Abstract

Incumbents significantly outperform challengers in American elections, but the normative implications of this phenomenon are ambiguous. Do incompetent officials exploit the political system to keep themselves in power, or do open elections effectively select for good leaders? To address this question, I define and estimate three components of incumbent success in elections—(1) party match, (2) quality selection, and (3) officeholder benefit—the first two of which are crucial for evaluating the health of democratic elections. Results are largely reassuring; a significant portion of incumbent success can be attributed to the fact that previous elections selected for high-quality candidates that match the partisan preferences of voters. However, the results vary in meaningful ways across time and settings. For example, party match has decreased over time while quality selection and officeholder benefit have increased, and the magnitude of quality selection relative to party match increases with the salience of the electoral setting.

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1 I thank Scott Ashworth, Chris Berry, Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, Gloria Chao, Andy Hall, Seth Hill, Jim Snyder, Mona Vakilifathi, and seminar participants at Berkeley, UChicago, and UCSD for helpful comments.
Do democratic elections do what they are supposed to do? Do they select for high-quality officials who match the preferences of the electorate? Often, researchers and pundits suggest that they do not, noting the electoral dominance of incumbents. Many interpret the success of incumbents as a sign that low-quality representatives exploit the political system to keep themselves in power (e.g., Fiorina 1977). An alternative interpretation, however, is that the initial elections in which incumbents entered did a good job of selecting good candidates, so we should expect incumbents to win again when they seek reelection (e.g., Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008; Zaller 1998). Is incumbent success in elections a sign of broken political institutions which keep incompetent leaders in power, or is it a sign that elections perform as intended and select for high-quality leaders?

To distinguish between these possibilities, I estimate three components of incumbent success in elections: (1) party match, (2) quality selection, and (3) officeholder benefit. Party match represents the extent to which incumbents perform better in elections because their partisanship is more likely to align with the partisan leanings of the electorate. For example, if an electorate always elects the same party, then incumbents will always win reelection simply because of their partisanship. Quality selection represents the extent to which incumbents perform better in elections because they are better than the typical candidate from their party running in the same electorate. The word better is not defined in terms of objective quality. Rather, it refers to whatever non-partisan dimensions of quality that voters care about. For example, quality selection could result from the propensity of competent candidates to win elections, but it could also result from a preference of voters to support taller or more attractive candidates. Clearly, the meaning and implications of quality selection will depend upon the specific dimensions of quality that voters care about most. But nonetheless, the magnitude of quality selection tells us whether elections do a good job of selecting for whatever non-partisan dimensions of quality that matter most to voters. Lastly,
Officeholder benefit refers to the extent of incumbent success that can be attributed directly to office holding. This includes, for example, increased experience, campaign contributions, media exposure, and name recognition; the propensity of high-quality challengers to avoid running against incumbents; a personal attachment that voters have to their incumbent; and other institutional advantages. Party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit are defined to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive, meaning that all of the electoral success of incumbents can be attributed to these factors and there is no overlap between them.\(^2\)

I estimate these quantities in the following way. The overall success of incumbents—i.e., all three factors combined—is measured with a simple, cross-sectional regression. A second regression which accounts for the normal partisanship of an electorate estimates the sum of quality selection and officeholder benefit, removing party match. Finally, a third estimation step involving a fuzzy regression-discontinuity design identifies officeholder benefit alone, devoid of quality selection and party match. Then, I subtract these estimates from one another to back out the quantities of interest. I estimate party match by subtracting the second estimate (quality selection + officeholder benefit) from the first (party match + quality selection + officeholder benefit), and I estimate quality selection by subtracting the third estimate (officeholder benefit) from the second (quality selection + officeholder benefit). More details on this empirical strategy, along with the necessary identifying assumptions, are presented in subsequent sections.

Applying this empirical strategy across many electoral settings and time periods, I uncover several important and largely-reassuring patterns. Party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit all play a significant role in American elections. Party match is the greatest of the three,

\(^2\) Certainly, the benefits of holding office may interact with the quality and partisanship of incumbents. However, this is not a violation of my assumptions or my assertion that these three quantities are defined to be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. If, for example, candidate quality interacts with the benefits of office-holding, then the average extent to which this benefits incumbents will contribute to the officeholder benefit quantity.
quality selection is statistically and substantively significant in most settings, and officeholder benefit only explains a small fraction of incumbent success. Elections appear to be effective in selecting for high-quality leaders who match the partisan orientation of the electorate, suggesting that the dominance of incumbents does not undermine the health of American democracy.

While the magnitude and consistency of results across electoral settings is striking, I also uncover several interesting sources of variation. The magnitude of quality selection relative to party match increases with the public salience of the electoral setting. Presumably, when voters have more information about candidates over and above party, they incorporate this information into their vote choices and are able to select for candidates who are high in non-partisan dimensions of quality. Despite the supposed dominance of parties and partisanship in electoral politics, quality selection is almost as important as party match in the case of the U.S. Senate—the most publicly salient setting in my analysis. I also find that party match has generally decreased over time while quality selection and officeholder benefit have increased. Comparing across state legislative settings, I find that the public financing of elections corresponds with higher quality selection and lower officeholder benefit, while term limits correspond with lower quality selection and higher party match. Lastly, I find that increased press coverage corresponds with lower party match, greater officeholder benefit, and little change in quality selection. These sources of variation lend insight into mechanisms by which elections select for high-quality candidates and policy reforms that may improve the effectiveness of elections.

In the subsequent sections, I first discuss related literatures on incumbent success and the effectiveness of elections. Next, I present my empirical strategy and illustrate it with results for U.S. Senate elections. I then discuss a potential concern about the comparability of each estimation step and present several re-weighting approaches for addressing this concern. Results are very similar across all re-weighting schemes, suggesting that concerns about different local averages have little
consequence for my estimates. With the empirical strategy in hand, I estimate party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit across 7 different electoral settings—the U.S. Senate, governors, the U.S. House, high-salience statewide offices (lieutenant governors, secretaries of state, and state attorney generals), low-salience statewide offices, state legislatures, and mayors—along with a pooled sample of all elections. Then, I examine variation across time, variation across electoral institutions, and variation across levels of media coverage. Finally, I conclude by discussing the implications of the results for public policy and the health of American democracy.

Related Literature

There is surprisingly little empirical research assessing the extent to which elections select for better representatives? Theoretically, democratic elections serve two primary goals—selecting good representatives and incentivizing already-elected officials to perform well. In American legislatures, there is little evidence that representatives adjust their roll-call behavior over time or in response to electoral incentives (Fowler and Hall 2014; Lee, Moretti, and Butler 2004), so the predominant role for elections appears to be in the selection stage. To my knowledge, there is only one paper that carefully studies the extent to which elections select for better representatives. Alt, Bueno de Mesquita, and Rose (2011) exploit term limits to show that U.S. gubernatorial elections are somewhat effective in selecting high quality officials and incentivizing them to perform well. This study, while innovative and valuable, is somewhat limited in scope. For example, their design is only applicable for studying governors facing term limits; it requires strong, all-else-equal assumptions; and it requires that short-term state-level economic indicators are appropriate measures of competence and accountability. Outside this context, there is little compelling evidence on whether elections effectively perform their posited roles.
The problems for researchers are a lack of credible designs and the inability to directly measure quality and performance. For example, if we had direct measures of quality for every candidate, we could assess how better candidates fare at different stages of the electoral process and see which dimensions of quality are selected for in different settings. Some researchers have attempted to measure quality using prior experience, personal traits, or press coverage (e.g., Jacobson 1989; Krasno and Green 1988; Tillman 2013), but these measures are imperfect and may not capture the dimensions of quality that matter most to voters. Moreover, among the selected sample of candidates that run in a general election, we might expect other, unmeasured dimensions of quality to be negatively correlated with observed measures of quality. Consider, for example, a candidate for U.S. Senate that has never previously held elected office. She must have something else going for her that allowed her to win the primary, so the correlation between previous experience and electoral success would tell us nothing about quality selection. Given the impossibility of measuring quality adequately and directly, an indirect approach—such as the one taken in this paper—is necessary.

Despite scant research on electoral selection, scholars have long studied the electoral advantages of incumbency (e.g., Alford and Brady 1989; Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002, 2004; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2000; Cox and Katz 1996; Erikson 1971; Gelman and King 1990; Hirano and Snyder 2009; Levitt and Wolfram 1997). This literature is highly relevant to the present study which attempts to determine the extent to which incumbent success can be attributed to direct returns to office versus the propensity of voters to select high-quality leaders. Often, studies of incumbency attempt to estimate the direct returns to incumbency by regressing election results on incumbency variables and other control variables designed to statistically remove confounding factors such as party match and quality selection. However, these confounding factors are just as interesting, if not more interesting, than officeholder benefit. The magnitudes of party match and
quality selection inform us about the extent to which elections select for better representatives. They are also highly relevant for our normative interpretation of incumbent success. If a high proportion of incumbent success is attributable to institutional advantages and other direct benefits of office holding, then we might be concerned about the repeated reelection of incumbents. Alternatively, if most of this success is attributable to party match and quality selection, we can say that elections are doing what they are intended to do by selecting for high-quality leaders.

**Empirical Strategy and U.S. Senate Results**

To illustrate my empirical strategy, I discuss the estimation and results for U.S. Senate elections in detail. In the subsequent sections, I replicate this analysis for the U.S. House of Representatives, governors, high- and low-salience statewide offices, state legislatures, and mayors. Data for mayoral elections comes from Ferreira and Gyourko (2009), and data for all other elections comes from an extended version of the data analyzed by Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002). For the Senate, I analyze 1,361 elections from 1926 to 2010. For each election, I code the two-party vote share of the Democratic candidate (ranging from 0 to 1) and an incumbency variable which takes a value if 1 if a Democratic incumbent seeks reelection, 0 if no incumbent runs, and −1 if a Republican incumbent seeks reelection. I also calculate the Democratic Party’s two-party vote share in the previous election which will be used for one component of the subsequent analysis. My empirical strategy involves three separate estimation steps and then subtraction to back out the relevant quantities of interest. All results for U.S. Senate elections are shown in Table 1.

[Table 1]

For the first step, I estimate the average extent to which incumbents perform better than non-incumbents through the following cross-sectional regression:

\[
\text{Dem. Vote Share}_i = \beta_1 \times \text{Incumbency}_i + \delta_i + \varepsilon_i, \tag{1}
\]
where $\delta_t$ represents year fixed effects which subsume the constant term. These fixed effects improve precision by accounting for the fact that some years are better for one party than others, but they do not systematically influence the subsequent results.\(^3\) $\beta_1$ represents the average extent to which incumbents perform better than other candidates from the same party. In the case of Senate elections, I estimate a coefficient of .123 (s.e. = .010, p < .001) which indicates that, on average, incumbent candidates receive 12.3 percentage points more of the two-party vote share than non-incumbent candidates from the same party. This coefficient represents the sum of all three quantities of interest: party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit.

In the second step, I modify the regression above in order to remove the role of party match:

\[
\text{Dem. Vote Share}_i = \beta_2 \times \text{Incumbency}_i + \gamma_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_i.
\]

In particular, I include state-decade fixed effects (denoted by $\gamma_i$) which account for the “normal vote” (Campbell et al. 1960) in each electorate and remove the extent to which incumbents perform better simply because they are more likely to come from states that match their party label.\(^4\) This regression is analogous to those of Gelman and King (1990) and Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002), estimating the extent to which incumbents tend to outperform the normal vote in their electorate. In the context of this paper, $\beta_2$ represents the sum of quality selection and officeholder benefit. For mayoral elections, I estimate a coefficient of .070 (s.e. .008, p < .001) suggesting that incumbent

\(^3\) The inclusion of year fixed effects could theoretically make a difference if there were significant trends in partisanship over time. In this case, $\beta_1$ would indicate the average difference in two-party vote share between incumbents and non-incumbents from the same party in the same year. In any case, the estimates are nearly identical with or without year fixed effects.

\(^4\) I include state-decade fixed effects as opposed to simply state fixed effects, because the data set covers a long period of time (1926-2010) and I want to allow for the possibility that the partisan preference of states changes over time. The inclusion of separate linear trends for each state-decade does not change the results. Also, decades refer to ten-year periods starting with years ending in 2 and ending with years ending in 1 (e.g., 2002-2011). This is done so that decades line up with redistricting cycles in settings where redistricting could change the partisan composition of the electorate (e.g., the U.S. House and state legislatures).
senators seeking reelection typically receive 7.0 percentage points more of the two-party vote share than non-incumbent candidates from the same party running for an open seat in the same state.

Since $\beta_1$ represents the sum of party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit and $\beta_2$ represents the sum of quality selection and officeholder benefit, I calculate the difference between the two estimates, yielding an estimate of party match—the extent to which incumbent success can be attributed to the proclivity of electorates to select for candidates that match their partisanship. If $\beta_1$ equals $\beta_2$, then we would conclude that elections are not selecting on party—other factors explain the success of incumbents. Alternatively, if $\beta_1$ is positive and $\beta_2$ is zero, then we would conclude that elections are selecting entirely on party and no factors outside of party labels contribute to the success of incumbents. In Senate races, I obtain a result in between these two extremes—5.3 percentage points of the 12.3 point incumbent edge (just over two-fifths) can be attributed to party match. Employing a non-parametric block bootstrap where states are sampled as clusters, I estimate a 95% confidence interval for party match which ranges from 3.0 to 7.3 percentage points. Therefore, party match explains a significant but minority share of incumbent success in elections.

For the third and final estimation step, I aim to estimate officeholder benefit, removing both party match and quality selection. This estimate may be interesting in and of itself, but it also allows for the estimation of quality selection—the extent to which incumbents perform well because previous elections selected for better candidates. In order to estimate officeholder benefit absent selection, I build upon the previous work of Erikson and Titiunik (2012) and Fowler and Hall (2013) who employ regression discontinuity (RD) designs to remove party match and quality selection and estimate the “personal incumbency advantage”—i.e., officeholder benefit. The RD design accomplishes this goal by focusing on the quasi-random outcomes of very close elections, where, on average, electoral winners will be no different than losers in terms of quality or party match. If we still see incumbents performing better than non-incumbents in contexts where the incumbents were
quasi-randomly assigned, then we can be sure that this performance advantage is not explained by electoral selection on quality or partisanship.

Estimating officeholder benefit using a RD design is not as straightforward as it may appear. For example, the influential paper of Lee (2008) does not estimate officeholder benefit as I have defined it here (see Caughey and Sekhon 2011, Erikson and Titiunik 2012, and Fowler and Hall 2013). Instead, Lee’s approach estimates the extent to which one election result influences the vote share in the next election. As shown by Fowler and Hall (2013), this estimand equals two times the officeholder benefit times the probability that the winner of a close election runs again plus two times the partisan incumbency advantage (a separate quantity indicating the extent to which a party benefits from incumbency status in an open seat race). Fowler and Hall simultaneously exploit close elections and term limits in state legislatures to estimate both the officeholder benefit and the partisan incumbency advantage, concluding that the partisan incumbency advantage is negligible. Building upon this previous result and design, I assume that the partisan incumbency advantage is zero and proceed to estimate officeholder benefit in other settings where term limits are not present.

In particular, I estimate $\beta_3$ in the system of equations below, employing two-stage least squares:

(3) \[
\text{Dem. Vote Share}_{it} = \beta_3 \ast \text{Incumbency}_{it} + \gamma \ast f(\text{Lagged Dem. Vote Share}_{i,t-1}) + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}, \text{ and}
\]

(4) \[
\text{Incumbency}_{it} = \pi \ast \text{Lagged Dem. Victory}_{i,t} + \sigma \ast f(\text{Lagged Dem. Vote Share}_{i,t-1}) + \delta_t + \mu_{it}.
\]

As before, $\delta_t$ represents year fixed effects. Both equations include $f(\text{Lagged Dem. Vote Share}_{i,t-1})$ a flexible function of the Democratic Party’s two-party vote share in the previous election, which I model as a fourth-order polynomial following Lee (2008), although results are robust to other specifications. In this setup, a close election result in one election is used as an instrument for incumbency in the next election. Because the electoral threshold is used as an instrument for incumbency, where non-compliance comes from incumbents who retire, this constitutes a “fuzzy”
RD design. Under the assumptions outlined below, $\beta_3$ represents the effect of incumbency on vote shares, independent of party match or quality selection. This quantity includes all of the electoral benefits (or costs) that candidates receive because they are incumbents that would not be present if they were running for the same seat as a non-incumbent candidate. These factors include but are not limited to experience from office holding, increased campaign resources, increased name recognition, increased ability to scare off high-quality challengers, and all of the behavioral and institutional factors that accompany incumbency status.

Several assumptions are required for any instrumental variables design to estimate the causal quantity of interest. First, I acknowledge that the effects of incumbency are heterogeneous and therefore, I can only estimate the local average effect of incumbency for electorates that sometimes have close elections. Next, the assumption of independence or exogeneity requires that the instrument be unrelated to unobserved causes of the dependent variable. In this case, the close election results must be uncorrelated with unobservable characteristics of these elections, allowing me to estimate the effect of close election results on incumbency status and vote shares in the next election. This assumption is guaranteed by the RD design so long as there is no strategic sorting or manipulation of the lagged vote share around the electoral threshold. While several papers have challenged the validity of RD designs in the recent U.S. House of Representatives elections (Snyder 2005; Caughey and Sekhon 2011), Eggers et al. (2013) show that these concerns most likely arise from a statistical fluke and in any case are not present in other electoral contexts. Therefore, the assumption of independence is quite defensible in this setting. Third, I assume that the instrument (close election results) exhibits a non-zero effect on the endogenous variable (incumbency). This assumption is guaranteed so long as some incumbents seek reelection. The next assumption of monotonicity requires that the effect of close election results on incumbency is at least zero or positive for every observation. Again, this assumption is virtually guaranteed because a Republican
cannot run as an incumbent when a Democrat won the previous election, and vice versa. Fifth, I assume that a close election result and incumbency status in one electorate does not systematically influence election results in other electorates (stable unit treatment value assumption). Even if a Democratic incumbent in one electorate might benefit the Democratic Party in a neighboring electorate, the magnitude of this effect is likely negligible and would likely be washed out by Republican incumbents from other electorates helping their candidates.

The final and perhaps most objectionable assumption is the exclusion restriction. Specifically, I assume that the only way in which close election results can influence the next election result is through the effect of the election result on incumbency. In other words, if no incumbents seek reelection, there should be no effect of the close election result on subsequent elections. This is comparable to saying that the “partisan incumbency advantage” as defined by Fowler and Hall (2013) is zero. There are theoretical reasons to worry about this assumption. For example, we could imagine a positive partisan incumbency advantage if retiring incumbents tend to help the new candidates from their party or if voters develop a sense of attachment to their incumbent party. Alternatively, we could imagine a negative partisan incumbency advantage if voters systematically vote against the party of retiring incumbents or if the out-party exerts more effort when an incumbent from the other party retires. Despite these possibilities, Fowler and Hall (2013) estimate this quantity in one electoral setting—state legislatures with term limits—and find that it is substantively negligible and statistically indistinguishable from zero. While their design cannot be replicated in settings without term limits, there is little reason to think that a partisan incumbency advantage would be more pronounced in other settings. In short, while the exclusion restriction is not guaranteed from first principles, it has received empirical support from previous work. To the extent that close elections influence subsequent election results, the effect appears to act solely through personal incumbency.
Implementing this test in the case of Senate elections, I estimate an officeholder benefit ($\beta_i$) of 0.037 (s.e. = .011, p < .01), suggesting that an incumbent receives an extra 3.7 percentage points of vote share compared to the counterfactual scenario where the same candidate is running as a non-incumbent for an open seat.

Figure 1 illustrates the way in which this quantity is estimated. The top panel shows the first stage effect of close election results on incumbency by plotting the average relationship between the incumbency variable (1 = Democratic incumbent, 0 = open seat, −1 = Republican incumbent) and the two-party vote share in the previous election. The winner of a Senate race seeks reelection approximately 7 out of 10 times, and this rate is relatively constant across previous vote share. Therefore, the incumbency variable takes an average value of about −.7 when the previous vote share is below 0.5 (meaning that Republican incumbents seek reelection about 70 percent of time), and then when the previous vote share crosses the electoral threshold, the expected value of incumbency jumps discontinuously to .7 (meaning that Democratic incumbents seek reelection about 70 percent of the time). If incumbents always sought reelection, this first stage effect, estimated by the magnitude of the discontinuity at the electoral threshold, would be 2—the close election would always switch the status of incumbency from Republican to Democrat or vice versa. However, since incumbents only seek reelection 70 percent of the time, the first stage effect is 1.4.

The bottom panel of Figure 1 shows the reduced form effect of close election results on the vote share in the next election. This is analogous to the analysis of Lee (2008). There is a smooth, continuous relationship between the vote share in one election and the vote share in the previous election with the exception of a discontinuous jump at the electoral threshold. When the Democratic Party barely wins one close election, it receives an extra 5.2 percentage points of vote share in the next election compared to the scenario where the Democratic Party barely loses. By dividing this reduced form estimate of 5.2 by the first stage estimate of 1.4, we obtain a close
approximation of the two-stage least squares estimate of officeholder benefit—3.7 percentage points.

[Figure 1]

With this estimate in hand, I estimate the magnitude of quality selection by subtracting my estimate of $\beta_1$ (officeholder benefit) from that of $\beta_2$ (quality selection + officeholder benefit). In the case of Senate elections, I estimate quality selection as 3.3 percentage points ($7.0 - 3.7$). As before, I use a non-parametric bootstrap to estimate a 95% confidence interval for this quantity which ranges from 1.1 to 5.2 percentage points.

To summarize the results for Senate elections, incumbents significantly outperform non-incumbents—receiving an extra 12.3 percentage points of vote share compared to candidates from their same party running in open seat races. However, only 3.7 percentage points or less than one-third of that success can be attributed to officeholder benefit, i.e. the causal benefits of running as an incumbent. The remaining majority of incumbent success in Senate elections can be attributed to party match and quality selection, with the former slighter larger than the latter. These results suggest that Senate elections succeed in selecting for candidates that are either high in quality or match the partisanship of the state. The bulk of incumbent success stems from the fact that voters previously selected for good candidates in past elections and only a small fraction of that success can be attributed to benefits obtained by candidates after becoming incumbents.

**Comparing Different Local Averages**

I estimate three different coefficients and then compare them in order to back out the relevant quantities of interest. $\beta_1$ represents the sum of party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit; $\beta_2$ represent the sum of quality selection and officeholder benefit, and $\beta_3$ represents officeholder benefit by itself. Therefore, I estimate party match by subtracting $\beta_2$ from $\beta_1$,
and I estimate quality selection by subtracting $\beta_3$ from $\beta_2$. However, even if my estimates are unbiased, they may reflect average effects for different populations, calling into question the comparability of the coefficients. $\beta_1$ is estimated through a straightforward, cross-sectional regression that weighs all observations equally, while $\beta_2$ is estimated through a differences-in-differences regression that implicitly puts more weight on the units that see more variation in incumbency. If the magnitudes of quality selection or officeholder benefit differ between the entire sample and the sample where we see more variation in incumbency, then my estimate of party match will be biased. $\beta_3$ is estimated with a fuzzy RD design that implicitly puts more weight on close elections. If the magnitude of officeholder benefit differs between settings with more close elections and those with more variation in incumbency, then I could obtain a biased estimate of quality selection. Unfortunately, there is no straightforward way to assess the extent of this problem or correct for it. However, I propose several corrective procedures which involve reweighting the data in order to make the local averages across the three estimation steps more similar. For each procedure, the results do not change significantly, suggesting that the extent of this bias is minimal. Results are shown in Table 2.

Assume temporarily that the only heterogeneity that could induce such a bias occurs across states. In other words, assume that the magnitudes of quality selection and officeholder benefit are homogenous within state but could differ across states.\(^5\) Then, we could reweight the three estimation steps so that they put the same relative weight on each state, allowing for comparable estimates. I accomplish this by reweighting the second and third estimation steps so that they put approximately the same weight on each state as the first estimation step where all observations are

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\(^5\) Heterogeneity in party match is irrelevant, because estimates of party match are not used to estimate either of the other quantities. Therefore, while we can imagine variation in party match across settings, it is not relevant for estimating quality selection or officeholder benefit without bias.
weighted equally. The fixed effects regression which estimates $\beta_2$ implicitly puts more weight on states that experience more variance in incumbency, so I reweight this regression by the inverse of the variance of incumbency in each state. The RD design which estimates $\beta_3$ implicitly puts more weight on states that have more close elections (e.g., Imbens and Lemieux 2008), so I select an arbitrary cutoff of 5 percent and weight by the inverse proportion of close elections in the state. Replicating the empirical strategy described in the previous section with the addition of these weights, I obtain new estimates of party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit. These new estimates are slightly less precise, but the point estimates are virtually unchanged. Therefore, heterogeneity across states in the values of quality selection and officeholder benefit poses little concern for my estimates. This reweighting approach that allows for such heterogeneity produces nearly identical results.

Instead of worrying about heterogeneity across states, we might worry about heterogeneity across time, because, for example, incumbency advantages are thought to have increased over time (e.g., Cox and Katz 1996; Gelman and King 1990; Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002 – more on this later). Now, temporarily assume that the values of quality selection and officeholder benefit are homogenous within a given year but could vary across years. Under this assumption, we can reweight each observation according to the variation of incumbency in each year and the prevalence of close elections in each year (in the same way that we previously reweighted by state). This approach will produce estimates that are robust to heterogeneity across time (as opposed to the previous results which were robust to heterogeneity across states). Again, the results are shown in Table 2 and they are virtually identical to the original, unweighted results. Therefore, whatever heterogeneity exists over time, it appears to hold no consequences for my estimates.\(^6\)

\(^6\) We cannot estimate party match or quality selection without posing some kind of homogeneity assumption (e.g., within states, within years, within state-decades, etc.). Suppose, for example, that we recovered the implicit regression weights for each observation in the differences-
Lastly, I conduct a similar reweighting procedure for each state-decade, this time assuming homogeneity within each state-decade but allowing for heterogeneity across state-decades. Again, the results in Table 2 are nearly identical to the unweighted results. Even if there is heterogeneity in quality selection and officeholder benefit across states, time, or state-decades, it does not appear to influence my estimates. The values of quality selection and officeholder benefit appear to be relatively constant across the different local populations for which we need to compare these quantities, and therefore, concerns about different local averages do not pose a significant problem for my subsequent results.

Results across Different Electoral Settings

Having described my empirical strategy and discussed results for Senate elections, I now present results across 7 different electoral settings—the U.S. Senate, governors, the U.S. House, high-salience statewide offices (lieutenant governors, secretaries of state, and state attorney generals), low-salience statewide offices (all other state offices), state legislatures, and mayors. The range of years for each setting varies according to the availability of high-quality data. For example, the analysis of U.S. House elections goes back to 1902, while the analysis of state legislatures only goes back to 1970, although I examine variation across time in the next section. In each case, my empirical approach is nearly identical to that shown for Senate. Instead of state-decade fixed effects, I utilize district-decade fixed effects in the analysis of the U.S. House and state legislatures and city-decade fixed effects in the analysis of mayors. In the cases where I pool different offices (low- and high-salience statewide offices) I include fixed effects for each office, although this inclusion does not influence the results. When I conduct the block bootstrap simulations to estimate confidence intervals, I sample states as blocks in the case of the Senate, governors, and statewide offices; in-differences analysis and reweighted each observation by its inverse weight. Then, we would simply recover $\beta_i$ from the cross-sectional regression and learn nothing about party match.
districts as blocks in the case of the House and state legislatures; and cities as blocks in the case of mayors.

Table 3 presents estimates of party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit for each setting, along with the corresponding 95% confidence intervals for each quantity. Estimates of party match and officeholder benefit are statistically and substantively significant in all 7 settings, and estimates of quality selection are substantively and statistically significant in 4 of the 7 settings. All three factors appear to play an important role in incumbent success. Party match ranges from 3.1 to 13.1 percentage points, quality selection ranges from 0.1 to 3.3 percentage points, and officeholder benefit ranges from 3.5 to 4.8 percentage points. These officeholder benefit estimates may appear low to those familiar with previous studies of incumbency advantage. However, most studies in this literature estimate a combination of quality selection and officeholder benefit without cleanly separating these two, distinct quantities. As expected, when I estimate the causal benefits of officeholding and separate them from quality selection, I obtain significantly smaller estimates. In the final row, I pool all elections to generate aggregate estimates of party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit. All three estimates are substantively large and statistically distinguishable from zero. Party match is the most significant factor, explaining approximately three-fifths of incumbent success in elections. Quality selection is the smallest of the three but still quite important. Approximately one-eighth of incumbent success can be explained by the ability of elections to select for non-partisan dimensions of quality. Taking a holistic view, elections across many settings appear effective in selecting for better representatives.

[Table 3]

Two additional columns provide transformations of these quantities in order to facilitate comparisons across settings. The fourth column of Table 3 presents the ratio of quality selection and party match. This ratio provides an indication of the extent to which voters are primarily selecting
on party or non-partisan characteristics at the ballot box. As expected, this ratio increases with the salience of the electoral setting, where voters presumably know more about the candidates are able to incorporate additional information over and above party into their vote choices. For mayoral elections, quality selection is only 17 percent as great as party match, but in Senate elections, quality selection is 63 percent as large as party match. Despite the supposed dominance of parties and partisanship in electoral politics, quality selection is quite important in the most publicly salient electoral settings.

The last column of Table 3 presents the officeholder benefit divided by the sum of all three factors, indicating the proportion of incumbent success that can be attributed to the causal benefits of office holding. High proportions would likely support the sentiments of scholars and pundits who bemoan the success of incumbents, accusing them of exploiting the political system to keep themselves in power. Low proportions, on the other hand, would suggest that elections do an effective job in selecting for high-quality leaders that match the partisanship of the electorate. With the single exception of gubernatorial races, only a minority of incumbent success can be attributed to officeholder benefit. The fact that most of incumbents’ success is explained by party match and quality selection is largely reassuring for the performance of American elections.

Gubernatorial elections are the most notable outlier in this analysis, with 59 percent of incumbent success attributable to officeholder benefit. The differences between gubernatorial races and other settings could be simply driven by chance. However, there could also be important institutional differences that explain the uniqueness of governors. One notable difference that I will return to later is that most governors face term limits. Regardless of the explanation, my small estimates of party match and quality selection in gubernatorial settings are interesting, because the only previous study which attempts to directly estimate electoral selection with a careful research design (Alt, Bueno de Mesquita, and Rose 2011) focuses exclusively on governors. My results
suggest that this study may understate the overall importance of selection in American elections, because gubernatorial races appear to the setting where quality selection is least prevalent.

Surprisingly, I obtain the largest estimates of quality selection in Congress which is often thought to be a bastion of entrenched incumbents. Academics and pundits often point to constituency services, franking privileges, pork barrel ing, and other institutional features of Congress that supposedly allow mediocre incumbents to keep themselves in power (e.g., Fiorina 1977). However, my estimates suggest that, if anything, congressional elections do a better job in selecting for high-quality representatives compared to other settings. A sizable proportion of incumbents’ electoral success in Congress can be attributed to the fact that incumbents are, on average, better than the typical candidates from their same party and electorate. The initial elections in which these incumbents entered were effective in selecting high-quality representatives.

**Variation over Time**

I now explore variation over time by separately estimating party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit for each setting and each decade where I have sufficient data. Figure 2 presents the results graphically. One general pattern is remarkably consistent across settings. Party match has decreased over time while quality selection and officeholder benefit have increased. Some exceptions stand out; party match and quality selection have remained relatively constant in gubernatorial races, and there has been little variation in state legislatures during the period of available data. Nonetheless, over the course of the 20th century, incumbent success gradually became less attributable to party and more attributable to non-partisan dimensions of quality and the direct benefits of office holding.

[Figure 2]
Surprisingly, the decline of party match took place when partisan polarization of elites increased (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), the importance of parties in Congress increased (Hall and Shepsle 2014), the importance of partisanship for individual vote choices did not decline (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002), and individual partisan attitudes were extremely stable (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). So what explains the decline in party match? The predominant factor appears to be the southern realignment. When southern states were dominated by the Democratic Party, incumbents in the South performed well in elections because of their party. To assess this possibility, I re-analyze the U.S. House after first dropping southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia). I focus on the U.S. House, because this setting provides the longest time period of data and shows the greatest decline in party match. Figure 2 shows that the decline of party match virtually disappears when the South is excluded, suggesting that the decline of the one-party South accounts for the decline in party match. In non-southern states, quality selection and officeholder benefit increased significantly over time while party match remained relatively constant. This finding is consistent with previous evidence that party and incumbency are not necessarily substitutes (Ansolabehere et al. 2006; Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002). As voters select more on quality and incumbency, they need not select less on party.

My results are consistent with many previous studies identifying a rising incumbency advantage (e.g., Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002; Cox and Katz 1996; Gelman and King 1990). However, previous studies have detected an increase in the sum of quality selection and officeholder benefit without separating the two. Figure 2 shows that the rise of quality selection was just as prominent as the rise of officeholder benefit in most settings, and the supposed rise of incumbency advantages identified by previous studies was influenced just as much by a rise in quality selection as a rise in officeholder benefit. Therefore, the rise of incumbents’ electoral success in the 20th century
is not the cause for alarm that some previous studies imply. Some of that rise is attributable to the increasing benefits of office holding, but a significant share is attributable to the fact that elections are increasingly selecting for high-quality candidates.

**Variation across Electoral Institutions**

Those that do worry about the ability of entrenched incumbents to keep themselves in power have proposed many policies which aim to improve the extent to which elections select for better representatives. The two most popular and widespread of these proposals are the public financing of elections and term limits. Here, I can partially assess whether these policies appear to achieve their desired goals by testing whether party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit are notably different in state legislatures that have public financing or term limits in place. Results are shown in Table 4. Constraints of statistical power and the fact that I need many elections in each setting to estimate these quantities of interest prevent me from running a clean differences-in-differences design which would provide better estimates of the effects of public financing and term limits. Therefore, the subsequent analysis is necessarily crude. Nonetheless, the differences I detect are suggestive of important effects that warrant further investigation.

[Table 4]

Using the same codings as Hall (2014), I separately estimate party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit for state legislative settings with and without “clean election laws.” These laws were present in Minnesota from 1976, Wisconsin from 1978, Arizona and Maine from 2000, and Connecticut from 2008. Generally speaking, clean election laws restrict private fundraising,

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7 Some do not classify Minnesota and Wisconsin as having “clean election laws” because the funding is only partial and there were never matching funds, but I group these five states together because they create the greatest degree of parity between incumbent and challenger resources. Hawaii also has public funding, but the level of funding is small and not indexed to inflation, so I follow Hall (2014) in excluding it from this classification.
guarantee significant funding for all serious candidates, and in some cases provide matching funds to maintain equality of campaign resources between competing campaigns. Consistent with Hall (2014) and with the expectations of advocates for clean election laws, I find that the officeholder benefit is markedly lower when clean election laws are in place—3.1 percentage points instead of 4.9. I also observe that quality selection is slightly higher—3.3 percentage points instead of 1.8. Therefore, clean election laws appear to accomplish their goal of reducing the direct benefits of office holding and increasing the ability of voters to select high-quality candidates.

Similarly, Table 4 presents separate estimates of party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit for state legislative settings with and without term limits. Those settings with terms limits see greater party match—11.8 percentage points instead of 10.6, less quality selection—1.4 vs. 1.7 percentage points, and the same level of officeholder benefit. If anything, terms limits appear to reduce the ability of voters to select on non-partisan dimensions of quality and increase the reliance of voters on party cues without altering the direct returns to office holding. One plausible explanation is that term limits prevent many high-quality officials from seeking reelection and bring in new candidates that are less familiar to the voters, forcing voters to increasingly rely upon partisanship and incumbency.

These simple comparisons are admittedly crude and should not be interpreted too strongly. These differences could be partly explained by inherent differences between the types of places that have or do not have clean election laws or term limits, and for reasons explained above, differences-in-differences designs are impossible due to the lack of statistical power. Moreover, clean election laws and term limits likely influence the types of candidates that run to begin with, and my estimates only speak to the types of candidates that are selected among the set that run in general elections. For example, term limits could still improve the quality of elected officials by improving the quality of general election candidates, even if term limits decrease the ability of voters to select the higher-
quality candidate in the general election stage. However, theory suggests, if anything, that term limits will decrease average candidate quality by kicking out high-quality incumbents and by reducing the career benefits of winning an election.

Variation across Press Coverage

Another factor thought to influence the effectiveness of elections and the health of democracy is press coverage. Presumably, in the absence of news coverage, voters can learn little about political candidates and therefore may be unable to select the best candidates. In order to assess the role of press coverage, I utilize data from Snyder and Stromberg (2010) on the congruence between congressional districts and newspaper media markets. Snyder and Stromberg show that their measure of congruence corresponds closely with the level of news coverage that districts receive about their representative in the U.S. House. Moreover, this measure is plausibly exogenous to education levels, political interest, and other important factors that may differ between high- and low-information districts. By estimating party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit in districts with high and low levels of media market congruence, I assess whether increased news coverage appears to improve the effectiveness of elections in selecting for high-quality candidates.

Before presenting the results, I note that the effects of press coverage on party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit are theoretically ambiguous. Most likely, we would expect press coverage to decrease party match, since voters are likely to rely increasingly on party in the absence of any information. Effects on quality selection and officeholder benefit, however, could go in either direction. On one hand, more press coverage should increase voters’ information about candidates and increase their ability to select higher-quality candidates. However, Snyder and Stromberg (2010) show that the effects of press coverage are asymmetric across incumbents and challengers. Higher congruence corresponds with significantly higher name recognition and
knowledge about the incumbent but exhibits no detectable effect on knowledge about challengers. Therefore, more press coverage could simply increase officeholder benefit without influencing quality selection. Moreover, Snyder and Stromberg show that press coverage significantly alters the behavior of incumbents in ways that may further increase officeholder benefit.

Figure 3 plots estimates of party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit for different levels of press coverage and media market congruence. I analyze all U.S. House elections from 1982 to 2010 (the three redistricting cycles for which congruence data is available), dividing each district-decade into quartiles—four equally sized groups with differing levels of congruence. As expected, more press coverage appears to decrease party match. Moreover, we see that higher congruence corresponds with greater levels of officeholder benefit but little change in quality selection. Presumably, by increasing information about the incumbent and by altering the incumbents’ behavior, press coverage decreases party match and increases officeholder benefit. Moreover, because press coverage does not appear to increase knowledge of challengers, the ability of voters to select on quality does not increase in high-congruence districts.

The finding that press coverage decreases party match, increases officeholder benefit, and does not significantly alter quality selection is normatively ambiguous. Perhaps press coverage harms the effectiveness of elections by glamorizing incumbents and leading voters to break away from their partisan preferences for superficial reasons. However, the results of Snyder and Stromberg paint a much more positive light on these results. Press coverage appears to cause members of Congress to exert more effort and to vote in line with their districts more often, so increased officeholder benefit could reflect better democratic accountability. Nonetheless, despite the potential benefits of increased press coverage for effort and accountability, I find little evidence that more news coverage increases the ability of voters to select for better representatives in general elections.
Conclusion

Many scholars and pundits bemoan the electoral dominance of incumbents, concluding that mediocre politicians exploit the political system in order to keep themselves in power. However, a more optimistic interpretation is that previous elections selected for better candidates, causing incumbents to perform well when they run again. Incumbents might perform well in elections simply because the previous elections selected for good leaders. Previous research has been unable to distinguish between these two possibilities, because quality is unobservable and there are few credible research designs that allow us to evaluate the performance of democratic elections. In this study, I quantify three distinct sources of incumbent success in elections, and the results are largely reassuring. Most of incumbents’ electoral dominance can be attributed to the fact that previous elections selected high-quality leaders who match the partisanship of the electorate.

Because the normative implications of incumbent success are ambiguous, previous studies of incumbency hold little direct relevance for the health of democracy. However, party match and quality selection, as defined and estimated in this study, hold relatively clear implications for democracy. Elections are designed to select high-quality leaders who match the preferences of the voters. One could question whether voters focus on the most important dimensions of quality or appropriately weigh partisanship and quality, but large, positive values of party match and quality selection in American elections suggest that elections are accomplishing one of their most fundamental goals.

While I argue that party match and quality selection are largely good for democracy, I do not argue that officeholder benefit is necessarily bad. If officeholder benefit arises from incompetent or corrupt leaders exploiting institutional advantages, then the presence of officeholder benefit, albeit a small portion of the overall success of incumbents, is still cause for alarm. However, officeholder benefit could also arise because leaders gain experience and learn on the job, making them more
attractive candidates when the seek reelection. In the present study, *officeholder benefit* is a black box containing all of the causal benefits of office holding, and future researchers should continue to delve more deeply into the various factors that contribute to this quantity.

The results of this study vary in interesting ways that hold implications for policy and the effects of electoral reforms. The magnitude of quality selection relative to party match increases with the salience of the electoral setting, so reforms that raise the salience of campaigns and elections may improve the ability of voters to select for non-partisan dimensions of quality. Quality selection appears to have increased over the 20th century, precisely as pundits warned of entrenched incumbents and decreased electoral competitiveness. Future research may uncover explanations for this trend which could provide further policy recommendations. Evidence from state legislatures suggests that public financing increases quality selection and decreases officeholder benefit while term limits decrease quality selection and increase party match. Lastly, evidence from the U.S. House suggests that increased press coverage does not improve democratic selection, presumably because it does not increase knowledge about challengers. Because my empirical strategy can be applied to any single-member, majoritarian, two-party, electoral system, future testing may lend further insights into the performance of elections in different settings and the effectiveness of policy reforms.

Do elections select for better representatives? Generally speaking, the answer appears to be yes. Elections select for high-quality leaders that match the partisanship of the electorate. Incumbent dominance in elections is not a sign of a broken political system. American elections show signs of a healthy democracy in which most incumbents are reelected because the previous elections effectively selected for better candidates.
References


Fowler, Anthony and Andrew B. Hall. 2014. Long-Term Consequences of Election Results. Working paper.


Hall, Andrew B. 2014. How the Public Funding of Elections Increases Candidate Polarization. Working paper.


Table 1. Detailed Results for U.S. Senate Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimating $\beta_1$</th>
<th>Estimating $\beta_2$</th>
<th>Estimating $\beta_3$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OLS OLS First 2SLS</td>
<td>OLS Vote Share Incumbency Vote Share</td>
<td>OLS Vote Share Incumbency Vote Share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV = Vote Share</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Incumbency</td>
<td>.123 (.010)</td>
<td>.070 (.008)</td>
<td>.037 (.011)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lagged Victory</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.397 (.060)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Fixed Effects</td>
<td>X X X X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State-Decade Fixed Effects</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f(Lagged Vote Share)</td>
<td>X X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>F-statistic</td>
<td></td>
<td>538.2</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Observations</td>
<td>1361 1361 1236</td>
<td>1361 1361 1236</td>
<td>1361 1361 1236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Match ($\beta_1 - \beta_2$)</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>[.030,.073]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Selection ($\beta_2 - \beta_3$)</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>[.011,.052]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officeholder Benefit ($\beta_3$)</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>[.016,.061]</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

State-clustered standard errors in parentheses; Block bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals in brackets. All estimates are statistically distinguishable from zero ($p < .01$). The table presents all steps necessary to estimate party match, quality selection, and officeholder benefit in U.S. Senate elections. The sample size drops from 1361 to 1236 for the RD analyses (columns 3 and 4) because elections are dropped where the previous election was uncontested. f(Lagged Vote Share) indicates that a fourth-order polynomial for lagged vote share (the running variable) was included.
Table 2. Senate Results under Different Re-weighting Schemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PM</th>
<th>QS</th>
<th>OB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unweighted</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.030,.073]</td>
<td>[.011,.052]</td>
<td>[.016,.061]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-weighted by State</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.032,.071]</td>
<td>[−.010,.062]</td>
<td>[.011,.086]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-weighted by Year</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.032,.071]</td>
<td>[.009,.052]</td>
<td>[.019,.064]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-weighted by State-Decade</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[.032,.070]</td>
<td>[−.008,.040]</td>
<td>[.028,.081]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Block bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals in brackets.

The table presents the Senate results under different re-weighting schemes designed to increase the comparability local averages, thereby increasing the validity of the comparisons of coefficients. Results are very similar across all reweighting schemes, suggesting that concerns about different local average effects do not significantly alter the results.
Table 3. Results across Different Electoral Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>PM</th>
<th>QS</th>
<th>OB</th>
<th>QS/PM</th>
<th>OB/(PM+QS+OB)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Senate (1926-2010)</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.633</td>
<td>.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. House (1902-2012)</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.179</td>
<td>.193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governors (1948-2012)</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide—High (1948-2012)</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.101</td>
<td>.337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide—Low (1948-2012)</td>
<td>.102</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>.178</td>
<td>.238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Legislatures (1970-2010)</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>.276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayors (1947-2007)</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.167</td>
<td>.257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pooled</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>.189</td>
<td>.246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Block-bootstrap 95% confidence intervals are shown in brackets.

The table presents estimates of party match (PM), quality selection (QS), and officeholder benefit (OB) for 7 different electoral settings and the pooled averages across all settings. In most settings, all three factors are statistically and substantively significant. The fourth column also shows the ratio of quality selection to party match, which, as expected, increases with the salience of the electoral setting. The fifth column shows the proportion of incumbent success that is explained by officeholder benefit. With the exception of gubernatorial races, officeholder benefit only explains a minority of incumbent success. In other words, most of incumbents’ electoral success in elections can be attributed to the fact that the initial elections selected for better representatives.
Table 4. Variation across Public Financing and Term Limits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PM</th>
<th>QS</th>
<th>OB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clean Election Laws</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.083, 0.102]</td>
<td>[0.001, 0.052]</td>
<td>[0.013, 0.062]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Clean Election Laws</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.104, 0.110]</td>
<td>[0.013, 0.023]</td>
<td>[0.045, 0.054]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term Limits</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.111, 0.126]</td>
<td>[−0.002, 0.025]</td>
<td>[0.040, 0.065]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Term Limits</td>
<td>0.106</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.103, 0.108]</td>
<td>[0.013, 0.021]</td>
<td>[0.046, 0.054]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table presents separate estimates of party match (PM), quality selection (QS), and officeholder benefit (OB) for state legislatures with and without clean election laws and with and without term limits. While these simple comparisons are necessarily crude, the results suggest several interesting patterns. Clean election laws correspond with higher quality selection and lower officeholder benefit while term limits correspond with slightly higher party match and slightly lower quality selection.
The figure illustrates the first stage and reduced form estimates involved in estimating officeholder benefit in the top and bottom panels, respectively. Dotted curves indicate standard errors, grey dots indicate binned averages, and the thick, black curves indicate fourth order polynomial fits. In the top panel, we see that both Democratic and Republican incumbents seek reelection about 70% of the time, so a close election result increases the value of the incumbency variable (scaled from -1 to 1) by 1.4. In the bottom panel, the 5.2 percentage point jump at the electoral threshold indicates that a bare Democratic victory increases the Democratic Party’s share of the two-party vote in the next election by 5.2 percentage points relative to a bare Republican victory. Dividing this point estimate by the first stage estimate, we obtain a close approximation of the 2SLS estimate of officeholder benefit—the causal effect of incumbency on vote shares, independent of party match and quality selection.
The figure presents separate estimates of party match (PM), quality selection (QS), and officeholder benefit (OB) for each setting and each decade. In general, party match has decreased over time while quality selection and officeholder benefit have increased, although this pattern does not hold in every setting.
The figure presents separate estimates of party match (PM), quality selection (QS), and officeholder benefit (OB) for four different groups of U.S. House districts between 2002 and 2010, showing variation across different levels of news coverage. Specifically, the figure plots separate estimates for each quartile of Snyder and Stromberg’s (2010) measure of congruence between district and newspaper media markets. Higher congruence (and thus more press coverage of a district’s representative) corresponds with lower party match, greater officeholder benefit, and little change in quality selection. By increasing name recognition of the incumbent and by changing the behavior of the representative, press coverage appears to increase officeholder benefit and decrease party match. However, press coverage exhibits no detectable effect voters’ knowledge about challengers, so there is little effect on quality selection.