The election season is heating up, and as always, the state of the economy is a key factor in voters’ decisions. When voters feel good about the economy and their own situation, they tend to support incumbents and the incumbent party. Feelings of economic insecurity generally push them toward challengers.

The research shows that voters’ feelings are a function not of levels but of changes. In other words, votes in November will be driven not by whether the economy is strong at the end of 2016, but by whether it got stronger during 2016. So it’s not about good or bad, but about better or worse.

To be sure, the economy isn’t everything. Strong economic conditions favored Al Gore in 2000 but (Bill) Clinton fatigue swung the election (narrowly) to George W. Bush.

This year, the bizarre candidacy of Donald Trump may trump whatever weight voters might otherwise have assigned to the economy.

Even so, Hillary Clinton’s advisers must have cringed when the latest gross domestic product data showed that the economy grew at a rate of only 1 percent in the first half of the year, the poorest such showing since 2011.

In North Carolina, we have a Republican governor running for re-election against a Democratic challenger. When the governor and president are from different parties, it presents a puzzle. Like most Americans, North Carolinians are concerned about the economy. Which party will they blame?

Fortunately, the situation here isn’t as dire as it is in Kansas, where Gov. Sam Brownback announced after his 2010 election that his state would be a laboratory to test the effectiveness of conservative economic policies. Kansas followed up with draconian spending cuts plus tax cuts that mostly benefited the rich. The result was a disaster, and Kansas now lags the country and its neighboring states in income and job growth.

North Carolina has fared better in spite of pursuing very similar policies. Our economy is far from a disaster and is recovering slowly. As I noted in a previous column, we shouldn’t attribute this to tax and spending cuts, because those policies have failed in nearly every state they’ve been tried. For some reason, North Carolina was immune to the worst ravages of those policies, and we can expect Gov. Pat McCrory to remind us of that this fall.

Even so, it’s hard to take seriously the governor’s claim of a “Carolina comeback.” The state’s economic picture is less likely to elicit a “wow” from voters than a “meh.” Improvements have paralleled gains in the national economy. There’s little to make our recovery stand out from the crowd.

N.C. State economist Mike Walden recently released his mid-year assessment of the state economy, and the picture he paints is iffy. The North Carolina economy is growing, but at a slow pace. Employment is rising, but worker productivity and wages are barely improving. Unemployment is falling, but the number of discouraged workers — those who would like a job but have quit looking and hence are not counted as unemployed — remains stubbornly high.

If this continues, and North Carolina voters have to make their decisions in an economy that’s neither wonderful nor terrible, any of a number of non-economic wild cards could become important. Will it be abortion and the governor’s reversal of his 2012 campaign promise? Will it be House Bill 2 and its effect on the state’s reputation? Will it be the state’s recently overturned voter ID law? Stay tuned. This could get interesting.