

# **Economic Voting through Boom and Bust: Information and Choice at Irish General Elections, 2002-2011**

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## **Introduction**

A considerable body of research exists on the economic and informational determinants of voting behaviour. However, unresolved questions remain about the relationship between these two factors. While economic voting is generally understood as a matter of prospective evaluation carried out on the basis of retrospective cues available to voters, the extent to which prospective information matters for vote choice remains unclear, in particular if it conflicts with retrospective experience. How do different sources of information compete for affecting vote choice and evaluations of incumbents? Specifically, how do voters evaluate incumbents if past economic performance has been good but predictions about the near future are bleak? In this chapter, we address this question by analyzing the economic and informational determinants of vote choice at three successive Irish elections: the last two general elections before the fiscal and economic collapse and the first election following the meltdown. Jointly, these elections form a quasi-experimental case study of economic voting that enables us to investigate whether the extent to which voters reward the government for facilitating an economic boom is affected by warnings about precarious foundations and predictions of economic decline.

To analyse this potentially contingent relationship we link media content data in the context of the elections with survey data from the Irish National Election Study (INES). The three election campaigns are marked by significant variation in the amount (and, for two elections, in the tone) of economic coverage across major Irish newspapers. For the 2007 and 2011

elections we know which voters read which newspapers, and we can estimate readership for the 2002 election. This allows us to investigate the extent to which the exposure to media reporting on the economy, both quantitatively (how much do the media report on the economy?) and qualitatively (how do the media portray the government's economic performance?) affect vote choice beyond citizens' evaluations of the government's economic performance. Controlling for standard predictors of vote choice, including economic evaluations, our findings suggest that the media have no effect on the decision to vote for an incumbent party in the context of the three most recent Irish elections.

In the next section, we develop our theoretical argument in the context of the literature on prospective and retrospective economic voting. We then introduce the data before describing how we measure the variables. In the fifth section, we present the results of our empirical analysis. We conclude by discussing our findings and drawing lessons for the literature on economic voting and media effects.

### **Economic voting: The role of the media**

During the 1992 US presidential election campaign, Bill Clinton's adviser, James Carville, placed a sign over his desk in the Little Rock headquarters displaying a simple four-word phrase: 'It's the economy, Stupid!' (Safire 1993, 376). While its mantraic use as Clinton's central campaign theme introduced the phrase into the popular lexicon, the gist of the message – that economic performance is of overarching importance for the popularity and electoral success of politicians – had long been established among practitioners and academics alike. Since Key's (1968) study, *The Responsible Electorate*, political scientists assume a reward-punishment model of leader and party support and electoral success: when economic conditions are good, the electorate will reward incumbents; when indicators of economic performance turn less than satisfactory, voters will punish office-holders (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). A wealth of comparative research suggests that the economy tends to weigh more heavily than other factors in the vote decision (e.g., Alvarez, Nagler and Willette 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Duch and Stevenson 2006). This does not necessarily imply that voters value the economy more than other political goods. The underlying claim is rather that the economy represents an informative and easily interpretable clue about the competence of incumbent politicians (Duch and Stevenson 2008). For this reason, voters are likely to rely on economic evaluations more than on other signals in making a voting decision (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000).

Economic voting is conceptualized as voter judgments on trends in general economic conditions serving to predict vote choice for or against incumbent candidates. Past findings were inconclusive as to whether voters take their clues from the wider economy and behave, in the terminology of the field, ‘sociotropically’, or follow a pattern of pocket-book voting (‘egotropic’ voting), as was originally reported by Kiewiet and Kinder (1979). However, the current state of knowledge tends toward voters considering national economic conditions when casting their vote (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007).

Another major controversy in economic voting research concerned the question of whether voters are retrospective or prospective in evaluating economic performance. While rational voters should be *prospective* in their assessment of election candidates and how they would perform in office once elected (Downs 1957), most empirical findings indicate that measures of *retrospective* economic evaluation by citizens work better than indicators of prospective evaluation (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). Given the considerable difficulties citizens face in predicting future trends, most scholars now assume that voters derive clues from observing the past performance of incumbents (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000).

To date, this assumption has gone largely untested. One reason for this is that prospective expectations and retrospective assessments frequently point in the same direction. Indeed, as Lewis-Beck and Paldam (2000, 118) remarked, ‘[t]here is very little difference between retrospective and prospective expectations, as people have largely static expectations.’ Economic voting, in the words of Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, ‘may be retrospective, prospective, or a mix of the two, depending in part on the political context. When the incumbent party has a clear political track record, retrospective evaluations should outperform prospective judgments’ (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2007, 531.)). Thus, voters seem to view past and current economic trends as strongly indicative of the future. However, this makes them prone to misjudge future developments. In this, voters are not alone: economists, for their part, have a ‘record of failure to predict recessions’ that remains ‘virtually unblemished’ (Loungani 2001, 419). Voter perceptions of the economy are shaped by these expert judgements about how well the economy performs, and these expert judgements are channelled to voters through the news media. This opens up the possibility that retrospective and prospective evaluations are in conflict. The question is then: *What do voters do if past performance and outlook diverge?*

We do not expect voters to be better forecasters than economists. However, we propose that the way in which mass expectations about future economic performance are formed is an important factor in determining the extent to which, as well as how, economic circumstances affect perception and, ultimately, vote choice. Thus, we take into account the information environment in which voters arrive at their retrospective and/or prospective evaluations and allow this to inform their vote choices. Existing evidence is inconclusive as to whether economic voting is seen as rational and informed or rather as a matter of taking accessible cues and satisficing (see, for example, MacKuen, Ericson and Stimson 1992). In fact, the role of the media in informing voters and providing a basis for economic voting remains severely under-researched. Only rarely has media coverage been taken into account as a variable in models of economic voting. Where the media did enter the analysis, the focus has mostly been on media exposure as an indicator of political sophistication (Gomez and Wilson 2001; Hetherington 1996). A recent exception is the analysis of the economy-media-public opinion nexus by Soroka et al. (2014). These scholars compare trends in macro-economic indicators, tone and amount of economic coverage with public evaluations about the economy in the US between 1980 and 2010. They find that media coverage tends to focus on current and future economic indicators, such as growth forecasts. Media reporting reflects changes in indicators rather than absolute measures of, for example, growth. Moreover, there seems to be a mutually reinforcing relationship between media measures and public opinion: the media reflect opinion changes while also effectively relaying information about changes in core indicators, thus rendering public mood similarly sensitive to changes in macroeconomic trends.

While the analysis by Soroka et al. (2014) benefits from their use of longitudinal data covering over 30 years, it is confined to the aggregate level, thereby black-boxing the causal process underlying opinion formation and vote choice. We aim to shed light into the box by using INES data to examine the role of media input on economic voting at the individual level. Finally, while Soroka et al. analyse how the economy developed according to real-world indicators, how this was reported in the media and how it was perceived by the public at large, we investigate how media reporting, individual perceptions, and their interplay shape vote choice.

Beyond the aforementioned research, studies on economic voting have only taken a limited interest in media variables and only insofar as they could be understood as ‘a strong correlate of political sophistication and awareness’ (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 900). Frequent media users have proven to be less focused on personal circumstances and hence to be less prone to pocketbook voting. It has been suggested that this is not only because more exposure reflects higher levels of awareness and sophistication but also because a ‘sociotropic priming effect’ occurs (Mutz 1992, 499). This implies that economic news emphasizes collective experiences with the economy, so that high media exposure leads voters to take such a larger picture more into account and to be less pre-occupied with their personal situation when evaluating governments and making their vote choice.

One shortcoming within the field of economic voting research is that the interest in media effects has remained relatively marginal. The literature has focussed exclusively on distinguishing between levels of awareness and sophistication. Moreover, the operationalization of such media effects remains restricted to simple measures of exposure (Holbrook and Garand 1996, Anderson et al. 2004, Ansolabehere et al. (2011)). As a result, the type of media outlets respondents are exposed to have not been taken into account, and neither has the content within those media been included in the analysis. In fact, any consideration of media content is limited to aggregate level studies that investigate the dynamics of real-world indicators, overall tendencies in media coverage and public opinion trends, such as aggregate economic perceptions (Soroka et al. 2014), consumer confidence (Hollanders and Vliegenthart 2011) or government popularity functions (Sanders et al. 1993). What is lacking, firstly, is a clear assessment of how voters obtain the information they need to base their vote choice on economic evaluations. Secondly, we do not know whether individual-level variation in the attention that is paid to economic issues is driven by media coverage.

The literature on media effects points us in a useful direction, in particular in the form of the theory of priming (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). Priming is an extension to agenda setting. This extension is crucial for any attempt at assessing the role of the media in economic voting. The agenda setting perspective implies that public attention to specific policy issues is directed and driven by media emphases: the more the media report on an issue or a policy area, the more the public becomes aware of it and cares about it (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 1993). Priming theory goes a step further and proposes that,

when our attention is directed towards an issue, a problem or a policy area, our wider political decisions – such as over how we evaluate governments, presidents or prime ministers, or who to vote for – are primed so as to be dominated by consideration of said issue, problem or policy area (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). With regard to economic voting, priming is therefore a valuable concept that allows us to propose an explanation of variation between individuals in how salient economic considerations become when a vote choice is to be made. In addition, we expect a simple information advantage of respondents thus primed: the more the focus on economic issues in the medium of choice, the higher the exposure to relevant information, and hence, the more solid the basis on which economic evaluations are formed and able to drive a respondent's vote choice. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: The more economic content readers are exposed to, the greater the association between economic evaluations and vote choice.

Beyond variation in the importance of the economy for an individual's vote choice, we are interested in how voters decide in situations of varying complexity about how good a guidance previous experience is for future economic expectations. We are not aware of any available coding of media content that readily distinguishes between retrospective and prospective economic coverage: it would mean to introduce yet more complexity into coding schemes to take into account the relative treatment of government records versus pledges and promises for the future. However, in a situation of increasing complexity, we would expect voters to be reliant on information and judgments from trusted sources to guide their evaluations of governments' economic performance. Indeed, the mass media do not merely provide readers with information and agendas, but they also implicitly or explicitly deliver judgments and recommendations with their reporting. Previous studies of media persuasion were concerned mainly with the detection of a general partisan bias (see e.g. Druckman and Parkin 2005, Ladd and Lenz 2009, Brandenburg and van Egmond 2013). By contrast, we propose that positive and negative media judgments about the state of the economy, or indeed its future prospects, serve as a tool for voters to make up their mind in an election campaign. Thus, we expect that

H2: The more negative reporting on the economy readers are exposed to, the more likely they are to vote against the incumbent.

**Data: Irish national elections and the economic collapse**

By using the three waves of the INES we can analyse elections that took place under substantially different economic circumstances and that were accompanied by vastly different media reporting. To this end, we analyse vote choice and its determinants in the context of three Irish general elections of 2002, 2007 and 2011. The 2002 election took place in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom that was to continue for another six years. In 2007 the boom was reaching its end with abounding warning signs of an over-heating housing market. The subsequent 2011 election occurred after the economic collapse and after a bailout by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund placed severe austerity rules on the Irish economy and on the electorate. At first glance, Ireland seems to provide a typical example of economic voting over these past three elections (for an analysis of the extent of economic voting in Ireland, see the chapter by Leyden and Lewis-Beck in this volume). The government, and most of all the senior coalition partner, Fianna Fáil, was rewarded twice for overseeing an economic boom, receiving 41.5 per cent of first-preference votes in 2002 and 41.6 per cent 2007. The junior coalition partner, the Progressive Democrats, gained two seats (in spite of a drop in first-preference votes) in 2002 and lost both seats and votes in 2007. Fianna Fáil was severely punished in 2011 in the wake of the economic and fiscal collapse, having its share of first-preference votes reduced to 17.5 per cent. Its coalition partner from 2007 until the breakdown of the 28<sup>th</sup> Government of Ireland, the Green Party, received less than two per cent of the first-preference votes and lost all of its six seats in the Dáil (Fianna Fáil's erstwhile junior coalition partner, the Progressive Democrats, had disbanded by November 2009, following devastating election results and political obsolescence from 2007 onward).

The evidence from the Irish case supports the claim that the electoral response to economic conditions is asymmetrical, with governments being punished considerably more for overseeing bad times than they are rewarded for good times (van der Brug et al. 2007, 163ff.; Soroka 2006). Existing research into economic voting in Ireland suggests that economic voting was less in evidence during the good times, when voters seemed more concerned about quality of life issues, than it became in the post-collapse election of 2011 (Chapter X; Marsh and Tilley 2010, Marsh and Mikhaylov 2012).

Another advantage of studying the Irish case is the fact that Irish newspapers are not traditionally partisan. This means that their readers are less drawn to particular papers because of their political leanings. At the same time, they vary with respect to their judgments on government policy and performance. As a result, the endogeneity problem that is evident in for instance the British case (see Ladd and Lenz 2009, 395ff; Brandenburg and van Egmond 2011, 450f) does not arise. Lastly, economic voting requires sufficient clarity of government responsibility matters. In the case of coalition government, the economic vote coefficient may weaken, because voters are less clear about who to blame compared with single-party government (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000; Powell and Whitten 1993; Royed et al. 2001). With coalition government being the norm in Irish politics, the three election studies provide us with least likely cases for an effect of economic evaluations on voter support for the main government party. At the same time, they open up the possibility that the media may assist voters in identifying the government party responsible for good or bad economic times.

### **Measurement of vote choice, media reporting and control variables**

Retrospective economic voting is about providing support for or withholding support from the incumbent parties, and the latter can be done with or without transferring support explicitly to another party. Thus, abstention is an element in the set of the economic vote choice – in particular in times of crisis. According to Kriesi (2012), disaffected voters have several options, including turning to opposition parties and abstaining from voting. This could be observed in, e.g., Southern European countries that were severely affected by the crisis. For the case of Portugal, Freire and Santana-Pereira (2012) have found that the incumbent presiding over an economic crisis is punished by a combination of ‘sincere protest voting’ and abstention. And for the Italian case, Passarelli and Tuorto have concluded that abstention functioned as a relief valve for the discontented electorate, so that voters’ critical evaluations of the economy led to ‘economic non-voting’ (Passarelli and Tuorto 2014, 156). Therefore, the dependent variable in our analysis is the vote for the main government party. This variable takes on the value 1 if a respondent indicated that they voted for Fianna Fáil at the respective national election. It is coded zero for respondents who indicated that they voted either for an opposition party or abstained from voting.

The main independent variables of interest are respondents’ evaluations of the government’s handling of the economy, as well as media coverage of, and media judgments on, this topic.



For their individual evaluations, respondents were asked: ‘Thinking back over the last five years – the lifetime of the 1997 to 2002 Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrat government – would you say that the ECONOMY in Ireland over that period of time got a lot better; a little better; stayed the same; got a little worse; or got a lot worse?’<sup>1</sup>

For each of the three elections, we can link INES survey data with content analysis data from major Irish daily newspapers in order to ascertain whether economic voting is predicated on the extent and nature of economic coverage that respondents are exposed to. The newspapers analysed are the *Evening Herald*, the *Irish Examiner*, the *Irish Independent*, *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Sun*, and the *Irish Daily Star*.<sup>2</sup> The different newspapers vary in amount and tendency of economic coverage, and separate media content analyses are available for each of these three elections.<sup>3</sup> During each of the three election, content analysis covered the entire official campaign period, from the day after dissolution of the Dáil to the day before election was held. The 2007 and the 2011 INES contain newspaper readership variables that allow us to directly match news content with individual respondents in the sample. News readership has not been recorded for in the 2002 election study. However, the 2007 INES contains a panel element, which includes 545 respondents who took part both in the 2002 and the 2007 waves. Therefore, we can use the 2007 readership data as a proxy for 2002 media behaviour for these respondents. While this may be imprecise, there is little to suggest that newspaper readership changes radically across even a five-year period.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2011 questionnaire, the time changes from ‘last five years’ to ‘last four years’.

<sup>2</sup> Selection of newspapers was based on readership figures. 2002 was a smaller study that only included the four largest selling papers, while 2007 included the six largest, all with an estimated readership of over 250,000 (<http://www.finfacts.ie/finfactsblog/2007/03/irish-newspaper-readership-2007.html>). In 2011, the *Evening Herald* was dropped from selection, perhaps because despite the existence of national edition it is widely perceived as a local, Dublin-based paper.

<sup>3</sup> For details of the coding procedure, coding categories, and inter-coder reliability tests see Brandenburg (2005) and O’Malley et al (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Since readership is in decline and we are using a proxy that is moving backwards in time, errors are more likely to occur due to readers having switched papers than not having been a reader in 2002. We are not aware of any systematic studies into stability and switching in newspaper readership, either in the form of national case studies or comparative research. The only evidence available comes from the UK, where Ladd and Lenz (2009) report a majority of readers in their sample as ‘habitual’ readers. The authors only counted respondents as habitual readers if they reported reading the same newspaper in every one of five waves of the 1992-1997 British Election Panel Survey.

Our media content variables are coverage and tone. Coverage is the proportion of total coverage in a newspaper devoted to economic issues over the course of the campaign. We treat this as an indicator of how much emphasis a particular newspaper placed on economic issues in the run-up to each of these three elections. Table 1 provides an overview of the coverage of economic issues in six Irish newspapers. There is quite some variation in the space that economic matters take up within each newspaper. In 2002, a little over 10 per cent of news content in the *Evening Herald* was on economic issues, while this amounts to over 16 per cent in the *Irish Independent*. An arguably more interesting comparison is over time. The average share of economic news reporting in all newspapers in 2002 was 13.5 per cent. This almost halved by 2007 (7.2 per cent) and eventually rose to one quarter of all news coverage in 2011. For three newspapers, the *Irish Examiner*, the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*, we have coverage data for all three-election years. Each of these paper individually reproduces the aforementioned pattern: as Ireland was on the verge the financial meltdown, economic news reporting was at its lowest.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

In addition to coverage of the economy, we include an interaction term between economic coverage and a respondent's evaluation of the economy in our empirical model. This enables us to estimate how variation in coverage across newspapers affects how likely their readers are to vote according to economic evaluations. While it is often advisable to compute multiplicative terms based on the full range of the component continuous variables to maximize the information contained in the interaction term (MacCallum et al. 2002), in the present case this would not result in an interaction term suitable for testing H1. Recall that the hypothesis states that those exposed to more economic coverage are more likely to display economic voting behaviour. If we simply interacted the continuous media variable with the ordinal evaluation scale, high values on the new variable would indicate exposure to much economic coverage paired with positive economic evaluation and low values exposure to little economic coverage and negative economic evaluations. However, our hypothesis is two-tailed: we would expect those exposed to larger quantities of economic coverage *and* making positive evaluations to be more likely to vote for the government than those with *either* less exposure *or* less positive evaluations or both. We also expect respondents exposed to a lot of economic coverage and having negative evaluations to be less likely to vote for the

government than those either less exposed or more positive about the economy or both. Therefore, in order to be able to measure the conditioning effect of media coverage on the strength of economic voting, we dichotomize the media variable, distinguishing between readers of newspapers providing a larger share of economic coverage and readers of newspapers providing little. The cut-off points have been chosen to distinguish clusters of papers providing a lot of economic coverage from those providing little. In most cases these values are near the mean and median values for a survey wave.<sup>5</sup>

Our second media variable is tone. This measure is only available for the 2002 and 2007 waves, since in contrast to the two earlier studies, the media content analysis conducted in 2011 that can be linked with INES does not include a measure of positive (+1), neutral (0) or negative (-1) content (McMenamin et al 2013, O'Malley et al. 2014). Therefore, it is only for the two earlier elections that we can use this additional variable to test whether exposure to more positive or negative media judgments drives vote choice in addition to self-reported economic evaluations of respondents (H2). The measure of media tone we use is not a newspaper's assessment of economic development but rather a judgment about the government's handling of the economy. All newspaper op-ed pieces and commentary were coded for tone whenever a reference was made to parties or political leaders. Selecting only those text segments that were also coded for containing coverage of economic issues, and then only those segments where judgments of the governing parties were given, we arrive at a measure of tone towards governing parties with regard to economic affairs. We take this as a meaningful indicator of media judgment of economic performance of the government as well as of economic policy proposals. Thus, the measure contains prospective as well retrospective media judgments on the economy and on the government's competence in this respect. As with coverage, there is quite some variation across the different newspapers. In 2002, the *Evening Herald* was virtually neutral in its tone, while the other three newspapers for which we have data were quite critical of the government – most so in the case of the *Irish Times* (see Table 2). By 2007, however, little is left of this criticism. On average, Irish newspapers were now neutral with respect to the government's economic competence, and the Irish Sun

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<sup>5</sup> The cut-off point for 2002 is 15 percent economic coverage; those for the 2007 and 2011 elections are 9 and 25, respectively. These cut-off points are at or very near the inflection point separating two parts of a bimodal distribution. Applying different cut-off points, such as the median, does not alter the substantive results reported below.

was strongly positive in its tone. During the 2007 election campaign, the only negative commentary reporting was produced by the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Daily Star*, and this was not nearly as negative as the average in 2002.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The newspaper readership question in the survey allowed the recording of multiple responses, and many respondents indicated that they regularly used two or more different newspapers for political information.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, when matching media content data to individual respondents, we average the coverage and tone measures for the different newspapers reported by a respondent. As readers of multiple newspapers did not indicate which papers they read more frequently and which less, we do not apply any weights when averaging.

We include a number of standard control variables in our models. Above all, these include demographic information such as the sex (female=1, male=0), age, education, income, and whether a respondent lives in an urban or rural constituency. Education is a six-point ordinal scale of the highest education level achieved by the time of the survey, ranging from no completed education (1) to university degree or equivalent (6). Income is measured by ten ordinal bands of respondents' overall annual household income before tax and including benefits. Bands range from under €20,000 to €150,000 and more. In addition, we control for the self-placement of respondents on a left-right ideological dimension as well partisanship.<sup>7</sup> Summary statistics for all variables are reported in Appendix 1.

## Results

To estimate the hypothesized effects of news coverage on economic voting (H1), we analyse data from the three election studies side by side (Table 3). As suggested by standard retrospective economic voting theory, at all three elections the probability that a respondent indicates a vote for the government increases with their evaluation of the economy. The

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<sup>6</sup> Respondents were asked the following question: 'Which of the following newspapers do you regularly use for political information?'. This was followed by a list of all major Irish newspapers, including Sunday papers.

<sup>7</sup> For left-right ideology, respondents were asked the following question: 'In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?'. For partisanship, the question was 'Do you usually think of yourself as close to any political party? [yes/no]'.

magnitude of the effect is considerable, with the odds of voting Fianna Fáil increasing by over 20 per cent in 2007 (Model III) and by almost 50 per cent in 2002 and 2011 (Models I and V) with every step toward a more positive evaluation on the five-point scale (models I through VI). However, we do not find any significant impact of the volume of newspaper reporting on economic matters. In particular, the interaction term of economic evaluations and coverage is not significant, which refutes Hypothesis 1 (models II, IV and VI). Of the control variables, only left-right ideology and partisanship have the expected association with vote choice. Respondents are more likely to report a vote for Fianna Fáil the more they tend toward the right of the ideological spectrum. The odds ratio is significantly different from 1 in 2002 and 2007, but not in 2011. Similarly, respondents who think of themselves as close to a political party also show an increased likelihood to vote for the main government party (however, this association is not statistically significant in 2002).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Next, we estimate logit models to assess the expectation that the likelihood of voting for the main government party is shaped by the tone of news reports on how the incumbent handles the economy (H2). The results are reported in Table 4. As with coverage, tone does not have any significant association with electoral support for the main incumbent party (models VII through X). To take account of the possibility that any effect on voting behaviour of the tone of newspaper reporting on the success of government economic policy depends on the volume with which such reports appear, we have also modelled an interaction term of tone and coverage (models VIII and X). This multiplicative term also fails to display any significant association with voting behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the estimates for reported in Table 4 lead us to reject Hypothesis 2. Once again, with the exception of left-right ideology in 2002 and partisanship in 2007, none of the control variable display a statistically significant association with vote choice.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

A host of research from around the world has shown that voters' perceptions of how

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<sup>8</sup> Due to extreme multicollinearity, we have not estimated the interactive effect of tone and coverage in the context of the 2007 election.

governments handle the economy affect their decision at the ballot box (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). More recent work has demonstrated that the media play an important role in shaping these perceptions (Hollanders and Vliegthart 2011; Soroka et al. 2014). In the present chapter, we have investigated the extent to which the exposure to media reporting on the economy affect vote choice both quantitatively (*how much* the media report on the economy) and qualitatively (*how* the media portray the government's economic performance). We have analysed how media reporting interacts quantitatively with citizens' evaluations of the government's economic performance and qualitatively how the tone media reporting. We have found that, once standard predictors of vote choice, above all economic evaluations, are taken into account, the media do not have any effect on the decision to vote for an incumbent party or at least not in the case of the three most recent Irish elections.

Thus, standard economic voting theory applies to the Irish context, spanning the years of boom and bust alike. This contradicts the argument by Singer (2011) that in times of recession, voters may perceive the incumbent to be the victims of uncontrollable events and absolve them from responsibility. Our evidence shows that, while economic evaluations contribute to explaining pro- or anti-government vote choice in 2002 and again in 2011, they largely fail to do so on the brink of the national economic collapse in 2007. However, as in the context of the earlier and later elections, media reporting does not step in to fill the explanatory gap. Indeed, the average tone of economic reporting in Irish newspapers was much more benign concerning the role of the government in 2007 (-0.02) than in 2002, when a more critical tone (-0.48) accompanied an impressive economic boom.<sup>9</sup> Overall, therefore, we conclude that the media do not reinforce the role of voters' economic perceptions for arriving at their vote choice. Neither do they directly influence this choice beyond the possible shaping of such perception. This is all the more remarkable as the causal link between economic evaluations and vote choice – blaming the government – is more directly captured in our measurement of news content than in the sociotropic perception of economic performance. Future research should investigate whether an indirect effect of the media exists that works via the shaping of voter perceptions of economic performance.

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<sup>9</sup> The figures are averages of tone across all newspapers. The averages of tone by newspaper are very close (-0.42 and 0.00, respectively, cf. also Table 2).



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**Table 1: Coverage of economic affairs in six Irish newspapers, 2002, 2007 and 2011**

	<i>2002</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2011</i>
Evening Herald	10.6	6.2	
Irish Examiner	11.7	9.5	20.7
Irish Independent	16.4	8.7	26.8
Irish Times	15.2	12.3	27.4
Irish Sun		3.8	30.8
Irish Daily Star		2.7	21.0
<i>Average</i>	13.5	7.2	25.3

Note: Cell entries are the percentage of total coverage devoted to economic issues over the course of the respective election campaign.

**Table 2: Tone of coverage of government handling of the economy in six Irish newspapers, 2002, 2007 and 2011**

	<i>2002</i>	<i>2007</i>
Evening Herald	-0.06	0.00
Irish Examiner	-0.29	-0.01
Irish Independent	-0.55	0.01
Irish Times	-0.80	-0.27
Irish Sun		0.57
Irish Daily Star		-0.28
<i>Average</i>	-0.42	0.00

Note: Cell entries are coded scores of the tone of judgment about the government's handling of the economy.

**Table 3: Logit regression of economic voting and news coverage, 2002, 2007 and 2011**

	2002		2007		2011	
	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>
Female	1.26	1.25	1.17	1.17	0.94	0.94
	(0.332)	(0.339)	(0.415)	(0.414)	(0.779)	(0.770)
Age	1.00	1.00	1.01	1.01	1.01	1.01
	(0.963)	(0.900)	(0.113)	(0.211)	(0.136)	(0.143)
Urban	0.97	0.96	0.92	0.95	0.68	0.68
	(0.889)	(0.879)	(0.666)	(0.789)	(0.090)	(0.089)
Income	0.91	0.91	1.03	1.01	0.96	0.96
	(0.511)	(0.512)	(0.772)	(0.878)	(0.432)	(0.418)
Education	0.85	0.86	0.94	0.91	0.99	0.98
	(0.120)	(0.131)	(0.488)	(0.256)	(0.949)	(0.890)
Left-right ideology	1.11	1.11	1.07	1.08	1.09	1.09
	(0.023)	(0.021)	(0.071)	(0.046)	(0.066)	(0.067)
Partisan	1.31	1.29	2.32	2.34	2.49	2.50
	(0.274)	(0.303)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Evaluation of economy	1.48	1.34	1.24	1.23	1.47	1.39
	(0.017)	(0.310)	(0.036)	(0.076)	(0.009)	(0.178)
Economic news coverage	1.03		0.94		1.01	
	(0.556)		(0.139)		(0.777)	
High coverage		0.63		1.17		1.13
		(0.762)		(0.871)		(0.798)
Evaluation×High coverage		1.15		0.96		1.09
		(0.683)		(0.848)		(0.790)
Constant	0.06	0.12	0.11	0.09	0.03	0.04
	(0.020)	(0.119)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.000)
LL	-219.91	-219.83	-324.68	-325.75	-263.69	-263.18
Wald	18.70	18.86	41.16	39.02	39.14	40.17
p>chi2	(0.028)	(0.042)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
pseudoR2	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.07
N	354	354	530	530	665	665

Note: Cell entries are odds ratios; p-values in parentheses.

**Table 4: Logit regression of economic voting and tone of news, 2002, 2007 and 2011**

	2002		2007	
	<i>VII</i>	<i>VIII</i>	<i>IX</i>	<i>X</i>
Female	1.26	1.26	1.16	1.13
	(0.333)	(0.326)	(0.454)	(0.540)
Age	1.00	1.00	1.01	1.01
	(0.970)	(0.995)	(0.129)	(0.172)
Urban	0.97	0.99	0.92	1.01
	(0.891)	(0.967)	(0.657)	(0.950)
Income	0.91	0.91	1.02	1.01
	(0.498)	(0.511)	(0.848)	(0.893)
Education	0.85	0.85	0.94	0.93
	(0.118)	(0.126)	(0.475)	(0.429)
Left-right ideology	1.11	1.11	1.07	1.07
	(0.023)	(0.026)	(0.075)	(0.079)
Partisan	1.31	1.30	2.30	2.31
	(0.275)	(0.292)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Evaluation of economy	1.48	1.48	1.23	1.20
	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.043)	(0.071)
Economic news coverage	1.00		0.94	
	(0.989)		(0.165)	
Economic news tone	0.64	0.47	0.59	0.47
	(0.813)	(0.674)	(0.316)	(0.176)
High coverage		2.15		1.27
		(0.680)		(0.458)
Tone×High coverage		4.41		-
		(0.677)		-
Constant	0.07	0.07	0.12	0.09
	(0.112)	(0.014)	(0.006)	(0.003)
LL	-219.88	-219.79	-324.17	-324.21
Wald	18.76	18.93	42.19	42.10
p>chi2	(0.043)	(0.062)	(0.00)	(0.00)
pseudoR2	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.06
N	354	354	530	530

Note: Cell entries are odds ratios; p-values in parentheses.

**Appendix 1. Summary statistics**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Obs</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<i>2002</i>					
Vote for incumbent	452	0.35	0.48	0	1
Female	426	0.47	0.50	0	1
Age	462	48.35	14.60	19	89
Urban	452	0.42	0.49	0	1
Income	416	2.80	1.00	1	4
Education	464	3.90	1.34	1	6
Left-right self-placement	419	6.63	2.56	0	11
Partisan	464	0.32	0.47	0	1
Evaluation of economy	462	4.26	0.89	1	5
News coverage of economy	464	14.92	2.16	10.57	16.39
High coverage	464	0.71	0.46	0	1
Evaluation×Coverage	462	3.03	2.10	0	5
Tone of econ. reporting	464	-0.48	0.17	-0.68	-0.06
Tone×Coverage	464	-0.41	0.27	-0.68	0
<i>2007</i>					
Vote for incumbent	690	0.36	0.48	0	1
Female	714	0.50	0.50	0	1
Age	767	50.69	15.50	18	94
Urban	776	0.53	0.50	0	1
Income	699	3.31	1.25	1	5
Education	778	3.92	1.37	1	6
Left-right self-placement	687	6.88	2.71	0	11
Partisan	783	0.32	0.47	0	1
Evaluation of economy	779	3.96	0.98	1	5
News coverage of economy	783	7.64	2.59	2.72	10.90
High coverage	783	0.27	0.44	0	1
Evaluation×Coverage	779	1.07	1.83	0	5
Tone of econ. reporting	783	-0.02	0.19	-0.28	0.57
Tone×Coverage	783	-0.02	0.04	-0.14	0
<i>2011</i>					
Vote for incumbent	996	0.15	0.35	0	1
Female	996	0.46	0.50	0	1
Age	996	45.30	15.86	18	90
Urban	996	0.56	0.50	0	1
Income	673	4.03	2.42	1	10
Education	996	4.33	1.20	2	6
Left-right self-placement	996	6.70	2.42	0	11
Partisan	996	0.24	0.43	0	1
Evaluation of economy	984	1.26	0.64	1	5
News coverage of economy	996	25.42	3.34	20.68	30.76
High coverage	996	0.64	0.48	0	1
Evaluation×Coverage	984	0.82	0.81	0	5

