I Like Him (Her) Anyway? Partisan Bias in Retrospection and the Attentive Electorate in the Context of Natural Disasters *

Hyun Woo Lim [†]

Washington University in St. Louis

December 13, 2018

[†]Ph.D. Student, Department of Political Science, Campus Box 1063, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130; hyunwoolim@wustl.edu.

Abstract

Are voters retrospective and attentive? If so, in what condition and to what extent are voters retrospective and attentive? In the context of natural disaster and presidential disaster declaration, I find that voters punish incumbent president for severe weather damage and reward him if there is disaster declaration to help them by individual level analysis with 2010-2014 CCES panel data. Moreover, other than voters' evaluation on president, both disaster and disaster declaration have positive association with voters' actual turnout. Together this paper's findings suggest that voters are retrospective and attentive. Furthermore, I find that the extent of reward and punishment toward incumbent is strongly associated with voters' partisanship. If voters and incumbent president share the same partisanship, voters reward substantively more the incumbent for their action and punish less for severe weather damage. It implies that voters are retrospection and attentiveness can be affected by partisan bias.

Introduction

If voters punish incumbents for harsh weather and reward incumbents for their accountable actions what kinds of people are they? Many studies have examined whether voters can evaluate politicians retrospectively and whether voters are attentive to politicians' behaviors or not (Achen and Bartels 2004; Arceneaux, Kevin, and Stein 2006; Gasper and Reeves 2011). However, in the context of argument over responsive and attentive voters, the question of to what extent different voters have different level of responsiveness and attentiveness is not well explored. Therefore, this paper investigate who are more or less responsive and attentive when they punish or reward incumbents for their accountability.

In real politics, voters can have hard time to identify who is responsible and accountable because of complexity in politics and lack of information. However, the case of presidential disaster declaration and weather damage provide great opportunity to examine voters' capability of responsiveness and attentiveness because the actors are limited and severe weather damage is almost random and easy to be perceived by voters retrospectively.

In the analysis of 2010 - 2014 CCES panel data, I found that voters who are identified as the same partisan to the incumbent president's partisanship are more generous about both punishment and reward toward the incumbent president for the weather damage and disaster declaration. Democrat voters will reward incumbent Democratic president substantively more than Republican or independent voters. It means that there is substantial difference in voters' retrospective and attentive judgment based on their partisanship.

This paper has important contribution on literature. I found that voters retrospectively and attentively evaluate elected representatives based on severe weather and politicians' accountable action for the damage in individual level analysis. More importantly, partisanship of voters is associated with their retrospection and attentiveness in that if voters and incumbent president share partisanship, voters are more generous about both punishment and reward for their retrospective and attentive evaluation. This heterogeneous effects have important implication as well. Partisanship of voters affect their ability to retrospection and

1

attentiveness. This implies that partisan bias can affect democratic accountability based on voters' responsiveness.

Literature

Retrospective and Attentive Voters

Scholars have studied whether voters can make retrospective judgment on politicians based on the given information or status (Achen and Bartels 2004; Arceneaux, Kevin, and Stein 2006; Gasper and Reeves 2011; de Benedictis-Kessner 2018). There can be two different mechanisms that explains retrospective and responsive voters: the first mechanism is voters evaluate the given information or status with reason. Rational voters could differentiate the cause of their current status and punish or reward incumbent politicians. The other mechanism is "blind retrospection". Voters could irrationally and absurdly punish or reward politicians based on things unrelated to their politics.

The difficult point can be whether voters' punishment on incumbents for severe weather damage is a rational retrospective behavior or not. As Gasper and Reeves (2011) argued, the distinction between these two mechanisms may not significant, and the main point is the fact that voters are responsive.

The other theory about voters are electorates who are attentive to the politicians' behaviors and responses. Attentive voters punish or reward politicians based on their politicians' behaviors and responses in given situation. In this paper, attentive voters will reward incumbent president for his response as presidential disaster declaration.

The challenging point in this theory is when many politicians are involved in the governmental action, whom attentive voters can punish or reward. Therefore, the good case to test this theory can be the effect of presidential disaster declaration because there are only two major actors, governor and president (Gasper and Reeves 2011). With this case, voters could more clearly identify who are responsible and accountable for the action if voters are

2

attentive.

Individual Level Analysis

Previous scholars already identified the effect of severe weather damage and presidential disaster declaration on electoral incentive of incumbent presidents and governors (Gasper and Reeves 2011; Kriner and Reeves 2015; Reeves 2011). They found there are positive relationship between disaster declaration and incumbent president's vote share and also presidents declare presidential disaster declarations strategically for electoral incentives.

However, whether voters are responsive or not and whether they are attentive or not has not explored at individual level. Therefore, in this paper, I will focus on individual level analysis on responsive and attentive voters with the case of weather damage and presidential disaster declaration. By panel data, we can also examine how political knowledge, news interest and education are associated with the effect of presidential disaster declaration and severe weather damage. People who are more politically informed and exposed to media could have larger effect than those who are not. It is because as Zaller (1992) argued, the greater an individual's level of political awareness, the more likely he or she is to receive political elites' messages. In other words, there can be interaction effect between the effect of presidential disaster declaration and the level of political awareness and interests.

Moreover, Gasper and Reeves (2011) could not examine whether there is heterogeneous effects based on partisanship. In a macro level, voters can be seen retrospective and attentive, but there can be variation of effects between Republican or Democrat voters. For instance, Republican voter will not punish incumbent Republican president even if there was severe weather damage or Republican voter will not reward incumbent Democratic president even if he declared disaster declaration compared to Democrat voter.

Lastly, the effect of severe weather damage and presidential disaster declaration on turnout can be studied. There are studies that natural disasters affect voters' behavior such as turnout in that flood can increase the turnout (Sinclair, Hall and Alvarez 2011). On

the other hand, other studies found no effect of natural disaster on turnout (Lasala-Blanco, Shapiro, and Rivera-Burgos 2017; Bodet, Thomas and Tessier 2016). In this respect, I studied how severe weather and disaster declaration affect turnout in individual level. It is unclear whether turnout of voter helps incumbent president or not, but it is meaningful to check whether voters are responsive and attentive with this data and theoretical framework.

In summary, I can identify three hypotheses to explore the theory of retrospective and attentive voters. The first is relationship with political interest and retrospective and attentive judgment. The hypothesis is that electorates will reward presidents for disaster declarations and punish president for severe weather damage but there is interaction between political knowledge and judgment. In this study, if a voter is more exposed to media, has higher education or more politically knowledgeable, the effect of disaster declaration will be larger and the punishment toward president will be smaller than those who are not.

The second is partisan retrospective and attentive voters. Democrat voter will punish incumbent Democratic president less than Republican voter. Also when there is disaster declaration, Democrat voter will reward incumbent Democratic president more than Republican Voter.

The last is the actual behaviors of retrospective and attentive voters in terms of turnout. Voters who suffered from severe weather or benefit from disaster declaration are more likely to turnout to evaluate incumbents. With this hypothesis, other than voters' opinion, we can examine actual behavioral effect of severe weather and disaster declaration. In other words, we can investigate the behavior of retrospective and attentive voters.

Data and Research Design

In this paper, I used Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) panel data from 2010 to 2014. This CCES panel data consists of 3 waves of surveys and by using this data, I can do individual level analysis. Individual fixed effects model is used to identify individual
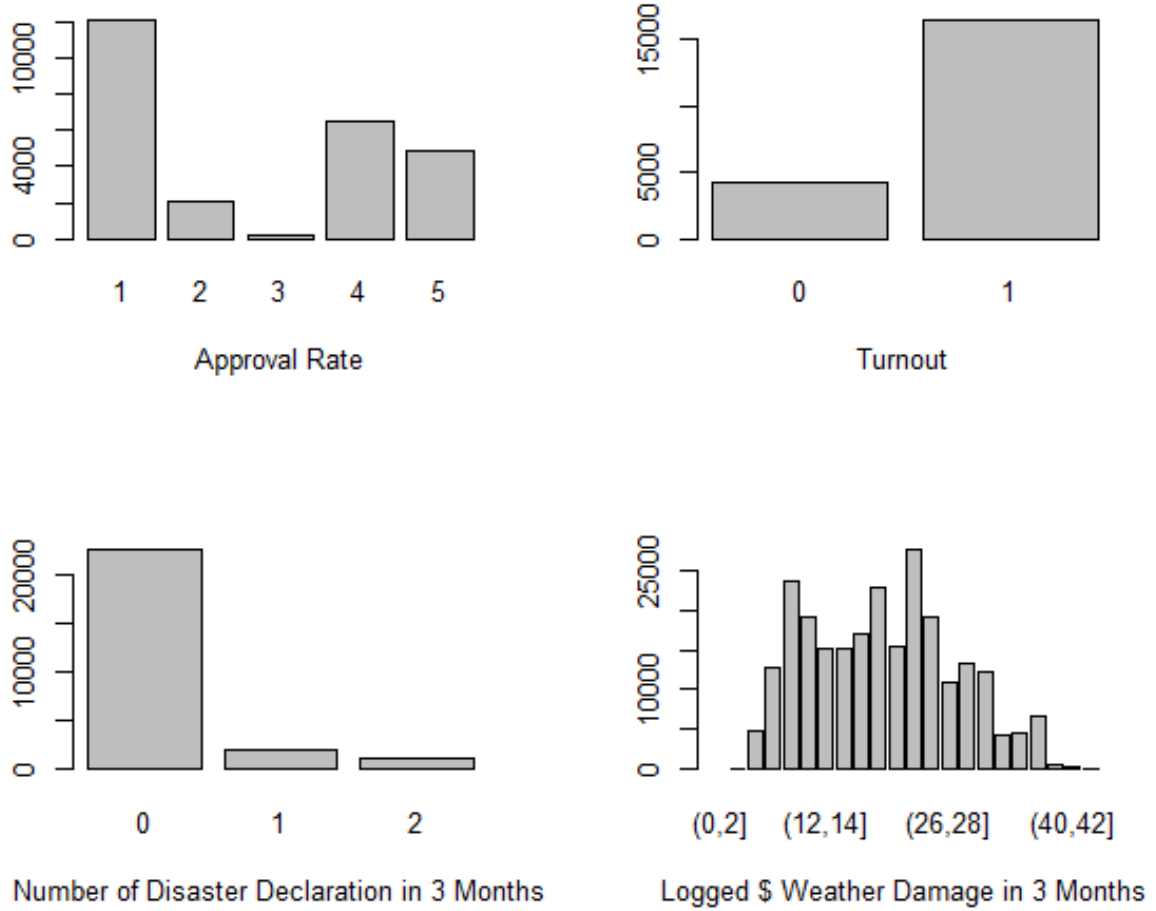
level analysis. Individual fixed effects cannot guarantee causal inference for analysis, CCES's panel data allows us to control for unobserved confounders with fine-grained individual fixed effects model. I also included year and state fixed effects to have more robust analysis.

Natural disaster and severe weather damage are plausibly random exogenous shocks, but the presidential disaster declaration is not completely random. As Kriner and Reeves (2015) argue, presidents do not issue disaster declarations. They strategically issue disaster declaration for electoral incentives. Therefore, if disaster declarations in 2010 to 2014 were targeted to increase electoral incentives, we might need to concern about causal relationship.

To tease out conditional and heterogeneous effect of disaster declaration, I used interaction term. To test first hypothesis, I used three variables for measuring political interests or awareness. These variables are news interests, political knowledge and level of education. The results are in the table 2. For the second hypothesis, I used party identification variables. Republican, Democrat and independent party identification variables are all binary variables (0 and 1). Lastly for the third hypothesis, I used individual's turnout as dependent variable. Therefore, table 4's models are logit regression with fixed effects.

Now I will explain the main variables. The main dependent variables are president's approval rate (Obama) and turnout which is binary variable. The key independent variables are the number of disaster declaration in 3 months and logged dollar amount of estimated weather damage. Figure 1 shows the summary statistics and distributions of key variables. Other control variables are Republican (binary), Democrat (binary), Independent (binary), female (binary), White (binary), education (1-6), age (18-91), income (1-14), political knowledge (0-4) and news interest (1-4). Political knowledge is measured by survey respondents' knowledge about majority party in U.S. House, U.S. Senate, state lower chamber and state higher chamber.

Figure 1: Distribution of Key variables

Results

I first check the effect of presidential declaration and severe weather damage on Obama's approval rate in individual level. Table 1 shows that disaster declaration has positive effect on president's approval rate. Table 1's model 3 with interaction effects between disaster declaration and news interest do not show statistically significant outcome, but based on various models, it is consistent that disaster declaration has positive effect on incumbent president's approval rate. The base model which is model 1 shows that when there is one more

presidential disaster declaration, a voter's Obama's approval rate increase by about 0.06. This is significant increase of approval rate considering the approval rate is scaled from 1 to 5. Also because this is individual level effect, aggregatively the effect size of one presidential declaration can be substantial. Unlike Gasper and Reeves's (2011) outcome, the property damage by severe weather do not have statistically significant effect on incubment president's electoral incentive, but the estimated coefficient is all negative and even with standard error, it does not overlap zero. This means that even if the outcome is not statistically significant in conventional level, but it is distinguishable from zero. It implies that weather damage may have negative effect on incumbent president's approval rate.

The various interaction terms for measuring political interest including level of political knowledge, news interest and education level do not show statistically significant effect. It means that my fist hypothesis for the relationship with political interest and retrospective and attentive judgment of voters has no statistically significant results. From table 1 we find that there is individual voters are retrospective and attentive, but they are not related to individuals' political interests.

Table 1: The Effect of Disaster Declaration on President's Approval Rate: Political Interests

	Obama approval rate				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Disaster declaration	0.065***	0.057**	0.025	0.065***	0.050**
	(0.009)	(0.023)	(0.050)	(0.009)	(0.025)
Property damage	−0.0002	−0.0002	−0.0002	−0.003**	−0.0002
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Disaster declaration: Political knowledge		0.003			
		(0.007)			
Disaster declaration: News interest			0.011		
			(0.013)		
Property damage: Education				0.001**	
				(0.0003)	
Disaster declaration: Education					0.004
					(0.006)
Individual fixed effects	x	x	x	x	x
Year fixed effects	x	x	x	x	x
State fixed effects	x	x	x	x	x
N	21,783	21,783	21,783	21,783	21,783
R^2	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 2 shows that how partisanship of individual affects their retrospective and attentive judgment. Considering our panel data is from 2010 to 2014, the incumbent president was Obama who is Democrat. When the incumbent is Democratic president, model 1 in table 2 shows that Democrat electorate's approval rate for Obama is about 0.067 point larger than Republican or Independent voter. On the other hand, model 2 shows the case of Republican electorate. In contrast to the case of Democrat electorate, Republican voter will have about 0.084 point less approval rate for Obama compared to Democrat or independent voters. Independent voters do not hold those interaction effect as panel 3 shows. Lastly, Democrat electorate also punishes Obama less than Republican or independent voters for the weather damage as model 5 shows. What we can learn from table 2's outcome is individual's partisanship affects their retrospective and attentive judgment on incumbent president critically. The heterogeneous effect among different partisanship shows substantial variation.

When incumbent president share same ideology, individual voters are more generous about punishment from weather damage and reward more for the incumbent president's actions. This is vice versa if electorate's partisanship is opposite of the incumbent president's partisanship. Overall, with the interaction term with Democrat, Republican and independent voters' dummy variable, the outcome of table 2 shows that partisanship of voters is strongly associated with their retrospection and attentiveness. This outcome is consistent with two partisan ideology and there is no interaction effects with independent voter, so I can argue that partisan bias on retrospection and attentiveness is robust.

Table 2: The Heterogeneous Effect of Disaster Declaration on President's Approval Rate: Partisanship

	Obama approval rate				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Disaster declaration	0.036***	0.089***	0.064***	0.065***	0.065***
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Property damage	−0.0002	−0.0001	−0.0002	0.0003	−0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Disaster declaration: Republican		−0.084***			
		(0.019)			
Disaster declaration: Democrat	0.067***				
	(0.017)				
Disaster declaration: Independent			0.003		
			(0.019)		
Property damage: Repbulican				−0.001	
				(0.001)	
Property damage: Democrat					0.002*
					(0.001)
Individual fixed effects	x	x	x	x	x
Year fixed effects	x	x	x	x	x
State fixed effects	x	x	x	x	x
N	21,783	21,783	21,783	21,783	21,783
R^2	0.005	0.005	0.004	0.004	0.004

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 3 has individual voter's turnout as dependent variable. All models show that both

disaster declaration and weather damage have positive association with turnout. For one disaster declaration, the log odds of turnout to vote increases by 0.11 as model 1 shows. In case of weather damage, for one logged property damage increase, the log odds of turnout increases by 0.003. For \$20,000 of damage ($\ln(20000) \approx 10$), the log odds of turnout for an individual increase by 0.03 (10 * 0.003). Although the size of effect is not substantively large, the statistical significance is robust. Panel 3 shows that there is negative interaction effect between disaster declaration and political knowledge. It means more politically knowledgeable voters will turnout about the log odds of 0.012 less than those who are not knowledgeable. More knowledgeable voters are less likely to be affected by presidential disaster declaration.

Table 3: The Effect of Disaster Declaration on Turnout

	Turnout		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Disaster declaration	0.115***	0.081*	0.151***
	(0.008)	(0.047)	(0.020)
Property damage	0.003***	0.003***	0.003***
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0005)
Disaster declaration: News interest		0.009	
		(0.012)	
Disaster declaration: Political knowledge			−0.012*
			(0.006)
Individual fixed effect	x	x	x
Year fixed effects	x	x	x
State fixed effects	x	x	x
N	17,662	17,662	17,698
R^2	0.037	0.037	0.037

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Discussion and Conclusion

Democratic accountability is deeply based on the idea of retrospective and attentive voters. As Key (1966) argued, "Voters are not fools", but voter could have hard time evaluating

elected politicians for retrospection and figuring out who is responsible with attentiveness because of the complexity of modern politics and burdensome from their daily lives. Nonetheless, this paper found that voters do make retrospective evaluation and attentive to politics by studying the case of natural disaster and presidential disaster declaration. Individuals voters make a retrospective decision of punishing incumbent president based on their situation from severe weather damage and reward him if he issue disaster declaration to help people those who are in needs. However, there are strong partisan bias on voters' retrospection and attentiveness in that voters reward more and punish less if the incumbent president shares the same ideology of theirs. Partisanship is the convenient heuristic for voters to take a position on policy issue or vote on elections. However, if partisan bias severely affects the voters retrospection and attentiveness, democratic accountability can be threatened.

Moreover, potentially, considering increasing number of president's unilateral actions such as presidential disaster declaration in recent years, president's unilateral action may attribute polarization among voters. It is because there are strong heterogeneous effect among voters based on their partisanship. There could be vicious cycle from partisan bias of voters and increased number of president's unilateral action for electoral incentives because president's action can amplify voter's biased retrospection and that could lead polarization with stronger partisan bias among voters.

There should be more of partisan bias and voters' retrospection and attentiveness with strong causal inference design to identify their relationship. In the future study, I will explore how governors play roles in the context of natural disaster and disaster declaration because governors are also important players who ask for help behalf the the citizens. Placebo test for retrospection and attentiveness of voters should be also done. It is unclear whether voters are really attentive to politics and reward incumbent president for disaster declaration. Also if disaster declaration can also benefit president's party including House and Senate members, the cost of president's unilateral action can be divided. It can be also studied in the context of elite's strategy to gain electoral incentives. Lastly, voters' retrospection and attentiveness

11

can be also studied in other political domain where actors are clear. For instance, interest groups can be also studied in this context. Democratic citizens can be retrospective and attentive to interest groups' actions.

Voters are responsive and attentive. They punish and reward based on their situation and the action of elected politicians. The concern is how partisan bias affects their retrospection and attentiveness. It is unclear why and in what condition the voters have biased retrospection and attentiveness, I found that voters' retrospection and attentiveness are strongly associated with partisanship.