

Do High-Profile Copartisans Help or Hurt? Obama, Beebe and Arkansas's 2012 Legislative Contests

Jay Barth
Hendrix College

Craig Burnett
Hofstra University

Janine A. Parry
University of Arkansas- Fayetteville

The positive impact of popular high-profile incumbents on the fortunes of down-ballot co-partisans has been the subject of many examinations. Less explored is the potentially depressive effect of an unpopular – but equally high-profile – same-party incumbent. Here, we look to a state experiencing partisan realignment to probe the influence of two high-profile copartisans – one popular and one not – on state legislative elections. We confine our sample to districts with close contests, offering a stricter test than past examinations. Specifically, we presented Arkansas voters in each of three subnational senate districts with either an approval question for President Obama (an unpopular Democrat), an approval question for Governor Mike Beebe (a popular Democrat), or no stimulus before asking them to select a major party candidate in the down-ballot race. While our pooled results produce the expected effects, both negative and positive, our experiments produced no significant effects. Our findings complicate the growing literature on the powerful influence of national forces on subnational elections. Keywords: American state elections, low-information elections, coattails

Introduction

The coattails effect — i.e., the ability of a popular candidate at the top of the ticket to improve the fortunes of down-ballot co-partisans — has long been a staple in American political analysis. Although both institutional and attitudinal changes in American politics have resulted in a diminishment of the phenomenon in presidential-congressional elections in recent decades, there is evidence that a voter's affect toward high-profile

politicus strongly influences her vote choice in low-information elections like state legislative races (e.g., Hogan 2005, Rogers 2016). Existing scholarship demonstrates that cues of all kinds become progressively more important as campaign communication and other information is more difficult to acquire. We expect that voter acceptance (or rejection) of a low-profile candidate based on a shared party label with a prominent political figure is exactly the sort of shortcut on which voters are sure to rely, particularly after decades of political nationalization (Hopkins 2018).

The particular circumstances of the 2012 Arkansas election cycle presented a unique opportunity to isolate not only the potential “pull” of a popular incumbent toward support for his down-ballot associates, but also the competing “push” that may be exerted by an unpopular — but also high-profile — party figure. Specifically, we administered a three-way experimental survey in three state senate races to explore the relative influence of Governor Mike Beebe, the state’s last wildly-popular Democrat, as compared with that of President Barack Obama, twice rejected in Arkansas by double digits. What we find is that despite a bipartisan, statewide consensus that President Obama’s depressive effect on down-ballot Democrats was driving a political revolution in Arkansas and the results of standard multivariate analysis, stimulating voters to think about either Beebe or Obama had no effect on their vote choice in a lower-profile race. Why? We suspect that because the legislative elections we examined were unusually competitive, our respondents likely were immune to our treatments. Further tests are needed.

Low-Information Elections and High-Profile Copartisans

High-profile elections in the United States — those for President, for the most prominent statewide offices, and for the U.S. House — receive the bulk of voter attention. Thus, voters go to the polls with a great deal of information about those races and the candidates on the ballot for them. Still, once there, those voters also cast votes for an array of other low-profile offices — both partisan and nonpartisan. Lacking information on candidate qualities, issue positions, and other information employed in higher-profile elections, voters often must rely upon one of a series of information shortcuts. As Matson (2006) describes it, “voters in low-information elections rely on whatever information is readily available to them in deciding on a vote” (63).

In nonpartisan elections, any differentiating factor can become a potent force in shaping voter decision-making. Taylor and Schreckhise (2003) found for example that candidate differentiation on a single, overarching “easy” issue – a tree preservation ordinance in that case – was particularly important in determining citizens’ votes. Examining a unique, “blank slate” election for newly-established zoning boards in Miami-Dade County, Florida, Matson (2006) likewise found that gender was the dominant cue, while ethnicity (operationalized as candidate surname) had a secondary effect; both characteristics outperformed campaign expenditures and ballot position.

Of course, when party is present on the ballot in such elections, it becomes the prevailing determinant of voting decisions. Schaffner and Streb (2002) compared survey answers in such races by providing one group of respondents partisan identifiers while withholding those cues in another group. Using survey data from California, they found voters were far more likely to state a preference in low-information election when they could identify candidates through partisan markers. In the absence of these cues, voters were more likely to not state a preference or to vote randomly.

In addition to the direct power that political parties have in shaping voter decision making in low-information elections, other analyses reveal that voters’ perceptions of candidates at the top of the ticket can impact partisans in low-information races lower on the ballot by producing coattails. The most expansive research, naturally, has focused on the potency of the president to shape both the candidate pool and the electoral fortunes of others on the ticket (e.g., Campbell 1960, Jacobson 1989, Carsey and Wright 1998). Simon, Ostrom, and Marra (1991), for example, found significant evidence that presidential approval permeates all electoral systems: “to the extent that the president is seen as successful, the public rewards members of the president’s party at all electoral levels” (1188). More recently, Rogers (2016) found that in the U.S. context specifically, presidential approval ratings have three times the impact of state legislative approval on voting decisions in state legislative elections.¹ Comparative accounts also continue to find a robust effect for the influence of presidential candidates on legislative outcomes, although election timing, party size, campaign coordination, and coalitional dynamics condition the relationship (Stoll 2015, West and Spoon 2017, Borges and Turgeon 2019).

¹ Further, while this might be expected among the least educated voters, the finding was true even among voters who knew which party controlled their subnational legislature.

With respect to gubernatorial coattails, Madariaga and Ozen (2015) highlight the potency of the state's highest-profile politician in shaping down-ballot voting patterns in elections where both presidential and gubernatorial elections are on the same ballot. In sum, a strong gubernatorial candidate can provide significant benefit to her party's presidential candidate in the state.² Hogan (2005) and Rogers (2016) found a similar impact for gubernatorial vote/approval rating on state legislative voting decisions. Even when controlling for other factors in state elections such as past performance by the party, campaign spending, and/or partisan identification, they show that gubernatorial popularity exerted significant influence on candidate vote margins down the ticket. The effect was most pronounced during competitive gubernatorial races and were less manifest when incumbent governors were running.³

Although the impact of *popular* high-profile incumbents on the fortunes of their down-ballot partisan peers has been the subject of regular investigation at the national and state level, the potentially depressive effect of an *unpopular* incumbent remains less fully explored. In addition, existing examinations of up-ballot influences on down-ballot elections rely on statewide – even nationwide – samples in which at least a third of the contests are not contests at all due to chronically-low challenger entry rates in state legislative races (Rogers 2015). Rogers (2016), for example, shows strong positive, and negative, effects for presidential approval on both candidate entry (in legislative elections between 1991 and 2010) and vote choice (using CCES data for 2008, 2010, and 2012, plus samples in the off-year states of New Jersey and Virginia.) While his approach is admirably thorough, the nature of the available data – statewide samples – means respondents included both voters facing competitive and voters facing noncompetitive state legislative races. The latter condition could exaggerate the influence of national forces. That is where our project – inclusive of priming experiments in three hotly-contested state senate contests – stands to contribute to the conversation about high-profile copartisans on down-ballot outcomes.

² Interestingly, presidential candidates lack the same positive impact on their fellow partisans running for governor, according to Madariaga and Ozen's analysis.

³ Meredith (2013) found, however, that gubernatorial voting has a limited impact on other statewide races.

Election Experiments

Election experiments — projects that make use of the random assignment of respondents to either treatment or experimental groups under real-world conditions — allow researchers to explore causal relationships with considerable confidence. Several studies have shown that question presentation in particular has a measurable impact on responses (e.g., Berinsky 2007; Kuklinski et al. 2001; Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Turgeon 2009; Kromer and Parry 2019).

Still, we are mindful that Barabas and Jerit (2010) critique the use of survey experiments as a means of drawing reliable conclusions about expected public opinion shifts when it comes to actual political events, people, or stimuli. Among their concerns is that survey experiments are vulnerable to what Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk call an “inflation parameter” (2007). The unrealistic purity of the survey experiment, coupled with the forced exposure to a treatment, they contend, will result in findings ungeneralizable to the stimuli of a messy reality. One way to lessen this concern about whether an experiment is externally valid is to model it after plausible, real world events. We attempt this by using real candidates in a real election, one in which voters could hardly avoid campaign messages or news reports connecting President Obama or Governor Beebe to local, down-ballot candidates.

2012 Arkansas: A Distinctive Electoral Context

The 2012 election cycle in Arkansas presented a distinctive opportunity in contemporary American politics to test the comparative power of the “pull” toward legislative candidates of the same party as a popular, high-profile incumbent officeholder and the “push” away from candidates representing the same party as a deeply unpopular, high-profile officeholder. Not only were both of the highest officeholders — Governor Mike Beebe and President Barack Obama — Democrats prominently featured in electoral communications during the campaign, but an historically-significant battle for control of the legislative chambers was *the* electoral story of the cycle. If the impact of high-profile copartisans — either positive and/or negative — on low-information, low-profile legislative races has an impact on vote decisions, it should be in a political context such as this.

Specifically, although Governor Beebe was not up for re-election and President Obama was, campaign messaging throughout the election

cycle complicated things. With respect to the former, Democrats running for the legislature in 2012 attempted to tie themselves to the governor.⁴ In many respects, it was a sound strategy. Arkansas's General Assembly not only had been controlled by Democrats for 138 years, but—for two generations—Arkansas politics had been marked by a pragmatic progressivism that separated the state from others in the region. Prodded by state Supreme Court rulings, for instance, Arkansas has developed a model early childhood program, boosted teacher pay, and overhauled school facilities, producing outcomes like rising test scores and a K-12 education system ranked 5th nationally by *Education Week*. Presiding over such successes during the 2012 election cycle was Mike Beebe, the Democratic governor who not only consistently commanded approval ratings above 65 percent but had won every one of the state's 75 counties in 2010.

On the other hand, state polling in early 2012 provided evidence that President Obama had become even less popular with the Arkansas electorate since his overwhelming 2008 defeat in the state. Consequently, although it was clear there would be no contest for the state's six electoral votes, the President was central to Republicans' efforts to gain control of both houses of the state legislature for the first time since Reconstruction. On paper, Arkansas Republicans promoted a platform they termed the "SIMPLE Plan," a blueprint promising smaller government, lower taxes, voter identification laws, and school vouchers.⁵ On the ground however, the Republican campaign was about just one thing: the president. As a billboard in a rural northeast Arkansas county proclaimed: "Save America. Vote Republican. Every Democrat Elected Helps Obama" (Barth 2012). This message was furthered when Americans for Prosperity (AFP) invested \$1 million in Obamacare-focused attacks on Democratic state legislative candidates. Recipients were asked to "thank [Republicans] for protecting our health care freedom" (Barth 2012).

Democrats countered by attempting to detach themselves from national political dynamics and by emphasizing that the party's candidates were on the team of the popular Beebe. Beebe himself energetically and uncharacteristically joined the fray, bankrolling state Democrats' campaign efforts, appearing in TV spots attacking AFP for "trashing Arkansas," and

⁴ Indeed, party leaders attempted to frame the election expressly as a choice between "Beebe or backwards." Report by Democratic Party of Arkansas Chair Will Bond at State Committee Meeting, 8 December 2012.

⁵ Arkansas Republican House Caucus website, <http://arhouse.org/2012/04/05/the-simple-plan/>

making a last-minute campaign swing through counties in the northeast quadrant of the state where many of the most competitive legislative races were found (DeMillo 2012). No matter: the party that had been in the minority since the end of Reconstruction managed to gain control of both houses of the legislature (although the State House control was decided only after a recount in one district).

The conventional wisdom inside the state asserts that the rapid transformation of one of the country's most Democratic strongholds into one of its most Republican was a consequence of the electorate's strong animosity toward President Barack Obama, an animosity that swamped even the express efforts of a popular, same-party gubernatorial incumbent. The conditions of the 2012 election cycle allow us to test the power of their respective influences.

Research Design, Hypotheses, and Data

Our project explores five hypotheses. The first three focus on whether the job performance of highly-visible elected officials exerts the predicted effect on votes for "down ballot" offices. Specifically, we examine whether the perceived job performance of the governor and the president affects candidate choice in state senate races. As noted above, we focus on Arkansas, a case where Governor Mike Beebe, a Democrat, enjoyed widespread job approval that crossed party lines: in 2012, his approval rate was 71 percent among likely voters.⁶ By contrast, Arkansas long disapproved of the job performance of President Barack Obama, also a Democrat. At the time of our study, his approval rating was 31 percent, a figure that had held steady since 2010.

Since the governor was a Democrat, our first hypothesis is that individuals who approve of Governor Beebe's job performance would be more likely to support the Democratic candidate for state senate, controlling for other factors. Similarly, our second hypothesis is that since the president was a Democrat, individuals who approved of President Obama's job performance would be more likely to support the Democratic candidate for state senate. Our third hypothesis follows from these: individuals who approved of both the governor's and president's job performance would

⁶ For simplicity of interpretation, we raw approval, i.e., the percent of respondents selecting "approve" to the question "Do you approve or disapprove of the way XX is handling his/her job as YY?"

exhibit even higher rates of support for the Democratic candidate for state senate, as both the governor and president were Democrats themselves.

H1: Individuals who approve of Democratic Governor Mike Beebe's job performance will be more likely to support the Democratic candidate for Arkansas senate when compared with the baseline of individuals who do not approve of the governor's or president's job performance.

H2: Individuals who approve of Democratic President Barack Obama's job performance will be more likely to support the Democratic candidate for Arkansas senate when compared with the baseline of individuals who do not approve of the governor's or president's job performance.

H3: Individuals who approve of both the governor's and president's job performance will exhibit the highest levels of support for the Democratic candidate for Arkansas senate.

To explore these hypotheses, we collected survey data on recently-active Arkansas voters. We asked respondents to report vote intention in the upcoming state senate race in addition to their evaluations of the governor's and president's job performance. Using a simple logit regression, we estimate whether these elected officials' job performance was predictive of the probability of voting for the Democratic candidate for state senate. As is standard in models of voting behavior, we include prominent demographic covariates, including age, race, education, and gender.

The remaining two hypotheses concern whether cuing individuals to consider the job performance of high-profile copartisans affects vote choice. Our first expectation is that when a prominent elected official is popular, such as Governor Beebe, individuals stimulated to evaluate him first will be more likely to support his co-partisans on the ballot (in our experiment, the Democrat running for state senate). Our second expectation is that a prominent unpopular elected official, such as President Obama, will have a depressive effect on intended vote choice when individuals are stimulated to consider first his job performance. More formally:

H4: Stimulating individuals to assess Governor Beebe's job performance will increase subjects' support for the Democratic candidate for the Arkansas senate.

H5: Stimulating individuals to assess President Obama's job performance will decrease subjects' support for the Democratic candidate for the Arkansas senate.

To test hypotheses 4 and 5, we conducted a simple experiment in which we randomly assigned respondents into one of three groups. Members of the first group served as the control and were asked to report their intended state senate vote choice before being asked questions about the job performance of the governor and president. The other two groups were exposed to one of two treatments: the first was asked to assess Governor Beebe's job performance and the second was asked to assess President Obama's job performance, both—of course—prior to being asked about vote choice in the state senate race.

To analyze our results, we use a logit regression where the two treatments are coded as dichotomous variables. Since we do not expect the effects to be distributed evenly, we interact the priming variables with party identification.⁷ Indeed, recent research on “negative partisanship” (e.g., Abramowitz and Webster 2016) leads us to expect that perhaps Republicans would have a stronger reaction than Democrats to our stimulus because we were referencing Democratic elected officials. These interactions also allow us to examine differences between partisans and independents. In keeping with Huber and Lapinski (2006), we expect partisans to be less susceptible to our stimuli than independents (but see also, Iyengar and Kinder 2010).

We collected data from more than 3,000 likely voters using interactive voice recognition software (i.e., robo-calls) in three competitive Arkansas state senate races (Districts 11, 19, and 34) on November 1, 2012 (the Thursday before the election).⁸ Because existing literature on Arkansas politics points to a wide urban-rural divide in party loyalty—i.e., white, rural voters are more likely to ticket-split than other Arkansas voters—we selected one rural district, (District 19 between Democrat David Wyatt and Republican Linda Collins-Smith), one urban district (District 34 between Democrat Barry Hyde and Republican Jane English), and one mixed district (District 11 between Democrat Steve Harrelson and Republican Jimmy Hickey). All of the races proved to be the close contests observers projected;

⁷ We also ran a model that used job approval as the interactive term with our treatment, producing similar results. Likewise, we estimated a model that used both party identification and job approval as interactive terms with our treatment; the results were identical.

⁸ “Likely voters” include people who had voted in at least two of the last four general elections in Arkansas.

indeed, in the Hyde-English matchup in Little Rock's District 34, only 288 votes ultimately separated the candidates. In two of the three races, the Republican prevailed; Democrat David Wyatt was the exception in District 19. The full survey protocol is in Appendix A.

Results

We present our results in two steps. First, we estimate a simple vote choice model to examine how respondents in our sample voted in their respective state senate races. As we described above, we pool the races into a single outcome — vote for the Democratic candidate — since we collected our data for primarily experimental purposes rather than collecting a representative sample of voters in these districts. We present a vote-choice model first to establish that, by and large, the voters in our study behave in the ways we would predict. We also calculate predicted voting probabilities. Second, we present the results of our experiment: whether asking respondents about a popular — or unpopular — high-profile political figure in advance of asking them about vote choice in a low-profile race has measurable effect.

Table 1 contains the logit regression outcome that examines vote choice. The results largely conform to expectations. With regard to party identification, the self-identified Democrats and Republicans were significantly more likely to support their co-partisan running for the state senate. Job approval for both elected officials — Obama and Beebe — increased the likelihood of voting for the Democratic state senate candidate. The extent to which these effects are uniform across party attachments is impossible to discern with the regression coefficients.

To examine how these effects impact vote choice, we calculate the predicted probability of voting for the Democratic candidate based on the regression results in Table 1 and present the results in Figure 1. The calculations presented in Figure 1 highlight key differences in behavior among our respondents. For Democrats who neither approved of Governor Beebe nor President Obama, the likelihood of supporting the Democratic state senate candidate is only 24.7 percent. When self-identified Democrats approve of Beebe but not Obama, this probability increases to 65.9 percent — an increase of 41.2 percentage points. When the Democratic respondent approves of Obama but not Beebe, the likelihood of supporting the Democratic state senate candidate increases to 86.5 percent. Thus, the approving of Obama's job performance is a substantially better predictor —

by 21.6 percentage points — of state senate candidate preference among self-identified Democrats. This finding suggests that perhaps some Democrats who only support Beebe but not Obama might be better described as old style Arkansan Democrats — the precise kind of voters who would have supported a Blue Dog Democrat — as they do not support the national party's standard-bearer. When the Democrat approves of both Beebe and Obama, the probability of supporting the Democratic legislative candidate is a near certainty (97.4 percent). Independents follow a similar pattern: the probability of supporting the Democratic state senate candidate is just 8.2 percent when a voter disapproves of both Beebe and Obama; approval of Beebe alone raises this probability to 34.6 percent; approval of Obama alone further raises this probability to 63.6 percent; and when she approves of both Beebe and Obama, the probability increases to 91.2 percent.

Interestingly, approval of Beebe seems to have a substantial effect on supporting the Democratic senate candidate for self-identified Republicans, as the probability of supporting the Democratic candidate increases to 17.7 percent. With regards to the effect of Obama's approval and the combined effect of approving both, we are analyzing a substantially small subset of Republican respondents. Indeed, while 55 percent of Republicans approved of Beebe, only 7.8 percent approved of Obama. Only 4.5 percent of Republicans approved of both. While supporting Obama or both Beebe and Obama significantly increased the likelihood of voting for the Democrat in the state senate race, the practical impact of the effect is minimal.

Overall, the estimates in Figure 1 suggest Beebe's popularity in the state exerted a positive influence for the Democratic candidate among Independents and Republicans. Furthermore, these estimates suggest that respondents who approved of Obama — a somewhat rare event — are more likely to support the Democratic candidate for state senate. We urge a cautious interpretation of the results for Republicans however, as you would need to ask more than 95 Republicans in Arkansas about Obama's job

Table 1- Analysis of Votes for the Democratic Arkansas State Senate Candidate

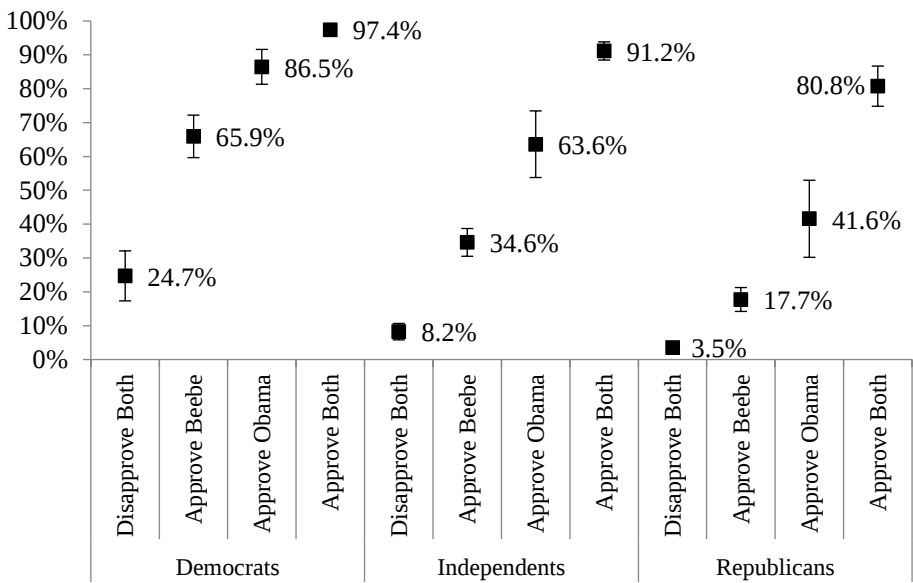
Democrat	1.30***
	(0.16)
Republican	-0.90***
	(0.15)
Approve Obama	2.97***
	(0.17)
Approve Beebe	1.77***
	(0.17)
Age	0.05
	(0.08)
White	0.30
	(0.19)
Education	0.11
	(0.06)
Female	0.21
	(0.12)
Constant	-3.20***
	(0.36)
Pseudo- R ²	.495
N	2540

Note: Dependent variable is vote for the Democratic candidate. The data in the analysis are pooled results for Arkansas state senate districts 11, 19, and 34.

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

performance before finding one who approved of President Obama’s job performance. Still, the results provide empirical support for our first three hypotheses and the conventional wisdom of the ongoing political transformation of Arkansas.

Figure 1 – Predicted Voting Probabilities for the Democratic Candidate, Arkansas State Senate



Having established in traditional multivariate analysis that approval of both Governor Beebe and President Obama are predictive of down-ballot Democratic votes even in a sample gathered solely in competitive districts, we turn now to a stricter test of copartisan influence: whether stimulating individuals first to consider their views of high-profile public officials has an effect on their prospective votes in a state senate race. As we described above, we estimate the effect for each of the three districts and then pool the responses into a single dataset.

We present the results of our regression analysis in Table 2. The first column of Table 2 contains the regression results for Arkansas Senate District 11, the contest between Democrat Steve Harrelson and Republican Jimmy Hickey, Jr. For this district, as expected, self-identified Democrats and Republicans were both more likely to support their co-partisans on the ballot. The results also reveal that despite our expectation that asking individuals first to consider their feelings about Beebe or Obama would influence vote choice, there was no overall effect (Beebe Stimulus and

Obama Stimulus) nor was there a specific effect on subgroups of voters (i.e., self-identified partisans).

Table 2- Beebe/Obama Stimulus Results, Vote for the Democratic State Senate Candidate

	Dist. 11	Dist. 19	Dist. 34	All Dist.
Democrat	2.63*** (0.35)	2.99*** (0.38)	2.74* (0.41)	2.75*** (0.21)
Republican	-1.44*** (0.40)	-1.76*** (.34)	-1.60*** (0.40)	-1.62*** (0.22)
Beebe Stimulus	-0.07 (0.28)	-0.06 (0.22)	0.33 (0.29)	0.04 (0.15)
Obama Stimulus	0.09 (0.26)	0.14 (0.22)	-0.27 (0.30)	0.01 (0.15)
Dem * Beebe Stimulus	-0.33 (0.48)	-0.20 (0.51)	-0.75 (0.56)	-0.39 (0.29)
Dem * Obama Stimulus	-0.63 (0.45)	-0.12 (0.52)	0.14 (0.58)	-0.29 (0.29)
Rep * Beebe Stimulus	0.70 (0.52)	0.91* (0.45)	-0.75 (0.61)	0.43 (0.29)
Rep * Obama Stimulus	0.46 (0.50)	0.57 (0.45)	0.22 (0.55)	0.42 (0.28)
Constant	-0.81*** (0.20)	-0.37* (0.16)	-0.47* (0.21)	-0.52*** (0.11)
Pseudo- R ²	.253	.308	.342	.293
N	1018	1245	830	3093

Note: Dependent variable is a stated vote for the Democratic candidate

* p<0.05, ** p< 0.01, *** p<0.001

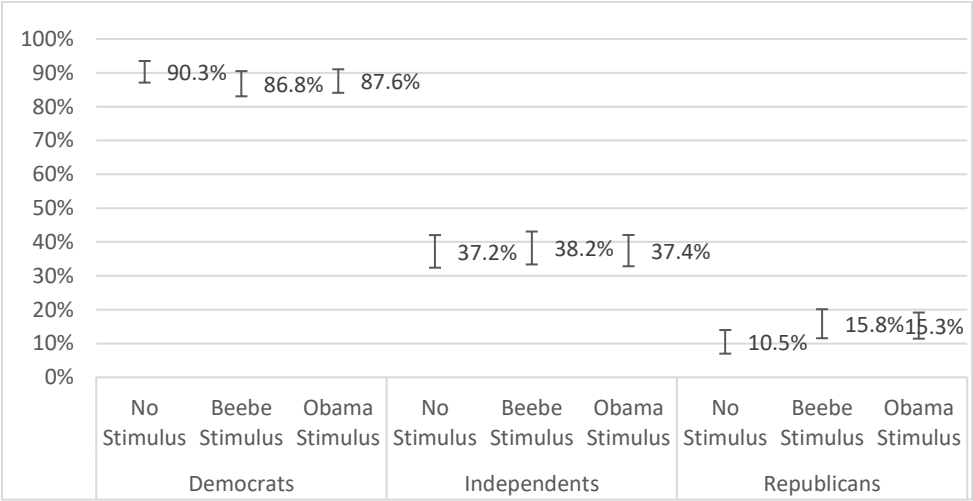
For District 19, where Republican Linda Collins-Smith challenged Democratic incumbent David Wyatt, we see that, again, self-identified Democrats and Republicans strongly preferred co-partisans. While we do not see an overall effect in this district either, we do find that Republicans who received the Beebe question were significantly more likely to support the Democratic candidate. Although this finding conforms to our expectation that Beebe’s popularity is helping fellow Democrats on the ballot, it is an isolated result as the interaction with Democrat is not significant.

For District 34, an open-seat contest between Democrat Barry Hyde and Republican Jane English, we find the same results as in District 11, i.e., we find no support for our hypotheses that Governor Beebe’s popularity helped Democratic candidates at the polls or that President Obama’s

unpopularity hurt them. In the last column, when we pool the results, again, we find no significant effects.

Once again, we calculate the predicted voting probabilities for the appropriate partisan subgroups across our treatments. As before, we calculate these probabilities for the pooled sample, which in this case is the regression result in the fourth column of Table 2. The probabilities we calculate, presented in Figure 2, serve to confirm our regression results: our treatments have no appreciable effect on vote choice, regardless of party identification. In an unreported series of regressions, we also find that it is not just party identification that is immune from effects: job approval interacted with our stimulus measures produces null results too. While our traditional analysis of voting behavior – in a competitive state legislative context – strongly implies that individuals’ assessments of the governor’s and president’s job performance matter for vote choice, our experiment shows that expressly activating these feelings *has no substantive effect on vote choice*.

Figure 2 – Copartisan Approval and Predicted Voting Probabilities for the Democratic Candidate, Arkansas State Senate



Conclusion

Arkansas is not alone in its a statewide, bipartisan consensus that Obama’s depressive effect on down-ballot Democrats contributed to the

state's recent political revolution. It is a thesis supported by traditional analysis of pooled responses, and – as shown here – even among respondents exposed to a competitive state legislative race. Our experiments however produced no significant effects. It may be that previous research has overstated the potency of the heuristics created by voters' evaluation of high-profile co-partisans on lower-level races because so many state legislative races are not serious contests. It is also possible our stimulus – simply asking for evaluations of Obama and Beebe before the question regarding the state senate race – was too subtle to create an effect.

A third, and more interesting, possibility is that our sample was immune to the stimulations we attempted. Respondents were, after all, practiced voters asked about unusually-competitive state senate districts during a cycle when party control of the state legislature was hotly contested for the first time in more than a century. Even more, they had been inundated with references to Obama and Beebe for weeks. In other words, if the job performance of the president and governor do swamp other factors in determining vote choice, it may be that these effects *had been cemented far in advance of Election Day* and would not be picked up days before the election. As U.S. Senator John Boozman put it the following spring: “The attempt in Arkansas has been regardless of what office you're running for to try and somehow link that with President Obama and the Obama agenda, which is very unpopular.”⁹ Under such conditions, we can assume most respondents possessed a fair amount of information, even in a typically-low-profile affair like a state senate race. As Huber and Lapinski (2006), Weber and Thornton (2012) and others have discovered, high levels of information depress experimental effects.

The null results in the second half of our analysis thus leave us with more questions than answers about the power of high-profile copartisans to shape down-ballot races. Only additional research will determine the actual potency of copartisanship in shaping voting behavior in the thousands of low-information elections happening in an increasingly nationalized environment.

⁹ Shane Goldmacher, “The Collapse of Arkansas Democrats,” *The National Journal* (11 April 2013).

Appendix A¹⁰

Q1. In the election for state senate, the two candidates are Senator Steve Harrelson/Senator David Wyatt/Representative Barry Hyde, a Democrat, and Jimmy Hickey, Jr./Representative Linda Collins-Smith/Representative Jane English, a Republican. If the election were held today would you vote for:

Press 1 for Steve Harrelson/Senator David Wyatt/Representative Barry Hyde
Press 2 for Jimmy Hickey, Jr./Representative Linda Collins-Smith/Representative Jane English
Press 3 for Don't Know

Q2. Do you approve or disapprove of the job Gov. Mike Beebe is doing?

Press 1 for Approve
Press 2 for Disapprove
Press 3 for Don't Know

Q3. Do you approve or disapprove of the job that President Barack Obama is doing?

Press 1 for Approve
Press 2 for Disapprove
Press 3 for Don't Know

Q4. Just a few more questions. For statistical purposes, please tell us your age.

Press 1 if you are under the age of 30
Press 2 if you are between the ages of 30 and 44
Press 3 if you are between the ages of 45 and 64
Press 4 if you are 65 or older

Q5. Please tell us your ethnicity.

Press 1 for African American
Press 2 for Asian American
Press 3 for Caucasian or White
Press 4 for Latino
Press 5 if you are of another ethnic origin not mentioned here.

¹⁰ The battery presented here represents the sequence to which members of the control group were exposed. One third of the respondents in each district heard the Obama approval prime first, followed by the senate race question, followed by Beebe approval, and another third in each district heard the Beebe approval prime first, followed by the senate race question, followed by Obama approval.

Q6. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as an Independent, a Republican, a Democrat, or other?

Press 1 for Independent

Press 2 for Republican

Press 3 for Democrat

Press 4 for Other

Q7. Which of the following education categories best describes your highest level of schooling?

Press 1 for High School Graduate or Below

Press 2 for Some College

Press 3 for College Graduate

Press 4 for Some Graduate School

Q8. Last question. Please tell us your gender.

Press 1 for Male

Press 2 for Female

Close: Thank you for your time.

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