

Provincial Government, Intergovernmental Policy:  
Provincial Electoral Choice in a Federal Context

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## **Provincial Government, Intergovernmental Policy: Provincial Electoral Choice in a Federal Context**

A crucial link in the chain of democratic electoral accountability for policy outputs is assignment of government responsibility. Voters may judge conditions satisfactory or not, but if they do not connect these conditions to a government responsible for bringing them about, they cannot effectively induce government to serve the public interest (Ranney 1954). In unitary, unicameral parliamentary systems with majority governments, voters would have an easy time of it: they can blame or credit the government for whatever fraction of the conditions are the result of government action. Most of the world's voters, however, face some form of divided power, whether it is between executive and legislature, between different parties in different branches of government or different legislatures, among the parties in a coalition government, or across levels in the context of multi-level governance. In any of those situations, judgments of responsibility become an important political attitude in and of themselves. Models of vote choice or government approval that include citizens' assessments of prevailing conditions can be improved by allowing these assessments to be mediated by attributions of responsibility.

Theoretical attention to this problem has not been lacking, but it has been conducted at a very general level. Empirical work demonstrates the importance of responsibility as a mediating variable. Research has generally proceeded separately in each of the different situations of divided power. So there is a voluminous literature on voting behaviour and accountability under divided government in the United States and to a lesser extent in France (e.g. Fiorina 1981; Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Leyden and Borelli 1995; Lowry, Alt, and Feree 1998; Lewis-Beck and Nadeau; Bennett and Bennett 1993). There is another comparative literature showing that economic voting is mediated by variation in the "clarity of responsibility" across countries (Anderson 1995a; Lewis-Beck 1988; Powell and Whitten 1993; Anderson 2000; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck, 2001). Yet another body of work discusses accountability in coalition governments (Anderson 1995b). And another set of studies deals with responsibility—mainly for the economy—in federal and multi-level systems (Niemi, Stanley, and Vogel 1995; Partin 1995; Peltzman 1987; Kenney 1983; Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990; Atkeson and Partin 1995). All find, to a greater or lesser extent, that voters' electoral response to prevailing conditions is stronger as the institutional context promotes clarity of responsibility and as their own individual judgments about responsibility are clearer.

The present paper investigates the effects of voters' judgments of responsibility in provincial elections in Canada. It is based in two provincial election surveys that included a battery of questions asking about federal and provincial governments' responsibility in a few salient policy areas. Building on a model developed in an earlier set of papers, I estimate

models of vote choice that allow these judgments to mediate voters' retrospective evaluations of the prevailing situation in those policy areas.

### Responsibility and Voter Choice

A large part of the voting calculus everywhere involves simple judgment of the current state of things, from the citizen's own fortunes to those of the nation (Downs 1957; Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988; Miller and Shanks ). Key's *Responsible Voter* is responsible for just this reason. And Kelly and Mirer's (1974) "simple act of voting" involves posing a question to the government: "what have you done for me lately". But it has long been recognized that these judgments are influential in the ultimate decision if, and only if, the government in question is judged to have had a role in bringing about these conditions, through action or inaction (Lau and Sears 1981; Feldman 1982; Anderson 1995a; Tyler 1982; Simon 1989; Peffley and Williams 1985; Peffley 1984; McGraw 1991).

The most recent and comprehensive work in this area demonstrates not just that responsibility judgments mediate the impact of policy performance judgments on voting behaviour at both levels of government in the US (Rudolph 2003a, 2003b). More importantly, Rudolph takes a step backward to ask what determines these responsibility judgments (see also Feldman 1982). Using survey data he shows that they are heavily coloured by partisanship, but also sensitive to variations in the institutional context such as divided government and the relative power of the executive and legislative branches in the budgetary process. Separate experimental research confirms this conclusion (Rudolph 2003c). And it falls roughly in line with recent exploratory work on responsibility in Canada's federal system (Cutler and Mendelsohn, forthcoming). Responsibility judgments are not random, non-attitudes, but reflect, to some extent, a reasoned response to available information.

Nearly all of the empirical work on this topic, however, concerns economic voting.<sup>1</sup> This has meant a rather straightforward conceptualization of responsibility and its role as a mediator of judgments of performance. Citizens and governments are assumed to want maximum economic growth, employment, and stability. And for both, the economy is in general the most important policy domain. Most other policy domains present a more complicated situation, for three reasons. First, policy positions intersect with performance in more complicated ways; few policy areas present benchmarks as clear as the economy. So it is less easy to disentangle voters' assessments of real-world conditions from their policy preferences—think of health care, for example. Second, information relevant to voters' assessments is less exact, detailed, and objective. Third, the salience of other policy areas shows more variation, both across individuals and over time. So, for example, many voters

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolph's work, however, (2003a 2003b) involves fiscal policy: more specifically the budgetary process in the US.

will see the government as responsible for the safety of drinking water, but attention to this issue will be highly punctuated and linked to poor performance.

A notable exception is the role of evaluations of Liberal party performance on health care in the 2000 federal election by Blais and his colleagues (2002) and a separate analysis by this author (Cutler 2002). Blais et al maintain that “the fact that many voters believed that the provincial governments were as much (or more) to blame helped limit the damage to the Liberals... The party’s vote share fell to only 22 per cent when dissatisfied non-partisans thought that the federal government was most responsible for the problems in the health system, compared with 43 per cent among those who did not lay all of the blame at the feet of the federal government.” The present paper aims to generalize this approach across policy areas.

Thus far, understanding of the role of responsibility judgments has been limited by crude measurement of responsibility, in the Canadian Election Study and elsewhere. The few surveys that have asked explicit responsibility questions—including this author’s previous studies—ask which *one* institution is responsible or more responsible than the others. But responsibility judgments are likely not black-and-white, especially when policy is the result of intergovernmental conflict and cooperation. More fundamentally, existing questions have assumed that respondents recognize that responsibility is logically zero-sum. As this paper will show, voters may attribute maximum responsibility to all relevant institutions if they believe that all were necessary for the conditions that came about. In this study the measures of federal and provincial government responsibility are separate scales that are not constrained to sum to the maximum value.

The context for this study is responsibility judgments within a federal system. Voters observe the results of government action and must estimate how much responsibility belongs to each government. If the connection between responsibility and judgment at the polls is violated, arguments for the democratic benefits of federalism lose much of their force. Federalism without jurisdictions separable in voters’ minds may be economically or administratively efficient, but that efficiency amounts to nothing if voters cannot force each level of government to hew to their preferences.

Scholars of federalism have assumed that this is not an easy task, as they have repeatedly argued that as policy-making becomes increasingly intergovernmental, accountability may suffer. Smiley pointed out most forcefully that executive federalism makes it hard for legislatures to hold executives accountable for intergovernmental policy (1987). And if it is hard for legislatures, it must be many times harder for voters (Richards 1998, Cutler 2001; MacKinnon and Nechyba 1997).

The prevailing model of responsibility in the social psychology literature can be applied to identify the sources of confusion for voters. This “triangle model” (Schlenker et al. 1994) emphasizes the linkages among “prescriptions”, “events”, and the “identity” of the actors whose responsibility is being judged. In the current context, prescriptions are

expectations of government; events are policy outcomes; and identity is the role of a given government with respect to the policy domain.

“People are held responsible to the extent that a clear, well-defined set of prescriptions is applicable to the event (prescription-event link), the actor is perceived to be bound by the prescriptions by virtue of his or her identity (prescription-identity link); and the actor seems to have (or to have had) personal control over the event, such as by intentionally producing the consequences (identity-event link)” (Schlenker et al. 1994, 649).

Obviously, voters perceptions of these three components will vary according to their own characteristics and features of the institutional and informational environment. And if responsibility really is a mediator of political judgments, then politicians can be expected to attempt to manipulate the linkages to their advantage (Weaver 1986). But in general we should expect that these linkages will be clear to only a tiny minority of voters, some of the time. And this situation potentially undermines basic electoral accountability.

To illustrate, consider health care in Canada. The event in question is the state of the health care system; relevant information ranges from personal experiences to reports on waiting lists and health outcomes. The prescription, at a general level, is the best and fairest health outcomes possible. But this is inevitably clouded by policy disagreements such as the total level of funding devoted to health and whether innovation might require short-term pain for long-term gain. Political responsibility, particularly in a federal system, is dominated by the identity corner of the triangle. The identity-event linkage is summarized in the question: How much did the government in question contribute to the event? But prior to this a voter must evaluate the identity-prescription linkage: What is the appropriate role for this government in health care? Contention over both of these questions dominates federal-provincial relations on this issue. Voters must make responsibility judgments in the context of *de jure* provincial jurisdiction and practical operation of the health system but consider also the federal government’s ongoing role in raising taxes, transferring funds to the provinces, and promulgating and enforcing national standards. Taken together, these linkages present voters with a real challenge in forming judgments of responsibility.

What, then, will famously under-informed (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1995), sporadically attentive (Popkin 1991) voters do? Or, to provide a framework for analysis: When and how will their judgments of responsibility deviate from those of a fully rational, fully informed expert in federalism and public policy?

One distortion would be what I have called elsewhere an “issue bias”. Voters would gravitate to issues on which responsibility is clearer. Issues where intergovernmental policy-making clouds responsibility would be downweighted in the vote decision. Some of the slack might also be taken up by non-issue factors: partisanship, leader evaluations, and prospective issue orientations. Ultimately, governments would be less accountable, and have more

latitude to pursue their own policy goals on issues where voters have trouble assigning responsibility.

A second distortion, and perhaps a response to the perversity of the first, is for voters to treat both governments as necessary contributors and weight an issue equally in evaluations of both governments. Logically, these weights should be exactly one-half for each of two governments. But voters may not hew to that logic, and instead attribute the full governmental responsibility to both governments, weighting the issue in votes at both levels by as much responsibility as government in general bears. This seems plausible in the Canadian experience at least, but findings from the realm of health care specifically (Cutler 2002 Blais et al. 2001), caution against assuming this approach is widespread.

A third distortion would be that as the clarity of responsibility declines, voters are less and less able to differentiate the electoral alternatives, reducing their incentive to turnout to vote.

The next section provides a simple model of federal voting behaviour that, when estimated with survey data on vote choice, accommodates the first two possibilities. A simple estimation model of turnout would be required to assess the third.

### **A Model of Federal Voting Behaviour**

In a set of earlier papers, I have proposed a model of federal voting. It is summarized here. The analysis of the federal voter's problem begins with a simple model depicting the evaluation of multiple governments in a federation. The model focusses on voters judging the acceptability of the government, ignoring the more complicated task of comparing the government with alternatives. Essentially, the choice of government approval is conceived as prior to a consideration of the alternatives and the criteria are predominantly retrospective. I adapt the standard portrayal of voter  $i$ 's utility  $U_{ig}$  from government  $g$  being determined in part by the distance between that voter's policy position  $X_{ik}$  on issue  $k$  and the position the voter attributes to the government,  $P_{igk}$  on that issue; summing over all issues. The other element in the calculus is a residual category  $L_{ig}$  (e.g. Leaders) that includes all determinants of the voter's evaluation of the government other than the policy and performance areas explicitly included in the first term.

In the context of retrospective performance-evaluation, the voter's position  $X_{ik}$  is their expectation for what a government should have been able to do—for more sophisticated voters, what an alternative governing party would have done—while the government position  $P_{igk}$  is the voter's assessment of that government's actual performance in that policy area. Put another way, the voter asks, for each policy area: 'Did the government live up to (my personal) expectations?' I call this analog of policy distance, 'performance distance'. Obviously, the traditional interpretation and this accountability interpretation of the standard policy-voting model can coexist in an empirical implementation.

I add both responsibility and issue salience (Fournier et al. 2003) to the standard model, so that voter-specific responsibility weights,  $R_{igk}$ , and voter-specific salience weights,  $S_{igk}$ , apply to each policy area. The model is:

$$U_{ig} = \sum_k \left[ - \left( R_{igk} S_{igk} \right) \left( P_{igk} - X_{ik} \right) \right] + L_{ig}$$

The scales of  $R_{igk}$  and  $S_{igk}$  are arbitrary, but it is convenient to think of them on the unit interval representing the proportion of total responsibility borne by government  $g$  and the salience of issue  $k$ . High values of  $R_{igk}$  and  $S_{igk}$  mean that a policy area is heavily weighted in the voter's calculus, while low values means that the policy area is less important. Most important, however, is the multiplicative functional form for the two weights, meaning that both are necessary for performance distances to affect voting behaviour. No matter how much responsibility is attributed to a government, it will not affect a voter unless the voter cares about the issue. Conversely, even the voter's pet issue will not affect the evaluation of the government unless the government is attributed responsibility for that policy area.

### Data and Methods

Ultimately, the model should be estimated jointly at both levels, using a federal-provincial panel election survey. I have such a project underway, but the data employed in this study is from provincial waves only. The model is estimated using survey data collected during the provincial election campaigns in Ontario and Saskatchewan in the fall of 2003.<sup>2</sup> Ontario voters were interviewed in the fourth week of the campaign. Saskatchewan voters were interviewed on the last 5 nights of the campaign.

In Ontario, specific responsibility questions were asked in five areas: health care, changes to health care, the economy, electricity, and taxes. In Saskatchewan, we asked about the economy, health care, and the farm crisis. The wording in both provinces was:

Now we would like to ask you some questions about how much responsibility the federal government and the Ontario [Sask] government have for some of the things going on in Ontario [Sask] at the moment. On all of these questions we will use a scale from zero to ten where zero means that the government is not at all responsible and ten means that the government is fully responsible. In the middle, five means that the government is partly responsible for what is going on. If you're not sure, please say so.

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<sup>2</sup> The surveys obtained 800 respondents in Ontario and 811 in Saskatchewan. T

A separate battery of questions tapped issue importance. But in this paper I dispense with salience to make the data speak more clearly on the question of responsibility; I will take up salience in future work with this data.

In order to maximize estimation efficiency, missing data was multiply imputed (Rubin 1987; King et al. 2001) using *Amelia* software (Honaker et al 2001). The rate of missingness on the responsibility questions was less than 5%, so the risks involved in using multiple imputation are not substantial. The probit estimates in the appendix combine the multiply imputed data, taking account of the imputation error.

A model of voting for an opposition party is estimated using probit. Effects presented graphically below were generated with *Clarify* software (Tomz et al 2003; King et al. 2001), which draws samples from the asymptotic sampling distribution of the parameters. Effects calculated using these samples reflect both estimation and fundamental uncertainty.

### The Contours of Provincial Responsibility Judgments

How much responsibility do citizens attribute to their provincial governments? In previous work, we have found sensible variation across issues, both in the government most often chosen as ‘mostly responsible’, as well as in the frequency of a ‘both governments responsible’ response (Cutler and Mendelsohn 2001; Cutler 2002; Matthews and Cutler 2003). But the current study is based on a zero-to-ten responsibility scale that allows for more subtle gradations of responsibility. At the same time, it may present respondents with more subtlety than they can handle, given that citizens cannot be expected to carry around responsibility ratings in their heads. Responses are very likely made up on-the-fly, so interpersonal variability in interpretation of the scale may overwhelm variation over issues.

Previous inquiries (Cutler and Mendelsohn, forthcoming) have apparently demonstrated that Canadians admit that “it is often difficult to figure out which government is responsible for what”. Across a number of surveys, three-quarters agree. In the Saskatchewan survey, however, I conducted a split-half wording experiment that reveals an even more muddled situation. 80 per cent agree that it is “difficult” (70% in Ontario). But in the other half, two-thirds agree that “it is pretty easy to figure out which level of government is responsible for what”. This striking contradiction provides further evidence that responsibility, jurisdiction, and intergovernmental relations are not top-of-mind for most voters. There is something of a “whatever you say” quality to their responses.

Figures 1a and 1b present smoothed histograms<sup>3</sup> of the distribution of responsibility attributions in Ontario (1a) and Saskatchewan (1b), summarizing the information in Tables 1a and 1b. Variation across issues is strikingly minimal. The means are between 6 and 7.5, indicating that voters saw the provincial government, on average, as more than partly

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<sup>3</sup> These are kernel density estimates.

responsible. But all of the Ontario means are above all of the Saskatchewan means, which likely reflects that larger, richer province's greater control over its own affairs.<sup>4</sup> On all issues, the vast majority of voters attribute to the provincial government at least half of the possible responsibility, and a large proportion—20% in Ontario, 10% in Saskatchewan, say that the government is “fully responsible”. One issue reassuringly stands out: electricity in Ontario, where a distinctive provincial policy was widely connected with a dramatic event (the blackout), and was a focus of opposition attacks on the government's record.

Of course, there is another government involved in these policy areas. Just as relevant is the *relative* allocation of responsibility to the two governments, documented in Figures 2a and 2b. Here, the evidence shreds any remnants of a federalism of “watertight compartments”. On all eight issues, more than 75% of voters have a total federal-plus-provincial responsibility score more than ten. That is, both governments are *more* than partly responsible.

The measurement of relative responsibility involves simply dividing the provincial responsibility by the total. The result, in Figures 2a and 2b, is strikingly normal, and tightly clustered around 50%. All issues except electricity in Ontario have mean provincial responsibility shares between 53% and 57%. On only two of these eight issues do more than a scant 10% of voters attribute less than 40% of their total responsibility to the provincial government—the farm crisis and health care in Saskatchewan. And only on taxes and electricity in Ontario do we find more than 10% giving the province more than three-quarters of the total responsibility. The great bulk of voters see both governments as at least partly responsible. We should not assume, then, that voters who call the provincial government ‘fully responsible’ are absolving the federal government. The relationship between provincial responsibility and provincial share of responsibility is positive, but a one-unit increase in responsibility is associated with a 2.5-4% increase in provincial share of responsibility. Voters who say a government is ‘fully responsible’ are predicted to give that government only 15% more of the total responsibility than voters who said the government is ‘partly responsible’ (5).

This initial evidence suggests two possible mechanisms. The first, and more flattering, is that voters recognize that in a truly intergovernmental policy world, both governments are *necessary* conditions for the results of government policy. The second, more pessimistic, is that voters cannot tell which government is responsible, so they guess that both are, and accordingly give them similar values on all but the most obvious issues. The evidence on federal responsibility for the fact that “In the last couple of years there have been some problems with the supply of electricity” points to the latter mechanism. Experts would

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<sup>4</sup> An alternative explanation that cannot be tested is that the responsibility items appeared much later in the Ontario survey. As respondents were asked more and more political questions, bringing to mind more of the actual and potential effects of government action, they might have unconsciously judged the government as more and more potent and thus responsible for outcomes.

likely give the federal government only very minimal responsibility. But just 43% of Ontario voters give the federal government less than a score of 5, while nearly one in six voters said the federal government was ‘fully responsible’, giving a score of 10! And of these roughly 100 respondents, more than two-thirds attributed full responsibility to the province as well.

Responsibility judgments are not meaningless non-attitudes. But nor are they highly rational, well-informed, or centrally processed by most voters? If they were, we would expect a much flatter distribution of the share of responsibility attributed to each government. Some voters, at least, would be differentiating the two governments’ roles more clearly. Instead, most Canadian voters are grudgingly accepting the “muddle” of federalism by employing a default assumption that both governments have contributed to current conditions and both deserve credit or blame accordingly.

### Responsibility and Policy Performance Voting

The real test of the quality of responsibility judgments and measurement of these attitudes is to assess their strength in mediating the influence of voters’ judgments of current conditions on their vote choices. In theory, voters who attribute no responsibility to the government should show no effect from these judgments; voters who say the government is ‘partly responsible’ should translate these judgments into government support about half as strongly as those who say it is ‘fully responsible. Thus simplified, the estimation model required is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Prob}(\text{Vote for Opposition}) = & \Phi (\theta \text{PID}_p \\ & + \beta_{k1} \text{CONDITIONS}_k \\ & + \beta_{k2} (\text{RESPONSIBILITY}_{kg}) \\ & + \beta_{k3} (\text{RESPONSIBILITY}_{kg} * \text{CONDITIONS}_k) \\ & + \beta_4 (\text{ISSUE FACTOR}) \\ & + \varepsilon_i) \end{aligned}$$

Where,

$\Phi$  is the standard normal cumulative distribution function, implying probit estimation;

$\theta$  is a vector of coefficients on  $p$  dummy variables measuring party identification;

$\beta_{k1}$  is a vector of  $k$  coefficients (one for each of  $k$  issues) relating judgments of conditions (or issue position) to vote choice;

$\beta_{k2}$  is a vector of  $k$  coefficients relating the main effect of responsibility attributions to vote choice; and

$\beta_{k3}$  is a vector of  $k$  coefficients relating the joint conditional effect of judgments and attributions of responsibility to vote choice;

$\beta_4$  is a coefficient relating a general issue dimension to the vote; and

$\varepsilon_i$  represents all other factors influencing vote choice for voter  $i$ .

The dependent variable indicates that the voter expressed an intention to vote for one of the two major opposition parties. This is the clearest exertion of electoral accountability.

The model controls for party identification, but strong party identification only. Party identification certainly colours responsibility attributions, so it is a required control (Rudolph 2003a, 2003b). But only strong partisans are likely to have their attachment to the party determine their responsibility judgments. Controlling for all levels of identification probably over-controls, masking other effects. For Saskatchewan, it is not possible get estimates when controlling for identification with the Saskatchewan Party: none of its strong identifiers voted for another party. Because it is a new party, partisanship is too close to the vote. Instead, I control for federal identification with the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties.

The other control is a one-factor maximum-likelihood factor score from a confirmatory factor analysis. In each province, multiple issues appear to occupy the same general policy dimension, perhaps rooted in more basic values and ideology. In Ontario the issues were increasing welfare rates; not allowing teachers to strike; a tax-programs trade-off; contracting out non-medical hospital services; and mortgage deductibility. In Saskatchewan the issues were: private delivery of non-medical hospital services; workfare; keeping the crown corporations; and city people not understanding rural problems. The factor score is preferable to individual variables to maximize estimation efficiency.

In these two elections, socio-demographic variables were minimally influential, so they are excluded to preserve efficiency in such a highly interactive model (see Achen 1989).

Probit estimates appear in the appendix because they provide little information to the reader in a model that is non-linear and non-additive in the first place and contains multiple interaction terms. Nor are reported tests of statistical significance for the interaction terms very useful, since the test is conditional on the values of all the independent variables. A much simpler way to present the results is to use *Clarify* software to generate simulations of predicted probabilities of voting for an opposition party. I plot these probabilities and their confidence intervals. Here, I compare the estimated probability of voting for an opposition party when state-of-the-world judgments are positive (or neutral) and negative.

The hypotheses are:

1. *Voters who pass negative judgments on current conditions should be more likely to vote for an opposition party.*
2. *This effect should increase as more responsibility is attributed to the provincial government.*

Neither province is kind to the theory or hypotheses. Figures 3a through 3d present Ontario results; 4a through 4c are Saskatchewan graphs. When looking at these graphs, though, it is important to remember how few respondents—less than 10% in Ontario—gave the government less than partial responsibility (5) for all of these issues (see Tables 1a and 1b).

Beginning with health care, figure 3a is puzzling. It reveals a pattern that runs against the grain of the theory. First, the upper line in Figure 4a indicates that for those who say there is a crisis in the health care system (-.5 on a scale of -1 to 1) the probability of casting an opposition vote is virtually constant, whether the voter sees the government as blameless or fully responsible. In the middle of the responsibility scale, twenty per cent separates those who say there is a crisis from those who say there is not. But as responsibility increases, the no-crisis voters come to resemble the crisis voters. So for voters who say the province is fully responsible—asked immediately after the crisis question—the judgment about the state of health care does not affect the vote. The obvious interpretation is that in this policy area the responsibility judgment is something of a policy attitude in and of itself, and perhaps merely a function of underlying attitudes to the government. In effect, there are two ways voters were pushed to the opposition parties. One was by judging health care to be in a terrible state. The other was to judge the long-serving provincial government to be responsible for whatever problems do exist in the system. On health care, we do not find responsibility to be a necessary condition for judgments to affect government support.

Figure 3b shows a more puzzling result along the same lines, on electricity. This was the one issue in the two provinces where provincial responsibility was highest, in both absolute and relative terms. The graph shows a pattern similar to health care. There is no responsibility effect for those who disagree with the current policy. But there is a compensatory effect from responsibility among those who agree with the government's approach. Here again are two routes to disapproval of the government: policy or responsibility for a problem. The lines appear to cross, implying a perverse relationship between the policy opinion and the vote at full responsibility. But the estimates are not precise, so it is probably safer to conclude that as in health care, for voters who blame the government the policy opinion does not drive vote choice. When the model is estimated without the policy attitude, it is clear that the government suffers for being judged responsible for the electricity problems faced by Ontarians.

The economy and taxes generate prettier pictures predicted by the theory. In both figures (3c and 3d), responsibility attributions determine not just the strength of the impact on the vote, but also the direction. Voters who saw the economy worse or taxes up tended to the opposition parties only if they fingered the provincial government for these conditions. If they held the government blameless, they inclined to voting *for* the government. Similarly, those who judged the economy better or taxes down inclined to the government if they found it responsible and to the opposition if the government was not responsible. Much of the story here must be in the allocation of responsibility to the federal government and the recognition that different parties held office at the two levels, even if this does not burn through the measurement of responsibility. Those who held the government blameless for a

worsening economy must be those least positive toward the federal Liberal party, something that pushes them away from the party at the provincial level.<sup>5</sup>

The striking contrast in the economy and taxes graphs is the comparison of “partly responsible” and “fully responsible” categories—the middle and right side of the responsibility scale. In these two economic areas the evaluation of the state-of-the-world had little clear effect the vote among those who found the provincial government only partly responsible. In this category, those who saw the economy better or worse, taxes up or down, were no different in their voting behaviour, all else equal. As I found in previous work (Cutler 2002), only those who were more definite about responsibility could take their judgments to the vote. Those who saw both governments responsible must have turned to other criteria in making up their minds.

Turning to the Saskatchewan graphs (3a to 3c), the hypotheses are little better off. Remember that the government was held by the NDP, in office as long as the Ontario Conservatives. So it was surprising that the election seemed very prospectively oriented, with the future of the Crown Corporations as a key issue.

In Saskatchewan, perceptions of the economy were not powerful drivers of vote choice. Nor did responsibility mediate what little effect they had. While the gap between positive and negative perceptions of the economy was close to ten per cent it is not statistically significant by any standards. Increasing attributions of responsibility appear to have the same effect as on health and electricity in Ontario, but again the estimates are very imprecise.

Responsibility has no mediating effect on the farm crisis in Saskatchewan, as figure 4b shows. The worse a voter judged the situation, the less they supported the government, whatever responsibility they attributed to the government. Responsibility is likely irrelevant here because the huge rural-urban cleavage in Saskatchewan politics is at its root representational and distributional. Where this is true, judgments of current conditions are very likely driven by raw interests, so they do not require responsibility to connect them to vote choice.

Only on health care does the graph (4c) present a picture predicted by the theory. Here, increasing attributions of responsibility push voters apart. The gap between voters who saw a crisis and those who did not nearly doubles from 17% to over 30% as voters move from attributing partial responsibility to full responsibility. Part of this is produced by voters who see no crisis getting more positive toward the government as they give it more responsibility, or perhaps credit. The distinctive pattern on this issue is probably produced by relatively clearer responsibility and clearer policy outputs (hospital consolodation). The NDP was closely associated with health care reform, particularly through the person of its

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<sup>5</sup> I did experiment with a model that used share of responsibility as the interactive variable. No significant interactions were found, indicating that absolute responsibility is more useful as voters face a decision about one government alone.

former leader Roy Romanow. The province's policy distinctiveness was clear to its residents and some were willing to credit it as well as blame it for the state of health care.

All told, the seven issues provide no ringing endorsement of voters ability to make and use responsibility attributions in a federal system. The pattern of findings across issues suggests that accountability for government performance in a federal system is highly contingent. Accountability in its basic sense may be evident only on very prominent issues and when a government's policy is clearly separable from both its opposition and the policy of the other level of government. These conditions were most apparent on health care in Saskatchewan and economic, role-of-the-state matters in Ontario. When these conditions are met, or among voters who meet these conditions, voters' attributions of responsibility are probably meaningful.

In other cases, policy and responsibility judgments may be quite separable, as on health care and electricity in Ontario. Here, responsibility judgments must be weaker attitudes and more strongly the result of projection from other attitudes. Or, on some policy domains the conditions are not really debatable, as with electricity in Ontario, and the real judgment is how much the government did (or did not do) to bring those conditions about.

In still other issue areas judgments seemingly about policy outputs are really more fundamental disagreements about distribution. Saskatchewan's farm crisis falls into this category—a crisis to a rural resident is not a crisis to an urban one. In this case, even if responsibility were clear, it would not be needed to mediate between the judgment and vote choice. In fact, on some issues like this responsibility is not clearly located in either government or both governments, so to the extent it does mediate, it only makes vote choice less predictable.

### **Conclusion**

These results hint strongly that federal voters face serious challenges in holding their governments accountable for policy outputs. To do so, they would have to make subtle, logically consistent responsibility judgments and apply them when choosing whether or not to support the governing party. Canadian voters are a long way from this ideal. Their responsibility attributions are inexact. What is more, even these vague attributions are applied much more loosely to judgments of conditions than we would expect from federal voters fully informed and confident about responsibility.

What are the consequences? These data do not speak directly to the question of an issue bias—where voters weight policy areas according to the clarity of responsibility. Yet on all but one of the issues examined here (Ontario—Health), voters who attribute partial responsibility to the provincial government take judgments of prevailing conditions to their vote decision far more weakly than those who find the government responsible. What will those in the middle do? Unless their decisions are simply more random, they will likely gravitate to prospective issue criteria, leader evaluations, or fall back on party identification.

These provincial voters do not appear to be hedging their bets and treating both governments as necessary conditions for a given policy result. This strategy would manifest itself in either of two ways. First, voters could call all governments ‘fully responsible’ and the maximum impact from judgments would be found for voters who did so. Or, second, voters could call governments ‘partly responsible’ but exert just as strong an impact as those who pinned full responsibility on either level. Neither is evident in the results presented here.

One caveat is in order, however. To fully evaluate the bet-hedging strategy we require a model that better uncovers non-linearity in the responsibility interaction. In the graphs presented here, there is some non-linearity in the predicted vote choice from 5 to 10 on the responsibility scale, but only as much as is inherent in the probit function. Unfortunately, the data is not rich enough at present to allow the line to bend more dramatically. Further research will explore a non-parametric specification.

Subsequent work will also concern itself with the salience interaction. It may be that ignoring salience actually clouds the responsibility interaction because those who do not care about an issue, and are therefore less clear about responsibility, are included with those who do. Perhaps only the latter will look like the federal voters envisioned in the theory.

Another important mediator may be political awareness, particularly awareness of the intergovernmental context. Of course, if we found that only those at high levels of awareness could effectively negotiate the intergovernmental thicket, it would only reinforce worries about threats to accountability.

Combined with previous work, this study has confirmed that these worries are not misplaced. Voters in a federal system have a harder time connecting policy outputs and prevailing conditions to government action than voters in a unitary one. Further research will attempt to use federal-provincial panel studies to fill in the federal side of the story missing from this study.

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Fig 1a. Ontario - Provincial Responsibility by Policy Area

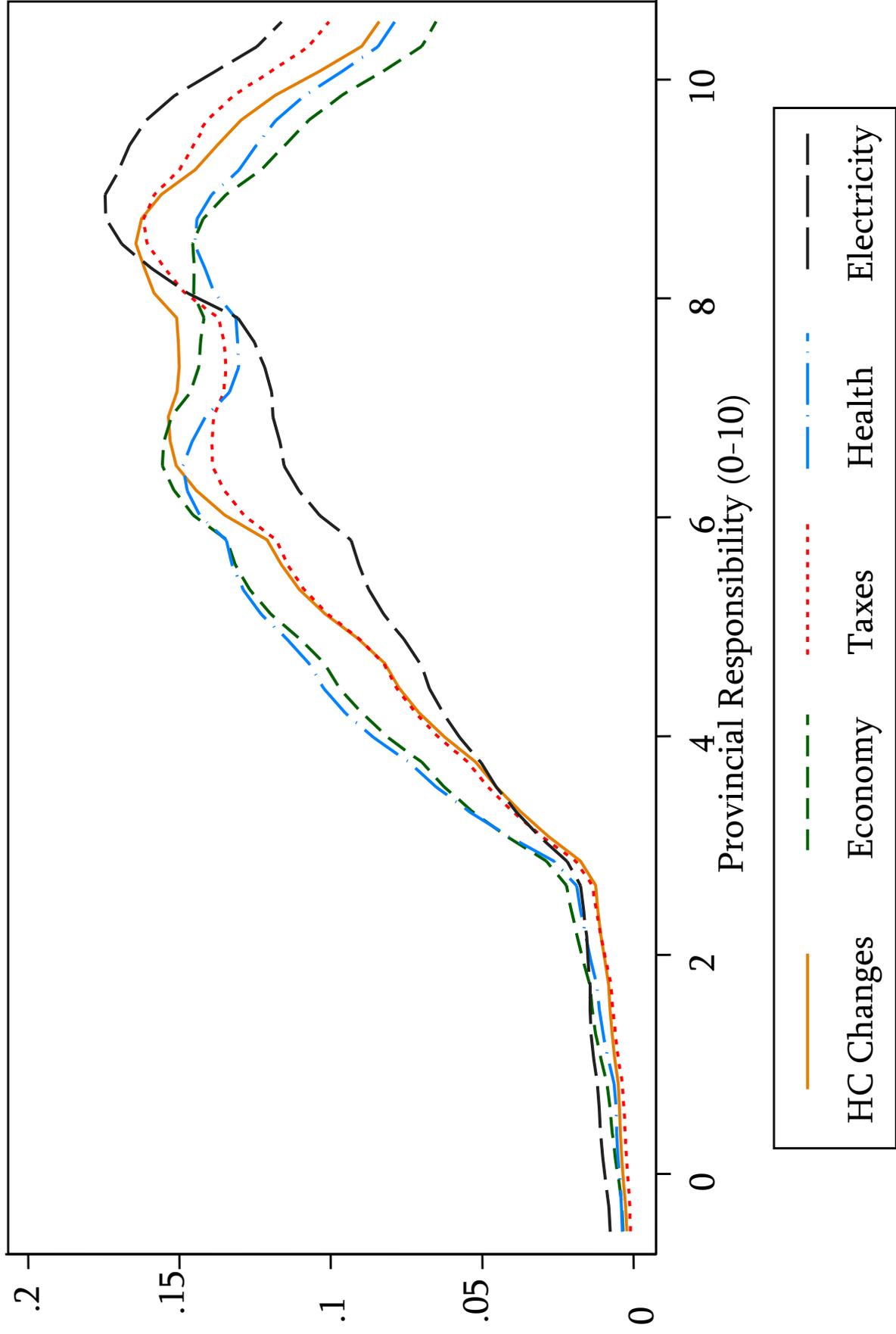


Fig 1b. Sask - Provincial Responsibility by Policy Area

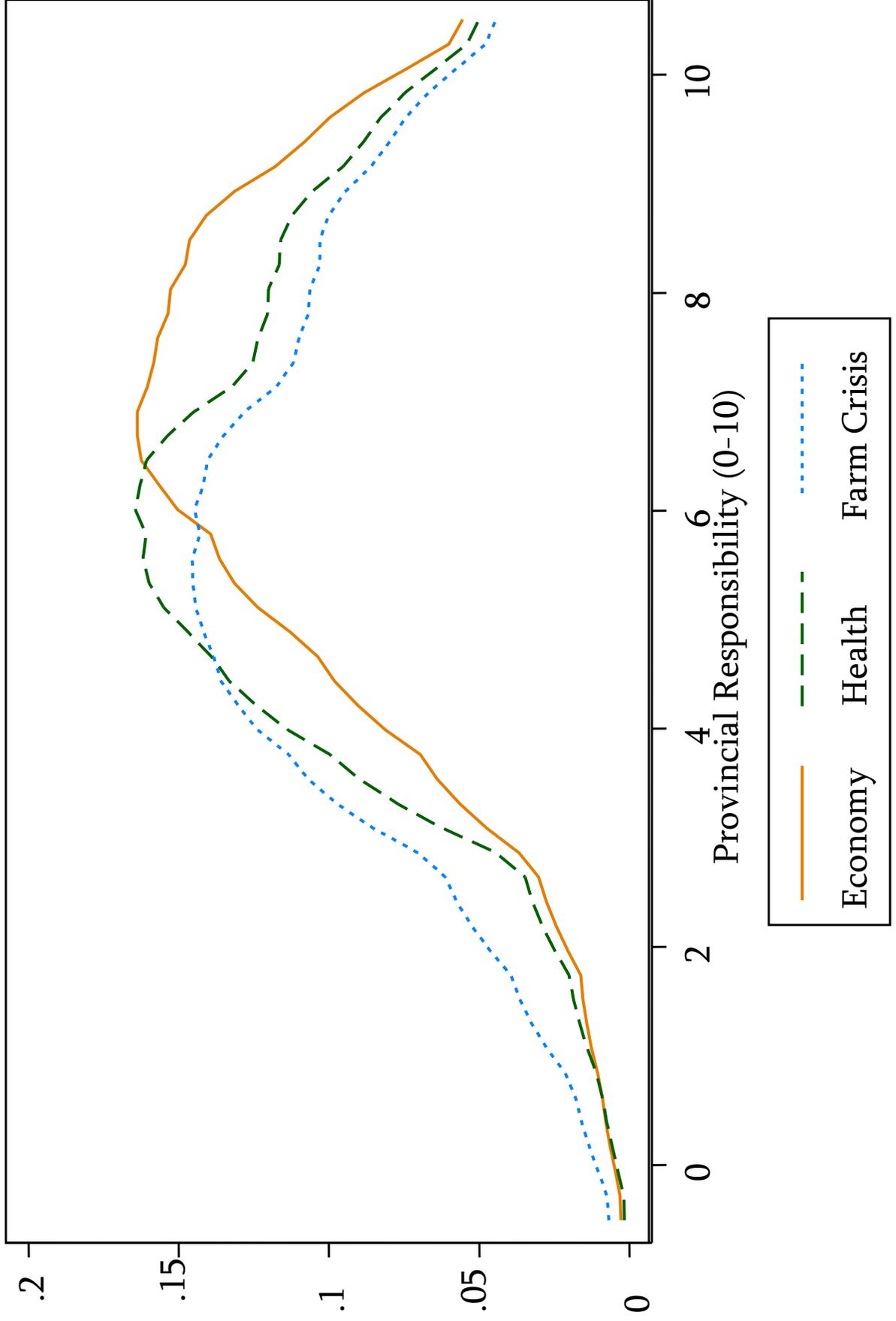


Fig 2a. Ontario - Provincial Share of Responsibility by Policy Area

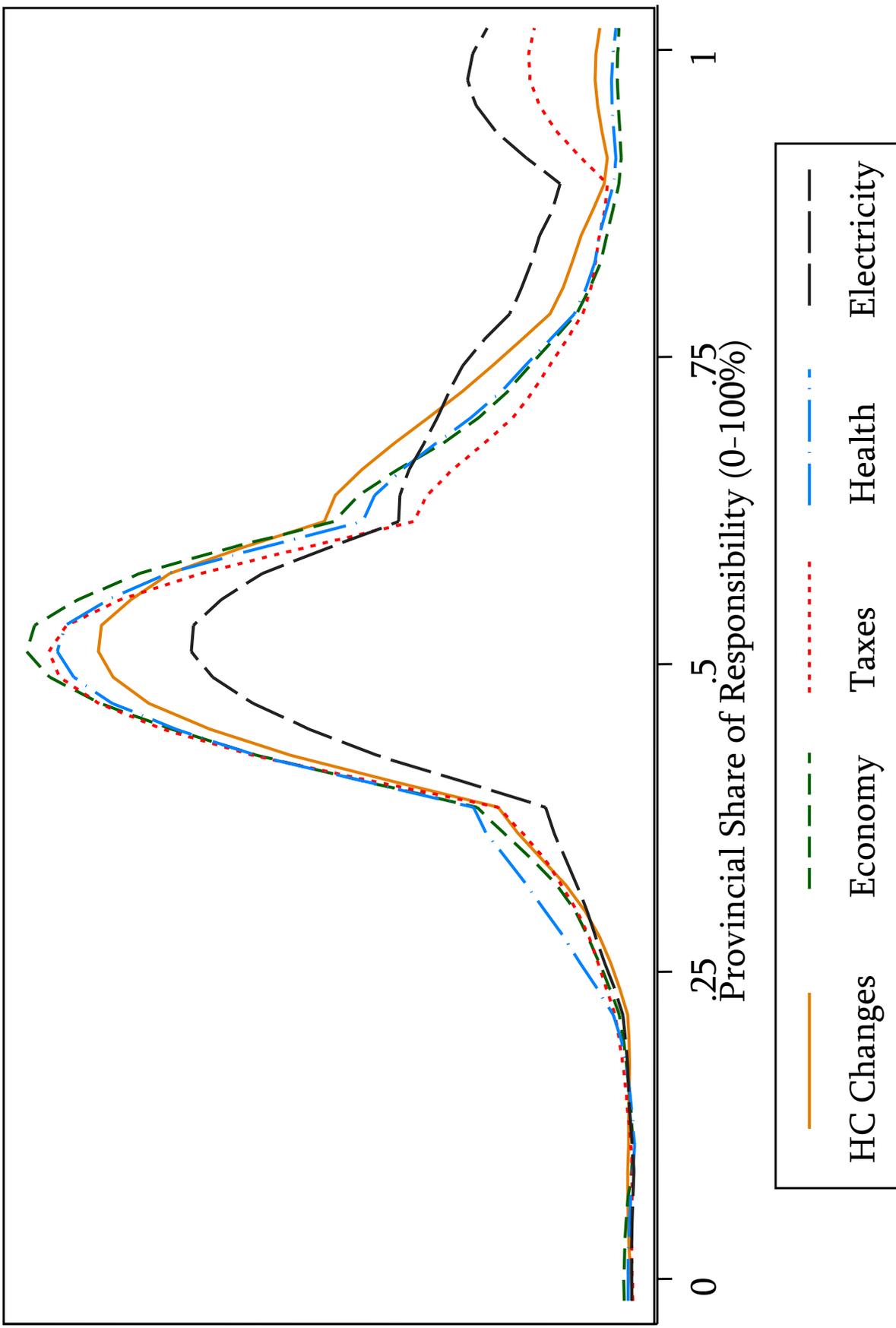


Fig 2b. Sask - Provincial Share of Responsibility by Policy Area

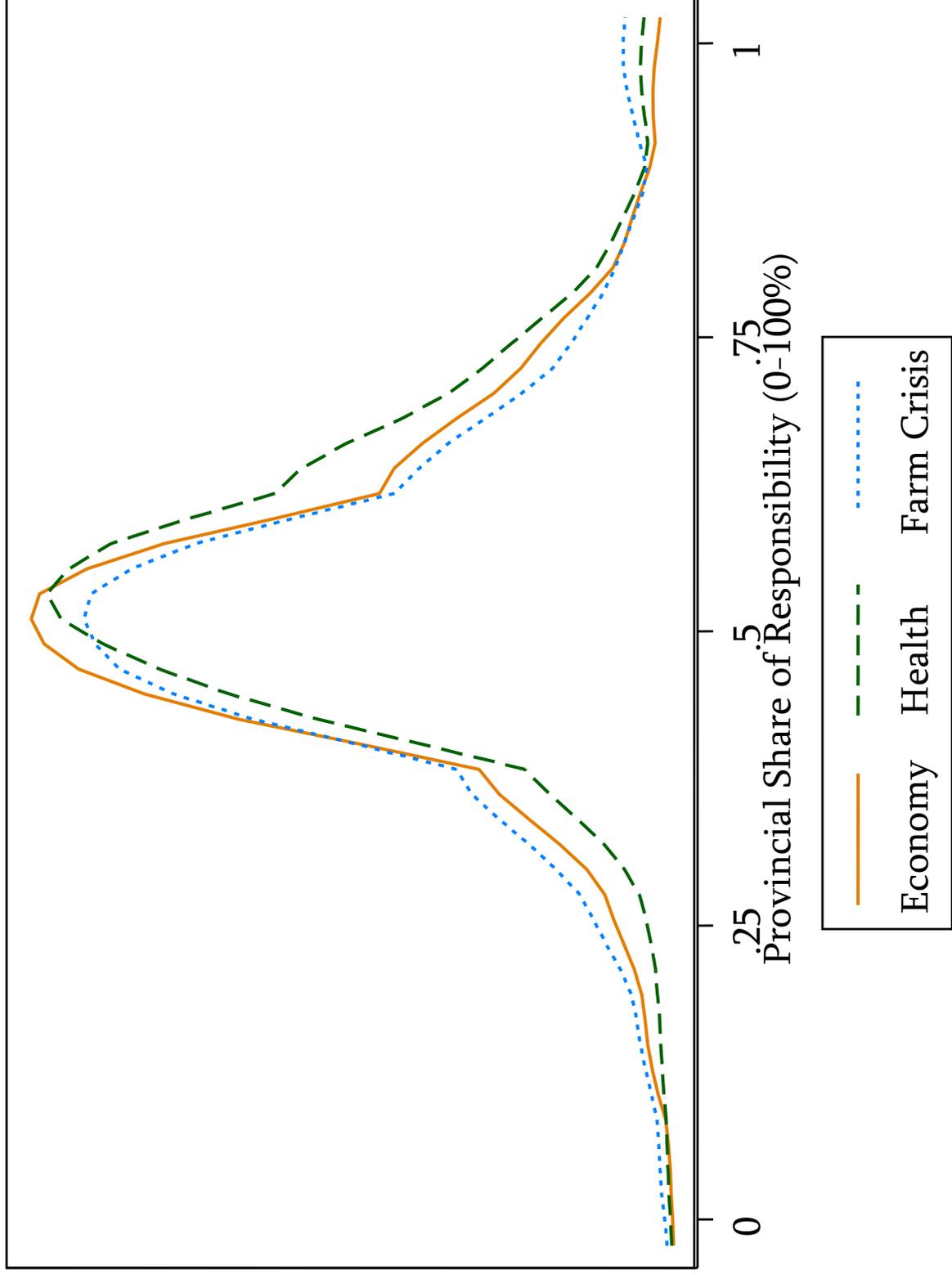


Figure 4a - Ontario Health Care

### Impact of Health Care Crisis Opinion (-1 to 1) by Responsibility Attributed to Provincial Gov't

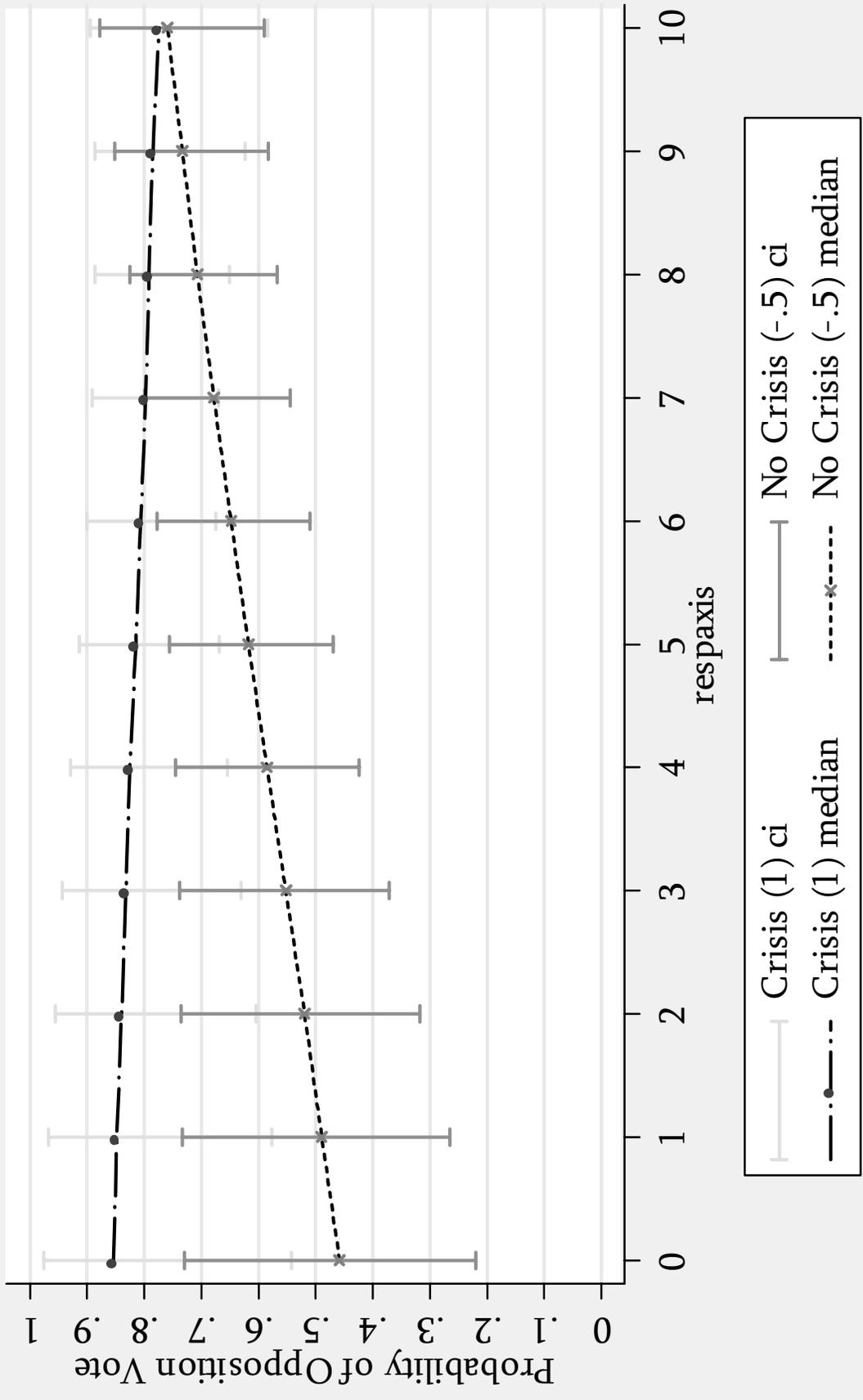


Figure 4b – Ontario Electricity

### Impact of Electricity Policy Opinion(-1 or 1) by Responsibility Attributed to Provincial Gov't

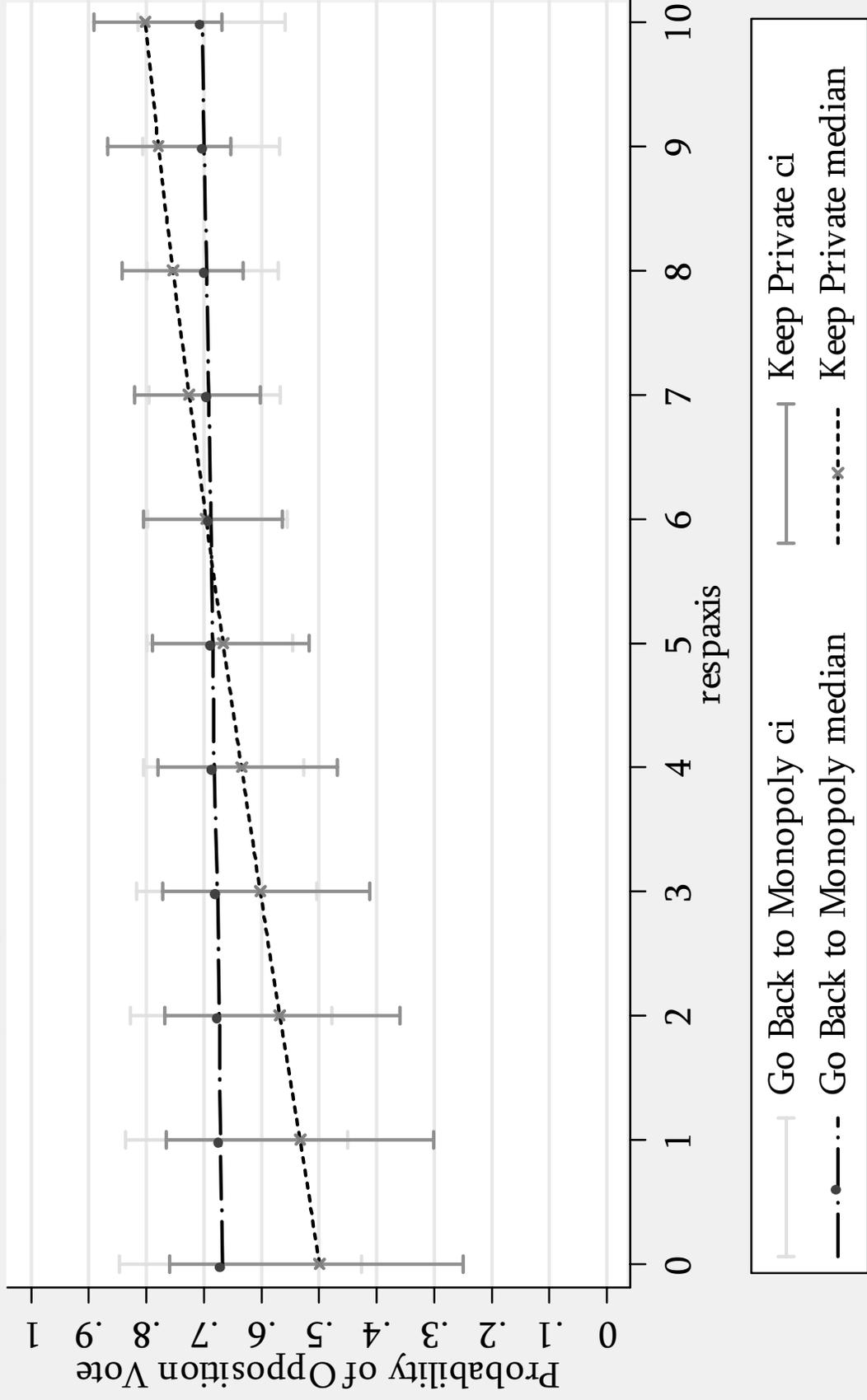


Figure 4c - Ontario Economy

### Impact of Economic Retrospection (-1 to 1) by Responsibility Attributed to Provincial Gov't

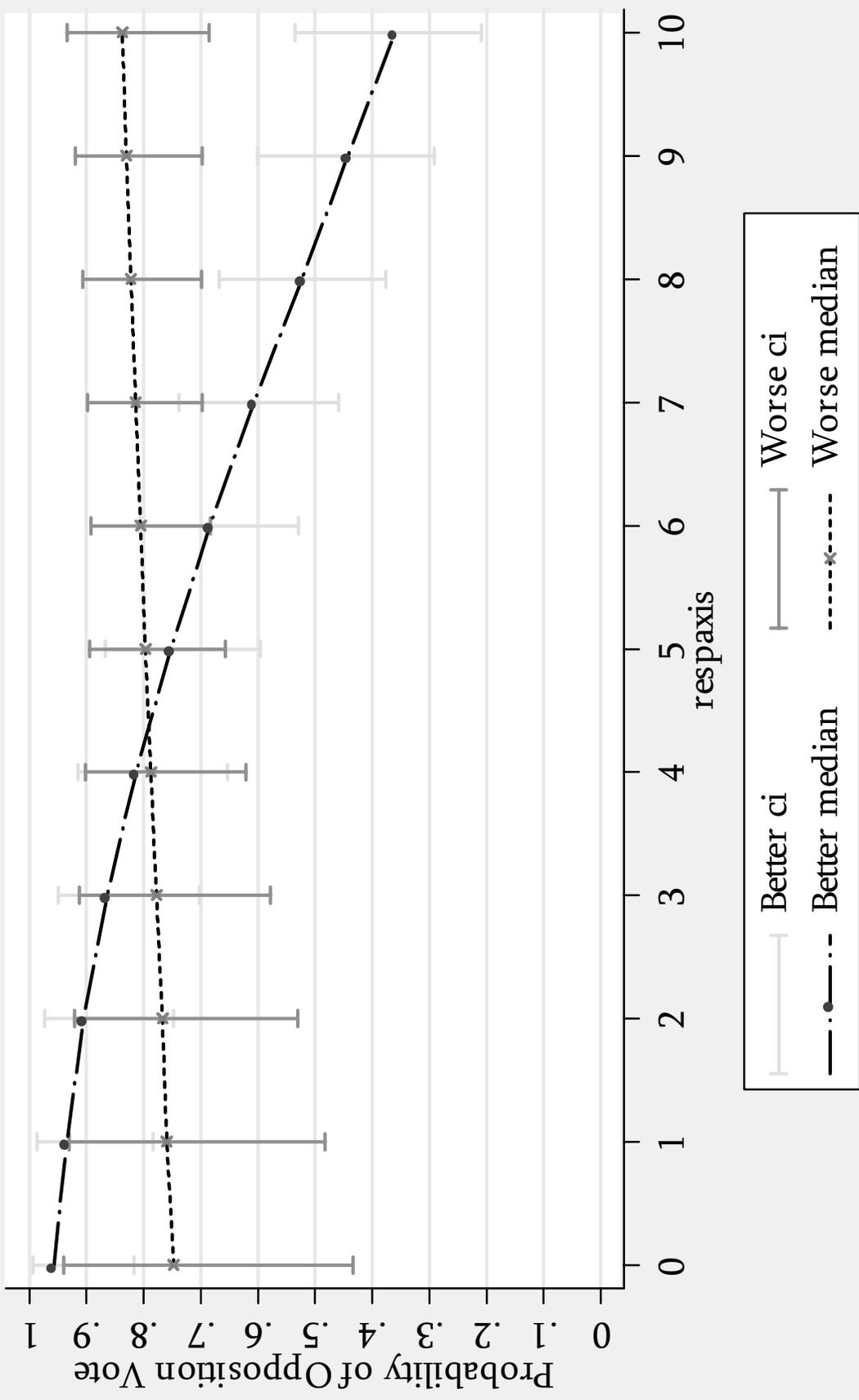


Figure 4d – Ontario Taxes

### Impact of Taxes Retrospection (-1 to 1) by Responsibility Attributed to Provincial Gov't

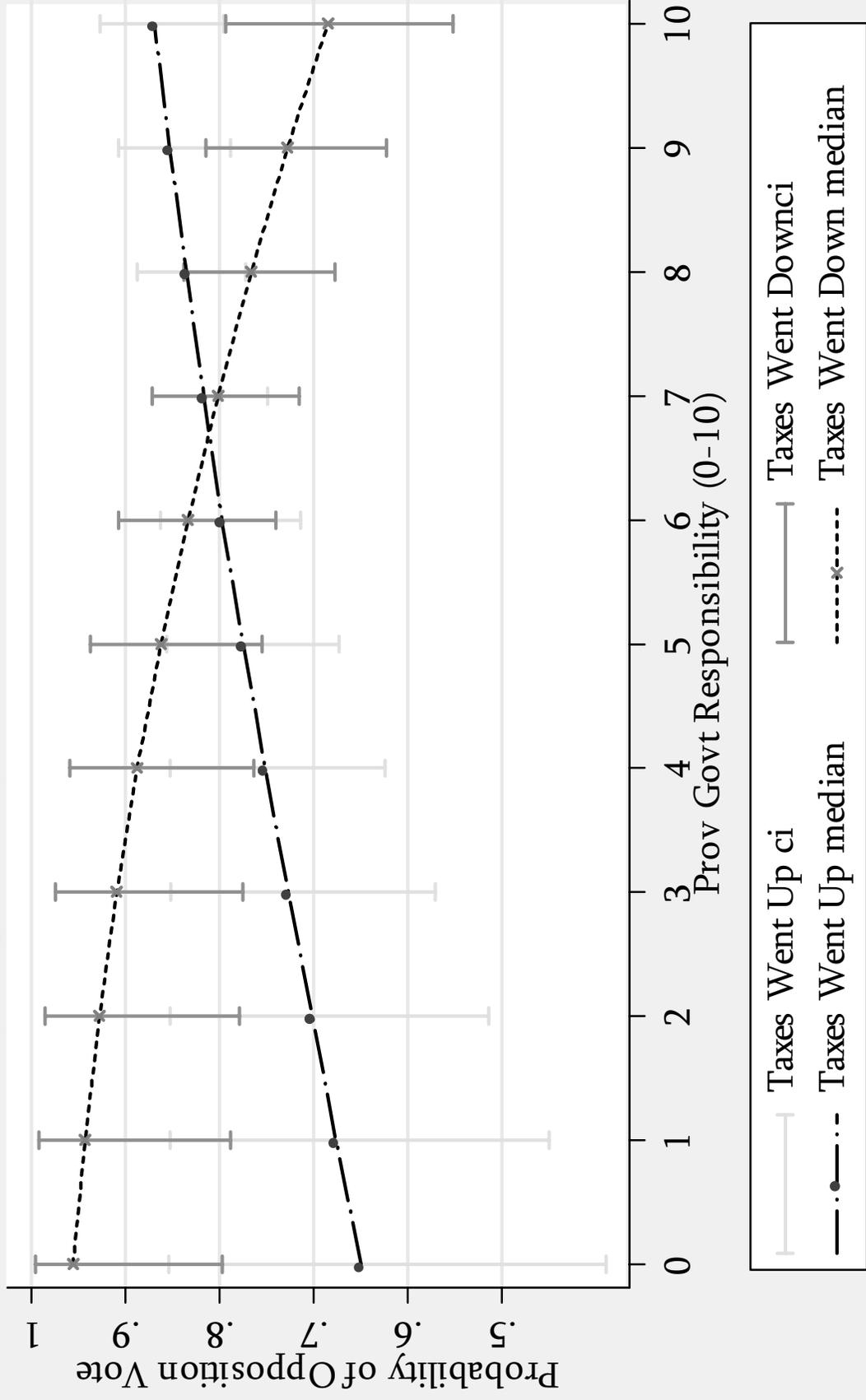


Figure 4a – Saskatchewan Economy

### Sask. Impact of Economic Retrospection (-1 to 1) by Responsibility Attributed to Provincial Gov't

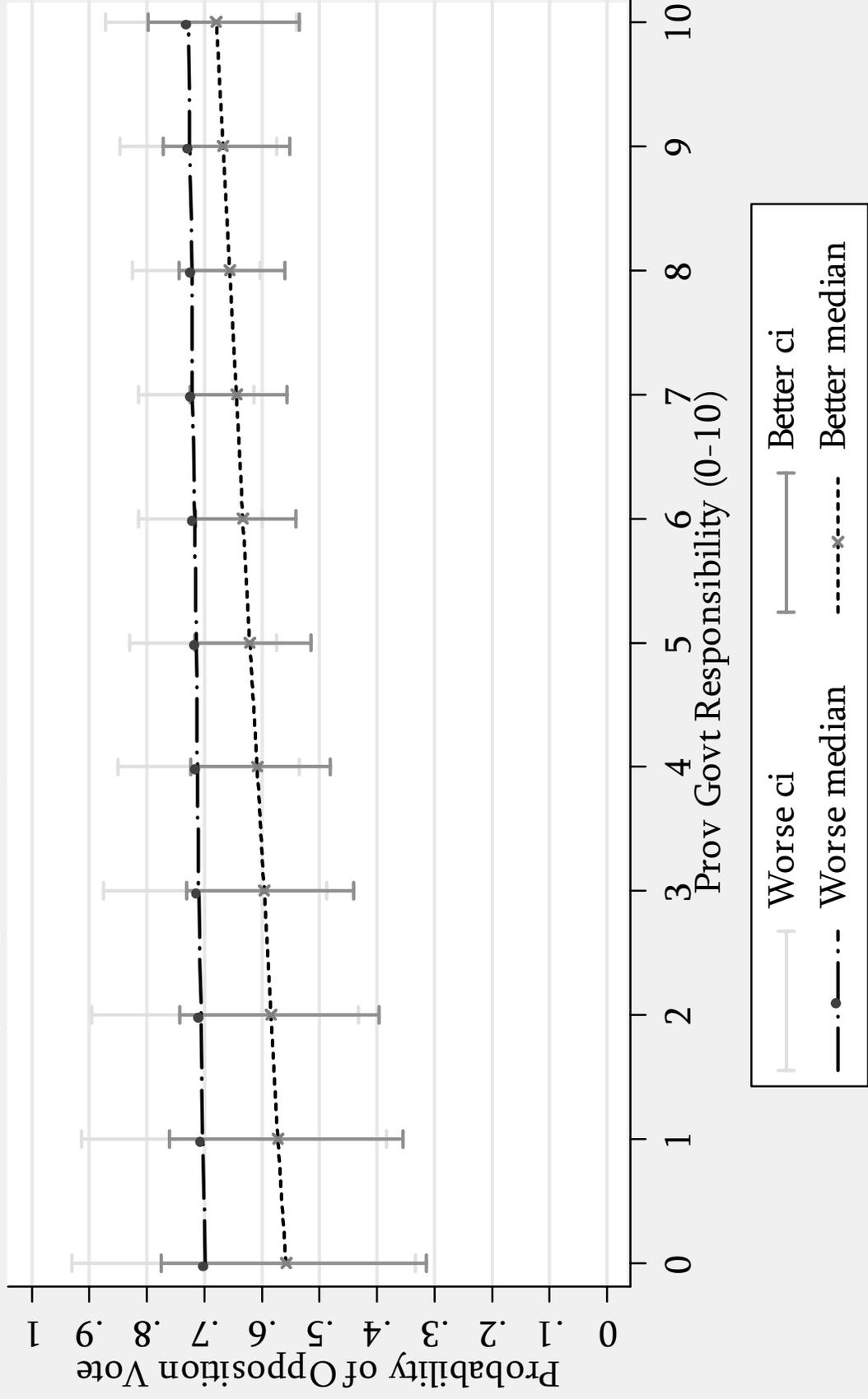


Figure 4b – Saskatchewan Farm Crisis

### Impact of Farm Crisis Assessment (0 to 1) by Responsibility Attributed to Provincial Gov't

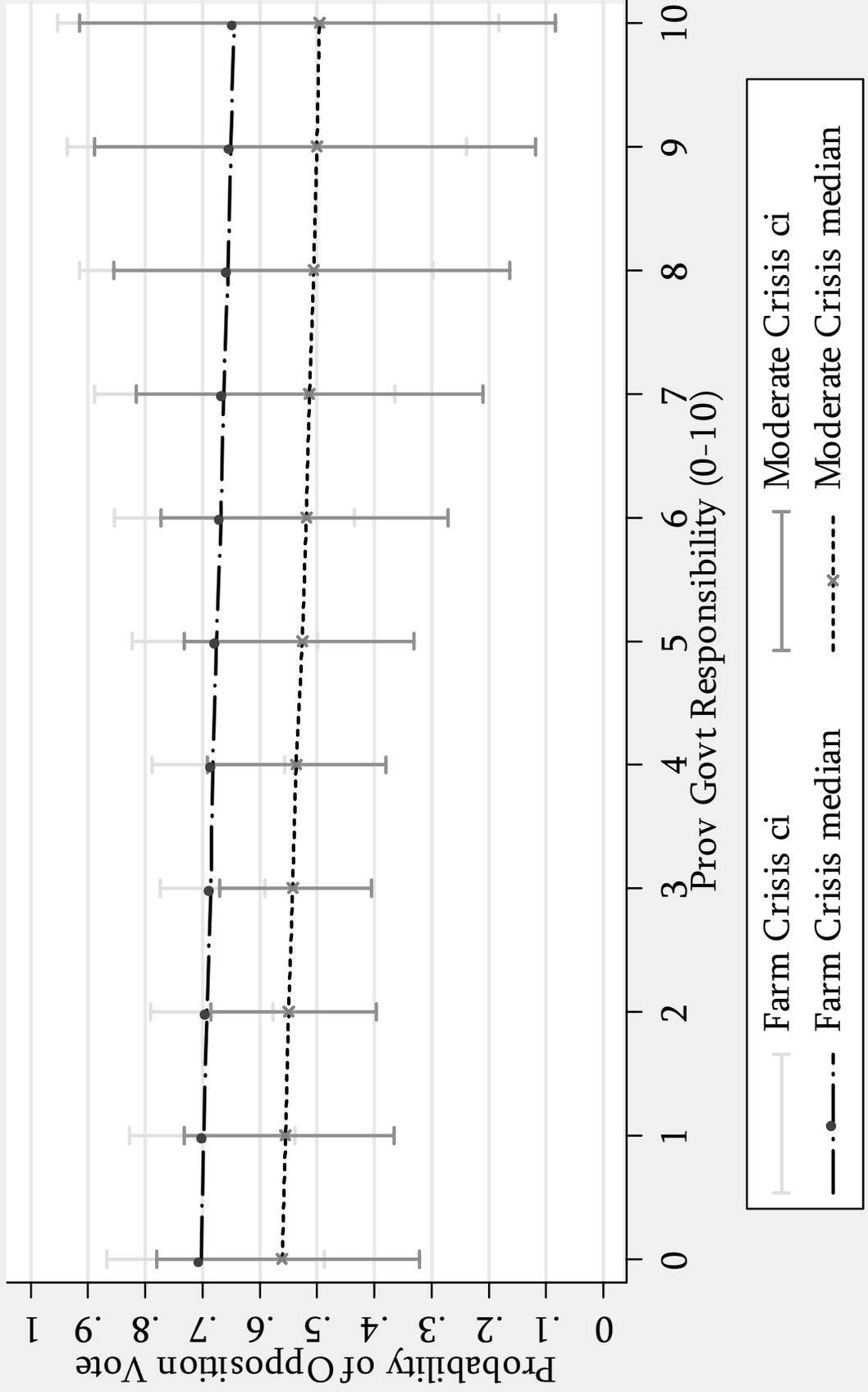
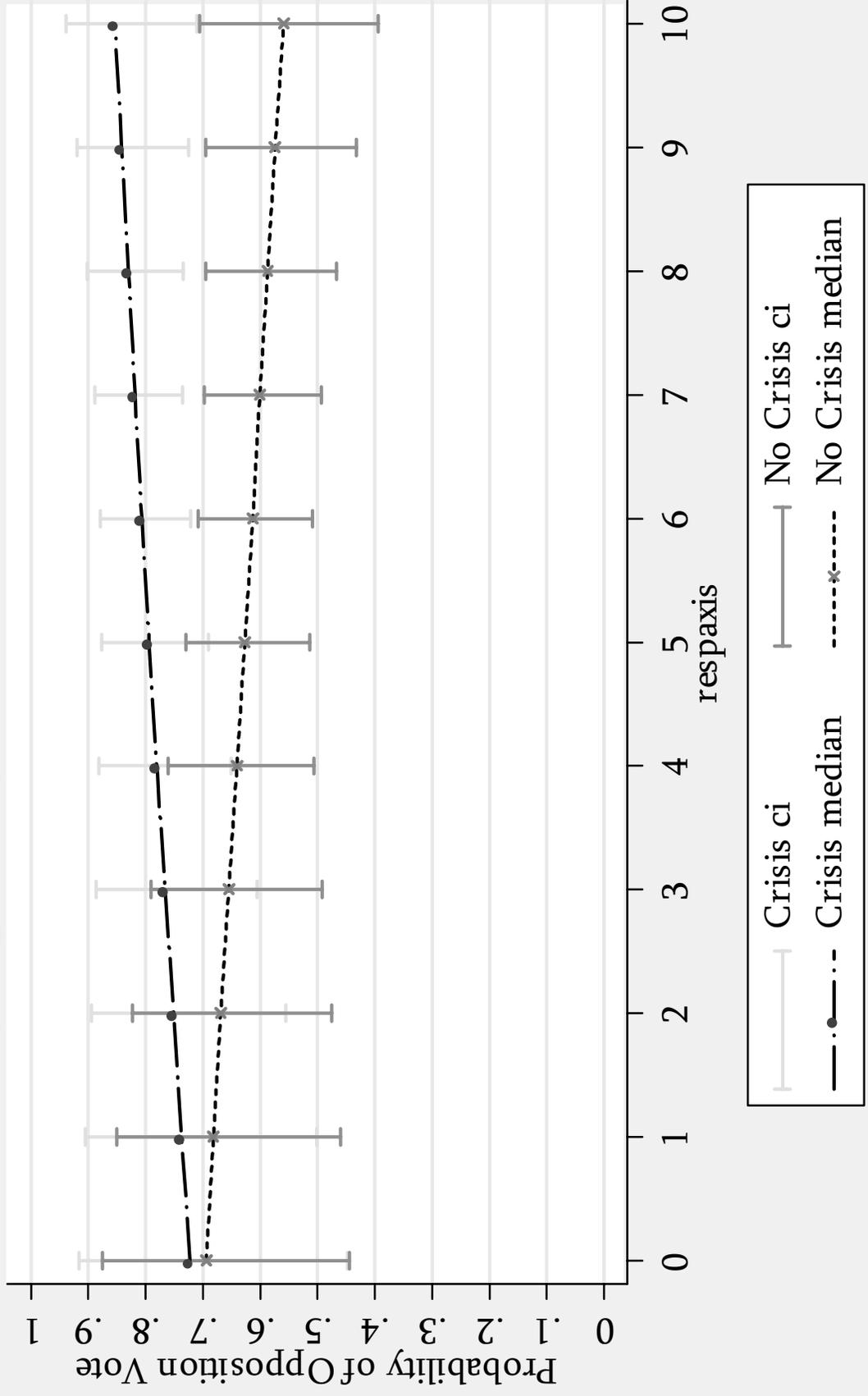


Figure 4c – Saskatchewan Health Care

### Sask. Impact of Health Care Crisis Opinion (.25 to 1) by Responsibility Attributed to Provincial Gov't



**Table 1a**  
**Provincial Responsibility by Policy Area**  
**Ontario**

	<i>Health Care</i>		<i>Changes in HC</i>		<i>Economy</i>		<i>Taxes</i>		<i>Electric</i>	
<i>Responsibility</i>	Percent	Cumul.	Percent	Cumul.	Percent	Cumul.	Percent	Cumul.	Percent	Cumul.
<b>0</b>	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%
<b>1</b>	0%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	3%
<b>2</b>	1%	2%	1%	2%	2%	3%	1%	2%	1%	4%
<b>3</b>	3%	5%	2%	4%	3%	6%	2%	3%	2%	6%
<b>4</b>	3%	8%	2%	6%	3%	10%	3%	6%	2%	9%
<b>5</b>	23%	31%	17%	23%	21%	31%	17%	23%	15%	23%
<b>6</b>	8%	39%	8%	32%	9%	40%	7%	30%	5%	29%
<b>7</b>	15%	54%	17%	49%	16%	56%	17%	47%	12%	41%
<b>8</b>	18%	72%	22%	71%	21%	77%	18%	65%	19%	59%
<b>9</b>	6%	79%	6%	77%	6%	82%	8%	72%	10%	69%
<b>10</b>	21%	100%	23%	100%	18%	100%	28%	100%	31%	100%
<b>DK/refused</b>		2%		3%		5%		5%		5%
<b>Mean</b>		7.06		7.35		6.92		7.51		7.55
<b>Std. Deviation</b>		2.22		2.09		2.21		2.12		2.41
	N=778		N=579		N=763		N=585		N=758	
<b>Relative Responsibility</b>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
	53%	14%	56%	15%	53%	13%	57%	18%	63%	20%
<b>Total Responsibility</b>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
	13.3	3.6	13.3	3.4	13.0	3.6	13.5	3.6	12.4	4.1

**Table 1b**  
**Provincial Responsibility by Policy Area**  
**Saskatchewan**

<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Health Care</i>		<i>Rural Sask</i>		<i>Economy</i>	
	Percent	Cumulative	Percent	Cumulative	Percent	Cumulative
<b>0</b>	0%	0%	2%	2%	1%	1%
<b>1</b>	1%	1%	1%	3%	0%	1%
<b>2</b>	3%	4%	4%	7%	3%	4%
<b>3</b>	3%	7%	8%	15%	2%	6%
<b>4</b>	6%	13%	9%	24%	6%	13%
<b>5</b>	27%	40%	22%	47%	16%	28%
<b>6</b>	11%	51%	10%	57%	12%	41%
<b>7</b>	15%	66%	12%	69%	17%	58%
<b>8</b>	16%	83%	15%	84%	21%	79%
<b>9</b>	6%	88%	5%	89%	7%	87%
<b>10</b>	12%	100%	11%	100%	13%	100%
<b>Don't Know/refused</b>		4%		4%		4%
<b>Mean</b>		6.44		6.00		6.81
<b>Standard Deviation</b>		2.13		2.41		2.13
		N=777		N=773		N=775
<b>Relative Responsibility</b>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
	53%	14%	53%	13%	56%	14%
<b>Total Responsibility</b>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
	12.3	3.5	11.7	3.6	12.4	4.0

Tables 3a and 3b

Probit Estimates of Opposition Vote (with Multiple Imputation)

Table 3a - Ontario		
	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Conservative PID	<b>-1.68</b>	0.29
Liberal PID	<b>0.64</b>	0.31
NDP PID	<b>1.23</b>	0.59
Issue Factor Score	<b>-1.12</b>	0.14
Health Care Crisis	0.76	0.48
Health Care Responsibility	0.04	0.04
Health Care Interaction	-0.72	0.65
Taxes Assessment	<b>-0.66</b>	0.32
Taxes Responsibility	-0.02	0.04
Taxes Interaction	<b>0.98</b>	0.41
Economic Retrospection	0.51	0.35
Economic Responsibility	<b>-0.09</b>	0.04
Economic Interaction	<b>-1.18</b>	0.48
Electricity Policy	0.21	0.24
Electricity Responsibility	0.05	0.03
Electricity Interaction	-0.37	0.32
Constant	<b>1.05</b>	0.43
N=554		

Table 3b - Saskatchewan		
	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Federal Alliance PID	<b>0.75</b>	0.21
Federal Conservative PID	<b>0.67</b>	0.33
Provincial Liberal PID	<b>0.46</b>	0.26
Provincial NDP PID	<b>-3.22</b>	0.33
Issue Factor Score	<b>0.59</b>	0.12
Health Care Crisis	0.12	0.89
Health Care Responsibility	-0.06	0.08
Health Care Interaction	1.09	1.30
Farm Crisis	<b>0.76</b>	0.33
Farm/Rural Responsibility	-0.02	0.12
Farm/Rural Interaction	0.01	0.10
Economic Retrospection	0.20	0.40
Economic Responsibility	0.02	0.04
Economic Interaction	-0.13	0.58
Constant	-0.36	0.75
N=642		

coefficients in bold are more than 1.64 times their standard errors