

**Matters of Life and Death:
Presidential Election Rituals and Monthly Suicide Rates
in the U.S., 1948 to 1993**

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Abstract

In Durkheim's *Suicide*, he argued that differences in suicide rates across collectivities should be viewed as "social facts," indicators of the "health" of these societies. Recently, social scientists¹ have returned to the Durkheimian tradition by using indicators such as levels of organizational activity, religiosity, and the divorce rate to explain cross-national and across-time variation in suicide rates. Overlooked in the newer literature is Durkheim's discussion of collective events and public rituals as mechanisms for producing greater social integration. Using an original data set, this article explores the impact of U.S. presidential elections as collective rituals on monthly suicide rates. Controlling for a host of rival explanations, including year and month fixed effects, the business cycle, and other collective events (the Olympics), I find that certain months of the presidential election cycle are associated with lower suicide rates. I conclude that U.S. presidential politics, typically seen as an arena of conflict, can be a source of social solidarity, and therefore, society- or network-centered theories of social cohesion need to be augmented to include institutional mechanisms of social integration.

Long before the appointed day arrives, the election becomes the great, and one might say the only, affair occupying men's minds. At this time factions redouble ardor; then every forced passion that imagination can create in a happy and peaceful country spreads excitement in broad daylight. . . The whole nation gets in a feverish state, the election is the daily theme of comment in the newspapers and private conversation, the object of every action and the subject of every thought, and the sole interest for the moment.

--Alexis de Tocqueville²

Political scientists often wonder whether U.S. presidential elections really matter.³ Do the activities, strategies, and personalities of the individual candidates make a difference to the election outcome, or is the result a foregone conclusion, prefigured by forces outside campaigners' control, such as the state of economy or the long-run distribution of partisan loyalties? But outcomes are not the only basis for assessing whether election campaigns make a difference. In addition to their partisan and policy consequences, presidential elections have important communicative, normative, and symbolic roles whose effects are less obvious and less often studied. These more anthropological aspects of campaigns can "bless" ⁴the winner and restore a sense of institutional legitimacy⁵, infuse a sense of hopefulness in the citizenry,⁶ and "cause an upsurge of fellow feeling."⁷ They also provide opportunities for civic education and for popular entertainment.⁸

The ceremonial aspects of presidential elections do not end with that fateful Tuesday in November.⁹ The peaceful transition of power that marks the "morning after" reincorporates political losers into the national community.¹⁰ And the presidential inaugural address the following January "is a rite of passage, a ritual of transition in which a newly elected president is invested with the office of the presidency."¹¹The inaugural serves many purposes, but chief among them is the reconstitution of the audience as a unified people through the articulation of traditional values that form the basis for the nation.¹²

From the perspective of the “new institutionalism” associated with James March and Johann Olsen,¹³ presidential elections in the United States, I argue, are institutions that evoke and convey powerful symbols about the nature of collective life in democracies, the sacredness of democratic politics and political values to the “imagined community”¹⁴ of the American nation, the worth and dignity of individuals within it, and their moral responsibilities to the commonweal. The normative power of elections, in other words, allows “individuals to come to believe that the decisions they make are important and worthy of their care.”¹⁵ Elections, indeed, are “good for us,”¹⁶ but like national holidays, they are “neglected seedbeds of virtue” by social scientists.¹⁷

As many have noted, presidential elections are quadrennial rituals in American politics.¹⁸ But it is one thing to claim that presidential elections are rituals and quite another to demonstrate convincingly that they are such entities. That is, how do we know that elections indeed work to “legitimate state power and reaffirm the intimate connections of individuals to the society as a whole and to the state.”¹⁹ And through what mechanisms are these effects produced? It is these theoretical and empirical challenges that prompted my colleagues and me to examine the work of one of the first, and certainly best known, theorists of social ritual, Emile Durkheim.

In Durkheim’s discussion of the role of religion in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he took great pains to separate religion as a theoretical construct from what is conventionally understood as religious behavior. Religion, as he defined it, was “more than the idea of gods or spirits.”²⁰ Its function was to separate the sacred from the profane, and thus religion was essential to all societies, even modern ones, because without the sacred there was no society: Although Durkheim chose to study the significance of religion in simple societies, the better to extract the essential elements of religion, he clearly intended the concepts he studied to be applicable to the modern day:

There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality... What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ, or the Jews remembering the exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of a decalogue, and a reunion of

citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal system or some great event in the national life?²¹

Religion, for Durkheim, consists of a set of beliefs about the nature of the sacred, which he often called “collective representations,” and a set of rites, which are “rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects.”²² Durkheim divides religious rites into two categories, negative and positive, and further specifies specific types of rites within each class. Elections, we argued,²³ take the form of *representative rites*, the function of which is to activate the important beliefs of the collective:

[T]he mythology of a group is the system of beliefs common to this group. The traditions whose memory it perpetuates express the way in which society represents man and the world...So the rite serves and can serve only to sustain the vitality of these beliefs, to keep them from being effaced from memory, and, in sum, to revivify the most essential elements of the collective consciousness. Through it, the group periodically renews the sentiment which it has of itself and of its unity; at the same time, individuals are strengthened in their social natures.²⁴

Many different kinds of beliefs characterize the American collective consciousness, but as several analysts have observed, political values play an especially prominent role.²⁵ According to Hall and Lindblom (1999), the frequent and noisy complaints about American politics and its politicians, are, paradoxically, indicative of the sacredness of political values in American culture.

As Durkheim noted, the holy stands in radical contrast to the profane; in America, this means that the political is in symbolic opposition to the workings of the economy, where ruthless self-promotion is accepted as normal... Therefore, when politicians are seen to serve special interests, obey party policies, and kowtow to the influence of lobbies, they are abused for their betrayal, and held up to public mockery. This could never happen if they were not put on moral pedestals in the first place.²⁶

Elections are canonical symbols of the American moral universe, part of its “civil religion”²⁷ in which democracy is seen as America’s gift to the world. Elections, “the defining institutions of modern democracy,”²⁸ most obviously and powerfully symbolize that a regime is democratic. Democratic procedures, however, are “not adequate either to confer or to confirm legitimacy,”²⁹ for a “fundamental presumption of democracy is that citizens will feel collectively, and sometimes individually, they can

intervene in public life to affect the course of their government.”³⁰ The symbolic value of elections consequently can diminish if sentiments of political efficacy and responsiveness are not sufficiently revived by the performance of the ritual. Rituals, in other words, can be more or less successful, a point to which I will return below.

Randall Collins, a contemporary social theorist and heir to the Durkheimian tradition, distills the essential components of ritual as follows: 1) Physical assembly of the group; 2) shared attention and awareness, (which Collins calls “entrainment”); 3) shared emotion. I part ways with Collins only in the first of these: Following Dayan and Katz (1992), my colleagues and I suggested that even though modern elections, for the most part, do not involve face-to-face community, the mass media may allow people to imagine their communion even though they are not assembled in the same location. “These psychological connections may allow individual people to participate in the ritual vicariously rather than directly...the resulting solidarity is less intense and more abstract than the bonding that occurs in real places such as sports stadiums or church sanctuaries, even airplanes. But the citizen identity enacted through either real or vicarious participation [in elections] is more extensive...and so the aggregate increase in solidarity is potentially great.”³¹

As quoted above, Durkheim believed that rituals served to “strengthen people’s social natures.” These strengthened connections between individual and group, according to Collins (2004, p. 49), are manifested in four outcomes for ritual participants: 1) feelings of solidarity and sense of membership; 2) “emotional energy [EE] in the individual: a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action”; 3) a renewed respect for group symbols, both old and novel, which are defended “against the disrespect of outsiders, and even more, of renegade insiders”; 4) “feelings of morality” that provide a basis for guilt in the case of “violating the group’s solidarity and its symbolic representations”.

Collins’ outcomes provide a way to assess whether a ritual has “worked.” Do members of the collectivity feel more solidary with their compatriots and feel more personally efficacious as a result of

their participation in the ritual? Taking advantage of a the panel feature of the American National Election Studies, my colleagues and I were able to determine that in 1996, the only year in which our key variables were asked in both the pre- and post-election surveys, positive and significant change occurred in individuals' levels of political efficacy and in the feelings of generalized trust, a measure often used to index levels of social capital.³² Moreover, the changes in efficacy and in trust were reinforcing. Figure 1 reports the key coefficients from our analysis. They convincingly demonstrate that as feelings of efficacy were "revivified" by the campaign, people become more trusting of the generalized other and vice versa.

--Figure 1 here--

Our investigation of the 1996 election supports the ritual thesis, but is limited by several factors. Obviously, it is one election, and we would like to be able to make a more sweeping claim about presidential elections generally. The NES pre-election interviews begin after Labor Day and the post-election interviews are usually completed by December. But as noted earlier, the election ritual covers more than the fall campaign. The party nominating conventions in the summer are important moments in the campaign calendar and the inauguration is probably unrivaled in its rhetoric of *communitas*. Do these events also contribute to social integration and increase feelings of confidence among group members? And how can we assess this in the absence of survey data? I turn back to Durkheim for clues.

Suicide and Social Integration

Sociology, argued Durkheim, should consist of the study of social facts, collective or social tendencies that influence individual behavior, but are themselves not reducible to individual psychology. They "affect the individual from without."³³ These collective thoughts are present, however, "in germ in individual minds."³⁴ Even though society is constituted through the activities of individual persons, "individuals by combining form a psychical existence of a new species, which consequently has its manner of thinking and feeling...When the consciousness of individuals, instead of being isolated

becomes grouped and combined, something in the world has been altered.”³⁵ Individual behavior, on the other hand, is not totally determined by group forces. Everyone, in fact, has a “double existence”: “In so far as we are solidary with the group and share its life, we are exposed to their [sic] influence; but so far as we have a distinct personality of our own, we rebel against and try to escape...We are drawn in a social direction and [at the same time] follow the inclinations of our own natures.”³⁶

The resultant tug-of-war between individuals’ “own natures” and society does not have a predetermined victor. There is, in other words, *variation* in the strength of these opposing forces, variation that can be systematically studied and used to account for various social phenomena. Suicide was one such phenomenon. Durkheim’s question was posed sociologically: Not, why do some people commit suicide and not others? but rather, why do suicide *rates* vary across different groups (countries, religious groups, occupations, regions, etc.) or across time for the same group? In formulating an explanation, Durkheim developed what might be called the “Goldilocks” (my word) theory of social integration. Some kinds of suicides happen when social forces are “too weak;” others, when they are “too strong.”³⁷

One occurs because society allows the individual to escape it, being insufficiently aggregated in some parts or even in the whole; the other, because society holds him in too strict tutelage. Haven given the name of *egoism* to the state of the ego living its own life and obeying itself alone, that of *altruism* adequately expresses the opposite, where the ego is not its own property .³⁸

It is the former, egoistic suicide, which Durkheim believed posed the greater threat in modern societies. In these circumstances, “suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social group to which the individual forms a part.”³⁹ Durkheim’s account of how weak societies produce comparatively more suicides among their members is worth quoting at length, for it alludes to some of the intervening social and psychological mechanisms that explain the link between social integration and suicide:

[I]t can be said that, as collective force is one of the obstacles best calculated to restrain suicides, its weakening involves a development of suicide. When society is strongly integrated, it holds individuals under its control, considers them at its service and thus forbids them to dispose willfully of themselves. Accordingly, it opposes their evading their duties to it through death. But how could society impose its

supremacy upon them when they refuse to accept this subordination as legitimate? It no longer then possesses the requisite authority to retain [individuals] in their duty if they wish to desert; and conscious of its own weakness, it even recognizes their right to do freely what it can no longer prevent. So far as they are the admitted masters of their destinies, it is their privilege to end their lives. They, on their part, have no reason to endure life's suffering patiently. For they cling to life more resolutely when belonging to a group they love, so as not to betray interests they put before their own. The bond that unites them in common causes attaches them to life and the lofty goal they envisage prevents their feeling personal troubles so deeply. There is, in short, in a cohesive and animated society a constant interchange of ideas and feelings from all to each and each to all, something like a mutual moral support, which instead of throwing the individual on his own resources, leads him to share in the collective energy and supports his own when exhausted.⁴⁰

These variables, such as social support, are precisely those that have been identified in the public health literature as responsible for providing protection against bad health outcomes.⁴¹

The point of this brief tour of Durkheim's sociology of suicide is to suggest that variation in suicide rates can serve as a useful proxy for social integration, a step also recently taken by Helliwell (2004) in his study of cross-national suicide rates and social capital. If rituals serve to strengthen the bond between individual and society, and if presidential elections, as argued, are such things, then we should expect to find, as one of their ritual "products," lower suicide rates. Studying over-time variation in suicide rates, in other words, will allow me to expand our treatment of election rituals to cover presidential elections more generally.⁴²

Before describing in detail the methodology of my inquiry, it is worth noting that suicide is considered morally unacceptable by contemporary Americans. Public opinion on the morality of suicide, with one exception, for incurable disease, has not budged in more than a quarter century. According to General Social Survey, about 90% of the American public cannot countenance the taking of one's own life in the cases of financial ruin, family dishonor, or "being tired of life." The "collective force" against suicide, therefore, is still quite strong even in highly individualized American society. These normative precepts should be more compelling during periods of greater social integration.

--Figure 2 here--

Data

Dependent Variable: My dependent variable is the monthly annualized suicide rate per 100,000 U.S. population from January 1948 to December 1993.⁴³ My data set, therefore, comprises 552 months, 46 years, and 12 presidential election cycles.

Independent Variables: In accounting for variation in suicide rates, I control for the monthly unemployment rate. The macro-economy influences suicide rates,⁴⁴ and it is necessary to control for its influence because according to theories of the Political Business Cycle, incumbent regimes may try to manipulate the economy to improve their re-election chances. To ease interpretation, the monthly unemployment rate is entered into the regression as a deviation from its series mean. I use dummy variables to index month in order to control for seasonal variation in suicide rates, which are highest in the spring and lowest in the fall and winter months.⁴⁵ I include a dummy variable which takes on the value of 1 during a month in which the Summer or Winter Olympic Games occur because both contests (until recently) were held during election years. Finally, I use a lagged dependent variable to control for the lagged effects of independent variables via the Koyck transformation.⁴⁶ To ease interpretation, the lagged suicide rate is also mean-centered.

Model

I model the monthly suicide rate as a function of its lag (mean centered), the contemporaneous unemployment rate (mean centered), and the series of dummy variables described above. In addition, year-to-year fluctuation is captured by 45 dummy variables with 1950, a non-election year, the excluded, or reference year. The cross-year variation could be modeled instead by using such things as rising divorce rates, expanding suburbanization, more effective anti-depressant medication, and other large-scale social processes operating during this time period. These macro sociological forces do not occur

with the periodicity of presidential elections, however, and therefore, I do not model them explicitly with contextual variables. Because these changes are uncorrelated with the election cycle, their omission will not bias the estimates of campaign effects. Seasonal variation in suicide rates is modeled by 11 dummy variables for months of the year, with July, the excluded, or reference, month.

The ritual thesis is tested by a series of year by month interactions between the appropriate months of the year and a dummy variable for presidential election cycle year. In the case of the inauguration, the interaction is between the month of January and the year after the presidential election. These interactions should be significantly negative, indicating that the suicide rate is lower during the key ritual months of the presidential campaign and its aftermath. I also include an interaction between the month of December and presidential election year in order to assess whether the election merely delays, rather than prevents, suicides.

Results

Results are reported in Table 1. (The coefficients for the yearly dummy variables are not shown in the table.) They indicate a strong seasonal pattern to suicide, as expected. Compared to July, the suicide rate is significantly higher in the spring months of March, April, and May, and June, and significantly lower in the late fall months of November and December. December, in particular, brings a noticeable drop in the suicide rate.

Turning to the coefficients of theoretical interest, the interactions of campaign months with presidential election years are negative, as predicted. Suicide rates are lower in August, September, October, and November of election years, as well as the following January, although in the cases of October and November the coefficient is not statistically significant. There is a “death spike” in December of election years, indicate by the positive coefficient for the December x election interaction year. However, it is not statistically significant and is smaller in size than the corresponding “death dip” in the previous month.

--Table 1 here--

Are All Rituals Created Equal?

The evidence in Table 1 is clearly in line with the perspective on presidential elections adopted here. However else they may matter, they do seem able to create social integration, at least in the post-war period I have studied. The coefficients in Table 1, however, represent average election effects, and one way to expand on the findings is to ask whether election effects on suicide are moderated by features of the campaigns that we can measure. Are some elections better than others?

To see whether the beneficial effects of elections have been realized more in some presidential elections than others, I collected the residuals from the regression shown in Table 1. I then treat the residuals for August and September of presidential election years, the two months during the fall election campaign with statistically significant interaction coefficients, as dependent variables. Months during presidential election years in which the residuals are positive indicate that the actual suicide rate is higher than predicted. Conversely, negative residuals correspond to election years in which the actual suicide rate is lower than expected. Therefore, “better” campaigns are associated with increasingly negative residuals.

I correlated the residuals for these months with a variety of campaign-specific information: voter turnout⁴⁷, closeness of the two-party vote, third-party performance, and a trend variable. The latter captures the simple notion that presidential campaigns have declined in quality over time for a variety of reasons.⁴⁸ These correlations are depicted in Table 2. First, note that none of the residuals is correlated significantly with the voter turnout rate. Higher levels of turnout, therefore, are not necessarily an indication (or result) of a successful election ritual. Nor do close elections or unusual elections produce strong deviations from average election effects.

--Table 2 here--

Instead, the trend variable is very strongly related to the August residuals and somewhat strongly to the September residuals. It is tempting to conclude that the result for the August residuals is due to the declining significance of the nominating conventions as newsworthy topics. Figure 3 presents the scatterplot of the August residuals against the combined number of hours the three major networks broadcast the presidential nominating conventions.⁴⁹ The correlation is -.7, and significant, with 11 elections, at the .02 level. Tellingly, network news coverage is correlated only -.2 with the September residuals, suggesting that, indeed, the August effect is due primarily to the conventions. As attention to the conventions has declined, these events of the presidential election ritual appear to have become less effective as foci of “entrainment.”⁵⁰

--Figure 3 here--

September marks the traditional kick-off of the presidential campaign. According to Roderick Hart’s content analysis, candidate rhetoric (speeches and ads) and press coverage of the campaign have become less optimistic in more recent elections.⁵¹ Patterson documents that reporting of the campaign has become less descriptive--focused on what the candidates say and do--and more journalist-centered and analytical.⁵² In addition, the media’s coverage of the campaign changes significantly between September and October. According to Hart, “Commonality” references in the news media show sharp declines between the beginning and the end of the fall campaigns,⁵³ even though the candidates’ rhetoric itself shows no such change. These cross-election and intra-campaign differences suggest that analysis of campaign and media discourse over the fall election may provide additional insight into the question of ritual effectiveness.

Conclusions

Presidential elections are not designed to be public health interventions, and it could be argued that they should not be evaluated upon that basis. However, many political scientists have maintained that elections have profound consequences for collective life in democracies in addition to whatever

accountability and representational outcomes they might produce. It is not unfair, therefore, to inquire systematically about how well presidential elections perform these extra-political functions. My analysis confirms that presidential elections do heighten social solidarity, as evinced by lower suicide rates. However, the results also suggest that the potential of elections in this vein is less realized now than in the earlier campaigns, something that should be included in the ledger when evaluating the quality of American electoral democracy.

My results also speak to an important debate in the social capital literature between those who see social cohesion as primarily a social network-centered phenomenon,⁵⁴ something built-up from interactions in civil society, and those who contend that the performance of political institutions and the design of public policies can act in more “top-down” fashion to foster social trust and solidarity.⁵⁵ Presidential elections are arenas of socialization in American society. Their social and ideational by-products have consequences. The choices that campaigners make about how to conduct them and, news organizations, to cover them, should not escape our scrutiny, for they have non-trivial effects on the health, literally, of the body politic.

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Table 1
Regression Analysis of Monthly Suicide Rates, 1948 to 1993,
Incorporating Presidential Election Campaign Months and Inauguration

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic
Constant	11.30	.13	90.16 [^]
Presidential Campaign Aug.	-.21	.14	-1.5*
Presidential Campaign Sept.	-.28	.14	-2.1**
Presidential Campaign Oct.	-.11	.14	-.73
Presidential Campaign Nov.	-.17	.14	-1.4
Presidential Campaign Dec.	.16	.14	1.1
Presidential Inauguration Jan.	-.26	.14	-1.9**
Olympics	.01	.09	.12
Unemployment _(t)	.10	.04	2.2 [^]
Suicide _(t-1)	.18	.04	4.1 [^]
January	-.05	.10	-.46
February	.00	.09	.04
March	.52	.08	6.36 [^]
April	.71	.08	8.87 [^]
May	.40	.09	4.78 [^]
June	.20	.08	2.47 [^]
August	.02	.09	.27
September	.03	.09	.33
October	-.19	.09	-2.15 [^]
November	-.24	.09	-2.70 [^]
December	-.80	.0	-8.77 [^]

N=551

R²=.89

SEE=.38

Durbin-Watson=1.96

***p < .10 ** p < .05, one-tailed**

[^] p < .05, two-tailed

Equation includes yearly dummy variables, coefficients not shown. Reference month is July. Reference year is 1950.

Table 2

Correlations of Campaign Characteristics with Regression Residuals

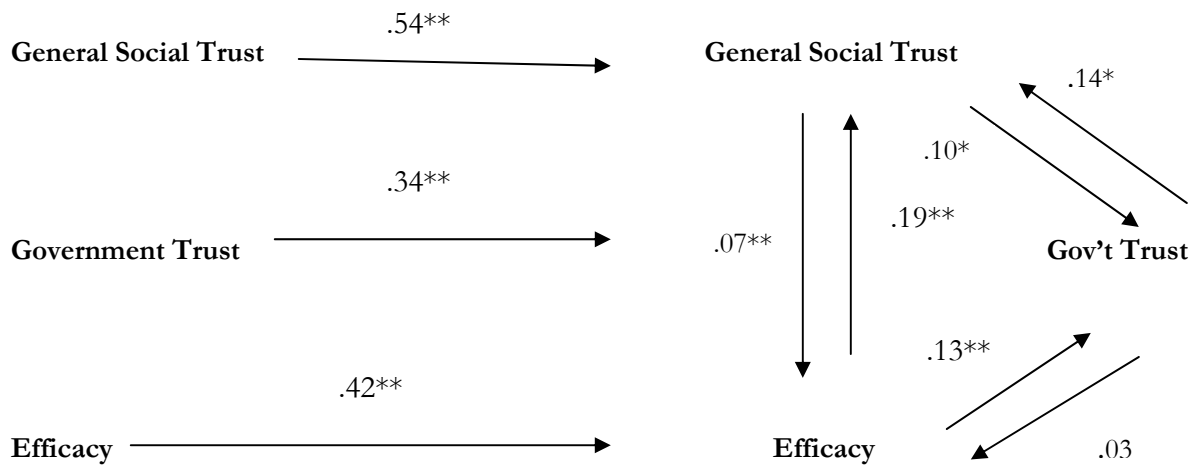
	August Residuals	September Residuals
Voter Turnout	-.39	-.12
Election Closeness	-.16	.07
Third-party Support	.24	.13
Trend	.83***	.54*

*** $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$ * $p < .10$, two-tailed

**Figure 1:
Model and Coefficients from Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson (1999)**

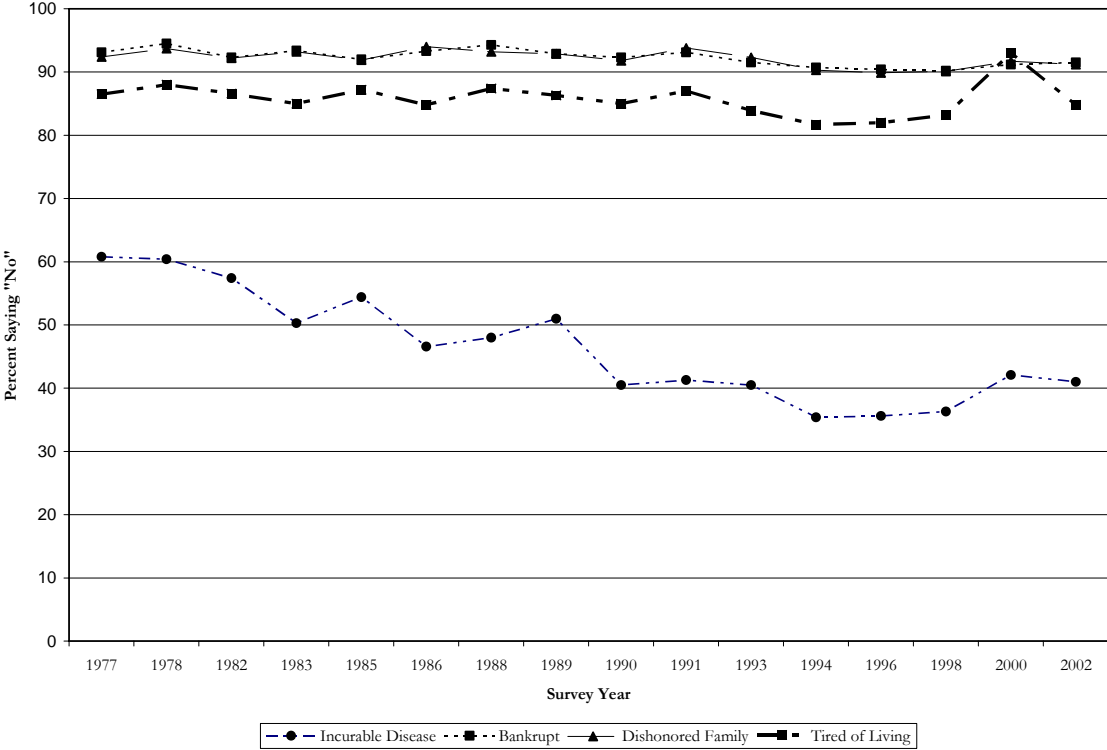
Pre-election

Post-Election



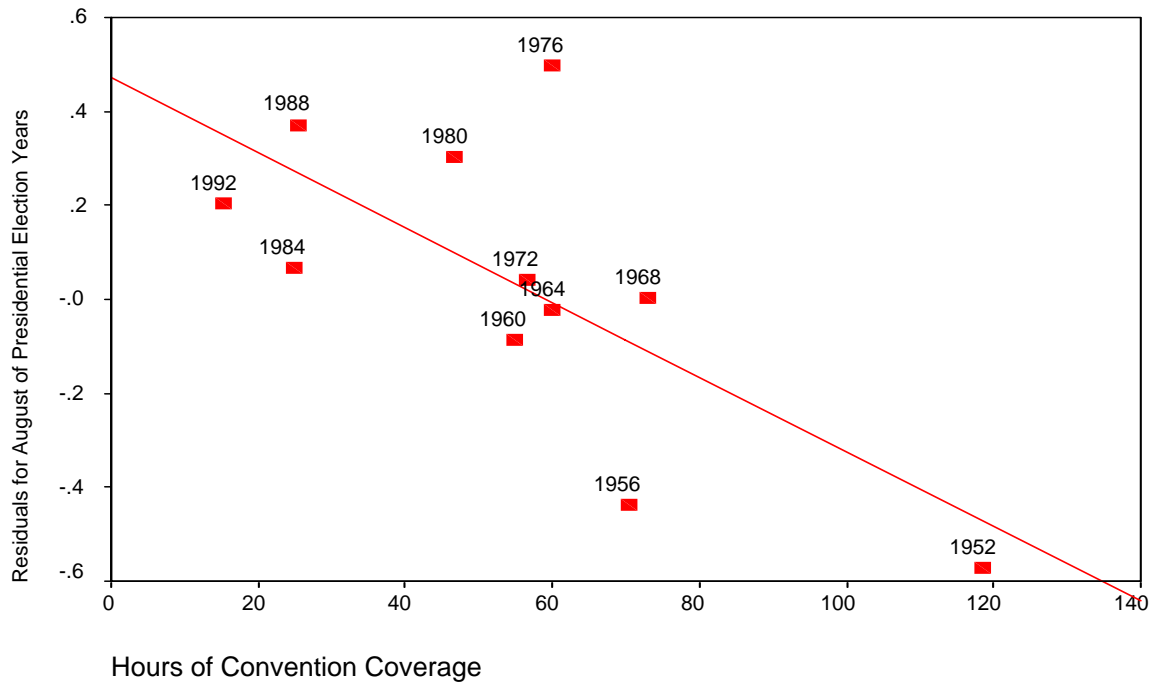
**** p < .05, two-tailed**
*** p < .05, one-tailed**

Figure 2: The Moral Acceptability of Suicide



Source: General Social Survey, 1977-2002. Question Wording: Do you think a person has the right to end his or her own life if this person . . .

Figure 3: Relationship between Convention Coverage and Regression Residuals for Month of August



Notes

¹ See, e.g., Baller and Richardson 2002; Cutler, Glaeser, and Norberg, 2000; Helliwell, 2004; Lorant et al. 2005; Pescosolido and Georgianna 1989; Stockard and O'Brien 2002; Thorlindsson and Bernburg 2005; van Tubergen, te Grotenhuis, and Ultee 2005.

² de Tocqueville, Alexis, p. 135.

³ See, e.g., Holbrook 1996; Bartels and Zaller 2001.

⁴ Katz 1997.

⁵ Anderson et al. 2005.

⁶ Zullo 1994.

⁷ Dayan and Katz 1992.

⁸ Scher 1997; Buchanan 2000.

⁹ Some take a dim view of these more spectacular features of elections, seeing them as manipulative. Edelman, for example, writes that the campaign “encourages acceptance of a myth by the masses of political spectators: a myth of protected status and of policies based upon an objective standard of equity rather than relative bargaining resources.” (1971:22). And Weissberg (1975; see also Ginsberg and Weissberg 1978), finding no “reality-based” reason for a feelings of political efficacy, concludes that such sentiments are illusionary, “a convenient set of beliefs protecting elites from mass dissatisfaction” (p. 486). I do not disagree with the claim that some features of elections may be mythical. These myths, however, may have positive by-products that should not be overlooked. Moreover, it is not the benighted that appear to be most vulnerable to the trappings of the election myth. Instead, we find precisely the opposite. Individuals with higher levels of political knowledge are considerably more likely to experience boosts in social trust and, to a somewhat smaller extent, feelings of political efficacy (Brehm, Rahn, and Carlson 1999).

¹⁰ Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson, 1999.

¹¹ Campbell and Jamieson 1990, p. 15.

¹² Ibid, p. 16.

¹³ March and Olsen 1989.

¹⁴ Anderson 1983.

¹⁵ Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson, p. 127.

¹⁶ Hart 2000.

¹⁷ Etzioni 2004, p. 3.

¹⁸ Edelman 1964; Bennett 1996; Scher 1997; Schudson 1994.

¹⁹ Schudson 1994, p. 35.

²⁰ Durkheim 1915, p. 35.

²¹ Ibid, p. 475.

²² Ibid, p. 41.

²³ Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson 1999.

²⁴ Durkheim 1915:420.

²⁵ E.g., Almond and Verba 1965; Huntington 2004; Lipset 1996; Merelman 1991; Spillman 1997.

²⁶ Hall and Lindblom 1999, p.111-112.

²⁷ Hammond 1980.

²⁸ Katz 1997, p. 1

²⁹ Ibid, p. 102.

³⁰ Madsen 1978, pp. 867-68.

³¹ Rahn, Brehm, and Carlson 1999, p. 128. See also Tocqueville 1960: “No doubt the influence exercised by the President on the conduct of affairs is weak and indirect, but it affects the whole nation; the choice of a President is of but moderate concern to each citizen, but it does concern them all. And any interest, however slight, takes on great importance when it is general.” (p. 135).

³² Brehm and Rahn 1997; Putnam 1995, 2000.

³³ Durkheim 1915, p. 35.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 319.

³⁷ Regulation is another dimension in Durkheim's typology. "Anomie" was the name given to "too little" regulation; fatalism, to "too much". Durkheim scholars differ over whether regulation and integration are really two different kinds of social forces. Indeed, Durkheim himself noted that egoism (the low end of integration) and anomie (the low end of regulation) had a peculiar "affinity for one another." For an especially clear discussion of these dimensions, see further Pope (1976).

³⁸ Durkheim 1951, p. 221, original emphasis.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 209.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 209-210.

⁴¹ Berkman, Glass, Brissette, and Seeman 2000.

⁴² Because of the influence of Durkheim on the development of sociology, suicide has been a frequent subject of study in this field. Sociologists have examined whether a number of public occasions, including holidays, important sporting events, and presidential elections, cause "death dips" (see, e.g., Curtis, Loy, and Karnilowicz 1986; Trovato 1998). The putative impact of presidential elections, in particular, was sharply debated in sociology's premier journal, *The American Sociological Review*, in the early 1980s. Boor (1981; Boor and Fleming 1984) reported evidence consistent with the thesis of this article, namely, that elections are integrative events, and therefore, lead to fewer suicides. This claim was challenged by Wasserman (1983, 1984), who contended that these results were spurious, arising because of failure to control for the political business cycle (Tufte 1978; more recently, see Suzuki 1992, and De Boef and Kellstadt 2004). Several things prompted my re-examination of this debate. In these studies, the presidential campaign was limited to the months of September and October of election years. However, as discussed above, other months of the election cycle also involve ritualistic activities. The nominating conventions typically occur in late July and August, election day itself and the peaceful transition of power (the 2000 election notwithstanding) in November can be solidarity producing (Brehm, Rahn, and Carlson 1999), and the inauguration of the President in January the following year is another important aspect of the election ritual. In addition, data are now available for a five more presidential elections, itself a reason to re-examine their argument given the stakes. The disagreement between Boor and Wasserman also involved several methodological considerations, all of which can be accommodated with the time-series regression approach I employ in my analysis. Finally, I go beyond their disagreement to consider possible mediators of election effects on suicide.

⁴³ Monthly suicide rates from 1948 to 1960 were obtained from Public Health Service Publication No. 1677. After 1960, rates were calculated based on monthly number of deaths by suicide reported in *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1900-1984*, and *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1985-1993*, available at the National Center for Health Statistics (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/vsus/vsus.htm>) and estimates of the U.S. resident population by month from *Current Population Reports* of the U.S. Census Bureau. Numbers of suicide deaths by month are not available for years 1994-1998. After publication, the data will be available for replication upon request.

⁴⁴ Berk, Dodd, and Henry 2006; Lester 2001; Neumayer 2003; Stack 2000; Viren 2005.

⁴⁵ Durkheim 1951; Wasserman 1983. It is possible that seasonal variation in suicide is smoothing out in more recent years. See Ajdacic-Gross et al. 2005.

⁴⁶ Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1981.

⁴⁷ I use McDonald and Popkin (2001) estimates for turnout.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Bennett 1992; Bartels 2000; Buchanan 2000; Hart 2000.

⁴⁹ Data are from Table 12-1, Stanley and Niemi 1994.

⁵⁰ Using a different methodology, Bennett (1996) pinpoints the 1976 election as a turning point in the functioning of the election ritual. Interestingly, 1976 is the election year in which both the August and September residuals are at their peak.

⁵¹ Hart 2000, Figure 6.1, p. 145. Finkel and Geer's (1998) analysis of campaign advertising does not show this same linear trend, however. Kathleen Hall Jamieson's (2000) content analysis of campaign discourse (ads, debates and speeches) shows yet a third pattern, with the percentage of "attack" discourse falling from 1952 to 1968, and then generally increasing through 1996.

⁵² Patterson 1993, Figure 2.3, p. 82, and Figure 3.1, p. 114.

⁵³ Hart 2000, Figure 7.2, p. 177.

⁵⁴ E.g., Putnam 1993, 2000.

⁵⁵ Brehm and Rahn 1997; Callahan 2005; Stolle and Hooghe 2003.