Discriminating the Vote in the 2016 Presidential Election

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Abstract

This research identifies the most important factors that influenced how voters actually cast their votes in the 2016 presidential election. We conducted a canonical linear discriminant analysis of ANES data. Our findings suggest that Obama job approval and evaluations of whether the country was on the "right" or "wrong" track were the strongest determinants of voter choice. Specifically Clinton voters were more likely to approve of Obama and feel that the country was on the right track. In addition, Clinton voters were more supportive of the Affordable Care Act, to oppose the building of a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, to believe that the economy has improved since 2008. Clinton voters also were slightly younger, better educated, and more likely to be non-white.

1. Introduction

The closeness of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as well as its unanticipated outcome, has led many to ponder what factors influenced voters in this election. Was it the not-so-robust economic recovery in "Rust Belt" states or rural areas? Was it a reaction against the Obama administration or misgivings about the Affordable Care Act? Was a personal reaction against one of the two candidates? This research is an effort to parse out the various reasons behind candidate choice in 2016.

Candidate choice is primarily determined by a long-term, relatively persistent set of social, demographic, and political characteristics,[1] Previous studies have shown that older, wealthier, and white voters tend to favor the Republican presidential candidate, In the last few elections, men also have been more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. Partisanship clearly affects vote choice, but the rising number of independent voters underscores that no successful candidate can rely only on his or her party members. Assessments of the state of the economy and the voter's own economic situation also have been shown to influence the vote choice. Political alienation has also been linked to the vote choice. Although political alienated individuals tend to stay home on Election Day, a third party candidate or an "outsider" candidate may lead them to vote.

Also important are the short-term activities of the campaign, candidates, or parties,[2] including negative campaigning.[3] In addition, research has suggested other intriguing determinants, such as genetic predisposition (Fowler, Baker, and Dawes, 2008; Fowler and Dawes, 2008), television market size (Althaus and Trautman, 2008), and altruism (Jankowski, 2007)

Yet, the 2016 presidential race baffled many observers, as Hilary Clinton lost, albeit narrowly, in many states that had traditionally voted for the Democratic candidate, or were predicted to do so in 2016. Our ask is to probe this

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[1] See Abramson, Paul R. and John H. Aldrich, (1982); Brady et al. (1995); Costa and Kahn (2004); Filer et al. (1993); Harder and Krosnick (2008); Hill, (2006); Hillygus (2005a): Holbrook (2012); Knack (1992); Leighley and Nagler (1992); Leighley and Nagler (2007); Lyons and Alexander (2000); Miller (1992); Miller and Shanks (1996); Petrocik and Shaw (1991); Piven and Cloward (2000); Plutzer, (2002); Rosenstone and Hansen, (1993); Sandell (2005); Sides and Vavreck (2013); Schur et al. (2002); Shachar and Nalebuff (1999); Teixeira (1992); Tenn (2007); Timpone (1998); Verba and Nie (1972); Verba et al., (1997); Wolfinger et al., (1990); Wolfinger and Rosenstone ,(1980); Wolfinger and Rosenstone, (1993).

[2] See Gerber and Green (2008, 2001, 2000a, 2000b); Gerber, Green, and Shachar ,(2003); Green, Gerber, and Nickerson, (2003); Green and Gerber, (2004)

[3] See Ansolabehere, (1999); Ansolabehere and Iyengar, (1995); Ansolabehere et al., (1994); Freedman and Goldstein (1999); Hillygus, (2005b); Lau et al., (2001); Martin (2004); Wattenberg and Brians ,(1999);

somewhat surprising electoral outcome.

2. Methodology and Results

In order to identify what were the most important factors which influenced how voters actually cast their votes in the 2016 presidential election, we conducted a canonical linear discriminant analysis.[4]The data is taken from the American National Elections Study, a multi-stage stratified cluster sample of US citizens 18 years of age and over. There were 4,271 completed interviews. The dependent variable is reported vote in the presidential election of 2016. We then compare this vote across the various demographic and attitudinal variables mentioned above.

Table 1 suggests that Obama job approval is the strongest discriminating factor in function LD1. "Whether the Country is on the Right track/Wrong track" is the strongest factor in function LD2. Additionally, we find that 96.5% of the between group variance is explained by LD1 and the remaining 3.5% is explained by LD2. The interpretation of this table is similar to multiple regression, since the coefficients can be interpreted much like betas. The sign indicates the direction and the strength of the variable as a predictor. Similar to factor loadings in factor analysis, the largest loading allows us to identify and label each factor or discriminant function.

Table 1. Coefficients of linear discriminants

Variable	LD 1	LD 2
	96.5% of explained between-group variance	3.5% of explained between-group variance
2012 Vote	0.8657	0.4463
Attn to News	-0.0057	0.2973
Right/Wrong Track	0.2224	0.8151*
Obama Job Approval	1.5763*	-0.2013
Better or Worse off	-0.0747	0.0269
Health Care Law	0.2058	0.1081
Unemployment	0.0241	-0.2139
Party ID	0.1252	0.7004
Gun Ownership	0.2299	-0.1372
Birthright Citizenship	-0.0212	-0.1430
Wall	-0.3695	0.5799
7pt Help Blacks	0.0488	0.0611
Affirmative Action	0.0279	0.1452
Fed spend on Crime	-0.0536	0.2327
Fed spend on Welfare	0.0451	0.0058
Fed spend on Kids	0.0367	-0.1732
Fed spend on Poor	-0.0624	-0.0052
Fed spend on Enviro	0.0870	-0.2602
Fracking	-0.0689	-0.0724
Gay Marriage	0.0983	-0.1141
Death Penalty	-0.0844	-0.1579
Economy since '08	0.2237	-0.2177
Bible	-0.0431	0.3879
Attend Church Freq.	-0.0918	0.0679
Age	0.0002	-0.0019
Education	0.0017	-0.0085
Race (White dummy)	0.3765	-0.3183
Gender	-0.1306	0.0625

Prior probabilities of groups: Clinton 0.4783 Trump 0.4143 Other 0.1072

* = Largest Coefficient

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[4] Canonical Discriminant Analysis is used to investigate the difference between groups on the basis of the attributes of the cases, indicating which attributes contribute most to group separation (Burns and Burns 2008). The analysis was conducted using weighted prior probabilities for each party's proportion of the population. Linear discriminant analysis involves the determination of a linear equation like regression that will predict to which group a case belongs. The form of the equation is: $D=v_1X_1+v_2X_2+v_3X_3+….v_iX_i+a$ Where D= Discriminant function, v=discriminant coefficient or weight, X=respondent's score for that variable, a=a constant, i=number of predictor variables.

Table 2 shows the group means for each of the variables included in the analysis. Starting with the two factors found to be the most important discriminants of the 2016 vote, there are clear differences in the means between Clinton and Trump voters. Clinton voters averaged 1.08 for Obama's job approval, with 1 being approve and 2 being disapprove. Trump voters average was 1.94. Next, the Right track/wrong track question was found to be the second most discriminant variable. This was more mixed with Clinton voters who averaged 1.47 (with 1 representing right track and 2 for wrong track), while Trump voters were more consistently negative, averaging 1.97.

This table also reveals some other patterns, albeit with less explanatory power. Clinton voters were more likely to support the Affordable Care Act than Trump voters (1.37 vs. 2.7). Clinton voters were more likely to oppose building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico than Trump voters (2.68 vs. 1.35). In evaluation the state of the economy since 2008, most Clinton voters thought it was slightly better as compared to most Trump voters who thought the economy was worse (1.37 vs. 2.46). Clinton voters attended church with more frequency than Trump voters (0.98 vs. 1.33). With regard to demographics, Clinton voters also were slightly more female, younger, better educated, and much more likely to be non-white. It is also interesting to note that very few differences between these voter blocs with regard to attitudes toward crime or individual news habits.

Table 2. Group means

Variable	H. Clinton Voter	D. Trump Voter	Other Voter
2012 Vote	1.06	1.88	1.57
Attn to News	2.22	2.24	2.65
Right/Wrong Track	**1.47**	**1.97**	1.87
Obama Job Approval	**1.08**	**1.94**	1.54
Better or Worse off	2.60	2.92	2.84
Health Care Law	1.37	2.70	2.18
Unemployment	2.16	1.89	1.89
Party ID	1.52	2.21	2.37
Gun Ownership	1.18	1.85	1.48
Birthright Citizenship	2.40	1.65	1.95
Wall	2.68	1.35	2.36
7pt Help Blacks	3.35	5.64	4.74
Affirmative Action	1.91	2.67	2.44
Fed spend on Crime	1.50	1.35	1.55
Fed spend on Welfare	1.97	2.76	2.43
Fed spend on Kids	1.42	2.04	1.68
Fed spend on Poor	1.46	2.21	1.91
Fed spend on Enviro	1.27	2.09	1.55
Fracking	2.47	1.81	2.19
Gay Marriage	1.30	1.96	1.44
Death Penalty	1.50	1.12	1.29
Economy since '08	1.37	2.46	1.84
Bible	2.20	1.75	2.23
Attend Church Freq.	0.98	1.33	1.23
Age	51.18	55.53	49.54
Education	11.90	11.37	11.80
Race (White dummy)	0.63	0.91	0.79
Gender	1.54	1.46	1.51

Figure 1, shows each observation plotted in the space of the two discriminant functions. As indicated, LD1 (Obama job approval) explains 96.5% of the variance and LD2 (Right track/Wrong track) explains the remaining 3.5% of variance. The two distinct groups of voters can be seen clearly, indicating the power of the two functions to accurately discriminate the likely vote for president.
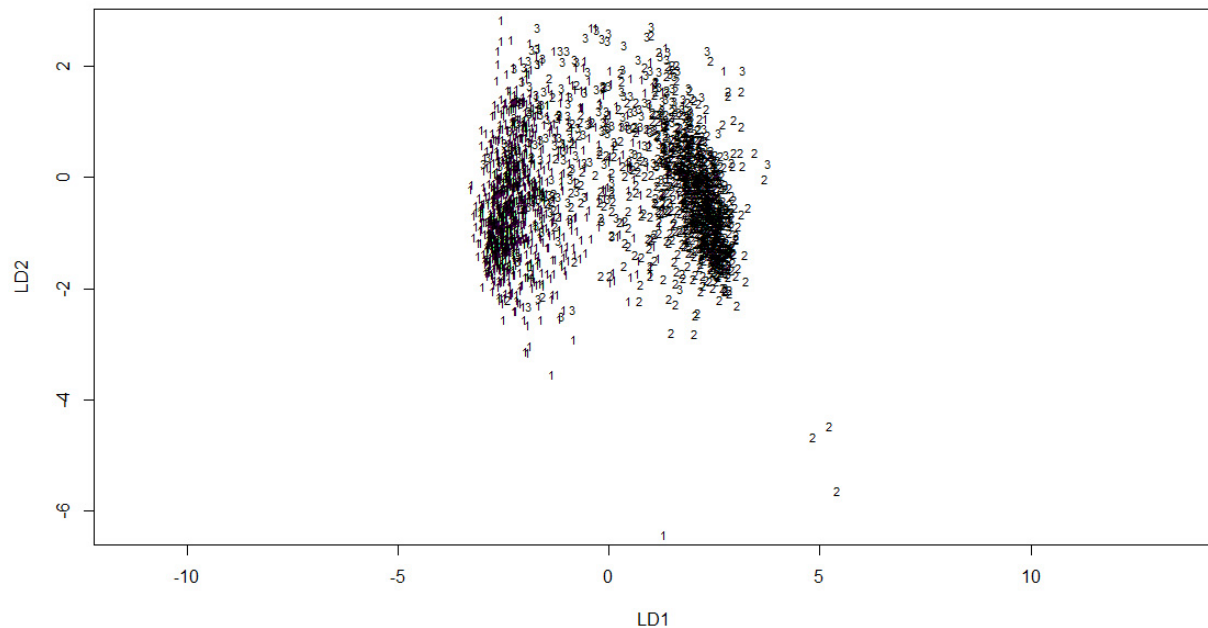

Figure 1. Scatterplot of LD1 (Opinion of Obama) and LD2 (Right/Wrong Track)

The following tables provide cross-tabulations of the variables of interest. As shown in Table 3 below, the job approval of President Obama was found to be the best discriminant of the 2016 vote. If a respondent approved of the job he was doing, they likely voted for Hillary Clinton. 81.86% of respondents who approved of Obama voted for Clinton, and only 5.78% of them voted for Donald Trump. Conversely, only 8.29% of those disapproving of Obama voted for Clinton, and 78.05% of them voted for Trump.

Table 3. Obama job approval and vote in 2016

Vote	Obama Job Approval		
	Approve	Disapprove	Total
Hillary Clinton	81.86%	8.29%	46.62%
	(1431)	(133)	(1564)
Donald Trump	5.78%	78.05%	40.29%
	(101)	(1252)	(1353)
Other	12.36%	13.65%	13.09%
	(216)	(219)	(435)
Total	100%	100%	100%
	(1748)	(1604)	(3352)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 2054, df = 2, p-value < 2.2e-16

As shown in Table 4, 86.78% of respondents who said the country was on the right track voted for Hillary Clinton, and only 6% of them voted for Donald Trump. Wrong track respondents were more mixed, with 31.55% voting for Clinton, and a slim majority of 53.21% voting for Trump.

Table 4. Right track/wrong track and vote in 2016

Vote	Are things in the country on…		
	Right Track	Wrong Track	Total
Hillary Clinton	86.78%	31.55%	46.62%
	(781)	(772)	(1553)
Donald Trump	6.00%	53.21%	40.29%
	(54)	(1302)	(1356)
Other	7.22%	15.24%	13.09%
	(65)	(373)	(438)
Total	100%	100%	100%
	(900)	(2447)	(3347)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 826.85, df = 2, p-value < 2.2e-16

Tables 5-9 confirm the results of the group means in Table 2. Clinton lost some support among 2012 Obama voters. Clinton voters had a more positive assessment of changes in the economy and the Affordable Care Act and were more likely to be a Democrat and non-white.

While the group means from Table 2 suggest that Hillary Clinton was able to retain the voters of those who voted for Barack Obama in 2012 better than Donald Trump's ability to capture the support of those who voted for Mitt Romney (1.08 vs. 1.88), the crosstabulation in Table 5 portrays a more complicated picture, although the percentages are very close (80.21% vs. 82.1%). It may be explained by considering votes for other candidates; Clinton lost more votes to Trump plus Other, than Trump lost to Clinton plus Other.

Table 5. Vote in 2012 and vote in 2016

Vote in 2016	Vote in 2012			
	B Obama	M Romney	Other	Total
Hillary Clinton	80.21%	5.34%	15.52%	46.62%
	(1232)	(60)	(9)	(1301)
Donald Trump	9.57%	82.1%	32.76%	40.29%
	(147)	(922)	(19)	(1088)
Other	10.22%	12.56%	51.72%	13.09%
	(157)	(141)	(30)	(328)
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(1536)	(1123)	(58)	(2717)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 1705.4, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16

Table 6 shows that if a respondent thought the economy was better since 2008, they likely voted for Clinton (73.01%), and if they thought it was worse, they likely voted for Trump (74.07%). However, it is worth pointing out that by almost every objective measure of the economy, it was significantly improved over the situation in 2008. If the economy and economic issues were driving voters, then it seems that many voters were not basing their vote on the actual economic situation. (43.56% overall said better, and 32.72% said worse)

Table 6. Economy and vote in 2016

Vote in 2016	Economy since 2008			
	Better	Same	Worse	Total
Hillary Clinton	73.01%	43.50%	14.60%	46.62%
	(1066)	(331)	(165)	(1562)
Donald Trump	13.70%	41.39%	74.07%	40.29%
	(200)	(315)	(837)	(1352)
Other	13.29%	15.11%	11.33%	13.09%
	(194)	(115)	(128)	(437)
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(1460)	(761)	(1130)	(3351)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 1049.1, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16

Table 7 shows the cross-tabulation of the vote by race. Clinton received 37.75% of the white and 70.69% of the non-white vote, and Trump received 49.18% of the white, and only 16.37% of the non-white vote. This confirms and supports Table 2 which showed that the Trump voter's group mean (for the white dummy variable) was 0.91, and the Clinton voter's group mean was 0.63. In this cross-tabulation, White votes accounted for 89% of Trump's total vote, and only 59% of Clinton's total.

Table 7. Race and vote in 2016

Vote	Race		
	White	Other	Total
Hillary Clinton	37.75%	70.69%	46.62%
	(924)	(639)	(1563)
Donald Trump	49.18%	16.37%	40.29%
	(1204)	(148)	(1352)
Other	13.07%	12.94%	13.09%
	(320)	(117)	(437)
Total	100%	100%	100%
	(1748)	(1604)	(3352)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 329.86, df = 2, p-value < 2.2e-16

Table 8 shows the vote by party, and again both candidates received most of their party's votes, with Clinton taking 88.71% of Democratic votes, and Trump taking 83.77% of Republican votes. Independents were evenly split with 38.72% and 37.38% respectively. The other interesting note is that more Republicans voted other (9.03%) than Democrats (5.36%).

Table 8. Party ID and vote in 2016

Vote	Party ID			
	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Total
Hillary Clinton	88.71%	7.20%	38.72%	46.62%
	(1092)	(75)	(376)	(1543)
Donald Trump	5.93%	83.77%	37.38%	40.29%
	(73)	(872)	(363)	(1308)
Other	5.36%	9.03%	23.89%	13.09%
	(66)	(94)	(232)	(392)
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(1231)	(1041)	(971)	(3243)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 1826.6, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16

Table 9 shows the cross-tabulation of the vote with opinion of the ACA (Obamacare). 80.73% of those favoring the law voted for Clinton and 72.04% of those opposed voted for Trump. While these differences are large, the variable was not found to be a significant predictor in the model.

Table 9. Health care law and vote in 2016

Vote	Opinion of ACA			
	Favor	Neither Fav/Opp	Oppose	Total
Hillary Clinton	80.73%	49.27%	14.30%	46.62%
	(1060)	(305)	(205)	(1570)
Donald Trump	9.67%	31.50%	72.04%	40.29%
	(126)	(195)	(1033)	(1355)
Other	9.60%	19.22%	13.67%	13.09%
	(126)	(119)	(196)	(441)
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(1313)	(619)	(1434)	(3366)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 1356.7, df = 4, p-value < 2.2e-16

Table 10 shows the crosstabulation of gender and 2016 vote, showing that men were slightly more likely to vote for Trump (44.4%) over Clinton (41.6%), and a slim majority of women preferred Clinton (50.91%) over Trump (37.06). While the differences are significant, the model did not find the variable to be an important discriminant.

Table 10. Gender and vote in 2016

Vote	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Hillary Clinton	41.60%	50.91%	46.62%
	(654)	(893)	(1547)
Donald Trump	44.40%	37.06%	40.29%
	(698)	(650)	(1348)
Other	13.99%	12.03%	13.09%
	(220)	(211)	(431)
Total	100%	100%	100%
	(1572)	(1754)	(3326)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 28.948, df = 2, p-value < 5.175e-07

Table 11 shows the three way crosstabulation of race, gender and 2016 vote. The top half of this table shows that Trump led widely among white men (61.34% to 38.66%) and narrowly among white women (46.06% to 41.34%). The bottom half of this table shows that Clinton overwhelmingly was the choice of non-whites, both men (64.79% to 19.8%) and women (76.20% to 13.36%). These differences are statistically significant, although the model did not identify either variable as a discriminant.

Table 11. Race, gender and vote in 2016

White Respondents			
Vote	Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Hillary Clinton	38.66%	41.34%	37.57%
	(387)	(525)	(912)
Donald Trump	61.34%	46.06%	49.40%
	(614)	(585)	(1199)
Other	15.58%	12.59%	13.02%
	(156)	(160)	(316)
Total	100%	100%	100%
	(1001)	(1270)	(2427)
Non-White Respondents			
Hillary Clinton	64.79%	76.20%	70.94%
	(265)	(365)	(630)
Donald Trump	19.80%	13.36%	16.32%
	(81)	(64)	(145)
Other	15.40%	10.44%	12.73%
	(63)	(50)	(113)
Total	100%	100%	100%
	(409)	(479)	(888)

Source: 2016 ANES

Chi-squared = 363, df = 7, p-value < 2.01e-74, p-value < 2.01e-74

3. Conclusion

These findings suggest that most voters in 2016 focused on the figure of Barack Obama and a general assessment of the nation's political future, rather than a specific economic or political issue. Further research on this finding is clearly necessary, as the American National Election Study, as well as most other surveys, does not allow for a thorough analysis of the reasons behind a respondent's negative view of former President Obama. Overt or even subtle racism is nearly impossible to measure in large surveys. This is also true of sexist attitudes. Although President Obama did not experience a dramatic decline in popularity (Holbrook, 2012), relative to his predecessors, he apparently remained a focal point for many disillusioned Americans who voted for Donald Trump. As Sides and Vavreck (2013) note, Americans are quite willing to blame the previous administration for the nation's problems, especially if the White House was formerly controlled by the opposition party. Of course, it is difficult to assess the "right/wrong track" sentiment, as individuals may have had different criteria for this assessment. However, our findings do suggest that a negative assessment of the likely political future of the nation was a major factor for those who voted for Donald Trump.

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Appendix Variables and Values

Variables Used	Values
2012 Vote	1 B. Obama 2 M. Romney 3 Other
Attn to News	1 Great Deal 2 A Lot 3 Mod Amt 4 A Little 5 None at All
Right/Wrong Track	1 Right Track 2 Wrong Track
Obama Job Approval	1 Approve 2 Disapprove
Better or Worse off	1 Much Better 2 SW Better 3 Same 4 SW Worse 5 Much Worse
Health Care Law	1 Favor 2 Neither Favor/Oppose 3 Oppose
Unemployment Nxt Yr	1 More 2 Same 3 Less
Party ID	1 Democrat 2 Republican 3 Independent
Gun Ownership	1 More Difficult 2 Same 3 Easier
Birthright Citizenship	1 Favor 2 Neither Favor/Oppose 3 Oppose
Wall	1 Favor 2 Neither Favor/Oppose 3 Oppose
7pt Help Blacks	1 Govt Should Help – 7 Blacks Help Themselves
Affirmative Action	1 Favor 2 Neither Favor/Oppose 3 Oppose
Fed spend on Crime	1 Increase 2 Same 3 Decrease
Fed spend on Welfare	1 Increase 2 Same 3 Decrease
Fed spend on Kids	1 Increase 2 Same 3 Decrease
Fed spend on Poor	1 Increase 2 Same 3 Decrease
Fed spend on Enviro	1 Increase 2 Same 3 Decrease
Fracking	1 Favor 2 Neither Favor/Oppose 3 Oppose
Gay Marriage	1 Gay Marriages 2 Civil Unions 3 No Legal Recognition
Death Penalty	1 Favor 2 Oppose
Economy since '08	1 Better 2 Same 3 Worse
Bible	1 Every word literal 2 Not all Literal 3 By man not WOG
Attend Church Freq.	1 Every wk 2 Almost every wk 3 2x/mo 4 Few times/yr 5 Never
Age	In years
Education	Highest Level of Education
Race (White dummy)	1 White 2 Other race
Gender	1 Male 2 Female