
The Logic of Electoral Democracy

Session 2

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17.263: American Elections

Roadmap

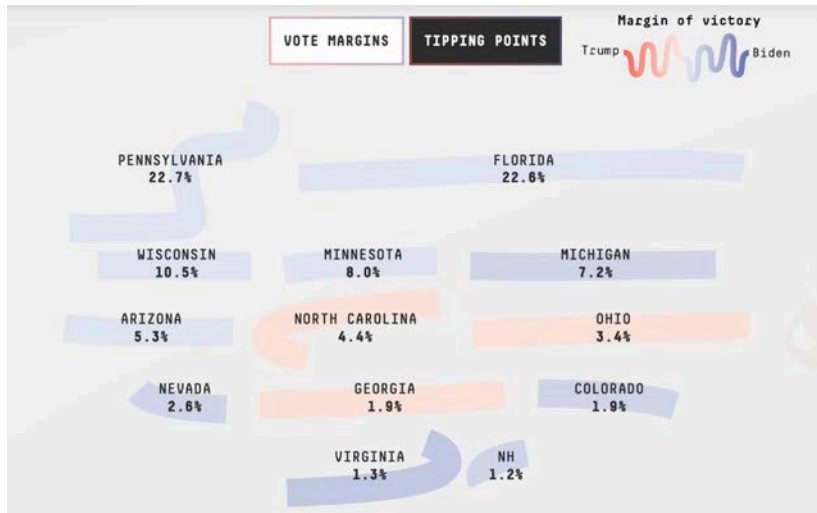
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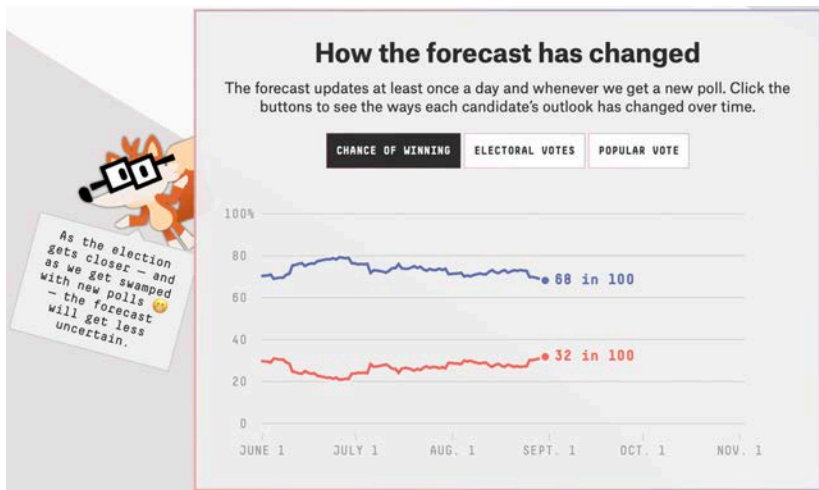
Forecasts

FiveThirtyEight Forecast (Aug 31, 2020): Tipping Points



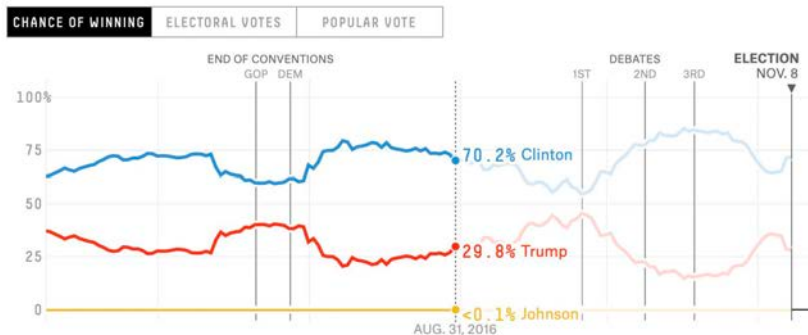
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FiveThirtyEight Forecast (Aug 31, 2020): Win Probability



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Democratic Theory

What Is Democracy?

- ▶ Democracy is a method of **collective decision-making** in which those bound by the decisions are in some sense **equal**.
- ▶ Alternative conceptions of democracy differ in the “**depth**” of political equality they require, in the **procedures** they presume democracy to require, and in whether they entail **substantive** as well as procedural criteria.

Arguments for Democracy

Non-instrumental

- ▶ **Equality:** Democracy is the **fairest** method of decision-making.

Instrumental

- ▶ **Alternation:** Democracy permits **peaceful** change of government.
- ▶ **Strategic:** Democracy forces rulers to heed citizens' **interests**.
- ▶ **Epistemic:** Democracy leads to **better-informed** decisions.
- ▶ **Educative:** Democracy **improves** citizens.

Arguments for Democracy

Non-instrumental

- ▶ **Equality:** Democracy is the **fairest** method of decision-making.

Because all citizens' **interests are equally worthy** of consideration, and because (adult, sane) citizens are the best judges of their own interests, democracy is the fairest method of deciding among or aggregating these (conflicting) interests.

Instrumental

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Adam Przeworski: “The very prospect that governments may change can result in a peaceful regulation of conflicts. . . . Bloodshed is avoided by the mere fact that. . . the political forces expect to **take turns.**”

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Amartya Sen: “no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press.”

- ▶ **Epistemic:** Democracy leads to **better-informed** decisions.
- ▶ **Educative:** Democracy **improves** citizens.

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John Stuart Mill: “the general prosperity attains a greater height, and is more widely diffused, in proportion to the amount and **variety of the personal energies** enlisted in promoting it.”

- ▶ **Educative:** Democracy **improves** citizens.

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Carol Pateman: “The major function of [participatory democracy] is an . . . educative one. . . . **Participation develops** and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate the better able they become to do so.”

Varieties of Democracy

Alternative conceptions of democracy emphasize different criteria:

- ▶ **Participatory vs. representative**
 - ▶ Do ordinary citizens participate actively in politics and policymaking, or do they merely select representatives to act on their behalf?
- ▶ **Minimalist vs. expanded**
 - ▶ Are competitive election sufficient for democracy, or is more required (e.g., universal suffrage or protection of civil liberties)?
- ▶ **Procedural vs. substantive**
 - ▶ Does democracy require only that certain procedures be followed, or are certain outcomes (e.g., severe economic inequality) undemocratic even if chosen by superficially democratic procedures?
- ▶ **Aggregative vs. deliberative**
 - ▶ Is democracy merely about the aggregation of individual preferences, or do/should those preferences emerge from collective deliberation?

Representative Democracy

- ▶ **Representation** means standing in for something absent—“making present again” (Hannah Pitkin).
- ▶ Representation and democracy developed semi-independently.
 - ▶ Just as Medieval Popes “represented” (stood in for) Christ on Earth, so did Medieval kings “represent” the people in the government.
 - ▶ Similarly, democracy was originally thought to require direct popular involvement in governing, and thus was considered possible only on a small scale (e.g., Ancient Athens).
- ▶ Eventually, however, political representation came to mean “acting in the **interests** of the represented, in a manner **responsive** to them” (Pitkin), and democratic elections became critical to both **legitimizing** representatives and inducing **responsiveness** to citizens.

A Principal-Agent View of Representation

- ▶ One common way of thinking about the strategic dynamics of representation is to consider representation a **principal-agent relationship** in which citizens (the principals) delegate authority to their representatives (the agents).
 - ▶ Analogy: relationship between shareholders and CEOs
- ▶ Principals have two basic tools for inducing their agents to act in their interests: **selection** and **sanctions**.
 - ▶ **Selection**: Choose good “**type**” of agent (e.g., CEO whose only goal is boosting stock price)
 - ▶ **Sanctions**: Align agents’ **incentives** with principal’s interests (e.g., compensate CEO with stock options).

Selection

- ▶ Generically speaking, “type” refers to some attribute of an agent that affects how they behave.
- ▶ What might *type* mean in the context of political representation?
- ▶ One problem that plagues agency relationships is **adverse selection**: If agents’ types are unobservable, then it can be hard to tell good types from bad ones.
 - ▶ Analogy: market for health insurance
- ▶ Another problem particular to American politics: Voters do not get to select agents from the whole pool of citizens, but generally must choose between those nominated by the major parties.
- ▶ Thus to a substantial degree, selection in American politics comes down to choosing either a Democrat or a Republican.

Within-Party Differences

- ▶ However, not all Democrats (or Republicans) are the same.
 - ▶ Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) is more liberal than Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV).
 - ▶ Gov. Rod Blagojevich (D-IL/prison) was more corrupt than (say) Gov. Maggie Hassan (D-NH).
 - ▶ Pres. Donald Trump (R-USA) is . . . different from other Republicans.
- ▶ What are some reasons for this?
 - ▶ Parties nominate different candidates for different offices (selection).
 - ▶ Candidates' incentives differ across constituencies (sanctions).

Sanctions

- ▶ These differences in incentives stem largely from the sanctions imposed by different electorates.
- ▶ Sanctions can be prospective or retrospective.
- ▶ **Prospective:** Voters penalize candidates who take unpopular **positions** and reward candidates who take popular ones.
 - ▶ **Problem:** Campaign promises may not be **credible**.
- ▶ **Retrospective:** Voters hold incumbents **accountable** for actions/outcomes during their term in office.
 - ▶ **Problem 1:** Sanctions can **conflict** with selection (should a conservative who wants to deter corruption vote for Trump?).
 - ▶ **Problem 2:** Voters do not always have the **information** need to monitor officials' actions (**moral hazard**).

Information and Institutions

- ▶ Crucial variable: **information**
 - ▶ Can voters discern good types of politicians from bad?
 - ▶ Are candidates' platforms an informative signal of future actions?
 - ▶ Can voters monitor politicians' behavior in office?
 - ▶ Can voters connect link social outcomes to policy choices?
 - ▶ And can voters make reasonable choices without being overwhelmed by information or deterred by the costs of acquiring it?
- ▶ Political and social **institutions** play a crucial informational role:
 - ▶ Electoral rules
 - ▶ Federalism
 - ▶ Parties
 - ▶ Interest groups
 - ▶ The media

Electoral Maps

Maps of the 2016 Presidential Election (Breakout Groups)

Electoral College

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Results_by_state,_shaded_according_to_winning_candidate%27s_percentage_of_the_vote_2016.svg

County Shares

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2016_United_States_presidential_election_results_map_by_county.svg

County Changes (2000–2016)

<https://arc-anglerfish-washpost-prod-washpost.s3.amazonaws.com/public/LDYKEXTX6E5QRFVWGTAMJWEYY.jpg>

Discussion Questions:

- ▶ What information or patterns does each map **highlight**?
- ▶ What information or patterns does each map **obscure**?
- ▶ For what purpose is each map most **valuable**?
- ▶ Is any of the maps especially **misleading**?
- ▶ Do you notice anything particularly **interesting** or puzzling?

Discussion with Whole Class

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