

## Blame, Responsibility, and the Tea Party in the 2010 Midterm Elections

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**Abstract** There is a general consensus both in the news media and scholarly research that 2010 was a highly nationalized election year. Reports have indicated that anti-Obama sentiment, the Democrats' legislative agenda, the economy, and the Tea Party were all factors contributing to Democratic losses in the congressional elections. In this paper, we use data from 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study to examine the individual-level dynamics that contributed to the heightened nationalization of the 2010 congressional elections. Our analysis shows that Tea Party support and the attribution of blame and responsibility by voters are essential to understanding the 2010 election outcome, beyond what we would expect from a simple referendum model of midterm elections. Not surprisingly, Tea Party supporters blamed Democrats for the state of national affairs, disapproved of the Democrats' policy agenda, and overwhelmingly supported Republican candidates in the congressional elections. However, our analysis shows that not all voters who supported Republican candidates

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were driven by high levels of opposition to President Obama and the Democrats. Another key group of voters blamed both Democrats and Republicans for the nation's problems but ultimately held Democrats responsible in the voting booth by supporting Republican congressional candidates.

**Keywords** 2010 Congressional elections · Midterm elections · Voting behavior · Tea Party movement

The 2010 U.S. midterm elections resulted in a historic Republican victory and dealt President Barack Obama's partisan allies a stunning defeat. The GOP gained 64 seats in the House of Representatives, taking a commanding majority of that chamber, and fell just a few seats short of taking control of the U.S. Senate. The Republican surge extended farther down the ballot, as the GOP claimed six governorships and reclaimed control of at least one state legislative chamber in 13 states. The election result was a decisive "shellacking" in the words of President Obama.

Scholars have long suggested that a standard referendum model explains midterm election outcomes, but the usual measurement of that model fell short of predicting the extent of Republican seat gains in the 2010 congressional elections (Brady et al. 2011; Jacobson 2011b; Jones and McDermott 2011). Scholars have offered many different explanations for the magnitude of the Democratic losses, variously arguing that the election results represented a reaction against unpopular policy changes and high levels of partisanship in the 111th Congress (Nyhan et al. 2012; Koger and Lebo 2012), inevitable losses following two electoral surges in the Democratic direction in 2006 and 2008 (Campbell 2010), the extreme unpopularity of the U.S. Congress (Jones and McDermott 2011), and the rise of the Tea Party movement (Jacobson 2011c).

While a variety of factors undoubtedly played a role in the 2010 elections, we argue there were two key reasons why so many voters supported Republican congressional candidates in 2010. First, we hypothesize that the Tea Party movement was able to nationalize the midterm elections, focusing campaigns on national concerns unfavorable to Democrats. Second, we hypothesize that a decisive set of voters blamed both parties for the nation's problems, but ultimately voted for Republican congressional candidates, apparently holding Democrats responsible for the failure to ameliorate them. Thus, as we will see from the results of our original survey, there were two very different blocks of voters who contributed to the Republican victory, and our findings suggest they based their decisions on very different reasons.

One feature the two groups did share, however, was that their reasons for voting Republican were nationally rather than locally based. And on that, analysts of the election were almost universally agreed. In reviewing the 2010 midterms, Jacobson (2011a) identified "2010 as the most nationalized midterm election in at least six decades" (p. 240). With high unemployment rates, increasing voter concern about the economy, and declining presidential approval ratings leading up to the elections

in November 2010, it certainly seems that the electorate was responding to the state of national affairs by punishing the Democrats in the elections (Jacobson 2011b, pp. 28–30). Even Howard Dean, the chair of the DNC from 2005 to 2009, emphasized the national focus of this election and the Republicans’ plan to blame the Democrats for the poor state of the economy, stating, “What the Republicans want to do is make this a referendum on Obama, and we know what the numbers show on that – they win.”<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, the 2010 elections featured the grassroots mobilization of the Tea Party, at that time, an informal network of political activists inflamed by President Obama and the Democrats’ policy agenda during the 111th Congress and committed to electing conservative legislators who would reverse these changes. As a polarizing force in the 2010 elections, the Tea Party movement was adamant about bringing change to Washington and thwarting the success of the Democrats’ policy initiatives, and the Tea Party’s message heightened the importance of national considerations in this election year.

Through an examination of these two factors, the punishment the Democrats received for failing to end the recession and the Tea Party’s goal to change Washington, we provide new insights into the underlying forces behind the heightened nationalization and sweeping Republican victory in 2010. Using individual-level data from an original post-election survey, we show that the heightened nationalization was not solely driven by high levels of opposition to Obama and the Democrats’ legislative agenda. Not surprisingly, Republicans and (even more) Tea Party supporters disapproved of President Obama and of the policies implemented during the 111th Congress and voted against Democratic candidates in the congressional elections. But we show that Democrats were also punished at the polls by another group of voters, disproportionately moderates and independents, who did not solely blame Obama or the Democrats for the state of the nation but did hold the Democrats responsible for their failure to improve economic conditions. These two groups of voters created a one-two knockout punch that the Democrats could not overcome.

## Background and Expectations

Although former Speaker Tip O’Neill argued that “all politics is local,” scholars have long emphasized the role of national forces in midterm elections. Referendum models of congressional elections (e.g., Tufté 1975; Kramer 1971) clearly connect midterm election results to national forces, attributing shifts in the partisan composition of Congress following midterm elections to voters’ economic evaluations and approval of the president. Fiorina (1978, 1981) further developed this referendum theory in his model of retrospective voting, establishing that voters often treat elections as referenda on the presidential administration’s handling of the economy.

<sup>1</sup> Howard Dean interview on *Morning Joe*, MSNBC, October 7, 2010.

Related to this referendum perspective, Key (1966) once described the American electorate as “an appraiser of past events, past performance, and past actions”. In 2010, American voters again carried out this role of appraisal, clearly expressing their dissatisfaction with the performance of President Obama and the Democrats in Congress. Scholars have observed that voters appraised the performance of the party in power in 2010 in two key ways. First, in many ways, voters acted according to the referendum theory of midterm elections, responding to the poor state of the economy in their vote choice. Second, voters used their vote to express their disapproval of the Democrats’ legislative agenda.

Standard referendum models underestimated the extent of the Republicans’ victory in 2010, but referendum variables such as the state of the economy and presidential approval were clearly still important for understanding the outcome of the 2010 elections. Obama’s overall approval rate stayed below 50 % in the weeks leading up to the election, including rates near single digits among Republicans and at or below 40 % among independents by election day.<sup>2</sup> Opinions about Obama’s handling of the economy were even more negative. Nevertheless, as Jacobson observes, the degree to which referendum models underestimated Democratic losses in 2010 “suggests that more than the usual fundamentals were involved” (Jacobson 2011b, p. 29).

Some scholars have argued that referendum models would have been more accurate in predicting election outcomes in 2010 if it had not been for the Democrats’ support for the unpopular health care and cap and trade bills (Brady et al. 2011). Democrats running in Republican-leaning districts who supported the health care, stimulus, or financial reform bills in Congress received a lower vote share than those who did not vote for these bills (Jacobson 2011a), and support for the health care bill was especially detrimental to Democratic congressional candidates, costing the Democratic Party not only votes but seats in Congress (Nyhan et al. 2012). Furthermore, individual-level analyses find that voters who opposed health care reform were less likely to vote for Democratic candidates (Konisky and Richardson 2012).

It has been suggested that Democrats were simply not successful in advertising the benefits of their major legislative initiatives to the American voters (Jacobson 2011b) and mistakenly believed that their policies would be seen as effective responses to the nation’s problems (Stonecash 2010). Voters’ responses to these Democratic missteps and miscalculations offer one explanation for the inability of the standard referendum model to predict the magnitude of the Democrats’ defeat. According to Weatherford (2012), however, considering the depth of the recession, the Obama Administration’s economic policies actually had a positive effect on the economy in most cases, and the fact that the Democrats did not receive electoral rewards for these policies in the 2010 elections is “attributable less to the mistakes of the administration than to the strategic success of its

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<sup>2</sup> Gallup, “Gallup Daily: Obama Job Approval,” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/113980/Gallup-Daily-Obama-Job-Approval.aspx>.

opponents at limiting the president's legislative accomplishments and framing the public's interpretation of this program" (p. 33). The Tea Party movement was an essential component of this campaign waged against the Democrats that Weatherford describes, and, as a result, the Tea Party has also received credit (or blame) for the 2010 election results.

President Obama's stimulus and healthcare initiatives only confirmed for many Tea Party supporters that Obama was intent on pushing the country in a socialist direction (Jacobson 2011b). Although Democratic leaders initially dismissed the Tea Party as "Astroturf," or a phony grassroots movement, by late 2009 and early 2010, events such as the Taxpayer March on Washington and the Tea Party Express bus tours proved that it would be difficult to ignore the Tea Party's message in the 2010 election campaigns (Courser 2010). According to Jacobson (2011c, p. 2), "The Tea Party movement, which promoted, articulated, and focused the opposition to Obama and his policies, played a major role in turning the election into a national referendum on the administration". Research assessing the role of the Tea Party in the 2010 elections has found that Republican candidates were more successful in districts with a higher number of Tea Party activists (Bailey et al. 2012), and Tea Party support among voters was a significant predictor of voting for a Republican House candidate in 2010 (Jacobson 2011c).<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, the Tea Party translated dissatisfaction with government and politics in Washington into anger.<sup>4</sup> This anger toward President Obama and Washington politics, coupled with greater enthusiasm among Republicans for voting in the 2010 elections, may offer some insight into the unanticipated Republican seat gains (Jacobson 2011b). These arguments about the Tea Party's role in the 2010 elections fit with Kernell's (1977) classic negative voting model of midterm elections: "...citizens displeased with a president's performance are more likely to vote against his party's congressional candidates than are satisfied voters likely to vote for them" (p. 52). And the Tea Party was certainly intensely hostile toward Obama.

While recognizing the potential role of these various factors, we argue there is another explanation for the 2010 election results: the heterogeneous ways the electorate attributed blame and responsibility for the economy. Voters ascribe *blame* to those political actors they believe instigated current negative circumstances, such as an economic downturn. Voters, however, hold actors who are expected to fix the nation's problems *responsible* for failing to do so. In many cases, voters attribute both blame and responsibility to the same actor. At other times, they may blame one

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note, however, that others have concluded that Tea Party endorsements did not improve the chances of electoral victory for Republican candidates (Bond et al. 2011; Jacobson 2011b; Karpowitz et al. 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Supporting this observation, a survey of Tea Party supporters found that while most Republicans expressed dissatisfaction with Washington politics, Tea Party supporters were more likely to express anger toward Washington. (New York Times/CBS News Poll, National Survey of Tea Party Supporters, April 5–12, 2010, <http://documents.nytimes.com/new-york-times-cbs-news-poll-national-survey-of-tea-party-supporters?ref=politics>).

actor while holding another responsible in the voting booth for not remedying the nation's ailments. We will show that this was the case in 2010.

Other scholars have examined the question of the attribution of responsibility in elections (e.g., Rudolph 2003; Petrocik and Steeper 1986; Gomez and Wilson 2003; Peffley 1984). For example, Petrocik and Steeper (1986) found that Republicans did not end up losing as many seats in the 1982 congressional elections as poor economic conditions led many analysts to expect. Petrocik and Steeper argue that the "attribution factor" largely explains these unanticipated election results. If more voters had attributed responsibility to the Republicans for the state of the economy, as would be expected under a referendum model, the Republicans likely would have suffered much greater losses in 1982.

A more direct comparison to 2010 may be the 1994 elections, in which the Republicans also took over the House by winning many more seats than expected. In 1994, "...the Democrats suffered the consequences of voters perceptions, but that does not mean that voters felt they were wholly to blame" (Abramson et al. 1995). The results from a 1994 pre-election survey demonstrate that 41 % of respondents believed that "neither Clinton nor the Republicans have done much worthwhile," but among the group of voters who expressed this view, 55 % intended to vote for the Republicans, while only 24 % intended to vote for the Democrats.<sup>5</sup> Thus although voters may blame both parties for the state of national affairs, they may only hold one party responsible when voting in the election. We expect a similar balance of blame and responsibility in 2010 as in 1994. And, we believe that it is this factor that explains why the Republicans won such a resounding victory in the 2010 congressional elections. As seems to have been true in 1982 and 1994, the ways in which voters attributed blame and responsibility in 2010 may be key to understanding the extent of the presidential party's losses in these highly nationalized midterm elections.

In the sections that follow, we begin by describing the data from our original survey. We examine blame attribution in the following section, looking first at its partisan and ideological basis, and then at the role of both blame attribution and Tea Party support in the way ordinary Americans perceived politics in 2010. Last, we analyze vote choice in the 2010 congressional elections.

## Measuring Citizen Attitudes in the 2010 CCES

We analyze citizen attitudes using the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a national stratified 2-wave Internet survey administered by YouGov. The CCES content consists of two major sections—a common block of political and demographic questions administered to more than 55,000 respondents, and a series of modules produced by research teams that are administered to sub-samples of about

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<sup>5</sup> Los Angeles Times Poll, October 17–19, 1994, [http://articles.latimes.com/print/1994-10-21/news/mn-53022\\_1\\_times-poll](http://articles.latimes.com/print/1994-10-21/news/mn-53022_1_times-poll).

1,000 individuals. The pre-election wave was conducted in October of 2010 and a post-election wave conducted in November and December of the same year.<sup>6</sup>

We are interested in assessing the roles of blame attribution and of Tea Party support in the 2010 elections. In order to measure how voters attributed blame, we rely on the following question: “To the extent the federal government has failed to solve our pressing national problems, who do you think is to blame—Democrats, Republicans, or both equally?”<sup>7</sup> About 23 % of respondents blamed Democrats, 19 % blamed Republicans, and fully 48 % chose the “blame both” option.<sup>8</sup> Thus, there were more respondents who blamed both parties equally than the combined number of respondents who blamed either of the two major parties, and our data suggests that respondents who chose the “blame both” option may have represented a key slice of the electorate. Of the 48 % of CCES respondents who chose the “blame both” response option, nearly 60 % voted for a Republican.

A second key variable in the 2010 election, attitude toward the Tea Party, is measured by the question, “There has been a lot of talk about the Tea Party movement these days. Which of the following best describes you?” Response options included “I am not a supporter of the Tea Party movement,” “I support the Tea Party movement but have not participated in Tea Party activities,” and “I support the Tea Party and have participated in Tea Party activities.” We combine the latter two options to create a dummy variable measuring whether a respondent was a supporter of the Tea Party movement. About 5 % of respondents said they were supporters who had participated in Tea Party-related activities, while 35 % described themselves as non-participating supporters of the Tea Party, leaving nearly 60 % of respondents who did not consider themselves supporters of the Tea Party movement at all.

In the next section, we will describe the background of those respondents who blamed both parties for the state of the nation and make importance distinctions between this block of voters and Tea Party supporters, in terms of their views toward politics. In order to test our hypothesis that blame attribution and Tea Party support were key factors in explaining the outcome of the 2010 elections, we will then analyze the role of these two variables as predictors in a multivariate vote choice model.

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<sup>6</sup> Respondents were selected from YouGov’s PollingPoint panel, an opt-in Internet panel, and then matched on a set of demographic and political characteristics to a random sample (stratified by age, gender, race, education, and region) from the 2005–2007 American Community Survey. The sample was weighted using propensity scores based on age, gender, race, education, news interest, voter registration, and non-placement on an ideology scale. This method produces a sample that looks similar to a probability sample on the matched characteristics, but may still differ in unknown ways on unobserved characteristics. Research comparing samples using this method to telephone and face-to-face surveys finds that such samples are similar in many ways (Yeager et al. 2011), although there remain concerns about generalizing results to a broader population (AAPOR 2010; Pasek and Krosnick 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Respondents were also given the option of selecting the answer “I’m not sure” in response to this question. Thirty-nine respondents selected this option, and they are omitted from our analysis.

<sup>8</sup> This quantity and those that follow are computed using team module weights.

## Blame in the 2010 Midterm Elections

### The Demographics of Blame Attribution

Who are these individuals who blamed both the Democrats and Republicans? First, although these individuals were slightly less knowledgeable about politics and less interested in the congressional election campaign than respondents who attributed blame to the Democrats or Republicans, the differences are small.<sup>9</sup> Second, these individuals were more evenly distributed across the party identification categories than we might expect: 28 % identified as Democrats, 27 % described themselves as Republicans, and 43 % were self-described independents.<sup>10</sup> Compared to the full sample, “blame both” respondents were more than 10 % more likely to describe themselves as independent, and were somewhat less likely to describe themselves as a Democrat or Republican. About 25 % of these respondents considered themselves “liberal,” 27 % said they were “middle of the road” or were not sure about their ideological placement, and 48 % said they were “conservative.” As might be expected, independents and moderates were more likely to blame both sides of the aisle. More than 75 % of self-described independents said they blamed both parties for the state of the nation as did 63 % of those who described themselves as ideologically “middle of the road.” The key point is that the blame question is measuring something other than partisanship, ideology, and political sophistication.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> More detailed information is reported in the “Appendix” section. Because respondents who selected “blame both” were slightly less educated and knowledgeable about politics, we further tested the alternative hypothesis that these voters supported Republican candidates because of a lack of sophistication. We found several reasons to discount this alternative hypothesis. First, respondent education, political sophistication, and interest in politics are included as controls in all multivariable models. Second, because respondents were given the option of answering “I’m not sure” in response to the blame attribution question, there is little reason to believe that the respondents who selected the “blame both” option did so because they were unable to select a substantive answer. Third, as an additional robustness check, we compared these “I’m not sure” and “blame both” respondents across other questions in the survey to see if the “blame both” respondents were expressing non-attitudes when given the opportunity on other attitudinal and knowledge measures. Large percentages (around 45–60%) of those who answered “I’m not sure” on the blame question also selected “I’m not sure” in response to other attitudinal and knowledge questions, including questions asking them to place the Democratic and Republican Parties on an ideological scale and evaluate the Supreme Court and their states’ governors. The “blame both” respondents answered “I’m not sure” at much lower levels on these same questions (5–11 %), rates comparable to those who blamed either the Democrats or Republicans. Finally, closer scrutiny of the congressional vote by sophistication among the “blame both” respondents finds no evidence that the less sophisticated were simply casting a “nature of the times” vote for the GOP; rather, it was the most sophisticated respondents who were the most likely to vote GOP, suggesting they were cognitively capable of both blaming both parties but holding the Democrats responsible. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that we examine the relationship between blame attribution and political sophistication more closely. These results are available from the authors upon request.

<sup>10</sup> This analysis classifies partisan leaners as independents.

<sup>11</sup> We estimated a multinomial logit model predicting respondent selection into blame categories, with “blame Republicans” as the base category. In this model, party identification, Obama approval, issue attitudes, educational attainment, and interest in the campaign were predictive of blaming both parties for the state of the nation (relative to blaming Republicans). These model estimates are available from the authors.

## Blame Attribution and Views Toward Politics in 2010

We next explore how the blame attribution measure is related to more specific attitudes about the economy and the legislative agenda to better understand the political preferences of this key block of voters who blamed both parties for national conditions. First, we asked CCES respondents “Who do you think is *most* to blame for the current state of the national economy—the Bush Administration, the Obama Administration, Wall Street and financial institutions, Congress, or someone else?” We present a cross-tabulation of responses to this item, disaggregated by responses to the “blame for national problems” item described in the previous section, in Table 1.

As is evident from the table, most respondents who chose “blame Democrats” or “blame Republicans” for the “national problems” blame attribution question also blamed the same party for the current state of the national economy. However, only a minority of the “blame both” respondents blamed either the Obama Administration or the Congress (about 36 % combined) for the 2010 economy. The Bush Administration (27 %) and Wall Street (27 %) were the two most frequently mentioned targets of blame for the current economy among those who blamed both parties for the nation’s problems. When we look at the vote choice of these various categories, we see that the vote reflects the partisan polarization that we might expect. However, this is true *except* among those who blamed both Democrats and Republicans for national problems *and* blamed Wall Street, Congress, or someone else for the state of the economy. Although we might have expected this subset of respondents to break evenly between Democrats and Republicans, the majority (70 %) voted for Republican members of Congress. This result suggests that an important and possibly decisive portion of voters did not apply a simple retrospective judgment to the vote decision. Rather than punishing Democrats for being in power when the state of the nation was weakened, these voters may have grown skeptical about the Democrats’ ability to improve conditions.

Considering this possibility, the next logical question is to ask which party they thought would be best suited to manage the economy in the future. To address this question, we asked which party “would do the better job handling” jobs and the economy. A cross-tabulation of the responses to this question and responses to the “national problems” blame attribution question is presented in Table 2.

Unsurprisingly, about 90 % of those who blamed one party for the nation’s problems thought that the other party would do a better job of handling jobs and the economy. More interestingly, as Table 2 shows, among the half of the sample who blamed both parties, about a third thought Republicans would be better for the economy, but only one in five thought the Democrats would better handle it.<sup>12</sup> Thus, despite placing blame for the 2010 economy on the shoulders of non-Democrats, CCES respondents who believed both parties were to blame for the state of the nation held a clear preference for the Republican Party on the most salient issue of the election.

Perhaps the very active Democratic majority in Washington was seen by those who blamed both parties as eschewing its responsibility to end the recession and instead was passing important legislation that was addressed at many things, but not at improving the economy, at least in the short term. In order to examine this question we consider these

<sup>12</sup> These differences are statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p < 0.05$ , one tailed).

**Table 1** Cross-tabulation of blame for the current state of the economy, by blame for national problems

Blame for national problems	Blame for the current state of economy					Total
	Bush admin	Obama admin	Wall Street	Congress	Someone else	
Blame Democrats	1.5 % (4)	55.0 % (148)	6.3 % (17)	31.6 % (85)	5.6 % (15)	100 % (269)
Blame Republicans	76.5 % (189)	0.8 % (2)	19.0 % (47)	0.8 % (2)	2.8 % (7)	100 % (247)
Blame both	<b>26.9 % (119)</b>	<b>16.5 % (73)</b>	<b>26.7 % (118)</b>	<b>19 % (84)</b>	<b>10.9 % (48)</b>	<b>100 % (442)</b>
Total	32.6 % (312)	23.3 % (223)	19.0 % (182)	17.9 % (171)	7.3 % (70)	100 % (958)

Cell entries indicate row percentages. The number of respondents falling into each cell is reported in parentheses  
 The bold entries highlight the percentages for respondents who blamed both Democrats and Republicans for the state of the nation

**Table 2** Cross-tabulation of better job handling economy/jobs, by blame for national problems

Blame for national problems	Who would do a better job handling economy/jobs?					Total
	Democrats	Republicans	Both equally	Neither	I'm not sure	
Blame Democrats	0.8 % (2)	91.4 % (245)	1.5 % (4)	4.9 % (13)	1.5 % (4)	100 % (268)
Blame Republicans	89.8 % (219)	0.4 % (1)	4.1 % (10)	3.3 % (8)	2.5 % (6)	100 % (244)
Blame both	<b>19.1 % (83)</b>	<b>32.0 % (139)</b>	<b>13.1 % (57)</b>	<b>25.3 % (110)</b>	<b>10.6 % (46)</b>	<b>100 % (435)</b>
Total	32.1 % (304)	40.7 % (385)	7.5 % (71)	13.8 % (131)	5.9 % (56)	100 % (947)

Cell entries indicate row percentages. The number of respondents falling into each cell is reported in parentheses

The bold entries highlight the percentages for respondents who blamed both Democrats and Republicans for the state of the nation

voters' views regarding the specific legislation enacted (or promoted) by the Democratic majority in Congress. Table 3 presents individuals' views of a number of the more highly salient legislative proposals pursued by the Democrats.

Looking across the cells of Table 3, we can see that most of the policies were unpopular among those who blamed the Democrats for the state of the nation. Tea Party supporters were revolted by the Democrats' legislative proposals, as were those who blamed only the Democrats for the state of the nation. Majorities of both groups were opposed to each of the proposals presented in Table 4, with particularly low levels of support for the Affordable Care Act, the Stimulus bill, and the nomination of Elena Kagan to the Supreme Court. Not surprisingly, most of these same reforms were quite popular among those who blamed the Republicans for the state of the nation. Thus, among the 40–45 % of the public with clear directional attributions of blame for the country's condition, reaction to the Democrats' legislative agenda was polarized and strong.

The plurality of respondents who blamed both parties for the state of the nation, however, was more evenly divided about the Democrats' legislative accomplishments. Among this group—60 % of which voted for a Republican House candidate—majorities supported the SCHIP bill, the “cap and trade” bill approved in the House, the Dodd-Frank financial reform bill, the repeal of the military's “don't ask, don't tell” policy, and a bill funding stem cell research. Almost half supported the controversial Affordable Care Act, and 47 % of those who blamed both parties endorsed the nomination of Justice Elena Kagan to the Supreme Court. The least popular legislative reform among the “blame both parties” subgroup was the stimulus package, but even that was favored by just under 45 %. Overall, the average voter who blamed both parties for the state of the nation supported 59 % of these legislative initiatives.<sup>13</sup>

These results clearly show that the “blame both” respondents were distinct from Tea Party supporters, in terms of their views toward the Democrats' legislative agenda. The pattern of results reported here does not support the simple reading of the Democratic “shellacking” in 2010 as only an issue-based reaction to the legislative agenda of the 111th Congress, nor does it support a simple reading of it as an expression of widespread opposition to President Obama and the Democrats. Indeed, the legislative item most rejected by the critical subcategory of voters who blamed both parties for the state of the nation was the stimulus package. About one-third of the dollar value of this piece of legislation consisted of tax cuts which observers claimed were included to win the support of Republicans,<sup>14</sup> and the stimulus was bitterly criticized by liberal activists as being insufficiently ambitious before and after it was enacted.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the stimulus may be the piece of legislation most closely linked to the outcome which may have rankled voters the most—the nation's continuing inability to recover from the deep recession of 2008–09.

In sum, these descriptive results demonstrate the heterogeneous ways retrospectively-minded voters can punish the majority party. Many people voted against the majority party because they disagreed with its policy agenda. Other voters punished

<sup>13</sup> This quantity was computed by summing the number of pieces of legislation for which a CCES respondent expressed “support,” and dividing this quantity by the number of items for which each respondent offered a directional response (“support” or “oppose”).

<sup>14</sup> Herszenhorn and Hulse (2009).

<sup>15</sup> Krugman (2009, 2011).

**Table 3** Percent of respondents supporting legislative reforms, by blame for national problems and Tea Party support

Blame category/Tea Party support	Legislation introduced in the 111th Congress							
	Stimulus bill	SCHIP (child health insur.)	ACES (cap and trade)	ACA (health reform)	Kagan	Financial regulation (Dodd/Frank)	DADT	Stem cell funding
Blame Democrats (269)	8.6 % (23)	43.1 % (116)	17.1 % (46)	5.9 % (16)	10.4 % (28)	33.8 % (91)	27.9 % (75)	29.4 % (79)
Blame Republicans (247)	93.1 % (230)	96.4 % (238)	85.0 % (210)	95.5 % (236)	90.7 % (224)	95.5 % (236)	91.5 % (226)	88.7 % (219)
Blame both (444)	<b>44.8 % (199)</b>	<b>71.2 % (319)</b>	<b>53.8 % (239)</b>	<b>49.3 % (219)</b>	<b>46.8 % (208)</b>	<b>72.5 % (322)</b>	<b>56.5 % (251)</b>	<b>62.2 % (276)</b>
Tea Party supporters (449)	12.5 % (56)	46.5 % (209)	21.8 % (98)	10.2 % (46)	12.2 % (449)	41.0 % (184)	29.0 % (130)	36.1 % (162)
Total (1,000)	50.2 % (502)	72.2 % (722)	52.4 % (524)	50.5 % (505)	47.4 % (55)	66.6 % (666)	57.3 % (573)	58.1 % (581)

Parentheses contain raw frequencies

The bold entries highlight the percentages for respondents who blamed both Democrats and Republicans for the state of the nation

**Table 4** Logistic regression predicting whether respondent voted for Democratic House candidate

	Vote for Democratic House candidate		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Party identification (seven categories, D–R)	−0.86*(0.11)	−0.65*(0.14)	−0.64*(0.14)
Democratic incumbent	1.08*(0.54)	0.99(0.60)	1.04*(0.61)
Republican incumbent	−0.73(0.59)	−0.77(0.65)	−0.73(0.65)
Obama approval	1.05*(0.14)	0.27(0.20)	0.24(0.21)
Tea Party support	–	−1.30*(0.60)	−0.65(1.22)
Blame Democrats for failing to solve national problems	–	−0.94(0.98)	−1.58(1.43)
Blame both Democrats and Republicans equally for failing to solve national problems	–	−2.07*(0.77)	−2.03*(0.77)
Tea Party support*blame both Democrats and Republicans	–	–	−0.89(1.40)
Issue scale	–	1.55*(0.35)	1.55*(0.35)
Political knowledge	–	−0.16(0.16)	−0.15(0.17)
Interest in the campaign	–	−0.10(0.31)	−0.10(0.31)
Family income	–	0.12(0.07)	0.13(0.07)
Education	–	−0.16(0.16)	−0.16(0.16)
Age	–	0.01(0.02)	0.01(0.02)
Female	–	−0.05(0.44)	−0.05(0.44)
African-American	–	0.88(0.91)	0.92*(0.91)
Constant	−2.16*(0.53)	0.63(1.64)	0.65(1.65)
N	619	595	595
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.72	0.78	0.78

The dependent variable is a Democratic 2-party vote for U.S. House representative. Standard errors are in parentheses

\* Indicates significant at  $p < 0.05$ , using a one-tailed test

the majority for failing to successfully manage the nation's affairs—most prominently, the national economy. This retrospective punishment is not applied simply because a particular party holds the majority at the wrong time; instead, many retrospectively minded voters will punish a majority party thought to be responsible for failing to improve an enfeebled state of the nation, even if it did not cause it in the first place. Our final test of this interpretation of voting behavior in the 2010 elections is with a multivariate model of individual-level vote. We recognize that many of the predictors of vote choice are highly correlated with one another, so it is critical to evaluate if we get any predictive leverage—above and beyond a standard referendum model—by distinguishing patterns of blame and by identifying Tea Party supporters.

### Nationalization and the Vote

We estimate a series a multivariate logit models in which our dependent variable is the self-reported vote choice in the congressional election (1 = vote for Democrat;

0 = vote for Republican). In our CCES module, 42.7 % of respondents reported choosing a Democrat for this office, about two percentage points fewer than the actual proportion of the vote garnered by Democrats nationwide.

Again, our key explanatory variable is blame for the nation's current conditions. Included are two blame dummy variables—one measuring whether respondents blamed both parties for the nation's problems and one measuring whether they blamed the Democrats alone. We also include a dummy variable measuring support for the Tea Party. Models 2 and 3 include an interaction term between the Tea Party support and the “blame both” variables (1 = both support the Tea Party and blame both parties for the state of the nation; 0 = all else).<sup>16</sup> This allows us to test if the effect of blame attribution is conditional on Tea Party support and vice versa.

Given journalistic and scholarly conclusions that national issues accounted for the 2010 outcomes, we also controlled for individuals' ideology through the use of a latent “issue liberalism” scale.<sup>17</sup> To produce such a scale, we used the first dimension from a principal component analysis of a battery of CCES issue questions.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, we include a number of standard political and demographic controls in our vote choice model. In our model, we use presidential approval and incumbency, the most prominent measures of national and of local forces, respectively.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, our model captures party identification using the standard 7-point party identification scale.<sup>20</sup> Because there is some evidence that respondents who blamed both parties for the state of the nation were less interested in and knowledgeable about the elections, we include measures of campaign interest and knowledge in our models.<sup>21</sup> We also

<sup>16</sup> The correlation between Tea Party support and the “blame both” variable is  $-0.03$ . A majority of “blame both” respondents indicated that they were *not* supporters of the Tea Party movement (56 %). Among those respondents who “blamed both” and supported the Tea Party, most of these individuals did not participate in Tea Party events. These results can be found in the “Appendix” section.

<sup>17</sup> We also estimated models using separate issue attitude variables, measuring views toward taxes and spending, abortion, immigration policy, and gun control, but including these variables instead of the issue liberalism scale did not change our conclusions.

<sup>18</sup> The factor analysis yielded a single factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1. This primary factor accounted for 50 % of the variance in the eight policy attitudes used in the analysis. The latent dimension yields scores which range from  $-1.8$  to  $1.6$ , where higher values indicate more consistently liberal opinions on policy issues.

<sup>19</sup> We used a five category variable measuring responses to this item, which incrementally ranges from “Strongly Disapprove” to “Strongly Approve.” Those who selected the “Not sure” option were assigned to the intermediate category. We use separate dummy variables for Democratic and Republican incumbents.

<sup>20</sup> We estimated additional models using a 3-category, a 5-category (with categories for strong Republicans, weak and leaning Republicans, Independents, weak and leaning Democrats, and strong Democrats), and dummy variables for each party identification category. In each of these models we found results analogous to those reported below.

<sup>21</sup> The wording for the campaign interest item was “Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs?” Response options included “hardly at all,” “only now and then,” “some of the time,” and “most of the time,” coded in that order. To measure political knowledge, we relied on an item from the pre-election wave which asked respondents to identify partisan majority control in four legislative chambers—the U.S.

include covariates for several key demographic characteristics, including African-American self-identification, age, sex, family income, and educational attainment.

## Results

Table 4 reports the estimates from three versions of a logit model predicting a Democratic vote in the congressional election.<sup>22</sup> The model reported in column 1 includes party identification, incumbency, and presidential approval as independent variables—a standard referendum model. Column 2 adds our key variables and political controls and Column 3 adds an interaction term between Tea Party support and blaming both parties equally for the state of the nation.

First, as previous research has demonstrated, incumbency played an important, although perhaps surprisingly modest, role in the 2010 midterm election. The Democratic incumbent variable is positive and close to conventional levels of statistical significance in all of the models presented in Table 4. This result suggests that, despite a toxic political environment for Democrats, voters were more likely to choose a Democrat when a Democratic incumbent was seeking re-election. The coefficient for Republican incumbency was not statistically different from zero.<sup>23</sup> In other words, individuals living in districts with a Republican incumbent were no more likely to vote for a Democratic candidate than individuals in districts with an open seat contest. Holding all covariates constant at their population medians, model 2 predicts that independents with a Democratic incumbent were 15 percentage points more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate than independents in an open seat race.<sup>24</sup> To this extent, at least, the elections can be considered partially local, and it appears that Democratic incumbents, in particular, benefited from this partial localization.

Nevertheless, our models find that national forces exerted a substantial effect on the vote. First, the coefficient for the approval rating of President Obama is positive and statistically significant in the simple model reported in column 1 of Table 4. However, in models 2 and 3, presidential approval is in the expected direction but is

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Footnote 21 continued

Senate, the U.S. House, the respondent's state Senate and state House. Responses were summed from 0 to 4, with higher values indicating more correct answers.

<sup>22</sup> We explored several alternative specifications of the models reported in Table 4. Most notably, we included an indicator for freshmen Democratic members to see if newly elected members faced an especially difficult electoral environment. The variable was not statistically significant from zero and did not affect the parameters reported in the table. We also estimated the model with an indicator if the member voted for the ACA bill; and replicated with an interaction between a respondent's issue preferences and Tea Party support. Again, these variables were not statistically significant.

<sup>23</sup> Wald test of joint statistical significance for both incumbency variables was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 17.8$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

<sup>24</sup> This result, and those that follow, were obtained by simulation using CLARIFY (King et al. 2000). Covariates were held at the following values: Obama approval ("somewhat disapprove"); Tea Party support ("not a supporter"); Policy attitude scale ("0"); blame variables ("blame both"); family income ("\$50,000–\$59,999"); education ("2 year degree"); age ("55"); sex ("male"); African-American racial identity ("non-black"). Simulations were based upon the model reported in column 2 of Table 4.

not statistically significant.<sup>25</sup> In the standard referendum model, it appears the national forces unique to the 2010 election (Tea Party support, partisan blame, and issue attitudes) are captured by the Obama approval measure.

Issue preferences were also predictive of the vote in the models reported in columns 2 and 3.<sup>26</sup> The latent issue scale was a statistically significant predictor of vote choice. According to model 2, individuals with a liberalism score 1 standard deviation above the population mean were predicted to be 37 percentage points more likely to vote for a Democrat than a respondent whose score was 1 standard deviation more conservative than the population mean. Meanwhile, measures of political knowledge, education, and income were not significant, as shown in columns 2 and 3.<sup>27</sup>

The coefficient for Tea Party support, a third measure of national forces, is negative and statistically significant. That is, those who supported the Tea Party movement were less likely to support the Democratic candidate in their district, all else equal. And the effect of Tea Party self-identification was large, as Tea Party supporters were predicted to be 21 percentage points less likely to vote for a Democrat than those who did not describe themselves as supporters of the movement. This result supports the conventional wisdom and scholarly consensus that support of the Tea Party movement was related to distaste for the Democratic Party label, even controlling for party identification and issue preferences.

Most critically, our model finds that partisan blame for the state of the nation was an important piece of the vote choice puzzle in 2010. Voters who blamed both Democrats and Republicans for the state of the nation were less likely to vote for a Democratic candidate, holding all else equal. Model 2 predicts that individuals who blamed both parties were 37 percentage points less likely to vote for a Democratic candidate than those who blamed Republicans alone. This result suggests that many voters who turned against the Democrats did so despite holding reservations about Republican Party's performance during the 111th Congress.

The model estimates presented in column 3 of Table 4 further demonstrate the anti-Democratic predictive effect of the subset of voters who blamed both parties for the state of the nation, but did not consider themselves to be supporters of the Tea Party movement. The coefficient for the interaction between Tea Party self-identification and voters who blamed both parties is not statistically significant, but the constitutive term for "blame both" is negative and statistically significant. This result indicates that, among those who were not Tea Party supporters, selection of "blame both" in response to the question about which party was to blame for the

<sup>25</sup> The fact that presidential approval is not statistically significant in models 2 and 3 likely can be attributed to the large number of highly correlated variables in this model. Model 1 demonstrates that presidential approval is a significant predictor of vote choice.

<sup>26</sup> The more complex models in columns 2 and 3 significantly improve the model fit beyond the referendum model reported in column 1 ( $\chi^2_{11} = 35.2, p < 0.05$ , column 2;  $\chi^2_{12} = 34.8, p < 0.05$ , column 3).

<sup>27</sup> Again, given the potential alternative explanation that those who blamed both might be making a simple-minded "nature of the times" decision based on a lack of sophistication, these controls for these political sophistication variables are especially important. Although these measures are not statistically significant given the other variables in the model, we conducted a series of other analyses more closely examining the relationship between political sophistication, blame, and vote choice, summarized in footnote 9.

nation's problems predicted a strikingly diminished likelihood of voting for Democratic candidates. In other words, Tea Party supporters and those who blamed both parties were two distinct groups of voters contributing to the Democratic loss.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Using original survey data, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors that came to play in voters' assessments during the highly nationalized 2010 elections. Our analysis focuses on two main groups of voters who voted against the Democrats. One subset of voters, primarily Republicans and Tea Party supporters, blamed Democrats for the state of national affairs, expressed disapproval for Democratic policies, and consequently voted for Republican congressional candidates. This amounted to almost 20 % of the sample, of whom more than 95 % voted Republican. Another key group of voters, making up 48 % of respondents, believed that both Democrats and Republicans were partly to blame for the nation's problems. A majority of this group, however, ultimately held Democrats responsible in the voting booth for the fact that national conditions had not yet improved, voting Republican by a 60–40 margin.

Thus, our analysis demonstrates that not all voters who supported Republican candidates were simply anti-Obama or anti-Democrat. A plurality of respondents indicated that they blamed *both* the Democrats and Republicans for failing to solve the nation's problems, and among this group, a majority blamed the Bush Administration or Wall Street for the current state of the national economy. These respondents who blamed both parties for the nation's problems were actually supportive by at least small majorities of many of the major legislative initiatives enacted during the 111th Congress. For these voters, national considerations factored into their voting decisions in a more nuanced manner. They did not entirely blame the Democrats for the nation's problems but ultimately held them responsible for the slow economic recovery.

As a way of assessing the substantive effect of blame attribution on the election outcome, we estimated a back-of-the-envelope counterfactual. How would the national vote share have changed if those who "blamed both" had split evenly at the ballot box, rather than breaking for Republicans? Whether we do this calculation with a simple redistribution of a bivariate table<sup>28</sup> or by re-estimating the predicted vote share assuming that the coefficient for the "blame both" variable was zero, rather than negative and large in magnitude, we find that the Democrats improve their aggregate vote share in races for the U.S. House by about 5 points—creating near parity with the

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<sup>28</sup> For this calculation, we estimated the predicted vote of each respondent based on column 2 of Table 4. This yields a 56.1 % Republican share of the two-party vote. If we recalculate such that those who "blamed both" were evenly divided between voting for Democrats and Republicans, the Republican share of the two-party vote is predicted to be just 52.4 %.

Republicans.<sup>29</sup> This suggests that the ways in which voters assigned blame and responsibility for the nation's problems had a profound impact on the election results.

Beyond our understanding of the 2010 election outcomes, this paper contributes to our broader understanding of the role of national forces in midterm elections. Even though we do not have parallel survey data from earlier elections to make direct comparisons, a general comparison with the 1982 and 1994 sheds some light on the possible conditions under which blame attribution might affect midterm elections. In the months leading up to the 2010 elections, analysts were questioning whether 2010 more closely resembled 1982 or 1994.<sup>30</sup> Republican President Ronald Reagan saw a 27 seat loss in his party's seats in Congress in the 1982 midterm election, while Democratic President Bill Clinton saw an even larger 54 seat swing in the 1994 midterm.

Even though the 2010 elections shared some of the elements of the 1982 elections—Reagan faced low approval ratings, high unemployment rates, and weak consumer confidence—in the end, 2010 looks most similar to 1994. In 1994, Republicans took control of the House from the Democrats after winning many more seats than expected, and in 1994, as in 2010, we also saw that many voters were dissatisfied with both parties but ultimately punished the Democrats at the ballot box. As opposed to 1982 when voters faced divided government, in 1994 and 2010, the president's party also controlled Congress. This suggests one possible lesson. In highly nationalized midterm election years with dissatisfied voters and unified government, we may expect to see the blame and responsibility attribution pattern that we observed in 2010. The theoretical expectations that we laid down in this paper should be further tested in future research.

To be sure, we are not concluding that the factors we have identified are the *only* reasons Republicans did so well in the 2010 elections. For example, we have not considered the important role that differential turnout among partisans might have played in shaping the election outcomes. However, our results suggest that the unique blame-attribution process among voters, along with the Tea Party's anger towards the policy efforts of a unified and Democratically-controlled government, helped to intensify the nationalization of this election in a way that aided Republican success. National considerations factored into individuals' voting decisions in a variety of ways in this election, and without either of these two groups of voters, we likely would not have observed such a dramatic election outcome.

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<sup>29</sup> To obtain this result, we first used the model parameters from column 2 of Table 4 to predict in-sample vote choice. Voters whose Democratic vote probability was greater than 0.5 were classified as Democratic votes, while those with a probability of <0.5 were classified as Republican votes. For the counterfactual described in the text, we changed the coefficient for the "blame both" variable to zero. Then we used the remaining model parameters to generate an in-sample prediction for this scenario. Under the counterfactual described in the text, Democratic vote share moves from about 43 % to about 48 %.

<sup>30</sup> e.g., see Roberts (2010), Klein (2010), Salvanto and Gersh (2009).

## Appendix

Blame category/Tea Party support	Educational attainment	Family income	Political knowledge	Campaign interest
Blame Democrats	3.89 (0.08)	9.05 (0.18)	3.12 (0.07)	2.85 (0.03)
Blame Republicans	4.30 (0.09)	8.76 (0.20)	2.97 (0.08)	2.62 (0.04)
<b>Blame both</b>	<b>3.66 (0.07)</b>	<b>7.92 (0.16)</b>	<b>2.52 (0.07)</b>	<b>2.26 (0.05)</b>
Tea Party Supporters	3.81 (0.07)	8.65 (0.15)	3.03 (0.06)	2.71 (0.03)
Average (weighted)	3.21 (0.05)	7.47 (0.11)	2.28 (0.05)	2.03 (0.04)

Cell entries are mean values. Parentheses contain standard errors

The bold entries highlight the mean values for respondents who blamed both Democrats and Republicans for the state of the nation

Blame category/Tea Party support	Not a supporter	Support, no participation	Support and participate	Total
Blame Democrats	9.0 % (24)	74.9 % (200)	16.1 % (43)	100 % (267)
Blame Republicans	97.1 % (297)	2.9 % (7)	0 % (0)	100 % (244)
<b>Blame both</b>	<b>56.4 % (247)</b>	<b>38.6 % (169)</b>	<b>5.0 % (22)</b>	<b>100 % (438)</b>
Average (unweighted)	54.6 % (540)	38.5 % (381)	6.9 % (68)	100 % (989)

Cell entries are row percentages. Parentheses contain raw frequencies

The bold entries highlight the percentages for respondents who blamed both Democrats and Republicans for the state of the nation

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