The Activation of "Fundamentals" Over the Course of U.S. Presidential Campaigns
Strengthening, Contextual Activation, or Mean Reversion?

Emily Thorson
ethorson@asc.upenn.edu
University of Pennsylvania

Richard Johnston
rjohnston@politics.ubc.ca
University of British Columbia

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How does the impact of the so-called "fundamental" factors on vote intentions evolve over the course of a Presidential campaign? Are factors like gender, race, religion, and income equally powerful at the beginning as at the end, or do they gain in importance as the campaign progresses? We sense that most academic observers believe the latter, but that intuition remains relatively unexamined: assertions about the activation of fundamentals are rarely subject to rigorous operationalization or testing. We know that the relationship between fundamental factors and vote choice changes over the course of the campaign, but little about the patterns underlying these changes. Do the fundamentals consistently increase in importance? Does their relative weight shift as a result of specific campaign events? Or can we observe a process of "mean reversion," in which the weight each fundamental consideration reverts to a particular level that is constant across elections? Finally, does the activation of fundamentals follow a similar pattern across election years?

This paper draws on existing literature to outline three potential patterns of activation: strengthening, contextual activation, and mean reversion. We then employ data from the 2000, 2004, and 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) to test these propositions with a body of data that is fully comparable across the span of a single campaign as well as across multiple elections. Ultimately, we find support for the mean reversion hypothesis. At the start of the campaign the weight of any given "fundamental" varies widely, and they evolved differently over the course of the campaign (sometimes in reaction to specific events). However, by the close of the campaign, these fundamentals converge upon a value that is remarkably similar across years.

Competing ideas about the activation of fundamentals

This section lays out the major presumptions (often under-articulated) of what fundamentals are and how they interact with campaign dynamics to shape voter preferences. Gelman and King (1993) offer perhaps the most frequently cited study of the activation of fundamentals in their study of the 1988 US Presidential election. Using commercial polls, they trace the changing importance of fundamentals over the course of the campaign and propose a process of "enlightenment," arguing that "by the time of the election, voters' preferences are 'enlightened,' at least in the sense of being predictable on the basis of fundamental variables from before the start of the general election campaign" (447). The campaign provides voters with the information they need to connect their preferences to their vote choice.

The most pointed further vindication of Gelman and King's intuition is Bafumi, Gelman, and Park (2004), which applies a variant of the original Gelman-King logic to the 2000 NAES. Bafumi et al. measure prediction weights from the 1996 ANES and observe that the power of the 1996 arguments increases toward Election Day, notwithstanding the shift in year and data set. For judgment on the economy, Bartels (2006) finds a similar pattern. Andersen, Tilley, and Heath (2005) have taken the logic abroad with considerable success. Also relevant is Holbrook's (1996) finding that campaign polls are subject to a quasi-gravitational pull from the outcome predicted by forecasting models, seemingly cut by systematic forces that repeat themselves from election to election. Subtly different but along the same lines is Campbell's (2008) finding that campaigns systematically narrow the frontrunner's margin and that most of the dynamics in preferences seem to be "systematic," that is, under the control of forces that repeat themselves from election to election. Subtly different again but also susceptible to interpretation in terms of

strengthening grip from long-term forces is the observation by Wlezien and Erickson (2002) that amplitudes of campaign flux shrink toward the end of the campaign.

But not all the evidence aligns with this view. Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004) and Shaw (1999) found advertising effects on voter preference, a claim reinforced by Hill, Lo, Vavreck, and Zaller (2008). They argue that by the last two weeks of the 2000, resources were not balanced between the sides, and that this imbalance was critical to the result. Additionally, Johnston et al. found no evidence that the economy became more important with time, a finding echoed in Bartels (2006). Vavreck (2009) also warns of the costs of ignoring the economy, but recognizes that a failure to do so will not always prove fatal. Her argument reveals that favored candidates are ill advised to ignore the economy. On the other hand, Vavreck finds that some candidates -- and not just Al Gore -- have successfully ignored the economy and still won. Empirically, then, the real world does leave scope for campaign choices which affect election outcomes, even if some of these choices are foolish.

In the following section, we attempt to clarify some of the implicit claims made in the literature summarized above by drawing out three competing predictions about the activation of fundamentals over the course of the campaign: strengthening, contextual activation, and mean reversion.

Strengthening of associations between fundamental factors and vote choice

The model of 'enlightened preferences' advanced by Gelman & King suggests, at its most basic level, that campaigns educate voters. Voters' ability to draw connections between their interests (as represented by their group identities) and their vote choice weakens between elections, and campaigns serve to (re)strengthen these associations. Simply put, as voters learn

more about candidates, they are better able to decide which candidate will more likely enact his preferred policy preferences. The enlightenment model implies that over the course of the campaign, fundamental variables will become more predictive of a person's vote choice. If true, then we expect that demographic groups should consistently become more homogeneous in their vote choice over the course of the campaign.

According to the enlightened preferences model, efforts of campaign strategists to capture voters off-set one another, and reduce outcomes to medium- and long-term factors. The campaign serves largely to help voters connect fundamental variables to candidate positions. For example, a frequent church attendee might learn about the Republican candidate's pro-life position, or a factory worker might learn about the Democratic candidate's tax credit for those making under $50,000 a year. As voters learn more about the candidates over the course of the campaign, characteristics like race, gender, and income should become more closely aligned with the vote. Aside from educating voters, campaigns cannot alter the outcome of a race except when one candidate runs an exceptionally bad or unusually apathetic campaign.

Two observable implications follow if the strengthening hypothesis is correct. We should expect (a) that fundamental factors are more predictive of the vote at the end of the campaign than at the start, and that (b) over the course of the campaign, they systematically grow in importance.

Contextual activation

While the enlightenment model predicts the consistent strengthening of fundamentals over the course of the campaign, other theories suggest more room for campaign effects. In this view, certain fundamentals may be strengthened over the course of the campaign as a direct

result of campaign strategy, while others remain un-activated. For example, by making race a salient issue, Obama's candidacy could have changed the association between race and vote choice in 2008, while Sarah Palin's candidacy may have affected the predictive power of gender. If contextual activation occurs, we should be able to observe it (either within campaigns or between them) when new issues or candidates emerge that touch upon fundamental considerations.

Mean reversion

A third potential pattern is *mean reversion.* In the mean reversion hypothesis, the weight of fundamentals reverts to a particular level that is constant across elections. This is the hypothesis implicitly endorsed by Kaplan, Gelman, & Park (2010):

> "Elections may be predetermined by the fundamentals in a process where predispositions are activated by campaign related information flows. Then, we expect the weight given to the fundamentals by the average voter just before one presidential election to become increasingly similar to the weights given the same fundamentals as the next presidential Election Day approaches. If true, the fundamentals will have been shown to revert back to equilibrium during high information campaign seasons" (Kaplan, Gelman, & Park 2010, 8-9).

If the mean reversion hypothesis is true, we would expect the weight of fundamentals to converge at a particular value at the end of the election, and for this value to be similar across elections.

The mean reversion hypothesis does *not* suggest that fundamentals invariably become more predictive of vote choice over time. Indeed, at the start of a campaign, a particular fundamental may be either underweighted or over-weighted. Mean reversion suggests only that by the end of the election, its weight will be at the same or similar level as it was the year prior.

Finally, it is important to note that the mean reversion theory is not necessarily incompatible with theories of contextual activation. A candidate might (for instance) focus on class issues in a series of speeches, making that identity more important to the vote for a few days or even weeks. The mean reversion hypothesis is agnostic as to campaign effects over the course of the campaign—it cares only that, on Election Day, each of the fundamental factors carries the same weight as it did the previous year. Thus, the implication is that any of those short-term effects will be ephemeral, burning off by the time a person casts their vote.

Data

To test the implications of these arguments, we rely on rolling cross-sectional data from the National Annenberg Election Surveys. For the telephone-based surveys (2000 and 2004) numbers were released on a random draw from a total bank of random digit dial numerical combinations. Clearance of each day's release was such that the date on which an interview is also a random draw. Sampling error aside, all that distinguishes daily samples from each other is the product of forces in real time. In 2000 and 2004, about 300 fresh interviews were conducted over the last four months of the campaign. In 2008, about 240 were conducted per day following 8 August. Analyses with the telephone samples for the first two years involve 120 days; for 2008 the number of days is 90.

Indicators

Although references to electoral "fundamentals" abound, there is no definition of what constitutes a fundamental. Past work on campaign dynamics has named factors including race, gender, age, education, income, party identification, religion (Kaplan, Gelman, and Park (2010) and region (Gelman & King 1993). Others include economic perceptions (Matthews & Johnston

2010), and although the importance of economic perceptions is well-recognized, we restrict our analysis to factors exogenous to the campaign itself While demographic factors and group membership are stable over the course of a given campaign, perceptions of the economy vary in important and systematic ways and may be meaningfully shaped by the campaign.

We focus on fundamentals for which there is a strong theoretical association with vote choice and avoid those that do not entail a clear prediction. For example, while education is frequently included in models of vote choice, there is not a strong directional association (once the confounding influence of income is controlled for) between education and vote. In other words, no preference exists to be enlightened.

Income. For each of the three election years, income is coded into a top, middle, and bottom tercile. We compare the top tercile to the middle tercile.

Born-again. Individuals who identified as born-again or evangelical.

Race. White or non-white.

Gender.

Region. Region is coded as "coast," "west" (including Midwest), and "south." South is compared to west.

Analysis

Our estimations exclude party identification for two reasons. First, party identification (unlike the factors listed above) is not necessarily exogenous to the campaign itself. Second, introducing party identification would mute the over-time effects of demographic fundamentals. To illustrate, the first column in Table 1 shows the combined power of the demographic variables described above to predict the vote in the last week of the campaign, contrasting each election year. The second column adds party identification and ideology (conservative-liberal identification) to the equation.

Table 1. Predictive Power of Demographics Across Election Years

	Demographics only		… + Party ID & Ideology	
	X^2	p	X^2	p
All three years	46.49	0.0007	39.05	0.0270
2004 v 2000	22.22	0.0272	16.40	0.1736
2008 v 2000	29.60	0.0010	23.99	0.0204
2008 v 2004	22.42	0.0131	19.33	0.0809

Note: X^2 are from Wald tests for equality of coefficients across years.

Table 2 illustrates the impact of individual demographic factors (before and after party identification and ideology are added to the equation) on vote choice in the final week before the election. The numbers are strikingly similar across years, with some shifts. For example, while gender was a key predictor in 2000, it shrank in importance in 2004 and 2008. In contrast, Southern residence has become more important over time. However, overall the table seems to offer initial support for the mean reversion hypothesis—the values tend to converge on a single value.

Table 2. Impact of Demographic Factors

	Demographics only			… + Party ID & Ideology		
	2000	2004	2008	2000	2004	2008
Age	0.258	0.051	-0.271	0.520**	0.137	-0.156
	(0.157)	(0.134)	(0.201)	(0.201)	(0.168)	(0.260)
Black	1.101***	1.112***	1.848***	0.827***	0.755***	1.857***
	(0.145)	(0.134)	(0.293)	(0.172)	(0.157)	(0.361)
Hispanic	0.304	-0.821	0.672*	0.048	-0.876	0.440
	(0.185)	(0.752)	(0.271)	(0.212)	(1.535)	(0.293)
Born again (whites only)	-0.513***	-0.729***	-0.702***	-0.318***	-0.431***	-0.296**
	(0.073)	(0.060)	(0.084)	(0.092)	(0.078)	(0.108)
Woman	0.273***	0.044	0.134	0.202*	-0.122	0.015
	(0.065)	(0.054)	(0.076)	(0.081)	(0.069)	(0.098)
Union family	0.305***	0.253***	0.173	0.250*	0.148	0.02
	(0.092)	(0.073)	(0.107)	(0.117)	(0.092)	(0.139)
Coastal	0.225**	0.156*	0.085	0.128	0.016	0.008
	(0.079)	(0.065)	(0.092)	(0.100)	(0.083)	(0.119)
South	0.015	-0.097	-0.231*	-0.103	-0.095	-0.291*
	(0.082)	(0.067)	(0.092)	(0.102)	(0.086)	(0.118)
Income tercile (top)	-0.142***	-0.247***	-0.177***	-0.026	-0.095*	-0.044
	(0.043)	(0.035)	(0.050)	(0.054)	(0.045)	(0.064)
Party identification				-1.213***	-1.123***	-1.094***
				(0.061)	(0.049)	(0.073)
Ideology				-1.020***	-1.077***	-1.083***
				(0.100)	(0.083)	(0.104)
Intercept	-0.285**	0.066	0.328**	-0.248*	0.167	0.374*
	(0.091)	(0.078)	(0.125)	(0.114)	(0.098)	(0.156)
Pseudo R^2	0.089	0.116	0.134	0.448	0.484	0.501
N	1657	2460	1294	1651	2450	1284

Note: For this analysis, the top income tercile is compared with the bottom rather than the middle, as in the pictures following.

Understanding the activation of fundamentals requires a clearer elaboration of what takes place between the start and end of the campaign. The strengthening hypothesis would suggest that the fundamentals grow (relatively consistently) better at predicting vote choice over the course of the campaign, while mean reversion allows for strengthening or weakening, as long as the final point converges.

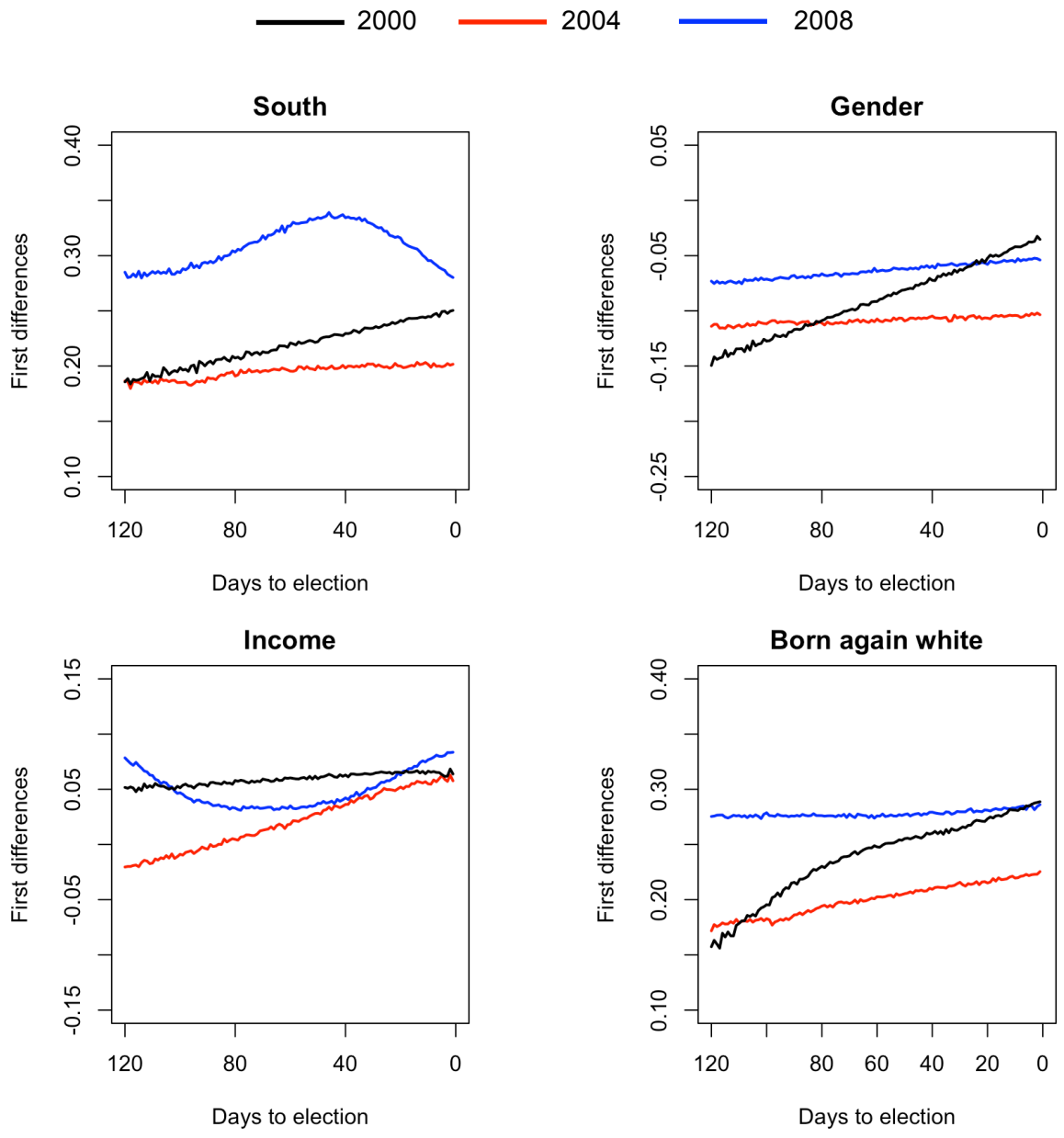
To plot the effect of fundamentals across the course of the election, we employ a semi-parametric analysis, estimating generalized additive models (GAMs) of two-party vote intention (Democratic). A probit function links the predictors to the dependent variable. Instead of producing a single estimate for the effect of any given independent variable on any given day, the generalized additive model produces estimates for each value of the independent variable of interest. For each value, the GAM reports the difference in normalized deviance between the GAM and a model with a linear term for that predictor (see Hastie and Tibshirani,1990; Beck and Jackman,1998).

GAMs have the added benefit of permitting us to models with both parametric and nonparametric components. For any given analysis, one of the coefficients varies over time (Wood 2006:168-169; Hastie and Tibshirani 1990: 265-266), and as such the factor-smooth-interaction for that variable is included in the model. Other demographic variables are included as controls. The results are plotted using the Rpackage 'Zelig' (Imai et al. 2009; Imai et al. 2008) to calculate conditional predicted probabilities. All other variables are held at their mean and the non-parametric term is displayed visually.[1] In the models below, they confidence intervals are

[1] The Appendix also contains a simplified illustration, generated via logistic regression, of the impact of each of the fundamental factors as a predictor of the Democratic vote share in 2000, 2004, and 2008. In each year, the first marker is taken from a logistic regression using data collected 115-120 days prior to the campaign, prior to the nominating conventions. The second regression draws on observations from the middle of the campaign, between days 58 and 62. The final analysis uses data collected during the three days prior to the election. The full regression

omitted because their inclusion obscures the overall pattern. However, the models (including confidence intervals) are included in the Appendix.

Figure 4. GAM plots of key fundamental variables



tables that generated these numbers are also included in the Appendix. For each year, the pattern generated by the logistic regression matches those produced by the GAM models.

The figures confirm the pattern suggested by the coefficients presented in Table 2: overall, demographic variables have become more predictive of the vote over the last three elections. Each year, the four months of the campaign seem to move the predictive power of demographics less and less, suggesting that they are becoming more and more fixed in their "true" positions relative to vote choice. Thus, the figures also offer initial support for the mean reversion hypothesis. Each year, despite fluctuations over the course of the campaign, the fundamental factors seem to converge to a surprising degree across election years.

Because the "contextual activation" theory is predicated on the impact of particular campaign events, testing it would require a finer-grained analysis of specific campaign factors (see, for example, the examination of the impact of the 2008 economic collapse in Johnston, Thorson, & Gooch 2010). While this type of analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, the within-year variation displayed in the figures above certainly suggests that there is room for these short-term movements. Finally, these analyses lend only weak support to the "strengthening" interpretation of activation. While strengthening is the modal process, some factors exhibit little change over the course of the campaign, and others actually shrink in importance.

Conclusion

Both the end-of-campaign regression analyses and the over-time displays show a great deal of support for the mean reversion hypothesis. Although demographic variables have on the whole become slightly more connected to the vote over the past decade (both at the beginning of the campaign and at the end), across elections they tend to converge on a similar weight.

On the other hand, the strengthening model does not perform well. Fundamental factors are always important, and indeed have become only more so since 2008, but campaigns do not routinely strengthen their effect. This is true for all fundamental factors taken together as well as for individual factors considered ceteris paribus. Some factors do see their weight systematically increase at certain points only to have the connection fade.

When we look at groups that have come to define a large part of the debate in US elections—women and men, rich and poor, black and white, South and non-South—trends in over-campaign movement are not consistent between campaigns and not always monotonic within campaigns. Dynamics are not in dearth but they seem specific to the factor and the moment. However, they do tend to converge at a similar point across years.

Overall, the analyses presented in this paper speak to the importance of (a) systematically defining the fundamental variables and (b) testing their importance both *within* and *across* campaigns. Our conclusions leave many questions unanswered. For example, Hillygus & Shields (2008) suggest that *which* fundamentals are activated can affect election outcomes. In other words, the total complex of electoral building blocks is sufficiently heterogeneous and so many of the parts are (at least potentially) at odds with each other that considerable scope exists for combining them in different ways in different elections. If mean reversion is inevitable, to what extent does it limit the scope for such new combinations? In addition, it would be enlightening to examine the circumstance under which mean reversion does or does not occur in the non-US context, as well as in non-Presidential elections.

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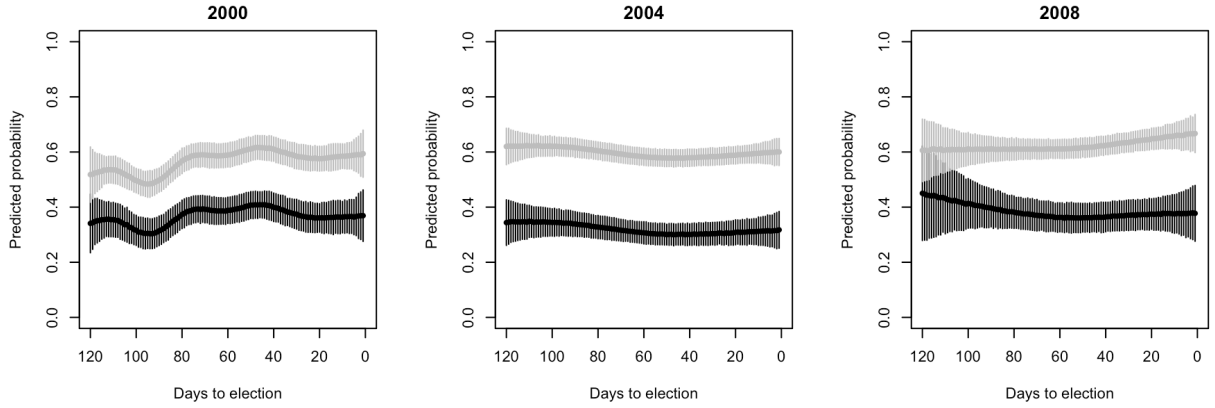
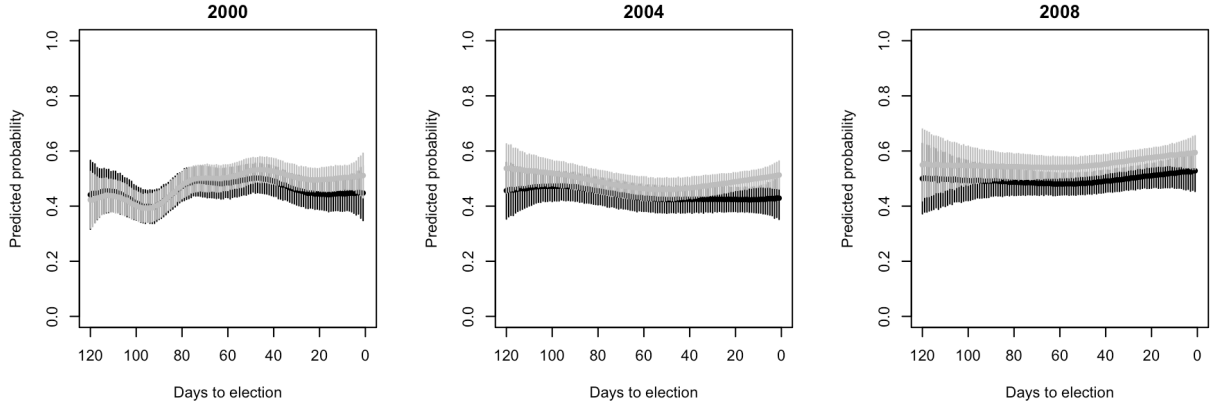
Appendix

Figure 1. Predicted probability of Democratic vote for born-again white, with 95% confidence interval



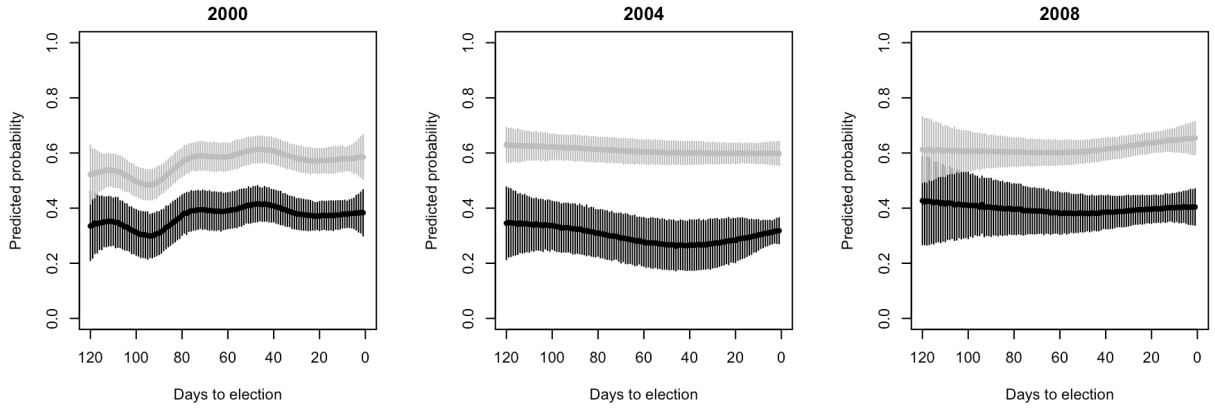
Black = born-again white, gray = all others

Figure 2. Predicted probability of Democatic vote by income, with 95% confidence interval



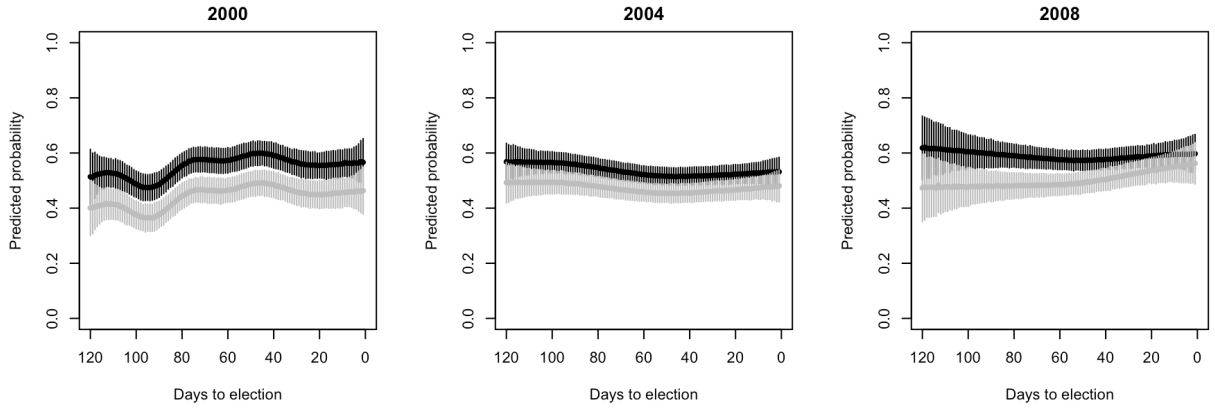
Black = highest tercile, gray = all others

Figure 3. Predicted probability of Democatic vote by region, with 95% confidence interval



Black = southern, gray = all others

Figure 4. Predicted probability of Democatic vote by gender, with 95% confidence interval

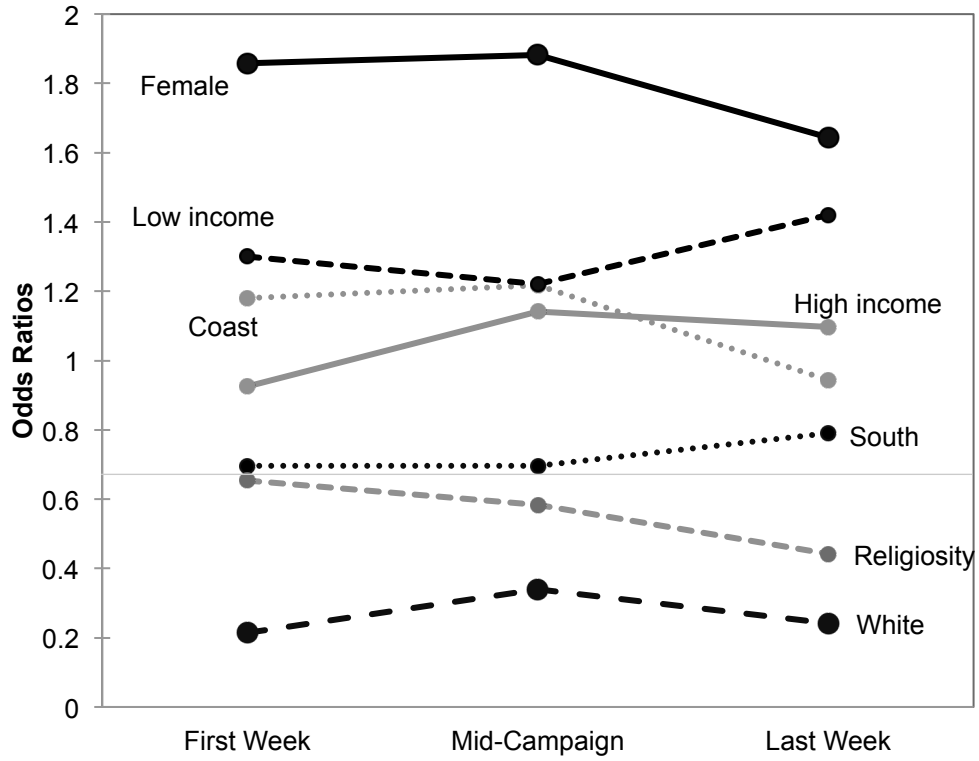


Black = female, gray=male

Figure 5. Impact of Demographics, 2000 – 2008

In each year, the first marker is taken from a logistic regression using data collected 115-120 days prior to the campaign, prior to the nominating conventions. The second regression draws on observations from the middle of the campaign, between days 58 and 62. The final analysis uses data collected during the three days prior to the election.

2000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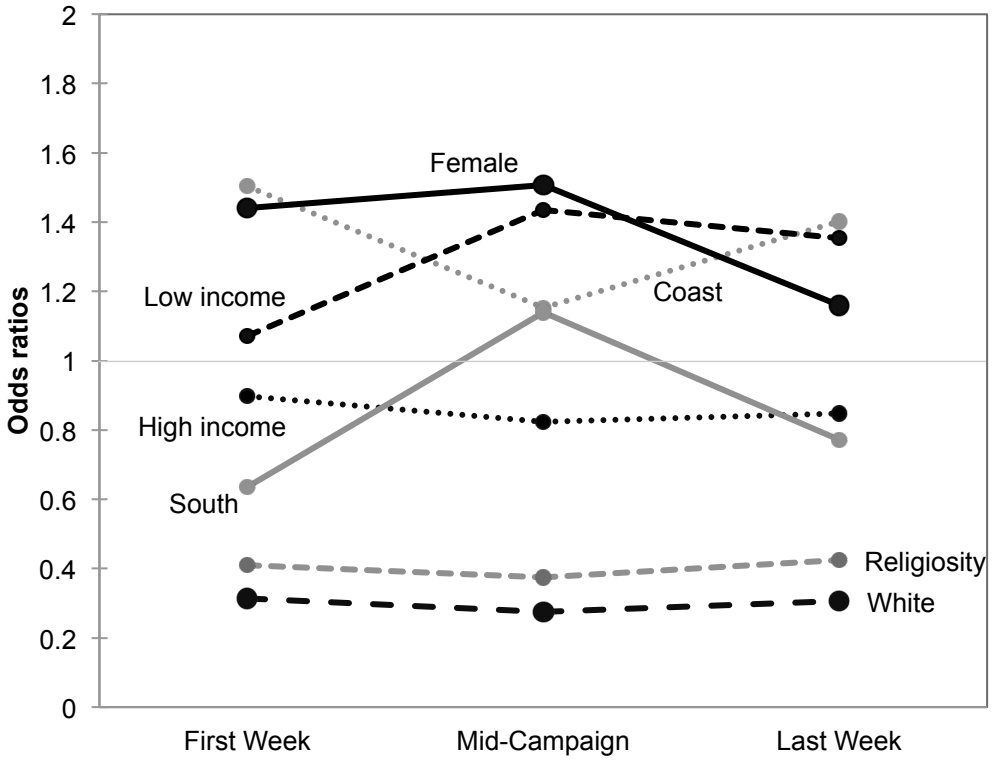
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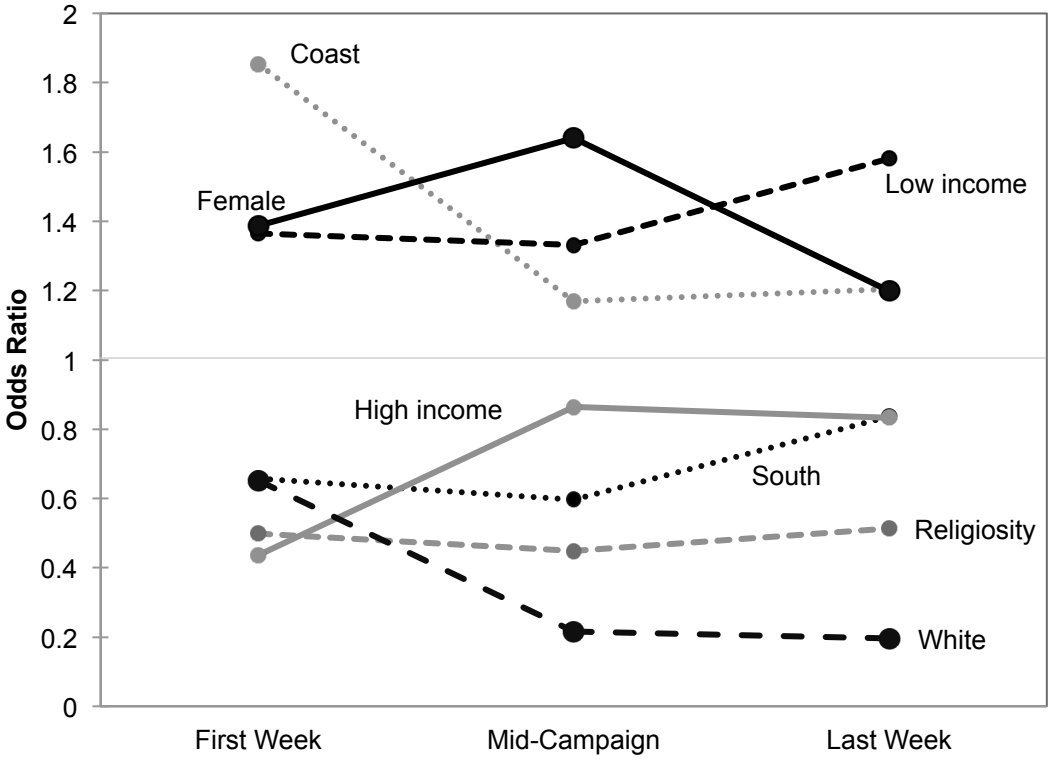
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Odds Ratio
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Low income
High income
South
Religiosity
White
First Week
Mid-Campaign
Last Week

Table 1. Activation of fundamentals, 2000 – 2008

	2000			2004			2008		
	First Week	Mid	Last Week	First Week	Mid	Last Week	First Week	Mid	Last Week
Coast	1.181	1.217	0.943	1.504**	1.153	1.402**	1.855**	1.169	1.205
	-0.205	-0.188	-0.181	-0.239	-0.197	-0.211	-0.858	-0.195	-0.248
South	0.697**	0.696**	0.791	0.897	0.823	0.847	0.658	0.596***	0.837
	-0.127	-0.112	-0.152	-0.145	-0.139	-0.128	-0.249	-0.105	-0.171
Low income	1.3	1.22	1.421*	1.071	1.435**	1.354*	1.364	1.331	1.581**
	-0.217	-0.183	-0.258	-0.181	-0.247	-0.213	-0.595	-0.262	-0.368
High income	0.925	1.142	1.097	0.635***	1.139	0.772*	0.436**	0.865	0.833
	-0.171	-0.185	-0.208	-0.098	-0.188	-0.109	-0.148	-0.14	-0.157
Religiosity	0.653***	0.583***	0.442***	0.409***	0.374***	0.425***	0.499**	0.448***	0.514***
	-0.0998	-0.076	-0.0697	-0.0552	-0.0535	-0.0535	-0.157	-0.0656	-0.0883
Gender	1.859***	1.883***	1.643***	1.441***	1.508***	1.16	1.387	1.640***	1.198
	-0.274	-0.247	-0.255	-0.192	-0.213	-0.142	-0.437	-0.235	-0.204
White	0.214***	0.340***	0.241***	0.314***	0.275***	0.306***	0.652	0.215***	0.196***
	-0.0452	-0.0614	-0.0542	-0.0646	-0.0583	-0.0539	-0.289	-0.0428	-0.0519
Constant	2.459***	2.037***	3.533***	3.825***	2.675***	3.139***	1.888	3.631***	5.367***
	-0.641	-0.454	-0.999	-0.991	-0.713	-0.697	-1.018	-0.911	-1.808
Observations	881	1,064	779	1,041	956	1,220	213	941	662

Dependent variable: Probability of Democratic vote or vote intention