Gubernatorial Coattail Effects in State Legislative Elections

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This work explores the influence of gubernatorial coattails in state legislative elections. Through a district-level analysis conducted in nine states, I measure how party support for the governor affects the percentage of the vote received by candidates running for the legislature. Findings indicate that gubernatorial coattails do influence candidate vote margins, even when factors such as campaign spending, past party performance, and other district-level conditions are controlled. However, the magnitude of this effect is mitigated by candidacy status and the closeness of the gubernatorial election. Specifically, coattail effects are dampened by the presence of an incumbent, while their influence is enhanced in states with competitive gubernatorial elections.

This analysis examines gubernatorial coattail effects in state legislative elections. The major question is: How much of an influence does support for the governor have on the votes received by candidates running for the state legislature? In other words, if a party’s nominee for governor does well in a district, does this translate into a larger vote share for that party’s state legislative candidate? Previous studies have explored the effects of presidential coattails on congressional elections and demonstrate their impact to be quite limited compared to other factors. The present analysis considers this phenomenon in state legislative elections where gubernatorial coattails are expected to be quite prominent. Given the lower visibility of legislative contests (compared to congressional elections), partisan cues are likely to play a greater role in a voter’s calculus, resulting in stronger coattails than observed in presidential-congressional elections. In addition, the variety of settings in which these elections occur makes it possible to test the influence of several contextual factors that might condition the strength of gubernatorial coattails.

Through the use of a district-level analysis, I examine coattail effects in non-presidential elections in nine states: Alaska, Arkansas, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, and Tennessee. The goal is to determine whether coattails have an influence while controlling for a range of candidate, district, and state-level features. In addition, I am interested in understanding the conditions that might mitigate this relationship. For example, how might factors such as candidacy status affect the impact of coattails? Do we find coattails to be stronger in open seat races where the overwhelming influence of incumbency is absent? Also, what role do institutional features play? Previous aggregate-level studies indicate that legislative professionalism serves to insulate elections as incumbents use the perquisites of office to ward off serious challenge. Are coattails indeed less influential in states that have more professional legislatures? Finally, how might features of the statewide race for governor influence the potency of coattails on the district level? Do more hard-fought gubernatorial races result in greater coattail effects? A multi-state, comparative approach enables me to test several of these important conditional relationships.

STUDYING THE COATTAIL PHENOMENON IN LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

A coattail is most often described as a spillover effect whereby an election for an upper-level office influences an election for a lower-level office. Many voters are brought to the polls by a high-profile campaign (such as for president or governor) but end up casting ballots for lower level elections as well (such as for Congress or the state legislature). Strong support in a district for a particular party’s candidate for higher office may therefore enhance the vote margin for that same party’s candidates running lower on the ballot.

Empirical studies over the years have examined this phenomenon, primarily as presidential coattail effects in congressional elections. Findings from this body of research indicate that presidential coattails do exert an influence (Born 1984; Campbell, 1986a; Campbell and Sumners 1990; Flemming 1995; Jacobson 1976, 1997; Mondak 1993), although the magnitude of their effect has diminished over time (Calvert and Ferejohn 1983; Edwards 1979; Ferejohn and Calvert 1984), and their degree of influence varies depending on candidacy status (Flemming 1995; Mondak 1993) and voter attitudes (Mondak 1990; Mondak and McCurley 1994). While coattails clearly play a role in affecting elections, the strength of their influence is seldom enough to matter for who wins or loses (Campbell and Sumners 1990; Edwards 1979). For example, Flemming (1995: 203) shows that under the best circumstances (in open seat elections), presidential coattails determine the outcome of U.S. House races only about 13 percent of the time.

While a number of studies have identified and measured coattails, there remains a great deal of uncertainty concerning the causal mechanism responsible for these effects. As one prominent congressional scholar notes, “...[t]he coattail...
this works is a matter of considerable debate” (Jacobson 1997: 157). It is often suggested that peripheral voters mobilized during high-stimulus elections (such as those for president) are primarily responsible for the phenomenon. Because these voters are less knowledgeable of campaign issues, they rely more often on heuristic cues such as partisanship in making their choices for down-ballot offices. Several studies attempt to more precisely identify and measure these effects by examining them at the individual voter level (e.g., Calvert and Ferejohn 1983; Jacobson 1976, 1997; Mondak 1990; Mondak and McCurley 1994). For example, Mondak and McCurley (1994: 153) rely on cognitive theories to explain coattail voting “as an efficiency-oriented process.” These authors state, “when forming decisions such as which House candidate to support, the individual often will turn to simple cues rather than engaging in an extensive deliberative process.”

In the present analysis, I examine coattails in the state setting where partisan cues are expected to be particularly important in voting decisions. While legislative elections in some states have taken on the characteristics of their congressional counterparts (Salmore and Salmore, 1996), in several other states these contests are barely on the “radar screen” for large segments of the population. Given the low profile of these elections, it is likely that a large contingent of voters are brought to the polls by high stimulus races for statewide office (e.g., governor) but also cast ballots for candidates in many down ballot races (e.g., state legislature). Indeed, research indicates that participation in legislative elections fluctuates considerably depending on the presence of important statewide elections (Austin et al.1991). Given the low-information context of state legislative elections, this setting would appear to be ideal for observing party-based coattail effects. Either consciously or not, a contingent of the voting public is expected to rely heavily on partisan cues, with the most relevant party being that of the preferred gubernatorial candidate.

Previous research has recognized and measured the impact of coattail effects in sub-national elections. In an article written over two decades ago, “Gubernatorial Coattails: A Vanishing Phenomenon?” Ronald Weber (1980) commented on the strength of coattails in state legislative elections given changes in the electoral environment (e.g., weakening voter attachment to parties, increasing campaign effects, and a larger impact of incumbency). From his analysis he concluded “gubernatorial coattails still seem to be alive in a number of states” (p. 156). Indeed, more recent studies have measured significant gubernatorial coattail effects in state legislative elections (Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000; Bibby 1983; Campbell 1986b; Chubb 1988). Campbell (1986b: 58), for example, identifies the presence of gubernatorial coattails in three out of four states he examines. He reports, “a party should gain about 2 percent of the state legislative seats for every five additional percentage points won by its candidate for governor.” Overall, Campbell finds that gubernatorial coattails are similar in magnitude to presidential coattails in affecting legislative elections.

Questions of gubernatorial coattails are addressed here in a manner consistent with several of the studies just mentioned, however, I depart from previous literature in three important ways. First, I examine the effects of coattails in a district-level analysis. Previous studies have not always used district-level data, but have relied instead on partisan seat changes (e.g., Campbell, 1986b) or party control measures (e.g., Chubb, 1988) as dependent variables. Use of district-level data adds precision to the analysis and allows me to assess the relative impact of coattails alongside important candidate and district level conditions. In the present study, both the dependent variable (percentage of the vote received by the Democratic candidate for the legislature) and the major independent variable of interest (coattails measured as the Democratic percentage of the vote for governor) are calculated on the district level. Such an approach enables me more clearly to identify and measure coattails in a manner consistent with congressional studies (e.g., Born, 1984; Mondak 1993).

A second departure from previous work is the use of many control variables. In order to calculate coattail effects adequately, it is necessary to account for the possibility of confounding variables. Because several states are examined, state-level differences are controlled for by including a measure of legislative professionalism (Squire 2000) and dichotomous dummy variables for the individual states. Additionally, a number of factors identified as influential by previous research are also included, such as candidacy status (e.g., Cox and Morgenstern 1993; Jewell and Breaux 1988), past party support in the district (e.g., Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Tucker and Weber 1987), and demographic features (e.g., Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000). Another variable of particular concern is candidate effort, measured as campaign spending. Previous studies of presidential coattails in congressional elections control for this variable (Born 1984; Campbell and Summers 1990; Fleming 1995), and it would seem to be important to include in the present study given its large influence in state legislative

1 Jacobson goes on to speculate about the causal mechanisms responsible for coattails: “Perhaps the presidential choice has a direct influence on the congressional choice; people prefer to vote for candidates sharing their presidential favorite’s party affiliation. Or perhaps both choices are influenced by the same set of conditions—for example, disgust with the failures of the current administration or delight with a party platform to which both candidates are committed—and so move in the same direction. It is even conceivable that, on occasion, support for the head of the ticket spills over from support for candidates for lower office” (1997: 157).

2 This is due in part to the low level of congruence between state legislative districts and media markets (Gierzynski and Breaux, 1996) and to the smaller amount of media coverage of state politics by news organizations (Layton and Walton, 1998).

3 A recent study by Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman (2000) also employs a district-level analysis, however, their “coattail” variable is the percentage of the vote received by the gubernatorial candidate measured at the state level. This state-level variable is then used to predict the probability of an incumbent winning reelection in a given legislative district.
elections (e.g., Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Tucker and Weber 1987).

The third departure from previous studies is the examination of factors thought to condition the effects of coattails. Three such mitigating factors include: candidacy status, institutional characteristics, and competitiveness of the gubernatorial election. Previous studies indicate that presidential coattails are dampened in congressional elections by the presence of incumbents (Flemming 1995; Mondak, 1993). Mondak in particular demonstrates that coattails are stronger in open seat elections where voters are forced to rely more heavily on partisan cues. Given such strong findings from the congressional setting, it will be interesting to see if they are also present in state legislative elections.

An institutional feature, legislative professionalism, is also expected to mitigate the role of coattails. Chubb (1988) finds that legislative "institutionalization" reduces the impact of coattails in state legislative elections. In settings where incumbents have the resources necessary to create a personal following, their reelection efforts are more shielded from outside forces. Results from a recent district-level study by Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman (2000) demonstrate support for this notion in their analysis of factors contributing to the probability of incumbent success. The authors report: "We find evidence that a high level of legislative professionalism insulates incumbents from the effects of higher level elections" (p. 869). The multi-state nature of the present study makes it possible to test for this mitigating role of legislative professionalism.

Finally, a factor expected to condition coattails is the competitiveness of the statewide race for governor. In highly competitive races, both candidates for governor work hard to win voter support and this increases turnout. Under such conditions, a greater spillover effect is expected whereby many voters brought to the polls by the gubernatorial campaign are also inclined to cast ballots for legislative candidates. These additional voters are probably much more likely to use partisan cues in voting for the legislature and a larger coattail effect should be observed. Examining several races with varying degrees of gubernatorial competition will allow me to sort out such influences.

**Anticipated Coattail Effects**

Given the general observations provided and the literature just reviewed, I expect to find a positive relationship between voting for governor and voting for state legislator at the district level. An OLS regression model will be used to test the influence of gubernatorial coattails measured as the percent of the district vote received by the Democratic gubernatorial candidate. The major dependent variable examined is the percentage of the district vote received by the Democratic candidate for the legislature. A key test of my hypothesis involves the inclusion of controls for factors also believed to influence the percentage of the vote received. Even when these various state and district-level factors are taken into account, do we continue to see an influence for gubernatorial coattails? Three sets of theoretically important factors along with several interactive effects are discussed below.

**Candidate-Level Characteristics**

Candidacy status is an important variable for explaining election outcomes. Because incumbent legislators have had a chance to build a personal following in the district, these candidates generally receive greater electoral support than their opponents (Jewell and Breaux 1988; Cox and Morgenstern 1993; Garand 1991). Compared to challengers, both incumbents and open seat candidates should receive a much larger vote percentage, all other things being equal. To measure these effects, two dichotomous variables (1 or 0) are used to indicate whether the candidate is an incumbent or an open seat contender. Challengers represent the excluded category in the model.

Another candidate-level factor likely to affect the percentage of the vote received is campaign spending. Previous literature demonstrates very clearly that spending has a positive influence on the percentage of the vote received in state legislative elections (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Tucker and Weber 1987). Given the varying sizes of legislative districts and the corresponding differences in campaign monies used across states, spending is calculated as the candidate's share of total spending (allocated by both major-party candidates during the election cycle). The variable ranges from 0 to 100 and is expected to have a positive influence on the percentage of the vote received.4

**District-Level Features**

A number of district-level conditions are expected to affect candidate vote percentages. To begin, the partisanship of district voters is of considerable importance (e.g., Caldeira and Patterson 1982; Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Giles and Pritchard 1985; Tucker and Weber 1987). In districts where there are high percentages of Democratic voters, candidates of that party should receive a larger portion of the district vote, all other things being equal. To assess the influence of partisanship, two measures of this

* In modeling the effects of campaign spending on state legislative elections, previous studies have often used a logged spending variable (e.g., Gierzynski and Breaux 1991) or included a squared spending measure (e.g., Tucker and Weber 1987) to capture the diminishing returns aspect of this relationship. Such techniques are not used here because spending is calculated as a percentage and is intended to measure the relative levels of spending by the two major party candidates (candidate spending / candidate spending + opponent spending). Because spending is not a major variable of interest and is included primarily as a control, more elaborate modeling techniques are unnecessary. Analyses conducted (but not shown) in which per capita spending is logged or used separately as a squared term show that there is indeed a diminishing returns aspect to campaign spending. Even when such measures are included, the main effects of the coattail variable (as well as the interaction terms) remain unchanged.
concept are examined. The first is a short-term indicator—percentage of the vote won by the party’s state legislative candidate in the last general election. A second, more long-term indicator of partisan support, uses population characteristics of the district to estimate voters’ partisan leanings. Based on an indicator developed by Koetzle (1998) to examine the influence of partisan diversity on competition in congressional elections, the measure is intended to calculate the degree to which voters are likely to support Democratic candidates. It is constructed by first taking the percentage-point deviations of a legislative district from the national median on five different variables expected to favor Democratic candidates: percent white, percent black, percent of households with incomes greater than $50,000, percent with at least a two-year college degree, and percent employed in the farming industry. These differences are then summed so that positive values represent a greater percentage of voters likely to support Democrats, while negative values represent a greater proportion likely to support Republicans (e.g., Democratic districts, for example, are those that score low on percent white, incomes greater than $50,000, percent college educated, and percent farming but score high on percent black). The totaled percentage point differences are then divided by the number of variables (5). It is expected that this variable will have a positive influence on the percentage of the vote received by Democrats.

Another variable that may affect the percentage of the vote received is turnout. Surges in voter participation brought about by campaign effort could give one party a boost at the expense of the other. Conventional wisdom suggests that Democrats benefit from higher levels of voter turnout, however, quantitative assessments of this relationship demonstrate inconsistent effects (e.g., Citrin, Schickler, and Sides 2003; DeNardo 1980; Nagel and McNulty 1996; Radcliff 1994). Here turnout is included as a means of controlling for differences in levels of participation across legislative districts. The measure is calculated as the number of votes for legislative candidates over the number of eligible voters in the district.

Together, these district-level conditions provide a key test of gubernatorial coattails. Once these factors have been taken into account, do coattails continue to exert an influence on the percentage of the vote received by legislative candidates?

### State-Level Conditions

States vary on a number of important dimensions that may affect the votes received by a party’s candidates for the state legislature. To control for these various system-level conditions, I first include a series of dichotomous dummy variables for each state except one (Tennessee serves as the excluded category). In subsequent analyses, these dummy variables are replaced with one variable measuring legislative professionalism, a variable I believe to be relevant for understanding the influence of coattails. Previous studies demonstrate that professionalism affects the competitiveness of elections, in part through the advantages bestowed upon incumbent candidates (Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Chubb, 1988. Here professionalism is used initially as a control factor, but later as part of an interaction term to assess the mitigating role of professionalism on coattails.

Legislative professionalism is measured using an index developed by Squire (2000) based upon three characteristics of legislatures in 1995 (legislative compensation, days in session, and staff resources). The variable can be interpreted as “how closely the state legislature mimics the U.S. Congress in terms of professionalization” (Squire 2000: 142). The nine states vary widely on this dimension as the following scores on Squire’s 0 to 1.0 scale indicate: Alaska (.232), Arkansas (.104), California (.571), Hawaii (.252), Idaho (.110), Illinois (.236), Kansas (.109), Minnesota (.179), and Tennessee (.117).8

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5 An example illustrates how this measure is calculated. The national median and the district mean for each of the following variables is used: percent white population (nation = 92, district = 75); percent Black population (nation = 3, district = 10); percent with family incomes greater than $50,000 (nation = 18, district = 16); percent holding at least a two-year college degree (nation = 23, district = 43); and percent employed in farming (nation = 2, district = 1). The percentage point deviations for each of the five variables for this district are then added together: (17) + (7) + (2) + (22) + (1) = 5. The sum is then divided by the number of categories (5) to equal 1.0.

6 For sake of parsimony, additional variables were tested but not included in the final model. The measures included district-level indicators used as part of the demographic index (race, family income, college degrees, and employment in farming) as well as several other factors: employment in manufacturing, employment in government, age, percent Hispanic, percent Asian, urban. A measure for the percentage of the district vote received in the most recent major election (previous Presidential or U.S. Senate election) was also examined. Results of these analyses showed results very similar to those presented here. The magnitude and level of statistical significance for coattails as well as for the interaction terms were nearly identical to those presented. These additional analyses are available from the author upon request.

7 Another state-level characteristic that would certainly enhance the influence of coattails is whether or not the state gives voters a straight-party option that allows them to pull one lever (or push one button, mark one box, etc.) to cast a ballot for all the nominees of the same party. Over the years many states abandoned this mechanism and by 2000 only seventeen continued using it (Kimball, Owens, McLaughlin 2002). In the nine states included in the present study, only Illinois had such a mechanism available (in 1994). Tests were conducted in which Illinois was removed from the dataset, however, the effects of coattails (along with the interaction terms) continued to have a similar influence on legislative elections. The dummy variables for each state used in part of the analysis that follows also demonstrate that when state differences are controlled, the effects of coattails remain strong.

8 Other measures of legislative professionalism were used in place of the Squire index in all the analyses that follow. For example, a categorical measure of professionalism used by Hamm and Moncrief (1999) along with a continuous index of “salary only” and “total compensation” measures developed by Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000) were tested. All worked similarly to the Squire index, in part due to their high degree of inter-correlation. Squire’s (2000) measure is used given that several components of professionalism are captured in a single variable.
Interactive Effects

As indicated earlier, the major expectation is that coattails will affect the votes received by state legislative candidates. Citizens brought to the polls by gubernatorial elections end up casting ballots in these and other down-ballot races. Because large numbers of these voters are less informed about these elections, their choices will be based heavily on convenient voting cues such as the partisanship of their preferred gubernatorial candidate. However, there are some conditions under which the strength of the partisanship cue is mitigated. Specifically, I examine the influence of incumbency status, legislative professionalism, and competitiveness of the gubernatorial contest.

The first condition expected to lessen the effect of coattails is incumbency. State legislative incumbents have many resources at their disposal for becoming well known to constituents (Chubb 1988; Weber, Tucker, and Brace 1991). Even to voters with low levels of knowledge, this type of recognition may be a cue that affects their voting and therefore lessens the influence of partisanship. Previous research considers this relationship in congressional elections and finds that incumbency indeed dampens coattails (Flemming 1995; Mondak 1993). To gauge the effect here, the coattail measure is interacted with the dichotomous variable indicating the absence of an incumbent candidate (Governor Coattail × Open Seat). If incumbency serves to lessen the impact of coattails, this variable should have a positive and statistically significant influence on the percentage of the vote received.9

The second condition that may influence coattails is professionalism of the state legislature. Given findings cited earlier from previous studies (e.g., Berry, Berkman, Schneiderman 2000; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000; Chubb 1988), legislative professionalism is expected to insulate legislative elections from external forces and therefore dampen the impact of gubernatorial coattails. However, such effects are probably only present for contests involving incumbents who have access to the insulating mechanisms of professionalism. To test for this effect, the following interaction term is incorporated into the model: Governor Coattail × Open Seat × Professionalism. A positive coefficient for this variable would demonstrate that the dampening effect of incumbency becomes more severe as legislative professionalism rises.

A final conditioning influence involves the nature of the statewide race for governor. It is expected that a highly competitive race for governor will enhance the influence of coattails as candidates and parties work hard to mobilize and persuade additional voters. In these high-intensity contests (compared to low-intensity contests), it is likely that a larger proportion of voters brought to the polls are relatively unaware of their choices in down-ballot races. Because such voters are expected to rely more heavily on partisan cues, stronger coattail effects should be observed. A number of variables could be used to gauge the competitiveness of the gubernatorial election at the state level (relative levels of campaign spending, party mobilization efforts, candidate activities, etc.). Here I have chosen the margin of the statewide vote to indicate the closeness of the race because it is a single indicator that encapsulates many variables that make a campaign competitive.10 If coattail effects do become stronger as election margins decrease, the interaction coefficient (Governor Coattail × Statewide Governor Margin) should be negative.

Data

Election information and campaign spending totals were obtained from the Elections Division of the Secretary of State’s Office in each state. Demographic statistics came from The Almanac of State Legislatures (Lilley, DeFranco, and Diefenderfer 1994) and the U.S. Census. A major challenge for this study was in gathering gubernatorial election results for individual legislative districts. Few states compile election data in this manner, so in most cases precinct-level data had to be aggregated to the legislative district level.11

This analysis uses information from state legislative elections in nine states: Alaska, Arkansas, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, and Tennessee.12 For all but two of the nine states, the information is from the 1998 election cycle (Illinois and Minnesota are from 1994).

9 It might seem that this relationship would best be tested with an interaction term using the dichotomous indicator for incumbency. However, such an interaction would not fully account for the mitigating role of incumbency given that Democratic challengers compete against Republican incumbents. Because the key distinction is between an incumbent running or not running, the dichotomous open seat variable is the appropriate variable to use as part of the interaction term.

10 Election margin is not an ideal measure, in part, because the actual margin is unknown until after the votes are counted. However, it is probably a good proxy for competitiveness given that polls conducted by news organizations leading up to the election give voters a sense of how close the outcome will ultimately be.

11 Gubernatorial election returns aggregated at the state legislative district level were available in only two of these states (California and Minnesota). In one other state, Illinois, the data was obtained from the Almanac of Illinois Politics (Roberts, Kleppner, and Van der Slik, eds., 1996). For the other six states, the data had to be aggregated by hand (from hard copies) or through manipulation of electronic files. The process of matching precinct returns from gubernatorial elections to specific legislative districts is fraught with a number of difficulties, not the least of which is that in some states, absentee voting and "early voting" (as in Tennessee) are tabulated only on the county level. An assumption was made that these votes were cast randomly across the legislative districts and were distributed evenly with each district. The process of allocating the gubernatorial votes to the proper legislative districts is probably as accurate as is possible, given the current constraints on how the data are made available.

12 Attempts were made to gather data from as many states as possible, however, limitations in obtaining both district level gubernatorial election returns (see Footnote 11) and campaign spending information for each candidate made it necessary to restrict the total number of states examined. As states begin to make available election returns that can be more easily aggregated to the district level, our ability to examine a wider number of states over an expanded time frame will be possible.
Non-presidential elections were chosen because this is when most states hold gubernatorial elections and because gubernatorial coattails are more likely to be observed. Data are from all races that were contested by both major parties (Democrats and Republicans) in both upper and lower house elections (Kansas and Minnesota did not hold Senate elections for the year chosen, so only House elections are used for these states).13

While no group of states is representative of all fifty, these nine provide variation on important dimensions such as political culture, ideology, and political party competition.14 In terms of legislative professionalism, a variable of great interest to the analysis, these nine states vary rather dramat-ically. According to Squire's index of professionalism (2000), the group represents a wide range of institutions from California, which is ranked first among all legislatures in the nation, to Arkansas which is ranked fortieth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democratic Candidate</th>
<th>Vote %</th>
<th>Republican Candidate</th>
<th>Vote %</th>
<th>Margin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Tony Knowles</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>John Lindauer</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Bill Bristow</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Mike Huckabee</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Gray Davis</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Dan Lungren</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Benjamin Cayetano</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Linda Lingle</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Robert Huntley</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Dirk Kempthorne</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Dawn Netsch</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Jim Edgar</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Tom Sawyer</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bill Graves</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>John Marty</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Arne Carlson</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>John Hooker</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Don Sundquist</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13 A potential problem with using only contested elections is that a large percentage of races go uncontested on a regular basis. For example, the percentage contested by major party candidates in the states examined are as follows: Alaska (Senate 60 percent, House 60 percent), Arkansas (Senate 41 percent, House 45 percent), California (Senate 90 percent, Assembly 90 percent), Hawaii (Senate 83 percent, House 98 percent), Idaho (Senate 37 percent, House 43 percent), Illinois (Senate 100 percent, House 69 percent), Kansas (House 48 percent), Minnesota (House 90 percent), and Tennessee (Senate 47 percent, House 36 percent). The low rates of contesting in some states means that the districts used in this analysis may very well be unrepresentative of all districts. However, given the definition of coattails used in this analysis (an electoral spillover effect from one election to another), coattails can only be observed when there is a contested legislative election. It is possible that some broader definition of coattails could be examined (e.g., a gubernatorial candidate's campaign might affect whether or not candidates of a particular party decide to run for the legislature), but such effects are beyond the scope of the present analysis.

14 In terms of regional balance, this group of states over-represents western parts of the country and under-represents eastern areas. However, the states do provide variation on a number of important variables. For example, using Elazar's sub-culture classifications (1984) we find that four states are categorized as moralistic (California, Idaho, Kansas, and Minnesota), three as individualistic (Alaska, Hawaii, and Illinois), and two as traditionalistic (Arkansas and Tennessee). Regarding political ideology the states provide a range of different contexts as indicated by the public opinion liberalism index of Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993), ranging from a low of 14.6 in Idaho to a high of 25.4 in California. In terms of two-party competition, the states again represent a range of differences, from Alaska (ranked 5th) to Arkansas (ranked 49th) on measures of district-level competition (Holbrook and Van Dunk, 1993).

Table 1 provides the percentage of the total vote received by each major party candidate for governor in the nine states examined. As one can see, candidate vote percentages varied widely. The 1998 governor's race in Hawaii was quite tight where the Democrat received slightly more than 50 percent of the total vote. A moderate degree of competition was present in Arkansas and California, but in the other elections, one candidate outdistanced the other by a large margin. The widest margin was in Kansas's 1998 election where Bill Graves received approximately 73 percent of the vote.15

The major dependent and independent variables of interest are the district-level percentages of the vote received by state legislative and gubernatorial candidates. The average Democratic percentage for each of these variables along with their standard deviation and range are listed for each state in Table 2. Overall, these data indicate very clearly that a large degree of variation is present. Both across and within states there are wide differences in the percentage of the vote received by gubernatorial and state legislative candidates.

Table 3 provides results from the multiple regression analyses to explain variation in the percentage of the two-party vote received by Democratic legislative candidates. The coefficients displayed in the first column include the major variables of interest along with dummy variables for the states. Overall, these variables explain approximately 88

15 The total vote percentage correlated highly with another competition measure, two-party vote, for all states except Alaska where in 1998 a write-in candidate along with several minor-party and independent candidates received a combined total of 31 percent of the vote. Election margins were calculated as a percent of the total vote as well as a percent of the two-party vote and tested individually in all the analyses presented. Both measures performed similarly, but only the total vote margin analysis is provided.
percent of the variance in the dependent variable as indicated by the R² statistic.¹⁶

As one can see, all the candidate and district-level variables are statistically significant and have an effect in the manner that was hypothesized. The average vote share for incumbents is more than nine percent higher than for challengers (the excluded category). Open seat contenders have an average vote share that is more than 4 percent higher than that received by challengers. Campaign effort is also an influential factor where every one-percentage point increase in the relative level of funding results in a vote increase of about 0.2 percent. Past party vote and demographic features also positively affect the percentage of the vote received. Interestingly, higher turnout has a positive and statistically significant influence on the Democratic percentage of the vote.¹⁷

The major variable of interest in the model, of course, is gubernatorial coattail. As the results demonstrate, the influence of this factor is strong and statistically significant. The unstandardized coefficient representing governor's coattails is .426, meaning that for every one percentage point increase in a Democratic gubernatorial candidate's vote percentage, the Democratic legislative candidate's vote in the district increases by about 0.43 percent. Such an impact may not seem very large, but given the range in support for governors across districts and the fact that about 16 percent of the contested state legislative elections in these states were decided by less than 5 percent of the vote, this seemingly marginal influence may make the difference in many contests.

The second column in Table 3 displays results similar to those in the first column except here the state dummy variables have been replaced with the one variable representing legislative professionalism. Only slightly less variance is explained with these variables (R² = .85), however, the variable for legislative professionalism is not statistically significant. More importantly, the coefficient for governor coattails remains statistically significant and strong, although its magnitude has been reduced (now at .200). Both sets of analysis in Table 3 demonstrate that coattails have a sizeable impact on state legislative elections, even in the face of controls for a variety of candidate, district, and state-level conditions.¹⁸

Having found a relatively strong and consistent effect for coattails, we now move on to determine if this effect is conditioned by the factors hypothesized about earlier. Table 4 includes the analysis that tests the effects of interactions for open seat and professionalism alongside the other control

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¹⁶ Tests for multicollinearity were conducted. Bivariate correlations as well as regressions running each independent variable against all the rest yielded no major relationship that would prevent using these variables simultaneously. For example, some of the highest bivariate correlations were between past party vote and campaign spending (Pearson = 0.621) and between legislative professionalism and governor coattail (Pearson = 0.602).

¹⁷ Some have warned that using so many variables measured as percentages may produce distorted results in multiple regression analyses. The concern is that the denominator of such ratio measures creates common variance among the independent variables and this can pose difficulties in estimation (e.g., Uslaner 1976). Recent studies demonstrate that this problem has been overstated (e.g., Firebaugh 1988) and that theoretical issues should be the major concern in model specification (Kritzer 1990). Here percentages are used because I believe these are the most suitable measures for the behavior being modeled. Using the number of votes cast would not be appropriate given the cross-state comparisons being made. In addition, the use of percentages is standard practice in aggregate-level election studies and this facilitates a comparison of these findings to existing literature.

¹⁸ A potential criticism of this interpretation is that we may be observing a "reverse coattail" phenomenon. In other words, the support for governor at the district level is not a cause, but instead is an effect. While support for candidates running in lower level elections may indeed bring greater support for a candidate higher on the ballot, it seems unlikely that the findings uncovered here are due to a reverse coattail phenomenon. The strong theoretical expectations outlined earlier along with the wide assortment of control variables included in the statistical analyses (particularly those at the candidate-level such as campaign spending) give strong support to the idea that the causal arrow indeed runs from the top-down.
**Table 3**
FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PERCENTAGE OF THE VOTE RECEIVED BY DEMOCRATIC STATE LEGISLATIVE CANDIDATES (Unstandardized coefficients, standard errors in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model #1</th>
<th>Model #2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governor Coattail</td>
<td>.426***</td>
<td>.200***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.033)</td>
<td>(.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>9.425***</td>
<td>9.912***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.807)</td>
<td>(.860)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Seat</td>
<td>4.441***</td>
<td>4.806***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.772)</td>
<td>(.803)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Spending</td>
<td>.197***</td>
<td>.212***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td>(.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Features</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Party Vote</td>
<td>.100***</td>
<td>.115***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.014)</td>
<td>(.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Index</td>
<td>.198***</td>
<td>.348***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.052)</td>
<td>(.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout</td>
<td>.064*</td>
<td>.120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.031)</td>
<td>(.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Professionalism</td>
<td>13.781***</td>
<td>20.112***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.342)</td>
<td>(1.344)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>-18.393***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.267)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>-8.03</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.398)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>-6.436***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.557)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>-5.748***</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.420)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>-951</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.381)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>-2.373*</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.151)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>3.490**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.217)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>-3.567**</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.302)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>13.781***</td>
<td>20.112***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.432)</td>
<td>(1.344)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R² =</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N =</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>598</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: +p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

In Model 1, the statistically significant and positive coefficient for the interaction term (Governor × Open Seat) indicates that coattails are much higher in the absence of an incumbent candidate. In fact, the difference is quite large. The presence of an incumbent candidate reduces the impact of coattails by nearly 50 percent. Such a finding suggests that voters brought to the polls by the high-stimulus gubernatorial election have another voting cue in addition to partisanship—incumbency—and this affects their voting.

Moving on to Model 2, I test the interaction term that includes the state-level characteristic of legislative professionalism (Governor Coattail × Open Seat × Professionalism). Such a test makes it possible to determine whether the dampening effect of incumbency on coattails is greater in more professional legislatures. As one can see, the coefficient is statistically insignificant meaning that the influence of incumbency on coattails does not vary by level of professionalism. In other words, the incumbency cue has the same heft in a state with a highly professionalized legislature (e.g., California) as it does in a state with a citizen legislature (e.g., Arkansas). Such a finding is rather surprising given the results of previous studies that show the electoral value of incumbency varies by level of professionalism (e.g., Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000).

Finally, Table 5 includes an interaction term containing a measure for a competitive gubernatorial election (Governor Coattail × Statewide Governor Margin). Included in this equation is the statistically significant interaction term from Table 4 (Governor Coattail × Open Seat). In addition, a variable for statewide governor margin is also included as a control (no influence is expected). If a highly competitive election increases the impact of governor's coattails, the coefficient for the interaction should be negative.

The results in Table 5 show that the coefficient for this interaction is indeed negative and statistically significant. By varying the gubernatorial vote margin variable from 1 to 30 (the average margin in these states is 29), the coattail effect is reduced by about half, controlling for other effects. Thus, coattail effects are stronger in those states where the statewide races for governor are more competitive.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Overall, these results demonstrate that gubernatorial coattails exert an influence on legislative elections. Far from being a “vanishing phenomenon,” their impact appears to be rather substantial, even when subjected to controls for a number of variables. In Model 1, the statistically significant and positive coefficient for the interaction term (Governor × Open Seat) indicates that coattails are much higher in the absence of an incumbent candidate. In fact, the difference is quite large. The presence of an incumbent candidate reduces the impact of coattails by nearly 50 percent. Such a finding suggests that voters brought to the polls by the high-stimulus gubernatorial election have another voting cue in addition to partisanship—incumbency—and this affects their voting.

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For the analyses presented in Tables 4 and 5, tests for multicollinearity were conducted. As one might expect, the interaction terms were highly correlated with their component parts. For example, the first interaction (Governor Coattail × Open Seat) is correlated with Open Seat at .905 (Pearson Correlation). In addition, there were high correlations between the two interaction terms included in Model 2 of Table 4 (Pearson Correlation = .856). While such correlations pose difficulties for estimation, they are unavoidable in testing important interactions.
wide range of variables. Such findings can be attributed to the behavior of voters who must often make decisions in a context of limited information. Voters casting ballots for state legislative candidates rely heavily on the partisanship of their preferred gubernatorial candidate in voting for a state representative.

While gubernatorial coattails clearly play a role in legislative elections, their influence is not constant across all states and districts. Aspects of the political environment, particularly those related to the presence of an incumbent and the competitiveness of the statewide race for governor serve to condition their impact. In open seat elections where the incumbency cue is absent, coattails have an even larger influence. Similarly, coattails are stronger in states with highly competitive gubernatorial elections where voter interest in the statewide contest strengthens the partisan spillover effects. Such findings demonstrate the critical role of political context in influencing voter behavior.

Legislative professionalism is another factor that was expected to condition the influence of coattails but the analysis found no such effect. Contrary to expectations, the dampening influence of incumbency on coattails did not become stronger as legislative professionalism grew. While such findings appear to run counter to those of other studies (e.g., Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000; Chubb 1988), it is important to note that previous studies have often been concerned with the overall electoral effect of
incumbency. Particularly for studies examining the probability of incumbent success (e.g., Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000), a wide assortment of advantages would seem to be responsible (e.g., ability to scare off strong challengers, fundraising advantages, etc.). In this analysis, only a limited part of the incumbency effect is examined—how it conditions partisan voting cues. The reason that incumbency does not rival partisan cues any more in a professional than in a non-professional legislature may be because the saliency of incumbency does not vary much across different institutions. In other words, voter familiarity and awareness of incumbents may be similar in both California and Arkansas.

Previous studies have not looked closely at voter familiarity of legislative incumbents across states, but conditions suggest it may not differ greatly by level of professionalism. It is true that incumbents in highly professional legislatures have greater resources that enable them to keep in close contact with voters (through newsletters, constituency services, etc.). But we also know that districts in professional legislatures tend to have larger populations, making such resources critical for establishing and maintaining a minimal level of contact. In less professionalized legislatures, incumbents have fewer resources for such purposes, but given the smaller districts these perquisites may be less necessary. In citizen legislatures, incumbents maintain familiarity with voters through personal interactions. Therefore, the incumbency cue may be as influential to voters in states with professional legislatures as it is in states that have citizen legislatures. Such conditions would result in the observations generated from this analysis—incumbency's dampening influence on coattails does not vary by level of professionalism.

Even when taking into account the various conditioning effects, the analysis shows that gubernatorial coattails have an important influence on legislative elections. While these effects are strong, one must be careful not to overstate their importance given the current state of competition in legislative districts. As recent studies suggest, there are large numbers of un-contested elections for state legislative office (Van Dunk and Weber 1997). On average, close to 35 percent of recent general elections (1988-1996) go uncontested on a regular basis (Squire 2000). This trend is due, in part, to the aggressive redistricting efforts of the 1990s and to the role of legislative campaign committees in targeting resources towards competitive seats (Gierzynski, 1992; Shea 1995). Given these conditions, the opportunities for coattails to have any influence are clearly limited. Perhaps, if more seats were contested, the influence of coattails would play a role in a larger number of legislative elections.

Overall, these findings provide important insight but are clearly a first step in addressing a range of important questions. For example, what factors associated with candidate activity might impinge upon coattail effects? Are certain types of candidates more or less likely to be affected by gubernatorial coattails? Alternatively, what features associated with the executive office might influence coattails? We know that political power of governors varies by state (Beyle 1999), so could these differences affect the strength of gubernatorial coattails? What role might political party organizations play in this process (particularly at the legislative chamber level)? Collecting data from a wider number of states over several election cycles will make it possible to answer these and other questions surrounding the coattail phenomenon in state legislative elections better.

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