

# Optimism experts handicap the presidential election with about 6 weeks remaining until Nov. 4

September 26 2008

---

With less than six weeks until the general election, a University of Pennsylvania study analyzing the relative optimism of the 2008 presidential and vice presidential candidates has found Barack Obama and John McCain to be equally optimistic and Sarah Palin slightly more optimistic than Joseph Biden.

Researchers have determined that the most optimistic candidates win more than 80 percent of presidential elections dating back to 1900. How optimism confers this electoral advantage is unclear, but Penn psychologists believe optimistic candidates inspire hope in the electorate and try harder, particularly when faced with a challenge.

The study, conducted by researchers from Penn's Positive Psychology Center, analyzed speeches given at the Saddleback Forum on Faith and the candidates' respective convention acceptance speeches to determine levels of optimism.

"Although our initial report suggests this election is too close to call, shifts in optimism and rhetoric over the next few weeks may very well predict which side emerges as the victor," Stephen Schueller, lead analyst on the project and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychology at Penn, said.

As a group, the vice-presidential candidates are less optimistic than the

presidential candidates, with Biden by far the most pessimistic of the four.

In addition, Republican candidates, according to the study, show a higher level of internality when explaining positive events and a lower level of internality when explaining negative events. Put simply, they accept credit for good events and blame others as the cause for negative outcomes.

While speeches analyzed for the study were scripted, more instances of impromptu speech — such as the debates — can provide additional material to look for shifts and changes in optimism as the election draws.

"With news of the national economic crisis, the upcoming weeks will provide further material to draw from because attributions about economic matters offer a rich source of data," Andrew Rosenthal, project coordinator with the Positive Psychology Center, said.

The first stage of this multi-part study established baseline optimism ratings for each candidate as of this month, to be used to gauge and compare optimism levels throughout the remainder of the campaign. Additional stages will include analysis of candidates' statements on specific issues and events. Analysis will be performed on three dimensions: absolute optimism and pessimism (where does the candidate fall on a numerical scale), comparison between candidates (where does the candidate fall in relation to other candidates) and relative optimism and pessimism (how the candidate compares with the initial baseline figure).

Researchers were trained in Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations, an analysis tool created by Penn's Positive Psychology Center. CAVE extracts and analyzes causal statements for positive or negative connotation, as well as three dimensions of causality: whether the

speaker attributes the cause of an event to an outside force or takes responsibility, whether the cause of an event is more or less likely to happen again and how many areas of public policy or segments of the population the cause will affect.

Source: University of Pennsylvania

Citation: Optimism experts handicap the presidential election with about 6 weeks remaining until Nov. 4 (2008, September 26) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-09-optimism-experts-handicap-presidential-election.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.