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Have Gubernatorial Elections Become More Distinctive Contests?

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Gubernatorial and presidential elections over the period 1947–1986 are examined, using a previously reported process for decomposing partisan electoral outcomes series into their long-term and short-term components. These measures are employed to examine the proposition that gubernatorial elections have become increasingly isolated from outside forces. It is found that presidential coattails appear to be declining in importance (but not only because a number of states have moved to off-year elections). Gubernatorial elections have converged around a national pattern of relatively close competition, unlike state-level presidential contests, which have shifted in favor of Republican candidates. The pattern of gubernatorial outcomes varies more from state to state, however. In specific elections, the short-term forces remain in rough equilibrium between the parties in gubernatorial contests, but not in presidential contests, where the average short-term shifts favoring one party or the other fluctuate from one election to the next. On the other hand, gubernatorial elections respond less uniformly than presidential elections to these election-specific, national-level forces. This evidence suggests that the gubernatorial election contest has, in general, become more distinctive from the national context, reflecting a more fully autonomous office.

Recent electoral history is marked by the substantial influence of new technologies on the electoral contest, new demands on the political system, and a political environment in flux. It has been suggested that these changes are associated with a number of changes in elections, including a growing incumbency advantage, a changed candidate pool, and a transformed electoral process. Parties are declining and news media are growing in importance, while voters are becoming more fickle—or perhaps more moved by the whimsies of celebrity status and media image. Observers worry that elections are increasingly shaped by national forces, not by the immediate electoral contest. These and related controversies about the nature of elections are typically assessed in the context of national survey data on presidential and congressional elections and in aggregated data on congressional elections.

This national focus neglects the important arena of state elections, which has also changed substantially in recent years. The gubernatorial office pro-

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vides a particularly important focus for raising these questions, since it offers a set of quasi-autonomous but highly visible contests for analysis. Candidates for an executive office are far more vulnerable to voters' judgments about policy proposals and responsibilities than legislators are, while the gubernatorial office offers us a substantial number of cases for analysis.

The important presumption of a quasi-autonomous contest underlying such arguments has not been sufficiently tested however. Governors may, after all, ride the coattails of their party's candidate for president. They may be constrained by the persisting partisan divisions in their state, allowing them few opportunities for change, or, alternatively, they may be subject to the prevailing tides of national opinion, with little opportunity to distinguish themselves within their states. Many states have acted as though these concerns were realized in electoral experience by moving to isolate their gubernatorial elections from presidential contests and by allowing governors to run for a second term as a means of enhancing their influence (Tompkins, 1987).

Have State Elections Been Nationalized? In the gubernatorial context, a number of arguments are advanced in favor of the conjecture that state elections are increasingly influenced by national electoral forces. It is suggested that the media has been increasingly nationalized—with national news and its coverage coming to dominate the individual voter's consciousness. Campaigns are increasingly dominated by sophisticated strategies and the consultants required for their execution. These consultants are nationally based, shaping their strategies toward more universalistic themes and practices (e.g. Sabato, 1981). Campaigns have grown more costly, partly as a result, and their successful execution seems to require more extensive, often nationally focused fund-raising. State political organizations have lost much of their patronage power, and direct primaries have replaced the organizational forum of party conventions, which provided them with critical resources for shaping their political environment (Bibby et al., 1983, p. 86). At the same time, organized interest groups, with national ties and interests, seem to have grown in importance (Beyle and Muchmore, 1983, p. 17). The modern world increasingly seems focused on the nation and its experience, in any event, so that states seem to be submerged in the larger forces affecting the nation as a whole. Partly as a result, the importance of the president and the presidency seems to have been magnified, so that stories about the impact of presidential fortunes on gubernatorial candidates abound.

Or, Are State Elections More Autonomous? Conflicting arguments are advanced in favor of the view that state elections are increasingly autonomous. The decline of partisanship has increasingly personalized campaigns and campaigning (e.g. Wattenberg, 1984, ch. 6), while the national party is per-

ceived as having few resources to use in attempting to influence state contests and little impact, in any event (Beyle and Muchmore, 1983, pp. 17, 47–48). Indeed, Claggett, Flanigan and Zingale (1984) fail to find any increase in the nationalization of party voting for congressional candidates over the 1842–1970 period. Moreover, Eldersveld argues that state parties have always had a limited opportunity to influence events and that there is little evidence of change (Eldersveld, 1982, p. 417). As the terms of office have improved, so have its seekers; Sabato bid “Goodbye to Goodtime Charlie,” heralding the emergence of the modern governor in recent years (Sabato, 1983). The modern governor is viewed as more capable and as having more responsibilities, underscored by a growth in administrative functions (Beyle and Muchmore, 1983, p. 18). Even if presidential contests have an important impact on gubernatorial elections, term reform has successfully disentangled most governors, with only twelve states now forcing the governor to stand for election at the same time as the president (Tompkins, 1987).

In short, no uncontested prediction can be made about the role national forces play in gubernatorial elections. Moreover, there has been little systematic work on this subject, perhaps, in part, because data limitations hinder any such exploration. Feigert (1985, p. 99) argues that states are “virtually immune from Republican presidential successes,” but he relies on a data base of aggregated measures of party competition, which provides only a weak test of the conjecture. Morehouse (1981, p. 75) suggests that “state politics are becoming independent from presidential politics,” but she employs split state-level decisions between gubernatorial candidates and presidential candidates as evidence. Sabato (1983, pp. 139–41) relies on similar evidence for his claim that the “coattail effect” has “generally declined” in states where the governor runs on the same ticket with the president. Still, these often aggregated results may conceal important national trends in the share of votes received by one party or the other, even though the outcomes suggest increasing denationalization. Selection biases may also cloud these results, since both studies report results for all states treated, not accounting for changes in the pool of states whose governors run at the same time as the president. More disaggregated studies of coattails appear in Kritzer and Eubank (1979), then Calvert and Ferejohn (1983), and Ferejohn and Calvert (1984), but they focus on congressional elections. Campbell (1986) reports evidence that presidential coattails extend to the division of seats in state legislatures, and finds that gubernatorial coattails have some independent impact. All of this evidence suggests that presidential coattails have not been lengthy, but it cannot be said to be conclusive. As a result, Weber and Parent (1985) argue that the pattern of evidence is such that “coattails” should not be ignored in “any comprehensive analysis” of state elections.

Clearly several questions are involved. (1) The most specific involves the impact of presidential coattails: Are the fortunes of gubernatorial contestants

tied to the presidential election result? More generally, the questions of “nationalization” emerge: have gubernatorial elections become nationalized, (2) either converging in the pattern of results considered across the states in the long term, (3) becoming more stable in the national pattern of short-term changes, or (4) becoming more uniform in their responses to immediate national-level election year trends and issues? All these factors bear on the larger question: Is the electoral contest for governor increasingly autonomous, or is it increasingly shaped by external factors?

ANALYTIC APPROACH

These questions cannot be addressed without a dynamic model of electoral outcomes. An analysis focused solely on specific electoral outcomes confounds the immediate forces influencing a particular election with the longer term patterns which shape it. If there is an underlying pattern of partisanship in the state, for example, any association between votes for a presidential candidate and a gubernatorial candidate running at the same time will confound the long-term relationship between partisanship and vote choice and the more immediate tie between votes cast for one candidate and votes cast for another.

Elsewhere, I have reported on a method for disaggregating gubernatorial electoral series which attacks this problem. In it, particular election results are decomposed into a “long term” component, reflecting the underlying pattern of outcomes, and a “short term” component, reflecting the difference between this pattern and the results of a particular election. The long-term measure is developed by “seasonally adjusting” gubernatorial election results for surges associated with presidential, or “on-year” elections, where the adjustment appears appropriate, then taking a twelve-year backcast moving average of the previous election results, beginning with the current election. The proportion of votes cast for the Democratic candidate is used as a measure of the partisan division, since this measure is more robust across all modern elections (notably those in the South); the procedure is applied to elections beginning in 1932. This adjusted moving average, or long-term component, thus reflects a pattern of results over a twelve-year period, which is related to the underlying partisan division within the state.¹ The

¹This long-term component may be viewed as an indicator of partisanship, but it is confounded by the office-specific nature of the measure. Alternative measures, based on the pattern of outcomes for a number of offices within a single election year, confound election specific forces with the underlying (and, as a result, presumably more long-term) pattern of outcomes; measures based on several offices are also confounded by the problem of selecting a comparable slate of offices in states with short ballots. This long-term component, in short, must be viewed as an imperfect indicator, which, nonetheless, has more desirable properties than other possibilities.

more immediate forces associated with a particular election, the short-term component, are then measured by taking the difference between this "long term" component and the adjusted election result.² This measure appears to tap the relatively immediate features of the electoral contest—those connected, for example, with incumbency (Tompkins, 1984) or, in this case, with the influence of issues and candidate specific appeals, while excluding the more persistent features of the contest.

For this inquiry, we are also interested in presidential election outcomes. Accordingly, twelve-year backcast moving averages are also computed for statewide presidential election outcomes (based on the percentage of the vote cast for the Democratic candidate), again beginning with the current year's result. The moving average provides a comparable long-term component measurement, and the difference between this long-term component and the actual election result provides a comparable short-term component measure. The separate treatment of these series allows for the possibility that the contests for the two offices are distinctive, even when the long-term pattern of outcomes is considered.

Four basic propositions are raised by these questions:

(1) *Presidential Coattails*. When contenders for governor face the electorate at the same time as the presidential candidates, are the results of the gubernatorial election influenced by the presidential election?³

Apart from the ties to presidential elections, are the results of gubernatorial elections shaped by prevailing national trends? Do the trends affecting the election in one state also tend to affect those in others? As Claggett, Flanigan and Zingale point out, two related issues are raised: Have levels of support "converged" across constituencies (considered in the long term), and are the constituencies responding uniformly to more immediate national political forces? Their distinction evokes another possibility: outcomes, considered across the nation, may vary around a stable national pattern, while these national patterns may, themselves, vary to a greater or lesser extent.

²The adjustment is not incorporated in states with no on-year elections, of course. It is also not used in five states with a small number of on-year elections, where the results of the procedure appear problematic. It is worth noting that it accounts for a noticeable surge in on-year participation but has far less consequence for the measures of electoral results. The procedure is explained more fully in Tompkins (1984, appendix 1; also 1980).

³Strictly speaking, presidential election outcomes may be influenced by the presence of particularly strong (or weak) gubernatorial candidates, as in Ferejohn and Calvert's (1984) assessment of bidirectional causation between president and House candidates—assessment of that more complex problem presupposes significant correlations between the two results (which Morehouse and Sabato argue against) and requires a substantial model of presidential election outcomes at the state level (which has not been developed in the literature at this writing). Accordingly, assessment of this possibility will not be pursued in this analysis.

(2) *Long-Term Convergence.* If convergence is taking place, then the “long term components” of electoral outcomes should vary less over time around a national mean (which reflects the typical outcome for that office).

(3) *National Short-Term Stability.* Whatever happens in the long term, the state-level contests may nonetheless vary in the short term. One question involves the stability of overall results, considered across the nation. If the overall pattern of changes in outcomes revolves around some relatively stable balance between the parties nationally, then state-specific forces are important, but national forces have little impact on the contests, suggesting that these remain in some rough equilibrium. If this pattern is less stable, the average level of change should vary from one election to the next, which would imply that national forces are playing a more important role in shaping the contests within specific states.

(4) *Short-Term Response Uniformity.* If responses to political forces are increasingly nationalized, then the variability of the “short term component” of various constituencies’ electoral outcomes about the national average response should be reduced, reflecting an increasingly uniform pattern of response to the national forces acting on any election. These might reflect national issues, the influence of the national party (or the president), other factors expressed at the national level, or simply more homogeneous election outcomes. On the other hand, if this variability increased, it would suggest that the features of a particular contest, such as candidates’ personal appeals and state-specific issues, had become more important in shaping outcomes.

In the analysis which follows, the 48 contiguous states are taken as the unit of analysis over the period 1948–1986. The two components of the electoral series of Democratic vote shares are examined for the relevant presidential and gubernatorial elections, each measured at the state level (employing data reaching back to 1932, as in earlier reports).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Presidential Coattails?

Are the results of gubernatorial elections influenced by a coincident presidential contest? One approach to this problem employs a calculation of split decisions (e.g. Morehouse, 1981; Sabato, 1983; Wattenberg, 1984, p. 19; note the reference in the latter to Burnham’s work): Where the candidate of one party wins one office, but the candidate of the other party wins another office, it presumably reflects the distinctiveness of the two contests. If state and national party organizations, their images, or voters’ loyalty to them, are

FIGURE 1 A

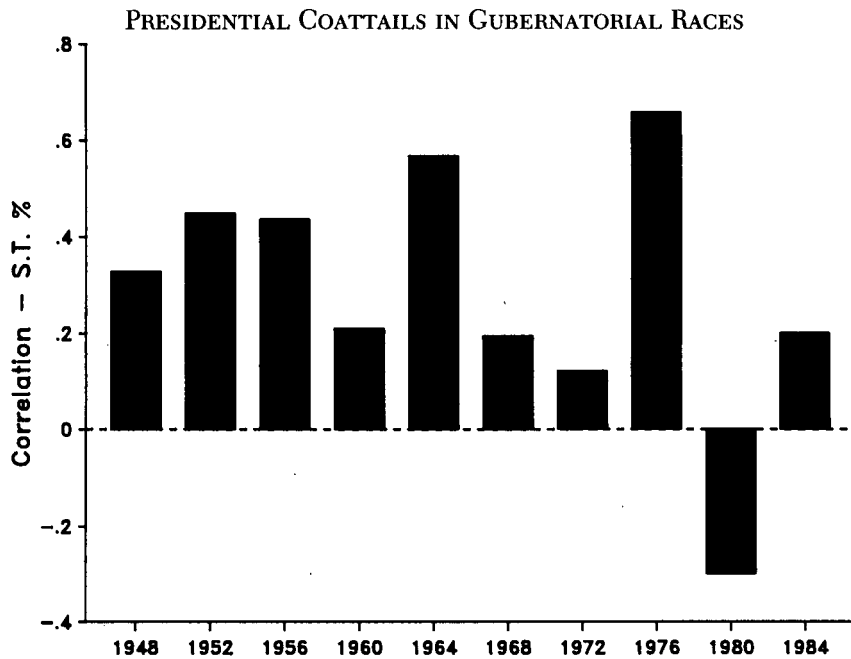
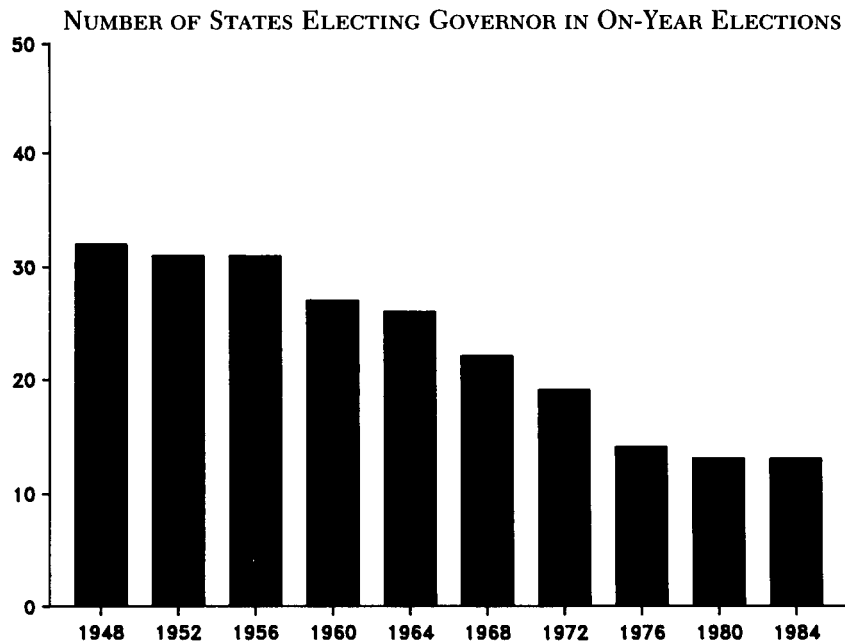


FIGURE 1 B



distinctive objects of evaluation, then this strategy will prove inadequate (since split outcomes may simply reflect these differences). If voter loyalties are closely divided, and races for one office prove more volatile than the other, then a relatively large change at the margin may be required to shift both offices simultaneously.

The method employed here, using the short-term component of the overall result, should provide more telling evidence for the presence of presidential coattails. The simple correlation between the short-term component of the presidential election and the short-term component of the gubernatorial election is $r = .254$ (computed over 227 coincident elections), suggesting that presidential coattails have a modest impact on gubernatorial elections. The distinctive methodology has some impact, but even the unadjusted Democratic vote shares are only modestly correlated ($r = .225$).

In figure 1 A, where the correlation between short-term components of the two series are reported for each election, two features appear noteworthy. One is that there is noteworthy variation in the role played by presidential coattails from one election to another and that these variations appear to have grown in importance in the latter portion of the period under study. The 1964 election, then the 1976 election (with a resurgent Democratic party), are associated with substantial coattail forces. In 1980, a modest "reverse coattail" appears, suggesting that candidate Reagan's appeals (and the incumbent president's lack of appeal) did not carry over to Republican gubernatorial candidates. By 1984, a modest linkage reasserts itself. Apart from this variation, the influence of coattails appears to be diminishing as a general matter—the correlation coefficients of the 1950s (.449 and .436, respectively) have generally declined, except for the dramas of 1964 and 1976. After 1964, only the 1976 election involved a correlation greater than $r = +.3$.

These results are clouded by the impact of gubernatorial term reform. As Figure 1 B indicates, the number of states electing their governor in the "on-year" has declined dramatically—in 1988, only twelve states will be electing their chief executive during the presidential election cycle. Since the pool of states has narrowed substantially, an assessment of the impact of these reforms is undertaken elsewhere (Tompkins, 1987).

Nationalization

If gubernatorial elections are influenced by presidential coattails, then other national forces may also shape the outcomes of a particular contest. The hypotheses of long-term convergence, short-term stability, and short-term response uniformity involve an assessment of the pattern of two components of electoral outcomes across the states.

Long-Term Convergence. If gubernatorial elections are becoming "nationalized," the variability of the pattern of election outcomes will decline.

FIGURE 2 A

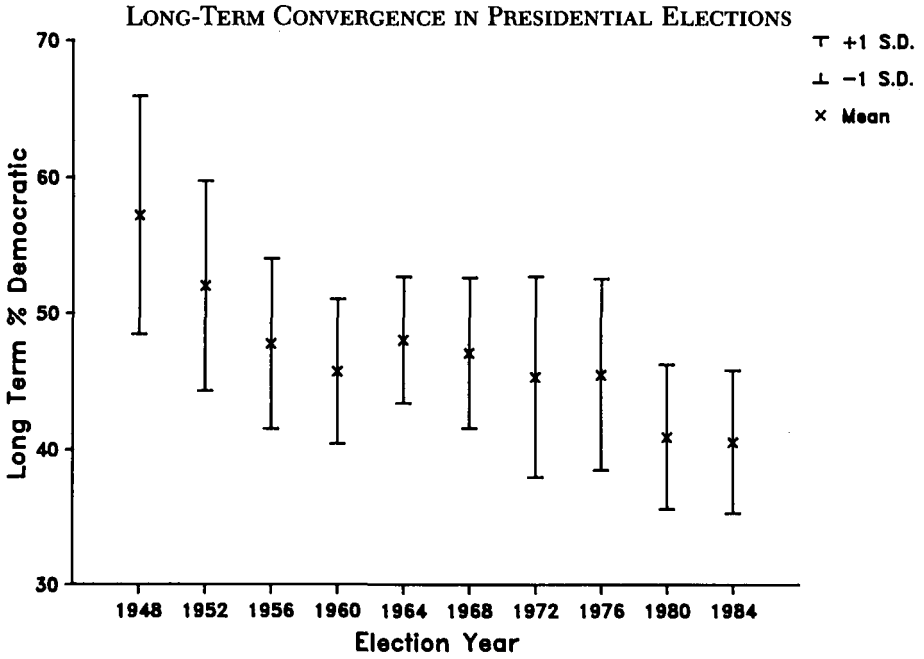
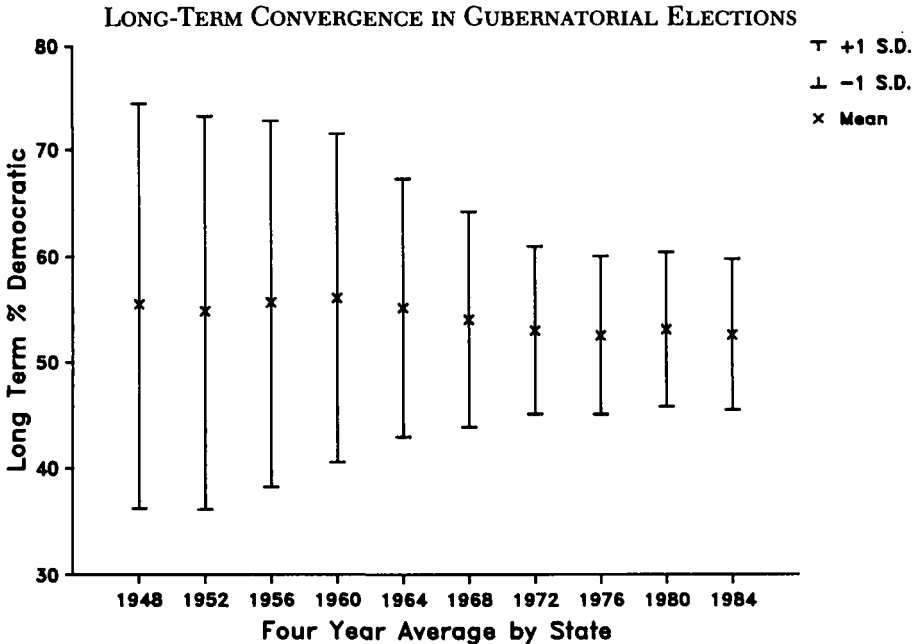


FIGURE 2 B



To assess this proposition, we can examine the value of the interstate mean of the long-term component of the partisan outcomes (which taps the underlying pattern in electoral outcomes) and, more importantly, a measure of dispersion about these means for the period under investigation. If convergence occurs, the standard deviations should decline, reflecting reduced interstate variation around the national pattern.

To assess the possibility of convergence, the average value of the long-term component, and the dispersion (measured by the standard deviation), of *presidential* elections is displayed in figure 2 A. The figure shows the clear decline of Democratic fortunes over the 36 years considered (as the mean state value of the long-term component declines.) It also shows some modest convergence across the states, as the standard deviation of the long-term component by state declines from 8.75% in 1948 to 5.27% in 1984.

In figure 2 B, comparable figures for *gubernatorial* elections are reported (based on the average result over the four years of a presidential term, for each state, thereby focusing on the presidential term and state as the unit of analysis). The figure shows that there has been little change in the average of the long-term component, across the 48 states, but that the dispersion has decreased dramatically, as the standard deviation declines from 19.26% in 1948 to 7.17% in 1984. In short, there has been substantial convergence in gubernatorial election results, in the sense that the differences between the long-term pattern of election results in the states have narrowed substantially, which has, of course, been reported elsewhere.

At the same time, states remain more varied in the pattern of gubernatorial results than they do in the pattern of presidential election results. Moreover, when we correlate the four-year long-term component average for gubernatorial elections with the long-term component for presidential elections, we find that the relationship is nearly zero (for example, for the full four-year period 1980–1983, $r = .10$.)⁴ In short, in important ways, gubernatorial contests remain distinctive from presidential contests.

National Stability. Stability in the average level of short-term change suggests a “nationalization” in the sense of a national equilibrium between the parties, which is expressed in a balance among the changes encountered in specific state-level contests. To assess this, we can examine the national average of the short-term changes associated with each state contest; does the average level of change remain constant (evidencing increasing national stability), or does it vary over time? Since the evidence for this proposition is closely related to the evidence for the uniformity of responses, which involves the variations about these national patterns, the two are considered together, in figures 3 A and 3 B.

⁴It is important to remember that interstate variability has been reduced, however, which means that the interstate correlation is restricted to this limited range and therefore attenuated.

FIGURE 3 A

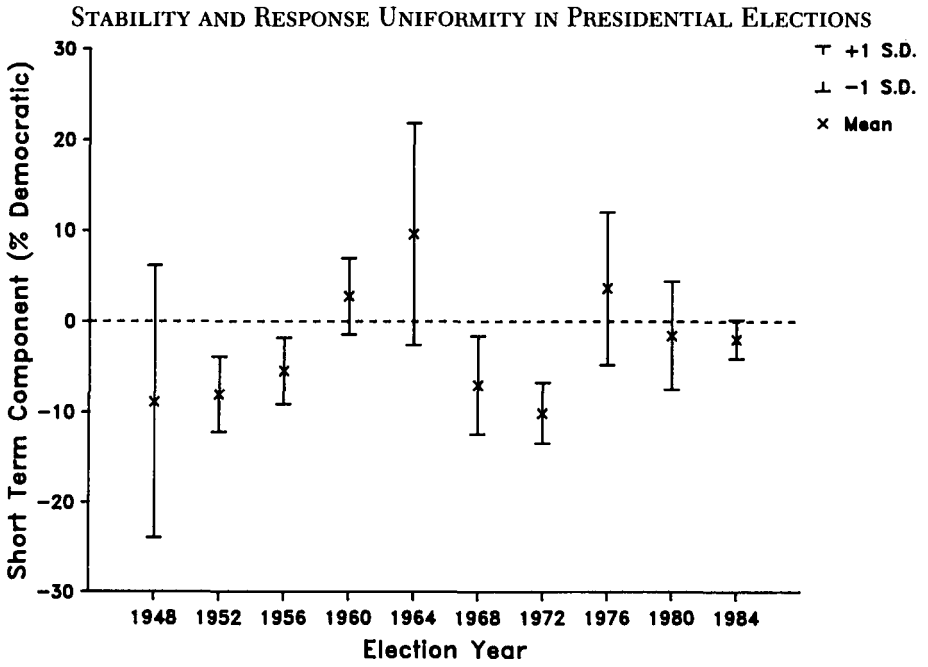
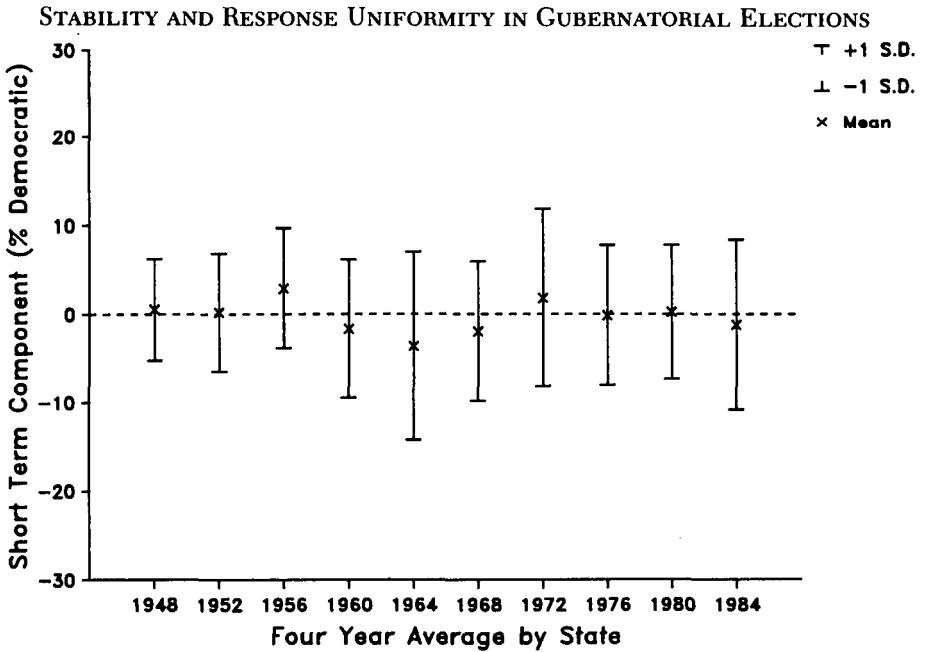


FIGURE 3 B



Short-Term Response Uniformity. Nationalization would also imply that the electoral contests reflected greater uniformity in their immediate response to specific, election-year forces. This uniformity should be reflected in lowered variability in short-term changes across the participating states, from the national average. Accordingly, we can examine variability around the national average of the short-term component of each series as a measure of the uniformity of states' responses to election-specific forces.

In figure 3 A, the average level and the variability of state's short-term responses in *presidential* elections is displayed. Expected swings in the fortunes of the parties appear, favoring the Republicans in 1948 (compared with the earlier elections involving Roosevelt), 1952, 1956, 1968, 1972, 1980 and 1984. The regional variations in their fortunes produce noteworthy increases in variability in 1948, 1964 and 1976. Still, the overall picture is one of relatively modest variability around the central (national) tendency. In addition, the average level of short-term change in the states has diminished substantially in the last three elections (down to -1.60% in 1980 and -2% in 1984, lower than in any election from 1948–1972). This suggests greater stability, and a continuing pattern of relatively uniform responses to these national elections (interrupted in some noteworthy cases). Nonetheless, this procedure is not directly comparable to evidence based on other offices, cast over longer time periods (e.g. Claggett, Flanigan and Zingale, 1984).

Figure 3 B displays the average level and the variability of the four-year average (computed within a presidential term) for each state's gubernatorial election. Two quite distinctive patterns appear: the average of these short term components is nearly zero⁵ (implying that the factors which would be attributable to national level but immediate electoral forces have little overall impact on gubernatorial elections). On the other hand, the variability of these short-term forces in gubernatorial elections is growing. It is, to be sure, at its peak in 1964 and 1972, but it is generally greater in recent years than it was decades ago. In short, gubernatorial election outcomes are increasingly subject to state-level forces, but they also reflect a relatively stable balance between the parties considered across the nation.

Further, presidential elections reflect a less stable balance between the parties across the nation than do gubernatorial contests, but short-term results vary more than the presidential results from state to state. For example, for 1980–1983, the standard deviation of presidential results (5.94%) is smaller than the gubernatorial results (7.61%), and in the 1984–1986 period, the difference grows (presidential S.D. = 2.14%; Gubernatorial S.D. = 9.64%).

⁵ It is largest in 1964, at -3.65% , a level smaller (in absolute value) than the average level for presidential elections in all years save for 1960, 1980, 1984, and just barely larger than the value for the 1976 presidential contest (3.63%). In five terms, the average gubernatorial change is smaller than it is in any presidential case, and in three more, the gubernatorial average is smaller in absolute value than it is in all but one presidential case.

THE SALIENCE OF THE GUBERNATORIAL OFFICE

The preceding propositions all have implications for our perspective on the gubernatorial office more generally. Sabato argues that the candidates for the office are increasingly capable and experienced, while I have argued that most gubernatorial term reform efforts have been aimed at separating the state's chief executive from the national arena (by moving elections to the off year) and "buffering" the incumbent to some degree (Tompkins, 1987). These arguments suggest that the salience of the office to the electorate should have grown as a result. Has it?

We have seen that the influence of presidential coattails appears to have declined in the modern era. The increasing separation of gubernatorial elections may, however, have played some role in this decline.

Gubernatorial contests have converged around a pattern of relatively close national competition. The balance continues to favor Democratic candidates, modestly, but the range of variation is noticeably diminished. The balance in presidential contests has shifted in favor of Republican candidates, but the decline in variation is less clear and dramatic. The pattern of change remains relatively constant for gubernatorial contests, but it continues to vary for state presidential contests. On the other hand, responses to gubernatorial contests appear to have become less uniform, while presidential contests vary in the uniformity of their responses in specific years (although a case can be made for greater uniformity, interrupted by unusual elections). The fact that Democratic party fortunes have remained strong at the gubernatorial level, resisting the increases in support for Republican presidential candidates, provides further evidence that the gubernatorial contest has been more completely isolated from national elections.

In a variety of respects, the electorate voting for governor must be viewed as responding differently from the electorate voting for president. It is apparent that we are slow in gathering evidence which would allow us to understand these differences better and to assess their implications.

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