PRESIDENTIAL
COATTAILS
AND
MIDTERM LOSSES
IN STATE
LEGISLATIVE
ELECTIONS

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*T*he *president's party consistently loses partisan control of state legislatures in midterm elections, a pattern similar to the loss of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives in midterms. This study examines presidential coattails as a possible explanation of these losses. Aggregate state legislative election outcomes between 1944 and 1984 in 41 states are examined. The analysis indicates that the president's party gains seats in presidential elections in proportion to the presidential vote in a state, and subsequently loses seats in midterm elections also in proportion to the prior presidential vote in the state. The presidential coattail and the midterm repercussion effects are evident even when gubernatorial coattail effects are introduced, but are fairly modest in states lacking competitive parties.*

D espite their number and importance, state legislative elections have not received a great deal of scholarly attention. One recent exception to this neglect is John Bibby's study of state legislative midterms (1983a, 1983b). Bibby found a definite pattern in midterm changes in partisan control of state legislatures. The president's party regularly loses control of state legislatures at the midterm, much as it loses seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. In each of the 9 midterms from 1950 to 1982, the presidential party suffered a net loss in the control of state legislative chambers. These losses ranged from 8 chambers in 1970 to 24 chambers in 1974.

This analysis proposes to extend and explain Bibby's findings. First, this study will extend Bibby's analysis of changes in control of the state legislature by examining changes in the percentage of seats held by the president's party. Bibby's findings regarding changes in partisan control are quite probably just one manifestation of a more general loss of seats for the president's party. Second, the study's main purpose is to determine if presidential coattails explain midterm losses. Other theories of presidential midterm losses in Congress have been suggested, notably Tufte's referendum on economic conditions and presidential popularity thesis (1975, 1978). However, the coattails theory (Bean, 1948; 1950; 1972, pp. 50–60) and, in its more sophisticated

form, Campbell's "surge and decline" theory (1966) have been shown to go a long way toward explaining the pattern of midterm loss in Congress (Campbell, 1985). The coattails thesis is that in a presidential election year a successful presidential candidate assists in the election of his party's slate of candidates, whether they be candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives or for state legislative seats. At the midterm many of these candidates, boosted into office in the prior election with help from the top of the ticket, lose when they run for reelection without the benefit of presidential coattails.

One might argue that presidential coattail effects in state legislative contests don't make sense. State legislators and presidents deal at different levels of government and for the most part are concerned with different issues. Nevertheless, parties are generally known by the presidential candidates they nominate, and candidates for state legislative seats are a good deal less well known to voters than the congressional candidates who ride presidential coattails. Therefore, even though one can make a case that there may not be good policy reasons for coattails to affect state legislative races, many voters may use their presidential vote as a guide in casting a vote for the state legislature because they lack other information (Hinckley, Hofstetter, and Kessel, 1974).

The analysis is divided into four major sections. The first section examines state legislative seat changes in presidential election years. The central question in this portion of the analysis is, to what extent do presidential coattails extend to state legislative elections? The second section examines state legislative seat changes in midterm elections. Again, the central question concerns the possible repercussions of presidential politics for state legislative elections: To what extent do seat changes at the midterm reflect the

removal of presidential coattails and the return to normal partisan politics?

Within each of these two sections the analysis will proceed in two steps. First, the extent of seat gains or losses for the president's party will be examined for all states in both presidential and midterm years. The distribution of gains and losses should provide an initial indication of whether coattails exist at the state legislative level, and whether Bibby's findings are a manifestation of a pattern of state legislative seat loss for the president's party at the midterm. Second, models will be constructed to account for seat changes in both presidential and midterm elections. At the state level the models will be examined with aggregate state election results over a period of elections. The state-by-state analysis is designed to control for the numerous idiosyncracies of the states that might otherwise mask the more general effects.

The third section of the analysis involves an examination of variations in coattail and midterm effects from state to state. Is there systematic variation, and what are its sources? In particular, do differing levels of party competition account for differences in presidential coattail effects and their midterm repercussions. The fourth section compares presidential coattails to gubernatorial coattails in state legislative elections.

The Data

Data are drawn at the state level from the 11 presidential elections and the 10 midterm elections from 1944 to 1984. Two states, Nebraska and Minnesota, are excluded because their state legislatures were nonpartisan for at least half of the time period under study. An additional 7 states are set aside because of peculiarities in election scheduling. Four of these states —Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland, and Mississippi—have four-year terms rather than the usual two-year terms for state

legislators (Council of State Governments, 1968, p. 49). Mississippi and 3 other states—Kentucky, New Jersey, and Virginia—hold their state legislative elections in odd-numbered years rather than the standard even-numbered years (Jewell and Olson, 1982, p. 16). Two states, Alaska and Hawaii, have been included although data on only 6 midterm and 7 presidential elections are available. The active data set covers a total of 443 presidential elections and 402 midterm elections in 41 states.

Since the analysis is concerned with on-year as well as off-year elections, there are two principal dependent variables. The first is coattail seat gain.[1] This is calculated as the percentage point gain in the seats held by a party before and after the presidential election. For example, if the Democratic party held 30% of a state legislature's seats before a presidential election, and won 40% of those seats in the election, the seat gain for that party would be 10 percentage points. The second dependent variable is midterm seat loss. The midterm seat loss variable measures the change in seats held by the president's party in the midterm election. Like the coattail variable, the midterm seat loss variable is calculated in terms of percentage point differences. The partisan compositions of the state legislatures were extracted from various volumes of the Council of State Government's *The Book of the States* (Council of State Governments, 1942–1982) and from *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports* (Donnelley, 1984).

A number of independent variables have also of course been collected. The principal independent variable is the percentage of the two-party statewide vote won by each of the two major presidential candidates in the presidential election. In addition, election results for gubernatorial races have also been collected in both presidential and midterm years in states holding these elections. Election returns were obtained from *Presidential Elections Since 1789* (Congressional Quarterly, 1975) and various issues of the *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* (Congressional Quarterly, 1981, 1984; Cook, 1976).

Seat Change in Presidential Elections

As expected, the party winning the presidency also tends to do well in state legislative contests held during presidential election years. The distribution of seat changes in state legislatures after presidential elections is skewed in favor of the party of the winning presidential candidate, much as one would expect if coattails were at work. Figure 1 is a histogram of the frequency of gains and losses for the president's party in presidential elections.

The party winning the presidency is nearly twice as likely to win seats in state legislatures as it is to lose seats. The winning presidential party gained at least 1% of the state legislative seats in 58% of the state elections examined (257 of 443). It lost 1% or more of the seats in 31% of the elections. There was no change in the remaining 11%. The mean seat change in all elections examined was a 3.2% gain for the winning presidential party. While this is a fairly definite pattern consistent with presidential coattails, an even stronger pattern may emerge in a multivariate model addressing less aggregated data. Presidential party losses may well be concentrated in states the candidate winning nationally failed to carry.

A single-equation model was constructed to examine state legislative seat changes in presidential elections more thoroughly. The dependent variable is simply the percentage point change in the seats held by the Democratic party after the presidential election. There are two major independent variables. The first is the percentage of the two-party presiden-

Figure 1. Net Change in the Percentage of State Legislative Seats
for the President's Party Following Presidential Elections

Percentage Point Seat Change for President's Party
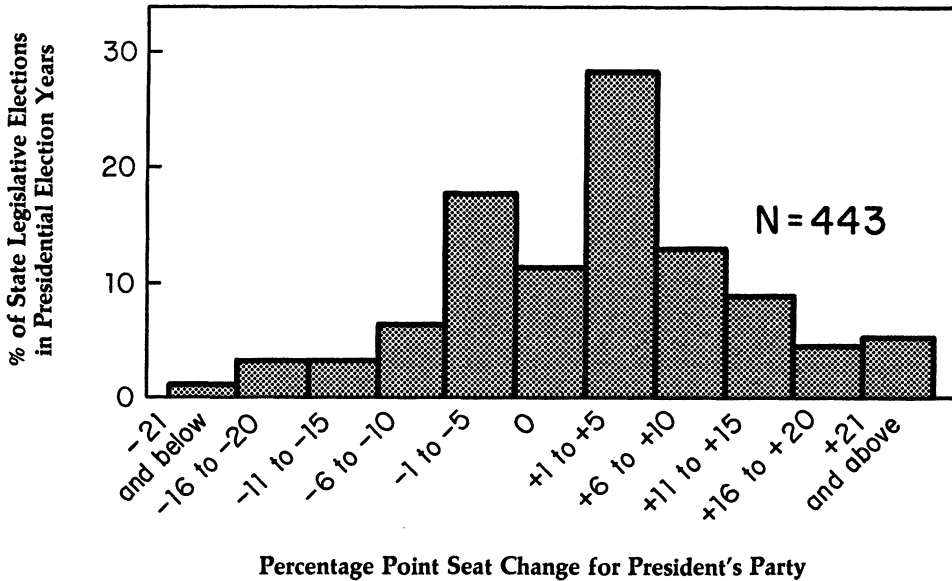
tial vote won by the Democratic presidential candidates. This is the coattail variable. The presumption is that the stronger the presidential candidate runs in a state, the more help he is to the bottom of his party's slate. Although other measures of the coattail variable have been suggested (Calvert and Ferejohn, 1983; Miller, 1955), the simple presidential vote variable has served quite adequately in previous studies exploring its effect in congressional elections (Campbell, 1985, 1986). The second major independent variable is the Democratic party's strength in the state legislature going into the election. If a party already holds a large percentage of the seats, it should be more difficult to add to that large base. It is a simple arithmetic fact of life that you cannot gain what you already have. Parties having a large initial base are also confronted with the likelihood of diminishing returns. It is likely to be more difficult to win an additional seat

if you already hold 99% of the seats than it is if you only hold 30%. The dependent variable and both of the major independent variables are oriented in terms of the Democratic and Republican parties, rather than in terms of the winning and losing parties, in order to capture the full variance of the variables. Orienting the analysis according to the winning or losing parties would artificially restrict variance and attenuate measures of association.

A third independent variable is also introduced into the analysis as a trend variable. Since the data set spans four decades, a great many changes in state and local politics may have occurred that could affect seat changes. For instance, a state's partisan balance may shift over time. It would be very difficult to obtain individual measures of these changes and, given the small number of cases for each state, would be even more difficult to incorporate such variables in the model.

As such, the analysis uses a simple counter variable to take trends into account. The variable is simply the last two digits of the presidential year. Since this variable is meant to control as much as possible for trends that might exist in any given state, and since it is not of any theoretical interest in and of itself, it is only included when it has a statistically significant effect.

Table 1 presents the regression results for each of the 41 states examined. On the whole the model appears to be fairly strong. The model accounts for 63% of the variance in the median state and for more than half the variance in 29 of the 41 states. Moreover, the two main independent variables have their expected effects.

The regressions present pretty convincing evidence that presidential coattails reach down to carry state legislative candidates into office. The coefficient of the presidential vote is positive in 39 of the 41 regressions. This pattern is, of course, extremely unlikely to occur by chance alone.[2] Moreover, even though the analysis could not take into account very many idiosyncracies associated with particular elections in particular states— idiosyncracies likely to blur the true impact of presidential coattails—the presidential vote coefficient is statistically significant ($p < .05$) in more than half of the regressions (22 of 41).

The actual strength of presidential coattails varied a good bit. While small negative coefficients were found in the examination of 2 states, positive coefficients exceeding 1.0 were found in 7 states. The median state had a coefficient of .49. That is, about every 2 additional percentage points of the two-party presidential vote won by a party meant a net gain of 1% of the state legislative seats for that party. Moreover, the presidential vote in states commonly varies by much more than 2 percentage points. The standard deviation of the Democratic presidential vote of the median state is 9.2

percentage points. Thus, in a typical state, a change of one standard deviation in the presidential vote can be expected to precipitate about a 4.5% change in the partisan composition of the state legislature.

Some perspective on the magnitude of these effects can be gained by comparing them to coattail effects in congressional elections. A previous study (Campbell, 1986) found, in elections from 1944 to 1980, that a party could expect a net gain of about 3.2 seats in the House of Representatives for every percentage point gained by the party's presidential candidate. In percentage terms, this translates into a coefficient of .74, only slightly more than the median coattail effect in state legislative contests. Thus, by present estimates, presidential coattails at the state legislative level are only slightly shorter than at the congressional level.

The second and less interesting independent variable, the initial base of the party in the state legislature, also had the expected effect. Negative coefficients were associated with the base variable in 39 of the 41 regressions. The negative base effects were statistically significant ($p < .05$) in 23 of the 41 tests, despite the small number of cases. The median state had a base coefficient of -.58. In less precise terms, holding a large proportion of the seats in a state legislature made gaining additional seats substantially more difficult.

Seat Change in Midterm Elections

According to Bibby's analysis and the coattail model, the pattern of seat changes in midterm elections should be the mirror image of seat changes in presidential years. The president's party should lose state legislative seats at the midterm, as the president's coattails are no longer available to state legislative candidates of the president's party.

**Table 1. The Coattail Model of Change in State Legislative Seats
in Presidential Elections, 1944–1984**

State	Intercept	Presidential Vote	Initial Base	Trend	R^2
Alaska	− .63	.98 (11.29)	− .90 (48.73)	.0105 (5.26)	.98
Arizona	− .13	.61 (2.66)	− .29 (3.65)	—	.31
Arkansas	.08	− .07 (2.63)	.15 (0)	− .0009 (3.36)	.40
California	.04	.01 (0)	− .09 (.29)	—	.03
Colorado	− .14	1.05 (7.82)	− .64 (8.48)	—	.70
Connecticut	− .21	.55 (3.06)	− .29 (3.87)	—	.53
Delaware	− .24	1.11 (6.09)	− .57 (10.60)	—	.64
Florida	− .05	.23 (3.19)	− .08 (.56)	—	.31
Georgia	.15	.16 (6.83)	− .27 (2.16)	—	.46
Hawaii	.03	.48 (16.93)	−1.32 (40.72)	.0098 (19.76)	.94
Idaho	− .10	.66 (8.42)	− .46 (3.36)	—	.52
Illinois	− .12	.96 (20.40)	− .98 (8.93)	.0026 (3.62)	.81
Indiana	−1.22	2.75 (47.11)	−1.23 (77.80)	.0083 (13.90)	.95
Iowa	−1.46	2.23 (53.75)	−1.20 (22.21)	.0142 (15.33)	.91
Kansas	− .11	.36 (1.73)	− .09 (.28)	—	.21
Maine	− .67	.35 (3.17)	−1.19 (9.47)	.0151 (7.79)	.70
Massachusetts	− .25	.24 (5.57)	− .13 (3.58)	—	.53
Michigan	− .39	.83 (16.31)	− .92 (34.79)	.0072 (12.25)	.89
Missouri	− .30	.89 (16.67)	− .91 (25.18)	.0067 (12.22)	.89
Montana	− .30	.40 (.90)	− .97 (9.41)	—	.63
Nevada	.20	.49 (1.92)	− .62 (8.20)	—	.55
New Hampshire	− .19	.46 (15.94)	− .03 (0)	—	.69

Table 1 (continued)

State	Intercept	Presidential Vote	Initial Base	Trend	R^2
New Mexico	.30	.26 (.36)	.68 (6.71)	—	.46
New York	− .22	.54 (15.28)	−1.12 (24.25)	.0077 (16.30)	.85
North Carolina	.30	.49 (8.03)	− .66 (3.35)	—	.50
North Dakota	− .95	1.34 (14.29)	− .77 (9.53)	.0095 (6.46)	.70
Ohio	− .05	.29 (.47)	− .20 (1.34)	—	.24
Oklahoma	.06	.19 (6.70)	− .19 (1.29)	—	.47
Oregon	.25	− .29 (.66)	− .19 (2.53)	—	.30
Pennsylvania	.08	.54 (11.12)	−1.00 (62.80)	.0024 (5.16)	.93
Rhode Island	.08	.29 (3.76)	− .33 (3.81)	—	.53
South Carolina	.68	.03 (.12)	− .89 (.13)	—	.02
South Dakota	− .23	.78 (2.78)	− .39 (2.79)	—	.37
Tennessee	.05	.37 (5.50)	− .35 (8.74)	—	.54
Texas	− .43	.14 (3.66)	.36 (9.55)	—	.76
Utah	− .11	1.03 (29.11)	− .67 (19.18)	—	.81
Vermont	− .26	.15 (2.65)	− .43 (7.76)	.0052 (7.67)	.63
Washington	.33	.63 (2.91)	−1.13 (21.93)	—	.77
West Virginia	− .14	1.12 (18.66)	− .58 (9.55)	—	.77
Wisconsin	− .08	.37 (2.58)	− .21 (6.76)	—	.54
Wyoming	.01	.79 (6.58)	− .87 (7.43)	—	.66

Note: The coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are F-values.

The evidence supports our hypothesis. There is a strong tendency for the president's party to lose seats at the midterm. A histogram of gains and losses for the president's party in midterm elections is presented as Figure 2. In more than 3 out of 4 (308 of 402) state midterm elections examined, the president's party suffered a net loss of at least 1% of the seats. The president's party made gains in only 13% of the midterm elections, and no change was observed in the remaining 11%. Put

Figure 2. Net Change in the Percentage of State Legislative Seats
for the President's Party Following Midterm Elections

Percentage Point Seat Change for President's Party
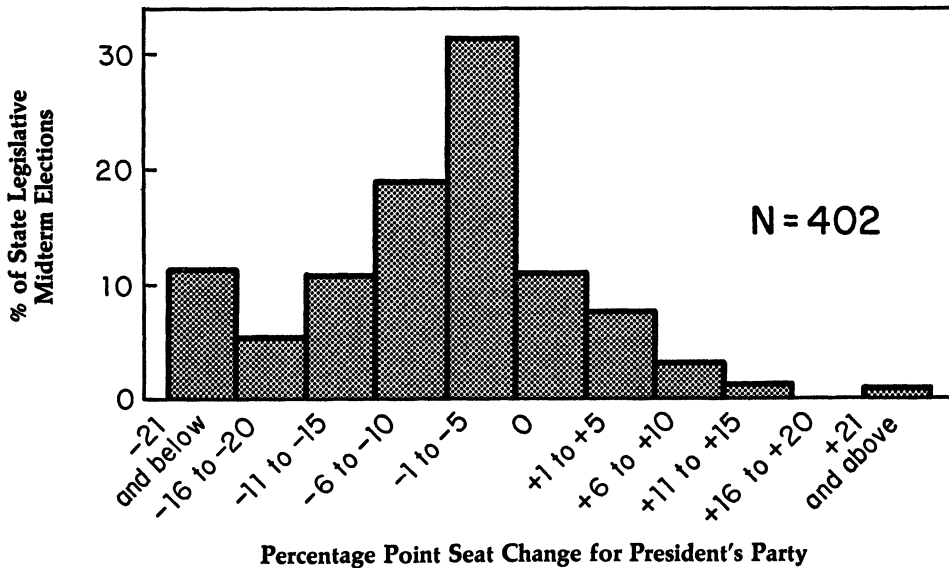
somewhat differently, the president's party is more than six times as likely to lose seats as it is to win seats. The mean seat change in all midterms examined was a 7.3% loss for the president's party. Of course, as in the case of seat losses in presidential elections, this level of analysis is a pretty rough cut of the data. The repercussions of presidential coattails for midterm elections are better examined in a less aggregated and multivariate analysis.

The single-equation model of midterm seat loss is quite similar to the coattail model for presidential elections. The dependent variable is a simple change variable computed by subtracting the percentage of state legislative seats held by Democrats after the presidential election from the percentage held after the midterm election. The independent variables in the midterm equation are identical to those used in the presidential election equation: two major independent varia-

bles, and a third independent variable introduced to control for trends favoring either of the parties. As in the presidential election equation, the first independent variable is the percentage of the presidential vote won by the Democrats. There is, however, one very important difference from the presidential election analysis: Whereas the effect of the presidential vote on seat changes for a party is hypothesized and shown to be positive in presidential elections, it is hypothesized to be negative in midterm elections. State legislative candidates receiving more help from the top of the ticket in presidential years have more help to lose in the following midterm election.

The second independent variable is the same Democratic base variable used in the presidential election equation, the percentage of seats held by the Democratic party prior to the last presidential election. The selection of this variable posed a problem. The logical choice of a base

variable for the midterm equation is the percentage of seats held prior to the midterm, rather than the percentage held prior to the previous presidential election. However, because seat gains at the presidential election are dependent on the presidential vote, the base variable following the presidential election is quite often highly correlated with the presidential vote. The collinearity problem, particularly when we are dealing with so few cases, can be substantial, and the coefficient estimates are often unstable or insignificant as a result. For this reason, the pre-presidential election base is substituted for the post-presidential election base in the regressions.[3]

The third independent variable is a trend variable identical to that used in the presidential election equation. It is simply a counter variable entered to take trends over this period into account. Regressions including the trend variable are only reported when it is statistically significant. Otherwise the regressions do not include the trend control.

Table 2 presents regression results for the midterm model. The model accounts for a good bit of the variance in midterm seat change, though it generally performed less well than the presidential election equation. The equation accounts for 49% of the variance in the median state. One reason for the somewhat lower predictive power of this equation is the use of the pre-presidential base instead of the post-presidential election measure. Using the post-presidential base, the equation accounts for 58% of the variance in the median state, and for more than half of the variance in 27 of the 41 states. This performance is on the same order as that of the presidential election equation.

The regressions indicate that midterm seat changes are in fact a negative function of the previous presidential vote in the state. Parties lose seats at the midterm in an inverse proportion to how well their presidential candidate did in the state in

the previous election. The withdrawal of presidential coattails significantly affects midterm results. The pattern is quite consistent. The coefficient of the presidential vote is negative in 39 of the 41 cases. It is also statistically significant ($p < .05$) in half of the cases (21 of the 41), despite the fact that a variety of considerations having the possibility of distorting the relationships could not be entered into the equation because of the limited number of cases.

As with the initial coattail effects, the strength of midterm coattail repercussions varies considerably. The latter effects range from the slightly positive coefficients found in North Carolina and Vermont to coefficients of –1.0 or less in 18 different states. The coefficients are less than –2 in 5 states. The median coefficient for the presidential vote is –.67. When the post-presidential election base is used, the presidential vote coefficients are slightly smaller. The median presidential vote coefficient in these regressions is –.52.

As in the case of presidential-related gains in presidential elections, presidential-related losses at the midterm can be set in some context by comparison to congressional election patterns. In midterm elections the president's party loses about 3.2 seats in the House of Representatives for every additional percentage point won by the president in the prior presidential election (Campbell, 1985). In percentage terms, a loss of 3.2 seats out of 435 seats translates into a coefficient of –.74, just slightly more negative than the median coefficient for coattail removal losses in state legislative midterms.

A second point of comparison for presidential-related midterm losses is, of course, the presidential coattail effect of the prior election. The negative presidential vote coefficients in midterm elections are of about the same magnitude as the positive presidential vote coefficients in presidential election years. The symmetry

Table 2. The Coattail Repercussion Model of Change in
State Legislative Seats in Midterm Elections, 1946–1982

State	Intercept	Presidential Vote	Initial Base	Trend	R^2
Alaska	.52	–1.04 (1.64)	– .13 (.04)	—	.36
Arizona	.25	–1.10 (14.05)	.33 (7.00)	—	.68
Arkansas	.09	– .02 (.22)	– .78 (.06)	—	.05
California	.47	– .67 (4.67)	– .28 (1.93)	—	.51
Colorado	.68	–1.48 (10.49)	– .19 (.51)	—	.60
Connecticut	– .53	– .39 (.36)	–1.31 (3.37)	.0231 (3.70)	.41
Delaware	–1.33	–2.86 (9.89)	.16 (.02)	—	.59
Florida	.12	– .30 (.88)	– .86 (0)	—	.19
Georgia	.07	– .05 (7.77)	– .04 (.42)	—	.66
Hawaii	.22	– .16 (.21)	– .16 (.06)	—	.13
Idaho	.30	– .55 (2.89)	– .16 (.19)	—	.37
Illinois	.65	–1.53 (74.45)	.12 (.23)	—	.91
Indiana	1.50	–3.54 (14.51)	.18 (.38)	—	.71
Iowa	1.23	–2.76 (151.05)	– .03 (.07)	—	.96
Kansas	.35	– .62 (6.33)	– .30 (4.11)	—	.59
Maine	.25	– .54 (7.64)	0 (0)	—	.52
Massachusetts	.07	– .13 (2.60)	.02 (.14)	—	.28
Michigan	.36	– .95 (3.45)	.14 (.42)	—	.37
Missouri	.26	– .63 (2.18)	.12 (.26)	—	.36
Montana	.92	–1.65 (49.72)	.08 (.29)	–.0034 (3.98)	.91
Nevada	.24	– .28 (.58)	– .26 (1.60)	—	.24
New Hampshire	.37	– .30 (14.28)	–1.22 (14.72)	.0035 (11.52)	.86

TABLE 2 (continued)

State	Intercept	Presidential Vote	Initial Base	Trend	R^2
New Mexico	1.53	–1.62 (5.48)	.13 (.13)	–.0128 (7.69)	.60
New York	.11	– .51 (13.30)	– .38 (2.53)	.0051 (6.90)	.79
North Carolina	.16	– .52 (3.22)	.13 (.05)	—	.41
North Dakota	.77	–1.77 (9.77)	– .14 (.24)	—	.63
Ohio	.56	–1.05 (2.96)	– .11 (.19)	—	.30
Oklahoma	.28	– .05 (.12)	– .32 (.96)	—	.14
Oregon	.51	–1.06 (7.55)	– .02 (.03)	—	.53
Pennsylvania	.25	– .85 (2.68)	.30 (.96)	· —	.34
Rhode Island	.23	– .50 (10.91)	.09 (.22)	—	.62
South Carolina	– .07	.02 (.04)	.04 (.03)	—	.01
South Dakota	.49	–1.05 (4.10)	– .14 (.31)	—	.41
Tennessee	.23	– .43 (2.29)	– .03 (.02)	—	.33
Texas	.65	– .11 (3.90)	– .45 (4.73)	–.0026 (5.60)	.49
Utah	2.22	–2.43 (17.72)	– .49 (2.68)	–.0169 (7.67)	.80
Vermont	– .03	.17 (1.27)	– .06 (.29)	—	.17
Washington	.90	–1.51 (11.00)	– .39 (1.80)	—	.63
West Virginia	1.00	–2.10 (57.94)	– .17 (.63)	—	.89
Wisconsin	.53	–1.03 (6.38)	– .02 (.02)	—	.48
Wyoming	.45	–1.08 (5.89)	0 (0)	—	.46

Note: The coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are *F*-values.

can be seen in a comparison of median coefficients, but is even clearer in comparisons of individual state coefficients. Where we find evidence of strong coattail effects in presidential election years, we tend to find evidence of equally strong coattail repercussions at the midterm. Conversely, where we find evidence of weaker coattails, we also tend to find weaker coattail removal or repercussion effects. A more systematic comparison indicates how closely coattail gains and

subsequent coattail losses are related. The presidential vote coefficients from Tables 1 and 2 are themselves strongly correlated with one another ($r = -.80$). One may interpret this negative association to mean that presidential coattails offer little or no residual benefits for a party. The benefits in the presidential election last only until politics returns to normal at the midterm.

As in the presidential election regressions, the base, the second of the principal independent variables, had a negative effect on seat change. As expected, however, the effect was somewhat stronger and more consistently negative when the post-presidential election base was used. The pre-presidential election base had a negative effect in 37 of the 41 regressions and was statistically significant ($p < .05$) in eight cases. Recall that the pre-presidential base has been used in Table 2 to reduce collinearity with the presidential vote variable.

Variations Among the States

The effects and midterm repercussions of presidential coattails on state legislative outcomes, though evident in most states, varies a good bit from state to state. Given the strong correlation ($r = -.80$) between the coefficients for the presidential year and the midterm, there is good reason to believe the state-to-state variation is systematic. The source of this systematic variation is somewhat less clear. There are a number of possibilities. Particularly heterogeneous states may be less uniform in their support for a presidential candidate, and consequently appear less responsive to the average vote in the state for that candidate. The very weak effects found in California, for instance, may be traceable to the very heterogeneous nature of the state. The varying sizes of state legislative districts, the use of multimember districts, and the drawing of district boundaries may dampen or accentuate coattail effects, particularly as they vary within a state

over four decades. The popularity of the president at the midterm can certainly accentuate or depress repercussion effects. Secular trends in a state, untapped by the crude trend indicator in the equations, may also complicate matters. Large scale immigration into western states over this period may be one such trend. Of the many potential sources of interstate variation, two in particular will be examined: interparty competition and ballot form.

Party Competition

States with competitive party systems should respond more strongly to fluctuations in presidential politics than states dominated by a single party. No presidential candidate, no matter how popular, can help his party capture state legislative seats unless his party actively contests those seats. Two measures of party competition are used to test the proposition of the relationship of party competition to coattail effects.[4] The first measure is based on the mean percentage of state legislative seats held by a party over the period from 1944 to 1982. This competitiveness index ranges from a value of 100 in states where the parties evenly split the state legislature to a value of 50 in states completely dominated by a single party. The second party competition measure taps the volatility of state legislative elections. This second measure is the standard deviation of the distribution of state legislative seats in all elections in this period.

According to both measures of party competition, there is a relationship between coattail effects, both presidential (Table 1) and midterm (Table 2), and state party competition. Both measures are positively correlated with coattail coefficients in presidential elections ($r = .31$ and $r = .34$, respectively) and negatively correlated with coattail repercussion coefficients in midterm elections ($r = -.46$ and $r = -.45$, respectively). An inspection of the scatterplots of both coefficients against the party competition measures

reveals a bit more about the relationship. The plots suggest substantial hetero-scedasticity. Coefficients vary a good bit among competitive states but are uniformly small in noncompetitive states. The 7 least competitive states of the 41 examined are Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. Each had a score of .7 or less on the mean percentage indicator of party competition. Only one of these 7 noncompetitive states (North Carolina, .49) had a coattail coefficient greater than .25, and only 1 (again North Carolina, −.52) had a coattail repercussion effect more negative than −.30. The range of coefficients among the remaining more competitive states is substantial. Among the 15 most competitive states—those having a score of .9 or more on the mean percentage indicator of party competition—coattail effects ranged from a high of 2.75 in Indiana to a low of −.29 in Oregon. Coattail repercussion coefficients were similarly dispersed, ranging from a strong effect of −3.54 in Indiana to a weak effect of −.39 in Connecticut. In other words, party competition is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for strong coattail effects. In competitive states a number of factors previously mentioned (e.g., heterogeneity) may mask the coattail effects in individual state legislative district contests.

Ballot Form

Coattail effects ought to be stronger in states with ballot provisions for a straight party vote (Weber and Parent, 1985, p. 26). Generally, such a provision is included in the party-column ballot, but not all forms of the party-column ballot have the single mark option for the straight party vote. On the basis of nine reports in the Council of State Governments' *Book of the States* between 1943 and 1982, the 41 states in this study were grouped by their provision for a straight party vote. Fourteen of the 41 states

changed their straight party vote provisions during this period, and were consequently dropped from this portion of the analysis. An additional 3 states were dropped because they were noncompetitive as measured by the first party competition measure (a score of 70 or less). The remaining 24 states divided nearly evenly, 11 having no straight party voting provision, and 13 having the option.

As expected, coattail effects appear somewhat stronger in the states with the straight party vote option. The median coattail effect in states lacking a straight party vote ballot is .49. The median coattail effect coefficient in states with a straight party vote ballot is .83. An analysis of variance, however, indicates that the difference is not significant at the .05 level ($p = .17$).

Gubernatorial Coattails

As portrayed to this point, the dynamics of state legislative elections would appear to be entirely driven by presidential electoral politics. Of course this is not the full story. Local politics undoubtedly have some effect. Caldeira and Patterson (1982b) have shown that local campaigns have a significant influence on state legislative election results. Moreover, candidates other than those running for president, most notably gubernatorial candidates, may have coattails (Weber, 1980). To test further the reliability of the presidential coattail findings and to set those findings in context, gubernatorial coattails are estimated by inserting the Democratic gubernatorial two-party vote percentage in the presidential and midterm equations of state legislative seat change. The equations are estimated for the 8 states consistently holding gubernatorial elections throughout this period in presidential election years, and for the 30 states consistently electing their governors in midterm elections. Three states (Florida, Illinois, and North Dakota) are

eliminated because of their changes in the scheduling of gubernatorial elections. Also, because of the small number of cases per state, the trend variable is omitted. The regression estimates are presented in Table 3.

These regression estimates make three points relevant to our analysis. First, the regression results generally indicate that candidates for governor have coattails that extend to their parties' state legislative candidates. Positive gubernatorial effects were found in 3 out of 4 states (29 of 38). The median gubernatorial effect is .37; that is, a party should gain about 2% of the state legislative seats for every 5 additional percentage points won by its candidate for governor. While this effect is statistically significant in a minority of states (8 of 38)—perhaps because of the small number of cases—it would appear that a strong run by a party's candidate for governor helps the party win seats in the state legislature.[5]

Second, the previous estimates of presidential coattail effects and their repercussions withstand the introduction of gubernatorial coattails. The coefficients still fit the expected pattern of positive effects in presidential elections and negative effects in midterm years. The expected signs are found in more than 9 out of 10 states (35 of 38). It is true that there are significant differences between the coefficients for a few states shown in Table 3 and the comparable coefficients that were estimated without controlling for gubernatorial coattails. However, in 3 out of 4 states, the difference between the estimates is less than .3, and the two sets of estimates are quite highly correlated ($r = .90$ in presidential year cases, and $r = .83$ in midterm year cases). Moreover, the estimated coefficients in Table 3 are nearly as likely to be stronger than the previous estimate (16 v. 22) as they are to be weaker.

The final point to draw from these regressions concerns the relative strength of presidential coattails and gubernatorial coattails. How do the presidential effects measure up against the gubernatorial effects on state legislative contests? The regressions suggest that the two effects are roughly equal in strength. The basis of this conclusion is a comparison of the absolute values of the standardized regression coefficients for the two variables in each of the 38 regressions. In the 8 states holding concurrent presidential and gubernatorial elections, presidential coattails appeared a bit stronger than gubernatorial coattails. Presidential effects were clearly stronger in 5 of the states, and very small differences (less than .05) were found in the remaining 3 states. In the states electing governors in midterm elections, half exhibited stronger gubernatorial coattails than presidential coattail repercussion effects, and half exhibited stronger presidential coattail repercussion effects than gubernatorial coattails.

Conclusion

There is a pulse to state legislative elections, a regular pattern of gains and losses very much like that observed in congressional elections. Moreover, the pulse is regulated by presidential electoral politics, again much like that of congressional elections. Presidential coattails extend to state legislative candidates. All things being equal, the change in a party's share of state legislative seats in presidential election years is proportional to the share of the vote won by its presidential candidate in the state. In presidential election years, a presidential candidate running a strong race in a state helps his party to gain additional state legislative seats. The opposite pattern is found in midterm elections. Whatever help the presidential candidate extended to his party's state legislative candidates in presidential election years is absent in the midterm election. Parties initially helped to significant

Table 3. Gubernatorial Coattail Effects on Changes in State Legislative Seats, in Presidential and Midterm Elections, 1944–1982

State	Intercept	Presidential Vote	Initial Base	Gubernatorial Vote	R^2
		Presidential Elections			
Delaware	− .44	1.08	− .56*	.43	.66
		.50	− .71	.22	
Indiana	− .92	1.64*	− .97	1.24	.89
		.36	− .68	.20	
Missouri	− .16	.67	− .45	.21	.74
		.43	− .53	.10	
Montana	− .35	.70	− .99*	1.02	.74
		.36	− .70	.37	
North Carolina	.32	.37	− .65	.07	.56
		.89	− .76	.12	
Utah	− .18	1.05*	− .66*	.12	.82
		.85	− .65	.09	
Washington	− .05	.54	−1.28*	1.05	.83
		.25	− .91	.27	
West Virginia	− .37	.69*	− .74*	1.04*	.89
		.47	− .65	.51	
		Midterm Elections			
Alaska	.34	−1.12	− .06	.38	.39
		− .67	− .05	.20	
Arizona	.06	−1.11*	.34*	.36	.76
		−1.49	1.08	.29	
Arkansas	.05	− .04	− .07	.06	.30
		− .36	− .09	.54	
California	.26	− .28	− .46*	.29	.72
		− .24	− .62	.61	
Colorado	.88	−1.64*	− .20	− .25	.61
		− .87	− .19	− .12	
Connecticut	−1.08	− .04	− .33	2.59*	.76
		− .02	− .36	.93	
Georgia	.07	− .04	− .03	− .01	.66
		− .66	− .15	− .09	
Hawaii	1.72	.01	−1.17	−1.65	.44
		.12	−1.04	− .97	
Idaho	.45	− .68	− .15	− .20	.39
		− .67	− .13	− .18	
Iowa	1.40	−2.73*	− .03	− .40	.97
		− .96	− .03	− .11	
Kansas	.02	− .65*	− .42*	.76	.75
		− .64	− .70	.46	
Maine	.35	− .55*	.02	− .22	.56
		− .74	.05	− .20	

Table 3 (continued)

State	Intercept	Presidential Vote	Initial Base	Gubernatorial Vote	R^2
Massachusetts	.15	− .19	.03	− .12	.31
		− .77	.18	− .32	
Michigan	− .81	− .12	.17	1.60*	.68
		− .07	.25	.74	
Nevada	− .20	− .18	− .33*	.83*	.80
		− .16	− .52	.76	
New Hampshire	.15	− .40*	− .37	.34	.76
		− .83	− .28	.42	
New Mexico	− .88	− .28	.13	1.94	.16
		− .13	.10	.32	
New York	− .10	− .30	.02	.53	.65
		− .41	.03	.48	
Ohio	− .48	− .18	.02	1.19	.44
		− .10	.02	.59	
Oklahoma	− .03	.07	− .31	.45*	.76
		.17	− .33	.84	
Oregon	.27	− .98*	− .11	.55	.64
		− .66	− .21	.38	
Pennsylvania	− .86	− .24	.18	1.80*	.70
		− .15	.18	.71	
Rhode Island	.22	− .49	.08	.02	.62
		− .75	.10	.04	
South Carolina	.24	− .04	− .40	.18	.34
		− .17	− .59	.93	
South Dakota	.20	−1.30*	− .22	.96*	.76
		− .74	− .26	.62	
Tennessee	.22	− .44	.11	− .14	.36
		− .57	.18	− .28	
Texas	.14	− .07	− .20*	.19*	.73
		− .52	− .67	1.21	
Vermont	− .10	.14	− .09	.10	.42
		.33	− .29	.52	
Wisconsin	− .25	− .52	− .20	1.24	.66
		− .35	− .39	.64	
Wyoming	.85	−1.30*	− .12	− .54	.50
		− .81	− .08	− .26	

Note: The top coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients, and the bottom coefficients are standardized regression coefficients.

*$p < .05$.

gains subsequently suffer commensurate losses when running without the benefit of coattails. In midterms, all things being equal, the change in a party's share of state legislative seats is inversely proportional to the share of the vote won by its presidential candidate in the prior presidential election in the state.

The evidence of a coattail pulse in state legislative elections is quite strong. First, the pattern is consistently found in different states. In 39 of 41 state-level

presidential election year multivariate regressions, the presidential vote has the expected positive coattail coefficient. Again in 39 of 41 state-level midterm election year multivariate regressions, the presidential vote has the expected negative coattail repercussion coefficient. Second, the pattern is statistically significant in a majority of states, despite the small number of cases (elections) considered. Third, the median magnitude of presidential coattail and repercussion effects in state legislative races is only slightly less than those effects in congressional races. Fourth, though the effects varied from state to state, this variation appears to be systematic. Presidential coattail repercussion effects in a state are generally comparable to the initial presidential coattail effects. State circumstances that blunt aggregate coattail effects, such as ballot forms and the lack of two-party competition, also blunt aggregate coattail repercussion effects. The correspondence of the two types of effects should add to our confidence about the findings. Where evidence is found of one of the effects, there should be evidence of the other, and this is precisely what we find. Finally, presidential coattail and repercussion effects continue to be found after controls for gubernatorial coattail effects are introduced.

Having carefully documented the substantial role presidential candidates play, by their presence in presidential election years and their absence in midterm election years, in determining state legislative election outcomes, the natural question is, what does this mean for state legislative politics? What are the more general political and policy implications? Are presidential coattails at the state legislative level beneficial or harmful to our politics?

The conventional wisdom regarding presidential coattails in congressional elections has been that the system benefits from the linkage of presidential and congressional electoral politics. Coattails promote cooperation between the executive and legislative institutions. Congressmen beholden to the president for their election or reelection, or perhaps even for their future reelection, have sympathetic ears for the president's proposals. If the institutions are structured to disperse power, possibly creating a chaotic or deadlocked system (Burns, 1967), then coattails are a compensating force promoting leadership and cooperation.

In state legislative politics, the role of presidential coattails is not quite so clear. On the face of it, one might conclude that presidential coattails in state legislative elections are detrimental to the system, or at best introduce extraneous noise into state politics. The problems facing the national government are not those facing state governments, which also possess different powers. According to this assessment, there is no reasonable linkage of national and state politics by presidential coattails.

However, the case can be made that presidential coattails are desirable in state legislative elections for much the same reasons they are desirable in congressional elections. To be sure, national and state issues often differ, but we can easily underestimate the number of issues common to both national and state politics, and the cooperation and coordination required to address these overlapping concerns. In a sense, presidential coattails in state legislative elections may help bridge the federalism gap between national and state governments, in much the same way that presidential coattails in congressional elections may help bridge the separation of powers gap between the president and Congress. Moreover, even when the national and state governments are not dealing with common issues, the public may benefit from its different governments pursuing different policy areas with some common underlying perspective or ideology. Presidential coat-

tails, at whatever level, may promote this common perspective. Presidential coattails seem to foster greater coherence between policies of nation and state, even though such bonding between them presumably is smaller than could be effected by "responsible" political parties.

Notes

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1. For an excellent discussion of the different constructions of election outcome variables in state and local election research, see Weber and Parent (1985, pp. 3-9). The advantage in using a seat-change variable as the dependent variable to construct the necessarily parsimonious model required by the small number of cases per state is that a number of variables that might affect the absolute success of a party (e.g., partisanship in the state) are likely to be near constant over a two-year period, and would not affect change in a party's success.

2. If there were no coattail effects, the probability of estimating a positive coefficient in any given state would be approximately one-half. Given this probability, a binominal distribution indicates that there is less than one chance in one thousand of estimating 39 or more positive coefficients out of 41 states. Thus, the proposition that coattail effects do not exist at this level can be quite safely rejected.

3. Results of regressions using the post-presidential election base rather than the pre-presidential election base are available from the author.

4. There are a variety of choices in selecting indicators of party competition. The two indicators used here are selected for several reasons. First, they cover the entire period under study. Although levels of party competition in a state may change over time (Broh and Levine, 1978; Patterson and Caldeira, 1984; Tucker, 1982), the trend variable in the original regressions should correct for this movement. Second, the dispersion indicator of party competition is somewhat sensitive to the aggregation problem raised by Ray and Havik (1981). A state legislature might be evenly divided between the parties but lack competitive state legislative districts. By the mean percentage of seats indicator such a state would look more competitive than it really is. While the dispersion indicator does not directly measure this district-level competition, it should be somewhat sensitive to it. Third, the mean percentage of seats indicator is consistent with previous research in

party competition, and focuses on competition for the particular office in question. Among others, Ranney (1976) and Patterson and Caldeira (1984) use a party's percentage of seats in the state legislature as one component of their more general indices of state party competition.

5. The gubernatorial coattail effects found in both presidential and midterm elections most probably have their own repercussion effects in the following election.

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