

AMERICAN VOTER TO ECONOMIC VOTER:

EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA*

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ABSTRACT

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That *The American Voter* has had, and continues to have, a profound influence on the study of political behavior goes without saying. However, that influence has not touched all its subfields. Oddly, it has had next to no impact in investigations of economic voting. This peculiarity is striking, because the book has an extensive chapter on the topic, Chapter 14 entitled “The Economic Antecedents of Political Behavior.” Furthermore, in Chapter 14, the major theories and findings known today are laid out. Here we document this fact, then trace the “loss” of this potentially seminal essay. We conclude with a plausible explanation for this loss, and suggest a new direction economic voting research might take, based on revived attention to this neglected contribution.

AMERICAN VOTER TO ECONOMIC VOTER: EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

Without exaggeration, it may be said that *The American Voter* (TAV) launched the modern field of political behavior. As Pomper (1978-1979, 617) observed, some thirty years ago, “it can be viewed as a ‘paradigmatic’ work, setting the boundaries and standards for subsequent research.” Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) has spawned thousands of scholarly publications in its subfields of political attitudes, candidate preferences, voting turnout, party identification, issue voting, social context, and electoral patterns. Prewitt and Nie (1971, 479) still sum things up, “Most of our systematic, empirical understanding of voting and elections in the U.S. can be directly traced to studies by this group.” This recital is well-known. Curiously forgotten is their founding of the *economic voting* approach, as well.

In Chapter 14 of TAV, entitled “Economic Antecedents of Political Behavior,” are presaged virtually all the theoretical and empirical elements in contemporary US survey investigations of economic voting. From this seed, what sprouted? When and where? We trace the journey of the economic voting idea, away from TAV, through later studies, to the current period. The idea soon became disconnected from its source, reemerging in new guises, a robust orphan. We identify the initial appearance of TAV in the literature on economics and elections. Then, we note the first use of the phrase “economic voting” in election survey research, essentially independent of TAV. In tracing the development of economic voting theory and measures, this independence remains. Finally, we attempt to explain why this link – American Voter to Economic Voter – was lost.

THE ECONOMIC VOTER IN *THE AMERICAN VOTER*

Within TAV (chp. 14), principle theories, measures, and findings of economic voting theory, as applied to US election survey data, are spelled out. (For a recent review of this survey literature, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007). Below, we quote directly, beginning with the general theory of the electoral punishment or reward of the incumbent, according to economic conditions. After that, quotations are offered on six major issues of continuing relevance: pocketbook v. sociotropic voting, retrospective v. prospective voting, economic measurement, homogenous v. heterogenous effects, the subjective v. the objective economy, and the exogeneity v. endogeneity of economic perceptions. What's remarkable about these excerpts is that they cover nearly every debate within the economics and voting literature, but they did so 20 years before the debate began. However, few who have engaged in the debate credit TAV as the seminal work. Consideration of these passages offers a glimpse at what has been overlooked and sets the stage for tracing the evolution of these ideas from their 1960 appearance, down to the present.

General Theory: Reward-Punishment and Incumbency

“First we will consider political behavior, the ultimate dependent political variable in our theoretical scheme. In this consideration the crucial questions are: (1) Is a person's economic outlook associated with his partisan choice between presidential candidates? (2) Is a person's economic outlook associated with his level of political participation? The answer to both of these important questions is substantially affirmative....Reviewing the pertinent information, it would seem that economic outlook must be placed, under our theoretical scheme, antecedent both to political behavior and partisan attitudes but between them and most of the more remote factors” (397, 399)

“Voting behavior varied with the voters' economic worries; those who were more worried less often voted Republican...[D]oes economic prosperity at election time give the incumbent an advantage at the polls? The successful candidate, the incumbent Republican President, Mr. Eisenhower, did apparently draw a disproportionately large part of his popular vote margin from the economic optimists in 1956.” (385, 400-401)

Issue No.1: Pocketbook v. Sociotropic Voting

“As the concept of economic outlook has been developed for the following discussion, it is related to each of two quite different frames of reference that make up a person’s economic world. These differing frames of reference, each contributing one major component to economic outlook, are (1) a person’s view of his own economic situation and (2) his view of the business conditions that confront the nation.” (394)

Issue No.2: Retrospective v. Prospective Voting

“Let us shift our attention from unemployment ...to factors associated with the expression of more generalized concern about personal economic problems. In the fall of 1956, about four out of every ten persons reported that they or their friends were worried about how they would get along in the next year or so.” (384).

“On a number of highly specific measures of economic optimism and pessimism the rank and file Democrats-for-Eisenhower were, in 1952, not the most pessimistic but the most *optimistic* of major voting groups.”(401)

Issue No.3 : Measurement of Economics

“The concept is that of a person’s economic outlook. As the name implies, this concept is a description of a set of rather general economic attitudes....it has no specific political referent or content....” (393)

“The specific questions used to measure economic outlook were as follows: ‘We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you and your family are better off or worse off financially than you were *a year ago*?’

‘Now looking ahead – do you think that a year from now you will be better off financially, or worse off, or just about the same as now?’

‘Thinking of your income and expenses during the next year – would you say that it will be an average year for you, or better than average, or worse?’

‘A *few years from now*, do you think you and your family will have a better income than you have now, or will you be in about the same situation, or in a less satisfactory situation?’

‘Thinking about conditions in the country as a whole –Do you think that during the *next twelve months* we’ll have good times financially, or bad times, or what?’

‘Would you say that at present business conditions are better or worse than they were a year ago?’

‘And how about a year from now, do you expect that in the country as a whole business conditions will be better or worse than they are at present, or just about the same?’

‘Looking ahead, which would you say is more likely – that in the country as a whole we’ll have continuous good times during the next five years or so, or that we will have periods of widespread unemployment or depression, or what?’” (395)

Issue No.4: Homogenous v. Heterogeneous Effects

“[A] characteristic of this economic entity is found in the uniformity of its political consequences for many segments of the population. It cuts across class lines, party lines, and through socio-economic groupings, usually showing in all settings the same relationships to a given political variable...Whenever there was a variation in economic outlook among a group of people it had much the same meaning for merchants, carpenters, and day laborers, for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans, for ranchers and city dwellers alike.” (394)

Issue No.5: The Subjective v. the Objective Economy

“[E]conomic outlook does, through individual perceptions of the economic situation, reflect the ‘real’ world...[T]here are significant changes in the national economy, particularly the consumer sector of the economy, which these attitudes foreshadow and reflect. Economic events have an impact on both personal and national components of economic outlook.” (394-395)

Issue No.6: Exogeneity v. Endogeneity of Economic Perceptions

“[P]re-existing partisanship affects the political constructions placed upon the flow of economic events....As we might expect, Republican identifiers were much more likely to think the Administration had done a good job than were Democrats...[A] Republican is, as we might expect, more likely than his Democratic counterpart to express satisfaction with the state of the nation’s economy.” (382, 388, 396)

“There is a statistically significant correlation between preference for presidential candidates and economic outlook even when the influence of other interrelated attitudes is statistically removed...If we conclude that economic outlook does not add greatly to our ability to predict, we do not conclude that economic outlook is not a meaningful political factor.” (399)

“Examination of the relevant data discloses that even though one’s economic outlook does reflect many facets of a person’s life that we capture in our descriptions of personal, social, and economic characteristics, it still exerts an *independent* influence on the selected aspects of political involvement which we have examined.” (400)

As we will see, these statements and controversies from TAV chapter 14 foreshadow the survey research that vigorously emerged two decades later. While many scholars credit TAV on a host of other topics, precious few recognize the work for founding economic voting theories. We now turn to how the connection between chapter 14 and the contemporary economic voting

research vanished, as we review the development of the field in each decade following the publication of TAV.

THE 1960'S: THE "LOST" YEARS

As we know, once TAV appeared, it quickly achieved major visibility in the scholarly journals and American politics textbooks of the day. [See the useful review of these early successes in Pomper (1978-1979, 618).] However, this pervasive influence did not spread to studies of economics and elections, despite the clear formulations on the subject it had laid out. Of course, the notion that economic conditions somehow relate to election outcomes had been around for sometime. [An especially good review of these early studies can be found in Monroe (1979).] Relevant studies can be cited from the 30s, 40s, and 50s (Tibbitts, 1931; Gosnell and Colman, 1940; Wilkinson and Hart, 1950). Indeed, Rees, Kaufman, Eldersveld, and Freidel (1962, 458) report that "fragments of research evidence" on the question date back to 1878(!). So, the economic voting idea, in some loose sense, was not new. What was new, courtesy of TAV, was its careful formulation as a hypothesis for individual voting behavior, tested against scientific election survey data. Appreciation of this "newness" simply seems absent during the 1960s.

Throughout the period, TAV is only cited in one study on economics and elections, by Rees, Kaufman, Eldersveld, and Freidel (1962), and that in an economics journal. The study, which examines aggregate links between unemployment and the congressional vote, in the states, mentions TAV in a footnote. They observe that TAV "provides evidence of a close relationship between perceived economic status and partisan voting preference." However, they go on to distance themselves from TAV, concluding "Nor have we attempted a 'motivational' or

‘perceptual’ interpretation of the voting act.” (Rees, Kaufman, Eldersveld, and Freidel, 1962, 458).¹

THE 1970’S: THE “WRONG” STUFF

The 1970s saw a flurry of economics and elections studies, mostly linking macro-economic conditions to popularity or the vote, in *aggregate* time series. (For reviews, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Monroe, 1984; Nannestad and Paldam, 1994). The seminal work here is Kramer (1971), in his examination economic fluctuations and the congressional vote. He directly acknowledges his theoretical debt to Downs (1957), and criticizes survey data, saying time series offer a “more direct test than is readily possible with survey data.” (Kramer, 1971, 131). TAV is given one sentence, a listing in a long literature review: “Results reported in *The American Voter* also suggest that persons concerned with economic problems tended to vote against the incumbent Republicans in 1956.” As perfunctory as this acknowledgement is, it represents more of a nod than that given in other vote or popularity function studies of the time.

In another period classic, Tufte (1978, chp. 5), with his referendum model of elections, demonstrates that the president’s party is punished by declines in real disposable income. While his data analysis is primarily also on aggregate time series, he bolsters it with some simple survey results. He says: “Do more than a few voters actually have economic matters on their minds when they vote? Survey interviews with individual voters conducted during election campaigns will help answer this question.” The footnote to this last sentence reads: “Such studies include Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, *The American Voter*, chapter 14.” (Tufte, 1978, 127). Tenuous as that link is, it is unique in that it cites chapter 14 explicitly. However, nothing more is made of it.

THE 1980'S: ECONOMIC VOTING AND THE SURVEY MODEL

In the 1980s, the study of economic voting through the use of election *surveys* came into its own. One might imagine that the time had come for Chapter 14 to shape, if not dominate, the relevant research. Such was not to be. Instead, the pivotal work is that of Fiorina (1978, 1981).

For the first time, “economic voting” appears in a phrase, with the title of his paper, “Economic Retrospective Voting in American National Elections: A Micro-Analysis.” That effort, analyzing the 1956 to 1974 NES surveys, indicated statistically significant effects of personal economic conditions on the individual presidential vote (Fiorina, 1978). What of the influences of TAV? These are plentiful and seen clearly in his book, which includes an elaboration of certain TAV ideas. For example, he gives extended treatment to the Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) discussion of issue voting and party identification (Fiorina, 1981, 9-10, 85-86). Nevertheless, there is no mention of Chapter 14. Instead, his inspiration comes from Key (1966), with Downs as a foil (Fiorina, 1981, chp.1). The gratitude is direct: “The foregoing argument is not original. Anyone familiar with the works of V.O. Key, Jr., will recognize it as the traditional reward-punishment theory of elections, a theory based on the assumption that citizens vote *retrospectively*” (Fiorina, 1981, 6). ²

Although Fiorina (1981, chp.7) focused on retrospective voting, he also gave attention to prospective voting. Kuklinski and West (1981) took the prospective argument a step farther, asserting that survey studies of the economic vote should employ future-oriented rather than past-oriented items. From this point, the prospective-retrospective controversy took off. As well, the unqualified phrase, “economic voting” officially entered the literature with its appearance in this Kuklinski and West (1981) paper. Curiously, they nowhere cite TAV, in any form.

Another theoretical division emerges about this time: pocketbook (personal) v. sociotropic (national) economic voting. Kinder and Kiewiet (1979, 1981) highlight the theoretical distinction between these two types, and show that sociotropic effects are much greater. This conclusion is reinforced in the more extensive treatment from Kiewiet (1983). This influential book takes its essential theoretical cues from Kramer and Fiorina. [See, in particular Kiewiet (1983, chapter 2).] His attention to TAV restricts itself to discussion of the concept of party identification (Kiewiet, 1983, 30).

In a related but neglected paper Kinder (1981) discusses, perhaps more fully than any other work ever, the Chapter 14 contributions of TAV: “The state of the literature is summarized perfectly by the discussion of economic discontent present in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960). In an otherwise insightful analysis, Campbell and company developed an index: “economic outlook” – that combined pocketbook and sociotropic concerns, thereby making comparisons between the two impossible.” Kinder (1981, 3). This brief comment, quixotically, fails to appreciate that TAV did, for the first time, make the important distinction between personal and collective economic interests.

For the rest of the 1980s, there are numerous survey-based investigations of economic voting, mostly focusing on the time (retrospective v. prospective) or the target (personal v. collective) of economic voting. [As well, it becomes a major question the study of Western European electoral behavior (Eulau and Lewis-Beck, 1985; Lewis-Beck, 1988a).] Also, interest gathers around the “responsibility hypothesis” (Peffley, 1984) and the quality of subjective survey measures of the economy (Lewis-Beck, 1985; Markus, 1988). In sum, economic voting work on American surveys flourishes during the period, but confesses precious little debt to Chapter 14 and TAV. ³ These studies, along with those from the 1960s and 1970s, are classified

in Table 1, in terms of year of publication, level of analysis, dependent variable, use of the “economic voting” phrase, and whether Chapter 14 is cited.

(TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

THE 1990’S TO TODAY: ECONOMIC VOTER MODEL AND TECHNICAL ISSUES

From the 1990s, the economic voter model has been an established paradigm for the investigation of political behavior, at home and abroad. By now, easily 500 books and articles have adopted such an approach. [See the reviews in Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000, 2007, 2008).] Much, not to say most, of the work relies on survey data, and addresses technical issues: the heterogeneity of the economic vote (e.g., Welch and Hibbing, 1992); the effects of economics compared to other issues (e.g. Alvarez and Nagler, 1995); the conditional effects of the economic vote (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck, 2001); the role of divided government (Norpoth, 2001); the role of political sophistication (e.g., Godbout and Belanger, 2007); and the exogeneity of economic evaluations (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Elias, 2008). Theoretically, Downs, Fiorina, Key, Kinder and Kiewiet still dominate. When TAV is mentioned, it is not because of the insights of Chapter 14; rather, because of its ongoing contributions in other areas of political behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

The American Voter, in Chapter 14, lays the foundation for economic voting theory as we know it. Indeed, it “builds much of the house,” so to speak. But this seminal contribution is forgotten completely, in dramatic contrast to the rest of the book. Why did this happen? The neglect in the economics and elections studies of the 60s and 70s could be accounted for by the data-type most typically employed: aggregate time series. However, what of the 1980s, when

individual-level survey data, NES in particular, came to dominate economic voting investigations? Here would seem to be prime and fertile ground for the fruition of Chapter 14. A temptation is to say that it did not happen simply because in that first work Fiorina chose Key as his touchstone. But this is too easy, and smacks of a “great man” theory of ideational dissemination. True, Fiorina was an opinion leader, but so were Kuklinski and West, and Kinder and Kiewiet, all writing at close to the same time. Is it possible that they all studiously ignored Chapter 14, while generously acknowledging other parts of TAV? This would be an odd conspiracy, and cannot be credited.

How else to explain the virtual absence of Chapter 14? A simple answer seems possible—*there is no Chapter 14*. That is to say, there is no such chapter in *The American Voter: An Abridgement*, which came out four years later. The original *The American Voter*, the volume containing Chapter 14 entitled “Economic Antecedents of Political Behavior,” was 573 pages long (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960). Soon after its appearance in 1960, it was abridged and several sections, including Chapter 14, were taken out, cutting the page length to 302. This abridged version came out in paperback in 1964 (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1964). Imagine the attractions to students and professors: the “same” book, in half the length at a more affordable price. Eagerly, scholars continued to read TAV, but in its abridgement. Because of this publishing “error”, Chapter 14 got lost. The new generations of graduate students (including both of us), never saw it. ^{4,5}

Now that Chapter 14 has been “rediscovered,” what can we say about its future? As the excerpts reported here make clear, TAV had theories and results about economic voting that were new and exciting for the times. But since then, most of these ideas and findings have now been recovered independently, by other scholars noted here. Is there something left that is still

largely untouched, meriting further exploration? Yes, at least one thing, their notion of *economic outlook*. This is a global subjective index of economic attitudes, summing up the eight items listed above (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960, 395). It combines the assessment of different economic objects, different in terms of target, time, and level. [Their inspiration came originally from work on consumer attitudes that Katona (1951, 1960) and his colleagues had been doing at the Institute for Social Research (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960, 394).] The expectation is that this multi-indicator model would have more reliability and validity than current measures, which are mostly single-indicator. Thus, the research agenda offered by Chapter 14 is still not completed.

ENDNOTES

1 Interestingly, one of the co-authors of this study – Eldersveld – was a colleague of “the four horsemen” at the University of Michigan. We speculate that it may have been this connection that led to this TAV citation. Perhaps if Eldersveld had not been third author (and note that authorship is not alphabetical), it would have had still more presence.

2 Key was also a major influence on the authors of TAV. Among other things, he read and commented on a draft of the book manuscript that became TAV. In TAV, Key is actually cited or discussed at at least 14 different points in the book (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, p. 565). The influence of authors is seldom one way or unique.

3 Lewis-Beck includes himself in this assessment. In exploring the time dimension of economic voting, using 1984 American election survey data, he simply fails to cite or discuss Chapter 14 or the TAV, in any form (Lewis-Beck, 1988b). In his book focusing on Western Europe, he only references TAV with respect to party identification (Lewis-Beck, 1988a, 58). In that work, his theoretical debt is to Fiorina, Key and – perhaps tellingly – Butler and Stokes (1969) (Lewis-Beck, 1988a, 33-34).

4 Lewis-Beck has his graduate student copy of the abridged version, purchased for \$2.95 in Ann Arbor, in 1970. Each chapter is well-marked up, as Chapter 14 would undoubtedly have been, if it had been there.

5 When Stegmaier arrived in graduate school, Chapter 14 had not only been lost, it had been replaced by Fiorina (1981). Required reading in American Politics at Iowa in 1994 included select chapters from TAV and Fiorina (1981). Lewis-Beck (1988a) was on the recommended list. There was no mention of Chapter 14.

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Table 1: Empirical Studies of Economic Voting in the US (1960-1989)

| Year | Author(s) | Level of Analysis | Generalized Dependent Variable | Use of phrase "Economic Voting" | Citation of TAV chapter 14 |
|-------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1962 | Rees, Kaufman, Eldersveld, Freidel | aggregate | Congressional Vote | no | yes |
| 1971 | Kramer | aggregate | Congressional and Presidential Vote | no | yes |
| 1975 | Bloom and Price | aggregate | Congressional Vote | no | no* |
| 1975 | Goodman and Kramer | aggregate | Congressional Vote | no | no |
| 1975 | Tufte | aggregate | Congressional Vote | no | no |
| 1975 | Meltzer and Vellrath | aggregate | Presidential Vote | no | no |
| 1975 | Arcelus and Meltzer | aggregate | Congressional Vote | no | no |
| 1975 | Macaluso | individual | Presidential Vote | no | no |
| 1976 | Wides | individual | Presidential Vote | no | yes |
| 1977 | Kenski | aggregate | Presidential Popularity | no | no |
| 1978 | Fiorina | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote; Presidential Approval | "Economic Retrospective Voting" | no |
| 1978 | Weatherford | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | no | no |
| 1978 | Klorman | individual | Congressional Vote | no | no |
| 1978 | Tufte | individual and aggregate | Congressional and Presidential Vote | no | yes |
| 1978 | Monroe | aggregate | Presidential Popularity | no | no |
| 1979 | Kinder and Kiewiet | individual | Congressional Vote | no | yes |
| 1979 | Monroe | aggregate | Presidential Popularity | no | yes |
| 1979 | Wides | individual | Presidential Vote | no | yes |
| 1981 | Kinder | individual | Presidential Approval | no | yes |
| 1981 | Kuklinski and West | individual | Congressional Vote | yes | no |
| 1981 | Kiewiet | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | no | no |
| 1981 | Fiorina | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | no | no |
| 1981 | Kinder and Kiewiet | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | no | no** |

| | | | | | |
|-------|----------------------------|---|--|-----|-------|
| 1981 | Hibbing and Alford | individual and aggregate | Congressional Vote | no | no |
| 1982 | Feldman | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | no | no |
| 1983 | McAdams and Johannes | individual | Congressional Vote | yes | no |
| 1983a | Weatherford | individual | Congressional Vote | yes | no |
| 1983b | Weatherford | individual | Congressional Vote | yes | yes |
| 1983 | Kiewiet | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | no | no |
| 1984 | Feldman | individual | Congressional and Presidential Approval | yes | no |
| 1984 | Norpoth | aggregate | Presidential Popularity | no | no |
| 1985 | Chappell and Keech | aggregate | Presidential Popularity | no | no |
| 1985 | Lewis-Beck | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | yes | no |
| 1986 | Abramowitz and Segal | aggregate | Congressional Vote | no | no |
| 1987 | Hibbs | individual and aggregate | Presidential Vote; Presidential Popularity | no | no |
| 1988a | Lewis-Beck | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | yes | no |
| 1988b | Lewis-Beck | individual | Congressional and Presidential Vote | yes | no |
| 1988 | Abramowitz, Lanoue, Ramesh | individual | Presidential Vote | yes | no |
| 1988 | Markus | individual (with aggregate economic data) | Presidential Vote | no | no*** |
| 1989 | Erikson | aggregate | Presidential Vote | yes | no |
| 1989 | Kinder, Adams, Gronke | individual | Presidential Vote | yes | no |

* These authors cite TAV, page 555 (chapter 20): "A party already in power is rewarded much less for good times than it is punished for bad times."

** This work cites TAV, chapter 15's discussion of the economic sensitivity of the farmer.

*** This author cites TAV chapter 10's discussion of the impact of the goodness and badness of the times on partisan change as motivation for how economics can affect voting.

**** These are general categories with many variations on the measurement of the dependent variables.