

Why forecast elections?

And how (not) to do so

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The Economist

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It's too early to forecast the 2020 election. So let me talk instead about why I think forecasting is worthwhile, but only when done correctly.



Why forecast?

A few guiding thoughts:

1. Academic reasons:

- Forecasts are a (the most?) popular public-facing product of political science
- Forecasting allows us to **explain** things before-hand (if models are robust enough)

2. Journalistic reasons:

- Forecasts are better than punditry
- Forecasts are better than polls alone
- Demand: If mainstream outlets don't (a) make their own forecasts or (b) cover good ones, bad forecasts will dominate

3. They're fun!

- They're fun to code and get working
- Readers like being presented with interactive content they can return to day-after-day, week-after-week

Forecasting is important

**But can be dangerous when done
poorly**

**Pay attention only to forecasters *who
take uncertainty seriously***

(The other ones are just lying to you)

How (not) to forecast

1. Don't use economic indicators alone

- They aren't predictive of election outcomes
- This is becoming more true over time

2. Don't act certain (unless you really are)

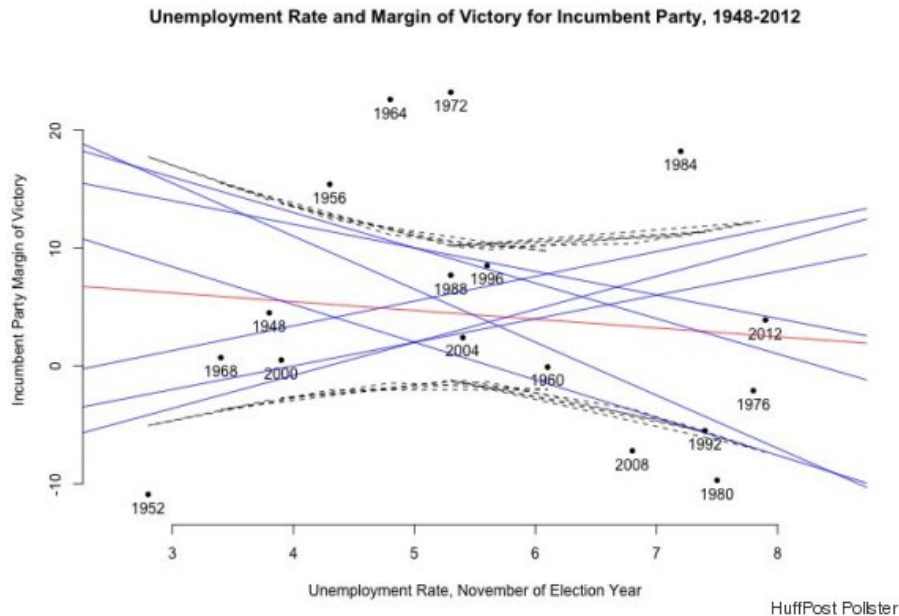
- False certainty can bias media narratives (especially when combined with reporters' political biases)
- False certainty can lead to severe consequences
- False certainty betrays our real understanding or how often "unlikely" election outcomes can happen (see: Trump 2016)

3. Be probabilistic

- Point projections don't matter; distributions do
- And so do electoral college votes (i.e. don't just predict the popular vote)

1. Don't use economic indicators alone

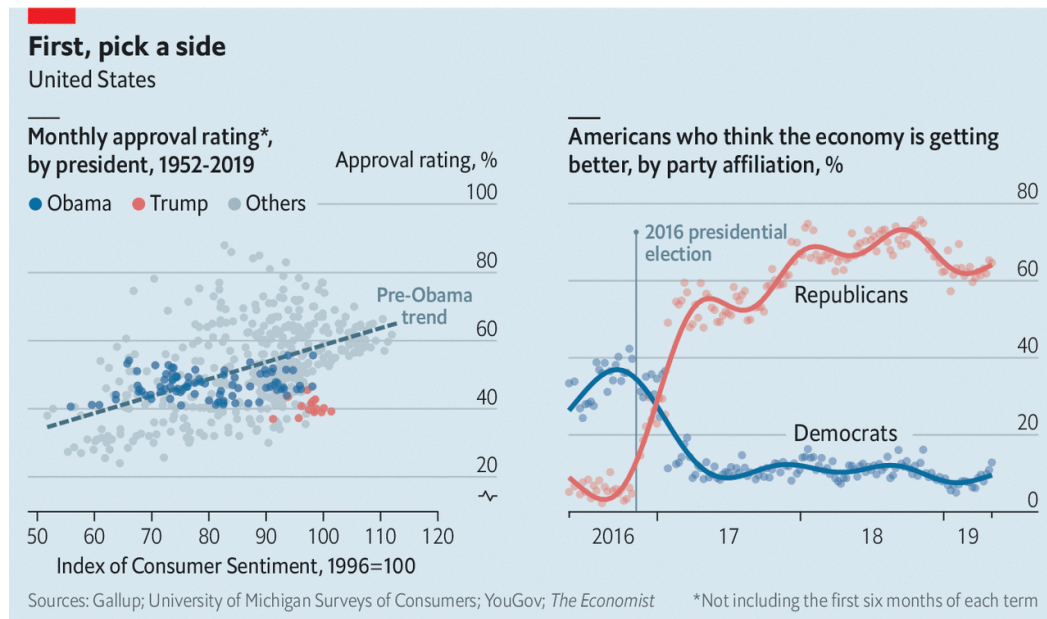
- Why? They are not predictive of election outcomes



Source: Natalie Jackson; Huffington Post (2015)

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- Why? They are not predictive of election outcomes
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Source: G. Elliott Morris; The Economist (2019)

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POLITICS 11/05/2016 03:59 pm ET | Updated Nov 07, 2016

Nate Silver Is Unskewing Polls — All Of Them — In Trump's Direction

The vaunted 538 election forecaster is putting his thumb on the scales.



By Ryan Grim

When presented with competing forecasts, people grab onto the ones that comport with their world-view

"For the polls to be wrong, there wouldn't need to be one single 3-point error. All of the polls — all of them, as Brianna Keilar would put it — would have to be off by 3 points in the same direction."

"If you want to put your faith in the numbers, **you can relax. She's got this.**"

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James Comey admits that his read of the polls may have influenced his handling of the Clinton email probe

A damning admission.

By Matthew Yglesias | @mattyglesias | matt@vox.com | Apr 13, 2018, 9:50am EDT

James Comey, 2018, "A Higher Loyalty":

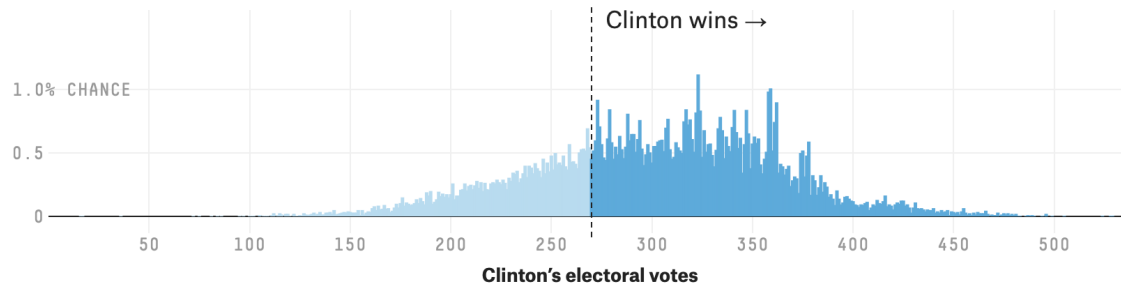
"It is entirely possible that because I was making decisions in an environment **where Hillary Clinton was sure to be the next president**, my concern about making her an illegitimate president by concealing the restarted investigation bore greater weight than it would have if the election appeared closer or if Donald Trump were ahead in all polls."

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- False certainty betrays our real understanding of how often "unlikely" election outcomes can happen (see: Trump 2016)

What to expect from the Electoral College

In each of our simulations, we forecast the states and note the number of electoral votes each candidate wins. That gives us a distribution for each candidate, where the tallest bar is the outcome that occurred most frequently.



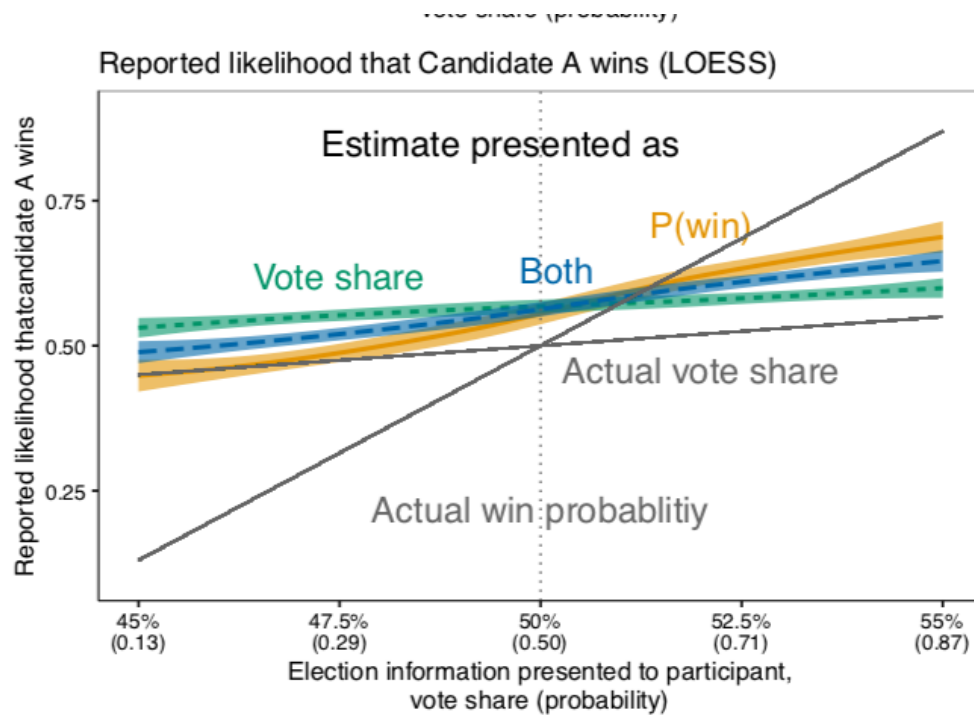
Source: Nate Silver; FiveThirtyEight (2016)

How can we convey our certainty?

With probability!

3. Be probabilistic

Why? Readers have the best understanding of the horse race when presented with probabilities



Source: Westwood, Messing and Lelkes (2019)

3. Be probabilistic

Point projections don't matter, distributions do...

- If we are not giving readers a sense of our certainty, we are lying to them.
- The best way to convey our certainty is to produce a distribution of possible outcomes for the election, combining confidence intervals with our point projections to transform them into probabilities

...and so do Electoral College votes (i.e. don't just predict the popular vote)

Clinton wins popular vote but loses Electoral College	10.5%
Trump wins popular vote but loses Electoral College	0.5%
Johnson wins at least one electoral vote	0.3%
McMullin wins at least one electoral vote	13.5%

Source: Nate Silver; FiveThirtyEight (2016)

Thank you!

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These slides were made with the `xaringan` package for R from Yihui Xie. They are available online at <https://www.thecrosstab.com/slides/2019-08-30-apsa/>