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The Revised Theory of Surge and Decline*

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The status of Angus Campbell's theory of surge and decline is a matter of considerable controversy. While analysis of the composition and voting behavior of presidential and midterm electorates fails to support the theory, analysis of aggregate congressional election results yields supporting evidence. This research seeks to reconcile these findings by proposing and examining a revised version of the surge and decline theory. The analysis finds that in presidential elections there is a surge in turnout among partisans of the advantaged party and a surge in support for the advantaged party among independent voters. Both surges are proportional to the magnitude of short-term forces as measured by the partisan division of the presidential vote. In midterm elections, both the one-sided partisan turnout surge and the independent vote surge for the advantaged party recede.

With the single exception of the 1934 election, the president's party has lost congressional seats in each midterm election since the Civil War. In the seven most recent midterms, from 1958 to 1982, the president's party has lost an average of nearly 29 seats. These losses range from 48 seats in both 1966 and 1974 to just four seats in 1962. The midterm loss of votes for congressional candidates of the president's party has been nearly as consistent, if not as varied. In each of the last seven midterms, the president's party has lost support from the previous presidential election. In 1962 and 1978 the president's party lost only two percentage points of the national congressional vote, but in 1966 and 1974 the losses reached six percentage points.

What accounts for these midterm seat and vote losses? Angus Campbell (1966) offered an explanation of these losses in his theory of surge and decline. At one time the widely accepted explanation of midterm elections, in recent years the status of the theory has become a matter of some controversy.[1] On the one hand, contrary to what one

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[1] An earlier and less elaborate theory accounting for midterm losses traced losses to the removal of coattail help (Bean, 1948, pp. 31–36, 1950, pp. 18–22). Like the theory of surge and decline, the simple coattail explanation of midterm losses traces their origin to the prior presidential election. The eclipse of these presidential election theories by referenda theory (Tufte, 1975, 1978) is clear in reviews of this literature. See especially Hinckley (1981,

would expect if the theory of surge and decline were valid, no significant and consistent differences in the compositions of midterm and presidential electorates have been found. On the other hand, recent research on aggregate election results lends substantial support to the theory of surge and decline. The purpose of this research is to explain these seemingly contradictory findings. The discrepancies in previous research will be explained by offering a revised theory of surge and decline and evidence that supports this revision.

The Original Theory

As originally formulated, the basic premise of the surge and decline theory is that presidential and midterm elections differ in the amount of stimulation they offer the public. Presidential elections are high stimulus elections. The campaigns are more energetic and generate a surge of political information about both candidates and issues. This surge has two effects. First, for peripheral voters who are less intrinsically interested in politics, presumably a group that is disproportionately independent, the surge election provides an added push to the polls, thus accounting for the higher turnout rates in presidential elections. Turnout in the seven presidential elections between 1956 and 1980 was 11 to 15 percentage points greater than in the following midterm elections. Second, the surge of political information is unlikely to be neutral in its partisan impact. One of the parties will be advantaged. That party not only holds its own partisans but also attracts a disproportionate share of the independent voters and weak partisan defectors from the disadvantaged party. The effects of the short-term forces or the surge of political information are magnified by the presence of peripheral voters. Since peripheral voters lack sufficient interest even to vote regularly, they most probably lack strong standing political commitments and thus move freely with the political tides. As James DeNardo (1980) concludes in his formalization of the surge and decline theory, "Peripheral voters are just as fickle inside the voting booth as they are about getting to it" (p. 418).

In contrast to presidential elections, midterm elections are low stimulus elections. The relative decline in political information returns politics to "normal" partisan divisions and rates of turnout. The core voters, having a more durable interest in politics, continue to turn out, and those who had been moved to defect at the presidential election tend to return to their party. The peripheral voters, requiring the extra stimulation of a

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p. 115), Jacobson and Kernell (1981, p. 64), Asher (1983, p. 368), and Mann and Ornstein (1983, pp. 138–40).

presidential campaign to motivate them to vote, fail to turn out at the midterm. Since these voters had been most susceptible to short-term considerations in the presidential election, considerations that usually advantage the party winning the presidency, their exit at the midterm is a bigger loss to the president's party than to the opposition party.

In the last decade the theory of surge and decline has been displaced as the accepted wisdom accounting for systematic midterm losses. Although the emergence of referenda theories (Tufte, 1975, 1978; Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1984; Kernell, 1977; Abramowitz, 1985; and Jacobson and Kernell, 1981, pp. 64–71) has played a significant role in this displacement, analyses of the composition and behavior of presidential and midterm electorates also have contributed. Apart from a couple of exceptions, expected differences between presidential and midterm electorates have not been found.[2] In their study of presidential and midterm electorates from 1956 to 1970, Robert Arseneau and Raymond Wolfinger (1973) found little difference in the partisan composition and defection rates of presidential and midterm electorates. Contrary to hypotheses suggested by the theory of surge and decline, presidential electorates were not systematically less partisan and more likely to defect than midterm electorates. An examination of updated data (Ornstein et al., 1984, pp. 58–59) concurs with the Arseneau and Wolfinger finding. Although there is some evidence that strong partisans compose a larger segment of midterm electorates than presidential electorates, there is little evidence that independents make up a larger share of presidential electorates than midterm electorates (J. Campbell, 1985b). Albert Cover's (1983, 1985) analysis of the turnout and defection of core and peripheral voters also questions the validity of the surge and decline theory. On the basis of the theory, Cover hypothesized that core partisans would be less prone than peripheral partisans to defect in the face of short-term forces. His analysis failed to support the hypothesis, and he concluded that "the relative loyalty of core and peripheral partisans is essentially random" (1985, p. 613).[3] Cover

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[2] The exceptions to these findings include Petrocik (1981) and DeNardo (1980). Petrocik found peripheral voters to be more responsive to short-term forces than core voters. DeNardo also found some evidence that peripheral voters are more prone to defection than core voters. Two other studies have failed to find the expected demographic and political interest differences between presidential and midterm electorates (see Wolfinger, Rosenstone, and McIntosh, 1981; J. Campbell, 1985b).

[3] My analysis corroborates Cover's on this point. Defection rates among partisans of the party disadvantaged by short-term forces in presidential elections were not greater than normal. The Democratic presidential vote, the indicator of short-term forces, is not significantly and positively correlated with the Democratic congressional vote of either Democratic partisans ($r = -.01$) or Republican partisans ($r = .10$).

also examined the hypothesis that turnout in the party advantaged by short-term forces would exceed that found in the disadvantaged party. Again the analysis failed to support the surge and decline hypothesis. Cover (1983) concluded that "the impact of short-term forces on turnout seems essentially random" (p. 19).

Although analysis of the composition and behavior of presidential and midterm electorates fails to support the theory, analysis of aggregate presidential and midterm election results have produced findings that are quite consistent with surge and decline. A presidential election's short-term forces, as measured by the partisan split of the presidential vote, account for seat gains in the presidential election and commensurate seat losses in the following midterm election (J. Campbell, 1985a, 1986a). Strong evidence of this pattern has been found not only in congressional elections but also in state legislative elections (J. Campbell, 1986b). The magnitude of these surge and decline effects not only nicely mirror one another but fit the data extremely well.

The Revised Theory

How can the findings regarding the composition of the electorate be reconciled with the findings supporting a surge and decline interpretation of aggregate congressional election results? One possible means of reconciliation is a reformulation of the theory. A revised theory of surge and decline suggests different hypotheses regarding the behavior and composition of presidential and midterm electorates and yet supports the same interpretation of aggregate congressional election results.

The foundations of the revised theory of surge and decline are similar to the original theory. Like the original formulation, the revised theory focuses on the effects of the surge of short-term forces in presidential elections. The presidential election surge is hypothesized to affect both the turnout rates and vote choice of partisans and independents to the advantage of the winning presidential party. Also like the original theory, the midterm election is regarded in the revised theory as a return to normal. The return to normal turnout and vote choice patterns results in midterm losses for the party advantaged in the prior presidential election.

The difference between the original and revised theories is in the nature of the surge effects in presidential elections. Unlike the original theory, the revised theory hypothesizes that the surge of interest and information in presidential elections will affect the turnout of peripheral partisans and the vote choice of independents.

The logic of the revised theory is straightforward. Consider a presidential election in which the candidates and the issues were generally favorable to one party over the other. What is the expected response of

a typical partisan of the party advantaged by these short-term forces, a typical partisan of the disadvantaged party, and a typical independent? Most advantaged partisans should be reinforced in their partisan preference and stimulated to vote with enthusiasm for their party's candidates. Disadvantaged partisans confront less pleasant options. Many partisans of the disadvantaged party may find themselves cross-pressured. They must choose to vote for the relatively unattractive candidate nominated by their party or defect to the opposition party's candidate. But there is a third option for the cross-pressured partisan: not voting. Of the three available options the decision not to vote may be the least difficult. This abstention effect of cross-pressures was observed long ago by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet (1944, p. 64) and more recently by both John Zipp (1985) and, to a lesser degree, Priscilla Southwell (1986). The decision for the third type of voter, the independent, should be much easier. Lacking a standing partisan commitment, the independent should be swayed by the short-term forces of the presidential election. The independent vote should divide disproportionately in favor of the advantaged party.

The differences between this revised theory of surge and decline and the original are depicted in Figure 1. Whereas the original theory suggested a surge in turnout among independents, the revised theory hypothesizes that the vote choice of independents would be influenced. Whereas the original theory suggested greater defections among partisans as a result of presidential election short-term forces, the revised theory hypothesizes a turnout differential between advantaged and disadvantaged partisans. There should be a surge of turnout among partisans of the advantaged party and a relative depression of turnout for cross-pressured partisans of the disadvantaged party.

FIGURE 1

A Comparison of the Original and Revised Theories
of Surge and Decline in Congressional Elections

| | | Voters | |
		Independents	Partisans
Effects of Short-Term Presidential Election Forces	Turnout Effect	Original theory	Revised theory
	Vote Choice Effect	Revised theory	Original theory

The revised theory of surge and decline yields two propositions that will be tested. They are

(1) *The partisan turnout proposition:* Partisans should be present in the presidential electorate in direct proportion to the magnitude of short-term forces favorable to their party.

(2) *The independent vote choice proposition:* The division of the independent vote in presidential elections should reflect the magnitude of short-term forces favoring one party over the other.

Data

The data used to examine these propositions are drawn from the 14 National Election Studies conducted from 1956 to 1982. These studies comprise a series of seven pairs of presidential and midterm elections. There are two advantages to examining this election series. First, the series allows for variance in the tilt and strength of short-term forces. Short-term forces may be nearly neutral in any single presidential election. Second, the midterm elections in the series can be used as a control group for any possibly confounding secular trends. If the revised theory is valid, relationships found in presidential elections should *not* also be found in midterm elections.

Four variables are used in the analysis. The first is the congressional vote choice. Although the variable is measured straightforwardly, an examination of the distribution revealed a problem for the analysis. Compared to the known national partisan division of the congressional vote, the NES data consistently overreport the Democratic congressional vote.[4] The overreporting, ranging from one to eight percentage points, was sufficiently large that it could be misleading. To make the survey responses more representative, the cases are weighted so that the partisan division of the congressional vote in the weighted survey is equivalent to the true partisan division of that election's vote.[5]

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[4] Two explanations may account for this bias. First, voters uncertain about who they actually voted for may simply indicate that they voted for their party's candidate. Since there are more Democratic than Republican identifiers, a Democratic bias would emerge in the aggregate. Second, uncertain voters may respond with the candidate's name they are most familiar with, which is generally the incumbent's. Since there are more Democratic than Republican incumbents, a Democratic bias would again emerge in the aggregate. Eubank and Gow (1983) find some evidence of a proincumbency bias in studies between 1970 and 1976 (Table 5) and a substantial proincumbency bias in the 1978 and 1980 studies.

[5] The weights used on Democratic and Republican congressional voters in each of the 14 elections are as follows: 1956, D = .973 and R = 1.029; 1958, D = .949 and R = 1.073; 1960, D = .968 and R = 1.039; 1962, D = .884 and R = 1.165; 1964, D = .894 and R = 1.25;

The second variable in the analysis is party identification. Partisanship is collapsed into three categories, with respondents leaning toward one of the parties counted as partisans. Since partisanship itself is not entirely immune to the influence of short-term forces, lagged measures of partisanship (e.g., 1958 party identification used for 1960) were examined when available to ensure its exogenous status.[6] However, the use of lagged party identification measures proved to have little effect on the findings.

The third variable is turnout. Validated turnout measures were used when available; otherwise, reported turnout measures were used. To avoid complications arising from secular trends in turnout and differences between validated and reported turnout measures, questions relating to turnout are structured as a group's percentage of the voting electorate rather than the more conventional percentage of the group having voted.

The final variable in the analysis is the actual partisan division of the presidential vote. The presidential vote is used as a summary surrogate measure of the direction and magnitude of short-term forces in a presidential election.[7]

Findings

The Partisan Turnout Proposition

The short-term forces of a presidential election campaign affects the turnout of partisans. Partisans encouraged by the slant of short-term forces turn out in greater numbers than usual, and partisans discouraged

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1966, D = .892 and R = 1.145; 1968, D = .973 and R = 1.033; 1970, D = .969 and R = 1.038; 1972, D = 1.024 and R = .992; 1974, D = .976 and R = 1.038; 1976, D = .99 and R = 1.014; 1978, D = .923 and R = 1.108; 1980, D = .906 and R = 1.112; and 1982, D = .958 and R = 1.056. The 1972, 1974, and 1976 data are drawn from the panel study to make use of the voter validation measure. If the 1972 cross-sectional study were used instead, the Democratic voters would have been overrepresented and been weighted by a value less than one.
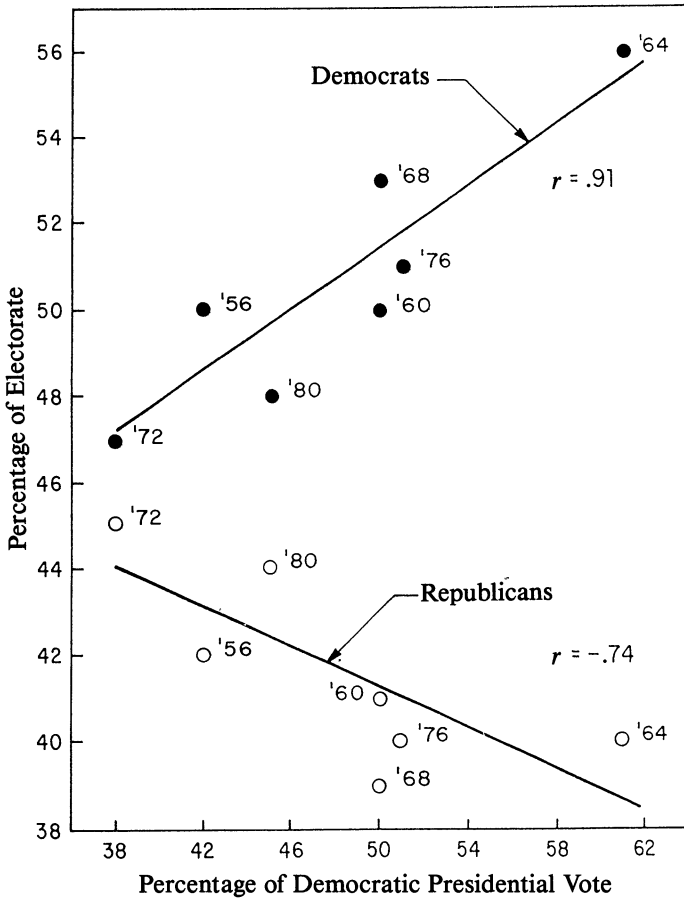
[6] Lagged measures of party identification were used in the 1960, 1976, and 1980 elections. The measures for 1960 and 1976 were obtained from the 1958 and 1974 surveys. The 1980 measure was taken early in the 1980 campaign. The use of lagged measures may have made little difference because the seven-point scale has been collapsed to three points. This would make the measure insensitive to most of the small short-term induced changes in partisanship.

[7] The measure of short-term forces, the aggregate vote percentage for the Democratic presidential candidate, is not as analytically independent of the behavior of different partisan categories as one would like. Certainly the measure of short-term forces is partially a product of the turnout and loyalties of each of the three partisan groups. Nevertheless, use of the measure does not bias the case in favor of the revised theory. Either or neither of the two versions of surge and decline could be supported using this measure.

by the slant of short-term forces turn out in fewer numbers than usual. The evidence is depicted in the plot (Figure 2) of the percentage of presidential electorates composed of Democratic and Republican partisans against the partisan division of the two-party presidential vote, the measure of short-term forces.

When short-term forces are favorable to the Democrats, peripheral Democrats flock to the polls. For the seven presidential studies examined, there is a strong positive correlation between the Democratic presidential

FIGURE 2

Effect of Short-Term Forces on Partisan Turnout
in Presidential Elections

Percentage of Democratic Presidential Vote

vote and the percentage of the presidential electorate made up of Demo-
cratic partisans ($r = .91$, $p < .01$). This correlation remains strongly posi-
tive when the 1984 election is added to the series ($r = .92$, $p < .01$) and
when lagged party identification measures are used for three elections in
the series (1960, 1976, and 1980, $r = .91$, $p < .01$). Democratic presence
in the presidential electorate ranged from 56 percent in the election most
favorable to Democrats (1964) to 47 percent in the election least favorable
to Democrats (1972).

The pattern of Republican turnout is quite similar. Republican par-
ticipation swells when conditions favor their party and shrinks when
conditions favor the Democrats. The percentage of the presidential elec-
torate made up of Republicans is strongly negatively correlated with
the Democratic presidential vote ($r = -.74$, $p < .02$). This correlation re-
mains strongly negative when lagged party identification measures are
used ($r = -.72$, $p < .04$) and when the 1984 election is added to the series
($r = -.79$, $p = .01$). Republican presence in the presidential electorate
ranged from 45 percent in the election most favorable to Republicans
(1972) to 40 percent in the election least favorable to their party (1964).[8]
A five-percentage-point drop may sound meager, yet recall that it is
accompanied by gains in the opposing party and that the full range of
congressional vote changes between presidential and midterm elections
in this series is only two to six percentage points.

The turnout surge of advantaged partisans in presidential elections
has repercussions for the congressional vote. The Democratic share of
the congressional vote in presidential elections is plotted against the per-
centage of Democratic and Republican party identifiers in Figure 3. The
relationships are generally what one would expect, though the correla-
tions for both Democrats and Republicans are not as strong as they were
with the presidential vote. The Democratic share of the congressional
vote increases as the Democratic presence in the presidential electorate
increases ($r = .50$) and as the Republican presence in the presidential
electorate decreases ($r = -.46$). When short-term forces are strongly to a
party's advantage, as indicated by a strong presidential vote, the party's
peripheral voters are stimulated to turn out. This one-sided partisan
turnout surge helps the party's congressional candidates. They may be
helped somewhat less by this turnout surge than presidential candidates

[8] The steeper slope found for Democrats is consistent with previous findings. First,
DeNardo (1980) found evidence that Democrats hold a greater advantage among periph-
erals than among core voters. Pro-Democratic forces should stimulate more Democratic
peripherals to vote. Second, from a different angle, Verba and Nie (1972, p. 214) found
that Republicans participate more often than Democrats, even when other characteristics
are controlled.

James E. Campbell

FIGURE 3

Effect of Partisan Turnout on Congressional Vote
in Presidential Elections
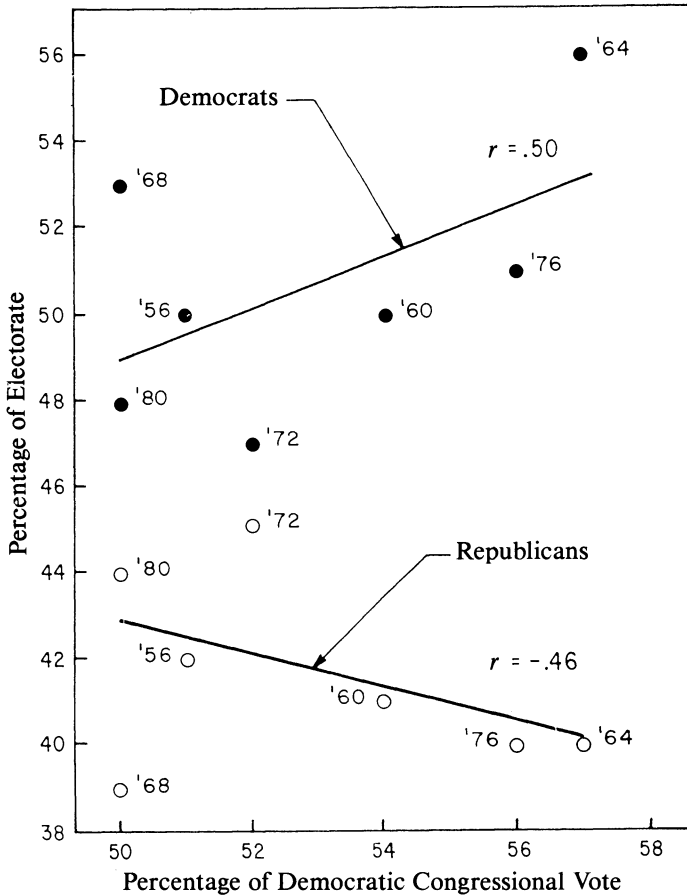
because of the many confounding district-level factors that blunt the
effect, but they are helped nevertheless.

The final link in this connection of partisanship and turnout is found
in the midterm election. The one-sided partisan turnout surge would fail
as an explanation of midterm losses if the same pattern reappeared at the
midterm. Such is not the case. There is, as one would expect, no signifi-
cant positive relationship between the prior Democratic presidential vote
and the presence of Democrats in the midterm electorate. In fact, there

is an unexpected (and unexplainably) negative correlation ($r = -.43$), though not statistically significant, between the prior Democratic presidential vote and the Democratic presence in the midterm electorate. There is also no significant negative relationship between the prior Democratic presidential vote and the presence of Republicans in the midterm electorate. The correlation is, in fact, weak and positive ($r = .21$).

The Independent Vote Choice Proposition

Independent voters are, as expected, clearly influenced by the presidential election's short-term forces.[9] The Democratic share of the congressional vote of independent voters in presidential elections is plotted against the measure of short-term forces, the Democratic share of the presidential vote of all voters, in Figure 4. The correlation is strongly positive ($r = .53$), and the slope is fairly steep ($b = .80$). Moreover, the relationship is even stronger if the 1972 election is excluded. Independent voters in 1972 were much more inclined to vote for Democratic congressional candidates than one would expect, given the strong Republican drift indicated by the presidential vote. In any event, even given the 1972 aberration, short-term forces strongly influence the congressional vote of independents. In 1964, when the Democrats were advantaged, independents favored Democratic congressional candidates by nearly two to one. Conversely, in 1956, when the Republicans were strongly advantaged, independents favored Republican congressional candidates by a ratio of two to one. Though independents are only a small portion of the total presidential electorate (on average about 8 percent), the large vote swing of independents can make a difference. A two-to-one advantage among a voting group of this size compared to a two-to-one disadvantage means about three percentage points to the total congressional vote. Given that the congressional vote over this period has ranged only seven percentage points in presidential elections, from 50 percent to 57 percent Democratic, the independent swing is substantial. Another way of looking at this is to examine the relationship between the swing in the Democratic congressional vote among independent voters in presidential elections and the swing in the Democratic congressional vote in the entire presidential electorate. The two are highly correlated ($r = .79$), again even though independents are not a large segment of the electorate.

[9] A pattern not directly related to the surge and decline thesis, but detected in examining the data, is a relationship between the independent percentage of the presidential electorate and the closeness of the presidential contest ($r = .36$). While independents may not have a rooting interest in either side, they apparently are stirred to action by a close election.

James E. Campbell

FIGURE 4

Effect of Short-Term Forces on the Congressional Vote
of Independents in Presidential Elections
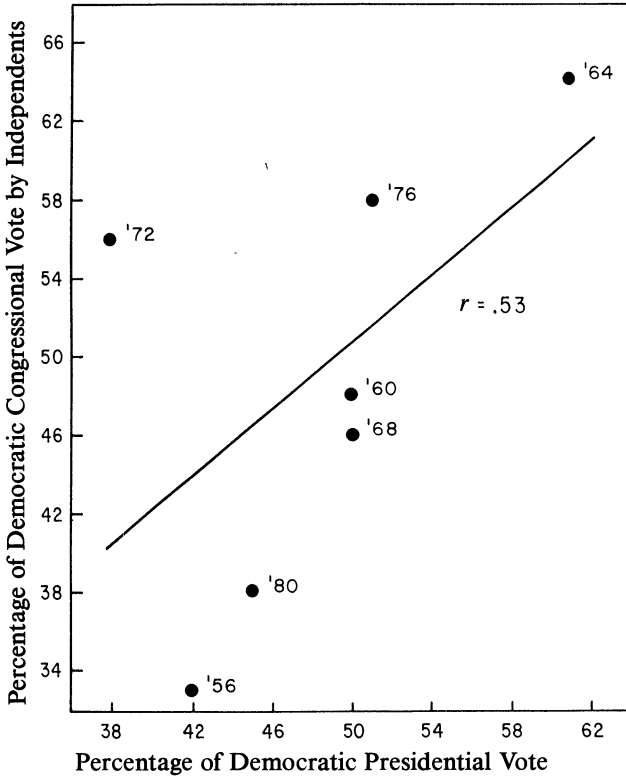
At the midterm, the independent vote usually returns to a more
normal division. In four of the seven midterms examined, the indepen-
dent vote for congressional candidates split between 47 percent to 53
percent Democratic.[10] Moreover, it was uncorrelated with the prior
presidential vote $(r = -.15)$. In short, the information surge of the presi-
dential election moves independent voters to vote for the advantaged

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[10] Even though the partisan split of the midterm independent vote usually returns to near
normal, there is still a fair amount of variation. Since the numbers of voting independents in
these midterm surveys are not as large as one might like, some portion of the variation might
be simple sampling error. Undoubtedly, some of the independent vote variation can also be
traced to political circumstances at the midterm, such as the president's popularity.

party's congressional candidates. With the information decline at the midterm, the party loses the advantage with the core independents.

Conclusion

This analysis offers evidence supporting a revised theory of surge and decline in congressional elections. There is a surge and decline of information and turnout that systematically benefits the winning presidential party in presidential elections and, in relative terms, costs that party votes in midterm elections. In essence, the basics of the theory remain intact. However, the details of the theory, the location and nature of surge effects, are quite different from those specified in the original thesis.[11]

There is a surge of turnout in presidential elections. It is a surge that benefits the winning presidential party, but it is not a turnout surge of impressionable peripheral independents. The turnout surge is among partisans of the winning presidential party. Reinforced in their partisan predisposition by the campaign favoring their party, they turn out in greater numbers than usual. Their counterparts in the disadvantaged party confront a much different situation. Discouraged and cross-pressured by the campaign tide running against their party, many of these disadvantaged partisans who would have normally voted in a presidential election choose not to vote. In effect, the turnout surge in presidential elections is a one-sided partisan surge for the party winning the presidency.

The slant of the information surge in presidential elections also appears to affect the vote choice of some voters. Like the turnout surge, this effect benefits the winning presidential party. However, the information surge does not appear to increase the defection rates of disadvantaged partisans as the original theory of surge and decline suggested. Short-term forces affect the vote choice of independent voters. Independents feel no cross-pressure from the direction of short-term forces and thus are more easily guided by them.

The one-sided partisan surge in turnout and the split of the independent vote according to the tilt of short-term forces clearly benefits

[11] An analysis of propositions drawn from the original theory similar to the above analysis for the revised theory produces negative results. It concurs with previous findings that fail to substantiate the theory as originally conceived. Based on the original theory, significant positive correlations might be expected between the extent of the surge in presidential elections (measured here by the winning presidential candidate's vote) and both partisan defections and the percentage of the electorate composed of independents. In fact the correlations in both instances are negative and well below conventional levels of statistical significance, $r = -.19$, $p = .34$ and $r = -.31$, $p = .25$ respectively. Also, as expected, the "control" correlations for the following midterms are near zero in both cases.

congressional candidates of the president's party in presidential election years. However, in midterm election years, these surge effects recede. Partisan turnout rates return to more normal levels and the independent vote is more evenly divided between the parties. For the congressional candidates of the president's party, the return to normalcy at the midterm represents a loss. The advantages of the partisan turnout differential and the favorable split of the independent vote in the presidential election helped a number of congressional candidates of the president's party win their seats in the presidential election. Without this help at the midterm, many of these candidates will fail to win reelection.

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