

The American Voter in 1932: Evidence from a Confidential Survey

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ABSTRACT In 1932, the American electorate was surveyed in a poll that has languished in the archives. The survey was conducted by Houser Associates, a pioneer in market research. It interviewed face-to-face a representative cross section about voter choices and issue attitudes. Although conducted on behalf of the Hoover campaign, the poll was not biased in his favor. The most striking revelation is that the electoral sway of the Depression was quite limited. The government was *not* seen by most voters as the major culprit or as having been ineffective in alleviating it. Even many FDR voters agreed. Moreover, there was no widespread “doom and gloom” about the future. What loomed larger in 1932 was the issue of Prohibition. The American people overwhelmingly favored repeal. The Democratic stand on it—that is, outright repeal—was a sure electoral winner, given Hoover’s staunch defense of Prohibition.

Few events have a more obvious story line than the election of 1932. Three years of unprecedented depression had shrunk the US economy to almost half its size under Herbert Hoover in the White House, with one in four Americans in the labor force out of work. It was no surprise, then, that Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated the sitting president by a huge margin; it was the biggest ever for a Democrat in presidential contests until then. The 1932 election offers a perfect exhibit for the electoral influence of the economy, a thriving research industry (Stegmaier and Lewis-Beck 2013). However, where is the evidence of the type that is the staple of voting studies?

There was no American National Election Study surveying voters in 1932, no Gallup Poll, no survey like the one conducted during the 1940 election in Erie County, Ohio (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). There were “straw polls” like the one conducted by the notorious *Literary Digest* and several newspapers (Robinson 1932a). However, these polls were concerned mostly with predicting the outcome rather than exploring the motives of voters. More important, their method of obtaining responses is deemed too unreliable to permit inferences about the American electorate. It was a flaw that was exposed with brutal effect in 1936, when the *Literary Digest* predicted the wrong man to win—by a landslide, no less; the fiasco resulted in the magazine’s demise (Converse 1987). Was there any poll that probed the presidential vote in 1932 along with opinions about the Depression and other topics pertaining to the election? Did the sampling method command some measure of respect?

It turns out, surprisingly, that the answer to both questions is yes. This begs the obvious follow-up question of why that poll has not been exploited in electoral research. The answer becomes apparent as the identity of the mystery poll is unveiled. The 1932 poll was conducted by J. David Houser & Associates, a market research firm in New York City. It was not done for public consumption but rather as a service to the Hoover campaign; call it a confidential survey. There is no record of any publication of the results and, by all indications, the interview data were not preserved or archived. What has survived is a 16-page report of the poll’s findings and methodology, archived at the Hoover Library in Iowa (Houser 1932). To my knowledge, there are only two references to the poll (Eisinger 2003, 77–78; Whyte 2017, 512–14).

The most striking revelation of the Houser Poll is that the Depression was not the dominant issue for American voters in the 1932 election as is commonly assumed. It had a potent rival in the issue of Prohibition. The American people overwhelmingly favored repeal. The Democratic stand on it—that is, outright repeal—was an electoral winner, given Hoover’s staunch defense of Prohibition. Meanwhile, for the Depression to sway voters, a few things had to happen. One was blaming the administration in office. It turns out that the government was *not* seen by most voters as the major culprit. Even many FDR voters agreed. As for efforts to lessen the impact of the Depression, it was the government that was praised by most voters, again including FDR voters. Radical measures such as providing unemployment benefits and a government takeover of the economy enjoyed little support, even among Democrats. As for the economic future, the poll showed no widespread “doom and gloom.” Instead, the majority of voters anticipated happy days ahead. Depression, where is thy sting?

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Granted, the Houser Poll was conducted for the Hoover campaign, but there is no sign of the poll being tainted. The bottom line showed Hoover trailing FDR by a wide margin. Who was Mr. Houser? How did he conduct the poll?

THE HOUSER POLL

J. David Houser operated a company that had made a name for itself not in the realm of politics but rather in market and industrial research (Converse 1987, 76). Its clients ranked among blue-chip

interviews with respondents of a representative sample of the American public about a wide range of political issues and, of course, their intended vote in the 1932 presidential election. Nothing like this had ever been done previously. The Houser Poll, as conducted in the latter part of 1932, may claim the title of the first national election study.

Unlike straw polls as conducted by the notorious *Literary Digest*, the Houser Poll obtained a sample of respondents in a way that matched the demography of the American electorate. A total

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corporations including American Telephone & Telegraph and Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing. The specialty of Houser Associates was the “Measurement of Attitudes,” which was prominently featured on its letterhead just below the company’s name. Although commonplace now, the notion that one could measure mental “attitudes” and gain insight from them about actions was a novelty in the 1920s. Long before this notion gained traction in psychological economics, Houser put it in print with a book published by Harvard University Press about executives’ attitudes toward employees (Houser 1927; still available at amazon.com).

In 1931, Houser ventured into politics. He offered his services to the Hoover administration to assist in the upcoming reelection campaign. There is no evidence that this was a business proposition for pay; it was more a personal favor. Houser and his friend in Hoover’s cabinet, Interior Secretary Ray Lyman Wilbur, were both “Stanford Men”—as their correspondence often proudly noted—and so, of course, was Hoover himself. Another personal connection was through Lewis Strauss, the vice treasurer of the Republican National Committee and an eager consumer of straw polls (Bisinger 2003, 77). At the request of the chairman of Westinghouse, one of Houser’s clients, Strauss met with Houser and was impressed with his ideas.

In a letter to Interior Secretary Wilbur on June 22, 1931, Houser made a pitch for “...a careful study by means of face-to-face interviews...of the attitudes of any cross section of the American public....These interviews would cover the attitude of each individual citizen toward any reasonable number of political issues...and the way he intends to vote at the next election. Then, with the proper sort of statistical treatment, it would be possible to show exactly how much weight each issue has in the minds of voters as a whole” (Houser 1931–1932).

This sounds like the approach to the study of voting taken by the classic published almost 30 years later, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). The guiding premise of that work was that to understand a citizen’s voting decision, we must ascertain relevant attitudes and capture their effects on that decision.

Houser followed up on his suggestion to Wilbur with a three-page memo to Strauss in March 1932, which was forwarded to the White House (Houser 1931–1932). It envisioned face-to-face

of 5,235 respondents were interviewed in 14 metropolitan areas all over the country. The selection was controlled to obtain an adequate sampling by sex, socioeconomic class, and urban–rural residence. Although further information is not available, it appears that the Houser Poll employed the type of “quota sampling” that Gallup and other organizations relied on and used for decades when they began polling in the mid-1930s. On October 21, 1932, Houser submitted a report of the poll’s findings to Strauss. There is no record, however, of a response from Strauss or anyone else in Hoover’s campaign, including the president himself. This is no surprise, perhaps, given the poll’s bottom line: Hoover was losing badly to FDR. With barely two weeks to go before Election Day, the Hoover campaign would have been hard-pressed to take advantage of the poll’s insights to avert defeat. The Houser Poll data, unfortunately, were not preserved. This article is based on the report of the tabulations submitted to Strauss, which is archived at the Hoover Library.

HOOPER LOYALISTS VERSUS FDR DEFECTORS

The report of the Houser Poll presented breakdowns of attitudes for three groups of voters: (1) those who voted for Hoover in 1928 and said they would vote for him again in 1932 (1,362 cases); (2) those who voted for Hoover in 1928 but said they would vote for Roosevelt in 1932 (670 cases); and (3) those who voted for Smith, the Democratic candidate in 1928, and said they would vote for Roosevelt in 1932 (1,072 cases). Two other groups of voters, those switching from Smith to Hoover (69) and those switching from Hoover or Smith to Socialist Thomas (85), are not shown in the report. It is clear from the case numbers of all these groups that FDR led Hoover in the poll by a substantial margin.

The most revealing of the three groups undoubtedly is the second (i.e., switching from Hoover to FDR between 1928 and 1932). It effectively swung the election to the Democrats. In the following charts, this group is labeled “FDR Defectors.” How do their attitudes compare with those in the first group, who stayed with Hoover? They are labeled “Hoover Loyalists” in the charts (i.e., “Loyal Republicans” in the Houser report). The third group, which comprises loyal Democrats, is not included in the charts because their attitudes closely resembled those of FDR Defectors.

BLAME FOR THE DEPRESSION

The standard narrative of the 1932 election reads as follows: “The collapse of the boom of the 1920s, for which the Republicans had, understandably, taken credit, brought upon Hoover the blame for the Depression. It was the prime factor in his defeat” (Freidel 1971, 322). Houser had a keen eye for the importance of voter attitudes that assigned blame or credit for economic conditions. His poll probed them with several questions, one of which asked whether “the government was at least somewhat responsible for the Depression.” It seems like a no-brainer. After three years of economic misery under one and the same government in office, who would hesitate to check this option? Yet, as clearly shown in figure 1, barely half of those voters who abandoned Hoover for FDR (i.e., the FDR Defectors) held the government at least somewhat responsible for the Depression. Granted, they were more inclined to do so than Hoover Loyalists, but it was not a day-and-night chasm and for such a low bar.

The Great Depression, it appears, was treated by many as a natural disaster caused by the economic equivalent of nature. Still, just as with hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and even shark attacks, voters nonetheless might look to government to mitigate the ill effects of disasters. A standard narrative is that Hoover and the Republicans, given their devotion to laissez-faire economics, were ill equipped to alleviate the misery of economic disasters through government action. Did voters believe, as queried by the Houser Poll, that “the government has done nothing to make the Depression less severe?”

Contrary to conventional wisdom, only one third of FDR Defectors answered yes. Most gave the government credit for having done something to lessen the severity of the Depression. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), in particular, was praised among most FDR Defectors. The RFC was arguably the most momentous measure of the Hoover administration, approved by Congress, to alleviate the Depression, with outlays equal to half of the federal budget in 1932 (Whyte 2017, 480).

If government was not the primary culprit for the Depression, who was? Houser confronted poll respondents with a lineup of the following suspects: the government, Wall Street, the people,

and big business. Which of these four was “most to blame” for the Depression? The responses were revealing. Only two in 10 FDR Defectors chose the government as the biggest culprit whereas nearly half chose Wall Street (figure 2). A third of Hoover Loyalists also chose Wall Street but few saddled the government with the most blame. Overall, Wall Street was by far the biggest culprit for the Depression. The government was a minor offender, even to FDR Defectors.

Although this was flattering, how did the government stack up against the competition in mitigating the economic collapse? Similar to the blame question, the Houser Poll inquired about which of the Big Four did “the most to make the Depression less severe.” As revealed in figure 3, the government won this contest with flying colors. Almost half of FDR Defectors attributed the most credit to the government—that is, in large measure, the Hoover administration. Wall Street, the biggest villain for the economic catastrophe, is virtually invisible in the credit chart shown in figure 3.

Figure 2
Attitudes of FDR Defectors and Hoover Loyalists about Who Was Most to Blame for the Depression

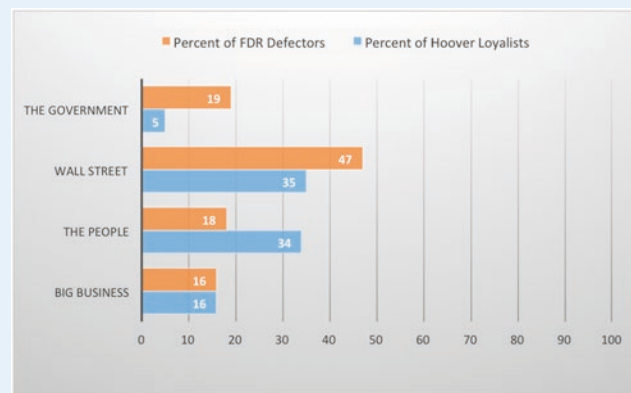


Figure 1
Attitudes of FDR Defectors and Hoover Loyalists about the Government’s Role in the Depression

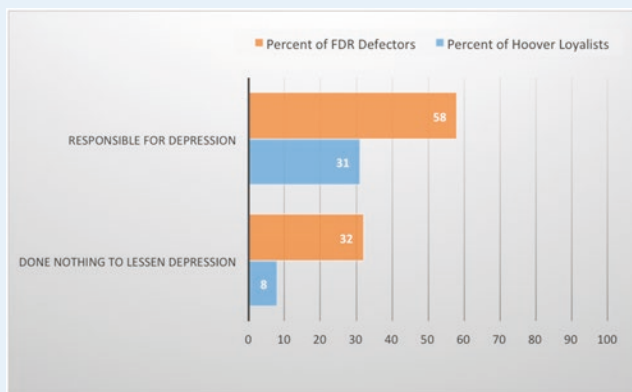
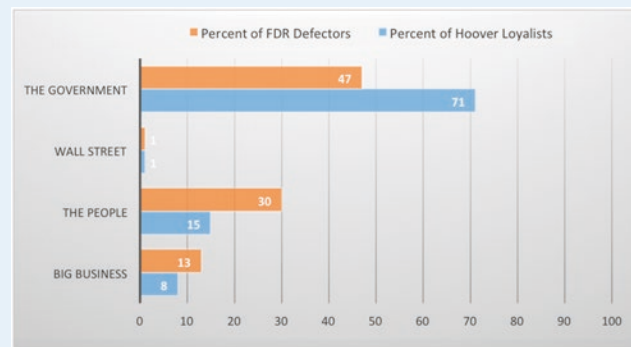


Figure 3
Attitudes of FDR Defectors and Hoover Loyalists about Who Has Done Most to Make the Depression Less Severe



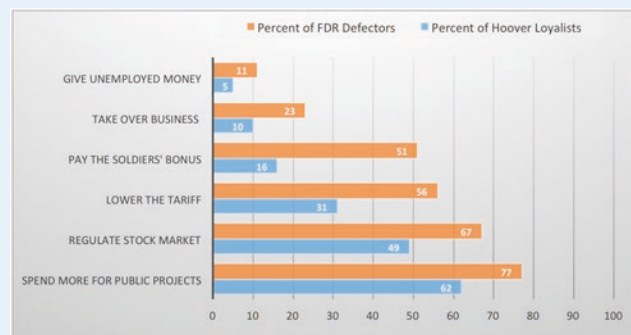
Despite what voters think about the overall economic picture, some will believe that in a depression, all that matters is one's personal fate. Losing one's job or savings in a failed bank is sufficient to change one's vote. In addition to probing attitudes about the Depression, the Houser Poll inquired whether a respondent (or a family member) was unemployed and had lost money in a bank failure. It is true that unemployment was more common among FDR Defectors than among Hoover Loyalists—whether personally or in one's family—and so was losing money in bank failures (figure 4). Although these experiences may have driven some voters to FDR, the majority of Americans appears not to have been affected personally by the Depression.

ECONOMIC PROSPECTS

Beyond probing how Americans were affected by the Depression and assigned blame for it to the government, among others, the Houser Poll also queried about the economic future. What further measures should be adopted to alleviate the economic misery of the Depression, restore prosperity, and even prevent a recurrence? It is well to remember that something as common today as unemployment benefits did not exist. The proposal for government to “give money directly to the unemployed,” as the poll stated, elicited virtually no support. Even among FDR Defectors, barely one in 10 thought this was a good idea (figure 5). Hoover certainly did not hurt his electoral prospects by failure to institute the “dole.” Meanwhile, despair over the failure of a laissez-faire economy to prevent the Depression—or at least to keep it brief—kindled support for a socialist system in some quarters. Should “the government take over control of business the way it did during the war?” the Houser Poll asked. Few voters embraced this idea, which was not on the agenda of the major parties, however much Republicans liked to accuse Democrats of moving in that direction.

At the same time, some measures enjoyed wider support, at least among FDR Defectors. Half wanted the government to pay the soldiers' bonus whereas most Hoover Loyalists, like the president himself, were opposed. The breakdown on the tariff question was similar. Conversely, the idea that the “government should regulate and control the stock market” was endorsed by two thirds

Figure 5
Attitudes of FDR Defectors and Hoover Loyalists about Economic Measures the Government Should Enact



of FDR Defectors. Even half of Hoover Loyalists approved of it. Wall Street, after all, was the “whipping boy” for the Depression, among Democrats and Republicans alike. Finally, the most popular measure, garnering majorities among both Hoover and FDR voters, was for the government to “spend more money for public improvements.” Enacting popular measures like the latter two might have helped Hoover forestall some voter defections to FDR.

With the American economy mired in a seemingly never-ending Depression in 1932, what was the economic outlook: more of the same misery ahead or somehow happier days? Consumer surveys would begin to regularly probe these sentiments in the postwar era. Pioneer that he was in so many ways, Houser already included questions about the *future* economy in his 1932 poll. He asked if “business in general is picking up” and if “there will be more employment a year from now?” We would expect the partisans of the incumbent administration, the Hoover Loyalists, to be more optimistic than partisans of the opposition—which is how partisanship is supposed to work.

Indeed, that was the case to some extent (figure 6). However, more remarkable, most FDR Defectors were not pessimistic. Six in 10 foresaw business getting better, and eight in 10 felt that way about employment. The numbers are similar for Loyal

Figure 4
Reports of FDR Defectors and Hoover Loyalists about How the Depression Has Affected Them Personally

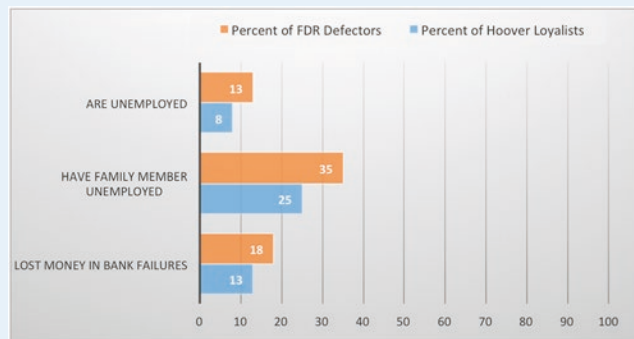
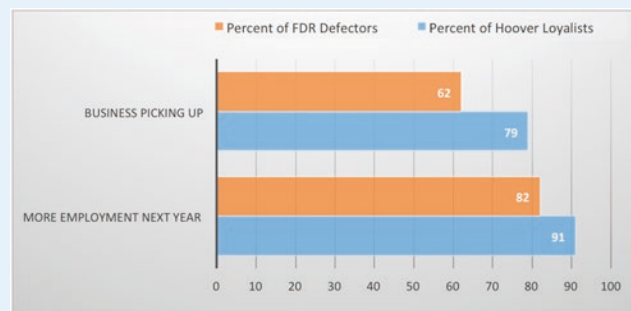


Figure 6
Attitudes of FDR Defectors and Hoover Loyalists about the Economy Ahead



Democrats who voted for Smith in 1928 and planned to vote for FDR in 1932. What made FDR voters so optimistic? It perhaps had less to do with economics than politics. It may have been their expectation that FDR was going to win the 1932 election and thus “Happy Days Are Here Again.” The *Literary Digest* and Hearst Straw Polls, the results of which were widely published in the press, left little doubt of an FDR landslide victory by mid-October 1932 (*New York Times* 1932b; Robinson 1932b).

Although the Depression undoubtedly steered voters away from Herbert Hoover, the sitting president during this catastrophe, and toward Franklin Roosevelt, who pledged a New Deal, the Houser Poll made it clear that the Depression did not quite pack a knock-out wallop in the 1932 election. What other issues were on the minds of American voters that year?

PROHIBITION

Twelve years earlier, Prohibition had become the law of the land. However, no sooner had the 18th Amendment been enacted than agitation for repeal gathered steam. Sensing the salience of the Prohibition issue in 1932, the Houser Poll posed the question:

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“Would repeal of Prohibition be good or bad for the country?” The responses were closely aligned with the presidential vote: more than eight in 10 FDR Defectors favored repeal compared to only one in two Hoover Loyalists (figure 7). Among Loyal Democrats (i.e., voted for Smith in 1928, FDR in 1932), the rate was nine in 10. Vote choices rarely break down so sharply along policy lines. Why in the case of Prohibition?

It was a simple issue, with a clear difference between the party positions, and it mattered greatly. One party, the Democrats, advocated outright repeal in its 1932 platform: no ifs, ands, or buts.

Roosevelt himself firmly endorsed the “wet” plank in his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. It earned him more enthusiastic applause than his pledge of a New Deal; it also was bigger news on the front page of the *New York Times* (1932a). Hoover, conversely, was a staunch defender of Prohibition. He threatened to decline the nomination if his party came out in favor of repeal. The Republican platform tried to straddle the issue, eventually favoring an amendment that would leave it to the states to decide what to do about Prohibition. For any voter anxious to repeal Prohibition, it was clear as drink which party would raise the glass.

Straw polls, which normally were preoccupied with elections, seized on the question of what to do about Prohibition. It strongly resonated with the American people, and no other issue merited their attention. The *Literary Digest* ran three “referenda” polls on Prohibition between 1922 and 1932, and millions responded (Robinson 1932a, 148). The 1932 poll made clear that Americans in all but two states favored outright repeal—and often by huge margins. In other words, the battle for repeal of the 18th Amendment already was won in the court of public opinion. This issue

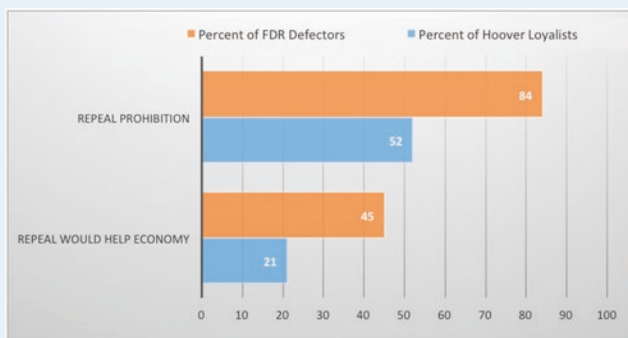
was bound to pay electoral dividends in 1932 for the Democratic Party and Roosevelt, who had pledged repeal. Refusal to endorse repeal must have harmed Hoover’s electoral fortune along with those of Republicans. Was Prohibition perhaps even more influential than the Depression in swaying voters in 1932?

The day after the election, the *New York Times* (1932c) splashed the prospect of repeal on its front page above the fold (the Volstead Act was the law that implemented Prohibition): “Necessary Majority for Repeal of the Volstead Act in Prospect.”

There was no mention of the Depression or the New Deal in the highlights of the lead story about the election (*New York Times* 1932c). The Houser Poll revealed that support for repeal separated FDR and Hoover voters by a wider margin than blaming the government for the Depression. (It makes you wonder if the *Times* was tipped off about the Houser Poll.) Granted, the economic collapse lent repeal of Prohibition a special urgency. Getting a drink is mighty tempting in times of economic despair. Some voters favored repeal because it would be good for business and jobs; however, that was not a majority, even among FDR Defectors (figure 7).

The electoral wallop of the Depression was blunted, to use a boxing metaphor, because its punches did not connect as well as expected by the standard narrative. According to the Houser Poll, the government was not seen as the major culprit for the Depression, compared to Wall Street and other offenders. Neither were voters unimpressed by government efforts to mitigate the Depression. There also were no simple solutions in sight that voters wanted tried while the government balked. Moreover, by the time of the 1932 election, most Americans saw happy days around the corner whether they were going to vote for Roosevelt

Figure 7
Attitudes of FDR Defectors and Hoover Loyalists about Prohibition



or Hoover. In contrast, repeal of Prohibition was a simple matter that government could settle easily in line with popular sentiments, leaning heavily toward repeal. The Democrats took the lead on this issue in 1932 and were rewarded for it at the polls.

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