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The Presidential Surge and its Midterm Decline in Congressional Elections, 1868–1988

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This note examines the effects of presidential elections on congressional elections. Nationally aggregated congressional seat and vote change data for the 61 congressional elections held in presidential and midterm election years from 1868 to 1988 are examined in a single-equation model. The results indicate strong presidential “surge and decline” effects. In presidential election years, a party’s presidential vote positively affects its congressional election results—the presidential surge. In the following midterm elections, the president’s party loses the advantage of the presidential surge and, as a consequence, also loses congressional votes and seats. These midterm losses of congressional seats and votes for the president’s party are in proportion to the party’s prior presidential vote margin. Presidential surge and decline effects, however, do not entirely explain vote and seat losses by the president’s party in midterms. In addition to suffering vote and seat losses because of the absence of presidential coattail or surge help, it appears that the president’s party also sustains midterm losses because of the public’s evaluation of the incumbent administration at the midterm.

By their presence in on-years and their absence in midterm elections, presidential campaigns affect the fortunes of political parties in congressional elections. In on-year elections, successful presidential candidates attract additional support for their party that spills over to congressional contests. As a consequence, the winning presidential party registers vote and seat gains in proportion to the size of the presidential victory. In the midterm election, congressional candidates of the president’s party do not enjoy the benefit of running with a popular presidential candidate at the top of the ticket. As a consequence, the president’s party suffers congressional losses, again in proportion to the prior presidential victory.

Recognition of the effect of presidential elections on congressional elections goes back at least to Bean’s (1948, 1950) examination of presidential coattails and the impact of their absence on midterm congressional elections. Angus Campbell’s (1964, 1966) theory of “surge and decline” provided a micro-level explanation for macro-level presidential election effects, especially the consistent midterm congressional losses for the party that had won the presidency.

In the 1970s, the theory of surge and decline suffered several apparent

setbacks.¹ First, investigations of its hypotheses about individual voting behavior produced findings that contradicted the theory (Arseneau and Wolfinger 1973; Kernell 1977; and later, Cover 1985). Subsequent research, however, revised the theory to accommodate these individual-level findings (Campbell 1987). Second, the development of the referenda theory of midterm elections effectively displaced the theory of surge and decline as the explanation of midterm losses by the president's party (Tufté 1975, 1978; Kernell 1977; Born 1986; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1984; Abramowitz, Cover, and Norpoth 1986; Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986). Again, however, the effect of the referenda theory's emergence on the theory of surge and decline is set in perspective by subsequent research. An analysis of both the referenda theory and the theory of surge and decline indicates that they are quite compatible (Campbell 1985). The compatibility of the two theories was actually first suggested by Tufté (1975, 826) in his original formulation of the referenda theory.

Although previous research examined separately the presidential surge and its midterm decline over various periods of history, both surge and decline effects on national congressional election results have not been examined over an extended series of elections. This note examines a single equation model of the presidential explanation of congressional election vote and seat change. The hypothesis examined within this single equation is that *a party's presidential vote positively affects the change in its share of votes and seats in presidential election years and negatively affects the change in its shares of votes and seats in the following midterm elections.*

DATA AND VARIABLES

The surge and decline hypothesis is tested with national election returns for the entire series of elections from 1868 to 1988. This includes a total of 61 congressional election years, 31 held in presidential election years and 30 held in midterm years. In order to cover all bases, electoral change is examined in terms of seat change for the parties as well as change in the nationally aggregated congressional vote. National congressional vote data are from Stokes and Iversen's series (Niemi and Fett 1986) up until 1976. The congressional vote split since 1976 and the national partisan division of seats data are drawn from Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin (1990). Both the vote and seat data are adjusted to reflect a division between the two major parties. Also, for the

¹There were also other reasons for the fading of the theory of surge and decline from conventional wisdom. Among these are: (1) the less obvious and apparently weakened coattail effects in recent presidential elections, (2) the greater variance in the midterm congressional vote than in the on-year congressional vote (Jacobson and Kernell 1981, and Erikson 1988), and (3) the greater emphasis placed on local factors in congressional races (Mann 1978, Ragsdale 1980). None of these developments, however, is critical to the theory of surge and decline (see Campbell 1990).

sake of comparability, the seat data have been adjusted because of the growth in the total number of seats in the House over time. The adjusted data reflect a constant House size of 435 members.²

The principal independent variable is an interaction of two variables. The first element is the two-party division of the popular presidential vote for the Democratic presidential candidate minus 50%. This indicates both the direction and magnitude of the presidential surge. The second element is a variable indicating whether the election is a presidential year or midterm election. Since the presidential surge is hypothesized to have a positive effect in presidential years, this variable has a value of plus one in these cases. The hypothesized negative effects of the prior presidential surge in midterms is reflected in this variable taking a value of minus one in midterm elections. The interaction of these two variables reflects the notion that big surges should be followed by big declines and that small presidential surges should be followed by small declines.

In general, the presidential vote margin of the two-party popular vote reflects the relative appeal of the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. However, in elections with a substantial third-party presidential vote, the two-party division of the presidential vote may not reflect short-term presidential forces quite so well. If the third-party presidential vote was not proportionately at the expense of the major parties, then the two-party vote may be misleading. In reviewing elections with substantial third-party presidential votes, one election stands out as especially problematic, Coolidge's 1924 election. In that election, Progressive candidate Robert LaFollette won 17% of the popular vote. The two-party division of the remaining 83% of the vote appears to overstate Coolidge's strength, placing it at 65%. Evidence that LaFollette was drawing heavily from potential supporters of Democratic candidate Davis is available from a comparison of state returns in 1924 and 1928. With LaFollette in the race in 1924, Democrats won 10% or less of the vote in five states. With LaFollette out of the race in 1928, Democrats won 31% to 45% of the vote in these same five states, even though Democrats were losing nationally in 1928 just as they had in 1924.³ Given the 1924 presidential vote problem, the analysis will be run both with and without this election and its associated 1926 midterm.

²Vacant and third-party seats were divided evenly between the two major parties before adjusting the data to a constant House size of 435. A proportional division of third-party seats was also examined. Findings using the proportional division were virtually identical to those using the even division. For example, there was only a .032 difference between the surge and decline coefficients using the two different measures (2.367 vs. 2.399).

³The five states, the 1924 and 1928 Democratic presidential vote percentages and their 1924 LaFollette votes were: California (8% Democratic in 1924, 34% Democratic in 1928 and 33% LaFollette); Minnesota (7% to 41% and 41% LaFollette); North Dakota (7% to 45% and 45% LaFollette); Washington (10% to 31% and 36% LaFollette); and Wisconsin (8% to 44% and 54% LaFollette).

The analysis of elections across such an extended period of American history requires that a number of other factors beyond the presidential surge be taken into account. Four other independent variables are included in the analysis.

1. The first control variable is the party's share of seats and votes going into the election. Any change in a party's share of congressional votes or seats is constrained by the party's initial holdings. Simply put, a party cannot lose what it does not have or gain what it already has. To reflect this reasoning, the Democratic vote or seat holdings in the prior midterm election are included in the equation.⁴ These prior votes and seats should have a negative impact on vote and seat change.
2. The effects of presidential election year short-term forces on congressional vote and seat change assumes that long-term forces are fairly stable. In most cases, even during secular realignments, this is a safe assumption. However, the New Deal realigning elections were jolts, large-scale and long-term shifts in the partisan balance. A dummy variable for the New Deal realigning elections of 1932 and 1934 takes this into account.⁵ Democratic gains ought to be unusually heavy in these elections and this should be reflected in positive coefficients for the dummy variable.
3. The third control variable also takes into account the different partisan eras included in the series. Prior to the New Deal realignment, the Republican party had been the majority party. All things being equal, Republicans should fare better in the early period and Democrats should fare better in later elections. The variable reflecting this difference is a simple dummy variable taking a value of one for elections before 1932 and zero for 1932 and later. The inclusion of this dummy variable has the effect of changing the intercept of the relationship between the presidential surge and the congressional vote and seat change variables.

⁴The prior midterm seat and vote levels are used for both presidential and midterm election years. The prior midterm holdings rather than that of the previous presidential election are used for midterm elections so that the effects of the presidential surge will not be obscured. A party's seat holdings in a presidential election year are composed partly of their holdings from the prior midterm and partly from the effects of presidential coattails. Therefore, if holdings in the presidential year were used, some of the losses from that level would be a consequence of the winning presidential party having more votes and seats to lose *because they had won the presidency*. From this view, the "exposure" model of congressional seat change simply identifies an intervening variable in the theory of surge and decline (Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986; Waterman 1990). The president's party loses seats in the midterm because it is consistently overexposed in midterm elections and it is consistently overexposed in midterms because it gained coattail seats in the prior presidential election.

⁵The New Deal dummy variable was included in keeping with Angus Campbell's (1966, 61) original argument that surge and decline effects should not be expected during a critical realignment such as that which took place in the early 1930s. Other treatments of the New Deal elections were also examined. Neither dropping the dummy variable nor dropping the elections themselves appreciably changed the estimated effects of surge and decline.

4. The final independent variable takes into account the possibility of a “midterm penalty” for the president’s party above and beyond that exacted by the decline from the prior presidential surge. A variety of midterm referenda theories (Kernell 1977; Tufte 1975, 1978; Erikson 1988) suggest that the midterm electorates generally punish the president’s party.⁶ Whether a result of unfulfilled expectations or the greater motivation of negative evaluations, there is an expectation that the incumbent president’s party is punished in the midterm. To allow for this possibility, a variable reflecting the president’s party was included in the equation. In midterm elections, the variable was assigned a value of one when the president was a Democrat and negative one when the president was a Republican. Democrat and negative one when the president was a Republican. Presidential election years are assigned a value of zero. A midterm penalty should be indicated by a negative coefficient.

FINDINGS

The regression results for Democratic vote and seat change, both with and without the 1924–1926 elections, are presented in table 1. Each of the coefficients is statistically significant, and the overall fit of the equations are quite good.⁷ The major finding concerns the presidential vote margin coefficient. This finding is clear cut. Presidential surge and decline effects have

⁶Ideally, a variable reflecting public evaluations about the incumbent party in the midterm would be included in the equation. As Kernell noted, there is no reason to suspect that all presidents would be judged equally harshly in midterms. Research incorporating the midterm referenda perspective examining recent midterm elections provides ample evidence that there is a referenda component to the election results (Tufte 1975, 1978; Abramowitz, Cover, and Norpoth 1986; Campbell 1985). However, midterm presidential approval measures are not available throughout most of the period under study.

⁷The equations may be more easily interpreted after collapsing dummy variables into the constant. For instance, the Democratic Congressional vote-change equation for pre-New Deal midterm elections with a Democratic president boils down to:

$$VOTECHG = 9.45 - .30 (PMARGIN) - .25 (PRIORVT)$$

where, *VOTECHG* is the Democratic Congressional vote change, *PMARGIN* is the prior Democratic presidential vote percentage minus 50% (taking a negative coefficient in midterms), *PRIORVT* is the Democratic congressional vote in the prior midterm, and the constant of 9.45 is the remainder of subtracting 1.58 (early GOP era) and 2.24 (midterm) from 13.27. Similarly, the seat change equation for post-New Deal presidential elections simplifies to:

$$VOTECHG = 85.32 + 2.37 (PMARGIN) - .34 (PRIORST)$$

where, *PRIORST* is the number of Democratic seats following the prior midterm election. While the “constant” is different in midterms with the different parties holding the presidency, in on-years and in pre-New Deal, New Deal, and post-New Deal elections, the surge and decline coefficients are the same in magnitude but change in sign between on-years (positive) and midterms (negative).

TABLE 1

THE EFFECTS OF SURGE AND DECLINE ON THE INTERELECTION CHANGE
IN DEMOCRATIC CONGRESSIONAL VOTES AND SEATS, 1868-1988

Independent Variables	Democratic Congressional Vote and Seat Change			
	All Elections		Excluding 1924-1926	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
Dem. Pres. Vote	+ .30***	+2.37***	+ .35***	+2.76***
Margin × Pres. or Midterm Election	(+.53)	(+.37)	(+.56)	(+.40)
Prior Democratic Congressional Vote or Seats	-.25**	-.34***	-.28***	-.34***
New Deal	+4.50**	+56.58**	+4.28**	+55.96**
Realignment	(+.19)	(+.21)	(+.18)	(+.21)
Early GOP Era (1868-1930)	-1.58*	-17.18*	-1.44*	-16.06*
	(-.19)	(-.18)	(-.16)	(-.17)
Presidential Party at the Midterm	-2.24***	-28.06***	-2.18***	-27.34***
	(-.37)	(-.41)	(-.36)	(-.39)
Constant	+13.27**	+85.32**	+14.68***	+86.76***
Number of Cases	61	61	59	59
R ²	.72	.65	.77	.67
Adjusted R ²	.69	.62	.75	.64
Standard Error	2.37	29.75	2.16	29.27
Durbin-Watson	1.64	1.90	1.74	1.80

Note: * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$. Standardized coefficients are in parentheses. Vote change is interelection change in the percentage of the Democratic congressional vote. Seat change is change in the number of Democratic seats, after dividing third-party seats equally between the two major parties and adjusting the total number of seats to a constant of 435. The Democratic presidential vote margin is the two-party presidential vote percentage (in the previous election in the case of midterms) less 50%. The election interaction variable is coded +1 for presidential years and -1 for midterms. The prior seats and votes are those at the previous midterm election. The New Deal realignment is +1 for 1932 and 1934 and 0 otherwise. The early GOP variable is +1 for elections from 1868 to 1930 and 0 otherwise. The presidential party at the midterm variable is coded +1 for midterms when a Democrat is president, -1 for midterms when a Republican is president and 0 for on-year election years.

exerted a substantial influence on congressional vote and seat change.⁸ *In presidential election years, the greater a party's presidential vote margin (positive one times presidential vote margin) the greater its gain of congressional votes and seats.* Every additional percentage point of the presidential vote adds almost one-third of a percentage point to the party's congressional

⁸The standardized coefficients indicate that the surge and decline variable was among the most influential if not the most influential variable in the equation. Also, there are two reasons to suppose that these estimated surge and decline effects may be underestimated in this equation: (1) The single surge and decline variable dictates that surge and decline effects are of equal

vote and gives it two to three more seats. However, whatever gains or losses occur in the on-year election because of the presidential surge are short-lived. *In midterm elections, the greater a party's prior presidential vote margin (negative one times presidential vote margin) the greater its loss of congressional votes and seats.* Any additional congressional votes or seats won in the presidential election year by virtue of the presidential surge are lost when those seats and votes are contested in the midterm without the intrusion of the presidential campaign. As expected, estimates of these surge and decline effects appear even stronger when the problematic 1924–1926 pair of elections is excluded.

Although there are strong surge and decline effects evident in this analysis, midterm losses by the president's party are not entirely explained by the absence of the prior presidential surge or coattails. In addition to losses attributable to the aftermath of the presidential surge, the president's party in the midterm typically has lost a bit more than 2% of the congressional vote and about 27 or 28 seats. These losses apparently are a consequence of public disappointments with the incumbent presidential party's performance during its first two years in office.

While this represents a substantial midterm penalty, it still should be clear that a large portion of midterm losses for the president's party are a result of the prior presidential surge. This is reflected in the typical midterm losses for the president's party estimated both with and without the presidential surge and decline variable. Without the presidential vote variable, the typical presidential midterm penalty was more than four percentage points of the congressional vote and about 44 seats. However, after taking the decline of presidential short-term forces into account, the midterm penalty (presumably due to negative public evaluations of the incumbent party) was cut nearly in half.⁹

DISCUSSION

Throughout American history, as the above analysis clearly demonstrates, congressional elections have been shaped by the surge and decline of presi-

size, though it seems plausible that the presidential party could save some residual of their presidential year gains; (2) The unavoidable omission of midterm presidential approval ratings would probably lead to the underestimation of surge and decline effects, assuming that presidential candidates who win by larger margins tend to be the popular presidents two years later at the midterm elections.

⁹Strictly speaking, the president's party at the midterm variable does not *explain* why the president's party typically loses these extra votes and seats. We presume that they may be explained, in whole or only in part, by some combination of the "negative voting" (Kernell 1977) and "midterm referendum" (Tufte 1975) explanations. However, we do not have a reliable indicator of these explanations for the entire election series. A previous analysis of more recent midterms indicates that the referendum explanation and the presidential surge and decline explanation were quite compatible.

dential elections. Congressional elections held concurrently with presidential elections are influenced by those presidential contests, to the advantage of the party winning the presidency. Congressional elections held in midterms are not subject to this influence. As a result, the presidential party that had enjoyed the benefits of presidential coattails now suffers congressional losses when its candidates must run without assistance from the top of the ticket.

While the effects of surge and decline on congressional elections is evident for the series of elections since the end of the Civil War, there remains the concern that surge and decline effects may have weakened or disappeared in recent years (Calvert and Ferejohn 1983, and Ferejohn and Calvert 1984). There certainly is reason to doubt the continuance of these effects. Recent presidents have not carried large numbers of fellow partisans into office with them. In Nixon's 1972 landslide over McGovern, Republicans picked up only 13 seats. Democrats gained just a single seat in Carter's 1976 victory over Ford. In Reagan's 1984 landslide over Mondale, Republican seat gains were again fairly minor. They gained only 15 seats in that election. In 1988, even though Bush defeated Dukakis, Republicans actually lost two seats. Given these *apparently* minor to nonexistent presidential coattails and the initial minority status of Republicans in the House, it is hardly surprising that Congress and the presidency have often been in the hands of two different parties. In fact, divided government now seems to be the rule rather than the exception. This recent history raises a real question: Has surge and decline become a relic of the past?

The answer to this question is in two parts. First, even though the swings of surge and decline are of smaller amplitude than in the past, they are still evident. The winning presidential party in most cases still gains votes and seats in on-years and loses votes and seats in midterms. Moreover, these recent surge and decline effects are more clearly evident in multivariate analyses (Campbell 1985, 1986a, and 1990). To test for the weakening of surge and decline effects within the general equation of table 1, I included interaction terms for the surge and decline and midterm penalty variables and whether or not the election was of recent vintage (1976 and since are coded one). As expected the surge and decline interaction term had negative coefficients in both the vote and seat change equations. Based on these estimates, the effects of surge and decline on congressional vote change dropped from .30 to .28 (post-1976) and its effect on seat change dropped from 2.36 to 1.71 (post 1976).¹⁰

¹⁰ An alternative interaction trend term, using 1972 rather than 1976 as a cut point, indicated a similar drop in surge and decline effects, from .32 to .22 for the vote change equation and 2.48 to 1.82 for the seat change equation. Analysis of subsets of elections also shows that surge and decline effects weakened in the 1970s to about half their prior strength but did not disappear

Second, the weakening of surge and decline effects does not mean that they will necessarily disappear. Whether surge and decline effects vanish depends upon the reasons they have already weakened. Three interrelated reasons for weakened effects seem plausible: partisan dealignment, the increased incumbency advantages, and the wasting of presidential coattails (Campbell 1990). First, party dealignment divorces the congressional vote from the presidential for some voters. This weakens surge and decline effects, though there is no reason to believe dealignment is so extreme as to uncouple the two votes for a majority of voters. Second, although the increased incumbency advantage is still a matter in dispute (Erikson 1971; Jacobson 1987; Bauer and Hibbing 1989), if true, it would be more difficult for any consideration, including those involving the presidential candidates, to influence congressional contests involving incumbents. However, again, incumbency advantages may not be so great that elections involving incumbents are entirely invulnerable to national forces.

Of the three possible reasons given for apparently weakening surge and decline effects, perhaps the most significant is the *wasting* of the presidential surge or coattails. Presidential coattails have appeared smaller in recent years in part because Republicans have been unable to take advantage of their presidential candidates' coattails in the South. In 1972, for instance, Nixon ran strongly in many southern congressional districts but Republicans left Democratic congressional candidates unchallenged in 35 southern congressional districts carried by Nixon, 22 of which Nixon carried with 70% or more of the vote. Undoubtedly, more districts could be added to this list in which Republicans mounted merely token candidacies.

The inability of Republicans to find quality candidates in these southern districts has not changed much since 1972. Bullock's (1988, table 4) figures indicate that while Republicans have gained some ground in the South, these gains have been modest in recent years. Republicans won about a quarter of southern seats in the mid-1960s and won a little more than a third of southern seats in the 1980s. Even in Reagan's 1984 victory over Mondale, Republicans left 33 districts uncontested that were carried by Reagan. In 1988, in a closer presidential contest, Bush carried 24 southern districts in which congressional Democrats were uncontested by Republicans. This suggests that coattails have not so much been trimmed in recent elections as they have gone unused. Moreover, what has not been gained in the presidential surge cannot be lost in the midterm decline. In effect, the Republican party's inability to recruit quality congressional candidates in the South has muted the process of surge and decline. The full effects of surge and de-

(Campbell forthcoming). Also, as expected, the interaction term for the midterm penalty variable indicated that the president's party has paid a smaller penalty since 1976.

cline will not be seen until the South completes its transition from its local one-party system to a competitive two-party system.¹¹

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¹¹The wasted coattail explanation explains why the decline in coattail effects appears more severe in aggregate national analyses than in district-level analyses. Born's (1984) analysis of presidential coattails in districts from 1952 to 1980 shows a weakening of coattails of about 20% (from .37 for 1952-1964 to .29 for 1968-1980) rather than the larger drop in the national-level analysis. Most notably, Born's district analysis excludes uncontested districts, precisely where most (but not all) coattail support would be wasted in most elections. If merely token Republican candidacies were also excluded from the district analysis, it is quite likely that there would be even a smaller decline in estimated coattail effects.

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