The Predictable Campaign:
Theory and Evidence

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Most of what we know about electoral campaigns originates in the United States. And what we know emphasizes the predictability of outcomes and the role of campaigns in producing that predictability. This forecasting success reflects the operation of what are styled as "fundamentals," factors that campaigns activate in roughly similar ways election after election. Although some analysts suggest that the US pattern travels abroad, the evidence is fragmentary and never rests on quite the same basis as the US original. To the extent that US findings reflect the operation of universals, notably in voter cognition, they should be replicated elsewhere. But critical to US analyses—sometimes considered explicitly but more often merely assumed—are institutional conditions: timing, money, the electoral system, the effective number of parties, parties' internal organization, and the sheer scale of the US economy. But then, documentation of the US case itself is rather fragmentary. We might also ask, then, how well does the stylization fit the original case?

This paper prepares the ground for comparison by excavation of arguments and evidence for the US. Even for the US, the idea of a predictable election turns out to be quite complicated. More than one macro-pattern is invoked. Sometimes the focus is on the frontrunner, sometimes on the incumbent. Sometimes the issue is the general susceptibility of the electorate to any kind of force exerted on it. Mostly the resultant predictions overlap, but occasionally they diverge. An insufficiently recognized fact is that the very idea of a "fundamental" is contested. In short, the US story has several layers, and some of the layers may not travel.

The comparisons in the paper are with Germany and Canada. The three cases contrast presidential and parliamentary regimes, two-party and multi-party systems, and plurality and proportional formulas. The comparative record is mixed and reveals contingencies that underlie the US case.

Fundamentals and Predictability

The strongest claim is that campaign dynamics are driven not so much by events as by underlying fundamentals. Starting points are accident of history, but the accidents are of no enduring significance. All they do is set the scale along which the campaign takes the parties' shares to their appointed destination. Flux within the campaign is of no substantive significance; rather, it reflects only the distance between the starting point

and the forecast equilibrium.

Not all claims in the domain are so strong. A simpler one is that the frontrunner's lead shrinks. Most of the time, this is perfectly compatible with the stronger, forecasting claim, and the two claims are commonly paired. But they are not necessarily linked and are conceptually distinct.

A third claim is that as fundamental considerations are incorporated into vote intentions, short-term flux in those intentions is damped. This proposition is compatible with the other two, but it too is conceptually distinct. And the argument underlying it is also compatible with a radically different conception of the "fundamental." This is a process definition that implies that the regularities campaigns exhibit do not necessarily yield outcomes that follow from a prediction model.

This puts three issues on the table: models of prediction from fundamentals; the time path to Election Day; and models for the accumulation and binding-in of fundamentals. We discuss each in turn, starting with the US baseline and then ask if or how it might extend to Germany or Canada. The discussion also includes the role of campaigns in constraining or amplifying the growth of third parties, as their presence complicates all the other propositions.

Prediction Models

The charter statement for current thinking about campaigns is Gelman and King (1993), who argue that movement in polls reflects real political forces. The forces that matter, however, have the net effect of clarifying the choice, of clearing the path for fundamental factors such as party identification, ideological position, group membership, and the economy:

> … we already know that [polls] move in the direction of the political scientists' forecasts. The relevant question is why they begin where they do. Our hypothesis is that the early position of the polls is a result of the information that is readily available at the start of the general election campaign (435).

And that information is commonly partial or even erroneous. As the campaign unfolds,

the information environment clarifies (Erikson and Wlezien 2012, Figure 7.3).[1] This includes the politicization of the economy. Although Gelman and King offer this as a conjecture, the pull of the economy inside campaigns is an established fact (Holbrook 1996; Sides and Vavreck 2013).

Far from introducing a random element into politics, competitive campaigns are necessary to make forecasting models work. The economy is a case in point. Voters respond to the economy, and the logic of the campaign almost assures that this recurring consideration will be primed. In good times the economy card will be played by the incumbent and in bad times, by the challenger (Bartels 2006; Claassen 2011). An exception that proves this rule is the 2000 US Presidential election, when Al Gore turned counterfactual into reality by failing to prime the economy (Johnston et al. 2004; Bartels 2006). From the US 2000 experience, Vavreck (2009) developed rules for optimal candidate strategies. Postwar elections revealed just enough optimization failure to to substantiate her argument, but not enough to disturb its general application. Empirically, the economy is regularly invoked and when it is, it is a trump.

Given the centrality of the economy, it is natural to focus on the party or parties responsible for managing it, the incumbent. Although not all elements in forecasting models refer to the incumbent, the critical moving parts do. They embody a retrospective-voting logic that focusses on some combination of economic performance and incumbent approval (where the latter incorporates some of the effect of the economy).[2]

These mechanisms yield a straightforward observable implication:

1. *The share for the incumbent party or coalition should be pulled toward the forecast result.*

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[1] Strictly speaking what Erikson and Wlezien show is that the lower the respondent's pre-election level of political knowledge the greater the turnover from pre-election intention to reported vote.

[2] This is a field for over-claiming. Although the median prediction from forecasting models routinely predicts the winner, individual models are all over the block, and predictions commonly over-predict the victor's share (Silver 2012). One riposte is to insist that the point of the exercise is to locate the forest—the winner—not individual trees (Sides 2012). Whatever the merits of this dispute, in this paper a point prediction is necessary to anchor the notion of a target.

For comparison, two issues must be confronted. One is a question of measurement: what is an incumbent? The other goes to the substance of campaigns and yields predictions for limitations or qualifications that might placed on the general prediction.

For the US and Canada, identification of the incumbent is straightforward. For the US, of course, this is the President's party. Canada is similar in that, as a classic Westminster system, it features single-party governments that usually command an outright majority of seats. Even when the government is in a minority, its responsibility for economic policy is absolute. Germany is the contrasting case. When the country is governed by a coalition that includes only one of the historically major parties, then the convention is that all parties in the coalition collectively are the prediction target. The difficulty comes when the outgoing coalition includes both major parties, such that the two Chancellor candidates are also cabinet colleagues. One possible solution (Gschwend 2009) is to focus on the Chancellor's own preferred post-election pairing of her own party plus a plausible partner from the same side of the ideological spectrum. This is inherently speculative, and for such cases a simpler solution is just to forecast the vote for the Chancellor's party (Kayser and Leininger 2014).

The other issue is the duration of the campaign. Stevenson and Vavreck (2000) argue that economic effects should be clearest when the campaign is long enough to do a complete job of burning off misinformation. From evidence in Gelman and King (1993), they deduce that six weeks is the minimum. Even if the official campaign is less than six weeks, the equivalent effect can be reached with fixed election dates, which *de facto* extend the campaign forward almost indefinitely. The US clearly fits this description. Germany usually does as well. Bundestag election dates are effectively fixed to a four-year cycle. It is next to impossible for a government to fall, as the standard form of non-confidence is "constructive," such that a motion to bring the government down must identify the new coalition. Only the government can bring itself down. This did happen in 2005, and our campaign plots, below, show 2005 as a short campaign. The event caused a constitutional wrangle, however, which delayed the onset of the official campaign. The 2005 observation is thus ambiguous. Canada stands in sharp contrast with the others and also contains useful internal heterogeneity. Before 1997, campaigns typically lasted seven weeks or more, as they began with a window for door-to-door enumeration and the wrapping-up of local

nominations. With a shift to a permanent electoral roll in 1997, the minimum length for campaigns was shortened to five weeks. The date of elections was not fixed, apart from the five-year maximum duration of any Parliament. Strictly speaking, the system moved to fixed elections after 2006 but governments retained the discretion go early and the minority Conservative government elected in 2006 asked for early dissolution of the House in 2008 and 2011.[3] Only for 2015, with that government now holding a majority of seats, did the election take place on the fixed date. That election also featured an early dissolution of Parliament, such that the campaign was the second longest in Canadian history. Thus:

2. *The shorter the campaign, the less effective it should be in pulling the observed result to the forecast one.*

Narrowing the Lead

It is a commonplace about US Presidential elections that the frontrunner's lead on Labour Day is cut roughly in half by Election Day (Campbell 2008; Bartels 2006; Erikson and Wlezien 2012). One pattern that narrows the lead by implication was observed by Holbrook (1996, 56-7): campaign swings that push toward that forecast result are bigger than swings in the other direction.[4] The frontrunner is usually the incumbent or his successor nominee. To the extent that this lead reflects a convention "bump," it embodies unsustainable short-run forces (Erikson and Wlezien 2012, 3; Johnston et al. 2004, Chapter 4). In this—very common—situation, Holbrook's arithmetic works to shrink the gap.

Not all mechanisms require reference to the incumbent or to a forecast, however. Rather they refer to the general balance among short-term forces or between short-term forces

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[3] The governing legislation, the Canada Elections Act (S.C. 2000, c. 9), section 56, sets the date as "the third Monday of October in the fourth calendar year following polling day for the last general election," but also states that "[n]othing in this section affects the powers of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion." The Governor General usually acts on the advice of the government.

[4] Holbrook's specific hypothesis is "the greater the negative disparity … the greater the potential effect of a positive campaign event."

and long-term ones. One major factor is inside voters' heads: party identification. Activation of the long-standing balance in identification will produce greater defection from than toward the frontrunner, and the larger the initial lead the greater the levelling impact of this activation (Erikson and Wlezien 2012, 55ff, 149-51). It is also claimed that late deciders split more evenly than do earlier ones. They do this because of their very ambivalence: the considerations they entertain are closely balanced (Campbell 2008, 146).[5] These internal factors are pushed by external ones. To the extent that defection from the trailing party to the leading party is driven by elite divisions within the former, patching up those divisions (as usually happens) diminishes the incentive to defect. Also, leading candidates are tempted to adopt conservative strategies so as to minimize the possibility of self-inflicted wounds. The wider the lead the more cautious the leader can afford to be. Reinforcing this caution is the likelihood that the media will scrutinize the leading candidate especially closely, with a concomitant negative shift in tone.[6] Taking all this together:

3. (a) *The frontrunner's lead should shrink over the course of the campaign, and*

    (b) *The wider the lead, the greater the shrinkage.*

Similar considerations apply to the Canadian case. Johnston et al. (1992, 21) observe that, starting in 1957, leads narrow more often than not. Although their conjecture focusses on the incumbent, it refers not to the inexorable power of a forecasting model but to selection bias at the start. As mentioned earlier, Canadian governments commonly choose the timing of elections and do so, unsurprisingly, to maximize their chances of reelection. They thus dissolve parliament when polls are favourable. The resulting pattern resembles a regression artifact: incumbents are fooled by unusual and unsustainable poll standings and pay the price as the campaign unfolds (*Ibid.*). The heterogeneity within the case is useful here as well. Where a parliament lasts a full five years, the window for manipulative timing is closed. Five-year electoral cycles occur when the government loses popularity

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[5] This presupposes that the forces that ultimately tip the balance are directionally diverse. A strong monotonic force could produce a tidal wave among the ambivalent. Note also that Campbell's argument for late deciders is different from Erikson and Wlezien's (2012) account of "walk-ins," on which more below.

[6] These propositions are canvassed and referenced in Campbell (2008, 145ff).

and seems unable to recover. This happened in 1993. Minority governments occasionally are defeated on non-confidence motions, as happened in 2006[7] and 2011. Although there is often the suspicion that the government is happy to be defeated in Parliament, this cannot simply be assumed, and the situation requires more than one opposition party to acquiesce. In these these situations, we have no basis to expect the regression-artifact logic to play out. The same may apply to the 2008 election, which was not precipitated by a confidence vote, but where the parliamentary situation had deteriorated such that all parties were willing to fight the election.

German incumbents, in contrast to both the US and Canadian cases, have generally little scope to start a campaign under circumstances of their choosing. The exception, as mentioned earlier, was the 2005 election, where the government brought itself down and survived a constitutional challenge to the early election. It was not the frontrunner in this situation.

Here too, variation in campaign length seems relevant, for reasons altogether like those canvassed in the discussion of incumbents. As mentioned, official Canadian campaigns vary from 35 to 72 days. German campaigns are effectively fixed in length, but 2005 is an ambiguous case.

Taking all this together:

4. *(a) The greater the discretion the incumbent enjoys in the timing of elections, the greater the subsequent loss in share.*
   (b) The longer the campaign the greater the loss in share.

Third Parties

Germany and Canada present an additional possibility. Both systems have multiple parties and in each the "effective number of parties" (ENP, Laakso and Taagepera 1979) has increased. For decades, the German system had an ENP around 2.5. The end of the Cold War brought the remnant of the East German Communists into the unified German electorate even as it opened up space for the Greens, such that in the 1990s the ENP edged up to the neighbourhood of 3.2. After 2000, the system fractured further and in

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[7] The vote actually occurred in late November 2005.

2017, featured an electoral ENP of 5.1. In Canada the pattern is curvilinear. As of 1988, the electoral ENP was 3.0. In 1993, it rose suddenly to 3.8 and stayed in that range for nearly two decades. In 2011 and 2015, it dropped to, respectively, 3.4 and 3.3.[8]

Do campaigns restrain the trend toward multipartism? Conceivably, new parties emerge between elections in response to personalities or to issues not on the main dimensions of party division. As the electoral deadline approaches, however, the logic of the electoral system might favour the status quo ante and produce a net defractionalization of vote intentions.

The proposition needs to be qualified by the institutional endowment of each case. There are two distinct strategic issues. One is for slippage in the vote-to-seat mapping. The other is for strategic sequencing in relation to possible governing coalitions.

On the first, strategic imperatives are stronger in Canada than in Germany. For Canada, the dominant pattern should be for the third-party share to be returned to the level dictated by recent history. Although Canada has had a multi-party system since the 1930s, fragmentation has never threatened the general pattern of single-party governments. Pressure to sustain this pattern would seem to be very strong, mitigated only by regional differences that can reverse the Canada-wide strategic logic. A consolidating effect can also occur in Germany, given the existence of the five-percent threshold for entry into the Bundestag, but it should be weaker than in Canada (Cox 1997; Meffert and Gschwend 2010).

For both countries, the opposite pattern can occur, under restrictive and, thus, rare circumstances. In Canada, if a third party reaches the point that it seriously threatens one of the major parties, it may see its growth accelerate still further (Rae 1971). The campaign can be an occasion for signalling this growth or for reaffirming the credibility to the rest of the electorate. In Germany, a party close to the threshold may also grow, but for reasons related to the fact governments are usually coalitions. This possibility is best discussed as part of a larger range of coalition-related possibilities.

German campaigns can shape and be shaped by sequential strategic possibilities. A

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[8] Calculations for both countries by the authors.

process that runs contrary to marginalization at the threshold is "rental voting," where a major party signals support for a threatened coalition partner so as to expand the total number of seats won by the putative coalition (Meffert and Gschwend 2010). The conditions for this seem severe but not intractable: the larger party's status as the potential formateur must not be threatened; the smaller partner is helped by geographical concentration, which facilitates coordination. Distinct from this possibility and of more general application is the matter of coalition credibility. As a coalition on one side of the spectrum loses strength, supporters of the smaller, more extreme partner may be pulled to vote for the more centrist one (Bargsted and Kedar 2009; Meffert and Gschwend 2010).[9]

The German case has more complex possibilities, ones that may ask more of the voter, and the possibilities are potentially offsetting even within a single campaign. Hence:

5. *(a) The campaign should produce shrinkage in the collective third-party share.*
   (b) The defractionalizing impetus should be greater in Canada than in Germany.

Damping of Flux

The mechanisms that underpin the narrowing of the horserace and the convergence on a target also imply that flux will be damped as the campaign approaches its end. Erikson and Wlezien (2012, 124) observe, for example, that in a prediction model that includes current poll information along with an economic indicator, the direct impact of the economy on choice diminishes with time. This is not because the economy becomes less important, but rather because its effect is now incorporated into the poll information. Once voters grasp the import of the economic situation, they become less susceptible to short-term displacement. Somewhat similarly, but with polarizing effect, impact from demographic factors and from issue positions that divide the parties increases (Gelman

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[9] Although this is a distinct process from that outlined in Kedar (2005), where moderate voters support extreme parties, the objective is the same: to pull the policy preferences of the governing coalition toward the voter's preferences. The action described in this paper seems more susceptible to updating of expectations.

and King 1993; Andersen et al. 2005; Arceneaux 2006).[10] This includes activation of partisanship (Erikson and Wlezien, 55ff). The central implication of all this is:

6. *Short-term flux in support for incumbents (or the frontrunner) should diminish over the course of the campaign.*

If the progressive damping of flux is a key implication of the Erikson-Wlezien model, how quickly does this hardening of intentions operate? How late is too late? Although we cannot answer in absolute terms, we can at least ponder comparisons that test the general validity of the claim. Jennings and Wlezien (2016) show that parliamentary frameworks, reliant as they are on strong parties, are generally quicker than presidential ones to incorporate fundamental considerations, however those are defined.[11] Presumably, partisan considerations are among the easiest to invoke, especially to the extent that they work off repetitive tropes. To the extent that the presidential-parliamentary comparison is also a candidate- versus party-centric one, we should also expect incorporation to be quicker in list-based Proportional Representation (PR) systems than in candidate-based single-member district (SMD) systems. The Jennings-Wlezien claims rest on a very Olympian comparison: all systems that fit one or the other category for the thousands of polls conducted since the dawn of the industry. Also, the evidence is rather indirect: the key descriptor is the speed with which the vote distribution predicted by pre-election polls converges on the actual one.

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[10] Although most analysts posit that campaigns yield increases in the absolute values of coefficients on fundamentals, as just described, another image was mentioned in passing in Gelman and King (1993) and rendered more explicit in Kaplan et al. (2012). Here the pattern is "mean reversion," the convergence of coefficients in the current campaign on the pattern prevailing in the long run. Often, this expectation coincides with the first, that is, with increases in coefficients' absolute values. But if some factor carries unsustainably great weight in the early going, its value should diminish. No direct test of the possibility seems to exist in the published literature, but Kaplan et al. (2012) present an indirect test: an out-of-sample prediction model with coefficients derived from earlier elections becomes more powerful as the the campaign advances. This subtlety is not implicated in any of this paper's analyses.

[11] The contrast in question is between presidential arenas and the parliamentary ones. The legislative arena in presidential systems is actually quicker to incorporate fundamentals than its parliamentary counterparts.

The more confined comparison in this paper sacrifices completeness of coverage for a more microscopic examination. One comparison is:

7. *(a) German and Canadian campaigns should incorporate fundamentals more quickly and completely than US ones.*
   (b) German campaigns should accomplish this incorporation more quickly and completely than Canadian ones.

Expectation 7(a) is implied by Jennings and Wlezien's (2016) comparison of presidential and parliamentary systems. Expectation 7(b) is implied by their comparison of PR (Germany) and SMD (Canada) systems.

That said, the presence of third parties in Germany and Canada is a complicating factor. To the extent that both systems are open to strategic considerations, the campaign may supply disruptive information. If voters are voting for policy, and parties are mainly instruments to this end, information about parties' relative chances of winning seats and about the prospective size of alternative coalitions could disrupt the behavior of voters whose basic dispositions are fixed. We will be alert to this when we confront the data, and rely on narrative to interpret contrary patterns.

Data and Methods 1: Tracking Intentions

The survey data for all analyses in this paper come from academically-based studies that use the "rolling cross section" design (Johnston and Brady 2002). These are the Canadian Election Study (CES), 1988-2015, the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), 2005-17,[12] and the National Annenberg Election Study (NAES), 2000-8. Although this means smaller samples than in the Erikson-Wlezien-Jennings work, there are no "house" effects in these data: these are integral surveys with a single sampling strategy and the same questionnaire. All are true probability samples and are subject to no post-stratification weighting and no massaging for "likely voter" identification. Each day in these data sets is a random draw from time, such that all that distinguishes respondents interviewed on one day from those interviewed on another day is something that has

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[12] The 2005 study predates GLES but the design was incorporated wholesale as its RCS component.

happened in the interval. The fieldwork mode is the telephone.[13]

As daily samples are small, all representation of campaign dynamics requires smoothing. In the absence of priors on specific time paths, we use a nonparametric smoother, specifically a Generalized Additive Model (GAM), with the restricted maximum-likelihood (REML) estimator and cubic regression splines.[14] This setup optimizes the tradeoff between bias and variability (Brady and Johnston 2006). Given the implications to be tested, the descriptive validity of the surveys is a special concern. For this see Table 1, which presents election-day outcomes as observed in official returns and as forecast by the smoothed values that we describe later in this paper. The forecast is the out-of-sample projection for the day following the last one of fieldwork. Although that forecast is close to the modelled reading for the last day, it uses information from the entire fieldwork period. The predicted values are generally quite close to the observed ones, but with a few glaring exceptions: the US in 2000 (over-prediction); Germany in 2009 (under-prediction); and Canada in 2004 and 2015 (under-prediction). Predictions for the third-party share are not quite so good, with Germany in 2009 and Canada in 2000 being the worst cases, each a large over-prediction. Special care is required for these cases.[15]

The fundamentals-driven "target" for each incumbent series is specific to the country. For the US the target value is based on the prediction model in Sides and Vavreck (2013), which uses pre-campaign information on approval, longevity in office, and a wide range of economic factors melded by Bayesian model averaging.[16] For Canada we draw on the similarly structured model in Bélanger and Godbout (2010, 2011). For Germany, we use

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[13] The Canadian Election Study for 2015 is a partial exception, in that fieldwork was conducted in parallel by the telephone and online. For unexplained reasons, the telephone component shows a Conservative surge and Liberal drop in late September-early October. Otherwise, tracking for the two components is basically parallel (Breton et al. 2017, especially Figure 3).

[14] We implemented the estimation with R package `mgcv`, and the function `gam()`.

[15] We do not find consistent over-prediction of the winner's share, in contrast to Erikson and Wlezien (2012). See their discussion of "walk-ins" at 160ff.

[16] Details on the 2012 model can be found Sides and Vavreck (2013), at. 247-8. Forecast values for 2000, 2004, and 2008 were supplied by Sides (private correspondence).

Table 1. Prediction Error in Survey Samples

	Incumbent				Third parties			
Year	Modelled	Observed	Error	Mean absolute error	Modelled	Observed	Error	Mean absolute error
US								
2000	56.4	50.3	6.1					
2004	49.8	51.2	-1.4	3.1				
2008	45.0	46.7	-1.7					
Germany								
2005	39.0	42.5	-3.5		31.3	30.6	0.7	
2009	25.7	33.8	-8.1	3.0	55.3	43.2	12.1	5.1
2013	45.7	46.1	-0.4		26.6	32.8	-6.2	
2017	32.9	32.9	0.0		45.2	46.6	-1.4	
Canada								
1988	45.8	43.0	2.8		21.7	24.9	-3.2	
1993	12.8	16.0	-3.2		47.0	42.1	4.9	
1997	37.2	38.5	-1.3		41.3	42.5	-1.2	
2000	41.7	40.9	0.8		49.2	40.4	8.8	
2004	31.5	36.7	-5.2	2.7	38.2	33.7	4.5	3.4
2006	27.6	30.2	-2.6		31.2	33.5	-2.3	
2008	40.0	37.7	2.3		35.1	36.0	-0.9	
2011	40.1	39.6	0.5		40.0	41.5	-1.5	
2015	26.3	31.9	-5.6		32.1	28.6	3.5	

Modelled values are predictions for election day from the nonparametric smoothing of daily values over the full campaign, as in Figures 1 to 5, below.

the model in Kayser and Leininger (2017). The German model incorporates aggregate information along Canada and US lines but also uses information from recent Länder elections, weighted for proximity to the current Bundestag election.

No theoretically-motivated forecasting models exist for third-party shares. Instead we rely

on the blunt instrument of recent history. For Germany and Canada, we simply average the third-party share for the five most recent country-wide elections. For Germany this produces a slowly increasing predicted value, reflecting the system's monotonically growing fractionalization. For Canada, it reflects curvilinearity, the third-party rise in the 1990s and its decline in recent elections.
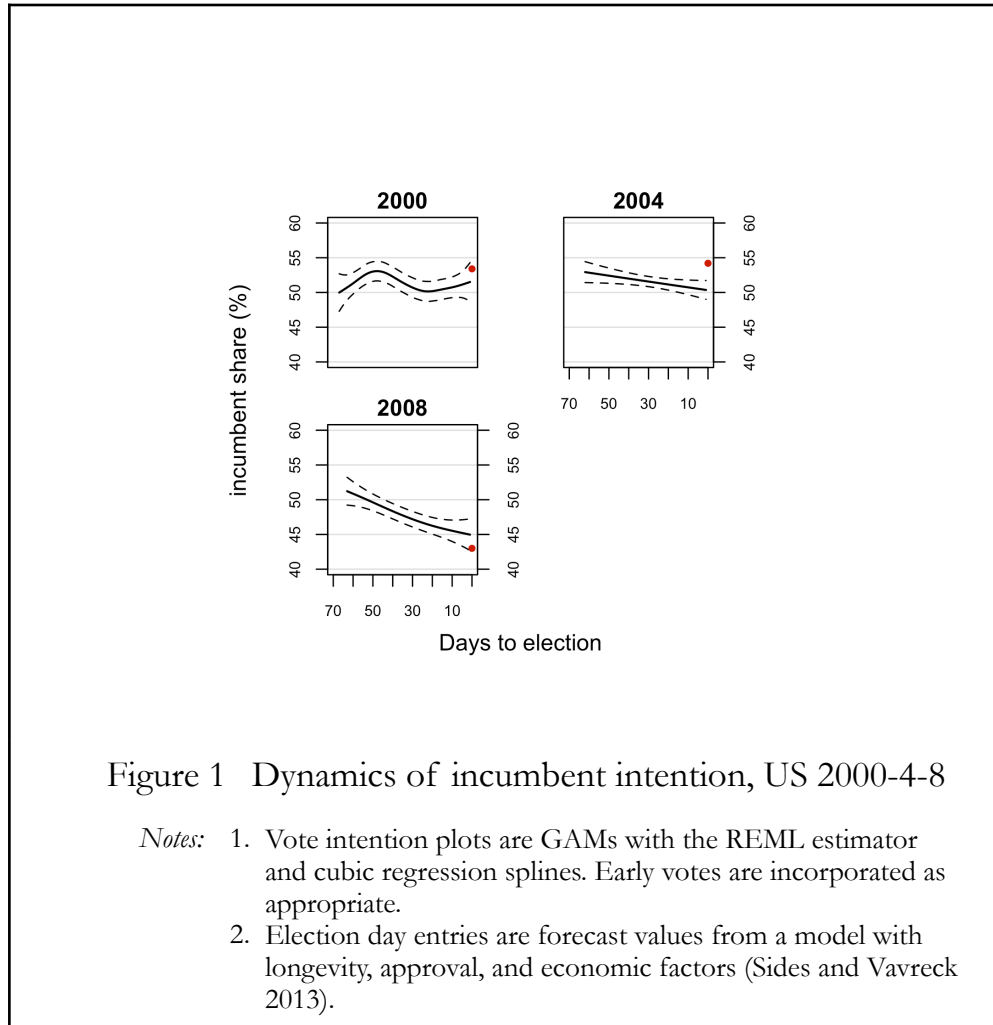
Incumbents and Frontrunners

The US, 2000-8

According to Figure 1, US campaigns do not routinely bring the electorate to the long-term forecast. In 2000, the only thing that helped voters close in on the forecast was the Democratic convention, such that by mid-September all seemed well for the forecast. Subsequent dynamics took the electorate away from the result, or it did until the very end.[17] The same was even more true in 2004. The best news seems to be for 2008, when late-campaign readings and the median forecast are quite close. One might ask, however, *why* they are so close given the massive deterioration of economic conditions between the last date for incorporating information into the forecast and the end of the campaign. The answer might be the race-based one given by Lewis-Beck and Tien (2009) but the careful analysis by Tesler and Sears (2010, Chapter 3) indicates that although the 2008 result was more racialized than earlier elections were, the net effect was essentially a wash. The relative success of forecasting models in that year may have been a happy accident (Campbell 2009). Even so, the forecast itself over-predicts the winner's share that year—and every year.[18]

The less-demanding expectation that the frontrunner consistently loses ground is fulfilled, however. In every case, the frontrunner is also the incumbent candidate or party. In 2000, Al Gore, running to succeed Bill Clinton, benefitted from a convention "bump." His immediate post-convention lead was not that great, but the bump brought him from a long way behind (Johnston et al. 2004, p. 27). His lead then grew over early September,

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[17] Recall also from Table 1 that the survey-based Election Day forecast for 2000 came in six points too high.

[18] Recall that the popular vote winner in 2000 was Al Gore.

Figure 1   Dynamics of incumbent intention, US 2000-4-8

Notes: 1. Vote intention plots are GAMs with the REML estimator
and cubic regression splines. Early votes are incorporated as
appropriate.
2. Election day entries are forecast values from a model with
longevity, approval, and economic factors (Sides and Vavreck
2013).

whereupon it evaporated. At the end Gore barely won the national popular vote.[19]
Roughly the same sequence describes 2004. The Bush campaign emerged from the
convention season ahead of John Kerry. In fact, Bush gained the lead before the
Republican convention but the bump expanded it. The rest of the campaign eroded the
lead and, although Bush's victory was clear, the final margin was narrow. The story was
repeated in 2008, with especially dramatic effect. This year merits a bit of elaboration.
Focus has commonly been on the Democratic share in 2008 and to regard Barak Obama
as the frontrunner whose lead, contrary to the norm, expanded. This expansion is
attributed to the financial crisis that struck in late September (Campbell 2009; Lewis-
Beck and Tien 2009). Indeed, Lewis-Beck and Tien argue that the margin would have
been even wider had race considerations not blunted the baseline Democratic advantage.

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[19] The smoothing in Figure 1 disguises the fact that Gore was behind for most of the last month.

It is true that Obama's position over the summer was slightly stronger than that of John McCain and was given a boost by the Democratic convention. But the Republican convention came after the Democratic one and gave McCain a massive bump. Although McCain did not seize the lead until a few days after Labour Day, he held it for the first half of September. The boost was largely attributable to Sarah Palin, as was the subsequent free fall (Johnston and Thorson 2009). The timing of the financial crisis simply does not fit the fine print of the shift (Johnston et al. 2010). In fact, most of what happened is parsimoniously explained as the unravelling of a short-term convention bump.

Germany, 2005-17

When there is movement in Germany, according to Figure 2, it is in the direction of the forecast "equilibrium." The dramatic recovery of the SPD and Greens in 2005 was certainly in that direction, as was the modest slide of the CDU/CSU in 2017. In the two elections with no trend, vote intentions began the campaign close to the forecast value. (In 2009, the problem was with the survey sample, which was eight points on the low side all along.)

In Germany, the incumbent is usually the frontrunner, and the same graph suffices for both. In 2005, however, the incumbent was an SPD-Green coalition that had alienated many of its supporters with a policy of restructuring and reform. This makes the frontrunner discussion for 2005 a bit convoluted.

For frontrunners, the German pattern is weakly consistent with the expectations 3(a) and 3(b). All this is to say that the frontrunner's lead never grew. In 2009 and 2013, no trend appears. In 2009 the plot is for the CDU/CSU only (as their main rival was also their coalition partner); in 2013 for CDU/CSU plus their coalition partner, the FDP. In 2017, the drift for the CDU/CSU was unmistakably downward, as the model leads us to expect. In 2005, the decline in the frontrunner's lead was spectacular—but in Figure 2, masked. The frontrunner was not the incumbent coalition but its rival, the CDU/CSU. The narrowing of the lead is indicated by the dramatic *rise* in the SPD/Green share. The CDU/CSU share also rose but only modestly, with the upshot that a lead of some ten points was erased.
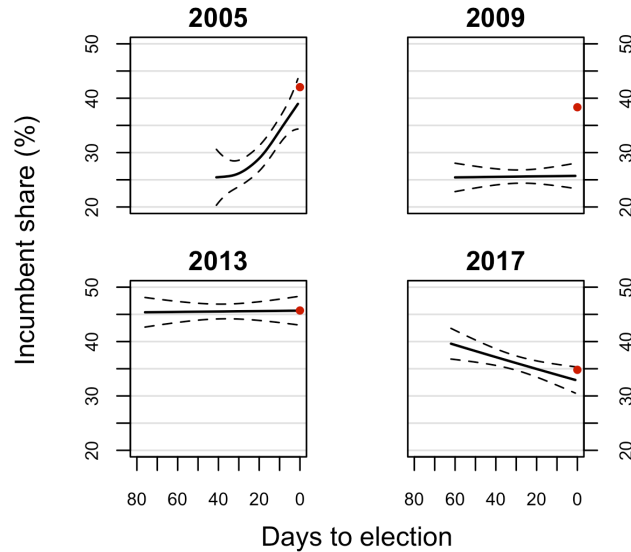
Figure 2   Dynamics of "incumbent coalition" intention, Germany
2005-17

Notes: 1. Vote intention plots are GAMs with the REML estimator and cubic regression splines.
2. Election day entries are forecast values from a model with longevity, state-level party history, and economic factors (Kayser and Meininger 2017).

Canada, 1988-2015

Although Canadian campaigns rarely take the electorate to the target established by the Bélanger-Godbout prediction model, according to Figure 3,they almost never take the electorate in the other direction. The striking exception is only a partial one. The 1993 campaign started with the incumbent in second place but with a share above that indicated by the prediction model. It then took the electorate toward the target, a reasonable trajectory given how bad the economy was and how weak the government's standing seemed mere months before.[20] But the slide continued until the fully half the

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[20] The Progressive Conservative party polled very poorly in the years before 1992 but seemingly rejuvenated itself, largely thanks to a high-profile leadership campaign in the spring of that year (Johnston 1998, Figure 4).

incumbent's support was stripped away. The prediction model suggests that the incumbent was in for serious retribution, a share that by itself would be a serious rebuke. But the process was accelerated by strategic forces, about which more below.

On frontrunners, the Canadian case is broadly consistent with the US one.[21] Only once did frontrunner gain over the campaign,[22] and six of eight times it ended up worse off. Sometimes, the loss is only slight. Once (2011) there was essentially no discernible movement and once (1988) the frontrunner lost serious ground but won all of it back. In
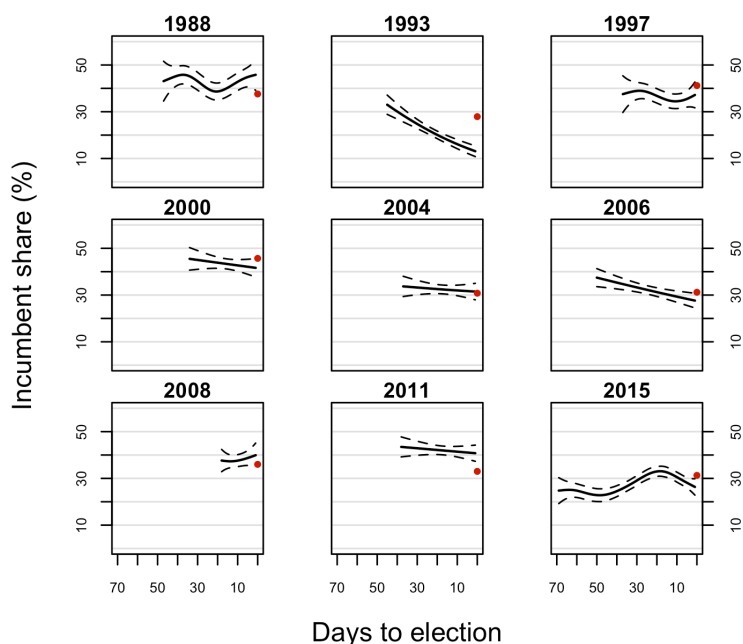

Figure 4 Dynamics of incumbent intention, Canada 1988-2011

Notes: 1. Vote intention plots are GAMs with the REML estimator and cubic regression splines.
2. Election day entries are forecast values from a model with longevity, popularity, and economic factors (Bélanger and Godbout 2010, 2011).

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[21] The short time plot for 2008 does not reflect the length of the campaign, only of CES fieldwork. The dissolution of Parliament caught everyone off guard, including the academic community.

[22] This was in 1993, when the front-running Liberals gained between two and three percentages points. This is not shown in Figure 4.

1993, Twice, the campaign made a huge difference. The drop in 2006 replaced a Liberal minority government with a Conservative one, ending more than a decade of Liberal rule and initiating nearly a decade of Conservative power. In 2015, the frontrunner lost serious ground, but the party in question was an historically small one.We return to this case in the next section.

Third Parties

Germany

For third parties, German campaigns usually push back at small parties. Only in 2013 did the share grow. The evidence is in Figure 4. (Again, the 2009 survey seems less satisfactory than the others in its representation of the overall balance of parties; the
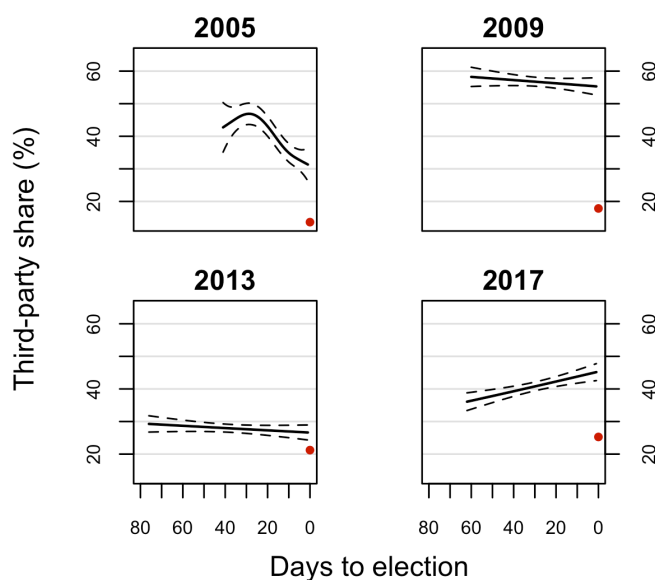

Figure 4   Dynamics of third-party intention, Germany 2005-17

Notes: 1. Vote intention plots are GAMs with the REML estimator and cubic regression splines.
2. Election day entries are means for total third parties' share in preceding *five* elections.

survey missed the actual third-party total by twelve points.) The exception is 2017, when the collective third-party share grew. More movement occurs for individual small parties, as outlined in the earlier passage on strategic sequencing, but such shifts are not easily detectable in the small daily samples (or even in large-scale commercial polls, for that matter). Most striking is the weakness of long-standing patterns. Predicted values based on them are much lower even than the values at the end of the campaign. New parties emerge in waves and some, such as the Pirate party, disappear almost as quickly as they appear, but most of this movement is outside campaigns. With the partial exception of 2005, pushback in campaigns is too weak to stem the tide.

Canada

In Canada some campaign trajectories in Figure 5 are more dramatic, and the exceptions
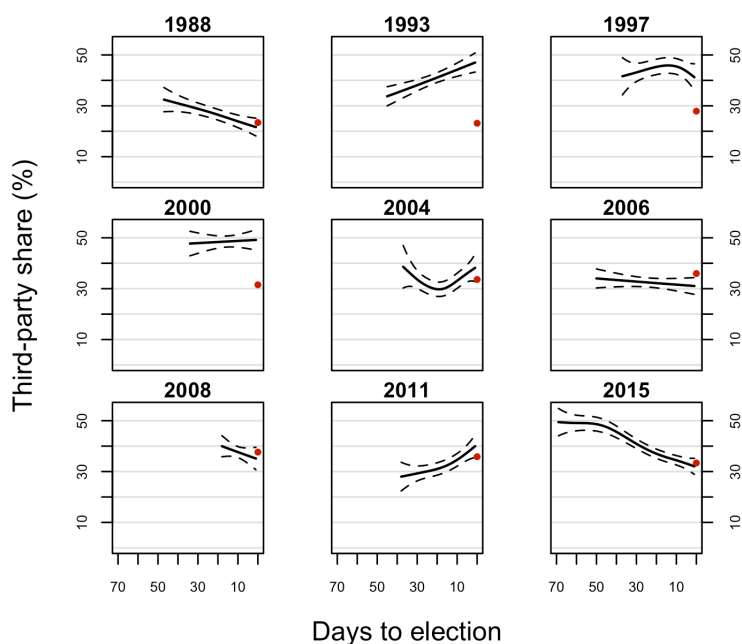

Figure 5   Dynamics of third-party intention, Canada 1988-2011

Notes: 1. Vote intention plots are GAMs with the REML estimator and cubic regression splines.
2. Election day entries are means for total third parties' share in preceding *five* elections.

correspond to situations envisaged by Rae (1971). Twice, in 2000 and 2006, nothing of interest happened to the overall third-party share. Four times, the share grew over the campaign. The surge in 1993 is particularly striking. The campaign opened with a third-party share higher than ever before—reflecting pre-campaign beachheads for the Bloc Québécois and Reform—and then saw a further surge by Reform. This surge forced the extra drop in the 1993 incumbent (Conservative) share that registers in Figure 3.[23] In 1997 both Reform and the NDP edged up. More consequential was the gain in 2004, which saw the Bloc Québécois grow further in Quebec and the NDP return to its pre-1993 standing in the rest of Canada. The 2011 campaign saw a surge by the NDP, which catapulted it to major-party status as the Official Opposition. The loss of Opposition status accounts for the dynamics in 2015. In this year, the NDP was the early campaign frontrunner, and its fate corresponds in exaggerated form to the standard story for frontrunners. The 2015 tracking resembles that for 1988, when the NDP opened the campaign tied with the Liberals but ended up close to its long-standing position.

Incorporation of Fundamentals and Short-term Flux

Method

As fundamentals are incorporated into intentions, the scope for flux diminishes. This hardening of preferences shrinks the scope for further incorporation of fundamentals as well as for short-term displacement by ephemera. The critical thing is how early and how completely the incorporation is accomplished.

We test this by within-campaign comparisons: slicing each campaign into weekly time units, calculating the variance in each unit, assembling a week-year-system data set, and then comparing the systems, time unit by time unit (Wlezien and Erikson 2002). Given that fundamentals are mainly conceived in terms of the major-party battle, the focus is on

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[23] An important fact for our discussion of later campaigns, below, is that the NDP began and ended the 1993 campaign with an historically low share.

the incumbent.[24]

The critical first step is to remove the error component from the total variance, so that what remains is a true representation of campaign flux. For any seven-day period, the starting point is each week's variance in incumbent intentions:

$$Var = \sum_{i=1}^{7} \frac{(p_i - \bar{p})^2}{7}$$

where p_i is the incumbent's proportion of vote intentions on the *i-th* day. As some of this variance is just random error, we cannot take the calculation at face value. Given that each election survey comprises an integral sample, with no additional variation generated by idiosyncrasies of survey firms this random error is solely the result of sampling. To an approximation, then, the error variance in any week is:

$$\frac{\bar{p}(1 - \bar{p})}{n}$$

where n is the average daily sample size of respondents with vote intentions. The true variance is simply the total variance minus the error variance. Where the difference is negative, we impute a variance of zero. For ease of interpretation, we convert the true variance into the standard deviation and multiply the result by 100.

Findings

The weekly results are plotted, system by system, in Figure 6. To further assist comparison, the figure also includes nonparametric smooths and confidence intervals.[25]

Contrary to expectation, the *average* weekly flux is lower in the US than in either of the

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[24] The argument can also be operationalized by looking at the correspondence between polls, day be day, and the ultimate result and averaging across elections (Erikson and Wlezien 2012, p. 35 passim; Jennings and Wlezien 2015). The closer a given day is to Election Day the less inter-election variance there should be, with election day itself showing the least of all. The speed of convergence can then be compared across systems.

[25] Smoothing is by the function `gamm()` from the R package `mgcv`, which allows us to specify a poisson distribution that takes into account zero inflation (that is, a surplus of values at zero).
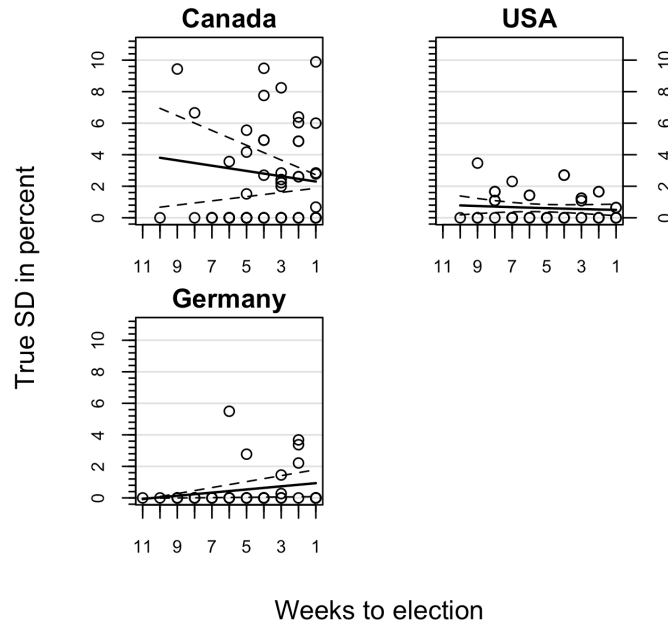
Figure 6 Short-term flux

Notes: 1. Plots are GAMs with the REML estimator and cubic regression splines;
Poisson distribution to take into account zero-inflation.
2. Entries are "true" daily standard deviations in incumbent vote intention,
week by week.

parliamentary systems. In line with expectation, flux is greater in Canada than in Germany. The key fact about Germany and Canada seems to be not that they are parliamentary regimes as such, but rather that they have multiple parties. Third parties bring disruptive information into the campaign environment. In contrast, US campaigns may have a more routinized repertoire. *Trends* in flux are not uniformly negative. Flux shrinks in Canada and the US but grows in Germany. We are not sure how much to make of this given the small number of observations.

Conclusions and Discussion

The scorecard for propositions about the predictable campaign is mixed at best. In their original order:

1. For hitting a forecast target, the track record seems best for Germany. The one seeming failure (2009) was of the survey sample, not the election result. The record for

Canada is not terrible. Usually, the campaign takes vote intentions toward the forecast; at least it does not take them away from it. The one exception is 1993, and even then the campaign magnified a trend in the right direction, considering the starting point. The worst record is for the US, where the campaign consistently missed the target and took intentions in the right direction only in 2008.

2. The relationship between length of campaign and its targeting accuracy is essentially nil. The longest campaigns—in the US—have the poorest track record. The record for typically long German campaigns and for longest Canadian one (in 2015) is quite good. Campaigns around the six-week threshold set by Stevenson and Vavreck (2000) —several Canadian ones and the 2005 German one—have a mixed record. Of the campaigns that span less than six weeks—all Canadian—three seem not inconsistent with the forecast, but two (2004 and 2011) took voters in the right direction.

3. (a) The most consistently successful proposition is that the frontrunner loses ground. Although this occasionally fails to happen, the reverse is never true. It is true of every US campaign. It is also true of German campaigns, although in a weak sense: the frontrunner lost ground two times in four and never gained. In Canada, interpretation is not always easy, but with some generosity, we see the frontrunner losing ground in seven cases, one of which started with a traditionally minor party in the lead.

(b) If the magnitude of a campaign shift reflects mainly the idiosyncrasy of its starting point, then the wider the gap the greater should be the shift. The data pattern turns out not to say much. In the 21st century, US gaps are no longer very wide, not even for openers. The campaign with the biggest shift, 2008, turned a small Republican lead into a moderately large Democratic one. Germany in 2005 seems like a notable success story for this proposition but it is an isolated case. Canada is mostly like the post-2000 US: the gap behind the frontrunner is rarely that big. The biggest shifts, 1993, 2011, and 2015, were not garden variety phenomena. Rather they signalled fundamental tensions in the party system, where the campaign amplified those tensions.

4. We identified two institutional factors that might condition the scale of frontrunners' losses:

(a) Contrary to our conjecture, *discretion* over the timing does not seem to produce big drops. The most striking shifts are in Canada, 1993 and 2006, where the

government did *not* control the timing; 1993 came at the statutory end of a Parliament and 2006 resulted from a non-confidence motion that the government did not want to lose. Germany in 2005 was a rare exercise of governmental discretion and it was followed by an impressively dynamic campaign. The interpretive difficulty, however, is that the government exercising the discretion was behind in the polls.

(b) Similarly, *duration* has no consistent effect. Most frontrunner declines are fairly small, such that duration effects are difficult to detect. Of five long campaigns—three in the US, two in Canada—both Canadian ones brought a big shift: in 2006, the government was overturned; in 2015, the early-campaign leader finished third. The long 2015 campaign reversed the dramatic dynamics of the 2011 campaign, but the 2011 campaign was a short one. The 2005 German campaign brought impressive dynamics but was of medium length, as was the campaign that brought the most dramatic shifts of all, 1993 in Canada.

5. The expectation that campaigns would damp third-party growth is not consistently borne out:

   (a) Such damping does occur, although the patterns are clouded by noise. By our count, six of the thirteen relevant cases see third-party shares shrink, four are ambiguous or of null effect, and three see clear increases in minor-party strength.

   (b) Expectations for the Canada/Germany contrast are overturned. In Germany, minor party shares grew once in 2017; otherwise they consistently declined, although not by much. In Canada, a clear decline in third-party shares was visible twice, in 1988 and 2015. The latter instance reversed a sharp third-party surge in 2011. The 1993 campaign produced an equally dramatic surge, and more modest ones seem visible in three other instances.

6. It is hard to see a consistent, impressive pattern of damped flux. Averaged across campaigns, weekly variance seems to go down in Canada and the US, but up in Germany.

7. Here too findings are mixed:

   (a) Flux is already modest by the *de facto* start of the US campaign. By this criterion, incorporation is more complete than for either of the other countries and is so at every point along the way.

(b) Roughly as predicted, incorporation of fundamentals is more complete in Germany that in Canada, and is so at every point along the way.

Taken all together, this hardly seems a stirring vindication for the notion of the predictable campaign. The most robust element is a simple one: frontrunners typically lose ground. Although the number of systems and elections in this paper is not large, the basic frontrunner claim seems defensible across a broad range of contexts. It is a useful reminder that intensified contestation evokes passions contrary to those that might have gained a temporary foothold, including ones stirred up the party in power. That said, the ubiquity of the pattern washes away what seem like reasonable corollaries. If link between the size of the lead and magnitude of decline is a clear corollary of the claim that starting points do not matter, then that claim is correspondingly weakened. The lack of consistent impact from discretion over the start point and from duration is, frankly surprising. So we can stand by the basic claim about frontrunners, but we should not embellish it.

The harder-edged forecast-based claim, which is where fundamentalist claim-making started, does not fare as well as the simpler frontrunner one. It performs least well on the home ground, the US, at least for these three elections. The forecast value does seem to exert gravitational force in Canada and Germany. Campaigns in those countries do not always take voters all the way, but at least they do not lead electorates astray. And taking them some of the way is, as originally claimed, a mechanism that helps make the forecast model work. But the pattern is not strong enough to warrant a claim as stark as in the Gelman-King original.

Our proposition about third parties is not in the original US-derived package but it seems like a perfectly reasonable extension to the multi-party world. Occasionally, campaigns do marginalize third parties, but they rarely do so completely. And sometimes they have the opposite effect. But this compels us to think harder about institutional context.

For context, Canada and the US may be boundary cases. Although both operate with the plurality formula, they differ sharply in electoral fractionalization. The common formula may even magnify the difference in susceptibility to campaign effects. The plurality formula commonly bottles up insurgency, as routinely is the case in US elections. But if an historically minor party crosses some threshold, the logic of the formula turns on its head

and accelerates their growth (Rae 1971). This is easiest to imagine when the small party has a sectional foothold (Chhibber and Kollman 2004). Such a situation—local bipartism with different pairs of competitors in different locales—need not be susceptible to campaign effects. But if competition becomes multi-party at the local level, then campaigns can induce strategically-motivated movement. This is not strategic voting of the canonical sort, focussed on local competitive conditions. That kind is uncommon in Canada (Blais 2002). But there is ample evidence of strategic-like induction when something occurs to disturb the field, even if the information being updated originates far away from the voter's district. Twice, in 1993 and 2011, Canadian campaigns have borne witness to this logic (Johnston 2017). On this argument, Germany is an intermediate case. As a multi-party system with coalition governments, it is a field for strategic sequencing. The German system does not create self-reinforcing dynamics, however; shifts can faithfully be registered, but they are rarely massively augmented.

Even without strategic updating, serious thought should be given a broader, process-oriented definition of electoral fundamentals. Such a definition is proposed by Erikson and Wlezien (2012, p. 50) but seemingly ignored in what is otherwise a well-received book. Here is the key quote:

> … fundamentals move as a random walk, whereas short-term campaign forces create a stationary series of deviations from the moving fundamentals.

Most campaign effects are transitory. But a powerful new argument or a dawning realization may displace the equilibrium itself, such that after the shock the new position will persist; it will not revert to the former starting point. This is the essence of the notion of a random walk. And a random walk can pull a result anywhere: away from the value predicated on stable, pre-campaign factors; toward a wider margin; and so on. The key is that the moving equilibrium can itself be the product of campaign induction. Fundamentals so defined do not guarantee predictable outcomes. An example is the fate of Al Gore in 2000. Johnston et al. (2004) show that the collapse of his reputation for honesty, the product of media induction, marks a phase transition in the campaign. The idea of a phase shift cannot be squared with a stationary time series. And a net shift in the perception of a candidate's trait does not fit the standard definition of priming an ordinary "fundamental."

This then is a plea for close attention to mechanisms. It is equally a plea for situating mechanisms in the context of institutions and of the history of party systems. Too much has been made of what is arguably a special case, the US, a case whose own the analytics are not well understood.

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