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## Are regions important in British elections? Valence politics and local economic contexts at the 2010 General Election

**Abstract:** Electoral support for governing parties and their major rivals is influenced by valence judgements, particularly over economic policy performance. Economic voting contributes in large measure to the changing geography of the vote, as economic conditions vary from place to place. But past work has tended to concentrate on objective economic indicators or on voters' personal evaluations of the state of the economy. Furthermore, work on contextual effects has suggested that **these** work most powerfully when very local, suggesting that the wider regional patterns which dominate much research on electoral geographies are artefacts of more intimate geographies. This paper expands the debate in two ways: first, by examining the extent to which voters' decisions are influenced by the economic evaluations of others in their communities; and second, by demonstrating that some contextual effects, at least, really are more powerful at the regional than at more local scales.

**Key words:** Valence politics; electoral geography; economic voting

## Are regions important in British elections? Valence politics and local economic contexts at the 2010 General Election

The dismal science exerts a powerful grip over government re-election prospects: while economic booms can give incumbents an aura of competence, and smooth the way to their re-election by a grateful electorate, recessions and downturns can heighten concerns over governments' effectiveness, and may lead to defeat at the ballot box. Had Jane Austen been a political scientist, she might have argued that it is a truth (almost) universally acknowledged that a government presiding over a recession will soon be in want of a parliamentary majority.

Voters' perceptions of the state of the economy provide the key link in the causal chain from economic trends to government support (Sanders *et al.*, 1987). When judging the efficacy of governments' economic policies, they can access a variety of information sources. The exact content of the information will depend on the scale to which the information applies and the context in which it is encountered. Some information comes from the state of the objective economy nationally (partly filtered through media reporting: Gavin *et al.*, 1996; Gavin and Sanders, 2003): unemployment rates, inflation, interest rates, exchange rates and so on. Some comes from individuals' own direct experiences: do they feel more or less affluent, more or less confident about the future, is their job secure or threatened? And some comes from their local contexts, at a variety of scales: sub-national variations in economic performance can be substantial, and some regions may be in recession (or enjoying strong growth) while the national economy is booming (or slumping).

A large research literature has built up around all these propositions (see, *inter alia*, Sanders *et al.*, 1987; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2007; Johnston and Pattie, 2006; Pattie and Johnston, 1995, 2008a). However, rather less attention has been paid to another information source within voters' local contexts: to what extent are people influenced by the economic views of those they live among and at what scale does this operate most effectively? Perceived local climates of opinion have been shown to affect electors' propensity to turn out (this being more likely where individuals think those around them value voting than where they do not: Campbell, 2006; Gerber *et al.*, 2008, 2010; Davenport *et al.*, 2010; Panagopolous, 2010; Pattie and Johnston, 2013) and their party choices and political values. (Other things being equal, people are likely to adapt their choices and views to match those which are locally dominant: Johnston and Pattie, 2006; McClurg, 2004, 2006.) But does this extend to economic evaluations? One might conceive a situation in which some voters are surrounded by others with a generally pessimistic outlook on the economy, while others live among more optimistic individuals. If voters do take into account either or both of the views of those they live among and their current situations, this might also extend, therefore, to an influence on their economic evaluations – with knock-on consequences for their decisions on whether to vote for or against the incumbent government. In this paper, we explore that link further by examining how the general climate of opinion on the economy affected how individuals voted at the 2010 General Election in Great Britain, and by asking at what scale the climate of opinion was most influential.

### Valence politics and the geography of the vote

A radical change has occurred in how analysts think of the factors driving election results. Traditional accounts of voting behaviour emphasise the importance of ideological contests and clashes of ideas, long-standing psychological attachments to parties, or the sociological undercurrents of party support. But in recent years, these positional approaches (so-called

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3 because they stress issues on which voters adopt opposing positions and beliefs) have been  
4 eclipsed. In their stead, the dominant thread in the literature now examines voters'  
5 evaluations of government performance on so-called valence issues (e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 2004,  
6 2009). These are policy areas on which virtually all members of a society agree: all want  
7 prosperity, security, good health, and so on. In a valence world, voters are not too worried  
8 about how a universally-desired outcome is achieved. What concerns them is that it is  
9 achieved. Governments that deliver (and are seen to do so) on valence issues improve their  
10 chances of re-election, while those that fail risk defeat at the polls.  
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12  
13 Valence concerns can cover a wide range of issues, and take in evaluations of parties'  
14 competence and suitability for office. But one valence factor dominates the literature:  
15 economic performance (though, as we will discuss later in the paper, economic policy can  
16 also be associated with positional politics: Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2011; Lewis-Beck *et al.*,  
17 2013). The economy is sufficiently complex to leave most voters uncertain over the pros and  
18 cons of different policy details. But hardly anyone in a modern society is immune to  
19 economic success or failure. Most are aware of generally rising or falling living standards. To  
20 the extent that governments get the credit or blame for economic performance, therefore, the  
21 economy should be a prime factor in shaping voters' choices supports this claim (Fiorina,  
22 1981; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Norpoth, 1992; MacKuen *et al.*, 1992; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2007;  
23 Samuels and Hellwig, 2010; Johnston and Pattie, 2011). If things are going well, there is a  
24 good case for voting the current government back into office. But if they are doing badly,  
25 perhaps it is time to remove them and give others a chance.  
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29 One strand of that literature, of relevance to this paper, focuses on the electoral effects of  
30 geographical variations in economic performance. Most countries experience sometimes  
31 substantial sub-national variations in local economic conditions. Some areas can enjoy  
32 affluence and growth at the same time as others suffer relative poverty and decline. To the  
33 extent that economic performance becomes a thermometer for wider valence judgements on  
34 how well (or badly) a government is performing, therefore, people living in different parts of  
35 a country may well come to rather different conclusions regarding the government's record,  
36 depending on how their local economy is faring. Even if the national economy is perceived as  
37 performing strongly, therefore, and even if a voter is becoming more prosperous as an  
38 individual, he or she may still have concerns over the government's competence and re-  
39 electability if his or her local economy is thought to be in trouble (Pattie and Johnston, 1995;  
40 Pattie *et al.*, 1997; Johnston and Pattie, 2001, 2006; Johnston, Dorling *et al.*, 2000).  
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43 Such sub-national economic evaluations operate at a wide variety of scales: voters respond to  
44 conditions in their immediate home neighbourhoods and in their wider communities  
45 (Johnston, Pattie *et al.*, 2000). However, recent research into the scale at which contextual  
46 effects operate in British elections find that more local contexts – like households,  
47 neighbourhoods, constituencies – are much more important as influences on the vote than are  
48 regional contexts (Johnston *et al.*, 2007: indeed, in their analyses, regional effects disappear  
49 once individual factors and more local contexts are taken into account). The implication is  
50 that, the considerable research interest in regional divides in British voting notwithstanding,  
51 voters are most influenced by things close to home, not by conditions at more generalised  
52 scales. But this does not necessarily close the debate. Few local economies are so small as to  
53 be contained within one parliamentary constituency, for instance. Many travel-to-work areas  
54 (TTWAs) can, for example, encompass cities, suburbs and rural hinterlands. Economic  
55 successes or failures in one part of a TTWA are liable to have substantial knock-on  
56 consequences for other parts. Furthermore, most Britons obtain much of their local news  
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3 from regional television broadcasters, whose networks often cover several TTWAs and many  
4 more constituencies and neighbourhoods. News stories about job losses or new investments  
5 are likely to be disseminated much more widely than the immediate local labour market  
6 directly affected, therefore, potentially giving individuals a wider sense of the state of their  
7 local economy **than that on their** own doorsteps. There may still be a case for examining the  
8 impact of broader scales than the immediately local.  
9

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11 There is clear evidence that most people have a reasonable general impression of the  
12 strengths and weaknesses of the local economies in which they live and work. Individuals'  
13 perceptions of the health of their local economies correlate **well with** objective indicators  
14 such as local unemployment rates and information on the state of the local housing market  
15 (Pattie *et al.*, 1997). To a large extent, this is the result of direct observation and experience.  
16 For instance, one's chances of being **unemployed, or of** knowing someone who has lost a job,  
17 are likely to be higher if one lives in an area where local unemployment rates are high than in  
18 one where they **are low**.  
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21 **Direct experience** is not the only means by which individuals form views of their local  
22 contexts, **however**. The views and opinions of others matter too (Huckfeldt and Sprague,  
23 1995; Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004; Pattie and Johnston, 1999, 2008b, **2013**; Zuckerman *et al.*,  
24 2007; Nir, 2011). Other things being equal, individuals can be influenced by the climate of  
25 **opinion among** their **acquaintances and** communities. Where they find **themselves in** a  
26 minority on an issue, for instance, they may re-evaluate their own position, bringing it into  
27 line with the majority view. Most analyses of such contextual effects to date have focussed on  
28 factors such as the partisan make-up of individuals' social networks. However, **there is no**  
29 reason why attention should be limited just to this aspect of local opinion. Other politically  
30 salient factors are also likely to be widely discussed and commented on within local  
31 **communities**.  
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34 The state of the local economy is one such issue. People routinely talk **to each other** about  
35 local economic **fortunes**. **The** more these conversations stress a particular trajectory for the  
36 local economy, the more reinforcement that view receives. Rising house prices – and hence  
37 growing assets for home owners – are a cliché of middle class dinner party discussions when  
38 local housing markets boom. Conversely, **the worse the local economic news**, the more likely  
39 individuals are to encounter pessimistic views from others – and the more pessimistic one  
40 might expect them to become in consequence. The local media (both press and, at a more  
41 regional scale in the UK, television and **radio**), **help develop** this local climate of **opinion**,  
42 **whether reporting** new investment in an area **or more local** redundancies. Whereas word-of-  
43 mouth discussions are most likely to contribute to a climate of opinion within a relatively  
44 circumscribed locale (perhaps a neighbourhood for conversations with friends, or a travel-to-  
45 work area for conversations with work colleagues), local media (especially broadcast media)  
46 mainly operate at a more regional scale, giving a wider perspective on whether the area is  
47 becoming more or less prosperous.  
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51 To what extent are individuals influenced by the local climate of opinion regarding the state  
52 of the economy, and how local is local when we consider this? It is to these questions that the  
53 paper now turns, through an analysis of the impact on voting at the 2010 UK General  
54 Election.  
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## 56 **From boom to bust: economic trends and government fortunes 2005-2010**

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3 The run-up to the 2010 General Election did not bode well for the incumbent Labour  
4 government. In power continuously since 1997, Labour had successfully rebuilt its reputation  
5 as a viable party of government by both modernising its policies to appeal to an increasingly  
6 middle class electorate (Shaw, 1994; Gould, 1998; Heath *et al.*, 2001) and (crucially) by  
7 capturing from the Conservatives a reputation for competent handling of the UK's economy  
8 (Sanders, 1999). Beginning in the mid-1990s, the UK economy moved into a prolonged  
9 period of growth and prosperity. The Labour government elected in 1997 enjoyed the fruits  
10 of the boom, which continued almost unbroken for the next decade: GDP grew strongly,  
11 while the unemployment rate fell (figures 1 and 2). The strong economy was an important  
12 plank in Labour's successful 2001 and 2005 re-election campaigns (Clarke *et al.*, 2004, 2009;  
13 Pattie, 2001, 2004). As Labour's Chancellor from 1997 to 2007, Gordon Brown had been the  
14 central figure in the party's economic team and he took much of the credit for the national  
15 economy's strong performance under his stewardship (hubristically announcing, in his 2006  
16 budget speech, there would be 'no return to boom and bust': *Hansard*, 22 March 2006,  
17 column 288). He hoped to capitalise on this record when he took over from Tony Blair as  
18 Labour leader and Prime Minister in 2007.  
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22 In retrospect, however, 2007 was the point at which the long economic boom came to an  
23 abrupt end (Gamble, 2009; Moran *et al.*, 2011). The first indications of trouble came from  
24 concerns over banks' exposure to increasingly vulnerable sub-prime mortgages in the US  
25 housing market (both in the UK and internationally). In the UK, a further dramatic signal  
26 came in late 2007 with a run on Northern Rock, a bank based in the North East of England  
27 which was particularly exposed as a major mortgage lender. The economic crisis developed  
28 rapidly over the subsequent year, engulfing much of the world economy and turning a  
29 financial crisis into a deep recession (Stiglitz, 2010). From the beginning of 2008, UK GDP  
30 declined for 6 consecutive quarters before staging an anaemic recovery in mid-2009 (figure  
31 1). By the 2010 election, it was still below the levels reached by the end of 2007. Similarly,  
32 after several years of improving figures, Britain's unemployment rate began to climb rapidly  
33 from late 2008 onwards, reaching over 8% by May 2010.  
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36 In late 2008, Alistair Darling, Brown's successor as Chancellor, warned that the economic  
37 downturn was potentially the most serious since the Great Depression of the 1930s (Darling,  
38 2011). Brown and Darling worked hard, via their domestic policies and their pivotal actions  
39 in a series of international summits, to prevent the recession turning into a full-blown  
40 depression, and Brown in particular argued that his experience and standing in international  
41 economic policy circles were what Britain needed to see it through the coming difficulties.  
42 These efforts notwithstanding, however, this was not auspicious for a party, and a leader,  
43 which had built their recent reputation in government on their ability to deliver prosperity.  
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46 Not surprisingly, the economy loomed large in voters' thinking in the run-up to the 2010  
47 election, and their predominant mood was gloomy. Shortly before the election took place,  
48 respondents to the 2010 British Election Study Campaign Internet Panel Survey (BES CIPS:  
49 for reasons outlined below, this is the main data set for much of the following analysis) were  
50 asked which was, in their opinion, the most important issue facing the country: 48% said it  
51 was the economy, while a further 5% mentioned unemployment. Far more said this than  
52 mentioned any other issue. Asked how the country's economic situation had changed over the  
53 previous year, 58% felt it had worsened (and 28% thought things had become a lot worse),  
54 while only 23% thought things had improved (and less than 1% thought they had improved a  
55 great deal: table 1). Nor did respondents think the future would be much better, either for  
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3 themselves or for the country. For the first time since the early 1990s, therefore, Labour  
4 entered a Westminster election looking distinctly **vulnerable**.

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6 That said, Labour **was not alone in facing difficulties because** of the downturn. In the **balmy**  
7 economic **conditions before** 2007, the Conservatives' new leader, David Cameron, and his  
8 Shadow Chancellor, George Osborne, had committed their party to matching the Labour  
9 government's spending plans (an attempt to reassure voters not only that the Conservatives  
10 would not threaten the prosperity Labour seemed to have delivered but also to counter the  
11 perception that popular public services were not safe in their hands). The crisis forced the  
12 Conservatives to rethink their economic strategy radically. Furthermore, for all Labour's, and  
13 Brown's, travails after 2007, Labour's reputation for economic competence, while tarnished,  
14 was not totally destroyed, while the Conservatives' reputation in this field, severely damaged  
15 by the 1992 ERM crisis, was not fully restored. The BES CIPS pre-election survey also asked  
16 respondents which party and which leader would be best able to deal with the country's  
17 economic problems (table 2). Going into the election, the Conservatives and David Cameron  
18 had a lead over Labour and Gordon Brown on the issue, but only a narrow one. If the crisis  
19 was bad news for the government, **therefore, nor** was not a clear-cut opportunity for the  
20 opposition.  
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#### 24 **Economic geography and electoral outcomes in 2010**

25 As we might expect, valence judgements played an important part in influencing voters'  
26 choices at the 2010 election (Johnston and Pattie, 2011; Clarke *et al.*, 2011). **And as** in  
27 previous downturns, the post-2007 recession did not hit all parts of the country to the same  
28 extent. Some areas found themselves under greater stress than others. To find out what effect  
29 local economic contexts had on the outcome of the 2010 election, however, we need some  
30 measure of local economic context. Unemployment statistics provide one readily available  
31 indicator. There is, however, a complication, as many of the constituencies in England and  
32 Wales (but not in Scotland) were redrawn between the 2005 and 2010 elections. To be able to  
33 assess local economic trends over time, therefore, we ideally need an indicator that gives  
34 local conditions in constituencies not only in 2010 but also in 2005 (and hence for which  
35 earlier data have been recast into the new constituencies): we have therefore accessed the  
36 National Online Manpower Information Service (NOMIS) data on the proportion of the local  
37 population aged between 16 and 64 claiming job seekers allowance, as these data have been  
38 estimated for each 2010 constituency and for each month between the 2005 and 2010  
39 elections.  
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43 As a first cut at estimating the impact of local electoral context on the results of the 2010  
44 election, we look at the impact of the local percentage of working age adults claiming Job  
45 Seekers' Allowance (JSA, a proxy for local unemployment rates) on constituency results.  
46 There is, however, a complication. **While the economy is generally now seen as a valence**  
47 **issue, it can also provide the basis for positional politics (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2011;**  
48 **Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2013; Nadeau *et al.*, 2010; Dassonville and Lewis-Beck, 2013).** Normally,  
49 the local unemployment rate (or equivalent) is thought of in voting models as a valence  
50 measure: higher local unemployment rates indicate poorer performance and hence falling  
51 support for the government. But unemployment **can also be** a positional **measure: parties**  
52 of the **left (Labour** in the UK context) are usually seen as better serving the needs of the  
53 unemployed than are parties of the right, hence the higher the local unemployment rate in an  
54 area, the greater the support we might **expect for Labour**, and the lower the support for the  
55 Conservatives. When the incumbent government is Conservative, therefore, both the  
56 positional and **valence implications** of unemployment tend to run in the same direction: the  
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higher local unemployment levels are, the lower the support for the Conservatives. But where a Labour government is seeking re-election, valence and positional perspectives on unemployment lead to very different conclusions. From a valence perspective, higher unemployment levels should lead to lower support for the (Labour) government, as its economic policies are not delivering prosperity. But from a positional point of view, higher unemployment should lead to greater support for Labour, as that party is generally seen as the 'better' party for the unemployed.

Pattie and Johnston (2008) suggest a strategy for escaping this dilemma. They treat the constituency unemployment rate at a fixed point in time as a position measure (as it indicates levels of affluence or poverty in a seat), and the change over time in the unemployment rate as a valence measure (are things getting better or worse locally). Their analysis of constituency voting patterns at the 2005 election illustrates the utility of this approach: the Labour government did better, and the Conservative opposition worse, in seats where unemployment was high than where it was low (as predicted by the positional perspective). But Labour did worse and the Conservatives better the greater the local growth in the unemployment rate over time (as a valence perspective would suggest). We therefore replicate this strategy for constituency voting trends at the 2010 election, both to validate Pattie and Johnston's claim and to gain an initial insight into the impact of local economic context at the 2010 election.

Each party's percentage share of the constituency vote in 2010 is regressed against three variables (Table 3): the party's local vote share in 2005 (which both controls for long-term geographies of party loyalty and also turns our model into an analysis of change in vote share between 2005 and 2010);<sup>1</sup> the percentage of 16-64 year olds in each constituency claiming JSA in May 2010 (the 'positional' measure); and the change in the percentage claiming JSA between May 2005 and May 2010 (the 'valence' measure, capturing shifting conditions over the lifetime of the 2005-2010 parliament).<sup>2</sup>

As anticipated, vote share at the 2005 election is by far the most important factor in each equation. Parties' geographies of support in 2005 were a consistently good guide to the equivalent geographies in 2010. Areas of relative strength and weakness for each party tend not to change dramatically from one election to the next.

Local economic conditions, as indexed by the two JSA measures, also affected party vote shares in the hypothesised directions. As predicted by the positional perspective on local unemployment rates, the higher the proportion of 16-64 year-olds claiming JSA in a constituency, the higher Labour's share of the vote in 2010, and the smaller the Conservatives' and the Liberal Democrats'. The less affluent the area, the better Labour did and the worse the other two parties performed. But change in JSA levels since the previous election affected vote shares in the directions predicted by the valence perspective. The more the proportion seeking JSA had grown in an area, *ceteris paribus*, the worse the Labour candidate did and the better the Conservatives fared. At this aggregate scale, at least, there is evidence that voters were reacting to their local economic contexts in 2010, punishing the government and rewarding the main opposition for worsening local conditions (Curtice, 2010, 389).

#### Local economic context and the individual voter

Are these aggregate, ecological, findings replicated when we look at individual voters' behaviour? The 2010 BES CIPS data have several advantages for addressing the question.

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3 The survey has a very large sample size (over 13,300 respondents), increasing its potential as  
4 a source of information on sub-national contexts. Furthermore, while most conventional  
5 surveys interview in only a sample of constituencies, meaning there may be problems of  
6 representativeness when looking at scales below the national, CIPS, unusually, has  
7 respondents from almost every constituency in Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> Both factors allow us to  
8 estimate local climates of opinion at a variety of scales, a feature we utilise in the next  
9 section. In addition, the panel interviewed the same individuals before, during and after the  
10 2010 election campaign, providing access to individuals' pre-election dispositions (post-  
11 election cross-sectional surveys can ask about these dispositions, but the responses are  
12 inevitably affected to some degree by both the campaign and by the election outcome,  
13 creating difficulties for modelling).  
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16 Our first step is to build baseline individual-level models for vote choice in 2010 (table 4).<sup>4</sup> A  
17 binary logistic model is estimated for votes for each of the major parties, with the y-variable  
18 coded 1 if the individual reported voting for the party in the post-election wave of CIPS, and  
19 0 if they voted for another party or abstained.<sup>5</sup> The models control for individuals' self-  
20 reported votes in 2005, taken from the first, pre-election, panel wave. This replicates the basic  
21 design of the constituency models discussed above, turns the logistic models into analyses of  
22 how individuals changed their votes between 2005 and 2010, and provides some control for  
23 longer-term determinants of party support. In addition, the models include three measures of  
24 individuals' economic positions and evaluations, also from the first panel wave (respondents'  
25 perceptions of how the national economy had changed over the preceding twelve months;  
26 their personal sense of exposure to the financial crisis; and their main source of income  
27 (allowing us to contrast those in employment with those on benefits or other income  
28 sources).<sup>6</sup> In addition, contextual variables measured objective economic conditions in each  
29 respondent's constituency. As in the constituency analyses, we employ the percentage of 16-  
30 64 year olds in each constituency claiming JSA in May 2010, and the change in that  
31 percentage between May 2005 and May 2010. Finally, the ACORN socio-demographic  
32 classification was used to assign each respondent's constituency to one of its five categories  
33 reflecting a rough continuum from the most affluent to the most hard-pressed areas.<sup>7</sup>  
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37 Not surprisingly, people who reported voting for a party in 2005 were more likely than non-  
38 voters then (both those who abstained in 2005 and those too young to vote) to vote for the  
39 same party in 2010. And voting for one of the 'big three' parties in 2005 made it less likely  
40 that an individual would vote for one of its rivals in 2010.  
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43 Individual economic evaluations and situations played a part too. Consistent with the valence  
44 perspective, the better individuals felt the national economy had performed in the year prior  
45 to the election, the more likely they were to vote for the Labour government and the less  
46 likely to vote for the Conservative opposition. As the model already controls for 2005 voting,  
47 this illustrates the impact of voters' economic evaluations on how their vote choice changed  
48 in 2010. And the effect is substantial. For instance, other things being equal, the odds of  
49 someone who felt the economy had improved a great deal over the preceding year voting  
50 Labour were 9.3 times higher than the equivalent odds for someone who thought the national  
51 economy had become a lot worse. As discussed above, however, the problem for Labour in  
52 2010 was that very few people indeed saw signs of strong economic recovery, while most  
53 thought the economy was stagnant or in decline.  
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56 To some extent, personal circumstances had an additional influence on how respondents  
57 voted. In line with positional arguments, individuals whose main income source came from  
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state benefits were less likely to vote Conservative or Liberal Democrat in 2010 than were **those in** employment – again even after past vote is controlled for. And pensioners were less likely than those in work to vote Liberal Democrat. But, intriguingly, individuals' perceptions of how much they had been affected personally by the financial **crisis had little influence** on vote choice. Of the 9 coefficients for this variable (3 in each of the 3 models), only one reached statistical **significance. Individuals** who felt they had not been affected very much by the crisis were somewhat more likely to vote for Labour than were **those** who felt they had been affected a great deal (consistent, obviously, with a valence argument).

Over and above individuals' personal circumstances and views, there is some evidence that local economic context influenced **their** vote **decisions; most** of the evidence **presented here** points towards a positional rather than a valence interpretation, **however**. The higher the proportion of adults in respondents' constituencies on JSA at the time of the 2010 election, for instance, the greater the likelihood of individuals voting Labour and the smaller the likelihood of voting either Conservative or Liberal Democrat. Similarly, individuals living in more economically marginal areas (as indexed by the coefficients for each constituency's ACORN category: the comparison in all cases is the most affluent ACORN category, 'Wealthy Achievers', and the other categories are represented by dummy variables and appear in the table in descending order of general affluence), the greater the likelihood of voting Labour and the lower the likelihood of voting either Conservative or (for those in the most hard-pressed areas at least) Liberal Democrat. Individuals in poorer neighbourhoods were more likely to vote for Labour – the party with the strongest long-term association with representing the interests of the poor – than to vote for either of the other two parties. But, unlike the aggregate models reported earlier, changes in the local economic situation over time, at least as indexed by the change between 2005 and 2010 in the percentage claiming JSA, had no statistically discernible effect on individual vote choice in 2010 once the other factors reported here are taken into account.

### **Local climates of opinion as valence effects at various spatial scales**

So far, the results replicate in large measure previous analyses of economic voting and of the importance of local economic context on vote choice. However, the CIPS data provide an unusual opportunity to examine the impact of not just the 'objective' economy in each area but also that of the local climate of opinion. Other things being equal, were individuals who lived in communities where the balance of opinion on the state of the economy was relatively pessimistic more likely to punish the government than were **those** who lived in more optimistic communities? The following analyses explore the local climate of opinion at three different scales. The first scale is that of the respondent's parliamentary constituency. CIPS respondents lived in 629 constituencies throughout Great Britain (Northern Ireland is excluded). On average, there are 23 CIPS respondents in each constituency, though this varies substantially. The second scale analysed is that of the **major local government areas. Counties have considerable public visibility and often engender a strong sense of public loyalty. In** England and Wales, the major county council areas designated by the 1974 local government reform are used **(the so-called shire counties) along with** the metropolitan counties, and Greater London. In Scotland, we employ the 6 regions used since 1999 for elections to the Scottish Parliament. These units were chosen in preference to the current local authority map as the latter is very fragmented and diverse, with substantial variation in the size of the main local **government areas, whereas the 1974** geography was more uniform in terms of the populations capture within each of the major county areas. Across the 62 areas we identify at this level, the average district contained 436 CIPS respondents (though this

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3 was notably higher in some areas). Finally, the third geographical scale considered here is  
4 that of the 11 standard government regions: on average, there are 1349 respondents in each.  
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7 Two different measures of the local climate of opinion are estimated at each scale using the  
8 CIPS data: the percentage of respondents in each area who felt the national economic  
9 situation had become a lot worse over the previous year; and the percentage who reported  
10 being affected 'a great deal' by the financial crisis. As discussed earlier, there was a  
11 considerable mood of pessimism in 2010, so these measures give an indication of where the  
12 most pessimistic areas were. Levels of deep pessimism vary substantially from place to place  
13 (table 5). Inevitably, the estimates are rather more provisional at the constituency level than at  
14 county or regional scales, as they are based on considerably fewer individuals. Even so, we  
15 would expect, *a priori*, a greater range of responses the more local the scale, as some of the  
16 'highs' and 'lows' will tend to average out as we look at larger and larger areas. And that is,  
17 indeed, what is observed. At the constituency scale, for instance, the percentage of  
18 individuals saying the national economy had become a lot worse ranged from 0% in some  
19 areas to 73% in others. The range at the 'county' scale was narrower, but still substantial,  
20 from 16% to 42%. And it was narrower still at the regional scale – from 23% to 32%. Similar  
21 patterns hold for the percentages saying they personally had been affected a great deal by the  
22 financial crisis. In the most pessimistic constituencies on this measure, almost 50% of  
23 respondents held this view, while in some no respondent made this claim. The equivalent  
24 ranges for the county and regional scales were 5%-19% and 10%-14% respectively.  
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28 The impact of the local climate of economic opinion is assessed by adding these variables to  
29 the baseline models presented in table 4. Nine separate models are estimated, three – one for  
30 each party's vote – at each of the three scales.<sup>8</sup> The key results are displayed in table 6 (only  
31 the coefficients for the 'climate of opinion' variables at each scale are given; the coefficients  
32 for the other variables included in the baseline model are not substantially altered by the  
33 addition of these). The coefficients tell a consistent – but intriguing – story.  
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36 Whichever scale we look at, and controlling for a range of other factors (including  
37 individuals' personal views on the state of the national economy and on how much they had  
38 been affected by the financial crisis), the higher the percentage of people in an area reporting  
39 the opinion that the national economy had considerably worsened over the preceding year,  
40 the lower the likelihood that individuals living there would vote for the Labour government,  
41 and the higher the chance of voting for the Conservative opposition. A similar pattern holds  
42 for the percentages reporting being greatly affected by the crisis at regional scale, though not  
43 at the constituency or county scales. The odds of voting Liberal Democrat, meanwhile, were  
44 not on the whole affected by the local climate of economic opinion. Only two 'climate of  
45 opinion' coefficients achieved statistical significance in that party's vote models, both at the  
46 regional scale. The higher the percentage of people in a respondent's region who thought the  
47 national economy had declined a great deal, and the higher the proportion in the region  
48 reporting they had been affected a great deal by the economic crisis, the more likely it was  
49 that the respondent would vote Liberal Democrat.  
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52 These results are consistent with the argument that voters are influenced not only by their  
53 local economic context when deciding to vote, but also by the local climate of economic  
54 opinion. Consistent with the valence argument, the more pessimistic the balance of opinion in  
55 an area, the less likely its residents were to vote for the government in 2010, and the more  
56 likely they were to vote for the main party of opposition – even when we control for their  
57 own economic views, and for the objective state of their local economy (as indexed by the  
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3 JSA variables). Voters in 2010 were not basing their decisions only on what they themselves  
4 saw and thought about the economy, but were also moved by what others in their  
5 communities thought. This marks a significant step forward in our understanding of  
6 contextual effects in voting, as previous studies have focussed on the objective state of the  
7 local economy and/or on individuals' self-evaluations of local conditions. Before now, **no**  
8 **studies**, to the best of our knowledge, **have** shown that the balance of local opinion matters  
9 too. Yet it does.  
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12 But even more intriguing is that both the size and the strength of the 'climate of opinion'  
13 effects increase substantially as we move from the relatively local scale of the parliamentary  
14 constituency to the county and then again to the regional scale: the bigger the area  
15 considered, the greater the influence of the general balance of opinion on voters' decisions.  
16 The differences in coefficient size as we move from local to wider scales are very substantial.  
17 For instance, regional scale coefficients for the percentage of respondents in different areas  
18 saying they felt the national economy had become much worse over the previous year were  
19 on average ten times larger than the equivalent constituency-level coefficients, and around  
20 four times larger than the county-level coefficients. Similarly large inter-scale differences in  
21 coefficient size are also evident for the percentage locally saying they personally had been  
22 affected a great deal by the economic crisis. On the face of things, this seems surprising, as  
23 we might expect a true 'climate of opinion' effect to be strongest at those scales where  
24 individuals are best placed to have a reasonable idea of what most of those around them think  
25 – and those scales are much more likely to be local than to be county- or region-wide.  
26 Furthermore, this seems contrary to work on the scale at which the neighbourhood effect  
27 'works', which suggests local contexts are much more important than broader, regional ones  
28 (Johnston, Pattie *et al.*, 2000; Johnston *et al.*, 2007).  
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32 In part, this is almost certainly an artefact of the crisper estimates we are able to obtain at the  
33 county and regional scales compared to the constituency scale. Other things being equal,  
34 larger sub-samples at these scales mean smaller standard errors on estimates and fewer  
35 random errors. But we suspect there is more going on here than just this. Crisper standard  
36 errors might lead to clearer messages on statistical significance, but why should this also lead  
37 to larger coefficients?  
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40 **These results** may reflect the fact that local economies are rarely contained just within one  
41 parliamentary constituency. Travel-to-work areas (TTWAs), for instance, illustrate the point  
42 that commuter zones and labour markets in many parts of the country cover relatively large  
43 areas encompassing the major metropolitan centres. Good or bad economic performance in  
44 one part of a TTWA may have knock-on consequences for people in other parts of the  
45 TTWA. Individuals may be influenced by more than just their immediate locality's economic  
46 performance, therefore: even residents of an affluent constituency in an otherwise stagnating  
47 region might feel increasingly anxious about the economy's future prospects – **especially if**  
48 **they are highlighted in local media.**  
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51 **At a broader scale, therefore,** these findings may capture the impact of local media markets  
52 (city-wide for local newspapers and radio stations, region-wide for regional television news  
53 broadcasts from both BBC and ITV) and their reporting on economic trends in their area. If  
54 local media outlets' economic coverage is dominated by 'bad news' stories, that may well  
55 lead – even without conversations between individual voters in the area – to a generally  
56 depressed view of the situation. More buoyant local economies, meanwhile, may produce  
57 fewer depressing economic stories. To the extent that it is through the local media that many  
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3 individuals get their fullest picture of how their local economy is faring, therefore, we might  
4 reasonably expect that local media market areas – crudely captured here by county- and  
5 regional-level scales – should become important contexts in setting local climates of opinion.  
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### 7 8 **Conclusions**

9 While the severe economic downturn in the UK (and world) economy after 2007 did not  
10 (quite) deliver a clear victory to the Conservative opposition at the 2010 election (the party  
11 was only able to form a government in coalition with the Liberal Democrats), it certainly  
12 contributed to the Labour government's defeat (and the party's worst election result since  
13 1983). Having built its success largely on a reputation for economic competence, the longest-  
14 serving Labour government in British history was brought down by a combination of market  
15 failure and hubris. Far from solving the problems of 'boom and bust', Gordon Brown's  
16 government fell victim to the largest economic crisis in over half a century. Going into the  
17 election, most voters were all too aware of the gloomy economic situation, felt anything but  
18 optimistic about the future, and as a result many turned against the government.  
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21 As in previous contests, the election result was also shaped by Britain's changing economic  
22 geography. The greater the increase in the local unemployment rate in a constituency between  
23 2005 and 2010, the more votes the Labour government lost there. But more than that, voters'  
24 decisions were influenced by the local climate of opinion regarding the economy. Voters'  
25 valence evaluations were shaped by their own situations (which in turn were influenced to  
26 some degree by the state of the local economy). But they were also influenced – as  
27 demonstrated for the first time here – by the opinions of those they lived among. Other things  
28 (including the objective state of the local economy) being equal, the more pessimistic local  
29 views of the economy, the less likely individuals were to vote for the Labour government and  
30 the more likely they were to vote for the opposition Conservatives.  
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33 But most striking of all, by a considerable margin, the 'climate of opinion' variables have  
34 their clearest and most substantial influence at the regional, not the constituency or county,  
35 scale. This stands in direct contradiction to other work on contextual effects, which shows  
36 that local contexts matter considerably more than broader ones (Johnston *et al.*, 2007). What  
37 is more, no voter can hope to encounter more than a very small proportion of individuals at  
38 the regional scale: we are unlikely to be picking up a conversation effect, therefore. Rather,  
39 we suspect the key factor here is related to economic reporting in the regional media,  
40 particularly via regional television news. Contrary to the implications of recent work on the  
41 subject, contextual effects can, it seems, be generated at a regional as well as a more local  
42 level. Regions remain important reference points for voters when it comes to large issues  
43 such as the state of the economy; after all, so much media attention is paid to regional  
44 variations – often expressed as the 'north-south' divide – that it is not surprising that such  
45 broad variations become ingrained in the public consciousness, as part of a 'them-and-us' set  
46 of attitudes which sees one set of regions as generally favoured by public policy and others  
47 disadvantaged.  
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51 It is hardly surprising that contextual effects which depend on inter-personal contact, such as  
52 conversations between individuals or some forms of campaign mobilisation, tend to be more  
53 efficacious when very local. But not all contextual effects are of this kind. Few voters are so  
54 naive as to think the economy begins and ends on their doorstep: most look to wider scales  
55 when evaluating government performance on this most important factor. But they are moved  
56 not only by the hard economic facts, but also by the shared optimism or pessimism of others  
57 in the areas in which they live, especially when these areas are large enough to capture a  
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broad sense of how the economy is really faring. Regional economic geographies, both substantive and affective, still matter in British elections.

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## Notes

- 1 The 2010 election in England and Wales was fought in different constituencies to those used in 2005: we therefore use Press Association estimates of the 2005 election results had that contest been held in the new seats: Rallings and Thrasher, 2007). Scotland's constituencies were redrawn prior to the 2005 election, so the 2005 results there are the actual election outcomes.
- 2 The models were checked for potential multicollinearity problems. In all cases, variance inflation factors were well inside conventionally accepted ranges, suggesting no difficulties.
- 3 A total of 629 constituencies were employed here, three fewer than the total number of 632 seats in Great Britain at the 2010 election. Two (Ealing Southall and Enfield Southgate) had no BES CIPS respondents. Respondents living in the Buckingham constituency, which was represented in 2010 by the Speaker of the House of Commons and hence was not contested by the major parties, were also excluded.
- 4 Once again, checks for multicollinearity using variance inflation factors revealed no problems.
- 5 Binary logistic models were used in preference to a multinomial logit for ease of exposition. The core analyses reported here have also been examined using the multinomial form: no major conclusions are affected.
- 6 The exact question wording for national economic evaluations was: "How do you think the general economic situation in this country has changed over the last twelve months? Has it: got a lot worse; got a little worse; stayed the same; got a little better; got a lot better; don't know?" The question wording for exposure to the economic crisis was: "Have you personally been affected by the financial crisis that is affecting world markets", and the options were: a great deal; somewhat; not much; not at all; and don't know.
- 7 ACORN is a commercial socio-demographic classification of British residential neighbourhoods, produced by CACI Ltd.. It combines data from the UK census and other government reports with information from lifestyle surveys to produce a hierarchical classification of neighbourhoods (built up from postcode levels) into 5 categories, 17 groups and 56 types (types nest within groups, and groups within categories). More information on the classification can be found on CACI's web site: <http://www.caci.co.uk/acorn-classification.aspx>.
- 8 As the three scales nest together – constituencies within counties within regions – there is some correlation between the various measures, raising the potential for multicollinearity problems if all three scales were entered simultaneously into the same equation. To avoid this, it was decided to model each scale in a separate model. Even so, the correlations are generally relatively modest. The constituency-county correlation for the percentage of people saying the national economy had become much worse was 0.378, while the constituency-region correlation was 0.205, and the county-region correlation was 0.547. The equivalent correlations for the percentage reporting they had been affected a great deal by the economic crisis were (constituency-county) 0.328, (constituency-region) 0.160, and (county-region) 0.294. We have experimented with models (not reported here) containing measures at all three scales simultaneously: the basic conclusions are unaffected. As local opinions on the state of the economy are shaped in part by objective local economic conditions, there is also a risk of multicollinearity between the



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constituency unemployment measures and the different measures of the local climate of economic opinion. However, as in previous models, an examination of the variance inflation factors for all the coefficients in each model showed that multicollinearity was not present: the VIF scores were all well within conventionally acceptable levels.

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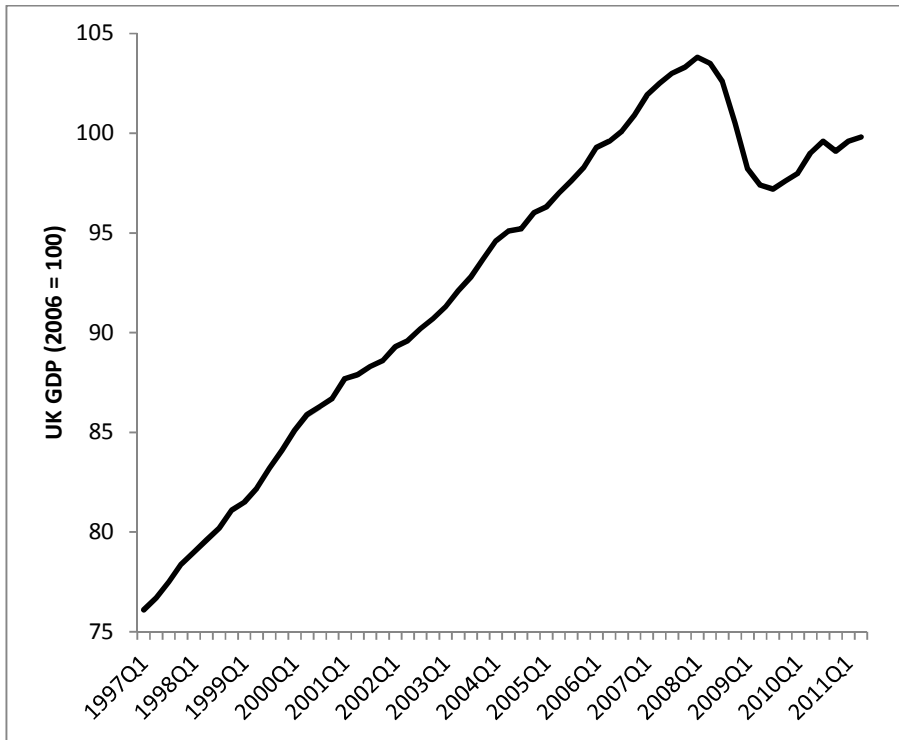
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Figure 1: UK seasonally adjusted quarterly GDP trends, 1997-2011 (2006=100)



Review Only

Figure 2: UK seasonally adjusted unemployment rate, 1997-2010 (source: Labour Force Survey)

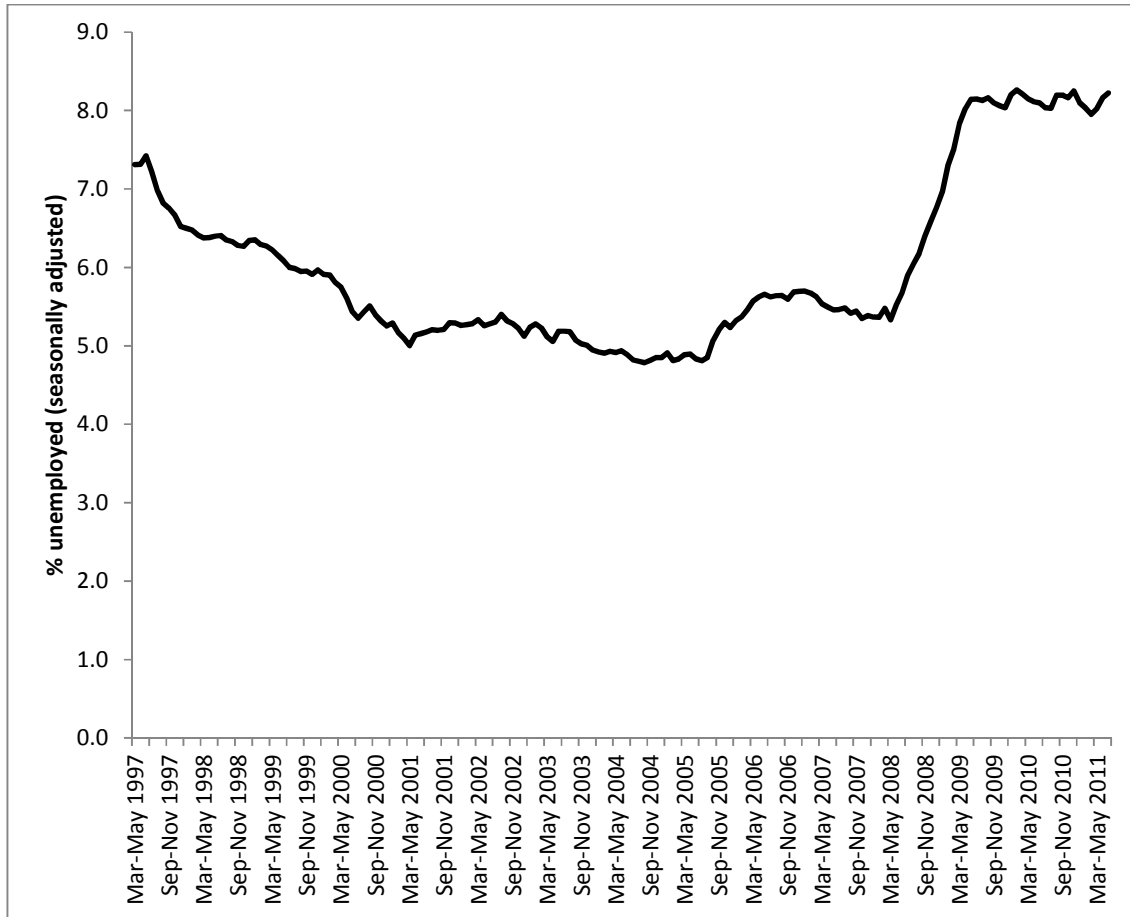


Table 1: Pre-election economic evaluations, 2010 (source: 2010 BES CIPS)

	State of personal finances		State of national economy	
	Change over last 12 months	Change over next 12 months	Change over last 12 months	Change over next 12 months
	%	%	%	%
Lot worse	15.4	9.7	28.4	11.1
Little worse	36.0	27.5	29.8	22.5
Same	34.2	40.3	18.7	28.1
Little better	12.4	20.2	22.4	36.4
Lot better	2.0	2.3	0.7	2.0
N	13088	12595	12987	12341

Table 2: Pre-election assessments of who is best able to deal with Britain's economic problems, 2010 (source: 2010 BES CIPS)

Which party best?		Which leader best?	
	%		%
Labour	31.3	Brown	29.7
Conservatives	35.2	Cameron	32.9
Liberal Democrats	20.5	Clegg	10.9
Don't know	13.0	Don't know	26.6
N	13356		13356

Table 3: Constituency vote shares in 2010 and local economic situation: OLS regression models

	Labour % 2010	Conservative % 2010	Liberal Democrat % 2010
Party % vote share 2005:			
Labour % 2005	0.91**		
Conservative % 2005		0.98**	
Liberal Democrat % 2005			0.90**
% claimant count, May 2010	2.78**	-0.66**	-0.84**
Change in % claimant count, May 2005 – May 2010	-5.21**	1.11**	1.53**
Constant	-5.51**	5.09	3.83
R <sup>2</sup>	0.91	0.95	0.83
N	631	631	631



Table 4 Baseline models: The economy and voting at the 2010 election (source: 2010 BES CIPS)

Vote 2010	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat
Vote 2005 (comparison = did not vote)			
Labour	2.02**	-0.52**	0.03
Conservative	-2.22**	2.88**	-1.20**
Liberal Democrat	-1.02**	-0.55**	2.25**
Other	-0.22	-0.07	-0.31**
Too young	0.36+	0.31	0.44*
Don't remember	0.05	0.34**	0.55**
Respondent's pre-election retrospective evaluation of national economic situation (comparison = got a lot worse)			
Little worse	0.48**	-0.33**	0.17**
Stayed same	0.76**	-0.48**	0.12
Little better	1.32**	-1.04**	0.07
Lot better	2.23**	-0.90*	-0.66
Respondent's pre-election self-reported level of exposure to the financial crisis (comparison = a great deal)			
Somewhat	0.15	0.03	-0.01
Not much	0.36**	-0.16+	0.03
Not at all	0.19+	-0.16	0.09
Respondent's main source of income (comparison = employment)			
Pension	-0.01	0.11+	-0.28**
Benefits	0.17+	-0.27*	-0.26*
Other	-0.23	-0.07	0.05
% claimant count in constituency, May 2010	0.14**	-0.10**	-0.09**
% point change in constituency claimant count, May 2005-May 2010	0.08	0.08	-0.01
ACORN constituency classification (comparison = 'ACORN Wealthy Achievers')			
ACORN Urban Prosperity	0.36**	-0.21*	0.08
ACORN Comfortably Off	0.13+	-0.04	-0.07
ACORN Moderate Means	0.43**	-0.26**	-0.03
ACORN Hard-Pressed	0.39**	-0.30**	-0.31**
Constant	-2.23	-1.18	-0.96
-2 log likelihood			
	13690.16	15786.99	13967.55
Model improvement			
	4875.16	5670.24	2752.57
Significance			
	0.000	0.000	0.000
% correctly classified			
	83.5	84.9	81.6
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			
	0.49	0.51	0.29
N			
	12430	12430	12430

Table 5 Local climates of economic opinion, 2010 (source: 2010 BES CIPS)

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Constituency scale					
% saying national economy had become a lot worse	0.0	73.3	28.8	12.0	629
% saying they had been greatly affected by financial crisis	0.0	47.3	12.2	8.4	629
County scale					
% saying national economy had become a lot worse	16.5	41.5	28.6	5.1	62
% saying they had been greatly affected by financial crisis	5.4	19.3	11.9	3.2	62
Regional scale					
% saying national economy had become a lot worse	22.7	32.3	28.5	2.6	11
% saying they had been greatly affected by financial crisis	9.7	13.9	12.1	1.4	11

Table 6 Baseline models plus 'local climate of opinion' at different scales: (source: 2010 BES CIPS)

Vote 2010	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat
Baseline model plus local climate of opinion at constituency scale			
% in constituency reporting national economy a lot worse	-0.007**	0.006*	-0.002
% in constituency reporting being affected 'a great deal' by financial crisis	-0.004	0.001	0.004
Baseline model plus local climate of opinion at county scale			
% in county reporting national economy a lot worse	-0.016**	0.014*	0.007
% in county reporting being affected 'a great deal' by financial crisis	-0.019+	0.018+	0.014
Baseline model plus local climate of opinion at government region scale			
% in region reporting national economy a lot worse	-0.049**	0.056**	0.031**
% in region reporting being affected 'a great deal' by financial crisis	-0.059**	0.082**	0.047*