

Analyzing presidential elections without incumbents

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I. Introduction

As pundits and scholars analyze the upcoming 2008 presidential election, it is useful to examine various factors to determine the chances for each party. There are many ways to describe the 2008 presidential election, but the most obvious is that it is an election without incumbents – the equivalent of an open seat in Congress. In total, throughout history, there have been 21 contested presidential elections¹ in which neither candidate was the incumbent, but only five of those elections were in the “modern” era, during which approval polling and other polling could be trusted. Out of these 21 elections, 12 resulted in the incumbent party losing reelection,² with four out of the five “modern” elections resulting in this party switch. By analyzing the different factors present in these 21 elections, we can determine the likelihood that the Republican Party will retain the White House in 2008.

Elections without incumbents are interesting for a variety of reasons. First off, presidential elections are significantly affected by incumbency. The incumbent president has access to the full resources of the White House, and he is able to so effectively get his message to the public that he has wins over 60% of elections. Scholars have argued that “mediated incumbency is superior to partisanship in explaining the outcomes of... recent national elections”³ Given recent studies on the vast effects of partisanship on elections, this result is

1 For this analysis, only elections with two major-party candidates are counted as “contested presidential elections.” The 21 used here refer to the elections of: 1796, 1808, 1816, 1836, 1844, 1848, 1852, 1860, 1868, 1876, 1880, 1884, 1896, 1908, 1920, 1928, 1952, 1960, 1968, 1988, and 2000.

2 The elections with regime change: 1844, 1848, 1852, 1860, 1868, 1884, 1896, 1920, 1952, 1960, 1968, and 2000.

3 E. D. Dover, *The Presidential Election of 1996: Clinton's Incumbency and Television* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), p. 1.

surprising to the extent that elections without incumbents should be considered completely separately from those in which the incumbent stands for reelection. With the vast effect that incumbents already have on elections in which they are candidates, the next logical question is what effect they have on elections in which they are not candidates. That is, the goal is to determine the chances of an incumbent President's party holding the White House based on a variety of factors. This paper will analyze that incumbent President's approval rating along with his party's midterm election losses.

II. Data and methods

The first factor that will be analyzed in this research note is the approval rating of the President who is in office during the incumbent-less election. Going into this research, the hypothesis is that approval ratings are positively correlated with a party's chances of retaining the White House in an election without incumbents. The theory behind this hypothesis is that voters are more likely to change parties in a presidential election if the incumbent is unpopular, and approval ratings are a way of measuring the President's popularity. Essentially, the question that this research note attempts to settle is if a President's popularity affects his party's candidate is likely to lose an election. The reasoning behind this theory is that the President is the leader of his party, and as such as he affects the popularity of his party. Research has found that “in predicting electoral behavior, the party difference index is found to be a better predictor than either the seven-point or four-point strength-of-identification measures.”⁴ Therefore, if the incumbent President affects his party's popularity, he should be able to affect the chance of his party retaining the White House. This theory will be analyzed by examining the approval ratings of incumbent President's prior to an incumbent-less election; this data will be plotted against the vote that the President's party candidate got in the next election. With

4 David Baker review of Kamieniecki Sheldon, *Party Identification, Political Behavior and the American Electorate* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.)

only five data points, since this can only be used in “modern” Presidential elections, this method is not without flaws. However, it should give a general estimate of the existence of a correlation.

The second factor that will be analyzed is the last midterm election results prior to the incumbent-less presidential election.⁵ This factor has many advantages, because all 21 contested incumbent-less can be considered. The hypothesis is that the less seats the incumbent President's party loses, the greater chance that his party retains the White House. This is based on similar reasoning as the previous hypothesis, with one additional logical leap being that midterm elections can predict the incumbents popularity. However, research has shown that “economic wellbeing and presidential popularity together accounted for over 90 percent of the variance in the vote for the president's party in midterm elections.”⁶

III. Modern Presidents: Approval rating effect

Since the advent of television, the radio, and the vast expansion of presidential power under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, scholars have described the presidency in vastly different terms. Scholars have described it as one in which the presidency transformed “from a small, personalized office to a collection of specialized bureaucracies with hundreds of professional staffers.”⁷ This modern presidency is characterized by constant polling, constant scrutinization by modern media, and by the President being much more attune to the public.⁸ Perhaps coincidentally due to the smaller sample size, or perhaps due to these aforementioned factors, 80% of elections without incumbents in modern times have resulted in the party in power losing it.⁹

5 For midterm elections, only House elections are considered as they are more consistent, with all seats up.

6 Alan I. Abramowitz; Albert D. Cover; Helmut Norpoth, “The President's Party in Midterm Elections: Going from Bad to Worse,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 30, No. 3. (Aug., 1986), p. 563.

7 James P. Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency* (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), p. 1.

8 Samuel Kernell, *Going Public* (Washington: CQ Press, 2007), p.41.

9 This election data, and all subsequent election data, was compiled from: David Leip, *Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*, <http://www.uselectionatlas.org> (December 5, 2007).

In the first incumbent-less election of the modern era, Republican ex-General and war hero Dwight Eisenhower ran against Democratic Governor Adlai Stevenson. The Democrats had served an unprecedented five terms, largely due to the lasting New Deal coalition built by Franklin Delano Roosevelt.¹⁰ However, by the time of the 1952 presidential elections, Harry Truman's popularity had sharply declined. His approval rating immediately after winning the 1948 election was fairly good, but by late 1949 it had started to wane, dipping below 50%. From 1950 to 1952, his approval rating never exceeded 40%, reaching a low of 22% in early 1952.¹¹ When people went to the polls to decide the new President in 1952, barely over 30% of the electorate approved of the job that the incumbent Democratic President Harry Truman was performing. Dwight D. Eisenhower managed to defeat Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson 55.2% - 44.3%.

However, if 1952 was an incumbent-less election in the face of a weak and unpopular President, the election of 1960 would prove to be the exact opposite. In this election, Dwight D. Eisenhower was an incredibly popular incumbent President, regularly registering approval ratings above 60%. His approval rating over the past two years had been high, reaching heights of almost 80% at the start of 1960. By the time people went to the polls, his approval rating was still at a respectable 57.73%, but the Administration candidate still lost in a narrow election. Despite Eisenhower's popularity, Republican Vice-President Richard Nixon lost to Democratic Senator John F. Kennedy 49.7% - 49.5%.

Lyndon Johnson's approval ratings were far less consistent than the previous two Presidents examined thus far, but his ratings still registered over 50% only three times in the last two years leading up the incumbent-less election of 1968. With the unpopular Vietnam war

10 Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, "The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 4 (Nov. 1990): 780-782.

11 In the "appendix" portion of this research note, one will find approval rating trends for each of the five Presidents mentioned in this section over their last two years in office (Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Reagan, and Clinton.) These trends were compiled from data in Gallup Brain.

continuing overseas, Lyndon Johnson's approval did not rebound by the time people went to the polls to pick between Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey and Republican Richard Nixon. Richard Nixon won 43.4% to 42.7% on the backdrop of Johnson's 41.65% approval rating (George Wallace had an unusually successful third party big for Governor, winning most of the deep South states.)¹²

After the incumbent-less election of 1968, America would go twenty years before experiencing another election in which neither candidate was the current President. Owing to a resignation and the regular switching of Presidents after that, it was only after Ronald Reagan had finished his two-term presidency that the Presidency would once again become an “open seat.” While Reagan was immensely popular in his first six years in office, the Iran-Contra affair had significantly diminished his appeal during the second half of his second term. Notwithstanding this, by the time of the 1988 elections, his approval had rebounded, and 53.57% of Americans said that they approved of the job Ronald Reagan was doing when they went to the polls and elected his Vice President with 53.4% of the vote to 45.6% for Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis. This represented the one and only time that party retained the Presidency in a modern era election without incumbents. It is interesting that it happened with a President who was not as popular as Dwight Eisenhower was when he failed to accomplish the same feat in 1960, although it does not completely discount the use of approval rating as a predictive tool.

In perhaps the closest election in recent history, George Bush defeated Al Gore despite losing the popular vote 48.4% - 47.9%. Al Gore received a plurality of the American vote on the backdrop of Bill Clinton's 56.54% approval rating. Because more Americans voted for him than for Republican challenger, this may continue to support the use of approval ratings as a

¹² CNN, “George Wallace dies,” September 1998, <http://www.cnn.com/US/9809/14/wallace.obit/> (December 6, 2007.)

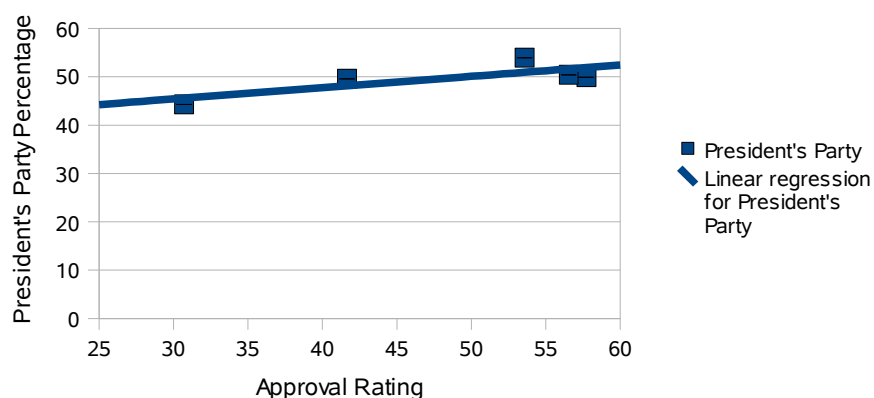
predictive measure for incumbent-less elections.

In order to determine if approval ratings are an accurate predictive measure for which party will win control of the White House, there needs to be a consistent numeric method to calculate which party “wins” an election. Merely using a “1” or a “0” does not work, because with only one “1,” the data will be heavily skewed. Instead, we will attempt to determine if there is a positive correlation between the approval rating of the incumbent and the percentage of the vote that his party's candidate wins in the general election. Again, using the exact percentage here will create skewed results because of varying successes for third party candidates, particularly George Wallace's run in 1968. Therefore, the percentage vote a party's candidate receives will be considered as a percentage of the votes received by the major candidates. Under this formula, Hubert Humphrey would have received 49.59% of the vote in 1968, due to how close he was to Richard Nixon in the popular vote (despite losing the electoral college in a landslide.) These data can be calculated for each presidential election in the modern era:

President	Approval	President's Party Vote
Truman	30.71	44.3
Eisenhower	57.73	49.9
Johnson	41.65	49.59
Reagan	53.57	53.94
Clinton	56.54	50.42

Then, these data can be plotted, with the goal of determining if a regression exists:

Approval as Predictor of Elections



These data seem to follow a linear regression modeled by the equation:

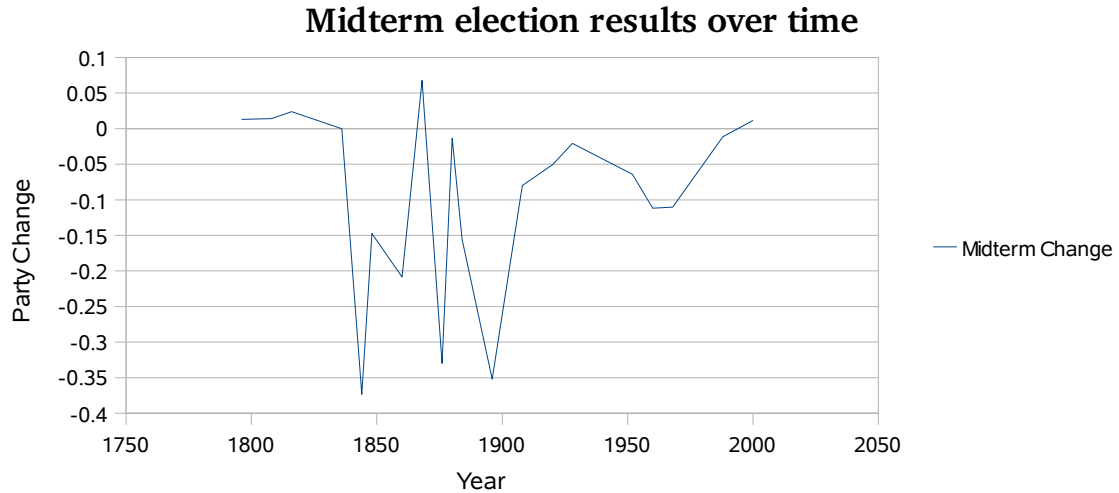
$$\begin{aligned}\text{President's Party Percentage} &= .234 * (\text{approval rating}) + 38.39540022 \\ \text{correlation (r)} &= .785445 \\ r^2 &= .6169245 \\ p &= .05769\end{aligned}$$

The high r-squared value, the high correlation coefficient, along with the low p-value seem to suggest that the two variables in this case are correlated. This means that the previous president's approval rating can predict, to some degree, the chance that a party retains the White House in an election without incumbents. However, with only five data point, and some slight inconsistencies, there is opportunity for a better predictor. The one predictor that can be applied to all 21 elections would be midterm election results two years prior to each incumbent-less election.

IV. Midterm elections as predictors

Midterm elections do not rely on polling data, and they are required by law to happen every four years. As such, they are fairly consistent over the past two centuries, and they can provide ample data points with which to analyze their predictive capacity for incumbent-less elections. However, there are several flaws with analyzing midterm elections over time, one of the main ones being the effect of gerrymandering has made party switches less extreme over the years.¹³ Gerrymandering accomplishes this by grouping Congressional districts in such a way that incumbents face reelection against a voting group in which their party is in the majority. While seat losses still occur, the modern era does not have any examples of one party losing 33% of its seats, which happened in 1894. The following chart, which plots the 21 midterm elections used in this analysis, shows that the changes have become less extreme in recent years:

¹³ Pew Research Center, "Midterm Match-Up: Partisan Tide vs. Safe Seats," February 2006, <http://people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=127> (December 7, 2007.)



Still, midterm elections should provide a general idea of a President's popularity, and as such, a positive correlation may exist between them and the chance of a President's party retaining the White House. First, the most representative examples will be considered specifically, and then all the data will be analyzed in the form of a regression. The first few midterm elections in this analysis center around the first few Presidents. In the early years of the republic, the data shows that party switches were rare, and after Thomas Jefferson's victory in 1800, the Democratic-Republicans held the White House until 1824. In this time period, midterm elections commonly resulted in gains for the party within the White House.¹⁴ As an example, modest gains by the Democratic-Republicans in the 1806 and 1814 midterm elections preceded the victories of both James Madison and James Monroe, respectively. These results were in large part precipitated by the Federalists having self-destructed after Jefferson's victory, retaining less than 20% of Congressional seats.¹⁵ While only the 1824 election of this era was officially unopposed, the Federalists provided little competent opposition from 1804 to 1816.

¹⁴ Again, this election data, and all subsequent election data, was compiled from: David Leip, *Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*, <http://www.uselectionatlas.org> (December 5, 2007).

¹⁵ Homer C. Hockett, "The Influence of the West on the Rise and Fall of Political Parties," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 4, no. 4 (Mar. 1918): 463.

And the incumbent Presidents were fairly popular, the midterm elections reflected this, and their party stayed in power throughout this time period. The hypothesis was consistently reinforced in these early days of the republic.

After the civil war, a clearcut two-party system is established in the United States. The Democratic party, with a base in the South, is the primary opposition to the Lincoln's Republican Party as the reconstruction era begins. Andrew Johnson, though Lincoln's Vice President, campaigns in the 1866 midterm elections for the Democrats, which makes sense given his Democratic background before being picked for a “national unity” ticket.¹⁶ However, the Radical Republicans gain seats on the backdrop of Johnson's massive unpopularity, gaining 7%, and leading to a Grant victory in the incumbent-less election of 1868. The hypothesis is supported, as an unpopular president's party loses seats, leading to a Republican victory in 1868. By his second term, however, Grant's popularity had sharply declined due to several corruption scandals, and his party suffered a massive 33% loss in the 1874 midterm elections. While Republican Rutherford Hayes was able to “win” the 1876 elections, this was likely due to an informal “corrupt bargain” that involved the end of Reconstruction in exchange for a Hayes Presidency. What is without doubt, though, is that Hayes suffered a fairly massive popular vote loss to Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden, which reinforces the model thus far. After Hayes' promised one-term presidency, the 1880 election represented the first incumbent-less election since 1836 that resulted in the incumbent party holding the White House with a plurality of the popular vote. Here, a 1% loss by the Republican party in the 1878 midterm elections was succeeded by a Garfield victory by only 1,898 votes. This election, like every incumbent-less midterm election until 1998, resulted in a loss for the party in power. However, the fact that it was such a modest loss suggests that if a party only loses a few seats, it can still retain the

16 Hans L. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1989) p. 263.

White House without invalidating the hypothesis. The next couple elections, however, would best be described as landslide victories for the party out of power, with 1884 leading to the ascension of Democrat Grover Cleveland, and 1896 leading to the landslide victory of Republican William McKinley in a realigning election after the depression of 1893.

During the Progressive era, this pattern continued to be reinforced, though there would be no more “landslides” like in the 1894-1896 model. Theodore Roosevelt, despite his continuing popularity, would lose 8% of seats in the 1906 midterm elections, but his hand-chosen successor, William Howard Taft, easily won in the 1908 elections. Then, when Wilson took office, he had to face unpopularity after going to war in Europe after promising repeatedly not to, and his Democratic party lost 5% of its House seats. This loss preceded James Cox's loss in the largest landslide loss by any incumbent party in an incumbent-less election, garnering barely over 36% of the vote. This led to the 1920s, which were characterized by isolationist Republican rule, and so Calvin Coolidge's Republicans lost 2% of House seats in 1926, but Hoover still easily beat Al Smith in 1928. Thus, midterm election results are not entirely consistent in this era, with the Democrats losing after only losing 5% of seats, and Republicans winning after losing 8% of seats, but slight inconsistencies do not inherently contradict the general trend that is forming.

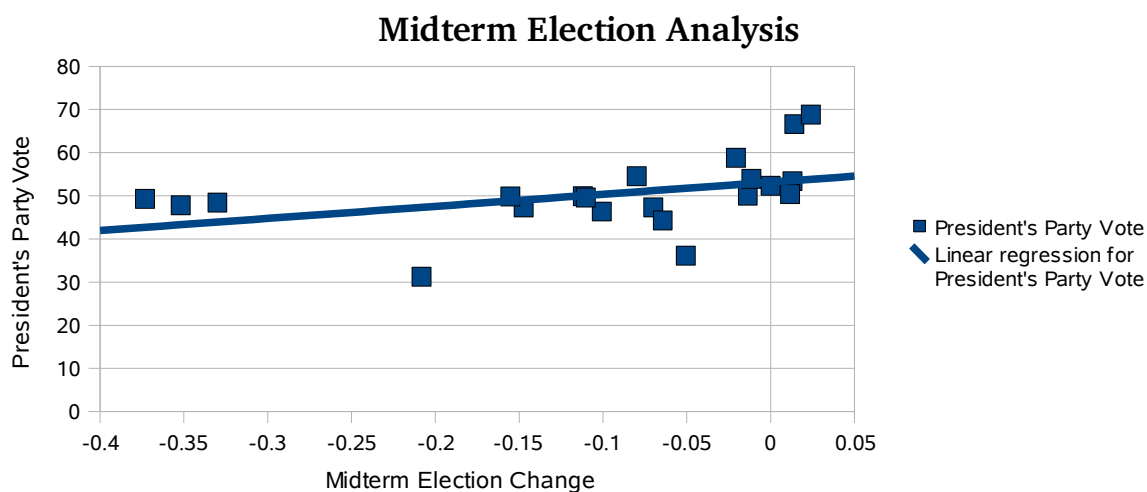
The modern era, characterized by the aforementioned gerrymandering and constant party switches, lasted from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election to the modern day. During this, party control changed in four out of five incumbent-less elections; however, since the equations work off popular votes, this may actually be calculated as three out of five for the purposes of the model (since Al Gore got more votes than George Bush in 2000, despite losing the electoral college.) In the first election of this era, Harry Truman's Democratic Party had lost 6% of seats in the 1950 elections. With voters scared over communism, and with Truman presiding over a

fifth straight Democratic term, the 1950 election loss was succeeded by a Republican victory in 1952 by the highest incumbent-less margin of the modern era. This trend continued, with a recession leading to an 11% loss in 1958 and a Democratic victory in 1960. Then, Democratic popularity over the Vietnam war led to another 11% loss in 1966, with a Republican victory in 1968. However, Ronald Reagan's popularity, while damaged over the Iran-Contra affair, still remained strong as the Soviet Union began collapsing and the economy continued strongly. A mere 1% loss of seats in the 1986 elections was succeeded by a Bush victory in 1988. Finally, the unique case of President Clinton presented itself in the final decade of the 20th century. Unpopularity over the Republicans due to their ongoing impeachment proceedings led to an unprecedented occurrence in the 1998 midterm elections – the President's party gained seats for the first time since 1934, and for the first “incumbent-less” time since 1814. This was succeeded by the a Democratic loss in 2000, but the fact that Al Gore still won a plurality of the vote suggests that the model based on popular vote returns is not entirely flawed.

These 21 elections seem to suggest a pattern: the more massive the midterm election loss of the party in power, the more likely that that party will lose the incumbent-less election. First, all the data can be compiled and examined as a table. Here, “Midterm Change” refers to the percentage of seats the incumbent President's party gained in the midterm elections, and “President's Party Vote” refers to the percentage of the vote the President's candidate got when compared to the major party candidate that got second place in the election. An important factor to consider in examining these results is that in some elections, both parties gained seats, but one party gained more seats. For example, in the 1834 elections, the Democrats did not lose any seats while the Whigs gained 12. Despite this, it is recorded as .49% loss for the Democrats, because they controlled a slightly smaller portion of the House when it increased by two seats.

Year	Incumbent President	Nominee	Midterm Change	President's Party Vote
1796	George Washington	John Adams	-0.042	53.40
1808	Thomas Jefferson	James Madison	0.014	66.63
1816	James Madison	James Monroe	0.024	68.819
1836	Andrew Jackson	Martin Van Buren	-0.005	52.317
1844	John Tyler	Henry Clay	-0.373	49.283
1848	James Polk	Lewis Cass	-0.147	47.327
1852	Millard Fillmore	Winfield Scott	-0.101	46.357
1860	James Buchanan	John Breckinridge	-0.208	31.261
1868	Andrew Johnson	Horatio Seymour	-0.07	47.30
1876	Ulysses S. Grant	Rutherford Hayes	-0.33	48.433
1880	Rutherford Hayes	James Garfield	-0.014	50.00
1884	Chester Arthur	James Blaine	-0.155	49.845
1896	Grover Cleveland	William Jennings Bryan	-0.352	47.799
1908	Theodore Roosevelt	William Howard Taft	-0.080	54.545
1920	Woodrow Wilson	James Cox	-0.051	36.123
1928	Calvin Coolidge	Herbert Hoover	-0.021	58.788
1952	Harry Truman	Adlai Stevenson	-0.064	44.30
1960	Dwight Eisenhower	Richard Nixon	-0.112	49.90
1968	Lyndon Johnson	Hubert Humphrey	-0.11	49.59
1988	Ronald Reagan	George H. W. Bush	-0.011	53.94
2000	Bill Clinton	Al Gore	0.011	50.42

A regression model can then be plotted in order to determine the validity of the hypothesis:



This model shows a fairly strong correlation between the midterm election results and the President's party vote in the next election. The regression analysis is:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{President's Party Percentage} &= 27.81 * (\text{midterm election gain}) + 53.1378 \\ \text{correlation (r)} &= .408094 \\ r^2 &= .16654 \\ p &= .03314\end{aligned}$$

If one ignores the margin of the President's victory, and simply records who got more votes in each election as either a "1" or a "0," the correlation is stronger:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Chance of Victory} &= 2.8685 * (\text{midterm election gain}) + .7209 \\ \text{correlation (r)} &= .68739313733093 \\ r^2 &= .4725093 \\ p &= 0.000287642662810228\end{aligned}$$

However, regardless of specifics, it is important to note that both analyses show positive correlations and p-values that reasonably discount this correlation being due to random chance. This means that, to some degree, midterm election results are correlated with the chance that the party maintains the White House in the next elections.

V. Conclusion

The analysis done within this research note suggests a strong correlation between both the incumbent's approval rating, the incumbent's gains in the midterm elections and whether or not his party maintains the White House in the incumbent-less election. No matter how much the incumbents party members attempt to distance themselves from the incumbent, voters still tend to decide incumbent-less elections at least partly based on their opinion of the person currently in the office. If the economy is strong, the incumbent is popular, and the people are generally happy with the direction the country is moving in, then they are much more likely to grant the party in power an extra term (1988) than if the economy is doing poorly and people are generally unhappy with the direction of the country (1896.)¹⁷ Further research outside the scope of this note could focus on attempting to find if it is possible to get a stronger correlation

¹⁷ Douglas Steeples and David O. Whitten, *Democracy in Desperation: The Depression of 1893* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1998), all.

in an analysis that combines several additional factors that measure an incumbents popularity and the general mood of the country with regards to the current regime.

Finally, this research note began by posing this question within the context of the 2008 presidential election. Thus, it makes sense to see where the analysis places the Republicans with regards to getting a third term in 2008. The approval rating analysis focused on the President's popularity immediately before the next election, and so the current data on Bush is one year away from the data used in the analysis. However, if we assume that the President's current popularity (about 32%, according to a recent Gallup poll) is his approval rating a year from now, the regression analysis on approval ratings puts the Republican as getting 45% of the popular vote. On the other hand, the midterm analysis is more favorable, with a mere 7% loss by the Republicans in 2006 suggesting that the Republican candidate might get as much as 51% of the popular vote. However, as was noted in the analysis of midterm elections, the exact regression line may not be the most accurate due to differences in gerrymandering over the past few decades. Thus, a 7% loss may be more severe now than in previous years.

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