

# Modern Machines: Information, Patronage, and Incumbency in Local Elections

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## Abstract:

That incumbents are highly likely to win reelection is a well established pattern. Scholars debate the degree to which incumbents are advantaged as a result of selection, responsiveness, or institutional insulation. Research has suffered from causality problems at the state and federal levels, and at the local level little research exists. This paper begins to address these problems. First, I lay out a theoretical framework for distinguishing between systems in which responsiveness is encouraged versus systems in which incumbents can be reelected without regard to their effectiveness as representatives. Then I employ a regression discontinuity design to show that incumbents benefit electorally from serving in office beyond what we would predict from their quality alone. Next, I provide evidence that low-information elections and large patronage workforces increase the proportion of incumbents who run for reelection and the proportion who win. Finally, I show that spending is disconnected from demographic change in cities with low-information environments.

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It is virtually always better to be an incumbent than a challenger in American elections. While political scientists have provided considerable evidence of this pattern at all levels of government, the source of the advantage (and the degree to which it is viewed as nefarious) remains debatable. Previous research on this topic can be categorized as representing three different views of the incumbency advantage. Some scholars have argued that the advantage is a selection effect; that incumbents are *ex ante* better politicians (Jacobson and Kernell 1981). Others have provided evidence that it is incumbents' actions in office, their records of service, which increase their probability of election (Fenno 1978). Both of these views are encouraging; regardless of the reason for winning, the reelection of incumbents reflects the success of representative democracy. A third, less optimistic possibility is that incumbents, once elected, use their access to institutions to entrench themselves in power regardless of their performance in office (Key 1949). In other words, in this view, incumbents implement or take advantage of institutional structures that decrease the contestability of the electoral arena.

Distinguishing among these causal processes is difficult because reelection is the observational equivalent for all three. Determining the source of the incumbency advantage is important for evaluating the success of democracy. If it is the case that winning is disconnected from quality or from voter approval then voters potentially lack meaningful representation and may not be able to control their government.

The goal of this paper is both to establish a causal link between incumbency and reelection that goes beyond selection effects, and to explore possible causal mechanisms in an analysis of incumbency at the local level in the United States. The vast majority of work on this topic has focused on elections and representation at the federal level, though a substantial body of work has analyzed state politics as well (see Hogan 2004 for a review). In comparison,

examinations of local level politics are much rarer. Yet, the local level in American politics is where we see the most variation in terms of election institutions, reelection strategies, and effects. For instance, the average reelection rate of Congressional incumbents hovers in the high 90s (see Abramowitz et al 2006) whereas the average reelection rate at the local level is about ten percentage points lower with a wide standard deviation. This variation in outcomes and in institutions affecting the electoral process means that cities offer a better venue for investigating patterns of reelection. Furthermore, the source of the incumbency advantage has been understudied at the local level. While we know that incumbents are more likely to win, few studies have explained why. Given that different factors may affect reelection at different levels of government, more work is needed with a local focus.

In this paper I argue that the local incumbency advantage cannot be wholly attributed to selection effects and that incumbents can be advantaged by institutional structures that decrease the contestability of the political arena. Aside from extending analysis to the local level, this paper also contributes to the larger debate on incumbency by offering a more detailed explanation of the institutional mechanisms that can work to protect incumbents. In the past scholars have tended to study the effect on incumbency of one institution at a time such as gerrymandered districts or the franking privilege. I present a theoretical framework that ties these institutional mechanisms together, allowing us to distinguish between systems in which responsiveness is encouraged versus systems in which incumbents can be reelected without regard to their effectiveness as representatives. This variable – *system responsiveness* – characterizes the electoral system, and thus differs from the *actor responsiveness* variable studied in the congressional literature, which characterizes politicians or parties. It is only by

focusing on legislative elections at the local level that we capture a large enough range on the system responsiveness variable to test this idea.

I begin by reviewing a small slice of the vast literature on incumbency. Then, I present a discussion of reelection strategies that decrease contestability. Following this, I offer quantitative support for my claims. Using a historical time-series from nine cities, I provide evidence of a causal connection between incumbency and reelection by employing a regression discontinuity analysis. Then, using a modern data set of more than 7,000 cities I show that low information elections and large municipal workforces increase the proportion of incumbents who run for reelection and positively affect incumbent win rates. I argue that this indicates that incumbents benefit from institutional structures which enhance the probability of reelection without regard to the office holder's quality or performance as a representative. I offer support for this claim in an analysis of expenditure patterns in the final section of the paper.

### **Literature Explaining the Incumbency Advantage**

A positive view of the incumbency advantage asserts that incumbents are successful because they are, quite simply, good at what they do – campaigning, governing, and/or representing voters' demands.<sup>1</sup> In this view, incumbency is a sign of being a high quality contender, or in Zaller's (1998) words, a "prize fighter." As Erikson and Wright (2001) have suggested, the electoral process is designed to choose strong candidates who "tend to win and retain their strength in subsequent contests" (p78). Cox and Katz (2002) show that in the post-1964 era incumbents have been likely to face weak challengers and retire strategically when they were in danger of losing. This evidence suggests that the incumbency advantage is a selection

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<sup>1</sup> The following section offers an extremely attenuated list of the work that has focused on the incumbency advantage (see Hirano and Snyder 2007 for a more thorough literature review)

effect – there is no causal link between incumbency and reelection; office holders and challengers are simply not comparable types of candidates.

Others argue that incumbents' behavior in office increases their advantage relative to challengers. Once elected, incumbents have the opportunity to gain experience, provide services, and make decisions that benefit their constituents (Hererra and Yawn 1999, Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987, Fiorina 1977). The greater the access to resources which satisfy voters, the stronger the incumbency advantage (Hirano and Snyder 2007; Berry et al 2000; Carey et al 2000; Cox and Morgenstern 1993). In part, this is because incumbents can prevent the emergence of quality challengers through their record of service (Gordon et al 2007, Carson et al 2007, Cox and Katz 1996, 2002).

The effects of selection and responsiveness may serve to reinforce each other. Stone et al (2004) show that deterrence of quality challengers is the result of incumbents' performance in office. Abramowitz et al (2006) argue that the rise in incumbent reelection over the past decades is the effect of demographic and elite sorting; people live in increasingly homogenous communities and elites are increasingly ideologically polarized. If incumbents win because they cultivate support among constituents and elites through their activities in office, these changing residential and ideological patterns could lead to safer incumbents. Fenno's work epitomizes the view that incumbents affect their own fates and that reelection is the result of high quality. He explains:

[I]ncumbency is not an automatic entitlement to a fixed number of votes or percentage points toward reelection. Nor is the 'power of incumbency' something that each member finds waiting to be picked up and put on like a new suit. Incumbency should be seen as a resource to be employed, an opportunity to be exploited; and the power of incumbency is

whatever each member makes of the resource and the opportunity .... [T]he power of incumbency is conditional” (2003 [1978] p211)

For scholars like Fenno, politicians’ strategies for reelection strengthen the electoral connection.

In an alternative view, a view that this paper supports, the reelection of incumbents may reflect a distortion of the democratic process. Frequently subscribers to this outlook are political challengers, journalists, and pundits; but scholarship in political science contributes to this perception by showing that incumbents have access to various resources that increase their chances of reelection which are unavailable to challengers and may not be related to the quality or performance of the incumbent. These include benefits like franking (Cover and Brumberg 1982, Mayhew 1974), campaign resources (Abramowitz 1991, Abramowitz et al 2006), media coverage (Prior 2006), and control over districting (McDonald 2006, Monmonnier 2001, Tufte 1973). We need not worry about these kinds of advantages if selection effects ensure that politicians in office are the best candidates. If (and only if) these resources increase the propensity to win regardless of the quality or performance of the office holder, the incumbency advantage might be more akin to a new suit.

To determine whether or not incumbency is like a new suit, scholars have typically asked whether direct incumbency resources (such as franking, staff, or fundraising), ability to deter quality challengers, or experience of the incumbent have the most explanatory power (see Levitt and Wolfram 2004 for example). Scholars have also analyzed the effect of responsiveness to voters on reelection chances both directly (Hogan 2004) and indirectly (McAdams and Johannes 1987, 1988). Results have been inconclusive; some scholars have found that incumbents’ advantage can be explained primarily by the experience they gain by serving in office (e.g. Lee 2001) or congruence with voters (McAdams and Johannes 1988). Others have found that safety

decreases responsiveness to voters (Griffin 2006). If this is indeed the case, that safe incumbents are less responsive and continue to see similar reelection rates as responsive incumbents, then we may want to question the relationship between quality and election.

The paucity of data available for studying city electoral processes has meant that fewer scholars have pursued analysis at this level; and nearly all have focused on one or a small number of cities. However, scholars have shown that being an incumbent increases the probability of election in a number of different locales (Krebs 1998; Prewitt 1970; Lieske 1989). Lieske (1989) attributes incumbent success in Cincinnati to name recognition and the presence of a political following, which he argues substitutes for a party based coalition. Lascher (2005) finds that California incumbents are more likely to win in large counties, a result he ascribes to low challenger visibility.

Other scholars have studied the factors that give rise to local candidate success, such as campaign spending (Krebs and Pelissero 2001, Fuchs et al 2000, Krebs 1998; Lieske 1989; Lewis et al 1995), prior office holding (Krebs, Merritt 1977), endorsements from local media, political organizations, and parties (Krebs; Stein and Fleischman 1987; Gierzynski and Breaux 1993, Davidson and Fraga 1988), race and/or ethnicity (Kaufmann 2004, Herring and Forbes 1994; Lieske and Hillard 1984), and certain educational and occupational credentials, like having a degree from an Ivy League school (Lieske 1989) or a law degree (Hamilton 1978).

The problem of course is that it is nearly impossible to avoid endogeneity in analyzing the relationships between these factors. We should expect that the strongest candidates will also benefit from the best resources in office and in campaigns. Many conclusions drawn in the literature are consistent with selection effects – incumbents win because they are the better

candidates and the better candidates garner better resources. In fact, Krebs (1998) finds that no indicators unique to incumbents affected their success.

A few findings indicate that there may be an effect of incumbency that is not necessarily attributable to selection. By studying a change in institutions, Schaffner, Streb, and Wright (2001) find that nonpartisan elections increased incumbents' reelection rates compared to partisan contests. They argue that voters use incumbency as a heuristic (presumably for experience) when party labels are unavailable.<sup>2</sup> A recent study of school board elections by Berry and Howell (2007) finds that incumbents benefit from inattentive publics. When student achievement was not the focus of media attention incumbent decisions to run for reelection, challengers' decisions to contest elections, and incumbent vote shares were not affected by changes in test scores. Both of these findings are consistent with the view that the degree of insulation incumbents receive by virtue of holding office is variable. In the next section I present a theoretical argument that is consistent with the findings of Schaffner et al and Berry and Howell, but which is also broader and better able to predict the conditions under which quality should matter.

### **Disconnecting From Voters and Getting Reelected Anyway**

The reason that scholars study the incumbency advantage is that it, presumably, has implications for the quality or effectiveness of governance. Similarly, a substantial literature in economics has been concerned with the relationship between the safety of incumbent firms and market performance. In a seminal book, Baumol, Panzar and Willig (1982) argued that the threat of entry can be enough to prevent firms with large market shares from extracting monopoly

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<sup>2</sup> However, Ansolabehere et al (2006), argue that party and incumbency are not substitutable cues. Using a longer time series they find that the incumbency advantage is strengthened rather than weakened by a switch from nonpartisan to partisan elections.

profits. As long as markets remain “contestable,” firms can be compelled to keep prices competitive. Analogously for political incumbents, the threat of removal may be enough to inspire responsiveness.<sup>1</sup>

We can draw on this framework for thinking about political markets in a relative way; arranging systems along a spectrum of what I call political contestability. Contestability can be described by four indicators: the degree to which constituents’ information about governmental performance or available alternatives is limited, the degree to which the entry, exit, or behavior of candidates is restricted, the degree to which the entry, exit, or behavior of voters is constrained, and the degree to which incumbents’ control over government seats is insulated from their vote share.

In the (unrealizable) political market with perfect information, free entry and exit, and a perfectly responsive and neutral translation of votes to seats, incumbents can only win by being the strongest candidates. This idealized version of the world represents one end of the contestability spectrum. Institutions or strategies that move the political market away from this end increase the probability of reelection for incumbents without regard to the effectiveness of representation or the quality of the candidate. Thus, the opposite end of the spectrum can be described as an uncontestable political market in which reelection of incumbents is wholly disconnected from quality of candidates and representation of voters. There are many different types of institutional arrangements and electoral strategies that move elections toward the disconnected end of the spectrum. Table 1 provides a sample of institutions and behaviors that do so, arranged by the four indicators listed above.<sup>2</sup>

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The institutions that govern political contests have the potential to determine which contestants are most likely to win elections and what skills or qualifications those contestants are likely to possess. We can expect that politicians will select and support institutions that are advantageous to them and will choose strategies that make it most likely that they will win given the context in which they run. These institutions and strategies may have normative value, but they may not. For instance, the first row of Table 1 lists strategies or institutions that violate democratic norms (or laws) which may make them more objectionable, but does not necessarily make them more effective than the licit or acceptable tactics listed in the rows below. In fact the legality of strategies tends to change over time; sometimes in response to evidence that the practice enhances incumbency advantage but not representation. The many mechanisms used by Southern elected officials to maintain white supremacy between the end of Reconstruction and the implementation of the Voting Rights Act (e.g. the white primary, poll taxes, and literacy tests) fall into this category. Although these particular practices are no longer employed, the potential to use disconnected institutions and strategies remains alive and well today. The last row in Table 1 lists practices that have a continuing presence in modern cities. The following sections describe these current practices in more detail.

### **Limited Information**

When constituents have limited knowledge about the performance of the government or available alternatives, incumbents may be able to win reelection without being responsive to the electorate. The lack of information about elections or politics possessed by potential voters is a well established feature of modern politics. But some electoral institutions are likely to exacerbate this condition by increasing the number of uninformed constituents or decreasing the

accuracy or comprehensiveness of the information that is obtained. For instance, only ten states mail voters the location of their polling place prior to elections.<sup>3</sup> Wolfinger et al (2005) report that six states mail sample ballots to voters. Given that only about 8% of local elections are held concurrently with state or federal elections, information may be even more limited in these environments.

### **Restricted Entry, Exit, and/or Behavior of Candidates and Voters**

The use of government resources to prevent opponent organization or enhance incumbent organization has the potential to affect both candidates and voters. A reliance on patronage workers falls under this category and was a common tactic among the infamous political machines that operated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries in American cities. Rewarding supporters with divisible benefits like public jobs serves to enhance loyalty toward the incumbent regime, providing a stable base of support among voters. The threat of economic loss if the incumbent is defeated makes recipients unlikely to support opposition candidates. As a result patronage serves to influence voter behavior and acts as a barrier to challenger entry. In some cases patronage workers are also “encouraged” to perform political work for the incumbent, like mobilizing voters on election day, or contributing to the incumbent’s reelection fund. Even further toward the disconnected end of the spectrum are political systems in which patronage employees use governmental power to increase support for the incumbent or hamper challengers. For example opposition candidates may be denied permits for holding political rallies, or an election administrator may choose to site polling places in such a way as to decrease turnout among potential opposition voters.

The rise of public sector unions and increasing limitations on political hiring and firing has made the more coercive aspects of patronage less common today. However, in some cities incumbents can sidestep both problems by providing government contracts to nonprofit community-based organizations whose clients are then expected to engage in political work (Marwell 2004, Casciano 2007). The use of such strategies may offer the incumbent an advantage at the polling booth that is not tied to their effectiveness as an elected official.

### **Translating Votes to Seats**

Unlike the other indicators of the conditional nature of incumbent reelection, this fourth indicator describes the degree of systemic advantage for coalitions of incumbents rather than individuals. The translation of votes into seats has been well studied and precisely defined by those studying national and state legislatures. Scholars have identified two features that define the degree to which a system is rigged in favor of a given coalition (or party) – bias and responsiveness (King and Browning 1987). There is evidence that city councils engage similar strategies at the local level, but the effect is virtually impossible to study because most cities use nonpartisan elections. Even in partisan cities, because councils tend to overwhelmingly be populated by one party, it is difficult to develop testable counterfactuals.

### **Establishing an Incumbency Advantage Beyond Selection**

Scholars employ a number of different methods for studying the incumbency advantage in state and federal contests. The method developed by Gelman and King (1990) represents the foundation of many analyses. Gelman and King's incumbency advantage is measured as the difference between the vote the party would receive in a given district when running an

incumbent versus the vote it would receive in the district running a new candidate. The benefit of this definition is that it explicitly models incumbent strength independent of party strength in the district. However, because most (~75%) of local elections are nonpartisan it is not reliable to use Gelman and King's method for studying incumbency effects at the local level.<sup>3</sup>

Two additional measures, the sophomore surge and the retirement slump are also common in the literature (see for example Ansolabehere et al 2007 or Alford and Brady 1988). The retirement slump, which averages the parties' vote share loss when their members do not seek reelection, is also not preferable at the local level as a result of nonpartisan elections. However, the sophomore surge, which measures the average vote gain for an incumbent in her second election, is usable and will be discussed below.

Yet another strategy for analyzing incumbency, developed by Lee (2001, 2008), uses the structure of elections to approximate an experimental setting. Lee employs what is called a regression discontinuity design to analyze the effect of winning in election  $t$  on the probability of victory in election  $t + 1$ , while controlling for the margin of victory in election  $t$ . A regression discontinuity design is a quasi-experimental method that uses cutoff scores along a continuous dimension to assign study participants to different pretest categories, allowing researchers to test the effect of the category on some outcome. In Lee's case the continuous dimension is the margin of victory and the cutoff is the electoral rule designating winners versus losers. The pretest is election  $t$  and the outcome is election  $t + 1$ .

I modify Lee's method to study incumbency at the local level in order to help rule out the argument that the advantage is wholly attributable to selection. Lee argues that we should view the outcome of close elections as essentially randomly determined such that the losers and

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<sup>3</sup> A Gelman and King style analysis of 167 elections in five cities that do use partisan labels for mayoral contests reveals a growing incumbency effect starting in the 1960s but large standard errors make the results unreliable.

winners are “*ex ante* comparable in *all other ways* (on average) except in their eventual incumbency status” (Lee 2001 p2). Importantly, close winners and losers should be similar on all characteristics that would affect their vote share in election  $t+1$  and their probability of winning election  $t$ . If the incumbency advantage is merely a selection effect, only margin of victory should affect outcomes in election  $t + 1$ , not the candidates’ winner/loser status. But, if we find incumbency status to have an effect on the probability of running and of winning in the next election, we have support for a causal incumbency effect.

Lee’s work focuses on the advantage in election  $t+1$  that a party gains by holding the Congressional seat in election  $t$ . Thus, he estimates the advantage of being the incumbent *party*. My focus, on the other hand, is on the effect of incumbency for individual *candidates* in a nonpartisan (local) context. So, whereas Lee’s unit of analysis is the Congressional district my unit of analysis is the candidate in a municipal election. I show that there is evidence of a causal effect of incumbency at the local level and then move to tests of the source of this advantage.

The data that I use come from nine cities, cover the years 1900 and 1985, and include both mayoral and city council elections. I collected candidate level data on mayoral elections in Chicago, Kansas City, New Haven, New York and Philadelphia and on city council elections in Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, and San Jose. These cities were chosen primarily on the basis of availability of election returns for the entire time span. Together the collection represents diverse regions of the United States and cities with substantial variation on demographic and political measures. The observations represent final elections in all cases. In the mayoral cities each election year contains at least two observations; a winner and one or more losers in the general mayoral race.<sup>4</sup> The data are more complicated for the nonpartisan city council elections. In all four of the cities a candidate could be elected outright in the primary if he won enough

votes. When the threshold was not met, candidates were forced into run-off elections. Additionally, for most of the time period council candidates were elected city-wide (at-large), but in the later part of the time series San Jose, San Antonio, and Dallas adopted district elections. In Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin after 1953, elections represent contests for a single seat even when the elections were city-wide. In San Jose and in Austin prior to 1953 multiple councilors were elected at a time. In these races the top- $N$  vote getters won, where  $N$  represented the number of seats. I discuss my method for controlling on these variations below.

I analyze two related dependent variables. First I determine the effect of incumbency on candidates' probability of running in the next election and then I determine the effect on candidates' probability of both running and winning in the next election. In the base model I include only three independent variables: the candidate's victory status in the current election, the candidate's margin of victory in the current election, and the interaction between these two terms. Margin of victory is calculated for each candidate depending on his or her victory status. For winners it is the candidate's percentage of the vote minus the percentage of the vote won by the losing candidate with the highest percentage. For losers it is the opposite; the candidate's percentage of the vote minus the percentage of the vote won by the winning candidate with the lowest percentage. This measure allows me to compare estimates in cities with multi-candidate races to those with single member elections.

All candidates and races are included in the analyses presented, but I also repeated them using only the winning candidate with the lowest total and the losing candidate with the highest total. Additionally in further tests I restricted the analysis to candidates whose margin of victory was +/- 50%, +/-25%, and +/-5%.<sup>5</sup> Finally, I tested alternative functional forms with second, third, and fourth order polynomials in the margin of victory.<sup>6</sup> The results changed very little

with these different specifications, so only the first order logistic regression results including all candidates are presented below in Table 2. In an alternate specification, shown in Table 3, I add city and decade fixed effects as well as a measure of candidate quality – campaign experience (the number of previous elections the candidate entered). Finally, I add indicators noting whether or not the election was a primary with no run-off, and whether or not the election was citywide in the council election models.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE] [INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In all of the models the effect of winning in election  $t$  has a positive and significant effect on the probability of running and winning in election  $t + 1$ . The graphical representation of these results, shown in Figures 1-4, makes the effect especially clear.

[INSERT FIGURES 1-4 ABOUT HERE]

The dots in these figures represent the unconditional (actual) mean of running or winning in election  $t + 1$  for intervals of margin of victory which are .02 wide. Losers are represented by points to the left of zero and winners are represented by points to the right. The lines represent predicted values from the regressions shown in Table 2. The jump in predicted probability of running and winning in the next election for candidates who won versus those who lost represents the estimated effect of incumbency. For mayors incumbency increases the probability of running in the next election by about .42 and the combined probability of running and winning by about .47.<sup>4</sup> For city councilors the effect is a 44 percentage point increase in the probability of running and a 46 percentage point increase in the probability of running and winning. In an additional analysis, I find that incumbent councilors increase their vote share in

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<sup>4</sup> For winners conditional on having run, the effect .64 for mayors and .50 for councilors.

the next election by about 10 percentage points.<sup>5</sup> Using the more typical measure of sophomore surge controlling for the number of candidates in the election, I find that the increase in vote share for councilors is about 10.3 percentage points and about 10.8 percentage points for mayors.

In order to have confidence that the incumbency advantage is not a selection effect it must be the case that the bare winners and bare losers of election  $t$  are similar (at time  $t$ ) on characteristics that might influence the outcome of election  $t$  and election  $t+1$ , such as political and campaign experience. Replacing the dependent variable with measures of political and campaign experience allows me to check this assumption by analyzing the differences in candidate quality for bare winners and bare losers. Regressing candidates' prior number of terms as mayor or councilor and prior number of runs for mayor or councilor on victory status, vote margin, and the interaction between the two reveals a small, although insignificant jump at zero for mayoral candidates, but not for councilors. What this means is that as of election  $t$ , winning mayoral candidates may have had slightly more experience than the losers; but councilors who barely won the election had (on average) the same amount of experience as candidates who barely lost. Graphical depictions of these results are shown in Figures 5-8.

[INSERT FIGURES 5-8 ABOUT HERE]

### **Decreasing Contestability of the Electoral Arena**

Given this evidence that local officials, particularly city councilors, benefit from an incumbency advantage net of their quality, this next section turns to an analysis of potential contributors to that advantage. The data are admittedly not ideal, but can offer some support for the argument that reelection may be disconnected from representation. The data are drawn

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<sup>5</sup> The analysis for mayoral candidates reveals a 2.4 percentage points for mayors but the result is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

primarily from the International City County Manager's Association (ICMA) which conducts periodic assessments of local governments. The ICMA mails a survey to city clerks in all United States cities with more than 2,500 residents. They have a response rate of about 64%.

Using surveys from 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001, I created a dataset with 7,174 unique local governments and a total of 18,416 observations (many cities were not included 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 was used for the 1986 observations and 2000 census data for the 2001 observations. Values were linearly interpolated for 1992 and 1996. Additionally data were merged in from the 1987, 1992, 1997, and 2002 Census of Governments files regarding city expenditures and numbers of municipal employees. Finally, I added data on state level institutions governing elections, published in Wolfinger et al (2005).

I argued above that low information elections and large patronage workforces should contribute to a less contestable electoral arena. We should expect then that weak incumbents will change institutions to increase their probability of victory such that less contestable electoral arenas will see higher incumbent reelection rates. The problem with evaluating these patterns empirically is that the cause and effect are cyclical. In an attempt to minimize this problem I take advantage of the subordinate status of cities with regard to state law and the time series nature of the dataset. First, I show that where states require the mailing of polling place locations fewer local incumbents run for and win reelection. Next, I show that cities with larger numbers of municipal employees per capita see increased incumbent run rates and increased incumbent reelection rates. Finally, I provide evidence that municipal expenditure on health and

welfare is significantly affected by local poverty levels only in states where polling place locations are mailed to voters even controlling for state fixed effects.

### **The Incumbency Advantage in Low Information Elections**

To analyze the factors that contribute to incumbent success I use the percentage of city councilors running for reelection and the proportion of those running who won as dependent variables. Table Four shows the mean values and standard deviations for the two dependent variables in each year.<sup>7</sup> The figures suggest that most incumbents choose to run for reelection and win, but that there is substantial variation across cities. So, given that all of these officials share some minimal amount of governance experience, what accounts for this variation? I argue that the contestability of the electoral environment plays a significant role.

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

I begin by analyzing the effect of low information environments on incumbents' propensity to run for reelection and victory rates. The analyses rely on a state level institution that has the potential to affect local level incumbents – the mailing of polling place locations to voters prior to election day. This measure is useful because it helps to avoid problems with endogeneity; city councilors are likely to be affected by the mailing of polling place locations, but they do not decide whether or not to provide the information to voters. To estimate the effect of this institution for municipal incumbents I split the sample into states that require election officials to mail polling locations versus those that do not. When voters are not mailed the location of polling places, it is the individual's responsibility to figure out where and when to vote. In states where officials are required to mail polling place locations voters should have more access to the

voting process and may be more informed about elected officials, so I expect fewer incumbents to run and win in cities located in these states.

I include a number of control variables that might affect incumbents' decisions to run and their ability to get reelected. In both analyses I add a dummy variable designating whether a majority of the city council is elected by *District* or at-large. 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. I include a dummy variable noting whether or not elections are *Partisan*. Although parties play a diminished role at the local level as compared to the days of classic machines, in some cases parties continue to provide organizational and financial support to candidates as well as resources for mobilizing voters. For this reason partisan elections may have a positive effect on incumbency reelection rates. On the other hand, because voters tend to have less information about challengers in nonpartisan cities they may be more likely to rely on incumbency as a cue for experience in these cases.

To capture the possibility that incumbents are more likely to run when they earn more money or have more power, I include the percentage of city budget spent on *Central Staff* (which includes councilors' salaries) and whether the city has a *Council-manager* or mayor-council structure. Bridges (1997) and Oliver and Ha (2007) argue that council-manager structures tend to create low information political arenas. However, typically councilors in these cities have fewer opportunities to influence city policy because of the power of the city manager, so there is no clear prediction for this variable. As a proxy for potential opportunity costs I include the

proportion of the council that is *Lawyers* and the proportion that is *Retired*. I expect the effect of the former measure to be negative and the latter to be positive. I also control for the presence of council *Term-Limits* and *Staggered* council terms.

In the analysis of incumbent reelection rates, as a proxy for candidate quality, I include the proportion of the council that identifies as *Business Managers* and *Professionals*.<sup>6</sup> Research on the federal incumbency advantage has found that economic downturns can hurt incumbents (Brady, Buckley, and Rivers 1999). I control for this with using the proportion of people in the city who are *Unemployed*. 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. I use the proportion of housing units occupied by *Home-Owners* to represent this population. To ensure that the results are not due to the number of councilors seeking *Reelection*, I include this total as a control. Cities in which no incumbents ran for reelection are excluded from this analysis.

Given that no politician can rely on disconnected reelection strategies alone, for an incumbent to represent her constituents she must be able to determine what the people want from a representative. This is likely to be harder in more heterogeneous places. I capture this with a measure of the racial *Diversity* of the population. This is a Herfindahl index (sum of the squared proportions) of the African American, Latino, Asian American, and white populations in a city. Additionally Oliver and Ha (2007) find that more diverse cities engender increased interest in local campaigns. For these reasons, I expect fewer incumbents to run and win in more diverse cities. Finally I include the natural log of the *Total Population* to control for political patterns

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<sup>6</sup> The ICMA categorizes the occupation of city councilors into 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, however Trounstine (2008) provides evidence that many local officials are prominent members of the business community. I use the categories of business managers and professionals as possible indicators of this characteristic.

related to city size. Fixed effects for states and survey years (1992, 1996, and 2001 with 1986 as the excluded category) are also included; standard errors are clustered by city to account for any relationship in the errors across years. Table Five shows the estimated values of the proportion of incumbents running and winning from these models (with standard errors in parentheses), holding all variables constant at their mean values.<sup>8</sup> The fully specified models are available in appendix Table A1.

[INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The results are clear: When states require the mailing of polling place information, fewer incumbents run for reelection and a smaller proportion win. About one incumbent councilor in every two cities declines to run and about one councilor in every nine cities loses.

### **The Incumbency Advantage and Municipal Workforces**

To determine whether or not patronage continues to operate as an important component of the incumbency advantage I analyze the effect on incumbency run and reelection rates of the per capita size of the *Municipal Workforce*. Clearly it would be preferable to use a measure that only included appointed officials or at least positions not covered by civil service; as Freedman (1994) explains in detail, these types of data are not available for most cities. Instead I use the overall size of the non-school related municipal workforce as a proxy for this concept. As explained above, we should expect that incumbents will have incentives to increase the municipal workforce to increase their safety, which ought to make us cautious about the direction of the relationship between these two variables. In an attempt to alleviate this problem to some degree I use a lagged version of the independent variable such that employment levels from 1987, 1992, and 1997 are used to predict reelection rates in 1992, 1996, and 2001

respectively. I use the same models described above with the addition of a lagged measure of the proportion of the city budget spent on *Payroll* and a lagged measure of the number of *Functions* handled by the city.<sup>9</sup> I also add controls for *Unemployment* and *Population change* in an attempt to rule out the alternative explanation that a large municipal workforce is actually a measure of responsiveness. Table six presents the results of these analyses.

[INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

The data from the first column of Table 6 suggest that a larger municipal workforce increases the proportion of incumbents who run for reelection. Moving from the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile in the per capita measure of municipal employees increases the proportion of incumbents running about one percentage point, from 43.4% to 44.5%. A large municipal workforce has the opposite effect for incumbents once they enter electoral contests. This makes sense given that using patronage employees for explicitly political work is no longer as widespread as it once was in city elections. In fact, restricting the analysis to cities in which no municipal employees were unionized in 1986 reverses the sign on employees per capita although the result is not statistically significant. The effect is even more powerful and closer to statistical significance when the analysis is also restricted to cities with non-concurrent elections (elections which are not held in November of even numbered years). These results are shown in the third column of Table 6. In these places, where turnout is typically low and municipal employees have no official bargaining structure, large municipal workforces increase the predicted share of incumbents who win. This finding suggests that a large municipal workforce is not simply a sign that governments are responding to demands among residents for employment or services.

## Indirectly Identifying Monopolies

I argued above that institutions that reduce the contestability of elections allow incumbents to win reelection without being responsive to voters. So, where politicians rely on disconnected strategies to increase their probability of maintaining office, cities should have identifiably different expenditure patterns. Imagine it were true that the median voter prefers some distribution of municipal benefits and that this is a slightly different distribution than is preferred by incumbents. Changes in demographics which shift the preferences of the median voter should affect spending patterns only in cities where incumbents do not rely on disconnected strategies of reelection. In the cases where incumbents have the luxury of insulation, their reelection should not depend on responsiveness.

To study this I analyze changes in the percentage of the municipal budget spent on *Health* and *Public Welfare* as a function of changes in a select number of demographic variables including change in the percentage of city residents in *Poverty*, the change in the percentage of residents who are *Non-citizens*, and change in *Median* household income. I control for the change in total *Revenue* and *Intergovernmental* revenue, adjusted for inflation, change in *Population*, change in percent *Homeowners*, and dummy indicators for local institutions (*Concurrent* elections, *Partisan* elections, *District* elections, and *Council Manager* systems). Fixed effects for states and year of the survey are also included. I split the sample by states that require officials to mail polling place locations versus those that do not to indicate relative degrees of contestability in the electoral arena. Table 7 shows the results of this analysis

[TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE]

As predicted, in low information environments, spending patterns are disconnected from the median voter. Only where polling place locations are mailed to voters does changing the needy

population have an affect on the change in spending on health and welfare. In these cities increasing the proportion of the population in poverty and increasing the percentage of non-citizens increases redistributive spending. Where elections are less contestable the effect of these variables is much smaller and they do not reach statistical significance.

## **Conclusion**

Gaining deeper knowledge of the presence and sources of the incumbency advantage contributes to our understanding of representative democracy. This paper has provided evidence that city mayors and council members are more likely to run and more likely to win after they have served a single term in office. It is plausible that this is the result of actions these officials take in office. Voters may value their experience and their effectiveness. However, some strategies for reelection are disconnected from the quality of representation voters receive. Using an economic market as an analogy we can find evidence of institutions that reduce the contestability of the political arena. Information may be incomplete, challenger entry limited, voter participation restricted, and votes may not translate into seat shares in a neutral way. Like the political machines famous at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political coalitions still use disconnected reelection strategies to increase their safety in office. Even controlling for a large number of demographic and contextual variables, incumbents are more likely to run and more likely to win in certain institutional settings. I find that low-information elections and a large municipal workforce can contribute to an increased incumbency advantage and that when the political arena is less contestable spending on health and welfare becomes disconnected from demographic changes.

*Table 1: Disconnected Reelection Strategies*

<b>Limiting Information</b>	<b>Limiting Entry or Exit of Challengers</b>	<b>Constraining Vote Choice</b>	<b>Disproportionate Seat Allocation</b>
Suppression of voluntary associations	Assassinating/threatening/imprisoning opposition candidates	Vote bribery	Malapportionment
Government controlled media	Candidate requirements (signatures, thresholds)	Suffrage restrictions	Reserved seats in the government's favor
Low information elections	Use of government resources to prevent opponent organization or enhance incumbent organization		Gerrymandering

**Table 2: Incumbency Advantage 1900-1985**

Dependent Variable	Mayoral Elections						City Council Elections					
	Probability of Running Election $t+1$			Probability of Winning Election $t+1$			Probability of Running Election $t+1$			Probability of Winning Election $t+1$		
	Coefficient	St. Err		Coefficient	St. Err		Coefficient	St. Err		Coefficient	St. Err	
Won, Election $t$	1.666	**	0.355	2.302	**	0.650	1.618	**	0.215	1.765	**	0.320
Margin, Election $t$	1.754	*	0.998	5.209		3.678	1.412	**	0.467	3.151	**	0.945
Margin*Won	-2.699	*	1.426	-5.000		3.780	-1.682	**	0.573	-2.734	**	0.994
Constant	-1.013	**	0.273	-2.300	**	0.605	-0.945	**	0.175	-1.854	**	0.272
$N$	321			321			1445			1445		
Pseudo $R^2$	0.150			0.306			0.160			0.254		

Note: Logistic regressions; Robust standard errors clustered by election

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$

The regression discontinuity design suggests that if the incumbency effect were attributable solely to selection then we ought to see no substantive or significant effect on “won” or the interaction of “margin\*won.” The interaction effect is included to allow the vote margin to affect winners and losers differently.

**Table 3: Incumbency Advantage 1900-1985 with City and Decade Fixed Effects**

Dependent Variable	Mayoral Elections				City Council Elections			
	Probability of Running Election $t+1$		Probability of Running & Winning Election $t+1$		Probability of Running Election $t+1$		Probability of Running & Winning Election $t+1$	
	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err
Won, Election $t$	1.927 **	0.415	2.77 **	0.722	1.666 **	0.223	1.935 **	0.341
Margin, Election $t$	1.255	1.116	5.146	3.579	1.606 **	0.519	3.369 **	0.998
Margin*Won	-1.109	1.523	-4.212	3.757	-1.839 **	0.662	-3.027 **	1.071
Prior Runs	-0.126	0.096	-0.239 *	0.130	-0.028	0.053	-0.128 **	0.061
City Wide Election					-0.677 **	0.243	-0.995 **	0.273
Primary, No Run-off					0.096	0.182	0.326 *	0.200
Constant	-1.220 *	0.710	-1.443 *	1.133	-0.918 **	0.257	-1.683 **	0.338
$N$	321		321		1445		1445	
Pseudo $R^2$	0.237		0.390		0.190		0.294	

Note: Logistic regressions; Robust standard errors clustered by election; City and decade fixed effects included but not presented

\* $p < .10$  \*\* $p < .05$

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***Table 4: Average Percentage of Incumbents Running and Winning***

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Year	Mean % Incumbents Running	Mean % Running Incumbents Reelected
1986	59% (32%)	88% (25%)
1992	76% (22%)	82% (22%)
1996	75% (23%)	85% (21%)
2001	73% (25%)	85% (24%)

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***Table 5: Effect of Low Information Elections on Incumbent Reelection***

Incumbents Running for Reelection		Running Incumbents Reelected	
Polling Location Mailed	No Mail Requirement	Polling Location Mailed	No Mail Requirement
38.0% (0.004)	44.7% (0.002)	84.0% (0.006)	85.6% (0.003)
Difference +6.7%		Difference +1.6%	

Note: Cell entries are estimates predicted using regressions in Table A1; Standard errors in parentheses. Differences are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ )

Table 6: Effect of Patronage on Incumbent Reelection

	% Incumbents Running		% Running Incumbents Reelected		% Running Incumbents Reelected in Non-Unionized, Non-Concurrent Elections	
	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err
Lagged Per Capita Municipal Workforce	0.478 **	0.149	-0.896 **	0.222	0.493	0.467
Lagged # City Functions	-0.003	0.002	0.003	0.003	-0.001	0.005
Lagged % Budget Spent on Payroll	-0.022	0.022	-0.059 *	0.033	-0.07	0.048
Lagged % Unemployed	0.059	0.182	-0.875	0.556	-1.562 **	0.658
Population Change	0.000 *	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Partisan Elections	-0.005	0.011	0.013	0.014	0.015	0.015
District Council	0.021 **	0.007	0.023 **	0.009	0.028 **	0.012
Diversity	0.012	0.02	-0.114 **	0.039	-0.073 *	0.045
Population (log)	0.013 **	0.005	-0.015 *	0.008	-0.019	0.014
% Council Lawyers	-0.007	0.03				
% Council Retired	0.049 **	0.015				
Council Manager System	-0.010	0.007				
% Budget Spent on Central Staff	0.121 **	0.045				
Term Limits	-0.025	0.017				
Staggered Council Elections	-0.315 **	0.016				
% Council Professionals			0.074 **	0.026	0.063 *	0.033
% Council Businessmen			0.035 *	0.019	0.030	0.026
% Unemployed			0.297	0.551	1.255 *	0.659
% Homeowners			0.004	0.044	0.084	0.059
# Incumbents Running			-0.016 **	0.003	-0.019 **	0.005
y1996	0.000	0.006	0.023 **	0.009	0.016	0.012
y2001	-0.011 *	0.007	-0.037 **	0.011	-0.044 *	0.015
Intercept	0.558 **	0.062	1.049 **	0.144	0.900 **	0.140
<i>N</i>	7646		7426		3185	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.366		0.062		0.086	

Note: OLS regressions; Robust errors clustered by city; State fixed effects included but not presented. Models weighted by city population to correct for heteroscedasticity.

\**p*<.10 \*\**p*<.05

Table 7: Effect of Contestability on Spending Patterns

	No Mail Requirement		Polling Place Location Mailed	
	Change % City Budget Spent on Health and Welfare			
	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err
Change % in Poverty	0.027	0.020	0.112 **	0.054
Change % Non-citizens	0.024	0.020	0.120 **	0.056
Change Median Income (millions)	0.047	0.090	0.040	0.065
Change Total Population (millions)	0.029	0.021	0.029	0.037
Change Intergovernmental Revenue (millions)	-0.024	0.026	0.005	0.045
Change Total Revenue (millions)	0.011	0.021	-0.004	0.005
Change % Homeowners	0.016	0.021	-0.032	0.024
Concurrent Elections	0.001	0.001	-0.002 **	0.001
Council Manager System	-0.001 *	0.001	0.001	0.001
Nonpartisan Elections	-0.002	0.001	-0.004	0.003
District Council	0.001	0.001	-0.002 *	0.001
y1996	-0.003 **	0.001	-0.002 *	0.001
y2001	-0.004 **	0.001	-0.005 **	0.001
Intercept	0.002 **	0.002	0.012 **	0.004
<i>N</i>	5928		1559	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.008		0.036	

Note: OLS regressions; Robust errors clustered by city; State fixed effects included but not presented.

\**p*<.10 \*\**p*<.05

Figure 1: Mayoral Elections  
Probability of Running

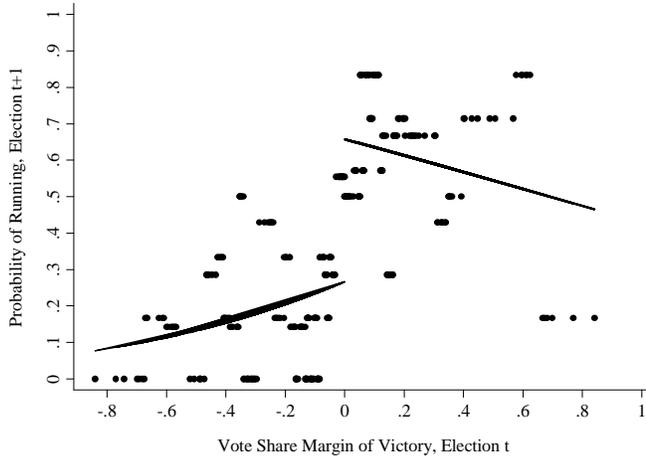


Figure 2: Mayoral Elections  
Probability of Winning

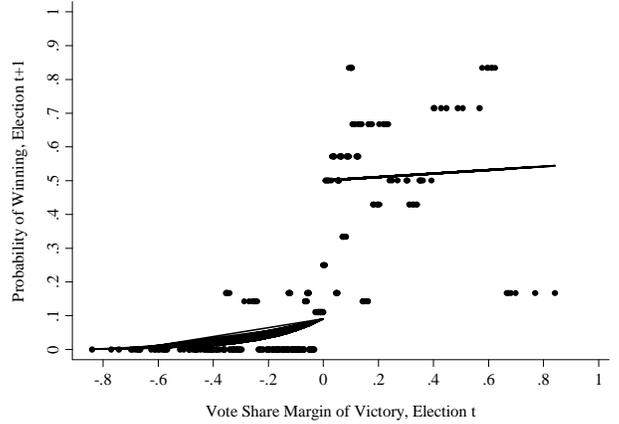


Figure 3: City Council Elections  
Probability of Running

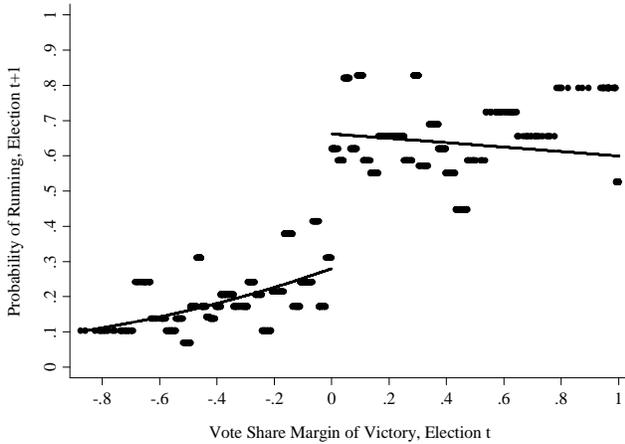


Figure 4: City Council Elections  
Probability of Winning

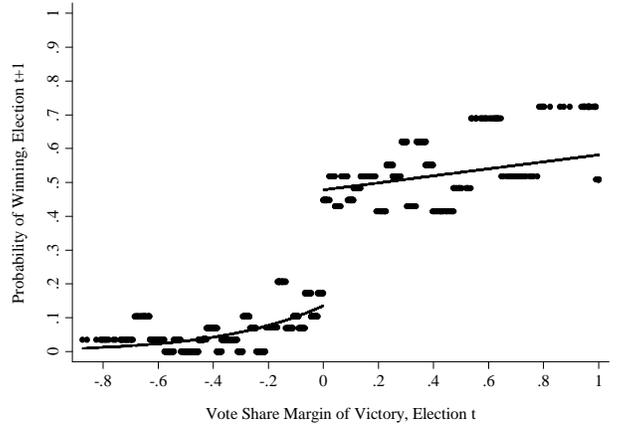


Figure 5: Mayors  
Past Electoral Experience

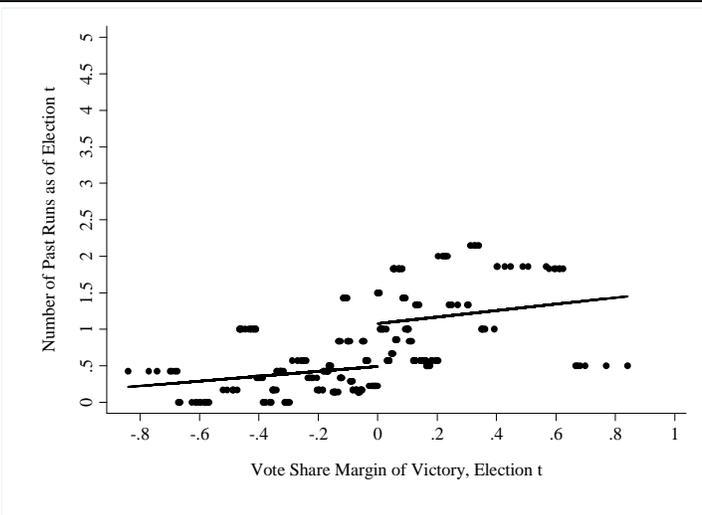


Figure 6: Mayors  
Past Political Experience

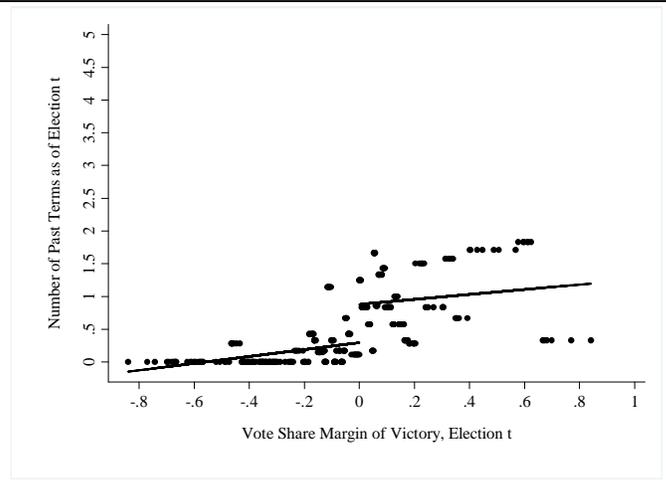


Figure 7: City Councilors  
Past Electoral Experience

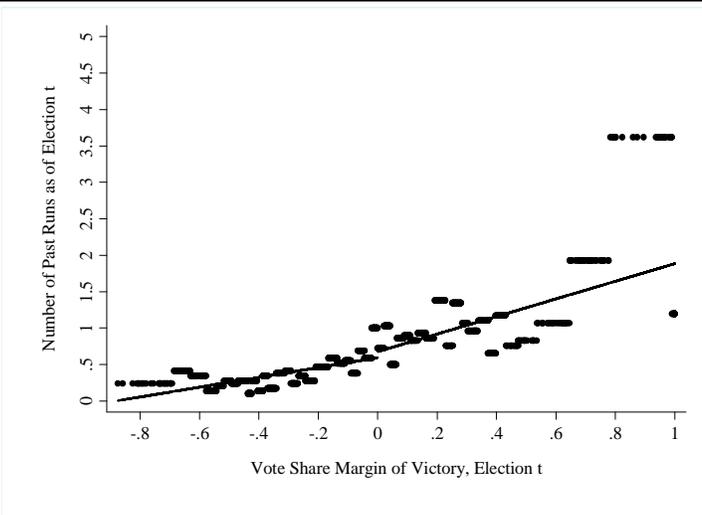
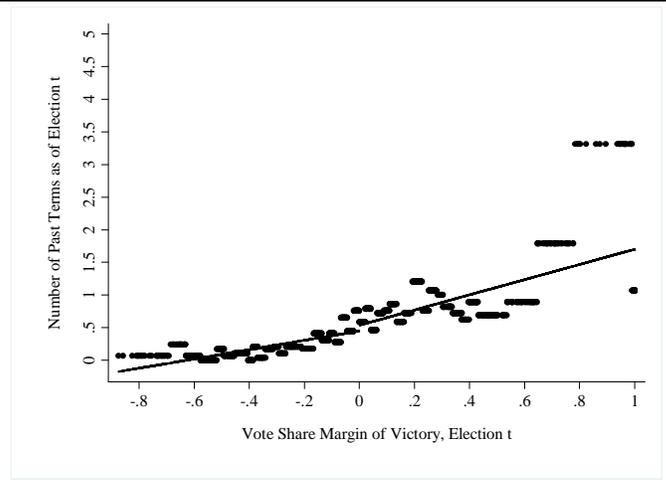


Figure 8: City Councilors  
Past Political Experience



## Appendix

Table A1: Effect of Low Information Elections on Incumbent Reelection

	Poll Mail: Running		No Poll Mail: Running		Poll Mail: Reelected		No Poll Mail: Reelected	
	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err	Coefficient	St Err
Partisan Elections	-0.014	0.017	0.000	0.007	0.047 **	0.021	0.018 **	0.008
District Council	0.024 **	0.012	0.020 **	0.005	0.024	0.015	0.014 **	0.006
Diversity	-0.065 **	0.026	-0.028 *	0.016	-0.143 **	0.046	-0.036	0.023
Population (log)	0.005	0.004	0.008 **	0.002	0.000	0.006	-0.002	0.003
% Council								
Lawyers	-0.084 **	0.031	-0.061 **	0.024				
% Council								
Retired	0.011	0.019	0.030 **	0.011				
Council Manager								
System	0.006	0.013	-0.019 **	0.005				
% Budget Spent								
on Central Staff	0.077	0.061	0.097 **	0.036				
Term Limits	-0.033 **	0.013	-0.054 **	0.009				
Staggered								
Council Elections	-0.301 **	0.024	-0.315 **	0.009				
% Council								
Professionals					0.035	0.037	0.060 **	0.019
% Council								
Businessmen					0.027	0.026	0.034 **	0.012
% Unemployed					-0.516	0.335	-0.311 *	0.180
% Homeowners					0.135 **	0.047	-0.002	0.029
# Running					-0.023 **	0.004	-0.011 **	0.002
Intercept	0.548 **	0.060	0.579 **	0.037	0.893 **	0.103	0.877 **	0.050
y1992	0.092 **	0.010	0.100 **	0.006	0.028 *	0.016	0.003	0.007
y1996	0.085 **	0.010	0.099 **	0.006	0.052 **	0.015	0.019 **	0.007
y2001	0.065 **	0.011	0.090 **	0.006	-0.022	0.019	-0.029 **	0.009
N	2472		9334		2287		8996	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.2668		0.3875		0.0446		0.0313	

Note: Robust Errors Clustered by City; State fixed effects included but not presented

\* $p < .10$  \*\* $p < .05$

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<sup>1</sup> There is a growing literature that argues that responsiveness to voters can produce less effective governance than non-responsiveness. See for instance Canes-Wrone et al (2001) who argue that politicians will sometimes "pander" to public opinion; disregarding private knowledge that following public opinion will lead to suboptimal outcomes. Their theory suggests that this is most likely to happen in close races and when the pandering is likely to go undetected. So it could be that an uncontestable market (because it increases incumbent safety) increases the probability of good outcomes in the long run. For the purposes of this article, I argue that contestability increases responsiveness and remain agnostic about the whether this is a good or bad state of the world.

<sup>2</sup> For an expanded list and in depth discussion of these strategies see Trounstein, Jessica. 2008. *Political Monopolies in American Cities: The Rise and Fall of Bosses and Reformers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> This figure is from data provided by Wolfinger et al who collected information for 42 states. I collected information for seven of the remaining states by calling secretaries of state. Oregon is excluded where votes are cast by mail. The information is for federal elections. The states requiring mailing are Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland, New Jersey, Nevada, New York, and Wyoming.

<sup>4</sup> It would be better if I could estimate these analyses without including candidates from the same race. For example Lee (2001) only includes Democratic candidates. I am unable to do this in

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the mayoral analysis because there the same party nearly always wins the general election (the Democrats during this time period). The nonpartisan council elections also prevent me from analyzing the fate of a single coalition over time. I attempt to deal with the econometric problem in two ways. First, in all of the analyses presented I cluster the standard errors by election. Secondly, I repeated the specifications after randomly selecting a winner and loser from each election. The results do not change in any substantial way.

<sup>5</sup> There are too few mayoral elections in this final category to run the analysis, but the results do not change for city council elections.

<sup>6</sup> Results of these alternative specifications are available from the author upon request.

<sup>7</sup> Table 4 only includes cities in which council terms are not staggered. The average run rate for cities with staggered terms is 36%.

<sup>8</sup> All estimates were generated using Clarify in Stata.

<sup>9</sup> This latter variable was calculated by counting the non-zero expenditure categories listed by the Census of Governments.