

**The Federal Face of Voting:
Are Elected Officials Held Accountable for the Functions Relevant to Their Office?**

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Abstract

Federalism is designed to enhance democratic representation because it gives citizens the opportunity to shape policymaking at multiple levels of government. This design feature is premised on the assumption that individuals make distinctions in the responsibilities that pertain to different levels of government and link these distinctions to their voting decisions. Citizens are expected to sanction politicians for those policy decisions over which their level of government has responsibility. This paper draws on work in both political and social psychology to develop a theoretical framework consistent with the federalist view of democratic representation to explain how people make voting decisions. Individuals who were able to vote in elections at all three levels of government (national, state, and local) in 2002 were surveyed, allowing a full test of the federalist voting model. Findings show that while citizens do make distinctions among levels of government when evaluating issues, they only link these distinctions to their voting decisions if those issue attitudes are highly accessible. Implications for democratic representation and future research are discussed.

Introduction

Federalism serves a fundamental representational function, and was, in fact, motivated by a particular theory of representation (Beer 1978; Ostrom 1987). By structuring the political system such that “[t]he federal and state governments are in fact but different agents and trustees of the people, instituted with different powers” (Madison [1788]1992: 237), the framers of the American constitution sought to strengthen accountability and preserve freedom. They believe that dividing powers among multiple levels of government in which leaders were popularly elected would enhance accountability since voters would be able to exert pressure on elected officials from distinct venues (Downs 1999). If one level of government is not doing what “the people” want, they can seek it from a different level. Hamilton ([1787]1992: 136) summarized the federalist theory of representation in *Federalist Paper No. 28*:

Power being almost always the rival of power; the General Government will at times stand ready to check the usurptations [sic] of the state government; and those will have the same disposition toward the General Government. The people, by throwing themselves into either scale, will infallibly make it preponderate. If their rights are invaded by either [level], they can make use of the other, as the instrument of redress.

The core assumption in this theory is that citizens cognitively make distinctions in what different levels do and link those distinctions to their voting behavior in a rational way. Yet the complexity of federalism may confound the intents of its designers. The spate of overlapping policy jurisdictions that characterizes modern federalism may overwhelm citizens, making it too costly for them to acquire the information needed to navigate the maze it creates (Downs 1999). Consequently, lines of responsibility may be ambiguous and unclear in federal systems, leaving politicians less, not more, accountable for their actions. Not only may voters have difficulty figuring out who is responsible for what, but politicians have an incentive to keep voters confused in an effort to avoid blame and falsely attract credit. These factors encourage confused

voters to cast ballots in an erratic fashion, muting electoral accountability, and begging the question asked in this paper: Does federalism enhance representation as intended by its designers or does it weaken it by creating a democratic system that is too complex for the average voter?¹

In order to answer this question, I combine existing political science theories of retrospective voting with psychological theories of responsibility attribution to develop a modern theory of cross-level voting behavior. The framework encompasses the core ideas of the federalist perspective on representation and leads to a number of testable hypotheses. This attempt is fairly unique in the political science literature since there has been relatively little work studying the impact that the federal structure of elections has on individual voting behavior (Atkeson and Partin 1995, 1998; Carsey and Wright 1998; Stein 1990). Heinz Eulau (1973: 169) observed 30 years ago that “[r]epresentation has been studied in isolation at each level of the federal system – national, state, and local – but it has not been studied as a network of linkages among the three levels of American government.” Despite the passage of time, this statement remains apropos (Brzinski, Lancaster, and Tuschhoff 1999).

Data from an original survey are used to test the hypotheses drawn from the federalist voting model. These data were collected in the only U.S. urban areas that had elections at all three levels of government in November 2002, and make it possible to assess the factors that shape cross-level voting. The empirical findings suggest that while citizens do make distinctions among levels of government when evaluating issues, they only link them to their voting decisions if those issue attitudes are highly accessible. This work is only a beginning, however. Questions remain and in the conclusion I lay out a research agenda that will push this initial effort forward.

Federalism and Voting Behavior

The literature on federalism and voting is quite small, but what exists provides valuable insights. Two theoretical features define the work in this field. The first is that voting decisions are assumed to reflect the federal structure of policy responsibilities. In his seminal study of cross-level voting behavior, Stein (1990: 32) theorizes that the functional responsibilities at each level of government, which are defined by “historical circumstances as well as constitutional and statutory provisions,” circumscribe the issues associated with a particular level of government and, consequently, “the content of voter evaluations.”

The second feature is that scholars either implicitly or explicitly use the retrospective voting model to characterize the voting decision (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Stein 1990). This simple model, as developed by V.O. Key (1966) treats vote choice as a judgment about the *past performance* of the party in government, rather than a comparison between competing candidates (e.g., Downs 1957). Voters decide whether things have gotten better or worse. If it is the former, they reward the incumbent party by voting for its candidates; if it is the later, they punish the incumbent party by voting against its candidates.

Taken together these theoretical considerations lead to the expectation that, in terms of cross-level voting behavior, retrospective evaluations reflect the functions for which each level of government is responsible. Atkeson and Partin (1995, 1998) find that voters hold governors responsible for the state economy, but not the national economy; while they hold senators responsible for the national economy and not the state economy. They contend that this is evidence that “the electorate holds candidates ‘functionally responsible’ for the agenda assigned to their respective offices” (Atkeson and Partin 1995: 106). These findings are consistent with individual-level evidence from studies that focus on gubernatorial vote choice (e.g., Hansen

1999; Niemi, Stanley, and Vogel 1995; Orth 2001; Partin 1995; Svoboda 1995) and aggregate studies of elections at different levels of government (e.g., Little 1998; Lowery, Alt, and Ferree 1998).

An alternative view suggests that national politics plays a larger role in shaping subnational voting behavior. Carsey and Wright (1998) replicate the Atkeson and Partin (1995) study (with some methodological modifications) using exit poll data and find that presidential approval has a strong impact on gubernatorial vote choice. They are not alone, either. Both individual-level (Niemi, Stanley, and Vogel 1995; Stein 1990; Svoboda 1995) and aggregate-level (Chubb 1988; Little 1998; Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991) studies have found that national forces have a significant effect on state-level voting behavior.

Of course, these findings do not, in and of themselves, undermine the federalist vision of cross-level voting (see Atkeson and Partin 1998). Levels of government may place emphasis on different functional responsibilities, but they are not completely independent of one another. If issues and events at one level spillover into political discussions at another level, retrospective evaluations that underlie voting behavior may not be completely distinct across levels of government (Nicholson 2005). Nevertheless, Carsey and Wright (1998) direct attention to a fundamentally important point. If national-level politics are construed as indistinct from subnational politics, the federalist model of representation is untenable. If voters simply treat subnational politicians as an extension of the national government, the federal structure of representation is minimized and levels of government are treated as a monolith.

The Federalist Model of Voting Behavior

The studies in the previous section rely on two implicit assumptions at the heart of the framers' perspective on federalist representation. These assumptions are summarized in the

following logical propositions and motivate the hypotheses that constitute the federalist voting model.

P1: Citizens make distinctions among levels of government in terms of the issues they handle.

P2: These distinctions are reflected in voting decisions made across levels of government.

Placed in the context of the retrospective voting model, the act of voting is defined as deciding whether to reward or punish the incumbent party on the basis of past policy performance. I rely on this model for two reasons. First, it allows this study to remain consistent with previous research, which has heavily relied on it (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Stein 1990). Second, and more importantly, it represents the minimal requirement for the effective exercise of democratic control (Key 1966). Compared to other models in which voters compare candidates (e.g., spatial models), the retrospective model requires that voters only form an opinion about the incumbent. The focal point of this study is whether federalism mutes democratic accountability, and including additional layers of complexity in the voting decision by using a less parsimonious model would only make the test too stringent – at least at this stage.²

The retrospective voting literature is rich in political science, but much of it is silent about the psychological aspects of this decision. Voters are often characterized as mindlessly striking out against the government when things go wrong. Some scholars, however, have delved deeper into the psychology of retrospective voting, building on social psychological theories of responsibility attribution that show most people do not reward the lucky or punish the innocent (Rudolph 2003; Rudolph and Grant 2002).³ Why would we believe voting behavior is any different? As Peffley (1984: 276) notes:

Prior to sanctioning. . . , voters presumably decide on the extent to which incumbents are in fact *responsible* for [the status quo]. That is, citizens must first reach the conclusion that the [incumbent] party is liable for “hard times” before throwing it out of office. This necessary precondition for sanctioning is ignored by adherents of Key’s theory because responsibility judgments are assumed to be automatic. (emphasis in original).

Two types of responsibility attribution identified in the social psychology literature are of importance to the cross-level retrospective model of voting behavior: functional responsibility

and causal responsibility. *Functional responsibility* (or what social psychologists typically call “role responsibility”) refers to the obligations that people are expected to fulfill. In hierarchies, higher levels imply less restrictive definitions of responsibility. Military generals, for instance, are often held accountable for things that they did not actually cause or intend to have happen. Rather, their social role obligates them to fulfill particular duties. If those duties are violated, they are held responsible (Hamilton 1978; Hamilton and Hagiwara 1992). Governments are also expected to serve a particular set of functions. Picking up trash, keeping public order, and providing for a common defense are functions that most modern governments are expected to fulfill by its citizens. Failure to adequately provide these, along with other expected functions, can be electorally perilous for democratic governments.⁴

People are attributed *causal responsibility* for an event where their actions are perceived to be instrumental to its occurrence. Governments (and other institutions) are held to a lower standard and may be held accountable even if its actions are not perceived to be instrumental in policy outcomes.⁵ In the context of a voting model, causal responsibility attribution is a retrospective evaluation of government performance. This concept is familiar to many political science voting models. Fiorina (1981), for instance, makes it a prominent feature of his retrospective voting model, calling them “mediated retrospective evaluations.” Whatever the name for the concept, causal responsibility attribution has consistently been found to underlie citizens’ decisions to blame or credit the government for policy performance and influence subsequent voting decisions (e.g., Abramowitz, Lanoue, and Ramesh 1988; Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Rudolph 2003; Rudolph and Grant 2002).

The propositions outlined above, combined with these clarifying definitions of responsibility attribution, generate two testable hypotheses regarding cross-level voting behavior.

If the federalist perspective is correct, attributions of functional responsibility in a federal system should reflect the issue distinctions citizens make among levels of government and direct them to the level of government they should assign causal responsibility (fulfilling *P1*).

Functional Responsibility Hypothesis: Citizens who attribute functional responsibility at level of government *l* for an issue *i* should be more likely to attribute causal responsibility for *i* to *l* relative to those who attribute functional responsibility to *l*'.

In turn, these causal responsibility attributions, differentiated by level of government, should influence citizens' voting decisions (fulfilling *P2*). In a federal system, when voters believe government policies are causally responsible for outcomes, reward and punishment should be allocated across different levels of government in light of the level of government voters perceive to be functionally responsible (Atkeson and Partin 1995, 1998; Stein 1990).

Federalist Voting Hypothesis: Voters who attribute credit to the government for issue *i* and attribute functional responsibility to level *l* should be more likely to vote for the incumbent party at *l* relative to those who attribute functional responsibility to *l*'., while voters who attribute blame to the government for issue *i* and functional responsibility to level *l* should be more likely to vote against the incumbent party at *l* relative to those who attribute functional responsibility to *l*'.

As stated, the *federalist voting hypothesis* mirrors an implicit assumption in current models of federalist voting behavior (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Stein 1990) that all voters accord issue *i* (e.g., the economy) the same weight in their voting decision. This is undoubtedly an untenable assumption because voters pay more attention to some issues than they do to others (Converse 1964; Hutchings 2001; McGraw and Pinney 1990). When voters pay more attention to a particular issue, attitudes related to that issue (such as responsibility attributions) are more likely to be accessible and, thus, more likely to affect behavior (Fazio 1995).

Tested in its naive form, the *federalist voting hypothesis*, may show weak effects even

though it may adequately explain the behavior of some individuals. Individuals with accessible attitudes on an issue have potentially thought more about it and may be more likely to assess the federal nature of the issue. Consequently, causal responsibility attributions that are highly accessible should be reflected more in cross-level voting decisions than less accessible ones.

These hypotheses articulate the core of the federalist model of voting by placing it in the context of a modern psychological theory of voting behavior. It also remains consistent with previous models of cross-level voting behavior, while making key concepts that are implicit in those models more explicit, as well as, relaxing strong assumptions about the weight various issues are given in voting decisions.

Data and Measures

Testing the federalist model of voting behavior requires measures of vote choice at multiple levels of government, causal responsibility attribution, and functional responsibility attribution. Currently, no existing election survey (e.g., American National Election Study) meets all three of these criteria. Consequently, this paper relies on original survey data to test the hypotheses. These data were collected following the November 2002 elections in locations that had simultaneous elections at national, state, and local levels of government. Representative samples were drawn from voter registration lists in the *only* three cities that fit this description: Ann Arbor, MI, Clarksville, TN, and Providence, RI. A total of 1200 registered voters were interviewed via telephone (approximately 400 per city) from this universe of cases with the help of a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) software by the University of Houston Center for Public Policy Survey Center. See the appendix for a more detailed description of the sample.

The unique design of the survey data in this study allows measuring voting behavior at

national, state, and local levels of government. The current literature on cross-level voting typically compares voting behavior in gubernatorial and senate elections (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Carsey and Wright 1998; Stein 1990). The strength of this design is that both of these offices are accountable to the same electorate (the state), yet they occupy different levels of government. In addition to senate and gubernatorial vote choice, a survey item was included to measure mayoral vote choice. Including mayoral vote choice provides a fuller test of the federalist voting model by modeling voting behavior at all three levels of government.

Functional and causal responsibility attributions (question wording discussed in the next section) are measured in regard to three issues: unemployment, education, and traffic congestion. Unemployment was chosen as an issue to maintain a consistent element with the federalist voting literature, which has focused on economic attitudes. Education and traffic congestion allow this paper to go beyond this literature by applying it to other issue areas. These issues were chosen because they were topical issues in the campaigns.⁶

The amount of time, in hundredths of seconds, was recorded with the help of the CATI software on the three main items tapping causal responsibility attribution, and is used to measure attitude accessibility (see Fazio, Williams, and Powell 2000). Interviewers were instructed to begin the latency clock at the end of the question and stop it when the respondent began answering the question.⁷ The raw response times, or latencies, measure more than just attitude accessibility, though. Some questions take more time to comprehend and some respondents take more time to respond. The latency scores used in the subsequent analysis account for these extraneous sources of variation in the measure by estimating a baseline for each respondent, which is then subtracted from each respondent's raw latency score (see Johnson 2004).⁸ These corrected latency scores take on positive and negative values where negative values indicate that

the respondent answered the question faster than her expected baseline and positive scores indicate she answered it slower than her expected baseline.

Empirical Findings

Holding Each Level of Government Responsible for the Things It Does

Attention is first directed to testing the *functional responsibility hypothesis*. The question wording for the survey items tapping functional and causal responsibility attribution is displayed in Table 1. The introduction for the functional responsibility items, asked respondents to think in terms of the level of government they perceived to be most involved with the three issue areas. Respondents were allowed to choose “the federal government in Washington,” “state governments,” or “local governments.”⁹

[Table 1 about here]

A series of questions were asked to tap their causal responsibility attributions. Respondents were first asked if they thought government policies had a positive or negative impact on the issue area (they were also allowed to volunteer that government policies had “no effect”). A “positive” response is interpreted as an attribution of credit to the government, while a “negative” response is interpreted as an attribution of blame. Respondents who volunteered “no effect” could mean that government policies simply don’t matter, or they could believe that government policies had not done enough to make things better. The former response evinces a lack of causal responsibility attribution, while the latter is a form of blame. No-effect responses were further probed to resolve this ambiguity. Respondents who attributed credit or blame (i.e., those who said government policies had a negative impact in the first question and those who said the government was “not doing enough” in the no-effect follow-up question) were asked to identify the level of government they deemed responsible for the perceived state of affairs.

The expectation generated by the federalist theory of representation is that citizens should be more likely to attribute causal responsibility (credit or blame) to the same level of government that they attribute functional responsibility (*functional responsibility hypothesis*). This hypothesis is tested with the following multinomial logit model. Each variable is measured at the individual-level. Subscripts denote the level of government to which the measure refers.

$$CRA = F(\mathbf{b}_0 + \mathbf{b}_1 FRA_N + \mathbf{b}_2 FRA_S + \mathbf{b}_3 FRA_L + \mathbf{IC}) \quad (1)$$

where CRA = Causal responsibility attribution regarding issue i ,
 FRA_N = Functional responsibility for issue i attributed to the national government,
 FRA_S = Functional responsibility for issue i attributed to the state government,
 FRA_L = Functional responsibility for issue i attributed to the local government,
 $\mathbf{?}$ = Vector of coefficients associated with matrix \mathbf{C} ,
 \mathbf{C} = Matrix of control variables: partisanship, ideology, age, gender, race, income, and education,¹⁰
 F = multinomial logit cumulative density function.

The coding of these variables is described in the appendix. Neither the statistical significance nor the direction of the coefficients in multinomial logit models provide much information on the actual impact of the independent variables on the *overall probability* a respondent chooses a particular category on the dependent variable. While the interested reader can use the coefficients to obtain such information, additional transformations must be made (see Whitten and Palmer 1996). To conserve space, parameter estimates of Equation 1 are not reported, but will be made available upon request. Instead, overall probability changes in the attribution of causal responsibility, conditional on changes in functional responsibility attribution, are reported to provide a clearer illustration of functional responsibility attribution's impact. More specifically, the overall conditional probability changes were calculated as follows with the help of Monte Carlo simulation (King, Tomz, and Whittenberg 2000):

$$p(CRA = l | FRA = l) - p(CRA = l | FRA \neq l) \quad (2)$$

where CRA = Casual responsibility attribution
 FRA = Functional responsibility attribution
 l = Level of government {national, state, local}

These overall conditional probability changes are reported in Table 2. If the *functional responsibility hypothesis* is correct, the probability changes in the diagonal cells in the table should be positive and statistically significant from zero.¹¹ This would indicate that respondents are more likely to attribute causal responsibility to the level of government they hold functionally responsible. On the whole, the pattern of significance among these probabilities corroborates the *functional responsibility hypothesis*. The first difference probabilities in the diagonal cells are statistically significant from zero (except for one cell in the traffic congestion model), while the off-diagonal cell probabilities are not significant from zero (exception for one cell in the education model).¹²

[Table 2 about here]

Holding Elected Officials Responsible for the Things They Do

The *federalist voting hypothesis* contends that voters should hold incumbents responsible for only those issues over which their office has functional responsibility. For instance, respondents who think education policy has had a negative impact on outcomes and believe that the state government is functional responsible for education policy should be more likely to vote against the in-party in their state's gubernatorial elections. This hypothesis is tested with a series of logit models:¹³

$$V_l = F(\mathbf{b}_0 + \mathbf{b}_1CRA + \mathbf{b}_2FRA_l + \mathbf{b}_3CRA \times FRA_l + \mathbf{I}\mathbf{C}), \quad (3)$$

where V_l = Vote choice for office at level of government l {1= vote incumbent, 0=otherwise},
 CRA = Casual responsibility attribution for issue i {-1=blame, +1=credit, 0=neither},
 FRA_l = Functional responsibility attribution for issue i {1=functional responsibility attributed to l , 0=otherwise},
 $\mathbf{?}$ = Vector of coefficients associated with matrix \mathbf{C} ,

C = Matrix of control variables: partisanship, ideology, age, gender, race, income, and education,
 $l = \{\text{national, state, local}\}$,
 F = logit cumulative density function.

The regression models are reported in Table 3. If the federalist theory of voting is an accurate description of cross-level voting behavior, the coefficients for causal responsibility attribution and the interaction term, d_1 and d_3 respectively, should be statistically significant and positive. Such a finding would indicate that when respondents attribute functional responsibility to the level of government at which they are voting, they are more likely to hold that official accountable for issue i . An inspection of Table 3 provides little support for the federalist theory of voting. The interaction term is statistically significant in only two models – the gubernatorial and mayoral vote choice models for education policy. In the gubernatorial model, the interaction terms is actually *negative*, contrary to expectation. And while the interaction term is statistically significant and positive in the mayoral vote choice model, the overall effect (i.e., $\beta_1 + \beta_3$) is not statistically significant. Given these weak findings, one would be led to conclude that voters are not linking their attitudes regarding unemployment, education, and traffic congestion to their vote choice in light of the way in which they categorize functional responsibilities for these policies across levels of government.

[Table 3 about here]

However, the models proposed in Equation 3 and estimated in Table 3 assume that all voters accord equal weight to unemployment, education, and traffic congestion in their vote choice. As discussed above, this is likely an untenable assumption with the effect of attenuating the coefficients of interest. A more accurate model of policy-based voting behavior takes into account the degree to which attitudes on an issue are accessible in the minds of voters. Attitudes that are more accessible are more likely to be reflected in the decisions that voters make. To test

this modified *federalist voting hypothesis*, the following models were estimated,

$$V_i = F(\mathbf{b}_0 + \mathbf{b}_1 \text{CRA} + \mathbf{b}_2 \text{FRA}_i + \mathbf{b}_3 \text{CRA} \times \text{FRA}_i + \mathbf{b}_4 \text{AA} + \mathbf{b}_5 \text{CRA} \times \text{AA} + \mathbf{b}_6 \text{FRA}_i \times \text{AA} + \mathbf{b}_7 \text{CRA} \times \text{FRA}_i \times \text{AA} + \mathbf{IC}), \quad (4)$$

where *AA* = attitude accessibility for issue *i*. The cleaned latency scores were used to measure attitude accessibility.

The parameter estimates are reported in the appendix (see Table A2). Because these models are quite saturated, the stability of these estimates was probed by simulating random changes in the underlying sample. All, but one, of the models that evinced statistically significant effects produced quite stable estimates.¹⁴ The addition of the three-way interaction between causal responsibility attribution, functional responsibility attribution, and attitude accessibility complicates the interpretation of these models. The test of the hypothesis that voters with accessible attitudes on issue *i* are more likely to link their causal responsibility attributions for issue *i* to their voting behavior at level *l* when they also attribute functional responsibility to level *l* (*FRA*=1) requires an inspection of the combined effect, which is $(\beta_1 + \beta_3 + \beta_5 + \beta_7 \text{AA})$. Consequently, the value of the combined effect, as well as its appropriate standard error, varies across values of *AA* (see Aiken and West 1991: 54). The *federalist voting hypothesis* predicts that the combined effect should be a positive number that increases as attitudes regarding issue *i* become more accessible (i.e., as *AA* decreases in value).

The combined effect coefficients reported in Table 4 represent the effect of causal responsibility attribution for a particular issue on vote choice when the respondent attributes functional responsibility to the level of government consonant with her vote choice *and* her attitude on the issue is highly accessible. To be fair to the modified *federalist voting hypothesis*,

I adopt a stringent definition of a “highly accessible” by choosing a cutoff value for AA that is two standard deviations faster than the mean. If this hypothesis is accurate, then surely the federal nature of these issues would be reflected in the voting behavior of those who fall in the top 2.5 percent of the attitude accessibility on these issues. This two standard deviation cutoff is only used for the purpose of calculating and presenting the combined effects. The parameter estimates that give rise to the coefficients in the Table 4 were estimated using the interval level measure of AA, while the combined effect coefficients displayed in Table 4 were calculated in the following way,

$$\mathbf{b}_1 + \mathbf{b}_3 + \mathbf{b}_5 + \mathbf{b}_7 AA^*, \quad (5)$$

where $AA^* = AA$ two standard deviations from its mean.

[Table 4 about here]

An inspection of Table 4 shows modest support for the *federalist voting hypothesis*. Respondents with accessible attitudes on unemployment are more likely to link vote for (against) their incumbent senator when they attribute functional responsibility to the national government and credit (blame) government for policy outcomes in connection with this issue. Respondents with accessible attitudes on unemployment but who attributed functional responsibility to the state government, showed a similar significant and positive relationship between causal responsibility attribution for unemployment and their vote choice for governor. This pattern did not extend to mayoral voting behavior.

Accessible causal responsibility attributions regarding education and traffic congestion linked to mayoral vote choice when functional responsibility for these issues coincided with the city. In contrast, accessible causal responsibility attributions for these issues did not affect senate or gubernatorial vote choice when functional responsibility matched those levels of government.

Moreover, if accessibility for these attitudes is lowered, at a certain point all of these coefficients shrink and become statistically insignificant. To illustrate, Figure 1 displays the combined effect coefficients for unemployment (and their 95-percent confidence intervals) calculated at different levels of attitude accessibility in the gubernatorial vote choice model. Note that as causal responsibility attributions regarding unemployment become less accessible (i.e., the latency score increases), the combined effect shrinks and the confidence interval crosses zero. Consequently, the *federalist voting hypothesis* may only apply, if at all, to a subset of voters for whom a particular issue is salient and readily accessible.

[Figure 1 about here]

The pattern of statistical significance for the coefficients in Table 4 is also intriguing. Unemployment only has an effect on national and state-level voting behavior, while education and traffic congestion only have an effect on city-level voting behavior (as long as functional responsibility is also attributed to those levels). In some sense, this pattern matches the actual assignment of functional responsibility for these issues. The national government has more to do with developing policies that affect unemployment, while local governments are more involved with setting education policy and handling traffic congestion. While only suggestive, these data lead to a hypothesis worthy of further study: Perceived functional responsibility attributions affect voting behavior to the extent they match the actual assignment of functional responsibilities.

The cause of this match between perceived and actual functional responsibilities is far from clear. It may reflect knowledge on the part of the respondent. After all, these results only work for respondents with highly accessible attitudes on the subject. Perhaps these individuals care a great deal about these issues and are motivated to pin credit or blame on the appropriate

office. On the other hand, it may reflect the set of issues discussed in the campaign. There are at least two reasons why campaigns may be the main culprit for explaining this pattern. First, campaigns at different levels of government tend to emphasize the issues over which officials are functionally responsible (Atkeson and Partin 2001; Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin 1984). Second, when campaigns focus on an issue, considerations about that issue, such as causal responsibility attributions, are more likely to be accessible (Zaller 1992).

The findings with regard to unemployment may provide some evidence for the campaign-effects claim. In 2002, unemployment was an issue in both senatorial and gubernatorial campaigns. The relationship at the state-level is likely further enhanced by the fact that all three of the incumbent governors in the state analyzed here were Republican, the same party as the sitting president. President Bush and his policies became an issue in each of these gubernatorial campaigns, which may be responsible for some degree of spillover from the national to the state level.

Conclusion

Citizens do appear capable of making distinctions in terms of what different levels of government do, and these distinctions structure where they attribute credit or blame for policy outcomes. However, these distinctions only affect voting behavior at different levels within the federal system under specific conditions. The data analyzed here suggests that the issue upon which voters are attributing responsibility must be highly accessible and the level of government perceived to be functionally responsible for that issue should coincide with the level of government that is actually responsible. As already discussed, future study should hone in on the explanation for this nuanced finding. Does it reflect campaign-specific cues, knowledge on the part of the voter, or both?

In addition to raising these issues and demonstrating the viability of a federalist voting behavior research agenda, this paper also improves on the exemplary models in this burgeoning field (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Stein 1990). It places their models in an attributional framework, explicating the key concepts to be modeled (functional responsibility and causal responsibility). The model developed here also incorporates the notion that individuals may weight issues differently in their voting decisions. In contrast, extant models of federalist voting behavior assume issues are weighted equally, biasing estimated effects downward. Were this approach used in this paper, the null hypothesis that voters do not incorporate the federal nature of issues into their voting decisions would have been embraced. By relaxing this assumption and including the accessibility of attitudes in the model, a more accurate picture of federal voting behavior emerges.

Given the exploratory and somewhat inconclusive nature of these findings, this paper seeks to invigorate a research agenda on the federalist nature of voting behavior. The implications for democratic representation are palpable. These data should allay fears raised in the introduction that federalism is too complex for voters to understand. To the contrary, voters distinguish among levels of government. However, the impact on voting behavior is far from direct or uniform. Some voters behave as the federalist voting thesis expects, while other do not. Figuring out the causes and implications of these differences will give further insight into the contours of democracy in the United States. For instance, if many voters are merely responding to campaign discourse, can voters be confused by credit claiming and blame avoidance strategies on the part of elites? Or do voters “see through” these sorts of attempts? Only a wider study will tell. The empirical evidence proffered here shows promise that an increased focus on this relatively under-studied topic is worth the costs.

Appendix

Cross-Level Election Study Sample

A random sample of registered voters were drawn from Ann Arbor, MI, Clarksville, TN, and Providence, RI, from which 1200 respondents were interviewed. Approximately 400 respondents were interviewed in each city (Ann Arbor = 403, Clarksville = 400, and Providence = 397). These cities were chosen because they had meaningful mayoral races in states with gubernatorial and senate races, which made it possible to measure voting behavior at all three levels of government. Since these were the only three populous (over 100,000) cities that fit these criteria, this sample design draws from the universe of cases. The sampling error rate is ± 3.0 percent (95-percent confidence interval) and the response rate was 64 percent. Table A1 describes these cities in more detail.

[Table A1 about here]

The cities were all roughly equivalent in size, with each featuring a mayor-council structure of government where the mayor possesses strong executive powers. Voters in Ann Arbor and Providence faced elections in which the incumbent party in the senate and mayoral races was Democratic, while the incumbent party in the gubernatorial election was Republican. In contrast, the Republican party was incumbent in all of the Tennessee races in which Clarksville voters participated. The competitiveness of races across levels of government varied among the cities and states sampled here, as well. Tennessee featured a competitive race, with Lamar Alexander (R) winning retiring Fred Thompson's (R) seat by five percentage points. Both the Michigan and Rhode Island senate races were less competitive by comparison. The Gubernatorial races were competitive in all of the states, particularly in Michigan and Tennessee, where the margin of victory was little more than a percent. The mayoral races were quite

uncompetitive in Ann Arbor and Providence, while Clarksville featured a relatively close election.

Coding Rules

A. Causal Responsibility Attribution Models	
Variable	Coding Rule
Causal Responsibility Attribution	0 = No blame or credit, 1 = National, 2 = State, 3 = Local, 4 = Other/combination, 5 = Don't know
National Functional Responsibility	1 = R attributes functional responsibility to national government, 0 = otherwise (including don't knows)
State Functional Responsibility	1 = R attributes functional responsibility to state government, 0 = otherwise (including don't knows)
Local Functional Responsibility	1 = R attributes functional responsibility to local government, 0 = otherwise (including don't knows)
Partisanship	-1 = Democrat, 0 = Independent, +1 = Republican
Ideology	-1 = Liberal, 0 = Moderate, +1 = Conservative
Age	Number of years
Gender	1 = Male, 0 = Female
Race	1 = White, 0 = Non-white
Income	1 = Under \$15k, 2 = \$15k to \$25k, 3 = \$25k to 35k, 4 = 35k to 50k, 5 = 50k to 65k, 6 = 65k to 80k, 7 = 80k to 100k, 8 = \$100k or more
Education	1 = Less than HS, 2 = HS, 3 = business/trade school, 4 = some college, 5 = college degree, 6 = post college
B. Vote Choice Model	
Senate Vote Choice	1 = Vote for the incumbent senate candidate/party, 0 = otherwise
Gubernatorial Vote Choice	1 = Vote for the incumbent gubernatorial candidate/party, 0 = otherwise
Mayoral Vote Choice	1 = Vote for the incumbent mayoral candidate/party, 0 = otherwise
Causal Responsibility Attribution	-1= Attribute blame to government policy for handling of issue (unemployment, education, traffic congestion), +1= attribute credit to government policy for handling of issue, 0= attribute neither credit nor blame.
Partisanship	-1 = Party of non-incumbent, 0 = Independent, +1 = party of incumbent

B. Vote Choice Model	
Ideology	-1 = Ideology of non-incumbent, 0 = Moderate, +1 = ideology of incumbent

The coding of control variables age, gender, black, education, and income, remain the same as those listed in the causal responsibility attribution models. For the coding of ideology, it was assumed that conservatives would be more likely to support Republicans and liberals would be more likely to support Democrats.

Parameter Estimates for Equation 4

Table A2 displays the logit estimates of Equation 4. One should be careful when interpreting the coefficients of the interaction terms and their components. Their magnitude and statistical significance is not necessarily informative. As discussed in the text, it is necessary to combine these parameter estimates in order to make inferences that are sensible in light of the specific hypotheses being tested. Furthermore, the combined effects and their standard errors vary across values of AA.

[Table A2 about here]

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Table 1: Question Wording for Functional and Causal Responsibility Attribution Items, 2002	
Concept Measured	Question Wording
Functional Responsibility Attribution	<p>Okay, for the next set of questions, we'd like to get your sense about the things government does. For these questions please think in terms of what you think the federal, state, and local government ACTUALLY do even if you think they should not be doing those things. I'm going to read a list of issues, and after each one, I'd like you to tell me the level of government you think is currently the most involved in dealing with that issue: The federal government in Washington, the state governments, or the local governments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Public education and schools b. Reducing unemployment c. Reducing traffic congestion
Causal Responsibility Attribution	<p>Next I'd like I'd like to get your opinion on the impact government policies have had on the issues we've been talking about.</p> <p>Do you think government policies have had a positive or negative impact on the quality of public education?</p> <p>Do you think government policies have helped reduce (unemployment/traffic congestion) or have they mad it worse?</p> <p>(For all three questions, respondents could volunteer that government policies had "no effect").</p> <p>[If R chose "no effect"] Do you think government hasn't been doing enough (for education/to reduce unemployment/traffic congestion) or do you think that government policies simply don't matter when it comes to (education/unemployment/traffic congestion)?</p> <p>[If R chose negative, positive, or not doing enough] What level of government do you think is the most responsible for (having positive/negative impact/not doing enough) for (education/unemployment/traffic congestion): The federal government in Washington, the state governments, or the local governments?</p>

Table 2: Substantive Impact of Functional Responsibility on Casual Responsibility Attribution, 2002

a. Unemployment

		Causal Responsibility Attribution		
		National	State	Local
Functional Responsibility Attribution	National	11.4*	1.5	3.9
	State	-1.3	13.6*	0.5
	Local	-5.0	-0.2	19.9*

b. Education

		Causal Responsibility Attribution		
		National	State	Local
Functional Responsibility Attribution	National	24.0*	2.5	-0.5
	State	-1.2	21.5*	5.5
	Local	3.4	11.6*	12.3*

c. Traffic Congestion

		Causal Responsibility Attribution		
		National	State	Local
Functional Responsibility Attribution	National	7.4	8.6	-2.5
	State	1.8	21.1*	-2.8
	Local	-2.1	-0.4	15.7*

Cell numbers are the change in overall probability that a respondent will attribute causal responsibility to the level of government in the column heading given that this person attributes functional responsibility to the level of government in the row heading instead of something else.

*Significant from zero ($p < 0.05$); Shaded cells are expected to be statistically significant from zero and positive.

Table 3: The Impact of Causal Responsibility Attribution on Cross-Level Voting Behavior, 2002

Variables	Unemployment						Education						Traffic Congestion					
	Senator		Governor		Mayor		Senator		Governor		Mayor		Senator		Governor		Mayor	
	b (s.e.)		b (s.e.)		b (s.e.)		b (s.e.)		b (s.e.)		b (s.e.)		b (s.e.)		b (s.e.)		b (s.e.)	
CRA	0.099 (0.181)		0.216 (0.157)		-0.136 (0.115)		0.257 (0.132)	*	0.420 (0.156)	**	-0.193 (0.143)		-0.084 (0.193)		0.023 (0.176)		0.151 (0.213)	
FRA	0.091 (0.289)		0.086 (0.196)		-0.017 (0.502)		-0.117 (0.379)		-0.134 (0.258)		0.171 (0.271)		1.034 (0.606)	†	0.566 (0.248)	*	-0.604 (0.301)	*
CRA × FRA	0.106 (0.267)		0.113 (0.257)		-0.668 (0.489)		-0.079 (0.403)		-0.700 (0.219)	**	0.431 (0.255)	†	-0.690 (0.798)		0.005 (0.268)		-0.464 (0.333)	
Party ID	1.847 (0.204)	**	1.308 (0.207)	**	0.845 (0.180)	**	1.889 (0.207)	**	1.321 (0.209)	**	0.811 (0.171)	**	1.827 (0.207)	**	1.385 (0.206)	**	0.826 (0.183)	**
Ideology	0.408 (0.161)	**	0.709 (0.168)	**	0.139 (0.203)		0.363 (0.169)	*	0.782 (0.174)	**	0.155 (0.198)		0.379 (0.174)	*	0.732 (0.186)	**	0.177 (0.203)	
Constant	0.631 (0.622)		-0.766 (0.608)		-0.441 (0.684)		0.776 (0.603)		-0.893 (0.662)		-0.461 (0.741)		0.417 (0.581)		-1.147 (0.651)	†	0.0182 (0.703)	
N	521		528		391		521		528		391		521		528		391	
χ^2	159.66	**	104.98	**	62.97	**	143.27	**	107.74	**	49.32	**	134.11	**	94.63	**	47.09	**
Pseudo- R ²	0.30		0.26		0.11		0.31		0.27		0.11		0.31		0.26		0.12	

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; †p < 0.10; standard errors in parentheses. Age, Gender, Race, Education, and Income were also included as control variables, but are not reported here to conserve space.

Table 4: Combined Effects of Functional Responsibility Attribution, Attitude Accessibility, and Causal Responsibility Attribution on Cross-Level Vote Choice, 2002

	Vote choice		
	Senator	Governor	Mayor
Causal Responsibility Attribution	Combined Effect (s.e.)	Combined Effect (s.e.)	Combined Effect (s.e.)
Unemployment	1.314* (0.787)	1.562** (0.503)	4.984 (4.156)
Education	-0.214 (1.187)	0.086 (0.491)	0.889* (0.537)
Traffic Congestion	0.298 (2.227)	0.330 (0.473)	0.477† (0.374)

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; †p < 0.10; standard errors in parentheses

Source: Each cell represents the combined effect from a three-way interaction model (see Equation 5). The combined effects were generated by setting functional responsibility attribution to the same level of government as vote choice (i.e., FRA=national for senate vote choice, FRA=state for gubernatorial vote choice, FRA=city for mayoral vote choice) and attitude accessibility to two standard deviations faster than the mean response time. See Aiken and West (1991: 54) for a detailed explanation of how to calculate combined slope effects and their appropriate standard errors.

Table A1: Description of Cities in Sample, 2002 Cross-Level Election Survey

Attribute	City		
	Ann Arbor, MI	Clarksville, TN	Providence, RI
Population	114,024	103,455	173,618
Government Structure	Mayor-Council	Mayor-Council	Mayor-Council
Senate Race	Carl Levin (D-Incumbent, 61%) vs. Andrew Raczkowski (R, 38%)	Lamar Alexander (R-Open, 55.1%) vs. Bob Clement (D, 44.8%)	Jack Reed (D-Incumbent, 78%) vs. Robert G. Tingle (R, 22%)
Gubernatorial Race	Dick Posthumus (R-Open, 48%) vs. Jennifer M. Granholm (D, 51%)	Van Hilleary (R-Open, 48.3%) vs. Phil Bredesen (D, 51.1%)	Donald Carcieri (R-Open, 55%) vs. Myrth York (D, 45%)
Mayoral Race	John Hieftje (D-Incumbent, 75.4%) vs. Marcia Higgins (R, 24.5%)	Johnny Piper (Incumbent, 42%) vs. Don Trotter (55%)	David Cicilline (D-Open, 83.6%) vs. David Talan (R, 9.9%)

Table A2: The Impact of Causal Responsibility Attribution on Cross-Level Voting Behavior, Conditioned by Attitude Accessibility, 2002

Variables	Unemployment			Education			Traffic Congestion		
	Senator	Governor	Mayor	Senator	Governor	Mayor	Senator	Governor	Mayor
	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)	b (s.e.)
CRA	0.066 (0.267)	0.145 (0.175)	-0.139 (0.146)	0.258* (0.127)	0.171 (0.181)	-0.06 (0.167)	-0.227 (0.214)	0.175 (0.266)	-0.148 (0.221)
FRA	-0.208 (0.371)	-0.243 (0.199)	0.495 (0.674)	0.091 (0.379)	-0.151 (0.276)	0.068 (0.338)	0.383 (0.776)	0.589** (0.253)	-0.079 (0.293)
CRA × FRA	0.409 (0.392)	0.658** (0.297)	0.007 (0.745)	0.261 (0.373)	-0.484† (0.288)	0.495 (0.300)	-0.731 (1.077)	-0.106 (0.349)	0.368 (0.367)
AA	-0.0001 (0.0007)	-0.0005 (0.0003)	-0.0001 (0.0002)	0.0008 (0.0006)	0.0003 (0.0004)	-0.0008* (0.0004)	-0.001* (0.004)	0.0001 (0.0005)	0.0001 (0.0006)
FRA × AA	0.0009 (0.001)	0.0006 (0.0006)	-0.01 (0.007)	-0.0003 (0.001)	-0.0009 (0.0009)	0.0003 (0.0006)	0.007† (0.004)	0.0006 (0.0007)	0.002* (0.0008)
CRA × AA	0.0002 (0.0006)	0.0001 (0.0006)	-0.0001 (0.0004)	-0.0007 (0.0008)	0.002** (0.001)	-0.0006 (0.0004)	0.0006 (0.0005)	-0.001† (0.0007)	-0.0001 (0.0006)
FRA × CRA × AA	-0.002† (0.001)	-0.002† (0.001)	-0.01 (0.007)	0.002 (0.002)	-0.002** (0.0009)	-0.0003 (0.0009)	-0.003 (0.004)	0.0007 (0.0008)	-0.0004 (0.0009)
Party ID	2.073** (0.241)	1.367** (0.239)	0.887 (0.202)	1.979** (0.251)	1.339** (0.250)	0.843 (0.190)	1.875 (0.240)	1.409 (0.235)	0.923 (0.197)
Ideology	0.463* (0.241)	0.697** (0.203)	0.146 (0.223)	0.289 (0.195)	0.889** (0.212)	0.18 (0.210)	0.263 (0.231)	0.838 (0.245)	0.281 (0.231)
Constant	0.98 (0.748)	-1.046 (0.961)	-0.482 (0.838)	0.649 (0.701)	-1.689 (1.017)	-0.798 (1.050)	0.564 (0.658)	-1.487 (0.924)	-0.481 (0.931)
N	429	430	329	421	421	325	433	433	326
χ ²	164.87**	115.26**	55.49**	109.22**	144.19**	64.21**	97.89**	106.17**	86.38**
Pseudo-R ²	0.35	0.29	0.12	0.32	0.3	0.13	0.32	0.28	0.15

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; †p < 0.10; standard errors in parentheses. Age, Gender, Race, Education, and Income were also included as control variables, but are not reported here to conserve space.

End Notes

1. Certainly, the framers were not envisioning a highly participatory democracy with universal suffrage. In fact, they openly feared democracy. However, in order for their view of federalism to remain a viable political institution in modern times, it must be consistent with the modern view of democracy.
2. Even if one were to contend that a less parsimonious model of policy-based voting were a better gauge of democratic control, it would be better to use the retrospective model for initial studies on efficiency grounds. If solid evidence emerges that federalism does not compromise retrospective voting, the next step would be to evaluate the performance of more complex models. If such evidence did not emerge, then there would be little reason to expend resources studying the performance of those models.
3. Social psychologists pioneered the study of attribution over 40 years ago (Heider 1958) and have generated a steady stream of research on the subject ever since. Moreover, political scientists have consciously developed theoretical models of responsibility attribution (e.g., Gibson and Gouws 1999; Iyengar 1991; Javeline 2003; McGraw 1991) drawn heavily from the social psychological literature.
4. Social psychologists studying role responsibility often emphasize the socially contingent set of obligations people are expected to fulfill besides those defined by “explicitly delineated tasks” (Hamilton 1978: 320). However, previous studies of cross-level voting have focused on the specific functions government actually does, assuming that differences in voting behavior across levels of government reflect cognitive understanding of explicit functional responsibilities (see Atkeson and Partin 1995; Stein 1990). Rather than assume this link, I directly model it. Consequently, functional responsibility is interpreted as a more restrictive conceptual definition (i.e., a subset) of role responsibility. The survey upon which the empirical analysis rests did include an item tapping the broader social psychological concept, asking respondents which level of government *should* perform specific responsibilities. While the results are largely robust when using this item as a measure of functional responsibility, it produces somewhat less evidence for the federalist voting hypothesis. Thus, to be fair to the federalist model of voting behavior, I rely on the more restrictive definition, which is more consistent with the theoretical framework articulated

in this literature. Nevertheless, future research should study the consequences of the broader social psychological definition.

5. Social psychologists have developed a number of models to describe how individuals perceive causality, with most focusing on the process by which individuals determine the proximate cause for some event or behavior (e.g., Hewstone 1989; Jones and Davis 1965; Kelley 1967). These models emphasize that intentionality is required for someone to be deemed causal responsible, and are less useful to the study of voting behavior in which attributions target government institutions (Fincham and Jaspars 1980; Hamilton and Sanders 1992). Macro-political outcomes are often complex and the product of multiple causes.

Voters need only believe that government policy could have done more to avert a problem even if it was caused by something else.

6. The survey took respondents approximately 15 minutes to complete. To reduce the possibility of question ordering artifacts, the vote choice questions were asked first and the causal attribution questions were asked toward the end of the survey. Also, items separated the functional and responsibility attribution questions.

7. However, mistakes were occasionally made. Sometimes interviewers failed to activate the response time clock on their CATI terminal. Other times, they accidentally turned the clock on more than once for a single question, yielding multiple latency scores for the same question. In both instances, these data were treated as missing.

8. The baseline is essentially the expected time it takes an individual respondent to answer a question controlling for systematic differences in individuals and questions.

9. Interviewers recorded extraneous responses into one of two categories. The “something else” category was used if respondents attributed responsibility to something other than the government. The “combination” category was used if respondents attributed functional responsibility to multiple levels of government, instead of identifying one they perceived to be the “most involved.”

10. These are standard control variables included in voting models. Partisanship and ideology are included

in this model because issues of federalism often break down along ideological and partisan lines. Given space constraints, the survey did not ask questions regarding the respondents' perceptions of the candidates' image characteristics. Since these items are likely to be highly correlated with the control variables that are included in the model, especially partisanship, there should be less concern that their exclusion poses a serious omitted variable bias.

11. Statistical significance was assessed with the help of *Clarify* (King, Tomz, and Whittenberg 2000). The probability point estimates were considered to be significant from zero if the 95-percent confidence interval did not include zero.

12. These results are even crisper if the analysis is restricted to voters.

13. Since individuals' vote choices in senate, gubernatorial, and mayoral races are likely to be correlated, this model was also estimated with a trivariate probit, which accounts for this correlation by modeling it in the likelihood function. There were no substantive differences in results.

14. A simulation was constructed to gauge the stability of the estimates in which 10 percent of the observations were dropped from the analysis at random to gauge whether the combined effect coefficients and standard errors are affected by small changes in the sample. This simulation was repeated 1,000 times and it was found that the substantive interpretation was unaffected, on average, 90 percent of the time for the unemployment and education results, but only 37 percent of the time for the traffic congestion result. This instability is understandable given that the coefficient for its combined effect is on the borderline of statistically significant (see Table 4). Consequently, less weight should be placed on this particular result.