Abstract

It has recently been claimed that the economy does not exert strong influence on evaluations of incumbent governments in a globalized environment due to the complex nature of the world's economy. We question this claim and examine whether and how exposure to economic news affects *economic* evaluations of governments and how these in turn affect *overall* government evaluations. The study, which is based on a two-wave national panel study in Denmark (N = 1,280) and a content analysis of the most prominent news outlets (N = 20,127), shows that we are not ready for a paradigm shift: The economy is still important in terms of predicting overall government evaluations, and exposure to economic news drives this relationship. In addition, priming is stronger for individuals who do not discuss the economy.

Keywords: Priming effects, government evaluations, economic news coverage, survey, content analysis

News Priming and the Changing Economy: How Economic News Influences Government Evaluations

One way (economic) news can influence public opinion is through priming. In this study, we examine whether news influences economic evaluations of governments, and whether, in turn, these economic evaluations influence overall government evaluations. We compare the influence of other issue-specific evaluations in today's complex economic-political environment with multiple actors being made responsible for how the economy is doing. The priming theorem suggests that citizens evaluate politicians according to their performance on issues that are foremost on their minds when they formulate their assessment. Priming is a result of two mechanisms: accessibility and applicability of information (Althaus & Kim, 2006). By testing whether individuals rely on economic news to form their economic evaluations, we test the accessibility mechanism. By testing whether they apply economic evaluations to formulate government evaluations, we test the applicability mechanism.

As far as *accessibility* of economic information, we know from media effects literature that news media play an important role in forming economic evaluations. Scholars have found that sociotropic evaluations of the economy were influenced by media exposure and consequently influenced vote choice (Hetherington, 1996; Shah & Watts, 1999). Furthermore, following the discussion on how interpersonal discussions moderate media effects (e.g., Lenart, 1994), we measure whether engagement in discussions about the economy moderates the relationship between media and economic government evaluations. Thus, we examine how different forms of economic information interact and shape political evaluations.

When it comes to the *applicability* of economic information to government evaluations, there is a considerable body of research on how (perceptions of) the state of the economy affects

electoral outcomes, especially since the 1970s (Fiorina, 1978; Kuklinski and West 1981; Lewis-Beck, 1986; Weatherford, 1978). This study does not examine economic voting behavior effects, but it uses literature from this field to argue about the applicability mechanism of economic news priming. The basic assumption is that incumbents are rewarded for good economic conditions and punished for bad ones. However, economic voting is conditioned by different factors, such as the political context or the level of political responsibility (Powell & Whitten, 1993).

This study examines change in economic evaluations in a changing economic context. We use panel surveys to address change at the individual level, and the survey waves were conducted over a period when the economic climate changed as well. We first present a content analysis of national media outlets in order to assess the visibility of economic news in each outlet. Next, we present a panel survey to examine how *change* in economic evaluations influences change in overall government evaluations. In the period studied, news about the economy became less negative after a long period of negative economic reporting. Thus, we study these relationships in times of change. In addition, while a large bulk of the research on economic voting and economic perceptions is based on aggregate data (Erikson 1990; Whitten and Palmer 1999), we use individual-level data to better capture the priming mechanism.

News Priming

The main objective of this study is to examine whether and how the media affect government evaluations. According to the priming literature, citizens evaluate politicians according to their performance on issues that are foremost on the citizens' minds. Most research on priming has argued that news media's emphasis on an issue enhances the accessibility of thoughts and evaluations about this issue. Hence, the issues become more relevant when formulating overall evaluations. Some studies support these results (de Vreese 2004, Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan &

Kosicki, 1997); others do not (Lenz, 2006; Malhotra & Krosnick, 2007). Examples of priming include media attention to Reagan's handling of the Iran-Contra affair, which affected his evaluations (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990), or media coverage of senate campaigns, which affected voting behaviour (Druckman, 2004). Priming theory has also been used in other contexts, for example to test the effect of crime news on racial attitudes (Valentino, 1999), or whether violent representations in media prime aggressive cognitive associations (Bushman, 1998).

Theory suggests that two factors "[moderate] the activation of stored knowledge" (Althaus & Kim, 2006, p. 962), namely accessibility and applicability of knowledge. Applicability refers to "the degree to which a stimulus and a stored knowledge construct are perceived as applicable to one another" (Althaus & Kim, 2006, p. 962). Accessibility refers to the visibility issues gain from the news media. The argument is that high media coverage on an issue is stored in citizens' memories, and such issues become more *accessible* when citizens evaluate the government (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In other words, if a schema becomes more accessible, it is used more frequently for processing information. From previous studies on news information and evaluation of incumbents, we know that media play an important role in influencing evaluations of politicians (Hetherington, 1996; Sheafer, 2008). Accessibility and applicability effects are complementary (Shehata & Falasca, 2014) and formulate a priming effect. But are economic evaluations applicable to overall government evaluations?

The Economy and Government Evaluations

In a nutshell, the study of economic voting examines how trends in (perceptions of) the economy affect the popularity of incumbents and voting behaviour (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2013; Stugaber, Lewis-Beck & Nadeau, 2013). Numerous studies have shown that the propensity to

vote for the incumbent government fluctuates according to economic assessments (prospective or retrospective, sociotropic or egotropic) (MacKuen, Erikson et al., 1992; Nannestad & Paldam, 1995; Whitten & Palmer, 1999). Vote choice is more sensitive to the deterioration than to the improvement of the economy (Nannestad & Paldam, 1997).

For example, Bill Clinton's famous campaign slogan in 1992, "It's the economy, stupid," marked the political context of the immediate post-Cold War era in which the economy was considered the most important topic in the evaluation of incumbents. Since then, after the gradual rise of a global and interconnected economy, scholars have argued that the landscape and dynamics of government evaluations have changed (Hellwig, 2007; Magalhães, 2014; Shehata & Falasca 2014). This change has been augmented in the wake of the complex economic crisis, which started with the collapse of several investment banks in the United States in 2008 and had severe consequences that resembled the Great Depression (Almunia, Benetrix, Eichengreen, O'Rourke & Rua, 2010). These scholars argue that the complex context of modern economics has made it difficult for citizens to attribute responsibility for economic affairs, and that economic voting therefore may be limited in the future (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2007). Scholars have observed changes in the way incumbents are evaluated in the increasingly interconnected and globalized world. They talk about a decline of economic voting because many actors are involved and governments cannot credibly take credit or blame for actions affecting domestic economics (Anderson, 2007; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2007). As Hellwig puts it, "globalization increases the volatility and hence the uncertainty of public assessments of government performance" (Hellwig, 2007, p.772). Recent studies conducted in countries both mildly and severely affected by the latest economic crisis confirm this theory. Shehata and Falasca (2014, p. 21) showed that citizens in Sweden did *not* "attach greater weight to economic

considerations in their government approval assessments following the outbreak of economic crisis." Priming of the economy was contingent on whether individuals attribute responsibility for economic affairs to the government (Shehata and Falasca 2014).

Similar results were found in a study of the 2011 Portuguese election. "Noneconomic issues made somewhat of a resurgence" (Magalhães 2014, p. 198) because many Portuguese voters partly blamed other actors for economic conditions. In the latest Italian elections, economic voting did occur but was mediated by attributions of responsibility (Bellucci, 2014). We argue that these findings were rational in times of global economic turmoil when citizens can be confused about attributions of responsibility and even financial journalists had problems understanding complicated economic concepts (Doyle, 2006; Davis, 2007). In addition, most of these studies reflect a period when foreign news about the economic crisis was prevalent, especially after the collapse of the international financial sector and the bailouts of southern European countries.

As mentioned above, the strength of the economy when predicting vote or government evaluations fluctuates according to the political context (Powell Jr & Whitten, 1993). In a changing context, we believe that the strength of economic perceptions on attitudes towards the government will be higher than during a period of crisis. Governments try to take credit when the economy is performing well, while they avoid blame during crises (Weaver, 1986). This pattern in government evaluations stems from the first economic voting theories, which argued that incumbents are rewarded for positive economic outcomes and punished for negative ones. Our argument is that because governments are aware of these relationships, they will try to push the economy to the top of the agenda in a time of positive economic developments, given that they are primary definers of news (Hall et al., 1978). Following this line of thought and classic

economic voting theories, we hypothesize that economic government evaluations will be strong predictors of government evaluations when the economy recovers from a crisis. In addition, in light of the proclaimed "end of economic voting," we believe that it is relevant to examine how media influence economic evaluations of governments via the priming mechanism and in relation to other issue-specific government evaluations. Unlike Magalhães (2014), who showed that noneconomic issues made a resurgence during the crisis, we expect that in a post-crisis context, economic evaluations have larger impact on government evaluations than other issue-specific evaluations. Previous studies have also examined overall government evaluations as a function of issue-specific evaluations of the government (Miller & Krosnick, 1996).

Thus, based on the rationale unfolded above regarding the applicability of economic evaluations and the accessibility of mediated information, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Economic government evaluations are a stronger predictor of overall government evaluations than other issue-specific evaluations.

H2: Media exposure drives *issue-specific* government evaluations, which in turn predict *overall* government evaluations.

The first hypothesis examines how important issue-specific evaluations are for overall government evaluations. In addition, we test whether *accessibility* of information played a role in forming these issue-specific evaluations. By connecting hypotheses 1 and 2, we test for an indirect priming effect. Because we expect media to influence issue-specific government evaluations, and, in turn, we expect these issue-specific evaluations to influence overall government evaluations, we hypothesize that:

H3a: Issue-specific government evaluations mediate the relationship between media exposure and overall government evaluations.

It should be noted here that instead of studying the impact of sociotropic economic perceptions on government evaluations like many similar studies, we examine the impact of the *economic performance of the government*. This distinction is made in order to measure how the policies of a government affect its overall evaluations (Shehata & Falasca, 2014). The main strength of this approach is that it encapsulates attributions of responsibility for the economy, which is a crucial parameter of this study, and allows us to compare economic evaluations with other issue-specific evaluations.

Because we are particularly interested in the economy, we will further examine whether exposure to *economic news* in the media is a better predictor of economic evaluations than simple measures of media exposure (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Slater, 2004). The relationship between media exposure and economic government evaluations is well established. Several studies have demonstrated that media coverage influences economic perceptions (Sheafer, 2008; Boomgaarden, van Spanje et al., 2011). Sanders and colleagues showed that changes in macroeconomics affected vote choice only through the way the media covered economic affairs (Sanders, Marsh et al., 1993). Hetherington (1996) showed that attention to media content during the U.S. Presidential Election in 1992 altered retrospective economic assessments and, subsequently, economic government evaluations (Hetherington, 1996). These evaluations, in turn, affected vote choice that year. Based on these findings, we hypothesize that individuals who are exposed to outlets that emphasize the economy will place more weight on economic evaluations of the government when evaluating the overall performance of the government.

H3b: Economic evaluations of the government mediate the relationship between exposure to economic news and overall government evaluations.

The Moderating Role of Interpersonal Communication

The interplay between media exposure and interpersonal communication is a common theme in the media effects literature. The main question is whether frequent discussion about an issue enhances media exposure effects or whether these effects are muted (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This question was first established as a "filter hypothesis" according to which personal communication reinforces or mutes media information depending on the information as well as the network of the discussants (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Some studies have confirmed that frequent discussion about an issue reinforces the effects of media (Scheufele, 2002; Schmitt-Beck, 2003) other studies found the opposite effect (Eveland & Scheufele, 2005; Hardy & Scheufele 2009 & Lenart, 1994).

Several studies of this interplay focus on its impact on knowledge (Eveland & Scheufele 2005; Hardy & Scheufele 2009; Kalogeropoulos, Albæk, de Vreese & Van Dalen, 2015), but surprisingly few have examined this interplay in connection with priming. Because priming effects depend on accessibility mechanisms, we argue that enhanced exposure to an issue will give it more weight in evaluations of the government. In one of the few priming studies that measure the interaction between interpersonal communication and media use (Mendelsohn 1996), engagement in interpersonal communication was also found to *enhance* media effects. Individuals show enhanced news priming effects because acquiring information about an issue (in our case, the economy) from both news and conversation will elevate the issue's importance in citizens' evaluation.

Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H4: Extensive discussion about the economy enhances the priming effects of economic news.

Case, Data, and Methods

The literature on economic voting has examined how the political and the economic context moderates economic voting (Powell & Whitten, 1993). In this study, we examine claims of a potential decline of economic voting in interdependent contexts (Hellwig, 2008), and we argue that the case of Denmark is appropriate for examining the relationship between economic government evaluations and overall government evaluations. Denmark is a small, interdependent, open economy, and therefore both international and domestic actors can be held responsible for economic outcomes. Moreover, the complexity of the political system in Denmark further enhances its relevance as economic voting has been found to be weaker in countries with coalition governments (Anderson, 2006) because many domestic actors can be held responsible for economic outcomes. In addition, because we are interested in the timing of this study, we argue that Demark in 2013 had the appropriate economic context: We needed to test these relationships in a country that was affected by the economic crisis and currently in a recovery phase. Denmark was actually hit by the global financial crisis and at the time of our study (2013) the economy was in recovery.[i]

We need dynamic data to study change and test our hypotheses. We chose a two-wave panel design because it allows for stronger causal claims than a cross-sectional design (Markus, 1979). A web-based national panel survey was fielded by TNS Gallup using a representative[ii] sample of the Danish population to gauge media consumption patterns, government evaluations, and assessments of the economy. Results are based on a net sample of 1,287 adult respondents. The response rate was 38.2%[iii] in the 1st wave (of the general survey) and attrition rates were 68% and 60% in the 2nd and 3rd wave. While the pattern of the findings was the same between Waves 1 and 2, Waves 3 and 4, and Waves 2 and 3, the dynamics were more illuminating between Waves 2 and 3. We will therefore focus on these waves, which will be called the 1st and

2nd Waves, respectively. The difference in the dynamics is attributed to the sudden resurgence of positive economic news between Waves 2 and 3. While news with a positive economic climate amounted to 26% of news with a negative economic climate between Waves 1 and 2, the ratio was 42% between Waves 2 and 3 and 39% between Waves 3 and 4 (N = 369 for the first period and N = 435 for the second period).[iv] Given that we expect to find a strong influence of economic evaluations on overall government evaluations in a *changing* context, as discussed above, we present the tests of these relationships in Waves 2 and 3, where the economic news coverage changed. This argumentation also follows the claims that changes in economic indicators have larger influence on people's expectations than the level of these indicators (Soroka, 2014).

Data collection for these two waves took place from May 20 until June 2, 2013 and from September 3-16, 2013. Media exposure was measured by asking respondents how many days they consume a specific media outlet during a typical week.[v] Overall government evaluations were measured by asking citizens: "How well or poorly do you think the current Danish government is performing in general?" Issue-specific government evaluations were measured by asking citizens: "How well or poorly do you think the current Danish government is performing on the topic of [welfare, immigration, economy, EU, climate and crime]?" These topics were examined before in priming studies (de Vreese, 2004). Respondents were asked to respond on a scale from 1-5.

To tap the media's attention to different issues, we conducted a systematic content analysis of a variety of the most prominent Danish news media outlets, the broadsheet newspapers *Politiken*, *Jyllands-Posten* and *Berlingske*, the financial newspaper *B*ørsen, the tabloid newspapers *B.T.* and *Ekstra Bladet*, the public broadcaster DR and the private

broadcaster TV2.[vi] The content analysis covered the period between June 3 and September 2, 2013, beginning the day after the interviews ended, until the day before the interviews for the next wave started. To measure the visibility of the economy in the newspapers and their websites, words[vii] that are commonly used in economic news stories were used as search terms in the population of articles published in these newspapers and websites in this period.[viii] The total population of articles was 20,703. To measure the visibility of the economy in TV news, three native speaker students were employed.[ix] Two economic articles/ broadcast items were chosen from each week between the two waves, with three additional articles per outlet for the two weeks leading up to each wave. A constructed weekday sampling strategy was used to ensure that all weekdays are equally represented in the sample (Riffe, Aust & Lacy, 1993).

While most priming studies ask questions involving media attention in general to tap exposure, we used a more comprehensive media measure, which effectively measured exposure in every outlet (see also Dilliplane, Goldman et al., 2013). Media content analysis and survey results were integrated by combining the media exposure measures to the content analysis findings as it has been previously used in the media effects literature (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004). Days of exposure to each outlet for each individual were weighted with the percentage representing the average visibility of the economy in the outlets for the days of the sampling.[x]

An ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to test the antecedents of overall government evaluations. In addition, six OLS regressions were run to investigate whether media exposure influences issue-specific evaluations. A binary variable of propensity to vote for any of the three coalition government parties called “government support” was also added as a control. The mediation analyses, which will help test the priming hypotheses, were run using Hayes’ (2013) application PROCESS, which uses bootstrap analysis. To capture change between the two

waves, we employed a conservative test by using *both* a mediator and a dependent lagged variable in all mediations. The same was done for the moderated mediation analysis, which was also conducted using PROCESSS.

Results

Because we are interested in *change*, we first present in Table 1 how issue-specific government evaluations and overall government evaluations changed over the two waves of the survey. There was a positive change on average in overall government evaluations from Wave 1 to Wave 2 (from 2.47 to 2.73, in a 1-5 scale). The issues of welfare, economy, and crime showed an increase between the two waves while the issues of immigration, the European Union, and climate showed a decrease. We also examined which evaluations showed significant changes between the two waves, and partial *t*-tests showed that the overall evaluations as well as most issue-specific evaluations changed significantly, including the economy. Changes in evaluations of the government handling climate and crime were not significant.

Table 1. *Change in the Issue-specific and the Overall Governmental Evaluations between the Two Waves.*

Variables	Wave 1	Wave 2	Change between the waves
Overall governmental evaluations	2.47	2.73	0.26***
Issue-specific governmental evaluations:			
Welfare	2.51	2.63	0.12***
Immigration	2.56	2.47	-0.08***
Economy	2.62	2.79	0.17***
European Union	3.07	2.95	-0.12***
Climate	2.97	2.96	-0.01
Crime	2.60	2.62	0.02

Note. Cell entries are means. All of these items were measured in a scale from 1-5 (N = 1287). Stars denote the level of significance in the changes between the waves ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

Figure 1 illustrates in percentages how prominent the economy is compared to non-economic stories in each media outlet. The results suggest that the economy is most prominent in broadsheet newspapers (from 22% to 52% of their content dedicated to economic news), followed by TV news (22% and 26% percent of economic news) and tabloid newspapers (11% and 12%)[xi].

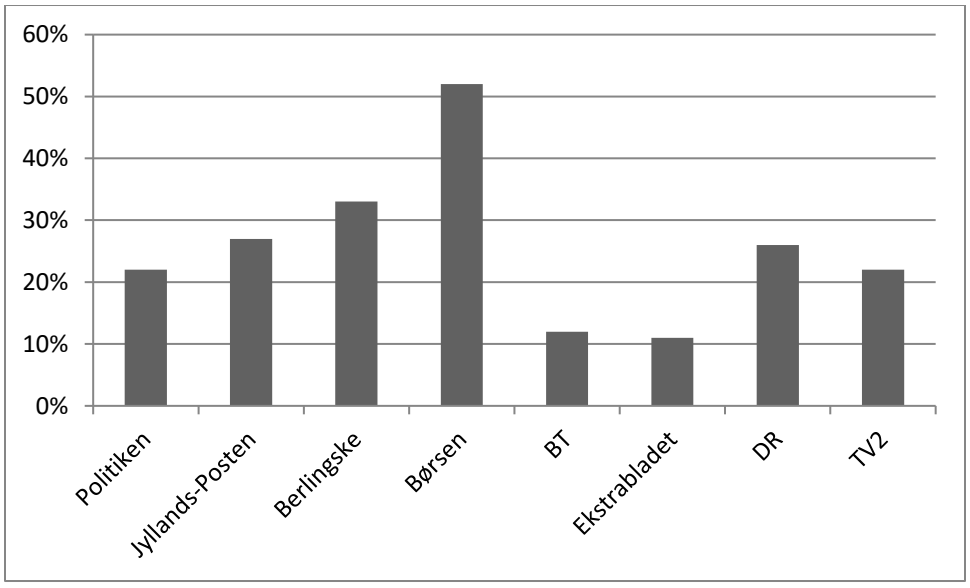

Figure 1. Prominence of economic news on different outlets
*Note*s. N = 20,703. Broadsheet newspapers: Politiken, Jyllands-Posten, Berlingske, B*ørsen, Tabloid newspapers: B.T., Ekstrabladet, Public Broadcaster: DR, Private Broadcaster: TV2. Percentages denote the ratio of economic stories to the total number of stories in these outlets.*

The first hypothesis concerns the predictors of overall government evaluations. More specifically, it predicted that economic government evaluations would be higher than other issue-specific government evaluations. Table 2 shows the results of the regressions. Model A presents the regression of the overall government evaluations and its dependent lagged variable, and

Model B includes a dependent lagged variable of overall government evaluations as well as issue-specific measures of government evaluation.

Table 2. *Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regressions of Overall Governmental Evaluations*

Dependent variable : Overall Governmental Evaluations	Model A	Model B
Overall Governmental Evaluations (t1)	.695*** (.018)	.263*** (.020)
Welfare		.185*** (.022)
Immigration		.071** (.021)
Economy		.341*** (.022)
European Union		.065** (.020)
Climate		.080*** (.020)
Crime		.057** (.021)
Constant	1.01 (.048)	-.119* (.060)
Adjusted R^2	.528	.733
N	1287	1287

Note. Results are *standardized* beta (β) coefficients. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01,*p < 0.05. Dependent variable: Overall Governmental Evaluations.

The results of the regression support our first hypothesis. The economic evaluations of the government had the largest coefficient, even larger than the dependent lagged variable. In addition, economic government evaluations were significantly larger than the evaluations of welfare, immigration, the European Union, climate, and crime when predicting overall government evaluations.[xii]

Table 3. *Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regressions of Issue-specific Governmental Evaluations*

Issues:	Welfare	Immigration	Economy	European Union	Climate	Crime
Issue-specific evaluations (t1)	.516***	.543***	.516***	.557***	.445***	.470***
	(.022)	(.022)	(.021)	(.023)	(.025)	(.024)
Media exposure	.001	-.002	.003*	.000	.001	-.002
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Government support	.425***	.466***	.583***	.317***	.340***	.501***
	(.049)	(.049)	(.051)	(.048)	(.049)	(.052)
Constant	1.18***	1.02***	1.16***	1.15***	1.50***	1.31***
	(.081)	(.084)	(.079)	(.090)	(.097)	(.091)
Adjusted R^2	.407	.438	.493	.401	.264	.359
N	1287	1287	1287	1287	1287	1287

Note. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$. Dependent variable: Issue-Specific Governmental Evaluations. Cell entries are *unstandardized* beta coefficients (B), with standard errors (SE) in parentheses. Higher scores in government support denote propensity to vote for a governmental party.

The second hypothesis involves the impact of simple media exposure measures on issue-specific evaluations. It suggests that media exposure will be a driver of the issue-specific government evaluations that predict the overall evaluations. As we saw in Table 2, all issue-specific evaluations had a significant impact on overall government evaluation so we will test the effect of media exposure on all six. For the purposes of this hypothesis, we ran six OLS regressions, which are presented in Table 3. The table illustrates that media exposure influences

economic government evaluations positively and significantly (the higher media exposure the more positive the evaluations). In all six regressions presented, media exposure was a significant predictor only for the regression regarding *economic* government evaluations. Therefore, we

Table 4 shows that only economic government evaluations mediated the relationship between media exposure and overall government evaluations. Path A (the relationship between the independent variable—media exposure and the mediator variable—economic government evaluations) and path B (the relationship between the mediator variable—economic government evaluations and overall government evaluations) were significant.[xiii] Mediation for the case of economy did occur, because 95% confidence intervals did not include zero (.0006 to .038) and thus the indirect effect of media exposure to overall government evaluations via economic government evaluations was significant. For the other issue-specific evaluations no significant mediation occurred.[xiv] Consequently, hypothesis 3a is supported, but again, as with hypothesis 2, only for the issue of the economy.

Table 4. *The Mediating Effects of Different Issue-specific Governmental Evaluations on the Relationship between Media Exposure and Overall Evaluations.*

Issues:	Welfare		Immigration		Economy	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Effect of media exposure on overall governmental evaluations (c path total effect)	.0008	.001	.001	.001	.000	.001
Effect of media exposure issue-specific governmental evaluations (a path)	.001	.001	-.001	.001	.004*	.001
Effect of issue-specific evaluations on overall governmental evaluations (b path)	.432***	.023	.262***	.024	.520***	.021
Effect of media exposure on overall governmental evaluations on efficacy (direct effect) (c' path)	-.0002	.001	.001	.001	-.002	.001
	Effect	SE	Effect	SE	Effect	SE
Indirect effects (bootstrap 5.000)	.0006	.0007	-.0004	.0004	.002	.0008
Confidence Interval	LL 95	UL 95	LL 95	UL 95	LL 95	UL 95
	-.0008	.002	-.001	.0004	.0006	.0038

To further examine this relationship, we tested whether exposure to *economic* news strengthens the mediation, as suggested by hypothesis 3b. For this test, results of the content analysis were integrated with the media exposure measures. The measures of individual exposure to each outlet were multiplied by the percentage of visibility of economy in this outlet for that period (see Figure 1). Results of this mediation are illustrated in Figure 2.

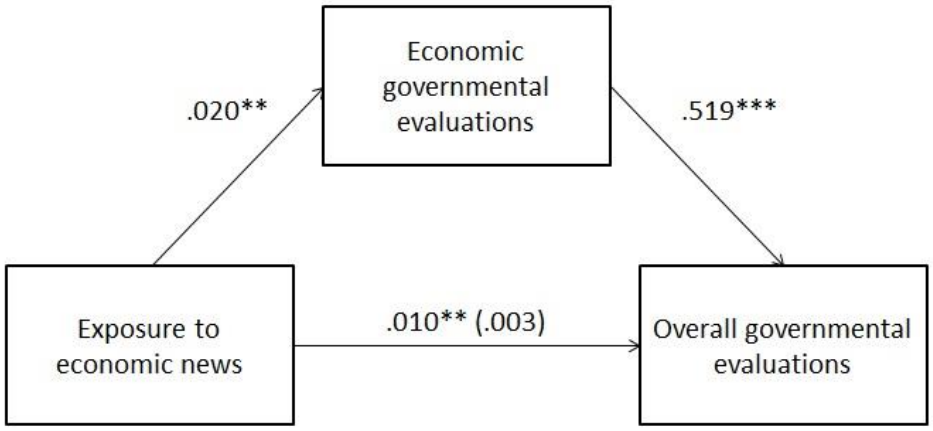

Figure 2. The mediating effects of economic governmental evaluations on the relationship between exposure to economic news and overall evaluations.
Notes. Bootstrapping analysis, 5000 resamples. Covariates: Overall government evaluations t1 and economic governmental evaluations Time 1. N = 1287. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Figure 2 shows that economic government evaluations mediate the relationship between exposure to economic news and overall government evaluations. Confidence intervals (95%) were from .004 to .017 and the indirect effect (.010) was significant at the .01 level. When raw media exposure measures were used as independent variables in the mediation presented in Figure 3, the indirect effect was significant at the .05 level. We thus conclude that hypothesis 3b is supported: Exposure to economic news is a better predictor of economic government evaluations, which in turn influence overall government evaluations, than simple media exposure measures.

To test how interpersonal communication about the economy moderates the effects of exposure to economic news and economic government evaluations, we employed a moderated mediation analysis (see Table 5). Hypothesis 4 suggested that for news priming effects would be higher for individuals with higher levels of interpersonal communication. Contrary to hypothesis 4, the interaction term is negative and significant ($p < .05$). In addition, as we can see in the table, the indirect effect becomes smaller and insignificant the higher the interpersonal communication. This relationship is also illustrated in Figure 3, which shows the different levels of the conditional indirect effect for the different values of interpersonal communication about the economy. Individuals with a high frequency of discussion about the economy show insignificant indirect effects from exposure to economic news on overall government evaluations (the confidence interval includes zero).

Table 5. *The Moderating Effect of Interpersonal Communication on the Relationship between Economic News Exposure, Economic Governmental Evaluations and Overall Governmental Evaluations*

Economic Governmental Evaluations, Time 2		
Predictor	B	SE
Constant	.578***	.114
Economic news exposure	.067**	.021
Interpersonal Communication	.104**	.032
Interpersonal Communication x Exposure	-.015*	.006
R^2	.502	

Conditional indirect effects at values of moderator

Interpersonal Communication	B	SE	CI
1.91 (-1 SD)	.019	.005	.009 to .031
2.98 (*M*)	.011	.003	.004 to .018
4.06 (+1 SD)	.002	.004	-.005 to .011

Note. N = 1287. Cell entries are unstandardized beta coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), and confidence intervals (CI) produced with the SPSS PROCESS macro, model 7 (Hayes 2013). Controls included are economic governmental evaluations Wave 1 and overall governmental evaluations Time 1. Values of the moderator are the mean and ± 1 standard deviation from the mean.

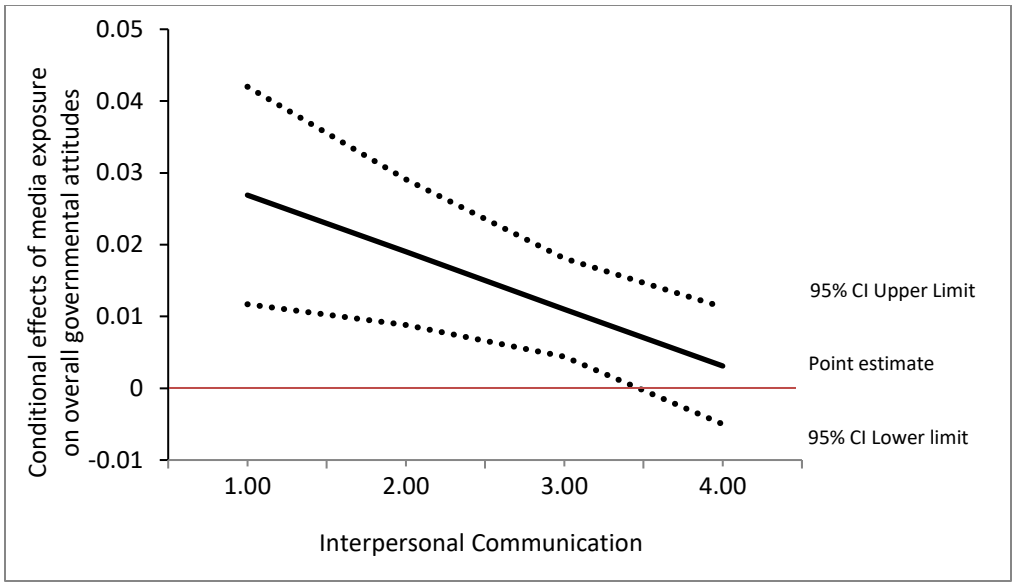

Figure 3. Conditional indirect effects at different levels of interpersonal communication.
Note. N = 1287. Values of the moderator denote the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th and 90th percentile.

Discussion

This study had two main goals: a) to examine whether evaluations of the economic performance of a government are still relevant when individuals form overall government evaluations, and b) to examine whether the media's focus on the economy influences economic government evaluations when individuals formulate overall government evaluations. The results supported our hypotheses and demonstrated a media priming effect at the individual level: The higher the visibility of economic issues, the more weight is given to economic evaluations of the government when predicting the overall government evaluations, compared to other issues.

These results contradict recent predictions and findings by scholars who observed that citizens did *not* attach any greater weight to economic conditions when evaluating the government due to the complexity of assigning responsibility for the economy in today's globalized world. In our study, which is conducted during a positive change in the tone of economic news and in economic government evaluations, we can see that the government is

rewarded. This finding might reflect the new landscape in the economic voting literature. Governments are not punished for negative economic conditions per se due to many actors being held responsible, but they are still rewarded for positive economic conditions. While previous studies have shown that the economy influences evaluations more during downturns (Nannestad & Paldam, 1997), our findings point in the other direction. Obviously, further research is needed to disentangle the effect of these contextual factors. We argue that regardless of whether national governments should actually take credit or blame for economic affairs in this new landscape, it is the *perception* that matters and media shape these perceptions.

Furthermore, we find a strong news media effect when it comes to the economy. We expected that media exposure would be a driver of all issue-specific evaluations (which eventually lead to overall government evaluations). However, this was the case *only for the economy*. We highlight this finding, especially in the light of media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), which suggests that people use media for issues with which they lack personal experiences. The economy is an issue with which citizens *do* have personal experiences. Although they do not necessarily use media to form attitudes, media effects were strong. At the same time, media effects on government evaluations for instance towards the European Union were not significant, contrary to media dependency theory. Last, but not least, we would like to point out that the effect of media on economic government evaluations was *positive*. This finding goes hand in hand with the assessment of the news coverage of the period of this study, compared with the previous wave. While the news remained mostly negative, there was a surge of positive economic news between the waves.

When it comes to the interplay between news media and discussion, we found that interpersonal communication about the economy *mutes* media effects on attitudes. This

contradicts our expectations. Due to the nature of priming and the issue-specific nature of our measure, we expected that an extra source of information on a specific issue would *enhance* media priming effects. A possible explanation for this result may be that people who frequently engage in economic discussions use media information less when forming evaluations. This may also be interpreted as an indirect media effect: Frequent discussants of political news are the first to be informed by the media and subsequently use their discussions rather than the media to form attitudes. In addition, discussions about an issue may actually weaken the salience the media has given it. We can also turn the interaction around and claim that media "fill the gaps" of interpersonal communication: People who seldom talk about the economy exhibit stronger media effects when evaluating the government simply because they use only this source of information. The same relationship involving economic discussions was recently shown when predicting economic knowledge (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2015). Lenart (1994) found similar results and asked for a new theoretical basis for this kind of "disordinant influence" (p. 114).

To expand our knowledge about the role of the economy and media priming, future research should systematically investigate these questions during periods with different political and economic contexts to examine the underlying patterns of priming concerning the economy. In addition, a more sophisticated examination of interpersonal communication that offers insights about the content of the discussions, the political orientation of the discussion network as well as the levels of political sophistication of discussants might clarify the interaction between media effects and discussion. Last, but not least, future research could examine how news media examined attributions of responsibility for economic affairs to measure whether the media covered change in the economic context as a result of government policies. Despite these

shortcomings, this study contributes to our understanding of the role of economic information and of the economy as a whole in predicting political evaluations.

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Notes:

[i] In 2013, Denmark returned to GDP growth. Inflation and unemployment fell compared to 2012; exports rose and private consumption remained stable for the first time since 2010 (European Commission, 2014).

[ii] An overview of the sample showed very small differences in terms of *education*, very small differences in *region* (30.6% of the population live in the capital area compared to 29.1% in the sample) and a representative distribution in the other regions. There was underrepresentation of young people in the sample (18.1% in the sample versus 35.3% in the population for ages 18-40) and an overrepresentation of older citizens (48.3% in the sample compared to 29.2% in the population for the age 60). Middle-aged groups (40-60) were well represented (33.5% in the sample, compared to 35.8% in the population).

[iii] Response rate was calculated by using AAPOR's standard calculator (I/(I+P) + (R+NC+O) + (UH+UO)) where I = complete survey, P = partial survey, R = refusal and break-off, NC = non-contact, O = other, UH = unknown if household/occupied housing unit and UO = unknown, other.

[iv] The economic climate was coded by four coders. The question was "What is the evaluation of the general economic climate?" Response options: a) There is no evaluation of the general economic climate, b) there is an unfavourable evaluation of the general economic climate, c) there is a mixed evaluation of the general economic climate, d) there is a favourable evaluation of the general economic climate. Inter-coder reliability was Krippendorf's $\alpha = 0.726$).

[v] Descriptives for the unweighted media exposure questions (DR: $M = 5.05$, $SD = 2.59$; TV2: $M = 5.04$, $SD = 2.59$; Politiken: $M = 1.66$, $SD = 1.89$; Jyllands Posten: $M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.87$; Ekstra Bladet: $M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.30$; BT: $M = 1.34$, $SD = 1.22$; Berlingske: $M = 1.48$, $SD = 1.65$; dr.dk:

M = 3.05, *SD* = 2.61; tv2.dk: *M* = 2.78, *SD* = 2.54; politiken.dk: *M* = 1.70, *SD* = 1.75; Jyllands-posten.dk: *M* = 1.78, *SD* = 1.85; ekstrabladet.dk: *M* = 2.29, *SD* = 2.34; bt.dk: *M* = 2.01, *SD* = 2.12, b.dk: *M* = 1.41, *SD* = 1.32; borsen.dk: *M* = 1.32, *SD* = 1.17).

[vi] The visibility of the offline versions of these outlets was used as a proxy for the visibility of their websites. In a pilot study, the visibility of the economy in the online and the offline versions of the study were found to be similar.

[vii] The words were: economy, deficit, debt, national debt, state budget, inflation, employment, unemployment, unemployed, salary, payment, investment, finance, stock market, C20 (stock market index), stock exchange, tax, financial crisis, house prices, loans, economic growth, consumer, financial profits, exchange rate equivalent, income, deflation, GDP, GNP, imports, exports, trade balance, consumer spending.

[viii] The population of newspaper articles was obtained by a computer-assisted content analysis using the electronic database Infomedia, which archives all news articles from printed newspapers published by different media outlets. The specific search in Infomedia is conducted by using search criteria such as search words, date and media outlet. All broadcasted news items were requested on DVD's from the Danish State and University Library.

[ix] The coders were given 15 TV news items from both TV stations and were asked to classify them as economic or non-economic. Results of the intercoder reliability showed that they agreed on 14/15 news items (percentage agreement: 93.33%).

[x] The calculation was done as followed: Number of days using the medium 1 * visibility of the economy in the medium 1 + number of days using the medium 2 * visibility of the economy in the medium 2 * [....]. Descriptive statistic for the weighted aggregate economic news exposure measure: *M* = 4.34, *SD* = 3.03.

[xi] For the measure of the visibility for the online outlets, their offline measures were used by employing the population of the articles obtained from Infomedia.

[xii] Partial *F*-tests showed that the difference between economic and other issue-specific attitudes towards the government is statistically significant: Economy and Welfare: F (1, 1279) = 18.7, $p < 0.0001$, Economy and Immigration: F (1,1279) = 72.5, $p < 0.0001$ Economy and EU: F (1, 1279) = 79.24, $p < 0.0001$, Economy and Climate: F (1,1279) = 77.3, $p < 0.0001$, Economy and Crime: F (1,1279) = 77.8, $p < 0.0001$.

[xiii] The significance of Paths A & B (the relationship between the independent variable and the mediator variable and between the mediator variable and the outcome variable) are the two first requirements for a true mediation relationship (Barron & Kenny, 1986).

[13] The direct effect was not significant in any of the mediation analyses. Such a finding was a condition in Barron and Kenny's recommendations for mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986), but this requirement has been widely criticized (MacKinnon, Krull & Lockwood, 2000; Shrout & Bolger, 2002; Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Parlamis, JD, Allred, K.G., & Block, C., 2010; Maguen S., Luxton, D.D., Skopp N.A., Gahm, G.A., Reger, M.A., Metzler, T.J. & Marmar, C.R., 2011). One of the arguments is that an association between X and Y may be stronger when a mediator is taken into account; therefore "it seems unwise to defer considering mediation until the bivariate association between X and Y is established" (Shrout & Bolger, 2002, p. 429).