The Incumbency Curse: Weak Parties, Term Limits, and Unfulfilled Accountability*

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Abstract

We study how representation works in a context where accountability to voters is restricted because of term limits and accountability to parties is limited because of party weakness. Analyzing all Brazilian mayoral elections since 1996 to the present using a regression discontinuity design, we show that becoming the incumbent party results in large subsequent electoral losses. We propose an explanation for these findings, which we also formalize in a model, according to which the presence of term limits, combined with political parties to which politicians are only weakly attached, affects the incentives and behavior of individual politicians in such a way that their parties’ suffer systematic losses. A descriptive analysis of an original dataset on the career paths of Brazilian mayors confirms that our assumptions are an accurate description of Brazil’s political context. Moreover, we find strong support for two central empirical implications of our theoretical explanation.

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1 Introduction

The central characteristic of democratic representative government is the delegation of authority from citizens to elected officials. By its very definition, this act of delegation implies that citizens lose control over the behavior of their representatives—at least temporarily. The main mechanism to ensure that representatives act in the best interest of the public is the existence of periodic elections, the single instrument that voters have to both retrospectively sanction elected officials and prospectively select “good” candidates who are honest and share their policy goals (see, e.g., Manin, Adam, and Stokes 1999).

In most cases, the delegation from voters to representatives is mediated by the political parties to which candidates are affiliated. Voters, candidates and parties form two related chains of principal-agent relationships (Moreno, Crisp, and Shugart 2003). Voters (the principal) delegate authority to parties and their candidates—the voters’ agents. In turn, the party (as the principal) delegates authority to the party’s elected candidates—the party’s agents. Thus, candidates are agents of both their parties and voters, and in both cases there is a tension between delegation and accountability—between letting the agent implement policy on the principal’s behalf and minimizing the agent’s opportunistic behavior. In a recent contribution, Samuels and Shugart (2010) argue that this tension is resolved differently in presidential than in parliamentary systems because both adverse selection and moral hazard problems are more severe in the former than in the latter, resulting in weaker parties in presidential democracies.

We build on these ideas, focusing on how the interaction between the conflicting demands of accountability to both parties and constituents may result in suboptimal outcomes. While Samuels and Shugart (2010) highlight the ways in which constitutional separation of powers may weaken parties, we highlight the vacuum of accountability that may occur when electoral rules that limit voters’ ability to sanction individual elected officials are adopted in a context where parties are already weak. In particular, we study executive offices elected via plurality
rules in a context where (i) accountability to voters is restricted because of term limits and
(ii) accountability to parties is limited because parties have little ability to discipline their
members and prevent candidates’ frequent party switches. What, if any, are the distinctive
characteristics of representation in such situations?

We investigate this question systematically through a study of how access to office af-
ffects political parties’ future electoral outcomes in Brazil’s municipalities, a context where
these two conditions hold. Brazilian mayors can serve no more than two consecutive terms,
and they are elected through political parties widely considered to be institutionally weak—
plagued by low legitimacy, shallow roots in society, and very limited ability to ensure dis-
cipline and loyalty from their members (Mainwaring 1995, 1999). We analyze all Brazilian
mayoral elections since 1996 to the present using a regression discontinuity (RD) design. By
comparing municipalities where a party barely wins an election to municipalities where a
party barely loses, this design allows us to isolate the causal effects of winning office from the
spurious correlation between current and future electoral success—a correlation that arises
because, on average, the parties with the best reputation or the strongest candidates are the
most likely to succeed. As we discuss and show in the last section, the highly competitive
races that are the focus of our RD design are representative of a large proportion of Brazil’s
municipal elections, enhancing the external validity of our results.

We divide our investigation in three parts. First, we ask whether winning a mayoral elec-
tion per se makes a party more likely to win again in the following election. Winning public
office gives parties access to direct and indirect benefits (public funds, name recognition, the
ability to deter challengers, etc.) that can be leveraged to boost future electoral support. It
also gives parties an opportunity to implement policies that are preferred by a plurality of
voters, and cultivate its brand. On average, in a political system where representation works
as expected, parties should either benefit from winning office or, at the very least, not be
harmed by it.

What we find, however, is exactly the opposite: when a party (barely) wins a mayoral
election in Brazil, its chances of winning the following election are severely diminished relative to its chances in similar municipalities where the party does not hold the mayor’s office. For example, on average, an incumbent party that is barely reelected is 15 percentage points less likely to win the following election than a similar incumbent party that is barely defeated. This overall disadvantage is not circumscribed to a few political parties or electoral years but is a rather widespread and persistent phenomenon.

Second, we use a conceptual framework built on the distinction between accountability to voters and parties to develop an explanation for why this disadvantage may occur. Absent electoral incentives and unconcerned about a future career within the party, some term-limited candidates may have an incentive to engage in opportunistic behavior—a kind of behavior that is well documented among Brazilian mayors (e.g. Ferraz and Finan 2011; Zamboni and Litschig 2014). Voters may still choose not to vote for a party when the party’s departing incumbent has behaved in undesirable ways. A weak party, however, cannot act on the anticipation of this punishment and prevent the incumbent’s behavior, given its lack of ability to control its incumbent candidate. The result is what we call “unfulfilled accountability”—a situation in which the incumbent candidate engages in opportunistic behavior in their last term, voters sanction the incumbent candidate’s party retrospectively, but weak parties are unable to act on the anticipation of this sanction and prevent the candidates’ behavior. We formalize our explanation in a simple three-period principal-agent model with three types of actors (voters, parties and politicians) and show that, under certain assumptions, our explanation can indeed be sustained as an equilibrium.

In the final part of our project, we conduct an extensive analysis that shows that several empirical implications (and assumptions) of our explanation are strongly supported by our data. The first piece of evidence we present is an original study of the career path of Brazilian mayors, for which we name-matched over 20,000 elected mayors to all political candidates who contested any election in Brazil between 1992 and 2012. Consistent with our assumption of low accountability to parties and the previous literature on party weakness in Brazil, we
find that a large proportion of mayors go on to run for office for a different party after they leave office. In addition, guided by our model and conceptual framework, we decompose the overall effect and find that, as predicted, the disadvantage is considerably larger in municipalities where the party is running immediately after its lame-duck mayor retires than in municipalities where the party is running immediately after its reelection-eligible mayor finished his first term in office. Finally, we conduct a separate analysis of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), a relatively programmatic, cohesive and high-discipline party that has long been considered the exception to the institutional weakness that plagues the Brazilian party system (Hunter 2010; Mainwaring 1999). According to our explanation, unfulfilled accountability occurs when parties are weak, which means that the mechanism we identify should not hold for the PT. As predicted by our framework, the disadvantage in municipalities where the PT lame-duck mayor just retired cannot be distinguished from the disadvantage in municipalities where the PT mayor is eligible for reelection.

Our theoretical explanation suggests that the interaction between party weakness and electoral rules that restrict reelection may affect individual politicians’ incentives and careers in a way that compromises accountability, feeds volatility and prevents the consolidation of the party system that would be necessary to break the cycle. This framework thus suggests a general mechanism that might operate in other developing democracies besides Brazil. For example, within Latin America, party weakness is a prevalent phenomenon (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Roberts 2012), and term limits are common in executive offices. Our findings also complement recent evidence that access to office results in subsequent electoral losses from a number of other developing democracies, such as India (Fisman, Schulz, and Vig 2012; Linden 2004; Uppal 2009), many democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (Klašnja 2014; Roberts 2008) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Macdonald 2013).
2 Accountability in a Context of Weak Parties and Term Limits

The literature on representation has long discussed the difficulties that arise from the fact that voters have a single instrument, elections, to both select policy platforms prospectively and sanction representatives' performance retrospectively (see Manin, Adam, and Stokes 1999, and references therein). Since the alignment of representatives' and constituents' preferences is never complete, it is essential that voters have the ability to monitor representatives in order to either remove them from office or induce changes in their behavior through the threat of sanction (Mansbridge 2009). It follows that electoral rules that restrict the accountability of individual candidates may deprive voters of one of elections' fundamental roles. At the same time, the delegation from citizens to politicians is often mediated by political parties. In this section, we explore how the existence and strength of parties can alleviate or worsen the representation challenges that may be created when the ties between individual candidates and the electorate are severed.

As mentioned before, this process can be understood as two related principal-agent relationships with three actors—voters, elected officials, and political parties. In the first relationship, voters delegate authority to parties and their candidates. In the second, the party delegates authority to its candidates. Elected officials are thus agents of two principals—their party and the voters who elected them. The quality of representative government will depend on how much alignment there is between the incentives of voters, individual politicians, and their parties, and on the different mechanisms that are in place to both select agents and minimize opportunistic behavior when misalignment does exist.  

These two principal-agent relationships lead to two types of accountability: candidates’

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1 This is a simplified description, as other factors could be incorporated into the model. For example, in a study of U.S. Senate members, Lindstädt and Vander Wielen (2011) find support for the hypothesis that legislators’ accountability to constituents varies strategically over time and is at its highest when reelection nears and constituents’ monitoring capacity is intensified.
“collective accountability” to their parties and “individual accountability” to their constituents (Carey 2003; Moreno, Crisp, and Shugart 2003). The goals of individual and collective accountability are often in tension: when candidates’ electoral success depends exclusively on their personal reputations, there are strong incentives to form linkages based on clientelism or patronage, undermining programmatic appeals and therefore democracy; on the other hand, when electoral success depends mainly on the party’s reputation, individual candidates have little incentive to respond to citizens’ needs, denying them an essential role of the democratic process (Kitschelt et al. 2010; Shugart 2001).

In their study of party systems, Samuels and Shugart (2010) argue that the separate origin and survival of the executive and legislative branches makes the tension between delegation and accountability to parties much higher in presidential than in parliamentary systems. Adverse selection is more likely in presidential systems, they argue, because parties need to recruit candidates that are appealing to a national constituency, and the qualities that make a candidate competitive at the national level are often in conflict with those that make him a faithful party agent. Furthermore, moral hazard is also more likely in presidential systems because the party has no power to remove the president from office, which gives the president strong incentives to deviate from the party line. The result is that countries with constitutional separation of powers put strong pressures on political parties to “presidentialize”, that is, to be fundamentally vote-seeking, adopt broad coalitions and diffuse ideological commitments.

While Samuels and Shugart’s (2010) framework focuses on how national party systems vary across constitutions, we use it to develop expectations regarding the nature of representation and accountability within a single political system. Our contribution highlights that the tensions that are brought about by the principal-agent relationship between party and candidates can be multiplied within a single political system when subnational executive positions are elected with plurality rules, as is often the case. Subnational executives are imperfect agents of their parties in much the same way presidents are, since (i) in order to be
elected they also must be competitive in a locality-wide election that in some cases might be large and, most importantly, (ii) like presidents, they cannot be removed from office if they abandon the party line. We argue that the extent to which these misaligned incentives result in unfulfilled accountability will depend on two related features: (i) the electoral horizon of elected officials, and (ii) how strong the parties are.

Samuels and Shugart (2010) emphasize the misalignment in incentives in the principal-agent relationship between parties and candidates (presidents). The assumption, however, is that the second principal-agent relationship from voters to politicians does bring accountability because presidents are directly elected by voters and can therefore be removed from office in their next election. But a feature that is too often overlooked is that executive offices tend to have term limits at both the national and subnational level. The very definition of accountability implies that “the principal has the right to withdraw the conditionally delegated authority altogether. This usually means dismissing (firing) the agent” (Moreno, Crisp, and Shugart 2003, p. 83). Thus, when elected officials are not eligible for reelection, the very essence of accountability is threatened.2

Two factors that are likely to reinforce accountability to voters when reelection is not allowed. One is presidents’ desire to protect their legacy: if presidents care about their place in national history, they will presumably avoid reckless policies and will also become involved in electing a successor that ensures policy continuity. The other is political parties: if presidents are associated with “national policy proposals that are associated with partisan appeals” (Samuels and Shugart 2003, p. 37), voters can hold presidents accountable retrospectively by giving or withholding support to the president’s party in the following election.

A municipality’s executive office—the subnational executive unit we study in this paper—lacks the visibility and importance of the presidency, making legacy considerations much less important. Thus, the main mechanism to guard against the removal of electoral accountabili-

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2Term limits have been shown to alter the behavior of politicians in systematic ways. See, for example, Alt, de Mesquita, and Rose (2011) and Besley and Case (1995).
ity via term limits is the presence of strong political parties—organizations with an infinite electoral horizon that seek to enforce the ideological cohesiveness and discipline of its members in order to build a credible reputation (Kitschelt et al. 2010). Thus, when parties are weak, term limits may result in undesirable outcomes by restricting individual accountability in a context where accountability to parties cannot be relied upon to ensure representation. Voters may still choose not to vote for a party when the party’s term-limited incumbent has behaved in undesirable ways. But if the weak party cannot act on the anticipation of this punishment to prevent the incumbent’s behavior, and if there are no other incentives to prevent the incumbent candidate’s behavior such as a future career within the party or the possibility of reelection, this retrospective sanctioning results in unfulfilled accountability—a cycle of undesirable but unavoidable incumbent behavior from which neither parties nor voters can escape.

In other words, our focus on executive offices implies that clarity of responsibility is high, i.e. voters may easily identify the mayor as the one responsible for municipality-level policy outcomes. But the ability to assign responsibility should be distinguished from the ability to act on the basis of that assignment (Hellwig and Samuels 2008). It may be relatively easy to assign responsibility to the mayor for municipal outcomes, but term limits prevent voters and institutional weakness prevents parties from directly sanctioning the mayor for his last-term’s performance.

The result is a paradoxical effect of term limits policies. Term limits are typically adopted with the goal of restricting politicians’ grip on power and increasing voters’ ability to populate elected offices with politicians who are closely aligned with them. But this presupposes that there are other, non-electoral mechanisms of accountability in place, the most important of which is the existence of strong parties. In developing democracies, however, party systems are often not strong, and the adoption of policies that constrain electoral accountability can have troubling consequences.
Unfulfilled Accountability as an Equilibrium

In applying our conceptual framework, one important question is whether the cycle of unfulfilled accountability we describe can be sustained as an electoral equilibrium. We now present a formal model to show that it can. The model has three actors: the voter, the party, and the incumbent politician.\(^3\) In line with our conceptual framework, the voter is the principal to the politician and the party, and the party serves as the principal to the politician. We assume that an incumbent politician faces a two-term limit, being prevented from running after successfully completing two successive terms in office. The party is not subject to the two-term limit. We therefore consider a three-period game, with two elections, after the first and the second period.

The politician chooses a simple action, which we term public good provision, \(g_t \in \{0, 1\}\), where \(g_t = 0\) denotes “shirking” (i.e. low effort). The politician also gets a rent from being in office – “ego” rents and monetary benefits – in period \(t\), \(r_{I,t}\), where \(I\) stands for being an incumbent. These aspects are common in agency models of politics (e.g. Besley 2007; Persson and Tabellini 1999). We assume \(r_{I,t} > g_t\), so that in principle, returns from holding office give incentives to politicians to run. The politician incurs a cost of public good provision of \(\theta g_t \in \{B, G\}\). For simplicity, let \(G = 1\) and \(B\) is such that \(Bg_t > r_{I,t}\). In other words, the politician facing \(\theta = B\) will always choose \(g_t = 0\), i.e. he cannot be incentivized (by the voter or the party) to provide the public good. We interpret this as the presence of some politicians who are simply insufficiently competent or too reckless, or both.\(^4\) In further discussion, we call politicians facing \(\theta = G\) “good” and those facing \(\theta = B\) “bad.” \(\theta\) is observed by the politician, but not by the voter or the party. \(\theta\) is randomly chosen by nature, and the draws are i.i.d. over periods (if a new candidate is in office). The politician

\(^3\)As is standard in principal-agent models, the challenger and his party are drawn randomly from the same distributions of types characterizing the incumbent politician and the party, allowing us to simplify our exposition by omitting the challenger and his party from the discussion.

\(^4\)Research on developing democracies indicates that such bad candidates are not infrequent (Caselli and Morelli 2004; Svolik 2013), especially in the presence of weak parties, as we hypothesize in our model (e.g. Grzymalla-Busse 2007).
may be punished by the party for shirking, \( p_t \in \{0, 1\} \), where \( p_t = 1 \) is the punishment. Therefore, the politician’s utility is \( r_{I,t} - \theta g_t - p_t \).

The party chooses whether to punish the politician for shirking, at a cost \( c(p_t) \), such that \( c(0) = 0 \) and \( c(1) = \kappa \), and \( \kappa \in \{L, H\} \). \( \kappa \) is observed by the party and the politician, but not directly by the voter.\(^5\) As argued above, \( \kappa \) may represent the strength of the party in disciplining its members, its ability to provide career advancement, and/or its ideological cohesion (i.e. its ability to screen in congruent members). \( \kappa \) is randomly drawn by nature at the start of the game. The party gets a benefit from having an incumbent in office, \( r_{P,t} \). For simplicity, let \( r_{I,t} = r_{P,t} \), so that rewards from office to a candidate and the party are the same. Henceforth, we refer to these office benefits simply as \( r_t \). The party’s utility is thus \( r_t - c(p_t) \). Suppose that cost \( L \) is such that \( r_t - L \geq 0 \). That is, the party with the low cost is strong enough to punish the shirking politician. We are interested in the effect of party strength when \( \kappa = H \), and how it varies relative to \( r_t \).

The voter extracts utility from candidate’s effort, \( g_t \), and chooses whether to vote for the party given the effort of the politician and the sanctioning decision by the party. That is, the voter chooses \( \sigma(g_t, p_t) \in \{0, 1\} \), such that:

\[
\sigma(g_t, p_t) = \begin{cases} 
0 & \text{if } g_t = 0 \& p_t = 0 \\
1 & \text{if } g_t = 1.
\end{cases}
\]

That is, the voter votes for the party when its candidate provides the public good, but votes against the party when the candidate shirks and the party fails to punish the candidate.\(^6\)

Finally, the timing of the game is as follows: (a) Nature chooses the type of the incumbent politician and the cost for the party; (b) the politician chooses \( g_1 \) and the party chooses \( p_1 \);

\(^5\)The information structure we have chosen has important consequences for the solutions to our model. In Section S3 of the Supplemental Appendix, we discuss the implications in more detail, as well as an alternative assumption that would lead to the same result.

\(^6\)In Latin America, there is evidence that this type of voter behavior does occur. For example, Calvo and Murillo (2014) show that, in addition to ideology, a key determinant of vote choice in Argentina and Chile is citizens’ perceptions of how competent parties are.
(c) voter observes $g_1, p_1$ but not the type of the politician or the cost to the party, and votes (end of period one); (d) if the politician is replaced, nature chooses the new politician and his type; politician chooses $g_2$ and the party chooses $p_2$ (if politician is kept); (e) voter observes $g_2, p_2$ and votes (end of period two); (f) if the politician is replaced, nature chooses the new politician and his type; politician chooses $g_3$ and the party chooses $p_3$ (if politician is kept); (g) all payoffs are realized and the game ends.

The main prediction arising from this simple model is the following:

**Proposition 1.** When the party is weak (i.e., when $\kappa = H > r$), the good politician provides the public good in the first period, is reelected, but shirks in the second period; the party does not punish the politician, and the voter in turn votes against the party in the second election. When the cost is low, in equilibrium, the good politician exerts effort in both terms in office, and the voter does not vote against the party in the second election.

**Proof.** Proof is in Section S3 of the Supplemental Appendix.

The logic of the proposition is straightforward. Since the voter does not observe the strength of the party and the type of the politician directly, she must try to infer them from the choices made—the public good provision and punishment. Given that the bad politician cannot be incentivized to provide the public good, and that the strong party is capable of punishing shirking good-type politicians, observing shirking by the lame-duck politician and lack of punishment from the party signals to the voter that the party is weak. Given the voter’s strategy, the weak party is punished in the election following the last term of its reelected incumbent.

### 3 Brazilian Municipalities and Parties

Our goal is to apply the conceptual framework developed above to the study of Brazil’s municipal elections—in particular to the analysis of the effects of a party’s holding the mayor’s office on the party’s future electoral success. Brazil is a highly decentralized federal
system, where the states have historically concentrated extensive political power, especially before the beginning of Brazil’s last dictatorship in 1964 (Abrucio 1998; Samuels 2003). The political power of municipalities increased gradually during the 1970s and 1980s and was crystallized in the 1988 Constitution, which established the legal status of municipalities as federal entities.

Brazilian municipalities are currently considered among the most decentralized and autonomous subnational units below the state level in all of Latin America (Nickson 1995), enjoying substantial policy responsibilities that include the parceling of land, and the organization and provision of public services of local interest, such as systems of public transportation, the provision of preschool and primary education and health services (Samuels 2004).\(^7\)

Brazil’s political system is also characterized by the weakness of its political parties. Scholars have long argued that Brazil has a weakly institutionalized party system, with high electoral volatility, low levels of party identification in the electorate, high fractionalization, little capacity of parties to exercise discipline over their members, and lack of strong ideological platforms (e.g. Ames 2001a,b; Mainwaring 1993, 1999; Samuels 2003).\(^8\) Moreover, party switching in Brazil’s Chamber of Deputies is a common phenomenon (e.g. Desposato 2006).

One of the reasons that have been cited for weakness of national party labels is Brazil’s electoral rules. Federal and state deputies are elected through a system of open-list proportional representation in at-large statewide districts with large magnitude, which effectively encourages candidate-centered electoral competition (Mainwaring 1991; Samuels 1999). Another reason is the extensive control of governors over their states’ Congressional delegation, which undermines the possibility of nationally cohesive platforms.

Brazil currently has 5,564 municipalities. The mayor (prefeito) is in charge of the mun-

\(^7\)The provision of preschool and primary education and health services includes the technical and financial cooperation of the state and the national government as well. For an overview of the responsibilities and characteristics of Brazilian municipalities, see IBGE (2001, 2002).

\(^8\)However, scholars have recently noticed some signs of progress towards party system consolidation (see, e.g., Hagopian, Gervasoni, and Moraes 2009).
municipal executive, and a municipal legislature (camara de vereadores) is in charge of local legislative matters. Since 1996, both the mayor and the municipal legislature are elected in general elections every four years. The legislature is elected by a proportional representation system, while the mayor is elected by simple plurality in all municipalities with less than 200,000 eligible voters.\(^9\) We collected a municipality-level dataset of demographic and socio-economic variables obtained from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), which we then merged with election returns as well as characteristics of individual candidates, parties and coalitions for mayoral and city council elections for 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012, obtained from Brazil’s Tribunal Superior Eleitoral. As shown in the descriptive statistics presented in Table 1, our final dataset has 27,455 municipality-year observations.

Our main analysis below pools all parties and focuses on the future effects of winning office for the incumbent party (i.e., the party previously elected and currently in office), regardless of the identity of this party. But we also present individual results for the four parties that win the largest share of mayoral elections in the 1996-2012 period: the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), the Democratas (DEM, formerly Partido da Frente Liberal, PFL), the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), and the Progresive Party (Partido Progressista, PP). As mentioned in the introduction, we also present results for the PT in Section 6. The PT and the PSDB have been the most important parties in Brazil’s presidential elections since 1994 (Samuels and Zucco 2014).\(^10\)

The number of parties that contest Brazilian mayoral elections is large (see Figure 1); in the 1996-2012 period we analyze, eight different parties won each 5% or more of all mayoral elections. But this does not translate into a large number of party candidates within each municipality. As shown in Table 1, the average number of effective parties in our sample is 2.16 and is only slightly larger in close races (2.36). In other words, Duverger’s Law leads to

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\(^9\)For municipalities above this threshold, elections where no party obtains 50% or more of the vote must go to a runoff election.

\(^10\)In the recent 2014 presidential election, the PMDB and PP supported the PT, while the DEM supported the PSDB. More details about Brazilian parties can be found in Mainwaring (1997, 1999), Samuels and Zucco (2014), and references therein.
approximate two-partism at the municipality level, even when the number of effective parties at the national level is large.\textsuperscript{11} It follows that parties only contest mayoral elections in a fraction of the municipalities each election year, a pattern that can be seen in Table 1: with the exception of the PMDB (which contests 47\% of elections), parties contest a third or less of the total number of mayoral elections in the 1996-2012 period. As we discuss below, this phenomenon affects the way in which we perform our analysis.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Brazilian Municipalities, 1996-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Overall Sample</th>
<th>Sample of Close Races</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obs</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>21,947</td>
<td>292,073.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>27,372</td>
<td>24,703.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote % Winner</td>
<td>27,455</td>
<td>55.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote % Runner-up</td>
<td>26,707</td>
<td>38.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDB runs</td>
<td>27,455</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMDB runs</td>
<td>27,455</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEM runs</td>
<td>27,455</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT runs</td>
<td>27,455</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP runs</td>
<td>27,455</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. effective parties</td>
<td>27,455</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sample of close races only includes elections where the winner party’s margin of victory is less than or equal to two percentage points. Election variables refer to mayoral elections. Municipalities where there is a second-round are excluded.

\textsuperscript{11}This is a commonly observed phenomenon, see Chhibber and Kollman (2004).
Figure 1: Mayoral Victories By Party – Elections 1996-2012
4 Research Design

In order to study how holding the mayor’s office affects the electoral performance of political parties in future mayoral elections in Brazil, we use a regression discontinuity design—a design that was first applied to the study of incumbency effects by Lee (2008). In this design, all units have a score, and those units whose score exceeds a known cutoff receive the treatment while those whose scores fall below the cutoff do not. Under appropriate assumptions, a comparison of units with and without the treatment close to the cutoff can be used to study the effect of the treatment on some outcome of interest. In our application, the unit of observation is the municipality, and the incumbency status of the party (the treatment) depends on the margin of victory obtained in a given election (the score), defined as the party’s vote share minus the vote share of its strongest opponent. The cutoff that determines electoral victory is thus normalized at zero: a party wins the election when its margin of victory is positive and loses otherwise.

Intuitively, the outcome of close elections can be regarded to be “as-if” randomly assigned, which results in municipalities where the party barely wins (the “treatment group”) being comparable to municipalities where the party barely loses (the “control group”). This allows us to study the (local) average effect at the cutoff of a party winning office on its subsequent electoral success by comparing the party’s average electoral outcomes in a given election (which we call election $t+1$) in municipalities where the party barely won the previous election (which we call election $t$), versus the average outcome in municipalities where the party barely lost election $t$. A formal definition of the estimand and the required identification assumptions is given in Section S4 of the Supplemental Appendix.

For estimation, we follow standard practice and use nonparametric regression to estimate two separate regression functions above and below the cutoff. In particular, we estimate a

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12 The use of the RD design to study incumbency has subsequently been explored by various authors; see, for example, Golden and Picci (2011) and Erikson and Titiunik (2014).

13 See Imbens and Lemieux (2008) and Lee and Lemieux (2010) for recent reviews of the RD design.
linear regression of the party’s electoral victory at $t + 1$ on the margin of victory at $t$, with weights computed by applying a kernel function on the distance of each observation’s margin of victory to the cutoff. The estimated effect is calculated as the difference between the estimated intercepts above and below the cutoff. These kernel-based estimators require a bandwidth for implementation, with observations outside the bandwidth receiving zero weight in the estimation. We follow common practice and select an optimal bandwidth that minimizes mean-squared-error (MSE). Since MSE-minimization leads to bandwidth choices that are too large for conventional confidence intervals to be valid, we use the robust confidence intervals developed by Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014b), which estimate the asymptotic bias ignored by conventional inference and correct the standard errors appropriately to produce valid inferences even for large bandwidths. For implementation, we use the rdrobust software.\footnote{Software available at \url{https://sites.google.com/a/umich.edu/rdrobust}. See Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014a) for details on the STATA implementation, and Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2014c) for details on the R implementation.}

5 The Electoral Disadvantage of Brazilian Incumbent Parties in Municipal Elections

As discussed and illustrated in Figure 1 above, the number of political parties that contest and win Brazilian mayoral elections is large. For this reason, we first present an analysis where the results are calculated for the incumbent party, whatever party this may be. This incumbent party analysis identifies the party that wins the election at $t - 1$, focuses on races where this party barely wins or loses at election $t$, and studies the effects of barely winning or losing at $t$ on outcomes at election $t + 1$. Since it requires three rounds of elections, our incumbent party analysis includes elections 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012.\footnote{Since our sample starts in 1996, the incumbent party is undefined in our sample in the 1996 election.} To provide more disaggregated information, we complement the incumbent party analysis with an individual analysis of the four largest parties mentioned in Section 3: the PMDB, the PSDB, the DEM,
and the PP. As mentioned above, in Section 6 we also focus on the PT, since it plays a central part in testing the implications of our theoretical framework. A detailed description of the composition of treated and control groups in our RD analysis for both the incumbent party and the individual party analysis is provided in Section S2 of the Supplemental Appendix (Tables S1 and S2).

Since we are interested in analyzing the electoral performance of a given party at election \( t + 1 \) after an electoral victory versus defeat at election \( t \), our outcome of interest is an indicator of whether the party of interest (incumbent party or individual party) wins the mayoral office at \( t + 1 \). (In Section S7 of the Supplemental Appendix, we also present results for the party’s vote margin at \( t + 1 \).)

As discussed above, Brazilian parties only contest a fraction of mayoral elections each year. In particular, during the 2000-2012 period, the incumbent party runs for reelection in approximately 60% of the municipalities in every election, leaving the remaining 40% of races to be decided between the other parties. Studying the downstream effects of becoming the incumbent party is thus complicated by the fact that our outcome of interest, the electoral performance of the party in the future election, cannot be observed in the large fraction of municipalities where the party does not contest the election.

One possible approach is to present results for those municipalities where the party analyzed (i.e., incumbent party or individual party) contests the election at \( t + 1 \). However, this would introduce biases if the party’s decision to run at \( t + 1 \) were influenced by the anticipation of its electoral performance at \( t + 1 \) and this affected treated and control groups differently. For this reason, we focus our analysis on an outcome that is free of complications: whether the party wins the future \( t+1 \) election regardless of whether the party is a candidate at \( t+1 \). We call this outcome “unconditional victory”, since it does not condition on the party contesting the \( t + 1 \) election. However, in the Supplemental Appendix, we also present (i) the effect of barely winning at \( t \) on whether the party is a candidate at \( t + 1 \) (Section S7), (ii) the effect of barely winning at \( t \) on whether the party wins election \( t + 1 \) given that
the party is a candidate on this election (Section S7), and (iii) an analysis that treats all municipalities where the party does not contest the $t + 1$ election as missing data, and calculate bounds for the conditional victory effect (Section S8). As we show, all our substantive results remain unchanged—in fact, the negative effects we report below are stronger when conditional victory is used as an outcome instead.

Table 2 presents the results for unconditional victory at $t + 1$—a dummy equal to 1 if the party wins election $t + 1$, and 0 if the party either runs and loses at $t + 1$ or does not contest the $t + 1$ election. The first row reports the results from the incumbent party analysis for the 2000-2012 period; the other rows report the individual party analysis in the 1996-2012 period for the four largest parties described above: PMDB, PSDB, DEM and PP. This table shows that, with one exception, barely winning election $t$ has negative and strongly statistically significant effects on the party’s unconditional victory at election $t + 1$. The exception is the PSDB, for which the overall effect cannot be distinguished from zero. Although, as we show below, we do find negative effects for the PSDB in a subsample of races predicted by our framework, it is noticeable that the only null effects in Table 2 are observed for the PSDB, the only party in the group that has been a consistent contender in presidential elections since the 1990s (having won two presidential elections since). Although the party can be seen as the second-most coherent party after the PT (in terms, for example, of party identification in the electorate), the party has not developed a coherent political platform, and in that respect it resembles the other parties analyzed in Table 2 (see Samuels and Zucco 2014).

The results for the incumbent party, which include all mayoral incumbent parties in Brazilian municipalities between 2000 and 2012, indicate that when an incumbent party barely wins the $t$ election (regardless of what party this is), it is 15 percentage points less likely to win the following $t + 1$ mayoral election than when it barely loses, and this effect is significantly different from zero (the robust 95% confidence interval ranges between -21 to -10 percentage points). The effect is illustrated in Figure 2. Similar effects are observed in
all the individual party analyses, with the exception of the PSDB. For this party, which also has the smallest effect in the conditional analysis presented in Table S7 in the Supplemental Appendix (Section S7), the unconditional effect cannot be distinguished from zero.

All in all, our analysis shows that Brazilian parties that win the mayoral election at $t$ by a small margin are significantly less likely to win office again at $t + 1$. The results are strong and persistent, but we must ensure that there are no threats to their validity. The RD design estimates would be invalid if incumbent or non-incumbent parties can precisely manipulate close elections to their advantage, in which case observations close to the cutoff may not be comparable as we are assuming. Two types of tests are now commonly used to examine the validity of the design: to ascertain no “placebo” incumbency effects on important pre-determined variables, i.e. variables whose values are realized before a party obtains incumbency; and to demonstrate that one does not observe disproportionately many bare wins (losses) just above (below) the vote cutoff (McCrary 2008). In Section S5 of the Supplemental Appendix, we show unambiguous evidence that our design is valid in this sense (Figure S1 reports density tests and Figure S2 reports placebo tests).
Table 2: RD effect of Incumbency at $t$ on Victory at $t + 1$ (Unconditional on Running) for Various Parties – Brazil Mayoral Elections, 1996-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>pval</th>
<th>h</th>
<th>Ntr</th>
<th>Nco</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>[-0.213,-0.101]</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>13.55</td>
<td>2754</td>
<td>2547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMDB</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>[-0.18,-0.066]</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>14.63</td>
<td>2878</td>
<td>3102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSDB</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>[-0.102,0.018]</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>18.77</td>
<td>2357</td>
<td>2397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEM</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>[-0.171,-0.033]</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>12.15</td>
<td>1698</td>
<td>1843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>[-0.259,-0.091]</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>12.43</td>
<td>1333</td>
<td>1315</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Running variable is party’s vote margin at $t$, outcome is dummy =1 if party wins the following election at $t + 1$, =0 otherwise. Estimate is average treatment effect at cutoff estimated with local linear regression with triangular kernel and MSE-optimal bandwidth chosen according to CCT implementation. Columns 3-7 report, respectively, 95% robust confidence intervals, robust p-value, main optimal bandwidth, treated observations within bandwidth, and control observations within the bandwidth.

6 Explaining Why Brazilian Parties Are Hurt By Winning Mayoral Elections

The results just reported show that, for those municipalities where the elections are competitive, Brazilian parties hurt their future electoral performance by winning mayoral elections. The effect is not only large but it is also remarkably persistent. As we show in Section S6 of the Supplemental Appendix, the negative effects (conditional and unconditional) observed in the pooled sample that covers the entire 2000-2012 period are also found when every election in this period is analyzed separately.

But what explains this finding? How is it possible that political parties, organizations whose important goal is to win office, are systematically hurt by winning elections? And how can this be sustained over time? Brazilian mayors can only serve consecutively a total of two terms, which forces parties to run with a non-incumbent candidate at least as frequently as every other election. When we juxtapose this phenomenon with the weakness of (most)
Brazilian parties, we can apply our conceptual framework directly. Thus, our explanation centers on the interaction of the institutional rules that constrain municipality elections and the relative weakness of Brazilian political parties.

In this electoral context, individual accountability is entirely eliminated in the mayor’s second term, and collective accountability is severely restricted because most parties have little ability to discipline their members, many of whom switch parties once or more during their political careers. The result is that, in the absence of reelection incentives, Brazilian mayors may have little incentive to act in the best interest of the public. Consistent with our framework, Ferraz and Finan (2011) have shown that Brazilian mayors engage in higher corruption in their last term (see also Zamboni and Litschig 2014).

Our next step is to verify some of the assumptions and test some of the empirical implications of our explanation. We provide three pieces of evidence. First, we explore the career path of Brazilian mayors and show that, as assumed in our theoretical framework, they have weak attachments to their parties, as measured by party switching. Second, we examine two empirical implications of our model’s proposition. The first is that we should expect that having a lame-duck incumbent will hurt the party more in the subsequent election than having a first-term incumbent who may be disciplined by reelection incentives. The second is that voter punishment following the last term of a term-limited incumbent politician should mainly be borne by weak parties, and not by parties that are strongly institutionalized. We consider each of them in turn.

The Careers of Brazilian Mayors

The central argument in our model is that, in their last period, mayors have no incentive to provide public goods and parties are unable to control the mayors’ behavior absent reelection incentives. Term limits for Brazilian mayors, however, only apply to consecutive elections. A mayor can only serve two consecutive terms, but can run for reelection again if he stays out of office at least one full term. Thus, if a large proportion of lame-duck mayors ran again
in the future and they ran with same party with which they were previously elected, the mayors’ electoral horizon would be, in practice, longer than two terms and we would expect the party to be able to exploit this long-term relationship to incentivize behavior that is beneficial to the party’s future success.

To establish whether our model’s premises are appropriate in the context of Brazilian mayoral elections, we analyzed the political career path of all mayors elected between 1996 and 2008 (the 2012 cohort is too recent to analyze). For every cohort of mayors elected in 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008, we matched their names to a database, compiled by us, of all the politicians running for an office at the municipality level or higher between 1996 and 2012. This allowed us to establish, for every cohort of mayors in our sample, whether they ran for office after being term limited once and, if they did, whether they ran with the same party.

Table 3 shows the results for the 2000 cohort—the results for the other cohorts are qualitatively very similar and are reported in Section S10.1 of the Supplemental Appendix. The table shows the career path for the full sample of mayors elected in 2000 in the first column, reporting in every cell the number of mayors who run in every election year between 2002 and 2012. We also disaggregate the full sample results into two, reporting counts in the second column for the subset of mayors who in 2000 were reelected to their second consecutive term, and in the third column for the subset who were elected for their first consecutive term instead. Years 2004, 2008 and 2012 are election years for municipal offices. Elections for state and federal offices also occur every four years but are staggered with municipal elections, occurring in 2002, 2006, and 2010.

Our unique data uncovers several noticeable patterns that had not been documented before. First, a small percentage of Brazilian politicians seek higher office after being elected mayor. For example, of the total 5,553 (64+5489 in first two columns of first row) mayors elected in 2000, only 444 and 421 run for higher office, respectively, in 2006 and 2010. (In

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16Our dataset includes candidates for the office of governor, federal deputy, federal senator, state deputy, state senator, mayor, and city council elections.
Section S10.1 of the Supplemental Appendix, we show that this pattern holds for the other cohorts as well.) Except for a small minority, the political career of Brazilian mayors seems to be confined to the municipal level. Second, a large proportion of eligible mayors run for a consecutive second term in 2004. Of the total 3,461 mayors in this subsample (24+3437 in first row), 70% (2,417) run for reelection in 2004.

Third, about half of the mayors who served two consecutive terms run for election again after waiting one election. Of the 2,092 mayors elected for a second consecutive term in 2000 (40+2,052 in first row), all of whom are lame ducks and are therefore ineligible to run for mayor in 2004, 53% (1,109) contest the 2008 municipal election (either for city council or mayor). This figure might suggest that, contrary to the assumptions of our model, the electoral horizons of mayors are longer than the consecutive term limits might suggest. However, more than half of these mayors who seek to be elected for a third term in 2004 (581 or 52%) run with a different party, suggesting that there is little continuity in mayors’ political careers within a single party, and confirming our modeling assumption (and the conventional scholarly view) that Brazilian politicians have weak attachments to their parties.

In sum, although our career analysis shows that a considerable proportion of mayors run for municipal office again after having served two consecutive mayoral terms and waiting at least one election, the degree of party switching is pervasive, which is consistent with our assumption that weak parties exert scant control over politicians. Our analysis of the 2000 cohort shows that of the 2,092 mayors who are reelected to their second consecutive term in 2000, only 25% run again in 2008 under their previous party (i.e., the party under which they held office for two terms). A similar pattern occurs in 2012, when only 12% (270) of mayors run again with their previous party.

We now turn to testing some of the empirical implication of our model.
Table 3: Career Path of Mayors Elected in 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full Sample</td>
<td>Elected to 2nd term</td>
<td>Elected to 1st term</td>
<td>Full Sample</td>
<td>Elected to 2nd term</td>
<td>Elected to 1st term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs</td>
<td>64 Yes 5489 No</td>
<td>40 Yes 2052 No</td>
<td>24 Yes 3437 No</td>
<td>2455 Yes 3098 No</td>
<td>38 Yes 2054 No</td>
<td>2417 Yes 1044 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wins</td>
<td>18 Yes 46 No</td>
<td>14 Yes 26 No</td>
<td>4 Yes 20 No</td>
<td>1359 Yes 1096 No</td>
<td>14 Yes 24 No</td>
<td>1345 Yes 1072 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs with same party</td>
<td>26 Yes 38 No</td>
<td>18 Yes 22 No</td>
<td>8 Yes 16 No</td>
<td>1688 Yes 767 No</td>
<td>22 Yes 16 No</td>
<td>1666 Yes 751 No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs and wins with same party</td>
<td>12 Yes 7 No</td>
<td>9 Yes 2 No</td>
<td>3 Yes 1 No</td>
<td>946 Yes - No</td>
<td>7 Yes - No</td>
<td>939 Yes - No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All cells report counts, i.e. the number of mayors in every category. First two columns (labeled Full Sample) report results for all mayors who were elected in 2000, while the sets of columns labeled Elected to 2nd term and Elected to 1st term subset these results by reelection status. Columns labeled Elected to 2nd term report results for the subset of mayors elected in 2000 who in 2000 were reelected to their second consecutive term, while columns labeled Elected to 1st term report results for the subset of mayors who was elected in 2000 for their first consecutive term.
Lame Duck Incumbents Versus Freshman Incumbents

The first empirical implication of our model is the difference between lame-duck incumbents (mayors who were elected at \( t - 1 \), reelected at \( t \) for a second consecutive term, and as a consequence cannot run for reelection at \( t + 1 \)) and freshman incumbents (mayors who were not elected at \( t - 1 \), were elected at \( t \), and can run for reelection at \( t + 1 \)). When parties are weak, our model predicts that the negative effects of incumbency for parties should be larger in those municipalities where parties contest the election with a non-incumbent candidate immediately after a term-limited mayor has concluded his/her second term, than in those municipalities where the party is running in an open seat (where no incumbents are running) or with a freshman incumbent.

To test this prediction, we create two mutually exclusive subsets of our data. The Incumbent Sample is composed of all municipalities where the candidate who got elected at \( t - 1 \) for a given party runs for reelection at \( t \) under the same party. In contrast, the Open Seat Sample is composed of all municipalities where the candidate who got elected at \( t - 1 \) for a given party does not run for reelection at \( t \). Note that the incumbent candidates’ decision to run for reelection, although clearly endogenous, is made before election \( t \) is held. Thus, we are legitimately subsetting our data based on a pre-treatment variable. We describe the Incumbent Sample in Table 4, and the Open Seat Sample in Table 5, in the context of the incumbent party analysis (the description for the individual parties is analogous).

For our purposes, the most important difference between the two samples is whether the party had a lame-duck mayor who is ineligible to run in the \( t + 1 \) election and whose term ends just after this election. The Open Seat sample contains a combination of incumbent

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17 We exclude cases where the candidate who got elected at \( t - 1 \) for a given party runs for reelection at \( t \) under a different party.

18 Unfortunately, it is difficult to explore these hypotheses with a strong quasi-experimental design. In the RD design that we used above to characterize the overall effects of incumbency, very close races allow us to proceed “as if” victory at election \( t \) had been randomly assigned. But there is no similar as-if randomization for mayors’ decisions to run for reelection, which is at the center of our explanation. Although we cannot solve this inferential issue, we analyze two subsamples of our dataset where, based on our theoretical model, the effects are predicted to be different.
Table 4: Description of Treatment and Control Groups in Incumbent Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A party wins at $t - 1$, so it is incumbent party at $t$;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The party’s candidate who won at $t - 1$ runs at $t$ and (barely) wins;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The same party runs at $t + 1$ (unless the outcome is Candidate $t + 1$);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We analyze outcomes for the party at $t + 1$, when it is an incumbent party but the candidate who won at $t - 1$ and $t$ cannot run anymore due to term limits; instead, the party has a new candidate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A party wins at $t - 1$, so it is incumbent party at $t$;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The party’s candidate who won at $t - 1$ runs at $t$ and (barely) loses;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The same party runs at $t + 1$ (unless the outcome is Candidate $t + 1$);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We analyze outcomes for the party at $t + 1$, when it is not an incumbent party, but some other first-term incumbent party either has an incumbent candidate who runs for reelection, or has a new candidate, or does not have a candidate and there is no incumbent party in the race.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RD effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Party outcome at $t + 1$ when party is an incumbent running with either an incumbent candidate or a non-incumbent candidate, versus,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Party outcome at $t + 1$ when the party is in opposition against either an incumbent candidate or non-incumbent candidate of the party that won at $t$, or no party is the incumbent at $t$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

candidates and non-incumbent candidates in both the treated and control group. In contrast, in the Incumbent Sample, the same combination of incumbent and non-incumbent candidates exists in the control group, but the treatment group is composed exclusively of non-incumbent candidates who are running immediately after the party’s previous incumbent has finished his second (and last) term and is therefore prohibited from running at $t + 1$.

Our model predicts that the negative effects of incumbency should occur primarily in the Incumbent Sample rather than in the Open Seat Sample. Naturally, if we see a difference between the subsamples we cannot be sure if it was caused by the fact that lame-duck mayors just retired in one sample but not the other or by some other factor strongly correlated with this phenomenon. Nonetheless, since the subsample analysis is entirely informed by our
theory, showing that our hypotheses are consistent with the observed data is an important first step to offer empirical support for our hypothesized mechanism.

Table 5: Description of Treatment and Control Groups in Open Seat Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A party wins at $t - 1$, so it is incumbent party at $t$;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The party’s candidate who won at $t - 1$ does not run at $t$, but the party runs with another candidate and (barely) wins;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The same party runs at $t + 1$ (unless the outcome is Candidate t+1);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We analyze outcomes for the party at $t + 1$, when it is an incumbent party and it either runs with an incumbent candidate who seeks reelection or with a new non-incumbent candidate or it does not run and there is no incumbent party in the race.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A party wins at $t - 1$, so it is incumbent party at $t$;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The party’s candidate who won at $t - 1$ does not run at $t$, but the party runs with another candidate and (barely) loses;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The same party runs at $t + 1$ (unless the outcome is Candidate t+1);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We analyze outcomes for the party at $t + 1$, when it is not an incumbent party, but some other first-term incumbent party either has an incumbent candidate who runs for reelection, or has a new candidate, or does not have a candidate and there is no incumbent party in the race.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RD effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Party outcome at $t+1$ when party is an incumbent running with either an incumbent candidate or a non-incumbent candidate vs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Party outcome at $t+1$ when the party is in opposition against either an incumbent candidate or non-incumbent candidate of the party that won at $t$, or in seat where no party is the incumbent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indeed, as we report in Table 6 for (unconditional) Victory at $t + 1$, the differences between the two subsamples are striking and in the direction predicted by our model.\(^{19}\) For the incumbent party analysis, the point estimate in the Incumbent sample is -21 percentage points with p-value of 0.000 and a 95% robust confidence interval ranging from $-29$ to $-16$

\(^{19}\) As we show in Section S11 of the Supplemental Appendix, the effects of barely winning at $t$ on Candidacy at $t + 1$ for the incumbent party become more pronounced in the Incumbent Sample relative to the overall sample (effects on Candidacy at $t + 1$ in the overall sample are reported in Section S7, Table S7, in the Supplemental Appendix). For this reason, we report the unconditional results for Victory at $t + 1$ (i.e. including all municipalities in the analysis, not only those where the party runs again at $t + 1$), and report the conditional results in Section S11 of the Supplemental Appendix.
that rules out both positive and small negative effects. In sharp contrast, the point estimate in the Open Seat sample is -4 percentage points and cannot be distinguished from zero (p-value 0.28). In other words, there is no evidence of disadvantage for the incumbent party in the Open Seat sample. Very importantly, the illustration of both effects in Figure 3 shows that the effect for the control groups is approximately equivalent in both subsamples: in both Figure 3a and Figure 3b, the intercept at zero of the regression function to the left of the cutoff is around 30 percentage points (it is somewhat larger in the Open Seat Sample). In contrast, the effects for the treatment groups are dramatically different across both samples, with the effect in the treatment group in the Incumbent Sample less than one third the size of the treated effect in the Open Seat Sample. This indicates that the difference between the samples is overwhelmingly driven by the treatment group—municipalities where the party barely wins at $t$, as our model predicts.

A very similar pattern holds for the individual party analysis. For all the parties considered, PMDB, PSDB, DEM and PP, the point estimate in the Incumbent sample is larger
Table 6: RD effect of Incumbency at $t$ on Victory at $t+1$ (Unconditional) for Various Parties, Open Seat vs. Incumbent sample – Brazil Mayoral Elections, 1996-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Subsample</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>pval</th>
<th>h</th>
<th>Ntr</th>
<th>Nco</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INCUMBENT</td>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>[-0.287,-0.159]</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>14.23</td>
<td>1823</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>-0.174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open Seat</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>[-0.15,0.044]</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>16.79</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>1106</td>
<td>[-0.183,-0.164]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PMDB</td>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>[-0.355,-0.11]</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>17.58</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Open Seat</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>[-0.167,-0.036]</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>13.71</td>
<td>2180</td>
<td>2466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PSDB</td>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>[-0.251,-0.04]</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>16.49</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Open Seat</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>[-0.062,0.065]</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>23.58</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>2224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DEM</td>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>[-0.248,-0.025]</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>23.46</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Open Seat</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>[-0.191,-0.03]</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>11.59</td>
<td>1296</td>
<td>1467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PP</td>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>[-0.507,-0.2]</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>13.89</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Open Seat</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>[-0.216,-0.026]</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>13.51</td>
<td>1098</td>
<td>1183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Running variable is party’s vote margin at $t$, outcome is dummy =1 if party wins the following election at $t+1$, =0 otherwise. Estimate is average treatment effect at cutoff estimated with local linear regression with triangular kernel and MSE-optimal bandwidth chosen according to CCT implementation. Columns 4-8 report, respectively, 95% robust confidence intervals, robust p-value, main optimal bandwidth, treated observations within bandwidth, and control observations within the bandwidth. Last column reports difference in point estimates between Incumbent and Open Seat sample and corresponding 95% bootstrapped confidence interval.
than the point estimate in the Open Seat sample, and with the exception of the DEM party, the difference between both estimates is strongly statistically significant in every case. In sum, and just as predicted by our model, the negative electoral effects at $t+1$ of winning the mayoral election at $t$ are greatly concentrated in those municipalities where, at the moment of the $t+1$ election, the party’s lame-duck mayor is finishing his second consecutive term.

A natural alternative explanation for the differences we find between both samples is that after a two-term mayor is forced to retire, the mayor’s party finds it more difficult to stay in office due to the loss of the incumbent mayor’s personalistic support, name recognition, experience, etc. Basic facts about the Brazilian party system can in principle support this hypothesis. In local elections such as the ones we analyze, political networks are highly personalistic. In this context, the forced retirement of mayors who have proved successful enough to be reelected may result in losses for his party.

However, following Erikson and Titiunik (2014), in Section S9 of the Supplemental Appendix we show that a mechanism that centers on the loss of the mayor’s personalistic support induced by term limits may explain why the effects of incumbency are larger in the Open Seat than in the Incumbent sample, but it may not explain why the effects are negative. As we show, if the difference between both samples were caused by the loss of the mayors’ personal appeal, the effects in the Open Seat Sample would be large and positive and the effects in the Incumbent sample would be positive but smaller. In addition, the overall effect in the full sample would be positive. But this is not at all what we observe, as most of the effects we observe are strongly negative.

Another rival explanation is that mayors who are barely elected are perceived as weak and encourage strong challengers to enter the race in the following election. Since the negative effects are very large in the Incumbent Sample and null (or much smaller) in the Open Seat Sample, this phenomenon can explain our results only if, relative to the control group, the perceived weakness of the party of barely elected mayors in the Incumbent Sample (who are reelected for a second consecutive term) is larger than the perceived weakness of the party
of barely elected mayors in the Open Seat Sample (who are elected for a first consecutive term).

Although we cannot entirely rule out this explanation, there are several factors that reduce its plausibility. First, as we discuss in our concluding section, the majority of mayoral elections are decided by small margins, diminishing the intensity of the “weakness signal” sent by an incumbent’s close reelection. Second, stronger challengers typically enter races where no incumbent candidates are running in those electoral contexts where incumbents are believed to have a strong personal incumbency advantage. As our Open Seat results showed, there is no evidence of such an advantage in Brazilian mayoral elections. Third, as we show in the next section, an explanation centered solely on the strategic entry of challengers cannot account for the different pattern we observe for the PT, where there are no differences between the samples. Moreover, the mechanism we hypothesize does allow for stronger challengers to enter strategically at $t + 1$ in the Incumbent Sample’s treatment group in response to the lame-duck mayor’s poor performance (which would be more likely to occur where parties are weak). This is simply another way in which the lame-duck’s poor performance may lead to decrease support for his (weak) party and as such can be accommodated by our explanation.

A final alternative explanation we consider is that mayors who are barely elected are less competent than candidates elected by bigger margins, and it is this incompetence, not shirking or corruption, what diminishes the likelihood that the mayor’s party wins again. However, the larger negative effects observed in the Incumbent Sample suggest that barely-winning mayors would be disproportionately more incompetent in this sample than in the Open Seat Sample, contradicting the natural expectation that candidates who have survived two elections are no worse, everything else equal, than candidates who have survived only one. Consistent with this expectation, Table S17 in Section S12 of the Supplemental Appendix shows that, in our overall sample, the incumbent party wins in 60% of the municipalities where the incumbent mayor is running for reelection, but in only 45% of the
municipalities where it runs with a non-incumbent candidate. Moreover, as mentioned above
and discussed further below, close races are typical in Brazil’s mayoral elections, suggesting
that the competence of barely elected mayors may not be very different from the competence
expected of an average mayor.

**The Outlier PT**

We now consider a second empirical implication of our model: that the most strongly in-
stitutionalized parties should exhibit smaller or null negative effects of winning office and
that there should be no difference between the Incumbent and Open Seat samples. We fo-
cus on the PT, which has long been characterized as Brazil most strongly institutionalized
party. Various scholars have documented that, unlike the rest of Brazilian parties, the PT
is a programmatic party with high levels of party discipline and strong attachments in the
electorate (see, e.g. Mainwaring 1999; Samuels and Zucco 2014). In an extensive study of
the evolution of the PT over time, Hunter (2010) has argued that, despite the pressures to
become a “catchall” party in the last decades, the PT preserved many of its early organiza-
tional features and remained the most disciplined party in the Brazilian party system despite
systemic pressures to adopt a vote-maximizing strategy—a strategy that was adopted by the
rest of the parties in the political system.

We corroborate these features when we analyze the career path of PT mayors. Although
our sample size is somewhat limited, in Table 7 we show that rate of party switching among
lame-duck PT mayors is much lower (in fact it is close to zero) than among lame-duck mayors
from other parties. For example, as shown in the first row, of the 2092 mayors (2052+40)
who in 2000 are reelected to their second consecutive term, 46 (6+40) belong to the PT and
2046 (34+2012) belong to other parties. As shown in the last two columns of the 2008 panel,
of these 2046 mayors who do not belong to the PT, 1084 run again in 2008—but only 505
of these do so under their previous party. In contrast, the third and fourth column in the
2008 panel shows that, of the 46 lame-duck PT mayors elected in 2000, 25 run again in 2008,
and 23 of those do so under their previous party. Thus, the rate of party switching among lame-ducks in 2000 who run again in 2008 is 8% (2/25) for the PT and 53% (579/1084) for all other parties, a striking difference.

According to the explanation that we have proposed, these features of the PT should result in much greater control over elected mayors, less shirking-type behavior, and less punishment by voters. In other words, the overall negative effect of becoming the incumbent party should be diminished for the PT, and there should be no difference in the effects between the Incumbent and Open Seat samples. As Table 8 below shows, this is exactly what we observe. The overall effect of -8 percentage points in the Full Sample is half the size of the effect we found in our Incumbent Party analysis in Table 2, and it is only significant at 10%.

Even more striking, the point estimates in both the Incumbent and Open Seat Samples are -9 percentage points, identical up to the third decimal, and the confidence interval of this difference naturally indicates that this difference cannot be distinguished from zero. Moreover, the PT is the only party in our analysis for which the negative effect in the Incumbent Sample cannot be distinguished from zero (confidence interval ranges from -33 to 16.5 percentage points). Since the number of observations for the PT in the Incumbent Sample is low when compared to the other parties, we cannot rule out that insufficient power is partially driving this lack of statistical significance. We note, however, that even the effects in the Open Seat sample, where the number of observations is comparable to several of the parties we analyzed previously, fails to be significant at conventional levels. In sum, the overall negative effect in the full sample is considerably lower for the PT than for other parties, and the comparison between the Incumbent and Open Seat Samples indicates no difference in the effects, two findings that are consistent with our explanation.
Table 7: Career Path of Mayors Reelected in 2000 to Second Consecutive Term: PT vs Other Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>All Yes</th>
<th>Yes No</th>
<th>PT Yes</th>
<th>Yes No</th>
<th>Other Parties Yes</th>
<th>Yes No</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2052</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wins</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs with same party</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2054</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wins</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs with same party</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>1811</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>1782</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs</td>
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<td>181</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>171</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wins</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>144</td>
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<tr>
<td>Runs with same party</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>1109</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1084</td>
<td>962</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Runs</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>789</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wins</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>579</td>
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<tr>
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<td>146</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>140</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>1940</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>146</td>
<td>1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs</td>
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<td>83</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wins</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs with same party</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>1428</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>1396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs</td>
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<td>363</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wins</td>
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<td>394</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runs with same party</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All cells report counts, i.e. the number of mayors in every category. First two columns (labeled All) report results for all mayors who were reelected in 2000 for their second consecutive term, while the sets of columns labeled PT and Other Parties subset these results by type of party. Columns labeled PT report results for PT mayors who in 2000 were reelected to their second consecutive term, while columns labeled Other Parties report results for mayors from all other parties who were reelected in 2000 for their second consecutive term.
Table 8: RD effect of Incumbency at $t$ on Victory at $t + 1$ (Unconditional on Running) for PT – Brazil Mayoral Elections, 1996-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsample</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>CI</th>
<th>pval</th>
<th>h</th>
<th>Ntr</th>
<th>Nco</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All seats</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>[-0.19,0.003]</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>19.80</td>
<td>909</td>
<td>1176</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>[-0.336,0.165]</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>15.72</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Seat</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>[-0.211,0.014]</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>16.92</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>[0.000]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Running variable is party’s vote margin at $t$, outcome is dummy =1 if party wins the following election at $t + 1$, =0 otherwise. Estimate is average treatment effect at cutoff estimated with local linear regression with triangular kernel and MSE-optimal bandwidth chosen according to CCT implementation. Columns 3-7 report, respectively, 95% robust confidence intervals, robust p-value, main optimal bandwidth, treated observations within bandwidth, and control observations within the bandwidth. Last column reports difference in point estimates between Incumbent and Open Seat sample and corresponding 95% bootstrapped confidence interval.
7 Discussion and Conclusion

We explored how access to office affects the parties’ future electoral success in Brazil. Analyzing all Brazilian mayoral elections since 1996 to the present using an RD design, we showed that (barely) becoming the incumbent mayoral party results in subsequent electoral losses. These losses are large, widespread, and persistent. We proposed an explanation for these findings, which we also crystallized in a formal model, where the key elements are the weakness of Brazilian parties, reflected in their inability to punish politicians for undesirable behavior in office, and the short electoral horizons induced by consecutive term limits.

Our explanation highlights that parties’ lack of strength may affect the careers and incentives of individual politicians in a feedback loop. Weak parties have few mechanisms to enforce discipline and prevent politicians from engaging in shirking or corruption. In turn, this gives politicians incentives to engage in precisely this kind of behavior, particularly when reelection is not an option and it is easy to continue their political careers with a different party. But if voters sanction the delinquent candidate’s party after the candidate’s last-term performance, the result is that candidates’ individual behavior ends up feeding volatility and preventing party system consolidation, which in turn encourages the continuation of the cycle.

A descriptive analysis of an original dataset on the career paths of Brazilian mayors confirms that the assumptions of our model are an accurate description of Brazil’s political context. The vast majority of politicians who serve two consecutive terms either never run again or if they run they do so with a different party. Moreover, we find strong support in our data for our model’s two main empirical implications. First, the disadvantage to incumbency is largely concentrated in the subsample of races where mayors are running for reelection at $t$, while the subsample where non-incumbent candidates are running $t$ shows much smaller effects. Second, there is no difference between these samples for the PT, Brazil’s strongest and most programmatic party where the obstacles to party discipline central to our model
are absent.

Our results are based on an RD design that, by construction, focuses on highly competitive races. A natural objection is that these races might be unrepresentative of the majority of municipal elections, and the negative effects we report might be “unnoticeable” to most voters and politicians. This potential threat to external validity, however, is much diminished in the context we study. Figure 4a displays the histogram of the winner party’s margin of victory in all mayoral elections in Brazil between 1996 and 2012, and shows that the majority of mayoral elections are highly competitive. The median margin of victory obtained by the party that wins the election in this period is just 11.3 percentage points (shown in the figure) and roughly a quarter of the races are decided by 5 percentage points or less. This is in stark contrast to noncompetitive settings such as U.S. House elections, shown in Figure 4b for a similar time period, where the median margin of victory of the winner party is 33.8 percentage points and where only about 5 percent of races are decided by less than 5 percentage points. In sum, close races are the norm in Brazilian mayoral elections, enhancing the policy relevance and external validity of our findings.

Finally, we note that the two characteristics our conceptual framework centers on, weak parties and term limits, are hardly exclusive to Brazil. As we noted, many developing democracies limit the reelection of those in charge of subnational executive offices, and even more suffer from weak party organizations. Our framework suggests that both features might interact to create a cycle of unfulfilled accountability that can severely compromise the quality of representation in these democracies.
Figure 4: Histogram of Margin of Victory for Winner Party: Brazil vs. United States

(a) Brazilian Municipalities, 1996-2012  
(b) U.S. House Districts, 1996-2010
References


Hagopian, Frances, Carlos Gervasoni, and Juan Andres Moraes. 2009. “From Patronage to Program The Emergence of Party-Oriented Legislators in Brazil.” Comparative Political Studies 42 (3): 360–391.


