

Some Pessimistic Ruminations on Disentangling Causal Processes in Presidential Elections

Philip E. Tetlock

*Institute of Personality Assessment and Research
University of California, Berkeley*

One can study presidential elections from a variety of methodological and theoretical angles. Some analysts take a dogmatically idiographic perspective and view each election as a unique event that must be understood on its own historical terms. There is rarely a shortage of possible explanations here. Dukakis lost to Bush, it has been argued, because he was passionless, remote, and too intellectual, because of the nasty character of the Republican campaign (the “negatives stuck”), because of the strength of the economy, because of public antipathy to liberals and their perceived weakness on crime, and because of the poor organizational skills of the Dukakis campaign.

Other analysts search for generalizations, even laws, that hold up across elections. For instance, Schlesinger’s (1986) cyclical theory of election outcomes maintains that American ambivalence toward the principles of economic individualism and egalitarianism leads to a predictable oscillation in public preferences for more conservative or more liberal presidential candidates. Another illustration is the work of Rosenstone (1983), who draws on both cross-sectional and time-series data to monitor shifts in voting patterns

and party allegiance. Focusing on post-World War II elections, Rosenstone invokes a complex multivariate battery of equations to explain the state-by-state outcomes of presidential elections. On the one hand, it is necessary to take into account the powerful inertial forces in politics: There is considerable continuity in voting patterns over time. On the other hand, it is necessary to take into account the substantial volatility in popular preferences. Voters punish the party in power when they believe the incumbent administration has mismanaged the economy or a war. Voters also reject candidates who are out of ideological step with public opinion. The more important the issues are and the greater the gap between the candidates, the larger the apparent causal impact of issues on the outcome. (Voters may not be ideologically sophisticated [Converse, 1975], but they are not fools [Key, 1966].) Finally, numerous other factors play important, occasionally decisive roles. Incumbency confers an advantage, candidate image makes a difference, and secular political trends may well be operating.

Zulow and Seligman make an important contribution to this research literature. They focus on the candidates. They

argue that American voters generally prefer presidential candidates who project optimism rather than pessimism and who do not ruminate about national problems. In support of their claim, they invoke both direct empirical evidence and more indirect circumstantial evidence. The direct evidence is impressive. Zullow and Seligman demonstrate powerful links between their content-analytic measures of pessimistic rumination and the outcomes of presidential elections. They failed to identify the winners of only 4 of the last 22 elections. Moreover, the pessimistic rumination variable by itself explains (in the statistical sense) approximately 40% of the variance in popular vote. It is tempting on the basis of such results to concede a key causal role to pessimistic rumination.

The temptation grows in light of the circumstantial evidence. We know from the research literature on depression that pessimistic ruminators tend to have lower activity levels and to be liked less and avoided more by others (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). These characteristics are not likely to serve them well in electoral competition. It is reasonable to infer (and there is some supporting evidence) that pessimistic ruminators will maintain less grueling campaign schedules and create less favorable impressions on those audiences they do address.

What reasons are there for caution, beyond the obvious caveats we need to attach to any correlational design? Although the authors control statistically for two of the most obvious alternative causal possibilities (incumbency and underdog status at the time of the nomination speech), there is a limit on how many variables they can control for in a design of this sort, a limit set by the relatively small sample of elections that they examine. There is, however, virtually no limit on the range of rival causal hypotheses one can generate: from physical characteristics of candidates (e.g., height, attractiveness ratings) to social and psychological characteristics of candidates (e.g., intelligence, speaking style, social poise, self-confidence, extraversion) to other properties of rhetoric (e.g., power, achievement, and affiliation imagery or, my favorite variable, integrative complexity; see Tetlock, 1981) to political mood of the country (e.g., Schlesinger's cyclical theory) to macroeconomic variables (e.g., growth rate, inflation, unemployment) to the state of foreign relations (e.g., Is there a serious threat of war? Is the nation at war? Has the nation recently experienced a major international triumph or defeat?). There is no doubt in my mind that investigators will be able to identify numerous linear combinations of such variables that allow us to predict the outcome of presidential elections with every bit as much accuracy as we could with the pessimistic rumination variable. Given the large number of potential causes and the small number of data points, such a result is practically a mathematical certainty.

What conclusion should we draw? One response is, of course, despair—to concede that determinants of presidential election outcomes are indeed indeterminate. Another possible response is to look for additional criteria and evidence for evaluating the merits of rival theoretical accounts. Parsimony and comprehensiveness are two such standards. All other things being equal, we should prefer a simpler theory to a more complex one, and a theory consistent with a wider range of facts to a theory that rests on a narrower data base. If we invoke these standards, the Zullow–Seligman theory fares reasonably well. The underlying assumptions of

the theory have empirical support from clinical work on depression; the predictions of the theory were supported by data from a sample of 22 presidential elections. But the Zullow–Seligman theory lacks the explanatory power of Rosenstone's multivariate model of election outcomes, an analysis that rests on a more fine-grained data base and that is consistent with a variety of survey research findings.

Finally, we come to the most important question a commentary of this sort can raise: What should now be done? How might Zullow and Seligman go about strengthening their causal case? Most important is the need to specify and test the exact mechanisms by which pessimistic rumination of rhetoric influences voting at the presidential level. Skeptics might well argue that, within a reasonably broad range, it does not matter much what candidates say. Presidential elections may depend much more on structural and systemic variables (the advantage of incumbency, the state of the domestic economy, and the nation's position in the world at large) than on individual variables. Here there is a pressing need for controlled studies that assess the relative importance of different hypothesized causal variables in realistically simulated presidential elections. How much of a difference does it make in the complexity and confusion of such a simulation that a candidate's rhetoric is low or high on pessimistic rumination? In view of the enormous range of stimuli on which the public might focus—arguments over issues, rumors of scandal, efforts at character assassination, major domestic and international events—is it reasonable to suppose much attention is paid to the particular property of rhetoric on which Zullow and Seligman have chosen to focus? There is also a need for careful secondary analysis of survey data to determine how key segments of the public perceive candidates scoring high or low on the pessimistic-rumination variable. And there is an obvious need to expand the data base to other types of elections within and outside the United States. Is pessimistic rumination actually a political asset in some countries (where such a rhetorical style leads to attributions of maturity, prudence, and wisdom)?

In short, Zullow and Seligman have made a noteworthy discovery; it would be premature, however, to claim they have found the rhetorical key to success in presidential elections.

Note

Philip E. Tetlock, Institute of Personality Assessment and Research, 3657 Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.

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