

U.S. National Elections

17.263/264

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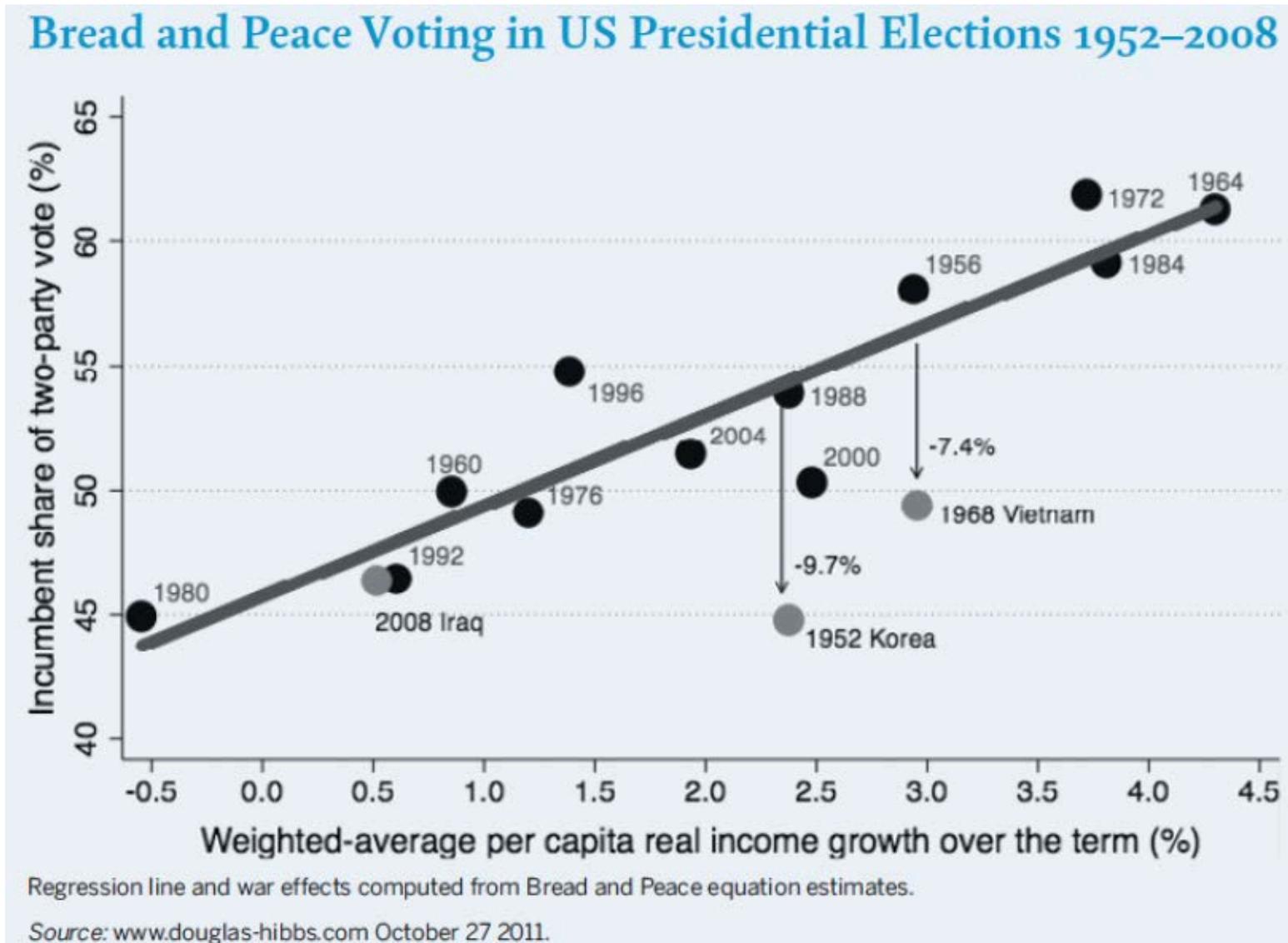
Week 6: Structural Determinants of Elections

Themes of the Day

- Structural factors limit politicians' influence over electoral outcomes.
- Predicting the past is hard, but predicting the future is even harder.
- Partisan balance in the electorate (normal vote)
- Peace and prosperity benefit incumbents (retrospective voting).
- The president's party is punished in midterms (balancing).

- Presidential elections are highly predictable—
at least after the fact.

The Hibbs Model

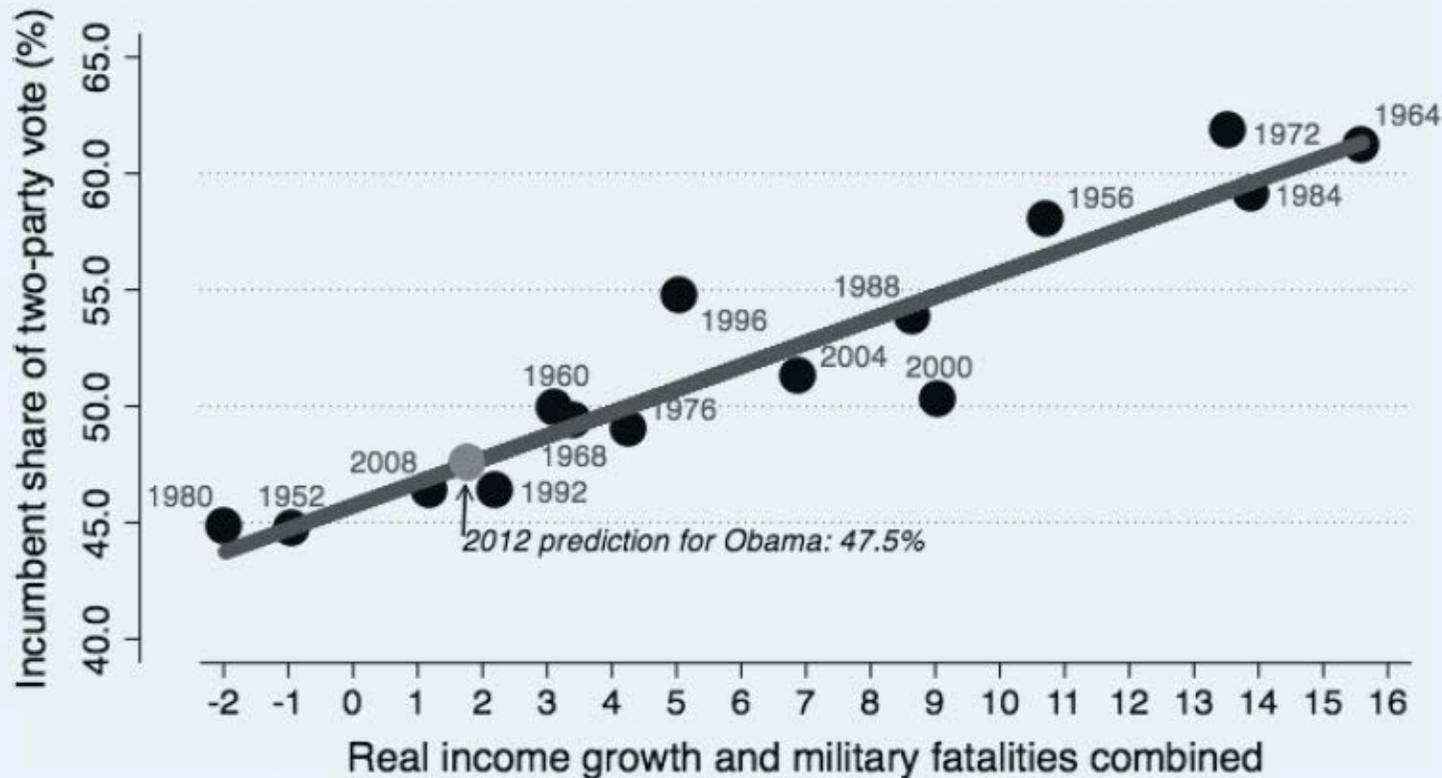


Courtesy of [Douglas Hibbs](http://www.douglas-hibbs.com). Used with permission.

- Two “objective” factors:
 - 1 “Bread”: income growth in previous term
 - 2 “Peace”: (absence of) fatalities from unprovoked wars
- No survey results or other endogenous predictors.

Is Obama's Fate Sealed?

Obama's Reelection Prospect under Bread and Peace Voting 2012 Prediction Based on Projections of 2012q3–2012q4 Conditions

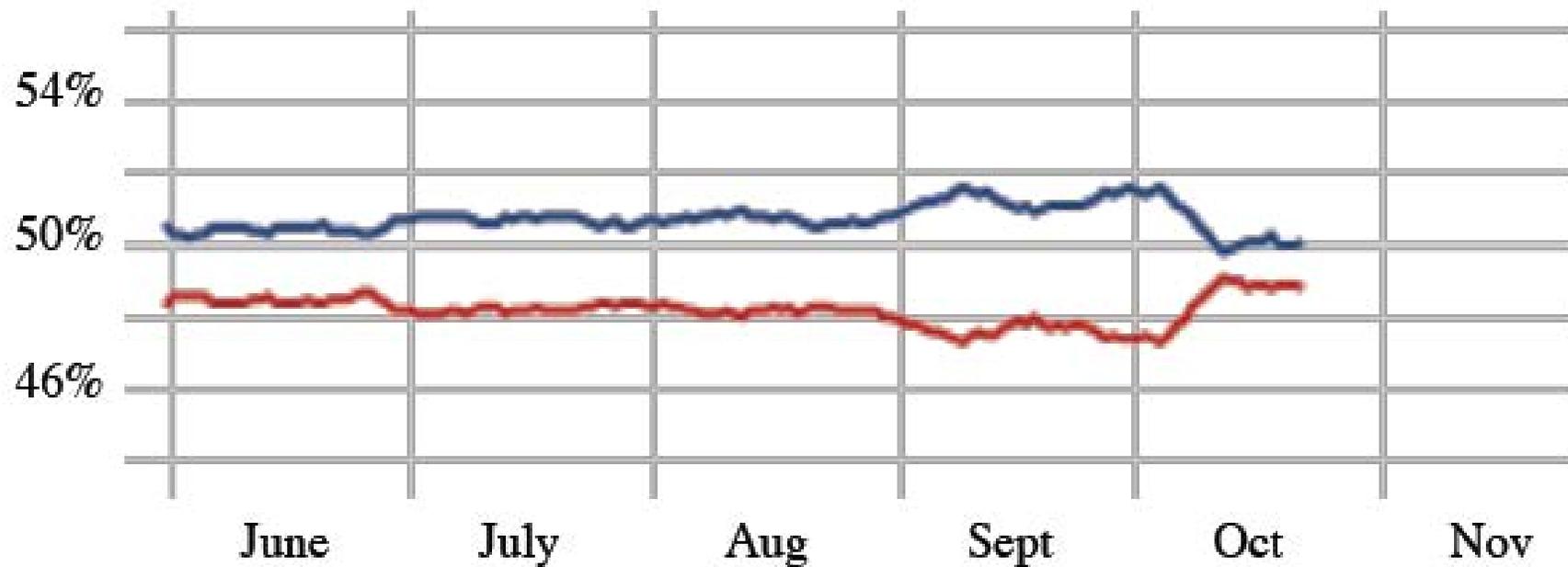


Combination of real growth and fatalities weights each variable by its estimated coefficient. Estimated effects of fatalities on vote shares: -0.7% in 2008 (Iraq), -7.4% in 1968 (Vietnam), -9.7% in 1952 (Korea); negligible in 1964, 1976, 2004, 2012, and null in other years.

Source: www.douglas-hibbs.com July 27 2012

Maybe Not

Nate Silver's Two-Party Vote Forecast ("Fivethirtyeight")



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- Silver's forecast incorporates polls, previous election results, ???
- "Prediction" in a very different sense.
- What do forecasts tell us, other than who will win?

Models of Vote Choice

- “Position” versus “valence”
- “Retrospective” versus “prospective”
- “Pocketbook” versus “sociotropic”
- Most election forecasts are based on a **retrospective sociotropic valence** model: How well did the incumbent party ensure peace and prosperity?

Partisanship and the Normal Vote

- Balance of power between the parts sets the baseline “normal vote”

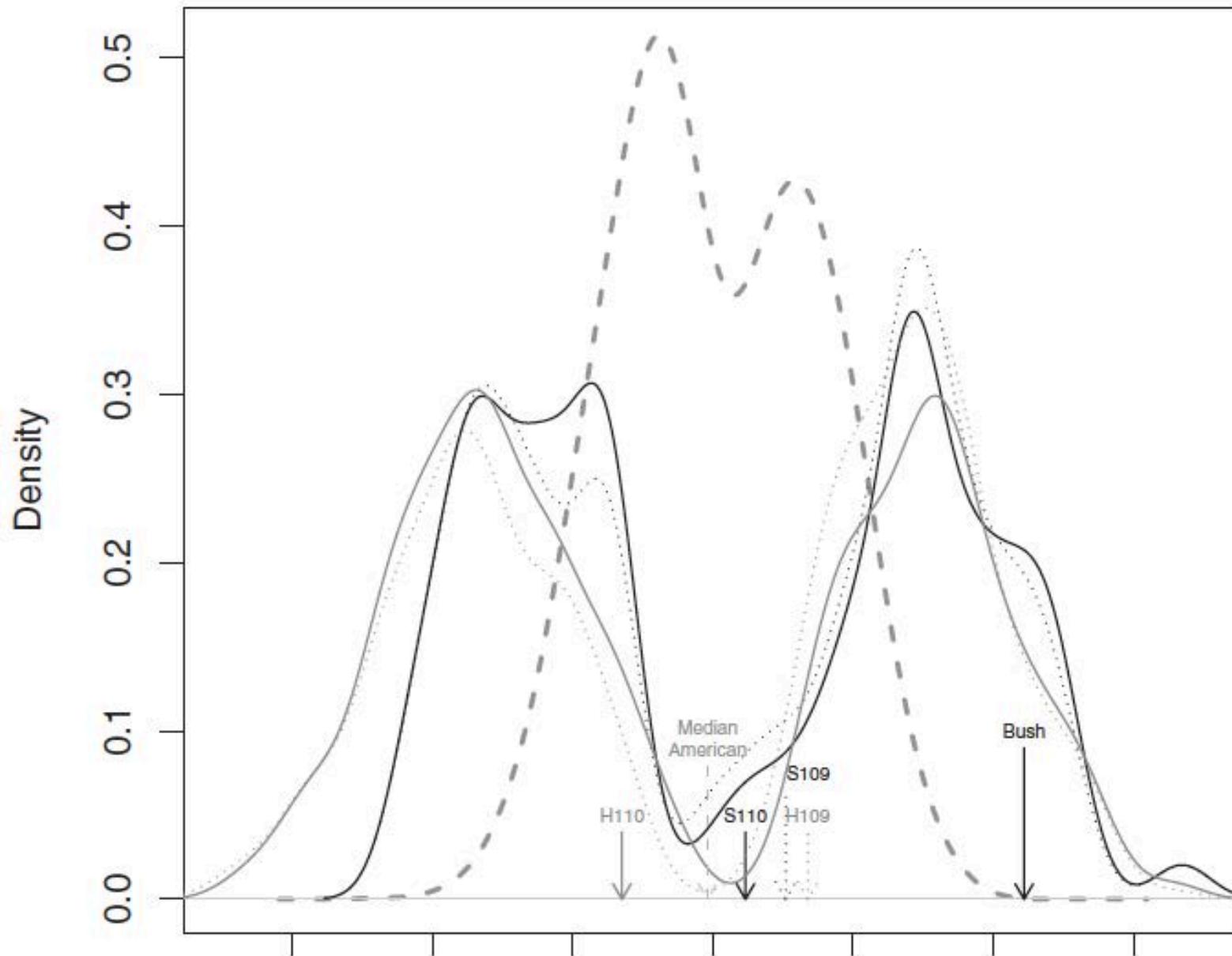
Demographics versus Economics

- The emerging Democratic majority?
- Demographic changes vs. short-term economic factors

The Puzzle of Midterm Loss

- Seemed like universal law until 1998 and 2002
- Returned with a vengeance in 2006 and 2010.
- **Explanation 1:** Surge-and-decline (coattails)
- But incumbent party does even worse in midterms than this would predict
- **Explanation 2:** Ideological Balancing

Ideological Extremity



Ideological Balancing

- Balancing between partisan extremes
- Separation of powers

Normative Implications

- Can voters hold officeholders accountable, given how little they know about politics?
- Limitations?

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