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Decreasing the Economy's Impact on Evaluations of the President: An Experiment on Attribution Framing*

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Decades of research has shown that economic considerations are strongly tied to evaluations of the president. Many studies have found that framing (often called priming) by news coverage, events, and presidential rhetoric can increase the weight of economic and other considerations in presidential evaluations. I use a survey experiment to show that attribution frames can decrease the weight of economic considerations on presidential evaluations. The finding holds implications the public's capacity to hold the president accountable and presidents' legislative strategies.

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In December 2007, the United States entered the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s.² As the economy contracted, unemployment rose from 4.7 percent in late 2007 to 7.8 percent by January, 2009. That same month, Barack Obama was inaugurated. Two years later, the economy was officially out of recession, but fears of a “double dip” recession remained and unemployment had climbed to almost 10 percent. In December 2010, 81 percent of the public thought national economic conditions were “very bad” or “fairly bad” while a mere 0.2 percent thought conditions were “very good.”³ Most agreed that things were bad, but how much did these perceptions of the economy shape public evaluations of Barack Obama?

Research on public evaluations of the president has consistently found that economic considerations are a primary driver of these evaluations (e.g., Mueller 1973; Kernell 1978; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Brace and Hinckley 1991; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Newman 2002; McAvoy 2006). However, research has also shown that events, news coverage, and elite discourse can increase the weight of various considerations on evaluations via a process known as priming or framing (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Druckman and Holmes 2004; Kelleher and Wolak 2006). In particular, this line of research shows that when news stories, dramatic events, or elite rhetoric focus on a particular topic, like the economy or terrorism, individuals tend to weigh considerations relating to that topic more heavily in their evaluations of the president. However, few studies explore the possibility that the same kind of messages could *decrease* the weight of a consideration on an evaluation.

Of course, presidents often have incentives to try to decrease the weight of unfavorable considerations in public evaluations (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). The Obama administration worked diligently to convince the public that it inherited the faltering economy, implying that the

state of the economy should not be the primary basis of evaluating Obama (e.g., Wilson 2009). Do such attempts to attribute blame somewhere other than the White House alter the criteria by which the public evaluates presidents?

The results of a survey experiment described below show that an attribution frame decreased the weight of economic considerations on evaluations of president Obama. The results highlight a politically and theoretically significant type of framing effect that has not received much attention. The findings are important because economic considerations consistently have a powerful effect on evaluations of the president (see Gronke and Newman 2009). If a message can dampen the strong connection between economic considerations and presidential evaluations, similar messages may prove powerful in other contexts where connections are not as strong. Furthermore, the effects reported here appear to have arisen primarily by the frame's capacity to increase a consideration's perceived applicability, not by simply raising considerations' accessibility in memory.

The study proceeds by discussing framing's impact on presidential evaluations. This discussion generates a hypothesis that is tested via the survey experiment. After describing the experiment and the results, I discuss what the results tell us about the psychology of framing effects. I close by examining the study's implications for the presidential accountability and presidential success in Congress.

Framing, Attribution Frames, and Evaluations of Presidents

Most accounts of individuals' political attitudes, including evaluations of presidents (which I will call "presidential evaluations"), view attitudes toward an object as a weighted sum of a collection of considerations (e.g., Azjen and Fishbein 1980; Chong and Druckman 2007a). As noted above, studies of framing and priming demonstrate that by emphasizing a certain

consideration, various stimuli (e.g., a speech) can increase the weight of a consideration on presidential evaluations (e.g., Druckman and Holmes 2004). Chong and Druckman (2007a, 107) explicitly define framing effects in these terms: “a framing effect occurs when a communication increases the weight of a new or existing belief in the formation of one’s overall attitude.” This definition of framing implies that the phenomenon political scientists often call priming “is theoretically indistinguishable from framing” (Chong and Druckman 2007b, 640). Within the context of evaluations of presidents, Miller and Krosnick (2000, 301) provide a definition of priming that is equivalent to Chong and Druckman’s definition of framing: “priming occurs when media attention to an issue causes people to place special weight on it when constructing evaluations of overall presidential job performance.” Given the equivalence between the terms, I will refer to such effects as framing effects below.

Although plenty of evidence shows that framing effects occur, questions remain about the psychological mechanisms driving them. Early studies argued that framing effects were the result of making considerations *accessible* in memory (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). For example, Krosnick and Kinder (1990) argued that individuals evaluating presidents typically do not think through the implications of every possible consideration, but instead “generally focus only on the aspects of their knowledge that happen to be most accessible at the time of judgment” (499). Thus, a communication like a news story makes a consideration accessible to an individual and when she is asked for a judgment, the consideration automatically comes to mind and is therefore emphasized in making the judgment.

More recently, attention has focused on whether considerations made accessible by a stimulus are judged to be *applicable* to the evaluation at hand. Some have suggested that framing effects require that (or are at least enhanced when) considerations are not just accessible

in memory, but are deemed applicable (e.g., Miller and Krosnick 2000; Althaus and Kim 2006; Chong and Druckman 2007b; see also Miller 2007). In this view, framing is a two-step process that is not automatic. First, a stimulus makes a consideration accessible. Then, if the consideration is deemed applicable to a particular judgment, it is given greater weight in that judgment. If the accessible consideration is not deemed applicable, it is not given greater weight.

The psychological mechanisms underlying framing effects hold significant political implications. Presidents tend to emphasize favorable conditions and shift their public rhetoric away from negative conditions (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). However, opposition politicians or aggressive journalists will sometimes force presidents to comment on unfavorable conditions. When this happens, presidents may try to convince the public that the problem is someone else's fault. If accessibility alone can create a framing effect, saying "I am not to blame" for negative conditions will not help a president. Such a message will make the negative considerations accessible and therefore more influential on the public's evaluations. On the other hand, if considerations must be seen as applicable to affect evaluations, effectively framing attribution away from the president would decrease the weight of the unfavorable consideration.

More broadly, the psychological routes by which framing works can shape the degree to which presidents affect mass opinion. Framing effects based entirely on accessibility imply an automatic process: a communication makes a consideration accessible and then individuals weight that consideration more heavily in evaluations. Such an automatic process can turn individuals into passive "victims" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 90) of framing whose opinions are based on whatever considerations presidents make accessible. In contrast, citizens who assess the applicability of considerations, disregarding those deemed inapplicable to the evaluation at

hand, will be less vulnerable to presidential framing.

One way to discriminate between the two potential routes for framing effects is to test whether a frame stating that a consideration is not applicable can decrease the weight of a consideration. If an individual hears that Obama is not responsible for economic conditions, this message raises the accessibility of economic considerations, but claims that these accessible considerations are not applicable to evaluations of Obama. Thus, the frame makes the consideration more accessible but less applicable. If framing works primarily through accessibility, such a message should increase the weight of economic considerations on overall evaluations. However, if framing effects require a consideration to be both accessible and applicable, then such a message should decrease the weight of economic considerations.

Studies have seldom asked whether a message that emphasizes a particular consideration can decrease that consideration's weight. A few studies that focus on other questions present bits of evidence suggesting that frames can decrease a consideration's weight. For example, Druckman and Nelson (2003) employed a frame arguing that when evaluating campaign finance reform, protecting free speech is more important than limiting the power of special interests. Subjects who encountered this frame considered the influence of special interest groups less important in thinking about campaign finance reform compared to those in a control group. Other studies find that messages emphasizing one consideration (e.g., terrorism) can decrease the weight of another consideration (e.g., education) not emphasized (Kinder and Krosnick 1990; Druckman and Holmes 2004).

I know of only one study that examines whether a frame emphasizing a particular consideration can decrease the weight *of that particular consideration*. Iyengar and Kinder (1987, ch. 9) found messages suggesting that the president is not to blame for particular

problems decreased the weight of related considerations on presidential evaluations. However, they report levels of statistical significance for these effects ranging from $p < .2$ to $p < .6$. In addition, they found economic considerations, the type of considerations under study here, least susceptible to framing effects. These results suggest that such messages *may* decrease the weight of considerations, but remain inconclusive.

I use an experiment to test whether an attribution frame that decreases individuals' sense of the president's responsibility for the economy also decreases the impact of economic considerations. Subjects were provided one of three messages. Some heard that the unemployment rate had climbed from 8 percent to 9.8 percent during Obama's presidency (*Control Condition*). Others were given the same information and were told Obama was to blame for this increase (*President Responsible Condition*) or was not to blame (*President Not Responsible Condition*). The experiment provides a test of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: Subjects in the President Not Responsible Condition should weight their perceptions of economic conditions less in evaluations of Obama than subjects in the other conditions.

If framing effects result merely from making considerations accessible, respondents in all three conditions should weigh perceptions of economic conditions equally in their evaluations of Obama. In contrast, if accessible considerations must be deemed applicable for framing effects to occur, those in the President Not Responsible Condition should weigh perceptions of the economy less in evaluations of Obama than do respondents in the President Responsible or the Control conditions.

The context of presidential evaluations provides a strong test of this hypothesis. The vast literature on presidential approval has consistently found that economic considerations powerfully influence the president's public standing (see Gronke and Newman 2009 for a review). Several individual-level analyses find economic considerations are among the strongest predictors of presidential evaluations (e.g., Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Nicholson, Segura, and Woods 2002; Newman 2003; Druckman and Holmes 2004). In fact, presidency scholars frequently argue that the public holds unrealistic expectations of presidents, uniformly listing the president's role as "the nation's chief economic manager" among them (Cronin and Genovese 2004, 138; see Jenkins-Smith, Silva, and Waterman 2005, 693 for a list of nine studies making this argument). Given the public's tendency to weigh economic considerations heavily when evaluating presidents, the President Responsible frame may not encourage subjects to weigh these considerations more than a control group. However, if there is a long-standing tendency for economic considerations to shape evaluations of the president, it may prove difficult for an attribution frame to reduce the weight of these considerations.⁴

The Experiment

I tested the hypothesis with a national online survey experiment administered by Knowledge Networks December 12-27, 2010.⁵ The sample of 1,746 U.S. residents 18 or older matches the national population quite well (Table 1). The subjects were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, blocking by subjects' party identification (Democrat, Republican, and independent). The three experimental groups were quite similar on several key demographic and political variables (see Table 2).⁶ All respondents were asked an identical set of questions except for the manipulation.

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

All subjects were asked an *Economic Attribution* question: “To what extent do you think the Barack Obama administration is responsible for current economic conditions?” Response options ranged along a horizontal scale from 0, labeled “Not at all responsible,” to 10, labeled “Entirely responsible.” The manipulation consisted of the following information, provided just before the attribution item:

Control Condition: “In 2009, at the beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency, the unemployment rate was 8 percent. According to the latest official figures, the unemployment rate is 9.8 percent.”

President Responsible Condition: “Many economists have argued that the Obama administration’s efforts to boost the economy, like the \$787 billion economic stimulus package, have not produced many new jobs, but may have created a drag on recovery by spending roughly \$2.6 trillion more than the government has during his presidency. In 2009, at the beginning of Obama’s presidency, the unemployment rate was 8 percent. According to the latest official figures, the unemployment rate is 9.8 percent.”

President Not Responsible Condition: “The unemployment rate has been rising since the last year and a half of George W. Bush’s presidency. In 2009, at the beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency, the unemployment rate was 8 percent. According to the latest official figures, the unemployment rate is 9.8 percent. Many economists argue that presidents have virtually no control over the economy. Before Obama took office, economists predicted that the unemployment rate would be around 10 percent for the first two years of his presidency no

matter what Obama did in office.”

Attribution frames like these have been shown to affect individuals’ attribution of blame (e.g., Iyengar 1991; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Malhotra and Kuo 2008). On their face, these particular frames may appear fairly strong. This is by design given that few studies have directly examined the effects a frame that decreases the applicability of a consideration can have on evaluations. As noted above, the study that most directly examines this question (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) found results with low levels of statistical significance. In addition, the goal was to make economic considerations accessible, but to vary their perceived applicability. As shown below, this goal was met, but it was unclear prior to the study whether more subtle frames would achieve this aim.⁷ As an initial study of a frame making a consideration accessible but less applicable, then, the frames were designed to be fairly strong to see whether the hypothesized effect is possible. Future refinements should examine effects of more subtle frames.

The outcome of interest is the weight of perceived economic conditions on evaluations of Obama. The evaluation measure consisted of two items. Respondents were asked to rate Obama on a feeling thermometer ranging from 0 to 100 and a job approval question, with five responses ranging from “strongly disapprove” to “strongly approve.”⁸ The correlation between these items was .90, so I combined them via principal components factor analysis and rescaled the combined evaluation variable to a 0 – 100 scale (Krosnick and Brannon 1993; mean 48.9, standard deviation 30.2).⁹ The average treatment effect is estimated by regressing evaluations on indicator variables for two of the three blocking groups (Democrat and Republican, coded 1 if in the group, 0 otherwise), *Economic Perceptions*¹⁰, an indicator for selection into the President Not Responsible Condition (coded 1 if selected, 0 otherwise), and the estimate of interest—the

interaction between them (see Gerber and Green 2012, 112).

Results

Table 3, column 1 presents the estimates. The results suggest that the President Not Responsible frame may have decreased the weight of economic considerations, as hypothesized. The interaction between economic perceptions and the President Not Responsible Frame is negative but falls short of statistical significance ($p = .13$, all tests two-tailed). To obtain a more precise estimate of the treatment's effect, I adjusted for covariates previous studies have shown to be strong predictors of presidential evaluations (see Gerber and Green 2012, ch. 4): individuals' political ideology and assessments of the president's handling of various issues (e.g., Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Greene 2000; Newman 2003). This entailed estimating the same OLS model, adding *Political Ideology*¹¹ and approval or disapproval of the president's handling of several issues: *Foreign Policy Approval*, *Health Care Approval*, *Education Approval*, and *Energy Approval* (each coded 0 for "disapprove" and 1 for "approve").¹²

Column 2 of Table 3 presents the results, which show more definitively that the President Not Responsible frame decreased the weight of economic perceptions on evaluations of Obama. The estimate for the interaction term remains negative and is statistically significant ($p < .05$). Individuals given the President Not Responsible frame weighed economic perceptions *less* than those in the other two conditions.

The coefficient for the interaction (-2.5) is about half the coefficient of economic perceptions (4.6), the estimated effect of these perceptions for those individuals not in the President Not Responsible Condition. Thus, subjects encountering the President Not Responsible frame weighed economic perceptions about half as heavily as did other subjects. To illustrate, Figure 1 shows the "punishment" associated with revising one's economic perceptions

from “fairly good” to “very bad,” a two-point shift in the economic perceptions variable (estimates generated by STATA’s “margins” routine with 95 percent confidence intervals). Holding other variables at mean or modal values, such a shift is estimated to result in a drop of 9 points for those in the President Responsible or Control conditions, from 52 to 43. In contrast, such a shift would result in lowering Obama’s evaluation only about 4 points for those in the President Not Responsible Condition, from 52 to 48. As a result, among subjects with the most negative views of the economy (30% of the sample) predicted evaluations were 5 points higher among subjects who encountered the President Not Responsible frame, a difference statistically significant at the .05 level.¹³ I estimated the models in columns 1 and 2 without demographic covariates. As expected given the balance across treatments (see Table 2), the estimates do not change much when these covariates are included (see Table 3, column 3; covariates include respondent education, sex, household income, age, and indicator variables for African American, Hispanic, mixed ethnicity, other ethnicity, southern residence).

[Table 3 about here]

I explored whether the framing effects differed across party groups. Theories of motivated reasoning (e.g., Lodge and Taber 2000) suggest that Democrats, motivated to protect their favorable view of Obama, might be especially open to attribution frames that suggest that considerations unfavorable toward Obama should be downplayed. In contrast, Republicans, motivated to maintain a negative view of Obama, might reject an attribution frame that would let Obama off the hook for poor economic conditions. The results suggest that Democrats and independents were more open to decreasing the weight of economic considerations than were Republicans. However, the results are not very strong, with p-values of the relevant parameter estimates between .1 and .2.¹⁴ Thus, the results are suggestive, but do not warrant drawing

strong conclusions. It may prove fruitful for future studies to explore party differences in framing effects more directly.

These results point to the power of an attribution frame to decrease the weight of a consideration. A few studies have found traces of evidence that this type of framing effect could occur. Here we have direct evidence that attribution frames can reduce the impact of economic considerations on the public's evaluations of presidents.

Framing via Applicability not Accessibility

The experiment was designed to test the effects of a frame that makes a consideration more accessible but less applicable. As a manipulation check, to be sure that the President Not Responsible frame affected the applicability of economic considerations, I examined whether subjects in the President Not Responsible Condition blamed Obama less for economic conditions than did other subjects. To do so, I took *Economic Attributions* (item described above, mean 6.0, SD 3.1) as the outcome measure. The effect of the treatments on those attributions is estimated by regressing the attributions on indicator variables for the President Not Responsible and President Responsible conditions and two of the three blocking groups as above.

Table 4, column 1 suggests that the experimental condition may have affected attributions in expected ways. The omitted category here is the Control Condition, so respondents in the President Not Responsible Condition put Obama's blame about 0.28 points lower on the scale than those in the Control Condition, though the estimate is only statistically significant at the .10 level. Since the public typically weighs economic conditions heavily in presidential evaluations, we might expect no effect from the President Responsible Condition. In fact, the estimate provides no clear evidence of any effect at all ($p = .37$).

To obtain a more precise estimate of the experimental effect, I included covariates known

to predict economic attributions: Political Sophistication, Political Ideology, Economic Perceptions, and interactions between these perceptions and partisanship (for evidence on these covariates' relationship with attributions, see Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003, 2008; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b; Tilley and Hobolt 2011).¹⁵ Table 4, column 2 presents the results, which provide strong evidence that the President Not Responsible frame decreased views of the president's culpability for economic conditions. Subjects in this condition ranked Obama's responsibility about 0.4 points lower than those in the control condition. Again, as expected, the President Responsible frame appears not to increase views of the president's responsibility for economic conditions beyond the public's typical expectations, as the estimated effect for this condition falls well short of statistical significance. The estimates are largely unchanged when demographic covariates are included (see Table 4, column 3). In short, the manipulation affected the degree to which individuals blamed Obama for economic conditions. Such a finding is not terribly surprising since others have found that "content rich information" affects blame attribution (Malhotra and Kuo 2008, 180; see also Iyengar 1991; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Arceneaux 2006; Sirin and Villalobos 2011).¹⁶

[Table 4 about here]

However, the finding is important to the experiment's logic because it shows that the President Not Responsible frame decreased the applicability of economic perceptions for evaluations of Obama. At the same time, this treatment increased the accessibility of economic perceptions.¹⁷ If framing works via accessibility, a frame that increases a consideration's accessibility and decreases its applicability, as the President Not Responsible frame does, would increase the weight of the consideration. Table 3 shows this did not happen. In fact, the opposite occurred. Subjects who encountered a frame making economic considerations

accessible but less applicable weighed these considerations less in their overall evaluation.¹⁸

Conclusion

Where many studies have shown that frames offered in presidential rhetoric or news coverage can increase the weight of considerations in presidential evaluations, this study shows that attribution frames can also decrease the weight of considerations. In fact they can decrease the weight of economic considerations, which routinely have a strong impact on presidential evaluations. Previous studies have hinted that this type of framing effect is possible, but this study provides firm evidence on the question. In addition, the results presented here suggest that accessibility does not appear to induce framing effects in this context. Frames making a consideration accessible but not applicable do not always boost a consideration's impact.

These results hold implications for presidential power over public opinion and in Congress. In terms of the public's evaluations of presidents, the results show that framing changed views of how much responsibility Obama bore for the struggling economy in late 2010. If a survey experiment can manipulate responsibility attributions, presidents may be able to do so as well, perhaps avoiding accountability. We know that presidents try to shift public attention away from negative considerations (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). However, eventually the president will be forced to address the unfavorable consideration as political opponents or aggressive journalists press the point. The experiment suggests that presidents may be able to frame the consideration as not terribly applicable to presidential evaluations because the president is not to blame for the relevant conditions. If so, presidents may be able to limit or possibly avoid blame and subsequent punishment.

More broadly, the potential for presidents to alter the applicability of considerations to various types of evaluations has consequences for the use and success of "going public."

Rational choice models of going public show that presidents have incentives to make public appeals on behalf of their proposals when those proposals are popular in the public but face opposition from interest groups and in Congress (e.g., Canes-Wrone 2001a; 2001b; Cameron and Park 2011). Such cases generate a contest for public opinion between the president and the proposal's critics. In such contests, presidents tend to employ "crafted talk," focusing their rhetoric on dimensions of the proposal that are popular with the public (Cameron and Park 2011). For their part, the proposal's opponents will try to focus public attention on considerations making the proposal less popular (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). To the extent that presidents can convince the public that the considerations making the public wary of the proposal are not applicable to evaluations of the proposal, the president stands a better chance of winning the opinion contest and ultimately a better chance of obtaining a more preferable outcome in the legislature. Thus, the president's capacity to alter the applicability of considerations for evaluations of people (e.g., executive or judicial nominees) or policies may affect the success going public generates and therefore, decisions about whether to go public in the first place.

Future research should continue to examine the conditions under which presidential rhetoric can generate the framing effects uncovered here. Extant research suggests several factors could condition the impact of attribution frames, including presidential popularity, the policy domain in question (international vs. domestic), and the strength of opponents' frames (e.g., Druckman 2001; Chong and Druckman 2007b; Sirin and Villalobos 2011). Additional studies would do well to explore these factors to delineate the conditions that offer presidents opportunities and challenges in their efforts to shape public opinion and legislators' behavior.

This study shows that attribution frames affect how much individuals blame presidents and the criteria they use to evaluate presidents. Consequently, we must continue to learn about

attribution frames. Doing so will help us understand presidential evaluations and the ways presidential rhetoric can shape presidential accountability and presidential influence in Congress.

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Table 1: Sample Descriptive Statistics

	2010 Census	Survey
18-24		10.6
20-24	9.6	
25-34	18.2	18.2
35-44	18.2	19.0
45-54	20.0	17.2
55-64	16.1	19.0
65-74	9.6	11.5
75+	8.3	4.6
Female	50.8	51.5
Male	49.2	48.5
White	72.4	68.2
Black	12.6	11.1
Hispanic	16.3	13.9
Less than High School	13.7	12.8
High School Grad	31.1	31.0
Some college	28.0	28.6
Bachelor's or higher	27.3	27.7

Cell entries are percentages.

Table 2: Means of Key Variables by Experimental Condition

	Control	President Responsible	President Not Responsible
N	576	580	590
Party Identification (mean, 1-7)	4.4	4.4	4.4
Ideology (mean, 1-7)	4.0	3.9	3.8
% White	68.0	68.4	68.5
% Black	11.3	11.2	10.9
% Hispanic	13.9	13.6	13.9
% Other Race/Ethnicity	3.8	3.5	3.8
% Mixed Race/Ethnicity	3.0	3.3	3.0
% Female	51.1	51.7	51.8
Education (mean, 1-4)	2.7	2.7	2.7
Income (mean, 1-19)	10.1	10.3	10.3
Age (mean, 1-7)	3.70	3.68	3.73

Note: none of the differences in means between any of the three groups are statistically significant at the .05 level. Only the difference in ideology means for the Control and President Not Responsible Conditions is statistically significant at the .10 level.

Table 3: Impact of Frames on Evaluations of Obama

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Economic Perceptions	12.47** (1.08)	4.61** (0.72)	4.73** (0.72)
President Responsible Condition	-0.32 (1.49)	-0.19 (0.96)	-0.33 (0.95)
President Not Responsible Condition	3.71 (2.30)	4.49** (1.48)	4.51** (1.46)
Economic Perceptions * President Not Responsible Condition	-2.92 (1.92)	-2.50* (1.24)	-2.59* (1.23)
Republican	-21.15** (1.57)	-6.58** (1.09)	-6.14** (1.08)
Democrat	20.48** (1.40)	4.45** (0.99)	3.32** (0.99)
Foreign Policy Approval		12.35** (1.03)	12.02** (1.02)
Health Care Approval		17.12** (1.10)	16.60** (1.08)
Education Approval		9.47** (1.07)	9.41** (1.06)
Energy Approval		10.50** (1.08)	9.95** (1.07)
Political Ideology		3.00** (0.32)	3.09** (0.33)
Constant	34.45** (1.59)	8.21** (1.52)	5.78** (2.38)
Demographic covariates included?	No	No	Yes
Observations	1534	1534	1534
Adjusted R-squared	0.38	0.74	0.75

Standard errors in parentheses; + significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%
Model estimated via OLS. The dependent variable is the 0 – 100 evaluation scale.

Demographic covariates include respondent education, sex, household income, age, and indicator variables for African American, Hispanic, mixed ethnicity, other ethnicity, southern residence.

Table 4: Impact of Messages about Attribution on Economic Attributions

	(1)	(2)	(3)
President Responsible Condition	0.14 (0.16)	0.18 (0.15)	0.19 (0.14)
President Not Responsible Condition	-0.28+ (0.16)	-0.40** (0.15)	-0.40** (0.14)
Democrat	-1.88** (0.15)	-1.42** (0.25)	-1.25** (0.24)
Republican	2.08** (0.16)	1.49** (0.24)	1.51** (0.24)
Political Ideology		-0.71** (0.05)	-0.70** (0.05)
Political Sophistication		-0.07* (0.03)	-0.07* (0.04)
Economic Perceptions		-0.70** (0.14)	-0.65** (0.14)
Economic Perceptions * Democrat		0.38+ (0.20)	0.42* (0.20)
Economic Perceptions * Republican		-0.38+ (0.22)	-0.44* (0.22)
Constant	6.17** (0.14)	9.66** (0.26)	10.31** (0.37)
Demographic covariates included?	No	No	Yes
Observations	1726	1726	1726
R-squared	0.24	0.36	0.38

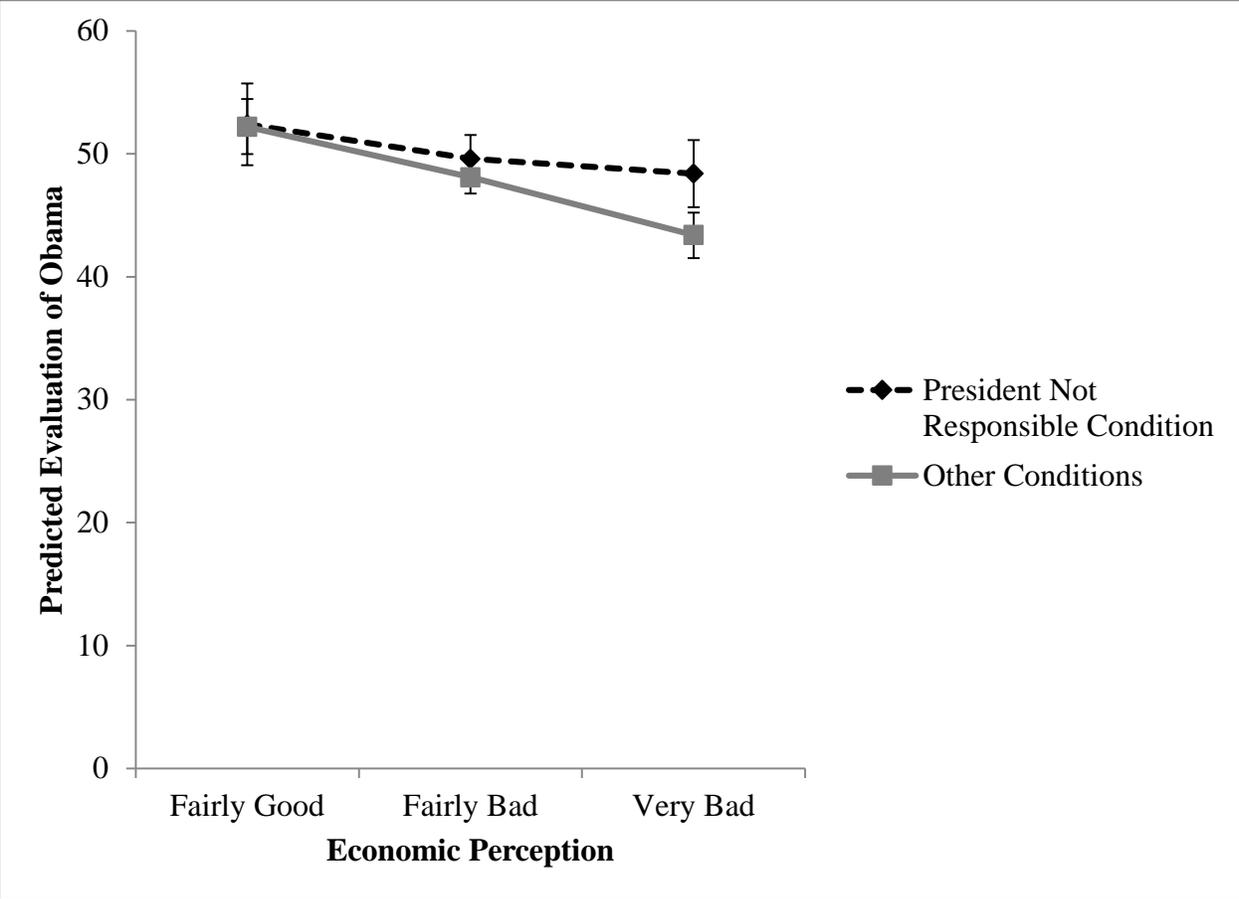
Standard errors in parentheses. + significant at 10%; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%
Estimate obtained via OLS.

The dependent variable is the 0 – 10 Economic Attribution item.

The Control Condition is the comparison category for the experimental condition variables.

Demographic covariates include respondent education, sex, household income, age, and indicator variables for African American, Hispanic, mixed ethnicity, other ethnicity, southern residence.

Figure 1: Economic Perceptions' Differing Effect on Evaluations by Experimental Group



Notes

¹ I thank Pepperdine University for support during this project. The survey experiment was funded by the Time Sharing in Social Sciences (TESS) program. I am indebted to Cynthia Colburn, Elizabeth Essary, Megan Francis, Caitlin Lawrence, Robert Sexton, and Chris Soper for help with pilot surveys and Poom Nukulki of Knowledge Networks for his help with the survey experiment. Thanks to Kevin Arceneaux, Jeff Cohen, Jamie Druckman, Jennifer Merolla, Costas Panagopoulos, and Elizabeth Zechmeister for suggestions on the project. All errors are my own.

² See <http://www.nber.org/dec2008.html>.

³ Data collected by Knowledge Networks for this study. See below for details.

⁴ Negativity bias in political cognition (e.g., Lau 1985) may suggest that one of the experimental conditions should exert a stronger effect than the other. Although negative frames may be stronger than positive frames, it is not obvious which of the frames in the experiment is negative. On one hand, saying someone is to blame for poor conditions seems negative. On the other, saying someone is “not” to blame also seems negative, especially when such a claim runs counter to common expectations. Since it is not obvious which frame is more negative, I hold no expectation that negativity bias will enhance the influence of one or the other frame consistently.

⁵ 3,706 panelists were randomly drawn from the Knowledge Networks panel. 2,365 responded to the invitation, yielding a final stage completion rate of 63.8% percent. The recruitment rate for this study, reported by Knowledge Networks, was 16.5% and the profile rate was 64.1 for a cumulative response rate of 6.7. The total sample was randomly selected into four conditions. One of these groups could not be used in this analysis because the economic perception and responsibility attribution questions were not asked of the group due to an error on my part.

⁶ Of the 33 comparisons in Table 2, only the difference in mean ideology between the Control and President Not Responsible conditions is statistically significant at the .10 level (without a Bonferroni correction).

⁷ In fact, the proposal to TESS was only accepted after the frames were made stronger because proposal reviewers were worried that subtler frames would not manipulate economic attributions. Pilot testing with 240 undergraduates showed that these frames did manipulate economic attributions.

⁸ Question wording: “We'd like you to rate Barack Obama using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorably and warm toward Obama; ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorably toward Obama and that you don't care too much for him. You would rate him at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward Obama. How do you rate Barack Obama on this thermometer?” “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as President?” Strongly approve, approve, neither approve nor disapprove, disapprove, strongly disapprove.

⁹ Using only the feeling thermometer or the approval item generated similar results, though the estimates are less precise.

¹⁰ Subjects were asked “how would you rate the condition of the national economy these days” and could choose “very good,” “fairly good,” “fairly bad,” or “very bad” (economic perceptions). Although perceptions were generally negative, there is still significant variation in responses: 29.6% “very bad”, 52.3% “fairly bad”, 17.8% “fairly good”, 0.4% “very good.”

¹¹ Ideology was measured using a standard 7-point item running from 0 (extremely conservative) to 6 (extremely liberal).

¹² These approval items are correlated at between .53 and .71. However, collinearity does not appear to cause problems in the model as variance inflation factors are all below 4.0.

Combining the four approval items into a single scale via principal components factor analysis produces virtually identical results to those reported below.

¹³ A model including an interaction between economic perceptions and selection into the President Responsible Condition, allowing a comparison of the weight of economic perceptions in all three conditions, generates similar results. The coefficient for the Economic Perceptions * President Not Responsible Condition interaction remains negative and is slightly smaller than in Table 3 (-2.4 compared to -2.5), though the collinearity induced by adding another interaction term inflates the standard error (from 1.2 to 1.4) enough that the interaction is only statistically significant at the .10 level, two-tailed. The Economic Perceptions * President Responsible Condition interaction is close to zero (0.21) and falls far short of statistical significance (SE = 1.4). This is to be expected. As noted above, previous studies routinely find that economic considerations have a strong influence on presidential evaluations. Consequently, the President Responsible Condition's frame may simply reinforce existing proclivities. The magnitude of the treatment effect is similar to that reported above. The model estimates that a two-point drop in economic perceptions (from "fairly good" to "very bad") would produce a 9 point decline in evaluations for those in the control group, and only a 4 point decline for those in the President Not Responsible Condition. As was the case in the model presented in Table 3, the weight of economic perceptions for subjects in the President Not Responsible condition is about half that for subjects in the Control Condition.

¹⁴ I estimated the model in Table 3, column 2 for Republicans, Democrats, and independents separately. Democrats and independents in the President Not Responsible Condition appear to

have weighed economic considerations less heavily than other subjects. The President Not Responsible * Economic Perceptions interaction term remained negative (-3.0 for Democrats and -3.1 for independents), but in both cases fell short of traditional levels of substantive significance ($p = .17$ for Democrats, $p = .13$ for independents). In contrast, for Republicans, the interaction term was closer to zero (-1.8) and well short of statistical significance ($p = .44$).

¹⁵ The measure of political sophistication is equivalent to Gomez and Wilson's (2003) measure. Their measure was based on answers to six open ended questions asking individuals to identify the job or political office held by four individuals, along with the party holding the majority of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The questions in the present study refer to the same offices, asking the job or political office held by John Boehner, Joe Biden, John Roberts, and David Cameron, along with the party holding a majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The study was in the field after the 2010 midterm elections, which shifted the majority of the House of Representatives from the Democrats to the Republicans. Therefore, some questions specified the relevant time period. The question about Boehner read "What job or political office will John Boehner hold starting in January?" The questions about House and Senate majorities read "Starting in January, which party will have the most members in the House of Representatives [Senate] in Washington?" Following Gomez and Wilson, since the items combine nicely (Cronbach's alpha = .76) I added the number of correct responses to form a 0 – 6 political sophistication scale (mean 2.98, SD 1.79).

¹⁶ Note that the effects shown in Table 4 are not framing effects. Theoretically, framing is distinct from persuasion or learning (e.g., Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Lenz 2009). Framing changes the weight of a consideration, but not the content of that consideration. The manipulated messages are frames in one context, but not in another. An argument that Obama is

not to blame for economic conditions appears to have persuaded individuals to change their views of Obama's culpability (Table 4). When the opinion in question is the degree to which Obama is to blame, these messages are not "frames," but arguments. However, the manipulation did generate a framing effect when the opinion in question is an evaluation of Obama (Table 3).

¹⁷ Following earlier studies (e.g., Tulving, Schacter, and Stark 1982; Bassili and Smith 1986; Gilbert and Hixon 1991; Miller 2007), I employed a word completion task to measure accessibility. First, I gave 29 undergraduates a blank sheet of paper and asked them to take the next minute to list everything that comes to mind when I say the phrase "the economy." I identified the most commonly listed words. Second, I gave a different group of 75 native English-speaking undergraduates a word completion task. All subjects were shown the same series of 15 word fragments (e.g., __NK) and asked to complete the words. Each word fragment was projected on a screen for 25 seconds. Of the 15 fragments, 7 could potentially be completed in a way that relates to the economy (e.g., BANK) or in ways that do not relate to the economy (e.g., TANK). The 7 fragments that could be related to the economy were based on the words students most commonly listed in step one. Prior to the word completion task, a randomly selected treatment group was given a paper with instructions for the task, the language from the President Not Responsible frame, and the attribution item employed in the survey experiments. A randomly selected control group received the same instructions. However, instead of the President Not Responsible frame and the economic attribution question, this form included a different attribution frame and question relating to the causes of student success in college.

On average, those in the treatment group completed the fragments with 1.9 words relating to the economy, while the treatment group only listed 1.4 economic words ($p = .06$). One of the courses was an introductory economics course and another was an introductory American

politics course. Students in these courses listed significantly more economic words than students in other courses (art appreciation and communication theory), presumably because the courses themselves made economic considerations more accessible. Adjusting for these covariates by including an indicator variable for subjects in these courses sharpens the difference between treatment and control groups so that the p-value of the average treatment effect shrinks to .04.

¹⁸ Chong and Druckman (2007a) show that for less knowledgeable individuals, framing can work via accessibility. To examine if accessibility increased the weight of economic perceptions for this group, I re-estimated the model for only those who scored 3 or lower on the 6-point political knowledge scale. I found no evidence that accessibility generated a framing effect.