

Predicting Congressional Elections From Expert Ratings, 1964-2022

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Over the summer, I collaborated with Government Professor Michael Franz on two distinct projects. First, I conducted preliminary research on the Federal Election Commission, or FEC, learning about its role of regulating and enforcing campaign finance law. I then spent the following week updating Franz's data on the FEC cases for his paper "Federal Election Commission Divided: Measuring Conflict in Commission Votes Since 1990," published in 2021. In this process, I noted both which commissioners voted (most serve for only a few years) and how they voted. This information is useful when contextualized with the knowledge that commissioners appointed by Democratic and Republican administrations may vote differently on contentious issues.

Second, I collected and presented data for our research paper "Predicting Congressional Elections from Expert Ratings, 1964-2022." This paper examines a long-ignored question regarding election predictions: To what extent can we utilize expert predictions, not just statistical modeling, to predict election outcomes? While there has been considerable research dedicated to predicting presidential election outcomes, there has been a lack of comprehensive analysis addressing whether these ratings accurately predict congressional elections ahead of time. Most election forecasting relies on statistical modeling, where a computer model analyzes various factors in each race. We examined the final House and Senate ratings before each election between 1964 and 2022 and compared them to the actual results. We also assessed the level of agreement across sources by examining ratings across sources from 2006 to 2022. We found that expert ratings are, in fact, reliable sources for predicting both election outcomes (i.e., whether the Democrat or Republican wins) and, more specifically, the vote share of each candidate (e.g., the Democrat receives 45% of the vote, and the Republican receives 55% in district X).

To collect the data for this paper, we needed both the expert ratings from 1964 to 2022 and the actual election results for this period. I worked to collect this data, focusing primarily on Congressional Quarterly (CQ), an organization that tracks legislation as it moves through Congress and publishes political predictions and analysis. My tasks included updating election results and CQ's final election ratings for 1964-1982, as well as election ratings for 2018-2022 (including month by month ratings that occurred before the final election rating so we could observe how the ratings evolved over time). I also systematically reviewed and updated the Democratic and Republican percentages of the vote received by candidates in various elections, checked and double-checked data entries, and dealt with some unknown complexities, such as fusion ticket candidates (candidates running under multiple parties) and at-large congressional seats (some states only have one congressional seat due to their small population, hence "at large"). All these tasks required ongoing communication and discussion with Professor Franz.

Once the data was collected, I summarized the results to create a first draft of the paper. I spent time examining prior research on election forecasting, which helped me contribute to writing the introduction. In the paper, I reviewed the evolution of election forecasts from simple predictions on presidential elections to complex models predicting individual House and Senate races using polling, macroeconomic data, and other race fundamentals. Additionally, I helped draft the discussion of the data (where it comes from, how it was collected, and how to read and evaluate it), analyzed our findings as displayed in figures in the paper, and wrote descriptions of these findings.

Ultimately, this process gave me tremendous insight into the world of political forecasting and the nature of data analysis in political science research. I am extremely thankful for Professor Franz for his support in this research, and I look forward to seeing our work published in a peer reviewed journal soon!

Faculty Mentor: Michael Franz

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