Follow the Bouncing Ball:
Presidential Nominating Conventions and Campaign Dynamics

Costas Panagopoulos

Institution for Social and Policy Studies
Yale University
77 Prospect Street
P.O. Box 208209
New Haven, CT 06520
(917) 405-9069
costas@yale.edu

Prepared for presentation at the State of the Parties Conference, University of Akron,
October 5, 2005

Introduction

Few features of the process of presidential selection in the United States have changed as dramatically as the national presidential nominating conventions. Once the setting for passionate candidate and policy contests between party factions, critics assert that contemporary conventions are primarily ceremonial: giant, quadrennial pep rallies or intricately orchestrated partisan productions that offer little guidance by way of useful information for the electorate (Panagopoulos 2004). Others describe conventions as "nonevents," representing a significant break from the past when conventions were deliberative meetings that featured genuine debate and negotiation amongst party leaders. Indeed between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries, at least two ballots were necessary to select a nominee at 26 conventions (10 Republican and 16 Democratic) (Holbrook 1996: 69) whereas the last time more than one ballot was necessary in modern times was 1952.

These developments in the nature of nominating conventions may be partly accountable for the patterns in the timing of the voting decision we observe. Data presented in Figure 1 demonstrates a sizable decline in the proportion of voters that reaches a decision about their presidential vote during the conventions from about one-quarter of voters in the 1960s to about one-tenth in recent election cycles. In fact, an analysis of the data suggests that proportion of voters that has reached a voting decision during the period of the conventions has declined by over one percentage point per election cycle between 1964 and 2004 (regressed on time and a constant, the coefficient equals -1.04 with standard error = 0.42; $p<.05$; N=11 Adj. R-squared=0.34).

[Insert Figure 1]

Despite these realities, nominating conventions remain crucial elements of presidential campaigns. Thomas Patterson (2004) argues that, "[c]onventions retain a purpose for which they were invented in the 1830s—the rallying of the party faithful. But they also serve a modern purpose. They boost interest in the campaign and heighten citizens' understanding of the candidates. In an age of 10-second soundbites and 30-second ads, the conventions stand alone as an opportunity for the public to hear at length why each party and its nominee should be entrusted with the presidency."

A feature—or byproduct—of national nominating conventions that has attracted considerable attention from both scholars and politicians alike is the convention "bump" (or bounce) that tends to follow each convention. Simply stated, the bump is the increase in support (relative to pre-convention support in opinion surveys) that a candidate typically receives at the conclusion of the party's convention.

The theoretical intuition behind the convention bump is rather straight-forward. Conventions offer the political parties the opportunity to present its candidate and image to voters in a positive and relatively uncontested format (Holbrook 1996: 71). Parties dominate the flow of information during conventions, exert notable control over the message disseminated through media outlets and generally attract favorable coverage during the convention period (Holbrook 1996). Holbrook (1996: 71) explains that, "[a]s voters learn more about the candidate and are exposed to campaign rhetoric on behalf of the candidate, they are more likely to support the candidate."

The resulting spike in support that typically follows nominating conventions can be consequential for presidential contenders. Campbell, Cherry and Wink (1992) have shown that while some portion of the bump from conventions is temporary, there is also evidence that part of the increase in support can have lasting implications. Campbell (2000: 150) estimates that, "a healthy portion," about half of the net convention bump, carries through to Election Day.

Convention Bumps: Measurement and Data

Scholarly approaches to measuring convention bumps have varied despite the relative simplicity suggested by the description of the concept of the convention bump. The method commonly used to calculate convention bumps was developed initially by Campbell et al. (1992). The pre-convention level of support is based on trial-heat polls taken between six days and two weeks prior to the opening of the convention. Post-convention support is based on surveys conducted during the week following the last day of the convention. The percentages are based on the candidate's share of respondents who expressed support for one of the two major party candidates for president, and the bump is the difference between the two preference measures (summarized in Holbrook 1996: 77-79).

Reliable survey results are unavailable prior to 1964, thus most analyses of convention bumps start there. Even so, other methodological considerations must be taken into account. First, most scholars determine preferences using data from Gallup surveys. While Gallup poll data on presidential preference is widely and consistently

available for the longest period of time, recent scholarship suggests the data may be susceptible to short-term fluctuations that skew the results, especially when samples are classified by estimates of respondents' likelihood of voting in the election (Erikson, Panagopoulos and Wlezien 2004)[1]. Second, other sample-based differences may also be consequential, and decisions about whether to use samples of registered voters or likely voters may influence measurement significantly. A third issue revolves around the appropriate number of pre- and post-convention surveys to be included. Some scholars advocate including multiple surveys conducted over several days by various survey organizations and using mean levels of support averaged over a set of surveys. Others espouse looking at single surveys that either immediately precede or follow conventions. Finally, there is substantial debate over how to allocate preferences for non-major party candidates even as most studies simply exclude these and limit the analysis to preferences for major-party candidates only,

I adopt the following approach to estimate convention bumps in this study. My aim is to maximize the precision of the data by incorporating several considerations described above. I estimate pre- and post-convention support using available Gallup data for the period 1964-1988 and ABC/*Washington Post* data for elections 1992-2004. Preferences are measured from surveys of registered voters taken immediately prior and

[1] While overanalyzing small differences in polls is a common hazard, 2004 data do underscore how bounce measurements can differ. The Gallup Organization's final poll before the July 26-29 Democratic convention was completed July 21, five days before the convention began; it had John Kerry and George W. Bush at 47-43 percent support. Gallup's post-convention poll, completed Aug. 1, had a 47-48 percent Kerry-Bush race – a net loss of five points for Kerry on the margin, the only negative bounce in Gallup data since George McGovern's in 1972.

By contrast, the 2004 ABC News/Washington Post pre-Democratic convention poll was completed July 25, four days later than Gallup's and the very night before the convention began; it found a 46-48 percent Kerry-Bush race (i.e., six points better for Bush on the margin). The post-convention ABC/Post poll, completed the same date as Gallup's, had a 50-44 percent race – a positive bounce of eight points for Kerry, which is nearer the long-term average.

immediately following each party's national nominating convention[2]. Preferences indicate share of two-party support major-party candidates only.

Convention Bumps Over Time: 1964-2004

The magnitude of convention bumps over the period 1964 to 2004 are displayed is Figure 2. The data demonstrate that the size (and, in the case of the chaotic Democratic convention of 1972, the direction) of convention bumps is considerably variable across election cycles, but not necessarily across parties. On average, both Democratic and Republican candidates extracted an equal 12-point increase in support following their nominating conventions[3]. This estimate is substantially larger than previous estimates of convention bumps (Campbell et al. 1992; Campbell 2000; Holbrook 1996). Interestingly, the lowest increase registered for a Republican candidate was the bump of only 4 percentage points earned by President George W. Bush following the 2004 convention. The highest bump for a Republican candidate (20 points) was afforded to Richard Nixon in 1968. Post-convention bumps for Democratic candidates in this period range from a reverse, 2-point *drop* in support for McGovern in 1972 to the highest increase ever recorded (36 points) for Bill Clinton in 1992. An analysis of the data reveals that post-convention bumps for Democratic candidates have been twice as variable as those for Republican candidates (standard deviations of 10.8 and 5.2 percentage points respectively), but few other party-based differences emerge in the initial analysis. The

[2] Note that while there are some differences between the approach I adopt and Campbell (2000), our respective estimates of convention bumps for corresponding periods correlate at the 0.84 (Pearson's R $p<.01$) level.

[3] Excluding Bill Clinton's unusually high bump of 36 points in 1992, Democratic candidates averaged 10-point bumps over this period.

data reveal no trends in the size of convention bumps over time for either party's candidates. While the magnitude of convention bumps has fluctuated across specific election cycles, it has remained relatively stable over time for candidates of both major parties and I observe do general patterns of surge or decline in the size of convention bumps between 1964 and 2004. The overall stability we observe over time in the magnitude of convention bumps is puzzling, especially given developments in related aspects of national conventions to which we turn our attention below.

[Insert Figure 2]

Explaining Patterns in Convention Bumps

Previous studies have provided a variety of explanations for the variation we observe in the magnitude of convention bumps. Scholars have demonstrated that post-convention increases in support tend to be higher for the party that hosts the first convention, typically the non-incumbent party. Campbell et al. (1992) explain that this finding is reasonable for three reasons. The first convention occurs earlier in the campaign season when a larger segment of the electorate is either undecided or not committed strongly to a specific candidate. Second, information is more scarce earlier in the campaign. Finally, voters are generally less knowledgeable about the challenging party which typically that holds the first convention (Holbrook 1996: 90). This finding has remained robust across other similar analyses. Convention bumps have also been shown to be larger for candidates who are trailing as they enter their conventions, most

likely for informational reasons similar to those described above. Campbell (2000) finds that trailing candidates gain about eight percentage points on average after their conventions, while frontrunners gain only above five points over their pre-convention support on average.

The theoretical underpinnings of the hypotheses tested by these analyses are driven by an information-based model of convention effects rooted in press coverage of convention proceedings. Despite the critical connection between the level of information about candidates generated by the convention and transmitted by the media, few empirical analyses explicitly incorporate measures of convention coverage and exposure in an effort to establish such links. Below I develop a model to explain the variation in convention bumps that includes such measures.

The omission of measures of media coverage of conventions (and exposure to such coverage) potentially leaves much of the story untold. In fact, a key development over the period examined by this study with respect to conventions, is the sharp drop in the media's coverage of conventions. Even as conventions tend to increase the overall amount of front-page newspaper[4] attention devoted to the presidential campaigns (Holbrook 1996), television coverage of actual, unfiltered convention proceedings has plummeted over the past four decades. Data on the total number of hours of network coverage of convention proceedings for each party's conventions between 1964 and 2004 is presented in Figure 3. The general pattern of decline applies to both parties. Whereas television networks routinely devoted between 30-40 hours of coverage to conventions during the 1960s, network coverage dropped ten-fold to its lowest level ever (3 hours for each convention) in 2004. An analysis of the data indicates that the total number of hours

[4] Only the *New York Times* was included in this study.

devoted to conventions by the networks has fallen steadily by over seven hours, on average (both parties) per election cycle (regressed on time and a constant, coefficient = -7.01; standard error= 0.75; p<.01; N=11; Adj. R-squared=0.90.)

[Insert Figure 3]

Figure 4 presents similar, although not identical, data on convention audiences in terms of ratings for convention viewership between 1964 and 2004. The data reveal a similar pattern of decline. Whereas over 25 percent of households with televisions routinely watched convention coverage during the average minute in the 1960s, ratings had dropped to about 15 percent of households for the three most recent convention cycles.

The decline is media coverage of conventions may be partly accountable for the decline we observe in the proportion of voters who make up their minds about which candidate to vote for during the conventions. Table 1 presents the findings of regression analyses that provide support for the hypotheses that declining coverage time and audience sizes help explain the dwindling rate of vote choice decisions arrived at during the conventions. The analyses show that higher ratings and audience sizes are associated with higher rates of decisionmaking during conventions. The simultaneous decline in ratings, coverage and decisionmaking at conventions over the period of this study suggests a linked phenomenon.

[Insert Figure 4]

It is reasonable to expect a relationship between media coverage of and attention to media coverage of convention proceedings and the magnitude of convention bumps. Specifically, we may expect a negative relationship to exist between these media coverage and attention variables and the size of convention bumps. If this is in fact the case, then the developments we observe over this period—the decline in network coverage of conventions and the decline in convention viewership—should be depressing the overall size of convention bumps over time. Yet there is no such evidence that the overall size of post-convention increases in support has been dragged down by the declining coverage and attention phenomenon. The empirical model I develop and test below will examines these questions further.

Two other factors that may influence the size of the convention bump are the portion of the electorate that is undecided about their vote choice before the conventions and the level of interest in the presidential campaign. Larger segments of undecided voters before the conventions signify greater opportunities for conventions to make an impact on voters and earn their support. Persuading voters who have already decided which candidate to support on Election Day is clearly a taller task. Undecided voters are not only more likely to be influenced by what they learn during conventions but they are also more likely to be interested in acquiring information that may help them to reach a decision, and, to that end, may turn to the conventions for help. Thus, we can expect a positive relationship between the overall proportion of undecided voters by the conventions and the size of the convention bump.

Data presented in Figure 1 permits us to determine the size of the electorate that was undecided about which presidential candidate to support before the conventions began between 1964 and 2004. The data reveal that 59 percent of voters on average are undecided by the time conventions convene during this period. The data also suggest, however, that the segment of the electorate that has been undecided at the start of the conventions is declining over time, even though the decline is not statistically significant at conventional levels (regressed on time and a constant, coefficient = -0.85; standard error =0.72; $p<0.27$; N=11; Adj. R-squared=0.04).

The level of interest in the presidential campaign is also likely to affect the size of the convention bump. Patterson (2004) suggests that the level of interest in the presidential election affects the number of "inadvertent" convention viewers. Unlike "deliberate viewers," who Patterson claims turn on the television set with the intention to watch the conventions, inadvertent viewers are those who come across the convention coverage while watching television and decide to stay tuned. The level of election interest affects the number of inadvertent viewers, and greater interest will act to generate attention to conventions and, consequently, boost convention bumps.

Interest is the outcome of the 2004 presidential election was higher than it has ever been over the period of the study. Fully 85 percent of National Election Studies respondents reported that they "care a good deal" about which party wins the presidential election. In fact, despite the overall sense of political disengagement many studies (Putnam 2000) have recently reported, Figure 6 presents evidence that interest in the outcome of presidential campaigns has climbed steadily between 1964 and 2004. In fact, an analysis of the data (regressed on time and a constant) reveals that the proportion of

the electorate that "cares a good deal" about which party wins the presidential election (compared to the percentage who indicate they "don't care") has increased by over 2 percentage points in each election cycle over this period (coefficient=2.17; standard error= 0.62; p<.01; N=11; Adj. R-squared=0.53.)

[Insert Figure 5]

I will test an empirical model to explain the variation we observe in the magnitude of convention bumps over the period 1964 to 2004. I propose that the size of convention bumps will be a function of the following factors: *audience size* (measured in ratings points), *coverage* (measured as the total number of hours of coverage by television networks), *campaign interest* (measured as the proportion of NES respondents who report caring "a good deal" about which party wins the presidency, and *undecided voters* (measured as the proportion of NES respondents who indicate they had not decided which candidate to support before the conventions started). I will also include a dummy variable for the party which hosted the *first convention*. To summarize, I expect positive relationships between each of these variables and the dependent variable (*convention bump).*

Table 2 presents the results of the multivariate regression analysis. The findings reveal support for several hypotheses. Confirming the results of previous studies (Holbrook 1996; Campbell et al. 1992), hosting the first convention in the cycle significantly boosts the magnitude of the convention bump. All else equal, the party that hosts the first convention earns a post-convention boost that is 8.78 points higher on average than the

bump afforded to the party that hosts the second convention. Of course, as I discussed above, it is difficult to disentangle this “first convention” effect from an “incumbency effect” since the incumbent party typically holds its convention last in the cycle. Nevertheless, the findings remain robust that the first convention bump is significantly higher than the convention bump that follows it.

There is no evidence that campaign interest affects the size of the convention bump. The coefficient for this variable does not achieve conventional levels of significance. One possibility is that campaign interest is expressed as larger audience size, but no independent effect emerges from the results.

The proportion of undecided voters at the start of the conventions does exert a significant and positive effect on the magnitude of the convention bump, as expected. The results suggest that for each percentage point increase in the proportion of the electorate that is undecided the size of the convention bump is likely to increase by 0.41 percentage points.

The results of the analysis with respect to the media coverage and audience size variables are perverse. Both variables appear to exert a significant effect on the dependent variable, yet in opposite directions. Higher rates of network coverage appear to depress the size of the bump (contrary to expectation) while larger audience sizes boost the magnitude of the bump. Despite this curious finding, both variables appear to be significantly related to the size of the post-convention bump and thus merit inclusion in analyses that seek to explain the variation we observe.

Discussion

The analyses presented in this study describe the variation in the magnitude of the convention bump that typically follows each party's presidential nominating convention. The main objective of the analysis was to explain the patterns we observe. I have shown that several factors help explain the variation in the bump, including the timing of each party's convention, the proportion of undecided voters in the electorate, the level of network coverage and audience size.

One remaining task is to speculate about why the magnitude of the convention bump, which has varied over the period of this study, shows few signs of surge or decline for either party. It appears part of the explanation may be found in the media coverage and exposure variables included in this study. I initially suspected that the sharp decline in media coverage of conventions during the period of this study and the corresponding drop in audience size exposed to convention coverage on television would have had the effect of depressing the size of the bump over the same period. Yet these two variables appear to be in tension, working to offset each other and thus, mitigating any depressing effect of one with the augmenting effect of the other.

Additional work to explore many of these findings is necessary. Details about forms of coverage by other media besides television may help explain some of the perplexities raised in this study.

References

Campbell, James E. 2000. *The American Campaign*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

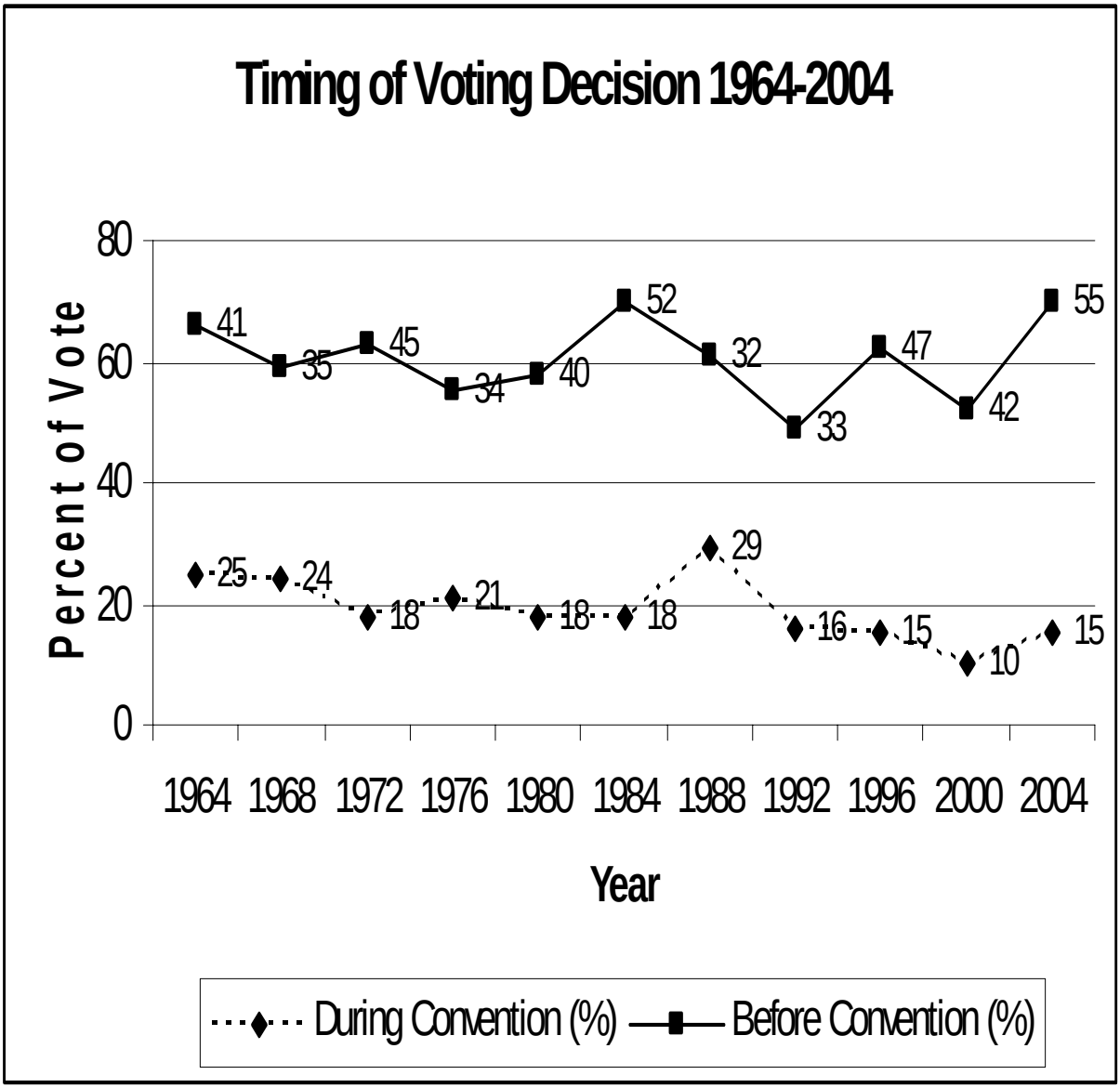
Campbell, James E., Lynna Cherry and Kenneth Wink. 1992. "The Convention Bump." *American Politics Quarterly* 20: 287-307.

Erikson, Robert S., Costas Panagopoulos and Christopher Wlezien. 2004. "Likely (and Unlikely) Voters and the Measurement of Campaign Dynamics." *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Winter)

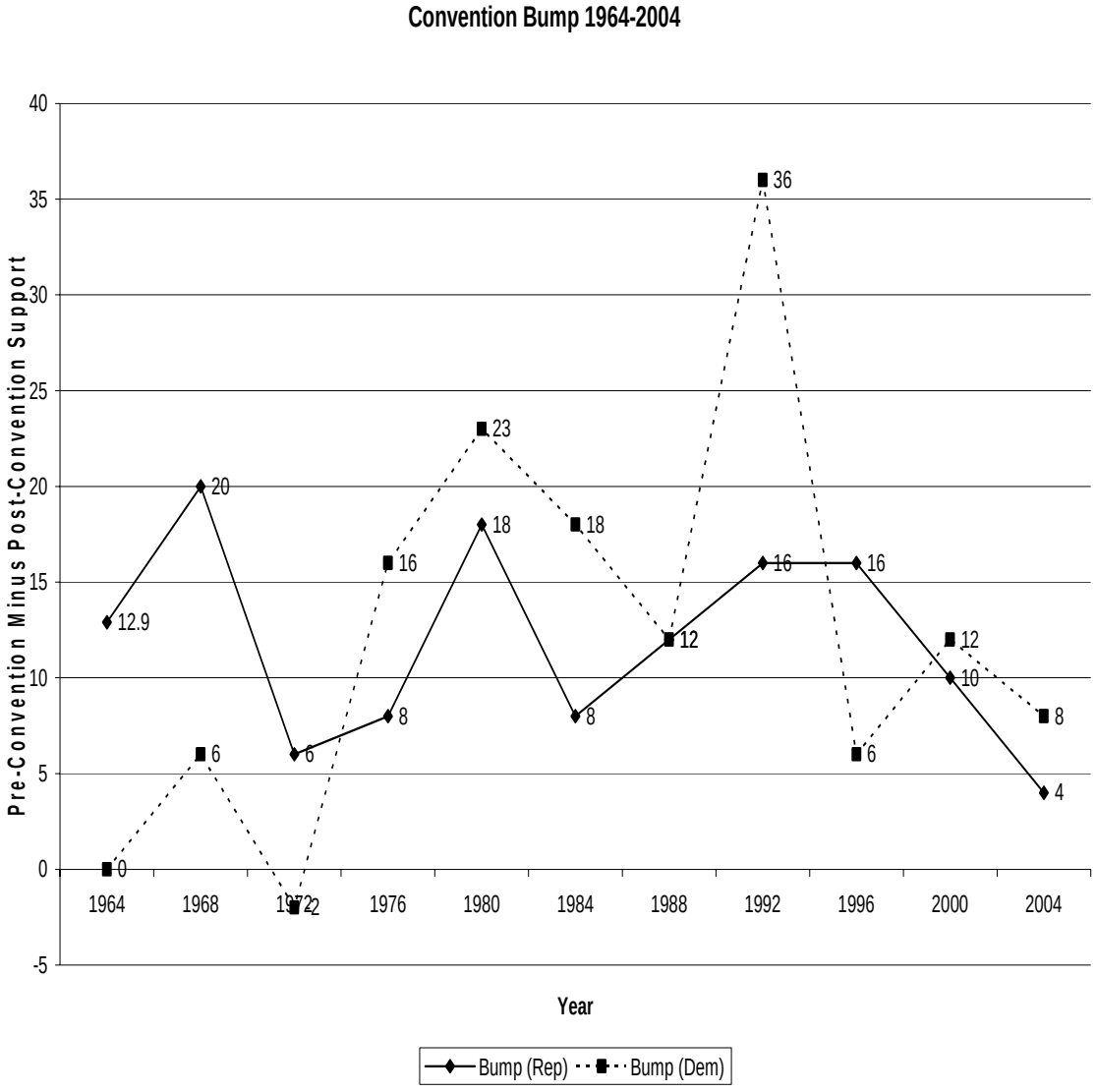
Holbrook. Thomas M. 1996. *Do Campaigns Matter?* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Panagopoulos, Costas. 2004. "Behind the Balloons: Political Consultants and National Nominating Conventions." *Campaigns & Elections.* July.

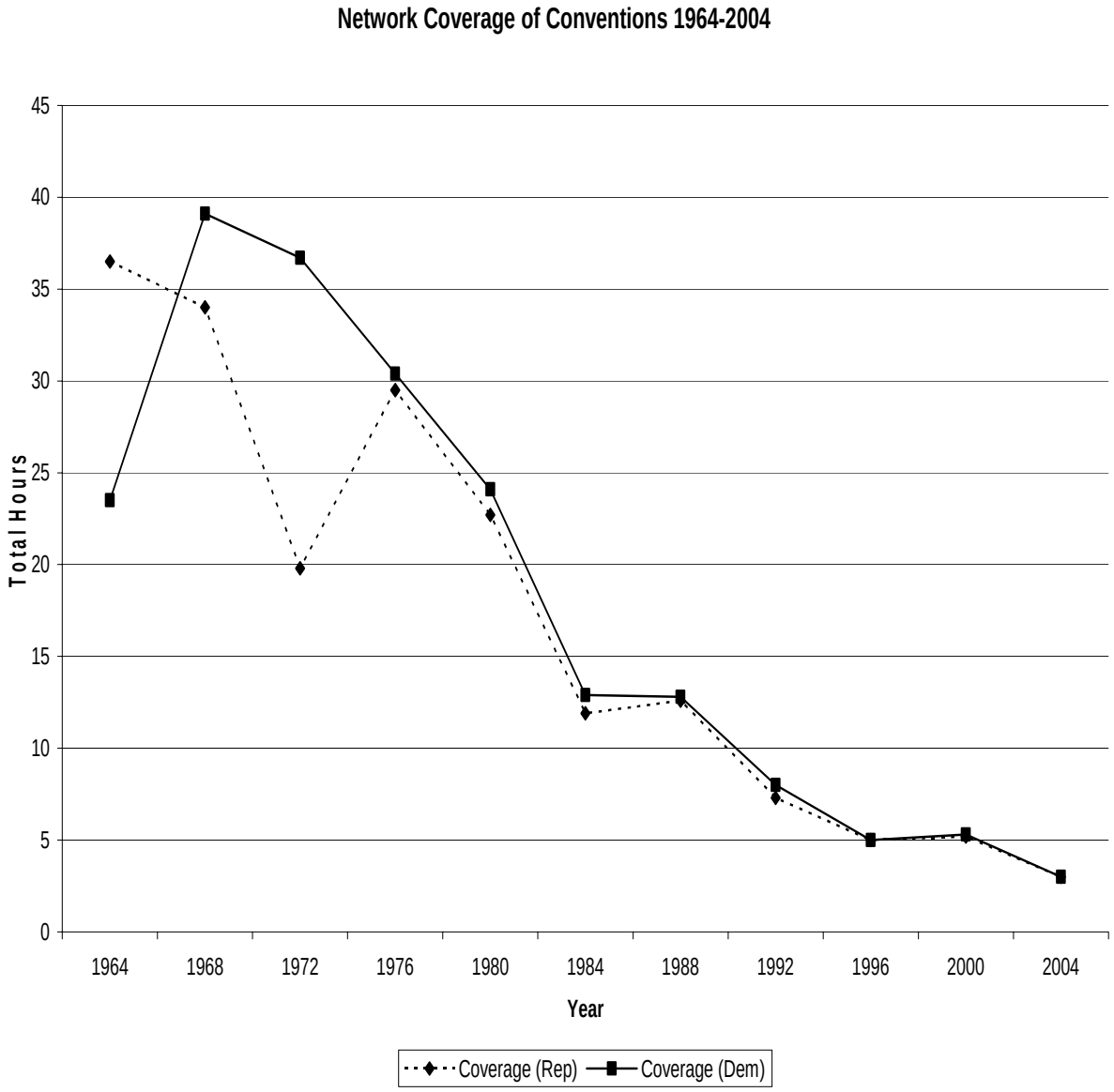
Patternson, Thomas. 2004. "Election Interest Is Up Sharply, But Convention Interest Is Not." Vanishing Voter Project. Harvard University. July 21.



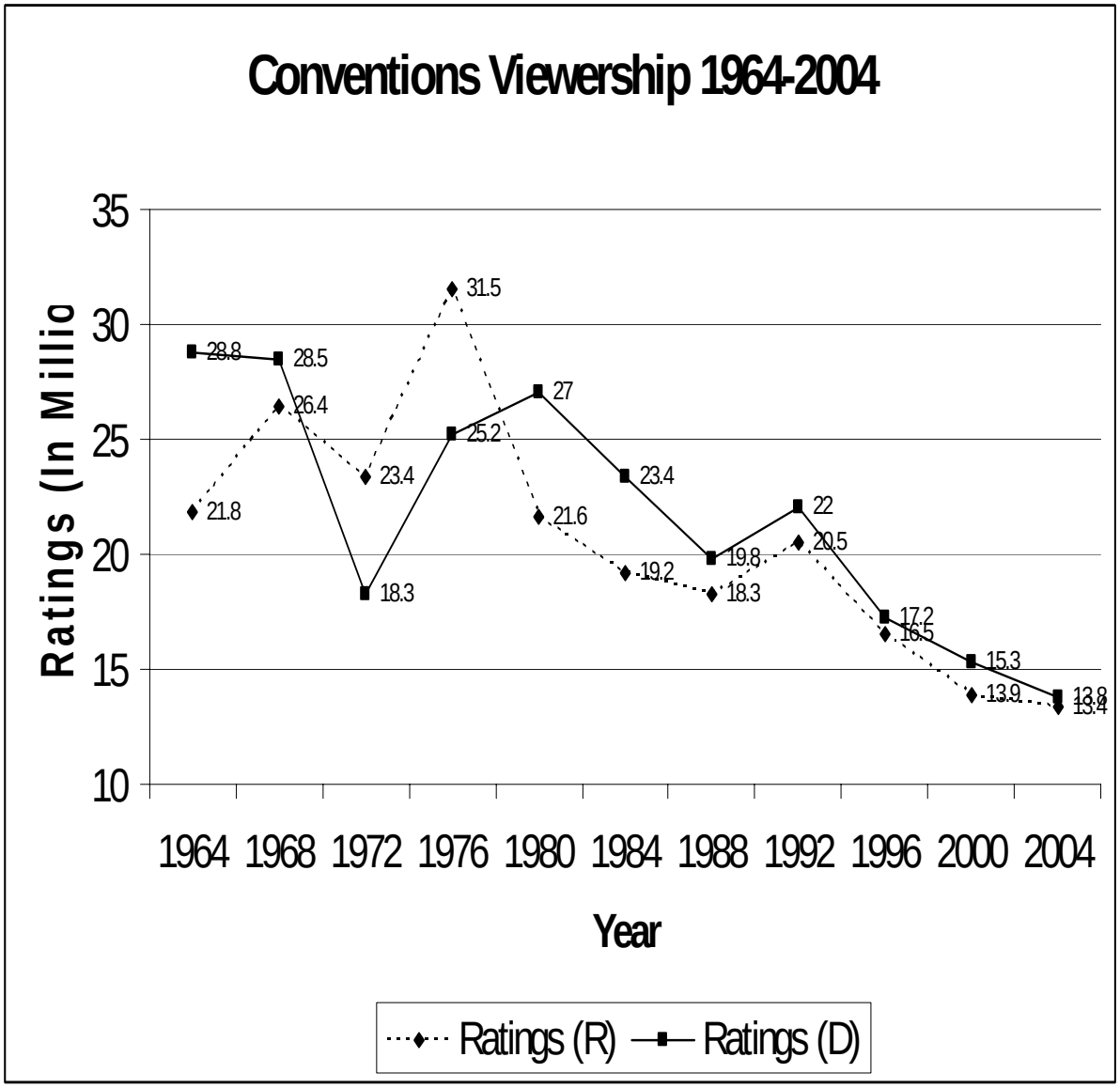
Source: National Election Studies.



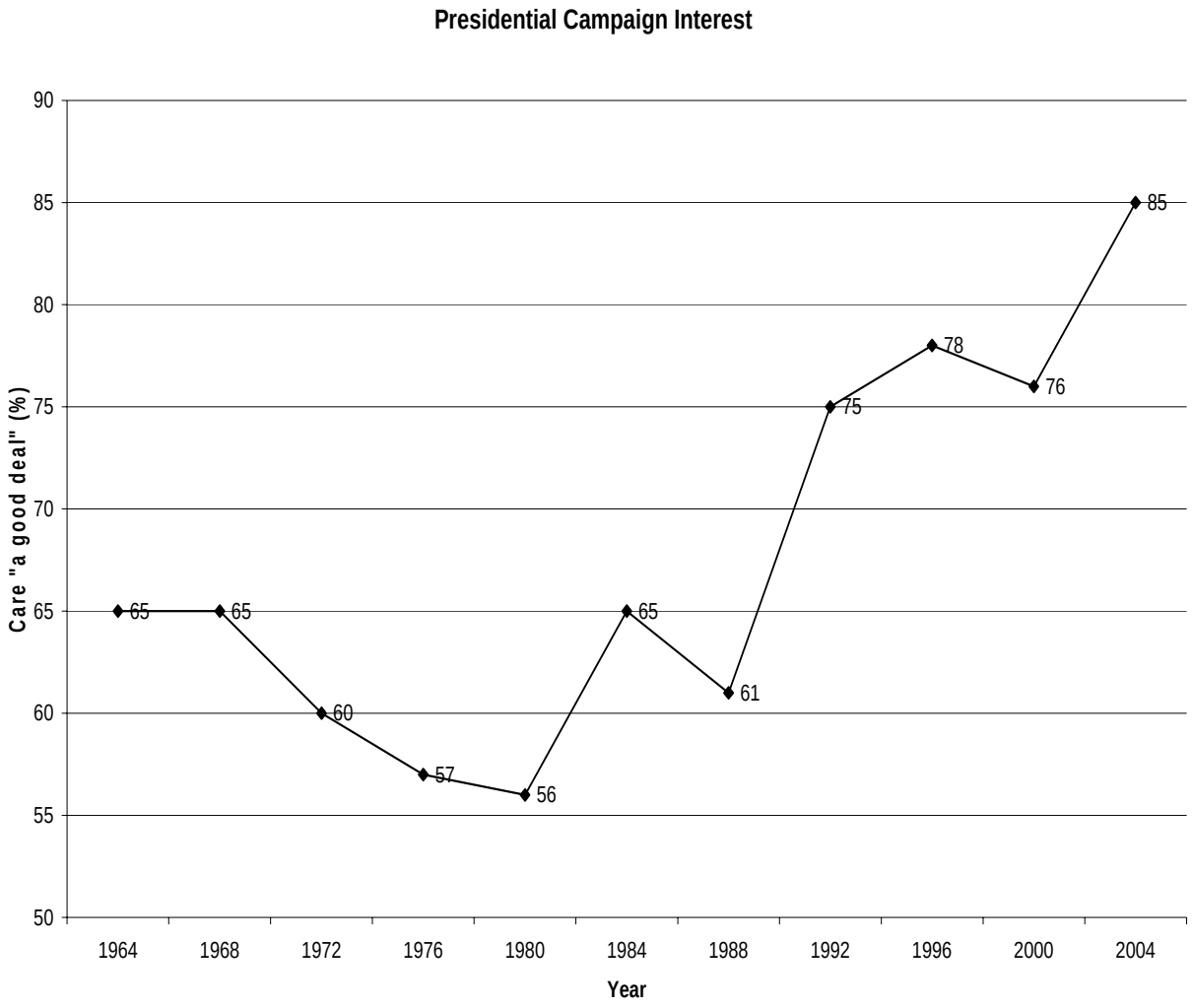
Source: Calculated by author from Gallup (1964-1988); ABC/*Washington Post* (1992-2004)



Source: *Vital Statistics on American Politics.*



Source: *Vital Statistics on American Politics.*



Source: National Election Studies.

Table 1: Vote Choice Decisionmaking During Conventions, Coverage and Audience

Dependent Variable: Proportion of voters who made up their minds about which candidate to vote for during national conventions (NES)

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Coverage (Networks total hours)	0.24*** (.08)	----------
Audience (Ratings)	----------	0.54*** (.19)
Constant	14.79*** (1.68)	7.63* (4.16)
N	22	22
Adj. R-Squared	0.28	0.25

NOTE: Ordinary Least Squares. Standard errors in parentheses.

****p<.01 ** p<.05 * p<.10*

Table 2: Explaining Convention Bumps

	Dependent Variable:
Independent Variables	Coefficient
Audience Size	0.95* (0.48)
Coverage	-0.51*** (0.20)
Campaign Interest	-.01 (0.25)
Undecided Voters	0.41* (0.23)
First Convention	8.78*** (3.07)
Constant	-28.08 (26.86)
N	22
Adjusted R-squared	0.36

NOTE: Ordinary Least Squares. Standard errors in parentheses

****p<.01 ** p<.05 * p<.10*