

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

June 1, 2016

## **Abstract**

Previous researchers have speculated that incumbency effects are larger when voters have weaker partisan preferences, but evidence for this relationship is surprisingly weak. We offer a fresh look at the question by examining the U.K.'s multiparty system. In general, the electoral value of incumbency should depend on the proportion of voters who are nearly indifferent between the parties competing for incumbency; in a multiparty system, that proportion may differ across constituencies depending on which parties are locally competitive. After first showing that U.K. voters in recent decades have stronger preferences between Conservatives and Labour than between Conservatives and Liberals, we show that incumbency effects are larger in close contests between Conservatives and Liberals than in close contests between Conservatives and Labour. By documenting how partisanship influences incumbency effects, our analysis shows that the comparative study of incumbency effects offers broader insights into electoral accountability across political systems.

# 1 Introduction

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

One explanation for variation in incumbency effects is partisanship, by which we mean the strength of voters' preferences between competing parties. Scholars studying American elections have suggested that the rise of incumbency effects in the post-World War II U.S. might be explained by the weakening of ties between voters and parties (Mayhew 1974; Krehbiel and Wright 1983; Ansolabehere et al. 2006); Jacobson (2015) attributed a recent drop in incumbency advantage to rising partisanship. Similarly, a number of researchers argue that incumbency effects are weaker in the U.K. than in the U.S. because British voters have stronger partisan preferences (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1984; Gaines 1998; Katz and King 1999).

Although variation in the strength of party preferences seems to make sense of important variation in incumbency effects in the U.S. and between the U.S. and U.K., the evidence for a relationship between partisanship and incumbency effects (whether in these cases or elsewhere) remains surprisingly weak. There are of course many differences between elections in the U.S. and the U.K. other than the strength of party preferences that could explain why incumbency effects are larger in the U.S. For example, campaign spending in British parliamentary elections is tightly restricted at the constituency level (and has been since the late 19th century), whereas spending in U.S. federal campaigns has never been restricted; to the extent that the incumbency advantage in the U.S. results from campaign spending (Fournaies and Hall 2014), this difference in regulation alone could

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<sup>1</sup>See e.g. Erikson (1971); Mayhew (1974); Fiorina (1977); Ferejohn (1977).

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

explain the difference in levels. The evidence for partisanship as an explanation for changes in incumbency effects in the U.S. is more convincing but remains incomplete. For example, Krehbiel and Wright (1983, p. 140) examine data on party identification and vote choice in the U.S., concluding that “partisan dealignment accounts for little of the increase in incumbency voting”; Ansolabehere et al. (2006) examine a change in the ballot format in Minnesota and conclude that incumbency effects did not drop when voters were given stronger party cues (see also Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002). Ansolabehere et al. (2007) find evidence of a larger (and earlier) incumbency advantage in U.S. primaries than in general elections; this pattern fits the partisanship view but could also be due to differences between the primary electorate and the general electorate.<sup>3</sup> Jacobson (2015) shows that the growth and decline of incumbency advantage in the U.S. is mirrored by changes in party loyalty and split-ticket voting over the same period, but of course many other things changed over the same period (e.g. financing and campaigning techniques, popular support for Congress) that could be seen as alternative explanations. In general, the difficulty researchers face in empirically linking partisanship and incumbency effects is that most variation in the strength of partisan preferences (e.g. across countries or over time within a country) coincides with variation in other relevant factors that potentially confound the analysis.

To address this problem, we study variation in incumbency effects *within* the U.K.’s multiparty system, where the strength of the relevant partisan preferences varies depending on the identity of the top two parties while many other contextual factors remain constant. The theoretical basis for a relationship between incumbency effects and partisanship is fairly straightforward: if incumbency status makes a candidate more attractive to voters (for whatever reason), this change in attractiveness will produce greater electoral benefits when a larger proportion of the electorate is relatively indifferent between the incumbent and her competitors on partisan grounds. The multiparty U.K. system offers an attractive setting to test this theory because in some places incumbency changes hands between the Conservatives and Labour, while in others it changes hands between

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<sup>3</sup>For example, it seems likely that the primary electorate is more aware of the incumbent’s activities in office. Ansolabehere et al. (2007) also provide intriguing evidence of larger primary incumbency effects in states with weaker intra-party factions, though they caution that this pattern is based on a small number of states.

the Conservatives and Liberals;<sup>4</sup> we show using survey data that more voters are nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and the Liberals than between the Conservatives and Labour, which implies that the electoral implications of shifts in incumbency between Conservative and Liberals should be larger than the electoral implications of a shift between Conservatives and Labour. In line with the theory and this survey evidence, we find that incumbency effects are indeed larger in Conservative-Liberal contests than in Conservative-Labour contests, and that this difference is robust to controlling for other differences between the two types of contests. Our analysis of a single political system thus produces unusually clear evidence that incumbency effects are larger when party preferences are weaker.

Of course, one could offer alternative explanations for the variation we find in incumbency effects across partisan matchups. Notably, Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) both assert that Liberals experience larger incumbency effects in the U.K. because of strategic voting: briefly, their explanation is that Liberal incumbency signals to Liberal supporters that the Liberal candidate is locally viable, which discourages Liberal supporters from strategically voting Labour or Conservative. Another alternative explanation is that there might be something different about Liberal MPs that explains why incumbency is more consequential in Conservative-Liberal contests. We test both of these alternative explanations with survey data and fail to find evidence for either. We recognize, of course, that it is impossible to completely rule out all possible alternative explanations for the patterns we see; we note, however, that some of these other explanations (such as the idea that Liberals tend to be better at establishing connections with their constituencies) could instead be seen as further results of the variation in partisanship we document.

Our results have several implications for the comparative study of elections. Most directly, they provide evidence that incumbency effects are relatively small in the United Kingdom in part because of the strength of voters' partisan preferences: if partisan preferences in all constituencies had been at the level of constituencies where Conservatives and Liberals vie for a seat, the effect of

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<sup>4</sup>We use the term "Liberals" to refer to Liberals, Liberal Democrats, Social Democrats, and candidates running under the SDP-Liberal Alliance. Incumbency also changes hands in a smaller number of cases between Labour and the Liberals; we focus on Conservative pairs both for simplicity and for statistical power.

incumbency on vote share in the post-World War II period would have been about twice as large on average and considerably closer to U.S. levels. This insight may also be useful in explaining why incumbency effects have risen (and, perhaps, fallen) in the U.S. and more broadly why incumbency effects vary across countries and electoral systems. In light of our analysis, the comparative study of incumbency effects is not just about what incumbents in various systems do to protect their positions; rather, it can shed light on broader questions about how electoral accountability and partisan preferences vary both across and within political systems, as we explain further in the conclusion.

## 2 Incumbency effects and party preferences in multiparty systems

In this section we clarify why incumbency effects might be expected to vary across party pairs in a multiparty system, emphasizing the strength of partisan preferences. Like much of the recent literature since Lee (2008), our analysis of incumbency effects asks how a party's performance in a constituency in a given election is affected by whether it won or lost the previous election in the constituency, conditional on the previous election being close. For example, supposing the Conservatives won in a constituency at time  $t - 1$ , how would the Conservatives' result in that constituency at time  $t$  have been different if instead the Conservatives had *lost* at time  $t - 1$ ? The difference between these two scenarios is the party incumbency effect for the Conservatives. As noted by Lee (2008) and discussed further by Erikson and Titiunik (2015) and Fowler and Hall (2014), earlier work on U.S. elections focused on different estimands, including the benefit for an individual of running as an incumbent (Erikson 1971) and the benefit for a party of fielding the incumbent candidate (Gelman and King 1990). The theoretical analysis and predictions of this paper would apply to any of these approaches; we focus on the party incumbency effect (which we will refer to simply as the incumbency effect in the remainder of the paper) because it has been the dominant approach in recent empirical research, including as the basis for estimates of individual incumbency effects (e.g. Erikson and Titiunik 2015; Fowler 2014).

We make two key assumptions about voter preferences and the role of incumbency in vote choice. First, we assume that voters care about two things when it comes to candidates for office: their party and their personal qualities, which we will refer to as “valence”. If a voter prefers

party  $A$  over party  $B$ , she will vote for party  $A$ 's candidate if all candidates have the same valence, but she might vote for party  $B$ 's candidate if she perceives that candidate to be more capable or hard-working. Second, we assume that voters perceive incumbents to have higher valence than the average candidate; this might be because voters value incumbents' experience in office, or because ineffective incumbents tend to retire, or for some other reason.<sup>5</sup>

Given these assumptions, how do incumbency effects depend on the strength of voters' partisan preferences? Consider first a system involving only two parties (say, Conservatives and Labour). It follows from the assumptions stated in the previous paragraph that the magnitude of the incumbency effect will depend on two key factors: first, the difference in average valence between incumbents and other candidates; second, the proportion of voters who are nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and Labour, such that a change in incumbency will change their preference ordering. If the Conservatives won the previous election (and thus they are the incumbents), they subsequently receive the support of all voters who prefer the Conservatives to Labour plus those voters who narrowly prefer Labour but are swayed by incumbency; if the Conservatives *lost* the previous election (and thus Labour are the incumbents), the Conservatives receive the support of all voters who prefer the Conservatives to Labour except those voters who narrowly prefer the Conservatives but are swayed by incumbency. Thus the incumbency effect for the Conservatives depends on the proportion of voters who are nearly indifferent between the two parties, such that they vote for whichever candidate is from the incumbent party.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship between incumbency effects and partisan preferences becomes more complicated when we consider systems with more than two parties, such as the UK. The key feature of multiparty competition that we leverage in this paper is that the value of incumbency may differ depending on what pair of parties is vying for incumbency: in our case, the electoral value to the Conservatives of defeating a Liberal opponent may differ from the electoral value to the Conservatives of defeating a Labour opponent. We define two distinct incumbency effects: the

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<sup>5</sup>All of our arguments would work in reverse if incumbency was on average a valence disadvantage.

<sup>6</sup>Note that the incumbency effect for Labour will be the same: assuming just two parties, one party's loss is the other's gain and thus the effect is symmetric.

*Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect* is the effect on Conservative electoral outcomes of the Conservatives having won the previous election as opposed to the Liberals; the *Conservative-Labour incumbency effect* is equivalently defined for the Conservatives and Labour. The question we ask is how these two effects differ in magnitude and how this depends on partisan preferences. (To be clear, the same comparison could be made focusing on Labour or the Liberals instead of the Conservatives, though as we will see the comparison we have chosen is the one we can best test in the UK setting.)

In order to make progress on how incumbency affects voting outcomes in elections with more than two candidates, we must make some assumptions about how voters decide on voting strategies. We consider two possible extremes. In the *pure strategic voting case*, we assume that voters focus entirely on the two parties vying for incumbency in a given setting; that is, when we are working out the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect, we assume that voters ignore Labour and vote Conservative or Liberal depending on which candidate they prefer. Under this assumption, the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect can be analyzed as if it were a two-party system involving only the Conservatives and Liberals; as in the two-party case above, what matters for incumbency effects is what proportion of voters is nearly indifferent between the two relevant parties. Thus assuming pure strategic voting, the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect will be larger than the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect if more voters are nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and the Liberals on partisan grounds than are indifferent between the Conservatives and Labour on partisan grounds.

The other extreme is the *pure sincere voting case*, in which voters simply vote for the candidate they like best. Under this assumption the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect consists of (a) the proportion of voters who narrowly prefer the Conservatives over the Liberals, or vice versa, and place Labour last, such that they vote Conservative or Liberal depending on who the incumbent is, and (b) voters who narrowly prefer Labour over the Conservatives and place the Liberals last, such that they vote for a Conservative incumbent and otherwise Labour. A similar statement can be made for the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect. If we denote by  $AB$  the proportion of voters who vote for narrowly prefer party A over party B (such that they would vote B if B were the incumbent) and rank party C last, the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect is ConLib

+ LibCon + LabCon, while the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect is ConLab + LabCon + LibCon; the difference between them is ConLib - ConLab. Thus under pure sincere voting the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect will be larger than the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect if there are more voters who narrowly prefer the Conservatives over the Liberals and place Labour last than there are voters who narrowly prefer the Conservatives over Labour and place the Liberals last.

### **Summary of implications**

Assuming that incumbency boosts candidate valence, the size of electoral incumbency effects will depend on the strength of party preferences both in two-party settings and in multiparty settings. In a multiparty setting we can consider different incumbency effects for each party pair (e.g. the effect of the Conservatives being the incumbent as opposed to Labour); whether we assume that voting behavior is purely strategic or purely sincere (in the sense defined above), the relative magnitude of these incumbency effects will depend on the proportion of voters who are nearly indifferent between the two parties. Under strategic voting, the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect is larger than the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect if more voters are nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and the Liberals than are nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and Labour; under sincere voting, the former effect is larger than the latter effect if more voters are nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and the Liberals and place Labour last than are nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and Labour and place the Liberals last.

## **3 Party preferences and expectations about incumbency effects in the UK**

In this section we use survey data from the UK to show that voters in recent decades have had stronger preferences between the Conservatives and Labour than between the Conservatives and the Liberals. In recent general elections, the British Election Study (BES) has asked voters to give a 0-10 score to each of the major parties, with 0 indicating “strongly dislike” and 10 indicating “strongly like”. As a rough indication of the proportion of voters who are nearly indifferent between



two parties, we examine the proportion of voters whose scores for the two parties are within a given amount; recognizing that voters may apply different implicit scales in assigning 0-10 scores to parties, we examine both the raw scores and normalized versions.

Figure 1 shows the basic patterns for the 2001, 2005, and 2010 BES data. The solid black curve in the upper left plot indicates the (weighted) proportion of BES respondents who place the Conservative and Labour parties within a given number of points on the 0-10 scale, where we vary the gap from 0 to 10; the dashed black curve shows the equivalent values for the Conservative and Liberal (Democrat) parties. (The gray curves will be explained shortly.) The plot tells us, for example, that about 35% of respondents place the Conservative and Labour parties within one point, compared to 45% for Conservative and Liberal; about 45% of respondents place the Conservative and Labour parties within two points, compared to about 65% for Conservative and Liberal. This suggests that under the pure strategic voting assumption introduced above (i.e. voters choose between the two parties vying for incumbency) the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect would be larger than the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect.

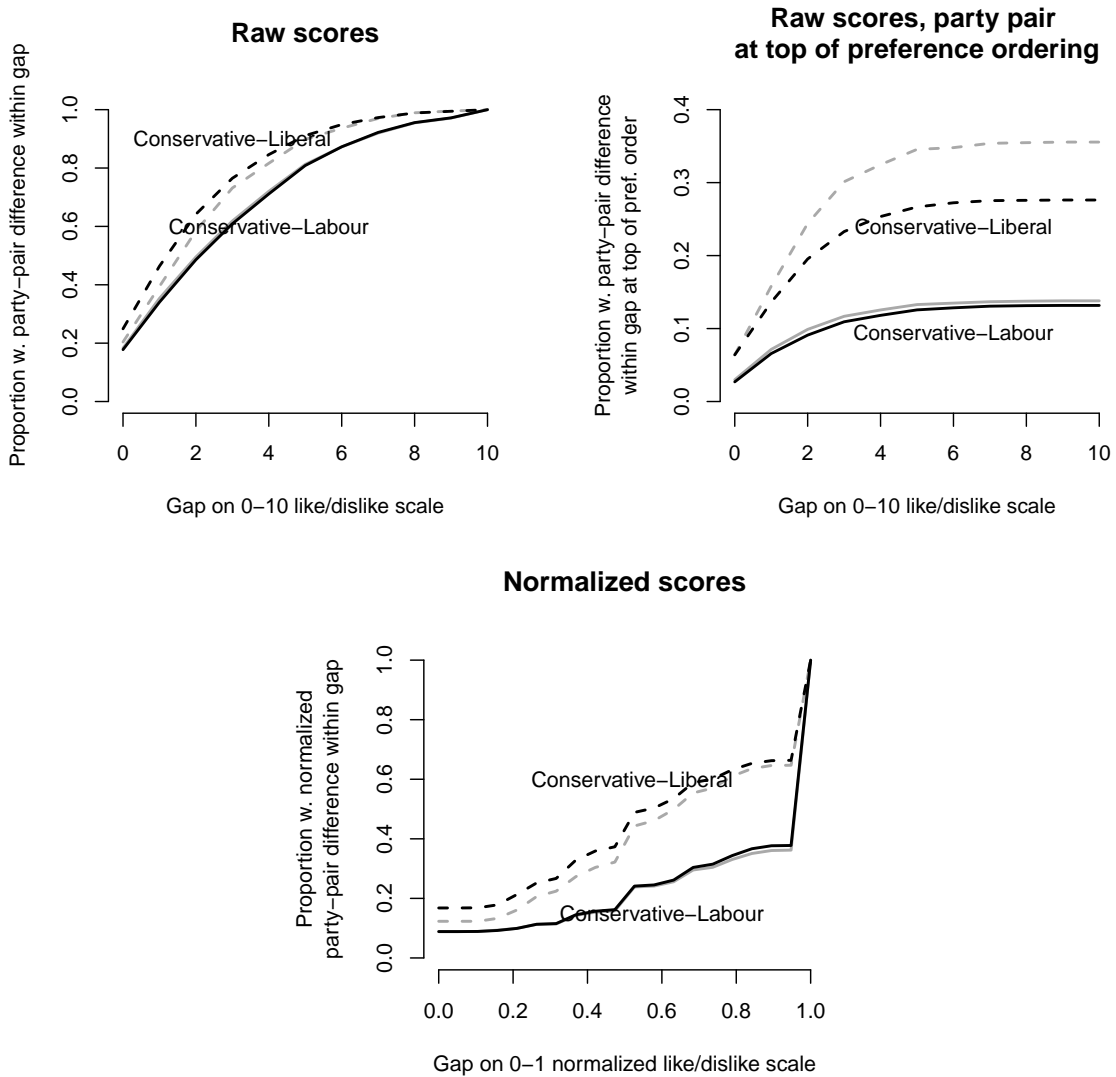
The top right plot of Figure 1 shows the same basic information with the extra condition that the two parties must be at the top of the respondent's preference ordering. This plot tells us, for example, that about 9% of respondents place the Conservative and Labour parties within two points and above the Liberals, compared to about 19% who place the Conservative and Liberal parties within two points and above Labour. This suggests that under the pure sincere voting assumption introduced above (i.e. voters choose the candidate they like best) the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect would be larger than the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect.

In the bottom plot of Figure 1, we present an alternative version in which we normalize each respondent's like-dislike scores such that the largest pairwise gap among the main three parties for each respondent is 1.<sup>7</sup> We then show the (weighted) proportion of respondents with a gap in *normalized* scores below a given value. The plot indicates that about half of respondents placed the Conservatives and Liberals within half a point on the normalized scale, while only about 20%

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<sup>7</sup>Thus a respondent who gives scores of 2, 4, and 8 to the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberals would have normalized scores of 0, 1/3, and 1, and a respondent who gives scores of 2, 3, and 4 would have normalized scores of 0, 1/2, and 1.

Figure 1: Strength of party preferences by party pair, 2001-2010



NOTE: The British Election Study asks respondents to rate each party on a 0-10 scale. In each plot the black curves show the (weighted) proportion of all respondents who place each pair of parties within a given interval, where the interval varies from 0 to the maximum possible value; the gray curves show the same information for respondents who live in constituencies where the given party pair finished in the top two in the previous election. In the upper right plot we apply the extra condition that the respondent ranks the other major party last. In the lower plot we normalize each respondent's scores such that the highest is 1 and the lowest is 0.

of respondents placed the Conservatives and Labour within the same margin. Because any gap less than one indicates that a party pair was at the top of the respondent's preference ordering, this shows that whether we assume pure strategic voting or pure sincere voting (as defined in the previous section), we should expect the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect to be larger than

the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect.

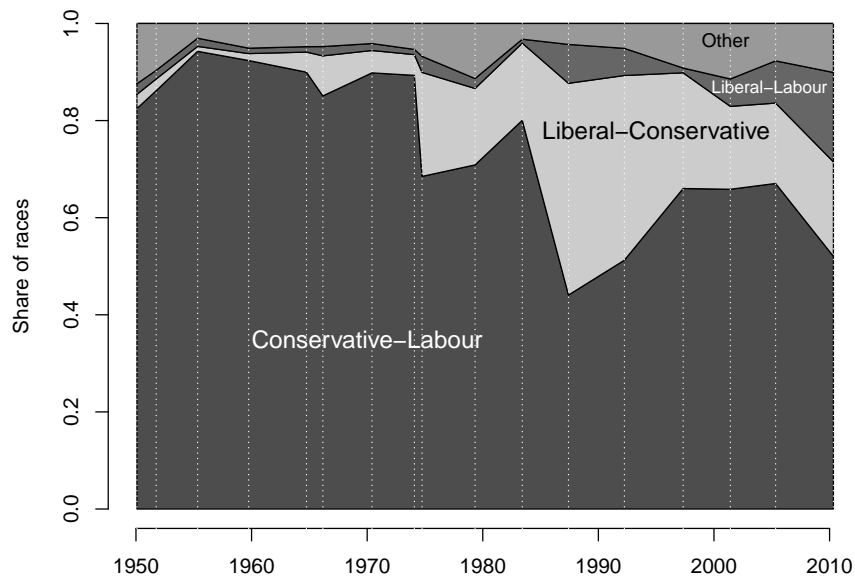
The evidence presented so far in this section suggests that in the entire UK electorate the proportion of voters whose support for the Conservatives would depend on whether the Conservatives or the Liberals hold a seat (the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect) is larger than the proportion of voters whose support for the Conservatives would depend on whether the Conservatives or Labour hold a seat (the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect). An important complication to raise at this point is that we cannot credibly estimate these two incumbency effects for the entire UK electorate or any other fixed set of voters: there are few if any constituencies in which we can obtain a credible estimate of Conservative support under hypothetical Conservative incumbency, Labour incumbency, and Liberal incumbency. What we can do is focus on cases where the Conservatives are in close competition with either Labour or the Liberals and use a regression discontinuity design (Lee 2008) to estimate the incumbency effect separately for the Conservative-Labour cases and the Conservative-Liberal cases. Figure 2 shows the proportion of constituencies in which a given party pair finished in the top two in the previous election since 1950.<sup>8</sup> Early in the postwar period, Labour and the Conservatives finished in the top two in the vast majority of constituencies; over time, this proportion has dropped as the Liberals (a term we use inclusively, as explained in footnote 4) regained some of the ground they lost earlier in the century. In particular, the Conservatives and the Liberals have been the top two parties in around 20% of races we analyze since the mid-1970s. (The proportions look very similar if we consider only contests where the previous election was close.) Our empirical analysis will use the Conservative-Liberal cases to estimate the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect and the Conservative-Labour cases to estimate the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect; extending the typical RDD, we will apply statistical controls to allow for differences in the two types of cases (such as when they took place, given the Conservative-Liberal contests tend to be more recent).

Given that we will be using different sets of cases to estimate the different incumbency effects, it is worth looking at the party-pair preferences that are relevant to each type of battleground. The

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<sup>8</sup>Here as in the rest of the paper we omit cases where, due to boundary changes so significant that the constituency's name changed, we are unable to link a constituency to election results in the previous election.

Figure 2: Proportion of races according to the top two parties in the previous race



NOTE: Figure indicates the proportion of races over time in which a given party pair finished in the top two in the previous race. Each vertical dashed line indicates a general election. Races are omitted when substantial boundary changes took place, such that the top two parties in the constituency in the previous election cannot be determined.

gray curves in Figure 1 indicate the degree of indifference for a given party pair in constituencies where that pair of parties finished in the top two in the previous election, i.e. where the incumbency effect for that pair will be estimated. In the top left plot, these gray curves are barely (if at all) distinguishable from the black curves, indicating that e.g. the intensity of preferences between Labour and Conservative parties is similar in Labour-Conservative battlegrounds and in the entire electorate. The discrepancy is largest for the Conservative-Liberal pairing in the upper right plot; not surprisingly, more voters place Labour last and are indifferent between the Conservatives and Liberals in Conservative-Liberal battlegrounds than in Conservative-Labour battlegrounds, which suggests that the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect we find in Conservative-Liberal battlegrounds will be larger than what we would hypothetically find in Conservative-Labour battlegrounds or for the electorate as a whole. There is a smaller discrepancy in the opposite direction when we look at normalized scores in the bottom plot. The overall implication is that incumbency effects in Conservative-Liberal contests should be larger than incumbency effects in Conservative-Labour contests; this is basically because of preference patterns that apply in the whole electorate,

but the difference may be exacerbated due to differences in preferences across different types of battlegrounds.

Figure 3 shows that the same pattern extends back to the 1970s, when we first have BES party like/dislike scores: the left plot compares the proportion nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and Liberals and the proportion nearly indifferent between the Conservatives and Labour using raw BES scores, both when we require that the party pair is at the top of the respondent's scores (in gray) and when we do not (in black); the right plot shows the same comparison for the normalized scores. (See notes under the table for details on how indifference is defined.)

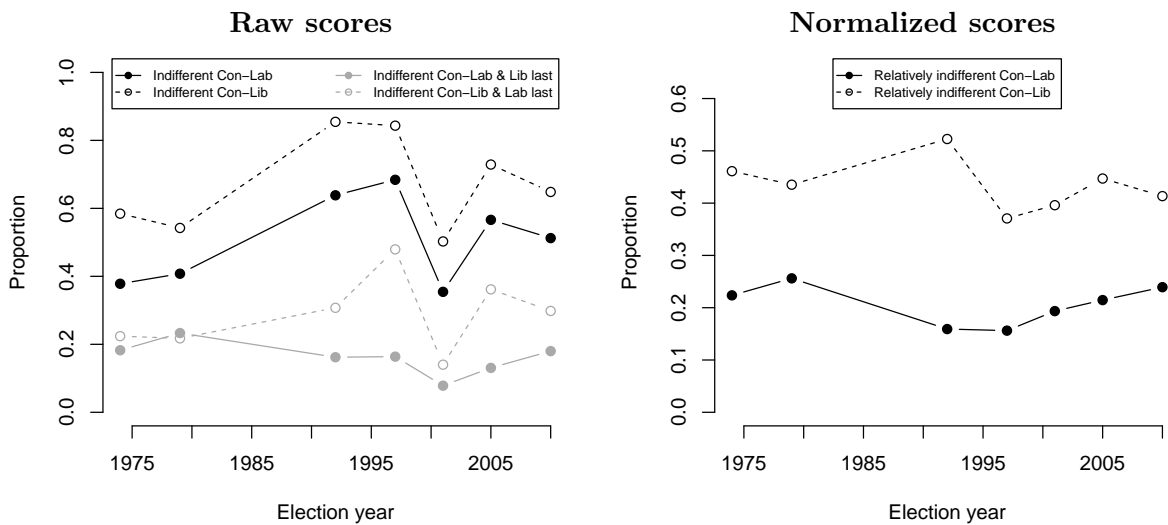
We can point to two reasons why voters in the period we examine held stronger preferences between the Conservatives and Labour than between the Conservatives and the Liberals. First, the Liberals were not in government during this period; to the extent that voters' party preferences come from feelings toward the government, it is unsurprising that the Liberals would not elicit strong feelings.<sup>9</sup> Second, the Liberals occupied an ideological middle ground throughout this period. The survey data clearly shows this back to the late 1970s, when voters were evenly split about whether the Liberal Party was ideologically closer to Labour or the Conservatives.<sup>10</sup> To be clear, the Liberals' centrism does not in itself ensure that Labour and the Conservatives would evoke the strongest party preferences: after all, a voter in the ideological center might be most indifferent between Labour and the Conservatives, both of which she dislikes but for different reasons, while strongly preferring the Liberals to either. The pattern of party preferences we document is consistent with a view that the Liberals occupy the center and most voters are to the left or right of center such that they have a clear preference between Labour and the Conservatives and put the Liberals either first or second.

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<sup>9</sup>Relatedly, to a strategic voter who cares about whether Labour or the Conservatives wins more seats in Parliament, a vote in a Labour-Conservative contest is twice as consequential as an equally close contest between either party and the Liberals.

<sup>10</sup>In the 1979 BES, 40% of respondents put the Liberals closer to the Conservatives and an equal number put them closer to Labour.

Figure 3: Indifference over party pairs since 1974 based in British Election Study



NOTE: In the left plot, in black we show the (weighted) proportion of respondents who are nearly indifferent between a pair of parties based on BES like/dislike scores (where indifference means placing within two points on the 0-10 scale used from 2001 and within one point on the five-point scale used before that); in gray we add the requirement that the respondent must rank the other party below both parties in the pair. In the right plot we use a relative measure of indifference: each respondent's like/dislike scores are normalized such that the highest is 1 and the lowest is zero; we show the (weighted) proportion for whom the given party pair is within half a point on this scale.

## 4 Incumbency effects by party matchup

We now turn to assessing the variation in incumbency effects across party matchups: for Conservative candidates, is the electoral benefit of defeating a Liberal opponent larger than the electoral benefit of defeating a Labour opponent? As explained above, we estimate incumbency effects using a regression discontinuity design (Lee 2008). The fundamental idea behind RDD approaches to incumbency effects is to study the effect of election outcomes at time  $t - 1$  on election outcomes in the same constituency at time  $t$ , focusing on close elections to minimize the endogeneity of time  $t - 1$  electoral outcomes. We first estimate the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect and Conservative-Labour incumbency effect separately; to address differences between Conservative-Liberal and Conservative-Labour battlegrounds, we then extend the RDD to include interactions with covariates.

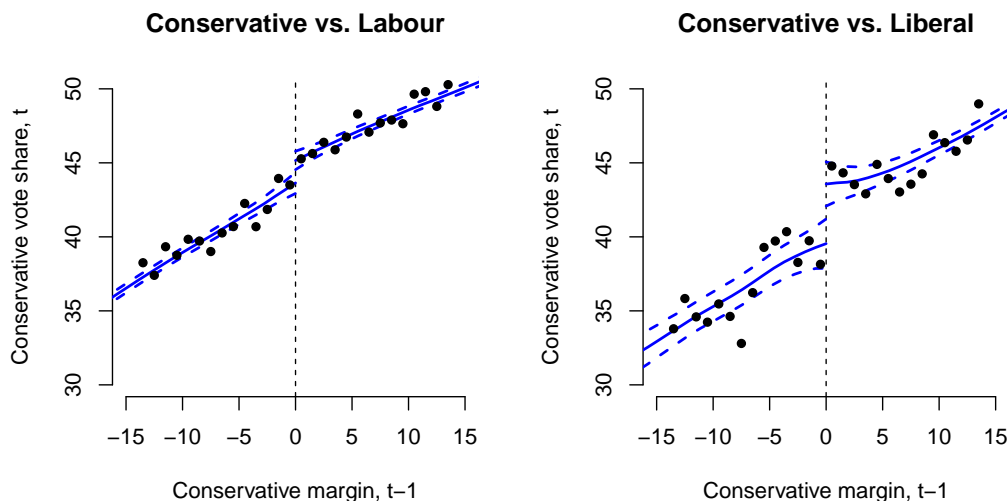
### Comparisons based on separate RDD estimates

The basic RDD result for the 1950-2010 period appears in Figures 4 and 5, which show the Conservative vote share (Figure 4) and the Conservative probability of winning (Figure 5) at time  $t$  as a function of the margin between the Conservatives and their best competitor at time  $t - 1$ .<sup>11</sup> In each figure, the left plot shows this relationship for cases where the Conservatives' best competitor was Labour, while the right plot shows this relationship for cases where the Conservatives' best competitor was the Liberals. That is, to the right of the vertical dashed line in all four plots, the Conservatives won the seat at time  $t - 1$ ; to the left of the vertical dashed line in the left plot of both Figures 4 and 5 Labour won the seat, while to the left of the vertical dashed line in the right plot of both Figures 4 and 5 the Liberals won the seat. The black dots show the average outcome for all cases in 1 percentage point bins of the Conservative margin (e.g. between 0 and 1%, between 1% and 2%, etc); the blue solid line shows the local linear regression a triangular bandwidth set at

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<sup>11</sup>Thus when the Conservative wins, the running variable is the difference in vote share between the Conservative candidate and the second-place candidate; otherwise, it is the difference in vote share between the winner and the Conservative candidate.

Figure 4: Regression discontinuity design (RDD) plot: the effect of Conservative victory at time  $t - 1$  on Conservative vote share at time  $t$ , 1950-2010



NOTE: Black dots show binned averages; blue curves show local linear regressions and point-wise 95% confidence intervals.

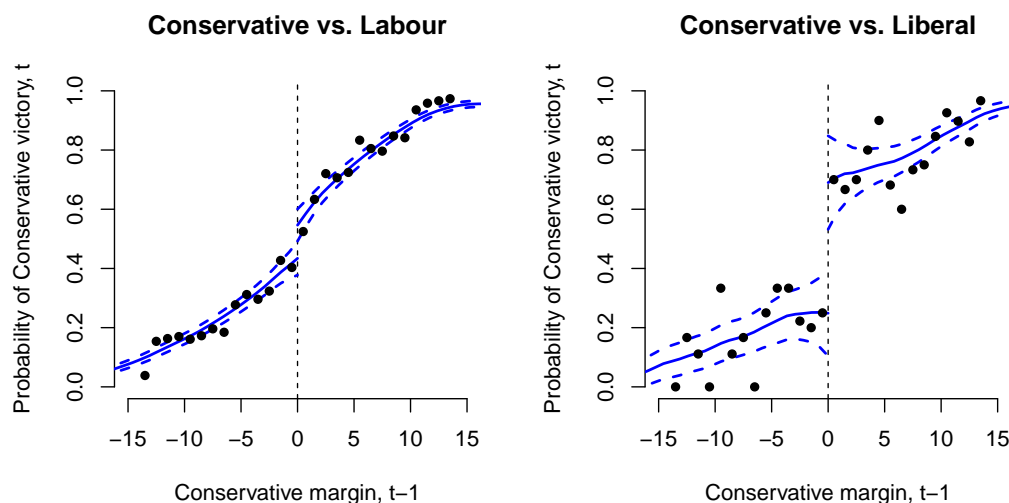
0.75 times the Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014) (henceforth CCT) optimal bandwidth<sup>12</sup>; the blue dashed lines show the point-wise 95% confidence interval for the local linear regression. The jump in the outcome at the threshold measures the incumbency advantage for the Conservatives: the effect of narrow victory at time  $t - 1$  on electoral success at time  $t$ .

It is clear from Figures 4 and 5 that, consistent with the evidence on preferences in the previous section, the benefit of incumbency for the Conservatives was larger in the period 1950-2010 when the primary opponent was a Liberal than when the primary opponent was from the Labour Party. The binned means closest to the threshold in Figure 4 indicate that when the Conservatives won a close race over either Labour or the Liberals, they won on average about 45% of the vote in the next election; when they lost a close race to Labour, they won 43% in the next election whereas when they lost a close race to the Liberals they won only about 38% in the next election. If outcomes in close losses provide a good measure of what *would* have happened if narrow victories had been turned into close losses, then these numbers imply an incumbency advantage for the Conservatives

<sup>12</sup>All tables showing analysis based on CCT bandwidths are reproduced in the Online Appendix using IK bandwidths (Imbens and Kalyanaraman 2012); the conclusions never depend on the bandwidth used.



Figure 5: RDD plot: the effect of Conservative victory at time  $t - 1$  on Conservative victory at time  $t$ , 1950-2010



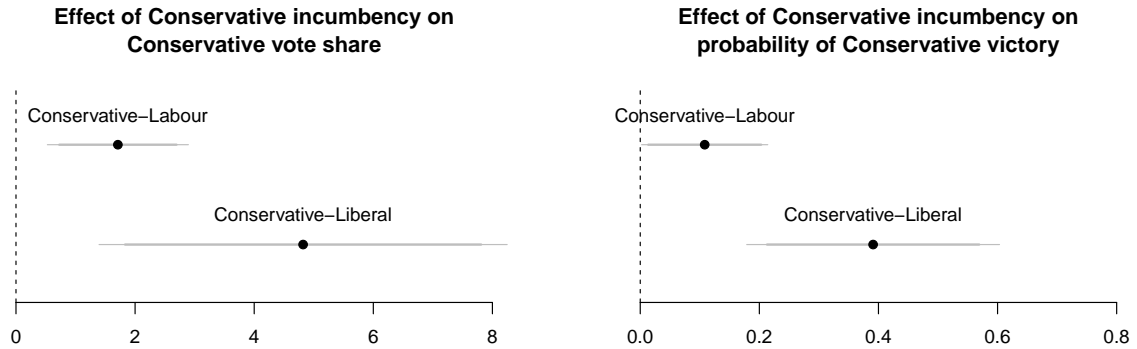
NOTE: See notes to Figure 4.

of 2 percentage points in close races against Labour and up to 7 percentage points in close races against the Liberals.

The difference between the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect and the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect is even larger when we look at the probability of Conservative victory at time  $t$  in Figure 5. In that figure, the binned means closest to the threshold suggest an incumbency advantage in close races against Labour of perhaps 10 percentage points (though the shape of the conditional expectation function implies that the true effect at the threshold is smaller), while the advantage in close races against the Liberals is around 45 percentage points.

Figure 6 shows point estimates and confidence intervals for the RDD-based party incumbency effect separately for each outcome (Conservative vote share in the left plot; Conservative winning probability in the right plot) according to whether the close election involved the Conservatives and Labour or Conservatives and the Liberals. Note that these estimates improve on the comparison of means on either side of the threshold both because they are based on the comparison of the conditional expectation function *immediately* above and below the threshold and because they incorporate the bias correction of Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014). For both outcomes, the difference in the two incumbency effects is statistically significant. For the vote share-based measure, the Z-statistic on the difference between the two incumbency effects is 2.03 (implying a

Figure 6: Bias-corrected estimates of incumbency advantage, by party pair



NOTE: Point estimates incorporate CCT bias-correction; gray lines show both the conventional 95% confidence intervals (wider lines) and the robust confidence intervals (narrower lines).

two-sided p-value of .04) when we use conventional standard errors and 1.78 (implying a two-sided p-value of .08) when we use the CCT robust confidence intervals. For the victory-based measure, the corresponding Z-statistics are 2.81 (.004) and 2.39 (.016).

In the Online Appendix we extend Figure 6 to examine the incumbency effect for all party pairs, including the Labour-Liberal incumbency effect and the Liberal-Labour incumbency effect (i.e. the effect of victory in a Labour-vs.-Liberal contest on each party's subsequent success). The estimates are noisy for the Liberal/Labour pairs, but for the most part we find larger effects in any pairing involving in the Liberals than in Conservative and Labour races.

### Comparisons based on local linear regressions with interactions

Although the difference we have documented between the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect and the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect is consistent with the theory and evidence presented in the previous two sections, there are of course many possible reasons for this difference. For example, it could be that incumbency effects are smaller in urban constituencies, and close elections involving Conservative and Labour candidates are more common in urban places; it could be that incumbency effects are larger in recent elections, and close elections involving Conservative and Liberal candidates are more common in recent elections. To address these possibilities we extend the standard RDD approach. In particular, we begin with the local linear approach to RDD

estimation, which fits a model like

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 \left( \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} \right) + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where  $Y_{it}$  is the Conservatives' electoral outcome (vote share or an indicator for victory) at time  $t$ ,  $\text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1}$  is the margin between the Conservative and the Conservative's strongest competitor at time  $t-1$ , and  $\text{ConWon}_{i,t-1}$  is an indicator that takes the value 1 if the Conservative's margin is positive at time  $t-1$  and 0 otherwise; the effect of incumbency conditional on a tied election at time  $t-1$  is indicated by  $\beta_2$ . (The regression model uses a triangular kernel that places the largest weight on observations where the margin at time  $t-1$  is zero, with the weights linearly decreasing to zero where the absolute margin is equal to the chosen bandwidth; see Imbens and Kalyanaraman (2012) and Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik (2014) on the use of triangular kernels for RDD estimation.) We first extend this model by adding an indicator for the Conservative's opponent at time  $t-1$  being a Liberal and interacting it with each element of Equation 1:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 \left( \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} \right) + \\ & \beta_4 \text{LibOpponent}_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 \left( \text{LibOpponent}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} \right) + \\ & \beta_6 \left( \text{LibOpponent}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} \right) + \\ & \beta_7 \left( \text{LibOpponent}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} \right) + \epsilon_{it}. \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

In this first extension of the model, the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect is measured by  $\beta_2$  and the difference between the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect and the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect is measured by  $\beta_6$ . We then extend the model further by also including

covariates  $\mathbf{X}_{it}$  and their interaction with  $\text{ConWon}_{i,t-1}$ :

$$\begin{aligned}
Y_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 \left( \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} \right) + \\
& \beta_4 \text{LibOpponent}_{i,t-1} + \beta_5 \left( \text{LibOpponent}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} \right) + \\
& \beta_6 \left( \text{LibOpponent}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} \right) + \\
& \beta_7 \left( \text{LibOpponent}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConMargin}_{i,t-1} \times \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} \right) + \\
& \mathbf{X}_{it} \boldsymbol{\gamma} + \left( \text{ConWon}_{i,t-1} \times \mathbf{X}_{it} \right) \boldsymbol{\psi} + \epsilon_{it}. \tag{3}
\end{aligned}$$

In this second extension of the model, the effect of incumbency is also allowed to vary across values of  $\mathbf{X}_{it}$ , e.g. over time or between urban and rural constituencies. Our question is whether the difference between the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect and the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect, as measured by  $\beta_6$ , is robust to allowing the incumbency effect to vary with other attributes in  $\mathbf{X}_{it}$  that might differ between the cases in which Conservatives have close elections with Liberals and cases in which they have close elections with Labour.

Column 1 of Table 1 shows the baseline analysis of Equation 1. The top panel indicates that when we estimate Equation 1 with Conservative vote share as the outcome, our estimate of  $\beta_2$  (the coefficient on  $\text{ConWin}_{it}$ ) is 1.911, indicating that conditional on a close election at time  $t - 1$  the Conservatives win almost 2 percentage points more in support at time  $t$  as a result of narrowly winning the time  $t - 1$  election as opposed to narrowly losing it. As indicated above the top panel, the CCT bandwidth for the triangular kernel used in this regression is 16.34, meaning that cases where the previous margin was above 16.34 percentage points are completely ignored and the weight assigned to the remaining case is linearly decreasing in the previous margin, with the largest weight going to essentially tied elections. (The total number of observations receiving positive weight is slightly over 4,000.) The bottom panel indicates that conditional on a close election at time  $t - 1$ , a narrow Conservative win increases the probability of a Conservative win at time  $t$  by .17; in this case the bandwidth chosen is about 10 percentage points, resulting in fewer elections being considered. In both cases we can reject the null hypothesis of no incumbency effect at the .001 significance level.

Table 1: How the effect of incumbency for Conservatives depends on the opponent (CCT bandwidths, 1950-2010)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<b>Outcome: Conservative vote share at <math>t</math> (<math>N = 4,030</math>, CCT BW = 16.34)</b>								
Conservative win at $t - 1$	1.911*** (.489)	1.644*** (.408)	1.642*** (.464)	.603 (.811)	1.788*** (.446)	1.591*** (.410)	1.899*** (.450)	1.938*** (.490)
Conservative win at $t - 1 \times$ Liberal opponent		1.782 (1.181)	1.687† (1.006)	2.013* (.849)	1.891 (1.191)	1.988† (1.168)	2.078† (1.174)	1.985* (.993)
<b>Outcome: Conservative win at <math>t</math> (<math>N = 2,423</math>, CCT BW = 9.99)</b>								
Conservative win at $t - 1$	.170*** (.044)	.133*** (.034)	.290*** (.039)	.014 (.074)	.131*** (.037)	.137*** (.034)	.127*** (.038)	.293*** (.043)
Conservative win at $t - 1 \times$ Liberal opponent		.308** (.100)	.384*** (.088)	.384*** (.079)	.308** (.101)	.314** (.100)	.309** (.100)	.388*** (.088)
<b>Covariates (and their interaction with indicator for Conservative win at <math>t - 1</math>) included:</b>								
Margin at $t$ (running var.)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Decade dummies			✓					✓
Year dummies				✓				
Borough (v. county)					✓		✓	✓
Country						✓	✓	✓
Country $\times$ borough							✓	✓

NOTE: Column 1 reports the coefficient and standard error for  $\beta_2$  from our estimate of Equation 1. Column 2 reports  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_5$  (the interaction) from our estimate of Equation 2. Columns 3-8 report  $\beta_2$  and  $\beta_5$  (the interaction) from our estimate of Equation 3 including different covariates and their interaction with the indicator for Conservative victory at  $t - 1$ . Regressions use triangular kernel weights with CCT bandwidths reported above each panel. \*\*\* -  $p < .001$ , \*\* -  $p < .01$ , \* -  $p < .05$ , † -  $p < 0.1$ .

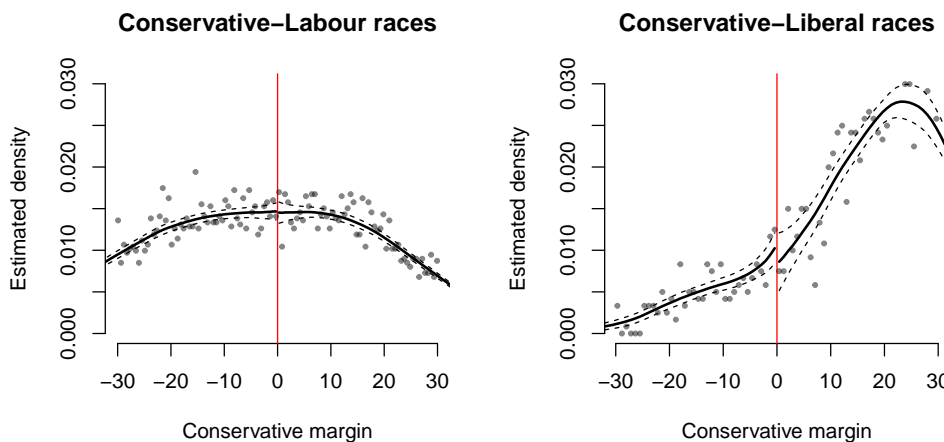
Column 2 of Table 1 reports the results when we interact an indicator for “Liberal opponent” with the indicator for Conservative victory at time  $t - 1$  (as well as the running variable and the interaction between them), as in Equation 2. When the outcome is Conservative vote share (top panel), the estimated Conservative-Labour incumbency effect (given by the “main effect” in the top row) is 1.644, which is slightly lower than the average effect given in Column 1; the interaction indicates that the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect is estimated to be about 1.8 percentage points higher, or around 3.5 percentage points overall. (The interaction in this specification is not significant at the  $p < .1$  level.) When the outcome is Conservative victory (bottom panel), the results are somewhat starker (consistent with the graphical evidence in Figure 5): the Conservative-Labour incumbency advantage is estimated at .133, while the interaction implies that the Conservative-Liberal incumbency advantage is around .45. (The interaction in this specification is significant at the  $p < .01$  level.)

In Columns 3-8 of Table 1 we report results for the main effect and interaction when we also interact the indicator for Conservative victory with other covariates, as in Equation 3, thus allowing the incumbency advantage to vary along with other characteristics that might vary between Conservative-Labour and Conservative-Liberal matchups. When the outcome is the Conservative vote share (top panel), the estimate of the interaction remains fairly stable between around 1.8 and 2.3 percentage points, indicating a Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect that is around twice the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect. Three of the interaction coefficients are significant at the  $p < .05$  level; two others are significant at the  $p < .1$  level. When the outcome is Conservative victory (bottom panel), the estimate of the interaction varies between about .3 and .4, indicating an effect of Conservative incumbency on the probability of subsequent Conservative victory that is between two and three times larger when the opponent was a Liberal. All of these interaction coefficients are significant at the  $p < .01$  level.

### **Tests of RDD validity and other falsification checks**

The validity of the sharp regression discontinuity design depends on the assumption that potential outcomes are continuous across the threshold at which treatment is applied; in this setting, this assumption essentially requires that we can use the Conservatives’ narrow losses to infer what would

Figure 7: Continuity in the density of Conservative vote margin, by party pairing (McCrary (2008) test)



NOTE: Continuity in the density of the running variable across the threshold suggests the key assumption of RDD is met.

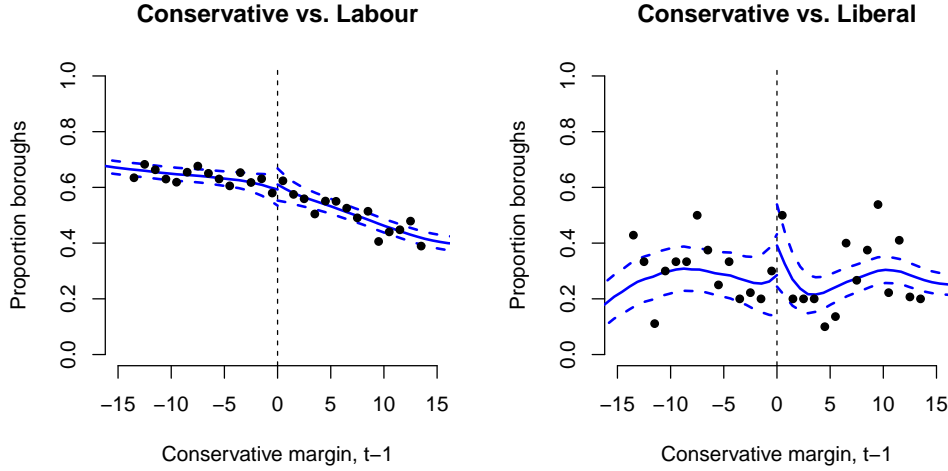
have happened to narrow Conservative winners if they had actually lost. Although this assumption is not directly testable, we can perform several indirect tests, including both standard tests and tests that are tailored to the specific research design used above to compare incumbency effects across party pairings (Eggers et al. 2015).

The continuity assumption may be violated if some parties or candidates can precisely manipulate their margin of victory – for example, if Conservatives could disproportionately win close elections. Figure 7 addresses this possibility. Each of the panels of Figure 7 shows the density of the Conservative vote margin, estimated separately on each side of the threshold separating cases where the Conservatives won and lost; the left and right panels apply to cases where the Conservatives’ main competitor was Labour and Liberal, respectively. The standard McCrary (2008) test for manipulation of the running variable checks for a discontinuity in the density at the threshold. As suggested by the plots, we fail to reject the null hypothesis of no jump at the threshold in both cases, as well as for both sets of cases combined,<sup>13</sup> which is consistent with the assumption that narrow Conservative wins and losses are comparable.

As another indirect test of the continuity assumption, we check whether pre-treatment covariates are continuous at the threshold separating narrow winners and losers. We test this assumption by

<sup>13</sup>The three Z-statistics are -.12, -.96, and -.49.

Figure 8: Continuity in the proportion of elections taking place in boroughs, by party pairing (falsification test)



NOTE: Both plots show the proportion of elections taking place in boroughs as a function of the Conservatives’ vote margin in the previous election. Constituencies are divided according to the whether the top two parties in the previous election were the Conservatives and Labour (left plot) or the Conservatives and the Liberals (right plot).

estimating the “effect” of Conservative victory at time  $t - 1$  on outcomes determined before period  $t - 1$ : an indicator for whether the constituency is a borough or a county (a measure of urban-ness), an indicator for whether the constituency is in England, the year of the election, and three measures of the Conservative performance at time  $t - 2$  (margin, vote share, and an indicator for victory). If the continuity assumption required for RDD is valid, these falsification tests should show null effects. For example, Figure 8 shows the RDD plot for the “effect” of Conservative victory at time  $t - 1$  on an indicator for whether the election took place in a borough. The plot confirms that close Conservative-Labour contests were more common in urban areas (as indicated by the higher overall proportion of elections taking place in boroughs in that subset), but within each subset close Conservative victories and losses appear to be equally likely to take place in boroughs.

Extending Figure 8, we report estimated effects of Conservative victory on pre-treatment covariates separately by party pairing in the first two columns of Table 2. Each entry is the RDD estimate (with bias correction) of the effect of Conservative victory at time  $t - 1$  on the pre-treatment covariate listed at the left; we estimate these separately for cases where the Conservative’s opponent was Labour or Liberal. None of the “effects” is significant, which is what we would expect if the



Table 2: Falsification tests: effect of Conservative incumbency on pre-treatment covariates (CCT bandwidths, 1950-2010)

Outcome	Bias-corrected, by matchup		Local linear, w. interaction	
	Labour opponent	Liberal opponent	Main effect	Lib. interaction
Pr(Borough)	.013 (.044)	-.039 (.132)	-.001 (.030)	-.035 (.085)
Pr(England)	.003 (.027)	-.052 (.103)	.007 (.018)	-.072 (.051)
Year of election	.586 (1.849)	-4.509 (3.908)	.078 (1.172)	-4.660 (3.403)
Conservative margin $t - 2$	.540 (1.017)	.002 (2.643)	.665 (.610)	.204 (1.789)
Conservative vote share $t - 2$	-.074 (.409)	.216 (.992)	-.115 (.273)	.140 (.786)
Conservative victory $t - 2$	.076 (.057)	.015 (.113)	.097* (.038)	-.023 (.115)

NOTE: In columns 1 and 2, each entry is the RDD estimate (robust standard error in parentheses) of the effect of Conservative victory at time  $t - 1$  on the pre-treatment covariate listed at left. In columns 3 and 4, each entry is a coefficient (standard error in parenthesis) from a local linear regression like Equation 2 in which the outcome is the pre-treatment covariate listed at left; coefficients shown relate to the treatment (Conservative victory at time  $t - 1$ ) and the interaction between the treatment and an indicator for Liberal opponent. Significance levels as in Table 1.

continuity assumption is met.

In the last two columns of Table 2 we present another falsification test that complements the analysis in Table 1. In Table 1 we used an interaction term to test whether the effect of incumbency on subsequent Conservative performance depends on whether the Conservatives' opponent was Labour or Liberal. In the last two columns of Table 2 we use the same approach, this time using pre-treatment covariates as the outcome; this allows us to check whether the difference in incumbency effects we found with this approach in Table 1 could be due to differences in covariate balance across types of battlegrounds. The last column of Table 2 reports the coefficient on the interaction from each regression; none of these is close to statistical significance, suggesting that differences in covariate imbalance do not explain why incumbency effects are estimated to be larger

in Conservative-Liberal matchups.<sup>14</sup>

## 5 Additional alternative explanations

The difference between the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect and the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect that we have shown is consistent with the pattern of preference intensity documented earlier: all else equal, we would expect a larger incumbency effect in Conservative-Liberal contests given the larger proportion of voters who are nearly indifferent between the main parties in those contests. The extended-RDD analysis in the previous section addressed a few alternative explanations for this pattern based on time period and constituency characteristics. In this section we consider two additional alternative explanations.

### **Does strategic voting explain the larger incumbency effect for Liberals?**

As noted in the introduction, previous studies of incumbency effects in the U.K. noted that incumbency seemed to matter more for the Liberals than for other parties (Gaines 1998; Katz and King 1999). This is what we would expect given the pattern of partisan preference intensity documented above: incumbency should matter more for Liberals because there are more voters whose ranking of the Liberals might depend on small valence shocks. But previous studies interpreted this finding differently: both Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999) suggest that Liberals have larger incumbency effects because of strategic voting. The key idea expressed in both papers is that incumbency has extra value for Liberals because it signals the local viability of the Liberal candidate to party supporters who may be inclined to vote strategically for another party; incumbency is assumed to play this role to a lesser extent for Labour and the Conservatives because voters who favor those parties simply assume their party is viable and vote for their top choice. Thus as Gaines notes (185), “the bonus of incumbency for Liberal candidates is not merely that they acquire whatever normal advantages office-holding confers, but also that it lets them overcome an electoral logic plaguing their party.” If there is a substantial pool of strategic voters who only vote for the Liber-

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<sup>14</sup>We do find a significant main effect for the last outcome (an indicator for lagged Conservative victory); inspection of the RD plots suggest that this is because of under-smoothing, i.e. curvature in the conditional expectation function that causes bias in the local linear regression.

als when there is a Liberal incumbent because they otherwise assume the Liberals are not viable, then this could be enough to explain both Gaines (1998) and Katz and King (1999)'s finding that incumbency matters more to the Liberals and our finding that incumbency matters more to the Conservatives when they face a Liberal incumbent. The strength of partisan preferences need not be a factor at all.

The key element of this alternative explanation is that incumbency must signal viability for Liberals: we should find that the perceived viability of the Liberals is higher when they *won* the previous election in the constituency than when they lost, all else equal. We might also expect this to be true for the Liberals when they compete against the Conservatives, but not for Labour when they compete against the Conservatives. To assess this, we use BES data from 2005 and 2010 to assess how narrow victories and losses for the Conservatives affect voters' perceptions of likely outcomes in subsequent elections. The BES asked respondents how likely it was that each of the major parties would win the election in their constituency.<sup>15</sup> The left plot suggests that voters perceive Labour as more likely to win when Labour narrowly won the last election than when the Conservatives narrowly won, suggesting that Conservative incumbency may reduce the perceived viability of Labour in Conservative-Labour contests; the result is not statistically significant, however, once we apply the bias correction and associated confidence intervals.<sup>16</sup> The right plot shows no effect in Conservative-Liberal contests: there is no evidence in the plot or in hypothesis tests<sup>17</sup> that voters see the Liberals as more viable on average when there is a Liberal incumbent, all else equal. Although this falsification test is somewhat underpowered (with 656 observations in the relevant bandwidth for Conservative-Labour contests but only 203 for Conservative-Liberal contests), it does cast doubt on an alternative explanation in which incumbency matters more in Conservative-Liberal contests because it signals the viability of the Liberal candidate.<sup>18</sup>

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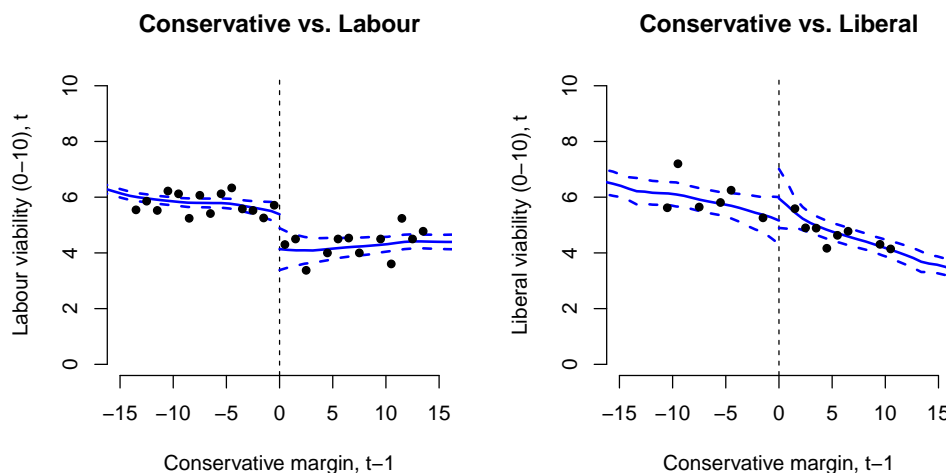
<sup>15</sup>The precise wording of the question was, "On a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, how likely is it that #{PARTY} will win the election in #{RESPONDENT'S CONSTITUENCY}?"

<sup>16</sup>The coefficient is -1.07, with a robust standard error of .76.

<sup>17</sup>The bias corrected estimate is 1.14 (i.e. the opposite sign from expectations, with a robust standard error of 1.07.

<sup>18</sup>In the Online Appendix we also use our interaction approach to show that incumbency effects are larger in Conservative-Liberal contests even controlling for the extent to which there might be

Figure 9: How does Conservative incumbency affect voters' expectations of their opponents' electoral viability?



NOTE: Both plots show the perceived viability of the Conservatives' main opponent in the constituency (Labour at the left, the Liberals at the right) among BES respondents as a function of the Conservatives' vote margin in the previous election. Constituencies are divided according to the whether the top two parties in the previous election were the Conservatives and Labour (left plot) or the Conservatives and the Liberals (right plot).

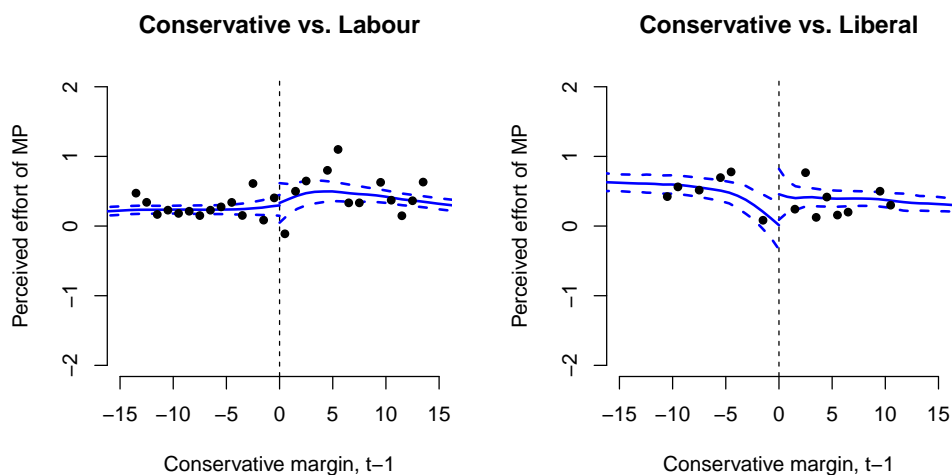
### Are Liberals better incumbents?

Another alternative explanation is that Liberal incumbents may be better able to take advantage of incumbency than MPs from other parties. In explaining why the Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect is larger than the Conservative-Labour incumbency effect, we have emphasized the difference in partisan preferences across different party pairs, but clearly the effect of incumbency on perceived valence could also vary across party pairs. One particularly simple mechanism that would produce this variation is if Liberal MPs are systematically better than Labour MPs at converting incumbency into valence benefits, for example because they tend to put more effort into constituency service or are more effective at claiming credit for their efforts. This would provide a particularly straightforward explanation for the variation in incumbency effects we find – an explanation that may have nothing to do with the strength of partisan preferences.

In fact, a simple cross-sectional analysis of BES survey data from 2005 and 2010 is consistent with this possibility. The 2005 and 2010 BES asks respondents to say how much they agree with coordination problems in the constituency.

the statement, “My member of parliament tries hard to look after the interests of people who live in my constituency.” Focusing on constituencies with Conservative-Liberal and Conservative-Labour matchups, the average effort rating of Liberal MPs is significantly higher than that of both Labour and Conservative MPs; if Liberal MPs are simply better than other MPs at making use of incumbency, this could explain why Conservative-Liberal incumbency effects are larger. A closer look at the survey data casts doubt on this explanation, however: the difference in perceived effort between Liberal MPs and others disappears when we focus on cases where the MP was narrowly elected. Figure 10 shows the average level of perceived effort for MPs in Conservative-Labour and Conservative-Liberal constituencies, as a function of Conservative vote margin in the previous election. If Liberal MPs were simply better than others at winning voters’ approval, then in the right plot (Conservative-Liberal contests) we might expect the average perceived effort to drop down at the threshold when a Conservative is elected instead of a Liberal; if anything it is the reverse. (Similarly, the left plot indicates that Labour and Conservative MPs appear to receive the same effort rating, conditional on a close election.) If Liberal MPs are not perceived to exert higher effort than Conservative MPs conditional on a close election, there would seem to be little reason to think that fundamental differences between Liberal MPs and others could explain the larger Conservative-Liberal incumbency effect.

Figure 10: How does Conservative incumbency affect voters’ evaluations of MP effort?



NOTE: See note to Figure 9; the outcome here is the perceived effort level of the local MP among BES respondents.

This survey evidence on MPs' perceived effort does point to an intriguing pattern that we view as complementary to our main argument about how partisan preferences and incumbency effects are related. A simple cross-sectional comparison shows that BES respondents who live in constituencies where the top two parties in the previous election were Conservative and Liberal give significantly higher evaluations of their MP's effort than BES respondents who live in constituencies where the top two parties were Conservative and Labour; this is true whether we focus on cases where the previous election was close or not. Thus while Figure 10 suggests that voters do not perceive a difference in effort level between Conservative and Liberal MPs (conditional on a close election), they do perceive a difference between the effort level of, on the one hand, Conservative and Liberal MPs in close races and, on the other, Conservative and Labour MPs in close races. To the extent that such a difference exists, and to the extent to which greater MP effort leads to larger incumbency effects (all else equal), this pattern would tend to produce higher incumbency effects in Conservative-Liberal contests than in Conservative-Labour contests. This could be viewed as an alternative explanation, in the sense that variation in MP effort is the proximate cause of the difference in incumbency effects. But ultimately we view this variation in MP effort as itself an effect of the variation in the intensity of partisan preferences. That is, even if MP effort levels were fixed across party pairings, we expect larger incumbency effects in Conservative-Liberal contests; because MPs are strategic and understand that the rewards of additional effort are larger in Conservative-Liberal contests, we expect MP effort levels to be higher in contexts where partisan preferences are weaker, which would tend to amplify the *ceteris paribus* effect.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have studied multiparty elections in the U.K. to shed light on the relationship between incumbency effects and the strength of voters' partisan preferences. Previous work pointed toward an important role for partisanship in explaining incumbency effects, but most existing findings are open to alternative explanations in part because variation in partisanship tends to coincide with variation in other relevant factors that affect incumbents' chances. Our approach is to compare incumbency effects across partisan matchups in the U.K., showing not only that incumbency effects vary in the way we would expect but that this variation cannot easily be

explained by other factors that vary across matchups. Of course, we cannot account for all possible alternative explanations of the patterns we observe,<sup>19</sup> but many of these explanations (e.g. the greater focus of Liberals on “community politics”) could also be seen as strategic responses to the difference in strength of partisan preferences that we document. At any rate, it is likely by accumulating several studies with different designs in different settings that we will develop a clearer view of how partisanship, incumbency effects, and electoral accountability are related.

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

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<sup>19</sup>An anonymous reviewer noted that voters may vote against incumbents from the government’s party; this would tend to reduce the electoral advantages of incumbency in Conservative-Labour contests more than in Conservative-Liberal contests because Liberals are not in government.

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