# Information, Turnout, and Incumbency in Local Elections

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Abstract:

It is a well established fact that incumbents win reelection at high rates. But scholars continue to 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. Next, 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. Then I provide evidence that low-information and low-participation elections 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 argued 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. Just noting high reelection rates can not help us to untangle the source of the advantage, but doing so is crucial for evaluating the success of democracy. If it is the case that winning is disconnected from quality or from voter approval then constituents may lack meaningful representation and may not be able to control their government. We can expect less policy responsiveness in cases where incumbents are protected by institutional mechanisms that decrease contestability.

The goal of this paper is to use local level elections in the United States to establish a causal link between incumbency and reelection that goes beyond selection and to provide evidence that institutions can simultaneously increase the probability of reelection and decrease

policy responsiveness  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. While the average reelection rate of Congressional incumbents hovers in the high 90s (see Abramowitz et al 2006), the average reelection rate at the local level is about ten percentage points lower and has 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 in a number of large cities, we have little comparative work than analyzes the causal mechanisms. Given that different factors may affect reelection at different levels of government, more work is needed with a local focus.

Aside from extending analysis to the local level, this paper contributes to the larger debate on incumbency by offering more detailed explanations of the institutional mechanisms that work to protect incumbents (like lengthy registration requirements or gerrymandering) and the effect that such institutions have on representation. I present a theoretical framework that allows 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. It is only by focusing on elections at the local level that we capture enough variation in systemic structure to test this idea.

I begin by reviewing a small slice of the vast literature on incumbency. Then, I present a discussion of institutions and 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 using a regression discontinuity analysis. Then, with a modern data set of more than 7,000 cities I show that state institutions that decrease information about elections and decrease participation increase the proportion of incumbents who run for reelection and the proportion who win. I then connect low turnout to high reelection rates. Finally, I show that less contestable systems are more likely to generate unresponsive municipal policy. I argue that together these findings indicate that incumbents benefit from institutional structures that enhance the probability of reelection regardless of the office holder's quality or performance as a representative.

**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.[1] 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 select 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 have been in danger of losing. This evidence suggests that the incumbency advantage is a selection effect – there is no causal link between incumbency and reelection; office holders and challengers are simply not comparable types of candidates.

Others suggest that incumbency does have a causal relationship with reelection – the basis of which is office holders' increased governing experience and success in representing

constituent demands. Once elected, incumbents have the opportunity to gain experience, provide services, and make policy decisions that benefit their constituents (Herrera and Yawn 1999, Cain, et al 1987, Fiorina 19789). The greater their 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 and 2002, Stone et al 2004). Abramowitz et al (2006) explain that the modern increase in the incumbency advantage reflects a stronger connection between incumbents and constituents as people have come to live in increasingly homogenous communities. Richard Fenno's work epitomizes the view that incumbent reelection is the result of finely honed relationships between office holders and constituents. 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, reelection is a sign that voters are being well represented.

In an alternative view, a view that this paper supports, the reelection of incumbents can reflect a distortion of the democratic process when incumbents win due to biases in the system that favor current office holders. 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 which may not be related to the quality or performance of the incumbent. These include benefits like franking (Jacobson 1997, Cover and Brumberg 1982, Mayhew 1974), campaign resources (Abramowitz 1991, Abramowitz et al 2006), media coverage (Prior 2006), and control over districting (McDonald 2006, Monmonmier 2001, Tufte 1973). We need not worry about these kinds of advantages if selection effects ensure that the politicians in office are the best candidates. However, if selection effects do not completely explain the incumbency advantage, and if these resources increase the propensity to win regardless of the performance of the office holder, the incumbency advantage might be more akin to a new suit. In such cases we can say that the electoral connection is likely to be damaged and we can expect policy to be disconnected from constituents' preferences.

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 find 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 it is indeed the case that safe incumbents are less responsive but continue to see reelection rates similar to responsive incumbents, then we should question the claim that reelection is driven by attentiveness to constituents.

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). Local candidate success has been linked to campaign spending (Krebs and Pelissero 2001, Fuchs et al 2000; Krebs; Lieske; Lewis et al 1995), name recognition (Lieske), 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 graduated from an Ivy League school (Lieske) or a possessing 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 campaigns and in office. 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 with which to satisfy their constituents. It then comes as no surprise that these politicians win reelection.

A few findings point toward an effect of incumbency that is not attributable to selection or responsiveness. Lascher (2005) finds that California incumbents are more likely to win in large counties, a result he ascribes to low challenger visibility. 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.[2] A 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. These findings are consistent with my argument that incumbents sometimes win reelection regardless of their performance as representatives. In the next section I describe institutional settings that make this outcome more likely to occur.

**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. Economists have developed a set of conditions that describe competitive markets in which social welfare is maximized. We can draw on this framework for thinking about political markets and to describe a set of conditions in which representation is maximized.

In a perfectly competitive political market there should be complete information about governmental performance and available alternatives. There should be free and instantaneous entry into, exit from, and behavior in the market for both candidates and voters, and there should be an efficient and neutral relationship between seat shares and vote shares. When these conditions are violated the political coalition in power has the freedom to be unresponsive to constituents without fear of electoral reappraisals. The degree to which these conditions are met suggests the degree of contestability of the political market.

There are many different types of institutional arrangements and electoral strategies that violate these contestability conditions. Table 1 provides a sample of institutions that do so.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Given that all political systems (just like all economic markets) are uncontestable to some extent it is useful to think of systems as arranged along a spectrum of contestability rather than as contestable or not. At one end of the spectrum where information is perfect, entry and exit is unrestrained, and vote shares are translated efficiently into seat shares, incumbents can only win by being perfectly responsive to constituents.[3] At the other end of the spectrum (which is my interest in this paper) the maintenance of power is wholly disconnected from the quality of candidates and representation of constituents.

In short, institutions that decrease contestability have an inverse relationship with incumbency and responsiveness. When politicians operate in an environment of limited contestability they are freed from constituents' demands even while they are advantaged in elections. The less contestable the political system, the more likely we are to find the government responding to a narrowly defined constituency whose demands are more stable, consistent, and easier to identify than the demands of a larger constituency would be.

Thus, politicians have an incentive to maintain a low level of contestability both to increase their chances of reelection and to maintain a more manageable electorate. However it is important to note that we need not witness competitive elections to have a contestable political market. The *threat* of losing may be enough to inspire responsiveness (see Baumol, Panzar, and Willig 1982). Given the institutional context that they face, we can expect politicians to behave strategically when choosing to run for office and deciding what strategies to adopt to ensure reelection – they will be as responsive as they need to be. Thus, it is integral that we understand systemic contestability (not just competition) when we study incumbency. The following sections describe in more detail the operation of institutions that decrease contestability in American cities.

**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. The lack of political information among potential voters is a well established feature of modern politics. But some electoral institutions are likely to exacerbate this condition by decreasing the availability, accuracy, or comprehensiveness of information about elections and governmental performance. For instance, only four states, California, Maryland, Nevada, and New Jersey require sample ballots to be mailed to registered voters prior to municipal elections.[4] When voters have greater difficultly learning about their governance options they may be more likely to use incumbency as a heuristic.[5] This could lead incumbents to win reelection even if they have done little to respond to the preferences of their constituents.

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

When institutions restrict the entry, exit, or behavior of candidates or voters incumbents can benefit. Historically local (and state) incumbents used institutions like poll-taxes, literacy tests, and white primaries to decrease participation and shape their electorates. Although these mechanisms are no longer available, scholars have identified a number of different institutions that decrease the entry of voters in modern elections (e.g. Wolfinger et al 2005). Today only nine states require registrars to mail voters the location of their polling place for local elections[6] and in all but seven states voters must register at least 10 days before any election.[7] This means that in most 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 35% of registered voters, falling as low as 1% in some places.[8]

Where constituents have less political information or are less likely to take advantage of their options for replacing elected officials we can expect incumbents to have an easier time ensuring that turnout favors their candidacy. Incumbents may be able to selectively target supporters for mobilization and they may be better able to take advantage of the tendency for voters to use name recognition as a heuristic for quality. Furthermore, incumbents might have an easier time defining and catering to the demands of a smaller electorate whose preferences could be quite different from the community at large. Thus, institutions that are designed to increase participation should make the political system more contestable and policy more likely to reflect the preferences of the broader community. Reelection should be more difficult and less desirable in such cases.

**Translating Votes to Seats**

This third contestability condition describes the degree of systemic advantage for coalitions of incumbents in translating vote shares into seat shares. The relationship between votes and seats has been well-studied by legislative scholars who have defined precise ways to measure the degree to which a system is rigged in favor of a given coalition (see King and Browning 1987 for example). 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 be overwhelmingly populated by one party, it is difficult to develop testable counterfactuals. However, if we were able to identify

rigged seat shares in municipal systems we should also find an increase in incumbency advantage and a decrease in responsiveness in these cases.

This theoretical framework leads to a number of related predictions which are tested in the remainder of the paper. First, we should be able to detect an incumbency advantage that is not solely due to selection. I find that when we compare candidates who barely won elections to those who barely lost, winners see a marked increase in their probability of running and winning in the next election. Second, institutions that decrease contestability should positively affect incumbents' decisions to run for reelection and the probability that they will win. I find that incumbents are more likely to run and win in cities where state institutions decrease information and participation. Finally, policy should be less responsive in less contestable arenas. I provide evidence that expenditure is less likely to be connected to city demographics in low information and low participation elections. Cumulatively these findings indicate that uncontestable environments lead to a scenario in which reelection can be disconnected from responsiveness.

**Establishing an Incumbency Advantage Beyond Selection**

Scholars employ a number of different methods for studying the incumbency advantage in state and federal contests. The technique developed by Gelman and King (1990) represents the foundation of many analyses because it explicitly models incumbent strength independent of a party's strength among voters. Gelman and King measure incumbency advantage as the difference between a party's expected vote share when running an incumbent and the party's expected vote share when running a new candidate. However, given that most local elections (~75%) are nonpartisan we can not use this method to gain a thorough understanding of incumbency at the local level. Two additional measures, the sophomore surge and the retirement

slump are common the literature (see for example Ansolabehere et al 2007 or Ansolabehere and Gerber 1997). The retirement slump, which averages the parties' vote share loss when their members do not seek reelection, is also unusable in nonpartisan contests. However, the sophomore surge, which measures the average vote gain for an incumbent in her second election can be applied in nonpartisan settings 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 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 is a quasi-experimental design 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 $t + 1$. This set-up assumes that margin of victory is an indicator of candidate strength or quality and that the determination of winning or losing in very close elections is essentially random.

What this means it that we should expect candidates who barely win elections to be similar to candidates who barely lost elections. They are equally "strong" candidates. When it comes time for the next election, the only difference between them is the determination of whether or not they won the earlier election. If the incumbency advantage is merely a selection effect, only margin of victory should affect outcomes in the next election, not the candidates' winner/loser status. Furthermore, at the time of the first election the candidates should be statistically identical with regard to all characteristics (like political experience) that are likely to

affect winning in election *t* and election *t*+1. If we find incumbency status to have an effect on the probability of running and of winning in the next election, and if we can show that bare winners are not significantly more experienced than bare losers, then we have support for a causal incumbency effect.

I modify Lee's method to study incumbency at the local level in order to rule out the argument that the advantage is wholly attributable to selection.[9] The data that I use come from nine cities, cover the years 1900 to 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 available 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.

In the mayoral cities each election year contains at least two observations; a winner and one or more losers in the general mayoral race.[10] The data are more complicated for the nonpartisan city council elections. In all four 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 election $t + 1$ and then I determine the effect on candidates' probability of both running and winning in election $t + 1$. In the base model I include only three independent variables: the candidate's victory status in election $t$, the candidate's margin of victory in election $t$, 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 total. 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 multi-candidate races to those with only two candidates.

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 (not shown, available upon request) I restricted the analysis to candidates whose margin of victory was +/- 50%, +/-25%, and +/-5%.[11] I tested alternative functional forms with second, third, and fourth order polynomials in the margin of victory. I analyzed the data for elections before 1950 separately from post-1950 elections. I added city and decade fixed effects, 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 models. Finally, I split the council analysis into two regressions analyzing district elections separately from at-large elections. The results changed very little with these different specifications, so only the first order logistic regression results including all candidates with no controls are presented below in Table 2.

[INSERT TABLE 2 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 0.02 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 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 percentage points and the combined probability of running and winning by about 47 percentage points. For city councilors the effect is a 44 point increase in the probability of running and a 46 point increase in the probability of running and winning. In an additional analysis, I find that incumbent councilors increase their vote share in the next election by about 10 percentage points.[12] 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 percentage points and about 11 percentage points for mayors.

However, we might expect to see such a large reelection gap if winners are significantly better candidates than losers and elections successfully sort out this relationship. That is, 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. If the candidates who win elections really are stronger then we would expect to see

measurable differences between the quality of the winners and quality of the losers at the time of the first election. It would be best if we had measures of all of the relevant indicators of quality such as campaign funds and charismatic appeal. These data are not available. Instead I compare winners and losers on two measures of quality that I do have – their campaign experience (the number of previous elections the candidate entered) and their governing experience (the number of previous terms the candidate served).[13]

Figures 5-8 demonstrate that there are no significant differences between bare winners and bare losers of city council elections, but that winners of mayoral elections have slightly more experience than the losers.[14]

[INSERT FIGURES 5-8 ABOUT HERE]

The difference between councilors and mayors can be explained (at least in part) by data limitations. I have very few extremely close mayoral races in the data set. This means we would expect most winners of mayoral elections to be significantly better candidates than the losers. To test the effect of quality more formally, I added the variable *Prior runs* to the base model presented in Table 2. The results (available upon request) suggest a positive effect for quality but virtually no change on the effect of winning for either mayors or city councilors. Thus, we can be confident that the regression discontinuity design is picking up real incumbency effects.

**Decreasing Contestability of the Electoral Arena**

Given the evidence that local officials, particularly city councilors, who win election to office once are more likely to run and win a second time, this section turns to an analysis of potential contributors to that advantage. It may be that after one term officials gain experience and expertise that is valued by voters and that once elected incumbents are responsive to

constituents' preferences. Or it could be that uninformed voters assume this to be the case and use incumbency as a heuristic for quality. Particularly if challengers are risk averse in the face if these realities we would expect a large incumbency effect. But it may be the case that some electoral arenas make it more likely that constituents will be uninformed, that challengers will face hurdles to entry, and that turnout will favor incumbents. It is undoubtedly the case that multiple mechanisms are responsible for producing the incumbency advantage revealed by the regression discontinuity. However, if some institutional settings make it easier for incumbents to insulate their power we should see a measurable increase in incumbency advantage in these less contestable environments.

The problem with evaluating this prediction empirically is that the cause and effect are cyclical. That is, we should expect weak incumbents to create less contestable political arenas that increase the incumbency advantage while decreasing the need for responsiveness. In an attempt to minimize this problem I take advantage of the subordinate status of cities with regard to state law. First, I show that where states require the mailing of sample ballots and polling place locations and allow same day voter registration fewer local incumbents run for and win reelection. Next, I show that these institutions also increase turnout and that higher turnout is associated with lower incumbent reelection rates. Finally, I provide evidence that policy is less connected to community needs in less contestable political arenas. I find that municipal expenditure on health and welfare is less likely to be linked to poverty levels where voters are not mailed sample ballots or polling place locations and when they are required to register a month before elections. Given that incumbents are more likely to win in these institutional settings, these findings support my argument that uncontestable arenas aid incumbents at the expense of representation.

The admittedly imperfect data that I use to draw these conclusions 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 64%. Using surveys from 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001, I created a dataset with 7,174 unique municipalities 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 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, I added data on state level institutions governing local elections such as requirements to mail sample ballots and polling place locations, as well as the cut-off date for registration. I identified states that required sample ballot and polling place mailings by evaluating statutes for states that Wolfinger et al (2005) code as having sent mailings for the 2000 presidential election.[15] The coding of these variables is constant for all years of the data. I gathered registration deadlines from Brians (1997) and the Federal Election Assistance Commission.[16] This variable changes over time for some states.

**The Incumbency Advantage in Low Information/Low Turnout Elections**

To evaluate the factors that contribute to incumbent success I analyze the likelihood that city councilors will run for reelection and the likelihood that they will win. I use the proportion of the council running and winning reported by the ICMA as dependent variables. In cities

without staggered terms for councilors an average of 70% of incumbents run for reelection and 85% of those running win.[17] There is substantial variation across cities. The standard deviation is 27% for running and 23% for winning. 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.

I begin by analyzing the effect of low information and low turnout environments on incumbents' propensity to run for reelection and victory rates. The analyses rely on three state level institutions that have the potential to affect local level incumbents – the mailing of sample ballots and polling place locations to voters prior to election day, and the cut-off date for voter registration. When voters have more information about their choices for replacing elected officials and are encouraged to participate we can expect the electoral arena to be more contestable and so should see fewer incumbents running and winning in these places. These measures are useful because they help to avoid problems with endogeneity; city councilors are affected by the mailing of voter information and registration deadlines, but they do not decide what the law will be. To estimate the effect of these state institutions for municipal incumbents I split the sample into states that require election officials to mail sample ballots versus those that do not, states that require mailing of polling places versus those that do not, and states that allow same day voter registration versus those that require registration at least a month in advance.[18]

I include a number of control variables that might affect incumbents' decisions to run and their ability to get reelected. In all 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 control for *Council Size* to account for the possibility of increased competitiveness in smaller legislatures. I include a dummy variable noting whether or not elections are *Partisan.* 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 incumbency 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.

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.[19] 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 viable. As a proxy for potential opportunity costs I include the proportion of the council that is *Retired*. I expect the effect to be positive. I also control for the presence of council *Term-Limits* and *Staggered* council terms. I add a dummy variable for *Concurrent* elections (elections held in November of even numbered years) which typically witness higher turnout.[20]

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.

Given that an uncontestable electoral arena on its own is insufficient to ensure reelection, for an incumbent to represent her constituents she must be able to determine what the people want from a representative. This might 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 (higher values indicate a more homogenous population). 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 related to city size.

I estimate a probit selection model which allows me to take into account strategic entry decisions of incumbents.[21] This set-up assumes that incumbents who run are not a random sample of the incumbent population with respect to their likelihood of winning. In the first stage I estimate the probability of running for reelection and in the second I estimate the probability of winning. The selection equation for running includes all of the variables listed above. The outcome equation on winning includes the same variables except *Central Staff*, *Term Limits*, *Staggered Council*, and percent *Retired*. Additionally, the outcome equation includes two proxies for candidate quality - the proportion of the council that identifies as *Business Managers* and *Professionals*.[22] Observations with missing data on either dependent variable are excluded from the analysis. Fixed effects for states and survey years (*1992*, *1996*, and *2001* with *1986* as

the excluded category) are included.[23] Standard errors are clustered by city to account for the relationship in errors across observations.

Table 3 shows the estimated proportion of incumbents running and winning from these models holding all variables constant at their mean values.[24] The fully specified base model using all states can be found in Table A1. The split sample models and the Stata code for obtaining the estimates are available upon request.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The results are clear: When states do not require the mailing of sample ballots and polling place information, more incumbents run for reelection and they are more likely to win. These differences are meaningful. Approximately one incumbent councilor in every two cities fails to run and win when voters are mailed information. Same day registration also decreases the proportion of incumbents running and winning by about one incumbent for every seven cities. When constituents have more information about elections and are encouraged to participate, incumbents are less insulated.

**The Institutions, Turnout, and Incumbency Advantage**

If a larger and more unpredictable electorate is part of the reason that incumbents run and win less frequently in mail states and states with early registration, then these institutions should also positively affect local level turnout and in turn we should see a negative association between turnout and reelection. There are several mechanisms that could link these outcomes. First, as is well-established in turnout literature, lowering the costs of voting increases turnout (Wolfinger et al 2005). Second, constituents should be more inclined to vote when elections are competitive (see Geys 2006 for a review), and thus when incumbents are less likely to run and win. This is

both because voters perceive a greater chance of being pivotal (Downs 1957, Riker and Ordeshook 1968) and because candidates increase their mobilization efforts (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Cox and Munger 1989). Third, as DeNardo (1980) has argued higher turnout can bring more unreliable and unpredictable voters into the political process which can aid the minority party or those out of power. Alternatively, it is possible that high turnout is linked to low reelection rates because dissatisfaction with incumbents both inspires voters to turn out and to cast ballots in favor of challengers. This hypothesis suggests that low turnout is an indication of a satisfied electorate.[25]

If my theory of contestability is accurate empirically we should find that states with lower barriers to participation have higher turnout rates even controlling for voter dissatisfaction. Knowing this, incumbents in high participation states should be less likely to run (which was shown to be the case in the previous section). This should make elections more competitive and so further increase turnout as voters perceive a greater chance to affect outcomes and candidates engage in mobilization efforts. Finally, the unwieldy electorate that comes with higher turnout should negatively affect reelection conditional on incumbents having entered the race.[26]

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

First, I show that the state level institutions that decrease barriers to participation increase turnout and that higher incumbent run rates (an indicator of low competition) decrease participation. The dependent variable is *Turnout* of registered voters in the most recent

municipal election as reported by the 1986 ICMA. The main independent variables are dummy indicators for state institutions (required mailing of *Sample ballots* and *Polling places* locations, and S*ame-day registration*) and the proportion of the city council *Running* for reelection. I include the variable percent *Unemployed* to control for the alternative possibility that dissatisfaction with the incumbent increases turnout.

The additional controls are similar to those used in the previous section including local institutions, proportion of homeowners, and diversity. In place of the natural log of population I use total *Population* to account for the Downsian hypothesis that larger electorates will have lower turnout rates. Finally, I control for a series of demographic characteristics that could affect aggregate turnout including the proportion of the population that is *Latino*, *Asian*, *African American*, *College graduates*, *Non-citizens*, and aged *18 and Over.* I cluster the standard errors by state. The results displayed in Table 4 indicate that state institutions have a significant effect on local level turnout and that when more incumbents run, fewer registered voters turn out.

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Mailing sample ballots and polling places increases turnout by about 7 percentage points and allowing voters to register on election day increases turnout by about 10 percentage points.[27] When no incumbents run for reelection, and all other variables are held at their mean values, an estimated 40% of registered voters turn out. When half of the council runs for reelection, about 38% turn out; and when the whole council runs for reelection about 36% turn out.[28]

Next I analyze the effect of turnout on incumbency reelection rates. As I did in the previous section I estimate a probit model with selection. This set-up allows me to estimate the effect of turnout on reelection conditional on incumbents having entered the race, helping to control for the competitiveness of the election. The dependent variables are whether or not an

incumbent ran and whether or not he/she won. The main independent variable is *Turnout*. I include the same controls as in the previous selection models.

The full results of this estimation, presented in Table A1, indicate that there is a significant negative relationship between turnout and reelection. Conditional on incumbents running, increasing turnout from 14% to 67% (going from the $10^{th}$ to the $90^{th}$ percentile) decreases incumbent win rates by about 6 percentage points, from 88% to 82%. Moving from the minimum level of turnout to the maximum decreases win rates from 90% to 78%, about 12 percentage points. When more voters participate fewer incumbents win reelection.

**Indirectly Identifying Monopolies**

I have argued throughout this paper 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 contestable electoral environments where incumbents must rely on responsiveness to win reelection.

To study this I analyze changes in the percentage of the municipal budget spent on *Health* and *Public Welfare* as a function of the change in the percentage of city residents in *Poverty*. To control for changing resources I include the change in *Median* household income, and change in inflation adjusted total *Revenue* and *Intergovernmental* revenue. I include controls for 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 use the same split sample design used above to indicate relative degrees of contestability in the electoral arena. I analyze responsiveness in states that require officials to mail sample ballots and polling place locations compared to those that do not and in states that allow same day registration compared to those that require registration a month in advance. To test the direct effect of voter participation I analyze responsiveness in cities where fewer than 35% of registered voters turned out (the median) compared to cities where more than 60% turned out to vote (the 85$^{th}$ percentile). Because I only have turnout data for 1986, this model estimates responsiveness in 1992 using 1986 turnout levels to account for a lag in policy implementation. Finally, to connect all of these pieces together I analyze responsiveness is cities where greater than 45% of councilors run for reelection (the mean) compared to cities where fewer than 45% run. Table 5 shows the results of these analyses.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

As predicted, in low information and low turnout environments, spending patterns are disconnected from the median voter. In each comparison, a change in the needy population has a more powerful effect on health and welfare spending in the more contestable political arena. Where sample ballots and polling place locations are mailed, where constituents are allowed to register on election day, and where turnout is high increasing the proportion of the population in poverty increases redistributive spending. Additionally, high reelection rates are associated with less responsive policy. Where elections are less contestable the effect of poverty is much smaller and generally less significant.

## Conclusion

Gaining deeper knowledge of the presence and sources of the incumbency advantage contributes to our understanding of representative democracy. If incumbents win reelection because they are the best candidates and/or because they are responsive their constituents then the rise in the incumbency advantage can only be considered a good thing. This paper has provided evidence that this may not be the right conclusion to draw about local elections. First, I have shown that mayors and council members are much more likely to run and much more likely to win after they have served a single term in office. This rules out one of the possibilities described above; incumbents do not win reelection simply because they started out as the best candidates. Secondly, I have shown that reelection is not always tied to experience or responsiveness.

There is a tremendous amount of evidence in political science scholarship that finds 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. Using an economic market as an analogy, I have suggested that we can (theoretically) measure the contestability of any electoral arena. By determining the degree to which information is freely available, challengers and voters have access to the political process, and seat shares are a straightforward representation of vote shares, we can determine how likely officials are to use responsiveness as a strategy for reelection. Mailing voters sample ballots and polling place locations and allowing them to register on election day are examples of institutions that should increase the electoral connection. The data presented here suggest that they do.

When more information about candidates and elections is provided and when voters need not worry about registering in advance fewer incumbents run for reelection and fewer win. I have argued that this is because these institutions increase contestability of the political arena, they increase turnout, and they create less predictable and stable electorates. In such environments incumbents can only win reelection by representing their constituents. Running is less attractive and winning is harder in these cases. When incumbents win reelection in uncontestable environments they have less incentive to be responsive. I have shown that policy is less likely to be connected to demographic change in these cities.

While the evidence presented here can only speak directly to the process of reelection and representation in local elections, the findings have implications for both the study of the incumbency advantage and democratic practice more generally. State and federal elections are also likely to be affected by institutions that decrease contestability and participation. Institutions that increase the costs of voting undoubtedly decrease turnout in state and federal elections and state and federal incumbents might be similarly discouraged from acting responsively in such environments. 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.

***Table 1: Disconnected Reelection Strategies***

| **Limiting Information** | **Limiting Entry, Exit, or Behavior of Challengers or Voters** | **Disproportionate Seat Allocation** |
|---|---|---|
| Suppression of voluntary associations | Assassinating/threatening/ imprisoning opposition candidates | Malapportionment |
| Government controlled media | Suffrage restrictions | Reserved seats in the government's favor |
| Low information elections | Registration Requirements | Gerrymandering |

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

| | Mayoral Elections | | | | City Council Elections | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dependent Variable | Probability of Running Election *t*+1 | | | | Probability of Running Election *t*+1 | | | |
| | Coefficient | | St. Err | | Coefficient | | St. Err | |
| Won, Election *t* | 1.666 | ** | 0.355 | | 2.302 | ** | 0.650 | |
| Margin, Election *t* | 1.754 | * | 0.998 | | 5.209 | | 3.678 | |
| Margin*Won | -2.699 | * | 1.426 | | -5.000 | | 3.780 | |
| Constant | -1.013 | ** | 0.273 | | -2.300 | ** | 0.605 | |
| *N* | 321 | | | | 321 | | | |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 0.150 | | | | 0.306 | | | |

| | Mayoral Elections | | | | City Council Elections | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dependent Variable | Probability of Running Election *t*+1 | | | | Probability of Winning Election *t*+1 | | | |
| | Coefficient | | St. Err | | Coefficient | | St. Err | |
| Won, Election *t* | 1.618 | ** | 0.215 | | 1.765 | ** | 0.320 | |
| Margin, Election *t* | 1.412 | ** | 0.467 | | 3.151 | ** | 0.945 | |
| Margin*Won | -1.682 | ** | 0.573 | | -2.734 | ** | 0.994 | |
| Constant | -0.945 | ** | 0.175 | | -1.854 | ** | 0.272 | |
| *N* | 1445 | | | | 1445 | | | |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | 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: Effect of Low Information Elections on Incumbent Reelection***

| | Estimated Proportion Running for Reelection | | Estimated Proportion Running and Winning | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sample Ballots Mailed | 35% (34-36%) | +10%** | 29% (18-34%) | +9%** |
| No Sample Ballot Requirement | 45% (44-45%) | | 38% (37-40%) | |
| Polling Locations Mailed | 38% (37-39%) | +7%** | 32% (27-36%) | +6%** |
| No Poll Mail Requirement | 45% (44-45%) | | 38% (37-40%) | |
| Same Day Registration | 41% (40-42%) | +2%** | 35% (29-39%) | +2% |
| Registration 1 Month in Advance | 43% (43-44%) | | 37% (35-39%) | |

Note: Cell entries are estimates predicted using probit models with sample selection; 95% confidence intervals in parentheses. Regression results available upon request.
** $p<.05$.

***Table 4: Effects of State Institutions and Electoral Competition on Turnout of Registered Voters in 1986***

| | Coefficient | St Err | Coefficient | St Err | Coefficient | St Err |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sample Ballots Mailed | 0.07 * | 0.04 | | | | |
| Polling Places Mailed | | | 0.07 ** | 0.03 | | |
| Same Day Registration | | | | | 0.10 ** | 0.03 |
| % Council Running | -0.04 * | 0.02 | -0.05 ** | 0.02 | -0.06 ** | 0.02 |
| Partisan Elections | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.03 ** | 0.02 |
| District Council | -0.03 ** | 0.01 | -0.03 ** | 0.01 | -0.03 ** | 0.01 |
| Council Manager System | -0.06 ** | 0.02 | -0.06 ** | 0.02 | -0.07 ** | 0.02 |
| Term Limits | -0.01 | 0.03 | -0.01 | 0.03 | -0.01 | 0.03 |
| Staggered Council Elections | -0.08 ** | 0.02 | -0.08 ** | 0.02 | -0.08 ** | 0.02 |
| Council Size | -0.00 | 0.00 | -0.00 | 0.00 | -0.00 | 0.00 |
| % Unemployed | 0.14 | 0.53 | 0.15 | 0.53 | 0.23 | 0.51 |
| % Homeowners | 0.12 ** | 0.05 | 0.13 ** | 0.05 | 0.11 ** | 0.05 |
| Diversity | 0.14 * | 0.08 | 0.13 | 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.08 |
| Population | -0.07 | 0.05 | -0.07 | 0.04 | -0.07 | 0.05 |
| % Latino | 0.01 | 0.07 | 0.01 | 0.07 | -0.00 | 0.07 |
| % African American | 0.11 | 0.07 | 0.11 | 0.07 | 0.08 | 0.08 |
| % Asian | 0.31 * | 0.16 | 0.31 ** | 0.15 | 0.38 ** | 0.13 |
| % College Grads | -0.20 ** | 0.04 | -0.21 ** | 0.05 | -0.19 ** | 0.05 |
| % Noncitizens | -0.09 | 0.15 | -0.07 | 0.14 | 0.08 | 0.15 |
| % Over 18 | 0.22 ** | 0.18 | 0.22 | 0.19 | 0.26 | 0.18 |
| Intercept | 0.19 | 0.16 | 0.18 | 0.17 | 0.22 | 0.16 |
| *N* | 2519 | | 2519 | | 2516 | |
| $R^2$ | 0.110 | | 0.110 | | 0.109 | |

Note: OLS regression with robust standard errors clustered by state.
*$p$<.10 **$p$<.05

***Table 5: Effect of Contestability on Policy Responsiveness***

Change % City Budget Spent on Health and Welfare

| | Effect of Changed % in Poverty | St Error |
|---|---|---|
| Sample Ballots Mailed | 0.078 * | 0.043 |
| No Sample Ballot Requirement | 0.048 ** | 0.021 |
| Polling Locations Mailed | 0.166 ** | 0.077 |
| No Poll Mail Requirement | 0.034 * | 0.019 |
| Same Day Registration | 0.074 * | 0.044 |
| Registration 1 Month in Advance | -0.006 | 0.027 |
| Lag Turnout >60% | 0.036 ** | 0.016 |
| Lag Turnout <35% | -0.007 | 0.009 |
| % Incumbents Running <45% | 0.082 ** | 0.028 |
| % Incumbents Running >45% | 0.007 | 0.033 |

Note: OLS regression; Robust standard errors clustered by city are reported.
*$p$<.10 **$p$<.05

Cell entries are coefficients resulting from regressing *Change in Percent of City Budget Spent on Health and Welfare* on *Change Percent in Poverty*. Models including controls for change in median household income, change in population, change in intergovernmental revenue, change in total revenue, change in percent homeowners, November concurrent elections, council-manager government, partisan elections, district elections, year and state fixed effects. Due to data restrictions turnout regressions are from the single year 1992 and include static measures.

Figure 1: Mayoral Elections
Probability of Running

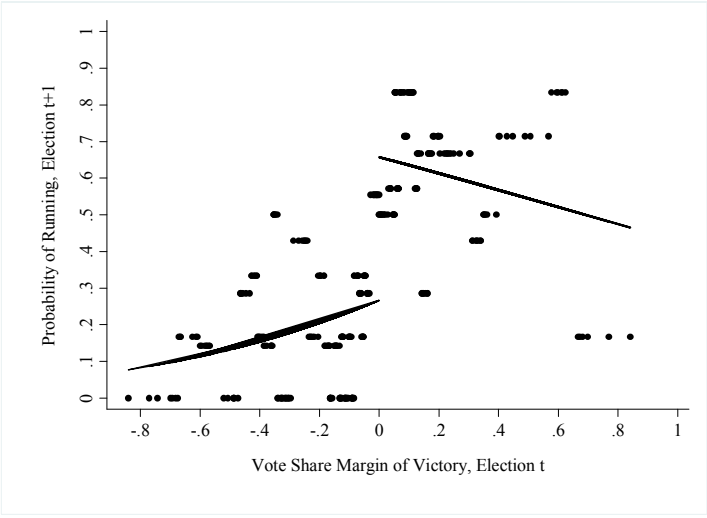



Figure 2: Mayoral Elections
Probability of Winning

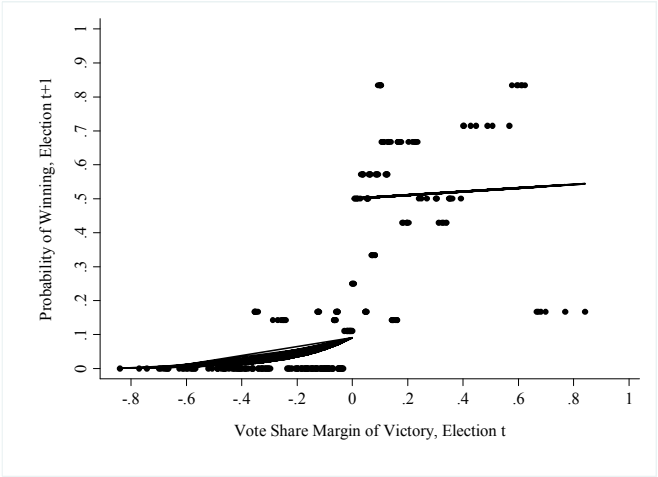



Figure 3: City Council Elections
Probability of Running

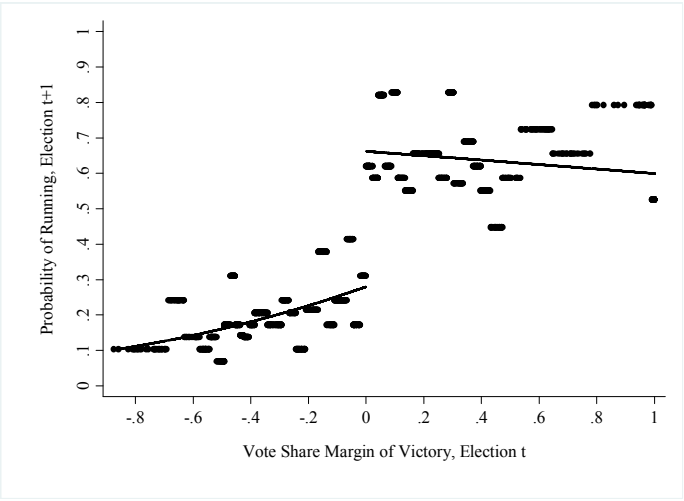



Figure 4: City Council Elections
Probability of Winning

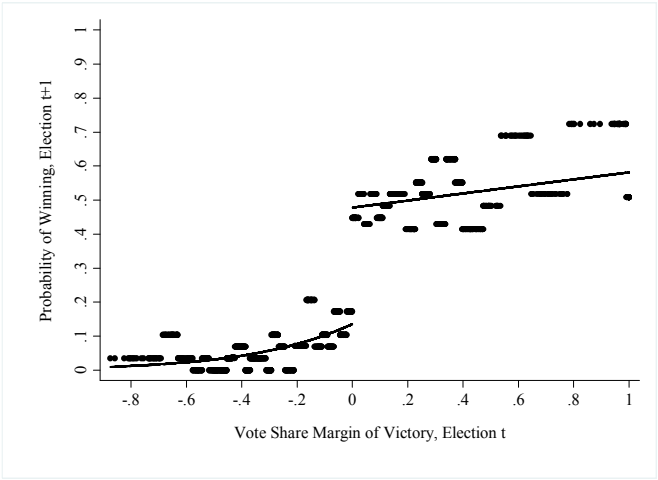


Figure 5: Mayors
Past Electoral Experience

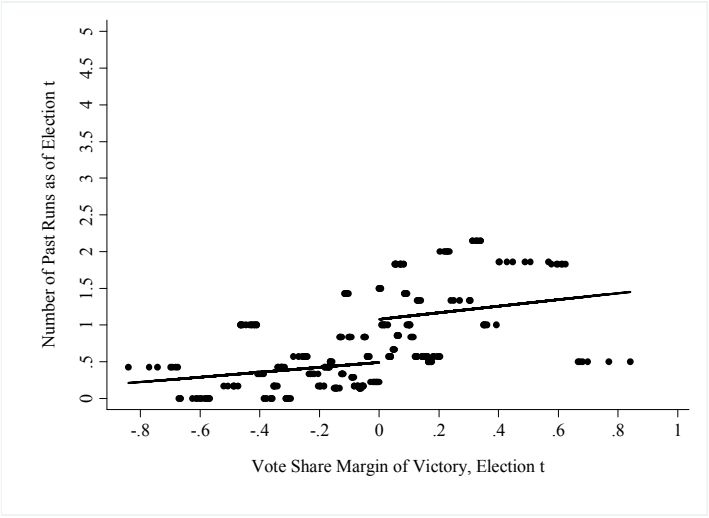



Figure 6: Mayors
Past Political Experience

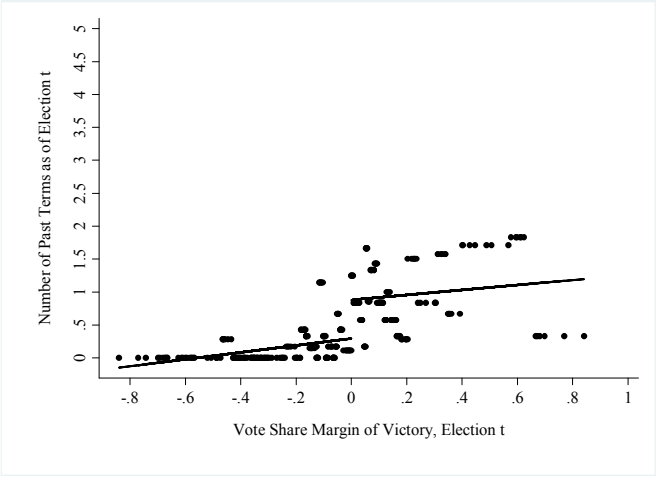



Figure 7: City Councilors
Past Electoral Experience

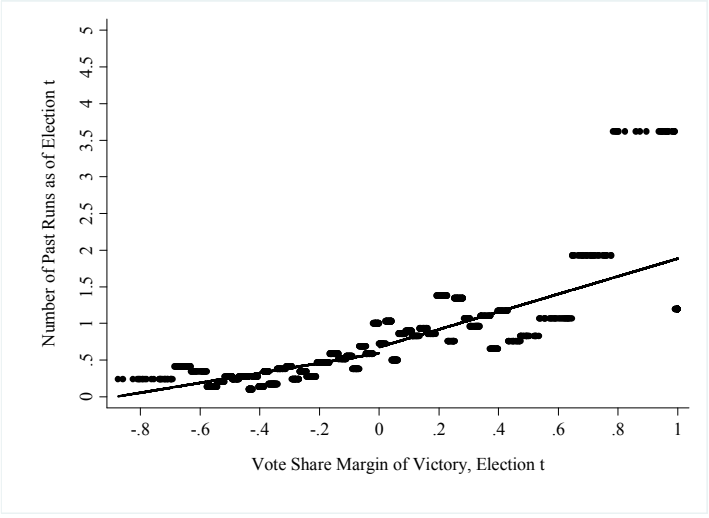
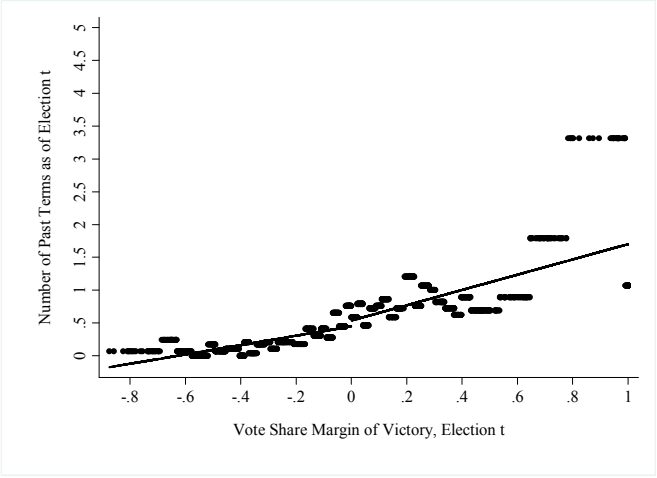



Figure 8: City Councilors
Past Political Experience



Appendix

***Table A1: Factors Affecting Incumbent Reelection***

| | Base Model | | Turnout Effect | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Won | Coefficient | St Err | Coefficient | St Err |
| Turnout of Registered Voters | | | -0.518 ** | 0.154 |
| Partisan Elections | 0.075 * | 0.040 | 0.125 | 0.079 |
| District Council | -0.016 | 0.028 | -0.052 | 0.065 |
| Council Manager System | 0.038 | 0.029 | 0.054 | 0.071 |
| November Concurrent Elections | 0.073 | 0.048 | 0.120 | 0.105 |
| % Council Professionals | 0.217 ** | 0.083 | -0.011 | 0.215 |
| % Council Businessmen | 0.109 ** | 0.052 | -0.013 | 0.117 |
| Council Size | 0.006 | 0.007 | -0.009 | 0.018 |
| % Unemployed | -2.191 ** | 0.769 | -0.959 | 1.815 |
| % Homeowners | 0.098 | 0.123 | 0.326 | 0.271 |
| Diversity | -0.220 ** | 0.967 | 0.134 | 0.227 |
| Population (log) | -0.025 * | 0.013 | 0.034 | 0.031 |
| 1992 | -0.058 * | 0.033 | | |
| 1996 | 0.075 ** | 0.033 | | |
| 2001 | -0.035 | 0.036 | | |
| Intercept | 1.427 ** | 0.228 | 1.065 * | 0.588 |
| Ran | | | | |
| Partisan Elections | -0.014 | 0.019 | 0.052 | 0.045 |
| District Council | 0.062 ** | 0.014 | 0.054 | 0.037 |
| Council Manager System | -0.055 ** | 0.013 | -0.043 | 0.033 |
| November Concurrent Elections | -0.063 ** | 0.022 | -0.101 ** | 0.047 |
| % Budget Spent on Central Staff | 0.240 ** | 0.094 | 0.042 | 0.282 |
| Term Limits | -0.140 ** | 0.022 | -0.123 ** | 0.056 |
| Staggered Council Elections | -0.859 ** | 0.262 | -0.703 ** | 0.052 |
| % Council Retired | 0.087 ** | 0.027 | 0.010 | 0.075 |
| Council Size | -0.005 | 0.005 | -0.003 | 0.012 |
| % Unemployed | -0.100 | 0.344 | -0.279 | 0.855 |
| % Homeowners | -0.040 | 0.050 | 0.024 | 0.125 |
| Diversity | -0.640 | 0.043 | -0.123 | 0.111 |
| Population (log) | 0.027 ** | 0.006 | 0.065 ** | 0.014 |
| 1992 | 0.281 ** | 0.014 | | |
| 1996 | 0.265 ** | 0.014 | | |
| 2001 | 0.218 ** | 0.015 | | |
| Intercept | 0.214 * | 0.123 | -1.544 ** | 0.389 |
| *N* | 68212 | | 19607 | |
| Censored Observations | 38423 | | 13861 | |
| Uncensored Observations | 29789 | | 5746 | |
| $\rho$ | -0.015 | | -0.141 | |

Note: Probit models with sample selection; State fixed effects included but not presented. Robust errors clustered by city.
*$p$<.10 **$p$<.05

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[1] 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)

[2] 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.

[3] By perfect responsiveness I mean that politicians will produce policy outcomes that are most preferred by a majority of constituents and elites in the long run. I do not mean to imply a perfect correlation between short-term public opinion and public policy. There is a growing literature that argues that short-term responsiveness can produce less effective governance than non-responsiveness (see for instance Canes-Wrone et al 2001). So it could be that an uncontestable market (because it increases incumbent safety and non-responsiveness) increases the probability of good outcomes in the long run. My theory

assumes that in perfectly contestable arenas constituents and elites will be able to recognize incumbent behavior that produces the outcomes that they most prefer. In my definition these incumbents are the most responsive.

[4] Maryland only requires Prince George's County to mail sample ballots. In Oregon local elections have been vote by mail since 1987. Because voters are mailed ballots to their homes they are essentially mailed a sample ballot prior to the election. In the statistical analyses Oregon is coded as requiring mailing of sample ballots.

[5] Of course many voters choose to remain uninformed about elections even when information is readily available. As long as intentionally uninformed voters are randomly distributed throughout the electorate institutions that decrease contestability should still have an effect.

[6] 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 voters registration cards 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.

[7] The states with same-day or no registration are Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Idaho, New Hampshire, and Wyoming enacted same day registration in the mid 1990s. The remaining states enacted their policy prior to the start of my data set. 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.

[8] 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.

[9] Lee's work focuses on the advantage of being the incumbent *party*. My focus, on the other hand, is on the effect of incumbency for individual *candidates* in a local context. My unit of analysis is the candidate in a municipal election (whereas Lee's is the Congressional district).

[10] It would be better if I could estimate these analyses without including candidates from the same race. For example Lee only includes Democratic candidates. I am unable to do this in 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 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.

[11] There are too few mayoral elections in this final category to run the analysis, but the results do not change for city council elections.

[12] The analysis for mayoral candidates reveals a 2.4 percentage point increase for mayors but the result is not statistically significant at conventional levels. The smaller effect can be explained by the fact that mayoral races appear to exhibit a selection effect as discussed below.

[13] I also analyzed the quality of challengers faced by incumbents in their first and second election. I find some evidence of a scare-off effect. Both mayors and councilors face less experienced challengers after they have served at least one term in office but the differences are not statistically significant.

[14] The figures were produced by regressing candidates' prior number of terms and prior number of runs for mayor or councilor on victory status, vote margin, and the interaction between the two.

[15] The coding notes these authors used were generously provided by Megan Mullin. See end notes 5 and 7 for additional detail about the coding.

[16] See endnote 8 for more detail about the coding of this variable.

[17] The average run rate for cities with staggered terms is 36%.

[18] The split sample design allows me to include state fixed effects and cluster standard errors by city to deal with correlation over time while still accounting for the hierarchical nature of the relationship between state law and local outcomes (Jusko and Shively 2005).

[19] I replaced the central staffing variable with a direct measure of council salaries for a sample of cities. The results are consistently positive but not consistently significant because of the reduction in cases.

[20] This variable was created from a 1986 ICMA question regarding the timing of municipal elections.

[21] I do not have the proper data for a true selection model because my data are city level. While I know the total number of council members, proportion of the council that ran for reelection, and the proportion who won, I know nothing about these particular councilors. I convince Stata to run my model by transforming my data set so that I have one observation for each councilor in each city. These observations are identical on all city level variables. I coded the proper proportion of each city's observations as having run and the proper proportion who won. I then ran probit models with sample selection using Stata's "heckprob" command for these councilors. For comparison I also estimated the proportion of incumbents running for reelection using OLS in the untransformed data set. The results were nearly identical. I am grateful to Chris Achen for helping to develop this design.

[22] 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 Bridges (1997) 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.

[23] In alternate tests I replace the state fixed effects with controls for Elazar's coding of state culture as moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic. The results do not change with this specification so only the fixed effects models are presented.

[24] Estimates were generated by running post-estimation simulations in Stata as described by Timpone (2002) and Baretels and Sweeney (2004). For each model I drew simulations of the model's parameters from a multivariate normal distribution with mean equal to the model's vector of parameters and variance equal to the variance-covariance matrix. I then estimated the probability of running ($\Phi[\gamma' z]$), the probability of running and winning ($\Phi_2[\beta' x, \gamma' z, \rho]$), and the probability of winning conditional on running ($\Phi_2[\beta' x, \gamma' z, \rho]/\Phi[\gamma' z]$), 1000 times for each model using the simulated parameters, setting each explanatory variable at its mean value. Table 4 reports the median values of these estimates along with their 95% confidence intervals (the 2.5$^{th}$ and 97.5$^{th}$ percentiles). To double check my work I also estimated predicted probabilities using Stata's "mfx" command. The results were nearly identical but because Stata's command does not report errors or confidence intervals, I report the values from my simulations.

[25] Most political science research concludes that the preferences of nonvoters are not significantly different from the preferences of voters (or are so small as to be unimportant), suggesting that this hypothesis is likely to be incorrect (e.g. Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978). Furthermore given that nonvoters are likely to be of lower socio-economic status and people of color it seems unlikely that nonvoting is generally a sign of satisfaction.

[26] An unconditional effect of participation on turnout would indicate that the effect is all working through the anticipated competitiveness of the election.

[27] Adding concurrent elections to the models reduces the effect of the state institutions by about half and has a strong (14 percentage point) independent effect on turnout. There is also a significant interaction between the state institutions and concurrency. Concurrent elections have a more powerful effect on turnout when sample ballots and polling locations are mailed and where same day registration is allowed.

[28] It is interesting to note that there is an interaction effect between these variables. The proportion of the council running only effects turnout in states with less contestable environments. Where state institutions increase turnout, competition has no additional affect on bringing voters to the polls.