

# Attributions for Presidential Elections: The Situational Shift Over Time

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Two investigations examined attributions for the outcomes of presidential elections. The first experiment examined attributions made by editorial writers for presidential elections from 1964 to 1984. The writers tended to make personal attributions for the causes of the election outcome a few days after the election, but shifted to primarily situational attributions 2 to 3 years later. Subjects in the second experiment were surveyed through a random-digit dialing procedure either a few days after the 1988 presidential election or 1 year later and asked why the election turned out the way it did. A shift toward more situational explanations over time was found, but not among those who had voted for the winning candidate. This latter finding illustrates a limitation of the situational shift effect.

Numerous investigations have demonstrated that people tend to explain another person's behavior in terms of something about the person at the expense of explanations emphasizing the role of the situation (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Heider (1958) described this phenomenon as behavior engulfing the field. This tendency is so strong that experimental subjects told that a speaker had no choice about which side of an issue to advocate nonetheless tend to believe that the speech reflects the presenter's real attitude, a phenomenon known as the *correspondence bias effect* (Jones & Harris, 1967). Research has found the tendency to overattribute another person's behavior to something about the person so pervasive that it has been dubbed the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977).

Although the fundamental attribution error appears robust, several investigations have found that the explanations we give for behavior often

change over time (Burger, 1985, 1986; Burger & Huntzinger, 1985; Burger & Rodman, 1983; Frank & Gilovich, 1989; Funder & Van Ness, 1983; Miller & Porter, 1980; Moore, Sherrod, Liu, & Underwood, 1979). The strength of the fundamental attribution error over time was tested in a pair of recent laboratory investigations (Burger, 1991). In both experiments the researcher found that the strength of the fundamental attribution error diminished significantly over the course of a few days. For example, subjects in one of these experiments demonstrated the correspondence bias effect (identifying a speaker's real attitude as the one he advocated, even when told the speaker had no choice) when they were asked for their attributions immediately after the speech. However, no evidence for this effect was found among subjects who gave their attributions 1 week later. The same pattern was found in a second investigation replicating the classic experiments by Ross, Amabile, and Steinmetz (1977) in which subjects in a quiz game erroneously attributed the questioner's ability to stump a contestant to the questioner's knowledgeability rather than to the randomly assigned role. Although this effect was replicated when subjects were asked for their attributions immediately after the game, again there was no hint of the fundamental attribution error among subjects who gave attributions 3 to 4 days later.

In short, recent laboratory experiments find a shift away from personal attributions and toward situational explanations for other people's behavior as time passes. In the case of the relatively trivial tasks used in laboratory experiments, this shift seems complete within a few days. Burger (1991) explained this situational shift over time in terms of information salience or vividness (cf. Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Paivio, 1971). That is, in most cases information about the person is more salient and vivid immediately after an event than is information about situational causes. Consequently, this personal information is more cognitively accessible to attributors and more likely to be identified as the cause of the behavior (cf. Taylor & Fiske, 1978). Burger (1991) argued that the heightened cognitive accessibility of personal information diminishes more rapidly over time than does the accessibility of the situational information as the vividness associated with the personal information fades.

The research reported here was designed first to examine the generalizability of the findings from the laboratory experiments reported by Burger (1991) to situations outside the lab. That is, we wanted to demonstrate the situational shift over time using an important, naturally occurring event. There are reasons to question whether the declining strength of the fundamental attribution error uncovered in the lab would also be found in nonlaboratory settings. Specifically, subjects in the laboratory investigations were asked to make attributions for people and tasks for which they had relatively little interest and essentially no other information beyond what the experimenter provided. However, much research suggests that

people typically do not conduct extensive attributional searches (if they engage in attributional processing at all) unless sufficiently motivated (Weiner, 1985). Rather, laboratory subjects often rely on cognitively efficient heuristics when answering experimenters' questions instead of considering many different reasons for a person's behavior (Gilbert, 1989).

Consequently, we decided to examine the way people explain the outcome of presidential elections. We selected this event for several reasons. Most Americans are exposed to extensive campaigning and discussions about the candidates prior to a presidential election. The outcome of the election is a salient and important event for most people, something they presumably would be interested in understanding. Further, political analysts often invoke both personal and situational reasons to explain the outcomes of elections. That is, candidates are said to win or lose, sometimes because of personal characteristics or actions, at other times because of situational factors outside their control.

Demonstrating a situational shift in attributions for presidential elections over time would provide strong evidence for the robustness of the effect and its applicability to events outside the lab. In addition, as described later, the data from the second experiment allowed us to examine a possible exception to the situational shift phenomenon and consequently provided insight into the mechanisms underlying the effect.

## EXPERIMENT 1

In the first experiment, we examined the attributions for presidential elections made by editorial writers published in major American newspapers. Examination of attributions by these people takes care of several questions that can be raised about the data from the laboratory experiments. We can be fairly certain that the attributions were made by people who are highly knowledgeable about and motivated to understand the person's (either candidate's) behavior. Further, the attributions were made spontaneously, without prompting by the investigator. The editorial writers no doubt made their attributions only after engaging in a lengthy consideration of the reasons for the election results, both when writing the postelection analysis and when discussing the election at a later time.

### Method

Attributions were taken from articles and columns appearing on the editorial pages of the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. To obtain attributions

immediately after the election, we examined each editorial page article and column concerning the election or the candidates for the 5 days following the presidential election (Wednesday through Sunday) for the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* and for the 3 days following the election for the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Christian Science Monitor* (which do not publish on weekends). We did this for the six elections between and including 1964 and 1984 for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* and for the elections between and including 1972 and 1984 for the *Los Angeles Times* (which did not publish an index for the 1964 and 1968 election years). The attributions taken from these articles constituted the *immediate* condition.

Attributions for the *delayed* condition were taken from editorial page articles appearing in the second and third year following the election. For example, for the 1964 election we examined articles appearing in 1966 and 1967. These articles were identified through the *New York Times Index* (under the heading "Presidential Election of 19—"), the *Los Angeles Times Index* (under the heading "Elections—Presidential"), the *Wall Street Journal Index* (under the heading "Elections" in the General News Index), and the *Christian Science Monitor Index* (under the heading "Elections—Presidential"). All articles and columns appearing on the editorial page during these years that dealt with the previous presidential election or the candidates were examined for attributions.

Attributions were defined as statements that specifically identified a cause for the outcome of the election. More than one attribution could appear in an article; however, subsequent attributions to the same cause appearing in an article were not counted. Coding was restricted to cases where the writer was clearly trying to explain the election outcome, usually keyed with such words as *because* or *since*. Attributions were used only if each of two judges independently agreed that the statement met the requirements for inclusion in the study.

Each of these attributions was then coded independently by the two judges for whether it was personal or situational. The judges were blind to the condition and hypothesis. Personal attributions included the personal characteristics or actions of one or both of the candidates. Situational attributions included circumstances surrounding the election or actions by people outside of the candidates' control. Examples of personal attributions were "President Nixon's diplomatic overtures to China and Russia clearly helped him with many voters" ("The Victory," 1992, p. 46) and "Mondale made [the outcome] worse by the ineptitude of his campaign" (Lewis, 1984, p. A-31). Examples of situational attributions were "Voters were signaling that they are tired of change . . . after the long, emotionally exhausting quarrel over Vietnam" ("The Victory," 1972, p. 46) and "The shadows of

Watergate . . . cleared the way for [Carter's] climb to the Presidency"<sup>1</sup> ("Speak Up," 1979, p. A-22).

The two judges agreed on the attributional coding in 183 of 194 cases (94.3%). Disagreements were resolved in each case after a brief discussion between the judges. All attributions were coded.

## Results and Discussion

We calculated the total number of personal and situational attributions for the immediate and delayed conditions. As shown in Table 1, nearly two thirds of the explanations for the elections made by editorial columnists within a few days following the election were classified as personal. However, this pattern was completely reversed for the attributions made 1 to 3 years later,  $\chi^2(1, N = 194) = 12.13, p < .001$ . Although the small sample sizes did not permit individual analyses by year, Table 1 also shows that the shift toward more situational attributions over time occurred in each election we examined.

The results are thus entirely in line with the results of earlier laboratory studies demonstrating a situational shift in attributions over time when explaining the causes of another person's behavior. In addition, this effect was found in conditions that were different in some important ways from those used in the laboratory experiments. The editorial writers were highly involved in their task and highly motivated to understand the reasons for the election outcome. They also had the time, motivation, and opportunity to collect information about the causes of behavior both immediately after the task and at the delayed time. Although it is not possible to say if the writers' attributions were more accurate when looking back after a few years than they were when made immediately after the election, it is clear that they were less likely to rely on information about personal causes for the election outcome in the delayed condition.

## EXPERIMENT 2

The second experiment was designed to replicate the findings from Experiment 1 and to examine a potential limitation of the predicted situational

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<sup>1</sup>Although attributions often could be implied from the statements, judges limited their inferences to the way the writer worded the sentence. For example, "Carter was helped by the anti-Washington atmosphere" would be coded as a situational attribution, whereas "Carter took advantage of the anti-Washington atmosphere" would be coded as a personal attribution. Although one might infer the second example from the first, the first statement places the emphasis on the situation whereas the second gives credit to an action taken by the person.

TABLE 1  
 Number of Personal and Situational Attributions by Editorial Writers as a  
 Function of Election and Time Since Election

<i>Election</i>	<i>Immediate</i>		<i>Delayed</i>	
	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Situational</i>	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Situational</i>
1964				
(Johnson-Goldwater)	16	10	1	2
1968				
(Nixon-Humphrey-Wallace)	8	11	1	3
1972				
(Nixon-McGovern)	26	8	1	2
1976				
(Carter-Ford)	12	9	1	7
1980				
(Reagan-Carter-Anderson)	14	2	3	3
1984				
(Reagan-Mondale)	31	16	3	4
Total number	107	56	10	21
Percentage	65.6	34.4	32.3	67.7

shift effect. We utilized a survey procedure to examine attributions for election outcomes. People were asked to make attributions for the outcome of the 1988 presidential election either within a few days after the election or 1 year later. One purpose of this study was to demonstrate the generalizability of the effect uncovered in the first experiment to average citizens trying to explain the outcome of the election.

More important, examining attributions among average citizens allowed us to look at a potential limitation of the predicted situational shift. Research on attributions for our own behavior has found that the oft-replicated tendency to attribute our successes to personal causes and our failures to situational causes is exaggerated in both directions over time (Burger, 1986; Burger & Huntzinger, 1985). That is, people tend to make attributions that become more personal over time when they succeed and more situational over time when they fail. This same pattern is found when people identify with or feel connected with the person they are making attributions about (Burger, 1985; Burger & Paffrath, 1991). Thus, fans in one study made attributions for a college basketball team's victories that became more personal (e.g., to the players' ability) over a period of several days after the game (Burger, 1985). Presumably, this shift resulted from selective memory decay and recall brought about by ego-gratifying motives.

When these findings are applied to the explanations people give to election outcomes, we might speculate that those who voted for the winning candidate would be less likely to shift from personal to situational

explanations over time than those voters whose candidate lost. This is because the former group of voters should be motivated to see their candidate's election as the result of his personal characteristics or actions, not merely the consequence of being in the right place at the right time.

This prediction is in line with a growing body of research indicating that we evaluate people with whom we share an association differently from those with whom we do not associate ourselves. For example, Finch and Cialdini (1989) found that subjects evaluated a historical figure (Rasputin, the "Mad Monk of Russia") less harshly when they were led to believe they shared their birth date with him. Similarly, Unger and Sev'er (1989) found that Canadians tended to attribute the downfall of Ben Johnson, their Olympic hero accused of illegal steroid use, to situational causes. Although the associations with the other person were rather weak and incidental, subjects' attributions in these studies appeared to have been influenced by their own ego-enhancing and ego-defensive motives. It is reasonable to expect that similar motives will be operating when the association with the candidate is one based on a personal choice (whom to vote for) made after some thought.

## Method

**Subjects.** One hundred forty adults living in Santa Clara County, California, and selected through a random-digit dialing procedure served as subjects.

**Procedure.** Subjects in the immediate condition were contacted during the evenings of Wednesday, November 9, and Thursday, November 10, the two days following the 1988 U.S. presidential election. The experimenter used a random-digit dialing procedure, randomly selecting a prefix from those used in the county and adding four digits selected from a random-numbers table. One hundred eleven adults were contacted. Forty-one did not want to participate and 3 who agreed to participate said they had no answer for the survey question. Thus, data were collected for 70 subjects in this condition.

The experimenter said to all English-speaking adults who answered the phone:

Good evening. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm conducting a research project for the Psychology Department at Santa Clara University. I was wondering if I could have about 2 minutes of your time to ask some of your impressions of the presidential election.

If subjects agreed to participate, they were asked "Why do you think the election turned out as it did?" The experimenter recorded subjects' responses verbatim. When each subject appeared to be finished answering, the experimenter asked "Anything else?" and again recorded the response, if any, verbatim. Each subject was cued this way only once. Finally, the experimenter asked "If you voted, which presidential candidate did you vote for?" and recorded the response.

Subjects in the delayed condition were contacted during weekday evenings the first week in November 1989, exactly 1 year after the election. The same random-digit dialing procedure used for the immediate subjects was employed until data for 70 additional subjects were collected. Subjects received the same introduction and questions from the same experimenter as used the previous year, except for references to the election, which were changed to "last year's presidential election."

Two trained judges independently coded the responses for the presence of either personal or situational attributions for the election outcome. The judges, blind to condition and hypotheses, agreed on 95.5% of the codings. A third judge decided the categorization in the few cases of disagreements. Personal attributions were defined as those in which the subject attributed the election outcomes to the candidate's characteristics or something he did or failed to do. For example, attributions to a candidate's personality or traits (e.g., he's too cold, he's likable, he was honest) were coded as personal. References to actions the candidate took either during the campaign or during elected office (e.g., didn't communicate well, ran a good campaign, didn't counterattack, has done well in the past) were also coded as personal. Situational attributions were defined as those attributed to the circumstances surrounding the election and which were largely out of the control of the candidate. Examples of these included the state of the economy, Reagan's popularity, the country not being ready for a change, the mood of the country, and lack of support from key groups or people. When subjects implied or stated that the candidate won or lost because he happened to be running in the right or wrong year (e.g., he's too liberal for the country right now), the attribution was coded as situational.

## Results and Discussion

Subjects were divided into those who gave personal attributions and those who gave situational attributions for the election outcome. Some subjects gave both personal and situational attributions, and they were placed into a separate category. Both judges agreed that 6 subjects' responses, 3 in each year, contained no attributions. The data from these 6 subjects were not included in the analyses.

First, we compared the number of people in the entire sample who gave



either personal or situational reasons for the election outcome for the immediate and delayed conditions. As shown in Table 2, we found the predicted shift toward more situational attributions over time,  $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = 5.13, p < .03$ . Whereas a majority of people explained the election outcome in terms of personal attributions just after the election, this number dropped significantly when a new set of people explained the election 1 year later. Thus, the situational shift uncovered in earlier laboratory research was also found here.

Next, we divided subjects into those who reported voting for Bush and those who voted for Dukakis. These data are shown in Table 3. As seen in the table, Bush voters showed virtually no shift in their use of personal or situational attributions over time. However, Dukakis voters were significantly more likely to attribute the election outcome to situational causes 1 year later than immediately after the election,  $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 7.57, p < .01$ .

The results thus demonstrate the generalizability of the earlier investigations, but also identify an important exception to this pattern. Right after the election, people tended to see the candidates as responsible for the outcome of the election. When looking back on the election 1 year later, the majority of subjects were able to see the situational factors responsible for the way the election turned out. A closer examination, however, revealed that this situational shift was largely limited to those people who had voted for the losing candidate. As the following discussion suggests, Bush supporters appeared to be motivated to see Bush's victory as the result of their candidate's characteristics and actions, even as time passed. Dukakis supporters did not share this motivation. This last finding represents an important limitation of the general situational shift uncovered earlier.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results from the two experiments advance our knowledge of temporal effects on attributions in two important ways. First, the

TABLE 2  
Percentage of Subjects Giving Personal and Situational Attributions or Both for the Outcome of the 1988 Presidential Election

<i>Time of Survey</i>	<i>Type of Attributions Given</i>		
	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Situational</i>	<i>Both</i>
November 1988	53.7	25.4	20.9
November 1989	38.8	44.8	16.4

TABLE 3

Number of Subjects Giving Personal and Situational Attributions or Both for the 1988 Presidential Election as a Function of Vote

<i>Time of Survey/Vote</i>	<i>Type of Attributions Given</i>		
	<i>Personal</i>	<i>Situational</i>	<i>Both</i>
November 1988			
Voted for Bush (20)	11	6	3
Voted for Dukakis (33)	17	9	7
Neither or no answer (14)	8	2	4
November 1989			
Voted for Bush (21)	12	5	4
Voted for Dukakis (28)	6	17	5
Neither or no answer (18)	8	8	2

studies demonstrate the generalizability of the situational shift over time uncovered in earlier laboratory findings. This shift from personal to situational explanations is not limited to events for which people have little motivation, no previous or subsequent information, and little or no interest in acquiring additional information. Rather, the situational shift was found when people explained the causes of an event they were interested in and relatively informed about.

Second, the findings from the second experiment reveal that the situational shift seems to depend on the nature of our relationship with the person for whom we are making attributions. The data suggest that the shift may be mitigated when making attributions for someone with whom we share what Heider (1958) called a positive unit relationship. This limitation of the situational shift over time is particularly important because we often have a significant association with the person for whom we make attributions.

Combined with earlier findings, the results from the two studies reported here add to our understanding of how cognitive and motivational mechanisms combine to affect our attributions for others both at the time of the event and after a considerable amount of time has passed. Although a complete understanding of how attributions change over time will require considerably more research, a picture of how this process works is beginning to take shape. In most situations, information about both personal and situational causes of a behavior is available to the attributor at the time of the event. Typically, however, information about the person is more vivid and thus more cognitively accessible at this time. Consequently, people tend to rely heavily on personal information at the expense of information about the situation when making attributions immediately after an event (hence, the fundamental attribution error). However, recent

research suggests that the vividness of the personal information fades rapidly over time, and with it the cognitive-accessibility advantage over situational information. Thus, when asked about the event after a considerable amount of time has passed, people are far more likely to consider situational causes of the behavior relative to personal causes than they would have earlier. As a result of this process, we see an apparent shift in attributions toward situational explanations and away from personal explanations.

This pattern can be altered, however, when we have a personal association with the other person and when dealing with an event that has success-and-failure implications. In such a case, attributors may be motivated to continue making personal attributions for an actor's success. Just as people tend to make attributions that become ego-flattering over time (Burger, 1986; Burger & Huntzinger, 1985), so might they be motivated to retain attributions over time that are flattering to friends and those they admire. Because personal attributions for success are more desirable than situational attributions, these motives might negate the situational shift found in other settings.

Although the research to date implicates two variables that affect how attributions change over time—vividness and relationship to the actor—there are, no doubt, many additional variables that can be identified. For example, in many situations people have the opportunity to obtain additional information about the actor, the event, or the consequences of the event. In addition, motives for consistency and stability might affect these attributions. In short, we are still several empirical demonstrations away from a complete model of how explanations for another person's behavior change over time.

Finally, the advantages that come from examining real-world events like presidential elections must be countered with the limitations of such research. In particular, there are several uncontrollable aspects of presidential elections that allow for alternate interpretations of the data. For example, we cannot know how Bush's behavior during the year following his election might have affected subjects' attributions in the second experiment. Editorial writers in the first experiment might have obtained additional information after the election or might be motivated to uncover a new angle from which to report on the election after a few years. Consequently, it is important to replicate the findings reported here and to eliminate potential alternative explanations in additional research.

Nonetheless, the two studies presented here again highlight the importance of examining the ways attributions change over time. Because most research on attributional processes examines explanations people give immediately after an event, we should be cautious when applying findings from these studies to events that take place over a long period of time. For

example, a number of researchers have examined attributions to better understand interpersonal relationships (e.g., see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Our research suggests that the reasons people give for their partners' behavior today may be quite different from those they will give a year or even a few days from now.

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