

Bias Will Find a Way:  
Economic Perceptions, Attributions of Blame, and  
Partisan–Motivated Reasoning during Crisis

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## Abstract

Partisans often rationalize reality. That is, they perceive real world conditions in a manner that credits their own party. Recent work, however, indicates that partisans are less inclined to rationalize when confronted with clear evidence, e.g. during an economic crisis. This study examines a different possibility. While partisans are capable of acknowledging the same reality, they may find other ways of aligning undeniable realities with their party loyalties. Using unique monthly survey data collected before and after the unexpected collapse of the British national economy (2004–2010), this study presents one key finding: As partisans came to agree that economic conditions had gotten much worse, they conversely polarized in whether they thought the government was responsible. While the most committed partisans were surprisingly apt in acknowledging the economic collapse, they were also the most eager to attribute responsibility selectively. Partisan–motivated reasoning is more adaptive than existing work acknowledges.

Keywords: *Partisanship, rationalization, motivated reasoning, economic perceptions, political learning.*

Over the years, it has become clear that citizens’ identification with a political party directs their thinking about reality in striking ways.<sup>1</sup> In perhaps one of the clearest examples, studies find that party identifiers tend to perceive economic conditions as being markedly more favorable when their party holds office (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Enns and McAvoy, 2012; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Wlezien, Franklin and Twiggs, 1997). Such findings not only suggest that partisanship serves as a powerful “perceptual screen” (Campbell et al., 1960, 133) leading citizens to reject information that does not conform to their preferred world views (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Lodge and Taber, 2013); they also challenge the ideal of an informed electorate capable of holding its representatives accountable (e.g., Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966; Lewis-Beck, 1990). If partisans simply bend reality to make it fit their pre-conceptions, holding incumbents accountable for economic conditions seems rather difficult (Anderson, 2007).

Yet recent findings suggest that under important conditions, partisan–motivated rationalizations are subject to constraints (Lavine, Johnston and Steenbergen 2012, see also Bullock et al. n.d.; Prior, Sood and Khanna n.d.). Most forcefully, Parker-Stephen (2013) finds that partisan disagreement over how to perceive economic conditions shrinks considerably when real economic conditions are indisputably clear (see also Chzhen, Evans and Pickup, 2014; Stanig, 2013). Recent experimental work further indicates that when the evidence is unambiguous, partisans appear not to reject it (Nyhan and Reifler n.d.; see also Redlawsk, Civettini and Emmerson 2010). Thus, when responsiveness from citizens is most needed, i.e. during a severe economic crisis, people seem able to set their party loyalties aside.

This study, however, examines a different possibility. Recent studies focus exclusively on citizens’ ability to perceive changes in real–world conditions. While the ability to acknowledge the same reality is obviously important, changing real–world conditions hardly matter in politics if they are not attributed to the (in)actions of government (Iyengar, 1991;

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<sup>1</sup>Data, supporting materials necessary to reproduce the results, and an appendix containing supplementary analyses will be made available at ———.

Peffley, 1984; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Rudolph and Grant, 2002). In politics, attributing responsibility is inherently difficult. And even when the economic bottom line is clear, it is often unclear who is to praise or blame. Given this *ambiguity*, partisans may easily escape unwanted conclusions from an indisputably clear reality by altering who they think is responsible. Attributions of responsibility may, in the words of Gaines et al. (2007, 959), give partisans “a license to rationalize.” Perhaps ironically, the instances where reality is most undeniable may be the very cases where partisans have the strongest motivation to engage in selective attribution of responsibility. Thus in contrast to more recent claims (e.g., Parker-Stephen, 2013), partisans may find other ways of aligning undeniable realities with their party loyalties: When forced to *converge* on how to perceive real-world conditions, partisans may simply *polarize* in whether they think the government is responsible.

To test this claim, this study uses a unique interrupted time-series design. With data from over 70 monthly surveys carried out in the United Kingdom from 2004–2010, this study examines how Labour and Conservative partisans’ economic perceptions and attributions of responsibility changed in response to one of the worst economic crises since the 1930s. The severity and unexpected nature of the economic collapse, as well as the detail of the survey data, provides an ideal setting for testing whether partisans can avoid unwanted conclusions from indisputable evidence.

Results show that partisan disagreement over how to perceive national economic conditions was dramatic prior to the outbreak of the financial crisis. Yet this disagreement evaporated as the British national economy moved into recession. Even the strongest partisans converged on how they thought the British economy had changed. However, while this suggests that partisans respond to undeniable facts, it does not mean that they cease to rationalize reality. As partisans of different stripes converged in how they perceived economic conditions, they conversely polarized in their attributions of responsibility. Following the first signs of an economic disaster, Labour partisans were suddenly eager to alleviate the Labour government of its responsibility, whereas Conservatives blamed the government for the eco-

conomic collapse. Consistent with motivated reasoning theory, polarization in attributions of responsibility was most predominant among strong party identifiers.

This paper extends a developing literature on how partisans attribute credit and blame for policy outcomes selectively – a literature which has, for the most part, remained experimental or concerned with settings where real-world conditions hardly change (e.g. Malhotra and Kuo, 2008; Marsh and Tilley, 2010; Rudolph, 2003*b*; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). Furthermore, with two main parties that have depolarized over time (Adams, Green and Milazzo, 2012; Evans and Tilley, 2012), British politics provides a harder case in a literature that is mostly focused on American politics – a setting where intense elite polarization may, in part, explain why partisan rationalization is so predominant (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Enns and McAvoy, 2012). By demonstrating how partisans may still avoid unwanted conclusions from an indisputably clear reality, this study calls for a reconsideration of whether agreement between partisans really means that they have escaped the pull of their priors (see also Gaines et al., 2007). Partisan-motivated reasoning seems more adaptive and dynamic than scholars have previously acknowledged.

## Limits to Partisan Rationalization?

A long line of research demonstrates that citizens' identification with a political party colors how they perceive reality (Bartels, 2002; Campbell et al., 1960; Enns and McAvoy, 2012; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Lebo and Cassino, 2007; Wilcox and Wlezien, 1993). For example, convincing evidence suggests that citizens' perceptions of the national economy seem suspiciously related to whether or not their favored party is in office (Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Ramirez and Erickson 2013; Wlezien, Franklin and Twiggs 1997, but see Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Elias 2008). While differences in how partisans perceive reality could be due other factors than partisanship *per se* (Gerber and Green, 1999; Gerber and Huber, 2010), scholarly consensus seems

to be that partisan disagreement stems from an individual’s motivation to make real-world conditions reflect well on her own party. That is, because people *want* to think that their party is performing relatively well, they tend to reject and counterargue information that does not conform to their predefined conclusions, and to seek out as well as uncritically accept information that does (Kunda, 1990; Lodge and Taber, 2013; Redlawsk, 2002; Taber and Lodge, 2006). The result: gulfs of disagreement between partisans in how they evaluate the same ostensibly objective reality.

Yet in recent years, scholars have started to examine how partisans respond when they are suddenly confronted with an undeniable reality (Lavine, Johnston and Steenbergen, 2012; Parker-Stephen, 2013). While this work does not directly challenge the notion that partisans rationalize reality, it highlights an important limitation of existing findings: Most studies are carried out in non-dynamic settings where political reality is relatively ambiguous and where partisans are thus not confronted with any clear information (Parker-Stephen, 2013). For example, since it is not unusual that economic indicators point in different directions or that the economic facts themselves are highly uncertain (Stevenson and Duch, 2013), partisans may easily justify divergent perceptions (see also Chzhen, Evans and Pickup, 2014). Thus in order to investigate whether partisans really prioritize party loyalty at the expense of accuracy, the counterfactual case is how partisans respond when suddenly faced with less ambiguous real-world conditions.

For example, after analyzing a large collection of opinion polls from the United States (1987–2011), Parker-Stephen (2013) finds that disagreement between Republicans and Democrats over how economic conditions were developing receded when the real economy was either “glorious” or “abysmal” and grew when economic conditions are merely “ordinary.” Recent experimental work also indicates that partisans may not be as hard-headed after all: When offered monetary incentives to give an accurate answer, partisan disagreement over factual matters decreases substantially (Bullock et al., n.d.; Prior, Sood and Khanna, n.d.); if the evidence is just clear enough, partisans appear not to reject it (Nyhan and Reifler

n.d.; Redlawsk, Civettini and Emmerson 2010). Under specific yet important conditions, partisan–motivated rationalizations seem subject to constraints.

Overall, existing work gives rise to two main predictions. First, party identifiers are expected to formulate markedly more optimistic perceptions of the national economy if they identify with the party in power and pessimistic perceptions if they identify with the opposition (H1). Logically, this difference is expected to be greater between strong as opposed to weak party identifiers (H1a). Secondly, partisans of different stripes are expected to *converge* in how they perceive national economic conditions when the real economy has clearly changed (H2). Furthermore, because even committed partisans “are not at liberty to conclude whatever they want to conclude merely because they want to” (Kunda, 1990, 482), one would expect convergence in how partisans perceive economic conditions regardless of the strength of their partisanship (H2a).

## **Attributions of Responsibility and the Adaptiveness of Partisan–Motivated Reasoning**

The notion that partisans face a reality constraint when perceiving real–world conditions is important. However, recent studies focus exclusively on partisans’ perceptions of whether real–world conditions have changed for better or worse. While the ability to acknowledge the same reality is obviously important when it comes to politics, it is not the only important aspect: If citizens’ perceptions of reality are to have any direct relevance to politics, citizens will have to attribute responsibility to a political actor (Anderson, 2000; Iyengar, 1991; Peffley, 1984; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Rudolph, 2003*b*). “Before economic discontents take on political significance,” Peffley (1984, 280) writes, “people must believe either that the government produced them or that it is the government’s job to remedy them.” Thus, without documenting how partisans attribute responsibility, recent studies (e.g. Parker-Stephen, 2013) remain inconclusive as to whether partisan–motivated rationalizations are really subject to constraints.

In politics, judging who is responsible for a given outcome is inherently difficult – a task not made less difficult when political elites themselves have clear incentives to blur lines of responsibility (Hellwig and Coffey, 2011; McGraw, 1991; Weaver, 1987). More importantly, the question of who is responsible does not follow logically from the way(s) in which reality has changed. A myriad of different causes could have produced a given macroeconomic outcome: substitute “outside forces” with “reckless banks” or “government policies.” Consequently, committed partisans may easily “muster up the evidence” (Kunda, 1990, 483) for why or why not government bears responsibility — or let others such as party elites or the news media do it for them.

There is evidence to suggest that citizens attribute credit and blame to government depending on whether their party is in office and whether policy conditions are good or bad (Malhotra and Kuo, 2008; Marsh and Tilley, 2010; Rudolph, 2003*a*; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). Thus, in contrast to the notion that attributions of responsibility are driven by relatively fixed institutional characteristics (e.g., Powell and Whitten, 1993; Anderson, 2000), such attributions appear to be malleable and highly selective. Yet most of the work documenting partisan selectivity has remained experimental or concerned with settings where real-world conditions hardly change. Thus, in a real, politically charged environment, do partisans use attributions of responsibility to escape unwanted conclusions from a reality that is indisputably clear? If so, the finding that partisans are capable of acknowledging the same set of facts cannot be taken as evidence that partisans have stopped rationalizing reality.

Overall, this gives rise to the expectation that while a clear economic change will cause convergence in how partisans evaluate the state of the economy (as stated in H2 and H2a), it will conversely lead partisans to polarize in their attributions of responsibility (H3). In short, rather than being constrained when confronted with clear information, partisans may find other ways of aligning a conflicting reality with their preconceptions. Logically, one would expect this pattern of polarization to be markedly more pronounced for strong as compared to weak partisans (H3a). The stronger the preconceptions, the stronger the motivation to



perceive reality in a partisan congenial fashion (Taber and Lodge, 2006).

It is important to note that the theory outlined above remains agnostic as to the exact causal ordering between economic perceptions and attributions of responsibility. That is, it does not specify whether partisans first respond by changing their evaluations of economic conditions and then their attributions of responsibility in response or vice versa. The crucial point is that for motivated partisans, the two outcomes are inextricably linked: When a sudden event forces partisans to give in on one outcome, they compensate on another. This is not to say that the causal ordering is unimportant, yet it likely reflects automatic processes that are inherently hard to disentangle (Lodge and Taber, 2013). In any case, whether the causal relationship flows in one way or the other, both accounts are consistent with the core idea that partisans respond selectively to changing macroeconomic conditions, that is; when partisans converge on one outcome, they polarize on another.<sup>2</sup>

## Research Design and Data

To investigate the hypotheses outlined above, this study uses the British Continuous Monitoring Survey (CMS, 2012) – a rolling cross-section consisting of 71 nationally representative surveys that were carried out each month in the United Kingdom from April 2004 to May 2010.<sup>3</sup> The structure of the data and the period within which the data was collected give rise to several important features.

First, the design directly exploits the sudden and unexpected outbreak of the financial

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<sup>2</sup>As with most existing work, it is beyond the scope of this study to disentangle the exact causal relationship (for one attempt see Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). Yet, I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing attention to this issue.

<sup>3</sup>It should be noted that the CMS was also collected after the national election in May 2010. Yet in order to focus attention on the dynamics set in motion by the onset of the financial crisis, this paper focuses on the period leading up to the 2010 election. Documentation and more information on the CMS can be found at <http://bes2009-10.org/>.

crisis in the United Kingdom as a way to gain variation in the macroeconomic context. In the United Kingdom, as in the United States, the first sign of an economic crisis was the failure of major banks. As Gamble (2009, 455) explains, “the first major sign of the impending disaster was the failure of Northern Rock in September 2007.” One year later, leading British banks like Lloyds and the Royal Bank of Scotland faced similar problems and were consequently nationalized (Cable, 2009; Gamble, 2009). As Figure 1 shows, the events that began in September 2007, marked by the bank run on Northern Rock, had enormous consequences for the British economy. Specifically, GDP growth went negative in 2008 and reached its lowest point in 2009; the unemployment rate reached a staggering 7.5 % in 2009; and the value of British stocks also suffered. Thus, this sudden and dramatic change in the real economy represents an important and well-defined intervention.

[Figure 1 about here]

Second, because the CMS contains 71 closely spaced cross-sections with 39 surveys conducted prior to the outbreak of the financial crisis, it makes for a strong case in terms of ruling out trend and history effects. In other words, because the data was collected well before the economic recession, it is possible to directly assess whether any changes observed after the intervention are simply general time trends in the data.

Lastly, because the same core questions have been asked throughout the surveys, it is possible to directly test whether citizens evaluations of the economy and, not least, attributions of responsibility change in response to an unexpected and sudden event. In short, it permits a dynamic analysis.

While no previous work has analyzed this type of contextual variation over such a large time span, this research design still builds on at least two assumptions: that the composition of the partisan groups is roughly the same over time on covariates related to the outcome, and that voters do not select into party identities based on how the macroeconomy is performing.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>It is instructive to consider what this type of selection would imply for the observed results. If economically dissatisfied Labour partisans have a higher propensity to select out

In Appendices C and E, I show that these assumptions are reasonable. Most importantly, when using a nine-wave panel collected in the same country, in the same period (2005–2010) and in the context of the same election study, I find essentially the same patterns as in the cross-sectional setting. Specifically, using partisanship measured in the first wave – which by design cannot be influenced by the onset of the financial crisis – there is clear evidence of convergence in how partisans perceive economic conditions. Hence while some respondents obviously do change their partisanship in response to the crisis, this does not alter the core findings of the study.

With all this taken into account, this dynamic and robust design represents an ideal setting for testing whether partisan rationalizations are inhibited when reality changes dramatically.

## Measures

The analysis will focus on three key measures. First, the main independent variable is the party identification of the respondent. Here, the question “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?” has been used. In order to make the over time dynamics more discernible, I am only focusing on respondents identifying with the two main parties, namely the Conservative and the Labour parties. Respondents who do not identify with either one of the main parties were excluded from the analysis. In Appendix J, I show that the time-varying trends for Liberal Democrats and those who do not identify with any party are consistent with the main analysis. Focusing on Labour and Conservative identifiers yields a total sample of 51,794 respondents (approximately 60% of their “Labour identity” than economically satisfied Labour partisans, this would leave the remaining Labour partisans disproportionately optimistic about economic conditions. Because the Labour partisans who remain would tend to be relatively optimistic about economic conditions, this would work *against* finding any signs of convergence between Labour and Conservative partisans in their evaluations of the national economy.

% of the sample) with roughly 400 Labour identifiers and 300 Conservative identifiers in each wave (see Appendix B for more detail).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, to capture the strength of party identification, the question “Would you call yourself very strongly, fairly strongly, or not very strongly [party label]?” was asked as a follow-up.

The second measure captures retrospective perceptions of national economic conditions and is one of the dependent variables. It is measured using the conventional retrospective question “How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months?” where respondents can choose from a five-point scale of “got a lot better,” “got better,” “stayed around the same,” “got worse” and “got a lot worse.” For means of presenting dynamics over a fairly large time span, the measure is assumed continuous and thus modeled using OLS regression. In Appendix H, I show essentially the same, but slightly more nuanced, results in an ordered probit model.

The third measure captures how respondents attribute responsibility for economic conditions. Here, the CMS contains the question “Which one of the following do you think affects the general economic situation in this country the most?” where the respondent can choose either the “British government,” “European Union,” “Both equally,” “Neither,” and “Don’t know.” Since the focus of this paper is on whether an individual blames the government or not, the measure has been collapsed into a binary outcome (see Appendix A). It is important to stress that since coalition governments are very rare in Britain, “the government” is a well-defined political entity typically confined to one single party (Anderson, 2000; Powell and Whitten, 1993). Specifically the Labour Party in the period studied here.<sup>6</sup>

While this measure was intended to capture respondents’ attributions of responsibility

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<sup>5</sup>In Appendix I I show that despite being an internet panel, the CMS does not contain more partisans than other face-to-face surveys collected in the same period.

<sup>6</sup>The option “Both equally” has been coded as missing. Including this response category does not alter the results.

towards government *vis-a-vis* the European Union,<sup>7</sup> it is precisely for this reason that the measure is attractive. The measure does not force respondents to be partisan congenial because it is asked within the context of European, not national politics. This should reduce the risk of inflated partisan responses (e.g., Bullock et al. (n.d.)) and perhaps help reveal partisans' sincere beliefs about whether the government affects the economy. Furthermore, because this study focuses on comparisons between two partisan groups over time, the fact that the measure may be imperfect at capturing absolute levels of attribution – i.e. *how* responsible a given respondent actually thinks the British government is – will not hamper time-varying inferences because such imperfectness is “differenced out.”

Still, in order to probe the validity of the attribution measure, Appendix D contains a more systematic comparison with a related and more detailed measure asked in the same survey from October 2008. The analysis shows that stating the British government affects the economy is clearly associated with blaming the British government as well as Gordon Brown for the financial crisis. Importantly, this association does not change dramatically for different types of respondents. The attribution measure used in the analysis is thus a robust and valid indicator of whether a respondent blames the British government.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, I include controls for age, gender, income, exposure to newspapers, unemployment status, whether the respondent has a mortgage, education levels, favorability towards British membership in the EU, and levels of political attention. These control variables are included to rule out potential selection effects that could render the groups incomparable.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>In the analysis I include a respondent's favorability towards British membership of the European Union as a control variable in order to assure that differences between partisans are not due to the fact that Conservatives' simply dislike the European Union more than Labour identifiers.

<sup>8</sup>Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

<sup>9</sup>The fact that the statistical model does not explicitly include news media content is not to say that the information environment is negligible. Yet controlling for this variable would

## Statistical Model

To analyze the data in the most transparent way possible, the analysis builds on a simple approach that imposes few assumptions on how responses within each partisan group as well as the difference between the groups should change over time. Depending on the scale of the response variable, a linear regression model or a binary probit model was fitted for the entire period where each wave,  $Month_t$ , was included as a dummy variable or “fixed effect” interacted with a respondent’s party identification. Each time period,  $Month_t$ , is thus allowed to have a unique effect for Conservative and Labour identifiers respectively. That is, it amounts to calculating a simple mean on the response variable for each survey wave and for both Labour and Conservative identifiers while adjusting for any imbalances on a range of covariates.

To fix ideas, this basic model is written more formally in Equation 1.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, the marginal effect of party identification is a function of the specific time period in question,  $Month_t$ . In other words, the marginal effect of party identification is allowed to vary across each wave as the hypotheses predict. For example,  $\gamma_0$  gives an estimate of the difference between partisans in the first wave,  $\gamma_1$  gives an estimate of the change in the marginal effect of party identification when comparing the first and the second wave, and so forth. Similarly,  $\delta_t$  gives the change in how Labour identifiers ( $PartyID_i = 0$ ) perceive economic conditions

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make little difference because the main objective is to examine how two groups of partisans respond differently to a macroeconomic change – i.e. a general shift in news media framing cannot explain why these groups would change differently over time. Still, selective exposure to a polarized information environment could be a possible underlying mechanism. Here, interested readers can consult Appendix K.

<sup>10</sup>Note that  $\beta_z$  captures the effect parameter of control variable  $z$  and  $\epsilon_i$  gives the random disturbances. Using a robust as opposed to the conventional estimator of the error variance makes no substantive difference. Thus the analysis employs the simpler conventional estimator.

relative to the first period.

$$y_i = \alpha + \left( \gamma_0 + \sum_{t=1}^{71-1} \gamma_t \text{Month}_t \right) \text{PartyID}_i + \sum_{t=1}^{71-1} \delta_t \text{Month}_t + \beta_z X_{iz} + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

In order to test whether changes in retrospective perceptions and attributions of responsibility are different conditional on partisanship *and* the strength of party identification (cf. Hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a), Model 1 is simply fitted to three subsets of the data. One subset includes respondents who report having weak party identities, one includes middling identifiers, and another subset includes those who report having strong party identities.

Because Model 1 involves a large number of parameters, the presentation of the results is graphical (the full table output can be found in Appendix L). Here, the focus will be on how the average response *within* each group of partisans and the estimated difference or the “partisan gap” *between* the two groups change over time. In the case of the linear regression model, obtaining these entities is straight forward. In the non-linear probit model, however, estimating predicted probabilities and marginal effects is subject to discussion. I opt for the advice of Hanmer and Kalkan (2013) and use the Average Marginal Effect (AME) and the Average Predicted Probability (APP) where controls are allowed to take on their observed values. For more detail on estimation and definitions of the APP and AME see Appendix F.

## Results

Based on the model and measures described above, the following section provides an empirical test of the theoretical argument. Specifically, three main predictions are assessed in the analysis. Firstly, voters who identify with Labour should be markedly more optimistic about economic conditions than those who identify with the Conservatives (H1) and this difference is expected to be more pronounced for stronger party identifiers (H1a). Secondly, partisan disagreement over economic conditions is expected to *decrease* following the sudden outbreak of the financial crisis (H2) – regardless of the strength of a respondent’s party identification

(H2a). Thirdly, the complete opposite pattern is expected with regard to whether partisans attribute responsibility for economic conditions to the government. Here, the sudden outbreak of the financial crisis is expected to *increase* the differences in whether partisans think the incumbent government is responsible for economic conditions (H3). Lastly, polarization in attributions of responsibility is expected to be most pronounced for strong party identifiers (H3a).

Figure 2 gives the time-varying dynamics of partisans' retrospective perceptions of the national economy (upper panel) and the partisan gap in these perceptions (lower panel) in response to the economic meltdown. Corroborating existing work (e.g., Bartels, 2002), there are dramatic and stable differences in how Labour and Conservative identifiers perceive national economic conditions prior to the economic collapse. As witnessed by the lower panel of Figure 2, the partisan gap amounts to roughly .3 on a 0-1 scale ( $p < 0.001$ ) when holding all controls constant, that is; 30 % of the whole scale. In line with the first hypothesis, partisan disagreement is not just a question of nuance: Labour identifiers think the economy is improving (slightly) whereas Conservatives think the economy is deteriorating as compared to 12 months prior. Consistent with most existing work (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Campbell et al., 1960), partisanship exerts a powerful influence on citizens' perceptions of economic conditions.

Granted, there are differences in how partisans evaluate economic conditions compared to 12 months prior, and such differences are likely the result of partisan rationalization. However, in following more recent work (Lavine, Johnston and Steenbergen, 2012; Parker-Stephen, 2013; Stanig, 2013), are there no limits to how far partisans will go in making reality fit their preconceptions?

The second half of Figure 2 speaks directly to this question. As the British economy suddenly collapsed after the bank run on Northern Rock, Labour partisans were faced with a clear trade-off between holding partisan congenial beliefs about reality and holding beliefs that were accurate. If partisans were solely motivated to root for their own party and perceive



reality in a partisan congenial fashion – regardless of how reality was developing – one would expect Labour partisans to continue insisting that the economy had gotten better or at least stayed about the same. As clearly shown in Figure 2, however, Labour partisans were not at liberty to conclude that the economy was relatively strong. Specifically, the stark differences found between Labour and Conservative identifiers prior to the crisis almost evaporated as the British economy suddenly collapsed. For example, in January 2009, when all indicators were pointing in one (negative) direction, the estimated difference between partisans’ retrospective perceptions of economic conditions dropped from 30 to 5.2 percentage points ( $p < 0.05$ ).<sup>11</sup>

Consistent with the second hypothesis, partisan disagreement over economic conditions appears to be subject to a reality constraint. Partisans identifying with Labour do not deny the facts simply because these facts do not fit with their preferred world views. Quite the contrary, Labour identifiers seem remarkably responsive to a clearly changing real economy.

[Figure 2 about here]

To further investigate whether the response to the economic collapse differs for respondents who are either weak or strong party identifiers, Figure 3 gives the same model as before, but now broken down by strength of party identification. Consistent with Hypothesis 1a and motivated reasoning theory, disagreement between Labour and Conservative partisans is clearly more pronounced for those respondents who have the strongest motivation to perceive reality in a party congenial fashion. As can be seen from the right panel, the estimated difference between strong Labour and Conservative identifiers hovers around a staggering 40 percentage points leading up to the bank run on Northern Rock. In comparison, the partisan

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<sup>11</sup>One concern is floor effects. Appendix H shows that when looking at the probability of giving the most extreme answer, i.e. “got a lot worse,” partisans still converge over time – albeit not as dramatically. Still, even if more extreme response categories than “got a lot worse” are substantively meaningful, respondents will perhaps naturally cluster up in the most extreme categories when studying severe events like an economic collapse.

gap for weak party identifiers tends to be just above 10 percentage points, or only around a quarter of the partisan gap between strong identifiers. What is perhaps most striking, however, is how partisans respond to the sudden economic collapse. As clearly shown in Figure 3, even among the strongest party identifiers there is strong evidence of convergence. Despite their strong motivation to rationalize reality and their markedly more optimistic economic outlook, strong Labour identifiers are not at liberty to conclude whatever fits with their preferred world views. As the British national economy moved into recession, partisans of both stripes – even those with the strongest inclinations to deny unfavorable evidence – converged in their evaluations of the state of the national economy (cf. Hypothesis 2a).

Overall and in support of Hypotheses 2 and 2a, partisans appeared to update their evaluations of the national economy in an unbiased way. As the economic situation turned dire, partisans converged in their evaluations of economic conditions regardless of their preconceptions.

[Figure 3 about here]

## **Who is Responsible?**

Up to this point, the analysis confirms the two strands in the discussion of the influence of partisanship: While partisans do tend to perceive reality in a manner that credits their own party, these differences appear to be subject to constraints. The unresolved question, however, is whether the fact that partisans are fully capable of acknowledging the same reality means that they have suddenly escaped the pull of their priors? According to the third hypothesis, there is reason to expect that this is not the case. Instead of being constrained when reality has clearly changed, partisan-motivated rationalizations may spill over into an attributional domain. As partisans of both stripes began to agree on the severity of the crisis in the beginning of 2009 (cf. Figure 2), they may simply have polarized in how they attributed responsibility for the economic downturn.

Looking at Figure 4, which depicts the trends in how partisans attribute responsibility

for contemporary economic conditions (upper panel) as well as the attributional differences between partisans (lower panel), this does indeed seem to be the case. Here, two findings are important. First, before the economic collapse both stripes of partisans attributed responsibility equally to government. Here, the partisan gap in how partisans attribute responsibility, i.e. the average marginal effect of party identification, was indistinguishable from 0 up until the outbreak of the financial crisis. More substantively, partisans agreed on how to attribute responsibility because they disagreed over outcomes: Labour identifiers credited the contemporary Labour government for what they perceived as being a fairly strong economy. Conservatives blamed the government for what they thought was a weak economy.

Secondly, and in line with the third hypothesis, as real economic conditions suddenly became less ambiguous and partisans converged in their perceptions of the severity of the crisis (cf. Figure 2), they polarized with regard to who they thought was responsible for contemporary economic conditions. Labour identifiers started blaming outside forces whereas Conservatives started blaming the government for what they both thought were poor economic conditions. Specifically, the average difference in the probability of stating that the British government affects the economy between typical Labour and Conservative respondents amounts to roughly 20 percentage points in the wake of the crisis and is, in most instances, statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). This is strong support for the third hypothesis: As differences are reduced in how Labour and Conservative identifiers perceive the state of the economy, polarization emerges in whether partisans blame the British government.

[Figure 4 about here]

In Figure 5, these patterns are further broken down by strength of party identification. While partisans converged on how they evaluated the state of the economy regardless of the strength of their preconceptions, the complete opposite picture is evident with respect to the attribution of responsibility. Here, the extent to which partisans polarize in whether they attribute responsibility to the British government is clearly conditional on the strength of party identification. Among the strongest party identifiers, the difference in the probability

of blaming the British government moves from being statistically indistinguishable from 0 to almost 40 percentage points ( $p < 0.001$ ) in response to the economic collapse. Furthermore, divergence in the attribution of blame is also clear for middling partisans: From being statistically indistinguishable from 0 the difference between middling Labour and Conservative partisans in the probability of blaming the British government reaches around 30 percentage points ( $p < 0.001$ ). For weak party identifiers, no such pattern is evident (cf. Hypothesis 3a). Altogether strong and middling partisans make up around one third of the total sample, i.e. including all respondents. Hence, polarization in the attribution of blame is not just a phenomenon occurring among a minor fraction of the electorate.

[Figure 5 about here]

All in all, the analysis above strongly suggests that while an unexpected economic collapse clearly inhibits disagreement between partisans, this does not mean that partisans have suddenly escaped the pull of their priors. Instead, partisans find other ways of aligning a conflicting reality with their preconceptions. Specifically, Labour identifiers simply relieve their own party of economic responsibility, whereas Conservative identifiers blame the Labour party, as they all start to agree on the severity of the economic recession.

## Discussion & Conclusion

The results presented here underline the dynamic and adaptive nature of partisan-motivated reasoning. In the wake of one of the worst economic downturns since the 1930s, Labour partisans were not at liberty to conclude that the economy had either gotten better or stayed the same; clearly, it had gotten much worse. Yet contrary to recent claims, the undisputed acknowledgement of an economic collapse – in and of itself – does not imply that partisans have ceased to rationalize reality. Even when the economic bottom line is clear, it is often unclear whom to praise or blame. And as the results clearly show, partisans take advantage of this fact by attributing blame for the economic downturn in a selective fashion. Thus, while citizens are not ready to “openly lie to themselves” (Taber and Lodge, 2006) or

“believe whatever they want to believe simply because they want to” (Kunda, 1990), they still have little trouble aligning even indisputably clear facts with their preconceptions. In short, attributions of responsibility grant partisans an opportunity to rationalize.

These findings have important implications for existing work. The focus in recent years within the literature on partisan rationalization has gravitated towards citizens’ factual beliefs about reality (Bartels, 2002; Bullock et al., n.d.; Jerit and Barabas, 2012; Prior, Sood and Khanna, n.d.; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2008) and whether citizens interpret such beliefs as evidence that reality has generally changed for better or worse (Parker-Stephen, 2013). This study, however, underscores the importance of taking the difference between perceiving changes in reality, be it specific factual beliefs or broader interpretations, and attributing responsibility for such changes to a political actor into account (Malhotra and Kuo, 2008; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). Apparently, whether party identifiers hold incumbents responsible not only varies over time – it varies in a “particularly patterned way” (Hochschild, 2001, 318). When the real economy suddenly changes, the standards by which incumbents are held responsible apparently change as well. Thus, for a large share of the electorate, perceptions of how the national economy has changed may not matter as much to politics as is commonly conceived in reward–punishment theories of electoral behavior (Anderson, 2007).

Still, some caution is in order in drawing out the general implications of this study. The financial crisis was an extraordinary, *negative* macroeconomic change. Because people are more sensitive to negativity (e.g., Rozin and Royzman, 2001; Soroka, 2014), it is possible that partisans would be more responsive, or in other words more inclined to change their economic perceptions and conversely attribute responsibility selectively, when exposed to negative as opposed to positive information. Thus, one question this study leaves open is whether the findings of convergence and polarization travel to more positive economic contexts (for some evidence on this see Enns and McAvoy 2012, Figure 1; and Parker-Stephen 2013, Figure 3). Furthermore, it is possible that the inherent complexity of what and who caused the financial crisis itself made the question of who is responsible extraordinarily ambiguous.

Consequently, admitting that economic conditions have changed for the worse may have involved little discomfort because it was easy for Labour partisans to blame other actors. Whether citizens are as free to blame different actors for other macroeconomic changes is, of course, an open question. Yet because citizens are perhaps always faced with different causal narratives – especially because party elites have interests in supplying them – the financial crisis may not have been a peculiar event.

Perhaps the most important and unresolved question to pose for future research is what specific mechanisms drive the patterns documented in this study. For example, is polarization in the attribution of blame driven by partisans simply inferring that the incumbent is (not) responsible from the fact that the economy has changed; by partisans actively seeking out and interpreting information selectively; or by the efforts of party elites to frame reality? All of these accounts are consistent with the notion that partisans rationalize reality, yet they hold different implications for our understanding of how, when, and why partisans rationalize. For example, if citizens “act on their own” when rationalizing real world conditions it gives rise to very different implications for democracy than if they are acting in response to party elite behavior.

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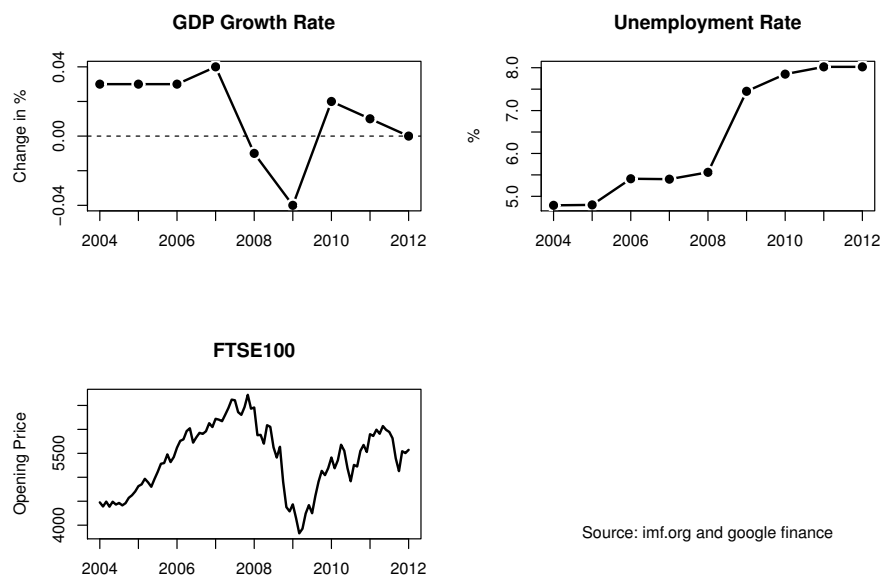
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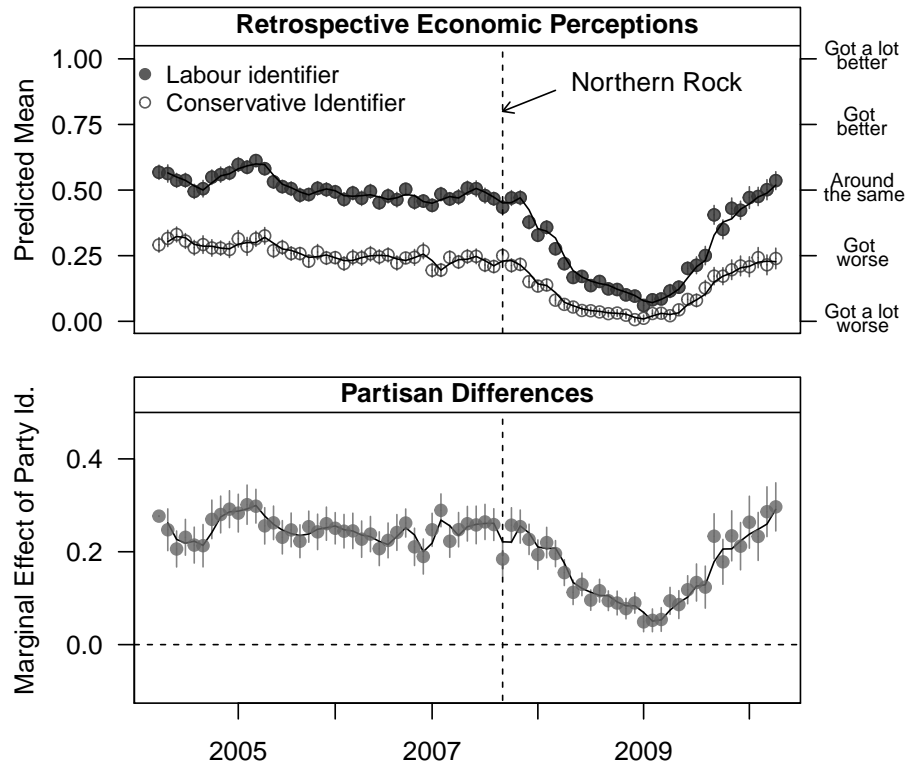
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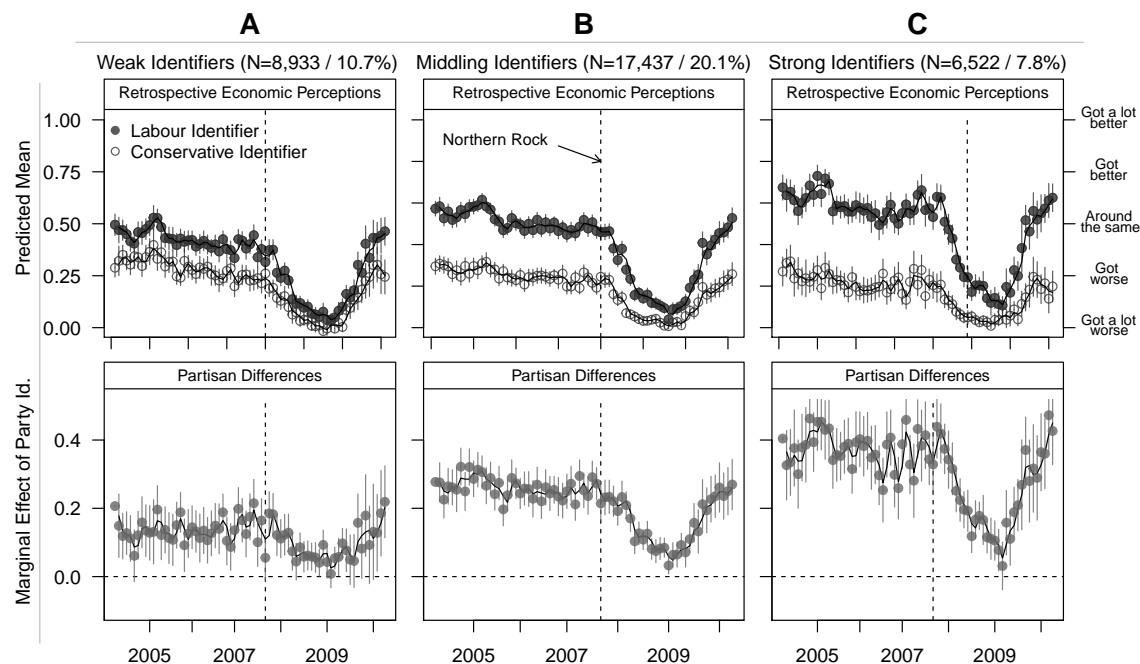
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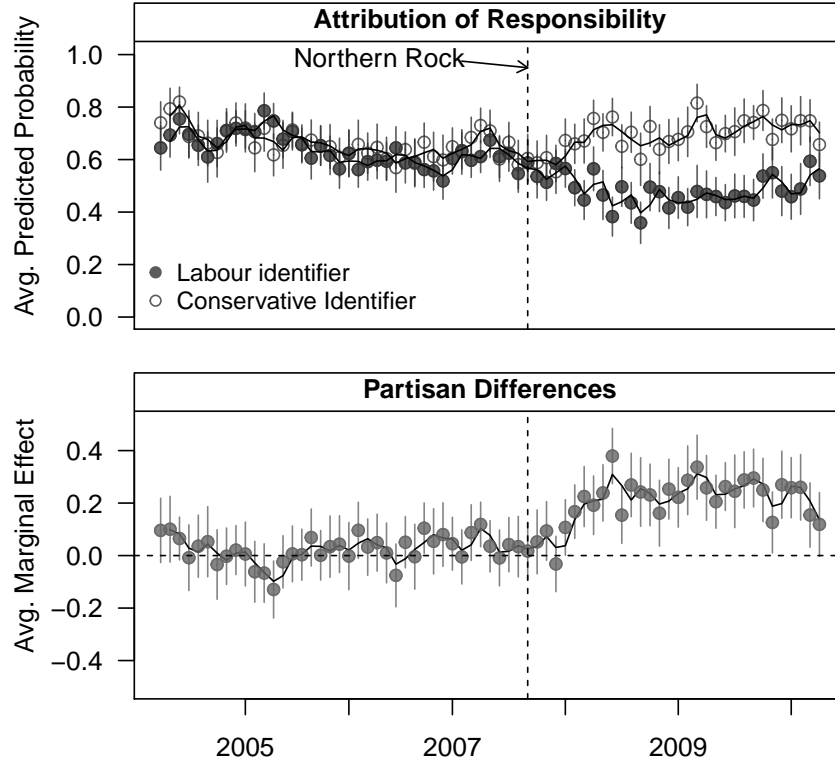
**Figure 1:** Development of key economic indicators in Britain, 2004-2012.



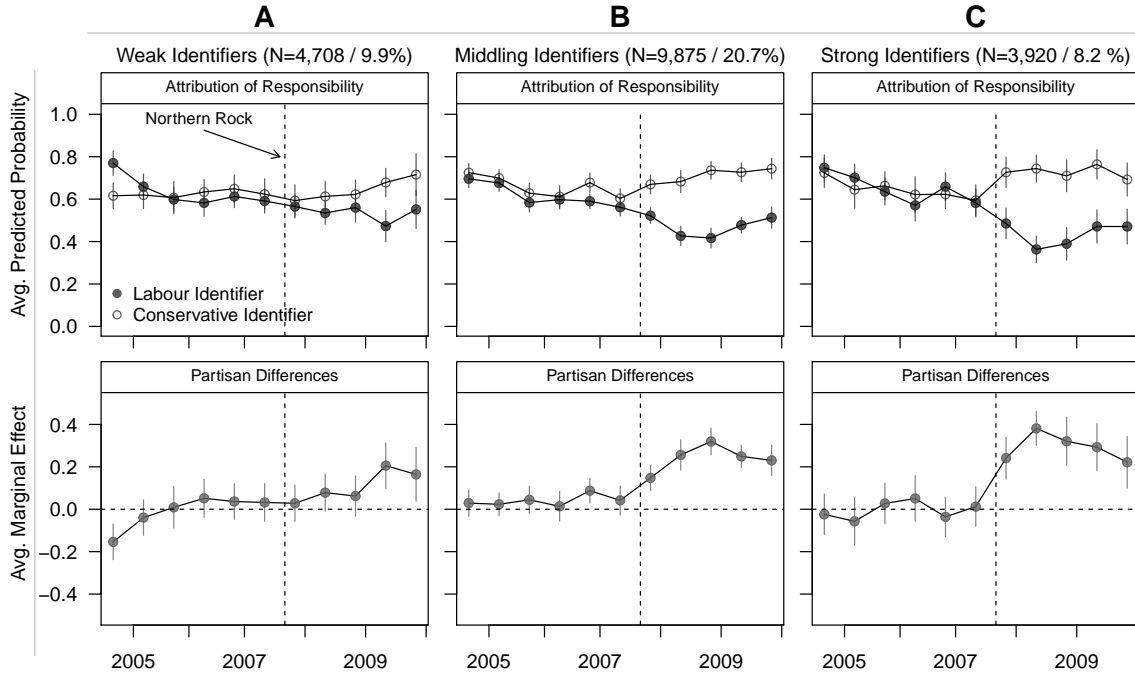
**Figure 2: Partisan differences in retrospective economic perceptions evaporate in response the economic meltdown.** Predicted means (upper panel) and the difference in Labour and Conservatives' retrospective perceptions of the national economy (lower panel) plotted with 95 % confidence intervals. Lines are simple moving averages with a 2-period bin. Question: How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months? (0 = Got a lot worse; 1 = Got a lot better). Model fit statistics:  $\sigma = .2$ , adj.  $R^2 = .42$ ,  $N=32.892$ .



**Figure 3: Even among the strongest party identifiers, partisan differences in retrospective economic perceptions evaporate.** Predicted means (upper panels) and the difference in Labour and Conservatives' retrospective perceptions of the national economy (lower panels) plotted with 95 % confidence intervals. Panel A gives estimates from a model that is fitted for weak party identifiers, Panel B for middling party identifiers, and Panel C for strong party identifiers. Lines are simple moving averages with a 2-period bin. The respective sample sizes,  $N$ , are depicted as well as the proportion  $N$  makes up of the whole sample. Question: How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months? (0 = Got a lot worse; 1 = Got a lot better).



**Figure 4: Party identifiers polarize in how they attribute responsibility in response to the economic meltdown.** Average predicted probability of blaming the government for economic conditions across partisan groups (upper panel) and the average marginal effect of party identification on attributions of responsibility (lower panel). Point estimates are plotted with a 95 % confidence interval obtained through simulation (1000 iterations). Lines are simple moving averages with a 2-period bin. Question: Which one of the following do you think affects the general economic situation in this country the most? (1 = the British government, 0 = else). Model fit statistics: Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .15$ , AIC = 22.476, N= 18,503.



**Figure 5: Polarization in attributing blame to the British government is most predominant among strong party identifiers.** Average predicted probability of blaming the government for economic conditions across partisan groups (upper panels) and the average marginal effect of party identification on attributions of responsibility (lower panels). Panel A gives estimates from a model that is fitted for weak party identifiers, Panel B for middling party identifiers, and Panel C for strong party identifiers. Point estimates are plotted with a 95 % confidence interval obtained through simulation (1000 iterations). Because a non-trivial number of cases were dropped from the analysis due to the coding of the dependent variable, the monthly waves are collapsed into 6-month periods to retain a sufficient number of cases (see Appendix G for the full time-series). The respective sample sizes,  $N$ , are depicted as well as the proportion  $N$  makes up of the whole sample. Question: Which one of the following do you think affects the general economic situation in this country the most? (1 = the British government, 0 = other).