

Forecasting the 2016 American National Elections

Introduction

James E. Campbell, *University at Buffalo, SUNY*

Every presidential election is different. But there is different and then there is 2016.

As the nomination contests and their surviving candidates have made clear, this year's election looks to be very different. Most notably, neither of the two highly controversial major party candidates are well thought of by an unusually large part of the electorate. Substantial majorities of Americans hold generally unfavorable rather than favorable views of both Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton and Republican Party candidate Donald Trump.

On the Democratic side, despite being her party's ultimate establishment candidate, Hillary Clinton enters the campaign with a warehouse of controversies (e.g., huge Wall Street speaking fees, the handling of the Benghazi fiasco, and the Clinton Foundation's fund-raising). This includes a year long FBI investigation into her mishandling of confidential and top secret emails on private unsecured computer servers while serving as Secretary of State. Though unindicted for handling classified information "in a grossly negligent way," the FBI characterized her actions as "extremely careless."

On the Republican side, while lacking the experience necessary for a long history of controversies in public office, Donald Trump has his own trail of business scandals (e.g., Trump University, multiple bankruptcies) and continues to demonstrate an uncanny flair for gratuitous insults and outlandish offenses (e.g., mocking a reporter with a disability, implying Ted Cruz's father was implicated in JFK's assassination, and other offensive comments directed at ethnic groups, women, and public figures of both parties). Regarding Trump as shallow, unprincipled, vulgar, boorish, and belligerent, many pragmatic conservative (aka, establishment) Republicans at least tentatively have decided to sit this election out, leaving the party unusually fractured even after its convention.

With all of this, the specter of a Clinton versus Trump race suggests that we should all expect the unexpected, but what should be expected? That is where election forecasting models come in.

In this symposium, we have again gathered eight election forecasters or forecasting teams to present their models' predictions of the 2016 national two-party presidential vote. Four also venture forecasts of the congressional elections. A ninth forecasting team offers a presidential prediction based on combining a number of forecasts based on very different approaches.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE FORECASTS

Each of the election forecasting models is based on a statistical analysis of historical data capturing how different pre-campaign contexts (aka, the fundamentals) have predicted vote divisions in the past. These predictors tap into the electorate's early vote inclinations, its predispositions that affect reactions to developments during the campaign, and performance and issue information likely to be considered in the course of the campaign. An electorate favorably disposed initially to the in-party and its candidate, in generally a good mood, and having positive information to be raised during the campaign is likely to elect the in-party candidate. Reverse the initial disposition, the mood, and the valence of information to be digested in the campaign and the outcome is also likely reversed.

So what is the context leading into the 2016 national elections? There are a number of ways to take a reading of the context, but before getting to the individual forecasts, it might be useful to review six indicators of the prevailing winds in this year's general election campaign.

A Third Party-Term Election

Open seat elections or, more accurately, elections in which the in-party is seeking more than a second term in the White House are historically much more competitive than elections in which a party has held the presidency for only a single term (Abramowitz 1988; Campbell 2000a; 2000b; and 2010;

Mayhew 2008; Norpoth 2000; Weisberg 2002) A comparison of the pair of bars on the left side of figure 1 illustrates the difference. A party having held the presidency for a single term and seeking a second has won seven out of eight times since 1948. Carter's defeat in 1980 was the only loss. Going back further in electoral history leaves the conclusion intact: second terms are nearly sure things. In contrast, parties seeking to extend their presidential tenure beyond a second term face competitive contests. There have been nine such elections since 1948, six of them open seat elections, and all have results within the range of 45% to 54% for the in-party. Democrats in this election are seeking a third consecutive term. *Outlook for 2016: Close Race.*

from conservatives than had before. A Pew poll in April found that 41% of Democrats and 45% of Republicans think their opposing party is a "threat to the nation's well-being" (Pew Research Center 2016). Polarization has hardened party lines, reduced the volatility of the electorate and compressed the vote division. *Outlook for 2016: Close Race.*

Sluggish Economic Growth

Although its electoral influence is routinely exaggerated, the growth in the economy is important both directly as an issue and as a backdrop for the election, a factor affecting the public's general perception of the in-party's performance and

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Polarized Party Parity

Since the realignment of the parties and their fortification by a polarized public (Campbell 2006 and 2016; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Abramowitz 2010), presidential elections have become hyper-competitive. The right-side pair of bars in figure 1 compares the spread of the in-party presidential vote in 10 elections from 1948 to 1984 to the seven elections since then. The standard deviation of the vote in the more recent series is only about half of what it was in the earlier period (3.3 compared to 6.5). Figure 2 may explain why. The parties are now much more dependent on their ideological bases than they had been. Democrats draw a bigger percentage of votes from liberals than they had and Republicans draw more

policies. The economy through a presidential term matters, but the most crucial period of economic performance is in the second quarter of the election year. This is recent enough to affect how many voters see the trajectory of the economy as their candidates preferences are taking form.

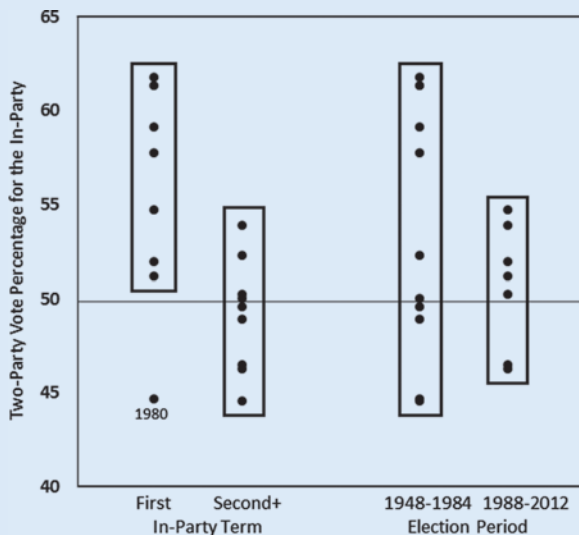
So how has the economy been doing? Figure 3 displays the quarterly growth rate of the real GDP following the end of the Great Recession in June 2009, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research (2016). As one might gather from the Federal Reserve's stimulus monetary policy, the recovery from the Great Recession has not been robust. The public appears to expect growth of about 3 percentage points and that has been about the post WWII average. Even in recent decades (1990–2006), real GDP in the median quarter has been 3.1 percentage points. Over the last six years, however, growth in the median quarter has been a full percentage point lower. The August growth rate report for the second quarter this year (1.1%) is even weaker, a good deal below average and the politically neutral.

Although anemic growth works against the Democrats, the impact should be somewhat muted by the fact that the incumbent is not in this year's race (Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2001; Campbell, Dettrey and Yin 2010; Holbrook 2008). *Outlook for 2016: Tilt to Republicans.*

Pre-Campaign Public Opinion: Mood

Public opinion prior to the start of the general election campaign can be read at different levels of specificity. At its most general level, Americans have been asked how things are going in the nation. A very large majority of Americans are dissatisfied with the direction of the nation. When you combine the sluggish economy noted above with national and international terrorism and racial unrest, it is not surprising that fewer than a quarter of Americans polled in the first three weeks of July think America is moving in the right direction, while nearly 70% think the nation is on the wrong track (Real Clear Politics 2016). A similar satisfaction question asked by Gallup in June arrives at a slightly

Figure 1
In-Party Vote by Number of Terms and Election Period, 1948–2012



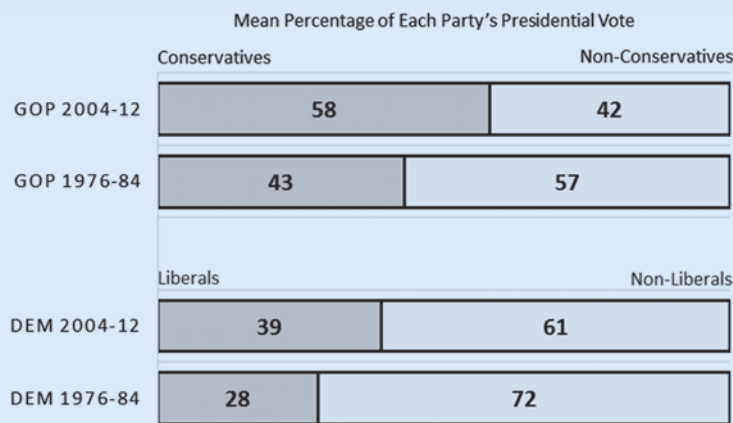
higher satisfaction number, but still under 30% (Gallup 2016). This sour attitude is not good news for the party that has held the White House the last seven plus years. Unhappy voters are inclined to make a change. *Outlook for 2016: Favors Republicans.*

Pre-Campaign Public Opinion: July Presidential Approval

A second public opinion barometer often used in forecasting models is the presidential job approval rating. When the public generally approves of the president's performance and record, voters are inclined to vote for continuity. A generally dissatisfied

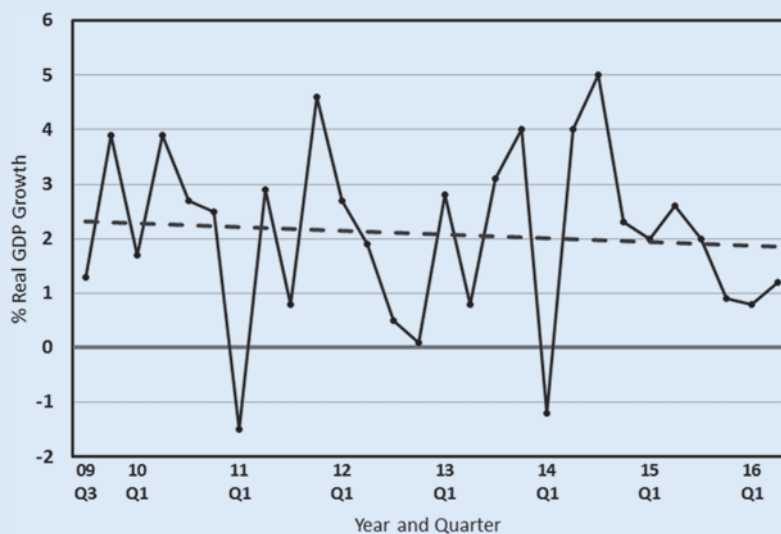
Although each model has its own track record and the accuracy of each forecast should stand judgment on its own, as background, it is worth bearing in mind that many of these forecasts were quite accurate in the 2012 election.

Figure 2
Greater Dependence of the Parties on their Ideological Voters, 1976–84 and 2004–12



Source: Calculated by the author from the National Exit Polls, 1976–2012 obtained in 2013 from the Roper Center.

Figure 3
Economic Growth Since the Great Recession, 2009–2016



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis (7/29/16).

public is inclined to vote for change. These ratings are also colored by partisanship, polarization, and incumbency. In open seat elections, for instance, presidential approval ratings may not be quite as indicative of support for the in-party as they are when an incumbent president is running. Presidential approval ratings for the departing presidents in the seven open-seat elections since 1948 are ranked along with the election's outcome in table 1. There were two decisive in-party losses with presidents rated in the low 30s or lower (1952 and 2008) and one decisive win with a president rated in the mid-50s (1988). President Obama's rating of around 50% suggests the election could go either way. *Outlook for 2016: Close Race.*

Pre-Campaign Public Opinion: Pre-Convention Preference Polls

While the public's views of national conditions and the sitting president's job performance offer important clues about what to expect from voters in November, their early assessments of the candidates also are suggestive precursors. Elections are normally a good deal more competitive than pre-convention polls would indicate, but they still provide a clue about the vote division (r with vote of .74). The four major (non-internet) preference polls in the week prior to the first (Republican) convention had Democrat Hillary Clinton with a narrow lead (52% to 48%) over Donald Trump, but the four polls had undecided voters ranging between 9% and 20%. *Outlook for 2016: Tilt to Democrats.*

THE FORECASTS

These early signs and readings of the context in which the campaigns will be run would suggest that 2016 was shaping up with a tilt to the Republicans until

Table 1

Presidential Approval in Mid-July of Open Seat Election Years, 1952–2012

Rank	Departing President (Year)	Approval %	Election Outcome
1.	Bill Clinton (2000)	59	Won (Lost EV)
2.	Ronald Reagan (1988)	54	Won
3.	Barack Obama (2016)	51	?
4.	Dwight Eisenhower (1960)	49	Lost? (Lost EV)
5.	Lyndon Johnson (1968)	40	Lost (Close)
6.	George W. Bush (2008)	31	Lost
7.	Harry Truman (1952)	29	Lost

Source: Gallup.

they nominated the bombastic Donald Trump. It was not a “sure thing” for the Republicans before their nomination and it (amazingly, to briefly editorialize) does not appear to be a “sure thing” for the Democrats after the Republicans’ astonishing nomination. But though informed, this is loose conjecture. A more systematic appraisal combining many of these fundamentals awaits the models explained in the following articles.

Each of the forecast models in the symposium (with the exception of the Pollyvote combining forecast) is based on a statistical analysis of historical data capturing how different pre-campaign contexts have predicted the vote divisions in past elections. Each has different sets of predictors, different data sources, different specifications and measurements, and different timings. They have different histories, as well. Some forecast models have long records with minor tweaking over the years and others have undergone major renovations. Over

time these revisions have produced some convergence in the models’ predictors and specification, including timing (when a model’s forecasts are most accurate). Although each model has its own track record and the accuracy of each forecast should stand judgment on its own, as background, it is worth bearing in mind that many of these forecasts were quite accurate in the 2012 election.

Seven of the forecasts made more than eight weeks before the 2012 election and, in several cases more than three months before the election, were within one and a half percentage points of the actual two-party popular vote (Campbell 2013).

To provide an overview and facilitate your comparison of the forecasts, I have extracted and organized the predictions of the models in table 2. Six of the 11 forecasts predict that Hillary Clinton will defeat Donald Trump with 51% or more of the two-party presidential vote. Two predict a Trump victory over Clinton by the same margin. The remaining three forecasts predict

Table 2

Summary of the 2016 PS Presidential Election Forecasts

Forecasters	Model(s)	Predicted Two-Party Popular Vote for Clinton		Certainty of Popular Vote Plurality	Days Before Election
Abramowitz	Time for a Change	48.6%		66%	102
Campbell	Trial Heat and Economy Convention Bump and Economy	50.7% Labor Day/Economy		69%	60
		51.2% Con. Bump/Economy		75%	74
Graefe, Armstrong, Jones, and Cuzan	Pollyvote (combining forecasts)	52.7%		–	63
Holbrook	National Conditions and Trial Heat	52.5%		81%	61
Jerôme and Jérôme-Spezari	State-by-State Political Economy	50.1%		50%	121
Lewis-Beck and Tien	Politics, Economics and Institutions Presidential Forecast	51.1%		83%	102
Lockerbie	Economic Expectations and Political Punishment	50.4%		62%	133
Norpoth	The Primary Model	47.5%		87%	246
Wlezien and Erikson	Leading Economic Indicators and the Polls	52.0% Post-Conventions		82%	83
		51.8% Pre-Conventions		72%	119

Table 3

Summary of the 2016 PS Congressional Election Forecasts

Forecasters	Model	Predicted Seat Change		Days Before Election
		US House	US Senate	
Abramowitz	Generic Ballot	+16 Democrats	+4 Democrats	75
Campbell	Seats-in-Trouble	+32 Democrats	+7 Democrats	81
Lewis-Beck and Tien	Politics, Economics, and Institutions House Forecast	+ 3 Democrats	+4 Democrats	102
Lockerbie	Economic Expectations and Incumbency	No Change	–	133

a very close election. The median forecast predicts that Clinton will win 51.1% of the two-party national popular vote.

Finally, while all eyes are understandably turned on the presidential election spectacular (like passing a car accident on the highway), there are important congressional races as well. For these races, the context more clearly favors one party: the Democrats. After their gains in the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections, Republicans hold more seats in the House of Representatives than at any time since 1931. They are at an 85-year high water mark. They are unlikely to gain any more seats and unlikely to hold steady at their current numbers. In the Senate, after their large gains in 2010, Republicans are defending more than twice the number of seats as Democrats. With Republicans defending 24 seats to only 10 seats defended by Democrats, Republicans are quite likely to sustain significant losses. But again, these are general expectations, the analyses of the forecasting models in four of the following articles provide a more systematic and specific expectations. Table 3 collects the basics of these four forecasts. ■

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SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS

Alan I. Abramowitz is the Alben W. Barkley Professor of Political Science at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Abramowitz has authored or coauthored six books, dozens of contributions to edited volumes, and more than fifty articles in political science journals dealing with political parties, elections, and voting behavior in the United States. He is also one of the nation's leading election forecasters—his *Time for Change Model* has correctly predicted the popular vote winner in every presidential election since 1988 including the 2012 election. Abramowitz's most recent book, *The Polarized Public: Why American Government Is So Dysfunctional* examines the causes and consequences of growing partisan polarization among political leaders and ordinary Americans. He may be reached at polsaa@emory.edu.

J. Scott Armstrong Professor at the Wharton School, is a founder of the *Journal of Forecasting*, *International Journal of Forecasting*, and the *International Symposium on Forecasting*. He is the creator of forecastingprinciples.com and editor of *Principles of Forecasting* (2001). In 2010, he was listed as one of the 25 Most Famous College Professors Teaching Today. He may be reached at armstrong@wharton.upenn.edu.

James E. Campbell is a UB Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University at Buffalo,

The State University of New York and is the guest editor of this symposium. He is the author of four books and more than 80 articles and book chapters on American macropolitics, electoral change, and other aspects of American politics. His most recently published book is *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton). He may be reached at jcampbel@buffalo.edu.

Alfred G. Cuzán is Distinguished University Professor at The University of West Florida. His most recent work addresses first principles of government (e.g., "Five Laws of Politics," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, July 2015, 415–419). On a Fulbright Grant, in spring 2016 he taught American politics and Latin American politics at the University of Tartu, Estonia. He may be reached at acuzan@uwf.edu.

Robert S. Erikson is professor of political science at Columbia University. His research on American elections has been published in a wide range of scholarly journals. He is coauthor of *The Macro-Polity* (Cambridge University Press), *Statehouse Democracy* (Cambridge), and *The Timeline of Presidential Elections* (Chicago). He is the former editor of the *American Journal of Political Science* and *Political Analysis*.

Andreas Graefe is a research fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University and LMU Munich's Department of Communication Studies

and Media Research. He also holds the endowed Sky Professorship in Customer Relationship Management at Macromedia University Munich. As the leader of the PollyVote project, Andreas has done extensive validation work on election forecasting methods and has developed several election forecasting models. He may be reached at graefe.andreas@gmail.com.

Thomas Holbrook is the Wilder Crane Professor of Government at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He has published in leading political science journals and is author of *Do Campaigns Matter?* (Sage, 1996) and *Altered States: Changing Populations, Changing Parties, and the Transformation of the American Political Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 2016). He may be reached at holbrook@uwm.edu.

Bruno Jérôme is an associate professor in the department of economics at the University of Paris 2 and member of the Law and Economics Center of Paris 2. His interests are political economy, public economics, election forecasting, European economics and institutions. His most recent books are *Analyse Economique des Elections* (*Economica*, 2010, co-authored with Veronique Jerome-Speziari) and *Villes de gauche, villes de droite: Presses de Sciences Po* (Forthcoming, 2017 co-authored with Richard Nadeau, Veronique Jérôme-Speziari and Martial Foucault). He can be reached at bruno.jerome@gmail.com.

Véronique Jérôme-Speziari is an associate professor in the department of management at the University of Paris Sud 11 and member of the Paris 2 Laboratory of Management. Her interests are political economy, public economics, election forecasting, political marketing, and nonverbal communication. Her most recent books are *Analyse Economique des Elections (Economica, 2010, co-authored with Bruno Jerome)* and *Villes de gauche, villes de droite : Presses de Sciences Po*. She can be reached at veronique.jerome@gmail.com.

Randall J. Jones, Jr. is Professor of Political Science, Emeritus at the University of Central Oklahoma, where he teaches election forecasting and conducts research in that field. He is the author of *Who Will Be in the White House? Predicting Presidential Elections (Longman, 2002)*, and is a founder of the Political Forecasting Group of the American Political Science Association. He may be reached at ranjones@uco.edu.

Michael S. Lewis-Beck is F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the

University of Iowa. His interests are comparative elections, election forecasting, political economy, and quantitative methodology. Professor Lewis-Beck has authored or co-authored over 260 articles and books, including *Economics and Elections*, *The American Voter Revisited*, *French Presidential Elections*, *Forecasting Elections*, *The Austrian Voter*, and *Applied Regression*. He may be reached at michael-lewis-beck@uiowa.edu.

Brad Lockerbie is professor of political science at East Carolina University. His research on economics and elections has appeared in numerous scholarly journals. He is author of *Do Voters Look to the Future: Economics and Elections (SUNY)*. He may be reached at lockerbieb@ecu.edu.

Helmut Norpoth is professor of political science at Stony Brook University. He is coauthor of *The American Voter Revisited* and has published widely on topics of electoral behavior. His book, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Roosevelt and the American*

People, is forthcoming. He can be reached at helmut.norpoth@stonybrook.edu.

Christopher Wlezien is Hogg professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin. His research and teaching interests encompass a range of fields in American and comparative politics, and his articles have appeared in various journals and books. He is coauthor of *Degrees of Democracy (Cambridge)* and *The Timeline of Presidential Elections (Chicago)* and coeditor of *Who Gets Represented? (Russell Sage)*. He was founding coeditor of the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* and currently is associate editor of *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

Charles Tien is a professor in the department of political science at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. His areas of interest include Congress, race and ethnic politics, and quantitative methods. Previously he was a Fulbright Scholar at Renmin University in Beijing, China. He can be reached at ctien@hunter.cuny.edu.