

Beyond economic voting: Government performance in noneconomic policy domains and elections in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Theories of retrospective voting assert that citizens who base their electoral choices on the performance of incumbent politicians can hold elected officials accountable for their actions and can signal policy preferences. While a considerable body of empirical evidence suggests that economic conditions affect incumbents' re-election prospects, there is remarkably little evidence that voters hold politicians accountable for noneconomic policy outcomes and few studies have tested for such a relationship. This paper explores the relationship between noneconomic performance and election results in UK national elections. We collected data on both constituency election returns and government performance across a range of policy domains including: crime rates, unemployment, and an index of local services. Since these performance measures tap important government outcomes that affect citizens' daily lives theories of retrospective voting predict a strong relationship between performance and election returns. In addition to providing a test of retrospective voting theory beyond the economy, our analysis speaks to questions about whether citizens hold national office holders accountable for local conditions and whether citizens attribute these outcomes to their local MP or to the governing party. Our results provide strong evidence of economic voting in the two most recent UK general elections and show that voters also consider local government performance beyond the economy when making their voting decisions. In doing so, they tend to hold the governing party—not their local MP—accountable for local performance.

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The retrospective voting account of electoral choice figures centrally in scholarly research on elections. This model suggests citizens can both hold elected officials accountable for their actions and signal their preferences over policy outcomes by simply basing their electoral choices on the performance of incumbent politicians. In light of the fact that voters are generally unable or unwilling to become informed about politicians' past legislative actions and intended policy reforms, retrospective voting stands as the "best empirical defense" of democracy (Achen and Bartels, 2004).

Evidence of this relationship between actual policy outcomes and election results is, however, almost exclusively confined to work on the link between the economy and elections. That is, in the existing empirical literature, retrospective voting is essentially synonymous with 'economic voting'. To date, scholars have devoted only limited attention to the relationship between election results and policy outcomes in the myriad noneconomic domains of government action.

The scarcity of research on noneconomic retrospective voting is troubling.¹ Both the normative value of retrospective voting and its implications for our descriptive understanding of how politics works hinge on the specific characteristics of voter responsiveness to government performance. If retrospective voting is confined to the economy, then citizens' electoral choices create incentives for politicians to pursue a healthy economy while, at the same time, leaving politicians unconstrained by public preferences on a host of other issues.

Based on the existing evidence we do not know the extent to which politicians are held accountable for their actions outside the single domain of the economy. Elected officials, of course, make decisions that affect a wide range of policy domains that affect individuals' lives in many important ways. Indeed, politicians arguably have considerably more control over matters such as traffic congestion and student-teacher ratios than they do over macro-economic conditions such as unemployment rates. This paper identifies and seeks answers to unanswered questions about retrospective voting beyond the economy.

The central question animating this paper is: do voters hold politicians accountable for performance in noneconomic policy domains? To provide an answer, we explore the relationship between the quality of policy outcomes and electoral results in UK Westminster parliamentary constituencies. To do so, we employ data on local crime rates and the quality of locally delivered government services.

¹ There are three fairly obvious potential explanations for the current state of the literature. First, theories of retrospective voting have been developed in the context of US politics and most empirical studies use data from US elections. The literature may therefore reflect the privileged place of the economy within American politics when compared to other developed democracies. Publication bias offers a second explanation. Some scholars may have studied noneconomic retrospective voting, found no evidence of a relationship, and then failed to publish their results. This publication bias is problematic because we do not know whether retrospective voting describes citizen behaviour in policy domains other than the economy. Finally, the lack of noneconomic studies may reflect the lack of suitable data on government performance in noneconomic policy domains. Data availability may increase, however, as governments become progressively more interested in policy evaluation and measurement.

The latter measure comes from the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of local government in England.² The CPA system, which was in place from 2002 to 2008, established a public performance measurement for the whole of English local government services covering a wide range of policy domains including: education, social care, the environment, housing, culture and benefits. While delivered by local governments, these services and programs are heavily affected by decisions made in the British House of Commons. England is one of the developed world's most centralized democracies and the centre controls virtually all taxation and an average 75% of the local budget (House of Commons, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2009). In addition to the CPA and data on incidents of reported crimes we also account for constituency unemployment levels in order to provide a comparison with economic voting.

Beyond a direct test for noneconomic retrospective voting, this paper also explores some specific characteristics of voter responsiveness to government performance. Specifically, we consider the extent to which voters: 1) hold the governing party and/or their local incumbent MP accountable for government performance; 2) are differentially responsive to recent and past performance; 3) react more strongly to negative than positive performance; and 4) issue salience moderates the performance-support relationship.

This paper's contribution to our understanding of retrospective voting and electoral politics is threefold: we expand the political behaviour literature by offering a test for noneconomic retrospective voting that employs objective measures of government performance. Such data provide a superior test of retrospective voting than do survey data commonly used in other studies. Furthermore, we contribute to the study of national elections in the UK by providing a detailed account of the determinants of aggregate-level vote choice in the last two general elections (2005 and 2010). Lastly, we use an original data set to address a range of questions on the specific patterns and characteristics of voter responsiveness to government performance.

This paper proceeds as follows: the first section reviews the normative significance of retrospective voting and discusses the limited amount of empirical research that addresses noneconomic government performance. Section two outlines the theoretical perspectives related to the broader question of retrospective voting and the relevant hypotheses we test. The set of theories we confront are grounded in a single simple premise: the specific characteristics of the electorate's responses to policy performance have important normative and descriptive implications because patterns of retrospective voting create particular incentives for elected policy-makers. We then introduce the specific cases investigated here – the 2005 and 2010 UK general elections. These elections provide a unique opportunity to study noneconomic retrospective voting in large part because of the availability of objective measures of the quality of locally delivered government services. This section introduces the reader to this measure, the CPA, and discusses the links between local government services and national elections. We then report the results of our empirical analysis. We find strong evidence of economic voting in UK general elections. Voters hold the governing party accountable for local economic conditions, such as local unemployment. Our results further indicate that the link between local

² Since local services performance measures (e.g. CPA) vary across countries within the UK, we restrict our analysis to local governments and elected Members of Parliament (MPs) in England.

government performance and national elections is not limited to the economy. Although to a lesser degree, changes in the local crime rate and the quality of local services affect the government party's (Labour) vote share. In addition, we find voters are not entirely short-sighted but consider performance over longer time periods.

Retrospective voting: more than just economic voting?

A central question that animates research on public opinion is: how can democracy function when citizens hold unstable and uninformed opinions? Classical theories of representative democracy expect citizens to be sufficiently interested in, and informed about, the policy issues of the day and the positions of competing politicians on these issues. This information enables citizens to arrive at informed vote choices. In this framework, citizens are presumed to be prospectively oriented; that is, they compare candidates both in terms of the political ends they promote and the policy means they propose to achieve these ends.

Over fifty years of empirical research on citizens' electoral choices, however, paint a very different picture. Citizens tend to be generally uninformed about even the most salient political issues of the day, have few stable opinions, and can rarely accurately identify candidates' policy positions (Berelson et al 1954; Campbell et al 1954; Bartels 2010). Perhaps most importantly, the claim that most citizens are largely uninformed about both politics in general and about the specifics of candidate platforms continues to receive empirical support (Delli-Carpini & Keeter 1996), and this fact raises serious questions about citizen influence on policy making. Since citizens are generally unaware of candidates' policy positions and often unsure of their own preference on many topics, most are unable to identify the candidate whose policy proposals most closely mirror their own. In this case, a theory of elections that hinges on the selection of candidates whose proposals best coincide with the citizens' preferences appears to lose its starting point.

The theory of retrospective voting, in contrast, asserts that citizens can ensure elites will pursue the sorts of policy outcomes citizens desire if voters respond to one easily available piece of information: the quality of life under the current government. The central empirical claim of retrospective voting is that citizens will tend to support the incumbent candidate or party when the results of past policy decisions are good and elect opposition candidates or parties when these results are bad. Retrospective voting does not require citizens to form preferences about proposals across a variety of policy domains nor to become informed about competing candidates' positions on these issues. As Fiorina (1981, 5) notes, citizens "typically have one comparatively hard bit of data: they know what life has been like during the incumbent's administration. They need not know the precise economic or foreign policies of the incumbent administration in order to see or feel the results of those policies."

This simple theory of voting has become a central feature of scholarly research on elections because it provides a normatively desirable model of electoral democracy consistent with the facts on the ground. From a normative perspective, retrospective voting implies that elections offer an opportunity for citizens to send meaningful signals about their preferences over policy outcomes in spite of their limited political knowledge. If citizens' vote choices are sensitive to the consequences of

incumbent candidates' decisions, then elected officials will aim to pursue policy outcomes that appeal to a majority of the electorate. Politicians who are unconcerned with public reaction to their records and/or adopt policies resulting in undesirable outcomes will soon be removed from office. Moreover, by enforcing political accountability through retrospective voting, citizens create incentives for politicians to pursue the policy outcomes that the majority prefer. Retrospective voting is thus consistent with the "perverse and unorthodox argument ... [that] voters are not fools" (Key 1966, 7) and suggests that election results are not "irrational,' or random, or solely the product of past loyalties and habits, or of campaign rhetoric and merchandising" (Kramer 1971, 140).

Coupled with these compelling arguments about the implications of retrospective voting for the functioning of democracy is a wealth of evidence supporting the basic claim that incumbents' electoral fates are strongly related to the quality of the policy outcomes they oversee. One, now ten year old, review of the relationship between economic conditions and elections notes "the flow of scholarly papers and books on the topic has changed from a trickle to a torrent of over 300 articles and books on economics and elections" (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2000, 183). One characteristic of this voluminous literature, in particular, stands out: the near exclusive focus of this literature on economic outcomes.

A recent and widely cited review of research on the relationship between economic performance and election results, Anderson (2007), starts by noting that the positive economy-vote relationship "has taken on the ring of an incontrovertible social scientific fact" (271) and then highlights the fact that this relationship is contingent on a range of institutional and psychological factors. These contingencies are important. The normative desirability of retrospective voting depends critically on whether or not actual citizen behaviour promotes the sort of political accountability presumed to flow from retrospective voting. For instance, scholars have found that the performance-vote relationship tends to be stronger when institutional design enables voters to more directly attribute performance to a specific elected official (e.g. Anderson 1995; Powell 2000; Powell & Whitten 1993) and thus the claim that retrospective voting enables political accountability hinges on institutional design. Similarly, the quality of the signal citizens send to elites by voting retrospectively depends importantly on the sort of performance that influences electoral choices. Achen & Bartels (2004) demonstrates for the US that voters respond primarily to economic developments in the six months immediately preceding presidential elections and that economic performance during the bulk of a president's term is unrelated to incumbent support. Scholarship on retrospective voting on economic performance is now primarily focused on the contingent nature of economic voting and the normative implications of these contingencies.

Claims that retrospective voting provides a democratic mechanism, which promotes political accountability and elite responsiveness to public preferences, are significantly undermined by the limited evidence of retrospective voting beyond the economy. Over the course of their term in office, elected officials make countless decisions on a host of noneconomic policy issues. In order to understand the scope of retrospective voting and the generalizability of the associated normative claims, we need a much deeper understanding of the patterns of retrospective voting on noneconomic issues. If voters tend to respond to economic performance but fail to account for performance in other domains, the normative significance of retrospective voting is quite limited. That is, we may find that citizens

perversely hold politicians accountable for conditions they have difficulty controlling, such as the economy, while ignoring performance in those domains more amenable to political control, such as the quality of public transit and availability of newer textbooks.

A small but growing number of studies consider the relationship between vote choice and objective measures of performance in noneconomic domains. The majority of these studies focus on either military actions, such as the number of casualties and the timing of the onset and conclusion of military campaigns (e.g. Arena 2008; Carson et al 2001; Koch and Gartner 2005; Voeten and Brewer 2006), or changes in tax policy (e.g. Berry & Berry 1994; Case 1994; Kone and Winers 1993; Eismeier 1983 Gibson 1994). Scholars have also explored a handful of other domains including: student test scores (Berry and Howell 2007); crime rates (Cummins 2009); the number and severity of terrorist attacks (Gassebner, Jong-A-Pin, and Mierau 2007), and a range of municipal services (Boyne et al 2009; James and John 2006; La Calle and Orriols 2010).³ We contribute to this emerging literature by offering a first test for noneconomic voting in UK national elections.

Furthermore, most studies of performance evaluation focus on national policies and elections at the national level, despite that fact that voters often more closely experience government services in local environments. Indeed, if retrospective voting is grounded in the assumption that individuals hold politicians accountable for performance that affects their daily lives, then citizens should be more sensitive to local performance than to national conditions. Attending to local conditions provides citizens with a relatively low cost means to form evaluations about national conditions (Books and Prysby 1999; Ansolabehere, Meredith, & Snowberg 2011).⁴ In keeping with these ideas, we explore variation in government performance in relatively small geographic units: English national electoral constituencies.

To date, remarkably few studies consider retrospective voting on noneconomic issues and no studies have tested the effect of local performance in noneconomic policy areas on incumbent reelection prospects in national elections. This paper sheds light on these underexplored aspects of retrospective voting.

Theoretical Perspectives and Hypotheses

The primary goal of this paper is to provide an empirical test for noneconomic retrospective voting. The theoretical motivation for such a test is straightforward: retrospective voting suggests people will hold government accountable for consequences of policy decisions they experience in everyday life. We therefore expect a positive relationship between indicators of the quality of policy outcomes and support for incumbent politicians. We test this hypothesis using two distinct measures of government performance in noneconomic policy domains across two UK national elections.

³ A range of studies considers noneconomic retrospective voting using survey-based methods. See, for example, Fiorina 1981, Fournier et al 2003, Oliver and Ha 2007. As we discuss in more detail below, the causal claims presented in such work are undermined by significant concerns about endogeneity.

⁴ Using data from the 1997 British Election Study, Johnston et al. (2000) finds that local economic conditions affect incumbent evaluations for national elections in England and Wales.

This study also sheds light on additional questions about the specific nature of the relationship between government performance and incumbent support. Retrospective voting provides voters with a means to signal the sort of performance they want future incumbents to pursue. Accordingly the characteristics of voter responsiveness are critical in understanding the sort of political decisions encouraged by performance voting. We consider four such characteristics and the remainder of this section discusses each one in turn.

Target of accountability

First, we explore whether voters tend to hold the governing party or their local incumbents accountable for government performance. When a governing party holds a majority of seats in a Westminster parliamentary system, the Prime Minister and cabinet have considerable control over both the legislature and executive. Most citizens, however, do not have the opportunity to vote directly for or against these individuals. The most direct means of holding this group accountable involves rewarding or punishing the governing party. Accordingly, retrospective voting suggests government performance should affect support for the governing party.

In many cases, however, the current incumbent within an electoral district is not a member of the party in government. In such cases, citizens may also wish to use their vote to signal their satisfaction with a sitting MP's performance. Indeed much of the rhetoric surrounding representation in single member districts highlights MPs' responsibility to their constituencies. Retrospective voting based on an incumbent MP's record creates incentives for future incumbents to respond to constituents' preferences about policy outcomes. MPs can, for example, lobby the government to change policies that directly affect some or all of their constituents. If voters respond to local conditions, an MP's ability to attract infrastructure funding or increase transfers to local service providers should be more likely to win re-election.

In Westminster parliamentary systems with a single member plurality electoral system, citizens have one vote and an interest in holding both the governing party and their local MP responsible for policy outcomes. The question is thus: when faced with an incumbent MP who is not a member of the governing party, do citizens hold the party or the individual responsible for policy performance? This choice becomes more difficult when we consider local policy outcomes where an individual MP may have more influence than on national issues such as foreign policy. Indeed, if voters are engaging in effective retrospective voting, they should hold local MPs accountable for those issues MPs can plausibly influence. Similarly, voters should hold the governing party responsible for issues most directly affected by the national executive.⁵ Accordingly, we expect to observe that individuals tend to hold the governing party responsible for most policy outcomes. Furthermore, we expect a positive relationship between the extent to which issues are plausibly affected by the actions of local MPs and the strength of the relationship between outcomes and support for incumbent candidates.

Accountability time horizons

⁵ These claims are consistent with work in the economic voting literature on attributions of responsibility. See Anderson (2007) for a recent review.

Second, we consider the temporal characteristics of voter responsiveness to policy performance. Research on economic voting suggests voters' evaluations of economic performance are heavily influenced by recent events. Survey based studies tend to measure voters' evaluations of economic performance in the year preceding an election. In an analysis of aggregate-level data from US presidential elections, Achen & Bartels (2004) finds voters respond almost exclusively to the economic growth in the final year of a president's term. Growth in the first three years has no effect.

This evidence of voter myopia is inconsistent with the central logic of retrospective voting. If voters want elected officials to pursue performance consistently, "the electorate should value performance over the incumbent's entire term of office, with little or no backward time discounting of performance outcomes" (Hibbs 2004, 7). Myopia, however, is much more consistent with an empirical account of voter behaviour grounded in the constraints of human cognition. Voters may simply attend to the performance they happen to recall, which will tend to be recent performance. If the rational framework is correct, voters will attend equally to past and recent performance. If the cognitive account is accurate, we should observe greater responsiveness to more recent outcomes.

Asymmetries in retrospective voting

Along with the tendency to place greater weight on recent events, research on human cognition suggests individuals respond more strongly to negative outcomes than they do to similarly sized positive events.⁶ As with other characteristics of voter responsiveness, a 'negativity bias' has implications for incentives facing elected officials. Specifically, if voters respond more strongly to negative performance than they do to positive, politicians should be more concerned within minimizing mistakes than they are with maximizing successes. A negativity bias in retrospective voting encourages risk-averse policy-makers.

Two early macro-level studies of the relationship between economic conditions and evaluations of incumbents found evidence of this negativity bias (Mueller 1971; Bloom & Price 1975). Despite these results, the overwhelming majority of research on the relationship between policy performance and political support, however, ignores the negativity effect and assumes individuals respond symmetrically to positive and negative performance.⁷ A recent exception, Boyne et al. (2009), finds a negativity effect in the relationship between local government performance and local elections. We use similar local performance data and test whether individuals are more responsive to deteriorating conditions than they are to improving conditions.

Types of crime and responsiveness

⁶ See Rozin and Royzman 2001; Baumeister et al. 2001.

⁷ Scholars have, however, tested for negativity biases in other relationships: For work on asymmetries between candidate traits and vote choice, see Kernel (1977), Lau (1982), and Aarts and Blais (2011). The negativity bias figures prominently in work on negative advertising (recent work includes Geer 2006 and Lau et al. 2007). Soroka (2006) finds evidence of asymmetries the relationships between economic conditions, media coverage of the economy, and public perceptions of the economy in the UK.

Finally, we also exploit the richness of our crime rate data set to test for variation in responsiveness to different types of crime. In general, patterns of retrospective voting across domains of government performance should reflect importance of different issues. Indeed, our concern with noneconomic retrospective voting is grounded in the notion that politicians only have incentives to respond to public preferences on those issues for which they are held accountable. Accordingly, we should expect to observe a positive relationship between the salience of an issue and the strength of the performance-vote relationship in that domain. In the present analysis, we test this hypothesis by disaggregating crime data into violent and property crimes. We start by assuming voters are more concerned with violent crimes given the physical and emotional impact of such crimes. Accordingly, we expect trends in violent crime to have a greater effect on incumbent support than changes in non-violent crimes.

Before reporting on our empirical tests of the hypotheses discussed here, we first introduce the context of these tests with a discussion of British national elections and the existing research on retrospective voting in the UK.

Government performance and electoral support in England

Recent national elections in England offer a unique opportunity to investigate the relationship between government performance in noneconomic policy areas and political behaviour. In this study we leverage the availability of objective measures of government performance across localities to contribute to the literature on retrospective voting in UK elections.

Government performance has played an important role in the many aggregate-level and individual-level studies of British elections. At the aggregate level, numerous studies have looked at constituency-level characteristics, such as the state of the local economy to explain a variation in election results. Results from the recent Conservative government era, show that government support was above average in affluent areas and below average in poorer areas. More specifically, scholars have found that Conservative Party vote share was negatively related to the local unemployment rate at the time of the election and to changes in the year before the election. Moreover, the governing party's vote share was positively related to average local income levels and to changes thereof (Owens and Wade, 1988; Johnston and Pattie, 1992). Other studies have used local housing prices as a measure for a constituency's economic well-being and found a positive relationship between high or rising housing prices and support for the Conservative Party (Pattie et al., 1995). In a recent study that compares the effect of local economic conditions on government support during Conservative government and Labour government periods, Pattie and Johnston (2008, 124) found that "[s]upport for Labour is always highest in the poorest areas, [...] while support for the Conservatives is always highest in the most affluent. But irrespective of which party is in power, the government of the day gets more support [...] where economic conditions are improving than in communities where they are worsening." In short, local economic conditions and constituency-level election results are clearly correlated.

Scholars have explored these same themes using survey-based studies of retrospective voting. Studies by Pattie and Johnston (2001, 2010) share our concern that "reward-punish models that focus on

one or two economic issues only ... over-simplify the situation” (Johnston and Pattie 2001, 486). The 2001 study considers the relationship between support for the governing party in 1997 and perceptions of government performance across a range of policy areas. The analysis of the 2010 election relies on a composite indicator measuring government performance on six national policy issues (education, immigration, the NHS, the financial crisis, the economy in general and taxation) and does not systematically distinguish between economic and noneconomic policy domains. In addition, work by Clarke et al. (2009) on their ‘valence politics’ account of British elections also finds evidence that perceptions of performance affect electoral choices.⁸

While these studies offer some evidence of noneconomic retrospective voting, it is far from conclusive. Survey based studies without a multiple-wave panel component face considerable limitations in their ability to identifying the causal impact of government performance on vote choice. In particular, many studies demonstrate that vote choice and partisan preferences play an important role in determining evaluations of party competence and even perceptions of objective conditions (Wlezien, Franklin & Twiggs 1997; Anderson, Mendes, & Tverdova 2004; Evans & Pickup 2010). Accordingly, it becomes difficult to assess whether and to what extent performance in office affects electoral choices. Therefore, we rely on three different objective measures of government performance and test whether variation in these measures is associated with variation in election results.

In addition to measures of economic conditions and crime rates, we also employ measures of the quality of government services provided by local governments. One of the main challenges in conducting aggregate-level research on retrospective voting is the availability of objective data on noneconomic government performance. In 2002, the central government implemented the Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA)—a new approach to evaluating English local government performance. Administered by an independent Audit Commission, the CPA framework closely defined priorities and performance standards and provided summary scores of overall performance for single-tier and county councils in England. These were comprised of a number of different components including core service performance in: education (children and young people), social services (adults), housing, environment, culture (libraries and leisure), and benefits. Scores in each of these areas, drawn from a mixture of self-assessment, review of performance indicators and onsite inspection by the relevant service inspectorates, were then combined to form a single scored judgment for each council (Audit Commission, 2002). CPA scores, which are available from 2002 to 2008, were published in English local and national media (James and John, 2006).

Two recent studies find evidence of an asymmetrical relationship between CPA scores and the electoral performance of local government politicians. James and John (2006) models the introduction of publicly available CPA scores as a shock to the relationship between local government and citizens. This study tests whether the publication of CPA scores affects the reelection prospects of incumbent governments and finds evidence of a negativity bias. Specifically, receiving a ‘poor’ performance rating has a substantial impact on incumbent vote share and there is little electoral benefit for those in the highest performance category. Boyne et al. (2009) adopts a similar approach and again finds evidence of

⁸ See also, Bartle 2003; Johnston and Pattie 2001

a negativity effect. To date, scholars have not considered whether the quality of local services affect national elections.

CPA scores provide an appropriate test for retrospective voting for two reasons. First, CPA scores tap government performance on the sorts of issues that directly affect citizens' daily lives. Retrospective voting provides citizens with a means to hold politicians accountable while remaining quite uninformed about politics in general and about the policy options a government has pursued. Rather, citizens need only attend to their own direct experiences with policy outcomes such as the health of the economy (Fiorina 1981). In Fiorina's formulation, citizens are most likely to respond to government performance when they actually experience the results of policy choices. Given their impact on citizens' daily lives, the quality of services such as libraries, leisure facilities, cultural programs, housing, and social services are likely to be noticed by citizens.

Second, while these outcomes are local, the central government in Westminster has considerable influence over the policy domains and outcomes measured by the CPA. The highly centralized structure of English government creates a strong link between the national and local level. Central government has become increasingly powerful in recent decades and regularly interferes in local issues (House of Commons, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2009). As a result, the balance of power between the national and local government is skewed in favour of a strong central government. In this setting, local elections are second-order elections. Although local governments are responsible for providing public services, and decisions over local services are made by local politicians and bureaucrats, they are heavily dependent on the central government. Grants from central government, on average, make up 75% of the local budget, and the potential for local taxation is limited. Overall, the strength of central government weakens local fiscal accountability and seriously constrains local revenue sources. In particular, the central government's influence on education—the largest locally provided service—stands out. "The introduction of the dedicated schools grant in 2006-07 resulted in local government having less autonomy on education expenditure, as the funding is now 'passported' directly to schools, effectively bypassing elected local government" (House of Commons, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2009, 13).⁹

In addition to CPA scores, we also consider the relationship between election results and both local crime rates and local unemployment. Crime rates provide a second test for noneconomic retrospective voting. Like the CPA, crime rates measure policy outcomes that are important, affect citizens' daily lives, and are outcomes that citizens may learn about without any interest in politics or effort to consume political news. To our knowledge, only one study has explored the relationship between crime and elections using aggregate-level data. Cummins (2009) finds a modest negative relationship between crime rates and US gubernatorial election results. We build on this study by exploring effect of crime outside the US and in much smaller localities (i.e. Westminster electoral districts as opposed to US states).

Along with these measures of noneconomic policy performance, we also test for a relationship

⁹ Health care, another service often administered by local governments, is provided by the central government through the National Health Service (NHS).

between local unemployment conditions and national election results at the local level. Doing so permits a comparison of the relative effect of retrospective voting in economic and noneconomic domains. Furthermore, we can compare our results with past studies and assess whether local economic performance continues to be a strong predictor of vote choice during the longest era of Labour government in British history.

Data and Methods

Data: sources, collection and challenges

In order to investigate our research questions and test our hypotheses we created an original data set using data from various academic and government sources. Electoral data for the 2005 and 2010 elections come from datasets made publically available by Pippa Norris.¹⁰ In addition to providing election results, these datasets also include information from the 2001 census about the characteristics of constituency populations. We then added performance data to these datasets. Crime rate information comes from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and information on welfare claimant rates, our measure of unemployment, from Nomis—Official Labour Market Statistics (subdivision of the ONS).

Linking local service performance, CPA scores, with electoral constituencies is slightly more challenging given these data come from different geographical units. Using directories from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), we were able to match the local government regions and Westminster Parliamentary constituencies. There is no problem for the vast majority of constituencies (359 of 533), which exist entirely within a single local government district.¹¹ For the 174 constituencies that belonged to more than one local authority, we used the mean value of the respective performance measure.¹²

Variables and measures

Our two dependent variables are: (1) vote share of the incumbent MP's party in a constituency and (2) constituency-level vote share of the party in government (Labour). The first variable allows us to test whether voters punish/reward their local MPs for the performance in office, while the second enables us to examine if voters hold the governing party accountable for local performance.

Our central independent variables are three different objective measures of government performance within Westminster constituencies: CPA scores, crime data and unemployment data. The CPA data is from upper-tier local governments (London boroughs, metropolitan districts, shire counties,

¹⁰ These datasets, the British Parliamentary Constituency Database 1992-2005 and the British Parliamentary Constituency General Election 2010, are available at <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris>. Between the 2005 and 2010 elections there were substantial revisions to the UK constituency boundaries. This boundary change does not present a problem for performance variables nor for riding population characteristics. Lagged vote shares for our analysis of the 2010 election are Rallings & Thrasher 'official notional results' which are estimates of party vote shares for the prior election had the 2010 boundaries been in place (see Rallings & Thrasher 2007).

¹¹ The only concern here is that local performance may vary geographically within local regions; thus average performance can be a noisy measure of performance within a given electoral district.

¹² This is only an issue for CPA and crime data. All other measures are reported at the constituency level. However, for future drafts, we seek to use GIS data to get a more accurate measure for these overlapping cases.

and unitary authorities), which are responsible for education, social services, regulatory services (i.e. land use planning and waste management), housing, libraries, leisure services, and welfare benefits. CPA data provide an official categorization of local service performance according to five broad summary scores ranging from poor to excellent service provision that is available for a reasonably long time period (2002–2008). This period pretty well matches two electoral cycles dominated by Labour governments (2001–2005 and 2005–2010). We examine whether a change in CPA score during each electoral cycle has an effect on vote share. In the 2005 models, we include a measure of change in CPA score between 2002 and 2005. All 2010 models include a measure of change in CPA score between 2005 and 2008.

To assess whether the local crime rate has an effect on the (re-)election prospects of national MPs, we use data on reported crimes per local authority (number of crimes per year from 2003 to 2010). The data is available for twelve different types of crimes, which we combined to create three different crime variables. Unless otherwise specified, we use the “all crimes” variable in our regression models, which captures the absolute change in number of crimes per capita during a clearly defined time period. In all 2005 models, the standard crime measure is the change in the number of crimes per capita between 2003 and 2005. For 2010 models, the standard crime measure is the change in the number of crimes per capita between 2005 and 2008. We use this variable for the local crime rate to test whether a change in the number of crimes during the electoral cycle has an effect on national election results. In one model, we investigate the effect of different types of crimes and distinguish between “violent crimes” and “property crimes.”

As a proxy for the unemployment rate, we use the claimant rates for each constituency from January and March of each year (between 2001 and 2010). The claimant rate serves as an indicator for the economic performance in each constituency. In our regression models, we test the effect of change in the local unemployment rate on vote share in general elections. In the 2005 models, the standard measure of unemployment is change in the unemployment rate between 2001 and 2005. In the 2010 models, the standard measure of unemployment is change in the unemployment rate between 2005 and 2010.

Since we are interested in the relationship between local government performance and the re-election prospects of elected officials, we examine whether a change in performance results in a change in incumbent vote share. Consequently, in all our regression models we control for the vote share won in the previous election (lagged vote share for either local incumbent party or Labour). Furthermore, we control for region in all models. We do so since past studies of UK national elections have found regional variations in party support and a persisting—if not growing—North-South divide. With the exception of London, Labour is significantly stronger in the North and Conservatives stronger in the South. This divide can, at least in part, be explained with (vastly) different economic situations in the North and South of England. For the 2005 models, we also include a dummy variable for Birmingham, where a scandal over postal voting fraud in local government elections erupted shortly before the election and caused a significant drop in Labour vote share.

Results

*** Table 1***

Our first analysis tests the hypothesis that voters hold the nationally governing party accountable for local performance.¹³ Results from this analysis, presented in Table 1, offer some support for this hypothesis. Consistent with past research, economic conditions are strongly related to support for the governing party. In both 2005 and 2010, there is a clear negative relationship between local unemployment and Labour vote share. In both cases, a 1% increase in unemployment is associated with a similarly sized decline in Labour vote share (1% in 2005 and 0.8% in 2010). In both cases, we measure the change in unemployment rates over the duration of the government's term in office. The similarity of coefficients is interesting given the distinct economic contexts. In 2005, the average change in unemployment was a 0.5% decrease. In 2010, following the global economic events of 2008, average unemployment increased by 1.8%. Overall, these results offer strong evidence of economic voting. These results reassuringly suggest that during the elections considered here, English voters did indeed engage in retrospective voting. The question, then, is whether such responsiveness occurred in noneconomic domains.

Results in Table 1 provide modest evidence of noneconomic retrospective voting. Coefficients from the 2005 and 2010 models indicate a negative relationship between change in the crime rate and support for the governing party. The estimated effect in 2005 is small and not statistically significant. In contrast, changing levels of crime had a substantial impact on Labour vote share across electoral districts in 2010. For this election, our crime variable measures the 5-year change in the number of crimes per capita. For instance, in 2005 the average number of crimes per person was 0.27 and this figure fell to 0.2 by 2010. Accordingly, levels of crime fell, on average, by 0.07 crimes per person between elections. Given the crime coefficient (-16.91), a decline of this magnitude is associated with an increase in Labour vote share of 1.2%. In short, the 2010 electorate appears very responsive to change in local crime rates.

In contrast, voters appear only weakly responsive to change in local government performance. In both years, the coefficient for CPA is correctly signed but not statistically significant. Moreover, the estimated impact of CPA change is quite modest. Recall that local government performance was scored on 4 and 5-point scales. Accordingly, a 1-point increase in CPA likely represents considerable improvement. Such a change, however, is associated with a very small increase in Labour vote (0.2%).

In sum, results from our first analysis indicate that voters hold the governing party accountable for their performance. While voters clearly hold the governing party responsible for unemployment conditions, there is also modest evidence that performance in noneconomic domains can matter.

Targets of accountability

The right hand columns in Table 1 present results from our analysis of the target of accountability. That is, we tested whether voters hold the governing party or their local MP accountable for local government performance. To do so, we regressed the vote share of the local incumbent's party

¹³ In all regression models, we control for region (results not shown).

on: our performance measures, a variable indicating whether the incumbent MP is a member of the Labour party, and interactions between the performance variables and this indicator. This model is set up in way that the performance coefficients indicate the impact of performance on support for non-Labour MPs. The impact of performance on Labour MPs can be calculated by adding coefficients from the main effects and interaction terms.

Results for 2005 confirm that voters primarily hold the governing party accountable for its performance. At first glance, the positive coefficient for unemployment (2.5) may appear puzzling. This seemingly perverse effect is consistent with the idea that Labour was held accountable for unemployment. The positive sign indicates that as unemployment increases, so too does support for non-Labour MPs. The large and statistically significant coefficient for the unemployment interaction term further indicates that unemployment had a very different impact on Labour incumbents. The estimated effect of unemployment change for Labour MPs is -1.24. When unemployment increases, support for Labour incumbents declines. The same pattern of results is evident in the 2010 regression. We again see a negative unemployment-vote relationship for Labour MPs (-1.52). In the same year, there is no relationship between employment conditions and support for non-Labour MPs. These unemployment results provide strong evidence that the governing party is held accountable for economic conditions and opposition MPs are not.

Consistent with results presented above, crime played a role in the 2010 election but not in 2005. In 2010, we again see evidence that local crime rates had different impacts for Labour and opposition MPs. For non-Labour incumbent MPs, higher crime rates are associated with higher support. Again, this result is consistent with the notion that opposition MPs were not held accountable for government performance. In fact, these MPs are the beneficiaries of voters' desire to punish governing Labour by supporting other party candidates. Adding the main effect and interaction terms reveals a strong positive relationship between changing levels of crime and support for Labour MPs ($B=-17.32$). To make sense of this estimate, the predicted impact of a one standard deviation decline in crime performance, an increase of 0.07 crimes per capita, is a 1.2% decline in the vote share of a Labour MP.

Turning to the CPA, results from the two elections are quite different. Change in CPA scores is unrelated to support for both Labour and opposition MPs in 2005. In 2010, however, we again see evidence that the governing party, not the local MP, is held accountable. As with crime and unemployment, declining local service quality is associated with increased support for opposition MPs. In constituencies with a Labour incumbent, however, the pattern is reversed. The estimated impact of CPA change on Labour incumbents' vote shares is 0.43. That is, a change from a CPA rating of 2 to 3, for example, is associated with a modest 0.4% increase in Labour support. Note that this coefficient is not significant at conventional levels ($p=0.17$).

Earlier we hypothesized that voters will be more likely to hold opposition MPs accountable for outcomes they are better able to control. Of the three performance measures considered here, local MPs are likely to have the most influence over the quality of local services. We do not, however, find any support for this hypothesis. Non-labour MPs are not held accountable for the conditions in any of these three domains. Rather, voters clearly hold the governing party accountable for all three types of

performance. Given improving conditions, we observe increased support for Labour incumbent MPs and decreased support for MPs from other parties.

*** Table 2 ***

Accountability time horizons

Research on economic voting suggests voters are myopic (Achen and Bartels, 2004). We investigated whether British voters paid more attention to events that occurred just before the election than they did to early performance. Interestingly, the results in Table 2 suggest that voters were most responsive to changes occurring in the middle of the government's time in office. The first column reports estimates of responsiveness to yearly changes in the crime rate across the five years Labour governed prior to the 2010 election. While the coefficient for the election year is incorrectly signed and not significant, there is a strong and significant negative effect of crime performance in each of the years between 2007 and 2009. Changes in the crime rate between 2006 and 2007 had no effect ($B=-3.43$). A similar pattern is evident in the unemployment results. In both models, change in unemployment in the year preceding the election is unrelated to Labour vote share. In contrast, employment performance in the middle of the government's term, specifically years 3 and 4, is clearly related to Labour vote share.

What accounts for the lack of responsiveness to election year performance? Since crime data is annual, the absence of an election year effect may be due to the timing of the election (held in May). That is, more than half of the crimes recorded that year occurred after the election. This explanation, however, does not fit the unemployment results. Our unemployment performance variables measure yearly change in first quarter unemployment. Thus, the election year variables measure change in unemployment over the twelve-month period immediately preceding the May elections. One possible explanation, consistent with these results, is that there are temporal lags in the link between actual performance and voter perceptions. That is, voters may not respond immediately to changing conditions but they do eventually.

*** Table 3 ***

Asymmetries in retrospective voting

Boyne et al. (2009) found that a decrease in CPA score has a much bigger effect on local government support than positive developments in CPA score. In order to test whether this negativity effect also characterizes the link between local government performance and support for the national governing party, we created different variables capturing negative (decline in CPA score between 2005 and 2008) or positive (increase in CPA score between 2005 and 2008) change. The results in Table 3 indicate that neither improving nor declining local service quality has a statistically significant

relationship with Labour vote share.¹⁴ In both years, however, there is some evidence that voters respond more strongly to improving conditions than they do to decline.

In 2005 the coefficient for improvement (0.37) is positive and statistically significant at the 90% confidence level ($p=0.07$). A one-point improvement in CPA score is associated with a 0.4% increase in Labour vote share. The coefficient for decline is incorrectly signed and not statistically significant. These results thus suggest Labour benefited from positive performance and were unaffected by declining local conditions. The same general results are apparent in 2010 with no effect of decline and a positive estimate for CPA improvement. The latter coefficient, while nearly identical to its 2005 counterpart, is not significant ($p=0.2$). In contrast to Boyne et al. (2009) as well as numerous psychological studies, we find modest evidence that national incumbents are rewarded for improved local conditions and not punished for decline.

*** Table 4 ***

Types of crime and responsiveness

Our crime measure is a composite of twelve different types of crimes.¹⁵ In order to see whether voters are more sensitive to changes in violent crime rates, we created two separate variables measuring violent and property crimes. Given that we find no evidence of responsiveness to changes in crime rates in 2005, we restrict our analysis to 2010. The results reported in Table 4 show that people are indeed more sensitive to different violent crimes. Specifically, the coefficient for violent crimes is nearly four times as large as the estimate for property crimes. The standard deviation of the 2005-2010 change in violent crimes across constituencies was 0.013. These results suggest a shift in crime performance of this magnitude is associated with almost a 1% change in Labour vote share (0.8%). While we can provide only a single test of the salience hypothesis, these results provide support for the notion that voter responsiveness to performance depends on the importance of the issue at hand.

Conclusion

This paper considers the characteristics of retrospective voting within English constituencies in the 2005 and 2010 UK general elections. Consistent with past research, we find clear evidence of economic voting. Vote shares of the governing Labour party are strongly related to changes in the unemployment rate within electoral constituencies.

Our analysis departs, however, from previous work by offering a broader empirical assessment of retrospective voting. Our models of incumbent party vote share include measure of both economic and noneconomic performance in our models. While we generally find that economic issues dwarf

¹⁴ The 2010 data does not permit a test for asymmetries in responses to changes in unemployment and crime rates. In that year, only 5 constituencies witnessed an increase in crime and only 1 experienced decreased unemployment. We found no evidence of a negativity effect in responses to unemployment change in 2005.

¹⁵ The categories of crime are: burglary (dwelling and other), criminal damage, drug offences, fraud and forgery, offences against vehicles, other offences, other theft offences, robbery, sexual offences, violence (with and without injury).

performance in noneconomic policy areas we do find modest evidence of noneconomic retrospective voting. In 2010, changing crime rates are strongly related to Labour vote share, and voters appear particularly sensitive to variation in the amount of violent crimes. In addition, we find modest, albeit not statistically significant, evidence of a relationship between the quality of locally delivered government services and election results.

This paper also explores the characteristics of retrospective voting at the aggregate-level. For each of the three policy domains explored here, we find consistent evidence that voters hold the governing party, not their local MPs, accountable for policy outcomes. In addition, we find that election results do not simply reflect performance over the very short term. In other words, electorates do not appear as myopic as some existing research suggests. Taken together, these results shed light on both the particular elections considered and broader debates about performance voting and political accountability.

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Tables

Table 1: Economic and noneconomic retrospective voting in UK national elections.

	Labour candidate vote share		Local MP party vote share	
	2005	2010	2005	2010
Lagged vote	.84 (.01)	.92 (.02)	.83 (.03)	.82 (.03)
CPA	.22 (.17)	.20 (.21)	.23 (.32)	-.87 (.31)
Crime	-2.43 (2.88)	-16.91 (2.92)	-8.10 (9.82)	13.49 (6.17)
Unemployment	-1.00 (.29)	-.80 (.32)	2.50 (.58)	.76 (.58)
Labour Incumbent	-	-	-8.24 (.45)	-8.16 (1.24)
CPA * Labour Incumbent	-	-	.05 (.40)	1.30 (.44)
Crime*Labour Incumbent	-	-	4.62 (10.25)	-30.81 (7.14)
Unemp.* Labour Incumbent	-	-	-3.24 (.65)	-2.28 (.66)
N	519	520	518	519
R-squared	.96	.93	.76	.73
Std. Err of Reg	2.96	4.16	3.29	4.41

Notes: Dependent variable for columns 1 and 2 is Labour party vote share. For columns 3 and 4, dependent variable is the vote share of the incumbent MPs party. Analysis restricted to English constituencies

Table 2: Time horizons of retrospective voting.

	Crime rate	Unemployment	
	2010	2005	2010
Lagged Labour vote	.92 (.02)	.84 (.01)	.91 (.02)
Perf. election year	21.81 (14.97)	.10 (.71)	.53 (.73)
Perf. election year – 1	-38.89 (16.72)	-1.42 (.72)	-3.04 (.60)
Perf. election year – 2	-24.66 (9.68)	-2.56 (.71)	-4.72 (1.07)
Perf. election year – 3	-30.76 (13.35)	-.10 (.59)	1.09 (1.13)
Perf. election year – 4	-3.43 (9.67)	-	1.48 (1.03)
N	520	519	520
R-squared	.93	.96	.93
Std. Err of Reg	4.14	2.95	4.03

Notes: Dependent variable is Labour party vote share. Analysis restricted to English constituencies

Table 3: Asymmetries in responsiveness to local government performance.

	Labour vote share	
	2005	2010
Lagged vote	.84 (.01)	.92 (.02)
CPA- Decline	-.50 (.53)	-.01 (.32)
CPA- Improvement	.37 (.20)	.43 (.34)
Crime	-2.33 (2.88)	-16.96 (2.92)
Unemployment	-1.00 (.29)	-.80 (.32)
N	519	520
R-squared	.96	.93
Std. Err of Reg	2.96	4.16

Notes: Dependent variable is Labour party vote share. Analysis restricted to English constituencies

Table 4: Responsiveness to violent and property crime performance.

	Labour vote share
	2010
Lagged vote	.92 (.02)
CPA	.15 (.21)
Violent crime	-62.06 (21.92)
Property crime	-16.52 (7.41)
Unemployment	-.72 (.32)
N	520
R-squared	.93
Std. Err of Reg	4.12

Notes: Dependent variable is Labour party vote share. Analysis restricted to English constituencies.