

Tie Goes to the Challenger

by Donald Granberg and Mikael Gilljam

In the classic proverb, the hungry jackass stands immobilized midway between two equally attractive haystacks. Or, consider the person suffering from a toothache who faces two noxious alternatives: continuing to endure the acute pain, or submitting to the dentist's drill. Life often bears a resemblance to one of these (positive or negative) metaphors. This is often the case in the choice of political candidates. In elections, more than a few people are unable to differentiate the leading candidates on measures of affect. These voters—we call them the “ties”—are the focus here.

What do the “ties” do on election day? Some may, of course, choose not to cast any ballot at all. Rating the top candidates equally may reflect a cross-pressure situation, which has been shown to increase abstention. Hence, our first hypothesis is that the ties are less likely to vote. Further, we expect the likelihood of abstention to increase as the tied value becomes more negative (a choice between two equally negative candidates, as opposed to two equally positive ones).

Incumbent Advantage?

Our second hypothesis predicts that the ties tend to stick with the incumbent. This implies that in order to become the voters' choice, it is not enough for the challenger to rise to the level of the incumbent. In this view, to induce people to abandon the status quo, you must offer something better, not something equally good. The psychological tendency of people to stick with what they have rather than switch to an equally attractive alternative has been found in several contexts.¹

The only basis for predicting the opposite, i.e., that the ties go to the challenger, is an inductive rule of thumb used by public opinion pollsters trying to forecast the outcome of elections. Their experience is that projections of

the vote are more accurate if they allocate a disproportionate percentage of the undecided people to the challenger rather than to the incumbent. However, this “rule” has been thought to apply mainly to nonpresidential contests.² Of course, being undecided on a vote intention measure is not the same as rating the leading alternatives equally, even if there is considerable overlap between the two. We choose to work with the affective ratings because they are measured more precisely.

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Our data are from the American National Election Studies, conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan in six presidential election years, 1972-1992. Our analysis uses a few simple measures. During the pre-election interview, respondents rated each presidential candidate on a 0-100 feeling thermometer. They were told their ratings should reflect the degree of warmth they feel toward each candidate. On the post-election survey, people were asked whether they voted and, if so, for whom.

“Ties” Less Likely to Vote

Our first hypothesis presumes that rating the candidates equally on the feeling thermometer lowers the motivation to vote. In fact, we found that in each of the six most recent presidential elections, there was a significantly lower turnout among the ties than among the non-ties. Combining across years, non-voting was 15 percentage points higher

among people who rated the candidates equally. We also divided the ties into three categories, depending upon whether the tied rating was positive (above 50), neutral (50), or negative (below 50). Nonvoting was highest (54%) for the negative-ties, followed closely by the neutral-ties (52%) and then the positive-ties (31%). The difference between the non-ties and the positive-ties was small (6 points) but still significant. We conclude with much confidence that the ties are less likely to vote than other Americans.

Tied Voters Ultimately Support the Challenger

Our second hypothesis, that the tie voters—for status quo reasons—will stick with the incumbent, was refuted. As Table 1 shows, in each of the six election years, the majority of the ties who voted for one of the leading candidates voted for the challenger. Combining across years, the ties depart significantly from a 50%-50% split. Even more impressive, the split observed among the ties, 57%-43% in favor of the challenger, departs even farther from the election outcome in these years—an electoral split favoring the incumbent by 53%-47%. Further, when the ties are divided into the three groups (positive, negative & neutral), each group gave a majority of its votes to the challenger rather than the incumbent. In baseball, the old rule says that a tie goes to the runner. In presidential elections, our new rule is that a tie goes to the challenger.

Thus, we can follow the “ties”, i.e., those who rate the two leading candidates equally on the feeling thermometer, as they move on the path toward an electoral decision. In the first instance, the ties were shown to be relatively likely to abstain from voting. Although we did not show the results here, we observed that the ties were disproportionately likely to vote for independent candidates in 1980 and 1992. There was

also some tendency for the people with a tie in their affective feelings to fall back on their party identification.

The test of the status quo hypothesis—that the ties would stick with the incumbent—yielded the most fascinating results. Completely contrary to the prediction, in each of the six presidential elections studied, a majority of voters who gave equal ratings to the incumbent and challenger voted against the status quo and in favor of the challenger. It is no small task to explain this finding.

First, it could be that rating the challenger at 70 on the feeling thermometer, for example, does not have the same subjective meaning to the respondent as rating the incumbent at 70. That, however, is not easy to provide evidence for. Second, while the data we used are suitable, they are not ideal. The best test would be to examine the voting behavior of people who were affectively tied when they entered the voting place on election day. However, such contemporaneous data do not exist. The problem with the pre-election ratings is that they

measure feelings at a given time, and there can be volatility in these ratings between the interview and election day.

One possibility concerns what happens after people have rated the two leading candidates equally at the time of the pre-election interview. This equal rating could signify that sentiment in favor of the challenger is actually on the upswing and is likely to be higher by election day. The incumbent is already so well-known that continuing exposure is not likely to have much impact. The challenger, on the other hand, would normally be less well-known and, therefore, the “mere exposure effect” can have a stronger, positive influence.³ Thus, the incumbent and the challenger are located at different points on a negatively accelerated exposure curve.

Finally, the process of getting candidates to agree to debate contains a clue to help understand why the ties go disproportionately to the challenger. Typically, the incumbent has been reluctant to debate, except when the incumbent is behind in the polls—as with Gerald Ford

in 1976. The reasoning has been that a debate forum will put the competitors on an equal plane and thereby remove some of the lustre and aura of being the incumbent. Our results suggest a psychological parallel. If the challenger achieves parity with the incumbent on the feeling thermometer, it is also likely that the challenger will be able to win the support of most of these tied voters. That may take us some distance toward understanding why, in US presidential politics, the tie goes to the challenger.

Endnotes

¹W. Samuelson and R. Zeckhauser, “Status Quo Bias in Decision Making,” *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 1988, 1, 7-59; D. Granberg and T. Brown, “The Monty Hall Dilemma,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1995, 21, 711-723.

²S. Panagakis, “Incumbent Races: Closer Than They Appear,” *The Polling Report*, 1989, 5, No. 4, 1-7.

³R. Zajonc, “Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1968, 9, Monograph Supplement No. 2, Part 2.

Table 1
Percentage Voting for the Incumbent and the Major Party Challenger Among Respondents Who Rated the Two Leading Candidates Equally on the Pre-Election Survey

	Incumbent	Challenger	Challenger Advantage	N
1972	47%	53%	6%	129
1976	49	51	2	206
1980	23	77	54	73
1984	46	54	8	103
1988	39	61	22	133
1992	41	59	18	101
Combined	43	57	14	745
Combined (positive rating of both)	41	59	18	496
Combined (neutral rating of both)	48	52	4	192
Combined (negative rating of both)	42	58	16	57

Note: Technically, there was no incumbent candidate in 1988, although George Bush represented continuity and the status quo. If the results from 1988 are excluded, the split for the Combined row would be 44% for the incumbent and 56% for the challenger with an N of 612.



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