Turnout and Incumbency in Local Elections

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Abstract:

It is well established that incumbents win reelection at high rates. But we know less about the

ways in which institutional variation affects the incumbency advantage. Using data from more

than 4,000 cities evidence in this paper indicates that institutions which generate low-

participation environments increase the proportion of city council incumbents who run for

reelection and the proportion who win. These low-turnout environments are shown to have

spending patterns that benefit particular subgroups in the population who have good reason to

participate even when the costs are high.

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Current office holders at all levels of government seek and win reelection at high rates. City councilors, like their counterparts in state legislatures and in Congress, benefit from this incumbency advantage (Trounstine 2011). This may be a sign of a healthy democracy. Constituents, pleased with the experience and performance of their representatives, reward elected officials with additional terms of office. But an alternative possibility exists. In some cases incumbents may be advantaged in securing reelection because they benefit from institutional rules that insulate their power. In these contexts constituents may lack meaningful representation.

In this paper city council elections are used to investigate the relationship between institutions, reelection, and responsiveness. The analyses reveal that certain institutions create low-turnout environments and are associated with increased reelection rates for city councilors and decreased responsiveness to the general electorate. The paper begins by reviewing a small slice of the vast literature on institutions and incumbency. Institutions that may affect the probability of reelection are discussed, with a focus on those which decrease participation in elections. Next, the data are described and the analyses presented. The results show that low-turnout institutions are associated with an increase in the proportion of city council incumbents who run for reelection and the proportion who win. Cities with low-turnout environments have spending patterns that benefit particular subgroups in the population who have good reason to overcome high participation costs. These findings indicate that incumbents can benefit from institutional structures that enhance the probability of reelection regardless of their performance as representatives.

Exogenous Influences on Incumbency

It has long been established in the turnout literature that institutions which lower the costs of voting increase turnout. For example, Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978) show that early deadlines for registration and limited registration office hours decreased turnout in the 1972 presidential election by about nine percentage points. Wolfinger, Highton and Mullin (2005) show that mailing sample ballots and polling locations increase voter turnout significantly. Hajnal and Lewis (2003) provide evidence that in cities in which elections are held concurrently with elections for higher level government offices, turnout is about 40 percentage points higher compared to off-cycle elections.

Thus, partially as a result of the institutions governing elections, some communities are likely to have higher voter participation than others. As Converse (1966) described for individual voters, turnout might be thought of as comprised of two components, the "normal" level of participation and the "current" level of participation. While particular elections will witness contextual factors (e.g. weather) that influence participation rates, these may be considered variations from the community's relatively stable, underlying turnout predisposition. The institutions governing elections should largely affect the "normal" component of aggregate turnout. A community's turnout predisposition is referred to here as its turnout environment.

The turnout environment should affect incumbents' opportunities as well as policy outcomes. The top panel of Figure 1 summarizes expectations about these basic relationships. Institutions affect turnout which, in turn, affects incumbent safety and policy outcomes. Although it is clearly the case that many of these factors are endogenously related (e.g. policy outcomes are also likely to affect the incumbency advantage and vice versa), this paper seeks to isolate and test the stylized version of reality captured by the pathways in Figure 1.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

The bottom panel of the figure describes the specific relationships that are tested. As explained in more detail below, not mailing polling locations to voters, requiring registration at least a month before elections, and holding non-concurrent elections should all create low-turnout environments. These low-turnout environments enhance the incumbency advantage and produce policy that is beneficial to subgroups with a strong fiduciary interest in local politics because they are likely to participate even when voting is onerous.

There are two reasons why variations in the turnout environment should affect incumbents' reelection chances. First, the makeup of the electorate may differ significantly in high versus low turnout elections. Research shows that individuals are more likely to vote as they age, earn more money, and achieve more education (e.g. Leighley and Nagler 1992). Younger, poorer, and less educated individuals turn out less frequently. As turnout rates increase, lower probability voters may make up a larger proportion of the electorate. Indeed, Hajnal (2010) shows that compared to high turnout municipal elections, low turnout elections tend to produce electorates that are whiter, wealthier, older, and better educated.

Further, scholars have shown that low probability voters tend to have weaker attachments to candidates and parties (Burnham 1965) and Dunne et al (1995) show that as the costs of voting increase, those who stand to benefit the least from an election outcome drop out of the electorate more rapidly than those who stand to benefit the most. The Dunne et al model assumes that the benefits of a particular election outcome are disproportionately distributed across the population such that the benefit function of the election outcome is convex (e.g. those who gain the most are a smaller proportion of the population than those who gain the least); while the costs of the outcome are independently and more evenly distributed. Voters only vote

when the benefits they receive (or the losses they incur) exceed the costs of voting. This implies that higher voting costs disproportionately affect net losers, shifting the median voter toward the net gainers. When voting is more onerous (and turnout lower), benefiters will make up a larger share of the electorate. If high probability voters are more likely to have stronger attachments to the current governing coalition or are more likely to benefit from and support the status quo, then higher turnout could negatively affect incumbent reelection. Hansford and Gomez (2010) provide evidence that this is the case in presidential elections; higher turnout decreases vote shares for incumbent candidates and parties.

The second reason that incumbency advantage could be affected by turnout is related to the first. There may be a limit to the number of constituents any elected official can reach and be responsive to, and these well-attended constituents could make up a larger share of the electorate where turnout is low. DeNardo (1980) has argued and Hansford and Gomez (2010) have demonstrated that as turnout increases, the electorate contains a higher proportion of unreliable and unpredictable voters. If these voters are less likely to have a connection to the incumbent then high turnout will negatively affect the likelihood that incumbents will both run for and win reelection to office. We ought to see an effect for running as well as winning because incumbents are strategic. They are unlikely to run for office if they know there is a high probability that they will lose the election. Instead they will "strategically retire," (Carson 2005, Stone et al 2010).

Variations in turnout environments should also be associated with identifiably different policy patterns. When the costs of voting are high, the median voter may have preferences that differ substantially from the median resident (Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003). As explained above, in low-turnout environments those who stand to benefit the most from election outcomes

are likely to make up a larger share of the electorate and policy is likely to be tilted toward their interests. Berry and Gersen (2009) provide evidence of this effect in school board policy - showing that in non-concurrent (e.g. low turnout) elections teachers unions win higher pay for teachers. We might expect that as voting becomes more onerous in municipal elections, policy will be more favorable for groups that have a consistent fiduciary interest in participating – e.g. municipal employees and homeowners. If municipal employees behave like other bureaucrats, we can expect that they will seek to maximize their total compensation (Niskanen 1971), thus increasing the share of budget spent on payroll and retirement benefits. Homeowners might seek to minimize the share of tax revenue that is funded by the property tax. Other types of taxes (such as sales or licensing taxes) tend to be less visible and may be more widely shared (Oates 2001). Thus, if low-turnout environments are overpopulated by these highly interested subgroups, we should expect to see higher municipal payroll expenditures and lower property tax burdens.[1]

The institutions governing elections and affecting voter participation vary significantly across states and localities. Many local elections have low-turnout environments. Only nine states require registrars to mail voters the location of their polling place for local elections[2] and in 21 states voters must register at least 30 days before any election.[3] This means that in many localities it is incumbent upon constituents to remember to register early enough and to figure out when and where to vote prior to the election. This could be a high hurdle for local races as only about 8% are held concurrently with state or federal elections. It comes as no surprise then to find that the median turnout in local elections is 27% of eligible voters, falling below 1% in some places.[4] Scholars have found that institutions associated with lower turnout have differential effects on various subpopulations (Wolfinger et al 2005; Brians 1997). This means

that varying turnout levels may be associated with differences in the composition of local electorates, support for the incumbent, and policy outcomes.

Data on Low-turnout Environments

We know from previous research that local legislators who win election to office are very likely to win reelection (e.g. Krebs 1998, Wolman et al 1990).   The local incumbency effect is probably produced by a variety of factors. Serving in office may provide candidates with experience and expertise that is valued by voters. Particularly if incumbents are responsive to constituents' preferences, they ought to have little trouble keeping their jobs. Risk-averse challengers are likely to time their runs when incumbents are weak or retiring adding to the incumbency advantage. However, there may also be exogenous, systemic factors that affect voters' ability to evaluate candidates and their likelihood of turning out to vote regardless of incumbents' actions in office. If some institutional settings make it harder for residents to cast a vote then we should see a measurable increase in incumbency advantage in these low-turnout environments. However it difficult to evaluate this prediction empirically because turnout in particular elections is likely to be affected by the presence or absence of incumbents on the ballot. And we might worry that weaker incumbents will seek to change institutions in such a way as to enhance their advantage in the next election. In order to minimize this problem we can use the subordinate status of cities with regard to state laws to analyze the effect of institutions that affect turnout (mailing of polling locations and registration timing) on incumbent reelection. City councilors are affected by these institutions but the state legislature, not city officials decide what the law will be. In the analyses below state level institutional variables are supplemented with a locally determined institution, concurrency of elections.[5]

The data used come primarily from the International City County Manager's Association (ICMA). The ICMA conducts periodic assessments of local governments by mailing a survey to city clerks in all United States cities with more than 2,500 residents. They have a response rate of about 63%.[6] As is often the case with local politics data, the ICMA data are imperfect in a variety of ways. Most importantly for this paper the data sets do not include information about candidates for local offices and only include turnout data in one survey year (1986). But they provide the best data available for studying large numbers of cities. Scholars have shown that ICMA respondents are fairly representative of the national urban population and provide relatively accurate measures of local structure and conditions (Aghion, Alesina, and Terbbi 2005, Hajnal et al 2002).

Using surveys from 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001, a dataset was generated with complete data for 4,393 unique municipalities and a total of 11,813 observations. Each year contains approximately 3,000 observations and many cities are not represented in all years. The ICMA data include information on institutional features of city government. These data were merged with census data to control for city level demographics. Census data from 1990 were used for the 1986 observations and 2000 census data for the 2001 observations. Values were linearly interpolated for 1992 and 1996. Additional data were merged in from the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2002 Census of Governments files regarding city expenditures. Finally, data on state level institutions that govern local elections were added. States that required polling place mailings were identified by evaluating statutes for states that Wolfinger et al (2005) code as having sent mailings for the 2000 presidential election.[7] The coding of this variable is constant for all years of the data. Registration deadlines were gathered from Brians (1997) and the Federal Election

Assistance Commission.[8] This variable changes over time for some states (but is constant across cities within states).

The Incumbency Advantage in Low-turnout Elections

To evaluate the factors that contribute to incumbent success, the proportion of city councilors that run for reelection and the proportion that run and win were analyzed. The proportion of winners conditional on the proportion running was not estimated for two reasons - one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical reason is that given that the institutions of interest in this paper are typically in place before any candidate decides to enter the race, we should see most of their effect operate through selection. That is, knowing that elections will be harder to win and governing more difficult in high-turnout environments, weaker incumbents should be more likely to step down in these places leaving the pool of candidates who do enter the race to be very likely to win. The second reason for not estimating the conditional effect is that the data are city level. The lack of individual councilor data limits the ability to estimate the effect of the institutions on winning conditional on the candidate's decision to run. However, these data do allow an estimation of the total proportion of the council that wins reelection. The lack of individual level data also precludes the analyses from including candidate and race specific factors that may affect incumbents' decision to run and their probability of winning (such as candidate experience and incumbent performance). This is a significant limitation of the data but impossible to remedy as candidate level data do not exist for large numbers of cities. As a rough solution the analyses include proxies for such factors at the level of the city council. The specific variables used are discussed in more detail below.

First, the effect of low-turnout environments on incumbents' propensity to run for reelection is analyzed. The dependent variable is the proportion of the council *Running* for reelection reported by the ICMA.[9] To measure the turnout environment two state level institutions are used – no requirement for the mailing of *Polling Place Locations* and *Registration* required 30 days or more before the election; and one local level institution – *Non-Concurrent elections* (elections not held in November of even numbered years).[10] When voters are less likely to participate we should see more incumbents running and winning.

The regressions include a number of control variables that might affect incumbents' decisions to run and their ability to get reelected and which could be correlated with the institutions affecting the turnout environment. Oliver (2001) and Oliver and Ha (2007), find that constituents are more likely to be interested and knowledgeable about local politics in smaller communities where voters are more likely to know and support challengers to office. The natural log of city's total *Population* is included to account for this. A variable measuring the proportion of the city council elected by *Districts* (as opposed to at-large) is included. This accounts for the lower cost of campaigns and lower levels of competitiveness in district elections as well as the ability for incumbents to provide targeted benefits in districted cities, creating a personal vote connection with their constituents. District councilors also typically represent smaller constituencies than at-large councilors and so may benefit from increased name recognition. The regressions control for per capita *Council Size* to account for the possibility of increased competitiveness in smaller legislatures or decreased capacity to be responsive when an official represents larger numbers of constituents.

A dummy variable noting whether or not elections are *Partisan* is included. Although parties play a diminished role at the local level today, in some cases parties provide

organizational and financial support to candidates as well as resources for mobilizing voters. So, partisan elections may have a positive effect on incumbent reelection rates. On the other hand, because voters tend have less information about challengers in nonpartisan cities they may be more likely to rely on incumbency as a cue for experience. The percentage of city budget spent on *Central Staff* (which includes councilors' salaries) captures the possibility that more professionalized legislatures are more attractive to office holders and so increase the probability of seeking reelection.[11]

To capture the possibility that incumbents are more likely to run when they have more power a dummy variable noting whether the city has a *Council-manager* or mayor-council structure is included. Oliver and Ha (2007) argue that council-manager structures tend to create low information political arenas which might lead incumbents to fare better in these cities. However, councilors in these cities tend to have fewer opportunities to influence city policy because of the power of the city manager, and so may be less interested in running for reelection. Two proxies for candidate quality are included- the proportion of the council that identifies as *Business Managers* and *Professionals*.[12] Both are expected to be positive. As a proxy for councilors with low opportunity costs the proportion that is *Retired* is included. These councilors should be more likely than professionally employed members to seek reelection.

Research on the federal incumbency advantage has found that economic downturns can hurt incumbents (Brady, Buckley, and Rivers 1999). This is controlled for by the proportion of people in the city who are *Unemployed*.[13] Additionally, certain types of voters are more likely to have high levels of information about candidates, have a larger stake in local elections, and to turn out to vote, potentially putting more pressure on incumbents to be responsive. The proportion of housing units occupied by *Home-Owners* and the proportion of the population that

is *College Graduates* is used to represent this population. *Median Household* income is also included.

For an incumbent to represent her constituents she must be able to build a cohesive coalition. This might be harder in more heterogeneous places. Additionally Oliver and Ha (2007) find that more diverse cities engender increased interest in local campaigns. This is captured with a measure of the racial *Diversity* of the population. The measure is a Herfindahl index (1-sum of the squared proportions) of the African American, Latino, Asian American, other non-white, and white populations in a city. It is expected that fewer incumbents will run and win in more diverse cities. Finally, the intercept is allowed to vary in cities that have *Staggered Council Terms* and *Term limits* for city councilors. In such places some incumbents are legally prohibited from seeking reelection in any particular year. Both coefficients are expected to be negative.

Because the state level institutions are collinear with state fixed effects the importance of state influence is handled by including a measure of each state's *Home Rule Score* collected and calculated by Jack Walker (available in the "Diffusion of Public Policy" dataset). This score measures each state's innovation with regard to granting municipal home rule. Higher scores indicate later adoption of home rule. This is used as a proxy for the permissiveness of state law with regard to municipal governance.[14] Fixed effects for survey years (*1992*, *1996*, and *2001* with *1986* as the reference category) are included and robust standard errors clustered by city are presented.[15] Summary statistics for all variables are shown in Appendix Table A1. Table 1 shows the results of these analyses for the proportion of incumbents running for and winning reelection.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The results are clear: When institutions discourage participation more incumbents run for reelection. These differences are meaningful. In cities where registrars are not required to mail polling locations and when local elections are not concurrent with national elections, the proportion of incumbents running is about 2 percentage points higher. It is close to 1 point higher when voters must register a month before election-day. As the second set of columns in Table 1 reveals, estimating an identical model where the dependent variable is the proportion of the council *Winning* reelection produces similar results. Not mailing polling locations increases the proportion winning by more than 2 percentage points. Requiring registration a month before the election and holding non-concurrent elections increase the proportion winning by about 1 point. Cumulatively these results offer support for the hypothesis that in cities where constituents are not encouraged to participate, incumbents are more insulated.[16]

Institutions, Turnout, and Incumbency Advantage

If a smaller and more predictable electorate is part of the reason that incumbents run and win more frequently when local registrars do not mail poll locations, registration closes further from election-day, and local elections are not held concurrently with national elections, then these institutions should also negatively affect local level turnout. In turn we should see a negative association between turnout and reelection.

Because the ICMA has only collected turnout data in one year of its survey (1986), these analyses can neither conclusively sort out the mechanism that leads to the relationship between turnout and reelection nor properly determine the direction of causality. However, the data do provide evidence that there are cross-sectional relationships among institutions, turnout, and reelection that are consistent with the theory.

State and local level institutions that decrease barriers to participation increase turnout. The dependent variables for this analysis are *Turnout of Eligible Voters* and *Turnout of Registered Voters* in the most recent municipal election as reported by the 1986 ICMA. Two different dependent variables are used because there are different theoretical expectations for the institutions. *Polling location* notices are mailed to registered voters, not eligible voters, so the effect of mailings on turnout of registered voters is estimated. On the other hand, longer *Registration* deadlines should be important for decreasing participation among those eligible to vote, so the effect of this institution is estimated on turnout of eligible voters. It is possible that *Non-Concurrent* elections affect participation at both stages of the voting process, so its effect is included in both models. The controls are similar to those used in the previous section including local institutions and socio-economic characteristics. Robust standard errors are presented. The results displayed in Table 2 indicate that institutions that increase the costs of participation have a significant, negative effect on local level turnout.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Not mailing polling place locations is associated with a 5 percentage point decrease in turnout and non-concurrent elections are associated with a 14 point decrease.[17] Requiring voters to register one month before the election is associated with a 4 point decrease in turnout of eligible voters. In turn, increased turnout is associated with decreased reelection rates.

In Table 3, the effect of turnout on incumbent run and reelection rates is estimated. Using a two-stage least squares regression, turnout of registered voters is instrumented with the institutions of interest (polling locations mailed, longer registration deadlines, and concurrent elections) along with the controls included in Table 2. Robust standard errors are presented.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

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The results in Table 3 indicate a significant negative relationship between turnout and reelection. Increasing turnout from 14% to 68% (going from the 10th to the 90th percentile) is associated with a decrease in the estimated proportion of incumbents winning by about 16 percentage points. When more voters participate fewer incumbents win reelection.[18]

The Turnout Environment and Municipal Policy

Institutions that create a low-turnout environment may allow incumbents to win reelection without being responsive to the general public. When the costs of voting are high elections are likely to produce a median voter whose preferences differ from the preferences of the median resident because the benefits of participation and ability to bear the costs of voting are distributed unequally. At least two types of interests might be advantaged in low-turnout municipal environments: municipal employees and home-owners. Because of their fiduciary interest in election outcomes we should expect that these groups will be less likely to drop out of the electorate even when hurdles are high. Thus, we can expect that policy will be more likely to favor their interests when institutions generate lower turnout elections.

To test this hypothesis, the proportion of general current expenditures spent on *Payroll and Retirement* and the proportion of tax revenue coming from *Property Taxes* are analyzed.[19] It is expected that the proportion of the budget allocated to payroll will be higher and the proportion of tax revenue funded by property taxes will be lower in low-turnout environments.[20] The main independent variables are dummy indicators of low-turnout environments (whether or not *Polling Locations* are mailed, *Registration* required 30 days in advance of the election, and whether or not elections are *Concurrent*). The regressions include the same set of controls as analyses above, including local institutions and socio-economic characteristics. In addition,

because local spending is strongly affected by the availability of outside revenue, the regressions include a control for the proportion of revenue coming from *Intergovernmental* sources. As above, fixed effects for survey year and each state's *Home Rule Score* are included Errors are clustered by city. Table 4 shows the results of these estimations.[21]

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

As expected, in low-turnout environments the proportion of the budget spent on payroll is higher and the proportion of taxes from property taxes is lower. In cities where polling locations are not mailed the proportion of the budget spent on payroll and retirement is about 4.5 percentage points higher and the proportion of tax revenues funded by property taxes is about 6.5 points lower. Similarly in jurisdictions where registration is required further from election-day and in those where elections are not held concurrently with other levels of government there is evidence that payroll spending is higher and property taxes are lower.[22] In sum, these results indicate that in low-turnout environments certain subpopulations may be better represented by government.[23]

Conclusion

Gaining deeper knowledge of the factors that affect the incumbency advantage contributes to our understanding of representative democracy.   There is a tremendous amount of evidence that incumbents gain experience over time, that they work hard to learn what their constituents want and to take actions in office that faithfully represent their voters. However, some political environments undoubtedly encourage these behaviors more than others. When institutions tend to dampen the baseline level of participation, representatives may have less incentive to use responsiveness as a strategy for reelection.

Not mailing of polling place locations, holding non-concurrent elections, and establishing registration deadlines farther from election-day tend to decrease voter turnout. Cities that have these institutions in place tend to see more incumbents run for and win reelection. These institutions are also associated with policy outcomes favoring highly interested subgroups that are likely to turn out to vote even when the costs of participating are high. The higher reelection rates combined with the narrower focus of policy suggests that low-turnout environments may create less incentive for elected officials to be responsive to a broad base of constituents.

This paper has made use of the subordinate nature of cities with respect to election law in order to avoid the endogenous nature of turnout and election outcomes. But we still cannot be sure that low-turnout institutions *cause* higher reelection rates and narrower policy outcomes. The principle problem is that using state level institutions to designate the turnout environment precludes the analyses from accounting for factors that might affect both the state's propensity to encourage voters to turn out and incumbents to seek reelection. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that the political culture in some states and cities increases both participation and turnover of elected officials. If this is the case, then constituents living in more democratic places may be more likely to encounter responsive elected officials. Additionally, the results presented here cannot help us to know exactly why incumbents are more likely to run for and win in low-turnout environments and how different laws may affect that environment in different ways. For instance, not mailing polling locations may have the largest effect on people without access to the alternative sources of information like the internet or newspaper, while non-concurrent elections may be most likely to drive down turnout among those with inflexible work schedules. These differences in participation might meaningfully affect incumbents' decisions and policy choices. Finally, it is possible that institutions that enhance participation may be correlated with

(because of something like political culture) or causally related to (because of a more challenging electoral environment) the performance of incumbents. If this is the case, the reason that incumbents might win more frequently in such settings is that they are doing a better job of representing their constituents. Figuring out these relationships will take access to much better local elections data than is currently available.

However, even without providing evidence of causality or untangling the direct effects of institutions, this paper has identified election laws that might make responsive democracy less likely – a failure to provide information to voters about their voting location, decoupling local elections from national election timing, and making it harder to register. Such laws are also associated with policy that advantages highly interested subpopulations. Until we dissect the many elements that contribute to the incumbency advantage at all levels of government we will never be able to fully evaluate the success of our system. In the meantime, if we want to increase the health of local democracy, the policy prescriptions are clear.

Figure 1: Expected relationships between institutions, incumbency, and policy

Electoral Institutions $\longrightarrow$ Turnout Environment

Incumbency Advantage

Policy Outcomes

Predicted Effects

No polling locations
mailed to voters

Registration required $\longrightarrow$ Low-turnout Environment
more than 30 days in
advance of election

Local elections not
concurrent with higher
levels of government
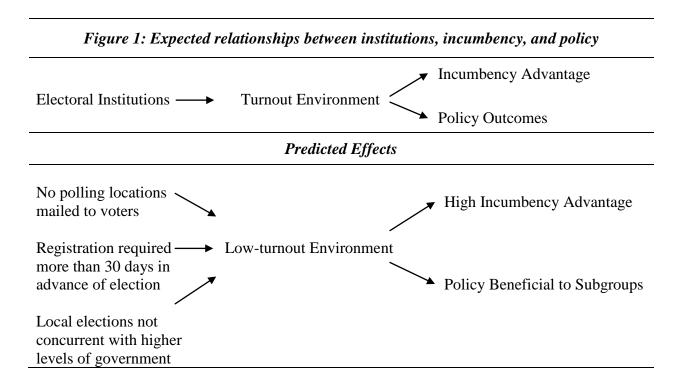
High Incumbency Advantage

Policy Beneficial to Subgroups

Table 1: Effect of Low-Turnout Institutions on the Proportion of Incumbents Running and Winning Reelection

	Running			Winning		
	Coeff.	St Err	P>|t|	Coeff.	St Err	P>|t|
Polling Locations Not Mailed	0.019	0.007	0.005	0.021	0.007	0.003
Registration 1 Month in Advance	0.006	0.005	0.182	0.009	0.005	0.054
Non-Concurrent Elections	0.020	0.007	0.002	0.009	0.007	0.161
Population (log)	0.006	0.003	0.021	0.004	0.003	0.135
% District Council	0.008	0.005	0.089	0.008	0.005	0.109
Partisan Elections	-0.008	0.005	0.138	-0.005	0.006	0.422
% Budget Spent on Central Staff	0.087	0.032	0.007	0.066	0.035	0.055
Council Manager System	-0.014	0.004	0.001	-0.010	0.004	0.018
% Council Retired	0.036	0.010	0.000	0.045	0.011	0.000
% Council Professionals	-0.007	0.014	0.640	0.019	0.014	0.174
% Council Business Managers	0.010	0.009	0.258	0.029	0.009	0.001
Term Limits	-0.052	0.007	0.000	-0.044	0.007	0.000
Staggered Council Elections	-0.336	0.007	0.000	-0.279	0.007	0.000
% Unemployed	-0.276	0.131	0.036	-0.258	0.134	0.054
% Homeowners	-0.042	0.022	0.055	-0.061	0.022	0.007
Diversity	0.013	0.012	0.302	0.008	0.013	0.522
% College Graduates	-0.065	0.022	0.004	-0.028	0.023	0.238
Median HH Income (10 thsds)	0.002	0.002	0.442	0.005	0.002	0.032
Council Size Per Thsd Persons	-0.003	0.002	0.193	0.000	0.002	0.978
State Home Rule Score	-0.029	0.007	0.000	-0.018	0.007	0.009
1992	0.098	0.005	0.000	0.084	0.005	0.000
1996	0.097	0.005	0.000	0.094	0.005	0.000
2001	0.084	0.006	0.000	0.073	0.006	0.000
Constant	0.605	0.034	0.000	0.505	0.035	0.000
R^2	0.356			0.282		
N	11,072			10,594		

Note: OLS regressions; Robust errors clustered by city

Table 2: Effect of State and Local Institutions on Turnout in 1986

	Registered Voters			Eligible Voters		
	Coeff.	St. Err	P>|t|	Coeff.	St. Err	P>|t|
Polling Places Not Mailed	-0.049	0.012	0.000			
Registration 1 Month in Advance				-0.042	0.007	0.000
Non-Concurrent Elections	-0.141	0.014	0.000	-0.083	0.013	0.000
Population (log)	-0.013	0.005	0.004	-0.015	0.005	0.004
% District Council	-0.024	0.01	0.016	-0.014	0.010	0.136
Partisan Elections	0.027	0.01	0.006	0.024	0.009	0.008
Council Manager System	-0.066	0.009	0.000	-0.053	0.008	0.000
Term Limits	0.003	0.019	0.885	0.005	0.017	0.788
Staggered Council Elections	-0.083	0.011	0.000	-0.063	0.011	0.000
Council Size Per Thousand Persons	0.012	0.005	0.008	0.010	0.007	0.138
% Unemployed	-0.321	0.270	0.235	-0.069	0.267	0.797
% Homeowners	0.121	0.038	0.002	0.166	0.036	0.000
% College Graduates	0.017	0.047	0.715	0.138	0.046	0.003
Median HH Income (thsds)	-0.017	0.005	0.000	-0.019	0.004	0.000
Diversity	-0.019	0.023	0.422	-0.047	0.022	0.033
State Home Rule Score	0.009	0.013	0.477	-0.007	0.012	0.548
Intercept	0.749	0.059	0.000	0.505	0.065	0.000
N	2511			1959		
R^2	0.172			0.173		

Note: OLS regressions; Robust standard errors presented.

Table 3: Effect of Turnout on the
Proportion of Incumbents Running and Winning Reelection

	Running			Winning		
	Coeff.	St Err	P>|z|	Coeff.	St Err	P>|z|
Turnout Registered Voters	-0.303	0.082	0.000	-0.300	0.077	0.000
Population (log)	0.005	0.006	0.446	0.010	0.006	0.098
% District Council	0.003	0.012	0.798	0.003	0.012	0.817
Partisan Elections	0.009	0.012	0.448	0.021	0.011	0.060
% Budget Spent on Central Staff	0.024	0.087	0.782	-0.031	0.081	0.705
Council Manager System	-0.030	0.012	0.010	-0.023	0.011	0.039
% Council Retired	-0.008	0.026	0.765	0.029	0.025	0.254
% Council Professionals	-0.066	0.031	0.035	-0.034	0.030	0.261
% Council Business Managers	0.006	0.020	0.770	0.022	0.019	0.239
Term Limits	-0.057	0.019	0.003	-0.036	0.017	0.038
Staggered Council Elections	-0.309	0.017	0.000	-0.275	0.016	0.000
% Unemployed	-0.552	0.299	0.065	-0.495	0.289	0.086
% Homeowners	0.000	0.049	0.999	0.007	0.047	0.874
Diversity	0.016	0.028	0.573	-0.021	0.027	0.434
% College Graduates	-0.041	0.054	0.444	-0.096	0.052	0.065
Median HH Income (10 thsds)	-0.007	0.005	0.217	0.000	0.005	0.978
Council Size Per Thsd Persons	-0.003	0.004	0.444	0.001	0.004	0.826
State Home Rule Score	-0.038	0.015	0.013	-0.030	0.014	0.036
Constant	0.786	0.087	0.000	0.619	0.084	0.000
R^2	0.195			0.176		
N	2398			2405		

Note: Two-stage least squares regression; Turnout of Registered Voters instrumented with polling locations not mailed, registration 1 month in advance, non-concurrent elections along with controls listed in table.

Table 4: Effect of Low-Turnout Environments on Municipal Policy

	Payroll Expenditures			Property Taxes		
	Coeff.	St Err	P>|t|	Coeff.	St Err	P>|t|
Polling Locations Not Mailed	0.045	0.007	0.000	-0.065	0.014	0.000
Registration 1 Month in Advance	0.003	0.005	0.475	-0.027	0.010	0.009
Non-Concurrent Elections	0.023	0.007	0.002	-0.035	0.014	0.011
Population (log)	0.011	0.003	0.000	-0.008	0.006	0.150
% District Council	0.012	0.005	0.024	-0.011	0.010	0.269
Partisan Elections	0.001	0.005	0.844	0.020	0.010	0.038
Council Manager System	0.002	0.004	0.673	0.015	0.009	0.079
Term Limits	0.016	0.007	0.023	-0.055	0.014	0.000
Staggered Council Elections	0.000	0.006	0.937	0.008	0.012	0.520
Council Size Per Thsd Persons	-0.002	0.003	0.377	0.000	0.006	0.945
% Unemployed	0.245	0.137	0.074	-0.782	0.275	0.004
% Homeowners	0.029	0.023	0.210	-0.189	0.049	0.000
% College Graduates	0.063	0.025	0.013	-0.048	0.052	0.356
Median HH Income (thsds)	-0.016	0.003	0.000	0.021	0.005	0.000
Diversity	0.093	0.013	0.000	-0.355	0.028	0.000
State Home Rule Score	0.049	0.008	0.000	0.145	0.016	0.000
% Rev. Intergovernmental	-0.158	0.015	0.000	0.469	0.035	0.000
1992	-0.033	0.004	0.000	0.024	0.004	0.000
1996	-0.041	0.004	0.000	0.009	0.006	0.129
2001	-0.035	0.005	0.000	-0.006	0.007	0.407
Constant	0.351	0.035	0.000	0.737	0.071	0.000
R^2	0.092			0.162		
N	12,011			11,995		

Note: OLS regressions; Robust errors clustered by city.

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Appendix

Table A1: Summary Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
% Incumbent Running	11072	0.426	0.230	0	1
% Incumbent Reelected	10594	0.368	0.221	0	1
% Payroll Expenditures	12011	0.496	0.178	0	1
% Property Taxes	11995	0.580	0.308	0	1
No Polling Locations Mailed	12011	0.826	0.379	0	1
Registration 1 Month in Advance	12011	0.360	0.480	0	1
Non-Concurrent Elections	12011	0.896	0.305	0	1
% District Council	12011	0.293	0.413	0	1
Partisan Elections	12011	0.214	0.410	0	1
% Budget Spent on Central Staff	12011	0.050	0.057	0	0.888158
Council Manager System	12011	0.564	0.496	0	1
% Council Retired	11466	0.190	0.189	0	1
% Council Professionals	11466	0.082	0.141	0	1
% Council Business Managers	11466	0.266	0.237	0	1
Term Limits	12011	0.070	0.256	0	1
Staggered Council Elections	12011	0.829	0.377	0	1
% Unemployed	12011	0.037	0.017	0	0.20368
% Homeowners	12011	0.650	0.123	0.074164	0.990705
Diversity	12011	0.248	0.189	0	0.993423
% College Graduates	12011	0.210	0.136	0.004389	0.884035
Median HH Income (10 thsds)	12011	34994	17607	9544	200001
Population (log)	12011	9.254	1.161	5.705781	15.12245
Council Size Per Thsd Persons	12011	0.992	1.125	0.00406	21.02102
State Home Rule Score	12011	0.572	0.331	0	1
% Revenue Intergovernmental	12011	0.187	0.138	0	1
Eligible Voter Turnout	1959	0.265	0.168	0.0004	0.855
Registered Voter Turnout	2511	0.386	0.199	0.01	0.95

[1] Of course, the reverse is also possible. Low-turnout elections are likely to be populated by voters who have a great stake in municipal policy outcomes – parents of school age children, home-owners, long-term residents (Oliver and Ha 2008, Hajnal 2010, Fischel 2001). These voters may be more supportive of challengers if they are unhappy with the status quo. Thus, turnout could have a positive relationship with reelection, particularly if incumbents are unresponsive to these highly interested subgroups. While this is a plausible scenario, the data I present below suggests that incumbents and highly interested subgroups both tend to benefit (not suffer) from low-turnout.

[2] The states that require mailing of polling place locations are California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, New Jersey, Nevada, and New York. Colorado and Maryland require mailings for some municipalities but not others. Oregon elections are all cast by mail and registered voters are mailed ballots to their home. Some or all municipalities in these states are coded as requiring mailings depending on state law. Arizona requires mailings in federal and state elections but makes the mailing optional in local elections. Delaware, Alabama, Georgia, and Washington mail registration cards to voters that list their precinct number and in some cases their polling place however no notification of a coming election is mailed to voters in these states. These states are coded as not mailing polling place locations.

[3] Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming require registration at least 30 days in advance for some years in the data set.

[4] These figures are from the International City County Managers Association survey conducted in 1986. This is the most recent year that the ICMA asked localities about turnout. There is no

other comprehensive source for turnout data in city elections. The figures represent data from 2,464 cities.

[5] Election concurrency varies at the sub-state level. Election timing is decided by state law in some places and by local law in others.

[6] The response rate for 1986 was 66%, for 1992 it was 70%, for 1996 it was 62%, and for 2001 it was 54%.

[7] See footnote 2 for additional detail about the coding. It would clearly be preferable to have this variable change over time. While it is possible to locate current state constitutional language, codes, and statues governing elections, it is extremely time consuming and in some cases impossible to determine dates of enactment and/or the language governing elections in prior years. As a result I am forced to test my hypotheses cross-sectionally.

[8] See footnote 3 for more detail about the coding of this variable.

[9] Unfortunately the ICMA reports only the proportion of the whole council running for and winning reelection even in cities with staggered council terms or term limits where only a portion of the council seat are up for election in a given year. This means that for many of my cities I systematically underestimate the proportion of the council seeking and winning reelection. To deal with this problem I include dummy indicators for cities with term-limits and staggered councils in my models. In alternate analyses I estimate the effects of contestability only for cities with non-staggered elections and without term limits and the patterns are essentially the same as those presented with a loss of significance but not substantive impact on the key independent variables. I also estimated the number of seats available in staggered elections by deflating the total number of council seats by 1/3rd or ½ and using this as the

denominator for the proportion of councilors seeking and winning reelection. These results are also very similar to those presented. All alternate specifications are available from the author.

[10] This variable was created from a 1986 ICMA question regarding the timing of the next municipal election and is constant for all years in the data set.

[11] Adding a measure of the salaries paid to city councilors is positive and significant, but because of missing data reduces the number of cases significantly. The addition of the variable does not change the conclusions presented

[12] The ICMA lists the occupation of city councilors in nine categories: lawyers, professionals, business managers, business employees, farmers, homemakers, teachers, clergy, and retirees. At the city level there is no clear way to measure candidate quality. Lieske (1989) offers evidence that college degrees and occupational prestige are strongly associated with candidate success in Cincinnati and Bridges (1997) shows that successful coalitions in the Southwest were dominated by prominent members of the business community. I use the categories of business managers and professionals as possible indicators of these types of candidates.

[13] A better measure would be change in unemployment. However, because I interpolate values between the decennial censuses this measure equates to a constant for each city and additionally requires that drop one year of my data. For these reasons I choose to include the level of unemployment instead.

[14] Adding controls for Daniel Elazar's coding of state political culture (individualistic, moralistic, and traditional) affects the results very little. The coefficient on registration deadlines becomes insignificant, but the effect sizes remain the same across all models. Adding Census region fixed effects results in insignificant coefficients on polling location mailings in all models

because the institutions is highly correlated with location (e.g. polling locations are not mailed in the Midwest at all and in only one state in the South).

[15] Running the models on each survey year separately produces results similar to those presented.

[16] A number of other interesting relationships emerge from these estimations. Many of the control variables work as expected. For instance, larger cities are likely to see more incumbents running for reelection and winning. Incumbents appear to benefit from mayor-council systems and district elections as well as more professionalized city councils. Retirees are more likely to run for reelection and businessmen and professionals are more likely to win.

[17] There are also significant interactions between the state institutions and concurrency. For example, concurrent elections have a more powerful effect on turnout when polling locations are mailed.

[18] It is interesting to note that the relationship between the institutional effect on turnout and incumbency advantage seems to differ across institutions. That is, running the two-stage model for each institution one at a time reveals that although non-concurrent elections have the most powerful effect on turnout, they has the smallest overall effect on incumbency advantage. This could be explained if concurrency produces multiple, countervailing effects. For instance, given that concurrent elections decrease constituents' knowledge and engagement of local issues (Oliver and Ha 2007), voters may be more likely to use incumbency as a heuristic in these settings. Alternatively, it could be that the incumbents who choose to run knowing that they will face a more activated electorate are simply of higher quality and so more likely to win. This argument suggests another possible reason for the relationship between low-turnout environments and an incumbency effect. High-turnout environments may limit the number of low quality candidates who run for office. This could mean that in high turnout environments a greater proportion of the apparent incumbency effect would be the result of selection. So we might expect a smaller pure incumbency effect (e.g. stripped of selection) when

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elections have high turnout. Ideally one would test this proposition with a regression discontinuity, but these data are insufficient for such an analysis.

[19] Although economists have shown that most property taxes are passed on directly to renters, homeowners are more likely to dislike the property tax. According to survey data commissioned by the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations in 1994, when asked to identify the least fair tax (with the choices being federal income tax, federal social security tax, state income tax, state sales tax, and local property tax) approximately 36% of homeowners identified the property tax as the least fair while only 23% of renters did. A two sample t-test indicates that these differences are significant at the .035 level (results available from the author). Fischel (2001) provides substantial evidence that homeowners are the most active participants in local democracy and policy making.

[20] Both predictions are referencing proportions (of expenditure and revenue). In order satisfy the preferences of public employees and homeowners at the same time a city would either need to decrease spending on other areas and/or increase their revenues from other sources.

[21] Adding a control for the total number of public employees or number of employees per capita does not change results.

[22] Replacing the registration variable with a measure designating states that allow registration within 10 days of elections produces much larger, more robust results.

[23] An alternative story is that individuals who support high spending on public employees and low property tax rates seek out communities that provide these policy options. Then, because everyone is happy with the policies offered by incumbents, we see high reelection rates. While this seems like a truly plausible account, it seems less reasonable to argue that these same people also try to sort themselves into communities where polling locations aren't mailed, registration is

difficult, and elections are non-concurrent. The fact that state legislatures (not local officials)

select registration and voter information laws as well as designate concurrency in many places

suggests that there remains a significant exogenous affect of institutions on turnout, incumbency,

and policy outcomes even in the presence of endogenous sorting. That said, this research design

and these data cannot rule out the possibility that these institutions actually encourage

responsiveness on the part incumbents meaning that low turnover and low turnout are actually

the result of satisfaction with incumbent performance.