



Presidential coattails in Taiwan: An analysis of voter- and candidate-specific data ☆, ☆ ☆



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ABSTRACT

Considerable empirical evidence demonstrates presidential coattail effects in elections held in the US. Employing hybrid logit and mixed logit models that analyze data collected from voters and candidates in Taiwan, this study examines coattail effects in a non-American setting. The findings show that presidential coattails exert powerful influences on Taiwanese citizens' vote choices and take the form of conversion. Contrary to American experiences, the mediating role of incumbency is quite minimal. Presidential coattails thus provide the president with an important source of influence in the legislative body. The linkage between presidential and legislative politics through coattails can help the operation of Taiwan's democratic institutions. Future research on voting behavior needs to consider voter characteristics as well as candidate attributes.

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Coattail effects are generally characterized as the influence of an election for an upper-level office on an election for a lower-level election. Such effects usually occur when there is a high-profile campaign for a higher office like presidency or governorship. The attractiveness of candidates for this office may bring voters to the polls and

influence their vote decisions by casting a straight ticket for candidates with the same party label running for lower-level offices such as seats in the Congress or in state legislatures. Thus, coattail effects may be brought about in two ways during elections. They can occur through mobilizing previous nonvoters to the polls so that they will also vote for candidates of the same party for lower offices. Or, coattails can happen by converting voters' support, who would otherwise vote for candidates of another party (Calvert and Ferejohn, 1983; Miller, 1955–56: 366). In both scenarios, coattail effects are demonstrated when voters cast a straight ticket in the elections of both offices that are held concurrently due to the attractiveness of candidates for upper-level offices.

Empirical analyses of coattails so far have primarily been conducted in the American context, largely as presidential coattails in US congressional elections with a few on the effects on elections of state legislatures (Campbell, 1986a; Hogan, 2005). Findings from these studies show that coattails do exhibit effects in elections but such effects vary according to voters' evaluations of candidates and candidates' incumbency status (Born, 1984; Campbell and Sumners, 1990; Flemming, 1995; Jacobson, 1976, 2009;

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Kritzer and Eubank, 1979; Mattei and Glasgow, 2005; Mondak, 1990, 1993). Previous research also demonstrates that coattail effects have ebbed over time and some studies even conclude that they rarely play a defining role in final electoral outcomes (Calvert and Ferejohn, 1983; Campbell, 1986b, 1991; Edwards, 1979; Ferejohn and Calvert, 1984; Kritzer and Eubank, 1979; Thorson and Stambough, 1995). Despite these rich findings based on American experiences, there are only a few empirical studies conducted in non-American settings (Golder, 2006; Magar, 2012). It begs the question whether generalizations from American experiences are equally applicable to non-Western democracies. Furthermore, it is worth noting that none of these previous studies has systematically assessed the effects of candidates' characteristics on coattails despite recognizing the importance of choice attributes. Indeed, empirical research has shown that choice attributes may significantly affect individuals' voting decisions. A proper analysis of presidential coattails thus requires data collected at both voter as well as candidate levels.

The case of Taiwan provides such an opportunity. Generally characterized as a semi-presidential system, the island country for the first time held the presidential election in 2012 concurrently with the election of its unicameral parliament, known as the Legislative Yuan (LY). Hoping that their charms could help their legislative running mates, presidential candidates of both the ruling Nationalist Party (the KMT) and the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) fiercely campaigned for their parties' legislative candidates. Thus, is the phenomenon of coattails a reality in Taiwanese politics as in American politics? If it is not a myth, do citizens' characteristics and candidates' attributes affect the magnitude of presidential coattails? Employing hybrid logit and mixed logit models, this study analyzes data collected at both voter and candidate levels. The findings show that presidential coattails were a powerful source of influence in Taiwan's 2012 elections as those who voted for incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou tended to support the ruling KMT candidates in the legislative election. Contrary to American experiences, the mediating role of incumbency in coattail effects is quite minimal. Thus, if used properly, presidential coattails should provide the president with an important source of influence in the legislative body and help to promote the president's campaign promises. Coattails also provide a linkage between presidential and legislative politics that can help the operation of Taiwan's democratic institutions.

1. Coattail effects in US elections

Interests in presidential coattails can trace back at least to Bean's study of the effects of presidential elections on the electoral outcomes of US Congress (1950; 1972a; 1972b). Largely generated from studies on the association between presidential and Congressional elections, the cumulated empirical evidence so far seems solid enough to suggest the existence of presidential coattails in American politics. Although the magnitude of such effects has been found to be declining (Calvert and Ferejohn, 1983; Campbell, 1986b, 1991; Edwards, 1979; Ferejohn and Calvert, 1984; Kritzer and Eubank, 1979; Thorson and Stambough, 1995), the

general consensus is that presidential campaigns, by their presence in on-year and their absence in off-year elections, significantly affect the outcomes of legislative elections at both federal and state levels. In on-year elections, presidential candidates by virtue of their charisma and the resources they bring to the campaigns attract additional support for their congressional running mates as well as for their parties' candidates for state legislative seats. The winning presidential party is thus able to garner seat gains in both Congress and state legislatures when these elections are held concurrently with presidential elections. Such spillover effects do not exist in mid-term elections since presidential elections in the US are held at an interval of 4 years. Without a popular candidate at the top of the ticket, the president's party frequently suffers off-year election losses. The presence and the absence of presidential coattails have been used as an explanation for the "surge and decline" of congressional elections in the United States (Campbell, 1986a, 1991).

The above findings are primarily based on aggregate voting data. Employing evidence collected at district level, these studies compare and examine the relationship between percentages of votes acquired by presidential candidates and their congressional running mates. The advantages of using aggregate data are that the data are comprehensive and allow analyses between districts at any one time and within the same district over time (Edwards, 1979). The key shortcoming is that aggregate voting data do not permit the analysis of voter motivation. As Miller (1955–56) convincingly argued more than five decades ago, voting for a congressional candidate "may be impelled by a sensitivity to factors uniquely associated with the particular congressional contest" (p.358) and the appeal of a presidential candidate is only one. Thus, "[w]here such factors are at all important to the voter he will be less readily influenced by the existence of presidential coattails" (p.358). To avoid the possibility of committing the ecological fallacy, erroneously drawing conclusions about individual characteristics from group data, several studies thus employ survey data collected at an individual level (Calvert and Ferejohn, 1983; Jacobson, 2009; Mondak, 1990; Mondak and McCurley, 1994; Miller, 1955–56).

2. Voter- and candidate-specific characteristics

Some studies based on individual level data have treated presidential coattails as a function of external cues in a decision-making process (Mondak, 1990; Mondak and McCurley, 1994). It is argued that information on congressional candidates during campaigns is usually not available, costly or sometimes even confusing. Voters may have to rely on external sources as their information short-cuts to help them in their voting decisions. In a presidential system like the United States, the presidency is generally regarded as the most important electoral prize and presidential candidates naturally become the focus of a campaign. As voters recognize the overwhelming importance of the presidency relative to other political offices, presidential candidates' charisma and policy stands become the dominant cues in citizens' voting calculus. By a simple transmission, the presidential vote extends to the choice of a

are substantially higher under presidential coattails. In addition, coattail effects in Taiwan took the form of conversion, in which a voter changed his/her mind due to the attractiveness of presidential candidates. This means that the president has an important source of influence in the LY because a substantial number of legislators are in the president's debt. If using this influence properly, the president has great advantages to implement his/her agenda with strong supports from the legislature.

Furthermore, the linkage of presidential and legislative electoral politics can also help the operation of Taiwan's democratic institutions. Indeed, the island country's semi-presidential system has frequently been characterized as dysfunctional after seven constitutional amendments during the past two decades. The increasingly intensified partisanship along with deepening political cleavage in the society has made political gridlocks an institutionalized feature of the system. The president, as the head of the government and the leader of the ruling party, needs all the means available to him/her in order to realize campaign promises. Coattail effects effectively bind the political fates of the president with his/her legislative running mates. As members of the LY are obliged to the president for their past and/or future electoral successes, they are more likely to lend support for the president's agenda. Coattails may serve as an agent of promoting leadership and facilitate the operation of an otherwise dysfunctional political system.

Empirical research has long recognized the effects of candidate characteristics on voting behaviors. None of the previous studies on presidential coattails has systematically analyzed the attributes of choices from the voter's view. Employing both hybrid logit and mixed logit models, this study has successfully demonstrated that presidential coattails are affected by determinants at both voter- and candidate-levels. While the findings from both models show the robustness of the conclusions, their methodological implications go beyond the scope of the current study. As empirical analyses of voting behavior tend to focus on the characteristics of individual voters, future research also needs to consider the attributes of choices available to them.

Finally, unlike previous studies conducted in the American context where multi-year data were utilized, findings of the current study are based on one national election return. The level of generalization of the current study is arguably limited. Such limitation is mainly because Taiwan's 2012 elections was the only one where the presidential and legislative races were held concurrently on the island. Nevertheless, Taiwan's 2012 elections provide a unique opportunity to examine presidential coattails outside of the American setting. As the findings offer important theoretical, methodological and policy insights, this research represents an initial effort of examining Taiwan's electoral politics that have cross-national implications.

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