

# Economic Voting and Political Sophistication

## Defending Heterogeneous Attribution

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The authors reply here to Godbout and Bélanger's critique of their work on political sophistication and economic voting. Principally, the authors stress the importance of using contemporaneous economic assessment and candidate preference measures in assessing their relationship. They also emphasize the empirical support for their key contentions that less sophisticated citizens tend not to credit/blame government for their own economic circumstances, and that more sophisticated citizens tend to focus on actors other than the president when attributing responsibility for the national economy. Finally, the authors stress the variety of contexts, both outside the United States and outside the domain of economic voting, in which their theory has found support.

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In their article, Jean-François Godbout and Éric Bélanger offer a reassessment of the conditioning effect of political sophistication on economic voting. In doing so, they critique our work, which shows that individuals at varying levels of political sophistication differ in their propensity to vote based on pocketbook and/or sociotropic criteria (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003, 2006a). Initially, the authors replicate our analyses using American National Election Study (ANES) data from the past five U.S. presidential elections (1988-2004), extending our tests to elections in which an incumbent president was not on the ballot. While they find little impact of sophistication on economic voting in these "open-seat" elections (a result that we would have anticipated—see below), their analyses for the other years strongly support our hypotheses, which the authors acknowledge. Their main criticism of our work thus rests on a second set of analyses, from which they conclude that our findings "do not hold . . . once [they] use the post-election reported vote as dependent variable" (p. 541). However, for reasons we will detail below, we view this shift in dependent variable—and the logic behind it—as deeply problematic, and regard any inferences drawn from these analyses as highly suspect.

In this piece, we reply to Godbout and Bélanger's four central criticisms of our work: (1) that the psychological mechanisms underlying our theory of heterogeneous attribution are unclear and insufficiently supported, (2)

that our theory does not hold in elections with no incumbent on the ballot, (3) that the use of preelection candidate preference measures in our original article (Gomez and Wilson 2001) mutes the effects of political campaigns and may weaken our inferences, and (4) that "the external validity of the current economic voting research on political sophistication is greatly limited since the typical analysis focuses only on one or two presidential elections" (p. 542).

### Support for the Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution

The premise underlying all of our work on ascriptions of causality is that less sophisticated individuals tend to make conceptually proximal attributions, focusing credit or blame on the single most obvious actor in the relevant sphere, while more sophisticated individuals tend toward diffuse attributions, dividing credit or blame between proximal and distal agents.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the context of presidential economic voting, less sophisticated individuals will disproportionately credit/blame themselves for their own economic circumstances and the president for the nation's circumstances, making them unlikely to engage in pocketbook voting and highly likely to vote sociotropically.

Godbout and Bélanger are skeptical about these claims. "The bulk of the evidence presented by Gomez

and Wilson,” they assert, “is not entirely supportive of their proximal/distal argument.” Specifically, they argue that “it is somewhat unclear why low sophisticates would remain entirely oblivious to their own economic woes in formulating an opinion about the current administration,” and that “a close examination of [our] results reveals that individuals at all levels of sophistication rely on sociotropic evaluations in roughly the same degree” (p. 544).

To begin with, our theory does not claim that less sophisticated voters are “completely oblivious” to their own economic well-being, only that they fail to make the specific, distal attributions that would logically translate these assessments into a pocketbook vote. The reasons for this are many, most notably that unsophisticated voters are less likely even to be aware of governmental policy decisions that may have affected them financially—and if they are aware, they may well be uncertain about which level (federal, state, local) or branch (legislative, executive, judicial) of government to credit or blame. More to the point, *we directly, empirically demonstrate the link between political sophistication and ascriptions of causality to federal government policy.* In 1988 and 1992, ANES respondents who reported a change (positive or negative) in their personal economic circumstances were asked whether federal government policies had contributed to this change or whether they “hadn’t made much of a difference either way.”<sup>2</sup> In our first article on this subject (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 905), we modeled answers to this question as a function of political sophistication, pocketbook evaluations (since people tend to take credit for good outcomes and project blame for bad ones), party identification, and an interaction between pocketbook evaluations and party identification (since people typically give more credit and less blame to presidents of their own party). The results are unmistakable: political sophistication emerges as a powerful predictor of these attributions, even after controlling for the other factors.<sup>3</sup> These results, along with findings from the 2000 Canadian Election Study that show exactly the same thing (Gomez and Wilson 2006a, 136), establish convincingly that politically unsophisticated individuals are *much* less likely than sophisticated ones to credit or blame federal government policy for their personal economic circumstances—exactly the premise that Godbout and Bélanger dispute.

Finally, with regard to our theoretical claims about sociotropic voting, Godbout and Bélanger’s assertions are puzzling. Our results *do not* indicate that individuals at all levels of sophistication rely on

sociotropic criteria equally. In 1992, sociotropic voting disappears altogether for the most sophisticated voters (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 908); in 1996, while the relationship is more modest, the marginal effects of sociotropic evaluations are greater for low and medium-low sophisticates than for those at higher levels (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 910). Moreover, we are again able to demonstrate empirically our underlying premise—results reported in *two* previous articles (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 907; 2003, 277-78) show that more sophisticated individuals are less likely to credit the president both for good economic conditions and for the federal budget surplus. Thus, once again, support for our theory emerges not only from the economic voting models themselves, but also from analysis of questions specifically tapping our posited psychological mechanisms.

## Economic Voting in Nonincumbent Elections

The major finding in the first portion of Godbout and Bélanger’s article is that the relationship between political sophistication and economic voting, while strong when a president seeks reelection, fades or even vanishes with no incumbent on the ballot. This pattern, however, should not be seen as damaging to our underlying theory. We have never claimed that there should be strong conditioning effects of political sophistication in these open races; in fact, our initial presentation of the theory speculated that relationships would likely be attenuated, and emphasized the importance of incumbency in providing “a clear object for citizen assessments of credit or blame based on their retrospective evaluations of economic circumstances” (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 903). Moreover, many studies suggest that economic voting in general is modest to nonexistent in presidential elections without an incumbent (Miller and Wattenberg 1985; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001; Norpoth 2002). It is not surprising, then, that political sophistication has little conditioning effect when questions of responsibility are legitimately ambiguous and economic assessments are of minor importance to the electorate as a whole. In sum, we acknowledge that open presidential races, because of much weaker economic voting in general, will mitigate the interactive effects of political sophistication. This in no way, however, undermines the psychological mechanisms that we argue are generally at work, and for which we provide extensive direct evidence as discussed above.

## A Troubling Choice of Data

In assessing existing studies of political sophistication and economic voting, Godbout and Bélanger note that “none . . . explicitly control for the moderating role that political campaigns may have on economic voting” (p. 542). Admittedly, while our models *do* control for issue positions, partisan and ideological predispositions, and socioeconomic characteristics, they *do not* “explicitly control for the moderating role” of political campaigns. However, if one looks closely at their models (see Table 4 of their article), Godbout and Bélanger do not “explicitly control” for campaign effects either—no campaign variables of either a dynamic or a static nature are included. The authors provide no theoretical description of what sorts of campaign forces might affect the interaction between political sophistication and economic voting, let alone any sense of how we might measure them. Moreover, they give no explanation of what campaign dynamics would produce the improbable changes that they observe between the preelection and postelection survey waves—namely, making unsophisticated voters *more* prone to pocketbook voting while simultaneously making sophisticated voters *less* so. Instead, Godbout and Bélanger merely argue that, whatever unspecified campaign forces may have been at work, they effectively capture them by using the recalled vote choice variable from the ANES postelection studies (as opposed to our models, which employ the preelection vote intention measure). We question the logic of this assertion and regard the resulting choice of dependent variable as seriously problematic.

Godbout and Bélanger claim that the preelection ANES respondents are not fully exposed to the dynamics of the campaign, and thus may not be aware of “news of the nation’s economic situation and the impact of the administration’s policies” (p. 549). Admittedly, respondents surveyed early in the preelection study have not been fully exposed to the messages of the campaign, but we should not overstate this concern. While some respondents were interviewed as early as the first week of September, in each year that we analyze, the preelection survey continued until the day before the election. Indeed, the average median completion date is twenty-nine days before the election, meaning that more than half of respondents were surveyed in the campaign’s final month.

More important, the authors’ decision to rely on the postelection vote choice variable creates a very serious problem. While their dependent variable is measured in the postelection panel, the independent

variables of greatest interest (economic evaluations) are measured only in the preelection survey. If campaign exposure (or, indeed, the mere passage of time and events) alters perceptions of economic circumstances, these changes go unmeasured. Use of the postelection vote choice item requires drawing causal inferences from independent and dependent variables measured as much as twenty weeks apart. It is not surprising that relationships change under those circumstances. If both variables are dynamic, as the authors admit (p. 545), we believe that utilizing survey measures taken *at the same time* is a much more reliable way to assess the relationship between economic evaluations and candidate preference. Indeed, this is the primary reason that we offered in our initial piece (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 905) for using the preelection candidate preference measure, in addition to our secondary claim that using the preelection item limits case loss.

Godbout and Bélanger contend that the postelection vote choice variable provides other benefits as well, but these claims are also problematic. First, they argue that using the preelection vote intention variable assumes that “undecided respondents will not turn out on Election Day” (p. 548). They also note that the postelection vote choice variable allows one to “[control] for respondents who may have switched their voting preferences between the preelectoral and the postelectoral surveys.” In fact, these “benefits” may actually be liabilities. Since *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), scholars have known that the postelection vote choice variable overreports turnout *and* support for the winner (e.g., Eubank and Gow 1983; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986; Wright 1990; Atkeson 1999). Indeed, Burden (2000) has shown that overreports of voting have increased over time to roughly 24 percent of the sample. This systematic error in the postelection measure has been shown to “[overestimate] the impact of incumbency-related variables and [underestimate] the effects of national forces” in U.S. Senate elections (Wright 1990, 543). Though we cannot be sure that these exact biases exist in the vote choice models presented by Godbout and Bélanger, the evidence is clear: the postelection vote choice variable is prone to systematic error and is biased.<sup>4</sup>

## External Validation for the Theory of Heterogeneous Attribution

A final criticism by Godbout and Bélanger centers on the external validity of our theory and findings.

They claim that we should have little confidence in the generalizability of analyses that focus only on one or two elections. In the context of our own work, we find this critique strange. The authors provide no reason why we should regard the 1992 and 1996 elections as somehow anomalous with regard to economic voting. Indeed, we would argue that the robustness of our initial findings (Gomez and Wilson 2001) across these two very different electoral contexts—one with a Republican incumbent in a poor economic climate, the other with a Democrat seeking reelection amid economic prosperity—provides a fair amount of generalizability in and of itself.

More to the point, however, this criticism ignores our subsequent published work. In one study (Gomez and Wilson 2003), we demonstrate that hypotheses derived from our theory are strongly borne out in the 1998 congressional elections (for which the ANES did *only* a postelection survey, with all relevant variables measured contemporaneously). In another piece (Gomez and Wilson 2006a), we show that the same processes of heterogeneous attribution that condition economic voting in the United States are also at work in the 2000 Canadian parliamentary election, the 1997 Mexican congressional election, and (somewhat less conclusively) in recent legislative elections in Hungary and Taiwan. Finally, we have demonstrated that our theory extends well beyond the domain of economic voting, predicting powerfully how citizens explain racial disparities (Gomez and Wilson 2006b) and the poor response to Hurricane Katrina (Gomez and Wilson 2007). Given these diverse studies, we regard broad generalizability as one of the great strengths of the theory of heterogeneous attribution—it explains much more than American economic voting. Its extension to countries other than the United States and to domains far afield from economic voting render implausible the notion that it is an artifact of a particular election or wave of the ANES.

## Notes

1. This summation is intended to give readers the gist of our theoretical claims. For a full elaboration of the theory of heterogeneous attribution, including its grounding in extant literature in both political science and psychology, see our previous work (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 902-3; 2003, 273-74; 2006a, 130-32). For details on both the conceptualization and measurement of political sophistication, see the appendix to our initial article (Gomez and Wilson 2001).

2. American National Election Study (ANES) question numbers are v880212 in 1988 and v923431 in 1992.

3. In addition, an identical model run with the 1988 ANES data produces the same results—sophistication is once again a statistically and substantively significant predictor of governmental attributions. These results are available from the authors.

4. The data suggest both significant overreporting of turnout (and thus post hoc fabrication of vote choice) and “winner’s bias” in the 1992 and 1996 ANES postelection samples. Reported turnout for the two years is 75 and 76 percent, respectively, compared with true national figures of 58 and 52 percent. Moreover, Bill Clinton (the winner in both years) receives a reported vote share of 48 percent in 1992 and 53 percent in 1996, compared with true national figures of 43 percent and 49 percent.

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