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Malone 460 C (The Hill)

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Sports and Voting

While previous studies generally presume that voters engage in retrospective voting to evaluate an incumbent's performance, another possibility is that voters are simply inclined to support the status quo when they feel personally satisfied or happy. We leverage a set of natural experiments to explore the extent to which personal happiness affects voting behavior. To do this, we examine events that government has nothing to do with and for which no government response would be expected: the outcome for the local college football team on the weekend before Election Day. We collected data on pre-election football scores between 1964 and the present, as well as local election returns for presidential, gubernatorial, and senatorial elections. We find that a win for the local college football team in the weekend before the election can lead the incumbent to receive more than three additional percentage points in the election. We also have some preliminary evidence that the incumbent party does better in gubernatorial elections when there is less cloud cover on Election Day, a phenomenon that affects voter happiness but to which no government would be expected to respond. Together, our results show that voters' choices depend significantly on events that affect their personal level of happiness even when those events are unrelated to government activity.

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