Article

Electoral Career Movements and the Flow of Political Power in the American Federal System

State Politics & Policy Quarterly
2014, Vol. 14(1) 72–89

DOI: 10.1177/1532440013520244
sppq.sagepub.com
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Abstract

I offer a novel way of documenting the flow of power between the state and federal governments. Rather than look at programs or expenditures, I examine the behavior of elected officials. Assuming that ambitious politicians gravitate toward the locus of political power, I track the flow of elected officials in the American federal system. Specifically, I look at the career paths of more than 12,000 individuals who served in the U.S. Congress between 1789 and 2012. By analyzing the movement of elected officials between the state and federal levels, I confirm the prevailing story line on the evolution of American federalism while generating a measure that can be used to assess the relative distribution of power in the system across time.

Keywords

federal/state, federalism, American political development, legislative behavior, legislative politics, governors, executive politics, elections, political behavior

The contours of the flow of political power in the American federal system are well understood. It is widely agreed that a more or less equitable distribution between the states and the federal government prevailed until the time of the Civil War. Following that conflict's conclusion, power began to stream to the federal level, with a dramatic centralization occurring during the New Deal era. In more recent decades, the current has partially reversed, with evidence of authority returning to the state level in several

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policy areas. Most scholars, however, would argue that the federal government continues to be the relationship's dominant partner.

My goal in this analysis is not to challenge the prevailing characterization of American federalism's evolution. Instead, it is to offer a novel way of documenting, or more ambitiously, measuring, the flow of power between the two levels. Extant studies of the federal system's historical development are of two basic sorts. The first tracks programmatic changes, focusing on the shifting locus of governmental authority (e.g., Riker 1964, 81–84). Such examinations tend to be rich in detail but analytically impressionistic. The second approach examines the distribution of government expenditures between the two levels (e.g., Prescott 1955). These studies generate important insights, but they run into data limitations in the earliest decades. Thus, our ability to compare state and federal spending across different federal eras is problematic.

Rather than look at programs or expenditures, I take an indirect approach by examining the behavior of elected officials. Operating from an assumption that ambitious politicians gravitate toward the locus of political power, I track the flow of elected officials in the American federal system. Specifically, I look at the career paths of more than 12,000 individuals who served in the U.S. Congress between 1789 and 2012. By analyzing the movement of elected officials between the state and federal levels, I confirm the prevailing story line on the evolution of American federalism while generating a measure that can be used to assess the relative distribution of power in the system across time.

The Evolution of American Federalism and Predictions about Ambitious Politicians

There is a broad scholarly consensus on the story line of American federalism. As shown in Table 1, three eras have been identified. The first era, usually called dual federalism, is said to have been in place between 1789 and 1933. The second era, termed cooperative federalism, is typically pegged to the years 1933 to 1964. The era since 1964 has been assigned several labels, although the new federalism appears to be preferred.[1]

Within these eras, there is somewhat greater controversy over different periods. This is particularly the case in the way developments over more recent decades have been said to unfold. But, while some might quibble with the beginning and ending dates supplied in Table 1 or with the details of specific periods, the major sweep of developments appears to be accepted. Keep in mind that the focus of this analysis is not on the historical details of the evolution of American federalism but rather on whether elected officials' behavior matches our predictions of how they should have behaved based on general characterizations.

It seems clear from descriptions of the first period of the dual federalism era that state government was thought to be of equal importance to the federal government. As Scheiber (1977, 632) observes, a "formidable" list of policies were left in state hands, among them are "elections and apportionment, civil rights, education, family and

Table 1. Federal Eras and the Predicted Relative Importance of State Office and Federal Office.

Era	Period	Approximate years	Major characteristic	Predicted relative importance of state office to federal office
Dual federalism	Dual federalism and state mercantilism	1789–1861	States and federal government are both sovereign and equal	State office is on par with federal office
	Transitional federalism	1861–90	Gradual increase in governmental activity and new powers vested in federal government	State office remains attractive but begins to lag behind federal office
	Initial centralizing developments	1890–1933	Federal government activity and reach increases, trend toward cooperative federalism begins	Power associated with federal office is clearly greater than that associated with state office
Cooperative federalism	New deal and intensive centralization	1933–41	Intense federal centralization of traditional state functions	Attractiveness of state office relative to federal office reaches nadir
	Cooperative federalism	1941–63	Increased federal aid, postwar increase in state generated revenue	Attraction of federal office is greater, small rebound in state office attractiveness
	Centralized federalism	1963–81	Policy developed at national level, states offered financial incentives to follow	
New federalism	Reagan variant	1981–93	Serious attempt to reverse federal centralization	Attraction of federal office remains greater, but state office attractiveness increases
	Clinton variant	1993–2001	Federal policy leadership, flexibility given to states	
	Recentralization and resistance	2001–	Federal policy dominance reasserted but resisted in many states	

Source. Eras and periods adapted from Dresang and Gosling (2010, 56–74) and Scheiber (1977).

criminal law, business organization, local government, and property rights." In his analysis of programmatic responsibilities, Riker (1964, 82–83) arrives at a similar conclusion, reporting that in almost every area of public policy, state governments enjoyed either predominant or exclusive control. If these characterizations are correct, we should expect that for ambitious politicians, getting elected to state office was as appealing as getting elected to federal office. On a relative basis, then, the prediction is that those who served in Congress up to the outbreak of the Civil War should be much more likely to have held state office, both prior to and after congressional service, compared with their colleagues in any other time period.

The second half of the nineteenth century is described by Scheiber (1977, 640) as a transitional period. In particular, he points to "the long-term trend toward centralizing doctrine in the constitutional realm," as well as "the strong move at the end of this period toward vesting new powers in the central government, notably in the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and the Sherman Act of 1890." This characterization suggests that, relative to the initial period, state office service should be somewhat less attractive relative to federal office than it had been because the focus of political power was shifting toward Washington.

The final period in the dual federalism era is said by Scheiber (1977, 640) to have witnessed significant changes in the federal relationship: "now Congress was acting in such areas as transportation regulation and corporation law that had been largely state responsibilities. Overlapping of functional responsibilities became more common as federal activity reached into new areas." Riker (1964, 83) also sees a shift in power toward the federal government, although with the balance still tipped slightly in the states' favor. A flow of political power to national capital and away from state capitals would suggest a continued deterioration in the appeal of state office relative to federal office.

In his analysis, Scheiber (1977, 644) identifies the New Deal as the zenith of the federal government's centralization of power. Control was exerted over "numerous policy areas formerly left largely or nearly exclusively to state and local government." Accordingly, this decade should be the nadir of state office attractiveness relative to federal office holding.

Since the New Deal, American federalism has gone through several more periods. In the most recent decades, there is evidence that power on some policies, notably on welfare, has been returned to the states. The balance, however, has remained in the federal government's favor. Thus, when John Connally wanted to leave Washington to return to Texas to run for governor, Lyndon Johnson advised him to stay because "*Here's* where the power is" (Caro 2012, 5, italics in original). Given all of this, we should expect a small rebound in the relative attractiveness of holding state office relative to the New Deal years.

Overall, the predictions generated in Table 1 suggest the following relationship. During the dual federalism era, state office holding should be relatively attractive because much of the political action was at the state level. Following the Civil War, power began to flow toward Washington, and we should expect ambitious politicians to have moved accordingly with the appeal of federal service peaking around the New

Deal. The relative attractiveness of state office holding should only have begun to rebound after the federal government started returning some power to the states (or as the states begin to reassert their powers) in the most recent decades.

Electoral Career Data

Testing the predictions listed in Table 1 requires a comprehensive data set on American electoral careers over a very long time period. The Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present provides career elective office information on the more than 12,000 individuals who served in Congress between 1789 and 2012.[2] For my purposes here, I assume that people who served in Congress were politically ambitious individuals who were attracted to elective offices where they could exercise greater power. I further assume that each person who served in Congress exercised agency; that is, he or she determined which office they would seek and when they would seek it. Clearly, they did not make those decisions in a vacuum. At various times, political elites, party leaders, or voters influenced in large part whose names would appear on ballots for various offices. Ultimately, however, it was always the individual who decided whether or not to run for a particular office. Consequently, using the biographical directory, I gathered data for each person on his or her service as either a member of a state legislature (or, in a few instances, a territorial legislature) or as a state governor prior to first serving in Congress. I also collected data on whether after leaving Congress an individual served in a state legislature (or, rarely, a territorial legislature), or as a state governor, or whether they failed in an effort to get elected to state office. The main idea is that collectively, the career movements of politically ambitious individuals reveal in which government institutions power resides.

Although service at the state level prior to serving in Congress is arguably of lesser theoretical interest in this study, it still provides insight into the relative standing of state and federal office. When federal office is more attractive because political power has gravitated to the national level, there is less incentive for ambitious politicians to first serve in state office. Consequently, in periods where power appears centered at the federal level, we should expect to find fewer members of Congress who began their electoral careers at the state level. When power is distributed more equitably, service at the state level should increase in attractiveness.

Of greater interest are career decisions after members depart Congress. Returning to state elective office indicates that service at that level is as satisfying for an ambitious politician as serving in federal office, otherwise we would expect those seeking power to attempt to return to Congress (or the presidency). Thus, we should expect to find a higher percentage of former Congress members serving at the state level during periods when power is more equitably distributed between the two levels. When power is centered at the federal level, we should find fewer former members of Congress returning to state elective office.

It is important to keep in mind, of course, that there are an unlimited number of different activities a member of Congress might have pursued after leaving that body. Many departed when they were at an age where they retired from public life altogether. In more than a few instances, health problems forced members to leave and

some died within days or weeks of their departure (and thereby greatly decreasing their opportunities to return to state office). Judicial positions on either the federal or state bench (which, even if an elected position, were not counted as a state office in this analysis) attracted many members. Perhaps even more important, the biographical directory notes that over the years, a large number of departing members simply "resumed the practice of his [or her] profession," typically as an attorney. And, of course, a few members pursued unusual career paths after leaving Congress. For instance, James O'Donnell (R-MI), who served in the House for four terms at the end of the nineteenth century, went on to become known as the "father of the beet-sugar industry of Michigan" (Moore 1915, 2294). Given all of these options, we might not expect a high percentage of departing members to opt to return to state elected positions, even during the most propitious periods. But, what matters in this analysis is the rate who returned in one period or era relative to other periods or eras.

Changes in the Relative Attractiveness of Offices and Electoral Career Behavior

Modern American politics operates with an assumed electoral career hierarchy. The expectation is that with only rare deviations movement goes from lower levels to higher levels. Thus, careers are expected go from the local level to the state level and then on to finish at the federal level because we assume that is how political power flows. But such a path is not ordained and elective careers in federal systems do have to follow this order. Indeed, in other federal countries, different patterns have developed (Stolz 2003). But in the modern American case, aberrations are rare, and when they happen, they merit media comment. For example, when Gordon Humphrey opted to leave the U.S. Senate to run for the New Hampshire Senate in 1990, he was derided for being "downwardly mobile" (Landrigan 1990). With considerable hyperbole, Humphrey later joked, "I might be the only person in U.S. history who went from U.S. senator to state senator—and I considered it a step upward!" (Gizzi 2000, 18). The press similarly treated the handful of other elected officials who moved to the state level from the federal level in recent years as curiosities, again tagging them as being "downwardly mobile" (e.g., Jacobson 2005).

It is critical for this study to appreciate that the current American electoral career hierarchy has not always been in place, an observation that has been made before (e.g., Squire and Hamm 2005, 129–30). Perhaps most visibly, Polsby (1968, 149–51) documented that several U.S. House speakers held state offices at the end of their electoral careers. And both Price (1975, 5–6) and Riker (1955, 462) cited the case of a U.S. senator from Maryland who resigned in 1792 to take a seat in the Maryland Senate. In fact, as the Price and Riker example suggests, Senator Humphrey was far from being the only U.S. senator who would later serve in a state legislature. There have been 90 individuals who have done so.

Movement back to state office from Congress was actually common early in American history. Take, for example, James Madison's electoral career path: Virginia

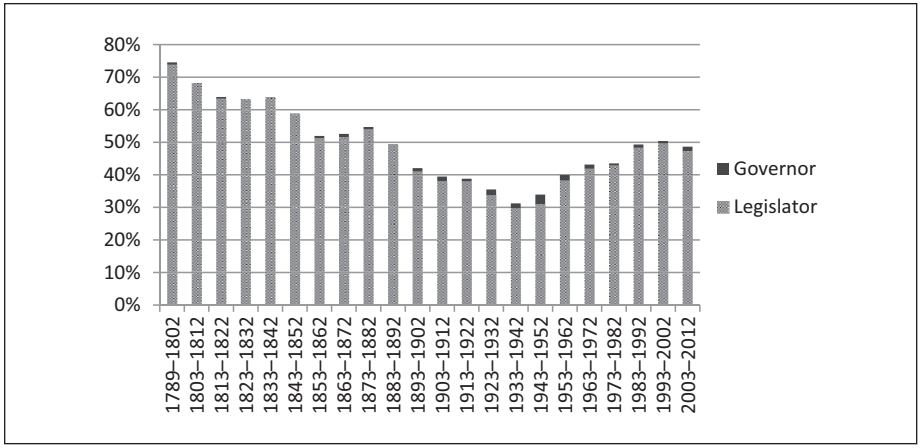

Figure 1. State position prior to Congress.

House (1776), Confederal Congress (1780–83), Virginia House (1784–86), Confederal Congress (1787–88), U.S. House (1789–97), Virginia House (1799), U.S. president (1809–17). Or the route taken by Madison's successor in the White House, James Monroe: Virginia House (1782), Confederal Congress (1783–86), Virginia House (1786), U.S. Senate (1790–94), Virginia governor (1799–1802), Virginia House (1810–11), Virginia governor (1811), and U.S. president (1817–25). The career paths of William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, and James Polk also bounced back and forth between the state and federal level before finally landing each of them in the presidency.

A large number of other politicians less well known today enjoyed similarly peripatetic careers. For instance, Charles Pinckney, a signer of the U.S. Constitution, experienced this remarkable sequence of offices: South Carolina House (1779–80), Confederal Congress (1785–87), South Carolina House (1786–89), South Carolina governor (1789–92), South Carolina House (1792–96), South Carolina governor (1796–98), U.S. Senate (1798–1801), South Carolina House (1805–1806), South Carolina governor (1806–1808), South Carolina House (1810–14), and U.S. House (1819–21). Even one of the more notorious American political careers followed what appears today to be an inverted course: William Marcy "Boss" Tweed served in the U.S. House (1853–55) before he was elected to the New York Senate (1867–71).

Given the existence of such career paths, the question here then becomes, does the movement of ambitious American politicians between the state and federal elective offices track with what is thought to be the flow of power between the two levels? A first cut at answering that question is shown in Figure 1. This figure shows the percentage of members of Congress who had first served in a state legislature (or a territorial legislature) or as a state governor, broken down by the decade in which the member had initially entered Congress.

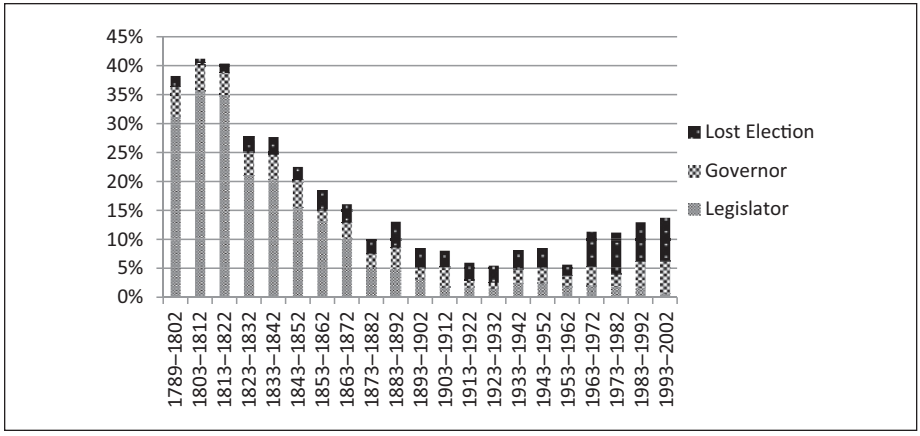

Figure 2. State position after Congress.

The ebbs and flows in career patterns revealed in Figure 1 fit well with the predictions given in Table 1. In the earliest decades, there were extraordinary levels of prior state service before first entering Congress, almost all of which was in a state legislature. The overall prior state service figure stays above 60% until 1843–51, when it falls just short of that level. The next three decades see figures above 50% and then, as predicted given the shift in power to the federal government, there is a steady decline, bottoming out at just over 30% in 1933–41. From that point, there are generally increases, with the three most recent decades witnessing prior state service levels comparable with those of the mid-nineteenth century.

A similar and perhaps even more convincing story is shown in Figure 2. This figure provides the percentage of members of Congress who returned to state service as either a state legislator or as governor, or made a failed attempt to get elected to office at the state level. The shape of the relationship is essentially the same as in Figure 1; the major difference is that, as we might expect, the percentages are lower. But, again, the attraction of returning to state office is highest in the early decades, when states shared power with the federal government on a more equitable basis. Indeed, between 1803 and 1821, over 40% of those who left Congress opted to serve at the state level. Perhaps most surprising is that over the first three decades of American federalism, roughly a third of all departing members of Congress later took a state legislative seat.

The percentage of former members of Congress returning to service at the state level or trying and failing to return steps down over the following decades along the path predicted in Table 1. The lowest levels of post-congressional state service show up around the New Deal era. Again, there is a rebound in interest in returning to state-level service over the most recent decades, echoing efforts to reinvigorate American federalism. Further confirmation of these trends is provided in Table 2, which tracks the career paths of members of Congress broken down by period and era.[3] The same patterns emerge. Thus, overall, elected officials in the American system behave in the

predicted manner, with their career patterns tracking the flow of power in the federal system.

Alternative Explanations for the Observed Pattern

An obvious alternative explanation for the observed career patterns presented in Figures 1 and 2 and Table 2 focuses on differences in personal financial incentives offered for service at the state and federal levels. The hypothesis would be that over time, financial inducements for service at the federal level increased relative to those offered for state service. As a result, politicians were differentially pulled toward Congress, not because of power but for personal financial rewards.

Although plausible, this hypothesis runs into difficulties on at least two scores. First, the congressional wage has always been higher than that in even the best paid state legislature. In 1832, for example, when members of Congress received a per diem of $8, the best compensated state legislators were getting only $4 a day (Brudnick 2013; Squire 2012, 235). Thus, there has always been a financial incentive to prefer service in Congress to service in any state legislature.

Second, there were two long periods where congressional salaries remained stagnant: The $8 per diem was in place from 1817 to 1855 and an annual $5,000 salary stayed constant between 1874 and 1907. During these stretches, we might expect shifts between state and federal service to remain roughly constant—state legislative pay also did not budge much (Squire 2012, 232–39)—if salary differences drove the observed relationships. But, as Figures 1 and 2 reveal, there was movement, and it was usually in the direction of federal service, consistent with the change in political power hypothesis.

There is another way this first alternative explanation might be examined. Governors usually were reasonably well compensated, and the position they held has always been considered prestigious. Consequently, examining movement between the governorship and Congress should again shed light on the relative attractiveness of federal and state service, this time while holding salary and prestige essentially constant. Figure 3 shows the percentage of members of Congress in each decade who previously served as governor. As the lure of serving at the federal government level increases, we should see a corresponding increase in the percentage of former governors moving to Congress. That expectation is fulfilled; the appeal of congressional service for governors is highest between 1923 and 1961. The lowest level of movement is also as predicted, during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

The flip side of this relationship—the percentage moving to the governorship from Congress by decade—is given in Figure 4. Again, the movement is as predicted by the power flow hypothesis. The percentage serving as governor after departing Congress is highest in the early part of the nineteenth century and lowest in the middle of the twentieth century. And once more, there is a small rebound in the percentage moving to a governorship over the most recent decades.

A second, less obvious alternative explanation centers on changes in transportation systems. The idea is that until the advent of rail travel in the 1840s and 1850s, getting

Table 2. Federal Eras and Periods and the Career Paths of American Politicians.

			Period		Era	
Era	Period	Years measured	% with prior service in state legislature or as governor (*N*)	% available with post service in state legislature or governor, or failed attempt for state office (*N*)	% with prior service in state legislature or as governor (*N*)	% available with post service in state legislature or governor, or failed attempt for state office (*N*)
Dual federalism	Dual federalism and state mercantilism	1789–1862	62.3 (3,768)	29.2 (3,590)	52.7 (8,483)	18.7 (7,890)
	Transitional federalism	1863–92	52.2*** (2,142)	12.9*** (2,028)		
	Initial centralizing developments	1893–1932	39.3*** (2,573)	7.1*** (2,272)		
Cooperative federalism	New deal and intensive centralization	1933–42	31.2*** (660)	8.1 (569)	37.5*** (2,459)	7.7*** (2,221)
	Cooperative federalism	1943–62	36.5** (957)	7.3 (879)		
	Centralized federalism	1963–82	43.3*** (842)	11.3*** (773)		
New federalism	Reagan variant	1983–92	49.3* (296)	12.9 (239)	49.4*** (1,071)	13.6*** (508)
	Clinton variant	1993–2002	50.2 (407)	13.8 (269)		
	Recentralization and resistance	2003–12	48.6 (368)	NA		NA

Note. Difference in proportions test for the preceding period or era.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).

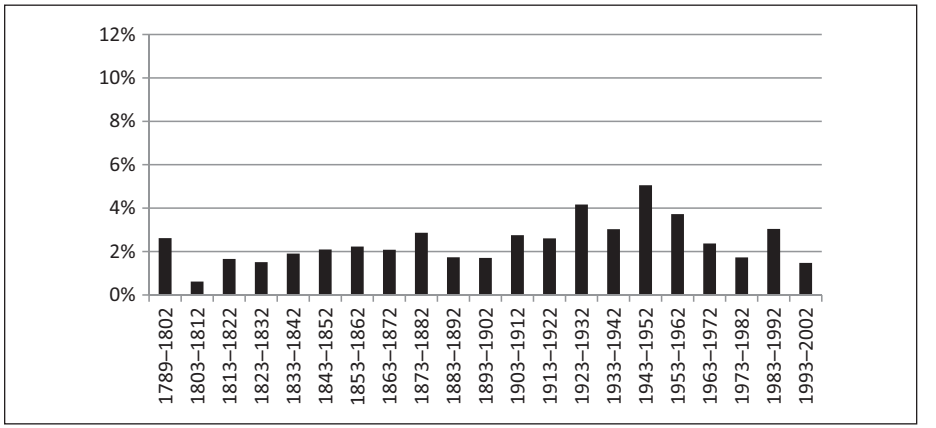

Figure 3. Percent governor prior to Congress.

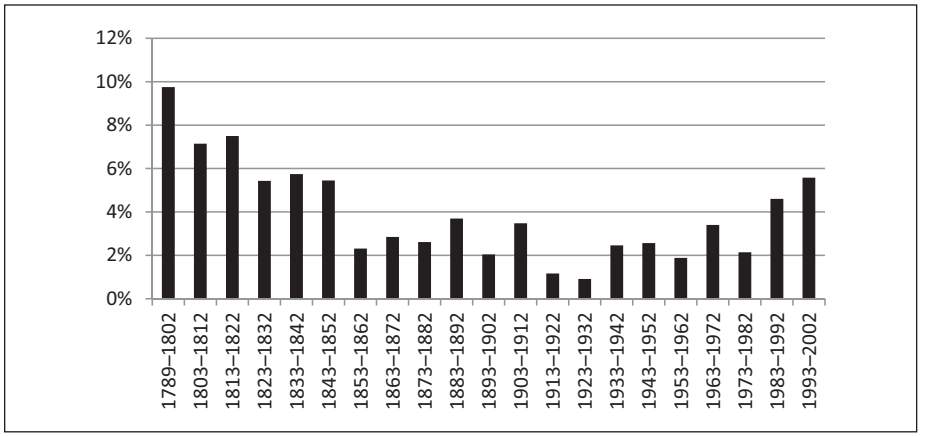

Figure 4. Percent governor after Congress.

to the congressional meeting place could be arduous.[4] Consequently, because state-level service was less burdensome, it was more attractive. Once getting to the nation's capital was relatively easy, national service became preferred. Note, however, that in Figure 2, the big step down in the percent returning to state service precedes the widespread availability of train travel by at least two decades, raising initial doubts about the validity of this hypothesis.

Another take on the impact of the relative ease of travel explanation is provided in Table 3, which presents the percent of members returning to state-level service between 1843 and 1861, the years in which train travel first became an option. If travel concerns made a substantial contribution to the decision to serve at the national or state

Table 3. Career Movements in Original 13 States, Added States, and Newest States 1843–61.

Decade	States	Total number of members eligible for state service after leaving Congress	Total number of members serving or attempting to serve in state government post service in Congress	% of members serving or attempting to serve in state government post service in Congress
1843–52	Original	379	79	20.8
	Added	300	75	25.0
	Newest (Arkansas, Michigan)	14	2	14.3
1853–62	Original	331	57	17.2
	Added	310	63	20.3
	Newest (California, Florida, Iowa, Texas, Wisconsin)	40	8	20.0

level, we should see some differences in behavior between those members of Congress who had, relatively speaking, an easier time getting to the capitol and their colleagues who faced more difficult travel. Thus, I compare the rates at which members from the original 13 states, who enjoyed better developed roads and, as coastal residents, the option to take boats, with their Western colleagues who generally had to cover greater distances and overcome more obstacles. I also look at the rates of return for members from states that had been admitted the previous decade: Arkansas (1836) and Michigan (1837) for the 1843–51 decade, and California (1850), Florida (1845), Iowa (1846), Texas (1845), and Wisconsin (1848) for the 1853–61 decade. The rationale for isolating those states is again that the distance from Washington and the lack of well-developed transportation options might limit the appeal of serving at the national level.

In both the 1843–51 decade and the 1853–61 decade, members of Congress from the original 13 states were less likely to return to service at the state level than were their colleagues from Western states, suggesting some impact. But the differences are slight and the gap between the two groups is smaller in the second decade than during the first decade.[5] Similarly, members from the newest states either behaved like their colleagues from the other added states, or were less likely to return to state service. These data indicate that at best travel influenced career patterns only at the margins. In the larger picture, it appears that the flow of power between the two levels of government is a more powerful explanation.

Career Movements as a Measure of the Flow of Political Power

The flow of politicians between the federal and state level tracks well with the conventional wisdom on the historical development of the American federal system. Given this correspondence, is there any way to use these data to measure the flow of power between the two levels of government? Being able to do so would be advantageous

Table 4. Prior and Post State-Level Service of Members of Congress, 1789–2012.

Years	Total first elected to Congress	% with prior service in state legislature or as governor	Deviation from 50%	Number departed Congress and available for post state service	% available with post service in state legislature or governor, or failed attempt for state office	Deviation from 25%
1789–1802	420	74.5	24.5	400	38.3	13.3
1803–12	324	68.2	18.2	308	41.2	16.2
1813–22	543	63.9	13.9	520	40.4	15.4
1823–32	463	63.3	13.3	442	27.8	2.8
1833–42	630	63.8	13.8	592	27.7	2.7
1843–52	716	58.8	8.8	679	22.5	−2.5
1853–62	672	51.9	1.9	649	18.5	−6.5
1863–72	624	52.6	2.6	597	16.1	−8.9
1873–82	768	54.7	4.7	727	10.0	−15.0
1883–92	750	49.3	−0.7	704	13.1	−11.9
1893–1902	760	42.0	−8.0	685	8.5	−16.5
1903–12	618	39.5	−10.5	546	8.1	−16.9
1913–22	691	38.8	−11.2	602	6.0	−19.0
1923–32	504	35.5	−14.5	439	5.5	−19.5
1933–42	660	31.2	−18.8	569	8.1	−16.9
1943–52	554	33.9	−16.0	507	8.5	−16.7
1953–62	403	40.0	−10.0	372	5.6	−19.4
1963–72	380	43.2	−6.8	353	11.3	−13.7
1973–82	462	43.5	−6.5	420	11.2	−13.8
1983–92	296	49.3	−0.7	239	13.0	−12.0
1993–2002	407	50.4	0.2	269	13.8	−11.6
2003–12	368	48.6	−1.4	110	NA	NA

because, of course, elected officials are a consistent measurement unit, measuring the same thing in 1789 as in 2012.

How these data might be interpreted, however, is not obvious. I offer an attempt at doing so in Table 4. The measures I devise are intended to calibrate both how power is distributed between the two levels of government and the direction in which power appears to be flowing. Among the data presented in Table 4 are the percent of members of Congress who served in state positions prior to serving in Congress and the percent who served after they departed from Congress, aggregated by the decade the member first served in Congress. These were the data used to generate Figures 1 and 2. The measures I developed are given in the fourth and seventh columns. In the fourth column, I use 50% as a pivot point, representing neutrality in the flow of power between the two levels of government. To some extent, the selection of 50% as the pivot can been seen as arbitrary but above 50% suggests a stronger likelihood of serving at the state level prior to Congress, and below 50% suggests a weaker likelihood of earlier state service. Thus, I subtract 50 from the percent of members of Congress with prior state-level service. Theoretically, this measure runs from 50, where power between the two levels is perfectly equitable, and −50, where power is completely centralized in the federal government. Positive numbers indicate that power is flowing toward equity

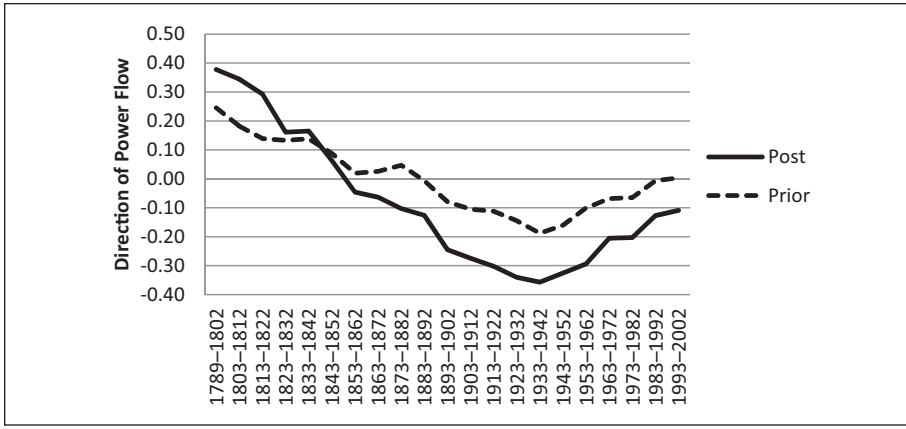

Figure 5. Measuring the flow of power.

between the two levels; negative numbers suggest power is flowing toward the federal government.

In the seventh column, I perform a similar calculation using 25% as the pivot for the members serving, or having tried to serve, in state office after departing Congress. Again, the choice of 25% can be seen as arbitrary, but the idea behind it is given that those who leave Congress can opt out of government service altogether or retire to the private sector, a post service pivot set at half the pivot for prior service seems reasonable. As with the earlier measure, positive numbers suggest power is flowing toward an equitable distribution of power and negative numbers that power is flowing toward the federal government. Theoretically, this measure runs from 75, where power between the two levels is equitable, and −25, where power is centralized in the federal government. In reality, however, the measure's effective upper end is 25.

The two measures, presented graphically in Figure 5, track well together but tell slightly different stories. The measure focused on prior service indicates that power pivoted in favor of the federal government in the late nineteenth century, although it had been flowing in that direction from the beginning. The measure focused on service after leaving Congress finds near equity for the first several decades and then a shift in direction in favor of the federal government. This measure indicates that the tipping point was passed just prior to the Civil War. Both measures report the highest levels of federal government centralization in the middle of the twentieth century. And each finds a reverse in flow toward greater equity in more recent decades.

These two measures are offered as one possible approach to using the data presented here to measure the flow of political power. Certainly, other pivot points could be selected and they might change the decade at which power is seen to shift between the levels. But, the fundamental finding about the directional flow of power would still be maintained give most defensible pivot choices.

Conclusion

Linking career movements to the shifting locus of political power over more than two centuries runs the risk of omitting important intervening variables. Even with the more obvious alternative explanations dismissed, there are other potential caveats lurking. One possible complication might involve the employment of rotation in some states and districts in the nineteenth century, an informal term limit mechanism that likely truncated an unknown number of congressional careers in ways that could be relevant to this analysis (e.g., Kernell 1977). Along somewhat similar lines, in more recent years, it is possible that the introduction of legislative term limits changed the career calculations of politicians in some states that might, at the margins, influence the relationships found here (e.g., Birkhead, Uriarte, and Bianco 2010; Lazarus 2006; Powell 2000; Steen 2006).

It might also be argued that parties controlled congressional and state legislative nominations during certain eras in American politics; consequently, they might have directed members to Congress and back to the states for their own reasons. Without a systematic analysis of the historical role of parties in legislative nominations, such a relationship cannot be completely ruled out. The problem with such an argument, however, is that American political parties have always been state based, meaning that even within each different party system, state organizations and behaviors have been disparate. If looking at the mid-twentieth century, for example, Mayhew's (1986) Traditional Party Organization measure would suggest that party organizations operated very differently across the nation, with some states having strong parties and other states weak parties. And even within one of the strong organization states, Illinois, the ability of parties to influence congressional nominations varied widely among inner city, outer city, and suburban districts around Chicago (Snowiss 1966).

Moreover, the interests of parties in the likely relatively few places and eras where they controlled congressional nominations—according to Huckshorn and Spencer's (1971, 46) analysis of House races in 1962, "If to the impact of the primaries is added the rudimentary party structure typically found at the congressional district level, recruitment as a party function is drained of meaning altogether"—might not always mesh with our expectations about power. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government clearly enjoyed a dominant position in the federal relationship. Yet in Chicago's inner-city districts, where the local Democratic Party did dictate House nominations, candidates were not sent to Washington because they were strong politicians capable of influencing politics where power was centered. Rather, congressional nominations were handed out to older organization members because "Although its utility to the organization is low, the office is not without its glamor and has tended to become a reward for long and loyal service" (Snowiss 1966, 631). The point for the analysis here is the parties over American political history have never been monolithic. Their powers and motivations have not only varied over time but also by state and district. Thus, they are unlikely to be an intervening variable of significance in this analysis. But, as suggested above, with the extended time span covered in the analysis, there may be other intervening variables that merit attention.

It is, however, clear that over the course of American history, power has shifted between the federal and state governments. I have shown that career patterns of elected officials have tracked those changes in predictable ways. The attractiveness of state-level service has ebbed and flowed in response to the level of power enjoyed at that level. Thus, the findings reported here are consistent with widely held notions about the relative distribution of policymaking authority. But, perhaps more important, my efforts to tie the evolution of American federalism to the career paths of politicians may provide a concrete way to assess the flow of political power between the two levels of government over time.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. This consensus is derived from a review of leading textbooks: Bowman and Kearney (2011, 37–40), Dresang and Gosling (2010, 56–74), Dye and MacManus (2009, 91–97), Harrigan and Nice (2013, 43–55), and Saffell and Basehart (2009, 48–54).
2. The directory can be accessed online at http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp.
3. The data presented here constitute the universe of members who served in Congress between 1789 and 2012. Thus, I am of the view that because differences among periods and eras are not estimates, statistical significance tests are not needed. This perspective would mean that the substantive importance of any difference is left for the reader to decide. There are, however, others who would argue that there is an underlying data generating process at work that is probabilistic in nature and produces the observed sample. For those who adopt this orientation to the data, I have included the statistical significance of difference of proportions tests between each era and period and its preceding era or period.
4. The growth of rail lines during this time period can be examined at http://railroads.unl.edu/views/item/bryan_rr_chars?p=6, and http://glencoe.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0012122005/student_view0/chapter17/interactive_maps.html.
5. None of the difference in proportions tests for the relationships in Table 3 reaches traditional levels of statistical significance for two-tailed tests. If one-tailed tests are employed, the difference between original states and added states during the 1843 to 1852 decade is statistically significant at .10.

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