

# Introduction—Assessments of the 2004 Presidential Vote Forecasts

by  
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In the 2004 presidential election, 121.1 million ballots were cast for the major party candidates. President George W. Bush received 51.24% of these votes to Senator John Kerry's 48.76%. As Bush prepares for his second term, we know how the candidates performed. How did the election forecasters do?

Evaluating election forecasts is not as easy as it would seem. Except when extremely lucky, forecasts are always to some extent inaccurate. There are always errors in the measurement of predictors, specification of the models, and unanticipated events in the campaign. Still, not all forecasts are equally inaccurate. How can

the accuracy of forecasts be fairly judged?

In my introduction to this election's forecasts (2004), I suggested several benchmarks. First, the average error (from

1948 to 2000) of naively guessing either a tie vote or the mean in-party vote (the null model) is 4.8 percentage points. The average error in Gallup's preference polls conducted from after the conventions to Labor Day (around the time that the fall campaign gets underway and many of the forecasts are made) is about 3.9 to 4.4 percentage points. Finally, polls conducted just before Election Day have an average error of about 2 points (1.6 since 1956).

Using these benchmarks in a roughly qualitative way, we can grade forecasts with errors

of less than 2 percentage points as "quite accurate," errors between 2 and 3 points as "reasonably accurate" (closer to the accuracy of the final polls than the pre-campaign polls), errors between 3 and 4 points as "fairly accurate," errors between 4 and 5 points as "inaccurate," and errors in excess of 5 points as "very inaccurate."

From a collective standpoint, 2004 was a good year for the seven forecasts presented in the October *PS*. Two forecasts (Wlezien and Erikson, Lewis-Beck and Tien) were in the quite accurate range; two (Abramowitz, Campbell) were in the reasonably accurate range; and one (Norpoth) was in the fairly accurate range.<sup>1</sup> One (Holbrook) was in the inaccurate range and one (Lockerbie) was very inaccurate. This was joined in the stratosphere of errors by the prediction from the leading forecasting model in economics. The venerable economist Ray Fair's late July forecast of a 57.5% Bush vote was a whopping 6.3 percentage points greater than the actual vote (Fair 2004).

Of course, 2004 is only one election. It would be imprudent to read too much into either a very accurate or inaccurate forecast for a single year. Nevertheless, for the most part, 2004 was good news for the forecast models. In the following essays, each forecaster or team of forecasters provides an assessment of how their model fared this year and what might be learned from the 2004 forecast.

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## Note

1. The errors were: Wlezien and Erikson .5% and 1.7%, Lewis-Beck and Tien 1.3%, Abramowitz 2.4%, Campbell 2.5%, Norpoth 3.5%, Holbrook 4.9%, and Lockerbie 6.4%. Due to a coding mistake, Holbrook's forecast was 56.1% for Bush, not his originally reported 54.5%. The forecasting model by Cuzan and

Bundrick, a progeny of Ray Fair's model but including a fiscal policy component, predicted a Bush vote of 52.8% in May and revised this downward to 51.1% in August. Both forecasts are in the quite accurate range. Also, my convention bump forecast was off by 1.5 points, placing it within the quite accurate range.

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## References

Campbell, James E. 2004. "Introduction: The 2004 Presidential Election Forecasts." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 37 (October): 733–5.

Fair, Ray C. 2004. "A Vote Equation and the 2004 Election." <http://fairmodel.econ.yale.edu/vote2004/index2.htm>

**Alan I. Abramowitz** is Alben W. Barkley Professor of Political Science at Emory University. He is author of *Senate Elections* (University of Michigan Press, 1992) and is currently researching party realignment in the U.S. and its consequences for presidential and congressional elections.

**James E. Campbell** is professor of political science at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. He is the author of numerous articles and several books including *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote* (Texas A&M University Press, 2000). He co-edited *Before the Vote: Forecasting American National Elections* (Sage, 2000). The morning after the 2000 election he appeared on *AM Buffalo* to discuss the election with film legend Mickey Rooney.

**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 *American Public Opinion* (Allyn and Bacon). He is the former editor of the *American Journal of Political Science* and the current editor of *Political Analysis*.

**Thomas M. Holbrook** is professor of political science and director of graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He is author of *Do Campaigns Matter?* (Sage, 2003).

**Michael S. Lewis-Beck** is F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor and Chair of Political Science at the University of Iowa. He has authored or co-authored over 110 articles or books, including *Forecasting Elections*. Lewis-Beck has forecast U.S., French, British, Hungarian, and German elections.

**Brad Lockerbie** is associate professor of political science at the University of Georgia. His research focuses on the role economics plays in political behavior.

**Helmut Norpoth** is professor of political science at Stony Brook University. He has authored or coauthored numerous articles on voting and public opinion, and co-edited *Economics and Politics: The Calculus of Support*. On many occasions, he has assisted the *New York Times* with its Election-Day analysis.

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