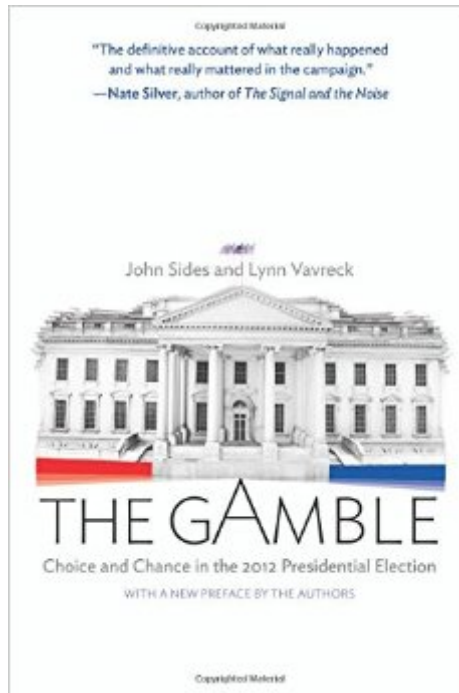


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The Gamble: Choice And Chance In The 2012 Presidential Election



Synopsis

"Game changer." We heard it so many times during the 2012 U.S. presidential election. But what actually made a difference in the contest--and what was just hype? In this groundbreaking book, John Sides and Lynn Vavreck tell the dramatic story of the election--with a big difference. Using an unusual "moneyball" approach and drawing on extensive quantitative data, they look beyond the anecdote, folklore, and conventional wisdom that often pass for election analysis to separate what was truly important from what was irrelevant. The Gamble combines this data with the best social science research and colorful on-the-ground reporting, providing the most accurate and precise account of the election yet written--and the only book of its kind. In a new preface, the authors reflect on the place of The Gamble in the tradition of presidential election studies, its reception to date, and possible paths for future social science research.

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Customer Reviews

The popular media covers U.S. presidential campaigns like announcers calling a horse race, highlighting every move, nuance, and setback as if it could determine the winner. Why? Because not doing so would give viewers tacit permission to watch something else, drive down the networks' ratings, and cost them advertising dollars. One journalist from Mother Jones identified 68 unique events the press labeled "game changers." Were they, or was it just meaningless hype? Approach In The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election, authors John Sides and Lynn

Vavreck analyze the race's twists and turns in measured tones, emphasizing the role "the fundamentals" (especially the economy) play in presidential elections. Sides is associate professor of political science at George Washington University and the coauthor of *Campaigns and Elections*. He cofounded and contributes to *The Monkey Cage*, a politics blog. Vavreck is associate professor of political science and communications at UCLA. As academics, they had to strike a balance between writing for a general audience versus writing for an academic audience. Books without sufficient analytical rigor might not be considered during tenure evaluations, so the authors took a bit of a risk by writing mainly for laymen. I thought they struck a clever and useful balance by dividing the book into two sections: commentary text, where the authors summarize their findings in the main body of the book; and appendixes that present their data and analyses in more depth. The main text contains plenty of facts and figures, but the appendices extend the analysis by including summary statistics (such as standard deviation and standard error) and other measures of interest to professional academics.

We live in an era of 24-hour cable news and instant news via the Internet. Pundits and journalists are more likely than ever to assert that even minor events during presidential campaigns are "game-changers" that will decide the contest. But in *"The Gamble,"* authors John Sides and Lynn Vavreck demonstrate that most elections are quite stable, proceeding according to the underlying fundamentals of campaigns that to a great extent are baked in the cake many months before voters head to the polls. The authors take a "Moneyball" approach to primaries and general elections, describing what does and does not move votes and using many tables, charts, graphs, and scatter plots to illustrate their assertions. Sides and Vavreck rightly note that conditions in the country matter infinitely more to the outcome of elections than do campaign tactics, but they may assign a bit too much emphasis to the state of the election-year economy--one can think of exceptions such as 1968, when the economy was churning along but a quagmire in Vietnam, social unrest at home, and a deeply divided party cost the incumbent Democrats the White House. Sides and Vavreck recount the 2012 Republican primary race, discussing the "invisible primary" that takes place long before Iowa and New Hampshire and the role of endorsements of candidates by party leaders--I never really thought that such endorsements mattered much, but the authors look at history to show what having a great number of endorsements tends to predict for a candidate. They also note that primaries operate according to fundamentals just as general elections do.

There are many graphs and charts in John Sides and Lynn Vavreck's new book about the 2012

Presidential election, "The Gamble", but to me the most interesting one was a map on page 217. It gave the locations of the Obama and Romney campaign field offices. It shows where the offices were concentrated - and where they were not. The map is in the chapter talking about the much-vaulted "Obama Ground Game", first developed in the 2008 election and kept around for 2012. Obama did have many more field offices than Romney, but the authors didn't think the work they did in contacting potential Obama voters and making sure they went to the polls was really a critical difference in Obama's victory. Okay, well, if not the "ground game", then what was helpful in Obama's victory? Was it Romney's "47%" remark? The number of ads the Obama campaign put on TV in the battle-ground states? The almost flawless Democratic convention? Obama's bouncing back in the last two debates? The fact that the US economy, while not exactly booming, was at least ticking upwards? Um, no. And what were the reasons behind Romney's loss? His Mormon religion? The "47%" remarks? His perceived business practices and lack of divulging more than 2 years of his tax returns? His stiff personality? A lack of affection and trust of him by the Republican base. Um, no. "No", because the authors really don't pinpoint a reason for one man's victory at the polls and another man's defeat. Oh, maybe "Chicago's" decision to "front-load" their ads - airing them early in the summer instead of waiting til the end of the campaign - which might have helped "define" Mitt Romney. But then the authors point out that most watchers of the ads were already interested in the race and politics in general, so maybe that wasn't it.

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