Which politicians do voters blame for the down economy?

August 17 2010

A down economy usually spells trouble for incumbents, but a new Brigham Young University study shows that six Republicans up for re-election this year caught a break when John McCain lost the last presidential election.

The analysis found that some voters are less objective (and more forgiving) in evaluating their governor's economic performance if the White House is controlled by the opposing political party.

"When there is an easy chance for people to pass the blame onto a party they don't like, they'll take it," said Adam Brown, an assistant professor of political science at BYU.

The study, which appears in the current issue of The *Journal of Politics*, found that whenever the president and the governor belong to opposing parties, voters will overestimate the policy success of the level of government their preferred party controls. This means that members of the governor's party will paint a rosier picture of their state's economy when the White House is controlled by a member of an opposing party.

Take a current political situation as an example: Since President Obama is a Democrat and Utah Gov. Gary Herbert is a Republican, Utah Republicans are two to three times more likely to blame the poor economy on the president than if McCain were president. They're also likely to say Utah's economy is outperforming that of the nation—by more than the data may show. By contrast, Utah Democrats are likely to do exactly the opposite, blaming Gov. Herbert instead of President Obama.

Brown used the economy, measured by unemployment rates, as an example of an unclear policy outcome because it's difficult or even impossible for most voters to determine which level of government affects it the most.

"The economy is the haziest, but it also drives approval and elections way more than anything else," Brown said.

Interestingly, Brown found the effect of unemployment on gubernatorial approval to be three to four times stronger among members of the president's party than among members of the governor's party. That is, members of the governor's party are more willing to ignore poor economic performance when evaluating the governor than members of the president's party.

Political scientists have long debated if people are capable of being objective when evaluating candidates, or if they simply toe party lines when they get to the polls. Brown's findings imply that voters are more likely to be objective when evaluating areas where responsibilities are clearer, or when the president and the governor are of the same party.

"People can be objective as long as there's not a partisan reason not to be objective," Brown said.

For the study, Brown looked at previous research in years in which the economy was down, giving him the chance to see how people assign blame and estimate economic performance.

As for why voters rely on partisan cues when assigning blame for policy outcomes, Brown has one hypothesis.

"We just like to protect what we believe," Brown said.

Provided by Brigham Young University