CHAPTER SEVEN

A Chicken in Every Pot: Ideology and Retrospection in the Great Depression

> For their part, academics have tended to dismiss campaign slogans of the past like "the full dinner pail" and "a chicken in every pot" on the grounds that something deeper must have been going on in these elections. But perhaps it wasn't.
>
> —David R. Mayhew, *Electoral Realignments* (2002, 161)

Americans are accustomed to thinking of the New Deal realignment as a triumph of both democratic responsiveness and Democratic Party ideology. The Great Depression following the stock market crash of 1929 had brought unprecedented economic catastrophe on the nation; real income per capita fell by an appalling 28% from 1929 to 1932. A rigidly conservative Republican government resisted public pressure to provide energetic relief and institutional reforms. Republicans lost heavily in the 1930 congressional elections. Then in the presidential election of 1932, voters responded with a historic repudiation of the incumbent president, Herbert Hoover. Franklin Roosevelt swept into office with 57% of the popular vote, and the Democrats—a minority party for most of the preceding 70 years—won 313 of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives.

Roosevelt's first hundred days in the White House brought a flurry of innovative policies. A robust economic recovery followed in short order. Real incomes increased by one-third over the course of Roosevelt's first term. Unemployment declined by one-third. Voters rewarded Roosevelt with a landslide reelection in 1936; he won more than 60% of the popular vote and carried 46 of 48 states. He went on to win an unprecedented four terms in the White House, and the Democratic Party enjoyed a durable reservoir of popular support that allowed it to dominate congressional elections for the next six decades. As V. O. Key, Jr. (1958, 589) summarized these events, "The election of 1936 ratified a sharp turn in public policy and successive Democratic victories clinched the reforms of the New Deal."[1]

Our aim in this chapter is to challenge this conventional interpretation of the New Deal era as a popular ratification of Roosevelt's policies. We do so primarily by analyzing American voters' reactions to the Depression, using electoral and economic data. In our account, voters in the depths of the Depression behaved in much the same myopic retrospective way as in the more ordinary times we considered in chapter 6.

We bolster our interpretation of the New Deal realignment by juxtaposing the American experience with parallel developments in several other democracies, where we find much the same results. Thus, what looks to the American eye like a triumph of folk democratic theory and ideological transformation was instead an accident produced by a specific configuration of election dates and economic vicissitudes. Policies were mostly irrelevant, and voters were their same old selves.

THE ROOSEVELT ELECTIONS

The conventional account of FDR's triumph in the presidential election of 1932 is that it represented a protest vote, a cry for help, with the electorate taking a chance on a largely unknown and cautious moderate whose principal attraction was that he was not Herbert Hoover. According to Key (1947, 268),

> The campaign gave to the public no clear-cut alternatives of policy, except with respect to prohibition. The Democrats were thoroughly wet. But no other issue of a major nature presented itself sharply and dramatically in the campaign. The times called for a great debate on measures to lift the American economy out of the morass, but a stranger might have presumed that all the fighting was about when and whether one could get a glass of legal beer. . . . It is doubtful that the rational appeals of either candidate had much to do with the election results. All types and classes of people had suffered deprivations; all of them were anxious for a change. Poor men, rich men, middle-class men, farmers, workers, all moved over into the Democratic ranks in sufficient number to give Roosevelt a resounding victory. All these classes could identify themselves with the "forgotten man," and they could equally feel themselves deserving of a "new deal" without necessarily insisting on exactitude in the definition of what the "new deal" was to be.[2]

By 1936, however, the character of Roosevelt's administration had become much clearer, not least to himself, and he campaigned well to the left of where he had stood in 1932. In his famous speech at Madison Square Garden in New York City two nights before the election, he attacked "organized money" for their hatred of him, and proclaimed to a thunderous ovation, "I welcome their hatred." A new political barometer, the Gallup poll, found an astounding degree of political polarization in the general public: 45% of the poll respondents, and 83% of Republicans, agreed that "the acts and policies of the Roosevelt Administration may lead to dictatorship" (Key 1961a, 246).

Despite the breadth and intensity of opposition to Roosevelt, the election result was a historic landslide for the incumbent. The voters joining in that landslide are said to have been "attracted by the Democratic program and the Rooseveltian personality and leadership" (Sundquist 1983, 214). Key, who had disparaged the importance of policy issues in the 1932 election, interpreted the 1936 election in a very different light. "The return of a party to power under circumstances [like those] of the 1936 campaign," he wrote (Key 1958, 578–579),[3] "gives such an election a special significance. Drastic innovations in public policy aroused the most bitter denunciation by the outs; the ins had to stand on their record. The electorate had before it the question whether to ratify these innovations, few of which had been clearly

1 The scholarly literature focusing on this period is enormous; Katznelson (2013) provided an important recent statement with extensive references. Key (1955), Sundquist (1983), and Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale (1990) discussed realignments generally, including this one. Mayhew (2002) offered a thorough critique of the concept of realignment and its empirical power.

2 Lest Key's emphasis on the political significance of repealing Prohibition strike modern readers as exaggerated, we note that a highly laudatory account of Roosevelt's campaign published in the early months of the new administration (Guilfoyle 1933, 218–219) suggested that the "return of beer in less than a month after the new Administration took office did more than anything else to inspire the people with confidence in the President. . . . Seldom, if ever before in the history of the country, has there been such a major accomplishment in such a short time. . . . If there was any turning point in the attitude of the people toward this depression it came simultaneously with beer."

3 The interpolated words are from a subsequent (1958) edition of Key's textbook, which repeats the quoted passage with only minor alteration.

foreshadowed in the 1932 campaign. The result could only be interpreted as a popular ratification of the broad features of new public policy."

This interpretation of the 1936 election has persisted down to the present, making it the preeminent example of a policy-based election in scholarly accounts of American electoral politics. Most scholars recognize that voters in the current era may place little emphasis on ideology and a great deal on economic conditions, as we discussed in chapters 2 and 6. However, they sometimes suppose that voting behavior was quite different in the 1930s. The continuing intense debate in the country over Roosevelt and his New Deal programs may have focused voters' minds on the practical implications of politics and public policy, making them more ideological than in normal times. As Theda Skocpol (2012, 42) put it—in contrast with the contemporary era—"back in the 1930s, American citizens could see that big, new things were being proposed and debated in Washington DC."

On this view, the dramatic economic distress of the Depression era might well have altered ordinary myopic patterns of economic voting. Millions of lost jobs and lost homes, hungry children, and ruined lives should be hard to forget. Minds would be focused on the full length of the Depression and on policy proposals for dramatic change in the government's role in the economy. In a popular textbook on *Party Politics in America*, for example, Marjorie Hershey (2011, 297) wrote,

> At critical times in American history, the parties have divided in ways that were, if not truly ideological, at least determinedly policy oriented. In the 1936 presidential election, for example, the Democrats and the Republicans offered dramatically different solutions to a nation devastated by the Great Depression. The hardships of that economic collapse probably focused voter attention to an unusual degree on the possible remedies that government could provide. Combined with a campaign centered on the pros and cons of the Roosevelt program for social and economic change, this may well have produced something close to a mandate in the election for both the president and Congress.

The conventional ideological interpretation of the voting patterns in this period requires that voters punished Hoover for his conservative ideological orthodoxy in 1930 and 1932, rewarded Roosevelt for adopting more progressive policies in the early years of the New Deal, and tapped the ideological brakes in 1938 when Roosevelt's court-packing scheme and the "second New Deal" raised concerns that policy might be drifting too far to the left. For

example, in accounting for the Republican congressional gains in 1938, James Sundquist (1983, 226) supposed that "independent voters were by now rebelling against Democratic excesses and swinging to a Republican party that in many states had acquired new progressive leadership, and deviant Republicans, having chastised their party sufficiently, were returning home."

MYOPIC RETROSPECTION IN THE ROOSEVELT REALIGNMENT

The conventional accounts seem to us to greatly overstate the extent to which Depression-era voters weighed and endorsed the specific policies of the Roosevelt administration. Our alternative interpretation is that voters responded to the hardships of the economic collapse in much the same way that they respond to ordinary economic vicissitudes—by punishing incumbents when things get worse and rewarding them when things get better. In broad outline, this retrospective interpretation accounts nicely for the major political tides of the Depression era, as figure 7.1 shows. The top part of the figure charts the course of the Great Depression in the United States as measured by changes from year to year in average real personal income.[4] The bottom part charts electoral support for the incumbent president's party (Republicans from 1928 through 1932, Democrats from 1934 through 1940) in presidential and congressional elections.[5]

It should be evident that there is a good deal of correspondence between the economic and electoral patterns in figure 7.1. In 1930, the first year of widespread economic distress, the Republican Party lost both votes and seats in a midterm congressional election. Two more years of accelerating depression triggered a thoroughgoing repudiation of Hoover and the Republicans in 1932. Roosevelt and the Democrats took power in early 1933, at what

4 Data on per capita personal income appear in table 7.1 of the National Income and Product Accounts available from the website of the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis (www.bea.gov). Unemployment figures tell much the same story as the real income figures, except that unemployment remained well above its pre-Depression level throughout the 1930s. According to the *United Nations Statistical Yearbook* (Statistical Office of the United Nations 1949), the unemployment rate increased from 3.2% in 1929 to 23.6% in 1932, peaked at 24.9% in 1933, declined to 14.3% in 1937, before spiking at 19.0% in 1938, then declined back to 14.6% by 1940.

5 The popular vote shares shown in figure 7.1 are taken from Rusk (2001), as are the vote and seat shifts reported in the text. Some other historical compilations are misleading because they tabulate total congressional votes without distinguishing between those cast in districts and those cast in (sometimes multiple) statewide at-large elections.

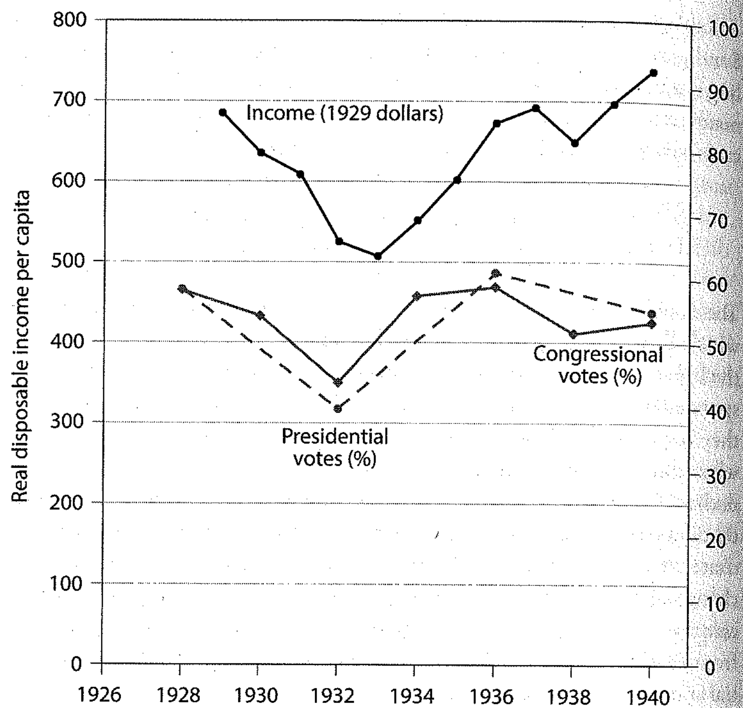

Figure 7.1. U.S. Income and Incumbent Electoral Support, 1928–1940

turned out to be almost precisely the low point of the Depression. As three years of steady economic recovery recouped most of the real income that had been lost since 1929, the Democrats made further gains in the midterm election of 1934 and again in the presidential and congressional elections of 1936. The economy continued to improve in 1937 but took a marked turn for the worse in 1938; the Democrats lost significant ground in the 1938 midterm election, leaving them well behind where they had been in 1932. In 1939 and 1940 the recovery resumed, and the Democrats regained some of that lost ground, but they still held fewer seats than they had in 1933—and fewer seats than the Republicans had held in 1929.

Of course, while the broad correlation between economic conditions and electoral tides evident in figure 7.1 is certainly suggestive of retrospective

voting, it is far from definitive. Fortunately, in this period for the first time in American history, the federal government collected detailed, standardized economic data from all across the United States. The dramatic economic collapse and recovery in the Depression era were by no means uniform across the country. Thus, we can test our interpretation by examining the political behavior of voters exposed to very different local economic conditions. Year-to-year income gains and losses in specific states were very large and extremely variable. In 1936, for example, real personal income per capita increased by 18% or more in Colorado, Delaware, and Nevada. At the same time, income plunged by 8% in Iowa, 14% in North Dakota, and 23% in South Dakota. Figures for some of the other Depression years are even more variable. This variation provides ample leverage for assessing the impact of state-level economic conditions on the vote, making the Depression era an extremely fertile setting for systematic analysis of retrospective voting. The bleak economic misery of the 1930s presents an extraordinary opportunity to test our account of the nature of electoral accountability.

Given the central importance of the 1936 election in conventional ideological interpretations of the New Deal era, our analyses of economic voting focus primarily on popular support for Roosevelt in that year.[6] We confine the analyses to states that were not part of the Confederacy, since the Solid South of this era, with its suppression of the black vote and widespread racial repression, its limited two-party competition, and its low white turnout (Key 1949), provides little scope for assessing the effect of economic conditions on voting behavior.

Our primary goal is to assess the impact of economic conditions during the Roosevelt administration on the 1936 vote. Doing so is not a historical anachronism, imposing current thinking on people of a different era. To the contrary, political insiders in 1936 were well aware of the likely connection between voters' income and their choices at the polls. Indeed, during the campaign James Farley and Harry Hopkins, FDR's powerful aides, were repeatedly accused of trying to buy the election with relief funds (Sherwood

6 We would like to have studied economic voting in the 1932 election, but doing so is not easy. The 1928 results reflect the distinctive polarizing effect of Democratic candidate Al Smith's Catholicism, while the 1924 results are skewed by the Progressive candidacy of Robert La Follette; thus, finding an appropriate baseline to control for partisanship is challenging. Even if midterm years were used, the economic data go back only to 1929, so that the economically grounded vote deviations from partisanship in baseline years, which were no doubt considerable in some states, could not be controlled.

1948, 85).[7] That there may have been something to these charges is suggested by the fact that spending on government transfers jumped significantly in 1936 after remaining fairly steady from 1933 to 1935.[8]

The explanatory factors in our analyses parallel those in chapter 6 with minor exceptions, the principal difference being the annual character of the economic observations here.[9] (Quarterly data do not exist for this period.) We focus on real personal income rather than GDP in light of the statistical results presented in chapter 6, which suggested that voters are much more responsive to changes in income than to changes in GDP.[10]

We begin by focusing on per capita income changes in each state in the election year, 1936. Figure 7.2 summarizes the relationship across the 37 non-southern states between these election-year income changes and the change in Roosevelt's share of the two-party vote from 1932 to 1936.[11] As an aid in

7 Relief funds are included in personal income, and thus are reflected in our analyses of economic voting. We would have liked to examine them separately, since they are more directly under government control and thus might be especially consequential at the polls, but their effect proved impossible to isolate satisfactorily. In the early New Deal years, transfer payments went primarily to the states with large cities, where FDR may have done especially well for other reasons. Relief payments per person within each state were quite steady from month to month, with only a small upward drift until late 1935. At that point, relief was turned over to the states, with only partial federal subsidies. The number of people on relief and the average per-person payment both dropped dramatically in many states—sometimes due to improving economic conditions (Whiting 1942) and sometimes due to state penny-pinching. None of the drop was the fault of the federal government, at least not directly. In any case, 1936 transfer payments turn out to have had no discernible effect on Roosevelt's electoral performance over and above their contribution to overall income gains.

8 However, no such pattern appears in the corresponding data from 1937 to 1940. The recovery was much further along by then, and payments may have settled into bureaucratic routine.

9 As in chapter 6, we define income changes as differences in logged income levels from the preceding year, multiplied by 100 to express them as percentage changes.

10 All of our state-level data on per capita personal income are from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, table SA1–3. We deflate nominal income levels using the Consumer Price Index produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The price index is for urban consumers only, and even for them, its accuracy during this era of widely varying and drastically changing incomes (and thus consumption patterns) is questionable. However, the relevant changes in price levels were modest, and in any case the choice of price index has little effect on our analysis (since any alternative index would simply add a constant increment to each state's logged income change in a given election year).

11 These two elections both clearly reflect a new partisan alignment quite different from the one that had prevailed in the preceding decade. The turnout-weighted correlation between states' Democratic vote margins in 1936 and 1932 is .65; the corresponding correlations between 1936 and 1928, 1924, and 1920 range from .13 to −.02. Clearly, as one would expect, the realignment mattered. Hence we cannot use an average of several prior elections to proxy for partisanship in our analyses, as we would otherwise prefer.

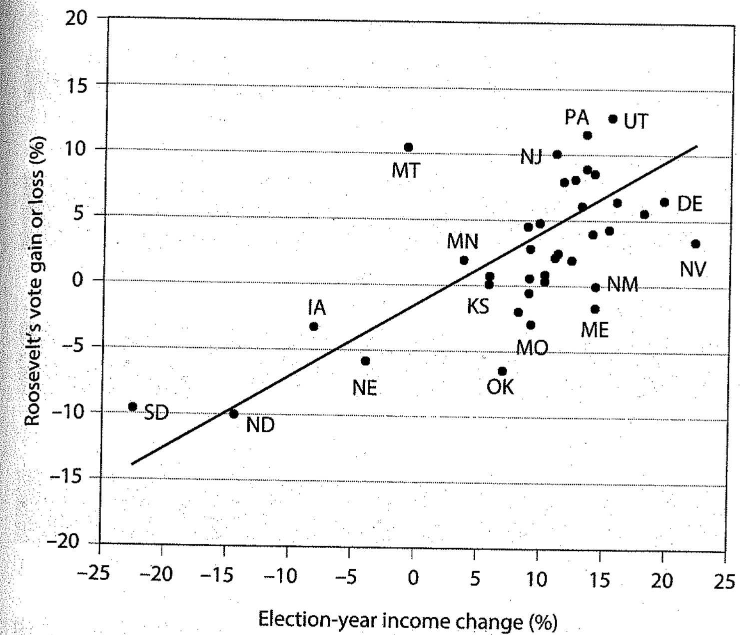

Figure 7.2. Election-Year Income Changes and Roosevelt's Popular Vote, 1936 (non-southern states)

interpreting the relationship between state income changes and vote shifts, the figure includes a turnout-weighted summary line. It is clear that there was a strong and fairly consistent tendency for Roosevelt to gain support in states that experienced significant income growth in 1936, and to lose support in states that experienced declines in income.[12] On its face, this evidence is quite consistent with our myopic, nonideological interpretation of the election outcome.

The analyses reported in table 7.1 confirm and elaborate the basic relationship evident in figure 7.2 between election-year income changes and vote shifts.

12 This relationship is not simply due to Roosevelt's vote losses in the thinly populated farm states where incomes fell. Indeed, excluding those states from the analysis would make the relationship even steeper.

Table 7.1. Retrospective Voting in FDR's 1936 Landslide

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1936 income change (%)	0.360 (0.092)	0.483 (0.166)	0.288 (0.132)	0.326 (0.208)
1935 income change (%)	—	0.080 (0.097)	—	0.105 (0.147)
1934 income change (%)	—	−0.012 (0.090)	—	0.084 (0.117)
1933 income change (%)	—	−0.065 (0.149)	—	0.067 (0.200)
1932 vote (%)	0.684 (0.101)	0.681 (0.106)	0.658 (0.127)	0.693 (0.138)
Turnout change (%)	0.120 (0.052)	0.126 (0.057)	0.117 (0.057)	0.129 (0.062)
Income level (1929 $100s)	—		1.19 (0.85)	1.19 (0.92)
Rural farm (%)	—		0.044 (0.143)	0.010 (0.153)
Foreign-born white (%)	—		−0.199 (0.167)	−0.149 (0.201)
Black (%)	—		−0.260 (0.218)	−0.174 (0.261)
Intercept	15.83 (6.32)	13.42 (6.55)	12.12 (8.30)	7.40 (10.11)
Standard error of regression	2.90	3.00	2.92	3.03
Adjusted R^2	.57	.54	.56	.53
N (non-southern states)	37	37	37	37

Dependent variable is the Democratic share of the presidential vote in non-southern states. States are weighted by turnout. Ordinary least squares regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses).

The analysis reported in the first column of the table relates Roosevelt's vote in each non-southern state in 1936 to election-year income changes. Rather than analyzing the change in Roosevelt's vote share from 1932, we include the 1932 vote share as an explanatory factor in order to allow for the possibility of erosion in his support in states that were most heavily Democratic in 1932. And since Roosevelt is said to have appealed especially strongly to new voters, we include the percentage change in turnout between 1932 and 1936 as an additional explanatory factor.[13]

The estimated impact of election-year income changes in the first column of table 7.1 suggests that every additional percentage point of state income growth boosted Roosevelt's vote share by more than one-third of a percentage point. This estimate implies differences of as much as 16 percentage points in the Democratic share of the two-party vote due to differences in election-year income growth from state to state. Moreover, this simple statistical model accounts for Roosevelt's performance in each state with an average error of less than 3 percentage points. Clearly, Roosevelt's electoral fortunes were heavily dependent on voters' local economic conditions, over and above whatever support he gained nationwide due to the overall economic recovery.

In the second column of table 7.1 we report the results of a more elaborate analysis including measures of state income growth in 1935, 1934, and 1933 in addition to the 1936 income figures. Whereas election-year income growth had a strong positive effect on Roosevelt's vote, previous income growth seems to have had little or no effect. Thus, the evidence from the 1930s is quite consistent with the evidence from more recent presidential elections presented in chapter 6 in suggesting that voters' retrospective assessments of the economy are quite myopic. These results provide a dramatic indication of the political significance of voters' myopia in a situation where the economic stakes were much larger than any observed in subsequent eras of American politics. In 1934 and 1935, Roosevelt presided over an increase of 17% in real personal income per capita, recouping more than half of the total decline in income over the preceding four years of depression. Whether he was truly responsible or not, our analysis suggests that he got little or no credit at the polls.

In all of the analyses reported in table 7.1, the estimated effect of turnout changes indicates that Roosevelt gained more support in states with large

13 The increase in turnout between 1932 and 1936 ranged from 2% to 22%, except in Kentucky (−6%) and Pennsylvania (+45%). Excluding these two outliers leaves the estimated effects of turnout on Roosevelt's vote virtually unchanged.

numbers of new voters than in states where turnout was relatively static. These estimates imply that Roosevelt's vote share in 1936 was 10 to 15 percentage points higher among new voters than among old voters (who were themselves giving Roosevelt almost 60% support). Thus, our findings are quite consistent with the notion that "the rising strength of the Democratic Party during the Roosevelt years probably depended heavily on new voters drawn to the polls by the Great Depression and the New Deal" (Campbell et al. 1960, 89).[14]

The analyses reported in the third and fourth columns of table 7.1 include state-level measures of a variety of demographic characteristics that loom large in historical accounts of the New Deal realignment: per capita income, the rural farm proportion of the population, the percentage of foreign-born whites, and the percentage of blacks.[15] To the extent that poor people, farmers, immigrants, and African-Americans responded more enthusiastically than other citizens to the New Deal policies implemented between 1933 and 1936, we should expect to see that states in which they were more numerous were relatively more supportive of Roosevelt in 1936 than they had been in 1932. For the most part, however, the reverse seems to be true. None of the effects is very large or very precisely estimated; but insofar as there are any patterns at all, they suggest that Roosevelt gained *less* support among these groups than in other parts of the population.[16] Of course, many, if not most, of the people in these groups were already Democrats. Our point is that unusually clear evidence of the Democrats' new ideology favoring them seems to have made no difference.

Including these demographic factors in the analysis turns out to make little difference for our conclusions regarding the nature and extent of retrospective economic voting. The estimated effects of election-year income changes in the third and fourth columns of table 7.1 remain substantial, albeit somewhat less precisely estimated. And the estimated effects of income changes earlier in

14 Additional statistical analyses, not detailed here, suggest that turnout gains also boosted Roosevelt's support in 1932 and 1940. Thus, the cumulative contribution of new voters to the building of a Democratic majority was even greater than is evident in the calculations reported here—probably adding about 5 percentage points to the "normal" Democratic presidential vote. Of course, Roosevelt also gained from conversion of former Republicans (Anderson 1979; Gamm 1989).

15 Data on the rural farm population, foreign-born whites, and blacks are from the Historical Census Browser developed by the University of Virginia's Geospatial and Statistical Data Center (http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus).

16 We also examined statistical specifications including various subsets of these demographic variables. None produced more sensible results.

Roosevelt's first term, while also less precise, are again much smaller than those in the election year, reinforcing the impression of substantial myopia in voters' assessments of the economy even in the midst of the Great Depression. This finding is quite consistent across alternate specifications, estimation methods, and samples. Omitting notable outliers from the analysis, individually or in various combinations, improves the statistical fit of our models, but the substantive pattern is again just the same—only myopic economic considerations mattered.[17]

Our analysis thus provides strong, consistent evidence that Roosevelt's landslide reelection hinged importantly on the fact that he presided over strong income growth during the election year. The implications of that fact may be illustrated by considering what might have happened if Roosevelt had happened to stand for reelection under less favorable economic circumstances than those prevailing in 1936. For example, what if incomes had *fallen* substantially in 1936 rather than *growing* substantially? Lest this possibility seem farfetched, we note that real per capita income *did* fall by more than 6% only two years later—with dire consequences for the Democrats in the 1938 midterm election.

Table 7.2 summarizes the results of a historical simulation comparing Roosevelt's actual performance in the 1936 election with his hypothetical performance under the economic conditions prevailing in 1938. Of course, any calculation along these lines must be far from exact. Most important, the statistical estimates of the effect of state-level economic conditions in table 7.1 provide no direct evidence regarding the additional impact of *national* economic conditions on Roosevelt's vote. Voters undoubtedly attended also to the national economy, but since that does not vary across states, we have no way to directly assess its importance here. However, rough calculations based on aggregate vote shifts comport with more detailed calculations based on data from the modern era in suggesting that the impact of national economic conditions was probably similar in magnitude to the impact of state economic conditions, making the total effect of the economy twice as large

17 For example, FDR's vote increased by more than 10 percentage points in Montana despite a small decline in real income in 1936. (This unexpected enthusiasm may be attributable to an economic boom in the preceding two years driven by excellent wheat prices and abetted by Roosevelt's 1934 decision to support the price of silver, a Montana victory in a policy battle dating to the 19th century.) On the other hand, Roosevelt lost ground in 1936 in Oklahoma, Missouri, and Maine despite substantial election-year income growth. However, omitting any or all of these outliers from our analysis leaves the results essentially unchanged.

Table 7.2. The 1936 Presidential Election with a 1938 Economy

	1936 conditions (actual)	1938 conditions (simulated)
National election-year change in real income (%)	+11.2	−6.4
Roosevelt vote share, non-South (%)	58.8	46.2
States carried (including South)	46/48	29/48
Roosevelt electoral votes (including South)	523/531	258/531

as suggested by the parameter estimates in table 7.1.[18] Thus, in the absence of better evidence, we simply assume that the estimated effect of state-level income changes in 1936 in table 7.1 can be applied both to state-level changes and to the national change.[19]

The resulting calculation suggests that under the economic conditions prevailing in 1938 Roosevelt would have received only 46% of the vote outside the South in 1936. More important, he probably would have lost 17 of the 46 states he actually carried, including New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois,

18 Hoover's share of the national two-party vote dropped by 18 percentage points when real personal income per capita fell by 17% in 1932; Roosevelt's vote share increased by 3.4 percentage points when real income grew by 11% in 1936. These results suggest that a president's national popular vote share might change by roughly three-fourths of 1% with each 1% change in election-year income growth. (A disparity of 28% in income growth between the two election years was associated with a 21-point difference in the incumbent's vote gain or loss.) That total impact is approximately double the estimated effect of state-level variation in table 7.1, with the difference presumably attributable to voters' sensitivity to national economic conditions. Rough tests using data from post-war presidential elections similarly suggest a total effect about twice as large as the state-level effect—though the electoral shift attributable to each percentage point change in real income seems to be larger in the post-war period than it was in the Depression era, perhaps because the relatively small shifts in the current era draw more attention now than they would have during the Depression's tectonic income changes.

19 Specifically, we project Roosevelt's hypothetical vote share in each non-southern state by subtracting the differences between 1936 and 1938 income growth figures for both the state and the nation, each multiplied by the average estimated effect of election-year income changes in table 7.1.

Ohio, and Michigan. In that case, even with a lock on the Solid South, he would have fallen short of an Electoral College majority, bringing the New Deal realignment to an abrupt and (from the perspective of hindsight) very premature conclusion.[20]

We conclude this section by reiterating how dramatically our interpretation of the 1936 election contrasts with the conventional understanding of the New Deal realignment. In our interpretation, voters rendered no meaningful verdict on the substance of New Deal policies. Judgments about the role of the government in economic life, the value of laissez-faire economics, or specific aspects of the New Deal program were largely irrelevant. Indeed, insofar as ordinary Americans did express specific judgments about economic policy in this period of crisis, they mostly reiterated the conventional judgments of the past. As Paul Krugman (2014) noted, "the public remained wedded to economic orthodoxy: by a more than 2-to-1 majority, voters surveyed by Gallup just after the [1936] election called for a balanced budget. And F.D.R., unfortunately, listened; his attempt to balance the budget soon plunged America back into recession."

Even in the remarkable circumstances prevailing in 1936, voters were focused on concrete economic conditions that they could see and feel when they went to the polls. Specifically, they were focused on income gains or losses over the course of the election year. Income growth earlier in Roosevelt's term, which contributed as much or more to their economic well-being, had no apparent electoral effect. That was water under the bridge. Roosevelt's reelection in 1936—and the New Deal realignment—depended crucially on a positive balance of answers to the question, "What have you done for us lately?"

CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS AND SHORT-TERM RETROSPECTIONS

Our analysis so far sheds light on the key event of the New Deal realignment—Roosevelt's landslide reelection in 1936. But it does nothing to explain how or why that landslide produced a long-lasting alteration of the partisan balance of power. The most significant electoral legacy of the New

20 Although Roosevelt's projected electoral vote in table 7.2 is not far short of a majority, he would have needed substantial additional popular votes to reach that majority. The closest pivotal state in this simulation is New Jersey, with a projected popular vote for Roosevelt of 47.4%.

Deal era was the establishment of durable Democratic majorities in Congress. The overwhelming Republican congressional majorities of the 1920s were swept away by the Great Depression, and the House of Representatives remained in Democratic hands for 58 of the next 62 years. Thus, the dynamics of congressional voting in the Depression era are crucial to understanding the nature and significance of the New Deal realignment.

Many scholars have argued that this momentous partisan realignment was fundamentally ideological or programmatic. Even the authors of *The American Voter*, no friends to intellectualist interpretations of elections, wrote, "The program of welfare legislation of the New Deal and the extraordinary personality of its major exponent, Franklin D. Roosevelt, brought about a profound realignment of party strength, which has endured in large part up to the present time" (Campbell et al. 1960, 534). Similarly, the most prominent contemporary study of party identification primarily emphasized the importance of social identities in the development of partisan attachments, but cited the New Deal as an exceptional period in which "an unusually clear ideological divide between the parties, dramatized again and again . . . shaped party attachments to an unusual extent" (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002, 106–107).

In contrast, we argue that the partisan realignment of the 1930s resulted in significant part from the accumulation of myopic short-term assessments of economic conditions in each successive election year. To validate this interpretation, we begin by showing that congressional election outcomes, too, were significantly affected by election-year income changes. But the fact that economic retrospections influenced current election outcomes does not in itself imply that they also influenced voters' long-term partisan loyalties. Indeed, our emphasis on the myopic nature of economic retrospections might suggest that voters are inevitably focused on the present, and thus that short-term political judgments formed in the heat of an election year are unlikely to have any long-term political ramifications. However, more careful attention to the persistence of electoral responses to short-term economic conditions suggests that retrospective judgments were indeed incorporated into durable partisan attachments, though as we will show, not in the way that some theoretical perspectives predict (Fiorina 1981; Achen 1992).

Table 7.3 reports the results of a series of statistical analyses relating the Democratic share of the two-party congressional vote to changing economic conditions through the early New Deal period.[21] The columns of the table

21 The economic data for this era are available only for states, not for specific congressional districts. Using state values as proxies for the unknown district-specific values no doubt induces

Table 7.3. Retrospective Voting in Congressional Elections, 1934–1940

	1934	1936	1938	1940
Election-year income change (%)	−0.014 (0.085)	0.498 (0.104)	0.300 (0.137)	0.462 (0.354)
Prior-year income change (%)	0.031 (0.083)	0.187 (0.066)	0.138 (0.111)	0.265 (0.199)
Previous vote (%)	0.796 (0.078)	0.858 (0.054)	1.000 (0.040)	0.808 (0.039)
Turnout change (%)	0.050 (0.039)	0.091 (0.033)	−0.025 (0.047)	0.007 (0.037)
Incumbency change (−2 to +2)	0.80 (0.45)	0.94 (0.41)	0.13 (0.48)	0.02 (0.44)
Intercept	12.34 (4.09)	−0.11 (4.23)	−4.79 (2.27)	5.13 (3.48)
Standard error of regression	5.73	4.79	4.96	4.70
Adjusted R^2	.66	.79	.82	.80
N (non-southern districts)	259	285	294	290

Dependent variable is the Democratic share of the vote in contested non-southern congressional districts. Districts are weighted by turnout. Ordinary least squares regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses); observations clustered by state.

present separate results for the 1934, 1936, 1938, and 1940 congressional elections.[22] In each case, the observations are non-southern congressional districts contested by both major parties in both the current and previous

non-negligible measurement error. Thus, the results of these analyses must be considered suggestive rather than definitive. However, the general similarity between our (state-level) presidential results and (district-level) congressional results provides some reassurance on this score.

22 The 1940 election provides a natural stopping point for our analysis, since thereafter politicians and voters alike were increasingly distracted from economic concerns and domestic policy debates by the coming of war.

election cycle.[23] In addition to election-year income changes and income changes in the off-year preceding the election, we include changes in turnout and the Democratic vote share in the preceding election as explanatory factors. We also take account of changes in incumbency status since the preceding election, since incumbency is likely to be the most salient local factor in most congressional elections (albeit less salient in the 1930s than in the contemporary era). Because there was substantial variation in the population (and electoral mobilization) of congressional districts in this era, we weight the districts by turnout.[24]

The results of these analyses parallel those for the 1936 presidential election in suggesting a strong effect of election-year economic conditions. Although no discernible effect appears in the 1934 midterm election, the estimated effect is sizable in each of the other three elections of the early New Deal era, and the average estimated effect across the four elections (.31) is comparable in magnitude to the estimated presidential effect reported in table 7.1. By comparison, economic conditions in the off-year preceding each election had little apparent impact, with an average estimated effect only half as large as for election-year income changes. Increasing turnout and incumbency also had significant positive effects on the Democratic congressional vote in 1934 and 1936, though these factors seem to have ebbed in importance thereafter.

The 1938 midterm election provides a convenient basis for comparison between the congressional election results presented in table 7.3 and the presidential election results presented in table 7.1. The estimated effect of election-year income changes in 1938 is of roughly average magnitude; the estimated effect of the 1936 vote is exactly 1.0, implying an essentially stable party balance; and the estimated effects of changes in off-year income, turnout, and incumbency are all modest. Thus, a simple scatterplot comparing election-year income changes and vote shifts in 1938 reflects the relationship with fair accuracy. The result is presented in figure 7.3. The figure

23 We exclude multimember and at-large elections (two seats each in Illinois, New York, North Dakota, and Ohio and one seat each in Connecticut and Oklahoma); several cases in California and Pennsylvania in which the same candidate ran on both the Democratic and Republican ballot lines (though we include cases in which either or both of the major party candidates also ran on minor party lines); and Minnesota and Wisconsin, where third parties (Farmer-Labor and Progressives, respectively) dominated state politics throughout this period. We also exclude Kentucky and Missouri in 1934 (since those states elected all representatives in multimember statewide elections in 1932).

24 To allow for the possibility that gubernatorial "coattails" and other unmeasured factors influencing congressional election outcomes in each state were correlated across districts, we cluster the observations by state and report robust standard errors.

A Chicken in Every Pot

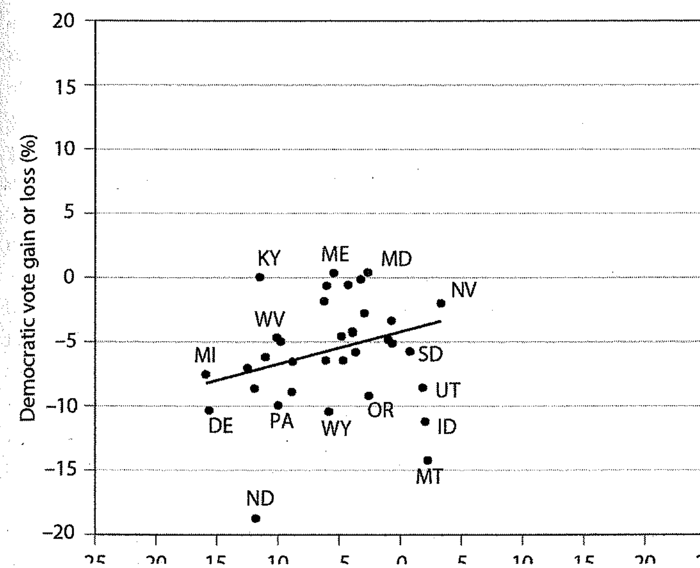

Figure 7.3. Election-Year Income Changes and Congressional Votes, 1938 (non-southern states)

is constructed so as to maximize visual comparability with figure 7.2, which presented the corresponding relationship for the 1936 presidential election. The scales for the horizontal and vertical axes are unchanged, despite the fact that there was a good deal less variation in state-level economic conditions in 1938 than in 1936, and also less variation in electoral shifts.

It is clear from figure 7.3 that economic conditions were much less propitious for the Democrats in 1938 than in 1936. Only five sparsely populated western states registered (small) gains in real income. Most states experienced real income *losses* of 5% to 10%, while Michigan and Delaware experienced losses of more than 15%. It is also clear that income gains and losses had somewhat less impact on congressional election outcomes than on presidential election outcomes; the turnout-weighted summary line in figure 7.3 is noticeably less steep than the corresponding summary line in figure 7.2. Nevertheless, the relationship is strong enough to account for differences of up to 6 percentage points in the expected Democratic vote over the range of economic conditions observed in 1938.

As with the corresponding plot for the 1936 presidential election in figure 7.2, there is no obvious ideological logic to the most prominent outliers in figure 7.3. Democrats gained slightly or held steady in 1938 in Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Kentucky, and Arizona; but these states would hardly be expected to appear in the vanguard of support for the progressive ideology of Roosevelt's "second New Deal," given their politics at the time. At the opposite extreme, the states that slipped furthest in their levels of Democratic support between 1936 and 1938 were North Dakota and Montana—both states hard hit by a bust in wheat prices.[25]

As with our analysis of the 1936 presidential vote in table 7.1, we probed the robustness of the results presented in table 7.3 by examining a variety of alternative statistical specifications including as additional explanatory factors the average income level in each state, the rural farm population, the proportion of foreign-born whites, and the proportion of blacks.[26] The demographic factors in these analyses had rather unimpressive and inconsistent estimated effects, just as they did in our analyses of the 1936 presidential vote. Richer states seem to have become more Democratic in 1936 but *less* Democratic in 1940; states with large numbers of blacks seem to have become more Democratic in 1938 but *less* Democratic in 1934; the percentages of farmers and immigrants seldom seemed to matter one way or the other. These results are quite puzzling in light of the prominence of these groups in conventional ideological accounts of the emergence of the Democratic New Deal coalition; as we noted earlier, these groups were already substantially Democratic, but additional ideological clarity about the Democrats' new commitment to them seems to have had no effect. And more important for our purposes, taking account of these demographic factors had very little effect on our conclusions regarding the political significance of short-term economic retrospections in congressional elections of the New Deal era.[27]

25 Wheat prices—a salient barometer of economic well-being in these states, among others—soared from \$0.35 per bushel in 1932 to \$1.14 per bushel in 1936, but were back down to \$0.45 per bushel in 1938. Achen (2012) discussed the electoral politics of wheat prices in Montana.

26 As with our economic data, these demographic data are available only for states, not for specific congressional districts. This limitation may account for some of the apparent anomalies in our estimates of the impact of demographic factors on New Deal voting patterns.

27 The average estimated impact of election-year income changes across the four election years declined from .326 to .291 (with an average standard error of .168). The average

PARTISAN REALIGNMENT AND THE CUMULATION OF SHORT-TERM RETROSPECTIONS

We turn next to the long-term implications of these short-term retrospections. As we saw in chapter 4, Morris Fiorina (1981, 84) described partisanship as a "running tally" of retrospective judgments of political performance, suggesting that those judgments might have persistent electoral effects over considerable periods of time. All of our analyses of congressional voting patterns demonstrate a good deal of persistence from election to election, with 80% or more of the Democratic vote share in each election carrying over to the next. This stability handsomely illustrates the significance of durable partisan loyalties in congressional elections. But are economic retrospections incorporated into those partisan loyalties, or are they merely short-term perturbations, irrelevant by the time of the next election?

We examine that question by tracking the *cumulative* impact of economic retrospections on the Democratic vote share in congressional elections from 1934 through 1940. Our statistical analysis generally parallels the separate analyses of the same four elections presented in table 7.3.[28] However, rather than considering each election separately, we assess the cumulative effect of both economic and noneconomic factors over the course of the whole decade.

As in table 7.3, we assess the electoral impact of real income changes in each election year and the preceding off-year. However, we also allow for the possibility that income changes in prior election cycles (beginning in 1933) continued to matter through their incorporation into durable partisan loyalties. In order to isolate the persistent effects of these income changes from other, noneconomic sources of change in partisan loyalties, we use the 1932 congressional vote as our baseline measure of partisanship throughout the decade and measure changes in turnout and incumbency relative to that baseline in each election year. Since we expect the persistent effects of income changes to be proportional to their original effects, we estimate a single persistence parameter reflecting the proportional impact of previous economic retrospections in each successive election cycle.

estimated impact of prior-year income changes declined from .153 to .085 (with an average standard error of .111).

28 As in the analysis reported in table 7.3, we exclude southern states, states dominated by minor parties, multimember and at-large elections (including states that elected their entire delegations at-large in 1932), and districts that were uncontested at any point in the decade. The resulting sample consists of 255 districts, about 10% fewer than in table 7.3. We weight each district by average turnout in the four elections.

The results of this analysis, presented in table 7.4, provide surprisingly strong statistical support for our account of partisan updating.[29] Income growth in each election year seems to have had a significant impact on Democratic fortunes at the polls, while income growth in the preceding off-year seems to have had rather little effect, just as our account of myopic retrospective voting (and the election-by-election evidence presented in table 7.3) would suggest. What is more striking is that our estimated persistence parameter implies that *all* of this myopic retrospection carried forward undiminished to subsequent election cycles, making its electoral impact extremely long-lasting.[30]

This pattern, with its odd durable emphasis on economic experience in even-numbered years, is very hard to square with conventional accounts of rational partisan updating, which imply that retrospective voters should rely on "a simple average of past benefits" to estimate parties' competence (Achen 1992, 200) or smoothly weight past experience in proportion to its current relevance (Gerber and Green 1998). However, the uneven accumulation of retrospections follows logically from the idea that elections prompt voters to engage in myopic updating of their assessments of partisan performance. The fact that times were good in 1936 had a significant impact on the 1938 congressional vote because much of the heightened Democratic support stemming from good times in 1936 carried over to 1938. The fact that times were also good in 1935 had much less effect, since 1935 was not an election year and thus was not as strongly incorporated into voters' party identifications or voting behavior in 1936 or, as best we can tell, thereafter.

These results imply that retrospective voting contributed significantly to the shifting balance of party fortunes in the Depression era, but not in a particularly sensible way. *Myopic* economic retrospections dominated not only in

29 To allow for correlation in the unmeasured factors influencing the results of the four elections in each district, we estimate the parameters of the model via nonlinear seemingly unrelated regression. The constrained nonlinear model fits the data less well than the separate linear models reported in table 7.3, and increasingly so in later years; but that difference reflects the fact that the model does not incorporate noneconomic sources of partisan change after 1932. (The "1932 vote" in table 7.4 is less strongly correlated with current Democratic support in each year than the more recent "previous vote" in table 7.3, and that difference increases with each successive election.)

30 The standard error of this parameter estimate is large enough to make *some* temporal discounting of past elections' economic conditions statistically plausible. However, even at the low end of the plausible range of parameter values, the extent of persistence implied by our analysis is substantial.

Table 7.4. Cumulative Retrospection in Congressional Elections, 1934–1940

	1934	1936	1938	1940
Election-year income change (%)	0.144 (0.037)			
Prior-year income change (%)	0.037 (0.028)			
Persistence of previous economic effects	—	1.02 (0.11)		
1932 vote (%)	0.821 (0.035)	0.780 (0.038)	0.873 (0.043)	0.644 (0.043)
Cumulative turnout change (%)	0.052 (0.023)	0.104 (0.022)	0.033 (0.019)	0.089 (0.026)
Cumulative incumbency change (−2 to +2)	1.01 (0.19)			
Intercept	9.30 (1.95)	8.92 (2.30)	−0.22 (2.52)	9.81 (2.78)
Standard error of regression	5.55	6.26	7.32	7.56
R^2	.69	.64	.61	.50
N (non-southern districts)	255	255	255	255

Dependent variable is the Democratic share of the vote in contested non-southern congressional districts. Districts are weighted by turnout. Nonlinear seemingly unrelated regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses).

the short run, by affecting current voting behavior, but also in the long run, through their incorporation into durable partisan attachments. The result was not quite the "running tally" described by Fiorina (1981), but more like a *skipping* tally. Only election years mattered. The New Deal realignment was due, in significant part, to this peculiar accumulation of myopic economic retrospections.

THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Our unconventional interpretation of the New Deal realignment helps to make sense of some otherwise-puzzling patterns in American electoral behavior in the Depression era. It also helps to account for a striking feature of electoral politics in other parts of the world during this period. Incumbent governments of widely varying ideological coloration were driven, willy-nilly, from office when the world economy fell into depression. But in almost every case, the short-term shift had long-term implications—the new incumbents enjoyed more or less stable electoral majorities for a decade or more. It is hard to attribute these long-term shifts to ideological judgments on the part of voters, given the remarkable diversity of principles and policies they embraced and the irrelevance of Depression-era principles and policies for dealing with the subsequent problems of world war and post-war change. It seems more straightforward to suppose that they, too, reflected "a kind of 'moving average' of reactions" (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 316) to the dramatic economic dislocations and recoveries of the 1930s.

Figure 7.4 summarizes the timing and magnitude of the Great Depression in the United States and seven other countries, as measured by changes in real GDP per capita (Maddison 2004). Although these data are, no doubt, subject to significant measurement error, they convey some sense of the dimensions of the depression in different parts of the industrialized world. The United Kingdom and Sweden (in the right panel of figure 7.4) experienced relatively mild declines in economic output in the early 1930s followed by substantial, steady increases through the rest of the decade (until the onset of war in 1940). Germany and France suffered somewhat steeper declines in output in the early 1930s, followed by rapid growth in the case of Germany but prolonged stagnation in the case of France. Australia (in the left panel) experienced a sharp drop in output in 1930 and 1931 followed by a fairly steady increase through the rest of the decade, while Ireland experienced rather little economic fluctuation throughout this period. Finally, the United States and Canada stand out in figure 7.4 both for the depth of the Great Depression and for its duration. Real output fell by 30% in the United States and by one-third in Canada; in both cases, the economy did not fully rebound until 1940.[31]

31 These trends in economic output are paralleled by trends in unemployment, which increased from 3.2% in 1929 to 24.9% in 1933 in the United States and from 4.2% in 1929 to 26.5% in 1933 in Canada (Statistical Office of the United Nations 1949).

A Chicken in Every Pot

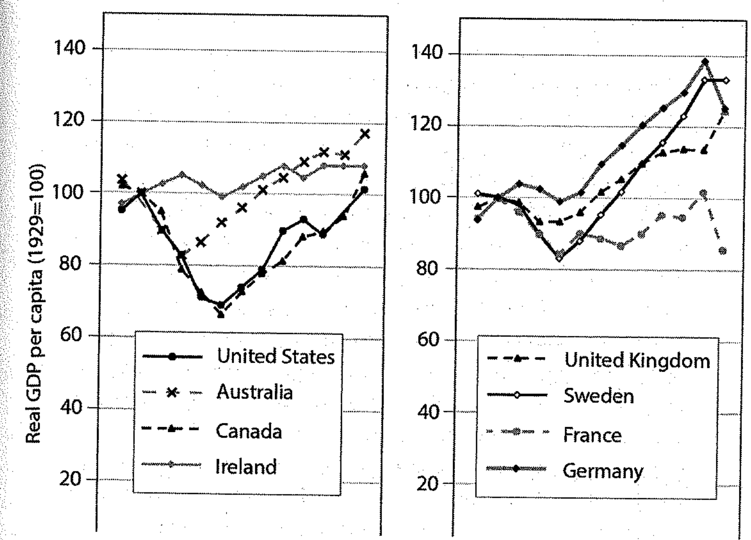

Figure 7.4. Depression and Recovery in Eight Countries, 1928–1940

In the United States, the resulting New Deal realignment replaced a profoundly conservative government with a liberal—critics would say radical—alternative. The shift seems entirely interpretable along ideological lines. Moreover, the subsequent recovery of the national economy seems to validate the efficacy of Roosevelt's dramatic policy innovations: real income per capita increased by a remarkable 46% over the years from 1932 to 1940.[32] However, the story seems a good deal less simple when we canvass the responses of electorates in other established democracies to the economic crises documented in figure 7.4.

Around the world, electoral reactions to the Depression produced momentous realignments of established party systems in a bewildering variety of configurations. Incumbent governments were deposed with impressive consistency during the worst days of the Depression, regardless of their ideologies.

32 One occasionally hears it said that "the war got us out of the Depression, not Roosevelt." We explore the appeal of factually incorrect but politically convenient beliefs in chapter 10.

And new incumbents who presided over robust economic recoveries were rewarded with long runs in office—again, regardless of their ideologies:

- In Canada, voters punished the incumbent Liberal Party in 1930, giving the Conservative Party a comfortable parliamentary majority. However, the new Conservative government could do nothing to stem the economic tide; real income continued to plummet and unemployment continued to escalate through 1931, 1932, and 1933 (just as they did in the United States). Economic conditions improved in 1934 and 1935 (again, just as they did in the United States), but when the Conservative government stood for reelection in 1935 unemployment still hovered near 20%. The voters responded by punishing the Conservatives even more vigorously than they had punished the Liberals in 1930, and the Liberals, who had been repudiated by the voters only five years earlier, won nearly three-fourths of the seats in the new Parliament. Economic conditions continued to improve steadily through the rest of the decade. By 1940, unemployment was below its 1930 level and real income was 40% higher than it had been a decade earlier. The Liberal government was returned with overwhelming parliamentary majorities in 1940, and again in 1945, 1949, and 1953 before finally falling in 1957.

- In Australia the economy declined precipitously in 1930–31, either despite or because of the "radical" policies of the incumbent Labor Party. In the general election of 1931, Labor was challenged by the newly founded United Australia Party, a coalition of conservative nationalists and Labor dissidents. Labor's vote share fell from 49% (winning 46 House seats) in 1929 to 27% (winning 14 House seats) in 1931. The United Australia Party won with 40% of the vote, the economy improved markedly, and UAP held power through three subsequent elections in the next decade.

- In Britain, a minority Labour government took office in 1929 but pursued orthodox policies and a balanced budget. By the end of 1930, unemployment had more than doubled and the value of exports had fallen by half. A plan to bolster the Exchequer through massive cuts in unemployment relief divided the Labour Party, leading Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald to form a multiparty National Government in 1931 to impose austerity. The National Government won a general election in 1931, but with 470 of the 615 seats in Parliament held by the Conservative Party. The remnant of the Labour Party, having expelled supporters of the National Government, won only 52 seats. In 1935, following two years of fairly robust economic growth, the Conservatives again won a comfortable parliamentary majority, and they remained in power through the end of World War II a decade later.

- In Ireland, the nationalist Fianna Fáil party came to power in 1932 (following a significant decline in the production of oats and potatoes, the two most important crops) and won an electoral majority early in 1933 (following a substantial rebound in agricultural production). Fianna Fáil continued in power for the next fifteen years, and remained the dominant party in Ireland until 2011.

- In Sweden, a Conservative prime minister was replaced by a Liberal in 1930. Real GDP declined and unemployment escalated from 12% to 22% over the next two years, despite an early exit from the gold standard in 1931. Another election in 1932 brought the Social Democratic Party to power. Unemployment peaked in 1933 and began to decline in 1934; real GDP increased markedly from 1933 through 1939. The Social Democrats remained in power (sometimes in coalition with other parties, and with a brief interlude in 1936) until 1976.

- In France, accountability was greatly complicated by the political institutions and culture of the Third Republic. The incumbent center-right coalition was defeated in the general election of 1932, at the low point of the Depression; but the victorious socialists and more conservative "radicals" failed to produce a government, leaving the radicals to govern with support from the center-right. That coalition was driven from office in early 1934 by riots organized by far-right groups. The economy continued to languish under the rightist governments that followed.

In 1936 a new Popular Front combining socialists, communists, and radicals won 57% of the vote, but the resulting government was again hampered by chronic friction among the coalition partners and was dissolved by the president. In 1939, economic output finally regained its 1929 level, mostly due to increased spending on armaments.

- In Germany, the downturn stemming from the Great Crash was exacerbated by a collapse of U.S. loans to fund war reparations and rebuilding. A series of coalition governments traumatized by the hyperinflation of the 1920s responded by cutting wages and spending and raising taxes. The unemployment rate doubled (from 15% to 30%) between 1930 and 1932. Popular support for the Nazi Party doubled over the same two years (from 18% in the Reichstag election of September 1930 to 37% in July 1932 and 33% in November 1932), while support for the Communist Party also increased. The 1932 elections produced a legislative stalemate that ended with the appointment of Adolph Hitler as chancellor in January 1933. In March, the Reichstag ceded its powers to Hitler. An election in May was marred by Nazi intimidation of the Communist and social democratic parties; the former was banned shortly after the election, the latter in June, and all other parties in July. Meanwhile, unemployment fell steadily beginning in 1933 (back to 15% in 1934 and below 5% in 1937), real GDP expanded rapidly (due in large part to a massive military buildup), and Hitler led Germany on to world war.

A crucial feature of this brief litany of electoral responses to the Depression is that the ideological interpretation customarily provided for voters' reactions in the United States does not turn out to travel well. Where conservatives were in power when the Depression hit they were often replaced with liberals or socialists, as in the United States and Sweden. But where relatively leftist governments were in power during significant downturns they were often replaced with more conservative alternatives, as in Britain and Australia. Where the existing party system was oriented around noneconomic issues, as in Ireland, voters rejected the "ins" and replaced them with "outs" whose policy positions cannot even be sensibly classified in left-right terms. Where the timing of elections forced more than one major party to stand for

reelection during the worst years of the Depression, as in Canada and Sweden, voters seem to have been perfectly willing to reject both in turn. Where complex coalition politics defused responsibility, as in France and Germany, discontented citizens turned to unstable coalitions, to fringe parties, or to the streets. Simply put, there is no consistent ideological logic evident in voters' responses to the Depression when we look beyond the American case. When voters got a chicken in every pot at election time, they usually liked the incumbent party's ideology just fine, whatever it happened to be. But when incomes eroded and unemployment escalated, they became ripe for defection to anyone who promised to bring home the poultry.

"A PROMISE OF SALVATION": SOCIAL CREDIT SWEEPS ALBERTA

Our brief global survey of electoral responses to the Great Depression underlines the apparent willingness of voters experiencing significant economic distress to embrace a remarkable variety of proposed solutions. In most cases, of course, those proposed solutions reflect *some* more or less respectable understanding of economic policies and their consequences. Thus, it may appear that voters in these instances were merely guilty of some ideological inconsistency—hardly surprising and plausibly sensible under the circumstances. However, we believe that the problem goes deeper than that. When the proposed solutions to economic distress happen *not* to be respectable, voters may be quite willing to embrace them nonetheless.

A remarkable example of this sort comes from the Canadian prairie province of Alberta, where voters in the midst of the Great Depression abandoned all of the province's established political parties in favor of an improbable, totally untried alternative, the Social Credit Party. We have nothing to add to existing scholarship on the meteoric rise of Social Credit, most notably John Irving's (1959) detailed account of *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta*. Nevertheless, we review the case in some detail, since it seems to us to shed considerable light on the combustible potential of blind retrospection under conditions of economic distress.[33]

33 Similar economic nostrums were embodied in the Townsend Plan, which attracted substantial support in California and other parts of the United States in the same period (Cantril 1941, chap. 7).

"In 1935," according to W. L. Morton (1950, 286), "the rural electors of Alberta refused to listen to their former leaders. They closed their ears to reason; in their despair, they sought only a promise of salvation." Although Social Credit embodied a certain "reforming impulse" (Finkel 1989, 40), careful analysis of the party's electoral support suggests that it was a catch-all party whose appeal had less to do with conventional economic cleavages or policies than with voters' desire for "a strong-willed, dauntless leader who would take them out of the wilderness" (Irving 1959, 340). The result was a colorful and unnerving episode in the history of modern democratic politics.

As we have seen, the national government of Canada had been in Liberal hands before passing to the Conservative Party in 1930. At the provincial level, an agrarian populist party, the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA), had been in power since 1921. In 1933, UFA leaders played a prominent role in the creation of a national farm-labor socialist party, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, which in turn supported the UFA provincial government of Alberta. Thus, Alberta entered the first provincial election campaign of the Depression era with what was, in effect, an agrarian socialist governing party. The Liberals were the largest mainstream opposition party, having received about 25% of the vote in each of the previous two provincial elections.

Alberta's Social Credit Party emerged from a social movement led by William Aberhart, a charismatic preacher, educator, and radio broadcaster. Though he had earlier dismissed the Social Credit philosophy as "crazy," he was won over by a highly popularized version he encountered in a book borrowed from a colleague in the summer of 1932. He "decided that Social Credit was exactly what the people of Alberta needed to redeem their province from the depths into which the bankers and financiers had plunged it" (Irving 1959, 48–49)—and he proceeded to give it to them.

Aberhart's crusade on behalf of Social Credit drew upon the resources and prestige of the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, a powerful religious institution which he had built and directed in the 1920s. "Under his leadership," Irving (1959, 50, 259) wrote, "the Social Credit movement glided almost imperceptibly from a religious to an educational to a social to a political movement, but throughout that evolution the people's perception of Aberhart as a Man of God was never dimmed and was one of the principal factors in inspiring them with loyalty and devotion to the Social Credit movement." Until just a few months before the 1935 provincial election, Social Credit retained the character of a social movement rather than a political party. However, "Social Credit speakers did not hesitate to whip up the people's resentment at

the government's seeming indifference to their sufferings. Small-town weeklies began to suggest in their editorial columns that thousands of people were persuaded that Aberhart was the Moses of a new economic deal. It followed that the Social Credit movement should enter politics without further delay" (Irving 1959, 121).

Aberhart and his followers employed an impressive variety of organizational and propaganda techniques, including study groups, parades, and open-air meetings. Aberhart's radio broadcasts spread the Social Credit gospel throughout the province. Often the broadcasts featured a "Man from Mars" who personified the confusion of ordinary Albertans in the face of economic chaos: "The 'Man from Mars' . . . could not understand why people were not receiving enough food and clothing in a land where food and clothing were being needlessly destroyed. Why were some people driving around in big cars, well-fed and prosperous, while others did not have even the barest necessities of life? Aberhart informed the Martian visitor that, if he could stay for the meeting, he would learn that Social Credit was the only way out of the present financial chaos, the only solution of the paradox of 'poverty in the midst of plenty'" (Irving 1959, 113).

The Social Credit platform called for the distribution of $25 monthly Basic Dividends to every citizen, the establishment of Just Prices on all goods and services, and a suspension of foreclosures pending the issuance of interest-free loans by the provincial government. Critics charged that "'basic dividends' could not be issued in Alberta because of constitutional limitations, and that, if they could be initiated, inflation would result. The prevailing attitude of educated people in the small towns to such arguments was aptly summed up by a local editor: 'The hope of the people, long deferred, has made hearts sick. Desperate diseases require desperate remedies. Perhaps people cannot be blamed for accepting unconstitutional and unintelligent prescriptions when constitutional and rational ones are platitudinous'" (Irving 1959, 121). According to Irving (1959, 256), "interviews are replete with admissions of a lack of understanding of the technical mechanisms or procedures that would be involved in carrying out monetary reform or in the provision of basic dividends and the just price. All such matters, people constantly insisted, could safely be left to Aberhart and the experts he would call in to implement his Social Credit programme." Editorialists railed in vain against "the uncritical belief of Aberhart's followers in Social Credit as a magic formula" (Irving 1959, 86). One pro-business interest group complained that "the whole Social Credit scheme is impracticable. It can be defended only by those who close their eyes to simple reasoning or those who are utterly cynical and reckless in what they say to electors. The religious atmosphere of Social Credit blinds people to these dangers" (Irving 1959, 362).[34]

The appeal of Social Credit no doubt stemmed in part from the fact that "in 'explaining' the causes of the depression it did not run counter to, but rather accentuated, the extremely hostile attitudes towards the existing economic system that had arisen in a period characterized by 'poverty in the midst of plenty'" (Irving 1959, 334). The electoral potential of the Social Credit movement was further enhanced by the weakness of voters' attachments to the existing political parties.[35] Most important, the incumbent UFA was, as Morton (1950, 287) put it, "old in the sense that it had been tried."

The UFA election manifesto "surveyed 'the notable record of achievement' of the farmers' administration in many fields, outlined the social dividends being paid to the people of Alberta, and concluded by setting forth in sixteen clauses the further steps that were necessary for the realization of the ultimate objectives of the U.F.A. movement. Replying to the challenge of the Social Credit movement, the government claimed that it had brought Alberta through the greatest depression in the world's history to better advantage than any other government anywhere" (Irving 1959, 352). Regarding the possibility of more radical change, the UFA declared that it was hamstrung by limitations on Alberta's sovereign powers and by the province's economic dependence on the rest of Canada. The voters were clearly not impressed by these excuses. After his final campaign rally, UFA Premier

34 A pamphlet issued by the Economic Safety League (quoted by Irving 1959, 361–362) sheds light both on the flavor of the Social Credit plan and on the exasperation of its opponents at its apparent illogic: "Social Credit proposes to issue toy or make-believe money (which it calls credit) at the rate of $10,000,000 a month. It does not disclose any method by which this toy money can be given the same purchasing power as Canadian money. . . . Existing provincial taxes are about $15,000,000 a year. Dividend payments alone would require $120,000,000, which is eight times this revenue. . . . Mr. Aberhart himself admits the need for revenue, but does not show how it can be obtained. His attempts to do so are childish. . . . Social Credit claims to be able to pay $120,000,000 a year with a much smaller sum (such as $10,000,000) if the toy-money is turned over fast enough. This is a crude fallacy. $120,000,000 a year can be paid with 10,000,000 dollar coins, notes, or even dollar-certificates if these are used over and over again (12 times a year is the example chosen). But the Government cannot use the dollars a second time till it gets them back from the public. The process of getting them back is called taxation. . . . Since continued inflation will make the toy-money valueless; and since the means for raising $120,000,000 a year are absurd, the whole Social Credit scheme is impracticable."

35 The combined vote for Liberals and Conservatives in the 1930 provincial election had totaled less than 40%. Irving (1959, 230) cited "a continuous tradition of great dissatisfaction with the conventional party system. . . . The operation of democracy in Alberta in terms of the two-party system had therefore been tenuous and uncertain."

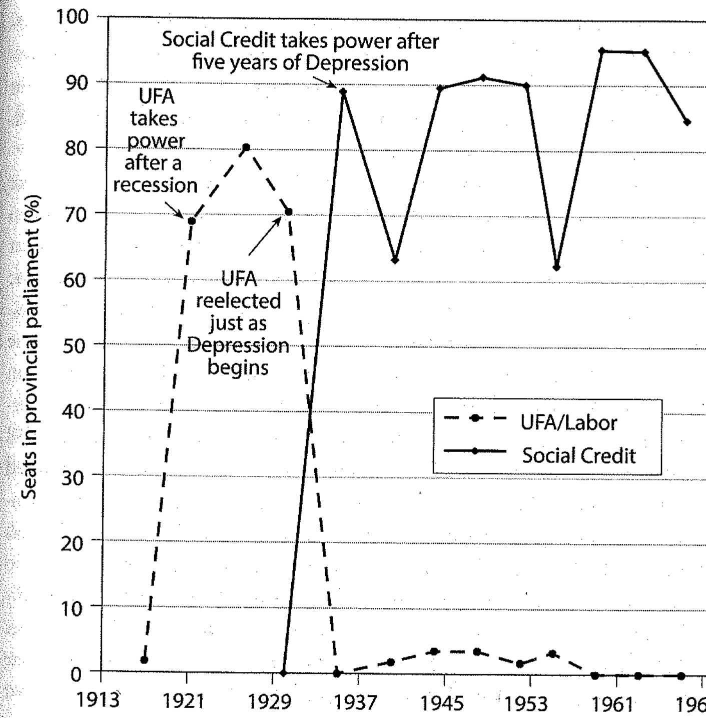

Figure 7.5. The Legacy of the Great Depression in Alberta Provincial Politics

R. G. Reid overheard a young man "say, to nobody in particular, 'Well, I guess Social Credit's no darn good, but who's there to vote for anyway—I guess I'll vote for Social Credit anyway'" (Irving 1959, 330–331). Many others did the same.

The result was a startling political earthquake, even by Depression-era standards. The fledgling Social Credit Party won 56 of the 63 seats in the provincial parliament; the incumbent UFA won none. Voters who lined up to receive their $25 bonuses on the morning after the election were to be disappointed. Nevertheless, as the timelines of party fortunes presented in figure 7.5 make clear, the critical election of 1935 precipitated a durable partisan realignment in Alberta. Social Credit would go on to dominate provincial politics for an entire generation, winning nine consecutive provincial elections (often with 90% or more of the seats in parliament) and governing without interruption for more than 35 years. By contrast, the UFA, the proponent of all the social welfare programs that one would suppose Depression-era voters needed, was destroyed forever as an effective political force in Alberta, never again winning as much as 5% of the seats (and seldom as much as 20% of the votes) in provincial elections.[36]

The remarkable rise of the Social Credit Party in Alberta is all the more remarkable when it is juxtaposed with the story of the adjacent Canadian prairie province of Saskatchewan. While the economic hardships of the Great Depression led Albertans to hand the reins of government to a charismatic preacher peddling funny-money economic policies, their neighbors in Saskatchewan followed a very different path, gravitating toward the very same left-wing populist ideology that Albertans abandoned. A provincial election in 1934 saw the utter collapse of the governing Conservative Party and its replacement with a new Liberal government. The Liberals were reelected in 1938 (Canada having averted the economic downturn that afflicted the United States in that year). At the same time, however, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)—the agrarian socialist party allied with Alberta's now-demolished UFA—flourished in Saskatchewan, first in opposition to the Liberals and later, beginning in 1944, as North America's first avowedly socialist government. As Seymour Martin Lipset acknowledged in his classic study of agrarian socialism (1968, xxii), "There has not yet been an adequate explanation, or even a detailed descriptive account of the factors involved that resulted in such different reactions from two quite similar social units."

Despite their drastic ideological differences, the Social Credit Party in Alberta and the CCF in Saskatchewan both managed to build durable electoral pluralities in the years following the Depression. In Saskatchewan, the socialists won five consecutive elections and governed the province without interruption from 1944 through 1964. The Liberal Party survived in opposition and won two elections during the 1960s, but never regained the share of seats it held in the provincial legislature in virtually every election before 1944. The Conservative Party, swept from office in 1934, won a total of one seat in all elections thereafter until 1975, despite carrying the province repeatedly in federal elections.

According to John Bennett and Cynthia Krueger (1968, 359), "the prevailing pattern of Saskatchewan voting can be summarized by the remark: 'They vote CCF in provincial elections, and Conservative in Federal. It

36 A quasi-successor, the New Democratic Party (NDP), enjoyed its first-ever victory in an Alberta election in 2015.

makes sense only if you live here.'" They added, "The sense in this situation is clear enough; the farmers voted for those parties that furnished or were associated with solutions to their problems, regardless of ideological doctrine." We would add that those parties were "associated with solutions" only in the sense that they happened to be in office when economic conditions improved.

CONCLUSION

John Irving (1959, ix–x) suggested that "the functioning of the democratic process in Alberta during the rise of the Social Credit movement provides a much needed corrective to the abstract concepts of the classical philosophers of democracy from John Locke to John Dewey." We agree, at least, that the rise of Social Credit—and the responses of a variety of democratic electorates to the stresses of the Great Depression—cast profound doubts on the romantic image of "the people" incorporated in the folk theory of democracy.

Looking at evidence from the United States, along with an array of election outcomes in Europe, Canada, and elsewhere, we have argued for an understanding of the politics of the Great Depression that is radically different from the usual contemporary views. Most voters, we argue, are busy with their lives in the best of times, and doubly so when they are under great economic pressure in recessions and depressions. Politics is full of complexities and uncertainties, even for those who can devote full time to it. The voters, not knowing what the best policies are, content themselves with asking at election time whether events have gone well or badly lately. Then they vote that myopic judgment.

These facts make sense of such otherwise perplexing electoral outcomes as Winston Churchill's loss of the British prime minister's office in 1945. He may well have asked, "What? Saving you from death in the concentration camps wasn't enough?" But once victory in Europe was achieved, the voters lost interest in that topic. What was on their minds at election time seems to have been the housing shortage (McCallum and Readman 1947, 203–204), to which no competent government would have diverted money during the war. The voters didn't care. They voted for a change.

When the state of the election-year economy is particularly dreadful, as it surely was during the depths of the Great Depression, voters are likely to feel more strongly about their retrospections, forming strong partisan aversions to the incumbents, and—if times improve—strong attachments to the parties that replace them. The resulting preferences endure in less stressful periods and are eventually passed on to children, imposing a long-term stamp on the party system. Voters will adopt more or less coherent "ideological" explanations for their behavior, the policies of the lucky party will be enacted, and a country may be substantially remade. The resulting political realignment may appear to political scientists and historians as a momentous ideological judgment by the electorate. But we find in the cases we have examined that the evidence for such interpretations is weak. Political insiders debate policy alternatives, but the electorate votes on a very different basis.