

WHOSE ECONOMY? PERCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE DURING UNEQUAL GROWTH

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Abstract Perceptions of national economic performance are a cornerstone of American public opinion and of presidential approval. Yet much of our knowledge about economic perceptions comes from political surveys conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, prior to the recent increase in income inequality. This article updates our understanding of economic perceptions by combining the 1978–2010 Michigan Surveys of Consumer Attitudes with various economic indicators. It first uses aggregate data to show that, despite rising inequality, Americans of all incomes continue to agree about national economic performance. In past work, snapshots from elections create the impression that these assessments of economic performance are influenced only by income growth among the wealthy. Examining more than 215,000 respondents over three decades, however, we learn that income growth among the poor is frequently more influential. This article thus identifies an attitudinal mechanism by which the poor's economic condition can profoundly influence American politics.

If the study of American presidential elections were reduced to a single finding, it might well be the central role of national economic performance. Political scientists have repeatedly documented that incumbent presidents receive higher

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approval and more support when the economy has grown in the period prior to the election (e.g., Kramer 1971; Kiewiet and Rivers 1984; Vavreck 2009). Since World War II, the most lopsided presidential elections have taken place during periods of rapid growth (e.g., 1972, 1964, 1984) or economic stagnation (e.g., 1980). The influence of economic performance is not limited to campaigns and elections: Past research connects the state of the economy to outcomes as disparate as political trust (Hetherington and Rudolph 2008) and aggregate partisanship (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). Given the predictive power of economic performance, it is not surprising that political scientists have devoted hundreds of articles to understanding its influence on voters' preferences (see Kiewiet and Rivers 1984; and Vavreck 2009 for reviews).

Yet, in the United States, much of the foundational research was conducted decades ago. Since then, the U.S. economy has undergone a structural shift, entering what some term a "new gilded age" (Bartels 2008; see also Hacker 2004; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Piketty and Saez 2006; McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Page and Jacobs 2009; Kelly and Enns 2010). Over the past three decades, real wages for poor Americans have been nearly stagnant while those for wealthy Americans have grown rapidly. According to the Current Population Survey, in 1978, Americans at the 95th income percentile made 6.7 times as much as their counterparts at the 20th percentile. This was just prior to the peak of economic voting studies. By 2003, that ratio had grown by 27 percent, to 8.5. These diverging fortunes were just beginning in the 1970s, and they raise a challenge that the early economic voting literature did not know to address: How is economic performance perceived in a period of rising inequality?

Studying Americans' national economic assessments in recent decades will provide insight into the ongoing debate about the rationality of collective opinion. Using surveys during postwar presidential elections, one recent study contends that low-income voters reward income growth among the affluent more than they reward overall income growth (Bartels 2008). Unlike older work, that study innovates by disaggregating the economic conditions experienced by different groups of voters. Its results suggest that voters may be prone to perceptual errors that decouple their own economic well-being from their perceptions. Economic perceptions are a critical case in part because economic information is so readily available in everyday life. If voters make perceptual errors with respect to the economy, they may be even more prone to do so on issues that are remote from their day-to-day experience.

By understanding the correlates of retrospective assessments about the national economy, we will also gain insight into the potential for political accountability in an era of rising inequality. As Bartels's (2008) findings suggest, if Americans' economic perceptions are disproportionately influenced by income growth at the top, they might inadvertently reward politicians who promote growth among that group. However, the opposite is potentially true as well: To the extent that Americans emphasize the condition of the poor when

assessing the economy, they will hold politicians accountable for growth at that end of the income distribution. If operative, this possibility represents a sharp departure from past work, which has consistently emphasized mechanisms that reduce the prospects of holding politicians accountable for economic outcomes among the poor.¹

Empirically, past inferences have been limited by their reliance on a relatively small number of political surveys conducted during elections. This article takes a different approach, instead employing more than 215,000 respondents to the Michigan Survey of Consumer Attitudes (SCA). By analyzing monthly time-series cross-sectional data from 1978 to 2010, we can observe a broader range of economic and information environments than has previously been available.² Following Krause (1997), we can compare relationships among subsets of the population, allowing us to identify whether the wealthy, the middle class, and the poor respond differently to economic changes. We can thus reassess claims about voter misperceptions with greater empirical leverage.

To be sure, the move away from analyzing political surveys has costs. This article can shed light only on economic perceptions, not on the vote choices that they ostensibly influence. And in fact, its evidence suggests that these attitudinal mechanisms are dampened during presidential campaigns, which could reflect partisan priming. Also, the SCA lacks information on respondents' partisanship, an important liability given studies of its influence on economic perceptions (DeBoef and Kellstedt 2004; Gerber and Huber 2009). But in the aggregate, partisanship varies only slowly over time (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Its absence is unlikely to confound the inferences here, which explore the relationship between economic conditions and economic perceptions over 388 months.³ Put differently, partisanship is primarily a source of cross-sectional variation in economic perceptions, while this research emphasizes variation in those perceptions over time.

This article's conceptual contribution, outlined in the next section, is to integrate research on economic perceptions with recent trends in income inequality. It advances three hypotheses: one based on claims of a "rational public" (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992), a second based on the class-bias claims advanced by Bartels (2008), and a third extrapolating from studies of happiness and relative income (e.g., Clark, Frijters, and Shields 2008). After introducing the data

1. There are solid economic grounds for studying these assessments as well. Economic assessments are close correlates of consumer sentiment, and are related to future economic consumption (Carroll, Fuhrer, and Wilcox 1994; Gerber and Huber 2009). For more on the possibility of a reverse relationship between present-day consumer sentiment and future economic behavior, see especially Bafumi (2010).

2. For prior uses of these data in political science, see MacKuen et al. (1992), Krause (1997), DeBoef and Kellstedt (2004), and Bafumi (2010).

3. MacKuen et al. (1992) make a similar argument. They defend their use of the same survey by saying that "these data from economic surveys are decidedly free of the problem of political response rationalization that plagues microanalysis" (p. 599).

and empirical methods, the article proceeds in two empirical sections. The first is largely descriptive. To understand the mechanisms at work, it considers whether the rising gap between the wealthy and the poor is visible in Americans' assessments of personal economic performance, although the article's ultimate goal remains explaining national economic assessments.⁴ The analyses show that Americans' personal economic assessments diverge in predictable ways, with the poor consistently reporting worse assessments of their own situation. But those gaps did not grow at all from 1978 to 2010. Thus, low-income Americans do not appear to be evaluating their personal economic situation by comparing themselves to the wealthiest. Strikingly, the wealthiest 5 percent are indistinguishable from the wealthiest 25 percent in their personal economic assessments, despite having enjoyed concentrated economic gains in this period. What's more, poor and wealthy Americans are generally in close agreement about the state of the national economy.

That agreement about national economic conditions despite rising inequality leads us to pursue our next question: Do Americans agree because they are all assessing economic performance at the top, as Bartels's (2008) results might imply? For these data, the answer is no. In fact, for wealthy, middle-income, and poor respondents, annual income growth at the 20th percentile is a stronger predictor of economic assessments than income growth at the 95th. Considering the period from 1978 to 2010, this analysis does not find evidence of systematic misperceptions by the poor. It instead finds considerable evidence that socio-tropic economic assessments are related to income growth among poorer Americans. Whether intentionally or not, if they were to act based on these economic perceptions, voters would punish or reward politicians who promote income growth at the low end of the income distribution. As in other cases (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992), when viewed in the aggregate, public perceptions of the economy generally appear to respond in a rational and parallel manner to real-world conditions. To the extent that this article uncovers irrationality, it is most likely to be among the wealthiest, whose improved economic position is not reflected in survey responses.

Hypotheses: Assessing Economic Performance

Scholars of American politics have studied economic and retrospective voting for at least 40 years (e.g., Key 1966; Kramer 1971), and the core theoretical claims emerged decades ago. Theoretical interest in the impacts of rising economic inequality is more recent (e.g., Hacker 2004; Piketty and Saez 2006; Bartels 2008) and, as a result, studies of economic perceptions have not yet been integrated with our understanding of economic inequality. This section

4. Put differently, this section considers both self-oriented or egoistic retrospections and society-oriented or sociotropic retrospections.

thus adapts three theoretical approaches to the task of explaining economic perceptions. To be sure, none of the approaches was developed primarily to explain perceptions of economic performance, and none is a perfect fit. Yet all yield predictions about how national economic perceptions might shift in a period of rising economic inequality.

At the aggregate level, research has noted a consistent relationship among economic performance, presidential approval, and election outcomes (e.g., [Kramer 1971](#); [Vavreck 2009](#)). These findings make intuitive sense: The economy influences day-to-day life in a multitude of ways, from wages to gas prices, meaning that people have access to considerable amounts of economic information. Reinforcing this intuition, [DeBoef and Kellstedt \(2004, p. 635\)](#) show that objective economic conditions strongly predict perceptions of economic performance.

These results are in line with the claims made by [Page and Shapiro \(1992\)](#) that in the aggregate, public opinion responds rationally to changing objective conditions. The “rational public” view does not contend that all individuals necessarily hold accurate perceptions. Instead, it claims that in the aggregate, perceptual errors tend to be offsetting, a fact that generates aggregate trends that respond in predictable ways to the real world (see also [Erikson et al. 2002](#)). This viewpoint holds that even if subgroups have different baseline levels of a given opinion or perception, those opinions are likely to change in ways that are parallel across groups, as they respond to common information. Page and Shapiro dub this phenomenon “parallel publics.” These claims about aggregate rationality constitute the first of the three hypotheses advanced here.

Yet, at the individual level, past work disagrees about the relationship between personal economic evaluations and support for the incumbent president (e.g., [Kinder and Kiewiet 1981](#); [Kiewiet and Rivers 1984](#); [Kinder, Adams, and Gronke 1989](#)). The weak observed relationship might stem from the fact that personal economic events typically have little to do with government policy ([Kramer 1983](#)). Alternately, the weak relationships might indicate that economic voting is largely sociotropic—that is, influenced chiefly by perceptions of aggregate conditions ([Kinder and Kiewiet 1981](#); [Kinder, Adams, and Gronke 1989](#)). Since Americans’ information about their own finances covers only a tiny fraction of the nation’s economic transactions, the possibility of sociotropic voting necessarily focuses attention on how Americans come to perceive national economic performance as good or bad (e.g., [Mutz 1994](#)).⁵

5. In the early economic voting research, the relative influence of retrospective versus prospective perceptions was one source of disagreement (e.g., [MacKuen et al. 1992](#)). Do Americans reward the president for past economic performance, or for anticipated economic performance in the future? Nonetheless, it is fair to say that models of economic voting within political science still put more emphasis on past economic performance (e.g., [Kiewiet and Rivers 1984](#); [Kinder et al. 1989](#); [Bartels 2008](#); [Vavreck 2009](#)). Moreover, we are interested here in the accuracy of assessments, and retrospective assessments are firmly grounded in an observed reality. It is far more difficult to assess the accuracy of predictions.

One source of disagreement in the earlier research centered on which aspects of the economy were most influential (e.g., Kiewiet and Rivers 1984). Economic performance is not a self-evident fact: At any given time, one might perceive the economy to be doing better or worse depending on the indicator one chooses. In assessing the economy, do Americans focus on unemployment, inflation, income growth, stocks, housing prices, some combination of those factors, or something else entirely?

Economic changes since the peak of the academic debates have added another complication. Beginning in the 1970s, economic gains in the United States have been increasingly earned by the wealthiest Americans (Hacker 2004; McCarty et al. 2006; Piketty and Saez 2006; Bartels 2008; McCall and Kenworthy 2009; Page and Jacobs 2009). For example, in 1970, a household at the 20th percentile received an income that was 15.9 percent of a household income at the 95th percentile. In 2003, the final year covered in this study, the comparable figure was 11.6 percent. Even when disagreeing about other issues, the canonical studies of economic voting conceived of economic performance as something experienced uniformly across the electorate (but see Krause 1997). In an era of rising income inequality, that assumption becomes less tenable.

Advancing that possibility, Bartels (2008) analyzes 14 National Election Studies during presidential years to show that what correlates with support for the incumbent is not income growth overall but income growth among the wealthy. In his words, “low-income voters seem to be more sensitive to the election-year growth rates for more affluent families than they are for families at their own income level” (p. 113). In this analysis, overall income growth does not prove a strong predictor of Americans’ vote choices. Thus, Americans are either principled believers in supply-side economics or else are holding incumbents to the wrong retrospective standard. Like the “parallel publics” view, this approach leads us to expect that different income groups’ perceptions will move in parallel. But the origins differ: Here, the parallel movement is because of a perceptual error among low-income Americans.⁶

Still, this provocative possibility merits more exploration, and more consideration of the underlying mechanisms that translate economic conditions into subjective perceptions. Is it truly the case that low-income voters perceive the level of economic growth incorrectly, or perhaps campaign effects or other intervening factors deemphasize income growth as a voting criterion among those with low incomes? Bartels (2008) demonstrates that income growth among the wealthy is predictive of low-income voters’ choices, but that does not necessarily imply that these choices are based on misperceptions. We thus need a direct test of the hypothesis that low-income voters’ perceptions of economic

6. To be clear, Bartels (2008) argues that these misperceptions are only one of several pathways through which the political system has fostered economic inequality in recent years. But for this article’s purposes, this pathway is the most central.

performance are chiefly influenced by income growth among the affluent. We also need to acknowledge that if economic assessments do incorporate performance at the low end of the income distribution, they could be a potent vehicle for representing that group's political interests.

The implication from Bartels (2008) is that voters acknowledge and reward income growth even if it accrues to a small subset of society. Yet if we assume that people assess their economic position relative to others, as studies of happiness and subjective well-being commonly contend (Frank 1985; Luttmer 2005; Clark et al. 2008), we might hypothesize precisely the opposite. To assess their personal financial situations, people need points of comparison. For decades, sociological research has emphasized the importance of reference groups with whom individuals can compare themselves (e.g., Hyman 1942), suggesting that one potential benchmark involves comparing oneself to other people (see Clark et al. 2008 for a review).

There are many potential reference groups one might use, and they can be defined in terms of geography, income, or other variables (Clark et al. 2008, p. 112). One prominent hypothesis emphasizes *local* comparisons, such as one's family, neighbors, friends, or coworkers (Frank 1985, Chapter 2; Luttmer 2005). Explaining this hypothesis, Frank (1985, pp. 8–9) writes, “[n]egative feelings are much more strongly evoked by adverse comparisons with our immediate associates than by those with people who are distant in place or time.” Yet comparisons with one's neighbors do not necessarily provide much information about the distribution of income nationally. A second hypothesis contends that broader “imagined communities,” such as national economic groups, might be a point of reference as well (Kinder et al. 1989; Kenworthy and McCall 2008). Certainly, there is reason to think that one's income relative to other Americans is influential on political attitudes such as vote choices (McCarty et al. 2006, pp. 92–93; see also Gelman 2008). And if low-income Americans use the wealthiest Americans as one benchmark in their economic perceptions, we should expect their personal economic assessments to decline as income is increasingly concentrated at the top.

To be sure, these national-level hypotheses assume that people perceive the relative performance of different economic groups, an assumption that finds mixed empirical support (e.g., Kenworthy and McCall 2008; Page and Jacobs 2009). Still, whether low-income Americans commonly assess themselves relative to the wealthiest remains a hypothesis worth considering. Indeed, the empirical tests below focus on national rather than local benchmarks for three reasons: Such comparisons are politically relevant (Kenworthy and McCall 2008), emphasized in past research (Bartels 2008), and empirically tractable with existing data.

Data and Methods

To understand how economic conditions influence Americans' economic perceptions, it is critical to observe attitudes under a range of economic conditions. In that respect, the University of Michigan's SCA is an unparalleled data source

(see also MacKuen et al. 1992; DeBoef and Kellstedt 2004). Since the 1950s, the SCA has polled American adults in the coterminous 48 states and the District of Columbia about their economic attitudes and expectations. The survey is conducted by telephone using random digit dialing, and each monthly cross-section comprises 60 percent new respondents and 40 percent respondents being interviewed for a second time.⁷ This survey is one of the main sources of data on consumer sentiment, and it has consistently included the same battery of questions about economic performance. It asks one question on government economic policy midway through, but is otherwise apolitical, a fact that should reduce the priming of partisan cues.⁸ As with past analyses (e.g., Krause 1997), this article begins in 1978 because that is the first year for which monthly data are available. It includes all data until April 2010, covering 388 months. The monthly sample sizes range from 492 to 1,459. We can thus observe a wide variety of economic conditions over a 33-year period, and can disaggregate responses by the wealthy, the poor, or other groups. This section outlines the benefits of using the SCA and then justifies the methods employed.

The SCA provides another advantage to scholars of income inequality: Beginning in the middle of 1986, its measure of income was not top-coded, leaving respondents free to report their annual income.⁹ At all times, the survey asked respondents: “thinking about your total income from all sources (including your job), how much did you receive in the previous year?” Prior to 1986, respondents were given fixed response categories. After that point, their responses were open-ended, making it easier to identify narrow income percentiles. For example, in the final month available, respondents provided 124 unique numbers in response to this question, from a low of \$5,000 to a high of just under \$1,000,000. The median personal income reported was \$60,000. As with other surveys, there is considerable rounding and non-response,¹⁰ and there are likely to be other reporting errors as well. Nonetheless, the data enable us to identify people in the upper echelons of the income distribution with rare precision. We know, for instance, that 841 respondents overall earned over \$250,000 (in constant 1991 dollars).

7. The mean American Association of Public Opinion Research RR2 from February 1, 1981, to December 31, 2008, was 62.4 percent, while the median was 67.0 percent. The trend over time is sharply downward. In 1981, RR2 was 72.4 percent, while by 2008 it was 39.8 percent. For detailed discussions of response rates to the SCA and their declines over time, please see Curtin et al. (2000, 2005). Additional information on the survey design and implementation is available at <http://www.sca.isr.umich.edu/main.php>.

8. The absence of strong partisan cues within the survey itself is an advantage if one’s goal is to assess the factors underpinning Americans’ day-to-day economic perceptions. It might be considered a disadvantage, however, if one’s goal were to understand voter decision-making in a campaign-like environment.

9. On the top-coding of income, see also pp. 122–23 of McCarty et al. 2006.

10. On average, 6.9 percent of respondents refuse to report their income.

Retrospective assessments of national economic conditions are consistently related to presidential voting (e.g., Kiewiet and Rivers 1984). Yet they matter even when elections are not imminent, as they correlate with outcomes as disparate as presidential approval (DeBoef and Kellstedt 2004) and political trust (Hetherington and Rudolph 2008). Since these attitudinal and behavioral outcomes in turn are related to policymaking (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002), this article focuses on the mass-level sociotropic economic assessments that lie at their foundations. The relevant question in the SCA asks: “would you say that at the present time business conditions are better or worse than they were a year ago?”¹¹ In this question, respondents are asked to assess a slope or change rather than an absolute level of economic performance. The subsequent analyses follow suit by specifying the core independent variables such as income growth in terms of annual changes.

Still, because personal economic assessments are potential precursors to national economic assessments (Ansolabehere, Meredith, and Snowberg 2010; Gomez and Wilson 2006), and because they are especially informative on questions of relative economic standing, this article also considers data on respondents’ assessments of their own economic situation in places. Here, the SCA asks respondents, “we are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you (and your family living there) are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?”¹²

There are 223,793 respondents to the SCA’s monthly surveys over this period. But because our hypotheses are about responses to economic conditions, that number dramatically overstates the empirical leverage we have. More important is the fact that the respondents are grouped in 388 months. Some of the analyses below aggregate the responses of low- or high-income Americans into 388 monthly time-series observations. Others use multilevel modeling (Gelman and Hill 2006) with random year effects to model the clustered nature of the data. In both cases, the goal is to accurately represent our level of uncertainty.

A Tale of Two Economies?

This section is primarily descriptive, and it aims to summarize the trends in Americans’ economic perceptions in an era of rising economic inequality.

11. This measure of sociotropic and retrospective economic assessments is slightly different from that asked by the National Election Study, which instead reads: “Now, thinking about the economy in the country as a whole, would you say that over the past year the nation’s economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?” The SCA question explicitly asks about “business,” perhaps calling to mind the situation of retailers, corporations, and other salient businesses in a way that the NES question about “the nation’s economy” does not. Still, the two questions are very similar in structure, especially when considering that the previous SCA question sets the geographic frame of reference as the “country as a whole.”

12. Both questions provide three categories, with a middle option of “same” or “about the same” (3) and then options for better (5) and worse (1).

Empirically, we know that Americans in the highest income brackets have seen marked income growth, while those in the lowest income brackets have seen far less. Do such differences appear in Americans' economic assessments?

Figure 1 provides initial evidence on this question. At the top, it charts income levels at the 20th, 40th, 60th, 80th, and 95th percentiles from 1978 to 2008.¹³ At the 20th percentile, real incomes grew by only 8 percent in this period. At the 80th percentile, they grew by 26 percent, while at the 95th percentile they grew by 41 percent. These facts are likely to be familiar, as they have been extensively documented (Hacker 2004; McCarty et al. 2006; Piketty and Saez 2006). The figure also illustrates that despite different baselines and levels of growth, incomes tend to grow for the poor and middle class at the same time that they grow for the well-to-do. Table 1A in the appendix confirms this observation by presenting the Pearson's correlations for income growth at each available income percentile. Annual income growth at different levels is always correlated at above 0.68, and the correlations are especially high when considering adjacent income levels. The results below will thus be especially attentive to concerns about collinearity.

Less familiar is the middle panel of figure 1, which illustrates Americans' personal, retrospective assessments for survey respondents in the top 5 percent (dashed line beginning in 1986), top 25 percent (dashed line), and bottom 25 percent (solid line) of the surveyed income distribution. The line for the top 5 percent is available only beginning in June 1986, when the response format of the income question changed.¹⁴ And visually, it is indistinguishable from the line for the top 25 percent. Nor are they statistically different: Their average difference is 0.06 on a 1–5 scale. Despite their unparalleled income growth, those at the highest echelon of the income distribution were not more likely to report a strong personal financial situation.

The figure illustrates a very consistent gap between high-income and low-income Americans. On average, the wealthiest 25 percent are 0.88 units higher than the poorest 25 percent, a difference that is highly statistically significant given the 1–5 scale.¹⁵ Very consistently, respondents who are wealthy at the time of the survey report better personal financial situations than do poorer respondents.

13. These data come from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. See www.census.gov/hhes/www/income.

14. The analyses employ these percentile cutoffs because of the granularity of the income data, especially prior to June 1986. Given the change to an open-ended income question, only beginning in June 1986 can we calculate the top 5 percent with any consistency. On average, 22 respondents had incomes above the 95th percentile in a given month.

15. The p -value from a two-sided t -test is less than 0.00001. By way of comparison, the standard deviation for the assessments of those below the 25th income percentile is 0.29, and for those above the 75th income percentile it is 0.43.

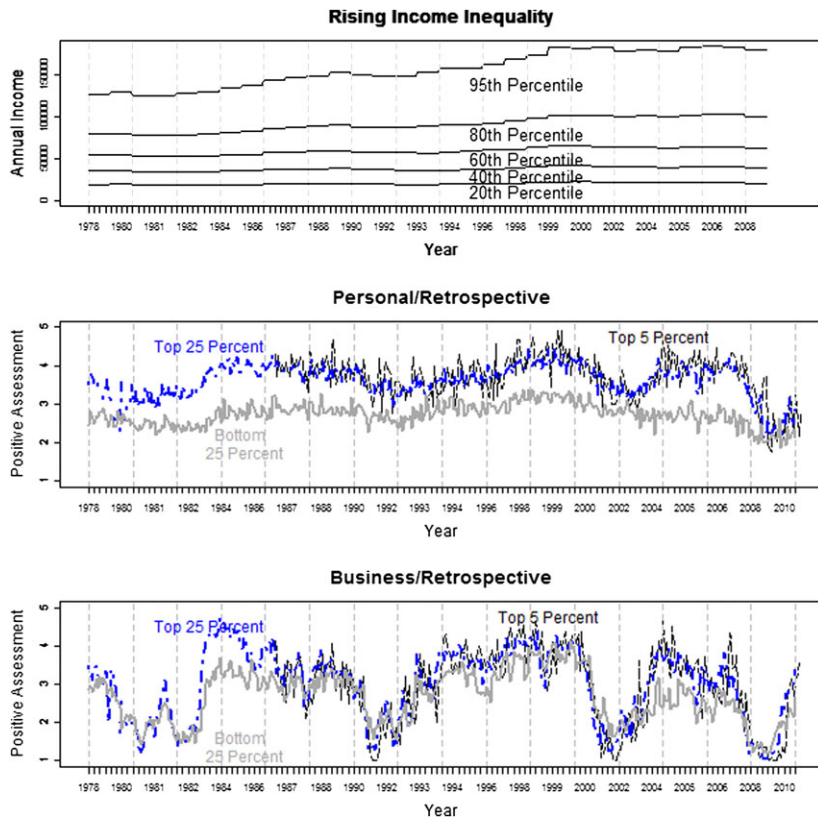


Figure 1. Income Inequality and Economic Assessments among Americans over Time. At the top, we see the rising income inequality from 1978 to 2008. In the middle, we see Americans' personal assessments of their economic condition from 1978 to 2010. At the bottom, we see Americans' sociotropic assessments by month, with higher values indicating better economic performance.

The middle panel of figure 1 also shows little evidence of an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, but we should subject that possibility to a formal test. We next run a basic regression model predicting the gap between the top 25 percent and the bottom 25 percent as a function of time in years. The estimated coefficient for years since 1978 is -0.0023 , and it has a standard error of 0.0017 . Put differently, the rich-poor gap in economic assessments over the prior year declines by 0.0023 units annually, a result that is statistically insignificant and substantively small. (By comparison, the gap's standard deviation is 0.31 .) This absence of an increase might reflect the fact that wealthier individuals were quicker to report improvements after the recession of the early 1980s. Also, poor respondents seem less negatively influenced in the period after September 11, 2001, or by the 2008 financial crisis. Overall,

Americans' objective income levels diverged over this period, but their views on their personal financial situations did not. The notion of "parallel publics," with different baselines and common responses to external shocks, is an apt description of the broad trends.

The absence of an increasing perceptual gap also provides a hint about how Americans assess their own financial situation. The poorest quarter of Americans do not appear to be assessing their personal financial situation relative to the richest Americans nationally: If they were, we would have seen declines over this period. And while both groups shift with the business cycle, the absence of a clear upward trend among the wealthiest is perplexing. Why do the personal retrospections of wealthy Americans not improve during a period of such strong income growth for that group? It seems plausible that the three-category response format truncates variation at the high end, although this would lead us to expect the time series to diverge as they trend downward. They do not. Alternatively, it might be the wealthy who think in terms of relative income in assessing their financial situation, and they might be comparing themselves to their coworkers, their neighbors, or to other Americans whose incomes have grown rapidly as well (e.g., Frank 1985).

Having considered Americans' personal economic retrospections, we now turn to perceptions of the country's economic performance. In the bottom panel of figure 1, we again subdivide the survey respondents by month into the poorest 25 percent, the wealthiest 25 percent, and the wealthiest 5 percent. The first observation that stands out is the general agreement of rich and poor on how the national economy has performed. There remains a statistically significant gap between the two groups, with those in the top quarter in terms of income 0.27 units more upbeat on average on a 1–5 scale. But here, the difference between the groups is dwarfed by the variation within groups: For the top 25 percent, the standard deviation is 0.93, and for the bottom, it is 0.68. Visually, the lines representing the three groups cannot be distinguished in most months. What matters is when you ask about economy, not whom you ask. Moreover, the difference appears to come partly from the fact that upper-income respondents are quicker to report improvement after recessions.¹⁶ This fact is most visible in the mid-1980s, but is seen again in the early 1990s and the mid-2000s.¹⁷ The

16. In interpreting these moments of divergence, it is important to note that the time series stems from a question asking respondents to compare business conditions in the present with conditions one year prior. For both poor and wealthy respondents, the change in national unemployment over the past year is much more strongly correlated with national economic assessments than is the level of unemployment at the time of the survey. This suggests that in the aggregate, both income groups are responding to the question being asked. The relationship is slightly stronger for the perceptions of the wealthy ($b = -0.64$, $SE = .03$) than for the perceptions of the poor ($b = -0.44$, $SE = .02$), giving rise to the possibility that wealthy people have more accurate perceptions of conditions one year prior.

17. This observation is confirmed via a regression model, where the national unemployment rate is a significant predictor of the gap between wealthy and poor ($b = 0.037$, $SE = 0.015$).

same general conclusions hold even when we separately track the top 5 percent of income earners. In fact, there is no significant difference between the sociotropic assessments of the top 5 percent and the top 25 percent.

To formally test these descriptions, we again run a regression model predicting the gap between sociotropic assessments at the top 25 percent and the bottom 25 percent of the income distribution. Here, the coefficient for time is -0.0007 with a standard error of 0.003 , indicating that the rich-poor gap is essentially constant. Rising income inequality has no clear analogue in Americans' sociotropic assessments of the economy. Whether wealthy or poor, Americans are reporting the same perceptions when it comes to overall economic performance. Given rising political polarization by income in at least some parts of the country (McCarty et al. 2006; Gelman 2008), and given the strong likelihood of partisan differences in economic perceptions (Gerber and Huber 2009), this near-unanimity is all the more striking. When asked about the nation's economy, Americans at various income levels give answers that are quite similar. This finding undercuts the claim that poor Americans are assessing their situation relative to the rich at the national level. Still, to adjudicate between the hypothesis emphasizing aggregate rationality and that emphasizing systematic misperceptions, we turn to individual-level data.

Whose Growth?

The fact that Americans largely agree about the state of the national economy leads to a second empirical question, one inspired by Bartels (2008): Whose economic growth do we actually perceive? As the economic fortunes of the wealthy and the poor have diverged, it is certainly possible that Americans have come to assess national economic performance based on the returns to the wealthy. But if the opposite is true, it may represent an underappreciated mechanism through which the fortunes of the poor influence perceptions and politics. This section tests that possibility using individual-level SCA data, monthly economic data, annual information on income growth, and multilevel models (Gelman and Hill 2006). Unlike the vast majority of studies of economic voting, we focus here on economic perceptions and thus are not limited to surveys conducted during election campaigns. This expands our empirical leverage considerably. Our dependent variable is the respondents' retrospective assessment of national business conditions.

The multilevel model accounts for the clustered nature of the data. For these analyses, we observe 215,723 respondents from 1978 to 2008,¹⁸ but only in 372 different months in 31 consecutive years.¹⁹ The multilevel approach allows us

18. An earlier version of this article reached highly similar conclusions using data from 1978 to 2003.

19. Income growth data is not yet available for 2009 or 2010, so these analyses exclude the 8,070 respondents to the SCA after December 31, 2008.

to model year-specific shocks, and such an approach helps us avoid falsely attributing such shocks to a time-varying independent variable. It also appropriately inflates the standard errors.²⁰

At the individual level, the basic model includes all the available demographics. Some are coded continuously, such as income,²¹ years of education, age in years, and age squared. The baseline model also includes indicator variables for Blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans, American Indians, and married respondents. To condition on other over-time influences, it includes several monthly economic measures as well. Specifically, the model uses one-month lags of unemployment, gas prices, oil prices, and the change in stock prices.²² As shown below, the results prove robust with or without these measures.

There are five key independent variables in the initial models: Current year income growth at the 20th, 40th, 60th, 80th, and 95th percentiles. All are measured in percentage terms, so that a one-percentage-point increase reflects the growth at that income percentile over the prior year. To allow for heterogeneity in the population, we subdivide our dataset into wealthy respondents (incomes above the 75th percentile), middle-income respondents (incomes between the 35th and 65th percentiles), and poor respondents (incomes below the 25th percentile).²³ Given that income growth has been concentrated at the top in recent decades (e.g., *Piketty and Saez 2006*), it is especially instructive to consider those with middle incomes and those with low incomes separately.

In the initial analysis, we include all five available measures of income growth in our models. Doing so enables us to see whether the data are able to differentiate between income growth's impacts at different levels—or whether the high correlations of growth across income groups prevent us from separately estimating the impacts of low- and high-end income growth. *Table 1* presents the results of multilevel models predicting respondents' sociotropic, retrospective assessments. The first and second columns provide the coefficients and standard errors for the poor respondents, while the subsequent four columns provide estimates for the middle-income and wealthy subsets. For all three groups, income growth at the 20th percentile is the strongest predictor of positive economic assessments of income growth at any level.

20. The multilevel models are implemented using the lme4 package in R (Bates and Maechler 2010).

21. Income is divided by the consumer price index, which standardizes it to 1991 dollars.

22. Unemployment data is from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, available online at www.bls.gov. Stock market data were obtained from Robert Shiller's website at www.econ.yale.edu/~shiller/data.htm, and supplemented with 2009 and 2010 data from Yahoo Finance, <http://finance.yahoo.com>. The stock measure is the percentage change in stock prices over the previous month. Oil and gas prices are available via the U.S. Energy Information Administration at www.eia.doe.gov. In the preliminary models, gas and oil price data are missing in 1978 and 1979. Subsequent models show no substantive changes when we remove these measures and thus include two additional years of data.

23. Here again, more finely grained subdivisions are not advisable because income was only assessed in an open-ended question beginning in 1986. The median number of fully observed respondents in the top quartile in a given month was 113.

Table 1. Predictors of Retrospective Sociotropic Assessments for Poor, Middle-Income, and Wealthy Respondents

| | Poor Respondents | | Middle-Income Respondents | | Wealthy Respondents | |
|----------------------|------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|---------------------|--------|
| | b _i | S.E. | b _m | S.E. | b _u | S.E. |
| Intercept | 47.947 | 14.367 | 72.094 | 22.531 | 86.148 | 28.393 |
| Income Growth (95th) | -1.882 | 5.099 | -4.903 | 8.983 | -7.716 | 12.058 |
| Income Growth (80th) | 8.190 | 9.732 | 12.923 | 17.141 | 14.900 | 23.011 |
| Income Growth (60th) | 9.621 | 9.138 | 11.119 | 16.082 | 15.361 | 21.573 |
| Income Growth (40th) | -13.223 | 6.977 | -16.574 | 12.275 | -18.500 | 16.476 |
| Income Growth (20th) | 18.169 | 4.725 | 22.492 | 8.326 | 23.154 | 11.179 |
| Natl Unemp (1) | -0.234 | 0.025 | -0.280 | 0.026 | -0.262 | 0.026 |
| Gas Prices (1) | 0.001 | 0.001 | 0.002 | 0.001 | 0.004 | 0.001 |
| Oil Prices (1) | -0.011 | 0.002 | -0.019 | 0.002 | -0.024 | 0.002 |
| Year | -0.032 | 0.007 | -0.046 | 0.011 | -0.054 | 0.014 |
| Stock Change (1) | 1.597 | 0.255 | 1.735 | 0.246 | 3.021 | 0.248 |
| Adj. Income | 9.358 | 1.954 | 3.004 | 1.690 | -0.157 | 0.149 |
| Education | 0.015 | 0.005 | 0.003 | 0.005 | 0.003 | 0.005 |
| Black | -0.110 | 0.025 | -0.228 | 0.031 | -0.297 | 0.041 |
| Hispanic | 0.017 | 0.035 | -0.007 | 0.040 | -0.063 | 0.052 |
| American Indian | -0.072 | 0.076 | -0.079 | 0.092 | -0.091 | 0.117 |
| Asian American | 0.036 | 0.082 | -0.048 | 0.066 | -0.059 | 0.054 |
| Married | -0.040 | 0.020 | -0.007 | 0.018 | 0.012 | 0.023 |
| Age | -4.367 | 0.260 | -3.108 | 0.306 | -2.308 | 0.370 |
| Age Squared | 3.462 | 0.250 | 2.410 | 0.315 | 1.846 | 0.389 |
| N | 37903 | | 42310 | | 39854 | |
| Years | 29 | | 29 | | 29 | |

SOURCE.—Michigan Survey of Consumer Attitudes.

If income growth at the 20th percentile increased by 0.01 in a given year—that is, by one percentage point—we should expect sociotropic assessments among the poorest quarter of Americans to improve by 0.18 on the 1–5 scale, with a standard error of 0.05. This impact is sizable given the dependent variable’s standard deviation of 1.82. By contrast, the same income growth at the high end of the income distribution is conditionally correlated with an improvement in sociotropic assessments of only -0.018 (SE = 0.051). In predicting the sociotropic assessments of poorer Americans, income growth among the wealthiest is negative in sign and not statistically significant. Strikingly, based on these models, we see the same pattern for the middle-income and wealthy subsets of respondents.²⁴

24. This general pattern also reappears for all three groups if we omit the time-varying independent variables such as lagged unemployment rates, gas prices, and stock prices.

The fully specified models in table 1 are informative, but they also raise concerns about collinearity (Goldberger 1991, Chapter 25), as they each include five correlated measures of income growth over time. This collinearity is likely to explain the negative coefficients for income growth at the 40th percentile and at the 95th percentile that the models return. As an initial robustness check, we thus focused on the low-income respondents. We estimated every possible specification that included 20th-percentile income growth as well as at least one other income growth measure. Doing so allows us to examine special cases of the full model where select coefficients are set to zero.

In all, there are 15 such models (including the fully specified model in table 1). Many of the models include three or four measures of income growth, so in all, we have 32 separate coefficients against which to compare the coefficient for 20th-percentile income growth. In all 32 pairwise comparisons, 20th-percentile income growth is the stronger predictor of economic assessments among poor Americans. Of particular note is the fact that its impact is significantly larger than 40th-percentile income growth when those two variables are included alone ($p < .01$, two-sided test), when they are included with any one other income growth measure (p always $< .01$, two-sided tests), and when they are included with any two other income growth measures (p always $< .01$, two-sided tests). When comparing the impact of income growth at the 20th percentile with income growth at the 40th percentile, it is very clear that the former is the stronger positive predictor of poor Americans' sociotropic assessments. Even among the wealthy subset, income growth at the 20th percentile is a stronger predictor than income growth at other percentiles in 30 of the 32 pairwise comparisons across the 15 models. Irrespective of the model specification, the core conclusion remains: Low-end income growth is the strongest and most consistent predictor of Americans' sociotropic assessments of the economy's past performance.

To gauge the relative influence of low-end and high-end growth, we now turn to models that condition only on income growth at the 20th and 95th percentiles.²⁵ Figure 2 depicts these results graphically by plotting simulated draws from the distributions of each coefficient of interest. The peak of each density corresponds to the mean estimated coefficient. As the density curves overlap less, the associated coefficients are more and more distinguishable. At left, the estimates are for the bottom 25 percent of survey respondents, while

25. The analyses above demonstrate that our conclusions will not depend on the particular model specification chosen. Still, this model specification is also justified by a factor analysis showing that two factors—one high-end income growth, the other low-end income growth—explain 88 percent of the variation in income growth. Specifically, the first estimated factor is growth at the higher incomes, with loadings of 0.68, 0.86, and 0.80 for income growth at the 60th, 80th, and 95th percentiles, respectively. This factor accounts for 0.46 of the variance. The second estimated factor is low-end income growth, and it explains 0.43 of the variance. Its loadings are 0.79, 0.78, and 0.68 for the 20th, 40th, and 60th percentiles, respectively.

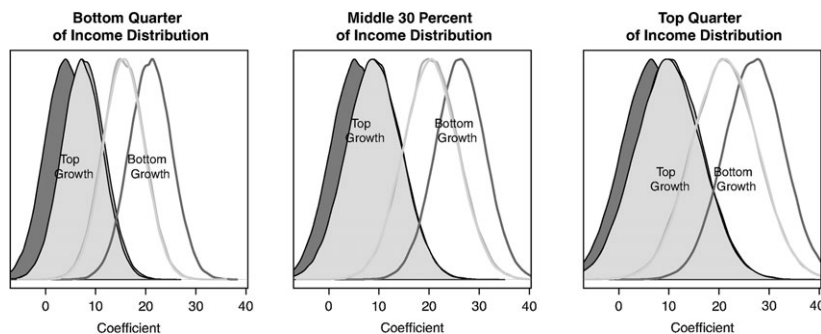


Figure 2. Relative Influence of Low-End and High-End Growth on Economic Assessments across Income Groups. For the poor subset (at left), the middle-income subset (center), and the wealthy subset (at right), these figures depict the distributions of the estimated coefficients for income growth at the 20th and 95th percentiles. In each case, the three different shades correspond to various model specifications. The darkest gray depicts the coefficients when modeled with no other covariates. The middle gray depicts the distribution of the coefficients when modeled alongside monthly economic indicators. The lightest gray shows the results from a full model with demographics as well.

in the center they are for the middle 30 percent of respondents. At right, they are for the top 25 percent. For all three income groups, the figure illustrates that income growth at the bottom of the income distribution is more strongly related to Americans' perceptions than similar income growth at the top.

For each key independent variable, the figure presents three densities, corresponding to three separate models estimated as robustness checks. The lightest gray densities provide the distribution of estimated coefficients given the basic model described above.²⁶ The standard gray densities show a pared-down model that includes no individual-level covariates. The dark gray densities provide still more evidence by estimating models with only the two measures of income growth as predictors. These parsimonious models are especially likely to indicate that income growth at the bottom is more predictive than income growth at the top. Still, in all cases, the substantive results are consistent, suggesting that the conclusions are quite robust to pronounced changes in model specification. Consider the light gray densities, indicating the fully specified models. For poor respondents, income growth at the bottom is a stronger predictor than income growth at the top in 93 percent of simulations, for a one-sided *p*-value of 0.07. For middle-income respondents, the comparable *p*-value

26. The only subtractions are oil and gas prices, which allow us to estimate the models for 31 years.

is the same, while for wealthy respondents it is 0.12.²⁷ Irrespective of the respondent's income, her economic assessments seem to be driven more by growth at the bottom than by growth at the top.

There are multiple reasons why these results might differ from those in Bartels (2008). One is simply that the two studies consider different dependent variables. Here, the focus is on perceptions, without regard for their downstream consequences for voting decisions. A second explanation is that they study different points in history, or else different times of the year. This article considers all months since January 1978, while Bartels (2008) covers elections back to 1952. It is plausible that election campaigns activate certain fundamental predispositions (Gelman and King 1993), perhaps changing the influence of income growth. It is also plausible that political surveys themselves activate those predispositions, inducing stronger relationships between partisanship and economic perceptions.

The evidence bears out the hypothesis that political time matters: When we interact annual low-end income growth with responses during election campaigns,²⁸ we find a significant negative interaction for the poor ($b = -6.31$, $SE = 3.16$) and the wealthy ($b = -10.50$, $SE = 3.053$), although not those with middle incomes. In both cases, the point estimate for low-income growth remains slightly larger than that for high-income growth, but the potential campaign effect is noteworthy. Low-income growth is less influential on sociotropic retrospections at precisely the points in time when Americans are asked to cast their presidential votes. This observation limits the capacity of Americans' sociotropic economic views to ensure that elected officials are held accountable for growth among poorer Americans. But it does not mute the underlying pattern that when Americans are assessing economic performance, their answers are most reflective of low-end income growth.

Conclusion

Income inequality has been increasing in the United States for a generation, as wages among top earners have grown dramatically while wages at the bottom of the income distribution have not. These changes have not gone unnoticed. Surveying a random sample of Americans in 2007, Page and Jacobs (2009) found

27. An additional robustness check considered the possibility that the results stem from mismeasuring income growth, since a respondent surveyed in January of a given year will not have been exposed to that year's income growth for as long as a respondent in the following December. To address this possibility, the analyses were replicated using a multilevel model for all respondents in only January (at the year's beginning) or December (at its end). For the wealthy and the poor, at the beginning of the year and the end, income growth among the poor is a consistently stronger predictor than income growth among the wealthy. The smallest difference appears for poor respondents during the month of December, when the impact of income growth among the poor is larger than that for the wealthy in 72 percent of simulations. For the full results, see table 2A in the appendix.

28. Election campaigns are formally defined as the two months prior to a presidential election.

that 72 percent believed that differences in income in the United States are too large (p. 40). Thus, the question becomes whether recent trends in income inequality are reflected in Americans' sociotropic economic perceptions. The simple answer is no.

To identify the mechanisms at work, we first considered personal economic assessments. Among poorer Americans, wages have grown slowly since the 1970s, and personal economic assessments have varied around roughly the same mean for decades. There is little evidence of assessments relative to the rich at the national level: Poor Americans have not become more pessimistic about their personal finances because others have been earning more. The same empirical trends hold for wealthy Americans, although that group *has* experienced considerable income growth. These observations suggest the value of future research considering the benchmarks that different Americans use to assess their personal economic situation. They also caution us against assuming that the wealthiest are necessarily the benchmark used by those lower in the income distribution. Framing the issue as "income inequality" encourages the assumption that low-income Americans are assessing themselves relative to those Americans in upper-income brackets. But while income is increasingly concentrated at the top, optimistic personal assessments are not.

Rich and poor, Americans usually agree when asked about the state of the national economy, and those assessments prove highly influential in election outcomes. At a time when economic fortunes are diverging, it is valuable to ask whose economy Americans are assessing. The answer from the SCA is that Americans at all income levels weigh income growth at the low end in their responses. When Americans report that the state of the economy is good or bad, they are reporting not only for the wealthy, but for the poor as well. For economic issues, this key precondition of retrospective political accountability does exist. In recent decades, sociotropic voting based on national economic assessments has provided a pathway through which the poor's economic condition shapes American politics.

Research designs that are effective for addressing some questions are often unable to address related questions, and this article is no exception. The SCA data provide unusual leverage to examine over-time variation in economic perceptions. Still, another future direction is to probe Americans' sources of economic information. Such work—already underway by [Ansolabehere et al. \(2010\)](#)—might consider the relative importance of social networks, daily experiences, and mass media in providing economic information. Future research could also continue to connect economic perceptions with vote choices and other forms of political decision-making, following the lead of [Zaller \(2004\)](#). Even if economic perceptions are firmly grounded in real-world economic conditions, as this article has demonstrated, the resulting political decisions need not be.

Appendix Tables

Table 1A. Pearson’s Correlations among Annual Income Growth at Different Income Levels

| | 20th | 40th | 60th | 80th | 95th |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 20th Percentile | 1.000 | 0.858 | 0.814 | 0.761 | 0.683 |
| 40th Percentile | | 1.000 | 0.897 | 0.860 | 0.747 |
| 60th Percentile | | | 1.000 | 0.924 | 0.807 |
| 80th Percentile | | | | 1.000 | 0.886 |

Table 2A. Multilevel Model Results, Estimating Retrospective Sociotropic Assessments for the Poor (Left) and Wealthy (Right)

| | b _l | SE | b _u | SE |
|----------------------|----------------|--------|----------------|--------|
| Intercept | −15.847 | 33.951 | −98.609 | 48.511 |
| Income Growth (95th) | 8.104 | 6.605 | 11.320 | 9.366 |
| Income Growth (20th) | 13.635 | 7.321 | 25.043 | 10.374 |
| Natl Unemp (1) | −0.098 | 0.103 | 0.068 | 0.146 |
| Year | −0.001 | 0.015 | 0.032 | 0.022 |
| Stock Change (1) | 2.803 | 2.141 | 4.415 | 3.051 |
| Adj. Income | 4.078 | 6.713 | −0.224 | 0.472 |
| Education | 0.026 | 0.017 | −0.032 | 0.017 |
| Black | −0.055 | 0.086 | −0.359 | 0.134 |
| Hispanic | −0.022 | 0.124 | 0.236 | 0.161 |
| American Indian | 0.207 | 0.245 | 0.420 | 0.416 |
| Asian American | −0.212 | 0.293 | −0.419 | 0.171 |
| Married | −0.003 | 0.063 | 0.024 | 0.073 |
| Age | −0.034 | 0.008 | −0.022 | 0.012 |
| Age Squared | 0.037 | 0.008 | 0.008 | 0.012 |
| Degrees of Freedom | 3,422 | | 3,279 | |
| Years | 31 | | 31 | |

NOTE.—Only December respondents. The coefficient for age squared was multiplied by 100.

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