

New study challenges conventional wisdom that Americans are 'pocketbook voters'

May 24 2024, by Meredith Rovine



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A new study that examined voting in the 2022 United States congressional elections shows that views on abortion were central to shifting votes in the midterm elections. Despite severe inflation and

grave concerns about deteriorating economic conditions, economic perceptions did not change votes.

The [study](#) was conducted by Diana Mutz, Samuel A. Stouffer Professor of Political Science and Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication, and Edward Mansfield, Hum Rosen Professor of Political Science in the School of Arts & Sciences.

It is published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, and demonstrates why the role of the economy is easily misinterpreted in research on American elections.

"Journalists frequently assert that Americans are 'pocketbook voters,' relying on their economic self-interest in making voting decisions," said study co-author Diana Mutz, Samuel A. Stouffer Professor of Political Science and Communication and Director of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics.

"What we found, however, is that people's views on abortion combined with the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* directly affected changes in vote choice between 2020 and 2022."

To evaluate how inflation and [economic conditions](#) more generally affected the 2022 midterms, the authors analyzed two waves of a probability panel survey that was fielded in 2020 and 2022 by the National Opinion Research Center.

Though Americans were widely aware of mounting inflation when they went to the polls in 2022, respondents' attributions of responsibility for inflation were either starkly partisan or completely nonpartisan.

Well over half of the representative national probability

sample—approximately 55%—held either "neither party" or "both parties" responsible. This pattern blunted inflation's potential impact as people either blamed the opposing party or did not assign responsibility to a single party.

Further, the study co-authors found that Americans who favored legal abortions were more likely to shift from voting for Republican candidates in 2020 to Democratic candidates in 2022, but the reverse was also true; those who opposed abortion became more likely to switch toward voting Republican.

However, since a larger number of Americans supported abortion, the combination of these shifts ultimately improved the electoral prospects of Democratic candidates.

Likewise, those respondents whose confidence in the U.S. Supreme Court declined from 2020 to 2022 were more likely to shift from voting for Republican to Democratic congressional candidates.

"Whether a given issue is determinative in an election or not, most political issues cut in both directions; in other words, they will both help and hurt the same candidate's prospects, depending on where the voter stands. For example, the Dobbs decision influenced vote changes in both Republican and Democratic directions," adds Mutz.

"As a result, it is often misleading for journalists to imply that a given political issue helped one candidate and hurt another. The economy is an issue that logically could hurt one side and help another, since everyone favors a strong economy. But in actual practice, people's perceptions of the economy typically mirror their pre-existing views, and thus these perceptions don't change their minds."

The study also addresses why widespread predictions that the

Democratic Party would suffer a substantial defeat in 2022 were wrong. In so doing, the study authors also question whether the long-standing emphasis on the economy in studies of U.S. voting is warranted.

Many studies assume that policy issues have little bearing on voting, while the economy has a substantial impact, especially in congressional elections. Yet from 2020 to 2022, congressional voting preferences changed in fundamentally rational ways based on [abortion](#) views, thus suggesting evidence of democratic accountability with respect to this particular issue.

"What people tell you is 'most important' in determining their vote is likely to be a reflection of their partisanship, rather than a source of change in their vote preferences," conclude Mutz and Mansfield.

"It could mean that people's perceptions of the economy are less important than journalists typically imply in their coverage. As a result, lingering effects of the Dobbs decision and general distrust of the Supreme Court may be especially influential in 2024."

More information: Diana C. Mutz et al, Inflation in 2022 did not affect congressional voting, but abortion did, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2319512121](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2319512121)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

Citation: New study challenges conventional wisdom that Americans are 'pocketbook voters' (2024, May 24) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-conventional-wisdom-americans-pocketbook-voters.html>

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