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The American Political Science Review, Vol. 89, No. 1. (Mar., 1995), pp. 99-107.

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American Political Science Review Vol. 89, No. 1 March 1995

ECONOMIC AND REFERENDUM VOTING: A COMPARISON OF GUBERNATORIAL AND SENATORIAL ELECTIONS

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We compare vote choice in senate and gubernatorial elections from 1986 and 1990 with two retrospective voting hypotheses: the national referendum hypothesis and an economic retrospective hypothesis. Despite the similarities between the office of U.S. senator and governor (same constituency, high levels of campaign spending, highly visible candidates, etc.), we find that different types of retrospective evaluations are used with respect to vote choice. As members of the national legislative branch, senators' fortunes are linked to the success or failures of the president. In contrast, governors, as state executives, are held accountable for perceived state economic conditions, while senators escape unscathed from the same general economic evaluations. These findings shed some light on the nature of vote choice in a political system complicated by federalism and separation of powers.

Americans live in a complex democracy in which institutions within and across federated levels have separate, yet interdependent, policymaking powers. Interconnections are created not only by constitutional arrangements but by the party system as well. To exercise adequately their role as democratic citizens, Americans need to be able to deal with the problems of assigning responsibility across these levels and institutions. Yet political scientists, understandably fascinated with the way voters exercise their right in the single most important election—the presidential—have yet to unravel the complex nature of vote choice in other, subpresidential elections. In order to uncover some of these possible complexities in vote choice, we apply two alternative theories of voting in subpresidential elections to gubernatorial and senatorial elections. The *national referendum* hypothesis suggests that voters in subpresidential elections express their approval or disapproval of the sitting president and his policies with their vote. In contrast, the *economic voting* hypothesis suggests that voters in these elections express support or dissent for the performance of the incumbent based upon how well the economy is doing.

The central tenet of the referendum theory is that all subpresidential elections are referenda on the performance of the incumbent president and his administration (Simon 1989; Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991). If the electorate is satisfied with how things are going and presidential approval is high, candidates of the president's party (incumbents as well as challengers) will benefit from his success. If, on the other hand, domestic or international affairs are going badly, *in-party* candidates will suffer the consequences, losing votes in the November election. Of course, candidates not of the president's party (*out-party* incumbents and challengers) will see their fortunes rise and fall inversely with presidential approval. Evidence supporting a national referendum hypothesis comes mostly from studies of congressional elections at the aggregate level (Abramowitz and Segal 1986; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1984, 1985; Marra and Ostrom 1989; Tufte 1975) and individual level (Kernell 1977; Uslaner and Conway 1984), although there have been a few studies indicating that gubernatorial elections are referenda on presidential policies as well (Piereson 1975; Simon 1989).

The alternative theory of vote choice in these elections comes from the economic retrospective voting literature (see, esp., Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). Simply put, this theory posits a reward–punish decision calculus on the part of the voter. The voter who feels better off financially (or sees the nation as a whole as better off) will reward the incumbent officeholder. Although this instrumental approach to vote choice has gained a great deal of credence in presidential elections (Fiorina 1978, 1981; Kiewiet 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981, 1978; Weatherford 1978; Wildes 1976), its applicability below the level of the national executive is less certain. Aggregate-level studies of the impact of economic conditions on midterm congressional elections have shown mixed success. Many have presented evidence in support of the economic retrospective voting theory (Born 1986; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Tufte 1975, 1978), while more recent studies have demonstrated no effects of economic conditions on general election outcomes (Alesina and Rosenthal 1989; Erikson 1990). Furthermore, individual-level studies of economic retrospective voting in these elections (Hibbing and Alford 1981; Weatherford 1978) have found a much weaker effect of economic conditions on vote choice than in presidential elections. Finally, the conventional wisdom on state elections (Chubb 1988; Stein 1990) is

that insofar as the economy matters, it is not a question of state-level accountability but rather a national-level effect whereby only incumbent candidates of the president's party are rewarded or punished based upon prevailing economic conditions.[1]

These two alternative theories of vote choice in subnational elections (the national referendum and economic voting) have much in common. Both share a retrospective or evaluative explanation of voter behavior: voters ask, "Am I better off today than I was before this administration?" Both also create an accountability model of government. However, the differences between these theories are profound with respect to the two types of elections studied here. Whereas the national referendum hypothesis posits a top–down view of politics and elections by focusing on presidential performance, the state economic voting hypothesis, as supplied here, suggests that state political conditions may influence vote choice in these statewide elections. Finally, the state economic theory focuses specifically on state economic evaluations while the referendum hypothesis posits a more general quality-of-life examination of the president's administration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND SUMMARY OF HYPOTHESES

A comparison of senatorial and gubernatorial elections is interesting because of the many similarities between the two offices. Most importantly, senators and governors have the same constituency—a single state. In addition, elections for both offices offer highly visible candidates, strong challengers, and high levels of campaign spending (see Abramowitz 1989; Seroka 1980; Squire and Fastnow 1994; Stein 1990; Wright 1974). Nevertheless, there are also important differences between these two offices, the most obvious pertaining to the branch and level of government. While the senator is a member of the national legislative branch, the governor is the state executive. Because of these differences in level and branch of government, the nature of vote choice in these elections may differ as well. We expect to find that state electorates hold their chief executive, the governor, accountable for state economic conditions to the exclusion of national forces such as presidential approval and evaluations of the national economy. This expectation is in marked contrast to most of the previous research in this area (Chubb 1988; Piereson 1975; Stein 1990; see also Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990). With respect to senate elections, however, we expect to find that vote choice is influenced by presidential approval.

These expectations are consistent with a *federalist* perspective of vote choice in subpresidential elections (see especially Stein 1990). Voters, according to this perspective, recognize and react to the differing responsibilities and circumstances of different branches and levels of government. For example, we would not expect voters to punish or reward local and state elected officials for the health of our national defense or our relationships with other nations. These issues traditionally lie within the realm of the national executive, the president. However, we would expect voters to blame or reward state elected officials for issues such as the condition of the state economy, education, crime, and other policy concerns normally assigned to state and local governments.

Some scholars have argued that cities and states have no real power to protect themselves from labor and capital flight and that state economies are influenced by external, national forces (Elkin 1984; Friedland, Piven, and Alford 1977; Hendrick and Garand 1991; Mollenkopf 1983; Peterson 1981). In this view, state elected officials are simply managers of their respective economies and hence are not politically liable for state economic performance. However, we contend that there is indeed an opportunity for state electorates to reward or punish incumbent officeholders for state economic conditions. Increasingly, states are actively recruiting businesses to their communities through tax incentives, inexpensive land, and cheaper living conditions for their employees. Such actions are taken by state governments in an attempt to improve their economic situation and decrease unemployment levels (Clarke 1986; Grady 1991). In fact, Brace (1991) has shown an increasing influence of state-specific policies in state economic conditions. Voters aware of such actions may evaluate the success or failure of these efforts with respect to the state's economic health and vote accordingly.

State voters may recognize that their state is doing relatively well or relatively poorly in comparison to other states. Alternatively, voters may simply recognize that their state is doing much better or much worse than the nation as a whole. If either is the case, whom do they blame or reward for these differing situations? Is the president responsible for the economies of the 50 states? Are senators, as representatives of their states in the national legislature, responsible? Or does the state government play some role in the state's standing within the national economy? Although the national government may have more room to "fix" the national economy through interest rates and protective tariffs, state officials have some maneuverability to improve or hurt their respective economies.[2]

Consequently, we argue that the responsibility of managing the state economy is laid at the feet of the governor. Governors, like presidents, are executives. The singular nature of their office makes them more vulnerable to public scrutiny and consequently more likely to be held responsible for state issues. In short, by virtue of their position, governors are visible "targets of discontent" (Kirschten 1990). In contrast, it is difficult to blame any single senator for the actions or inactions of the other 99. As a result, while senators may escape from economic retrospective evaluations (particularly at the state level), governors, because of the singular nature of the executive office, may be more susceptible to state economic

voting. In a similar vein, the governor, as the leader of the state, is expected to do what is best for the state while senators, as representatives of the states in the national government, may be expected to represent their state's interests balanced against the needs of the entire nation.

If senators are not held directly responsible for the state economy, what are their responsibilities? Recall the assertion that senators may be expected to balance the concerns of their state with issues faced by the entire nation. As a result of these expectations, we argue that a senator's electoral fortunes are tied to the president's perceived success or failure. Because senators are part of a national body and a larger legislative institution, their electoral framework for the voters is national. Such a context inevitably ties them to the activities of the president, who is the singular executive of the entire nation.

Peripheral evidence supports our contention that governors are viewed by voters as responsible for issues concerning the state, while senators are linked to the national government and the president. In particular, Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin (1984) find that news stories about the governor examine state-specific concerns, while senators are often discussed in terms of national issues and their proximity to presidential positions. They also find that governors, whether because of the nature of their office or their location to the local press, are more visible than senators. Finally, research has shown that the governor is the second most recognized elected official, behind the president (Hinckley, Hofstetter, and Kessel 1974; Squire and Fastnow 1994).

Our expectations about vote choice in these elections are that senators, as members of the national legislative branch, will be closely tied to the policies and performance of the sitting president. In short, we expect to find strong evidence of retrospective, national referendum voting in senate races. In contrast, governors, as state executives, will not be affected by prevailing opinions about the performance of the president. Instead, we expect voters to hold their governor accountable for state economic conditions. Furthermore, in both types of races, we argue that accountability will be prevalent only in the reelection efforts of incumbents. The fortunes of incumbent in-party senators rise and fall with presidential approval, while incumbents of the out-party benefit or suffer in the inverse. Incumbent governors, regardless of their partisan ties, are held accountable for worsening or improving state economic conditions. Like Hibbing and Alford (1981), we believe it is unlikely for the electorate to blame or reward open-seat candidates for actions or inactions not directly linked to them. Consequently, open-seat candidates should not be affected by presidential performance evaluations or state economic evaluations.

In addition, a modification to both the economic retrospective voting and the referendum hypotheses is the argument that the retrospective (whether economic or quality-of-life) evaluations are fundamentally linked with the party of the sitting president. Some research on both congressional and gubernatorial elections has concluded that only incumbent candidates of the president's party benefit or suffer from prevailing economic conditions (Hibbing and Alford 1981; Stein 1990). According to this research, out-party incumbents are unaffected by evaluations of economic conditions. The same may hold true for the referendum hypothesis. Only in-party incumbents, because of their partisan and institutional proximity to the president, may benefit or suffer from presidential evaluations. In order to test this incumbency-oriented in-party hypothesis, we shall model vote choice separately based upon the party of the incumbent. Thus we shall be able to observe whether incumbents of the president's party are the only candidates affected by improving state economic conditions (in governor's races) or presidential performance (in Senate races).

DATA AND METHODS

The data used in this analysis come from the 1986 American National Election Study (NES) and its 1990 Senate Election Study.[3] The 1986 study covers 24 states with gubernatorial elections and 23 states with Senate elections, while the 1990 study covers all 36 states with a gubernatorial contest and 31 of the 35 states with Senate elections in the 1990 election year.[4] With the changing contexts, candidates, and different aggregate-level forces present across these two election years, we are presenting a fairly robust test of our hypotheses. Further, 1986 and 1990 are excellent years for us to test our hypotheses. Since 1986 and 1990 are both "mid-term" election years, the races we study here are not being overshadowed by the high profile presidential election. Indeed, most gubernatorial contests are now held in these "off-years" for that very reason (Tompkins 1988). In addition, a wide range of economic conditions are prevalent in 1986 and 1990. In 1986, the mean change in real disposable income per capita from 1985 to 1986 was a positive 4.62%, with the least growth found in North Dakota (.84%) and the most in New York (9.93%). Economically, with even more across-state variation than in 1986, in 1990, 49 of the 50 states had positive increases in their disposable income per capita from the previous year, with the mean increase an impressive 7.19%. (Nevada saw a 2.03% drop in its disposable income per capita while South Dakota experienced a 15.95% increase in the same economic measure.) State unemployment in 1990 was also relatively low, as indicated by the mean unemployment rate of 5.2%.[5] Thus, these two election years provide a stiff test of our hypotheses, as economic times were good, with a fair amount of variation across the states, making subtle differences between the states all the more important if state economic factors do play a role in state elections.

The 1986 NES survey offers a preliminary, suggestive test of our hypotheses. In particular, we must be concerned with the national sampling frame of this

survey. As a result, there will be many more respondents from more populous states than from less populated states. Because our interest is in a cross-sectional comparison of vote choice in all states, any national sample of voters is suboptimal: here we are as interested in the vote choice made in Wyoming as that made in New York (Westlye 1983). However, in spite of this limitation, if we find even modest support for our hypotheses among the 1986 sample, we contend that we may still say something about the nature of vote choice in a political system complicated by federalism and separation of powers. Fortunately, the 1990 Senate Election Study does not suffer from this same limitation, because its sampling frame emphasized across-state parity concerns over national sampling concerns. Thus, the 1990 Senate Election Study offers us the best opportunity to test our hypotheses.

The dependent variable used here is the vote of the respondent. The variable is dichotomous and represents a choice of the Democratic (0) or Republican (1) candidate for the office in question (either senator or governor).[6] The dichotomous nature of our dependent variable precludes the use of ordinary least squares, since the assumption of linearity would be violated. As a result, the nonlinear logistic regression method of estimation will be used.

We apply identical models to both senate and gubernatorial races. In both races we expect to find evidence supporting a retrospective theory of voting. However, each race should differ with respect to where that retrospective judgment will be found. By applying identical models to both types of races, we are allowing the national referendum model and state economic voting model to compete against one another. We include individual presidential approval scores in our model to test the notion that subnational elections are "referenda" on the president and his policies. This presidential approval variable is coded 1 through 5, with a value of 1 representing *strong disapproval*, and a value of 5, *strong approval*, of the president's performance.

Our model also includes the respondent's evaluation of the contemporary economic situation to test the economic retrospective voting hypothesis. Respondents were asked to evaluate their personal financial situation, the economic condition of their state, and the economic condition of the nation as a whole. These variables are coded 1 through 5, with a value of 1 representing *much worse*, and a value of 5, *much better*. (A value of 3 indicates an *about the same* response). Because we have information on economic perceptions at three separate levels, we shall include them all. Thus if an assignment of economic responsibility is at all present, we will be able to detect at which level that accountability rests (at the national, state, or "personal pocketbook" level). We include personal economic conditions because some scholars have concluded that the individual's economic condition should be the decisive factor (Campbell, et al. 1960), while others believe that the nation's economic health (as perceived by the voter) is the decisive factor (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). We expect, however, that insofar as there is economic voting in these elections, it will be a the level of the state: perceptions of the state economy will be the predominant focus of our inquiry.

Finally, variables that will be included as "controls" are *partisanship* and *ideology* of the respondent. Political scientists have long known that such variables play an important role in influencing voting behavior (Campbell et al. 1960). They are needed as controls in our models to separate partisan differences and perceptions from economic and presidential performance evaluations. Both of these variables are based upon responses to a survey question and are represented by seven-point scales. For the party identification variable, a value of 1 represents a strong Republican affiliation and a value of 7 represents a strong Democratic affiliation. For the ideology variable, a value of 1 indicates an extremely conservative self-placement, and a value of 7 indicates an extremely liberal self-placement.

Formally, our model takes the following shape:

$$Y = a + b_1(\text{PE}) + b_2(\text{SE}) + b_3(\text{NE}) + b_4(\text{PA}) + b_5(\text{PTY}) + b_6(\text{ID}) + e,$$

where Y = vote choice, PE = personal economic evaluations, SE = state economic evaluations, NE = national economic evaluations, PA = presidential approval, PTY = strength of party identification, ID = ideological strength on the liberal–conservative scale, and e = error term.

RESULTS

The results from an initial test of the two hypotheses are presented in Tables 1 and 2.[7] Table 1 presents the logistic regression coefficients for the contested Senate races held in 1986 and 1990, while Table 2 presents the results from an analysis of the gubernatorial races held those same years. Results from races where there was a Republican incumbent (the same party as the president in 1986 and 1990) are presented next to those for races where the incumbent was a Democrat (the out party in both 1986 and 1990) and those for races where the incumbent retired to leave an open seat. For the Senate races, we expect to find a strong and significant relationship between presidential approval and vote choice, with no evidence of economic retrospective voting. In contrast, we expect to find economic voting in gubernatorial elections and little or no national referendum voting. Furthermore, if the aforementioned incumbency-oriented in-party hypothesis were correct, we would find state economic voting (for governors) and referendum voting (for senators) only in races with a Republican incumbent.

The results from the Senate races suggest a rejection of the economic retrospective voting hypothesis as expected: none of the individual-level economic evaluations (at the personal, state, or national levels)

TABLE 1

Logistic Regression Model of Vote Choice for the Republican Candidate in Senate Races, 1986 and 1990

	DEMOCRATIC INCUMBENT SENATOR		REPUBLICAN INCUMBENT SENATOR		OPEN RACE	
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	1986	1990	1986	1990	1986	1990
Personal economic conditions	−.038 (.225)	.054 (.113)	−.099 (.153)	.088 (.121)	−.258 (.474)	.235 (.288)
State economic evaluations	.317 (.238)	−.119 (.120)	−.137 (.162)	−.031 (.122)	.402 (.452)	−.357 (.321)
National economic evaluations	−.312 (.256)	−.290 (.154)	.090 (.167)	.099 (.167)	.142 (.492)	.216 (.424)
Presidential approval	.591** (.190)	.266** (.093)	.168 (.100)	.328*** (.083)	1.981* (.848)	.134 (.218)
Party Identification	−.508*** (.115)	−.539*** (.068)	−.525*** (.080)	−.377*** (.069)	−.380 (.257)	−.934*** (.212)
Ideology	−.258 (.206)	−.166* (.079)	−.234* (.118)	−.165* (.077)	.147 (.452)	−.466* (.193)
Constant	.417 (1.443)	1.424* (.677)	3.294*** (.880)	1.881** (.703)	−7.623 (4.261)	5.417** (1.922)
N	196	536	303	477	58	122
−2 log likelihood	151.958	498.340	311.280	425.639	31.332	77.819
% correctly predicted	82.65	76.49	76.57	79.66	84.48	86.89

Note: For economic evaluations, a high number indicates better economic conditions (1–5 scale); for presidential approval, a high score represents stronger support for the president (1–5 scale); the partisanship variable is coded so that strong Republicans are 1 and strong Democrats are 7 (1–7 scale); ideology is coded so that a high score indicates a more liberal position (1–7 scale). Standard errors are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

prove to have a significant effect (at $p < .05$) on vote choice in these elections regardless of the type of race, although the effect of national economic evaluations in races with a Democratic incumbent in 1990 is quite close to being statistically significant. With respect to the presidential approval variable, however, the results are quite different. In races with an incumbent of either party, the coefficient for presidential approval is both strong and significant, with the obvious anomaly of races with a Republican incumbent senator in 1986. This supports the argument that there is an element of a presidential "referendum" at work in these Senate elections. Republican candidates (incumbents as well as challengers) benefited from a positive evaluation of the sitting president in 1990, while Democratic incumbents in both 1986 and 1990 and Democratic challengers in 1986 benefited from a negative evaluation of the sitting president. In short, voters in Senate races express their support for or dissatisfaction with the president by respectively rewarding or punishing candidates of his party—a national referendum effect. In addition, party identification is significant and in the expected direction. The more Republican a voter, the more likely he or she supported the Republican candidate. Finally, in all of the Senate races from 1990 and in races with an incumbent from the GOP in 1986, liberalism was significantly and negatively related to a Republican vote.

This support for the referendum voting hypothesis in Senate elections fits well with our federal interpretation of Senate elections. The fortunes of incumbent senators, as members of the national legislature, are tied to presidential performance. However, in open races, the national referendum effect was present only in 1986 and not found at all in 1990; and the results from the 1986 open race model are questionable due to the small number of respondents. In the 1990 open-race model, party identification and ideology are the only significant variables, as we would expect. Because candidates in open races do not have a record related to the president's policies, it would seem implausible for voters to evaluate them in terms of presidential performance. This indicates that voters were not blaming or rewarding open-seat candidates based upon their evaluations of the president and his policies.

The results from a test of the same hypotheses on gubernatorial elections (presented in Table 2) offer very different conclusions. To begin, whereas presidential approval was shown to be strongly affecting vote choice in senatorial elections, in gubernatorial elections the effect is not consistently present. Only in 1986 races either with a Democratic incumbent or in open races does the presidential approval measure meet the level of statistical significance. Certainly, this evidence (admittedly, from our weakest data) does not substantiate the referendum hypothesis,

TABLE 2

Logistic Regression Model of Vote Choice for the Republican Candidate in Gubernatorial Races, 1986 and 1990

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	DEMOCRATIC INCUMBENT GOVERNOR		REPUBLICAN INCUMBENT GOVERNOR		OPEN RACE	
	1986	1990	1986	1990	1986	1990
Personal economic conditions	−.183 (.181)	.005 (.123)	.196 (.248)	−.247 (.126)	−.095 (.176)	.200 (.120)
State economic evaluations	−.391** (.149)	−.276* (.139)	.588* (.261)	.651*** (.151)	.167 (.176)	−.182 (.125)
National economic evaluations	.127 (.176)	−.092 (.158)	−.089 (.269)	.064 (.181)	.010 (.196)	−.188 (.170)
Presidential approval	.545*** (.139)	.034 (.096)	.291 (.181)	.123 (.093)	.330** (.123)	.150 (.084)
Party identification	−.425*** (.089)	−.435*** (.072)	−.544*** (.137)	−.481*** (.071)	−.490*** (.089)	−.559*** (.071)
Ideology	−.099 (.141)	−.100 (.083)	−.731*** (.211)	−.140 (.080)	−.114 (.140)	−.109 (.078)
Constant	.645 (1.008)	2.117** (.755)	2.698 (1.542)	1.233 (.764)	.669 (.906)	2.402*** (.675)
N	296	380	167	378	225	413
−2 log likelihood	265.539	417.814	114.726	390.912	229.757	437.371
% correctly predicted	78.04	72.89	82.04	75.66	74.22	75.79

Note: For economic evaluations, a high number indicates better economic conditions (1–5 scale); for presidential approval, a high score represents stronger support for the president (1–5 scale); the partisanship variable is coded so that strong Republicans are 1 and strong Democrats are 7 (1–7 scale); ideology is coded so that a high score indicates a more liberal position (1–7 scale). Standard errors are in parnetheses.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

which suggests that *all* subpresidential elections are used by the voters as national referenda on the president's policies. However, it does suggest that there may occasionally be such an effect. In every other type of gubernatorial race studied here (races in 1986 and 1990 with a Republican incumbent and races with a Democratic incumbent in 1990), the presidential approval measure does not significantly affect vote choice.

More importantly, in contrast to the lack of economic voting found in Senate elections, we do find state economic retrospective voting in gubernatorial elections. In 1986 and 1990, perceptions of state economic conditions affect vote choice in gubernatorial elections with an incumbent of either party. The negative sign in races with a Democratic incumbent shows that a perceived improvement in the state economy hampers the success of the Republican candidate (the challenger in this case)—a reward for the Democratic incumbent. Similarly, the positive coefficients in races with a Republican incumbent indicate that a perceived improvement in the state economy helps Republican incumbents and hurts Democratic challengers. Although the effect is visibly stronger in races with a Republican incumbent, the fact that it is also felt in races with a Democratic incumbent lends credence to the simple state economic retrospective voting hypothesis: incumbent governors are held accountable for state economic conditions. Not surprisingly, then, the effect does not exist in races where there is no incumbent. Again, candidates for an open gubernatorial seat, like their senatorial counterparts, are not held responsible for past events. Finally, in all types of gubernatorial elections in both 1986 and 1990, partisanship significantly affected vote choice.

Because Republican incumbent governors consistently seem to be more affected by perceived state economic conditions (as demonstrated by the larger coefficients), there may exist some sort of in-party accentuation of economic voting in those races. Although previous research would lead us to believe that this is the case (Chubb 1988; Stein 1990), we can only speculate that these governors were punished more severely or rewarded more handsomely because of their shared partisan ties to the sitting president. After all, for both of the years studied here—1986 and 1990—a Republican occupied the White House. Nevertheless we find this result intriguing and believe a more thorough examination of its implications may be useful. In Table 3, we demonstrate the impact of differing economic evaluations on vote choice in elections with a gubernatorial

TABLE 3

Predicted Percent Probability Voting Republican in Governor's Races, 1986 and 1990

EVALUATIONS OF THE STATE ECONOMY	DEMOCRATIC INCUMBENT		REPUBLICAN INCUMBENT	
	1986	1990	1986	1990
Much worse	42.85	41.00	41.39	33.20
Worse	33.65	34.53	55.98	48.80
Stayed the same	25.54	28.58	69.59	64.62
Better	18.83	23.28	80.46	77.80
Much better	13.56	18.73	88.12	87.05

Note: The percent probability predictions presented here come from the log–odds ratio derived from multiplying all of the independent variables in our model (see Table 2) by their respective mean values, excluding the state economic conditions measure. The product of the state economic evaluations coefficient and the possible values for that variable (1–5) are then added. For each value of the independent variable, a different probability prediction is then calculated. This table is illustrative of the relative effect of state economic evaluations on vote choice for this particular model. For an extended discussion of the interpretation of logistic regression coefficients, see Hosmer and Lemeshow, 1989.

incumbent by using probability predictions derived from the results presented in Table 2.

Setting all of the variables (except state economic evaluations) to their mean values, we calculate a percent probability prediction of a Republican vote in these races based upon differing values of the state economic condition variable. For example, a person living in a state with a Republican incumbent governor in 1990, with mean responses of all of the other variables included in the model and who perceives the state economy as having become "much worse" over the past year will vote for the incumbent with a probability of about 33%. However, another voter, with mean responses to all of the other variables and who perceives the state economy as having become "much better" over the past year, will support the Republican incumbent in this race with a percent probability of about 87%. The difference, then, is slightly less than a 54% shift in probability of voting for the Republican incumbent based upon differences in perceptions of the state economy. This exhibits a strong effect of state economic conditions in races with a Republican incumbent governor.

In contrast, although there is a significant effect of state economic conditions on vote choice in races with an incumbent Democratic governor, it is not nearly as strong as it is for Republican incumbents. For example, the extremes for voters in states with Democratic incumbent governors in 1990 are a 41% probability of voting for the Republican challenger (state economy is "much worse") and about a 19% probability prediction of voting for the Republican challenger ("state economy much better"). Indeed, the differences in probability of a Republican vote between the two extreme responses to the state economic conditions question (*much worse* versus *much better*) are much lower for voters in states with Democratic incumbents (29% in 1986, 22% in 1990) than for voters in states with Republican incumbents (47% in 1986, 54% in 1990).

In these races, Democratic and Republican governors were rewarded for a perceived improvement in the state economy. However, GOP governors were even more susceptible to poor evaluations of state economic conditions than Democratic governors, and Republican challengers were not helped by a perceived weakening of the state economy the way Democratic challengers were. If future research uncovers similar results when a Democrat occupies the White House, then an altogether new modification of the incumbency-oriented in-party hypothesis will be in order. Recall that Stein (1990) found that only incumbent governors of the president's party benefit or suffer from economic evaluations, thus suggesting little, if any, state-level accountability. Our results indicate that while incumbents from both parties were held responsible for state economic conditions and incumbents of all stripes were almost equally rewarded for improving state economic conditions, in-party incumbents were more affected by a perceived worsening of the state economy than their out-party counterparts.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of gubernatorial and senatorial vote choice in two different election contexts supports our initial hypotheses and provides us with some interesting insights to the characteristics of these elections. We find a strong national referendum effect in Senate races whereby candidates of the president's party (challengers as well as incumbents) benefit or suffer from the popularity of the sitting president. Furthermore, in senatorial elections, we do not find any significant effect of economic evaluations on vote choice. In marked contrast, we find that governors, as chief executives of their respective states, are held responsible for the health of their state economies and are not generally shown to be liable for fluctuations in presidential approval.

These findings offer a complex picture of vote choice. Our evidence of referendum voting in Senate elections supports the findings of Simon, Ostrom, and Marra (1991), while the lack of a comparable effect in gubernatorial elections contradicts their assertion that all subnational elections are referenda on the sitting president. Similarly, our evidence of state economic retrospective voting in gubernatorial elections contradicts most of the conventional wisdom on these elections (Chubb 1988; Stein 1990), although we do find something of an in-party incumbency effect whereby incumbent governors of the president's party suffer more from a perceived worsening of state economic conditions than incumbents of the out party—a finding not too different from Stein's (1990).

Given that both senators and governors have the same constituency—the state voters—the differences uncovered here support a federal interpretation of the two offices. Senators, as members of the national

legislative branch, are linked by voters to the national government and are hence susceptible to evaluations of the president. In contrast, governors, as state executives, escape from these national-level evaluations of presidential performance and are instead held liable for state economic conditions. This suggests that despite their similar constituencies, governors and senators are held responsible for different agendas. The federal nature of our government places a different emphasis and perspective on each office. As a result, the electorate holds candidates "functionally responsible" for the agenda assigned to their respective offices. This conclusion is consistent with other research in this area, which has found that voters are able to differentiate the responsibilities of different political offices and behave according to those assigned responsibilities when they vote (Stein 1990).

Notes

We wish to thank Walter J. Stone for his helpful comments, suggestions, and criticisms on earlier drafts of this paper. The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order: this paper is in every way a collaborative enterprise. An earlier version was presented at the annual meetings of the Western Political Science Association, Pasadena, 1993. The data utilized in this paper were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

1. Stein (1990) argues that this finding supports a "functional responsibility" interpretation of federal elections. Governors are not "functionally responsible" for state economic conditions, and incumbent governors are thus not held accountable by state electorates; incumbents of the president's party are used by state electorates to send a message to the president about the economic condition in the states and regions.

2. Furthermore, as pointed out by Peffley (1985), responsibility for economic conditions may be assigned even though elected officials may not have the power or authority to affect change; accountability is a function of the position held, rather than the activities of the person holding the position.

3. Unfortunately, prior to 1986, the NES did not ask questions pertaining to state economic conditions, which is necessary if we are to test for state-level economic voting. In addition, the 1988–92 NES Senate Election Study did not ask about gubernatorial vote choice during the presidential election years of 1988 and 1992. In short, the 1986 NES study and the 1990 Senate Election Study offer us the two most readily accessible data with which to test our hypotheses. Elsewhere we have focused solely on senate elections, using the 1988 and 1992 segments of the Senate Election Study. Because we are unable to compare these results with those from our analyses of gubernatorial vote choice, we do not present them here.

4. Four of the Senate races in 1990 were uncontested. In two states, the Democratic senator ran unopposed (Arkansas and Georgia) and in two others, the Republican ran unopposed (Mississippi and Virginia). Because our hypotheses deal with the necessity of casting a dissenting vote for the incumbent, we exclude those races where there was no challenger.

5. The state unemployment data come from the NES Senate 1990 study used in our analysis. The percent change in real disposable income per capita for the states is calculated from *Sales and Marketing Management*'s annual survey of buying power.

6. In two of the gubernatorial races (Alaska and Connecticut), there were highly visible Independent candidates. For present purposes, we have excluded the votes cast for any Independent candidates in any race. Indeed, in the entire 1990 NES Senate Study sample, only 17 respondents supported an Independent candidate.

7. Before we tested the two alternative hypotheses, we examined the bivariate relationships between the various economic indicators because we were concerned with multicollinearity. However, we found little evidence to support a concern. The lack of collinearity is consistent with the findings of Kiewiet (1983, 88–95).

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