

Attributions of Responsibility for Economic Conditions in Canada: Explanations and Implications

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Introduction

The literature on economic voting has moved well beyond the initial formulations of simple credit and blame for economic conditions. Recent work has demonstrated that the strength of economic voting is weakened by the presence of multi-level institutions (Anderson 2005, 2006). While an important step in the reward and punishment model is the actual attribution of responsibility for economic conditions to different state and non-state actors, little is known about how citizens make these decisions in multi-level states.

This paper builds on earlier work considering responsibility attributions to different state and non-state actors within the American federal government by assessing the importance of multi-level governance and international influences on the attribution process in Canada. Questions that guide the paper are both exploratory (to what state or non-state actors do citizens attribute responsibility for national economic conditions?) and explanatory (why do citizens attribute responsibility to these different actors or influences?). In the Canadian case, the theory of attribution bias is drawn upon and tested using a range of salient factors including: ideology, partisanship and region. Finally, implications and consequences of responsibility attributions for vote choice and opinion formation are considered.

Data for the paper come from the 2004 Canadian Election Study, which asked respondents: 'which of the following has been most responsible for how Canada's economy has been doing: business, unions, the federal government, provincial governments or the United States?' Multinomial logistic regression is used to model the attribution process and test competing hypotheses.

Economic Voting, Clarity of Responsibility and Responsibility Attributions

An important component of incumbent support draws on perceptions of economic performance. The study of economic voting has moved well beyond the initial formulations of a rewarding (punishing) the incumbent for good (bad) economic performance with re-election (voting out of office). One of the central developments in the development of this literature has been the effort to try and explain why the economy-vote relationship is not consistent across time and space. Among the major theories to explain cross-national variation in the strength of economic voting, the clarity of responsibility hypothesis has been most prominent (Anderson 1995, 2000; Nadeau, Niemi and Yoshinaka 2002; Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999).¹ This approach contends that the strength of economic voting for the nation-state government is dependent upon the clarity of responsibility within the central government. The presence of factors such as minority governments, coalition governments or strong bicameral institutions may act to blur, from the perspective of the electorate, clear lines of responsibility to elected actors within the national government. Empirical findings consistently support the validity of this theory (Anderson 1995, 2000; Nadeau, Niemi and Yoshinaka 2002; Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999).

¹ Pacek and Radcliffe (1995) while not discounting the important of the clarity of responsibility hypothesis and supporting findings also contend that the comparative strength of economic voting is dependent upon the size of the welfare state and the relative number of citizens more or less dependent on government assistance.

A recent development in the clarity of responsibility and economic voting literature is a consideration of clarity on a second dimension. Whereas previous research solely considered the effects of clarity of responsibility within the national level of government or along a “horizontal dimension”, recent literature advances the conception of clarity of responsibility along the “vertical dimension” (Anderson 2005, 2006). In this advance, the vertical dimension of clarity of responsibility is determined by the presence and nature of multi-level governance.² Using both institutional design as well as fiscal indicators of decentralization, Anderson shows that the comparative strength of economic voting is weakened by the presence of decentralized multi-level governance (2005, 2006). Indeed, this analysis demonstrates that the effects of multi-level governance on weakening economic voting exist even when controlling for the presence of horizontal clarity of responsibility.

Underlying these studies of economic voting is the implicit assumption that the electorate actually attributes responsibility to government for economic conditions. In past work, it is certainly the case that arguments have been made for why citizens should seek to attribute responsibility for economic conditions to government. In this vein, Norpoth contends:

“Governments have good reason to believe that an economy in good health will earn them the support of the electorate. They enact policies that, in their judgment, will promote that economic health and thus assure their hold on political power. A great deal of government activity is consumed with the shaping and adjusting of economic policy. After all, government itself is a giant among economic actors, with close to four-tenths of the gross domestic product going through its hands” (1992, 51).

On a similar point, Jacobsen writes:

“If democracy works at all, economic conditions ought to shape election results. Modern governments have assumed broad responsibility for the economic welfare of citizens. Governing parties and leaders should thus be rewarded or punished at the polls according to how well they manage the economy” (1991, 33).

While the assumption of government responsibility underlies the economic voting endeavour, only recently has this assumption been tested.

Past work on responsibility attributions has demonstrated that when an attribution of responsibility for the economy is made economic voting is stronger. For instance, in the United States previous research has demonstrated that a strong relationship exists between personal economic evaluations and political evaluations when responsibility for personal economic conditions is attributed to social or government factors rather than personal ones (Abramowitz, Lanoue and Ramesh 1988; Feldman 1982). In the context of evaluations of the American national economy, these perceptions have a greater effect on presidential approval and vote support when an attribution of responsibility to the president is made (Lau and Sears 1981; Kinder and Mebane 1983; Peffley and Williams 1985; Rudolph and Grant 2002; Tyler 1982). Similarly, at the level of the American states, state economic conditions have a greater effect on gubernatorial support when responsibility is attributed to the governor (Rudolph 2003; Stein 1990; Svoboda 1995).

² See Anderson (2006) as well as Rodden (2004), Hooghe and Marks (2001) and Lijphart (1999) for discussions of comparative measures of institutional multi-level governance and fiscal decentralization.

While the question of responsibility attributions might be applicable to the full range of economic voting, the question is even more salient in the context of low levels of clarity of responsibility on either the horizontal or vertical dimension. In institutional contexts with high levels of clarity on both dimensions, to the extent that government is held responsible for economic conditions it is relatively straightforward to attribute responsibility. For example, in small unitary states like Norway or Sweden, to the extent that citizens hold the government responsible for the economy they can directly attribute responsibility to the central government as the only reasonable government actor to be blamed or credited for the condition of the economy. However, the question of the attribution of responsibility can become much more salient in institutional contexts when clarity on either the vertical or horizontal dimension is attenuated.

If the political context blurs responsibility for economic and political outcomes, how do citizens attribute responsibility for such outcomes? Such blurred conditions might occur, on the horizontal dimension of clarity of responsibility, if a minority government is in power or if the lower and upper houses of elected government are controlled by different parties and, on the vertical dimension, if more than one order of government is legislatively or fiscally empowered. Conceivably, within these kinds of institutional situations, choices must be made within the electorate as to which actors or institutions they believe to be most responsible for the health of the economy.

To this point, research on the question of modelling responsibility attributions has been studied in the context of horizontally divided government in the United States. Rudolph (2003a, 2003b) has considered just this question of responsibility attributions for economic conditions. Under conditions of divided government, in which the American Presidency was controlled by the Democrats and the Houses of Congress were controlled by the Republicans, Rudolph assessed the nature of responsibility attributions for the American national economy to a range of actors within American politics and society. Among the choice sets for who is most responsible for the state of the American economy, respondents choose from among the President, Congress, Business People and Working People (Rudolph 2003a). Drawing on 'in group' theories of attributional choice, Rudolph found that partisanship exerted a significant influence on attributions of responsibility for economic conditions (2003a). At the state level, Rudolph demonstrates that attributions of state government responsibility for fiscal outcomes are determined by both individual-level factors such as partisanship and political sophistication as well as contextual factors such as the balance of budgetary power and partisan power within the state legislature (2003b).

Outside of Rudolph's work considering the attribution of responsibility within either the American federal government or state government, there is no comparable research that considers the responsibility attribution process within the context of multilevel states. It is this omission in the extant scholarship on economic voting, clarity of responsibility and institutional context that this paper seeks to address.

Responsibility Attributions and Multilevel Governance

Because there is no previous work done on the attributional choice for economic conditions of citizens within the context of multilevel institutions, a central purpose of this paper is to consider the actual distribution of this choice set. A second intent of this paper is to develop hypotheses that can be used to explain the nature of attributional

choice and to consider why some citizens choose different actors or institutions over others. A final question that will guide this analysis is the extent to which economic voting for the federal incumbent is most prominent amongst those citizens who hold the federal government most responsible for economic conditions in Canada.

The paper develops and tests three central hypotheses to account for differences in attribution of responsibility decisions. According to social psychological theories of attribution bias, the attribution decision can be influenced by group membership and the desire to credit one's own group only for good outcomes and to assign responsibility for poor outcomes to others (Bem 1972; Glynn et al. 2004; Hewstone 1989). In the choice context of deciphering responsibility for economic outcomes, it is expected that credit for good results or conditions will be attributed to one's own group and blame for bad results or conditions will be attributed elsewhere. Two important forms of group membership that shape political behaviour in the Canadian case include region of residence and identification with a political party.

The explanatory importance of region of residence has long been a defining feature of Canadian politics.³ While of great relevance in debates over constitutional and institutional change, the role of region has also been shown to have a prominent influence in political behaviour, public opinion and vote choice in Canada (for example, Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005; Blais et al. 2002a; Gidengil 1992). In this sense, region is an aspect of Canadian politics that has served to define collective identities and political values as well as to shape vote choice along regional lines. In terms of collective identities and political values, Western Alienation and the sovereignty movement in Quebec are prominent examples of the continuing salience of region in Canada. Additionally, the parameters of federal electoral support in the last 12 years continues to perpetuate a regional character in which parties gain strength from regionally concentrated support (i.e. Reform/Canadian Alliance in the West, currently Conservatives in the West and Bloc Quebecois in Quebec).

On the basis of the strength of the regional fact in Canada, it is expected that regional differences should influence the nature of responsibility attributions for the Canadian economy. For instance, while the predominantly social democratic character of Quebec may favour attribution decisions to government, the continuing strength of the sovereignty movement may also suggest attributions to the provincial government over that of the federal government. In the Atlantic, a historic economic weakness and regional dependency on federal involvement will likely shape attribution decisions in favour of the federal government. The sense of (real or perceived) alienation in the West and continuing pushes for decentralization of authority may influence attribution decisions away from the federal government in favour of the provincial level among respondents in Western Canada.

A second significant basis of group membership in Canada is identification with a political party. Rooted in the socio-psychological approach to voting behaviour, the concept of party identification denotes an affective tie to one's preferred party that is held by the voter. The connection of voters to parties suggested by this concept is theorized to shape political attitudes and opinions. The concept of party identification has long been shown to have some influence on voting behaviour (Blais et al. 2002a; Gidengil 1992)

³ Where regions in Canada are conventionally operationalized as Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario and the West.

and issue positions (Blais et al. 2002b) in the Canadian case. For present purposes, the concept of party identification is drawn on to account for attribution of responsibility decisions. In particular, it is expected that a strong identification with the federal incumbent party will increase the likelihood of attributing responsibility to the federal government. By contrast, a strong identification with any of the other federal parties not in government should increase the likelihood of responsibility attributions to any actor other than the federal government.

Beyond testing the direct effects of region and party identification on responsibility attribution decisions and consistent with expectations from theories of attribution bias, the effects of region and party identification may be conditional upon actual perceptions of economic conditions. In this sense, to whom a respondent attributes responsibility for the economy may be dependent on prior group memberships. Accordingly, those respondents with a strong identification with the governing party should be more likely to attribute responsibility to the federal government when they think that the national economy is doing well. By contrast, those with a strong identification with the governing party who think that the national economy is not doing well should be more likely to attribute responsibility to any actor other than the federal government. Similarly, while respondents who have a strong identification with a non-governing party and who think that the national economy is doing well should be more likely to attribute responsibility to any actor other than the federal government, those voters who identify with a non-governing party who think that the national economy is not doing well should be more likely to attributed responsibility to the federal government.

A final hypothesis to account for differences in responsibility attribution decisions considers the effects of personal political ideology. The left-right ideology of respondents may contribute to the attribution decision because of what a left or rightwing ideology may imply for the proper role of government in the economy. Those on the left might prefer to see a greater level of government involvement in regulating market conditions through the exercise of taxing, spending, tariffs, subsidies and a strong redistributive role of government. By contrast, right-leaning respondents might be expected to prefer far less government involvement in all aspects of the economy. As a result, it is expected that the more ideologically rightwing a respondent is the more likely to attribute responsibility for the economy to explicitly non-governmental actors such as business, unions or the United States in distinction to more leftwing respondents preferring the opposite.

The final section of the paper will estimate a relatively straightforward model of incumbent vote choice. The main purpose is to test the hypothesis that those respondents who attribute responsibility for the national economy to the federal government are more likely to hold the federal government accountable for national economic conditions (either blaming or rewarding). Presumably, economic voting should be highest amongst those voters who indicate that the federal government relative to other choices is the most responsible for the health of the Canadian economy. Evidence to the contrary, may suggest that low levels of clarity of responsibility on the vertical dimension undermine the ability of voters to hold the federal government accountable for national economic conditions.

The Case of Canada

These hypotheses will be tested in the case of Canada. To properly address the case of Canada, a few of points of context regarding the 2004 federal election as well as the institutional dynamics more generally must be made. Entering into the 2004 Canadian federal election, the governing Liberal Party of Canada had been in power continuously since 1993. In that time, the Liberals had won three consecutive majority governments (1993, 1997, 2000) under their leader Jean Chretien. In 2003, Chretien resigned and Paul Martin won leadership of the Liberal Party. As such, the Liberals lead by newly chosen Paul Martin entered the 2004 federal election looking to win a fourth majority government. However, while the Liberals won the election their party and campaign were plagued by scandal from the previous administration and they were reduced to a minority government.

With respect to the nature of clarity of responsibility in Canada, a range of points can be made. On the horizontal dimension of clarity of responsibility, high levels of clarity have historically characterized Canada. Of the factors theorized to undermine clarity of responsibility on the horizontal dimension, few have been present historically and none were present within the federal level leading up to the 2004 federal election. This is to say that the Canadian federal government has historically been characterized by majority governing parties (therefore no minority or coalition governments), weak parliamentary committees, strong party discipline and a democratically illegitimate and weak upper chamber (or Senate).

On the vertical dimension of clarity of responsibility, as shaped by the presence of multi-level governance, Canada is one of if not the most decentralized multi-level states among advanced industrial countries (Anderson 2005, 2006). According to a range of institutional and fiscal indicators of multi-level governance, Canada is tied or scores as the most decentralized country among a range of advanced industrial democracies (Anderson 2005, 2006).⁴ Given the discussion of vertical and horizontal clarity of responsibility

Data and Methods

The data for these analyses come from the 2004 Canadian Election Study (CES). The CES is a three-wave election study that includes campaign, post-election and mailback portions of the survey. This data set is a particularly useful one upon which to conduct these analyses because a question on responsibility attributions in the context of multi-level institutions was asked in the mail-back portion of the survey. The question was: “Who do you hold most responsible for how Canada’s economy has been doing: business, unions, federal government, provincial governments or the United States”. While the answer choices don’t allow for a relative ranking of these options, the set-up of the question and answer key does allow for a general indication of the preferences of

⁴ Based on Anderson (2005, 2006), Canada is consistently rated as the most decentralized among 16 advanced industrial democracies including Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States. Institutional indicators of multilevel governance include the presence and nature of federalism, regional elections and territorial autonomy (Anderson 2005, 2006). Fiscal indicators draw on the relative strength of taxing and spending powers of subnational governments as well as the borrowing autonomy of subnational governments among these countries (Anderson 2005, 2006).

respondents vis-à-vis responsibility attributions for economic conditions in the multi-level state of Canada.

The central hypotheses of the responsibility attributions section of the paper are operationalized using the best available indicators from the 2004 CES. Region of residence is relatively unproblematic as dummy variables are created for each of the Atlantic, Quebec and the West (the reference category is Ontario). Party identification is coded into two dummy variables: identification with the incumbent party and identification with any other party. This leaves identification with no political party as the reference category. To be coded as identifying with a political party, respondents must have indicated that they had a strong or fairly strong identification with the named party. This method of coding party identification is consistent with previous work on Canada and ensures that the effects of party identification on responsibility attributions or vote choice are only tested amongst those respondents with a reasonably strong level of attachment to a political party (Anderson 2005; Blais et al. 2002).

To test for the existence and strength of attribution bias in explaining responsibility attributions, interaction terms are created using socio-tropic retrospective evaluations of the national economy with region and party identification variables (both incumbent and non-incumbent). The socio-tropic retrospective measure of the economy considers evaluations of the national economy (as opposed to one's household) over the past year or two (as opposed to into the future). Past research indicates that socio-tropic retrospective evaluations perform the best out of the range of subjective indicators (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). Using the socio-tropic retrospective measure and the regional dummies and party identification variables, interaction terms are created to determine whether positive views of the national economy influence the nature of regional and partisan identification effects on shaping responsibility attributions.

To operationalize the ideology variable a number questions were combined into an ideology scale. These questions included respondents' views on whether the federal government should spend more, less or about the same on welfare, health care, education, foreign aid and social housing.⁵

The final component of the paper estimates a model of incumbent vote choice and tests whether an attribution of federal responsibility for economic conditions influences the strength of economic voting. These models will again use socio-tropic retrospective economic evaluations. However, in these models interaction terms will be created with economic evaluations and a recoded responsibility attribution variable. The responsibility attribution variable will be recoded into a dummy variable in which a value of '1' indicates an attribution of responsibility decision to the federal government and '0' indicates an attribution decision to any other actor.⁶

Finally, all models in all parts of the paper include socio-demographic control variables for gender, income, education and union status. Based on the above discussion, the models take the following form:

$$\text{Model 1 Responsibility Attribution} = a + \text{socio-demographics} + \text{region} + \text{ideology} \\ + \text{party id} + e$$

⁵ For exact question wording see Appendix.

⁶ Respondents coded '0' also include those providing a 'don't know' answer.

Model 2 Responsibility Attribution= $a + \text{socio-demographics} + \text{region} + \text{party id} + \text{ideology} + \text{economic evaluations} + \text{party id} * \text{econ. eval.} + \text{region} * \text{econ. eval.} + e$

Model 3 Incumbent Vote= $a + \text{socio-demographics} + \text{region} + \text{party id} + \text{economic evaluations} + e$

Model 4 Incumbent Vote= $a + \text{socio-demographics} + \text{region} + \text{party id} + \text{economic evaluations} + \text{Federal Resp. Attr.} + \text{econ. eval.} * \text{Fed. Resp. Attr.} + e$

where a is the constant and e is the error term.

Responsibility attribution analyses in Models 1 and 2 are conducted using multinomial logistic regression.⁷ Multinomial logistic regression is a form of regression analysis that allows the researcher to consider the effects of independent variables on the probability of respondents choosing from among the choice alternatives relative to a base category. This form of regression is well suited to the structure of the dependent variable of responsibility attributions because each of the five plausible choices is mutually exclusive and no ordering of preference is implied.⁸ The base category for all analyses is the federal government.⁹

The models estimating incumbent vote choice are conducted using binary logistic regression because the dependent variable is either a vote choice for the incumbent party (1) or a vote for any other party (0).

Results

Table 1 contains frequency distributions on the question of responsibility attributions for the Canadian economy. Amongst respondents in the 2004 CES who positively attributed responsibility, a plurality of 42 percent thought that “Business” is

⁷ For an elaborated discussion of the development and statistical properties of the multinomial logistic regression model see Borooah (2001).

⁸ Using the multinomial logit model induces the potential problem of independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) (Kennedy 2003). This problem can arise from the possibility that in the multinomial logit model “the relative probability of choosing two existing alternatives is unaffected by the presence of additional alternatives” (Kennedy 2003, 269-70). The central means of avoiding this problem is to conduct the estimation using a multinomial probit model (Borooah 2001; Kennedy 2003). However, the reason why this paper will continue to estimate the models with multinomial logit instead of probit is because the version of the statistical program Stata currently available to the author doesn’t include the capacity to estimate the multinomial probit model (the ‘mprobit’ command in Stata).

⁹ The base category of federal government is chosen for a number of reasons. Of interest in this paper is the attribution of responsibility for economic conditions to government actors. Among government actors (federal versus provincial governments), it is expected that the federal government will be chosen more than provincial governments because provincial governments have far less power to influence the national economy. Further, using the federal government as the base category allows for an explicit consideration of the attribution decision between the most prominent government actor and a range of non-governmental actors. Finally, data for other explanatory variables such as economic evaluations and party identification is only available at the federal level.

most responsible for the health of the Canadian economy. By contrast, under 2 percent thought that unions were most responsible for the health of Canada's economy. Of interest from the perspective of multilevel governance, almost forty percent of respondents attributed responsibility to one of the two constitutional orders of government in Canada. While only 9 percent of this group thought that the provincial governments were most responsible, close to 30 percent attributed responsibility for the health of the Canadian economy to the Federal government. Finally, a not inconsequential number of respondents (17 percent) felt that the United States was most responsible for the condition of the Canadian economy.

(Table 1 about here)

Results for each column in Table 2 reflect the effects of independent variables on the chances of attributing responsibility for economic conditions to the named actor relative to the federal government. Positive coefficients indicate increasing likelihood of assigning responsibility to the named grouping (business, unions etc.) and negative coefficients suggest increasing likelihood of assigning responsibility with the federal government. Results in Column 1, considering the relative choice between business responsibility and federal government responsibility indicate that higher income and education increase the likelihood of attributing responsibility for economic conditions to business. By contrast, being a union member has a positive effect on choosing the federal government relative to business.

(Table 2 about here)

Respondent region of residence has a prominent effect on the attribution process. Relative to the base (and omitted) category of Ontario, respondents in the Atlantic, Quebec and the West are more likely to attribute responsibility for national economic conditions to the federal government over that of business. That said the effect is clearly strongest for Quebecers where they are 62% less likely to indicate business responsibility relative to the federal government.¹⁰ Not surprisingly and confirming expectations, the left-right ideology of the respondent has an important effect on the attribution decision. Indeed, based on the risk ratio, results indicate that a one-unit shift in ideology to the right increases the likelihood of assigning responsibility for economic conditions to business over that of the federal government by almost 200 percent. Finally, in this choice set, party identification with either the incumbent Liberal Party or any of the other parties exerts no statistically significant direct effect on the attribution choice between business and the Federal Government.

The second column of the model from Table 2 considers the choice of responsibility between unions and the federal government. Of the background socio-demographic variables, only income has a significant effect and the negative coefficient indicates that higher income leads some voters to choose the federal government over unions. Among the regional dummy variables, only respondents from Quebec were significantly more likely to attribute responsibility in this choice set and being from Quebec increase the chances of choosing unions by 45 points based on the risk ratio.

¹⁰ Following Borooah's (2001) discussion, multinomial logistic regression coefficients can be transformed into 'risk ratios' or 'relative risk ratios'. Risk ratios are functionally similar to odd ratios in binary logistic regression but are adapted for the particular characteristics of the multinomial logit model. Stata produces these results using the 'rrr' command following the multinomial logistic regression estimation.

In an interesting result, having a rightwing ideological position greatly increased voter's probability of attributing responsibility for economic conditions to unions. While one might expect that rightwing views will be associated with non-government responsibility for the economy, it is somewhat surprising that a rightwing position links responsibility for economic conditions to unions.¹¹

Of particular interest to the research endeavour are the attribution decisions between different levels of government in the Canadian case. These results are found in column 3. Amongst the socio-demographic variables, a one-category rise in household income increased the probability of attributing responsibility to the federal government over the provincial governments by about 5 points. By contrast, those respondents possessing a university education were 32 points more likely to attribute responsibility for the national economy to the provincial governments of Canada.

The results also indicate significant regional effects on this attributional choice. While Atlantic respondents were not more likely than Ontario ones to choose one level of government over the other, respondents in both Quebec and the West clearly were. Indeed, in the case of Quebec, respondents were almost 400 points more likely to attribute responsibility for economic conditions to the provincial governments of Canada than the federal government. Likewise, respondents in the West were close to 150 points more likely to attribute responsibility for the Canadian economy to provincial governments as opposed to the federal government. Given the size and strength of these effects, it would seem evident that regional ties have a prominent impact on the attributional process between multiple levels of government in Canada. Finally, in contrast to each of the two previous choice comparisons, identification with any party other than the governing Liberals increased the chances of attributing responsibility to the provincial governments by 57 points. Identification with the federal governing party had no independent effect on the attribution choice between the federal and provincial governments.

The final choice set includes attribution decisions to the United States versus the Federal Government of Canada. Among socio-demographic variables having a statistically significant effect, women and union members were more likely to attribute responsibility to the federal government. Regional effects are also observed for this choice set. Respondents from the Atlantic and Quebec are more likely to attribute responsibility for national economic conditions to the federal government over that of the United States. Of the remaining independent variables, having a right wing ideology significantly increased the probability of attributing responsibility to the United States over that of the federal government. Resulting from high standard errors, party identification variables had no effect.

Beyond the initial modelling of the attribution process, decisions of responsibility may also be conditioned by the interaction of actual perceptions of whether the economy has improved or worsened and group memberships such as partisan identification or region of residence. Presumably, thinking that the federal government is most responsible for economic conditions may be most prominent among those who think that the economy has improved *and* identify with the federal governing party in Canada. By

¹¹ This result may be accounted for by the possibility that rightwing respondents, in attributing responsibility for economic conditions to unions, blame unions for bad economic conditions more than they credit unions for good economic conditions.

contrast, thinking that the national economy has improved but identifying with a party other than the governing party may induce respondents to attribute responsibility for economic conditions to actors other than the federal government. In the context of the regional dimension, respondents in regions where the regionalism and preferences for political decentralization have historically had a particularly high political salience (such as Quebec or the West), respondents may be more likely to attribute responsibility away from the federal government when the national economy is perceived to be doing well. As such, Table 3 contains results for the models estimated in Table 2 with the addition of sociotropic retrospective economic evaluations and the interaction of these evaluations with government and non-government party identification.

(Table 3 about here)

From the first column of results in Table 3 comparing Business and the Federal Government, respondents identifying with the governing Liberals who think the national economy has improved should be more likely to attribute responsibility to the federal government. Results indicate that while the direction of effect is correct (towards to the federal government) the magnitude ratio of standard error to coefficient is such that the effect is not statistically significant. By contrast, respondents thinking that the economy has improved who also identify with any other party are more likely to suggest that business is more responsible for the good performance of the economy. Therefore, a partisan effect is found but not in favour of the federal government. In addition, a regional effect is observed. In each of the Atlantic, Quebec and West regions (relative to respondents in Ontario), respondents who think that the national economy has improved are more likely to attribute responsibility away from the federal government and towards business.

The second column of results indicates a similar effect for the choice contrast of unions and federal government responsibility. Respondents who identify with a party other than the governing Liberals and who think that the national economy has improved are about 53 points (based on the risk ratio) more likely to attribute responsibility to unions instead of the federal government. The expected effect among governing party identifiers towards attributing responsibility to the federal government does not materialize. A regional effect is also present in that respondents in Quebec and the West (relative to Ontarians) who think that the national economy has improved are more likely to attribute responsibility for the national economy towards unions as opposed to the federal government.

Results from Table 2 indicated that identifying with a non-governing party increased the chances of attributing responsibility for the national economy to the provincial governments of Canada. When testing for interactive effects of economic evaluations on the attribution choice between these levels of government, as presented in the 3rd column of Table 3, interesting results are obtained. In the first instance, the direct effect of the non-government party identification variable is significant and positive and suggest that among those who think that the national economy has worsened and identify with a non-governing party attributions of responsibility are made to the provincial governments of Canada. Continuing the pattern established in each of the first two choice comparisons, respondents identifying with a non-government party who think that the national economy has improved are more likely to attribute responsibility to the provincial governments over that of the federal government. Any partisan effect in

favour of the federal government party does not develop. Following established patterns of regional effects, respondents who think that the national economy has improved in each of the Atlantic, Quebec and West regions are more likely than Ontarians to attribute responsibility the provincial level of government instead of the federal government.

Finally, based on the final column of results of Table 3, those identifying with non-governing parties who think that the national economy has improved are significantly more likely to attribute responsibility for the health of the Canadian economy to the United States over the federal government. Amongst the regional interaction terms, only respondents in Quebec were more likely to attribute positive economic changes to the United States instead of the federal government.

To recap findings to this point, consistent trends based on results in Table 3 indicate clear partisan and regional effects that condition the attribution process. In particular, among those respondents who indicate a partisan affiliation with any of the non-governing parties, those who think that the economy has improved are more likely to attribute responsibility to any actor other than the central government. Similarly, amidst respondents from regions other than Ontario, there appears to be a consistent effect in which responsibility for positive economic conditions is attributed to actors or institutions other than the federal government.

(Table 4 about here)

The final aspect of the empirical part of this analysis is to test for whether economic voting is any greater amongst those who suggest that the federal government is most responsible for the condition of the Canadian economy. Presumably, economic voting for the federal incumbent party should be highest amongst those respondents who think that the federal government is most responsible for the health of Canada's economy. Results for Model 3 indicate a baseline regression of Liberal support in the 2004 Federal election. Of the independent variables included in the model, region, ideology and party identification have statistically significant effects. Respondents from Quebec, the West and those holding a right-wing perspective were significantly less likely to support the Liberals. Further, while identifiers with a non-governing party were far less likely to support the Liberals, identifying with the governing party drastically increased the chances of voting the Liberals. Finally, a one-unit increase in evaluations of the national economy increases the likelihood of supporting the incumbent by about 42 points based on the odds ratio.

Of central interest for the theoretical purposes of this paper is the nature of economic effects on voting for the federal governing party among those respondents who attribute responsibility for the national economy to the federal government. Model 4 contains these results. The direct effects of socio-tropic evaluations indicates that a one unit increase in evaluations of the national economy among respondents who attribute responsibility to an actor *other than* the federal government increased the likelihood of supporting the federal Liberals by 40 points. This result indicates that some economic voting is occurring amongst those who attributed responsibility to a different actor than the federal government. The statistically insignificant coefficient for the interaction term of economic evaluations and federal government responsibility suggests that economic voting amongst those who attribute responsibility to the federal government for economic conditions is *not* greater. Stated differently, the results for Model 4 suggest that in the 2004 Canadian Federal election economic voting for the incumbent Liberal Party was not

significantly increased amongst those voters who thought that the federal government was most responsible for the health of the Canadian economy.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present work builds on the established parameters of the economic voting model and previous efforts to model attributions of responsibility within a level of government. This paper has sought to extend the literature on economic voting through modelling the responsibility attribution process for economic conditions in the multilevel state of Canada and considering the effects, if any, on vote choice. The main findings of the paper suggest that a process of partisan rationalization occurs through which attributions of responsibility are made. Further, a chestnut of Canadian politics, namely regionalism, also exerts a significant influence on the direction of responsibility attributions. Finally, the findings of this paper suggest that, contrary to expectations, the strength of economic voting at the federal level is not greater amongst those respondents who think that the federal government is most responsible for the health of the Canadian economy.

Underlying most work on economic voting is the assumption that responsibility for the national economy should be and is attributable to the central government. Results from the simple distribution of responses represent a good news/bad news scenario for the general applicability of the economic voting model. The good news is that almost 30% of respondents indicate their view that the federal government is most responsible for the health of the Canadian economy. The bad news is that a clear majority locate primary responsibility for the economy elsewhere with the choice of business receiving a plurality (almost 43%) of support. While it wouldn't be expected that all respondents should indicate that government is responsible for the health of the economy, these distributions provide a sense of the relative proportions of citizens who credit or blame government for economic conditions.

While an awareness of the nature of attribution decisions is interesting in its own right, of particular interest for this paper is the character of and explanations for attribution decisions between different levels of government. Responses indicate that amongst respondents who attribute responsibility to government, about three-quarters of respondents chose the federal government while 25% identified the provincial governments. In the context of a significantly decentralized multilevel state such as Canada, this distribution suggests that provinces (or subnational levels of government) are on the radar screen for economic responsibility but are not seen as central economic actors. Given these results, it might be expected that in other more centralized multilevel states such as Australia, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Switzerland or the United States, a greater level of responsibility for the national economy would be attributed to the central government relative to respective subnational levels. Indeed, this conjecture poses a potential direction for future work on the topic.

Based on results from the attribution of responsibility models, it is evident that group-serving attribution bias significantly alters the attribution of responsibility decisions of respondents. In Canadian politics, two prominent and wide-ranging group memberships or affiliations appear to have significant effects on the attribution decision: party identification and region of residence (or regionalism). On the one hand, this confirms well-established insights about political behaviour in Canada: partisanship and

regionalism matter. On the other hand, these findings contribute to a further understanding of *how* they matter in the Canadian case. In particular, regionalism and partisanship appear to systematically bias perceptions of responsibility for economic outcomes in Canada. According to results in this paper, these factors bias responsibility perceptions in ways that encourage decentralization (respondents in regions other than Ontario and/or with non-government party identifications tend to indicate provincial responsibility over federal responsibility) or non-governmental responsibility (both region and opposition party identification increase the chances of attributing responsibility to business, unions or the United States over the federal government). Indeed, based on this data from the 2004 election, the effects of group attribution bias systemically weaken attributions to the federal government and the governing Liberal Party.

A final observation concerns the non-finding that economic voting is not greater amongst those respondents who attributed responsibility to the federal government for national economic conditions. This result is truly surprising. There are at least two potential means to account for this result. The first deals with leadership changes within the federal government prior to the 2004 election. Before calling the June 2004 federal election, Paul Martin succeeded Jean Chretien as leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and Prime Minister in late fall 2003. One possible explanation for the lack of results is that respondents who attributed the health of the Canadian economy to the federal government did so on the basis on Jean Chretien's leadership as Prime Minister not Paul Martin's. As a result, when time comes to vote, even though the respondent believed that the federal government was most responsible for the health of the economy, they don't vote on this basis because it is Jean Chretien not Paul Martin who should get the credit (or blame). This interpretation is consistent with work done on the United States in which retrospective economic voting matters most for American presidents when they are seeking re-election (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001). By contrast, when a new candidate for the incumbent party is seeking office (e.g. Al Gore in the 2000 election), economic evaluations matter much less because the candidate cannot (or should not) be held accountable for past economic conditions.

An alternative or perhaps complementary explanation for the failure of economic voting to be significantly stronger amongst respondents who attributed responsibility to the federal government focuses on the blurred clarity of responsibility under decentralized multilevel governance. Consistent with earlier work on multilevel governance, clarity of responsibility and economic voting, an alternative interpretation of the non-finding is that the ability of respondents to follow through on their attribution decisions was undermined by the complexity of multilevel governance. In this approach, the information demands imposed by multilevel governance upon citizens impeded their capacity to successfully navigate the institutional landscape and as a result weakened their ability to follow through and hold the federal government accountable for economic outcomes attributed to them. This interpretation or explanation of the non-findings would serve to support other work suggesting that the strength of economic voting, and ultimately democratic accountability, is weakened by the presence of highly decentralized multilevel institutions (Anderson 2005, 2006).

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Table 1 Distribution of Attribution of Responsibility Decisions

Business	42.5%
Unions	1.6
Federal Government	29.5
Provincial Governments	9.2
United States	17.2

**Table 2 Explaining Responsibility Attributions for Economic Conditions in Canada
(Multinomial Logistic Estimation of Federal Attributions of Responsibility)**

	Variables	Business	Unions	Prov. Gov'ts	USA
Socio-demo.	Female	-.30 (.23) <i>.74</i>	-.42 (.39) <i>.66</i>	-.19 (.29) <i>.83</i>	-1.01 (.13)*** <i>.36</i>
	Income	.06 (.02)*** <i>1.07</i>	-.15 (.05)* <i>.86</i>	-.06 (.02)** <i>.95</i>	.00 (.03) <i>1.00</i>
	Union	-.56 (.14)*** <i>.57</i>	.18 (.70) <i>1.19</i>	-.22 (.36) <i>.81</i>	-.28 (.12)** <i>.76</i>
	Univgrad	.38 (.18)** <i>1.46</i>	.23 (.37) <i>1.26</i>	.27 (.16)* <i>1.31</i>	.13 (.25) <i>1.13</i>
Region	Atlantic	-.32 (.18)* <i>.72</i>	.42 (.59) <i>1.53</i>	-1.00 (.88) <i>.37</i>	-.50 (.19)*** <i>.61</i>
	Quebec	-.96 (.02)*** <i>.38</i>	.37 (.05)*** <i>1.45</i>	1.60 (.08)*** <i>4.94</i>	-1.59 (.04)*** <i>.21</i>
	West	-.26 (.16)* <i>.77</i>	.51 (.41) <i>1.67</i>	.89 (.28)*** <i>2.45</i>	-.04 (.19) <i>.96</i>
Political	RWideo	1.04 (.18)*** <i>2.84</i>	1.73 (.55)*** <i>5.62</i>	.81 (.49)* <i>2.25</i>	.94 (.40)** <i>2.55</i>
	GovPid	-.07 (.16) <i>.93</i>	.30 (.45) <i>1.35</i>	.04 (.36) <i>1.04</i>	-.14 (.24) <i>.87</i>
	NGovPid	.15 (.18) <i>1.17</i>	-.87 (.84) <i>.42</i>	.45 (.14)*** <i>1.57</i>	.01 (.17) <i>1.01</i>
	Constant	.91 (.10)***	-1.65 (.37)***	-1.52 (.26)***	.71 (.10)***
		N=1192	Pseudo R ² = 0.08	Log Likelihood = -1447.9	

Note: Cells contain coefficients estimated from multinomial logistic regression, standard errors in parentheses and risk ratios in italics.
*** p<.01 ** p<.05 * p<.1

**Table 3 Explaining Responsibility Attributions for Economic Conditions in Canada
(Multinomial Estimation of Federal Attributions of Responsibility including economic interactions)**

	Variables	Business	Unions	Prov. Gov'ts	USA
Socio-demo.	Female	-.26 (.20) .77	-.41 (.43) .66	-.21 (.25) .82	-1.03 (.14)*** .36
	Income	.06 (.02)*** 1.06	-.15 (.07)** .86	-.06 (.03)** .94	-.00 (.03) 1.00
	Union	-.56 (.14)*** .57	.20 (.74) 1.22	-.20 (.36) .82	-.27 (.11)** .76
	Univgrad	.35 (.20)* 1.42	.23 (.37) 1.26	.28 (.16)* 1.33	.13 (.26) 1.14
Region	Atlantic	-.37 (.17)** .69	.25 (.50) 1.28	-.93 (.90) .39	-.54 (.17)*** .58
	Quebec	-.98 (.02)*** .38	.31 (.07)*** 1.36	1.66 (.08)*** 5.28	-1.62 (.04)*** .20
	West	-.28 (.17)* .76	.51 (.40) 1.67	.98 (.32)*** 2.66	-.04 (.18) .96
Political	RWideo	1.10 (.17)*** 3.01	1.72 (.56)*** 5.60	.82 (.46)* 2.28	.93 (.39)** 1.07
	GovPid	-.02 (.16) .98	.40 (.44) 1.49	.16 (.37) 1.17	-.03 (.24) .97
	NGovPid	.20 (.16) 1.22	-.80 (.81) .45	.52 (.15)*** 1.69	.06 (.16) 1.07
Economic	Socret	-.12 (.08) .89	-.03 (.21) .97	-.83 (.12)*** .43	-.16 (.14) .85
Interactions	GPID*SCRT	-.29 (.27) .75	-.77 (.55) .46	-.35 (.30) .71	-.34 (.34) .71
	NGPID*SCRT	.43 (.10)*** 1.53	.43 (.22)* 1.53	.54 (.21)*** 1.72	.44 (.27)* 1.56
	Atl*SCRT	.84 (.23)*** 2.31	-.21 (.41) .81	1.16 (.12)*** 3.19	.13 (.30) 1.14
	Qc*SCRT	.12 (.04)*** 1.13	.49 (.10)*** 1.62	.66 (.05)*** 1.94	.27 (.03)*** 1.31
	Wst*SCRT	.42 (.19)** 1.52	.25 (.13)* 1.28	.75 (.26)*** 2.12	.08 (.22) 1.08
	Constant	.99 (.11)***	-1.60 (.37)***	-1.58 (.29)***	.73 (.10)***
		N=1192	Pseudo R ² = 0.09	Log Likelihood= -1433.9	

Note: Cells contain coefficients estimated from multinomial logistic regression, standard errors in parentheses and risk ratios in italics.
*** p<.01 ** p<.05 * p<.1

**Table 4 Economic Voting in the 2004 Canadian Federal Election
and Economic Responsibility Attributions**

	Variables	Model 3		Model 4	
Background	Female	.18 (.12)	<i>1.19</i>	.18 (.16)	<i>1.20</i>
	Income	.01 (.02)	<i>1.01</i>	.05 (.03)*	<i>1.05</i>
	Union	-.00 (.14)	<i>.99</i>	.06 (.20)	<i>1.06</i>
	Univgrad	.20 (.13)	<i>1.22</i>	.21 (.17)	<i>1.23</i>
Region	Atlantic	.33 (.19)*	<i>1.39</i>	.30 (.26)	<i>1.35</i>
	Quebec	-.41 (.16)***	<i>.67</i>	-.81 (.22)***	<i>.45</i>
	West	-.73 (.14)***	<i>.48</i>	-.66 (.19)***	<i>.52</i>
Political	GovPid	2.16 (.13)***	<i>8.69</i>	2.22 (.18)***	<i>9.18</i>
	NGovPid	-1.93 (.18)***	<i>.14</i>	-2.00 (.24)***	<i>.14</i>
Economic	Socret	.35 (.09)***	<i>1.42</i>	.35 (.13)***	<i>1.43</i>
	Fed. Resp.			.24 (.19)	<i>1.27</i>
	FDRSP*SCRT			-.11 (.26)	<i>.89</i>
	Constant	-.73 (.17)***		-1.07 (.23)***	
		N=2174		N=1255	
		Pseudo R ² = 0.31		Pseudo R ² = 0.33	
		Log Likelihood= -963.1		Log Likelihood= -528.4	

Note: Cells contain coefficients estimated from binary logistic regression, standard errors in parentheses and odds ratios in italics. *** p<.01 ** p<.05 * p<.1

Appendix

Socio-demographics:

Female - coded as a dummy variable in which female=1 and male=0

Income - Measure of household income coded as an interval variable in increments of ten thousand dollars.

Union – Coded as a dummy variable in which the respondent belongs to a union=1 or does not belong to a union=0.

Education – Coded as a dummy variable in which respondent has completed a Bachelor's degree or higher=1 and has not completed such as degree=0.

Regional:

Atlantic (including Nfld, NS, NB and PEI) Quebec, West (Man. Sask. Ab. And BC) – Dummy variables in which the respondent is a resident from the named region=1 or not a resident of the named region=0. The reference region is Ontario.

Political:

Left-Right Ideology is an index of different questions on government spending. Respondents were asked their opinion on whether the government should spend more, the same or less on a number of issues of public policy. Responses were recoded such that higher values represented more rightist views and lower values indicated more leftist views.

Question wording was “Should the federal government spend more, less or about the same as now on welfare, health care, education, foreign aid and social housing? Alpha for this index was 0.53.

Governing Party Identification: Respondent identified strongly or very strongly with incumbent party=1 or did not identify strongly or very strongly with governing party=0

Opposing Party Identification: Respondent identified strongly or very strongly with an opposition party=1 or did not identify strongly or very strongly with an opposition party=0.

Economic:

A socio-tropic retrospective measure is used in which the question asked was: Over the past year, do you think that Canada's economy has gotten better (=1), gotten worse (= -1) or stayed about the same (=0)?