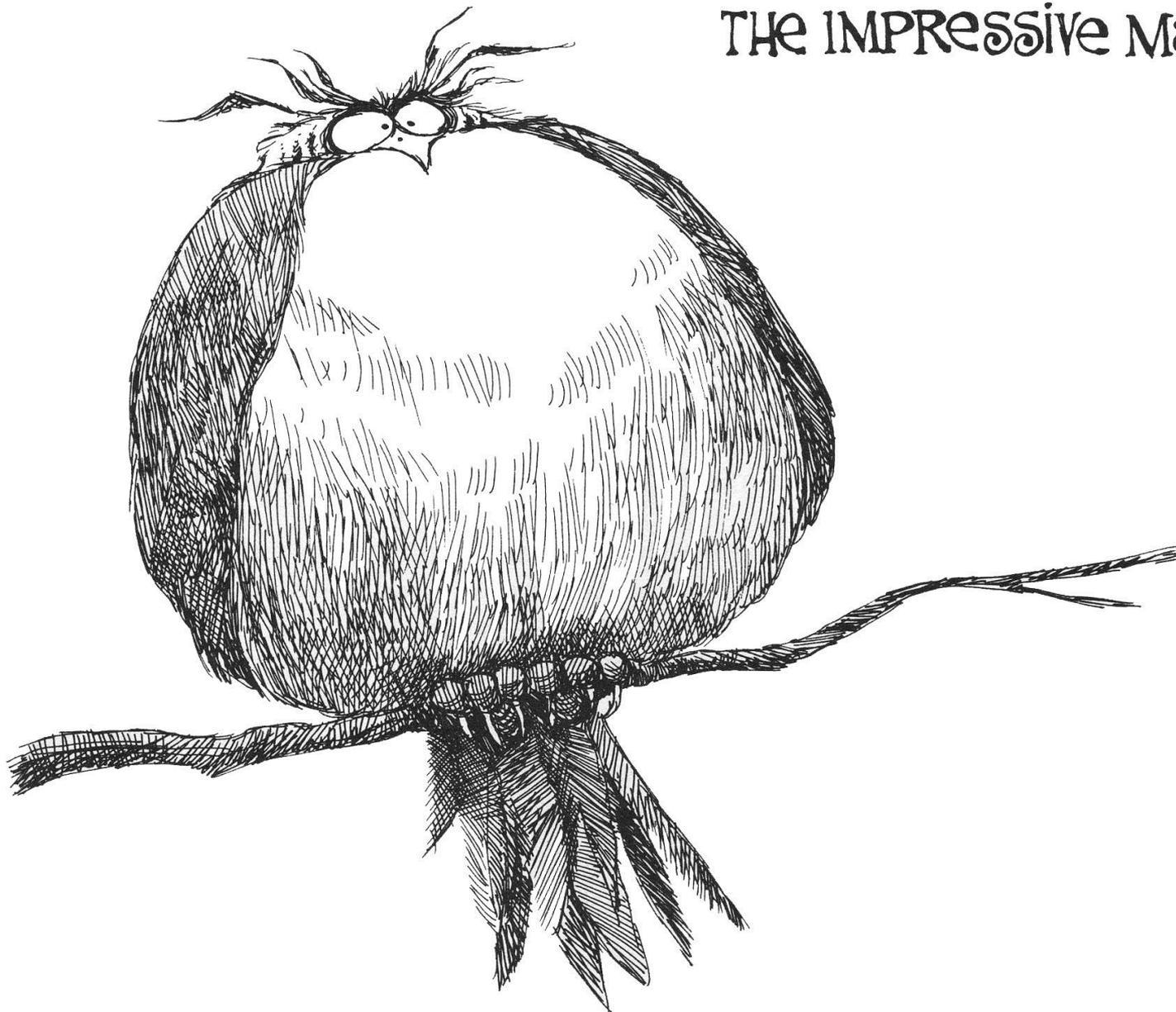

*Searching for Meaning
in Presidential Elections*

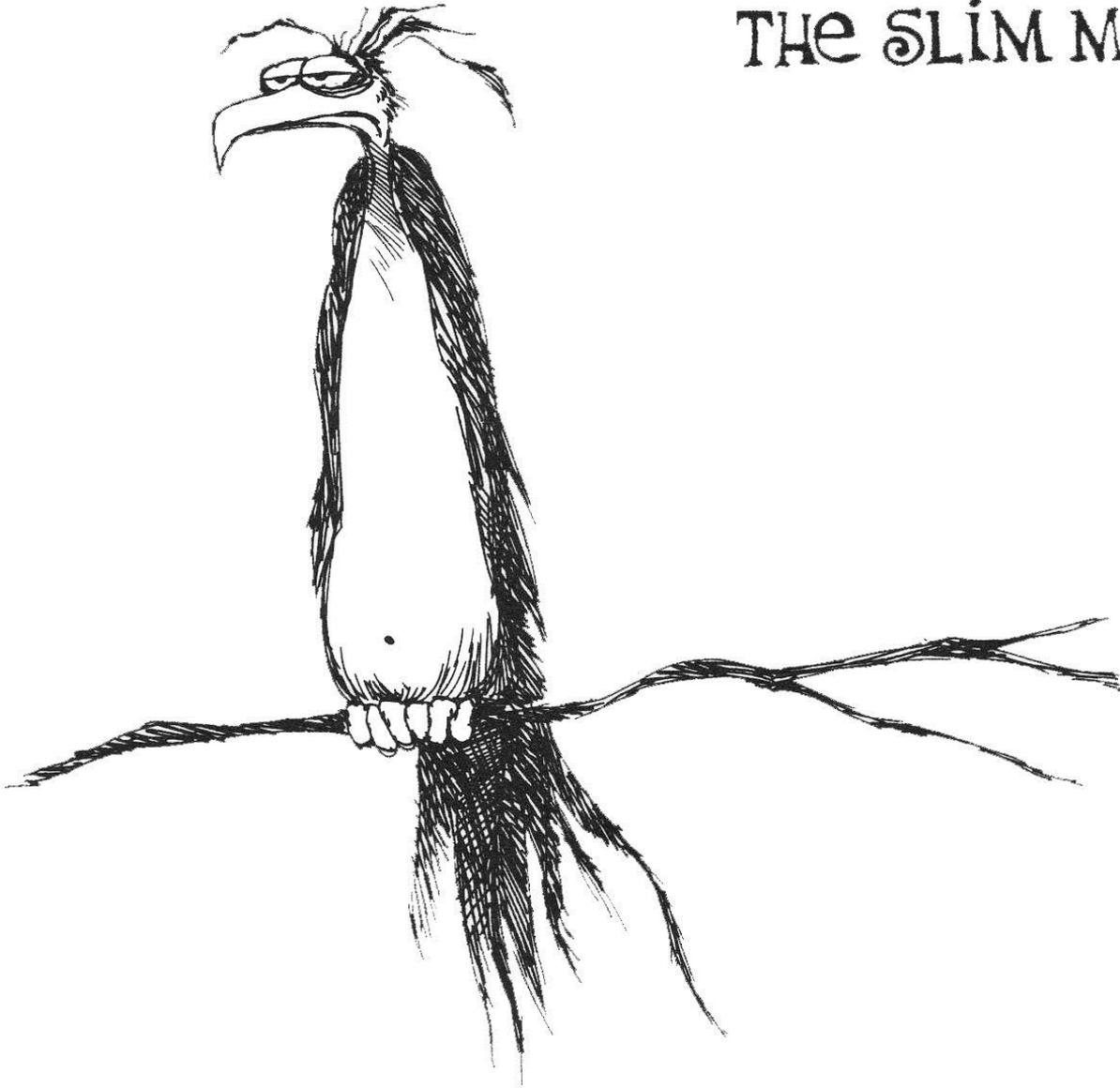
Larry M. Bartels

Vanderbilt University

THE IMPRESSIVE MANDATE



THE SLIM MANDATE



THE ELUSIVE MANDATE

“Obama won but he’s got no mandate.”

—Charles Krauthammer

“A divided nation did not hand President Obama a mandate.”

—ABC News

“Obama enters a second term without a clear mandate for action.”

—*Christian Science Monitor*

THE ELUSIVE MANDATE

“Mandates aren’t quite ‘myths,’ ... but neither are they readily identifiable entities about which we can make confident assertions. ... The mandate is in the eye of the beholder. ... So when journalists and politicians weigh in on the subject they are really psychoanalysing the electorate writ large.”

—*The Economist*

“To be sure, many individual voters act in odd ways indeed; yet in the large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it.”

—V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (1966)

“In American presidential campaigns of recent decades the portrait of the American electorate that develops from the data is not one of an electorate straitjacketed by social determinants or moved by subconscious urges triggered by devilishly skillful propagandists.”

—V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (1966)

“... It is rather one of an electorate moved by concern about central and relevant questions of public policy, of governmental performance, and of executive personality.”

—V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (1966)

“Propositions so uncompromisingly stated inevitably represent overstatements. Yet to the extent that they can be shown to resemble the reality, they are propositions of basic importance for both the theory and the practice of democracy.”

—V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (1966)

To what extent can Key's optimistic portrait of *The Responsible Electorate* "be shown to resemble the reality" of contemporary American electoral politics?

“the clarity of the alternatives ... and the character of information”

- Key was reacting to earlier scholarly studies emphasizing “the general impoverishment of political thought in a large proportion of the electorate” and suggesting that “many people know the existence of few if any of the major issues of policy.”
 - Were these merely manifestations of “the [un]clarity of the alternatives”?
-

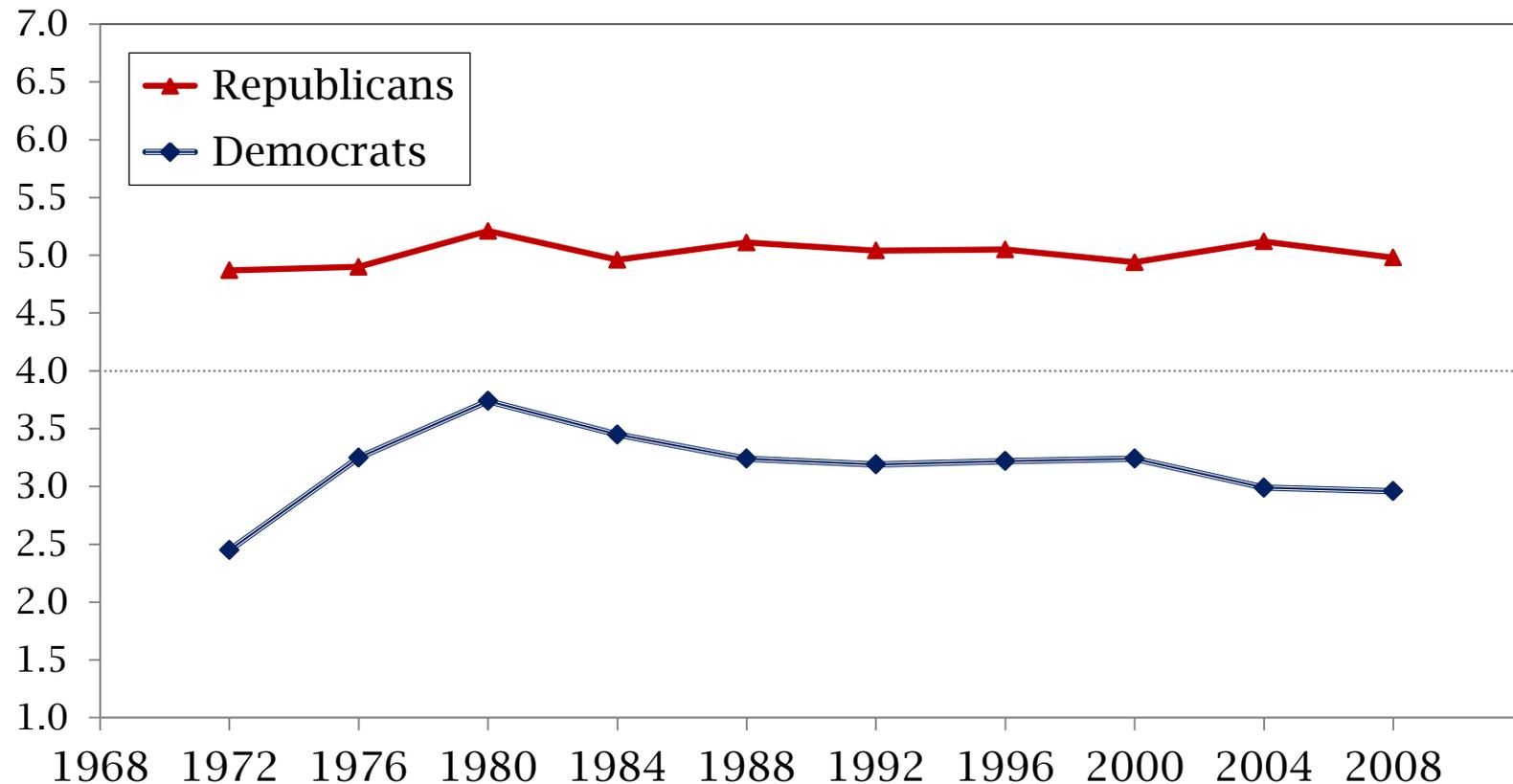
Partisan Polarization: “A Choice, Not an Echo”

- Over the past three decades, American politics has become significantly more polarized along partisan lines than it was in the 1950s.
 - While voters have responded by becoming more partisan, they do *not* seem to have become notably better-informed or more systematic political thinkers.
-

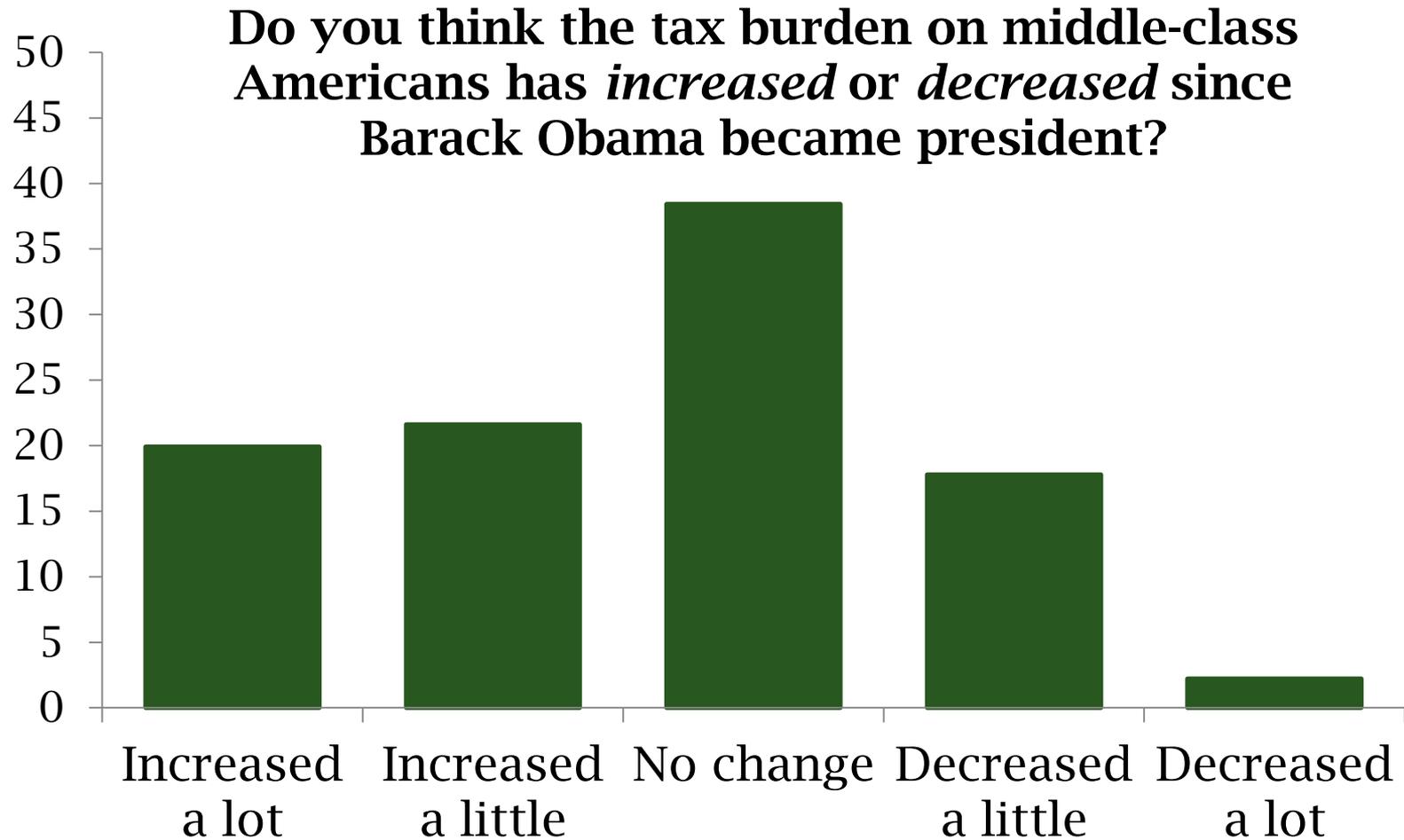
For example, voters are quite insensitive to variation in candidates' policy stands ...

Perceived Ideological Positions of Presidential Candidates

(excluding 23% of respondents who declined to place themselves and/or candidates)



... most are unaware or misinformed about significant policy changes ...



... and momentous policy proposals ...

Under the budget proposed by Paul Ryan, federal spending on everything *other* than Medicare and Social Security would decline over the next 20 years ...

- (a) from 22% to 18.5% of GDP
 - (b) from 22% to 14.5% of GDP
 - (c) from 14.5% to 11.5% of GDP
 - (d) from 14.5% to 7% of GDP
-

... and momentous policy proposals ...

Under the budget proposed by Paul Ryan, federal spending on everything *other* than Medicare and Social Security would decline over the next 20 years ...

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| (a) from 22% to 18.5% of GDP | 23% |
| (b) from 22% to 14.5% of GDP | 34% |
| (c) from 14.5% to 11.5% of GDP | 15% |
| (d) from 14.5% to 7% of GDP | 11% |



... and momentous policy proposals ...

Under the budget proposed by Paul Ryan, federal spending on everything *other* than Medicare and Social Security would decline over the next 20 years ...

(a) from 22% to 18.5% of GDP	23%	10%
(b) from 22% to 14.5% of GDP	34%	10%
(c) from 14.5% to 11.5% of GDP	15%	4%
(d) from 14.5% to 7% of GDP	11%	4%
(e) don't know	---	71%

... and momentous policy proposals ...

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(a) from 22% to 18.5% of GDP	23%	10%
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(d) from 14.5% to 7% of GDP	11%	4%
(e) don't know	---	71%

... and *only 40% of the voters who were undecided this summer* knew that Republicans controlled the House of Representatives.

	<i>More members in the House</i>	<i>More members in the Senate</i>
Democratic Party	21%	39%
Republican Party	40%	23%
Not sure	39%	38%

Heuristics and “Gut Rationality”

- Political scientists have stressed the *potential* value of “information shortcuts”—but with little attention to how they may lead voters astray.
 - What, exactly, should Hispanic voters have inferred from Gerald Ford’s ignorance of how to eat a tamale?
 - Considerable evidence suggests that voters do not behave *as if* they were fully informed.
-

“the electorate in the large”
(*or*, the miracle of aggregation)

- Nevertheless, if individual errors “cancel out,” the electorate *as a whole* may come to the “correct” collective judgment.
 - But there is no guarantee that individual errors *will* “cancel out,” and some evidence that they don’t—at least not entirely.
-

“subconscious urges” and “devilishly skillful propagandists”

- Candidates who *look* “competent” (to naïve subjects seeing photos for less than one second) are more likely to win (70% of Senate races).
 - Voters are swayed by the sheer volume of television advertising in the final days of the campaign (but these effects evaporate in a matter of days).
-

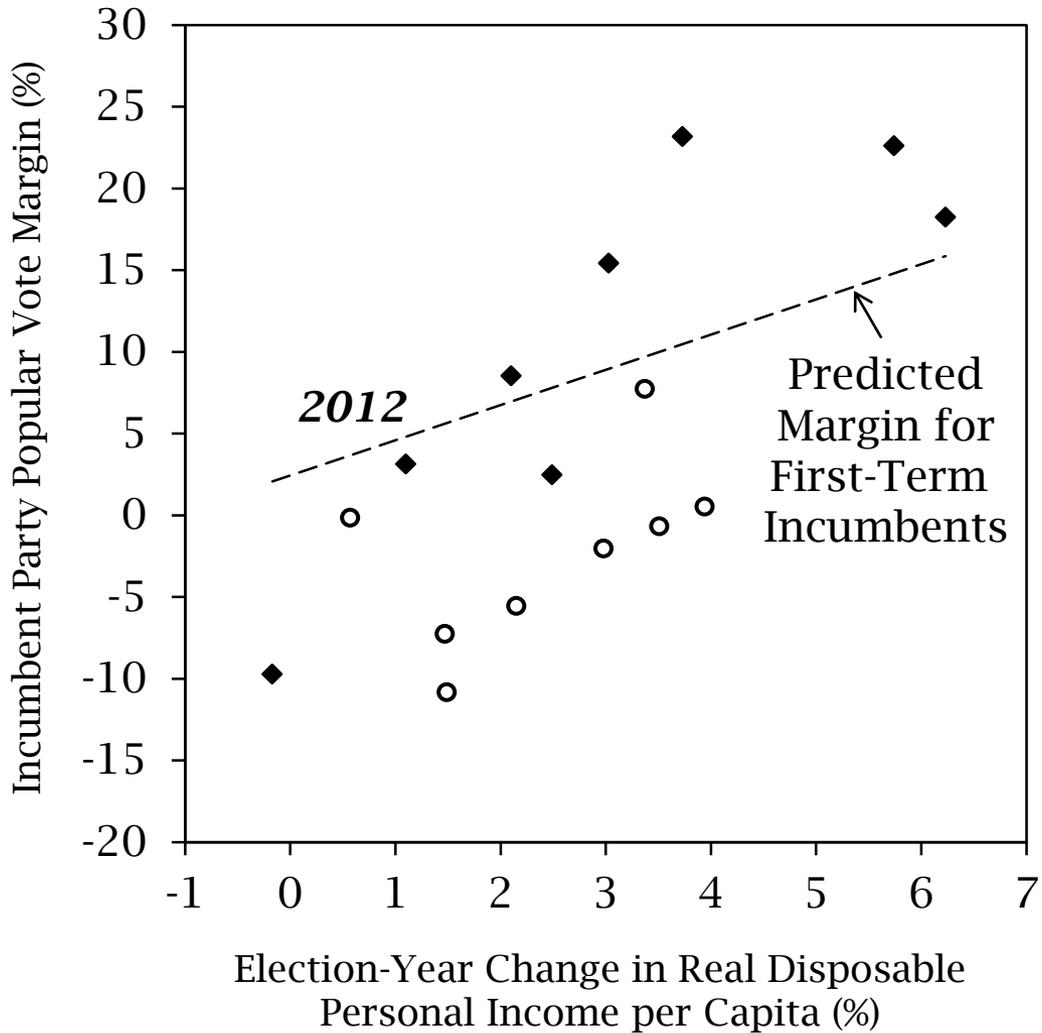
“central and relevant questions of public policy”

- The appearance of “issue voting” often reflects *rationalization*, or voters simply adopting the stands of candidates they prefer for other reasons (for example, Social Security privatization in the 2000 campaign).
-

“governmental performance, and ... executive personality”

- There is considerable evidence that voters are swayed by their perceptions of economic and social conditions.
 - For example, the incumbent party's electoral performance is strongly affected by the rate of income growth over the course of the election year.
-

Election-Year Income Growth and Incumbent Vote Margin, 1952-2012



This “retrospective voting” seems to render political ignorance less troubling.

After all, even uninformed citizens “typically have one comparatively hard bit of data: they know what life has been like during the incumbent’s administration.”

—Morris Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (1981)

Unfortunately, retrospective voting is harder than it may seem.

- Voters' *perceptions of national conditions* are seriously skewed by partisan and other biases.
 - Voters are *myopically* focused on current conditions, mostly forgetting or ignoring the past.
 - Voters have great difficulty sensibly *attributing political responsibility*.
-

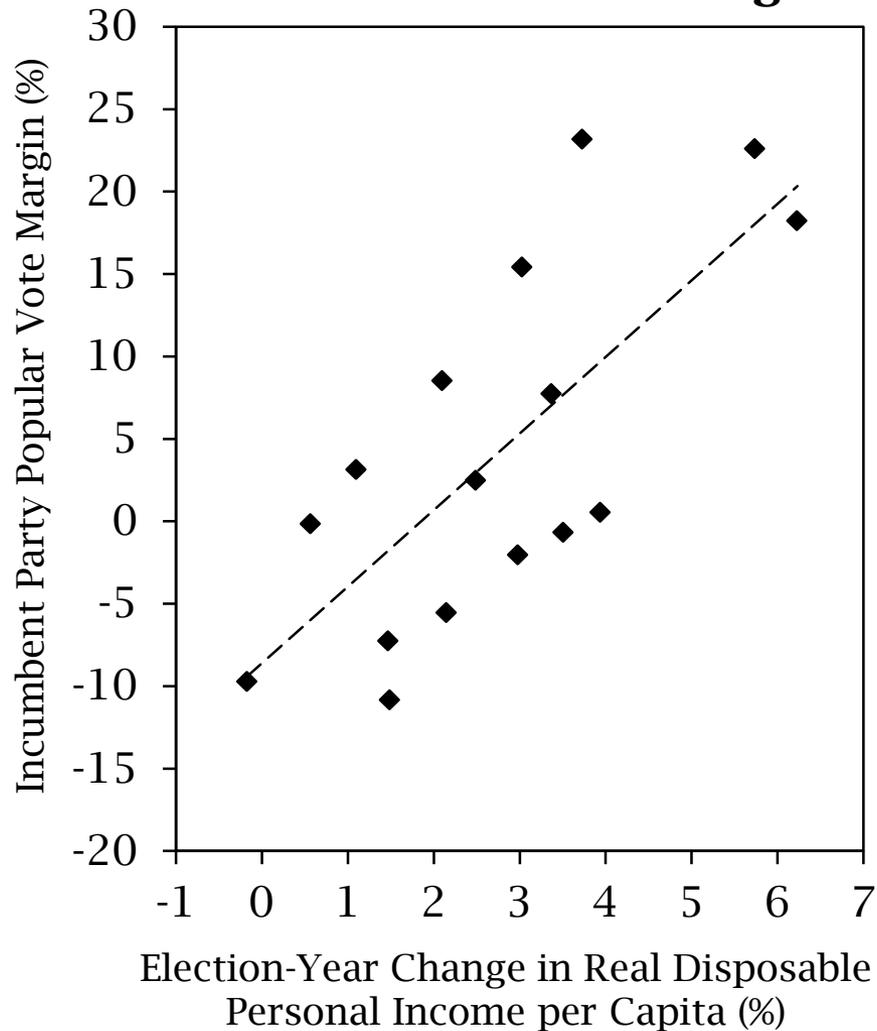
Voters' perceptions of national conditions are seriously skewed by partisan and other biases.

- For example, most “strong Democrats” in 1988 said that inflation had increased under Republican Ronald Reagan; in fact, it had declined from *13.5%* to *4.1%*.
 - These biases are generally largest among *well-informed* partisans.
-

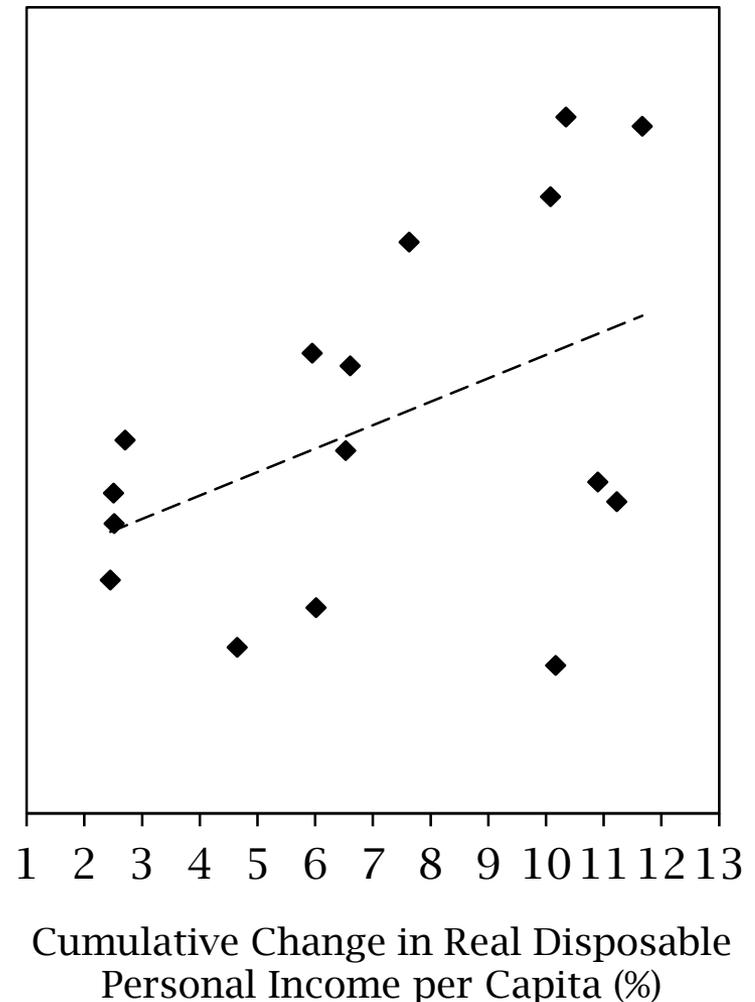
Voters are *myopically* focused on current conditions, mostly forgetting or ignoring the past.

- Incumbents' fortunes depend on income growth in the year of the election—or even a fraction of that year—*not* over the incumbent president's entire term.
-

Election-Year Income Growth and Incumbent Vote Margin



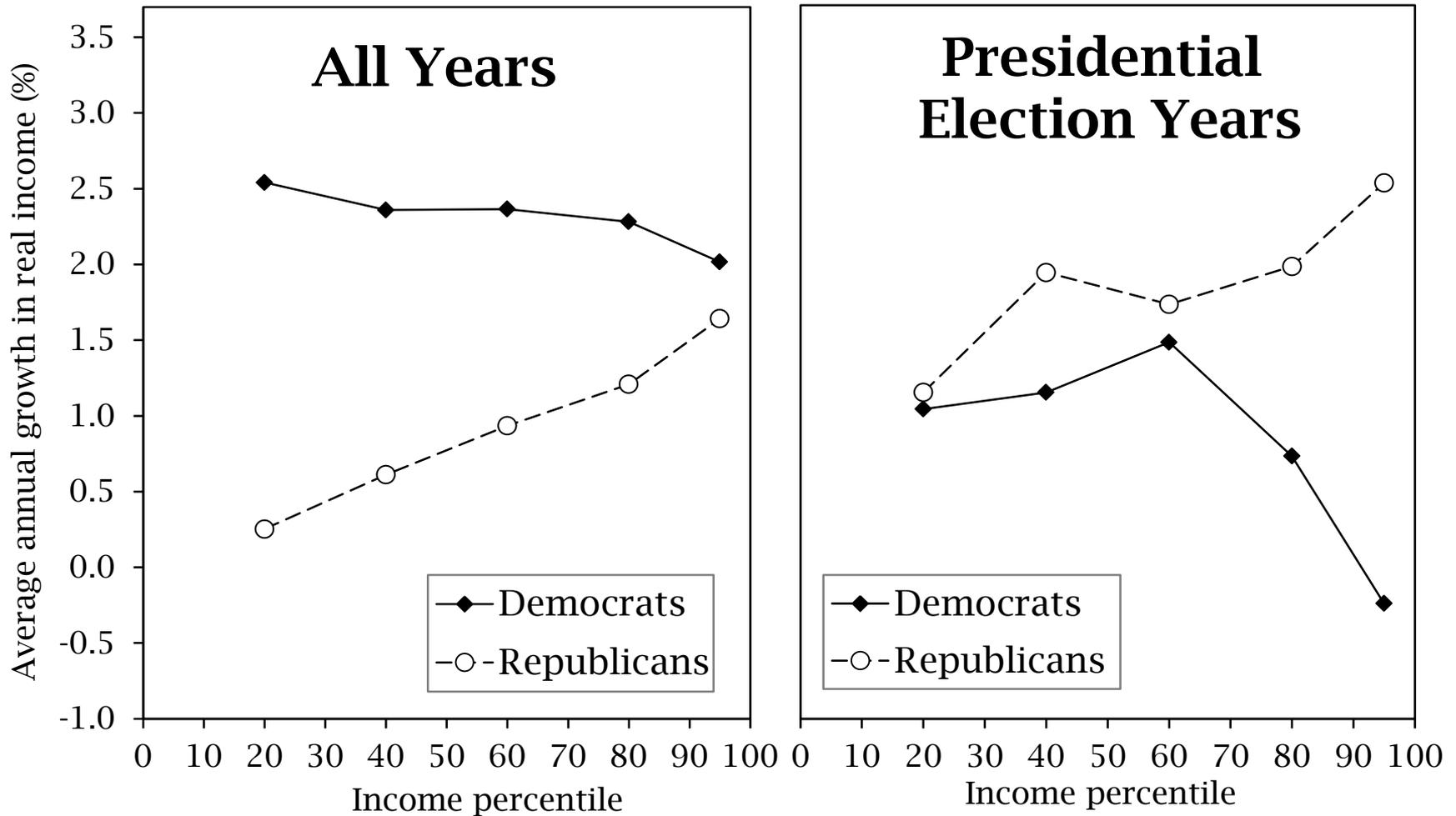
Cumulative Income Growth and Incumbent Vote Margin



Voters are *myopically* focused on current conditions, mostly forgetting or ignoring the past.

- *Republican* presidential candidates have been advantaged by voters' myopia due to partisan differences in *election-year* income growth in the post-war era.
-

Income Growth under Democratic and Republican Presidents, 1948-2009



“Of all the races in an advanced stage of civilization, the American is the least accessible to long views. ... Always and everywhere in a hurry to get rich, he does not give a thought to remote consequences; he sees only present advantages. ... He does not remember, he does not feel, he lives in a materialist dream.”

– Moiseide Ostrogorski (1902)

Voters have great difficulty sensibly *attributing political responsibility*.

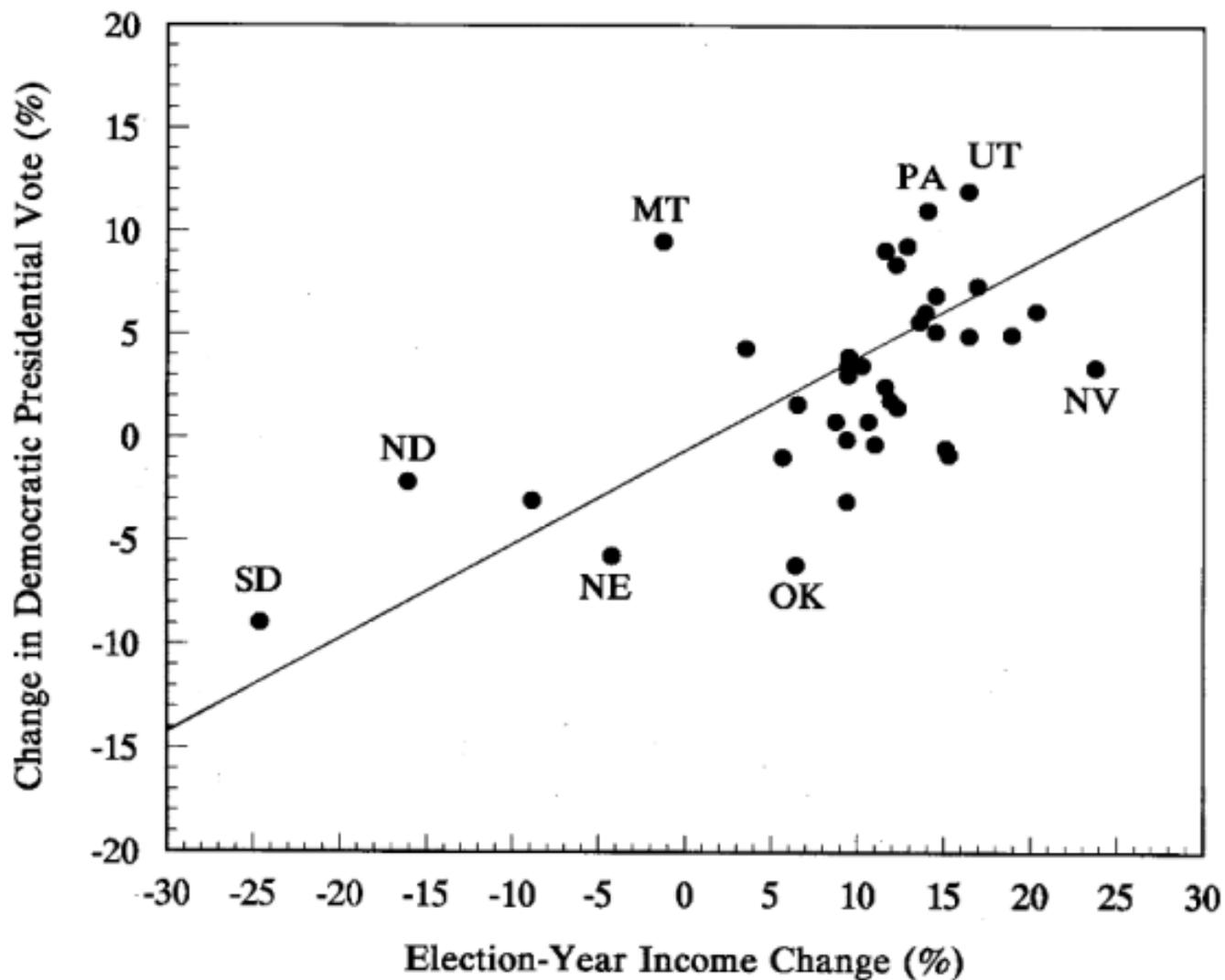
- Incumbents are routinely punished for *droughts and floods*. In 2000, about 2.8 million people voted against Al Gore because their states were too wet or too dry.
 - *Shark attacks* in New Jersey in 1916 cost Woodrow Wilson 8% to 10% of the vote in the affected townships.
-



Even in moments of crisis, these patterns of electoral behavior seem to remain largely unaltered.

- American voters in the midst of the Great Depression reelected Franklin Roosevelt in a landslide in 1936 not (as usually supposed) because they endorsed New Deal policies, but because economic conditions were improving *at the time of the election*.
-

Figure 2: Short-Term Retrospection
in the 1936 Presidential Election



-
- Elsewhere, voters elected liberals (Canada and Sweden), conservatives (Canada, Britain, Australia), nationalists (Ireland), socialists (Sweden, Saskatchewan), and a wacky radio preacher (Alberta)—any available alternative until conditions improved.
 - In Germany, prolonged distress discredited all the mainstream parties, the Nazis won substantial popular support, and democracy fell.
-

Elections and the Political Order

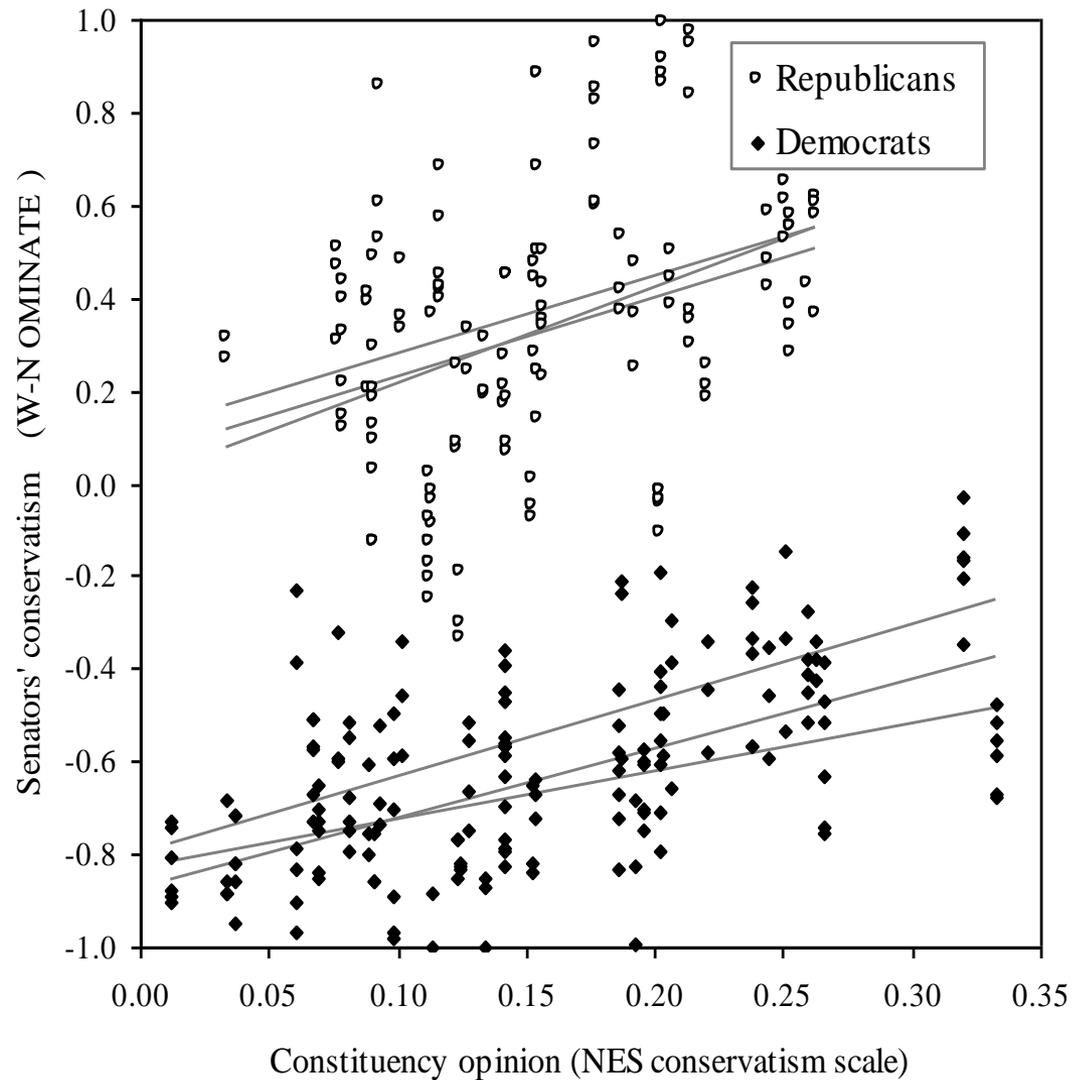
- The most ambitious portrait of “the “responsible electorate” in the half-century following Key is Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson’s 2002 book, *The Macro Polity*, which underlined “the extraordinary sophistication of the collective electorate” and “strong evidence that the policies of national elites ... respond directly to small changes in public opinion.”
-

-
- However, their analysis of election outcomes as resulting from shifts in “macropartisanship” and “policy mood” is rather unsatisfying:
“our forecasting ability is limited until the month before the election,” and depends heavily on shifts in partisanship over the course of the election year—shifts which are “volatile and essentially uncorrelated with the other variables of the model.”
-

-
- Moreover, their characterization of *policy change* as stemming primarily from shifts in the public's "policy mood" seems inconsistent with their own analysis, which suggests that the policy effect of moving from the *most conservative* "mood" in the past half-century to the *most liberal* "mood" would be dwarfed by the effect of replacing a *typical* Republican president with a *typical* Democrat.
-

Republican and Democratic office-holders are generally much more extreme than the voters who elect them—underlining both the *significance* and the *limitations* of elections.

Constituency Opinion and Senators' Roll Call Votes, by Party



-
- Thus, election outcomes have very significant and systematic *policy consequences*; but ...
-

-
- Thus, election outcomes have very significant and systematic *policy consequences*; but ...
 - ... those election outcomes are *largely random*—shaped much more by short-term income growth and other idiosyncratic factors than by “relevant questions of public policy, of governmental performance, and of executive personality.”
-

**In that case, why
have elections at all?**

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- “Largely random” outcomes still provide *some* incentive for incumbents to make voters better off, since that improves the incumbents’ chances of being reelected.
-

In that case, why have elections at all?

- “Largely random” outcomes still provide *some* incentive for incumbents to make voters better off, since that improves the incumbents’ chances of being reelected.
 - The tendency of voters to hold incumbents to higher standards the longer they have been in power makes it very hard for either party to get too entrenched in office.
-

“Propositions so uncompromisingly stated inevitably represent overstatements. Yet to the extent that they can be shown to resemble the reality, they are propositions of basic importance for both the theory and the practice of democracy.”

—V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (1966)
