Incumbency Effects and the Strength of Party Preferences: Evidence from Multiparty Elections in the United Kingdom[*]

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Abstract

Previous researchers have speculated that incumbency effects are larger when voters have weaker partisan preferences, but evidence for this relationship is surprisingly weak. We offer a fresh look at the question by using new data to study incumbency effects in the U.K. since 1802; to investigate the role of partisanship, we focus on the period of multiparty competition since 1900, exploiting the fact that the strength of voters' party preferences depends on which two parties are locally competitive. Comparing different partisan matchups, we show that incumbency effects are consistently larger in contests where voters have weaker partisan preferences between the locally competitive parties. We also use survey data to discount alternative explanations based on strategic voting or differential effort across parties. By documenting how partisanship influences incumbency effects, our analysis shows how the comparative study of incumbency effects can offer broader insights into electoral accountability across political systems.

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1 Introduction

The study of incumbency effects started with questions about the re-election rate of members of the U.S. Congress[1] and developed into a huge literature in American politics examining the trajectory and source of incumbents' electoral advantages.[2] In recent years, studies have begun to emerge that examine incumbency effects outside the U.S. (see e.g. Hainmueller and Kern 2008; Uppal 2009; Kendall and Rekkas 2012; Ariga 2015). While this comparative literature builds on questions about incumbent insulation that motivated the early U.S. studies, it also has the potential to yield insights into a broader set of questions about how the behavior of politicians and voters varies with the nature of political campaigns, legislative institutions, and party systems.

One explanation for variation in incumbency effects is partisanship, by which we mean the strength of voters' preferences between competing parties. To motivate our discussion of partisanship in the comparative study of incumbency effects, consider Figure 1, in which we plot the evolution of incumbency effects in the U.S. and U.K. since 1900.[3] Two facts are particularly striking about this comparison. First, incumbency effects have tended to be much higher in the U.S. than in the U.K., particularly in the second half of the 20th century; around 1980, for example, incumbency was worth about 12% of vote share and a 50% higher chance of winning in the U.S. as opposed to 3% and 20% in the U.K. Second, the incumbency advantage measured by vote share in the U.S. grew rapidly between about 1950 and 1980 and appears to have declined in the decades since. The strength of voters' party preferences has been offered as an explanation for both facts. Previous researchers have invariably pointed to the party-oriented nature of British politics (and the correspondingly low importance of individual candidates) in explaining the relatively low incumbency advantage in Britain (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1984; Gaines 1998; Katz and King 1999). Similarly, one of the explanations for the rise in the incumbency advantage in the U.S. has been "dealignment", i.e. the weakening of ties between voters and parties (Mayhew 1974; Krehbiel

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[1]See e.g. Erikson (1971); Mayhew (1974); Fiorina (1977); Ferejohn (1977).

[2]See e.g. Krehbiel and Wright (1983); Gelman and King (1990); Cox and Morgenstern (1993); Levitt and Wolfram (1997); Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart (2000); Lee (2008)

[3]For both countries, we conduct RDD-based incumbency effects estimation (Lee 2008) within 30-year windows (i.e. 15 years before and after the date indicated on the horizontal axis) using a local linear regression with triangular bandwidths given by Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012). The reference party for the U.S. is the Democrats; for the U.K. the reference party is the Liberals/Liberal Democrats in cases where they were among the top two parties, otherwise the Conservatives, and otherwise Labour.

and Wright 1983; Ansolabehere et al. 2006); the subsequent apparent decline in incumbency effects has not yet been the subject of serious study, but it may be the result of the widely-discussed polarization that has occurred since the 1980s (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006).

Figure 1: Incumbency effects in the UK and US, 1900-2010
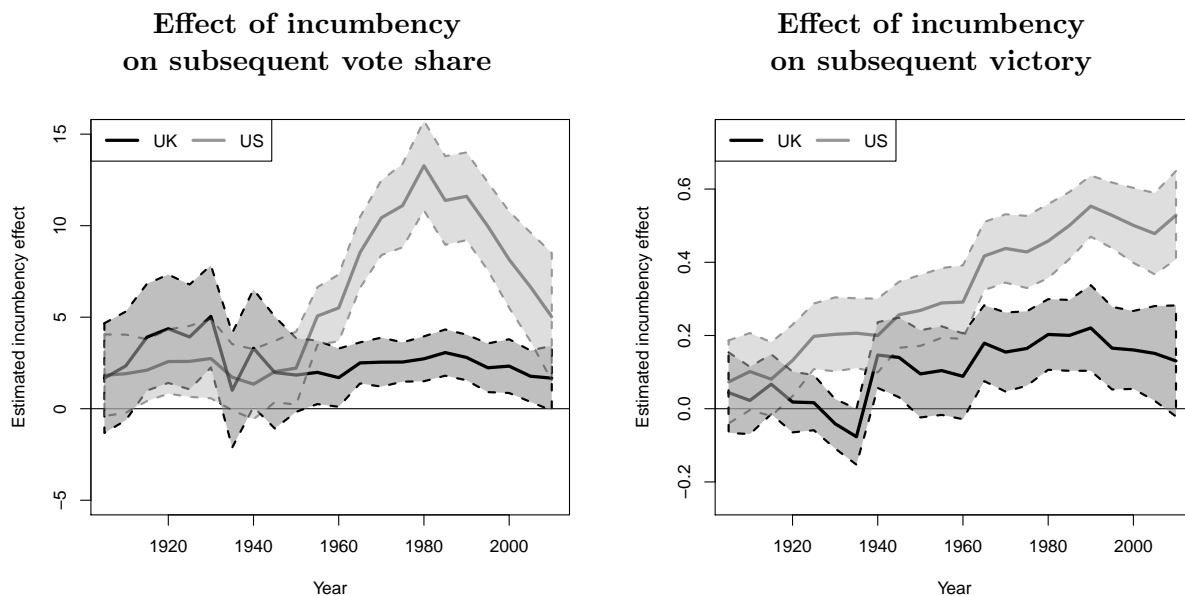
NOTE: RDD-based incumbency effects shown for U.K. House of Commons and U.S. House of Representatives since 1900. Estimation for year t is based on data from year $t - 15$ to $t + 15$ using Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012) bandwidths. The outcome is the vote share of the reference party in the left plot and a victory for the reference party in the right plot. The reference party is the Democrats for U.S.; the reference party for the U.K. depends on the contest. (Conservatives for Con-Lab and Con-Other contests in U.K.; Labour for Lab-Other contests; otherwise Liberals/Liberal Democrats.)

Although variation in the strength of party preferences seems to offer a compelling explanation for both the U.S.-U.K. comparison and the over-time U.S. pattern in Figure 1, there is surprisingly little credible empirical evidence for a relationship between partisanship and incumbency effects in these cases or elsewhere. There are of course many differences between elections in the U.S. and the U.K. other than the strength of party preferences that could explain why incumbency effects are larger in the U.S. For example, campaign spending in British parliamentary elections is tightly restricted at the constituency level (and has been since the late 19th century), whereas spending in U.S. federal campaigns has never been restricted; to the extent that the incumbency advantage in the U.S. derives from campaign spending (Fouirnaies and Hall 2014), this difference in regulation alone could explain the difference in levels. And while partisanship has been tested as an

explanation for the rise of incumbency advantage in the U.S., the evidence remains underwhelming. For example, Krehbiel and Wright (1983, p. 140) examine data on party identification and vote choice in the U.S., concluding that "partisan dealignment accounts for little of the increase in incumbency voting"; Ansolabehere et al. (2006) examine a change in the ballot format in Minnesota and conclude that incumbency effects did not drop when voters were given stronger party cues (see also Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002). Ansolabehere et al. (2007) find evidence of a larger (and earlier) incumbency advantage in U.S. primaries than in general elections; this pattern fits the partisanship view but could also be due to differences between the primary electorate and the general electorate.[4] In general, the difficulty researchers face in empirically linking partisanship and incumbency effects is that most variation in the strength of partisan preferences (e.g. across countries or over time within a country) coincides with variation in other relevant factors that potentially confound the analysis.

To address this problem, we study variation in incumbency effects *within* the U.K.'s multiparty system, where the strength of partisan preferences varies across types of constituencies while many other contextual factors remain constant. The theoretical basis for a relationship between incumbency effects and partisanship is fairly straightforward: if incumbency status makes a candidate more attractive to voters (for whatever reason), this change in attractiveness will produce greater electoral benefits when a larger proportion of the electorate is relatively indifferent between the incumbent and her competitors on partisan grounds. (For interested readers, we formalize this intuition in a simple model in the Appendix.) The multiparty U.K. system offers an attractive setting to test this theory because variation in party matchups across constituencies (i.e. Labour-Conservative contests in some places, Liberal-Labour or Liberal-Conservative contests elsewhere) creates variation in the effective strength of partisan preferences within a single system: as we show with survey data, voters have consistently had stronger preferences between Labour and the Conservatives than between the Liberals and either Labour or the Conservatives, which suggests that voters on average should have stronger partisan preferences in Labour-Conservative contests.[5]

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[4]For example, it seems likely that the primary electorate is more aware of the incumbent's activities in office. Ansolabehere et al. (2007) also provide intriguing evidence of larger primary incumbency effects in states with weaker intra-party factions, though they caution that this pattern is based on a small number of states.

[5]As we explain below, the logic requires that some voters are strategic in the sense that they focus on the top two parties rather than simply vote for their favorite party.

In line with the theory and this survey evidence, we find that incumbency effects have indeed been consistently larger in contests involving the Liberals than in Labour-Conservative contests, and that this difference is both long-standing and robust to controlling for the type of constituencies where Liberal candidates tend to be competitive. Our analysis of a single political system thus produces unusually clear evidence that incumbency effects are larger when party preferences are weaker.

Of course, one could offer alternative explanations for the variation we find in incumbency effects across partisan matchups. Notably, Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) both assert that Liberals experience larger incumbency effects because of strategic voting.[6] Briefly, their explanation is that Liberal incumbency signals to Liberal supporters that the Liberal candidate is locally viable, which discourages Liberal supporters from strategically voting Labour or Conservative. We show that the survey data do not support this account: although we find an effect of incumbency on perceived viability in Labour-Conservative matchups, we find no such effect in matchups involving Liberals, which suggests that the strategic voting mechanism offered by Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) does not explain the variation in incumbency effects we document. We also show that the pattern we document cannot easily be explained by systematic differences in effort between Liberal MPs and MPs from other parties; as we discuss in Section 5, there do appear to be differences in perceived MP effort across parties, but these differences are more consistent with a view in which MPs strategically devote effort to constituency service based on the strength of voters' party preferences.

Our results have a variety of implications for the comparative study of elections. Most directly, they provide evidence that incumbency effects are relatively low in the United Kingdom in part because of the strength of voters' partisan preferences: if partisan preferences in all constituencies had been at the level of constituencies where the Liberals were competitive, incumbency effects in the post-World War II period would have been about twice as large on average and considerably closer to U.S. levels. This insight may also be useful in explaining why incumbency effects have risen (and, perhaps, fallen) in the U.S. and more broadly why incumbency effects vary across countries

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[6]As we explain further below, their analysis used different methods and a much shorter time span, and failed to control for the type of constituency in which the different parties compete. Part of our contribution is thus to replicate their finding with a different method, a longer time span, and additional control variables.

and electoral systems. In light of our analysis, the comparative study of incumbency effects is not just about what incumbents in various systems do to protect their positions; rather, it can shed light on broader questions about how electoral accountability and partisan preferences vary across political systems.

2 Party preferences across party matchups in British elections

The strength of partisan preferences can vary across political settings for many reasons. In this paper we focus on variation that arises across British parliamentary constituencies due to variation in the identity of the the locally competitive parties. Since the rise of Labour in the early 20th century, British elections have been characterized by multiple major parties competing for seats. Figure 2 characterizes constituencies based on the top two parties in the previous election in the constituency in elections since 1832; the matchup type is undefined when the previous election was uncontested or the constituency is newly created. The rise of Labour and the disappearance of uncontested seats are the two most dramatic developments in the figure. Notably, since the early 20th century there has been a mix of party matchups across constituencies: mostly Conservative vs. Labour, but also Conservative vs. Liberal and (to a lesser extent) Labour vs. Liberal.[7]

For the purposes of investigating the relationship between partisanship and incumbency effects, the key feature of British elections is that voters on average have stronger preferences between Labour and Conservatives than they do between the Liberals and either Labour or the Conservatives. If this is true across constituencies and some voters are strategic (in the sense that they focus on the locally competitive parties), then this implies stronger partisan preferences on average in Labour-Conservative matchups than in Liberal-Conservative or Liberal-Labour matchups. In this section, we document this claim using survey data back to the 1970s and argue that it was likely true all the way back to the rise of Labour early in the 20th century.

Figure 3 tells the main story using survey data from the 2001, 2005, and 2010 elections. In each of these elections, the British Election Study asked respondents to give a 0-10 score to each of the major parties, with 0 indicating "strongly dislike" and 10 indicating "strongly like". We think of the difference between these scores for a given voter and party pair as a measure of the voter's

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[7]We use the term "Liberal" to refer to both the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats.

Figure 2: Number of races and close races, by type of matchup
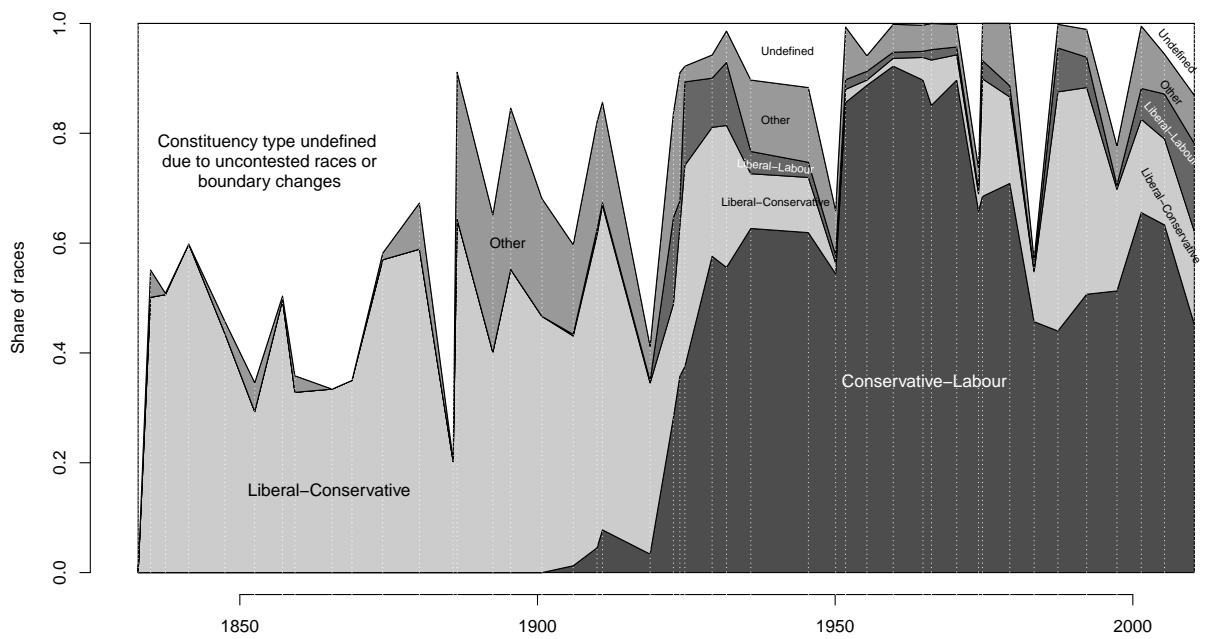
NOTE: The matchup type in a given constituency in a given election is defined based on the top two parties in the previous election in the constituency. Each vertical dashed line indicates a general election.

partisan preference between those parties (analogous to $\phi^i = u_i(p_a) - u_i(p_b)$ in the model in the Appendix). In Figure 3 we report the empirical CDF of the absolute partisan preferences for each pair of major parties (Labour and Conservative, Liberal and Conservative, Liberal and Labour); in other words, we report the proportion of respondents whose difference in reported feeling between a given pair of parties is at or below x for $x \in \{0, 1, \dots 10\}$. In the top left panel we show this for all respondents, pooled over the 3 elections.[8] It is clear that party preferences are stronger on average between Labour and the Conservatives than they are for the other party pairs: the proportion of respondents reporting a feeling score within 2 points is above 0.6 for Liberal-Conservative and Liberal-Labour comparisons but only around 0.45 for Labour-Conservative comparisons. (Both differences are highly significant in a weighted t-test, with t-values above 15.)

The other panels of Figure 3 show the same empirical CDFs when we divide respondents based on the actual constituency matchup where they live (where the constituency matchup is based on the top two parties in the previous election in the constituency). The pattern is the same across types of constituency: preferences are stronger between Labour the Conservatives than they are between the Liberals and either party regardless of the local matchup.

Figure 4 shows that Labour and the Conservatives elicited stronger partisan preferences going back at least to the 1970s. We plot the proportion of respondents reporting feeling scores within 2 points, by party pair, in each BES survey in which the question was asked.[9] The analysis shows that the rate of indifference went up somewhat for all pairs in the 2000s, but in every survey the proportion who were nearly indifferent between Labour and the Conservatives was lower than the same proportion for the other two party pairs.[10]
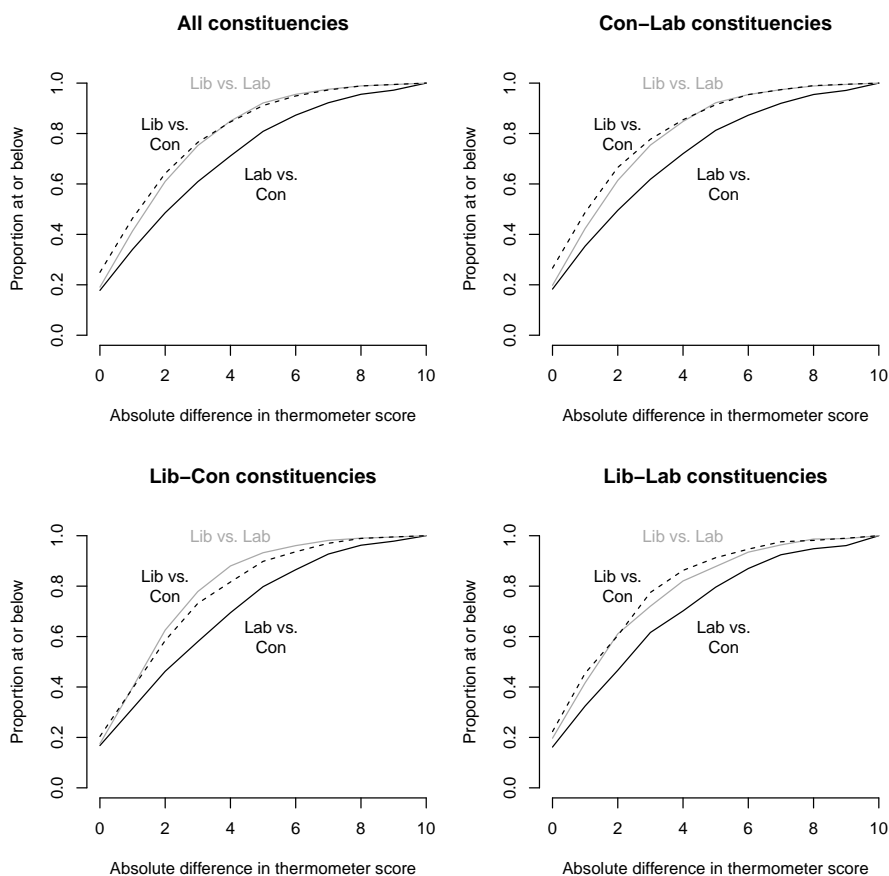
If we view incumbency status as something that increases a candidate's valence by a fixed amount (as formalized in the Appendix), these patterns of party preferences imply that more voters would change their vote in response to incumbency given a choice between a Liberal and either

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[8]For this analysis we use respondents who report a feeling score for all three parties and who live in constituencies that we can classify (based on the previous contest in the constituency) as Lib-Con, Lib-Lab, or Lab-Con. (Thus respondents in constituencies that underwent large boundary changes are excluded.) Weighted sample sizes are 1,421 (2001), 2,888 (2005), and 1,975 (2010).

[9]In 1987, 1992, and 1997 respondents were given the options "strongly against", "against", "neither", "in favor", "strongly in favor" (rather than the 0-10 scale from "strongly dislike" to "strongly like"). We assign the scores 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 to these options.

[10]Within each survey, we can reject the null of no difference in the proportion of respondents providing feeling scores within 2 points for both the Lab-Con vs. Lib-Con comparison (all t-statistics above 8) and the Lab-Con vs Lib-Lab comparison (all t-statistics above 3.9).

Figure 3: Strength of partisan preferences (empirical CDFs) by party pair in the 2001, 2005, and 2010 British Election Study

a Labour or Conservative candidate than they would in a choice between a Labour candidate and a Conservative candidate. This implies a larger incumbency effect in contests between the Liberals and the Conservatives or the Liberals and Labour than in contests between Labour and the Conservatives if at least some voters focus on the top two candidates in each constituency to the exclusion of less competitive parties – in other words, if some voters are strategic. To the extent that this is true, we expect voters on average to consider the partisan stakes to be higher in constituencies with Labour vs. Conservative matchups than in constituencies where the Liberals are competitive, which (according to the theory) implies larger incumbency effects in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab

Figure 4: Proportion of respondents reporting feeling scores within 2 for each party pair, 1974-2010
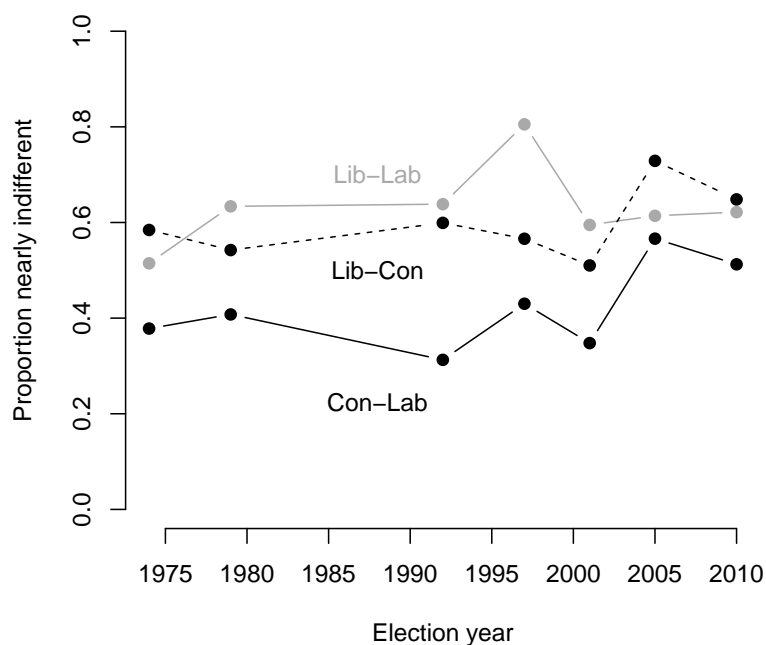
NOTE: We report the (weighted) proportion of BES respondents in each election survey who placed a given pair of parties within 2 points of each other on a 0-10 feeling scale.

contests than in Lab-Con contests.

We can point to two reasons why voters from the 1970s to 2010 held stronger preferences between Labour and the Conservatives than between the Liberals and either party. First, the Liberals were not in government during this period; to the extent that voters' party preferences come from feelings toward the government, it is unsurprising that the Liberals would not elicit strong feelings.[11] The second is that the Liberals occupied an ideological middle ground throughout this period. The survey data clearly shows this back to the late 1970s, when voters were evenly split about whether the Liberal Party was ideologically closer to Labour or the Conservatives.[12] The Liberal Democrats were established in the 1980s through a merger of the Liberal Party with centrist breakaways from both Labour and the Conservatives. In 2011, party leader Nick Clegg acknowledged the Liberal

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[11]Relatedly, to a strategic voter who cares about whether Labour or the Conservatives wins more seats in Parliament, a vote in a Labour-Conservative contest is twice as consequential as an equally close contest between either party and the Liberals.

[12]In the 1979 BES, 40% of respondents put the Liberals closer to the Conservatives and an equal number put them closer to Labour.

Democrats' ideological position when he claimed that the party owned "the freehold to the centre ground of British politics".[13] To be clear, the Liberals' centrism does not in itself ensure that Labour and the Conservatives would evoke the strongest party preferences: after all, a voter in the ideological center might be most indifferent between Labour and the Conservatives, both of which she dislikes but for different reasons, while strongly preferring the Liberals to either. The pattern of party preferences we document is consistent with a view that the Liberals have indeed occupied the center, but most voters are to the left or right of center such that they have a clear preference between Labour and the Conservatives and put the Liberals either first or second.

While the survey data we analyze only goes back to the 1970s, the pattern of preferences across party matchups likely extends back much further. The rise of Labour placed the Liberal Party on an awkward ideological middle ground: more progressive than the Conservatives but not as radical as Labour. Following the arrival of Labour as a serious electoral force in 1920, there was uncertainty about which party (Conservatives, Liberals, or perhaps a subset of both in the form of a Centre Party) would emerge to lead the "resistance to socialism"; by 1924, however, the Conservatives had clearly assumed that role (Cowling 2005). Meanwhile, Labour decisively established itself as the main party of the Left (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). As the majority of voters aligned themselves with either Labour or the Conservatives, the Liberals (squeezed in the center) became the second choice of most voters – a fact that is reflected in the Liberals' repeated efforts to adopt preferential voting (Reilly 1997).[14] In short, although we lack survey data to show the point decisively, it seems likely that the pattern of party preferences we documented above extends back at least to the 1920s, when a polarized left-right politics emerged, leaving the Liberals stranded in the center. This suggests that, to the extent there were incumbency effects early in the 20th century, they may have been larger in contests between a Liberal and Conservative or a Labour candidate than in contests between Labour and the Conservatives.

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[13]Allegra Stratton and Patrick Wintour, "Nick Clegg tells Lib Dems they belong in 'radical centre' of British politics", *The Guardian*, 13 March 2011.

[14]In 1912 a Liberal government included preferential voting in an abortive franchise bill; in 1930, a minority Labour government with Liberal support passed a preferential voting bill in the House of Commons (Reilly 1997), later to be defeated in the House of Lords.

3 Incumbency effects by party matchup

We now turn to assessing the variation in incumbency effects across party matchups. We estimate incumbency effects at the party level using a regression discontinuity design (Lee 2008). The fundamental idea behind RDD approaches to incumbency effects is to study the effect of election outcomes at time t on election outcomes in the same constituency at time $t + 1$, focusing on close elections to minimize the endogeneity of time t electoral outcomes. Suppose that a set of elections take place at time t in which the winner is decided by a coin flip; the randomization of time t outcomes ensures that winners and losers are identical in expectation and eliminates any correlation between features of the winners (e.g. their party) and features of the constituencies in which they won. The RDD approach to incumbency effects involves comparing the electoral performance at time $t + 1$ of the winners and losers from time t elections, focusing on the electoral threshold that separates winners from losers in order to approximate the "coin-flip election" scenario. As in Lee (2008), our analysis focuses on the effect of incumbency for *parties*; that is, we compare the performance at time $t+1$ of a given party following a narrow *victory* at time t with the performance of the same party at time $t + 1$ following a narrow *loss* at time t. (In the Appendix we show results going back to 1802 focusing on the candidate level, an approach discussed in De Magalhaes (2015).)

The RDD-based approach to estimating incumbency effects for parties requires defining a "reference party" from whose perspective we measure the margin of victory at time t (which determines incumbency status) and the electoral outcomes at time $t + 1$ (vote share and victory). In a pure two-party system, the incumbency effect will not depend on which party is chosen as the reference party: a narrow loss for one party is a narrow gain for the other, and any resulting electoral gain for one party comes at the expense of the other party. This will not generally be true in a multiparty system. One reason for this is that party a's incumbency-based gains could come mainly at the expense of party b even as party b's incumbency-based gains come mainly at the expense of party c (Katz and King 1999); thus even focusing on races where either party a or party b wins, the effect we find may depend on which party is the reference party. The other reason is that incumbency effects may vary across matchups (e.g. for the reasons discussed above) and different parties likely have different mixes of matchups; for example, in recent decades in the U.K., Liberal incumbents mainly face Conservative challengers while Conservative incumbents mainly face Labour challengers.

In Figure 5 we report the effect of a party winning at time t on its vote share at time $t + 1$; in each plot we use a different party as the reference party. As in Figure 1, we estimate the effect for a given year by carrying out an RDD analysis using all elections within 15 years before and after that year; we use a local linear regression with triangular kernel weights and the bandwidth selected by the Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012) algorithm. (In the Supporting Information we present histograms of the running variable by period and type of contest; the density appears to be continuous across the margin, as confirmed by the McCrary (2008) test in each subsample.) For Conservatives and Liberals our estimates go back to 1832 (the first election in which we have reliable party labels for candidates); for Labour we begin in 1905, the first point at which we have at least 100 close elections within a window of 15 years on either side. (Figure 6 shows the same analysis, where the outcome is the probability of the party winning at time $t+1$.) Figure 5 indicates that incumbency had a positive and fairly steady effect on vote share for each party throughout the 20th century; the effect was lower and possibly negative before that.[15] The magnitude of the effect in the 20th century seems to vary depending on the reference party: when we take the Liberals as the reference party, incumbency is worth about 5 percentage points on average during the post-World War II period; over the same period, the effect is only about 2 percentage points when the Conservatives are the reference party and even less when Labour is the reference party. The effect of incumbency on the probability of victory in the next election (Figure 6) seems to rise over time in each set of analysis but again varies in magnitude across parties; by the late 20th century, incumbency increases the probability of victory in the next election by almost .5 when we take Liberals as the reference party but only about .1 when the Conservatives or Labour are the reference party.

These results are consistent with the theory and the survey data presented in the previous section. The survey evidence (Figures 3 and 4) indicates that voters had weaker preferences between the Liberals and Labour or Liberals and Conservatives than between Labour and the Conservatives. Clearly when we carry out RDD analysis with the Liberals as the reference party, we focus on matchups involving Liberals (i.e. matchups where voters have relatively weak preferences between the top two candidates); when we carry out RDD analysis with Labour or the Conservatives as the

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[15]The possible negative effect of incumbency on both vote share and the probability of winning that we find in the 19th century deserves further attention but will not be the focus of this paper.

Figure 5: Effect of incumbency on vote share, U.K. 1835-2010, by reference party

Conservatives

Labour

Liberals
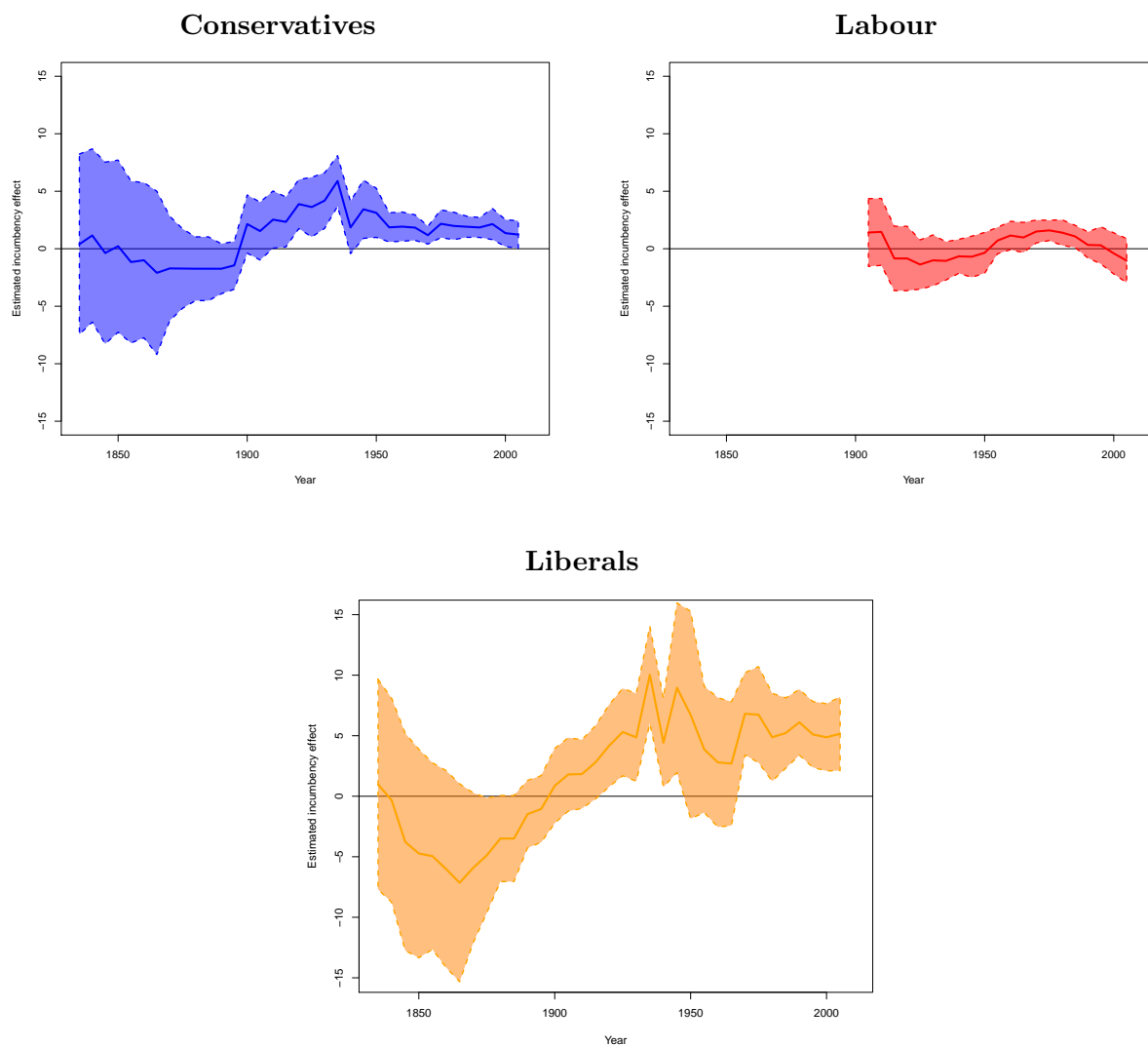
reference party, we predominately focus on matchups between Labour and the Conservatives (i.e. matchups where voters have relatively strong preferences between the top two candidates).[16] This suggests that incumbency effects should be larger when we take the Liberals as the reference party, and Figures 5 and 6 confirm this.

To clarify the link between the type of matchup and the size of incumbency effects, in Table 1 and 2 we restrict attention to cases where the top two finishers in the previous contest were either

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[16]Figure 2 shows that since the early 20th century the principal opponents of Labour candidates were Conservatives and vice versa.

Figure 6: Effect of incumbency on probability of winning, U.K. 1835-2010, by reference party

Conservatives
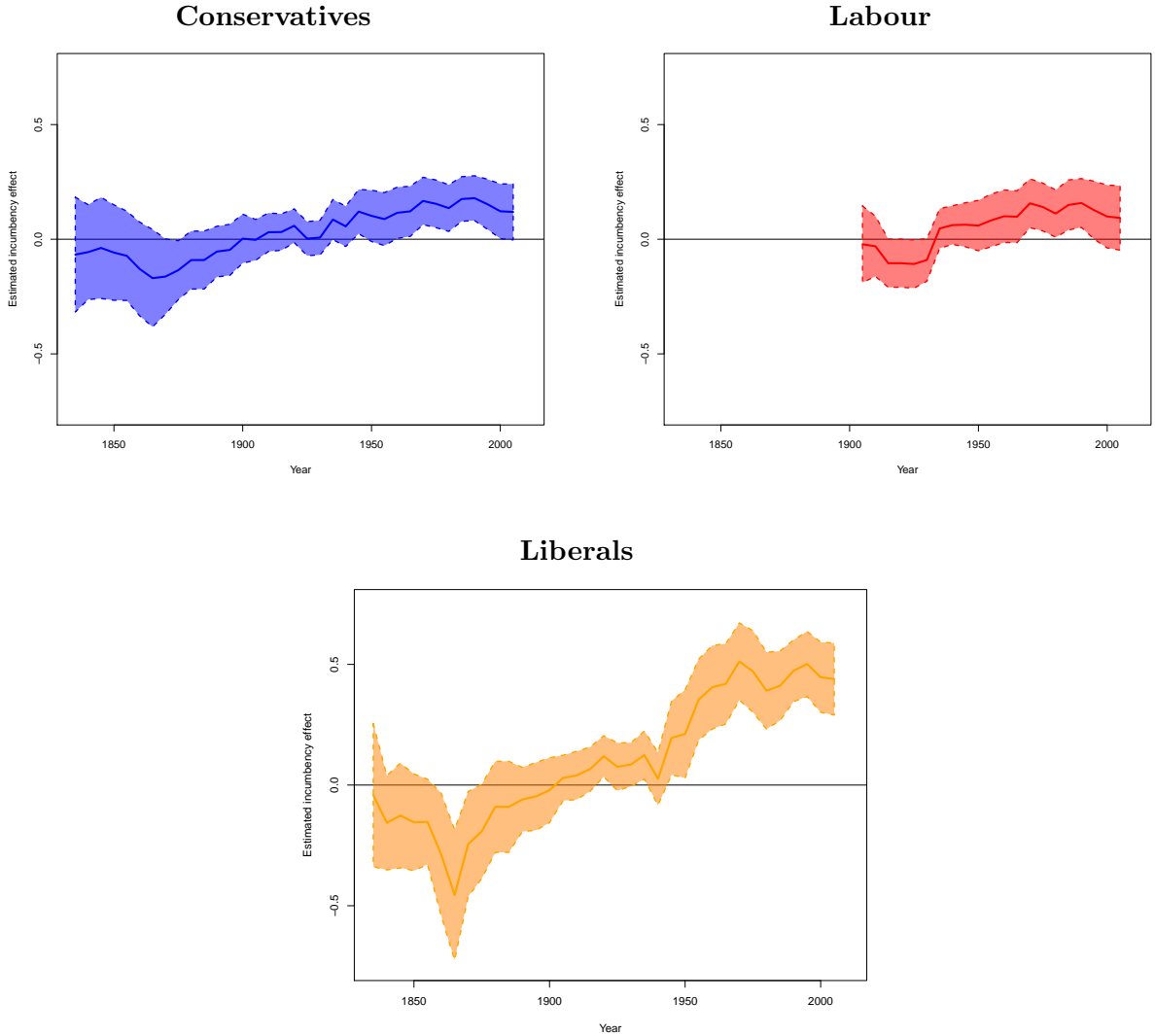
Labour

Liberals

Labour, Conservative, or Liberal[17] and (by extending the standard RDD framework) test whether the incumbency effect varies across matchups controlling for other factors. In column 1 of Table 1 we begin by reporting the effect of incumbency on subsequent vote share (Table 2 does the same for probability of vote) using a model like

$$Y_{t+1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \mathrm{RV}_t + \beta_2 \mathrm{Won}_t + \beta_3 \mathrm{RV}_t \times \mathrm{Won}_t \tag{1}$$

where RV_t is the margin between the reference party and the next closest competitor at time t,

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[17]Compared to the analysis in Figures 5 and 6, this excludes cases in which smaller parties finished in the top two.

Table 1: Effects of party incumbency on vote share (IK bandwidths)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Early period (1900-1950) (N = 2,764, IK BW = 18.04)							
Treatment	3.266*	-.741	-1.277	-.975	-1.866	-.976	-2.078	-2.354
	(1.357)	(1.871)	(2.993)	(2.806)	(1.919)	(1.886)	(1.943)	(3.029)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		6.528**	5.130*	4.901*	5.900*	6.594**	5.963*	4.699*
		(2.334)	(2.340)	(2.212)	(2.348)	(2.333)	(2.348)	(2.365)
	Late period (1950-2010) (N = 5,633, IK BW = 23.49)							
Treatment	2.248***	1.764***	2.649***	2.715***	1.831***	1.570***	1.833***	2.651***
	(.434)	(.364)	(.458)	(.639)	(.395)	(.364)	(.398)	(.476)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		4.681***	4.274***	4.216***	4.751***	4.390***	4.454***	3.915***
		(.954)	(.862)	(.783)	(.961)	(.943)	(.947)	(.849)
	Entire period (1900-2010) (N = 9,553, IK BW = 25.93)							
Treatment	2.662***	1.098*	-.568	.013	.581	.815	.395	-1.050
	(.539)	(.535)	(1.554)	(1.455)	(.570)	(.541)	(.580)	(1.559)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		4.854***	4.133***	3.581***	4.636***	4.814***	4.656***	4.000***
		(.903)	(.949)	(.898)	(.908)	(.902)	(.906)	(.955)
Treatment also interacted with:								
Running variable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies			✓					✓
Year dummies				✓				
Borough (v. county)					✓		✓	✓
Country						✓	✓	✓
Country × borough							✓	✓

NOTE: For each time period and model, we report the main treatment effect and (in models 2-8) the interaction with matchup type. Models 3-8 include additional interactions between the treatment and covariates to assess alternative explanations for the difference in treatment effects between Lib-Lab/Lib-Con matchups and Lab-Con matchups. For each time period we choose a bandwidth using Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012)'s algorithm and employ triangular regression weights that depend linearly on the magnitude of the margin.

Won_t is an indicator equal to 1 when $\text{RV}_t > 0$ (and thus the reference party won at time t), and β_2 corresponds to the treatment effect, i.e. the effect of the reference party having won the election at time t on that party's election outcome at time $t + 1$. To pool together the effect for the different types of matchups, we define the Liberals as the reference party for Lib-Con and Lib-Lab matchups and we define the Conservatives as the reference party for Con-Lab matchups.[18] Consistent with the figures above, in column 1 we find that incumbency increases subsequent vote share by 2-3 percentage points in the early period, the late period, and overall.

In column 2 of Table 1 we introduce an interaction between the treatment and a dummy

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[18]As above, we estimate this with local linear regression using a triangular kernel and the optimal bandwidth recommended by Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012).

indicating that the constituency is Lib-Lab or Lib-Con (as opposed to Lab-Con):

$$Y_{t+1} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{RV}_t + \beta_2 \text{Won}_t + \beta_3 \text{RV}_t \times \text{Won}_t + \beta_4 \text{LibConstituency}_t \times \text{Won}_t. \qquad (2)$$

The coefficient β_4 thus measures the extent to which the incumbency effect is larger in Lib-Lab and Lib-Con matchups than in Lab-Con matchups. In column 2 we find that (again consistent with the figures above) the incumbency effect was significantly larger in constituencies involving Liberals throughout the period we examine: when we consider the entire period, incumbency is worth an additional 1 percentage point in vote share in Lab-Con constituencies and about 6 percentage points in Lib-Con and Lib-Lab constituencies. In columns 3 and 4 we carry out the same analysis but we additionally interact the treatment with decade dummies and then year dummies;[19] the magnitude of the interaction drops a little but remains strong, indicating (again, consistent with the figures above) that the larger incumbency effect in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab races is not due to differences in *when* these took place within a given time span.

Having established a difference in the incumbency effect across matchups, in columns 5-8 we check whether this difference may simply be explained by other differences between the constituencies where these matchups occur. In particular, we additionally allow the incumbency effect to vary by whether the constituency is a borough or county constituency (i.e. predominantly urban or rural) and what country it is located in (England, Scotland, Wales, (N.) Ireland). The difference between the incumbency effect in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab constituencies and in Lab-Con constituencies remains strong controlling for these constituency features, even when we again include the decade-treatment interactions. The analysis thus indicates that the larger incumbency effect for Liberals is not simply an artifact of Liberals running in the *kind of constituency* where incumbency effects are larger (at least, if that variation is captured by borough/county and country indicators); rather, even allowing for incumbency effects to vary over time and across the kind of constituency we still find that the effects were larger in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab constituencies than in Lab-Con constituencies.[20]

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[19]Note that because our intention is to see whether incumbency effects are larger in Lib-Con and Lib-Lab constituencies once we allow the effect of incumbency to vary over time, it is insufficient to control directly for time period: we must also interact the time variables with the treatment.

[20]In the Supporting Information we show that this difference (controlling for type of constituency) is robust to varying the bandwidth of the RDD analysis: we reproduce Tables 1 and Table 2 using bandwidths recommended by Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014), with nearly identical findings, and we provide figures showing how estimates depend on bandwidth controlling for type of constituency separately by period (early and late) and outcome (vote

Table 2 performs the same analysis using victory (rather than vote share) as the outcome. The conclusion is essentially the same. Consistent with Figure 6 above, the difference in the effect of incumbency on subsequent victory for Liberals is clearer in the later period than in the earlier period. Across specifications, we find that in the period since 1950 incumbency has had a far larger impact on the probability of subsequent victory (conditional on a previous close race) in Liberal-Conservative and Liberal-Labour matchups than in Labour-Conservative matchups. Column 2 indicates that incumbency increases the probability of subsequent victory by .134 in Labour-Conservative matchups and almost .5 in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab matchups; the difference is somewhat smaller when we interact the treatment with covariates, but in all specifications the difference is over .2 and statistically significant. Together with Table 2, this provides convincing evidence that incumbency effects were larger in Lib-Lab and Lib-Con constituencies than in Lab-Con constituencies, and that this difference cannot be explained simply by the types of constituencies where Liberals tended to compete.

4 Does strategic voting explain the larger incumbency effect for Liberals?

As noted in the introduction, we are not the first to detect a difference in incumbency effects across parties in the U.K.: using different methods from ours, both Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) report a larger effect for Liberals than for Labour and the Conservatives. The analysis we reported in the previous section goes further than either study to establish this fact: Not only do we examine a time period more than twice as long as either study, but we also include covariates to address the obvious explanation that Liberals are competitive in different kinds of seats. Although our findings and those of Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) are all consistent with the theory linking party preferences to incumbency effects, Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) offer a different explanation for Liberals' larger incumbency effects. In this section we consider this alternative explanation and provide evidence that casts doubt on it.

While neither Gaines (1998) nor Katz and King (1999) investigates the question in any depth, both papers suggest that the likely explanation for the larger incumbency effect for Liberals is

share and victory).

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Table 2: Effects of party incumbency on probability of winning (IK bandwidths)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Early period (1900-1950) (N = 3,183, IK BW = 22.31)							
Treatment	-.014	-.171***	-.230**	-.197**	-.184***	-.171***	-.194***	-.233**
	(.037)	(.049)	(.077)	(.073)	(.050)	(.049)	(.051)	(.078)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		.235***	.088	.064	.226***	.239***	.228***	.078
		(.061)	(.059)	(.057)	(.061)	(.061)	(.061)	(.060)
	Late period (1950-2010) (N = 2,343, IK BW = 9.68)							
Treatment	.184***	.134***	.341***	.391***	.124**	.132***	.118**	.327***
	(.045)	(.035)	(.043)	(.061)	(.038)	(.035)	(.039)	(.047)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		.354***	.260**	.266***	.333***	.342***	.316***	.237**
		(.093)	(.083)	(.077)	(.093)	(.093)	(.093)	(.084)
	Entire period (1900-2010) (N = 4,416, IK BW = 10.66)							
Treatment	.095**	.066*	-.349***	-.323***	.046	.065*	.038	-.363***
	(.032)	(.031)	(.078)	(.074)	(.033)	(.032)	(.034)	(.079)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		.086	.215***	.209***	.072	.086	.073	.216***
		(.052)	(.052)	(.049)	(.053)	(.052)	(.053)	(.052)
Treatment also interacted with:								
Running variable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies			✓					✓
Year dummies				✓				
Borough (v. county)					✓		✓	✓
Country						✓	✓	✓
Country × borough							✓	✓

NOTE: See Table 1.

strategic voting. The key idea expressed in both papers is that incumbency has extra value for Liberals because it signals the local viability of the Liberal candidate to party supporters who may be inclined to vote strategically for another party; incumbency is assumed to play this role to a lesser extent for Labour and the Conservatives because voters who favor those parties are more likely to assume their party is viable and simply vote for their top choice. Thus as Gaines notes (185), "the bonus of incumbency for Liberal candidates is not merely that they acquire whatever normal advantages office-holding confers, but also that it lets them overcome an electoral logic plaguing their party."

Before assessing this explanation with survey evidence, it is worth considering the proposed mechanism in more depth both to clarify the logic and assess its observable implications. To see how incumbency can act as a signal that especially increases support for Liberals, consider a voter who knows the general distribution of matchups (e.g. the proportion of Lab-Con constituencies) but knows nothing about her own local constituency race except the party of the incumbent MP. If the incumbent is either Labour or Conservative, it is reasonable for this voter to infer that the local contest is primarily between Labour and the Conservatives, given that the main challenger of a Labour MP is most commonly a Conservative and vice versa; if instead the incumbent is a Liberal, it is reasonable for this voter to infer that the local contest is primarily between the Liberals and the Conservatives, given that the main challenger of a Liberal MP is most commonly a Conservative in recent elections.[21] Now, if the voter is at least somewhat strategic and prefers not to throw away her vote on a non-viable candidate, then it may be that she will vote for the Liberal only when the Liberal is the incumbent. Table 3 shows hypothetical vote choices of voters as a function of the voter's party preferences (which vary by rows) and the party of the incumbent (which varies by columns and from which the voter infers which parties are locally competitive). For example, the first row shows the vote choices of a voter whose favorite party is the Liberals, followed by the Conservatives and finally Labour; this voter votes Conservative if she finds out that the incumbent is Labour or Conservative (which leads her to believe that the Liberals are not locally competitive) and votes Liberal if she finds out that the incumbent is a Liberal (which leads her to believe the

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[21]Although for expositional clarity we assume the voter makes a binary judgment about the Liberal's viability (and assumes the opponent of a Liberal is always a Conservative), the logic of the argument only requires that voters infer that the Liberals are *more* viable when there is (even narrowly) a Liberal incumbent than otherwise.

Table 3: How incumbency affects strategic vote choice when incumbency is a signal of viability

Preference ordering	Vote choice if **Con or Lab incumbent** (voter assumes Con-Lab contest)	Vote choice if **Liberal incumbent** (voter assumes Con-Lib contest)
(1) Lib ≻ Con ≻ Lab	Con	Lib
(2) Lib ≻ Lab ≻ Con	Lab	Lib
(3) Con ≻ Lib ≻ Lab	Con	Con
(4) Con ≻ Lab ≻ Lib	Con	Con
(5) Lab ≻ Lib ≻ Con	Lab	Lib
(6) Lab ≻ Con ≻ Lib	Lab	Con

NOTE: As described in the text, we consider the vote choice of a strategic voter who knows only the distribution of constituency types and party of the local MP. If the incumbent is Labour or Conservative, the voter assumes the local contest is between Labour and the Conservatives and chooses between those two. If the incumbent is a Liberal, the voter assumes the contest is between the Liberals and the Conservatives and chooses between those two.

Liberals are locally competitive). In three of the six possible preference orderings, the voter votes Liberal if there is a Liberal incumbent and not otherwise. Note that rows (1) and (2) of Table 3 capture the dynamic referred to by Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999), which is that Liberal incumbency causes a Liberal supporter to *stop* voting tactically and instead vote sincerely for her top choice, but the table also highlights another dynamic not considered in those papers: in row (5), Liberal incumbency causes a voter who places the Liberals middle in her preference ordering to *start* voting tactically and vote for the Liberals instead of her top choice. Thus to the extent that Liberal incumbency serves as a signal of the Liberals' viability in local constituency contests, strategic voting could explain the larger incumbency effect for Liberals both through the mechanism identified by Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) and through a related mechanism.

The key element of this explanation for larger Liberal incumbency effects is that incumbency must signal viability for Liberals: we should find that voters see the Liberals as more likely to win the election in their constituency when the Liberals *won* the previous election in the constituency than when the Liberals *lost* the previous election in the constituency, all else equal. By the logic laid out in the previous paragraph, we might also expect the effect of incumbency on perceived viability to be larger in contests involving the Liberals than in Labour-Conservative contests.[22]

To assess whether incumbency does in fact affect perceived viability especially in matchups

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[22]In theory, it could also be that the effect of incumbency on perceived viability is the same across parties but voters who favor the Liberals are more responsive on average to perceived viability, i.e. more strategic. This greater responsiveness may be due to the lower average perceived viability, or due to the lower partisan stakes in contests between Liberals and their competitors, or perhaps other reasons.

involving the Liberals, we use the British Election Study from 2005 and 2010, which asked respondents how likely it was that each of the major parties would win the election in their constituency.[23] We evaluate the effect of incumbency on this outcome using the same RDD techniques employed above: focusing on narrowly-decided races, does the election of a Liberal actually increase the perceived viability of the Liberals in the constituency, as required by the strategic voting mechanism? Figure 7 shows the RD analysis and bandwidth sensitivity graphically. Focusing on Lib-Con and Lib-Lab constituencies, we see no effect of Liberal victory on the perceived viability of the Liberals in the constituency (top panel); by comparison, we *do* see an effect of Conservative victory in Lab-Con constituencies on the perceived viability of the Conservatives in the constituency (bottom panel).[24] The absence of an effect of Liberal incumbency on perceived Liberal viability would seem to be strong evidence against the strategic voting interpretation offered by Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999). The finding that incumbency seems to affect perceived viability in Lab-Con matchups but not Lib-Con and Lib-Lab matchups is puzzling in light of the broader argument of this paper,[25] but resolving that puzzle lies outside the scope of this paper. The null result in Lib-Con and Lib-Lab constituencies casts serious doubt on the argument that incumbency matters more for Liberals because of strategic voting.
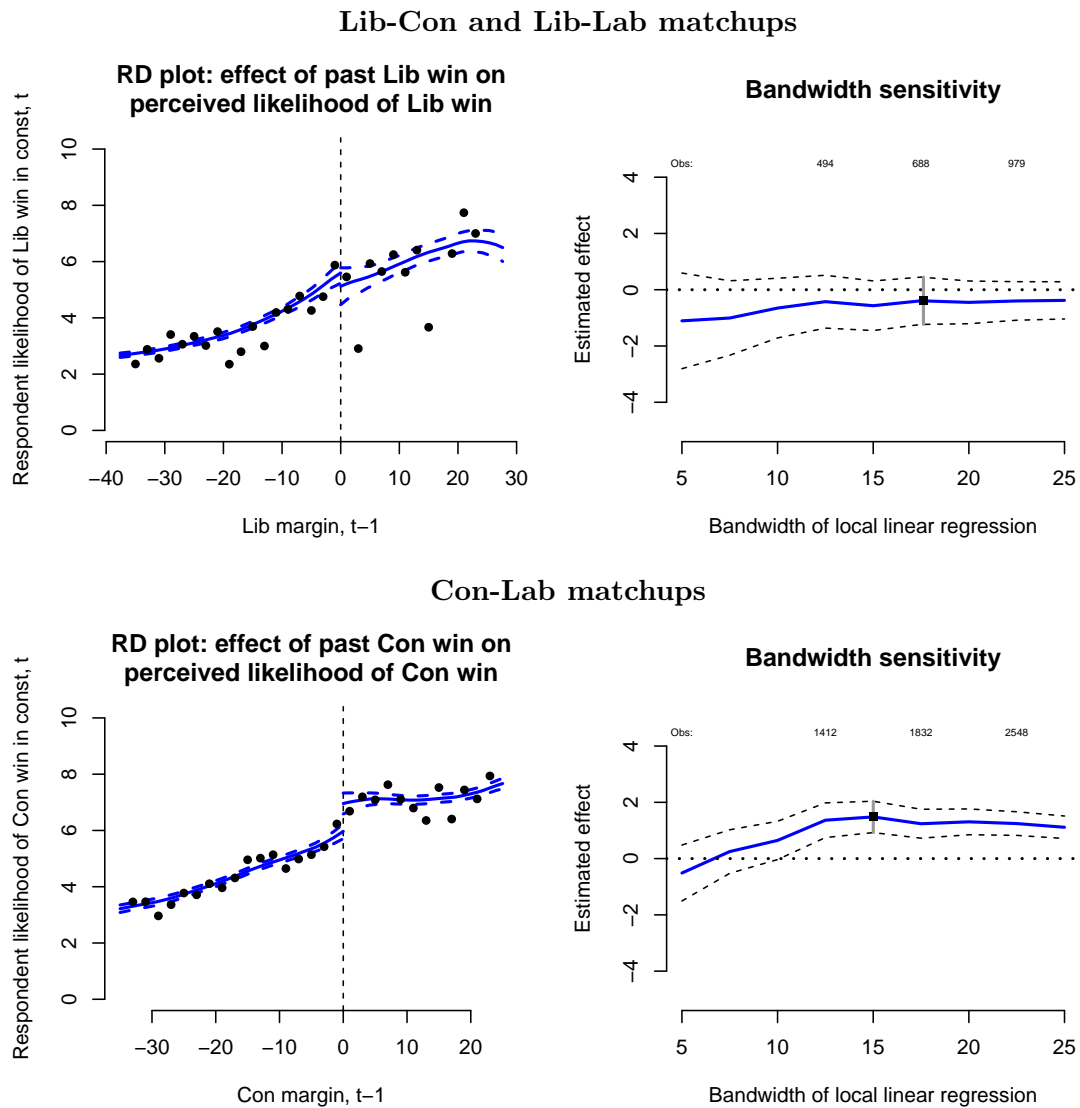
We can also examine the possible role of strategic voting in a slightly different way. In competitive settings with three viable parties, incumbency may provide a useful coordination device for voters who are nearly indifferent between the top two parties and opposed to the third: the ordering of the top two (and thus the identity of the incumbent party) may help voters decide which of these parties to support in the next election. (Thus in this account voters may be perfectly informed about which parties are competitive but uninformed about other voters' strategies.) As it happens, contests in which the Liberals are competitive are disproportionately contests where all three parties are potentially viable. If we define a race with potential coordination problems as one in which the three main parties each gain at least 20% of the vote, almost 30% of Lib-Con/Lib-Lab

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[23]The precise wording of the question was, "On a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, how likely is it that #{PARTY} will win the election in #{RESPONDENT'S CONSTITUENCY}?"

[24]As one would expect, we also see a negative effect of Conservative incumbency (i.e. positive effect of Labour incumbency) on the perceived viability of Labour in Lab-Con constituencies.

[25]That is, given our finding that incumbency advantage is larger in Lib-Con and Lib-Lab matchups, our own prediction of future outcomes would depend more on incumbency in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab contests than in Lab-Con contests.

Figure 7: How does incumbency affect voters' expectations of electoral outcomes?

Lib-Con and Lib-Lab matchups

RD plot: effect of past Lib win on perceived likelihood of Lib win

Bandwidth sensitivity

Con-Lab matchups

RD plot: effect of past Con win on perceived likelihood of Con win

Bandwidth sensitivity

NOTE: For the top panel (Lib-Con and Lib-Lab matchups) and bottom panel (Lab-Con matchups), the left plot shows the perceived viability of the reference party (Liberals at top, Conservatives at bottom) as a function of the margin between the reference party and the closest competitor. Black circles are binned means; blue lines are local linear regression estimates with 95% confidence intervals, using a triangular kernel weights and Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012) bandwidths. The right plot shows how the estimated effect (the jump at zero in the left plot) and confidence interval varies with the bandwidth used, where the black circle indicates the Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012) bandwidth.

matchups since 1950 have potential coordination problems while around 12% of Con-Lab matchups do. To the extent that coordination problems make incumbency more valuable, it could be this difference (rather than the difference in the strength of voters' partisan preferences) that explains the higher incumbency effects in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab matchups.

Table 4 reports analysis in which we assess whether incumbency effects are higher in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab contests even when we control for three-way races. Column 1 reports the simple incumbency effect; column 2 interacts this with a dummy for a Liberal race; columns 3 adds an interaction between incumbency (the treatment) and a dummy indicating that all three main parties won at least 20% of the vote in the previous race (suggesting a possible coordination problem). Consistent with the view that incumbency can resolve coordination problems in multiparty situations, we find a larger incumbency advantage in cases where all three major parties won at least 20% in the previous race; we cannot reject the null hypothesis for the earlier period, but the point estimates are similar in the two periods and for the entire period. Of course, contexts with multiparty competition may differ in many other ways that could produce a larger incumbency effect, but columns 4-8 of Table 4 indicate that the point estimate is stable as we include controls for decade, constituency type, and country. Regardless of the specification we find that incumbency effects are larger in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab matchups even controlling for the possible presence of coordination problems.

In the Supporting Information we report additional analysis focusing on the effect of incumbency on victory rather than vote share.[26] In that analysis, too, we find that incumbency effects in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab matchups are larger even controlling for the possible presence of coordination problems; by contrast with the results in Table 4, we find no relationship between three-way competition and the effect of incumbency on subsequent victory.

Taken together, the analysis in this section casts doubt on the view that strategic voting explains the larger incumbency effect in contests involving the Liberals. Most importantly, survey evidence from 2005 and 2010 does not reflect the hypothesis in Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) that incumbency signals viability for the Liberals; contrary to their explanation, incumbency seems to signal viability only for Labour and the Conservatives. We do find some evidence that in-

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[26]We also report analysis using Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014) bandwidths.

Table 4: Are incumbency effects (vote share-based) larger in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab contests controlling for coordination issues? (IK bandwidths)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Early period (1900-1950) (N = 2,764, CCT BW = 18.04)							
Treatment	3.254*	-.702	-1.159	-1.256	-2.389	-1.373	-2.652	-2.381
	(1.341)	(1.850)	(1.885)	(2.964)	(1.938)	(1.901)	(1.964)	(3.001)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		6.452**	6.551**	4.980*	5.943*	6.636**	6.034**	4.539†
		(2.308)	(2.306)	(2.314)	(2.320)	(2.306)	(2.320)	(2.339)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			1.754	1.722	2.195	1.700	2.321	2.146
			(1.729)	(1.680)	(1.730)	(1.737)	(1.740)	(1.691)
	Late period (1950-2010) (N = 5,633, CCT BW = 23.49)							
Treatment	2.391***	1.707***	1.256**	2.157***	1.391**	1.187**	1.422**	2.227***
	(.539)	(.449)	(.438)	(.542)	(.474)	(.438)	(.478)	(.565)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		6.044***	5.892***	5.153***	5.992***	5.627***	5.719***	4.885***
		(1.172)	(1.133)	(1.024)	(1.142)	(1.120)	(1.127)	(1.009)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			2.331***	2.171***	2.325***	2.035**	1.954**	1.702**
			(.670)	(.618)	(.669)	(.663)	(.661)	(.605)
	Entire period (1900-2010) (N = 9,553, CCT BW = 25.93)							
Treatment	2.657***	1.134*	.800	-.228	.279	.594	.109	-.736
	(.572)	(.565)	(.569)	(1.606)	(.604)	(.575)	(.615)	(1.612)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		4.800***	4.827***	4.047***	4.577***	4.795***	4.608***	3.910***
		(.950)	(.944)	(.996)	(.950)	(.943)	(.948)	(1.003)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			1.592*	1.760*	1.683*	1.508*	1.625*	1.701*
			(.713)	(.696)	(.712)	(.713)	(.712)	(.695)
Treatment also interacted with:								
Running variable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies				✓				✓
Borough (v. county)					✓		✓	✓
Country						✓	✓	✓
Country × borough							✓	✓

NOTE: Analysis follows that of Table 1, except that in models 3-8 we add an interaction between the treatment (an incumbency indicator) and an indicator for whether all three main parties won at least 20% in the previous race, which suggests a coordination problem.

cumbency effects are larger in multiparty contexts, but even controlling for the presence of possible coordination problems we still find larger incumbency effects in matchups involving Liberals.

5   Are Liberals better incumbents?

We have shown that incumbency effects are larger in contests involving Liberals than in Labour-Conservative contests; we have also shown that this difference does not seem to be explained by strategic voting. In this section we address an additional alternative explanation, which is that the ability of politicians to take advantage of incumbency may vary across types of matchups or even parties. The electoral impact of incumbency should depend not just on the strength of partisan preferences but also on the extent to which incumbency status affects candidates' perceived valence. (The model in the appendix formalizes this intuition.) In explaining the larger incumbency effects in Lib-Lab/Lib-Con constituencies, we have emphasized the difference in partisan preferences across different matchups, but clearly the effect of incumbency on perceived valence could also vary across matchups. One particularly simple mechanism that would produce this variation is if Liberal MPs (who, after all, are only found in Lib-Lab/Lib-Con constituencies) are systematically better at converting incumbency into valence benefits, for example because they tend to put more effort into constituency service or are more effective at claiming credit for their efforts. This would provide a particularly straightforward explanation for the variation in incumbency effects we find – an explanation that may have nothing to do with the strength of partisan preferences.

In fact, a simple cross-sectional analysis of BES survey data from 2005 and 2010 supports this possibility, although as we explain below we favor a different interpretation. The 2005 and 2010 BES asks respondents whether they agree with the statement, "My member of parliament tries hard to look after the interests of people who live in my constituency." We find that BES respondents who live in Lib-Con and Lib-Lab constituencies report a significantly greater average degree of agreement with this statement compared to respondents who live in Lab-Con constituencies; this is consistent with the idea that the type of MP who runs in these constituencies is especially effective at performing constituency service or getting credit for constituency service.[27] In addition, focusing

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[27]The average score on a 5 point scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) is .24 in Lab-Con constituencies; it is .22 higher (standard error .04) in Lib-Con constituencies and .12 higher (.05) in Lib-Lab constituencies.

on the same set of constituencies, the average effort rating of Liberal MPs is significantly higher than that of Labour and Conservative MPs, which is consistent with the idea that Liberals in particular are effective at constituency service or credit claiming.[28] The higher perceived effort level of Liberal MPs is consistent with a view in which incumbency effects are particularly large in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab constituencies not because party preferences are relatively weak in these matchups but because Liberal MPs are particularly good at extracting electoral benefits from incumbency.

This interpretation does not hold up, however, when we look more closely at the survey data: the difference in perceived effort between Liberal MPs and others disappears when we focus on cases where the MP was narrowly elected. That is, we obtain a null result in RDD analysis where we study the effect of a narrow Liberal victory or loss in the previous election on the subsequent perceived effort level of the incumbent, which indicates that (at least in the close elections on which our main analysis focuses) voters do not perceive a difference in effort level between Liberal MPs and others.[29] Figure 8 shows the RDD plot and sensitivity analysis: although the perceived effort of MPs is higher on average in constituencies where Liberals won than in constituencies where they lost, there is no jump at zero, which suggests that the higher scores for Liberal MPs are not due to fundamental differences between Liberal MPs and others but rather can be attributed to the characteristics of constituencies where Liberals are competitive. The data thus do not support an interpretation in which Liberal MPs are somehow systematically better able to capture the benefits of incumbency than MPs of other parties.

What, then, should we make of the cross-sectional pattern that MPs in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab contests in 2005 and 2010 were viewed as exerting more effort than MPs in Lab-Con contests? Although selection bias could explain the pattern, we suggest that MPs exert less effort in Lab-Con contests (and more effort in contests involving the Liberals) for the same reason that incumbency effects are lower in those contests (and higher in contests involving the Liberals): the electoral rewards of putting effort into constituency service depend on the strength of voters' partisan preferences, and thus a strategic MP would exert more effort in a Lib-Con/Lib-Lab constituency than in a Lab-Con constituency. In this sense, our finding on the relationship between partisanship and incumbency

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[28]The average score on a 5 point scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) is .58 for Liberal MPs; it is .35 lower (.06) for Labour MPs and .22 lower (.06) for Conservative MPs.

[29]By contrast, we find a positive effect for Conservatives and a negative one for Labour, perhaps because the unpopularity of Labour in 2010 tarnished voters' assessments of Labour incumbents.

Figure 8: Effect of Liberal victory on perceived effort of local MP, 2005 and 2010
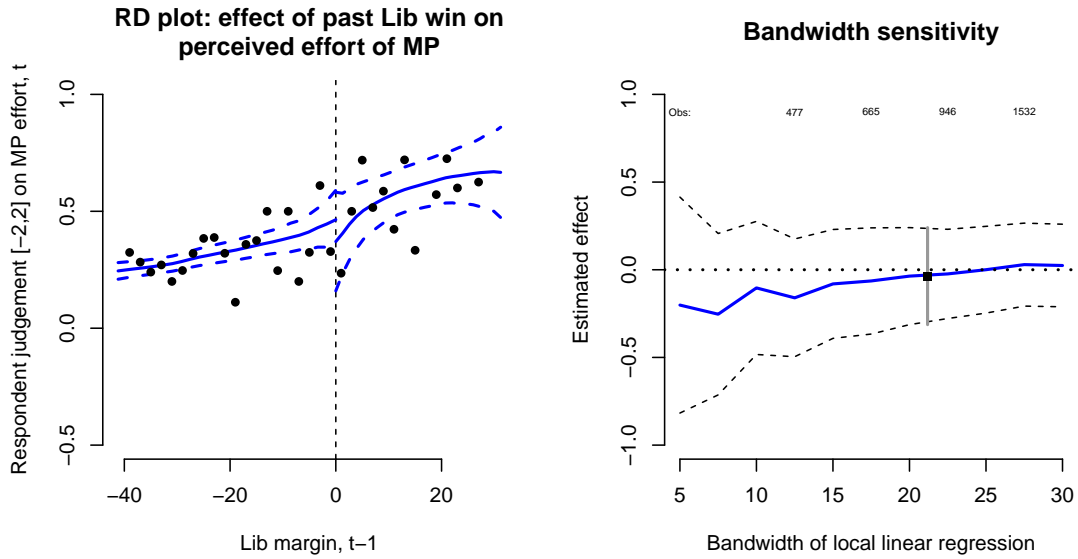
NOTE: The dependent variable is the survey respondent's level of agreement (on a five point scale from -2 to 2) to the statement "My member of parliament tries hard to look after the interests of people who live in my constituency." The running variable is the margin between the Liberal candidate and the top non-Liberal finisher; for consistency with our other analysis we restrict attention to cases where the other top candidate was Labour or Conservative. The right panel shows sensitivity of the estimates to the bandwidth chosen; the Imbens-Kalyanaraman bandwidth is highlighted.

effects should be viewed as an equilibrium result that reflects both voter preferences and the strategic response of MPs to those preferences. As highlighted in our formal model, a given difference in valence between two candidates should produce a larger electoral impact in settings where voters have weaker partisan preferences; thus even if incumbency gives a fixed valence boost across party matchups, we should expect to see larger incumbency effects in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab constituencies given the pattern of preferences we see in survey data and a reasonable proportion of strategic voting in the electorate. But when we consider the strategic behavior of MPs, the same logic also implies that the valence boost provided by incumbency is probably *not* fixed across party matchups: to the extent that the valence boost from incumbency depends on MPs exerting costly effort, we would expect MPs to exert more effort in situations when that effort would be more highly rewarded, which are precisely those situations when voters have weaker partisan preferences. Thus the larger incumbency effect we see in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab constituencies is probably due in part to the greater efforts of MPs to build a personal vote in those constituencies; even controlling for these

efforts (if they were observable), however, we would still expect to find larger incumbency effects in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab constituencies because of the difference in the strength of partisan preferences across party matchups.

6   Conclusion

In this paper, we have studied multiparty elections in the U.K. to shed light on the relationship between incumbency effects and the strength of voters' partisan preferences. Previous work struggled to establish this relationship in part because most variation in partisanship coincides with variation in other relevant factors that affect voting incumbents' chances. We address this problem by comparing incumbency effects across partisan matchups in the U.K., showing not only that incumbency effects vary in the way we would expect but that this variation cannot easily be explained by other factors that vary across matchups.

One key implication of our analysis is that the study of incumbency effects may be able to yield insights into a broader set of issues than has been previously supposed. The dominant view seems to be that studying incumbency effects provides two main payoffs: understanding the degree to which incumbents are insulated from electoral accountability, and assessing how much incumbents are able to do for their constituents (e.g. King 1991; Cox and Morgenstern 1993; Uppal 2009). When we recognize that incumbency effects reflect not just incumbent actions but the strength of voters' partisan preferences, it becomes clear that comparative studies of incumbency effects could also yield insights into the extent to which political systems are candidate-centered as opposed to party-centered, which is in turn likely to depend on e.g. the electoral system, the legislative process, and polarization at the elite and mass level. Similarly, although our focus has been on how the strength of partisan preferences affects voters' response to incumbency, the logic applies more broadly to how voters respond to *any* differences among candidates, including differences in perceived corruption, capability, or policy positions; in that sense, the study of incumbency effects can speak to a broader set of questions about accountability and its relationship with partisan preferences, a question that has been examined by Kayser and Wlezien (2011) and others. Thus while the study of incumbency effects began with concerns about incumbent re-election rates specific to the U.S., the development of comparative work on the topic promises to yield much broader

insights into how electoral accountability and partisan competition vary across political systems.

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Appendix I: A model of partisanship and incumbency effects

In this section we offer a simple decision-theoretic model of vote choice that clarifies the relationship between the distribution of party preferences in the electorate and the degree to which incumbency affects electoral outcomes. Consider an election between two candidates, a and b. We assume that voters care about two aspects of candidates: their valence level (which may reflect the candidates' charisma, skill, attention to local issues, or other features that all voters value) and their party. All voters like higher valence levels but voters have different views about the parties; thus voter i derives utility $v_a + u_i(p_a)$ from the election of candidate a, with v_a denoting the candidate's perceived valence level and p_a denoting the candidate's party.[30] Voter i will vote for a rather than b if

$$u_i(p_a) - u_i(p_b) \geq v_b - v_a. \tag{3}$$

We think of incumbency as a characteristic that affects the valence of a candidate. Denote by $v_a(I)$ the valence of a when a's party is the incumbent party, and by $v_a(C)$ the valence of a when a's party is not the incumbent party (with $v_b(I)$ and $v_b(C)$ similarly defined); thus incumbency is beneficial if $v_a(I) > v_a(C)$ and $v_b(I) > v_b(C)$. The literature on incumbency effects offers many reasons why valence may depend on incumbency, e.g. the resources to which incumbents have access (Ashworth 2006; Fouirnaies and Hall 2014), the benefits of seniority (McKelvey and Riezman 1992; Muthoo and Shepsle 2014), "scare-off" (Cox and Katz 1996; Levitt and Wolfram 1997; Hall and Snyder 2015), and the ability of incumbents to signal type Caselli et al. (2013). To simplify the exposition, we assume that $v_a(C) = v_b(C) = 0$ (i.e. challengers have the same normalized valence level of 0) and $v_a(I) = v_b(I) = \Delta > 0$ (i.e. incumbency boosts valence by Δ).[31]

The effect of incumbency on electoral outcomes will then depend on how much incumbency affects valence (Δ) and the proportion of voters who are nearly indifferent between the parties. Define $\phi^i \equiv u_i(p_a) - u_i(p_b)$ as voter i's partisan preference between a's party and b's party, with $f(\phi)$ indicating the distribution of partisan preferences in the electorate. When a is the incumbent, all voters with $\phi^i > -\Delta$ vote for a; when b is the incumbent, all voters with $\phi^i > \Delta$ vote for a; the shaded areas in Figure 9 (which reflect the difference, under two distributions of ϕ_i) indicates the effect of incumbency on vote share.

The comparison of the left and right panels of Figure 9 highlights how the size of the incumbency effect depends both on how much incumbency affects valence (Δ) and on the distribution of voters' party preferences. Assuming that incumbency has roughly the same effect on candidate valence for the two parties, the electoral implications of incumbency will depend both on how large that effect is and the proportion of voters who are nearly indifferent between the two parties.

Appendix II: Candidate-based incumbency effects

While this paper focuses on incumbency effects for parties (i.e. the difference in a party's electoral performance at time $t + 1$ if it won vs. lost at time t), one can also carry out the analysis at the level of the individual *candidate*. We can ask two kinds of questions: Are winners from time t more

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[30]In the context of a parliamentary election, a voter may care about the party of her local MP for various reasons: perhaps she has preferences about national policy and thus cares about what party/coalition governs; perhaps she has preferences about the MP's local constituency service and believes that an MP from a given party is more or less likely to pursue the right priorities; perhaps she simply derives consumption value from being represented by an MP whose ideology is closer to her own.

[31]The main conclusion that incumbency effects will be larger when a larger proportion of voters have weak partisan preferences requires only that $v_a(C) \approx v_b(C)$ and $\frac{v_a(I) - v_a(C)}{v_b(I) - v_b(C)} > 0$.

Figure 9: Incumbency effects and the distribution of partisan preferences

Weak party preferences;
large incumbency effects

Strong party preferences;
small incumbency effects
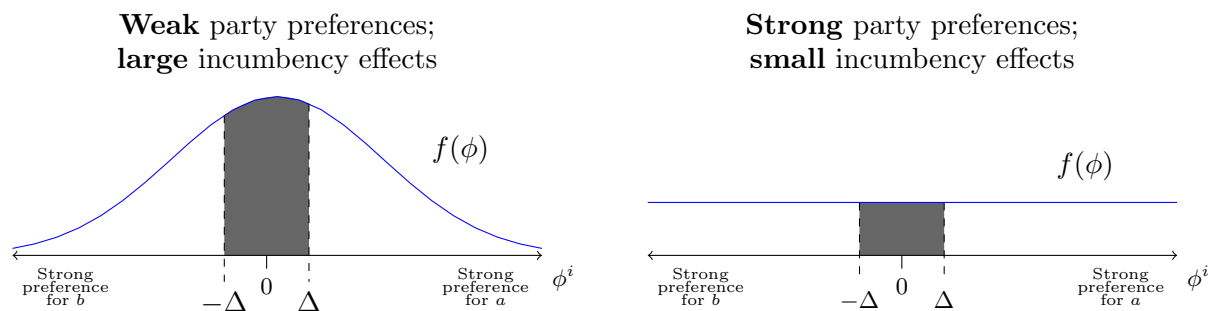
NOTE: For a fixed effect of incumbency on valence, the effect of incumbency on vote outcomes depends on the distribution of voters' party preferences; if candidates have similar valence in the absence of incumbency, incumbency effects will be larger when more voters are indifferent between the parties (as in the left panel, compared to the right panel).

likely than losers from time t to be candidates at time $t + 1$? (One can ask this question about the office being contested at time t, or about any office.) Perhaps most importantly for the study of incumbency effects, are winners from time t more likely than losers from time t to win office in the same constituency at time $t + 1$? From candidate-based RDD analysis of this type, one can learn something about how electoral victories affect the careers of politicians: does (narrowly) winning office (and thus obtaining power, experience, connections, and an income stream not available to losers) put candidates on a track to win further elections? This would seem to depend, in general, on a combination of the factors extensively studied by prior literature on incumbency effects (such as the electoral value of name recognition, legislative power, and campaign finance) and other factors that have received less attention, though they no doubt affect conventional estimates of incumbency effects (such as the degree to which losing candidates tend to leave politics and the tendency of incumbents to run for re-election rather than seeking other opportunities).

Figure 6 reports two candidate-based RDD analyses using data from the U.K. since 1802. (Note that the CLEA dataset for the United Kingdom begins with the 1832 election.) The left plot reports the effect (over time) of a British parliamentary candidate winning (vs. losing) a close contest on the probability of that candidate *running* in the same constituency in the next general election; the right plot reports the effect of winning a close contest on the probability of *winning* in the same constituency in the next general election.[32] Here (as in the other over-time analysis in this paper) the RDD estimate for a given year is based on elections within a time window of thirty years (e.g., 1875-1915, for the 1900 estimate), and we use the optimal bandwidth recommended by Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012).[33] The results indicate that both effects have been increasing fairly steadily since the beginning of the period we examine. Probably narrow winners became more likely to win again (right panel) at least in part because they became more likely to run again (left panel), but it should be noted that the relationship could run the other way as well: narrow winners may have decided to run again partly because they saw that they became more likely to win.

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[32]We judge that the same candidate runs or wins in the same constituency in the next election if a candidate with the same *surname* runs or wins; this leads to false positives when one candidate is replaced by a relative, but the rate of false positives is likely to be similar for narrow winners and losers. We omit cases where the constituency disappears due to e.g. boundary changes.

[33]The figure is indistinguishable if we instead use Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014) bandwidths.

**Effect of winning
on subsequent candidacy**
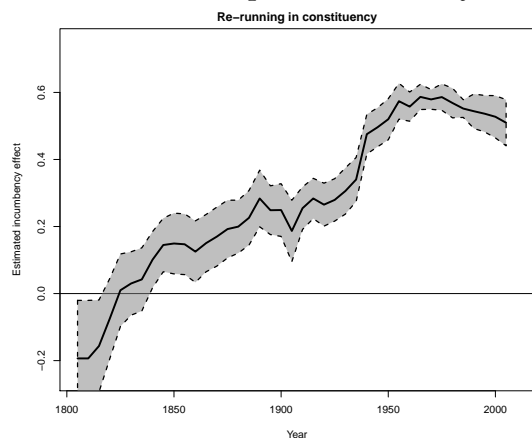
**Effect of winning
on subsequent victory**
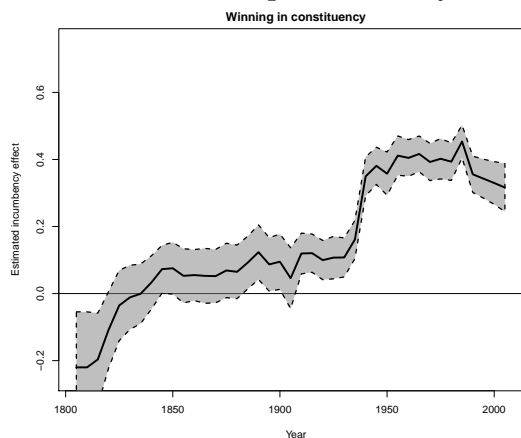
NOTE: Candidate-level RDD estimates of the effect of winning vs. losing at time t on running in the same constituency at time $t+1$ (left panel) and winning in the same constituency at time $t+1$ (right panel). As elsewhere in the paper, estimates for a given year are based on elections within fifteen years of that year; estimation is based on local linear regression with triangular weights and bandwidths chosen by the Imbens-Kalyanaraman algorithm.

Supporting Information

Figure 10: Histograms of running variable by type of matchup
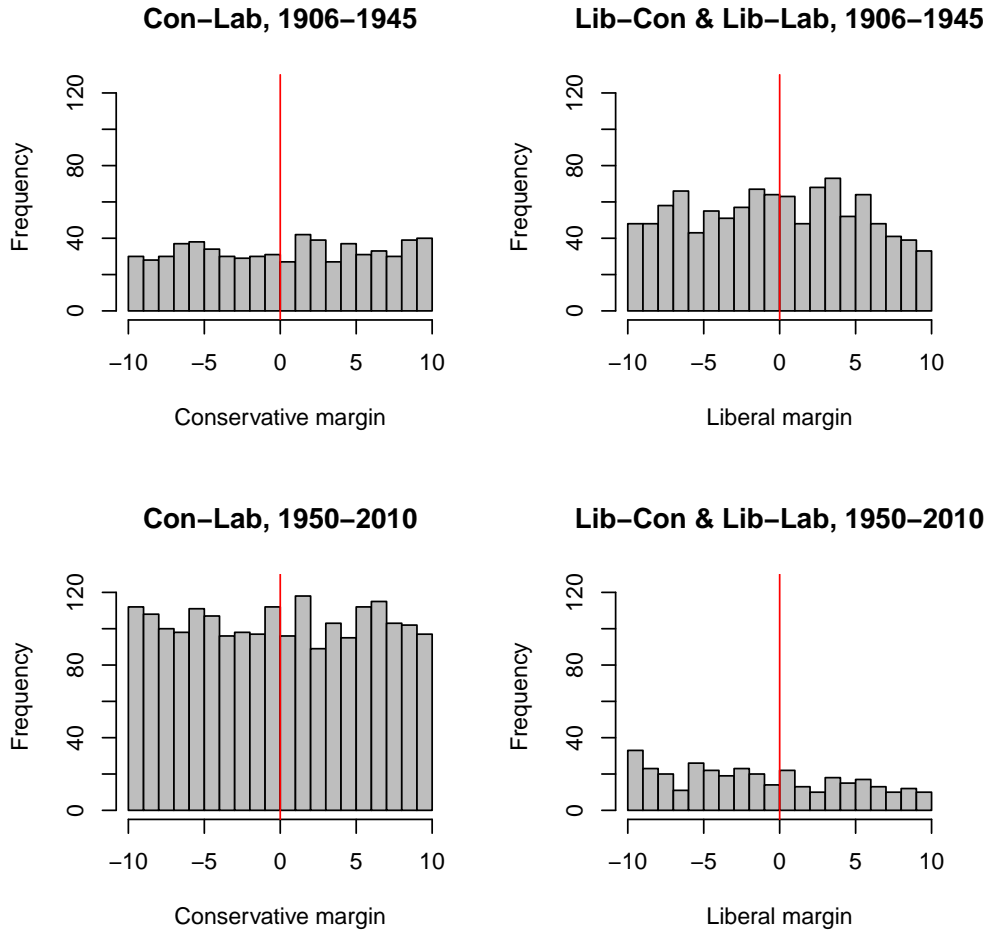
37

Table 5: Effects of party incumbency on vote share (CCT bandwidths)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Early period (1900-1950) (N = 2,764, CCT BW = 18.04)							
Treatment	3.254*	-.702	-1.283	-.979	-1.841	-.950	-2.063	-2.368
	(1.341)	(1.850)	(2.966)	(2.781)	(1.898)	(1.865)	(1.922)	(3.001)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		6.452**	5.057*	4.820*	5.822*	6.527**	5.898*	4.634*
		(2.308)	(2.315)	(2.189)	(2.323)	(2.307)	(2.322)	(2.339)
	Late period (1950-2010) (N = 5,633, CCT BW = 23.49)							
Treatment	2.391***	1.707***	2.491***	2.126**	1.847***	1.548***	1.825***	2.493***
	(.539)	(.449)	(.559)	(.777)	(.487)	(.450)	(.490)	(.583)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		6.044***	5.296***	5.502***	6.148***	5.695***	5.800***	4.915***
		(1.172)	(1.055)	(.960)	(1.181)	(1.158)	(1.164)	(1.040)
	Entire period (1900-2010) (N = 9,553, CCT BW = 25.93)							
Treatment	2.657***	1.134*	-.467	.063	.619	.886	.444	-.971
	(.572)	(.565)	(1.611)	(1.507)	(.600)	(.571)	(.611)	(1.617)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Con or Lab		4.800***	4.183***	3.735***	4.553***	4.766***	4.589***	4.049***
		(.950)	(.998)	(.942)	(.956)	(.949)	(.953)	(1.005)
Treatment also interacted with:								
Running variable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies			✓					✓
Year dummies				✓				
Borough (v. county)					✓		✓	✓
Country						✓	✓	✓
Country × borough							✓	✓

NOTE: See Table 1.

Table 6: Effects of party incumbency on probability of winning (CCT bandwidths)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Early period (1900-1950) (N = 3,183, CCT BW = 22.31)							
Treatment	-.015	-.176**	-.233**	-.208**	-.186***	-.175**	-.194***	-.233**
	(.041)	(.054)	(.083)	(.080)	(.055)	(.054)	(.056)	(.084)
Treatment × Liberal		.238***	.099	.085	.230***	.242***	.231***	.091
vs. Con or Lab		(.067)	(.065)	(.063)	(.067)	(.067)	(.068)	(.066)
	Late period (1950-2010) (N = 2,343, CCT BW = 9.68)							
Treatment	.187***	.137***	.345***	.394***	.127***	.135***	.121**	.331***
	(.044)	(.034)	(.042)	(.059)	(.037)	(.035)	(.038)	(.045)
Treatment × Liberal		.350***	.260**	.266***	.331***	.339***	.315***	.238**
vs. Con or Lab		(.090)	(.081)	(.075)	(.091)	(.090)	(.091)	(.082)
	Entire period (1900-2010) (N = 4,416, CCT BW = 10.66)							
Treatment	.095**	.068*	-.347***	-.320***	.048	.067*	.040	-.361***
	(.032)	(.031)	(.077)	(.072)	(.033)	(.031)	(.033)	(.077)
Treatment × Liberal		.080	.213***	.205***	.067	.081	.067	.213***
vs. Con or Lab		(.051)	(.050)	(.048)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)

Treatment also interacted with:								
Running variable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies			✓					✓
Year dummies				✓				
Borough (v. county)					✓		✓	✓
Country						✓	✓	✓
Country × borough							✓	✓

NOTE: See Table 2.

Figure 11: Difference in incumbency effects (Lib-Lab/Lib-Con vs Lab-Con races) as function of bandwidth and controls, separately by period
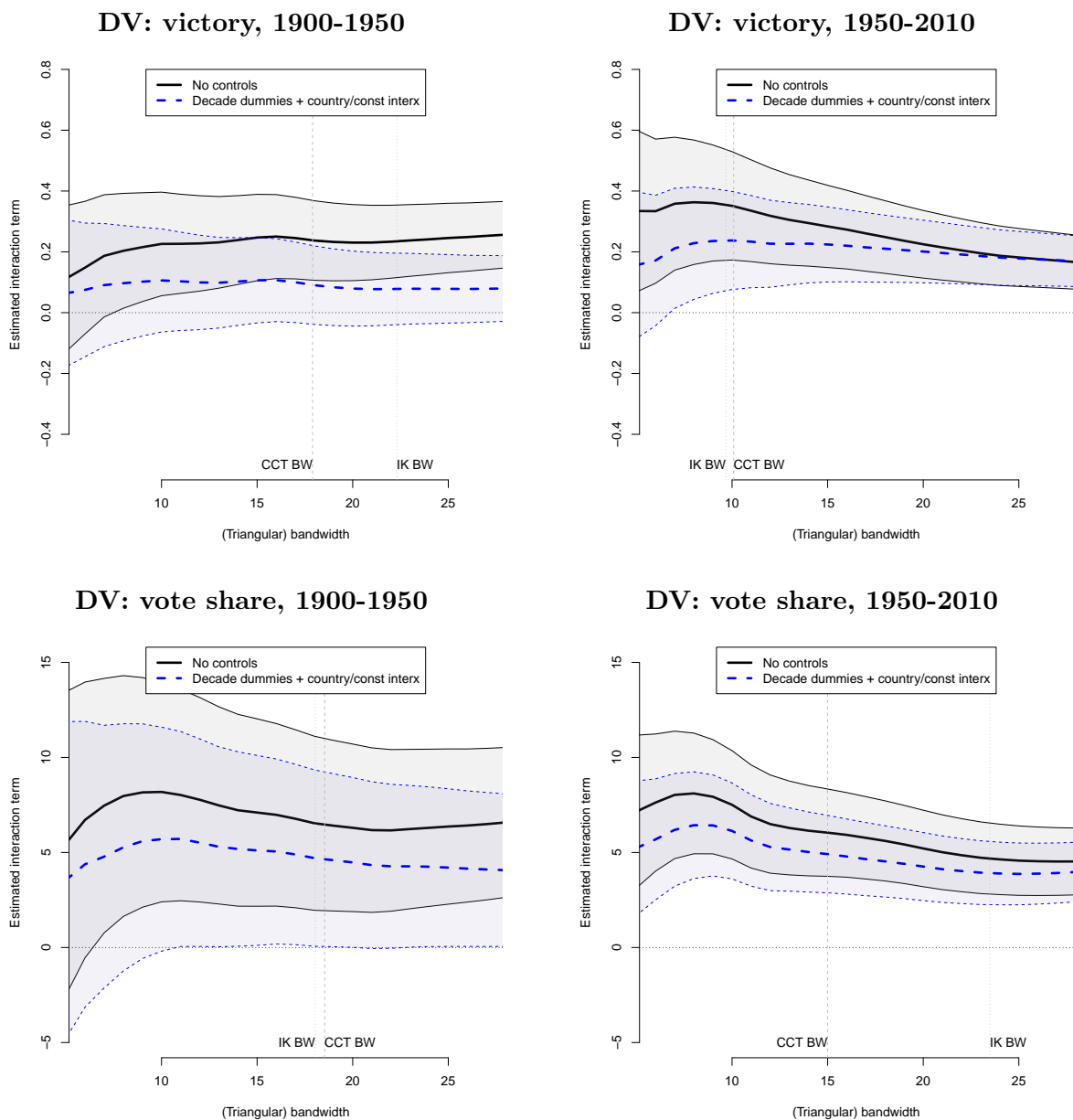
NOTE: Plots show the sensitivity of the results of Tables 1 and 2 to the choice of bandwidth. In each panel the solid line shows the estimated interaction between the incumbency indicator and the Lib-Con/Lib-Lab matchup indicator in a model with no controls (corresponding to column 2 of Tables 1 and 2) as a function of the bandwidth in the RDD analysis, while the dashed line shows the same thing when controls are included (corresponding to column 8).

Table 7: Are incumbency effects (victory-based) larger in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab contests controlling for coordination issues? (IK bandwidths)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Early period (1900-1950) (N = 3,183, CCT BW = 22.31)							
Treatment	-.015	-.176**	-.181***	-.236**	-.195***	-.183**	-.206***	-.241**
	(.041)	(.054)	(.055)	(.083)	(.056)	(.055)	(.057)	(.084)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		.238***	.240***	.100	.231***	.245***	.234***	.092
		(.067)	(.067)	(.065)	(.067)	(.067)	(.067)	(.066)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			.037	.081†	.041	.044	.055	.090†
			(.050)	(.047)	(.050)	(.050)	(.050)	(.047)
	Late period (1950-2010) (N = 2,343, CCT BW = 9.68)							
Treatment	.187***	.137***	.129***	.336***	.120**	.129***	.115**	.326***
	(.044)	(.034)	(.034)	(.042)	(.037)	(.035)	(.038)	(.045)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		.350***	.345***	.254**	.325***	.334***	.311***	.236**
		(.090)	(.090)	(.081)	(.091)	(.090)	(.091)	(.081)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			.009	-.013	.012	.004	.007	-.017
			(.054)	(.050)	(.054)	(.054)	(.054)	(.050)
	Entire period (1900-2010) (N = 4,416, CCT BW = 10.66)							
Treatment	.095**	.068*	.070*	-.345***	.050	.069*	.041	-.359***
	(.032)	(.031)	(.031)	(.077)	(.033)	(.031)	(.034)	(.077)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		.080	.081	.210***	.068	.081	.068	.210***
		(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			-.026	.021	-.019	-.023	-.012	.028
			(.039)	(.036)	(.039)	(.040)	(.040)	(.036)

Treatment also interacted with:								
Running variable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies				✓				✓
Borough (v. county)					✓		✓	✓
Country						✓	✓	✓
Country × borough							✓	✓

NOTE: See Table 4; this table focuses on victory rather than vote share.

Table 8: Are incumbency effects (vote share-based) larger in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab contests controlling for coordination issues? (CCT bandwidths)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Early period (1900-1950) (N = 2,764, CCT BW = 18.04)							
Treatment	3.254*	-.702	-1.159	-1.256	-2.389	-1.373	-2.652	-2.381
	(1.341)	(1.850)	(1.885)	(2.964)	(1.938)	(1.901)	(1.964)	(3.001)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		6.452**	6.551**	4.980*	5.943*	6.636**	6.034**	4.539†
		(2.308)	(2.306)	(2.314)	(2.320)	(2.306)	(2.320)	(2.339)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			1.754	1.722	2.195	1.700	2.321	2.146
			(1.729)	(1.680)	(1.730)	(1.737)	(1.740)	(1.691)
	Late period (1950-2010) (N = 5,633, CCT BW = 23.49)							
Treatment	2.391***	1.707***	1.256**	2.157***	1.391**	1.187**	1.422**	2.227***
	(.539)	(.449)	(.438)	(.542)	(.474)	(.438)	(.478)	(.565)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		6.044***	5.892***	5.153***	5.992***	5.627***	5.719***	4.885***
		(1.172)	(1.133)	(1.024)	(1.142)	(1.120)	(1.127)	(1.009)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			2.331***	2.171***	2.325***	2.035**	1.954**	1.702**
			(.670)	(.618)	(.669)	(.663)	(.661)	(.605)
	Entire period (1900-2010) (N = 9,553, CCT BW = 25.93)							
Treatment	2.657***	1.134*	.800	-.228	.279	.594	.109	-.736
	(.572)	(.565)	(.569)	(1.606)	(.604)	(.575)	(.615)	(1.612)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		4.800***	4.827***	4.047***	4.577***	4.795***	4.608***	3.910***
		(.950)	(.944)	(.996)	(.950)	(.943)	(.948)	(1.003)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			1.592*	1.760*	1.683*	1.508*	1.625*	1.701*
			(.713)	(.696)	(.712)	(.713)	(.712)	(.695)
Treatment also interacted with:								
Running variable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies				✓				✓
Borough (v. county)					✓		✓	✓
Country						✓	✓	✓
Country × borough							✓	✓

NOTE: See Table 4; this table uses Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014) bandwidths.

Table 9: Are incumbency effects (victory-based) larger in Lib-Con/Lib-Lab contests controlling for coordination issues? (CCT bandwidths)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Early period (1900-1950) (N = 3,183, CCT BW = 22.31)							
Treatment	-.015	-.176**	-.181***	-.236**	-.195***	-.183**	-.206***	-.241**
	(.041)	(.054)	(.055)	(.083)	(.056)	(.055)	(.057)	(.084)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		.238***	.240***	.100	.231***	.245***	.234***	.092
		(.067)	(.067)	(.065)	(.067)	(.067)	(.067)	(.066)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			.037	.081†	.041	.044	.055	.090†
			(.050)	(.047)	(.050)	(.050)	(.050)	(.047)
	Late period (1950-2010) (N = 2,343, CCT BW = 9.68)							
Treatment	.187***	.137***	.129***	.336***	.120**	.129***	.115**	.326***
	(.044)	(.034)	(.034)	(.042)	(.037)	(.035)	(.038)	(.045)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		.350***	.345***	.254**	.325***	.334***	.311***	.236**
		(.090)	(.090)	(.081)	(.091)	(.090)	(.091)	(.081)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			.009	-.013	.012	.004	.007	-.017
			(.054)	(.050)	(.054)	(.054)	(.054)	(.050)
	Entire period (1900-2010) (N = 4,416, CCT BW = 10.66)							
Treatment	.095**	.068*	.070*	-.345***	.050	.069*	.041	-.359***
	(.032)	(.031)	(.031)	(.077)	(.033)	(.031)	(.034)	(.077)
Treatment × Liberal vs. Lab/Con		.080	.081	.210***	.068	.081	.068	.210***
		(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)	(.051)
Treatment × third party vote share > 20%			-.026	.021	-.019	-.023	-.012	.028
			(.039)	(.036)	(.039)	(.040)	(.040)	(.036)
Treatment also interacted with:								
Running variable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies				✓				✓
Borough (v. county)						✓	✓	✓
Country							✓	✓
Country × borough							✓	✓

NOTE: See Table 4; this table uses Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014) bandwidths and focuses on victory as the outcome rather than vote share.