Nothing Generic About It: Using Generic Ballots to Predict State Legislative Elections

Andrew E. Smith
University of New Hampshire

Gallup Generic Ballot

“If the election for Congress were being held today, which party’s candidate would you vote for in your congressional district – the Democratic Party’s candidate or the Republican Party’s candidate?”

IF UNSURE: “As of today, do you lean more toward the Democratic Party’s candidate or the Republican Party’s candidate?”

Generic Ballots

• Gallup began using in 1942:
• Has been quite accurate in predicting Congressional composition (Moore & Saad)
• Now regularly used by pundits
  – On RealClearPolitics and Pollster.com dashboards
Generic Ballot in States

- Increase in state polling
  - After 2000 election
  - Increase in OVR polling (cheap)
  - Some have been reporting generic ballots for state legislature (PPP)
- Importance of 2010 legislative elections in redistricting
- No research into performance of generic ballots in states

New Hampshire

- 24 member Senate
- 400 member House
  - Truly generic: only 23% would even guess who their state rep is
  - Multi-member districts
  - Multi-town “floterial” districts

Data

- % GOP of 2-party statewide election results
  - NH Secretary of State
- Final UNH/WMUR election poll
  - 6 elections: 2000 – 2012
  - Conducted weekend before election
  - 600-850 likely voters
  - % GOP of 2-party generic ballot vote
    - Unallocated and allocated undecideds
- Both parties won control of House & Senate during this period
Question Wording

“Please think about the election for your representative to the New Hampshire House of Representatives (Senate). Do you plan to vote for the Democratic or Republican candidate for New Hampshire House of Representatives (Senate) this time?” (parties rotated)
IF UNSURE: “Are you leaning toward voting for the Democratic candidate or for the Republican candidate?”

State House Results

- Fairly accurate
- Underestimates GOP vote

% GOP of 2-party NH House Vote and Final UNH Poll
State Senate Results

- Also fairly accurate
- Underestimates GOP vote
% GOP of 2-party NH Senate Vote and Final UNH Poll (Undecideds Allocated)

Average difference: 2.3%

Generic Ballot Percentage and Percentage of Seats Won

• Generic ballot does not do a good job predicting:
  – percentage of seats won by GOP
  – number of seats won by GOP

• Worse when actual vote is farther from 50-50

Actual and Predicted GOP House Seats (Unallocated)

Average difference: 38.5 Seats
Actual and Predicted GOP House Seats

- Allocated

212
220
204
180
176
228
257
282
250
160
176
298

Predicted Seats
Actual Seats

Average difference: 40.5 Seats

Actual and Predicted GOP Senate Seats

Predicted Seats
Actual Seats

Average difference: 3 Seats

Model

- Moore & Saad (1997) adjusted Gallup predictions
  - Simple regression of # of actual seats by predicted seats
- Greatly improves NH predictions for both NH House and Senate
Conclusions

- Generic ballots are effective in predicting composition in both state House and Senate races
  - When adjusted to account for party bias and seat underestimation bias
- Works well in NH, may not work as well in other states
  - Encourage pollsters in other states to include these questions