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Our Moneyball Election

Posted by *Adam Gopnik*

We have arrived, this morning, at the true moneyball moment in American electoral politics, where the fight is not just between candidates but also between two ways of predicting the future, analytic and impressionistic. Nate Silver has Obama's chances of reëlection around a ninety-per-cent certainty; Sam Wang, of the "Princeton Consortium"—though exactly who consorts with him in Princeton is unclear, the idea of consorting, electorally, is too winning not to relish—has Romney's odds even longer than that. Note that they are not saying that the election will be over in a hour or anything like that; on the contrary, they predict that what is, historically, a close race, will remain one, with at most a couple of percentage points dividing the two men. What they are saying is that, short of a statistical miracle, it can only end one way. What the pro-pundit class is saying, on the other hand, is that no one really knows, it will be a long night, it could go either way, and the rest of the usual excited—and, if you don't care too much about the future of the country, exciting—chatter.

It might be worth italicizing the truth that this difference really is a child of the Bill James sabermetrics revolution, which Michael Lewis analyzed so enthusiastically in his best seller "Moneyball." The point is that what Silver and Cohn and Wang—there's a law firm for you!— are doing is not just arriving at a somewhat different result by a somewhat different set of formulae, but pursuing an entirely different (no other word to use here) epistemology. The confrontation between analysts and impressionists is precisely like that, with the statistical analyst—the Jonah Hill character in "Moneyball," the movie—and Billy Beane on one side, and all those scouts and baseball pros on the other.

What Bill James and his acolytes insisted was, simply, that the future would be like the past— that ball players would perform in the majors at essentially the same level that they did in the minors. What the scouts insisted is that the future is *not* like the past—not reliably—that each ballplayer, like each campaign, is so different in his shape and potential that you delude yourself by looking only at the numbers. How can you say a guy will hit .300 in the majors when he's hitting .300 in Scranton? Don't you know the difference between minor-league pitching and major-league curveballs? Well, yes, the analysts say, obviously you have to adjust the numbers for the circumstances—if your minor-leaguer is hitting in a league where everyone hits .300 it means less than if he's doing it in a league where everyone hits .150—but the numbers are, as a matter of demonstrable fact, consistent.

Nate Silver and the rest are not saying that they're looking at the *same* broad run of evidence and making a scientific guess while the others are just guessing. What they're saying is that you can look at much, much *less* evidence, but be confident in what it tells you just because you are confident that the future will be like the past—that polling averages, properly adjusted, are a nearly infallible guide to the results of elections. The pro-pundit class is saying, echoing those scouts and pros, that there are just too many variables—too much uncertainty with tens of

millions of individuals acting according to the whims and moods and strictures of the moment—to think that this is so. As with ballplayers, so with politicians, the pros say: only a seasoned and practiced eye can suss out, exactly, the tools of each campaign—who they reach, what they say, how they react—and get the right answer. It's a gut-level thing, they say, and they point, not unreasonably, to the many cases where polls are wrong, missing the point that, on the whole, they're right.

Those gut feelings pan out just enough to give you confidence that they are less fallible guide than we might think. For example, my own subjective impression is that, far from feeling detached or depressed about today's election compared with 2008's, Obama supporters feel that *more* is at stake today—that this is, as Jonathan Cohn has said, the election of our lives. One reason is Paul Ryan: his remarks, ably [annotated by my colleague Amy Davidson](#), on Obama's betrayal of the "Judeo-Christian" creed ought to be seen as appalling as they obviously were. "Judeo-Christian," one ought to add, is a very recent term, invented by Christians to insist on religious primacy in politics; the "Judeo" bit is there to ward off accusations of anti-Semitism. Martin E. Marty, a Lutheran pastor and long-time professor of theology at the Theological Seminary of the University of Chicago, put it perfectly many years ago when he wrote "a bill of particulars against the political use of the term," which, he said, is designed to exclude someone. The best candidate is the secular humanist, the liberal individualist, or the Enlightened Founding Father (until the last of these gets baptized into "born-again" status). And yet substantively, what do its partisans contend for that is not available somewhere in ancient or modern philosophy? The *motives* for being just and ensuring justice are distinctive in Jewish and Christian faiths, and that is terribly important. Yet the contents of just acts done on Platonic, Aristotelian, Kantian, Millsian or Jeffersonian grounds can be the same. The issue, then, is that of the place of religious motivations in the public realm. Privileging the "Judeo-Christian tradition" means putting a premium on a particular scriptural revelation. Alternately, to turn Jewish and Christian faiths into generic philosophies for civil purposes is to misunderstand whatever in them ever gave people hope or power, and amounts to a desecration. That result is a high price to pay for attaining a momentary political advantage.

One wonders what the noise would have been like if a Muslim politician—we do have one or two—had accused Ryan of betraying "Sharia-Islamic traditions." Even Billy Beane might have been confounded.

And what does *that* sort of analysis have to do with numbers? It is a reminder that, percentages and poll results aside, what changes the numbers are people's, well, faiths. What is at stake in this dispute is, at heart, the agency of observers: whether it is possible to see past the static and the numbers to the core reality that others might miss. *Everyone else says that the guy can't hit; I know by watching him that he's got what's needed in his gut, and that he can. Everyone else is saying that Obama has it locked up; but I look at those crowds and I hear Romney talking, and I know there's a wave coming.* In a sense, Silver et al. say we can't. If they're right, what we should learn is not that Nate Silver is smarter than the rest of us; it is that no one, and nothing, quite escapes the numbers. But we need also remember that, en masse, we make the numbers from our changing motives, and in that doubleness—we're each part of one giant immovable pile of numbers; we each choose where to place ourselves within the pile—resides a (still quite beautiful) mystery of election.

[Triumph of the Nerds: Nate Silver Wins in 50 States](#) November 7, 2012 by [Chris Taylor](#) 33

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[Barack Obama](#) may have comfortably won re-election in the electoral college, and opened up a decisive lead (two million and counting) in the popular vote. But here is the absolute, undoubted winner of this election: [Nate Silver](#) and his running mate, big data. [Watch Nate Silver video]

The *[Fivethirtyeight.com](#)* analyst, despite being [pilloried by the pundits](#), outdid even his 2008 prediction. In that year, his mathematical model correctly called 49 out of 50 states, missing only Indiana (which went to Obama by 0.1%.)

This year, according to all projections, Silver's model has correctly predicted 50 out of 50 states. A last-minute flip for Florida, which finally went blue in Silver's prediction on Monday night, helped him to a perfect game.

A caveat: Florida has not yet been called officially, but Obama is in the lead with 98% of precincts reporting. If anything, Silver's placing of Florida on a knife edge makes him look even more prescient. No wonder one of the night's more popular tweets suggested that he was actually from the future, working from old newspapers.

What does this victory mean? That mathematical models can no longer be derided by "gut-feeling" pundits. That Silver's contention — TV pundits are generally no more accurate than a coin toss — must now be given wider credence.

The great thing about a model like Silver's (and that of similarly winning math nerds, such as Sam Wang of the [Princeton Election Consortium](#)) is that it takes all that myopic human bias out of the equation. The ever-present temptation to cherry-pick polls is subverted.

You set your parameters at the start, deciding how much weight and accuracy you're going to give to each poll based purely on their historical accuracy. You feed in whatever other conditions you think will matter to the result. Then, you sit back and let the algorithm do the work.

Silver may be a registered Democrat, but he learned back when he was doing baseball analysis that he'd never get anywhere if his models weren't absolutely neutral, straight down the line between feuding teams.

By 2016, if the networks are paying attention, don't be surprised to see that the talking heads are all Nate Silver clones. Every media organization will now want its own state poll-based algorithm, especially given [how much traffic Silver has driven to the *New York Times*' website](#). We'll see more about that kind of model, and less stories about individual polls, which are almost always misleading unless you aggregate them.

Statistics, big data, neutral mathematical models — this, it turns out, is what people want. Who knew?

Well, we geeks knew, but we're starting to get used to having the rest of the world follow our lead. We had the smartphones first, we read the fantasy books before they became blockbuster movies and TV shows, and now we can boast that we stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Nate Silver's data before it was popular.

For the Nate-haters, here's the 538 prediction and actual results side by side