

**CITIZEN FORECASTING: CAN UK VOTERS SEE THE FUTURE?\***

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In the leading democracies, election forecasting is much in vogue. [See the current review essay by Lewis-Beck and Tien, 2010]. Exemplars are France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. For the case at hand, the United Kingdom, two methodological approaches share the task: statistical models and opinion polls. With respect to the former, a regression equation posits itself, to be estimated on aggregate national data. With respect to the latter, expressions of vote intention in public surveys are exploited. [As examples, consult these papers: Clarke and Stewart, 1995; Lebo and Norpoth, 2007; Lewis-Beck, 2005; Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, and Bélanger, 2009; Mughan, 1987; Norpoth, 2004; Sanders, 1991, 2005; Whiteley, 1979, 2008.] These approaches have pros and cons (Lewis-Beck, 2001; Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Bélanger, 2010). Not all general election forecasting restricts itself to one or the other method, however. One renegade strategy is that of neural networks, proposed by Rallings and Thrasher (2005). Another, which we propose here, has been labeled *citizen forecasting* (Lewis-Beck and Skalaban, 1989).

Citizen forecasting draws on the foreknowledge of voters themselves, rather than on any external statistical equation. It is based on polling data, but not the usual item of *vote intention* – “who would you vote for?” Instead, it relies on an item about *vote expectation* – “who do you think will win?” The dominant hypothesis may be that voters cannot really “know” who will win. Therefore, when asked, their responses, in the aggregate, will be random. In a simple two-party system, such as that of the United States, randomness in the forecasts would produce something close to a 50-50 split, one party versus the other.

Nevertheless, actually testing this hypothesis against United States survey data, such a random result seldom appears. In fact, exploring the American National Election Study (ANES) presidential election surveys (1956-1996), Lewis-Beck and Tien (1999, 176) report that, in

general, citizen forecasting yields far better than a chance result. The ANES question, typically posed about two months before the contest, is as follows: “Who do you think will be elected President in November?” For these eleven contests, the correct response was given, on average, 71 percent of the time, an estimate statistically significant far beyond the .001 level. US citizens, in other words, seem able to forecast national elections rather well. Below, we ask if UK citizens can do the same. We find that they can, in various ways. Then, we go on to model that individual voter response. After all, this forecasting ability seems amenable to explanation. We conclude with an application to the upcoming 2010 general election.

#### CAN UK VOTERS FORECAST ELECTIONS?

There are good reasons to suppose that, despite the American rejection of the null hypothesis, it would not be rejected in Britain. Three reasons present themselves: the multi-party nature of the polity; the single member plurality (SMP) electoral system converting votes to seats; and data problems of item availability and item consistency. Let us address each, in turn. The first argument is that, while the US is a two-party system, the UK is a three- (or four-) party system. Certainly, the third-party Liberal Democrats are a force to be reckoned with, garnering between 17% and 22% of the national vote share 1992-2005. (See Table 1, third column). Still, across roughly the same period in the US, third-party movements, mostly notably Ross Perot’s Reform party in 1992 and 1996, received comparable vote shares. Further, in the UK there are other, lesser, “fourth-parties,” together capturing 6% to 10% of the vote. (See Table 1, fourth column). Again, it should not be forgotten that the United States has a vigorous tradition of such splinter parties competing in presidential elections, e.g., the Natural Law party (Lewis-Beck and Squire, 1995).

**TABLE 1: UK GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS, PERCENT VOTE SHARE, 1992-2005**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Conservative Party</b>	<b>Labour Party</b>	<b>Liberal Democratic Party</b>	<b>Other Parties</b>
<b>1992</b>	41.9	34.4	17.8	5.8
<b>1997</b>	30.7	43.2	16.8	9.3
<b>2001</b>	31.7	40.7	18.3	9.4
<b>2005</b>	32.4	35.2	22.0	10.4

Finally, and perhaps most telling, in the UK only one of two parties (Labour or Conservative) has a meaningful chance to lead the government. In that sense, it is comparable to the US case, where only the Democrats and the Republicans have a realistic shot at occupying the White House. The expectation, then, is that virtually all UK respondents (other than the “don’t knows”) will pick one of the two major parties, just as in the US. With that assumption, the choice effectively reduces to two, making the random baseline again 50-50. To the extent the UK estimates depart from that null baseline, we gain confidence in the citizens as forecasters.

The second reason for why the null might not be rejected is the SMP system, and its disproportional conversion of votes to seats. For example, the winning Labour party in 2001 and 2005 had a lower vote share than the winning Conservative party in 1992. (See Table 1). In this electoral system, such disproportionality happens due to both the geographical distribution of party support, and the related drawing of district boundaries. (See Curtice, 2001; Mitchell, 2005; Rallings, Johnston, and Thrasher, 2008). On the one hand, the disconnection between votes and seats might make it difficult for the average citizen to figure out who or what is a “win.” On the other hand, a very tight empirical link between seats and votes has been repeatedly demonstrated (Johnston et al., 2001; Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, and Bélanger, 2009; Whiteley, 2005). This suggests

that voters themselves could know this, at least in a general way, and may be themselves able to convert votes to seats in terms of assessing a win.

The third reason why the null hypothesis might be sustained has to do with data issues. Are there enough pre-election surveys with an appropriate citizen forecasting question? Are these questions worded the same, at least approximately? If the answer to either of these questions is “no,” then it will be difficult, if not impossible, to apply the necessary tests. Fortunately, we have managed to locate four general pre-election surveys – 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005. While more could be wished for (and maybe eventually be uncovered), these four are enough to provide a solid baseline result. With respect to the items, there are two basic forms, one asking about “which party will win?” and the other asking “which party will get the most MPs?” The meaning of the two items is highly similar, with the second taking explicit account of the fact that it is seats (not votes) that yield the win. The latter phrasing was applied in 1992 and 1997, the former phrasing in 2001 and 2005. (For the exact wording in each contest, consult the wording at the bottom of Table 2).

**TABLE 2: WHICH PARTY WILL WIN? (1992-2005)**

<b>Party Name</b>	<b>1992</b>		<b>1997</b>		<b>2001</b>		<b>2005</b>	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Conservative</b>	460	34.8	300	16.3	321	6.7	115	8.9
<b>Labour</b>	505	38.1	1214	66.1	4187	87	1004	77.9
<b>Liberal Dem</b>	5	0.4	7	0.4	16	0.3	24	1.9
<b>Other</b>	0	0	1	0.1	4	0.1	3	0.3
<b>Don't know</b>	354	26.7	313	17	283	5.9	143	11.1
<b>Total (N)</b>	1324		1835		4811		1289	

Note: Results are weighted responses from the following surveys: 1992: British General Election Panel Survey 1987-1992 (stage 1, election campaign phone survey). “Which party do you think will end up with the most MPs in Parliament?” Weighting variable = wt12. 1997: The British General Election Study: Campaign Panel, 1997 (late campaign, wave 3, phone survey). “Which party do you think will end up with the most MPs in Parliament?” Weighting variable = WTALA. 2001: The British Election Study 2001 Rolling Cross-Section Campaign Phone Survey conducted by Gallup. “Which party do you think is most likely to win in the country as a whole?” Weighting variable = campaign survey weight. 2005: The British Election Study April 2005, YouGov internet survey. “Which party do you think is most likely to win the general election?” Weighting variable = W8.

In these four pre-election surveys, can most British voters forecast the winning party? Yes. For certain cases it is even quite easy. That is, 87 percent got it right in 2001, followed closely by 77.9 percent in 2005. With respect to the Labour victory of 1997, ending the long Conservative reign, 66.1 percent declared it, a guess well beyond chance. Thus, despite the vagaries of the multi-party system, the trickiness of votes-seats conversion, and inconsistencies in item wording, the winning party still manages to send out a strong signal, which the overwhelming majority of voters pick up.

However, the citizen forecaster is not infallible. The 1992 citizen forecast misses, incorrectly calling a Labour victory (38.1 percent Labour to 34.8 percent Conservative respectively, with 26.7 percent “don’t know”). What is going on here? It is a close contest, and this can happen when the race is close. For example, in the extremely close US race of 1960 (Nixon-Kennedy), the majority mistakenly called it for Nixon (57 % to 43%). In 1976 (Ford-Carter), another close race, the majority called it correctly for Carter, but barely (51% to 49%). Not surprisingly, tight races are hard to call, and that is something we see here. Why is the 1992 UK race close? Not because of the vote shares, 41.9% for the Conservative party to only 34.4 % for the Labour party, rendering a vote share margin not at all close (recall the vote shares reported in Table 1). Instead, it is close because of the seat shares. In Table 3, observe that the Conservatives in 1992 garnered just 51.6 % of the seats, a bare majority, making it de facto a very close race.

**TABLE 3: WINNING PARTY, PERCENT VOTE, PERCENT SEATS, 1992-2005**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Winning Party</b>	<b>Percent Vote</b>	<b>Percent Seats</b>
<b>1992</b>	Conservative	41.9	51.6
<b>1997</b>	Labour	43.2	63.4
<b>2001</b>	Labour	40.7	62.5
<b>2005</b>	Labour	35.2	55.0

## DO UK VOTERS KNOW WHEN AN ELECTION IS CLOSE?

The above contention, that voters misforecast 1992 because it was a close race, rests on an ecological inference that could be false. That is, it assumes that individual voters actually *saw* that the race was close and therefore introduced more uncertainty into their forecast calculation. Fortunately, we do have individual-level evidence on the closeness question, and on the two extreme races – 1997 (the least close with 63.4% seats for the winner) and 1992 (the most close with 51.6% seats for the winner). In 1997, the survey asked which party would get the most MPs, with a large majority of voters identifying Labour. (See Table 4a, column 2). Besides, the survey went on to ask if that party “would have enough MPs to form a government?” Table 4b (column 2) displays the percentage distribution on that question. Overwhelmingly (55.1%), the electorate thought the winner would be able to form a government alone (only 22.7% thought otherwise). From this finding, it seems clear that the 1997 voters saw, before the balloting itself, that it would not be a close contest.

Now consider the close race of 1992. In Table 4a (column 1), we observe again that the electorate was nearly evenly divided as to whether the Conservative or the Labour party would win the “most MPs,” with over one-quarter simply declining to guess. (By far, this is the highest “don’t know” score across the four contests. Recall Table 2). Further, when asked whether the party they named would have “enough MPs to govern?” the modal response was that it did “need support from another party.” (Table 4b, column 2). In other words, the typical voter saw the race as very close, so close that the party of victory would not be able to go it alone.

**TABLE 4: CLOSENESS OF THE RACE**

**A: Which party will win the most MPs in the country? (percent of respondents)**

<b>Party</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1997</b>
<b>Conservative</b>	34.8	16.3
<b>Labour</b>	38.1	66.1
<b>Liberal Dem</b>	0.4	0.4
<b>Other</b>	0	0.1
<b>Don't know</b>	26.7	17
<b>Total</b>	100	99.9

Details on the surveys can be found in Table 2.

**B: Enough MPs to Govern? (percent of respondents)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1997</b>
<b>Enough MPs</b>	27.9	55.1
<b>Need Support</b>	39.4	22.7
<b>Don't Know</b>	6	5.2
<b>No Party Named</b>	26.7	17
<b>Total</b>	99.9	100

\* This survey question was asked only of respondents who named a party in response to the question “which party will end up with the most MPs?” If the respondent did not name a party, this response is reflected in the “no party named” category in table 4B.

The question asked in 1992 and 1997 was “Do you think the (party named) will have enough MPs to form a government on its own, or will it need the support of another party to form a government?”

These results, from the contrasting cases of 1992 and 1997, indicate that voters, in advance of the ballot itself, rather accurately gauge the tightness of the race. On the one hand, knowing the race not tight, they have an easy time predicting the winner. On the other hand, knowing the race is tight, they naturally have a much more difficult time making an accurate prediction; in that case, many get it wrong, or merely withdraw from making a prediction.

**FORECASTING THE WINNER V. FORECASTING THE WINNER’S SHARE**

We observe that voters, more often than not, can correctly forecast the winning party. Also, that forecast usually takes place about two weeks before the actual balloting. (The median

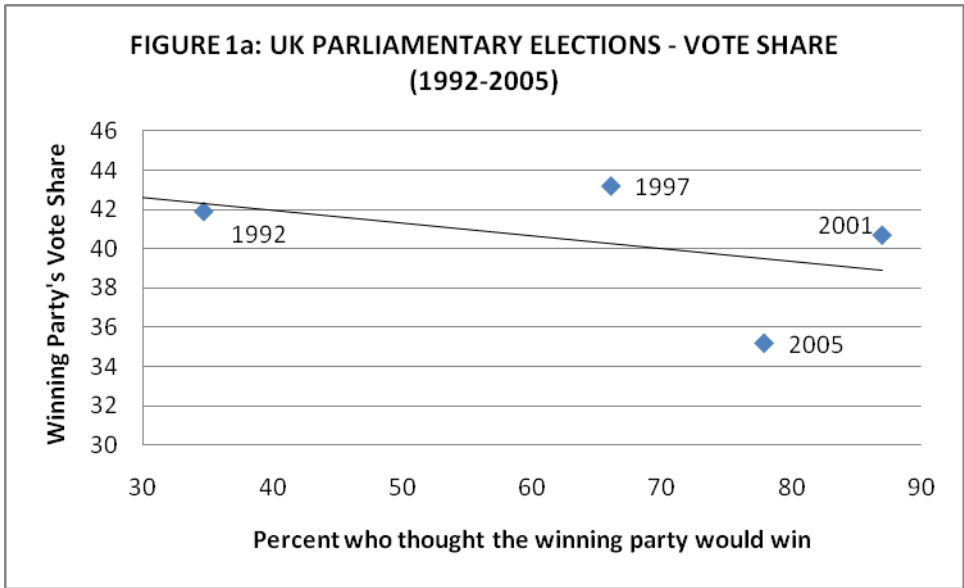
response date prior to the election is as follows: 1992 = 10 days; 1997 = 6 days; 2001 = 16 days; 2005 = 15 days). But, these successes are of limited satisfaction, given there are only four elections in the series. Thus, we impose a more difficult test: can the citizen forecast score from each pre-election survey forecast the precise vote share the winning party receives? In Figure 1A, we observe a scatterplot, with the winner's citizen forecast score on the X-axis, and the actual winning party total vote share on the Y-axis. No relationship appears to exist, except perhaps a slight counter-intuitive one, with increases in X tending to generate a negative response in Y. (See the sketched-in regression line). The actual regression estimate (OLS) below, confirms this anomalous finding.

$$V = 44.6 - .07F + e \quad \text{Eq.1}$$

(6.5)    (-.66)

$$R^2 = .18 \quad N = 4$$

Where V = the total vote share of the winning party; F = the citizen forecast score of the winning party; e = the error term; the figures in parentheses are t-ratios; R<sup>2</sup> = the coefficient of determination; N = 4 (general elections, 1992 – 2005).

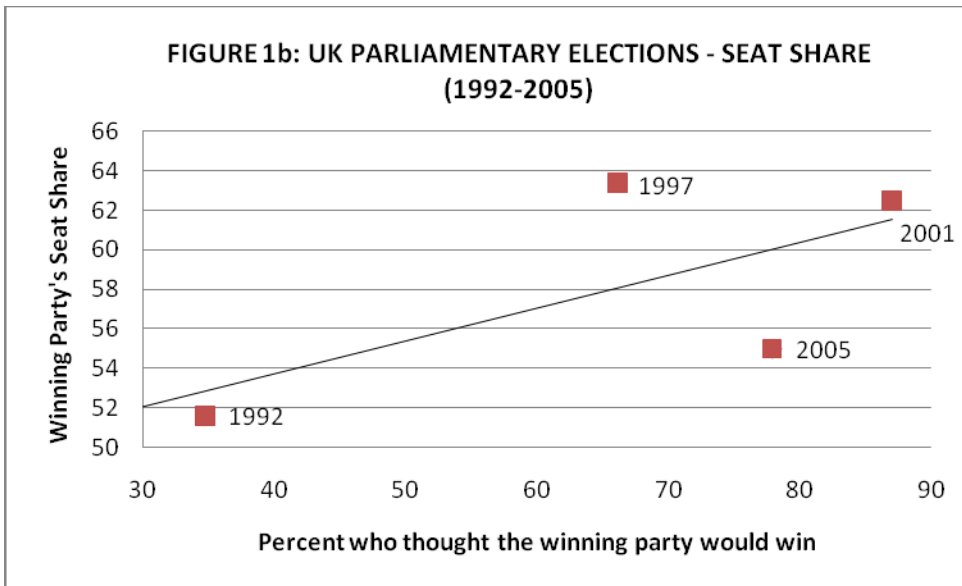


Recall, however, that the power to govern resides with the seats won, not the votes. It seems reasonable that, to the extent voters base their forecasts on an assessment of which party will govern, the dependent variable should be seat share, instead of vote share. In Figure 1B is that scatterplot, again with the regression line fitted to it. The relationship appears strong and positive, as expected. To test this proposition, we re-run the same regression, but with winning party seat share (S) as the dependent variable. Below are those results.

$$\begin{aligned}
 S &= 47.1 + .17F + e && \text{Eq. 2} \\
 (5.1) & \quad (1.2)
 \end{aligned}$$

$$R^2 = .43 \quad N = 4$$

Where S = seat share in percent, and the other variables and statistics are defined as in Eq. 1. We observe that the relationship is rather strong, in fact strong enough to risk a seat forecast for 2010, a task to which we now turn.



#### THE CITIZEN FORECAST FOR 2010

What is the “citizen forecast” for the upcoming 2010 election? The final citizen forecast will be delivered two or three weeks before the actual (May) contest, calculated from the final pre-election survey. We have not yet travelled to that point on the time line. Still, we can issue a preliminary citizen forecast, based on the most current BES (internet) Continuous Monitoring Survey available, that of January 20- February 2, 2010 (N = 982). That instrument asks “which party do you think is most likely to win the next General Election?” In the weighted frequencies to that item, 67.9 percent of the respondents selected the Conservative party. That citizen forecast can be translated into a seat forecast, by utilizing the above prediction equation, as follows:

$$S = 47.1 + .17 (67.9) \quad \text{Eq.3}$$

$$= 58.6 \text{ percent Conservative seats.}$$

Of course, that result technically holds for an election held just after the survey, say February 3. In fact, the election will be held about three months from that time. Still, this preliminary forecast has value, suggesting that if Conservatives hold on to their current lead, they will be able to comfortably govern alone. Further, given this point estimate holds, it would be a greater victory than that for Conservatives in 1992 or Labour in 2005.

#### WHY UK VOTERS CAN FORECAST

We have seen that, usually, most United Kingdom voters know who will win the General Election. How is this possible? We postulate two explanations, a Political Model and a Contextual Model. The former argues that citizens who are more active political participants will do better at forecasting. Because they are engaged in politics, these voters have more information, and are better able to interpret it. Having followed the contest attentively, they sift and sort, coming up with a winning guess that is much better than average. The Contextual Model differs. It relies more on voter intellect, less on voter commitment. That is to say, citizens who know more, are in a better position to apply their knowledge to figure out the political space they inhabit. While this knowledge base is not perfectly tapped by education, schooling does act as a surrogate for it. However, the educated voter does not have perfect prevision. For one, it is fogged when the contest is a tight race. If the candidates are neck-and-neck, it is difficult to judge the winner, especially when the judgment must be made in the heat of the candidate home stretch.

We test the models against individual-level survey data, from the two contrasting election types: a close race (1992) and a not close race (1997). In Table 5 results appear on the Political Model. Regardless of the race, party identification is always significant and positive. Such a

result comes as no surprise. It merely records that partisans project their own bias onto the party's chances of winning. Other things being equal, Conservatives will tend to foresee a Conservative victory, Labourites a Labour victory. More interesting is what happens to the other political variables, once party identification is taken into account. In 1997, political involvement does improve a voter's forecasting ability, as expected. Specifically, interest in politics and attention to politics in the media (newspapers and television) have significant coefficients. In 1992, however, the picture is different. Specifically, feeling you have a grasp on politics, contacting an MP, and following politics on the television do not aid you significantly in calling the winner. Perhaps because 1992 is a close race, these political "insights" simply are not able to help much. The difficulties of forecasting in a close race are underlined by the 1992 model fit, which is especially poor (pseudo-  $R^2 = .08$ ). Can an advantaged political context overcome these difficulties? We address that question next.

**TABLE 5: POLITICAL MODEL OF CITIZEN FORECASTING (Logistic regression)**

	<b>1992</b>	<b>1997</b>
Party ID	.50** (.07)	.47** (.06)
Political Interest		.22** (.06)
Politics too complicated	.09 (.07)	
Contact MP	-.17 (.14)	
Attn Politics - Newspapers	.16** (.07)	.29** (.06)
Attn Politics - Television	-.21** (.07)	.13** (.05)
Constant	-.45** (.17)	-.05 (.11)
N	1127	1809
Pseudo $R^2$	.08	.12
Percent Correctly Predicted	64.3	66.0

\*\* Statistical significance at .05 two-tail.

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

Results come from the surveys detailed in Table 2.

The dependent variable is coded as 1 (correct forecast of election winner) or 0 (incorrect forecast) from responses given to the questions detailed in Table 2.

*Party ID*: 1= identification with the party that won the election, 0 = Don't know, -1= identification with a party that did not win the election.

*Political Interest*: 4= a great deal of interest, 3= quite a bit, 2= some, 1= a little, 0=no interest, don't know.

*Politics is too complicated*: 2=agree, 1=neutral, 0=disagree. (Note that in 1997 this question was asked to just a subset of respondents. Including this question in the analysis results in a substantially smaller N).

*Contact MP*: Has respondent contacted his/her MP? 1= yes, 0=no.

*Attention to Politics in Newspapers*: 4= a great deal, 3= quite a bit, 2= some, 1= a little, 0= respondent doesn't regularly read a newspaper or doesn't know.

*Attention to Politics on Television*: 4= a great deal, 3= quite a bit, 2= some, 1= a little, 0= respondent doesn't regularly watch TV or doesn't know.

The Contextual Model examines situational characteristics of the voter, and the electorate. Voters who are well-placed within the social and informational network should do better. Those with more education, and the privileges that a higher class standing brings, are advantaged in terms of figuring out the workings of the world, including the political world. Nevertheless, they are not simply clairvoyants. If they are asked to forecast at a time when the election itself is relatively far away, their vision may be clouded. Moreover, the more competitive the electoral context, the more difficult it will be to predict. When it is down to the wire, with both candidates in a photo finish, the winner could be anyone's guess. To capture all these contextual possibilities, we examine the impact of educational level, social class, closeness of the race, and days distance from the election itself, at the same time controlling for partisan projection. The results of this analysis appear in Table 6.

**TABLE 6: CONTEXTUAL MODEL OF CITIZEN FORECASTING (Logistic Regression)**

	<b>1992</b>	<b>1997</b>
Party ID	.54** (.07)	.41** (.08)
Closeness	1.26** (.14)	2.05** (.15)
Social Class/Income	.12 (.08)	.28** (.08)
Education	-.04 (.08)	.07** (.03)
Days before Election	.05** (.01)	.04** (.02)
Constant	-1.23** (.46)	-2.53** (.54)
N	1298	1167
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.18	.31
Percent Correctly Predicted	72.0	73.8

\*\* Statistical significance at .05 two-tail.

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

Results come from the surveys detailed in Table 2.

The dependent variable is coded as 1 (correct forecast of election winner) or 0 (incorrect forecast) from responses given to the questions detailed in Table 2.

*Party ID*: 1= identification with the party that won the election, 0 = Don't know, -1= identification with a party that did not win the election.

*Closeness*: 1= party will win enough seats to govern alone, 0= party will need support of another party to govern.

*Social Class/Income*: Relative Income (1992): 5= far above average to 1= far below average. Social Class (1997): 5= upper middle class, 4= middle, 3= upper working, 2= working, 1=poor.

*Education*: Age the person finished his/her education.

*Days before the Election*: Number of days before the election when the respondent completed the survey.

The 1997 results most clearly support the Contextual Model, with a pseudo- R<sup>2</sup> of .31. Higher class standing, along with greater educational attainment, are significant predictors of forecasting ability. In addition, so is the closeness variable. That is, those who perceive, correctly, that the race is not especially close are much more likely to go on to forecast the winning side. Note that this variable works the same way in 1992. That is, those who perceive that the race is not close are more likely foresee the Conservative victory. However, the very

closeness of the 1992 race also prevents the social situation variables (income and education) from making a difference. This makes good sense; when the race is truly too close to call, being in a position “to know” amounts to no more than knowing that you cannot know.

The only anomalous result is the apparent positive impact of days from the election. In both 1992 and 1997, the earlier the respondent was queried, the more accurate was his or her forecast, thus going against expectations. We believe this result, which contradicts the parallel US result, can be attributed to the electoral calendar difference between the two systems. In the US the calendar is fixed, whereas in the UK it is flexible. Thus, in the US case, those surveyed farthest from the election event are least mobilized, while in the UK case they are most mobilized, because they are nearest the actual date when the endogenous election was called. Further, they are able to avoid the last minute campaign blitz that can temporally distort voter perspective, causing drift from an anchored position.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We began our essay by asking whether voters in the UK can forecast the General Election outcome. There are good reasons to believe in the negative, given the multi-party system, the nebulous votes-seats link, and data limitations. Nevertheless, the general answer comes out positive. Most UK voters, most of the time, know in advance which party will win. Further, they know more than the simple dichotomy – party X will win or lose. In the aggregate, their citizen forecast predicts rather well the precise seat share that the winning party will obtain. What gives individual voters this forecasting power? It is two things: their political involvement and their social situation. Educated, socially advantaged voters who follow politics are especially well-placed to perceive the incoming political tides.

How do everyday citizens manage to do this? Clearly, not with a mathematical or statistical model. Instead, they draw on what they know. Where does that knowledge “come from?” Again, it is not based on any conscious, arithmetic calculation. Instead, they rely on what we would call their “political intelligence,” that abiding reservoir of information that most democratic citizens, but some more than others, have. In that sense, it operates as “emotional intelligence” does in the realm of personal judgment (Goleman 1995). That is, we may not be able to articulate why we make the choice we make, but we nevertheless believe, even know, that it is the “right” choice for us. In the same way, in politics, we do not always know why we think Candidate X will triumph, but we are convinced he or she will, because of what we know from our ground of “political intelligence.” Further, and perhaps more remarkably, we know it, even when it goes against our own preferences, i.e., we are able to see that Candidate X will win, even though we favor Candidate Y. UK voters, then, are not only intelligent political forecasters, they are capable of disinterested, even altruistic, forecasts. Again, we are reminded that democratic voters are far from fools.

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