

The Theory of Conditional Retrospective Voting: Does the Presidential Record Matter Less in Open-Seat Elections?

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This research tests the idea that retrospective voting in presidential elections is conditional, that retrospective evaluations are applied more strictly to incumbents seeking election than to in-party candidates (successor candidates) who are not incumbents. Voters may assign only partial credit or blame for national conditions to successor candidates because, unlike incumbents, these candidates did not personally have power over the policies that might have affected the national conditions leading up to the election. This theory of conditional retrospective voting is examined at both the aggregate level on elections since 1948 and with individual-level survey data since 1972. The analysis consistently finds, as the theory of conditional retrospective voting contends, that the electorate's retrospective evaluations matter significantly more to the vote for an incumbent than to the vote for a successor candidate of the in-party.

Democratic theorists often turn to theories of retrospective voting to explain how democracies can function effectively with electorates having modest levels of information and sophistication.¹ Unlike prospective voting, which requires the electorate to know, evaluate, and contrast the sometimes complex or ambiguous positions of the parties and candidates, retrospective voting requires relatively little of voters. It only requires them to determine whether they think that the in-party has done a reasonably good job. If voters judge conditions to be acceptably good, they vote to return the in-party to office. If they judge conditions to be unacceptably bad, they vote to replace the in-party with the opposition party.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether voters apply their retrospective evaluations of the incumbent presidential administration's performance to the same degree in all presidential elections or whether these evaluations matter less in open-seat elections when incumbents are not running. We propose and test an amendment to the retrospective theory of voting, that retrospective voting is conditional

or varies with the circumstances of incumbency. Specifically, the theory of conditional retrospective voting contends that retrospective evaluations of the performance of incumbent administrations matter significantly more to voters when the incumbent is in the race than when a successor in-party candidate (not the incumbent) is running. Voters attribute partial responsibility for national conditions, both economic and noneconomic, to successor candidates. They assign only part of the credit for good conditions and only part of the blame for bad conditions to successor candidates who did not personally wield power over policies that might have affected the national conditions leading up to the election.

The Theories of Retrospective Voting

The theory of retrospective voting is that voters base their votes on their perceptions of the past performance of the parties and candidates in governing. One

¹The data sets used in this study will be available upon publication at http://www.polsci.buffalo.edu/faculty_staff/campbell/. There is an extensive literature on retrospective voting. See, Lewis-Beck et al. (2008), Kiewiet and Rivers (1984), Lewis-Beck (2006), and Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000).

of the earliest statements of the theory was offered by Lippmann in *The Phantom Public*. As Lippmann put it, “to support the Ins when things are going well; to support the Outs when they seem to be going badly, this, in spite of all that has been said about Tweedledum and Tweedledee, is the essence of popular government” (1925, 126). In *The Responsible Electorate*, the venerable Key advanced and tested the theory: “The impact of events from the inauguration of an Administration to the onset of the next presidential campaign may affect far more voters than the fireworks of the campaign itself” (1966, 9). In the notes to the conclusion of his posthumously published classic work, Key observed that voter decisions in elections were based on whether they “like or don’t like the performance of government” (150). Tufte, in *Political Control of the Economy*, offered one of the first tests of the macro-political tests of elections as referenda “on the incumbent administration’s handling of the economy and of other issues” (1978, 106). Tufte neatly summarized the primacy he found in retrospective evaluations of the state of the economy when he wrote that, “...as goes economic performance, so goes the election” (137).

In *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*, Fiorina (1981) clarified the mechanisms of retrospective voting theory and provided a comprehensive empirical examination of the theory. Fiorina drew a distinction between two versions of the theory. The first was associated with Key (1966) and was based on the premise that voters were purely results oriented. Elections amounted to a simple referendum on the in-party’s performance providing rewards or punishment after the fact for policy success or failure. A second version of the theory was associated with Downs and was based on the premise that voters look for convenient and reliable information about the likely effects of alternative policies proposed for the future. Experience with past policies may provide such low-cost information. Voters look to the past to obtain a firmer, more reality-based set of expectations about where the parties and candidates might lead them in the future. Retrospective voting, from this perspective, is not an end in itself, but “a means to prospective voting” (1957, 13). Fiorina concludes from his analysis that “future expectations count and count very heavily among contemporary American voters” (1981, 197), but that these are grounded in retrospective evaluations of the parties and candidates. Political learning from the past is applied to the election at hand. “Directly experienced and/or perceived events and conditions first contribute to performance evalua-

tions, and both in turn contribute to future expectations” (197). Lewis-Beck’s cross-national work on economic voting corroborates Fiorina’s findings in many respects. Lewis-Beck concluded that voters do not simply vote retrospectively and that prospective voting is informed by retrospective evaluations (1988, 64–65). Voters learn from the past and apply this to their vote decisions about the future.

The theory of conditional retrospective voting departs from the standard unconditional theory in its claim that retrospective evaluations provide more useful information to voters when the incumbent is running and that retrospective evaluations provide fewer insights into future performance in open-seat contests. In essence, the theory of conditional retrospective voting suggests that accountability for governmental performance is partly a matter of party responsibility and partly a matter of personal responsibility associated with the president. When an incumbent is running, both personal and party responsibility apply. When the incumbent is not running, only party responsibility applies to the vote, and voters must look to information about the particular candidates to determine who is more likely to govern effectively.

The Varying Value of Retrospective Evaluations

There is a disparate literature that, in one way or another, suggests that retrospective evaluations have a smaller impact on the vote when a successor candidate is running. The first of these is Fiorina’s (1981) finding that retrospective evaluations enter voter calculations, to a significant degree, by informing prospective evaluations of the candidates and parties. If Fiorina is correct, one might suppose that voters would find greater information value in retrospective evaluations when an incumbent is running. Past performance may partly carry over to the future with the continuity of the same party in office, but may more fully carry over with the continuity of the same person as well as the same party in that office. When the in-party candidate is not the incumbent, voters cannot be quite as sure that the successor would govern in the same way as his or her predecessor. If they liked or disliked the performance of the incumbent, they can feel more comfortable in concluding that they would like or dislike the performance of that incumbent in another term. This conclusion might not be so safely drawn about a successor candidate. The information gained through retrospective evaluations should be to some degree discounted

when applied to a successor candidate of the in-party. Evaluations of President Eisenhower in 1960 could only help voters so much in forming expectations about what Richard Nixon would be like as president. Similarly, Hubert Humphrey in 1968 was not Lyndon Johnson, George H.W. Bush in 1988 was not Ronald Reagan, Al Gore in 2000 was not Bill Clinton, and John McCain in 2008 was not George W. Bush. Though of the same party, each was a different person with his own strengths and weaknesses of leadership.

Other research indicates that the rewards or punishments associated with evaluations of past economic and other conditions depend on who is attributed with responsibility for those conditions. Peffley makes a compelling case that “retrospective voting should be affected in no small measure by perceptions of whether the incumbent party is responsible for economic conditions....attributions of responsibility affect the *weight* that is assigned to performance information....If a person feels that the incumbent party is not at all responsible for prevailing economic conditions, then this information tells her or him nothing about the competence of the party or the party’s future policy intentions” (1984, 288). Petrocik and Steeper (1986) and Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh (1988) both find evidence that the attribution of responsibility to the government for conditions is important to the assignment of rewards and punishments. Norpoth (2001) examines the attribution of responsibility in the possibly complicating circumstances of divided government. In a similar vein, Powell and Whitten (1993), Whitten and Palmer (1999), Christopher Anderson (2000), and Cameron Anderson (2006) in their cross-national analyses establish how certain institutional arrangements in government blur political responsibility for economic conditions and thereby blunt the electoral impact of retrospective evaluations of those conditions. These “clarity of responsibility” findings mesh nicely with Lewis-Beck’s findings that, “the number of parties in the ruling coalition appears to dampen the economically based anti-incumbent vote” (1988, 109). In short, attribution of responsibility matters in the application of retrospective evaluations, and one might suppose that less responsibility attributed to a new in-party candidate means that retrospective evaluations should matter less to voters in the decision of whether to vote for that candidate.

The conditional nature of retrospective voting also finds support in studies explicitly comparing races with and without incumbents. In their analysis of the National Election Studies’ open-ended questions about what voters like and dislike about the presidential candidates and their political parties, Miller and

Wattenberg examined both the time-horizon (retrospective or prospective) and the ends or means (performance or policy) of responses for different types of candidates (incumbents, challengers, and those in open-seat races) in elections from 1952 to 1980. They found that voters tend to apply retrospective performance criteria more to incumbents, prospective policy criteria more to challengers, and a mix of prospective and retrospective performance criteria to candidates in open-seat contests. They conclude that, “for races with incumbents, retrospective performance clearly plays a much greater role” (1985, 369).

In his examination of the implications of the two-term limit on presidents for retrospective voting theory, Norpoth asks: “Of what use to a voter is the ‘performance of the incumbent’ if that incumbent is not running for re-election?” (2002, 126). He initially answers this question by observing that, “Strictly speaking, incumbent performance, including economic performance, should not be expected to affect the voting decision in such elections” (126). The idea that responsibility carries forward fully because of the common party affiliations of the candidates “may be very well true for elections where candidates are little known to most voters, but is hard to accept for electoral contests featuring highly visible contenders” (126). His empirical analysis confirmed his suspicions. While his index of economic performance was significantly and positively related to the vote for incumbent presidents in 22 elections from 1872 to 2000, it was unrelated to the vote for the would-be successors to incumbents in the 10 open-seat elections in this period. The economic index’s coefficient actually had a negative sign in the open-seat equation.

Nadeau and Lewis-Beck (2001) in analyzing NES data from 1956 to 1996 come to the same conclusion. Their analysis finds that, “when a popularly elected president is able to lead the campaign, economic voting becomes almost exclusively retrospective. He or she is judged essentially on perceived national economic performance over the past year. But when the incumbent campaign is headed up by a new standard bearer, economic voting becomes exclusively prospective” (2001, 178). It seems plausible that if successor candidates are not held responsible for the economy left by the incumbent, by the same token they might not be held responsible otherwise for the incumbent’s record. And even if responsibility does carry over from incumbent to successor in the same party, it probably does not carry forward completely.

The conditional nature of retrospective voting is also suggested in research of subpresidential voting. In examining retrospective voting in congressional

elections, Hibbing and Alford (1981) found that retrospective voting more strongly affects the vote for incumbents of the in-party than of in-party candidates running in open-seat contests. In his analysis of 12 gubernatorial elections in four states between 1986 and 1998, King found that “in all elections with an incumbent seeking to return to office, gubernatorial popularity had the greatest impact on voters’ decisions....The effect of gubernatorial popularity was reduced substantially in open seat races...” (2001, 593).

Finally, research on presidential election forecasting suggests that retrospective voting may be conditional, having a muted effect for successor candidates.² Suspicions about the diminished effect of retrospective effects for successor candidates were first raised among election forecasters in the wake of the 2000 election. The major presidential election models, each of which had a retrospective component, overpredicted the vote for Vice President Al Gore. With indicators of strong economic growth in the first half of 2000, both Campbell (2001) and Lewis-Beck and Tien (2001) independently suggested that Gore might not have been accorded the full credit for economic good times that voters would have attributed to President Clinton had he been running. When both models were reestimated with a specification that awarded successor candidates half credit or blame for economic conditions, the fit of both models to the data from past elections was improved. Further testing of both Abramowitz’s “time for a change” forecasting model and Campbell’s “trial heat and economy” forecasting model found that the conditional or partial credit model fits the data at least as well as the unconditional or full credit specifications of the models (Campbell 2008).³

²In one of the very few studies of succession effects, Franco Mattei and Herbert Weisberg (1994) find that though retrospective evaluations do not carry the same weight for would-be heirs of the incumbent as they would in evaluating the incumbent himself, they do matter for successor candidates. Moreover, the closeness of the association between the in-party successor candidate and the incumbent affects the extent to which voters apply their retrospective evaluations to the successor candidate. Evaluations of the incumbent president’s performance matters more in deciding whether to vote for a sitting vice president than a past vice president. Presumably, it should also matter more in the case of a vice president than a successor candidate who had not held that office.

³Sidman, Mak, and Lebo (2008) also investigated partial credit retrospective evaluation forecasting models. Applying Bayesian Model Averaging to 72 models, they found that unconditional models generally had smaller errors, but the differences were relatively small. It is, however, unclear how strong any of their models are. The question remains whether retrospective evaluations have conditional effects in a fully specified model (Campbell 2008).

Based on this accumulated research, there is good reason to suppose that the retrospective evaluations of voters might play a larger role in elections in which incumbents are running than in those in which they are not. If voters consult retrospective evaluations at least in part because of their value in predicting the future performance of leaders based on their past performance as Fiorina (1981) found, if retrospective evaluations have stronger effects when the responsibility can be more clearly and definitely attributed as Peffley (1984) and others found with respect to the economy, if voters are more likely to mention retrospective evaluations as something that they like or dislike about incumbents than about nonincumbents as Miller and Wattenberg (1985) found, if retrospective evaluations of the economy play a larger role in the vote in incumbent elections than in open-seat elections as both Nadeau and Lewis-Beck (2001) and Norpoth (2002) found, if retrospective economic evaluations matter more to the elections of House incumbents of the in-party than they do to nonincumbents of the in-party as Hibbing and Alford (1981) found, if gubernatorial popularity matters more when the incumbent is running than in open seats as King (2001) found, and if awarding partial credit or blame to successor candidates for economic conditions strengthens the accuracy of presidential forecasting models as Campbell (2001) and Lewis-Beck and Tien (2001) claimed, then it seems quite plausible that retrospective evaluations of all sorts, noneconomic as well as economic, matter less in open-seat contests than they do when an incumbent is running.

The diminished effects of the economic record on the vote for successor candidates seems well-established through the work of both Nadeau and Lewis-Beck (2001) and Norpoth (2002). What we seek to determine is whether the muted retrospective voting can be applied more generally to the elections without incumbents. Do presidential approval ratings, which presumably measure voter reactions to the incumbent’s performance in office across the spectrum of policy areas and activities and over some length of time, matter less in the assessment of successor candidates than they do in evaluations of the incumbent? This is the proposition that we will now examine.

Data and Methods

The theory of conditional retrospective voting, that retrospective evaluations have a significantly smaller influence on preferences and voting for successor

candidates of the in-party, is tested in four ways—with macro data dealing with the impact of approval on presidential preferences, with micro-level or individual-level NES data dealing with presidential preferences, with macro data dealing with the presidential vote, and with micro NES data dealing with the reported vote.

The key independent variable in the analysis is presidential approval. The aggregate measure of presidential approval is drawn from Gallup Poll data collected since 1948 (Roper Center 2009). Gallup asks a national sample of adults, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way (the president’s name) is handling his job as president?” The percentage of those who indicate that they approve of the president’s job performance is his approval rating. Since 1972, the NES has asked respondents the same presidential approval question.

Presidential approval is assumed to reflect the composite of various retrospective evaluations that the survey respondent considers politically important. While responses to the approval question may reflect reactions to the president’s recent performance, retrospective voting theory does not stipulate the range of history that must be evaluated to be truly retrospective, and the generally stable nature of aggregate approval ratings suggests that respondents are not basing their assessments on recent impressions. Even so, to ensure that truly retrospective rather than contemporary evaluations are being examined, approval ratings with substantial lags are used in the macro-level analysis. The impact of presidential approval in incumbent reelections and in open-seat elections is evaluated using a number of dependent variables: presidential preference polls, preference measures built from NES “likes and dislikes” questions, NES feeling thermometers, and the vote choice.

The conditional retrospective voting theory is tested first on preference or trial-heat poll data at the macro level in elections from 1948 to 2008. With only 16 elections (10 with incumbents and six with successor candidates: 1952, 1960, 1968, 1988, 2000, and 2008), conclusions drawn from this analysis must be somewhat tentative. Since both approval ratings and preference polls are conducted in the course of these elections, especially in more recent years, we are able to examine multiple associations of the effects of approval ratings on preference polls in each election year. The lagged effect of approval on the in-party’s support in a later preference poll controlling for the candidate’s standing in the earlier preference poll are examined at nine points during the campaign within

each election since 1980. This provides 39 cases of the association between approval and preferences in elections with incumbents and 24 cases without incumbents.

The second test of the theory examines the impact of approval on preferences about the presidential candidates using individual-level NES data from 1972 to 2004, both an index of preferences based on survey responses of what respondents liked or disliked about the parties’ candidates and an index of preferences based on the “thermometer” questions. These data also have different limitations, having only two successor elections in this series (1988 and 2000). To minimize the risk of omitted variable bias, the analysis includes a battery of control variables that have been associated with preferences for presidential candidates and would be considered causally prior to presidential approval evaluations (therefore a plausible source of a spurious association between approval and either presidential preferences or the vote). These include party identification, ideological orientations, religiosity, both retrospective and prospective economic evaluations, as well as a set of personal background characteristics (gender, race, income, and education).⁴ These variables were oriented to reflect which party was the in-party.⁵ The economic considerations are also specified as having conditional effects.

The third and fourth tests of the theory parallel the first two, but examine the impact of approval on the vote division at the macro level and the reported vote at the micro level. While both the macro and micro analyses have their data limitations, the four tests in combination and with multiple indicators

⁴The study uses the ANES Cumulative Data File of studies from 1948 to 2004 (the October 31, 2005 release). The data are weighted by variable VCF0009a. The variables used are VCF0403 and VCF0407 to construct the presidential likes-dislikes preference measure, VCF0424 and VCF0426 to construct the feeling thermometer preference measure, VCF0704a for presidential vote choice, VCF0450 for presidential approval, VCF0880 for retrospective economic evaluations, VCF0881 for prospective economic evaluations, VCF0301 for party identification with leaners combined with weak partisans, VCF0804 for ideological orientation, VCF0130 for religiosity with no attendance and no religious preference combined, VCF0114 for household income, VCF0140a for education, VCF0104 for gender, and VCF0106 for race and ethnicity with minority racial and ethnic minorities combined.

⁵When Democrats are the in-party, the characteristics assigned the higher values on the control variables are a Democratic party identification, a liberal ideological orientation, higher education levels, lower family incomes, racial minorities, females, and less religiously active. When Republicans are the in-party, the opposite characteristics are assigned the higher values.

should provide a strong foundation for determining whether retrospective voting is conditional.

The Findings

The findings are consistent and conclusive. The analyses of presidential approval effects on both preferences and the vote at both the macro and micro levels indicate that retrospective voting is conditional. In open-seat elections, retrospective evaluations matter to both preferences and votes for successor candidates, but they matter significantly less than they do for the preferences and votes for incumbents who bear some measure of personal responsibility for the conditions being evaluated by voters.

Approval and Candidate Preferences

The first test is the macro analysis of approval on presidential preferences. Table 1 presents the estimated effects of June presidential approval ratings on the in-party candidates' standing in the early September preference polls for elections from 1948 to 2008.⁶ Because of the small number of elections, we examined the data as a split sample rather than with an interaction term. The first equation estimates the impact of approval on voter preferences when the incumbent was in the race, and the second estimates this impact in the six open-seat elections since 1948.

Even with the limited number of elections to examine, the difference between incumbent-seat and open-seat elections is clear. Presidential preferences are strongly influenced by approval rates when incumbents are running, but not in open-seat contests. A 2% increase in the approval of the incumbent translates into slightly more than a 1% increase in the amount of preference poll ratings. This relationship is not statistically significant in open-seat contests. The difference in the approval coefficients is statistically significant ($p < .05$, one-tailed). This leaves open the possibility that open-seat elections are not only less retrospective affairs, but may be unaffected by retrospective judgments—though the lack of a significant approval effect in open seats may largely reflect the small number of elections examined.

Table 2 examines whether there is an open-seat difference in the impact of approval on preferences using lagged preferences and approval ratings on later

TABLE 1 The Effect of Aggregate Presidential Approval on Preference for In-Party Presidential Candidates in Incumbent and Open Seat Races, 1948–2008.

<i>Dependent variable: In-party candidate share of early September preference poll</i>		
Independent Variable	Incumbent Running	Open Seat Election
Presidential approval (June)	.55** (.16)	.16 (.18)
Constant	25.47	41.63
N	10	6
Adjusted R ²	.56	.00
Standard Error of Estimate	6.42	5.65
Durbin-Watson	2.85	1.65

** $p < .01$, one-tailed. The difference in the approval coefficient is statistically significant ($p < .05$, one-tailed).

preference polls at multiple points in campaigns since 1980. This allows for multiple tests of the effects of approval on preferences during the same election year (June approval's effect on July preferences, etc.).⁷ Prior to 1980, approval ratings were not taken frequently enough to allow these lagged tests of association. As in the first analysis, it is clear in Table 2 that presidential approval affects preferences regarding incumbents, but not for in-party candidates who are not incumbents. Even controlling for the initial preference poll standing of the incumbent candidates, about 40% of every additional point in approval ratings boosted the candidates' later preference poll numbers. For successor candidates, however, approval ratings seemed to be irrelevant to their later preference poll standings. The difference in approval effects is statistically significant ($p < .01$, one-tailed). The question at this point seems to be whether retrospective evaluations matter at all in open-seat contests, rather than whether they are equal to their impact when an incumbent is running.

Table 3 reports the analyses of the individual-level effects of presidential approval on the preferences for the in-party candidate. Are voters who approve of the president's job performance less likely to carry over those evaluations to in-party candidates who are not the incumbent than they are to incumbents who are running? The table presents the analysis for elections since 1972 of two presidential preference measures in NES data. The first measure is

⁶June approval ratings were used since they preceded the conventions. July approval polls were less comparable since some were affected by the parties' convention bumps.

⁷Approval and preference polls were conducted frequently enough to have nine readings in each election. With lagged variables, this translates into eight usable cases each year, though only seven were available in 1980.

TABLE 2 The Effect of Aggregate Presidential Approval on Preferences for In-Party Presidential Candidates in Incumbent and Open Seat Races, 1980-2008.

<i>Dependent variable: In-party candidate share of presidential preference poll</i>		
Independent Variables	Incumbent Running	Open Seat Election
Lagged presidential approval	.38** (.11)	.06 (.06)
Lagged preference poll	.37** (.15)	.55** (.19)
Constant	15.65	19.69
N	39	24
Adjusted R ²	.63	.22
Standard Error of Estimate	4.35	3.98
Durbin-Watson	2.42	1.78

**p < .01, one-tailed. Preference polls and approval ratings were read at nine points in the election year from June through November. There were eight usable cases in each election year. Because of irregular polls, some lagged approval polls were the same for more than one case. The coefficient for lagged presidential approval is significantly greater in elections in which the incumbent is running than in open seat elections (p < .01, one-tailed).

based on a count of responses to open-ended likes and dislikes questions (the number of likes about the in-party candidate and the dislikes about the out-party candidate minus the dislikes about the in-party candidate and the likes about the out-party candidate). The measure ranges from +10 to -10. The second measure is based on the voter's thermometer rating of the in-party candidate minus the voter's rating of the out-party candidate. The interaction terms in the equations estimate the difference in the effect of approval on these preference measures in elections when the in-party candidate is the incumbent. The analysis also controls for a number of factors suspected of influencing presidential preferences. These control variables generally had their expected effect on presidential preferences.

As the interaction terms in the table indicate, approval of the president's job performance matters significantly more to voters when the incumbent is running. In open-seat elections, presidential approval boosts the evaluation of the nonincumbent in-party candidate by almost two and a half likes-dislikes mentions and by about 28 thermometer points. In contrast, when the incumbent is running, presidential approval boosts the evaluation of the incumbent by about three-and-a-half mentions on the likes-dislikes measure and about 40 thermometer points—a difference of about one mention on the likes-dislikes measure and 12 thermometer points. The interaction

estimated differences in approval effects in both regressions are statistically significant (p < .01, one-tailed). General retrospective evaluations significantly affect preferences for successor candidates, but they once again have a significantly stronger impact on preferences for incumbents.

Approval and the Presidential Vote

Retrospective voting theory expects the vote for in-party candidates to rise or fall with evaluations of the president and his administration, and it does. But as the conditional retrospective voting theory contends, the rise or fall of the in-party vote with presidential evaluations is substantially muted when the in-party candidate is not the incumbent. Table 4 presents the relationship between the in-party candidate's share of the two-party vote and presidential approval in May, June, and immediately before Election Day. Both the May and June approval ratings precede the parties' conventions and are thus unaffected by temporary convention bumps. To establish that we are examining retrospective effects beyond those related only to the economy, the regressions include economic growth in the first three quarters of the election year, from January to September.

The regression results presented in Table 4 again find the effects of retrospective evaluations to be conditional. Regardless of when the reading of presidential approval is taken, the in-party candidate can expect to gain about a third of a percentage point of the vote for every additional percentage point of approval when the in-party candidate is the incumbent. If the in-party candidate is not the incumbent, the estimated effects are positive but much smaller and not statistically significant. On average, the impact of approval rating on the vote for these successor candidates appears to be about half of what it would have been for the incumbent personally. This is consistent with the previous estimates of both Campbell (2001) and Holbrook (2008). Consistent with Nadeau and Lewis-Beck (2001) and Norpoth (2002), the effects of the economy on the vote are consistently stronger and statistically significant when incumbents are in the race. In open-seat contests, economic effects on the vote were consistently weaker and never achieved statistical significance. Analyses using economic growth over the first half of the election year and economic growth from the fourth quarter of the preceding year to the third quarter of the election year corroborated these findings.

Individual survey data of the reported vote choice also supports the theory of conditional retrospective

TABLE 3 The Effect of Individual Presidential Approval on Preferences for In-Party Presidential Candidates in Incumbent and Open Seat Races, 1972-2004.

<i>Dependent variable: Presidential preference (two measures)</i>		
Independent Variables	Likes-Dislikes Measure	Thermometer Measure
Presidential approval	2.35 (.10)**	27.98 (1.07)**
Presidential approval interaction with incumbent election	1.06 (.11)**	11.63 (1.16)**
Incumbent in the election	-.57 (.09)**	-3.20 (.93)**
Retrospective economic evaluations	.16 (.07)**	1.83 (.70)**
Retrospective economic evaluations interaction with incumbent election	.05 (.08)	.24 (.78)
Prospective economic evaluations	.15 (.08)	1.61 (.85)
Prospective economic evaluations interaction with incumbent election	-.03 (.09)	-.29 (.96)
Party identification	1.10 (.02)**	13.90 (.22)**
Ideological orientation	.69 (.04)**	6.22 (.38)**
Religiosity	.10 (.02)**	.88 (.16)**
Income	.04 (.02)**	.81 (.21)**
Education	.08 (.01)**	.59 (.15)**
Gender	.13 (.05)**	.86 (.48)
Race and Ethnicity	.10 (.02)**	4.76 (.51)**
Constant	-6.91 (.14)**	-80.05 (1.41)**
N	15,257	14,855
Adjusted R ²	.53	.60
Standard Error of Estimate	2.78	28.52

**p < .01, one-tailed. The F-test of the approval interaction effect was 90.92 in the likes-dislikes equation and 100.13 in the thermometer equation. Both were statistically significant at p < .01, one-tailed. The incumbent in the election variable is a dummy variable scored 1 when an incumbent was running and 0 otherwise.

voting. Retrospective voting matters in both elections with incumbents and elections without them, but matters significantly more in the former than the later. Table 5 presents the percentage of voters reporting to the NES that they voted for the in-party candidate in elections from 1972 to 2004. The reported vote is broken down by partisanship, presidential approval, and whether the election was one in which the incumbent was running. As the table reveals, in each category of partisanship and in both incumbent and open-seat elections, those who approved of the president were more likely to vote for the in-party candidate than those who disapproved of him. The differences were quite sizeable in each case. What is also clear is that the differences in the vote percentages of approvers versus disapprovers in each category of partisanship was greater when the incumbent was running than when a successor candidate was the in-party candidate.

Approval mattered in open-seat contests, but mattered less than it did when the incumbent was running. Among partisans of the in-party, whether you approved or disapproved of the president's job

performance changed your likelihood of voting for the in-party candidate by about 46 percentage points when the incumbent was running. When the incumbent was not running, it only made a 34 percentage point difference. Among partisans of the out-party, in elections with an incumbent in the race, those who approved of the president were 44 percentage points more likely to vote for him than those who disapproved of him. In open-seat elections, the in-party voting difference between those who approved and those who disapproved of the president's job performance was a good deal smaller, only about 27 percentage points.

The logit estimation in Table 6 of the reported presidential vote in NES surveys from 1972 to 2004 confirms that retrospective approval evaluations have larger effects on the vote when an incumbent is running. Presidential approval matters to the in-party presidential vote in all elections, but particularly for incumbents and less so for would-be successors. The conditional nature of retrospective voting is reflected in the interaction term of presidential approval and whether the election was one in which an incumbent

TABLE 4 The Effect of Aggregate Presidential Approval on the Vote for In-Party Presidential Candidates in Incumbent and Open Seat Races, 1948–2008.

<i>Dependent variable: In-party candidate share of the national two-party popular vote</i>						
Independent Variable	Presidential Approval in May		Presidential Approval in June		Presidential Approval at the Election	
	Incumbent Running	Open Seat Election	Incumbent Running	Open Seat Election	Incumbent Running	Open Seat Election
Presidential approval (May, June, or Preelection)	.35** (.07)	.13 (.08)	.32** (.07)	.15 (.09)	.34** (.06)	.16 (.09)
GDP growth in the first three quarters of the year	.74* (.27)	.52 (.51)	.65* (.31)	.46 (.50)	.75* (.25)	.36 (.51)
Constant	33.22	42.12	35.25	41.42	33.68	41.42
N	10	6	10	6	10	6
Adjusted R ²	.84	.31	.81	.35	.86	.36
Standard Error of Estimate	2.46	2.71	2.67	2.63	2.28	2.61
Durbin-Watson	2.63	2.61	2.60	2.47	2.37	2.34

**p < .01, *p < .05, one-tailed. The presidential approval coefficients are significantly greater (p < .01, one-tailed) in incumbent running elections in each of the regressions.

was running. Controlling for an array of factors that might affect both approval evaluations as well as the vote, the effect of presidential approval evaluations are evident and are clearly stronger when the in-

cumbent is in the race. As expected, the difference in the effects of presidential approval on the vote in incumbent elections as opposed to open-seat races is statistically significant (p < .01, one-tailed). A separate analysis of NES 2008 data also supports the theory of conditional retrospective voting.

TABLE 5 Individual Presidential Approval and Votes for the In-Party Presidential Candidates in Incumbent and Open Seat Races, 1972–2004.

Party Identification and Presidential Approval	Vote % for In-Party Candidate		Smaller Difference in Open Seat Elections?
	Incumbent	Open Seat	
In-Party Partisans			
Approve	95.2	93.1	
Disapprove	49.5	58.7	
Difference	45.7	34.4	Yes 75% (34.4/45.7)
Independents			
Approve	79.3	68.2	
Disapprove	22.8	26.8	
Difference	56.5	41.4	Yes 73% (41.4/56.5)
Out-Party Partisans			
Approve	49.0	31.0	
Disapprove	4.9	4.1	
Difference	44.1	26.9	Yes 61% (26.9/44.1)

Note: Logit analyses indicated that each of the differences between incumbent elections and open-seat elections is statistically significant, p < .05. Leaning independents are classified as partisans.

Since logit coefficients are not easily interpreted directly, we converted them to expected probabilities of voting for the in-party presidential candidate. The effect of presidential approval in an open seat or an election in which the incumbent is running is the difference in the expected probabilities of an in-party vote for those approving of the president's past performance and for those disapproving of that record, with all other considerations equal (set to the mean values of the control variables for respondents in the particular type of election). In open-seat elections, presidential approval increased the probability of an in-party vote by 46.5 percentage points. In elections with a running incumbent, presidential approval increased the probability of an in-party vote by 60.8 percentage points. The 14.3 percentage point difference reflects the conditional nature of retrospective voting.

The direct effects of retrospective economic evaluations of presidential preferences (Table 3) and the vote (Table 6) are also noteworthy. These economic retrospective evaluations have some direct effect on preferences, but no significant direct effects on the vote. It would appear that economic retrospective evaluations largely influence both presidential preferences and the vote indirectly by helping to shape the

TABLE 6 The Effect of Individual Presidential Approval on Voting for the In-Party Presidential Candidates in Incumbent and Open Seat Races, 1972-2004.

<i>Dependent variable: Vote for the in-party presidential candidate</i>	
Independent Variables	Logit Estimation
Presidential approval	2.06 (.16)**
Presidential approval interaction with incumbent election	.76 (.18)**
Incumbent in the election	-.26 (.15)
Retrospective economic evaluations	.01 (.10)
Retrospective economic evaluations interaction with incumbent election	.13 (.11)
Prospective economic evaluations	.20 (.12)
Prospective economic evaluations interaction with incumbent election	-.05 (.14)
Party identification	1.18 (.03)**
Ideological orientation	.62 (.06)**
Religiosity	.13 (.02)**
Income	.09 (.03)**
Education	.03 (.02)
Gender	.06 (.07)
Race and Ethnicity	.67 (.08)**
Constant	-7.21 (.25)**
N	9,277
Chi-square Statistic for model fit	7,629.56**
% predicted correctly	88.4
% reduction in error	75.5

*p < .05, **p < .01, one-tailed. The chi-square test of the approval interaction effect was 17.18 and statistically significant at the p < .01 level, one-tailed.

voters' general retrospective evaluations of the president's performance. There is no particular reason why economic evaluations should stand out from the other impressions that voters have of the president's job performance, though some effects of economic evaluations on preferences may be picked up by the economic evaluation measure. In the 2000 election, for example, to the extent that voters thought that the economy had done well under the Clinton administration, they would be more likely to indicate that they approved of President Clinton's job performance. Both the preference equations in Table 3 and the vote equation in Table 6 indicate that these voters approving of President Clinton were more likely to vote for his Democratic would-be successor Al Gore, but not as likely as they would have been to vote for President Clinton had he been the Democratic candidate.

The conditional impact of general retrospective evaluations is further demonstrated by estimates of the expected in-party votes for voters with different

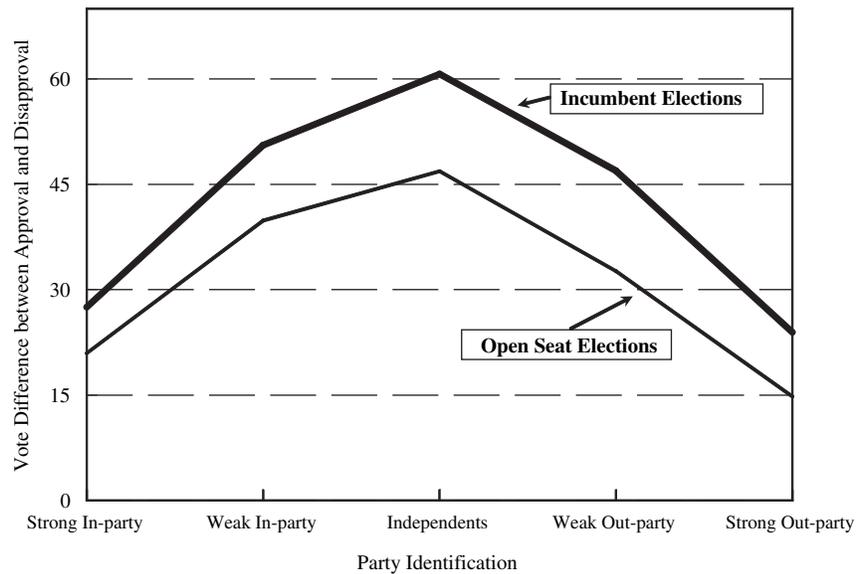
party identifications and different evaluations of the president's job performance. Figure 1 plots the difference in the expected probability of voting for the in-party candidate between those who approved of the president's job performance and those who did not. These differences are plotted for voters by their party identifications and by whether the election was an open-seat or an incumbent running contest.

Three points about retrospective voting are apparent in this figure. First and most obviously, whether the incumbent is running or not, in-party candidates benefit when more voters approve of the performance of the party's president. All in-party vote differences between approvers and disapprovers are in the positive range. Second, partisanship affects the extent to which approval affects the vote. Whether the presidential contest involves the incumbent or is an open seat, presidential approval matters more to weak and leaning partisans than to strong partisans and more to independents than partisans of any strength. In both incumbent and open seat elections, the approval effects reach their peaks among independents. Finally, as the theory of conditional retrospective voting contends, approval matters more to the vote when the incumbent is in the race than when he is not. Regardless of partisanship, when an incumbent was running, voters were significantly more inclined to vote for the in-party candidate when they approved of the president or against the in-party candidate when he or she disapproved of the in-party candidate. The differences in probabilities of an in-party vote (the gap between the two curves in Figure 1) ranged from about seven percentage points among strong partisans of the in-party to 14 percentage points among independents and weak partisans of the out-party—but by whatever margin, there was a consistent and significant gap with the approval difference mattering less in open-seat elections.

Discussion

There is no question that voters look to the past in deciding how they will vote. They (perhaps wisely) do not depend exclusively on what the candidates and media tell them during the campaign. As our analysis has demonstrated, however, voters understand that the value of information and evaluations of past performance by the parties is of greater value in some elections than in others. When the incumbent is running, retrospective evaluations as reflected in approval ratings of the incumbent are especially

FIGURE 1 Expected In-Party Vote Difference between those Approving and Disapproving of the President’s Job Performance, 1972–2004



Note: Calculated from the logit equation estimates in table 6. Leaning independents are grouped with weak partisans.

meaningful to voters and strongly affect their candidate preferences and votes. When the incumbent is not running, retrospective evaluations are less meaningful and less strongly affect the voters’ candidate preferences and their votes. In open-seat elections, voters are more heavily influenced by evaluations of the candidates and their issue positions.

The theory of conditional retrospective voting was thoroughly tested on both candidate preferences and the vote with both macro- and micro-level data and with two indicators of candidate preferences at the micro level. The findings were consistent on one central point. In each and every test (eight in all), retrospective voting was found to be significantly weaker in open-seat elections.

While the findings were consistent on the central point of the theory, there were also differences in the extent to which the impact of retrospective evaluations differed in open-seat as opposed to incumbent elections. The impact of approval in open-seat elections appeared weakest in the macro-level analyses. Approval appeared to make no difference in macro-level analyses of the impact of approval on candidate preferences (Tables 1 and 2). This may reflect the small number of open-seat election observations in these analyses. In the macro analysis of the impact of approval on the vote, approval appeared to have about half the effect that it had in incumbent elections. In the individual-level analyses,

the smaller effect of retrospective evaluations in open-seat contests was less pronounced, but still significant. In the micro-level analyses, based on the interaction estimates in Table 3 and the percentages in Table 5, the effects of retrospective evaluations in open seat contests were about 70% of what they were when incumbents were running.

Though all of the findings support the conditional retrospective voting perspective, the differences between the macro- and micro-level findings raise some additional questions. While these differences may be attributed to the small number of cases in the macro-level analyses, they might also reflect the even smaller number of open-seat elections examined in the micro-level analyses. Since approval ratings were not available in the NES data used in the micro-level analyses until the 1972 election, the micro-level analysis encompasses only two open-seat elections: 1988 and 2000. The macro-level analysis also includes the open-seat elections of 1952, 1960, 1968, and 2008. The difference in the macro- and micro-level findings, though at all times supporting conditional retrospective voting, may reflect the voters’ perceptions of different levels of associations between the successor candidate and his party’s incumbent. Although four of the six successor candidates in this period were sitting vice presidents (Stevenson in 1952 and McCain in 2008 being the exceptions), the closeness of associations with their presidents varied.

G.H.W. Bush in 1988 certainly emphasized his association with President Reagan and, though Al Gore in 2000 kept President Clinton at arm's length during the campaign, he had been a very active and visible vice president.

Were the successor candidates not examined in the NES series less strongly associated with their party's presidents? There are reasons to speculate that they may have been. Stevenson in 1952 was associated with Truman, but had not been his vice president. Nixon in 1960 had served two terms as Eisenhower's vice president but had maintained a public image quite independent of the president. Humphrey in 1968, though serving as Johnson's vice president, tried to distance himself during the campaign from the then unpopular president whose approval rating had dropped as a result of the unpopular Vietnam War. Finally, aside from not having served as vice president to President George W. Bush, John McCain in 2008 had a record in the Senate of breaking with his party on a number of issues and ran as a self-proclaimed political maverick. As a result, McCain was able to lead his opponent in the early September preference polls despite his party's president having the lowest approval rating on record for July of an election year.

Analysis of the 2008 NES data supports the view that voters made a bigger distinction between President Bush and Senator McCain than they usually have between presidents and successor candidates and that they discounted their retrospective evaluations of President Bush quite heavily in evaluating Senator McCain. The effects of presidential approval evaluations in 2008 were not only weaker than the normal approval effects in elections with a running incumbent, but weaker than they had been in previous open-seat races (1988 and 2000).⁸

⁸At this writing the 2008 NES data has not been integrated with the cumulative NES data file and the likes and dislikes variables have not been released. However, data were available to estimate the thermometer regression equation in Table 3 and the vote choice logit equation in Table 6. The specification of equations were not identical to those in Tables 3 and 6 owing to a difference in the coding of income, and there were no interaction terms since we were dealing with a single election. The results of the thermometer equation indicate that approval of President Bush increased the thermometer rating difference between Senators McCain and Obama by about 21 points. This is well below the 40 point difference when an incumbent was running. It is also about seven points below the effect of approval in the two open-seat elections (1988 and 2000) included in the NES cumulative data file. Converting the vote choice logit results into probabilities, all other things held constant, there was a 32 percentage point approval effect in 2008 on the probability of voting for the in-party candidate. This is substantially smaller than the 61-point approval effect when an incumbent was running and even smaller than the 47-point effect found in the other (1988 and 2000) open-seat elections.

While both the micro- and macrofindings suggest not only that retrospective evaluations matter less in open-seat elections than in elections in which an incumbent is running, a comparison of these findings and the different elections that they examined also suggests that the degree to which retrospective evaluations are discounted in an open-seat election depends on the voters' perception of how closely associated the successor candidate is to the party's incumbent president.

One final question is raised by the conditional effects of retrospective evaluations. If retrospective evaluations matter less in open-seat races, then something else must matter more.

What fills the gap left by the reduced influence of retrospective evaluations in open-seat elections? There would seem to be two possibilities. Either long-term predispositions (partisanship) or short-term evaluations of the candidates and their issue positions must have a larger impact in open-seat election. Partisanship would seem to be a likely suspect. However, Weisberg (2002, 351–52) found that partisanship, like retrospective evaluations, actually has a *smaller* impact in open-seat elections than it has in incumbent elections. The difference is not large, but his analysis of NES data from 1956 to 1996 shows absolutely no sign of partisanship being a greater influence in open-seat presidential elections. Thus, it would appear that with retrospective evaluations mattering less in open-seat contests, assessments of the candidates' leadership qualities and their issue positions are the considerations that are of increased importance to the voter's choice.

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