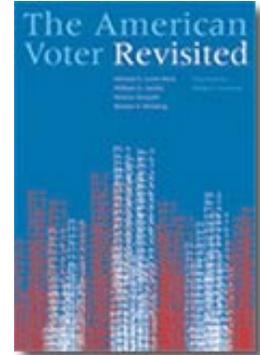


Michael Lewis-Beck, co-author of *The American Voter Revisited*
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Q&A with Michael Lewis-Beck, co-author of *The American Voter Revisited*

Michael S. Lewis-Beck is the co-author, along with William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg, of *The American Voter Revisited*. We sat down with Michael to talk about the book.



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University of Michigan Press: Why was the original book written? Was there something unique or special about the 1952 and 1956 elections?

Michael Lewis-Beck: The book, by the now renowned team of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, came out of a growing dissatisfaction with how elections were analyzed by pundits and scholars. Discussions in the media would use anecdotes, stories, or tidbits of facts to explain why people voted the way they did. There was a lot of Monday-morning quarterbacking. Scholars would look at patterns of election returns in the states, or describe accounts give by politicians. It was all guess work, since no one really knew anything about individual voters, and how they thought and acted. That was the big break through of *The American Voter*, the research systematically talked to real voters, and in more than one election.

The 1952 and 1956 elections offered a unique opportunity, as the first massive scientific public opinion surveys of individual American voters to become available. These surveys were the fodder for this seminal study.

UMP: That represents the history of the original. What then was your motivation or inspiration for writing *The American Voter Revisited*?

MLB: We wanted to see if *The American Voter* stood the test of time. After all, it was based on elections now over 50 years old. Perhaps the conclusions were completely old-fashioned. We wanted to find out.

UMP: What did you find out as you researched and wrote the book?

MLB: *The American Voter* had a profound impact on scholars, pundits, and politicians, and ordinary students of American elections. It became the accepted way of thinking about how citizens actually behaved politically. But there has been a growing worry that what it discovered is no longer true. After all, it came

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out in 1960. At first blush, the obvious reaction is that it is out-of-date, and no longer offers relevant explanations. We wanted to see if, in fact, its theories and conclusions still held up, once you applied them to current presidential elections. For example, do socio-economic conditions and, especially, party identification, still largely determine how Americans vote? Are voters still mostly inattentive to politics, with a rather low level of interest in politics, and very little understanding of the liberal-conservative debate raging at the elite level? The answer to these questions, perhaps surprisingly, is "yes." In other words, the typical American voter follows pretty much the same cues as he or she did fifty years ago.

UMP: How does your approach differ from *The American Voter*?

MLB: The key difference is that it employs contemporary presidential elections, 2000 and 2004, instead of relying on 1952 and 1956. This is important for several reasons. For one, students barely even know who the candidates, Stevenson and Eisenhower, were. For another, it is plausible that how voters behave has dramatically changed. If this is so, it needs to be documented.

In that context, it seemed important to us to follow, to the extent possible, the original research procedures of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes. By that means, a clear answer could be arrived at—we could say, one way or another, if voters were different, then to now. As we mentioned above, they are remarkably the same.

UMP: Why is voting behavior of interest?

MLB: Voting behavior is about what people do do, not what they should do or might do. It is that behavior that elects presidential candidates, or defeats them. Collectively, it is probably the most important political act in the country. Thus, how individuals do actually vote, and why, is the research focus. For example, we would not ask if some should vote for Hillary Clinton or not. That is a question of their personal values. Instead, we would ask, Given you vote for Clinton, why do you do it? With questions such as this, we begin to sort out what moves voters, and why some candidates win, some lose.

UMP: How was information gathered for your book?

MLB: The information, or data, for the book come from scientific national samples of the American electorate, for the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. These public opinion polls, conducted by the National Election Study, out of the University of Michigan, are the premier source of information available about the individual American voter.

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UMP: What are the National Election Studies and what part do they play in both the original and this book?

MLB: The National Election Studies systematically interview, face-to-face, about 1500 voters, before and after each election. Each interview lasts an hour or more, and contains an extensive set of questions about political attitudes, issues, and behaviors, and socio-economic background. There are many election polls in the country, but the NES, as they are called, serve as the flagship.

The NES surveys offered a revolutionary new way of studying voters. Never before had individuals been systematically examined in this way. They were begun in 1948, and their 1952 and 1956 surveys formed the core information source for the original. In our book, we draw a conscious parallel to that choice, selecting the most current two NES now available, that for the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004.

UMP: How does the NES arrive at a sample of the national electorate?

MLB: The NES draws a probability sample of the entire American electorate, usually of around 1500 respondents. Since selection is based on principles of randomness, it is representative of all American voters. In other words, it is effectively a microcosm of them. That is why, even though they only speak to around 1500 voters, they can make statements about all American voters. An almost unique feature, these days, of the NES is that the interviews are face-to-face (i.e., in home talking to individuals in private), as opposed to telephone. This makes them especially valuable.

UMP: You write that you are more interested in understanding the processes that lead to voting behavior rather than predicting that behavior. Why is that?

MLB: We are most interested in understanding why voters act the way they do. When you can answer the question, why did voters pick candidate X over candidate Y, you can solve a lot of disagreements. For example, why in 2004 did voters select George Bush over John Kerry? There was a lot of speculation in the press about that question. We show a number of reasons why this occurred, and rule out some reasons that do not hold up. For instance, voters saw Kerry as indecisive, and Bush as trustworthy. Also, those who saw the economy as improving stuck with the President. Further, the Democrats were less loyal to Kerry, than the Republicans were to Bush. These are but some of the findings. Such results move us well down the road, in terms of explaining voting behavior generally.

About prediction, we are not saying prediction is not important; it is. In fact, we do demonstrate that, knowing a voter's set of attitudes prior to an election, we

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can predict the vote rather accurately. Unfortunately for prediction of the overall election outcome, these measures of attitudes are not available until after the election takes place.

UMP: One point you make is very interesting, that the party with a group image problem is the Republican party. Can you explain?

MLB: There are certain groups in the society that are more reliably Democratic than Republican, among them labor, blacks, low-income voters, Jews, and urban dwellers. In other words, the historical New Deal coalition that was formed after Franklin Roosevelt became president. This coalition is changing somewhat, for example, it is gaining women and Hispanics. The Republicans have had a difficult time attracting these groups. However, they are making some inroads into the New Deal coalition, for example, with southern whites, and Catholics. Indeed, our analysis shows that Catholics, while they used to be solidly Democrat, are no longer.

UMP: It almost seems as if another [The American Voter Revisited](#) would be a good idea after the 2008 election. (In that the next election might be a watershed event).

MLB: It is always good to keep findings fresh, by incorporating new information, such as the 2008 election will provide. Will it be a watershed event? Clearly, there will be new candidate faces, on both the Republican and Democratic sides. The Iraq war, which was a major issue in 2004, still persists today. The economy is also at the top of the agenda. And, the American electorate is somewhat more ideological than it used to be. But do these things add up to a watershed? Commonly in presidential elections, there is the challenge of change. Look at the special dramas of 2000 and 2004. While 2008 will not be like them, it can be expected to have its share of compelling issues. The key question for us is how the American voter responds to these issues. Do they rely on the same signals, the same thought processes, the same underlying set of preferences, or not? My guess is that they will respond in ways very similar to ways they always have.

UMP: Expanding on that answer: What does [The American Voter Revisited](#) tell us about the upcoming 2008 election?

MLB: The outcome will be shaped by long-term, and short-term, forces. First, look at the long-term forces. At the end of the campaign, American voters return to their party identification for guidance. Almost always, they vote for the candidate of the party they feel attached to. It is important to emphasize this point. Someone who says they are a Democrat will, almost invariably, vote for the Democratic Candidate. Likewise, a Republican will do the same with regard to the Republican candidate. This does not leave a lot of wiggle room. There are

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in fact some true independents in the electorate, but they are only around ten percent of the voters. Besides party, enduring group attachments count. For example, blacks, Jews, Hispanics, women, and labor union members are clearly more likely to vote Democratic, southern white males and evangelicals are clearly more likely to vote Republican.

With respect to short-term forces, there are the various issues, and candidate leadership characteristics. The two leading issues, war and the economy, will both be on the agenda in 2008. What we have shown is that Republicans have an edge from voters on the war issue, at least if the war is going well. With respect to the economy, the party in the White House, Republican in this case, will be punished for bad times. Other issues, such as health care or the environment, will have only limited play because, as we have demonstrated, most American voters do not tend to such issues and, when they do, they have difficulty differentiating the candidates on them.

Of course, this bundle of forces does not compose a crystal ball, enabling us to foretell without error who will win the contest. But it does show that, for the individual voter, there are clear reasons that can be pointed to for his or her choice. These reasons have to do with that voter's perceived interest, in the short- and long-run. In other words, they are not merely passive spectators of a popularity contest, with shallow or fickle opinions based on personality or appearance or what the latest talking head is saying. That is, they are certainly not fools, as the authors of the original *The American Voter* pointed out, and our work continues to demonstrate.

UMP: How do you see [The American Voter Revisited's](#) place in the canon of books on American politics?

The original, *The American Voter*, was unique. It changed the way political scientists thought about how people voted, and spawned literally thousands of books and articles. One can say, without hesitation, that it is the most widely cited book in the discipline. Beyond that monumental influence, it reached, as few academic books have, the hearts and minds of many politicians and pundits. There are a handful of scholarly political science books that this group knows. This is one of them.

We of course do not expect to attain that level of recognition. However, our book, *The American Voter Revisited*, largely vindicates the findings and interpretations of *The American Voter* itself. Thus, it deserves a place next to it on the canonical bookshelf.

Read more about [The American Voter Revisited](#) at
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