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Partisan-Colored Glasses? How Polarization has Affected the Formation and Impact of Party Competence Evaluations

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Partisan-Colored Glasses? How Polarization has Affected the Formation and Impact of Party Competence Evaluations

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Government from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

       These days it seems "polarization" is a buzzword in American politics. Journalists and pundits alike routinely discuss the degree to which the American public has become polarized. Often times, however, media discussions of polarization never go much deeper than whether more Americans identify as "Republican" or "Democrat," or "conservative" or "liberal" as compared with 20 or 30 years ago. What these surface-level discussions of polarization miss is that the possible effects of polarization on American politics may go far beyond how many Americans identify as Democrats or Republicans.

       Polarization may indeed reshape the entire way political attitudes and opinions are formed in our country. If more Americans are moving to the ideological and partisan extremes, then diverse aspects of politics may be viewed though a partisan lens, or partisan-colored glasses if you will. Even opinions on questions that seem inherently nonpartisan, like whether the national economy has gotten better or worse in the past year, could take on a partisan bias in a polarized America.

       One political attitude in particular that could be greatly affected by increasingly strong partisan biases is party competence evaluations. These evaluations of which party can better handle a given political issue used to be driven by perceptions of actual party performance on that issue. When a party performed well on an issue by passing and implementing effective policy, competence evaluations would improve. When a party did not, competence evaluations would worsen. In a polarized America, however, that may no longer be the case. Rather than being driven by perceptions of actual party performance, polarization may cause these party competence evaluations to be formed based on partisan loyalties. This in turn may affect the impact competence evaluations have on an individual's decision of who to vote for in an

election. In this thesis, I will address both of these topics. I seek to answer two related research questions. The first is: how has the effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice changed over time? The second question is: how has the effect of party identification on the formation of party competence evaluations changed over time?

The Rise of Partisan Polarization

For years now, scholars have discussed the growing polarization in American politics. There is little debate at this point about polarization at the elite level – countless studies have shown that politicians in Washington and political leaders around the country have become more polarized since the mid-1970s (McCarty 2014). This polarization has caused the two parties to each become more homogenous in terms of ideology and to grow farther apart from each other ideologically to point where there is now no ideological overlap between the two parties in Congress (Poole and Rosenthal 2001, 18). Alan Abramowitz goes as far as saying "ideological differences between the parties are probably greater now than at any time in the past half century" (2007, 2).

The debate that continues to rage within political science is whether this polarization has also happened at the mass level, or the level of average Americans. There are a number of political scientists – most notably Morris Fiorina – who believe that the polarization of average Americans has not occurred and that very little has changed since the 1950s in terms of the political beliefs held by average Americans (Abramowitz 2007, 3). These political scientists define polarization as a "movement away from the center and concentration at the extremes" (Fleisher and Bond 2013, 2). Their data show that this movement away from the center has not occurred. The percentage of Americans identifying as Independent in party identification

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questions and the percentage identifying as moderate in political ideology questions has

remained more or less stable since the 1960s. According to Fiorina, if polarization had occurred

at the mass level, the percentage of Americans identifying as Democrats or Republicans and as

liberals or conservatives would have increased in the past few decades. Multiple surveys have

shown this is not the case (Fiorina 2013).

Fiorina also argues that average Americans do not use abstract terms like "liberal" and

"conservative" in the same way that elites do. Average Americans may self-identify as liberal or

conservative, but often times they express more moderate positions on a range of issues. This is

especially true for self-identified conservatives (Fiorina 2013). Fiorina and several other scholars

have presented data that show that on a wide range of issues Americans continue to express

moderate positions, suggesting that the political center may be even larger than political ideology

questions on national surveys show it to be (Fleisher and Bond 2013, 2).

Fiorina does acknowledge that there has been some change in the ideology of the

electorate in the past few decades, but that change has occurred only among individuals who

were already partisan. This change, which Fiorina calls party sorting, has caused self-identified

Democrats to become more homogeneously liberal and self-identified Republicans to become

more homogeneously conservative, causing the ideological distance between the two groups to

grow (Fiorina and Abrams 2014). The Americans who were in the middle decades ago, however,

have stayed in the middle and not been ideologically sorted (Fiorina 2013).

This party sorting is largely responsible for the polarization we have seen at the elite level

according to Fiorina and other like-minded political scientists. The parties have become more

extreme because their core supporters have become more extreme and more ideologically

homogeneous (Fiorina 2013). According to these scholars, the majority of the public would

prefer to have moderate candidates run for office, but core party supporters and party leaders continue to serve up two extreme candidates that voters are then forced to choose between in the general election (Fleisher and Bond 2013, 2). In addition, media coverage of this elite polarization tends to exaggerate the amount of partisan division in the American public, causing Americans to believe the divide between the average Democratic voter and the average Republican voter is larger than it actually is. However, despite polarized elites and biased media coverage, political scientists on this side of the debate argue that America as a whole has "an increasingly moderate core with extreme wings, all of whom have increased antipathy for the opposition" (Levendusky and Malhotra 2014).

On the other side of the mass polarization debate is a group of political scientists who firmly believe polarization has occurred at the mass level. These political scientists argue that there are "considerable differences of opinion between red-state Republicans and blue-state Democrats, particularly among voters and activists" (Fleisher and Bond 2013, 2). They contend that the disconnect between average Americans and politicians that Fiorina claims to exist is a myth; American voters align well with the ideological orientation of the party they choose to vote for (Fleisher and Bond 2013, 2).

Abramowitz argues that mass polarization is in part the result of changing demographics in America. Nonwhite voters make up an increasingly large proportion of total voters, and an overwhelming majority of these nonwhite voters gravitate towards the Democratic Party. The growing dependence of Democratic candidates on nonwhite voters, along with decision of most Republican candidates to appeal to white voters unhappy with the Democrats' economic and racial liberalism, is partially responsible for the ideological and regional realignment we have seen in America. Abramowitz claims that this racial divide between the parties has increasingly

pushed conservative whites in the South into the Republican Party and liberals and moderate whites in the Northeast, Midwest, and Pacific states into the Democratic Party (Abramowitz 2014). As a result, the polarization between Democratic and Republican voters on social welfare and racial issues has grown consistently since the 1970s (Carsey and Layman 2014 "Our Politics is Polarized on More Issues than Ever Before").

Abramowitz and other political scientists who believe that polarization has happened at the mass level assert that this polarization is evident both in how voters think and how they act. In terms of how voters think, evidence has shown that American voters have grown more ideologically extreme over the past few decades. Voters today have more coherent ideological preferences than voters a generation ago did, preferences that guide them away from the center (Abramowitz 2007, 15). Additionally, while the percentage of Americans who identify as moderate has not changed, the percentage who express moderate opinions on issues has dropped. Hare and Poole found that when they corrected for bias in respondents' ideological self-placement in the 2012 American National Election Studies, the percentage of respondents who expressed moderate opinions was much lower than the percentage of respondents who claimed to be moderate (2014).

Abramowitz also points out that over the past few decades, the number of educated and interested voters in America has grown, resulting in a more ideologically extreme voting population. The least educated, least interested voters today still remain firmly in the ideological center, but there are fewer of these voters today than there were four decades ago (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, 544-545). There is also some evidence that while the number of Americans who claim to be Independents has remained stable, the number of Americans who actually behave like Independents is shrinking. What this means is that many of the Americans who claim

to be Independents today vote consistently for one party, meaning they behave in the same manner as self-declared partisans (Keele and Stimson 2005, 12).

In terms of how voters behave, political scientists arguing in favor of mass polarization state that the increases in partisan voting that have taken place over the past few decades are proof positive of polarization at the mass level. Previous research has shown that the impact of partisanship on voting behaviors has increased significantly in the past few decades. Bartels found that in presidential elections, the impact of partisanship on voting behaviors was almost 80 percent greater in 1996 than it was in 1972. In congressional elections, the impact of partisanship on voting behaviors was almost 60 percent greater in 1996 than it was in 1978 (Bartels 2000, 35). This increase in partisan voting has occurred across the country, a fact that Abramowitz and like-minded scholars use to bolster their argument that polarization has occurred at the mass level (Bartels 2000, 41).

As polarization increasingly drives voters to the left or to the right, public perceptions of political figures and events become skewed by individual partisanship. Evidence has shown that there is a biased lens through which partisans view the world. This is largely because partisans have a social identity attached to their chosen political parties. Partisans see the world through partisan-colored glasses in part because party leaders are sending signals to supporters about where they should stand on issues and what they should believe (Carsey and Layman 2014, "How our Partisan Loyalties are Driving Polarization"). As a result, partisans from either side of the aisle can be exposed to the same set of objective facts but still have different perceptions and attitudes based on these facts (Bartels 2002, 124).

One example of this phenomenon can be seen in the public's rating of presidential handling of economic policy. Ostensibly all members of the public are exposed to the same

"facts" in terms of change in the unemployment rate, rate of inflation, etc. As a result, one would expect that Democrats' and Republicans' evaluations of a president's handling of economic policy would rise and fall in tandem, even if there is a gap between the ratings themselves. However, in the two years leading up to the 1992 election, Bartels found that this tandem rise and fall did not quite happen. Bartels used ANES panel data to project how strong Republicans' and strong Democrats' evaluations of President George H.W. Bush's handling of the economy would have changed over time in the absence of partisan bias. When he compared this model to actual changes in opinion between 1991 and 1992, he found that the evaluations of strong Republicans declined at a rate much lower than the no-bias model predicted and the evaluations of strong Democrats declined at a rate much higher than the model predicted. In short, both strong Republicans and strong Democrats were exposed to the same set of facts – the rise in unemployment between 1991 and 1992 – but their perceptions of these facts were quite different, as evidence by their differing evaluations of President Bush's handling of the economy (Bartels 2002, 126-129).

On a range of other attitudes and evaluations, Bartels found effects of partisan bias. When assessing everything from Ronald Reagan's hunger for power to Jimmy Carter's handling of unemployment, Democrats and Republicans interpreted concrete political events and facts in ways that reflected the influence of partisanship on attitudes and attitude formation (Bartels 2002, 131). Bartels found that even in questions that do not specifically mention a political figure, the effect of partisanship on perceptions of the political world is still evident. In the 1988 NES survey, respondents were asked to compare the current levels of unemployment and inflation to where each economic marker was in 1980. One would expect that Democrats and Republicans would give quite similar answers; after all, they witnessed the same improvement in

the unemployment and inflation rates between 1980 and 1988. However, Democrats were quite unwilling to admit the economy had improved during Reagan's presidency. More than 50 percent of strong Democrats said inflation had gotten "somewhat worse" or "much worse" since 1980. In actuality, the inflation rate had dropped from 13.5% in 1980 to 4.1% in 1988 (Bartels 2002, 134).

Party Competence, Party Identification, and the Vote

Bartels' research clearly shows that Americans have partisan-colored glasses through which they view the world, allowing them to interpret objective facts in distinctly partisan ways. If polarization has occurred at the mass level, causing more Americans to identify with one party over the other whether they openly admit it or not, the question becomes how might this increased partisanship affect other attitudes and political perceptions? In particular, I am interested in whether increasing partisan bias has had an effect on how party competence evaluations are formed. Party competence evaluations are interesting opinions to study because there is a fair amount of evidence showing these evaluations play a role in vote choice in federal elections.

Discussion of the role party competence evaluations play in federal elections began in the 1980s when a number of political scientists found that party competence evaluations have a statistically significant impact on vote choice at the individual level and elections results at the aggregate level (Abramowitz, Cover, and Norpoth 1986, 567; Cover 1986 "Presidential Evaluations and Voting for Congress"). One study in particular found that evaluations of the relative ability of the two parties to handle national economic problems have a significant impact on congressional voting, even when controlling for party identification and feelings about the

president (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979, 514-516). Authors of these early studies hypothesized that party competence evaluations acted as an intervening variable between presidential popularity and vote choice. They believed that voters' opinions about the president's performance influenced voters' perceptions of party competence, which in turn influenced midterm vote choice (Cover 1986 "Party Competence Evaluations and Voting for Congress," 307).

Since then, research has fairly consistently shown that party competence evaluations have an effect on vote choice. Using data from the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, Therriault found that party competence evaluations have a statistically significant impact on vote choice in congressional elections, even when controlling for partisanship and a range of other demographic variables (2009, 10-14). The effect of party competence evaluations seems to vary across different types of elections, however. Lasley and Stegmaier found that party competence evaluations have a larger impact on vote choice in races with an incumbent than in open-seat races. This is because party competence evaluations are generally linked with voters' perceptions of each party's performance in Washington. Incumbents are seen as partially responsible for that performance, while candidates running for an open-seat are generally seen as disconnected from the comings and goings in Washington (Lasley and Stegmaier 2001, 557-558).

These competence evaluations are influenced by a number of factors. One of these factors is of course retrospective evaluations. When evaluating whether one party or the other would better handle a certain issue, people typically recall recent events having to do with that issue, and then consider which party is more responsible for those events. For example, when determining which party can better handle the nation's economy, individuals might consider recent changes in the unemployment rate or the rate of inflation then determine which party is responsible for those changes. In 1981, Fiorina found that when evaluating the government's

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economic performance, retrospective evaluations could actually offset partisan bias. That is to say, strong Democrats could rate the Republican administration as more competent on the economy if they perceived that business conditions had improved significantly under Republican leadership (Fiorina 1981, 110). For many years, these retrospective evaluations were thought to be the most important factor influencing competence evaluations.

Because retrospective evaluations change over time as individuals are exposed to new information, the logical conclusion is that competence evaluations would also change over time. Studies have shown that this is true to a degree. Perceptions about which party can better handle the nation's economy, for example, have changed throughout history (Brasher 2000, 71). However, Peffley, Feldman, and Sigelman did find that while party competence evaluations do change when individuals are exposed to new information, they do not change as rapidly as statisticians would predict if retrospective evaluations were the only factor influencing competence evaluations (1987, 117-119).

Party competence evaluations are also strongly influenced by partisanship. It is a natural assumption that Democrats are more likely to say their party is more competent and Republicans are more likely to say the same of their party. Several studies have shown a connection between party identification and party competence evaluations, namely that party identification has an effect on competence evaluations (Green and Jennings 2011, 20). One study in particular crafted separate models predicting competence ratings for the Democratic Party and Republican Party on a number of issues. In both models, partisanship had a statistically significant impact on competence evaluations (Green and Jennings 2011, 21-25). There is some evidence to suggest that the causal relationship may be in the other direction, meaning that party identification may be determined in part by individuals' evaluations of each party's relative competence on key

issues (Mangum 2012, 7-10; Green and Jennings 2011, 20). The evidence in this area has been mixed, however.

Retrospective evaluations and party identification are widely considered to be the two biggest factors influencing competence evaluations, and they are the two variables of greatest importance in my research. However, there are other factors thought to have some impact on party competence evaluations. There is some evidence to suggest that perceptions of the performance of a sitting president can influence perceptions of his party's competence. One study analyzing competence evaluations from the time of the Truman administration to the Obama administration found that relative party competence ratings have varied positively with approval ratings for Democratic and Republican presidents alike (Jacobson 2012, 697-699). However, the impact of evaluations of presidential performance on party competence evaluations is not widely discussed in the literature.

Hypotheses

I do not seek to take a side in the debate about mass polarization from the outset in this paper. Instead, I choose to offer hypotheses about what we would expect to see happen to the relationship between party competence evaluations, party identification, and vote choice *if* polarization has indeed occurred at the mass level and then determine the extent to which these hypotheses are supported. The connection between polarization and party competence evaluations is an interesting one because if partisanship is indeed increasing due to polarization, as scholars arguing in favor of mass polarization suggest, there are several possible implications for party competence evaluations. One possible implication is that party competence evaluations will have a larger effect on vote choice in more recent elections than they did in elections a few

decades ago. If polarization causes voters to have more crystallized opinions about the two major parties, then competence evaluations should be easier for individuals to produce because voters have a clearer idea of where each party stands (Hetherington 2001, 623, 627). This ease in forming competence evaluations in turn should cause voters' beliefs about each party's relative competence to have a larger impact on vote choice. A second implication has to do with how the competence evaluations are actually formed. If Americans are becoming more partisan overall because of mass polarization, one possible effect of this is that party competence evaluations will be increasingly driven by party identification rather than by retrospective evaluations. If more Americans are behaving like partisans, the pool of Americans with fluid opinions about each party's competence, opinions largely shaped by retrospective evaluations, will grow smaller and smaller over time. As a result, mass polarization – if it has occurred – may cause party identification to have a larger effect on the formation of competence evaluations over time and retrospective evaluations to have a smaller effect over time.

The first two hypotheses I test have to do with individual vote choice. As stated above, if mass polarization has occurred, causing individuals to have more coherent and crystallized opinions about each major party, then party competence evaluations should be easier to form. If the relative competence of each party is easier for voters to determine, it is more likely that these competence evaluations will impact a voter's decision of who to vote for. Therefore, my first hypothesis is:

> **H1:** *The effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice in House and Senate elections will be larger over time.*

The second hypothesis is inspired by Bartels' 2002 article about partisan bias in attitude formation. If partisans do have partisan-colored glasses through which they see the world, and

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more and more Americans are behaving like partisans due to mass polarization, then one would expect that opinions about everything from party competence on a given issue to the state of the economy would increasingly be influenced by party identification. However, if the growing power of partisanship is filtered through all of these political attitudes and opinions that in turn influence vote choice, then when these attitudes and opinions are controlled for, the independent impact of party identification on vote choice should not grow much over time. Therefore, my second hypothesis is:

> **H2:** *The effect of party identification on vote choice in House and Senate elections will remain constant over time.*

The second two hypotheses I will test have to do with the formation of party competence evaluations. For many years retrospective evaluations were considered the primary variable influencing the formation of party competence evaluations. Strong partisans may have consistently seen their party as more competent on a variety of issues, but for the majority of Americans in the middle of the political spectrum, competence evaluations were formed by considering recent political events. However, if mass polarization has driven more Americans to behave like partisans, as many scholars suggest, the percentage of Americans forming competence evaluations based on party identification and partisan loyalties would be expected to go up significantly in recent elections. Therefore, my third hypothesis is:

> **H3:** *The effect of party identification on party competence evaluations will increase over time.*

Using that same logic, the percentage of Americans relying on retrospective evaluations to form party competence evaluations would be expected to decline if polarization has spread through the American public. Therefore, my fourth and final hypothesis is:

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H4: *The effect of evaluations of changes in the national economy on party competence evaluations will decrease over time.*

Data and Methods

All of the data I analyze in this thesis come from the American National Election Studies. Election data from 1986 through 2012 are analyzed. The decision was made to begin in 1986 because originally only midterm elections were going to be analyzed in my study, and the article that inspired this research concluded its analysis in the previous midterm election (1982). Ultimately, I decided to fill in the presidential election years because the trends I am interested in studying should be present in both midterm and presidential election years. No data are analyzed for 2006 and 2010 because ANES ceased to conduct election surveys in midterm years after 2002.

For the first sets of models, probit regression is used to analyze the data. The dependent variable in these analyses – which will be discussed in greater depth below – is a dummy variable so probit regressions are necessary.[1]

The last set of models are run using ordinary least squares regression. The dependent variable in those models, the party competence variable, is a nominal variable. Originally the data was analyzed using mprobit regression, as would be expected with a nominal dependent variable. I then compared the results of the mprobit regressions with the results of the OLS regressions, and I determined that there was no significant difference between the models both in

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[1] Because it is not possible to interpret the magnitude of the effect of an independent variable on the dependent variable by simply looking at the coefficient in a probit model, the PRCHANGE command has to be employed. This command, developed by Scott Long and Jeremy Freese for use in Stata, allows one to see how changes in the value of each independent variable correspond with changes in the predicted probability of choosing a 1 for the dependent variable while the other independent variables in the model are held constant.

terms of variable significance and trends in the effect of each independent variable over time. As a result, I ultimately decided to use OLS regression because the output is much easier to display and interpret.

Dependent Variables

There are two dependent variables used in this thesis. For the first sets of models, the dependent variable is vote choice in House and Senate elections. Vote choice is coded into a dummy variable, with individuals who voted for a Democrat coded as a 0 and individuals who voted for a Republican coded as a 1. I decided to use vote choice in House elections and vote choice in Senate elections as dependent variables in separate models because Senate races tend to be more nationally-oriented while House races tend to driven by more unique, local factors. As a result, each independent variable may have a different impact in Senate elections then it does in House elections.

For the last set of models, the dependent variable is party competence evaluations. These competence evaluations come from the ANES question asking respondents to determine which party is better able to handle the nation's economy. In the 1986 and 1988 ANES survey, the competence question asked respondents to determine which party can better handle the issue most important to the respondent. However, in both of those election years the economy was a fairly major issue. As a result, I would not expect this change in question wording to cause a significant amount of error. The competence variable is coded so that respondents who said Democrats are assigned a 0, respondents who said there wouldn't be a difference between the two parties are assigned a 1, and respondents who said Republicans are assigned a 2.

Independent Variables

For the first set of models, the vote choice models, party competence evaluations are the first independent variable included. Job performance evaluations of the sitting president, evaluations of the change in the national economy over the past year, and evaluations of the change in personal finances over the past year are all included as control variables. All three of these variables are coded so that lower values correspond with negative emotions and higher values correspond with positive emotions. The first two of these variables are included as controls because they are considered by most political scientists to be strong predictors of vote choice. I decided to also include change in personal finances as a control variable because there is some evidence that opinions about personal finances exert an impact on vote choice independent of opinions about the national economy (Markus 1988, 151).

Party identification is also included in these models as a control of course. Party identification must be included in the models for me to test H1 and H2. Party identification is coded as a 7-point scale, with "strong Democrat" being the lowest value and "strong Republican" being the highest value. The rest of the control variables are demographic variables that are widely considered to have an impact on vote choice. These demographic variables are age, level of education, gender, and race. The race variable has been recoded into a dummy variable with respondents who identified as white being assigned a 1 and all other respondents being assigned a 0. I decided to include these demographic variables in particular because they were used in almost all of the vote choice and election models I came across in the literature.

For the last set of models, only three independent variables are included: party identification, evaluations of changes in the national economy over the past year, and evaluations of changes in personal finances over the past year. The first two variables are included because

they are both necessary to test H3 and H4. Since I am specifically looking at competence questions asking which party can better handle the nation's economy, the national economy variable would be expected to have an especially strong impact on the formation of competence evaluations. The personal finances variable is included based on the logic presented above – if opinions about personal finances can impact vote choice independent of opinions about the national economy, opinions about personal finances may also independently impact party competence evaluations.

Results

House Vote Choice Models

The first models I will look at test H1 and H2. Table 1 displays the results for the House vote choice models. There are a number of interesting findings in this table. Of greatest interest to me is the effect of the party competence variable on vote choice. As can be seen in the table, the party competence variable has a positively-signed coefficient in every single election year analyzed. What this means is that individuals who select higher values for the party competence variable are more likely to vote for a House candidate from the Republican Party when all other variables in the model are held constant. This result is not at all surprising given that the lowest value for the party competence variable, 0, is assigned to individuals who said Democrats would be more competent on the economy, while the highest value for the variable, 2, is assigned to respondents who said Republicans would be more competent. Individuals who believe the Republican Party is the more competent party should be more likely than individuals who believe Democrats are more competent to vote for a Republican House candidate. And the results below show this is indeed the case.

Table 1: Probit Regression Analysis of Vote Choice in House Elections, 1986 - 2012

	Election Year											
	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2008	2012
Party competence	0.078	0.243***	0.362***	0.307**	0.138	0.028	0.122	0.665***	0.473***	0.152	0.358***	0.293*
	(0.089)	(0.085)	(0.103)	(0.129)	(0.114)	(0.121)	(0.11)	(0.185)	(0.144)	(0.119)	(0.103)	(0.152)
Presidential job approval	0.094*	0.098*	0.147**	0.123*	-0.194***	-0.257***	-0.283***	0.237**	0.133	0.261***	0.147**	-0.322***
	(0.053)	(0.056)	(0.064)	(0.074)	(0.071)	(0.094)	(0.078)	(0.116)	(0.082)	(0.081)	(0.073)	(0.096)
Change in national economy	-0.021	0.000	0.023	0.001	0.020	-0.195*	0.162**	0.165	0.054	0.044	-0.023	-0.031
	(0.053)	(0.059)	(0.072)	(0.088)	(0.069)	(0.103)	(0.08)	(0.112)	(0.092)	(0.077)	(0.094)	(0.082)
Change in personal finances	0.019	-0.009	-0.042	0.039	0.068	0.063	-0.114	-0.208*	-0.105	-0.065	0.007	0.040
	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.055)	(0.063)	(0.061)	(0.082)	(0.074)	(0.126)	(0.079)	(0.066)	(0.046)	(0.066)
Party identification	0.284***	0.273***	0.294***	0.294***	0.336***	0.368***	0.234***	0.405***	0.251***	0.291***	0.343***	0.368***
	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.031)	(0.038)	(0.037)	(0.044)	(0.046)	(0.081)	(0.049)	(0.053)	(0.04)	(0.06)
Age	-0.002	0.005*	0.003	0.004	-0.003	0.008*	-0.003	0.012	-0.01*	0.004	0.003	0.000
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Education	-0.014	0.062**	0.015	-0.004	0.050	0.107**	-0.031	0.078	-0.14***	0.076*	-0.064	-0.019
	(0.031)	(0.03)	(0.036)	(0.042)	(0.037)	(0.046)	(0.042)	(0.078)	(0.046)	(0.043)	(0.039)	(0.033)
Gender	-0.098	0.162*	-0.282**	-0.216	0.126	-0.126	-0.025	-0.094	-0.133	-0.048	-0.206*	0.244
	(0.097)	(0.097)	(0.114)	(0.137)	(0.118)	(0.144)	(0.135)	(0.227)	(0.14)	(0.131)	(0.118)	(0.171)
White	0.468***	0.375**	0.77***	1.01***	0.259	0.269	-0.078	0.573	0.44**	0.619***	0.155	0.299
	(0.17)	(0.195)	(0.236)	(0.287)	(0.217)	(0.247)	(0.233)	(0.542)	(0.191)	(0.172)	(0.13)	(0.182)
(Constant)	-1.511***	-2.687***	-2.366***	-2.654***	-1.406***	-0.672	0.431	-3.637***	-0.450	-2.638***	-1.289***	-1.194
	(0.363)	(0.399)	(0.454)	(0.536)	(0.498)	(0.628)	(0.595)	(1.096)	(0.618)	(0.475)	(0.39)	(0.763)
Pseudo R-squared	0.231	0.267	0.321	0.312	0.348	0.410	0.261	0.394	0.346	0.404	0.412	0.557
N	873	944	736	545	830	527	518	215	689	668	1,154	852

Standard errors in parentheses

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

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Table 1 also shows that the coefficient for the party competence variable only achieves statistical significance in the 1988, 1990, 1992, 2000, 2002, 2008, and 2012 election models. This fluctuation in significance over time suggests that my first hypothesis (H1) may not be supported. If party competence does indeed have a larger impact on vote choice over time, I would expect to see either consistent statistical significance or statistical significance in only the later election years. However, it is impossible to determine if this hypothesis is supported or not simply based on probit regression outputs alone because I cannot determine the magnitude of the effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice from the regression outputs.

Table 1 also makes clear the power party identification has on vote choice. In every single election year analyzed, the coefficient for the party identification variable is highly statistically significant, coming in below the $p<0.01$ bar when the other variables in the model are controlled for. The coefficient for the party identification variable is also positive in every House regression model. This tells me that respondents who select higher values for the party identification variable are more likely to vote for House candidates from the Republican Party. This result is not surprising because higher values of the party identification variable are associated with support for the Republican Party.

The third and final variable that appears to have a significant effect in most of the elections analyzed is the presidential job approval variable. In every year except 2002, the coefficient for the presidential job approval variable is statistically significant when the other variables in the model are controlled for. This result is not all that surprising given that aside from party identification, an individual's evaluation of the sitting president is probably one of the strongest predictors of vote choice in congressional elections. The coefficient for the presidential approval variable alternates between being positively and negatively-signed in my models based

on whether the president in power is a Republican or a Democrat. In years when the sitting president is a Republican, the coefficient is positive, meaning that individuals who rate the president positively are more likely to vote for Republican House candidates. In years when the sitting president is a Democrat, the reverse is true. There is one noticeable exception to this statement. In the 2000 House vote model, the coefficient for the presidential job approval variable is positive despite the fact that the sitting president is a Democrat. This means that individuals who rate President Bill Clinton positively are more likely to vote for House candidates from the Republican Party. This result is quite unexpected, but a closer examination of the 2000 election could yield an explanation for this result.

I want to briefly discuss the impact of the age variable on vote choice. Age is only statistically significant in the House vote models in a handful of years – 1998, 1996, and 2002 – but in those three years, a curious pattern emerges. In the 1998 and 1996 models, the coefficient for the age variable is positive, meaning that older voters are more likely to vote for a Republican House candidate. This makes sense given that the Republican Party is traditionally thought of as a party supported by older voters. In the 2002 model, however, the coefficient is negative, meaning that older voters are actually less likely to vote for a Republican House candidate, which is somewhat surprising.

To truly understand the effect each independent variable has had on vote choice in House elections since 1986, we must turn to Table 2. Table 2 shows the change in the probability of voting for a Republican House candidate that occurs when each independent variable goes from its minimum value to its maximum value and the other variables are held constant. Because each variable has a different scale, the probability change values for each variable cannot be directly compared to each other. However, the numbers in the table do allow me to get a sense of the

magnitude of the effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable. Additionally, I can evaluate the change in magnitude over time.

What is most clear in Table 2 is that no variable has had a consistent impact on vote choice in House elections over time. The probability change values for all nine variables vary over time, and they vary quite significantly in some cases. The probability change values for the party competence variable and the party identification variable fluctuate quite noticeably over time, which can be seen more clearly in Figures 1 and 2 below. The variable with the least fluctuation is the gender variable, which consistently has a fairly weak effect on vote choice in House elections.

Interestingly, the national economy variable is another variable that has a fairly consistent, fairly weak effect on vote choice in House elections. The opinions about the change in the national economy variable really only has a noticeable impact on vote choice in three of the 12 elections studied. In the 1996, 1998, and 2000 models, going from the minimum value of the national economy variable (the national economy has gotten much worse in the past year) to the maximum value (the national economy has gotten much better in the last year) increases the probability that a respondent will vote for a Republican House candidate by an absolute value of over 0.25 when all other variables in the model are held constant. In every other election year, however, going from the minimum value of the national economy variable to the maximum value increases the probability that a respondent will vote for a Republican House candidate by an absolute value of less than 0.1 when all other variables in the model are held constant. This result is quite surprising given the large amount of literature that has discussed the impact of retrospective economic evaluations on vote choice.

Table 2: Effect of Going from Minimum Value to Maximum Value of Each Independent Variable on Predicted Probability of Voting for Republican House Candidate, 1986 – 2002

	Election Year											
	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2008	2012
Party competence	0.059	0.182	0.250	0.223	0.109	0.022	0.097	0.494	0.364	0.121	0.267	0.223
Presidential job approval	0.106	0.110	0.152	0.133	-0.228	-0.293	-0.321	0.276	0.158	0.304	0.167	-0.364
Change in national economy	-0.031	0.000	0.032	0.001	0.032	-0.297	0.254	0.258	0.086	0.069	-0.032	-0.046
Change in personal finances	0.028	-0.013	-0.059	0.057	0.107	0.100	-0.179	-0.322	-0.166	-0.104	0.010	0.060
Party identification	0.595	0.565	0.591	0.607	0.685	0.718	0.510	0.774	0.549	0.616	0.690	0.730
Age	-0.043	0.148	0.070	0.115	-0.086	0.218	-0.096	0.335	-0.273	0.125	0.068	0.000
Education	-0.031	0.140	0.031	-0.009	0.118	0.250	-0.074	0.186	-0.322	0.178	-0.140	-0.109
Gender	-0.037	0.061	-0.099	-0.080	0.050	-0.050	-0.010	-0.038	-0.053	-0.019	-0.075	0.092
White	0.165	0.134	0.223	0.291	0.103	0.107	-0.031	0.219	0.173	0.235	0.056	0.111

To determine if my first hypothesis (H1) is supported in the House vote models, I decided to plot the change in the predicted probability of voting for a Republican House candidate caused by going from the minimum value of the party competence variable to the maximum value over time.

Figure 1: Effect of Going from Minimum Value to Maximum Value of Party Competence Variable on the Predicted Probability of Voting for Republican House Candidate, 1986 – 2012
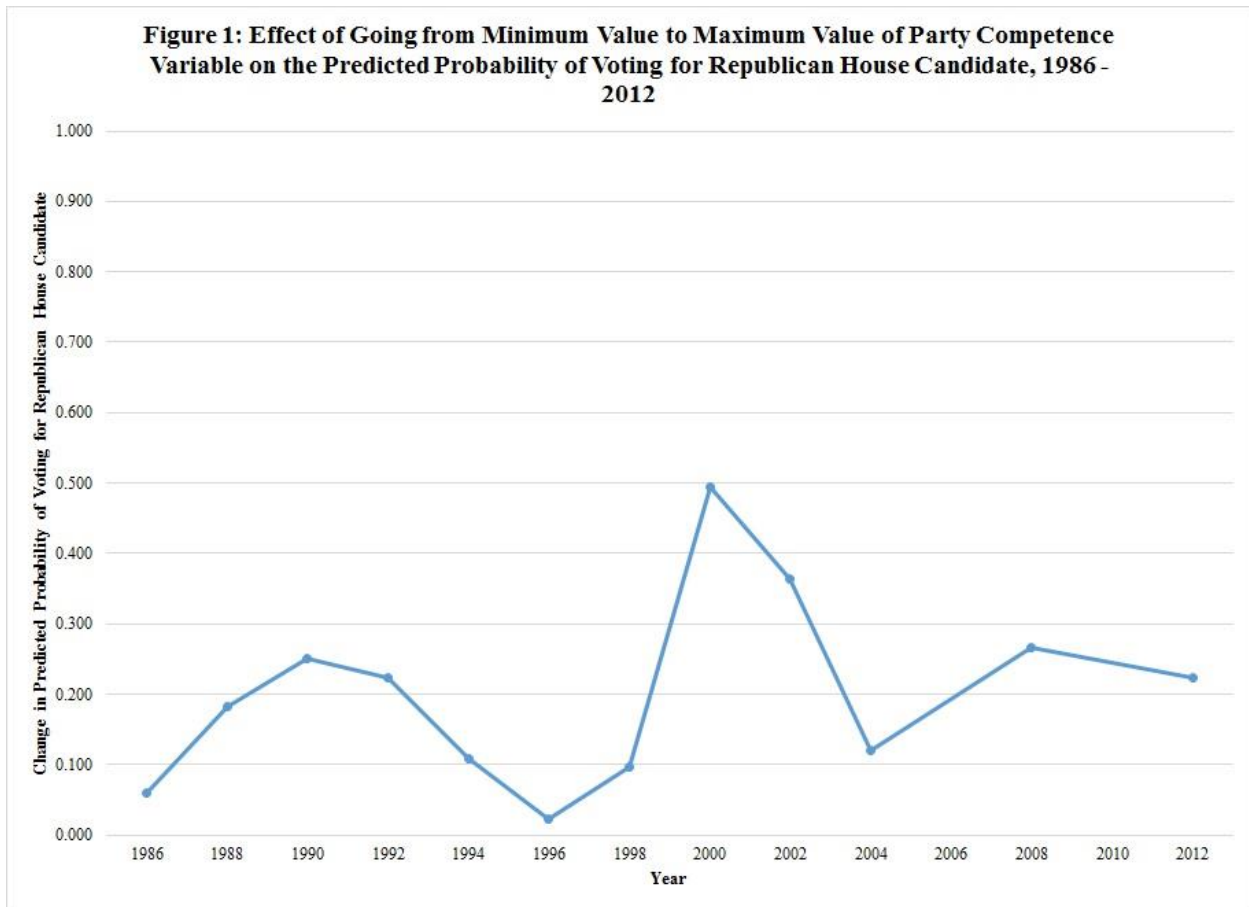
Figure 1 clearly shows that H1 is not supported by the House election models. The overall trend in the effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice is upward, but the year to year effect of party competence evaluations swings up and down quite dramatically over time. The fact that the effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice changes so drastically between election years suggests that there may be other factors influencing the relationship between party competence evaluations and vote choice that I do not control for. For example, the salience of the economy as a political issue may be affecting the relationship between party

competence evaluations and vote choice, a possibility I will explore further in the discussion section of this thesis.

To determine if my second hypothesis is supported I again decided to plot over time the change in the predicted probability of voting for a Republican House candidate caused by going from the minimum value of the party identification variable to the maximum value.

Figure 2: Effect of Going from Minimum Value to Maximum Value of Party Identification Variable on the Predicted Probability of Voting for Republican House Candidate, 1986 - 2012
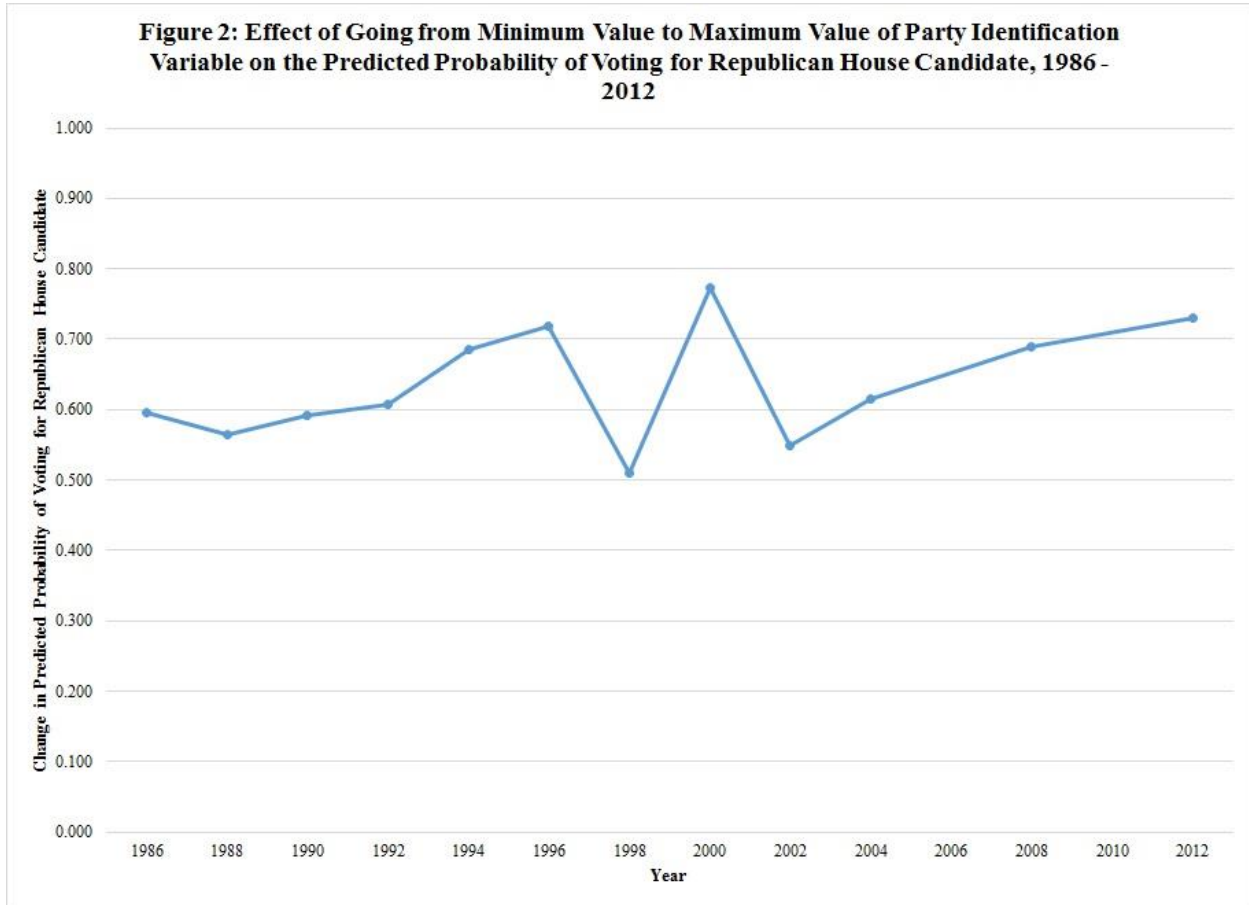
As can be seen in Figure 2, H2 is also not supported by the House vote models. Instead of staying constant over time, the effect of party identification on vote choice oscillates during the time period I study. The oscillations are much less pronounced than in Figure 1, but they are still visible. Even if the fluctuations from 1996 through 2002 are discounted, the overall trend in the effect of party identification on vote choice in House elections is definitively upward. In the 1986 model, going from the minimum value of the party identification variable (strong

Democrat) to the maximum value (strong Republican) increases the probability that a respondent

will vote for a Republican House candidate by 0.595 when all other variables in the model are

held constant. In the 2012 model, going from the minimum value of the party identification

variable to the maximum value increases the probability of voting for a Republican House

candidate by 0.73. This is certainly a large enough increase to say that H2 is not supported by the

House vote models.

Senate Vote Choice Models

With the analysis of the House vote choice models complete, I now turn to the Senate

vote choice models. Looking at Table 3, it is clear that the coefficient for the party competence

variable achieves sporadic statistical significance throughout the years I study, just as it did in the

House vote models. In the case of the Senate models, the coefficient for the party competence

variable is statistically significant in the 1986, 1988, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2008 models.

The coefficient for the party competence variable is statistically significant in the same number

of House vote models, though in an interesting twist, it is not significant in the exact same years

in the House and Senate models. As was the case with the House vote models, the fact that the

party competence variable is sporadically statistically significant provides preliminary evidence

that H1 will not be supported. If the effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice in

Senate elections does increase over time, I would expect the coefficient of the party competence

variable to be statistically insignificant in earlier election years and statistically significant in

later election years when controlling for other variables in the model. Since this is not the case,

my expectation is that H1 will not be supported by the Senate vote models.

Table 3: Probit Regression Analysis of Vote Choice in Senate Elections, 1986 - 2012

	Election Year											
	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2008	2012
Party competence	0.328***	0.426***	0.186	0.187	0.351***	0.234	0.27**	0.377*	0.445**	0.145	0.516***	0.059
	(0.11)	(0.095)	(0.127)	(0.159)	(0.13)	(0.159)	(0.123)	(0.217)	(0.187)	(0.137)	(0.147)	(0.181)
Presidential job approval	0.229***	0.104*	0.254***	0.213**	-0.302***	-0.499***	-0.346***	-0.244*	0.21*	0.369***	0.261**	-0.528***
	(0.065)	(0.062)	(0.076)	(0.095)	(0.076)	(0.131)	(0.088)	(0.126)	(0.11)	(0.098)	(0.106)	(0.1)
Change in national economy	0.020	-0.092	-0.217**	-0.21*	-0.054	0.190	0.129	0.008	-0.022	0.044	0.015	-0.177*
	(0.064)	(0.067)	(0.089)	(0.125)	(0.073)	(0.117)	(0.107)	(0.124)	(0.106)	(0.093)	(0.146)	(0.093)
Change in personal finances	-0.066	0.13**	-0.030	-0.058	-0.023	0.072	0.053	0.124	0.108	0.052	0.011	-0.043
	(0.064)	(0.055)	(0.067)	(0.081)	(0.067)	(0.099)	(0.091)	(0.137)	(0.118)	(0.08)	(0.066)	(0.079)
Party identification	0.251***	0.254***	0.253***	0.275***	0.279***	0.363***	0.281***	0.267***	0.317***	0.264***	0.277***	0.323***
	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.039)	(0.048)	(0.04)	(0.061)	(0.052)	(0.088)	(0.067)	(0.06)	(0.057)	(0.068)
Age	0.003	0.003	-0.002	-0.007	-0.007*	0.009	-0.001	0.009	-0.011*	0.008*	0.003	-0.009*
	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Education	-0.020	0.009	-0.037	-0.005	-0.002	0.041	-0.047	0.034	-0.081	0.020	0.048	0.014
	(0.038)	(0.033)	(0.045)	(0.052)	(0.039)	(0.063)	(0.044)	(0.084)	(0.054)	(0.049)	(0.057)	(0.046)
Gender	-0.070	0.073	-0.197	-0.103	-0.241*	-0.141	-0.047	-0.147	0.031	-0.038	0.016	-0.003
	(0.122)	(0.109)	(0.14)	(0.169)	(0.13)	(0.196)	(0.166)	(0.263)	(0.186)	(0.159)	(0.167)	(0.172)
White	0.455**	0.412*	0.751***	0.924**	-0.291	-0.136	-0.224	0.308	0.439*	0.137	0.759***	0.194
	(0.181)	(0.233)	(0.287)	(0.362)	(0.224)	(0.32)	(0.261)	(0.56)	(0.229)	(0.204)	(0.183)	(0.296)
(Constant)	-1.839***	-2.536***	-1.45***	-1.485**	0.772	-0.945	-0.158	-1.684	-1.886**	-2.807***	-2.818***	0.502
	(0.452)	(0.455)	(0.54)	(0.613)	(0.535)	(0.791)	(0.718)	(1.148)	(0.751)	(0.529)	(0.536)	(0.793)
Pseudo R-squared	0.318	0.287	0.272	0.297	0.378	0.469	0.355	0.353	0.429	0.446	0.504	0.570
N	612	756	445	327	691	309	394	187	437	480	741	665

Standard errors in parentheses
***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

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Again mirroring the results of the House vote models, the coefficient for the party identification variable achieves the highest level of statistical significance in every single election year examined. This result is as unsurprising as it was in the House vote models because party identification is strongest predictor of vote choice in any election. In some ways, this consistently high level of statistical significance would be more expected in Senate vote choice models than in House vote choice models. Congressmen are able to insulate themselves from national party reputations and politics to a certain degree by bringing federal money back to their district and by forming relationships with their constituents. As a result, there are partisans willing to vote for a congressman or congresswoman from the other party if he or she has served the district well. Senators have a much harder time insulating themselves from national politics, and as a result, it is less likely that partisans will switch sides and vote for a candidate from the other party. The fact that the coefficient for the party identification variable achieves such a high level of significance in every single House and Senate model is a testament to how strong its impact on vote choice is.

The presidential job approval variable is also shown to be a strong predictor of vote choice in Table 3. The coefficient for the presidential approval variable achieves at least the minimum level of statistical significance when controlling for the other variables in every single Senate model in Table 3. When compared to the House vote models, the coefficient for the presidential approval variable in the Senate vote models achieves higher levels of statistical significance in the earlier election years. This makes sense if you apply the same logic applied in the paragraph above. Senate elections are driven more by national factors than House elections are and the approval rating of the sitting president is one of those national factors. Therefore, it

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makes sense that the coefficient for the presidential approval variable achieves higher levels of statistical significance in the Senate vote models than in the House vote models.

The final variable from Table 3 that warrants discussion is the age variable. The age variable in the Senate vote models is statistically significant in four of the election years – one year more than in the House vote models – but the pattern displayed in these four years is quite different than the pattern displayed in the House vote models. In Table 1, the coefficient for the age variable is negative in only one of the three years it achieves statistical significant. In Table 3, however, the coefficient for the age variable is negative in three of the four models, or years, in which it achieves statistical significance. In those three models, older voters are actually less likely than younger voters to vote for a Republican Senate candidate. This finding challenges the widely held belief that older voters are always more likely than younger voters to support Republican candidates in any election in any year.

To evaluate the magnitude of the effect of each independent variable on vote choice in Senate elections, I measure the change in the probability of voting for a Republican Senate candidate that occurs when each independent variable goes from its minimum value to its maximum value and the other variables are held constant. Table 4 displays the change in probability caused by each variable in each model. Just as we saw in Table 2, Table 4 shows that there are huge fluctuations in the effect of each independent variable on vote choice in Senate elections during the time period I study. The probability change values for the party competence evaluation variable and party identification variable both fluctuate over time, quite significantly in the case of the competence variable. The gender variable is the variable with the most consistent effect on vote choice in Senate elections, just as it was in the House election models, and that effect is again quite small.

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Table 4: Effect of Going from Minimum Value to Maximum Value of Each Independent Variable on Predicted Probability of Voting for Republican Senate Candidate, 1986 – 2002

	Election Year											
	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2008	2012
Party competence	0.257	0.319	0.140	0.138	0.273	0.185	0.212	0.288	0.344	0.115	0.357	0.038
Presidential job approval	0.266	0.119	0.276	0.231	-0.347	-0.538	-0.396	-0.283	0.246	0.418	0.279	-0.517
Change in national economy	0.032	-0.141	-0.290	-0.274	-0.084	0.296	0.201	0.012	-0.036	0.070	0.020	-0.224
Change in personal finances	-0.104	0.193	-0.045	-0.086	-0.036	0.114	0.083	0.190	0.171	0.083	0.015	-0.055
Party identification	0.549	0.539	0.540	0.576	0.592	0.720	0.601	0.573	0.658	0.567	0.561	0.620
Age	0.078	0.082	-0.055	-0.193	-0.202	0.233	-0.038	0.241	-0.295	0.226	0.083	-0.195
Education	-0.047	0.020	-0.084	-0.012	-0.004	0.098	-0.111	0.079	-0.191	0.047	0.093	0.064
Gender	-0.028	0.028	-0.074	-0.038	-0.094	-0.056	-0.019	-0.057	0.012	-0.015	0.005	-0.001
White	0.175	0.150	0.244	0.279	-0.111	-0.054	-0.089	0.115	0.172	0.054	0.247	0.061

Two other variables with relatively consistent and relatively small effects on vote choice in Senate elections are the education variable and the evaluations of personal finances variable. Going from the minimum value to the maximum value of either variable never increases the absolute value of the probability that a respondent will vote for a Republican Senate candidate by more than 0.2. This tells us that neither variable is especially helpful in explaining vote choice in Senate elections from 1986 to 2012.

To better understand the fluctuations in the effect of the party competence variable, I decided to plot the probability change values for the party competence variable in a line graph.

Figure 3: Effect of Going from Minimum Value to Maximum Value of Party Competence Variable on the Predicted Probability of Voting for Republican Senate Candidate, 1986 – 2012
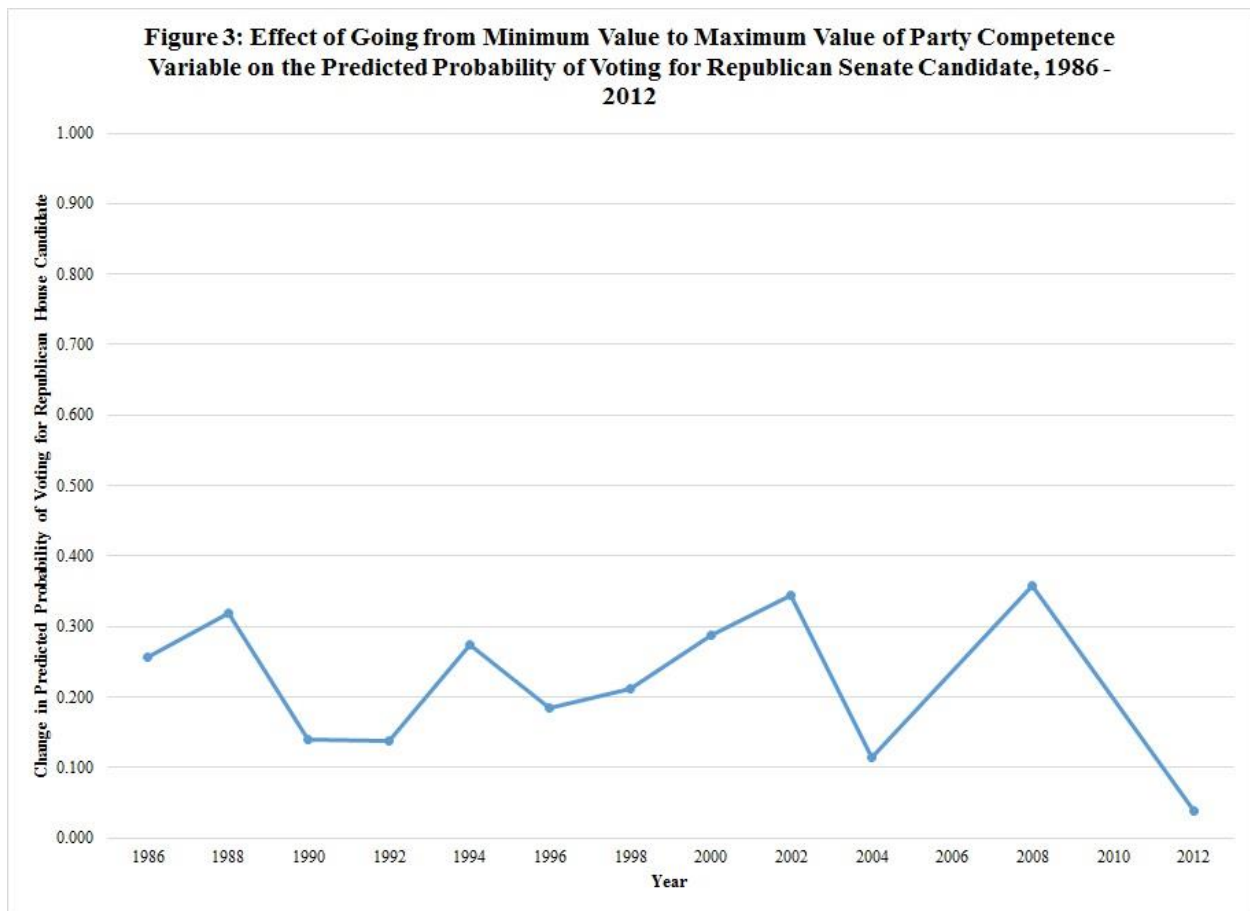
Figure 3 shows that the fluctuations in the effect of the party competence evaluation variable on vote choice in Senate elections are quite extreme. Thus I can say that H1 is not supported by the data. The effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice rises and falls

seemingly with every single election, and the overall trend in the effect of party competence evaluations is flat if not slightly negative. The smallest effect the party competence variable has is in the 2012 Senate vote model. In that model, going from the minimum value of the party competence variable (Democrats can better handle the nation's economy) to the maximum value (Republicans can better handle the nation's economy) increases the probability that a respondent will vote for a Senate candidate from the Republican Party by only 0.038 when all other variables in the model are held constant. The largest effect is in the 2008 model. In that model, going from the minimum value of the party competence variable to the maximum value increases the probability that a respondent will vote for a Republican Senate candidate by 0.357 when all other variables in the model are held constant.

Now that I have determined that H1 is supported by neither the House models nor the Senate models, I turn back to H2. To evaluate the effect of the party identification variable over time, I plotted the probability change values for the party identification variable in a line graph.

Figure 4 below provides weak support for my second hypothesis. Aside from the spikes in the 1996 and 2002 Senate vote models, the effect of party identification on vote choice in Senate elections remains fairly constant across the 12 elections I study. In the 1986 model, going from the minimum value of the party identification variable (strong Democrat) to the maximum value (strong Republican) increases the probability that a respondent will vote for a Senate candidate from the Republican Party by 0.549 when all other variables in the model are held constant. In the 2012 model, going from the minimum value of the party identification variable to the maximum value increases the probability of voting for a Republican Senate candidate by 0.62. This means that effect of party identification on vote choice in Senate elections does

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increase across the 26 years I study, but it increases by a very small amount. Therefore, it is fair

to say that H2 receives weak support from the Senate vote models.

Figure 4: Effect of Going from Minimum Value to Maximum Value of Party Identification Variable on the Predicted Probability of Voting for Republican Senate Candidate, 1986 - 2012
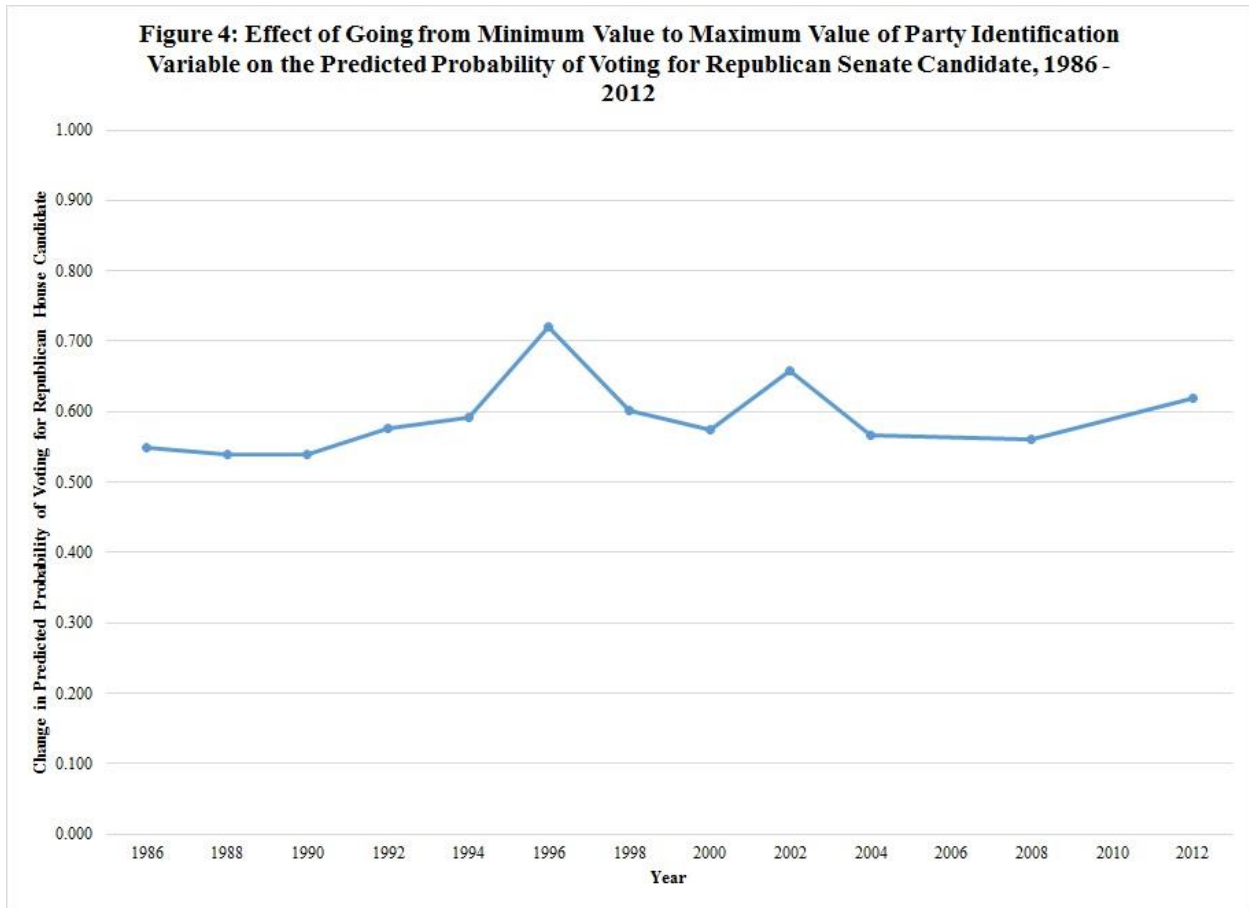
Party Competence Models

Now that I have concluded the analysis of my first two hypotheses, I turn to my two

hypotheses having to do with the formation of party competence evaluations. Table 5 displays

the results of the OLS regressions in which an individual's party competence evaluation is the

dependent variable. Looking at Table 5, it is clear that the coefficient for the party identification

variable is statistically significant in all 12 models. It is also worth noting that the coefficient for

the change in the national economy variable achieves statistical significance in all but two

models: the 2000 and 2008 models.

Table 5: OLS Regression of Party Competence Evaluations, 1986 - 2012

	Election Year											
	1986	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2008	2012
Party identification	0.156***	0.155***	0.167***	0.168***	0.197***	0.24***	0.242***	0.235***	0.241***	0.239***	0.27***	0.261***
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.01)	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.007)	(0.005)
Change in national economy	0.082***	0.1***	0.039**	0.043**	-0.03**	-0.077***	-0.086***	-0.028	0.095***	0.097***	0.033	-0.115***
	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.021)	(0.015)	(0.03)	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.027)	(0.023)	(0.025)	(0.01)
Change in personal finances	0.054***	0.022	0.019	0.023	-0.031**	0.002	0.03*	-0.008	0.048*	0.009	0.020	-0.017**
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.012)	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.027)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.008)
(Constant)	0.128***	0.179***	0.43***	0.423***	0.769***	0.587***	0.468***	0.426***	-0.079	-0.102*	0.002	0.377***
	(0.048)	(0.058)	(0.048)	(0.06)	(0.062)	(0.109)	(0.089)	(0.116)	(0.074)	(0.057)	(0.044)	(0.045)
R-squared	0.3	0.295	0.286	0.285	0.384	0.436	0.416	0.446	0.502	0.529	0.529	0.613
N	1,882	1,584	1,789	1,252	1,675	842	1,186	727	1,259	1,005	1,977	5,705

Standard errors in parentheses
***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

To determine if my third hypothesis (H3) is supported by the data, I decided to plot the change in the party identification coefficient over time in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Effect of Party Identification on Party Competence Evaluations, 1986 - 2012
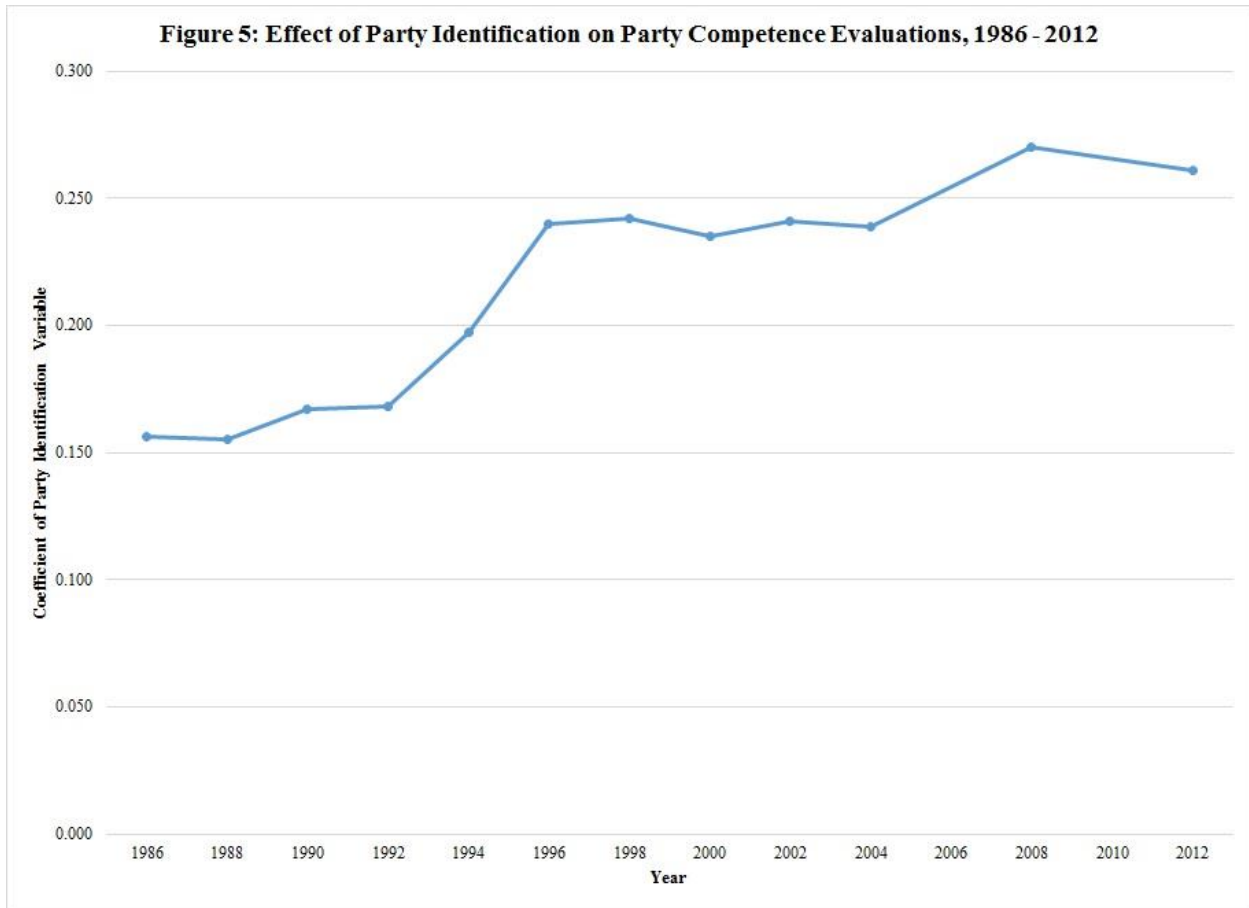
Figure 5 provides quite strong support for H3. The coefficient for the party identification variable increases quite a bit across the 12 elections I examined. The coefficient in the 1986 model is 0.156, meaning that a one unit increase in the party identification variable is associated with a 0.156 increase in the value of an individual's party competence evaluation. The value of the party identification coefficient in the 2012 model is 0.261, meaning that a one unit increase in the party identification variable is associated with a 0.261 increase in the value of an individual's party competence evaluation. This increase in the value of the party identification coefficient from 0.156 to 0.261 seems relatively small at first glance. But when you consider that the party identification variable has a 7-point scale, this increase becomes much more significant. In the

1986 model, a six unit increase in the party identification variable – meaning an increase from the lowest value of the party identification variable (strong Democrat) to the highest value (strong Republican) – is associated with a 1.092 increase in the value of the party competence variable. In the 2012 model, a six unit increase in the party identification variable is associated with a 1.827 increase in the value of the party competence variable. This increase in effect from 1986 to 2012 is quite large when you consider that the party competence variable only has a 3-point scale. As a result, it is clear that H3 is strongly supported by the data.

The fourth and final hypothesis (H4) is concerned with the effect of opinions about changes in the national economy on party competence evaluations. To get a clear idea of the effect of this variable, I decided to plot the coefficients of the national economy variable over time.

Figure 6: Absolute Value of Effect of Evaluations about the Change in the National Economy on Party Competence Evaluations, 1986 - 2012
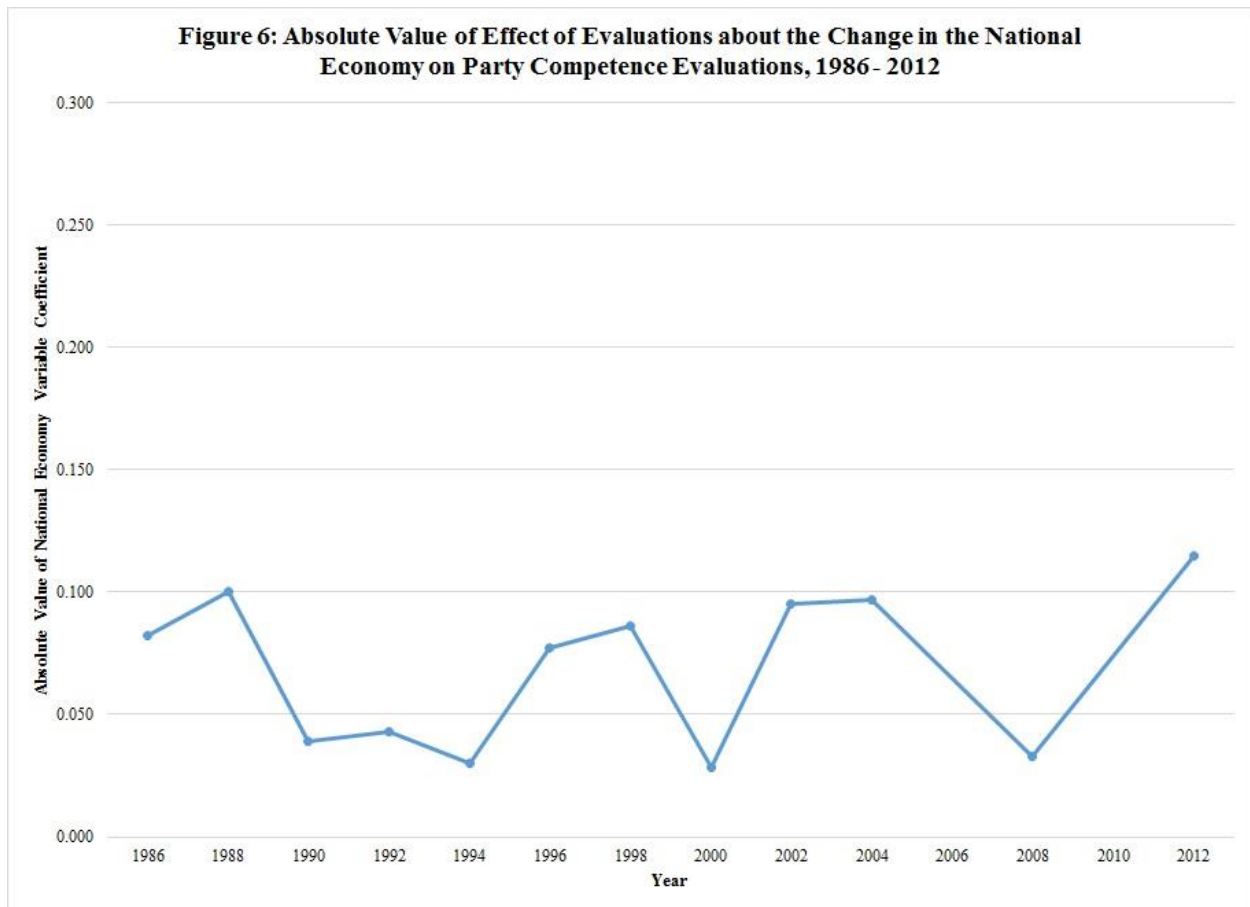
Figure 6 very clearly shows that H4 is not supported. The coefficient for the national economy variable rise and falls frequently by relatively large amounts. The reason H4 is not supported by the data may have something to do with the actual ANES question I use to create the national economy variable. My fourth hypothesis is that the effect of retrospective evaluations on vote choice will decrease over time. The problem with the national economy variable I use is that the ANES question asking how the national economy has changed over the past year may not be the best operationalization of this concept of retrospective evaluations. A better question would be one that followed the national economy question and asked respondents which party is responsible for the change in the economy. This question could serve as the critical link between evaluations of the national economy and formations of party competence evaluations, and would likely be a better indicator of retrospective evaluations. Unfortunately, this question does not appear on the ANES survey and therefore could not be included in my models. If I had been able to include this variable in the model, it is possible that the effect of retrospective evaluations on party competence evaluations would have oscillated less dramatically over time.

Discussion

The results presented in the figures above provide fairly strong evidence of which of my hypotheses are and are not supported. H1 asserted that the effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice in congressional elections would increase over time. This hypothesis is supported by neither the House vote models nor the Senate vote models. The effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice fluctuates, quite significantly in the case of the Senate vote models, over the time period I study.

H2 theorized that the effect of party identification on congressional vote choice would remain constant over time. This hypothesis receives moderate support from the data at best. The hypothesis is not supported by the House vote models, in which the effect of the party identification variable fluctuates over time and in which the overall trend is clearly upward. The hypothesis receives weak support, however, in the Senate vote models. Aside from two years in which the effect of party identification on Senate vote choice spikes upward, the effect of party identification increases only slightly over the 12 elections I study.

H3 postulated that the effect of party identification on party competence evaluations would increase over time. This hypothesis is supported quite strongly by the models I created. The coefficient for the party identification variable, which is statistically significant in all 12 models, increases consistently and noticeably from 1986 to 2012.

Finally, H4 stated that the effect of the opinion about the national economy variable would decrease over time. This hypothesis is not at all supported by the data. The value of the coefficient for the national economy variable oscillates quite frequently across the 12 elections I study, showing no clear trend in the effect of that variable on party competence evaluations.

Overall I find mixed results in terms of evidence of mass polarization. On the one hand, the effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice does not increase in the way one would expect it to as a result of mass polarization. The overall trend in Figure 1 especially, and Figure 3 to a lesser degree, is upward, but the effect of party competence on vote choice in House and Senate elections varies wildly over time. If polarization has happened at the mass level, we would expect to see more voters have clear and strong preferences that favor one party over the other, preferences that will drive them to say that party is more competent. As these competence evaluations become increasingly easy to form, we would expect voters to have an

easier time making a connection between party competence evaluations and their decision of which candidate to vote for, causing competence evaluations to have a larger effect on vote choice. The fact that my results did not show a clear increase in the effect of competence evaluations on vote choice suggests that polarization may not have occurred at the mass level to the degree that some political scientists have argued.

On the other hand, the effect of party identification on party competence evaluations grows consistently and significantly over the 12 elections I look at, providing strong evidence of polarization at the mass level. Multiple studies have shown that mass polarization is causing party identification to have a larger effect on a range of political opinions and attitudes held by Americans because Americans are increasingly seeing the world through partisan-colored glasses. My results show that an individual's party competence evaluation is one of the opinions being impacted by those glasses. In addition, even when controlling for variables that data have shown are increasingly influenced by party identification – like party competence evaluations and evaluations of the president – the effect of party identification on vote choice increases over time in both the House and Senate vote choice models. Scholars arguing in favor of mass polarization have found clear evidence that the power of partisanship on vote choice has been increasing since the 1970s (Bartels 2000, 35). My results show that even when controlling for variables that should lessen the independent effect of party identification on vote choice – because the effect of party identification is filtered through these variables – the effect of party identification on vote choice still increases from 1986 to 2012, providing evidence of just how powerful a predictor of vote choice party identification has become.

The logical question here is why my results are so mixed. One reason could be tied to the fact that elections are very unique events. Election-specific context can cause variables to have

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very different effects year to year, making it harder to find clear trends in the effect of any given variable over time. Take the economy, for example. The state of the economy at the time of each election may significantly impact the effect of the party competence variable on vote choice. I made the decision when I began this research to use the competence question about the economy instead of the competence question about the issue most important to the respondent, which was used more commonly in previous literature, because the most important problem competence question was not asked in four of the ANES surveys I analyze. I believed using the economy competence question instead would not be problem because conventional wisdom tells us that in many elections, the economy is considered one of the most important political problems by a majority of voters. Therefore, I expected that there would be a great deal of overlap between responses to the most important problem competence question and responses to the national economy competence question. However, it turns out the economy is not selected as the most important problem as consistently as I previously thought.

Figure 7 shows that the economy has been selected as the most important problem at relatively high rates since 1986. In fact, the economy has been the issue most commonly selected as the most important problem since 1986 (Baumgartner and Jones 2014).[2] However, the percentage of respondents selecting the economy as the most important problem varies quite significantly year to year. In some years, the percentage of respondents choosing the economy rises above 50 percent, while in other years it drops below 20 percent. This variability makes sense when we consider historical context. After George H.W. Bush became president in 1988, a

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[2] The other issue areas asked about on the Gallup survey that are included in the policyagendas.org data set are civil rights/minority issues/civil liberties, health, agriculture, labor and unemployment, education, environment, energy, immigration, transportation, law/crime/family issues, social welfare, community development and housing issues, banking/finance/domestic commerce, defense, space/science/technology/communications, foreign trade, international affairs and foreign aid, government operations, and public land and water management.

recession hit the American economy, causing the economy to be a more salient issue in the 1990 and 1992 elections than it had been in the 1988 election ("Voters React More to Local Issues" 1991; "Wave of Diversity Spared Many Incumbents" 1993). This explains why the percentage of respondents selecting the economy as the most important political issue rises from 1989 to 1992 in Figure 7. In addition, the economic collapse that began in the final months of 2008 was one of the dominant issues in the 2008 and 2010 elections, a fact that is reflected by the large percentage of respondents in Figure 7 saying the economy was the most important political problem in those years ("Majority Gains 21 More House Seats" 2009; "GOP Wave Yields Control of House, Greater Numbers in the Senate" 2011).

Figure 7: The Percentage of Respondents Saying A Macroeconomic Issue was the Most Important Political Problem in Gallup Survey, 1986 - 2012
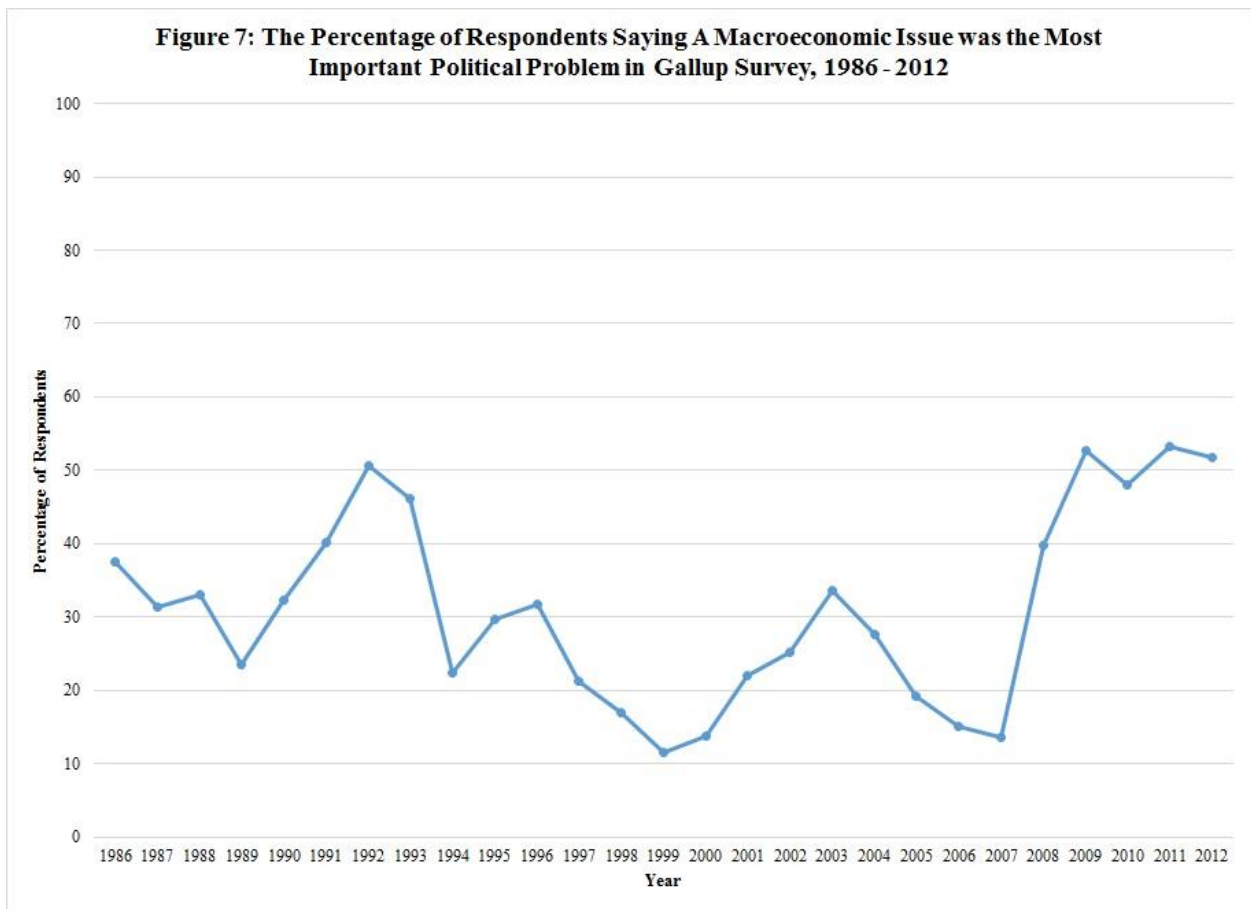
Source: policyagendas.org

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Conversely, in years when the economy was stable or booming, other political issues were able to become more salient to voters. In 1998, Republican attempts to impeach President Bill Clinton became the most widely discussed issue in the election, and in 2000, the lack of one major national issue for the two parties to debate about caused more esoteric factors, such as candidate strength and fundraising ability, to play a larger role in the outcomes of House and Senate elections. In both of these election years, the national economy was doing relatively well (Abramowitz 2001; Benenson 2000). This context helps explain why the percentage of respondents selecting the economy as the most important political problem in Figure 7 dips so low in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Additionally, the economy was quite stable at the time of the 2006 election, allowing other issues – namely the Iraq War and the Bush administration's poor handling of Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts – to receive more attention in that election ("Politics & Elections Political Power Shift Dominates 2006, No Ordinary Election Year" 2007). This explains in part why the percentage of respondents saying the economy was the most important problem dropped in 2006 and the subsequent two years before the Great Recession hit.

Since I have established that the percentage of Americans saying the economy is the most important political issue varies significantly over time, the question becomes whether this variation might explain the fluctuations I saw in the effect of party competence evaluations on vote choice in Figures 1 and 3. When comparing Figures 1 and 7, there are some clear similarities. The lines in both graphs rise in the early 1990s, drop in the late 1990s, rise again in the early 2000s, fall again in the years leading up to the Great Recession, and then rise once again starting in 2008. The changes over time in the two figures do not perfectly match each other, but the similar trends in the two figures provide preliminary evidence that the fluctuations in the effect of evaluations of party competence on the economy on vote choice may be due in

part to fluctuations in the importance of the economy as an issue to voters. In years when the economy is one of the most important issues to voters, evaluations of party competence on the economy become much more salient to voters and therefore have a much larger effect on vote choice. In years when the economy is not a salient issue to voters, evaluations of party competence on the economy become somewhat irrelevant, and the effect of these evaluations on vote choice declines.

When comparing Figures 3 and 7, there are again clear similarities, though the two lines do not match up as well as the lines in Figures 1 and 7 did. In Figures 3 and 7, we again see the two lines decline in the late 1990s, rise in the early 2000s, decline in the years leading up to the Great Recession, and rise again after the recession hits. However, there are some noticeable differences between the two graphs. For one, the line in Figure 3 declines in the early 1990s while the line in Figure 7 rises. Additionally, the line in Figure 3 drops dramatically between 2010 and 2012, while the line in Figure 7 does not. These differences suggest that while the fluctuations in the effect of evaluations of party competence on the economy on vote choice may be due in part to changes in how many Americans consider the economy to be an important issue, the cause of the fluctuations is likely more complicated than that. One goal in future research would be to tease out other possible causes of these fluctuations.

The fact that election-specific context, namely the most important issues in each election, may have been partially responsible for some models in this paper providing evidence of mass polarization while other models did not suggests that context matters in studies about polarization. In many ways, elections are very idiosyncratic events. The political issues, candidate characteristics, and other unique attributes that combine to produce the results of one

election are often quite different from the factors that combine to produce the results of the subsequent election.

It's possible that one reason that the debate about mass polarization still rages on in the political science community is that scholars on both sides of the debate are not taking context into account as much as they should. Of course there are many studies looking at mass polarization that do not rely on election data. In the studies that do, however, controlling for more context-related variables – such as the relative importance of various issues in each election or public perceptions of major candidates' traits in each election – may yield a clearer answer about whether polarization has occurred at the mass level as well as about what effect this polarization may be having in elections. This is not to say that no efforts have been made in the current literature to control for election context-related variables – that is certainly not the case. All I am arguing is that controlling for more of these context-related variables and taking context into account more in analyses may provide more clarity about the extent to which polarization has occurred at the mass level. I cannot be sure of this, of course, but the fact that context clearly affected my results is suggestive.

Implications

The results presented in this paper help shape our understanding of polarization and the formation of party competence evaluations in America. Though the results of the vote choice models are somewhat inconclusive, the results presented in Table 5 and Figure 5 provide support for the hypothesis that polarization has caused party identification to play a larger role in the formation of political opinions and attitudes. Political scientists who argue that polarization has occurred at the mass level claim that this polarization has caused pretty much every aspect of

politics – from opinions of the sitting president to evaluations of changes in the national economy – to be seen in a partisan light by individuals. It is quite clear that evaluations of party competence are one of the opinions being influenced by growing partisanship.

The fact that party competence evaluations are increasingly just a reflection of party identification has serious implications for our political system. If the trend we see in Figure 5 continues, actual party performance and accomplishments on the issue of the economy may matter less and less over time. If party competence evaluations are increasingly formed based on an individual's party identification, a party's performance on the economy and the legislative accomplishments a party has tied to the economy slowly become more irrelevant. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, evaluations of which party is responsible for the state of the economy will be seen through a partisan lens, causing retrospective evaluations to have a partisan bias. Strong partisans on both sides of the aisle will assign blame to the other party when the economy is doing poorly and give credit to their party when the economy is doing well, making the actual accomplishments and actions of each party somewhat irrelevant in the formation of retrospective evaluations. Second, the growing power of party identification over the formation of party competence evaluations makes retrospective evaluations somewhat irrelevant themselves. Regardless of how a party performs on an issue and regardless of what actions related to that issue a party takes, supporters of that party will say their party is better able to handle that issue at higher and higher rates because they see everything through partisan-colored glasses. To put it simply, party supporters will say their party is always right and their party is always more competent.

The implications of this for our political system are rather bleak. If a party's supporters will always say their party is more competent and the other party's supporters will always say the

other party is more competent, then there is little incentive for the two parties to compromise to get anything done. The incentive that used to exist – winning the support of Americans in the middle and weak supporters of the opposition party – is disappearing as more voters are becoming fiercely loyal to one party and seeing the world through partisan-colored glasses that favor that party. With the incentive for compromise in Congress diminishing, the obstructionist tactics and partisan bickering that have become commonplace in today's Congress are likely to continue into the future. As a result, Congress is unlikely to become much more functional anytime in the near future.

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