The Influence of Name Sounds in the Congressional Elections of 2006

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This study retests this investigator's analytical model used in previously published studies of 1996 and 1998 elections measuring the influence of selected phonetic features of surnames on the relative success of various political candidates. The model presumably works best when voters are least motivated or most confused by issues. In the analyses of the 1998 elections the reliability of the model was 66%. In the analyses of the 2006 elections the reliability of the model was 68.6%. These results suggest that the analytical model is reliable over time and that the importance of issues and/or other factors was relatively constant or evenly polarized.

Phonetic symbolism has been much debated and examined in speech records and controlled experiments (see, for example, Fischer-Jørgensen, Jakobson, Marchand, and Osgood as discussed in my *Communication Monographs* article [1998]; see also Whissel's more recent [2001] study confirming a relationship of sound and emotion in given names). However, no predictive analytical models have been tested in a natural social context of the emotive values in language sounds except my own as previously reported. The purpose of the current study is to retest the analytical model of speech sounds in the surnames of political candidates as a predictor of electoral success and to interrogate the relative importance of substantive issues in this particular election.

A clear and measurable case in which speech sounds may affect human behavior lies in political elections. Voters usually attribute their electoral choices to positions candidates articulate on issues, to party loyalty, or to some form of discursive meaning, but many, especially "undecided" voters, may also be influenced by a variety of emotive

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associations, among which are the sounds of candidates' names, especially a clear, predictable rhythm and complementary attributes. Unlike other types of emotive associations, those that might be linked to the phonetics and prosody of names are not only non-discursive, but are also fixed and relatively non-manipulable. Thus, if language sounds have an effect on human behavior, they should have a predictable influence on voter behavior. The results of this study confirm that reasonably accurate predictions of election results can be made on the basis of selected phonetic features (an analytical model) in surnames of candidates.

General elections usually offer voters a practical choice of two names. Thus, if speech sounds have symbolic or aesthetic value in and of themselves, we should be able to detect some influence in election results, especially in those elections in which issues seem unimportant or confusing, i.e., when discursive information is lacking, ignored, or self-canceling in its claims.

Three considerations are important: First, one might assume that the mood of the electorate varies. If so, names that are attractive in one election may not be so in the next election. Thus, the more variation in public mood or in basic human responses, the less predictability we should expect with any set of phonetic parameters, or, conversely, the greater the predictability found with any set of parameters, the less variation and greater consistency can be presumed in public mood or in common human response patterns to a particular pattern of sound.

Second, contrasting phonetic patterns can be considered equally attractive or appealing for different qualitative reasons, just as very different types of music can evoke unexpected or unusual interest in a given setting (e.g., different kinds of street music that might be encountered quite by chance). Thus, an unusual phonetic pattern might evoke unexpected interest because of its distinctiveness or some qualitative fit with other images of the moment. An assertive sounding name might attract our interest not because we are initially interested in assertiveness but because it seems to fit the character of the person or the perceived context so completely. Something may be attractive simply because it has a unique consistency and our minds crave variety. Assuming that such cases exist, no single set of phonetic attributes can account for all general responses to name sounds in any human behavior,

no matter how elaborately specified. Yet, some set of attributes may still correlate with all responses as an overall statistical pattern.

Third, we may assume that many responses may exhibit patterns not found in individual responses. Any specific sound or set of sounds may evoke contrasting associations with some people even while they evoke a different and predictable pattern of associations with people in general. At best, a single set of phonetic attributes might be linked to common human responses only in a statistical way. My previous studies show that a particular set of attributes can be statistically linked to general voter behavior, and they suggest that all name sounds evoke some type of emotive response in everyone.

Two previous reports by this investigator have confirmed that voters, perhaps the small but crucial number of "undecided" voters, seem to be influenced in a predictable way by the sounds of language, especially a clear, distinctive rhythm, in the family names of political candidates (as noted in my previous studies, similar analyses of given names do not produce statistically significant results, perhaps because voter attention is focused on family names in our political system). These studies report the predictive reliability of added scores from twenty phonetic attributes (the analytical model shown below and discussed at greater length in my earlier studies). They thereby illustrate in a practical way that speech sounds have an effect of their own on human behavior, i.e., in addition to morphological forms suggesting gender or social status, in addition to lexical meanings of face value (e.g., "Black" or "White," whether or not ironical), and in addition to name familiarity and obvious associations (e.g., the name "Hitler" scores well but has very negative associations).

In each study I have used the same analytical model while refining procedures and definitions and using new data. For a full description of the model and analytical procedures, I refer the reader to my previous studies listed below. The current study is designed to double-check the reliability of the model with the same type of database used in 1998. It includes predictions based on prior analyses of the names of the principal contenders in the 469 Congressional elections of 2006–435 House races and 34 Senate races.

However, my procedure was to delete all third party candidates except for the Senate race in Connecticut. My deletions included the independent candidate in Vermont who won the Senate race, and so I allowed that to lower my statistical averages.

I also deleted all incumbents running unopposed by a major party candidate, or races in which principal contenders could not be accurately determined, as in a few races in Louisiana and Texas where ballots allowed multiple candidates from the same political party–Democrats and Republicans. Thus, only 411 races were actually counted.

I have always assumed that my analytical model works best when voters are least motivated and/or most confused by issues. This hypothesis is suggested by the fact that the model has greater reliability in races that are at a higher level (e.g., presidential and for judgeships in which candidates do not campaign on issues) and less reliability at the local level where candidates are better known personally. It is also often said during political campaigns that voters are more interested in issues than usual. If so, then the effect of name sounds and the reliability of my analytical model should decrease.

At the same time, we should also assume that the effect of name sounds might be decisive only for a limited number of voters. If an electorate is focused on very polarizing issues, it may be that relatively few voters are swayed decisively by name sounds. If the electorate is evenly divided over polarizing issues, then those who are swayed by name sounds would decide the winners. If, on the other hand, the electorate is lopsided on the polarizing issues, then those who are swayed by name sounds would not affect the outcome.

My purpose in applying my analytical model to the elections of 2006 was to test its scientific reliability over time and to see if the results might suggest whether or not and the degree to which voters were motivated by the issues, especially by the war in Iraq. Were the voters clearly polarized by that and/or other issues, and if so was the polarization lopsided or evenly divided?

Summary of Results

As already mentioned, the data used in this analysis of the 2006 elections very closely parallels the data used in my analysis of the 1998 elections–the names of principal candidates in all but a few of the contested House and Senate seats nationwide. In 1998 the analytical model predicted 278 winners out of 421 elections, "demonstrating a high level of statistical reliability–i.e., a chi-square value of 43.085 (1 degree of freedom) with $p<.001$" (Smith 1999, 325). For the year 2006 the

model predicted 282 winners out of 411 elections for an even higher level of reliability. Considering the comparability of the data used, these results strongly confirm the efficacy of the analytical model over time, as well as the fact that speech sounds in general and name sounds in particular have an effect on human behavior.

At the same time, these results do not necessarily indicate that the electorate was more or less focused on particular issues, party loyalty, or other factors (e.g., incumbency). From 1998 to 2006, the percentage of correct predictions increased from 66% to 68.6%, which suggests that voters were less focused on issues, other factors, or even more confused than ever. However, we should refrain from jumping to that conclusion for at least two reasons: First, even though the increase in the reliability of the model strongly confirms its scientific validity, the increase itself is not highly significant statistically. That is to say, the increase may be reasonably described in terms of chance.

Second, the polarization on issues and/or other factors may have been evenly divided, and the number of voters swayed by name sounds may have been relatively small yet decisive in a modestly greater number of contests. This explanation may seem reasonable from news reports of exit polling, but we need to bear in mind that exit polling is designed to elicit statements of interests and that the news media have a need to express those interests in discursive terms. However, this explanation may be supported by the fact that more races than in 1998 were decided by a small number of votes. That is to say, if a small number of voters are swayed by name sounds, they may determine a greater number of elections if the other voters in those elections are relatively evenly divided.

Obviously, the data I am reporting here cannot validate this latter hypothesis, but what they do show is that the analytical model is statistically reliable over an eight-year period and that the importance of issues and/or other factors was either little changed in this period of time or the electorate was evenly polarized by these other factors in 2006.

As I mentioned in my study of the 1998 elections, "The rhythms and sounds of language are obvious adjuncts to meaning as they affect us in poetry, advertising, and everyday speech. The value of a smooth sounding name in politics has also been often observed" (1999, 332-333). What I have tried to do in this series of studies is to "demonstrate these observations systematically."

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Appendix

Categories and Description of the Analytical Model

A. Rhythm	
1. two syllables	+1.5
2. more than two syllables	+0.5
3. monosyllabic	-0.5
4. initial stress	+1.5
5. medial stress	-0.5
B. Vowels	
1. stressed vowel is mid vowel	+1.0
2. stressed high vowel	-1.5
3. vowel sequence higher to lower/front to back	+0.5
4. terminal [i] following a stop	+1.0
5. schwa before terminal nasal consonant	+0.5
6. high vowel before terminal fricative/affricate	-1.0
C. Consonants	
1. terminal nasal (especially [n], possibly [nd])	+1.5

2. [l] or [r] following initial stop	+1.0
3. initial [l] or [r]	+0.5
4. initial fricative	-1.0
5. ending fricative/affricate	-1.5
6. more than one medial stop	-1.0
7. more than one fricative glide	-1.5
8. special harshness	-1.0
9. tie-breaker (e.g., voicing, clusters)	-0.5

Descriptions of Categories and Sub-Categories

A. 1, A. 2, A. 3. Two appears to be the most favorable number of syllables, and there are one point differentials (in descending order) between the sub-categories: two syllables (A. 1.), more than two syllables (A. 2.), and monosyllabic (A. 3).

A. 4, A. 5. Initial stress (A. 4) is given a high score of one and a half while medial stress (A. 5) is given a minus half, a two point differential.

B. 1, B. 2. If the stressed vowel is a mid vowel (B. 1), as in *Kennedy*, *Reagan*, *Harrison*, or *Roosevelt*, it is scored a plus one. All high vowels, but especially the high back vowels of *Van Buren*, *Hughes*, *Dewey*, and *Bush*, are negative and if stressed are scored a negative one and a half (B. 2) – a spread of two and a half points from the stressed mid vowels.

B. 3, B. 4. There is an apparent preference for sequences of high to low and/or front to back vowels. Such a pattern is not usually very clear, but names in which it is, such as *Jackson*, *Lincoln*, *Truman*, *Reagan*, and *Clinton*, gain a half point value. Even more reinforcement of the stressed-unstressed pattern may be seen in the function of vowels at the end of a name. A terminal unstressed [i] following a stop generates a plus one.

B. 5, B. 6. A terminal unstressed schwa before the nasal [n] reinforces the basic trochaic rhythm. If the value of the consonant is added from the next category, this particular combination of sounds–the *-un* sound–is the single most positive score on this list (occurring in the names of 20 of the 42 winners in Presidential elections). By contrast, a high vowel before a fricative or affricate disrupts the preferred sense of rhythm and structure.

C. 1. Terminal nasal, especially [n], has a long and easy duration, which smoothes the downbeat and perhaps adds a sense of continuity to the trochaic structure. As indicated in B. 5, this is a very positive feature.

C. 2, C. 3. Liquid consonants at the beginning of a name seem to lend a sense of continuity because of the uninterrupted air flow. Most positive is an [l] or [r] following an initial stop of a name with two or more syllables such as *Cleveland* or *Clinton*. This particular consonant cluster begins with physical firmness followed by a smooth air flow. At the beginning of the name, this sequence seems to suggest direction or purpose and generates a score of plus one. Also, beginning liquids, as in *Lincoln*, *Roosevelt*, and *Reagan*, generate a modest plus one and a half.

C. 4. Turbulence seems to obscure the clarity and simplicity of the rhythmical pattern. However, the affricates are not included with the fricatives in initial position. Like the stops, the affricates begin with the complete closure of the vocal tract and release the airflow with brief explosions of friction. Phonetically, they are like the [tr] cluster in which a continuant follows a plosive, as in C. 2. Thus, initial affricates, as in *Johnson*, are not negative and may even justify a positive score.

C. 5. Turbulence at the end of a name is more negative and points again (as in B. 6) to the greater importance of the terminal phonemes in general. Thus, terminal fricatives (C. 5), as in *Douglas*, *Davis*, *Cox*, *Smith*, *Dukakis*, and *Bush*, generate a negative score of one and a half. The affricates are included as negatives here because their friction is more noticeable in terminal position.

C. 6, C. 7, C. 8, C. 9. The basic rhythmical pattern of a name may also be disturbed in medial positions. No Presidential candidate, for example, has won whose name had more than one medial stop and two (Goldwater and Dukakis) have lost decisively. Similarly, not many names have more than one fricative glide, but when they do, the repeated turbulence, although slight, seems to have a very clear negative effect, which justify a minus one and a half. The fricative glides off the initial [d] and second [k] of *Dukakis* are examples. "Special harshness" includes clusters of fricatives (e.g., *Morasch*) or junctures within names between two fricatives (e.g., *Steffes*) and has been used to analyze non-Presidential elections with a score of minus one. The last sub-category (C. 9) is a catchall for use only when scores are tied. Although specific values have not been calculated, one half point is added or subtracted from one of the names for features that reinforce or disturb a simple trochaic rhythm.