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Political-Science Forecasts are Predictably Unpredictable

By David Houghton
UCF Forum columnist
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Social scientists just can't help making predictions, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that we're likely to be wrong.

A few years ago, political psychologist Philip Tetlock found during a decades-long study that "experts" with Ph.D.s are no better than a monkey throwing darts at predicting what will happen in the social, economic and political arenas. Indeed, he suggested, the monkey may even be *better* than we are.

Political scientists who ought to know much better – myself included – often make rash predictions.

Earlier this year – during a particularly volatile point in tensions between Tel Aviv, Israel, and Tehran, Iran – I was interviewed on Orlando's Fox 35 morning show and boldly predicted that by this fall Israel would probably attack Iran's nuclear sites.

Not long after, though, the political landscape changed; the Obama administration jump-started negotiations on the nuclear issue in a way that has so far staved off an Israeli missile attack, and made it publicly known that cyberattacks on nuclear sites in Tehran had delayed Iran's ability to enrich the uranium necessary to produce a nuclear bomb.

Of course, it's still quite possible that an Israeli attack could take place. But if I were right – and I sincerely hope I am not – I will have been right by mistake, based on incomplete information available at the time, which happened to lead to the eventual conclusion.

In reality, any attack by Israel on Iran is predictably unpredictable.

The Central Intelligence Agency is not any better at this. Recall that the CIA did not predict earth-shattering events such as the Islamic revolution in Iran, the end of the Cold War or the events of 9/11.

Why does this happen? Part of it probably has to do with the way our minds operate after an event to render those unpredictable and unlikely events as somehow foreseeable in retrospect, what psychologists call “hindsight bias.”

But there is also a deeper reason: Simply put, the social world may well be inherently unpredictable. Although legions of economists, sociologists and political scientists still believe that there are underlying “laws” that govern their respective disciplines, relatively few such regularities have ever been found.

In their place, we instead have theories.

As essayist Nicholas Nassim Taleb writes it in his book *Foiled By Randomness*, if economists could make reliable predictions about the economic world, far more of them would be rich by now. As a former stock market speculator, he knows what he is talking about.

The social world is fraught with intangibles, shifting variables, unintended consequences, unforeseen changes and freak effects.

To appreciate the perils of prediction, take the recent presidential elections in Egypt.

During the first half of the year, *The New York Times* – usually considered one of the most authoritative sources of international news in the United States – was filled with articles discussing the fight between two supposed “front runners” in the campaign, Amr Moussa and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, an establishment military figure versus a renegade “liberal” Islamist.

Neither came close to winning. Instead, two candidates pretty much written off by everyone in the West – Ahmed Shafik and Mohamed Morsi – finished at the top in the first round of voting.

In the runoff earlier this month, Morsi apparently won with just over 50 percent of the vote, but even that final outcome wasn’t announced by Egypt’s election commission until Monday. Pretty much nobody predicted all of this except, perhaps, Morsi himself.

He was very often written off by pundits as “uncharismatic” and “lacking in support,” and other Islamists were thought a much better bet.

Making predictions was especially ill-advised in this case. For one thing, nobody really knows even today whether the first round results represented the true will of the Egyptian people. No reliable U.S.-style opinion polls were permitted in advance, which means that on-the-ground reporters were forced to rely on impressionist accounts of “the will of the people,” a sort of Egyptian “Dewey Wins.”

Former President Carter said that the Carter Center was denied access to many voting sites and so could not make a reliable determination as to the election’s fairness.

Many voters clearly believed that the first round was at least partially rigged: Mubarek’s own former prime minister (Shafik) almost wins after a revolution to topple Mubarek? One of the apparently weakest Islamic candidates actually tops the poll?

For many ordinary Egyptians, it didn’t pass the sniff test. Morsi’s win suggests that if the military rigged it in the second round, they didn’t do much of a job.

But whether it was fixed, predicting the vote in a country holding the first meaningful presidential election in its history was always going to be well-nigh impossible – as is the case in forecasting all the social sciences.

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