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# Voter Choice

## Session 18

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17.263: American Elections

# Roadmap

[Explaining Voter Choices](#)

[What to Expect Today](#)

# Explaining Voter Choices

## The Funnel of Causality

Social, Demographic & Economic Characteristics



Party Identification (Dem/Ind/Rep)



Issue and Policy Positions



Candidate Traits



Vote Choice

## Political Leanings of Social Groups (2016 Election)

Group Attribute	Clinton Share
African American	92%
Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual	85%
Jewish	76%
No Religion	73%
Latino/Asian	70%
...	...
Male	44%
Protestant	38%
Rural	36%
Veteran	36%
White Southerner	29%

Other attributes, such as Catholic (48% Clinton), high-income (49% Clinton), and union member (55% Clinton), were once much more predictive of vote choice than they are now.

## Interests, Networks, and Identities

Group attributes predict vote choice for several reasons.

- ▶ Members of different social groups have different **interests**.
  - ▶ e.g., African Americans and civil rights protections
- ▶ Social **networks** differ between social groups.
  - ▶ Opinion leadership and social sanctions
- ▶ Group memberships can form an important part of an individual social **identity**.
  - ▶ Membership (objective)  $\neq$  identification (subjective)

## Partisanship and Social Identity

Most of the effect of social identities is built into **party identification**: self-categorization as Democratic, Independent, or Republican.

- ▶ Parties are coalitions of social groups, and there is substantial consensus over which groups go with which party.
- ▶ Individuals sort themselves based on their most salient social identities.
- ▶ But as the term suggests, party identification can itself become a social identity.

## Partisanship as Perceptual Screen

- ▶ Like all identities, party identification shapes how we understand the social world, even to the point of acting as a “perceptual screen” that filters out uncongenial information.
- ▶ Thus, citizens’ PID **shapes** their understanding of their political interests and values as much as it is shaped by them.
- ▶ Not surprisingly, PID is also powerfully predictive of vote choice (increasingly so since the mid-20th century).



## Issues and Policies

- ▶ Most people do not have strong, well-informed opinions about specific policies.
- ▶ To the extent that they do have strong opinions, these are often the consequence of cues from co-partisan opinion leaders.
- ▶ In fact, when individuals switch parties, they often update their issue preferences.
- ▶ The exceptions tend to be “easy” issues that are non-technical and closely connected to group-based interests and values.
  - ▶ e.g., abortion
- ▶ That said, it is very common for party identifiers to hold at least some issue positions incongruent with their party, and such “cross-pressured” voters are the most likely targets for persuasion.

## Candidate Traits

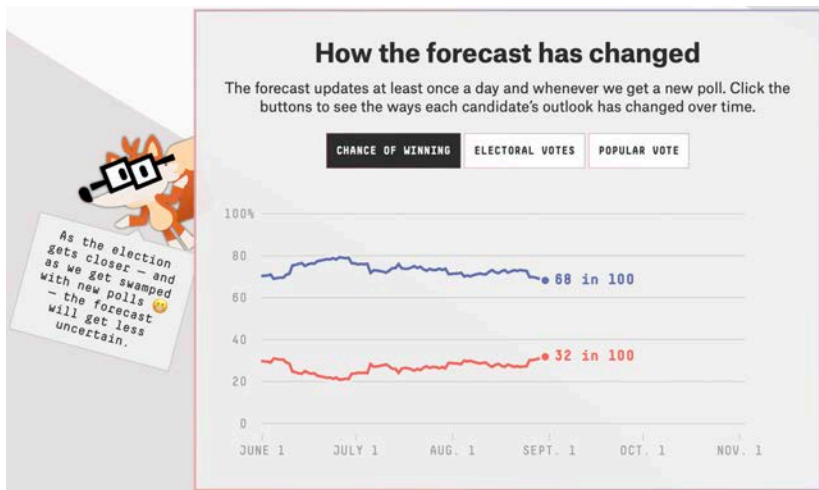
- ▶ When voters explain their choice, candidate traits are among the most frequently mentioned factors.
  - ▶ “He’s a war hero.”
  - ▶ “She’s dishonest.”
- ▶ Nevertheless, they lie at the bottom of the funnel of causality. Why?
- ▶ Because candidate traits are extremely subjective and profoundly colored by partisan motivated reasoning.
  - ▶ Is he vulgar and offensive or straight-talking and blunt?
  - ▶ Is she confident and experienced or a power-hungry professional politician?

## Explaining 2016

- ▶ Partisanship still powerfully predictive (almost 90% of partisans “came home”).
- ▶ Both candidates personally unpopular.
- ▶ Biggest changes occurred among low-education (pro-Trump) and high-education (pro-Clinton) whites.
- ▶ Why? Economic anxiety, though much discussed, seems to have been relatively unimportant.
- ▶ Instead, conservative racial and immigration attitudes, which are inversely correlated with education, were best predictors of pro-Trump shifts.
- ▶ Views on trade followed vote choice rather than causing it.
- ▶ Low-education whites were concentrated in critical states.

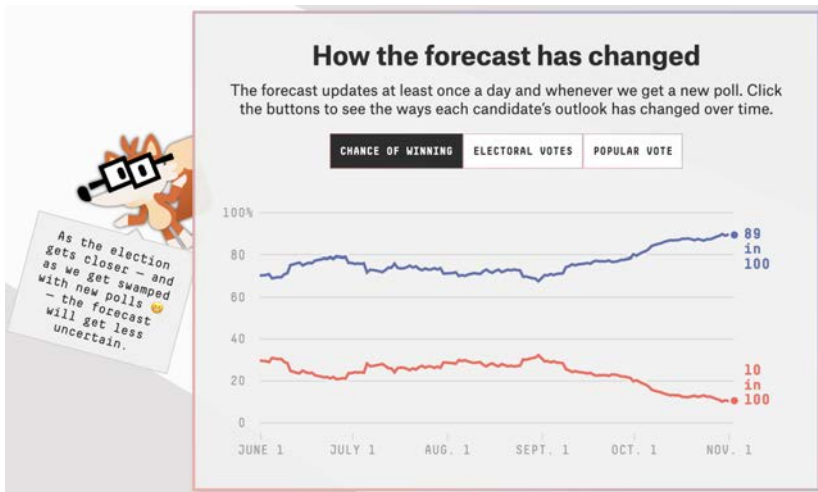
# What to Expect Today

# How It Started



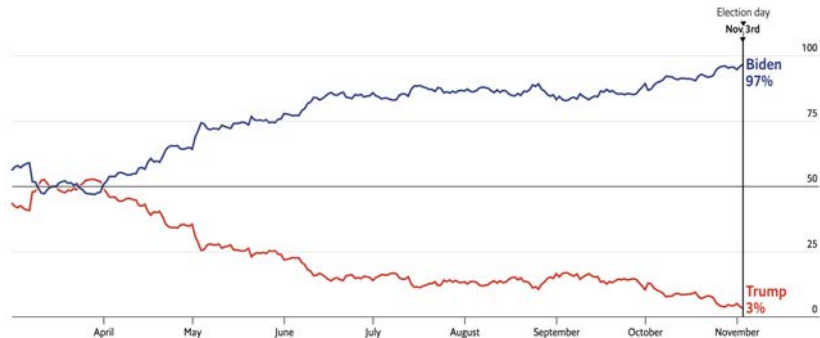
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# How It's Going



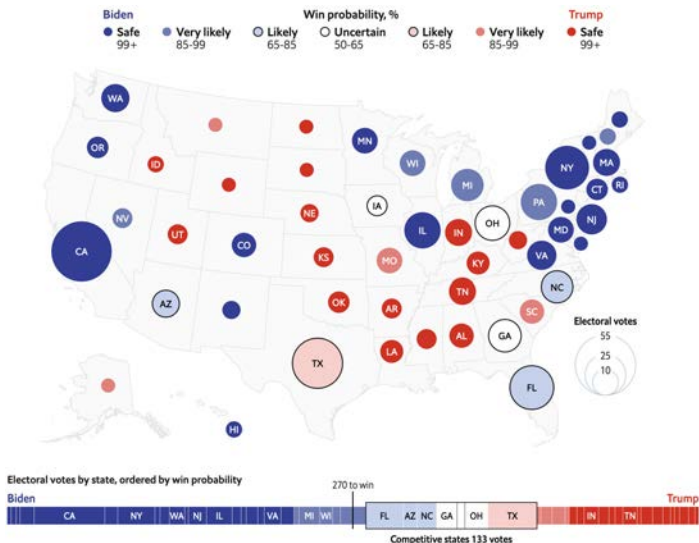
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