Midterm Elections Used to Gauge President's Reelection Chances

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ABSTRACT

Since 1952, there have been thirteen instances in which the incumbent president's party lost seats in the House of Representatives in a midterm election. Researchers have created two competing theories to explain this trend. The "surge-and-decline theory" argues that the reasons for high voter turnout in a presidential election are absent in a midterm election, leading to a decline in voter turnout and subsequent losses by the president's party. The other theory, the "referendum theory," argues that losses suffered by the president's party are due to the president's performance and the performance of the economy. When it comes to presidential elections, out of the thirteen midterm election losses, the incumbent party was able to retain the White House in the subsequent presidential election six times. The other six times, the incumbent party lost the White House. However, there is little to no research explaining why this is the case. This article attempts to answer two questions. First, can results of midterm elections serve as an indicator of a president's reelection chances? Second, if so, which theory, surge-and-decline or referendum, helps explain this trend this best? Utilizing statistical analysis, my research shows that there is insufficient evidence to conclude whether midterm elections can serve as an indicator of a president's reelection chances.

Introduction

There have been fifteen presidential elections and fifteen midterm elections since 1952. Out of those fifteen midterm elections, there have been thirteen elections in which the political party of the incumbent president lost seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and two elections in which the incumbent president's party gained seats. Of the fifteen presidential elections, there have been seven instances in which the incumbent president's party lost seats in the previous midterm election, but won the subsequent presidential election, and seven instances of the opposite.

Conventional analysis of midterm elections is usually in relation to the previous presidential election, or the issues or events leading up to a presidential election. Rarely are midterm elections considered in terms of whether the president, or his party in some cases, would retain the White House in the next presidential election. The focus of this research is to determine whether midterm elections can serve as a predictive indicator of the outcome in the following presidential election. For decades, scholars have speculated as to why the president's party suffers losses at the midterm election. An examination of these theories can provide insight into the variables that should be considered.

Competing Theories of Midterm Elections

Coattails and Surge-and-Decline Theory

When it comes to midterm elections, there are two prominent theories that help explain why the president's party suffers losses. The first theory is the "coattails theory." According to this theory, first proposed by Bean (1948), the losses suffered by the president's party are a result of the decline in voter turnout for midterm elections. Those that voted in the presidential election because of a specific candidate are less likely to vote in the off-year election; thus, congressional candidates from the president's party are likely to suffer defeat in the absence of presidential "coattails" (Press, 1956).

Building on the coattails theory is the surge-and-decline theory. According to A. Campbell (1960), a high-stimulus election, an election in which issues, events, or popular candidates may stimulate widespread enthusiasm and interest amongst the electorate, is usually followed by a low-stimulus election, an election in which issues or events do not stimulate interest and enthusiasm amongst the electorate for the election. If there is enough interest, in any given election, voters who may not usually vote (or voters with weak party identification) tend to vote for one party over the other. However, if the election does not seem to be important enough, only the typical, dedicated voters will vote.

In order to test his theory, Campbell focused on patterns and trends in voter turnout and partisanship. Campbell referred to two panel studies conducted by the Survey Research Center. The first study was of participants' choices in the presidential election in 1952 and in the previous midterm election. In 1956 and 1958, the Survey Research Center conducted a second round of surveys, asking the participants about their vote choices in both of these elections. These two national surveys revealed three interesting findings. First, Campbell classifies the 1952 presidential election as a surge election, due to an increase in voter turnout and a swing in partisanship that resulted in Dwight Eisenhower receiving more votes than Thomas Dewey. Second, Campbell classifies the 1956-1958 election cycles as an electoral decline due to less political party activity and media coverage than in typical presidential elections. Finally, he notes a major swing in partisanship in favor of Democrats, as opposed to the Republican swing of 1952.

Referendum Theory

In response to the original surge-and-decline theory, Tufte (1975) tries to explain why it is the case the president's party loses the number of seats that it does. Whereas surge-and-decline is focused mainly on voter turnout and the amount of interest and information that is present in the election, Tufte focuses on two additional, yet equally important, factors: presidential popularity (Kernell, 1977; Piereson, 1975) and national economic performance (Kramer, 1971; Stigler 1973).

Using data from 1938 to 1970, Tufte (1975) examines his hypothesis through multiple regression analysis, using the following equation:

$$\text{Vote Loss by President's Party in Midterm} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 [\text{Presidential Popularity}]$$
$$+ \beta_2 [\text{Yearly Change in Economic Conditions}] + \varepsilon$$

Based on his findings, Tufte concluded that all of the midterm elections from 1938 to 1970 were in fact a referendum on the president based on the president's performance and the management of the national economy. Tufte based this argument on his finding that the two independent variables—the president's approval rating and the yearly change in real disposable personal income per capita—explained approximately 91% of the variation in midterm election results. According to Tufte, a 10 percentage point change in the president's Gallup approval rating equates to a 1.3 percentage point change in the national midterm congressional vote of the president's party. Tufte also found that a change of $100 in real disposable income in the year prior to the election equated to a 3.5 percentage point change in the national midterm congressional vote of the president's party.

Tufte followed up on his research in his 1978 book, *Political Control of the Economy*. He began with the 1946 midterm election and concluded with the 1974 midterm election. He then found that a 1 percentage point change in the growth of real disposable income per capita the year prior to the election equates to a 0.6 percentage point change in the president's party's national congressional vote. Also, a 10 percentage point change in the president's Gallup approval poll equates to a 1.3 percentage point change in the president's party's national congressional vote, which was the same as when Tufte conducted this

research in 1975. Tufte's results led to a shift in scholars' consideration of how the president's party loses midterm congressional races. This shift in focus to referendum-type voting deflated the importance of the surge-and-decline theory.

Restoration and Revision of Surge-and-Decline

In the late 1980s, there was an attempt to resurrect the surge and decline theory. J. E. Campbell issued a revised version in 1987, refined the model in 1991, and refined the model once more in 1997. According to J. E. Campbell (1987), the difference between his theory and A. Campbell's original theory is that, unlike the original theory, turnout of peripheral partisans and the voting choice of independents will be affected due to a surge in both interest and information.

Campbell's revised theory makes the claim that the number of partisans present in the electorate for the presidential election and a presidential candidate's share of the independent vote is directly proportional to the magnitude of the short-term forces that favor the president's party. Campbell utilizes linear regression analysis to prove his theory, examining the relationship between congressional vote choice and party identification, turnout, and the president's share of the popular vote in the previous midterm election between the years 1956 and 1982.

Campbell (1987) concluded that there was a surge effect in the number of partisan voters that turned out and a surge effect for information present during the presidential election; these surge effects are not present in midterm elections. In 1991, Campbell issued a revision to his version of the surge-and-decline. This time, he expanded his analysis to thirty-one presidential elections and thirty midterm elections between the years 1868 and 1988. For the purposes of this revision, Campbell looked at the relationship between electoral change and the president's popular vote share, controlling for a number of factors, including whether the election year was a presidential year or a midterm year. Campbell concluded that although his findings weakened over a large period, surge-and-decline effects were still present.

Campbell (1997) outlines his completed revision of surge-and-decline in *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections*. Here Campbell explains that his theory, unlike the original surge-and-decline theory, takes into account Tufte's idea that the midterm election acts as a referendum on the president's party. Campbell's revised theory also takes into account Kernell and Jacobson's (1983) theory of the strategic politician. Campbell (1997) concludes that the short-term forces affecting the presidential election, in addition to influencing the decisions of the electorate, has the potential for affecting congressional candidates' decisions. This includes whether an incumbent decides to seek reelection or retire, a challenger decides to declare their candidacy, or a party decides to run a candidate at all.

Using Midterm Election Theories to Predict Subsequent Presidential Elections

Although these two schools of thought attempt to explain why the president's party would suffer losses in the midterm election following his own election, scholars have yet to apply these theories to the question of whether midterm elections could be a predictive indicator of subsequent presidential elections. Voter turnout and enthusiasm, presidential performance, economic performance, and all of the other variables that comprise these two theories, are not only important in terms of the first two years of the president's term in office; they also factor greatly into the second half of the term as well. Thus, there is a clear link between midterm and presidential elections.

However, it is likely that any causal relationship between midterm elections and subsequent presidential elections is less clear because there are so many factors that affect the outcome of presidential elections. These factors include, but are not limited to, policy issues, candidate favorability, and political ideology. When it comes to predicting presidential elections, there is a consensus among scholars that there are two

main factors to consider at the time of the election: the popularity of the incumbent president and the state of the economy. In regards to the economy, Fair (1978) concluded that the economy, in terms of real economic activity (i.e., change in Gross National Product [GNP] or changes in the unemployment rate), affects the voting in presidential elections. A similar finding came from Erikson (1989), although his measure of economic activity was per capita disposable income.

In regards to presidential popularity, some scholars have argued that the incumbent president's approval rating had nothing to do with his reelection chances (Mueller, 1973). Others have disagreed by showing evidence of a positive correlation between the president's approval rating in the last poll prior to the election and the actual vote share the president received (Sigelman, 1979). Scholars have also incorporated presidential popularity to predict the vote share of the presidential candidate of the incumbent party, who is not the incumbent president himself (Brody & Sigelman, 1983). Thus, presidential popularity and the economy are common variables to predict the president's, and his party's, chances of retaining the White House.

Most scholars use the Tufte model, focusing on presidential popularity and the state of the economy, when creating their own presidential models. The only difference is that whereas Tufte uses real disposable income per capita as the economic indicator, presidential election models use GNP (Lewis-Beck & Rice, 1984; Abramowitz, 1988), Gross Domestic Product (GDP), inflation (Moghaddam & Elich, 2009), or any combination of these three variables to represent the state of the economy.

Although there is little research supporting the idea that midterm elections affect subsequent presidential elections, I contend that there is an effect. The reason for this is that two things happen at the conclusion of a midterm election: the incumbent president reacts to the results, whether it is through a change in policy or personnel, and in the next presidential election, there is a surge in voter turnout.

In this article, I focus on two important questions. First, are the theories used to explain midterm election results applicable to predicting subsequent presidential elections? If it is the case that these theories are applicable to predicting subsequent presidential elections, then the second question is which theory, surge-and-decline or referendum, is the most applicable for predicting subsequent presidential elections. It is my contention that midterm election theories are applicable to predicting subsequent presidential elections and that Tufte's referendum model, or a variation of it, is the most applicable for predicting subsequent presidential elections.

Data and Methodology

In order to test my theory and hypothesis, I estimate three models. The first two models approximate the midterm surge-and-decline and referendum theories. The third model is a test of my own theory that the results of the previous midterm elections influence subsequent presidential elections.

Data from sixteen presidential and midterm elections (1948 to 2010) comprises the research. The data does not expand to pre-1948 due to the limited availability of certain variables. For example, the Bureau of Economic Analysis only has quarterly data regarding personal disposable income as far back as 1947, and Gallup only has data on its presidential job approval poll as far back as 1937.

The first variable of interest is the number of House of Representatives seats lost or gained by the president's party in each election calculated as the difference between the number of seats held or won during one election, and the number of seats held or won during the next election. Out of the sixteen midterm election years examined, House seat gains and losses range from a loss of sixty-three seats in 2010 to a gain of eight seats in 2002. This variable will serve as the dependent variable for the midterm election models and as the main independent variable for my presidential election model.

The second variable is simply whether or not the president was reelected (or his party retained control of the White House). This binary variable serves as the dependent variable in the presidential election model; it is coded zero for instances in which the president lost his reelection bid (or his party lost control of the White House) and one for instances in which the president was successfully reelected (or his party successfully retained control of the White House). Out of the sixteen presidential election years covered, there are eight instances in which the president won reelection or his party maintained control of the White House, and eight instances in which the president lost reelection or his party lost control of the White House.

In order to measure the direction and magnitude of the presidential surge (Campbell, 1987), I use the share of the popular vote received by the winning candidate in each presidential election. It is also the independent variable of primary focus to surge and decline supporters (Campbell, 1985). Over the course of the past sixteen presidential elections, the president's share of the popular vote ranged from 43% in 1992 to 61.1% in 1964.

Another variable measured is the president's approval rating prior to each election. This data comes from Gallup with the last poll taken prior to the election ranging from September to October; the president's approval rating over the course of this data series ranges from 25% in 2008 to 74% in 1964. This variable is one of the main independent variables in Tufte's referendum model (1975).

I examine two variables that measure economic health. The first is the percent change in total disposable income per capita (adjusted for inflation) calculated from Bureau of Economic Analysis data. Whereas Tufte's original model utilized the percent change in total disposable income for the year prior to the election, this research utilizes the percent change in total disposable income for the year the election occurred. The reason for this is the election year's percent change in disposable income is a more contemporary measure to use instead of the percent change from the previous year. The percent change of total disposable income during election years range from -2.6% in 1980 to 7.5% in 1950.

The second income variable examined is how confident consumers are about the state of the current economy, via the current index with the index normalized to have a value of one hundred in December 1964. The data representing this variable covers years 1951 to 2010 with an election low of 70.4 in 1952 to an election high of 113.0 in 1998. (For years 1951 to 1959, the most recent index number prior to the election is used. From 1960 onwards, the average of the July, August, and September indices is used). This variable is included in the referendum model to represent voters' ideas about the economy.

I also include a dummy variable representing the incumbent president's political party. A zero represents the Republican Party, and a one represents the Democratic Party. This variable is included in the midterm election models to examine whether incumbent presidents of one party tend to lose more seats in the midterm election than presidents of the other party.

For the purposes of this research, I have constructed a model to show that midterm elections are a predictive indicator for presidential elections. This model illustrates the question: which of the two theories, surge-and-decline or referendum, is a better predictive model for midterm elections? Can midterm election results serve as an indicator in predicting the president's reelection chances? The hypothesis born from this model is that the results of a midterm election, in conjunction with intervening factors, can serve as a predictive gauge as to whether or not the incumbent president will win reelection.

I incorporated regression analysis to examine the relationships between these variables. Linear regression is used to examine the relationship between House gains/losses and the president's popular vote percentage, president's approval rating prior to the midterm, and percent change in total disposable

income. In order to maintain consistency, both the surge-and-decline and referendum models are comprised of data from 1954 to 2010. Logistic regression is used to examine the relationship between whether or not the president is reelected and the results of the previous midterm election. Table 1 outlines the different models analyzed, the variables included, and the type of regression applied to each model.

Results

Surge-and-Decline Model

This model examines the relationship between the number of House seats gained or lost by the president's party in the midterm election and the president's performance in the previous presidential election. This model has an R-value of 0.384, representing a weak correlation between the number of House seats lost or gained by the president's party, and the president's performance in the previous presidential election and party identification. This model also has an R-square value of 0.231, meaning that this model only explains approximately 23% of the variance between the dependent variable and the independent variables.

The constant, the predicted value of number of House seats gained when the other variables equal zero, has a value of 49.912. This means that assuming the independent variables were zero, the president's party would gain approximately 49 to 50 House seats. The variable representing the president's popular vote percentage in the previous presidential election has a coefficient value of -132.458, meaning that assuming the other variables remain constant, the president's party will lose approximately 132 to 133 House seats for every one percentage point increase in the president's popular vote. The variable representing the president's political party has a coefficient value of -12.359, meaning that assuming the other variables remain constant, for every unit increase in political party there will be a 12.359 decrease in the number of House seats gained. Because this variable was coded zero for Democrats and one for Republicans, the Republicans will lose approximately 12 to 13 more seats in midterm elections than Democrats will. The regression equation representing this model of the surge-and-decline theory is represented as:

$$\text{Number of House Seats Gained} = 49.912 - 12.359 \, [\text{Party}]$$
$$- 132.458 \, [\text{President's Share of Popular Vote}] + \varepsilon$$

In order for the variables to be considered statistically significant, or significantly different from zero, their p-values have to be below 0.05. In this model, neither of the two variables' p-value was below 0.05. The variable representing the president's popular vote percentage has a p-value of 0.252, and the variable representing the president's party has a p-value of 0.329. In addition, the constant is also not statistically significant, as its p-value is 0.414.

Referendum Model

This model examines the relationship between the number of House seats gained or lost by the president's party in the midterm election, and the president's performance during the time between the presidential election and the midterm election. This model has an R-value of 0.876, representing a very strong correlation between the president's performance in office and the results of the midterm election. This model also has an R-square value of 0.768, meaning that this model explains approximately 77% of the variance between the dependent variable and the independent variables.

The constant has a value of -120.888, meaning the president's party would lose approximately 120 to 121 House seats if the independent variables equaled zero. The variable representing the president's approval

rating has a coefficient value of 153.351, meaning that assuming the other variables remain constant, the president's party will gain approximately 154 House seats for every percentage point increase in the president's approval rating. The variable representing the yearly percent change in personal disposable income has a coefficient value of 7.412. Assuming the other variables remain constant, for every percentage point increase in personal disposable income, the president's party will gain approximately seven to eight House seats. The variable representing consumer's confidence in the economy has a coefficient value of 0.120. This means that for every unit increase in consumer confidence, the president's party will gain at most one additional House seat, assuming the other variables remain constant. The variable representing the president's political party has a coefficient value of -21.114. Because this variable was coded the same way as in the surge-and-decline model, Republicans are expected to lose approximately 21 to 22 House seats more than Democrats, assuming the other variables remain constant. The regression equation representing this model of the referendum theory is represented as:

$$\text{Number of House Seats Gained} = -120.88 - 21.114 \, [\text{Party}] + 153.351 \, [\text{President's Approval Rating}] + 7.412 \, [\text{Yearly Percent Change in Personal Disposable Income}]$$
$$+ \, 0.120 \, [\text{Consumer Confidence}] + \varepsilon$$

With the exception of the variable representing consumer confidence, the other independent variables have a p-value less than 0.05. President's approval rating has a p-value of 0.004, percent change in disposable income has a p-value of 0.030, and the president's party has a p-value of 0.029. Therefore, these three variables are statistically significant from zero. The constant is also statistically significant with a p-value of 0.004. The variable representing consumer confidence has a p-value of 0.761. Although this variable is not considered statistically significant, it is still an important variable when considering how the economy factors into midterm elections.

Based on these results, it is apparent that for the period 1954 to 2010, the referendum theory is a better explainer of why the president's party loses U.S. House seats in the midterm election than the surge-and-decline theory. However, although one theory is better at explaining why incumbent presidents suffer midterm losses, this does not necessarily mean said theory also explains why some presidents, and their parties, are successful at retaining the White House in the next presidential election, while others fail. Therefore, I constructed my presidential model utilizing the following process:

- Model #1 will incorporate the number of House seats gained or lost by the president's party only.
- Model #2 will incorporate the number of House seats gained or lost by the president's party and the variables representing the surge-and-decline theory.
- Model #3 will incorporate the number of House seats gained or lost by the president's party and the variables representing the referendum theory.

Presidential Election Model

In order to incorporate the midterm theories into the presidential model accurately, I made several changes to the midterm models. First, I lagged the variable representing the president's popular vote by four years, to represent the incumbent president's popular vote in the previous presidential election. Second, I lagged the variable representing the number of House seats gained or lost by the president's party by two years to represent the incumbent party's performance in the previous midterm election. Third, the variable representing consumers' confidence in the economy is represented as the average of the values of the index taken the year prior to the presidential election. The variables representing both the president's approval rating and the yearly percent change in total disposable income are the only variables not changed.

After running all three models of my theory, there were no models where the variables reached statistical significance. The first model, in which the variable representing House seats gained, was the closest to statistical significance. This variable was the only one included and had a coefficient value of 0.032. This means that for every House seat gained by the president's party, the chances the incumbent president, or his party, retaining the White House increase by 65.7%. The constant has a value of 0.561, meaning that assuming the president's party did not gain any seats, the chances of the incumbent president retaining the White House increase by 63.7%. The equation representing this model is represented as:

$$\text{Incumbent President Reelected} = e^{0.561 + 0.032 \text{ [House Seats Gained by President's Party]}} / 1 + e^{0.561 + 0.032 \text{ [House Seats Gained by Presidents' Party]}}$$

The results generated are most likely due to the small sample size. In order for logistic regression to work, there has to be a relatively large sample size of data. There is debate among statisticians as to how many cases are needed in order for the sample size to be considered large. If a normal logistic regression model were applied to a small sample size, then the results would reflect over-fitting. If this were the case, then the only remedy would be results from future elections.

Based on the results of my presidential models, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that midterm election results have an impact on the incumbent president's reelection chances. There is also insufficient evidence to conclude that either the surge-and-decline theory or the referendum theory is applicable in explaining presidential reelection success or failure. This leads to the following question: if these theories are not applicable as predictive indicators, then what factors need consideration when predicting presidential elections?

Evaluating the Theories

Surge-and-Decline Theory

The president's share of the popular vote is the foundation of the surge-and-decline theory. When evaluating this theory in terms of predicting midterm elections, no statistically significant relationship exists between the president's share of the popular vote and the number of U.S. House seats his party will lose or gain in the next midterm election. Compared with the referendum theory, surge-and-decline holds a unique advantage. Whereas the referendum theory is limited in the number of elections examined due to limited data availability, surge-and-decline is not. This allows me to expand the period and include cases prior to 1936. Thus, I ran another model similar to the one run earlier representing the surge-and-decline theory. The expectation is that if more cases are included, then the results of this model will be an improvement over the model run earlier. The model remains the same as the one tested earlier; however, this model includes midterm elections from 1862 to 1934.

After running this model, the results were as follows. In terms of the actual equation, the adjusted R-square value was -0.015, and its p-value was 0.487. The variable representing the president's percentage of the popular vote in the presidential election had a coefficient value of -81.750 and a p-value of 0.391. The variable representing political party had a coefficient value of -9.700 and a p-value of 0.349. Compared with the earlier model, this model is a worse representative of surge-and-decline. Thus, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the surge-and-decline theory does not fit the overall trend of the president's party losing congressional seats in midterm elections.

The underlying principle behind the theory of surge-and-decline is that certain forces present in a presidential election are absent in a midterm election, which results in lower turnout and a loss of congressional seats for the president's party. However, I fail to see the reason as to why the president's share of the popular vote from his election is comparable to the number of seats his party gains or loses in

the subsequent midterm election (Campbell, 1991). Analyses of the relationship between presidential popular vote and midterm losses rely upon the assumption that the president's popular vote would be the same in the midterm election as it was in the previous presidential election. This is not the case, however. Instead, the moving parts that resulted in the president's victory begin to shift again at about the same time the president takes office and begins to make decisions. Because the president is on the ballot every four years, there has to be a method in place to gauge the public's attitude towards the president, thus explaining the role of the presidential approval poll, one of the underpinnings of the referendum theory.

Based on the results presented in this research, and taking into account the error of evaluating the president's popular vote, it is said with confidence that the theory of surge-and-decline is not the best theory to explain presidential midterm losses.

Referendum Theory

Although the period of the referendum theory is limited due to unavailability of data regarding president's approval rating and requisite economic data, it is still better than the surge-and-decline theory at explaining why the president's party loses congressional seats. The president's approval rating is, according to the data, the strongest variable available to predict whether the president's party will lose or gain seats.

There has been numerous literature published on the role of the economy in elections (Kramer, 1971; Stigler, 1973; Tufte, 1975). On its own, the annual percent change of total disposable income per capita for the election year is not a statistically significant variable. However, when the consumer confidence index for the third quarter of the election year is included, then the percent change variable becomes statistically significant. Nevertheless, the p-value for the variable representing consumer confidence never reaches the 0.05 threshold. Regardless, the inclusion of this variable in the overall equation is necessary. This is because the economy is considered as an intervening variable; it has an effect on both the president's approval rating and the results of the election.

The role of the economy in Tufte's referendum model is transposable onto elections in general. The economy plays a role in both the midterm election and the presidential election. Each one of these components is a leg in the "election triangle."

Although the referendum cannot serve as the foundation of a presidential model that incorporates midterm election results, it does not necessarily follow that the theory as a whole is unable to serve as the foundation of a presidential model. This leads to an important question: what factors from the referendum theory, and possibly any outside factors, deserve consideration when creating a presidential election model?

Presidential Model

For this presidential model, none of the variables included reached the appropriate levels of statistical significance. Now it is time to turn attention to what factors need consideration when predicting presidential elections. Based on the results from this research, the first factor to consider when predicting presidential elections is the president's approval rating.

The graph measures the president's approval rating in the last Gallup poll prior to the election against the average predicted probabilities of the president's reelection chances. For example, a president with an approval rating of 70% has, according to the graph, a 95% chance of winning reelection. Contrarily, a president with an approval rating of 34% only has a 12% chance of winning reelection. In the graph, the inflection point is located between 45% and 51%. That means somewhere between these two percentages,

the incumbent president's chances of reelection are 50%. This graph supports the idea that presidents with an approval rating below 50% prior to Election Day will lose reelection. This was the case for Gerald Ford, whose approval rating was 45% when he lost to Jimmy Carter in 1976. Jimmy Carter's approval rating was 37% going into the 1980 election when he lost to Ronald Reagan. George H. W. Bush lost to Bill Clinton in 1992 with a pre-Election Day approval rating of 34%. The only exception to this rule is Harry S. Truman in 1948, whose last recorded approval rating before the lost election was 39%.

Another factor that deserves consideration deals with the issues determining the election. Sometimes the most important issue is the economy; at other times, foreign policy is the top issue. For example, in the 1968 presidential election, the deciding issue was the Vietnam War. The 2004 presidential election focused mainly on the "war on terrorism," especially in the last days of campaigning with the release of a video recording of Osama bin Laden the weekend before the election. Any presidential model needs to include an operationalization of this variable.

One other factor deserving attention is the off years of the presidential term. Elections work in the basic sequence of presidential election, midterm election, and presidential election. If it were the case that presidential elections are a referendum on the president's term in office, then voters will consider years three and four of the presidential term more than years one and two. If a presidential model were to incorporate this idea, then the accuracy of the model will be heading in the correct direction.

Conclusion

According to the results, it seems as though midterm elections have no bearing on subsequent presidential elections. This is important because this means that Congress has no "coattails" for the president to run on or that the (lack of) decisions made by the Congress have no direct effect on presidential elections. However, why is it the case that Congress has no coattails? Although Congress is composed of 535 unique individuals, it is also comprised of 2 distinct political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans. The political fortunes of the president and the political fortunes of his fellow party members in Congress should be one and the same. The best indicator for this dynamic is Congress's approval rating. However, only nine presidential elections have a recorded Congressional approval rating. As time progresses, I am confident researchers will be able to determine whether there is a relationship between Congress's approval and the president's reelection.

Jacobson and Kernell (1983) said midterm elections provide an interesting testing ground for theories regarding voting and elections in the United States. I am in complete agreement with this statement. As political scientists continue to construct models to predict presidential and midterm elections, it is my hope that any theory crafted will explain the trends that make American politics unlike anything else in the world. For example, future studies might take Tufte's referendum model, substitute the president's approval rating for Congress's approval rating, and instead of determining changes in the composition of the U.S. House of Representatives, determine the reelection chances of the incumbent president and incumbent party.

Models	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Controls	Type of Regression
Midterm: Surge-and-Decline	Number of U.S. House Seats	Incumbent President's Share of Popular Vote	Incumbent President's Political Party	Linear Regression
Midterm: Referendum	Number of U.S. House Seats	President's Approval Rating Prior to Election; Percent Change in Personal Disposable Income; Consumer Confidence Index	Incumbent President's Political Party	Linear Regression
Presidential	President Was/Was Not Successfully Reelected	Number of U.S. House Seats; Other Independent Variables	Incumbent President's Political Party	Logistic Regression

Table 1. Midterm and Presidential Election Models

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