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1 The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections, 1868–1988

There is a presidential pulse to congressional elections. Presidential campaigns affect congressional elections by their presence in on-year elections and by their absence in midterm elections. The first of these effects is most obvious: presidential coattails. The winning presidential party in presidential elections gains congressional votes and seats in proportion to its presidential vote. The second effect, the effect of the absence of the presidential campaign in midterm elections, is less obvious. Running without the advantage of presidential coattails, congressional candidates of the president's party suffer losses in the midterm. Like on-year gains, midterm congressional vote and seat losses associated with the absence of presidential coattails are proportionate to the previous presidential victory. This cycle of electoral change is the presidential pulse to congressional elections. The amplitude of this electoral change in the House of Representatives is set by the winning vote margin in the presidential election. Although the strength of the presidential pulse has weakened in recent years, it has been and remains a continuing feature of the American electoral system.

Presidential Theories of Congressional Elections

The idea that there is something like a presidential pulse to congressional elections is not new. Louis Bean long ago suggested that congressional candidates who live by presidential coattails die by their absence in the midterm.[1] Angus Campbell developed the theory of surge and decline to explain the linkage between individual voting

behavior and inter-election change in presidential and midterm elections.[2] According to this theory, the events and personalities of each presidential campaign almost always determine the presidential election winner. The intensity of the campaign causes many people having only a slight interest in politics (peripheral voters) to turn out to vote. These voters are easily swayed by the political climate of that election year. Together with defectors from the party disadvantaged by the campaign, these peripheral voters provide the winning margin for the presidential candidate of the advantaged party, and this spills over to help many congressional candidates of the winning presidential candidate's party. These advantages cannot be counted on at the midterm and, in any event, the generally lower intensity of the midterm election itself makes any short-term advantage of less consequence. Without the hoopla of the presidential contest, peripheral voters stay home. Without a presidential race to say otherwise, the partisan defectors of the previously disadvantaged party go home to their party. The fallout is that many congressional candidates of the president's party are left stranded at the midterm.

Both Bean's simple coattails theory and Campbell's surge-and-decline theory claim a presidential pulse to congressional elections. Presidential victories carry over to congressional election outcomes. Moreover, these presidential victories have repercussions for the next midterm. The loss of the favorable presidential surge or presidential coattails results in the presidential party's consistent loss of congressional support in midterm elections. The track record of the president's party in midterms is amazingly consistent: the president's party has lost seats in thirty-one of the thirty-two midterm elections held from 1862 to 1986.

The Eclipse of the Theory

Although it was once the conventional wisdom, the theory of surge and decline has been eclipsed in recent years. The theory has been challenged on four grounds.

1. Several suspected differences between presidential and midterm electorates that were suggested by the theory simply have not emerged. Specifically, while the theory implies that there should be more "independents" (presumably, more peripheral voters) and partisan defections in presidential rather than in midterm electorates,

Arseneau and Wolfinger did not find these consistent differences.[3]

While these findings raise doubts about how individual voting behavior generates the presidential pulse, there are other ways in which the presidential surge can take place. A revised theory claims that the presidential surge is a result of the presidential campaign swaying the vote choice of independent voters and influencing the turnout rates of partisans.[4] The party losing the presidential race has more cross-pressured partisans (voters who dislike the nominee of their party), and they are more inclined to stay home to avoid voting for either presidential candidate. Congressional candidates of the winning presidential party are, then, the unintended beneficiaries of the difference in partisan turnout, but only until the midterm, when there are no longer cross-pressures from the presidential race.

2. A second charge concerns the relative variability of the vote in presidential and midterm election years. The theory of surge and decline supposes greater volatility in presidential than in midterm elections. This drives turnout higher and shakes partisans away from their normal vote to vote instead for the president's party. Jacobson and Kernell interpret this to mean that the congressional vote should vary more across on-year elections than across midterms.[5] Their investigation, however, contradicts this. They find greater variation actually in midterms than in on-year elections.

Unfortunately, too much has been read into this finding. The relative variation of the vote in the two types of elections is actually of little consequence. In fact, it is quite possible for the process of surge and decline to work perfectly with little variation in on-year elections and a great deal of variation in midterms. Take the extreme hypothetical situation in which all voters are coattail voters and one party wins 100 percent of the presidential vote election after election. Despite this consistent supersurge, there would be *zero* variance in the on-year congressional vote. True, the variability of the midterm congressional vote suggests that midterms are not merely quiet descents to the normal vote. The important variation in the vote, however, is not among midterm or among on-year elections, but in the vote between midterm and on-year elections. The point is simple: what is critical to the theory is the *systematic direction of the vote change or variation between elections.* The theory argues only that the party winning the presidency also systematically wins a greater than usual share of the on-year congressional vote.

3. The third challenge to the theory comes from an alternative theory of midterms: the idea that midterms are referenda about the performance of the incumbent administration.[6] By the referenda theory, electoral change in the midterm reflects public appraisals of how well the president is doing. While this view of midterm change is often regarded as competing with the presidential pulse theories, a head-to-head test of these theories indicates otherwise.[7] The two theories are actually complementary and, when combined, offer a more complete explanation of presidential losses in midterms than either does individually.[8]

4. The fourth challenge to the theory emphasizes the importance of local rather than national forces in congressional elections. At the outset of *Unsafe at Any Margin*, Mann states what has become the prevailing view:

> Congressional elections are local, not national, events: in deciding how to cast their ballots, voters are primarily influenced not by the president, the national parties, or the state of the economy, but by the local candidates.[9]

Ragsdale stated the localism perspective pointedly in her article: "The Fiction of Congressional Elections as Presidential Events."[10] Former Speaker Tip O'Neill put the point even more bluntly. By the Speaker's reckoning, "All politics is local."

Yet even the former Speaker might admit to a bit of hyperbole, that congressional elections are not *entirely* local in character. After all, the president (the most notable national "force") remains the best known politician to most voters; the presence of a presidential contest boosts turnout in most elections by more than a third of the midterm vote; and even though weakened a bit, parties continue to link candidates together in the deliberations of most voters. Moreover, national forces take on added importance because they are more variable from one election to the next than local factors. While local forces may be more influential in explaining congressional elections in any single election year, they are undoubtedly less influential in explaining change. Many district considerations such as incumbency, campaign spending advantages, and the partisan composition of the district often do not change much between elections. On the other hand, the impact of presidential candidates can change dramatically from one election to the next.

While the theory of surge and decline can be defended against each

of the above four charges, its most important defense is the positive evidence in its behalf. A variety of studies continue to find evidence of presidential coattails in House elections as well as in Senate and state legislative contests.[11] Over at least the last three decades, there is also evidence of the expected midterm repercussions from the prior presidential surge.[12]

The Questions

This chapter examines national evidence of the presidential surge in presidential election years and its repercussions in the following midterm elections. It examines the presidential surge and its midterm decline over a long stretch of American electoral history. National changes between elections of the parties' shares of seats and votes are examined for the thirty-one presidential and the thirty midterm elections from 1868 to 1988. It also explores how the presidential pulse has changed over time. Specifically, four questions will be addressed:

1. To what extent do presidential coattails affect the national congressional vote and the partisan distribution of seats?
2. What are the repercussions of presidential coattails for electoral change in midterm congressional elections? Does the president's party lose in the midterm in proportion to its coattails in the prior presidential election?
3. How has the presidential surge in congressional elections changed in recent years? Have presidential coattails diminished significantly? If so, by how much and what might have caused it?
4. Has the midterm repercussion from the prior presidential surge, like the surge itself, weakened in recent times; if so, what may have caused this change?

Electoral Change and the Presidential Surge

The analysis examines four measures of electoral change in Congress. Two are concerned with change in presidential election years: the change in Democratic congressional *votes* and *seats* from the prior midterm to the presidential election. The other two are the corresponding electoral change variables for midterms: the change in Democratic congressional votes and seats from the presidential election to the mid-

term. All four of these measures are adjusted to reflect a division between only the two major parties. Also, for the sake of comparability, the number of seats has been adjusted because of the growth in the total number of seats in the House over time. The adjusted number of seats reflects a constant House size of 435 members.[13] The principal explanatory variable, reflecting the direction of the presidential surge, is the Democratic percentage of the two-party popular presidential vote. The associations between the presidential vote and the four measures of change in congressional votes and seats are examined in several ways, oriented in terms of the winning presidential party in tabular analysis and in terms of the Democratic party in both bivariate and multivariate regression analyses.[14]

Surge and Decline

The Presidential Surge

As expected, in presidential election years the winning presidential party typically gains congressional votes and wins additional seats. Since 1868 the winning presidential party has gained congressional votes and seats in more than two out of three elections. It gained votes in twenty-one of the thirty-one elections (68 percent) and picked up additional seats in twenty-two elections (71 percent).

While the winning presidential party generally registers congressional gains, the magnitude of the presidential victory clearly matters. All presidential surges are not equal. Table 1.1 divides presidential election years into two categories by the magnitude of the presidential popular vote victory. The first category consists of elections won by a presidential candidate with less than 55 percent of the two-party popular vote and the second consists of presidential landslides or near-landslides. As the table shows, presidential parties narrowly winning election are just about as likely to lose votes and seats as gain them. The story is far different when the presidential surge unambiguously favors one party. In landslide and near-landslide presidential elections, the winning presidential party made congressional gains in almost every instance and these gains were typically of an impressive magnitude.

The effects of the presidential surge are revealed more systematically by regression analyses. Several regression analyses of the effects

Table 1.1

Presidential Election Year Congressional Vote and Seat Gains for the Winning Party by Margin of Presidential Victory, 1868–1988

Narrow to moderate size presidential victories (less than 54.9% of the pres. vote)

Year	Presidential vote (party) (in %)	Vote gain (in %)	Seat gain
1908	54.5 R	–1.6	–7
1988	53.9 R	+1.1	–2
1944	53.8 D	+4.0	+20
1900	53.2 R	+3.2	+14
1868	52.7 R	–2.3	–20
1948	52.3 D	+7.9	+75
1896	52.2 R	–3.6	–43
1892	51.7 D	–0.5	–36
1916	51.6 D	–1.4	–22
1976	51.1 D	–1.4	+1
1968	50.4 R	+0.4	+4
1884	50.1 D	–2.2	–26
1960	50.1 D	–1.1	–21
1880	50.0 R	0	+33
1888	49.6 R	+0.8	+24
1876	48.5 R	+1.7	+41
Median gain:		–0.25	–0.5
% with gains:		44	50

Presidential landslides or near-landslides (55.0% or more of the pres. vote)

Year	Presidential vote (party) (in %)	Vote gain (in %)	Seat gain
1924	65.2 R	+4.3	+23
1912	64.4 D	+6.6	+45
1920	63.8 R	+7.4	+61
1936	62.5 D	+2.3	+13
1972	61.8 R	+1.5	+13
1964	61.3 D	+4.9	+37
1904	60.0 R	+5.0	+48
1984	59.2 R	+3.4	+15
1932	59.2 D	+11.0	+99
1928	58.8 R	–1.2	+31
1956	57.8 R	+1.5	–2
1872	55.9 R	+3.3	+54
1952	55.4 R	+0.1	+22
1980	55.3 R	+2.8	+34
1940	55.0 D	+2.2	+6
Median gain:		+3.3	+31
% with gains:		93	93

Note: The presidential vote is the percentage of the two-party vote. The number of seats prior to 1912 is calculated as though there were a constant House size of 435. Seat gains are rounded to the nearest integer.

of the presidential vote on both a party's congressional vote and seat gains were conducted. For those interested, the full results of these regressions are presented in the first section of Table A1.1 on page 72. These regressions indicate that the presidential surge has a substantial positive effect on a party's share of both congressional votes and seats. Moreover, these effects are quite consistent across different specifications of the regression equations and the different sets of elections.

My analysis reveals that a party can expect an increase of about 2 percentage points in its congressional vote from every 5-percentage-point increase in its presidential vote. The estimated effect of the presidential vote on the party's congressional vote gains is about 0.4. Given that the median winning presidential vote has been 4.5 percentage points over the 50-percent mark, a typical presidential surge boosts that party's congressional vote by nearly 2 percentage points in the congressional vote ($4.5 \times 0.4=1.8$). To put this in perspective, this typical surge effect is roughly half the size of the average swing in the congressional vote between elections (about 3.5 percentage points).

The presidential surge also substantially affects the partisan distribution of seats. Each additional percentage point of the presidential vote adds about three more congressmen to a president's coattails. The estimated effects of a party's presidential vote on its seat gains range from just shy of three seats per percentage point of the presidential vote to nearly three and a quarter seats. A presidential victory of average proportions (4.5 percentage points) adds about fourteen seats ($4.5 \times 3=13.5$) to that party's column.

The Midterm Decline

The short-term nature of the prior presidential surge is clearly in evidence in midterm elections. Exactly as the several presidential theories contend, congressional candidates who ride presidential coattails into office in a presidential election year often fall when those coattails are pulled out from under them in the midterm. The decline of support for the president's party in the midterm is inversely proportional to the magnitude of the presidential victory two years earlier. Table 1.2 presents midterm losses following both narrow presidential victories and landslides. While there is no appreciable difference in the consistency of losses in the two types of midterms, the presidential party lost in

Table 1.2

Midterm Election Year Congressional Vote and Seat Losses for the President's Party by Margin of Prior Presidential Victory, 1870–1986

Narrow to moderate size prior presidential victories (less than 54.9% of the pres. vote)

Year	Presidential vote (party) (in %)	Vote loss (%)	Seat loss
1910	54.5 R	–2.4	–63
1946	53.8 D	–6.4	–56
1902	53.2 R	–1.4	–12
1870	52.7 R	–1.9	–56
1950	52.3 D	–3.2	–29
1898	52.2 R	–2.4	–31
1894	51.7 D	–9.2	–144
1918	51.6 D	–3.8	–20
1978	51.1 D	–3.2	–15
1970	50.4 R	–3.3	–12
1886	50.1 D	+0.7	–15
1962	50.1 D	–2.4	–4
1882	50.0 R	–2.7	–71
1890	49.6 R	–3.8	–105
1878	48.5 R	+2.1	–2
Median loss:		–2.7	–29
% with losses:		87	100

Prior presidential landslides or near-landslides (55.0% or more of the pres. vote)

Year	Presidential vote (party) (in %)	Vote loss (in %)	Seat loss
1926	65.2 R	+0.5	–11
1914	64.4 D	–6.8	–63
1922	63.8 R	–8.7	–75
1938	62.5 D	–7.7	–76
1974	61.8 R	–5.9	–49
1966	61.3 D	–6.2	–48
1906	60.0 R	–2.8	–32
1986	59.2 R	–2.4	–5
1934	59.2 D	–0.7	+12
1930	58.8 R	–3.1	–51
1958	57.8 R	–5.1	–49
1874	55.9 R	–7.7	–140
1954	55.4 R	–2.6	–19
1982	55.3 R	–4.8	–25
1942	55.0 D	–5.3	–46
Median loss:		–5.1	–48
% with losses:		93	93

Note: The presidential vote is the percentage of the two-party vote. The number of seats prior to 1912 is calculated as though there were a constant House size of 435. Seat changes are rounded to the nearest integer.

nearly every instance, there are differences in the magnitude of these losses. Midterm losses were typically greater in midterms that followed presidential landslides. Bigger declines follow bigger surges. Typically, presidential party losses have been nearly twice as large in midterms following presidential landslides. This difference emerges quite clearly despite the lack of controls. It is quite plausible that the midterm repercussions of the prior presidential surge would be hidden by changes in the volatility of the congressional vote and its translation into seats over the years or by different public evaluations of presidents at the midpoint of their terms. However, they are not.

The regression analyses (reported in full in the Appendix, page 72) confirm the tabular analysis: midterm declines are proportional to the prior presidential surge. A party loses about half a percentage point of the midterm congressional vote and about four seats in the House for every additional percentage point of the presidential vote in the prior presidential election. According to the regression results, following a presidential victory of average proportions, the president's party can expect to lose more than 2 percent of the congressional vote and about eighteen seats in the midterm election.

Surge and Decline through Time

While there is general evidence of a presidential surge and its repercussions in the midterm decline of support for the president's party, these effects may have changed over time. To address the questions of possible changes or trends in surge-and-decline effects, the election series are examined in overlapping subsets of ten presidential elections and their following midterms. This time span appears to be short enough to reflect change, yet sufficiently long to permit stable estimates of surge and decline within the subset. The first subset of elections consists of the ten pairs of elections from 1868 to 1904. Each subsequent subset drops the oldest presidential election and its midterm and adds a more recent pair. Estimates of surge-and-decline effects are obtained for a total of twenty "rolling" subsets of elections.

Two pairs of elections are omitted from this trend analysis, 1932–34 and 1924–26. Critical realignment elections, like the 1932–34 New Deal elections, are atypical. The process of surge and decline depends on the effects of short-term forces in presidential campaigns receding in the midterm. The long-term forces of a critical

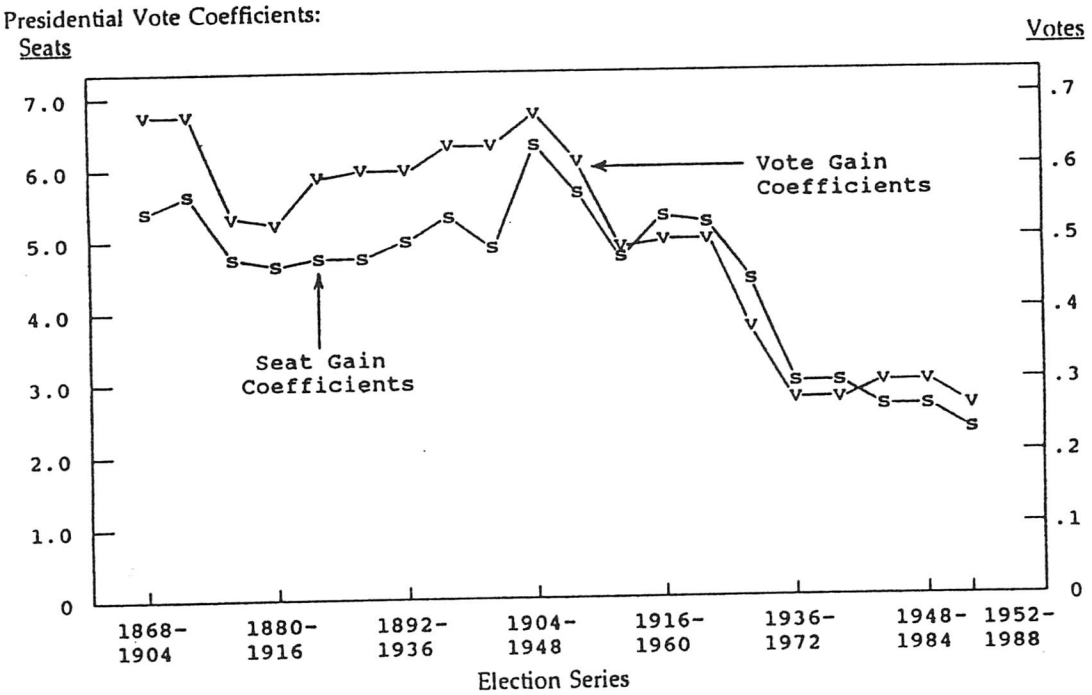
realignment election, unlike short-term forces of a normal presidential campaign, by definition do not recede in the midterm. In this circumstance, a basic premise of surge and decline, the link between the presidential vote and short-term forces, is absent. There is no reason to expect the 1932 presidential surge to recede in the 1934 midterm since the 1932 surge, unlike that in other presidential election years, was not a temporary phenomenon.

The problem with the 1924–26 elections is a bit different. The 1924 election is a problem because of the significant third-party presidential vote (17 percent) for Progressive party candidate Robert La Follette. Because of the size and character of the La Follette vote, the two-party division of the 1924 popular vote exaggerates Republican Coolidge's support in 1924 and would cause an underestimation of both surge and decline effects if it were included. As Table 1.1 indicates, Republicans in 1924 made quite modest gains for such an overwhelming portion of the *two-party* presidential vote and, as Table 1.2 indicates, they sustained unusually light midterm losses for such a "landslide" (actually registering a gain in votes!). Although for different reasons, the inclusion of either the 1932–34 or 1924–26 elections would only obscure real surge-and-decline effects.

The Presidential Surge through Time

The effects of the presidential surge are traced through time in Figure 1.1. This figure plots the percentage of congressional votes and seats a party could expect to gain from each additional percentage point of the presidential vote that it won. These values were obtained from regression analyses for each subset of elections in the series. As is clear from both trend lines, the presidential surge is not what it used to be. From the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century each additional percentage point of the presidential vote pulled in an additional half to seven-tenths of a percentage point of the congressional vote and from five to six seats. However, presidential coattails have been far shorter in more recent elections. In the latter half of the twentieth century, each additional percentage point of the presidential vote carried with it about a quarter to three-tenths of a percentage point of the congressional vote and about two and a half to three additional seats. Although coattails certainly cannot be dismissed, a one-percentage-point gain in the presidential vote has about half the effect on congres-

Figure 1.1. **Trend in Presidential Vote Effects on Presidential Year Congressional Vote and Seat Change, 1868–1988**



Note: The coefficients are unstandardized. Each series consists of ten elections. The regressions also included prior congressional votes or seats. The New Deal realignment election and the 1924 (third-party problem) election are excluded from the series.

sional elections that it once had. As a consequence of these shortened coattails, the branches of government are more commonly controlled by opposing parties following presidential elections than they had ever been. In the twenty-five presidential elections from 1868 to 1964, only three (12 percent) produced a divided government. However, in the six presidential elections from 1968 to 1988, divided government has been the result of all but one (1976).

On the basis of the above evidence it is tempting to conclude, as Ferejohn and Fiorina do in their study of coattail effects, that "House members have less to fear of national electoral tides associated with a presidential race than they have ever had before."[15] While true in one sense, it is not the full story. Although the impact of a one percentage point greater presidential victory is less than it once was, large presidential victories are more common now than they were in the late 1800s. The typical winning presidential vote in the ten presidential elections from 1868 to 1904 was only 52 percent. This compares to a typical winning presidential vote in recent years of about

55 percent. As a consequence, presidential coattails in both periods carried relatively few candidates into office, though for very different reasons. Metaphorically, the fashion of presidential coattails differed in the two periods. In the late 1800s coattails were very wide (many votes and seats per percentage of the presidential vote), but they were also very short (relatively narrow presidential victories). The point here is that while it is true that presidential landslides pack less of a punch on congressional elections than they used to, small overall effects of presidential coattails on congressional elections are not unprecedented.

The Midterm Decline through Time

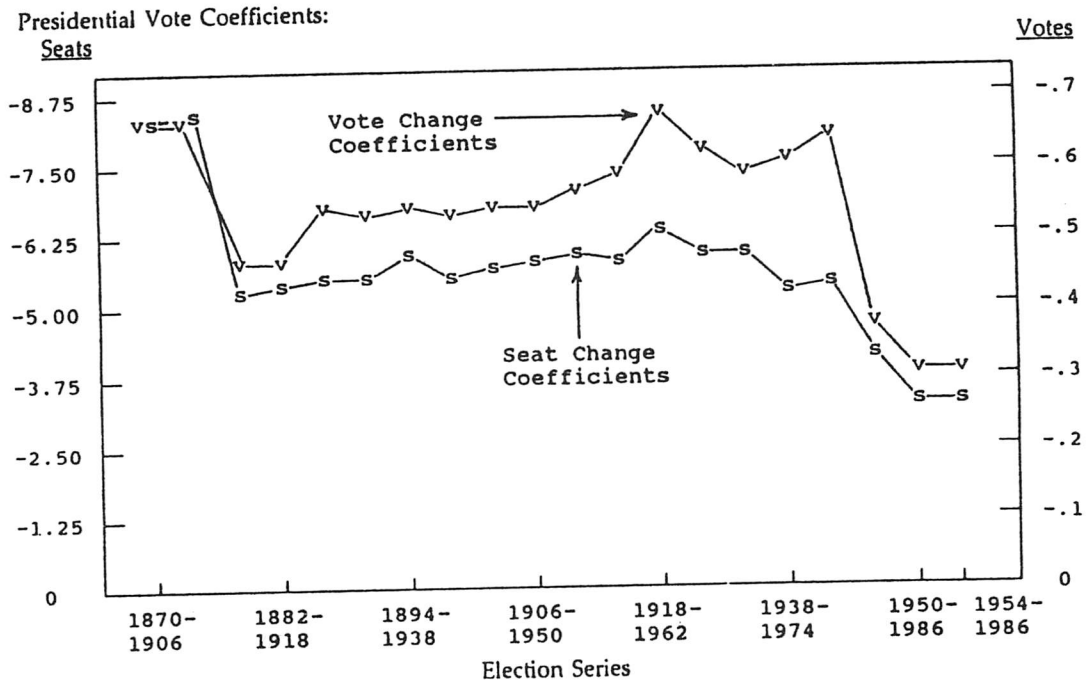
The trend in the midterm decline is basically consistent with the pattern of the weakening presidential surge. Unfortunately, it is not possible, because of the lack of appropriate data prior to 1946, to control for the public's midterm approval of presidential performance throughout the entire series, so that a completely accurate view of the trend of the midterm decline can be obtained. Nevertheless, despite this methodological difficulty, the trend in the midterm decline again suggests a weakened presidential pulse in recent years.

The trend in the effects of the midterm decline is presented in Figure 1.2. The figure plots the regression coefficients for the midterm decline for the subsets of elections. The pattern in these midterm coefficients is similar to the pattern in the presidential surge coefficients observed in Figure 1.1. Like the presidential surge, their midterm repercussions were greatest in the initial few election series and are a bit smaller in the most recent series, dropping most noticeably in the last three subsets of elections.

Explaining the Weakened Presidential Pulse

The preceding analysis has found consistent evidence of a presidential pulse to congressional elections. Whether examining seat or vote change, in nineteenth-century or twentieth-century elections, there is a definite presidential election beat to electoral change in the House. Yet while these findings should give pause to claims that presidential coattails are now out of fashion, it is also clear that they have weakened. The presidential pulse is still beating but without its prior strength. For

Figure 1.2. **Trend in Presidential Vote Effects on Midterm Congressional Vote and Seat Change, 1870–1986**



Note: The coefficients are unstandardized. Since presidential popularity at the midterm data were only available for elections since 1946, regressions for only the last three series included that variable. Each election series consists of ten elections, except the most recent, which has nine cases. The 1934 New Deal realignment and the 1926 (following the 1924 third-party problem election) midterms are excluded from the series.

one reason or another, the presidential vote is not now as closely linked to congressional vote and seat change as it has been historically.

Two interrelated explanations for the weakened link between the presidential and congressional votes are commonly mentioned: the partisan dealignment explanation and the increased incumbency advantage explanation.

Partisan Dealignment

For a variety of possible reasons—the aging of the party system, political scandals, the nomination of lackluster or extremist presidential candidates, and an increased reliance on the media—political parties seem to mean less to the public today than they once did. Although often exaggerated, the signs of dealignment are evident in many forms. There are more self-professed pure independents and apoliticals. Partisan defection rates are slightly higher. Fewer voters cast a straight

party-line ticket for all offices.[16] Since the presidential surge depends upon voters associating congressional candidates with their parties' presidential candidates, dealignment may weaken the presidential pulse. If fewer voters pay attention to the partisan bonds between candidates, the impact of the presidential vote on congressional elections undoubtedly will be blunted.

Incumbency Advantages

The increased advantages of incumbency also may cause a weakened presidential pulse. Incumbents not only win by larger margins than they used to, but they also may be better able to insulate themselves from national forces. Whether by merely advertising their greater political experience and accomplishments, driving their opponents into bankruptcy with their greater financial resources, or simply scaring off quality challengers, incumbents appear better able now than ever before to divorce their contests from the national race. In a similar vein, the rise in congressional campaign spending combined with the spending limits imposed by public financing of presidential contests may have reduced the dominant attention on and thus the influence of the presidential campaign over congressional campaigns.

Wasted Coattails

While partisan dealignment and increased incumbency advantages certainly seem to be plausible explanations of the weakened presidential pulse, a third explanation may also be plausible. The weakened presidential pulse may be a consequence of wasted coattails, wasted Republican coattail opportunities in the South. Beginning with Goldwater in 1964, Republicans have employed a "southern strategy" in presidential politics. This strategy has succeeded in helping Republicans win the presidency in five of the last six presidential elections. However, while Republican presidential candidates have done exceedingly well in southern states in recent years, the traditional one-party Democratic South remains fairly well intact locally. Southern Republican parties are still in development. This has meant that many Democratic congressional candidates have gone entirely unchallenged or faced only token opposition. For most of this period, Republicans have been unable to recruit enough qualified congressional candidates to get the

benefit of presidential coattails. Even ample coattails can't carry candidates who do not exist or who are not skilled enough to hold on. While dealignment and incumbency may have contributed to the weakened presidential pulse, the evidence also points to the "wasted coattail" explanation.

The 1972 Clue

The timing of the drop in the presidential surge lends some support to the "wasted coattail" interpretation of the weakened presidential pulse. Surge effects were relatively stable for election series extending as late as through the 1960s. Although they dropped a bit before this, the most pronounced drop occurred with the inclusion of the 1972 election. The magnitude of the presidential surge was cut by about a third from the 1928–68 series to the 1936–72 series. Given this sharp drop, a closer examination of the 1972 election may reveal why the presidential pulse has declined more generally in recent years.

The 1972 election was a landslide victory for Richard Nixon over Democratic candidate George McGovern. Nixon carried every state in the nation except Massachusetts (and the District of Columbia) and won nearly 62 percent of the popular vote. Despite this, Republicans gained a mere 1.5 percent of the congressional vote and only thirteen seats. By comparison, Lyndon Johnson in 1964 won by about the same magnitude as Nixon and his party gained nearly 5 percent of the congressional vote and thirty-seven seats. Based on the regressions estimates, the congressional Republicans in 1972 should have done about as well as the Democrats did in 1964. According to the regressions, Republicans should have gained 4.5 percentage points of the congressional vote and thirty-two seats. Republican gains also fell far short of the press's expectations at the time. As *Congressional Quarterly* reported, "While Nixon was overwhelming Democrat George McGovern, . . . presidential coattails materialized for his fellow Republicans in only a handful of other races."[17]

Why did Republicans fail to register larger congressional gains in the wake of Nixon's landslide? The shortfall appears to be the result of the distribution of Nixon's support. Nixon's 1972 victory was of landslide proportions because of his strength in the South. Although he won just about everywhere, he did especially well in southern states. Seven of Nixon's ten strongest states were in the South. In

Table 1.3

Southern Congressional Districts Uncontested by Republican Congressional Candidates but Carried by Nixon in 1972

State	District	Nixon vote (in %)	State	District	Nixon vote (in %)
Alabama	7	66	Mississippi	1	80
Arkansas	1	69	Mississippi	3	79
Arkansas	2	64	N. Carolina	3	74
Arkansas	4	69	N. Carolina	6	72
Florida	1	84	Oklahoma	3	70
Florida	2	69	Texas	1	70
Georgia	1	75	Texas	10	59
Georgia	2	80	Texas	11	70
Georgia	3	78	Texas	12	62
Georgia	6	80	Texas	14	61
Georgia	9	82	Texas	15	55
Georgia	10	73	Texas	16	64
Louisiana	1	71	Texas	17	73
Louisiana	2	60	Texas	19	76
Louisiana	4	75	Texas	23	62
Louisiana	5	73	Virginia	3	72
Louisiana	6	70	Virginia	5	72
Louisiana	7	68			

Source: The uncontested seats were identified in CQ's *Guide to U.S. Elections, 2d ed.* (Congressional Quarterly: Washington, 1985). The district vote for Nixon is from Michael Barone, Grant Ujifusa, and Douglas Matthews (1975) *The Almanac of American Politics, 1976* (n.p.: n.p., n.d.). The Louisiana seats did not have runoffs with Republicans, though Republican candidates may have been in the initial election.

four of these states he received more than 70 percent of the vote. Unfortunately for Republicans, many districts in these southern states were uncontested by Republican congressional candidates. Table 1.3 lists thirty-five southern congressional districts in 1972 that were carried by Nixon but in which congressional Democrats ran unopposed by Republicans. Nixon not only carried each of these districts but won all but two with more than 60 percent of the vote and won twenty-two of the thirty-five with 70 percent or more of the vote. This suggests that rather than Nixon's coattails being short, there just weren't enough congressional candidates available to ride them.

Moreover, this problem was not limited to the failure to offer a challenge. In many long-time Democratic areas of the South, in 1972 and to this day (as Canon's and Maisel's essays in this volume attest),

many Republican challengers were not especially well-qualified candidates. Even when coattails are provided, a party needs local candidates who are serious enough to benefit from coattail help. As Nixon told political chronicler Teddy White before the election: "part of our problem is that we have a lot of lousy candidates; the good ones will go up with me, the bad ones will go down."[18] There were just not many good ones to take advantage of the available coattail help.[19] In short, *Nixon's coattails were often wasted coattails.*

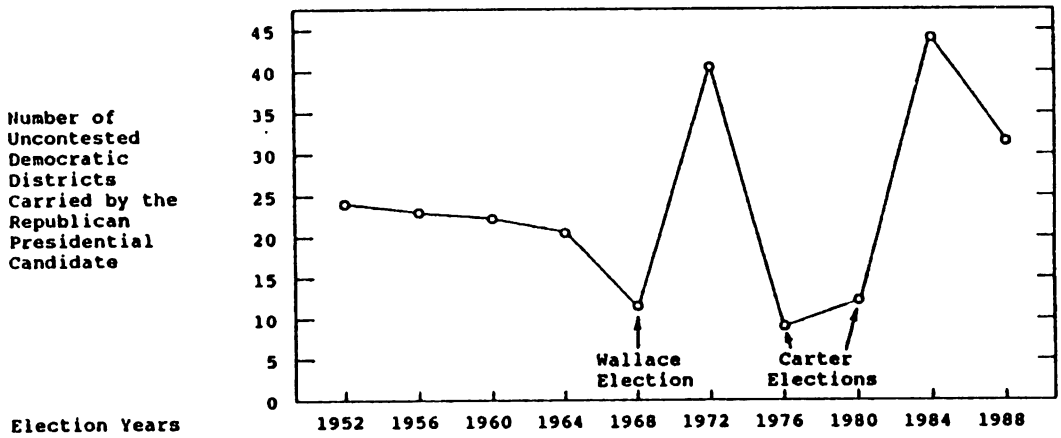
The Pattern of Wasted Coattails

If Republicans wasted coattails only in 1972, we might just "write off" that election as an aberration. The question is whether 1972 was especially unusual or have Republicans continued to waste their coattails in uncontested southern Democratic districts? Figure 1.3 presents some evidence that the Republican problem of wasted coattails was not confined to 1972.

Figure 1.3 plots the number of congressional districts left uncontested by Republicans and the number of these uncontested districts that were then carried by Republican presidential candidates in presidential elections from 1952 to 1988.[20] Prior to 1964, Democratic presidential candidates carried at least two out of three of the party's uncontested congressional districts. Moreover, it was quite rare for Republican presidential candidates to carry these congressional districts by wide margins, with a vote in excess of 60 percent. In short, prior to 1964, Republicans did not waste much of any presidential coattail help they might have been able to exploit.

While the Wallace candidacy of 1968 complicates any assessment of coattails in that election and while southerner Jimmy Carter's candidacies of 1976 and 1980 interrupt the pattern, Republicans wasted substantial coattail help not only in the election of 1972 but also in 1964, 1984, and 1988. In each of these four elections, Republican presidential candidates carried more than half of districts the party left uncontested to congressional Democrats. In 1972 and 1984, Republican presidential candidates won more than 80 percent of these districts, many by wide margins. Also, most of these districts were in the South.[21] At a minimum, three out of five uncontested Democratic districts carried by a Republican presidential candidate in any election were in southern states.

Figure 1.3. **Uncontested Democratic Congressional Districts Carried by the Republican Party's Presidential Candidate, 1952–1988**



	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988
Total Districts Uncontested by the GOP	81	69	71	39	41	45	43	40	54	61
Percent Carried by GOP Presidential Candidate	30%	33%	31%	54%	27%	91%	21%	30%	80%	52%
Percent of GOP Carried Districts from the South	92%	87%	86%	100%	100%	85%	78%	75%	77%	59%

Conclusion

Although the presidential pulse to congressional elections remains vital, there is no question that it has weakened in recent elections. Will this trend continue or be reversed in future elections? The future strength of surge and decline depends, in large part, on the causes of their weakening in recent elections. A weakened presidential pulse because of a growing incumbency advantage may forebode still further weakening. Some have read the 1988 congressional election to suggest that an incumbent is now only vulnerable to scandal. If so, short-term national forces are of little consequence. Surge and decline is, as Angus Campbell indicated in the title of his article, a theory of electoral change. If there is no change, if incumbents are cemented to their seats, any theory of electoral change becomes irrelevant. If this is the case, surge and decline may be rather strictly constrained to the few open-seat districts.

To the extent that the weakened presidential pulse results from partisan dealignment, we might expect a stable but weakened pulse. Ladd suggests that weakened partisan associations are a characteristic of the new party system.[22] There is no inexorable decline to nonpartisanship, just weakened partisanship compared to what we have seen in the past.

If this is true, the current presidential pulse might remain at its present strength, weaker than it had been but still of some potency. If, on the other hand, partisan dealignment is a precursor of a realignment, the presidential pulse might gain strength. Several scholars claim that a realignment is in progress.[23] If this is the case, the realignment might reinvigorate partisanship and restore the presidential pulse to much of its previous strength.

Finally, if the weakened state of the presidential pulse is a consequence of wasted presidential coattails (especially, though not exclusively, in the South), the prognosis for the presidential pulse may be more promising, if not in the short-run, then within the foreseeable future. Compared to the entrenchment of incumbents and partisan dealignment, the problem of wasted coattails may be more tractable and temporary. It is certainly more of a regional than national phenomenon. It is also a problem that one of the parties has a real stake in solving and one that may be resolved by the ambitions of aspiring local politicians. With the eventual retirements of conservative incumbent southern Democrats and the availability of coattails to prospective candidates, it seems unlikely that Republican coattails in the South will go unexploited forever. At some point, the Republican party ought to be able to recruit quality candidates in districts that their presidential candidates consistently win. However, as the data in Figure 1.3 indicate, this is a painfully slow process. More than a decade after Nixon's coattails were wasted, the situation has improved only at the margins. Republicans in the South were about as wasteful of Reagan's 1984 coattails as they were of Nixon's twelve years earlier.

Despite the continued waste of Republican coattails in the South, there are signs of change in the offing. It appears that the pool of experienced potential Republican congressional candidates in the South may be growing. One important source of viable congressional candidates is the state legislature. In running for and serving in a state legislature, candidates gain valuable experience and become better known to the electorate. According to Bullock's figures, in the 1970s the Republicans held only about 15 percent of seats in the lower houses of southern state legislatures and even a smaller share of state senate seats.[24] This was a substantial impediment to the Republicans putting forward quality challengers. In baseball terms, they just didn't have much of a minor-league system. During the 1980s, Republican ranks in southern state legislatures gradually grew. After the 1988

elections, over 27 percent of the lower houses and over 21 percent of the upper houses were Republican. Although still small in number, there are now many more Republicans positioned to contest congressional seats previously left uncontested to the Democrats. With this expanded pool of potential candidates, the prospects of Republicans seriously contesting more seats should be substantially improved.

While partisan dealignment and the advantages of incumbency may prevent the presidential pulse from being restored to full strength, it ought to regain some of its prior strength as Republicans draw more serious congressional candidates from their expanded pool of state legislators. Of course, Republican problems in the South are not purely a matter of finding quality candidates to challenge Democrats. For generations the South has been solidly Democratic and, at risk of understatement, these traditions die hard. Nevertheless, though many Republican presidential voters in these southern districts may not immediately swarm to Republican congressional candidates, undoubtedly many will opt to vote straight tickets when that option is offered to them. If so, the presidential pulse of congressional elections may beat more strongly in the future than it has for some time.

Notes

1. See Louis H. Bean, *How To Predict Elections* (New York: Knopf, 1948) and *The Mid-Term Battle* (Washington: Cantillion Books, 1950).

2. See Angus Campbell, "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change," in *Elections and the Political Order*, ed. Angus Campbell et al. (New York: Wiley, 1966). See also Angus Campbell, "Voters and Elections: Past and Present," *Journal of Politics* 26 (1964): 745-57.

3. Robert B. Arseneau and Raymond E. Wolfinger, "Voting Behavior in Congressional Elections" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, 4–8 September 1973).

4. James E. Campbell, "The Revised Theory of Surge and Decline," *American Journal of Political Science* 31 (1987): 965–79.

5. Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 63. Erikson places a great deal of weight on this charge against surge and decline. See Robert S. Erikson, "The Puzzle of Midterm Loss," *The Journal of Politics* 50 (1988): 1011–29. However, Cover takes issue with the basic finding of greater variation in the midterm vote. See Albert D. Cover, "Surge and Decline in Congressional Elections," *Western Political Quarterly* 38 (1985): 606–19.

6. There is a substantial body of research on the referenda theory of midterms. See Edward R. Tufte, "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review* 69 (1975): 812–26 and also his

Political Control of the Economy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); Samuel Kernell, "Presidential Popularity and Negative Voting: An Alternative Explanation of the Midterm Congressional Decline of the President's Party," *American Political Science Review* 71 (1977): 44–66; Alan I. Abramowitz, Albert D. Cover, and Helmut Norpoth, "The President's Party in Midterm Elections: Going from Bad to Worse," *American Journal of Political Science* 30 (1986): 562–76; Richard Born, "Strategic Politicians and Unresponsive Voters," *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986): 599–612; and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, James A. Stimson, and Richard W. Waterman, "Interpreting U.S. Congressional Elections: The Exposure Thesis," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 11 (1986): 227–47.

7. James E. Campbell, "Explaining Presidential Losses in Midterm Congressional Elections," *Journal of Politics* 47 (1985): 1140–57.

8. This is precisely as Tufte originally suspected. See Tufte, "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections," 826.

9. Thomas E. Mann, *Unsafe At Any Margin* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1978), 1.

10. Lyn Ragsdale, "The Fiction of Congressional Elections as Presidential Events," *American Politics Quarterly* 8 (1980): 375–98.

11. See James E. Campbell, "Predicting Seat Gains from Presidential Coattails," *American Journal of Political Science* 30 (1986): 165–83; Richard Born, "Reassessing the Decline of Presidential Coattails: U.S. House Elections from 1952–1980," *Journal of Politics* 46 (1984): 60–79; Richard Born, "Surge and Decline, Negative Voting, and the Midterm Loss Phenomenon: A Simultaneous Choice Analysis," *American Journal of Political Science* 34 (1990): 615–45; John A. Ferejohn and Randall L. Calvert, "Presidential Coattails in Historical Perspective," *American Journal of Political Science* 28 (1984): 127–46; John A. Ferejohn and Morris P. Fiorina, "Incumbency and Realignment in Congressional Elections," in *The New Direction in American Politics*, ed. John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1985); Randall L. Calvert and John A. Ferejohn, "Coattail Voting in Recent Presidential Elections," *American Political Science Review* 77 (1983): 407–19; James E. Campbell and Joe A. Sumners, "The Presidential Coattails in Senate Elections," *American Political Science Review* 84 (1990): 513–24; James E. Campbell, "Presidential Coattails and Midterm Losses in State Legislative Elections," *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986): 45–63; and John E. Chubb, "Institutions, the Economy, and the Dynamics of State Elections," *American Political Science Review* 82 (1988): 133–54.

12. See Barbara Hinckley, "Interpreting House Midterm Elections: Toward a Measurement of the In-party's 'Expected' Loss of Seats," *American Political Science Review* 61 (1967): 694–700, and Campbell, "Explaining Presidential Losses in Midterm Congressional Elections" and "Presidential Coattails and Midterm Losses in State Legislative Elections."

13. Third-party seats and vacancies were divided evenly between the major parties before adjusting the two-party division of seats to a constant total of 435.

14. The data for the examination of the presidential pulse come from several sources. National level partisan seat and vote data are drawn from Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, and Michael J. Malbin, *Vital Statistics on Congress, 1989–1990 Edition* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1990), and Stokes and

Iversen's national congressional vote series found in Richard G. Niemi and Patrick Fett, "The Swing Ratio: An Explanation and an Assessment," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 11 (1986): 75–90. The presidential vote data are drawn from *Guide to U.S. Elections*, 2d ed. (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1985).

15. Ferejohn and Fiorina, "Incumbency and Realignment in Congressional Elections," 142.

16. Wattenberg's figures indicate that split-ticket voting rose from the 12- to 16-percent range before 1968 to the 25- to 34-percent range in elections from 1968 to 1984. See Martin P. Wattenberg, "The Hollow Realignment," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51 (Spring 1987): 66.

17. "An Apparent Record Landslide—With Qualifications," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* (11 November 1972): 2947.

18. Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1972* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 403.

19. While much of Nixon's 1972 coattails were wasted, they were not completely wasted. Jacobson found 1972 coattails in his examination of 165 districts in twenty-five states, only two of which were in the South. See Gary C. Jacobson, "Presidential Coattails in 1972," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 40 (1976): 194–200.

20. The 1968 election is complicated by the third-party candidacy of George Wallace. Because of this complication, the figure indicates the number of uncontested districts carried by the Republican presidential candidate in 1968 in which Nixon ran ahead of Humphrey, regardless of the Wallace vote in the district.

21. The reader may question the exclusive focus on uncontested Democratic districts. However, while the number of uncontested Republican districts has grown since 1952, they still remain relatively few in number (eighteen in 1988) and Democratic presidential candidates have never carried more than two of these districts in any election since 1952.

22. Everett Carll Ladd, "As the Realignment Turns: A Drama in Many Acts," *Public Opinion* 7, no. 6 (1985): 2–7.

23. See John R. Petrocik, "Realignment: New Party Coalitions and the Nationalization of the South," *Journal of Politics* 49 (1987): 347–75; and Charles S. Bullock III, "Regional Realignment from an Officeholding Perspective," *Journal of Politics* 50 (1988): 553–74.

24. Bullock, "Regional Realignment," 566, 568. The states classified as southern are the same as those used by Bullock: AL, AR, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, TX, and VA.

Appendix—Table A1.1

Effect of the Democratic Presidential Vote on Change in the Democratic Congressional Vote and Seats in Presidential and Midterm Elections, 1868–1988

	Presidential elections (1868–1988)				Midterm elections (1870–1986)			
	Democratic vote change		Democratic seat change		Democratic vote change		Democratic seat change	
Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Democratic pres. vote	+.39 (5.66)	+.39 (9.14)	+2.95 (3.94)	+3.20 (6.41)	–.48 (6.06)	–.50 (5.69)	–4.52 (3.80)	–3.62 (2.93)
New Deal	—	+2.88 (1.57)	—	+45.60 (2.33)	—	+4.47 (1.21)	—	+36.08 (.75)
Prior Dem. congressional vote or seats	—	–.53 (6.22)	—	–.46 (5.58)	—	–.05 (.28)	—	–.45 (2.22)
Early GOP era (1868–1928)	—	–2.73 (4.05)	—	–34.44 (4.73)	—	+.25 (.18)	—	+5.12 (.28)
Constant	–18.68	+9.28	–148.00	–36.96	+23.43	+26.54	+230.01	+286.95
N of cases	31	31	31	31	30	30	30	30
R^2	.53	.86	.35	.80	.57	.60	.34	.50
Adjusted R^2	.51	.84	.33	.76	.55	.54	.32	.42
Std. error	2.74	1.59	29.87	17.72	3.15	3.20	47.42	43.59

Note: The Democratic presidential and congressional votes are shares of the two-party vote. The New Deal variable is a dummy variable (1932,1934=1, otherwise=0). The Republican electoral era variable is a dummy variable (before 1932=1, otherwise=0). Prior Democratic votes and seats are from the prior midterm election. In all cases, the number of seats have been adjusted to a constant House size of 435 seats. The coefficients in parentheses are *t*-ratios.