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How Getting the Facts Right Can Fuel Partisan-Motivated Reasoning

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Abstract: *Scholars often evaluate citizens' democratic competence by focusing on their ability to get relevant facts right. In this article, I show why this approach can yield misleading conclusions about citizen competence. I argue that although citizens with strong partisan loyalties might be forced to accept the same facts, they find alternative ways to rationalize reality. One such way, I show, is through the selective attribution of credit and blame. With four randomized experiments, conducted in diverse national settings and containing closed- as well as open-ended questions, I find that as partisans correctly updated economic beliefs to reflect new facts, they conversely attributed responsibility in a highly selective fashion. Although partisans might acknowledge the same facts, they are apt in seizing on and producing attributional arguments that fit their preferred worldviews.*

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FTFJTV.

Getting the facts right, or at least being willing to revise one's beliefs about the world, is a cornerstone of representative democracy (Berelson 1952; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Kuklinski et al. 2000). If citizens are not able to get basic facts straight (e.g., whether unemployment has gone up or down), how are they supposed to send a meaningful signal to policy makers or to hold incumbent politicians accountable for how real-world conditions have changed (Anderson 2007; Healy and Malhotra 2013)? Given these stakes, it is not surprising that one of the most debated findings in political science is how citizens appear to view reality in ways that reflect well on their party (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016; Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). In some of the most dramatic instances, Republicans and Democrats cannot "even agree on the *direction* of change" (Bartels 2002, 137, original emphasis) in objective economic indicators.

Yet recent work has given ground for more optimism on the part of citizens (Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2017; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). If citizens of different partisan stripes are just faced with unambiguous real-world conditions (De Vries, Hobolt, and Tilley 2017; Parker-Stephen 2013) or provided with small monetary incentives to report an accurate answer (Bullock et al. 2015; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015), they offer less tainted perceptions of reality. Sometimes, partisans react "in a similar way to changes in the real economy" (De Vries, Hobolt, and Tilley 2017, 115); they "learn slowly toward common truth" (Hill 2017, 1404); and they "heed the facts, even when doing so forces them to separate from their ideological attachments" (Wood and Porter forthcoming, 3). Sometimes, even committed partisans can get the facts right.

In this article, however, I advance an argument that has largely been overlooked in recent work: Getting the

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[Correction added on 13 May 2019, after first online publication: In the legend of Figure 5, Study 2 was corrected to read Study 1. In footnote 4, Figure 2 was corrected to read Figure 3. In the legend of Figure 4, Appendix B.2 was corrected to read B.3.]

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facts right is no guarantee that citizens will act in accord with democratic ideals and hold incumbent politicians accountable (see also Anson 2016; Bisgaard 2015; Gaines et al. 2007; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). To the contrary, I argue, although even committed partisans can be forced to acknowledge that economic growth is sluggish or that crime rates are decreasing, they can easily explain away these facts by attributing responsibility in a highly selective fashion, crediting their own party for success and blaming other actors for failure (e.g., Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Rudolph and Grant 2002). This way, the mere acknowledgment of new facts cannot be taken as evidence that citizens "form the sort of opinions policy advocates hope for and democratic theorists expect" (Parker-Stephen 2013, 1087). Quite to the contrary, the acknowledgment of new facts could—paradoxically—fuel partisan-motivated reasoning in how citizens attribute credit and blame.

I present the most comprehensive evidence to date on how partisans attempt to explain away indisputable facts through the selective attribution of responsibility. With four population-based experiments, conducted in the United States and Denmark (N = 8,621), I examine how citizens simultaneously revised their economic perceptions and attributions of responsibility when exposed to either positive or negative information about economic growth. I find strong evidence that although partisans of different stripes revised their perceptions of the economy to reflect new economic facts, they conversely apportioned credit and blame to the incumbent in a highly selective fashion—a pattern that replicates across two diverse national settings and reverses when governments change.

Moreover, I develop two novel survey instruments for probing deeper into how citizens reason about responsibility. First, I show that exposing citizens to credible arguments about why the incumbent is (not) responsible does little to temper partisan-motivated reasoning. Rather, respondents dramatically shifted how they viewed the persuasiveness of the *same* arguments depending on whether macroeconomic circumstances were portrayed as good or bad. Apparently, the perceived persuasiveness of arguments comes down to a disturbingly simple question: Does the argument support the "right" conclusion? Finally, I use open-ended questions to examine whether citizens *themselves* are capable of producing attributional arguments that fit their preferred conclusion—even when they are not explicitly prompted to consider the responsibility of the president or government. Using both trained human coders and an automated routine for discovering lexical features, I show that citizens, in particular in the context of the United States, easily mustered up attributional arguments that suited their preferred conclusion.

In sum, I demonstrate why focusing narrowly on citizens' ability to get the facts right can lead scholars astray. Sometimes, citizens of different partisan stripes might acknowledge the same set of facts. But at the same time, they might explain away these facts by seizing on and producing attributional arguments that fit their preferred worldviews.

Theoretical Background

Imagine that the United States Commerce Department released a new report showing that economic growth in the country is booming. How would citizens respond to this fact?

One answer—commonplace in research on public opinion—is that citizens' willingness to acknowledge the facts at hand depends on whether the evidence reflects well on their party (Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Schaffner and Roche 2017). Citizens identifying with the incumbent will likely accept news of booming economic growth at face value because their party has the economic stewardship. Opposition identifiers, on the contrary, will likely greet the same evidence with skepticism, trying to denigrate, counterargue, or avoid the information altogether. Of course, being skeptic toward new evidence is not in itself problematic. What is problematic is that such skepticism is applied in an opportunistic or "motivated" fashion (Ditto and Lopez 1992; Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013; Taber and Lodge 2006): Opposition and government identifiers would likely have reasoned in complete opposite ways had they received news of waning, not booming, economic growth or had the opposite party been in office. This way, evidence is judged, not on its informative value, but on whether it reflects well on a given party.

Yet recently, another answer has emerged. Exploiting, in part, the sudden and unambiguous economic changes during the financial crisis, scholars have consistently found that partisans of different leanings updated their economic perceptions in the same, negative direction to the extent that partisan perceptual differences waned (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Parker-Stephen 2013; also see Chzhen, Evans, and Pickup 2014). In a series of experiments, Prior, Sood, and Khanna (2015) and Bullock et al. (2015) offered participants small monetary rewards for giving a correct answer and found a nontrivial reduction in the partisan gaps on various factual questions (but see Berinsky 2018). Recently, Hill

(2017) found that when partisans received the same noisy signals about whether a politically charged fact was true or false, they too updated their beliefs in the same direction to the extent that they converged over time (also see Gerber and Green 1999; Guess and Coppock forthcoming; Wood and Porter forthcoming). In all of these studies, partisans did not simply reject or counterargue inconvenient facts. When the evidence changed, for good or bad, partisans followed.

But what should we make of these findings? On its face, recent work suggests that "people do not seem to be at liberty to conclude whatever they want to conclude merely because they want to" (Kunda 1990, 482). Apparently, there are limiting conditions for partisan-motivated reasoning (e.g., Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2017; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Mullinix 2016). Yet recent findings raise an overlooked question: When citizens get the facts right, does it mean that they have escaped the pull of their partisan motivations and act in accord with democratic ideals?

In what follows, I argue that it does not. Sometimes, it is the acceptance of inconvenient facts that creates the cognitive dissonance necessary for fueling processes of partisan-motivated reasoning. Just as "hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction" (Festinger 1957, 3), so too could the acknowledgment of inconvenient facts lead citizens to search for alternative ways of rationalizing reality. Gaines et al. (2007) highlighted this paradox more than a decade ago, yet it has received surprisingly little scrutiny in subsequent research (but see Anson 2016; Bisgaard 2015; Groenendyk 2013; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). To date, there is thus scarce evidence and theory about how people might employ different mental strategies to explain away indisputably clear facts. In the remainder of this article, I develop and test what is arguably one of the most important strategies for rationalizing unambiguous facts: *selective attribution.*

How Getting the Facts Right Fuels Selective Attribution

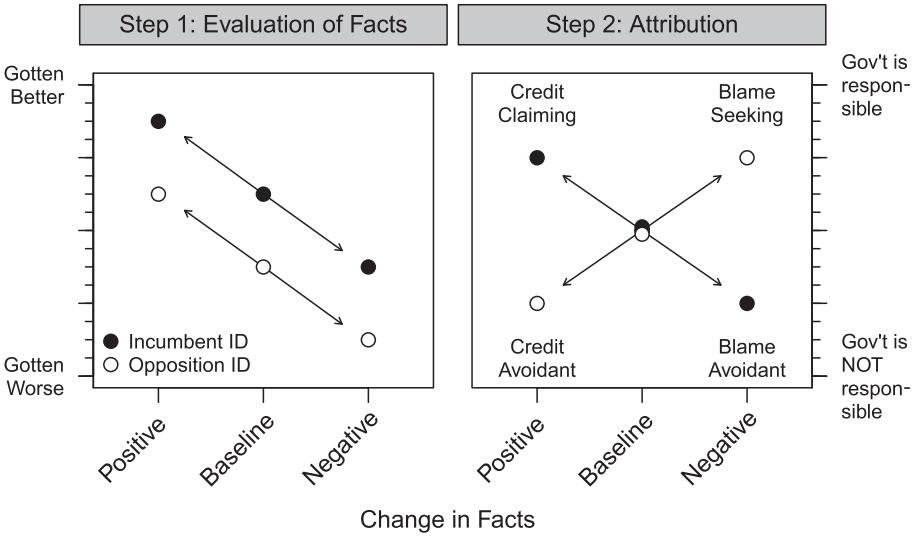
Attributions of responsibility do not follow logically from the way(s) in which reality has changed. For any given real-world development, different explanations can be supplied for why the incumbent is–or is not–responsible, giving motivated partisans leeway to rationalize even the most undeniable set of facts (Bisgaard 2015; Gaines et al. 2007). For example, during the financial crisis beginning in 2007–8, there was little doubt that national economies around the globe clearly changed for the worse. Yet even in this case, the question of what ultimately caused the economic meltdown remained inherently ambiguous: risk-seeking banks, outside forces, or failed governmental policies are all exchangeable reasons—among which motivated partisans can easily choose whatever suits their preferred conclusion.

Figure 1 details the reasoning strategies that two hypothetical individuals could pursue to rationalize an undeniable set of facts. Here, the solid dots indicate a government identifier and the hollow dots represent an individual identifying with the opposition. The point of departure, shown in the left panel of Figure 1, is a situation in which both individuals update their perceptions of real-world conditions in the direction of the evidence. Of course, different stripes of partisans will not always respond this way (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Schaffner and Roche 2017). Yet our interest hinges on the instances in which partisans *do* update their perceptions in the direction of new evidence (e.g., De Vries, Hobolt, and Tilley 2017; Wood and Porter forthcoming). In such instances, how can citizens continue to rationalize reality?

Upon accepting a negative economic fact (rightmost dots in each panel), government identifiers who seek to maintain their partisan identity could engage in *blame-avoidant reasoning* and come to think that the incumbent is now *less* responsible for the state of the economy. Opposition identifiers, on the contrary, could engage in *blame-seeking reasoning* and revise their attribution of responsibility in the opposite direction, thinking that the incumbent is now *more* responsible. When the individuals accept a positive economic fact (leftmost dots in each panel), these patterns could be the complete reverse: Now government identifiers could engage in *credit-seeking reasoning* and opposition identifiers in *credit-avoidant reasoning* and again update their attributions of responsibility in the direction that serves their partisan goals. In short, as partisans acknowledge the same facts, they might conversely polarize in how they attribute responsibility.

To date, few studies have examined how citizens simultaneously revise their perceptions of real-world conditions and attributions of responsibility. The most direct evidence comes from an observational study of the financial crisis in Britain. Here, Bisgaard (2015) found that whereas even the most committed Labour and Conservative partisans converged in their evaluations of the economy in response to the crisis, they polarized over whether government was to blame (see McCabe 2016 for related observational study). This evidence is important, yet apart from the question of whether it generalizes beyond the context of a historic economic meltdown, such evidence faces one major obstacle: How is it possible to show that citizens reason about responsibility in a *partisan*-motivated fashion?

FIGURE 1 How the Acknowledgment of Unambiguous Facts Can Induce Selective Attributional Reasoning



Note: When citizens update their evaluations of real-world conditions in the same direction in response to positive and negative evidence (left panel), what selective reasoning strategies can then characterize citizens' attribution of responsibility (right panel)?

Since there is no objectively correct answer to who is responsible, sorting out whether citizens reason in a partisan-motivated fashion is challenging. In the context of the British economic downturn, for example, both Labour and Conservative partisans might have had good reasons other than their partisan affiliation for reaching different conclusions about government responsibility. Labour partisans might rightly think that outside forces were to blame for the economic downturn, whereas conservatives might rightly blame government policies. In such an instance, the key to showing that citizens reason in a partisan-motivated fashion is to compare counterfactual scenarios in which alternative explanations can be ruled out: How would citizens have attributed responsibility had the economic bust been a boom, or had a different party been in power—all else equal? People might articulate good arguments for why the incumbent is or is not responsible, but such arguments should not change just because an economic indicator is now pointing in the "wrong" direction or because the opposite party enters office. Showing how individuals seize on and selectively use arguments to confirm their preferred worldviews in different counterfactual scenarios will get at the very core of motivated reasoning theory—something that is rarely done empirically (Kahan 2016; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). In the pages that follow, I describe and report the results from four randomized experiments that explicitly get at this.

Research Design and Data

The experiments were conducted in two different national settings, the United States and Denmark, and included a triad of instruments ranging from closed- and open-ended questions to an argument rating task. Collectively, the four experimental studies give rise to at least two key advantages for testing the argument.

First, subjects were randomly exposed to either positive or negative information about a recent change in the gross domestic product (GDP). Due to random assignment, the experiments directly get at the counterfactual scenario that existing observational studies cannot: How do partisans attribute responsibility when the *same* economic indicator suddenly points in a direction that is (un)favorable to their party, all else equal? In addition, two of the experimental studies were conducted in Denmark during a period in which a center-left coalition government was replaced by a center-right party. Although this contextual variation is not as clean as a randomized treatment, it provides an important opportunity for examining the other counterfactual scenario: Does partisans' reasoning change when their party is suddenly (not) in office?

Second, I implemented an argument rating task and open-ended questions for probing deeper into the reasoning processes driving the selective allocation of credit

Table 1 Overview of Experimental Studies

	Country	Fielding Period	N	Outcome Measure
Study 1	United States	03-31-2016–04-06-2016	1,899	Closed-ended Open-ended Argument rating task
Study 2	Denmark	02-03-2015–02-17-2015	2,593	Closed-ended
Study 3	Denmark	12-15-2015–02-19-2016	2,621	Closed-ended Open-ended
Study 4	Denmark	01-15-2016–01-31-2016	1,508	Open-ended

Note: All studies were collected through YouGov, targeting the voting-age population.

and blame. In the argument rating task, I asked participants to rate the persuasiveness of six different arguments for why the incumbent was (not) responsible. For each argument, however, I randomly varied whether economic growth was portrayed as strong or weak. This allows me to examine whether partisans' evaluation of the *same* argument changes when it suddenly supports a different conclusion. That is, what counts as a good argument in one instance might suddenly be deemed a weak argument in another because it now supports the "wrong" conclusion (Kahan 2016). Moreover, the argument rating task makes it possible to examine whether citizens reason about responsibility in a partisan-motivated fashion when they are given credible reasons for why the incumbent is (not) responsible. The open-ended questions add an important layer to the argument rating task: Are citizens *themselves* capable of mustering up arguments that serve their partisan goals when they are not explicitly prompted to consider the culpability of the incumbent? By combining different counterfactual comparisons with a triad of survey instruments, the experimental design allows for a strong test of how citizens use attributions of responsibility to explain away a new set of facts.

Data Collection

All four experimental studies were conducted online using the private polling agency YouGov, where the target population was the voting-age population. Table 1 gives a brief overview of the studies and their key characteristics.[1]

[1]The samples for Studies 1, 2, and 3 were collected using a dynamic sampling technique, what YouGov refers to as "Active Sampling," in which respondents are invited continuously to match the key characteristics of the target population. With this sampling technique, YouGov cannot calculate a response rate for a given sample. In Study 4, there were 4,199 invitations sent out and 1,508 respondents took part in the survey, yielding a response rate of 35.9%.

The fact that the studies were collected in two different countries is important for probing the generality of the argument. Clearly, Denmark and the United States represent two different contexts. Economically, Denmark is a small and open economy that is inextricably linked to the performance of neighboring economies. Furthermore, in the Danish multiparty system, governments are usually cooperative and formed by a coalition of parties, making political responsibility relatively murky (e.g., Powell and Whitten 1993). The United States is a large and more closed economy with a political system that is focused on the president. In recent years, American partisan elites have also become increasingly polarized (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), and partisan animus is often strikingly apparent in the electorate (e.g., Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; McConnell et al. 2018). Thus, both the clarity of responsibility and the level of polarization among citizens differ across the two countries, providing a critical opportunity to examine whether the argument spans different political and economic settings.

Stimulus Material

In designing the stimulus material, two things were important. First, while keeping in touch with reality, the stimulus material needed to be relatively strong and unambiguous to create a situation in which both stripes of partisans would acknowledge the facts at hand. Second, it was important to design the material to vary in a positive or negative direction while holding everything else constant.

To achieve this, subjects were randomly assigned to read about either a positive or negative change in GDP. (Studies 1 and 2 also included a control condition, in which respondents did not read any information.) In Studies 1 and 2, the treatment conditions took the form of mock newspaper articles that citizens would likely

encounter in everyday life. Importantly, the differences between the negative and positive articles in, for example, word usage, concepts mentioned, and so forth, were minimal. That is, the two conditions only varied on whether the same economic indicator was pointing in a positive or negative direction.

In Study 1 (United States), respondents assigned to treatment read either a positive article about how the estimated average growth throughout 2015 was an impressive 2.4% or how GDP growth had dropped from 4% in the first quarter to a disappointing 0.7% in the last quarter of 2015. At the time, these were the actual numbers reported by the U.S. Commerce Department. To make the two treatments less ambiguous, subjects were told that economic experts found the recent growth numbers to be either "impressive" or "dissapointing," respectively.

In Study 2 (Denmark), subjects assigned to the negative treatment read an article about how GDP growth in the fourth quarter during the previous year was −0.3% and how economic experts interpreted that as disappointing. The positive article had the exact same structure, but now subjects read that fourth quarter growth was 0.3% and that economic experts took those numbers as encouraging. At the time, the official agency handling demographic and economic statistics in Denmark, Statistics Denmark, estimated that GDP had increased by 0.3% in the last quarter of 2014 with an uncertainty of +/−0.4% meaning that the development in GDP could, in principle, have been negative.

In Studies 3 and 4 (Denmark), the treatment took the form of a more concise statement that was also about a recent change in GDP. In Study 3, subjects assigned to the positive condition read that "the annual economic growth in Denmark in 2015 is expected to be 1.5%. Compared to the previous year, this represents a clear improvement in Danish economic growth." Those assigned to the negative condition read that "in the third quarter of 2015, the economic growth in Denmark was −0.1%. This is the first time in over a year that economic growth is negative." In Study 4, subjects in the negative condition read that "according to preliminary numbers from Statistics Denmark, Danish economy grew by only 0.7% in 2015. This is markedly worse than expected by economists." Subjects in the positive condition read that "according to preliminary numbers from Statistics Denmark, Danish economy grew by up to 1.7 percent in 2015. This is markedly better than expected by economists." At the time, these numbers were those reported by Statistics Denmark. The stimulus material appears in Appendix A in the Supporting Information (SI).

Measures

Party Identification. Prior to reading the articles or statements, participants in all studies answered a set of questions measuring party identification. In Study 1, party identification was measured using the question, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?" as well as the follow-up question, "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?" that was asked for respondents who did not initially identify with the Democratic or Republican Party. The two measures were collapsed into a binary indicator that takes the value 1 if the respondent identifies with the incumbent (N = 867), at the time the Democrats, and 0 if the respondent identifies with the opposition (N = 600), the Republicans.

In Study 2, respondents were asked, "Many people see themselves as supporters of a specific party. There are also many people who do not see themselves as supporters of a specific party. Do you see yourself as supporter of a party, for example as social democrat, conservative, social-liberal, liberal, people's socialist or something else, or do you not see yourself as supporter of a specific party?" Respondents who did not see themselves as supporters of a specific party were asked this follow-up question: "Upon reconsideration, is there one party you see yourself as closer to than other parties?" In the analysis, these measures are also collapsed into a binary indicator that takes the value 1 if the respondent supports the incumbent parties (N = 466), at the time the Social Democrats ("Socialdemokraterne") and the Social Liberal Party ("Radikale Venstre"), and 0 if the respondent supports the Center-Right opposition parties (N = 445), the Liberals ("Venstre") and the Conservatives ("De Konservative").

In Studies 3 and 4, party affiliation was captured using the question, "If a general election were held tomorrow, which political party would you vote for?" Again, the measure is recoded into a binary indicator where 1 indicates whether the respondent would vote for the incumbent parties (Study 3: N = 257; Study 4: N = 169), now the Liberals, and 0 indicates whether the respondent would vote for a major opposition party (Study 3: N = 499; Study 4: N = 328), now the Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party ("Socialistisk Folkeparti").

Perception of Facts. After having read the articles or statements, participants in Studies 1, 2, and 3 were asked the standard retrospective question: "Would you say that

over the past year the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?" Here, respondents could mark one option on a 5-point scale: *Gotten much better*, *gotten somewhat better*, *stayed about the same*, *gotten somewhat worse*, or *gotten much worse*.[2] The question also included a *don't know* option. In the analysis, *don't know* answers are treated as missing and the variable is rescaled from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating the most positive evaluation of the economy (Study 1: M = 0.49, SD = 0.28, D/K = 7.5%; Study 2: M = 0.63, SD = 0.20, D/K = 5.4%; Study 3: M = 0.55, SD = 0.21, D/K = 14%).

Attribution of Responsibility. In Studies 1, 2, and 3, respondents were asked closed-ended questions about the responsibility of the incumbent. In Study 1, respondents were asked, "How much is President Obama responsible for how the nation's economy has changed over the past year?" Response options were *a great deal, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, not at all*, and *don't know*. In Study 2, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "The social democratic-social liberal government is responsible for the state of the Danish economy" Their response options were *disagree completely, disagree somewhat, neither disagree nor agree, agree somewhat, agree completely*, and *don't know*. And in Study 3, the question read, "Lars Løkke Rasmussen's current government is responsible for how the economic situation is in Denmark today compared to one year ago," and it included the same six-category response scale. Although the wording differs somewhat across each study, the focus below is on how citizens—*within* each national setting—revise or do not revise their attributions of responsibility in response to treatment. Again, the variables are scaled from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating that the government is responsible and *don't know* answers are excluded (Study 1: M = 0.61, SD = 0.32, D/K = 10.0%; Study 2: M = 0.61, SD = 0.26, D/K = 7.1%; Study 3: M = 0.57, SD = 0.30, D/K = 9.4%). The exact question wording and descriptives for the argument rating task and the open-ended questions are presented in the analysis.

[2]In Study 2, the question had an additional prompt in the treatment conditions asking respondents, "Thinking about what you just read, would you say that over the past year..." This was also the case in Study 3, where the prompt read, "In light of the latest development in Danish growth, would you say..." Originally, these prompts were included to force respondents to at least consider the evidence. However, a pilot study that was conducted prior to the collection of Study 1 indicated that the prompt made little difference for people's answers, and it was thus left out in Study 1.

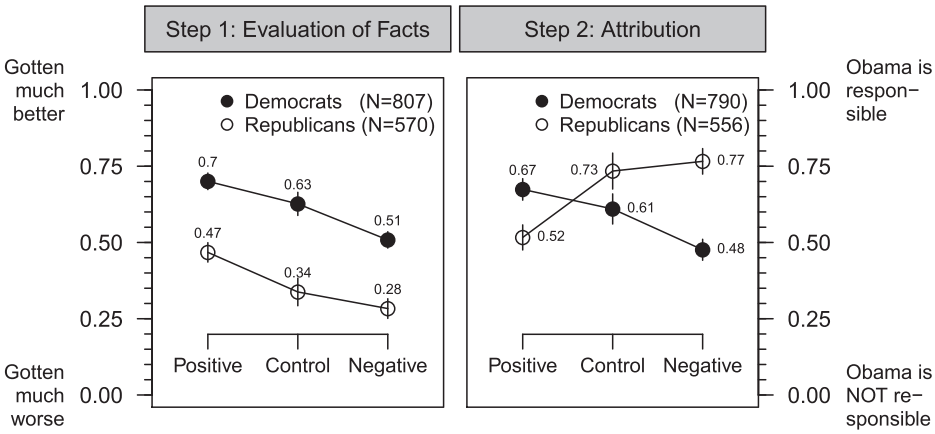
Parallel Perceptions, Polarizing Attributions

Did Democrats and Republicans acknowledge the new information on economic growth and, importantly, did they attempt to explain away these facts by attributing responsibility selectively? Figure 2 shows the estimated average response conditional on party identification and treatment assignment in Study 1. The left panel in Figure 2 shows the retrospective perceptions of the national economy, and the right panel displays how respondents attributed responsibility across treatment conditions. Looking at partisans' retrospective economic perceptions in the control condition (middle dots, left panel), the results corroborate existing work (e.g., Bartels 2002): Disagreement between Democrats and Republicans is astounding. Specifically, the partisan perceptual gap was a staggering 0.29 units ($p < .001$), or almost one-third of the entire scale.

Yet despite massive disagreement, Republicans and Democrats were not oblivious to new, credible facts about economic growth. As the left panel in Figure 2 shows, Republicans and Democrats clearly updated their economic perceptions in a parallel fashion and in the direction of the evidence (e.g., De Vries, Hobolt, and Tilley 2017; Wood and Porter forthcoming). Of course, this does not mean that partisans will always respond to the facts at hand. Yet it creates the starting point for testing the key theoretical prediction: When partisans acknowledge a new set of facts, does it lead them to attribute responsibility in a partisan-motivated fashion?

It clearly does: Whereas Republicans and Democrats moved in the same direction in their economic perceptions, they moved in diametrically opposite directions in how they apportioned credit and blame to President Obama. When comparing the positive condition to the control condition in the right panel of Figure 2, Republicans became a staggering −0.22 units ($p < .001$) on the 0–1 scale—or 22 percentage points—*less* convinced that Obama bears responsibility for the U.S. economy. Following the theoretical predictions laid out earlier, Republicans clearly engaged in credit-avoidant reasoning. Democrats, on the other hand, became 6 percentage points ($p = .034$) *more* convinced that Obama was responsible and thus engaged in credit-seeking reasoning (the difference-in-differences is 0.28, $p < .001$). In the case of negative evidence, the picture is now the reverse. Comparing the negative condition to the control condition, Democratic respondents alleviated President Obama of responsibility by −13 percentage points ($p < .001$) and thus clearly engaged in blame-avoidant reasoning. For

FIGURE 2 Partisans Update Their Economic Perceptions in a Parallel Fashion, but Polarize in the Attribution of Responsibility (United States)



Note: Results are from Study 1 (United States) and show how respondents revise their retrospective perceptions of the economy (left panel) and attributions of responsibility (right panel) when suddenly confronted with positive or negative information about economic growth. Entries are computed based on OLS regression models that were fitted separately for each outcome. Vertical lines give the 95% confidence intervals for the predicted means. For the full model output, see SI Appendix B.1.

Republicans, the treatment effect was not significantly different from 0 ($p = .38$). Since Republicans already held very negative perceptions of the economy in the control condition and also thought Obama was responsible, this result is unsurprising.[3] Importantly, with an estimated difference of −17 percentage points ($p < .001$), the negative treatment effects were significantly different across the two partisan groups. In short, when Republicans and Democrats updated their economic perceptions in the direction of new evidence, they polarized in the attribution of responsibility.

The Same Pattern Replicates in a Low-Polarization Context

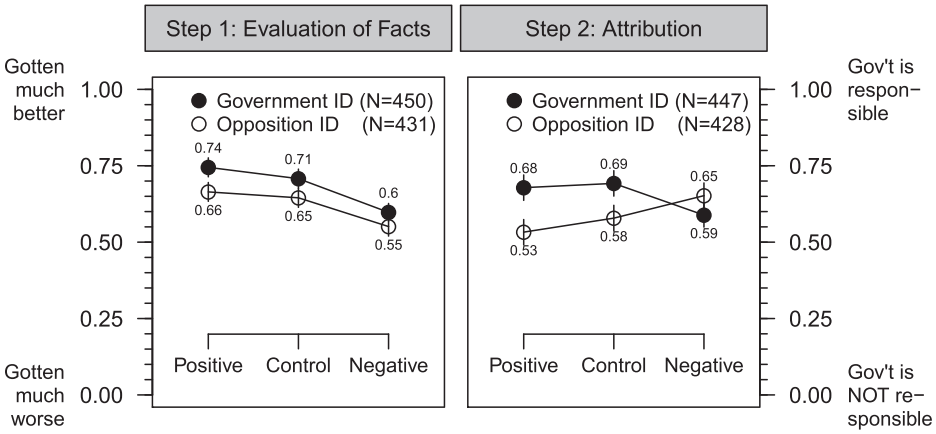
Given the polarized nature of U.S. politics, it is perhaps not surprising that partisans would allocate credit and blame in a partisan-motivated fashion. Thus, a pertinent question is whether the results above replicate in a less polarized political setting where lines of responsibility are murkier.

Figure 3 shows the results from the experiment in Study 2 that was carried out in Denmark. As above, the figure shows how partisans revised their economic perceptions (left panel) and attributions of responsibility (right panel) in response to positive and negative news about economic growth. In what is immediately clear from the left panel in Figure 3, government and opposition identifiers were markedly less polarized over the state of the national economy than in the case of the United States. In the control condition, the estimated partisan perceptual gap was a modest 6 percentage points ($p = .004$), with both partisan groups holding fairly positive economic perceptions. Furthermore, there was no effect of receiving positive news about economic growth relative to the control condition, which, given the optimistic outset for both partisan groups in the control condition, is unsurprising. Yet the picture is different in the case of negative news about economic growth. Here, the treatment effect relative to control was −9 percentage points ($p < .001$) for opposition identifiers and −11 percentage points ($p < .001$) among incumbent identifiers (there was no detectable difference between the two effects, $p = .60$). Parallel to the results from the United States, partisans of different stripes appeared to update their economic perceptions in the direction of the negative evidence. But did it also lead them to apportion credit and blame in a highly selective fashion?

Again, it clearly did. As both partisan groups updated their economic perceptions in a negative direction, incumbent identifiers became −10 percentage points ($p < 0.001$) less convinced that the governing parties

[3]Hence, the lacking effect of negative evidence more likely reflects how Republicans are pretreated rather than a genuine failure to move Republicans with negative evidence (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007; Slothuus 2016).

FIGURE 3 Partisans Update Their Economic Perceptions in a Parallel Fashion, yet Polarize in the Attribution of Responsibility (Denmark)



Note: Results are from Study 2 (Denmark) and show how respondents revise their retrospective perceptions of the economy (left panel) and attributions of responsibility (right panel) when suddenly confronted with positive or negative information about economic growth. Entries are computed based on OLS regression models that were fitted separately for each outcome. Vertical lines give the 95% confidence intervals for the predicted means. For the full model output, see SI Appendix B.2. Incumbent identifiers include subjects who identify or lean toward the incumbent parties, at the time the Social-Democrats ("Socialdemokraterne") and Liberal Democrats ("Radikale Venstre"), and subjects are coded as opposition identifiers if they identify or lean toward the main opposition parties, the Liberals ("Venstre") or the Conservatives ("Konservative").

were responsible for the national economy, and opposition identifiers became 7 percentage points ($p = .01$) *more* convinced that the coalition government was responsible (the difference-in-differences was −18 percentage points, $p < .001$).[4] Although the polarizing effect of the treatment was not as pronounced as in the case of the United States, the same core pattern is evident. Even in the less polarized Danish context, partisans assigned responsibility in a selective fashion. When negative facts arrived, incumbent identifiers were blame avoidant and opposition identifiers blame seeking in how they thought about the question of responsibility.

When Governments Change, Partisans Switch Roles

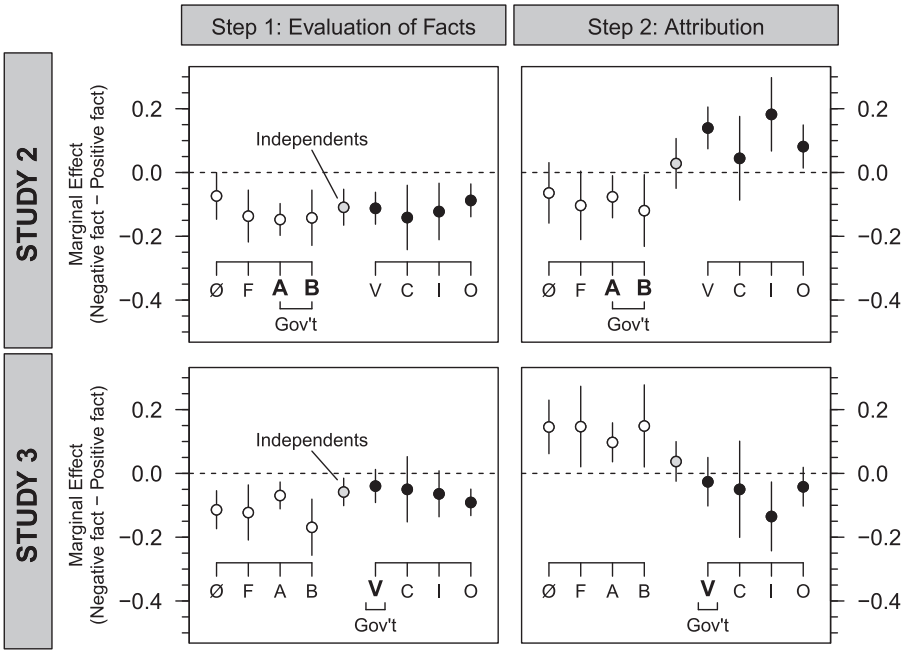
An even stronger test of whether citizens attribute credit and blame in a partisan-motivated fashion is to show that the patterns above reverse as governments change. On June 18, 2015, a general election was held in Denmark. Prior to the election, a coalition of center-left parties, the Social Democrats and the Social Liberal Party, had been in office. However, due in part to the electoral success of the Danish People's Party, the election resulted in a center-right government consisting only of the Liberals (the name reflecting the European meaning). Fortunately, Study 2 was collected in Denmark in February 2015 and thus before the general election, whereas Study 3 was conducted 10 months after in December 2015 through February 2016 and thus well after the election. This provides a unique opportunity to examine whether partisans suddenly shift their way of thinking about responsibility when their party is (not) in office.

Figure 4 shows the results for Study 2 (upper panels) and Study 3 (lower panels). To reduce complexity, the figure depicts the marginal effect of receiving negative—as opposed to positive—economic news on retrospective economic perceptions (left panels) and attributions of responsibility (right panels). The marginal effects are estimated for each individual partisan group, including pure independents, and the partisan groups are organized into a coalition of left-and right-wing parties typical of Danish party politics.

Looking first at how all partisan groups revised their retrospective economic perceptions (left panels), it is clear that in both studies all partisan groups, including

[4]As with the case of pretreatment effects earlier, the fact that partisans do not change how they assign responsibility in response to positive news (relative to control) is unsurprising because both partisan groups were already quite positive in their economic assessments at the outset (cf. upper left panel in Figure 3). Therefore, informing subjects that the Danish economy is doing well is inconsequential to their economic perceptions, creating little need for partisans to conversely revise their attributions of responsibility.

FIGURE 4 When the Government Changes, Partisans Switch Roles



Note: The marginal effect of randomly receiving negative as opposed to positive facts about economic growth on retrospective economic perceptions (left panels) and attributions of responsibility (right panels) in a situation where the government in Denmark is led by a coalition of center-left parties (Study 2) and a center-right party (Study 3). Plotted estimates are marginal effects with associated 95% confidence intervals obtained from OLS regressions fitted separately for each outcome and study. For the full models, see SI Appendix B.3. Party groups are organized from left to right as they commonly appear on the left-right scale in Danish politics: Unity list (Ø), Socialist People's Party (F), Social-Democrats (A), Social-Liberals (B), Liberals (V), Conservatives (C), Liberal Alliance (I), and Danish People's Party (O).

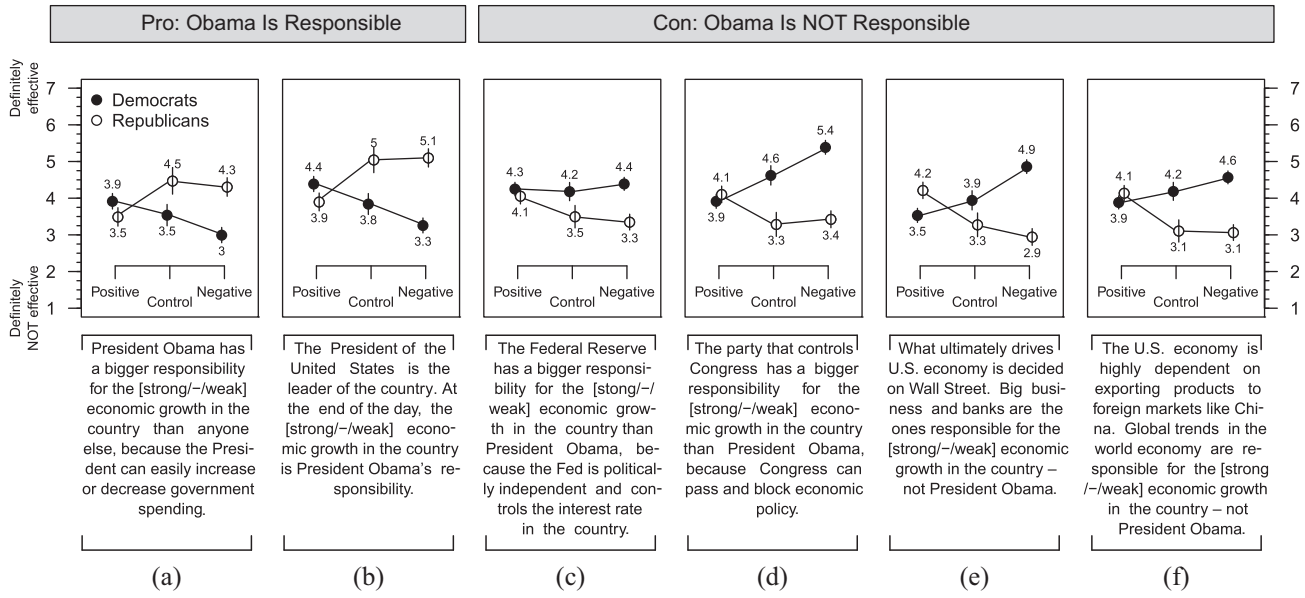
independents, revised their economic perceptions in the same, negative direction. Given the inevitable noise that enters when the results are further broken down by partisan groups, the homogeneity in how different partisan groups revise their economic perceptions is remarkable. Even more striking, however, is the *heterogeneity* in how the right-and left-wing partisan groups revised their attributions of responsibility. As witnessed by the upper right panel in Figure 4, left-wing partisans came to think that the center-left government was less responsible for the economic situation when exposed to negative economic news—and vice versa for respondents identifying with right-wing parties. But just 10 months after—when the center-right government was in place—the pattern was suddenly the reverse (see bottom right panel). Now, partisan groups on the left suddenly think that the center-right government was more responsible for waning economic growth, and partisan groups on the right appear to reach the opposite conclusion. This is striking evidence that citizens, even in a less polarized context than that in the United States, allocate credit and blame in a highly opportunistic fashion.

Partisans Seize on Arguments That Support the "Right" Conclusion

Until now, subjects have been asked to attribute responsibility in a context without any information about who could possibly be responsible and why. Thus, one pertinent question is whether participants would still attribute credit and blame in a selective fashion if they were directly confronted with arguments for why the incumbent is or is not responsible. To examine this possibility, subjects in Study 1 completed an argument rating task at the end of the survey in which they were instructed with the following text:

> On the following pages, we will present you with some edited arguments that other participants in this study have provided about whether or not President Obama is responsible for the current economic situation. Please read the arguments and answer *how effective you think the argument is in making its case regardless of whether you (dis)agree with it.* (original emphasis)

FIGURE 5 Democrats and Republicans Rate Arguments about President Obama's Responsibility Differently Depending on Whether the Argument Supports the "Right" Conclusion



Note: Results are from Study 1 (United States), and entries are predicted means conditional on partisanship and treatment assignment with associated 95% confidence intervals. Estimates were obtained by fitting a linear regression model for each argument. See the figure for the full wording of the arguments. Full model output appears in SI Appendix B.4.

Following the instruction, subjects were asked to rate the effectiveness of six arguments that were presented one at a time and in random order. Two of the arguments implicated Obama as responsible for the economy, whereas the remaining four emphasized the responsibility of other actors—specifically, the Federal Reserve, trends on foreign markets, the U.S. Congress, and big business on Wall Street (the arguments are printed in full length in the bottom of Figure 5). For example, respondents were asked to read the argument, "President Obama has a bigger responsibility for the [positive/–/weak] economic growth in the country than anyone else, because the President can easily increase or decrease government spending," and, following others (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013), respondents were subsequently asked to rate the argument on a 7-point scale (1 = *definitely NOT effective*, 4 = *not sure*, and 7 = *definitely effective*). To ensure that respondents would evaluate the effectiveness of the arguments in the right context, the treatment was repeated in the arguments; that is, subjects who read a negative article also saw the word *weak* in the arguments.

Figure 5 reports the results from the argument rating task. Panels A through F show the conditional means within partisan groups and across the experimental conditions. If partisans evaluate the arguments in an opportunistic fashion, we would expect to see Democrats rating pro arguments (i.e. arguments stating that Obama is responsible) as *less* persuasive arguments when the economy is portrayed negatively as opposed to positively. Republicans, to the contrary, should rate the exact same pro arguments as *more* convincing when the economy is portrayed negatively as opposed to positively. Importantly, this pattern should be the complete opposite for arguments implicating actors other than President Obama.

As can be seen from Figure 5, Democrats and Republicans did evaluate the arguments in a highly selective fashion. Looking at the results for the first pro argument in Panel A in Figure 5, Democrats and Republicans clearly polarized in how they rated the effectiveness of the argument. When the economy was presented negatively, as opposed to positively, Democrats found the argument implicating President Obama as -0.92 ($p < .001$) units less effective, (on a 7-point scale). Republicans viewed the exact same argument as 0.82 ($p < .001$) units *more* effective leaving the difference-in-differences in how the two partisan groups respond at a staggering -1.74 ($p < .001$) units. An almost identical pattern is evident when assessing the second pro argument stating that Obama was responsible because "he is the leader of the country" (i.e., Panel B in Figure 5). Taken together, this is a striking result: Democrats and Republicans' ratings of the same set of pro arguments changed dramatically when the state of the economy changed.

However, the results for the two pro arguments are not made less striking by the fact that the pattern is reversed when considering the four con arguments in Figure 5. For example, when participants were asked about how persuasive they found the argument that the "party that controls Congress" bears responsibility, Democrats rated the argument as 1.47 ($p < .001$) units more effective on the 7-point scale when the economy was portrayed negatively as opposed to positively, and Republicans rated it as 0.68 units ($p < .001$) *less* effective. Although not as pronounced in the case with the Federal Reserve (Panel C), the polarizing pattern was remarkably similar across the four con arguments.[5]

Taken together, the results in Figure 5 strongly support the notion that partisans reason about the question of responsibility in a highly selective fashion. When partisans are presented with different arguments for why the incumbent is or is not responsible, the arguments themselves are evaluated, not based on the their inherent quality, but rather on the conclusions that they happen to support.

Polarization in Attribution Extends to Open-Ended Answers

Lastly, Studies 1, 3, and 4 included open-ended questions asking respondents to freely list their thoughts about who or what they thought was responsible for the state of the economy. Besides providing a more unobtrusive measure than the closed-ended questions used above, the open-ended questions also allow for a much closer examination of what considerations respondents themselves bring to bear. In Study 1, subjects were asked, "We are now interested in hearing your thoughts about who or what you think is responsible for the economic situation in the country. More than one possibility may come to mind. Please write your thoughts in the field below. Some sentences and/or keywords are enough." Respondents in Studies 3 and 4 were asked a similar question. In the studies that also contained a closed-ended question about responsibility, the open-ended question was asked first to avoid contaminating the open response. Importantly, the open-ended questions did not mention any political actors (e.g., the government or president), thereby avoiding priming respondents.

To determine the meaning of the text provided by respondents, three human coders were instructed to classify the open response, with at least two coders always classifying the same text (inter-coder agreement rate ranged between 87 and 96%). The coding scheme consisted of several categories, yet in the analysis the classifications were collapsed into a simple binary indicator capturing whether the respondent did not hold the incumbent responsible or whether she assigned full or partial responsibility to the incumbent. Across the three studies, a meaningful share of respondents assigned responsibility to the incumbent (Study 1: 35.6%; Study 3: 35%; Study 4: 23.5%). For more detail on coder instruction, descriptive statistics, validity, and robustness to different coding decisions, see SI Appendix C.

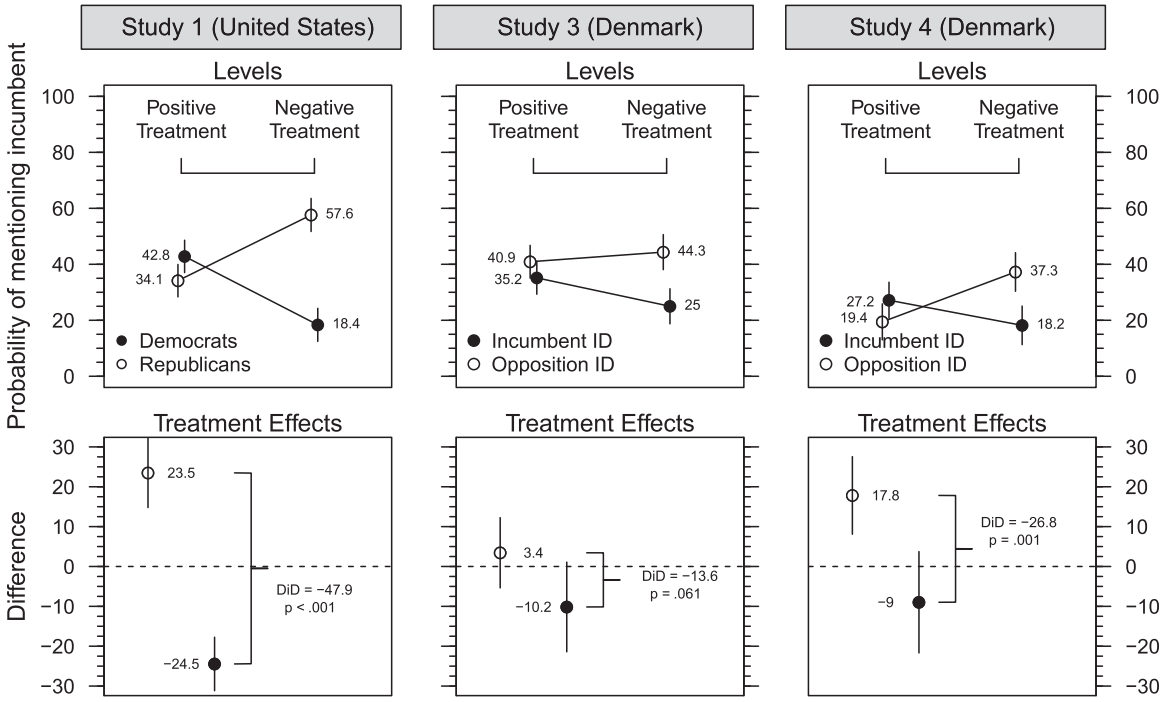
Figure 6 shows the predicted probability of assigning responsibility to the incumbent conditional on treatment assignment and party identification across the three studies. The estimates are obtained from a linear probability model in which the coded, binary indicator is regressed on treatment status, party identification, and their interaction.[6]

Looking first at the results from the United States in the leftmost panel, Republicans and Democrats clearly arrived at different conclusions about whether President Obama was responsible depending on the performance of the national economy. In the positive treatment condition, for example, the probability of assigning responsibility to President Obama was slightly higher among Democrats than among Republicans (compare 42.8 to 34.1%). However, this partisan gap *reversed* quite dramatically when partisans were exposed to negative news about economic growth: With an estimated probability of 57.6%, Republicans were now markedly more likely to mention President Obama in the open response than Democrats (among Democrats, the probability was only 18.4%). As shown in the lower leftmost panel, the changes within the partisan groups (i.e., the effects of the treatment) were striking: Democrats became −24.5 percentage points ($p < 0.001$) less likely to hold Obama accountable in the negative compared to the positive treatment condition—for Republicans, the effect of the negative treatment was diametrically opposite with a change in probability of 23.5 percentage points ($p < .001$), leaving the difference-in-differences at a massive −47.9 percentage points ($p < .001$).

[5]One reason why the pattern does not appear as strong in the case with the Federal Reserve perhaps owes to the fact that while the monetary policies pursued by the Fed are, in principle, politically independent, the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve is still appointed by the president (under the approval of the Senate). For example, Janet Yellen, the chair of the Board of Governors at the time, was appointed by Barack Obama.

[6]Since the regression model is saturated, the OLS estimator will return the same estimates as a logit or probit model.

FIGURE 6 When Asked to Freely List Their Thoughts, Citizens Still Allocate Credit and Blame in a Partisan-Motivated Fashion



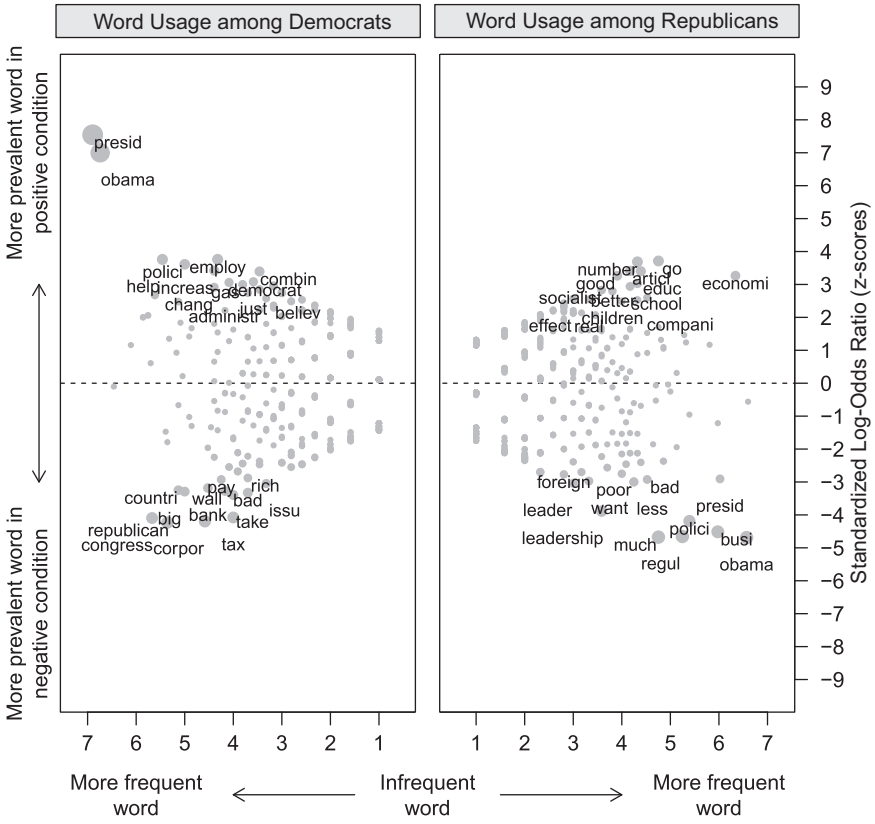
Note: Results are from open-ended survey questions asked in the United States (Study 1) and Denmark (Studies 3 and 4). The text has been classified by human coders to capture whether the respondent does or does not assign responsibility to the incumbent (see SI Appendix C for more information on coding). Plotted entries give the predicted probability of apportioning responsibility to the incumbent conditional on partisanship and treatment assignment (upper panels) as well as the marginal effect of treatment assignment conditional on partisanship (lower panels). Results are from (saturated) linear probability models with robust standard errors fitted separately for each study. Study 1: N = 1,170; Study 3: N = 811; Study 4: N = 563. Full model output appears in SI Appendix B.5.

Albeit not as pronounced, the same pattern of polarization is evident in the two Danish studies. Looking at the lower panels in the case of Studies 3 and 4, the treatment effect was not always detectable within one of the partisan groups but, importantly, the difference-in-differences was −13.6 (p = .061) and −26.8 (p = .001) percentage points in Studies 3 and 4, respectively. That is, although there was not always consistent evidence that *both* of the partisan groups simultaneously changed their attributions of responsibility in response to the treatment, they did appear to respond differently to the treatment.

But what actors did partisans mention, when they were not blaming or crediting the incumbent? To get a better sense of what participants actually wrote in the open response, Figure 7 shows how the word usage among Democrats (left panel) and Republicans (right panel) in Study 1 changed in response to treatment. Following the approach outlined by Monroe, Colaresi, and Quinn (2008) for discovering lexical features of text, Figure 7 shows the words that are most distinctively used in the negative as opposed to the positive treatment condition for Democrats and Republicans (for more detail on estimation, see SI Appendix D). The more extreme values are on the y-axis, the more distinctive the word is for the negative relative to the positive treatment condition, and the more extreme values are on the x-axis, the more frequent the word is in the overall corpus of text. Thus, the farther away from the center of the graph, the more important the word is in distinguishing what Democratic and Republican respondents write in the negative relative to the positive treatment condition.

Figure 7 corroborates the results above: For Democrats, words like "obama" and "presid" (stemmed version of "president") were more prevalent in the positive treatment condition, and the exact opposite was the case for Republicans, with words like "obama," "regulation," "leadership," and "president" most prevalent in the *negative* treatment condition. Interestingly, when Democrats were confronted with negative news about waning economic growth (i.e., the negative treatment condition),

FIGURE 7 What Words Are Most Distinctively Used in the Negative Relative to the Positive Treatment Condition?



Note: Results are displayed separately for Democrats (left panel) and Republicans (right panel). The y-axis shows a standardized log-odds ratio comparing the negative and positive treatment conditions for each unique, stemmed word occurring in the open responses. Following Monroe, Colaresi, and Quinn (2008, 387–89), the standardized log-odds ratio has been regularized with an informative Dirichlet prior (see SI Appendix D for more detail). The x-axis shows the logged frequency of the word. Note that the placement of the words relative to the point estimates has been altered slightly to avoid overlapping text.

blame was directed toward the Republican-led congress (e.g., "congress" and "republican") and another list of disliked actors (e.g., "corporations," "bank," "rich," and "wall street"). For Republican respondents in the positive condition, the results were murkier. Here, Republicans appeared to emphasize education ("educ," "school," and "children") and companies ("compani").

In all, the results from the open-ended questions are remarkably consistent with the pattern found in the previous sections. When respondents are asked to assign responsibility in an open-ended question without considering a set of predefined actors, they still appear selective in how they allocate credit and blame to the incumbent—especially so, in the highly polarized American setting. This is an important result. It suggests that partisans not only assign credit and blame selectively, but they also do it spontaneously.

Discussion and Conclusion

Partisanship, the story often goes, leads citizens to bend the same objective facts in the direction that serves their partisan goals (e.g., Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006). Yet recent evidence suggests that this story is likely exaggerated (Bullock et al. 2015; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015) and that partisans are not always oblivious to new facts (De Vries, Hobolt, and Tilley 2017; Hill 2017; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Parker-Stephen 2013). When the facts on the ground unfold, even committed partisans appear to react "in a similar fashion" (De Vries, Hobolt, and Tilley 2017, 1) and to "learn slowly towards common truth" (Hill 2017, 4).

However, existing discussion almost exclusively revolves around citizens' ability to perceive real-world conditions accurately—not how they in turn apportion credit

and blame. Across four experimental studies conducted in diverse national settings, I have shown why this omission is important. When partisans were randomly exposed to either positive or negative news about economic growth, they were indeed willing to update their perceptions of the national economy in the same direction, but they polarized in whether they thought the incumbent was responsible. Although partisans might acknowledge new facts, the mere acknowledgment of these facts apparently leads them to reason about the question of responsibility in a highly partisan-motivated fashion.

These findings have important implications for existing work. That partisans can learn facts in a similar way or "in a fashion close to Bayes' Rule" (Hill 2017, 31) cannot necessarily be taken as straightforward proof that partisans "form the sort of opinions policy advocates hope for and democratic theorists expect" (Parker-Stephen 2013, 1087). If the acknowledgment of new facts leads partisans to reason about the question of responsibility in a highly selective fashion, then such patterns of learning can hardly be characterized as unbiased or normatively desirable. Of course, there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to judging whether the incumbent is responsible. People might even articulate good arguments for why the incumbent is or is not culpable. However, judgments about responsibility, as well as the arguments that people might bring to bear, should not depend on whether the evidence points in a negative or positive direction or whether one's party is in office. If arguments come and go depending on whether they support the "right" conclusion, then these arguments merely serve to bolster preexisting views.

Still, some caution is in order in drawing out the implications of the findings. First, an important discussion has emerged on whether partisans—in the context of an opinion survey—simply express beliefs that cast their party in a positive light without truly committing to such beliefs (Berinsky 2018; Bullock et al. 2015; Gerber and Huber 2009; McConnell et al. 2018; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015). Although identifying what people "truly" believe in politics is difficult, if not impossible, an important question is whether expressed beliefs influence subsequent behavior, which does not always appear to be the case (McGrath 2017).

Second, another important aspect that this study leaves open is what role party elites play in mitigating and reinforcing partisan-motivated biases (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). Competing party elites have clear electoral interests in playing the "blame game" (Hood 2010) and in providing different narratives about who is responsible. Sorting out whether and how the supply of different narratives or justifications influences partisans' reasoning about real-world conditions would be an important area for future research. Furthermore, I have focused on how partisans might escape unwanted conclusions by attributing responsibility selectively, yet there are also other reasoning strategies that citizens might pursue to avoid inconvenient facts (see Anson 2016; Gaines et al. 2007; Groenendyk 2013). Delineating what strategies people employ to explain away inconvenient facts is an important topic for future research.

In any case, this article highlights a central paradox of citizen responsiveness to new evidence: The acknowledgment of new facts can lead citizens to reason about the question of responsibility in a highly partisan-motivated fashion.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix A: Stimulus Material
Appendix B: Full Model Outputs
Appendix C: Human Coding of the Open Response
Appendix D: Automated Discovery of Lexical Features