The Global Incumbency Advantage

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Abstract

This paper provides causal estimates of the incumbency advantage at the national level. Considering all presidential and parliamentary elections held since 1945, we estimate how a national electoral victory affects the winner's probability of retaining power beyond the term for which they were elected. On average, election winners benefit from an incumbency advantage, but this effect is short-lived and differs markedly across contexts: it is large in Africa, North America, and Western Europe, but muted or even reversed in Latin America, Asia and Oceania. We relate these patterns to local estimates of the incumbency advantage, which we review in a meta-analysis. Within countries, the incumbency advantage correlates positively with GDP per capita and negatively with corruption. Across countries, it is largest in both the most democratic and the least democratic countries, due to different mechanisms. In established democracies, the incumbency advantage reflects a boost in the subsequent electoral performance of election winners. In less democratic regimes, it stems from manipulation of the timing of elections and of the conditions in which elections are fought.

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1 Introduction

In democracies and autocracies alike, incumbents often enjoy an electoral advantage over other candidates for public office. Understanding the magnitude of the incumbency advantage has direct implications for political accountability, policy quality, and the functioning of democracy. Indeed, if incumbents enjoy a large electoral advantage simply by virtue of holding office—through name recognition and visibility, campaign finance, or institutional tools—this shapes their incentives. A strong incumbency advantage can weaken accountability by making incumbents less responsive to voters, but it may also reduce short-term populism and encourage long-term policy choices. It may affect political selection as well, since fewer turnovers imply greater experience but also more scope for corruption, while strong incumbency effects might discourage the entry of high-quality challengers.

At the same time, the incumbency advantage reflects a political equilibrium shaped by voter learning, candidate quality, and institutional checks and balances. Large incumbency effects might indicate that voters are rationally reelecting competent incumbents, or they might signal barriers to entry and entrenched low-quality politicians. Alternatively, they may also reflect voters' demand for political stability. Thus, understanding the incumbency advantage matters both to assess its welfare effects and as a diagnostic of democratic quality: whether reelection rewards performance and accountability, or entrenches power at the expense of free and fair electoral competition.

Since the 1970s, a large literature has studied the incumbency advantage, with an early focus on U.S. congressional and state elections (Ferejohn, 1977; Fiorina, 1977; Gelman and King, 1990; Cox and Katz, 1996). This inspired more recent empirical work leveraging causal identification methods, such as regression discontinuity designs, to estimate the incumbency advantage (Lee, 2008). Other studies examined the incumbency advantage in local elections beyond the U.S. context. However, this literature does not provide causal estimates of the incumbency advantage at the national level: across countries, institutional settings, and political systems, we do not know how winning a national election affects a party's or a politician's subsequent electoral performance. At this level, the existence of large incumbency effects would have important implications for the likelihood of political turnover (Marx et al., 2024) and the evolution of democratic systems (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019).

This paper provides the first causal estimates of the incumbency advantage at the national level and across countries. Measuring the incumbency advantage at the national level poses new conceptual challenges, because incumbents not only benefit from common sources of advantage described in the literature, but also have the ability to affect the timing of elections and the conditions in which elections are fought. Thus, while previous work often equates the incumbency advantage with the causal effect of an electoral win on subsequent electoral

performance, our setting requires considering the possibility that incumbents may determine whether competitive elections take place at all (Egorov and Sonin, 2014), and if so, when. To account for this, we propose a novel and complementary characterization of the incumbency advantage as the causal effect of incumbency on the probability that a candidate or party remains in office beyond the scheduled end of their term. This allows us to consider a wide variety of institutional settings, including countries with heterogeneous levels of democracy where incumbents retain power through various means, including—but not restricted to—winning elections.

Using data from all presidential and parliamentary elections conducted across the world since 1945, we study how national electoral victories affect a party's or a candidate's chances of remaining in office beyond the next scheduled election. We also estimate how incumbency affects the probability of winning the next election, conditional on the election taking place. In our approach, incumbency effects on subsequent electoral performance can be interpreted as one of the mechanisms driving a leader's ability to remain in office beyond their mandated term, in addition to leader-driven changes in the timing and the competitiveness of elections. Throughout the analysis, we rely on the nonparametric regression discontinuity approach from Calonico et al. (2014) for identification and estimation, and we conduct extensive placebo checks to verify the validity of our empirical design.

We first review and bring together insights from the literature studying the incumbency advantage in economics and political science. While previous work has studied incumbency effects in many countries or regions, we lack a unified understanding of the key insights from this literature. In the first part of the paper, we perform a comprehensive meta-analysis of this body of work to identify the main correlates of the incumbency advantage. This meta-analysis reveals novel patterns of heterogeneity across political regimes and levels of economic development. For example, large incumbency advantages are observed in countries that belong to the OECD, an intergovernmental organization comprising high-income and generally democratic countries. Emerging and developing countries, by contrast, tend to display incumbency disadvantages, in line with previous theoretical work studying the origins of anti-incumbent biases (e.g., Klašnja and Titiunik, 2017). We perform several empirical exercises to identify the sources of this heterogeneity and highlight the role of two key variables, GDP per capita and corruption, as important predictors of the incumbency advantage in subnational elections.

We then turn to our core objective: providing a causal estimate of the national incumbency advantage in our global sample of presidential and parliamentary elections, at the level of political parties and individual candidates. We document the existence of a positive but short-lived party-level incumbency advantage at the national level. Political parties that win national elections experience sharply different power trajectories relative to runner-up parties:

election winners are approximately 10 percentage points (p.p.) more likely to be in power five years after a given election (an effect corresponding to 27% of the runner-up party's probability of being in power at that point, significant at the 10% level), and for at least one year beyond the scheduled end of their term. However, this effect gradually dissipates over time. Seven years after a given election and three years after the scheduled term end, the winning party is no more likely to be in power, on average. Estimates of the incumbency advantage of individual candidates in presidential elections deliver similar insights—winning presidential candidates benefit from an incumbency advantage on average, but this estimate falls short of statistical significance.

Mirroring the insights from our meta-analysis, these effects vary substantially across the world. Incumbent parties in OECD countries and African countries enjoy a more pronounced advantage. In the former, incumbency effects are largely driven by countries in North America and Western Europe. The same insights broadly hold for individual candidates running in presidential elections in those regions. By contrast, incumbent parties face a disadvantage in Latin America and in Asia and Oceania. However, the evidence from national elections diverges from within-country estimates for low-income countries. In those settings, the literature has documented large incumbency disadvantages in local elections, while we estimate a very strong party-level incumbency advantage at the national level. Finally, we do not observe substantial differences between incumbency effects measured in presidential elections and parliamentary elections. Unsurprisingly, elections deemed not free and fair yield very large incumbency advantages for the parties and presidential candidates that win them.

We explore two sets of mechanisms to explain these findings: incumbency effects on subsequent electoral performance, and manipulation of the timing and the competitiveness of elections by winning parties and candidates.

First, we examine how differences between election winners and runner-ups in their subsequent electoral entry and performance explain the divergence in their power trajectories over time. By measuring whether incumbents are more likely to compete in and win subsequent elections, we extend the standard characterization of the incumbency advantage to the context of national elections. At the global level, we find non-significant incumbency effects on the joint probability of competing and winning the next election. However, this null average result masks substantial heterogeneity that mirrors the heterogeneity we find for the power trajectories of election winners and runner-ups. Election winners in North America and Western Europe have a substantially larger unconditional probability of winning the next election, while incumbents in Latin America, Asia and Oceania face a significantly lower probability of winning. In line with the findings from our meta-analysis, these incumbency effects tend to be larger in regions with higher levels of income and lower levels of corruption.

Second, we consider the possibility that changes in the timing of subsequent elections

and in the conditions under which they are fought affect incumbents' ability to retain power beyond their scheduled term. To explore the timing mechanism, we compute the difference between the dates of constitutionally mandated elections and actual election dates. We find that national officeholders in several subsamples (e.g., autocracies and low-income regions) retain power by postponing elections or by canceling them outright. We then provide suggestive evidence that the ability to determine whether subsequent elections are free and fair—by manipulating the conditions in which electoral campaigns are fought, or the electoral results after the vote—also contributes to improving incumbents' electoral prospects in autocratic regimes. Overall, the positive incumbency advantage we observe in low-income countries does not appear to be driven by increased candidate entry or electoral support conditional on running, but rather by institutional manipulation.

These patterns give rise to a non-linear relationship between the incumbency advantage on the one hand, and levels of economic development and democratic quality on the other. While local estimates of the incumbency advantage correlate positively with GDP per capita, our estimates of the national incumbency advantage are lowest for middle-income countries with intermediate values of institutional quality, and largest for the most democratic and the least democratic countries in our sample. This arises due to different mechanisms in the two latter sets of countries. In high-income and democratic countries, winning a national election improves the winning side's performance in the subsequent election. In low-income and less democratic countries, election winners are more likely to retain office beyond their scheduled term due to their ability to manipulate the timing and the competitiveness of elections.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes our meta-analysis of the literature studying the incumbency advantage within countries. Section 3 describes our data. Section 4 describes our empirical framework for estimating the incumbency advantage at the national level. Section 5 presents our main results, Section 6 discusses mechanisms, and Section 7 concludes.

2 Meta-analysis

We start our analysis of the incumbency advantage across countries with a review of the existing evidence in economics and political science. We surveyed the empirical literature to recover as many estimates of the incumbency advantage as possible and to identify robust conclusions from this body of work. Throughout the meta-analysis presented in this section, we highlight the findings from specific studies to illustrate some key conceptual insights.

Importantly, our meta-analysis focuses on estimates of the incumbency advantage obtained via regression discontinuity designs (RDDs). This focus serves two purposes. First, while the literature provides estimates computed via other methods (e.g., Ansolabehere et al.,

2000), RDDs have arguably become the dominant and state-of-the-art approach to measure the incumbency advantage across a range of institutional settings (see Lee, 2008; Lee and Lemieux, 2010). Second, considering estimates from a single empirical approach allows us to pinpoint heterogeneity in empirical estimates of the incumbency advantage that reflects genuine variation across countries or institutional settings rather than variation stemming from methodological differences across studies.

2.1 Analysis sample

The standard approach to causally identifying an incumbency advantage is a close-elections RDD. This method examines how candidates or political parties who marginally won an election perform in the subsequent election held in the same constituency or electoral unit, compared to marginal losers. Specifically, one can estimate

$$Y_{it'} = \alpha + \beta T_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \delta T_{it} X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{1}$$

where X_{it} represents the margin of victory of candidate i in the election held at time t, T_{it} is a dummy indicating candidate i's victory (it is equal to one when X_{it} is positive, and zero otherwise), and $Y_{it'}$ measures the electoral performance of candidate i in the subsequent election. The coefficient of interest β measures the electoral advantage that winners of the election conducted at time t enjoy in the election conducted at time t'.

In our meta-analysis, we focus on the effect of winning an election on the probability of winning the next one, instead of other secondary outcomes (such as the probability of running or the candidate's vote share conditional on running) since these other outcomes are not consistently reported across studies. Appendix A describes the methodology we followed to comprehensively survey the literature. In total, we recovered 94 estimates from 58 studies, covering a total of 29 countries. Most of these estimates (58) measure the incumbency advantage for some subnational office (e.g., in mayoral, gubernatorial, regional, or state legislature elections). The remaining estimates (36) measure the incumbency advantage in constituencies for the national parliament (e.g., congressional districts for the U.S. House of Representatives or parliamentary constituencies in the United Kingdom). Studies of the incumbency advantage also differ in whether they measure effects of incumbency on individual candidates or political parties. We recover 46 estimates of party-level effects, and 48 estimates of candidate-level effects.

2.2 Findings

Many studies of the incumbency advantage focus on congressional or state elections in the U.S., where there is evidence of a strong incumbency advantage. Lee (2008), for instance, shows that when the Democratic Party marginally wins a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, its probability of winning the same seat again in the subsequent election is 36 p.p. higher than if it had marginally lost. However, this large incumbency advantage constitutes an outlier when considering estimates of the incumbency advantage across all countries studied in the literature. Estimates of the incumbency advantage outside the U.S. are typically much lower, and many countries feature an incumbency disadvantage. Figure 1 illustrates the vast heterogeneity in available estimates of the incumbency advantage across countries.

(a) Party-level estimates

-40 -30 -20 -10 0 10 20 30 40

Incumbency advantage estimate

(b) Candidate-level estimates

(b) Candidate-level estimates

Figure 1: Distribution of incumbency advantage estimates across countries

Notes: This figure illustrates the distribution of local estimates of the incumbency advantage across countries. Panel (a) (resp., b) shows party-level (resp., candidate-level) measures of the incumbency advantage. When several studies measure the incumbency advantage in a country, we report the average of available estimates.

The largest incumbency advantages are typically measured in high-income countries. In Appendix Figure A.1, we show the average incumbency advantage by region, electoral system, and election level. Panel (a) reports estimates at the party level, and shows a sharp contrast between OECD countries, in which there is a large positive average incumbency advantage (14 p.p.), and the rest of the world, where the average incumbency advantage estimate is negative (-5 p.p.). Accordingly, the incumbency advantage is very large on average in Western Europe and North America (26 p.p.), and low in developing regions, such as Africa

(-6 p.p.) and Latin America (-6 p.p.). Panel (b) of Appendix Figure A.1 shows that these results hold at the candidate level as well.

Potential determinants of the incumbency advantage. The fact that OECD countries display large incumbency advantages while countries outside the OECD are often associated with an incumbency disadvantage suggests that economic development and institutional quality may be important determinants of the incumbency advantage. Indeed, previous work has identified several channels through which development might shape incumbency effects. From the literature, we identified seven key plausible determinants of the incumbency advantage.

First, there are three potential economic determinants: GDP per capita, as measured in the Penn World Tables (Feenstra et al., 2015), unemployment, from the International Labour Organization, and income inequality, as measured by the Gini index, from the World Inequality Database. Across many studies, satisfactory economic performance has been linked to support for incumbent governments (see, e.g., Pacek, 1994; Duch, 1995, 2001; Anderson et al., 2003). Uppal (2009) shows that, in India, the incumbency disadvantage is higher in states with lower incomes, higher unemployment, and worse public goods quality. Bernhard and Karakoç (2011) similarly find a positive relationship between redistribution and the incumbency advantage in post-communist states. Higher inequality is positively correlated with greater party extinction rates, thereby lowering the likelihood of incumbents winning reelection in these countries. Finally, Roberts (2008) shows that unemployment shapes voters' decision to sanction outgoing governments. This mechanism is particularly relevant in post-communist European countries, where all workers were previously guaranteed employment.

Corruption is also frequently cited as a source of incumbency disadvantage (Klašnja, 2015). One often proposed underlying mechanism is that when corruption is widespread, voters assume that most incumbents are corrupt, creating an anti-incumbent bias. Klašnja and Titiunik (2017) argue that this effect increases with the length of an incumbent's tenure. Since setting up effective rent-extraction networks takes time, voters can limit the total amount of corruption by limiting reelection probabilities (see Coviello and Gagliarducci, 2017, for empirical evidence consistent with this mechanism). Costas-Pérez et al. (2012) show that voters hold incumbents more accountable for corruption when they can more easily access information about politicians' behavior. To explore the role of these factors in shaping the incumbency advantage, we consider as potential predictors the measures of corruption and accountability from the Varieties of Democracy dataset, or V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2021).

Finally, Ariga (2015) interprets the absence of an incumbency advantage in Japan as the consequence of the strong intraparty competition in the country's multi-member parliamentary districts. When several candidates share similar ideologies, voters can easily

shift away from incumbents to ideologically close competitors, weakening any incumbency advantage. To account for the effects of ideological proximity between competitors, we consider political and societal polarization (both from V-Dem) as additional determinants of the incumbency advantage.

Findings. We perform a series of empirical exercises to explore how the incumbency advantage correlates with the covariates described above. In Appendix Figure A.2, we regress party-level estimates of the incumbency advantage on its potential determinants using three different estimation techniques.

First, we perform bivariate OLS regressions in which we successively regress the incumbency advantage on each of the aforementioned covariates. In these regressions and the ones described below, we control for the electoral system (majoritarian or proportional representation) as well as the level of the election (local office or representation in the national parliament). Furthermore, to avoid giving excessive weight to countries covered by numerous studies (such as the U.S.), we weigh incumbency advantage estimates so as to give the same weight to each country. This exercise identifies four predictors that are statistically significant at the 95% level. The incumbency advantage is positively correlated with GDP per capita and accountability, and negatively with corruption and political polarization.

Second, we estimate a multivariate OLS regression of the incumbency advantage on the full set of explanatory variables. While no coefficient reaches statistical significance at the 95% level, the direction of the effects remains consistent with the bivariate regressions. The estimates are less precise, reflecting the substantial multicollinearity among the covariates. For instance, the correlation between a country's log GDP per capita and its corruption level is very large (0.69).

Third, we run a Lasso regression using all covariates of interest, choosing the penalty with a tenfold cross-validation to minimize the mean squared error. This analysis selects corruption and accountability as the most powerful correlates of the incumbency advantage. When running a multivariate OLS regression on these covariates, only corruption stands out as a statistically significant driver of the incumbency advantage (p-val.: 0.012).

In Appendix Figure A.3, we perform the same set of exercises using candidate-level estimates of the incumbency advantage. This analysis yields similar results, with GDP per capita, unemployment, accountability, and corruption being the only statistically significant determinants (at the 90% level) in the bivariate analysis. In the Lasso estimation, (log) GDP per capita is selected as the strongest correlate of the incumbency advantage (p-val.: <0.001).

Overall, from the analysis of party-level and candidate-level estimates, GDP per capita and the level of corruption stand out as the strongest determinants of the incumbency advantage. In Figure 2, we plot the average party-level incumbency advantage in each country against

these covariates. The incumbency advantage steadily increases with GDP per capita, while there is a strong negative link between the incumbency advantage and corruption. This result is in line with existing descriptive evidence from Golden and Nazrullaeva (2023), who find a strong positive correlation between legislators' reelection rates and GDP per capita.

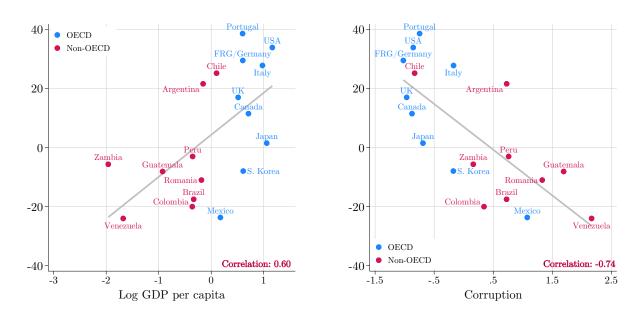


Figure 2: Correlates of the incumbency advantage

Notes: This figure compares party-level incumbency advantage to (log) GDP per capita (as measured by the Penn World Tables) and corruption (as measured by V-Dem). Both variables are standardized, and we report Pearson correlation coefficients along with the line of best fit. Each coefficient of our meta-analysis is associated with the average GDP per capita and corruption level in the country and time period of study. We then report the average estimate by country.

We plot the corresponding figures for the other potential determinants of the party-level incumbency advantage in Appendix Figure A.4. The corresponding candidate-level results are shown in Appendix Figures A.5 and A.6. The takeaways from these additional results are similar: for example, the incumbency advantage correlates positively with political accountability.

3 Data

We now turn to our estimation of the national-level incumbency advantage across countries. For this analysis, we leverage data on all presidential and parliamentary elections held worldwide since 1945, combined with data on national leaders, parties, and political regimes. This section describes our main data sources, and Appendix B provides additional information.

Elections and electoral results. We use the results of presidential and parliamentary elections held between 1945 and 2023 from the National Elections Database (Marx et al., 2025). Our data include 1,135 presidential elections and 3,051 parliamentary elections, for a total of 4,186 elections held in 213 countries.¹ In presidential elections, we have access to each candidate's party affiliation and vote share. In parliamentary elections, we observe the seat shares won by each competing party.

Leaders and Political Parties. We build a database of individual leaders of the executive branch for each country, with the dates at which they gained and lost executive power. We link these data to parties and candidates competing in elections (see Appendix B.1) to measure the extent to which election winners stay in power beyond their constitutionally planned term, relative to runner-ups. To track the performance of political parties over time, we build a database of parties using data from PartyFacts (Döring and Regel, 2019), V-Parties (Lührmann et al., 2020; Pemstein et al., 2018), and Wikidata. We track changes in party names to group successive instances of a party into a single entity.² The resulting database includes 8,040 parties. Appendix B.2 describes its construction.

Political regimes. Finally, we collect data on the institutional contexts in which national elections are held. In particular, we determine whether each election in our sample led to the designation of a member of the executive branch, and the type of regime in which it took place (see Appendix B.3 for details). We also identify the constitutionally defined term lengths of those appointed after each election, i.e., the length of a presidential term or the duration for which new MPs are elected. Our measurement of term lengths relies on V-Dem (Lührmann et al., 2020), the Comparative Constitutions Project (Elkins and Ginsburg, 2022), the vLex legal database, and Baturo and Elgie (2019). Appendix B.4 provides additional details.

4 Empirical Framework

4.1 Power trajectories

When elections are held at regular constitutionally mandated intervals, the incumbency advantage can be measured as the effect of marginally winning an election on the probability of victory in the next election. This is the object of interest in most studies surveyed in Section 2. However, this approach does not fully capture how winning a national election increases a winner's chances of remaining in office beyond their initial term, whether elections

¹The data also cover non-sovereign entities with significant autonomy such as Hong Kong, Niue, or Anguilla. ²For instance, in Kazakhstan, the "Otan" (Fatherland) party, founded in 1999, was relabeled "Nur Otan" in 2006, and then "Amanat" in 2022. In our analysis, we group these three entities as a single party.

take place or not. For instance, national leaders can postpone elections or cancel them outright. They may also call early elections when conditions are favorable to them. In our dataset, this is not a marginal phenomenon: we find that 38% of the elections in our sample were not held within six months of the incumbent's constitutionally planned term end.

To measure the incumbency advantage beyond electoral performance in the next election, we estimate the effect of marginally winning an election on two outcomes: the likelihood of being in power τ years after the election conducted at time t (we refer to this as the winner's *power trajectory*), and the likelihood of being in power $\tilde{\tau}$ years after the end of the constitutionally planned term—an effect we refer to as the *post-term incumbency advantage*.

Power trajectories: Presidential elections. We first estimate the effect of marginally winning an election on the probability of being in power across the ten years following a given election. For each year after the election, we record whether the leader or party in power aligns with the election winner, the runner-up, or neither. For presidential elections, we do this by comparing the sitting president in each relative year τ to the winner and the runner-up of the election conducted at time t. The president aligns with the election winner if they are the individual who won the election, if they belong to the party that won the election, or if they have been unambiguously designated as the representative or successor of the election winner. We proceed similarly for the runner-up.³ Since we consider not only individual leaders but also their successor candidates representing the same party, the estimates obtained using this outcome can be interpreted as party-level estimates of the incumbency advantage. To allow for a transition period after each election, outcomes for relative year τ are measured τ years and 180 days after the date of the election conducted at time t.⁴

To illustrate our definition of outcomes, consider the 2008 U.S. presidential election. This election took place on November 4th, 2008. The winner, Barack Obama from the Democratic Party, was inaugurated on January 20th, 2009, replacing George W. Bush from the Republican Party. Barack Obama remained in power until January 20th, 2017, when Donald Trump from the Republican Party took over the presidency. For this election, outcomes for relative year $\tau=0$ are measured on May 3rd, 2009; for relative year $\tau=-1$ on May 3rd, 2008; and for relative year $\tau=1$ on May 3rd, 2010. For all relative years in which Barack Obama was in office (namely for $\tau\in[0,7]$), the sitting president was the election winner so our main outcome $Y_{ic\tau}$ is equal to one for the winner and zero for the runner-up. In relative years $\tau\in[8,10]$, the president in power (Donald Trump) was not a candidate who competed in the 2008 election,

 $^{^3}$ In some cases, the sitting president is aligned with both the winner and the runner-up. For example, in the October 1981 Iranian presidential election, both candidates of interest were affiliated with the Islamic Republican Party (IRP). We therefore consider that the runner-up, Ali-Akbar Parvaresh, aligns with Ali Khamenei, the incumbent. In such cases, the outcome $Y_{ic\tau}$ is equal to one for both the winner and the runner-up.

⁴We motivate this decision in Appendix C.2. We measured the duration of transition periods for 33% of our sample of presidential elections. 99.7% of transitions had taken place within 180 days of the election.

but he was a member of the Republican Party—the same party as John McCain, the 2008 election runner-up. The leader in power for relative years $\tau \in [8, 10]$ therefore aligned with the runner-up. Moreover, Barack Obama's predecessor also belonged to the Republican Party: we accordingly code relative years $\tau = -1$ and $\tau = -2$ as periods when the leader in power was aligned with the runner-up. Table 1, panel (a) reports the power trajectories for both candidates in this election.

Table 1: Power trajectories for the 2008 elections in the United States

Relative year	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
(a) Presidential elections													
$Y_{ic\tau}(c = B. Obama)$	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
$Y_{ic\tau}(c = J. McCain)$	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
(b) House of Representatives elections													
$Y_{ic\tau}(c = Democratic Party)$	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
$Y_{ic\tau}(c = \text{Republican Party})$	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0

Notes: This table reports the value of the outcome $Y_{ic\tau}$ in each relative year $\tau \in [-2, 10]$ for candidates of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party in (a) the 2008 U.S. presidential election; and (b) the 2008 U.S. House of Representatives elections.

Power trajectories: Parliamentary elections. We define the winner of a parliamentary election held at time t as the party or coalition that secured a plurality of seats in that election.⁵ This definition allows us to identify an election winner in systems where parliamentary elections do not lead to the designation of a member of the executive branch, such as the United States.⁶

For each relative year, we consider that the party in power in parliament is the party that controlled a plurality of seats. Lacking data on changes in the composition of parliament between elections, we assume that the composition of parliament is always determined by the most recent parliamentary election.⁷ To define the outcome variable in equation (2), we then determine whether that party is the election winner (or its clearly defined successor), the runner-up (or successor), or neither. For instance, the Democratic Party won the 2008 elections to the U.S. House of Representatives, retaining a majority won in 2006. They were

⁵In the rare case of a tie, we rank parties by vote shares. Furthermore, we group together the results of parties that were part of coalitions formed before the election, as if they corresponded to a single party. Appendix B.5 describes how we distinguish ex ante coalitions from ex post coalitions.

⁶We do not include data on candidates in parliamentary elections that lead to the designation of a member of the executive. No academic source provided this information. The data that we extracted from Wikipedia were lackluster and seemed unreliable as such. Placebo tests such as the one described in Section 5.1 failed when implementing this specification.

⁷When a country witnesses a successful coup, we consider no party to be in power in parliament until new parliamentary elections are held.

then defeated by the Republican Party, which won successive elections in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016. Democrats won again a majority of seats in 2018. Table 1, panel (b) illustrates the values of the outcome variable in the case of the 2008 elections to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Post-term incumbency advantage. Identifying the power trajectories of election winners and runner-ups also allows us to estimate the effect of an electoral victory on the probability of being in power after the winner's constitutionally planned term has elapsed. We measure this post-term incumbency advantage by focusing on the number of years relative to the end of the constitutionally planned term, rather than years relative to the election date, for years $\tilde{\tau} \in [-3,3]$. As before, we allow for power transitions by measuring outcomes with a lag of 180 days. For instance, the U.S. Constitution mandates four-year presidential terms. To assess whether the winner of the 2008 U.S. presidential election was still in power at the end of the constitutionally planned term (at $\tilde{\tau} = 0$), we measure outcomes on May 3rd, 2013, four years plus 180 days after the 2008 election took place. Outcomes for $\tilde{\tau} = -1$ and $\tilde{\tau} = 1$ are measured on May 3rd, 2012 and May 3rd, 2014, respectively.

Estimation. Having defined our main outcomes of interest, we proceed to the estimation of the incumbency advantage in our global sample of national elections. For each election conducted in country i at time t, our regression includes two observations: one for the winning party or candidate and one for the runner-up party or candidate. Parties and candidates are indexed by $c \in \{\text{winner}, \text{runner-up}\}$. For each year $\tau \in [-2, 10]$ relative to the election conducted at time t, we estimate the following equation:

$$Y_{ic\tau} = \alpha + \beta_{\tau} T_{ict} + \gamma_{\tau} X_{ict} + \delta_{\tau} T_{ict} X_{ict} + \varepsilon_{ic\tau}. \tag{2}$$

In this equation, $Y_{ic\tau}$ is a dummy variable equal to one if party or candidate c is in power in country i in relative year τ , and zero otherwise. The running variable X_{ict} is c's margin of victory in the election conducted in country i at time t. It is measured in terms of vote shares for presidential elections and seat shares for parliamentary elections. This running variable is symmetric around the threshold; it always takes positive values for the winner and negative values for the runner-up. The coefficient β_{τ} captures the causal effect of marginally winning an election on the likelihood of being in power τ years after the election (or $\tilde{\tau}$ years after the end of the term for which election winners were elected). For estimation, we use the nonparametric method of Calonico et al. (2020) and cluster standard errors at the election

⁸We provide additional information on the construction of our outcome variables in Appendix B.6. The accuracy of our coding of outcome variables was verified through several validity checks described in Appendix B.7.

⁹When elections have several rounds, the margin of victory is measured using the results of the last round.

level.

To check that there is no imbalance in incumbency status at the RD threshold, we also measure these outcomes one and two years prior to the election held at time t. In the absence of electoral manipulation around the threshold, marginal winners and marginal runner-ups should have equal probabilities of being in power before the election. If marginal election winners are more likely to be in power immediately before the election, this would suggest that some incumbents manipulate elections to remain in power. Thus, the coefficients associated with outcomes measured one and two years before the election ($\tau = -1$ or $\tau = -2$) can be interpreted as placebo tests.

Our sample for estimating equation (2) comprises 2,710 elections, including 753 presidential elections and 1,957 parliamentary elections. Among these elections, 26% were held in OECD countries, 51% in a democracy, and 65% were free and fair (according to V-Dem). In our heterogeneity analysis, we split the world into five regions: Africa (21% of the elections in the sample), Asia and Oceania (22%), Eastern Europe (11%), Latin America (27%), and Western Europe and North America (20%).

4.2 Next-election incumbency advantage

A key reason why a marginal election winner may remain in power beyond their constitutionally planned term is that winning one election can increase the likelihood of winning the next. To explore this, we implement the same empirical design of the studies surveyed in Section 2. Using a close-elections RDD, we estimate the impact of marginally winning an election on the probability of winning the subsequent one, conditional on that election taking place. This effect combines the impact of winning an election on the probability of competing in the next election and the probability of winning the next election conditional on running. We evaluate the effect of incumbency on the probability of winning the next election using the following equation:

$$Y_{ict'} = \alpha + \beta T_{ict} + \gamma X_{ict} + \delta T_{ict} X_{ict} + \varepsilon_{ict}, \tag{3}$$

where $Y_{ict'}$ is a dummy equal to one if party or candidate c who competed in the election at time t won the next election at time t', and zero otherwise. β measures the *next-election incumbency advantage*. We estimate equation (3) using a sample of 2,689 national elections for which we can define the outcome, the treatment, and the running variable—in particular, we impose the restriction that the election at time t' took place no more than ten years after the election at time t. This includes 714 presidential elections and 1,975 parliamentary elections. To illustrate how we define the outcome variable, consider the following examples:

 $^{^{10}}$ Rules for the inclusion of elections are detailed in Appendix C.1

- 1997 South Korean presidential election. This election was won by Kim Dae-jung from the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP). During his term, the NCNP merged with the New People Party to form the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP). Kim Dae-jung retired at the end of his term, and the MDP was represented in the 2002 presidential election by Roh Moo-hyun. Moo-hyun won this election, defeating the candidate of the Grand National Party (GNP), Lee Hoi-chang. Thus, we consider that the winner of the 1997 election won the subsequent election. 11
- 2017 German federal election. The coalition between the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and the Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU) won this election. However, having failed to secure an outright majority, the CDU/CSU engaged in a government coalition with the runner-up party, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Following the rules defined in Appendix B.5, we consider the CDU/CSU as a single entity because the CDU and CSU pledged to join forces before the election. By contrast, the SPD is considered as a distinct party because their union with the CDU/CSU was negotiated after the results. As the SPD won the next election in 2021, we consider that the runner-up of the 2017 election won the subsequent election.

To understand whether our estimates of β are driven by the effect of victory on the probability of running in the next election or by an effect on the probability of winning the next election conditional on running, we also estimate equation (3) using a dummy indicating whether party/candidate c runs in the next election as the dependent variable. As a complementary measure of the incumbency advantage, we also estimate the effect of marginally winning an election on vote shares (in presidential elections) or seat shares (in parliamentary elections) in the following race.

5 Results

5.1 Testing the identification assumption

Our empirical strategy relies on the assumption that the only discrete change occurring at the threshold is the incumbency treatment status. This identifying assumption would be violated, for instance, if incumbents can precisely manipulate election results near the threshold to stay in power. A common method to test for manipulation of the running variable is the

¹¹In rare cases, a candidate may leave the party with which they ran and run with another side in the next election. If the candidate's former party fields a new contender, we treat that new candidate as not aligned with the previous frontrunner. As an example, Lee Hoi-chang left the GNP after losing the 2002 South Korean election and ran as an independent in 2007 against the GNP candidate. Though the latter won the election, we consider that the runner-up of the 2002 election failed to win the subsequent election because Lee Hoi-chang lost the 2007 election.

density test designed by McCrary (2008), which measures discontinuities in the distribution of the running variable at the cutoff. This test is not informative in our setting, because each election is associated with exactly two observations—one for the winner, on the right of the threshold, and one for the runner-up, on the left—with running variables equally distant from the threshold. The distribution of the running variable is therefore symmetric, with, by construction, no discontinuous jump in density at the threshold (see Appendix Figure D.1).

Previous studies of the incumbency advantage leveraging a close-elections RDD were conducted in the context of local elections held in democratic countries. These studies have justified the identification assumption by underlining the unpredictability of election results at the RD threshold, which are influenced by random factors such as weather conditions (Eggers et al., 2015). The same idea applies for national elections, although the threat of manipulation looms larger in this context. Indeed, leaders may strategically influence the timing of elections, and in doing so affect the electoral outcome, and autocratic leaders may rig elections outright. To test whether incumbents systematically manipulate election results around the threshold in our setting, we implement the placebo analysis described in Section 4.1. Specifically, we examine whether marginally winning an election affects the probability of being in power six and eighteen months *before* the election. Positive and significant estimates would suggest that incumbents are able to manipulate election results to their benefit.

Panel (a) of Figure 3 presents placebo estimates for the full sample and various subsamples. We find no statistically significant effect in the full sample (p-val.: 0.180), in presidential elections (p-val.: 0.262), or in parliamentary elections (p-val.: 0.410). Reassuringly, there is no systematic evidence of electoral manipulation by incumbents across most subsamples. However, we find positive and significant effects for elections classified as not free and fair and for those held in autocratic regimes. In autocracies, marginal election winners are 24 p.p. more likely to be in power six months before the election, providing evidence of manipulation of election results in those settings.

In panel (b), we display placebo test results obtained when restricting the sample to elections classified as free and fair by V-Dem. We find no evidence of manipulation in the full sample (p-val.: 0.666) or in any of the subsamples. However, the classification of elections as free and fair may be endogenous to their results, with elections marginally lost by the incumbent being more likely to be considered free and fair. To avoid using a sample selection criterion that is endogenous to the electoral outcome, we therefore use the full sample of elections in our baseline estimation, and show in the Appendix that our results are robust to restricting the sample to free and fair elections. We also check that our results are robust to using the sample of elections *following* free and fair elections. This inclusion criterion is less sensitive to the issue of endogenous coding but mostly selects elections that are free and fair, given the strong autocorrelation in that variable.

(a) All elections **(b)** Free and fair elections Full sample Presidential elections Parliamentary elections Democracies Autocracies High GDP p.c. Low GDP p.c. High corruption Low corruption OECD Non-OECD West EU and North America Latin America Asia and Oceania Eastern Europe Free and Fair Elections Not Free and Fair Elections

Figure 3: Placebo tests: Effect of election victory on being in power before the election

Notes: This figure shows RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the effect of winning an election on the probability of being in power six months before the election date, in our global sample of elections and in various subgroups including different regions, levels of political and economic development, regimes, and election types. In panel (a), we include all elections, whereas panel (b) restricts the sample to elections coded as free and fair by V-Dem. Our empirical strategy is detailed in Section 4.1.

90

95

5.2 Estimates of the national incumbency advantage

Confidence bands:

We now study the existence of an incumbency advantage in national elections throughout the world. Our main outcome captures the effect of winning an election on the probability of being in power beyond the constitutionally mandated term. In our baseline specification, we jointly consider presidential and parliamentary elections and we estimate the incumbency advantage at the party level, using the outcomes defined in Section 4.1. For presidential elections, this involves considering individual candidates, candidates representing the same political party, and other successor candidates. We then provide estimates of the individual-level incumbency advantage specifically for presidential elections. ¹²

Figure 4(a) plots estimates of the national party-level incumbency advantage for years $\tau \in [-2, 10]$ relative to the election conducted at time t, based on equation (2). On average, winning

 $^{^{12}}$ Data limitations prevent us from estimating the individual-level incumbency advantage in parliamentary elections. The main challenge is that individual candidates for the executive leadership position cannot clearly and systematically be identified before the election at time t' in these settings. This issue regularly arises in the numerous contexts where no political party has won an outright majority of seats in parliament, and bargaining between parties takes place after the election to form a government coalition.

an election increases a party's chances of being in power until approximately six years after the election, with the magnitude of the RD estimate dropping substantially between $\tau=3$ and $\tau=5$ years after the election. Naturally, part of this advantage is shaped by term lengths. The average term length in our sample is 4.5 years, with the majority of elections granting four-year (41%) or five-year (42%) terms.

(a) Power trajectories **(b)** Post-term incumbency advantage .9 .9 .8 .8 .7 .6 .5 .5 .4 .3 .3 .2 .2 .1 0 -.1 Year relative to the election Year relative to the end of the term 90 95 -Confidence bands:

Figure 4: Party-level incumbency advantage, full sample

Notes: This figure reports RD point estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals for β_{τ} as defined in equation (2). In panel (a), $\tau \in [-2, 10]$ represents years relative to the election, with a lag of 180 days. In panel (b), $\tilde{\tau} \in [-3, 3]$ is relative to the constitutionally planned end of term.

In Figure 4(b), we report estimates of the effect of a party's victory on the likelihood of being in power for each year $\tilde{\tau} \in [-3,3]$ relative to the scheduled end of term. The coefficient for year $\tilde{\tau} = 0$ reflects the effect of marginally winning an election on the probability of being in power six months after the theoretical end of the term. Based on this approach, we find evidence of a global incumbency advantage at the party level: winning an election increases the likelihood of being in power six months after the end of the term by 10 p.p., corresponding to a 27% increase relative to the average probability for close runner-up parties. This effect is statistically significant at the 10% level (p-val.: 0.065). We also observe an advantage in the likelihood of being in power 18 months after the end of term, though this estimate is not statistically significant. Coefficients for estimates corresponding to subsequent years are small and non-significant, implying that the incumbency advantage we estimate in the full sample of national elections is short-lived.

In Figure 5, we report individual-level estimates of the post-term incumbency advantage in presidential elections. The estimate for $\tilde{\tau}=0$ for the global sample is positive and significant at the 10% level (+11 p.p., p-val.: 0.064). The corresponding estimates for $\tilde{\tau}=1$ and $\tilde{\tau}=2$ are

also positive but fall short of statistical significance.

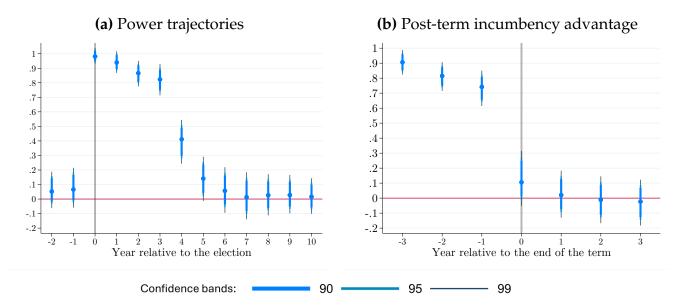


Figure 5: Individual-level incumbency advantage, presidential elections

Notes: This figure reports RD point estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals for β_{τ} as defined in equation (2). In panel (a), $\tau \in [-2, 10]$ represents years relative to the election, with a lag of 180 days. In panel (b), $\tilde{\tau} \in [-3, 3]$ is relative to the constitutionally planned end of term.

5.3 Heterogeneity

Our meta-analysis in Section 2 highlighted the wide variation in local estimates of the incumbency advantage across regions and levels of economic development. We now explore heterogeneity in the national incumbency advantage across these different settings.

Figure 6(a) presents the results from this heterogeneity analysis. In this figure, each dot represents a separate regression discontinuity estimate of the effect of narrowly winning an election on a party's probability of being in office six months beyond the expected end of term for a given subsample. The estimates in Figure 6(a) are those obtained for $\tilde{\tau}=0$, and Appendix Figure D.2 reports the corresponding estimates for $\tilde{\tau}=1$ and $\tilde{\tau}=2$. Mirroring our findings on the incumbency advantage in local elections, national elections in OECD countries are associated with a much larger incumbency advantage than those taking place in non-OECD countries. In OECD countries, we estimate a party-level incumbency advantage of 19 p.p. (p-val.: 0.009)—an effect corresponding to 55% of the marginal runner-ups' probability

¹³Appendix Figure D.3 shows effects when restricting the sample to elections that are free and fair (or that follow free and fair elections). We also show that our results are insensitive to more restrictive criteria for country selection, such as restricting the sample to UN member states or excluding countries with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants (see Appendix Figure D.4), and that our results are robust to the inclusion of year or election year fixed effects (see Appendix Figures D.5 and D.6).

of being in power six months after the end of the constitutionally mandated term. Appendix Figure D.7(c) shows that this effect is persistent: incumbent parties in OECD countries enjoy a higher probability of remaining in power up to three-and-a-half years after the end of their term. By contrast, we find much smaller and statistically insignificant effects outside OECD countries (+4 p.p., p-val.: 0.716).

In Figures 6(b) and 6(c), we report these effects separately for presidential and parliamentary elections. The large effects observed in OECD countries are primarily driven by presidential elections. Indeed, incumbents in OECD countries benefit from a 49 p.p. incumbency advantage (p-val.: <0.001). Outside of the OECD, there is no such advantage in the context of presidential elections (the estimated advantage is of only 4 p.p., p-val.: 0.545). For parliamentary elections, the differences between OECD and non-OECD countries are modest and the effect is not statistically significant in either group.

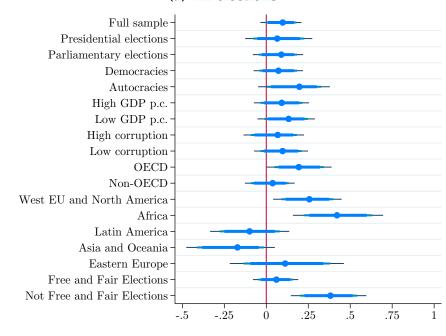
Estimates of the party-level incumbency advantage in different regions reveal even more striking differences, consistent with our meta-analysis results. Elections in North America and Western Europe are associated with a large positive incumbency advantage (+26 p.p.). We also find an incumbency advantage in Eastern European countries (+11 p.p.), though not statistically significant (p-val.: 0.354). In some regions, however, we estimate sizable incumbency disadvantages. In Asia and Oceania, winning an election reduces the likelihood of being in power by 17 p.p. on average, implying that close winners are 37% less likely to be in power after their term ends than marginal losers. These effects stem mainly from parliamentary elections, with an incumbency effect of -22 p.p. (compared to -3 p.p. for presidential elections). Latin America is also associated with an incumbency disadvantage (-10 p.p.), although this estimate is not statistically significant (p-val.: 0.280).

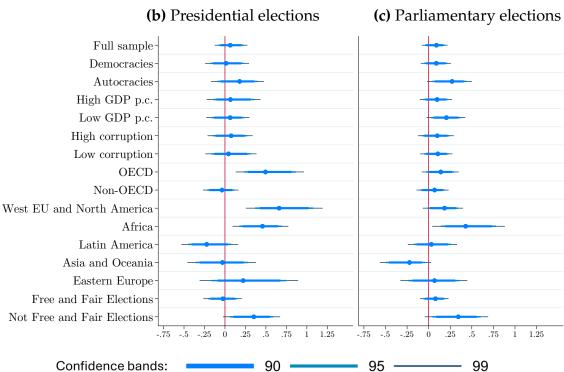
Figure 7 presents heterogeneity results for individual-level estimates of the incumbency advantage in presidential elections. Overall, incumbents enjoy a positive and statistically significant advantage in presidential elections held in OECD countries (+45 p.p.) and those held in Western Europe and North America (+57 p.p.). Estimates of the individual-level advantage are also large in Africa (+26 p.p.) and in elections considered not free and fair, but both of these estimates fall short of statistical significance.¹⁴

The results presented thus far broadly echo the insights from Section 2, especially for the subsamples of elections conducted in high-income and democratic countries. However, while we documented a monotonic relationship between economic development and the incumbency advantage in our meta-analysis, our estimates of the national incumbency advantage paint a more nuanced picture. The subsample for which we find the largest

 $^{^{14}}$ Appendix Figure D.8 reports the placebo checks corresponding to individual candidates in presidential elections, looking at a candidate's probability of being in power before the election conducted at time t. We fail to detect a significant effect of electoral victories on this outcome except for two subsamples: elections held in autocracies (p-val.: 0.003), and elections considered not free and fair (p-val.: 0.007).

Figure 6: Heterogeneity in the party-level incumbency advantage **(a)** All elections

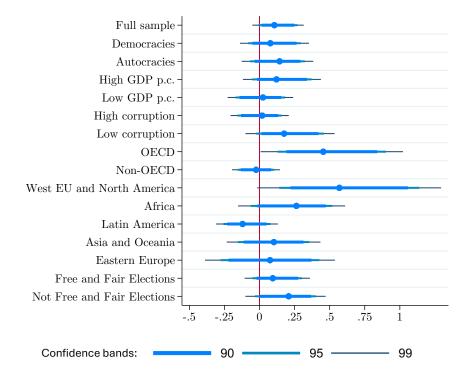




Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the incumbency advantage in our global sample of elections and in various subsamples. Panel (a) includes all elections, whereas panels (b) and (c) are restricted to presidential and parliamentary elections only, respectively. Our empirical strategy is defined in Section 4.1.

national-level incumbency advantage is Africa. There, marginally winning a national election increases the likelihood of staying in power by a staggering 42 p.p. (p-val.: <0.001), almost

Figure 7: Heterogeneity in the individual-level incumbency advantage in presidential elections



Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the incumbency advantage for leaders in presidential elections, in our global sample of elections and in various subsamples. Our empirical strategy is defined in Section 4.1.

tripling the probability of being in power relative to a close loser (+191%). This advantage holds across both presidential (p-val.: 0.001) and parliamentary elections (p-val.: 0.005). We also find positive, though sometimes non-significant effects in other subsamples associated with weak democratic institutions: autocracies (+20 p.p.; p-val.: 0.047), elections deemed not free and fair (+38 p.p.; p-val.: <0.001), and countries with low GDP per capita (+13 p.p.; p-val.: 0.075) or high corruption levels (+7 p.p.; p-val.: 0.522). 15

6 Mechanisms

Several channels may underlie the incumbency effects we observe. First, winning a national election might influence the probability of competing in the subsequent one. Second, incumbency may improve reelection prospects conditional on running. Third, power holders may manipulate the electoral cycle, by postponing or canceling elections, or by calling early elections when conditions are politically favorable to them. Fourth, incumbents might tilt

¹⁵Note that there is substantial overlap between these categories: for instance, African elections constitute 39% of those held in autocracies, 41% of those classified as not free and fair, 33% of elections in high-corruption countries, and 37% of those in low-income countries.

the electoral playing field in their favor, using the tools at their disposal that determine whether elections are actually free and fair. In this section, we build on our RD framework to disentangle these mechanisms.

6.1 Next-election incumbency advantage

To test for the first two channels, we estimate the effect of marginally winning an election on the probability of running in and winning the subsequent one.

Impact on performance in the next election. Leveraging the framework described in Section 4.2, we first estimate effects of winning a national election on parties' joint probability of running in and winning the next election. Our estimates are reported in Figure 8. Strikingly, the global incumbency advantage uncovered in Figure 4(b) does not stem from this channel. Indeed, we find that, on average, winning an election only increases by 1 p.p. parties' probability of victory in the subsequent election. This effect is not statistically significant (p-val.: 0.843), and we also detect no effect in the subsamples of presidential or parliamentary elections.

However, we find meaningful effects in several subsamples. In Western Europe and North America, close winners are 21 p.p. more likely to win the next election relative to marginal losers (p-val.: 0.011). This effect is substantial, corresponding to a 58% increase in the probability of winning. Similar electoral advantages are visible in other high-income settings, namely OECD countries (where we measure a +13 p.p. effect), countries with a high GDP per capita (+8 p.p.), and those with low corruption levels (+5 p.p.), although the last two estimates are not statistically significant. However, in Asia and Oceania as well as in Latin America, incumbents suffer from substantial electoral disadvantages (of -23 p.p. and -11 p.p., respectively). To

While the next-election incumbency effects of Figure 8 often mirror the post-term incumbency effects reported in Figure 6, some subsamples exhibit stark differences. In several subgroups, winning an election decreases the probability of winning the next election while still increasing the likelihood of being in power beyond the constitutionally planned term. This is particularly true in less democratic settings. For instance, autocracies exhibit a strong next-election incumbency disadvantage (-14 p.p.) but a large post-term incumbency

¹⁶These subgroups substantially overlap. As an example, Western European and North American elections represent 66% of those in the OECD, 36% of those in countries with high levels of GDP per capita, and 39% of the elections in low-corruption countries.

¹⁷Appendix Figure D.9 reports estimates of the next-election incumbency advantage for candidates in presidential elections. We find the strongest effects among OECD countries and in Western Europe and North America, where candidates who marginally win an election are much more likely to win the subsequent presidential election than marginal losers.

advantage (+20 p.p.).

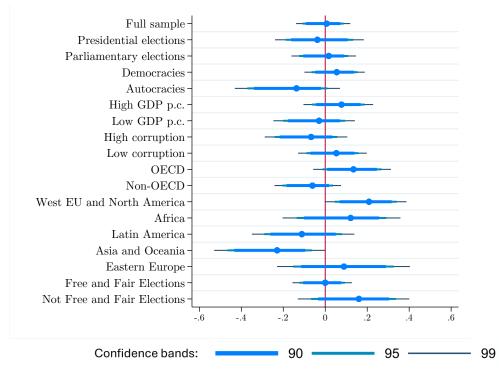


Figure 8: Heterogeneity in the next-election incumbency advantage

Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the effect of winning an election on the joint likelihood of running in and winning the next election in our global sample of elections and in various subsamples. Our empirical strategy is described in Section 4.2.

Impact on competing in the next election. The incumbency effects reported in Figure 8 compound two effects: an effect of incumbency on a party's likelihood of running in the next election, and an effect on electoral performance in the next election, conditional on running.

The former may be the result of a scare-off effect (as explored by, e.g., Cox and Katz, 1996; Levitt and Wolfram, 1997; Hall and Snyder, 2015; Ban et al., 2016) that deters potential challengers from running against strong incumbents. Furthermore, winning parties may have a higher probability of survival, further contributing to a discontinuous increase in the probability of running in the next election at the RD threshold (Dinas et al., 2015). Conversely, if incumbents expect to be defeated, this might create a discontinuous drop at the threshold in the probability of running again.¹⁸

Furthermore, officeholders can allocate public funds strategically to increase electoral support, direct funds to local political organizations and campaigns, and exert influence over media outlets—all of which can enhance their electoral prospects, conditional on running.

¹⁸Losing parties may also be more likely to change their names, which can make them harder to track and lead us to erroneously code them as not competing in the next election. To mitigate this risk, we carefully linked parties across elections and identified party name changes using Wikidata (see Appendix B.2 for details).

They also benefit from greater name recognition and accumulated political experience. Yet, holding office also subjects them to retrospective accountability: weak economic performance during their tenure can erode or even overturn these advantages.

To disentangle these forces, we estimate the effect of winning an election on the likelihood of competing in the next one. Estimates, reported in Appendix Figure D.10(a), tend to be small and not statistically significant. This is due to the fact that in national elections, almost all marginal winners (94%) and marginal runner-ups (95%) run in the next election. Among the subsamples we study, only elections in Latin America stand out: incumbency leads to a marginally significant (p-val.: 0.096) 7 p.p. drop in the likelihood of running in the next election. This effect contributes to the incumbency disadvantage observed in this region, suggesting that strategic withdrawals or institutional constraints may prevent incumbent parties from contesting future elections.¹⁹

6.2 Timing and Fairness of Elections

The differences between the post-term incumbency effects measured in Figure 6 and the next-election incumbency effects reported in Figure 8 suggest that, in less democratic contexts, the incumbency advantage enjoyed by election winners does not stem from improved performance in subsequent elections. To understand the sources of incumbency effects in these settings, we examine two alternative mechanisms: the ability of incumbents to manipulate the timing of elections to their benefit, and their capacity to alter the conditions under which elections are held, thereby increasing their likelihood of retaining power.

Manipulation of the electoral schedule. We first examine the extent to which manipulation of the electoral calendar can contribute to an incumbency advantage. In Appendix Figure D.11, we measure the extent to which elections take place earlier or later than their constitutionally planned date, in contexts of different democratic quality. This analysis shows that the electoral calendar is most often manipulated in less democratic countries. In the bottom tercile of democratic quality, only 57% of elections were followed by another election held on schedule (within six months of the constitutionally planned end of term), compared to 75% in the middle tercile and 71% in the top tercile. Manipulation involves both advancing and postponing elections: in low-democracy countries, for instance, 24% of elections were held early (within six months of the constitutionally planned end of term), and 19% were held late (more than six months after the end of the constitutionally planned term) or canceled. Such delays in the electoral calendar are concentrated in less-democratic contexts: only 6% of the elections in the second tercile of democratic quality and 3% in the top tercile were held late

¹⁹A negative effect is also observed in Africa (-5 p.p.), though it is not statistically significant (p-val.: 0.334).

or not at all. By postponing elections, incumbents artificially extend their tenure and thereby secure an advantage.

In democratic countries, elections are seldom postponed but snap elections are common: 26% of elections in the top tercile of democratic quality are held early. Countries with intermediate levels of democratic quality adhere most closely to the constitutionally planned electoral calendar. Indeed, incumbents in these countries face mostly null or negative electoral advantages, so early elections would typically harm incumbents. Furthermore, institutions in these countries are strong enough to prevent the postponement or cancellation of elections by incumbents.

Manipulation of the electoral playing field. Beyond the strategic manipulation of election dates, incumbents can tilt elections in their favor by changing the conditions in which electoral campaigns are fought or by directly manipulating electoral results. To explore this mechanism, we re-estimate equation (3) using as an outcome $Y_{ict'}$ the dummy variable equal to 1 if the winner of the election held at time t won the subsequent election (held at time t') and that subsequent election was not free and fair. Our estimates, displayed in Appendix Figure D.12, provide suggestive evidence that the manipulation of the electoral playing field contributes to the next-election incumbency advantage in less democratic contexts. Indeed, we find large positive effects of incumbency on the probability of winning a subsequent non-free and fair election in autocracies (8 p.p., p-val.: 0.183), in African countries (12 p.p., p-val.: 0.211), and for elections that were already non-free and fair at time t (19 p.p., p-val.: 0.050).

6.3 Decomposing the incumbency advantage

The evidence provided in this section thus far shows that the incumbency effects uncovered in Figure 6 stem from an effect of incumbency on the probability of winning the subsequent election, from the manipulation of the timing of election dates, and from incumbents' ability to tilt the playing field in their favor by organizing elections that are not free and fair. To quantify the relative importance of these mechanisms in explaining overall post-term incumbency effects, we conduct a simple decomposition exercise.

When estimating equation (2), we use as an outcome $Y_{ic\tilde{\tau}}$ a dummy variable equal to one if candidate or party c was in power in country i in year $\tilde{\tau}$, measured relative to the year of an election e. This outcome can be decomposed as the sum of three dummies, all measured in year $\tilde{\tau}$: (i) $Y_{ic\tilde{\tau}}^{\text{no election}}$, equal to one if c is in power and no election has been held since e; (ii) $Y_{ic\tilde{\tau}}^{\text{free and fair}}$, equal to one if c is in power and at least one election has been held since e, the last of which was free and fair; and (iii) $Y_{ic\tilde{\tau}}^{\text{not free and fair}}$, equal to one if c is in power and at least one election has been held since e, the last of which was not free and fair. We can estimate

equation (2) using $Y_{ic ilde{ ild$

We show the results of this decomposition procedure in Figure 9 (where outcomes are measured six months after the end of the constitutionally planned term).²⁰ There, we also report the share of elections in the RD bandwidth for which, six months after the end of the constitutionally planned term, (i) no subsequent election had been held; (ii) at least one subsequent election had been held, the last of which was free and fair; and (iii) at least one subsequent election had been held, the last of which was not free and fair.

In the most democratic contexts, free and fair elections are almost always held by the end of constitutionally planned terms (or shortly thereafter), and incumbency advantages in these contexts reflect the advantage that incumbents benefit from in free and fair elections. However, worldwide, it is common for close elections to be followed by non-free and fair elections or for subsequent elections to be postponed, especially in non-democratic contexts. These substantially inflate the incumbency advantage, as estimates of $\hat{\beta}_{\tilde{\tau}}^{\text{no election}}$ and $\hat{\beta}_{\tilde{\tau}}^{\text{not free and fair}}$ are almost always positive and of a similar order of magnitude to $\hat{\beta}_{\tilde{\tau}}^{\text{free and fair}}$.

This decomposition also helps reconcile our measures of the incumbency advantage in national elections with the results of our meta-analysis. In local elections, incumbents enjoy a much stronger advantage in contexts characterized by higher levels of economic and political development. By contrast, this pattern does not hold at the national level, where we find similar incumbency effects across contexts with different levels of GDP per capita and corruption. This reflects the ability of national leaders to postpone elections or to hold elections that are not free and fair. Indeed, the contribution of free and fair elections to the national incumbency advantage, $\beta_{\tilde{\tau}}^{\text{free and fair}}$, mirrors the pattern observed in the meta-analysis, with sizable advantages in contexts with high incomes and low corruption levels, and muted or negative effects in poorer and more corrupt environments. However, in less developed contexts, large advantages from non–free-and-fair elections and from postponing elections raise the overall incumbency advantage to levels comparable to those observed in developed settings.

The relationship between political development and the incumbency advantage is illustrated further in Figure 10. There, we show for different levels of democracy three

²⁰Appendix Figures D.13 and D.14 show corresponding results for outcomes measured 18 months and 30 months after the end of the constitutionally scheduled term, with similar patterns to those of Figure 9 across subsamples.

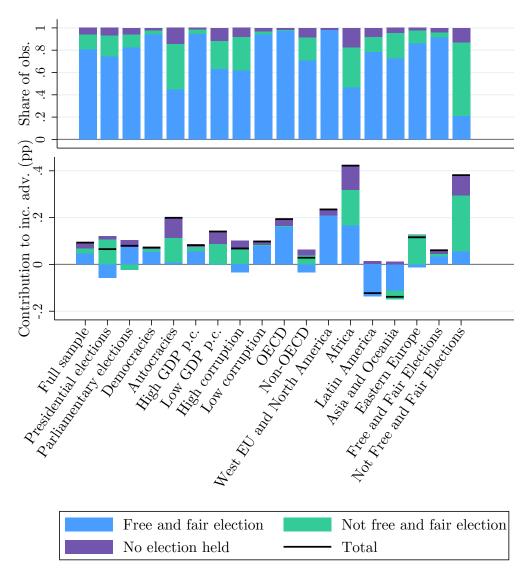


Figure 9: Decomposition of the incumbency advantage

Notes: In the top panel, we report, for different subsamples, the share of elections in the RD bandwidth for which, six months after the constitutionally planned end of the term, (i) no subsequent election had been held; (ii) at least one subsequent election had been held, the last of which was free and fair; and (iii) at least one subsequent election had been held, the last of which was not free and fair. In the bottom panel, we decompose post-term incumbency effects using the procedure described in Section 6.3. The overall post-term incumbency effects—measured six months after the constitutionally planned end of the term and represented with horizontal black lines—are expressed as the sum of three components: one reflecting the postponement or cancellation of elections ("No election held"), one capturing the incumbency advantage in free and fair elections ("Free and fair election"). To categorize elections as free and fair or not, we rely on V-Dem. We exclude from the sample observations for which we could not compute an outcome because an election was not categorized by V-Dem. In all regressions, we use the optimal bandwidth selected by the procedure of Calonico et al. (2020) for the computation of the overall incumbency effect.

measures of the incumbency advantage: (i) the post-term incumbency advantage, measured using equation (2); (ii) the post-term incumbency advantage when restricting the sample of elections to those deemed free and fair by V-Dem; and (iii) the next-election incumbency

advantage, measured using equation (3) and again restricting the sample to free and fair elections. In the most democratic contexts, the three measures almost coincide, reflecting an incumbency advantage arising from free and fair elections held on or ahead of schedule. As democratic quality deteriorates, the next-election incumbency advantage drops, reaching strong disadvantages in the least democratic contexts. However, in these contexts, the postponement of elections and their manipulation in favor of incumbents offset this effect. This reverses a strong next-free-and-fair-election incumbency disadvantage into a massive post-term incumbency advantage. Marginal election winners are least likely to stay in power beyond their term in countries with intermediate levels of democracy. In these contexts, voters regularly sanction incumbents in elections, and democratic institutions are strong enough that leaders cannot easily cling to power through undemocratic means. Overall, these forces yield a U-shaped relationship between democratic quality and the post-term incumbency advantage.

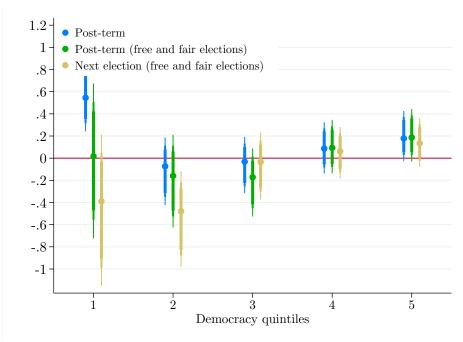


Figure 10: Incumbency advantage measures by level of democracy

Notes: This figure reports RD estimates as well as 90%, 95% and 99% robust confidence intervals of the incumbency advantage for different quintiles of a democracy index (extracted from V-Dem). For each quintile, we show (1) the post-term incumbency advantage for the full sample of elections; (2) the post-term incumbency advantage for the subset of elections deemed free and fair by V-Dem; and (3) the next-election incumbency advantage for the subset of elections deemed free and fair by V-Dem. Democracy levels are measured as an average of V-Dem's five corresponding variables: deliberative, egalitarian, liberal, participatory, and electoral democracy.

7 Conclusion

This paper provides the first causal estimates of the incumbency advantage at the country level across a global sample of national elections. We document a positive but short-lived incumbency effect at this level: election winners are more likely to remain in office beyond the scheduled end of their term, yet this advantage dissipates within a few years. Importantly, the magnitude and direction of incumbency effects vary substantially across contexts. OECD countries are characterized by large positive incumbency effects, while incumbency disadvantages emerge in regions such as Latin America, Asia and Oceania. These patterns are closely associated with varying levels of economic development, corruption, and institutional quality.

Our findings suggest that different factors may contribute to the electoral advantage enjoyed by incumbents across countries. In consolidated democracies, the incumbency advantage primarily operates through improved electoral performance in subsequent elections. In settings with lower democratic quality, however, it may reflect institutional manipulation of the timing and the competitiveness of elections. These heterogeneous patterns underscore the need to consider both electoral and institutional dynamics when evaluating how incumbency effects contribute to political competition worldwide.

By extending the analysis of incumbency effects to the national level and across countries, we offer novel evidence on the determinants of political turnover and bring new insights to ongoing debates about the resilience and the future of democracy globally. In contexts where the incumbency advantage is sustained by institutional manipulation, the prospects for genuine political competition remain fragile. Conversely, in established democracies, where the incumbency advantage stems primarily from improved electoral prospects, incumbency effects may contribute to strengthening political selection and accountability as political careers remain attractive to potential entrants, and incumbents are not deterred from seeking to remain in power through democratic means. Whether democracies can preserve these features will depend on their ability to safeguard electoral integrity and to ensure that institutional constraints against political entry and renewal do not develop over time, especially in settings with large incumbency advantages.

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Appendix

A Meta-analysis

A.1 Methodology

Search. To perform our meta-analysis, we searched for all studies relying on a close-elections RDD to estimate the impact of marginally winning an election on the probability of winning the next election. We performed this search in three steps.

First, we searched Google Scholar for articles that mentioned both "incumbency advantage" and "regression discontinuity". Second, we queried OpenAI's o3 and Google's Gemini Pro 2.5's Deep Research models, using the following prompt:

Please do a comprehensive search of all academic papers using a regression discontinuity design to estimate the incumbency advantage in national or local elections. Search exhaustively for all studies published in economics and political science journals as well as high-quality working papers (e.g., NBER or CEPR working papers). When both a working paper and a peer-reviewed version of a study exist, please only list the peer-reviewed publication. Narrow the search to studies from [region]. Only consider papers that provide quantitative estimates of the incumbency advantage. Exclude non-academic sources such as opinion pieces and blog posts. Provide complete citations for all papers found. Again, please include all articles that match the former criteria.

In this prompt, [region] was successively replaced by "Latin American countries", "the US and Canada", "European countries", "Asian countries", "Australia and other Oceanian countries", and "African countries". When the model asked follow-up questions to tailor the search, we responded by asking for the widest search possible, focusing on studies after 1990. Indeed, RDDs only started to be widely used in economics in the late 1990s, and the first use of an RDD to estimate the incumbency advantage we could identify is the working paper of Lee (2001), which would eventually be published as Lee (2008). Finally, we completed our search by identifying within the articles that we had already found references to other studies of the incumbency advantage.

Excluded studies. We excluded from our analysis sample the following studies:

• Studies that only measured the incumbency advantage in terms of vote shares in the next election, rather than in the probability of winning that election.

- Studies that pooled in the same regression elections using different electoral systems (e.g., proportional representation and plurality rule), such as Atsusaka et al. (2024) and Weiler (2021).
- Studies of elections in the judicial branch (e.g., Olson and Stone, 2023; Zoorob, 2022).
- Studies that do not explicitly mention whether they measure the incumbency advantage conditional on the incumbent candidate/party running again in the following election or unconditionally (e.g., Schiumerini and Page, 2012; Miguel and Zaidi, 2003).
- Studies of the Uruguayan *ley de lemas* system, in which voters cast the same ballot for regional and presidential elections (e.g., Aguirre and Brum, 2023).
- Estimates computed using the decomposition method proposed by Fowler (2014) and Erikson and Titiunik (2015), which are not directly comparable to our definition of incumbency advantage because they strip the candidate advantage from the party component (e.g., De Benedetto, 2014, 2019). However, we include the pre-decomposition RDD estimates reported in these studies, as they align with our definition of party-level advantage.

Information gathered. We gathered from each study its headline estimate of the incumbency advantage. In cases where an article studied several countries, we gathered one headline estimate by country. When both party-level and candidate-level measures of the incumbency advantage were reported, we also collected both estimates. When estimates were given for different types of elections (e.g., mayoral and gubernatorial elections), or different time spans, we reported them separately. For each estimate included in our meta-analysis, we gathered the following information:

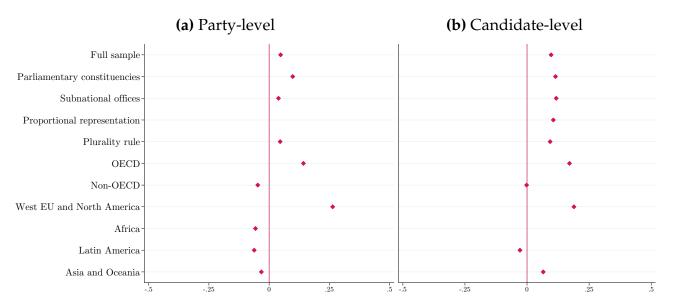
- Country and time period in which the study took place.
- Level of observation (party or candidate)
- Election level: either "Parliamentary constituencies" (e.g., district-level races in elections for the United States House of Representatives), or "Subnational elections", for executive positions at the state, region, province, county or municipal level (e.g., governor, state legislator, mayor, member of a city council).
- Whether the estimate is computed conditional on incumbents running again in the subsequent election or not.
- The measured incumbency advantage and associated standard error. 1

 $^{^{1}}$ When several RD estimates of the incumbency advantage were reported on equal footing, we kept the average

Analysis sample. Our analysis dataset includes 117 estimates of the incumbency advantage, extracted from 64 articles. Most estimates (94) provide unconditional measures of the incumbency advantage, while the remaining are conditional on the candidate or party running again. We choose to only include the former in our analysis as it is the broadest measure of the incumbency advantage.

A.2 Additional results

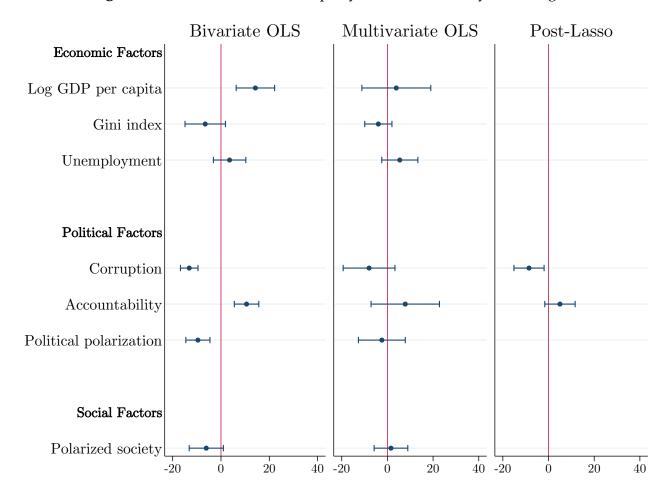
Figure A.1: Average incumbency advantage in the meta-analysis, by subsample



Notes: This figure reports the average incumbency advantage across studies of our meta-analysis, for various subsamples. To avoid over-weighing countries overrepresented in studies (the United States, in particular), we first average estimates within each country before taking averages within each subsample. We do not report estimates for subsamples with estimates from a single country.

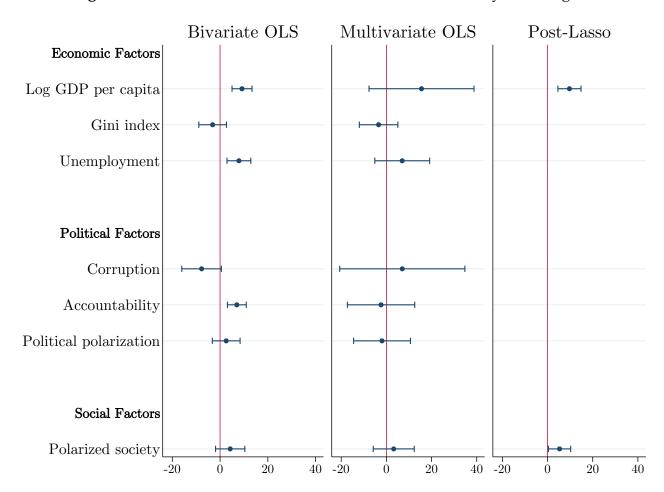
value of these coefficients as our main measure. The corresponding aggregate standard error was computed as $\sigma = \frac{1}{N} \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^{N} \sigma_i^2}$, where σ_i denotes the standard errors of individual estimates.

Figure A.2: Determinants of the party-level incumbency advantage

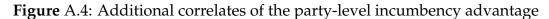


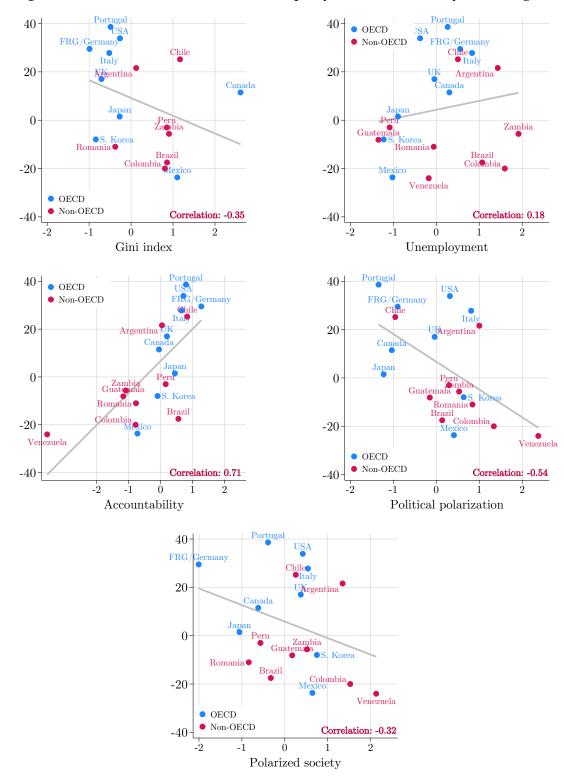
Notes: This figure reports estimates and robust 95% confidence intervals from regressions of party-level estimates of the incumbency advantage on seven covariates. The left panel reports results from bivariate OLS regressions (each estimate corresponds to a separate regression). The middle panel reports results from a multivariate regression on all covariates as well as two dummies identifying elections under proportional representation systems and elections for subnational offices (coefficients on these dummies are not reported). On the right panel, we display the results of a post-Lasso multivariate regression. To obtain these estimates, we first run a Lasso regression using all covariates, choosing the penalty with a tenfold cross-validation to minimize the mean squared error. We then run a single multivariate OLS regression on the covariates selected by the Lasso regression. In all regressions, observations are weighted by the inverse of the number of studies covering the same country, such that each country receives the same weight. All covariates are standardized to have mean zero and unitary standard deviation.

Figure A.3: Determinants of the candidate-level incumbency advantage



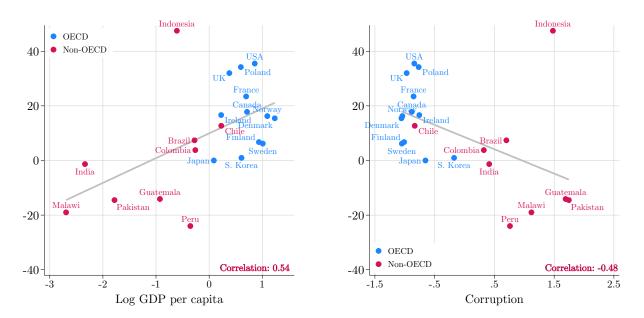
Notes: This figure reports results of the exercise performed in Appendix Figure A.2 for the candidate-level incumbency advantage instead of the party-level incumbency advantage.





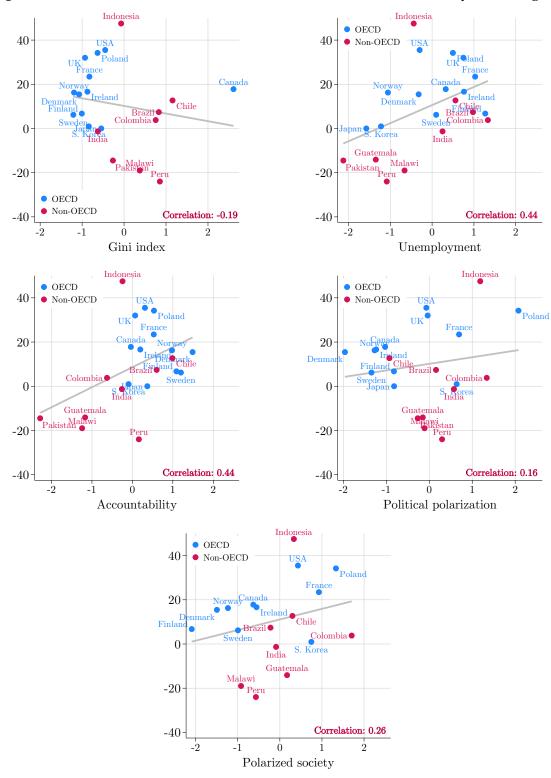
Notes: Each plot compares party-level incumbency advantage to a given covariate, expressed in standard deviation terms. We report Pearson correlation coefficients. Estimates are pooled by country.

Figure A.5: Correlates of the candidate-level incumbency advantage



Notes: This figure compares candidate-level measures of the incumbency advantage with GDP per capita (as measured by the Penn World Tables) and corruption (as measured by V-Dem), expressed in standard deviation terms. Each dot corresponds to the average estimate of the incumbency advantage reported for a country.





Notes: Each plot compares candidate-level incumbency advantage to a given covariate, expressed in standard deviation terms. We report Pearson correlation coefficients. Estimates are pooled by country.

Table A.1: Estimates included in the meta-analysis

Article	Country	Level	Electoral system	Outcome	Time span	Conditional	Effect
Núñez (2018)	Argentina	Subnational office	Plurality Parties		1985-2015	No	+
Battocchio (2018)	Argentina	Subnational office	Plurality Parties		1983-2015	No	+
Feierherd and Lucardi (2023)	Argentina	Subnational office	Plurality Parties		1983-2019	No	+
Avelino Filho et al. (2022)	Brazil	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Candidates	1998-2019	No	+
De Magalhaes et al. (2025)	Brazil	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Candidates	1998-2010	No	+
Bastos and Sanchez (2024)	Brazil	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	2000-2008	No	N
Novaes and Schiumerini (2022)	Brazil	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	2004-2016	No	-
De Magalhaes et al. (2025)	Brazil	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	2000-2008	No	N
Klašnja and Titiunik (2017)	Brazil	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1996-2012	No	-
Titiunik (2009)	Brazil	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	2000-2004	No	-
De Magalhaes et al. (2025)	Brazil	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	1994-2010	No	N
De Magalhães et al. (2025)	Brazil	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	2000-2008	No	-
De Magalhaes et al. (2025)	Brazil	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	2000-2008	No	-
De Magalhães et al. (2025)	Brazil	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	2000-2008	Yes	-
Sevi (2025)	Canada	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1867-1972	Yes	+
Sevi (2023)	Canada	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1990-2021	Yes	N
Sevi (2025)	Canada	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1972-2021	Yes	N
Archambault and Winer (2023)	Canada	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1867-2019	No	+
Kendall and Rekkas (2012)	Canada	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1867-2008	Yes	+
Lucas (2021)	Canada	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1904-2018	No	+
Nzabonimpa (2023)	Canada	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	1867-2021	No	+
Salas (2016)	Chile	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Parties	1989-2013	No	+
Munoz (2021)	Chile	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	2000-2016	No	+
Klašnja and Titiunik (2017)	Chile	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	2004-2012	No	+
Klašnja and Titiunik (2017)	Colombia	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	2003-2011	No	-
De Magalhães et al. (2025)	Colombia	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	2003-2015	Yes	-
De Magalhães et al. (2025)	Colombia	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	2003-2015	No	+
De Magalhães et al. (2025)	Denmark	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	2005-2014	No	+
Dahlgaard (2016)	Denmark	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	2005-2013	No	+
De Magalhães et al. (2025)	Denmark	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	2005-2014	Yes	+
Ade et al. (2014)	FRG/Germany	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1990-2005	No	+
Ade et al. (2014)	FRG/Germany	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1976-1990	No	+
Freier (2015)	FRG/Germany	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1945-2010	No	+
Kotakorpi et al. (2017)	Finland	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Candidates	1970-2007	No	+
Hyytinen et al. (2018)	Finland	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	1996-2012	No	+
De Magalhães et al. (2025)	Finland	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	1996-2012	No	N
De Magalhães et al. (2025)	Finland	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	1996-2012	Yes	+
Kotakorpi et al. (2017)	Finland	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	1996-2008	No	N
Dano et al. (2025)	France	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1958-2016	No	+

Dano et al. (2025)	France	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1979-2011	No	+
Morales Carrera (2014)	Guatemala	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1999-2011	No	-
Morales Carrera (2014)	Guatemala	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1999-2011	No	-
Linden (2004)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1951-1967	Yes	+
Lee (2020)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1977-2014	No	N
Linden (2004)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1980-1989	No	+
Linden (2004)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1991-1999	No	-
Linden (2004)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1980-1989	Yes	N
Linden (2004)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1951-1967	No	+
Linden (2004)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1991-1999	Yes	-
Lee (2020)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1977-2014	Yes	-
Karnik et al. (2023)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1980-2014	Yes	N
Lee (2020)	India	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1977-2014	Yes	+
Uppal (2009)	India	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1975-1991	No	N
Uppal (2009)	India	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1975-1991	Yes	-
Uppal (2009)	India	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1991-2003	Yes	-
Uppal (2009)	India	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1991-2003	No	-
Lewis et al. (2020)	Indonesia	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	2005-2017	No	+
Redmond and Regan (2015)	Ireland	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Candidates	1937-2011	No	+
Jankowski and Müller (2021)	Ireland	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Candidates	1937-2020	No	+
Jankowski and Müller (2021)	Ireland	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	1942-2019	No	+
Golden and Picci (2015)	Italy	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Candidates	1948-1992	Yes	N
Golden and Picci (2015)	Italy	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Candidates	1948-1992	Yes	+
De Benedetto (2019)	Italy	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1993-2011	No	+
De Benedetto (2014)	Italy	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1993-2011	No	+
Ariga (2015)	Japan	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1958-1993	No	N
Ariga et al. (2016)	Japan	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1994-2014	No	N
Ochieng'Opalo (2014)	Kenya	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1970-1992	Yes	N
Ochieng'Opalo (2014)	Kenya	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1992-2012	Yes	+
Kang et al. (2018)	Korea, Republic of	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1988-2014	No	N
Roh (2017)	Korea, Republic of	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1988-2012	No	-
Roh (2017)	Korea, Republic of	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1988-2012	No	-
Kang et al. (2018)	Korea, Republic of	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1988-2014	No	-
Kang et al. (2018)	Korea, Republic of	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1988-2014	No	+
Kang et al. (2018)	Korea, Republic of	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1988-2014	No	+
Kang et al. (2018)	Korea, Republic of	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1988-2014	No	+
Kang et al. (2018)	Korea, Republic of	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1988-2014	No	N
Magalhães and Spirgel-Sinclair (2021)	Malawi	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1994-2014	No	N
Lucardi and Rosas (2016)	Mexico	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	2000-2015	No	N
Klašnja and Titiunik (2017)	Mexico	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1997-2009	No	-
Lucardi and Rosas (2016)	Mexico	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	2000-2015	No	-

Fiva and Smith (2018)	Norway	Parl. constituency	Proportional	Candidates	1945-2014	No	+
Fiva and Røhr (2018)	Norway	Subnational office	Proportional Candidates		2003-2015	No	+
Afzal (2007)	Pakistan	Parl. constituency	Plurality Candidates		1988-1997	No	-
Weaver (2021)	Peru	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	2006-2014	Yes	-
Weaver (2021)	Peru	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	2006-2014	No	-
Klašnja and Titiunik (2017)	Peru	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	2006-2014	No	-
Bartnicki et al. (2022)	Poland	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	2006-2018	No	+
Lopes da Fonseca (2017)	Portugal	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1993-2013	No	+
Klašnja (2015)	Romania	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1996-2012	No	-
Lundqvist (2013)	Sweden	Subnational office	Proportional	Candidates	1991-2006	No	+
De Magalhães and Hirvonen (2023)	UK	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1966-1992	No	+
Eggers and Spirling (2017)	UK	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1955-2010	No	+
De Magalhães and Hirvonen (2023)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1976-2018	No	+
Guriev et al. (2025)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1976-2004	No	+
Broockman (2009)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1950-2006	No	+
Guriev et al. (2025)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	2006-2018	No	+
Lee (2008)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1946-1998	No	+
Warshaw (2019)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1988-2016	No	+
Warshaw (2019)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1988-2016	No	+
Hall and Snyder (2015)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1948-2010	No	+
Guriev et al. (2025)	USA	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	2020-2024	No	+
Uppal (2010)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1968-1989	No	+
De Benedictis-Kessner (2018)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1950-2014	No	+
Trounstine (2011)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Candidates	1915-1985	No	+
Hall and Snyder (2015)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1970-2010	No	+
Ferreira and Gyourko (2009)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1950-2005	No	+
Fowler (2014)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1996-2008	No	+
Hall and Snyder (2015)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1978-2010	No	+
Warshaw (2019)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1988-2016	No	+
Warshaw (2019)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1988-2016	No	+
Warshaw (2019)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1988-2016	No	+
Warshaw (2019)	USA	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	1988-2016	No	N
Di Bonifacio et al. (2025)	Venezuela	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	2008-2021	No	-
Ochieng'Opalo (2014)	Zambia	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1991-2013	Yes	+
Ochieng'Opalo (2014)	Zambia	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Candidates	1970-1991	Yes	N
Macdonald (2013)	Zambia	Parl. constituency	Plurality	Parties	1991-2011	No	N
Macdonald (2013)	Zambia	Subnational office	Plurality	Parties	2006-2011	No	-

Notes: This table lists all studies used in our meta-analysis. In the column "Effect", "-" indicates a statistically significant negative effect (at the 90% level), "+" indicates a significant positive one (at the 90% level), and "N" indicates an insignificant effect.

B Data Construction

In this appendix, we describe the data we collected to measure the national-level incumbency advantage. Our dataset includes 1,135 presidential elections and 3,051 parliamentary elections (4,186 elections in total), held between 1945 and 2023. We also describe the coding of key variables used in our analysis.

B.1 Leaders and Candidates

We collected data on national leaders following the procedure described in Marx et al. (2024). Using V-Dem (Lührmann et al., 2020), books by Dieter Nohlen and coauthors (Nohlen et al., 1999, 2001b,a; Nohlen, 2005; Nohlen et al., 2005; Nohlen and Stöver, 2010), and Wikipedia, we identify who was the head of state and the head of government of any country at any point in time.

We linked these leaders of the executive branch as well as the candidates competing in presidential elections with their personal characteristics, most importantly their partisan affiliations. To do so, we link them with their Wikipedia pages and Wikidata identifiers, and recover personal information from Wikidata. In cases where Wikidata was incomplete or inconsistent, we completed our dataset using Wikipedia entries and other online sources. Precisely, we searched for additional data in cases where:

- Wikidata provided no information on partisan affiliation;
- Wikidata indicated that a leader's party six months after their election to the presidency differs from the one with which they were elected;
- A leader was affiliated with a given party without dates of membership.

B.2 Political Parties

To build our database of political parties, we began by creating an entry for every party included in the V-Parties (Lührmann et al., 2020; Pemstein et al., 2018) and Party Facts (Döring and Regel, 2019) datasets. Some Party Facts entries included links to Wikipedia pages, which we connected to Wikidata. We reviewed all other entries to find whether we could link them to a Wikidata element. We also surveyed cases in which a single Wikidata identifier was associated to multiple Party Facts or V-Dem entries. Incorrect matches were separated, and correct ones were consolidated as a single entry.

We then identified a list of parties of interest. Each was linked to its Wikipedia page and Wikidata identifier using an automatic process followed by manual verification. Specifically, we included parties that meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Obtained at least 5% of the votes in a presidential election, or won at least 5% of the seats in a parliamentary election.
- Ranked third or higher in an election.
- An elected leader registered in the Leaders database (see Appendix B.1) was part of this party at some point in their life.

This list was then merged with the crosswalk described above. To further enrich the dataset and establish party linkages, we added all parties listed by Wikipedia as predecessors or successors of parties of interest (and recursively their own predecessors and successors). Our final dataset includes 8,040 parties.

Renamed parties. To assess the extent to which parties remained in power across election cycles, we were attentive to cases in which parties were renamed. Not accounting for party name changes may lead us to consider that a party lost power when it simply retained power under a different name.

To account for name changes, we built party lineages. We considered party A as the successor of another party B if Wikidata lists B as A's sole predecessor (using variables "follows" (P155) or "replaces" (P1365)) and reciprocally, B lists A as its only successor (using "followed by" (P156) or "replaced by" (P1366)). This conservative rule aims to minimize misclassifications by ensuring that succession links reflect continuity rather than factional splits. Following this procedure, we were able to identify 7,561 party lineages.¹

Below are examples to illustrate the rules we followed to group parties in party lineages:

- The French right-wing party Les Républicains (LR) is linked to its predecessor, the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP). Indeed, Wikidata lists LR as UMP's sole successor, and UMP as LR's sole predecessor.
- Agir, a splinter formed by former Les Républicains members in 2017, is treated as a separate entity. Though Agir's item points to LR as its predecessor, the link is not reciprocal (Wikidata doesn't list Agir as one of LR's successors).
- The Italian Communist Party, which was active between 1921 and 1991, has two successors: the Communist Refoundation Party, and the Democratic Party of the Left. It is therefore associated with neither and all three entities correspond to different party lineages.

¹Because we decided to rely on a conservative approach, and because Wikidata has imperfections, it is likely that some valid party lineages are considered as separate entities by our database. For our post-term parliamentary outcomes (as defined in Section 4.1), we manually verified all cases in which the party in power was affiliated to neither the winner, nor the runner-up, and manually affiliated parties when necessary. The full procedure is described in Appendix B.6.

B.3 Regimes

To characterize political institutions, we follow the methodology of Marx et al. (2024). We first extract from V-Dem a partition of countries' history in a succession of regimes. For countries not covered by V-Dem, we manually define regimes. For each regime, we then identify whether presidential and parliamentary elections were held and, if so, if they led to the designation of a head of state or a head of government. We extract this information using V-Dem variables, and complete the missing data manually.

B.4 Constitutionally planned length of terms

B.4.1 Presidential elections

To identify the constitutionally planned length of presidential terms, we first extracted data from V-Dem (where the v2exfxtmhs and v2exfxtmhg variables code the *de jure* term length of the HOS and HOG, respectively) and CCP (whose hosterm and hogterm variables indicate the maximum term length of the HOS and HOG, respectively).

When data was missing in both V-Dem and CCP for a given election, and in cases where V-Dem and CCP contradicted themselves, we searched for the constitutionally planned length of presidential terms through background research. Specifically, we searched for the last adopted constitution (including amendments) at the time of the election and looked for articles determining the length of presidential terms. In the cases where we could not find the text of the constitution in force at the time of the election, we turned to secondary sources such as the Baturo and Elgie (2019) textbook or Wikipedia.

B.4.2 Parliamentary elections

To define the constitutionally planned length of parliamentary terms, we relied on three sources: CCP (where the variable LHTERM gives the maximum term length for members of the first—or only—chamber of the Legislature), the PIPE dataset (Przeworski et al., 2013, whose LEGTERM variable codes the constitutionally prescribed duration of the legislative term in the lower house), and the textbook of Colomer (2016), which provides for a large number of elections the term length of the lower (or single) chamber of parliament.

Again, in cases where none of these sources allowed us to find the constitutionally planned length of parliamentary terms, and in cases where there was a contradiction between sources, we conducted background research to ensure a coverage as complete and accurate as possible. As for presidential term lengths, we searched for the constitution in force at the time of the election (including amendments) and located articles determining the planned length of legislatures. During this process, we relied on vLex, a legal database that encompasses materials from more than 100 jurisdictions. This database was especially useful to obtain

information on elections held in colonial territories. Indeed, vLex contained exclusive digitized versions of historical documents, such as orders in council emitted by British authorities to establish legislative councils. In cases where we could not find the text of the latest version of the constitution at the time of the election, we turned to secondary sources, such as Wikipedia.

B.5 Coalitions

Our parliamentary election results database distinguishes between two types of party coalitions:

- 1. **Ex-ante coalitions**, such as the CDU/CSU alliance in Germany, that are formed prior to the election with a formal commitment to act as a unified block.
- 2. **Ex-post coalitions**, such as the *Große Koalition* between the CDU/CSU and the SPD from 2013 to 2021 in Germany, that are formed after the election.

We treat ex-ante coalitions as if they were a single party. In contrast, ex-post coalitions, being endogenous to the election results, are treated as distinct entities in our analysis.

B.6 Building outcomes

This section describes how we tracked the political fate of election winners and runner-ups, in the years following the election (see Section 4.1), and in the next election granted that it was not canceled (see Section 4.2).

B.6.1 Post-term incumbency advantage

Defining the leader and party in power. To measure whether election winners and runner-ups were in power in the years following the election, we began detecting the party and leader (if relevant) in power in these years. For presidential elections, we relied on the leader data described in Appendix B.1. It allowed us to identify who was the officeholder at any point in time as well as their partisan affiliation.

In the context of parliamentary elections, we defined being "in power" as holding a plurality of seats in parliament (as described in Section 4.1). We assumed that the party with a plurality of seats at a given time was the party that won a plurality of seats in the last election.² To capture

²When identifying this party, we were attentive to take into account all elections—even those excluded from the regression sample following the rules defined in Appendix C.1. For instance, the 1992 Congolese parliamentary election was won by the pro-presidential Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (UPADS). It nevertheless fell short of securing an absolute majority. Opposition factions joined forces to build a coalition, thereby denying the UPADS the possibility of nominating a prime minister from his own ranks. In response, President Lissouba dissolved the National Assembly. Because this dissolution happened shortly after the election, we do not include this election in our regression sample. However, it would be wrong to act as if the composition of parliament was not changed by the 1992 election.

power disruptions, we supplemented our election data with information on coups from Powell and Thyne (2011). Since this dataset only covers 1950–2010, we used Wikipedia to extend the data's coverage over 1935–2023. Whenever a coup occurs, we leave the outcome missing until the next election.

Measuring outcomes. For each relative year $t \in [-2, 10]$ surrounding a presidential election, we compared the president in office to the winner and runner-up of the election. We performed this comparison using Wikidata identifiers (see Appendix B.1). We manually verified each case in which neither candidate is matched to the president in power.

To track the political outcomes of the winner and runner-up parties (in both presidential and parliamentary elections), we followed a very similar procedure, leveraging the party identifiers of our parties database (see Appendix B.2).

B.6.2 Next election incumbency advantage

To measure the effect of winning an election on success in ulterior elections, we linked the winner and runner-up candidates and parties of each election i to contestants in the following election i + 1.

We linked candidates (in presidential elections) and parties (in both presidential and parliamentary elections) to the list of competitors in the following election using Python's fuzzywuzzy library. We manually verified every imperfect match, and performed a manual match when none could be made automatically. We identified cases when the candidate or party did not run in the next election. When they (or a clearly designated successor) ran in the next election, we documented the rank they reached, as well as their vote/seat share. This allowed us to define the outcomes defined in Section 4.2.

B.7 Data quality checks

To assess the quality of the coding of our outcome variables, we performed the following checks:

- We extracted a random sample of 50 presidential and 50 parliamentary elections, with an oversampling near the regression discontinuity threshold. We manually coded nextelection outcomes and power trajectories for both the winner and runner-up of each of these elections. We then compared our results to our outcomes.
- In the year following an election, the election winner should be in power. We inspected all observations in which our outcome variables suggest otherwise.
- We verified that both of our empirical approaches (as detailed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2)
 never contradict each other. For each election, next-election outcomes indicate whether

the winner of the following election is the incumbent, the runner-up, both, or neither. Accordingly, post-term variables should indicate that the leader in power right after the next election is that same candidate/party.

- When coding the performance of election winners and runner-ups in the following election, we linked parties across elections by comparing their names. An alternative strategy would have been to exploit the unique party identifiers of our parties database. We checked all discrepancies between outcomes coded using the two methods.
- Marx et al. (2024) identifies electoral turnovers, defined as situations in which the incumbent candidate or party fails to win reelection. If a turnover occurs in election i, then the winner of election i-1 was not reelected. We ensured that the corresponding next-election outcomes are coded accordingly.

C Empirical Strategy

C.1 Elections included in the sample

Our analysis includes all presidential and parliamentary elections held between 1945 and 2023, excluding the following cases:

- Elections excluded from the election results database (Marx et al., 2025): by-elections held for a small number of seats, elections of constitutional assemblies whose sole purpose is to draft a new constitution, and elections for the upper chamber in multi-cameral parliaments.
- Elections with a single candidate or party (including plebiscites).¹
- Parliamentary elections without political parties (e.g., because they are banned), or such that the share of seats won by independent candidates is above 90% (e.g., Jordan 1997).
- Elections that are not the last of their type (i.e., presidential or parliamentary) during the calendar year.
- Presidential elections whose results were canceled (e.g., Bolivia 1978), where the president-elect died shortly after the election (e.g., Iran July 1981), or that were shortly followed by a coup (e.g., Panama 1968).
- Parliamentary elections whose results were annulled, that were shortly followed by a coup or by a congressional dissolution.

¹Following this criterion, we excluded elections held under the National Front agreement in Colombia (1956-1974), during which the two main parties agreed to alternate power every four years.

- Parliamentary elections in which members were appointed rather than elected. In such cases, the appointing authority can use nominations to marginally secure a plurality of seats, raising concerns of manipulation of the running variable. Furthermore, our electoral data does not systematically distinguish between elected seats and appointed seats. In such cases, we cannot compute seat shares focusing only on elected seats.
- Presidential elections in which more than one leader is elected (e.g., in Bosnia and Herzegovina).
- Indirect presidential elections, unless the following conditions hold: (1) the electoral college was elected solely to elect the president; (2) the election took place in one round; (3) electors are pledged (as in the United States Electoral College), or there are more than 1,000 electors in the electoral college. This inclusion rule is designed to exclude from the sample elections for which precise manipulation of the election results is possible.
- The presidential election held in Argentina in 2003, where Carlos Menem won the first round but withdrew before the runoff, resulting in Néstor Kirchner being elected with a negative margin of victory.

For our study of the next-election incumbency advantage, we further exclude from our sample elections that were not followed by another election within a 10-year period.

C.2 Transition period

When measuring the power trajectories of leaders and parties, we measure outcomes for each relative year with a 180-day lag to allow for a transition period (see Section 4.1).

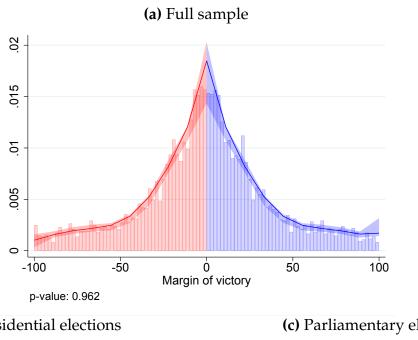
To measure the typical length of such transitions, we leveraged presidential elections won by a different individual than the outgoing official. Using our next-election outcomes, we detected all elections in which the winner hadn't won the previous election. Relying on our leader data (see Appendix B.1), we were able to determine inauguration date of each president-elect and computed the transition period accordingly. We paid careful attention to exclude all elections in which the president-elect was already in power before the election (e.g., because they seized power through a coup). We manually verified all elections followed by multiple power transitions within a year to detect exceptional situations.

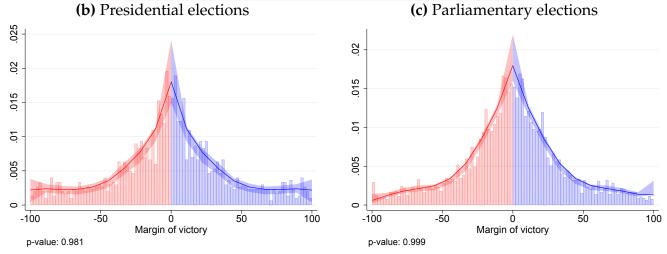
We extracted 390 elections, corresponding to 33% of the sample of presidential elections. Transition periods range from 1 to 194 days, with a mean of 56 days.² We choose a 180-day delay to cover the vast majority of transition periods: all but one election in the sample presented above are covered (99.7% coverage).

²The election with the longest transition period within this sample was held in El Salvador in 1956. Because a constitutional rule mandated that presidential inaugurations could only take place on the eve of the independence day, José María Lemus had to wait for more than six months between his election and his inauguration.

D Additional Results and Robustness Checks

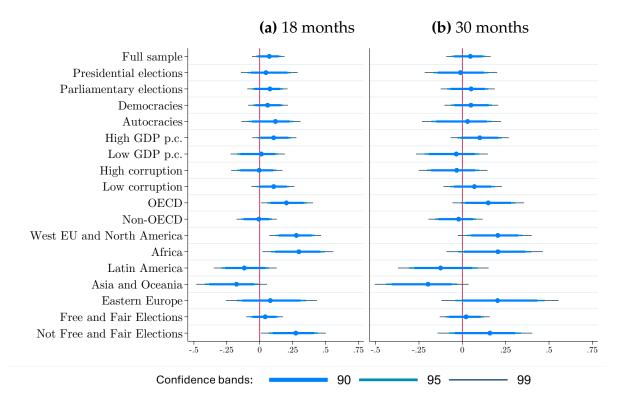
Figure D.1: Density tests: post-term specification





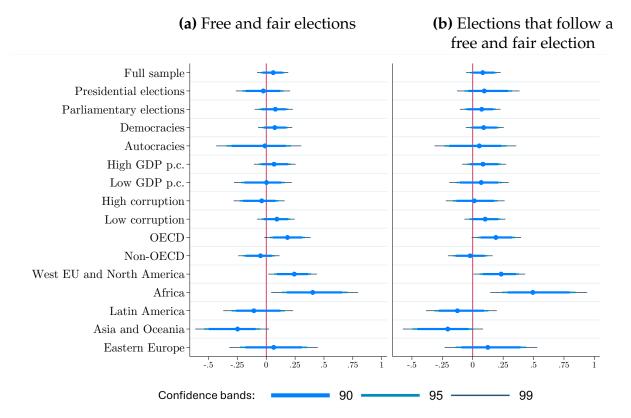
Notes: In this figure, we implement the density test of Cattaneo et al. (2018) on the sample of elections covered by our post-term specification. P-values for the imbalance test are reported below each graph, and we plot the density of the running variable at the cutoff.

Figure D.2: Post-term incumbency advantage on the likelihood of being in power 18 and 30 months after the end of the term



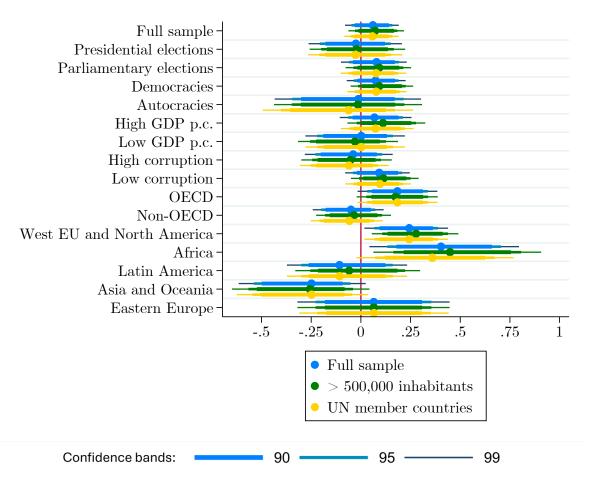
Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the post-term incumbency advantage on the likelihood of being in power 18 months (in panel (a)) or 30 months (in panel (b)) after the end of the term.

Figure D.3: Post-term incumbency advantage, with a sample restriction to free or likely free elections



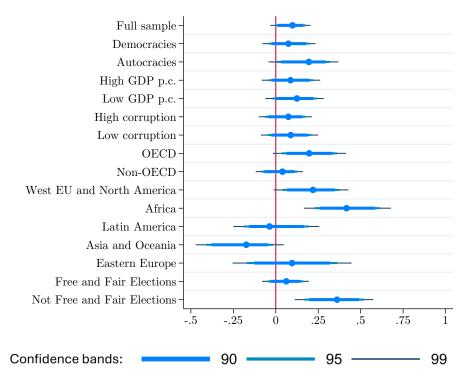
Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the post-term incumbency advantage when restricting the sample of elections to those deemed free and fair by V-Dem (in panel (a)), or to those that are likely free and fair as they follow an election that was deemed free and fair by V-Dem (in panel (b)). The appeal of focusing on elections that follow free and fair elections instead of using the sample of free and fair elections is that whether elections are coded as free and fair is likely endogenous to election results.

Figure D.4: Post-term incumbency advantage under various sample inclusion rules



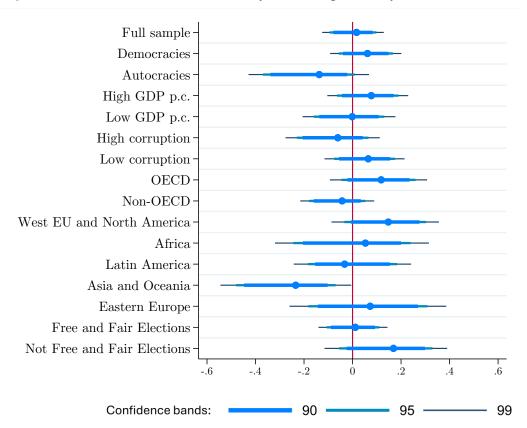
Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the incumbency advantage in various subgroups including different regions, politico-economic development levels, regimes, and elections. We successively report results for the full sample of countries, for countries that had more than 500,000 inhabitants in 2010 (according to World Bank), and current UN member countries. The latter includes former nations that were part of the UN before disappearing (e.g., Yugoslavia), but not countries that used to be part of the organization (e.g., Taiwan) or observer states (e.g., Palestine).

Figure D.5: Post-term incumbency advantage, with calendar year fixed effects



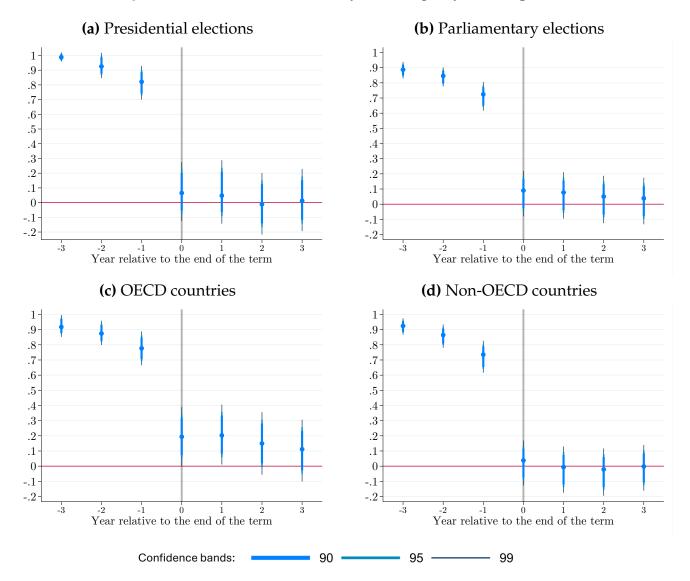
Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the incumbency advantage in various subgroups including different regions, politico-economic development levels, regimes, and elections. We include fixed effects for the year in which the election was held.

Figure D.6: Next-election incumbency advantage, with year fixed effects



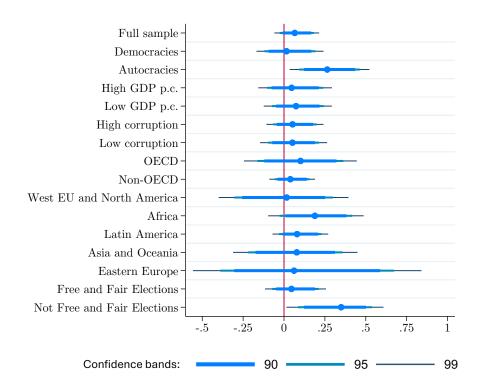
Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the effect of incumbency on the joint likelihood of running in and winning the next election for various subsamples including different regions, political and economic development levels, regimes, and elections types. We include fixed effects for the year in which the election was held.

Figure D.7: Post-term incumbency advantage, by subsample



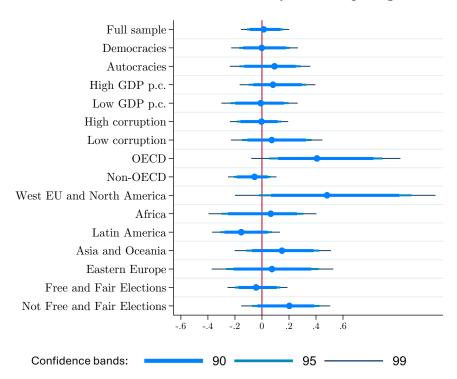
Notes: This figure shows RD point estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals of the effect of incumbency on the likelihood of being in power t years plus 180 days relative to the constitutionally-planned end of term. We measure these effects through equation (2).

Figure D.8: Placebo test: Effect of election victory on being in power before the election (presidential candidates)



Notes: This figure shows RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the effect of winning a presidential election on the likelihood on being in power six months before the election date. The sample is restricted to candidates in presidential elections. Our empirical strategy is detailed in Section 4.1.

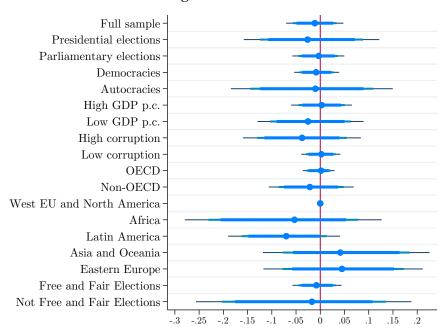
Figure D.9: Individual-level next-election incumbency advantage in presidential elections



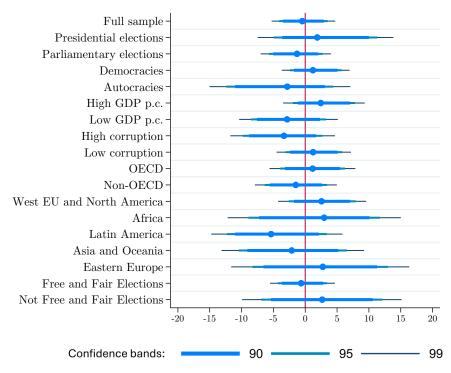
Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the next-election incumbency advantage for leaders in presidential elections. We report results for various subgroups including different regions, politico-economic development levels, regimes, and elections. Our empirical strategy is defined in Section 4.2.

Figure D.10: Complementary measures of the next-election incumbency advantage

(a) Running in the next election

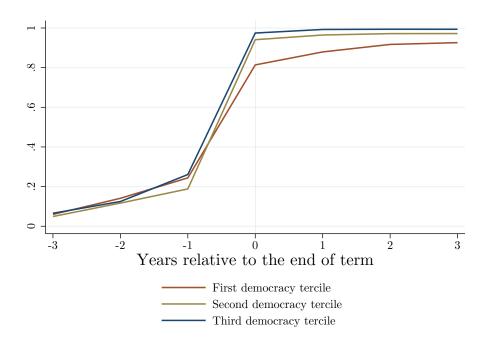


(b) Vote/seat share in the next election



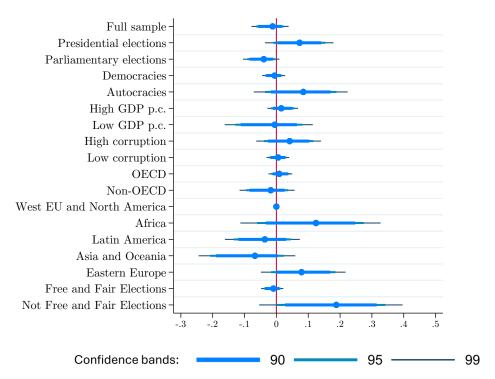
Notes: This figure plots, for various subsamples, RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the effects of winning and election on running again in the next election and on the score received in the next election, measured as the candidate/party's vote share in presidential elections, and as the party's seat share in parliamentary elections.

Figure D.11: Timing of subsequent elections by democratic level



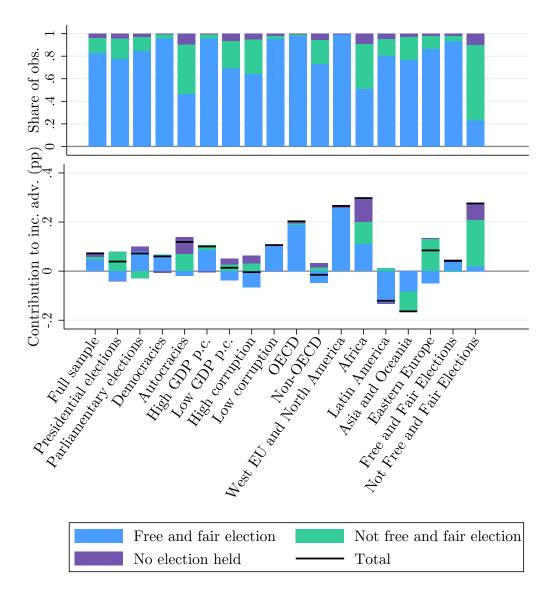
Notes: This graph reports the share of elections that were followed by another election τ years relative to the planned end of term, with $\tau \in [-3,3]$, split by tercile of democratic quality (our measure of the quality of democracy is described in Figure 10).

Figure D.12: Next-election incumbency advantage: Non-free and fair elections



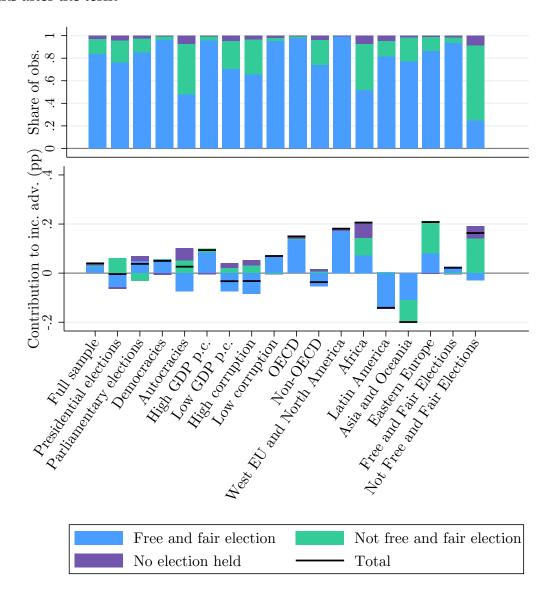
Notes: This figure plots RD estimates as well as 90%, 95%, and 99% robust confidence intervals of the effect of incumbency on the joint likelihood of winning the next election and the next election being considered not free and fair, in our global sample of elections and in various subsamples. Our empirical strategy is described in Section 4.2.

Figure D.13: Decomposition of the incumbency advantage on the likelihood of being in power 18 months after the term



Notes: This figure reports the same exercise as Figure 9, but on the effect of an electoral victory on the likelihood of being in power 18 months after the constitutionally planned end of term.

Figure D.14: Decomposition of the incumbency advantage on the likelihood of being in power 30 months after the term



Notes: This figure reports the same exercise as Figure 9, but on the effect of an electoral victory on the likelihood of being in power 30 months after the constitutionally planned end of term.