Presidential Campaigns
Session 14

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17.263: American Elections

Roadmap

Pre-election Reports

Campaign Effects

Campaign Dynamics

Campaign Strategies

Pre-election Reports

Peer Reviews

▶ In the next two classes, you will dividing into small groups and giving feedback on your peers' pre-election reports.

▶ Before each class, you will read one or two of your peers' reports and come to class with comments and questions.

Campaign Effects

A Remarkably Stable Race

Who's ahead in the national polls?

An updating average of 2020 presidential general election polls, accounting for each poll's quality, sample size and recency
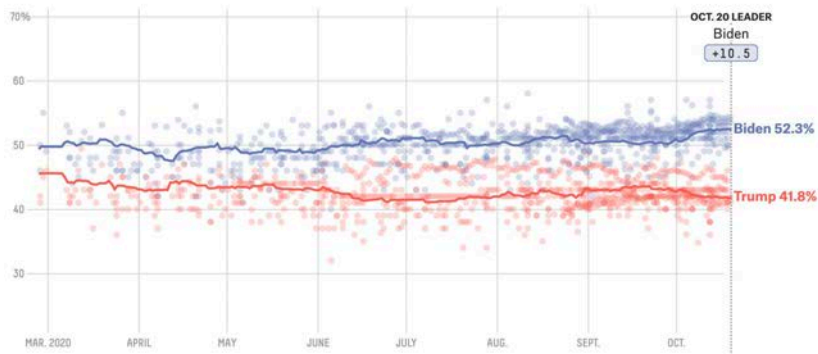
The Puzzle of Predictability

▶ Polls much more stable in 2020 than past years, even 2016.
▶ Trial heats typically fluctuates greatly over the campaign, though moves gradually towards the fundamentals.
    ▶ Internal (e.g., party ID)
    ▶ External (e.g., economy)

Predictions in 1992
Two-party vote share for George H. W. Bush, %

Puzzle: If elections are so predictable, why are polls so variable? Do campaigns even matter?

When Campaigns Matter

▶ First, let's be clear that we are talking about presidential general elections, which are distinctive in several ways.

    ▶ Fewer undecided voters (e.g., relative to primary elections)

    ▶ More balanced resources (e.g., relative to House elections)

    ▶ More media coverage of and information about the candidates

▶ These factors dampen the impact of campaigns relative to other sorts of elections.

▶ But even in presidential elections, there is scope for campaign effects.

How Campaigns Matter

Even if elections were totally predictable, campaigns could still matter by

- ▶ Informing ("enlightening") voters about the fundamentals.

    - ▶ Informing of them of the state of the economy, etc.

    - ▶ Reminding them why they are Democrats/Republicans.

- ▶ Exerting large but counterbalancing effects

    - ▶ Assuming optimal campaign and even resources

But elections are *not* entirely predictable—the favored candidate does sometimes lose, and campaigns help explain why.

Campaign Effects

Mechanisms by which campaigns can affect the outcome:

▶ Reinforcement (bringing partisans back to the fold)

▶ Persuasion (issues, candidate traits)

▶ Priming (criteria of evaluation)

▶ Mobilization (convincing supporters to vote)

Campaign Dynamics

Trial Heats over the Campaign

Early Polling in 2016 More Accurate than Most Prior Elections
Polling Error Relative to Actual Presidential Election Results, 1980 to 2016
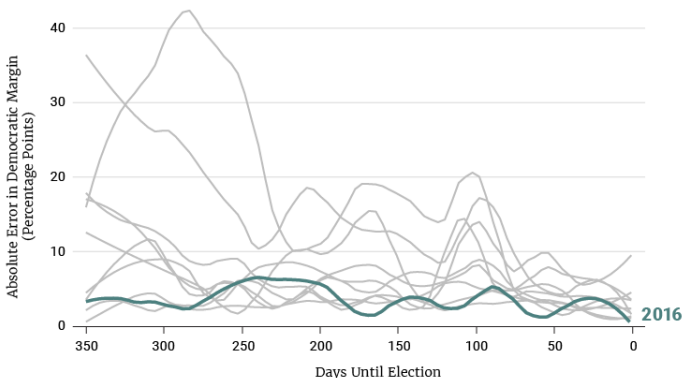
Sources: G. Elliott Morris and Alexander Agadjanian
Christopher Wlezien and Will Jennings, 2013, "The Timeline of Election Campaigns: A Comparative Perspective";
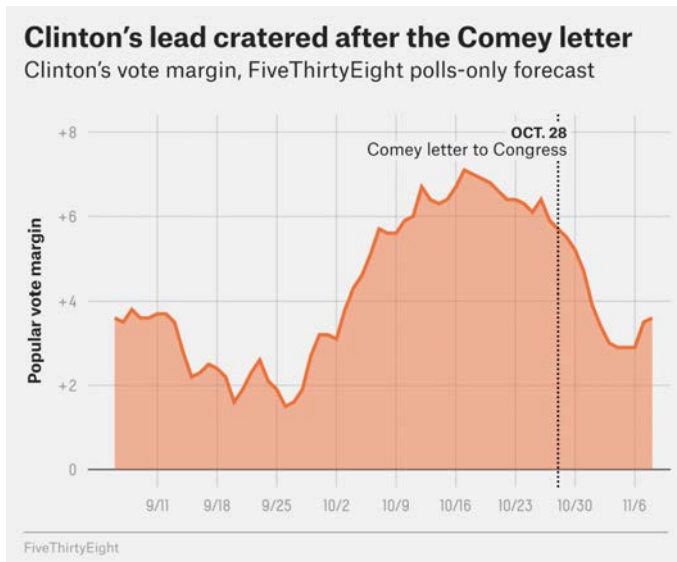Huffington Post Pollster

The Timeline of Presidential Elections

▶ Presidential campaigns are to some extent regular and predictable.

| Nominations | | VP | Conventions | | Debates | | Election Day |

April   November

▶ But some events are unpredictable.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2016 $2.50

NEW EMAILS JOLT CLINTON CAMPAIGN IN RACE'S LAST DAYS

F.B.I. Looks at Messages Found During Inquiry Into Weiner's Texts

Bumps and Bounces

How might campaign events affect voters' preferences?

▶ Some events (e.g., conventions) do have effects that partially persist to Election Day.

▶ But most are "bounces" that dissipate over time, in part because they are exaggerated by partisan non-response.

▶ Still, even bounces can affect the election if they occur late.

Clinton's lead cratered after the Comey letter
Clinton's vote margin, FiveThirtyEight polls-only forecast

Silver, Nate. "The Comey Letter Probably Cost Clinton The Election So Why Won't the Media Admit As Much?"
FiveThirtyEight. May 3, 2017. © ABC News Internet Ventures. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative
Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Campaign Strategies

Constrained Choices

▶ Candidates' campaign choices are constrained by their resources and the structural environment.

▶ Candidates try to choose the optimal campaign strategy given these constraints.

Two Types of Presidential Campaigns

▶ Clarifying: Candidate advantaged by the fundamentals (peace, prosperity) emphasizes (i.e., primes) those issues and clarifies their connection to them.

▶ Insurgent: Disadvantaged candidate avoids the fundamentals, instead emphasizing issues on which they have an advantage and their opponent's position is unpopular.

1984: Ronald Reagan (R) vs. Walter Mondale (D)

▶ GDP growth: $+$**6**%
▶ Military causalities: **1**

▶ Incumbent party: **Republican**
▶ Favored candidate? **Reagan**

Reagan

Mondale

Click on screenshots to view ads.

Questions: What considerations (e.g., issues or traits) does the ad prime? What is its emotional tone? How do the images/audio evoke this tone?

2008: John McCain (R) vs. Barrack Obama (D)

- GDP growth: $-\mathbf{1}\%$
- Military causalities: **352**

- Incumbent party: **Republican**
- Favored candidate? **Obama**

McCain

Obama

Click on screenshots to view ads.

Questions: What considerations (e.g., issues or traits) does the ad prime? What is its emotional tone? How do the images/audio evoke this tone?
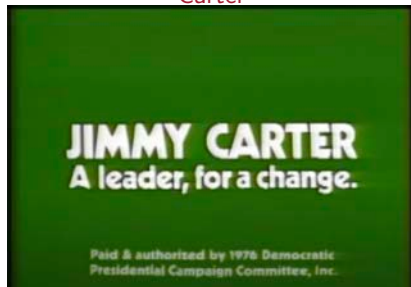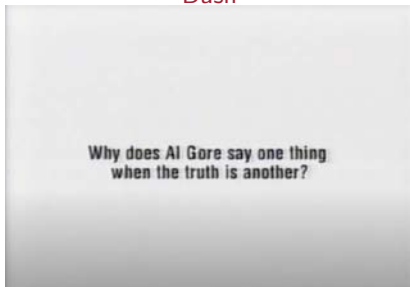
1976: Gerald Ford (R) vs. Jimmy Carter (D)

- GDP growth: $+\mathbf{4}\%$
- Military causalities: $\approx \mathbf{2}$

- Incumbent party: **Republican**
- Favored candidate? **Ford**

Ford

Carter

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Questions: What considerations (e.g., issues or traits) does the ad prime? What is its emotional tone? How do the images/audio evoke this tone?

2000: George W. Bush (R) vs. Al Gore (D)

▶ GDP growth: $+$**3**%
▶ Military causalities: **0**

▶ Incumbent party: **Democratic**
▶ Favored candidate? **Gore**

Bush

Why does Al Gore say one thing
when the truth is another?

Gore

Al Gore

Click on screenshots to view ads.

Questions: What considerations (e.g., issues or traits) does the ad prime?
What is its emotional tone? How do the images/audio evoke this tone?

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