

National Forces in State Legislative Elections

By
STEVEN ROGERS

The race for the White House is at the top of the ticket, but voters will also choose more than 5,000 state legislators in November 2016. While voters elect and hold the president responsible for one job and state legislators for another, the outcomes of their elections are remarkably related. In analyses of elite and voter behavior in state legislative elections, I show that legislators affiliated with the president's party—especially during unpopular presidencies—are the most likely to be challenged, and compared with individual assessments of the state legislature, changes in presidential approval have at least three times the impact on voters' decision-making in state legislative elections. Thus, while state legislatures wield considerable policymaking power, legislators' electoral fates appear to be largely out of their control.

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Presidential elections capture the interest of both voters and political scientists. The average television ratings for the 2016 Republican presidential debates exceeded that for the 2015 World Series, and much of

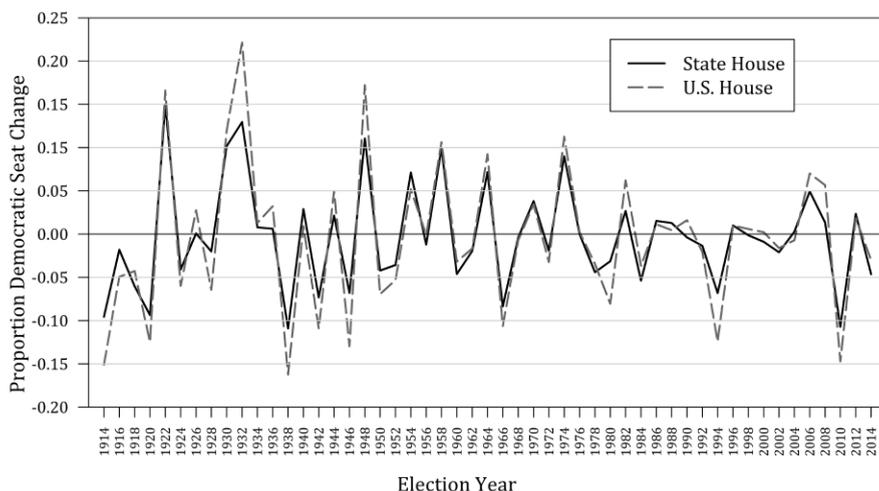
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FIGURE 1
Democratic Seat Change in State House and U.S. House Elections



NOTE: Nationwide proportion of seats won or lost by the Democratic Party in state house or U.S. House elections over the last one hundred years.

scholars' attention (e.g., this volume) is focused on the presidential election. Between a Trump presidential candidacy and the potential for the first female president, the interest in presidential politics is not surprising, but what may be surprising is how closely related the race for The White House is to the thousands of state house elections that will also occur this November.

The relationship between national and state politics is suggested by a simple graph. Figure 1 illustrates the nationwide seat change for the Democratic Party in state (black solid line) and U.S. House elections (grey dashed line) over the past 100 years. Legislative seats clearly changed party hands in both federal and state contests each year, but the similarity between federal and state elections is striking. In all but five elections, the party that gained seats in Congress also made net gains in state legislatures. While the correlation (.95) is not definitive, it strongly suggests that there is a common dimension underlying both federal and state elections.

The existence of such a dimension challenges the founders' vision for the American federal system. The founders argued that "the federal constitution forms a happy combination; the great and aggregated interests being referred to the national, the local and particular to the State legislatures" (Madison 1787). Under this conception of government, federal legislators handle national issues; state legislators handle state issues; and voters hold each of these sets of legislators accountable for their respective tasks through elections (Hamilton 1788). Following these expectations, one could look to Figure 1 and explain that

Republicans took control of Congress in 1994 and 2010 because of Democrats' unpopular health care reforms. The explanation, however, is less immediately discerned—at least in regard to accountability—for why Republicans gained hundreds of state legislative seats in each of these elections. Why Republicans made substantial gains in state legislatures in 1994 and 2010 becomes clearer when one disregards the idea that “all politics is local.” Tip O’Neil used this famous phrase prior to being elected to the Massachusetts state legislature in 1936, and consistent with theories of electoral accountability (e.g., Ferejohn 1986), this characterization of politics implies that state legislators must consider looming judgments at the ballot box when making decisions regarding state workers' rights, education polices, or raising taxes (e.g., Hamilton 1788; Key and Cummings 1966; Arnold 1992). Otherwise, they will lose their jobs.

Figure 1 suggests and the analyses here provide more systematic evidence that Tip O’Neil’s characterization of politics is wrong. Instead of being local affairs, state legislative elections are dominated by national politics. To demonstrate this, I study the behavior of political elites and voters in state legislative elections. I find legislators affiliated with the president’s party—especially during unpopular presidencies—are the most likely to face major party challengers, and compared with individuals’ assessments of the state legislature, changes in presidential approval have at least three times the impact on voters’ decision-making in state legislative elections. With both elites and voters responding to national instead of state legislative politics, state legislators’ electoral fates appear largely out of their own control.

Presidential Politics in Legislative Elections

Political scientists have long documented the relationship between presidential politics and the behavior of both elites and voters in lower level elections. Jacobson (1989) and Lublin (1994), for example, argue that challengers to sitting members of Congress strategically account for presidential politics before deciding to contest an incumbent for their seat. Additionally, there is a rich literature on voter behavior in congressional elections focusing on presidential coattails (e.g., Campbell 1960), congressional elections serving as a referendum on the president (e.g., Tufté 1975), and midterm elections “balancing” the congressional and executive branches of government (e.g., Erikson 1988). Each of these studies provides evidence of a relationship between the executive and legislative politics in federal elections.

The Constitution prescribes that members of Congress work with the president to establish federal policies, so it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a relationship between presidential politics and congressional elections. If voters want to better ensure the president’s proposals become law, they can vote the president’s copartisans into Congress. State legislators also have some role in federal politics, such as in redistricting or recent Medicaid expansions, but their primary responsibility is state lawmaking. Recent state laws have curbed

collective bargaining in Ohio and automatically registered voters in Oregon. These specific policies are in addition to the decisions state legislators across the country make when appropriating their \$800 billion in state tax revenue each year. To promote representative policymaking, theories of electoral accountability suggest voters will assess these policies and determine whether the policy-makers should keep their jobs (Ferejohn 1986; but see also Fearon 1999).

Despite state legislators' important policymaking responsibilities, there are repeated indicators that "the American people are not boiling with concern about the workings of their state government" (Key 1956, 3). A 2009 Yale University poll found that fewer than half as many voters closely followed news about state politics as did national politics (Leiserowitz, Maibach, and Roser-Renouf 2009). In turn, less than 20 percent of voters can identify their state legislator (Vanderbilt University poll 2013), and many have undefined views of their legislature. Approximately 21 percent of respondents to the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study were "not sure" whether they approved of their state legislature as compared to the 2 percent of respondents who had a similar lack of opinion regarding President Bush. These disparities may not be surprising considering the meager amount of media attention state legislative politics receives, even at the local level. When monitoring news coverage of political campaigns leading up to the 2004 presidential election, the Lear Center found that only 1 percent of local news coverage was devoted to state legislative elections compared with 61 percent of coverage devoted to the presidential election (Kaplan, Goldstein, and Hale 2005).

With little attention given to the legislature, voters in need of an assessment of state political actors could heuristically turn to their more accessible evaluation of the president (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Kahneman and Frederick 2002; see also Gabaix and Laibson 2005).¹ This behavior by voters is a by-product of parties "[imposing] great political simplicity on the most complex governmental system of the world" (Schattschneider 1942, 53). A shared party label between the president and state legislators, however, may oversimplify the electoral process. State legislative elections could become "second-order" elections analogous to European Parliament elections, in which votes are cast "on the basis of factors in the main political arena of the nation" (Reif and Schmitt 1980, 9). Second-order elections are unlikely to serve what is presumably elections' first-order purpose: to hold state legislators accountable for their own performance.

At least two conditions must be satisfied for state legislative elections to serve their first-order purpose. Voters must have a fair opportunity to cast a ballot against the policy-makers, and votes must be meaningfully connected to what policy-makers are doing themselves (Powell 2000, 51). To satisfy the former condition, voters need a candidate to emerge to challenge the incumbent, and to satisfy the latter condition, there needs to be a strong relationship between how an elected official performs in office and in elections. The next sections illustrate how national politics affects the extent to which both these conditions are satisfied through analyses of challenger entry and voter decision-making in state legislative elections.

Presidential Politics and Challenger Entry in State Legislative Elections

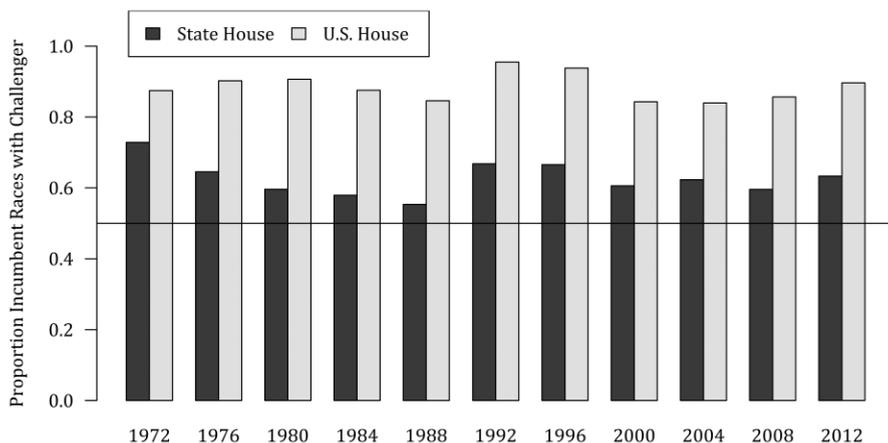
The first condition for accountability requires that voters have an alternative choice to the incumbent in an election. Alternative choices in state legislative elections, however, are relatively rare compared with congressional elections. Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of U.S. House and state incumbents who faced major party challengers in presidential election years since the 1970s.² On average, 20 percent more U.S. House incumbents face challengers compared with state house incumbents. In more recent elections, a third of state legislative incumbents did not face a challenger in either the primary or general elections from 1992 to 2010 (Rogers 2015). Otherwise stated, a third of state legislative incumbents won reelection just by signing up.

The low levels of challenger entry in state legislative elections illustrated by Figure 2 are not promising for those who hope state legislative elections provide accountability. Levels of competition in state legislatures are partly explained by institutional features of state legislatures, such as professionalism (Hogan 2004; Squire 2000) and campaign finance laws (Mayer and Wood 1995; Werner and Mayer 2007; Hamm and Hogan 2008; Malhotra 2008), but it is also important to consider candidates' decisions regarding when to run for office. Jacobson (1989), for example, argues that congressional candidates strategically run for office to take advantage of a president's popularity and shows that presidential approval correlates with the percentage of quality challengers in U.S. House elections (Jacobson 1989, Table 3). This relationship suggests that during an unpopular Democratic presidency, Republican congressional challengers will take advantage of the antipresident sentiment and be more likely to run, giving voters more opportunities to electorally sanction Democrats who perform poorly.

The first election following the Watergate investigation provides a prime example of candidates adopting this type of strategy. Most candidates had to determine when to run while Nixon was still in office, and likely recognizing the president's unpopularity, Democrats challenged 163 of the 164 Republican U.S. House incumbents seeking reelection. State legislative Democratic candidates, however, also appeared to make similar strategic decisions. Every Republican state legislator was challenged by a Democrat in more than fifty state legislative chambers (Tidmarch, Lonergan, and Sciortino 1986). Democrats did well at both the federal and state levels in 1974 (Figure 1), and this success would not have been possible if Democrats had not decided to run for office.

One can see comparable patterns in more recent state legislative elections. Following an unpopular Iraq War and Hurricane Katrina during the George W. Bush administration, 63 percent of state legislative Republicans faced a major party opponent compared with 52 percent of Democrats in 2006. Following unpopular health care reforms of the Obama administration, more than 68 percent of state legislative Democrats faced opponents in 2010 when the comparable figure for Republicans was 55 percent. And in 2012 in Tennessee—a state where 55 percent of voters disapproved of Obama's performance as

FIGURE 2
Challenge Rates to Incumbents in the State House and U.S. House



NOTE: Dark and light grey bars illustrate the proportion of State House and U.S. House incumbents who faced a major party challenger in presidential election years since 1972. On average, the difference in rates in challenger entry is greater than 20 percent.

president—Democrats chose not to challenge Republicans in thirty-seven of ninety-nine state house districts, meaning Republicans had to win only thirteen of forty-five contested elections to retain their majority in the Tennessee state house. When asked why this was the case, Tennessee Republican Glen Casada responded that “President Obama and the anti-president attitude” was “the biggest thing working for us” (Cass 2012).

To investigate the extent to which the “antipresident attitude” matters for state-level elites’ decision-making and more specifically whether Jacobson’s theory of strategic entry—where candidates take advantage of national political conditions—translates to the state legislative level, I examine challenger entry in state legislative elections from 1991 through 2010 in forty-four states.³ The dependent variable is whether a sitting state legislator, who survived the primary, from a single-member district received a major party opponent (Klarner et al. 2013).

Similar to Jacobson, my independent variable of interest is the president’s average approval rating in the Gallup poll from April through June of the election year. My focus on the second quarter of the election year aims to capture political conditions for the approximate time period when many candidates decide to challenge an incumbent. If state legislative challengers take advantage of national political conditions, incumbent state legislators of the president’s party should be more likely to face an opponent when the president is unpopular. Similarly, state legislators unaffiliated with the president’s party should more often face competition when the president is popular. State legislative challengers may also anticipate riding presidential coattails in presidential elections or fear being swept up

in “midterm loss.” I therefore estimate the relationship between presidential approval and challenger entry for all elections, as well as separately for presidential and midterm elections.

Following previous studies of state legislative challenger entry, my analyses account for more local political conditions, such as those within the state or district. Since a candidate likely does not want to be part of a meaningless minority party, face an unfriendly district, or challenge a particularly strong incumbent, I control for the preelection seat share of the minority party (Dubin 2007; *State Partisan Composition* 2016), district’s partisanship, incumbent’s previous vote share, and the number of terms served by the incumbent.⁴ I additionally account for institutional variation across states and elections, such as the state’s annual income growth, legislature’s level of professionalism (Squire 2012), and whether a state has term limits. Prior work also finds legislative competition is greater immediately following redistricting (Pritchard 1992) or in non-Southern elections (Squire 1989). Each estimation, therefore, accounts for whether an election took place under these conditions. Given the dichotomous dependent variable, I use probit regressions to estimate the relationship between challenger entry and my independent variables of interest, and for clarity in presentation, I convert probit estimates to average predicted probabilities in text and figures.

Analyses in Table 1 present statistical relationships between the independent variables and state legislative challenger entry for all elections (first two columns), presidential elections (middle two columns), and midterm elections (last two columns). Providing evidence that state or local conditions influence state legislative competition, challengers more often emerge in states with narrower legislative majorities, but state legislative incumbents face fewer challengers if the district partisanship is favorable to the incumbent party. Estimates in Table 1 furthermore suggest that incumbents who oversaw stronger state economies are less likely to face competition. Income growth of 2 percent in the second quarter of an election year reduces the likelihood of a general election challenger by approximately 2 percent.

While state or local conditions appear to influence whether an incumbent state legislator receives a challenger, statistical analyses in Table 1 also suggest that the levels of competition largely depend on an incumbent’s affiliation with national political actors. State legislators affiliated with the president’s party are 4.5 percent more likely to face opposition than those unaffiliated with the president’s party (see Table 1, columns 1 and 2). Challengers from both sides of the aisle, furthermore, appear to recognize that the president’s party does poorly in midterm elections. Members of the president’s party are 1.4 percent more likely to face a challenger in a midterm rather than presidential election (see Table 1, columns 3 and 5). Meanwhile incumbents unaffiliated with the president’s party are 1.8 percent less likely to face a challenger in the midterm (see Table 1, columns 4 and 6).

The president’s legislative copartisans are additionally more likely to be challenged when the president is unpopular. Using estimates from the first two columns of Table 1, Figure 3 illustrates the disparity in the probabilities of incumbents facing a challenger—separated by their affiliation with the

TABLE 1
 Challenger Entry as a Function of Political Contexts Subset by Incumbents' Party and Type of Election

Variable	President's party incumbents all elections	Not president's party incumbents all elections	President's party incumbents presidential elections	Not president's party incumbents presidential elections	President's party incumbents midterm elections	Not president's party incumbents midterm elections
Average Q2 presidential approval	-0.012* (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.008* (0.002)	0.006* (0.002)	-0.013* (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
Change annual log Q2 state personal inc.	-4.206* (0.490)	-1.947* (0.506)	-2.947* (0.793)	-4.455* (0.838)	-5.161* (0.710)	-2.08* (0.760)
Minority party seat share	0.942* (0.109)	1.008* (0.107)	0.946* (0.165)	1.048* (0.146)	0.951* (0.148)	0.883* (0.158)
Professionalism	-0.123 (0.110)	0.050 (0.107)	-0.484* (0.158)	0.365* (0.152)	0.273 (0.155)	-0.283 (0.153)
Southern dummy	-0.625* (0.028)	-0.647* (0.028)	-0.657* (0.041)	-0.695* (0.039)	-0.59* (0.040)	-0.596* (0.040)
Logged district size	0.140* (0.016)	0.104* (0.016)	0.133* (0.023)	0.059* (0.022)	0.138* (0.022)	0.157* (0.023)
Term limits enacted	0.015 (0.024)	-0.108* (0.023)	0.024 (0.035)	-0.027 (0.033)	-0.002 (0.032)	-0.160* (0.033)
First election after redistricting dummy	0.107* (0.034)	0.157* (0.031)	0.131* (0.041)	0.249* (0.036)	0.043 (0.074)	-0.024 (0.089)
Freshman dummy	-0.103* (0.028)	-0.003 (0.027)	-0.128* (0.040)	-0.008 (0.039)	-0.086* (0.038)	-0.003 (0.039)

(continued)

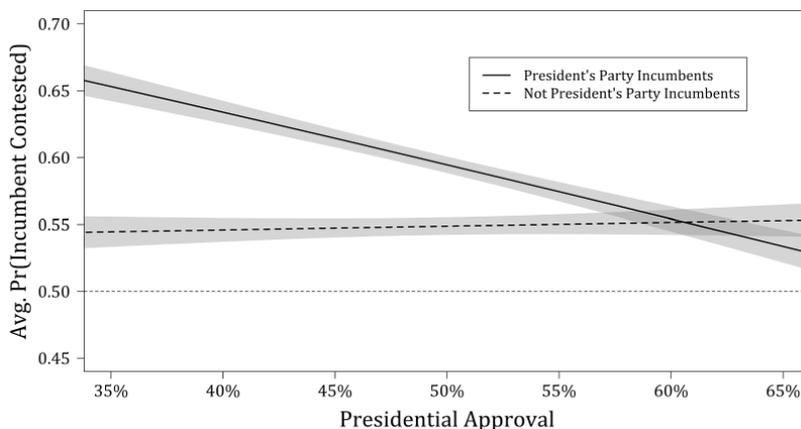
TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

Variable	President's party incumbents all elections	Not president's party incumbents all elections	President's party incumbents presidential elections	Not president's party incumbents presidential elections	President's party incumbents midterm elections	Not president's party incumbents midterm elections
Terms served	-0.011* (0.004)	-0.010* (0.004)	-0.012* (0.006)	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.011* (0.005)	-0.016* (0.005)
Incumbent party presidential vote	-1.615* (0.081)	-1.258* (0.078)	-1.660* (0.119)	-1.297* (0.106)	-1.628* (0.112)	-1.211* (0.117)
Incumbent previous vote share	-2.694* (0.129)	-2.588* (0.124)	-2.843* (0.187)	-2.671* (0.170)	-2.616* (0.179)	-2.688* (0.185)
Incumbent previously contested dummy	-0.178* (0.048)	-0.155* (0.046)	-0.232* (0.071)	-0.173* (0.062)	-0.145* (0.066)	-0.188* (0.070)
Member of the Democratic Party	0.241* (0.026)	0.002 (0.027)	0.156* (0.045)	-0.035 (0.045)	0.203* (0.041)	0.115* (0.046)
Constant	2.376* (0.193)	1.754* (0.191)	2.491* (0.282)	2.062* (0.273)	2.378* (0.274)	1.166* (0.284)
Log-likelihood	-10520.47	-10862.58	-5064.301	-5551.188	-5427.688	-5239.959
N	18895	18660	9053	9754	9842	8906

NOTE: Probit estimates of the likelihood of a major party challenger contesting an incumbent state legislator from 1991 to 2010. Columns are divided by type of incumbent (member of the president's party or not member of the president's party) and type of election (presidential or midterm). Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p \leq .05$.

FIGURE 3
 Predicted Probabilities of State Legislators Facing a Major Party Challenger under
 Different Levels of Presidential Approval



NOTE: Using estimates from the first column of Table 1, the solid line represents the predicted probability of an incumbent state legislator of the president's party being challenged under different levels of presidential approval. Grey regions represent 95 percent bootstrapped confidence intervals. Only under popular presidencies is a member of the president's party less likely to be challenged than state legislators not affiliated with the president.

president's party—under different levels of presidential approval. A 10 percent decrease in presidential approval increases the average predicted probability of a member of the president's party facing an opponent by approximately .04. During unpopular presidencies, the president's state legislative copartisans are much more likely to face competition. When the president's approval rating is 35 percent, the estimated probability of a member of the president's party being challenged is .65 (solid line), but the comparable probability for state legislators unaffiliated with the president's party is only .54 (dashed line).

The third and fifth columns of Table 1 suggest that the relationship between presidential approval and challenger entry is stronger in the midterm election. A 10 percent decrease in presidential approval increases the probability of a member of the president's party facing a challenger in a presidential election by .026, but the impact of the same change in presidential approval increases the probability of a challenger by .039 in the midterm. With more than 5,000 state legislative elections each election year, these changes in probabilities translate into whether hundreds of state legislators face competition in the general election.

Presidential Politics and Voter Behavior

The findings in Table 1 and Figure 3 suggest that state legislative challengers are strategic like their federal counterparts and partly base their decisions to

challenge an incumbent on the popularity of the president. The underlying assumption of this strategy is that voters displeased with the president will also be more likely to vote against a member of the president's party in a state legislative contest, but there is relatively little existing evidence that individual evaluations of the president relate to vote choice in state legislative elections.⁵

To investigate the extent to which this relationship exists, I employ two sets of surveys. I first rely on the 2008, 2010, and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). YouGov Polimetrix conducted these online surveys in two waves, interviewing the same respondents in October and November of those years. In the first wave, individuals were asked whether they approved of the president, governor, and state legislature; and in the second wave, respondents stated how they voted in their state legislative elections. To complement these recent nationwide surveys and examine elections since the 1970s, I use New Jersey state polls conducted by the Eagleton Institute of Politics. New Jersey state elections occur in the "off-year" (e.g., 2007 or 2009), separate from federal elections and presumably should be less sensitive to national political influences.

For the first set of survey analyses using the CCES, I estimate how vote choice relates to voters' approval ratings of the president, governor, and state legislature while controlling for a respondent's party identification.⁶ My dependent variable is whether a voter supported the state house majority party in an election. My approval ratings of political actors are on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve," and I code these responses to be consistent with my dependent variable.⁷ To examine the relationship between a voter's evaluations of political actors and vote choice, I use a weighted probit analysis using sample weights provided by the CCES.⁸ To simplify interpretations, I convert probit estimates to predicted probabilities in text and figures. For differences in predicted probabilities, I adjust the variable of interest and hold other variables at their weighted sample means.

Providing evidence that local politics matters in state legislative elections, statistical analyses in Table 2 suggest that when voters strongly approve of their state legislature instead of strongly disapprove, the probability they vote for a candidate of the state house majority party increases by up to .12. Similarly, strongly approving instead of strongly disapproving of the governor changes the predicted probability of a state house vote by at least .18. Punishing an unpopular governor's legislative party can stall the governor's legislative agenda, and the relationship between vote choice and gubernatorial approval could reflect this tactic by voters.

Assessments of state-level actors' performance play some role in state legislative elections, but findings presented in Table 2 provide evidence that state legislative politics are more national than local. Shifts in presidential approval from strongly disapproving to strongly approving can change predicted probabilities of voting for the president's copartisans by at least .38. The relative impact of presidential to state legislative approval is remarkable. Figure 4 summarizes the predicted probabilities of voting for candidates of the state house majority or president's party using estimates from the 2012 election. The solid line represents the probability of voting for the state house majority party under different levels of state legislative approval, and the dotted line plots the probabilities of

TABLE 2
State House Vote Choice as a Function of Approval Ratings and Party ID

	2008	2010	2012
Election year			
Presidential approval	.205° (.011)	.413° (.014)	.433° (.014)
Governor approval	.131° (.013)	.077° (.013)	.087° (.016)
State legislative approval	.096° (.015)	.090° (.017)	.059° (.018)
Party ID (7 pt.)	.561° (.010)	.492° (.013)	.477° (.013)
Constant	.037° (.018)	.112° (.024)	.050° (.020)
Log-pseudolikelihood	-5165.3	-5844.5	-6719
N	18815	30757	28443

NOTE: Probit estimates of state house vote choice as a function of voters' assessments of the political actors and partisan identification. These data from the Cooperative Congressional Elections Studies are weighted to make them representative of registered voters in the 2008, 2010, and 2012 elections. Standard errors in parentheses.

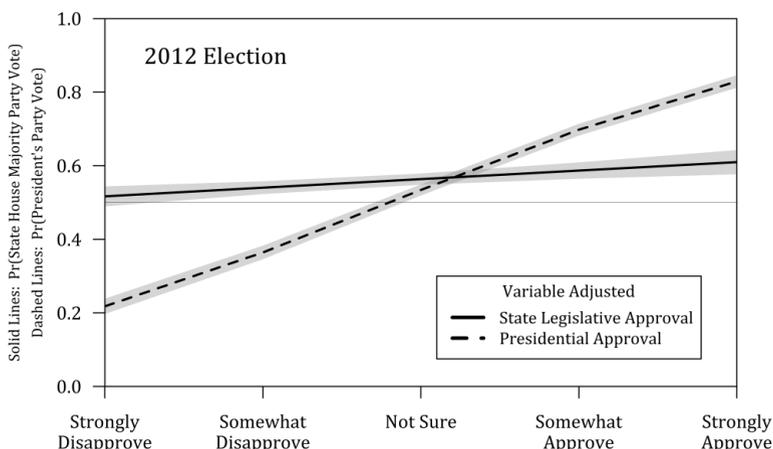
° $p \leq .05$.

voting for a legislative candidate of the president's party for given levels of presidential approval. With growing approval, predicted probabilities of voting for these parties' candidates increase, but changes in presidential approval have at least three times the impact of comparable shifts in state legislative approval.

The relationship between presidential approval and state legislative vote choice is robust. Levels of voter political knowledge or divided state government have no attenuating effect, and the relationship persists among wealthy, educated, or politically interested voters. The correlation between state legislative vote choice and presidential approval also consistently emerges when estimating the model on data subset by state. Therefore in state legislative elections across the country, changes in presidential approval clearly matter more than shifts in state legislative approval even though legislative parties control the legislature's performance more than the president's.⁹

The findings from the CCES surveys provide persuasive evidence that national politics influences voters' decisions in state legislative elections. These analyses, however, only examine recent state elections that coincide with federal contests. Some state elections, such as those in New Jersey or Virginia, occur in the "off-year" separate from presidential or congressional elections. When advocating off-year elections, New Jersey Governor Alfred Driscoll asserted that "the election for a Governor and for Assemblymen should not coincide with a Presidential election. The importance of a gubernatorial election merits an election that will not be overshadowed by a national contest for the Presidency" (New Jersey Constitutional Convention 1947).¹⁰ While the focus of this study is assembly

FIGURE 4
 Voter Behavior in State Legislative Elections under Different Levels of State Legislative and Presidential Approval



NOTE: Comparisons of the relationships between an individual’s assessments of the president or state legislature and their state house voting decisions in the 2012 elections. The solid line represents the predicted probability of voting for a candidate of the state house majority party under different levels of state legislative approval, and the dashed line represents the probability of voting for a member of the president’s party under different levels of presidential approval. The relative influence of presidential approval is at least three times that of state legislative approval.

rather than gubernatorial elections, Driscoll’s overarching point regarding state elections still applies. By being held separate from federal contests, off-year elections should be less likely to be “overshadowed,” and New Jersey provides an excellent opportunity to evaluate the influence of presidential politics in state legislative elections under electoral conditions presumably less sensitive to national politics.

I, therefore, examine New Jersey voters’ state legislative voting behavior using polls from the Eagleton Institute of Politics. This investigation tests the robustness of findings regarding the impact of national conditions on voter behavior in state legislative elections in two key respects. First, it analyzes elections that occur in the off-year. Second, it examines polls from each of the five presidential administrations since the 1970s instead of only more recent elections. Similar to the CCES analysis, I estimate the relationship between vote choice and a voter’s approval rating of the president, governor, and state legislature while controlling for an individual’s party identification.¹¹ To account for New Jersey’s multimember districts and options to vote for two Democrats, split the ticket, or vote for two Republicans, I estimate this relationship with an ordered probit regression.

Table 3 presents evidence that presidential influences in state legislative elections are not solely a result of federal election coattails nor a recent phenomenon.

In each Eagleton poll, approving instead of disapproving of the president can change the probability of a state legislative vote for the president's party by at least .27. While gubernatorial politics matters more in some elections than others, assessments of the New Jersey state legislature's performance never have a meaningful relationship with vote choice. The final column of Table 3 indicates that these off-year election findings are not confined to New Jersey, as national influences have similar effects in Virginia legislative elections, which also occur in odd-numbered years.¹² National politics, therefore, appears to permeate elections, even when there are no federal candidates on the ballot.

Discussion

My analyses suggest an unpopular presidency is bad news for the president's state legislative copartisans on multiple fronts. Not only will a member of the president's party be more likely to face a challenger in the general election, but when voters go to polls, many will likely vote for the state legislative challenger instead of the member of the president's party because they are displeased with the president. These complementary behaviors by elites and voters in state legislative elections help to explain the striking pattern of election outcomes illustrated by Figure 1 and provide evidence that there is a common dimension underlying both federal and state legislative elections: national politics.

Applying these findings to the upcoming 2016 election, a popular Barack Obama may help state legislative Democrats to regain seats lost in 2014. Meanwhile an unpopular Obama may mean more defeats for state-level Democrats. It, however, may be difficult for Obama's party to suffer many more losses. Following the 2014 election, Democrats held fewer state legislative seats than they had at any time since before the Great Depression, prompting members of the national media such as Chris Cillizza, Matt Yglesias, and Chuck Todd to call Democrat losses in state legislatures "the single most overlooked and underappreciated story line of President Obama's time in office" (Cillizza 2015; Yglesias 2015; Todd 2015).

Cillizza, Yglesias, and Todd bring attention to the underappreciated relationship between presidential and state legislative politics; my contribution to this volume provides evidence of the remarkable strength of this relationship. But another underappreciated point is that the influence of national forces in state legislative politics makes contests for the state legislature "second-order elections" where state legislators' own performance has relatively little to do with their own electoral success. Recall Figure 3, which suggests that being a member of the president's party increases the likelihood that a state legislator faces a challenger by more than 4 percent. By means of comparison, state legislators would have to oversee more than 4 percent growth in the state economy to offset this increased competition. Similarly, Figure 4 shows that compared with individual assessments of the state legislature, changes in presidential approval have at least three times the impact on voters' decision-making in state legislative elections. These analyses are just a portion of findings regarding the dim prospects for

TABLE 3
 New Jersey and Virginia Off-Year State Legislative Voting as a Function of Approval Ratings and Party ID

State and Election Year	NJ 1973	NJ 1975	NJ 1979	NJ 1983	NJ 1985	NJ 1987	NJ 1995	NJ 2007	VA 2007
Presidential approval	.216* (.060)	.218* (.050)	.252* (.074)	.210* (.064)	.323* (.082)	.179* (.059)	.423* (.078)	.228* (.063)	.296* (.023)
Governor approval	.015 (.068)	.202* (.064)	.088 (.067)	.094 (.066)	-.012 (.102)	.146* (.068)	.228* (.085)	.074 (.055)	.18* (.043)
State legislative approval	.005 (.078)	.013 (.063)	.080 (.069)	-.033 (.075)	.151 (.099)	.022 (.069)	-.017 (.095)	.092 (.058)	.186* (.039)
Party ID	.746* (.055)	.707* (.050)	.902* (.056)	.711* (.059)	.860* (.084)	.665* (.053)	.758* (.069)	.684* (.051)	.613* (.043)
Intercept: R votes split votes	-.232* (.099)	-.498* (.082)	-.292* (.106)	-.048 (.088)	-.052 (.134)	-.098 (.095)	-.267* (.103)	-.051 (.094)	.185* (.070)
Intercept: split votes D votes	.141 (.098)	-.262* (.080)	-.215* (.105)	.109 (.088)	.043 (.134)	-.057 (.095)	-.182 (.102)	.282* (.096)	.573* (.072)
Log-likelihood	-211.444	-353.944	-220.603	-192.25	-92.577	-195.878	-127.763	-251.3	-452.272
N	446	654	638	415	323	509	461	523	1052

NOTE: Ordered probit estimates of state house vote choices as a function of voters' assessments of the president, governor, and state legislature along with party identification. Column headings indicate the state and year of the poll. The Eagleton Institute of Politics conducted the New Jersey polls, and the *Washington Post* conducted the Virginia poll. In these off-year election states, presidential approval consistently correlates with state house vote choice.

accountability in state legislatures. I show elsewhere that there is little evidence that state legislators are held accountable for worsening crime, education, or economic policy outcomes, and few individual legislators pay an electoral price for extreme ideological representation or unpopular roll-call votes (Rogers 2013).

Taken together these findings suggest that state legislators have relatively little control over their own elections. State legislators control what happens at the state house, not the White House, and if national forces dominate state legislative elections, it undermines theories' of accountability claim that there should be a meaningful relationship between how state legislators perform in office and elections. Tip O'Neil's characterization of politics, therefore, does not seem to apply to state legislatures. Instead of being local affairs, state legislative elections are dominated by national politics.

Notes

1. Voters may also use state legislative elections to signal displeasure with (Piketty 2000; Kellerman 2008) or repudiate an unpopular president, similar to how federal midterm elections can be considered presidential referendums (e.g., Tuftte 1975). In a related literature on gubernatorial elections, Arceneaux (2006) finds that voters distinguish between presidential and gubernatorial responsibilities, but Carsey and Wright (1998) discover national forces such as presidential approval influence gubernatorial contests. Similarly, work on federalism finds that national conditions influence regional elections (Anderson and Ward 1996; Leigh and Mcleish 2009; Rodden and Wibbels 2011; see also Erikson and Filippov 2001; Kedar 2006; Leon 2012; Martins and Veiga 2013).

2. For a more thorough review of the determinants of state legislative challenger entry, see Rogers (2015).

3. I exclude states with "off-year" voting (e.g., 2007 and 2009) to make comparisons between midterm and presidential elections. Main results are similar when including off-year states. I also exclude Nebraska due to their nonpartisan legislature.

4. I measure partisanship using district-level presidential vote for the incumbent state legislator's party. For the 1991–2000 elections, I use Gore-Bush vote, and for the 2001–10 elections, I use averaged Bush-Kerry and McCain-Obama vote. My analysis is missing Gore-Bush vote for the New Mexico Senate and the Arkansas, Colorado, and Mississippi state legislatures and Kerry-Bush vote for Florida and Mississippi.

5. Prior work provides evidence of a relationship between the national economy and state legislative elections, focusing on seat or chamber changes (Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000; Campbell 1986; Chubb 1988; see also Klarner 2010; Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991; Fiorina 1994). This statistical association potentially reflects a relationship between voters' evaluations of the president and their decisions in state legislative elections, but the relationship between seat changes and the national economy could also be the result of other factors, such as challenger entry decisions and voter turnout. Objective measures of economic performance furthermore do not necessarily translate into subjective assessments of the government at the individual level (De Boef and Kellstedt 2004; Krause 1997), limiting inferences regarding how evaluations of the president shape voters' decisions in state legislative contests.

6. The 2008 and 2010 surveys asked, "For whom did you vote for in the state legislative elections" in the respondent's lower chamber. In 2008, individuals could select a "not sure" response, but in 2010, this option was unavailable. To simplify my presentation, I focus on registered voters who gave a definitive Democrat or Republican response. Findings are similar when including "not sure" responses in a multinomial probit estimation. Estimates available upon request.

7. For example, strongly approving a Democratic state legislature receives a similar coding to strongly approving a Democratic president. Substantive findings are similar when either using dummy variables for approval levels instead of a cardinal measure or substituting voters' assessments of the economy for their approval ratings of political actors. There are a considerable number of "not sure" responses to the governor and state legislative approval questions, and I code these responses as a middle category to reflect

uncertainty regarding whether the respondent disapproves or approves of these political actors. “Not sure” respondents may have answered correctly if given different closed item responses (Mondak 1999, 72). Main conclusions do not change when omitting “not sure” respondents. All estimates available upon request.

8. CCES samples are wealthier, better educated, and more politically interested than the general population. Main findings are not sensitive to including controls for these demographic differences.

9. All estimates available upon request.

10. This quote was found thanks to Bishop and Hatch (2012).

11. Over the past 40 years, the Eagleton Institute at times changed the wordings of the vote choice, approval, and party identification questions. To maintain comparability to CCES estimates in Table 2, I code response categories similar to the CCES analysis. Results from an alternative model specification without these adjustments are similar.

12. Of the New Jersey elections examined, only 1973 and 1985 had a gubernatorial election. Virginia results use a 2007 *Washington Post* poll. Instead of a vote choice question, this survey asked “regardless of your local contest, which party would you like to see in control of the Virginia state legislature after the November elections, the (Democrats) or the (Republicans)?” I code “divided” responses as the middle category.

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