

Taking Credit and Avoiding Blame: Good News, Spin Control, and Democratic Accountability

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Relying on experimental methodology, we find that positive and negative reports of specific aspects of the economy influence the audience's assessments of political responsibility for the state of the economy. In addition, whether the president actively attempts to take credit (in the case of positive economic news) or attempts to avoid blame (in the case of negative economic news) also influences assessments. Finally, we find that effects are largely dependent on individual levels of partisanship.

Keywords blame management, credit taking, economic evaluations, economic information, news reports, party identification, political accountability, political responsibility

There are plenty of recommendations on how to get out of trouble cheaply and fast, most of them come down to this: deny your responsibility. (Lyndon Baines Johnson, speech at a Democratic fund-raising dinner, September 30, 1967)

An important prerequisite of democratic government is that citizens have the opportunity to hold elected officials accountable for undesirable political outcomes. For such opportunities to be effective, however, citizens must accurately assess the contemporary political and economic environment. While this may seem to be a relatively straightforward task, citizens often have scarce information on which to base their general political and economic evaluations (Conover et al., 1986, 1987; Holbrook & Garand, 1993). Much of the recent literature in political science therefore has stressed the impressionistic nature of general political evaluations (Lodge et al., 1989, 1995) and the important role played by political elites in shaping these evaluations (Clarke & Stewart, 1994; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; MacKuen et al., 1992; Zaller, 1992). In addition, accountability requires that citizens assign responsibility to the appropriate political actors for creating and, if necessary, for alleviating political conditions.

In the United States, at least two sets of factors complicate the process of attributing responsibility. First, institutional factors, such as the separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism, obscure lines of accountability (Weaver & Rockman, 1993). Even under unified party control, it is often difficult to establish

clear lines of responsibility for policy failures or successes.¹ Further confounding assessment of responsibility are efforts by political elites to manage news reports—particularly reports concerning political responsibility (Brody, 1991; Clarke & Stewart, 1994; McGraw, 1990, 1991; McGraw et al., 1995). To study this phenomenon, we use an experimental design to see if participants, after being exposed to a fictitious news report that suggests the national economy is either improving or declining, are more likely to give credit or blame to the President if he specifically claims responsibility for the economic improvement, denies blame for an economic decline, or is blamed by his political opposition.

Theoretical Foundation

Recent investigations focusing on elite attempts to persuade public opinion have greatly increased our understanding of the ability of political elites to manage public evaluations (McGraw, 1990, 1991; McGraw & Hoekstra, 1994; McGraw et al., 1995; Zaller, 1992). Consistent with the theoretical perspective of “blame management strategies,” we view elite political accounts as persuasive communication: elite attempts at altering citizens’ opinions. Consequently, before persuasion occurs, messages from political leaders must pass through a series of mediating responses. As political scientist Kathleen McGraw and her associates (1995, p. 55) argue, there are four broad steps to the persuasion process:

- 1) constituents must be *exposed* to the explanation; 2) they must pay *attention* to it; 3) they must *comprehend* it; and 4) they must *accept* the account as legitimate and credible [*italics in original*].

The fourth step, acceptance of the elite message, is critical in the success of the persuasive attempt.

Recent theoretical advances called the Receive, Accept, and Sample (or RAS) model of attitude change also demonstrate the importance of “acceptance” of elite messages (Zaller, 1992). Building on prior work (Converse, 1962; McGuire, 1968), Zaller argues that dominant messages within the media have powerful effects on political attitudes depending on levels of *dosage and resistance*. In other words, the extent of exposure to dominant and countervailing information sources as well as the ability to resist dominant messages varies dramatically across time periods and individuals. According to this model of attitude change, individuals most exposed to dominant media messages are most likely to be influenced by the message. The more one is exposed to countervailing information, however, the more capable one is of counterarguing or resisting dominant messages. In addition, Zaller argues that the persuasive effects of elite messages are mediated by levels of “partisan resistance.”² For example, a highly aware conservative may be exposed to the blame management strategies of a Democratic house challenger, but she is not predisposed to accept those accounts. According to Zaller (1992, pp. 236, 241):

[there is] a tendency for partisans, all else equal, to accept favorable information about their party’s candidate and to resist favorable information about the opposition’s candidate. . . . This pattern indicates the existence of a partisan bias in citizens’ processing of the candidate information to which they are exposed: Given reception of a range of campaign

messages, people tend to accept what is congenial to their partisan values and to reject what is not.

Finally, past research demonstrates that different types of elite strategies aimed at managing blame have different consequences (McGraw, 1990, 1991). In most general terms, the most common political accounts are excuses and justifications (Austin, 1961; Bennett, 1980). According to McGraw et al. (1995, p. 55):

Excuses are a denial of full or partial responsibility for an act or its consequences, with admission that the outcome is indeed negative. Justifications, in contrast, are characterized by an attempt to deny or minimize the negative aspects of the event; in essence, justifications claim that the act or its consequences are not as bad as it first appeared.

Although an important aspect of an excuse is the full or partial denial of responsibility, such denials can be either horizontal or vertical diffusions of responsibility (McGraw, 1990). Horizontal excuses involve claims that suggest an outcome is the product of joint decisions from a group of co-equal decision makers. Vertical excuses, however, are delegations of responsibility to an individual (or group) "of different status or authority" (McGraw, 1991, p. 1146).³

One might think that "blaming" other people may be an effective strategy, but prior work suggests that vertical and horizontal diffusions of responsibility may be rather ineffective persuasive attempts (McGraw, 1990, p. 1141). Nevertheless, in the 1992 presidential election, President Bush engaged in both excuses and justifications, arguing that the economy was indeed not as bad as people thought (justification), as well as denying responsibility for the ailing economy by blaming the recession on congressional Democrats (vertical excuse). The theoretical approach employed in this analysis borrows heavily from the "blame management" research agenda, although our focus is slightly different. Specifically, we are interested in determining whether the same blame management strategies may have different effects depending on which political actor claimed (or denied) responsibility for current political conditions. Iyengar (1991) has demonstrated that thematic (as opposed to episodic) news coverage of political problems encourages viewers to hold governmental actors responsible for both causing and fixing political problems, but we are interested in whether news items influence political actor is held accountable. In other words, whereas previous research has focused on attempts at blame management from a single source, our research adds to this literature by examining the impact of blame management and credit-taking strategies by competing sources.

The Economy and Attributions of Responsibility

Previous research in political science has devoted considerable attention to the influence of the economy on individual and aggregate political evaluations (Fiorina, 1981; Key, 1966; Kiewiet, 1983; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979, 1981; Tufte, 1978). Although debates still exist regarding the nature of these effects (e.g., whether the effects are prospective or retrospective), there is general agreement that Presidents are often held responsible for current economic conditions (Clarke & Stewart, 1994; MacKuen et al., 1992). Nevertheless, some Presidents weather the storm of eco-

conomic downturns more successfully than others. Ronald Reagan, for example, was generally able to blame the economic recession during the early 1980s on the Carter presidency (Peffley & Williams, 1985). George Bush, by comparison was less successful in blaming congressional Democrats for the stagnant economy in 1992 (Hetherington, 1996). Although there may be many dimensions of political responsibility, Iyengar (1991) has demonstrated that the two dimensions of *causal* and *treatment* responsibility are generally the most important in political contexts.

In the present article, we investigate whether elite attempts at persuasion and blame management are successful among audiences who are given information suggesting that the national economy is either improving or declining. Our investigation rests on a number of assumptions. First, we assume that there are multiple interpretations of any single political event (Edelman, 1971). As Page and Shapiro (1992, p. 340) have noted, "events seldom speak for themselves." Second, political elites actively try to manage "interpretations," but differ in terms of their interest and ability to do so. For example, Page et al. (1987) have observed that statements made by popular Presidents have a greater effect on public opinion than statements made by unpopular Presidents. Similarly, Entman (1989) notes that both presidential partisans and presidential opponents are more likely to criticize the President when his popularity is declining. Consequently, not only are unpopular Presidents less successful in moving public opinion, they are also likely to face greater competition in trying to manage public evaluations. In addition, exposure to different political accounts should influence individual political evaluations, though the effects should be contingent upon both the nature of the political event and the interpretation itself. Political events, for example, can have either positive or negative political consequences.

In this respect, previous research on the influence of the economy suggests that citizens may react in an asymmetric fashion to information about the economy, punishing incumbents for economic declines but not necessarily rewarding incumbents for economic prosperity (Bloom & Price, 1975; Clagett, 1986; Headrick & Lanoue, 1991; Lanoue, 1987; but see Lewis-Beck, 1988). More generally, literature from psychology indicates that audiences are more inclined to search for causal attributions when presented with negative information (Skrowronski & Carlston, 1989; Taylor, 1991). Weiner (1985), for example, finds that causal attributions are more likely when individuals fail to achieve a prescribed goal, whereas Hultzworth-Munroe and Jacobson (1985) find that among married couples more negative behaviors produce greater causal attributions. Within political science, Lau (1985) has distinguished two separate motivations justifying why people may give greater weight to negative information. The first motivation is called *perceptual negativity* and is based on the greater salience of negative information, while the second is *motivational negativity* and is based on the desire to avoid costs. On a similar note, Quattrone and Tversky (1988) contend that under normal conditions, citizens are more sensitive to political costs than to political benefits. Based on this research, we expect that not only would citizens pay greater attention to bad economic news, but when confronted with bad economic news, citizens should be more inclined to attribute causal responsibility.

Because previous research has established a link between the state of the economy and presidential approval, we have focused the experiments on questions of presidential responsibility for the national economy. In this respect, our work differs from much of the research on blame management strategies in that responsi-

bility for the economy is less straightforward than responsibility for an individual's unpopular political act or involvement in a political scandal (McGraw, 1991; McGraw et al., 1995). In addition, unlike political scandals, where avoiding blame is the primary goal, an improving economy presents elites with the opportunity to claim credit, perhaps even when credit is undeserved.

Consequently, we address the following questions. (1) When exposed to good economic information, are participants more likely to credit the President with responsibility for an improving economy if he specifically claims responsibility for the economic improvement? Are subjects less likely to credit the President if his political opposition claims responsibility? (2) When exposed to negative economic information are subjects less likely to attribute responsibility to the President if he denies responsibility for current economic conditions? Are subjects more likely to blame the President if his or her political opposition blames the President? (3) Are subjects' attributions of responsibility different if citizens are exposed to positive, as opposed to negative, economic information? (4) And, finally, are these effects contingent upon individual-level partisanship?

Methods

To investigate these questions, we utilize a randomized posttest experimental research design (McGraw, 1990; McGraw et al., 1995). The manipulations involved in such experiments are intended to be as realistic as possible (see Appendix A). In fact, the reports used in the following experiments were created to reflect actual reports appearing in the *New York Times*. Two experiments were conducted. The first experiment included three separate conditions. The control group received information positively describing current economic conditions. The description of the economy included no references to political actors.⁴ In the second condition, participants read the exact same information with an additional paragraph in which President Clinton claimed responsibility for the improved economy. In the third condition, Newt Gingrich and a group of congressional Republicans claimed credit for current economic conditions. The second experiment closely mirrored the first but focused on how politicians attempt to avoid responsibility for bad economic conditions. As in the first experiment, subjects in the control condition received information describing a general decline in the economy, with no reference to governmental figures. In the second condition, President Clinton specifically blames congressional Republicans for the economic decline. Finally, in the third condition, congressional Republicans blame the President for the decline.

After reading the hypothetical report about the economy, participants were asked a number of questions such as their general evaluations of the national economy, their attributions of causal and treatment responsibility for current economic conditions, their partisan and ideological affiliations, and their general level of political knowledge (see Appendix A). After completion of the study, participants were debriefed and told the true purposes of the experiment.

The experiments were conducted from January through May 1995. During this time period the average unemployment rate was 5.62 percent, with a range of 5.4 to 5.8 percent, and the average current price index was 151.14 with a range of 150.3 through 151.9. Overall, economic conditions were generally positive but remained stable over the time in which the experiments were conducted. The average presidential approval rating over the course of this study was 45.7 percent,

with a high of 48 percent at the beginning of February and a low of 42 percent at the beginning of March. Although monthly measures were unavailable regarding evaluations of Newt Gingrich, the measures that were available indicated that Gingrich's average approval rating was 34.6 percent, with a high of 37 percent in April and a low of 34 percent in January. As with the indicators of economic conditions, public opinion regarding the respective performances of Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton remained relatively stable over the course of the study.⁵

Page and co-workers (1987) suggest that popular Presidents can successfully move public opinion, while unpopular Presidents may be much less successful. Although it is unclear whether the same patterns hold for the Speaker of the House, one would not expect very large persuasive effects based on the approval ratings of Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton during the time period of this study. If there is a consolation in this, it is that any findings of persuasive effects probably underestimate the persuasive ability of more popular political leaders.

Participants

Participants in the experiments were 189 undergraduate students recruited from undergraduate classes at two separate medium-sized public universities in the South and Midwest. They were randomly assigned to both the experiment and the experimental condition. The participants ranged in age from a low of 18 to a high of 43, with the average age being 21. Fifty-four percent of the subjects were female and approximately 75 percent of subjects were white, 16 percent were African American, and 9 percent belonged to another ethnic group (mostly Asian). The mean levels of party identification and ideology were 4.2 and 3.7, respectively, measured on a 7-point scale (see Appendixes A and B).

Expectations

Based on the RAS theory of attitude change, we expected that in the "improving economy" condition, participants receiving the pro-Clinton spin would be more inclined to give credit to Clinton for the good economic news, whereas subjects receiving the pro-Congress spin would be less inclined to give credit to the President. In addition, as discussed previously, we expected to find that individual-level partisanship, or what Zaller calls "partisan inertia" would mediate these responses (Zaller, 1992). In the second experiment we expected presidential attempts to blame bad economic news on other political actors to result in less blame for the President. In addition, as in the first experiment, we expected that the effects of the elite accounts would be contingent on partisan affiliation (Zaller, 1992). More specifically, we expected that Democrats would be more receptive to President Clinton's interpretations of the political report, whereas Republicans would be less receptive.

Results

Experiment One: Spin Control and Good Economic Information

We began by considering attempts by the President and his political opposition to claim credit for an improving economy. We created two dichotomous variables, one indicating exposure to the report in which President Clinton claimed responsi-

bility for the economy, and the second indicating exposure to the report in which congressional Republicans claimed responsibility. The main effects of these variables indicate whether subjects receiving managed reports react differently than subjects receiving the basic information. In addition, we included interaction terms between the subject's partisan identification and the "spin" of the particular scenario in order to test the partisan resistance hypotheses. Finally, we included partisan identification, ideology, and sophistication as control variables.

Table 1 shows that attempts to claim credit for an improving economy apparently substantially affect assessments of responsibility, contingent on individual-level partisanship. In general, Republican participants were less likely to attribute responsibility to the President for "good" economic conditions when the President actively took credit for creating these conditions. Democrats, on the other hand, were more likely to give credit to the President when the President specifically claimed responsibility for creating the positive economic conditions. Although it is impossible for us to discern whether or not these effects are limited to President Clinton and the current scenario, taking credit for the economy in this manipulation, apparently improved the President's standing among his own partisans. Based on the work of Page et al. (1987), however, we believe that the effects of credit taking are based at least in part on the President's overall popularity. More popular Presidents should be more effective in having their interpretation of a report presented to the public, as well as finding a more receptive public audience. Given that President Clinton's popularity was in the mid-40s at the time this analysis was conducted, we believe that this particular scenario represents a conservative test of the President's potential influence over participants' assessments of responsibility. Finally, in this particular scenario, credit taking by other political actors was less effective. An attempt by Newt Gingrich and a group of congressional Republicans to claim credit for improving economic conditions had no effect on assignment of responsibility.

Table 1

Clinton's causal and treatment responsibility regressed on credit-taking strategy (improving economy experimental subjects only)

	Causal responsibility	Treatment responsibility
Party identification	.07 (.18)	.19 (.29)
Ideology	-.03 (.14)	.18 (.18)
Awareness	-2.64 (.84)**	-1.52 (1.1)
Clinton claims credit	-4.05 (1.1)**	-2.17 (1.3)*
Republicans claim credit	-1.1 (1.0)	-.85 (1.03)
Party X Clinton claims credit	.91 (.25)**	.53 (.3)*
Party X Republicans claim credit	.15 (.22)	.67 (.61)
Constant	5.6 (.97)**	4.74 (1.6)**
R-square	.37	.28

N = 91; **p* < .05, ***p* < .01 (one-tailed test).

Experiment Two: Spin Control and Bad Economic Information

If Presidents can benefit from taking credit for good economic news, can they use blame management strategies to avoid responsibility for bad economic news? As mentioned previously, we included two separate manipulations: (1) the President blames congressional Republicans for the decline in economic conditions; and (2) the President is blamed by congressional Republicans. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2. Looking at the interaction terms presented in the lower half of Table 2, we find that, while the effects of "blame management" were largely contingent upon the subject's partisanship, the effects are not as clear as in the first experiment. More specifically, Republicans were less likely to attribute causal responsibility to the Clinton administration than were Republicans in the control group.⁶ Because this result is somewhat counterintuitive, we conducted an additional analysis in which we created separate dummy variables indicating whether or not subjects identified themselves as Democrats, Independents, or Republicans. In this analysis, Democratic participants comprise the base group. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 indicates that the experimental manipulations had little or no effect on Democratic participants; neither blaming the political opposition nor being blamed by them significantly reduced the level of causal responsibility attributed to Clinton by Democratic subjects. It should be kept in mind, however, that Democrats were much less likely to attribute responsibility to the President in the first place. As such, engaging in a blame management strategy appeared to gain the President very little among his own partisan adherents—largely because they did not blame him for the bad economic conditions to begin with. Republican participants, however, were less likely to attribute responsibility to the President when he blamed congressional Republicans. In the absence of any blame management strategy for the decline in economic conditions, Republican participants were automatically

Table 2
Clinton's causal and treatment responsibility
regressed on blame management strategy
(declining economy experiment subjects only)

	Causal responsibility	Treatment responsibility
Party identification	-.80 (.23)**	.23 (.25)
Ideology	-.07 (.13)	-.03 (.14)
Awareness	-.47 (.15)**	-.32 (.16)
Clinton blames	-3.54 (1.43)**	2.06 (1.59)
Clinton blamed	-1.88 (1.65)	.19 (1.85)
Party X blames	.65 (.32)*	-.44 (.35)
Party X blamed	.33 (.33)	-.09 (.37)
Constant	10.18 (1.17)**	5.56 (1.3)**
R-square	.26	.08

N = 98; **p* < .05, ***p* < .01 (one-tailed test).

Table 3
Clinton's causal responsibility
regressed on blame management strategy
(declining economy experiment subjects only)

	Causal responsibility
Republican	2.95 (.92)**
Independent	2.35 (1.1)**
Ideology	-.08 (.13)
Awareness	-.46 (.15)**
Clinton blames	.70 (.94)
Clinton blamed	.04 (.82)
Republican X blames	-2.76 (1.29)**
Republican X blamed	-.37 (1.4)
Independent X blames	-1.5 (1.7)
Independent X blamed	-.99 (1.6)
Constant	5.22 (.968)**
R-square	.28

more likely to attribute responsibility to the President. In other words, unless given information to suggest otherwise, Republican participants instinctively attributed responsibility to the opposition-party President. However, when given information suggesting that the President was not entirely at fault, even if the information came from the President himself, Republican participants were slightly less inclined to blame the President. Blaming other political actors (such as Congress) thus was a successful blame management strategy for the President in this experiment. Finally, at a more general level, Republicans appeared to be less likely than Democrats to believe that the President should be held responsible for managing the economy. When subjects were asked who should have responsibility for the economy, their answers indicated that Republicans in the experiment were less likely than Democrats (or Independents) to believe that the President should have responsibility for managing the economy ($r = .20$, $t = 1.87$). As such, Republican participants may have been more receptive to arguments suggesting that the President was not responsible for declining economic conditions.

Positive versus Negative Information

As mentioned previously, there is debate in the recent literature as to whether or not citizens react in an asymmetrical fashion to economic reports (Bloom & Price, 1975; Claggett, 1986; Headrick & Lanoue, 1991; Lanoue, 1987; Lewis-Beck, 1988). Generally, it is argued that the public is more likely to punish an incumbent President for economic failure than to reward an incumbent for economic success. If we combine the data from both of the previous two experiments into a single data set and create a dummy variable (called "Negative Information") indicating whether or

not the participant was exposed to the negative or positive economic news we can compare participants' assessments of responsibility across the positive and negative economic information groups. It must be noted, however, that while participants in these experiments were randomly assigned to both the experimental and treatment conditions, combining the data sets eliminates a control group in the classical sense that it received no economic information. Nevertheless, comparing the two groups that are included in this experimental design does begin to permit insights into the "asymmetric" effects of negative and positive economic information. If citizens do, in fact, react in an asymmetrical fashion to economic information, we would expect information tone (improving economy versus declining economy) to have a significant positive effect on attributions of causal and treatment responsibility. Substantively, this would indicate that the public is more inclined to attribute responsibility to the President when economic conditions are declining than when the economy is improving. By regressing Clinton's causal and treatment responsibility on the tone of the economic report, our analysis bears directly on these questions.

Table 4 shows that exposure to negative economic information was associated with an increased willingness among participants to attribute causal and treatment responsibility to the President. This finding suggests that subjects act in a fundamentally different way when exposed to "bad" economic information than when exposed to "good" economic information. More specifically, when exposed to a "bad" economic report, participants were more inclined to attribute responsibility to the President. When confronted with a "good" economic report, participants may be less concerned about who is (and who is not) responsible for current conditions. Consequently, in these experiments, the President appeared to have more leeway to claim responsibility for an improving economy than to deny responsibility for a declining economy.

Conclusions and Implications

Before discussing the implications of these experiments, a few notes of caution are in order. Because attempts were made to make the experiments realistic, the results of this analysis may very well be bound to the specific scenarios. In addition, the

Table 4

Clinton's causal and treatment responsibility regressed on tone of news coverage

	Causal responsibility	Treatment responsibility
Party identification	.43 (.12)**	.59 (.13)**
Ideology	-.05 (.09)	.04 (.11)
Awareness	-.44 (.14)**	-.38 (.16)**
Negative economic information	5.3 (.77)**	3.8 (.89)**
Party X negative economic information	-.88 (.17)**	-.57 (.19)**
Constant	2.71 (.54)**	2.57 (.62)**
R-square	.34	.18

N = 189; standard errors in parentheses; **p* < .05, ***p* < .01 (one-tailed test).

use of college students strongly constrains the generalizability of the findings. Television news reports devoted to the economy may elicit entirely different responses from the general population. Similarly, the results of the analysis may reflect more on Bill Clinton's ability to move public opinion than on a more general relationship between presidential comments and public reactions. Nevertheless, because Clinton's popularity was relatively low at the time these experiments were conducted, the results may constitute a conservative test of the President's potential to influence public evaluations of the economy. It is likely that a President with higher approval ratings would be more successful. In addition, these results may be limited to public reactions to the economy and may not be generalizable to credit-taking or blame management strategies surrounding other political issues. Finally, the results of this analysis cannot address situations where the President and Congress simultaneously fight to gain credit for an improving economy or compete to deny blame. Of course, these are important questions for future research. For example, what are the effects when the President and Congress are in direct competition for gaining credit or denying blame, perhaps in the same newspaper article, television newscast, or debate? Does the President have a greater impact on opinion than the Speaker of the House in these situations? If both are quoted in the same story, is opinion polarized according to partisanship?

With these caveats in mind, the most important implication of this study is that presidential attempts at blame management significantly influence political evaluations. The effects are, however, contingent upon the nature of the management strategy, the actor who reports the blame management strategy, and the partisan affiliation of the person receiving the information. First, in the improving economy experiment, the President was able to convince his own partisans that he was responsible for the improved economy when he actively claimed credit for the improvements. Republican participants, on the other hand, were less easily persuaded.

In terms of the bad economic experiment, Democratic participants were less likely to blame the President for declining economic conditions. This was true regardless of whether the President engaged in a blame management strategy. Republican participants were more likely to blame the President for a declining economy unless the President actively engaged in a blame management strategy. Such a strategy decreased the blame that the Republican participants attributed to the President. It is impossible to discern whether or not this finding is unique to Republicans, to questions of economic responsibility, or to President Bill Clinton. It does appear that a blame avoidance strategy may help to lessen the political impact of a declining economy.

Concerning the asymmetry in public evaluations of the economy, we find that participants were more inclined to attribute responsibility to the President when presented with information indicating a declining rather than an improving economy. Our results thus are similar to those of Headrick and Lanoue (1991), who find that the public pays more attention to economic news when conditions are declining—possibly because they are more concerned with assigning political responsibility.

Finally, we return to basic questions of democratic accountability. To what extent can political elites mold opinion by taking credit or managing blame? Our analysis indicates that political elites may confound citizen attempts at attributing responsibility. By interpreting political events, political elites can significantly affect individual assignment of political responsibility. Nevertheless, in our experiments, only comments by the President influenced attributions of responsibility. Further-

more, even the President appeared to be somewhat limited in either avoiding responsibility for negative conditions or in taking credit for positive conditions. Accordingly, while the results suggest that credit-taking and blame management strategies do influence political evaluations, there are substance limitations to elites' abilities to entirely avoid or claim responsibility.

Notes

1. In 1994, for example, President Clinton blamed congressional Republicans for the more visible legislative failures of his first two years in office.

2. Although much of Zaller's (1992) arguments revolve around political awareness and the extent to which citizens are capable of arguing against dominant media messages, and their exposure to countervailing information sources, the effects of exposure are less relevant in the laboratory setting, where levels of exposure are constant across participants.

3. See McGraw (1991, p. 1136) for a fuller description of the differences between excuses and justifications.

4. The article did include a statement by an "expert" on the economy (see Appendix A). Research by Page et al. (1984) suggests that expert testimony accompanying television news casts may influence political evaluations and attitudes. Our experiments suggest that these findings generalize to newspaper stories as well.

5. Contextual data regarding the state of the national economy are from relevant issues of the Survey of Current Business. Data on approval ratings of the president and Newt Gingrich are from relevant issues of the Gallup Opinion Report.

6. This is not to suggest that Republicans in these experimental conditions were less likely to blame the President for economic declines than were Democrats. In general, Republicans were much more likely than Democrats to blame Clinton for declining economic conditions.

7. We are very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for these suggestions.

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Appendix A: Variable Description

Retrospective evaluations: "Looking back over the past year, would you say that economic conditions have improved, stayed about the same, or declined?" (0 indicates subject believes economy has declined.)

Prospective evaluations: "Looking ahead to next year, would you say that economic conditions should improve, stay about the same, or decline?" (0 indicates subject believes economic conditions will decline.)

Causal responsibility: "Please indicate the extent to which you believe President Bill Clinton has helped to cause the current economic conditions—where 1 indicates 'very little causal responsibility' and 10 indicates 'great causal responsibility.'" (This question was rescaled so that 0 indicates subject gave Clinton no responsibility for current economic conditions.)

Treatment responsibility: "Please indicate the extent to which you believe President Bill Clinton is responsible for fixing or maintaining current economic conditions—where 1 indicates 'very little treatment responsibility' and 10 indicates great treatment responsibility.'" (This question was rescaled so that 0 indicates subject gives Clinton no responsibility for treating current economic conditions.)

Party identification: "Of the following categories, which best describes your partisan affiliation? 1. Strong Republican 2. Weak Republican 3. Independent, leans Republican 4. Independent 5. Independent, leans Democrat 6. Weak Democrat 7. Strong Democrat." (This measure was rescaled so that 0 indicates strong Republicans.)

Ideology: "Of the following categories, which best describes your ideology?"

1. Strong Liberal 2. Weak Liberal 3. Moderate, leans Liberal 4. Moderate 5. Moderate, leans Conservative 6. Weak Conservative 7. Strong Conservative." (This measure was also rescaled so that 0 indicates strong Conservatives.)

Awareness: Number of correct responses to seven questions designed to tap neutral political knowledge: participants were asked in an open-ended question what political offices were held by Al Gore, William Rehnquist, and Boris Yeltsin, what political party currently controlled the House of Representatives, and what proportion of Congress must agree to override presidential veto. (0 indicates no correct answers.)

Negative economic information: Coded 0 if subject was exposed to a positive story on the economy, 1 if subject was exposed to a negative story.

"Improving Economy Experiment"

Clinton claims credit: Coded 1 for subjects who received paragraph in which President Clinton claimed responsibility for current economic conditions, 0 otherwise.

Republicans claim credit: Coded 1 for subjects who received paragraph in which congressional Republicans claimed responsibility for current economic conditions, 0 otherwise.

"Declining Economy Experiment"

Clinton blames: Coded 1 for subjects who received paragraph in which Clinton blamed congressional Republicans for current economic conditions, 0 otherwise.

Clinton blamed: Coded 1 for subjects who received paragraph in which Clinton was blamed by congressional Republicans for current economic conditions, 0 otherwise.

Experimental Instruments

1. Improving Economy Experiment

Economic Picture Brightens: Unemployment Down,
Consumer Confidence Up

WASHINGTON, Unemployment declined to 5.1% today bringing the number of unemployed to its lowest level since August 1992. Leading economists suggest that the decrease in the number of unemployed may indicate that the nation is heading into a period of sustained economic prosperity. Economist Samuel Grafton noted that while much of the public remains underemployed, "overall, this is the strongest we have seen the economy in a long time." Consumer confidence increased by 2% over the last month indicating that the public also believes that the economy is heading in the right direction.

(a) *President Clinton claims credit:* In his weekly radio address, President Clinton hailed the new economic figures as the clearest indication possible that his economic policies have been a success. "In 1992, I promised that my administration would work towards providing jobs for

middle class Americans, the newest economic figures demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that these efforts have been successful." Clinton noted that unemployment was now lower than at any other time during the past twenty years.

(b) *Congressional Republicans take credit:* A group of congressional Republicans, led by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich held a news conference in Washington today in response to the economic news. Gingrich hailed the economic news as the clearest indication possible that a Republican Congress could stimulate economic growth. "Businesses all across America are hiring workers, demonstrating their faith that the country is finally in the right hands." Gingrich noted that unemployment was now lower than at any other time during the past twenty years. "To find unemployment this low," Gingrich commented, "you almost have to go back to the last time Republicans controlled congress."

2. *Declining Economy Experiment*

Economy in Decline: Unemployment Increase Worries Nation

WASHINGTON, Unemployment increased to 7.1% today bringing the number of unemployed to its highest level since 1992. Leading economists suggest that the increase in the number of unemployed may indicate that the nation is heading into an economic recession. Economist Samuel Grafton noted that while the absolute level of unemployment is not particularly troublesome, the trend towards higher unemployment may indicate that the economy has ceased its expansion and will now enter a recessionary period. Consumer confidence fell 2% over the last month indicating that the public also harbors concerns over the direction of the national economy.

(a) *President blames congressional Republicans:* In his weekly radio address, President Clinton blamed the increase on the policies of the Republican Congress. "In 1994," the president commented, "the American people elected a Republican House and a Republican Senate that cares more about providing tax cuts to the wealthy than about providing jobs for middle class Americans. The increase in unemployment we are experiencing now," Clinton continued, "is a direct result of the Contract for America." President Clinton noted that, thanks to the policies of the Republican Congress, unemployment was higher now than at any other time during his Administration and would soon be higher than during any time during the Bush Administration.

(b) *Congressional Republicans blame the President:* A group of congressional Republicans, led by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, held a press conference in Washington in response to the economic news. Noting that unemployment would soon be higher than at any other time during the Clinton presidency, Gingrich commented that the increase in unemployment was an indictment against Clinton's economic policies. "In 1992," Gingrich commented, "the American people elected a Democratic president who they believed would help create jobs, this president and, even more broadly, the Democratic party, has failed."

Appendix B**Cell Sizes and Cell Means of Party Identification, Ideology, and Political Sophistication**

Improving economy experiment	Clinton claims responsibility	Republicans claim responsibility	Control
Total $n = 91$	$n = 28$	$n = 30$	$n = 33$
Average party identification	5.6	2.1	5.2
Average of ideology	3.9	2.5	4.0
Average of sophistication	.4	.6	.5

Declining economy experiment	Clinton blames Congress	Clinton is blamed	Control
Total $n = 98$	$n = 33$	$n = 32$	$n = 33$
Average party identification	3.4	4.4	4.2
Average of ideology	4.1	3.5	3.5
Average of sophistication	.64	.74	.7

Actual Political and Economic Conditions during Experimental Testing

Experiments were conducted during January through May 1995. During this time period the average unemployment rate was 5.62 percent with a range of 5.4 to 5.8 percent, and the average current price index was 151.14 with a range of 150.3 through 151.9. The average presidential approval rate was 45.7, with a high of 48 at the beginning of February and a low of 42 at the beginning of March. The average approval rate of Newt Gingrich was 34.6, with a high of 37 in April and a low of 34 in January.