

ARTICLE

A drag on the ticket? Estimating top-of-the-ticket effects on down-ballot races

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Abstract

Campaign staff, journalists, and political scientists commonly attribute the poor performances of a party's down-ballot candidates to low-quality or extreme top-of-the-ticket candidates, but empirical evidence on this conventional wisdom is scant. We estimate the effect of candidate quality and ideology in gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections on co-partisan vote shares in down-ballot U.S. House races. While naive estimates imply that top-of-the-ticket candidates influence down-ballot outcomes, after accounting for correlations in candidate quality/ideology across offices, we estimate near-zero statewide top-of-the-ticket effects on U.S. House elections. We similarly observe near-zero top-of-the-ticket effects in the further-down-ballot settings of state-legislative and county-legislative elections. Overall, voters exhibit a strong capacity to discern differences in quality and ideology across offices and incorporate this information into their vote choice throughout the time period under investigation. However, in line with other research, this link between candidate quality/ideology and election outcomes has weakened considerably in recent years.

Tom Barrett, a Republican state legislator from Michigan, challenged Democratic incumbent Elissa Slotkin in the 2022 midterm elections to represent Michigan's 7th U.S. House district. The newly drawn boundaries of this district resulted in a near-perfect 50–50 split between Democratic and Republican voters, based on returns from the 2020 presidential election. Given the district partisan composition, the ostensibly favorable national environment for Republican candidates in a midterm election with an unpopular Democratic president, and Barrett's strong credentials by most traditional metrics (i.e., legislative experience in the state house and state senate as well as over two decades of military experience), Barrett looked to be in a strong position to defeat an incumbent House member. In

the end, Slotkin prevailed by a margin of 5 percentage points, leaving Barrett and his aides to ponder his loss. Barrett's top campaign strategist quickly pointed to the "question of candidate quality" in the gubernatorial race, describing it as "our biggest headwind" (Alberta, 2022), and state party leaders concurred: "the top of the ticket was a drag on everything" (Gibbons, 2022). In other words, these campaign strategists and party leaders argued that Barrett, a down-ballot Republican congressional candidate, would have performed better had a stronger Republican candidate competed in the gubernatorial race.

This idea—that a *higher quality* candidate at the top of the statewide ticket improves the electoral prospects for a party's down-ballot candidates—is

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/J6C26T>.

The Cornell Center for Social Sciences verified that the data and replication code submitted to the AJPS Dataverse replicate the numerical results reported in the main text of this article.

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a common refrain among political strategists, party leaders, candidates, political scientists, and others. To support this claim, these observers often point to a turnout mechanism (e.g., Druke, 2022; Mearhoff, 2022; Williams, 2021), hypothesizing that high-quality candidates at the top of the ticket generate enthusiasm among their party's supporters, which increases the likelihood that they turn out to vote. These mobilized partisans then provide additional votes for the party's down-ballot candidates. Observers have also advanced similar claims about the influence of the top-of-the-ticket candidate's ideological position on down-ballot outcomes. Despite the pervasiveness of claims related to the sizable impact of statewide top-of-the-ticket candidate quality and ideology on the electoral fate of down-ballot candidates, there is little empirical evidence on these questions.

Whether the top-of-the-ticket candidate in a statewide election influences down-ballot outcomes is not only a concern for campaign strategists and party leaders but also of direct interest to political scientists. It speaks to the potential importance of strategic party coordination, institutions governing candidate selection, and the competence of voters. If very low-quality down-ballot candidates can sneak into office on the coattails of a strong, marquee candidate at the top of their party's ticket, voter competence might be called into question, as an important purpose of elections is the selection of "good types" and the screening out of unqualified candidates (Ashworth, 2012; Fearon, 1999). Nevertheless, with only rare but important exceptions (e.g., Meredith, 2013), scholars of U.S. electoral politics have largely ignored top-of-the-ticket candidate effects outside of the presidential election setting.

To study statewide top-of-the-ticket effects, we examine variation in top-of-the-ticket candidate quality across states but within the same national aggregate partisan environment. Using this design, we estimate the effect of a candidate quality advantage (or disadvantage) in governor and Senate races on the electoral performance of a party's candidates in down-ballot U.S. House races from 1950 to 2022. We also examine the role of candidate ideology, assessing whether a relatively moderate or extreme nominee at the top of the ticket in the Senate or governor race influences down-ballot election outcomes. We consider a host of new and existing measures of candidate quality and ideology, which we can observe for both top-of-the-ticket and down-ballot candidates. While media accounts often conflate quality and ideology, our analyses allow us to differentiate between top-of-the-ticket effects induced by each candidate characteristic.¹ All together, this analysis represents a

comprehensive examination of how statewide top-of-the-ticket factors influence down-ballot voting behavior in U.S. House elections.

For both candidate quality and ideology, we find a similar pattern of results. A naive approach that fails to account for down-ballot House candidate quality/ideology yields estimates of top-of-the-ticket effects that are modest but substantively meaningful and statistically distinguishable from zero. For instance, for candidate quality, a one standard deviation increase in a party's candidate quality advantage in the Senate/governor race is associated with a 1–2 percentage point boost for that party's candidates' vote shares in U.S. House races. However, an electoral environment that is conducive to the presence of a high-quality candidate at the top of the ticket tends to be conducive to the presence of high-quality candidates from that same party for other offices. After accounting for this correlation in candidate quality across offices, the estimated effect of top-of-the-ticket quality (and, separately, ideology) shrinks to near zero. Importantly, these estimates are very precise, allowing us to dismiss the possibility of meaningfully large effects with a high degree of confidence. The near-zero estimated effect of top-of-the-ticket quality and ideology is insensitive to various alternative measurement strategies, sample restrictions, and specifications. Furthermore, our results extend to the further-down-ballot settings of state-legislative and county-legislative elections, where we also estimate near-zero top-of-the-ticket effects for both candidate quality and ideology.

At the same time, we observe robust relationships between down-ballot candidate quality/ideology and down-ballot election outcomes. A one standard deviation increase in down-ballot House candidate quality equates with a roughly 4 percentage point increase in vote share for a candidate, and a one standard deviation shift in ideology induced by a candidate's extremity corresponds with a roughly 2 percentage point decrease in that candidate's vote share. We again observe a similar pattern for candidates in state- and county-legislative elections. These results—where voters' choices in the down-ballot race appear responsive to the quality and ideology of the relevant down-ballot candidates but insensitive to the candidates in the top-of-the-ticket race—are broadly consistent with accounts emphasizing the competence of voters and their ability to incorporate pertinent information about candidates and their policy orientations when making assessments in congressional elections (Fowler, 2020). Similarly, they align with work emphasizing voters' tendencies to reward (or punish) candidates ideologically in (or out of) step with district views (Canes-Wrone, Brady, & Cogan, 2002; Hall, 2015). The results seem to rule out the possibility that all voters simply ignore candidate quality and ideology

¹ Many media accounts do not distinguish between a weak top-of-the-ticket candidate due to, for instance, qualifications versus ideological extremity.

entirely. In fact, as the quality advantage shifts from one party in the top-of-the-ticket race to the other party in the down-ballot House race, voters shift their partisan support commensurately in the same direction, and we find a similar pattern of results for shifts in ideology across offices. Given that our results raise doubts about top-of-the-ticket effects, we explore the purported turnout mechanism often highlighted as the rationale for these effects. We fail to find evidence of turnout patterns consistent with partisan mobilization (or demobilization) in response to statewide top-of-the-ticket candidate quality or ideology.

Our results have several important implications. First, they revise the widely accepted notion that a statewide top-of-the-ticket candidate's quality or ideology exerts meaningful influence over the electoral outcomes for that party's down-ballot congressional candidates. Second, our findings provide evidence in support of voter competency in House elections and, most likely, in other down-ballot settings. Voters do not reward low-quality (or extreme) candidates based on the appeal of their party's top-of-the-ticket candidate, but they do seem to take into account the quality and ideological positions of the down-ballot candidates themselves. Finally, the context for our study raises questions about the ongoing inclination and capacity of voters to assess candidates based on quality and ideology. Our sample of electoral contests is heavily concentrated during a period in which (1) polarization and nationalization were growing but had not reached the heights observed in the contemporary period of American politics and (2) high-quality local news sources were prevalent, creating a rich informational environment. In contrast, the most recent period exhibits considerably diminished (though still positive) quality and ideology effects in down-ballot House races, suggesting changes in how voters learn about, evaluate, or reward high-quality and moderate candidates. If these patterns persist, upward trends in the prevalence of lower quality and more ideologically extreme officeholders are likely to continue, consistent with findings documenting increasing rates of inexperience among newly elected members of the House (Porter & Treul, 2025).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Competing theoretical perspectives both support and challenge the role of top-of-the-ticket candidate effects in statewide elections. Among these viewpoints, two theoretical mechanisms stand out as pathways that could result in top-of-the-ticket candidate effects: turnout and persuasion (Calvert & Ferejohn, 1983). A top-of-the-ticket effect through a turnout mechanism usually entails the candidate mobilizing new voters (Campbell, 1960). If these new voters also tend to support that same party's candidates in other

elections, then down-ballot, co-partisan candidates would receive an electoral boost from the top-of-the-ticket candidate. For example, a high-quality candidate in the senatorial or gubernatorial race might generate enthusiasm among co-partisans in the electorate, mobilizing straight-ticket voters who would otherwise not participate in the election. An ideologically extreme candidate at the top of the ticket may have the opposite effect, motivating supporters of the opposite party to turn out against the candidate.

With the persuasion mechanism, down-ballot candidates benefit from a strong top-of-the-ticket candidate who attracts voters to support not only herself but also her co-partisan down-ballot candidates. "The underlying idea, of course, is that voters may base their decisions for lower offices upon their decisions for higher office..." (Calvert & Ferejohn, 1983, p. 408). A top-of-the-ticket candidate who effectively makes the case for her party's priorities, principles, and values could generate electoral appeal up and down the ticket. In this scenario, the top-of-the-ticket candidate—through their perceived competence, presentation of self, or other aspects of their past or anticipated conduct in office—acts as a sort of lead salesperson to enhance voters' perceptions of the party brand, and a candidate who appears incompetent, unserious, or ideologically extreme may not act as an effective salesperson for the party. For instance, voters may draw on information about the top-of-the-ticket candidate to infer characteristics (e.g., ideology, competency, integrity) about down-ballot, co-partisan candidates (Halberstam & Montagnes, 2015). Alternatively, an unqualified, scandalous, or corrupt top-of-the-ticket candidate may generate negative attention that crowds out the affirmative case for the party in the media. Importantly, for the persuasion channel, the top-of-the-ticket candidate does not influence the turnout decision of voters, only their vote choices.

In contrast, other theoretical perspectives cut against spillovers from the top-of-the-ticket candidate to down-ballot races. These accounts generally emphasize that voters distinguish their electoral decisions across offices based on the characteristics of the candidates running for them, implying high degrees of voter sophistication and competence. Prominent findings include that (1) voters punish politicians out of step with district-level political preferences and (2) voters place a premium on descriptive (e.g., race, gender, religion) or valence candidate characteristics (e.g., quality, leadership, connection to a community). According to this view, voters often make separate assessments based on the individual candidates in each contest, reducing the chances of the top-of-the-ticket candidate dictating down-ballot vote choices.²

² Another perspective is that voters engage in anticipatory balancing; they make a sophisticated calculation about which parties are likely to win office and attempt to balance partisan control across levels of government. This

An important strand of this work finds that legislators ideologically “out of step” with their constituents are more likely to lose future elections (Canes-Wrone, Brady, & Cogan, 2002). As members of Congress cast roll-call votes supporting their party’s platform at the expense of aligning with the preferences of their district’s median voter, they earn lower vote shares in upcoming elections, and their chances of retaining office decline. Related research finds that when primary electorates nominate extreme candidates, these candidates fare worse in general elections than moderate candidates better aligned with district preferences (Hall, 2015). In each of these accounts, voters process and incorporate information about down-ballot candidates into their vote decisions. The observed electoral penalties—for incumbent politicians voting out of step with their district or for nominees who are extremist—require voters to discern the ideological positions of down-ballot general election candidates and to observe whether or not they align with their own preferences.

Another strand of research emphasizes the importance of other candidate characteristics, which also implies separate voter assessments for each office. If voters in congressional elections care about, for example, candidate race (Branton, Cassese, & Jones, 2012), gender (Fulton & Dhima, 2021), or district connections (Hunt, 2021), voters must incorporate information about down-ballot candidates into their choice calculus. Research that directly examines the effect of candidate quality—measured in various ways—on electoral success finds that voters reward higher quality candidates (Buttice and Stone, 2012; Treul et al., 2022). For example, in school board elections, voters tend to prefer candidates who have work experience in education (Atkeson & Hamel, 2020). As with accounts examining the ideological positioning of down-ballot candidates, vote choices driven by descriptive or valence characteristics require knowledge on the part of voters about candidates for each office.

Across these varying accounts, congressional elections serve as a primary venue for the study and testing of theoretical explanations of voter behavior. The coattails literature initially developed around examining top-of-the-ticket effects for presidential candidates on down-ballot House races, and much of the literature on ideological representation and candidate valence characteristics is also in the context of congressional elections. Similarly, politicians, strategists, and journalists have made a variety of prominent claims in the popular media about the importance of statewide top-of-the-ticket effects specifically on U.S. House races (e.g., König, 2024; Walter, 2022; Weisman & Glueck, 2022). As a result, we primarily focus on the U.S. House

as a down-ballot setting. At the same time, the effect of statewide candidate quality and ideology may be heterogeneous across different down-ballot offices. State- or local-legislative races may be more subject to top-of-the-ticket influence than House elections, as voters likely have less information on further-down-ballot candidates. To account for this possibility, we also examine the down-ballot contexts of state-legislative and county-legislative elections.

For all of these accounts of voter behavior, multiple pathways may well be at play both within and across electoral contests. Whether the turnout and persuasion mechanisms predominate or the mechanisms emphasizing voters’ capacity to make separate assessments for each office predominate ultimately amounts to an empirical question. To provide evidence on the question, we turn towards estimating candidate effects at the top of the ticket on down-ballot election outcomes.

A simple framework for decomposing a House candidate’s vote share in the setting of a presidential election could take the following form:

$$\underbrace{V_{it}}_{\text{Down-ballot vote share}} = \underbrace{N_i}_{\text{Normal vote in district}} + \underbrace{H_{it}}_{\text{Down-ballot candidate effect}} + \underbrace{G_t}_{\text{Top-of-ticket candidate effect}} + \underbrace{A_t}_{\text{Aggregate partisan environment}} + \underbrace{\epsilon_{it}}_{\text{Idiosyncratic error term}}, \quad (1)$$

where V_{it} is the House candidate’s vote share in district i in year t , N_i is the normal vote in the district (i.e., the vote share in district i in a “typical” year/race), H_{it} represents the shift in V_{it} due to features about the particular down-ballot candidates, G_t represents the shift in V_{it} due to features specific to candidates in the top-of-the-ticket contest, and A_t represents the shift in V_{it} due to features of aggregate environment (not attributable to the top-of-the-ticket candidates). The quantity of interest is G_t , the presidential top-of-the-ticket (or coattail) effect. The objective is to estimate the effect of the candidates at the top-of-the-ticket on down-ballot vote share. Unfortunately, the counterfactual in studies of presidential coattails is difficult to conceptualize (the effect of a particular set of candidates relative to what?), coattails in these studies generally refer to a vague bundle of unknown candidate-specific features (which features are responsible for the effect?), and the absence of variation in presidential candidates within an election year poses an impossible inferential challenge (the researcher cannot separate candidate effects from yearly partisan tides).

By examining state-level top-of-the-ticket candidates and focusing on their measurable features (i.e., quality, ideology), we better conceptualize the

perspective implies interdependent calculations across offices, but likely a negative top-of-the-ticket effect.

counterfactual and avoid many of the inferential challenges. Meredith (2013) makes considerable progress on this question of top-of-the-ticket effects by focusing on state-level candidates. He studies gubernatorial coattails using a “friends-and-neighbors” design, examining how much of the increased support that a gubernatorial candidate receives in her home county spills over to her party’s candidates for other statewide offices. He finds that each percentage point increase in support for the gubernatorial candidate translates into a 0.1–0.2 percentage point boost for a co-partisan candidate—lower than most presidential coattail estimates. However, a friends-and-neighbors design does not provide evidence on the widely accepted core claim that we seek to test: whether nominating a top-of-the-ticket candidate with certain attributes (in particular, quality and ideology) influences down-ballot outcomes. A meaningful contribution of this paper, then, is to develop an approach that sheds light on the role of these key factors—quality and extremity—for top-of-the-ticket effects.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND INFERENTIAL CHALLENGES

Because we are interested in estimating gubernatorial and U.S. Senate top-of-the-ticket candidate effects on down-ballot U.S. House races, we can leverage variation in top-of-the-ticket quality *within* a particular aggregate national environment:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 \underbrace{V_{it}} & = & \underbrace{N_i} & + & \underbrace{H_{it}} & + & \underbrace{G_{st}} \\
 \text{Down-ballot} & & \text{Normal} & & \text{Down-ballot} & & \text{Top-of-the-ticket} \\
 \text{vote share} & & \text{vote in} & & \text{candidate} & & \text{candidate} \\
 & & \text{district} & & \text{effect} & & \text{effect} \\
 & & & & & & \\
 + & & \underbrace{A_t} & + & \underbrace{\epsilon_{it}} & & \\
 & & \text{Aggregate} & & \text{Idiosyncratic} & & \\
 & & \text{partisan} & & \text{error term} & & \\
 & & \text{environment} & & & &
 \end{array} \quad (2)$$

Model (2) is identical to model (1) except for one change in the indexing: G_t in (1) is G_{st} in (2), which now indicates the statewide top-of-the-ticket candidate effect in state s and year t . Moving from conceptual to operational, this change allows us to measure, and thus account for, shifts in House party vote share due to the national aggregate environment (i.e., “partisan tides”) using election year fixed effects without absorbing all of the variation in top-of-the-ticket candidate quality.³

Our main empirical specification estimates a model that maps neatly onto the decomposition of the House vote share expressed in model (2). Specifically, we esti-

mate the following model using ordinary least squares regression:

$$V_{it}^D = \beta_1 P_{it}^D + \beta_2 H_{it}^D + \beta_3 G_{st}^D + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (3)$$

where V_{it}^D is the Democratic share of the two-party U.S. House vote in district i and year t , P_{it}^D is the Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote (de-measured) in district i in the most recent election, H_{it}^D is the quality differential between the Democratic and Republican House candidates, G_{st}^D is the quality differential between the top-of-the-ticket Democratic and a Republican candidates in state s and year t , γ_t is year fixed effects, and ϵ_{it} is a random error term clustered on the state-year. In most specifications, we also control for incumbency status in the House race. The inclusion of the district’s de-measured presidential vote provides our measure of the “normal” or expected vote in the district, and the year fixed effects account for partisan tides induced by any feature of the aggregate environment. Thus, the empirical setup allows us to estimate, relative to the normal vote in the district, the magnitude of the expected shift in down-ballot House vote share that we attribute to a co-partisan top-of-the-ticket candidate quality (dis)advantage after accounting for the partisan tide from the national aggregate environment and the candidate quality differential in the House race. Using the same empirical setup, we also consider the effects of top-of-the-ticket candidate ideology.

Not accounting for the aggregate environment might lead a researcher to attribute wrongly the effects of a partisan tide to a top-of-the-ticket candidate; state-level data and year fixed effects account for this problem. The second key issue revolves around adequately measuring the features of candidates in down-ballot House races. The pool of general election candidates for a party in a particular electoral setting is shaped by processes like the individual choices of candidates to run or retire, the recruitment of candidates by state party organizations, and the primary election to earn the nomination. These processes likely produce a (positive) correlation in candidate characteristics across offices within a party and state. In particular, features of the electoral environment that induce a certain type of top-of-the-ticket candidate to run for office likely induce similar down-ballot candidates from that party to run. Alternatively, state primary electorates may nominate a slate of similar candidates for various offices. Failing to account for candidate quality/ideology in the down-ballot House race would bias estimates of the top-of-the-ticket effect if these candidate characteristics are correlated across offices. With this challenge in mind, measuring both top-of-the-ticket and down-ballot quality/ideology is extremely important to avoid biasing estimates.

³ In a presidential election year, A_t (and the year fixed effects used to measure A_t) captures the entire national environment, including aggregate shifts due to candidates in the presidential race.

DATA AND MEASURES

For our primary analysis, we use data for U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and gubernatorial elections from 1950 to 2022.⁴ To measure the electoral performance of down-ballot House candidates, we examine the Democratic share of the two-party U.S. House vote.

We derive our primary measure of candidate quality from newspaper endorsements of candidates. This measure, validated and described in detail in DeLuca (*forthcoming*), draws upon more than 21,000 endorsements from 368 newspapers across over 6,000 electoral contests for various offices. The measurement strategy yields an estimate of the relative quality of the Democratic and Republican candidates based on their likelihood of being endorsed by local newspapers, while explicitly accounting for the propensity of each individual newspaper to endorse candidates from a particular party (i.e., the newspaper's partisan bias). The rationale for relying on newspaper endorsements is straightforward: newspaper editors are close observers with detailed knowledge of the candidates, and they have extensive experience making such assessments. These candidate evaluations are holistic in nature, incorporating aspects of a candidate's profile, including relevant experience, competency, honesty, and intelligence, akin to expert evaluations used in other research on candidate quality (Buttice & Stone, 2012).

The standardized, endorsement-based quality measure takes a value of 1 when the Democratic candidate has a one standard deviation advantage in quality, -1 when the Republican candidate has a one standard deviation quality advantage, and 0 when neither candidate has a quality advantage. We use the endorsement-based quality differential at the top of the ticket (a governor race, a U.S. Senate race, or the average of the two in the case of concurrent Senate and governor elections) to examine whether a top-of-the-ticket quality advantage spills over into the electoral performance of co-partisan candidates in down-ballot House races. Our main sample includes all U.S. House races between a Democratic and a Republican candidate for which we have a quality differential estimate in that race and a top-of-the-ticket Senate/governor race.

Additionally, we consider other measures that capture candidate quality. In particular, we examine a canonical measure of quality based on whether a candidate has relevant prior officeholding experience (Hirano & Snyder, 2019). Again, this measure is constructed as a quality differential between the Democratic and Republican candidates. We also consider two other quality measures: the incidence of an incumbent scandal and incumbency status. Candidate

scandals can indicate corrupt dealings, moral or character failings, and incompetence. Thus, researchers interpret this measure as a *negative* signal of candidate quality. The measure draws upon various types of scandals, including personal, political, and financial, for U.S. House members, U.S. Senators, and governors recorded in Basinger et al. (2014), Hamel and Miller (2019), and Rottinghaus (2014, 2015). Finally, we also measure quality using incumbency status. Previous-winning candidates are typically higher quality than their challengers due to electoral selection (Zaller, 1998) and scaring off high-quality challengers (Cox and Katz, 1996). As Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008, p. 1006) note, "Voters elect candidates whom they like on some dimension (e.g., ability or trustworthiness), so, compared to the average challenger, candidates who have won in the past are relatively more attractive on that dimension" and "[c]hallengers may be deterred from running against incumbents who are perceived to be of high ability."

Furthermore, we examine the extent to which top-of-the-ticket candidate *ideology* affects down-ballot U.S. House vote share. We measure candidate ideology using contributor CFscores from Bonica (2014, 2023). Our primary measure is the midpoint between Democratic and Republican candidates' dynamic CFscores in each electoral contest (we construct the same midpoint measure based on static CFscores as well). While ideological estimates based on campaign-finance contributions have the benefit of being widely available for both incumbents and challengers since 1980, they are not without limitations. In particular, campaign-finance scores seem to capture a different underlying dimension than roll-call scores and other measures of ideology, which likely indicates that campaign-finance measures reflect not only donors' ideological preferences but other considerations as well (e.g., Barber, 2022; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2017). Given these limitations, we examine two additional measures of the incumbent candidate's ideological position derived from roll-call votes (based on Nokken-Poole scores and NOMINATE scores). For more details on sample selection, quality and ideology measures, and other variable definitions, see Online Appendix A (pp. 1–2).

The empirical setup follows the specification for candidate quality but considers the ideological midpoint for House candidates and the gubernatorial/Senate candidates at the top of the ticket in lieu of the candidate quality differential. The ideological midpoint between candidates shifts to the left (i.e., in a negative direction) or right (i.e., in a positive direction) depending on the location of the two candidates. For instance, holding constant the Republican candidate's position, a more liberal Democratic candidate pulls the midpoint leftward (i.e., a negative shift) relative to a more moderate Democratic candidate. These specifications allow us to test whether the relative

⁴ For supplementary analyses, we employ state-legislative and county-legislative elections data, which we detail in Online Appendix B (pp. 3–4).

ideological positions of the candidates at the top of the ticket affect down-ballot House vote shares, controlling for the relative ideological positions of the candidates in the House race. We standardize the candidate ideological midpoint measure to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. We also consider alternative operational definitions for candidate ideology, such as indicators for candidate extremity (rather than the midpoint), which allows us to assess whether nominating a relatively extreme candidate at the top-of-the-ticket results in an electoral penalty for down-ballot co-partisan House candidates.

In the empirical analyses, our measures of candidate quality—in particular, the newspaper-endorsements measure—largely capture quality as an officeholder in government (*governing quality*) rather than quality as a campaigner (*campaigning quality*). Stone and Simas (2010, p. 373) similarly make a distinction between character valence (“the bundle of qualities and skills that relate to character and job performance”) and campaign valence (“the skills and resources instrumental to waging an effective campaign”). By governing quality, we adopt the conceptualization of Buttice and Stone (2012, p. 871) and mean “the characteristics, abilities, and traits such as integrity and skills in governing that voters value intrinsically in their elected officeholders,” while campaigning quality refers to a candidate’s capacity to proficiently run and operate an electoral campaign.⁵ A concern may arise that campaigning quality rather than governing quality is a more relevant dimension for assessing top-of-the-ticket candidate quality effects. However, the governing dimension of candidate quality is also likely relevant for this assessment. Holding constant campaigning quality, voters tend to value and prefer candidates based on their governing quality (e.g., Buttice and Stone, 2012). Our empirical approach thus explores whether a top-of-the-ticket candidate’s increased appeal induced by a governing quality advantage spills over to co-partisan House candidates.

In addition, although conceptually distinct, many of the attributes that make candidates strong officeholders also enhance their ability to run an effective campaign. For instance, management skills are required to effectively operate a legislative office and to run an electoral campaign; communication skills are helpful to be an effective lawmaker, to disseminate information to constituents as an officeholder, and to present a compelling vision to voters as a candidate; and strategic decision-making ability helps an officeholder allocate time and effort among competing responsibil-

ities in office while also enabling a candidate to deploy campaign funds and staff effectively. In other words, the skill set conducive to being a high-quality officeholder has substantial overlap with the skill set conducive to being a high-quality campaigner. Thus, while our primary candidate quality measure aims to gauge governing quality, the overlap in skill sets for these two dimensions implies that it also captures campaigning quality. Furthermore, our alternative measures, like relevant officeholding experience and incumbency status, likely capture important aspects of campaigning quality, though these measures inevitably also tap into governing quality. In Online Appendix Section D.III (pp. 11–12), we empirically examine the relationship between our measures of candidate quality and measures that more directly capture campaigning quality, and we observe strong statistical relationships between the two sets of measures. In sum, by examining multiple measures that capture different dimensions of candidate quality, we can assess the relationship (or lack thereof) between top-of-the-ticket candidate quality and down-ballot election performance.

RESULTS

Main results

Table 1 displays the main results examining the relationship between down-ballot U.S. House vote share and the top-of-the-ticket candidate quality differential as well as the top-of-the-ticket ideological midpoint. Examining first the analysis using the newspaper-endorsement quality measure in the upper section of the table, columns (1) and (4) report a naive estimate of the top-of-the-ticket quality effect on down-ballot vote share. While this specification controls for the normal vote in the district and includes year fixed effects, it does not account for down-ballot candidate quality or incumbency. The two naive estimates of the top-of-the-ticket candidate quality effect register a substantively meaningful size and are statistically distinguishable from zero.⁶ Specifically, a one standard deviation increase in the quality advantage at the top of the ticket is associated with a 1.3–1.8 percentage point increase in the co-partisan down-ballot House vote share.

Much of the literature controls for House incumbency status, so we report estimates from such a specification in columns (2) and (5), for all years and midterm years, respectively. While the estimated coefficient on top-of-the-ticket quality reported in

⁵ “[I]ntegrity, competence, and dedication to public service are examples of qualities that define the character and abilities of candidates. Voters value these qualities in their leaders and in government, and they may facilitate voters’ trust in leaders’ ability to advocate constituency interests. In contrast, name recognition and campaign funds, while necessary to mounting a successful campaign, are not of intrinsic interest to voters” (Stone & Simas, 2010, p. 373).

⁶ We hold the samples constant within specifications (1)–(3) and (4)–(6), restricting the sample to the elections for which we can measure quality/ideology at both the top of the ticket and in the House race. We find similar estimates for the naive specifications based on the full sample of House races irrespective of whether we observe House quality/ideology; see Online Appendix Table E1 (p. 15).

TABLE 1 U.S. Senate and governor top-of-ticket effects on U.S. House vote shares.

	All years			Midterm years		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Newspaper-endorsement quality differential						
Top-of-ticket quality	0.013* (0.004)	0.009* (0.003)	−0.002 (0.003)	0.018* (0.006)	0.012* (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)
House incumbency		0.104* (0.003)	0.077* (0.003)		0.103* (0.004)	0.077* (0.004)
House quality			0.039* (0.003)			0.037* (0.004)
Observations	1,694	1,694	1,694	946	946	946
Clusters	435	435	435	237	237	237
Dynamic CFscore ideological midpoint						
Top-of-ticket midpoint	0.009* (0.002)	0.004* (0.002)	−0.001 (0.002)	0.010* (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	−0.000 (0.002)
House incumbency		0.090* (0.002)	0.078* (0.002)		0.085* (0.003)	0.074* (0.003)
House midpoint			0.020* (0.001)			0.018* (0.002)
Observations	4,584	4,584	4,584	2,529	2,529	2,529
Clusters	702	702	702	378	378	378
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Normal vote	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sample	All	All	All	Midterm	Midterm	Midterm

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by state-year are in parentheses.

The dependent variable is the Democratic share of the two-party House vote (measured as a proportion).

The sample includes House races in which the relevant quality/ideology measure is available in both the House race and Senate/gubernatorial race.

* $p < .05$.

columns (2) and (5) diminishes in size, both estimates remain statistically distinguishable from zero. Finally, in columns (3) and (6), our specification includes a control for both House incumbency status and the candidate quality differential in the House race. Based on this specification, the magnitude of the estimated relationship between the top-of-the-ticket quality differential and down-ballot House vote share is near zero for both the sample that includes all election years and the sample that is restricted to midterm years. In other words, once we more fully account for the correlation in candidate quality across offices within a particular statewide electoral setting, we fail to find evidence consistent with a top-of-the-ticket quality effect on down-ballot vote share. The relationship between the House candidate quality differential and House vote share, however, has a substantively large magnitude: a candidate with a one standard deviation advantage in candidate quality is expected to receive about a 4 percentage point boost in vote share relative to a candidate in a race without an advantage or disadvantage (i.e., a quality differential of zero).

The results examining the possible role of top-of-the-ticket candidate ideology on down-ballot House vote share are displayed in the lower section of Table 1. We observe a similar pattern of results for candidate ideology. The naive estimates of the relationship between the top-of-the-ticket ideological midpoint and down-ballot House vote share, reported in columns (1) and (4), imply that a one standard deviation shift in the top-of-the-ticket ideological midpoint to the right (left) is associated with about a 1 percentage point increase (decrease) in down-ballot House Democratic vote share. Again, the inclusion of a control for House incumbency diminishes the magnitude of the relationship in columns (2) and (5). Finally, in columns (3) and (6), once we fully account for the House candidate ideological midpoint, the estimated coefficient on the top-of-the-ticket ideological midpoint shrinks to near zero. In other words, we also find no evidence that candidate ideology at the top of the ticket exerts influence on down-ballot electoral outcomes in House races, but the ideological midpoint of the candidates in the House race again strongly correlates with the vote share in that race.

The similarity in the pattern of results across our estimates for top-of-the-ticket candidate quality and ideology in Table 1 is notable. In particular, the naive top-of-the-ticket estimates that fail to account for features of the down-ballot candidates seem to imply meaningfully large top-of-the-ticket effects. However, once we account for House candidate quality/ideology, the top-of-the-ticket estimates diminish to near zero. Our results show that, when measuring down-ballot quality and ideology directly, candidate characteristics in the down-ballot race correlate much more strongly with down-ballot electoral outcomes than the candidate characteristics for the top of-the-ticket race. Thus, failing to control for down-ballot candidate quality/ideology induces omitted variable bias in estimates of top-of-the-ticket quality/ideology; an analysis that does not appropriately account for down-ballot candidate characteristics likely overstates the magnitude of the top-of-the-ticket effect.

At the same time, one might also worry that the decision to run for down-ballot candidates depends on strategic calculations influenced by the quality/ideology of the top-of-the-ticket candidates. In this scenario, a congressional candidate may enter or exit a race based on the statewide candidate's perceived coattails. That is, the quality (or ideological position) of candidates in the statewide race might itself induce higher quality (or more moderate) candidates in a party to run in down-ballot races in the state. Thus, top-of-the-ticket quality/ideology could have an *indirect* effect through the channel of influencing who runs down-ballot rather than a *direct* effect on down-ballot vote shares. By incorporating the quality differential or ideological midpoint measure for the down-ballot House race, columns (3) and (6) in Table 1 control for this correlated strategic entry across races in the same state—the potential *indirect* effects—and provide estimates of the *direct* effect of top-of-the-ticket candidates.

From a normative perspective, this kind of indirect top-of-the-ticket effect seems less problematic than direct effects. A direct top-of-the-ticket effect would imply that voters do not separately evaluate their down-ballot congressional candidates, which could allow bad candidates to win office on the coattails of high-quality statewide candidates. Such a result might call voter competency into question. However, there is nothing problematic about rewarding high-quality down-ballot candidates whether or not they were induced to run by the top-of-the-ticket candidate. In addition, most claims related to top-of-the-ticket effects are implicitly about the direct effect. For instance, when observers assert that Tom Barrett would have defeated Slotkin with a stronger Republican top-of-the-ticket candidate, the direct effect is the relevant quantity of interest. In other words, holding constant the down-ballot candidates (and their

quality and ideology), would a higher quality or less extreme top-of-the-ticket candidate result in a higher vote share for that party's down-ballot candidate?

Nevertheless, the indirect causal pathway could present an inferential concern, so we conduct several additional analyses to assess the drivers of strategic entry for down-ballot candidates; all of these analyses suggest that top-of-the-ticket effects do not operate through an indirect channel. Specifically, the correlation between top-of-the-ticket and down-ballot candidate quality/ideology attenuates markedly after controlling for state- or district-level electoral conditions, indicating that the electoral environment rather than a specific top-of-the-ticket candidate is most likely responsible for which down-ballot candidates decide to run for office; indeed, durable features of the statewide electoral environment explain more of the variation in House candidate quality and ideology than highly dynamic features (see Online Appendix C, pp. 5–9).⁷ After accounting for conditions in the broader electoral environment, the estimated top-of-the-ticket effect for quality and ideology is near to and statistically indistinguishable from zero even *without* conditioning on House quality/ideology (see Online Appendix Table C3, p. 8).

We also take two additional alternative approaches to remedy this inferential concern, both of which confirm our core results. First, we subset the sample of House races to uncompetitive districts. In lopsided districts, a candidate's electoral prospects in the general election should not contribute to strategic entry/exit dynamics, given that one party's candidate is likely heavily favored in such a district regardless of the statewide candidates. Using the sample of safe districts in Online Appendix Table C4 (p. 9), we fail to find evidence of top-of-the-ticket effects for quality/ideology, but we find large and statistically significant estimates for our measures of down-ballot characteristics. Thus, in House districts unlikely to be subject to strategic entry concerns, we observe the same pattern of results as our primary findings.

Second, we leverage the subset of U.S. House races that feature matchups between the same pair of candidates, similar to the strategy of Levitt and Wolfram (1997). We use variation *within* those repeat matchups to examine whether the top-of-the-ticket quality differential affects down-ballot House vote share. In other words, the repeated contests between candidate pairs allow us to hold constant the quality differential in the down-ballot House race and isolate the effect

⁷ The most relevant aspects of the electoral environment seem to evolve over multiple election cycles within individual states (rather than sudden year-to-year shifts), consistent with state-level shifts due to gradual demographic change, evolving partisan alignments, or changes in state-level political institutions and party organizations. Online Appendix Section C.II (pp. 6–7) examines the relationship between the electoral environment and House candidate quality/ideology in detail.

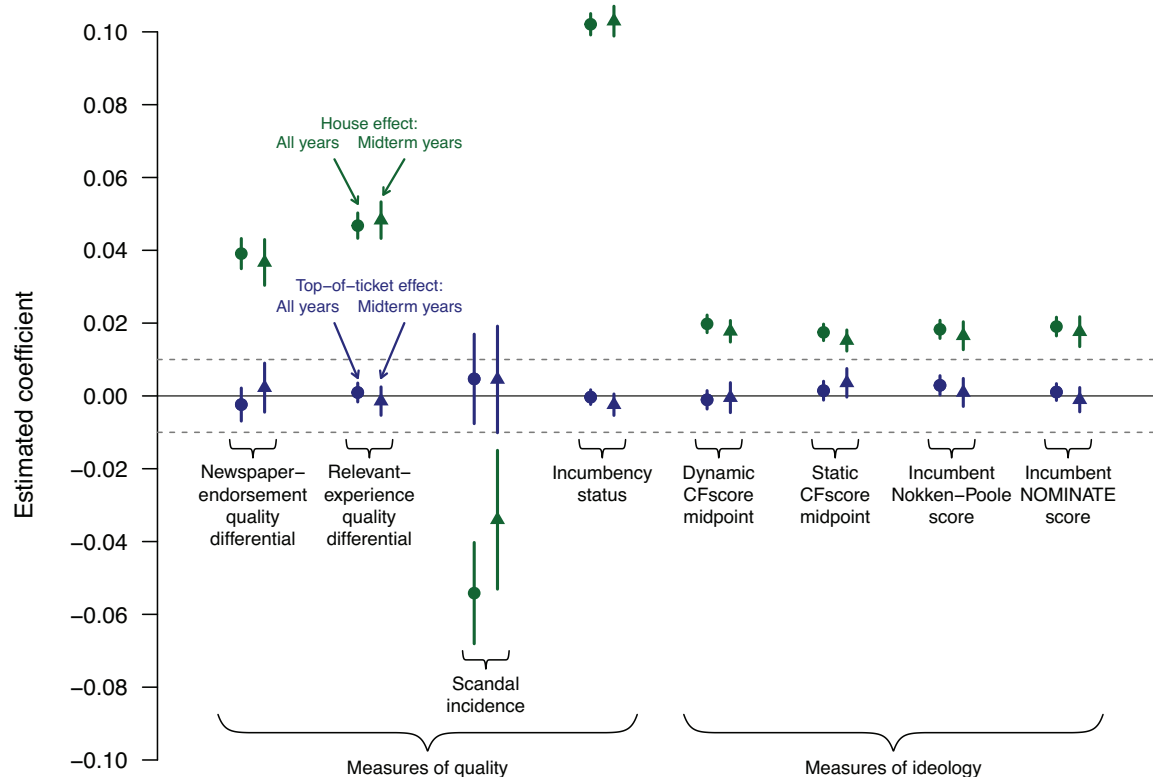


FIGURE 1 Estimated coefficient on top-of-the-ticket and House quality/ideology. *Notes:* This plot indicates the estimated coefficient for the statewide top-of-the-ticket quality/ideology effect (blue) and the House quality/ideology effect (green) as reported in columns (3) and (6) of Table 1 and in the same columns in Online Appendix Table D1 (p. 10). Estimates based on the sample of both presidential and midterm years are indicated with circles, and estimates based on the sample of only midterm years are indicated with triangles. The dashed horizontal lines indicate a meaningfully large effect on House vote share of ± 1 percentage points. The vertical line segments around each estimate correspond to a $100\% \times (1 - 2\alpha) = 90\%$ confidence interval, which is equivalent to the two one-sided tests approach for $\alpha = 0.05$ (Rainey, 2014).

of the top-of-the-ticket candidates on down-ballot vote share. Such an approach also holds constant down-ballot candidate entry and exit decisions, helping to address concerns about strategic behavior for congressional candidates based upon who runs at the top-of-the-ticket. Using this alternative approach to account for down-ballot differences in candidates, we again find no evidence of top-of-the-ticket effects with respect to candidate quality or ideology (see Online Appendix Table C5, p. 9). Taken together, these analyses provide additional support for the claim of minimal top-of-the-ticket effects even using strategies that more fully account for strategic entry and exit dynamics.

Alternative measures of quality and ideology

Importantly, the near-zero estimate for the statewide top-of-the-ticket effect is not sensitive to any particular measure of candidate quality and ideology. In Figure 1, we reproduce this result using various alter-

native measures of candidate quality and ideology. As noted above in the Data and Measures section, we consider three additional measures of candidate quality based on whether the candidates have relevant office-holding experience, whether the incumbent candidate experienced a scandal in the term of the election, and the candidate's incumbency status. All three of these measures are operationalized similarly and range from -1 to 1 . However, because scandal incidence is a negative indication of quality, the hypothesized direction of a top-of-the-ticket effect is negative rather than positive. The estimates plotted in Figure 1 are based on our main specification (see columns 3 and 6 of Table 1). Moving from left to right, Figure 1 shows the set of estimates based on the newspaper-endorsements quality differential measure, the relevant officeholding experience measure, the incidence of scandal measure, and the incumbency status measure. For all of these measures, for both the sample that includes presidential and midterm years and the sample that includes only midterm years, the point estimates for the top-of-the-ticket effect are near to and statistically indistinguishable from zero.

On the other hand, we observe a relationship between House candidate quality and House vote share of a substantively meaningful magnitude for all four measures. As stated above, for the newspaper-endorsements measure, a House candidate with a one standard deviation quality advantage is expected to receive about a 4 percentage point gain in vote share relative to a candidate with no quality (dis)advantage. For the relevant experience measure, a House candidate who has a relevant experience advantage (i.e., a candidate with relevant experience facing a candidate without such experience) is expected to receive about a 5 percentage point gain in vote share. For scandal incidence, which is generally considered to be a negative indication of quality, a House candidate with a scandal is expected to experience about a 3–5 percentage point vote share penalty. Finally, for incumbency status, an incumbent House candidate is expected to receive a 10 percentage point increase in vote share.⁸

We also consider three alternative measures of candidate ideology: the ideological midpoint between the candidates based on static CFscores, the incumbent candidate's ideological position as measured by Nokken–Poole roll-call scores, and the incumbent's ideological position as measured by Common-Space NOMINATE roll-call scores. The estimates for the top-of-the-ticket effect are displayed in the right half of Figure 1. For our primary measure (the dynamic CFscore midpoint) as well as the three alternative measures, for both the sample based on all years and the sample based on only midterm years, the top-of-the-ticket estimates for candidate ideology are near to and statistically indistinguishable from zero. Again, while the top-of-the-ticket ideology estimates are near zero, the magnitude of the relationship between House vote share and House candidate ideology remains substantively meaningful for all four measures. For both of the ideological midpoint measures based on dynamic and static CFscores, Democratic vote share is expected to increase (decrease) by about 2 percentage points for a one standard deviation shift to the right (left) in the ideological midpoint of the House candidates. Similarly, for both of the roll-call score ideology measures, Democratic vote share is expected to increase (decrease) by about 2 percentage points for a one standard deviation shift to the right (left) in the incumbent's ideological position. In other words, for a wide range of candidate quality and ideology measures, we consistently estimate a top-of-the-ticket effect on House vote share of approximately zero, and, at the same time, we find a substantively large relationship between House vote share and House

candidate quality and ideology for all of the measures that we examine.

Nevertheless, while a null result implies an estimate consistent with a true effect of zero, it does not necessarily imply that an estimate is inconsistent with a substantively large effect. Imprecise estimates make this concern most acute. Following Rainey (2014), we employ an equivalence testing framework by defining the magnitude of a meaningfully large effect for a top-of-the-ticket quality/ideology advantage and then taking a two one-sided test approach. In this framework, a two one-sided test with an $\alpha = 0.05$ is equivalent to constructing a $100\% \times (1 - 2\alpha) = 90\%$ confidence interval and determining if the interval contains the meaningfully large effect. The horizontal dashed lines in Figure 1 indicate an effect of ± 1 percentage point for a one-unit change of each measure of quality and ideology, and the vertical line segments that extend from each point estimate indicate the relevant confidence interval.⁹ Based on this framework, we can reject a meaningfully large top-of-the-ticket effect for three out of the four quality measures and for all four ideology measures. Said differently, our top-of-the-ticket estimates are close to zero and precisely so, except in the case of scandal incidence for which our estimates are imprecise. While we cannot rule out a meaningfully large effect for the scandal incidence measure, we also do not find evidence in support of it. In fact, our point estimates for the top-of-the-ticket effect from the incidence of a scandal are positive even though the hypothesized direction is negative.

Quality and ideology effects in the recent period

Increasing nationalization—with electoral outcomes for the U.S. House, U.S. Senate, governor, and other offices strongly linked to presidential election outcomes (e.g., Hopkins, 2018; Jacobson, 2015)—characterizes the recent period in U.S. electoral politics. During this period, voters increasingly seem to make a single partisan judgment that they apply across multiple offices. While much of this literature focuses on the link between the presidential vote and the vote for other offices, the dynamics driving electoral nationalization could imply that there is meaningful heterogeneity in top-of-the-ticket and House quality/ideology effects over time. For instance, research finds that the recent decrease in resources available to local newspapers (in particular staffing) has negative impacts on the level of political coverage that these

⁸ The incumbency boost in vote share is likely due both to the quality advantage that arises from selection effects and scare-off as well as “direct officeholder benefits” (Levitt & Wolfram, 1997).

⁹ With the exception of scandal incidence, all of the quality and ideology measures are re-scaled to have a standard deviation of one or incidentally have a standard deviation fairly close to one (e.g., relevant experience and incumbency status have standard deviations of 0.91 and 0.94, respectively).

TABLE 2 U.S. Senate and governor top-of-ticket effects by period.

	Quality measures			Ideology measures			
	Newspaper	Relevant	Incum-	Dynamic	Static	Nokken-	NOM-
	endorsement	experience	bency	CFscores	CFscores	Poole	INATE
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Most recent period: 2010-2022							
Top-of-ticket quality/ideology	−0.013 (0.008)	−0.004 (0.003)	−0.002 (0.002)	−0.002 (0.003)	−0.000 (0.002)	−0.001 (0.002)	−0.001 (0.002)
House quality/ideology	0.025* (0.007)	0.026* (0.004)	0.042* (0.002)	0.016* (0.002)	0.012* (0.002)	0.007* (0.002)	0.007* (0.002)
Observations	109	1,210	2,243	1,644	1,763	1,142	1,142
Clusters	46	151	281	230	243	161	161
Earlier period: pre-2010							
Top-of-ticket quality/ideology	−0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)
House quality/ideology	0.039* (0.003)	0.048* (0.002)	0.112* (0.002)	0.021* (0.002)	0.020* (0.002)	0.017* (0.002)	0.018* (0.002)
Observations	1,585	7,895	8,424	2,940	3,106	4,449	4,452
Clusters	389	1,018	1,131	472	483	663	663
p -value: $\beta_{\text{Top2010-2022}} \neq \beta_{\text{Toppre-2010}}$.171	.140	.298	.752	.646	.115	.607
p -value: $\beta_{\text{House2010-2022}} \neq \beta_{\text{Housepre-2010}}$.037	<.001	<.001	.048	.002	<.001	<.001
House incumbency	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Normal vote	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by state-year are in parentheses.
The dependent variable is the Democratic share of the two-party House vote (measured as a proportion).

* $p < .05$.

newspapers publish (Peterson, 2021), and inaccessibility to local news is linked with less engagement and greater nationalized voting (Hayes & Lawless, 2021; Moskowitz, 2021). To the extent that the decline of local news sources makes it more difficult for voters to assess down-ballot races separately from the top-of-the-ticket race, we might expect to observe a different pattern of results in the most recent period. Another related possibility is that voters may value candidate quality less than they used to due to increased polarization; for example, Porter and Treul (2025) find that the electoral benefits of candidate experience have declined markedly in the most recent time period.

In Table 2, we report estimates restricting the sample to the period from 2010 to 2022 and for the period prior to 2010.¹⁰ In both the more recent and the earlier periods, the magnitude of the estimated top-of-the ticket effect for all measures of quality and ideology is near to zero.¹¹ We fail to reject the

null of no difference in the top-of-the-ticket effect across the two time periods for all measures of quality and ideology.¹² Interestingly, we do observe notable heterogeneity in the magnitude of the estimated coefficient on House candidate quality and ideology across the two time periods. The magnitude of the House quality estimate declined considerably from the pre-2010 period to the more recent period: the estimate decreased from 0.039 to 0.025 (36% decrease) for the newspaper-endorsements measure, from 0.048 to 0.026 (46% decrease) for relevant experience, and from 0.112 to 0.042 (63% decrease) for incumbency status. We observe a decline of a similar magnitude in the House estimate from the early period to the more recent period for all of four measures of ideology. We can reject the null of no difference across the two time periods for all of the measures of quality and ideology.

Thus, throughout most of the period of our sample, voters seem to exhibit a deft ability to con-

¹⁰ Estimates are similar using alternative cutoffs like 2008 and 2012. In Online Appendix Table E4 (p. 17), we split our full sample into shorter time periods and report estimates from each period.

¹¹ We do not report estimates for the incidence of scandal measure, as our scandal measure for the top of the ticket is only available through 2012.

¹² The p -value for the difference is reported in bottom of Table 2. We conduct the hypothesis test using a “stacked regression” that includes interactions between all variables and an indicator for post-2010. The estimates for the top-of-the-ticket and House quality/ideology effects are identical and equivalent using the interactive approach and using split samples.

sider the attributes of the candidates in their House race (both relative quality and ideological positions) and to incorporate that information into their vote decisions. However, in the more recent period, the link between candidate quality/ideology and voters' choices has weakened. This decline is compatible with several possible explanations, including that voters have encountered greater difficulty in acquiring information about candidates due to changes in the information environment or that voters have changed how they evaluate candidates, perhaps due to heightened partisan considerations in the context of growing polarization.

Additional robustness checks

We examine a variety of additional specifications, sample restrictions, measurement strategies, and alternative electoral settings to assess the sensitivity of our estimates for top-of-the-ticket candidate quality and ideology.

In Online Appendix B (pp. 3–4), we examine top-of-the-ticket effects in the down-ballot settings of state-legislative and county-legislative electoral contests. Voters generally have greater access to information about U.S. House candidates compared to candidates seeking further-down-ballot offices. As a result, one possibility is that top-of-the-ticket effects are more pronounced in further-down-ballot settings relative to down-ballot House races. Using the same empirical approach as our House analysis, we find a similar pattern of results for state-legislative and county-legislative contests for both candidate quality and ideology. Specifically, the estimates are consistent with near-zero statewide top-of-the-ticket effects on down-ballot state-legislative and county-legislative election outcomes. At the same time, we observe robust, positive associations between further-down-ballot candidate quality/ideology and those candidates' vote shares (for the full results, see Online Appendix Table B1, p. 4). Importantly, this exercise carries some caveats: we could only study further-down-ballot races for a more recent and more limited time period, and we have access to fewer measures of candidate quality—both limitations not present when studying congressional races. Thus, we view these further-down-ballot analyses as helping to reaffirm our primary findings for U.S. House races but not as definitive evidence that the absence of statewide top-of-the-ticket effects is universal across down-ballot offices.

In Online Appendix D (pp. 9–15), we examine alternative measurement strategies, including binary indicators for candidate quality and ideological extremity rather than continuous measures, as well as separate continuous measures of ideology for each candidate

rather than a midpoint (Online Appendix Table D2, p. 11). For our main results, we combine gubernatorial and Senate top-of-the-ticket effects, but in Online Appendix Table D5 (p. 14) we report separate estimates for each office. In Online Appendix E (pp. 15–17), we report results based on a variety of sample restrictions, including House races in states outside of the South (Online Appendix Table E2, p. 16) and open-seat versus incumbent-contested races in both the House and top-of-the-ticket races (Online Appendix Table E3, p. 16). Additionally, we consider a variety of alternative specifications in Online Appendix F (pp. 18–20), including estimates based on specifications with district fixed effects (Online Appendix Table F1, p. 18), specifications with incumbent-candidate fixed effects (Online Appendix Table F2, p. 19), and specifications with state fixed effects and state-by-time-period fixed effects (Online Appendix Table F3, p. 19).

In Figure 2, we provide a very high-level summary of estimates of the top-of-the-ticket effect across alternative measurement strategies, specifications, and sample restrictions. Specifically, we report the distribution of estimates for the top-of-the-ticket coefficient for each of our eight measures of quality and ideology based on eight different specifications and two different sample restrictions.¹³ Of note, the distribution of the 128 top-of-the-ticket quality/ideology estimates is centered almost precisely at zero (the mean and median are both approximately zero), and the distribution has a narrow spread.¹⁴ This high-level summary demonstrates that the estimates reported throughout the paper align closely with the broader set of estimates from alternative specifications and measures. To summarize, across a host of reasonable alternative approaches, we find scant evidence of meaningfully large top-of-the-ticket candidate effects on electoral outcomes in down-ballot U.S. House races.

Considering persuasion and turnout mechanisms

As noted in the section on Theoretical Perspectives, two channels exist through which candidates at the top of the ticket could affect down-ballot election outcomes. The first channel is persuasion, whereby a candidate at the top-of-the-ticket convinces voters to support her co-partisan colleagues down-ballot. For instance, a high-quality candidate could make

¹³ We multiply the scandal incidence measure by -1 so that it has the same hypothesized direction as the other measures. All of the quality/ideology measures are standardized to have a standard deviation of 1 or incidentally have a standard deviation close to 1 with the exception of the scandal incidence measure.

¹⁴ See Online Appendix Section FIV (pp. 19–20) for a summary of the distribution by category and measure as well as all 128 estimates.

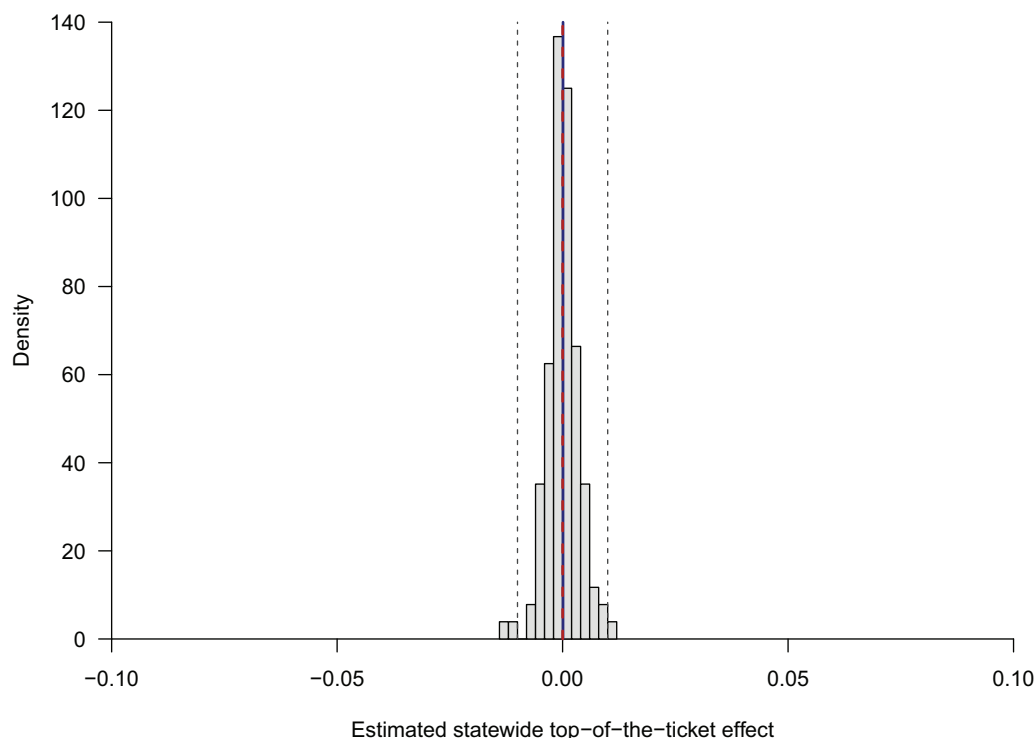


FIGURE 2 Estimated effect of statewide top-of-the-ticket quality/ideology on down-ballot U.S. House vote share across alternative measures, specifications, and sample restrictions. *Notes:* This plot indicates the estimated coefficient on the statewide top-of-the-ticket quality/ideology based on eight specifications for all years and only midterm years for all eight measures of quality/ideology. The distribution is approximately centered at zero: the mean (median) is indicated with a blue (red dashed) vertical line. The interval $[-1, 1]$ is indicated by the gray dashed vertical lines.

the party's policy agenda, principles, and values more appealing to voters, resulting in these voters casting a straight-party ballot. In Online Appendix G (pp. 20–23), we explore patterns of vote switching across offices as the quality advantage shifts from one party's candidate in the top-of-the-ticket race to the other party's candidate in the down-ballot House race. We similarly examine shifts in the ideological midpoint across offices. Overall, as the candidate quality differential (or ideological midpoint) shifts across offices, voters tend to switch their partisan choice accordingly, consistent with Kuriwaki (forthcoming). These results suggest that voters acutely discern and respond to differences in quality (ideology) across offices rather than making a single rigid partisan choice.¹⁵

The second possible channel is turnout. The turnout channel could operate through, for example, a charismatic high-quality candidate mobilizing individuals with a lower turnout propensity. If these voters then tend to support that candidate's down-ballot co-partisans, those down-ballot candidates would benefit electorally. Since our previous results do not provide direct evidence on turnout as it relates to candidate quality or ideology, we examine this issue explicitly.

As a test of the turnout mechanism, we explore the possibility of differential turnout in which the partisan composition of the electorate changes based on the relative quality or ideological positions of the top-of-the-ticket candidates. We describe the analysis and report the full results of this exercise in Online Appendix H (pp. 23–26); we fail to find evidence consistent with differential turnout dynamics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Despite the prevalence and seemingly widespread acceptance of the notion that the quality and ideology of statewide top-of-the-ticket candidates influence down-ballot election outcomes, we estimate a top-of-the-ticket effect for both quality and ideology near to and statistically indistinguishable from zero. The precision of our estimates allows us to rule out an effect of a substantively meaningful magnitude with a high degree of confidence. Although our primary focus is down-ballot congressional elections, we observe the same pattern of results in further-down-ballot state- and county-legislative elections for a more limited time period.

We demonstrate that a naive approach to estimating top-of-the-ticket effects on down-ballot House

¹⁵ As in our main results, we find a diminished relationship in the recent period (see Online Appendix Table G2, p. 23).

election outcomes yields estimates of a modest but nonnegligible magnitude that are statistically distinguishable from zero, ostensibly confirming the existence of top-of-the-ticket effects. For instance, a one standard deviation quality advantage at the top of the ticket is associated with a 1–2 percentage point boost for that party's House candidates. However, this relationship is driven by a correlation in the quality and ideology of candidates across offices. An electoral environment conducive to the entrance and emergence of a high-quality or moderate top-of-the-ticket candidate also tends to be conducive to the entrance and emergence of similar kinds of down-ballot House candidates. However, after accounting for down-ballot House candidate quality/ideology, the estimate for the top-of-the-ticket effect shrinks near to zero.

Instead, the relative quality and ideological positions of the candidates in the down-ballot House races better explain the voting patterns in those House races. Our results suggest that voters exhibit proficiency in assessing the relative quality (and ideology) of candidates separately for each office. This finding counters concerns that low-quality or extreme candidates could win office based on the appeal of the top-of-the-ticket candidate and provides evidence in support of voter attention, sophistication, and competence.¹⁶ However, the electoral context that we examine is mostly characterized by relatively low partisan polarization and a rich, high-quality informational environment due to the prevalence of local news sources. The diminished effects of down-ballot House candidate quality/ideology that we observe during the most recent period likely reflect broader shifts in voter behavior and the electoral environment. One explanation for these results is that voters may be placing less emphasis on governing quality and ideological proximity and more emphasis on partisan alignment due to increasing polarization. An alternative explanation is that voters may have greater difficulty assessing candidate quality and ideological fit as a result of changes to the informational environment with the rapid decline of local news sources. While our study cannot adjudicate between these possibilities, our findings point to important shifts in how voters evaluate candidates that warrant further investigation.

Our results may also have implications for the strategies of political campaigns and the prognostications of political analysts. If statewide top-of-the-ticket


candidates exert a minimal influence on down-ballot House races, then congressional campaigns may effectively direct resources towards highlighting the policy positions and attributes of individual candidates, regardless of the strength of the co-partisan candidate at the top of the ticket. The findings in this paper highlight the potential electoral benefits of localized and candidate-focused campaigns.

While this study provides direct evidence only on Senate and governor top-of-the-ticket effects, the pattern of results poses questions about the validity of estimates of presidential coattails. On the one hand, studies of presidential coattails are subject to the inferential concerns that we have highlighted, and our state-level research design cannot be applied as a remedy in that context; on the other hand, presidential top-of-the-ticket effects could plausibly be much larger than those of a senator or governor. Finally, this study opens several avenues for future research. One set of questions revolves around how the changing informational environment and increasing nationalization of American politics may impact voter capacity, in particular, the ability to evaluate candidates up and down the ballot. Future work could investigate whether the patterns observed in this study persist in news deserts versus locales that have retained high-quality local news sources. Another related question involves whether voter education and civic engagement initiatives can help maintain or even increase voters' abilities to evaluate down-ballot candidates in a changing informational environment. Understanding such dynamics would provide valuable insights into maintaining and promoting informed voter participation across all levels of government.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Anthony Fowler, Isaac Hale, Michael Miller, and audiences at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Conference, the Harris School Political Economy Lunch, and the Harvard Kennedy School Political Science Junior Faculty Workshop for constructive feedback. We also thank three anonymous reviewers and the editors for their helpful suggestions.

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¹⁶ Due to the correlation between governing quality and campaigning quality, a separate concern is that voters might be selecting candidates based on their campaigning skill rather than their governing skill (in other words, the electoral rewards from governing quality could be incidental). In Online Appendix Section D.IV (pp. 12–13), we attempt to disentangle governing and campaigning quality, and our results suggest that governing quality primarily accounts for the relationship between House candidate quality and House election outcomes.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: DeLuca, Kevin, Daniel J. Moskowitz, and Benjamin Schneer. 2025. "A drag on the ticket? Estimating top-of-the-ticket effects on down-ballot races." *American Journal of Political Science* 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.70025>