

## Pundits Vs. Nate Silver, Data Vs. "Gut"

Blog >>> October 29, 2012 5:51 PM EDT >>> SIMON MALOY

Nate Silver has a computer model. Each day he plugs the data from the various national and swing state polls into that model, numbers are crunched, simulations are run, and he posts the results on his *New York Times* **blog** indicating who is more likely to win the presidential election: Barack Obama or Mitt Romney. (As of this posting, Silver's analysis has Obama winning in 74.6 percent of scenarios.) And for this, Silver is coming under attack from pundits who insist that their gut feeling tells them the race is a true toss-up.



"Anybody that thinks that this race is anything but a tossup right now is such an ideologue, they should be kept away from typewriters, computers, laptops and microphones for the next 10 days, because they're jokes," complained Joe Scarborough on the October 29 *Morning Joe*.

Complaints like Scarborough's are helped along by publications that have an interest in maintaining the view of a race that is essentially a flip of the coin, and in preserving the importance of their own roles as gatekeepers with access to critical insider information. *Politico*'s Dylan Byers cited Scarborough's criticism along with that of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks in **positing** that Silver may be a "one-term celebrity."

"If you tell me you think you can quantify an event that is about to happen that you don't expect, like the 47 percent comment or a debate performance, I think you think you are a wizard. That's not possible," Times columnist David Brooks, a moderate conservative, said on PBS earlier this month. "The pollsters tell us what's happening now. When they start projecting, they're getting into silly land."

It makes sense that pundits like Scarborough and Brooks would have it out for a numbers guy like Silver. Their oeuvre is the intangible. They analyze based on gut feelings and nonspecifics. Their great trick is to transform the utterly unquantifiable into something approaching concrete certainty.

Brooks famously observed in 2008 that Obama would have difficulty connecting with "less educated" and "downscale" voters because "he doesn't seem like the kind of guy who could go into an Applebee's salad bar, and people think he fits in naturally there." This was a two-fer screw-up for Brooks: Obama **won handily** among voters making \$50,000 or less and voters who didn't attend college; and Applebee's **doesn't have salad bars**.

And then there's Scarborough. His disdain for Silver's predictive model notwithstanding, Scarborough himself is big on making predictions, only his are informed less by data and more by things like spin and momentum. One week ago he wrote a **blog post** for *Politico* arguing that the election will either result in a narrow Obama win or a Romney landslide -- a prediction that left him plenty of wiggle room. What did he base this toothless prognostication on? Momentum, his "gut," and the gravitas he exudes:



If Romney's momentum is strong enough to erase the 10-point deficit he once faced in Ohio, expect him to carry other swing states like Nevada and Colorado.

That scenario would have been far more plausible had Mr. Romney turned in a stronger performance at last night's debate in Florida. As things stand today, Ohio is still a heavy lift for the GOP candidate and that means President Obama should still be considered a slight favorite to win reelection.

But my gut tells me there are two likely scenarios: (1) President Obama will squeak out a narrow Electoral College victory or (2) Mitt Romney will carry Ohio and be swept into office by a comfortable margin.

After practicing politics for 20 years, I suppose I would rather be in Mitt Romney's shoes than Barack Obama's. Incumbents who are under 50 percent two weeks out usually go down to defeat.

But who knows? Maybe Barack Obama will bend history once again.

"Gut." "Momentum." "Who knows?" "Maybe." Every word of that carefully hedged, adding up to a giant nothing-burger.

But these are the kinds of analyses that earn you pundit cred. They're "smart takes." Meanwhile Nate Silver is being raked over the coals for committing the sin of showing his math.

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