Comparative Incumbency in National Legislatures: Patterns and Variations

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Introduction

One of the more common themes in the discussion of legislative elections in the United States is the substantial advantage held by incumbents when running for re-election. In many of these discussions is the implicit hypothesis that this is somehow unique to the US, and little mention is ever made of the potential incumbency effects in other countries. It is often assumed that because other nations have stronger parties and thus more party-line voters, the incumbency effect is virtually eliminated.

We challenge that assumption. Using legislative election data from several nations, we measure the impact of party strength and economic forces on the re-election rate of individual legislators to determine how much of the incumbency effect is driven by the idiosyncrasies of national political structures and how much is directly attributable to these general measures.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

Incumbency in the United States

It is not much of an exaggeration to suggest that incumbency effects have been the obsession of American political scientists. It has long been part of the lore of American elections that incumbents have a decided advantage over challengers. Since the 1970s, immense scholarly attention in America has focused on discovering the factors that endow incumbents with their electoral advantages. Much of the work has centered on Congressional elections, but the examination of the incumbency advantage has even been extended to state and local elections (Cox and Morgenstern 1993; Jewell and Breaux 1988; Krebs 1998).

There are numerous theories about why incumbents possess an electoral advantage. The casework hypothesis (Fiorina 1977a) argues that incumbent congressmen provide services to constituents which challengers cannot. The help an incumbent offers to constituents to negotiate the bureaucratic maze in Washington enhances the good will that constituents feel toward the incumbent, thereby increasing the chances that the incumbent will be reelected. The inability of challengers to provide such services puts them at a considerable disadvantage.

Stokes and Miller (1966) posited the "name familiarity" hypothesis. They claim that voters who are otherwise uninformed will vote for a candidate whose name they recognize. This holds especially true for uninformed voters who are of the opposite party as the incumbent because "any information at all about the rivals' party candidate creates the possibility of a choice deviating from party"(204). Since most incumbents have greater name recognition than their challengers, they have a built-in advantage on election day.

One of the first empirical studies that found an electoral advantage among incumbents was *Congressmen and the Electorate* (Cummings 1966). Another empirical study found that sixty percent of new Representatives increase their vote share when they run as an incumbent for the first time (Erikson 1971). Finally, Krostroski (1973) showed that the relative importance of party had declined in post-war Senate election, while the importance of incumbency had experienced an almost proportionate increase for both Democrats and Republicans. While these studies provided some of the first evidence of an incumbency advantage, they engaged in little systematic theory testing and were characterized by rudimentary methodology.

Abramowitz (1975) tested the name familiarity hypothesis and what he termed the "reputation" hypothesis, a theory that stated voter satisfaction with the incumbent's performance in office accounted for incumbency advantage. His findings showed little support for name familiarity and substantial support for the reputation hypothesis. However, the small sample size of 302 voters in one district limited the generalizability of the results.

Fiorina (1977b) further substantiated the incumbency advantage by documenting the decline of partisanship among the electorate and the rise of voting behavior favorable to incumbents. He expanded on his casework hypothesis by attributing the rise of incumbents to the increasing use of the perquisites of elected office: the franking privilege, staff, and advertising. However, he deemed that the true nature of the incumbency advantage was inconclusive due to the lack of data on the problem.

The following year, the Center for Political Studies at Michigan conducted one of the first comprehensive studies of a congressional election. The National Election Study of 1978 spawned a host of articles tackling the incumbency puzzle. Mann and Wolfinger (1980) found that congressional incumbents were both better known and better liked than challengers. They attributed this finding to the use of congressional perquisites that enabled incumbents to communicate much more effectively with their constituents. Abramowitz (1980) showed that most challengers had much lower visibility among voters than incumbents did. He also noted that incumbents benefited the most from direct contact with constituents. Hinckley (1980) showed that voters give the highest ratings to House incumbents. Ragsdale (1981) buttressed these studies by employing an interrelational model that found incumbent popularity and challenger invisibility contributed to House incumbent victories. Finally, Jacobson (1981) found that incumbents benefited substantially from advertising, credit claiming, position taking on issues, and development of a homestyle.

An examination of the National Election Study of 1980 found a significant effect for the perquisites of congressional office, even in a year that was characterized by a high degree of policy oriented voting (McAdams and Johannes

1983). Further study revealed that constituent satisfaction with casework had a positive effect on the probability of voting for the incumbent, supporting the casework hypothesis (Fiorina 1981).

Incumbency Elsewhere

While the effects of incumbency within the U.S. are well documented, there is little research on incumbency effects in other countries. Most studies have focused on Great Britain, and the evidence is inconclusive. Much of the evidence of incumbency effects in the U.K. was anecdotal, until the publication of *The Personal Vote* (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). This study surveyed British voters after the 1979 parliamentary election. It found that incumbent Labor MPs were more likely to win than challengers. Nevertheless, they still found much stronger party effects among the British electorate. While the effects of party had declined in the U.S., there was not a similar decline in the U.K. This cast doubt on the effects of incumbency in the U.K.

Gaines (1998) challenges the findings of *The Personal Vote*. Employing a fixed effects model, he estimates the advantage of incumbency in British elections in the post-war era. He finds the largest incumbency effects for Liberal MPs, while the effects for Conservative and Labour MPs are small to non-existent. He concludes that there has been no substantial change in the advantages of incumbency in Britain during the post-war period. However, he includes no measure for challenger quality or for constituency service. Thus, we do not know from Gaines' study if incumbency effects in Britain are more pronounced if variations in challenger quality and constituency service are taken into account.

VARIABLES

Unemployment

Previous research shows that voters evaluations of economic performance affect their vote choice. Kinder and Kiewet (1979) found that while personal economic circumstances did not affect a voter's decision, their judgement about where the nation is headed economically did. Other studies have shown that if Democratic candidates benefit if unemployment is a serious national problem, and that voters judge incumbent presidents on the basis of retrospective policy performance, including economic policy (Kinder 1981; Miller and Wattenberg 1985). In House elections, a one-point drop in the GNP growth rate may cost the incumbent party an additional five seats (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1984). Nor is the relationship between national economic circumstances and election outcomes limited to the United States. Studies have found a strong relationship between the national unemployment rate and election results in West Germany and Italy (Beluci 1991; Rattinger 1991).

While there is ample evidence that economic conditions affect elections, especially the fortunes of the ruling party, the question we must address is whether they affect the incumbency rates? We postulate that they do. We believe that to some degree voters hold all incumbents responsible for the management of the economy. When economic conditions deteriorate, voters are less likely to approve of an incumbent legislator. Therefore, a slumping economy should have a negative impact on the incumbents' re-election chances.

To test this, we employ a standard measure of economic performance, the unemployment rate. We expect that as unemployment rises, the number of incumbents defeated should also rise.

Economic Development

High levels of economic development infuse democracies with considerable stability. By contrast, democracies with low levels of economic development are often characterized by flux: governments often form and dissolve within short periods of time. The instability can trace its roots, at least partially, to the high levels of dissatisfaction with government among the voters in an underdeveloped country.

We theorize that this dissatisfaction also affects the reelection rates of incumbents. Such dissatisfaction disposes voters in underdeveloped countries to be less inclined to reelect incumbents. By contrast, voters in nations with high levels of economic development should be more willing to re-elect incumbents. To control for this effect, we employ energy consumption per capita, a commonly used measure of economic development (see, for example, Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994, and Jackman 1975).

We expect that economic development is curvilinear with the rate of incumbency defeats. When a nation become highly developed economically, each increase in development leads to little or no increase in incumbency defeats. To solve this, we use the natural log of energy consumption per capita.

Party Strength

Another factor that can clearly influence the rate of incumbent re-election is the strength of the party structures within the nation. As the political parties become more powerful and coherent both within the legislature and the electorate, they are more able to assist incumbent legislators in retaining their positions.

To measure the amount of power the national political parties have to influence incumbency, we constructed a ten-point scale of party power (see Appendix 1 for a complete breakdown of how the scale was constructed). The scale takes into account the strength of the party in the legislature, campaign finance laws as they apply to both the candidates and the parties, the amount of control the party has in the nomination process, and the overall centralization of power within the party.

Re-Election Rate

To provide a direct measure of the incumbency effect, we measured the rate at which legislators are re-elected when they choose to run again. The re-election rate was calculated by dividing the total number of legislators who won re-election by the total number of incumbents running for re-election.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

The first test of the incumbency model is to use the three primary independent variables, unemployment, energy consumption, and party strength. Since the dependent variable, re-election rate, is essentially continuous, we employed OLS regression to test the initial model. The data for the model were drawn from four countries that use single-member plurality district elections: the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and Canada. The election data covers the period from 1956 through 1994.

TABLE 1

N=44	F(3,40)=11.17	*p*(F)=0.0001
R^2=0.4558	Adjusted R^2=0.4150	

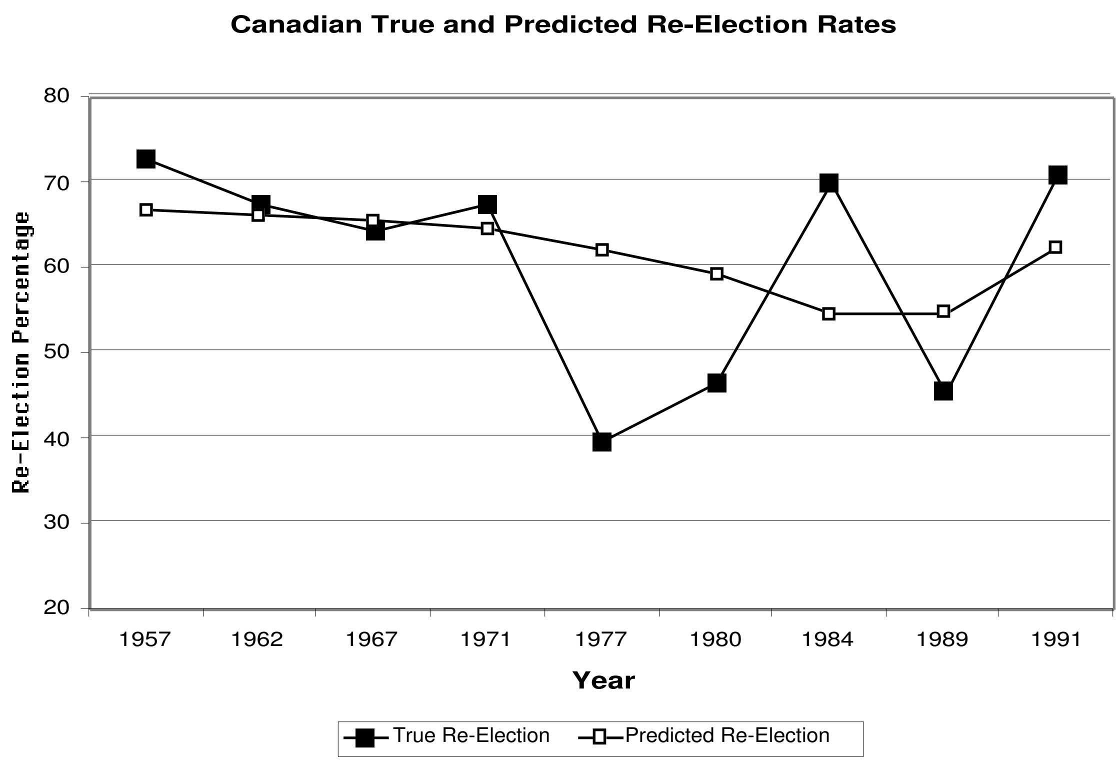
Dependent Variable: Re-election Rate

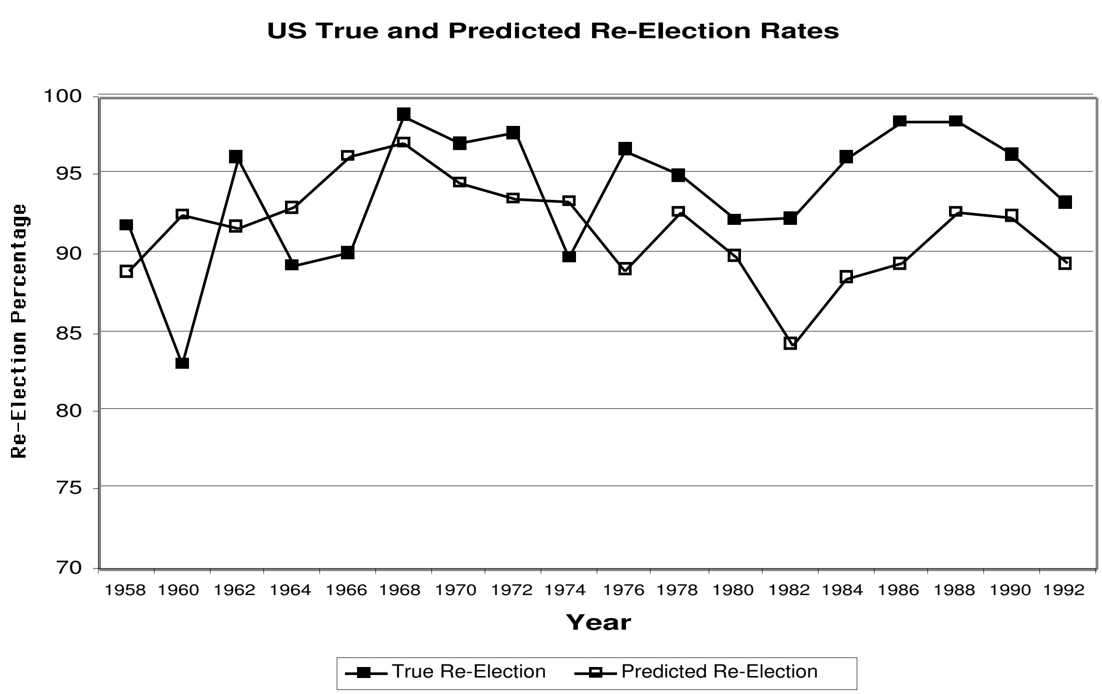
	Coefficient	t-score	p(t)
Unemployment	-1.875	-3.013	0.004
Log Energy Consumption	6.966	5.511	0.001
Party Strength	-0.769	-1.015	0.316
Constant	28.285	2.477	0.018

The results of the initial analysis are mixed. Although the unemployment and energy consumption variables were significant and in the proper direction, the party strength variable failed to approach significance. Overall, the model does only a mediocre job of predicting re-election rates. This is demonstrated most clearly when examining the predicted re-election rates and comparing them to the actual prediction rates.

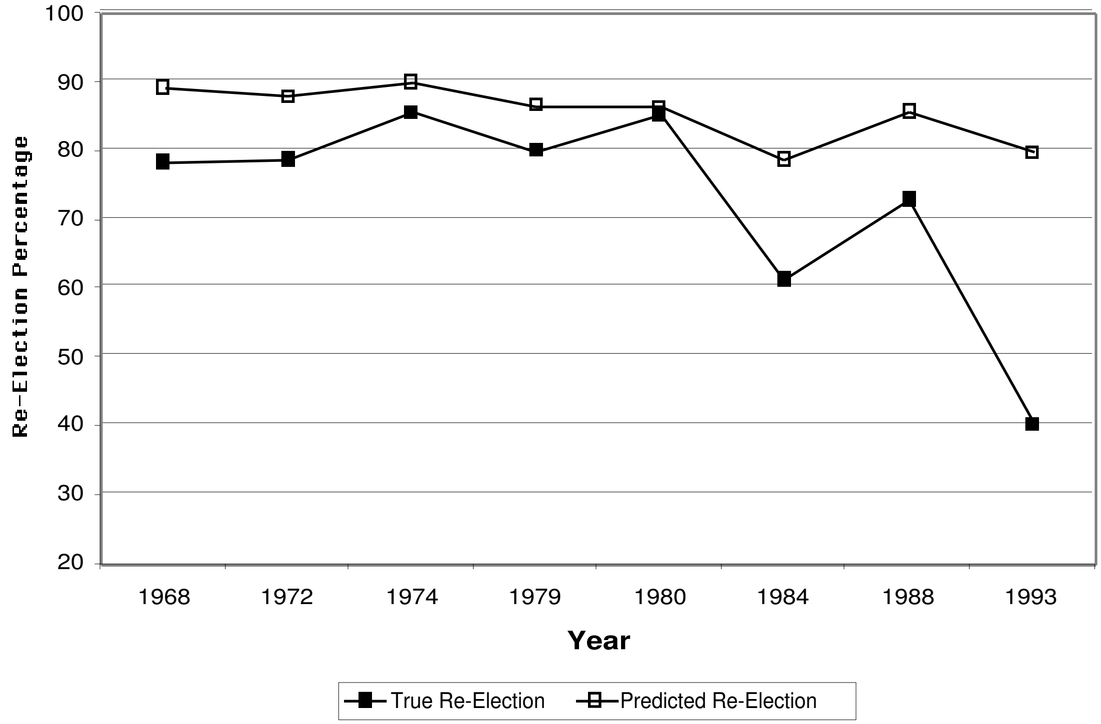
TABLE 2

	United States	UK	Canada	India
Mean True Re-Election Rate	94.02%	91.14%	72.83%	60.46%
Mean Predicted Re-Election Rate	91.60%	83.35%	85.56%	61.76%
Median True Re-Election Rate	95.55%	91.30%	78.55%	67.30%
Median Predicted Re-Election Rate	92.40%	88.42%	86.50%	62.43%

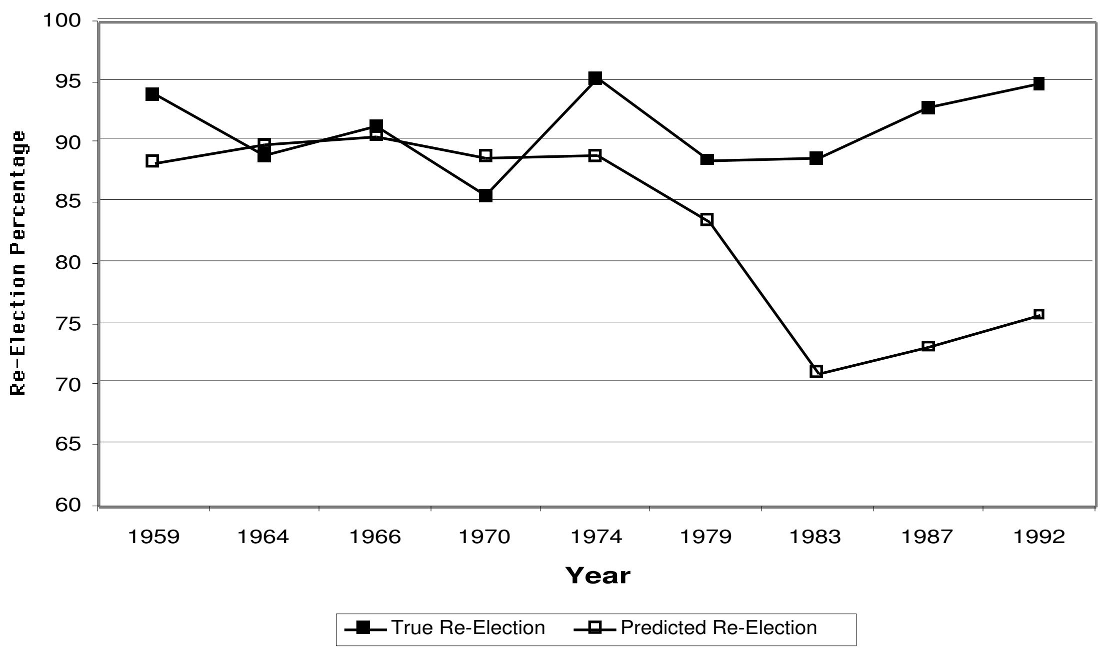

Canadian True and Predicted Re-Election Rates
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
Re-Election Percentage
1957
1962
1967
1971
1977
1980
1984
1989
1991
Year
True Re-Election
Predicted Re-Election


US True and Predicted Re-Election Rates
100
95
90
85
80
75
70
Re-Election Percentage
1958
1960
1962
1964
1966
1968
1970
1972
1974
1976
1978
1980
1982
1984
1986
1988
1990
1992
Year
True Re-Election
Predicted Re-Election

Indian True and Predicted Re-Election Rates



UK True and Predicted Re-Election Rates



Both the table and the graphs demonstrate the strengths and the weaknesses of the model as a whole. In the case of the US, the model generally underestimates the incumbency rate, while in India it consistently overestimates it. For Canada and the UK, the results are more mixed. For all of the nations except the US, there was at least one election in which the prediction was off by at least 15%.

While the results of the model indicate that the three primary independent variables are reasonably good predictors of incumbency, they do not address the primary question--is incumbency in the United States substantively different from incumbency elsewhere in the world? To answer that question, we added dummy variables for all of the nations except the US to the model. By creating the cascading dummy variables, we set the baseline model as the United States.

TABLE 3

N=44 F(6,37)=18.64 *p*(F)=0.0001
R^2=0.7514 Adjusted R^2=0.7111
Dependent Variable: Re-election Rate

	Coefficient	t-score	p(t)
Unemployment	-1.157	-2.097	0.043
Log Energy Consumption	0.045	0.005	0.996
Party Strength	5.556	1.204	0.236
UK	-38.98	-1.229	0.227
India	-47.84	-1.145	0.259
Canada	-43.45	-2.138	0.039
Constant	91.449	1.059	0.297

The results of the second regression are strikingly different from the first set of results. Energy consumption is no longer an effective predictor, and the constant lost significance as well. Only one of the three cascading dummy variables reached significance, Canada. Given the high R^2, low *N*, and the low levels of significance (even the variables that are significant are not strikingly so), it would appear that there is a problem in the data.

Closer examination of the dataset itself reveals the problem. For all of the nations except the United States, as the party strength variable goes up, the re-election rate also increases. In the United States, the re-election rate is very high even though the party strength code is quite low. See table 4 for a complete breakdown of the party codes and re-election rates.

TABLE 4

	Party Strength	Re-Election Rate
US-pre FECA	1	91.52%
US-post FECA	2	95.27%
India	4	60.46%
Canada	6	72.83%
UK	8	91.14%

Although the increase in the party strength code brought about by the Federal Elections and Campaigns Act (FECA) increased the re-election rate as expected, it is clear the US is starting from a very different baseline than the other three nations. To test this question further, we replaced the cascading dummy variables with a single dummy for the US.

TABLE 5

N=44 $F(4,39)=29.24$ $p(F)=0.0001$
$R^2=0.7499$ Adjusted $R^2=0.7243$
Dependent Variable: Re-election Rate

	Coefficient	t-score	p(t)
Unemployment	-1.217	-2.496	0.017
Log Energy Consumption	0.272	0.166	0.869
Party Strength	7.491	4.750	0.001
US	51.465	5.506	0.001
Constant	35.041	4.556	0.001

The results of the regression confirmed our suspicions—the incumbency rate in the United States does start at a different baseline than the other nations. While the other nations start out with a base incumbency rate of approximately 35%, the United States starts at approximately 86.5%. The overall fit of the model is substantially better, and the party strength and unemployment variables reached standard significance levels.

Since the Unites States is clearly such a powerful outlier, we wanted to see if the base model would be more accurate if the US elections were excluded from it. If the model showed substantially higher levels of significance over the US-inclusive model, it can still prove useful as a predictor of incumbency in the rest of the single-member district nations.

TABLE 6

N=26 F(3,22)=13.01 p(F)=0.0001
R^2=0.6396 Adjusted R^2=0.5904
Dependent Variable: Re-election Rate (US excluded)

	Coefficient	t-score	p(t)
Unemployment	-1.198	-1.762	0.092
Log Energy Consumption	0.123	0.056	0.956
Party Strength	7.713	3.538	0.002
Constant	34.73	3.532	0.002

Compared to the US-inclusive model, this model is a substantial improvement (see table 1). The R^2 values increased substantially, and the party strength variable reached significance. Of note is the drastic drop in the energy variable. When we incorporated this into the model, we did so thinking that India would be the country most likely to be affected by the energy consumption variable. The results of the analysis indicate that is was, in fact, the extremely high energy consumption rates of the US that drove the variable to significance in the first model, not the low rates of India.

CONCLUSIONS

So what does it all mean? Contrary to our initial expectations, it *does* appear that incumbency in the United States is substantively different than in other single-member plurality district systems, even when economic factors and party strength levels are taken into account in the model. The final regression demonstrated that party strength and unemployment rates are reasonably accurate predictors of the incumbency rate in all of the nations excluding the US.

The strength of the party variable should not come as a surprise to students of legislative elections. As parties become more cohesive and powerful, and as they gain greater control over financial affairs, they are able to institute stricter discipline within their organizations. Legislators learn to remain loyal to the party if they want to get re-elected, and the party provides them with the resources to do so. Eventually, the party becomes more important to the public than the individual legislator, and re-election becomes more a matter of gaining the party's initial support and less a matter of appealing to the voters. In the system with the greatest level of party control, the UK, the individual parliamentarian is at the mercy of the party for finances, nominations, and positions within government.

Why does the US differ so greatly from the other three nations in the analysis? It is most likely a function of the lack of a clear connection between the individual member of the legislature and the executive branch. Members of the president's party can distance themselves from the Oval Office without bringing down the entire government. In the UK, India, and Canada, the prime minister is elected by the parliament, and to remove the prime minister, the voters must remove the individual legislators that support the prime minister. Ideally, the best test of this hypothesis would be to add several other presidential-style nations to the data pool and include a dummy variable for "presidential nation" rather than just the United States, but the other nations with presidential democracies either have a one-party system (ala Mexico) or the data are simply unavailable. In either case, the question of presidential versus parliamentary structure and the impact on incumbency is unanswerable until further data are made available.

Appendix 1

This appendix describes the creation of the party strength variable. We used the following criteria to determine the overall strength of the party. For each criteria, the nation's party system was scored from 0 to 2, with 0 indicating little or no party power, 1 indicating moderate party power, and 2 indicating strong party power.

Legislative power was defined as the amount of control the parties were able to exert over individual legislators, including: the power of legislators to introduce their own bills; the overall level of party vote cohesion; and the amount of control the party exerts over leadership appointments.

Individual financial control was defined as the amount of control the state has over individual legislator's campaign spending. This coding differed from all of the other codes—as individual legislators are able to raise and spend more of their own money, the less reliant they are on the party for money, and thus the less power the party has over the candidate.

Party financial control was defined as the amount of control the state has over campaign spending by political parties. As parties are able to raise and spend more money, the more power the parties have over the candidates.

Nomination control was defined as the amount of power exerted by the parties to determine which candidates actually run in the general election. As the parties gain more control over the process, the easier it is to remove those legislators who refuse to follow the party line.

Party centralization was defined as how concentrated the party power is at the national level. The more power the national party has to control the behavior of the sub-national party branches, the easier it is for the national party to impose a nation-wide agenda and exclude those members that do not follow it.

	0	1	2
Legislative Power	Party weak in the legislature (US, India)	Party has moderate strength (none)	Party very strong, substantial enforcement powers (UK, Canada)
Finance			
-Individual	Essentially no limits on individual spending (India, US pre-FECA)	Some limits, but they can be generally circumvented or ignored (UK, US post-FECA)	Strict, enforced limits (Canada)
-Party	Strict, enforced limits (Canada)	Some limits, but they can be generally circumvented or ignored (UK, US)	Essentially no limits on party spending (India)
Organization			
-Nomination of Legislators	National party has little control (US)	National and sub-national parties have roughly equal control (none)	National party has near total control (UK, Canada, India)
-Centralization of Power	Power dispersed throughout sub-national organizations (US, Canada, India)	Power somewhat centralized at the national level (none)	Power highly concentrated at the national level (UK)

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