

Responsibility Attribution Biases in Multilevel Governance

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Partisan bias in responsibility judgements

We examine biases in attributions of regional vs. central government responsibility for regional economic outcomes in a context of multilevel governance

Theoretical background:

- Group-serving attribution bias: people tend to attribute credit for perceived successes to own group and blame the out-group for failures
- Partisan bias: partisans credit own party for good conditions and blame out-party for bad conditions
- Theories of motivated political reasoning depict a tension between accuracy and directional goals

Multilevel governance

Institutional context may affect the likelihood of engaging in partisan rationalization.

- Context shapes clarity of responsibility – a key accountability mechanism
 - Ascription of functional responsibilities of each level of government
 - “Divided federalism” (Brown 2010): when regional and central government are controlled by different parties
- Clarity of responsibility increases the opportunity to credit/blame governments along partisan lines

Besides partisanship, (contending) territorial identities may provide an additional source of group-based bias

Research questions

Informed by the particularities of decentralized governance:

- Is there any room for attribution bias given the limited leverage of regional governments to influence economic outcomes?
- Is partisan bias enhanced under conditions of divided federalism?
- Do territorial (regional vs. national) identities bias attributions of responsibility in line with the perceived state of the regional economy

Hypotheses

- H1.** As perceptions of the regional economy improve, the closer voters feel to the regional incumbent party the more likely they will be to attribute responsibility to the regional government
- H2.** Divided federalism triggers partisan bias; unified government dampens it
- H3.** As perceptions of the regional economy improve, the closer voters identifies with the region vis-à-vis the state the more likely they will be to attribute responsibility to the regional government

Experiment

Experiment embedded in online panel survey (round 5, Oct 2013)

Sample: Spain, residents, aged 18-48, N=845

Design:

- Information about the regional economic performance is manipulated, 3 conditions
 - Worse/Better: “Some of the more recent data show signs of IMPROVEMENT/DOWNTURN in the state of the economy in [region] during the last quarter”
 - Control: no information provided
- Dependent variables:
 - To what extent do you think the regional government is responsible for the state of the economy in [region]? And the central government? Response scale from “Not at all” (0) to “Completely” (10)

Measures

- Attribution of responsibility: difference regional – central government (-10 to 10)
- Partisanship: closeness to incumbent party (5-point scale)
- Territorial identity: difference region – Spain identification scales (-10 to 10)
- Divided federalism: 5 out of 17(+2) regions, N=346 (41%)

Models

- Partisan bias (*H1*): 2-way interaction

$$\text{attribution diff} = \text{treatment} \times \text{closeness regional incumbent}$$

- Partisan bias enhanced by divided federalism (*H2*): 3-way interaction

$$\text{attribution diff} = \text{treatment} \times \text{closeness regional incumbent} \times \text{divided}$$

- Territorial id bias (*H3*): 2-way interaction

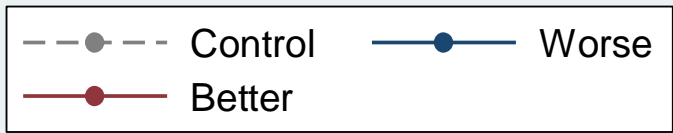
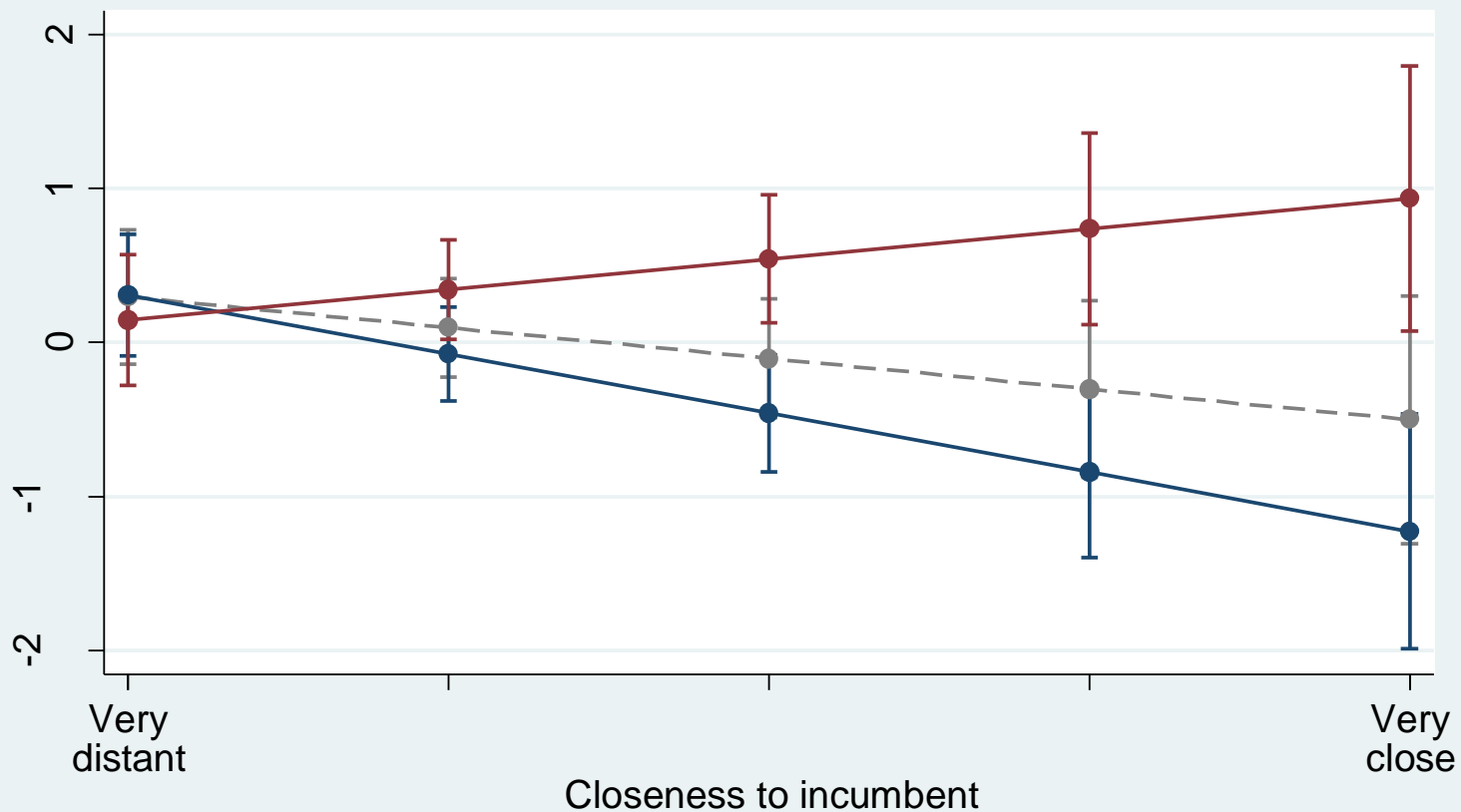
$$\text{attribution diff} = \text{treatment} \times \text{territorial id}$$

Partisan bias, H1 & H2

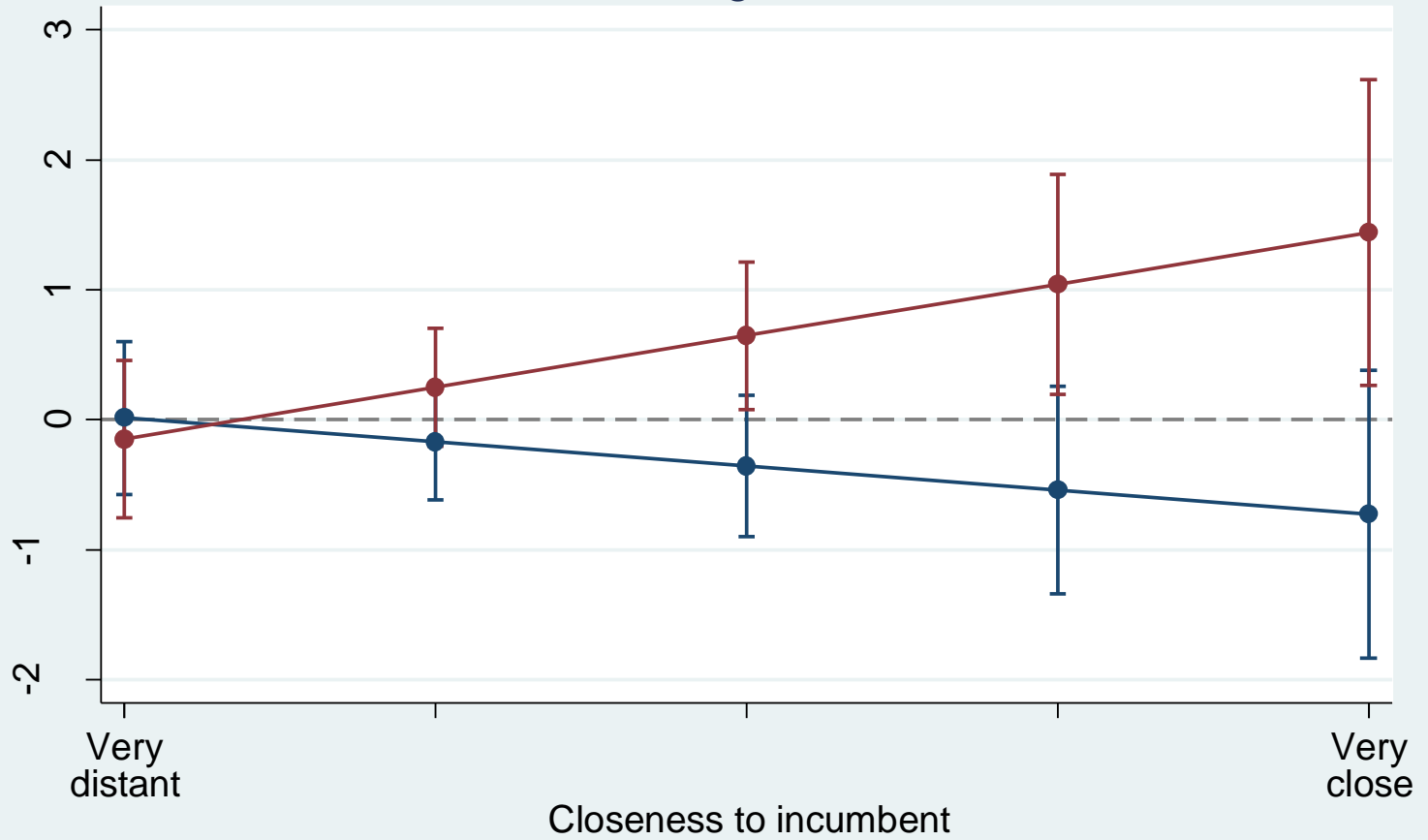
	(1)	(2)
Treatment (ref.: control)		
Worse	0,013 (0,300)	-0,184 (0,365)
Better	-0,150 (0,310)	-0,183 (0,364)
Closeness to regional incumbent	-0,798 (0,529)	0,228 (0,679)
Worse × Closeness	-0,738 (0,717)	-0,144 (0,948)
Better × Closeness	1,591* (0,760)	-0,495 (1,011)
Divided		0,243 (0,473)
Worse × Divided		0,540 (0,628)
Better × Divided		0,214 (0,673)
Divided × Closeness		-2,308* (1,085)
Worse × Closeness × Divided		-1,118 (1,459)
Better × Closeness × Divided		3,792* (1,569)
Constant	0,296 (0,223)	0,221 (0,266)
Adj. R-squared	0,016	0,040
N	845	845

+ p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01

Predicted attribution

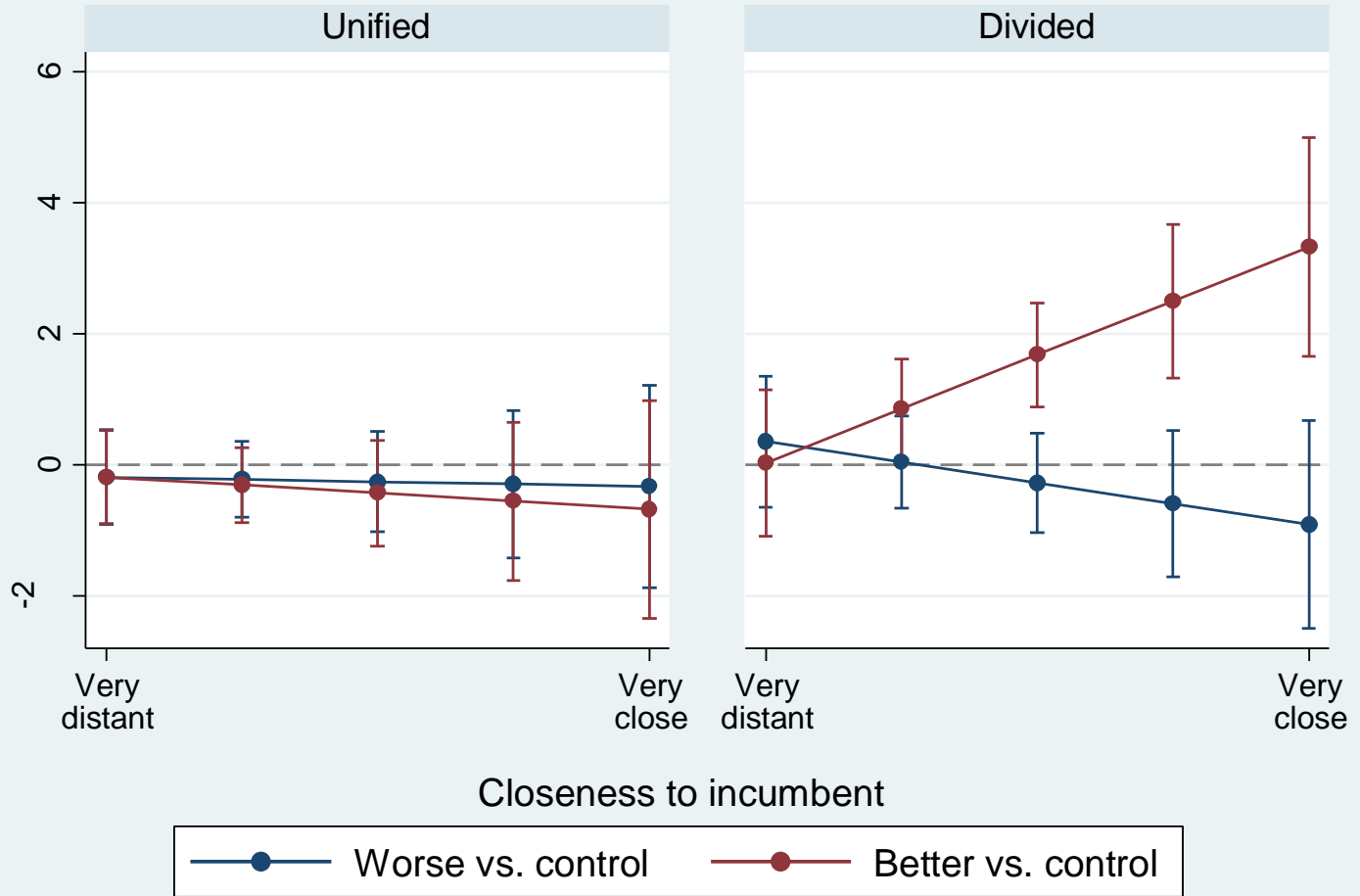


Treatment marginal effects



—●— Worse vs. control —●— Better vs. control

Marginal treatment effects

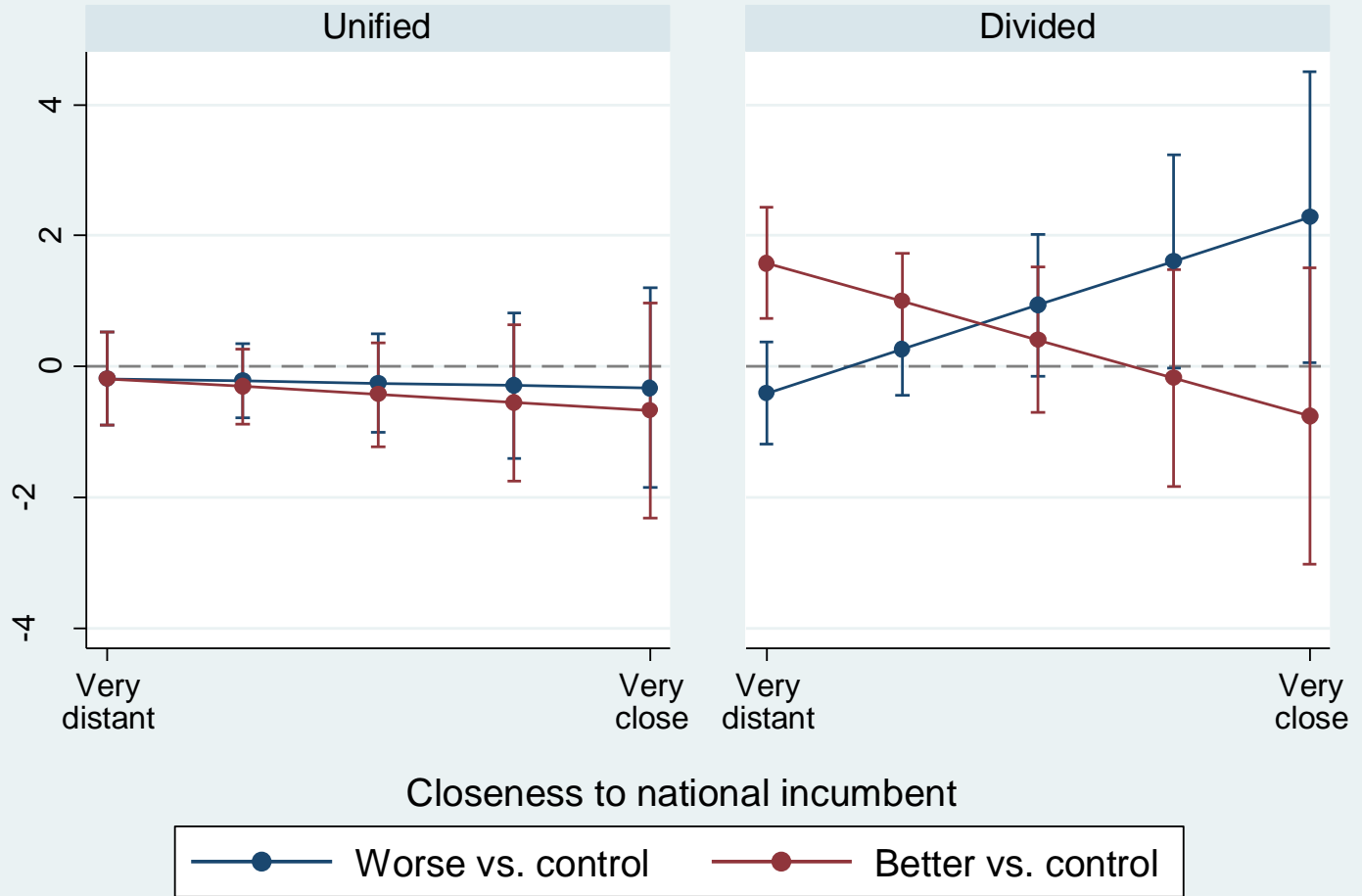


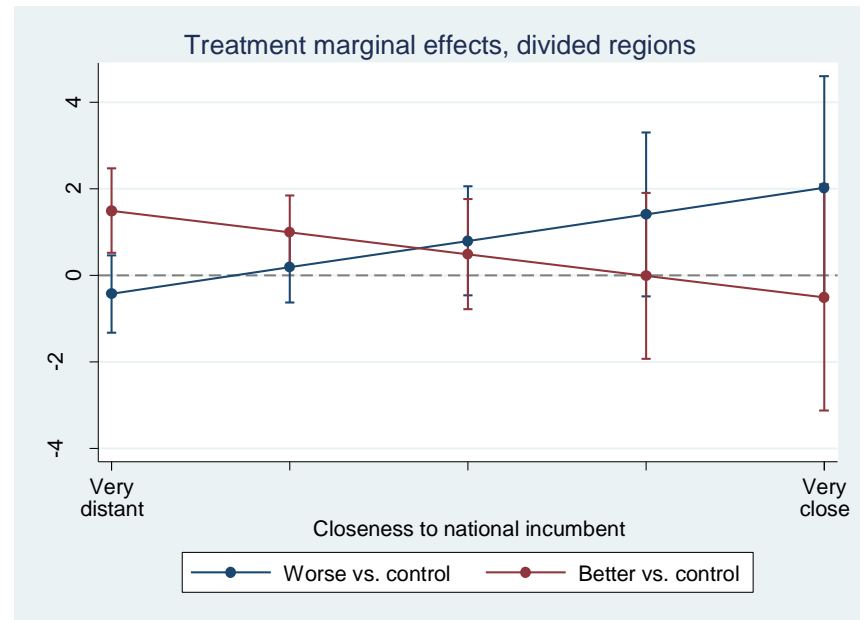
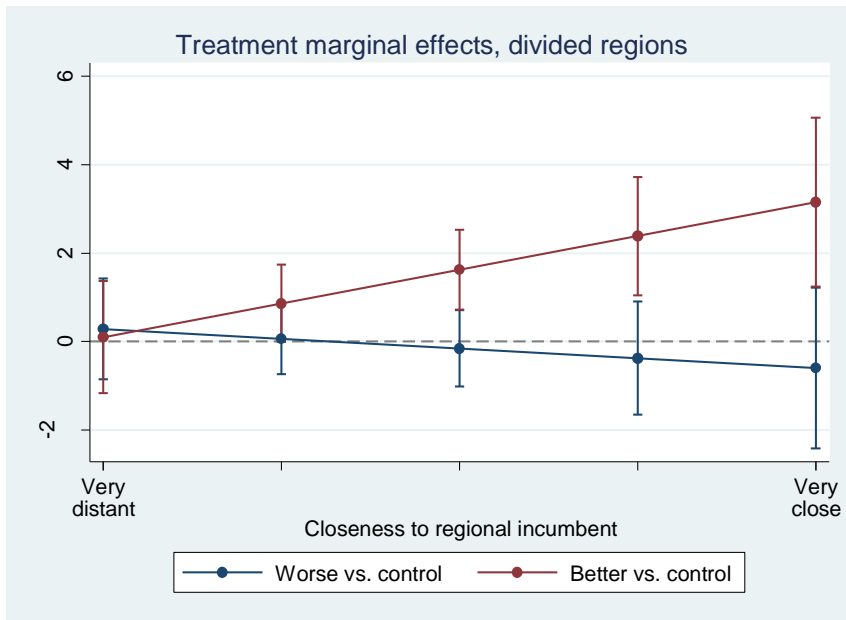
Closeness to central government incumbent

	(1) All regions	(2) Divided regions
Treatment (ref.: control)		
Worse	-0,184 (0,362)	-0,121 (0,652)
Better	-0,183 (0,361)	0,435 (0,714)
Divided	-0,914* (0,398)	
Worse × Divided	-0,223 (0,536)	
Better × Divided	1,764** (0,563)	
Closeness to national incumbent	0,228 (0,672)	2,353* (1,119)
Worse × Closeness national	-0,144 (0,938)	2,451 (1,488)
Better × Closeness national	-0,495 (1,002)	-2,004 (1,529)
Divided × Closeness national	2,396* (1,179)	
Worse × Closeness national × Divided	2,836+ (1,590)	
Better × Closeness national × Divided	-1,846 (1,663)	
Closeness to regional incumbent		-1,818+ (0,969)
Worse × Closeness regional		-0,883 (1,272)
Better × Closeness regional		3,051* (1,368)
Constant	0,221 (0,263)	-0,011 (0,499)
Adj. R-squared	0,059	0,138
N	845	346

+ p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01

Marginal treatment effects, all regions



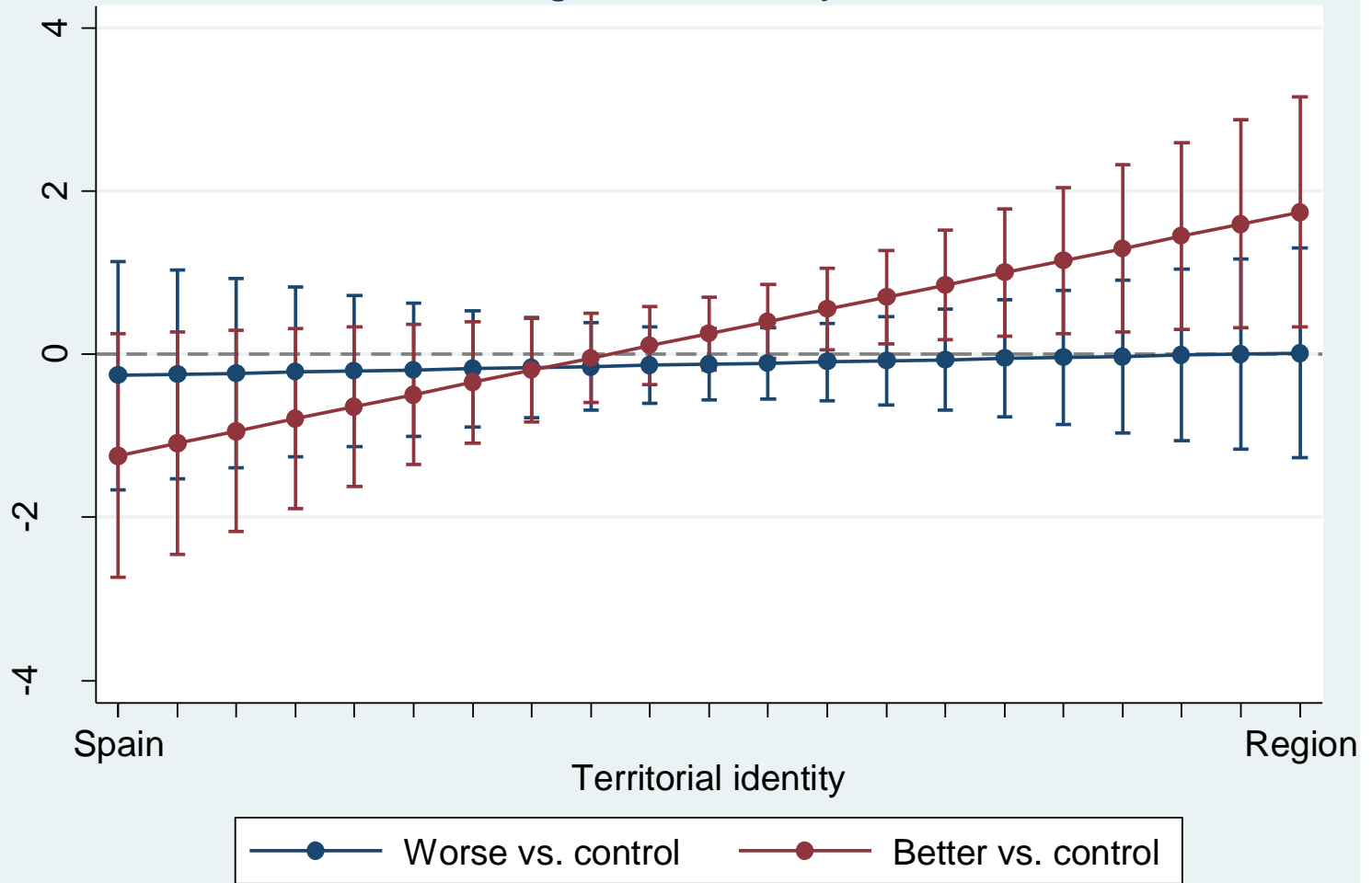


Territorial id bias, H3

	(1)	(2)
Treatment (ref.: control)		
Worse	-0,067 (0,666)	-0,182 (0,718)
Better	-1,898** (0,719)	-1,543* (0,766)
Territorial identity	-4,047** (0,911)	-3,674** (0,999)
Worse × Territorial id	-0,042 (1,200)	0,276 (1,297)
Better × Territorial id	4,226** (1,324)	2,988* (1,406)
Closeness to regional incumbent		0,237 (0,668)
Worse × Closeness		-0,342 (0,933)
Better × Closeness		-0,540 (0,996)
Divided		0,476 (0,470)
Worse × Divided		0,348 (0,621)
Better × Divided		-0,020 (0,665)
Divided × Closeness		-1,584 (1,086)
Worse × Closeness × Divided		-0,891 (1,467)
Better × Closeness × Divided		3,217*
Divided × Closeness		(1,571)
Constant	2,153** (0,496)	1,923** (0,532)
Adj. R-squared	0,052	0,071
N	845	845

+ p<.1, * p<.05, ** p<.01

Treatment marginal effects by territorial id



Conclusions

Evidence of significant partisan bias despite clear functional responsibilities

Partisan bias apparently restricted to conditions of divided government

Territorial identity serves as an additional source of attribution bias

Limitations and extensions

Manipulation taps reaction to incoming messages about economic conditions, rather than perceptions of these

Closeness to regional incumbent correlates with regional territorial id as of time of data collection

Available observational evidence is less conclusive, although mostly in the expected direction

Additional moderators to be explored: level of decentralization, terms in office, minority/coalition governments