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Exploiting Friends-and-Neighbors to Estimate Coattail Effects

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Federalist democracies often hold concurrent elections for multiple offices. A potential consequence of simultaneously voting for multiple offices that vary with respect to scope and scale is that the personal appeal of candidates in a high-profile race may affect electoral outcomes in less salient races. In this article I estimate the magnitude of such coattail effects from governors onto other concurrently elected statewide executive officers using a unique dataset of county election returns for all statewide executive office elections in the United States from 1987 to 2010. I exploit the disproportionate support that candidates receive from geographically proximate voters, which is often referred to as the friends-and-neighbors vote, to isolate variation in the personal appeal of candidates. I find that a one-percentage-point increase in the personal vote received by a gubernatorial candidate increases the vote share of their party's secretary of state and attorney general candidates by 0.1 to 0.2 percentage points. In contrast, personal votes for a secretary of state or attorney general candidate have no effect on the performance of their party's gubernatorial candidate or other down-ballot candidates.

INTRODUCTION

Voters in most federalist countries elect representatives to serve in political institutions that vary in scope and scale. Representatives in such multilevel governments are selected in a mix of concurrent and separate elections, often referred to as the electoral cycle. Previous research has identified a number of channels through which the electoral cycle can cause contamination effects such that electoral outcomes at one level of government are affected by a feature of another level of government.[1] One contamination effect that has long interested academics, journalists, and political pundits is the coattail effect. Miller (1955) defines a coattail effect as the effect that the personal identity of a party's candidate in one election has on the performance of the party's candidates in concurrent elections.[2] Coattails affect the chances that personally popular executives such as Ronald Reagan or Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will come into office with a supportive legislature, which in turn has consequences for whether such leaders can enact their agendas. Coattails also have important implications for the structure of political parties, campaign finance, and the electoral incentives of representatives (Samuels 2002, 2004).

Since the 1940s, scholars have tried to empirically test for the existence of coattails and to estimate the magnitude of their influence in a variety of contexts. Estimating these effects might seem like a straightforward exercise, but this is not the case because a number of factors, for instance, voters' preferences and the state of macroeconomy, affect how a party's candidates perform at both the top and bottom of the ballot. Regressions are typically used to control for variables that are thought to affect both a party's top- and down-ballot performance, and any remaining association between a party's top- and down-ballot vote share is interpreted as the coattail effect (Samuels 2003, 83). Unfortunately, it is difficult to observe, measure, and specify the proper functional relationship between all these variables. These unmeasured or mismeasured determinants of a party's down-ballot vote share are also likely to affect the party's vote shares in other races. When this happens, the association between a party's top- and down-ballot vote shares is expected to be larger than the true coattail effect due to these omitted variables. Even if all of the other joint determinants of top- and down-ballot vote shares are properly included in a regression, additional problems arise when down-ballot candidates' coattails also affect the top-ballot race. In such cases, endogeneity will cause the expected association between top- and down-ballot vote shares to overstate the coattail effect. Consequently, previous research that interprets this association as a

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[1] A high profile election can either provide or crowd out vote-relevant information in less salient concurrent elections (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Wolak 2009). The mix of races on a ballot may affect the distribution of preferences of individuals who turn out to vote (Berry and Gersen 2010), in part by changing parties and elites incentives to engage in mobilization (Cox 1999). How voter preferences are translated into votes also differ when elections are held concurrently (Mondak and McCurley 1994; Zudenkova 2011). Thus, the electoral cycle may affect the entry decisions of candidates and parties (Golder 2006; Shugart and Carey 1992) and the incentives for candidates and parties to share resources and engage in other forms of coordination (Hicken and Stoll 2011; Samuels 2003).

[2] Although this definition is generally accepted in the American politics literature, sometimes the term "coattail effect" is used in the comparative politics literature to refer to any feature of one level of government that affects election outcomes at another level of government. For example, Ames (1994) refers to the relationship between local political control and national election outcomes as a coattail effect. Others refer to such cross-level spillovers as contamination or interaction effects (Cox and Schoppa 2002; Ferrara, Herron, and Nishikawa 2005; Hainmueller and Kern 2008; Herron and Nishikawa 2001).

TABLE A.1. Selected Previous Estimates of Coattail Effects

Study	Type	County	From	To	Years	Point Estimate
Kramer (1971)	T	U.S.	President	House	1896–1994	0.30
Jacobson (1976)	I	U.S.	President	House:	1972	
				Independents		0.49
				Republicans		0.39
				Democrats		0.18
Calvert and Ferejohn (1983)	I	U.S.	President	House	1956–1980	0.49
Born (1984)	C	U.S.	President	House	1952–1980	0.33
Ferejohn and Calvert (1984)	T	U.S.	President	House	1896–1980	0.24 to 0.51
Campbell and Sumners (1990)	C	U.S.	President	Senate	1972–1998	0.18
Campbell (1991)	T	U.S.	President	House	1868–1988	0.30 to 0.35
Mondak (1993)	C		President	House:	1976–1988	
				Open-Seat		0.79
				Non-Open-Seat		0.41
Flemming (1995)	C	U.S.	President	Open-Seat House	1972–1992	0.29
Samuels (2000)	C	Brazil	President	National Congress	1994, 1998	0.42
			Governor			0.18
Hogan (2005)	C	U.S.	Governor	State Legislature	1994, 1998	0.43
Mattei and Glasgow (2005)	C	U.S.	President	House:	1976–2000	
				Open-Seat		0.82
				Non-Open-Seat		0.30
Broockman (2009)	C	U.S.	House	President		0.05
Fair (2009)	T	U.S.	President	House	1916–2006	−0.70 to 0.80
Magar (2012)	C	Mexico		Chamber of Deputies:	1979–2009	
			Governor	President Concurrent		0.37
				President Not Concurrent		0.49
			President	Governor Concurrent		0.03
				Governor Not Concurrent		0.44

Notes: Type "I" is an individual-level study, type "C" is an aggregated cross-sectional study, and type "T" is a time-series study. In studies where multiple point estimates are reported for different years or different parties, I average the point estimates across all years or all parties.

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