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Persuasion in Context: The Multilevel Structure of Economic Evaluations

Jeffery J. Mondak, Diana C. Mutz, and Robert Huckfeldt

The idea that social context influences political attitudes is now widely accepted in studies of political persuasion (e.g., Eulau 1986). However, since individuals are each part of numerous different social contexts, this seemingly straightforward maxim often tells us very little. Will people rely on the social environment comprised of their immediate families, their neighborhoods, their states, or their nation as a whole in making political judgments? In this chapter we use the multilevel structure of economic evaluations to examine which social environments are most important to political judgments; in addition, we look at how the basis of these judgments is altered by the presence of high levels of information.

In the United States, citizens tend to hold presidents responsible for the economic state of their nation. But at the same time, people tend not to attribute responsibility for their personal problems to national political leaders (see Sniderman and Brody 1977; Brody and Sniderman 1977). Although there are notable exceptions to this generalization (e.g., Sears and Citrin 1982; Tufte 1978), on balance the accumulation of findings suggests that sociotropic judgments, that is, perceptions of the state of the nation as a whole, are far more important to people's political views (e.g., Schlozman and Verba 1979; Kiewiet 1983; see Sears and Funk 1990, for a review).

Nowhere has this counterintuitive pattern in the formation of political attitudes been as thoroughly established as in the economic realm. Neither declining family financial conditions nor even loss of a job has been found to have much of an impact on judgments of national political leaders. As Kinder and Kiewiet (1979, 523) summarized, "Private economic experience is important, but not for politics. Economic discontents and political judgments inhabit separate domains." Despite the immediacy and obvious personal relevance of economic experiences within the immediate family, they are apparently less persuasive when it comes to political attitudes because it is

quite difficult for people to connect this social context with judgments of national political leaders.

At the same time, it has been well established that judgments of national economic conditions significantly and consistently enter into political evaluations. While personal experiences are "morselized" (Lane 1962) and rarely connected to political judgments, perceptions of national economic conditions are quite readily connected to judgments about political leaders at both presidential and congressional levels (e.g., Kiewiet 1983; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979). As a result, national political leaders tend to be held accountable for retrospective perceptions of national economic performance.

But personal experience and perceptions of national economic well-being are only two points along a broad continuum; in between an individual's immediate life space and his or her perceptions of national conditions is a broad middle ground consisting of perceptions of successively larger collectives with whom people may interact either through interpersonal or mass mediated communication (e.g., Conover 1985; Weatherford 1983; Mutz 1994). What remains unclear is what kind of role these intermediate-level collectives play in the process of evaluating political leaders. For example, are perceptions of community economic well-being insulated from political consequences as are personal economic experiences? Or are they processed more like collective, national-level information and readily connected to judgments of political leaders?

The reason for the neglect of intermediate-level collectives does not rest in past null findings or in a theoretical rationale predicting that these collectives should be less persuasive politically or inherently less important. Instead, it results largely from a lack of available data corresponding to judgments about the economic conditions of more local entities.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the processing of economic information from an intermediate collective, in this case, one's own neighborhood. The neighborhood is of potential political significance simply due to the ready availability of socially transmitted information—information that may complement or counter economic perceptions premised solely on personal or national conditions. We do not assume the neighborhood to be a self-contained community in which the resident conducts all of life's daily activities. For a few rare individuals this may be the case, but for most it is surely not. Our assumption, instead, is that social relations are inescapable within any geographically based collectivity. When we look out the front window or walk around the corner, we are exposed to information about the neighborhood, and that information ultimately may contribute to our political judgments. Further, perceptions regarding the neighborhood's economic fortunes can be formed without attention to either one's own economic situation or national economic developments. Hence, neighborhood-level perceptions

may influence political judgments independent of the familiar family-level and national-level effects.¹

We begin this exploration by reviewing the bits and pieces of evidence currently available on the politicization of subnational economic perceptions. Next we simultaneously examine the politicization of family economic experience, perceived neighborhood economic experience, and perceived national economic experience. By comparing the politicization of different social contexts among those with varying levels of exposure to outside sources of economic information, we gain further insight into differences in how information from various social contexts is processed and how this information ultimately influences judgments about presidential economic policies.

Politicizing Subnational Collective Economic Judgments

Each individual lives within a unique social environment. Residence in a neighborhood, membership in a church, and employment in a workplace expose the individual to a unique blend of information that conditions political behavior (Huckfeldt 1986). For example, a neighborhood context conveys social information that affects individual-level electoral choice (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987, 1995). Similar contextual effects may operate on other aspects of political behavior, including the evaluation of political leaders.

The debate over what type of information people use to evaluate economic performance has led to some consideration of collectives other than the nation as a whole. It is generally agreed that state and local community economic contexts have the potential to influence assessments of political leaders, but there has been little empirical research establishing the contributions of these perceptions. As Weatherford (1983, 870) argues, "The evaluation of economic conditions is a natural situation for contextual effects to operate through interpersonal contact; individuals are readily aware of co-workers and acquaintances who are unemployed, and shoppers in markets as diverse as food and real estate commonly compare their experiences with inflation" (see also Kinder, Rosenstone, and Hansen 1983).

While there are studies that have looked at economic influences in other than congressional and presidential elections, the measures of economic conditions usually have been at the national level (e.g., Klorman 1978). In one exception, Piereson (1977) examined congressional elections and changes in economic conditions within congressional districts but found voting to be largely independent of district economic conditions. On the other hand, Chubb (1988) found state economic conditions to be significantly related to gubernatorial election outcomes. However, for purposes of this study, we are interested in the extent to which people hold presidents accountable for eco-

conomic conditions closer to home than perceived national conditions, yet less parochial than one's own personal experiences.

The few studies that meet these criteria generally do not address perceptions of economic conditions within clearly circumscribed communities that are defined by boundaries such as state or city borders (cf. Pollard 1978). Instead, they involve measures of researcher-defined groups such as classes or Labor Market Areas (e.g., Weatherford 1983, 1978). Typically, they relate aggregate, objective measures of how a group is faring economically with individual political attitudes. Although subjective perceptions of local economic conditions are probably closely related to objective measures of local economic conditions (e.g., Weatherford 1983), they do not easily lend themselves to comparisons with the predictive power of family finances or subjective perceptions of national conditions.

In a study directly examining the effects of perceptions of group economic well-being, Conover (1985) found that perceptions of group economic interests were perceived to overlap very little with personal financial interests, and even less with perceptions of change in national conditions.² Moreover, she found that perceptions of group economic interests had significant independent effects on presidential performance evaluations (see also Kinder, Rosenstone, and Hansen 1983; Kinder, Adams, and Gronke 1989). Mutz (1993) found that hearing about unemployment problems interpersonally contributed to less favorable attitudes toward the president as well as to less favorable assessments of national economic conditions (see also Mutz 1992).

Processing Economic Information

Although the results of studies examining perceptions of group economic conditions confirm their potential for influence, they are inconclusive with regard to theoretical rationale. For example, why should people be influenced by group interests when they are seldom swayed politically by personal ones? Personal experiences originally recommended themselves as readily available, low-cost sources of economic information. Since this type of information is accessible without much effort, it seems a natural referent for a notoriously poorly informed, weakly motivated public. But as Downs (1957) reminds us, procurement costs are only one of several types of costs required to become informed.

In addition to the time and effort required to gain access to information, it is particularly important to take into consideration the costs of evaluation, that is, the costs of relating that information to political judgments. When it comes to family economic experience, these costs are extremely high. Such highly personal events are not seen as immediately relevant to political judgments. And although the strengths and weaknesses of personal experiences and perceived national conditions—in terms of ease of access and evaluation—might

logically balance out to a stalemate, they typically do not. Past research suggests that the low cost of obtaining personal-level information is overshadowed by the high costs of its interpretation (Mutz 1994).

Nonetheless, the immediate personal experience of those who live together has long been considered a social context with tremendous potential for political influence (Chaffee and Mutz 1988). The high personal relevance of this social context and its close physical proximity make it difficult to ignore. Moreover, the vividness and immediacy of one's own immediate surroundings should have tremendous political potential if the evaluative costs can be overcome and those perceptions can be connected to political consequences. Groups may be in an ideal position to capitalize on both immediacy and collectivity. Information about groups will have more personal relevance than information about the nation as a whole; but at the same time, perceptions of group well-being should have more obvious political relevance (Conover 1985).

The idea that groups might serve as a middle ground, facilitating the connection of the personal and political, is reinforced by analyses suggesting that, from the perspective of most citizens, both family economic experiences and perceptions of national conditions have serious drawbacks as sources of information on which to base political judgments. The most logical and efficient way for people to decide which of their many social environments to use in framing a response to a policy question is to judge that source of information against the dual criteria of trustworthiness and relevance to the evaluative situation at hand (Weatherford 1983). One can be fairly certain that perceptions of one's own family finances are based on complete and accurate information, but the logical relationship between family finances and how the president is doing is far more of a leap. In other words, trustworthiness is high, but relevance is low. On the other hand, perceptions of national economic conditions are clearly relevant to evaluating the president, but macroeconomic information is extremely difficult to understand (e.g., McCloskey 1990); in this case, the trade-off is in favor of relevance, but it minimizes trustworthiness. The efficiency of procuring highly trustworthy information through personal and highly parochial experiences consistently clashes with the ease of interpreting its political relevance. Again, groups may serve as an important middle ground combining moderately trustworthy information with perceptions of a collective that has more obvious political relevance than personal economic problems.

Effects of Information Levels on the Processing of Economic Judgments

Much of what we know about why some types of information are more easily connected to political judgments than others comes from studies that have

examined differences in how these judgments are connected to political views among subgroups in the population. For example, several studies have shown that personal experiences are more likely to be connected to political judgments among the less politically informed. Weatherford (1983) and Conover et al. (1986) both found that personal experiences were more politically influential among those unknowledgeable about national economic conditions. Mutz (1992) also found that high levels of exposure to news about the economy decreased the importance of personal concerns to political judgments.

Studies along these lines are generally interpreted as indicating that personal experience serves as a default source of political information, to be relied upon only in the absence of more abstract, national-level information. Comparisons of the predictive power of national economic judgments seem to confirm this idea. Weatherford (1983), for example, found that high levels of information primed the importance of collective, national-level perceptions to political evaluations, while people with low levels of information relied instead on personal economic experience.

All else being equal, people will rely on the social context most relevant to the judgment they are making (in this case, national-level conditions), even if it means some sacrifice in the trustworthiness of that information. But in forming impressions of the national economic climate, individuals will strive to balance efficiency and reliability (Mondak 1994a). Simple default judgments may be efficient, but they will be of little utility if these judgments are of uncertain reliability. Consequently, reliance on default information should decrease when substantive information relevant to an evaluation becomes available (Chaiken, Lieberman, and Eagly 1989; Mondak 1994b). As Weatherford (1983, 162) argues, "The dilemma of choosing between personal and national referents for economic voting is more apparent than actual. Realistically, neither extreme is likely to be represented, but the population can be conceptualized as distributed between the two poles. Along this continuum, the balance will shift from personal to national conditions as the dominant basis for assessing government economic policy."

The idea that people will default to less relevant criteria for judging presidential economic performance only in the absence of more appropriate, collective-level information has received considerable support in recent research. But this perspective contradicts an equally theoretically compelling argument suggesting precisely the opposite. Mill ([1861] 1962), for example, argued that political discussion promoted the awareness of connections between the personal and political: "It is a school in which people learn the impact of remote events on their and other people's political interests" (944). Formal and informal channels of political communication could enhance the extent to which people politicize their immediate social contexts by helping them connect this information to politicians and policies (e.g., Mutz 1994).

Although this argument makes intuitive sense, evidence suggests that some types of information or ways of framing issues may aid people in politicizing their personal experiences, while others may discourage people from doing so (e.g., Iyengar 1991). But in general, information that comes to us from outside the life space provides a more relevant, if somewhat less reliable, basis for assessing a national leader. Thus, the general tendency will be to rely on the larger social context, but in a pinch, people will extrapolate from their more immediate social context.

Overall, then, we expect external information to decrease the importance of personal financial assessments to political judgments and simultaneously to increase the importance of national-level perceptions of economic trends. To the extent that perceptions of neighborhood conditions represent a middle ground between the immediacy of personal experiences and the political relevance of national conditions, the neighborhood context may help people connect a highly immediate, yet still collective, problem to government officials. On the other hand, to the extent that perceptions of neighborhood economic well-being serve merely as default sources of economic news, outside information may decrease the importance of perceptions of neighborhood economic well-being.

In addition to these hypothesized interactions, we expect the three perceptions of economic conditions to each have independent main effects on perceptions of how the president is handling the economy. As in so many other studies, we expect a small effect from personal experiences, and a much stronger effect from perceived national economic conditions. Perceptions of trends in neighborhood economic well-being should fall somewhere in between the two since they represent moderate levels of accessibility and relevance. While people clearly do not feel comfortable concluding based on their own family economic experiences that government is to blame, a somewhat larger sample of experiences will make them more confident of the relevance of that judgment. In short, it should convince them that the problem is not simply yours or mine, but rather one that is shared by many others.

Methods

The data used in this study are drawn from the first wave of a larger project focusing on contextual effects on political behavior. Fifteen hundred residents of South Bend, Indiana, were interviewed at three points in time during the 1984 election campaign. The interview from which the data in this study are derived took place after the Indiana primary but before the national party conventions. All data collection was done by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University using computer-assisted telephone interviewing.

Neighborhoods served as the primary sampling units in this sampling frame. As Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) explain, neighborhoods were not

chosen because the investigators attributed any particular epistemological status to them as groups, but rather because they structure proximity and exposure—two important elements of involuntary social interaction (Huckfeldt 1983): “Where we live determines the churches that are nearby, where we do our shopping, the bumper stickers and yard signs that surround us. Moreover, neighborhoods serve as staging grounds for a variety of voluntary social activities” (see Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, chap. 2, for sampling details).

The specific items used to compare the predictive power of personal and collective referents were a series of questions asking for retrospective assessments of economic conditions in the nation as a whole, the neighborhood, and in the immediate family.³ These questions were asked using a retrospective one-year time frame. Previous studies suggest that memory even for family economic experiences is too poor to provide reliable estimates when asked about a longer time period (see Kernell 1978; Fair 1978), and there is little difference in the predictive validity of the item when it is asked using a more recent, six-month time frame. The dependent variable was the commonly asked question regarding how well the respondent approves or disapproves of the way the president is handling the economy.⁴ In order to avoid artificially inducing self-interested political attitudes in the context of the survey itself, questions concerning economic perceptions were asked after the questions about Reagan approval and were separated by a large number and variety of other questions (see Sears and Lau 1983).

An additive index of the amount of outside information reaching individual respondents was constructed by combining responses to four different questions. These questions included attention to campaign news, frequency of reading political news in newspapers and listening to it on the radio or television, and the frequency with which respondents discussed politics with others.⁵ In order to test the hypothesized interactions between economic judgments and information levels, the scale was dichotomized into those with high and low levels of outside information. These measures of mass and interpersonal political communication are all indicative of contact with social contexts outside the immediate life space. They are not designed to tap the reception or storage of specific messages as they might well be if they were designed to assess the influence of exposure on perceptions of the nation’s economic well-being or some other form of attitude change (see Zaller, this volume). Nor are we concerned with the accuracy or directionality of the economic information respondents have encountered. Instead, our goal is simply to characterize each respondent’s information environment in terms of the extent of exposure to information outside of his or her immediate life experiences and to evaluate how such exposure alters the standards people use in assessing the president’s handling of the economy.

In order to establish a baseline against which to assess the relationships

between economic perceptions and presidential approval, a battery of demographic variables were also included in the logit regression equations predicting attitudes toward Reagan’s handling of the economy; these included age, gender, family income, and education.⁶ Even more important for purposes of eliminating potential reciprocal relationships and establishing people’s long-term political predispositions, the equations include measures of party identification and ideology. Ideology was measured using the traditional seven-point scale.⁷ Since people sometimes adjust the strength of their party identification in response to short-term economic changes (see Kiewiet 1983), we used two dummy variables to represent Republican or Democratic party identification, but did not incorporate the strength of partisanship in these measures in order to avoid reactivity problems.⁸ These controls, in combination with the fact that the dependent variable is a dichotomous measure of support, further decreased the likelihood of reciprocal causation.

Findings

The logit equation in table 1 presents results that are consistent with previous findings on sociotropic voting. First there was predictable rationalization of

TABLE 1. The Influence of Personal, National, and Subnational Economic Conditions on Evaluation of Presidential Performance

	Coefficient	t-value
Constant	-0.22	-0.32
Sex	-0.33*	-1.92
Republican	1.07**	4.28
Democrat	-0.86**	-4.59
Education	0.01	0.28
Age	-0.01	-1.46
Income	0.09	1.54
Ideology	0.15*	3.28
Family	0.44**	3.76
Nation	0.79**	7.08
Neighborhood	0.57**	3.44
Model chi-square = 442.18		
N = 952		

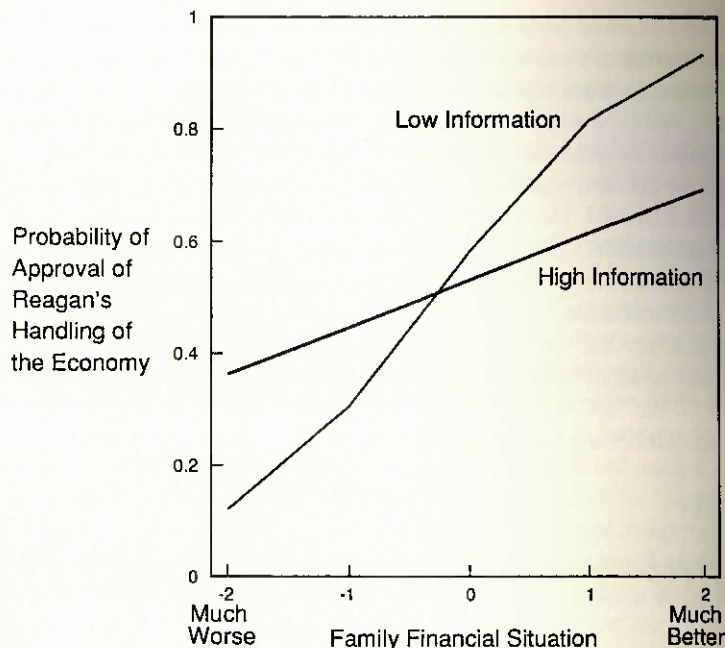
Source: 1984 South Bend study.

Note: The dependent variable is support for Reagan’s handling of the economy (1 = approve; 0 = disapprove). Probability of approval = $e^f / 1 + e^f$ where $f = a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + \dots$

**p < .001

*p < .01

#p < .10



Source: Table 2

Fig. 1. Influence of perceptions of family financial situation, by level of information.

Reagan's handling of the economy according to partisan and ideological leanings. More conservative respondents were more likely to approve of Reagan's handling of the economy, as were Republicans, while Democrats were negatively predisposed in their assessment of his performance.

As in so many previous studies of economic influences on voting, retrospective perceptions of national economic conditions had a strong impact on support for the president's handling of the economy. The coefficient corresponding to perceptions of national economic conditions was nearly twice the size of the coefficient corresponding to family finances, though both achieved statistical significance in the equation. Most important, the size of the coefficient corresponding to perceptions of neighborhood economic conditions fell in between the family and national coefficients, as predicted. While all three effects were significant, perceptions of national conditions mattered most and family finances the least. Although the three economic perception measures were fairly strongly correlated (mean $r = .49$), they each made significant independent contributions to the chi-square value of the equation. Table 2

summarizes the results for the equation incorporating the hypothesized interactions with levels of outside information. Level of information alone made no difference to people's evaluations of the president, but it clearly mediated the effects of the economic variables. As illustrated in figure 1, perceptions of family finances were indeed stronger predictors of approval of Reagan's handling of the economy among those with low information (in all figures values for control variables are held at their means). As the negative coefficient in table 2 indicates, those with high levels of information were less likely to rely on family finances to inform their judgments about Reagan's handling of the economy. Although family finances also maintained a significant direct effect on Reagan approval, the negative interaction coefficient meant that this effect was quite small for those with high levels of external information.

TABLE 2. Economic Conditions and Evaluation of Presidential Performance, by Level of Information

	Coefficient	t-value
Constant	-0.13	-0.18
Sex	-0.34*	-1.95
Republican	1.04***	4.14
Democrat	-0.84***	-4.40
Education	0.02	0.36
Age	-0.01	-1.45
Income	0.09	1.51
Ideology	0.16***	3.40
Family	1.16**	3.20
Nation	0.24	0.84
Neighborhood	-0.23	-0.49
Information	-0.21	-0.84
Information		
× Family	-0.81*	-2.13
Information		
× Nation	0.65*	2.08
Information		
× Neighborhood	0.90*	1.80
Model chi-square = 453.97		
N = 952		

Source: 1984 South Bend study.

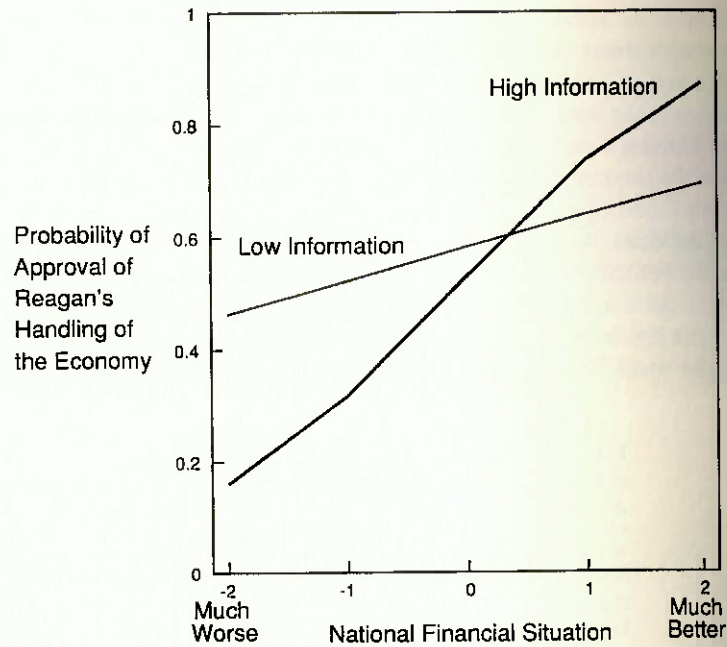
Note: The dependent variable is support for Reagan's handling of the economy (1 = approve; 0 = disapprove). Probability of approval = $e^f / 1 + e^f$ where $f = a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + \dots$

*** $p < .001$

** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

$p < .10$



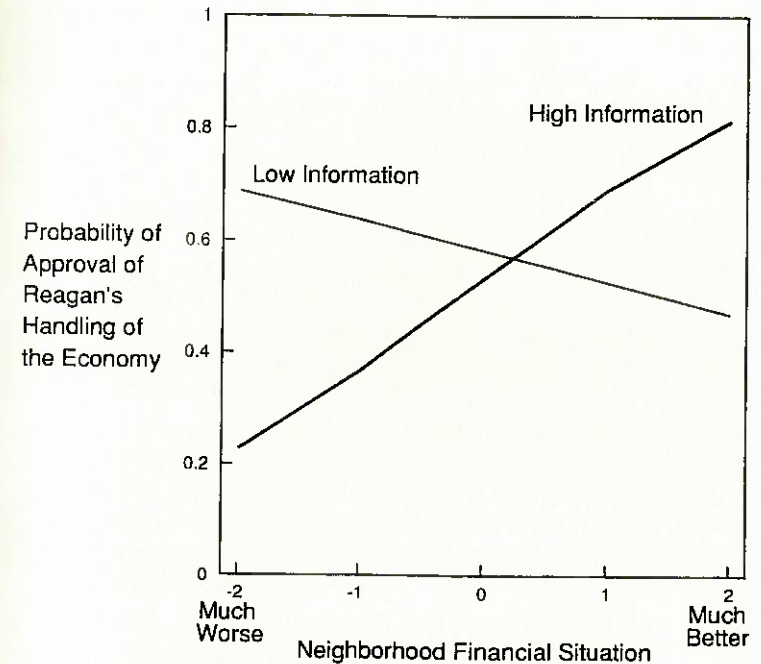
Source: Table 2

Fig. 2. Influence of perceptions of national financial situation, by level of information.

The coefficients in table 2 suggest that the main effect of national economic conditions in table 1 was driven primarily by respondents high in external information. The main effect of perceived national conditions was weak and statistically insignificant, but the interaction indicated that the effect was strong and significant among the high information subgroup. As figure 2 illustrates, if national conditions were perceived to be much worse than in the previous year, low information respondents were less likely to punish the president for this downturn, but they were also less likely to reward him if they perceived conditions to have improved.

Finally, figure 3 summarizes this same relationship for perceptions of neighborhood economic conditions. The main effect of neighborhood perceptions disappeared when the interaction was included in the equation, but the interaction coefficient itself was large, and approached statistical significance. In general, the pattern in figure 3 is very similar to figure 2, although the interaction is more pronounced in figure 3.

The findings for neighborhood context are largely consistent with our



Source: Table 2

Fig. 3. Influence of perceptions of neighborhood financial situation, by level of information.

earlier discussion. Although information of this kind may be more costly to acquire than information on family finances, once obtained it is, in fact, easier to connect to judgments of political leaders than personal experiences. At the same time, it is not seen as equally relevant to presidential evaluations as are judgments of national conditions. The predicted impacts of relevance and accessibility are as anticipated.

But the pattern of responses to these questions is particularly telling with respect to the ease with which people make judgments about the economic state of their neighborhoods. The distribution of responses to the family finances question indicates that only a very small number of people were unable to assess change in their family financial situation—a mere 12 in all. But there were nine times as many “don’t know/no response” answers to the neighborhood question, virtually the same number as for the question on national economic conditions. This pattern suggests that one does not, by default, have readily available information on neighborhood economic conditions. Moreover, the nonrespondents to the neighborhood question were not

the same as those who did not respond to the national question; only 27 respondents fell into this category in both instances. Not surprisingly, the type of information gathering that gives one impressions of national conditions appears to be different from the type of information gathering that gives one an impression of what the neighborhood is like.

Discussion

First and foremost, the results of this study suggest that judgments drawn from a variety of social contexts may enter into the formation of attitudes toward presidential policies. People are most likely to utilize the social context most relevant to presidential evaluations, that is, the state of the nation as a whole, and, in descending order of importance, the neighborhood economic context, followed by the immediate family financial situation. However, since information about these contexts is not equally accessible or efficient to gather, people who are not heavily exposed to outside sources of information are more likely to utilize less relevant, but more accessible, social contexts in framing their response to a policy question. The context within which issues are evaluated may be altered by the amount of mass and interpersonal information reaching a given individual.

Clearly, structuring the question of what kind of economic information matters most as a competition between personal economic experience and perceived national conditions ignores a wide range of intermediate collectives with substantial potential for influence (Weatherford 1983). Neighborhoods are only one example of an intermediary collective of this kind; they are probably neither the most nor the least influential type of intermediary collective. On one hand, neighborhoods provide substantial opportunities for obtaining impressions of neighborhood economic conditions; in addition to many opportunities for interpersonal exchange of information, neighborhoods make it possible to indirectly observe changes in economic well-being. New cars in the driveway, home improvements and expansions, as well as obvious signs of neglect all contribute to neighborhood economic impressions without requiring interpersonal contact. On the other hand, from the perspective of group identification, they are probably not the most salient groups in many people's minds. The fact that they, nonetheless, have a substantial impact on assessments of the president, suggests that intermediary collectives are well worth incorporating into models of economic influences on the evaluation of political leaders. These results also suggest that people utilize information about neighborhoods in much the same way they do national judgments. There is a natural tendency to see information concerning more proximate collectives as easier to obtain. One might assume, therefore, that ease of access combined with greater confidence in the reliability of the information

would make it a natural "default" if one lacks national-level economic information. However, our results suggest that neighborhood judgments are no easier to obtain than national economic judgments. Moreover, people with low levels of information default to personal experiences and *not* to neighborhood perceptions. It is precisely the same individuals with ample access to information about those outside of their personal life space who are most likely to utilize both neighborhood economic evaluations and national ones.

Mass media coverage focused on national-level economic phenomena may make it far easier to come by reliable impressions of national economic trends than impressions of more proximate groups with which one has limited interpersonal contact. In any case, the quality of communication networks within groups may be a better predictor of their political import than their size, proximity to the individual, or geopolitical significance.

Although the nation may serve as the most important social context for purposes of forming attitudes toward presidential policies, it remains to be seen whether forming attitudes toward more local political leaders prompts people to frame similar judgments in terms of more local social contexts. While this might be the general tendency, it seems likely that again, those who are limited in the amount of information on that particular collective may be forced to default to a less relevant, yet more easily accessible social context. The persuasive power of social context is not inherent in the immediacy or vividness of a particular social realm, but is, in itself, a function of the political context in which the judgment is made.

NOTES

1. We recognize that countless other collectivities exist. We do not claim that the neighborhood is any more important than these other groups, but only that the neighborhood constitutes a viable context for our purposes.

2. In this case, respondents each individually designated the group they felt closest to.

3. *Family finances*: "In general, would you say that you and your family are better off, worse off, or about the same financially compared with a year ago? Much or somewhat better/worse?" Coded as a five-point scale from much worse (-2) to much better (+2). *Neighborhood conditions*: "How about your neighborhood, would you say that most families in your neighborhood are better off, worse off, or about the same financially compared with a year ago? Much or somewhat better/worse?" Coded as a five-point scale from much worse (-2) to much better (+2). *National conditions*: "Now let's talk about the country as a whole. Would you say that most families in the country are better off, worse off, or about the same financially compared with a year ago? Much or somewhat better/worse?" Coded as a five-point scale from much worse (-2) to much better (+2).

4. "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Ronald Reagan is handling the economy?" Coded as approve (1) or disapprove (0).

5. To form the information index, four questions were combined to form a 14-point scale. To designate high and low levels of information, the scale was divided so that scores of 0 through 6 indicated low information, and 7 through 13 high information. "How much attention do you pay to news reports about the campaign for president—a great deal, quite a bit, some, very little, or none?" Coded as a five-point scale from none (0) to a great deal (4). "Some people are more involved in politics than others, and we would like to find out about your involvement. I'm going to read you a list of things that some people do in politics. Could you tell me whether you do these things regularly, sometimes, rarely, or never: Discuss politics? Read political stories in newspapers? Listen to political reports on radio or tv?" Coded as four-point scales from never (0) to regularly (3).

6. *Gender*: Recorded by the interviewer: Male (0), Female (1). *Education*: "What is the highest grade of school or year of college you have completed?" Coded as 18-point scale indicating actual number of years. *Age*: "In what year were you born?" Year number was subtracted from 1984. *Family Income*: "Last year, before taxes, was your total family income: Under 5,000 dollars; 5 to 10,000 dollars; 10 to 15,000 dollars; 15 to 20,000 dollars; 20 to 30,000 dollars; 30 to 40,000 dollars; 40 to 50,000 dollars; 50,000 dollars and over?" Coded as eight-point scale from 0 to 7.

7. *Ideology*: "When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as a liberal, a conservative, a moderate, or what?" If liberal or conservative: "Do you think of yourself as a strong liberal/conservative or a not-very-strong liberal/conservative?" If neither liberal nor conservative: "Do you think of yourself as closer to liberal or closer to conservative?" Coded as a seven-point scale from strong liberal (0) to strong conservative (6).

8. *Party identification*: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?" Coded as two dummy variables, Republican (1) or not (0), and Democrat (1) or not (0).

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