



2012 NORC PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION

The 2012 NORC Presidential Election Survey was designed to measure public opinion about important issues the country faces—economic recovery, health care costs, and extreme partisanship. Conducted in the fourth year of a slow and unsteady economic recovery, this survey intends to determine, among other things, whether or not voters held the incumbent responsible for the condition of the economy; if it matters that the recession began during a previous administration; and does the electorate account for whether the opposition cooperated with the president or confronted him?

The survey results suggest that party affiliation is fundamental to the way people react to political as well as non-political issues, and that partisanship is often a substitute for knowledge. In particular, we gained insight into attitudes and understanding of the Affordable Care Act, the state of the economy, responsibility for economic recovery policies, and family finances.

The first section, “Responsibility and Partisanship,” addresses how respondents rate the condition of the economy, who they hold responsible for its condition, and the role partisanship plays in making these evaluations. Next are two thematic sections on areas of particular focus, “The Affordable Care Act and Vote Choice” and “The Public’s Knowledge About Responsibility for Recent Controversial Public Policies.”

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The 2012 NORC Presidential Election Survey was conducted in the weeks prior to the 2012 presidential election and is a nationally representative household survey with 2,136 adults. The survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago in partnership with the following experts: Mark Hansen, Ph.D., University of Chicago; Andrea Campbell, Ph.D., Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Stephen Ansolabehere, Ph.D., Harvard University; and Benjamin Page, Ph.D., Northwestern University.

Respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or other affiliation. Self-identified Republicans and Democrats were then asked if they considered themselves to be a strong or not so strong Republican/Democrat. These questions determined the “strong” and “weak” party variables used in many tables. All self-identified Independents were asked if they thought of themselves as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party, which produced the “leaning” Independent variables.

RESPONSIBILITY AND PARTISANSHIP

KEY FINDINGS

- Voters who say that the nation's economy has gotten better during the last year are much more likely to prefer President Barack Obama, and voters who think that the economy has gotten worse are much more likely to prefer Governor Mitt Romney.
- Voters who say that their own family finances have improved during the last year are significantly more favorable to Obama, and voters who say their finances have worsened are significantly more favorable to Romney.
- The impact of assessments of the trajectory of the nation's economy and the impact of reports on the improvement in family finances depends on who voters blame for the state of the economy: Obama, President George W. Bush*, or the banks.
- Largely, regardless of the improvement or deterioration of their family finances, respondents who blame Obama for a bad economy overwhelmingly prefer Romney, and respondents who blame Bush overwhelmingly prefer Obama. Respondents who blame a nonpartisan actor for the state of the economy, the banks for instance, strongly prefer Obama if their finances are better and strongly prefer Romney if their finances are worse.
- Regardless of their appraisal of the trajectory of the national economy, respondents who blame Obama for the state of the economy are overwhelmingly likely to prefer Romney, and respondents who blame Bush are overwhelmingly likely to prefer Obama. Respondents who blame Obama for a bad economy but think the economy is getting better, however, give Obama a little more support, and respondents who blame Bush for a bad economy and think the economy is getting worse give Obama a little less support. It seems that Obama is being held to account for his stewardship of the nation's economy over the last year, enjoying rewards from voters who see the economy improving and taking punishment from voters who see the economy getting worse.
- Voters rate the condition of the economy mostly "not so good" to "poor," although 21 percent rate it "good" (mostly) or "excellent" (less than 1%). The assessments of the economy are tinged by partisan identification. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents who give the economy a positive rating are Democrats.
- Judgments of credit and blame for the state of the economy vary widely. Respondents who rate the economy "bad" blame everybody for it: Obama, Bush, both parties in Congress, the Federal Reserve Board, as well as banks and other financial institutions. By small margins, the largest numbers of respondents lay a "great deal" or "some" blame on the banks and "not much" or "no" blame on Obama.
- When asked to name the actor who deserves the "greatest" blame, however, respondents list the banks, Bush, Obama, and Congress (Democrats and Republicans together) in about equal numbers.

We investigated the interaction of economic conditions, attributions of responsibility, and partisanship in the 2012 elections. Historically, poor economic conditions in election years have been threatening to the prospects of incumbents and incumbent parties.

The Great Recession began and reached the stage of crisis during the term of Bush, but the recovery during the administration of Obama has been slow and unsteady. This recession, moreover, has many plausible fathers, ranging from partisan political actors like the Administration and Congress to the nonpartisan Federal Reserve Board to non-political actors like banks and other financial institutions.

Unlike most survey organizations, we did not presume that voters found the economy bad and political actors blameworthy. And indeed, when asked for assessments of the state of the nation's economy, about 20 percent of respondents rate it "good" (most) or "excellent" (a very few). Forty-two percent consider the economy "not so good" and 37 percent "poor."

*"President Bush" (or "Bush") will always mean President George W. Bush and not President George H.W. Bush throughout the report.

Table 1. All Respondents View of Economy

	Excellent	Good	Not so good	Poor
State of nation's economy	0.6%	20.5%	41.8%	37.1%

FAMILY FINANCES

Our respondents report that their family finances have either stayed the same or worsened over the last year. Twenty-seven percent said that their finances are worse than last year, 43 percent the same, and 20 percent better.

The condition of family finances has a powerful relationship with preference in the presidential election. Respondents who report their finances as better than last year are 59 percentage points more likely to support the incumbent, Obama, than respondents who report that their finances are worse than last year.

Table 2. Family Finances and Presidential Candidate Preferences

	Finances better	Finances same	Finances worse
Prefer President Obama	84.7%	66.5%	25.4%
Prefer Governor Romney	15.3%	33.5%	74.6%

The effect of improvement or deterioration in family finances on respondents' presidential preferences, however, depends upon whether (among respondents who see the overall state of the economy as bad) Obama or Bush took the blame. A slight relationship between finances and presidential preference remains in both cases: whether respondents blame Obama or Bush, they are a bit more likely to support Obama if the household budget improved and a bit more likely to support Romney if the family budget worsened. On the whole, however, respondents who blame Obama overwhelmingly prefer Romney and respondents who blame Bush overwhelmingly prefer Obama. On the other hand, respondents who blame a nonpartisan actor, the banks, for the state of the economy strongly prefer Obama if their finances are better and strongly prefer Romney if their finances are worse.

Table 3. Family Finances, Presidential Candidate Preferences, and Responsibility for the Economy

	Blame President Barack Obama for state of economy		
	Finances better	Finances same	Finances worse
Prefer President Obama	8.1%	4.0%	0.5%
Prefer Governor Romney	91.9%	96.0%	99.5%
	Blame President George W. Bush for state of economy		
	Finances better	Finances same	Finances worse
Prefer President Obama	96.0%	92.0%	71.3%
Prefer Governor Romney	4.0%	8.0%	28.7%
	Blame banks for state of economy		
	Finances better	Finances same	Finances worse
Prefer President Obama	77.3%	64.3%	32.5%
Prefer Governor Romney	22.7%	35.7%	67.5%

Family finances would seem to be objective facts that are impervious to partisan influences—respondents actually see the income flowing in and the expenses flowing out. Not so, however. Democrats are appreciably more likely than Republicans to say that their family finances are better or the same. Republicans are significantly more likely to say that their financial fortunes are poorer than the year before. Strong Republicans are 36 percentage points more likely than strong Democrats to say that their family finances have gotten worse in the last year (which just happens to have been presided over by Obama). Put differently, 78 percent of the respondents who report improvement in their financial circumstances are Democrats, and 64 percent of the respondents who report deterioration in their financial circumstances are Republicans.

Table 4. Family Finances: Perceptions and Partisanship

Family finances	Strong Democrats	Weak and Independent Democrats	Independents	Weak and Independent Republicans	Strong Republicans
Better	27.3%	28.2%	13.7%	10.8%	7.2%
About the same	63.3%	55.2%	44.4%	45.0%	45.5%
Worse	9.4%	16.5%	41.9%	44.2%	47.3%

STATE OF THE ECONOMY, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE PREFERENCE, AND PARTISANSHIP

We also asked respondents to give us an assessment of the national economy’s progress in the last year, whether it has gotten better, stayed the same, or gotten worse. Respondents are significantly more positive about the nation’s economy than about their own finances: 34 percent said the economy is better, 29 percent said the economy is the same, and 36 percent said the economy is worse.

The assessment of the nation’s economic trajectory also has a powerful relationship with preference in the presidential election. Respondents who say the nation’s economy is better than last year are 71 percentage points more likely to support the incumbent, Obama, than respondents who say the economy is worse.

Table 5. State of the Economy and Presidential Candidate Preferences

	Economy better	Economy same	Economy worse
Prefer President Obama	91.9%	63.0%	20.7%
Prefer Governor Romney	8.1%	37.0%	79.3%

The effect of assessments of the economy’s trajectory on preference, however, also depends upon responsibility. As before, voters who blame Obama for the state of the economy are overwhelmingly likely to prefer Romney and respondents who blame Bush are overwhelmingly likely to prefer Obama. But there is also an important, and interesting, qualification. Voters who fault Obama for a bad economy but thought the economy is better give Obama a little more support. Conversely, voters who censured Bush for a bad economy but think the economy is getting worse give Romney a little more support.

Plainly, voters are not dispassionate in their attributions of credit and blame. Partisans credit their own side for the good and blame the other side for the bad.

Thus, improvement or deterioration in family finances had very little effect on presidential preference net of blame, which is to say, net of partisan predispositions.

Table 6. State of the Economy, Presidential Candidate Preferences, and Responsibility

	Blame President Barack Obama for state of economy		
	Economy better	Economy same	Economy worse
Prefer President Obama	25.7%	2.1%	1.5%
Prefer Governor Romney	74.3%	97.9%	98.5%
	Blame President George W. Bush for state of economy		
	Economy better	Economy same	Economy worse
Prefer President Obama	91.1%	95.3%	76.2%
Prefer Governor Romney	8.9%	4.7%	23.8%
	Blame banks for state of economy		
	Economy better	Economy same	Economy worse
Prefer President Obama	83.9%	54.2%	37.1%
Prefer Governor Romney	16.1%	45.8%	62.9%

Assessments of the trajectory of the nation's economy did matter, however—not a lot, but some—depending upon the attribution of blame for the state of the economy. Respondents who think the bad economy is Obama's fault are a little more likely to favor Obama if they believe that the economy has gotten better lately. Conversely, respondents who think that the bad economy is Bush's fault are a little more likely to oppose Obama if they think that the economy has gotten worse lately.

The assessments of blame for the overall state of the economy are primarily driven by partisanship. In that respect, it is difficult to see if Obama has escaped accountability for the economy because the Great Recession began on Bush's watch. The people who blame Bush are the people who are already inclined to support Obama, and vice versa. It also seems, however, that the electorate is holding Obama to account for his stewardship of the nation's economy over the last year, rewarding him with a little more support if they see that the economy is improving and punishing him with a little less support if they see that the economy is worsening.

We also asked respondents to tell us whether the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse over the last year. Overwhelmingly, we find that Democrats live in a country whose economy has either gotten better or stayed about the same. Republicans live in a country whose economy has gotten worse. Strong Democrats are 67 percentage points more likely than strong Republicans to say that the economy has gotten better or stayed the same. Put differently, 88 percent of the respondents who say the economy has gotten better are Democrats, and 68 percent of the respondents who think the economy has gotten worse are Republicans.

Table 7. The State of the Economy: Perceptions and Partisanship

Nation's economy	Strong Democrats	Weak and Independent Democrats	Independents	Weak and Independent Republicans	Strong Republicans
Better	59.0%	50.8%	20.4%	10.0%	5.8%
About the same	32.5%	26.7%	28.5%	34.4%	18.5%
Worse	8.5%	22.5%	51.1%	55.6%	75.7%

A DEEPER LOOK AT THE ECONOMY AND ASSIGNMENT OF CREDIT AND BLAME

As discussed, respondents' ratings of the economy, we found, are strongly influenced by partisan identification. Thirty-two percent of respondents who identify as Democrats but only 7 percent of respondents who identify as Republicans rate the economy good or excellent. Put differently, of those who give a positive assessment of the economy, 87 percent are Democrats.

For this reason, the respondents who take a positive view of the economy give most credit to Obama and the Democrats in Congress, with praise as well to the Federal Reserve Board, and deny any credit to Bush and the Republicans in Congress. Ninety percent of the economic optimists give Obama "a great deal" or "some" credit, 82 percent give congressional Democrats at least some credit, and 80 percent give the Federal Reserve Board some credit. Forty-three percent, on the other hand, say that Bush does not deserve much or any of the credit for the good economy. Forty-three percent say that congressional Republicans do not deserve much credit either.

Table 8. A Positive View of the Economy and Credit for a Good Economy

	President Barack Obama	President George W. Bush	Congressional Democrats	Congressional Republicans	Federal Reserve Board	Banks
Great deal of credit	36.8%	28.3%	21.0%	22.8%	23.3%	29.6%
Some credit	53.0%	28.6%	60.8%	33.6%	56.6%	45.2%
Not much credit	6.1%	10.8%	11.9%	18.7%	13.1%	12.2%
No credit	4.0%	32.2%	6.3%	24.9%	6.9%	13.0%

Respondents who rate the economy "not so good" or "poor," on the other hand, lay blame on the banks, Congress (whether Democrats or Republicans), and Bush (by a slight margin in that order). Eighty-seven percent thought the banks deserve a great deal or some of the blame, while 86 percent say congressional Republicans, 84 percent say congressional Democrats, and 86 percent say Bush also share a great deal or some of the blame. Fewer, but still many respondents, place much of the blame on the Federal Reserve Board (77 percent). Although a majority cast blame on Obama, a third (34 percent) say that he had little or no responsibility for the bad economy.

Table 9. A Negative View of the Economy and Blame for a Bad Economy

	President Barack Obama	President George W. Bush	Congressional Democrats	Congressional Republicans	Federal Reserve Board	Banks
Great deal of blame	25.0%	42.1%	31.1%	33.1%	26.6%	50.9%
Some blame	41.6%	43.5%	53.1%	52.9%	51.2%	36.4%
Not much blame	21.7%	10.0%	11.5%	10.1%	15.1%	8.5%
No blame	11.7%	4.4%	4.3%	3.9%	7.1%	4.3%

When we asked respondents who see a bad economy who was the most to blame for it, the greatest numbers reproach the banks (28 percent), followed by Bush (24 percent), Obama (22 percent), and Congress (20 percent, taking Democrats and Republicans together) in about equal numbers. The Federal Reserve Board is blamed first of all by only five percent.

Table 10. A Negative View of the Economy and Those Held Most Responsible

	President Barack Obama	President George W. Bush	Congressional Democrats	Congressional Republicans	Federal Reserve Board	Banks
Deserve greatest blame	22.1%	24.1%	12.5%	7.9%	5.2%	28.2%

Attributions of responsibility for a perceived bad economy are strongly shaped by partisan identification, just as attributions of responsibility for a perceived good economy are. Democrats are much more likely to blame Bush (most of all) and congressional Republicans, plus the banks. Strong Democrats were 41 percent more likely to reproach Bush, 22 percent more likely to censure congressional Republicans, and 21 percent more likely to fault the banks than strong Republicans. Conversely, Republicans are much more likely to blame Obama (most of all) and congressional Democrats. Strong Republicans are 55 percent more likely than strong Democrats to blame Obama and 28 percent more likely to blame congressional Democrats.

Table 11. A Negative View of the Economy and Those Most Blamed

Greatest blame	Strong Democrats	Weak and Independent Democrats	Independents	Weak and Independent Republicans	Strong Republicans
President Barack Obama	1.2%	4.7%	18.8%	32.4%	56.0%
President G. W. Bush	43.0%	39.0%	23.5%	9.3%	2.4%
Congressional Democrats	0.1%	3.5%	21.4%	19.9%	28.5%
Congressional Republicans	22.5%	11.4%	0.0%	0.4%	0.4%
Federal Reserve Board	0.7%	7.0%	7.9%	8.6%	1.3%
Banks	32.5%	34.5%	28.4%	29.4%	11.3%

The politics of the economic recovery are also contentious. Democrats and Republicans in Washington have argued about the necessity of the bank bailout, the efficacy of the stimulus, the wisdom of the auto industry rescue, the urgency of the deficit, and many other things. We asked respondents to tell us whether they think Obama and congressional Republicans have each made a “big effort,” “some effort,” or “very little effort” to fix the economy. Democrats overwhelmingly say that Obama has made a big effort or some effort and the Republicans on Capitol Hill have made none. Conversely, Republicans are much, much more likely than Democrats to say that the GOP has made all the effort and Obama has made none. Each side observes its “team” behaving more virtuously in Washington.

Table 12. Perceptions of Effort Toward Economic Recovery

	Strong Democrats	Weak and Independent Democrats	Independents	Weak and Independent Republicans	Strong Republicans
Both tried	16.7%	34.4%	40.2%	40.6%	26.8%
President Obama tried	81.7%	54.7%	25.9%	14.7%	6.2%
Republicans tried	0.6%	4.1%	10.8%	29.5%	52.7%
Neither tried	1.0%	6.7%	23.1%	15.3%	14.2%

THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT AND VOTE CHOICE

KEY FINDINGS

- The Affordable Care Act (ACA) is an electoral liability. A large proportion of Independents oppose the law, and these respondents are much less supportive of President Barack Obama than those who favor the law.
- Partisanship and perceptions trump self-interest when it comes to assessments of the ACA. Lacking health insurance or experiencing some of the problems the ACA aims to address (like being denied health insurance for a pre-existing condition) have little effect on ACA support. Instead, support for the law is based on party identification and beliefs about the likely effects of the law.

MOTIVATION

The ACA was the centerpiece of Obama's legislative agenda.

Public opinion polling during and after the ACA's passage showed that although majorities of Americans favored many of the law's individual elements, the reform as a whole was unpopular. After the Supreme Court's ruling upholding the law, the percent favoring the law topped 50 percent in some polls, but substantial proportions remain opposed to the law. Republican presidential candidate Governor Mitt Romney vowed to repeal the law if elected.

This survey attempts to answer two questions:

1. Does Obama receive any electoral payoff from the ACA, particularly from those who might benefit from its provisions? Will the law's continuing unpopularity reduce support among key groups such as Independents?
2. Are attitudes toward the ACA shaped by self-interest and past experience? Or do they reflect partisanship or beliefs about what the ACA might accomplish if fully implemented?

FINDINGS

Obama appears to garner little electoral payoff from the ACA. Candidate preference is largely driven by partisanship—85 percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaning Independents intend to vote for Obama, while 82 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents intend to vote for Romney.

There is an electoral cost from the law among Democrats and Independents. The ACA divides both Democrats and Independents. Support for Obama is lower among Democrats and Independents who hold negative views about the ACA. For example, 93 percent of Democrats who oppose repeal of the ACA prefer Obama, but that proportion drops to 80 percent among Democrats who favor ACA repeal. That said, the proportion of Democrats with negative ACA views is relatively small.

The splintering effect of the ACA is larger among Independents, where opinions on the ACA are more evenly split. Among the 38 percent of Independents who oppose ACA repeal, Obama support is 64 percent. However, among the 49 percent of Independents who favor ACA repeal, support for Obama is only 24 percent.

Support for Obama among Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents who might personally benefit from the ACA is only a little higher than among other Republicans. Among Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents, 15 percent of those who couldn't see a doctor sometime in the last 12 months because of cost, who have been denied health insurance because of a pre-existing condition, or who are uninsured say they will vote for Obama rather than Romney—a proportion higher than among other Republicans, but still quite low.

Table 13. Personal Medical/Insurance Experience and Presidential Candidate Preference

		Democratic-leaning Independents		Republican-leaning Independents	
		President Obama	Governor Romney	President Obama	Governor Romney
Couldn't see doctor b/c cost	Yes	88%	5%	15%	75%
	No	84%	6%	7%	84%
Denied insurance b/c pre-existing condition	Yes	89%	6%	14%	71%
	No	86%	5%	5%	87%
Insurance status	Not Insured	83%	2%	15%	74%
	Insured	86%	6%	8%	83%

Finally, ACA support is not driven by personal experiences with the health care system, such as lack of access to medical care. Rather, opinions about the law reflect partisanship and predictions about the likely effects of the ACA in the future. Multivariate analysis shows that respondents are more supportive of the ACA if they believe that it will increase the proportion of Americans with health coverage, decrease the cost of health care in the United States, improve their own access to care, and reduce their own health care costs. Past experiences are not statistically significant in explaining ACA support: there are no differences in ACA opinion between those in excellent or poor health; between the insured and the uninsured; between those who have skipped a doctor's visit because of cost and those who haven't; and between those who have not been denied insurance for a pre-existing condition and those who have.

Table 14. The Affordable Care Act and Presidential Candidate Preference

		Self-identified Democrats			Self-identified Independents		
		% with opinion	Candidate preference		% with opinion	Candidate preference	
			President Obama	Governor Romney		President Obama	Governor Romney
ACA opinion in 2010	Favored	78%	92%	3%	40%	74%	12%
	Opposed	8%	72%	14%	44%	10%	66%
ACA opinion in 2012	Oppose repeal	64%	93%	4%	38%	64%	20%
	Favor repeal	25%	80%	9%	49%	24%	56%
Expectation of change in personal health care access under ACA	Better	25%	91%	2%	12%	67%	20%
	Worse	4%	70%	18%	20%	6%	72%
	No difference	67%	89%	6%	61%	50%	30%
Expectation of change in personal health care costs under ACA	Less	14%	89%	10%	7%	64%	14%
	More	17%	76%	5%	41%	20%	60%
	No difference	60%	92%	4%	43%	56%	24%

THE PUBLIC'S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY FOR RECENT CONTROVERSIAL PUBLIC POLICIES

KEY FINDINGS

- A large portion of the electorate has a hazy idea of who was responsible for four recent, controversial policies: the Medicare prescription drug benefit, the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP), and the economic stimulus.
- A large majority of respondents know that President Barack Obama passed the ACA, but a third of respondents believe that President George W. Bush passed the stimulus, or admit that they do not know who did. Respondents are more likely to be wrong than to be right about the responsibility for both of Bush's policies.
- Respondents' "knowledge" of responsibility for policy is also strongly shaped by partisanship. With dim actual knowledge, people tend to attribute success in passing legislation—whatever it is—to their affiliated party. The tendency to claim credit for policy is especially strong among Democrats and Obama supporters.

MOTIVATION

A basic requirement for holding leaders accountable is knowing the actions they took in office. The Obama and Bush administrations both passed major legislation in

both of the policy areas that were most in dispute in the 2012 presidential election: economic recovery and health care. In health care, the administration of Bush passed the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act, and the Obama administration passed the ACA. To promote economic recovery, the Bush administration passed the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, which included TARP, and the Obama administration passed the American Reconstruction and Recovery Act.

All four policies were well publicized and controversial. Bush's "Medicare prescription drug benefit bill" was the most expensive addition to Medicare since its inception; Obama's "health care reform bill" was the subject of a Supreme Court decision in 2012. Bush's "bank bailout bill" and Obama's "stimulus bill" were both criticized for their expense and questioned about their effectiveness. The newspapers are filled with stories of popular outrage about the ACA, the stimulus, and TARP.

FINDINGS

Respondents overwhelmingly (and correctly) attribute the ACA to Obama. (Note: the question made no reference to "Obamacare.") More respondents attribute the Medicare prescription drug bill to Obama (incorrectly) rather than to Bush, and a large number of respondents did not know which president passed it.

Table 15. Attribution of Responsibility for Passage of Health Care Policies

	Prescription drug benefit (President G. W. Bush)	Health care reform (President Barack Obama)
President G. W. Bush	34.5%	5.4%
President Barack Obama	45.2%	86.2%
Don't know	20.3%	8.4%

More respondents attribute both economic recovery policies to Obama. At the same time, more respondents attribute both policies to Obama (44.8 percent) than attribute both policies correctly: TARP to Bush and the stimulus to Obama (30.6 percent). Almost 11 percent (10.7 percent) of respondents attribute both policies to Bush, and 13.9 percent of respondents attribute both policies incorrectly. It could be that people remember the Obama years better than the Bush years. They might recall that Obama did something about health and something about the economy. They guess, incorrectly, that he must be responsible for ACA *and* prescription drugs, for the stimulus *and* TARP.

Respondents' professed "knowledge" about policy responsibility is also strongly linked to partisanship and candidate preference. Democrats and Obama's supporters lay claim to *both* health policies and to *both* recovery policies for Obama. Governor Mitt Romney's supporters, likewise, are a little more likely to attribute both recovery policies to Bush. On the other hand, a few more of the most partisan Republicans deflect responsibility for TARP to Obama.

Table 16. Attribution of Responsibility for Passage of Health Care Policies by Political Party

Health: Prescription drug benefit (President G. W. Bush) and health care reform (President Barack Obama)					
	Strong Democrats	Weak and Independent Democrats	Independents	Weak and Independent Republicans	Strong Republicans
Both attributed correctly	30.8%	28.5%	35.3%	47.3%	57.6%
Both attributed to President G. W. Bush	3.0%	7.0%	8.3%	4.4%	1.4%
Both attributed to President Barack Obama	65.0%	62.5%	52.6%	44.6%	38.7%
Both attributed incorrectly	1.2%	2.0%	3.9%	3.8%	2.3%

Table 17. Attribution of Responsibility for Passage of Economic Recovery Policies

	TARP (President G. W. Bush)	Stimulus (President Barack Obama)
President G. W. Bush	34.4%	22.2%
President Barack Obama	50.3%	65.5%
Don't know	15.3%	12.4%

Table 18. Attribution of Responsibility for Passage of Economic Recovery Policies by Political Party

Recovery: TARP (President G. W. Bush) and stimulus (President Barack Obama)					
	Strong Democrats	Weak and Independent Democrats	Independents	Weak and Independent Republicans	Strong Republicans
Both attributed correctly	28.3%	26.7%	34.9%	34.7%	34.3%
Both attributed to President G. W. Bush	5.1%	12.6%	11.8%	16.3%	8.3%
Both attributed to President Barack Obama	54.9%	47.4%	43.8%	35.5%	34.8%
Both attributed incorrectly	11.7%	13.4%	9.5%	13.5%	22.6%

Table 19. Attribution of Policies and Presidential Candidate Preferences

	Health Care Policies		Economic Recovery Policies	
	Prefer President Obama	Prefer Governor Romney	Prefer President Obama	Prefer Governor Romney
Both attributed correctly	32.4%	53.0%	28.1%	36.1%
Both attributed to President G. W. Bush	2.5%	4.3%	7.4%	13.9%
Both attributed to President Obama	62.2%	41.0%	52.0%	34.0%
Both attributed incorrectly	2.9%	1.7%	12.4%	16.0%

The findings complicate the narrative of a popular uprising against specific policies. A large portion of the electorate has a pretty hazy idea of who is responsible for what. Memories fade and attention is low, so people guess who accomplished something in favor of the more recent president. Partisans also have motivational reasons to misremember. They want to give their candidate the credit for making things happen. By placing responsibility where responsibility is not due, voters confuse accountability.

DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS: DIFFERENT REALITIES

SUMMARY

- Voters who consider themselves Democrats and voters who consider themselves Republicans perceive very different realities. Democrats and Republicans tend to see the political world, and everything that bears on it, through partisan lenses.
- Democrats and Republicans who think that the economy right now is bad hold different people responsible for it. Democrats are much more likely to assign the blame to President George W. Bush, congressional Republicans, and banks and other financial institutions. Republicans generally view President Barack Obama and congressional Democrats as the culprits.
- Democrats and Republicans see the events in Washington in different ways. Democrats are much more likely to say that Obama tried to repair the economy but congressional Republicans did not assist. For their part, Republicans credit the congressional Republicans with sincere efforts to fix the economy and Obama with little.
- Party affiliation affects preference toward the Affordable Care Act, even trumping personal health care experiences as the key predictor of favorable or unfavorable responses.
- Partisan differences extend to memory of facts. Democrats and Republicans both tend to attribute the stimulus bill (correctly) and the bank bailout bill (incorrectly) to Obama. Democrats, however, are more likely to give Obama credit for making things happen in Washington.
- The perceptions of economic “realities” are also affected by partisanship, both at the level of the nation and at the level of the family pocketbook. Democrats are more likely to sense that the nation’s economy is getting better. Republicans believe that it is getting worse. Likewise, Democrats are more likely to report that their family finances have improved (or stayed the same), while Republicans are more likely to say that their family circumstances have taken a turn for the worse.

Academic researchers have known for years that partisan identification is a major influence on vote choices in elections at all levels. The authors of *The American Voter* (1960), who elaborated the concept of party identification, also likened partisanship to a “perceptual screen” that affects the way that voters perceive candidates, campaign events, policy issues, and other elements of the political world. They see and interpret “reality” in ways that are consistent with their partisan worldview. The 2012 election is no exception.

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