

Although it may need translation from British to American, some of you may be amused by the forecasting model developed by my (English) colleague and co-author, Roger Mortimore, who has worked out a foolproof (to date) methodology for forecasting British general elections.

"Professor Robert Mackenzie (LSE) was once quoted as saying that he enjoyed election nights in the same way other people enjoyed the Cup Final.

"Allow me to present a prediction model for determining the outcomes of British general elections, which over the period since 1950 has as a record to match Bob Mackenzie's swingometer. (See table.) All you have to do to predict which of the major parties will have an overall majority in the Commons following the election is to note the shirt colours usually worn by the current holders (on election day) of the FA Cup. If their shirts are predominantly in the Conservative colours of blue or white, a Conservative victory will ensue; on the other hand if the predominant colour is red or yellow, Labour will be successful. (Black stripes are ignored.)

"The table shows that the Tories win an election held when the FA Cup is held by a club who play in predominantly Blue or White shirts; Labour wins when the cup holders wear a shade of Red or Yellow. A hung Parliament results when the Cup holders wear both parties' colours.

Elec.	Winner	FA Cup holders	Shirt colour(s)	Correct?
1997	Lab	Manchester U. (1996)	RED	Y
1992	Con	Tottenham H. (1991)	WHITE	Y
1987	Con	Coventry City (1987)	Sky BLUE	Y
1983	Con	Manchester U. (1983)	RED	N*
1979	Con	Ipswich Town (1978)	BLUE	Y
O'74	Lab	Liverpool (1974)	RED	Y
F'74	Hung	Sunderland (1973)	RED & WHITE	Y
1970	Con	Chelsea (1970)	BLUE	Y
1966	Lab	Liverpool (1965)	RED	Y
1964	Lab	West Ham U. (1964)	RED	Y
1959	Con	Nott'm Forest (1959)	RED	N
1955	Con	Newcastle U. (1955)	Black & WHITE	Y
1951	Con	Newcastle U. (1951)	Black & WHITE	Y
1950	Lab	Wolves (1949)	"Old Gold"	Y

"\* Would have been correct if Brighton & Hove Albion (BLUE) had not missed an open goal in the dying seconds of the FA Cup final, before losing the replay.

"This, which I christened the "Sweet FA (Football Association) Prediction model", has failed only twice over the last fourteen elections; furthermore, the sensitivity of the prediction method is demonstrated by the election of February 1974, which produced the only post-election hung Parliament since the War - that election was fought when the cup holders were Sunderland, whose striped shirts are red and white in equal measure. The obvious improbability of such a pattern arising by chance gives the model a high degree of statistical significance.

The political implications should be obvious. If Tony Blair waits until after the next Cup Final to hold the election, the outcome is at present still in doubt. On the other hand, since the current FA Cup holders are Chelsea, who play in blue, if (as many have predicted) Tony Blair calls an election on 3 May, William Hague will be Prime Minister on 4 May.

Or perhaps not. The point of this jeu d'esprit is to demonstrate that it is possible to find an apparently statistically significant pattern in almost anything, given a sufficiently free hand. Of course, even this degree of freedom is not enough for some; at the next election we shall have, as we always have, predictions aplenty by methods that cannot claim even the semblance of a track record: astrology (in 1997, one astrologer confidently predicted John Major's victory on the basis of something called the planet Rahu); "voodoo" polls (prizewinner last time the Tesco "Electoral Roll" poll with a predicted 13% share for the Monster Raving Loonies); "on the basis of history". (Dr David Carlton was undisputed loser of the 20 Reuter's experts in 1997, who even at the last predicted a hung Parliament because he believed history showed that a swing big enough to give Tony Blair a majority was impossible).

It is always possible to construct a pattern which fits the past. But unless it explains the past, in a way which still applies in the present, it will not help predict the future. The initial test of any model must be its inherent plausibility as a causal explanation, and this is a test that relies on judgment, not mathematics; if this is forgotten, "statistically significant" becomes a meaningless, perhaps dangerously misleading, term. Nor is "track record", as such, anything more than a perceptual delusion. (Would the FA Cup model be a jot more plausible if I had originally discovered and published it in 1996?)

Perhaps Mr Blair should temporarily abandon Newcastle United (Black & White), and join Alastair Campbell on the terraces cheering Burnley (Claret) to the FA Cup, just to be on the safe side.

Roger Mortimore