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Political Dynasties in Democracies: Causes, Consequences and Remaining Puzzles^{*}

Short title: Political Dynasties in Democracies

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Abstract:

Kinship often continues to play an important role in determining the ruling class even under modern democratic elections in a wide range of countries. In recent years, academic interest in the causes and consequences of such dynasties has been rapidly expanding. In this introduction to the Feature Issue, we review existing work on political dynasties' formation and potential implications for socio-economic outcomes (such as economic growth, distributive policy, and gender representation), and outline a number of questions and challenges that remain important avenues for future research.

Key words: Political dynasty, elite persistence, family ties, power.

JEL classification: C41, D39, D70

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Although almost all countries historically used kinship as the main principle for distributing political power, the development of representative democracy resulted in the replacement of hereditary succession with popular elections as the key mechanism for political selection.¹ Even so, kinship has often continued to play a role in determining the ruling class in democracies. Recent prominent examples include George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton in the United States, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Canada, South Korean President Park Geun-hye, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō in Japan, and Sonia and Rahul Gandhi in India. An interesting European example is former Belgian Prime Minister and first President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy, whose wife, brother, sister, and two sons are – or have been – likewise politically active. More generally, the comparative data set brought together by Smith (2012) highlights that political dynasties remain a common phenomenon in many modern and well-functioning democracies – although their prevalence differs significantly across countries (see also Fiva and Smith, 2016). At the higher end of the spectrum are developing countries like the Philippines (over 40 percent dynastic at the national level) and small democracies like Iceland (over 30 percent). At the lower end are large developed democracies including Germany and Canada (less than 5 percent).

Dynastic politicians can be defined as politicians who are related by blood or marriage to other individuals formerly holding political office. This definition is a close equivalent to those brought forward in Dal Bó et al. (2009), Smith (2012), and Chandra (2016), and covers, for instance, politicians' children, grandchildren, siblings, spouses, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and so on. Even so, it is best seen as a general definition that allows for further specification depending on the circumstances (and data availability). A narrow interpretation might take into account only politicians that succeed a relative in the same jurisdiction immediately following

¹ Hereditary succession remains common in non-democratic regimes (e.g., Camp, 1982; Vilas, 1992; Brownlee, 2007; McMillan, 2013). A recent example is the 2011 succession of North Korea's Kim Jong-un into power following the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, who himself became supreme leader following the death of his father, Kim Il-sung, in 1994.

the departure of their predecessor, whereas a broader interpretation might include those with relatives currently or previously holding office at the same or different levels of government. Note, however, that our definition always *excludes* politicians who are followed but *not* preceded by relatives. The reason is that politicians starting a political dynasty are not dynastic at the time of their first election. This is important because ‘those who are followed rather than preceded by family members can create advantages for their descendants but cannot be said to have been initially advantaged themselves by such ties’ (Chandra, 2016, p.14).

The case of Herman Van Rompuy mentioned above illustrates the possible intricacies involved in defining political dynasties. Herman was first elected to the Belgian Senate in 1988, and thereby achieved elected office *after* his brother Eric – who was first elected into the European Parliament in 1981 and the House of Representatives in 1985. However, both brothers had a long history of activity in the youth wing of the Christian-Democratic party. In fact, Herman was elected leader of this youth wing from 1973 to 1977, and was succeeded in this position by Eric from 1977 to 1983. The designation of Herman Van Rompuy as a dynastic politician thus depends on how broadly one defines political activity.

Political dynasties as a research agenda received relatively little attention until recent years (notable exceptions in English include Hess, 1966; Clubok et al., 1969; Laband and Lentz, 1985; Ishibashi and Reed, 1992). Since the path-breaking study of Dal Bó et al. (2009), however, academic interest has been expanding rapidly among both political scientists and economists. Political scientists have been predominantly interested in *why* political dynasties arise and/or persist. Some of this work has focused on quantifying the electoral and career advantages of dynastic politicians (Feinstein, 2010; Asako et al., 2015; Smith and Martin, 2016). Others instead investigate the roles played by a country’s democratic institutions (e.g., the existence of candidate-centred electoral systems, or the organizational weakness of parties) and the

(de)centralization of candidate selection processes (Smith, 2012; Chhibber, 2013; Chandra, 2016; Amundsen, 2016).

Among economists, the main focus of attention has thus far been on the persistence of dynastic political power. The underlying idea is that time in office induces an entrenchment of political power due to the ability of elites to perpetuate their power through electoral advantages (i.e., name recognition, fundraising and campaigning abilities, contact networks, and so on). Dal Bó et al. (2009) were first to test this hypothesis using a regression discontinuity (RD) design aimed at separating out the causal effect of incumbency from the effects of other traits (personal charisma, wealth, etc.) that may be common within dynastic families. They convincingly document that longer tenure significantly increases the probability of forming a political dynasty. Several scholars have since tried to replicate these results at either the national or local level in, for instance, Argentina (Rossi, 2016), Brazil (Bragança et al., 2015), the Philippines (Querubin, 2016), the United Kingdom (Van Coppenolle, 2015) and Norway (Fiva and Smith, 2016). The findings have been decidedly mixed, and explaining this variation remains an important open question we return to below.

The contributions included in this *Feature Issue* – whose main findings we briefly discuss in the last section of this introduction – aim to further develop this literature by focusing on two central research questions:

1. *What allows political dynasties to perpetuate their power in democracies?*
2. *What are the political and economic consequences of political dynasties?*

In this introduction, we provide some initial insights regarding these questions at the heart of this *Feature Issue*, and also highlight a number of remaining theoretical and empirical puzzles.

1. Causes of Dynasties in Democracies

Scholars of elite dominance have long noted that the ruling class may be able to perpetuate its power over the less organised masses, even within a democracy (Mosca, 1896; Pareto, 1901; Mills, 1956). Similar to a family-owned firm (Burkart et al., 2003), elites might want to keep a tight family grip on political office, especially if the private benefits of office exceed what can be gained outside of politics. More generally, the wealth, education, good genes, and connections enjoyed within prominent elite families may help them to maintain their grip on power, even when faced with electoral competition. Hess (1966, p.3) reflects this view when he notes that most of the prominent dynasties in the United States share a more-or-less common background that might be considered the ‘best butter’ in American politics: ‘old stock, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, professional, Eastern seaboard, well to do’.

However, Dal Bó et al. (2009) reject the argument that members of dynasties in the U.S. are simply the ‘best butter’ of American politics, and find that dynasty formation can be causally linked to the length of time a founding member holds office, suggesting a ‘power-treatment effect’ of incumbency on dynastic perpetuation. Serving more than one term increases the name recognition, financial resources, and political connections that potential dynastic successors can use to their electoral advantage. In line with this view, Feinstein (2010) finds that the resource advantages possessed by members of dynasties give them substantial electoral advantages over other candidates. The basic conclusion, as Dal Bó et al. (2009, p.115) put it, is that ‘power begets power’.

This power-treatment effect of incumbency has since been replicated at either the national or local level in Argentina (Rossi, 2016), Brazil (Bragança et al., 2015), and the Philippines (Querubin, 2016). Yet, interestingly, similar results are *not* found using very similar research designs in the United Kingdom (Van Coppenolle, 2015) or Norway (Fiva and Smith, 2016). Such cross-country variation points to system-level or institutional factors that might

condition the mechanisms and processes through which dynasties are formed, or possibly temporal differences related to the level of democratic or economic development.

The argument that institutions might matter was first brought forward by Smith (2012), who argues that the power-treatment effect explanation is too simplistic given the considerable variation in the presence of dynasties across time, countries and parties. He argues that this variation is best explained by institutional structures that affect the demand for dynastic politicians within parties. First, electoral systems that generate incentives for candidate-centred (rather than party-centred) vote choice may increase the relative value of a dynastic candidate's name recognition and other resources, both for voters and for party actors involved in candidate selection. Second, in parties where the candidate selection process is decentralised to local party actors, dynastic candidates may be more advantaged in securing the nomination. This is because they possess closer ties to local party actors, but also because local actors may prioritise local connections whereas party leaders at the national level may take a more diverse approach to candidate selection. In a similar approach, Chhibber (2013) argues that dynastic leadership succession in India is more likely in parties that lack broader organizational ties to groups in society, and have centralised party finances (in the top leadership). Chandra (2016) further explores how party institutions in India contribute to subnational variation in dynasties.²

In line with such an institutionalist perspective, existing studies of power-treatment effect strongly suggest that *different* institutional environments – even when these are party- rather than candidate-centred – can support the *same* perpetuation of dynastic political power. They also highlight that *similar* electoral settings – whether these are party- or candidate-centred – can induce *different* outcomes in terms of power transfers within dynasties. There remains a lack of comparative empirical research, however, aimed at assessing the exact role

² In another study involving the effect of institutions, Querubin (2011) finds that the introduction of term limits in the Philippines did not stop dynasties from perpetuating their dominance—rather, they allowed them to spread because incumbents tend to seek higher office and get their relatives elected to their previous positions.

of institutional factors in this process. We consider this an important puzzle that should be addressed in future work. Promising avenues may include the use of experimental survey techniques to uncover voters' preferences for dynastic politicians under different institutional settings, or exploiting instances of institutional reform in a greater number of country cases.

Future work should also further explore the mechanisms behind the *supply* of dynastic candidates. In a survey-based assessment of the motivations behind potential politicians' ambition to seek office, Lawless (2012) finds that respondents whose parents had previously run for elective office (at any level) were up to 10 percentage points more likely to envision a future in politics for themselves. This provides strong evidence that a family tradition in politics can influence individuals' own political ambition – much like a family tradition in, say, business, academia or medicine affects children's career choice (Laband and Lentz, 1983; Lentz and Laband, 1989). An additional supply-side factor may be assortative matching between spouses (Becker, 1973), which might also help explain why many dynasties – such as Bill and Hillary Clinton, or Herman and Geertrui Van Rompuy – take the form of husband-wife pairs.

2. Consequences of Dynasties in Democracies

Understanding the causes of dynasties establishes a necessary precondition for studying their potential socio-economic consequences. For instance, political dynasties caused by assortative matching between spouses might have very different implications than political dynasties arising due to, for example, rent-seeking motivations. Yet, in stark contrast to research on family firms – where the discussion has largely centred on 'whether family-owned firms have advantages in the market place' (Besley, 2005, p.51) – few studies have thus far addressed the potential consequences of political dynasties. As argued by Besley (2005, p.51), the 'advantage in name recognition is palpable [but] whether politician quality is transmitted intergenerationally is far from clear'. What are the political and economic consequences of

political dynasties? Do dynasties generate positive or negative effects for the functioning of democracy or the quality of representation?

On the one hand, if dynastic politicians enjoy advantages that shield them from electoral accountability or deter the entry of other, possibly more qualified, candidates – as with the well-known incumbency advantage – it might result in a decrease in the quality of representation. Much like female legislators in the U.S. must outperform their male counterparts to overcome higher barriers to entry (Anzia and Berry, 2011) and female members of parliament in Germany require more political experience to obtain extra-parliamentary jobs (Geys and Mause, 2014), non-dynastic candidates who run against dynastic candidates might need to be of higher quality, and exhibit higher legislative performance if elected. This means that dynastic politicians might be of lower quality in terms of policymaking, *even if* they are of higher quality in terms of electoral strength. This may be particularly troubling since dynastic politicians appear to enjoy an advantage over other MPs in progressing from the backbenches to the cabinet (Smith and Martin, 2016), placing them at the pinnacle of political leadership.

On the other hand, dynasties might also have a positive effect on democracy. For example, Parker (1996, p.88) argues that members of dynasties may be beneficial to the functioning of the legislature, since ‘family members who have served in Congress can act in a tutorial capacity’. The electoral advantages that dynastic politicians possess may also translate into downstream distributive advantages for their districts. Dynastic politicians elected on their personal reputation might, for instance, be more motivated to provide benefits to their districts than politicians who owe their election to their party label alone. This would reflect Keefer and Khemani’s (2009) argument that legislator effort at ‘bringing home the pork’ is lower in constituencies where party identification among voters is stronger.

The few existing studies on the economic consequences of dynasties paint a complex and contradictory picture. Asako et al. (2015), for example, find that districts represented by

dynastic politicians in Japan have worse economic outcomes, despite receiving relatively more distributive benefits. The reason, they argue, is that dynastic politicians spend the distributive benefits inefficiently. A very similar pattern is observed in Brazil by Bragança et al. (2015), who show that dynastic politicians winning a close election spend more resources on urban infrastructure, health and sanitation. Nevertheless, these additional investments do not appear to translate into improved economic outcomes (such as local economic growth, student learning, or the quality of public services). The expansion in the size of local governments in Brazil by dynastic politicians thus appears mostly to reflect rent extraction, such that political dynasties can, in this case, be said to induce a deterioration of government performance. Daniele and Vertier (2016) analyse a large sample of Italian mayors in the period 1998-2013 and find no effects of dynastic mayors on average spending, revenue and transfer levels. They do find, however, that dynastic mayors tend to implement stronger political budget cycles. In contrast, Besley and Reynal-Querol (2015) present evidence that dynastic leaders may positively impact the rate of economic growth, but only where the leader enjoys significant autonomy in decision-making.

Political dynasties might also result in positive effects for gender representation, as dynastic succession may be one way for female candidates to break into politics in systems where women are otherwise disadvantaged (Jalazai, 2013; Folke et al. 2016b). Indeed, many female politicians in the U.S. and elsewhere first entered politics when their husbands died in office, a process sometimes referred to as a ‘widow’s succession’ (Kincaid, 1978). Labonne et al. (2016) show that the imposition of term limits by the Philippine constitution on all elected offices after the 1986 People Power revolution caused higher levels of female representation in local executive offices *only* for dynastic women.³ In fact, in the Philippine case, term limits are

³ In the Italian dataset employed by Geys (2016) in this *Feature Issue*, the share of female politicians is higher among dynastic politicians (19%) compared to non-dynastic politicians (17%) and politicians setting up a dynasty (10%). Moreover, while 26% of all female politicians in the dataset are dynastic politicians, the same is true for only 22% of all male politicians.

argued to be more effective than other policies such as gender quotas, since the latter would still require women to individually overcome gender biases among party leaders or voters. Folke et al. (2016b) argue that political dynasties are beneficial for female representation in politics because they help voters and party actors involved in candidate selection overcome information asymmetries with respect to the quality of female candidates. Their empirical analysis combines comparative legislator-level data from twelve democracies and candidate-level data from Ireland and Sweden, and provides strong evidence that political dynasties' positive effects for gender representation indeed arise because they allow women to overcome a vote disadvantage in elections. They also find that the introduction of a gender quota in Sweden resulted in a temporary increase in dynastic female recruitment.

Clearly, there may be multiple ways, both direct and indirect, in which dynastic politics can have consequences for socio-economic outcomes and the quality of representation in a democracy. For instance, it might be that dynastic politicians are more constrained by their family than non-dynastic politicians – leading to less change in public policies following dynastic succession. This argument is consistent with Besley and Reynal-Querol's (2015) finding that individuals' autonomy in decision-making represents a crucial mediating factor to observe differences in socio-economic outcomes between jurisdictions run by dynastic and non-dynastic leaders. Yet, overall, the mechanisms linking political dynasties and their possible consequences for socio-economic outcomes remain poorly understood. Moreover, establishing the causal connection between dynasties and their socio-economic consequences is challenging due to the many confounding factors at play.

3. Overview of Feature Issue Articles

The three contributions included in this *Feature Issue* focus *either* on the causes behind political dynasties (Rossi, 2016) *or* on the consequences of dynasties for socio-economic outcomes (Geys, 2016; Folke et al., 2016a).

In the first article, Martín Rossi revisits the notion that ‘power begets power’ using data from Argentinian parliamentary elections. This setting is of substantial interest to verify the generalizability of the findings from the U.S. case analysed by Dal Bó et al. (2009). Elections in Argentina are based on closed-list proportional representation in multi-member districts rather than the single-member district races characterizing the U.S. electoral system. Interestingly, however, the results from Argentina corroborate those of Dal Bó et al. (2009). Rossi then takes the analysis one step further and provides two thought-provoking pieces of evidence indicating that family name recognition is an important mechanism behind political dynasties. On the one hand, the observed effect of longer tenure in office on establishing a dynasty arises only among politicians with uncommon surnames, which indicates that common surnames cannot provide an equally powerful brand-name advantage than uncommon names. On the other hand, women are more likely to employ their husband’s surname for political purposes when married to someone with a recognised surname (defined as a surname linked to someone having held an important political office in the past), and are less likely to use their husband’s surname when their own surname is recognised. This reflects a strong belief that there is a (political) benefit from choosing the ‘correct’ surname when entering the political arena. Finally, Rossi presents suggestive evidence that dynastic candidates tend to receive higher positions on the party list in Argentina, which naturally puts them in a better position to obtain elected office. This points to an important party-based mechanism behind political dynasties in party-centred political environments, whereby at least part of any dynastic advantage is likely to arise through better connections with the party organization (for a similar argument in a different setting, see Fiva and Smith, 2016).

The second and third articles in this *Feature Issue* turn to the consequences of political dynasties, and thereby relate to a growing literature on the implications of the selection – and self-selection – of politicians (e.g., Besley, 2004, 2005; Caselli and Morelli, 2004; Messner and Polborn, 2004; Keane and Merlo, 2010; Galasso and Nannicini, 2011).

Benny Geys investigates to what extent dynasties are associated with a reduction of (s)elected politicians' human capital, using local-level data from Italy. The underlying idea is that when family ties act as a substitute for skills (or, more generally, human capital) in the political selection process, dynastic politics may lead to the selection of politicians with relatively lower education levels compared to their political peers. Exploiting the political consequences of a legal change in 1993 – which gave Italian mayors considerably more power in the selection of aldermen and vice-mayors – Geys shows that a political selection process controlled by politicians rather than the electorate favours dynastic individuals with relatively lower levels of education compared to their political peers. This suggests that the perpetuation of dynasties may have important implications in terms of politicians' human capital.

Evidently, while politicians' human capital is a relevant outcome with important implications for policy decisions (Besley et al., 2010, 2011; Gagliarducci and Nannicini, 2013; Daniele and Geys, 2015), an exclusive focus on politicians' human capital does not illuminate whether, and to what extent, dynasties affect actual policy-making and socio-economic outcomes. Olle Folke, Torsten Persson, and Johanna Rickne therefore assess the economic implications of individuals' rise to positions of local political power in Sweden for their close relatives. While such effects have previously been observed in the Philippines (Fafchamps and Labonne, 2014) and Italy (Gagliarducci and Manacorda, 2014), Sweden arguably reflects a context of substantially higher transparency and institutional quality. Even so, Folke et al. document substantial effects. That is, getting elected mayor in a close election, rather than becoming the opposition leader, boosts the average yearly earnings of a politician's child –

though not his/her siblings – by 10 percent of a full-time median wage. Given the Swedish institutional setting, these results are highly unlikely to arise from outright corruption or rent extraction. In fact, Folke et al. illustrate that the Swedish effects do not reflect higher probabilities to obtain public sector jobs, are strongly concentrated at the lower end of the earnings distribution, and arise conditional on living in the same municipality as the parent. Combined with the finding that children of first-time (narrowly-elected) mayors are less likely to become students, this suggests that their observed boost in earnings is due to the behaviour of the children themselves – i.e., they stay ‘home’ to work instead of leaving to pursue higher education – rather than possibly illegitimate decisions of local politicians.

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