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Assessing the value of state legislative experience and legislative professionalism in national election performance, 1974–2010

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ABSTRACT

State legislative experience and chamber professionalism have been shown to benefit state legislators as they decide and prepare to run for national office in American Congressional elections. Yet, what are the effects of these two factors on national election performance? I test the implications from the literature that state legislative experience and chamber professionalism should impact national election outcomes on all two-party contested elections from 1974 to 2010. I find that state legislative experience enhances candidates' vote shares, though differently for different candidates. Yet, surprisingly professionalism plays no moderating role. Such effects present at the earlier stages of elections wash out as elections come to a close.

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1. Introduction

Extant literature has consistently demonstrated that state legislative experience of candidates and the level of professionalism of the chamber to which the members belonged have played important roles in elections at the state and national levels. Studies have found these factors to be impactful at the beginning stages of elections, such as candidates' entry into races and the quality of the challenger's impact on the incumbent's decisions (e.g., Berkman, 1994; Berkman & Eisenstein, 1999; Maestas, Maisel, & Stone, 2005). Yet, what are the impacts at the final stages of the election? The impacts of state legislative experience and professionalism at the outcomes of

national races have been mostly implied; if such experience matters in state legislative elections and also at the early stages of national elections, then it may also matter at the later stages of national elections.² Further, there is reason to expect state legislative professionalism moderates state legislative experience, given the evidence of professionalism being an important factor in races at all levels, from strengthening political networks and provid-

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² Maestas et al. (2005) address the "perceived" chances of winning the election in 1998, and Maestas et al. (2006, 205–206) examine the relationship between probability of running for office and probability of winning elections. Also, Lublin (1994) evaluates the impact of challengers' past office experience at any level, on incumbents' votes in Senate elections. Yet, these and other relevant studies do not examine the vote shares received by former state legislators as candidates as a function of their own state legislative experience and professionalism of their former state chamber in House elections. This is largely due to the theoretical scope of these studies, which tend to focus primarily on the beginning stages of the races or on one candidate's effect on another (e.g., Lublin, 1994), as opposed to a candidate's past experience influencing his/her future national electoral performance.

ing candidates with experience in constituent casework (Maestas, Fulton, Maisel, & Stone, 2006), to protecting candidates in state races from exogenous shocks, such that state elections increasingly resemble national Congressional elections (Berry, Berkman, & Schneiderman, 2000).

In this paper, I seek to test the implications that state legislative experience and the moderating influence of chamber professionalism may matter at the later stages of national elections. The goal of this paper, then, is to test hypotheses that flow from the literature in order to provide a fuller understanding of the impacts and moderating roles of prior, lower level political experience and professionalism on bids for national elective office. I test these implications on all contested, two-party Congressional elections for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1974 through 2010. I also utilize a new, dynamic measure of state legislative professionalism from Bowen and Greene (2014) allowing for a more rigorous test of this moderating factor on national election performance.

I find strong support for the implication that state legislative experience matters for most candidates' vote shares in national elections, though the magnitude of effect is small suggesting that prior subnational experience acts more as a bonus, rather than a key determinant of electoral victory. However, this experience matters differently for different candidates. State legislative experience matters more for Republicans than for Democrats, and I find no support for the implication that chamber professionalism matters in candidates' performance in national elections. To thoroughly address these implications, I explore a pair of additional models comparing incumbents and challengers to assess alternative contexts in which state legislative experience and chamber professionalism may matter. These findings strongly support the notion that state legislative experience matters differently for different candidates, with no measurable moderating impact of professionalism on national election performance. An additional, broad conclusion to make based on these findings is an empirical one, suggesting that the degree to which we are likely to find impacts of prior office experience in national elections performance largely depends on where we look for it.

These findings are useful in informing how scholars of American national politics, state politics, and electoral behavior think about the impact of state legislative experience and professionalism. Perhaps the value *professionalized* chambers offer is mostly at the state level or in decisions to run for national office, but not in election outcomes.

2. State legislative experience and professionalism: impacts in national elections

Studies examining the impacts of state legislative experience in the context of national campaigns have received much attention in the literature. Maestas et al. (2006) found that state legislators are strategic as they form their progressive ambitions and decisions about when to run in an election. Additionally, Berkman and Eisenstein (1999) found that past state legislative experience matters in non-incumbent candidates' decisions to run for election and

also in their ability to raise funds. These and other studies (Banks & Kiewiet, 1989; Berkman, 1994; Bond, Covington, & Fleisher, 1985) support the notion that state legislative experience indeed impacts the decisions of candidates to pursue Congressional office, and also positively impacts their abilities to attract and secure resources and support in these national election bids. And similarly, there remains strong evidence that state legislative experience positively impacts elections efforts in elections at the state level (Berry et al., 2000; Hogan, 2004; Jewell & Breaux, 1988; Van Dunk, 1997).

Also, there have been numerous important studies of the role and processes of professionalism of legislatures in the American states (King, 2000; Mooney, 1995; Squire, 1992, 2007). In the electoral context specifically, the findings at both the state (Hogan, 2001; Thompson & Moncrief, 1997) and national (Berkman & Eisenstein, 1999) levels demonstrate that more professionalized chambers lead to better qualified and prepared candidates. Though the measures of professionalism vary across these and other studies, they all indicate a similar trend that, on average, those from more professional legislatures are better able to secure more funding, resources, support, professional consultants, media buys, and expanded political networks more broadly (e.g., Maestas et al., 2006). These benefits afford the opportunities for candidates to be strategic in deciding whether and when to enter races. And Berry et al. (2000) concluded that their findings indicated similarities between state legislative elections and national Congressional elections, yet conditional entirely upon the professionalism of the members' chambers. They specifically note, "[S]tate elections have become more like Congressional ones; we find that this is the case *only* when state legislatures are more professional and therefore look more like Congress" (Berry et al., 2000, 871). Their thorough treatment of the impact of professionalism in the electoral context, albeit at the state level, has opened the door to consider the impact of state legislative experience and professionalization at the national Congressional level. As they assert, professionalism should make state legislative elections increasingly more like Congressional elections by becoming more candidate-centered. Following this line of logic, there is an implication that similar positive impacts of professionalism may be observed at the national level by providing quality candidates able to mount serious election bids, and thus this is an important intersection to consider in deepening the understanding of factors impacting elections³

However, not all scholars have found positive impacts from professionalism across the board. Notably, Squire (1993) found that increased levels of professionalization lead to negative perceptions of state legislatures by

³ While Berry et al. (2000) centered their examination on the intersection of institutionalization and professionalization and the resultant impact on electoral "insulation", their conclusion supports the assumption, which is the subject of my analysis, that we may indeed see positive impacts from professionalization on electoral performance, given the types of benefits afforded by professionalism to candidates.

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