



Local media tone, economic conditions, and the evaluation of US governors

Nicholas Clark & Todd Makse

To cite this article: Nicholas Clark & Todd Makse (2019) Local media tone, economic conditions, and the evaluation of US governors, Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, 29:1, 82-101, DOI: [10.1080/17457289.2018.1464013](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2018.1464013)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2018.1464013>



Published online: 17 Apr 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 28



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Local media tone, economic conditions, and the evaluation of US governors

Nicholas Clark^a and Todd Makse^b

^aDepartment of Political Science, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, PA, USA; ^bDepartment of Politics & International Relations, Florida International University, Miami, FL, USA

ABSTRACT

Connections between media coverage, economic conditions, and performance evaluations of political leaders have seldom been explored in specific local media markets, due to the challenges of measuring media tone and content for a large number of media outlets or markets. In this paper, we develop a measure of media tone by comparing the economic evaluations of local media consumers and national media consumers within the same media market. We then use this measure to evaluate the relationship between media tone and objective economic conditions. We find that positive media tone increases the probability that individuals will approve of the governor's performance in office, and that tone also attenuates the negative relationship between unemployment and gubernatorial approval.

Even as American voters and institutions have become more polarized by almost every available metric and the role of partisanship in voting has increased, gubernatorial elections have remained relatively unpredictable; for example, in 2010, 27 states had or elected a governor opposite from the party whose presidential candidate it voted for in 2008. Part of the explanation for this trend lies with economic voting. While early research cast doubt on the applicability of economic voting to state politics (Turett 1971; Kenney and Rice 1983), later contributions have found stronger evidence that voters punish or reward gubernatorial incumbents based on perceived economic performance (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Hansen 1999).¹ In fact, the effects of state and local economic performance do not stop there; individuals' perceptions of the national economy also seem to be affected by experiences with the local economy (Mondak, Mutz, and Huckfeldt 1996; Reeves and Gimpel 2012; Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Rogers 2014).

CONTACT Nicholas Clark  clarkn@susqu.edu  Department of Political Science, Susquehanna University, 514 University Avenue, Selinsgrove, PA 17870, USA

¹The same principle has been extended to the local level. For example, local officials are often held accountable for their performance on relevant metrics, such as school board officials being rewarded or punished based on the performance of district schools (Berry and Howell 2007).

While the relationship between economic performance and incumbent support is well established, relatively few efforts have sought to draw out the connections between media coverage, economic conditions, and performance evaluations of political leaders (see Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien 2014 for a recent exception), and none have examined these linkages at the local or state levels. Attention to media portrayals of the economy is a crucial link in understanding economic voting since most research casts doubt on the idea that voters are highly informed about objective economic conditions.

In this paper, we build on the existing research by investigating the relationship between local media coverage of the economy, perceived and objective economic conditions, and support for gubernatorial incumbents. We begin by developing a survey-based measure of local media coverage of the economy, using economic evaluations batteries from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) to compare the portrayal of economic conditions across media markets. By associating individual respondents with localized measures of both economic conditions (county-level) and media coverage (media market-level), we highlight one important trait of local media coverage: substantial variation exists in the tone of economic coverage even when objective conditions are similar.

Subsequently, we use this measure to model the relationship between media portrayal of the economy, objective economic conditions, and evaluations of sitting governors. Having found that objective economic conditions and the tone of media coverage often do not align, we argue that media coverage and economic conditions should each exert an independent influence on gubernatorial evaluations, and that media tone should also condition the relationship between economic conditions and job approval.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the prior research on economic voting behavior, the public's awareness about the economy and the influence of media cues. Next, we develop a series of predictions regarding media coverage, economic conditions, and gubernatorial support. Third, we illustrate the creation of our local media tone measure, which we refer to as economic portrayal, and provide evidence of its validity and utility. Finally, we present and discuss results from models of gubernatorial approval, illustrating that the tone of economic coverage within local media outlets indeed conditions the relationship between local economic conditions and levels of support for gubernatorial incumbents.

Evaluating economic performance

One of the most consistent findings within political behavior research is that the state of the economy influences voting behavior. During periods of economic decline, individuals tend to blame incumbent elected leaders and vote

accordingly in elections. Such patterns of behavior have been observed in the United States at the state level (Hansen 1999), in presidential elections (Bartels and Zaller 2001) and congressional elections (Kiewiet and Udell 1998), and across Western Europe (Lewis-Beck 1988) and other Western democracies (Duch and Stevenson 2008).

This literature often presumes a high level of cognitive sophistication on the part of the public. Some scholars, for instance, argue that a sophisticated process underlies economic voting, in which voters gather information on the proposed economic policies and past economic performance of the candidates and their political parties and then compare the likely future economic performance of each candidate (Stigler 1973; Fiorina 1981). Much of this research relies on objective measures of economic performance such as growth, unemployment and inflation (Abramowitz 1988; Lewis-Beck 1988; Erikson and Wlezien 2012), an approach critiqued on the grounds that economic voting is based more on perceptions of the economy, which may be inaccurate (Nadeau, Niemi, and Amato 1994). Nonetheless, the use of objective conditions is critical to testing the core assumption of the economic voting theory (Van Der Brug, Van Der Eijk, and Franklin 2007). Specifically, for economic voting to serve as a mechanism for democratic accountability within the modern electoral process (Powell and Whitten 1993; Anderson 2007), voters must be responding to actual changes in the economy.

The literature on political knowledge, however, suggests that individuals do not actually know much about political and economic processes. Most individuals perform poorly on survey metrics of knowledge, failing to recall basic facts about institutions and articulating inconsistent issue positions when surveyed at different points in time (Converse 1964; Neuman 1986; Luskin 1987; Bennett 1988; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992). Such problems are even more pronounced with respect to economic information. Because processing economic information (as opposed to information about the political system) is often more taxing on one's cognitive capabilities, many individuals only seek out economic information intermittently (Doepke et al. 2008). Given this dismal portrait of the public's knowledge, the possibilities for informed economic voting would appear to be rather limited. However, some scholars have argued that uninformed individuals still make informed choices by following the cues of trusted sources such as elites and the media (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Confronted with the difficulties of evaluating economic performance, some individuals engage in benchmarking. This process entails voters looking to the state of the economy in other jurisdictions (whether localities, states, or countries) to evaluate economic performance in their own relevant jurisdiction (Powell and Whitten 1993). If the national economy is poor, but the international economy is catastrophic, a sophisticated voter should credit, not blame, the responsible officials. Cohen and King (2004) find evidence of

benchmarking with respect to the relative performance of national and state economies. However, we are still left to question how a supposedly ill-informed public is not only knowledgeable about state and national economic conditions, but is able to accurately compare the two in order to evaluate the performance of gubernatorial incumbents.

The media may serve to provide such information. Recent survey and experimental work find a strong relationship between media coverage and the direction of public opinion (Bartels 1993) as well as the public's level of political knowledge (Norris and Sanders 2003). In fact, both the well-informed and the ill-informed appear to learn from, and are affected by, new information presented in the media (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006). In particular, media outlets shape the public's perceptions of the state of the economy (Shah et al. 1999; Goidel et al. 2010; Hollanders and Vliegenthart 2011).

Kayser and Peress (2012) argue that the media offers the minimal necessary information through a process they refer to as "pre-benchmarking". Since many voters lack the sophistication to draw comparisons across jurisdictions, the media contextualizes such information as part of reporting on the economy, noting whether the economy is performing better or worse than in other jurisdictions or at other levels. In addition, the frequency of economic coverage generally increases when a jurisdiction is experiencing an economic decline (Doms and Morin 2004; Anduiza and Marinova 2015). Importantly, editorial stances do not appear to motivate pre-benchmarking; newspapers that share an ideological commitment with the government do not provide more positive coverage (compare to newspapers of an opposing ideology) when the economy is performing well (Kayser and Peress 2015). However, consistent with the expectation that newspapers cater to the beliefs of their base (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006), an outlet's ideological positioning *does* moderate the frequency of negative pre-benchmarking; papers who share the government's ideology offer less negative coverage when the economy is in decline (Kayser and Peress 2015).

Economic evaluations in American state politics

The federal nature of the American political system not only means that economic attributions need to be divided between national and state institutions, but that information about the economy is reported in both national and local media outlets. Whereas national outlets are almost certain to focus on the national (and international) economy, local outlets may focus both on the local economy and the national economy. Local outlets, then, are perfect venues for pre-benchmarking.

Because of pre-benchmarking, media portrayals may not correspond perfectly with objective economic conditions for several reasons. If two media markets experience similar economic conditions but pre-benchmarking is

practiced by media outlets in only one market, the portrayals of the economy experienced by the two audiences may be enormously different.

For example, if the local economy is worse than the national economy, a contextualized portrayal (i.e. one that pre-benchmarks) will highlight that disparity, leading citizens to focus more of their displeasure on the governor and other state and local officials. Conversely, a portrayal that lacks contextualization might obfuscate the differences between the local and national economies and prevent citizens from holding the governor and state officials accountable.

Likewise, when the local economy is better than the national economy, a pre-benchmarked portrayal would emphasize the relatively better standing of the local economy, which should improve evaluations of the governor, or at least mitigate criticism. A non-benchmarked portrayal would once again obscure the differences across levels of the economy, preventing citizens from crediting state and local officials.

There are several reasons why there may be variance in the tone of economic coverage, even among media markets with similar objective economic conditions. First, pre-benchmarking may not be practiced consistently by all media outlets, particularly by more parochial local media. Second, some outlets may report economic conditions in a biased manor, either due to political biases or because of incentives to offer more negative or sensationalistic content.

Turning to the factors that influence gubernatorial approval, our first two hypotheses, then, are straightforward. We expect that objective economic conditions will be negatively correlated with gubernatorial job approval, as per the central tenet of economic voting theory. Moreover, since the tone of economic coverage in the media can be partially divorced from economic conditions when pre-benchmarking occurs, we expect economic portrayals to have an independent effect on gubernatorial approval, above and beyond the effect of objective economic conditions.

Hypothesis 1: As local unemployment increases, gubernatorial evaluations will be more negative.

Hypothesis 2: As local media portrayals of the economy become more positive, gubernatorial evaluations will be more positive.

Finally, we hypothesize that economic conditions and media tone have an interactive relationship. We assert that even if local media outlets similarly covered the same economic conditions (in terms of frequency and contextualization), all economic coverage would not have the same effect on the public. In particular, when it comes to gubernatorial evaluations, there are reasons to believe that the impact of economic information will be highly conditional.

First, for the media to influence gubernatorial evaluations, citizens must be interested in obtaining information about state government and the state economy. Pre-benchmarking may eliminate *one* of the cognitive tasks involved with economic voting, but not all citizens will be paying attention to the economy at all. In fact, there is a reason to believe that an individual's receptiveness to certain types of knowledge, especially something such as state-level economic performance, varies across economic contexts. Lyons, Jaeger, and Wolak (2013), for example, show that political knowledge about state government increases with declining economic performance.

Second, even if citizens had access to equal amounts of relevant information during both good and bad economic times, the evidence suggests that economic voting has a downward bias: governors are blamed for high unemployment, but receive little credit for low unemployment (Hansen 1999). The comparative research demonstrates that similar patterns exist for economic information that is benchmarked, rather than presented in absolute terms (Hansen, Olsen, and Bech 2015).

We argue, therefore, that the effects of economic conditions and media coverage are not independent, but are in fact, conditional on one another, as captured by the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Positive media portrayals will attenuate the negative relationship between unemployment and gubernatorial approval, while negative media portrayals will strengthen that negative relationship.

Measuring media portrayals

The research on media effects largely relies on content analysis, generally focused on one or two national sources (Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien 2014), or one or two sources per country (Kayser and Peress 2015). While offering the most direct measure of the nature of media coverage, such an approach comes with a number of drawbacks. First, content analyses can be challenging and time-consuming even when focused on a small number of sources, but become prohibitively costly when one seeks to analyze several hundred content providers. Second, analyzing one (or even several) outlets per media market does not capture the totality of that media market's coverage, nor does it account for the reality that many citizens consume multiple media sources in different measures. For these reasons, assessing the tone of media coverage in each of the more than 200 media markets throughout the United States is a prohibitively time-consuming task and one fraught with potential measurement error.

We offer an alternative approach, relying on survey data that allows for a more systematic investigation when the goal is to study many local media markets. We develop an *indirect* measure of media coverage, inferring the

aggregate tone of economic portrayals in each media market based on a comparison of how two types of individuals: those who primarily consume local news and those who primarily consume national news. To characterize the media's aggregate portrayal of the economy within a media market, we compare the national economic evaluations of individuals who report consuming national news (which is *constant* across media markets) with those who report consuming local news (which *varies* across media markets). Assuming that individuals do not select into national and local sources for reasons correlated with economic evaluations (a possibility for which we also account), individuals in both groups are exposed to the same economic conditions, implying that any differences across the two groups within the media market must be driven by local media portrayals.

To measure media tone (the variable economic portrayal) in each media market, we rely on questions from the 2010 CCES (Ansolabehere 2012), in which respondents were asked about their consumption of national and local media (question CC301b). Using zip code geo-identifiers for each respondent, we determine in which of the 206 US media markets (as defined by the Federal Communications Commission) the respondent lives. Among those individuals who reported consuming television media in the last 24 hours, we separated individuals into those who consumed local media only, those who consumed national media only, and those who consumed both.

To generate our measure of media tone, we begin by estimating two models predicting an individual's evaluation of the national economy (question CC302): one for local-only television consumers and one for national-only television consumers. These models are hierarchical linear models² where individuals are nested within counties and include the following predictor variables: demographic factors (race, gender, age, marital status, children, education, and employment status), political factors (party identification, ideology, political interest, 2008 turnout, acts of reported participation in 2010, and political interest), and county-level unemployment (both November 2010 unemployment and year-over-year change). We also control for an individual's propensity to give positive evaluations to other institutions and actors by averaging a battery of approval measures for the president, Congress, the Supreme Court and individual senators and representatives.

Results from these models are then used to generate fitted values for each local-only consumer and national-only consumer in the dataset. By producing separate models for each type of media consumer, we account for the individual and contextual-level characteristics that may be related to the selection of media choice at the local and the national level.³ For every individual, the

²Like Reeves and Gimpel (2012), we find nearly identical results using an ordered logit model.

³In fact, Heckman selection models indicate that the two processes are, in fact, non-independent. Many of the same factors which predict media choice also predict national economic evaluations, and the null hypothesis of independent equations is easily rejected ($p < .001$). Since we are only interested in

predicted value is then compared to the individual's actual economic evaluation to produce a difference score. By using these difference scores instead of raw media market-level averages, we account for the possibility of sampling error (i.e. that the sample for a given media market is predisposed to be unusually positive or negative in its economic evaluations).

Lastly, we average the difference scores for each group (local consumers and national consumers) in each media market, and subtract the average for national consumers from the average for local consumers. This step accounts for any media market-level factors (e.g. objective conditions) which might affect both local and national media consumers, and thus, makes the tone measure comparable across media markets. A summary of the steps in the production of the measure can be found in [Table 1](#).

The resulting measure is then algebraically transformed so that it has a range from 0.00 (which is the score for the Monterey/Salinas, CA media market) to 1.00 (Amarillo, TX). We limit the use of this *economic portrayal* score to media markets with at least 10 respondents in each media consumption category (users of local media only and users of national media only) to exclude cases where this measure is likely to be measured with low precision. Across the remaining 144 media markets, *economic portrayal* has a mean of 0.43 and a standard deviation of 0.19. [Table 2](#) lists the media markets with highest and lowest portrayal scores.

Before continuing, we consider other possibilities of what this measure might be capturing. Most obviously, it might simply reflect local economic conditions, with local media painting a rosier picture of the economy in places where the economy is indeed stronger. Overall, however, there is a very small and not statistically significant correlation ($r = -0.09$, $p = .28$) between media market-level unemployment and our measure of economic portrayal.

Second, the measure might capture some other aspect of media coverage, such as partisan political bias. However, if this were the case, we would expect our measure of economic portrayal to be relatively stable across years. Instead, when we calculate the same measure using the 2014 CCES data, we find an extremely modest correlation ($r = 0.05$, $p = .52$) between a media market's 2010 and score and its 2014 score.

While it is possible that our measure is capturing some other feature of the economic environment or media coverage, it is difficult to imagine any such feature that would (a) produce systematic differences across consumers of local and national media and (b) be correlated both directly and conditionally with gubernatorial evaluations, as we show in the sections that follow.

predicting national economic evaluations in order to create this metric, and not to test theoretical claims about the national evaluations *per se*, modeling the two types of media consumers separately accounts for the selection issue without modeling it directly.

Table 1. Creation of the media tone measure.

Step 1a: Produce a model of national economic evaluations (Local media consumers only)
Step 1b: Produce a model of national economic evaluations (National media consumers only)
Step 2a: Generate predicted values for all local media consumers using the model from step 1a
Step 2b: Generate predicted values for all national media consumers using the model from step 1b
Step 3: Compare predicted value vs. actual value for all consumers (difference scores)
Step 4a: Average difference scores at media market level for local media consumers
Step 4b: Average difference scores at media market level for national media consumers
Step 5: Subtract average from Step 4b from average from Step 4a

Table 2. Highest and lowest economic portrayal scores.

Media markets with highest scores	Media markets with lowest scores
Amarillo, TX (1.00)	Monterey-Salinas, CA (0.00)
Lubbock, TX (0.94)	San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose, CA (0.07)
Tyler-Longview-Lufkin-Nacogdoches, TX (0.91)	Burlington-Plattsburgh, NY/VT (0.12)
Tulsa, OK (0.89)	Springfield-Holyoke, MA (0.16)
Chico-Reading (0.88)	New York, NY (0.17)

Data and methods

To test the above hypotheses, we utilize our measure of economic portrayal in conjunction with other items available in the 2010 CCES. As noted above, we limit our analyses to the 144 media markets for which we had sufficient responses to construct the media tone measure (those with at least ten local media consumers and ten national media consumers). Since our models measure the effects of local media coverage, we limit our analyses to individuals who reported consuming local media or both local and national media, excluding those who did not consume media or those who consumed national media only (although we consider the last group of individuals in a placebo test we describe below).

Our dependent variable, gubernatorial approval, is a four-point ordered measure (question CC308d); in our sample, 43% of respondents expressed approval or strong approval of the governor, while 57% expressed disapproval or strong disapproval. We depart from the economic voting literature's more typical use of a vote choice measure due to constraints specific to the 2010 election. Specifically, there were only 13 incumbent governors seeking re-election in 2010 due to an unusually large number of term-limited governors. Moreover, of those thirteen, four were appointed mid-term and only four were in states that are typically politically competitive. Since Campbell, Dettrey, and Yin (2010) find that retrospective evaluations matter significantly more to incumbents than to their same-party successors, relying on vote choice data in an election year such as this is undesirable.

We model gubernatorial approval using a multilevel ordered logit model, with individuals nested within media market segments. We do this because

many media markets cross state lines, meaning that there are respondents who share the same media market but not the same governor. Such individuals should not be grouped together in a single level-2 unit. In total, the 144 media markets are divided into 238 media market segments, with a median of 97 respondents per group and an interquartile range of [30, 237].

To measure local economic conditions, we use the November 2010⁴ county-level unemployment rate⁵ from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the respondent's county.⁶ The average unemployment rate was 9.4% across all respondents in the dataset (s.d. = 2.4).⁷ To test Hypothesis 3, we also create an interaction between economic portrayal and the unemployment rate, mean-centering both the interaction and its constituent terms for ease of interpretation.

In addition, we control for the individual's evaluation of the national economy.⁸ Although we believe that individuals can evaluate the national and local economies separately and holding national and local officials accountable accordingly, we also believe that national economic evaluations will, all things equal, be correlated with gubernatorial evaluations.⁹

Next, we control for a series of political factors that may predict gubernatorial approval. First, we account for whether the respondent and the governor identify with the same party¹⁰ (question V212a), as well the ideological distance between the respondent's self-placement and their placement of the governor (questions CC334A and CC334B).

We also control for the partisanship of the governor (GOP governor), and allow for the possibility that the effect of economic evaluations varies depending on the governor's party. There are several reasons we may wish to include

⁴Some studies have argued theoretically and demonstrated empirically that it is *change* in unemployment, rather than the contemporaneous level of unemployment, that should influence retrospective voting. However, we find no evidence of this pattern in the 2010 CCES data. Even before accounting for the factors that are the focus of this paper, the correlation between year-over-year change in state-level unemployment and gubernatorial approval is positive ($r = 0.09$), not negative as would be expected.

⁵While other studies have examined other economic indicators such as GDP change, gas prices, and foreclosure rates (Reeves and Gimpel 2012; Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014), unemployment rates are still the most common metric in the literature on gubernatorial evaluations.

⁶We considered other county-level covariates such as the "normal vote", operationalized here as the two-party presidential vote from 2008, or a "friends-and-neighbors" effect (Key 1949; Rice and Macht 1987), measured with an indicator of whether the county is the governor's home county (the county they lived in at the time they were elected governor).

⁷We also considered alternative models that measured state-level unemployment, rather than county-level unemployment. In these models, we found support for Hypotheses 1 and 2, but no interactive effect between unemployment and media tone.

⁸Although this measure is also used in the construction of the economic portrayal measure, there is no risk of overlap between the two measures since the media market-level measure is aggregated across many individuals and compared to predicted scores, as described in the previous section. In fact, the correlation between the two measures at the individual level is negative ($r = -0.10$).

⁹For the sake of comparison, we also find a similar correlation between national economic evaluations and approval of the state legislature.

¹⁰Pure independents are coded as a "0" on this measure, and a separate dummy variable for these individuals is included in the model. Republican and Democratic-leaning are treated as partisans.

these covariates. First, Brown (2010) finds that in states where the governor is a member of the party opposite the President (in this case Republican governors), the effect of economic conditions is much larger. Wright (2012) advances a different argument that would also demand that we control for an interaction between the governor's party and unemployment: he argues that unemployment is a Democratic-owned issue and therefore impacts Democratic and Republican governors differently.

Finally, we control for a variety of variables which may be fruitful in predicting gubernatorial approval. First, we include a battery of demographic controls, including ideology, gender, education, age, political interest, political participation, and whether an individual is African-American or of Hispanic heritage, as well as the index of institutional approval described above.¹¹

In addition to the random intercept, which allows evaluations to randomly vary across media market segments, we also include a random slope term for the variable unemployment rate, the effect of which is also allowed to vary across media markets. Model diagnostics indicate that both the random intercept and random slope term improve model fit.

Table 3 presents the results as described above, for all individuals who consumed local media in the past 24 hours, including those who consumed both local and national media. Model 1, in the left column, only examines the unconditional effects of objective economic conditions and media tone, to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. Model 2, in the right column, presents the full model, including the interaction term that is used to assess Hypothesis 3.

Table 4 presents a placebo test that serves to assess the possibility that our tone measure is capturing something other than economic portrayals in local media. In this model, we re-run the analysis for CCES respondents who reported consuming *national* media only. If economic portrayal is indeed capturing portrayals of the economy in the local media, it should not affect individuals who did not consume local media.¹² Thus, we expect to find negligible effects of media tone – both direct and conditional – while other findings should be similar to Model 1.

As expected, Model 1 offers support for both Hypotheses 1 and 2. The negative coefficient associated with the unemployment rate indicates that gubernatorial approval decreases as unemployment goes up. The positive

¹¹ Although the partisanship variables should capture most of the propensity of individuals to support governors of their own party, we also considered the possibility that the effects of demographics would differ depending on the governor's party, insofar as those demographics are capturing some variance associated with partisanship. For only two of these variables (age and education) did we find such an effect. Thus, we also include interactions between each of these variables and the *GOP governor* dummy.

¹² Of course, it is possible that even individuals who do not consume local media are influenced, at least indirectly, by the tone of local media portrayals of the economy. Moreover, the CCES question asks respondents only about their consumption of local and national media in the past 24 hours, allowing the possibility that people consume a given type of media in general, but not in the past 24 hours. Thus, while we should expect the direct and conditioning effects of local media to be *weaker* for national media consumers, we need not expect a zero effect.

Table 3. Multilevel ordered logit models of gubernatorial approval.

	Model 1	Model 2
County-level unemployment	−0.03 (0.01)**	−0.04 (0.01)**
Economic portrayal	0.85 (0.27)**	0.95 (0.27)**
Unemployment × economic portrayal	–	0.12 (0.06)*
GOP governor	1.45 (0.16)**	1.44 (0.16)**
National economic evaluations	0.24 (0.02)**	0.24 (0.02)**
GOP governor × economic evaluations	−0.46 (0.03)**	−0.46 (0.03)**
Same party as governor	0.74 (0.03)**	0.74 (0.03)**
Pure independent	0.09 (0.05)*	0.09 (0.05)*
Ideology (7-point scale)	0.08 (0.01)**	0.08 (0.01)**
Ideological distance from governor	−0.73 (0.01)**	−0.73 (0.01)**
Female	−0.08 (0.03)**	−0.08 (0.03)**
Age	0.009 (0.001)**	0.010 (0.001)**
GOP governor × age	−0.010 (0.002)**	−0.010 (0.002)**
Hispanic	−0.27 (0.05)**	−0.27 (0.05)**
African-American	−0.33 (0.04)**	−0.33 (0.04)**
Educational level	0.06 (0.01)**	0.06 (0.01)**
GOP governor × education level	−0.07 (0.02)**	−0.07 (0.02)**
Political interest	0.17 (0.02)**	0.17 (0.02)**
Political participation scale	0.07 (0.01)**	0.07 (0.01)**
Institutional approval index	0.91 (0.03)**	0.91 (0.03)**
σ (Intercept)	0.43 (0.05)	0.44 (0.05)
σ (Random slope: unemployment)	0.003 (0.002)	0.003 (0.001)
<i>N</i> (Individuals/media market segments)	27,794/238	27,794/238
Log-likelihood	−27,958.06	−27,953.22

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Cutpoint values not reported.

$p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 4. Placebo test (national media consumers only).

County-level unemployment	−0.04 (0.02)**
Economic portrayal	0.51 (0.35)
Unemployment × economic portrayal	−0.02 (0.09)
GOP governor	1.40 (0.29)**
National economic evaluations	0.27 (0.04)**
GOP governor × economic evaluations	−0.53 (0.06)**
Same party as governor	0.60 (0.08)**
Pure independent	−0.18 (0.11)#
Ideology (7-point scale)	0.11 (0.02)**
Ideological distance from governor	−0.91 (0.02)**
Female	−0.07 (0.05)
Age	0.006 (0.003)#
GOP governor × age	−0.007 (0.004)#
Hispanic	−0.07 (0.10)
African-American	−0.26 (0.12)*
Educational level	0.06 (0.03)*
GOP governor × education level	−0.08 (0.04)*
Political interest	0.24 (0.06)**
Political participation scale	0.07(0.02)**
Institutional approval index	0.92 (0.06)**
σ (Intercept)	0.56 (0.09)
σ (Random slope: unemployment)	0.005 (0.004)
<i>N</i> (Individuals/media market segments)	7367/230
Log-likelihood	−6812.34

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Cutpoint values not reported.

$p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

coefficient associated with media tone indicates that positive coverage of the economy leads to more positive evaluations of the governor. Model 2 provides support in favor of Hypothesis 3. The interaction term is statistically significant in the expected positive direction, meaning that the negative effect of unemployment becomes attenuated as economic portrayal moves in the positive direction.

The control variables also behave as expected. Individuals who share the governor's political party evaluate the governor more positively, while pure independents are slightly more approving than out-partisans, but much less approving than co-partisans of the governor. The perceived ideological distance between the respondent and the governor reduces levels of approval. Republican governors are generically more popular, but this is almost certainly a function of 2010 being a pro-Republican wave election year. The effect of national economic evaluations depends on the governor's party. For Democrats, the effect is positive, while for Republican governors, the net effect of national evaluations was negative.

Among the additional control variables in the second column, age, education, political interest, political participation, and institutional approval index are predictors of positive evaluations, while being female, Hispanic or African-American is negatively associated with gubernatorial approval. Age and education also exhibited conditional effects depending on the governor's party; the positive effect of each is attenuated when the governor is a Republican.¹³

To assess the substantive significance of the interaction between economic portrayals and unemployment, we calculate the predicted probability of gubernatorial approval, holding all other values at their means, for different values of economic portrayal and unemployment. [Figure 1](#) illustrates these estimates (and their associated 95% confidence intervals) for the mean level of economic portrayal, and for values one standard deviation above and below the mean.¹⁴

[Figure 1](#) shows that when unemployment is low, the predicted probability of gubernatorial approval is similar across the range of values of economic portrayal indicating that the impact of media coverage is weak under positive economic conditions. To be more exact, the marginal effect of media tone ceases to be discernible from zero when unemployment is lower than 6.4%. On the other hand, at the highest levels of unemployment, the marginal

¹³We also find evidence that the effects of media portrayals, unemployment, and the interaction between the two differ substantially across Democratic and Republican governors. For Democratic governors, media portrayals have a significant direct effect but do not condition the relationship between unemployment and gubernatorial approval. For Republicans, the interactive effect is statistically significant while the main effect is not.

¹⁴Note that in discussing the results (and presenting [Figures 1](#) and [2](#)), we transform unemployment rates and economic portrayal scores back to their uncentered values.

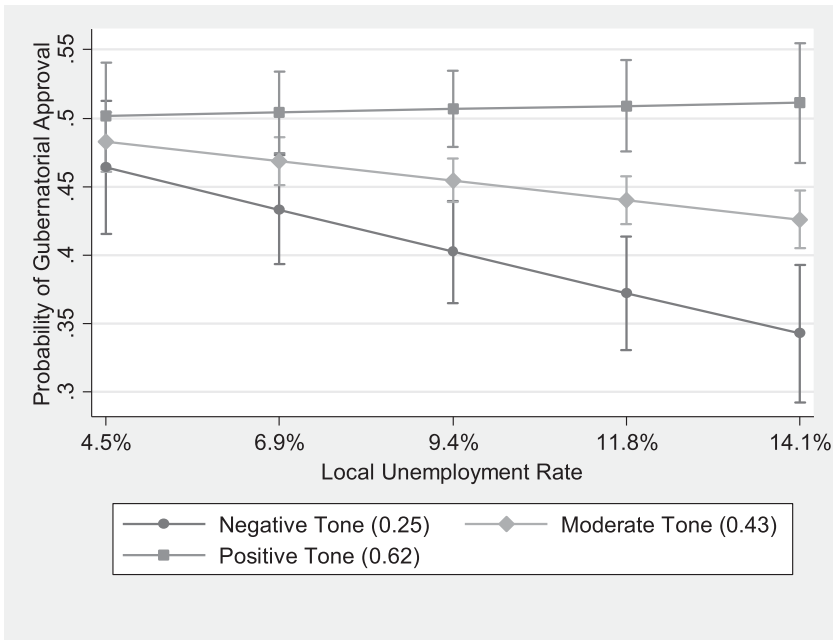


Figure 1. Substantive effects of unemployment, by media tone.

Note: Brackets represent 95% confidence interval.

effect of media tone is not only statistically significant but substantively quite large.¹⁵

Figure 2 illustrates the findings in a slightly different manner, by calculating the total marginal effect of unemployment (the direct effect plus the interactive effect) across different values of economic portrayal. The graph shows that the total marginal effect of unemployment is negative and statistically significant across much of the range of economic portrayal, but ceases to have a statistically significant effect when economic portrayal reaches values higher than 0.56. Cases with values higher than 0.56 represent roughly 27% of the respondents and 39% of the media markets in the study.

Finally, Table 4 illustrates the null findings with respect to media tone that we expected for consumers of national media. The direct effect of media tone is statistically insignificant and the interactive effect is effectively zero. The gubernatorial evaluations of national media consumers are unaffected by the tone of economic portrayals in local media, as would be expected. This

¹⁵This finding – differential effects when unemployment is high and low – is consistent with the broader research on economic voting. For example, Van Der Brug, Van Der Eijk, and Franklin (2007) find a similar ceiling effect regarding the effect of economic conditions on support for governing parties. That effect may well be due to uneven media coverage of the economy; the media tends to cover the economy and pre-benchmark more during periods of decline (Anduiza and Marinova 2015; Kayser and Peress 2015).

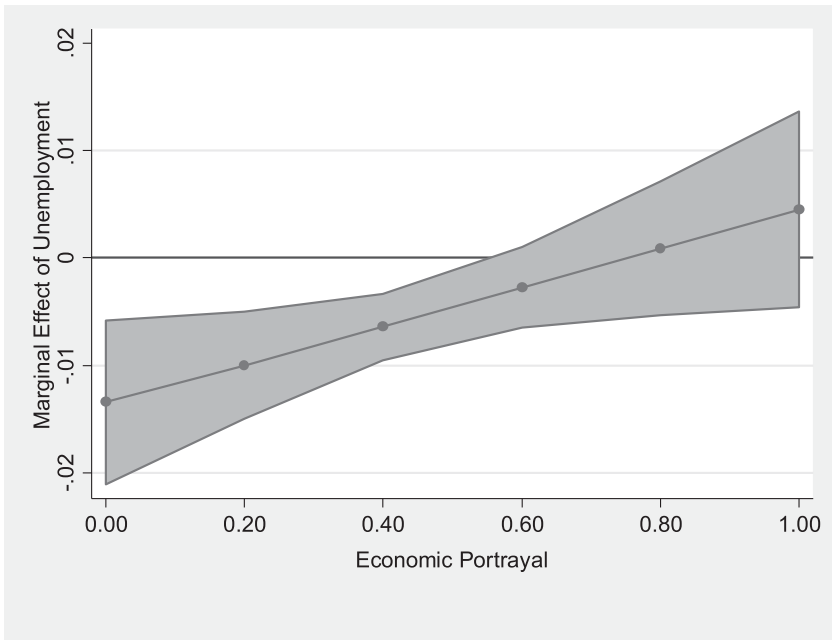


Figure 2. Total marginal effect of unemployment, by media tone.

Note: Shaded area represents 95% confidence interval.

null finding, combined with the direct and conditional effects of our measure of media tone in Model 2, increase our confidence that this measure is indeed capturing economic portrayals in local media.

Conclusion

In this paper, we demonstrate that a measure of local media coverage of the economy offers new avenues for understanding blame attribution, economic voting, and other concepts at the intersection of information, economics, and politics. With the advent of large-scale national surveys like the CCES and complementary methodologies such as MRP (e.g. Lax and Phillips 2009), it is increasingly possible to study the direct and conditional effects of media coverage without relying on content analysis or similarly labor-intensive methods.

Furthermore, our analyses show that the effects of local media can be important in determining how individuals evaluate their governor, particularly under unfavorable economic conditions. Alongside studies that link local media usage to political knowledge (Lyons, Jaeger, and Wolak 2013) and recent studies on the effects of sub-national economic outcomes (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2014; Rogers 2014), this paper makes clear that the federal character of the American states and its multilevel media structure

demand increased attention to disentangle the relationships between knowledge sources and public opinion, particularly with respect to the economy.

A key finding in this study is the weak correlation between unemployment and the positivity of media coverage, which suggests that local media coverage is anything but perfectly reflective of economic conditions. Local media outlets *may* serve to inform individuals about the state of the economy and to contextualize economic performance within the local and national settings, but at other times, local outlets may simply be leading individuals away from accurate assessments of the national economy.

One explanation for the discrepancy between media coverage and actual economic conditions may reside in the literature on pre-benchmarking; while the few extant studies have found evidence of media pre-benchmarking, it is far from evident that this is a universal media habit. In light of the common portrayal of local media outlets as being more parochial, it is possible that some media outlets pre-benchmark and others do not, leading to variance in portrayals that is a matter of framing rather than a matter of accuracy. Regardless, future work should seek to explore the causes of local media portrayals of the economy as well as its effects.

Finally, the paper's findings have implications for our understanding of accountability in state politics. Previous work has established that voters seek out more information when the economy is faring poorly and are more likely to punish incumbents under negative economic conditions. But media positive portrayals of the economy can represent a barrier to such electoral sanction; our finding suggests that positive media contextualization may counteract objectively poor economic conditions and insulate governors from negative feedback. To punish incumbents, then, voters must have enough of an idea that the economy is bad such that they are motivated to obtain economic information *and* the local media coverage must depict the economy negatively. Conversely, voters may be less likely to reward incumbents for positive economic conditions. But if they do seek out information (which they may be less likely to do if the economy is strong), they are less likely to be led astray by coverage whose tone does not match objective conditions.

These findings do not promote confidence in the public's ability to exercise accountability over decision-makers. Ideally, the media would enable the public to identify the policies that contribute to strong or weak economic performance and act accordingly. At the minimum, the media should impart an accurate understanding of the state of the economy, even if it does not allow for blame attributions. This paper suggests that while the media can improve the public's understanding of the economy, it does not always do so in practice.

But regardless of the normative implications, these findings contribute to our understanding that the nature of accountability in economic voting is

both complex and characterized by several asymmetries in the impact of positive and negative economic information. Only by attempting to characterize the content of media portrayals of the economy, as we have attempted to further in this paper, can we fully map the linkages between information about the economy, perceptions of the economy, and evaluations of incumbents.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the assistance and feedback from the following individuals: Matthew Jarvis, Steve Rogers, Meredith Crane, Makayla Wendland, and Christopher Wlezien.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Nicholas Clark is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Susquehanna University. His research interests focus on voting behavior, public opinion, and elections in advanced industrial democracies.

Todd Makse is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Florida International University. His research interests include state politics, legislative politics, redistricting, and political behavior.

References

- Abramowitz, Alan I. 1988. "An Improved Model for Predicting Presidential Election Outcomes." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 21 (4): 843–847.
- Anderson, Christopher J. 2007. "The End of Economic Voting? Contingency Dilemmas and the Limits of Democratic Accountability." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10: 271–296.
- Anduiza, Eva, and Dani Marinova. 2015. "When Bad News Is Good: Political Knowledge in Times of Crisis." <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/51822f26-90d3-4ed5-8aa6-68fce2bfd251.pdf>.
- AnsolaBehere, Stephen. 2012. *Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2010: Common Content*. Release 1: February 26, 2012. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- AnsolaBehere, Stephen, Marc Meredith, and Erik Snowberg. 2014. "Mecro-Economic Voting: Local Information and Micro-Perceptions of the Macro-Economy." *Economics & Politics* 26 (3): 380–409.
- Atkeson, Lonna Rae, and Randall W. Partin. 1995. "Economic and Referendum Voting: A Comparison of Gubernatorial and Senatorial Elections." *American Political Science Review* 89: 99–107.
- Bartels, Larry M. 1993. "Messages Received: The Political Impact of Media Exposure." *American Political Science Review* 87 (2): 267–285.

- Bartels, Larry, and John Zaller. 2001. "Presidential Vote Models: A Recount." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34: 9–20.
- Bennett, Stephen E. 1988. "'Know-Nothings' Revisited: The Meaning of Political Ignorance Today." *Social Science Quarterly* 69: 476–490.
- Berry, Christopher R., and William G. Howell. 2007. "Accountability and Local Elections: Rethinking Retrospective Voting." *Journal of Politics* 69: 844–858.
- Brown, Adam R. 2010. "Are Governors Responsible for the State Economy? Partisanship, Blame, and Divided Federalism." *Journal of Politics* 72 (3): 605–615.
- Campbell, James E., Bryan J. Dettrey, and Hongxing Yin. 2010. "The Theory of Conditional Retrospective Voting: Does the Presidential Record Matter Less in Open-Seat Elections?" *The Journal of Politics* 72 (4): 1083–1095.
- Cohen, Jeffery E., and James D. King. 2004. "Relative Unemployment and Gubernatorial Popularity." *Journal of Politics* 66 (4): 1267–1282.
- Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, edited by David E. Apter, 206–261. New York: Free Press.
- Delli Carpini, Michael, and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Doepke, Jorg, Jonas Dovern, Ulrich Fritsche, and Jirka Slacalek. 2008. "The Dynamics of European Inflation Expectations." *B. E. Journal of Macroeconomics* 8 (1): 1–23.
- Doms, Mark E., and Norman J. Morin. 2004. "Consumer Sentiment, the Economy, and the News Media." *FRB of San Francisco Working Paper No. 2004-09*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=602763.
- Duch, Raymond M., and Randolph T. Stevenson. 2008. *The Economic Vote: How Political and Economic Institutions Condition Election Results*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Erikson, Robert S., and Christopher Wlezien. 2012. *The Timeline of Presidential Elections*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fiorina, Morris. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gentzkow, Matthew, and Jesse M. Shapiro. 2006. "Media Bias and Reputation." *Journal of Political Economy* 114 (2): 280–316.
- Goidel, Kirby, Stephen Procopio, Dek Terrell, and H. Dennis Wu. 2010. "Sources of Economic News and Economic Expectations." *American Politics Research* 38: 759–777.
- Hansen, Susan B. 1999. "'Life Is Not Fair': Governors' Job Performance Ratings and State Economies." *Political Research Quarterly* 52 (1): 167–188.
- Hansen, Kasper M., Asmus L. Olsen, and Mickael Bech. 2015. "Cross-National Yardstick Comparisons: A Choice Experiment on a Forgotten Voter Heuristic." *Political Behavior* 37: 767–789.
- Hollanders, David, and Rens Vliegenthart. 2011. "The Influence of Negative Newspaper Coverage on Consumer Confidence: The Dutch Case." *Journal of Economic Psychology* 32: 367–373.
- Jerit, Jennifer, Jason Barabas, and Toby Bolsen. 2006. "Citizens, Knowledge, and the Information Environment." *American Journal of Political Science* 50: 266–282.
- Kayser, Mark Andreas, and Michael Peress. 2012. "Benchmarking Across Borders: Electoral Accountability and the Necessity of Comparison." *American Political Science Review* 106: 661–684.
- Kayser, Mark Andreas, and Michael Peress. 2015. "The Media, the Economy and the Vote." Working Paper.

- Kenney, Patrick J., and Tom W. Rice. 1983. "Popularity and the Vote: The Gubernatorial Case." *American Politics Quarterly* 11: 237–241.
- Key, V. O., Jr. 1949. *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Kiewiet, D. Roderick, and Michael Udell. 1998. "Twenty-Five Years after Kramer: An Assessment of Economic Retrospective Voting Based upon Improved Estimates of Income and Unemployment." *Economics & Politics* 10 (3): 219–248.
- Lax, Jeffrey R., and Justin H. Phillips. 2009. "How Should We Estimate Public Opinion in the States?" *American Journal of Political Science* 53: 107–121.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S. 1988. *Economics and Elections: The Major Western Democracies*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., and Charles Tien. 1996. "The Future in Forecasting: Prospective Presidential Models." *American Politics Quarterly* 24: 468–491.
- Lupia, Arthur, and Mathew McCubbins. 1998. *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Luskin, Robert C. 1987. "Measuring Political Sophistication." *American Journal of Political Science* 31 (4): 856–899.
- Lyons, Jeffrey, William P. Jaeger, and Jennifer Wolak. 2013. "The Roots of Citizens' Knowledge of State Politics." *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 13: 183–202.
- Mondak, Jeffrey J., Diana C. Mutz, and Robert Huckfeldt. 1996. "Persuasion in Context: The Multilevel Structure of Economic Evaluations." In *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*, edited by Diana C. Mutz, Pa. Sniderman, and Richard A. Brody, 249–266. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Nadeau, Richard, Richard G. Niemi, and Timothy Amato. 1994. "Expectations and Preferences in British Elections." *American Political Science Review* 88 (2): 371–383.
- Neuman, W. Russell. 1986. *The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Norris, Pippa, and David Sanders. 2003. "Message or Medium? Campaign Learning During the 2001 British General Election." *Political Communication* 20 (3): 233–262.
- Powell, G. Bingham, and Guy D. Whitten. 1993. "A Cross-national Analysis of Economic Voting: Taking Account of the Political Context." *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (2): 391–414.
- Reeves, Andrew, and James G. Gimpel. 2012. "Ecologies of Unease: Geographic Context and National Economic Evaluations." *Political Behavior* 34: 507–534.
- Rice, Tom W., and Alisa A. Macht. 1987. "The Hometown Advantage: Mobilization or Conversion?" *Political Behavior* 9 (3): 257–262.
- Rogers, Jonathan. 2014. "A Communitropic Theory of Economic Voting." *Electoral Studies* 36: 107–116.
- Shah, Dhavan V., Mark D. Watts, David Domke, David P. Fan, and Michael Fibson. 1999. "News Coverage, Economic Cues, and the Public's Presidential Preferences, 1984–1996." *Journal of Politics* 61 (4): 914–943.
- Sniderman, Paul M., Richard A. Brody, and Phillip E. Tetlock. 1991. *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Soroka, Stuart N., Dominik A. Stecula, and Christopher Wlezien. 2014. "It's (Change in) the (Future) Economy, Stupid: Economic Indicators, the Media, and Public Opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (2): 457–474.
- Stigler, George J. 1973. "General Economic Conditions and National Elections." *The American Economic Review* 63 (2): 160–167.
- Turett, J. Stephen. 1971. "The Vulnerability of American Governors, 1900–1969." *American Journal of Political Science* 15: 108–132.

- Van Der Brug, Wouter, Cees Van Der Eijk, and Mark N. Franklin. 2007. *The Economy and the Vote: Economic Conditions and Elections in Fifteen Countries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, John R. 2012. "Unemployment and the Democratic Electoral Advantage." *American Political Science Review* 106 (4): 685–702.
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.