

WSJ ON CAMPUS  
from  
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



can navigate the transition  
to college—together.

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

THE NUMBERS GUY | OCTOBER 23, 2010

## In a Divisive Election, Consensus Eludes Forecasters, Too

By CARL BIALIK



Nearly everyone expects the Republicans Party to take a decisive majority in the House of Representatives after the vote on Nov. 2. Just try telling that to some of the political scientists whose job it is to predict election outcomes.

Thanks to the wide variety of tools forecasters employ, their predictions diverge, sometimes sharply, on the extent of Republican gains and even over whether the pickup will be big enough to transfer control of the House.

### Numbers Guy Blog

[Forecasting Campaign 2010](#)



[View Full Image](#)

Getty Images

The U.S. House of Representatives chamber in December 2008.

Forecasters themselves say the party balance in the House is tougher to predict than it seems on the surface. Calling House contests isn't as simple as averaging a few polls in the 435 districts and declaring likely winners. Polls are sparse in some races, and pollsters struggle to identify likely voters when turnout typically is light in midterms. In addition, local surveys don't always square with national trends or with other signals political scientists study, such as presidential approval ratings or economic conditions.

One explanation for the big range of predictions is that forecasters employ different methods. Some concentrate on nationwide trends, while others look closely at individual races. And some are purely quantitative while others mix numbers with judgment calls.

Political prognosticators say one reason they use different methods—and come up with different results—is that election forecasting is a relatively young science. Forecasters have been using statistical analysis for only a few decades, and the opportunity to observe midterms comes around just once every four years.

### Attack Ads

Get a look at some of the ads campaigns are running to embarrass their rivals—and vote for the most effective.

What makes this year especially tough is that most forecasters anticipate a so-called wave election, in which one party makes major gains. There simply aren't many precedents on which to base their models: One party has gained 20 seats or more in five midterm elections in the last half-century.

"We just don't have the data we need to go back before 1946," says Alan Abramowitz, a political scientist at Emory University.

### Races in 2010



See which House, Senate and governors' races are considered closest.

[More interactive graphics and photos](#)

"We are dealing with a fundamentally different electoral system, and very different electorates."

Complicating matters, analysts looking at House races need to decide how to weigh national polls that aim to capture party preferences.

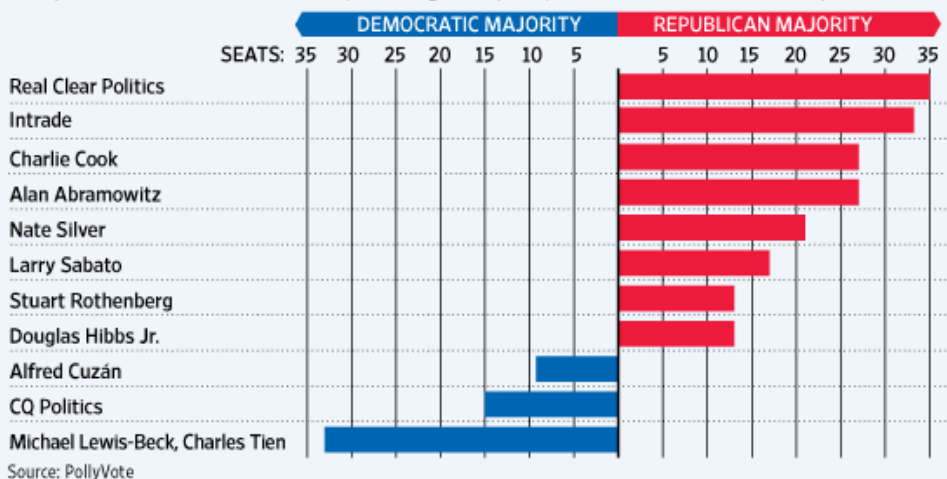
"Congressional elections generally are more difficult," says James Campbell, a political scientist at the University at Buffalo. "A lot of local factors come into play."

Political scientists tend to rely on one of three types of prediction methods. Veteran forecasters, notably Charlie Cook and Stuart Rothenberg, combine data with impressionistic analysis, drawing on decades of experience calling races as well as interviews with hundreds of candidates. In the purely statistical camp is Nate Silver, who gained attention for his computer model that accurately predicted the 2008 presidential election and has developed a similar tool for House races. And a number of political scientists have produced mathematical models that, for the most part, treat the election as a single race.

Most political fortune tellers have Republicans taking control of the House, but a few see the Democrats emerging with a narrow edge.

### Conflicting Visions

Pollsters and researchers have produced a wide range of forecasts for how the balance of power in the House of Representatives will look after Nov. 2, according to PollyVote, a website that studies election predictions.



Mr. Cook, who expects a Republican takeover similar to the GOP's 52-seat gain in 1994, has been calling House races since 1984. Mr. Cook and some other election analysts assign ratings to each race, indicating whether it is almost certain to go in one party's column, is leaning that way or is a tossup.

Most of the time, his predictions have been on target.

Yet in the last two House elections, both of which featured major Democratic gains, Mr. Cook's midsummer forecasts didn't fully pick up the extent of the party's victory, according to an analysis by Prof. Campbell: 24 of 25 seats leaning Democratic went that way, but just 12 of 27 lean-Republican seats were won by the Republican candidate.

### Live Updates on Election Night

[Get breaking email alerts](#)

"Wave elections are a heck of a lot trickier to predict than normal years," Mr. Cook says. He adds that his ratings of races aren't

[Follow our Twitter account.](#)

[Follow updates on Facebook](#)

[Complete Coverage: Campaign 2010](#)

precisely forecasts, but instead are intended to indicate to paying subscribers to his newsletter which races are worth watching.

Nonetheless, his projections often are converted into precise forecasts for comparison purposes. For instance, PollyVote, a group of political scientists and economists who study forecasting, translate Mr. Cook's broad outlook for the House into a 52-seat gain because he has written that he expects an outcome similar to 1994.

Mr. Silver, who writes about his forecasts on the New York Times's website, also takes a quantitative approach, but he does so by forecasting each district, using half a dozen variables, including polls, voter income levels and candidates' fund-raising. "In the long run, you're going to do a lot better with a district-by-district analysis," Mr. Silver says.

---

#### More Numbers Guy

[Where Infrastructure Estimates Come Up Short](#) (10/16/10)

[Sex Studies Leave a Lot to Be Desired](#) (10/09/10)

[Hiring Data Tell Different Stories](#) (10/02/10)

He and other analysts note that a single numerical prediction might mask the extent of uncertainty, especially with a high number of close races.

Dartmouth College political scientist Joseph Bafumi and his colleagues forecast a 23-seat House majority for Republicans, but give the Democrats a one-in-five chance of holding on to power. Though there is major potential for error with these

forecasts, Prof. Bafumi says, "no one wants to know about that too much."

**Write to** Carl Bialik at [numbersguy@wsj.com](mailto:numbersguy@wsj.com)

Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A4

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)