A Gubernatorial Helping Hand? How Governors Affect Presidential Elections*

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March 2014

Abstract

It is commonly argued that a presidential candidate will be helped in a state by having a governor of the same party in office. However, there is little research to support this claim. To address this question we use a regression discontinuity design, which allows us to estimate the causal effect of gubernatorial party control. We show that a presidential candidate is in fact hurt by having a governor from the same party. On average, this penalty is a 3-4 percentage point reduction in a state's presidential vote share in the following election. We also show that voters punish the presidential party in gubernatorial midterm elections. Having established these relationships, we explore why this is the case. One possible explanation is a variation of the ideological balancing argument, whereby voters' choices for one office are conditional on which party holds office at a different level.

*We thank Jim Alt, Andy Hall and the session participants at the American Political Science Association annual meetings, Chicago, 2013, for their helpful comments.

1. Introduction

When a state votes for president, how much sway does the governor have over the outcome? Political practitioners and political commentators typically claim that governors are a positive force for their party's presidential ticket. For example, the night of the Republicans' wave election of 2010, TV commentators rushed to the judgment that the fresh batch of newly elected Republican governors would tip the presidency to the GOP in 2012.[1] In 2011, Reid Wilson, editor of the National Journal's hotline summarized the conventional wisdom thusly in an Atlantic Magazine commentary: "Those governors who do not have to seek reelection next year can donate their political organizations – often the best existing machines in their states – to their party's eventual nominee."[2]

Governors supposedly make a difference at the margin by mobilizing their party's workers and supporters; it is also possible that they exert modest influence on the counting of the votes. Proper empirical evidence for this proposition, however, is difficult to find. For instance, Abramowitz (2001) performed a regression analysis of the state vote in two presidential elections and found no effect for the governor's party. Testing the proposition via multiple regression equations over multiple elections, Powell (2004) found no support for the idea that governors help their presidential ticket. In fact, in one specification the estimated effect of the governor's party is both negative and significant, though quite small.[3]

The conjecture that governors benefit their party in presidential elections must compete with a theoretical argument that implies the opposite outcome – that having a governor of one's party hinders a presidential ticket. The theoretical basis is the idea that voters choose

[1]For example, on Fox News, Howard Dean's former campaign manager Joe Trippi observed: "Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, these are all big electoral vote states and they had Democratic governors. They now got Republican governors and, as Carl can tell you, governors matter a lot. They can actually help in a presidential year in terms of which way the state goes." Over at CNN, Senior Political Correspondent Gloria Borger reached a similar conclusion: "If you look at the governors' races particularly in states like Ohio and Florida, your mind moves ahead or at least mine does to 2012, because Barack Obama would certainly like to have Democrats as governors in those states. It certainly helped George W. Bush when his brother was governor of the state of Florida. And I think that if he loses those, it's going to be – it's not going to be fun." These quotes are from a Smart Politics blog post by Eric Ostermeir. http://blog.lib.umn.edu/cspg/smartpolitics/2010/11/media_myth_exposed_loss_of_dem.php

[2]http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/06/governors-drive-the-political-discussion/240568/.

[3]For another skeptical view, see Jonathan Sides, "Gubernatorial Coattails," The Monkey Cage, June 16, 2011. http://themonkeycage.org/blog/2011/06/16/gubernatorial-coattails/.

candidates (e.g., for president) based on the net policies that result, not just from this one election in isolation but from a sequence of elections. In short, centrist voters seek a balance between the ideological excesses of the left and right. If the right (left) party is in power for one office, they tilt toward the left (right) party when voting in the next election for a different office. We see this with the congressional vote at midterm where parties usually do worse when they control the presidency than when they do not, thus contributing to the presidential party's loss of seats at midterm (Erikson, 1988; Alesina and Rosenthal, (1989, 1995, 1996); and Bafumi et al. 2010). A similar pattern is found for state legislative elections, where voters punish the governor's party at midterm (Folke and Snyder, 2012). In the theoretical section of the paper we lay out the argument for why we could expect balancing also across different levels of government.

Voting for balance does not require that voters hold complex spatial models of ideology in their heads. All that is required is that the presence of a Republican (Democratic) governor in a state makes voters gravitate toward the Democratic (Republican) presidential candidate. The motivation could be a simple belief that no party should hold all the major offices. Or, voters could respond directly to ideological tendencies of policies enacted under the sitting governor, for which the governor's party affiliation is a marker. Also, the party of the governor could matter for interest group behavior, which would be a mediating factor for voters following a balancing behavior in their voting.

To examine the gubernatorial effect on presidential elections, we use data drawn from a dataset of election results covering every presidential and gubernatorial election from 1880 through 2012. We study governors who are not up for reelection in the presidential year, and therefore still in power for two more years at the time of the presidential election.[4] We test for the effect of gubernatorial party control on the state's presidential vote. For much of the analysis, we restrict our cases to post-World War II and sometimes further to non-southern states only. The dependent variable of interest is the change in the Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote from the previous election.

A simple test of this question is to see whether the presidential vote shifts more or less

[4]In some states governors are elected in odd-numbered years, so in these states the governor will be in power for one more year or three more years.

in the direction of the governor's party. While informative, this test is open to the claim of being influenced by unobserved variables. Therefore, we use a regression discontinuity design (RDD). The specific research design follows Folke and Snyder (2012). In effect, the RDD involves comparing the presidential vote shift in those states where a Democratic governor barely won with those where a Republican governor barely won. In these states where the gubernatorial vote was very close, the difference between the states with the two types of winning governors is basically a coin flip, virtually a random draw.[5] Thus, states with Democratic governors who barely won election and states with Republican governors who barely won election should be virtually identical on all variables, except for variables that are directly affected by the gubernatorial election outcome.

The estimates show that winning the governor's election systematically leads to a loss for the party's presidential candidate in the state in the subsequent presidential election. On average, this loss is about 3 percentage points when estimated for the entire sample, but rises to 4 percentage points or higher when the analysis is restricted to for the postwar period outside the South, the cases where party ideological distances are most pronounced. Given our identification strategy, we can interpret this as a causal effect. Thus, we can rule out the that the result is due to omitted variables such as swings in party popularity, and we can also rule out that it is due simply to reversion to the mean. The bottom line from this analysis that we find strong evidence that there is a penalty for the party of the governor in presidential elections.

In a recent paper Caughey and Sekhon (2012) raises concerns regarding the validity of electoral RD designs, which are based on Snyder's (2005) finding of incumbents winning noticeable more of the very close election to the U.S. House of Representatives. They argue that under some conditions the outcomes of the very close elections will not be as good as random, which would lead to biased RDD estimates. In a series of robustness and placebo tests we confirm the finding of Eggers et. al. (2014) that this type of sorting is not a concern in other electoral settings. Instead these test provide strong evidence for that the identifying assumption holds.

[5]See, e.g., Imbens and Lemieux (2008) for an overview of the RDD methodology. See, e.g., Lee, et al. (2004) and Ferreira and Gyourko (2009) for applications involving U.S. elections.

Although our RDD estimates establish that there is a negative effect, they say little about why this is the case. In an extension of our main analysis we use data from the American National Election Studies to study the effect of gubernatorial elections on individual presidential vote choices This allows us to study the behavior of voters as a function of their individual characteristics. In support of the balancing hypotheses we find that the negative effect of holding the governor's office is conditional on the respondent's knowledge of partisanship and information. The effect is both larger for voters with weak or no party ties, and for voters that are more informed.

Apart from balancing, we discuss other potential mechanisms. For example, it could be that governors time unpopular policies so that their impact on the party as a whole is mainly felt during the midterm election. Also, we could consider a story of differential mobilization, where the party holding the governorship becomes complacent, while the opposition becomes especially motivate to win.

Finally, we examine the opposite relationship as that in our main analysis – that is, how does the party of the president relate to gubernatorial elections? We find evidence that there is a similar, and possibly even larger, effect. Our results suggest that winning the presidency is associated with an average vote share loss of 5 percentage points or more in the subsequent gubernatorial elections.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section we provide a theoretical framework for understanding why voters would engage in balancing behavior not only across different offices within the same level of government.

First we should however provide the rationale for ideological, policy or partisan balancing across the executive and legislature, which follow from for example Erikson (1988) and Alesina and Rosenthal (1989, 1995, 1996). Assuming Democratic executives tend to promote policies that are more liberal than those desired by the most citizens, and Republican presidents tend to promote policies that are more conservative than those desired by the most citizens, voters can use midterm elections to counteract the results of executive elections. By

electing congressional representatives of the opposite political party they make it more likely that the president and congress will have to bargain to pass legislation, and the resulting policies will tend to be more moderate. Another type of behavior consistent with balancing theory is the possibility that voters can perform anticipatory balancing when they expect a landslide for the executive (see, e.g., Scheve and Tomz 1999).

This argument can also be applied to balancing across different level of government. Kedar (2006, 2009) forcefully argues that the same effect of elections in sequence can occur in the federal domain, so that knowing who controls the national government influences state or provincial election outcomes. The idea is that voters see their net policy as the product of both the fixed national party configuration and the pending subnational partisan control. Indeed, there is persuasive evidence that national party control influences Lander elections in Germany (Lohman et al., 1997; Kern and Hainmueller, 2006; Kedar, 2006), provincial elections in Canada (Erikson and Fillipov 2001), and (as shown below) gubernatorial elections at the presidential midterm in the US. In each case, the party in control at the national level suffers at subsequent subnational elections.

Here we argue that if voters engage in this sort of balancing behavior in subnational elections to balance known national policy, it is plausible that voters do the reverse: votes for president may be influenced by the policy decisions at the state level resulting in part (particularly in voters' minds) from the party that controls the governorship. These policy considerations can be both retrospective and prospective. Viewed by voters in the presidential year, the previous gubernatorial election had generated policies downstream that generally tilted in the direction of the governor's party and presumably would continue to do so for the next two years until the next gubernatorial election. The median voter sees a mechanism to push net policy back to the center by trying to elect the opposite party in the presidential election.

Of course for this argument to make sense, the voter's relative utility for the two presidential candidates must be partially dependent on the voter's utility for policies under the current governor. One possibility is that voters consider their overall tax burden and also the total bundle of services they receive from government. Each is a function of national

and state legislation and actions in a way that the appeal of policies at one level is related to policies at the other. We present a simple formalization of the argument in the Appendix.

Consider taxes. A voter's marginal utility loss from taxation increases as a function of net taxes extracted, regardless of the government source. That is, a dollar paid to the state produces the same pain as a dollar given to the federal government. Conduct the mental experiment where the control condition is a Republican governor and the treatment condition is a Democratic governor. Suppose the treatment results in higher taxes for our subject, the median voter. The treatment of a Democratic regime at the state level leads to the higher taxation experienced and expected for the next two years.[6] Thus, the treatment spurs the median voter with extra motivation to seek tax relief. This can be accomplished by voting for the Republican presidential candidate, who by reputation will be more frugal than his Democratic opponent.

A similar argument applies to spending. Voters enjoy the fruits of government spending whether they are from actions at the state or national level. In addition, state spending is directly affected by actions at the national level that control the spigot of federal grant money for the safety net (e.g., Medicaid), education, transportation, and other government functions. Consider again our thought experiment where the median voter is treated to either a Republican or a Democratic governor. Under the control condition, the Republican governor resists spending on government programs and will continue to resist for two more years. Under the experimental condition, the Democratic governor spends freely on redistribution and government services and will continue to do so for two years. Thus, while the control condition motivates our median voter to seek relief in the form of federal grants to the state and other federal actions that might substitute for state inaction, this concern is relaxed under the treatment condition of a Democratic governor. Thus, our median voter is more inclined to vote for the spendthrift Democratic presidential candidate when the Republican controls the governorship.

Obviously, the taxing and the spending arguments can be combined. In our thought experiment, it is important not to compare the typical median voter in states under Repub-

[6]See, e.g., Kousser and Phillips (2009, 2012) for evidence that governors are able to move fiscal policy in their preferred direction.

lican governors with the typical median voter in states under Democratic governors. Rather, we are considering the same median voter under two conditions, with everything else being equal except that the governor could be of either party. The hypothesized negative effect of party control of the governor could be a small increment of the vote, difficult to detect under normal circumstances, just as the positive effect of a gubernatorial helping hand could be real but miniscule.

3. Data and Specifications

3.1. Data

We use data from elections between, 1882-2012, which we split into two time periods and the pre and post-WWII periods. The main dependent variable is the change in state presidential vote share since the last presidential election. To improve the precision of our estimates, we demean the dependent variable by subtracting the yearly mean of the change in state presidential vote share. This captures "national tides." The key independent variable is the partisan division of the vote in gubernatorial elections. Electoral data are from the ICPSR and publications by the election officials of each state. Gubernatorial and presidential election returns are measured in terms of the Democratic percent of the two-party vote.

The dependent variable is distributed quite symmetrically around zero, with a mean of -0.11 and standard deviation of 9.6. The Democrats control the governorship in 55.3% of our midterm elections. One important feature of the data is the large number of close gubernatorial elections, at least outside the South. The gubernatorial election margin variable is distributed symmetrically about 0, with a mean of 3.6 and a standard deviation of 15.4. In nearly half of the elections in our main sample (283 out of 669) the winning margin is below 5%.

3.2 Specifications

We consider four different specifications for estimating the effect of the gubernatorial party on state presidential vote share: (i) OLS, (ii) an RDD specification with a flexible control polynomial, (iii) an RDD specification in which the sample is restricted to close

elections, and (iv) an RDD specification in which the sample is restricted to close elections, and in which we include a local linear control function. The OLS specification quantifies the general association between gubernatorial party and the state presidential vote share, but it does not provide an estimate of the causal effect. However, with the RDD we can estimate the causal effect of the gubernatorial party on the presidential vote share.

Let i index states, and let t index election years, where each election year t corresponds to two years, i.e., one-half of a presidential election cycle. Let P_{it}^D be the vote share won by the Democratic presidential candidate in state i in election t; let $\Delta P_{it}^D = P_{it}^D - P_{it-2}^D$ be the change in the Democratic presidential vote share in state i between the last presidential election at time $t-2$ and the election at time t; and let $G_{i,t-1}^D$ be a dummy variable indicating whether or not state i has a Democratic governor during the presidential mid-term at time $t-1$.

The OLS specification assumes a simple relationship between ΔP_{it}^D and $G_{i,t-1}^D$:

$$\Delta P_{it}^D = \beta_0 + \beta_1 G_{i,t-1}^D + \gamma P_{it-2}^D + \epsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

where β_1 measures the relationship between having a Democratic governor and the change in state Democratic vote share in the presidential election. Note that we also include the lagged presidential vote share P_{it-2}^D, which might capture reversion to the mean. We estimate models with and without this control variable.

The RDD regressions follow three of the standard RDD approaches. The first approach uses the full sample and includes a control function. The control function is a low-order polynomial function of the forcing variable, which is the Democratic margin of winning or losing in the gubernatorial election in state i at time $t-1$, $M_{i,t-1}^D$. The basic idea behind this specification is that the treatment variable, $G_{i,t-1}^D$, is entirely determined by the forcing variable, $M_{i,t-1}^D$. Because of this, we can control for potential endogeneity of the treatment variable, and also deal with other problems, such as omitted variable bias, by controlling flexibly for the forcing variable. We present results for 3rd- and 4th-degree polynomials in the tables below. Following the conventional RDD approach, we use a separate control

function on each side of the threshold. To reduce the possibility of over-fitting the control polynomials by including outliers in the tails of the vote share distribution, we limit the sample to observations where the parties have between 40% and 60% of the vote share. After this exclusion we are left with 70% of the total sample.

The specification is then:

$$\Delta P_{it}^{D} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 G_{i,t-1}^{D} + \gamma P_{it-2}^{D} + \delta_t + f(M_{i,t-1}^{D}) + \epsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

where $f(M_{i,t-1}^{D})$ is the control function. Note again that we also include the lagged presidential vote share P_{it-2}^{D}. It is not necessary to include this variable for our identifying assumptions to hold. It is also not necessary for us to demean the data by subtracting the yearly mean from the dependent variable[7]. These steps, however, substantially reduce the estimated standard errors. In the robustness checks, we show that the point estimates are similar with or without these adjustments.

The other two RDD approaches employ the simple OLS specification in equation (1) above, but limit the sample to "close" elections – i.e., those where the winner's share of the vote is close to 50%. We consider several different vote margins around 50% to define close elections, including 5%, 3%, 2% and 1% margins. In the two narrowest windows, we the run the specifications without any control for the forcing variable. In the two wider windows we include a local linear control of the forcing variable. Including the local linear control allows us to account for the possibility that there is a strong relationship between the forcing variable and our outcome even within the window of "close" elections.[8] In the local linear specification we allow the slope of the linear control function to vary on either side of the threshold.

4. Basic Results

4.1. Graphical Analyses

Following previous RDD work, we begin with a graphical analysis. Figures 1(a)-1(d)

[7] We do this separately for each one of our estimation samples.

[8] See Snyder et. al. (2014) for a discussion of this potential problem.

show binned averages of the change in state presidential vote share,[9] ΔP_{it}^{D}, as a function of the percentage of votes received by the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, $G_{i,t-1}^{D}$. The range of $G_{i,t-1}^{D}$ in the figures is 40% to 60%, which covers 75% of the observations in our sample. The interval for each bin is 1 percentage point. Figure 1(a) shows the full sample from 1882 to 2012, 1(b) excludes the southern states, 1(c) shows the period after WWII for all states, and 1(d) shows the period after WWII with the southern states excluded.

It seems clear from Figure 1(a) that for the full sample ΔP_{it}^{D} falls as we cross the 50% threshold and move from Republican gubernatorial control to Democratic control. The downward shift appears to be around 2-3 percentage points. Figure 1(b) shows that when we exclude the southern states the downward shift across the threshold appears to be of the same magnitude, but the drop is clearer. Figure 1(c) shows that in the post-WWII period the downward shift appears to be slightly larger, and Figure 1(d) shows that when we exclude the southern states the drop becomes even clearer. Note that the overall relationship between the change in state presidential vote share and the gubernatorial vote share is positive, if we consider cases far from the threshold.

Overall, while it is difficult to pin down the magnitude, the figures indicate that there is a loss in state presidential vote share for the party of the governor. Most importantly the shifts in the outcome variable around the 50% threshold indicate that this is a direct effect of gubernatorial party control, rather than general trends in party support, reversion to the mean, or other potential omitted variables.

4.2. Regression Analyses

We now turn to the regressions. Table 1 presents the main results. Each row of the table represents a different specification, and each column covers a different sample. Column 1 covers the full time period and all states, column 2 excludes the south, column 3 covers the post-WWII period for all states, column 4 covers the post-WWII period excluding the south, column 5 covers the pre-WWII period for all states and column 6 covers the pre-WWII period excluding the south. Each cell contains the estimated coefficient on the Democratic

[9] As in the regressions we subtract the yearly mean of the change in state presidential vote share.

governor dummy variable – i.e., β_1 in equation (1) or (2) – as well as the standard errors in parentheses and number of observations in brackets. Estimates that are significant the 5% level are highlighted by being in bold font.

Consider the full time period, shown in column 1. The OLS estimate shows no overall relationship between the party of the governor and the change in state presidential vote share. The estimates for the RDD specifications, however, are all negative and at least weakly statistically significant. The range of the estimates is large, extending from -2.4 to -4.5. The reason for the large variation in the estimates can be traced back to Figure 1(a). First, there is a considerable amount of noise in the relationship between the forcing variable and the outcome variable. This means that the estimates may vary considerably as we change the margin used to define close elections, but all of the estimates are all statistically significant at the 5% level. Also, as we increase the margin we use to define close elections, we capture more and more of the overall positive relationship between the forcing variable and the outcome variable. By including the local linear control function in the two wider windows we address this issue. Although the range of the estimates is fairly large, we can be confident that the party that controls the governor's office can expect a noticeable vote loss in the presidential election.

Column 2 shows that the loss in the presidential vote share is only slightly larger for the non-southern states. The estimated vote loss in the RDD specifications ranges from about -2.4 to -4.9. Also, all of the estimates are statistically significant at the 5% level. Note that the standard errors shrink in some specifications when we exclude the southern states, even though this reduces the sample size.

Columns 3-6 subdivide the analysis into the years through World War II (1882-1932) and the post-WWII years (1946-2012), again for all states and without the south. Here, the evidence for a gubernatorial penalty is far greater for the post-WWII years than the preceding period. In fact, the difference in results for the two eras is quite distinct.

The evidence for the post-WWII period is concentrated in columns 3 (all states) and 4 (non-south). The OLS estimates are still close to zero. But the RDD estimates are decidedly negative and stable. For all states, the estimates are in the range from -2.5 to

-4.3 percentage points. The results are particularly crisp when the south is excluded, with estimated effects between -3.2 and -4.8 percentage points. All of the 12 estimates for the post-WWII period are statistically significant. In fact, for the non-south cases, all but one of the estimates is significant at least at the .005 level (one chance in 500; two tailed-test). Thus, the evidence is compelling that for the post-WWII period, especially outside the south, holding the governorship has cost a party a large penalty in the range of 4 percentage points at the next presidential election. We do not find any effect during the earlier period, whether for all states (column 5) or for non-south only (column 6).

The evidence that the gubernatorial penalty may be conditional can be interpreted as supportive of ideological balance as a cause of the penalty. During most of the pre-WWII period, the left-right divisions that existed – involving populism, the progressive movement, and the nascent New Deal alignment – did not clearly follow party lines.[10] With ideological distinctions blurred between Democrats and Republicans, the party of the governor would not have been a consistent motivator of presidential voting. Postwar, the now familiar distinction between liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans crystallized, including as it involved federal relations between the national government and the states. This makes ideological balancing of the governor and president a plausible electoral consideration. Further, if ideological balancing is the motivator of the gubernatorial penalty, it should not surprise that the effect has been strongest outside the south. Only in very recent decades has southern politics been seen as an ideological battle between liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans.

4.3. Robustness Checks

We perform four types of robustness check to test the validity of our RDD results in Table 1. First, we exclude all cases where an incumbent is running (i.e. open seat elections), as incumbents involved in close elections might be particularly unpopular. Second, we omit the

[10]From the 1890s through the 1920s both parties had progressive and conservative wings. Prominent progressive reformers include Republican leaders such as Teddy Roosevelt, Charles Evans Hughes, Robert LaFollette, George Norris, and Fiorello LaGuardia, as well as Democrats such as Woodrow Wilson and Al Smith. See, e.g., Sundquist (1983) for discussions of the earlier "party systems." See Burner (1968) for an analysis of the sharp divisions inside the Democratic party in the 1920s. See Hirano an Snyder (2007) for evidence of the Democratic party's strong shift to the left during the New Deal era.

control for lagged presidential vote share, and define the dependent variable as the "raw," non-demeaned, change in state presidential vote share. Third, we examine the cases with simultaneous gubernatorial and presidential elections. Fourth, and finally, we perform three placebo tests. In these, we test whether the party of the governor appears to affect three different outcome variables from the previous election. This is a key test of the identifying assumptions of the RDD. If the identifying assumptions hold, then in the RDD specifications the party of the governor should not be related to outcomes in previous elections.

The results are presented in Table 2. Each row covers a different RDD specification, and each column covers a different robustness check. As in Table 1, each cell contains the point estimate of the Democratic governor dummy variable – i.e., β_1 in equation (1) or (2) – as well as the standard error of the estimate in parentheses, and number of observations in brackets.

We show the results for the open seat elections in columns 1 and 2, using the full sample in the first column and the post-WWII period in the second. Irrespective of the period we can clearly see that the results are not driven by unpopular incumbent governors that win close elections. In fact, all of the point estimates are larger than when we also include elections with incumbents. This suggests that, if anything, it is more "costly" to win an open seat election than one where an incumbent is running.

In column 3 and 4 we drop the control variables and do not subtract the yearly mean from the dependent variable . Column 3 shows estimates for the full period, and column 4 covers the post-WWII period. In these specifications all the point estimates are negative, but the range is larger. Also, as expected, the standard errors become much larger than in our baseline specifications. Thus, none of the estimated coefficients are statistically significant. Most importantly, although the point estimates are of course a bit different from those in Table 1, none are very different from the estimates in the baseline specification. This shows that the control variables are needed only to increase the precision of the estimates.

Next, column 5 shows that the party of the sitting governor no longer matters for the presidential contest when the state holds a fresh gubernatorial election in the presidential

year.[11] All point estimates for the RDD specifications are small and statistically insignificant. This is as expected, since for these cases the party of the next governor is being determined at the same time as party of the next president, so the party of the sitting governor should be largely irrelevant.

Finally, columns 6-8 show the results of the placebo tests. The outcome variable in column 6 measures Democratic control of the state legislature after the previous election;[12] the outcome in column 7 is a dummy indicating whether the Democratic candidate won the previous gubernatorial election; and the outcome in column 8 is the state presidential vote share in the previous presidential election. The estimated coefficients for all outcomes and specifications are close to zero, and none are even close to being statistically significant. Thus, the placebo tests give strong support for the identifying assumptions of the RDD. This increases our confidence that the RDD estimates provide the causal effect of the party of the governor.

In Figure 2 we show the results of the placebo tests from columns 6-8 graphically using the same set up as in Figure 1. This graphical analysis validates the results from the placebo regressions. There is no shift in neither one of the three outcome variables as we cross the threshold for having a Democratic governor in the future. Together with the regression results this corroborates our identifying assumptions and provides strong evidence that there is no reason to be concerned about the type of sorting around the threshold described by Caughey and Sekhon (2012).

4.4. Individual Level Analysis

In this section we continue our evaluation of the effect of gubernatorial elections on presidential outcomes by analyzing individual-level data from the American National Election Studies. The individual level survey data allows us to study the behavior of voters as a function of their individual characteristics. The motivation is to see if evidence can be found that balancing against the governors party is conditional on the respondents partisanship

[11] Some states hold gubernatorial elections every two years and some hold gubernatorial elections only in presidential election years.

[12] This variable is -1 if Republicans control a majority of the seats in both chambers of the legislature, $+1$ if Democrats control a majority of seats in both chambers, and 0 if control is split between the parties.

and information. Intuitively, "balancing" considerations should have a larger effect on the vote choice of those with weak or no party ties. For partisans, such considerations – even if taken into account – are unlikely to change vote choice. And obviously, balancing for ideological purposes would require a certain amount of political knowledge.

Voting for president based on the governors party would seem to be the province of sophisticated voters who know a lot about politics. We find strong support for these conditional hypothesis: Our cases are nonsouthern presidential voters 1952-2008 in the NES cumulative file.. As in the main analysis, we restrict attention to cases where the previous gubernatorial election was "close." The analysis is straightforward: We regress the vote choice on the governors party, controlling for the gubernatorial vote two years before, and the respondents party identification on the full seven-point scale. To ensure as much precision as possible given the noisy survey data, we control for year and state fixed effects. We first analyze all respondents from nonsouthern states that fit our closeness criterion and then again, separately by partisan and information subgroup. Echoing our aggregate analysis, we find that survey respondents are most likely to cast a presidential vote for the party that lost the close gubernatorial election. This tendency is stronger for independents than partisans and stronger for informed than for uninformed voters.

For purposes of a separate analysis, we define independent voters as the combination of "pure" independents and leaners toward one of the major parties. Partisans are the combined strong and weak Democrats and Republicans. For information level, we use the information index developed by John Zaller (2004) for presidential elections 1952-2000 and updated by Benjamin Highton for 2004. (We do not have this measure for 2008.) This is a composite measure, based on interviewer ratings and available information items in the specific years survey, and standardized with mean zero and standard deviation one for each presidential year. We define as "High Knowledge" all voters with a score above the median score among voters. As critics of balancing theory stress, it takes a combination of political awareness and cognitive ability to consider future policies contingent on the likely combination of political actors in the presidency and Congress. For balance theory to hold, we should find seeming balance behavior concentrated among the most knowledgeable respondents.

In the spirit of the RDD analyses above and to reduce unobserved heterogeneity, we restrict attention to cases for which the Democratic share of the vote in the previous gubernatorial election is between 45 percent and 55 percent. This wide range is necessary to find states within the NES cumulative file that experienced both close Democratic wins and close Democratic losses.

Table 3 presents the individual-level analysis, showing the coefficients for the governors party and its standard error (clustered by state.) The dependent variable (the presidential vote) is measured as 0 = Republican vote and 100 = Democratic vote rather than as the usual 0-1, in order to mimic the aggregate scale in percentages. The specification includes fixed effects for state and year.

The first row of results is for all cases. Here we see a coefficient of about -6.2, which is slightly higher than the aggregate estimates for postwar nonsouthern states. This confirms a similarity of findings across methods. More important are the patterns when subdivide by partisanship and information.

Regarding partisanship, the estimated effect for Independents is that winning the governorship results in a loss of about 19 percentage points in the presidential election. This highly significant result compares to a loss of about 1 point (and not significant at the .05 level) for partisans. Thus, as expected, we find that Independents are much more likely to balance against the party of the governor.

Another crucial test is for information level, and here again the data are consistent with expectations. For High Knowledge voters, the estimates indicate about 8.4 percent of the votes hang in the balance as a function of the governors party ($p < .001$). For Low Knowledge voters, the effect is less than half as large (3.9 percent) and not statistically significant.

We also combine the traits of independence and information. Among High Knowledge Independents, the estimated effect of gubernatorial control is a quite large – 24.3 percent – and highly significant. The estimated coefficients for both Low Knowledge and High Knowledge Partisans, and for Low Knowledge Independents, statistically insignificant at the .05 level (estimates not shown).

What should we make of this individual-level analysis? On the one hand, the results

approach the upper limit of what as one could expect in terms of the governor effect being conditioned by partisanship and information. On the other hand, we should be aware that the results are sensitive to exact equation specification. For example, the equation must include the lagged gubernatorial vote as a control. Also, incorporating state and year effects are crucial to obtaining relatively precise results. There are 28 nonsouthern states sampled by the ANES that in different presidential election years had a Republican and a Democratic governor elected within the 5 percentage point window. The coefficients for the governors party represent the presidential vote differential within-state between having a closely elected Democrat and a closely elected Republican. Clustering the standard errors by state is crucial to avoid overconfidence in assessing statistical significance.[13]

With appropriate caution, we conclude the following from our individual-level analysis. First, it confirms the central finding that voters presidential choices tend to go against the governor's party. Second, it shows that this anti-governor response is most prevalent by independents without party ties and by voters who are highly informed about politics. The latter in particular is consistent with the idea that the reason for voting against the governor is to achieve ideological balance.

4.4. Effect of Presidential Party on Gubernatorial Elections

If voters condition their vote for a presidential candidate on the party of their state's governor, then it seems likely that the reverse also holds – that is, people might condition their vote for governor based on the party of the president.[14] We test this hypothesis using national-level election data. More precisely, we estimate the same type of RDD as the baseline regressions above, except that we do not include any control variables other than the forcing variable. Also, because the sample is so small, we only include a linear control function, rather than a low-order polynomial. We also estimate specification where the sample is restricted to close elections. Of course, this should not be treated as a true RDD due to the small sample size.

We use the Democratic share of the two-party popular vote to define the presidential

[13]The estimated standard errors are quite similar if we cluster-year instead.

[14]Indeed, given the importance of presidential elections and the presidency, this seems even more likely.

winning margin.[15] The dependent variable is the mean change in the Democratic vote share from one midterm election to the next. The forcing variable is the national two-party vote share for president. The independent variable of interest is the party of the president. Our expectation is that the Republican (Democratic) vote for governor shifts in the negative direction when the Republican (Democrat) is elected as president in the intervening election.

Figure 3 shows the data. There, we plot the average change in gubernatorial vote share against the two party presidential vote share. Consistent with the balancing hypothesis, there is a large negative shift in the gubernatorial vote share as we cross the threshold determining whether the president is a Republican or a Democrat.

The regression results are shown in Table 4. The estimates suggest that the presidential party generates between a 5-7 percentage point swing in the gubernatorial vote from the previous election to the next. The results are similar in the full sample of 33 elections between 1882-2010 and the post-WWII sub-sample, but slightly larger in the latter period. All estimates are highly significant. Thus, there appears to be a direct electoral penalty in gubernatorial elections associated with holding the presidency, akin to the "midterm slump" in congressional elections.

5. Discussion

Despite the common wisdom that governors help their presidential ticket, we find that having a sitting governor of the same party actually hurts their party's presidential ticket.

It is worth reviewing the strength of the evidence for our claim. We observe that barely winning the governorship in a state versus barely losing affects the state's vote in the next presidential election. After WWII, as much as 4 percentage points or more of the presidential vote in a state swings on the party of the governor. Rather than a bonus, this is a 4 point penalty to a party for holding the governorship. This gap is statistically significant at the .05 level in virtually all specifications, and in many specifications it is significant at the .005 level (.001 with a directional one-tailed test) . A negative relationship this strong would be found no more than one chance in one thousand if the null hypothesis were true (and even

[15]Two presidential elections in the data set – 1888 and 2000 – resulted in Republican victories in the Electoral College even though the popular vote plurality favored the Democratic candidate. Of course, we count these instances as Republican victories.

less, of course, if governors actually help the ticket). This significance level takes on special importance because our RDD closely approximates the random assignment of outcomes in a true experiment. We also show that several placebo tests strongly support the identification assumptions of the RDD.

Although we are confident that we have established the existence of a gubernatorial penalty in presidential elections, we cannot maintain the same degree of confidence in our accounting of the mechanisms behind this effect. We have posited that voters penalize the gubernatorial party because they are motivated by a desire for ideological moderation. A more modest version of this argument is that voters may simply be broadly motivated by the less cognitively demanding goal of balancing the partisan distribution of political executives who influence their life. One result that is suggestive of ideological balancing is that the estimated effects are strongest post-WWII and stronger without than with the South. The current ideological division between the parties in the states did not emerge in its current shape until the 1940s, and not in the South until much later.

Other explanations should be considered, in addition to ideological or partisan balancing. One intriguing possibility is that governors frequently implement unpopular policies – or time decisions so that unpopular policies are felt mainly in years when the governors themselves are not up for re-election – which endangers their party's reputation and thus its presidential prospects. Another possibility is that when a party holds the governorship it becomes complacent about mobilizing its supporters, to its electoral detriment. By contrast, the opposition might be especially motivated to win. Yet another possibility is that presidential strategists might overestimate the power of the governor to mobilize voters, also leading to complacency and fewer votes than expected.

6. Conclusion

This paper shows that the common belief that governors help their presidential ticket is false. Rather, the paper provides compelling statistical evidence that the reverse is true. A state's voters are less likely to vote for a presidential candidate when the sitting governor in their state is of the candidate's party. We suggest that this result is a product of voters engaging in ideological balancing. While plausible, however, this is just one possible mech-

anism. Why governors exert a negative rather than positive influence on presidential voting remains an open question.

In closing, we return to the question posed at the outset of this paper: what was the effect of the newly elected Republican governors on the presidential election of 2012? Seven of the battleground states in 2012 had elected Republican governors in 2009 and 2010, as if centrist voters tried to balance President Obama's liberalism. In 2012, centrist voters in these states could push state-related policy further to the right by choosing Romney or balance with Obama. This contrast with the counterfactual given a Democratic governor, a choice to push further left by voting for Obama or balance with Romney.

The extrapolation from our analysis of earlier elections is that as many as four percent of the presidential vote pivoted on the governor's party. In each of the eight battleground states served by a Republican governor, Obama won by less than this four point margin; that is, Obama's percent of the two-party vote was less than 54 percent. A shift of 4 points toward the Romney in any of these states would have flipped the state to the GOP. A four point shift in all eight states (FL, IA, NV, OH, PA, VA, WI) would have swung 102 electoral votes, more than sufficient to swing the Electoral College to Romney. Thus, the wave of new Republican governors elected in 2010 might well have affected the 2012 presidential outcome, but not in the way most political observers anticipated at the time. According to our analysis, this wave might have saved Obama. Had all (or even most) of the eight key battleground states elected Democratic governors in 2010, Mitt Romney might have been elected president.

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Appendix

Consider the following model. There are two levels of government, national and state. Each provides a public good and fully funds the public good with taxes. Let G_N and G_S be the amount of public good provided by the national and state governments, respectively. Voters care about the two public goods and also their after-tax incomes. Each voter i pays national and state taxes according to the functions $T_{Ni}(G_N)$ and $T_{Si}(G_S)$, respectively, and therefore has an after-tax income of $C_i = Y_i - T_{Ni}(G_N) - T_{Si}(G_S)$. Assume $T'_{Ni} > 0$, $T'_{Si} > 0$. Each and has a utility function of the form:

$$U_i(G_N, G_S, C_i) = U_{Ni}(G_N) + U_{Si}(G_S) + U_{Ci}(C_i)$$

Assume that U_i is strictly increasing and strictly concave in all its arguments, so $U'_{Ni} > 0$, $U'_{Si} > 0$, and$U'_{Ci} > 0$, and $U''_{Ni} < 0$, $U''_{Si} < 0$, and $U''_{Ci} < 0$. Substituting for C_i yields the indirect utility function:

$$V_i(G_N, G_S) = U_{Ni}(G_N) + U_{Si}(G_S) + U_{Ci}(Y_i - T_{Ni}(G_N) - T_{Si}(G_S))$$

Differentiating V_i twice yields

$$\frac{\partial^2 V_i}{\partial G_N \partial G_S}(G_N, G_S) = U''_{Ci}(C_i)T'_{Ni}(G_N)T'_{Si}(G_S) < 0$$

Thus, the marginal utility of an increase in G_N is smaller the higher is G_S (and the marginal utility of an increase in G_S is smaller the higher is G_N).

Consider any given state. Suppose that if the state has a Democratic governor then $G_S = G_S^D$, and if the state has a Republican governor then $G_S = G_S^R$, with $G_S^D > G_S^R$. Suppose voters in the state expect that if a Democratic candidate wins the upcoming presidential election then G_N will be equal to G_N^D, and that if the Republican candidate wins G_N will be equal to G_N^R, with $G_N^D > G_N^R$. For each voter i, let $\Delta V_i = V_i(G_N^D, G_S) - V_i(G_N^R, G_S)$ be the difference in utility of having the Democratic candidate win the upcoming presidential election compared to having the Republican candidate win. Then, if the state has a Democratic governor at the time of the presidential election (who will continue in office after the presidential election), ΔV_i is lower for every voter i in the state than if the state has a Republican governor at the time of the presidential election.

Note that if G_N and G_S are strong complements in the voter's utility function – i.e. if $\frac{\partial^2 U_i}{\partial G_N \partial G_S} > 0$ and "large enough" – then it is possible for $\frac{\partial^2 V_i}{\partial G_N \partial G_S}$ to be positive. But, if G_N and G_S are only weak complements or substitutes, then $\frac{\partial^2 V_i}{\partial G_N \partial G_S}$ will be negative as above.

Table 1: **Presidential Vote Change for Governor's Party**

Specification	1882-2012 All States	1882-2012 No South	1946-2012 All States	1946-2012 No South	1882-1932 All States	1882-1932 No South
OLS	-0.152	-0.628	-0.932	**-0.987**	2.461	2.412
	(0.487)	(0.420)	(0.498)	(0.391)	(1.766)	(1.572)
	[669]	[510]	[503]	[386]	[125]	[96]
RDD, 3rd-Order	**-3.257**	**-3.681**	**-3.810**	**-4.810**	1.951	2.051
Polynomial	(1.582)	(1.661)	(1.524)	(1.429)	(6.621)	(7.011)
	[462]	[384]	[352]	[278]	[88]	[84]
RDD, 4th-Order	**-4.458**	**-4.848**	**-4.121**	**-4.832**	-3.125	-3.312
Polynomial	(1.948)	(2.050)	(1.865)	(1.742)	(9.607)	(10.151)
	[462]	[384]	[352]	[278]	[88]	[84]
RDD, 5% Margin	**-2.515**	**-2.613**	**-3.537**	**-4.352**	2.936	3.722
+ Local Linear	(1.091)	(1.128)	(1.038)	(0.944)	(4.084)	(4.242)
	[283]	[243]	[212]	[173]	[59]	[58]
RDD, 3% Margin	**-3.525**	**-3.600**	**-4.311**	**-4.722**	2.446	1.860
+ Local Linear	(1.258)	(1.279)	(1.332)	(1.232)	(3.637)	(3.982)
	[170]	[148]	[125]	[104]	[37]	[36]
RDD, 2% Margin	**-2.436**	**-2.402**	**-3.322**	**-3.727**	1.280	1.449
	(0.826)	(0.765)	(0.900)	(0.790)	(2.116)	(2.017)
	[120]	[105]	[90]	[75]	[24]	[24]
RDD, 1% Margin	**-2.859**	**-2.960**	**-2.537**	**-3.208**	-3.002	-4.634
	(1.166)	(1.046)	(1.251)	(1.136)	(7.231)	(5.733)
	[67]	[59]	[53]	[45]	[10]	[10]

Cell entries are the estimated coefficients on the *Democratic Governor* dummy variable. The dependent variable is *Change in Democratic State Presidential Vote*, ΔP. Standard errors in parentheses. Sample sizes in brackets.

Table 2: **Robustness Checks**

Specification	1882-2012 Open Seat	1946-2012 Open Seat	1882-2012 No Controls	1946-2012 No Controls	1882-2012 Gov Elect	Dem Leg. Placebo	Dem Gov. Placebo	Pres Vote Placebo
OLS	0.891	-0.301	-0.535	-0.692	**1.138**	**0.270**	**0.284**	**1.279**
	(0.813)	(0.863)	(0.493)	(0.517)	(0.571)	(0.078)	(0.039)	(0.513)
	[366]	[237]	[669]	[503]	[748]	[472]	[640]	[632]
RDD, 3rd-Order Polynomial	-4.571	**-5.171**	**-3.568**	**-4.114**	-1.883	-0.080	-0.024	0.748
	(2.322)	(2.163)	(1.606)	(1.547)	(1.790)	(0.171)	(0.084)	(0.838)
	[261]	[184]	[462]	[352]	[497]	[336]	[434]	[434]
RDD, 4th-Order Polynomial	**-5.701**	**-5.317**	**-4.644**	**-4.279**	-2.845	-0.013	-0.059	1.129
	(2.852)	(2.615)	(1.979)	(1.897)	(2.250)	(0.206)	(0.099)	(1.005)
	[261]	[184]	[462]	[352]	[497]	[336]	[434]	[434]
RDD, 5% Margin + Local Linear	**-3.126**	**-4.778**	**-2.704**	**-3.614**	-2.014	0.095	-0.019	0.743
	(1.484)	(1.384)	(1.107)	(1.051)	(1.238)	(0.228)	(0.117)	(1.162)
	[172]	[120]	[283]	[212]	[324]	[214]	[274]	[274]
RDD, 3% Margin + Local Linear	**-4.115**	**-5.519**	**-3.762**	**-4.520**	-2.537	-0.155	-0.057	0.394
	(1.708)	(1.745)	(1.292)	(1.352)	(1.678)	(0.287)	(0.148)	(1.367)
	[102]	[71]	[170]	[125]	[216]	[130]	[167]	[166]
RDD, 2% Margin	**-2.473**	**-3.719**	**-2.518**	**-3.332**	-1.579	-0.114	-0.004	0.476
	(1.106)	(1.150)	(0.846)	(0.916)	(1.126)	(0.184)	(0.093)	(0.889)
	[71]	[49]	[120]	[90]	[148]	[90]	[118]	[116]
RDD, 1% Margin	**-3.876**	**-3.866**	**-2.911**	**-2.533**	-2.419	0.070	0.032	0.162
	(1.507)	(1.444)	(1.164)	(1.241)	(1.850)	(0.245)	(0.127)	(1.062)
	[37]	[26]	[67]	[53]	[78]	[47]	[66]	[65]

Cell entries in columns 1-2 are the estimated coefficients on the *Democratic Governor* dummy variable. In columns 6-8 the cell entries are the estimated coefficients on the *Future Democratic Governor* dummy variable. The dependent variables are *Democratic Control of State Legislature* (column 6), *Democratic Control of Governorship* (column 7), and *Change in Democratic State Presidential Vote* (column 8). Standard errors in parentheses. Sample sizes in brackets.

Table 3: **Governor's Party and Presidential Voting in ANES, Non-Southern States, 1952-2008**

Sample	Estimates
All Cases	**-6.152**
	(2.610)
	[4221]
Independent	**-18.859**
	(6.905)
	[1222]
Partisan	-0.890
	(3.055)
	[2999]
High Knowledge	**-8.435**
	(2.708)
	[2051]
Low Knowledge	-3.900
	(4.114)
	[2055]
Independent and High Knowledge	**-24.304**
	(6.494)
	[569]
Independent and Low Knowledge	-13.610
	(10.569)
	[610]

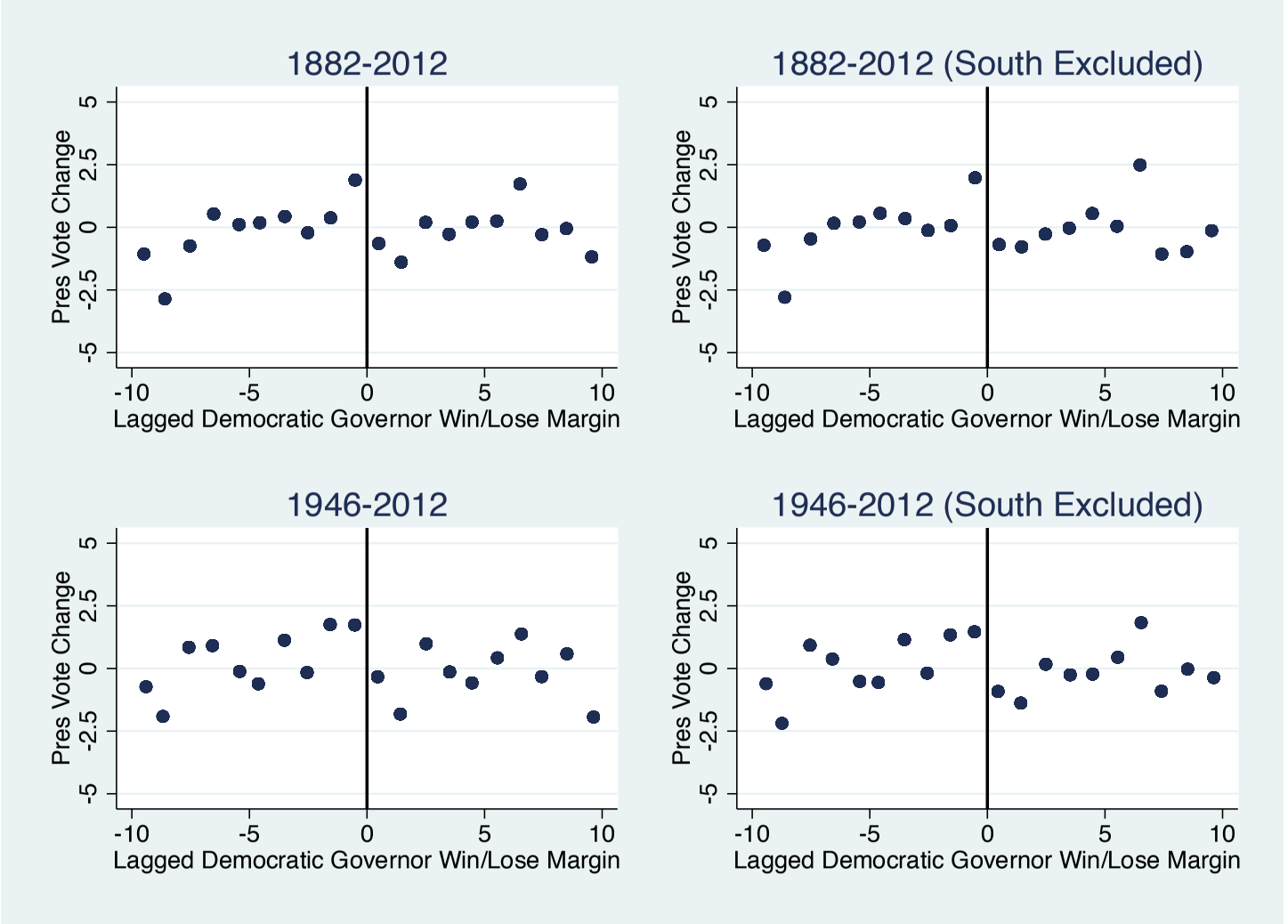
Cell entries are the estimated coefficients on the *Democratic Governor* dummy variable. The dependent variable is a dummy indicating the respondent voted for the Democratic presidential candidate. Control variables include state and year fixed effects, plus respondent party identification and the prior state-level vote for governor. States are excluded if they hold a gubernatorial election at the same time as the presidential election. Standard errors, clustered by state, in parentheses. Sample sizes in brackets.

Table 4: **Gubernatorial Vote Change for President's Party, 1882-2010**

Specification	1882-2010	1946-2010
OLS	**-4.644**	**-6.611**
	(1.111)	(1.406)
	[33]	[17]
Linear Control	**-5.818**	**-6.816**
	(1.760)	(2.303)
	[33]	[17]
5% Margin	**-5.152**	**-6.499**
	(1.323)	(1.913)
	[20]	[11]
4% Margin	**-5.522**	**-6.944**
	(1.529)	(1.983)
	[17]	[10]
3% Margin	**-5.655**	-6.909
	(1.788)	(2.666)
	[11]	[6]
2% Margin	**-6.446**	**-9.286**
	(1.890)	(1.556)
	[9]	[5]

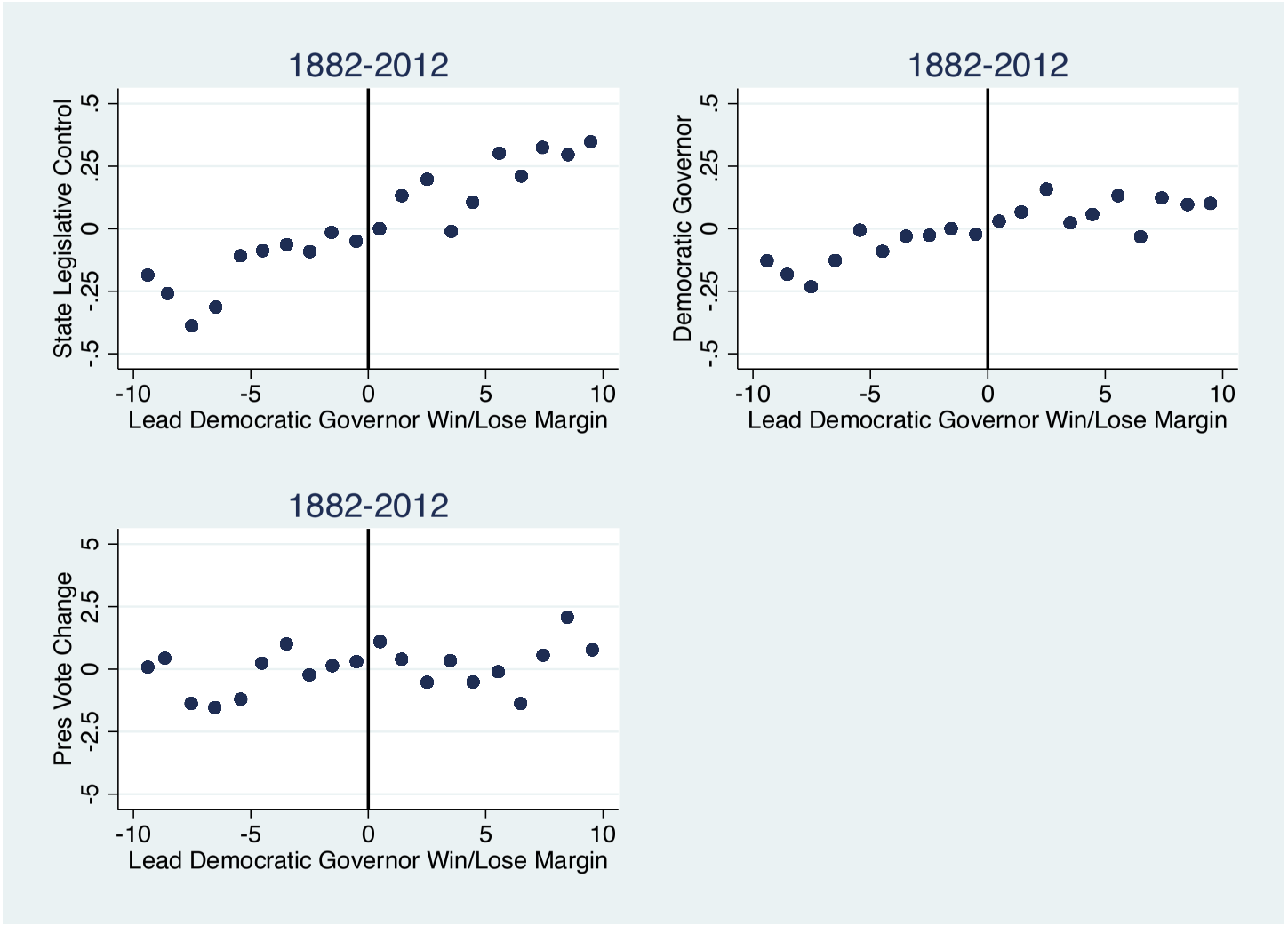
Cell entries are the estimated coefficients on the *Democratic President* dummy variable. The dependent variable is *Change in Mean Democratic Vote for Governor*. Standard errors in parentheses. Sample sizes in brackets.

Figure 1. Presidential Vote vs. Lagged Gubernatorial Vote



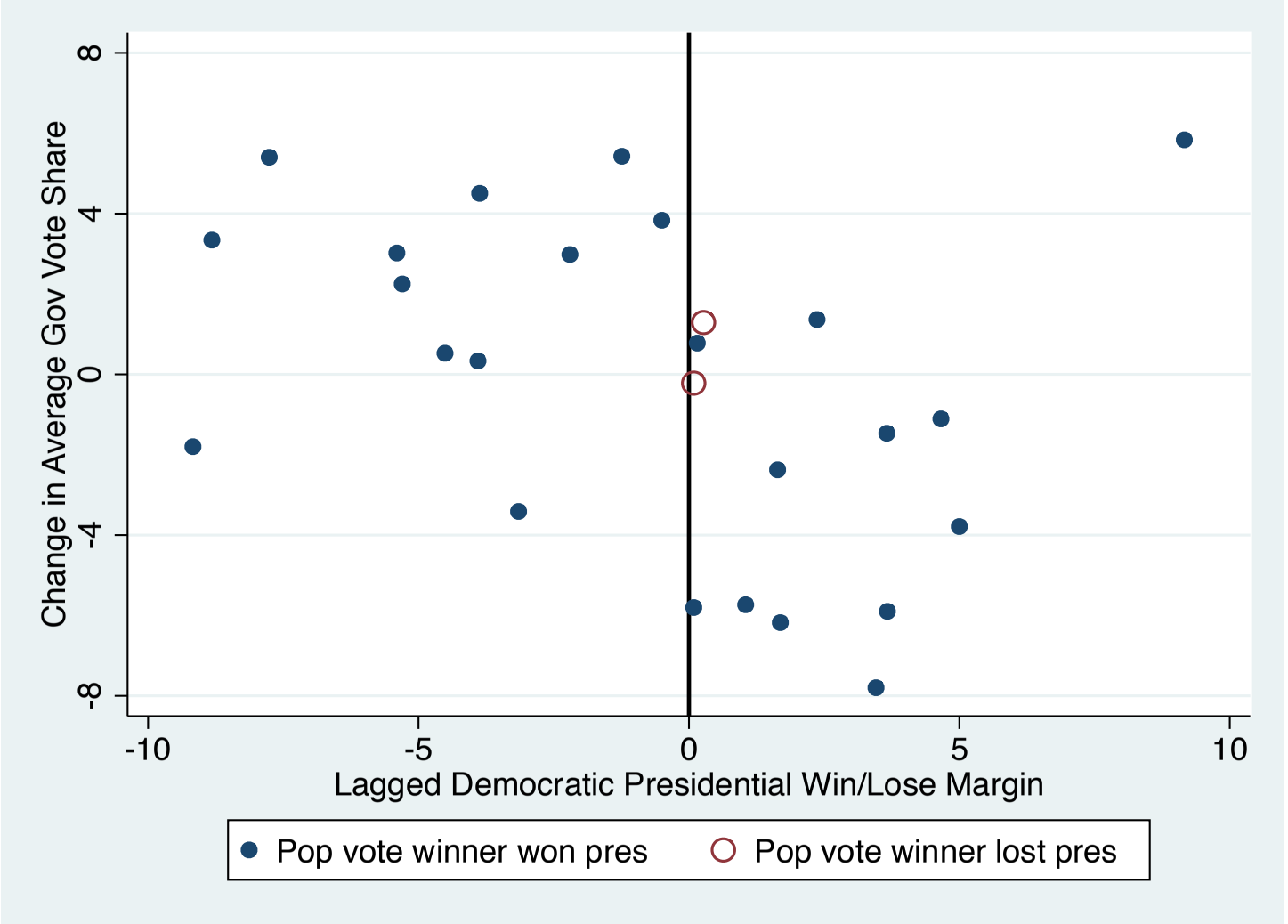
Note: The bandwidth is 1 percentage point. In (a) we define the outcome as the Democratic state legislative control, (b) we define it as having a Democratic Governor, and (c) the change in state presidential vote share between t and t-1.

Figure 2. PlaceboTests



Note: The bandwidth is 1 percentage point. In (a) we show the full sample, (b) the full sample excluding southern states, (c) the post-WWII period, and (d) the post-WWII period excluding southern states.

Figure 3. Gubernatorial Vote vs. Lagged Presidential Vote



Note: Each point represents one election year. The two hollow points are the two years where the winner of the popular vote did not win the election.