The Nationalization of Sub-presidential Elections: Retrospective Voting & the Salience of Presidential Heuristics

By Eli Mckown-Dawson

Eli Mckown-Dawson is a second-year student double majoring in Political Science and Philosophy with certificates in U.S Intelligence Studies and Global Citizenship. Eli works as a public policy researcher with the DeVoe L. Moore Center and a research assistant with the LeRoy Collins Institute. His research interests center on public opinion, survey methodology, election science, and political behavior. He has presented at multiple local and statewide conferences and recently discussed a co-authored paper on ranked choice voting at the 2022 APSA State Politics and Policy Conference. Beyond his research, Eli serves as a Fellow with the Institute of Politics at FSU, a member of the Research-Intensive Bachelor's Certificate Program, and President of the Pre-Law Society at FSU. Eli's work has also been published in nonacademic spaces, such as the Tallahassee Democrat.

Abstract

American democracy is a complex system that operates across multiple federated levels. This structure presents a challenge to the voting public: how should they judge the performance of elected officials? Vote choice in presidential elections is better understood than in less visible down-ballot races, a discrepancy this paper attempts to rectify by ascertaining how voters retrospectively evaluate candidates in senatorial and gubernatorial elections.

Scholars have traditionally subscribed to a "federalist" theory of subpresidential vote choice in which voters consider the economic conditions of their state when choosing a governor but focus on presidential performance in senatorial races. In contrast, I expect to observe that in both cases, voters rely far more heavily on the heuristic of presidential approval due to the increasing nationalization of subpresidential elections.

I utilize linear probability regression to isolate the impact of retrospective economic evaluations and presidential approval on senatorial and gubernatorial elections in 2006. My results indicate that presidential approval heavily affected vote choice in both races while retrospective economic evaluations were far less salient. The findings present a substantial contribution to the literature on subpresidential vote choice, and the absence of federalized retrospective voting has implications concerning voters' ability to hold elected officials accountable.

Introduction

American democracy is a complex and multifaceted system that operates across multiple layers of government, each possessing separate but often intersecting powers. The national and state party organizations link these federalized levels of government and provide a degree of interconnectedness omitted from the Constitution alone. One challenge this system presents to the voting public is assigning responsibility to political candidates at each level of government. In other words, how do voters judge whether an incumbent is performing adequately? Vote choice in presidential elections is better understood than in less visible down-ballot races, thus, this paper attempts to rectify this discrepancy by ascertaining how voters retrospectively evaluate candidates in senatorial and gubernatorial elections.

My analysis applies two competing theories of subpresidential vote choice to each race type. First, the *national referendum* hypothesis posits that voters use subpresidential elections to express their approval or disapproval of the sitting president (Simon, Ostrom, and Marra, 1991, p. 1188). Second, the *economic retrospective* hypothesis suggests that voters judge incumbent fitness based on recent economic performance (Fiorina, 1981, p. 427). The purpose of my analysis is twofold. First, to assess the extent to which these theories drove vote choice in the 2006 election. Second, to ascertain whether reliance on the heuristic of presidential approval increased in 2006—relative to previous elections—for both gubernatorial and senatorial races.

Political scientists such as Robert Stein, Lonna Atkeson, and Randal Partin have posited a "federalist" theory of subpresidential vote choice, whereby voters understand the obligations of elected officials at each level of government and can assign responsibility accordingly (Stein, 1990, p. 32; Atkeson and Partin, 1995, p. 105). If these expectations hold, voters will hold senatorial candidates functionally responsible for presidential performance, while assessing gubernatorial incumbents based on the performance of the state economy. Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin found that news coverage of governors is most often linked with statewide concerns, while similar stories about senators are tied more closely to national issues and the president (1984, pp. 1235-1239). Stephen Elkin, however, identified substantial overlap between the performance of the state and national economy, thereby reducing the liability of state officials for the economic performance of their respective states (Elkin, 1984, p. 11). Consistent with their federalist interpretation, Lonna Atkeson and Randall Partin found that voters tend to consider the economic conditions of their state when choosing a governor but focus on presidential performance in senatorial races. Thus, voters' retrospective evaluative criteria depend on the race in which they are participating (1995, p. 105).

However, I hypothesize that—due to increased polarization and nationalization between 1995 and 2006—these findings will not hold. The increasing nationalization of subpresidential elections may result in higher reliance on the heuristic of presidential approval, with less attention paid to economic conditions. Polarization has also made partisan heuristics more useful, as an elected official's party label tells us more today about their issue positions and ideology than it did twenty years ago due to increased partisan alignment (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2005, p. 51; Jochim and Jones, 2013, p. 362). Studies conducted by Marc Hetherington and Adam Brown—after Atkeson and Partin's 1995 paper—provide evidence that voters have begun to focus on partisan heuristics, often at the expense of other retrospective evaluations. For instance, Hetherington found that increased exposure to media causes voters to rely less on economic evaluations (1996, p. 391). Moreover, voters are increasingly likely to utilize partisan heuristics when voting in subpresidential elections due to uncertainty surrounding the assignment of responsibility for state economic performance (Brown, 2010, p. 606).

To assess these hypotheses, I utilized data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and found strong support for my *nationalization* hypothesis. Presidential approval heavily affected vote choice both in senatorial and gubernatorial elections, while retrospective economic evaluations were less salient. I arrived at these results by using linear probability regression to assess—controlling for party identification and political ideology—how state and national economic evaluations, as well as presidential approval, affect vote choice in the 2006 election. Substantively, evaluations of the president had a more significant effect than all other variables included in the model. Thus, I find that both election types are consistent with a top-down view of politics, with candidates' fortunes linked to retrospective evaluations of the sitting president.

Theory and Hypothesis

Theories of subpresidential vote choice have coalesced around instrumental explanations, whereby voters choose candidates based on an expected impact on government policy (Stein, 1990, p. 30; Atkeson and Partin, 1995, p. 99; Fiorina 1981, p. 427). Robert Stein posits a so-called “federalist” theory of vote choice to explain how voters make these decisions. He asserts that voters understand the different responsibilities of each level of government and alter their performance assessments to reflect this understanding (Stein, 1990, p. 32). Two competing theories of retrospective voting—the national referendum and state economic hypotheses—heavily influence this work and explain how voters assess elected officials at different levels of government. The *national referendum* hypothesis—as espoused by Dennis Simon and Robin Marra—posits that sub-presidential elections serve as referenda on the incumbent president. Voters hold the president responsible for the national economy and subsequently cast senatorial votes in line with their presidential preference (Simon, 1989, p. 286). Voters, therefore, express their approval or disapproval of the incumbent administration through their down-ballot decisions (Simon, Ostrom, and Marra, 1991, p. 1188). Previously, evidence supporting this theory came primarily from studies of congressional elections (Abramowitz and Segal, 1986, p. 439). However, studies conducted by Simon, Carsey, and Wright show the same effect for gubernatorial elections, a finding contrary to a federalist interpretation of vote choice (Simon, 1989, p. 286; Carsey and Wright, 1998, p. 994).

The competing theory of vote choice in down-ballot elections is *state economic retrospective voting*, as espoused by Key (1966) and Morris Fiorina (1981, p. 427). This theory also assumes a retrospective voter, but one whose vote choice depends on their view of the economy and whether they feel financially better or worse off under the incumbent administration. Previously, this theory garnered a great deal of support at the national level, but sub-national applicability remains uncertain. Some findings support the theory at the state level (Born 1986, p. 600), but studies by Erikson, Hibbing, and Alford have either no effect on congressional elections or that the effect applies only to incumbent politicians due to their direct connection to economic policy (Erikson, 1990, p. 373; Hibbing and Alford, 1981, p. 436).

At the state level, past theories on economic retrospective voting ran counter to Atkeson and Partin's hypothesized difference in assigned responsibility. Generally, economic conditions were thought to matter, but only at the national level. It was, however, observed that state-level incumbents of the president's party were rewarded or punished based on national economic conditions leading up to the election (Stein, 1990, p. 51). This view was supported by Stephen Elkin, who maintained that state and national economies are inexorably linked, and as such, state officials are unaccountable for economic performance in their respective states (Elkin, 1984, p. 11). On the other hand, Atkeson and Partin pointed to the work of Dennis Grady and M. K. Clarke to support their hypothesis. Both scholars found that states take on an active role in economic development by encouraging business development through tax incentives and affordable living conditions (Atkeson and Partin, 1995, p. 100). Another contemporary study that supported Atkeson and Partin's theory at both the gubernatorial and senatorial levels was an analysis of news stories by Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin. They found that stories about governors most often focus on state-level concerns, while similar stories about senators are tied more closely to national issues and the president (Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin, 1984, pp. 1235-1239). Overall, both theories of retrospective voting were relatively widespread, but there was substantial debate about which sector of the economy voters evaluated for each race type and whether presidential approval mattered for gubernatorial elections.

As mentioned above, Atkeson and Partin hypothesized that voters use different retrospective frameworks when evaluating senatorial and gubernatorial candidates. They observed a strong national referendum effect in Senate races, while economic evaluations remained insignificant. Candidates from the president's party fared better when approval of the sitting president was higher, and vice versa (Atkeson and Partin, 1995, p. 105). This effect applied both to incumbents and challengers, indicating that previous support of the president's agenda may be unnecessary for referendum voting to occur. Atkeson and Partin observed the inverse for gubernatorial elections, in which prospective governors were held responsible for the health of their state's economy but not approval of the sitting president (Atkeson and Partin, 1995, pp. 103-104). Unlike senatorial retrospective voting, this effect only applied to incumbent candidates, as voters could not hold candidates responsible for the economic conditions of their state before entering office. Broadly, these results supported their hypothesis and ran counter to some of the prevailing theories of the time.

For example, while Simon, Ostrom, and Marra found evidence of referendum voting, they asserted that it applied in both senatorial and gubernatorial races (1991, p. 286). However, Atkeson and Partin found that it only appeared in Senate races and lacked a comparable effect on gubernatorial elections (1995, p. 105). Their evidence of economic voting in gubernatorial races also contradicted most contemporary theories. They found a possible in-party accentuation of economic voting, as governors of the sitting president's party were punished and rewarded more substantially for shifts in perceived economic conditions (Atkeson and Partin, 1995, p. 104). Their findings comport with a federalist interpretation of both offices, with governors and senators evaluated based on different criteria despite identical constituencies. They refer to this evaluative shift as a "functional responsibility" that candidates hold for the duties assigned to their respective offices (Atkeson and Partin, 1995, p. 100).

Since the publication of Atkeson and Partin's study in 1995, studies exploring the factors that affect subnational vote choice, have returned varying results. For instance, in 1996, Marc J. Hetherington used data from the 1992 presidential election to assess how media coverage shaped voters' national economic evaluations (Hetherington, 1996, p. 372). That election had particularly negative media coverage of the economy, and Hetherington theorized that this would affect voting behavior. He found a negative correlation between media consumption and retrospective economic assessments and that these evaluations were significantly related to vote choice (Hetherington, 1996, p. 391). In 2010, Adam R. Brown found that in the 2006 election, "voters actually divide responsibility for economic conditions in a partisan manner, preferring to blame officials from the opposing party when problems arise" (Brown, 2010, p. 605). This finding runs counter to previous theories—including that of Atkeson and Partin—in which voters divide policy blame based on functional policy responsibility. Brown posited that because economic responsibility is uncertain, voters rely on partisan heuristics to make electoral decisions.

Similarly, Morris Fiorina, Samuel Abrams, and Jeremy Pope explored the status of retrospective voting and its effect on the 2000 presidential election. They found that the cause of

Al Gore's underwhelming performance was a failure to receive the usual amount of credit for the performance of the previous administration. Specifically, they found the weaker relationship between vote share and retrospective economic evaluations resulted in an 8 percentage point difference compared to the 1988 election (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2003, p. 24). However, when correcting for Gore's campaign mistakes, they found that he received the same amount of retrospective credit as Bush did in 1988. Predictions failed because external factors worked against these fundamental issues and muted their apparent effects, not because retrospective voting was unimportant (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2003, p. 24). In other words, voters' heightened attunement to national campaigns results in comparatively less focus on outside factors—like the economy—and reduced differentiation of how voters behave in subnational elections.

Furthermore, polarization compounds this national focus and makes presidential politics paramount. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal assert that the parties in Congress have polarized significantly. They arrive at this conclusion by measuring congressional roll call votes to show that Democrats and Republicans have become more ideologically separated and internally homogenous over time (2005, p. 13). Thus, we can predict how congressional Democrats and Republicans will vote on most bills to an extent impossible in previous decades (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2005, p. 51). A candidate's party identification, therefore, sends a clearer message about how they will behave if elected than it would have in previous decades. Voters can use this information to judge how likely the candidate is to support the president's agenda (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2005, p. 51). Subpresidential elections can, therefore, be used to bolster the president, which may impact the weight voters give to partisan considerations.

Thus, I hypothesize that a federalist interpretation of vote choice will not hold in the 2006 election. Specifically, we will see a greater emphasis on retrospective presidential voting at both the senatorial and gubernatorial levels, while the salience of economic conditions will decrease due to nationalization and polarization (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2005, p. 51; Hetherington, 1996, p. 372). Statewide elections have experienced substantial nationalization since the publication of Atkeson and Partin's 1995 paper, owing in large part to both increased partisan polarization and the proliferation of digital media. As seen in Hetherington's findings, national media coverage can significantly sway vote choice (1996, p. 391). And because accurately assigning economic responsibility may be impossible, voters—as Brown argues—may instead look toward partisan ties (2010, p. 605). These studies, coupled with Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope's findings that nationally focused elections draw attention away from the economy, support the theory that presidential approval is now voters' primary electoral heuristic in subpresidential elections. I argue that this holds for both senators and governors, despite Atkeson and Partin's findings to the contrary for the latter office.

Data & Methods

Data were drawn from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)—a survey that assesses public opinion on Congress—to assess retrospective voting in senatorial and gubernatorial elections. The survey sampled from all 50 states, but my analysis excludes Nebraska and Connecticut as both lacked a candidate from one of the major parties in 2006. To collect this data, a common content survey consisting of approximately 120 questions was administered to 36,500 respondents, thus enabling accurate measurement of the distribution of political attitudes and preferences within states and congressional districts. A large number of respondents also allows for the precise measurement of regression coefficients.

The aforementioned sample was divided into three strata: Registered and Unregistered Voters, State Size, and Competitive and Uncompetitive Congressional Districts. Stratification ensures the attainment of adequately representative statewide samples and the ability to measure differences between competitive and uncompetitive races. Sample matching was utilized to best approximate a true random sample, and probability weights were applied during my analyses to ensure generalizability. 2006 was a midterm year—meaning no presidential election took place—in which George W. Bush was president. Thus, the highest-profile elections were congressional and gubernatorial (Warner, 2018, p. 661). During this time, voters observed a relatively healthy economy, as the change in real disposable income per capita was a positive 4.98%, and National unemployment decreased from 5.3% in 2005 to 4.4% in 2006 (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2021).

The dependent variable utilized in this study is respondent vote choice for the office in question: either Senator or Governor. It is a dichotomous variable where 0 represents a choice of Democrat and 1 represents Republican. The binary nature of this measure precludes the usage of standard ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, and for ease of interpretation, the dependent variable was assessed using linear probability regression. Logistic regression was used to validate results, and no relevant differences in statistical significance were present between the two models. Identical models were applied to both the senatorial and gubernatorial races, thus allowing the national referendum and state economic voting hypotheses to compete across each race. I expected to find significant evidence of voters behaving retrospectively. However, departing from previous studies, I predicted that national referendum voting would be the driving evaluative in both race types.

Presidential approval is included as an independent variable in the model to test the national referenda theory. The concept was operationalized using a four-point scale, on which respondents rated their approval of the president. A value of 1 represents strong disapproval of the sitting president, and 4 represents strong approval. Evaluations of the state and national economy are included in the model to test the economic retrospective voting theory and evaluate the level at which this retrospection occurs. I represent both variables using five-point scales, in which 1 indicates that the respondent thinks the economy has become "much worse" and 5 indicates it has become "much better." A value of 3 indicates a respondent has rated the economy "about the same." These three variables—presidential approval, state economic conditions, and national economic conditions—were used to assess how voters assign responsibility in both senatorial and gubernatorial elections. I expected to observe a more substantial effect from presidential approval than either economic variable.

In addition to the independent variables of primary interest—presidential approval, state economic evaluations, and national economic evaluations—the model includes variables that capture the party identification and political ideology of respondents as "controls." Their purpose is to separate the effects of partisan perception from economic and presidential performance evaluations. Given the outsized sway these factors hold over vote choice, their inclusion is necessary to avoid observing a spurious relationship. Party identification—whether a respondent identifies with the Democratic or Republican party—is measured on a seven-point scale. A respondent's self-placement of 1 indicates strong Republican affiliation, while 7 indicates strong Democratic affiliation. The ideology variable—measuring whether a respondent identifies as a conservative or liberal—was created from a five-point scale on which respondents to the 2006 CES placed themselves to indicate their political ideology. A value of 1 indicates "very conservative” self-placement, while a value of 5 indicates “very liberal” self-placement. Both scales are widely utilized in research on vote choice, as party identification and ideology are considered core political predispositions (Chen and Goren, 2016, p. 704).

As mentioned above, I use a linear probability model to assess the relationship between vote choice and both economic and referenda retrospective voting. The statistical model—based upon Atkeson and Partin’s 1995 model and run on Stata 17—takes the following shape:

$$\text{VoteChoice}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{StateEconomicEvaluations}_i + \beta_2\text{NationalEconomicEvaluations}_i + \beta_3\text{PresidentialApproval}_i + \beta_4\text{PartyIdentification}_i + \beta_5\text{Ideology}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Regression coefficients are interpreted such that they equal the change in the probability that our dependent variable (vote choice) equals 1 (Republican) for a one-unit change in the independent variable of interest, holding all else constant. The coefficients on all independent variables should be interpreted in this way, the only difference being the number of scale points present in each variable. For instance, presidential approval is measured on a four-point scale, economic evaluations and ideology on a five-point, and party identification on a seven-point. Thus, the impact of a one-unit change differs slightly. This interpretation holds for both dependent variables (senatorial and gubernatorial vote choice) as each is scaled from 0 to 1.

Results

The results of my analysis are presented in Table 1 which contains the linear probability regression coefficients for contested Senate races in 2006, and Table 2 which contains the same results from gubernatorial elections held that same year. Each table has three rows: one for races with a Democratic (the out party) incumbent, the second for a Republican (the president’s party) incumbent, and the third for open-seat races. I expected to find a strong and statistically significant relationship between presidential approval and vote choice for both senatorial and gubernatorial elections. I did not anticipate a strong relationship between views on the economy and vote choice regardless of race type and incumbent.

Table 1. *Linear Probability Regression Model of Vote Choice for the Republican Candidate in Senate Races for 2006 (N=17,427)*

Independent Variables	Democratic Incumbent Senator	Republican Incumbent Senator	Open race
State economic conditions	-0.017***	0.008	0.007
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.011)
National economic evaluations	0.054***	0.039***	0.010
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.011)
Presidential approval	0.165***	0.180***	0.184***
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.016)
Party identification	-0.058***	-0.058***	-0.075***
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.008)
Ideology	-0.061***	-0.051***	-0.064***
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.012)
Constant	0.364	0.334	0.522
	(0.028)	(0.034)	(0.071)
N	9,089	6,909	1,428
R-squared	0.686	0.708	0.758

* $P < 0.05$. ** $P < 0.01$. *** $P < 0.001$. Two-tailed.

The results from the analysis of 2006 senatorial races support my nationalization hypothesis and support a federalized interpretation of vote choice, as national considerations primarily drive senatorial vote choice. Both economic retrospective variables are statistically significant—$p < 0.001$—across most non-open races, thus, we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no effect. However, their average apparent effect is relatively low. The high degree of statistical significance most likely stems from the use of a large data set and is, therefore, not caused by either variable. My control variables of party identification and ideology were, as expected, statistically significant predictors of vote choice. More importantly, when holding these factors constant, presidential approval has both a statistically ($p < 0.001$) and substantively significant effect across all race types.

In this model, state economic conditions remain statistically insignificant for races with Republican incumbents and open-seat elections, which may indicate that voters are more likely to utilize this heuristic when evaluating a member of the president's out-party. Although statistically significant for races with Democratic incumbents, these considerations minimally affect respondent vote choice. As expected, Republican candidates benefit from positive evaluations of the state economy when the incumbent is Republican or during open races; these evaluations only benefit Democratic incumbents. National considerations were salient only for non-open seat races. The Republican candidate benefits from positive evaluations of the national economy regardless of incumbency status, but substantively, these considerations have little effect on vote choice. For example, in Senate races with a Democratic incumbent, a respondent's evaluation of the national economy changing from "much worse" to "much better" increases the probability they will vote for the Republican candidate by only 0.216. This effect is relatively insubstantial, yet the impact on other race types is even less significant. When considering state economic evaluations, the change is virtually nonexistent. National economic evaluations appear to be more salient for senatorial races, but in either case, the effect of economic retrospective voting is insignificant.

The most substantial influence on senatorial vote choice comes from presidential approval. As with the majority of my explanatory variables, presidential approval is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The average apparent effect is, however, considerably higher than even party identification or ideology. For every one point higher on the four-point scale respondents rate the president, the probability they vote for the Republican candidate increases by between 0.165 and 0.184, depending on the incumbent party. Thus, a respondent who "strongly approves of the President has between a 0.495 to 0.552 higher probability of voting for the Republican candidate than a respondent who "strongly disapproves" of the President. Note that this is our observed effect even while holding economic evaluations, party identification, and ideology constant. The effect is larger when the incumbent is a Republican (0.180) than when they are a Democrat (0.165), indicating that voters may be more willing to reward a candidate from the president's party than decline to support one from the out party. Alternatively, this could be due to a compound effect of being both a member of the president's party and an incumbent. The effect was largest (0.184) in open-seat races, suggesting that when voters lack a record to evaluate, they rely more heavily on the heuristic of presidential approval.

Table 2. *Linear Probability Regression Model of Vote Choice for the Republican Candidate in Gubernatorial Races for 2006 (N=18,521)*

Independent Variables	Democratic Incumbent Governor	Republican Incumbent Governor	Open race
State economic conditions	-0.056***	0.042***	0.012*
	(0.004)	(0.007)	(0.005)
National economic evaluations	0.069***	0.018*	0.034***
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)
Presidential approval	0.134***	0.112***	0.180***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Party identification	-0.062***	-0.080***	-0.053***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Ideology	-0.059***	-0.052***	-0.062***
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)
Constant	0.496	0.597	0.320
	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.038)
N	6,399	6,592	5,530
R-squared	0.631	0.615	0.696

* $P < 0.05$. ** $P < 0.01$. *** $P < .001$. Two-tailed.

The results from a test of the same hypotheses on gubernatorial elections (presented in Table 2) offer similar conclusions. Both economic retrospective variables are statistically significant (either $p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.001$) regardless of the incumbent party, and therefore, the null hypothesis of no effect cannot be rejected. But—as in senatorial races—their average apparent effect is not particularly substantial, a significant departure from a federalist interpretation. Party identification and ideology were also statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Notably, the effect of presidential approval on vote choice was almost as strong as in senatorial elections, in addition to being highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This effect holds across all race types and supports the nationalization hypothesis, as vote choice in a state-level race is primarily correlated with a national consideration.

Consistent with the aforementioned federalist interpretations of vote choice, state economic conditions have a larger impact on gubernatorial elections, compared to the results from senatorial elections presented in Table 1. This also holds for national economic conditions, and in races with a Democratic incumbent or no incumbent, this criterion matters more than state evaluations. Again, the Republican candidate benefits from positive evaluations of the national economy across all race types. However, these effects fail to translate to substantive significance. Concerning the state economic evaluations variable, a positive effect—a higher probability of voting for the Republican candidate—is observed when the incumbent is Republican or during open races, while the effect is negative when the incumbent is a Democrat. Therefore, when a respondent's evaluation of the state economy changes from "much worse" to "much better" when the incumbent is a Democrat, the probability they will support the Republican candidate decreases by 0.224.

In the most substantial departure from a federalist interpretation, presidential approval is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and affects vote choice more than party identification, ideology, and both retrospective evaluations of the economy. The effect is lower than in senatorial races, but it still exceeds that of economic evaluations. The probability that a respondent votes for the Republican candidate increases by between 0.112 and 0.180 for every one point higher they rate President Bush (the incumbent in 2006). Therefore, a respondent who "strongly approves" of the President has between a 0.336 to 0.540 higher probability of voting for the Republican candidate than a respondent who "strongly disapproves" of the President. The effect is higher when the incumbent is a Democrat (0.134) than a Republican (0.112), the opposite of what was observed in senatorial races. However, the effect was still largest in open-seat races (0.180), lending further credence to the assertion that heuristic use of presidential approval increases when voters lack a record to evaluate.

Discussion

This analysis of vote choice in the 2006 midterm election supports my initial hypothesis and provides several ancillary findings. These results indicate a strong national referendum effect in both race types, whereby presidential approval is the primary heuristic utilized when selecting both senatorial and gubernatorial candidates. As the popularity of the sitting president improves, so too do the electoral fortunes of members of his or her party. This finding holds across all race types, regardless of incumbency status, but appears to be stronger in senatorial races. Conversely, while economic conditions were almost always statistically significant, their average apparent effect was relatively low. In other words, we can be confident that these evaluations affect vote choice, but that effect appears to be insubstantial. While more impactful in gubernatorial races, the effect of presidential evaluations consistently dwarfs economic considerations. Overall, these results indicate that the success of both gubernatorial and senatorial candidates is tied more closely to referenda on the president than to retrospective economic evaluations. This finding comports with my initial hypothesis and may indicate a substantial nationalization of elections.

These findings contrast with those of Atkeson and Partin, who observed that "the electorate holds candidates 'functionally responsible' for the agenda assigned to their respective offices" (Atkeson and Partin, 1995, p. 106). I hypothesize that this discrepancy is due to the nationalization of statewide elections that have taken place since 1995. As national politics and policies have taken center stage, evaluations based on these conditions appear to have become more salient in voters' minds. This mechanism is consistent with the growing body of literature published since 1995 on the nationalization of electoral politics. Voters are increasingly likely to utilize partisan heuristics across all election types (Brown, 2010, p. 605). Additionally, exposure to media coverage has been found to negatively correlate with economic retrospective voting (Hetherington, 1996, p. 391). Thus, as voters are exposed to more media coverage of elections, their propensity to rely on economic evaluations decreases; this has occurred concurrently with their increased reliance on presidential approval because of nationalized elections and partisan motivated reasoning (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope, 2003, p. 24).

Beyond this overall shift in retrospective evaluations, I observed multiple secondary discrepancies between this study and previous work in the field. Atkeson and Partin found only state economic evaluations to be a statistically significant predictor of gubernatorial vote choice, and the coefficients on this variable were larger than those of national economic evaluations. This finding appears to have changed. Now, not only are both statistically significant—in large part due to the size of my data set—but national evaluations are more influential than state evaluations in most gubernatorial races. This finding may be yet another indicator of how nationalized these elections have become. Not only is presidential approval the most salient factor, but the national economy takes precedence over that of the state, even when voting for an office that plays no role in shaping national economic policy. I have also found that presidential approval has the most substantial impact on open seat races for both senatorial and gubernatorial elections. This seems to indicate that without a record to observe, voters rely more heavily on the heuristic of presidential approval.

Across most elections, I observe the opposite effect with retrospective economic evaluations, whereby their impact decreases in open-seat races. It appears that when given less information, voters do not increase reliance on heuristics equally, and instead, double down on referendum voting. Party identification also appears to impact the extent to which presidential approval affects vote choice. The results from senatorial races indicate that an increase in presidential approval is associated with a larger increase in the probability of voting Republican when the incumbent is a Republican (Hibbing and Alford, 1981, p. 436). This finding would seem to suggest that voters prefer to reward members of the president's party rather than oppose the out-party. However, the opposite was true for gubernatorial elections, in which presidential approval was more impactful when there was a Democratic incumbent. Without a more thorough investigation, it is difficult to hypothesize why this difference exists.

These findings provide strong evidence of a significant nationalization of statewide elections and possible sorting between the two parties from 1995 to 2006. The analyses comport with broader national trends that have only increased since 2006 and have significant implications concerning political accountability and predictive polling. Substantial expansions in mass media communication and an increasingly polarized population heavily increase the salience of national evaluative factors such as presidential approval. In turn, this appears to have decreased the importance of economic retrospective voting. This shift may result in lower levels of accountability for state officials whose fortunes are tightly linked to the sitting president. Because the president now functions as the figurehead of both the national and state party organizations, voters may find it more difficult to effectively judge the performance of state-level officials. These trends—if they continue to hold—represent a substantial shift in how voters evaluate subpresidential elections. Researchers and pollsters alike should be aware that presidential approval is now the primary metric by which voters judge candidates, regardless of whether they serve in the U.S Senate or are chief executives in their own right.

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