Spotlight on Fred Wolens: The Impact of Cloud Cover and Football Games on Election Results

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Can cloud cover on Election Day be used to predict the next governor? What can college football games tell us about the next presidential race? These are questions that motivate Fred Wolens, a junior in the Political Science department, in his ongoing research on Retrospective Voter Theory.

Retrospective Voter Theory assumes that voters will choose to re-elect—or not to re-elect—an incumbent based on how satisfied they are with the candidate’s previous term based on economic or other policy related achievements. Another factor that influences the decision is the voter’s prediction as to how well other candidates would perform if elected.

But, according to Fred, voters do not always act reasonably.

“My research demonstrates that voters are acting neither retrospectively nor prospectively, but merely out of irrational motives. This shows that they are not always rational voters and are acting purely as a result of personal feelings,” explained Fred.

Under the guidance of Dr. Neil Malhotra, Assistant Professor of Political Economy in the Graduate School of Business, Fred has gathered the results of the presidential, gubernatorial, and senatorial elections since 1960. He is studying the effect of two factors on the outcomes of these elections: NCAA Division 1 football game results and cloud cover.

In order to analyze the effect of the football results, Fred assigned each D1 team to a county (the level at which the election data is delineated). For example, the election returns of Santa Clara County were linked to the results of the Stanford football games. Fred, who is currently analyzing the preliminary results, found that counties in which the home football team won the previous Saturday’s game were more likely to reelect the incumbent.

“In fact, the correlation between a team’s win and the reelection of the incumbent is so strong that it is sort of unbelievable,” said Fred. The surprisingly strong correlation has led Fred to question whether confounding variables have skewed his findings.

“It is possible that some other factor might be coming into play,” Fred admits. For example, a college football team might be successful because the city in which it is located is thriving as a result of the strategic policies of the current mayor. “It is very difficult to isolate a single variable in this case, but we are working on getting rid of some of the noise” he said.

Fred is looking not only at the winner of the Saturday game but also at the score of the game and the overall season record of each team. There are plans to analyze whether a win on the previous Thursday has a similar or weaker effect on an incumbent’s probability of being reelected. Fred is also using the post-election games as control tests to see whether these yield any significant results.

Fred has been collaborating with Professor Andrew Healy at Loyola Marymount University. Dr. Healy was initially motivated to pursue research in this area after hearing an anecdote about the 1969 New York City mayoral election in which the incumbent, John Lindsay, managed to win after being very far behind in the polls. Lindsay’s re-election has been attributed to his campaign’s references to the “Amazin’” Mets, who, despite ranking ninth place in their ten-team league, managed to win the World Series.

“Lindsay got a huge bump in the polls following the World Series win, leading us to consider this effect across other sports,” Fred said.

Fred is also in the preliminary stages of a study on the effect of cloudy skies on election results. “I am looking at data from over 1200 weather stations as well as information collected by the National Climate Data Center,” he said.

“Unfortunately, there is a wide range of standards of data from some of these weather stations.” He says that some old reports are about as reliable as “mom and pop outside in the rain with a jar and a ruler.”

Fred acknowledges that there are many factors besides cloud cover that may distort his results.

“Papers have been published that show that voter turnout for Democrats is much lower in the rain because of various socio-economic factors. In order

\(^1\) Stanford University
to minimize the effects of weather variables that may affect turnout, we are controlling for rain and temperature in my study.”

Fred is constantly adding new control variables, like temperature and wind speed, to make the data more reliable and a better fit. “There are a lot of factors to control for, and sometimes the work can be very tedious. But it is really satisfying to see the progress we’ve been making.”

Fred says this project, which he calls his “first foray into research,” is a lot more rewarding than he expected it to be. “It is really exciting to have original work,” he said.

Fred began this project in April 2008 after hearing that Dr. Malhotra, then working in the undergraduate Political Science department, was looking for a research assistant. “This project really indulged my inner cynicism,” admitted Fred.

Fred is considering using the topic of this project as a springboard for a co-term or honors thesis. “I would particularly like to look at how voters’ decisions are influenced by professional sports, as well” he said.

Fred Wolens is a junior pursuing a major in Political Science and a minor in Communications. He is currently an RA in Burbank and describes himself as an "avid music historian." Fred is originally from London.