

Can an Independent candidate win the White House?

Voter / Consumer Research

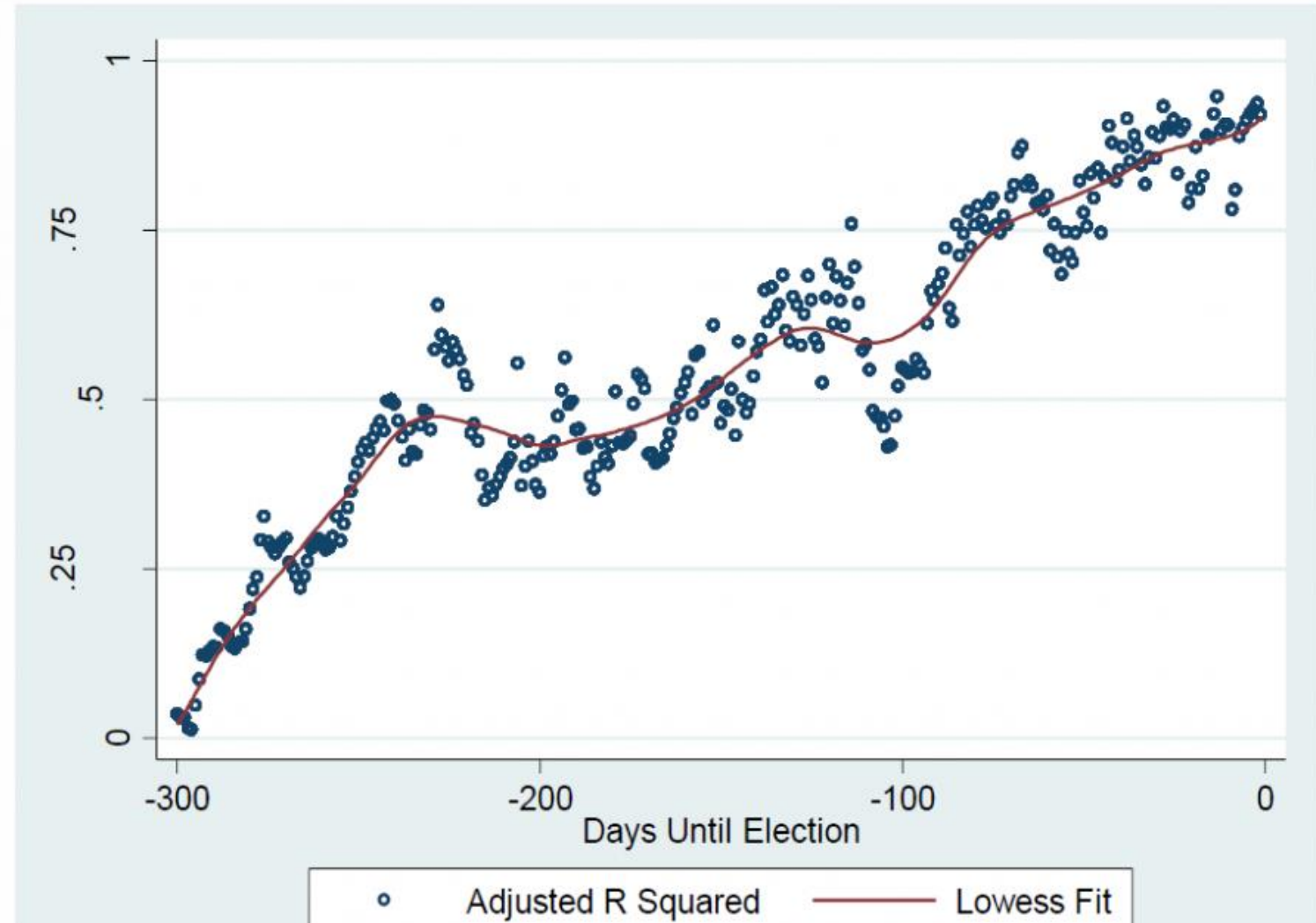
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The Question

- Could an independent candidate actually win a race of the White House.
 - As of today there are good odds that both the GOP and the Democratic nominee will be extremely unpopular, that both will enter the general election with higher negative impressions than positive impressions.
 - If ever there were a circumstance under which an independent could win, this is it.
- The question is, is it possible.
- Polling this far out cannot provide the answer
- This lays out some other ways to look at that question

Polling in March out does not provide good forecasts for November:

The further from the election
(horizontal) the less polling
results correlate with actual
outcomes (vertical)



History:
3rd Party /
Independent
candidates who
topped 5%

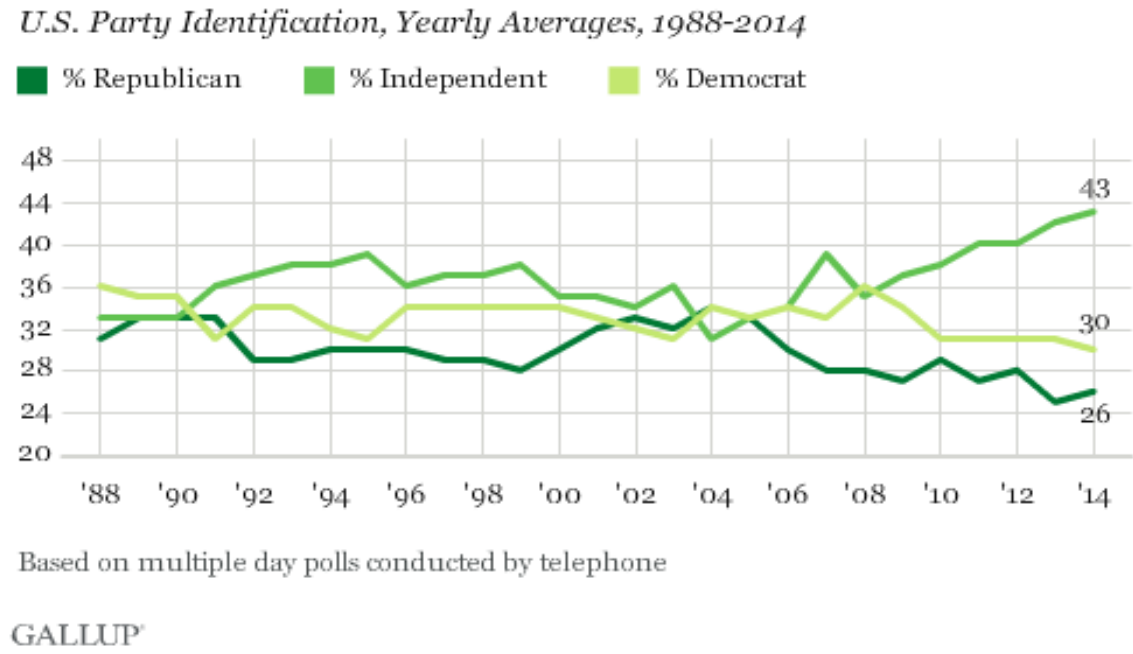
		Vote share	EV
1912	Teddy Roosevelt	28%	88
1924	Robert LaFollette	17%	13
1948	Strom Thurmond	3%	39
1968	George Wallace	14%	46
1980	John Anderson	7%	0
1992	Ross Perot	19%	0

Since Perot

- Electorate has changed dramatically: sharp increase in Independent registration
- Pervasive anger at all things Washington

Sharp increase in independents: Gallup

Gallup reports a sharp increase in Independent voters. Voter registration statistics in states that register by party show the same.



Approach #1: Back of the envelope: Electoral College Votes in states that have voted for an independent

1. Look at statewide races that have elected Independent candidates in statewide races
 2. Take the most Republican state to do so (Alaska) and the most Democratic state to do so (Rhode Island) and consider all states in between (on a Tilt R to Tilt D ranking) in play.
 3. This generates an estimated 421 electoral college votes
 - Excludes 3 states more Democratic than Rhode Island
 - Excludes 12 states more Republican than Alaska
- Note: Partisan ranking of states obtained from Cook Political Report

Approach #1 Details

- States that have elected Independents for Governor (relatively recently)
 - Ventura (MN)
 - Walker (AK)
 - Weicker (CT)
 - King (ME)
 - Chafee (RI)
- States that have elected Independents for US Senate
 - Sanders (VT)
 - Lieberman (CT)
 - King (ME)
- Note: most of were already quite well known before they decided to run as Independents

Approach #2: elasticity

- Elasticity is a measure reflecting how many swing voters a state has.
 - You can have very partisan states that are very elastic:
 - Rhode Island is both very Democratic and very elastic; even with a lot of elasticity Republicans have a very tough time winning. But note that Rhode Island has had both Republican and Independent Governors recently.
- Make the assumption is that with more elasticity, and therefore fewer straight ticket voters, 'elastic' states might be more likely to vote for an Independent.
- Scenario 1: If you pick the most elastic and center most states (see next page: middle cell of the top row), the number of electoral college votes is 66
- Scenario 2: If you pick the high and medium elastic and center most states (middle cell of top two rows), the number of electoral college votes adds to 169
- Scenario 3: all top swing states, plus medium swing of center states (entire top row, plus middle cell of the 2nd row); this yields 205 electoral college votes.
- Note: any of these scenarios might be enough to prevent a Republican or a Democrat from getting an absolute majority of the Electoral College votes, throwing the election to the House of Representatives. See last page on that.

Note: Data is taken from a the 538 column a couple of years ago (NYT, May 21, 2012).

Approach #2: details

Partisanship Elasticity	D states	Center states	R states
High	HI, MA, RI, VT	ME, OR, WA, CO, IA, NH, NM, WI, AR, MT	AK, ND, SD, WV
Medium	CA, CT, IL	NJ, FL, MI, MN, NV, OH, MO	AR, ID, KS, KY, NE, TN, TX, UT, WY
Low	DC, DE, MD, NY	NC, PA, VA, IN, GA	AL, LA MS, OK, SC

Approach #3: Perot / Ventura / King

- Ross Perot got 13% of the Democrats, 17% of Republicans and 30% of Independents (exit polling); he got fewer Independents than Clinton or Bush, so not a good model.

	Clinton	Bush	Perot
Democrats	77	10	13
Republicans	10	73	17
Independents	38	32	30

- Reflecting the increase in Independents, if you apply these numbers to Gallup's estimates of R's, D's and I's, Perot would have gotten 21.2% of the vote, instead of 18.9% he did get.

Approach #3: Perot, Ventura, King

Ventura got elected with the following distribution of partisan support (exit polling)

	Humphrey	Coleman	Ventura
Democrats	56	10	33
Republicans	5	66	29
Independents	17	28	52

Angus King has been elected as an independent 3 times; the first was his election to the Governorship in 1994

	Brennan (D)	Collins (R)	Carter (Green)	King (I)
Democrats	61	10	7	23
Republicans	13	41	2	45
Independents	26	23	11	40

Note I could not find exit polling the Linc Chafee race for Governor of Rhode Island.

Approach #3: Independent voters

- Apply the Ventura / King model with some changes. At this point there is no reason to believe an Independent candidate would draw more Democratic than Republican votes for instance. Also anti DC anger is higher than it was in '98.
 - The model: the Independent candidate gets 22.5% of GOP and Dem votes and 55% of Independent vote

	% of all voters	% of group going to Independent	Multiply and add
D's	30	.3	9%
I's	43	.55	23.65%
R's	26	.3	7.8%
		Total	40.45%

- If these assumptions are correct, it is not hard to see an Independent get a larger vote share than either the Republican or Democratic candidate
- Note: this only works IF Independents actually bother to show up: the 2012 national exit poll pegged the number of Independents on election day at 29%, while Gallup reports that 40% considered themselves Independents in 2012.
 - Below we use exit polling, reflecting counts of Independents who actually do show up.

Approach #3: Independent voters by state, assign Electoral College votes

- It's difficult to find a source of data measuring independent voters the same way in every state
- Exit polling is one source: uses party ID
 - One problem is that exit polling is not conducted in every state every two years
 - Data below goes as far back as 2008 exit polls to get statistics
 - But: relatively few states, the bulk are '12 and '14 data
 - But: mixing Presidential and non Presidential elections
- Step 1: apply the Ventura / King model from the previous page and add models for D and R candidates
 - Dem model: 22.5% of I vote, 60% of D vote, 10% of R vote
 - Rep model: 22.5% of I vote, 10% of D vote, 60% of R vote
- Step 3: calculate who will win each state and allocate EV's.
- Result:
 - Independent: 443 EV
 - Democrat: 42 EV
 - Republican: 30 EV

Approach 3#: grain of salt

There are several problems with this model

1. Partisans have become more partisan in the last few years. Defection rates of 40% among today's R's and D's strike me as high.
 2. Under this scenario 23 states containing 302 EV's would go to the Independent with a margin smaller than 5%. That is a lot of close races that would have to fall in place.
 - Only 17 states would go to the Independent by a margin of more than 5%, amounting to 145 electoral college votes (AL, AR, AZ, FL, ME, MA, MO, MT, NV, NH, OR, TN, VT, WA, WI)
 - Ignoring for the moment that Maine could split its Electoral College vote
 3. The model does not recognize that some states have more 'swing' or 'elasticity' than other states. The number of Independents does not reflect this entirely.
 - In Kentucky, for instance, rural Democrats routinely vote for Republicans for federal office. In California cross-over voting is a rare event.
 4. In a lot of the very close states either Democrats or Republicans or both have a solid infrastructure in place to get their people out. In close races that matters.
 - In many southern states for instance, an independent might split the White vote while the African American vote would probably stay solidly Democratic, potentially moving some Republican states into the Democratic column.
- I do think it is very possible that a strong independent challenge could prevent the major party candidates from getting a majority of the Electoral College. There are enough states on the list of 17 above that are 'must get' states for either party.

Bottom Line

- The numbers suggest it is possible that an independent candidate could win outright, but I think it is unlikely.
 - A lot of closely divided states would have to fall in line
- Independents would truly have to behave as Independents.
 - In a number of states people register as Independent who are quite liberal and vote Democratic nearly all the time (Massachusetts for instance).
- The model assumes equal defection rates among Republicans and Democrats. This far out that is a reasonable assumption. In November things may work out differently.
 - Trump for instance, with many primary voters to his left, might suffer from a higher defection rate than Clinton who is closer to the center.

EV absolute majority

- To be elected President requires an absolute majority of the Electoral College vote.
- The Twelfth Amendment provides for what happens if the Electoral College fails to elect a president or vice president:

... if no person have such majority, then from the persons having the highest numbers not exceeding three on the list of those voted for as President, the House of Representatives shall choose immediately, by ballot, the President. But in choosing the President, the votes shall be taken by states, the representation from each state having one vote. if no person have such majority, then from the persons having the highest numbers not exceeding three on the list of those voted for as President, the House of Representatives shall choose immediately, by ballot, the President. But in choosing the President, the votes shall be taken by states, the representation from each state having one vote

- Note: 33 state delegations are majority Republican, although that count could change in these elections; but it won't change by much.

... And if the House of Representatives shall not choose a President whenever the right of choice shall devolve upon them, before the fourth day of March next following, then the Vice-President shall act as President, as in the case of the death or other constitutional disability of the President.

- So we'll have to see who Trump picks as his VP nominee.