

Collective Accountability in State Legislative Elections
Obama: the State Legislator People Vote Against¹

By Steve Rogers²

Abstract: Party labels allow voters to hold elected officials collectively accountable. This form of accountability is seen at the national level, but it is unclear if voters similarly hold state legislative parties accountable. In studies of parties in state legislative elections, previous research ignores the state house majority party and does not account for voters' approval or knowledge of the legislature. To overcome these limitations, I use two data sets to investigate collective accountability. With recent surveys, I show respondents' approval of the state legislature correlates with a party's state house votes, suggesting elections serve to hold state legislative parties accountable. Examining past elections, I find the state house majority party receives little reward for good economies. Evaluations of the president, however, play a stronger role in both analyses. Presidential approval has twice the impact of state legislative approval on voting decisions, even amongst those who knew which party controlled their legislature. The role misinformation and federal evaluations play in legislative elections raises concerns for how voters hold state legislative parties accountable.

¹ Draft prepared for presentation at the 2012 State Politics and Policy Conference. A version of this paper with its Appendix can be found at <http://princeton.edu/~rogerssm/Conferences/StatePolitics/RogersSPPC-2012.pdf>

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The 2010 elections swept Republicans into state legislatures. Republicans gained over 700 seats and took control of fifteen legislative chambers. One of these was the Wisconsin Senate, where the incoming majority leader asserted his party would “fully flex their legislative muscle and advance the mandate provided by the electorate” (Kedzie 2010). In 2010, Republicans held onto every chamber they already controlled. After being returned to power, the Tennessee Senate majority leader believed the election gave Republicans the “mandate here to lead” (Locker 2010).

Claiming a mandate seems fair if voters use elections to express their approval and reward state legislators for their performance. However, it is unclear if this happened in 2010. Democrats lost seats in Wisconsin, Tennessee, and many other states but only gained in five legislative chambers. These poor electoral showings followed considerable successes in 2006 and 2008. State legislative Democrats may have performed poorly across the country in 2009 and 2010, but it seems unlikely that nearly every state legislative party did a bad job after performing so well a few years earlier.

This raises the question of whether voters hold state legislative parties accountable through elections. Elections can serve as an accountability mechanism when perceived as a sanctioning device. Looming judgments made at the ballot box every two years incentivize legislators to act in voters’ interests to avoid losing the next election (Manin 1997; Key 1961). For example if unemployment rises, voters can throw those in power out of office for their poor management of the economy. This potential punishment helps address the moral hazard problem created by representative government.³

³ Elections can also be understood as a way to “sort among types” and address adverse selection problems facing voters (Fearon 1999: 69).

Powell suggests two necessary conditions for elections to serve as an accountability tool. Voters “must have a fair opportunity to cast a meaningful vote for or against the policymakers” and “know who is responsible for making policy” (Powell 2000: 51). With only a fourth of Americans able to identify their state legislator, most voters likely do not satisfy the second condition at the state legislative level (Jewell 1985). Parties can help simplify the accountability process (Schattschneider 1942; Berelson 1954). By retrospectively judging the parties and electorally rewarding or punishing its members, voters can hold state legislators collectively accountable for their party’s performance.

Voters hold national parties collectively accountable, but less is known regarding state parties (Key 1966; Tufte 1975; Fiorina 1981; Jones & McDermot 2004). Despite addressing the reward or punishment to the governor’s or president’s party in the legislature, no published work considers the electoral role of the state legislative party. It is unknown whether these parties are electorally meaningful in their own regard. If they are not, it casts doubt that elections serve to hold legislators accountable for their own actions.

To provide a better understanding of state legislative elections, I therefore examine both data from surveys and past elections. I discover a relationship between individuals’ opinions of the legislature, suggesting voters hold state legislative parties accountable for their performance. The strength of this relationship, however, is diminished by misinformed voters and the influence of non state legislative actors. These findings are more fully demonstrated as follows. First, I address how voters could use these elections to hold parties accountable and offer three collective accountability hypotheses. I then discuss prior research on the role of parties in state legislative elections. I build on this work using two approaches. First, I examine the relationships between voters’ knowledge, opinions, and decision-making in state legislative

elections using survey data. The second approach analyzes party seat changes from 1972 – 2010 as a response to economic and approval variables. I present findings respectively in the third and fourth sections before concluding remarks.⁴

Collective Accountability

By identifying the party in power and making a retrospective judgment, a voter can reward or punish members of a political party for good or bad performance. Party members are then held collectively accountable for their actions. If elections serve as sanctioning mechanisms, political parties should expect to be electorally rewarded for good performance, creating incentives to act in voters' interests. To investigate this expectation, I generate three collective accountability hypotheses to address how shared party labels are electorally meaningful for voters in state legislative elections.

The first collective accountability hypothesis focuses on state legislative parties. If voters hold legislative parties accountable, negative evaluations of the legislature's performance should result in voters electorally sanctioning the incumbent legislative party in power. This form of accountability would resemble Responsible Party Government and seems straightforward given state legislators have the most control over the legislature's actions (Ranney 1954). The state house hypothesis then expects the incumbent state house majority party to gain seats or votes following times of high approval or strong economic performance. Evidence for this hypothesis suggests impending elections incentivize state legislators and their parties to act in voters' interests.

Voters' knowledge and their opinions regarding other levels of government, however, may influence how voters cast their state legislative ballots. For example while Powell requires

⁴ Another chapter of the dissertation plans to study whether voters hold individual legislators accountable for their individual behavior, such as roll call activity.

voters “know who is responsible for making policy,” most do not know which party controls their state legislature (Figure 1). Without knowing which party is in power, voters will not know who to punish or reward. Individuals additionally have relatively undefined views of the legislature. In the 2008 CCES, 20% of respondents were “Not sure” of whether they approved of the state legislature, but only 2% gave a similar response when asked about the President. When searching for an evaluation of Democrats, particularly obscure state legislative ones, voters may turn to their assessments of party figureheads, such as the governor or the president.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Evaluations of the governor or president may also be influential if voters use state legislative elections to sanction these non-legislative branches of government. By casting ballots against the governor’s party in legislative elections, voters can prevent an unpopular governor from pursuing his legislative agenda. Similarly, voters upset about Obamacare could support Republicans to make it more difficult to implement this health care policy in the states. Voters additionally may punish the president’s state legislative co-partisans to signal their displeasure to the White House.⁵ To examine scenarios where evaluations of non-legislative actors influence state legislative elections, I test the gubernatorial and presidential collective accountability hypotheses. The former expects the governor’s party to gain state legislative seats or votes following prosperous times or when the governor is popular. Similarly, the presidential hypothesis expects state legislators of the president’s party to be more successful in elections during times of high presidential approval.

Sanctioning the governor or president through state legislative elections may incentivize these non-legislative actors’ behavior, but it also suggests state legislators are held less

⁵ Before modern polling, Presidents commonly used state elections to assess trends in voters’ assessments of their own and their party’s performance.

accountable for their own behavior. If state legislative elections serve to sanction state legislative parties, the state house party hypothesis should receive support. Evidence for the presidential or gubernatorial hypotheses, however, implies election outcomes are partially determined by non-legislative actors, diminishing legislators' influence on their own elections. Legislative parties are then less constrained by elections. They can act more freely and not necessarily in voters' interests. Without a strong connection between legislative behavior and voters' decisions at the polls, state legislators will not be held accountable for poor performance, and the meaning of their elections becomes "increasingly confused" (Fiorina 1992).

Accountability in State Elections & Limitations of Research

Previous research addresses some of this confusion, but in studies of state elections, the governor is the center of attention.⁶ Governors and state legislatures mirror the presidential-congressional relationship within the "laboratories of democracy." Political scientists take advantage of this executive-legislative relationship to address the "surge and decline" or "balancing" theories of midterm elections (Bailey & Fullmer 2011; Folke & Snyder 2010). While valuable to better understand balancing, this research does not explicitly address whether voters hold state legislative parties accountable for poor economic performance or governance. Bailey and Fullmer do not discuss their unemployment control, but its coefficient suggests voters do not punish governor's state legislative party for high unemployment. Lowery, Alt, and Ferree similarly observe "inconsistent" relationships using relative income growth, but they and others provide evidence of gubernatorial coattails in state legislative contests (1998: 765; Campbell 1986; Chubb 1988; Hogan 2005).

⁶ In analyses of gubernatorial elections, findings are mixed regarding whether governors electorally benefit from strong state economies (Stein 1990; Atkeson & Partin 1995; Carsey & Wright 1998; Ebeid and Rodden 2006; Javian 2011). Despite political psychology research arguing voters distinguish between presidential and gubernatorial responsibilities, Carsey and Wright (1998) and Javian (2011) discover national forces such as presidential approval influence gubernatorial contests (Arceneaux 2006). Voters therefore may reward or punish the governor for conditions both in and out of his control.

Focusing on national forces, Chubb discovers the president's state legislative party is rewarded more for good national economies than the governor's party is for strong state economies. Looking at individual legislators' reelection probabilities instead of seat change, Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman (2000) similarly find coattails and national economic forces influence election outcomes, but legislative professionalism mediates their impact. Both of these analyses employ economic measures in interaction terms to account for the parties that factually control political institutions. Even if someone knows the economy is strong, using this interaction supposes they also know who to reward or blame.⁷

No prior research on state legislative elections accounts for whether voters know which parties control political institutions. More surprisingly, no published work even considers the role of the legislative party.⁸ It is therefore unknown if the state legislative party and its reputation is electorally meaningful in its own regard. If who controls the state house matters little for election outcomes, state legislative parties will not be held accountable for their actions.

To disentangle how sharing a state legislative party label matters, I investigate whether the state house majority party receives any reward comparable to that of the governor's or president's party by testing each collective accountability hypothesis using separate survey and electoral datasets. Responses from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey allow for hypotheses tests with individual-level measures of voter approval and knowledge, and seat change data let me examine a larger set of elections where surveys are unavailable. The

⁷ Approval measures better capture voters' assessments of government performance, but research relating approval and state legislative election outcomes is scarce. Klarner includes presidential approval in his 2010 state legislative election forecasts (Klarner 2010). Prior to this, the only known published state legislative election work including a measure of presidential approval uses a much aggregated dependent variable: "partisan control of legislative chambers across the states" instead of seats or votes (Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991: 1180). The relationship of gubernatorial approval and state legislative seat change receives greater attention, but prior work employs limited samples and produces mixed results (Mayo 2004; Folke & Snyder 2010; Bailey & Fullmer 2011).

⁸ Spiegelman's (2010) dissertation investigates the relationship between state legislative roll rates and party reputation. His reputation measure, the difference in the changes of Democratic and Republican statewide state legislative vote, is, however, indirect.

approaches complement one another to provide both a micro and macro level understanding of accountability in state legislative elections.

Micro Approach: Survey Analysis

Previous state legislative electoral research ignores the role of the legislative party and generally assumes economic conditions proxy for voters' evaluations. It additionally presumes voters know which parties control political institutions. This, however, is not always the case. To address these shortcomings, I utilize responses from the 2006 – 2010 CCES surveys where thousands of individuals answered state legislative evaluation, knowledge, and voting questions.⁹ Evaluation questions offer measures of individuals' assessments of government or economic performance. Voters may attempt to hold legislators collectively accountable by their state legislative party label for these performances, but they could incorrectly attribute blame or reward. Knowledge questions let me account for which party an individual *believed* controlled the governorship or state house. These large surveys therefore provide valuable data that allow for tests of the collective accountability hypotheses.

Despite drawing from a national population, the CCES samples, however, are likely not representative. Respondents are wealthier, better educated, and more politically interested than the general population.¹⁰ This biased sample more often accurately identifies the party in power and therefore may be better able to hold state legislators collectively accountable than the general population. Most CCES respondents, however, are still less likely to identify the majority state

⁹ YouGov/Polimetrix conducted these online surveys in two waves, interviewing the same respondents in October and November. In the first wave, CCES asked individuals who controlled their state legislative chambers and whether they approved of the state legislature. In the second wave, respondents stated how they voted in their state senate and house elections. In 2006, the survey had state legislative vote choice but not knowledge or approval questions. I report results from this survey where possible.

¹⁰ More detailed comparisons are in Table A-1. For 2008 comparisons, I draw from the September panel of the 2008-2009 ANES Time Series Study. For 2010, I use the Evaluations of Government and Society Study, which was conducted the same month as the CCES. It should be noted that question wordings and response categories, however, sometimes differ.

legislative parties than the governor's or majority federal legislative parties. If one assumes the proportion incorrect responses reflects levels of guessing, two thirds of voters were uncertain of who controlled their state legislative chambers (Figure 1).¹¹

To study whether voters hold their state legislators accountable, I examine the relationship between a respondent's reported vote in the lower state house election and their opinions regarding the economy or various political actors. To capture economic opinions, I use a respondent's assessment of how the national economy performed in the past year, ranging from "Much Worse" to "Much Better." I code these responses from -2 to 2 and adjust them to account for which parties individuals thought controlled the governorship or state house.¹² For example, if the respondent thought the economy was much better and a Republican was governor, "National Economy X Governor" receives a value of -2. If they, however, thought the economy was much better and Democrats controlled the state house, "National Economy X State House" receives a value of 2. I create similar independent variables for governor and state legislature approval.¹³ Due to the lack of a presidential party knowledge question, I assume voters knew Bush was a Republican and Obama was a Democrat and adjust measures accordingly.

The dependent variable, reported state house vote choice, is coded as 0 for a Republicans and 1 for Democrats.¹⁴ With the aforementioned coding scheme, positive coefficients therefore

¹¹ One could also assume many "Not Sure" respondents would have answered correctly if given different closed item responses (Mondak 1999:72).

¹² These adjustments assume strongly approving of a Democratic Governor is the same as strongly disapproving of a Republican Governor. To check this assumption, I estimate the main model with unadjusted approval variables on data subset by who respondents thought controlled the governorship and state house. Conclusions regarding the gubernatorial hypothesis do not change, but there is a difference between respondents who thought Democrats or Republicans controlled the state house. I address this in greater detail below.

¹³ There are a considerable number of "Not sure" responses to the governor and state legislative approval questions. I code these as a middle 0 category to reflect uncertainty regarding whether the respondent disapproves or approves. When adjusting approval measures to account for individuals' beliefs, "Not sure" responses regarding who controls the state house or governorship generate more 0 values. These respondents are less educated, wealthy, and partisan, and it may be inappropriate to assume they fall into a middle category (Table A-2).

¹⁴ Each the 2006, 2008, and 2010 surveys asked "For whom did you vote for in the state legislative elections" in the respondent's lower chamber. In 2006 and 2008, individuals could select a "Not Sure" response, but in 2010, this

on the state legislative, gubernatorial, and presidential approval variables therefore respectively provide evidence for the state house, gubernatorial, and presidential hypotheses. I also control for respondents' seven point party identification in estimations and employ respondent level sample weights to address some of the differences between the CCES samples and general population.

When interpreting results, some limitations of these approval measures deserve further attention. For example, the state legislative approval question does not specifically ask about the state house or senate. I therefore assume a respondent's approval rating for the "state legislature" is the same across both chambers.¹⁵ There are additionally a considerable number of "Not sure" responses to the governor and state legislative approval and knowledge questions, which I code as a middle category to reflect uncertainty regarding whether the respondent disapproves or approves. Main conclusions do not change when omitting these "Not Sure" respondents (Table A-4).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1 presents weighted probit estimates of Democratic vote choice as a function of approval and economic variables. Estimates provide evidence for the state house as well as the gubernatorial and presidential hypotheses. In both 2008 and 2010, approval of the legislature positively associates with vote choice in state legislative elections. If a respondent strongly

option was unavailable. For each election, I therefore focus on those who gave a definitive Democrat or Republican response. Findings are similar when including "Not Sure" responses in a multinomial probit estimation (Table A-3). The number of responses to this and another question potentially reflects inaccuracies or misreporting in the CCES. When asked who received their vote in the 2008 state house election, 23,908 individuals answered "Democrat," "Republican," or "Someone Else." 22,495 respondents also gave one of these answers to the comparable state senate question, despite only two-thirds of senate seats being up for election while 85% of state house seats were. It is doubtful this many respondents voted for both state legislators. To limit the influence of such misreporting, I again focus on state house elections. To avoid additional misreports, I omit states that did not have state house elections (Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, Virginia, and sometimes Maryland) in given election years.

¹⁵ Conclusions from main results do not change when estimations are run on data subset to those who thought the same party controlled both legislative chambers. This assumption therefore is less concerning unless respondents have different opinions regarding state senate and state house Democrats.

approves instead of strongly disapproves of their state legislature with other covariates set to their mean, voting predicted probabilities can change by at least .166. When considering a 2010 voter who thought the economy was “Much Worse” than a year ago, switching which party the voter believed controlled the state house changes the probability of a Democratic vote by up to .084.¹⁶ These findings are the first known evidence that state legislative parties are electorally meaningful in its own regard and that voters hold their members accountable.

The approval variables used to generate Table 1’s estimates account for which party a voter believes controls their state legislature. It, however, is important to remember a non-trivial amount of voters cannot correctly identify their state house majority party. Not knowing who to blame or reward introduces potential concerns for accountability. Consider a state legislature controlled by Republicans. A voter may disapprove of the legislature’s performance but believe it is controlled by Democrats. In the election, this voter subsequently may support the Republican legislative party to punish the perceived Democrats in charge. Due to misinformation, Republicans would receive an electoral reward for its poor performance.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

To address whether misinformation attenuates state legislative accountability, I estimate the models on data subset by whether a respondent correctly or incorrectly identified the majority state house party. The approval interaction terms in these estimations use the party a respondent believed controlled the state house. I additionally estimate the models assuming all respondents were informed and knew which party controlled their state government.

The reward or punishment for the incumbent state legislative party in power seems to be attenuated due to misinformation. State legislative approval coefficients in Table 2 diminish by

¹⁶ The 2006 and 2008 surveys include local economic questions. Results are similar to those using national economic measures, see Table A-5.

about 30% when moving from the “Belief” to “Informed” interactions. To illustrate these differences and their potential impact on accountability, Figure 2 plots the predicted probabilities of a 2010 Democratic state house vote using the estimates from Table 2. Amongst those who correctly identified the majority state house party, moving from “Strongly Disapprove” to “Strongly Approve” changes their vote probability by .178 (Figure 2: Dotted line). For respondents who incorrectly identified the party in power, a similar shift changes the probability by .206 (Figure 2: Dashed line). If all voters, however, were informed and correctly identified the legislature in power, the relationship between legislative approval and vote choice weakens. The change in predicted probability when adjusting approval is only .094 (Figure 2: Solid line). This represents the reward given to the actual majority party. If a legislature therefore is perceived to be performing well, the party in charge then may receive an attenuated reward due to misinformation. This weakened relationship between performance and vote choice is potentially troubling if one hopes elections effectively hold the state legislative parties accountable for *their* performance.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Misinformation weakens elections’ ability to be a sanctioning tool used against state legislators, but evaluations of non-legislative actors further influence state legislative elections. Estimates in Table 1 suggest evaluations of both the governor and president correlate with reported state house vote choice. If a respondent strongly approves instead of strongly disapproves of their governor, the predicted probability of voting for a Democratic state house candidate can respectively change by at least .181. This supports the gubernatorial hypothesis and could serve as evidence that voters’ use their state legislative votes to reward or punish the governor for his or her performance running the state government.

The state executive may influence state legislative contests, but assessments of the president are a driving force in legislative elections. Even when controlling for the state of the economy, strongly disapproving instead of strongly approving of the president can change voting predicted probabilities by at least .4. This is a considerably larger impact than that for state legislative or gubernatorial approval. Figure 3 illustrates the relative influence of presidential and state legislative approval on state house vote choice. Solid and dotted lines respectively plot the predicted probability of a Democratic state house vote under different levels of presidential or state legislative approval. Black and grey lines represent Republican approval in 2008 and Democratic approval in 2010. With growing approval of Republican institutions, the predicted probability of voting Democrat unsurprisingly decreases. Similarly as approval of Democratic institutions increases, respondents are more likely to support Democratic state legislative candidates. The shifts in predicted probabilities, however, are twice as large for presidential rather than state legislative approval.¹⁷

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Presidential approval may have a larger role than gubernatorial or legislative approval, but a respondent's partisanship is the strongest predictor of vote choice. Changing a respondent's partisan identification from "Strong Republican" to "Strong Democrat" can shift the probability of a Democratic vote by over .6. Presidential approval, however, even seems to influence partisans' votes. Figure 4 replicates Figure 3's presidential approval predicted

¹⁷ The strength of this association between state house votes and presidential approval is comparable to the relationship between U.S. House voting has with assessments of the president (Table A-6). I estimate vote choice as a function of presidential approval, partisan identification, and state legislative or US House approval. Probit coefficients on presidential approval differ, but in 2008 a strongly disapprove to strongly approve shift in presidential approval with other variables at their means changes the predicted probabilities of Democratic state house and US House votes respectively by .45 and .51. In 2010, these changes are .71 and .66. It, however, is unclear why scaled Congressional approval has a negative relationship with US House vote choice in the 2010 election. A possible explanation is more individual than collective accountability occurs in federal elections, and a respondent may disapprove of Congress but approve of their Congressman. This will be explored further in the "individual accountability" chapter.

probability plots but uses estimates from samples subset by respondent's partisan identification. Democratic and Republican voters are party loyal in state legislative elections. Democrats, however, were more likely to vote for a Republican state legislator if they approved of Bush, and Republicans are more likely to vote for a Democrat if they disapproved. Reflective trends occur after Obama became president. Therefore even within partisan subgroups, evaluations of the president seem to influence state legislative election outcomes.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

The evidence for the presidential hypothesis is remarkably robust. The strong association between presidential approval and vote choice persists in divided legislatures and in states where no branches of state government changed partisan hands from 2006 to 2009. Having correct knowledge of who controlled the state house has no mediating effect on presidential approval. Inconsistent with the findings of Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman, estimates actually suggest evaluations of the president are more influential in states with professional legislatures (Table A-7).¹⁸

Results with one exception hold when data is subset by those who approve or disapprove of the president, governor, or state legislature. Strongly instead of somewhat approving of Bush in 2008 did not seem to affect state legislative vote choice (Table A-8). These Bush approvers still overwhelmingly voted for Republican state legislative candidates. Intensity of disapproval

¹⁸This is perhaps a result of citizens with professional state legislatures being the least likely to pay attention to their legislature (Squire 1993: 483). This professionalism result holds in 2006 and 2008, but the 2010 estimate is not significant. Including the party ID and professionalism interaction reduces the magnitude of this coefficient, possibly attributable to the relationship between approval and ideology in professional state legislatures amongst conservatives, or those already opposed to Obama (Richardson, Konisky, and Milyo 2011). Estimates from 2008, however, suggest state legislative approval matters more in professional legislatures. Results from 2010 are in the same direction but insignificant.

had a larger impact on respondent's vote choice. The greater impact of disapproval on vote choice is consistent with findings in the Congressional literature (Cover 1986).¹⁹

Macro Approach: Seat Change Analysis

While tests of the collective accountability hypotheses using survey data provide strong support for the presidential hypothesis, the findings only present evidence from the most recent elections. These occurred during relatively unpopular presidencies and may be outliers due to unique political events, such as the financial crisis. To further test the collective accountability hypotheses over a larger set of elections, I study the relationship between state legislative seat change and economic or approval variables since 1972.

For the seat analysis, my dependent variable is the proportion change in state house seats for the president's, governor's, or state house majority party.²⁰ Due to the lack of survey data, I rely on economic variables to proxy for favorable government performance, such as "Logged Change Real Disposable Income" at the national and state levels.²¹ Similar to prior work, I

¹⁹ I also estimate the main model on data subset by who respondents' thought controlled the state house (Table A-9). For those who think the president's party controls the state house, state legislative approval had a weaker relationship with vote choice. To investigate this further, I examine what determines state legislative approval. Table A-10 presents estimates of an ordered probit where state legislative approval is the dependent variable. I remove respondents who were "Not sure" who controlled the state house and include a dummy variable with interactions for whether they thought Democrats controlled the state house. Presidential approval has a near zero relationship with state legislative approval in 2008 and 2010 amongst those who *did not* think the president's party controlled the state house. Party ID however had a stronger relationship amongst these groups. These trends occur to a mediated degree when data is further subset by a respondent's Party ID or whether they correctly identified the state house majority party. I welcome suggestions of how to better explore this tradeoff between presidential approval and partisanship. It is unclear to me why it exists.

²⁰ For example in Texas in 1998 under President Bill Clinton and Governor George W. Bush, the dependent variable for "President's Party" is the proportion change in Democratic seats in the Texas state house (-0.02), but the dependent variable for "Governor's Party" is the proportion change in Republican seats (0.02). Meanwhile in 1992 when Republicans gained .9% of Arkansas state house seats, the "President's Party" dependent variable is .009 accounting for incumbent President George H.W. Bush, and the "Governor's Party" dependent variable is -0.009 accounting for Governor Clinton.

Findings do not change when the dependent variable is Democratic party seat change and independent variables are economic measures interacted with the president's, governor's and state house majority party (Table A-11).

²¹ I use Consumer Price Index factors to convert disposable income data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis to 2010 real dollars. I then estimate the annual logged change. Each state in a specific year receives the same measure of "National Logged Change RDI," and each observation receives a specific state-year "State Logged Change RDI" measure.

therefore assume voters' know the parties in power and have accurate assessments of the economy, which translate into their evaluations of the parties (Campbell 1986; Chubb 1988; Klarner 2010). Each collective accountability hypothesis again expects a positive relationship between these measures and the state legislative seat change for the president's, governor's, or state house majority party. To further test the presidential hypothesis, I estimate a similar model but substitute the economic variable with the president's approval rating in the last national Gallup poll before the November election. This variable ranges from zero to one and assumes uniformity in presidential approval across states. State level measures of approval are preferable but unavailable.

Estimations also include two control variables. To capture coattail effects or surges in partisan turnout, I include the change in a state's congressional vote for the dependent variable's party. Unlike presidential, gubernatorial, or senatorial vote, this measure is available in two year intervals as U.S. House elections closely follow the state house election calendar.²² To control for a party's electoral exposure, I include the previous seat change for the current dependent variable's party (Oppenheimer, Stimson, & Waterman 1986).²³ I include state fixed effects and estimate heteroskedastic and autocorrelation consistent standard errors to account for potential serial correlation. The Appendix presents estimates with and without these controls (Tables A-12, A-13, & A-14). Substantive results do not change.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Substantive findings are similar with using national or state level unemployment figures. These estimates, however, fail to reach traditional levels of statistical significance. Future work plans to examine other government measures perhaps more directly related to evaluations state government, such as crime rates or educational performance.

²² Since some states' election calendars do not match the U.S. House, observations from states such as New Jersey and Virginia are omitted from main analysis. Estimates without the Congressional vote control including these states are in the Appendix.

²³ A party is exposed when they control more vulnerable seats than normal. For example, the 2008 election put many Democrats in seats they did not traditionally hold. Republicans in 2010 likely had an easier time winning these seats back.

Table 3 presents OLS estimates of the president's, governor's, and state house majority party seat change regressed on economic measures. Estimates in the first three columns use national economic variables and the latter three employ state level variables. Reflecting exposure, a party's seat gains in the previous election negatively correlate with their success in the current election. State legislators also ride the coattails of their congressional counterparts.²⁴

The presidential findings do not seem to be a recent phenomenon. In examining elections since the 1970s, a standard deviation increase in "State Logged Change RDI" also results in a 0.7% change in state legislative seat share for the president's party. The state economy measure, however, may be a proxy for the national economy. A comparable change in "National Logged Change RDI" results in a 1.9% increase in seats for the president's party (Table 3: Pres. Pty). This accounts for over a third of the average party swing of 5% in state legislative contests.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

A similar trend emerges when using the presidential approval measure. A 10% increase in presidential approval associates with a 1.3% gain in seats for the president's party (Table 4). This is not surprising given the aforementioned economic estimates and the relationship between presidential approval and the state of the economy (Mueller 1970). Presidential approval correlates with state legislative election outcomes even when controlling for national or state economic conditions. Voters' assessments of the president, perhaps influenced by social policy or presidential scandals, therefore seem independently influential in state legislative elections.

Carsey and Wright assert "national forces working through evaluations of the president are a major influence on voting for governor" (1998: 1001). My findings suggest these forces are strong enough to reach a vast majority of state legislative chambers. To demonstrate this, I

²⁴ The coattail effect for president's party estimation is the weakest. This may suggest the coattail control introduces some presidential or federal influence in the other estimates. Omitting this variable does not change substantive results.

estimate a reduced model for each state, where seat change is only a function of these variables and previous seat change.²⁵ Over 40 states have positive relationships between growth in the national or state economy and president's party seat change (Figure 5: Panels A & B).

[Insert Figure 5]

State house elections are tied to the White House but not as tightly as their federal counterparts. When the dependent variable is the change in U.S. House or all State House seats, the coefficients on "National Logged Change RDI" respectively are 1.47 and 0.98 (Figure 5: Panel A). When using presidential approval as the primary independent variable, the comparable coefficients are 0.27 and 0.18 (Figure 1: Panel C). While some state legislative chambers are more sensitive to national conditions than the U.S. House, national forces' impact is approximately two-thirds the size for the "laboratories of democracy."²⁶

Presidential estimates from both Table 3 and Figure 5, are generally consistent with the survey analysis. The seat analysis, however, provides little evidence that voters hold the state house majority party accountable. Both state and national economic coefficients are relatively small or in the unexpected direction (Table 3: St. Hse. Pty). When estimating the model on individual states, there is only a positive relationship between economic growth and state house majority party seat change in approximately half of states (Figure 5: Panel D). The strongest evidence for the state house hypothesis emerges when controlling for midterm elections (Table

²⁵ Due to sample sizes, I no longer use robust standard errors. To include states with off-year elections I omit congressional vote. Each sample includes approximately 18 observations.

²⁶ State level findings should be interpreted with caution given the small sample sizes. Estimates for example suggest New Jersey voters do not reward the president's party for good economies (Figure 1: Panels A & B), but the state house majority party is (Panel D). This may appear sensible given the state's professionalism and off year elections, but in 1973, a year where the economy was measured to be strong and Nixon was unpopular, largely drives these findings. Panel C plots estimates of president's party seat change regressed on presidential approval instead of an economy measure. New Jersey now votes for or against the president's party more than any other state. Mississippi, another off year election state, similarly moves from the bottom of Figure 1: Panel A to the top of Panel C. Variations between Panels A and C illustrate how economic variables may inconsistently capture individual's assessments of political parties or actors.

A-14). These estimates, however, are smaller than the comparable presidential estimates (Table A-12) and fail to achieve traditional levels of statistical significance.

Contextual variation may influence how voters reward or punish political parties. These variables shape gubernatorial elections (Ebeid & Rodden 2006), but including controls and interactions for the structure of the economy or divided government do not influence results for state legislators of the state house majority or governor's party (Tables A-15 & A-16). Similar to the survey analysis, I find a stronger relationship between presidential approval and seat change during unpopular presidencies. Consistent with Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman, professionalism mediates the effect the national economy has on the president's party's seat change (Table A-17). The expected seat reward for the president's party in the most professional state legislature is still considerable and greater than any reward for the governor's or state house majority party.

The seat analysis reaffirms the findings from individual level responses to surveys that non-legislative actors seem to influence state legislative elections. While the seat change analysis relies on assumptions regarding voter knowledge and does not include a direct state legislative approval measure, estimates pertaining to the state house majority party hypothesis do not support the relatively weak state legislative accountability findings from the survey analysis.

Conclusion

Taken together, both analyses suggest that state legislative elections serve as a weak sanctioning mechanism to incentivize state legislative party behavior. Survey findings present the first known evidence that the state house majority party is electoral meaningful in its own regard, but state legislative elections' strength as a sanctioning mechanism underwhelms. As demonstrated by Figure 2, voters not knowing which party to reward or punish may attenuate

state legislative accountability. Additionally if a state legislator recognizes his electoral fate is largely the result of presidential instead of his own performance, there is less incentive for him to act in voters' interests. Therefore while voters' approval of the legislature matters in state legislative elections, the impact of these evaluations is diminished by limited voter knowledge and relatively dwarfed by voters' opinions of the president.

If the purpose of elections is to incentivize reelection-minded legislators to act in voters' interests, the evidence suggests state legislative parties' behavior means little for their electoral fate. State legislators' behavior may matter at the margins, but national forces seem to largely drive whether they are reelected. This casts doubt on whether state legislative elections are an effective means of hold parties collectively accountable. If state legislators recognize the weak relationship between their performance and electoral fate, political scientists additionally need to reconsider how they study legislatures. Legislators' common party electoral goals and reputations are the cornerstone of theories of lawmaking (Rhode 1991; Cox & McCubbins 1993; 2005). Some are already being tested in the states (Cox, Kousser, & McCubbins 2010; Anzia & Cohn 2011). Before testing these theories in "laboratories of democracy," it would be useful to establish that protecting the state legislative party brand is electorally meaningful.

This analysis is one of the first to shed light on the role of the state legislative party in elections. Survey responses suggest voters reward or punish the state legislative parties, at least the ones they believe are in charge, and try to hold state legislators collectively accountable. State legislative elections, however, are largely driven by non-legislative forces. A party's control of the state government matters but occupying the White House is more critical.

These trends correspond to what was seen in the 2010 elections. State senate leaders in Tennessee and Wisconsin claimed mandates following their party's victories. Most

Wisconsinites knew Democrats controlled the state government and were unhappy with their performance. Most Tennesseans, meanwhile, did not know Republicans already controlled the state's Senate. Of those who did, most disapproved of the state legislature's performance. Voters in both states, however, disapproved of Obama to a greater degree than they did state legislative Democrats and gave Republicans control of their state governments. While it seems voters held Wisconsin state parties accountable, findings presented here potentially suggest Republicans' mandates may be on a shaky or more accurately a presidential foundation.

Tables

Table 1: Weighted Probit; Dependent Variable: Democratic State House Vote Choice

Variable	2006	2008	2010	2006	2008	2010	2006	2008	2010	2006	2008	2010
Intercept	0.239*	-0.464*	-0.016	-0.04*	-0.263*	0.074*	-0.405*	0.105*	0.074*	-0.405*	0.105*	0.074*
	(0.017)	(0.052)	(0.023)	(0.02)	(0.027)	(0.024)	(0.058)	(0.027)	(0.024)	(0.058)	(0.027)	(0.027)
National Economy	0.485*	0.334*	0.422*				0.11*	0.103*				
	(0.018)	(0.032)	(0.023)				(0.034)	(0.027)				
Presidential Approval				0.47*	0.338*	0.451*	0.314*	0.412*				
				(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.018)				
National Economy X Gov Response	0.061*	0.003	-0.003									
	(0.018)	(0.011)	(0.018)									
Governor Approval X Gov Response				0.162*	0.133*	0.116*	0.131*	0.114*				
				(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.015)				
National Economy X State House Response		-0.004	0.055*									
		(0.013)	(0.023)									
State Leg Approval X State House Response				0.108*	0.107*	0.107*	0.105*	0.101*				
				(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)				
PID (7pt)	0.538*	0.63*	0.665*	0.401*	0.502*	0.469*	0.5*	0.469*				
	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.01)	(0.013)	(0.01)	(0.013)				
N	16878	18425	28032	16839	18334	27867	18324	27850				

* $p \leq .05$; Standard Errors in Parentheses

Table 2: Weighted Probit; Dependent Variable: Democratic State House Vote Choice

Variable	2008		2008		2010		2010	
Respondents Used	All	All	Correct	Incorrect	All	All	Correct	Incorrect
Intercept	-0.263* (0.027)	-0.268* (0.026)	-0.27* (0.04)	-0.287* (0.06)	0.074* (0.024)	0.065* (0.024)	0.09* (0.035)	-0.095 (0.074)
Presidential Approval	0.338* (0.016)	0.342* (0.016)	0.339* (0.024)	0.327* (0.039)	0.451* (0.016)	0.472* (0.015)	0.466* (0.021)	0.375* (0.052)
Governor Approval X Governor Response (Belief)	0.133* (0.014)		0.134* (0.019)	0.177* (0.031)	0.116* (0.014)		0.101* (0.017)	0.168* (0.061)
Governor Approval X Factual Party Control (Informed)		0.131* (0.013)				0.081* (0.013)		
State Leg Approval X State House Response (Belief)	0.108* (0.018)		0.129* (0.02)	0.027 (0.035)	0.107* (0.018)		0.115* (0.021)	0.13* (0.056)
State Leg Approval X Factual Party Control (Informed)		0.074* (0.014)				0.061* (0.015)		
PID (7pt)	0.502* (0.01)	0.507* (0.01)	0.483* (0.014)	0.434* (0.024)	0.469* (0.013)	0.472* (0.013)	0.443* (0.018)	0.447* (0.041)
N	18334	18856	9961	2035	27867	30884	18525	2148

* $p \leq .05$; Standard Errors in Parentheses

Table 3: 1972 - 2010: Dependent Variable: Party Seat Change, State Fixed Effects

Dependent Variable (Seat Change):	Pres. Pty	Gov. Pty	St. Hse Pty	Pres. Pty	Gov. Pty	St. Hse Pty
National Logged Change RDI	0.926* (0.127)	-0.018 (0.149)	-0.098 (0.152)			
State Logged Change RDI				0.34* (0.096)	-0.108 (0.13)	0.017 (0.128)
Previous Seat Change	-0.265* (0.04)	-0.194* (0.044)	-0.144* (0.049)	-0.267* (0.044)	-0.193* (0.044)	-0.144* (0.048)
Congressional Vote Change	0.229* (0.039)	0.303* (0.043)	0.316* (0.043)	0.264* (0.041)	0.304* (0.044)	0.316* (0.043)
Constant	-0.026* (0.01)	0.009 (0.023)	-0.011 (0.011)	-0.013 (0.01)	0.011 (0.022)	-0.013 (0.011)
R-Squared	0.283	0.202	0.213	0.244	0.204	0.212
N	857	851	857	857	851	857

* $p \leq .05$; Robust Standard Errors in Parentheses

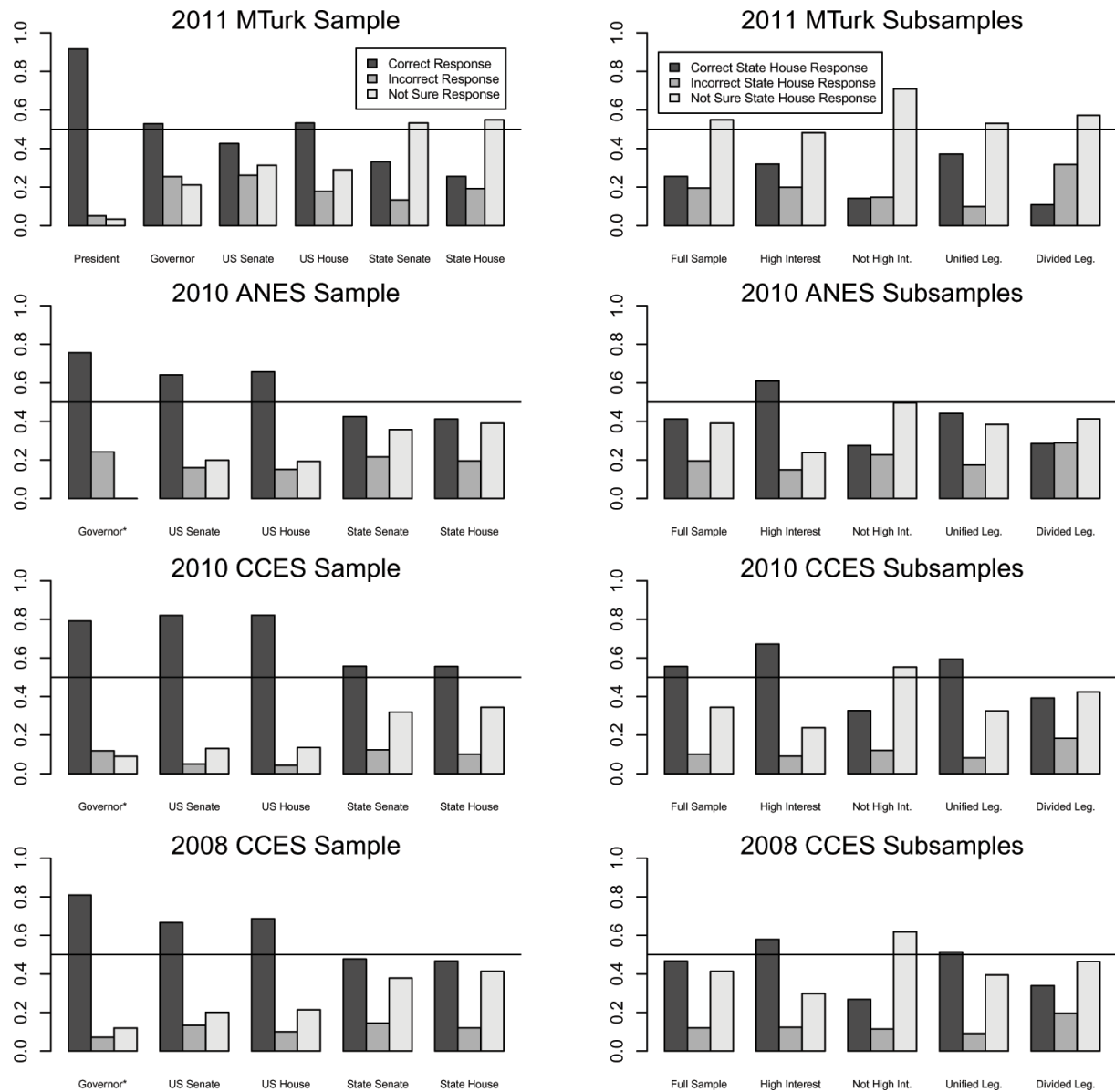
Table 4: 1972 - 2010: Dependent Variable: Party Seat Change, State Fixed Effects

Dependent Variable (Seat Change):	Pres. Pty	Pres. Pty	Pres. Pty	Pres. Pty
Presidential Approval	0.128* (0.022)	0.056* (0.023)	0.107* (0.021)	0.055* (0.023)
National Logged Change RDI		0.791* (0.139)		0.879* (0.185)
State Logged Change RDI			0.239* (0.094)	-0.083 (0.128)
Previous Seat Change	-0.288* (0.046)	-0.276* (0.042)	-0.287* (0.045)	-0.275* (0.042)
Congressional Vote Change	0.237* (0.039)	0.22* (0.038)	0.238* (0.039)	0.218* (0.038)
Constant	-0.071* (0.015)	-0.052* (0.014)	-0.065* (0.014)	-0.052* (0.014)
R-Squared	0.254	0.287	0.263	0.288
N	857	857	857	857

* $p \leq .05$; Robust Standard Errors in Parentheses

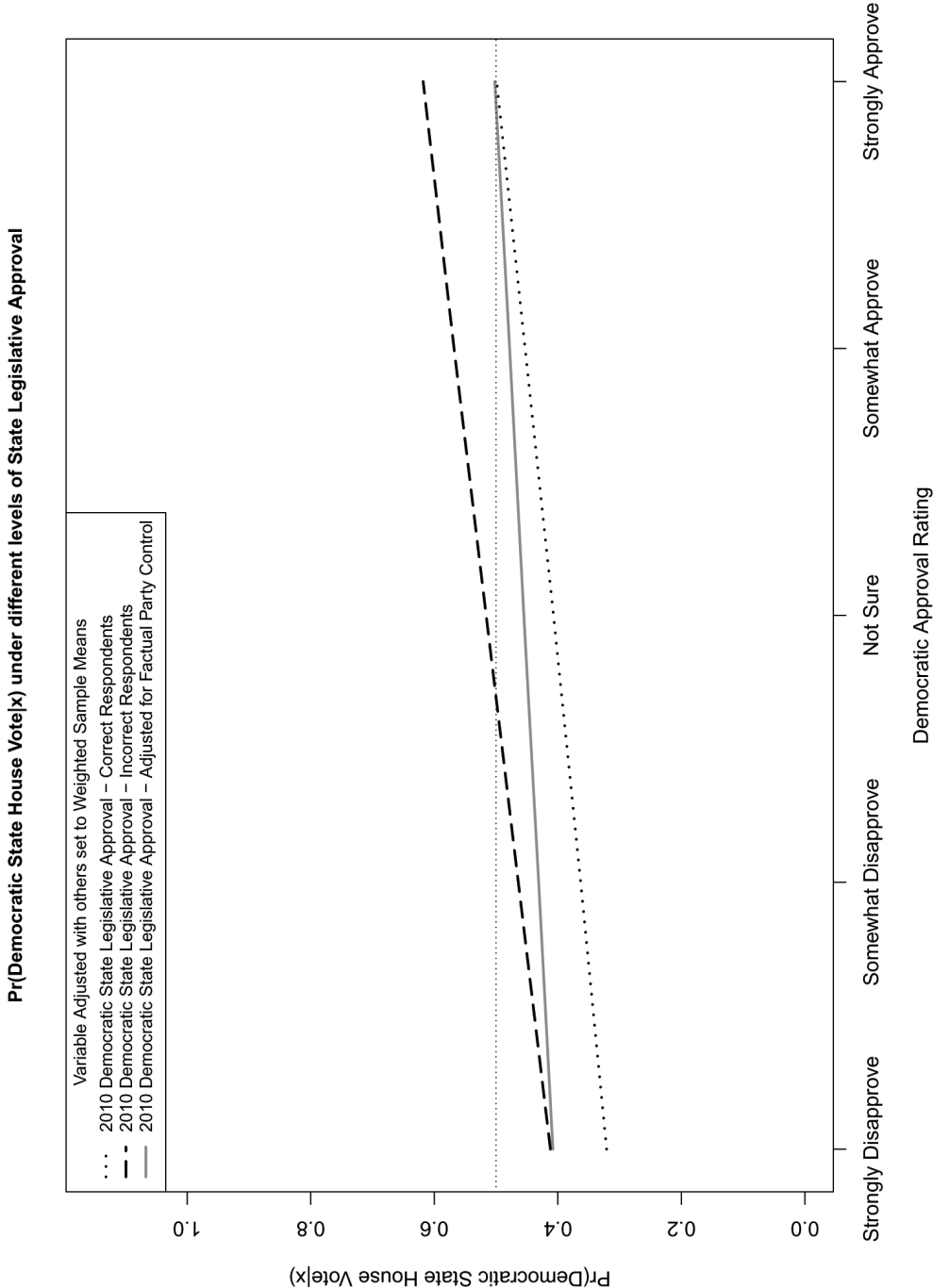
Figures

Figure 1: Levels of Knowledge Regarding Partisan Control of Federal and State Government



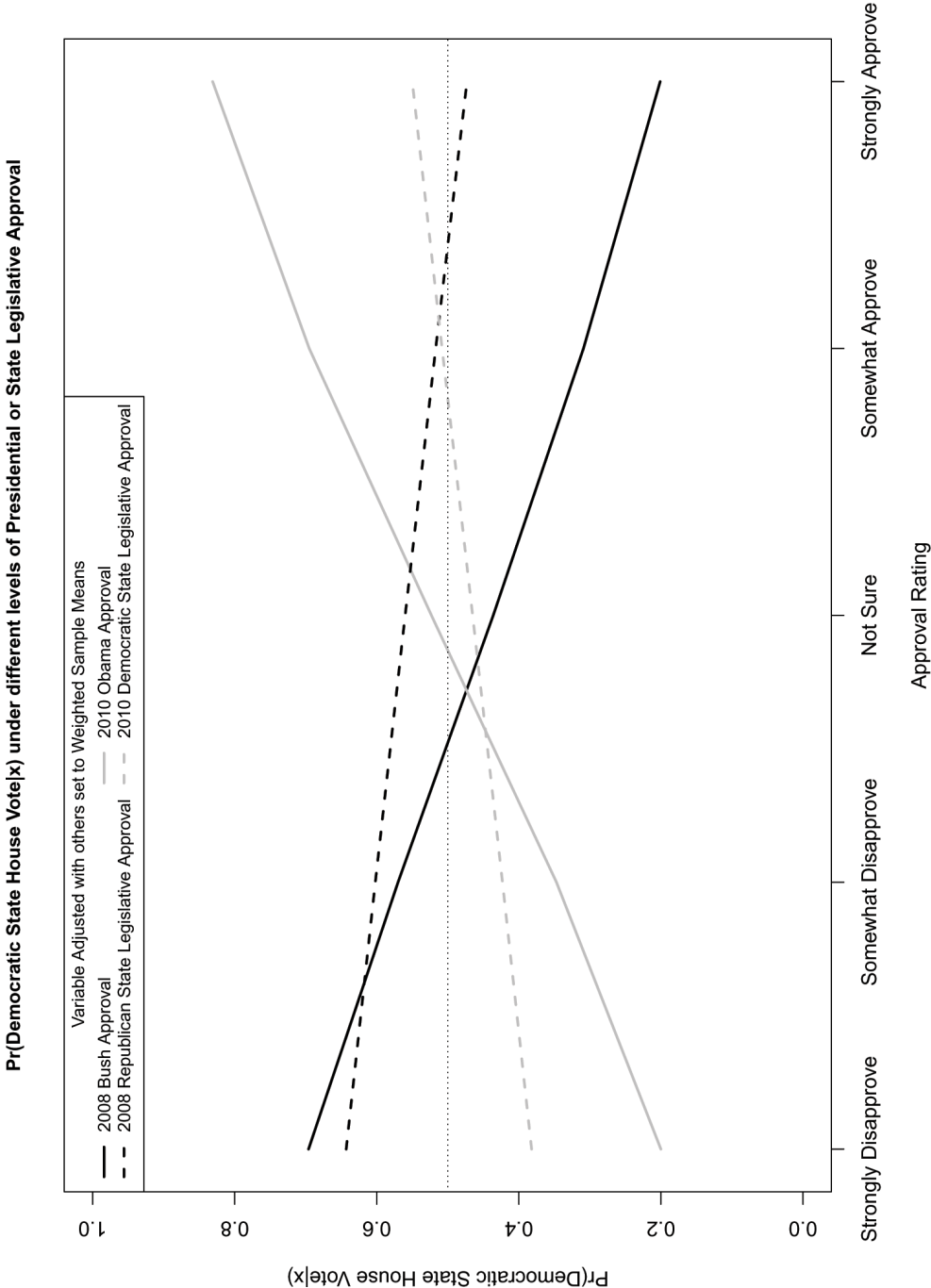
The left column of graphs illustrates proportion of Correct, Incorrect, and Not Sure responses regarding which party controls various political institutions, listed on the X-Axis. The right column lists these proportions for different subsets of the population (Level of Political Interest) or contextual variables (Divided Legislatures).

Figure 2: Probability of Democratic State House Vote Under Different Levels of State Legislative Approval



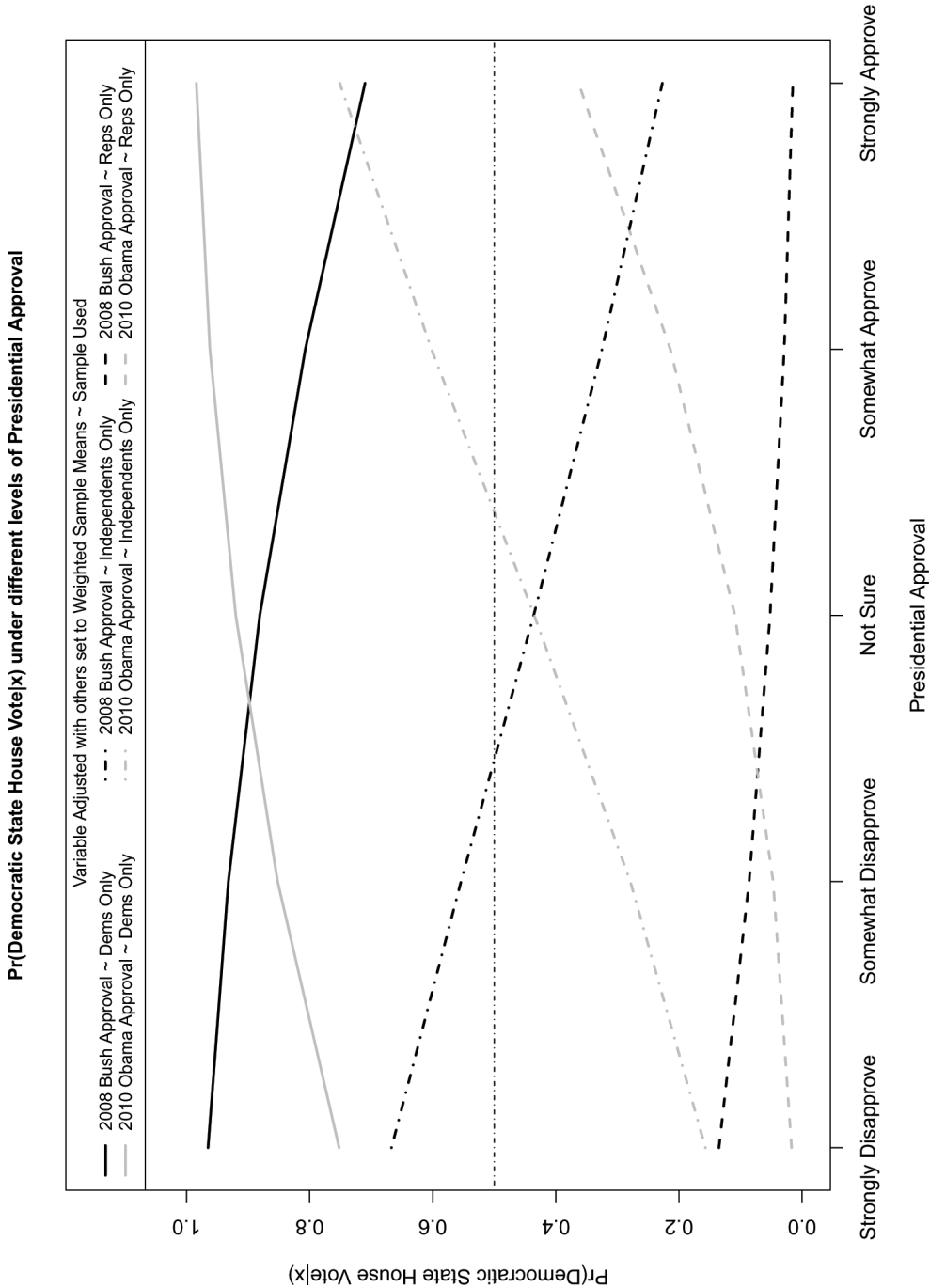
The above plots the predicted probability of a Democratic State House vote under different levels of State Legislative Approval. Dotted and dashed lines use probit coefficients estimated using samples of respondents subset by whether they correctly identified the state house majority party. The solid uses the full 2010 sample but adjusts State Legislative Approval for the party that factually controlled the state house.

Figure 3: Probability of Democratic State House Vote Under Different Levels of Presidential or State Legislative Approval



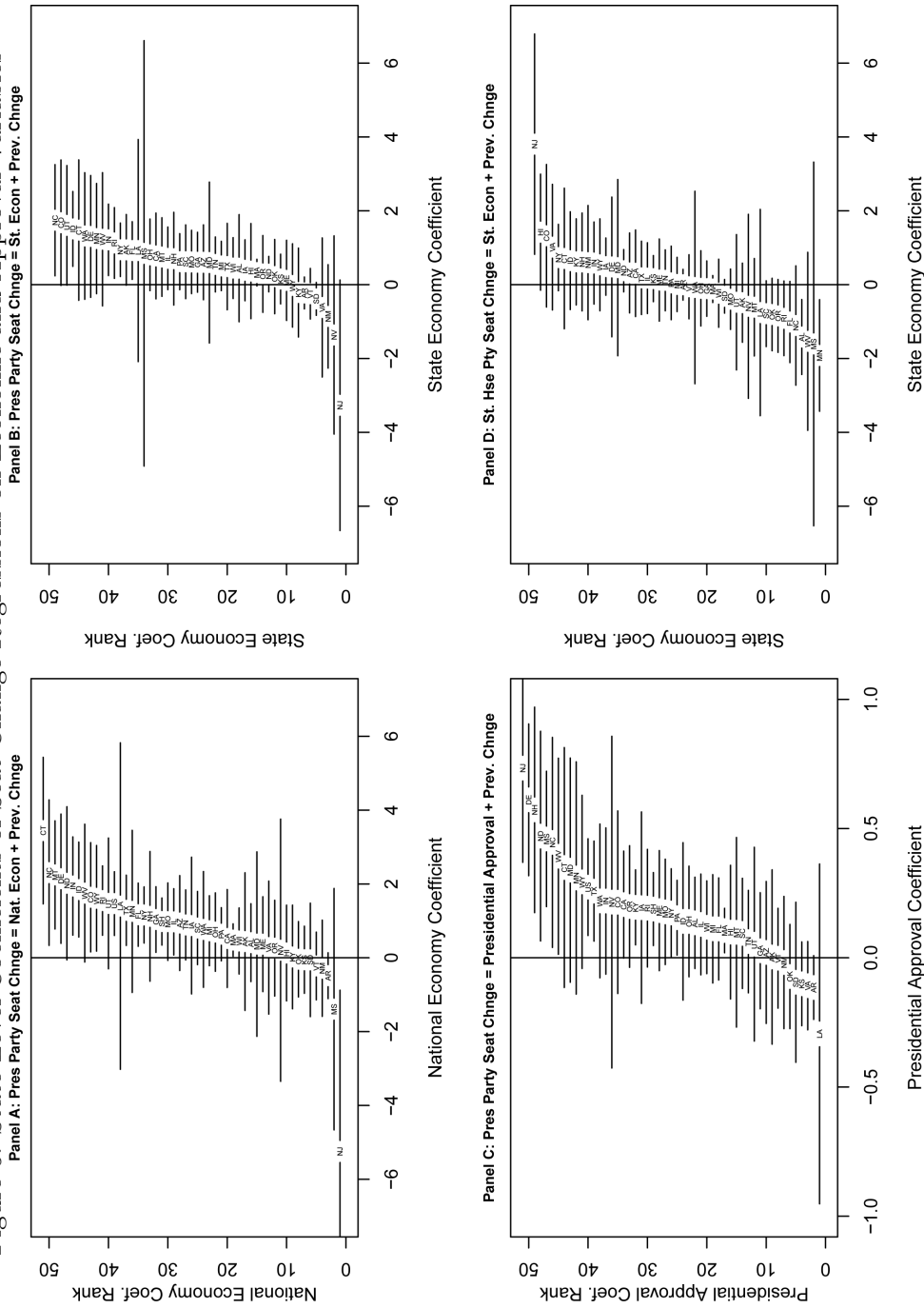
The above plots the predicted probability of a Democratic State House vote under different levels of Presidential or State Legislative Approval. Solid lines adjust the level of presidential approval, and the dotted lines adjust state legislative approval.

Figure 4: Probability of Democratic State House Vote Under Different Levels of Presidential Approval; Subset by PID



The above plots the predicted probability of a Democratic State House vote under different levels of Presidential Approval. Plots use probit coefficients estimated using respondent Party ID subsets from 2008 or 2010.

Figure 5: State Level Coefficients of Seat Change Regressions on Economic and Approval Variables



The title of the panel indicates the OLS model used for that plot using data from 1972 - 2008. Lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the economic or approval coefficients. Each plot includes every state. Plots using National Economic or Approval variables also include comparable coefficients for the US House (US) or all state house seats (SH).

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