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US election likely to test traditional party habits

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That this year's American presidential contest is unusual hardly needs to be said. What remains to be seen is just how far the outcomes diverge from the norm. To help you assess the results, here are five features of American presidential elections worth knowing. Two weeks ago, they were all going Hillary Clinton's way; that is less clear today.

First, US presidential races are tight: since 2000, the average winning margin is just 3.5 per cent of votes cast. It wasn't always thus: of the 17 presidential elections between 1920 and 1984, 10 were won by double digits. But the average margin has declined sharply over the years, falling by a third between the 1952-1964 elections and those of 1968-1996, before halving again in this century.

A winning margin of 6 per cent would therefore be substantial. The Clinton camp expected such a victory; it now looks unlikely.

Second, margins have tightened because a rising share of the electorate identifies closely with a party, which translates into increasingly rigid voting on party lines. In the five elections between 1972 and 1988, some 25 per cent of Democratic identifiers voted for the Republican presidential candidate. In contrast, in the four elections between 2000 and 2012, fewer than 10 per cent of Democratic identifiers voted against their party. The proportion of defectors among Republican voters was always lower but has also dropped.

Falling defection rates reflect three factors. To begin with, Americans are more ideologically oriented than they used to be: the 1972 American National Election Study found there were about as many centrist voters as there were voters at either end of the liberal/conservative spectrum; 40 years later, the centrists were outnumbered by 12 percentage points.

At the same time, voters have sorted themselves more sharply into parties that reflect their ideological commitments.

Because many southern Democrats were traditionally conservative, while most northeastern Republicans were moderate liberals, as late as 1972 only a third of

voters held views fully aligned with their party identification. By 2012, those mismatches had largely disappeared: the Democrats are now a homogeneously liberal party while the Republicans are homogeneously conservative.

Finally, as that realignment occurred, the parties shifted their positioning so that it more closely matched their base, with the initially centrist Democrats moving sharply to the left while the Republicans (who were always conservative) moved slightly to the right. The increased distance between the parties meant that switching between them imposed a greater ideological cost on voters, further reducing the likelihood of defection.

But this election is as much about personalities as it is about issues. And concerns about the candidates' character could readily upset the pattern of rigid voting along party lines.

Were that to occur, the extent of the impacts would depend on whether the change affected a third feature of US elections, which is the predominance of "straight ticket" voting.

American presidential contests coincide with elections for a broad range of other offices at congressional and state level. In the presidential elections from 1972 to 1988, nearly 30 per cent of voters split their vote, choosing different parties for different positions. However, as party alignment increased, the share of split-ticket voting collapsed, with only 6 per cent of Obama and Romney voters differentiating their presidential and congressional choices.

As a result, outcomes across offices have become very highly correlated: in 2012, only 25 out of 435 House districts were won by a candidate not from the party of the presidential candidate who carried that district. And while the relationship is looser in the Senate, it is still tight: in the 2014 midterm election, 33 out of 36 Senate contests were won by the candidate of the same party that carried the state in the 2012 presidential election.

A fortnight ago, the Democrats believed straight-ticket voting would persist, giving them control of the Senate as well as of the White House. But the reaction to the renewed FBI probe makes that clean sweep much less probable, potentially saving some "down ticket" Republicans.

Both parties' expectations could, however, be confounded by a fourth factor, which is the impact of voters' distrust of the candidates on turnout.

Over the eight elections from 1972 to 2000, the mean turnout, as measured by the United States Election Project, was 55 per cent. Since then, turnout levels have rebounded, exceeding 60 per cent. Higher voting rates among college-educated women (and their increasing share of the electorate) and among African-Americans accounted for the bulk of the change, while turnout remains low among poorer, non-college educated whites and Hispanics.

The voting rates of African-Americans, 93 per cent of whom voted for Obama, are likely to decline, while those for Hispanics seem set to rise, but from a low base. What is harder to predict is the effect of Donald Trump's candidacy on white turnout. Trump may galvanise higher turnout among poorer whites, but he has struggled to improve his ratings among traditional Republican constituencies, notably college-educated white women.

At this stage, those factors still favour the Democratic camp, which is better organised for turning out the vote. But the issues surrounding Hillary Clinton may well lead anti-Trump voters to abstain, cutting her lead.

Fifth and last, unlike Australia, where voters are reasonably similar from state to state, Texas' electorate is very different from California's, as is Idaho's from New Hampshire's. Voters are, in other words, highly sorted geographically, so that while outcomes are close nationally, in most states they are not: in the 2012 election, just four "battleground" states were decided by a margin of less than five percentage points.

Yet the battleground could shift in unexpected ways, affecting votes in the state-based electoral college — and giving the pundits even more to talk about.