

## POLITICS

*Special Issue on Forecasting the 2024 US Elections*

# A POLITICAL HISTORY FORECAST OF THE 2024 US CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** Statesman and scholar Alexis de Tocqueville once noted, "History is a gallery of pictures in which there are few originals and many copies." In other words, history has a habit of repeating itself, and we can deduce cycles and patterns that will likely recur. Such stability and inertia should bode well for prediction. Nevertheless, when it comes to election forecasting, especially in the US, most prognostications rely on short-term political fundamentals measuring macroeconomic performance or government or leader popularity. In this contribution, we adopt a structural approach but depart from existing literature by focusing on historical party and governance dynamics in the vein of de Tocqueville to establish if they offer solid guidance as to the performance of the Democrats in US Congressional elections. Our ex-post models provide solid predictions of which party will control Congress and the Democrat's seat tally in each chamber between 1946 and 2022. This creates conditions to assume Political History may help us forecast Campaign 2024. In this contribution, we apply this Political History Model to predict the 2024 Congressional elections.

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## INTRODUCTION

“The history book on the shelf  
Is always repeating itself.”  
(ABBA 1974).

An infamous line from the winning Eurovision hit song *Waterloo* epitomizes that events and behaviors often recur and human nature and institutions are arguably largely stable and persistent. This observation is hardly new. Scholars have long recognized the idea of historical cycles and patterns and their repeatability – the concept of the road taken and how decisions and events can foster enduring constellations (e.g., Pierson 2000). Others have championed the “Laws of Politics” (Cuzan 2015) giving birth to aphorisms like governments losing votes in second-order contests or the advantage of candidate incumbency. Such notions about institutions and citizens augur well for election prediction.

Election forecasting has three principal strands: polls, markets, and models. Academics conventionally devise models that traditionally rely on theory for projection, incorporating “fundamental” indicators to prognosticate. **Consider, for example, the longstanding model of Lewis-Beck and Tien (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Tien 2004), which following Tufte (1975), argues elections are plebiscites of how the president’s party has performed in office, primarily through their stewardship of the economy. Others have followed suit, and such fundamental-inspired models have been used to forecast elections globally (e.g., Dassonneville, Lewis-Beck, and Mongrain 2017; Nadeau and Lewis-Beck 2020). All these models primarily rely on short-term aspects like government or leader popularity, longevity of office, or macroeconomic indicators.**

**Our contribution is in the modeling tradition, but we take a different tack, eschewing any measure of public opinion or macroeconomic context close to the race. Instead, we focus on political structure and history, with the method assuming election performance is partly shaped by enduring patterns in a polity. Here, we test whether historical-critical junctures, party strength at the State level, and institutional and electoral forces can offer solid guides to the performance of the Democrats in US Congressional elections. This collection of dynamics forms what we classify as a Political History (PH) model. While some US forecasting endeavors have, in part, customarily incorporated structural dynamics into their predictions (e.g., Keilis-Borok and Lichtman, 1981), sole reliance on these features is a recent phenomenon (see Quinlan and Lewis-Beck 2024; Quinlan, Schnaudt, and Lewis-Beck 2021). As we shall see, the US PH model offers credible and competitive estimates of how Democrats have fared in Congressional elections between 1946 and 2022, with out-of-sample predictions correctly predicting control of the House of Representatives in 85-90% of instances and the Senate about 7 out of 10 times.**

Some may consider devising a PH model relying on structural components to foretell the 2024 elections is valiant, given the current political climate is in flux and these Congressional contests are

being held concurrently with a presidential election with many novel features. President Biden's late withdrawal from the race, sparked by a widely recognized poor debate performance against Donald Trump in June 2024 that highlighted concerns over the President's age, means he is the first eligible incumbent not to seek re-election since 1968. Democrats have coalesced around Kamala Harris as their nominee, hoping she becomes only the second sitting Vice President to be elected directly to the Presidency since 1836. Ms. Harris's campaign is significant in many respects: the first contender in 56 years to gain the nomination without winning a primary, only the second female to headline a Presidential ticket, and the first woman of Black and South Asian heritage to contest the office. On the Republican side, there is the distinctness of Donald Trump, a former president twice impeached, with a bombastic character, unconventional political approach, and who continues to make mendacious claims about the propriety of the 2020 election. It is the first time a former President contests since 1912, raising the specter of only the second non-consecutive second-term presidency since Grover Cleveland. Mr. Trump's third tilt at the White House is notable for him being the first US President convicted of a crime and surviving an attempt on his life. Several commentators have noted his campaign's controversial rhetoric (e.g., Colvin and Barrow 2024; Homans 2024), with some warning a Trump win could threaten democracy (e.g., Brownstein 2023; West 2022). If that were not enough, 2024 marks the first "post" COVID-19 election, while abortion looms large after the 2022 Supreme Court decision limiting the practice. All these factors could cast doubt on whether a PH model that takes little direct heed of this has much to offer.

We recognize 2024 is a stern test of the PH approach. The 2022 contests proved a challenge for the model, where it overstated Democrat losses, and against its ex-ante projection, the Democrats retained Senate control (Quinlan and Lewis-Beck 2023); although other well-traveled models also understated their performance – e.g., Tien and Lewis-Beck 2023). Defects like 2022 mean the model "learns" by incorporating these misses into future projections. Nevertheless, despite the unsettled political environment, the PH model has performed solidly historically, including correctly calling many recent elections.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, we contend that the PH approach can be seen as a historical benchmark testing how these contests *conventionally* go. Suppose the PH model comes close in 2024. In that case, the contest may mark a "*return to normalcy*" to invoke former President Warren Harding, where historical and institutional features remain a solid guide for how Congressional elections play out despite the recent political tumult. If it falls significantly short, we contend it can be seen as a yardstick for understanding how *different* the 2024 contest is compared to the races of yesteryear.

Based on a point estimate forecast of 46 seats, the PH model predicts the Democrats will lose Senate control in 2024. This suggests Democrats are apparent but not staggering favorites to lose control, with a 70% chance of being in the minority. The PH model for the House predicts a knife-edge race. The point estimate projection of 215 seats implies Democrats will fall three short of a majority. However, with the average error of between 12 and 14 seats, this is no sure bet, with a small margin of seats set to settle House control.

## MODEL

### *Theory*

The PH approach rests on structural features assumed to be autoregressive – i.e., they have long-standing predictive power. The specific dynamics will differ by polity and by contest. Its bedrock in the US includes governance, Federal-State electoral dynamics, and historical junctures. Applying this intuition to forecasting elections is evolving. It had mixed results when applied to the 2022 Congressional contests, where it underestimated the Democrats (Quinlan and Lewis-Beck 2023); although it was not alone – e.g., Lockerbie 2023; Tien and Lewis-Beck 2023). However, the model correctly forecasted they would lose the House. In Germany, a PH forecast of the 2021 Federal race (Quinlan, Schnaudt, and Lewis-Beck 2021) did not anticipate the SPD winning most votes (nor did other established models – e.g., Jérôme, Jérôme-Speziari, and Lewis-Beck 2022). However, it accurately predicted the vote share of the Others Bloc, against poll expectations.

**The starting point for the 2024 PH models is how much a party controls the federal government.** We contend when Democrats hold complete control of the federal government (i.e., the presidency and control of the Senate and House simultaneously), they will lose seats. The cost of governing has achieved ubiquity as a “law” of elections, with several studies noting parties in power lose votes (e.g., Cuzan, 2015; Norpoth, 1991), driven by the governing party straying from the median voter and alienating certain groups with governing decisions (Nannestad & Paldam, 2002; Wlezien, 2016). **Between 1946 and 2022, we observe patterns of one party gaining outright federal government control.** While such power is often short-lived, we posit it exacerbates the cost of the governing penalty as voters have one party to hold responsible.

In the Federalist Papers 39 and 45, James Madison (1788a, 1788b) articulated the symbiotic relationship between the federal government and the States. We posit that such reciprocity translates into the electoral arena, and the state political context influences federal elections. Specifically, for both chambers, we include the number of Democrat Governors six months before the contest and the overall Republican party strength in the state. The mechanism supposed is that with control of the governorship, structural advantages will accrue, such as campaign infrastructure, greater coverage in the media, etc. Further, the costs and benefits of office flow to the party who controls Governorships. Conversely, we expect when Senate races occur in states where Republicans are electorally strong, Democrats will win fewer seats as Republicans will have an inbuilt advantage of support and infrastructure.

We posit Senate election dynamics impact both the Senate and the House elections. Approximately 1/3 of Senate seats are contested each cycle. To recognize the influence of the electoral calendar, we codify the number of Democrat seats as not up, and we expect that the fewer Democrat seats up, the more seats Democrats will win in the Senate. We suppose that Senate elections can have ripple effects on House contests by the number of incumbent Democrat Senators retiring. The power of Senate incumbency has been widely recognized (Matland and Studlar 2004). An incumbent Senator’s

retirement means a standard bearer lost. Open Senate seats sometimes involve brutal primary battles and attract more significant resources, potentially diverting them from House contests. These races often appeal to sitting House members, opening more House seats. Thus, we suppose the more retiring Democrat Senators in a cycle will be negatively associated with the number of seats Democrats win in the House.

**Reoccurring events are standard coin in model forecasts. However, they do not go far enough. Game changers or shocks to the system often bring about long-standing shifts that endure.** New patterns are, so to speak, “locked in.” Such re-alignments can come from different emerging issues prominent in political competition and structure or a change in the power balance between actors (see Key 1959; Petrocik 1987). Including these in a model is critical as these transformative events **shift the constant and slope terms, and if not considered, will lead to model misspecification and systematic forecasting error.**

Here, we argue two significant realignments are relevant. With its shifting balance of governmental powers, Civil Rights legislation passed in August 1965 represented such a critical juncture as it ensured the enfranchisement of minorities. It played a pivotal role in the re-alignment of the South, where Democrats had traditionally dominated, as Republicans began to gain ground, drawing more support from southern white conservatives. We suggest this is associated with the decline of the Democrat Party Senate firewall, underpinned by the South (Pildes 2011). We expect it to impact the Democrats’ Senate’s performance negatively.

The 1994 Republican sweep based on its *Contract with America* saw it win control of the House for the first time in 40 years and make substantial Senate gains. It is now widely considered a realigning contest (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Campbell 2006), as partisanship re-asserted its power, social conservative issues became more prominent, and the Republicans consolidated their electoral stranglehold of the South, which coincided with the rise of cable news television. We assume this will be negatively associated with Democrats’ performance in the House.

#### *Data and Model Operationalizations*

We constructed the dataset (Quinlan, 2024) based on data from the Clerk’s Office of the House of Representatives (2022), the Ballotpedia database (2022), and the Brookings Institute. We focus on the Democrats as they have been the dominant force historically in Congress since 1946. Of the 39 contests from 1946, Democrats have controlled the House 26 times (~67%) and had a Senate majority 24 times (~62%).

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions, and we have two dependent variables: the total number of seats the Democrats win in the Senate and the House. We have seven independent variables across our two models. Three are common to both: Democrat dominance of federal government, the total number of Democrat governors, and GOP strength in a state. We codify this with a dichotomy – coded 1 if the Democrats control *all* three branches of the Federal government and 0 otherwise. We

classify the number of Democrat governors nationwide six months before election day. We measure the strength of the GOP in states by counting the number of states with two GOP Senators who voted for the Republican presidential candidate in the most recent presidential election and where a Senate contest is taking place in the election year. For the Senate model, we codify the number of Democrat Senate seats not up for election. For the House model, we count the incumbent Senate Democrats not contesting the election six months before polling day. We measure the two realignments – the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 1994 Republican wave with two dummy variables, codifying elections post-1966 for the former and all contests post-1994 as 1. All other contests are coded 0. In Appendixes A-C, we provide summary data, parameters informing the 2024 forecast, and ancillary analyses.

## MODELS PERFORMANCE 1946-2022

**Table 1** Political History Model: OLS regression models exploring the Democrat N of seats in US Senate and House elections 1946-2022

<i>Dependent variable: Democrat N seats in the Congressional Chamber</i>		
	I	II
	Senate	House
Dominance of Federal Government	-5.057** (1.498)	-29.723*** (6.137)
N Governors <sup>t-6months</sup>	0.236+ (0.135)	2.900*** (0.583)
Senate Contests: Strong GOP state	-0.416* (0.157)	-2.254* (0.747)
N Holdover Senate Seats	0.851*** (0.154)	-
Elections post Voting Rights Act 1965	-4.623** (1.434)	-
Senate Seats: N Incumbents Retiring	-	-4.978** (1.300)
Elections post 1994 Republican Revolution.	-	-13.358+ (7.846)
Constant	25.153*** (4.674)	208.999*** (17.618)
<b>Model Summaries</b>		
N elections	39	39
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.72	0.74
Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE)	3.684	15.732
<b>Within-sample diagnostics</b>		
$\bar{x}$ MAE	2.7	12.0
Largest Absolute Prediction Error (Seats)	7	33
Correctly calls Control	72%	87%
<b>Out-of-sample diagnostics: Jackknife</b>		
$\bar{x}$ MAE	2.7	12.0

Largest Absolute Forecast Error (Seats)	10	38
Correctly calls Control	72%	87%
<b>Out-of-sample diagnostics: One-step-ahead</b>		
$\bar{x}$ MAE	2.9	14.0
Largest Absolute Forecast Error (Seats)	10	35
Correctly calls Control	77%	81%

*Note:* Entries are unstandardized coefficients of OLS regression with standard errors in parentheses. \* =  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ . More information is available in Tables C5-C9, Appendix C.

In Table 1, our slope estimates align with theoretical expectations. Federal government dominance negatively correlates with the Democrat's performance. When they control all branches of the Federal government, on average, Democrats will lose seats. The number of Democrat governors positively correlates with the party's performance. Every governorship the party holds is associated with an additional 2.9 House seats on average, and for every 5 Governorships held, the party can expect to gain one Senate seat *ceteris paribus*. The more Senate seats being contested in states where the Republican Party is strong is associated with fewer Democrat Senate and House seats. The more holdover Senate seats the Democrats have, the more Senate seats the party can anticipate winning. While the more incumbent Democrats retire from the Senate, the fewer seats they can expect to win in the House. Finally, we observe a strong association between the Democrats' performance and two critical junctures. On average, elections after the 1965 Voting Rights Act see Democrats win fewer Senate seats. Similarly, *ceteris paribus*, since the 1994 Republican revolution, Democrats can be assumed to win 13 fewer House seats in elections post-1994 than pre-1994.

In adjudicating the models' prediction capacity, four criteria are essential: lead time, replication, parsimony, and accuracy (Lewis-Beck, 2005). On the first three, both models stand up reasonably. We can estimate the models six months in advance. They are easily reproducible, based on official data readily available, and both are relatively efficient with five variables a piece.

The *El Dorado* of forecasting is accuracy. There are several means of exploring this. First, the model's fit to the data – both fit decently with an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.72 for the Senate and 0.74 for the House model, respectively. Second, we tested how the PH model compared to a naïve model where seat performance in the previous contests is used as the sole predictor. This shows that the PH model performs stronger (see Appendix C, Table C4). Third, we look at the within-sample mean absolute error (MAE), which treats all errors equally and provides a benchmark for the typical prediction error. For the Senate model, the MAE is 2.7, while for the House, it is 12. Third, the Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) is a stricter test of average error as it gives more weight to more significant errors from the model. Unsurprisingly, it is greater than the within-sample MAE – 3.684 for the Senate and 15.732 for the House, indicating that, on average, the Senate point forecast for Democrats will be within four seats, and the House prognosis will, on average, be within 16 seats of the result. Fourthly, we decipher how often the model correctly predicts which party will control each chamber, the ultimate test of the

model's accuracy. Encouragingly, control of the House is accurately forecast in 87% of instances. For the Senate, the PH model correctly predicts control 72% of the time.

Within-sample predictions are known to be optimistic, for they rely on data available retrospectively. Out-of-sample tests are stricter as they involve prophesying without information about the election in question. The most common out-of-sample diagnostic is the jackknife method. Under this procedure, the Senate model's MAE is 2.7, reassuringly the same as the within-sample estimate. Soberingly, the largest seat error is 10, but more comfortingly, control of the Senate is correctly forecast in 72% of instances, identical to within-sample estimates. For the House, the jackknife MAE is duplicated to the within-sample estimate (12.0), with the largest seat error rising to 38 (1946). Encouragingly, this stress test sees control of the House correctly projected 87% of the time.

The one-step-ahead method is arguably the strictest out-of-sample test but perhaps the most apt, as it focuses solely on data that would have been available to the forecaster for an ex-ante prediction. We apply this procedure to elections from 1972 onwards (i.e.,  $N=26$ ; ~67% of data). The MAE for the Senate model under this scenario is marginally larger than the within-sample MAE (2.9 v 2.7). The most significant absolute seats error is 10, identical to the within-sample estimate. Promisingly, the models under this specification correctly predict Senate control 77% of the time. For the House, the MAE under this condition is 14, higher than the within-sample MAE (12). Nevertheless, this specification accurately predicts House control in 81% of instances, somewhat lower than the within-sample and jackknife estimates.

## 2024 FORECAST AND REFLECTIONS

We show the PH approach for the Senate and the House, when tested empirically in two separate regression equations across 39 elections, shows promise in predicting the performance of Democrats and which party will control each chamber. The coefficient signs of the PH predictors are consistently in the expected direction. The models exhibit solid statistical fit, and the PH approach correctly forecasts which party will control each chamber about three-quarters of the time, with House control prognoses notably better. These results are remarkable, given they are based on structural and institutional features, with no mention of issues of the day. While the PH approach does not tell the whole story, it gives us a solid idea of the last chapter. If nothing else, we maintain for 2024 that it can act as a barometer of normalcy, allowing us to situate these elections in a historical context.

Using the PH models from Table 1 to forecast the complexion of the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress, it predicts Democrats will lose Senate seats, with the point estimate suggesting they will have 46 seats and a 70% chance of losing control of the Chamber. For the House, the PH approach predicts a cliffhanger. The point estimate prognosis of 215 seats, three short of a majority, is remediated because, with an average error of 12-14 seats anticipated, the race is "too close to call" and will be settled by a small margin. In sum, the PH model for 2024 suggests that Democrats are unlikely to achieve a clean sweep of Congress.



As we write in August 2024, it is notable the PH predictions are in sync with other renowned forecasters and poll aggregators in predicting Democrat losses in the Senate and likely minority status (See Appendix D). Polling averages on the generic ballot of the two parties show a dead heat, with these prognosticators rating the House contest as “too close to call,” with Republicans having a slight edge.

### **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study have not yet been verified by PS's replication team. Data will be openly available at the Harvard Dataverse upon publication of the final article.

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### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

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<sup>i</sup> We investigated whether elections from 2000 behaved notably differently from contests before. We found little evidence these contests stood out significantly from the standard PH model (see Table C1, Appendix C). We found little evidence a potential COVID-19 effect substantially altered the standard PH model (see Table C2, Appendix C). We explored whether Trump's political entry was a critical juncture, finding little evidence it meaningfully altered the standard PH model for the House. However, some evidence suggests Democrats performed a little better in Senate contests during Trump's involvement in national campaigns. Nevertheless, it is not overwhelming (see Table C3, Appendix C).