

Terms and Time:

Reevaluating Gubernatorial Incumbency

If tenure is any measure of gubernatorial strength, then governors for most of America's history needed weight-lifting courses.

*Larry Sabato
Goodbye to Good-time Charlie, 103*

One of the most understudied aspects of elections is the role of the structure of the office in shaping electoral outcomes. This issue is especially important in the study of state and local elections since those elections feature the most institutional variety. While some research has been done on the evolution of the office of governor, it has seldom been linked to studies of electoral behavior.

State elections remain understudied relative to the congressional and presidential elections that have been used to understand voting in America. Some scholars may have shied away from state and local races because they fear that the analysis of these elections will not be seen as relevant to scholars across the entire nation or important in the general theories of electoral behavior. However, other scholars are increasingly seeing state elections as an opportunity to gain some theoretical leverage in understanding the decision making of voters and the exercise of democracy in the United States.

The lack of scholarly interest in gubernatorial elections is especially puzzling since governorships remain one of the great prizes of American politics. The parties take great pride in winning control of the governor's mansion with the counts of each party's share of the state governorships being tracked almost as closely as the partisan balance in Congress. The control of the governor's mansion remains an important measure of party strength in a state, made even more important by the increasing focus on governors' leadership in policy.

The research presented here is intended to serve several purposes. The first goal is illustrate historical trends in gubernatorial elections. Such research has been done in the past, but often with varying methods and results. Forming a clear picture of the general historical patterns in gubernatorial races is needed as a foundation as we start to include these elections in our broader theories of electoral politics.

While clarifying trends in the electoral competition for the governorship is a worthy goal, this study demonstrates that gubernatorial elections share some common tendencies with U.S. House races. While federal and state races have traditionally been considered separate fields of study, the research presented here suggests that once the shifting length of terms in office is included in the analysis, the common ground between House and gubernatorial elections becomes more evident and that our institution-specific theories of changes in the incumbency advantage are no longer viable explanations.

Data

This study utilizes an original data set that includes the returns for almost all gubernatorial elections held since American independence from England. This involves 3,154 races from 1776 to 2000. Election results from a wide variety of sources were gathered by the author and put into machine-readable form. The data set includes variables for the candidate names, vote totals, and party affiliations, time since previous election as well as the date of the election and a variable identifying the incumbent. In some cases specific names and vote totals for small third party candidates with low vote totals were combined into a category of scattered candidates. Combining minor candidate totals was necessitated by the reporting of sources that do not report all third party candidates and their totals separately.

Although this would seem to be a straight-forward process, assembling the election returns of the states can be difficult because results are often inconsistently reported in the various published sources. While the source of variations in published returns is often a mystery, it is likely that some variation in returns results from relying on news sources that publish “final” returns well before returns are finalized. It is common practice for news media to report that returns are “99% complete.” As it turns out, the counting of the last votes may alter the final count slightly (that is, not enough to alter the winner or loser, but enough to worry a researcher). The problem of precise counting was amply illustrated in the 2000 election as Americans watched Florida’s grappling over exactly what counts as a vote and what ballots merit counting. While most researchers in the field have always been aware of such problems, the relatively minor variations even in the state’s different recounts suddenly became a matter of national concern.

Vote totals from a few elections are not included for a variety of reasons. The most common reasons are that election returns were forever lost by the states or not available in any official or unofficial sources located thus far. Surprisingly, while the birth of democracy is one of America’s most cherished accomplishments, the specific returns from some elections have not been as cherished. In most of these cases the names of the winners and losers of these races have been reported but vote totals have proven more elusive. The inclusion of incomplete returns from these elections permits the examination of reelection rates even though comparisons of margins of victory are impossible.

Occasionally returns were not included do to legal challenges to the legitimacy of returns. State legislatures have at times rejected vote totals due to alleged election fraud. The standard used for inclusion in the analysis here is that any vote totals reported as official returns by the states can be utilized for study.

Vote fraud presents a dilemma to the researcher. Excluding contested vote totals from the analysis is one alternative to the researcher, but this may come at too high a price. Contested elections have been most common in the South, particularly between 1860 and

1900. Excluding contested elections would reduce the already low number of Southern races. Many elections are contested by some candidate or party and the success of these protests may reflect more on the political strength of the disgruntled candidate than on the degree or certainty of any irregularities. In addition, many states experienced voting fraud that was never detected or acted upon by legislatures. Because early American elections were managed by local officials that were closely associated with one of the parties, such fraud (or at least claims of fraud) are a constant in early American history.¹

If the researcher wishes to exclude contested elections some standard must be applied to decide what degree of challenge will merit exclusion. Since it is impractical, if not impossible, for the merits of each challenge to be evaluated in a study of this scope the criteria used here it to use any reported results available. This certainly includes counts for many illegal ballots, but since disputed ballots are likely to be found in the scrutiny of any election, little can be done. If nothing else, the 2000 election reminded many observers that the numbers found in elections are far from perfect and that disputes can undermine the results of races at any level. However, since few social scientists have expectations of a perfect data set, few will be dissuaded by the relatively minor problems in elections.

In a few cases, some election returns were not used because vote counts did not make a final determination of the winner, not due to vote fraud, but because no candidate garnered the necessary percentage of the vote required by a state's constitution to be declared the winner. States have held as many as four elections in a year attempting to give a candidate a victory. Since these races usually involve the same candidates with similar vote totals, including each of these contests would over-represent a particular contest. In these cases only the final election that determined who would hold office have been included in the analysis.

¹ A discussion of disputed gubernatorial elections can be found in Kallenbach's **The American Executive**, 86-93.

Missing returns are most common in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century, making the number of cases from the few states even smaller. For this reason, graphs will reflect only those races since 1800. Returns from early American history may also disproportionately reflect those few states which held elections every year up until the mid 1800s. Returns from early American history should be analyzed with discretion and are included here to provide a full picture. The perspective of this study is to include all possible cases since they can always be extracted later if they appear unrepresentative.

Results

The results presented here represent a preliminary analysis of historical trends. Undoubtedly, additional variables and more in-depth analysis will provide some additional insights into gubernatorial elections. However, the results provide a foundation for some conclusions and suggest some interesting hypotheses for future research.

Timing

One well-documented change in gubernatorial elections is that states have moved their elections away from presidential election years. For example, in 2001 New Jersey and Virginia will have gubernatorial elections with another 36 holding contests in 2002. With only 11 states selecting their chief executive at the same time as the nation's top office, the desire of states to insulate themselves against the national electoral tide is evident.

The states' motives may be reflected in work such as Atkeson and Partin's (1995: 105) recent study that showed that while Senate candidates benefited or suffered from the popularity of a sitting president, governors remained generally insulated from such an effect. Atkeson and Partin's research suggests that voters are largely successful at accomplishing the kind of electoral compartmentalization that we would hope for lest all American elections become referenda on the president. Rather than politics become an

undifferentiated mass, voters are able to focus on the different agendas of the different offices. Stein (1990) comes to a slightly different conclusion as his analysis suggests that citizens are aware of the differing functional responsibilities of state and national governments and that voters recognize that governors have little control over state economic conditions and turn instead to the president when voting retrospectively.

While these recent studies have begun to address what may be unique to voters' choices for the different offices, other questions remain. Given the differing responsibilities assigned by our system of federalism, what may be most surprising are similarities between these offices. And, while recent research may provide some leverage, some lessons can be learned from a broader historical perspective.

Incumbent Vulnerability

One of the most discussed electoral trends in political science is change in incumbent security. Since David Mayhew first introduced "the case of the vanishing marginals" in the 1970s, scholars have scrambled to describe and explain the shifting fate of congressional incumbents. The ability of incumbents to maintain their position and the importance of reelection as a motive was one of the centerpieces of the discussion of Congress for over a decade. As we will see, the trends first detected in congressional races appear in gubernatorial races leaving the institution specific explanations offered by some authors suspect.

While some research has been done on competition in gubernatorial races, no clear consensus exists among researchers. Mark Tompkins (1984) asserts that the dominant view is that while states' elections in general are becoming increasingly competitive, gubernatorial incumbents are becoming increasingly secure. In contrast, J. Stephen Turett (1971) argued that a number of scholars report that American governors are more

vulnerable today than in earlier periods. These widely divergent results suggest that more research is needed.

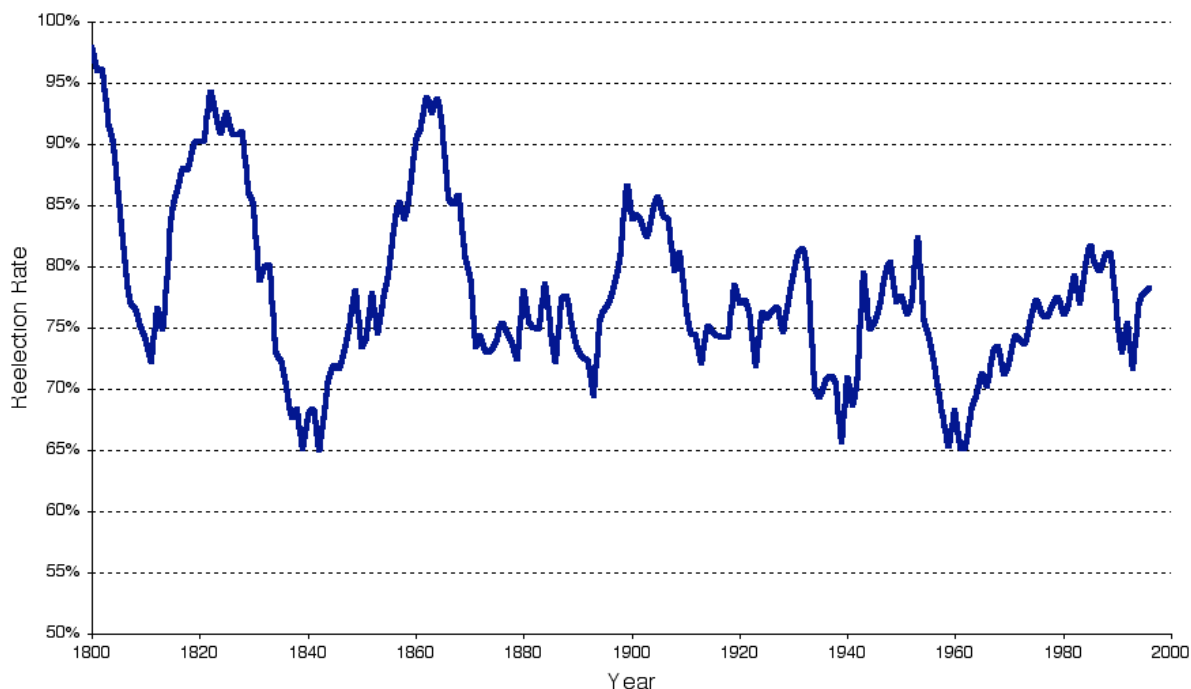
Some of the differences in results may be caused by data selection. Most of the studies available are limited in some manner. Turett's study (1971) only included results from 19 states since 1900. Tompkins (1984) examined elections since 1945. The analysis presented here avoids this problem by including all races from all years providing the most complete picture available.

There are several ways to measure incumbents' electoral success. The most straight forward means is successful reelection. If officeholders are successfully reelected then we can consider them successful. While other measures such as margin of victory have been used in the studies of congressional studies, their use has generally not produced dramatically different results than reelection. In addition, preliminary results of the data used here show little difference between studies of vote share and those using simple reelection.

Reelection Rates

To see how harshly or kindly America's governors have been judged by the votes over U.S. history, a long-term perspective is useful. Figure 1 shows the trend in the percentage of gubernatorial incumbents reelected from 1800 to the present. A moving average (± 2 years) is used to smooth the graph slightly and avoid over emphasizing very high or low reelection rates in years with few elections. Some years (especially odd-numbered years) often have few or no elections involving incumbents and without some kind of smoothing, these years produce wild variations in yearly averages.

Figure 1:
Reelection of Incumbent Governors
5-Year Moving Average



The picture of gubernatorial elections in Figure 1 may be complete, but it remains far from clear. There is little appearance of a strong, general trend over the last two centuries. Despite the smoothing effect of the moving average, short-term changes in reelection rates are often quite dramatic. While some general downward trend seems apparent, such conclusions may be slightly misleading since there are such a small number of data point available from the first decade of the 1800s. Not only were there fewer governors elected by voters early in our history, the exceptional success of a few governors like Trumball (Sr. and Jr.) in Connecticut elected to many successive one-year terms may greatly exaggerate early Americans' fondness for their governors. Especially in comparison to the dramatic variations from decade to decade, any trend over the last 200 years seems less than compelling.

Significant variation around the general trend is clear. The drop in reelection following the 1820s may represent Jacksonian Democracy's impact on the office as

governors saw their ability to coordinate state government undermined by the long ballot and the large number of executive branch officials now independently elected. The 1860s, with the Civil War and the division of the nation, reflect a brief highpoint in incumbent reelection followed by a period of higher gubernatorial turnover as the end of reconstruction witnessed the expulsion of Republican governors from the South and as state government grappled with the fallout of the civil war and the growing challenges of urbanization. As the cities grew, governors found themselves besieged by demands for increased government services and the need for new taxes to finance them. Further, after seeing their powers reduced as the growing state bureaucracies were created with little control by the chief executive, America's governors were not well equipped to attack the demands of these growing governments.

Led by progressive governors like Robert LaFollette of Wisconsin, Hiram Johnson of California, Teddy Roosevelt of New York and Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey, the progressive movement succeeded in turning voters' concerns about corruption in government into reform which would give governors more power and prestige. Governors again saw lower reelection rates in the 1930s with its economic depression and again in the 1960s with the social and political upheaval associated with the war in Vietnam and the struggle over civil rights.

In 1960 pollster Louis Harris argued that the governors made unlikely presidents because of the burdens of their office (369-370).

"In short, the job of being Governor of a state has become one of the hottest spots of all elected offices. The chances are that a man moving into the number one post in a state will inherit a financial situation where capital funds have been heavily tapped for current operating expenses, where tax collection methods are far from efficient, but where demands for dollars, from both municipalities and state-sponsored projects, have reached record heights.

Thus, we are witnessing a massive squeeze of the hitherto politically invulnerable position of Governors.”

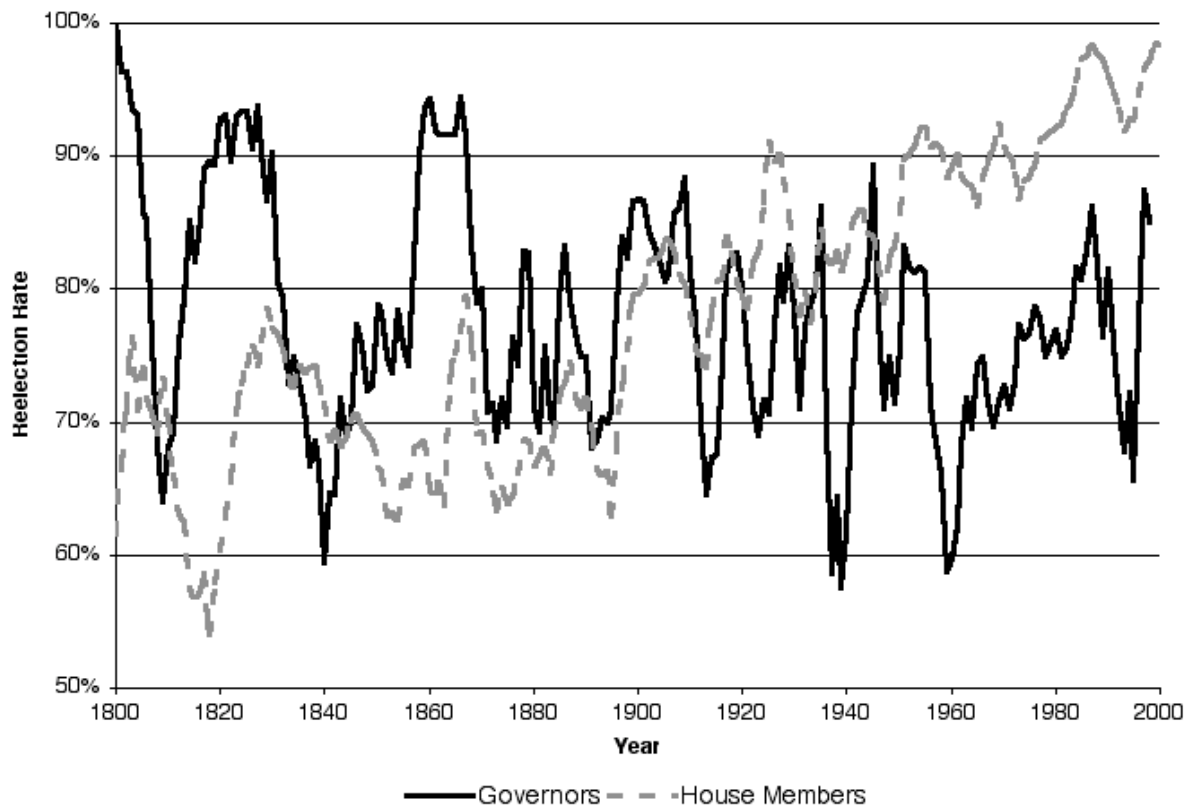
While the governor of the 1960s may have been obscure and embattled, by the 1970s governors were well-known and strong contenders for the presidency (Sabato 9). In fact, only George H. W. Bush’s move from the vice presidency interrupted the domination of ex-governors in the White House.

One factor helping governors was the growth in distrust of the federal government beginning in the 1960s. The percentage of respondents expressing a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in their state government rose from 63% in 1972 to 80% in 1998. With the distrusted and powerful federal government to rail against, governors could play “David” to the federal “Goliath.”

Larry Sabato argues that American governors went through a transformation. Throughout the nation the office of governor went through much needed reform as states finally gave their governors the tools they needed to control the executive branch and lead state governments. With more control over budgeting and with more staff resources American governors found themselves in a much stronger position to meet the demands of their office and satisfy the wants of restless voters.

While the historical decline in gubernatorial reelection rates is neither dramatic nor clear, it is striking in comparison to the rise of reelection rates in the House of Representatives that have been consistently over ninety percent in the last ten years and have been as high as 98%. Figure 2 charts the changing fates of both House and gubernatorial elections, revealing clearly different trends for the two offices. While gubernatorial reelection rates have shown some signs of slipping over the last 100 to 150 years, reelection rates in the U.S. House have clearly been heading up.

Figure 2
House and Gubernatorial Reelection Rates



One hypothesis is that U.S. House elections are responding to very different forces than gubernatorial elections. Much of the literature on the study of congressional incumbency has focused on explanations specific to the Congress such as casework. Some studies have looked at voter behavior, but even these might be called into question by the recent literature that suggests that voters make distinct evaluations of governor and federal offices.

However, the comparison between House and gubernatorial reelection rates may be problematic since all governors (or at least their terms) are not created equal and the length of gubernatorial terms has changed significantly over the last 200 years.

Changes in length of terms

One of the most important reforms in the governors' offices of America has been longer terms for the occupants. Joseph Schlesinger (1971, 237) argued that, "If tenure

potential is turned into the reality of governors with long terms, the gubernatorial office could become a true position of political leadership in the states.”

In the first decade of the 1800s Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont were holding gubernatorial elections every year with Tennessee and Ohio reelecting their governor every 2 years. Delaware, New York and Pennsylvania were holding elections every 3 years with Kentucky waiting 4 years between elections.²

Short terms like the one-year terms held by many U.S. governors were relatively common in the Nineteenth century. Early Americans only begrudgingly offered power to elected officials in the spirit of John Adam’s declaration that, “Where annual elections end, there slavery begins.” Slowly, early Americans became more comfortable granting power for more than one year. Some governors even advanced Progressive causes and came to be seen as protectors of the people rather than threats to their liberties. Many governors came to believe that short terms demanded continuous electioneering, as they had to quickly turn their attention to winning the next election. By the 1900s 21 of the 45 states had adopted the 2 year term, another 21 had 4 year terms with two states still using one-year terms and one holding elections every three years. Massachusetts was the last state to abandon one-year terms in favor of two-year terms in 1920. By the 1990s most states elected their governor every 4 years with New Hampshire and Vermont holding to the two-year terms that had been adopted during the 1870s to replace one-year terms.

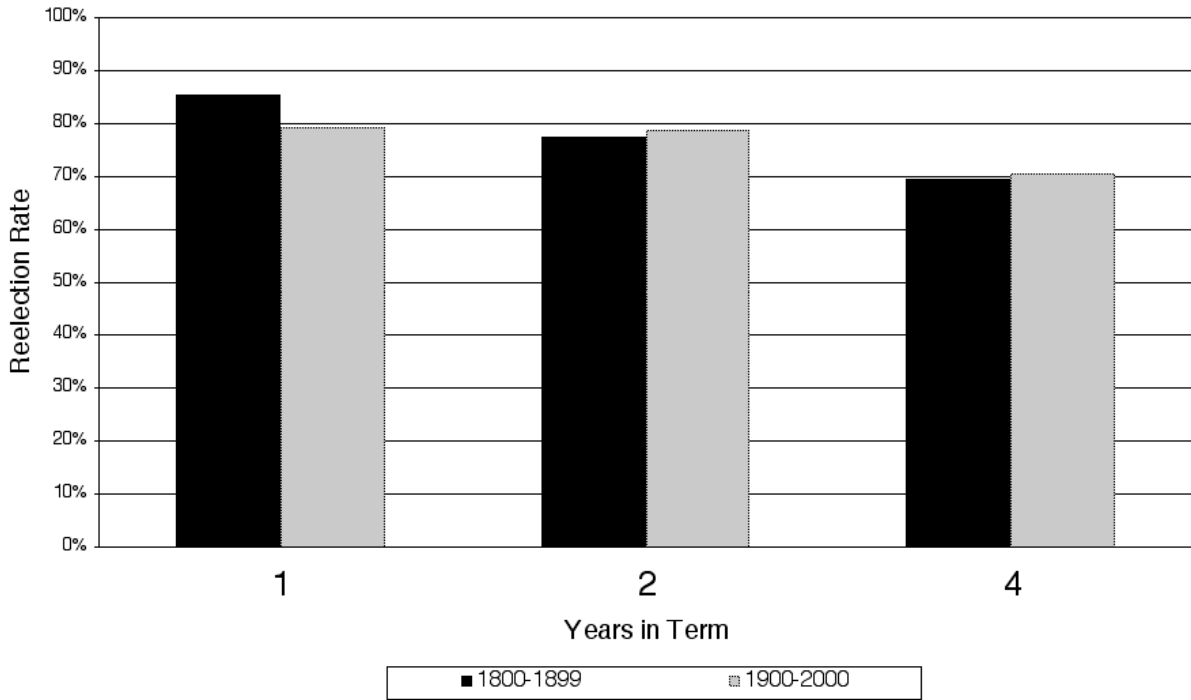
Interaction of term and reelection

The shift toward longer gubernatorial terms is an interesting topic in itself. However, the more interesting question for this paper is what impact these shifts had on the decisions

² Early in U.S. history many states did not directly elect their governors. Several of America's early states did not hold elections for governor and would put off the direct election of governors well into the future: Georgia (1825), North Carolina (1836), Maryland (1838), New Jersey, (1844), Virginia (1851), and South Carolina (1865).

voters made. While political power is won by an election, it is exercised over time. The goal of parties is to control offices as long as possible and winning elections is only an ends to that means. Therefore, one interesting question is to examine how reelection rates have varied with the length of gubernatorial terms.

Figure 3
Reelection Rates by Length of Term



The impact of length of term on reelection rates in the last two centuries is graphed out in Figure 3. As the figure shows, governors in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries who had served short terms were more likely to win reelection than those who had served a longer term. This helps explain why governors found it harder to win elections since seeking reelection involved winning more time in office than it had early in US history.

The longer term need not bode well for incumbents at election time so lower reelection rates following more time in office is not a particularly surprising result. More time in office gives incumbents more time to find their way into trouble with the infamous coalition of minorities that forms over the years as incumbents take actions that prove unpopular with different segments of the electorate. Hibbing and Brandes (1983: 809) have

suggested that “the lengthy hiatus from voter judgment may make reelection more difficult for Senators” and the peril for governors would seem to be every bit as great. Voters’ calculus might also be altered with a longer term. Put in a rational choice perspective similar to that introduced by Riker and Ordeshook (1968) voters might expect to receive three times more benefits (positive or negative) from a candidate serving six rather than two years given the officeholder’s ability to provide these benefits for three times the amount of time. Thus, all other things being equal, voters should invest more time in their decision to reelect a governor for four rather than two years, making the idea of simple incumbency voting less plausible.

Voters may also suffer from fatigue after being served by one elected official too long. Similarly, elected officials may suffer their own form of fatigue as they run out of policy ideas and other ways to inspire public support. Both voters and officeholders may be inclined to seek new leadership or new challenges. The length of term may be a factor in other settings as well. An earlier study of electoral success of incumbents in the U.S. House and Senate revealed that differences between the two offices was not so great once the length of terms was included in the analysis (Collier and Munger, 1994).

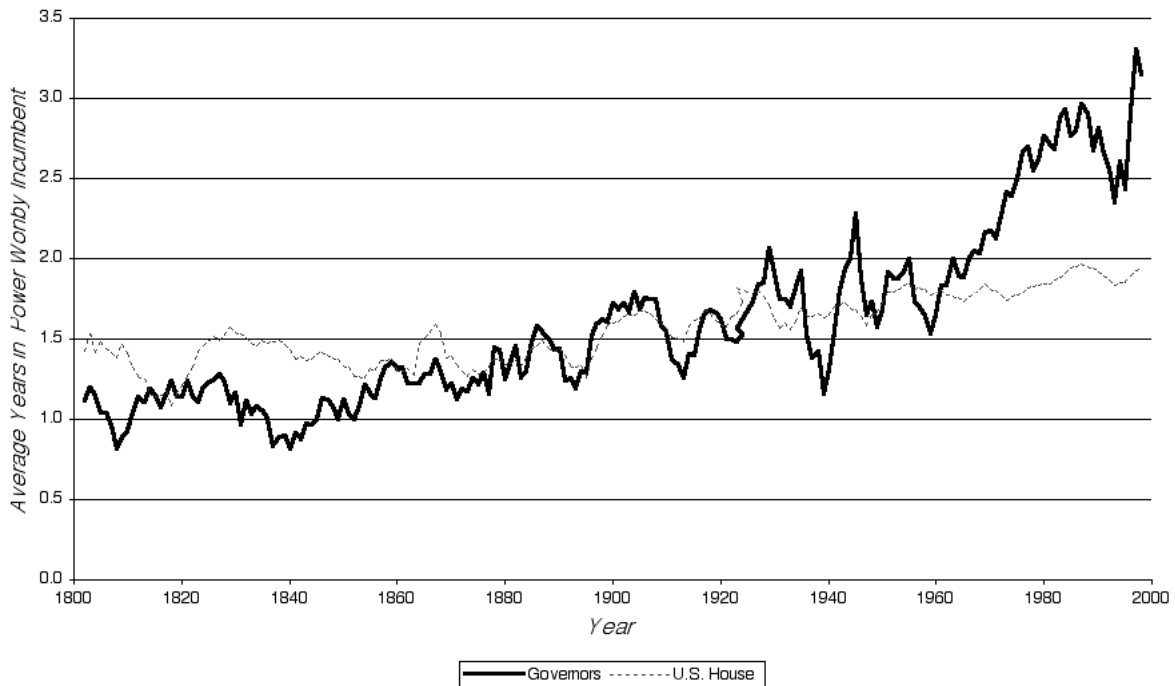
While the differing reelection rates of governors by terms provides few surprises and little theoretical leverage, combining the term in office with reelection rate clarifies the picture of shifting electoral fortunes over time.

In order to account for the length of gubernatorial term, incumbent victories were weighted by the length of term to reflect not only if the incumbent had won, but also how much time in office they had won. Incumbents’ electoral fate, which had been coded as 0 or 1, was multiplied by the length of the term leading up to the election. For example, an incumbent winning election to a four year term was coded as a 4. Of course, losing incumbents retained the value of 0 regardless of the length of term served.

As Figure 4 shows, once the interaction of electoral success and term in office is included the data reveals a very different picture of the retention of gubernatorial

incumbents. Gubernatorial incumbents go from an average of winning just over one year in office in the early 19th century to winning over 2.5 years in office by the late 20th century. Raw election rates that showed gubernatorial incumbents generally winning a lower percentage of their races concealed that they were actually winning the right to more years in office.

Figure 4:
Years in Power by Office
(5 Year Moving Average)



Not only does the inclusion of gubernatorial terms offer insights into the race for governors, it also offers some insights into congressional elections. Because it is now evident that long term trends in the reelection of governors mirror those of congressional incumbents, those institutionally based explanations of congressional success now look less appealing. The rising reelection rates found in congress in the 1960s and 1970s were shared by America's governors who did not share Congress's fondness for casework and or battling the bureaucracy to win over constituents.

Discussion

The heavy emphasis on American congressional elections tells us a good deal about a rather atypical set of electoral contests.

Ragsdale, 1973, 57

Americans seem to be developing a willingness to retain elected officials other than House members. America's governors seem to be winning longer and longer stays in office. Since David Mayhew introduced the "Case of the Vanishing Marginals" almost 30 years ago, the rising electoral security of incumbents has been the subject of considerable speculation by students of congressional and electoral politics. However, the presence of a similar trend in gubernatorial elections signals a need to reevaluate some explanations. "Institutional" explanations such as casework, pork barrel projects and the like that seemed like obvious suspects seem much less attractive than broader explanations implicating the behavior of voters.

Mayhew in his original exposition of the case of the vanishing marginals suggested that incumbents were doing better because they had developed communication resources that permitted them to advertise more effectively with their constituents. Fiorina (1977) suggested that constituency casework permitted members of Congress to assault the expanded bureaucracy that grew from the Great Society to the benefit of constituents while avoiding the electoral risks of taking positions on policies. By contrast, Tufte's (1973) argued that incumbents were made safer by favorable redistricting following the 1960 census. While most of the explanations were already in doubt, with America's governors sharing the good fortunes of members of Congress, the institutional explanations suffer further.

Ferejohn (1977), Krehbiel and Wright (1983) and others have placed the causes for changes at the feet of voters. Ferejohn offered evidence that weakening party identification led voters to substitute the simple cue of incumbency for the cue of party. As dealignment decreases the value of party as a cue, incumbency as a cue can become viable to the voter. Krehbiel and Wright refined this explanation and argue that partisan identifiers as well as

independent voters have turned to incumbency as a voting cue in recent elections. Under their hypothesis incumbency does not arise in only the absence of partisanship as a voting cue; voters have altered their decision rules independently of shifts in the strength of their partisan attachments.

The similarities between the two are supported by recent studies of voting behavior using survey data. Niemi, Stanley and Vogel (1995) found that voters held their governors responsible for poor state economies, declines in personal finances and tax increases.

What then would have driven voters into the arms of incumbents from both the Capitol and Governors' mansions? One cause may be the rising challenges to voters' calculus. As the role of the government expanded, the number of issues before the public in elections expanded and the voting calculus of citizens may have become more complex. Additionally, the value of party as a voting cue may have declined. As these changes occurred, incumbents gained as voters sought stable voting cues.

As governments at all levels have taken on more issues, voters have tried to take on these issues as well in choosing their representatives. Not only does the proliferation of issues make the choice of candidates more complex, it also increases the probability that voters will find no candidate that agrees with them on all issues. Citizens who feel that no candidate completely reflects their point of view will look for some means of breaking the stalemate.

With so many issues involved in an election, voters may find it difficult to determine the candidates' positions on all of the relevant issues and thus may seek some form of voting cues as information cost cutting mechanisms as described by Downs (1957). The complication of the issues before citizens may have driven some voters to the use of simplified cues in making their choices. While party is a likely cue for voters, the meaning of party eventually declined, making it less useful in choosing candidates. Parties became coalitions of such widely diverse groups that voters in the coalition may have felt ill at ease with each other.

With party labels meaning less and less, voters may be forced to find new cues for voting, stop voting or toss a coin in the voting booth. The increasing complexity of the political world and the multitude of issues before the government may have increased individuals' reliance on other cues such as incumbency or the personal characteristics of the candidates.

We may also be witnessing the further successes of the rising class of professional politicians. As America said farewell to the amateur governor Larry Sabato characterized as "Goodtime Charlie," the new generation of governors may be proving more adept at winning office.

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