

***Abramson, et al., Ch. 7: Presidential Performance and Candidate Choice***

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- I. Introduction: primary focus of this chapter:
  - A. The correspondence between the performance of the national economy and the electoral fortunes of the party of the incumbent president
  - B. Candidate strategies and retrospective voting based on perceptions of *domestic affairs* outcomes, especially economic prosperity or hardship
  - C. Aldrich gives two reasons for excluding evaluations of *foreign affairs* outcomes from his assessment of retrospective voting (Fn. 6, p. 297):
    - 1. The low concern over foreign affairs in the public and
    - 2. (as a consequence) the relative paucity of data about foreign affairs evaluations within the public.

- II. What is retrospective voting?
  - A. Vote-choice decisions based on evaluations of the success or failure of the incumbent administration in achieving universally desired ends:
    - 1. In domestic affairs:
      - a. Economic prosperity [measured by inflation and unemployment]
      - b. Domestic peace and morality
    - 2. In foreign affairs:
      - a. Peace
      - b. National prestige
  - B. Major theorists:
    - 1. V.O. Key, Jr. argued that voters can be “a rational god of vengeance and of reward” by focusing primarily on incumbent performance
    - 2. Anthony Downs and Morris Fiorina argued that:
      - a. Voters make comparisons among the alternatives standing for election – not just focusing on the incumbent party’s candidate
      - b. But that the incumbent has an advantage: more is usually known about them and their performance
        - (1) Even if the incumbent’s performance has been weak, the challenger must convince the voters that he/she can do better
        - (2) If the incumbent’s performance has been strong, it is even harder for the challenger to convince the voters that he/she can do even better
  - C. Such retrospective voting is likely to be:
    - 1. Strongest if the incumbent president is running for reelection
    - 2. Somewhat less strong if the incumbent vice president is running for the presidency
    - 3. Less likely (**but still possible** *even if neither the incumbent president nor vice president is representing the party*, for example):
      - a. Positive retrospective voting could produce a *maintaining election*, as in 1908 & 1928, when Republican non-incumbents Taft and Hoover defeated Democratic challengers.
      - b. Negative retrospective voting could produce:
        - (1) A *deviating election*, as in 1952, when the Democrats were weakened by [over-wrought] Republican charges of “crime, communism, and corruption,” even though Truman was not seeking re-election.
        - (2) A *reinstating election*, as in 1920, when the Democrats, without Wilson, were unable to counter Harding’s appeal of a “return to normalcy.”
        - (3) A *realigning election*, as in 1860, when the Democrats were divided by the slavery issue that Buchanan had failed to resolve.

- III. Evaluations of governmental performance:
  - A. Few voters think government has done a good job on the problem that they think is the most important
  - B. However, this should not be surprising – if government were doing a good job, then the problem wouldn’t be most important to the voter
  - C. There is a very strong relationship between a voter’s assessment of the government’s handling of their most important problem and their vote choice [Table 7-1, p. 154]:
    - 1. The incumbent party is usually defeated when in election years with the highest levels of negative assessments of the government’s handling of the most important problem (1980, 1992)

2. Conversely, the party is usually reelected in election years with lower levels of negative assessments of the government's handling of the most important problem (1984 & 1996)
  3. In 2000, the voters assessments looked more like 1984 & 1996 than 1980 or 1992, which was a factor in why Gore won a majority of the popular vote
- D. There is also a very strong relationship between a voters' assessments of which party would do a better job of handling their most important problem and their vote choice Table 7-2, p. 155
- E. However, most voters thought that neither party would do a better job of handling their most important problem
- IV. Economic evaluations and the vote for the incumbent:
- A. The relationship between a respondents' financial situations and their vote is often not particularly strong Table 7-3, p. 158
  - B. The relationship with vote choice is stronger with a respondents' assessment of the national economy than with their own personal economic well being Table 7-4, p. 159
  - C. Voters' positive assessments of the national economy in 2000 were more like those in 1984 and 1996 than in other years with more negative assessments
  - D. However, the relationship between these national economic assessments and vote choice was weaker in 2000 than in any of the four preceding elections (to Gore's disadvantage)
  - E. There is a strong relationship between the voters' approval of the incumbent president's handling of the economy and their vote choices Table 7-5, p. 160
  - F. However, this relationship was weaker in 2000 than in the preceding five elections (again to Gore's disadvantage)
- V. Evaluations of the incumbent Table 7-6, p. 162 :
- A. Fiorina distinguishes between two types of retrospective evaluations:
    1. *Simple*: perceptions of direct effects of policy on the voter or the nation
    2. *Politically mediated*: assessments tied to incumbent or incumbent's party – e.g., level of approval of the way the incumbent president is handling his job – is strongly related to vote choice
      - a. Nixon ('72), Reagan ('84), & Clinton ('96) were rated high and won reelection
      - b. Carter ('80) and Bush ('92) were rated lower and lost reelection
      - c. One exception: Ford ('76) was rated high but lost [punishment for pardoning Nixon?]
- VI. The impact of retrospective evaluations:
- A. Evidence indicates retrospective voting was widespread in all recent elections
  - B. Comparative judgments are often made, as suggested by Downs and Fiorina:
    1. Few people base their votes on judgments of past performance alone
    2. Most use past judgments as a starting point for comparing the major contenders
  - C. 2000 was most like 1984, 1988, and 1996 Figure 7-1, p. 164 :
    1. Government's handling of the voters' most important problem was generally rated higher than in other recent elections
    2. Evaluations of the incumbent president were generally positive
    3. The incumbent's party was rated equal to or better than the challenger's party at handling the voters' most important problems
  - D. There is a strong relationship between an index of the 3 retrospective evaluations and the vote choice Figure 7-2, p. 165 In 2000, Gore essentially tied Bush because there was a slightly proincumbent set of evaluations, combined with a very slight asymmetry against the incumbent in translating those evaluations into voting choices
  - E. When compared to *prospective* evaluations, *retrospective* were somewhat stronger in 2000 Table 7-7, p. 166
- VII. Conclusion:
- A. Both *prospective* and *retrospective* evaluations are related to vote choice in recent elections
  - B. In 2000:
    1. *Prospective* evaluations favored neither candidate because they were so evenly balanced
    2. Gore had a modest advantage on *retrospective* evaluations among all voters but:
      - a. Bush won greater support among those voters with pro-Republican evaluations than Gore did among those voters with pro-Democratic evaluations
      - b. The result was an even balance in the popular vote