

REASSESSING PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE ON STATE LEGISLATIVE ELECTION OUTCOMES

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INTRODUCTION

- State legislative elections are immensely important-their results affect state and national political issues in numerous ways.
- Existing research shows some relationship between state legislative election outcomes and national factors (presidential approval, national economy) but it is unclear whether this relationship is longstanding or a recent development because they only focus on elections after the 1970s.
- Research Question: How much influence did presidential approval have on state legislative elections before the '70s?
- I seek to measure the effects of presidential approval from the 1940s to the 1970s.
- Using a dataset that reports state legislative election outcomes from as far back as the late 1930s, I run OLS regressions to measure the effect of presidential approval on state house and senate elections, controlling for the national economy, previous incumbent party seat share, and the prior presidential vote.

THEORY

- A review of the historical record shows a disparity in perception of power between presidents in the mid- and late-twentieth century: voters assumed presidents in the latter period had more decision-making power in administrative and policy arenas than their predecessors.
- Voters are more likely to pay attention after the 1970s as presidents became increasingly involved in policies that affect either their life directly or the direction of the country.
- If we expect activist presidents, in a period with increased media coverage and partisanship, to be more present in the minds of voters in state legislative elections, the reverse should also be true: voters may have been less likely to use their opinions of the president to judge the president's co-partisans in state legislative elections from the '40s to the '70s.

HYPOTHESES

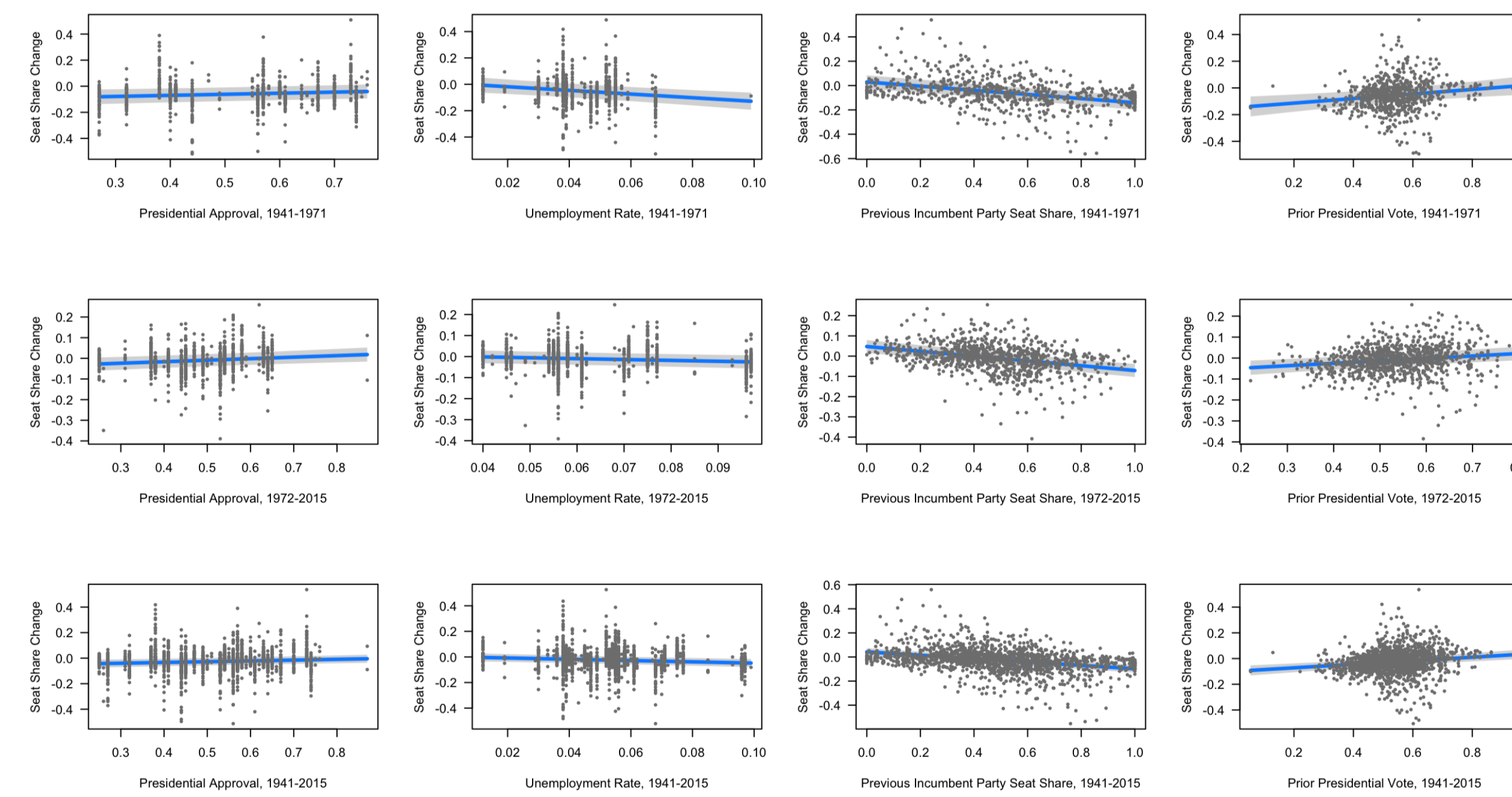
- Presidential approval did not have less influence on state legislative elections from the 1940s to the 1970s.
 - There is no meaningful difference between the effect of presidential approval on state legislative elections from the '40s to the '70s and the '70s to present.
 - Presidential approval had a significant effect on state legislative elections from the '40s to the '70s and it is greater than the effect on state legislative elections from the '70s to present.
- Presidential approval had less influence on state legislative elections from the 1940s to the 1970s.
 - Presidential approval had no significant effect on state legislative elections from the '40s to the '70s.
 - Presidential approval had a significant effect on state legislative elections from the '40s to the '70s although it is smaller than the effect on state legislative elections from the '70s to present.

REGRESSION MODEL

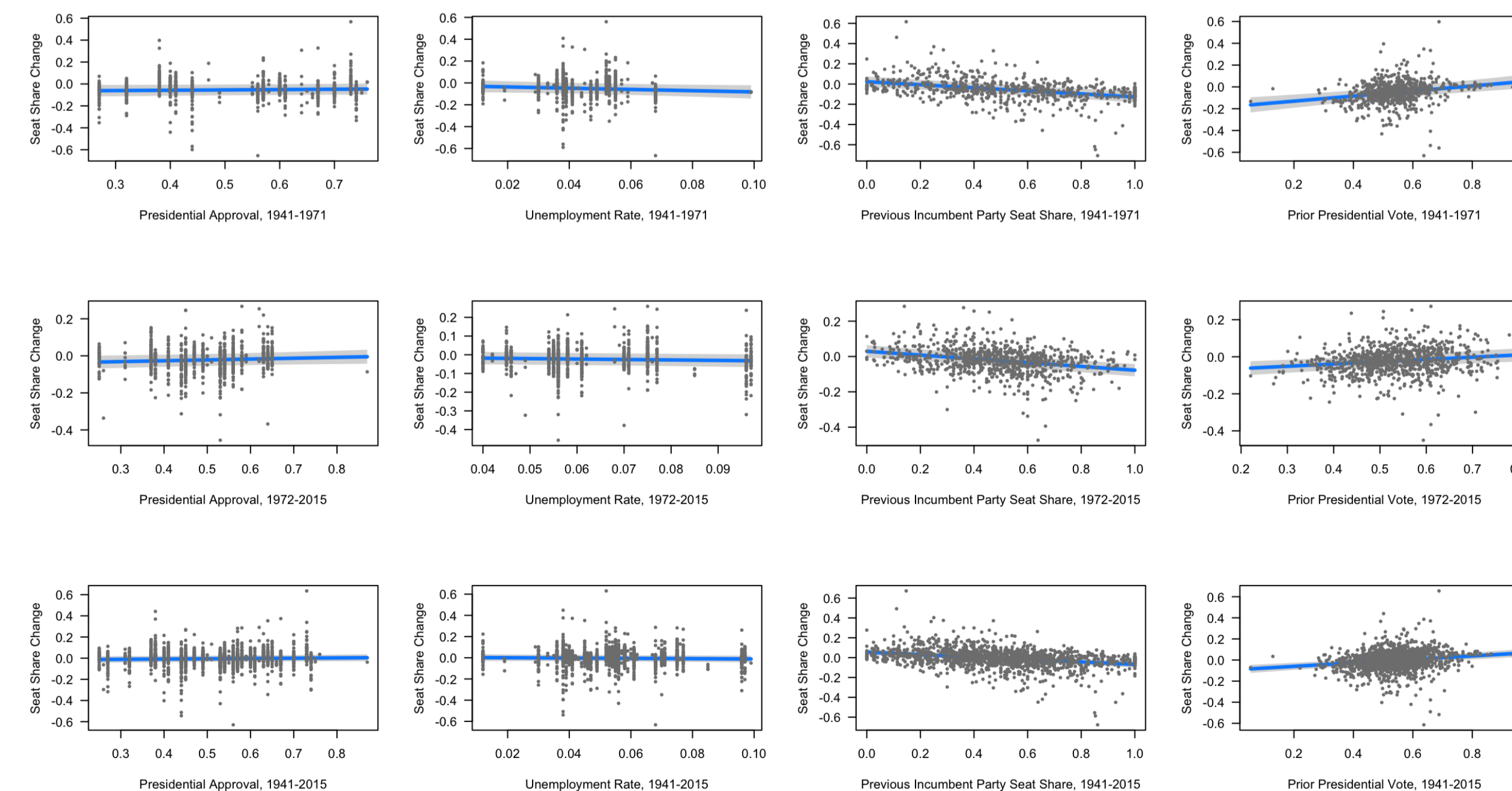
$$\begin{aligned} \text{State Legislative Election Outcomes}_{sc} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{Presidential Approval}_t \\ & + \beta_2 * \text{Unemployment Rate}_t \\ & + \beta_3 * \text{Past Incumbent Party Seat Change}_{stc} \\ & + \beta_4 * \text{Prior Presidential Vote}_{st} \\ & + \beta_5 * \text{Post-1971} \\ & + \beta_6 * [\text{Post-1971} * \text{Presidential Approval}_t] \\ & + \text{StateFE}_s + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

RESULTS

Linear Relationship Between Causal Variables and State House Seat Share Change



Linear Relationship Between Causal Variables and State Senate Seat Share Change



RESULTS (CONTINUED)

- OLS regressions show no significant difference in the effect of presidential approval between state legislative elections from the 1970s to present and state legislative elections from the 1940s to the 1970s.

Table 5: Presidential Co-Partisan State House Seat Share Change, 1941-2015

	(1941-1971)	(1972-2015)	(1941-2015)	(1941-2015)
Presidential Approval	0.083* (0.033)	0.074** (0.023)	0.061** (0.019)	0.077** (0.025)
Unemployment Rate	-1.39* (0.355)	-0.416** (0.154)	-0.503** (0.138)	-0.793** (0.167)
Previous Incumbent Party Seat Share	-0.170** (0.020)	-0.118** (0.013)	-0.140** (0.011)	-0.139** (0.011)
Prior Presidential Vote	0.171** (0.054)	0.117** (0.027)	0.137** (0.027)	0.140** (0.027)
Post-1971				0.031 (0.022)
Post-1971 x Presidential Approval				-0.026 (0.039)
Constant	0.038 (0.055)	-0.041 (0.028)	-0.018 (0.028)	-0.021 (0.029)
N	686	939	1,625	1,625
R ²	0.153	0.164	0.128	0.134
Adjusted R ²	0.083	0.114	0.099	0.104

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Table 6: Presidential Co-Partisan State Senate Seat Share Change, 1941-2015

	(1941-1971)	(1972-2015)	(1941-2015)	(1941-2015)
Presidential Approval	0.030 (0.030)	0.046 (0.027)	0.027 (0.019)	0.035 (0.024)
Unemployment Rate	-0.573 (0.333)	-0.242 (0.177)	-0.149 (0.139)	-0.397* (0.168)
Previous Incumbent Party Seat Share	-0.151** (0.018)	-0.107** (0.014)	-0.123** (0.010)	-0.123** (0.010)
Prior Presidential Vote	0.233** (0.049)	0.123** (0.030)	0.164** (0.026)	0.165** (0.027)
Post-1971				0.019 (0.022)
Post-1971 x Presidential Approval				-0.006 (0.040)
Constant	-0.030 (0.050)	-0.056 (0.032)	-0.053 (0.027)	-0.053 (0.028)
N	653	872	1,525	1,525
R ²	0.147	0.135	0.123	0.127
Adjusted R ²	0.073	0.081	0.092	0.095

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

CONCLUSION

- I measure the effects of presidential approval on state legislative election outcomes from the 1940s to the 1970s and find that the effect of presidential approval does not change for state legislative elections.
 - The unemployment rate has had a significant effect on state house elections since the '40s.
 - In state senate elections, the effects of presidential approval and the unemployment rate are insignificant for the entire time series.
 - Previous incumbent party seat share and the prior presidential vote remain significant throughout.
- My findings suggest that the influence of presidential approval on state legislative elections has existed for at least the past seventy to eighty years in state house elections.
- These findings have important implications for our understanding about the scope of American presidential power and state legislative accountability: were the effect of presidential approval to increase, state legislative co-partisans would lose the capacity to affect their own electoral prospects independent of the president.
 - If good governance does not increase legislators' likelihood of re-election, they have little incentive to advocate policies with their constituents in mind.
 - Legislators are far more likely to support policies that align with their personal ideological positions.
 - If long-standing norms regarding representation and accountability are to persist, we must find a way to reduce the effect of presidential approval on state legislative outcomes and increase the likelihood that voters judge the president's co-partisan state legislators on their own merits.

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