

At Which Moment is it Possible to Forecast Election Results?

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(Lavareda, Antonio. 2009. *Emoções ocultas e estratégias eleitorais*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Objetiva)

The book *Emoções ocultas e estratégias eleitorais* by Antonio Lavareda is innovative with respect to explaining the determinants of the vote. The author does not set out to explain the motives for voter decision based solely on what has already been proposed by the Brazilian literature.

Grounded in his empirical experience and academic qualification, Lavareda provokes researchers who take an interest in electoral behaviour by proposing arguments that complement existing explanations of the determinants of the vote, as well as pointing out other motivations guiding voter decision.

Over the course of his book, Lavareda fills in gaps that exist in the Brazilian electoral studies literature. By questioning electoral events present in the Brazilian context, the author seeks to clarify certain aspects of the electoral dynamic.

It is important to stress that this book is not a campaign manual; neither is it a purely academic work. It is not an autobiography, despite the fact that the author relates some of his experiences. So, how should this work be recognized? *Emoções ocultas e estratégias eleitorais* is a dialogue between theory, empiricism and professional experience.¹

In the Brazilian literature, much research has gone into deciphering voter decision in a majority election. Among published works, Singer (2000), Veiga (2001), Carreirão (2002; 2004), Lourenço (2003; 2007), Almeida (2008), Oliveira and Santos (2009), Camargos (2009) and Telles (2009) stand out.²

Singer (2000) develops a study about the relation between ideology and voter choice. Considering the 1989 and 1994 elections, he shows that part of the votes received by

presidents Collor and Fernando Henrique Cardoso were ideologically motivated. For the author, ideology is a predictive variable of voter choice. Through it, it is possible to discern how voters will vote.

Veiga (2001), Lourenço (2003; 2007) and Telles (2009) show that radio and television electoral broadcasts interfere in voter decision. The authors reveal the importance of publicity messages, which may guide individual electoral choice. These works evince the fact that radio and television electoral broadcasts constitute an instrument that may interfere in the formation of individual electoral choice. In this sense, gauging the impact of publicity messages conveyed by radio and television electoral broadcasts is necessary for one to understand voter choice.³

The analysis of the electoral process must consider the political context, for the party alliances made by the candidates are inherent to it. Candidates' attributes are also important factors in understanding individual electoral choice. Candidates' symbolic characteristics can motivate voter choice (Carreirão 2002; 2004).

Do good administrations elect candidates? This is the main question put by Almeida (2008).⁴ He states that a "well evaluated administration" is a causal variable that determines the vote. By means of quantitative and qualitative data, Oliveira and Santos (2009) recognize the importance of Almeida's thesis. However, they state that the variable "good administrations" is necessary but not determinant in explaining voter behaviour.

Camargos (2009) asks whether the economy can determine voter choice. Does a voter vote for a given candidate considering his/her economic well being? An individual's economic situation or the country's economic performance, for instance, is a predictive variable of voter choice (Powell and Whitten 1993).

Lavareda considers all the variables/causes pointed out to explain voter behaviour. However, unlike the works mentioned, Lavareda's arguments are structured thus: theory-empiricism-professional experience.

The analysis of several electoral surveys, the market guidance provided to various candidates and his academic qualification ensure that the book is a continuous dialogue between theory, empiricism and professional experience. This dialogue makes it possible for the reader to gain a fruitful understanding of the electoral dynamic in Brazil and of the motives/variables that orient individual electoral choice.

In explaining the motives for electoral choices, Lavareda highlights the economic vote and the retrospective vote — the evaluation of the ruler's administration. Based on public opinion polls, he states that Brazilians are optimists; that they worry about inflation and unemployment; and that they try to identify rulers' responsibilities when evaluating them.

Lavareda's work confirms common sense: the end of inflation was a "victory for Brazilians". Therefore, one can state that controlling inflation is a demand on voters' part,

for they recognize that through it, economic development and job creation are possible. Voters consider governments responsible for what happens with the economy (p. 61).

Lavareda's arguments show the plausibility of the economic vote theory and suggest that the evaluation of governments is associated with the performance of the economy.⁵ In this case, voters check on the country's economic situation in order to classify the government's performance. Therefore, the performance of the economy is one of the parameters that voters consider in evaluating an administration.

Two remarks: the economic vote is more "sociotropic", "concerned with the national situation, than 'egocentric', that is, directed at personal considerations" (p. 66). The retrospective vote is associated, among other aspects, to the evaluation of the economy made by the voter; in other words, the voter positively evaluates the government's administration due to the latter's performance vis-à-vis the economy.

Lavareda's approach with respect to the retrospective vote leads me to the following questions: 1) why do administrators with good poll ratings fail to get re-elected? 2) why do candidates supported by administrators approved by the electorate fail to obtain electoral success? Lavareda's book does not answer these questions directly, but points out ways forward.

Publicity messages and emotions guide voters' decision. Qualitative and quantitative research must identify voters' wishes, the image of the candidates among the electorate, the weakness of the opponents and the symbols that may be created and explored in voters' universe.

The research makes it possible to construct electoral strategies, which have the aim of marketing the candidate among the electorate. This marketing needs to generate emotion among voters, and the research has the role of identifying what elicits such emotion (p. 73).⁶

Lavareda stresses the importance of electoral research in defining campaign strategies. Without it, it would be perhaps impossible to create efficient strategies. For the author, information "is the master key that allows one to unveil what occurs in the hearts and minds of individuals while they play their multiple roles interacting in society" (p. 69). Research surveys are sources of information.

Lavareda shows that before defining any campaign strategy, it is necessary to conduct a strategic diagnosis. It is the starting point for defining electoral strategies. The author stresses that there is no dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative data. Both are necessary and complement each other in the definition of campaign strategies.

Research also serves to monitor campaign strategies, i.e., to check their efficiency (or lack thereof) among the electorate. Campaign monitoring also consists of assessing the opponents' strategies and the performance of all the competitors in the race (p. 79).

Considering such arguments, I state that well evaluated candidates may have failed to win re-election due to a lack of efficient strategies — communication strategies in particular. The same is bound to occur with candidates supported by well evaluated administrators, but who fail to win elections.

The book devotes special attention to electoral strategies that are mainly perceptible on radio and television broadcasts. The types of strategy adopted by candidates are determinants of the vote, as well as the emotions they can elicit among voters.

The author brings to light a new tool that is emerging, which can act in tandem with qualitative and quantitative research. Neuroscience plays a complementary role, particularly to qualitative analyses. Through neuroscience and the focus group technique, it is possible to find out with accuracy voters' reactions to publicity messages or news involving adversaries. Neuroscience is one more tool that may be used in indentifying and deciphering voters' emotions as a function of electoral strategies (p. 157-58).⁷

Over the course of his book, Lavareda provokes readers when he questions the events originating in the electoral dynamic. Does party fragmentation exist in Brazil? In his eyes, it does. The author considers that there are many reasons why it is important to take political parties into account in the effort to understand the Brazilian electoral dynamic. One of them is the ongoing process of party fragmentation, which the author demonstrates using quantitative data.

What is voters' party preference? Why, after winning two presidential elections (1994 and 1998), does the PSDB not have high party preference levels? These problems raised by Lavareda elicit two fundamental questions: 1) In the face of the PSDB's reduced party preference levels, is it possible to explain electoral choice by means of party preference and also of ideology? 2) Is the party fragmentation present in Brazil caused by ideological cleavages?⁸

Why do majority electoral disputes become bipolarized? The "de-ideologization" of electoral disputes — since the spectrum of objective differences between candidates' positions has been reduced as a function of the end of the Cold War — and the high cost of majority campaigns, which makes "prohibitive those candidacies lacking major chances of success", are the causes of the common bipolarization of majority elections in Brazil (p. 45).

Lavareda's work shows that electoral strategies matter. Without them, it is perhaps impossible to predict and understand the results of elections. *Emoções ocultas e estratégias eleitorais* does not disregard the determinants of the vote presented by various Brazilian works. But it does show that these determinants are not enough to explain individuals' electoral choice. Electoral strategies — most perceptible at the start of the radio and television electoral broadcasts — must be taken into account.

Considering Lavareda's arguments, I establish that it is necessary and prudent that researchers of electoral phenomena await the start the radio and television broadcasts and watch their development in order to forecast the result of a given election. For as Lavareda aptly shows, if the broadcasts construct efficient publicity messages capable of generating emotion among voters, electoral forecasts based on variables of ideology, situation of the economy and well evaluated administration may turn out to be false.

Lavareda's book is excessively provocative, for in the end it allows me ask: At which moment is it possible to forecast election results? Or is this not possible?

Translated by Leandro Moura

Notes

- 1 Professional experience is uncommon in Brazilian works dealing with elections. Professional experience represents the fact that the academic uses arguments built on the basis of his experience to analyse electoral events.
- 2 Figueiredo (1991) develops sophisticated theoretical arguments to explain individuals' electoral choices.
- 3 On the power of persuasion of publicity messages, see Popkin (1991).
- 4 Fiorina (1981) develops the thesis that the voter votes retrospectively, i.e., he/she analyses the public administrator's performance and opts to vote for his/her re-election. In this sense, the retrospective vote represents the option for continuity.
- 5 In the specific case of Brazil, I am referring to the federal government (president of the Republic).
- 6 On the role of emotions in an electoral dispute, see Westen (2007).
- 7 Westen (2007) has worked extensively on the use of neuroscience in elections.
- 8 Carreirão (2009) partly responds, for he analyses economic rather than ideological cleavages. Furthermore, the author develops his arguments only considering the 2006 presidential elections.

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