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Further Evidence of the Partisan Consequences of Legislative Professionalism

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In an earlier article I hypothesized that the professionalization of American state legislatures enhanced the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party. While the statistical analyses reported in that article were consistent with the hypothesis, there has been lingering concern that the finding may be spurious. Specifically, if voter preferences within states increasingly supported both professionalization and Democratic candidates, the link between professionalization and Democratic success would reflect these underlying unmeasured preferences. Recently, state-specific time series measures of voter ideology were reported in an *AJPS Workshop* article. Incorporating these into the earlier analysis shows that shifts in voter ideology have a significant relationship to Democratic success, but the original relationship between professionalization and Democratic success is unaffected.

Split party control in the American states rose sharply in the post-war period, and a major component of that rise was relatively poorer Republican performance in legislative elections than in gubernatorial elections (Fiorina, 1992). In a previous article (Fiorina, 1994), I tested the hypothesis that the professionalization of some state legislatures had the unintended consequence of increasing Democratic representation. The hypothesis rests on a simple opportunity cost argument. Amateur legislatures, with their short sessions (often, biennial) are relatively more attractive to people who can combine part-time service with their primary occupations—independent proprietors and professionals, for example. In contrast, salary and wage earners find it more difficult to take leave from their primary occupations for legislative service. When legislatures professionalize, however, service becomes full-time, and the relative burdens reverse. Now professionals and proprietors may be reluctant to give up their more secure and lucrative primary occupations, whereas salary and wage earners may find public service more attractive than their current positions. Given statistical tendencies for proprietors and professionals—especially private sector professionals—to be relatively more Republican, and wage and salary earners—especially public sector salary earners—to be relatively more Democratic, it follows that the transition from amateur to professional legislatures will discourage some

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potential Republican candidates and encourage some potential Democratic candidates. Given the further assumption that, other things being equal, more and better candidates result in more success at the polls, legislative professionalization should provide a representational benefit to Democrats.

In a pooled time-series cross-sectional analysis of thirty-one non-southern states covering the period 1946 to 1990, an indicator of professionalization—real biennial legislative compensation—was significantly related to the growing presence of Democrats in state legislatures. Every \$10,000 increase in compensation was associated with an increase in Democrats of nearly 1 percent (Fiorina, 1994, 310). This relationship was estimated with controls for national level electoral forces (presidential coattails and midterm losses, national economic conditions), state level forces (gubernatorial coattails), the previous level of Democratic legislators, and fixed effects for individual states.

A natural question is whether this finding might be spurious. Could there be some unmeasured variable—related both to legislative compensation and to Democratic representation—that accounts for the apparent relationship between the two? The obvious suspect is voter preferences. If voters decide that they would prefer a larger government that delivered more services, they should realize that Democrats are more sympathetic to such a policy goal, and that a professional legislature can better construct and oversee such a government. Hence, an unmeasured shift in voter tastes would produce both a more professional and a more Democratic legislature. Mindful of this possibility I reestimated the equation with additional variables for state population, state per capita income, and size of state government to determine whether such proxies for voter “taste” for larger government might weaken the relationship between compensation and Democrats. They did not; in fact, the relationship marginally strengthened (Fiorina, 1994, 311).

Still, more direct measures of voter sentiments would be preferable to the indirect measures utilized thus far. Happily, these are now available. In a recent *AJPS* article Berry et al. (1998) report measures of voter ideology by state and by year for the period 1960–1993. In contrast to previous suggestions that state ideology for all practical purposes is constant during the post-war period (e.g., Wright, Erikson, and McIver, 1987), these measures reveal significant temporal variation within states: some become more liberal (Massachusetts, Virginia); some more conservative (Pennsylvania); and most fluctuate to some degree (Berry et al. 1998, 336). These new measures are not beyond question, of course, but based on the validity studies reported by Berry et al. (1998), they appear to be empirically superior to any alternatives.

What happens to the relationship between legislative compensation and Democratic legislative fortunes when direct measures of citizen ideology are included in the analysis? Table 1 reports the answer.

Table 1. Democratic Seat Share in Non-southern Lower Houses

Independent Variables	Models		
	1	2	3
Democratic Reps. (t-1)	.512 (.027)	.383 (.039)	.362 (.039)
Real Compensation	.0099 .0030	.0098 (.0042)	.0104 (.0042)
Presidential Year	-27.29 (2.78)	-21.97 (3.07)	-19.69 (3.13)
Vote	.5086 (.0598)	.430 (.065)	.381 (.067)
Gubernatorial Year	-20.14 (2.74)	-14.28 (2.91)	-13.78 (2.89)
Vote	.3981 (.0522)	.289 (.055)	.280 (.055)
Midterm	-9.99 (1.02)	-6.47 (1.46)	-5.80 (1.46)
GNP growth	.1670 (.0625)	.0008 (.141)	.0171 (.140)
State Ideology	—	—	.156 (.051)
SEE	9.01	8.04	7.97
adj R ²	.735	.709	.715
n	712	496	496

The first column of Table 1 is the principal equation of my original article (1994, Table 2, column 3). Using the same data and estimation methods, the second column reports the coefficients and standard errors for the same equation estimated on the shorter time series (1960–1990) for which the voter ideology estimates are available.¹ When the early postwar years (1946–1958 inclusive) are omitted, the estimated impact of presidential and gubernatorial coattails, national economic conditions, and the midterm reaction are weaker, consistent with myriad studies of the increasingly individualized nature of American elections in recent decades. Of most interest, however, the coefficient on real legislative compensation in the shorter time

¹Coefficients are estimated via dummy variable least squares, where the equations include fixed effects for the thirty-one states. For a discussion see Fiorina (1994, 310–311).

series is almost identical to the coefficient estimated on the longer series: every \$10,000 increase in real biennial compensation is associated with .98 percent more Democratic legislators. Dropping 30 percent of the original observations does levy a cost on the standard error of the coefficient—it is one-third larger in the abbreviated estimation. Nevertheless, the coefficient is still easily significant at conventional levels ($p < .01$, one-tailed test).

The third column of the table reports the equation from column 2 augmented with the Berry et al. (1998) measure of citizen ideology. The additional variable is highly significant, leaving very little doubt that the composition of state legislatures varies with the ideology of state electorates. A one standard deviation increase in state liberalism in a given year would increase the proportion of predicted Democrats in a state lower house by 2.29 percent. Admittedly, a standard deviation is a relatively large change, but given the number of control variables in the analysis, this still seems like reasonably strong evidence of representational responsiveness to citizen preferences.

What happens to the coefficient of legislator compensation when citizen ideology is included in the equation? Almost nothing: the coefficient increases marginally and its standard error remains the same. The conclusion is the same as before: every \$10,000 increase in real biennial legislator compensation is associated with a 1 percent increase in Democratic state representatives. Coincidentally, an increase of one standard deviation in compensation would increase the predicted Democrats in the state lower house 2.34 percent, virtually the same effect as that for citizen ideology.

To be sure, this may not be the end of the story. The possibility remains that the causal link that underlies the relationship between professionalism and Democratic success may be somewhat different from the candidate self-selection process that I have hypothesized. But the evidence for some genuine causal relationship between partisan fortunes and the structure of state legislatures appears to be very strong.

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