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# “The Big Sort” That Wasn’t: A Skeptical Reexamination

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*We have built a country where everyone can choose the neighborhood (and church and news shows) most compatible with his or her lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences of this segregation by way of life: pockets of like-minded citizens that have become so ideologically inbred that we don't know, can't understand, and can barely conceive of “those people” who live just a few miles away. (Bishop 2008, 40)*

In 2008 journalist Bill Bishop achieved the kind of notice that authors dream about. His book, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*, was mentioned regularly during the presidential campaign; most notably, former president Bill Clinton urged audiences to read the book.<sup>1</sup> Bishop's thesis is that Americans increasingly are choosing to live in neighborhoods populated with people just like themselves. In turn, these residential choices have produced a significant increase in geographic political polarization. Bishop does not contend that people consciously decide to live with fellow Democrats or Republicans; rather political segregation is a byproduct of the correlations between political views and the various demographic and life-style indicators people consider when making residential decisions.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the cause, Bishop contends that the resulting geographic polarization is a troubling and dangerous development.

We do not doubt that various kinds of sorting are occurring in the United States—as they have in the past and no doubt will in the future. Most importantly, political science research has shown that during the past three decades party sorting has occurred—liberal-minded Americans have increasingly made the Democratic Party their home, and conservative-minded Americans have increasingly gravitated to the Republican Party (without changing the shape of the aggregate distribution of public opinion). Questions about the amount of sorting and its causes, however, still remain (Gelman 2011; Levendusky 2009).<sup>3</sup> Yet claims about geographical sorting have always struck us as somewhat questionable. Residential mobility notwithstanding, do the citizens of, say, Massachusetts and Mississippi differ more today than they did in 1950, before the jet plane, the interstate highway system, broadcast television, and other economic and cultural homogenizing

influences? To be sure, states are gross units of analysis, but descending to lower levels, a half-century ago when the United States was still largely a country of small towns and cities, did blue-collar union Democrats who worked in the mines and factories interact with white-collar Republican managers and professionals more than they do today? The older member of our team finds that claim implausible.

Despite the opinions of various reviewers on the Amazon.com website and in the popular media that *The Big Sort* is thorough, systematic, and well-researched, most academic researchers would conclude the opposite.<sup>4</sup> After some primary data presentation in the first 55 pages the book becomes a potpourri of secondary evidence and anecdotes, and much of the latter consists of fragments gleaned from works on popular sociology. Moreover, on close inspection the little original evidence that is reported—which so impressed Mr. Clinton and provides the foundation for the pop sociological arguments that fill most of the book's pages—is weak. In the following section of this article we show that the case for geographic political sorting has not been made. Indeed, using Bishop's standard, the data suggest the opposite: geographic political segregation is *lower* than a generation ago. Then we make the case that although the concerns expressed by Bishop are legitimate—that various factors may be operating to make Americans more culturally inbred than a generation ago—geographic political sorting has little or nothing to do with that development.

## THE (LACK OF) EVIDENCE FOR INCREASING GEOGRAPHIC POLARIZATION

Bishop and Cushing purport to establish the existence of geographic polarization by presenting changes in presidential voting returns by county, with particular emphasis on the difference between the close 1976 and 2004 elections (Introduction, 6, 9–11, 20, 43–47). By way of explanation, they write “We decided to use presidential election results—instead of either voter registration or state elections—as the common measurement among the nation's more than 3,100 counties *to avoid the effects of different candidates* or changing voting districts” (our emphasis) (2008, 9). On the contrary, a moment's reflection should show that far from minimizing the effects of different candidates, reliance on presidential voting returns maximizes the effects of different candidates.

Bishop and Cushing report that between 1976 and 2004 the proportion of voters living in “landslide counties” (where one party achieved a victory margin of 20% or more of the two-party vote) increased from 27% to 48% in competitive presidential elections

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(elections resulting in a winner’s margin of 10% or less of the two-party vote). This is clearly a significant increase (and the figure that greatly impressed Mr. Clinton). But to attribute that increase to a change in geographic sorting requires that other relevant explanatory factors have remained constant. Surely one such factor is the identity of the competing candidates. If voters view Gerald Ford and George W. Bush as two identical Republicans, and Jimmy Carter and John Kerry as two identical Democrats, the case for voter sorting as the causal explanation for the increase in landslide county population is plausible.<sup>5</sup> Yet, these two Republicans obviously differed, as did the two Democrats. According to the National Election Studies, the 1976 electorate saw the two candidates as 1.85 units apart on the standard seven-point liberal-conservative scale. The 2004 electorate saw the candidates as 2.45 units apart.<sup>6</sup> Is it at all surprising that a contest between a moderate Republican from the Midwest and a moderate Democrat from the South divided the voters in most locales more evenly than a contest between a conservative Republican from Texas and a liberal Democrat from Massachusetts?

There are other obvious problems with the temporal contrast. One reviewer (Kellner 2008) noted that 1976 was the low point for the percentage of the population residing in landslide counties in the post-World War II period and 2004 the high point. Therefore, the choice of those beginning and end points exaggerates the “trend” in geographic polarization. Still, using the figures in Bishop’s table 1.1, the pre-1948–76 average is 33% of the nation’s population living in landslide counties compared to a post-1984 average of 43%. This 10 percentage point difference is slightly less than half the magnitude of Bishop’s 1976–2004 contrast, but perhaps enough of a difference to establish the point he wishes to make. Taking a longer historical perspective, however, Klinkner (2004a,b) and Klinkner and Hapanowicz (2005) undercut that fallback position: Since 1840 county-level presidential vote polarization as defined by Bishop fluctuates far more than the 10 percentage point increase over the past generation—from less than 20% in 1896 to more than 50% in 1904, and from less than 25% in 1952 to nearly 60% in 1964, for example. If geographic polarization is tearing us apart, both levels and increases have been greater in the past, and the country has survived intact.

But as suggested here, the most serious problem with Bishop’s analysis is the reliance on presidential election returns. Elsewhere (e.g., 2009, 30) we have argued that this is a general problem in the literature on political polarization. Although presidential voting returns obviously are an important indicator of political preferences, they are frequently inconsistent with other valid indicators of political preference such as voter registration and election returns for other offices (both of which Bishop and Cushing eschew). For example, in the 2004 election, George W. Bush carried Montana by 20 points, but Montana voters elected a Democratic governor. Even more strikingly, Montana voters approved a prohibition of gay marriage by a 67% majority along with a permissive medical marijuana initiative by a 62% majority. Similarly, in November 2011, 62% of Ohio voters overturned a Republican law limiting public employee unions. At the same time 66% of Ohio voters went on record as opposed to the individual mandate of the Democratic health-care law. Citizens living in segregated political enclaves who feel so strongly about their views as to endanger the survival of the country presumably would vote in solidarity with their partisan compatriots whatever the issue or whomever the candidates. Evidently, many of them do not.

Table 1

### Presidential Landslide County Population: 1976 v. 2004 (Percentage of presidential voters living in counties where margin of victory was 60:40 or greater)

	BISHOP	REPLICATION OF BISHOP	PARTY REGISTRATION STATES	OTHER STATES
1976	26.8	25.8	24.5	27.0
2004	48.3	47.5	48.5	46.6
Increase	21.5	21.7	24.0	19.6

Source: Bishop, 2008: 10.

Note: “Party Registration States” include the 21 states for which we have pre- and post-sort registration data.

### Voter Registration

In contrast to presidential election returns that are highly dependent on the identities of the contending candidates and the conditions under which they occur, a more general and undoubtedly more stable measure of partisan preference is the standard attitudinal measure of party identification.<sup>7</sup> A Democratic gun lover might vote for Bush in 2000 without becoming a Republican. Similarly, a Republican wind-surfer might vote for Kerry in 2004 without becoming a Democrat. But even state-level measures of party identification did not become available until the 2000s, and reliable figures are not available for smaller units even now, so using party identification to study temporal changes in neighborhood homogeneity is impossible. A behavioral measure of party identification—voter registration—however, is available at the county level—the level from which Bishop’s evidence comes. The drawback of voter registration is that not all states have partisan registration—29 states plus the District of Columbia have it today and somewhat fewer—23 had it in the mid-1970s.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately for our purposes scholars who have worked closely with such data have concluded after a number of validity tests that “The 21 states for which we were able to collect party registration data are surprisingly representative of the country as a whole” (McGhee and Krimm 2009, 351).<sup>9</sup> That conclusion certainly holds for our purposes. The first column of table 1 reproduces Bishop’s landslide county figures. Column 2 reports our replication from US Census Bureau data. Our figures are very close to his—within 1 percentage point in each year and the increase between 1976 and 2004 is actually slightly larger, so our conclusions do not depend on any differences in the raw data. Columns 3 and 4 compare landslide county percentages in states with and without party registration. The party registration states have a slightly lower figure in 1976 and a slightly higher figure in 2004, resulting in a *greater* increase using landslide voter population in the party registration states. Thus, if anything, the political trend identified by Bishop is even stronger in party registration states than in states without party registration.

An examination of trends in voter registration in American counties leads to conclusions about geographic polarization quite different from those based on presidential election returns. First, as McGhee and Krimm, among others, note, in recent decades there has been a significant increase in the “independent,” “decline to state,” or “other” categories (henceforth referred to as “inde-

Figure 1

**Distribution of Independents by County: 1976 v. 2004 (1,198 counties in total for 21 states included in the sample)**

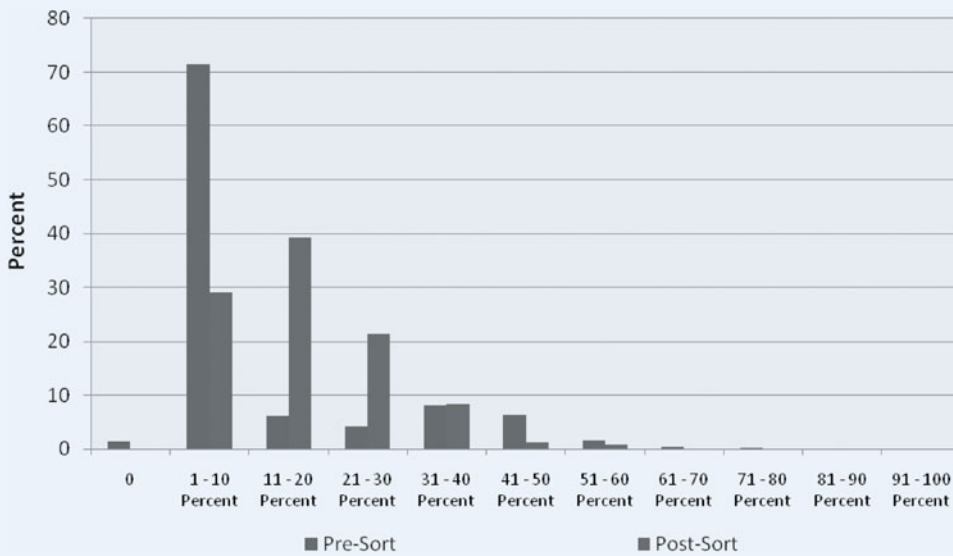


Table 2

**Population Living in “Landslide” Counties Has Declined**

	YEAR	PERCENT
“Landslide” = 60:40 Party Margin	1976	49.9
	2008	15.3
“Landslide” = 55:45 Margin	1976	68.9
	2008	21.8
“Landslide” = Party Majority	1976	75.2
	2008	41.6

Source: 21 states included in this sample. Census of Population and Housing, US Census Bureau. (<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/>)

pendents”).<sup>10</sup> As shown in figure 1, in 1976 more than 70% of the counties in partisan registration states had 10% or fewer independents. By 2004 the situation had reversed: more than 70% of the counties had 10% or more independent registrants. Across the 1,200 counties in these states, average independent registration increased from 12% to 18%, average Republican registration increased from 33% to 39%, and average Democratic registration fell from 55% to 42%. The proportion of counties where Republicans have a 20% or more registration edge (i.e., a “landslide” in Bishop’s term) almost doubled, rising from 7% to nearly 13%, while the proportion of counties where Democrats have such a large margin halved, falling from 38% to 18% (no counties have a landslide independent registration edge). Thus, at the county level what has occurred is not counties increasingly polarizing into Democratic and Republican categories, but rather counties becoming less Democratic and more Republican and independent.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, because counties differ greatly in population, Bishop could still be correct. However, as the top panel of table 2 shows, the percentage of the population living in landslide counties

has declined in tandem with the decline in the number of landslide counties.<sup>12</sup> To repeat: *if we define landslide counties according to their voter registration rather than their presidential vote, the proportion of the American population living in landslide counties has fallen significantly, from about 50% to 15%.*<sup>13</sup> Only four of the 21 states under consideration fail to follow this pattern (Appendix table 2A). South Dakota shows a trivial (less than 1%) increase in the percentage of its population living in landslide counties. Kansas and Nebraska show small increases to absolute figures that are quite low (to 5.76% and 12.27%, respectively). Only Wyoming shows the kind of increased geographic polarization that Bishop

claims to be the general pattern: from 21.74% in 1976 to 63.09% in 2008.

As Klinkner (2004b, 1) notes, the concept of a “landslide county” is vague—it is highly dependent on the definitional figure employed. In Bishop’s defense one might object that the rise in independents makes it more difficult for either party to achieve the 20% margin that constitutes his definition of a landslide county. So, allowing for the increase in independents we have calculated two weaker measures of landslide counties: (1) one party enjoys a 20% or more registration margin (e.g., 45% Democrat, 35% Republican, 10% Independent), and weaker still, (2) one party simply has a majority of the registered voters (e.g., 50.1% Democrat, 41.9% Republican, 8% independent). Although these category definitions take us far from what most people would consider “landslides,” they are alternative measures of county political polarization. Whatever definition is used, the second and third panels of table 2 show that counties in the United States have *become increasingly politically heterogeneous*, not increasingly homogeneous. Using a 10% margin as the criterion for defining a landslide county, the percentage of the population living in such counties has declined from about 69% to 22%, with only Kansas and Wyoming constituting exceptions to the general downward trend (Appendix table 2b). Finally, the percentage of the population residing in counties where one party simply has an absolute majority—50% or more voter registration—has declined from 75% to 42%, with only Kansas, Massachusetts, South Dakota, and Wyoming as exceptions to the general trend (Appendix table 2c). In sum, two of three definitions find trace evidence of geographic sorting in Kansas and South Dakota, and Bishop’s thesis looks great in Wyoming, but the large majority of states—and their populations—provide evidence to the contrary.

**Discussion**

Do the preceding analyses prove that political residential segregation is not occurring? No. That is not our position. We are simply pointing out that Bishop’s sweeping argument about



geographic political sorting has little or no empirical foundation, former President Clinton to the contrary notwithstanding. The simple fact is that it will take much more detailed research to settle questions about geographic sorting one way or the other. In particular, to examine the subject of residential polarization in a systematic manner requires data at a much lower level than the county level. One of us lives in New York County, New York, where neighborhoods range from the Upper East Side and SoHo to Harlem and Washington Heights. The other lives in San Mateo County, California, where neighborhoods range from the Woodside estates of Silicon Valley billionaires to the Redwood City bungalows of Mexican immigrants. No county-level figures can capture the disparate political textures of these areas, as well as thousands of others in the United States.

### WOULD GEOGRAPHIC SORTING PRODUCE TERRIBLE CONSEQUENCES?

We turn now to a second question: if subsequent research at the neighborhood level were to find that geographic sorting in fact is occurring, would such a finding point to a serious problem for American democracy? The fears Bishop expresses are shared by many: “... like-minded homogeneous groups squelch dissent, grow more extreme in their thinking, and ignore evidence that their positions are wrong” (2008, 19). Bishop cites a social-psychological literature on group pressure in support of such conclusions (2008, Chapter 3).<sup>14</sup> We agree that such behavior is highly problematic for democratic politics, and if realized, a matter of serious concern.

*To repeat: if we define landslide counties according to their voter registration rather than their presidential vote, the proportion of the American population living in landslide counties has fallen significantly, from about 50% to 15%.*

Other, arguably more relevant literatures point to quite different conclusions. The argument that increasing neighborhood homogeneity leads to ideological inbreeding, stifling consensus, squelching of dissent, and other bad things rests on a series of assumptions:

1. Neighborhoods are important centers of American life.
2. The residents of American neighborhoods talk to each other.
3. Politics is an important topic of their discussions.

If these assumptions hold, then the results of social-psychological experiments on group pressure may well apply. But many respected scholars believe that the problem with American life today is precisely that the preceding assumptions do not hold.

### Neighborhoods as Centers of American Life

A decade ago Robert Putnam published his magisterial work *Bowling Alone* (2000). Over much of the period addressed by Bishop, Putnam found that Americans had become much less socially engaged than in earlier decades. They were strikingly less likely to join traditional community-based organizations such as the Elks, Lions, Eagles, Kiwanis, Rotary, Masons, Grange, the PTA, the American Legion—and a long list of other groups that had bound together previous generations of Americans.

Some critics noted that Putnam had ignored a plethora of new groups that had formed since the mid-twentieth century, but Putnam responded that many of these were not groups in the sense he meant. The groups he studied were community-based. Their members met regularly face-to-face; they elected officers and engaged in activities. In contrast, many of the newer groups were simply professional staffs with letterhead and mailing lists.<sup>15</sup> Their “members” wrote checks; they were “supporters,” not members in the traditional sense. Their connections were based on responding to the same direct mail solicitations or visiting the same websites, not personal conversations at a weeknight meeting. After analyzing a wealth of data Putnam (2000, 63) concluded that “... active involvement in clubs and other voluntary organizations has collapsed at an astonishing rate, more than halving most indexes of participation within barely a few decades.” The decline was general—civic, political, religious, and, importantly, “informal.” In the latter category Putnam included neighborhood connections: “... when compared with neighborliness in the mid-1950s, neighborhood ties in the 1990s are perhaps less than half as strong.” (2000, 106). Putnam identifies suburbanization as one of the contributing factors to the decline of neighborliness.

A majority of the American population now is suburban, more than twice the figure in 1950. According to urban sociologists the transformation of the United States into a suburban nation “had significant consequences for every aspect of American life ... [it] fostered new patterns of localism and isolation that have also revolutionized relationships between individual communities and the nation” (Kruse and Sugrue 2006, 1). Housing patterns func-

tioned to isolate families and residents from the street, from other neighbors and from the community at large, and helped promote a culture of privatism (Bellah 1985, 142–63; Clapson 2003; Duncan 1981; Duncan and Lambert 2002; Keller 2003; Kunstler 1994; Moughtin 2003). Suburban homes came to serve as a “refuge, a place where people attempt to insulate themselves from the problems of ‘others’” (Gainsborough 2001, 13). In fact, these modern suburban developments were designed “for people to live independently, each in his own self-sufficient home, dependent only on cars and roadways to take him wherever he needed to go” (Lovenheim 2010, 70). According to urban historian Kenneth Jackson “... the new idea was no longer to be part of a close community, but to have a self-contained unit, a private wonderland walled off from the rest of the world” (1985, 58). Rifkin (2004, 154) writes that because Americans like to keep their “... distance from ... neighbors ... there is little sense of community in the average American suburb.”

Far from interactive groups that discipline their members’ thinking, observers and scholars alike have described contemporary Americans as “suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation” (Bellah 1985, 6) and fear that Americans “face social malnutrition” (78). Lane (2000, 9), for instance, found that, “there is a kind of famine of warm interpersonal relationships, of easy-to-reach neighbors, of encircling, inclusive memberships, and of

Table 3

### How Many Neighbors Do You Know by Name?

	PERCENT
None (0%)	6.3
Almost None (5%)	15.0
A Few (10%)	24.9
Some (25%)	19.1
About Half (50%)	12.2
Many (75%)	7.6
Most (90%)	7.3
Almost All (95%)	4.1
All (100%)	3.4

Source: Howard, Gibson, and Stolle 2005

solitary family life.” Beatley (2004, 351) describes Americans as having a case of social numbness noting an “emergence of a socially detached, passive and disconnected citizenry.” Morris (2005, 2) describes American life as an “oppressively anonymous existence.” [See also McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006, 2008)].<sup>16</sup>

Even discounting for hyperbole, the implication of this body of research is clear. Contemporary American neighborhoods are not the first places one would look for the operation of strong social pressures. Even if neighborhoods were becoming more homogeneous politically, any resulting tendency for neighborhoods to squelch dissent and enforce conformity would be at least partly offset by the fact that their denizens were less likely to be involved in neighborhood affairs, and consequently less likely to be sensitive to any purported neighborhood consensus. If a dissident regards her neighborhood as little more than a place to sleep, she can hardly be intimidated into adhering to the neighborhood consensus—if she knew there was one.<sup>17</sup>

#### Do Residents of Neighborhoods Talk to Each Other?

There is direct evidence on this question. A 2005 Georgetown University survey (Howard, Gibson, and Stolle 2005) asked the following question: “Now I want to ask you about people who are not necessarily your close friends. Let’s start with your neighbors. How many adults in your neighborhood would you know by name if you met them on the street?” Table 3 reports the responses.

Almost two-thirds (65%) of Americans reports that they could not name more than one out of four residents of their neighborhoods. Almost a majority (46%) report that they could not name more than one out of 10. Evidently American neighborhoods in the 2000s are not places where “everyone knows your name.” For most Americans a close connection to the neighborhood is something seen only in old movies. Today, women are in the labor force not conversing over the backyard fence. In many places the neighborhood school is a relic of the past. People today work long hours, maintain busy after-work schedules, and are more likely to spend leisure time in solitary pursuits than they are to talk to their neighbors on front porches—few of which exist in any case. The clear implication is that contemporary Americans are unlikely to know the political inclinations of their neighbors, let alone be

Table 4

### When You Talk to Your Neighbors, How Often Do You Discuss Political Issues?

	PERCENT
Usually	1.8
Sometimes	14.7
Rarely	29.1
Never	54.5

Source: Howard, Gibson, and Stolle 2005.

cajoled and bullied into adopting them. Even if people can guess the political inclinations of their neighbors on the basis of lifestyle correlations (e.g., are there beer cans or chardonnay bottles in the curbside recycling bins?), they are unlikely to feel much social pressure from nameless faces who happen to live down the street.

#### When Neighborhood Residents Talk, Do They Talk Politics?

The Georgetown University study (Howard, Gibson, and Stolle 2005) also speaks directly to this question. The survey included a question “When you talk to your neighbors, how often do you discuss political issues?” Table 4 reports the responses. Evidently American neighborhoods are not hotbeds of political debate. An absolute majority of Americans replies “never,” apparently not only still adhering to the old admonition not to discuss politics or religion at the dinner table, but generalizing it to broader arenas. Another 30% say “rarely.” Fewer than two in 100 Americans say “usually.” If these two individuals can create and enforce conformity in their neighborhoods, they are persuasive indeed.

Of course, as noted one does not need to talk to a neighbor to infer their political inclinations. If one’s neighbor regularly shoots groundhogs in her vegetable garden, the chances are better than even that she is a Republican. Similarly, if your neighbor does yoga in his backyard, the chances are better than even that he is a Democrat. People can infer (albeit with considerable error—according to the exit polls more than 35% of gun owners voted for John Kerry in 2004) the partisanship of their neighbors without ever having a conversation about politics. Happily the Georgetown University survey also included an item that would tap such possibilities: “Of the people you interact with in your neighborhood, how many of them have different political views than yours?”

Although more than four out of five respondents have just said that they rarely or never discuss politics with their neighbors, three-quarters of them at least are willing to hazard a guess about their neighbors’ views. Table 5 shows that the majority who do so believe that their political environment is *not* homogeneous; a majority of Americans believes that at least one out of four neighbors have different views and a quarter believes that half or more of their neighbors have political views different from the respondent.

The fact that so many Americans perceive their neighborhoods as politically diverse may partly explain their reluctance to talk politics (table 4). Diana Mutz (2006, 123) writes that “. . . people entrenched in politically heterogeneous social networks retreat from political activity mainly out of a desire to avoid putting their social relationships at risk.” Members of the political class may be

**Table 5**  
**Of the People You Interact with in Your Neighborhood, How Many of Them ... Have Different Political Views from Yours?**

	PERCENT
None (0%)	3.1
Almost None (5%)	4.2
A Few (10%)	14.2
Some (25%)	25.6
About Half (50%)	14.7
Many (75%)	6.6
Most (90%)	2.5
Almost All (95%)	1.1
All (100%)	1.3
Don't Know	26.7

Source: Howard, Gibson and Stolle 2005.

willing to end friendships over political disagreement, but politics does not rank so highly for most people. Indeed, political affiliation appears to be a surprisingly unimportant part of most people’s self-images. Table 6 reports the responses to a survey item on an older (1995) ISSP survey.<sup>18</sup> The item reads “We are all part of different groups. Some are more important to us than others when we think of ourselves. In general, which in the following list is most important to you in describing who you are? (and the second most important? and the third?).” As shown in the table, of 10 “groups” listed, political party came in dead last: only five respondents out of more than 1,200 thought of themselves first as partisans, and only 51 put party among their top three reference groups.

In sum, neighborhoods are not important centers of contemporary American life. Americans today do not know their neighbors very well, do not talk to their neighbors very much, and talk to their neighbors about politics even less. And they do not see themselves as swimming in a sea of like-minded people who have intimidated or cast out anyone who believed otherwise; they are aware that their neighbors differ politically. Even if geographic political sorting were ongoing, its effects would be limited by the preceding facts about contemporary neighborhood life.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The conclusions of this article can be stated in a single compound sentence. There is no evidence that a geographic partisan “big sort” like that described by Bishop is ongoing, and even if it were, its effects would be far less important than Bishop and those who support his thesis fear. We do not categorically deny that subgroups of Americans are becoming more like-minded, that they are becoming increasingly ideologically inbred, and that they have difficulty comprehending people unlike them. As we have argued in a number of earlier publications (Fiorina and Abrams 2009; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005), there is evidence that this is occurring among members of the political class, a development we find troubling.

Yet, however important or troubling they may be, *such trends are independent of geographic political sorting*. A Texas Democrat

**Table 6**  
**Most Important Group Respondent Identifies With**

	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD
Occupation	15.5	20.1	14.1
Ethnic Background	4.0	6.0	6.2
Gender	8.2	8.1	12.2
Age Group	3.1	9.6	10.5
Religion	10.3	12.9	8.0
Political Party	.3	1.2	2.7
Nationality	2.5	5.6	5.1
Family or Marital Status	50.9	20.0	9.5
Social Class	1.8	6.7	10.5
Party of the Country Respondent Lives In	3.7	10.1	21.1

surrounded by “drill, baby, drill” Republicans can still sit down in the privacy of his living room and write a check to the Environmental Defense Fund. None of his neighbors need know; his reference group is virtual. That is a more common example of political activity today than joining a neighborhood demonstration. Advances in communications technology have made geographic location less important than in earlier eras. Presidential candidates campaigning in Iowa spend money raised from supporters scattered throughout the entire United States, to state only the most obvious example. The simple fact is that a neighborhood big sort could occur without changing either the everyday lives of most Americans or the political process that prevails today. ■

**NOTES**

1. The book is an elaboration of work done in collaboration with sociologist Robert Cushing. For reports of Mr. Clinton’s approval see, for example, <http://www.thebigsort.com/home.php>. <http://irjci.blogspot.com/2008/07/bill-clinton-says-bill-bishops-big-sort.html>.
2. As in the kinds of cultural generalizations loved by pundits: Starbucks v. McDonalds, beer v. chardonnay, churches v. wine bars, pee wee football v. youth soccer, etc.
3. Note that Bishop’s *Big Sort* should not be confused with “the great sorting-out” of Galston and Kamarck (2005) who use the term in the context of party sorting.
4. For example, before us, Klinkner (2004a, b); McGhee and Krimm (2009).
5. Not conclusive by any means. There are still questions about the issues on which the campaign is fought, the performance of the preceding administration, and so on.
6. Interestingly, the 2004 electorate apportioned the .60 increase in candidate polarization equally—they placed both Kerry and Bush exactly .30 units farther from the center than the 1976 electorate had placed Carter and Ford.
7. For example, “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”
8. Because 1976 was the precomputer era we were only able to procure records for 21 states. See appendix.
9. As shown in the appendix party registration states include large population states like California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York. The Midwest is the most underrepresented region. Partial sample notwithstanding, the political characteristics of the 1,300 counties in partisan registration states closely mirror those of the 3,100 US counties. In particular, McGhee and Krimm show that from 1968 to 2008 the presidential vote across the counties in party registration states is almost identical to that in all states.
10. Note that people who register as independents may incur some cost. In closed primary states they may have to reregister to vote in a primary.

11. An extreme example: In 1976, almost the entire population (99.75%) of Louisiana lived in Democratic landslide counties. In 2008, only 31.44% did (with no Republican or independent landslide counties).
12. Bishop's original analysis ends in 2004. But in an afterward to a subsequent edition he claims that the trends described in *The Big Sort* continued in 2008: "America came out of the recent presidential election more divided than it had been in November of 2004. Nationally, political differences from county to county increased in '08, continuing the movement toward a more politically segregated country that began in the mid-1970s" (2009, 305). Hence, we use the more current 2008 data in our analyses.
13. Substituting registered voters for population shows the same 35 percentage point drop.
14. For example, in the classic Asch experiment subjects conform to group judgments even when it contradicts the evidence of their own senses.
15. Skocpol (2003) makes the important further point that such newer groups are unrepresentative of the public at large. They over-represent affluent, educated middle-class professionals who can contribute money.
16. We are only reporting arguments and conclusions here, not endorsing them. At least one of us is a fan of suburban living in part because of the absence of "encircling, inclusive memberships."
17. On a recent Saturday afternoon one of us stopped by our local Starbucks for a pick-me-up. There were 14 customers sitting around the cafe, but not a single conversation was taking place. Everyone was looking at their smartphone or laptop.
18. International Social Science Programme. For details see <http://www.issp.org/>.

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APPENDIX

Table 2a

State Population Living in "Landslide" Counties ("Landslide" = 60:40 Party Registration Margin)

	1976	2008	INCREASE
Arizona	18.38%	1.27%	—
California	51.94	0.00	—
Delaware	0.00	0.00	—
Florida	44.18	1.93	—
Iowa	2.89	1.44	—
Kansas	0.34	5.76	Increase
Kentucky	65.78	49.88	—
Louisiana	99.75	31.44	—
Maryland	60.28	40.34	—
Massachusetts	11.33	.000	—
Nebraska	8.20	12.27	Increase
Nevada	61.07	6.26	—
New Mexico	58.48	19.49	—
New York	45.22	40.43	—
North Carolina	86.74	11.06	—
Oklahoma	77.61	25.57	—
Oregon	26.98	0.00	—
Pennsylvania	65.77	38.11	—
South Dakota	11.54	11.93	Increase
West Virginia	73.84	24.65	—
Wyoming	21.74	63.09	Increase
Percentage of Population Living in Landslide Counties	51.9%	14.4%	

Table 2b

State Population Living in "Landslide" Counties ("Landslide" = 55:45 Party Registration Margin)

	1976	2008	INCREASE
Arizona	41.30%	2.00%	—
California	74.24	6.27	—
Delaware	0.00	0.00	—
Florida	88.96	9.71	—
Iowa	2.11	1.80	—
Kansas	0.81	14.21	Increase
Kentucky	72.46	60.79	—
Louisiana	100.0	36.23	—
Maryland	96.03	60.18	—
Massachusetts	88.66	0.00	—
Nebraska	24.75	22.02	—
Nevada	62.02	0.63	—
New Mexico	98.55	21.29	—
New York	48.63	40.43	—
North Carolina	94.26	15.56	—
Oklahoma	95.62	36.72	—
Oregon	65.36	18.85	—
Pennsylvania	73.45	49.81	—
South Dakota	21.90	20.81	—
West Virginia	92.01	53.89	—
Wyoming	28.36	63.09	Increase
Percentage of Population Living in Landslide Counties	65.1%	21.9%	

Table 2c

State Population Living in "Landslide" Counties ("Landslide" = Party Registration Majority)

	1976	2008	INCREASE		1976	2008	INCREASE
Arizona	43.11%	2.00%	—	Nevada	95.96	7.70	—
California	84.39	41.12	—	New Mexico	100.0	23.97	—
Delaware	0.00	0.00	—	New York	58.03	42.38	—
Florida	90.44	23.94	—	North Carolina	97.44	30.51	—
Iowa	23.15	2.40	—	Oklahoma	99.74	45.48	—
Kansas	15.59	22.85	Increase	Oregon	85.97	20.39	—
Kentucky	98.91	91.37	—	Pennsylvania	89.02	65.32	—
Louisiana	100.0	60.22	—	South Dakota	53.09	57.95	Increase
Maryland	98.03	64.11	—	West Virginia	98.78	25.74	—
Massachusetts	20.41	92.90	Increase	Wyoming	36.62	93.89	Increase
Nebraska	74.83	38.44	—	Percentage of Population Living in Landslide Counties	75.0%	39.5%	

# Forecasting the 2012 French Presidential Election

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**ABSTRACT** Who will win the next French presidential election? Forecasting electoral results from political-economy models is a recent tradition in France. In this article, we pursue this effort by estimating a vote function based on both local and national data for the elections held between 1981 and 2007. This approach allows us to circumvent the small  $N$  problem and to produce more robust and reliable results. Based on a model including economic (unemployment) and political (approval and previous results) variables, we predict the defeat, although by a relatively small margin, of the right-wing incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy in the second round of the French presidential election to be held in May 2012.

The incumbent president, Nicolas Sarkozy, will face a tough challenge during the French presidential election in May 2012. For the first time since 1981, when the right-wing president Valéry Giscard-d'Estaing was defeated by the Socialist challenger François Mitterrand, the 2012 election takes place in difficult economic times. As the sitting president for the last five years, Sarkozy will likely be held accountable for the poor performance of the French economy. The large number of declared candidates from the Right running in the first round of the election is interpreted as a sign of the dissatisfaction with Sarkozy's record among his own followers, and some speculate that he may not even get to the decisive second round.

Is the victory of Sarkozy's main challenger, the Socialist François Hollande, a foregone conclusion? To address this question, we developed a forecasting model based on local and national data whose values were known several months before the election. Based on the results of this politico-economic model, we conclude that Nicolas Sarkozy will run a competitive fight but will ultimately lose his bid for re-election. After 17 years of waiting, the return of a Socialist at the Élysée appears highly probable.

This article is divided into four parts. First, we briefly review the literature on French forecasting models. Next, we provide details about the French electoral system. Then, we introduce our model and the data used for its estimation. Finally, we present

and discuss predictions derived from this model, including our forecast for the 2012 election.

## FORECASTING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN FRANCE

Polls remain the favored tool for public opinion and political parties to predict electoral outcomes. But sometimes polls go wrong. Political scientists and economists have developed alternative scientific approaches to electoral forecasting including political stock markets and statistical models (Lewis-Beck 2005). In line with the last approach, in this article we propose a forecasting model based on French local (namely, *départements*) and national data.

Contrary to the United States, forecasting models for French presidential elections remain a scarce commodity. Based on a political-economy specification, most of these use time-series data (Lafay, Facchini, and Auberger 2007; Lewis-Beck, Bélanger, and Fauvell-Aymar 2008; Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, and Bélanger 2010) and deal with limited observations ( $N = 8$ , the number of presidential elections since 1965). To circumvent this small  $N$  problem, scholars have turned to a combination of local and national information, using either departmental (Auberger 2010; Dubois and Fauvelle-Aymar 2004) or regional data (Jérôme and Jérôme-Speziari 2004) to estimate forecasting models.<sup>1</sup> Beyond increasing the number of observations, using local data captures local economic and political patterns over time (see Campbell 1992).

The record of forecasting models in France is mixed. On one hand, the victory of the candidate from the Right, Jacques Chirac, was accurately predicted in 1995. Backward (out-of-sample) forecasts nicely demonstrate how the evolution of the French economy heralded months in advance the two victories of Socialist candidate, François Mitterrand, as the challenger in 1981 and as

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the incumbent seven years later. No model, on the other hand, predicted that the second round of the 2002 election would be fought between the incumbent right-wing moderate president, Jacques Chirac, and the leader of the extreme-right, Jean-Marie Le Pen.<sup>2</sup> The election of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007, despite the low popularity of the sitting right-wing president (Jacques Chirac) and prime minister (Dominique de Villepin), was also unforeseen by most forecasters. Overall, the models using both local and national data fared better. We present our own model based on this approach later in the text. First, however, we discuss the details of the French electoral system.

### THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The French polity is a semipresidential system in which the executive branch is shared by the president and the prime minister. In the French variant of this system, the president is presumed to be the dominant political figure and to act as the main agenda-setter with little initiative given to the prime minister. Adopted in 1958 under the chairmanship of General De Gaulle, the Constitution of the Fifth French Republic was tailored to assure the preeminence of the executive (the president) over the legislative branch. It granted extended powers to the president as well as an extensive seven-year mandate (since then it has been reduced to five years). The election of the president through universal suffrage was included in the Constitution in 1962 after a successful referendum. The first modern French presidential election took place in December 1965.

*Adopted in 1958 under the chairmanship of General De Gaulle, the Constitution of the Fifth French Republic was tailored to assure the preeminence of the executive (the president) over the legislative branch. It granted extended powers to the president as well as an extensive seven-year mandate (since then it has been reduced to five years).*

The French system experienced its first failure in 1986 when the Socialist president François Mitterrand, elected in 1981 for a seven-year mandate, was forced to name a right-wing prime minister after the victory of the Right in the 1986 legislative elections. This first period of divided government (called “*cohabitation*” in France) lasted two years and was followed by two similar episodes, from 1993 to 1995 and between 1997 and 2002. Two constitutional changes were introduced in 2000 to prevent such a dilution of presidential powers: the length of presidential mandates was aligned to that of the National Assembly (five years) and the electoral calendar was organized to ensure that the presidential election will take place a few months before the legislative elections.

These changes were designed to strengthen the executive power and reduce the odds of divided government. Consequently, the presidential election has now regained its original meaning, emphasizing the prominent role of the president on both domestic and international spheres. These changes did not go unnoticed by the French voters, who now consider legislative elections as second-order elections. Not surprisingly, turnout for presidential elections has remained high whereas participation for legislative elections has fallen dramatically. Now, many observers characterize French elections as a three-round electoral system, formed of the eliminatory and decisive rounds of the presidential elections (only the two first candidates in the first round are eli-

gible to run for the second) and the confirmatory legislative elections whose primary function is to provide the newly elected candidate with an appropriate majority in the Assembly to fulfill his political agenda. Therefore, the importance of presidential elections in France can hardly be understated.

### A FORECASTING MODEL FOR FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Our model rests on two assumptions largely shared by forecasters: First, it assumes that national electoral outcomes in most countries can be satisfactorily explained by a limited number of political and economic variables. Second, it hypothesizes that the values taken by these variables several months in advance are often more useful to predict electoral outcomes than information picked closer to Election Day. This last assumption supposes that campaigns basically play a “clarifying” role by refocusing voters’ decisions on fundamentals like partisanship, the state of the economy, and the overall record of the incumbent.

The approach adopted by most electoral forecasters consists of using aggregate indicators (unemployment, approval rate, etc.) measured with a lag to predict the outcome national elections (see Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992). Using disaggregated (local) information serves two main purposes: to predict local results, a task that is crucial in American presidential elections whose outcome is determined at the state level through the Electoral College system and, for practical reasons, to circumvent the small  $N$  problem because of the limited number of national elections. In this case,

the purpose is to increase the degrees of freedom to arrive at more robust and reliable results. The local results do not form the primary focus of such work but rather are aggregated and averaged to obtain a national figure.

This second approach is adopted in this article. A mix of political and economic variables, measured at local and national level, explains and predicts the outcome of French presidential elections. The selection of the explanatory variables, as is clear in the text that follows, rests on the theoretical underpinnings of the well-established politico-economic model. The use of disaggregated data serves the practical purpose of increasing the number of cases, but the point can also be made that local information is more relevant to voters’ choice and that models using these should provide better results.

Our model is estimated from local *départements* and national data and takes the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Vote}_{i,t} = & \alpha_i + \beta_1 \text{UNEMP}_{i,t} + \beta_2 \text{POP}_t + \beta_3 \text{PRESID}_{i,t} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{STRENG}_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 \text{STRENG}_{i,t-2} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{DDep}_i + \varepsilon_{i,t}. \end{aligned}$$

The dependent variable ( $\text{Vote}_{i,t}$ ) measures the vote share for the right-wing candidate in the 96 French departments in the second round of the five presidential elections held between 1981

and 2007 ( $t = 5$ ; see the appendix for more details about the variables). Using the score of the left-wing candidates would have produced the same results because only two contenders can move to the second round. A methodological problem arises in 2002 when Jacques Chirac faced the extreme-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round and won 82% of the vote. To address this problem, we use the vote share of all right-wing candidates in the first round of the 2002 election and therefore predict this aggregated vote share.

The independent variables include four variables measured at the local level: the evolution of the unemployment rate (UNEMP), the level of support for the right-wing candidate at the previous presidential election (PRESID), and two measures of the partisan strength of the Right at the local level ( $STRENG_{t-1}$  and  $STRENG_{t-2}$ ). A fifth variable, the popularity of the right-wing candidate (POP) is measured at the national level. All these variables are available several months (UNEMP and POP) or several years (PRESID,  $STRENG_{t-1}$ , and  $STRENG_{t-2}$ ) before the election. Using a four-month lag for the unemployment and popularity variables (values taken in December) makes sense giving the dynamics of French electoral campaigns. The period from January to May represents the last stretch of the campaign, when declared candidates really start touring the country.

The theoretical status of the variables in the model is well established. The first variable, unemployment (UNEMP), is expected to display a negative sign on the basis that the electorate punish or reward incumbents depending on the recent evolution of the labor market (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007).<sup>3</sup> The second variable, POP, the national popularity of the second round right-wing candidate, is included to account for the impact of political variables on electoral outcomes (Nannestad and Paldam 1994; typical examples of such variables are wars and scandals). The interpretation of this variable, which is expected to exert a strong and positive impact on the vote, is made easier because right-wing candidates in France were incumbents in the decisive second-round in all instances save one, either as president (1981, 2002, 2007, and 2012) or prime minister (1988; the only exception is 1995; still, in the 1995 election, the incumbent prime minister Édouard Balladur ran in the first round). The third variable, the support for the Right at the previous presidential elections (PRESID), accounts for the inertia in voting patterns over time. The last two variables ( $STRENG_{t-1}$  and  $STRENG_{t-2}$ ) measure the difference between the national and local support for the right-wing candidate at the previous and penultimate presidential elections and account for the local strengths of the Right (the

Table 1

## A Forecasting Model for French Presidential Elections, 1981–2007

OMITTED ELECTIONS	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	None	2007	2002	1995	1988	1981
UNEMP	-26.0*** (1.93)	-21.7*** (2.61)	-27.2*** (1.62)	-27.8*** (2.63)	-24.8*** (1.79)	-22.9*** (4.69)
POP	.453*** (.022)	.469*** (.022)	.447*** (.0303)	.457*** (.0235)	.458*** (.0254)	.447*** (.0201)
PRESID ( $t-1$ )	.157*** (.0303)	.0842*** (.0299)	.179*** (.0303)	.139*** (.044)	.279*** (.045)	.113*** (.0335)
STRENG ( $t-1$ )	.37*** (.0496)	.317*** (.0424)	.493*** (.0541)	.324*** (.083)	.325*** (.067)	.253*** (.0675)
STRENG ( $t-2$ )	-.106* (.061)	-.161** (.0633)	-.071 (.0706)	-.0224 (.0554)	-.0742 (.0657)	-.251*** (.0905)
Constant	24.3*** (2.19)	27.1*** (2.06)	23.4*** (2.39)	25.3*** (2.73)	17.9*** (3.06)	27.1*** (2.36)
Observations	478	382	382	382	383	383
Adjusted $R^2$	0.77	0.83	0.74	0.80	0.79	0.75
S.E.E.	0.43	0.45	0.47	0.50	0.48	0.63
AIC	2147	1645	1627	1734	1613	1741

Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed tests).

Note: *Départements* fixed-effects are not reported due to space limitation.

expectation is that a department highly favorable to the Right at time  $t-1$  is likely to behave the same way at the next election).

The model is estimated with panel data ( $t = 5$  elections;  $i = 96$  departments;  $N = t \times i = 480$ ). The political and economic information included in the specification cannot account for all possible cofactors susceptible to influence the vote, such as religion, culture, and socio-demographic indicators. The solution to this problem is to use a fixed-effect model to control for unobserved time-invariant differences between *départements* (practically speaking, this means including  $i-1$  departmental dummy variables in the model; see variable  $DDep_i$  in the preceding equation). Using this estimation technique ensures that the estimated coefficients presented in table 1 are not biased due to omitted time-invariant variables. Another potential problem could arise because the popularity variable (POP) is time-variant but space-invariant (i.e., its value is the same for all departments in given year). To ensure that our estimates are not biased by a time random effect (see Greene 2008), we performed Hausman tests (with and without the variable POP in the model) that confirm that the department-fixed effect and time-random effect model is the adequate specification for our data.

## THE RESULTS

The regression analyses for our forecasting model are reported in table 1. Given the nature of our data, we use generalized least-squares (GLS), which allows for heteroscedastic and cross-sectionally correlated disturbances, to get efficient estimates of the regression parameters (see Greene 2008). The estimates in column (1) are based on the five elections under study and are used to obtain within-sample predictions as well as our out-of-sample forecast for the 2012 election. The results in columns 2 to



Table 2

## Out-of-Sample and within Forecasts, 1981–2007 (in %)

	2007	2002	1995	1988	1981
<b>Forecast (within)</b>	<b>51.57</b>	<b>56.71</b>	<b>52.22</b>	<b>45.66</b>	<b>47.02</b>
Actual	53.19	57.67	52.71	46.11	47.86
Mean Absolute Error	1.62	0.96	0.49	0.45	0.84
<b>Forecast (out-of-sample)</b>	<b>50.37</b>	<b>56.58</b>	<b>52.92</b>	<b>45.65</b>	<b>47.64</b>
Actual	53.19	57.67	52.71	46.11	47.86
Mean Absolute Error	2.82	1.09	0.21	0.46	0.22

6 present estimates when elections are deleted in turn ( $t = 4$ ) and serve to perform out-of-sample forecasts for previous elections (1981 to 2007).

A first look at the overall performance of the model is needed. The model fits the data well, explaining close to four-fifths of the variance (Adjusted  $R^2 = .77$ ) in the level of support for the candidates of the Right across the French departments during the sampling period. Moreover, all the explanatory variables are statistically significant and properly signed. Finally, the robustness of the results is clear. The values of the adjusted  $R^2$  and the standard error of estimates vary within a narrow range (from .74 to .83 and from .45 to .63, respectively) when elections are deleted and all the coefficients but one ( $STRENG_{t-2}$ ) are significant and adequately signed in the regressions.

The key concern is about the quality of the predictions derived from our model. To recall, within and out-of-sample forecasts are first computed for the 96 departments and then averaged to arrive at a single estimate for each election (a weighting procedure is used to account for the departments variable population sizes). The observed and forecasted levels of support for the right-wing candidates in the second round of presidential elections are displayed in table 2. The precision of the model is striking. The mean absolute error for the within-sample forecasts is low, .87, and the winner is adequately determined for the five elections under study (the Left won in 1981 and 1988 and the Right in 1995, 2002, and 2007).

The crucial test bears on the quality of the out-of-sample forecasts. The results in table 2 show that the model performs well. The mean absolute error for the out-of-sample predictions is low, 1.06, and once again, the model picked the correct winner in all cases. One outcome is admittedly less accurately predicted, namely the victory of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 (error = 2.8). One reason for this larger error may be the “open election” character of this race. In 2007, Sarkozy succeeded in distancing himself from the incumbent government (of which he had been a prominent figure for years) and consequently avoided losing too much support due to its unpopularity.

Overall, our parsimonious specification—based on the evolution of unemployment, popularity ratings, and departmental political trends—performs very well and, with a lead time of four months, proved to predict the major political shifts (from the Right to the Left in 1981 and again to the Right in 1995) in France over the last decades.<sup>4</sup> Based on this model, what would be the outcome of the forthcoming French election? Is there another major political shift in sight after 17 years of domination of the Right at the apex of the French political system?

The 2012 French presidential election will be held on April 26 (first round) and May 6, 2012 (second round). Our forecast is based on the results displayed in the first column of table 1 and based on information available in December 2011 or before. The prediction is about the vote share for Nicolas Sarkozy, the sitting president, assuming that he will face the Socialist François Hollande in the second round. According to our estimates, the vote for the candidate of the moderate Right decreases by 2.6 percentage points for every 1 percentage point increase in the evolution of the rate of unemployment when the Right is in power (and increase accordingly it forms the opposition). More importantly, an increase of 1 percentage point in the popularity of the candidate of the moderate Right can bring him a gain of 0.45% of vote share.

What is the expected support for Nicolas Sarkozy in May 2012 given the level of these variables four months before the election? According to official data from the INSEE, the unemployment rate increased on average by 1% in the French departments between the second and the fourth quarters of 2011 (see the appendix for more details). The level of approval for the current president reached 36% in December 2011 according to IFOP.<sup>5</sup> Including these values in our model, with the appropriate information for the other predictors ( $PRESID$ ,  $STRENG_{t-1}$ , and  $STRENG_{t-2}$ ) and the estimates for departmental fixed-effects, brings us to the conclusion that the candidate of the moderate Right, the incumbent president Nicolas Sarkozy, will receive 48.1% of the vote in the second round of the French presidential election in May 2012 against 51.9% for the candidate of the moderate Left, the Socialist François Hollande. Of course, this prediction is conditional on the statistical margin of error and the political uncertainty about the identity of the two candidates who will make their way to the second round. Given the level of the standard error of the estimate for the model (0.43) and the mean absolute error for the out-of-sample forecasts for previous elections (1.06), our prediction is on safe ground, statistically speaking. Also, the possibility that a candidate from the extreme-left or the extreme-right gets enough support to qualify for the second round appears unlikely. All in all, the prediction that the next president of France will be a Socialist seems to rest on solid grounds, politically and statistically. ■

## NOTES

1. The administrative architecture of France offers different ways to use local data. France is divided into 22 regions, 96 departments, and 36,000 municipalities.
2. Existing models have tried so far to forecast the aggregate support for all left-wing or right-wing candidates in the first round of the presidential election (see Nadeau et al. 2010). This represents an obvious shortcoming since the only candidates who are allowed to move to the decisive second round are the ones who got the highest support in the first ballot. In most instances (6 out of 8), the second round have been fought between the moderate left-wing and right-wing candidates, the two deviant cases being the 1969 (opposing centrist Alain Poher and Gaullist Georges Pompidou) and 2002 (opposing moderate right-wing president Jacques Chirac to extreme-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen) elections. Future work would need to tackle this issue. In the case at hand, the 2012 election, all indications suggest that the more usual pattern, a fight between the moderate left-wing (Socialist François Hollande) and right-wing (sitting president Nicolas Sarkozy), will take place.
3. The rate of unemployment is preferred to GDP growth rate for two reasons. First, GDP growth is not available at the departmental level. Second, unemployment outperforms GDP when these two variables are included in the model.

4. Our model clearly did better than polls. In December 1980, for instance, polls reveal a commanding lead for Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and many observers concluded that he will be reelected. In December 1995, pollsters were undecided about the outcome of the election based on surveys showing that Jacques Delors (a Socialist who finally did not run) appeared to be a very competitive candidate for the Left.
5. All the polls used in this study are from IFOP (see the appendix). This firm ran two surveys in December 2011. The fieldwork for the first lasted two days (December 8 and 9) and was based on a sample size of 971 respondents. The second fieldwork lasted for a week (December 8 to 16) and used a larger sample of 1,851 respondents. The level of approval for Sarkozy in the first and second polls was 40% and 34%, respectively. Given the obvious merits of the second poll (longer fieldwork and larger sample), we weighted these scores according to the sample size of the IFOP surveys (.34 (40%) + .66 (34%) = 36%).

Editor's note: For readers interested in a longer discussion of different forecasting models and their application to the French case, the tenth anniversary edition of *French Politics* (10:1, 2012) has a special symposium on the May presidential elections (guest edited by Michael Lewis-Beck). The symposium also reports results from a survey of 100 political scientists and experts on French politics predicting the vote for the candidate of the Front National. For a limited time, there will be open access to this edition at: <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/fp>.

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## APPENDIX

**Dependent Variable (Vote)** = Vote share of the right-wing candidate in the second round of presidential elections (1981, 1988, 1995, 2007). For 2002: Vote share of the right-wing candidates in the first round of the presidential election.

### INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

- UNEMP**: change in the unemployment rate at the department level between the fourth and the second quarter during the year preceding the election.
- POP**: Popularity of the right-wing candidate measured by the percentage of respondents satisfied with the performance of the incumbent President (1981, 2002, and 2007) or Prime Minister (1988, 1995) in the month of December preceding the election.
- Presid** ( $t - 1$ ): Vote share of the right-wing candidate at the previous election.
- Streng** ( $t - 1$ ): Difference between the vote share of the right-wing candidate at the departmental and national level in the second round at the previous presidential election (1981, 1988, 1995, 2007). For 2002: Difference between the vote share of the right-wing candidate at the departmental and national level in the first round at the previous presidential election.
- Streng** ( $t - 2$ ): Difference between the vote share of the right-wing candidate at the departmental and national level in the second round at the penultimate presidential election (1981, 1988, 1995, 2007). For 2002: Difference between the vote share of the right-wing candidate at the departmental and national level in the first round at the penultimate presidential election.
- DDep**: ( $i - 1 = 95$ ) department dummies.

### SOURCES

Electoral outcomes (Vote, Presid, Streng) data come from the CDSP (Centre de Données Socio-Politiques/Science Po Paris): <http://cdsp.sciences-po.fr>.

Popularity data come from the IFOP Barometer (monthly data): [www.ifop.fr](http://www.ifop.fr).

Unemployment data come from the INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques): [http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg\\_id=99&ref\\_id=CMRSOS03312](http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=99&ref_id=CMRSOS03312).