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# Regional party system, causal attribution, and economic voting in new democracies: The case of the 2007 Korean presidential election

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## Abstract

How do citizens in new democracies locate the target of responsibility for economic conditions, and how do political cleavages mediate citizens' attribution process and their consequences? To answer these important but little-studied questions, this study analyzes the 2007 presidential election in Korea. Primary findings in this study elucidate the need to consider the role of political cleavages in explaining economic voting in new democracies. Specifically, even after controlling for economic salience and voters' political sophistication, political cleavages (represented by hometown and regional partisanship) exercise a clear and significant influence on voters' attribution process and their electoral choices. Thus, in new democracies, in particular in Korea, the attribution of responsibility clearly works in a manner different from that in established democracies. Although focused on the case of Korea, the results of this study have important implications for economic voting in any new democracy.

## Keywords

Attribution of responsibility, economic voting, electoral choice, Korea, regional party system

## Introduction

Economic voting plays an essential role in the process of democratic accountability (Anderson, 2007; Gomez and Wilson, 2006). A classic reward–punishment model of economic voting (Key, 1966; Kramer, 1971) provides the most straightforward illustration of this argument.<sup>1</sup> However, the empirical linkage between economic conditions (and citizens' perceptions of them) and electoral behavior is by no means simple. Voluminous studies question the naive assumptions of the model. For this reason, ongoing debate exists about what Anderson (2007) calls the 'contingency dilemmas' of economic voting or what Lewis-Beck and his colleagues identify as the instability, endogeneity, and multidimensionality of economic voting (Lewis-Beck et al., 2011).

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In the last decade, the concept of responsibility attribution has received greater attention (Rudolph, 2003a, 2003b; Samuels, 2004). Indeed, the concept lies at the heart of the idea in the economic voting literature that economic perceptions become important only when judgment of accountability mediates the relationship between economic perceptions and voting behavior (Peffley, 1985).<sup>2</sup> Simply put, who gets blamed if the economy worsens and who gets credit when the economy improves? Further, what determines citizens' attribution of responsibility? Recent studies indicate that at least two factors should be considered when analyzing the attribution process: institutional context (Rudolph, 2003a) and individual traits (Gomez and Wilson, 2001, 2003, 2006). Studies of these factors may advance our knowledge of how to interpret variations in economic voting, in particular the process of attributing responsibility and its role in voting decisions.

Yet, the existing literature on responsibility attribution and economic voting has at least two shortcomings. First, not surprisingly, its primary regional focus has been advanced democracies. Only a few studies have applied theories of responsibility attribution to new democracies (Alcañiz and Hellwig, 2011; Johnson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2009), even though the logic and process of democratic accountability in new democracies differs substantially from that in advanced democracies. Second, little research has investigated the implications and consequences of political cleavages on voters' attribution process in new democracies.

The lack of such research is somewhat understandable in advanced democracies, where the impact of a stable party system can be investigated by studying partisanship effects. But in new democracies, where parties are very young and often short-lived, and personalized politics are more salient, the relevance of partisanship rationalization (Rudolph, 2003b) as a causal factor in voting decisions may be empirically questionable, for several reasons. First, in a nascent party system where electoral volatility is very high, citizens find it difficult to locate the target of accountability.<sup>3</sup> Second, even when voters can identify those responsible for the management of the economy, this knowledge may not necessarily be associated with electoral sanctions, since the low level of party system institutionalization in new democracies often results in unclear policy alternatives from opposition parties (Gélineau, 2007). Third, the conventional model of economic voting provides little insight into the relationship between economic conditions and support for different non-governmental parties in a multi-party competition (Owen and Tucker, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Finally, in new democracies, understanding the relationship between economic voting and citizens' attribution of responsibility requires a more context-specific analysis. In post-communist countries, for example, the effect of economic performance on the electoral fate of parties is dependent upon their connectedness with the communist past (e.g. 'new regime' parties versus 'old regime' parties) (Owen and Tucker, 2010; Tucker, 2006). Similarly, in the Korean context, where party systems have been frozen along regional cleavages, voters exercise electoral accountability in a manner different from that which the conventional economic voting model would predict.

So the question is: how does political preference operate as a mediating factor in the responsibility attribution process in new democracies, where parties reorganize themselves frequently by repeated splits and mergers? Unfortunately, our understanding of how, and to what extent, the process of responsibility attribution and electoral accountability in new democracies is different from that in advanced democracies is quite limited (Roberts, 2008). Given that the attribution of responsibility lies at the heart of economic voting theory, the current state of research needs to improve.

This article contributes to the current debate by focusing on an important but little-studied aspect of economic voting: the role of political cleavages on the attribution process of voters in new democracies. In examining the 2007 presidential election in Korea, this study is grounded in the assertion that in new democracies, and in Korea in particular, any causal linkage between

citizens' evaluation of the economy, attribution of responsibility, and electoral choice is strongly mediated by the political cleavage structure.

This article is organized as follows: the first section provides a review of the existing literature on economic voting in new democracies; the second offers a review of the literature on attribution of responsibility and provides a background to the main argument of this study; the third addresses the study's methodology and empirical results; and the final section concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

## Literature on economic voting in new democracies

A great deal of research explores economic voting in the context of advanced democracies, but only recently has debate emerged around three important aspects of economic voting: instability, endogeneity, and unidimensionality (Lewis-Beck et al., 2011). In addition to these dimensions, it is highly relevant to pay special attention to the role of political cleavages in applying the economic voting model to new democracies, since contextual differences have raised theoretical challenges to this model.

In general terms, a low level of party system institutionalization (Mainwaring, 1999) and non-programmatic links between party and voter (e.g. charismatic and clientelistic links) (Kitschelt, 2000) pose important challenges to governmental accountability in new democracies, where the effects of economic conditions on voting behavior may be marginal at best. Therefore, while the growing body of literature<sup>5</sup> on economic voting in new democracies acknowledges the significance of economic conditions on voters' decisions, it also confirms that economic voting may work in a different way in new democracies.

Based on the post-communist experience, the Transitional Identity Model presented by Tucker (2006) is one of the most instructive alternative analyses of economic voting in this respect. According to this model, the relationship between economic conditions and electoral support depends on whether citizens identify parties with the old regime or the new regime. Tucker argues that 'new regime' parties identified with the transition from communism to the new liberal-capitalist system are likely to perform better in regions where the economy is performing better. Conversely, the 'old regime' parties related to the old communist system are expected to perform better in regions with worse economic conditions. In a similar vein, in their nuanced analysis of Poland, Shabad and Slomczynski (2011) successfully demonstrated that the nature of the party system, and, in particular, the polarization and fluidity of the party system, were important factors in diminishing the extent of electoral control by Polish voters.

Posner and Simon (2002) came to similar conclusions in the African context. Using a unique combination of data from a post-election survey and a household poverty survey, they found that in the newly democratized African country of Zambia, as in other African countries, different economic conditions across districts had no effect on electoral support in the initial election after the 1991 transition to a new regime. They argue that unless there is a weakening of neo-patrimonial rule – in which patron–client relationships substitute for the mechanism of democratic accountability – little electoral accountability based on economic performance will occur.

Comparatively speaking, few studies of economic voting have been conducted in East Asian contexts. Moreover, scholarly findings on the relevance of economic voting in this region are limited, inconsistent, and, at best, mixed. In their analysis of the first presidential election in Taiwan, Hsieh and colleagues (1998) found that voters' assessments of economic performance did not fully explain their electoral choices. Instead, what played an important role in voting decisions were voters' evaluations of a candidate's ability to manage the economy – along with security concerns. In an empirical analysis of Taiwan's presidential elections of 1996 and 2004, Choi (2010) failed to

discover any pervasive and consistent effect of economic voting, though her analysis did reveal a more nuanced trend. After accounting for population heterogeneity, Choi found that economic voting occurred more often among certain types of Taiwanese voters, particularly in terms of level of education and lifetime experience variables. Simply put, Choi's work demonstrates a differential pattern across groups in Taiwanese economic voting.

Although it attracted scholarly attention, the traditional economic voting model had only limited relevance to Korea due to the predominance of regional cleavages (Kim, 1993; Lee, 1998; Park, 1993) – until the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis of 1997. It was at this point that scholarship on Korea pointed to a changing pattern of economic voting. Lee's (1998) work demonstrates that economic voting in Korea can be an important framework for voter decision-making only when the influence of regional cleavages is weak. That is, when the regional cleavage variable is salient, a candidate's competency loses its predictive power. More recently, in Jhee and Shin's (2007) study covering the longer period from 1992 to 2004, both the Korean legislative elections and presidential elections revealed that voters' increased experience with democracy did not correspond with increased strength of economic voting.

In sum, the existing literature on economic voting in new democracies has confirmed the importance of contextual differences in advanced democracies and new democracies. Clearly, recent scholarship on economic voting provides a better understanding of the role of the economy and perceptions of the economy in voting behavior in new democracies. Nevertheless, many questions remain. First, why is economic voting more salient in some new democracies than others? Second, to what extent and in what ways do other factors such as political partisanship and party system influence voters' attribution process and electoral decisions?<sup>6</sup> In examining the case of Korea, this study attempts to extensively address the latter issue.

## **Economic voting and attribution of responsibility**

Democratic theory hinges upon the notion that citizens are able to hold elected officials accountable through the electoral process (Powell, 2000). This means that in an election, elected officials who currently hold offices are evaluated based on their performance. While multiple salient issues may influence electoral competitions, research indicates that economic issues are among the most important of these (Singer, 2011a). If this assumption is true, how and to what extent do citizens clarify where the responsibility for economic management lies? A body of studies confirms, contrary to a simplistic theory of reward–punishment, that the ways voters attribute responsibility for economic conditions are obscured by important variables such as institutional structure, the salience of economic issues, voters' level of political sophistication, and partisan rationalization.

### *Institutional structure*

If the attribution of responsibility lies at the heart of economic voting theory, institutional structure plays a key role in shaping that attribution. Powell and Whitten (1993) call this idea the 'clarity of responsibility' theory, which argues that when a country's institutional structure enables voters to clearly identify the locus of responsibility, the explanatory power of economic perceptions increases. For instance, under the unified government of a presidential system in which the president's party controls the executive and legislative branches at the same time, citizens can clearly identify the incumbent party as solely responsible for the economy's performance. However, under a divided government in which the opposition party controls the legislative branch (or at least one of the branches in a bicameral legislature), citizens may find it difficult to attribute responsibility for economic conditions.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the effect of economic perception decreases.

Korea's constitutional structure is a presidential and unitary system with a unicameral legislature. After the 2004 legislative election, the incumbent Uri Party controlled the presidency and the congress as well, a rare situation in Korean politics after the democratization of the country. Under these conditions, the 2007 Korean presidential election, which serves as the focus of this study, presented a case of great clarity of responsibility. For this reason, the clarity of responsibility thesis is not tested in the empirical analysis for this study.

### *Economic salience*

Although numerous studies have confirmed the significance of economic considerations in voter decisions (Vavreck, 2009; Wlezien, 2005), there are good reasons to believe that economic concerns do not attract citizens' attention in a universal way (Singer, 2011a, 2011b). Indeed, according to a recent study by Singer (2011a), the importance of the economy in voter decisions varies across individuals and electoral contexts.

In Korea, the trauma of the 1997 IMF economic crisis left voters very sensitive to economic issues at the time of the 2007 presidential election. Also, since economic indicators had not improved as much as citizens had expected during the 2002–2007 Roh Moo-hyun government, the consumer sentiment index had actually worsened. These factors made the economy the most significant issue for voters during the 2007 presidential campaign.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in an East Asian Institute (EAI) survey, over two-thirds of respondents consistently identified economic issues (the sum of the issues of economic polarization and economic development) as needing to be at the top of the next government's national agenda.

### *Political sophistication*

In the reward–punishment model of economic voting, each voter is assumed to be a rational actor with sufficient knowledge to attribute credit and blame (Key, 1966). However, recent studies (Duch et al., 2000; Gomez and Wilson, 2003, 2006) suggest that substantial variation exists in individuals' level of sophistication, which can obscure the attribution process assumed by the model. Specifically, an individual's ability to attribute responsibility may be a function of political sophistication. A series of recent studies (Gomez and Wilson, 2003, 2006) provides relatively strong evidence for this argument. For instance, voters with a higher level of political sophistication were more able than less-sophisticated voters to clarify whether economic responsibility lay primarily with the president, the congress, or another actor (Gomez and Wilson, 2003).

Interestingly, the literature on economic voting in Korea ignores political sophistication as an important factor in economic voting. An analysis by Jeong and Kwon (2008) suggests that the voting decisions of Korean citizens may be influenced by the amount and nature of public information about the economy.<sup>9</sup> However, in their analysis of economic voting, they failed to address the role of political sophistication, that is, the differential ability of voters to process political information, as well as its impact on their voting decisions. This study, even though based on a proxy measure, attempts to address the role of political sophistication in economic voting in Korea for the first time.

### *Partisan rationalization*

In addition to political sophistication, partisan rationalization<sup>10</sup> is an individual trait that has been shown to be an important factor complicating the attribution process. Generally, electoral decisions require voters to invest time and resources (Downs, 1957). Thus, as rational actors, voters are likely to rely on partisan cues to collect the information necessary for electoral decisions.



Partisanship may result in strong bias in political perceptions (Bartels, 2002). A series of recent studies (Anderson et al., 2004; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Evans and Pickup, 2010) indicate a possible reverse causation between economic perceptions (and attribution) and political preference. That is, contrary to a primary tenet of economic voting theory, a voter's economic perceptions may be a consequence of partisanship rather than a determinant of electoral choice. Indeed, Evans and Andersen (2006) have provided fairly strong evidence that partisanship may influence retrospective evaluation, in particular, perceptions of the national economy. Partisanship may also influence prospective economic perceptions (Ladner and Wlezien, 2007).

The argument for this perspective is straightforward and compelling, but regional evidence for the influence of partisanship on attribution is mainly limited to the contexts of Great Britain (Evans and Andersen, 2006) and the United States (Evans and Pickup, 2010).<sup>11</sup> Conversely, there is little knowledge of how partisan rationalization influences the attribution process in new democracies.

### *Regional cleavages in Korean electoral politics*

How does partisan rationalization work in the Korean electoral context? Not surprisingly, measuring the partisanship effect in new democracies is a daunting task. In Korea, two different but inter-related characteristics of party politics must be addressed. On the one hand, like other new democracies, short-lived parties, personalized politics, high electoral volatility, and an unstable party system<sup>12</sup> have been the main characteristics of the Korean political system since democratization. On the other hand, the structure of political cleavages in Korean politics crystallized and froze along regional lines during the democratic transition, and was still present during the 2007 presidential election. Thus, since the democratization of Korea, one of the strongest determinants of electoral choice has been regional cleavages. As Zielinski (2002) demonstrates, once the alignment of political cleavages is frozen in a new democracy, political mobilization of a new cleavage is very difficult.

The case of Korea exemplifies this sort of rigidity. Since democratization, Korea has maintained a very unstable floating party system but a stable regional cleavage structure. For instance, liberal parties, whose regional stronghold is the Cholla (south-western) region, have repeatedly split and merged, with the main party altering its name seven times between the 1988 democratic transition and the 2007 presidential election. Even during the 2007 election year, the ruling party repeatedly reorganized itself, changing its name from the Uri Party to the Unified Democratic New Party (UDNP). Thus, from Korea's founding democratic election to the 2007 presidential election, the Korean party system retained two regional party systems, the so-called Cholla parties and Kyeongsang (south-eastern province) parties. Though parties sometimes changed names after merging with other political factions in order to expand their base of political support, the political structure of regional cleavages in Korea that was established at the time of democratization was largely intact at the time of the 2007 presidential election.

Under these conditions, it would be misleading to rely only upon partisanship to disentangle the causal relationship between economic perception and political preference variables. If voters' alignment is frozen along a regional cleavage and parties change their names frequently, it is more appropriate to pay special attention to the role of regional cleavages in voter decisions. I call partisanship anchored in regional cleavages 'regional partisanship,' a term that implies support for those parties that politically represent the same region.

In this study, I propose that the persistent effect of regional cleavages can be captured by measuring two variables: regional cleavage and regional partisanship. In the case of the 2007 Korean election, the latter denotes a loyal supporter of the incumbent liberal Uri Party or opposition conservative

Grand National Party (GNP), as determined by voting history in the last two elections. Based on the previous discussion, I began with the assumption that a respondent's attributing process is strongly conditioned by regional cleavages, and that this relationship is even stronger among regional partisans. Thus, it was expected that supporters of the incumbent (Uri) party who had negative 'economic perceptions' would be more likely to blame someone outside the national government for the unfavorable economy. In a parallel manner, I expected that supporters of the opposition (GNP) party who had a negative evaluation of the economy would be more likely to blame the national government.

## Measures, variables, and method

The presidential election of 2007 was a critical contest in several respects. First, if Lee Myung-Bak (MB), the opposition candidate, was to be elected, Korea would pass what Huntington (1991) called the 'two-turnover test' representing a major milestone for Korean democracy. Second, the 2007 election was a typical 'economy election' since, as mentioned earlier, economic concerns were the most important issue in the election. While economic voting is often related to the important mechanism of democratic accountability, such accountability takes time to be fully realized in new democracies, a stage that has been called the democratic learning process. Two decades after the democratic opening in 1987 and one decade after the traumatic IMF economic crisis in 1997, the electoral politics of the 2007 Korean election offered a good test case for economic voting theory in a new democracy.

### Data

This study used data from the 2007 Korean presidential campaign to test the argument that regional cleavages play an important role in voters' attributions of responsibility and electoral choices. The data were taken from the 2007/2008 East Asian Institute Panel Data (hereafter, EAI data) for the 17th Korean presidential election. Collected from April 2007 to April 2008, this is the first comprehensive panel data for a Korean election.<sup>13</sup>

### Empirical strategies

To test the proposed theoretical argument, this study employed two different empirical strategies. The first was a multinomial logit analysis that did not include any endogenous variables; it was used to examine the attribution process among different actors deemed responsible for the economy. This model has an advantage in comparing voters' preferences across the different choice sets. In addition, to assess the actual explanatory power of the variables in the multinomial logit model, I calculated the 'relative risk ratio' (Long, 1997). In the second model, the attribution of responsibility for national economic conditions was expected to be an endogenous variable; therefore, a two-step probit with endogenous regressor model was used. In the second model, several variables were included to control for other factors that may have influenced voter electoral choice.

The study's primary dependent variables are electoral choice and attribution of responsibility for worsened national economic conditions in Korea. I coded '1' for respondents who reported an electoral choice for MB, the opposition candidate, and '0' otherwise. For attribution of responsibility, I created a dummy variable and assigned '1' to those who held the national government responsible for the worsening of national economic conditions as they perceived them, and '0' for all others.



The primary independent variables of the study are retrospective economic evaluation, attribution of responsibility, economic salience, political sophistication, partisanship, and a regional cleavage. Retrospective evaluations were tapped by asking respondents the following question: ‘On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with national economic conditions?’<sup>14</sup> 1. Very satisfied; 2. Fairly satisfied; 3. So-so; 4. Fairly dissatisfied; 5. Very dissatisfied.’ For attribution of responsibility for national economic conditions, I used the following question, plugging their previous answers into the space: ‘You said you were [...] about national economic conditions. Among those responsible, who exercised the greatest influence on the economy? 1. National government; 2. Party and Congress; 3. Company; 4. Individual; 5. Others?’ In specifying the causal factors for electoral choice for MB, I created a dummy variable that identified voters who had answered that they were fairly dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the economy and attributed primary responsibility to the national government, assigning ‘1’ for those, and ‘0’ otherwise. Economic salience is another important factor in the economic voting literature. In order to capture this effect, I created a dummy variable that measured perceptions of economic salience. If, from the first to the fourth EAI wave, a respondent consistently identified an economic issue such as growth or economic polarization as the most important priority of the national agenda in the next government, I assigned a value of ‘1,’ and ‘0’ otherwise.

Individual political sophistication is very difficult to measure since the EAI panel did not ask a set of related questions. Relying on basic background information, such as level of education reached and political interest, I developed a proxy measure for political sophistication. After recoding political interest in an ascending way, from 0 (no interest) to 4 (very strong interest), I added this number to the level of education reached, with the higher the combined value for a respondent, the higher the level of political sophistication.

As mentioned earlier, it was not easy to differentiate partisanship from voting intention in an imminent election, that is, to measure the independent effect of partisanship. Bearing this in mind, I developed two regional partisanship variables, one for the incumbent Uri Party (Uri) and one for the GNP (GNP), the primary opposition. Instead of utilizing a question that asked respondents which party they supported, I created a variable for unwavering supporters of these parties that included consistent supporters of the same party in both the previous 2004 17th legislative election and 2006 local government election. In this way, I controlled for the potential contamination effect of voting intention in an imminent election.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, operationalization of the independent variable of regional cleavage was fairly straightforward. I created two dummy variables, denoting ‘1’ for those who listed the Cholla or North Kyeongsang region as their hometown, ‘0’ otherwise. Since the empirical tests of this study focused on the competition between the two most powerful parties, Uri and GNP, whose regional strongholds are Cholla and North Kyeongsang, I did not include other regional variables.

In addition to the primary independent variables, I also included in the analysis several control variables, such as a general retrospective evaluation of the Roh Moo-hyun government, ideology (conservative), religion (Christianity), income level, and age. In this case, the higher the values in the retro-evaluation, the more negative the evaluation. By including this variable, I was able to test the impact of purely economic perceptions that might otherwise have easily been mixed with a general evaluation of the incumbent. Income and age were also continuous variables; ideology (conservative) and religion (Christianity) were dummy variables.

## **Results**

The empirical analysis conducted for this article took place in two stages. First, I examined the variables affecting voters’ attribution process – specifically, the extent to which attribution is

**Table 1.** Citizens' negative evaluation of national economic conditions and attributions to national government

	Cholla	Loyal Uri supporter	North Kyeongsang	Loyal GNP supporter	Average
Respondents dissatisfied with national economic conditions and blaming government	13.26 (-6.21)	9.69 (-9.78)	23.49 (+4.02)	34.05 (+14.58)	19.47

Source: EAI data (fifth wave, 2007).

Notes: Entries represent percentages. Entries in parentheses are the difference from the average of the total sample.

influenced by a political cleavage and other variables. Second, I explored the consequences of the attribution process by analyzing the relationship between negative attributions toward an incumbent government for worsened economic conditions and the decision to vote for the opposition party, as well as how this process is mediated by political cleavages.

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who held the national government responsible for worsened national economic conditions. As Table 1 demonstrates, a clear regional cleavage was evident among citizens who held this belief. Only 13.26% of those whose hometown was in the Cholla region, the incumbent's political stronghold, attributed responsibility for an unsatisfactory national economy to the national government (6.21% lower than average). This figure increased by more than 10% to 23.49% (4.21% higher than average) for respondents whose hometown was North Kyeongsang, the opposition's stronghold. This trend is even stronger in the case of regional partisanship (unwavering supporter). Only 9.69% of loyal Uri Party supporters (9.78% lower than average) blamed the national government for the unsatisfactory national economy, while 34.05% of loyal supporters for the GNP (14.58% higher than average) did so. Thus, regional partisans disproportionately excused or blamed the national government for a bad economy, depending on whether or not they shared the same regional affiliation.

The multinomial logit analysis provides more compelling evidence of a causal relationship between regional partisanship and attribution of responsibility. Table 2 shows the analysis of citizens' attribution of responsibility for national economic conditions. The reference category for this analysis is the national government. Multinomial logit analysis provides a thorough comparison among possible responsible actors. One way to assess the substantive effect of the coefficient in this model is to examine the relative risk ratio (Gomez and Wilson, 2003; Long, 1997), which represents a unit change in the predictor variable relative to a reference group, holding all others constant, as shown in Table 3.

Table 2 provides several interesting results. First, contrary to recent findings by Gomez and Wilson (2003, 2006), the level of voters' political sophistication was significant for party/congress in a negative direction. In the other two cases, the trend was also negative, although it failed to reach statistical significance. How to interpret this result?<sup>16</sup> Perhaps political sophistication worked differently in the context of the 2007 Korean election, where 'clarity of responsibility' was obvious and more sophisticated voters were more likely to create their attributions independent from regional cleavages. Thus, voters with a higher level of political sophistication were more likely to identify incumbent responsibility, a finding that may have been influenced by measurement issues related to political interest and level of education. One may speculate that the more attentive voters are, the more critical the view they have of an incumbent government.

**Table 2.** Multinomial logit analysis of attribution of responsibility for national economic conditions

	Party/congress	Company	Individual	Others
Political sophistication	-.22(.08)***	-.01(.22)	-.12(.14)	-.48(.16)**
Economic salience	-.20(.19)	-.64(.34)	-.88(.44)**	-.75(.54)
Loyal Uri supporter	-.02(.21)	.43(.27)	.66(.31)**	.70(.38)*
Loyal GNP supporter	-.92(.17)****	-1.66(.34)****	-.76(.35)**	-.70(.38)*
Cholla	.03(.18)	.04(.26)	.89(.29)***	-.33(.42)
North Gyeongsang	.06(.19)	-.06(.32)	-.10(.41)	.01(.41)
Con	.79(.45)*	-1.45(.72)**	-1.57(.82)*	.33(.90)
Number of Obs	1307			
LR Chi2	146.89			

Note: National government is reference category for analysis. \*\*\*\* p < .001; \*\*\* p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \* P < .1.

**Table 3.** Factor change in the odds of responsibility for national economic conditions

	Party/congress	Company	Individual	Others
Political sophistication	.80***	.99	.88	.62***
Economic salience	.80	.53*	.41**	.47
Loyal Uri supporter	1.0	1.5	1.9**	2.0*
Loyal GNP supporter	.40****	.20****	.47**	.50*
Cholla	1.0	1.0	2.4***	.72
North Gyeongsang	1.1	.94	.90	1.0

Notes: National government is reference category for analysis. The coefficient in the table is relative risk ratio, which represents the probability of choosing each category relative to the reference category by increasing one unit in each independent variable, all thing equal. \*\*\*\* p < .001; \*\*\* p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \* P < .1.

Second, unlike previous studies (Singer, 2011a, 2011b), economic salience was statistically significant only in the individual–national government category, where it had a negative effect. In this case, those who perceived the economic issue as significant were more likely to point out the national government’s responsibility. Given that the direction in all pair-cases was negative, it is possible to speculate that those who were more keenly aware of economic issues were more likely to identify the national government as the actor primarily responsible for the national economy. Since, in 2007, the institutional structure in Korea enabled voters to clearly identify the locus of responsibility, this consistently negative direction in both categories (sophistication and economic salience) was not surprising.

Finally, as expected, a single variable that was consistently significant across the categories was regional partisanship for the opposition party (GNP). In all pairwise comparisons, voters who consistently supported the GNP in the previous two elections were much more likely to attribute

responsibility for the worsened economy to the incumbent national government. Looking at the third column (individual–national government pairwise comparison), it is also possible to confirm the strong effect of a regional cleavage on voters’ attribution process. Both the regional variable (Cholla) and the regional partisanship variable for liberal parties (loyal Uri supporter) had a strong effect in the expected direction. Given that the dependent variable was the national economic condition, the values associated with both variables further verify the strong effect of regional cleavages. In the fourth column, regional partisanship for both parties had a significant impact in the expected direction: a loyal Uri supporter was more likely to blame others, while a loyal GNP supporter was more likely to blame the incumbent national government.

The substantive meaning of this effect can be assessed by looking at Table 3. Regional partisans for the Uri Party were almost twice as likely, and respondents whose hometown was in the Cholla region were almost 2.5 times as likely, to attribute responsibility for national economic conditions to individuals. Similarly, loyal Uri supporters were almost twice as likely to attribute responsibility for national economic conditions to someone other than the national government. This typical blame-shifting was clearly based on regional partisanship, confirming the primary expectation of this study.

Let us turn to the electoral consequences of economic evaluations and attributions of responsibility. If the attribution process in the election is highly influenced by regional partisanship, to what extent can this factor be considered a determinant of the success of MB, a candidate from the opposition GNP party in the 2007 presidential election? Table 4 shows the cross-tabulation between attribution and electoral choice, with a focus on regional cleavages. As expected, regional cleavages exerted a strong effect on voters’ electoral choice. Of those with a hometown in the Cholla region who blamed the national government for unsatisfactory national economic conditions, only 37.08% supported MB (27.58% lower than average), while around three-quarters (74.22%) of voters with a hometown in the North Kyeongsang region who held the national government responsible supported him (9.56% higher than average). With respect to the effect of loyal regional partisanship, a similar number of loyal Uri supporters attributing economic responsibility to the national government (38%) voted for MB (26.66% lower than average), while 80% of loyal GNP supporters voted for MB (15.34% higher than average). This finding is consistent with the theoretical expectations outlined in the previous sections.

In order to confirm a causal relationship between voters’ attribution of responsibility and electoral choice, I used a two-step probit model with an endogenous regressor analysis. This model included several variables to control for other possible factors, and considered as an endogenous variable citizens’ attribution of responsibility for national economic conditions. In order to assess the substantive power of the coefficient, I calculated an average marginal effect in the predicted probability of each variable, as shown in the second column of Table 5.

**Table 4.** Attribution of responsibility, regional cleavages, and electoral choice

	Cholla	Loyal Uri	North Kyeongsang	Loyal GNP	Average
Percentage of respondents who voted for MB attributing responsibility for unsatisfactory national economic conditions to the national government	37.08 (–27.58)	38 (–26.66)	74.22 (+9.56)	80 (+15.34)	64.66

Source: EAI data (fifth wave, 2007). Entries are percentages. Entries in parentheses are the difference from the average of the total sample.

Table 5 demonstrates several important findings that highlight the primary arguments of this study. First, it confirms that even after controlling for other causal factors, economic evaluation and attribution of responsibility were the most powerful determinants of electoral choice for MB. In particular, citizens' perceptions of the national government's responsibility for economic mismanagement had the strongest effect on their electoral choice for the opposition party (a marginal effect of .67). Consistent with this, voters who had a more unsatisfactory evaluation of national economic conditions were more likely to support MB (a marginal effect of .19). This finding leads to some interesting inferences. First, the economy seems to have had an independent effect as an electoral determinant. Given the model's control of a general retro-evaluation of the incumbent government, the results suggest that Korean voters were sophisticated enough to differentiate their economic evaluations from their overall evaluations of the incumbent government.

As predicted, the results confirm the persistent effect of regional cleavages in voters' electoral choices. Regional partisans for the Uri Party and voters whose hometown was in the Cholla region were much less likely to vote for MB, the opposition candidate, while voters who came from the North Gyeongsang region were much more likely to support him. Regional partisanship for the GNP had an effect, as expected, but failed to reach significance even after controlling for the effects of evaluation and attribution.

**Table 5.** Two-step probit with endogenous regressor model

	Presidential vote choice for MB	
	Coef (std error)	Marginal effects
Govt responsibility for national economic condition	4.27 (1.50)***	.67***
Sociotropic evaluation	-1.17 (.44)***	-.19***
Economic salience	-.04 (.13)	-.01
Loyal Uri supporter	-.43 (.13)***	-.07**
Loyal GNP supporter	.17 (.18)	.03
Cholla	-.72 (.12)***	-.11***
North Gyeongsang	.27 (.12)**	.04**
Retro evaluation	.02(.09)	.003
Conservative	-.12 (.11)	-.02
Christianity	.08 (.11)	.01
Man	-.15 (.09)	-.02*
Income	.00 (.14)	.00
Age	.09 (.05)*	.02
Con	2.70 (1.60)*	-
Number of Obs	2206	-
Wald Chi2	252.96	-

Notes: Instrumented is the variable of governmental responsibility for national economic condition and instrument is the variable of *Sophistication*. \*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05; \* P < .1.

## Discussion and conclusion

How do citizens in new democracies locate a responsible actor for economic conditions, and how do political cleavages mediate citizens' attribution process and its consequences? To answer these important but little-studied questions, this study analyzed the case of the 2007 Korean presidential election. The findings make clear that the role of political cleavages must be taken into account when explaining economic voting in new democracies. Even after controlling for economic salience and political sophistication, regional cleavages and regional partisanship in Korea were found to exercise a clear and significant influence on voters' attribution processes. Thus, in new democracies, the attribution of responsibility clearly works in a manner different from that in established democracies.

Further, the two-step probit model with an endogenous regressor (attribution of responsibility to national government) confirmed that political cleavages are a significant determinant of electoral choices. Because of multi-party competition based in regional strongholds, the overall intensity of the regional voting pattern in the 2007 presidential election was weaker than in the 2002 election, but the persistent effect of regional cleavages was still evident. Even though MB won in a landslide by more than 5 million votes, he garnered less than 10% in the Cholla region, the incumbent's stronghold. At the same time, he swept a little more than 70% of the votes in his own regional stronghold of North Gyeongsang.

These results do not mean that economic evaluations and attributions are purely endogenous, however. As discussed previously, the election's main issue was the economy – in particular, the economic polarization exacerbated during the two previous democratic regimes. The empirical results on electoral choice also confirmed that, even after controlling for the strong effect of regional cleavages, voters' evaluations of the national economy and their attributions of responsibility to the national government were the strongest determinants of electoral sanctions. The wide margin between MB and Chung Dong Young, the incumbent candidate in the Seoul metropolitan area (53.2% versus 24.5%), can be explained by the salience of economic issues.

Although based in the 2007 presidential election, this study highlights the importance of enduring cleavage structures for a more complete understanding of the process of electoral accountability in Korea. Further, the findings of this study are consistent with Zielinski's (2002) observation that cleavage structures frozen in new democracies make it very hard to mobilize new cleavages. In fact, the latest legislative election (19th election in 2012) reaffirms this observation, since the Saenuri Party, the successor to the GNP, did not gain any seats in the Cholla region, and the Democratic United Party, the successor to the Uri Party, gained only three out of 67 seats in the Gyeongsang region.<sup>17</sup>

Although focused on the case of Korea, the results of this study have important implications for economic voting in any new democracy. First, before economic voting stabilizes in a new democracy, the system must pass through several stages of political reform. The Korean experience seems to prove the case. After passing the two-turnover test and overcoming the traumatic experience of the IMF economic crisis, Korean voters began to develop a more sophisticated economic perception and attribution process and hold the national government more economically accountable. Thus, this research supports recent studies (Shabad and Slomczynski, 2011; Slomczynski et al., 2008) demonstrating that a system of repeated elections can function as a mechanism of accountability in new democracies.

At the same time, however, the specific mechanism by which electoral accountability works is dependent upon the political context (Roberts, 2008; Tucker, 2006). So, another implication of the study is that voters' attributions of responsibility and their consequences work in a particular way



in new democracies. More specifically, cleavage structures pertaining to individual voters matter more than economic perceptions *per se*. Regional partisans for the liberal (Uri) parties in Korea did not discard their parties because of the disappointing management of the economy if the parties represented a regional cleavage to which they were attached. While other studies on economic voting have paid attention only to institutional structures or individual voter traits as intervening variables, the variables examined in this study reveal that political cleavage structures in new democracies clearly matter, both in terms of voter attributions and in their consequences for elections.

Importantly, the findings of this study may apply to other new democracies in Asia. In Taiwan, for instance, a salient issue has been identity politics around the Sino-Taiwan relationship (Hsieh, 2002). Voters' retrospective evaluations of the incumbent are largely influenced by their position along important political cleavages. Further, as Posner and Simon (2002) demonstrate, in many new democracies where ethnic cleavages and patrimonial politics are still dominant, party systems are fluid, and electoral volatility is high, political rationalizations for attribution of responsibility are based less on party partisanship than on political cleavages, just as this study demonstrated. More in-depth comparative case studies would be helpful in elucidating this process.

The findings also remind us that the role of economic factors in voting decisions may contain two separate stages: evaluation (attribution) and selection. Even when voters are aware of those in the government responsible for economic mismanagement, they may not punish the incumbent party, for many reasons. One may be the lingering effect of regional political cleavages, as this study demonstrated. Another may be the non-clarity of policy alternatives promised by the opposition party. Thus, unlike the expectations of the conventional economic voting model, voters behave differently even when they attribute responsibility for negative economic conditions to the incumbent, and not simply because their economic evaluations are contaminated by partisanship. Samuels and Hellwig's (2010) insightful study identifying at least four different measures of electoral accountability illustrates the wide range of meanings of electoral accountability for economic performance. If imperfect electoral accountability may result from a particular political context, the complex relationship between economic performance and electoral accountability in new democracies offers an interesting and important venue for future research on the operation of democratic accountability in new democracies, especially as the voters' experience with democracy increases.

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## Notes

1. That is, as Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier's (2000: 183) review succinctly summarizes, 'the citizens vote for the government if the economy is doing all right; otherwise, the vote is against.'
2. As Rudolph (2003b: 700) said, 'Accountability, if it is to be properly exercised, first requires citizens to make attributions of responsibility.' In line with this, Alcañiz and Hellwig (2009: 1) argue that 'democratic accountability is premised on the concept of responsibility.'
3. Voters' sole reliance on party labels in this case does not provide them with a reliable cue for who is responsible for economic mismanagement, since even before the election, the politicians who are responsible for economic policy may frequently switch from the governing party to the opposition (see Zielinski et al., 2005).
4. That is, according to the conventional economic voting model, if the voters are not satisfied with economic performance, they are more likely to support the opposition. However, it does not explain relevantly why voters are more likely to support a certain non-governing party.

5. Due both to the specialized focus of this study and to the limitation of the space, I cannot give a comprehensive review of the literature of economic voting in new democracies. For a recent and comprehensive review of this, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2008).
6. Even though it is preliminary, Lee (1998) pointed out that when voters have a clear understanding of the location of responsibility, they are more likely to cast retrospective economic votes.
7. According to Powell, 'If the resources necessary for policy making are dispersed into the control of numerous groups and individuals, citizens cannot identify who is responsible for policies' (2000: 51).
8. The dominant strategy of the opposition party during the campaign period was to name the period of two liberal governments as 'the lost decade,' implying that two inept liberal governments had mismanaged the Korean economy.
9. According to preliminary analysis (Jeong and Kwon, 2009: 217), perception of family economy played a more important role in the 18th election, which occurred in 2008, four months after the 17th presidential election in 2007. They speculate that in the legislative election, of which the main interest lies in district representation (in Korea, regional representation), there is more information through which voters may be able to spell out their individual interest more clearly than in the presidential election.
10. Partisan rationalization can work in two separate but interrelated processes: selective evaluation and selective attribution (Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). That is, citizens can modify their view of economic performance and/or they can change whom they hold responsible for economic performance. This study focuses more on the latter since, as discussed earlier, the attribution process lies at the heart of economic voting theory. But it does not mean that these processes are mutually exclusive. This study has an interest in examining why some groups do not attribute responsibility for the mismanagement of the economy to the national government. That is, even though voters perceive the salience of the economy due to the worsening economic condition, they may not locate its responsibility in a uniform way because of the influence of political cleavages.
11. In terms of new democracies, so far I can identify only one article on Latin America (Johnson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2009).
12. According to Stockton (2001) and Hicken (2011: 104), Korea takes the top spot in the ranking of greatest electoral volatility among new democracies. Specifically, electoral volatility in Korea from 1981 to 1992 was scored at 72.3, much higher than that in Latin American countries, for example. Indeed, for the 1992 legislative election, the oldest party (the Democratic Liberal Party) was only two years old. Even after adding on the age of its predecessor (the Democratic Justice Party), 'its age of 12 would rank 27th in comparison to the 37 Latin American parties.'
13. At the beginning, the sample size was 3503, which had decreased to 2111 at the sixth wave. The sampling method was computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI).
14. This study included national economic conditions only. First of all, unlike for national economic conditions, EAI data does not include a question that asks respondents to choose a responsible actor for the family's economic condition from among the categories of national government, company, individual, or other. Second, based on preliminary analysis, it was found that citizens' perception of family economic conditions fails to reach the level of significance in the model for electoral choice. Since this study focuses on determinants of attribution and the consequences of attribution (electoral choice), respondents were asked only about national economic conditions.
15. It is also possible to measure partisanship by tapping a typical question ('Which party do you support?') at the beginning of the panel, which can help control for the so-called 'endogeneity' issue. Marsh and Tilley's (2010) study adopted this strategy. However, there is a practical reason why such a strategy is not appropriate in the political context of the 2007 Korean presidential election. Because of political volatility, there was significant inconsistency in the party name of the incumbents listed on the questionnaire. President Roh had been elected in 2002 as the candidate of the Democratic Party (DP), but due to internal conflict, his supporters split from DP and created a new party, the Uri Party. In the last year of his tenure, due to his dropping popularity and several scandals, a political group that favored unification with the DP created another party, the Great Unification Democratic New Party (GUDNP). This party finally merged with the Uri Party, keeping the GUDNP name.

16. In a divided government, where the locus of responsibility is more complicated, it is expected that voters with higher political sophistication are more capable of identifying who is the real responsible actor for the economy rather than just singling out the president (Gomez and Wilson, 2003: 276–277).
17. Interestingly enough, the percentage of respondents in the Kyeongsang region who said that the economy was worse was 43.2%, little different from the average for the whole sample (43.4%) (EAI data). However, the incumbent party (Saenuri) swept this region with 63 out of 67 seats. That is, many voters in this region chose the incumbent party even if they believed that the economy got worse, and not because they believed that the economy got better. These results imply that the main argument of this study is relevant to current electoral politics in Korea beyond the 2007 presidential election.

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