Predicting Presidential Elections: Assessing the Determinants of Vote Choice

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Study Information

1. Title

Predicting Presidential Elections: Assessing the Determinants of Vote Choice

2. Authorship

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3. Description

Gelman and King (1993) contend that pre-presidential election opinion poll responses are amiss because voters are generally uninformed until near or at election day. Prior to the election, voters are generally uninformed and respond likewise. They propose that voters are educated by presidential campaigns and ultimately decide their vote based on their enlightened preferences that they identify over the course of the campaign. These enlightened preferences are more in accord with economic and political conditions.

This paper assesses the determinants of vote choice by simulating the conditions of campaign election through the use of information provided in frames of economic, policy, and personality issues likely to arise in the 2024 campaign. We are particularly interested in how these frames affect various politically important demographics, including young, Black, and Hispanic voters.

4. Hypotheses

Respondents will be assigned to one of three treatment conditions (ECONOMIC, POLICY, OR CHARACTER), or a CONTROL condition.

Economic Treatment

- H1: Respondents assigned to the ECONOMIC treatment condition will express relatively greater preference to Biden than those assigned to the control group as measured by feeling thermometers and vote choice. We expect this effect is strongest among Biden 2020 voter, Democrats, and liberals.
- H1a: Respondents assigned to the ECONOMIC treatment condition will express greater economic optimism.
- H1b: Respondents assigned to the ECONOMIC treatment condition will support Joe Biden more than respondents assigned to the CONTROL condition.

Policy Treatment

- H2: Respondents assigned to the POLICY treatment condition will express greater preference for the candidate who is closer to their policy position (measured in pre-treatment). For example, someone who

is furthest to the left on abortion, will express greater support for Biden when exposed to treatment than those in the CONTROL condition.

- H2a: Respondents assigned to the POLICY treatment condition will perceive Trump and Biden to be further apart on policy than those assigned to the CONTROL condition.
- H2b: Partisans assigned to the POLICY treatments will favor co-partisans more than that partisans assigned to the CONTROL condition.

Character Treatment

- H3: Respondents assigned to the CHARACTER treatment condition will express greater preference for Biden compared to the control as measured by vote choice and feeling thermometers. We expect this effect is strongest among Biden 2020 voters, Democrats, and liberals.
- H3a: Respondents assigned to the CHARACTER treatment condition will express greater dissatisfaction for the way Trump conducts himself compared to respondents assigned to the CONTROL condition.
- H3b: Respondents assigned to the CHARACTER treatment condition will express greater satisfaction for the way Biden conducts himself compared to respondents assigned to the CONTROL condition.

All Treatments

- H4: Respondents who voted for Biden in 2020 assigned to one of the treatment conditions (ECONOMIC, POLICY, OR CHARACTER treatment) will be more likely to support Biden in 2024 relative to Biden 2020 voters assigned to the CONTROL condition.
- H5: Respondents who follow politics "not at all" or "not very closely" assigned to one of the treatment conditions (ECONOMIC, POLICY, OR CHARACTER treatment) will express relatively greater preference to Biden than those assigned to the CONTROL group as measured by feeling thermometers and vote choice.
- H6: Lower scoring respondents on the political knowledge battery assigned to one of the treatment conditions (ECONOMIC, POLICY, OR CHARACTER treatment) will express relatively greater preference to Biden than those assigned to the CONTROL group as measured by feeling thermometers and vote choice.

Design Plan

1. All respondents will answer pre-treatment political attitudes and demographic questions.
2. All respondents will answer pre-treatment economic, policy, and presidential character questions which asks them about their attitudes about these domains.
3. Respondents will be randomly assigned to one of 6 treatment conditions.

- Economic treatment (question + answer)
- Economic control (question)
- Policy treatment (policy divergence)
- Policy control
- Character treatment (Trump unpresidential actions)
- Character control (Trump and Biden presidential actions)

4. Manipulation Check
5. Outcome Measures

- How would you rate economic conditions today?
- How likely are you to vote in the 2024 election
- Vote choice
- Candidate FT
- Right track/wrong direction
- Enthusiasm

5. Study Type

Experiment - A researcher randomly assigns treatments to study subjects, this includes field or lab experiments. This is also known as an intervention experiment and includes randomized controlled trials.

6. Blinding

- For studies that involve human subjects, they will not know the treatment group to which they have been assigned.

7. Is there any additional blinding in this study?

Respondents will be randomly assigned by Qualtrics to their respective treatment conditions.

8. Study design

This is a straight-forward survey experiment. All respondents are asked pre-treatment questions regarding their political affiliations, vote history, attitudes toward policies and politics, and demographic questions.

Next, all respondents are asked pre-treatment economic, policy, and political questions. Respondents are then randomly assigned to one of six treatment conditions.

- Economic treatment (question + answer)
- Economic control (question)
- Policy treatment (policy divergence)
- Policy control
- Character treatment (Trump unpresidential actions)
- Character control (Trump and Biden presidential actions)

After treatment, all respondents are asked questions to assess the effectiveness of the manipulations. Finally, respondents are asked 7 questions that serve as the outcome measures.

9. Randomization

Randomization is essential for this study. Respondents will be assigned by simple randomization to one of the six treatment conditions. Each treatment condition will be assigned roughly the same number of respondents.

Sampling Plan

We will obtain our sample using the online participant recruitment platform Prolific. This will enable us to quickly obtain a large, nationally representative sample for the survey.

10. Existing data

Registration prior to creation of data: As of the date of submission of this research plan for preregistration, the data have not yet been collected, created, or realized.

11. Explanation of existing data

N/A.

12. Data collection procedures

Participants will be recruited through the online platform Prolific. We will work with Prolific to obtain the participants. We will pay Prolific who will pay respondents based on their proprietary pay formulas.

13. Sample size

Our target sample size is 2000 participants. We will attempt to recruit up to 2100, assuming that not all will complete the total task.

14. Sample size rationale

2000

15. Stopping rule

Not applicable.

Variables

16. Manipulated variables

Economic treatment (question + answer)

- Growth - Surprise (y/n)
- Jobs and Unemployment - Surprise (y/n)
- Inflation - Surprise (y/n)

Policy treatment (policy divergence)

- Abortion - Surprise (y/n)
- Environmental - Surprise (y/n)
- Gaza - Surprise (y/n)

Character treatment (Trump unpresidential actions)

- January 6 - How presidential? (-50-50)
- Terminate Constitution - How presidential? (-50-50)
- Bible- How presidential? (-50-50)

17. Measured variables

Manipulation Check:

- Econ Outlook - much worse - much better (-2:2)
- Prez place - liberal-conservative (-3:3)
- Trump norm ck - like-don't like (-1:1)
- Biden norm ck - like-don't like (-1:1)

Outcome Measures:

- econ today - poor-excellent (1-4)
- likely voter - very likely - not likely at all (1-4)
- vote choice - Biden, Trump, Someone else
- candidate FT - Trump/Biden (0-100)
- things - right direction, wrong track, not sure (-1:1)

Covariates:

- race

- sex

- Party ID - Democrat, Republican, Independent, other

- ind_lean - GOP, Democrat, neither

- dem/gop lean - strong, weak

- ideology - very liberal - very conservative (-2:2)
- 2020 vote choice - DT, JB, someone else, DK, non-voter
- Follow politics - very closely-not closely at all (1:4)
- Political knowledge
    - How many justices serve on the U.S. Supreme Court?
    - On which of the following does the U.S. federal government currently spend the least?
    - Which party controls the U.S. House of Representatives?

18. Indices

Outcome indices

- Candidate preference = candidate ft + vote_choice
- Outlook = things + enthus + econ_outlook
- Civic Participation = likely + things + enthus

Measures

- Political knowledge = chuck + court + spend + majority + chief
- Econ pre-treat = gdp + unemployment + inflation

Analysis Plan

We will analyze the relationship between the various treatment conditions and the manipulation checks/outcome measures. We will use pre-treatment variables as potential controls.

19. Statistical models

We will use OLS and difference-in-means to analyze our results. The manipulated variables will be the treatment conditions and the dependent variable is our outcome measure index.

20. Transformations

21. Inference criteria

Describe your inference criteria here or state not applicable.

22. Data exclusion

Describe your data exclusion criteria here or state not applicable.

23. Missing data

Respondents who do not complete the entire survey will be removed from the analysis.

24. Exploratory analysis

We expect heterogeneous treatment effects for members of different demographics, particularly young, Black, and Hispanic voters. Therefore we will look for heterogeneous treatment effects among different demographic variables (age, gender, income, race, and education).

Other

25. Other

Enter any additional information not covered by other sections, or state not applicable.

References

Enter any references used throughout the text here.