

Rationally Speaking #173: Brendan Nyhan on, “What can we learn from the election?”

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and with me is today's guest, Professor Brendan Nyhan.

Brendan is a political scientist at Dartmouth College and a returning guest; he was on Rationally Speaking a few years ago now. I invited him back on the show now because, like many people, I've been obsessively checking Twitter in the weeks leading up to the elections and in the days following. Out of all the voices on Twitter, I've just found Brendan to be one of the most careful and lucid commentators on what's been happening.

I actually reached out to Brendan right after the election to see if he could be subbed in as a last-minute guest that week. To his credit, he said he wanted a little more time to carefully go through the data and figure out what happened, which I respect. That's very in-keeping with the spirit of Rationally Speaking.

I'm glad that you could join us. Welcome back to the show, Brendan.

Brendan: Thanks for having me.

Julia: I'm interested in teasing out the different explanations for what happened, for why Trump won. And that'll involve taking a look at the polls, why or whether the polls were wrong, and just more broadly, what kind of updates we should be making to our models of how the world works and how democracy works, etc, from what just happened.

That's a lot to cover but we'll do the best we can.

Brendan, as I'm sure you're well aware, there have been a bunch of theories that have been popular trying to explain why Trump won the election, ranging from “Trump's fans felt left behind by the economy,” to “Trump's fans are racist,” to “Trump's fans are sexist,” to “Hillary was just unusually uncharismatic,” to the fake news, etc.

It seems to me that all of these stories do explain at least some of what happened. But I feel it's a little lazy to just stop there. I'm wondering if any of these stories seem to you to have a particular amount of explanatory power — like, more than the others — or if we just can't tell.

Brendan: There's no one answer or one explanation, as you suggested as you were even asking the question. We can't pinpoint one thing that is THE reason Trump won. All of the stories after the election has suggested this is the reason Trump won, I think are misleading.

That's how elections work. If about 100,000 votes had flipped the other, we'd be telling completely different stories now. It's important to be careful here and to think about what we know about elections and to what extent this election corresponds.

In a lot of ways, this election has been incredibly surprising, very different from

elections in the past.

In other respects, this election was very similar to 2012, and it's very similar to a lot of past elections. Most Republicans, despite all the weirdness of this campaign, voted for Donald Trump. Most Democrats voted for Hillary Clinton. It was a relatively small shift in vote relative to 2012 that made the difference. That's ultimately what it came down to.

Julia: I was going to say, you could flip that around and say: The fact that things played out the way a normal election does is in itself surprising because Donald Trump was such an unusual candidate. That is the surprising fact.

Brendan: I agree on that completely. Yes. If you told us two years ago that Trump would do what he did, most people would have thought there'd be much more crossing of party lines than we saw.

This election was a demonstration of the power of party identification. Not just to convince people to vote for the candidate of their party, but the power that opposition to a disfavored candidate in the other party has to keep people from crossing party lines. I think that's an underappreciated part of the story.

Julia: You were saying that the breakdown was relatively similar to previous years with more normal candidates on the Republican side. Were the demographics of support for the Republican candidate this time also relatively similar to past elections?

Brendan: No. The most important change in the composition of support for Trump — compared to 2012, for instance, which is the most immediate comparison — is that he performed, according to the exit polls, which are the only data we have now, more poorly with college educated white voters than Mitt Romney did.

But he traded off a lower vote margin among folks in that group, who turned out to vote, for a higher margin among white voters who don't have a college education. That is a larger group as a percentage of the population. And they're concentrated disproportionately in those Rustbelt states that ultimately ended up making the difference in the election.

Julia: The ones where we were the most surprised at the support for Trump when the data actually came in.

Brendan: That's right.

Julia: Is there any explanation for that fact, that unique fact about the composition of Trump support, that seems to have explanatory power? I realize we're in, just like, "analyzing correlations" territory, so maybe you can't say anything about it — but you may also have a hunch?

Brendan: I would say what we have now are hunches. We have seen that pattern — to be clear, that pattern of disproportionate support among non-college whites, and underperformance among college educated whites — is one we saw for months in

the polls. It's not new and didn't materialize at the last minute.

The reason the outcome was surprising is that Trump performed better than we expected based on pre-election polls. We can talk about the question of why the polling was a little bit off.

Julia: Yeah, I hope to get to that.

Brendan: Yeah, but a more fundamental question is just why the support looked like that in general, rather than how well the polling did at forecasting the vote.

I think what we saw was that Trump appealed disproportionately to non-college whites in the message he offered. The things that made him unusual made him more appealing. He promoted a kind of white identity politics that resonated with some non-college whites, even as it turned off some college educated whites.

That tradeoff isn't a bad one if you hold most of the Republicans in your column electorally. It turned out to work out pretty well for him.

There's a story here about the kinds of messages the parties offer and he offered a different one and so he shifted, he pivoted that Republican coalition just slightly. And that that may have helped make the difference.

Julia: An alternative explanation that's pretty popular in my circles is that the reason that he appealed more to the non-college educated white voters was not so much about white identity politics, as it was about a frustration with — either political correctness, like the language of political correctness, from the educated liberal class — and/or the smugness or disdain that they felt from liberals.

Which I've certainly seen anecdotal evidence of... but at the same time, I'm often skeptical of explanations that “this thing that has annoyed me for years just turned out to be the reason why Donald Trump won!” Because these explanations often come from people who themselves are frustrated with the language of political correctness. So I discount that a little bit.

My question, I guess, is whether you think there's any reason to prioritize the “white identity politics” narrative over the “backlash against political correctness” narrative? Or do you think those were the same thing?

Brendan: I think they're more related than distinct. I agree with your instinct that we should be wary of putting our own stories into the mouths and minds of Trump voters.

The idea they're closely following the details of speech codes on college campuses and things strikes me as silly. Most people don't pay attention to that stuff. There's a narrow group of people who read conservative publications who might be familiar with those things, but I think the average person just doesn't know.

There might be a broader sense in which people feel a kind of resentment toward coastal elites. That might be part of the kind of identity politics that Trump

promoted. Even the jeering of journalists at his rallies had a function like that. That was a part of the show that he put on, was literally to point and yell at the journalists at his rallies. I do think it's part of this overall message.

I should just say again though, it's important to be clear about the extent to which Trump was or was not surprising. The composition of his support was surprising. The fact that he held his party together, given what he did, was surprising.

He ultimately will end up near where we would have expected given the conditions of the country, using the so-called “fundamentals models” that people in political science use to try to forecast elections when they know nothing about the candidates. Using things like how high approval of the President is, how fast the economy is growing and how long the party in power has held the White House.

Those factors predicted a very close election. The outcome was not a surprise in terms of those factors. Those factors suggested the Democrats would face a very tough race. It's just that when Trump came in and did what he did, people thought he would underperform. He had the highest unfavorable ratings in the history of modern Presidential campaigns. Shouldn't that mean he would underperform? Rather, it would turn out the answer seems to be: Not as much as you'd think.

Julia: You also, along with a few other commentators I've been following like Kevin Drum, have been pointing out that a lot of these “root cause” explanations about people's anxiety about the economy, or their resentment of the relative growing status of minorities relative to white people — no one's really giving evidence those root causes have gotten worse in the last few years. If they haven't gotten worse, if they maintained the same rate, then why... is it actually fair to use those as explanations for Trump's win? Or is it that they are explanations, it's just that no one before Trump took advantage of those underlying root causes?

Brendan: I think that's the key. Trump appealed to people's racial resentment, he appealed to resentment of other minority groups. His support was more strongly correlated with racial resentment than Mitt Romney's. His support was more strongly correlated with negative feelings towards Muslims than Mitt Romney's.

It's not clear that those resentments are stronger than they were in 2012. The Republican party just wasn't leveraging those. Mitt Romney was not appealing to those feelings in a way that Trump did. This is, to a certain extent, a supply side problem, if you want to think about it in economic terms.

There's a candidate out there who is making ethnicity more salient to voters and appealing to people on that basis. The party nomination process... [is supposed to] help parties choose candidates who fit the ideology of their members. But it's also a candidate screening process, and in this case, it failed to stop someone who would appeal to voters on that basis.

It's not clear that a similar campaign would not have worked in the past.

I think the root cause framework is the wrong one. People tell these stories where it was somehow inevitable in this year, and I just don't think that's the case. The failure here starts with the Republican party allowing Trump to win the nomination. There have been candidates like him in the past, and parties have successfully coordinated to prevent them from securing Presidential nominations.

The failure here by the Republican party to prevent Trump from securing that nomination allowed him to make these appeals to the broader electorate — with the power of party identification behind him. That's what's so powerful. That's what was missing before. Once he wins the nomination, he is a Republican. And the party tribalism is going to hold the overwhelming number of Republicans in place.

Julia: In the set of updates to my models of how the world works in general, from this election, one big update has been: I just had this instinctive sense that the people “in charge,” vaguely-speaking, wouldn't let something crazy happen. If it was at all possible to stop that crazy thing from happening. And I feel like one major data point against that model is the fact that Trump got the nomination. Especially given that as far as I could tell — and I talked to some people who had talked to insiders in the Republican leadership — there wasn't any real coordinated effort to stop him either. It wasn't that they tried really hard and failed.

Is that also your impression? Do you understand why they didn't try harder?

Brendan: It depends how you define "try harder". Their model... let me say who "they" is. The Republican candidates who were competing against Trump had a model of how the world works that turned out to be wrong. Their model was Trump would fade.

I expected him to fade. All previous political history expected him to fade. Celebrity candidates who have never held elected office might poll at high levels initially, but ultimately, they've tended to fall off as the party coordinates around candidates with broader appeal, and deeper support in the party and so forth.

Everyone, myself included, expected that to be the outcome. So they were all waiting to pick up Trump's support. They were playing the game of, "I want to be the last person standing against Trump, not the one to go down in flames while taking him down with me."

It was a painful, slow-motion coordination failure. Where even though at different times, different Republican candidates opposed Trump, they never did so effectively or in a coordinated manner.

It's very difficult. There's no way to make binding agreements to coordinate among the political campaigns. You could see Rubio and Cruz and Jeb Bush and everyone else struggle with how to do this. If Marco Rubio is going after Trump, your

incentive as Ted Cruz is to say, "Look at these guys down in the mud, I'm the statesman who's rising above", and vice versa. As we saw, that didn't turn out to be a very effective approach.

Julia: Yeah. Maybe the update for me should be more like: Don't instinctively model "the people in charge" or the decision-makers as this one block. But instead pay attention to separate incentives that could cause coordination problems, and prevent any one subset from acting, even if it would be best for the whole group if they all acted. Or something.

Brendan: That's right. Parties are less coherent and organized than they seem.

The Republican nomination process had features that made this coordination problem even worse. They had accelerated their calendar compared to 2012, which gave them less time to coordinate and organize against Trump.

They also gave disproportionate delegates to the winner of states above their vote share. That was intended to move them more quickly to a nominee. There was a belief that Mitt Romney had been weakened by the Primary process in 2012. They thought it would be better to coalesce around a nominee to win the White House in 2016.

As it turned out, that helped boost Trump towards a Republican nomination even though he wasn't winning 60 and 70% of the vote. He was winning 40% of the vote — but he was typically the plurality winner.

And getting additional bonuses in delegates that are helping him and push him closer and closer to the nomination. Those rules all ended up mattering, as obscure as they are. Even as it became clear what was happening, no one within the Republican party actually had the power to stop it, despite the fact that almost no Republican elected officials endorsed Trump.

We have no precedent for his candidacy. If you look at the... in the modern period of Presidential nominations, no nominee looks anything like him. We've never had a candidate with weaker support among elected officials in their party.

Yet, they failed to stop him. People either sat on the sidelines or they failed to coalesce among the other candidates. They ultimately let it happen, despite almost none of them expressing that Trump was their first choice.

Julia: One interesting theme I'm noting in the conversation so far is, explanations about "why now?" or about why it makes sense that Trump won in this particular year, don't have as much behind them. And there are certain, almost accidents, that made him especially able to succeed when past candidates in Trump's reference class have failed.

How does that... it seems like there's some tension between that theme, and the general theme that I keep hearing in the media, about the rise of authoritarianism

and nationalism around the world.

For example, in Brexit. A lot of people see parallels between Brexit — which was like this rejection of cosmopolitanism, and a turning inward — and Trump's rise, and a lot of the rhetoric that made Trump popular. But doesn't that contradict the "why now" explanations?

Brendan: Yeah, it's an interesting point. I think we're still trying to figure out the extent to which what we've seen here is parallel to what's happening in Europe. There does seem to be a common element in terms of the messages that candidates are using. You can think of what Trump is offering as an anti-cosmopolitan message of the sort that has proved to be successful in some context in Europe.

The EU makes for an especially fruitful target in their case, because it is this transnational institution that exercises quite a lot of power. We don't have an equivalent institution here. Instead, Trump focused more on the threat from immigrants, and supposed ways of Muslim terrorists coming to get us, disguised as refugees. That was all bundled with a similar message.

I think there's something there. The danger here is to turn the occurrence of an event into the inevitability of an event.

Julia: Yeah, preach.

Brendan: What Trump did might have been a 5% or 10% chance. That fact that it happened doesn't mean it was inevitable what happened. There's always some baseline risk of a candidate like that.

We've only had 44 Presidents. In the contemporary period, our sample size is really small. We actually don't have a great sense of how well our party nominations system works, in terms of screening out candidates who make demagogic appeals. There's just isn't enough data to say something with a lot of confidence.

I think, we in my field, put too much faith in that system based on that small sample. We thought it was more robust to candidates like Trump than it turned out to be. Similarly, after he won the nomination, people went through a similar set of rationalizing processes about the general election — that, it too, would prove to be more robust to Trump than it turned out to be.

But that may still also be a kind of unlikely event. As I said to you, the fundamentals suggested a close election. Once you won the nomination, it was going to be a lot tougher. It looked for a long time like Hillary Clinton had the advantage, but not by that much, and the margin of error was relatively small. Even though the models were saying 85% or 90% heading into election day, that is not 100%. As we saw, it wasn't.

Julia: Okay, that's a great segue to talk about the polls and the models. On the one hand, I'm usually the person saying, "Hey people, don't complain that the predictions were 'wrong,' because predictions are probabilistic, and if you say something has a

70% chance, well, 30% of the time, it's not going to happen. And that's completely in line with the model that made the prediction.”

At the same time, some of these models — like Sam Wang's at the PEC — were 95%-99%. Surely we should be making some updates now that those made the wrong prediction. That there's something wrong with the way that model was generated.

My question is: Are there any updates you think we can make — with relative confidence, given the probabilistic nature of all of this — about how much to trust these kinds of models? Or about which kinds of models to trust?

Brendan:

Yeah. I would say two things. We should look at the polls and the models. The models depend on input from the polls. There are ways they can try to account for error in those polls.

The re-analyses that I've seen, that have been most thorough in the wake of the election, suggest that the main problem is just the polls were off. It's important to even be specific about how the polls were off. The national vote, Hillary Clinton won, the polls are not going to be off very far in how much they missed on the national vote. The problem is that in certain key states, the polling was unusually inaccurate, and with a close enough map, that meant that the forecasted outcome was wrong.

We're still figuring out I think why the polls were off in those states. It may be something about how the polls tried to estimate who would actually turn out. It's a complicated issue. Polling is very hard because no one answers the phone. And so we're trying to build representative samples in other ways, and those don't always work as well as we like.

So, one issue is what's going on with the polls. I don't think we know.

The second issue that you're getting at with your question is: what about the models? Clearly, the ones that were most confident seem to have been far too certain. The Huffington Post pollster and the Princeton election consortium models both had Clinton at over 99%. One event doesn't falsify those either, but they appear to have been overconfident.

On the other hand, the Upshot model where I contribute had Clinton at about 85%, and they show that the actual outcome is well within the range of reasonable probabilities you will get from the distribution of possible outcomes under their model. It was somewhat unlikely, 15% chance, but by no means vanishingly so.

We're going to have to think about this more carefully, but at the same time always keeping in mind that 85% is not 100%.

The example I used in the talk I gave after the election came from a tweet somebody wrote — this being the third election where there's been a lot of emphasis on forecasters — it said basically, 85% is almost the equivalent of the

chance of getting 1 if you roll a six-sided die. We rolled it twice and it came up “not 1”, and in the third we rolled it and we came out 1. And everyone's like, "Well, that means data has no value." That is a conclusion we have to resist.

There's more to elections than forecasting outcomes, but also one election does not undermine the value of all quantitative analysis. I've tried to push people to be a little more precise in the extent to which they update and what they update about.

Julia: I had a lot of conversations with people in the week leading up to the election — because I think I was a little bit more stressed out than my average friend. People kept pointing at the models as reason not to worry at all. But I kept feeling like, "Look, even... there's many credible models that have Trump at 30% or so", which is like, if you thought you had a 30% chance of severe complications from surgery, you wouldn't be like, "Oh! I'm not worried at all because I have a 70% chance, things will go fine, no need to be worried."

I think people just, their brain parses that 70% as, "Well it's greater than 50%, therefore Hillary's the favored candidate, therefore I don't have to worry." I don't fully understand what's happening in people's brains. But I had so many people arguing with that, like, "Look, there's zero reason to worry, Trump has zero chance in the face of all this evidence." I think, yeah, maybe our brains round up probabilities to one, or down to zero.

Brendan: Yeah. We have to figure how to communicate probability in a more intuitive way.

The Upshot tried this idea of a field goal kicker — that these were the yardage of a field goal, as a way of translating their estimated probability. If it were a certain percentage, you'd say, "The probability of Hillary Clinton winning is the same as the probability of field goal kicker making a field goal from this distance," which at least has the property of something that happens most of the time, if you're talking about a reasonable yardage. But people have many examples in their mind of it not happening.

Julia: Yeah. Actually that's why I was thinking about the surgery case, I thought that was something where intuitively, people actually do know how to think about probabilities. But maybe they don't?

Brendan: I don't think they do. This is an issue in business, in government, in medicine — probabilities baffle our mind. We just have a really tough time with them.

Julia, can I add something though on the why the polls were wrong that we haven't talked about?

Julia: Yeah, please.

Brendan: I've heard two stories after the election that are interesting. I don't know if they're true but I think they're worth considering.

The one I put less stock in is the idea that, consistent with what your friends were telling you, people knew these probabilities and therefore didn't try as hard. Basically, those probabilities are assuming everyone tries as hard as they would have in prior elections. They're calibrated based on past elections.

But if everyone knows the probabilities and adjusts their behavior accordingly, that hurts Hillary Clinton's chances. I don't think the group she underperformed with are likely to be ones that are obsessively consuming 538. She racked up huge... she probably racked up pretty big margins in the coastal cities that are the reason her national vote total, popular vote margin, is well over 1.5 million at this point.

I don't think that's why, but it's at least worth considering what that means when there's widespread awareness of the forecast.

The second point though is — we haven't talked much about Hillary Clinton's strategy, but the counterpart to this is, the issue terrain in a Presidential election is defined by the interaction of the two candidates. Normally, that's been fought on this traditional liberal/conservative act... about the size and scope of government. Think of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney talking about how to address health care and so forth.

Presidential elections typically center on domestic policy issues for the most part. And those are typically defined by that divide between the parties, on what the role of government is.

What was unusual about this campaign was that, not only was Trump pivoting towards this anti-cosmopolitan appeal, and away from a traditional small government message — but that Hillary Clinton went along with it. She thought she could peel off suburban women, Republican leaning or moderate Republican women, especially, by emphasizing Trump's offensive statements and lack of qualifications for the Presidency.

That meant she didn't offer a strong message about government standing up for you and being on your side, as a Democratic candidate typically offers, including Barack Obama.

That's another reason potentially that Trump may have overperformed among those white folks who didn't go to college, in the Upper Midwest. They may not have heard that message about who's on your side. And instead Hillary Clinton's message about, "Trump made offensive statements" and qualifications, may have played into this cosmopolitanism-versus-nationalism divide that may have broke Trump's way in the end.

Julia: On the general topic of how to update models from surprising events: Do you have any understanding of why the markets rebounded so thoroughly right after — I guess, the morning after — Trump's win? I've read a bunch of explanations and I haven't found that feels satisfying to me.

Brendan: One of the two authors of the main analysis of how the market moved during the

campaign is down the hall from me here at Dartmouth. Eric Zitzewitz, who's an economist — he and Justin Wolfers, who's an economist at the University of Michigan, found that the market seemed to be moving quite significantly in overnight futures markets. Downward whenever Hillary Clinton's fortunes in prediction markets fell during major campaign events. Their estimates suggested that the market would be valued significantly less if Trump won. But then when he did, it didn't decline as much.

Julia: Well, it went really down and then it went back up, basically all the way.

Brendan: Right, those initial overnight futures markets moved negatively, but when the market re-opened, it stabilized.

Justin Wolfers wrote a piece for the Upshot, where I contribute, trying to figure out happened. He and Eric I think are still working on this, but the theory they offer in this piece that Justin wrote is that the overnight traders are guessing where the market will go. It's like a smaller, less thick market than the main market that's open during the trading day. These folks who are reacting during the debates and so forth, may not have been representative of the full opinion of the market as expressed after the eventual outcome of the election.

I think that honest truth is they don't know. Markets are even harder to parse sometimes than voters. I think we're still working on that one.

Julia: Yeah, it's very tempting to just say, "Well, the markets are being irrational now." Or I guess that markets were irrational back then, when they reacted negatively to news that was good for Trump.

But I really don't want to lean too hard on, "Well, guess they're just irrational" theories. Because that doesn't really allow us to revise our models. It's like an easy out, that I don't want to use unless all signs really point to it, I think.

Brendan: Yeah, agreed.

Julia: We're just about out of time but thank you, this was a pretty helpful post mortem for me and I suspect for many of our listeners. At this point, let's wrap things up and move on to the Rationally Speaking pick.

[interlude]

Welcome back. Every episode, we invite our guest on Rationally Speaking to introduce the pick of the episode. That's a book or a blog, or article, or something that has influenced his or her thinking in some way. Brendan, what's your pick for today's episode?

Brendan: An article that I think your listeners might enjoy and probably find depressing is Craig Silverman's analysis at BuzzFeed of how widely shared fake news stories were in that platform during this election. You briefly mentioned this issue.

I didn't think it was "the" reason that Trump won, but this election did reveal that Facebook in particular is an important vector of misinformation. It's an issue our democracy is going to have to confront.

Craig's article shows that completely fake stories are reaching millions and millions of people. That's a problem for our democracy even if it doesn't change a single person's vote. It is contaminating the quality of democratic debate, it's making people less well-informed. It's an issue we have to take seriously, and it's one that people can help address in their own daily lives by, for instance, reporting fake stories that they see on Facebook to try to get the platform to stop circulating them. I think it's definitely worth people's time to check out.

Julia: Cool. That does indeed sound enjoyable and depressing in one package. Thank you, Brendan.

Brendan: I'm here to help.

Julia: We'll link to that on the podcast website as well as to your blog. Brendan, thank you so much for joining us on the show.

Brendan: It was my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Julia: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.