

Predicting Presidential Elections

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The upcoming presidential election is the news topic of the day. The press daily discusses the campaigns of the Republican candidates and President Obama's strategies for dealing with them. These various activities will assuredly have significant effects. But other factors also substantially affect the outcomes of presidential elections – factors that remain the same year after year and election after election. Those factors are the focus of this article.

The factors can be expressed in a simple formula that predicts which candidate will win decisively or whether the election will be close. The formula accurately predicts the outcomes of 19 of the 20 presidential elections between 1932 and 2008. It offers a definite prediction for the 2012 election.

The formula in general terms

The formula is given below in general terms. It is expressed¹ more precisely in later sections of the article.

1. The candidate of the incumbent political party gets one point.
2. The opposition candidate gets one point if the economy is bad.
3. The opposition candidate gets one point if the country is involved in a war that has lasted too long without adequate progress to bring it to a conclusion.
4. Either candidate gets one point if he is charismatic.

The prediction is then simple: If one candidate has more points than the other, he will win decisively. If the two candidates have the same number of points, the election will be close.

Several other models have been developed over the years for predicting presidential elections. For example, Ray Fair was a pioneer in the field. He published his original econometric model in 1978 and has updated it several times since then.² Nate Silver has written a number of articles

¹The author has also written *Boss or Dupe: The Voter in American Politics* (free download from <http://www.jeffrohlfs.com>) and *Bandwagon Effects in High Technology Industries* (MIT Press, 2001). He gratefully acknowledges helpful comments from Chris Rohlfs.

² See <http://fairmodel.econ.yale.edu/RAYFAIR/PDF/2010C.pdf> for the November 2010 update.

on predicting presidential elections. In November, 2011, he wrote “Is Obama Toast? Handicapping the 2012 Election.”³ The model described in the present article differs from previous predictive models in its combination of simplicity and remarkable accuracy.

The economy

Gross domestic product (GDP) is the most comprehensive measure of the state of the economy. Nevertheless, the rate of unemployment has much greater political impact than GDP. We therefore use the rate of unemployment in the above formula to determine whether the economy is bad. In particular, the economy is bad if the rate of unemployment exceeds 7 percent.

The political impact of high unemployment can be seen clearly in the 1980 election, when Ronald Reagan decisively defeated President Jimmy Carter. During the presidential debates, Reagan asked the question, “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” That question and the obvious negative answer for many Americans was regarded as a telling blow in the campaign. The unemployment rate had remained high throughout much of Carter’s term, especially toward the end, near the election.⁴

Much the same sequence of events unfolded again 12 years later – but with the political parties reversed. Bill Clinton decisively defeated President George H. W. Bush in 1992. Clinton’s mantra throughout the campaign was, “It’s the economy, stupid!” As before, the unemployment rate was high toward the end of incumbent’s term, near the election.

Moving toward the present, we observe that Barack Obama inherited the worst economic problems to face any incoming president since Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933. Fortunately, the Bush team – particularly, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson and Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke – had made a good start in dealing with the problems. The Obama team continued the program and made substantial progress toward improving the economy.

- Real GDP began to decline in the first quarter of 2008 – the final year of the Bush administration. It bottomed out in the second quarter of 2009 – within 6 months of the time that Obama took office. By the third quarter of 2011, real GDP was higher than before the recession.⁵
- The data on the rate of unemployment tell a different story, however. The rate went above 7 percent in December 2008, the month before Obama took office. It has exceeded 9 percent for most months in 2009 through 2011. Since October 2011, the

³ *New York Times Magazine*, November 6, 2011.

⁴ See <http://www.bls.gov> for data on the rate of unemployment.

⁵ See <http://www.bea.gov> for data on real GDP.

rate has been slightly below 9 percent, but it has a long way to go to get down to 7 percent.

The bad economy will probably be a substantial political liability for Obama. But as we discuss below, it is unlikely to cost him the election.

War⁶

The public generally strongly supports a war when the president initially proposes it. In particular, public support was initially strong for all the following wars: World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War, the War in Afghanistan, and the second Iraq War.

Public support for war is often fickle, however. If the war is not quickly wrapped up, the public sometimes loses patience. The war then becomes a political liability for the incumbent political party. For example:

Korean War: The Korean War began in June 1950. Before the war, it was generally assumed that President Truman would run for reelection. Many news analysts thought that he would do well, even against the war hero Dwight Eisenhower. After all, the economy was strong, and Truman had proved in 1948 that he was an extremely capable and energetic campaigner.

The war, however, became increasingly unpopular as it continued with no end in sight. Truman's popularity plummeted to the point where his disapproval rating in January 1952 was 67 percent.⁷ He withdrew from the presidential race on March 29, 1952.

The Republicans then, led by Dwight Eisenhower, won a landslide victory in the 1952 elections.

Vietnam War: Large-scale military actions by the United States in Vietnam began in early 1965. Before the war, it was generally assumed that President Johnson would run for reelection. He was expected to win easily, as he had in 1964.

The war, however, became increasingly unpopular as it continued with no end in sight. Johnson's popularity plummeted to the point where his overall approval rating in 1967 and 1968 was 43 percent.⁸ He withdrew from the presidential race on March 31, 1968.

⁶ Much of the discussion in this section is taken from Chapter 7 of the author's book *Boss or Dupe: The Voter in American Politics* (free download from <http://www.jeffrohlf.com>), to which the reader is referred for further detail and documentation.

⁷ Frank Newport, "Bush's 69% Job Disapproval Rating Highest in Gallup History: Truman had 67% in 1952," <http://www.gallup.com/poll/106741/bushs-69-job-disapproval-rating-highest-gallup-history.aspx>.

⁸ "Bush's Job Approval Rating," http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2006/12/bushs_job_appro/

The Republicans then, led by Richard Nixon, won a close victory in the 1968 elections. Were it not for the war, the Democrats would probably have won decisively. The economy was strong, and they were the incumbents. Moreover, the mood of the country at the time was definitely Democratic. The Democrats had large majorities in both houses of Congress.

Second Iraq War: The Second Iraq War was launched in March 2003. Thirteen months later the public had already lost patience with the war. President Bush's approval rating reached a low of 41 percent.⁹

One would normally have expected Bush to win the 2004 election decisively. He was the incumbent, and the economy was strong. Moreover, the mood of the country at the time was definitely Republican. The Republicans controlled both houses of Congress.

With the ongoing unpopular war, Bush won a close election over John Kerry in 2004. In 2008, with the war still ongoing and even more unpopular, the Republicans were routed.

World War II: World War II, in contrast, never became unpopular. The public strongly supported the war effort to the end. When the troops returned after the war, they were welcomed home as heroes.

War in Afghanistan: The War in Afghanistan has now lasted more than ten years. Popular support for the war has varied, but it has never been a significant political liability.

First Gulf War: The First Gulf War was wrapped up in less than a year, and the public never lost patience. The rapid and successful ending of the war benefited President George H. W. Bush politically. (Nevertheless, he lost the election the following year to Bill Clinton.)

Timing

The public never lost patience with World War II or the War in Afghanistan. Both those wars began with attacks on U.S. soil – Pearl Harbor and the attacks of 9/11, respectively. Under those circumstances, the public appears willing to give the President whatever time he needs to wrap up the war.

When the war takes place entirely on foreign shores, the public appears to lose patience after about two years. That is when the war becomes political liability.

The more rapid decline in the popularity of the Second Iraq War is easily explained. The ostensible reason for launching the war was weapons of mass destruction. The Bush Administration claimed that it knew for a fact that Saddam Hussein had such weapons. After

⁹ Elisabeth Bumiller, "The Reach of War: The President; Bush Lays Out Goals for Iraq: Self-Rule and Stability," *New York Times* (May 25, 2004): online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/25/world/reach-war-president-bush-lays-goals-for-iraq-self-rule-stability.html?scp=1&sq=elisabeth%20bumiller%20may%2025,%202004&st=cse>.

the U.S. invasion, it became obvious that the claim had no basis in truth. It is no wonder that the public got fed up so quickly.

Ending the War

A war does not have to be ended entirely to avoid political liability. President Nixon proved that point during his first term in office. By the time of the 1972 election, he had still not ended the Vietnam War. He had, however, removed all ground troops from Vietnam. The public apparently regarded that outcome as fully satisfactory. Nixon won a landslide victory over George McGovern.

Charisma

The outcomes of presidential elections do not depend entirely on the state of the country or on political issues. They also depend on the personal traits of the candidates; in particular, on which candidate (if either) has charisma.

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines "charisma" as "a personal magic of leadership arousing special popular loyalty or enthusiasm for a public figure (as a political leader or military commander)."

I offer the following list of presidential candidates who have exhibited charisma, as defined above, (since 1932):

- Franklin Roosevelt;
- Dwight Eisenhower;
- Jack Kennedy;
- Ronald Reagan;
- Bill Clinton; and
- Barrack Obama.

The choices of Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan for this list seem completely obvious. The others may require some explanation:

Dwight Eisenhower: Many persons do not think of Eisenhower's low-key style as exhibiting charisma. Nevertheless, his immense personal popularity at the time is beyond doubt – apart from any questions involving the condition of the country or any political issues.

Bill Clinton: Bill Clinton's charisma clearly manifested in his debates with President George H. W. Bush. Clinton's great ability to resonate with the audience made the debates a mismatch. His charisma is also evidenced by his great political success under conditions of adversity. He decisively defeated Bush in 1992, notwithstanding Bush's leadership of the successful Gulf War

and his own sexual scandals. The sexual scandals continued during his first term of office. He was even impeached (though not removed from office). Nevertheless, he won a decisive reelection victory. “Charisma” is another word for the teflon of “the teflon president.”

Barrack Obama: Obama’s 2008 campaign inspired much of the voting public, who expected great things when he became president. His candidacy was historic, leading him to become the first African American president of the United States. Charisma is the best explanation for Obama’s decisive victory in 2008. He had the undoubted advantage of an unpopular war. There were also definite signs that the economy was in trouble, but it had not yet turned bad. Even apart from charisma, that combination might have led to an Obama victory, but the election would have been close – much as Nixon’s victory was close in 1968. In actuality, Obama not only won the presidency decisively, but he also increased Democratic majorities in Congress, carrying several members of the House and (especially) the Senate on his “coat tails.”

The determination of which presidential candidates had (have) charisma is inherently subjective. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that charisma had a sizable impact on several presidential elections. One must either contend with the subjectivity (as this article does) or omit an important determinant from the analysis. In any event, the above list of charismatic candidates does seem entirely reasonable and defensible.

What is a close election?

The above formula applies to popular votes. None of the considerations in the formula relates to the Electoral College. But a decisive victory in terms of popular votes almost always translates into a decisive victory in terms of electoral votes.

“Close election” is defined as follows: The popular votes of the winner are not more than 1.06 times the popular votes of the candidate of the other major party. If there are only two candidates, an outcome of 52-48 is regarded as decisive; the ratio would then be 1.08. An outcome of 51-49 is regarded as close; the ratio would then be 1.04.

Even if there are more than two candidates in a presidential election, focusing on the candidates of the two major parties makes sense. Third-party candidates typically get a relatively small percentage of the popular and electoral votes. Most of them get no electoral votes at all.

Predictions of Historical Presidential elections

The table below shows predictions based on the above formula for each Presidential election from 1932 to 2008. Actual outcome and the predicted outcome are both given in the table.

Predictions of Historical Presidential Elections

Year	Economy bad?	War going on too long?	Who has charisma?	Score	Predicted outcome	Actual outcome
1932	Y		O	Hoover 1, Roosevelt 2	Roosevelt decisive	Roosevelt decisive
1936	Y		I	Roosevelt 2, Landon 1	Roosevelt decisive	Roosevelt decisive
1940	Y		I	Roosevelt 2, Wilkie 1	Roosevelt decisive	Roosevelt decisive
1944			I	Roosevelt 2, Dewey 0	Roosevelt decisive	Roosevelt decisive
1948				Truman 1, Dewey 0	Truman decisive	Truman decisive
1952		Y	O	Eisenhower 2, Stevenson 1	Eisenhower decisive	Eisenhower decisive
1956			I	Eisenhower 2, Stevenson 0	Eisenhower decisive	Eisenhower decisive
1960			O	Nixon 1, Kennedy 1	Close	Close
1964				Johnson 1, Goldwater 0	Johnson decisive	Johnson decisive
1968		Y		Humphrey 1, Nixon 1	Close	Close
1972				Nixon 1, McGovern 0	Nixon decisive	Nixon decisive
1976	Y			Ford 1, Carter 1	Close	Close
1980	Y		O	Carter 1, Reagan 2	Reagan decisive	Reagan decisive
1984	Y		I	Reagan 2, Mondale 1	Reagan decisive	Reagan decisive
1988				G.H.W. Bush 1, Dukakis 0	G.H.W. Bush decisive	G.H.W. Bush decisive
1992	Y		O	G.H.W. Bush 1, Clinton 2	Clinton decisive	Clinton decisive
1996			I	Clinton 2, Dole 0	Clinton decisive	Clinton decisive
2000				Gore 1, G.W. Bush 0	Gore decisive	Close
2004		Y		G.W. Bush 1, Kerry 1	Close	Close
2008		Y	O	McCain 1, Obama 2	Obama decisive	Obama decisive

Y = yes; N = no

I = incumbent party; O = opposition party

Incumbent-party candidate is listed first in the score column.

See <http://www.usconstitution.net/elections.html> for data on popular votes of presidential elections.

As the Table shows, the formula accurately predicts the outcomes of 19 of the 20 Presidential elections from 1932 to 2008.

The inaccurate prediction was in 2000. The formula predicts a decisive victory for Al Gore, the Democratic incumbent, but the election turned out to be close. In the previous presidential election the charismatic Bill Clinton had been re-elected, even though the mood of the country had shifted to Republican. At the time of the 2000 election, the Republicans controlled both

houses of Congress. Under these circumstances, incumbency had less value than usual. It did not justify the point given to incumbency in the formula.

Prediction for 2012 election

Yogi Berra observed, "Making predictions is hard, especially about the future." Nevertheless, we apply the above formula to make a prediction about the 2012 Presidential election.

1. Obama will, of course, get 1 point for being the incumbent.
2. Unemployment is unlikely to fall to 7 percent by the time of the election. Thus, the Republican candidate will get 1 point for the bad economy.
3. The Republicans are unlikely to score a point for an unpopular ongoing war. Obama has already ended the war in Iraq. The War in Afghanistan is unlikely to be a political liability, especially since the expansion of the war led to the death of Osama Bin Laden, the architect of the attacks that occurred on 9/11.
4. Obama gets 1 point for being charismatic. The Republicans do not have a charismatic candidate in this election.

The score according to the formula is Obama 2, Republicans 1. This score translates into a prediction of a decisive victory for Obama.

It is not at all unprecedented for a charismatic president to win re-election decisively, even though the economy is bad. Roosevelt won decisively in both 1936 and 1940, even though the economy was bad. Reagan won decisively in 1984, even though the economy was bad.

Summary

This article proposes a simple formula for predicting which candidate will decisively win a presidential election or whether the election will be close. The formula reflects the following considerations:

- Is the economy bad?
- Is the country involved in a war that has lasted too long without adequate progress to bring it to a conclusion?
- Which candidate (if either) is charismatic?

The formula accurately predicts the outcomes of 19 of the 20 elections between 1932 and 2008. It predicts a decisive victory for Obama this year (2012)