

EconoFact Chats: Voting, Income, and the Red-state, Blue-state Paradox

Andrew Gelman, Columbia University

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Michael Klein:

I'm Michael Klein, Executive Editor of EconoFact, a nonpartisan web-based publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein:

In the 1993 documentary, 'The War Room,' which is about Bill Clinton's first run for the presidency, James Carville and George Stephanopoulos are shown to have a handwritten sign taped to the wall that reads, "it's the economy, stupid." The point was, that people would vote for pocketbook issues and their analysis seemed right.

After having very high approval ratings in the wake of successfully conducting the first Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush lost to Clinton, and many attribute that to the weakness of the economy at that time. There is good evidence that the state of the economy affects the outcomes of presidential elections. A good economy helps the incumbent. There is also evidence that there is a tilt towards the Republican party by voters who are better off. But there's a paradox that states that richer states tend to lean towards Democrats. To discuss this, and other topics, I'm very pleased to welcome to EconoFact Chats, Professor Andrew Gelman of Columbia University. Andrew is a Professor of Statistics and Political science at Columbia. He has received the Outstanding Statistical Application award three times from the American Statistical Association. Andrew, welcome to EconoFact Chats.

Andrew Gelman :

I'm happy to be here.

Michael Klein:

Andrew, economists and statisticians both love paradoxes. So let's start off with one; the so-called red-state blue-state paradox. Can you briefly describe what that is?

Andrew Gelman :

Democrats traditionally have been the party of the common man, and have done better among lower income voters. Republicans do better among rich voters, traditionally. But in the past few decades, Democrats have been strongest in richer states. Those states like New York, California, Maryland, Virginia, Democrats have either been consistently winning or trending toward them. Republicans have been winning lower income states. So the paradox is that Democrats are winning among rich states. Republicans are winning poor states, but the voters for the two parties actually are similar in their average incomes. So it's not rich people who vote for Democrats, it's rich states, which implies that something has to be going on within the states to explain that.

Michael Klein:

So Andrew, what's the resolution of this paradox?

Andrew Gelman :

The resolution is that when we talk about a kind of battle between red-states and blue-states, you imagine differences between say New York and California, and places like Texas; the biggest differences are among high income voters. So the red-state, blue-state battle is happening among the higher income voters, not among the lower income voters. And Democrats are doing better richer states to a large extent because they're doing better among poor voters in richer states, and Republicans are doing better in poor states in large part because they're particularly doing well among well off voters in those poor states. So different things are happening among the rich and the poor and how they vote.

Michael Klein:

So you called this the income voting gradient, right?

Andrew Gelman :

Yeah. There's this idea that things like culture wars are more apparent to higher income voters. More educated voters, higher income voters are more politically plugged in. If you look at the map of how an election would've gone, if you only had people in the lowest third of income, you'd see a much flatter pattern. You'd see smaller differences between states. When you look at the election among the richest voters, then you see much bigger differences between the states. So being a New Yorker, or Texan somehow matters more on average, if you're richer.

Michael Klein:

So this means that the culture war that people are talking about is really among upper middle class or rich voters. And so it's more among, or between upper middle class and rich voters in Texas, versus upper middle class and rich voters in New York.

Andrew Gelman :

Yeah, what we used to say, this is a dated reference now, but we used to say it's not the Prius versus the pickup-truck, it's the Prius versus the Hummer.

Michael Klein:

That's a good way to say it. Let's unpack this a little bit. This has been going on for a long time. In fact, you have an article comparing the evolution of voting patterns, and you look at the election of 1896 in which the Democrat William Jennings Bryan lost to William McKinley. And in that election there was a clear economic choice with the Republican party more right leaning economically. And in fact, some of our listeners might know that the focus of the 1896 election was whether to remain on the gold standard, and Bryan was nominated after his famous 'cross of gold' speech. And a few listeners might also know that the Wizard of Oz purportedly can be read as an allegory about that election.

Andrew Gelman :

Yeah, so what's interesting, yeah, if you look at the electoral map from the late 1800s, which parties won which states, it's almost a reverse of what you see now. And the Republicans were winning the industrial states in the east, and the north, and the Democrats were winning the south and they were winning agricultural states. But as you point out, well, it's kind of a bit of a mystery. We called it the 20th century reversal. And what's interesting is that the two parties flipped their geographic bases over the century. And even in my lifetime, like California used to be a Republican, a solid Republican state, and it's not anymore. Vermont used to be a Republican state. West Virginia used to be very Democratic. Even in the last 40 years, there have been a lot of changes. But at the basic level, the Republicans have favored business, and the Democrats have favored income or wealth redistribution for the past hundred years or

so. The Republicans have been roughly speaking on the right, and the Democrats have been roughly speaking on the left, and the geographic bases have changed.

Michael Klein:

So it's not that Republicans now are different than Republicans then, and Democrats now are different than Democrats then, it is rather something having to do with changes in the composition of the states?

Andrew Gelman :

Yeah, it has to do with who the voters, are and especially how richer people are voting. I live in New York City and we're used to almost all of New York City being strongly Democratic. The major cities being maybe Democrats voting 80%, getting 80% of the vote in a lot of the major cities. And that didn't used to be the case, and wealthy people in New York City did not used to vote for Democrats. And so the compositions changed, and how the wealthier people vote has changed over the past hundred years, or over the past fifty years.

Michael Klein:

Is there any evidence about differences in voter turnout and how that's linked to economic status?

Andrew Gelman :

Well, richer people are more likely to turn out to vote. It's kind of funny because every once in a while you'll get something like some kind of too clever by half economist type saying how it's irrational to vote. I was actually so annoyed about this, a colleague of mine, Aaron Edlin, an economist actually, and I wrote a paper explaining why it's actually rational to vote, and I can tell you why I think that, but I always think it's funny because the economists are always telling people it's irrational to vote and you shouldn't vote. But then actually who votes? Richer people vote, more educated people vote.

Usually economists are not questioning how people spend their time and how people spend their money. But when it's voting, all of a sudden they're all so eager to say that. Rich or well-educated people are much more likely to vote but it varies a lot by where you live, and people in the north are much more likely to vote than people in the south. If we had a national popular vote system, it would change election results, partly because turnout varies geographically. So in the electoral system, if you have a state with low turnout, it still gets a certain representation in a popular vote system, in the northern states would...their higher turnout would count more.

Michael Klein:

Well, also it's the case that a number of the last Republican victories, the Republican candidate lost the popular vote but won the electoral vote.

Andrew Gelman :

Oh yeah. Well there was one case, right? 2016. I mean 2000 is kind of a funny case because the best count was that Gore won Florida by about 20-30,000 votes. But they didn't count them all. At least that's what the political scientist said. But that's another story about elections is that, the rules matter and rules can be manipulated sometimes.

Michael Klein:

But even if the rules are not manipulated, a vote in say, Wyoming is worth a lot more than a vote in California, because there's a minimum number of electoral college votes, right?

Andrew Gelman :

Yeah, it's funny, I mean if you live in Wyoming or you live in California, your vote doesn't matter much because those states aren't close. But a few years ago, California was close, and then the vote in California mattered a lot. In the presidential election, the biggest factor of whether your vote matters is just how close the state is. When it comes to elections for US Senate, that's another story because of course Wyoming gets two senators and so does California.

Michael Klein:

If we go back to the point that the main difference in terms of how rich people vote, is that rich people vote more for Republicans in states like Texas, and more for Democrats in states like New York. And the poor, the difference is not as marked. A corollary of this, that you make in an article, is that because the national media is located in states where there's in fact a low correlation between income and how people vote, that richer people in states like New York might be more on average voting for Democrats. Because the national media is located in New York, reporting tends to focus on culture issues rather than economic issues as determinants of voting patterns. But in fact, the economic status really matters a lot. Is this still a valid issue?

Andrew Gelman :

It's still valid in relative terms, but maybe not so much in absolute terms because when we wrote our book, which we started writing in 2004, and which we wrote using data from 2000 and 2004 and previous elections; back then, there was a clear difference that richer voters were about 15 percentage points more likely to vote Republican than poorer voters. But in recent elections it's been a wash. There's been very little income voting gradient. So this is a kind of paradox of its own, which we didn't really address in our book, that nowadays at the national level, your personal income does not predict how you're going to vote, but the economic conditions can certainly predict how you're going to vote. I think there is evidence that economic conditions affect how people vote, but it's not so simple as the rich people voting for the conservative party, and the poor people voting for the liberal party, which used to be more the case.

Michael Klein:

So President Reagan famously said that there was a misery index when he was running in 1980, which he took as the sum of the inflation rate and the unemployment rate. And in fact, there's a lot of research in economics that shows that incumbents are hurt by a bad economy. So this, you're saying, is actually a very robust finding?

Andrew Gelman :

Yeah, for presidential elections. I think for the midterm elections, the issue is much more balancing. Most people who decide to vote in the first place are pretty partisan. There aren't that many split ticket voters, but those who are in the middle will react to what they see as the extremism of the parties. So currently the Democrats control two of the three branches of government and the Republicans control one branch. So there's a kind of rationality for a voter in the middle to say, oh, the Democrats, they've had enough power, and maybe it's time for the Republicans to have the power. Now how does that relate to the economy? It's not clear that the economy is so important for the midterm elections. And indeed, when you talk about the Democrats and Joe Biden and the economy, you could draw all sorts of stories like unemployment rate is very low, but the real income growth is not so great because of inflation obviously. So there are different statistics you can look at. If you are wanting to balance the parties, then you can find negative news about the Democrats, which can give you an economic reason to vote that way, to vote for Republican.

Michael Klein:

So you make the point that midterms are kind of pendulum swings to a greater extent, than presidential elections. And I guess there's a long history of midterms going against the incumbent party.

Andrew Gelman :

Yeah. And one twist in this election is there were some controversial Supreme Court decisions about gun control and abortion. As polls seem to show that people regard the Supreme Court as a partisan institution more than it used to be. And so that's like if we say the Democrats control the Presidency and Congress, and the Republicans control the Supreme Court. So that should affect balancing calculations a little bit, that people are aware of this in a way that they weren't before.

Michael Klein:

Andrew, this podcast is going to air the day before the midterm elections and you talked about what polls are saying. People follow polls or many people follow polls, quite closely in the run up to elections. And as a statistician, what are your views on the accuracy of polls? So one is reminded of the 2016 election when all the polls seem to suggest with a high degree of likelihood that Hillary Clinton would defeat Donald Trump. But even though she won the popular vote, she lost the electoral college, and the election.

Andrew Gelman :

Some colleagues and I did an empirical study a few years ago where we looked at 16 years' worth of state polls for president, governor and senator, and we compared the stated margin of error in the polls to the empirical margin of error -- how far off the polls were on average. In this case, because we looked at pre-election polls taken in the two weeks before the election, we could have an empirical check on the polls, which you can't always have. We found that the empirical error was about twice the stated margin of error. So my quick rule is to take the margin of error of the poll and double it. Things have changed somehow. When I was young, there weren't that many polls. It's become very cheap to do polls. And so lots of news organizations do them. They get released all the time.

Back in the day there'd be a poll and they'd say, "here's the poll, and here's the margin of error." Nowadays there's this blizzard of polls, but as you said, all the polls can still be off by a certain amount. The other thing that's really challenging is to get inside the polls. So I mean this is fascinating stuff. So we were talking earlier, you were talking about how Jewish voters are kind of famous for being very liberal despite being richer than average. And one thing we found was that not only are Jews voting roughly 70% for Democrats, but richer Jews, lower income Jews and upper income Jews vote pretty much the same. There's actually very little difference between how richer Jews and poorer Jews vote.

If you look at Mormons, Mormons is a kind of Republican counterpart to Jews. They also represent about 2% of the population. They're very conservative, and they vote about 75% Republican. Richer Mormons vote much more Republican than poorer Mormons. So the reason why I'm bringing this up, well first it's just kind of amazing what's in the data that you can find. But it's really hard to find this stuff. You have to kind of look at a lot of polls and not fool yourself. And one of my personal struggles is keeping up with this stuff. So we wrote a book in 2008 about how rich and poor people vote, and how religious and non-religious people vote. And there's a million things I don't have time to tell you about, but it's hard to say how things changed since 2008 because it really requires an immersion in the polls, in the data, doing lots of adjustments. I mean, if you think it's hard to use the polls to determine who's ahead, you can just imagine how difficult it is to use the polls to determine things like income gradients, or gender gaps or things like that. It's a huge amount of effort.

Michael Klein:

So one of the most famous pictures in all of political science is Truman holding up a newspaper that says Dewey won. Polling, I imagine has gotten better since then, but still probably a very, very difficult thing.

Andrew Gelman :

Oh, yeah. I mean people change their mind, and there's a lot of non-response. I think polling has improved since 1948, and they do a lot more polling including right before the election. But it's a moving target, and the response rates for polls are below 5% now, typically. And they used to ask this question, they used to say, "who are these non-respondents? Who are these people? They're antisocial and why don't they respond?" Now we say, "who are these strange people, 'respondents?'" And it's a funny thing because I don't respond to polls like who would respond to these robocalls? It's horrible.

If you were surveyed, if you were an adult in the 1950s and were surveyed in a poll, it would be rational to answer that poll because back then you might be one of 1,500 people being surveyed by Gallup. Their results would be reported in newspapers across the country. They could affect policy. It's actually in the 1950s, it was more rational to answer a survey to vote. Nowadays, actually, you have more impact as a voter maybe than as a survey respondent. And so fewer and fewer people respond. And that is a challenge. You're getting respondents who are more interested in politics, but when the survey response is 5%, and the election turnout is 50%, then you got to think who are those 45% of people that you're missing?

Michael Klein:

So Andrew, thank you very much for talking to me today about these issues, and we'll see what happens with the midterm elections. But you certainly give us a lot of insights into voting patterns and issues related to polling. So thanks a lot.

Andrew Gelman:

Oh, it's a pleasure.

Michael Klein:

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