



Premier cycle Moyen Orient Méditerranée
de Sciences Po - Campus de Menton

Méthodes comparatives et statistiques en Science politique

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Séance 4. Economie et politique : l'analyse agrégée du 'cost of ruling'

DOCUMENTS

Short-Term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior, 1896-1964*

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I. Introduction

This study is an attempt to employ some simple statistical models, motivated by certain assumptions about voting akin to those discussed by Downs and others,¹ in an attempt to explain short-term fluctuations in the division of the national vote for the U. S. House of Representatives, over the period 1896-1964. The models will yield quantitative estimates of the impact of economic conditions on congressional elections, and of the effects of incumbency and presidential "coattails" as well.

The notion that a vote represents a decision or rational choice between alternatives is an important theme in democratic theory. However, this rationality hypothesis has proved to be difficult to test empirically, particularly with survey data, from which most of our recent knowledge of individual voting behavior is drawn.² The present study is an attempt to put a modified form of the rationality hypothesis to a different and in some respects more direct test than is readily possible with survey data.

The analysis bears directly on the substantive question of the relationships between economic conditions and U. S. national election results. National economic decisions frequently involve such considerations as how much price stability must be sacrificed in order to achieve a specified growth rate, and so forth, so clearly, quantitative knowledge of the electoral consequences of varying mixes of growth, price stability, and unemployment is relevant for an incumbent administration wishing to maximize its own chances for reelection; conceivably, such knowledge may also be relevant to the task of achieving a socially optimal mix of policies. Moreover, investigation of these various relationships may also provide a basis for developing new methods of long-range election forecasting to supplement current techniques, based on polls. The specific relationships used in the present study are too aggregative to be of great forecasting value in themselves, but our results do suggest that a more disaggregated and

detailed model of the same general type may be of interest in this respect.

Finally, the extent to which congressional election results depend on economic and other external conditions, which cannot be effectively controlled by any particular congressman or campaign organization, is a question of general interest to students of campaigning and elections, and might also have implications for our understanding of the operation of the division of powers in the Federal government.

Several previous studies have considered the question of the effect of economic conditions upon election outcomes, and the principal results should be briefly described here.

W. A. Kerr examined the correlations of various economic indices with the "conservative" presidential vote (defined as the Whig vote prior to 1856, and the combined Republican-Prohibition vote in subsequent years) over a series of elections, in an attempt to test the hypothesis that prosperity increases the conservative vote.³ The rank-order correlations with a variable identified only as "Index of per capita realized national income (adjusted by cost of living)", averaged over the election year and three preceding years, was .19, over the period 1897-1940. The correlation with "cost of living (corrected for century trend)," similarly averaged, was .17 (for 1837-1936), and with a "wholesale price index," .29 (for 1861-1940). More explicit definitions of the variables or data sources were not given, and most of the other economic series used are not measures of "prosperity" in any usual sense of the term. All in all Kerr's results lend only modest support, at best, to his basic hypothesis.

Pearson and Meyers considered a somewhat different hypothesis, that "the public tends to vote for the continuation of administrations that have been in power during prosperous times and to vote against the incumbent administration when depression marks the approach of election time."⁴ They used a "general price level" as their measure of overall prosperity, and found that the presidential candidate of the incumbent party was defeated in 11 of the 13 presidential elections from

* The research described in this article was performed at the Cowles Foundation for Research in Economics at Yale University, under grants from the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

¹ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1957).

² Though see V. O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 1966).

³ W. A. Kerr, "A Quantitative Study of Political Behavior, 1840-1940," *Journal of Social Psychology*, 19 (1944), 273-281.

⁴ F. A. Pearson and W. I. Myers, "Prices and Presidents," *Farm Economics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: New York State College of Agriculture, Cornell University), 163 (September 1948), 4210-4218, at p. 4210.

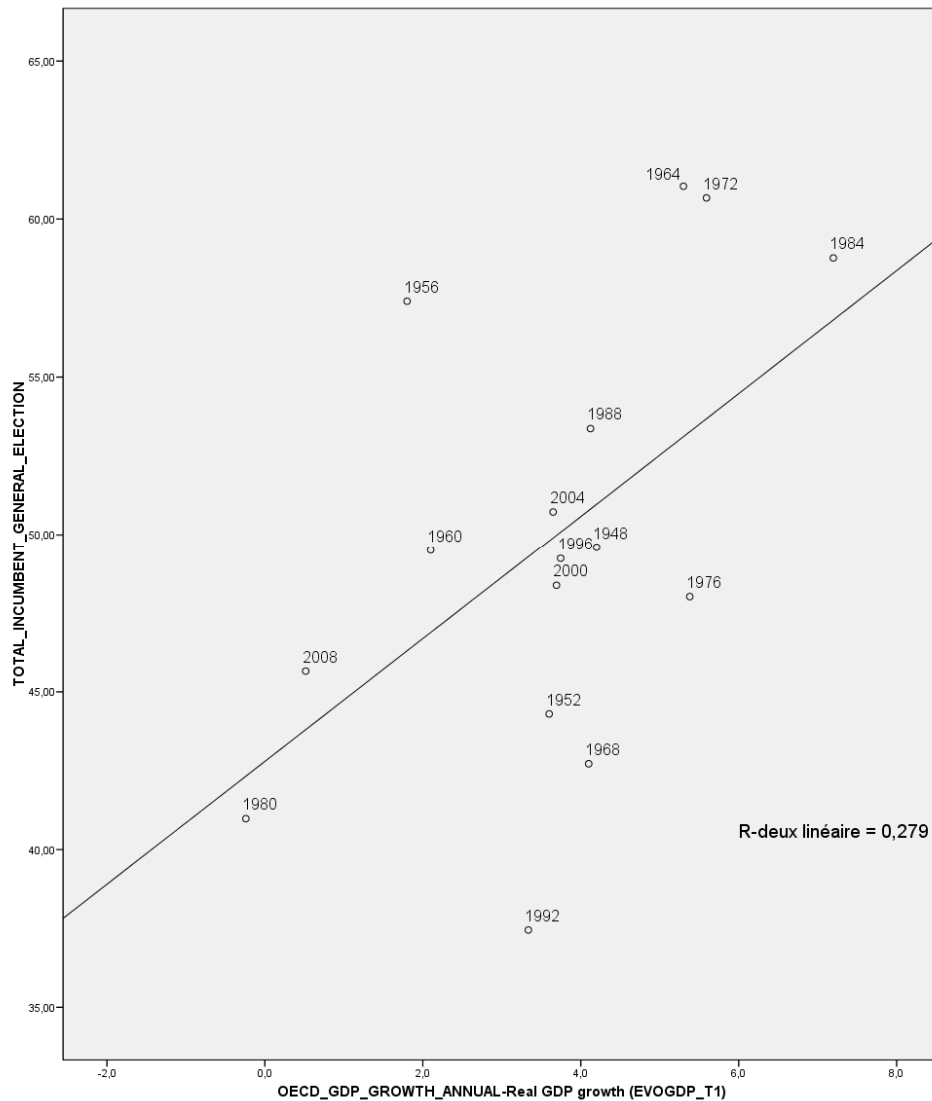
Exemple n°1 : GDP growth and incumbent vote in US presidential elections (1948-2008)

Corrélations

| | | GDP_GROWTH H_ANNUAL - Real GDP growth (EVOGDP_T1) |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|---|
| TOTAL_INCUMBENT_GENERAL_ELECTION | Corrélation de Pearson | ,528(*) |
| | Sig. (bilatérale) | ,035 |
| | N | 16 |

* La corrélation est significative au niveau 0.05 (bilatéral).

Nuage de points et droite de régression



$$VOTE = 1.947 * GDP + 42.796$$

Figure 3
Vote for Incumbent Party by Incumbent
President's Approval Rating at Mid-Year,
1948-2008

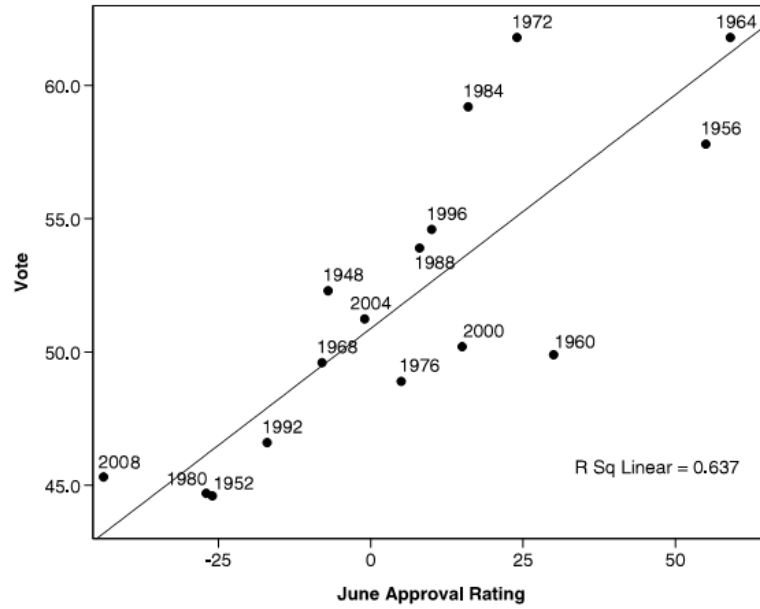


Figure 4
Incumbent Party Vote by Predicted
Incumbent Party Vote, 1948-2004

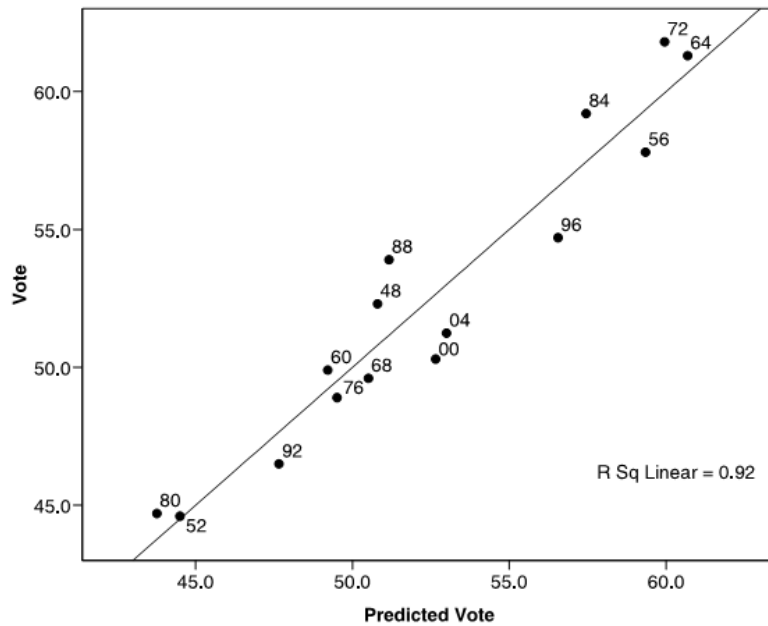


Table 2
Success of Incumbent Party Candidate in
Presidential Elections by Type of Election,
1948–2004

| Results | Type of Election | |
|--------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| | First-Term | Second- or Later-Term |
| Won | 6 | 2 |
| Lost | 1 | 6 |
| Average Vote | 55.9% | 49.5% |

Source: Data compiled by author.

Note: Vote share based on major-party vote.

Table 2
Economic voting

| | Model 1 |
|-----------------|----------------|
| Sample | |
| Prior vote | 0.29 (0.18) |
| Unemployment | −1.35** (0.39) |
| Growth | 0.50 (0.79) |
| Inflation | −0.08 (0.12) |
| ENP change | −1.21 (1.07) |
| Trend dummies | |
| Country dummies | |
| Constant | 29.64* (11.05) |
| Observations | 34 |
| Adj. R^2 | 0.36 |
| R^2 | |

