

## **Priming the Voter: Assessing the Implications of Economic Perceptions on Evaluations of Leaders and Parties**

David McGrane

Department of Political Studies, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan - Email address: david.mcgrane@usask.ca

Kirk Clavelle

Department of Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan (Alumnus) - Email address: kirkclavelle@gmail.com.ca

Loleen Berdahl

Department of Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan - Email address: loleen.berdahl@usask.ca

**Abstract:** This article examines the effects of economic perceptions on party leader evaluations and on the overall feelings of voters towards the various parties contesting the election. We find that positive feelings towards incumbent parties and premiers and negative feelings towards the primary opposition parties and their leaders increase when voters feel that the provincial economy is strong. However, such 'sociotropic' economic perceptions do not affect feelings towards third parties and their leaders. In this sense, economic perceptions are important for the battle between the governing party and its primary challenger: they prime voters to like either the incumbent party and Premier, or like the government-in-waiting and the Premier-in-waiting. On the other hand, voters' evaluations of third parties and their leaders seem to be based on factors other than economic perceptions.

**Keywords:** economy, sociotropic, economic perceptions, voters

**Résumé:** Au lieu d'examiner l'effet des perceptions économiques sur le choix de vote, cet article examine les effets des perceptions économiques sur l'évaluation des chefs des partis et les effets des perceptions économiques sur les sentiments généraux des électeurs à l'égard des différents partis politiques. Nous constatons que des sentiments positifs envers les partis et les premiers ministres actuels et des sentiments négatifs envers les partis de l'opposition et leurs chefs augmentent lorsque les électeurs estiment que l'économie provinciale est forte. Cependant, les perceptions économiques « sociotropiques » n'affectent pas les sentiments envers les troisièmes partis et leurs chefs. En ce sens, les perceptions économiques sont importantes pour la bataille entre le parti au pouvoir et son adversaire principal: ils peuvent renfoncer la tendance des électeurs d'aimer le gouvernement et le Premier Ministre ou d'aimer le parti et son chef qui ont la plus la chance de faire tomber le gouvernement. D'autre part, les évaluations des électeurs envers les troisièmes partis et leurs chefs semblent être fondées sur des facteurs autres que les perceptions économiques.

**Mots-clés:** l'économie, sociotropic, perceptions économique, les électeurs

## Theoretical Framework

The importance of economic conditions to electoral fortunes is a truism in politics; it is often assumed, rightly or wrongly, that voters reward incumbent governments electorally when economic times are good, and punish the same governments when times are bad. These assumptions have been examined in academic research and a robust literature examines the relationship between the economy and voting; researchers have found that the public's perceptions of the state of the economy often influence voters' propensity to punish or reward incumbent governments by voting for or against the incumbent party. Economic factors are by no means considered the only influence on how citizens decide which party to support, but they have been demonstrated to have relevance. What is less clear in existing research is the impact of economic considerations on voters' evaluations of leaders and their political parties (i.e. how much voters report liking leaders and political parties regardless of if they actually voted for them).

This article does not examine the influence of economic perceptions on which party citizens ultimately choose to vote for on Election Day (i.e. vote choice). For an examination of the effect of economic perceptions on vote choice in recent Canadian provincial elections, readers are instructed to explore the article in this special edition by Roy and McGrane. Rather, this article examines the effect of economic perceptions on voters' feelings towards all of the party leaders and political parties contesting an election. The central finding of the article is that the 'reward/punish' logic of economic voting theory applies to the

evaluations of incumbent parties and incumbent leaders as well as evaluations of primary opposition parties and their leaders. It is found that voters who feel that the provincial economy is going well are more apt to like the incumbent party and Premier, whereas voters who feel that the provincial economy is going poorly are more apt to dislike the primary opposition party and its leader. However, third party evaluations and third party leader evaluations are not influenced by economic perceptions. In this sense, economic perceptions matter for the main battle of provincial election campaigns: they prime voters to support either the incumbent party and Premier or the government-in-waiting and the Premier-in-waiting. On the other hand, voters' evaluations of third parties and their leaders seem to be evaluated on other factors.

Before examining the scant literature on economic considerations and voters' evaluations of political parties and leaders, it is important to explore the large and sophisticated literature on vote choice and economic considerations (i.e. economic voting theory). At the heart of economic voting theory is the belief that average voters take into account how a government handles the economy and their perceptions of the current economic conditions when voting (Anderson, 2010: 140). Simply put, it is argued that voters hold the incumbent government accountable for their current economic situation (Happy, 1986: 47). Voters award incumbent governments in good economic times by voting for the incumbent party and punish incumbent governments in bad economic times by voting for opposition parties. Economic voting theory began with Anthony Downs's seminal work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). Downs

argues that voters make rational decisions when voting to determine which party will give them the most utility, with 'utility' defined as the economic and political benefits that a voter receives from voting for a party (1957: 36-37). Voters use their perceptions of utility to assess the current government; if the personal utility of an incumbent government is perceived as high, voters will vote for the incumbent government, whereas if the personal utility of an incumbent government is perceived as low, voters will cast a vote against the incumbent government (Downs, 1957: 38-39).

Economic voting research extends back to the 1960s and includes myriad studies from the United States, Europe, and Australia (Kramer 1971; Powell and Whitten, 1997; Lewis-Beck, 1986; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Fiorina, 1978; Nannestad and Paldam, 1997). Canadian researchers have also used economic voting theory as a way to understand federal vote choice (Happy, 1986, 1989, 1992; Archer and Johnson, 1988; Carmichael, 1990; Gelineau and Belanger, 2005; Nadeau and Blais, 1993; Nadeau et al., 2000; Anderson, 2010). Research has considered the effect of the influence of individuals' subjective perceptions of the economy on voting behaviour. In the perceptions studies, researchers generally distinguish between two broad types of economic perceptions, sociotropic and egocentric, and two broad timeframes, retrospective and prospective. As such, there are four types of economic perceptions that can be considered: retrospective egocentric, retrospective sociotropic, prospective egocentric, and prospective sociotropic (see Table 1).

In the economic voting literature, the distinction between retrospective and prospective perceptions is important as voters will take into account how well they did economically under a current government, as well as how well they expect to do economically in the future under the same government, or another party (Nadeau et al., 2000: 79). While some studies examine all four types of economic perceptions, most survey datasets include only one or two measures of economic perception.

International studies suggest that economic perceptions often – but not always – matter when citizens are deciding which party to vote for (Clarke and Stewart, 1994: 1116; Lanoue, 1994: 198-199; Nannestad and Paldam, 1995, 1997; Anderson et al., 2004: 12-15). In Canada, Nadeau et al.'s study of the 1997 federal election found that all four types of perceptions influence vote choice, with prospective and retrospective sociotropic voting perceptions having greater influence (Nadeau et al., 2000: 81). Anderson's analysis of federal elections from 1988-2006 found that all four types of economic perceptions influence incumbent vote choice to some degree, with sociotropic perceptions having more impact than egocentric perceptions, and prospective sociotropic perceptions being more salient than retrospective ones (Anderson, 2010: 155).

The influence of subjective perceptions of the strength of the economy and perceptions of one's personal financial position on vote choice has been questioned. Particularly, there is doubt cast on the usage of individual cross-sectional data and the resulting endogeneity (i.e. the independent variable is correlated with the error term in a regression model).

**Table 1: Categories of Economic Perceptions**

	Thinking about your own finances	Thinking about the entire economy
Thinking about the past	Retrospective egocentric: Voters' assessments of how past government actions have benefited the voter's personal economic situation	Retrospective sociotropic: Voters' assessments of how past government actions have benefited the national (or provincial) economy
Thinking about the future	Prospective egocentric: Voters' assessments of how future government actions will benefit the voter's personal economic situation	Prospective sociotropic: Voters' expectations of how future government actions will benefit the national (or provincial) economy

At issue is the causal direction of the relationship between vote choice and economic perceptions. Some research has pointed out that economic perceptions are actually structured by political preference- i.e. a voter for the governing party is naturally inclined to believe that the economy is going well because they like the government (Kramer, 1983; Wlezien et al., 1997; Anderson et al, 2004; and Evans and Pickup, 2010). In this sense, vote choice is determining economic perception and not the other way around. The solution to this problem is generally to construct models that consider the effect of objective economic conditions (particularly inflation and unemployment) on vote choice. At the same time, there have been attempts to defend the use of subjective economic perceptions as a key determinant of vote choice (see Stevenson and Duch, 2013).

Canadian research has yet to fully consider the influence of economic perceptions on political factors beyond vote choice. Some economic voting literature outside of Canada examines the relationship between economic variables

and the popularity of governing parties (Mueller, 1970; Goodhart and Bhansali, 1970; Kramer, 1971). Popularity, in this sense, is the party that citizens indicate that they would vote for between elections- i.e., 'if an election were held today.' Unlike economic voting research that focuses on who the citizen actually voted for in an election (vote choice), 'popularity function' studies consider how the popularity of the governing party changes with changes in economic and political conditions (Nannestad and Paldam, 1997: 214). A small number of Canadian studies have generally found qualified support for the conclusion that the popularity of the governing parties at the federal (Monroe and Erikson, 1986) and provincial (Tellier, 2006) levels increases in relationship to objective economic measurements such as unemployment rates, inflation, and GDP. However, no literature has examined how economic perceptions affect voters' evaluations of particular political parties.

Similarly, there appears to be little research in Canada on the connection between leadership evaluations and

economic perceptions. Research does show that leadership evaluations are an important determinant of vote choice. Perrella notes that political parties are often “defined by their leaders” (2010: 240). After examining Canadian Election Studies over a 30 year time span, Gidengil et al. found evidence that leadership evaluations are a strong determinants of vote choice (2000a: 14). In particular, leadership evaluations had a large effect on vote choice in the 2000 (Blais et al., 2002: 175) and 2004 elections (Gidengil et al., 2006: 18). In her analysis of Canadian Election Study data from 1988 to 2006, Bittner found that perceptions of leadership traits were a factor in vote choice as well, but not to the same extent as partisanship, and a leader’s perceived character was more important than perceptions of competency (2010: 200). She also found that socio-demographics, partisanship, ideological self-placement, and issues attitudes (such as taxes versus spending) can impact leadership evaluations (Bittner, 2011: 53-72). However, she did not include economic perceptions in her analysis.

The one research study that has examined the relationship between objective economic measurements and leadership evaluation at the federal Canadian level is Nadeau and Blais (1995). They examine the relationship between voting for the Liberal Party in Canadian federal elections, Canada’s unemployment rate, and proportion of Canadians who think that the Liberal leader would make the best Prime Minister according to Gallup Polls. Interestingly, they found that the objective measure of the unemployment rate was of little use in explaining variation in Canadian’s evaluation of the Liberal leader. On the other hand, both the rate of unemployment and leadership

evaluations did impact the success of Liberal leaders in getting elected as Prime Minister. Nadeau and Blais conclude that, while the unemployment rate and leadership evaluations affect federal vote choice, these two variables have a weak relationship to each other and predominantly act independently to influence vote choice. No research has examined the relationship between subjective economic perceptions and leadership evaluations in Canada. Indeed, this is the gap in the literature that we attempting to fill.

While there appear to be some interesting linkages between vote choice, leadership evaluations, and economic perceptions, there is little work that isolates the relationship between how a person perceives the strength/weakness of the economy and how they evaluate leaders and their parties in Canada. Recently, using data considering the 2011 Saskatchewan election, Clavelle (2013) found that economic perceptions were an important predictor of the incumbent premier’s leadership evaluations. Further, Clavelle found that economic perceptions were not a predictor of the opposition party leader’s leadership evaluations. Overall, he concluded that economic perceptions had an indirect effect in the 2011 Saskatchewan election by structuring leadership evaluations, which in turn were a significant predictor of vote choice. We use CPEP data to explore this relationship between economic perceptions and leadership evaluations beyond the Saskatchewan context.

In sum, Canadian researchers have been curious about the effect of economic perceptions on public attitudes beyond vote choice. However, there has been little attempt to pursue this research avenue in a systematic fashion and to

disentangle economic perceptions from other behavioural variables. Further, nearly all of the research on economic voting in Canada has looked only at the federal level, despite the fact that provincial government policy greatly influences the performance of Canada's economy. Provincial governments set the rates of a wide range of taxes, play a key role in environmental assessments, administer skills training programs, and own various Crown Corporations and public utilities. Economic issues play an important role in provincial elections and the policies of the parties that are elected to form provincial governments have a decisive economic impact. As such, we examine the Canadian provinces as laboratories to explore how economic perceptions shape broader attitudes towards politics such as voters' evaluations of provincial parties and their leaders.

### **Methodology**

The Comparative Provincial Election Project (CPEP) survey data presents a unique opportunity to consider more closely the influence of economic perceptions on leader and party evaluations. Despite a larger economic downturn, there was considerable variation in provincial economic fortunes at the time of the 2011 and 2012 elections. In some cases (e.g., Saskatchewan), the provincial economy was robust; in other cases (e.g., Ontario), the provincial economy was experiencing distress. Further, discussions of the economy were more central to some election campaigns than to others (see Sampert, this special edition).

Drawing on the CPEP survey data for eight provinces, this paper considers three research questions:

1. What is the relationship between economic perceptions and voters' evaluations of incumbent leaders and parties?
2. What is the relationship between economic perceptions and voters' evaluations of the primary opposition leader and party?
3. What is the relationship between economic perceptions and voters' evaluations of third party leaders and third parties?

Using a model that tests the effects of a large number of variables, the Roy and McGrane article in this edition examines the relationship between vote choice and economic perceptions during provincial elections. Rather than replicating Roy and McGrane's analysis, our analysis considers six separate dependent variables concerning the evaluation of leaders and political parties using data from eight provincial elections (Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia). In the construction of these variables, 'incumbent party' is defined as the party that held government going into the provincial election that we are examining. 'Primary opposition party' is defined as the non-incumbent party that the received highest popular vote in the provincial election under study (not the previous provincial election). In an effort to preserve cases and exclude fringe parties, we define 'third parties' strictly as the parties who placed third in popular vote in the various elections under exploration. In Saskatchewan and PEI, the third place parties were more like fringe parties as opposed to true third parties so they were excluded from our analysis.<sup>1</sup>

The six dependent variables are as follows:

- incumbent Premiers' leadership evaluations;
- evaluation of incumbent governing parties;
- primary opposition party leaders' evaluations (specifically, the aggregated leadership evaluations of Adrian Dix in British Columbia, Danielle Smith in Alberta, Dwain Lingenfelter in Saskatchewan, Hugh McFadyen in Manitoba, Tim Hudak in Ontario, Pauline Marois in Quebec, Olive Crane in Prince Edward Island, and Lorraine Michael in Newfoundland and Labrador);
- evaluation of the primary opposition parties (specifically, the aggregated evaluations of the following parties: British Columbia NDP, Alberta Wildrose Party, Saskatchewan NDP, Manitoba Progressive Conservatives, Ontario Progressive Conservatives, Parti Québécois, PEI Progressive Conservatives, and Newfoundland and Labrador NDP);
- third party leaders' evaluations (specifically, the aggregated leadership evaluations of Green Jane Sterk in BC, Liberal Raj Sherman in Alberta, Liberal Jon Gerrard in Manitoba, NDP Andrea Horwath in Ontario, CAQ Francois Legault in Quebec, and Liberal Kevin Alyward in Newfoundland and Labrador); and
- evaluations of third parties (specifically, the aggregated evaluations of the following parties: British Columbia Green Party, Alberta Liberal Party, Manitoba Liberal Party, Ontario NDP, Coalition Avenir Quebec, and

the Newfoundland and Labrador Liberals).

All leadership and party evaluations are measured on a 100 point scale. Respondents were asked:

Using a 100-point scale, where zero means that you really dislike the leader (party) and 100 means that you really like the leader (party), how do you feel about the following party leaders (political parties)?

The independent variables of interest are retrospective sociotropic and retrospective egocentric economic evaluations. Since CPEP examines provincial elections, we relied on a question regarding provincial economies as opposed to the Canadian economy as a whole. Retrospective sociotropic economic evaluations are measured through the question: "Over the past year, has [your province's] economy improved, worsened or stayed about the same?" This question was coded 3=improved, 2=stayed about the same, and 1=worsened. Retrospective egocentric economic evaluations are measured through the question "Financially, are you better off, worse off, or about the same as a year ago?" This question was coded 3=better off, 2=about the same as a year ago, and 1=worse off. Retrospective economic perceptions were chosen because most economic voting theories see elections as an opportunity for voters to pass judgment on the incumbent party's past performance when it comes to the economy. Similarly, perceptions of the strength of the *provincial* economy were used because provincial leaders and parties are most likely to focus on provincial economic issues as opposed to national and local economies. As might be expected, there is a moderate, though not strong, correlation between sociotropic

and egocentric evaluations (Pearson's  $R=.320$ ). Evidently, respondents feel that the strength or weakness of the provincial economy is not necessarily reflected in their own personal financial situation. Considering the varying economic contexts within Canadian provinces during the time of these elections, objective indicators such as levels of unemployment and inflation could have been used as independent variables. However, the difficulties of integrating such objective measures into individual level survey data and space limitations meant that pursuing such an analysis was not feasible.

Sociodemographic control variables include province (dummy variables for Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island, with Ontario as the reference category); sex (female=1, male=0), age in years, education (0=less than high school diploma, 4 = professional degree/doctorate), income (0 = less than \$20,000, 10 = over \$100,000); religious affiliation (Catholic, Protestant, other religion, with no affiliation/atheist as the reference category); visible minority (1=visible minority, 0 = not visible minority); union membership (1=union member, 0 = non-union member); and rural (1=rural resident; 0 = urban/suburban resident).

## **Findings**

The Roy and McGrane article employs a multivariate type of analysis called the 'bloc recursive' model that tests the impact of a large number of variables on vote choice. Besides sociotropic and egocentric economic perceptions, the other variables in their model includes social background, beliefs and values, party identification, issues opinions, and

leader evaluation. Their analysis reveals that in four of the eight provincial elections that we are examining (Newfoundland, Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan), positive sociotropic economic perceptions were a significant factor in explaining voting for the incumbent party. As for egocentric economic perceptions, this variable was only significant in explaining voting for the incumbent Saskatchewan Party. As we will see, our analysis below is generally congruent with the findings of Roy and McGrane.

Before looking at the evaluations of parties and leaders, we briefly look at the bivariate relationship between economic perceptions and vote choice in each provincial election. While vote choice is not our main concern, it is important to understand the impact of economic perceptions on voting for the three types of parties that we are examining (incumbent party, primary opposition party, and third party). Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the mean of respondents' sociotropic and egocentric retrospective economic perceptions, broken down by the type of party for which they voted.

Several clear patterns emerge from the data in Tables 2 and 3. First, in virtually every case, the sociotropic and egocentric economic perceptions of incumbent party voters were more positive than those of primary opposition party voters. This finding is very much in line with the view that voters 'reward' incumbent parties when they perceive that the economy is strong and their personal financial situation is improving. In some cases, the difference in the means between the voters of the various parties may not have been large enough to make this variable significant for certain elections. Nonetheless, our data establish

**Table 2: Vote Choice and Mean of Retrospective Sociotropic Economic Perceptions by Province**  
*(1=worsened, 2=stayed about the same, and 3=improved)*

	Voted Incumbent	Voted Primary Opposition Party	Voted Third Party
NL	2.59	2.35	2.21
PE	1.93	1.51	N/A
QC	2.06	1.77	1.78
ON	2.12	1.39	1.62
MB	2.27	1.76	2.06
SK	2.78	2.24	N/A
AB	2.46	2.19	2.31
BC	2.22	1.52	1.85

**Table 3: Vote Choice and Mean of Retrospective Egocentric Economic Perceptions by Province**  
*(1=worsened, 2=stayed about the same, and 3=improved)*

	Voted Incumbent	Voted Primary Opposition Party	Voted Third Party
NL	2.00	1.92	1.86
PE	1.85	1.75	N/A
QC	2.01	1.86	1.97
ON	1.93	1.77	1.72
MB	1.94	1.97	1.71
SK	2.14	1.75	N/A
AB	2.12	2.03	2.06
BC	2.05	1.71	1.97

an important bivariate relationship between vote choice and economic perceptions that supports the basic theory of economic voting and the analysis of Roy and McGrane.

Second, in all cases, the difference in economic perceptions between incumbent party voters and primary

opposition party voters is much greater for sociotropic economic perceptions than egocentric economic perceptions. Congruent with the analysis by Roy and McGrane, such a finding suggests that sociotropic economic perceptions have a greater impact on vote choice in the provincial elections that we are

examining than do egocentric economic perceptions. Voters may be keener to evaluate the incumbent party on how its policies have improved the entire provincial economy instead of focusing on the more abstract effect that government policy may have had on their own personal finances.

Third, Roy and McGrane's analysis only examined voting for incumbent parties and it did not examine how economic perceptions could have a different impact on third parties and the primary opposition party. For the most part, our data show that third party voters had more positive economic perceptions than did primary opposition party voters (even though third party voters' economic perceptions always remained less positive than those who voted for the incumbent party). This finding suggests that economic perceptions may have a greater impact on voting for primary opposition parties than voting for third parties. If a voter is really negative about the economy and their financial situation, they may choose to opt for the primary opposition party because that action would have the best chance of resulting in immediately changing the government and bringing different policies that could improve economic growth.

Bivariate analysis confirms that, prior to introducing other types of variables, economic perceptions do have an important impact on choosing between the two major parties contesting a provincial election. Further, economic factors have less influence on voters for third parties that do not have a realistic chance at forming government than on voters of the incumbent party and its main challenger. To further our understanding of the effect of economic perceptions on provincial election

campaigns, we now move away from looking at economic perceptions and vote choice to our primary investigation, which is the examination of the influence of economic perceptions on what may be termed 'antecedent' factors to vote choice such as liking and disliking political parties and leaders. Our findings below will illustrate that retrospective sociotropic economic perceptions can prime citizens to vote in certain ways on election day. To do this, we aggregate the voters in all provinces together to examine the six dependent variables specified earlier. The advantages of aggregating all provinces together are the creation of very large dataset to work with and the ease of interpreting one table instead of several tables. We control for 'province' in our multivariate analysis, which allows us to discern any impact that a respondent's province of residence may exert.

Looking first at the bivariate analysis of the correlations between sociotropic and egocentric economic perceptions and our six aggregated dependent variables concerning evaluations of parties and leaders (Table 4), positive sociotropic evaluations are strongly correlated to positive feelings towards incumbent premiers and incumbent parties. Positive egocentric evaluations are also correlated with feelings towards premiers and incumbent parties, but the relationship is much weaker. A similar pattern is portrayed when it comes to primary opposition parties and leaders. Positive sociotropic economic perceptions are strongly correlated with negative feelings towards primary opposition parties and leaders while positive egocentric economic perceptions have a significant, but weaker, correlation with negative feelings towards primary opposition parties and

their leaders. This evidence suggests that voters are primed to vote for the incumbent party when they have positive sociotropic, and to a lesser extent egocentric, economic perceptions. However, economic perceptions are much less of a driver of feelings towards third parties and their leaders. The correlations between economic perceptions and feelings towards third parties and their leaders are not significant. In this sense, economic perceptions do not appear to prime citizens to vote for third parties.

A further question of interest is the extent to which voters blame incumbent provincial governments for bad economic times and give credit to incumbent provincial governments for good economic times. In order to examine this question, the CPEP survey asked voters who indicated that they believed that the provincial economy had improved the following question: "Have the policies of the PROVINCIAL government made [the name of province]'s economy better, or have they not made much difference?"

Similarly, voters who responded that the economy had worsened were asked, "Have the policies of the PROVINCIAL government made [the name of province]'s economy worse, or have they not made much difference?" Voters who felt that the economy had 'stayed the same' were not asked this question. The result is a subset of CPEP respondents whose attitudes can be probed to understand the effect of assigning blame/giving credit for state of the provincial economy on party and leader evaluations. First, it should be noted that 64% of voters who thought that provincial economy had improved gave credit to the policies of the provincial government while 66% of

voters who thought that the economy had worsen blamed the provincial government's policies. This finding is consistent with the logic of economic voting theory that voters punish incumbent government for bad economic times and reward incumbent governments for good economic times. Whether merited or otherwise, voters do appear to generally hold provincial governments accountable for the state of the provincial economy.

Second, how does assigning blame and giving credit affect the evaluations of leaders and their parties? Table 5 reports the means for our six dependent variables concerning party and leader evaluations for this subset of CPEP respondents.

A familiar pattern emerges in Table 5: the ratings of the Premiers and incumbent parties as well as those of the primary opposition parties and their leaders are greatly affected by the assignment of credit/blame while third parties and their leaders were affected quite little. Voters who thought that the economy was improving and that the provincial government was responsible for the improvement were more likely to rate the incumbent party and Premier quite high and the primary opposition party and its leader quite low. The reverse was true for those voters that thought that the economy was worse and blamed the provincial government's policies. However, the extent to which a voter blamed the government for bad economic times or praised it for good economic times seemed to matter little to how they evaluated third parties or third party leaders.

**Table 4: Correlations between Economic Perceptions, Evaluations of Leaders, and Evaluation of Parties (Pairwise Deletion)**

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>Sociotropic Evaluations</b>	<b>Egocentric Evaluations</b>
Incumbent Premiers	0.4515 <sup>a</sup> (n=6567)	0.1807 <sup>a</sup> (n=6579)
Incumbent Parties	0.4099 <sup>a</sup> (n=6516)	0.1763 <sup>a</sup> (n=6528)
Primary Opposition Party Leaders	-0.1129 <sup>a</sup> (n=6534)	-0.0262 <sup>c</sup> (n=6545)
Primary Opposition Parties	-0.1408 <sup>a</sup> (n=6510)	-0.0277 <sup>c</sup> (n=6522)
Third Party Leaders	0.0011 (n=5198)	-0.0193 (n=5206)
Third Parties	0.0089 (n=5240)	0.0073 (n=5249)

a: p≤.001, b: p≤.01, c: p≤.05

**Table 5: Credit/Blame for Economic Performance and Mean of Party and Leader Evaluation (0= really dislike and 100=really like)**

	<b>Thinks that economy has got improved and that the policies of the provincial government have made economy better</b>	<b>Thinks that economy has improved and that policies of the provincial government have not made much of a difference</b>	<b>Thinks that economy has worsened and that the policies of the provincial government have made economy worse</b>	<b>Thinks that economy has worsened and that policies of the provincial government have not made much of a difference</b>
Incumbent Premiers	72.8 (n=1266)	46.0 (n=720)	15.6 (n=952)	42.0 (n=607)
Incumbent Parties	69.0 (n=1250)	42.7 (n=710)	18.0 (n=945)	40.7 (n=608)
Primary Opposition Party Leaders	28.3 (n=1257)	49.2 (n=716)	48.7 (n=944)	38.4 (n=604)
Primary Opposition Parties	28.8 (n=1248)	49.1 (n=712)	54.7 (n=945)	37.3 (n=607)
Third Party Leaders	43.7 (n=815)	44.7 (n=588)	42.6 (n=803)	48.6 (n=498)
Third Parties	40.4 (n=813)	35.9 (n=593)	37.5 (n=810)	43.1 (n=504)

The multivariate analysis for our six dependent variables concerning the evaluations of parties and leaders presents a fuller picture and tests whether the bivariate relationships hold when we control for other pertinent variables (Table 6). These multivariate analyses were completed using OLS regression. This technique is appropriate for the leadership and political party evaluations, as all are interval-level variables ranging from 0 to 100.

When it comes to evaluations of parties and leaders, it is important to note provincial variations. Using Ontario as a reference category produces an important effect on the regression when exploring the effect of province of residence on leader and party evaluations. Table 6 depicts that respondents from provinces where the governing party was comfortably returned to power (Saskatchewan, PEI, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Manitoba) had a greater propensity to have positive feelings towards the incumbent Premier and party than respondents from Ontario, where the governing Liberals won a minority government. However, residents of most other provinces also had more positive feelings towards their primary opposition parties than did Ontarians. These findings illustrate that, as a group, the Ontario Liberals, Dalton McGuinty, the Ontario Progressive Conservatives, and Tim Hudak were significantly less liked than their respective colleagues in several other Canadian provinces. When it comes to third parties, the opposite is true: the Ontario NDP and Andrea Horwath were generally better liked than third parties in most of the other provinces examined.

A number of other socio-demographic factors emerged as significant in Table 6. Specifically, women and the higher educated liked

incumbent Premiers and parties as well as third parties and their leaders more than men and the lower educated did; older respondents were more likely to like the incumbent Premier and party more than were younger respondents; union members liked third parties and their leaders more than non-union members did; and Catholic and Protestants liked opposition parties and their leaders more than atheists did. Overall, a voter's socio-demographic position can lead to a predisposition for liking certain parties and leaders. This finding is congruent with the relatively important role that socio-demographic factors play in explaining vote choice in Roy and McGrane's application of the bloc recursive model to these eight provincial elections.

Looking specifically at sociotropic and egocentric economic perceptions, our independent variables of interest, the multivariate analysis supports the findings of the bivariate analysis. Even after controlling for other variables, positive sociotropic evaluations of the provincial economy produce positive feeling towards the incumbent party and premier and negative feelings towards the primary opposition party and its leader. Following the 'reward/punish' logic of economic voting theory, it appears that voters reward incumbent parties and Premiers for a strong economy and feel less positively about the government-in-waiting and Premier-in-waiting when they perceive the provincial economy to be strong. In this sense, positive sociotropic economic perceptions prime citizens to vote for the incumbent party and negative sociotropic economic perceptions prime citizens to vote for the primary opposition party. Again confirming the bivariate analysis, feelings towards third parties and their leaders are not impacted by sociotropic economic perceptions. This finding

suggests that third parties and their leaders were evaluated on grounds other than perceptions of the strength/weakness of the provincial economy.

### **Implications**

Our exploration of CPEP data in regards to economic perceptions and feelings towards political parties and their leaders raises three important issues for our understanding of Canadian provincial politics. First, assessing the impact of the economy on Canadian provincial elections is a difficult task. It is our contention that the impact of economic perceptions can sometimes be diluted in large multivariate analyses of vote choice when powerful explanatory variables such as leadership evaluations and partisanship are included. Using data from eight provincial elections, we find evidence that positive sociotropic economic perceptions lead to more positive feelings towards incumbent parties and Premiers and more negative feelings towards primary opposition parties and leaders. As such, sociotropic economic perceptions can prime citizens to vote for certain parties. In this way, economic perceptions act as important antecedent variables that can influence a voter's leadership and party evaluations that, consequently, have large impacts on vote choice. As such, our findings suggest the existing literature on vote choice at both the provincial and federal level in Canada may be missing some earlier steps in the causality when it comes to assessing how economic perceptions affect vote choice.

Second, the analyses in this article and the article by Roy and McGrane in this special edition make it quite clear that *egocentric* economic perceptions did not have a large impact

on vote choice or the evaluations of leaders and parties in the eight elections examined. In terms of economic perceptions, these elections were referendums on the extent voters felt that provincial economy had improved. However, while voters view provincial governments as being accountable for the overall performance of the economy, they seem less inclined to see provincial governments as being responsible for their own personal finances. As argued above, the link between government policy and one's own personal financial situation is quite abstract and difficult to map out. On the other hand, voters do expect government be competent managers of the provincial economy and judge political parties and their leaders in this light.

**Table 6: Multivariate Analysis of Evaluations of Leaders and Parties**

	Premiers' Evaluations	Governing Party Evaluations	Primary Opposition Parties Leaders' Evaluations	Primary Opposition Parties' Evaluations	Third Party Leadership Evaluations	Third Parties' Evaluations
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
QC*	-4.15 (2.308909)	-3.31 (2.377126)	<b>12.67a</b> <b>(2.734026)</b>	<b>8.66b</b> <b>(3.054175)</b>	<b>-8.49a</b> <b>(2.530085)</b>	<b>-7.36b</b> <b>(2.394039)</b>
SK*	<b>15.35a</b> <b>(2.300102)*</b>	<b>10.39a</b> <b>(2.365417)</b>	<b>-8.73a</b> <b>(2.171912)</b>	4.11 (2.681525)	N/A	N/A
PE*	<b>15.39a</b> <b>(2.594122)</b>	<b>11.70a</b> <b>(2.617578)</b>	4.32 (2.35102)	4.40 (2.7355738)	N/A	N/A
MB*	<b>8.30a</b> <b>(2.158397)</b>	<b>6.01b</b> <b>(2.276253)</b>	<b>6.13b</b> <b>(2.051647)</b>	<b>1.20b</b> <b>(2.358381)</b>	<b>-15.05a</b> <b>(1.951337)</b>	<b>-11.03a</b> <b>(1.874615)</b>
NL*	<b>10.02a</b> <b>(2.32194)</b>	<b>5.65c</b> <b>(2.360238)</b>	<b>21.80a</b> <b>(2.226198)</b>	<b>16.81a</b> <b>(2.518472)</b>	-3.51 (2.37318)	12.45a (2.015269)
AB*	-.005 (2.1319)	-3.76 (2.111954)	<b>14.59a</b> <b>(2.237838)</b>	<b>10.24a</b> <b>(2.516044)</b>	<b>-12.53a</b> <b>(1.964611)</b>	<b>-5.99b</b> <b>(1.800106)</b>

BC*	-.511 (2.09796)	-3.85 (1.934712)	<b>9.89a</b> <b>(1.952879)</b>	<b>8.80a</b> <b>(2.243019)</b>	2.95 (2.098016)	.42 (1.90959)
Female	<b>5.95a</b> <b>(1.456575)</b>	<b>4.22.b</b> <b>(1.439797)</b>	1.15 (1.58667)	-2.03 (1.764347)	<b>7.78a</b> <b>(1.603852)</b>	<b>6.88a</b> <b>(1.450518)</b>
Age	<b>.23a</b> <b>(.0490545)</b>	<b>.10c</b> <b>(.502049)</b>	-.02 (.0536103)	-.06 (.624763)	-.11c (.0532879)	<b>.10c</b> <b>(0.501432)</b>
Education	<b>1.85a</b> <b>(.3511262)</b>	<b>1.50a</b> <b>(.346224)</b>	<b>-.85c</b> <b>(.3828558)</b>	<b>-1.07c</b> <b>(.4263535)</b>	<b>1.51a</b> <b>(.38-7946)</b>	<b>1.41a</b> <b>(.3338859)</b>
Income	.32 (.2458176)	.34 (.239284)	.21 (.2668376)	.02 (.3009621)	<b>-.77b</b> <b>(.2658731)</b>	-.47 (.2437058)
Catholic**	3.40 (1.995342)	2.03 (2.061107)	<b>7.98a</b> <b>(2.273191)</b>	<b>8.06b</b> <b>(2.550237)</b>	<b>-4.85c</b> <b>(2.256182)</b>	-.83 (2.086203)
Protestant**	2.95 (1.939128)	<b>5.20b</b> <b>(1.845554)</b>	<b>7.79a</b> <b>(2.062408)</b>	<b>10.55a</b> <b>(2.294675)</b>	<b>-4.75c</b> <b>(2.025517)</b>	-2.49 (1.900781)
Other religion**	.85 (2.264344)	3.12 (2.198408)	4.39 (2.570572)	5.14 (2.291774)	-.69 (2.442069)	1.41 (2.429958)

Visible minority	<b>7.74c</b> <b>(3.643632)</b>	<b>11.24a</b> <b>(3.049319)</b>	-2.45 (3.508063)	1.628797 (2.062408)	1.52 (3.348506)	3.35 (3.047953)
Foreign born	1.95 (2.707423)	-.15 (2.440548)	.69 (3.259859)	1.73 (2.71808)	-3.48 (2.788974)	-4.73 2.719898
Union	-.07 (1.864695)	-1.00 (1.87924)	-.35 (2.004782)	-1.55 (2.160822)	<b>6.68a</b> <b>(2.069603)</b>	<b>4.61c</b> <b>(1.883929)</b>
Rural	-1.61 (1.790059)	-3.40 (1.749674)	<b>5.12b</b> <b>(1.894685)</b>	2.25 (2.16657)	-1.08 (1.970616)	-1.65 (1.798954)

All significant coefficients are bolded (a= p≤.001, b= p≤.01, c= p≤.05). Reference categories are as follows: \* = Ontario and \*\*= No religion.

Third, our central finding is that ‘reward/punish’ logic of economic voting theory pertains to the evaluation of the incumbent party and the Premier as well as the primary opposition party and its leader. Our multivariate analysis finds evidence that positive economic perceptions concerning the performance of the provincial economy are correlated with voters liking both the incumbent party and the incumbent Premier, which primes these voters to ultimately vote to maintain the incumbent government. Similarly, negative economic perceptions are correlated with voters liking the primary opposition party and the leader of the primary opposition party, which primes these voters to vote against the government and in favour of the most feasible alternative.

However, economic perceptions appeared to not prime respondents to vote for or against third parties. Perhaps, voting for a third party is not seen as having a little immediate effect on the economy because the party has a very small chance of forming government. Our analysis illustrated that respondents who voted for third parties were neither as negative about the economy as those who voted for primary opposition parties nor as positive about the economy as those who voted for the incumbent. Economic perceptions were simply not a factor for these voters. Further, economic perceptions did not impact the manner in which all voters evaluated third parties and third party leaders. It appears that third parties and their leaders are evaluated according to different criteria compared to the two main combatants in a provincial election campaign.

The foregoing analysis opens some interesting possibilities for future research. The economy appeared to be a major issue in most of the recent provincial elections covered by the CPEP data. For the most part, federal economic voting literature examines

the direct impact of economic perceptions on vote choice. However, less attention has been paid to the influence of economic perceptions on other aspects of electioneering such as evaluations of parties, leaders, issues positions, issue saliency, partisanship, and satisfaction with the performance of the provincial government. Further, economic perceptions seem to affect third parties differently than incumbent parties or primary opposition parties and more research could be done to understand this phenomenon. Finally, more research could be done on how objective measures of strength of provincial economies, such as unemployment rate or GDP growth, could influence the evaluations of different types of party leaders and different types of political parties.

Certain analysts have advanced the notion that the economy has become *the* defining issue of our times. John Ibbitson (2013) recently argued that the 2008 financial crisis “still haunts us” and that “the economy matters above all” in Canadian politics. He quotes Nik Nanos, head of the polling firm Nanos Research, who calls the economy “an open wound” that dominates all other political issues in Canada. If this is the case, political scientists should be playing close attention to not just how economic perceptions affect vote choice but also how economic perceptions affect other aspects of Canadian electioneering. The CPEP data provide a valuable resource with which to understand how these economic perceptions shapes Canadians’ political views.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We were more interested in 'strong third parties' as opposed to 'fringe' parties. Due its fringe nature, there were no CPEP questions about the third place Prince Edward Island NDP or its leader. Similarly, there were no questions about the third place Saskatchewan Green Party or its leader. Indeed, the PEI NDP received 3.2% of the popular vote and the Saskatchewan Green Party 2.9% of the vote.