

# Why Some Blame Politics for Their Personal Problems

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Vanessa Baird<sup>1</sup> and Jennifer Wolak<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

Why do some people blame the political system for the problems in their lives? We explore the origins of these grievances and how people assign responsibility and blame for the challenges they face. We propose that individual differences in the personality traits of locus of control and self-esteem help explain why some blame the political system for their personal problems. Using responses from a module of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we show that those with low self-esteem and a weaker sense of control over their fates are more likely to blame the political system for the challenges they face in their lives. We also demonstrate that this assignment of blame is politically consequential, where those who intertwine the personal and the political are more likely to evaluate elected officials based on pocketbook economic conditions rather than sociotropic considerations.

## Keywords

self-esteem, locus of control, personality, attribution of blame

“A 30 rack of coors light is \$23 now at Sun Stop. Thanks, Obama.” @CampaignRPoz, September 21, 2014.

When things go wrong in our lives, it is natural to try to determine who or what is to blame. Some blame karma or bad luck, while some find fault within themselves or others. Interestingly, some hold the government responsible when things in their personal lives do not turn out as they had hoped. Why do some people believe that the political system is to blame for the problems in their lives? We explore the origins of people’s personal grievances with government, focusing on individual level differences in why people attribute negative personal outcomes to the nature of the political system.

For the most part, people’s political judgments have been thought to be separate from what is happening in their personal lives. People evaluate the performance of elected officials based on the health of the national economy, not the state of their personal finances (Fiorina, 1981; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979). Demand for government investment in redistributive policy have more to do with people’s ideology and values than their personal socioeconomic status (Fong, 2001; Schlozman & Verba, 1979). Symbolic considerations, such as core values, partisanship, and ideology, typically do a better job explaining political preferences than self-interested personal concerns (Sears & Funk, 1991; Sears et al., 1980). Yet even if most people’s political preferences are not driven by self-interested concerns, we show that there are meaningful variations in the degree to which people see their personal lives as intertwined with politics.

We explore why some people see their personal challenges as a product of the political system. Rather than reflecting merely people’s material hardships, we propose that personality traits also help explain how people assign blame when things go wrong in their lives. We focus on how people’s self-evaluations shape how they assign blame, particularly the effects of personality differences in locus of control and self-esteem. Drawing on responses to a module of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we show that those who feel less control over their own futures and those who hold negative self-perceptions are more likely to blame the political system for their personal circumstances. Political socialization serves as a countervailing force, where factors like education and support for democratic principles predict lower likelihoods of assigning blame to government. The personal challenges people face seem to play only a minor role in explaining people’s tendency to blame government for their problems. We further demonstrate that people’s beliefs about the political origins of their personal problems are consequential for how they evaluate elected officials. Those who believe that their personal challenges have political origins are more likely to weigh self-interested considerations in their evaluations of officeholders and less likely to lean on sociotropic

<sup>1</sup>University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Jennifer Wolak, Department of Political Science, University of Colorado, 333 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0333, USA.  
Email: wolakj@colorado.edu

evaluations. In this way, personality differences contribute to variations in how people connect personal and national economic conditions to their evaluations of officeholders.

Our results show that people differ in the degree to which they see politics as personal. While all of us face different challenges in our lives, some see these as their own responsibility to address, while others perceive the problems they face as the product of the political system. Those who believe that their personal challenges have political origins are not necessarily those who have faced greater hardships. Instead, the assignment of blame to the political system has more to do with people's personality traits, and how they see themselves and their personal control over their futures. These findings highlight an important source of heterogeneity in how people assign blame and responsibility within politics. This is useful to understand given that the ways people attribute responsibility in politics informs whether they hold politicians accountable for outcomes (Iyengar, 1989; Peffley, 1984).

We confirm that those who believe that their personal challenges have political origins evaluate the performance of politicians in distinctive ways, where they are more likely use their own circumstances to inform their views of presidential performance. Even though most people are not guided by self-interested concerns in their political lives, we demonstrate that some people by their nature are more likely to approach politics in personalized terms. People's personality traits direct whether they evaluate elected officials based on sociotropic or pocketbook concerns.

## Assigning Responsibility and Blame

When asked to choose candidates on Election Day, people consider not just the promises for the future offered in candidates' campaign speeches, but also the nature of past and present political performance. Incumbents who preside over good economies and popular policy changes can expect to be rewarded at the ballot box. Those who serve in times of scandal or economic hardship risk electoral retribution at the next election (Fiorina, 1981; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981). In evaluating politicians based on their past performance, retrospective voters constrain their elected representatives, who make different choices because of their fears of how constituents will evaluate their performance in office (Ferejohn, 1986; Stimson et al., 1995).

Retrospective voting creates accountability pressures only so long as citizens can correctly recognize who is responsible for political outcomes and then assign responsibility and blame based on that knowledge. If citizens fail to see elected officials as responsible for a negative outcome, then politicians can evade electoral punishment (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Peffley, 1984; Peffley & Williams, 1985). This means that political accountability rests in part on how people assign responsibility and blame for outcomes. Citizens often do this well. They reward and punish elected

officials for how they perform in office, voting out those with weaker track records (Fiorina, 1981; Stimson et al., 1995). They recognize that state government officials and national officials hold different roles for managing political crises, and use this information in assigning political responsibility and blame (Arceneaux, 2006; Gasper & Reeves, 2011; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008).

Yet people are imperfect in how they assign responsibility and blame in politics. Myopic voters are prone to focus on what happened recently rather than evaluating incumbents based on their performance over their longer term in office (Achen & Bartels, 2016). Politicians can shift blame away from themselves through how they justify and explain their actions in office (McGraw, 1991). Partisanship can lead to biased evaluations of who is responsible. People are less likely to blame politicians who share their same party allegiances, and are more quick to point the finger at members of the opposing party (Jones, 2020; Lyons & Jaeger, 2014; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008; Rudolph, 2006). They make errors in assigning blame as well. Presidents are held accountable for national economic performance to a degree which likely exceeds their practical ability to control economic outcomes. Apolitical outcomes like shark attacks, football games, and weather conditions can inform performance evaluations and election outcomes (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Gasper & Reeves, 2011; Healy et al., 2010).

Citizens also vary in how accurately they assign blame and responsibility in politics, as those with higher levels of political sophistication tend to better connect political outcomes to responsible elected officials (Gomez & Wilson 2001, 2008). We propose that people also differ in how they assign responsibility and blame within politics as a function of their personality traits. In contrast to prior studies that consider how people allocate responsibility and blame to different elected officials, institutions, or levels of government, we focus on the general tendency to assign blame to the political system when things go wrong. When asked about the origins of their personal challenges, some assign blame to politics, while others fail to see their personal struggles as the fault of the political system.

This kind of heterogeneity in political responsibility attributions has often been overlooked in past research, as politics is typically seen as a domain where people's personal stakes seem unimportant to their demands of government. Rather than choose policy outcomes that deliver personal rewards, people are instead thought to be guided by social considerations and symbolic politics (Sears & Funk, 1991; Sears et al., 1980). Yet even though people tend to be more concerned about what is best for the collective rather than what might benefit themselves personally (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981), people vary in the degree to which they see the political world in personalized terms. Wilson and Banfield (1964) describe this as a value of public-regardingness, where some are more likely than others to put the public good ahead of their personal

goals. Surveys also confirm that people vary in the degree to which politics and the personal are intertwined. When asking people about the origins of the challenges they are facing in their personal lives, most people name personal, self-located explanations. Yet a sizable subset of Americans believe that their personal challenges have social or community origins (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Feldman, 1982). People differ in the degree to which they blame the government for their personal problems, but the origins of these beliefs are not well understood. We explore how people's personality traits shape the ways they assign responsibility and blame for their personal problems.

### Personality Traits and Blaming Politics

Research affirms that people's personality traits help explain why some people are more politically engaged than others, as well as why people demand different kinds of public policy outcomes (e.g. Gerber et al., 2010; Mondak, 2010; Mondak et al., 2010). We expect that personality traits also inform how people assign responsibility and blame in politics. We explore the consequences of trait differences in explaining why some people believe that their personal problems are a product of the political system while others do not. We expect that whether people take personal responsibility for their difficulties depends on people's self-evaluations.

We focus on individual personality differences in people's self-perceptions, as we expect that people's views of themselves and their capabilities shape how they react to the challenges they face in their lives. We consider how people see themselves, as captured in self-esteem, as well as how they perceive their influence over their environment, as captured in the trait of locus of control. Locus of control refers to deep-rooted differences in the degree to which people feel that are in charge of their own lives and are responsible for the outcomes they obtain in life. Some are high in personal control, where they believe that they direct their futures through their own efforts and abilities. Others have an external locus of control rather than an internal locus of control and fail to hold the same confidence about their ability to direct their futures. Instead, they tend to see outcomes as beyond their personal control, determined by forces beyond themselves such as luck, fate, or the actions of others. While those with an internal locus of control tend to take responsibility for how their own actions contribute to their outcomes in life, those with an external locus of control view their environment as out of their control and unresponsive to their efforts.

Whether people feel like they are in control of their fates or merely affected by their environments reflects deeply-rooted individual differences (Rotter, 1966). As a personality trait, locus of control serves as a general orientation that shapes how people respond to a number of choices in specific situations (Lefcourt, 1991), though its relative importance varies across domains (Ng et al., 2006; Wang et al.,

2010). Differences in people's perceptions about their control over their environment are described as a stable disposition, one that finds its origins in both genetics and socialization. Like other personality traits, differences in locus of control have a significant heritable component, where about a third of the variation in the trait is attributable to genetic factors (Miller & Rose, 1982; Pedersen et al., 1989). Socialization also plays a role, where levels of internal control tend to be higher in individualistic societies compared to collectivist ones (Cheng et al., 2013). However, locus of control tends to be only minimally affected by life events like losing a job (Legerski et al., 2006; Preuss & Hennecke, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

People's perceptions of their control over their environment shape their approach to life and interactions with others. Those with higher levels of personal control are more likely to take action to better their own lives (Strickland, 1989). They believe that they can make personal changes that will help them obtain better outcomes for themselves. They tend to be more resilient in the face of stress and less discouraged by negative setbacks (Ng et al., 2006; Spector, 1982). In contrast, those with an external locus of control are reluctant to take action, as they do not believe that they hold the power to effect change within their lives. They are more likely to feel helpless in challenging situations, doubting their ability to control their own futures. As a result, those low in personal control are more easily discouraged from taking actions to improve their situation (Lefcourt, 1991; Strickland, 1989).

Differences in locus of control are thought to shape people's approach in their political lives as well. Those who are high in personal control are thought to be more engaged in politics, because they believe that they can wield influence over their environment (Carmines, 1978a; Cohen et al., 2001; Dawes et al., 2014). Differences in whether people feel in control of their own lives also predict immigration attitudes, where those who feel more personal control report less resentment toward immigrants (Harell et al., 2017).

We believe that differences in personal control help explain why people see their personal challenges as a product of the political system. We expect that those with an internal locus of control will be less likely to believe that politics contributes to the problems they face within their lives. When people feel greater personal control, they will be more likely to take responsibility for their own futures. In contrast, we expect that those with an external locus of control will be more willing to blame the political system for the challenges they personally face. Because they feel that their difficulties are out of their own control, they will instead assign blame and responsibility to the political system.

In addition to exploring the effects of personality differences in locus of control, we also consider the effects of self-esteem for how people assign blame in politics. Self-esteem reflects people's perceptions of their value and their self-worth. Those high in self-esteem hold positive, favorable

views of themselves, believing in their self-worth and value. Those low in self-esteem hold less enthusiastic, ambivalent, or even negative views about themselves. They are less likely to see their own positive qualities and tend to question their self-worth and their capabilities (Rosenberg, 1965). Like locus of control, self-esteem is also considered self-evaluative, rooted in how people see themselves and their capabilities. While locus of control refers to people's views about their control over their environment, self-esteem reflects introspective and internalized views of the self. We expect that these kinds of self-appraisals influence the ways that people assign responsibility and blame, where negative outcomes are interpreted in different ways depending on people's perceptions of their personal strengths and limitations.

Like locus of control, self-esteem is characterized as a personality trait, a general, enduring orientation that guides behavior across multiple domains. As a personality trait, levels of self-esteem tend to be quite stable within individuals, with similar over-time consistency as is seen for other personality traits (Orth & Robins, 2014; Trzesniewski et al., 2003). Its origins are found in both genetics and socialization, with a level of heritability comparable to those of the Big Five personality traits (Neiss et al., 2006; Roy et al., 1995).

Self-esteem is considered to serve as a psychological resource for individuals, one that helps them persist within difficult domains. Those who hold more positive beliefs about themselves feel greater self-confidence to take on new challenges. Those with low self-esteem anticipate negative outcomes, and often focus their energies on trying to minimize harms rather than maximize successes (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Rosenberg & Owens, 2001). Within politics, self-esteem is thought to facilitate citizen engagement, where higher levels of self-esteem and self-confidence predict greater attention to politics, feelings of efficacy, and participation (Carmines, 1978b; Rosenberg, 1962; Wolak, 2020). Levels of self-esteem also shape people's orientations toward politics, including their engagement in partisan political life as well as their support for democratic norms (Sniderman, 1975; Sniderman & Citrin, 1971; Wolak & Stapleton, 2020).

We consider whether self-esteem helps explain why some people are more likely to blame the political system for the challenges they face within their own lives. We expect that those with low self-esteem will be more likely to believe that their personal challenges are due to the political system. As self-esteem increases, we expect that people will be increasingly likely to reject the idea that politics is the source of their personal dilemmas.<sup>2</sup> Those with low self-esteem are prone to negative thinking (Rosenberg & Owens, 2001). While those with higher self-esteem tend to feel confident about their prospects for achieving success, those with lower levels of self-esteem harbor greater doubts about their ability to secure favorable outcomes in their lives. When confronted by negative events in their personal

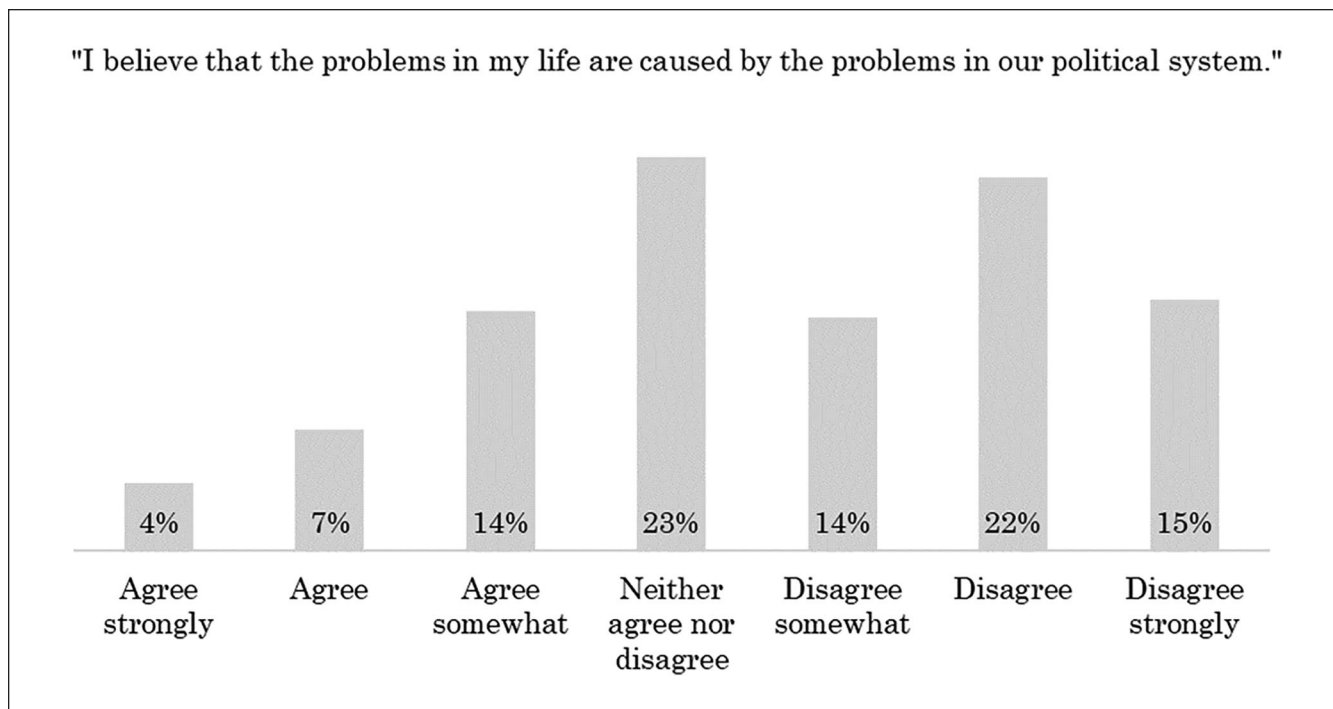
lives, those with high self-esteem are more resilient and less likely to be discouraged by setbacks. Those with low self-esteem tend to dwell on negative outcomes, focusing on what is going wrong rather than what is going well. This can contribute to feelings of cynicism toward government (Sniderman, 1975). Because of this, we expect that lower levels of self-esteem will be associated with a greater likelihood of assigning blame and responsibility to the political system than higher levels of self-esteem.

## Data and Measures

We explore why some people believe that government is at fault for the problems they face in their lives. To measure how people assign political blame, we rely on an item included in a module of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement, "I believe that the problems in my life are caused by the problems in our political system." Response options fell on a seven-point scale from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly." As shown in Figure 1, people are more likely to disagree with this statement than agree with it, with 51% of respondents voicing disagreement. One out of four respondents agrees with the statement, and believes that their personal challenges can be blamed in part on the political system. We find about a quarter of the sample falls at the middle of the scale, responding that they neither agree nor disagree with the statement. This is consistent with prior studies that have argued that most people do not blame the political system for their personal struggles (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Sears & Funk, 1991). Yet it also highlights a sizable proportion of Americans that believes that their problems have origins within politics.

What distinguishes those who see political origins to their personal challenges from those who do not see politics as a force that contributes to the problems in their lives? We propose that there are important personality trait differences that predict how people assign responsibility and blame. We expect that people who feel greater personal control are less likely to believe that their personal problems are rooted in the political system. To measure locus of control, we rely on an item that asks people whether they believe that they are able to take control of the challenges they face in their personal lives.<sup>3</sup> Our measure is scored such that low values reflect an external locus of control and higher scores reflect greater personal control and an increasingly internalized locus of control.<sup>4</sup> We also consider whether self-esteem limits the tendency to see political origins to personal challenges, where those with higher levels of self-esteem will be less likely to believe that the political system is at fault for the problems they face. To measure self-esteem, we rely on an implicit measure. Respondents are asked how much they like their first and last name (Gebauer et al., 2008).<sup>5</sup> More favorable ratings of one's name serves as an indicator of





**Figure 1.** Propensity to blame politics for personal challenges.

higher self-esteem, while negative ratings of one's name serves as an indicator of lower self-esteem.

As controls, we first consider the effects of socialization. In explaining why people do not necessarily look to government to solve their personal problems, scholars have pointed to political socialization. Values of self-reliance and self-sufficiency are part of the American ethos, emphasizing ideas of achieving a better life through one's own efforts. This mindset encourages people to take personal responsibility for their challenges rather than looking to government for solutions (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Feldman, 1982; Schlozman & Verba, 1979). The origins of these beliefs are found within political socialization (McClosky & Zaller, 1984). To capture the effects of political socialization, we first include an indicator of educational attainment. We use education as a proxy for exposure to socializing messages that deter people from blaming politics for their own life challenges. We expect that increasing years of schooling will be associated with a lower likelihood of attributing personal challenges to political sources. As an indicator of support for democratic principles, we include items that assess support for rule of law, given that these beliefs also find their origins in political socialization (McClosky & Zaller, 1984).<sup>6</sup> We expect that those with greater education and greater support for democratic principles will be less likely to believe that their personal challenges have political origins.

We also include controls to consider the possibility that people's tendency to assign blame to politics is connected to their personal life experiences. It has been suggested that people's personal economic conditions may inform whether

they blame elected officials for the health of the economy (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Lau & Sears, 1981). As such, it is important to try to control for the personal challenges that people could attribute to forces beyond themselves. To assess whether people are personally struggling or succeeding in their lives, we rely on three measures. First, we include an indicator of pocketbook economic conditions, using an item that asks people whether their household income has increased or decreased over the past 4 years. It may be that people are more likely to blame the political system for their problems when they are facing financial struggles than when things are going well for them economically. We also draw on a set of items in the CCES about the positive and negative experiences that people have had over the past 4 years, such as finishing school, receiving a raise at work, or losing a job. From these items, we created summed scales of positive life experiences as well as negative life experiences.<sup>7</sup> With these items, we can see whether those who are facing greater personal challenges in their lives and in their financial security are more likely to assign blame to politics than those who are more economically secure and successful. We also control for partisan effects and demographic differences, by including indicators of party identification, strength of partisanship, religiosity, gender, race, and age.<sup>8</sup>

### Why People Believe Politics is the Cause of Problems in Their Life?

To model individual differences in assigning blame to politics, we rely on regression. Results are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Explaining Why People Blame Politics for Personal Problems.

	Blames politics for problems in life
Internal locus of control	-0.344* (0.043)
Self-esteem	-0.103* (0.047)
Education	-0.079* (0.033)
Support for democratic principles	-0.196* (0.053)
Personal economic conditions	-0.020 (0.043)
Positive life events in last four years	-0.020 (0.011)
Negative life events in last four years	0.027* (0.012)
Partisanship	0.004 (0.005)
Strength of partisanship	-0.020* (0.010)
Religiosity	0.089* (0.032)
Female	-0.100* (0.020)
African-American	0.018 (0.029)
Latino	-0.050 (0.041)
Age	-0.002* (0.001)
Constant	1.001* (0.068)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.288
N	931

Note. 2016 CCES. Regression estimates. Standard errors in parentheses.  
\* $p < .05$ .

We find that differences in people's personality traits are important predictors of why some people blame the political system for their personal problems. We first confirm that individual differences in locus of control strongly predict whether or not people perceive political origins for their personal challenges. A person with the highest level of perceived personal control has a predicted value of 0.62 on the indicator of blaming government, compared to 0.28 for a person with an internal locus of control—a difference of about one and a third standard deviations. People who believe that they are able to control their own futures through their efforts and industry see their personal challenges as their own responsibility. When people do not believe they have much power over their environment, they are more likely to blame the political system for their personal circumstances.

We also confirm that levels of personal self-esteem predict whether people believe that their personal struggles are the fault of the political system. Those who report greater feelings of self-esteem are more likely to reject the idea that their problems have political roots. Those with the highest level of implicit self-esteem have a predicted value of 0.37 on the dependent variable, compared to 0.47 for those at the lowest level of self-esteem, a difference of about a third of a standard deviation. When people have confidence in themselves and their abilities, they are less likely to see their personal challenges as politically rooted. While some argue that those with high self-esteem deflect personal blame for negative outcomes (Brewin & Shapiro, 1984), we find that low self-esteem is associated with a greater likelihood of assigning blame to the political system. People's

self-evaluations and how they view themselves relative to their environment shape whether they take personal responsibility for their problems or instead shift blame to the political system.<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the control variables, we find that education serves as a force that limits people from politicizing their personal problems. As years of schooling increase, so does the likelihood of rejecting the idea that personal problems have political origins. The effect size is comparable to that of self-esteem, with a 0.08 difference in blame assignment between those with the highest and lowest levels of educational attainment. This is consistent with our expectation that exposure to socializing messages encourages a mindset of taking personal responsibility for dealing with obstacles in life. Likewise, our second indicator of exposure to socializing messages, support for democratic principles, is also negatively associated with a tendency to perceive political origins for personal challenges.

In considering the degree to which people are more likely to attribute blame to political causes when they have encountered greater challenges, we find only partial support for this. When it comes to pocketbook economic conditions, we find no effect on assigning blame to government. Those who have seen their own financial situation decline over recent years are no more likely to believe their problems have political origins than those who have seen their household finances improve. People's views about whether their personal problems have political origins are disconnected from the health of their personal finances, which suggests that this kind of political grievance has more to do with people's personality traits than their material circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, those who have experienced positive life events like getting a raise or a new job are as unlikely to blame government for their hardships as those who have not had these experiences. It is only in the case of negative life experiences where we find a significant effect on how people assign blame. Those who have experienced hardships like losing a job or being a victim of a crime are more likely to believe that their personal challenges have political origins than those who have not had such experiences. Each negative event experienced is associated with a 0.027 point increase in assigning blame to politics on the 0 to 1 scale. The magnitude of this effect is quite small, but highlights that the ways that people assign blame and responsibility seem at least partially related to their personal experiences.<sup>11</sup>

We find no evidence of partisan differences in how people assign responsibility and blame. Democrats and Republicans do not differ in their propensity to perceive their personal problems as politically rooted.<sup>12</sup> We find that independents are somewhat more likely to blame politics for their personal problems than strong partisans. Consistent with past work that suggests that religious beliefs inform how people attribute responsibility and blame (Li et al., 2012), we find a positive correlation between religiosity and implicating politics as a cause of personal challenges. In terms of

demographic differences, women are less likely than men to say that their personal problems have political origins. Older people are also less likely to blame politics compared to younger people. We find no differences in assignment of blame between blacks, whites, and Latinos.

### Consequences of a Mindset of Blaming Politics for Personal Struggles

When people attribute responsibility for their personal problems to the political system, is it consequential for their political decision-making? We propose that these beliefs affect how people evaluate elected officials. In studies of attributions of political responsibility and blame, people's willingness to punish or reward government for outcomes is thought to depend on whether or not people see government as responsible for these matters (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Lau & Sears, 1981; Peffley, 1984; Peffley & Williams, 1985). If people do not assign blame to elected officials when things go wrong, then these negative outcomes should not inform people's evaluations of governmental performance. This is thought to explain why pocketbook economic considerations seem such weak predictors of people's choices on Election Day. Instead of blaming the government for their personal economic challenges, people are more likely to take personal responsibility for these negative events.

We test whether those who blame politics for their personal challenges evaluate elected officials in different ways than those who do not assign responsibility to politics. We expect that those who see their personal challenges as a problem of politics will be more likely to use appraisals of their own circumstances to evaluate the performance of elected officials. When people believe that their financial well-being is affected by national factors such as inflation, unemployment, or taxes, they are more likely to connect their personal economic fortunes to their evaluations of governmental economic performance (Feldman, 1982). Likewise, when people connect their personal problems to social or community concerns, they are more likely to believe government has an obligation to help solve those problems (Brody & Sniderman, 1977).

We focus on evaluations of the president, and how people balance sociotropic versus pocketbook economic evaluations in their appraisals of presidential performance. We expect that those who attribute personal challenges to political origins will be more likely to use self-interested considerations in assessing presidential performance. Those who do not perceive political roots to personal challenges will be less likely to rely on personal economic conditions and more likely to evaluate the president based on national economic performance. To test this, we interact people's tendency to believe that their personal challenges have political origins with indicators of both pocketbook and sociotropic economic evaluations as explanations for levels of presidential approval. Pocketbook economic

**Table 2.** Conditional Effects of Economic Evaluations on Presidential Approval.

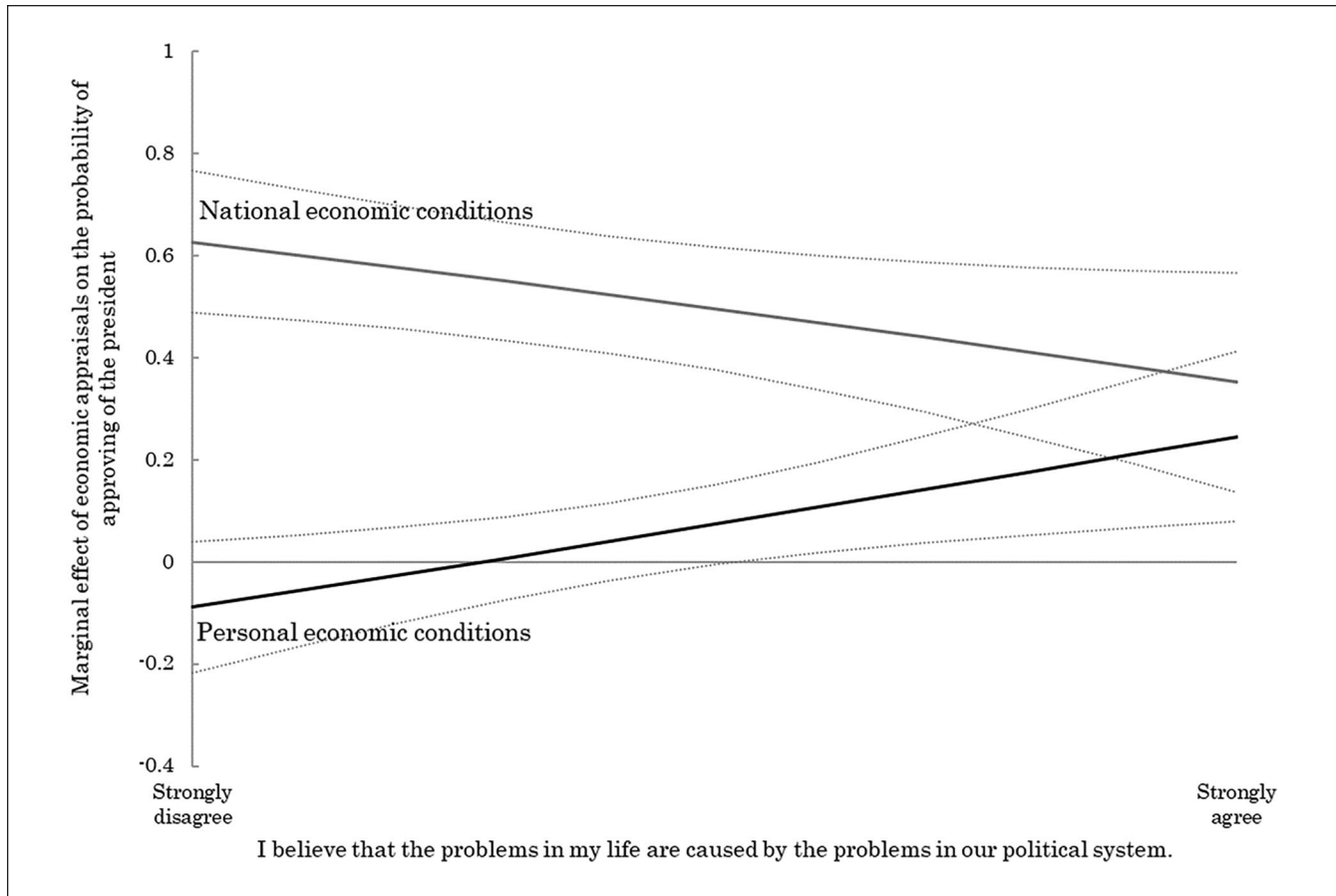
	Presidential approval
Blames politics for own problems	-0.735 (0.784)
Personal economic conditions	-0.874 (0.652)
Blames politics × personal economic conditions	3.138* (1.239)
National economic conditions	6.165* (0.838)
Blames politics × national economic conditions	-2.919 <sup>+</sup> (1.549)
Education	0.269 (0.349)
Partisanship	-0.754* (0.070)
Female	0.428* (0.186)
African-American	0.539* (0.265)
Latino	0.106 (0.301)
Age	-0.011 <sup>+</sup> (0.006)
Cutpoint 1	-1.176* (0.583)
Cutpoint 2	0.063 (0.559)
Cutpoint 3	2.382* (0.615)
N	890

Note. 2016 CCES. Ordered logit estimates. Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ . <sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ .

conditions are assessed with an item that asks people whether their household's annual income has increased or decreased over the past 4 years.<sup>13</sup> Sociotropic economic appraisals are assessed with an item that asks respondents to rate on a five-point scale if they think the nation's economy has gotten much better or much worse over the past year. Presidential approval is asked on a four point scale ranging from strongly approve to strongly disapprove of the job being done by President Barack Obama.<sup>14</sup>

Ordered logit results are shown in Table 2. We find that the effects of pocketbook economic conditions on presidential approval depend on whether people believe that their problems have political origins, as indicated by a significant interaction term. In Figure 2, we plot the marginal effects of both pocketbook and sociotropic economic appraisals on the probability of approving the president over people's propensities to see personal challenges as politicized. Among those who do not agree that the political system contributes to their personal problems, there is no relationship between the health of people's personal finances and their evaluations of the president's performance. However, among those who agree that politics causes the problems in their lives, pocketbook economic conditions predict people's approval of the president. The predictive power of self-interested economic concerns increases with the strength of agreement with the statement. Among those who somewhat agree that the problems in their life are caused by the political system, predicted presidential approval is 44% among those with declining personal finances, climbing to 57% approval among those greatest personal economic improvements—a thirteen point difference. Among those who strongly agree



**Figure 2.** The effects of economic appraisals on presidential approval, conditional on trait differences in assigning blame.

that the problems in their life are caused by the political system, pocketbook economic conditions are even more important to explaining presidential approval. A person with the greatest declines in their personal finances has a 35% likelihood of approving of the president, nearly doubling to 62% approval among those with the greatest growth in their personal finances—a 27-point difference. The effects of pocketbook economic evaluations on presidential approval depend on how people assign responsibility and blame for their personal problems.

When consider the effects of sociotropic economic appraisals, we find a near significant interaction effect associated with the belief that personal challenges have political origins. As Figure 2 shows, people's evaluations about the health of the national economy tend to better predict presidential approval among those who reject the idea that the political system is to blame for their personal problems than among those who agree with it. This shows that people who blame their problems on the political system use distinctive standards to evaluate the performance of elected officials. We also confirm a substantial effect for partisanship, where a strong Republican has a 16% likelihood of approving of the president, and a strong Democrat has an 83% of approving of the president. This is consistent with recent work that shows

that party allegiances increasingly dominate performance criteria in the public's evaluations of the president (Donovan et al., 2020).

## Conclusions

People struggle with different problems in their lives, but only some people believe their personal challenges are a product of the political system. People vary in the degree to which they own responsibility for the struggles they face in their lives. In contrast to prior studies of how people assign blame and responsibility to different political actors, we show that people also vary in their general propensity to blame the political system when things go wrong for them. In this, we better understand how people define the boundaries of what is political. For some, what is personal is personal, not political. For others, boundaries between the personal and the political are less sharply drawn. Others have argued that people vary in their tendencies toward seeing the political world in personal versus collective terms (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Wilson & Banfield, 1964). We confirm that people vary in the degree to which the personal is political, and moreover, show that these differences reflect deep-rooted trait differences.



These findings help us understand the origins of people's political grievances, and the conditions under which disadvantages rise to the level of a complaint against government (Felstiner et al., 1980). Governments can intervene to improve the lives of their citizenry, and the actions of government can also aggravate the problems people face in their personal lives. When people blame government for their personal challenges, they may well have reasonable grounds to do so. But to the extent to blame is assigned based just on people's self-evaluations and personality traits, it suggests that government is also held responsible for problems that it did not create. This speaks to the origins of the feelings of mistrust and alienation that follow from people's frustrations with the political system (Miller, 1974). When people's grievances are a function of personal attributes or circumstances that cannot be improved (or worsened) by the political system, it suggests that perhaps there will always be some percentage of people who are aggrieved regardless of political outcomes.

Americans generally do not think that their personal problems are something that government needs to solve. This culture of self-reliance within the American ethos has been argued to explain low levels of public demand for redistributive policy and high levels of tolerance for social inequalities (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Feldman, 1982; Schlozman & Verba, 1979). The origins of these beliefs have been thought to be socialized. Our results support this, but also identify personality traits as a countervailing force that increases the likelihood of personalized politics. People approach the political world in different ways, as a consequence of how they see themselves as well as how they perceive their influence over their political environment. Those with low self-esteem think about their relationship with politics differently than those with high self-esteem, as they are more likely to believe that politics is responsible for the hardships they have encountered. When people feel like their fates are determined by chance or luck, they are more likely to believe that their problems are out of their hands and instead intertwined with the political system.

Most people do not believe that the political system is the cause of the problems they face in their lives. But for those who do, this seems only weakly related to people's material interests and personal experiences. Instead, the tendency toward personalized politics is better understood as a product of people's personality traits. This means that the same negative outcomes are political to some but not necessarily so to others. In order to understand what people expect from the political system, we need to understand that people interpret the same outcomes in different ways.

We show that people's personality traits are important to how they assign responsibility and blame in politics. Past accounts of how people attribute responsibility have focused on how people are guided by factors like political awareness and partisanship in deciding who is responsible for outcomes. These results show that some by their nature are more

likely to see the problems in their life as part of the domain of politics. This extends our understanding of the importance of personality traits in politics. Not only do people's predispositions inform their policy demands, they also shape how they hold politicians accountable. We find that those with an internal locus of control and high levels of self-esteem are less likely to believe that their personal problems have political origins. This highlights the importance of people's self-evaluations within politics. Locus of control and self-esteem have been argued to shape whether people feel empowered to engage in political life (Carmines, 1978a, 1978b; Cohen et al., 2001; Rosenberg, 1962). We show that these traits also shape how people see their relationship with the political system.

Our findings suggest that people's personal traits form a distinct lens through which their political impressions are formed. Those who see the personal as political are more likely to evaluate incumbents based on their personal circumstances. Those who tend to see the personal as personal evaluate politicians through a more sociotropic lens. Most people do not blame the system for their personal circumstances, suggesting that political socialization serves to limit the pursuit of personal gain in favor of promoting the public good. But some do blame the political system for their problems, and approach politics with more self-interested motives in mind. In this way, personality traits contribute to heterogeneity in patterns of economic voting.

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### ORCID iD

Jennifer Wolak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4742-7442>

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. We also confirm this within our data. In a model that considers locus of control as a function of pocketbook economic conditions, summed indicators of positive and negative life events, education, religiosity, gender, race, and age, only age and education predict locus of control.
2. High self-esteem helps people rebound from negative outcomes. If this reflects a tendency for those with high self-esteem to deny personal responsibility for negative outcomes (Brewin & Shapiro, 1984), then we might expect to find a positive relationship between self-esteem and assigning blame to the political system.

3. The specific wording asks about agreement with, "I believe the problems in my life are completely out of my control" on a seven-point scale that ranges from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly." This is a limited measure compared to those used in past studies of locus of control (Carmines, 1978a; Dawes et al., 2014), in that we only have a single item to assess this trait rather than a battery of multiple items.
4. Our focus is on how general trait differences in personal control inform the specific decision to blame politics for personal challenges. Past research demonstrates that self-evaluative personality traits like these are distinctive from political attitudes. For example, the personality trait of self-efficacy is distinct from feelings of political efficacy (Condon & Holleque, 2013; Lane, 1959; Wolak, 2020). In the case of locus of control, people's general orientations toward a sense of internal control are typically considered to be distinct from how people attribute responsibility and blame within specific settings like school or the workplace (Wang et al., 2010).
5. The wording of the item asks, "How much do you like your full name (first name and last name together) in total?" Responses are given on a nine-point scale with endpoints labeled "not at all" and "very much." The correlation between our self-esteem measure and the indicator of locus of control is modest ( $r=0.1$ ).
6. This is measured based on disagreement with two statements, "Sometimes it is necessary to bend the law to deal with social problems" and "It is not necessary to obey a law you consider unjust."
7. Positive life experiences include finishing school, taking a new job, receiving a raise at work, getting married, retiring, and having a child. Negative life experiences include losing a job, being issued a traffic ticket, being a victim of a crime, visiting an emergency room, and getting divorced. In the Supplemental Appendix, we describe the results under different operationalizations of these life events. When the events are included individually, only losing a job has a significant effect on the assignment of blame.
8. Religiosity is assessed as the average of three items from the common content of the CCES on the importance of religion, frequency of prayer, and frequency of attendance at religious services.
9. By considering people's general tendencies to blame the political system for their personal problems, we cannot know for certain whether people assign blame mostly to current politicians or instead to fundamental features of government. Our intent was to assess people's tendency to blame the political system generally. In Table A3 of the Supplemental Appendix, we test for the possibility that our results are instead the product of people's reactions to current officeholders. We find that our results are robust to a control for global satisfaction with incumbents in government.
10. We find no significant differences associated with household income levels or employment status when considered as control variables.
11. We also considered whether the effects of these life events are conditional on people's personality traits, but neither self-esteem nor locus of control condition the effects of these events on how people assign blame.
12. We also find no significant effect associated with ideology if included as a control.

13. Response options range on a five-point scale from "decreased a lot" to "increased a lot."
14. This reflects the inclusion of presidential approval in the pre-election wave of the CCES.

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### Author Biographies

**Vanessa Baird** is an associate professor of political science at the University of Colorado. Her research focuses on what makes people support abandoning the rule of law in favor of violence. She also studies what makes people redress their grievances through litigation and how this has an impact on the judicial agenda.

**Jennifer Wolak** is a professor of political science at the University of Colorado. She studies public opinion and political psychology.