

Partisan Retrospection?: Partisan Gaps in Retrospection are Highly Variable

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Contents

1	Summary	2
2	NES 1988	3
2.1	Measures	3
2.2	Results	3
3	NES 1992	4
3.1	Measures	4
3.2	Results	6
4	NES 2000	7
4.1	Measures	7
4.2	Results	7
5	NES 2004	8
5.1	Measures	8
5.2	Results	8
6	NES 2008	9
6.1	Measures	9
6.2	Results	9
7	Aggregate	10

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1 Summary

The difference between partisans' responses on retrospection items is highly variable, ranging from over 40% to nearly 0. For instance, in 1988 nearly 30% fewer Democrats than Republicans answered the question about the change in inflation rate between 1980 and 1988 correctly (see Table 1). (It had declined dramatically.¹) However, similar proportions of Republicans and Democrats got questions about changes in the size of the budget deficit and defense spending between 1980 and 1988 right. The median partisan gap across 20 items asked in the NES over 5 years (1988, 1992, 2000, 2004, and 2008) was about 15 points (the median was about 12 points), and the standard deviation was about 13 points. (see Table 6). This much variation suggests that the extent of bias in how partisans perceive depends on a variety of conditioning variables. For one, there is some evidence to suggest that during severe recessions, partisans do not differ much in their assessment of economic conditions (see [here](#)).

¹"Inflation had fallen from 13.5% in 1980 to 4.1% in 1988." [The Irrational Electorate](#) by Larry Bartels

2 NES 1988

2.1 Measures

WOULD YOU SAY THAT COMPARED TO 1980 -

- Defense Spending Increased or Decreased [Increased]
- Inflation [Decreased]
- Unemployment [Decreased]
- Deficit [Increased]
- Environment (Fed. efforts increased or decreased) [Decreased]

2.2 Results

Table 1: NES 1988

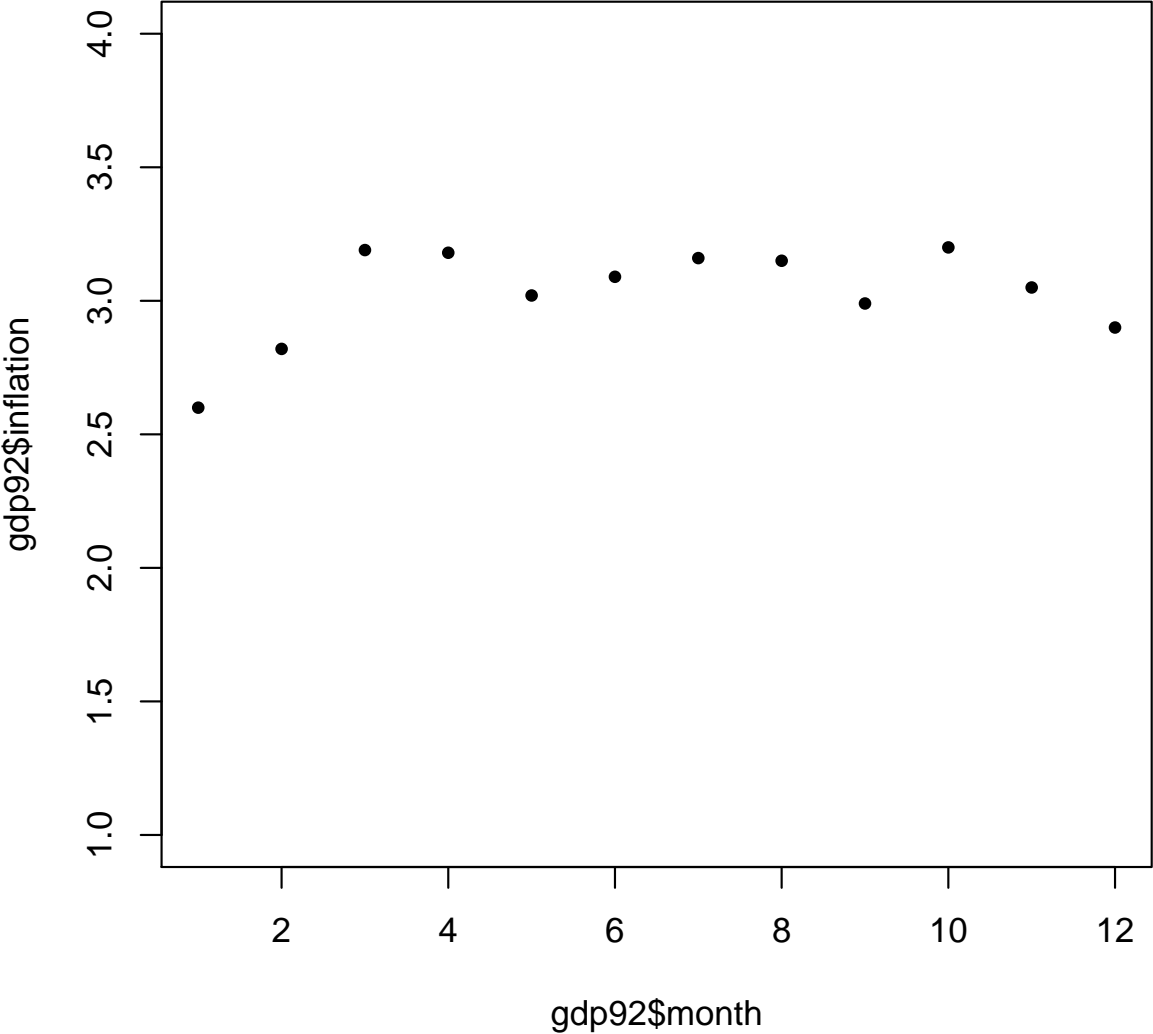
items	pid	correct	incorrect	dk
Inflation	Rep.	55.28%	42.27%	2.45%
Inflation	Ind.	27.92%	69.54%	2.54%
Inflation	Dem.	24.77%	73.3%	1.92%
Inflation	Overall	37.41%	60.05%	2.54%
Unemployment	Rep.	74.36%	23.45%	2.19%
Unemployment	Ind.	43.15%	49.75%	7.11%
Unemployment	Dem.	38.51%	59%	2.49%
Unemployment	Overall	53.57%	43.3%	3.12%
Environment	Rep.	14.73%	63.18%	22.09%
Environment	Ind.	16.84%	48.98%	34.18%
Environment	Dem.	28%	44%	28%
Environment	Overall	21.05%	52.21%	26.74%
Defense	Rep.	73.51%	12.14%	14.34%
Defense	Ind.	69.54%	9.14%	21.32%
Defense	Dem.	72.89%	9.78%	17.33%
Defense	Overall	72.28%	10.63%	17.1%
Deficit	Rep.	76.8%	19.2%	3.99%
Deficit	Ind.	70.56%	19.29%	10.15%
Deficit	Dem.	72.93%	20.27%	6.8%
Deficit	Overall	73.93%	19.77%	6.31%

3 NES 1992

3.1 Measures

- Would you say that over the past year, the level of unemployment in the country has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse? (923527)
Would you say much better or somewhat better?
Would you say much worse or somewhat worse? (923528)
- Would you say that over the past year, inflation has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse? (923529)
Would you say much better or somewhat better (923530)
- How about the economy. Would you say that over the past year the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?(923531, 923532)
- What about in the last few months, since about the 4th of July. Would you say that the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse? (923533, 923534)
- Compared to four years ago, would you say that the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse? (923535, 923536)
- Would you say that over the past year economic conditions in this state have gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse? (923543, 923544)

Inflation in 1992 over the 12 months



3.2 Results

Table 2: NES 1992

items	pid	correct	incorrect	dk
Unemployment	Rep.	71.2%	27.6%	1.2%
Unemployment	Ind.	83.33%	15.87%	0.79%
Unemployment	Dem.	86.76%	12.39%	0.85%
Unemployment	Overall	79.56%	19.15%	1.29%
Inflation	Rep.	42.2%	55.4%	2.4%
Inflation	Ind.	65.87%	33.33%	0.79%
Inflation	Dem.	61.41%	37.61%	0.99%
Inflation	Overall	53.84%	44.51%	1.65%
Economy4yr	Rep.	5.4%	79.2%	15.4%
Economy4yr	Ind.	3.97%	82.54%	13.49%
Economy4yr	Dem.	3.38%	84.65%	11.97%
Economy4yr	Overall	4.31%	86.96%	8.73%
EconomyJuly	Rep.	7.2%	92.2%	0.6%
EconomyJuly	Ind.	1.59%	96.83%	1.59%
EconomyJuly	Dem.	3.1%	95.77%	1.13%
EconomyJuly	Overall	4.55%	94.25%	1.21%
Economy1yr	Rep.	12.4%	71.4%	16.2%
Economy1yr	Ind.	5.56%	79.37%	15.08%
Economy1yr	Dem.	3.66%	84.23%	12.11%
Economy1yr	Overall	8.09%	82.82%	9.09%

4 NES 2000

4.1 Measures

- Would you say that compared to 1992, the nation's economy is better, worse, or about the same? (V001596)
- Would you say that compared to 1992, the federal budget deficit is now smaller, larger, or about the same? (V001590)
- Would you say that compared to 1992 the nation's crime rate has gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same? (V001617)

4.2 Results

Table 3: NES 2000

items	pid	correct	incorrect	dk
Economy	Rep.	66.87%	32.35%	0.77%
Economy	Ind.	53.81%	40.61%	5.58%
Economy	Dem.	79.44%	19.59%	0.97%
Economy	Overall	71.28%	27.18%	1.55%
Deficit	Rep.	55.11%	37.46%	7.43%
Deficit	Ind.	43.15%	41.12%	15.74%
Deficit	Dem.	63.82%	29.96%	6.21%
Deficit	Overall	57.96%	34.17%	7.87%
Crime	Rep.	30.96%	66.72%	2.32%
Crime	Ind.	23.86%	70.56%	5.58%
Crime	Dem.	45.01%	52.8%	2.19%
Crime	Overall	37.01%	60.31%	2.68%

5 NES 2004

5.1 Measures

- Would you say that OVER THE PAST YEAR, inflation has gotten BETTER, stayed ABOUT THE SAME, or gotten WORSE? (V043104)
Would you say MUCH [better/worse] or SOMEWHAT [better/worse] (V043105)
- Would you say that OVER THE PAST YEAR, the level of unemployment in the country has gotten BETTER, stayed ABOUT THE SAME, or gotten WORSE? (V043101)
Would you say MUCH [better/worse] or SOMEWHAT [better/worse] (V043102)
- Do you think the difference in incomes between rich people and poor people in the United States today is LARGER, SMALLER, or ABOUT THE SAME as it was 20 years ago? (V045113)
(Would you say the difference in incomes is) MUCH [larger/smaller] or SOMEWHAT [larger/smaller]? (V045113a)
Do you think this is A GOOD THING, A BAD THING, or haven't you thought about it?
- Now thinking about the economy in the country as a whole, would you say that over the past year the nation's economy has gotten BETTER, stayed ABOUT THE SAME, or gotten WORSE? (V043097)

5.2 Results

Table 4: NES 2004

items	pid	correct	incorrect	dk
Unemployment	Rep.	22.65%	75.78%	1.57%
Unemployment	Ind.	56.36%	40.91%	2.73%
Unemployment	Dem.	63.9%	34.17%	1.93%
Unemployment	Overall	46.09%	51.98%	1.93%
Inflation	Rep.	8.09%	88.76%	3.15%
Inflation	Ind.	3.64%	90%	6.36%
Inflation	Dem.	2.9%	94.02%	3.09%
Inflation	Overall	5.06%	91.44%	3.5%
Economy	Rep.	21.24%	77.94%	0.82%
Economy	Ind.	49.57%	48.72%	1.71%
Economy	Dem.	62.67%	36.32%	1.01%
Economy	Overall	44.76%	54.17%	1.07%
Richpoor	Rep.	73.14%	25.06%	1.81%
Richpoor	Ind.	81.82%	15.15%	3.03%
Richpoor	Dem.	84.42%	13.41%	2.17%
Richpoor	Overall	79.06%	18.78%	2.16%

6 NES 2008

6.1 Measures

- Would you say that OVER THE PAST YEAR, the level of unemployment in the country has gotten BETTER, stayed ABOUT THE SAME, or gotten WORSE? (V083087)
Would you say MUCH better or SOMEWHAT better? / Would you say MUCH worse or SOMEWHAT worse? (V083087a)
- Would you say that OVER THE PAST YEAR, inflation has gotten BETTER, stayed ABOUT THE SAME, or gotten WORSE? (V083089)
Would you say MUCH better or SOMEWHAT better? /Would you say MUCH worse or SOMEWHAT worse? (V083089a)
- Do you think the difference in incomes between rich people and poor people in the United States today is LARGER, SMALLER, or ABOUT THE SAME as it was 20 years ago? (V085080) (Post-election)
(Would you say the difference in incomes is) MUCH larger or SOMEWHAT larger? (V085080a)

6.2 Results

Table 5: NES 2008

items	pid	correct	incorrect	dk
Unemployment	Rep.	73.35%	25.27%	1.38%
Unemployment	Ind.	76.52%	21.97%	1.52%
Unemployment	Dem.	86.14%	12.32%	1.54%
Unemployment	Overall	81.21%	17.19%	1.59%
Inflation	Rep.	76.38%	22.7%	0.92%
Inflation	Ind.	77.65%	18.56%	3.79%
Inflation	Dem.	82.53%	15.71%	1.76%
Inflation	Overall	79.84%	18.26%	1.9%
Richpoor	Rep.	70.83%	27%	2.17%
Richpoor	Ind.	73.84%	24.05%	2.11%
Richpoor	Dem.	80.93%	17.2%	1.87%
Richpoor	Overall	77.04%	20.91%	2.05%

7 Aggregate

Table 6: Aggregate

item	year	gap
Inflation	1988	30.51
Unemployment	1988	35.85
Environment	1988	13.27
Defense	1988	0.62
Deficit	1988	3.87
Unemployment	1992	15.56
Inflation	1992	19.21
Econ4Year	1992	2.02
EconJuly	1992	4.1
Econ1Year	1992	8.74
Economy	2000	12.57
Deficit	2000	8.71
Crime	2000	14.05
Unemployment	2004	41.25
Inflation	2004	5.19
Economy	2004	41.43
RichPoor	2004	11.28
Unemployment	2008	12.79
Inflation	2008	6.15
RichPoor	2008	10.1
Mean		14.86
sd		12.57
Median		11.93