

Change in the Components of the Electoral Decision

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One useful way to employ survey data to understand presidential election outcomes is to decompose the electoral decision into a set of “components” measuring different aspects of the election. *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960) utilized a decomposition into six components, analyzing how attitudes toward the Republican and Democratic candidates, domestic and foreign issues, social groups, and parties as managers of government moved the vote decision in the 1952 and 1956 elections (see also Stokes, Campbell, and Miller 1958). This paper analyzes how these components have changed in importance over the past half-century. Additionally, this paper augments the components model by developing summary measures of the short-term forces affecting election results.

Neither *The American Voter* nor *The American Voter Revisited* deals sufficiently with the implications of party identification for how the six components affect the electoral decision. After analyzing the impact of the six components on the vote, they do an additional analysis of the impact of those components controlling for party identification, but that treats the effects of party identification as linear rather than recognizing its inherent interactive character. The six partisan attitudes do not affect the electorate in a uniform manner. As *The American Voter* and *The American Voter Revisited* both showed, Democrat identifiers have more pro-Democratic means on all the six partisan attitudes and Republican identifiers have more pro-Republican means on all of them. Consider, however, a polarized component on which Democratic identifiers tend to be pro-Democratic (such as giving more pro-Democratic than anti-Democratic comments about the Democratic presidential candidate) and on which Republican identifiers tend to be pro-Republican (giving more comments against the Democratic candidate than for her). Regardless of whether the net effect of that component helps the Democrats or hurts them, the logic of the model is that it helps them among their own partisans, hurts them among the other party’s partisans, and the real effect of that component is determined by how it plays among Independents. If one assumes the partisans are extremely likely to stay with their party regardless of short-term factors, then it is really just the effect among Independents that will matter. Therefore, this paper also extends the basic components model by adding a special focus on political independents.

The Basic Components Model

The basic components model is fairly simple. The National Election Studies surveys ask a series of eight open-ended questions as to what the respondents like and

dislike about each party and its presidential candidate. Human coders subsequently classify each respondent's answers into an elaborate set of "master codes," coding up to five responses on each of the eight questions. These codes are then classified into a set of "partisan attitudes." In preparing *The American Voter Revisited*, we attempted to classify the responses into categories using classification decisions that matched as closely as possible to those employed for *The American Voter*, though there were inevitably several difficult decisions as to how to classify particular codes.¹ In any case, we categorized responses as referring to the Republican and Democratic candidates, domestic and foreign issues, social groups, and parties as managers of government.

The next step of the components model is to construct the six separate components. In each case, we counted up the number of pro-Republican or anti-Democratic) comments made by the respondent in a category (such as the number of comments made about what the person likes about the Republican party or candidate on domestic issues and what the person dislikes about the Democratic party or candidate on domestic issues) across the eight questions, counted up the number of pro-Democratic or anti-Republican comments made by the respondent in the same category across the eight questions, and then took the difference. Since these measures are constructed on the basis of up to 5 answers to each of 8 questions, the components could each conceivably have a range of -40 to +40.

The third step is to regress the individual's vote decision on these components along with computing the mean on each component. The impact of the component on the vote decision is then the product of a component's unstandardized regression coefficient and its mean. This value shows how much each component moved the vote decision, controlling for the other components.

This model has been applied to several elections. *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960) employed it for analyzing the 1952 and 1956 elections (see also Stokes, Campbell, and Miller 1958) and Stokes (1966) extended this analysis to the 1960 and 1964 elections. Later analysts extended it through 1972 (Kagay and Caldeira 1980; Pomper 1975; Miller and Miller 1976; Popkin 1976) and 1980 (Miller and Wattenberg 1981). More recently, *The American Voter Revisited* (Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg 2008, chap. 14) employed this model for analyzing the 2000 and 2004 elections.²

Methodologically, there are two obvious issues with this components model. First, the reliance on open-ended comments can be questioned. For example, the scores are affected by how verbal the respondents are, so some respondents will have more extreme scores than others simply because they give more elaborate answers as to why they like and dislike the parties and candidates. Some analysts would prefer using closed-ended questions to analyze vote determinants rather than these open-ended questions; see Kessel and Weisberg (1999) for a detailed discussion of the stakes involved in this choice.

¹ Erin McAdams performed the categorization.

² In a related series of analyses, Kessel (Smith and Kessel 1995; Smith, Radcliffe, and Kessel 1999; Kessel 2004; Kessel 2005) employed both a simpler decomposition into only 3 components (candidates, issues, and parties) and a more elaborate decomposition into 16 components (e.g., candidate experience, international involvement, and comments about other people in the party).

The second issue is the use of ordinary least-squares regression analysis on a dichotomous dependent variable rather than using logit or probit analysis. As is well understood, the linear assumption underlying OLS regression, when applied to dichotomous variables, leads to predictions that some people will have probabilities above one and others will have probabilities below zero of displaying the dependent behavior, both of which violate the rules of probability theory. By contrast, logit and probit analysis are well behaved in this sense because they are non-linear. *The American Voter* might have used logit or probit if they had been easy to compute in the 1950s, though Stokes (1966, 28) later argued against using such analyses since “the distribution of the electorate along an attitude dimension is much more easily summarized under the linear model.” Most important, the impact of each component on the vote decision cannot be so readily calculated with non-linear models, since it would not be appropriate to multiply the regression coefficients by their respective means.³

Extending the Components Model

In addition to comparing the components model results for the 2000 and 2004 elections to those for earlier elections, the basic *American Voter* components model will be extended in two ways in this paper. First, the factors affecting voting turnout will be examined by using turnout as a dependent variable in addition to the usual component analysis of vote direction.⁴ Thus, it will be possible to see the extent to which attitudes toward each candidate, domestic and foreign issues, social groups, and parties as managers of government affect the decision as to whether to vote. Some of these attitudes may mobilize respondents to vote in a particular election, while others may not.

This analysis of turnout is vulnerable to the usual problems associated with overreport of turnout in NES surveys, though hopefully the factors leading to overreport are not correlated with the factors associated with the turnout decision. More important, Democrats vote at lower rates than Republicans, which will confound the analysis since components that favor the Republicans in a particular election will appear stronger than those that help the Democrats – which may be why Stokes and colleagues did not include this in their work; fortunately this problem can be handled by controlling for party identification. [Comments on the turnout analysis will be appreciated – I like the idea of using the components to analyze turnout, but I need feedback as to whether this part of the analysis is worthwhile.]

Second, the component analysis will be broken down to focus on political independents. After all, partisans rarely defect to the other major party (only 6%-8% did in the 2000 and 2004 elections), so there would not be enough variation in their voting direction for regression analysis. However, independents swing from one party to the other, and their choices are essential to determining the outcome of an election. Therefore the component analysis will be performed separately for self-declared Independents, as determined by the first party identification question.

³ The Kessel papers referenced above use different approaches to trying to achieve an impact analysis from probit, but there is no simple definitive procedure for doing so.

⁴ Another way to accomplish this goal would be to employ multinomial logit analysis on a trichotomous vote variable – voted Republican, voted Democrat, and did not vote – though that again would raise the problem of how measure the impact of each component when coefficients cannot be legitimately multiplied by the variables’ means.

Leaners are included with Independents in this analysis rather than with the party to which they admit being closer. Keith et al. (1992) argue that leaners should be combined with partisans, but that would leave too few independents for separate analysis. Instead, this paper follows Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004) in recognizing that treating leaners as independents leads to more stable categories. The Independents who say they are closer to one party or another may simply be reporting how they are currently planning to vote in the upcoming election, which can swing back and forth several times before the actual election takes place (Shively 1977, 16-20). That may make leaners look like they are voting about the same as weak partisans, but, according to this interpretation, they are coming to that decision because of short-term factors more than long-term factors.

Two further adjustments to the usual components model are made in this paper. While regression analysis is used to determine the size of effects, statistical significance will be determined through logistic regression. As is commonly claimed, the results using regression and logit analysis are not very different, but there would be differences in some of the analyses reported here as to which components are deemed to have significant effects. These are generally instances where one component barely passes the significance test with one model and not with the other, but it seems safer to judge significance on the basis of the statistical model that is actually appropriate for dichotomous dependent variables.

The other adjustment involves the social group component. The components are generally interpreted as short-term factors affecting the vote. However, the social group component measures long-term group identification matters that are very close to party identification itself, much more than it measures short-term election-related factors. Most of the social group references coded into this category relate speak about the coalitional bases of the parties: that the Democrats are good for the working, or not good for business people, or good for blacks, or not good for Christian fundamentalists, or similar statements (or the converse statements as regards Republicans) that are typically related to why the respondents are or are not Democrat in their partisanship. There are occasionally more short-term matters incorporated into this component when a specific social cleavage becomes salient for a particular presidential election, but that is the exception rather than the rule. Because of the long-term perspective of the social group component, it will be disregarded when this paper treats the components as short-term.

Vote Components over Time

Table 1 shows the effects of the six components on the electoral decision from 1952 to 1980 (Miller and Wattenberg 1981) and for 2000 and 2004 (Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg 2008). As analysts have typically found over the years, the social group component has always helped the Democratic vote, while managing government has nearly always worked in favor of the Republicans (with the sole exception during this time frame of 1964), and these patterns continued in 2000 and 2004.

Table 1. Components of the Vote Decision, 1952-1980, 2000-2004*

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	2000	2004
D candidate	-1.18	.17	-1.99	-3.93	.90	4.29	-.05	-.93	.68	1.62
R candidate	4.37	7.60	5.70	-2.60	1.60	3.98	.24	-.70	.35	1.45
Domestic issues	-1.34	-.88	-.54	-2.36	1.10	1.35	-.69	2.70	.00	-.72
Foreign issues	3.30	2.46	1.80	-.25	1.00	3.23	.40	3.06	.56	-1.30
Gov't management	5.40	1.18	1.20	-.30	1.50	.04	.17	2.87	.59	.60
Social groups	-4.29	-5.50	-4.01	-2.59	-3.60	-4.55	-4.53	-5.08	-4.08	-3.16
sum	6.26	5.03	2.16	-12.03	2.50	8.34	-4.46	1.92	-1.90	-1.51
sum without social groups	10.55	10.53	6.17	-9.44	6.10	12.89	.07	7.00	2.18	1.65
sum abs	19.88	17.79	15.24	12.03	9.70	17.44	6.08	15.34	6.26	8.85
sum abs w/o social groups	15.59	12.29	11.23	9.44	6.10	12.89	1.55	10.26	2.18	5.69
standard deviation	3.85	4.29	3.37	1.45	1.99	3.34	1.89	3.21	1.86	1.84
stdev without social groups	3.17	3.31	2.91	1.59	0.31	1.82	0.43	2.03	0.27	1.30

*Each component, including attitudes toward the Democratic candidate, is coded in a pro-Republican direction, so positive values show that the component helped the Republicans and negative values show it helped the Democrats.

Sources: Miller and Wattenberg (1981) and Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg (2008).

What is more interesting is the issue side, where the results for 2000 and 2004 do not comfortably fit usual patterns. Domestic issues have generally favored the Democrats over the years (with significant exceptions for the Reagan election of 1980 and the Nixon victories in 1968 and 1972). They still favored the Democrats in Bush's victory in 2004, but they were exactly neutral in the close 2000 contest. Foreign issues have generally favored the Republicans over the years (with the exception of when the Republicans nominated Barry Goldwater in 1964). They still favored the Republicans in 2000, but they swung decidedly in the Democratic direction in 2004 because of negative reactions to the Iraq War.

The candidate side is also interesting. One would expect that each party's candidate would help garner votes for their party, but there are interesting exceptions when one party nominates a candidate who turns out to be weak as Goldwater was for the Republicans in 1964 and McGovern was for the Democrats in 1972. Table 1 shows that Reagan cost the Republicans votes in 1980, while Humphrey cost the Democrats votes in 1968 and Stevenson in 1956 and Carter in 1976 did not attract votes for the Democrats. In 2000, the Bush candidacy did little to move the election toward the Republicans, and the Gore candidacy actually moved the vote more in a Republican direction than did the Bush candidacy. Bush moved the vote more in a Republican direction in 2004, but the Democratic candidate again moved the vote in the Republican direction more than Bush did. In short, the Democratic candidates in 2000 and 2004 did not end up helping their own causes.

Several sets of summary statistics are provided in the bottom rows of Table 1, chosen to tap what the components reflect about short-term forces. Since the social group factor is mainly long-term, the summary statistics on the first five components – without the social group component – are of greatest interest here.

The sum row shows how much the components together moved the vote. What is most noticeable is how much smaller the entries for 2000 and 2004 are than for most earlier elections. For example, the first five components moved the vote decidedly in the Republican direction in the 1950s, allowing the Republicans to overcome a real Democratic advantage in party identification. They were pro-Republican enough in 1960 to make the Kennedy-Nixon election a very narrow Democratic victory even though the Democrats still had the advantage in party identification. The sums of the first five components were only slightly pro-Republican in 2000 and 2004, but the Democratic edge in party identification was much weaker, allowing the 2000 election to be close enough that the popular vote winner did not win the Electoral College and allowing the Republicans to win the 2004 popular vote.

The next two rows in Table 1 show the sums of the absolute values of the effects of the components, showing how strong the short-term forces were. Again, the values for 2000 and 2004 are much smaller than most of the earlier entries. The first five components were major aspects of the 1950s elections, but short-term forces were much milder in 2000, and they were still relatively weak in 2004.

The bottom rows in Table 1 give the standard deviations of the components in each election year, so one can more readily judge how uniform they were in magnitude. Yet again the entries for 2000 and 2004 are distinctive, especially in comparison with the 1950s. The components in the 1950s varied more in their values, as when government management and the Eisenhower candidacy gave the Republicans several percentage points in the vote in 1952 while domestic issues and the Stevenson candidacy each gave the Democrats at least one percentage point that year. By contrast, none of the first five components moved the vote even one percentage point in 2000, and none of those five aided the Democrats. The components varied more in 2004, but the standard deviation that year was still on the low side.

To summarize, the five short-term components of the vote had relatively little effect in 2000 and 2004. Collectively they moved the vote little, they were weak as short-term forces, and they were relatively uniform. Most analysts view contemporary partisan politics as highly polarized (cf. Fiorina 2005). At first blush, polarization would seem to imply that the short-term components would be very important. Instead, polarization means that there is less room for the short-term forces to matter. If people are voting their partisanship more (Bartels 2000), as was the case in these two elections, then short-term factors are weaker – though there still can be some effect of short-term forces in slightly changing the distribution of party identification (Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004, 43; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg 2008, 420).

The Components within Partisan Categories

Table 2 shows the means for each component by party identification in 2000 and 2004. One would expect that nonvoters would be less likely to make comments than voters, so the means for nonvoters would be closer to zero than those for voters. That

pattern generally holds in Table 2, except for occasional comparisons where the differences are so small as to be nonsignificant.

Table 2. Means of Components for Turnout and Vote, 2000 and 2004*

Means	Turnout 00	Turnout 04	Vote 00	Vote 04
<i>Democrats</i>	.78	.77	.08	.08
RCAND	-.73	-.64	-.86	-.76
DCAND	-.72	-.80	-.75	-.87
DOMESTIC	-1.99	-1.66	-2.19	-1.98
FOREIGN	.01	-.94	.01	-1.01
GROUP	-1.44	-1.41	-1.62	-1.51
MANAGE	-.44	-.63	-.43	-.60
<i>Independents</i>	.64	.60	.54	.42
RCAND	.08	-.06	.19	-.15
DCAND	.14	.12	.16	.09
DOMESTIC	-.09	-.51	.00	-.66
FOREIGN	.10	-.28	.16	-.33
GROUP	-.48	-.63	-.55	-.92
MANAGE	.15	.00	.18	.08
<i>Republicans</i>	.83	.89	.92	.94
RCAND	.96	1.23	1.08	1.26
DCAND	.98	1.44	1.08	1.45
DOMESTIC	2.42	1.51	2.80	1.63
FOREIGN	.20	.75	.24	.74
GROUP	-.02	-.06	-.03	-.06
MANAGE	.76	1.01	.83	1.08

*Each component, including attitudes toward the Democratic candidate, is coded in a pro-Republican direction, so positive values show that there were more pro-Republican (and anti-Democratic) comments on the component than pro-Democratic (and anti-Republican) comments.

As to be expected, the means on each component are most pro-Republican for Republican identifiers and least pro-Republican for Democratic identifiers. Most of the components break in the Republican direction among Republican identifiers and in the Democratic direction among Democratic identifiers, with the interesting exceptions of foreign issues, which did not favor the Democrats even among Democratic identifiers in 2000, and social groups, which did not the Republicans even among Republican identifiers in either election year.

The other pattern to look at in Table 2 involves change between 2000 and 2004 within party identification categories. Views of Bush became somewhat more extreme for partisans and changed from positive to negative among Independents. Republican views of the Democratic candidate became more negative, while the mean for Independents became slightly less negative. Comments on domestic issues became less extreme for Democrats, while becoming decidedly anti-Republican among Independents. Comments on foreign issues became more extreme for partisans, while switching from

pro-Republican to pro-Democrat among Independents. Comments about parties as managers of government became somewhat more extreme among partisans, while becoming more neutral among Independents.

The regression coefficients for Independents are shown in Table 3, with significant values bolded. Few variables significantly affected turnout, and the patterns are not very interesting. Views of the two candidates and social group comments affected the vote of Independents in both elections, with domestic issues being significant in 2000 and foreign issues in 2004.⁵

Table 3. Coefficients of Components for Turnout and Vote among Independents, 2000 and 2004*

Coefficients	Turnout 00	Turnout 04	Vote 00	Vote 04
(constant)	.620	.531	.537	.516
RCAND	.016	-.016	.053	.102
DCAND	.000	.007	.083	.060
DOMESTIC	-.003	-.010	.051	.023
FOREIGN	.072	-.008	.045	.102
GROUP	-.028	-.094	.058	.042
MANAGE	.001	.040	.031	-.006
% predicted	64.0%	57.6%	54.2%	86.8%

*Bolded values are significant. Each component, including attitudes toward the Democratic candidate, is coded in a pro-Republican direction, so positive values show that claimed turnout is greater and Republican voting is greater as the net comments on the component are more pro-Republican.

Table 4 shows the effects of the components on turnout and the vote. The Independent vote in 2000 was pushed in a Republican direction by attitudes toward Bush and Gore, and, to a lesser extent, foreign issues and government management, with only social groups moving their vote in a Democratic direction. In 2004, the Independent vote was moved in a Democratic direction by social groups and foreign issues, and, to a lesser extent, attitudes toward Bush and domestic issues, with attitudes toward Kerry moving their vote slightly in the Republican direction.

⁵ The regression equations were also computed separately for Democratic and for Republican identifiers. However, the defection rates among partisans were so low in these elections (4%-6%) that there is not enough variance on the dependent variables in these regressions to have confidence in the analysis. [Feedback on whether to proceed with this analysis for partisans would be appreciated.]

Table 4. Effects of Components for Turnout and Vote, 2000 and 2004*

Effects	Turnout 00	Turnout 04	Vote 00	Vote 04
<i>Independents</i>				
RCAND	0.1	0.1	1.0	-1.5
DCAND	0.0	0.1	1.4	0.5
DOMESTIC	0.0	0.5	0.0	-1.5
FOREIGN	0.7	0.2	0.7	-3.4
GROUP	1.3	5.9	-3.2	-3.9
MANAGE	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0

*Values corresponding to significant regression coefficients are bolded. Each component, including attitudes toward the Democratic candidate, is coded in a pro-Republican direction, so positive values show that the component helped the Republicans and negative values show it helped the Democrats.

What is most interesting in Table 4 is how all the components among Independents advantaged the Republicans less in 2004 than in 2000. Social groups, foreign issues, and even attitudes toward George W. Bush cost the Republicans significant numbers of votes among Independents in 2004. We generally expect that candidates win because short-term factors lead Independents to break in favor of them, but that was not the case in 2004. Bush's 2004 victory was due the electorate being slightly more Republican in partisanship, not due to how Independents evaluated short-term forces.

Conclusions

The vote components model of *The American Voter* was used periodically through 1980, but hadn't been used again until *The American Voter Revisited* employed it again for 2000 and 2004. Only the social group factor helped the Democrats in 2000, while Bush's victory in 2004 was based on positive views of his candidacy and negative views of John Kerry's candidacy, with foreign issues hurting the Republicans that year.

While this summary of the 2000 and 2004 election in terms of vote components is interesting, it is more interesting to note that the short-term components were relatively mild in these two elections. They were relatively uniform, and they moved the vote little. These were polarized elections in which long-term partisanship had a large effect and short-term factors were weaker.

The conventional wisdom is that elections turn on how Independents are affected by short-term forces. Breaking the electorate down by partisan categories shows that was not the case in 2004. None of the components added much to Republican vote totals in 2004. George W. Bush won the election due to a small increase in Republican partisanship rather than due to short-term forces moving Independents in his favor. The components model for Independents thus tells a very different story about the 2004 election than when the model is applied to the electorate as a whole.

Thus, the vote components model remains interesting in what it shows about elections, and it is even more interesting when the conventional analysis is augmented with summary statistics about the short-term forces and when the basic model is extended by focusing on the voting of Independents.

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