How party preferences constraint democratic accountability: Why some voters left Labour after the financial crisis and why many did not

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Abstract

Political agency models formalize the expectation that citizens hold incumbent parties accountable for economic breakdowns. Studying the impact of economic downturns on voting behavior, political scientists have argued that – in contrast to this expectation – the voting behavior of most citizens tends to be remarkably stable and few voters switch votes between two elections. This discrepancy is at the center of this paper. Building on prior research in political psychology I argue that two mechanisms constraint citizens' capacity to act in accordance with the retrospective account of democracy: the first is related to perceptual bias of incumbent performance. Voters with strong ties towards their prior choice are likely to filter new information that would otherwise challenge their previous behavior (dissonance avoidance). The second is related to voters for whom the first form of bias fails. Even strong partisan will not filter reality perfectly. If the economic downturn is massive, citizens' capacity to avoid a dissonant reality might be constraint. In these instances citizens might, however, prime other attitudes in their evaluation process to justify and maintain past behavior as the 'lesser of two evils' (dissonance reduction). I apply this theoretical framework to the United Kingdom between 2005 and 2010 and the economic shock in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. This provides an ideal case for understanding the response of prior Labour voters. Using data from the British Election Panel Study I firstly show that a large segment of previous Labour voters actually rated the performance of Labour negatively. Among this subgroup, however, an equally large segment seemed to have justified their vote for Labour as the lesser evil and maintained prior behavior. Electoral accountability might thus lie in the hands of a small subset of citizens.

Keywords: vote switching, economic voting, financial crisis, partisan bias, United Kingdom.

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1 Introduction

In 2005 the United Kingdom's Labour party entered office for the third consecutive time. Two years later the largest financial crisis since World War II hit the economy of the United Kingdom. The housing market and banking system suffered severely, destroying billions of private wealth. Economic activity declined and caused a two-year recession and a sharp increase in unemployment (Bisgaard, 2015, 852-853). In 2010, two years after bailing-out Northern Rock Bank, Labour faced the next General Election. Like most incumbents looking back at dire economic times, Labour officials might have been wondering: are voters dissatisfied with the management of the financial and economic crisis? Would they blame Labour for the downturn? And, most importantly, would they express their dissatisfaction by switching votes at the upcoming election?

Labour lost about six percentage points and 91 seats in the House of Commons, ending 13 years of New Labour government. Labour's main political rivals, the Conservative and Liberal Democratic party, increased their vote share by 3.7 and one percentage points, respectively. Although decisive, these losses might not have been as large as Labour feared, Tories or LibDems hoped, media coverage often suggested and were likely smaller than *some* political scientists would expect.[1] For political agency models (Ferejohn, 1986; Fearon, 1999; Besley, 2006) formalize the expectation that electoral competition provides an important check to political failure in office. According to this view of politics voters are responsive to past government output (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981), especially to economic output which matters in their everyday live (Anderson, 2007; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000, 2007; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Healy and Malhotra, 2013). If this idea is an accurate description of citizens' decision-making, electorates should be volatile and comprise many voters who switch political support between two elections. In the UK, however, only few voters seem to have acted in line with the retrospective model of democracy. This paper aims to understand this discrepancy.

A first answer could be that 'citizens are no competent evaluators of the past' (Huber, Hill and Lenz, 2012, 720). In a perfectly rational world citizens would encounter new evidence, revise prior beliefs regarding the state of the economy, and ultimately adjust electoral behavior to these new perceptions of reality (Gerber and Green, 1998). Research in political psychology has, however, shown that changing factual beliefs is a demanding cognitive process. Perceptual bias is particularly likely, if new evidence challenges preferred behavior and political identities (Kunda, 1990; Tabor and Lodge, 2006; Leeper and Slothuss, 2014; Kahan, forthcoming). The idea behind this approach is that partisanship serves as a 'perceptual screen' (Campbell, Converse and Stokes, 1960, 133) which hinders former Labour supporters to alter their prior factual beliefs regarding the economy (Wlezien, Franklin and Twiggs, 1997; Bartels, 2002; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Evans and Pickup, 2010; Gerber and Huber, 2010). If this is the case, voters in the UK did not punish Labour because they saw no reason for it in the first place. A second answer could be that citizens revised prior beliefs, but attributed responsibility for the economic downturn to other actors. For what

[1] Remember that Labour lost 5.5 percentage points between 2001 and 2005. The General Election of 2010 resulted in a hung parliament and a coalition government for the first time since 1974 and only the second time since the end of World War II.

matters in retrospective theories of voting are not economic circumstances *per se*, but the blame the administration deserves for it (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Peffley, 1984; Rudolph and Grant, 2002; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). In this sense even objective conditions are open to interpretation and rationalization (Gaines et al., 2007; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011; Maholtra and Kuo, 2008; Rudolph, 2003). Complementing bias in factual beliefs, partisan bias in responsibility attribution might explain why citizens refused to move away from Labour (Bisgaard, 2015).

Both explanations rest on the idea that partisan bias distorts the processing of new information which would otherwise challenge prior behavior. Both offer powerful explanations for how electoral accountability is undermined by partisan preferences. In this paper I argue, however, that perceptual filters are not perfect filters of reality. Partisan bias of factual perceptions stems from an individual's motivation to avoid the pressure of a reality dissonant with preferred behavior and partisan preferences (Festinger, 1957). This, however, does not mean that partisans are 'at liberty to conclude whatever they want to conclude merely because they want to', as even proponents of motivated learning conclude (Kunda, 1990, 482) (see also Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002, 9). Various scholars therefore argued that – when confronted with an 'undeniable' reality – citizens' inclination to block dissonant information is constrained (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Redlawsk, Civettini and Emmerson, 2010; Parker-Stephen, 2013; Chzhen, Evans and Pickup, 2014).

For voters in the UK this seems to be the case. Figure 1 shows the development of (a) economic perceptions (factual beliefs) and (b) voters' perceived performance of Labour over the 2005-2010 election cycle among Labour supporters of 2005.[2] The first message of this figure is that former Labour supporters showed no signs of partisan rationalization of factual beliefs (Parker-Stephen, 2013; Chzhen, Evans and Pickup, 2014): at the height of and after the financial breakdown these voters did not interpret the state of the economy in a way that is consonant with their prior behavior. The second message is that when individuals rate the performance of Labour – which I take as the politically significant part of economic discontent (Rudolph and Grant, 2002; Duch and Stevenson, 2008) – they draw different conclusions: after the economic shock about 40% rate the performance of Labour positively, while about 35% rate it negatively (down from uniform satisfaction with Labour in 2005). While the first segment might have attributed credit and blame in a partisan congenial fashion (Maholtra and Kuo, 2008; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011; Bisgaard, 2015), the second segment poses a challenge to the explanations outlined above. The segment of voters which became dissatisfied with Labour clearly outnumbers the segment of voters that actually moved away from Labour in 2010. It is their reasoning and decision-making process I aim to understand in this paper.

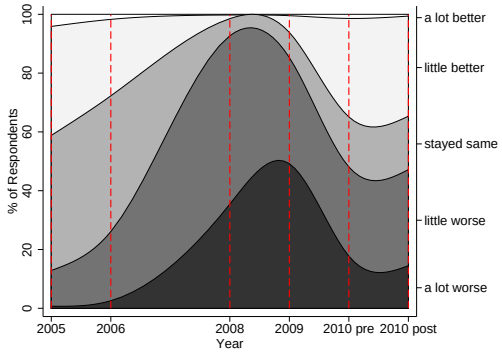
Research question *Why do voters stick with their prior choice, if they became dissatisfied with how it managed the economy?*

In this paper I argue that voters whose assessments of their preferred party are dissonant

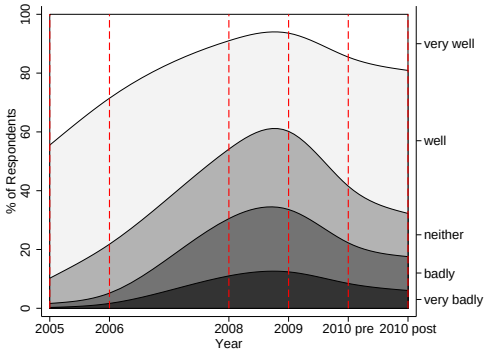
[2] I focus on prior Labour voters because this is the only group for whom the financial crisis was likely to be treathening regarding their voting behavior.

Figure 1: Evaluations of Labour's Economic Performance and Economic Performance in General, 2005 to 2010, among 2005 Labour voters

(1a) Economic Circumstances in General



(1b) Labour's Economic Performance



Note: In all survey waves respondents were asked: 'How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last 12 months?'[(1) Got a lot worse, (2) Got a little worse, (3) Stayed the same, (4) Got a little better, (5) Got a lot better] and 'How well do you think the present government has handled the economy in general? [(1) Very well, (2) Fairly well, (3) Neither well nor badly, (4) Fairly badly, (5) Very badly]'. Both figures show the proportions of respondents for each answer category for the following panel waves: (a) 2005 post-election (field time: May 2005), (b) 2006 (May-June 2006), (c) 2008 (June-July 2008), (d) 2009 (July-August 2009), (e) 2010 pre-election (April 2010), and (f) 2010 post-election (May 2010). The sample is restricted to respondents who reported a vote choice for Labour in the 2005 post-election wave and reported their vote choice in the 2010 post-election wave.
Source: British Election Panel Study (Clarke et al., 2010)

with preferred behavior can justify behavior with the help of two simple facts: (a) voting against one party implies voting for another party and (b) for most voters the economy is not they only factor they deem relevant in politics. The main argument of this paper is that voters who are pressured by a dissonant reality can rely on these other factors to maintain their prior behavior. In particular, partisans might rely on their preferences towards the opposition party to justify their vote choice for the incumbent as the 'lesser of two evils' (Groenendyk, 2012). This allows partisans to rationalize away poor performance of their party as long as they find attitudes on which the other party is seen more negative than their own party (Abelson, 1959; Fein and Spencer, 1997; Spencer et al., 1998; Cooper and Mackie, 1983). In the UK switching to, say, the Tories implies voting for a party that quite likely offers policies a former Labour voter might not agree with, is ideologically opposed to his or her own views, or is led by a politician this voter does not like. By priming these other factors of political choice, citizens alleviate the dissonance which allows them to stick with prior choices (Groenendyk, 2012).

I apply this theoretical framework to Labour's third term in office between 2005 and 2010. This is an ideal case to understand citizens' response to economic changes. Firstly, the economic shock was unexpected and large enough to inform voters' behavior. Furthermore, it happened during the election cycle giving Labour enough time to react to the new economic reality and voters enough time to observe the effort of the incumbent. Secondly, the 2005-2010 election cycle has been covered intensively by the British Election Panel Study (Clarke et al., 2010). This allows me to measure

prior perceptions, preferences, and behavior as well as citizens' response after the financial crisis became visible. Thereby I can apply a very conservative test: I analyze whether prior changes in performance assessments have an impact on later changes in behavior and preferences (Lenz, 2012)

The idea that partisanship makes voters less responsive to politicians' performance has received broad attention recently (Eggers, 2014; Kayser and Wlezien, 2011; van der Brug, van der Eijk and Franklin, 2007). I contribute to this literature in three principal ways: firstly, I offer a more complete picture of how partisan preferences undermine electoral accountability. Existing research focused predominantly on perceptual bias as primary way of dissonance avoidance. In this paper I argue that partisan bias does not end when perceptions are dissonant with prior behavior. Secondly, I focus on a group which usually is not at the center of research in political behavior: prior incumbent voters. This has two advantages: firstly, prior incumbent voters are the main principals of the incumbent, as only their behavior can pay the current government the electoral costs of its efforts in office. From the standpoint of electoral accountability this group thus is the most interesting group. The second advantage is methodological. Because all voters share the fact that they voted for Labour in 2005, the causal inferences drawn upon comparisons within this group are likely more valid than comparing prior opposition to prior incumbent voters who differ on various other observed and unobserved factors. Thirdly, unlike most existing studies on attitude change I rely on a methodologically more demanding research design that fundamentally rests on the temporal ordering of the causal chain and reduces the impact of confounding bias and endogeneity concerns.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the theoretical framework. I start with a simple decision-theoretic model in which party preferences – understood as a summary measure of all factors a voters regards as important in politics – shape citizens response to an objective shift in macroeconomic performance. The third section outlines the data used as well as my identification strategy. The fourth section contains first graphical results. I conclude with an outline of my theoretical model to other party systems and discuss the normative importance of the findings in this paper.

2 Theoretical framework

I start with a simple decision-theoretic framework to model how party preferences undermine electoral accountability. In the following I conceptually distinguish between (a) behavior, (b) party preferences (or utilities), and (c) the components of these party preferences (Train, 2009).[3] The latter comprise various attitudes (such as issue positions, performance evaluations, or any other aspect of political life that is evaluative), but also contain self-categorizations (such as partisanship which is an identification (Campbell, Converse and Stokes, 1960, 122) (see also Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002)). Thus, it should be noted that party preferences in the way I use this term does not equal party identification that proved to be so important in voting behavior research.

[3]This reflects the most basic assumption among political scientists that 'vote choices reflect party preferences, which can be predicted by attitudinal indicators' (Bølstad, Dinas and Riera, 2013, 430). This also provides the foundation of all discrete choice models (Train, 2009).

I refer to partisanship as a (more or less) stable affective attachment towards a party, which is rooted in socialization (Campbell, Converse and Stokes, 1960; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002; Green and Palmquist, 1990, 1994; Gerber, Huber and Washington, 2010). Preferences, on the other hand, are a summary measure of all factors that are of importance to a voter, of which group attachments and social identities are one – perhaps the most important – component.[4] I assume that voters cast a vote in favor of the party they prefer the most (they are not strategic).

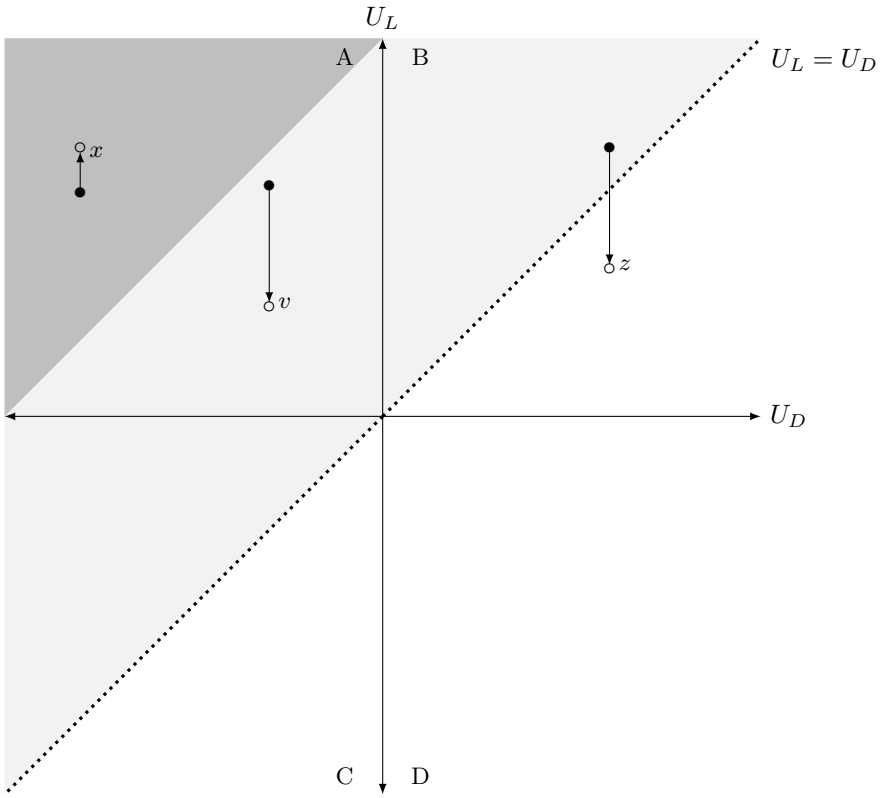
While the universe of attitudes and identities that informs citizens' voting behavior seems infinite and individuals might care about different factors in politics, party preferences are by definition low-dimensional. This has the main advantage that party preferences in a two-party system can be represented in a two-dimensional space. Figure 2 depicts the preferences for the incumbent Labour party (vertical axis, running from -5 to 5) relative to the challenging Conservatives (horizontal axis) (Groenendyk, 2012). The full dots refer to the party preferences of a citizen in 2005. The location in this preference space is a function of the various factors a voter deems relevant in politics. For example, a voter located in the upper left corner of Figure 2 strongly prefers Labour over the Tories; we might gesture that this is an older voter, maybe trade unionist with a strong sense of belonging to the working class, and who has ideologically clear-cut attitudes. A voter located closer to the indifference line has weaker preferences; maybe he or she is younger and perceives that parties are ideologically converging. He or she might thus be more output-oriented in her understanding of politics and focus more on election-specific differences between parties (as argued recently by Eggers, 2014). More generally, voters located above the dashed, 45 degree line prefer Labour over the Conservatives and *vice versa*. The spatial distribution of voters within this preference space reflects the pattern of party competition in a country. In a strongly polarized political system most voters will be located in the upper-left and lower-right corner. A more competitive system is characterized by a large segment of voters scattered across the indifference line.[5] The main idea of Figure 2 is that this pattern of party competition shapes citizens' response to economic changes (van der Brug, van der Eijk and Franklin, 2007; Kayser and Wlezien, 2011; Eggers, 2014)

I remain agnostic regarding the factors that cause a voter to be located in this preference space. The only assumption I will make is that performance evaluations of the economy have the electoral power to move voters across this preference space (the main stipulation of economic voting models Duch and Stevenson, 2008, 40). In particular, hollow dots refer to the party preferences of a voter in 2010 – after the economic crisis has affected the welfare of the United Kingdom. The arrows connecting these dots reflect the causal claim that the financial crisis shaped the party preferences of voters and the voting behavior of *some* voters. A voter is expected to alter prior behavior, if he or she crosses the indifference line. In the following three sections I outline three 'strategies' that help citizens to stick with prior behavior, even in the presence of a dissonant reality. This might help understand why the electoral shock for Labour has not been as massive as the economic shock

[4] My usage of party preferences thus resembles more the 'running tally' concept of (Fiorina, 1981) which is more evaluative in nature and more prone to change than the classical Michigan approach.

[5] One might also gesture that voters located in quadrant C who like neither party are most likely to abstain. In this paper I will not consider turnout as a response to economic changes.

Figure 2: Voting-Decisions in a Two-Party System Depending on Underlying Preferences and Economic Changes (2005 to 2010)



Note: $U_.$ refers to the underlying preference a voter has for each party L, C. Voters in the grey areas rank L highest; in the white area C is more popular. Voters pick the highest ranked alternative. The thick dotted line indicates equal utility between L and C (indifference). Full dots refer to party preferences for L and C in 2005, hollow dots to preferences in 2010. A vertical shift of an arrow denotes an in- or a decrease in feeling for L due to the economic crisis. Three hypothetical voters (x, v, z) are shown based on their reaction to the financial crisis.
Source: adapted from Groenendyk (2012)

to the UK.

2.1 The persistence of prior perceptions

In this paper I conceptualize economic voting as a form of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959). The idea behind this theory is that when attitudes are not consistent with behavior, a certain degree of discomfort will arise.[6] In particular, a sharp economic downturn is discomforting for the past behavior and previously held expectations of 2005 Labour voters. Political agency models argue that citizens resolve this inconsistency by altering future

[6] A similar approach can be found in the 'balance theory' of Heider (1958). According to this view people aim to maintain balance between their attitudes and preferences. Because dissonance theory has attracted more attention in political behavior research I will not focus on this latter approach.

behavior (i.e. they punish Labour in 2010). However, as motivated by Figure 2 citizens care about other factors as well and might thus be biased towards this old choice. Consequently, they might aim to justify and maintain their prior behavior in light of new challenging evidence (Mullainathan and Washington, 2009; Bølstad, Dinas and Riera, 2013).

The first form of partisan bias refers to dissonance *avoidance*. It can be summarized by the question: 'are citizens' capable of being be persuaded by new evidence'? (Gerber and Green, 1998, 190). As shown in Figure 1 several voters did not update their initially positive evaluations of Labour's economic performance.[7] This strategy obviously alleviates the dissonance and is best described as a form of partisan motivated reasoning (Tabor and Lodge, 2006; Tabor, Cann and Kucsova, 2009; Kahan, forthcoming). Various theories of public opinion formation stress that citizens tend to protect their belief against contradicting evidence and strongly attached voters – such as voter x in Figure 2 – might be particularly versed in doing so (Campbell, Converse and Stokes, 1960; Zaller, 1992). They might avoid news that challenges existing beliefs (i.e. bias the sample of information on which beliefs are formed) or avoid including them in rebuilding their prior belief (i.e. placing different weights on contradicting pieces of information when averaging across the sample) (for a discussion see Gerber and Huber, 2010). Regardless of the underlying psychological process, strength of attachment to Labour is likely to color perceptual changes of Labour's performance (Wlezien, Franklin and Twiggs, 1997; Bartels, 2002; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Evans and Pickup, 2010; Gerber and Huber, 2010). The obvious implication of dissonance avoidance is that voters who do not update prior beliefs should feel no pressure to change party preferences or voting behavior.

2.2 The persistence of prior behavior

Perceptual bias and dissonance avoidance are subconscious processes.[8] Whenever these processes, however, fail and inconsistent attitudes enter conscious awareness, voters' prior behavior is challenged. One obvious way to resolve the dissonance is to alter behavior and punish Labour at the upcoming election – as proponents of retrospective voting would argue (Ferejohn, 1986; Fair, 1978; Fiorina, 1981). I argue, however, that partisan bias does not end here. In particular, citizens might engage in dissonance *reduction* to maintain prior behavior. Citizens can justify their voting as the 'lesser of two evils' on the basis of other attitudes or identities that are equally important to them (Groenendyk, 2012). In this sense voters might reduce the support for Labour as a response to their newly formed belief about the performance of Labour, but can reaffirm their prior behavior by calling to mind other aspects of political life on which Labour seems more attractive than the Tories (Abelson, 1959; Spencer et al., 1998; Fein and Spencer, 1997). In Figure 2 this form of reasoning is illustrated by voter v who was less biased towards Labour in 2005 than x. Suppose

[7] In the following I will only focus on citizens' assessment of the performance of Labour in managing the economy, because incumbent performance is the politically significant part of economic discontent (Rudolph and Grant, 2002; Duch and Stevenson, 2008) and factual beliefs regarding the economy show almost no variation even among Labour supporters.

[8] In terms of dual process models of political reasoning (Lodge and Tabor, 2013, ch. 2) perceptual bias is a heuristic reasoning that is more intuitive and thus related to System 1 (in contrast to a more careful, deliberate System 2 reasoning process).

that voter v became convinced that the performance of Labour was not satisfying. This affected his or her support for Labour and v moves downwards in the preference space. Suppose further that this voter also cares about the membership of the UK in the European Union or the regulation of immigration to the UK and that the Tories' policy platform on these issues oppose the views of v. Hence, given these other factors this voters deems relevant Labour still appears to be the more attractive choice. In Figure 2 this 'lesser of two evils' justification is reflected by the downward shift that remains above the indifference line.

2.3 The switching voter

If party preferences undermine electoral accountability either by shaping citizens' perceptual or behavioral response, only a specific subset of former Labour supporters should be expected to translate new evidence regarding the economy into a new vote choice at the upcoming election. This segment of voters is illustrated by voter z. Suppose again that this voter learned[9] from new evidence and rates the performance of Labour negatively. Consequently, he or she also reduces support for Labour. The electoral consequences are, however, different when compared to voter v. This voter actually crosses the indifference line and is expected to alter voting behavior in 2010. The main difference between this switching voter and v lies in their location in the preference space: because z has no negative feelings towards the opposition party he or she does not encounter the psychological pressure of voter v to engage in dissonance reduction.

I thus have four expectations regarding the perceptions, preferences, and behavior of former Labour voters:

(1) Voters with strong ties towards Labour will not learn from new evidence.

(2) Voters who do not learn from new evidence will not change prior party preferences and will not change prior voting behavior.

(3) Voters who learn from new evidence will reduce the prior party preferences for Labour.

(4) Voters who learn will only change prior behavior if the main alternative is regarded as attractive enough.

3 Research design and causal inference

In this section I discuss the major barriers to identify the causal effects outlined in the theory section. The most important threats to inference originate in (a) confounding by observed and unobserved variables and (b) endogenous relations between voting, preferences, and economic perceptions (Gerber, Huber and Washington, 2010). I start with endogeneity bias. The main assumption of the previous section is that behavior is more persistent than perceptions and preferences. It *responds* to changes in economic performance evaluations (moderated by prior party preferences).

[9] By 'learning' I mean the process of integrating new evidence into already existing beliefs about reality (Gerber and Green, 1998).

Endogeneity bias results if voters first change their voting intention (for reasons unrelated to the economy) and then adjust their performance evaluations of Labour accordingly.[10] Observationally both explanations are equivalent, the flow of the causal arrow, however, is reversed. In order to disentangle this relationship I follow Lenz (2012) and use three panel waves. In particular I use measures of citizens' economic performance perceptions and voting behavior in the following waves:

(a) in 2005 (after the election that brought Labour into power)

(b) in 2008 (during the electoral cycle when the economy faltered after the financial crisis)

(c) from 2010 (after the election that brought Labour's defeat)

The main idea behind this approach is to estimate the effect of changes in economic performance assessments between 2005 and 2008 on changes in voting between 2005 and 2010, *given a voter has not yet changed voting intentions in 2008*. If voters consequently report a different voting behavior in 2010, there is strong evidence that voters actually updated behavior in response to updates in perceptions.

3.1 Data and Coding

I use data from the British Election Panel Study (Clarke et al., 2010) which conducted nine interviews over the 2005-2010 electoral cycle: three were collected before, during, and after the 2005 general election campaign (2005-pre, 2005-cam, 2005-post), one was collected in 2006, 2008, and 2009, and again three in 2010 (2010-pre, 2010-cam, 2010-post). The three core variables – voting, party preferences, and economic performance perception – are taken from different waves and coded in the following way.

Voting behavior. I use actual voting behavior to restrict the sample to prior incumbent voters (wave: 2005-post). The population of interest is thus reduced to Labour voters of 2005. The main dependent variable is voting changes until 2010 (wave: 2010-post). Therefore, all prior Labour voters will be coded as 0 if they report in the 2010-post wave that they again voted for Labour; former Labour voters of 2005 who reported voting for another party or who reported to have not voted at all are coded as 1 (indicating a vote switch). To account for changes in voting that might have happened before economic performance perceptions have happened, I measure voting intentions in 2008: 1 = a respondents plans to (again) vote for Labour , 0 = respondent plans to vote for another party or abstain. Furthermore, to account for voters who are undecided given the inflow of overwhelming new information in 2008, a third category is added, indicating that a respondent does not yet know which party to vote for in 2010.

Economic performance perception and its change: As discussed in the introduction voting behavior should be influenced by the performance of the incumbent in managing the economy.[11]

[10] The rationale behind this approach can be explained by cognitive dissonance: because voters plan to vote against Labour they aim to achieve coherence between their attitudes and planned behavior. Citizens might equally have not formed perceptions at all and simply answer in this way to appear coherent within the survey (Prior, Sood and Khanna, 2015; Bullock, Gerber and Hill, 2015)

[11] Given the massive shift of general economic perceptions in 2008 and 2009 it seems unlikely that this quantity informs voting

Table 1: Coding Scheme for Changes in Economic Performance Perceptions, 2005–2008–2009

	Labour's Economic Performance in 2005								
	bad			**neither**			**good**		
	in 2008			**in 2008**			**in 2008**		
	bad	**neither**	**good**	**bad**	**neither**	**good**	**bad**	**neither**	**good**
bad	change	change	–	change	change	change	change	change	change
N	11	1	–	29	9	4	136	51	45
neither	change	stable	–	stable	stable	stable	change	stable	stable
N	1	2	–	11	6	4	37	73	98
good	–	–	–	stable	–	stable	stable	stable	stable
N	–	–	–	2	–	1	34	58	270

Note: Coding scheme for changes in performance perceptions between 2005 and 2008 or 2009. – indicates cells that are never observed. "change" refers to citizens who significantly altered prior perceptions. "stable" refers to respondents who only marginally altered prior perceptions.

I use values from the 2005-post wave as baseline values, from which citizens might or might not depart after the financial crisis. In order to account of measurement error and to not artificially create a large treatment group, I combine performance evaluations of both the 2008- and 2009-wave. I use the coding scheme shown in Table 1.

Party preferences and their change: Voters' party preferences are measured using feeling scores regarding each of the two main British parties. Respondents were asked: 'On a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about the [Labour / Conservative] Party?'. I measured the initial location of a voter in the preference space in the 2005-post wave. All three variables are re-measured in the 2010-post wave and are used to map changes in party preferences that have occurred over the election cycle.

4 Results

In the following three sections I graphically show results for three updating processes: (1) Updating prior factual beliefs regarding the performance of Labour. In particular, I test the hypothesis that prior strength in party preferences (i.e. the location in Figure 2) moderates the impact of the economic shock on citizens' perceptions. (2) Updating prior party preferences as a response to newly formed beliefs about reality. Here I test the hypothesis that the economy has the capacity to move voters across the preference space. In particular, we should expect a downward movement among those voters who learned from the financial crisis and no movement for voters with stable performance assessments. (3) Updating prior behavior. In particular, I test the impact of the previous location in the preference space in a citizen's willingness to hold the incumbent accountable.

4.1 Update of prior factual beliefs

The first question I aim to answer in this section is which citizens are capable of being persuaded by new evidence?[12] The two upper sub-figures of Figure 3 show the party preferences for Labour and Conservatives in 2005 among Labour voters of 2005 conditional on whether these voters changed their prior perceptions (left) or not (right). This mimics the idea of Figure 2 that an extreme location in the preference space leads to dissonance avoidance. Each subfigure can be conceptualized as a 10x10 cross table in which the color in each cell marks the total percentages in each group. For example, in figure (b) about 16% of voters who did not change their performance assessments in 2008/9 rated Labour at 10 and the Conservatives at 0 (this is the most biased location). Additionally, the red dots highlight the average location for 2005. In subfigure (b) the average voter rates Labour at about 8 and the Tories at about 2.

In order to answer the first question, we have to compare figure (a) and figure (b). In both subfigures party preferences for previous Labour supporters appear highly structured. Most voters are located in the upper left corner which suggests that they clearly prefer Labour over the Conservatives – of course, this generally reflects to overall pattern of party competition in the United Kingdom. However, when comparing the initial party preferences of voters *who will alter perceptions in the aftermath of the crisis* and voters *who will have with stable perceptions*, it appears – in line with theories of public opinion formation – that the former are less polarized than the second group. This is best indicated by the average party preference in both groups: voters who update their initial perceptions already were less favorable towards Labour and more favorable towards the Tories by about one point on this 10-point scale. This bolsters past research that highlights the importance of prior preferences in motivated political learning. A second way of looking at this relationship is provided by Figure 5 in the Appendix. The dots in this figure show the relative frequency of reporting changed performance assessments in 2008/9 for each value of Labour support in 2005. The size of the dot reflects to the overall amount of respondents in each category. For example, in subfigure (a) about 140 respondents strongly supported Labour (preference = 10); among them 25% altered their performance assessment in 2008/9. This, again, provides clear evidence that the strength or prior party support affects future reactions to external events that challenge prior behavior.

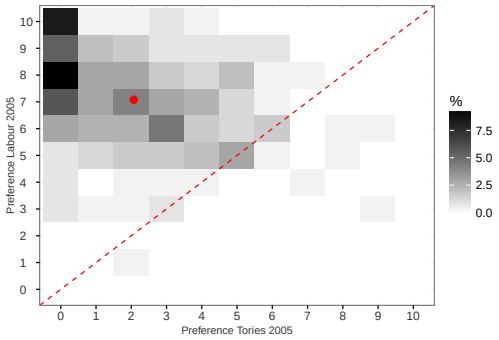
4.2 Update of prior party preferences

The second question I aim to answer in this section is 'does the economy have an effect on citizens' party preferences' (i.e. do voters move across this space in accordance with their prior perception updates). In order to assess the importance of the economic shock on party preferences, I compare figures (c) and (d). These two figures show party preferences for Labour relative to the Tories in 2010 for voters who changed performance assessments in 2008/9 (c) and for voters who did not respond to the external shock provided by the financial crisis (d). The effect of the economy is

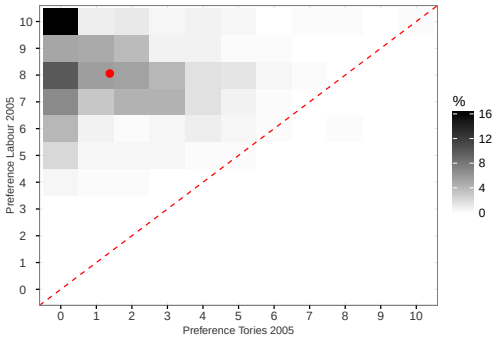
[12] Figure 1 obviously suggests that the answer to the question 'are citizens capable of being persuaded by new evidence' has to be answered positively.

Figure 3: Preference space in (1) 2005 and (2) 2010 for Labour and Tories, conditional on (a) changes or (b) stability in economic handling perceptions, among 2005 Labour voters

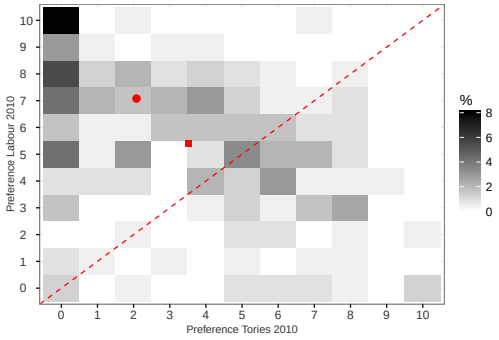
(a) Preference space (Labour - Tories) in 2005, Perceptions will change in 2008/9



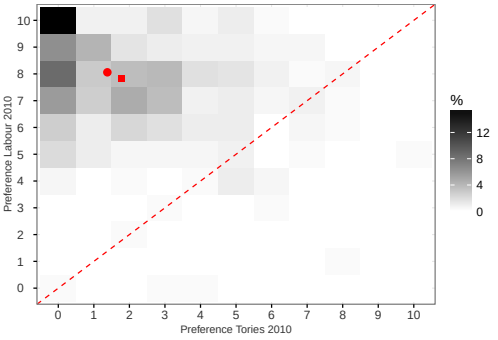
(b) Preference space (Labour - Tories) in 2005, Perceptions will be stable in 2008/9



(c) Preference space (Labour - Tories) in 2010, Perceptions changed in 2008/9



(d) Preference space (Labour - Tories) in 2010, Perceptions stable in 2008/9



Note: Figures and show preferences for Labour on the y-axis and preferences for the Conservatives on the x-axis in 2005 (top) and 2010 (below) for voters will change performance assessments in 2008/9 (right) or not (left). Different colors indicate the total percentages in each group. Red dots refer to the average party preferences combination in 2005, red rectangles to the average party preference in 2010. For easier comparisons the figures for 2010 show the average for 2005 (dot) and 2010 (rectangle). The sample is restricted to respondents who reported a vote choice for Labour in the 2005 post-election wave and reported their vote choice in the 2010 post-election wave.
Source: British Election Panel Study (Clarke et al., 2010)

clearly visible: In accordance with retrospective accounts of preference formation, voters with stable perceptions showed almost no movement across this preference space. Their party preferences appear as clear-cut as before the crisis affected the United Kingdom. Although, support for the Tories increases marginally and Labour seems a little bit less popular, there are almost no voters who move close or move across the indifference line. This provides stark evidence that the dissonance avoidance strategy proved to be successful for this subset of voters.

More importantly, however, citizens with changing perceptions show a clear and strong movement across this preference space. Party preferences appear much more scattered than before the economic crisis. The average party preference is again informative: there is a clear downwards trend for Labour. This suggests that when citizens became dissatisfied with its economic perfor-

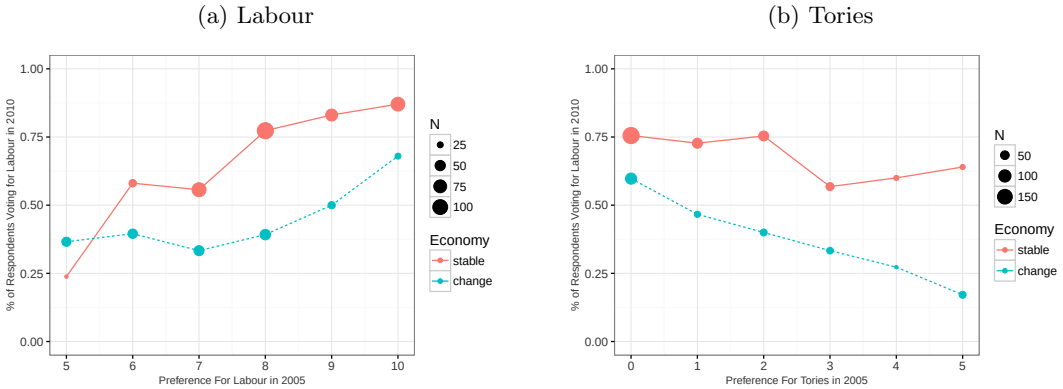
mance, they also reduced electoral support for the incumbent Labour party. Interestingly, there is also a rightward shift in support of the Tories. Apparently, Labour not only suffered from the crisis, but the Conservatives seemed to gain ground even among prior Labour supporters. As can been seen these updates cause several voters to cross the indifference line between Labour and Tories.

4.3 Update of prior voting

The third question I aim to answer is whether the financial crisis translated into a behavioral change – the main question underlying research on retrospective accountability. Figure 3 already provided evidence that some voters moved across the indifference line. However, the theoretical framework implies that only a specific subset of voters will actually show this kind of behavior: voters who regard the opposition party as attractive choice and who thus do not engage in dissonance reduction. Figure 4 shows the relative frequency of voting for Labour in 2010 (this also means that voting behavior remained stable as all figures are conditioned on the fact that a respondent voted for Labour in 2005) conditional on two factors: (1) whether a voter altered performance evaluations between 2005 and 2008/9 or not. Voters with changing perceptions are indicated by the dotted, blue lines; voters with stable beliefs are indicated by the red, solid line. (2) how a voter thought about Labour in 2005. This support is shown on the x-axis. The y-axis shows the relative frequency of voting for Labour for each level of prior support and for whether a voter altered prior perceptions or not. The size of the dots again refer to the total amount of voters in each group. For example, about 75 respondents rated Labour at 10 in 2005 and then reported stable performance assessments in 2008/9. Among them about 85% remained loyal with Labour. On the other hand, about 25 voters rated Labour at 10 in 2005, but changed their performance assessments in the upcoming years. Among them about 70% remained loyal with Labour. Thus, the difference between the blue and red line in figure Figure 4 provides an estimate of the causal effect of the economy on vote switching. The shape of each line, on the other hand, reflects the moderating impact of prior party preferences on this decision to hold in incumbent accountable.

There are two important implications in Figure 4: firstly, in both figures the red line is above the blue line. This provides clear evidence that the economic shock, if not avoided by partisan motivated reasoning, pulled voters away from Labour. Secondly, the – slightly – concave shape of the red line and – slightly – convex shape of the blue line indicate that prior party preferences moderated this decision. Voters' willingness to hold the incumbent accountable increases significantly the weaker the preferences for Labour and the stronger to feeling towards the Conservatives are. This provides evidence that voters who became dissatisfied with Labour's performance in office, engaged in some kind of 'lesser of two evils'-justification if the main alternative was not seen as attractive choice option.

Figure 4: Probability of voting for Labour, conditional on (a) changes or (b) stability in economic handling perceptions and prior preferences for each party, among 2005 Labour voters



Note: Percentage of respondents choosing Labour in 2010 conditional on stability (red line) or changes in prior performance perceptions in 2008/9 (blue line) and conditional on prior preferences for each party (x-axis). Preferences range from 0 to 10, to contain observations values with very few observations have been combined. The size of the dots indicates the number of respondents in each preference-category among which the percentage of voters depicted on the y-axis actually choose Labour in 2010.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I present evidence that partisan preferences undermine electoral accountability. I conceptualize models of retrospective democratic accountability as form of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). In particular, in the aftermath of a larger economic downturn reality is dissonant with the prior expectations and prior behavior of voters who elected the incumbent into office. Political agency models argue that citizens solve this dissonance by adjusting upcoming behavior; this alleviates the dissonance and generates the accountability incentive on which these models build their view of democracy (Ferejohn, 1986; Fiorina, 1981; Barro, 1973). However, in this paper I argue that many citizens are biased towards their old choice and aim to stick with previously made choices. If this is the case citizens must find a way to resolve the dissonance by other means than voting for one of the challenging parties. I argue that two forms of partisan bias are likely to drive citizens reasoning and behavior: the first is related to dissonance avoidance. In line with research in political psychology this form of bias implies that voters subconsciously block information that would otherwise challenge their prior behavior. The second is related to dissonance reduction. While the first form of bias filters pieces of dissonant information, this second source of bias emerges when dissonant information enters conscious awareness. In particular, citizens who become dissatisfied with the performance of Labour need to justify their behavior on other grounds. I argue that by recalling other attitudes that are of importance to a voter citizens might justify their prior choice as the lesser of two evils.

I apply this theoretical framework to the United Kingdom between 2005 and 2010. I present evidence that both forms of bias powerfully undermine citizens' response to the financial crisis. One important constraint regarding the evidence presented here refers to the supply of political

alternatives. Although, politics in the UK has been dominated by the Labour and Conservative party, a significant amount of voters considers the Liberal Democrats a viable alternative (Alvarez, Nagler and Bowler, 2000). Given the electoral position of LibDem as a moderate alternative located ideologically between Labour and Tories, voters might have expressed their dissatisfaction with Labour by switching to LibDem. Future work will address this concern and analyze whether voters who rank LibDem as the most-preferred alternative to their previous choice hold Labour accountable. There is, however, a significant constraint to this kind of behavior (which is the reason I have not yet included the preferences for LibDem): the geographical pattern of party competition. In particular, the single-member district and majority rule used in the United Kingdom produces a significant amount of tactical voters (i.e. voters who vote for a least preferred party in order to avoid having an even less preferred party win their district) (Bølstad, Dinas and Riera, 2013). In this sense citizens might still justify their prior Labour choice as the lesser of two evils, because voting for LibDem means potentially wasting their vote. In future work I will test this assumption by taking account of the district characteristics of a voter. More specifically, I will distinguish between districts in which party competition in 2005 was (a) dominated by one party, (b) open between two parties, (c) open between all three major parties. I will then compare whether voters who rank LibDem (or the Conservatives) as second alternative respond differently to the financial crisis when LibDem (or the Conservatives) is competitive in their district (i.e. has realistic chances if winning the district) or not (Eggers, 2014; Eggers and Spirling, 2016).

The theoretical framework outlined in this paper also has important implications regarding electoral accountability in other countries or in other periods. In general, if most voters hold strong and clear-cut party preferences (i.e. they are located in the corners of Figure 2) they will be less responsive to economic changes. Political systems such as the United States of America, in which partisan polarizations has grown strongly over the last decades (Bartels, 2000), might thus be less likely to generate strong electoral accountability. In a similar vein elections in the United Kingdom between the 1960ies and 1980ies, when the electorate was much more polarized, might not have been decided by economic outcomes. The theoretical framework also implies important insights for multi-party systems. In general, the supply of more than one challenger increases the chance that a voter might find a viable alternative and will not engage in dissonance reduction. At the same time the presence of coalition government in most multi-party systems and the geographical pattern of party competition might increase the cognitive burden of voters to hold their incumbent accountable.

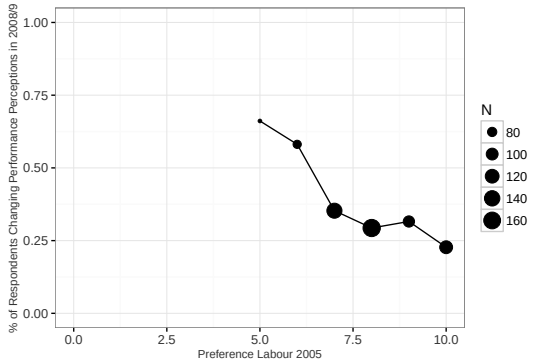
This research also has important normative implications for our understanding of electoral accountability. If party preferences are such a dominant force in shaping citizens' response to external events, the segment of voters that is willing to pay political parties the costs for their efforts and behavior while in office might be much smaller than expected. If only a small subset of former incumbent voters is capable of transforming an external event into a behavioral choice, it might be that incumbent parties face much weaker incentives to act in line with the general preferences of the public than political agency models suggest. This is particularly important as the segment of switching voters might not represent the rationally informed citizens on which

democratic changes ought rest. As various scholars pointed out, voters with weakly structured preferences tend also to be among the least informed and least attentive voters (Zaller, 2004). Hence, they might more prone to campaign rhetoric and erratic mood swings than voters who follow politics more closely (Huber, Hill and Lenz, 2012). This provides a general dilemma for democratic polities: the agents who might drive the incentives for incumbents, might at the same time be the least informed.

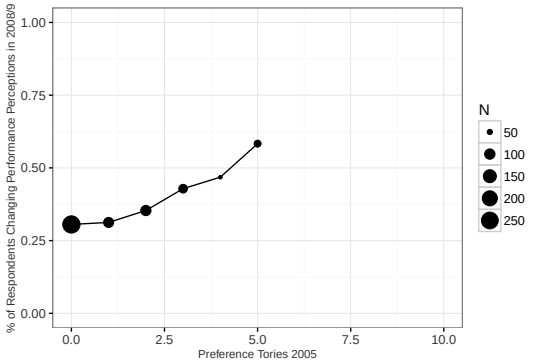
6 Appendix

Figure 5: Probability of changing prior economic performance perceptions conditional in prior party preferences, among Former Labour Voters

(a) Labour



(b) Tories



Note: Percentage of respondents changing prior perceptions in 2008/9 conditional on prior preferences for each party. Preferences range from 0 to 10, to contain observations values with very few observations have been combined. The size of the dots indicates the number of respondents in each category among which the percentage of voters depicted on the y-axis actually change perceptions.

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