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Fiva, J. H., & Smith, D. M. (2018). Political Dynasties and the Incumbency Advantage in Party-Centered Environments. *American Political Science Review*, 112(3), 706-712.
doi:10.1017/S0003055418000047

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Political Dynasties and the Incumbency Advantage in Party-Centered Environments*

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January 17, 2018

Abstract

A handful of recent studies have investigated the causal effect of incumbency on dynasty formation in candidate-centered electoral contexts. We use candidate-level data and a regression discontinuity design to estimate the incumbency advantage and its relation to dynasty formation in the party-centered, closed-list proportional representation setting of Norway. The results indicate that the incumbency advantage exists even in this party-centered environment; however, in contrast to recent findings for the United States and the Philippines, we find no evidence that incumbency is important to the formation of dynasties. This finding underscores the need for more research into the role of internal party organizational networks in the perpetuation of political dynasties.

Keywords: incumbency advantage, dynasties, regression discontinuity design, Norway

*Jon Fiva gratefully acknowledges the hospitality of the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard, and the Centre for the Study of Equality, Social Organization, and Performance (ESOP) at the Department of Economics at the University of Oslo. We also thank Colleen Driscoll, Ross Friedman, Anna Gomez, Anna Menzel, Megan Mers, Oscar Pedersen, and Anthony Ramicone for data collection assistance, and Henning Finseraas, Askill Halse, Joan Ricart-Huguet, Johanna Rickne, Øyvind Skorge, Carlos Velasco Rivera, anonymous referees, and workshop participants at ISF (Oslo), NTNU (Trondheim), Princeton University, the University of Copenhagen, the University of Nottingham, and the University of Oslo for helpful comments.

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What explains the persistence of political dynasties in democracies?¹ A considerable presence of dynasties has been documented in democracies as diverse as the U.S. (Feinstein, 2010), Japan (Asako et al., 2015), Ireland (Smith and Martin, 2017), and India (Chandra, 2016), and a growing body of research attempts to uncover the mechanisms behind this phenomenon. A prominent explanation points to the electoral advantages of a dynastic background, suggesting that dynastic ties might function in a way that is similar to the well-known incumbency advantage. The incumbency advantage includes the direct advantages of being in office (such as name recognition and experience), as well as the deterrence of high-quality challengers (e.g., Carson, Engstrom and Roberts, 2007). It is not difficult to imagine how a dynastic candidate, particularly one who immediately succeeds his or her family member in the same district, might “inherit” part of a predecessor’s incumbency advantage, which can thus be thought of as an *inherited incumbency advantage*.

Recent studies of the incumbency advantage estimate the causal effect of incumbency on future election outcomes through the use of regression discontinuity (RD) designs applied to close elections, where the “treatment” of winning office can be considered “as good as random” (Lee, 2008). In candidate-centered electoral systems—i.e., where votes are cast for individual candidates rather than party lists—the incumbency advantage is substantial (e.g., Fowler and Hall, 2014; Erikson and Titiunik, 2015, for the U.S.).

Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder (2009) similarly use the RD design to evaluate the causal effect of incumbency on the creation of a political dynasty in the context of historical U.S. congressional elections. Although holding office does not have an effect on the innate characteristics of a politician’s child or other relative, it certainly increases their connections and name recognition. For congresspersons who narrowly won their *first re-election*, the probability of having a family member serve in the future increased by 6 percentage points, on average, and up to 14 percentage points in the South. In the Philippines, where single-member district (SMD) elections are also used, Querubin (2016)

¹We define a “dynastic” politician in national offices as anyone who is related by blood or marriage to a politician who had previously served in national office.

finds that candidates who narrowly won their *first election* were 12 percentage points more likely to have a future relative serve in office. In other words, dynasty formation appears to become more likely the longer a (potential) founding member holds office, suggesting a “power-treatment” effect on elite families.²

These studies provide compelling evidence that incumbency and length of tenure play an important causal role in the creation of dynasties in candidate-centered environments. However, dynasties also exist in party-centered environments—viz. closed-list proportional representation (PR) systems—where votes are cast not for candidates but for parties, and thus where the underlying mechanism of name recognition of individual candidates, in theory, does not carry the same sort of electoral relevance as it does in candidate-centered environments (e.g., Carey and Shugart, 1995; Shugart, Valdini and Suominen, 2005). In such contexts, it is less clear whether and how incumbency relates to the probability of forming a dynasty. Moreover, a recent study by van Coppenolle (2017) finds no effect of first-term incumbent re-election on the probability of forming a dynasty using historical data from the U.K. House of Commons, which suggests that the “power-treatment” effect may not operate in the same way across different contexts.³

In this study, we apply an RD design adapted for use in PR list systems (Folke, 2014) to empirically investigate the relationship between incumbency and dynasties in the party-centered environment of closed-list PR elections in Norway. In the process, we first extend the incumbency advantage literature from a candidate-centered environment, where it has been extensively studied, to a party-centered environment, where surprisingly little scholarship exists.⁴ Because Norway’s closed-list system excludes preferential voting for candidates, voters’ decisions are, in theory, based more on evaluations of parties and those

²Rossi (2017) reaches a similar conclusion with a different approach and data from Argentina.

³van Coppenolle (2017, pp. 21-22) conjectures that one reason for the null effect in historical U.K. elections (1837 to 1910) may be the fact that dynasties were more prolific in the U.K. than the U.S., so perhaps crowded out opportunities for new dynasties to form.

⁴A few studies, such as Golden and Picci (2015) and Kotakorpi, Poutvaara and Terviö (2017), investigate the phenomenon in (open) list systems with preferential voting. Using parties as the unit of analysis (rather than candidates), Liang (2013) identifies a party incumbency advantage under closed-list PR in Swedish local elections.

parties' policy programs than on the candidates on the lists.⁵ Moreover, a candidate's rank position, and thus how likely he or she is to win a seat, is determined by the party, not voters. We provide the first empirical evidence using an RD design of an incumbency advantage for individual politicians in a party-centered, closed-list PR system.

We then test whether there is an inherited incumbency advantage under Norway's party-centered system. As noted, RD designs have previously been used to identify a causal effect of incumbency on dynasty formation in candidate-centered SMD contexts. Norway's closed-list PR system is theoretically more party-centered than these contexts, yet dynastic politicians still account for roughly 7 percent of members of parliament (MPs)—a proportion that is comparable to the U.S. (Feinstein, 2010; Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder, 2009). Does the emergence of dynasties in a party-centered environment like Norway operate in the same fashion as it does in candidate-centered environments? We find no evidence that it does. We discuss the implications of these novel empirical findings in the context of existing studies, and spell out directions for future research.

Institutional setting and data

Our dataset includes all candidates who ran in the 18 national legislative elections between 1945 and 2013 (elections are every four years).⁶ For the sample we analyze, there are 19-20 districts with a median magnitude of seven seats. In all parties, nominations and list order are determined by local conventions attended by party delegates (Valen, 1988). The re-nomination of former candidates, including incumbents, is not automatic. Party identification among voters is high: roughly 70 percent in the early postwar period, and around 50 percent by the 1980s (Bengtsson et al., 2013, p. 71). We limit our analysis to candidates in the eight main parties: Labor Party (DNA), Liberal Party (V), Socialist Left Party (SV), Conservative Party (H), Communist Party (NKP), Christian Democrats

⁵This does not mean that voters do not recognize or care about candidates, particularly those at the top of their preferred party's list (cf., Bengtsson et al., 2013, pp. 88-89).

⁶The dataset is described in Fiva and Smith (2017). The total number of observations (candidates) in the dataset is 49,480. For longitudinal trends in the number of candidates, see Appendix Figure A.3.

(KrF), Progress Party (FrP), and Center Party (SP).⁷

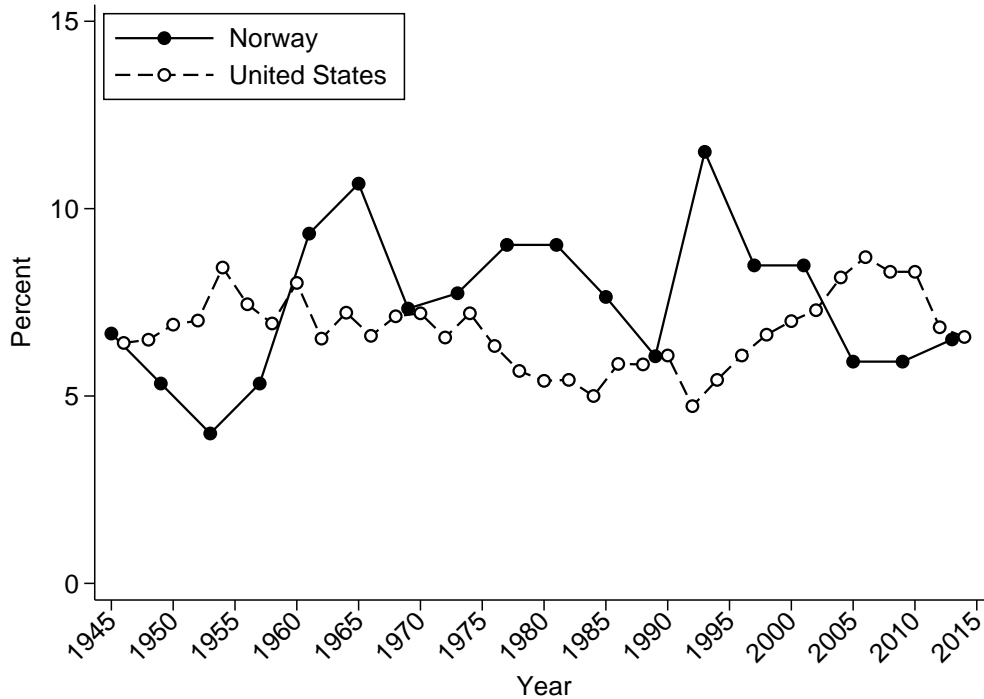


Figure 1: Political dynasties in Norway and the United States, 1945-2015.

Note: Trend line represents the proportion of legislators who were related to a previously-elected legislator or cabinet minister, and includes relationships to those who served prior to 1945. For comparison, we plot the trend for the U.S. House of Representatives; U.S. data are compiled from replication data for Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder (2009), and updated using the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress.

Party vote counts at the district level allow us to measure how close each candidate was to winning (losing) a seat, given the number of votes and seats won by each party and the candidate’s list position. Biographical data for all cabinet ministers, MPs, and deputy MPs serving at least 100 days during a term come from the *Archive of Politicians* at the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD).⁸ Importantly for our purposes, this dataset also includes information on family ties between politicians. Figure 1 shows the proportion of Norwegian MPs after each election who were related to a formerly serving MP or cabinet minister. For comparison, the figure also plots the proportion in the U.S.

⁷Party-wise patterns in seat shares and dynastic membership are illustrated in (online) Appendix Figure A.1 and Figure A.2, respectively. The largest parties are DNA and H. Dynasties are most common in DNA, H, SP, and KrF.

⁸These data go back to 1814, the first election, but are most complete for MPs elected since 1945.

House of Representatives over the same time period. In both countries, the proportion has remained relatively stable—between 5 and 10 percent.

We construct a variable, *Family member winning future seat*, which is a dummy variable equal to one if a candidate has a relative who becomes an MP or cabinet minister in the future.⁹ For elected candidates, this variable accurately captures dynastic ties. For unsuccessful candidates, we lack systematic biographical data unless the candidate served as a deputy, or won a seat in a different election. Luckily, the Norwegian system of designating the runners-up as deputies means that information on family ties for the vast majority of marginally unsuccessful candidates is also available. We extensively searched online records for biographical information on the remaining candidates who were next in line to win a seat, which delivered several additional cases of family ties.

Before proceeding to our RD strategy, we report the results of a simple OLS regression of the relationship between political power and dynasty formation (*Family member winning future seat*). In addition to length of tenure (*Terms served*), we explore the correlation with having ever been ranked first on the party list (*First-ranked*) and having ever served in cabinet (*Cabinet experience*).¹⁰ The full results are presented in Appendix Table A.1.¹¹ Because these power-related variables may be correlated with each other as well as dynasty formation, we explore them each separately, then all together. All three variables correlate positively with dynastic succession; however, in the joint specification, there is no longer a statistically significant association for seniority (*Terms served*), and the point estimate is small (0.007). These correlations suggest that cabinet experience (point estimate = 0.053 in the joint specification) and being list leader (point estimate = 0.040) may be particularly important for forming a dynasty in Norway’s party-centered environment, but beg the question of whether incumbency or length of tenure in office matter at all, in contrast to previous findings in candidate-centered environments. To

⁹This variable also accounts for one dynastic MP who was newly elected in 2017.

¹⁰We restrict the sample to the final observation of MPs leaving office between 1945-1997 because the proportion with a future relative drops off after 1997 (Appendix Figure A.4), suggesting that there has not yet been sufficient time for posterior relatives to appear.

¹¹Appendix Table A.2 provides descriptive statistics for this sample.

pin down the causal effect of incumbency on dynasty formation we must rely on the RD design.

Estimation Strategy

Our data sample for the RD design is based on candidates running in the 1953-1981 period (13,306 candidate-year observations).¹² We limit the sample to this period for two reasons. First, we need a sufficiently large period *after* candidates have run in order for family members to (potentially) appear in the data. Second, we want to avoid complicating the analysis with a 1953 reform where the Modified Sainte-Laguë seat allocation method replaced D’Hondt, a 1989 reform that introduced adjustment seats, and the 1985 election, in which parties were allowed to form joint lists.¹³

Candidates can be broadly classified as belonging to one of three categories: those with 1) a safe position, 2) some chance of winning, and 3) virtually no chance of winning. For our purposes, only the second group is relevant.¹⁴ In two-party SMD elections, it is straightforward to measure electoral closeness, since a predefined threshold (50 percent of the total vote count) decides the winner. In multi-member PR elections, this is more complicated, since the number of seats a party wins depends on the vote counts of *all* parties, and there is no predefined threshold to win an additional seat. As a measure of closeness, Folke (2014) proposes to measure the distance to a seat threshold as the minimum total vote change across all parties that would be required for a party to experience a seat change. We implement this measure (*Win Margin*) to capture how close a marginal candidate was to losing (winning) a seat.¹⁵

¹²In 1973, four candidates ran simultaneously in two districts. We keep only the observation in which they performed best.

¹³Our main results are insensitive to the choice of time window.

¹⁴Appendix Figure A.5 gives the frequency of observations as a function of rank distance to the marginally elected. In our sample, 11 percent of candidates (1,521 observations) are *marginal*. Appendix Table A.3 provides descriptive statistics for this sample.

¹⁵Appendix Figure A.6 gives the frequency of observations. There is no evidence of sorting around the threshold, a potential problem with the “as good as random” assumption of RD designs in SMD settings (Caughey and Sekhon, 2011; Eggers et al., 2015). This is not surprising, since it is essentially impossible to predict exactly where seat thresholds are going to be in multi-member proportional representation

Our baseline empirical specification is a local linear regression of the form:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \textit{Seat}_i + \beta_2 \textit{Win Margin}_i + \beta_3 \textit{Win Margin}_i * \textit{Seat}_i + \xi_i, \quad (1)$$

where \textit{Seat}_i (incumbency treatment) is a dummy equal to one that is deterministically assigned to candidate i in election t if he or she has a positive win margin and therefore wins a regular (non-deputy) seat in parliament. Equation (1) allows the slope of the regression line to differ on either side of the cut-off by including interaction terms between $\textit{Win Margin}$ and \textit{Seat} . ξ_i is an error term. We cluster standard errors at the candidate level.¹⁶

Y_i represents one of four outcome variables: 1) a dummy variable equal to one if candidate i runs in the subsequent election; 2) a dummy variable equal to one if candidate i wins a seat in the subsequent election; 3) the total number of terms served by candidate i (including partial terms based on days served as a deputy MP); or 4) a dummy variable equal to one if candidate i has a family member who ever wins a seat in the future. In the first two cases, β_1 estimates the average *incumbency advantage* in a “sharp” RD framework.¹⁷

In our analysis of the *inherited incumbency advantage*, we consider the third case, where *terms served* is the outcome variable, as the first-stage equation. This equation estimates how tenure in office changes with seat status in the current election. In the fourth case, where *family member winning future seat* is the outcome variable, β_1 is a reduced form estimate which pins down how the probability of having a family member serving in the future depends on a candidate’s seat status in the current election. The *local average treatment effect* of serving one additional term can be recovered by dividing this estimate by the discontinuity jump in the first-stage equation, i.e., using a “fuzzy” elections (Fiva, Folke and Sørensen, 2018). Appendix Figure A.7 shows McCrary density plots (McCrary, 2008).

¹⁶If we alternatively cluster at the district level, it yields standard errors of similar magnitudes.

¹⁷Some runners-up will serve at least some time as deputies and thus receive (partial) treatment of office (see Appendix Figure A.8). In our analysis of the inherited incumbency advantage, any time served as a deputy is included in the first-stage equation.

RD framework (Lee and Lemieux, 2010).

Results

We first present graphical evidence using a common bandwidth of 5 percentage points for *Win Margin*. Figure 2 gives the RD plots based on candidates' contemporaneous (election t) win margin for each of the four outcome variables. We plot local averages of the outcome variables calculated within bins of half a percentage point, and fit separate regression lines on each side of the discontinuity. The vertical line represents a “zero” win margin, and indicates the transition from candidates who marginally lost to those who marginally won.

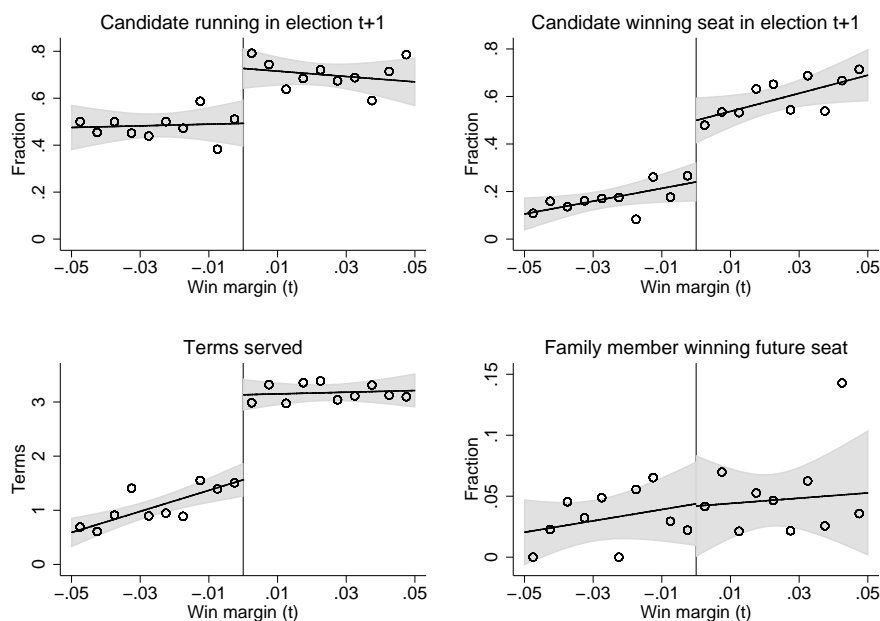


Figure 2: RD plots of incumbency advantage and inherited incumbency advantage.

Note: Sample restricted to candidates from the main parties who are less than 5 percentage points away from the seat threshold ($N=792$). Each bin represents an interval of half a percentage point. Separate linear regression lines are estimated to the left and right of the discontinuity using the underlying data, not the binned scatterpoints. Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

There is clear evidence of an incumbency advantage. In the top-left panel of Figure 2, we see that winning a seat in the current election increases a candidate's probability

of running again in the next election. Moreover, the top-right panel indicates that the probability of winning in the next election roughly doubles. Note that this calculation includes all candidates who ran at election t (i.e., it is not conditional on running at $t + 1$).¹⁸ The bottom-left panel shows that the total number of terms served appears to jump from about 1.5 to 3.0 at the cut-off. When it comes to the inherited incumbency advantage, however, there is no clear evidence that winning a seat has a causal effect on the future political careers of family members. The bottom-right panel indicates that the probability of having a family member winning a seat in the future is about 0.04 for both marginal losers and marginal winners close to the cut-off.

In Table 1, we give the regression results using the mean-square-error optimal bandwidth for each model as suggested by the algorithm developed by Calonico et al. (2017). The first column provides the baseline results based on Equation (1). In Columns (2)-(5), we sequentially add fixed effects for year, party, district, and list rank to the model specifications. Finally, the specification in Column (6) adds a set of control variables for occupation and gender.

Consistent with the graphical evidence, the results show evidence of a substantial incumbency advantage—about 24 percentage points (Panel B, Column 1)—for a marginally elected candidate. The estimate is statistically significant and insensitive to the inclusion of controls (cf. Columns 2-6). The results from Panel A in Table 1 suggest that a large part of this advantage comes from re-nomination.¹⁹ For a marginally elected candidate, the probability of being on the ballot in the next election increases by about 23 percentage points (Panel A, Column 1).²⁰ In Panel C, we provide the results for the

¹⁸Appendix Figure A.9 documents that the advantage persists for one subsequent election, but then appears to fade. We do not find any systematic pattern between current win margin and seat status in previous elections (cf. Appendix Figure A.10).

¹⁹In Appendix Figure A.11, we find no causal effect on getting a *better* list position in the next election, however, there is a strong effect on the probability of becoming the *top-ranked candidate*. It appears that top-ranked candidates who marginally fail to win a seat often do not get re-nominated in the top rank (if nominated at all), while top-ranked candidates who do win *maintain* their position.

²⁰While the RD design makes it straightforward to estimate the effect of winning *unconditional on running*, estimating the conditional effect requires addressing selection into future candidacy. In Appendix C, we follow Anagol and Fujiwara (2016) and estimate bounds on the incumbency effect conditional on candidacy. Conditioning on running again at $t + 1$, we estimate an upper (lower) bound of 33 (10) percentage points.

Table 1: RD estimates of incumbency advantage and inherited incumbency advantage.

Panel A: Candidate running in next election						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
RD estimate	0.243 (0.077)	0.245 (0.076)	0.261 (0.075)	0.259 (0.075)	0.262 (0.076)	0.257 (0.077)
R ²	0.054	0.063	0.101	0.137	0.152	0.167
N	627	627	627	627	627	627
Bandwidth	0.038	0.038	0.038	0.038	0.038	0.038
Panel B: Candidate winning seat in next election						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
RD estimate	0.239 (0.063)	0.243 (0.064)	0.271 (0.062)	0.264 (0.064)	0.269 (0.064)	0.262 (0.064)
R ²	0.199	0.206	0.261	0.287	0.297	0.303
N	774	774	774	774	774	774
Bandwidth	0.049	0.049	0.049	0.049	0.049	0.049
Panel C: Number of terms served						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
RD estimate	1.568 (0.220)	1.566 (0.217)	1.677 (0.207)	1.595 (0.209)	1.594 (0.203)	1.606 (0.203)
R ²	0.327	0.339	0.393	0.463	0.496	0.503
N	728	728	728	728	728	728
Bandwidth	0.046	0.046	0.046	0.046	0.046	0.046
Panel D: Family member winning future seat						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
RD estimate	-0.004 (0.023)	-0.005 (0.024)	-0.016 (0.022)	-0.014 (0.020)	-0.016 (0.019)	-0.015 (0.020)
R ²	0.005	0.010	0.050	0.093	0.100	0.129
N	983	983	983	983	983	983
Bandwidth	0.066	0.066	0.066	0.066	0.066	0.066
Year FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Party FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
District FE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rank FE	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	No	No	No	No	Yes

Note: Each cell represent RD estimates based on equation (1) using the mean-squared-error optimal bandwidth calculated by the Calonico et al. (2017) algorithm. In Column 6, we include dummies for candidates' gender and prior occupation (see Appendix Figure A.15). All specifications include separate linear control functions on each side of the discontinuity. Standard errors clustered at the candidate level are in parentheses.

number of terms served, which can be considered our first-stage equation. We find that a narrowly won seat increases the number of terms served by 1.6. Finally, in Panel D, we provide results for the inherited incumbency advantage. The estimated effects are close to zero, and insignificant in all specifications. Using a fuzzy RD, we estimate a local average treatment effect of *servng one more term* of -0.009, with a confidence interval that excludes substantial positive effects.²¹

Remarks

In this study, we provide the first empirical test using a regression discontinuity design of whether an individual incumbency advantage—as documented in numerous candidate-centered contexts—exists in a party-centered, closed-list PR system: it does. We also provide the first such test of whether an inherited incumbency advantage—as documented in a few recent studies using data from candidate-centered contexts—exists in such a party-centered system: we find no evidence that it does. We offer two interpretations of our empirical null findings for the relationship between incumbency and dynasty formation—both of which point to internal party networks as the mechanism behind the creation of dynasties in party-centered contexts like Norway.

First, it appears that there are many failed candidates whose relatives nonetheless go on to get elected in the future. Since list rank, and thus one’s probability of getting elected, depends on the decisions of the party’s local nominating conventions—not primary election voters, as in the United States—it should perhaps not be surprising that an active candidate who narrowly misses out on getting elected might still have close enough ties to party activists to result in his or her relatives’ being better placed in

²¹The 95% confidence interval for *terms served* ranges from -0.034 to 0.016 (see Column (6) in Appendix Table A.4). This finding is robust to varying the bandwidth around the seat threshold (see Appendix Figure A.12). As an additional robustness check, we also test a proxy measure of family ties based on common last names of candidates in the same district or party over time, as in Querubin (2016). These results again provide no clear evidence that incumbency has a causal effect on the future political careers of family members (see Appendix B). The results are also consistent if we restrict the sample to candidates who were never previously elected or marginal (Appendix Figure A.13), or first-time candidates only (Appendix Figure A.14).

future nomination decisions. The fact that candidate selection is by law decentralized to local party organizations may contribute to this network effect. For example, Valen (1988, p. 220) notes that “Norwegians do not ‘run for office.’ Candidacies are expected to emerge from active participation in party work.” List balance on geography and group interests tends to be achieved through lower-ranked candidates, while those at the top of the list tend to be selected on the basis of characteristics like “platform abilities” and enjoying “confidence within the party.” Would-be dynastic candidates are likely to have a leg up on these characteristics.

An additional factor that may explain our null findings for the inherited incumbency advantage is that the dominant families in Norwegian politics tend to occupy safe list positions. About half (48%) of the senior members of dynasties in our full sample are never close enough to the cut-off for winning or losing a seat to be included in our estimation sample. Rather, the OLS results suggest that they are important movers and shakers in the party organization and leadership. While about 4 percent of MPs with no cabinet experience had a relative follow them into office as an MP, nearly 12 percent of cabinet ministers had a relative in parliament. Similarly, 8 percent of MPs who were at any time ranked at the top of their party list during their tenure were followed into parliament by a family member, compared to just 2 percent of MPs who were never list leaders.²²

Our take on these correlations is that cabinet promotion and being list leader may be particularly useful for establishing a dynasty in party-centered contexts like Norway, while serving many terms perhaps not. On the other hand, it is important to consider that the types of politicians who are likely to achieve such high positions in the party and government may *ex ante* possess the qualities (personal character, education, expertise, etc.) that make them valuable to parties. If these qualities are at all heritable, then their family members may be of similar high quality. Since our RD design does not give

²²Among the dynastic MPs in the full sample (1945-2013), 60 percent were themselves top-ranked, compared to 51 percent of non-dynastic MPs. In total, 7 percent of MPs are dynastic, but among those who were top-ranked on their party list, 9 percent are dynastic.

variation in cabinet promotion or rank, this may be one reason why we do not detect a stronger treatment effect of incumbency on the formation of political dynasties.

Our null finding for the inherited incumbency advantage in the party-centered context of Norway is both theoretically and empirically important for understanding the formation of dynasties in comparative perspective. Political dynasties are a common phenomenon in many democracies, but the exact mechanisms involved in their perpetuation appear to differ depending on the institutional context. Compared to the larger and statistically significant effects that have been estimated in candidate-centered contexts like the U.S. and the Philippines, the null finding from Norway suggests that incumbency plays a smaller explanatory role in the mechanisms underlying dynastic politics in countries with strong party organizations and party-centered voting. Combined with the absence of an effect in the United Kingdom (van Coppenolle, 2017), our results suggest a need for more comparative investigations across different institutional contexts, and additional time periods.

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