

What Really Wins a U.S. Presidential Election?

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What is the determining factor in any race for the White House – the economic situation or the televised debates? The two elements, in fact, are closely related: the economic situation is decisive for an individual voter, but advertisement (positive or negative) is also an important influence on voter behavior.

Political scientists addressing questions about the 2012 U.S. presidential election are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, the idea that the economic situation strongly determines the outcome of the election (illustrated by the now famous sign at the headquarters of the 1992 Bill Clinton campaign which read like this: "It's the economy, stupid") seems to have taken permanent root, which has led to repeated questions about why Obama continues to outpace his opponent in the polls despite the prolonged recession. On the other hand, the apparent volatility of the polls, demonstrated in particular by Mitt Romney's surge after the first debate with Obama, raises the question of whether specific events in the coming weeks – the impact of the second (October 17) and third (October 22) debate, or a confrontation with Iran – will decide the outcome of the election. Hence this dilemma for observers: whether to highlight the "fundamentals" in an analysis or treat the last "gaffes" or electoral tactics as serious determinants of what will happen on Election Day.

In fact, this is a false dilemma. If the economy is truly a major determinant of the outcome of any election, electoral campaigns emphasize the importance of the economic context for every voter. To understand this, we offer a brief overview of research on the link between economic conditions and election results.

Researchers and pollsters have been conducting statistical studies of the relationship between economic conditions and presidential election results for over forty years. In the case of the United States, these studies consistently show that macroeconomic fluctuations during the years and months before an election are highly-correlated with the percentage of votes obtained by the candidate of the ruling party. The main problem

is to determine which fluctuations must be taken into account in the election – for example, increases in household income or increases (and decreases) in unemployment rates. This is an issue which has provoking intense debate, as well as the date from which the economic situation must be evaluated. Nevertheless, relatively strong evidence indicates that an improvement of the economy is a reliable indicator of the president's – or his party's candidate – chances of winning an election.

The majority of statistical models, which take economic indicators into account, predict a narrow victory for Obama, whose percentage of the popular vote is at the moment slightly above 50%. This lead over his opponent should in turn give him a higher number of votes in the Electoral College. However the stated margin of error in the electoral models means

that we cannot exclude from realistic scenarios the possibility that the popular vote winner will not get a majority in the Electoral College, as a close result is predicted in several individual states. In theory, at least, the probabilities are that the economic situation has improved enough for Obama to win a second term.

How, then, to explain the ups and downs of the polls? To answer this question, we must consider another series of studies which focus on how the voting intentions of individual are shaped rather than data providing the “big picture” of the country or snap shots of the situation in the fifty individual states and the District of Columbia. Most of these studies show that the majority of people are loyal to their favorite political party: they vote for the nominee of one of the two major parties, at least in presidential elections, because they traditionally identify with one major party or the other. In fact, even voters who consider themselves independent generally support the same party election after election rather than alternating their vote. The main objective of a party’s electoral campaign is therefore to mobilize its existing supporters and attract undecided voters who might be swayed in different ways. It is not productive to devote time or resources to trying to convince supporters of the opposing party to change sides, as they do only very rarely.

The electoral preferences of individuals can be explained by many factors: sex, race, age, education, place of residence, religion, ideology and, according to some studies, an assessment of the economic situation. As we fast approach the date of the U.S. election, both parties’ campaigns seek, through advertising, personal contacts and other approaches, to both emphasize the qualities of their candidate, as understood by their supporters, and highlight the negative traits of the opposing candidate. If the campaign strategists demonstrate a certain level of competence and have sufficient financial and other resources, existing party supporters will be mobilized and they will vote for the candidate they were predisposed towards before the start of the campaign.

The problem is that many people do not bother to vote. Participation rates have been declining for decades in all Western democracies. In the United States, only about two out of three (63%) of registered voters went to the polls in the 2008 presidential election. Candidates and their election advisers are very much aware of the need to get the vote out, and therefore spend much effort convincing those who voted for their party in the last election to go to the polls again this time. When the economic situation is bad, strategists of the president in-office have fewer arguments in favor of their candidate and thus tend to argue that the situation would be even worse if their opponent was elected. For its part, the opposition campaign seeks not only to portray the president in-office as the source of the country’s ills but also highlight the many differences between the two candidates, including their personalities and moral characteristics. It follows that debates can temporarily have an impact on the election. With his sharp (and predictable) criticism of the President in the first debate, Mitt Romney demonstrated to his followers that he was adamantly opposed to Obama’s policies, and thus energized them, slightly increasing his poll numbers in the process. But his attacks have not convinced Obama’s supporters to switch sides. Romney’s upswing has not been able to fundamentally alter the trajectory of the election.

However, it would be premature at this stage to predict Obama’s reelection. Even without an economic recession, Democrats are historically less likely to go to the polls than Republicans, as many of them are from poor sectors of the population and traditionally feel less engaged with political processes they barely understand. If we combine this reality and

the economic situation with two other factors – that several states with a Republican majority have made the registration process more complicated for voters who traditionally cast their ballots for the Democrat, and that a certain level of racism and religious intolerance persist among many voters who are inclined to vote for the Democrats – we can only conclude that the election night (November 6 to 7) will doubtless be very long.

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