CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Southern Political Science Association

http://www.jstor.org

Explaining Presidential Losses in Midterm Congressional Elections

James E. Campbell
University of Georgia

Two sets of theories attempt to explain the variance in the loss of seats in the House of Representatives by the President's party in midterm elections. The first set of theories, the coattails/surge-and-decline theories, explains midterm losses as a function of the previous presidential election. The second set of theories, the popularity/economy theories, explains midterm losses as a response to conditions at the time of the midterm. This research examines both theories' ability to explain midterm seat losses in the same set of midterm elections. The findings indicate that there is some merit to both theories, that the economy does not have the impact suggested by previous research, that the coattails/surge-and-decline theories offer somewhat more accurate predictions of seat losses and that an integrated model predicts more accurately than either individual model. In effect, the two sets of theories ought to be considered as being complimentary rather than purely competitive. The integrated model is also used to examine differences between a President's first and second midterm, to explain seat losses in the 1982 midterm, and to predict losses for the 1986 midterm.

There are few patterns in American politics as regular as the loss of House seats by the President's party in midterm elections. With the single exception of the 1934 election, the President's party has lost seats at every midterm in this century. Since the mid-1940s, the typical midterm loss has been about 30 seats. Although the President's party has consistently lost seats in this period, the extent of the losses has varied considerably. In the last forty years, seat losses have ranged from a low of 4 seats in the 1962 midterm to a high of 54 in the 1946 midterm.

Several theories have attempted to explain the midterm phenomenon. These theories are essentially of two types. The first type, the coattails/ surge-and-decline theories, explains midterm losses by the events of the preceding presidential election. A strong showing by the President in the previous election should produce greater losses at the midterm. In effect, the bigger they are, the harder they fall. The second type, the economy/ popularity theories, explains midterm losses by the circumstances surrounding the midterm itself. The midterm is a referendum on the state of the economy and the popularity of the incumbent administration.

The coattails theory is the most basic theory of the first type, those concentrating on the circumstances of the previous presidential election. The president's popularity and the voters' tendency to cast straight party

ballots help the President's congressional candidates in presidential election years. In the absence of this coattail help at the midterm, a number of the President's congressional candidates are beaten. Although the extent of coattails is difficult to determine (Miller, 1956; Moreland, 1973; and Press, 1958) and may have diminished in recent years because of the increased advantage of incumbency (Kritzer and Eubank, 1979; Edwards, 1979; and Cover, 1983), several studies have found evidence of their existence (Jacobson, 1976; and Kaplowitz, 1971). The most recent and sophisticated investigation of coattail voting at the individual level has confirmed its existence and its decline since the 1950s (Calvert and Ferejohn, 1983, p. 416; and Ferejohn and Calvert, 1984).

A more elaborate and sophisticated theory in this vein is the surge-and-decline theory (Campbell, 1966). This theory explains midterm losses by the difference in the stimulus of on-year and off-year elections. Presidential elections are high-stimulus elections. There is a surge of information, interest and participation. Since the presidency is the focus of politics in America, presidential elections generate political interest and the dispersal of political information. Peripheral voters as well as core voters participate. Both are influenced by the outpouring of political information. This information and influence are generally, almost by definition, to the advantage of the successful presidential aspirant.[1] Although both peripheral and core voters are influenced by this information, peripheral voters should be influenced more since they are more likely to lack strong partisan attachments or a substantial base of prior information (Converse, 1966a and 1966b). Like the coattail theory, the surge-and-decline theory supposes that whatever benefits a party's presidential candidate also benefits the party's congressional candidates. The midterm election, by contrast, is a low-stimulus election, creating a decline in information and in turnout. The general level of political information is comparatively low and is not necessarily as favorable to the incumbent President and party. Moreover, the low-stimulus election only brings out the core voters, voters less susceptible to persuasion by short-term information and significantly more partisan than the peripheral electorate. Although the supposed difference between the presidential election voters and midterm voters has been

---

[1] The positive relationship between the direction of short-term forces and the successful presidential candidate exists virtually by definition. A candidate can win under only three circumstances. First, the minority party candidate can only be successful when short-term forces are in his favor and then only when they are sufficiently in his favor to overcome the party's minority status. Second, the majority party candidate can win if the short-term forces are neutral or in his favor. Finally, the majority party candidate can win if short-term forces are against him, so long as those forces are insufficient to overcome the party's majority status. Thus, while it is conceivable that the direction of short-term forces could oppose a successful presidential candidate, it is unlikely.

brought into question recently (Wolfinger, Rosenstone and McIntosh, 1981), several studies have produced evidence in support of the surge-and-decline thesis (Campbell, 1966; Hinckley, 1967; and DeNardo, 1980).

The coattail and surge-and-decline theories, at one time the dominant explanation of midterms, are no longer the conventional wisdom (Hinckley, 1981, p. 115; Tufte, 1978, pp. 106-107; and Jacobson and Kernell, 1981, p. 64). In their place has emerged a second set of theories that focus on circumstances at the time of midterm.

There are two variables at the time of the midterm that have been used to explain the extent of midterm losses. The first is the popularity of the President. A midterm election is regarded by many as a referendum on the President (Kernell, 1977; Piereson, 1975; and Tufte, 1978). Voters signal their approval or disapproval for an administration by voting for or against the congressional candidates of the President's party. A second variable at the time of the midterm that has been used to explain the extent of midterm losses is the state of the economy, commonly measured by the change in real disposal income per capita. More real spending power for the voters means more votes for the congressional candidates of the incumbent President's party. Research on the impact of economics in midterm elections is extensive (Kramer, 1971; Tufte, 1975; Arcelus and Meltzer, 1975; Bloom and Price, 1975; Goodman and Kramer, 1975; Hibbing and Alford, 1981; Hibbs, 1982; Kiewiet, 1983; and Owens, 1984).

To the extent that conventional wisdom now exists concerning the factors affecting midterm losses, that wisdom is contained in Tufte's model of influences on midterm voting (1978, p. 112).[2] Tufte uses both presidential popularity and the change in the economy to explain midterm losses. In an examination of the eight midterms from 1946 to 1974, the two variables explain about four-fifths of the variance in the standardized measure of vote loss of congressional candidates in the President's party. The model performs somewhat less well when the most recent midterms are also considered. An examination of the economy/popularity model for the ten midterms from 1946 to 1982 indicates that the economy and presidential popularity explain only about half of the variance of the standardized vote-loss measure. The inclusion of the 1978 and 1982 midterms reduces the

---

[2] Tufte's model in a strict sense only predicts deviations from the normal vote. As such, in this strict sense, it does not compete with the surge-and-decline theory since it recognizes the normal vote baseline, though one can certainly argue with the manner in which the baseline is introduced as a part of the dependent variable. However, Tufte's model has been regularly used to generate predictions of midterm losses (Witt, 1983; Mann and Ornstein, 1983; and Jacobson and Kernell, 1982), and its construction leaves the impression that factors at the time of the midterm are the most important factors in determining the vote and ultimately the seat outcomes. In this sense Tufte's model applied to the question of midterm losses has been taken to be in competition with the coattails and surge-and-decline models.

amount of explained variance from 79 percent to just 52 percent (adjusted R-square).[3]

Despite the considerable amount of research on midterms, two problems continue to impede progress in explaining and predicting midterm seat losses. The first and most serious problem is that the contending schools of research do not confront one another head on. The research involving the coattails and surge-and-decline theories proceeds for the most part as though there were no possibility that circumstances at the time of the midterm could have an impact (Tufte, 1978, p. 106). Those examining factors at the time of the midterm are at least equally guilty of tunnel vision. Their research dismisses, on rather scant evidence, the possibility that midterm losses may partially depend on the circumstances of the previous presidential election. For instance, in Tufte's model there is no consideration that the events of the previous presidential election had any impact on the midterm loss, except that the loss is calculated as the difference between the congressional vote and the party's normal vote in the previous eight congressional elections. In fact Tufte went so far as to argue that the coattails/surge-and-decline theories fail even to offer an explanation of the variance in midterm losses. According to Tufte, although the coattails/surge-and-decline theory "explains why the President's party should almost always be operating in the loss column, it does not account for the *number* of votes and seats lost by the President's party" (1975, p. 813). The second problem with past research is that different studies have examined different dependent variables and few have used the actual change in the number of seats held by the President's party. The seat-loss variable is the variable that has shown the unusual regularity, is the most politically

---

[3] The reestimation of Tufte's model was made using the 1982 Council of Economic Advisors' report of economic conditions over this period. The recent poor prediction of the Tufte model, using the standardized vote-loss measure, has been noted by Jacobson (1983, p. 6), by Mann and Ornstein (1983, p. 140), and by Witt (1983, p. 49). Whereas the Republicans lost 26 seats in 1982, the Tufte model predicts a loss of 58 or 59 seats. One should note that while evidence in support of the Tufte model has apparently been found at the aggregate level, there has been considerable difficulty finding such evidence at the individual level (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Hibbing and Alford, 1981; Fiorina, 1983; Kramer, 1983; Weatherford, 1983; Sigelman and Tsai, 1981).

Jacobson and Kernell (1981, ch 6; and 1982) have altered Tufte's model by introducing a lag in his independent variables. It is their contention that this lag is produced by the decision of potential candidates to seek or not to seek office. If this thesis is true, it would introduce an intervening variable in the basic Tufte model. Economics and the President's popularity affect congressional candidates' decisions, which in turn affect the election outcomes. As such the Jacobson-Kernell model appears to be more of a refinement in the Tufte model than a challenge to it. The Jacobson and Kernell thesis regarding strategic politicians could, of course, be adapted to the coattails model. Strong congressional candidates may be more likely to run if they believe the top of the ticket will also be strong.

important and, unlike the standardized vote-loss variable, is sensitive to the distribution as well as the national division of the congressional vote.

The purpose of this research is to test both sets of theories using the same dependent variable, the seat loss for the President's party, and the same set of midterm elections. If, as one might suspect, the data support to some degree each set of theories, an integrated model of midterm losses will be constructed and analyzed.

The Data and Methods

Ten midterm elections since the 1946 midterm are examined. The data base does not extend to midterms prior to 1946 because the Gallup presidential popularity measure at the midterm has only been collected since 1946. The fact that there are only ten data points to work with obviously constrains how elaborate any model of midterm loss can be. However the data is sufficient to examine the basic variables of each theory.

The main portion of this analysis requires the measurement of four variables. The principal dependent variable is simply the number of seats lost in the midterm by the President's party. This is calculated as the difference in the number of seats held or won at the midterm and the number held or won at the previous presidential election.[4] The second variable is the share of the two-party vote won by the incumbent President in the preceding election. This is the independent variable of primary interest to proponents of the coattail and surge-and-decline theories.[5] In the

---

[4] A companion analysis was also conducted on a vote-change variable, the percentage point change in the national aggregate vote for the congressional candidates of the President's party from the presidential election to the midterm. The vote-loss, rather than seat-loss, analysis supports in most respects the findings of the principal analysis reported below. The vote-loss equivalent of the integrated model (model 5) accounted for 76 percent of the variance. Both the presidential vote (b = -.27, beta = -.63) and presidential popularity (b = +.09, beta = +.50) were statistically significant at the .01 level. The midterm variable was not significant (b = +.03, beta = +.22). The intercept was +4.10. Further details of this vote-loss analysis may be obtained from the author.

[5] The analysis considered and examined several alternative measures and specifications for the coattail/surge-and-decline model before settling for the simple share of the two-party presidential vote. In particular two alternative coattail measures were considered. The first was based on Calvert and Ferejohn's (1983) analysis of coattails from 1956 to 1980. The estimates of the net coattail advantage to the President's party were calculated from Calvert and Ferejohn's table 2 (p. 415). The estimates are as follows: 4.68 in 1956, -2.19 in 1960, 9.75 in 1964, 1.47 in 1968, 8.91 in 1972, -.27 in 1976, and 3.01 in 1980. The Calvert and Ferejohn measure produced results remarkably similar to those using the simple division of the two-party vote measure. The two measures were very highly correlated (r = .95). Because the Calvert and Ferejohn measure is only available since 1956, because it does not improve the predictive power of the model and because the simple two-party vote is more accessible, the two-party presidential vote measure was used throughout this analysis. The gain in seats in the

period covered by this study, the presidential-vote variable has ranged from a high of 62 percent in 1972 to a low of 50 percent in 1960. The mean is 55 percent. The third and fourth variables are of interest to advocates of the economy/popularity theories. The third variable is the presidential popularity measure asked by Gallup in the fall prior to the midterm. Presidential popularity ranged from a high of 67 percent approval for Kennedy going into the 1962 midterm to a low of 32 percent approval for Truman going into the 1946 midterm. The mean is 52 percent. The fourth measure is the percent annual change in real disposable income per capita as calculated from data in the 1982 *Economic Report of the President.* The economy varied from a 6.0 percent growth rate going into the 1950 midterm to a 2.6 percent decline going into the 1946 midterm. The mean growth rate in the ten midterms studied is 1.3 percent.

COMPARING THE MODELS

The first step in this analysis is to estimate the coattail/surge-and-decline model and the economy/popularity referendum model. Regression results for each model are presented in table 1. The coattail/surge-and-decline model employs a single independent variable, the President's share of the two-party vote in the last election. Although this single variable model greatly oversimplifies the theory, its predictive power is remarkably strong. The presidential vote, two years removed from the midterm, explains fifty-five percent of the variance in midterm losses. If the 1946 midterm is excluded, the presidential vote explains eighty percent of the variance in the remaining nine midterms. As both the coattails and surge-and-decline theories lead us to expect, strong presidential showings in presidential elections are followed by proportionately large seat losses for the President's party in the subsequent midterm. In more specific terms, an increase of one percent in the presidential vote translates into an expected loss of a little more than three House seats in the following midterm.

The finding regarding the strength of the coattails/surge-and-decline model is bolstered by evidence of coattail or surge effects in the prior presidential election. Calvert and Ferejohn (1983 and 1984) and Born (1984) have successfully measured significant coattail effects. My own research (Campbell, 1985) also found substantial coattail effects. A coattail

---

President's party was also considered as a coattail variable; however, curiously enough, it did not prove to be a very good measure. The problem with the seat-gain measure is that it is sensitive to the prior midterm outcome. So, when the prior midterm produced a gain for the incoming President's party, coattail or surge effects are understated by the seat-gain measure. Conversely, when the incoming President's party suffered losses at the prior midterm, as they would if they were the incumbent party, the seat-gain measure overstates the coattail or surge effects.

TABLE 1

MODELS OF MIDTERM LOSSES

Model (1) The Coattails/Surge-and-Decline Model
           SEATLOSS = 145.22 − 3.20** PRESVOTE + e
                                     (−.77)

$R^2 = .60$
Adj. $R^2 = .55$
$N = 10$

Model (2) The Economy/Popularity Model
           SEATLOSS = −81.58 + 2.70 ECONOMY + .93 PRESPOP + e
                               (+.42)   (+.55)

$R^2 = .51$
Adj. $R^2 = .37$
$N = 10$

Model (3) The Combined Model
           SEATLOSS = 75.47 − 2.75** PRESVOTE + .85* PRESPOP + .96 ECONOMY + e
                               (−.67)   (+.51)   (+.15)

$R^2 = .88$
Adj. $R^2 = .82$
$N = 10$

Model (4) The Reduced Model
           SEATLOSS = 90.02 − 3.00** PRESVOTE + .86** PRESPOP + e
                              (−.73)   (+.51)

$R^2 = .86$
Adj. $R^2 = .82$
$N = 10$

Model (5) The Integrated Model
           SEATLOSS = 75.17 − 3.13** PRESVOTE + .79** PRESPOP + .40* MIDTERM = e
                              (−.76)   (+.47)   (+.27)

$R^2 = .92$
Adj. $R^2 = .88$
$N = 10$

Where   SEATLOSS = The difference between seats won at the midterm and seats won at the previous election by the President's party
           PRESVOTE = the President's share of the two-party vote in previous election
           ECONOMY = annual change in real disposable income in the year before Midterm
           PRESPOP = popularity of the President at the Midterm

Note: The number in parentheses is the standardized regression coefficient.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

model accounts for over ninety percent of the variance in aggregate seat changes in presidential elections from 1944 to 1980. Moreover, the positive coattail effects found in presidential elections closely corresponded to the negative coattail effects found in midterms. According to the coattail model for presidential elections, every additional one percent in the presidential vote for Democratic candidates translates into a little more than a three-seat gain for Democrats in the House (b = 3.22).

The economy/popularity model also performs quite well, though not as well as the coattails/surge-and-decline model. This two-variable model, composed of the annual change in real disposable income per capita and the President's popularity, explains nearly forty percent of the variance in seat loss. The coefficients associated with this model also are presented in table 1. As the standardized coefficients indicate, though both variables appear to have an impact, the impact of presidential popularity is the stronger of the two.

The strength of both models suggests that each may be seriously underspecified in that each omits the independent variable(s) of the other model. Even given data limitations that demand a very parsimonious specification, a merger of the two models should be considered. Two benefits seem likely from such a merger—the possible creation of an even more powerful integrated model and the more accurate estimation of the relative strengths of the explanatory variables.

COMBINING THE MODELS

The combined model, employing all three explanatory variables, is presented as model 3. As expected, the predictive power of the combined model is greater than either of the separate models. The combined model accounts for over 80 percent of the variance in midterm losses for the ten midterms.

The most surprising findings of the combined model concern the relative strengths of the explanatory variables. Economic conditions at the time of the midterm have a very weak and statistically insignificant direct effect on the extent of midterm losses. In fact, when the economic-conditions variable is dropped from the model, as it is in the reduced model (model 4), the adjusted measure of explained variance holds constant. Apparently part of the impact of the presidential vote has been erroneously attributed to economic conditions in the economy/popularity model. The prior presidential vote and economic conditions have been fairly strongly and negatively correlated throughout this period (r = -.41). Omitting the negative effect of the presidential vote from the midterm model thus has had the effect of inflating the positive direct impact of economic growth. Moreover, economic conditions at the time of the midterm have nearly no indirect effect on midterm loss. A regression analysis with presidential

popularity as the dependent variable and economic conditions at the midterm as the independent variable indicates that economic conditions at the midterm have a nearly negligible impact on presidential popularity (beta = .07). This of course also means that it had a nearly negligible indirect effect through presidential popularity to seat losses (standardized indirect effect = .04). However, there is some evidence to suggest that the economy has a *lagged* and apparently indirect effect on midterm losses. The state of the economy early in the President's term affects the President's popularity at the midterm. The annual change in real disposable income for the year prior to the midterm is positively related (beta = .48) to the President's popularity in the year of the midterm. In standardized terms, this means that the economy has a lagged indirect effect on seat losses of .24 (.48 from economy to presidential popularity and .51 from presidential popularity to seat losses). In unstandardized terms, a one percent increase in real disposable income in the year prior to the midterm should improve the President's popularity at the midterm by about two percentage points and thereby save the President's party from losing nearly two seats.[6]

As for the other explanatory variables, both the President's share of the vote and his popularity strongly influence the extent of midterm losses. Their relative strengths are indicated by the standardized coefficients. As the coattails/surge-and-decline theories predict, the impact of the presidential vote is the stronger factor. Midterm elections are partly a return to normal politics after the strong short-term forces of the presidential election. Midterm elections are also, though to a lesser extent, referendums on the President's performance.[7]

---

[6] Lagged economic effects have also been found in a number of previous studies (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; and Norpoth and Yantek, 1983). It is of course possible that lagged economic conditions have a direct effect on seat losses. However, when lagged economic conditions were included in the integrated model in place of economic conditions at the midterm, neither the lagged economic conditions nor presidential popularity had statistically significant effects on seat loss. The small number of cases and the correlation between lagged economic conditions and presidential popularity produced unstable estimates of their effects. Because of this problem, the lag in the economic variable, the non-attitudinal character of the economic variable, and the insignificance of the lagged direct economic effects when the increased incumbency-advantage variable is included in the regression, prior economic conditions are considered exogenous in this analysis, and their effects are specified as indirect. The lagged change in real disposable income per capita ranged from a high of +.5.8% for the 1974 midterm to a low of -2.7% in 1946. The mean change was +1.6%. The precise estimate of the economy's unstandardized lagged indirect effect is 1.73 seats. A one percent improvement in the economy prior to the midterm increases popularity by 2.01, and a one percent increase in popularity reduces seat losses by .86.

[7] One might suspect a colinearity problem between the presidential vote and presidential popularity. However, the coefficients of both the presidential-vote variable and the presidential-midterm-popularity variable are significant and quite stable. The correlation between the presidential vote and the midterm popularity measure is in fact slightly negative for this set of elections (r = -.10).

Since the analysis is based on only ten midterms, the findings may be unusually sensitive to the aberration of a single midterm. In consideration of this potential problem, the reduced model has been reestimated omitting each midterm one at a time. This reestimation procedure is similar to Chatterjee and Wiseman's (1983) analysis of Tufte's findings. The reestimations of the reduced model confirm the strength of the model. The fit of the model, as measured by the adjusted R-square, is quite good in each of the ten reestimations. It ranges from accounting for 91 percent of the variance when 1982 is omitted to 74 percent of the variance when the 1962 midterm is dropped. The range of reestimated coefficients is also reasonable. The unstandardized coefficient for the presidential vote varies from -3.21 when the 1966 midterm is excluded to -2.72 when the 1958 midterm is dropped. The effect of presidential popularity ranges from 1.01 when 1982 is omitted to .50 when 1946 is excluded. Eight of the ten reestimations place the popularity coefficient between .83 and .93. In short, the results do not appear to be too sensitive to particular data points.

PREDICTIONS AND RESIDUALS

The ultimate test of the reduced model is its success in prediction. This has already been demonstrated by the model's high R-square. However, the model's actual predictions for each of the ten midterms illustrate the model's predictive power more graphically. Table 2 presents the actual seat loss and the predicted seat loss from the coattails/surge-and-decline model, the economy/popularity model and the full and reduced models. As a point of comparison, if the mean seat loss of 30.2 were used as a predictor, the mean error would be 15.2 seats above or below the actual seat loss in a given midterm.

Both the coattails/surge-and-decline model and the economy/popularity model generally yield more accurate predictions than the mean loss of seats. The coattails/surge-and-decline model has a mean error of 8.2 seats and is more accurate than the economy/popularity model in six of the ten midterms examined. Clearly the worst prediction of the coattails/surge-and-decline model was the 1946 midterm. In failing to consider Truman's unusually low level of popularity, the coattails/surge-and-decline model underestimated the extent of the midterm loss by 26 seats. The economy/popularity model had a slightly greater mean error of 10.5 seats. The economy/popularity model substantially underestimated seat losses in the midterms of 1958, 1966, and 1974. Two of these midterms followed landslide presidential elections and the third, 1958, followed a presidential victory of only a slightly smaller magnitude.

The reduced model's predictions, as expected, compare favorably with the predictions of the coattails/surge-and-decline model and the economy/popularity model. The mean error of the reduced model is 4.2 seats. The

TABLE 2

PREDICTED SEAT LOSS IN CONGRESSIONAL MIDTERM ELECTIONS, 1946-1982

ELECTION YEAR	ACTUAL SEAT LOSS	COATTAILS/ SURGE-AND-DECLINE PREDICTION	ECONOMY/ POPULARITY PREDICTION	COMBINED MODEL'S PREDICTION	REDUCED MODEL'S PREDICTION	INTEGRATED MODEL'S PREDICTION
1946	-54	-28	-59	-49	-45	-50
1950	-29	-21	-25	-26	-29	-34
1954	-18	-31	-23	-21	-19	-24
1958	-47	-40	-31	-37	-36	-39
1962	-4	-15	-12	-3	-3	-4
1966	-48	-50	-27	-48	-52	-52
1970	-12	-15	-22	-12	-12	-9
1974	-48	-53	-35	-50	-49	-46
1978	-16	-18	-24	-18	-18	-12
1982	-26	-31	-41	-40	-39	-31
Average Error	—	±8.2	±10.5	±4.0	±4.2	±4.1

mean error of the coattails/surge-and-decline predictions is nearly twice as great, and the mean error of the economy/popularity predictions is more than twice as great. Moreover, the reduced model only is slightly less accurate in its predictions than the full version of the model (model 3).

As one might expect, there is a definite pattern in the differences between actual and predicted seat losses. The early midterm losses tended to be greater than predicted, and the later losses tended to be less than predicted. In fact, there is a fairly strong correlation (r = .69) between the error term and the year of the midterm, even though the Durbin-Watson test is inconclusive about the significance of this serial correlation at the .05 level (d = 1.24). The reasons for this pattern of residuals seem quite evident: the decline in party voting and the rise in the incumbency advantage. These trends can be taken into account and used to correct the reduced model's predictions. Several different trend variables were examined.[8] The variable that proved to capture both the decline in partisanship and the rise in the incumbency advantage in a single variable is a simple counter variable for the midterm year. This trend correction variable is simply the midterm year expressed in two-digit form (e.g., 46, 50, 54, etc.). Including this correction term in the reduced model eliminates the serial correlation problem (d = 2.35). This corrected reduced model or the integrated model is presented as model 5. Introducing the midterm year as a surrogate variable for the decrease in party voting and the increase in incumbency advantage has several effects. It slightly increases the impact of the presidential vote, slightly diminishes the impact of presidential popularity at the midterm, and increases the amount of explained variance from 82 percent to 89 percent. The predictions of seat losses based on this corrected model appear in the far right column of table 2. These corrected predictions are at most 8 seats in error, whereas the uncorrected predictions

---

[8] Four different trend correction terms were explored. These are: the midterm counter variable, a dummy variable taking on values of 0 before 1964 and 1 thereafter, an incumbency variable (the percentage of incumbents reelected) and a partisan decline variable (the percentage of voters claiming to be pure independents or apolitical). All four variables removed serial correlation when introduced as a third independent variable in the reduced model, according to the Durbin-Watson test. The midterm counter variable was judged to be the best of the four on three grounds. (1) It produced the highest adjusted R-square of the four (.89). Entering incumbency variable increased the adjusted R-square to .86. Entering partisan decline increased it to .83. The dummy entry increased it to .88. (2) Unlike the incumbency and partisan decline variables, the counter variable is simple and more useful from a prediction standpoint. (3) The counter variable can serve as a surrogate for both the incumbency increase and partisan decline variables. This is an important consideration when dealing with a very small number of cases. The correction term that produces nearly as great an increase in the model's predictive power is the dummy variable. The dummy variable correction yields an intercept of 97.60 for pre-1964 midterms and 106.27 for post-1964 midterms. The understandardized coefficients are –3.25 for the presidential vote and .89 presidential popularity.

were as many as 13 seats off. However, in terms of the total amount of error, the improvement is rather modest. The mean error of the corrected predictions is 4.1, compared to 4.2 for the uncorrected predictions. Even so, we should take into account that the model has not underestimated losses in the last twenty years, the last time being 1962 when the model underestimated seat losses by a single seat. Thus, even though the correction factor has made only fairly modest improvements in previous predictions, prudence suggests that such adjustments may be valuable in predicting future midterm losses.

First and Second Midterms

The integrated model not only explains the general loss of seats by the President's party, but also explains differences that have been observed between losses in a President's first midterm and losses in a second midterm. Abramowitz, Cover and Norpoth (1984), Mann and Ornstein (1981, p. 48) and others have noted that Presidents lose more seats in their second term's midterm than in their first midterm. The difference has been considerable. In the twenty-one midterms in this century, the mean seat loss for first-term administrations has been 32 while the mean seat loss in subsequent midterms has been 41. The difference between first and subsequent midterms is considerably larger in recent years. Since 1946, the average seat loss for first-term Presidents has been only about 15 seats while the average seat loss in second terms has been about 45 seats. What accounts for this 30-seat gap? Most of the difference can be explained directly by the general model of midterm seat loss. The presidential party has suffered greater losses in their second midterm for three reasons. First, since the mid-1940s first-term Presidents have won by smaller margins than reelected Presidents (53.7 percent versus 56.5 percent). As we have seen, this larger vote margin should produce a greater loss of seats at the second midterm. Second, as Abramowitz, Cover and Norpoth note, first-term Presidents have enjoyed surprisingly greater approval ratings at the midterm than Presidents serving a second term (55.0 percent versus 46.5 percent). The lower popularity of second-term Presidents should also increase their seat loss relative to first-term Presidents. Finally, first-term presidencies are generally more recent in the series. There is nearly a 12-year difference in the mean year of first- and second-term presidencies in the ten midterms. Since these first-term presidencies tend to be more recent, we ought to observe smaller seat losses because of the greater incumbency advantage and more prevalent split-ticket voting trends.

Most of the 30 seat difference between first- and second-term presidencies can be explained by these three differences—differences in the prior presidential vote, presidential popularity, and the period or trend factor. By inserting the mean values of the three independent variables of

the general model of midterm seat losses (model 5) for both first and second term presidencies, we can estimate how much of the 30-seat difference in seat losses is attributable to differences in the vote, popularity and general insulating trends (i.e., midterm variable). The mean differences in the three independent variables of the general model explain 21 of the 30 seat difference between first and second midterm losses, or 70 percent of the gap. The greater presidential vote before the second midterm explains about 9.3 seats of the difference. The lower popularity of the President at the second midterm explains about 6.7 seats of the differences, and the fact that second midterms occurred earlier in the series explains another 4.7 seats of the difference.

The 1982 and 1986 Midterms

Beyond explaining midterm losses in general and the differences between first midterm and second midterm losses, the model is useful in interpreting losses in particular midterms and, of course, in actual prediction of losses in future midterms. The case of the 1982 midterm illustrates the model's use in explaining particular losses. Based on President Reagan's share of the 1980 two-party presidential vote (55%) and considering an adjustment for the incumbency or trend factor, the Republicans in 1980 should have looked toward 1982 expecting to lose 23 seats if Reagan had maintained average popularity ratings at the midterm (52%). Since Reagan was actually ten percentage points below the average popularity ratings at the 1982 midterm, the Republicans in 1982 should have revised their expected losses upward by eight seats, to an expected loss of thirty-one seats. The actual Republican losses in 1982 amounted to 26 seats, 5 less than expected. Although this five-seat difference is not large, it suggests that some factors may have partially compensated for the unpopularity of the Reagan administration. It is possible that the Republican National Committee's activities on behalf of their congressional candidates, the redistricting that occurred between the 1980 and 1982 elections (Abramowitz, 1983, p. 770), and the campaign spending advantage of Republican candidates may have had some modest impact on the extent of seat losses.

What did the Republican loss of 26 seats in 1982 mean? To a large extent it meant that Reagan had won by a healthy margin in 1980. To a lesser extent it meant that Reagan was not very popular and that the Republican efforts in redistricting and organizing a national campaign in 1982 may have had some success in keeping their losses less than what they might have been.

Perhaps the most stringent test of a model is its ability to predict future events. So what does the model predict for the 1986 midterm? According to the model, Republicans should expect fairly substantial losses in 1986. The precise prediction is a loss of 34 seats. This prediction is based on the fact

that Reagan won with a large percentage of the vote (59%), on the assumption that he receives average popularity ratings in 1986, and on the assumption that the trend correction term properly controls for the trend. Using a slightly different correction term, a simple dummy variable for post-1964 elections, increases the predicted Republican losses to 39 seats. A loss of 34 to 39 seats would reduce Republican ranks in the House to between 143 and 148 members and put them between 70 and 75 seats away from controlling the House.

CONCLUSION

Two sets of theories about the loss of seats at the midterm election by the President's party have been examined in this research. Both the coattails/ surge-and-decline theories and the economy/popularity theories predict seat losses fairly well. While the coattails/surge-and-decline model predicted seat losses more accurately than the economy/popularity model, a model incorporating the elements of the two theories proved to be a more powerful model than either of the individual models. In effect, the two theories of midterm losses, commonly considered to be in competition with one another, are more profitably considered as complementing each other. The coattails/surge-and-decline model permits us to estimate the extent of the fall from the presidential election vote to the normal vote, and the economy/popularity model permits us to estimate any deviations from that normal vote at the midterm. Together they explain better than four-fifths of the variance in midterm seat losses. The average absolute error in the integrated model is just slightly more than four seats.

The strongest variable in the integrated midterm model is the prior presidential vote. Losses tend to be greater when the President wins by a large margin in the preceding election. For every additional percentage point of the vote the President wins in the prior election, one can expect his party to lose about three seats at the midterm.

The prior presidential vote is associated with greater seat losses for two reasons. First, it affects the aggregate vote loss. As both the coattails and surge-and-decline theories suggest, the greater the pull of the President in the prior election, the greater the fall back to the normal vote at the midterm. Apparently, this fall is of greater importance to the midterm seat loss than deviations around the normal vote caused by factors at the time of the midterm. Second, the presidential vote is important in predicting seat losses because of its link to the *distribution* of the vote losses. A vote loss of X percent following a narrow victory by a President is likely to be fairly evenly spread across districts. However, a vote loss of X percent following a sizable presidential victory is more likely to come from districts in which the President did abnormally well. A vote loss of this second type is likely to

cost disproportionately more seats than a vote loss of the first type. Indeed, if we look at the ratio of seats lost to change in the percentage of votes, a statistic similar to Tufte's swing ratio (Tufte, 1973 and 1975), we see a definite relationship with the presidential vote ($r = .57$). The loss of votes creates a greater loss of seats when the president wins by a large margin. When Presidents have won by 54 percent of the vote or less, a loss of one percentage point of the congressional vote at the midterm on average translates into a loss of 6.2 seats. When Presidents have won by 55 percent or more, a loss of one percentage point of the congressional vote at the midterm on average translates into a loss of 8.2 seats.

The second strongest variable in the integrated model is the public evaluation of the President's job performance at the time of the midterm. To a significant degree, seat losses tend to be greater when the President is unpopular at the midterm. For every additional percentage point favorable to the President in the midterm Gallup poll, one can expect the President's party to save about one seat.

The final variable suggested by previous research is the change in the state of the economy. Quite surprisingly, the change in the economy at the time of the midterm does not have a significant direct effect on midterm seat losses. Economic conditions do, however, have some impact on midterm losses. The effect of economic conditions seems to be lagged, indirect and somewhat more modest than previously claimed. A one-percent improvement in economic conditions in the year prior to the midterm enhances the President's popularity enough to save his party about two seats at the midterm.

REFERENCES

Abramowitz, Alan I. (1983). "Partisan Redistricting and the 1982 Congressional Elections." *Journal of Politics* 45: 767-770.

Abramowitz, Alan I., Albert D. Cover, and Helmut Norpoth (1984). "The President's Party in Midterm Elections: Going from Bad to Worse." Paper delivered to the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicaco, IL, April 11-14, 1984.

Arcelus, Francisco, and Allan H. Meltzer (1975). "The Effects of Aggregate Economic Variables on Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 69: 232-239.

Bloom, Howard S., and H. Douglas Price (1975). "Voter Response to Short-run Economic Conditions: The Asymmetric Effect of Prosperity and Recession." *American Political Science Review* 69: 1240-1254.

Born, Richard (1984). "Reassessing the Decline of Presidential Coattails: U. S. House Elections from 1952-1980." *Journal of Politics* 46: 60-79.

Calvert, Randall L., and John A. Ferejohn (1983). "Coattail Voting in Recent Presidential Elections." *American Political Science Review* 77: 407-419.

Campbell, Angus (1966). "Surge and Decline: A Study of Electoral Change." In Angus Campbell et al. (ed.), *Elections and the Political Order.* New York: Wiley.

Campbell, James E. (1985). "Predicting Seat Gains from Presidential Coattails." *American Journal of Political Science*, forthcoming.

Chatterjee, Sangit, and Frederick Wiseman (1983). "Use of Regression Diagnostics in Political Science Research." *American Journal of Political Science* 27: 601-613.

Converse, Philip E. (1966a). "The Concept of the Normal Vote." In *Elections and the Political Order*. See Angus Campbell.

_____ (1966b). "Information Flow and the Stability of Partisan Attitudes." In *Elections and the Political Order*. See Angus Campbell.

Cover, Albert D. (1983). "Surge and Decline Revisited." Paper delivered to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Denver, CO, September 1-4, 1983.

DeNardo, James (1980). "Turnout and the Vote: The Joke's on the Democrats." *American Political Science Review* 74: 406-420.

Edwards, George (1979). "The Impact of Presidential Coattails on Outcomes of Congressional Elections." *American Politics Quarterly* 7: 94-107.

Ferejohn, John A., and Randall L. Calvert (1984). "Presidential Coattails in Historical Perspective." *American Journal of Political Science* 28: 127-146.

Fiorina, Morris P. (1983). "Who is Held Responsible? Further Evidence of the Hibbing-Alford Thesis." *American Journal of Political Science* 27: 158-164.

Goodman, Saul, and Gerald H. Kramer (1975). "Comment on Arcelus and Meltzer, the Effect of Aggregate Economic Conditions on Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 69: 255-265.

Hibbing, John R., and John R. Alford (1981). "The Electoral Impact of Economic Conditions: Who is Held Responsible?" *American Journal of Political Science* 25: 423-439.

Hibbs, Douglas A., Jr. (1982). "President Reagan's Mandate from 1980 Elections: A Shift to the Right?" *American Politics Quarterly* 10: 387-420.

Hinckley, Barbara (1967). "Interpreting House Midterm Elections: Toward a Measurement of the In-party's 'Expected' Loss of Seats." *American Political Science Review* 61: 694-700.

_____ (1981). *Congressional Elections*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Jacobson, Gary C. (1976). "Presidential Coattails in 1972." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 40: 194-200.

_____ (1983). "Reagan, Reagonomics, and Strategic Politics in 1982: A Test of Alternative Theories of Midterm Congressional Elections." Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Denver, CO, September 2-4, 1983.

Jacobson, Gary C., and Samuel Kernell (1981). *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

_____ (1982). "Strategy and Choice in the 1982 Congressional Elections." PS 15: 423-430.

Kaplowitz, Stan (1971). "Using Aggregate Voting Data to Measure Presidential Coattails Effects." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35: 415-419.

Kernell, Samuel (1977). "Presidential Popularity and Negative Voting: An Alternative Explanation of the Midterm Congressional Decline of the President's Party." *American Political Science Review* 71: 44-66.

Kiewiet, D. Roderick (1983). *Macroeconomics and Microeconomics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Kinder, Donald R., and Roderick D. Kiewiet (1979). "Economic Discontent and Political Behavior: The Role of Personal Grievances and Collective Economic Judgments in Congressional Voting." *American Journal of Political Science* 23: 495-527.

Kramer, Gerald H. (1971). "Short-term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior, 1896-1964." *American Political Science Review* 65: 131-143.

_____ (1983). "The Ecological Fallacy Revisited: Aggregate Versus Individual-level Findings on Economics and Sociotropic Voting." *American Political Science Review* 77: 92-111.

Kritzer, Herbert M., and Robert B. Eubank (1979). "Presidential Coat-tails Revisited: Partisanship and Incumbency Effects." *American Journal of Political Science* 23: 615-626.

Mann, Thomas E., and Norman J. Ornstein (1981). "The 1982 Election: What Will it Mean?" *Public Opinion* 4: 48-50.

―――― (1983). "Sending a Message: Voters and Congress in 1982." In Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein (eds.), *The American Elections of 1982*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute.

Miller, Warren E. (1956). "Presidential Coattails: A Study in Political Myth and Methodology." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 20: 353-368.

Moreland, William B. (1973). "Angels, Pinpoints and Voters." *American Journal of Political Science* 17: 170-176.

Norpoth, Helmut, and Thom Yantek (1983). "Macroeconomic Conditions and Fluctuations of Presidential Popularity: The Question of Lagged Effects." *American Journal of Political Science* 27: 785-807.

Owens, John R. (1984). "Economic Influences on Elections to the U.S. Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 9: 123-150.

Piereson, James E. (1975). "Presidential Popularity and Midterm Voting of Different Levels." *American Journal of Political Science* 19: 683-693.

Press, Charles (1958). "Voting Statistics and Presidential Coattails." *American Political Science Review* 52: 1041-1050.

Sigelman, Lee, and Yung-mei Tsai (1981). "Personal Finances and Voting Behavior: A Reanalysis." *American Politics Quarterly* 9: 371-399.

Tufte, Edward R. (1973). "The Relationship Between Seats and Votes in Two-Party Systems." *American Political Science Review* 67: 540-554.

―――― (1975). "Determinants of the Outcomes of Midterm Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 69: 812-826.

―――― (1978). *Political Control of the Economy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Weatherford, M. Stephen (1983). "Economic Voting and the 'Symbolic Politics' Argument: A Reinterpretation and Synthesis." *"American Political Science Review* 77: 158-174.

Witt, Evans (1983). "A Model Election?" *Public Opinion* 6: 46-49.

Wolfinger, Raymond, Steven J. Rosenstone, and Richard A. McIntosh (1981). "Presidential and Congressional Voters Compared." *American Politics Quarterly* 9: 245-255.