Voter Displeasure: The Role of Dislike For the Opposition In the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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Abstract

One of the surprising things about the 2016 presidential election was how much each presidential candidate was disliked. In this historic election, questions about whether voters made their decisions by supporting their candidate or voting against another have arisen. Studies have been done in the past that examine which traits of candidates motivate voter decisions, however, the highly vitriolic and emotional nature of the past year’s election merits a special examination that takes different factors into account than previous studies. More specifically, a study must be done that examines not only voters’ tastes, but also their distastes. I explore this question using a survey implemented on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. I hypothesize that the voters in the 2016 presidential election will make their voting decisions primarily based on feelings of dislike for the candidate(s) they did not vote for, that party loyalty will have little to no effect on the likelihood of voters make ballot choices based on dislike, and that the lack of partisanship will enable voters to prioritize policy positions and candidate traits when considering their candidates. I discuss the importance of my findings in the conclusion.
Introduction

Several years ago, I was examining a data set collected by Pew Research Center concerning the 2012 presidential election for an assignment in a research methods class I was taking. While looking over the data, I noticed that a large number of Republican voters cited their reason for voting for Romney as “wanted to get Obama out of office.” The concept of a large number of voters casting the ballot against a candidate they disliked rather than for a candidate they approve of is a topic worth investigating in elections of various political climates, not least the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. This election proved to be difficult for academics and news media to predict, and the outcome of the election was unexpected for many. It is important to attempt understand the circumstances surrounding an election such as this one.

This study will investigate whether dislike for the “opposition” candidate was the primary motivator for voters decisions in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. It will reference previous studies that have investigated the role of other factors that motivate voters decisions in elections such as partisanship and candidate character. There has been little body of work revolving around the issue of “voting against,” and therefore the articles referenced will serve mainly to provide an idea of the roles these other factors played in past elections. This will provide a point of reference for how conditions had changed by 2016. The data will be 500 survey responses collected online using the Amazon Mechanical Turk program. The results will show that dislike for the opposition was the primary motivator for voters’ decisions in this election, with candidate policy platforms coming in close second. Strength of partisan ties will have some bearing on whether a voter makes their decision based on dislike.
Literature Review

When studying voter data, there are a variety of facets of campaigns and metrics of approval that analysts use to explain the success or failure of candidates and the behavior of voters. It is important to examine the significance of these metrics to understand how to construct a study of a presidential election, even one so singular as the election of 2016.

Party

An important factor in voters’ process for selecting a candidate their sense of partisanship. Political parties are easy ways for voters to identify with or against a candidate, providing a general framework for what that candidate’s opinions on issues will be and how their ideology is constructed.

This relationship may also be true in the inverse. An experiment designed by Bonneau and Cann (2013) indicated that voters are able to identify the party of a given candidate even in the absence of explicit partisan identification. The experiment asked participants to select their preference from a list of judiciary candidates, providing one group of participants with information on the candidates which excluded party identification, and providing the other (control) group with information which included party identification.

The results of the experiment showed little difference in partisan alignment between the control group and the other group. “The experimental results show that in a tightly controlled setting where candidate information is held constant but only half of subjects were given explicit partisan cues, voters were still able to draw conclusions about the partisanship of the judicial candidates and bring their partisanship to bear on
Thus, even without knowing a candidate’s party label, the voter’s own party identification was usually enough to keep them voting pretty consistently along party lines. This experiment has a great deal of internal validity, and only few real-world weaknesses (such as the generally non-partisan nature of judicial elections). It is therefore a fairly reliable demonstration of how partisanship effects voters’ decisions in elections.

Many people complain that parties make politics too divisive. However, there are several studies seem to indicate that this is untrue. A study by Ezro et al found that “when the level of partisanship is low, the polarization of voter preferences translates into popular support for extreme parties. In contrast, longstanding attachments to mainstream (moderate) parties dampen the relationship between voter polarization and support for extreme parties.” According to this study, mainstream partisanship could serve as a function of lower political polarization. This study doesn’t represent an isolated or unpopular opinion in academia. Another study by Lacy and Markovich (2016) theorized that higher partisanship also leads to lower volatility in elections. This longitudinal study used both modern and historical data, and found that the American bipartisan system is remarkably stable and provides an excellent framework that makes elections easy to predict since voters are fairly confident in their choice. Increases in

volatility were highly linked to voter uncertainty about who to vote for. Because of this, we hypothesize that this election will have been less polarized along party lines.

**Policy Issues**

If political polarization is indeed occurring in our society, it is possible that divides over policy issues are to blame, rather than parties. In a representative democracy, it is ideal that the voter hold their political candidates and representatives accountable for their policy and issue positions by voting based largely upon this factor. Some have made the claim that voters tend to vote more along party lines as political polarization increases, and that consequently issue positions will go largely ignored, but many scholars have contested this claim. One study, for example, made the suggestion that political polarization since 1965 has not occurred along party lines, but on an issue-by-issue basis, and that party ideologies have shifted accordingly. This would suggest that issue voting has maintained relevancy overtime, and that parties are mainly relevant as a general grouping of candidates and politicians with similar ideologies and policy positions. Another study found that, even if provided little information regarding ideological affiliation, voters were mostly able to identify candidates with a similar ideology position to their own in the spatial model when given issue information. In a campaign where candidates like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders championed sentiments of mistrust for traditional politics and partisanship, it is quite possible that voters in this election used policies rather than parties to identify the candidates most

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similar to them. We hypothesize that policy voting will be quite prevalent in this election.

**Candidate Traits**

Voters’ perception of candidate traits are inherently linked in many ways to issue voting. For example, a study by faculty at the College of William and Mary found that voters who were only given information about candidate character traits were still able to provide confident assessments of the candidates’ issue positions, compared to a control group who were given no information about the candidates. The same was true for the inverse: voters who were given information on candidate issue positions only were able to make inferences about candidate character traits. Another example is a series of studies on presidential campaigns (that function as a single longitudinal study) done by faculty members and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. These studies use data from the American National Election Study (ANES) from the 2004, 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, and focus on voter perceptions of candidate traits. The findings found a significant difference in the way the characters of George W. Bush and John Kerry were perceived, but found that this did not contribute much to Bush’s successful reelection. However, the 2008 study found that John McCain’s deficit in leadership (unusual for a Republican candidate) and empathy ratings played a significant

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part in his loss to Barack Obama,\(^9\) and the 2012 study found that Romney’s significant disadvantage in the character trait ratings arena cost him greatly in his race against Obama. It is possible that these traits will have factored into voters decisions in the recent election, but more likely the negative perception of both candidates’ characters will lead voters to focus on different ways of identifying their chosen candidate.

**Feeling Thermometers**

In addition to feelings about candidate traits, a voter’s body of knowledge about the election could cause them to have feelings for a candidate that are not explainable by issues, party or traits. A “feeling thermometer” is one of the most common ways researchers measure voter appraisals of candidates. On a survey, thermometers usually consist of giving respondents a range of numbers (0 to 1.0, 0 to 10, 0 to 100, etc.) with which to rate their approval of/preference for a given candidate (lower numbers indicate lower approval/preference, higher numbers indicate higher approval/preference). The resulting approval variable is implemented in a variety of ways in election research. For example, the thermometer is often treated as a dependent variable in models with independent variables such as ratings of candidate traits\(^10\) and perceived character weaknesses.\(^11\) One study takes the difference of results of feeling thermometers from the two major party candidates in the 2008 campaign and uses that difference (scaled from -100 to 100) as an indicator for the respondent’s overall voting preference. This

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preference is they used as a dependent variable, with party identity and ideology as independent variables. Some studies use thermometer ratings to create control groups while relating candidate opinions on issues to perceived candidate traits.

Relating Old Literature to the 2016 Election

Many have commented on how unpredictable the 2016 election was. In this way, this election exemplified the Ezro and Lacy studies remarkably. The election was certainly volatile, as the ultimate Donald Trump victory contradicted almost every attempt by the media and academics at predicting the result of the election. It is also possible that the choice between Trump and Clinton fueled a feeling of public uncertainty that may have driven many voters to third parties, or even to vote across partisan lines in what has been described as an exceedingly polarized election. If this is true, partisanship may have played less of a role in this election than in others, and it will be important to pay close attention to the trends associated with partisanship that emerge from our survey.

While we hypothesize that the 2016 election was not particularly partisan, we also believe that this will have an impact on issue and trait-based voting. As voters are faced with choices they do not like both within and outside their party of choice, they pay greater attention to a candidates issue positions and character traits to find a means of differentiating the candidates and strengthening the confidence of their voting decision. Indeed, the Holian and Prysby studies would seem to indicate that candidate

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traits are playing an increasingly important role in elections, since (as mentioned earlier) Republican candidates have increasingly suffered in presidential elections as a result of poor perceptions of their character. As such, perhaps the 2016 will prove to be symptomatic of a national shift towards candidate trait voting, contrary to our hypothesis.

There is some question as to whether feeling thermometers are an applicable method for evaluating voter opinions of the candidates in the 2016 election, as it has been in previous elections. The race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was so steeped in vitriol that many voters felt that there was little promise in either candidate. The result is that many voters though of the candidates less in terms of what they liked about them and more in terms of what they disliked. As such, an approval scale from 0-100 might cause data to be concentrated in the lower portion of the scale. It is important, therefore, to create a feeling thermometer that measures disapproval as well as approval, such as a 0-100 scale where scores 0-49 represent dislike and scores 51-100 represent approval, with 50 being completely neutral. A disapproval scale might provide researchers with a more accurate picture of the extent to which each candidate was disliked. This is the kind of feeling thermometer we intend to use in our survey.

In summary, the nature of the election and the weight of prior research lead us to hypothesize that:

1. The voters in the 2016 presidential election would make their voting decisions primarily based on feelings of dislike for the candidate(s) they did not vote for.
2. Party loyalty would have little to no effect on the likelihood of voters make ballot choices based on dislike. The election will not be particularly partisan.
3. The lack of partisanship will enable voters to prioritize policy positions when considering the pros and cons of their candidate options.

Findings

The survey was designed using Qualtrics software and implemented on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is known for having some inherent bias as a means of implementing surveys. Since it is an online survey, respondents will know how to use the internet, and are therefore likely to be younger. They have access to computers, and are less likely to be below a certain income. MTurk also has a reputation for turning up primarily Democrats as respondents, which certainly proved true for this survey. The survey we implemented contained questions about who they voted for and what influenced their decisions, in addition to general demographics questions. In most cases, respondents were also prompted to provide more specific reasons why they chose their candidate (specific policy, character trait, etc.), to see if any specific factor was overwhelmingly driving voters decisions. Variables such as age and the feeling thermometers needed little recoding. Education was categorical, and was coded in ascending order from fewer years of education to more years of education. Income was coded similarly. Almost every other variable was coded as multiple dummy variables.

The responses to our survey question that asked how the respondent chose their preferred presidential candidate seemed to overwhelmingly confirm our hypothesis that “dislike for the other candidate” played a significant role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The bar graph below shows the counts of the responses to this question.
The percentage of respondents who reported “disliked other candidates” as their primary motivation for making their voting decision was 46.63%. The second-most-commonly-reported motivator was approval for the candidate’s policies, which inspired the voting choices of just over 34% of our respondents. 26% of respondents who based their decision on “dislike” cited candidate policy opinions as the source of this dislike.

Consistant our hypothesis, candidate traits played very little role in influencing voter’s decisions. A regression run on attributes found a statistically significant positive relationship between the age of the respondent and voting for a candidate based on attributes, but only a slight one (the age coefficient value was .004 and the p-value was .005).
We used a logistical regression to study the potential reasons why so many people based their vote on dislike for another candidate. The results of that regression were as follows:

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<table>
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<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>(1) dislike</th>
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<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Observations</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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“Female” and “Black” are gender and race dummy variables, respectively. “Age” is a continuous variable, while “Education” and “Income” are both quantitative categorical variables (categories for “Education” are based on respondents’ highest levels of education, and “Income” categories are simply ranges of annual income in
ascending order). All of these variables were chosen to determine if there were any demographic trends in the data. “Clinton thermometer” and “Trump thermometer” are Clinton and Trump’s feeling thermometer scores, necessary to check for what bearing voters approval of the candidates themselves had on the manner in which they made their decisions. “Democratstrongparty,” “Republicanstrongparty,” and “Nmpstrongparty” are all variables measuring the strength of respondents’ adherence to their party of choice (Democratic, Republican, and non-major parties respectively). This gives us a means of measuring the role partisanship played in directing how voting decisions were made.

It is immediately evident that there is a statistically-significant negative relationship between the respondents’ levels of partisanship and their likelihood of casting their vote based on dislike for other candidates. The more partisan a respondent is, the less likely that respondent is to vote based on dislike, regardless of which party they affiliate with. It would seem that the more a voter adhered to a party, the better able they were to identify traits they liked about their candidate of choice and make decisions based on those traits rather than on dislike. What is interesting is that this phenomenon occurred across every party with fairly a comparable degree of extremity. A voter’s choice of party did not play a major role in whether or not they based their vote on dislike, but the strength of their ties to their party did. This would also suggest a possible lull in partisanship, since many people based their votes on dislike for other candidates, which we see is associated with weak partisan ties.
There was also a significant negative relationship between thermometer scores and voting based on dislike. This is to be expected, since the more a voter likes a candidate, the less likely they are to base the voting decision purely on dislike for another candidate.

**Conclusion**

The evidence that we collected supported our hypothesis concerning the prevalence of voting based on dislike. More respondents reported being motivated by dislike for the candidate they did not vote for than by any other factor. Our hypothesis concerning the level of partisanship in the election was supported in one way, but contradicted in another. Voters in this election had an overall weak level of partisanship, as we predicted, and the phenomenon of voters basing their choices on which candidate they wanted to vote *against* was present in all political parties. However, there was a
relationship between levels of partisanship and voters’ likelihood to base their voting decisions on dislike. The more partisan a voter was, the less likely they were to base their vote on their dislike for one or more of the candidates. It is possible that this is because candidates who affiliate more strongly with a party are better able to identify traits or opinions that they share with the candidate in their party.

We observed many respondents report policy positions as being a major motivator for their voting choices, but this number was not as high as we anticipated. Of the respondents who reported choosing their candidate out of dislike for the other candidate, there were far more respondents who reported this dislike to be the result of the other candidate’s history of corruption than respondents whose dislike was based on policy opinions. Even those who did report caring primarily about policy positions may have been subject to bias. It is possible that voters say they care primarily about policy issues because they believe this is the “correct” answer for a rational voter (paying attention to policies makes them more rational). It is logical to assume that voters believe themselves to be rational, and will therefore respond in the way they believe a rational voter would respond. It is therefore possible that the extent to which policies motivated voters’ decisions was somewhat exaggerated in our study. We also found that candidate attributes played very little role in influencing the decisions of voters in this election.

The prevalence of voting displeasure in this election is unsettling. It indicates that American voters in the 2016 presidential election saw far more to be displeased with in their nation’s potential leaders than they saw positive traits. Rather than looking to their leaders as sources of inspiration, or at least encouragement, Americans saw even
their preferred choice of candidate as merely the lesser of several evils. We can only hope that future elections provide a source of optimism for the country.
Works Cited


