The Election: Final Countdown

November 2, 2016

After a long presidential campaign, it is time to prepare for the election on November 8. For most of October, Hillary Clinton was holding a stable lead. Now Donald Trump is on the offensive again. On November 1, the average of many polls showed that Trump had a marginal lead in some of the important swing states (states where it is quite open whether voters will vote for a Republican or Democratic candidate), such as Florida, Ohio and Iowa.

Dramatic developments right before November 8 could affect the outcome of the election, but by all normal accounts, Hillary Clinton still seems to be winning the race for the White House. However, it is easy to get swept away in all the coverage of the presidential race. It may now be time to have a look at the very important elections for the U.S. Congress.

Election Day
The election is always on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. November was chosen mostly because it was a convenient month for farmers, having finished their harvest work. Monday was avoided because some people might have to start travelling the day before the election, and Sunday should be reserved for worship.
Normal aspects of the campaign

This year’s campaign is not a normal one, but many aspects of the presidential race are still recognizable. For example, the use of negative TV ads has more or less been as expected. This year the Democrats have even used ads that resemble one of the most famous negative ads ever, the Daisy ad from 1964. One of them is approved by Hillary Clinton, whereas an anti-Trump ad in Ohio is paid for by a super PAC (Political Action Committee). Super PACs are independent organizations that can support a candidate with unlimited sums of money and run any ads they like. This allows the candidates to say that they are not responsible for the worst attacks.

It is no coincidence that a lot of money is spent on ads in Ohio, as it is an important swing state. There are at least eleven other swing states at the moment: Florida, Iowa, Nevada, Utah, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Georgia, Colorado, Michigan and Wisconsin.

The number of electoral votes from the so-called blue states – the states Clinton is very likely to win – gives her a better starting point than Trump before the electoral votes from the swing states are counted. In other words, he needs to win far more swing states than Clinton
does in order to win the election. As of November 1, the statistician Nate Silver estimated Trump’s chance of winning the election to be about 25 per cent.

**Unusual aspects of the campaign**

Trump has been stunningly personal and crass in his attacks against Clinton. Not only has he repeatedly referred to her as “crooked Hillary”, but also in her presence called her a “devil” during the second presidential debate and a “nasty woman” during the third and last debate. Clinton’s big mistake, on the other hand, was to suggest that half of Trump’s supporters belong in a “basket of deplorables”, meaning a group of intolerant and disgusting people.

Why does Trump appeals to so many people? Many Americans see him as someone who can fight the corrupt political elite in Washington, DC who they regard as evil forces, represented by a “devil-like” candidate. Many Trump voters do not like this type of rhetoric at all, but would rather vote for him than Clinton anyway, partly because of Clinton’s role in the political establishment over so many years. The question is how far this type of rhetoric can take Trump. Can he become president by offending so many people? *(The New York Times, which supports Hillary Clinton, keeps updating [a list of people, places and things that Trump has insulted.](#)*

However, the worst thing Trump has said in this campaign is that he might not respect the outcome of the election. This adds to his claims that the election could be rigged and that the polls are manipulated by the media. We can only speculate, but the reason for such statements could be as “innocent” as face-saving. If he loses, Trump might want to be able to say that he accepts the outcome, but that he would have won if the media and the establishment had not teamed up against him. This way, he can forever claim to be the “real” winner.

Nonetheless, in a modern democracy it is in fact shocking that a candidate says he might not follow democratic principles. In addition to the comments he has made about women, immigrants and ethnic minorities, this has made a growing number of high-profile Republicans distance themselves from Trump.
More than a lucky candidate
Many people say that Hillary Clinton is an extremely lucky candidate because she is facing Trump and not a more experienced politician. She probably deserves more credit than that. One thing she has succeeded doing, is standing out from President Barack Obama, without creating too much distance to him. That is a very hard balancing act after eight years with president who is relatively popular among Democrats.

Given that she is extremely experienced and knowledgeable, she has also managed to debate Trump without coming across as arrogant. Furthermore, it is true that Clinton can have quite a temper, so it is impressive that she remained calm when she was insulted during the debates. Finally, she may become America’s first female president, without having used this as a major argument.

The U.S. Congress elections
A bill (a proposal for a new law) has to pass through both chambers of Congress – the House of Representatives and the Senate – in order to become law. The political system is designed for cooperation between the president and Congress and across party lines in Congress.
However, over the past decades the will to compromise and cooperate has not been what it used to be. This makes it even more important for a party to have the majority in at least one of the two chambers. When presidents promise “change”, as Barack Obama did, this is often not very realistic because the power of the president is so heavily limited by Congress. For that reason, the outcome of the Congress elections can be just as important as the presidential election.

The expression “down the ballot” refers to these Congress elections. The ballot is a piece of paper or another device used to vote in an election, and candidates for Congress, are listed below the presidential candidates. Of the 100 seats in the Senate, 34 seats will be up for election this year.

The big question in 2016 is: Will the Republicans remain the majority party, or will the Democrats retake the Senate? It is a very close race. In addition, all of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives are up for election. Here the Republicans will most likely end up with a majority, but the Democrats may pick up more seats than the 188 seats they have today.

**270 to win**

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump fight for 538 electoral votes (see interactive map). This means that the magic number for victory is 270 electoral votes. In the electoral system, each state functions as a separate system, and each state has a number of electoral votes based on the population of that state.

Almost all the states have a winner-take-all system. For example, this means that all the 29 electoral votes from the important swing state of Florida will go to the candidate who wins.

**The election and beyond**

The days before the election will be exciting. As mentioned, Trump is doing quite well in some important swing states, and there is always some uncertainty about polls. Whatever the outcome, however, there are difficult years ahead. The two major American parties are like umbrella organizations that appeal to widely different groups of voters, and in the long run they cannot afford to lose support from large groups of the population. For that reason the Republicans have to find out how reach out to women, minorities and immigrants,

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**The Bradley effect**

Tom Bradley was the African-American mayor of Los Angeles who was running for governor of California in 1982. He led in the polls, but lost the election. According to the theory of the Bradley effect, the explanation is that people sometimes prefer to give a politically correct answer when asked whom they are going to vote for, rather than telling the truth. This year there are probably some Republicans who won’t admit that they are voting for Trump, but it is not clear how that may affect the polls.
which are groups Trump has more or less driven away from the party. The Democrats are also split between liberal voters, many of whom supported Bernie Sanders in the primary elections, and more moderate voters. Moreover, even if Clinton wins the election, it will be difficult to work with Congress without a majority of Democrats in both chambers.

Adapted from “The Election: What Is at Stake?” by Magne Dypedahl, Høgskolen i Sørøst-Norge, November 1, 2016
Tasks

1  Comprehension
Work in pairs and explain the following terms or expressions:
- Poll
- Negative ads
- Swing state
- PACs
- Congress
- The Bradley effect

2  Polling
a  Find out more about the support of Trump and Clinton in your own class. Conduct a poll and compare the results to the average polls for the United States or find states that seem to agree with your class.
b  Discuss the result of the poll in class. Do you think the results would be different with other Democratic and Republican candidates than Trump and Clinton?
c  What type of politicians would be good presidential candidates if Norwegians had been able to vote in an American election? Give examples and explain your choice.

3  Discuss
a  Who would you vote for if you could vote in the presidential election? Why?
b  Why do you think Trump says he may not be willing to respect the outcome of the election?
c  What do you think will happen if Clinton wins? How may the Trump supporters react?
d  What do you think will happen with the Republican Party and the United States if Trump wins?
e  Discuss how you would react to being called “nasty”, “crooked”, “liar”, “devil”, and the like. Is this how you would teach your children to communicate? Is it acceptable to use such language in politics?

4  Election update
Make a daily election update in class and note if there are any changes in the predictions for the outcome of the election. The latest developments in poll averages, also for the Senate and House of Representatives, can be seen here: [http://www.realclearpolitics.com](http://www.realclearpolitics.com). It can also be interesting to follow the election forecast of Nate Silver, who is a famous statistician who analyzes baseball and elections: [http://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/?ex_cid=rrpromo](http://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/?ex_cid=rrpromo).

5 After the election
Make a summary of the results in both the presidential election and the U.S. Congress election.