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Life Before Polls: Ohio Politicians Predict the 1828 Presidential Vote

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Candidates covet votes. They exert extraordinary effort and expend vast resources seeking to win as many votes as possible. Yet, the costly pursuit of votes occurs under great uncertainty concerning both the strategic correctness of their positions on issues and the efficiency of their campaigns. Of course, prudent candidates dedicate some resources to learning how voters are responding to their appeals, generally by commissioning polls of public opinion.

Candidates' early adoption of scientific survey technology (Converse 1987) and the important role polls play in modern campaigns invite the question of how candidates ever got on without them. Before polls, did public opinion reside on a vast *terra incognita* on which candidates staked out issue positions oblivious to the whereabouts of the median voter? If so, campaigns must have been riddled with mistakes and inefficiency. John G. Greer (1991) made just this argument in claiming that the absence of accurate information about shifts in the electorate's preferences allowed political parties to be blindsided by what became realigning elections.

The historical record offers few clues as to the extent to which nineteenth-century candidates labored under strategic ignorance. Yet, accounts of politicians and pundits alike tallying newspaper endorsements and carefully gauging attendance at campaign rallies do survive.¹ How-

ever questionable these indicators' validity, even to contemporaries, they represented some of the few quantifiable barometers of voter sentiment available to that era's politicians. Some candidates kept "their ear to the ground" (a nineteenth-century dictum) by engaging in more active forms of voter research. They consulted business, militia, religious, fraternal, and other leaders and sent party workers to canvass voters and identify whom to usher to the polls (Frankovic 1998).

Although the historical record reports candidates employing these techniques to research voter opinion, it is silent about the accuracy of their results. Since, then as now, information about voters had great strategic value, campaigns frequently kept such information confidential, and it is consequently lost to historical investigation. There is, fortunately, at least one exception of an instance of careful, prepolling voter research surfacing into public view.² Buried in the July 9, 1828 issue of the *U.S. Telegraph* is a report from Andrew Jackson's Ohio organization about their candidate's chances in the upcoming presidential election. Unlike the transparent campaign propaganda that flowed voluminously from the era's partisan press, this lengthy article candidly reports precise vote-spread predictions submitted by "men of political knowledge and integrity . . . from every [congressional] district in the state." These data offer a special, perhaps unique, opportunity to shed light on the quality of voter research and the degree of candidates' political competence during the early years of the republic.

In this article I shall coax as much information as possible from these data by subjecting them to several tests. I begin with the simple null

hypothesis that has these informants' predictions insignificantly associated with the actual result. Satisfied that the informants were onto something, I question whether their success arose from direct observation of local opinion or reflects simply a competent projection of the preceding election's results in their respective districts. The latter is a real possibility, since both Jackson and John Adams competed for the same office four years earlier. Finally, I raise the bar once more and test these informants' predictions against the accuracy of comparable estimates generated by modern survey researchers.

Predicting Ohio's 1828 Presidential Vote

The 1828 presidential election has often been presented as a watershed in American electoral history. With it came the national nominating convention, a new level of mass party organization (McCormick 1966), and a shift of national power from New England to the West. Four years earlier, the election had been "stolen" (Remini 1981) from Andrew Jackson, who won a sizable plurality of the popular vote but failed to attain the necessary majority in the electoral college. When the House of Representatives convened to elect the president, the third place finisher, Henry Clay, threw his support behind runner-up Adams. Apparently, a deal had been cut. Shortly after his inauguration, Adams appointed Clay as his secretary of state, at the time the most reliable steppingstone to a presidential nomination. In 1828, Jackson won his revenge, as he was swept into office with 56% of the popular vote and overwhelming support in the South and West.

Contemporary news reports reveal

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that few observers doubted Jackson's prospects in Ohio. In the state's three-way campaign in 1824, he had finished second to Henry Clay by only 766 votes despite being poorly organized in many counties. With Kentuckian Clay off the 1828 ballot, Jackson's victory seemed likely. Yet, with good reason, no one was taking this outcome for granted. The campaign was fought in the mud, with each side heaping scandalous charges against its opponent. Even rumors of sexual misconduct by both candidates' wives received abundant coverage throughout the state.³ Moreover, anticipating a tough election, President Adams and his supporters in Congress had reconfigured the tariff to curry Westerners' favor. Adding a final dose of uncertainty was Ohio's phenomenal growth as the nation's population migrated westward; turnout in 1828 was two-and-a-half times greater than in 1824 (McCormick 1966; Ratcliffe 1973). Entering the summer election campaign, Ohio was frequently named by Jackson supporters as a state pivotal for their candi-

date's success, yet the outcome of the ballot remained in doubt.

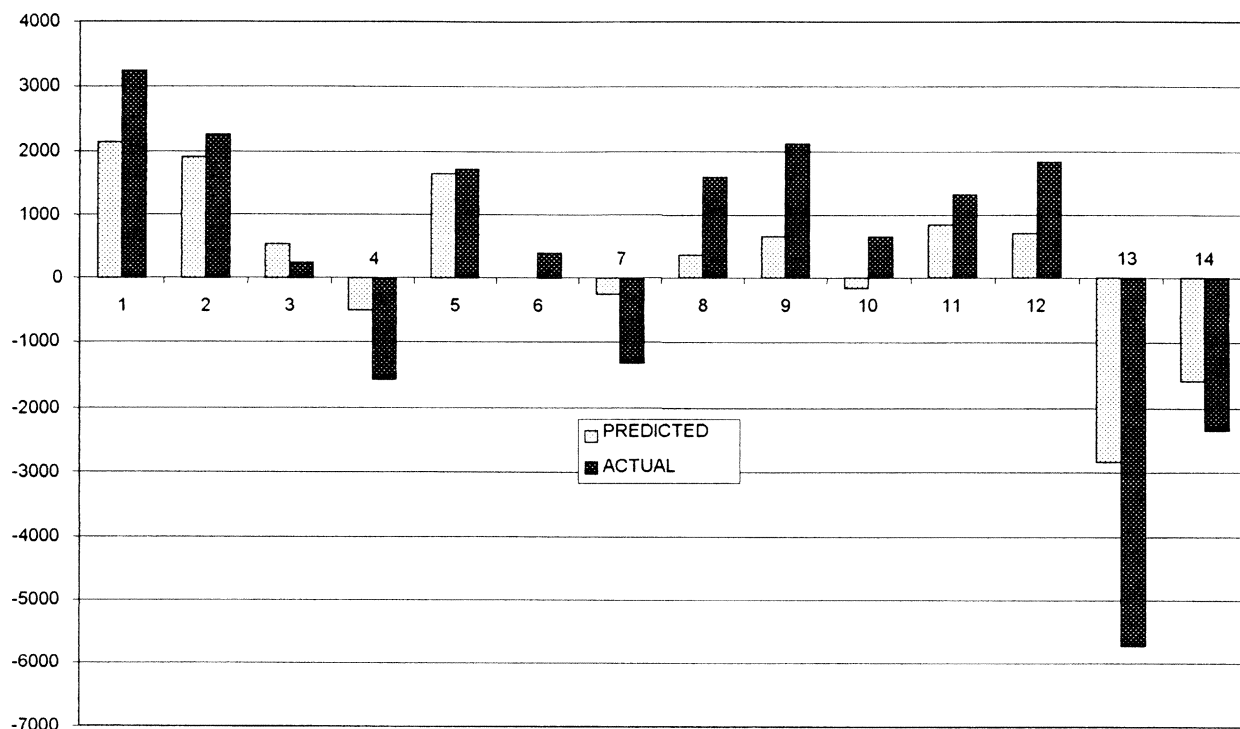
In late July, members of Jackson's campaign committee in Cincinnati canvassed the state and issued detailed vote estimates for the presidential race in each congressional district. How well did they do? Not badly at all. Citing the "mass of evidence," the report's authors concluded a "probable and almost certain prospect of Jackson getting the vote of Ohio." Specifically, the politicians' individual district tallies summed to a statewide Jackson victory margin of 7,150 votes. Four months later, he won by 4,143 votes from among the 131,049 cast. Translated into vote shares, the committee's point estimate of 52.7% for Jackson proved 1.5 percentage points too high, well within the acceptable tolerances of modern pre-election surveys. Moreover, the closer one looks, the better the predictions appear. Figure 1 plots these vote predictions against the actual vote for each congressional district. In only one district, the 10th, did the informants predict the wrong win-

ner, and even here they correctly foresaw a close outcome. With the exception of the 3rd district, they forecast a narrower margin than the winner actually received. Considering that they were predicting actual vote margins that depended on turnout as well as preferences, the local politicians can be judged to have performed remarkably well. How, lacking modern polling technology, did these politicians manage to produce such accurate results?

Politicians' Prediction Methodologies

The 1828 news report reveals a few clues about how the informants arrived at their predictions. The politico who reported from the 4th district appears to have directly monitored local opinion. He described "an increase in his [Jackson's] friends here in the last six months and the continued changes that are daily making the prospects of success . . . encouraging." The correspondent from the 8th district in-

Figure 1
Comparison between Predicted and Actual Jackson Vote Margins in the Election of 1828, by Ohio Congressional Districts



stead relied on the prognostications of “intelligent men, acquainted with the politics of the district.” Other informants counted newspaper endorsements. In the 7th district, where only one newspaper supported Jackson and three or four favored Adams, the informant correctly predicted a solid Adams’ victory. However primitive their methods, there can be no gainsaying the informants’ success in predicting actual vote spreads. The predicted majorities in Figure 1 account for 88% of the variance in the districts’ vote margins three months later.⁴

Before giving too much credit to nineteenth-century voting research, one must consider the possibility that these informants made good guesses with little effort by simply extrapolating the previous election’s

results. Even without surrendering their favorite spots on the county courthouse bench, they might have fulfilled their obligation to the Cincinnati committee by projecting the past election’s results onto the current campaign. After all, both Jackson and Adams had been on the ballot in 1824 and returns revealed distinct Jackson and Adams strongholds across the state (Stevens 1957) that reappeared in 1828. But projection potentially entailed a couple of serious pitfalls. First, as noted, the population had exploded over this brief period. Second, the 1824 campaign had been a three-way race in which neither Adams nor Jackson had won a plurality. Anyone wishing to accurately forecast 1828 vote margins using 1824 returns would have to correctly redistribute a large

Clay vote to the two candidates. Nonetheless, some might have tried, and all probably incorporated this information into their estimates.

Lacking direct evidence of the informants’ methodologies, whether any relied exclusively on the 1824 results must be left to inference. This can best be done by answering the following question: Did the July assessments yield more accurate predictions than would the best guess based on the 1824 result? If not, it would not be possible to say with confidence that these politicians left their professional confines and undertook direct observation. (One could conclude, however, that whatever effort they made did not matter.) If, however, their predictions prove significantly superior to those possible from a consideration of the



Nineteenth-century American artist George Caleb Bingham sometimes depicted local campaign scenes. In fact, Bingham was as much a politician as painter. An ardent supporter of Whig candidate William Henry Harrison in the 1840 presidential election, Bingham gave speeches and painted banners. He was also elected to the Missouri legislature (on his second attempt) and later served as state treasurer. In “Country Election” citizens line up to declare their votes publicly. Although the painting offers a stylized and benign image of democracy in America, the inebriated voter toward the end of the line being helped to the poll serves as a reminder that this painter-politician also had the sensibilities of a realist, to be expected of someone who once had been narrowly defeated for election. From the Art Collection of the Bank of America. Source: Kernell and Jacobson. *The Logic of American Politics* (2000, 351).

TABLE 1
Alternative Technologies Forecast Presidential Vote, by Congressional District (CD)

| CD | Sample Method | 1828 | | Sample Size | 1992 | |
|---|-----------------|------------------|---------------|--|------------------|---------------|
| | | Predicted Vote % | Actual Vote % | | Predicted Vote % | Actual Vote % |
| 1 | * | 52.8 | 65.14 | 25 | 64 | 43 |
| 2 | * | 57.4 | 64.37 | 37 | 37.84 | 28 |
| 3 | * | 49.2 | 51.25 | 37 | 35.14 | 41 |
| 4 | * | 54.5 | 40.54 | 21 | 33.33 | 31 |
| 5 | * | 51.6 | 61.32 | 37 | 29.73 | 33 |
| 6 | * | 60.8 | 52.47 | 40 | 45 | 40 |
| 7 | # of newspapers | 53.3 | 42.15 | 38 | 34.21 | 34 |
| 8 | Politicians | 53.2 | 57.09 | 23 | 34.78 | 29 |
| 9 | * | 62.1 | 60.53 | 29 | 48.28 | 47 |
| 10 | * | 60.1 | 53.53 | 32 | 34.48 | 42 |
| 11 | * | 47 | 57.02 | 30 | 83.33 | 73 |
| 12 | * | 41.2 | 58.69 | 28 | 42.86 | 40 |
| 13 | * | 48.5 | 24.45 | 28 | 35.71 | 38 |
| 14 | * | 37.8 | 37.02 | 46 | 52.17 | 46 |
| 15 | | | | 26 | 38.46 | 36 |
| 16 | | | | 25 | 28 | 37 |
| 17 | | | | 50 | 42 | 50 |
| 18 | | | | 23 | 30.43 | 43 |
| 19 | | | | 33 | 54.55 | 40 |
| Mean Absolute Error = 9.1; s.d. = 6.3 Actual Vote = $-.28 + 1.55 (.18)$ Predicted Adj. R ² = .85 | | | | Mean Absolute Error = 6.9; s.d. = 5.2 Actual Vote = $16.8 + .56 (.11)$ Predicted Adj. R ² = .55 | | |

* = "Mass of evidence from every district in the state, and from men of political knowledge and integrity."

1824 vote alone one could conclude that the informants must have actively monitored the electorate.⁵

The equation below pits these two "explanatory" variables against one another to determine if the informants might have cued exclusively on the 1824 result. Only the informants' predictions attain statistical significance (standard errors in parenthesis), suggesting that the politicians either directly or indirectly, fully incorporated information available from the 1824 election into their estimates.⁶

$$\begin{aligned}
 1828 \text{ Vote} &= 1.98 \text{ Predicted margin} && (.47) \\
 &- .39 \text{ 1824 margin} && (.46) \\
 &\text{Adjusted } r^2 &= &.87
 \end{aligned}$$

Thus far, prepolling technology has performed well. Clearly, the electorate was not some inscrutable mass that revealed its opinion of candidates only on election day. Now, let me raise the bar several notches higher and match the accuracy of the 1828 predictions against those produced by modern survey research.

Comparing Ohio Presidential Election Predictions in 1828 with 1992

In 1992, the Buckeye state was again viewed as pivotal in the upcoming presidential election. By September, Ross Perot's candidacy had faded badly from its early summer peak,

when Perot briefly threatened to take over the frontrunner's position. He remained an active candidate, however, and his presence made the election outcome uncertain (McCann, Rapoport, and Stone 1999). In September, the CBS/NYT's Voter Survey launched a full-scale (N = 846) investigation of Ohioians' preferences for the November election. Like the Cincinnati group's 1828 report, the CBS/NYT survey yielded an accurate forecast: 38.2% of the vote for Clinton and 36.3% for Bush. In November, the two finished in a dead heat, with Clinton squeezing out victory by 159 votes.

Although both the 1828 and 1992 analyses were conducted in order to

predict the statewide presidential result, they enlisted different technologies that generate different kinds of estimates that need to be adjusted to permit comparisons. CBS/NYT surveyors conducted a randomly sampled statewide survey that yielded percentage estimates, while the Cincinnati committee summed a statewide actual vote prediction from district reports. In order to compare these two technologies directly, I have distributed the survey respondents into Ohio's nineteen congressional districts.⁷ For the 1828 data, it was only necessary to convert the districts' vote-margin estimates into percentages.⁸ The results are reported in Table 1.

Even using much smaller subsamples, the modern surveyors managed to produce marginally superior point estimates for the district vote than did their 1828 counterparts. On the other hand, the regression estimates find the 1828 predictions performing better in accounting for cross-district variance in the November returns. Overall, however, these differences are less striking than are their similarities. Both the CBS/NYT researchers and Cincinnati committee members accurately forecast their elections. Then as now, candidates found a way to learn voters' preferences sufficiently in advance of the election to adjust their campaign strategies.

Discussion

Historians of public opinion polling depict scientific surveys as a

breakthrough technology that forever changed election campaigns. The findings presented here do not challenge this view. What they do call into question is the notion that nineteenth-century campaigners labored under a severe informational deficit about voters' preferences. Like Joseph Lister with germ theory vanquishing nineteenth-century quackery, the lore of public opinion research has George Gallup, armed with comparatively few, randomly selected respondents, outdueling the editors of the venerable *Literary Digest* poll, backed by legions of subscribers, in forecasting the 1936 presidential election (Asher 1998, 69-70). The findings presented in this article—albeit from a single election—caution against adopting the “progress through science” motif to account for the rapid acceptance of survey research by campaigns.⁹

Perhaps this story should be recast as signalling a breakthrough of a different sort—specifically, as an object lesson in adapting technology to a new style of politics. The 1828 election ushered in an era of mass political parties for American politics. For the remainder of the century and early into the next, elections would be won or lost on the efforts of numerous party workers dispersed across the electorate who assiduously sought out the candidate's supporters and escorted them to the polls with the party's ballot in hand. In these labor-intensive campaigns decided by turnout, those

best suited to reveal an electorate's tendencies to vote and to favor their candidate were not some randomly selected sample of voters, but rather the party workers whose efforts would be directly reflected at the ballot box.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reforms altered the way candidates were recruited, the way campaigns were conducted, and even how voters exercised their civic responsibility. By the time modern polling technology arrived on the scene, the vast majority of America's candidates no longer entered the electoral arena as their party's dutiful standard bearers, recruited by and riding to office on the efforts of a large, dense field organization. Instead, they had become entrepreneurs, politicians whose success depended less on their parties, which had been dismembered by reforms, and more on their own efforts to create and sustain an independent base of support among voters. These increasingly self-reliant candidates could no longer depend on turnout. With their limited reach into the electorate, the best the modern candidates could hope to do was fashion and communicate an attractive message to a receptive audience. For these politicians, the arrival of polls was a godsend. Without them, these new-styled candidates stood little chance of matching their forebearers' levels of political competence.

Notes

1. Interestingly, editorial endorsements could serve as a valid predictor of how well different newspapers were serving the interests of candidates. During the first half of the nineteenth century, newspapers were subsidized by political parties, so their endorsements offered a reasonable gauge of the strength of the party organization, if not the sentiment of voters. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nonpartisan newspapers largely monopolized mass information. Their endorsements might well have indicated the kinds of coverage afforded the candidate.

2. According to Littlewood (1998), Jackson boosters of 1824 and 1828 conducted the first straw polls to provide objective measures of

public support for their candidate. These results were widely reported in the press, opening the possibility of replicating the analysis presented here. For the history of straw polls more generally, see Robinson (1932).

3. Charges that Jackson's wife had abandoned her “loving” first husband and taken up an adulterous relationship with Jackson sullied both his and her reputations and caused some supporters to worry that public belief in the rumor had weakened Jackson's support. In retaliation, members of the Jackson campaign charged that Adams' wife had taken up prostitution while living in Moscow during her husband's tenure as ambassador to Russia. For a fuller account of this mudslinging, see Remini (1981).

4. The coefficient (and t-statistic) for the predicted vote is 1.65 (10.05). This and the other relationships reported below were forced through the origin to avoid crediting any bias in estimates to the informants' predictive accuracy.

5. Compiling the districts' 1824 votes and comparing them to the 1828 returns proved difficult for three reasons. First, simply finding the presidential vote broken down by counties was a challenge. Fortunately, the editor of the *Chillicothe Times* (“Presidential Election” 1824) found the official county returns newsworthy. Unfortunately, the composition of the electoral districts changed between 1824 and 1828, as counties were created or reassigned as the growth of Ohio's population necessi-

tated. Third, the 1824 votes were cast for three candidates while the 1828 vote was split by two. I tested various algorithms for allocating the Clay vote and converted both sides of the equation to percentages of total vote (and their logarithms), but no method provided superior estimates to simply subtracting the Adams from Jackson votes.

6. As noted earlier, I have suppressed the intercept since it is reasonable to expect that a prediction of zero difference in the predicted vote should be matched by zero difference in actual vote. Including the intercept did not alter the outcome, however. In generating the values given in the next section, I

restored intercepts when examining the dependent variable as a percentage of the total vote. To assess the added value of the informants' techniques more explicitly, one can first purge the effects of the 1824 vote margins from both the predicted and actual 1828 district margins and then regress their residuals. While the resulting regression coefficient for the predicted vote is the same, of course, this exercise shows the predictions explaining 59% of the residual variance unaccounted for by the 1824 vote.

7. While this information is not directly available in the respondent records, Marketing Systems Group successfully placed re-

spondents into districts by sorting records by area code and phone extension. The pros and cons of disaggregating surveys in this way are discussed in Miller and Stokes (1963).

8. Requiring the modern survey to predict vote spread struck me as less reasonable than converting the 1828 spreads into percentages. This required adjusting the actual vote totals by the predicted spread and percentage.

9. Geer's 1996 assessment of the numerous advantages of modern polling is well taken. Here, I am arguing that changes in the characters of candidacies and political parties at the turn of the century era drove candidates and campaigns to use polls more than did any inherent qualities of polls themselves.

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