

Partisan Bias and Gubernatorial Approval: The Quest for Asymmetries*

Aaron Strauss
Department of Politics
Princeton University
abstraus@princeton.edu

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Abstract

Explanations of gubernatorial approval ratings that use aggregate-level data have suffered from the ecological fallacy, producing invalid results. Modern ecological inference techniques do not solve the problem so I propose using partially disaggregated data to better explain partisan effects. Using SurveyUSA's cross-tabulated surveys—which provide evidence of partisan bias on several levels of gubernatorial approval—I find that voters are quick blame institutions or office holders of the opposite party for poor economic conditions, and, analogously, to offer praise for economic growth to governors of their own party. Governors are able to court constituents of the opposing party by moderating their position on “easy issues,” such as abortion.

1 Introduction

Over a half century ago Robinson (1950) investigated literacy rates on the aggregate and individual levels; the aggregate data indicated that the foreign-born literacy rate was higher than the rate for those born in the U.S. His analysis of the individual-level data produced the opposite—and intuitive—finding. The “ecological fallacy” of equating behavior observed on aggregate levels and unobserved behavior at the individual level continues to create difficulty for scholars. When deconstructing gubernatorial approval rating, scholars reach discrepant conclusions about the effects that partisanship and presidential approval have on governors' ratings; I propose that these differences are caused by the multiple levels of aggregation employed by the studies. In this paper, I use newly available, somewhat disaggregated, polling data to measure gubernatorial approval and non-aggregated explanatory variables—thereby avoiding the ecological fallacy—to how discern how citizens evaluate their chief executive.

*I would like to thank Prof. Doug Arnold and Hillary D. Hampton for their insights and suggestions. All remaining mistakes are mine alone.

SurveyUSA releases near-monthly gubernatorial, senatorial, and presidential approval ratings for all 50 states, cross-tabulated by party. Examination of their data yields an interesting distribution for governors' approval ratings. Strong Republican support for some Democratic governors (and vice-versa) produces a flat distribution of "cross-party" approval.¹ This phenomenon is in contrast to both cross-party support for senators and "in-party" support for governors. This paper explores the reasons for asymmetries between these different groups. As noted by other scholars, important factors for estimating gubernatorial approval include economic effects, co-partisanship between federal and state executives, party control of institutions (unified versus divided government), and state demographics. Here, gubernatorial ideology and "national mood" supplement this existing set of explanatory factors.

After a brief review of the major themes of current research, this paper comprises three major themes about gubernatorial approval among partisan subgroups. First, I address the divergent findings asserted by scholars on the effect of partisanship on gubernatorial evaluations and find the ecological fallacy to be the crux of the problem. Next, a graphical overview of cross-party support for governors leads to the discovery of three asymmetries: a partisan split at the voter level, a federal-state distinction, and a divergence in effects for office-holder ideology. Finally, the core of the paper explores explanations for these asymmetries, using both time-series and cross-sectional regressions to explain how partisanship effects individual perceptions of chief executives.

1.1 Prior Research

While American political science research on presidential approval has a long history (Mueller, 1970) work on statewide officials have only recently been the object of scholars' attention. Due in part to a lack of polling data on the state level, the early literature focused instead on election returns (Morehouse, 1981; Holbrook, 1987; Svoboda, 1995). As Svoboda discusses, much of this prior research on gubernatorial elections analyzes whether voters "retrospectively" evaluate candidates on state economic conditions, punishing and rewarding incumbents accordingly. The consensus within the literature is that voters *do* hold governors responsible for economic conditions (Howell and Vanderleeuw, 1990; Lowry, Alt, and Ferree, 1998; King, 2001), with stronger accountability

¹Throughout the paper, the term "in-party" references the party of the governor; "out-party" is the party which does not hold the chief executive office. Out-party gubernatorial approval is also termed "cross-party" support.

for incumbents and in states with unified governments.

Recently, direct data on gubernatorial job performance became more widely available. In 2002, Beyle et al., introduced the Job Approval Rating (JAR) index. This compilation comprises the marginal results of virtually all statewide polls since 1950 that ask job performance questions about presidents, senators, or governors. The creators of the JAR index account for differences in question wording and record the survey-fielding organization so that scholars can control for “house effects.” This collection (or its unpublished predecessor) is the main data source for multiple studies of gubernatorial approval (Hansen, 1999; Cohen and King, 2004; Cohen and King, 2005). An analysis of the JAR data confirms the election data-based consensus on retrospective gubernatorial evaluation (1999). Cohen and King (2004, 2005) reach a similar conclusion, but find counterintuitive effects of partisanship.

This research is partially an extension of Squire and Fastnow (1994). They contrast senatorial and gubernatorial election results, noting the differences between cross-party support for the two types of office holders. The general conclusion is that senators garner more votes from members of the opposite party (or “cross-party” support) than do governors. However, I find that gubernatorial cross-party approval is more varied, and explore the reasons for this difference.

Despite a common economic accountability theme, the existing literature on gubernatorial ratings and electoral fortunes is broad and varied in its specific conclusions. Much of this research is examined later in this paper to facilitate comparison with the results of this study.

2 Party Effects on Governor’s Approval Rating

The use of aggregate data, such as the JAR collection, in studies of gubernatorial approval ratings has led scholars to contradictory conclusions. Multiple studies have conflated selection effects occurring on the state level with choices made by individuals. In general, this classic ecological fallacy is intractable; to avoid it, scholars should focus efforts on using more granular datasets.

2.1 The Ecological Fallacy of Gubernatorial Approval

Studies of governors’ approval ratings often find counterintuitive effects for partisanship and presidential approval. MacDonald and Sigelman (1999) find that the effect of party is insignificant, and

may actually have a counterintuitive effect (i.e., being a Republican increases the likelihood for approving of a Democratic governor and vice versa). King and Cohen (2004) report that “partisan advantage works opposite to expectations.” The conclusion that identifying with a governor’s party is negatively related to gubernatorial support is virtually inconceivable and wholly unsupported by the literature on presidential approval (Erikson, McKuen, Stimson 2002; Gilens, 1998; among others).

Other scholars find the more satisfying result. Early work on elections by Svoboda (1995) concludes that party identification is the most important predictor of voting behavior. When analyzing gubernatorial job approval, King (2001), in contrast to his later work, finds that party has a significant, important, and intuitive effect in all elections analyzed.

One might conjecture that these varying of interpretations of party effects are due to scholars’ choice of gubernatorial election results or job performance ratings. However, this explanation is unconvincing given the close relationship between gubernatorial approval and vote percentage (MacDonald and Sigelman, 1999; King 2001). Instead, the discrepancy is more likely caused by the use of aggregate data; studies that do not analyze individual-level data often fall victim to the ecological fallacy (Robinson, 1950). In the case of gubernatorial approval ratings, the aggregate-level data is uninformative about the behavior of individual because a separate process exists on the aggregate level that works in an opposite direction to the micro-level theory. At the state level, governors who are elected in “hostile territory” (i.e., a state with a plurality of opposition party identifiers) must be high quality politicians. If they were not high quality, partisan forces would have contributed to their loss. These good politicians earn high performance ratings from their constituents once in office.

This points is somewhat supported by the facts that Democratic governors have higher approval ratings (on average) in states with larger Republican populations, and Republican governors have approximately the same approval ratings across the range of state-level Democratic identification. Combining these two relationships as shown in Figure 1² yields at best an uninformative result, and at worst a counterintuitive and incorrect conclusion. Indeed, Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) observe this information loss via aggregation when they note “Gubernatorial contests are not easily

²The data is from SurveyUSA’s gubernatorial polling of the 52 governors from May 2005 to June 2006. See Section 4.1 for details.

predicted from the combination of state partisanship, state ideology, ... plus incumbency.”

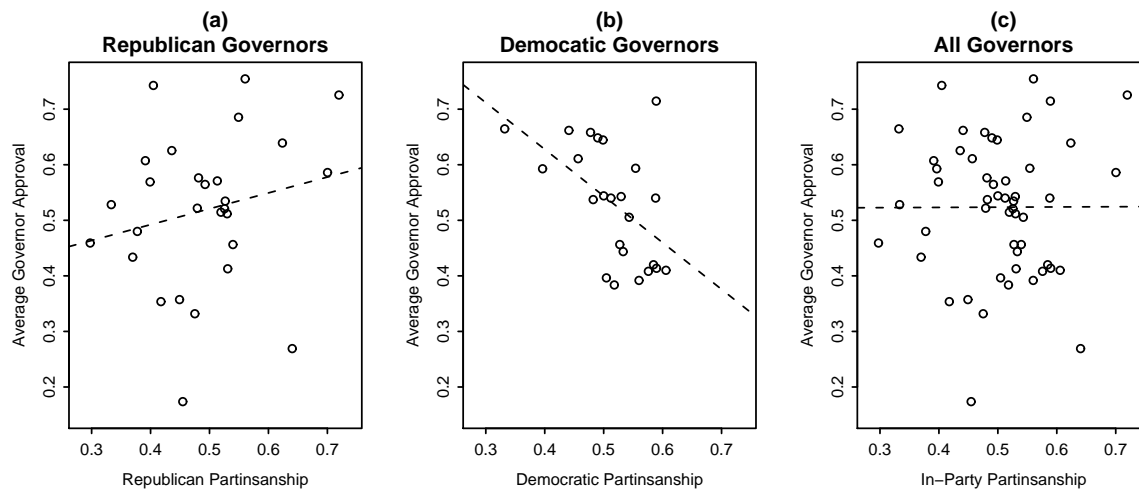


Figure 1: Gubernatorial approval rating by state partisanship for (a) Republican governors, (b) Democratic governors, and (c) all governors. Note the potentially unexpected relationship between approval and partisanship for Democratic governors.

On the individual-level—in contrast to the state-level—Republicans are more likely to approve of a Republican governor than are independents, who are in turn more likely to approve of a Republican executive than are Democrats. (The analogue is true for a Democratic governor). As illustrated in Figure 2, very few current governors buck this pattern. Only Phil Bredesen (D-Tennessee) garners more support from members of the opposite party than members of his own. And, of the 52 governors studied, only five receive higher evaluations from members of the other party than from independents.³

A second example of ecological data impeding precise analyses of gubernatorial performance ratings is the uncertain effect of presidential popularity. Intuitively, governors of the same party of an unpopular president should be punished via association; if the president is popular, these governors should be rewarded. Studies that measure presidential approval at a national or individual level validate this intuition. But, studies that aggregate both gubernatorial and presidential approval on the state level find mixed results.

For example, using national presidential evaluation as an explanatory variable, Morehouse (1981) finds that when a president is elected his popularity trickles down to governors of the president’s party. These governors are negatively affected when the president is less popular, specifically

³No governor has a higher approval rating among independents than among members of his/her own party.

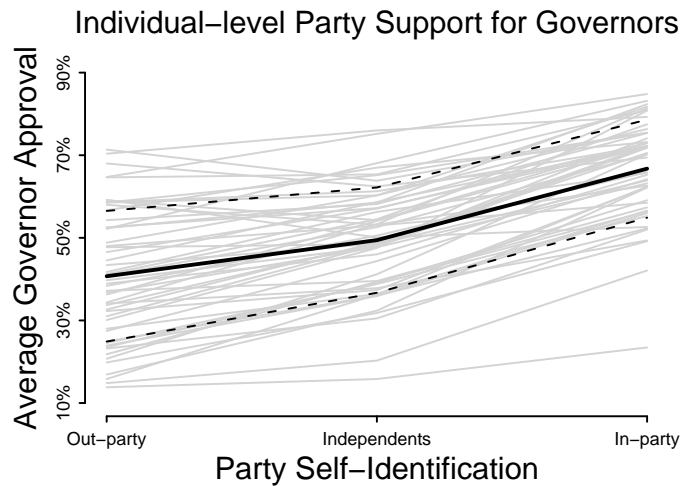


Figure 2: Support for governors among three partisan groups. The data is aggregated from individual-level data at the party level and is thus not subject to the ecology fallacy. Each gray line represents a governor; the black solid line is the mean; each black dotted line is one standard deviation from the mean.

during mid-term elections.⁴ This type of study is not susceptible to ecological problems the theory’s actors are elected officials (not voters) and the presidential data is aggregated nationally. At the other end of the aggregation spectrum, Svoboda (1995) analyzes individual-level survey responses directly and finds a strong relationship between a voter’s evaluation of the president and his/her vote choice.

If scholars take the middle approach and examine presidential approval on the state level, the results are muddled. King (1991) examines the JAR database and concludes that for each percentage point increase in the president’s job performance, assessments of governors of the president’s party increase by just one-tenth of one percentage point. In Crew and Weiher’s (1996) longitudinal regressions of three states, the presidential approval variable is rarely statistically significant. Most recently, King and Cohen (2005) use the JAR database and conclude: “Perhaps our most surprising results are the mixed findings concerning the impact of the presidency on gubernatorial popularity.”

⁴An analogous finding for Senators appears in Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002).

2.2 Ecological Inference and Gubernatorial Approval

The most common form of the ecological problem involves two group of people (e.g., blacks and whites; Democrats and Republicans) and a choice made by individuals in these groups (e.g., whether to vote; gubernatorial approval). Ecological inference methodologies estimate the groups' characteristics (e.g., black turnout rate; approval rating among Democrats) from only the aggregated data (e.g., overall turnout rate and census data; overall gubernatorial approval and state partisanship). Unfortunately, inferring individual-level behavior from aggregate-level data is in essence an intractable problem (Freedman et al., 1991; Ansolabehere and Rivers, 1995).

King (1997) sparked a resurgence in the ecological inference literature with publication of his book *A Solution to the Ecological Inference Problem*. His solution combines what information is present in aggregate data with strict assumptions about the distribution of individual-level effects to better estimate underlying behavior. One key assumption in King's model is that the distribution of the groups characteristics are normally distributed about one mean. In an extension of this technique, Imai, Lu and Strauss (2006) allow these means to vary based on the population characteristic in question (e.g., percent black; state partisanship).

With respect to gubernatorial approval ratings, applying modern ecological inference techniques to the state-level data of the 52 recent governors does not produce intuitive results. Both King's computer program (EzI) and Imai et al.'s algorithm find a flat relationship between gubernatorial approval and partisanship and a negative relationship between approval and presidential popularity (Figure 3). Perhaps more data points (for instance, including the entire JAR dataset) would help; but, unlike regression analyses, adding more data points does not increase the degrees of freedom in ecological problems.⁵

The literature on the ecological fallacy and ecological inference is replete with assertions that the problem of inferring individual-level behavior from aggregated data is at its core an intractable problem. If scholars are to attempt to draw conclusions regarding individual-level choices, they must find datasets that do not aggregate information. While JAR is a helpful resource, more granular datasets are needed to accept or reject hypotheses in a statistically sound manner. SurveyUSA's cross-tabulated data, analyzed below, reduces these aggregation effects.

⁵In ecological inference, for each additional point of data, one addition parameter must be estimated.

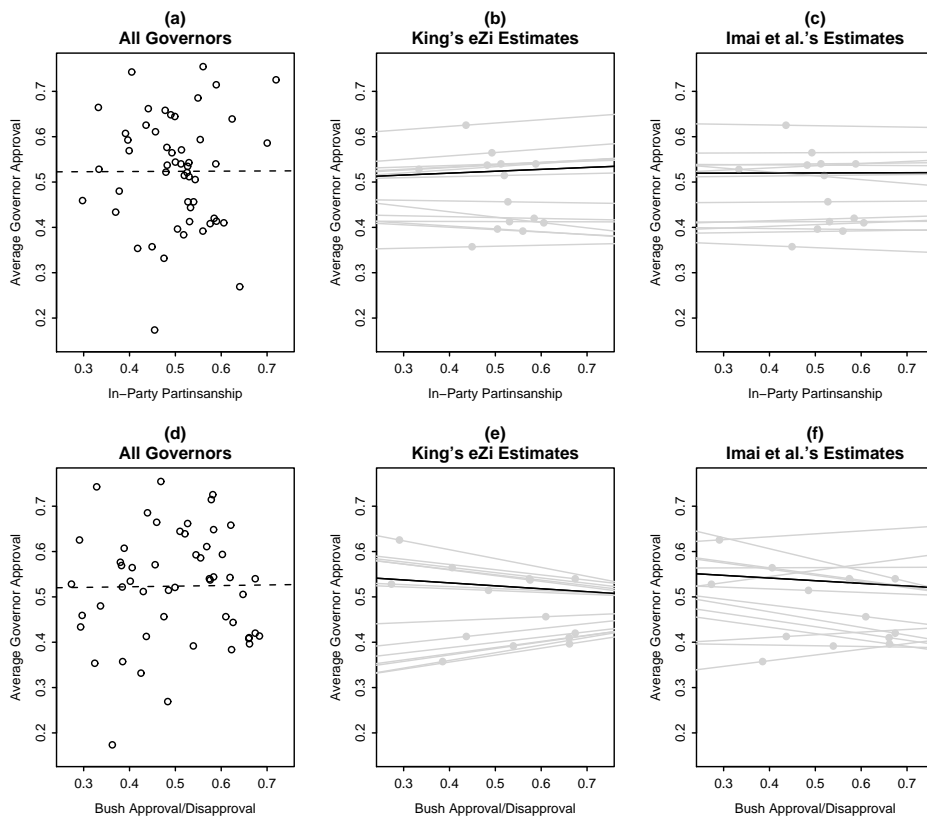


Figure 3: Simple regression and ecological inference results for state-level data. The first row plots gubernatorial approval by two-way, in-party partisanship (with independents ignored). Cell (a) is a replication of 1(c). Cells (b) and (c) report the point estimates of ecological inference. Each gray line represents a state and estimates how gubernatorial approval would vary in that state at a given level of partisanship (x-axis). Each gray circle is the point on the line the represents the actual level of partisanship in the state. The black line is the mean effect of partisanship. The second row comprises the analogue plots for approval versus presidential approval (Republican governors) and disapproval (Democratic governors).

2.3 Two and a Half Asymmetries

As shown in Figure 2, relative support between partisan groups is consistent with the micro-level theory. However, puzzles emerge when examining the cross-sectional distribution of gubernatorial support within each party segment. As Figure 4 illustrates, the in-party support is more concentrated than support among independents, which in turn is more concentrated than “cross-party” support. On one level, these distributions are intuitive. For instance, independents have a natural level of support for generic governors (the population mean of the data is almost exactly 50%); systematic and idiosyncratic differences between states push the approval rating among independents varying distances from this natural value. More extreme (and, thus, probably rarer)

circumstances induce situations in which a governor's support among independents is quite far from 50%. Hence, actual gubernatorial approval among independents (histogram of Figure 4(b)) is a rough approximation of a normal curve centered about 50% (gray curve in Figure 4(b)).

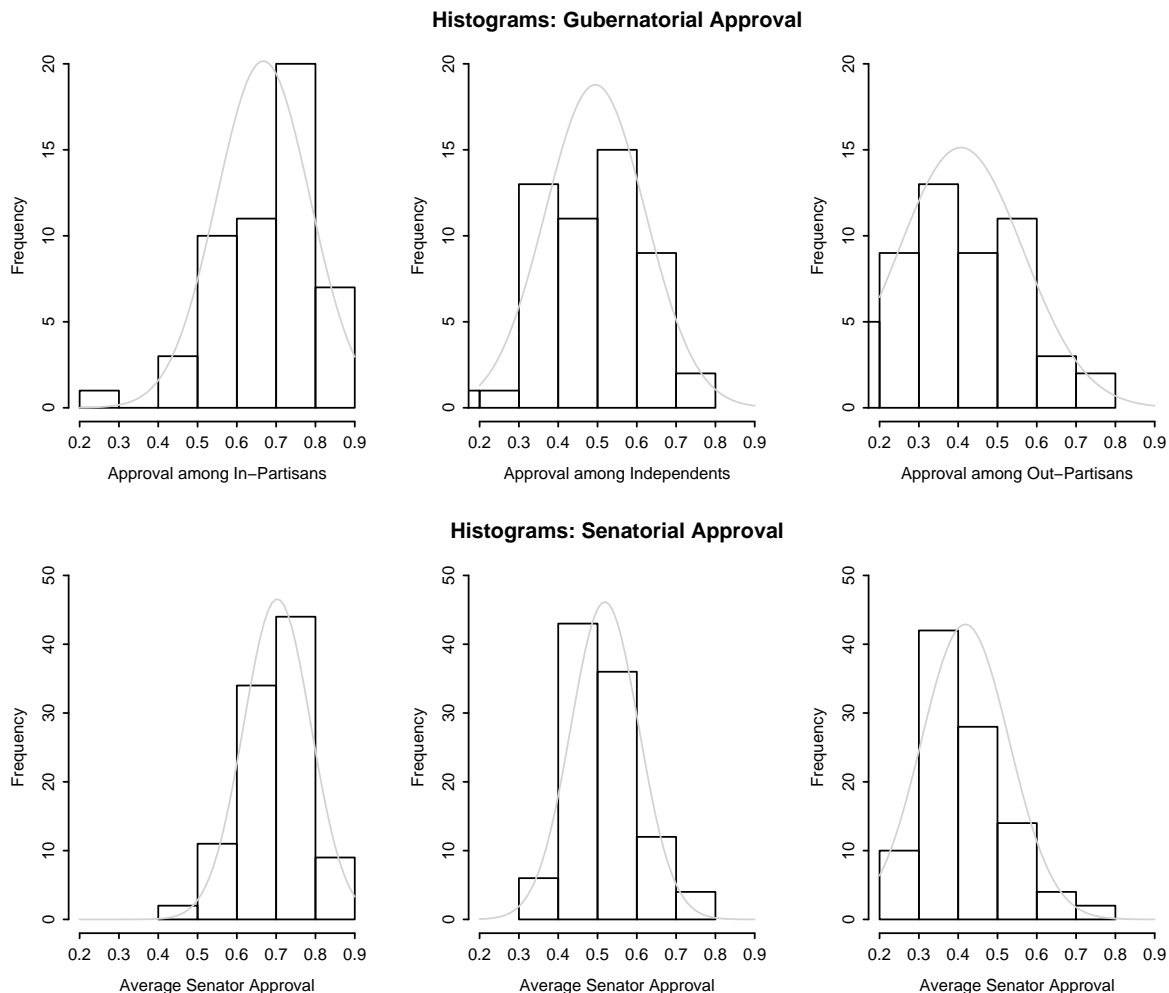


Figure 4: Histograms of average 2005-2006 gubernatorial and senatorial approval among partisan groups: (a) in-partisans, (b) independents, and (c) out-Partisans. Note the higher variance among out-partisans.

From a second perspective, support for governors from the three partisan groups warrants further investigation. Note the increasing variance of approval as voters' partisan identification moves away from that of their chief executive. The standard deviations of approval amongst the partisan groups are 11.8% for in-party support, 12.7% for independent support, and 15.8% for out-party support.⁶ This phenomenon is not a result of ceiling effects, as no level of support falls

⁶The difference between out-party variance and variance among the other two partisan groups is statistically

below 10% . Further, if diminishing returns play a role in keeping the level of support among in-partisans from reaching 100%, then perhaps the same process should be observed preventing cross-party support from approaching 0%. The data make plain that in-partisans' support for governors is less varied than that of out-partisans. The main question addressed in this study is: *What causes some out-partisans to approve of their governor?* This paper explores the partisan, economic and ideological cues that voters receive from elites and the media.

The explanations considered must also explain a second pattern found in the data: cross-party support for senators is less variable than the analogue evaluations of governors. Figure 4 depicts the histograms of average approval ratings for the 100 partisan U.S. Senators between July 2005 and June 2006.⁷ While average cross-party support for senators (41%) almost exactly the same as for governors (41%), the standard deviations differ significantly⁸—11% for senators and 16% for governors. Again the data show that some governors are able to garner noteworthy levels of cross-party support.

Small differences also appear in cross-party support when chief executives are separated by party. Republicans are slightly more likely to approve of Democratic governors than vice versa (42% to 40%). Comparison of these two distribution (Figure 5) reveals that both have the same standard deviation, about 16%. Neither of these statistics represents a significant difference between the two groups.

To determine whether the party of the governor is worth investigating, I also examine the exit polls from a point in history somewhat similar to 2005: the 1990 election. (Election exit polls must be substituted for approval ratings as the variable of interest since cross-tabulated approval ratings are not widely available prior to 2005.) November 1990 is the most recent election in which none of the current governors were up for re-election, a Republican occupied the White House, and a majority of the states (35) conducted elections for governors. Cross-party support is displayed in Figure 6. Again, the Democratic governors garner more support from Republicans than vice versa; in contrast to approval ratings, differences in means and standard deviations for election returns are statistically significant.

significant at the 90%-level. The difference in mean loyalty for in-partisans and out-partisans (i.e., cross-party support subtracted from 100%) is significant at the 95%-level.

⁷As an independent, Senator Jeffords (VT) is not included. New Jersey sent three Senators to D.C. during this time period.

⁸Significant at the 99% level.

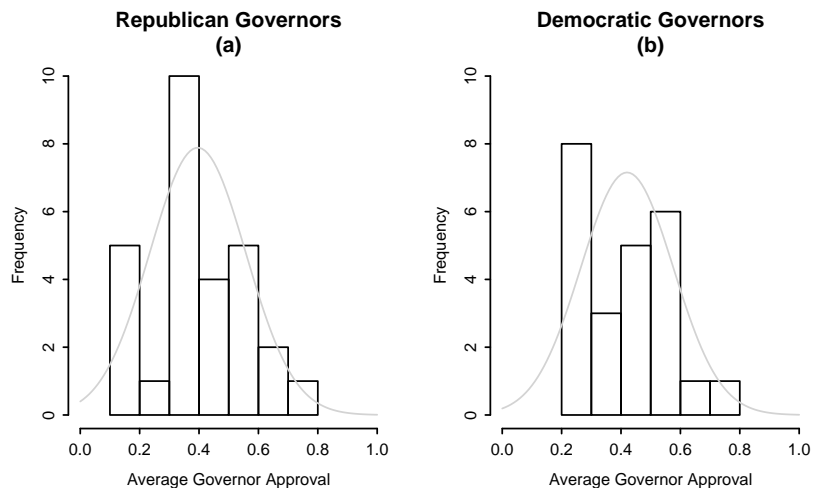


Figure 5: Histograms of Average 2005-2006 Gubernatorial Approval Among Out-partisans for (a) Republican Governors and (b) Democrat Governors.

Of course, election data is suboptimal for several reasons. First and most significant, exit polls ask about election choices rather than job performance. Second, elections are fundamentally unique time periods. As Zaller (1992) emphasizes, voters respond very differently when there are two information flows (such as during a campaign) as opposed to when the governor has a state-sized bully pulpit. Third, incumbency is a major factor in elections, and but is a constant across approval ratings.⁹ Those issues aside, the evidence suggests there may be differences for Democratic versus Republican governors.

A complete explanation for cross-party gubernatorial approval must account for the multiple asymmetries described in this section. First, the theory must explain differences between in-partisans and out-party members. Second, approval ratings for senators and governors must be affected differently, as these distributions are dissimilar. Third, the explanation should account for the slight differences between Democrats and Republicans chief executives. One advantage to studying cross-party approval is the larger variance in the dependent variable, which allows smaller effects to be visible on the statewide level.

⁹Of the 35 elections examined, 12 featured Democratic incumbents and 11 included Republican incumbents.

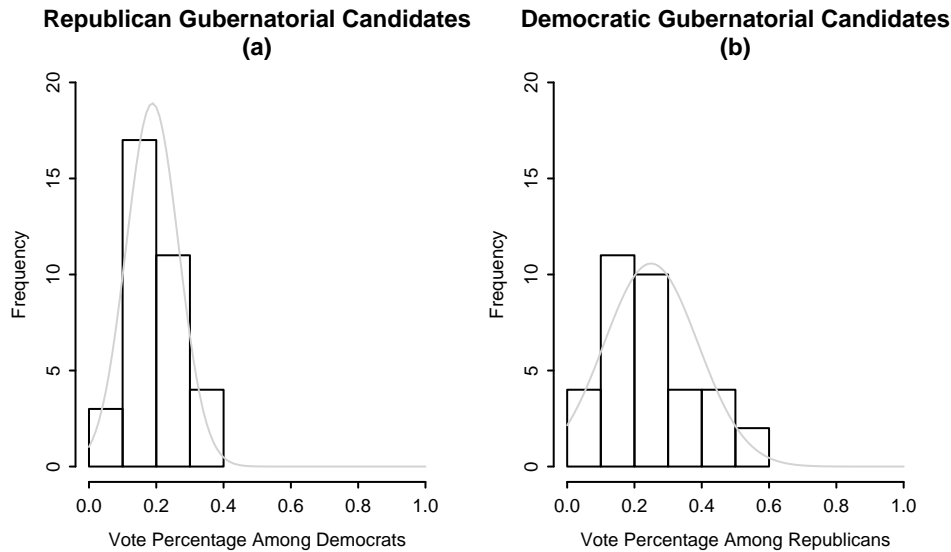


Figure 6: Histograms of vote share By voters of the opposite party for (a) Republican candidates for governor and (b) Democratic candidates for governor.

3 Underlying Theory

As the ecological inference problem indicates, evidence of micro-level theories may be scarce on a macro-level. However, the individuals' unstable preferences (Converse, 1964) can balance each other on the aggregate-level (assuming unbiased error) to produce sensible patterns in the data (Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson, 2002). While these macro-level movements are the phenomenon studied in this paper, many of the explanatory measures of gubernatorial approval rating have micro-level foundations. Theories of individual behavior that are manifest in the gubernatorial approval ratings include voters' perceptions of the economy (e.g., accurate perceptions and partisan skew), voters' connection between the party of the governor and the party of the president, two-sided or one-sided information flows to the electorate, and "easy" versus "hard issues".

Many scholars have found that economic conditions have a heavy impact the political fortunes of governors (Howell and Vanderleeuw, 1990; Partin, 1995; Hansen, 1999; Cohen and King, 2004). This phenomenon can explain two of the three asymmetries: governor's party and federalistic differences. Leyden and Borrelli (1995) note that voters judge a governor more harshly for the state of the economy if the governor is of the same party as the president. In an effort to explain why governors and senators are treated differently, Squire and Fastnow (1994) note that voters hold governors responsible for the state economy and senators responsible for the national government,

just as the lawmakers' roles suggest they should. .

This sweeping statement of accountability assumes that voters can accurately measure the state of the economy. Achen and Bartels (2006) find that voters can fail to observe large changes of the economy when the changes are inconsistent with their partisan predispositions. To use one of their examples, when asked in 1996 whether the budget deficit had increased or decreased under President Bush, only a quarter of Republicans knew that the deficit shrank—well below the national average. In the case of gubernatorial approval ratings, Republicans might hesitate to give credit to a Democratic governor for an improving economy, especially if they can give credit to a Republican governor.

A similar theory predicts that the fortunes of state chief executives will depend on the economic state of the nation if the governor and president belong to the same party. Downs (1951) presents a framework in which voters would rationally evaluate the party in power based on its current performance. Since simple partisan cues deeply affect voters decisions, especially uninformed voters (Converse, 1975), a citizen of Indiana might link his/her Republican governor with the Republican President. Unfortunately for the governor, conditions outside of his control may affect his approval rating.

However, some governors do have a convenient excuse for state crises: blame the legislature (of the opposite party). Since, at least on the federal level, legislative output is similar under unified and divided government (Mayhew, 1991), governors who operate with an opposition legislature still reap the benefits of legislative accomplishments while retaining the option of “passing the buck” when necessary. The empirical data provides evidence that these governors have higher approval ratings (MacDonald and Sigelman, 1999; Lowry, Alt, and Ferree, 1998). This theory also applies to negative economic conditions. If unemployment increases, governors with a hostile legislature can blame the state assembly for economic woes. Indeed, voters under unified rule punish governors more severely for poor economic performance (Leyden and Borrelli, 1995).

Combining the theories regarding voters' partisan bias and unified control of governments yields further predictions of voter evaluation. Under divided rule, out-partisans would blame the governor for a sour economy while in-partisans would blame the legislature. If the economy recovered, these same voters would be quick to give credit to the opposite institution. This latter effect is dampened, however, by the fact that voters are reluctant to credit politicians for good economic performance;

empirical evidence bears out this claim on both the federal (Mueller, 1973) and the state level Hansen (1999).

Economic factors help explain why out-partisans would evaluate their governor negatively, but the question still remains why so many out-partisans set their biases aside and approve of their governors. I argue that governors can send subtle clues to out-partisans on “easy issues” and earn their trust and approval. Carmines and Stimson (1980) develop a definition of these “easy issues”, which unsophisticated voters weight most heavily. The authors postulate that easy issues are (1) symbolic rather than technical, (2) address ends rather than means, and (3) have been present on the political agenda for a lengthy period. I test the robustness of easy issue cues by examining governors’ position on abortion: certainly an easy issue by the Carmines-Stimson criteria, but an issue not often mentioned on the state level. I determine whether an abortion effect exists on gubernatorial approval ratings, and contrast the effect to that of the difficult, but oft-discussed issue of fiscal policy.

These theories explain all three asymmetries seen in the cross-tabulated approval data. First, since out-partisans are more likely to blame the governor than in-partisans (and since politicians are rarely rewarded for a good economy), out-partisans’ approval will be more varied than in-partisans. Second, governors are tied to their own, individual state economy—unlike senators who are all primarily affected by the same national economy—and thus exhibit higher variability in approval ratings. Third, Republican governors are currently tied to the President, thus potentially shifting their approval ratings in an undeserved negative direction.

4 Data and Empirical Findings

4.1 SurveyUSA’s 50-State Tracking

The primary source of data for this research is SurveyUSA’s collection of 50-state tracking polls. In May 2005, SurveyUSA began polling the approval ratings for the president, senators, and governor in all 50 states. Polls are fielded monthly for presidential approval and about once every six weeks for the two statewide offices. The job performance questions for all three positions were often asked in the same survey. Poll results were demographically weighted to the “most recent

U.S. Census estimates.”¹⁰In a departure from standard telephone surveys, SurveyUSA uses an automated touch-tone technology instead of a live interviewer; studies indicate that such a change in methodology does not affect the survey results (Knapp and Kirk, 2002).

The major advantage of using SurveyUSA’s data is that cross-tabulations are provided for party, gender, ideology, race, church attendance, education, age, and views on abortion. Not every cross-tabulation is available for every state, but the data is nearly complete. A second advantage is that the questions and methodology are standardized across time and the states, thus making comparisons more appropriate.

However, problems with this data source do exist. The first is that only cross-tabulations, and not individual-level data are available, creating the potential for ecological problems. The ecological fallacy is avoided in two ways. First, the cross-tabulated data is often a direct measure of the quantity of interest (e.g., level of cross-partisan approval). Second, the predictor variables (e.g., unified or divided government) are constant across individuals or represent a state characteristic (e.g., state population) that relates to a macro-theory of gubernatorial approval. Both of these conditions act in concert to eliminate the need to perform ecological inference.

Also potentially problematic is the effect of presidential approval priming on gubernatorial evaluations. SurveyUSA’s approval questions are not rotated, and respondents are asked to rate President Bush’s job performance first, the governor’s performance next, and then the senators’ performance. Alspach and Bishop (1991) find that when the gubernatorial question is asked after the presidential question, respondents rate their governors in comparison to the president. Given President Bush’s low approval ratings during this time period (averaging about 40%), the ratings for governors and senators might be artificially inflated. More problematic is the fact that evaluations of President Bush’s performance vary across regions, and thus this level of inflation is not constant across the states.¹¹

With survey data available for 50 states over the course of a year, two types of regressions are conducted: time-series and cross-sectional. The time series data uses gubernatorial approval from May 2005 to June 2006, which includes 52 governors. For most governors, 11 measures of approval are available. While data is available after June 2006, these ratings are not included because the

¹⁰See Appendix B for a sample questionnaire and complete methodological statement.

¹¹This potential bias is not present in the time-series analysis, since a lagged dependent variable is included.

2006 election season began about that time. Two states, Virginia and New Jersey, elected new governors in November 2005, but in neither state did the incumbent governor run for another term. The duration between approval surveys—one or two months—is not taken into account.

The cross-sectional analysis focuses on the effects of fiscal policy, and since most states' budgets are due on July 1, gubernatorial approval ratings during July 2005 are analyzed. Because the sample size of partisan groups in one poll is so small, these approval rates are averaged with the cross-tabulations of the surveys that immediately preceded and succeeded the July 2005 measures.

4.2 Economic and Demographic Data

The procedures for operationalizing the explanatory variables for regression analyses and variables used in the ecological inference analyses are as follows:

State Economy. For the cross-sectional analysis, state income growth from the last two quarters of 2004 to the first two quarters of 2005 represents the condition of the state economy. This value is multiplied by 100 to make regression coefficients easier to interpret. For monthly time-series analyses, state income data is unavailable, so the unemployment level (lagged one month) is used. For both the state income and unemployment data, the nationwide value is subtracted from the state value, quantifying the relative economic conditions of the states (Cohen and King, 2004).

Unified government. A state is considered to have a unified government when the party of the governor strictly controls both branches of the legislature. States with equally divided Senates (and Nebraska's non-partisan legislature) are considered divided.

National Mood (Anti-Governor). The President's approval rating when the governor was first elected. If the president and governor belonged to the same party when the governor was elected, this measure is subtracted from 100%.

State Demographics. The U.S. census provides estimates of both state population (2005) and state diversity (2000).

Ecological inference variables

State partisanship. State partisanship is represented by the percent of the population that self-identifies with the party in question (as reported by SurveyUSA). This value is then divided by the total percent of respondents who identify with one of the two major parties.

Presidential Approval. Presidential approval is averaged over across all SurveyUSA data from

May 2005 to June 2006. For Democratic governors, the president's approval rating is subtracted from 100%, producing a common direction of effect across the states.

4.3 Gubernatorial Ideology Data

While ideological scores are available via Poole and Rosenthal's (1997) NOMINATE score for members of Congress and for presidents, no such scores are available for governors. In lieu of this information, researchers tend to focus a major issue, such as abortion, when analyzing gubernatorial ideology (Cook, Jelen and Wilcox, 1994). In addition, the proposed change in state expenditures for the next fiscal year also helps measure gubernatorial ideology.

The National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) provides public ratings of politicians, which are used here to code abortion views. NARAL's rating system includes three categories: pro-choice, mixed-choice, and pro-life. This position is then compared to the opposition's party's platform. Pro-life Democrats and pro-choice Republicans receive a score of 1 for "abortion congruence." All mixed-choice politicians are coded as 0. The remaining governors are assigned a score of -1.

Abortion is entered into regressions as an ordinal variable instead of two dichotomous variables (i.e., one variable for issue congruence and one for mixed views) because so few governors take a view that diverges from that of their party. Connecticut Governor Jodi Rell is the only pro-choice Republican governor (from NARAL's perspective) and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and West Virginia's Joe Manchin are the only pro-life Democrats. Given this lack of variance in the dichotomous variables, the benefit of the ordinal variable's larger variance outweighs the cost of the incorrect assumption that the ordinal variable is scalar.

Measuring a governor's stance on fiscal issues is not as straightforward as evaluating abortion positions. The National Governor's Association, in partnership with the National Association of State Budget Officers, canvasses the states and records the broad strokes of the budget proposed by the nation's governors each spring. Since governors' positions on fiscal and economic issues should correlate with their ideal level of state spending, I use proposed percentage change in state expenditures (for fiscal year 2006) to help operationalize ideology. The variable is offset by the national average, and—similarly to the abortion variable—multiplied by -1 in the case of Democratic governors.

4.4 Economic Conditions and Partisan Bias

Hansen (1999) claims that “Life is not fair” for governors, as they are not rewarded for lower unemployment. In contrast, I find that, while the effect of better economic conditions may be statistically indistinguishable from zero for the entire electorate, governors do get credit for prosperous economic conditions from members of their own party. Unfortunately for these chief executives, Hansen’s quote still holds true in one respect: the blame governors receive for bad economic conditions from out-partisans that outweighs their reward among in-partisans.

The primary tool of analysis for the time-series data is a Prais-Winsten (1954) regression, which automatically includes a lagged dependent variable. State economic conditions are deemed “improving” (or “worsening”) when the state’s unemployment rate relative to the national rate drops (or increases) by at least 0.1% from the measured time period. In these cases of changing economy, both periods must be included in the analysis, since gubernatorial approval rating is autoregressive. The first measure of approval rating in each “chain” of time periods with consecutively improving or worsening unemployment adds nothing of value to the analysis; n-sizes have been adjusted to reflect these gaps.

As the results in Figure 7 depict, changing state unemployment has an effect on gubernatorial evaluations that is significant for each partisan groups. The coefficients are around -1, meaning that a full point drop in relative state unemployment translates into a one percentage point increase in gubernatorial approval ratings. The effects of the national economy on approval ratings are larger, but noisier. For independents and out-partisans, who are affected most by national unemployment, a similar drop in the U.S. unemployment level translates into a 6-7 percentage point increase in performance evaluations.

The effect of state unemployment on gubernatorial approval ratings may seem small to some readers. The results are dampened by the partisan bias of voters who are predisposed to blame (or give credit to) governors of their party (or the opposing party). Larger effects exist in subsets of the population where these biases work in the direction of the unemployment-approval relationship (Figure 7(d) and (e)). In-partisans credit governors with two percentage points of approval for every point decrease in relative unemployment. On the other side of the bias, out-partisans decrease their support for governors by 5 percentage points during poor economic times for an analogous increase in unemployment. The former bias is not quite meet the rigor of statistical significance; the latter

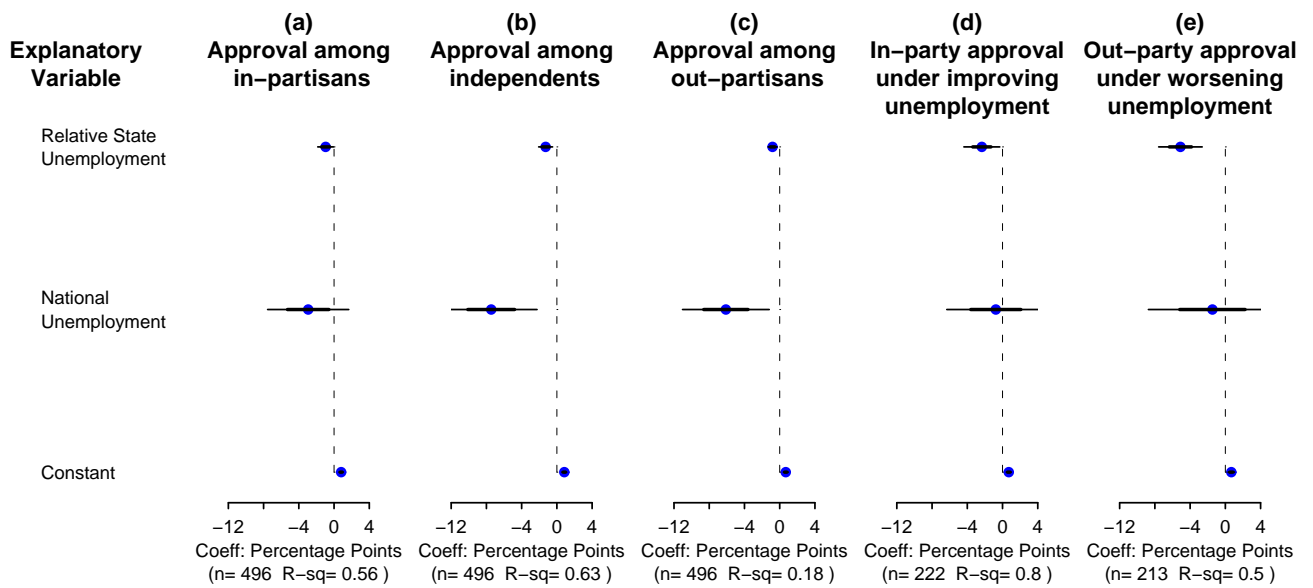


Figure 7: Monthly Prais-Winsten regression of cross-party gubernatorial approval.

does.

The rest of this section explores the circumstances under which out-partisans give credit to governors when the economy is strong, and when in-partisans will blame the governor for poor economic performance. First, the co-partisanship between the state and federal executive branches is examined. Second, I analyze how voters react differently under unified or divided governments.

4.5 Economy and Co-Partisanship

During poor economic times and when the governor and the President are of the same party, the “co-partisanship” of the two elected officials can hurt the governor during poor economic times. The state’s chief executive can neither blame the President and nor rely on members of her party to finger the President as the cause of their economic woes. When the economy recovers, however, the governor can take pleasure in knowing that member of the opposing party will not credit the president for the economic turnabout.

To measure the effects of these processes, I evaluate economic conditions and whether or not the governor is Republican. (President Bush was in the White House for the duration of the data set; thus co-partisanship occurs only with Republican state executives.) The non-interaction indicator variable of “Republican governor” is not included in the regression since this effect is not additive

for every time period. Republican governors might in general garner more or less support than their Democratic counterparts, but this effect manifests itself in the autoregressive term of the Prais-Winsten regression.

When the state economy falters, the governor almost always gets blamed by members of the opposing party (Figure 8(e)). One might think that Democratic governors could shift the blame for the bad economy to President Bush, but this tactic certainly does not work among Republican voters. Republican governors could try to shift the blame to the President, though that sort of party disloyalty probably would not help their political careers. Interestingly, party loyalty among the states' citizens is not strong enough to wholly survive through poor economic times. Democratic in-partisans blame their governor for worsening unemployment (Figure 8(b)) even when they have the option of blaming President Bush. This disloyalty is demonstrated by Democratic voters in Michigan's weak economy; only 56% approve of Democratic Governor Granholm, ten points lower than the nation in-party average.

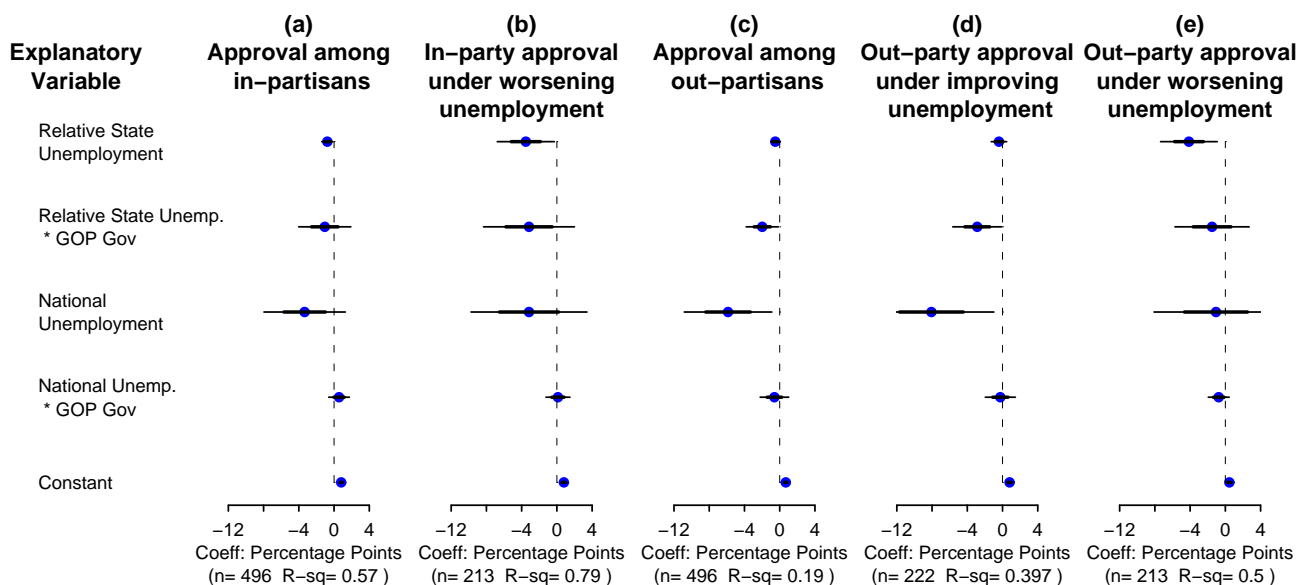


Figure 8: Monthly Prais-Winsten regression of cross-party gubernatorial approval with a focus on governor-president co-partisanship.

Under an improving state economy with a Democratic Governor, Republicans are more likely to give credit to Bush than to the state's chief executive (Figure 8).¹² Democratic voters who live

¹²This proposition is difficult to test with the presidential approval data because of the large national events, such as Iraq, that affected his approval rate during this time period.

in a state with a Republican governor, on the other hand, are more inclined to praise their local politician rather than to increase their evaluation of the President. In this case, the governor is most likely taking credit for the economy while the President may be silent on the issue (since the national economy is not improving as fast as the state's.) The data indicate that a one-point decrease in the relative unemployment rate results in a 6 percentage point cross-party approval boost for Republican governors, but generates an analogous boost of only 2 points for Democratic governors.¹³

4.6 Economy and Unified Gov't

Though the data are noisy, the time-series regression produces some evidence that voters also take into account whether the government is unified or divided. The results indicate that in-partisans will only punish the governor for poor economic performance when there is no one left to blame: the state house, state senate, and President are of the voter's party. Likewise, governors who shepherd the state through prosperous economic times will be especially rewarded with cross-party support when the out-partisans cannot credit a member of their own party.

To test this theory, I add a two-fold interaction term of co-partisanship and unified government to the model. As with co-partisanship, the non-interaction term of unified government is not added since those effects should have entered into voters' evaluation through the previous term's approval rating. Under the theory, the two "simple" interaction terms between unemployment and co-partisanship, and between unemployment and unified government should be small and negative. Most importantly, the two-fold interaction that includes all three terms should be large and negative.

Due to lack of data, none of these terms reaches statistical significance at conventional levels, though the point estimates for the two-fold interaction terms are large and negative (Figures 9(b) and (d)). These values are significant at the 80% level. The simple interaction terms are all within one standard deviation of zero and occasionally have the "incorrect" sign.

In contrast to the small overall effects of the unemployment rate (Section 4.4), single-party control during a changing economy can have a large impact on the political fortunes of a governor. Under unified government and a president who shares the governor's party, the governor's support

¹³Due to decreased sample size, these point estimates include more noise than those in the previous section.

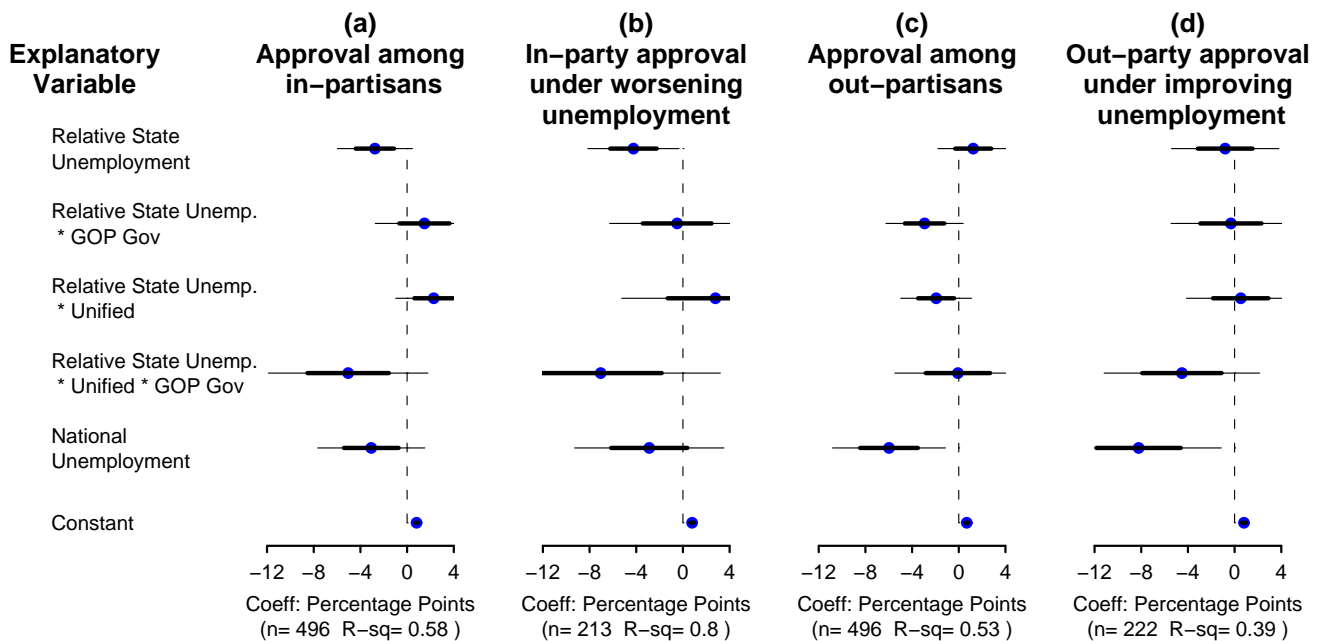


Figure 9: Monthly Prais-Winsten regression of cross-party gubernatorial approval with a focus on unified versus divided government. Direct tests of the theory are shown in cells (b) and (d).

among his/her partisan base drops by 9 percentage points for every point increase in relative state unemployment rate. Similarly, among out-partisans with no one of their own party to credit for economic prosperity, support for the governor increases by five points for every unit change in relative unemployment.

All of the asymmetries outlined in Section 2.3 can be at least partially explained by a combination of economic performance, institutions, and partisan bias. The varying conditions of local economies help explain the existence of larger variance among cross-party support for governors than for senators. Since a worsening economy has disproportionately more effect on a governor and since out-partisans are more likely to react to a worsening economy, partisan bias helps explain the differences between the variances of in-partisan and out-partisan support distributions. And because the fate of Republican governors is tied to the fate of President Bush, Democratic governors have a slightly easier time attracting cross-partisan support.

4.7 Gubernatorial Ideology: Abortion and Fiscal Policy

As gubernatorial ideology rarely changes at measurable levels, a cross-sectional analysis is used to examine how effectively governors can attract members of the opposing party by taking issue

positions that run counter to the national platform of the governor's party. The standard control variables of party, unified government, logged state population (MacDonald and Sigelman, 1999), and state diversity (King and Cohen, 2005) are included in the model.¹⁴ One control variable not previously discussed in the literature, national mood, is added to the regression as well. Though effects across issues are difficult to measure, a governor moderating her stance on abortion has an impact on cross-party support that is at least as large as that which comes from moderating her stance on fiscal policy. This effect holds true even though a governor's position on abortion is discussed in the media much less than her budgetary policy.

The results of the cross-sectional OLS regression are displayed in Figure 10. The control variables all have the expected sign (except for unified government which is indistinguishable from zero) and over half the variance of cross-party support is explained. Since comparing coefficients across variables on different scales is difficult, the effect of moving a specified distance on each variable is displayed. Note that maintaining high approval ratings while governing a large state is much more of a challenge than when governing a small state. This factor could help explain why Democratic governors fare slightly better than Republican governors in their respective hostile territories.

To discern between the idiosyncracies of individual governors, scholars sometimes include the size of the original electoral coalition (King and Cohen, 2005). The logic of including this variable is that a larger the electoral victory indicates that the governor will be an effective chief executive. An alternative (or perhaps complimentary approach) is to include an anti-governor national mood variable. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) argue that the electorate swings back and forth in a logical manner between favoring and disliking the parties. If a Democrat is elected governor when the nation's mood¹⁵ heavily favors Republicans, then the Democrat must be an excellent campaigner to overcome voters' partisan cues.¹⁶ Campaign success correlates with popularity, and once the national mood shifts, the governor may be quite popular. A measure of anti-governor sentiment thus picks up differences in gubernatorial quality. In the regression presented here,

¹⁴Keeping the untransformed dependent variable is also standard in the literature (see discussion in MacDonald and Sigelman, 1999). As depicted by Figure 2, the range of the dependent variable is not approaching its artificial bounds.

¹⁵If using the exact terminology of Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002), "mood" should be replaced with "macropartisanship".

¹⁶Alternatively, the governors opponent might have been particularly inept.

national mood has the correct sign, but is not quite statistically significant.

The cross-sectional analysis demonstrates that the abortion issue is highly salient to out-partisans. A Republican governor moving from a pro-life stance to a pro-choice stance would increase his or her approval rating among Democrats by 23% points. (Similar results would occur if a Democratic governor became pro-life.) To achieve the same improvement in out-partisan evaluations through a shift in fiscal policy, a Democratic governor would have to decrease his or her proposed growth in state expenditure by 31 percentage points—an achievement most likely outside the realm of possibility.

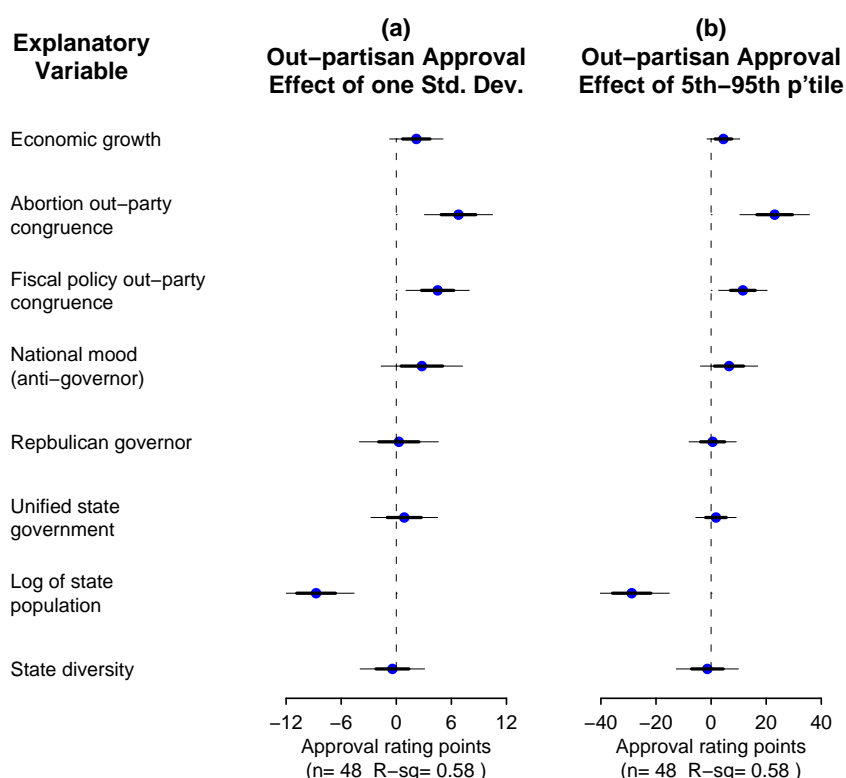


Figure 10: Cross-sectional regression effects on cross-party gubernatorial approval. Two states are missing: Texas because the governor did not report a proposed budget (fiscal policy congruence) and New Jersey because the governor was elected, not appointed (national mood).

The validity of these results might be called into question for a few reasons. First, voters may be more likely to know their governor's stance on abortion than the governor's fiscal policies. However, the newspapers cover the state budget process much more closely than they cover abortion issues. For instance, in 2005 California held a special election for eight referenda; the first proposition dealt with parental notification of abortion. Even in this climate, a search of the *San Francisco*

Chronicle in 2005 reveals only 74 articles that contain both the name of California’s governor (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and the term “abortion”. In contrast, 502 articles were written about Schwarzenegger and the budget.¹⁷

Second, even comparing standard errors or percentile shifts might not constitute a valid statistical comparison. Perhaps governors’ range of abortion stances is artificially high since they realize how much the issue moderation will help with out-partisans. More likely however, the party’s keep their governors from abandoning the national platforms in such an obvious way; only three governors take a position fully opposite their party. This constraint probably artificially lowers the standard deviation of abortion congruence and might be why the point estimate for the effect of abortion is closer to that of fiscal policy in Figure 10(a) than 10(b).

Third, out-partisan congruence might simply represent ideological moderation in general, thus obviating the need for a micro-level theory in which voters pick up on subtle cues of specific policy positions. The measure of fiscal policy represent up some of this general ideological shift as well, though often governor’s are constrained by economic and budgetary realities when proposing the total amount of expenditures for the next fiscal year. There is no simple answer to this concern other than to explore individual-level data in the future.

Shifting the partisan focus, performing a similar regression for in-partisans proves difficult with this data. The variance of the this dependent variable is lower than that of the cross-party support regression. Further, the degree of partisan disloyalty that exists in the data is difficult to predict with the standard measures. For instance, the correlation coefficient between in-partisan gubernatorial support and economic growth is negative, tiny ($r = -.0043$), and is indistinguishable from zero at even 10% confidence. If the dataset is restricted to states with Republican governors and unified governments (so that Republican partisans in these states have no one to blame for poor economic conditions), the regression coefficient between gubernatorial approval and economic growth is positive ($r = 0.203$), but still not statistically significant. Similarly, no relationship appears between in-partisans and governors’ ideological stances. Perhaps partisan loyalty dissipates for idiosyncratic reasons, such as a scandal. For instance, Ohio governor Bob Taft has the lowest in-party approval rating in the dataset, most likely because of the “Coingate scandal.”¹⁸. Just

¹⁷In perhaps a more typical example, *The Houston Chronicle* wrote 95 articles dealing with Governor Perry’s budget, and only 12 dealing with his stance on abortion.

¹⁸Taft eventually pled “no contest” to four misdemeanor counts on August 18, 2005. (See Balz, Dan. “Taft Admits

as this paper focuses on cross-party support, perhaps future research could focus on intra-party support.

Over one-fifth of governors abandon their parties' stances on abortions to some degree, and voters to react to these shifts in policy positions. Out-partisans improve their evaluation of these moderate governors, while in-partisans do not appear to be affected. The lack of media coverage of gubernatorial abortion views provides evidence that (at least some) voters react to small cues on "easy" issues.

5 Discussion

Scholars who study gubernatorial approval ratings must be of guard against the ecological fallacy. Using aggregate data on both sides of the regression with a theory that hypothesizes countervailing effects within the aggregate data (e.g., Democrats and Republicans approving of governors at different rates) is a recipe for statistically nonsensical and invalid results.

Though the SurveyUSA data does not suffer from the ecological fallacy, the data is still aggregated. Finding direct evidence for an individual-level theory such as partisan bias with state-level data is difficult, if not impossible. For instance, the media could be playing a large role in helping voters distinguish between unified and divided government. On the other hand, members of the public receive similar signals from the media, yet the partisan groups react differently.

The circumstantial evidence presented here indicates that voters suffer from partisan bias when evaluating their governors. During good economic times, Republican citizens will seek out any Republican institution or elected official (e.g., state house, state senate, the president) to credit before improving their evaluation to their Democratic governor. Though governors are always blamed to some extent for economic slumps, their status in the eyes of the voters is greatly diminished when no institution controlled by the other party is present to share the blame.

All is not lost for governors who wish to develop a broad base of support. From subtle clues about a governor's ideology (on an issue such as abortion), voters infer whether the governor effectively represents them. When governors abandon their party's national platform on "easy issues", they gain latitude to stake out a more partisan position on harder political issues such as *Ethics Violations.* *The Washington Post.* August 18, 2005; Page A06.)

the state budget. But so too is governors' freedom limited for hard issues, as voters *do* respond to changes in fiscal expenditures—albeit with less fervor than on the issue of abortion.

Finally, I introduce a new variable for gubernatorial cross-sectional analyses that helps control for unmeasured gubernatorial quality. If a governor is first elected during a period in which voters are hostile to his/her party, the governor must have overcome the strong partisan cues that affect voters' decisions—indicating a very successful campaign. The governor's win further indicates that his/ her platform resonates with the state's voters, predicting future success.

5.1 Conclusion

Research on statewide elected officials is inhibited by a lack of individual-level data. This dearth of data is especially noticeable when measuring job performance ratings because political surveys that provide data on individuals are often conducted in conjunction with elections, and thus include questions about vote preference but not job performance. Scholars who study gubernatorial approval ratings often rely on aggregate data and do not fully consider the consequences of aggregation effects.

Specifically, the effects of partisanship are often misspecified. Statewide partisanship acts as a screening process, so that Democratic governors elected in Republican-dominated states often have higher valences and more conservative ideologies. These characteristics have a positive impact on such governors' job approval ratings. Scholars who are not cognizant of this effect will find apparently counterintuitive coefficients on partisanship variables. To circumvent the problems of aggregation, this study uses cross-tabulated data with explanatory variables that are constant across individuals.

Theories of voters' use of partisan cues are not new to political science (Downs, 1957). Using data from the states can be helpful in pinpointing the exact nature and magnitude of these effects. On the federal level, studies of the president and Congress are constrained by the singularity of these institutions. Scholars cannot replace a Republican president with a Democratic one to explore the effects of partisanship under the same economic and political conditions. However, viewing the 49 states that have a chief executive and a bicameral legislature as microcosms of federal institutions can be useful for analyzing the behavior of citizens. First, though, researchers must understand the limitations of state-level data and the mechanisms by which voters evaluate their state government.

6 Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
Time-series analysis				
In-partisan approval	0.67	0.13	0.17	0.94
Independents' approval	0.49	0.14	0.09	0.84
Out-partisan approval	0.41	0.17	0.07	0.84
Lagged relative unemployment	-0.0017	0.01	-0.023	0.071
Lagged national unemployment	0.05	0.0016	0.046	0.051
Republican governor	0.56	0.5	0	1
Unified government	0.4	0.49	0	1
Cross-sectional analysis				
Out-partisan approval	0.38	0.16	0.13	0.71
Half-year relative state economic growth	0.24	1.69	-8.37	4.13
Abortion congruence	-0.68	0.59	-1	1
Fiscal congruence	-1.1	6.07	-24.98	7.22
National mood	0.52	0.15	0.33	0.88
Republican governor	0.56	0.5	0	1
Unified government	0.4	0.49	0	1
Ln(State population)	15.09	0.998	13.25	17.35
State diversity	0.37	0.16	0.07	0.73

7 Appendix B: Sample Questionnaire and Statement of Methodology

Questionnaire.

- Do you approve? Or disapprove? Of the job George W. Bush is doing as President?
Approve? Press 1.
Disapprove? Press 2.
If you are not sure, press 3.
- Do you approve? Or disapprove? Of the job {namegovernor} is doing as Governor?
- Do you approve? Or disapprove? Of the job {namesenator1} is doing as United States Senator?
- Do you approve? Or disapprove? Of the job {namesenator2} is doing as United States Senator?

Intervening Questions

To complete the poll, just a few more quick questions

- Do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent?
Republican, press 1.
Democrat, press 2.
Independent, or a member of some other party, press 3.
[pause]
If you are not sure, press 4.

Methodological Statement. This SurveyUSA poll was conducted by telephone in the voice of a professional announcer. Respondent households were selected at random, using Random Digit Dialed (RDD) sample provided by Survey Sampling, of Fairfield CT. All respondents heard the questions asked identically. Within the report, you will find: the geography that was surveyed; the date(s) interviews were conducted and the news organization(s) that paid for the research. The number of respondents who answered each question and the margin of sampling error for each question are provided. Where necessary, responses were weighted according to age, gender, ethnic origin, geographical area and number of adults and number of voice telephone lines in the household, so that the sample would reflect the actual demographic proportions in the population, using most recent U.S.Census estimates. In theory, with the stated sample size, one can say with 95% certainty that the results would not vary by more than the stated margin of sampling error, in one direction or the other, had the entire universe of respondents been interviewed with complete accuracy. There are other possible sources of error in all surveys that may be more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. These include refusals to be interviewed, question wording and question order, weighting by demographic control data and the manner in which respondents are filtered (such as, determining who is a likely voter). It is difficult to quantify the errors that may result from these factors. Fieldwork for this survey was done by SurveyUSA of Verona, NJ.

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