

# Parties' Strategic Behavior as a Source of Incumbency Advantage: An Analysis of Spanish Senatorial Elections in the Post-Franco Era

Elena Llaudet ♦ Harvard University ♦ ellaudet@fas.harvard.edu

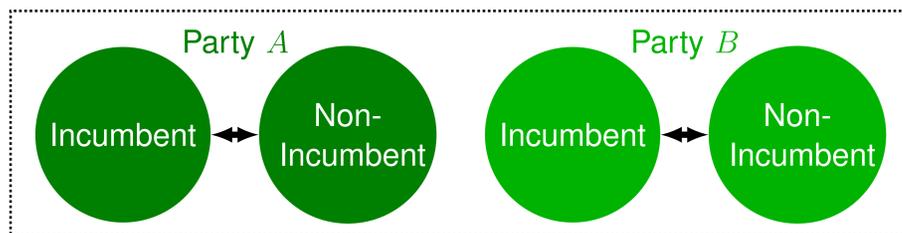
## OVERVIEW

The literature on incumbency advantage has focused primarily on the actions of politicians and not parties. In this paper, I find that most of the incumbency advantage in Spanish senatorial elections comes from the strategic behavior of parties. In particular, I argue that Spanish parties place favored, vulnerable incumbents first on the ballot to boost their chances of electoral success. In some circumstances, this position on the ballot alone improves the probability of the candidate's election by 68 percentage points. The resulting incumbency advantage is estimated to be responsible for the reelection of 81 senators in the last nine elections.

## METHODOLOGY

To estimate the incumbency advantage of senators in Spain, I use the method introduced by Hirano and Snyder (2009):

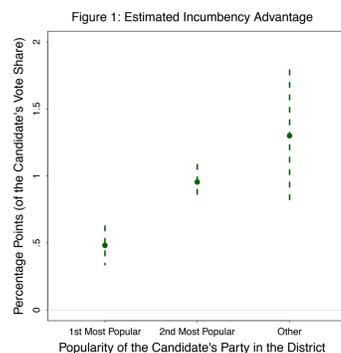
Electoral Results in District  $d$  at Time  $t$ :



Exploiting the multi-member district system of the Senate in Spain, I estimate the advantage of incumbents over their challengers by comparing their electoral outcomes to those of the non-incumbents running from the same party in the same race.

## SIZE AND PATTERNS OF INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

- The average incumbency advantage of Spanish senators is estimated at .7 percentage points of a candidate's vote share
- Besides its small magnitude, it is estimated to be responsible for the reelection of 81 senators in the last nine elections (out of 765)
- The size of the incumbency advantage is estimated to increase as the popularity of the party in the district decreases (See Figure 1)

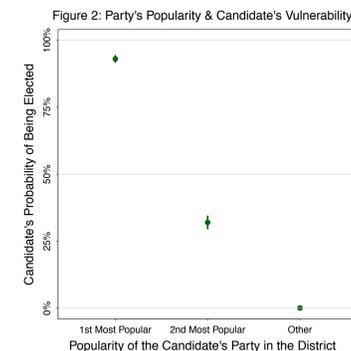


## WHAT IS THE SOURCE?

I argue that the observed incumbency advantage comes from the strategic behavior of the parties. In particular, I argue that parties work hard to position vulnerable incumbents first on the ballot so as to boost their chances of electoral success. Here are the different pieces of the argument:

### In Spanish Senatorial Elections, the Popularity of a Candidate's Party in the District is a Strong Predictor of the Candidate's Vulnerability

- Candidates of the most popular party are almost guaranteed to be elected. They tend to take all except one of the seats in the district
- Candidates of the second most popular party usually end up competing among themselves for the remaining seat. Whoever ends up winning does so by a small margin
- While incumbents of the most popular party are not vulnerable, those of the second most popular party are highly vulnerable

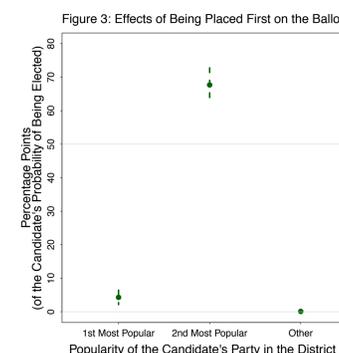


### There are Large Ballot Positional Effects

- Candidates listed first on the ballot receive a vote share .5 percentage points higher than co-partisans listed second on the list
- Candidates listed third on the ballot receive a vote share .3 percentage points lower than co-partisans listed second

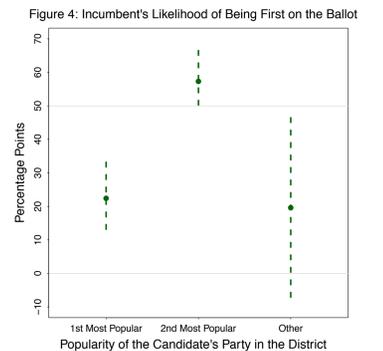
### Ballot Positional Effects are Especially Consequential for Vulnerable Incumbents

- For candidates of the second most popular party, being placed first on the ballot increases their probability of electoral success by 68 percentage points (See Figure 3)
- For the rest of the candidates, ballot positioning has small to no consequences



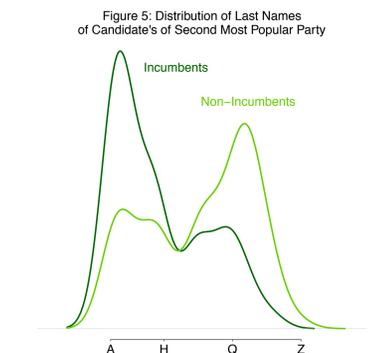
### Vulnerable Incumbents are Very Likely to be First on the Ballot

- Incumbents from the second most popular party are 58 percentage points more likely to be placed first on the ballot than their co-partisan non-incumbents (See Figure 4)
- Generally speaking, how likely incumbents are to be placed first on the ballot highly correlates with how much of a benefit such a position confers the candidate given the popularity of the party (Compare Figures 3 and 4)



### Accomplishing this Requires a Specific and Deliberate Candidate Selection Process from the Part of the Party Leaders

- In the elections under study, the placing of the candidates on the ballot was done by law in alphabetical order of last names
- In order to ensure that a vulnerable incumbent be placed first on the ballot, parties had to choose his or her co-partisans based, at least in part, on last name
- Figure 5 shows the distribution of last names of incumbents and non-incumbents of the second most popular party in the district



### The Strategic Placing of Incumbents on the Ballot Explains Almost All of the Observed Incumbency Advantage

- This is especially true for incumbents of the second most popular party in the district (See Figure 6)
- The incumbency advantage observed in parties that are neither of the two most popular seems to come from a different source. I would argue that these parties cannot rely on their popularity to get their candidates

elected and thus their incumbents tend to be popular at a personal level. Fewer than 8% of incumbents are from "other parties"

