Editors' Introduction

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *American Politics Quarterly* is devoted generally to forecasting models of American national elections and more specifically to their application to the 1996 elections. This is the first time that a group of election forecasting models has been assembled in one scholarly journal, offering forecasts of the election at least 2 months before the balloting. Forecasting in general is a risky business, and forecasting an election outcome based on the vote decisions of more than 100 million American voters is an especially treacherous undertaking. Nevertheless, the scholars assembled in this special issue think that it can be done with some considerable, if less than perfect, certainty and are willing to stick their necks out quite publicly with their forecast several months before the election. The election results on November 5 will tell how many of them still have their necks intact.

Although election forecasting outside of political science has a long and colorful history replete with bellwethers, straw polls, and punditry, systematic election forecasting within political science has a relatively brief history. Despite the efforts of Louis Bean (1940, 1942, 1948) in blazing a forecasting trail in the 1940s, it was not until the late 1970s that a significant body of research began to accumulate on election forecasting.

The recent wave of forecasting models began with Sigelman's analysis of the connection between presidential approval ratings and subsequent election results (Sigelman 1979; Brody and Sigelman 1983), Rosenstone's (1983) model of presidential election results in the states, and the adaptation by Lewis-Beck and Rice of Tufte's approval rating and economic performance model to forecast both congressional and presidential elections (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1984a, 1984b; Tufte 1978). Abramowitz (1988) amended the Lewis-Beck and Rice approval and economy model by appending a "time for a change" variable to it, and Campbell and Wink (1990), in following a lead from Lewis-Beck (1985), built a model around the trial-heat poll question

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(i.e., "If the election were held today . . .") and economic conditions. Lewis-Beck and Rice (1992) significantly amended their initial model by adding indicators from the presidential primaries and prior congressional elections. Building on Rosenstone's state-level model, Campbell (1992) also constructed a model to predict the presidential vote in the individual states based on the trial-heat polls, economic indicators, and a number of state-level variables. With the exception of the state models developed by Rosenstone (1983) and Campbell (1992)—and reanalyzed by Gelman and King (1995)—all forecasting models have been tested using national time-series data.

Scholars from sister disciplines to political science also have been drawn to the forecasting arena. Yale economist Ray Fair (1978, 1982, 1988) developed a national time-series model comparable to the national political science models, with two important exceptions: (a) It did not include any measure of public opinion, and, because of this, (b) it was estimated over nearly twice as many elections as the political science models (covering elections since 1916). Economic conditions and incumbency are at the core of Fair's model. Historian Allan Lichtman covered an even longer span of electoral history (since 1860) with his forecasting rules (Lichtman and DeCell 1990; Lichtman 1996). Lichtman identified 13 "keys" or indicators to the presidential election and devised a decision rule to predict the winning presidential candidate based on the number of keys favoring each party's candidate. From the standpoint of political science, it is tempting to criticize Fair's model for even attempting to predict election results without a reading of public opinion and Lichtman's 13 keys for the subjectivity and crudeness of his indicators as well as the oversimplification of how the keys are combined to predict simply a winner or a loser (rather than the candidates' portion of the vote). Nonetheless, it is heartening to see a diversity of approaches and a lively interest in the forecasting enterprise.

It is one thing to develop a model and another to have it withstand the rigors of a test under fire. Five of the national models were under the gun in the 1992 election: (a) Fair's (1988) economy-incumbency model, (b) Lewis-Beck and Rice's (1992) original approval-economy model, (c) Lewis-Beck and Rice's amended and more complex

model that incorporates internal party divisions (as reflected in primary results) and partisan trends (as reflected in prior midterm results), (d) the Abramowitz (1988) approval-economy-"time for a change" model, and (e) the Campbell and Wink (1990) trial-heat and economy model (Campbell and Mann 1992, 1996; Greene 1993; Campbell 1993). Of this crop, the election offered a clear verdict of three winners and two losers. Each of the three winners—the original Lewis-Beck and Rice model, the Abramowitz model, and the Campbell and Wink model—were accurate to within 1 percentage point of the vote in predicting the Clinton victory and offered forecasts by or before Labor Day. Each was a good deal more accurate than the polls at the time that the forecast was made and more accurate than the seat-of-the-pants predictions made just days before the election by most pundits (Campbell 1993). One of the two losers was Lewis-Beck and Rice's (1992) amended and more complicated model, which called for a narrow Bush win. This model missed the two-party vote by more than 5 percentage points. The biggest miss was produced by Fair's model, which predicted a solid majority (about 56%) for President Bush, an error of a whopping 9 percentage points.

Since the 1992 election, the established models have been updated, and others have been revised or otherwise amended. In addition, and indicative of the growing interest in forecasting, a number of new and intriguing models has been developed. In this issue of *APQ*, we present some of the most prominent of the established and the most promising of the new models with their forecasts for the 1996 election between Democratic President Bill Clinton and Republican challenger Bob Dole. Each presents a specific point forecast of the November presidential popular vote, and many assess the uncertainty surrounding their forecasts. Six separate presidential forecasting models, each arriving at a forecast at least 2 months before the election, are presented. To accommodate publishing and printing schedules, each precise forecast for 1996 (submitted at least 2 months before election day) is presented at the end of this issue, allowing *APQ* readers to determine conveniently how accurately each forecast predicts the actual November vote. In the interest of comprehensiveness, we also have included in this section a few forecasts that are not represented

in the articles in this issue. Although all articles describe and apply a forecast model to the presidential (and, in one case, congressional) election, some also tackle broader issues surrounding the forecasting enterprise.

Each of the six presidential election forecasts predicts a Clinton victory in the upcoming election. All six of the presidential forecasts give Clinton a percentage of the two-party vote in excess of 50%, and in some cases these forecasts suggest a sizable Clinton victory margin. Of course, these forecasts are based on information available to scholars (and, presumably, to the mass media and voters) at least 2 months before the election. As several authors point out, it is possible that the presidential campaign or unusual short-term events could result in last-minute shifts in the vote. However, the past record of forecasting research suggests that these shifts are unusual and are often captured in the effects of variables already included in the forecasting models. In any event, the best estimates of the leading election forecasters would suggest that Bill Clinton will be reelected in November.

We would be remiss if we did not point out the article by Erikson and Sigelman, in which the authors develop a model to forecast the aggregate two-party vote in the 1996 congressional elections. Much of the work on forecasting House elections focuses on midterm elections, so it is noteworthy that Erikson and Sigelman have offered a forecast of the House elections during the 1996 presidential election year. Although the 1996 presidential election has drawn (and will continue to draw) the bulk of attention, both in this issue and in the popular press, no one doubts the importance of the House and Senate results for politics after the 1996 elections.

It is our hope that this special issue of *APQ* facilitates further development of the forecasting field in elections and perhaps elsewhere in political science, as well as encouraging greater precision in estimation, greater attention to questions of uncertainty, and more attention to the hard data of politics.

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