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Evaluating the 1986 Congressional Election Forecasts

Author(s): James E. Campbell

Source: *PS*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter, 1987), pp. 37-42

Published by: American Political Science Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/419268>

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Finally, the Iran-contra affair may have a more long-term effect on our relations with the rest of the world. The incident seriously weakens the Reagan administration's claim to pursue a foreign policy marked by clarity and consistency. Other nations may now, understandably, be

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*Whatever the legislative consequences, the administration's credibility at home and abroad has been severely damaged.*

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hesitant to join new American initiatives to address pressing international problems. Friends and enemies alike may demand more convincing evidence, a higher price, for American commitment to a policy course. Repairing this damage will not be easy and may well extend to the end of the Reagan administration.

#### **Suggested Reading**

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### **Evaluating the 1986 Congressional Election Forecasts**

**James E. Campbell**  
University of Georgia

There are many reasons political scientists might be and, increasingly, have become interested in election forecasting. Compared to many other areas of research, election forecasting certainly has a greater immediate political relevance. It also presents a real challenge. If, as Gary Jacobson has said, election forecasting is recreational political science, it is a demanding and risky recreation. It does not permit the comfortable safety of the standard after-the-fact political research. It offers a strenuous test of theory. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

What is perhaps most appealing about election forecasting is its definiteness and its ambition for greater precision. You could wade through the literature offering "conclusions" that this factor or that factor was somewhat, generally, unquestionably or clearly important. Too often even quantitative work stops at examining standardized coefficients and

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James E. Campbell is an associate professor of political science at the University of Georgia and a former APSA Congressional Fellow. The focus of his recent work is a re-examination of the congressional election theory of surge and decline.

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significance tests. For those who regard this current state as too vague and too timid for their appetites, election forecasting provides refreshing clarity, a pinned-down political science.

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*The longer the coattails in a presidential election, the greater the losses in the subsequent midterm.*

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A few days after the 1986 midterm elections a group of intrepid congressional election forecasters (Alan Abramowitz, David Canon, Tom Rice, Jim Stimson, and myself) assembled for a postmortem at the Southern Political Science Association meeting in Atlanta. What follows is a review of how well the House and Senate forecasting models predicted the 1986 elections and some reflections on questions raised in evaluating these models.

### The House Forecasts

The Republicans lost five seats in the House. By historical standards this was a very small midterm loss for a president's party. In the previous 10 midterm elections the president's party had an average net loss of 30 seats and in recent second term administrations the president's party sustained an average net loss of 52 seats, the much ballyhooed "six year jinx."

Compared to these historical averages all of the forecasting models looked pretty good in 1986. Each predicted Republican losses significantly below the average loss of recent midterms. The reason for the consistent prediction of lower than usual losses is that all of the models include an aspect of, or are a variant of Tufte's original presidential referendum model (1975 and 1978). Popular presidents help their party reduce midterm losses and President Reagan was very popular throughout the 1986 campaign. For most of the campaign Reagan's approval ratings with the public stayed in the 65 to 68% range, 13 to 16 percentage points above the average 52% midterm approval for recent presidents. A Wirthlin poll shortly after the Iceland

summit meeting in October placed Reagan's approval rating as high as 73%.

Even though all of the forecast models took Reagan's popularity into account and as a consequence predicted lower than usual seat losses, there remained some substantial differences.<sup>1</sup>

(1) *Exposure-Referendum*. The Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman (1986) forecast was the most accurate prediction of the net partisan seat change in the House. They predicted a Republican loss of seven seats. Three variables were used to generate this prediction. In addition to the standard referendum variables measuring presidential popularity and economic conditions they included an exposure variable. The exposure variable is the number of seats a party holds going into an election above or below the party's historical average. The presumption is that a party holding more seats than usual is defending a greater number of vulnerable seats and therefore ought to suffer greater losses. Conversely, a party holding fewer than normal should be expected to hold its own and possibly pick up seats from the opposing party. Exposure alone accounts for 46% of seat change variance in congressional elections from 1938 to 1984 and alone would have predicted a two seat Republican loss this year (Oppenheimer et al., 1986: 244).<sup>2</sup> Adding the exposure variable to the basic referendum model, altered to predict seat changes rather than vote changes as originally specified by Tufte, increases the proportion of explained variance in seat changes in all

<sup>1</sup>There are a number of models other than the three reviewed above. Tufte (1978), Abramowitz, Cover and Norpoth (1986), Brody (1982), Hibbs (1982), Jacobson and Kernell (1981), Jacobson (1982) and others have produced models to explain the congressional vote. I have limited the focus of this discussion to models that predicted seats directly rather than votes and those used to generate public predictions prior to the election. Any reference to explained or accounted for variance in this essay refers to the *adjusted* variance unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>This exposure alone or basic model predicts a four seat loss for the Democrats in 1988.

congressional elections since 1946 from 27% to 78%.

Although there is no disputing that the exposure-referendum model was on target in 1986, there is a perplexing aspect of the model. Looking only at midterm congressional elections, it appears as though a party's exposure generally has had little if anything to do with the extent of its seat losses. A midterm seat loss equation (1946-1982) with exposure as the sole independent variable actually fails to account for any seat loss variance. Moreover, exposure remains insignificant ( $p = .80$ ) after presidential popularity is added to the equation. The overall fit *in midterms* of a model using only exposure to predict seat losses has been quite poor (Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman, 1986: Table 3). Postdiction errors in the last eight midterms have averaged plus or minus 16.5 seats and in four of these eight midterms the pure exposure model missed by more than 20 seats.

(2) *Lagged Referendum*. The Lewis-Beck and Rice (1984: 478) forecasting equation is entirely within the referendum tradition. Forecasts from this model are based on three considerations: the president's popularity, the state of the economy and whether or not the election is a midterm. What is distinctive about this model is that it is based on readings of presidential popularity and the economy nearly six months prior to the election.<sup>3</sup> It accounts for 80% of seat change variance (unadjusted) in congressional elections since 1950 and its average absolute error has been about eight seats. In 1986 the equation predicted a 14 seat loss for the Republicans, nine seats more than the actual loss.

There seems to be little argument that at least some form of the referendum model of partisan change in congressional elections has merit. However, the pure referendum model as it has been applied to interelection change makes a somewhat dubious implicit assumption. In attempt-

ing to predict change from one election to the next the model assumes that the starting point, the prior election, makes no difference to the extent of change. The model is surprisingly indifferent to whether the prior election had been an unmitigated disaster or an impressive victory for the party. It predicts the same amount of change in either circumstance.

(3) *Coattails-Referendum*. My model of midterm partisan seat change in the House draws on two theories of midterm elections (Campbell, 1985 and 1986). Like the preceding models, my forecast equation in part considers the outcomes of midterm elections to be a referendum on the president's performance in office. The model is also based on Angus Campbell's theory of surge and decline (1966 and Campbell, forthcoming). The aggregate consequence of surge and decline is that the president's party in midterm elections ought to suffer losses inversely proportional to how well the party did in the prior presidential election.<sup>4</sup> Running

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*One possible explanation of the 1986 prediction error is that it is confounded by a secular regional realignment favoring Republicans.*

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without a winning presidential candidate's coattails ought to cost some congressional candidates their midterm elec-

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<sup>4</sup>Although Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman regard the exposure hypothesis as making surge and decline unnecessary (1986: 239), from my perspective their exposure variable is one possible intervening variable elaborating the surge and decline theory. That is, a president's party becomes overexposed in presidential elections because of the president's coattails. Once overexposed they return to normal at the midterm. It is interesting to note that the exposure variable indicates that in every midterm since 1950 the president's party has been overexposed rather than underexposed. Moreover in the 10 midterms before 1986 the Democratic presidential vote is strongly correlated ( $r = .77$ ) with the party's exposure going into the next midterm.

<sup>3</sup>This is similar to Jacobson and Kernell's specification (1981: 68) except their dependent variable was Tufte's standardized vote loss rather than seat losses.

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tions. The longer the coattails in a presidential election, the greater the losses in the subsequent midterm.

After testing equations based on both theories on the same set of elections, I found that each accounted for some seat change and that combined together they fit previous midterm seat losses quite closely. A detrended model based on the prior presidential vote and the president's midterm popularity accounted for 88% of the variance in midterm seat losses. The average absolute error of the expected seat loss for midterms since 1946 was about four seats and the worst absolute error was eight seats. The model received further support from a complementary model for on-year House elections and from its application to state legislative elections.

The 1986 prediction of my coattails-referendum model was considerably off target. Based on Reagan's landslide of 1984 and his popularity going into the midterm the Republicans were expected to lose 21 seats (Campbell, 1986: 86). This 16 seat overprediction of Republican losses is double the greatest previous postdiction error of the model.

How does the coattail-referendum model emerge from the aftermath of its 1986 miss? In reexamining the model, albeit safely after-the-fact, it is still very strong. When the model is reestimated with the 1986 election included it accounts for 85 percent of midterm seat loss variance. The average absolute postdiction or after-the-fact error of the reestimated, but identically specified, model is 5.4 seats and the worst postdiction error is 10 seats in the 1986 midterm. Moreover, both of the principal independent variables remain statistically significant ( $p < .005$ ).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>The coefficients of the reestimated equation are: a constant of 47.78, -2.90 for the prior presidential vote, .93 for presidential popularity and .53 for the trend correction counter variable. Only one respecification improved the fit of this model. Replacing the trend correction counter variable with an interaction of the counter and presidential vote variables increases the adjusted proportion of explained variance to 86% and reduces the average absolute error to 4.8 seats.

One possible explanation of the 1986 prediction error is that it is confounded by a secular regional realignment favoring Republicans (Epstein, 1985; Wolfinger, 1985; Ladd, 1985). Although at this point it is a difficult contention to prove, there is some evidence suggesting it. For instance, there were a number of individual districts (e.g., Texas 13th, 14th, 19th, and 26th) that looked as though Republicans had narrowly won them in 1984 because of Reagan's coattails. Surprisingly few of these once Democratic districts were recaptured by Democrats this year. Less anecdotally and still by way of speculation, I respecified the equation to permit the possibility of a realignment. I substituted a realignment variable in place of the equation's trend correction term, a counter variable corresponding to the year of the midterm inserted to detrend the data after autocorrelation was detected. The realignment variable was assigned a value of 1 for the Republican midterms of 1982 and 1986 and a value of 0 for prior midterms. When this admittedly crude indicator of realignment is included, the fit of the equation improves significantly (adjusted  $R^2 = .91$  and an average absolute postdiction error of 3.4 seats).<sup>6</sup>

### The Senate Forecasts

In Senate elections the Democrats gained eight seats and regained the majority status they had lost in 1980. Two models constructed by Lewis-Beck and Rice (1986) and Abramowitz and Segal (1986) were in place to forecast these elections. These models are similar in several respects and, not surprisingly, yielded similar predictions. With slight measurement differences, both are based on three independent variables: presidential popularity, change in economic conditions and the number of seats at stake for the president's party. If a party has a greater number of seats to defend, as the Republicans did in 1986, the arithmetic works against it. Lewis-Beck and Rice

<sup>6</sup>The coefficients are: a constant of 72.28, 19.13 for the realignment term, -2.91 for the prior presidential vote, and 1.08 for presidential popularity.

add a fourth variable (a dummy variable for Democratic administrations) and, as in the case of their House model, they use lagged measures of their independent variables so that they can make earlier forecasts. For previous Senate elections Abramowitz and Segal account for 49% of the variance and Lewis-Beck and Rice account for 65%. The average absolute error of Lewis-Beck and Rice postdictions has been 1.7 seats.

In 1986 both models predicted the Democrats to make gains in the Senate, but neither predicted the gains to be quite as great as they actually were. Lewis-Beck and Rice forecast a five seat net Democratic gain and Abramowitz and Segal predicted a three seat gain. From one standpoint these forecasts look pretty good. Despite a very popular president the models correctly predicted losses for his party. However, a three to five seat error when there are only 34 contests and when the models are usually more accurate might raise some concern.

### **The Midterm Question**

While having their referendum base in common, the various forecasting models have a number of other matters in dispute. One particularly important question, raised again in examining the recent Senate forecasts, is whether separate models for congressional elections in midterms and presidential election years are necessary or whether a generic model suitable to both on and off-year elections is possible? Of course, parsimony recommends a single model. All things being equal, simplicity is preferable to complexity. The real question, however, is whether all things are equal. Are those who favor a single model purchasing a minor amount of parsimony at the price of greater accuracy? If on-year congressional elections differ substantially from off-year elections then models not incorporating this difference may introduce unacceptably greater errors into their forecasts.

The Senate models may be instructive in determining whether accuracy is being sacrificed to obtain a model suitable for both on and off-year elections. Neither of

these models makes any distinction between midterms and presidential year elections. One preliminary indication that these models are losing predictive power by not making this distinction would be if the models were more successful in one type of election and less successful in the other. Do these models work equally well

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in both types of elections? An inspection of residuals from the Lewis-Beck and Rice model (1986: Table 1) suggests that there is a difference. In Senate elections held in presidential years the Lewis-Beck and Rice model is extremely accurate, an average absolute error of less than one seat. In Senate elections held in midterms, however, the model (not including 1986) does not do so well. Its average absolute error in midterm elections is 2.4 seats. Although this difference does not mean that these models necessarily would be strengthened by incorporating a distinction between midterm and presidential year elections, it does suggest that the distinction could be one worth making.

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## A Graphic Look at the 1986 Elections

### John P. Katosh

Election Data Services, Inc.

Immediately following the November elections, television analysts and news-

paper reporters offered a great deal of commentary regarding the results of the elections and their meaning for the country. And in the next few months, there will be a number of books—many of them authored by, or including articles written by, political scientists—that will go into even greater detail analyzing and explaining “what really happened” during the election campaigns and at the polls, as well as assessing the likely impact of those actions and results.

While these efforts represent important contributions to our understanding of the electoral process in the United States, it is often very difficult—and time consuming—to read (or watch) and absorb all of this information. Therefore, adhering to the maxim that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” the next few pages present a series of election graphics that visually report the results of the 1986 senatorial, congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative elections.\*

Each of the maps shows the partisan outcomes for the particular elections in question. Accompanying each map are a series of tables. The first table in the series reports partisan strength before and after the November elections. The two other tables following the first three maps report incumbent re-election success rates by party and partisan retention rates by type of race—incumbent running or open-seat. There is also a graph showing re-election rates for U.S. senators and representatives in the post-war era. Final-

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At the time these maps were prepared, Mr. Katosh was Director of Research and Analysis at Election Data Services, Inc.—a Washington, D.C.-based research and consulting firm. He is currently the Director of Survey Research at Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc.—also in Washington, D.C. Mr. Katosh is completing his dissertation on the use of geopolitical databases for targeting in election campaigns at the University of Michigan.

\*The maps presented here were produced by Election Data Services, Inc. using the Atlas Advanced Mapping Package developed by Strategic Locations Planning, Inc. The research assistance of Dale Tibbits, at E.D.S., Inc., is gratefully acknowledged.