Five Laws of Politics: A Follow-Up

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ABSTRACT

In this follow-up to "Five Laws of Politics," I show that the original estimates of electoral outcomes describing the five "laws" hold up with twice the number of elections and three times as many countries as in the original article. The analysis yields long-run equilibrium values for several electoral parameters that set limits to incumbent support in a democracy. The evidence lends additional support to the notion that elections in democracies appear as if governed by "laws of politics."

In "Five Laws of Politics" (Cuzán 2015), an analysis of 426 elections in 23 presidential and parliamentary democracies drawn from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development members and Latin America revealed the following invariant or nearly invariant patterns: (1) *Law of Minority Rule*. On average, 75% of the electorate turned out to vote, of whom 42% marked their ballots for the incumbents—the president's or prime minister's party— which yields a support rate of less than one third of the electorate. (2) *Law of Incumbent Advantage*. Incumbents win reelection 60% of the time. (3) *Law of Shrinking Support*, also known as "the cost of ruling" (Budge et al. 2012; Nannestad and Paldam 1999; Wlezien 2017). The incumbents incur a loss of support between elections averaging 4 percentage points. (4) *Law of the 60% Maximum*. The incumbent party candidate succeeded at crashing that ceiling in fewer

than 3% of cases. (5) *Law of Partials*. No single party or coalition of parties can harmonize the diversity of interests and opinions of the electorate. The democratic synthesis is produced by competing parties taking turns at governing (Budge et al. 2012). On average, any one party serves two terms for a total of eight years in office.

The purpose of this follow-up article is twofold: (1) to present additional confirmatory evidence in support of the contention that there are, indeed, "laws" of politics[1]; and (2) to extract theoretical insights from the empirical findings. I argue that democracies appear to exhibit a general tendency toward equilibrium values in electoral outcomes. The findings derive from a dataset composed of twice as many elections (i.e., 971 versus 426)[2] and three times as many countries (i.e., 74 versus 23) as in the original article.[3] To be added to the original dataset, elections generally must have been held in countries in which for at least two decades ending in the most recent year their Freedom House (2018) ratings on political rights and civil liberties were no higher than 4 (i.e., Partly Free). However, in t some instances—usually in Africa, where democracies are scarce—this rule was relaxed if no more than in one or two nonelection years one of the ratings reached no higher than 5. Figure 1 displays the distribution of most countries across space and region.[4] Also, to avoid losing data on current administrations or governments, if an incumbent party was currently in its third or later term at the time of the analysis, its values on Terms, Outcome, Reign, and Maximum Vote were "right censored." That is, its values on Terms and Reign are counted as of the time they were observed for the analysis because they will not be any lower.

<Figure 1 about here>

FINDINGS

<I now proceed to analyze the data, first as averages over the entire period and then longitudinally, across time.

Statics

The descriptive statistics of the electoral variables are shown in table 1. The first column of data presents values for the entire dataset. These should be compared to those displayed in table 1 in Cuzán (2015, 417). The averages have budged only slightly, although the variation around the mean values has widened—an understandable difference given the range of democratic development in the countries covered in the more inclusive series. The mean values showing so little difference demonstrates that the original findings are robust with respect to the number and diversity of cases. This suggests that adding more countries or elections is unlikely to alter the parameter estimates. One benefit is that it may bring into relief regional patterns and variations with greater confidence than can be justified at present. Only the few that appear unlikely to be diluted with additional data are mentioned in this article.

On average, 75% of eligible voters turn out to vote, casting 40% of their ballots for the incumbents, which amounts to a "support rate" of not quite one third of the electorate (i.e., Law of Minority Rule). When victorious, the in-party typically (1) wins approximately 45% of the vote, which is around 4 percentage points higher than the opposition's share when it prevails; (2) is reelected nearly 60% of the time; and (3) serves two terms lasting about eight years (i.e., Law of Incumbent Advantage). This advantage notwithstanding, incumbents lose about 4 percentage points per term (i.e., Law of Shrinking Support),[5] and in only about 3% of cases does the in-party top the Law of the 60% Maximum.[6]

<Table 1 about here>

Compared to their counterparts in presidential systems, incumbents in parliamentary democracies face a larger electorate (i.e., turnout is higher); are reelected more often but with a smaller share of the vote; are constrained by a lower ceiling on that vote (i.e., presidential systems break the 60% ceiling twice as often as parliamentary systems); but incur a smaller loss between elections. Moreover, when the opposition wins, it also takes in a lower fraction of the vote than those in presidential systems.[7] However, there is no difference in the incumbents' share of the vote (win or lose), the number of consecutive terms they serve, or the length of their reigns.

As shown in figure 2, in almost two thirds of the cases, the vote share of incumbents is highest when they first are elected to office; another 25% peak in their first reelection; and only 10% crest in their second or later reelection. Figure 3 paints an even more dramatic picture, depicting a leftward-skewed distribution in which 80% of incumbents manage to obtain no more than 50% of the vote. Beyond that, their numbers fall precipitously. In fact, fewer than 10% take in more than 55% and, as mentioned previously, no more than 3% top 60% of the vote—with almost all of those outliers falling outside the developed democracies, in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Actually, some in the top 3% reflect opposition boycotts; at the very next contested election, the incumbents' share shrank drastically. Furthermore, in only nine countries does the Incumbent Vote *average* exceed 50%; all but one (i.e., Australia, 50.2%) are found outside of the developed democracies.[8]

<Figures 2 and 3 about here>

Dynamics

The longitudinal behavior of these variables, shown in figure 4 (Turnout and Incumbent Vote) and figure 5 (Incumbent Winning Vote and Opposition Winning Vote), all slightly drift

downward across time, although the R-sq. in all is small (≤0.05). Conversely, Incumbent Loss, Terms, and Reign are flat, as shown in figure 6. Turning to the developed democracies only, as a group they show no relationship between time and Turnout, Incumbent Loss, Terms, or Reign. However, figure 7 shows a secular decline among them in the Winning Vote for both the Incumbents and the Opposition, with the more pronounced decrease occurring in the former (R-sq.=0.19 and 0.07, respectively).[9]

<center>Figures 4–7 about here</center>

Although modest, the secular decline in Incumbent Vote in the developed democracies, where elections have been held continuously for three-quarters of a century or longer, may reflect a combination of a breakdown of old-party cohesion, erosion of an old-party brand, and an increasingly divided electorate, which makes it more difficult for erstwhile catchall parties to aggregate interests—probably not a good thing. Or, it may signal a more positive development because in most of these democracies, one party was dominant for many years. Taken together, these changes may mean that the political arena in the developed democracies has become more competitive. This may be regarded as a good thing because vigorous competition for votes among parties is a hallmark of modern mass democracy (Budge et al. 2012). Which of the two interpretations is closer to or encompasses a larger share of the truth of the matter remains to be seen.

DISCUSSION

The previous analysis suggests that in countries where there is sufficient freedom to contest them, election outcomes gravitate toward a set of parameters describing electoral equilibrium.[10] At equilibrium, the variables measuring incumbent support generally tend toward the following values: Support Rate (33%); Incumbent Vote (40%); Incumbent Winning Vote (45% in

parliamentary, 50% in presidential); the ceiling they are highly unlikely to break (60%);

Incumbent Loss in percentage points per term (-3 in parliamentary, -6 in presidential); their

reelection rate (50% in presidential, 60% in parliamentary); Terms (2); and Reign (8 years).

These parameters could be interpreted as the "natural" values toward which democracies incline,

fluctuating up and down in the long run.[11]

If indeed there are natural or equilibrium values in electoral outcomes, then we would

expect democracies that have been around a long time to be closer to them than those that have

not. As shown in figure 8, this appears to be the case. The range of values around the overall

average among the newer democracies (i.e., those with fewer elections) is 1.5 to 2.0 times as

large as that of the older democracies. (Outliers above the mean are mostly African and those

below it are a mix of Latin American and post-Communist European.) Furthermore, as shown in

figure 9, all regional trend lines on Incumbent converge. It is as if time acts as a funnel, drawing

toward the equilibrium level what initially had been widely dispersed country outcomes. From

figure 8, we can surmise that the threshold for reaching the equilibrium values appears to be

somewhere between 10 and 15 consecutive elections. Held on average every four years, it may

take about 40 years for the average values of at least some of the new democracies to approach

equilibrium. Nevertheless, the process may proceed faster in some and slower in other

democracies. It depends on the strength of friction encountered from electoral rules (Carey 2018;

Shugart and Taagepera 2017) and from country-specific contexts including political culture,

recent history, and exceptional leaders (Colomer 2010).

<Figures 8 and 9 about here>

Be that as it may, the evolution might proceed more or less as follows. The initial

elections may favor one party above all others due to, say, the prestige of its founding leader or

its history in the fight for independence or founding of democracy. Following the death or retirement of the leader or particular failures in policy, infighting among rival claims to the presidency or the premiership rooted in ideas, interests, and personal ambition would ensue, causing a split.[12] Starting at the other end, political entrepreneurs would seek to merge ideologically close parties that divide the vote of a large minority or plurality of the electorate into a larger, more competitive organization or alliance. We do occasionally observe party splits, mergers, and short-term as well as enduring alliances in various countries from time to time.[13]

CONCLUSION

This analysis appears to uphold the claim that elections in democracies are governed by a number of "laws" of politics constraining the share of support and, therefore, the time that an incumbent party can expect to exercise power in a single stretch. Although these "laws" may be largely a function of mechanical or statistical features of democratic institutions (Lebo and Norpoth 2007; Norpoth 2014; Shugart and Taagepera 2017; Stokes and Iverson 1962), their operation in specific cases is mediated by particular electoral rules and country-specific contexts, which are the product of history, culture, and political leadership. From the analysis, we may draw a specific recommendation for institutional reform: more frequent elections should aid the equilibrium-seeking processes of democracies.[14] Parliamentary democracies should consider holding elections no less often than every three years and presidential democracies no more than every four years, including off-year elections for the legislature halfway through the presidential term, as in the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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    Completeness of Coverage." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44 (2): 339–43.

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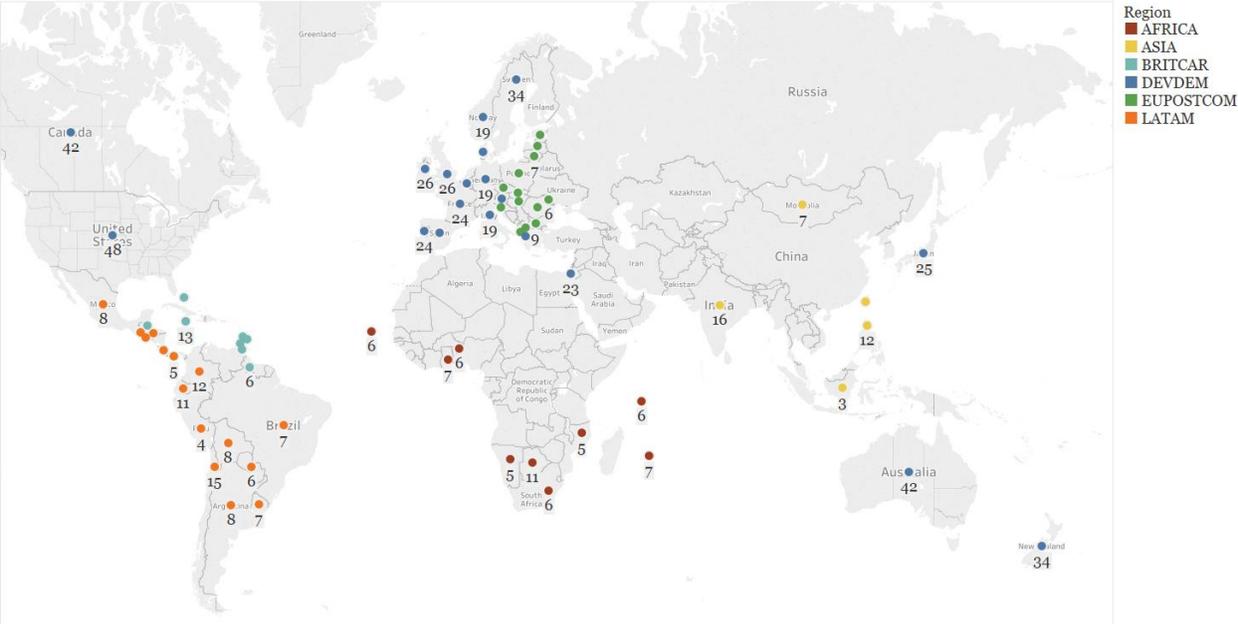
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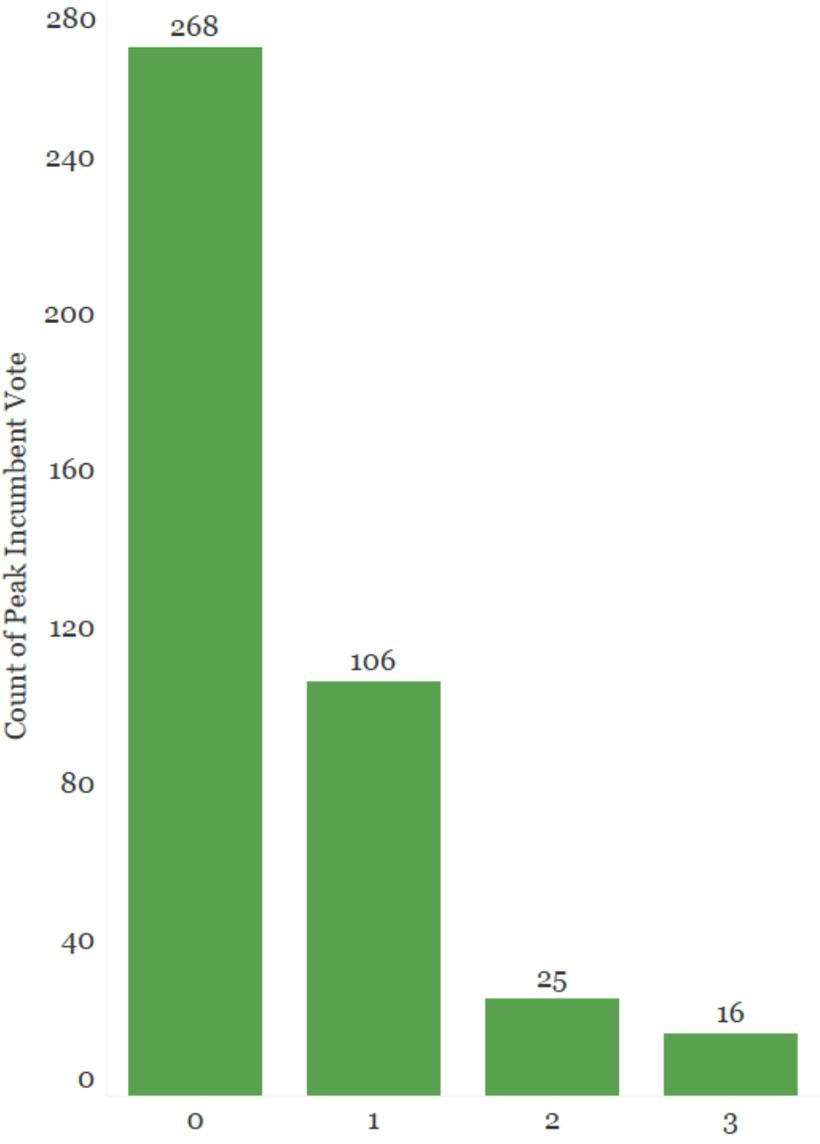| Table 1 Descriptive Statistics, All and by Type.			
	Total Countries=74 Elections=971 Outcomes=882 Inc. Vote=879	Parliamentary Countries=46[a] Elections=679 Outcomes=628 Inc. Votes=631	Presidential Countries=32[a] Elections=292 Outcomes=254 Inc. Votes=248
VARIABLE (%)	Mean (S.D. of population)		
Turnout	74 (13)	75 (13)	71 (13)
Support Rate	30 (11)	30 (11)	28 (11)
Incumbent Vote	40 (13)	40 (12)	41 (15)
Incumbent Winning Vote	46 (11)	44 (11)	50 (9)
Maximum Incumbent Vote	54 (14)	51 (15)	57 (11)
Incumbent Loss	-4.4 (10)	-3.6 (8.7)	-6.6 (13.1)
Reelection Rate (Outcome)	.57 (.50)	.61 (0.49)	.50 (0.52)
Terms	2.2 (1.8)	2.4 (2.0)	1.8 (1.1)
Reign (in years)	8.4 (6.8)	8.6 (7.6)	8.0 (4.9)
Incumbent Vote › 60%	3%	2%	6%
Opposition Winning Vote	42 (11)	41 (11)	43 (11)
Notes: [a]Both parliamentary and presidential elections are included for France, Poland, and Portugal. Also, three times the Israeli prime minister was elected on a nation-wide vote, and those elections are classified as "presidential."			

Figure 1. Map of Elections.

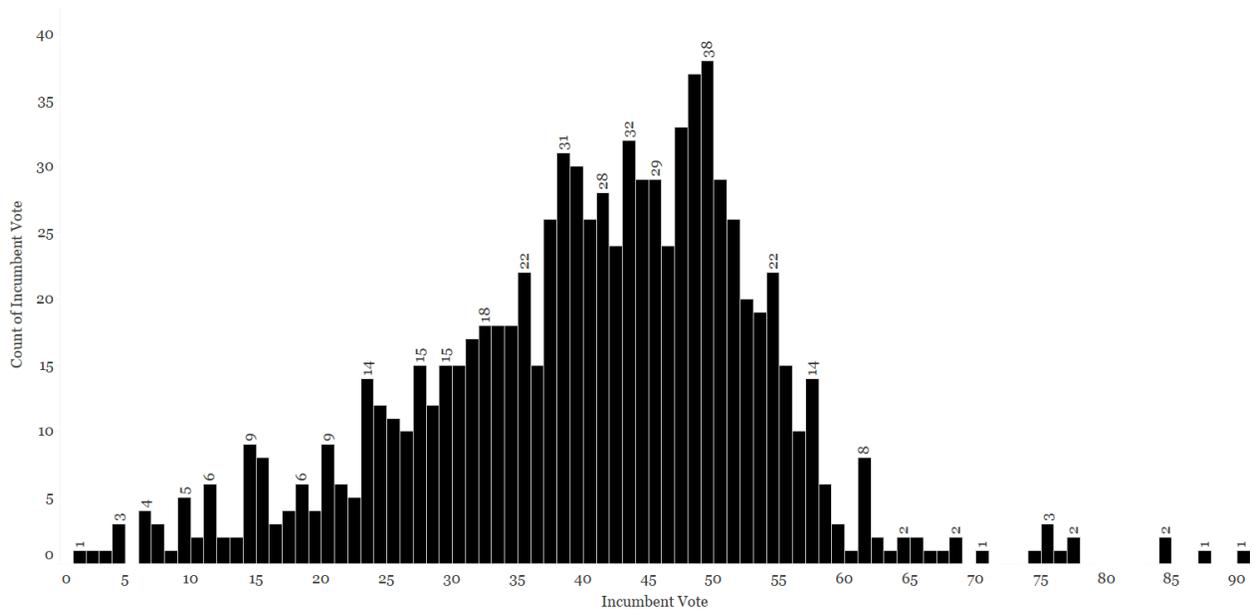Figure 3. Incumbent Vote Frequency Distribution.

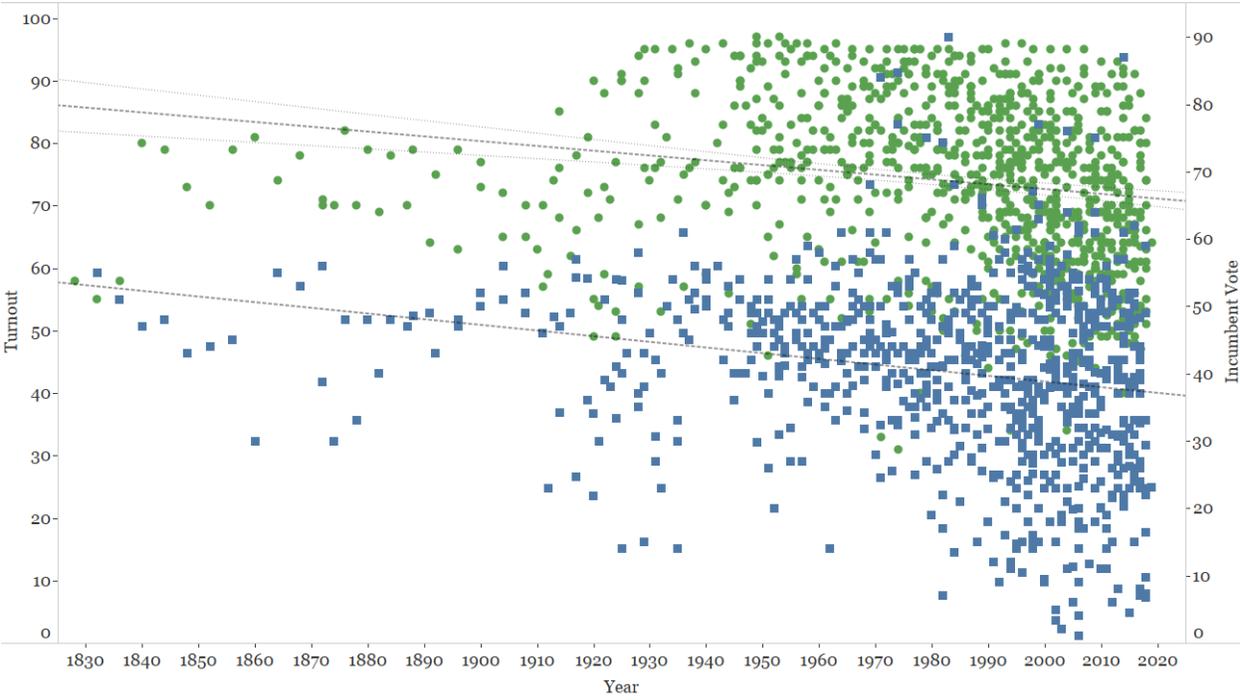Figure 4. Turnout and Incumbent Vote.
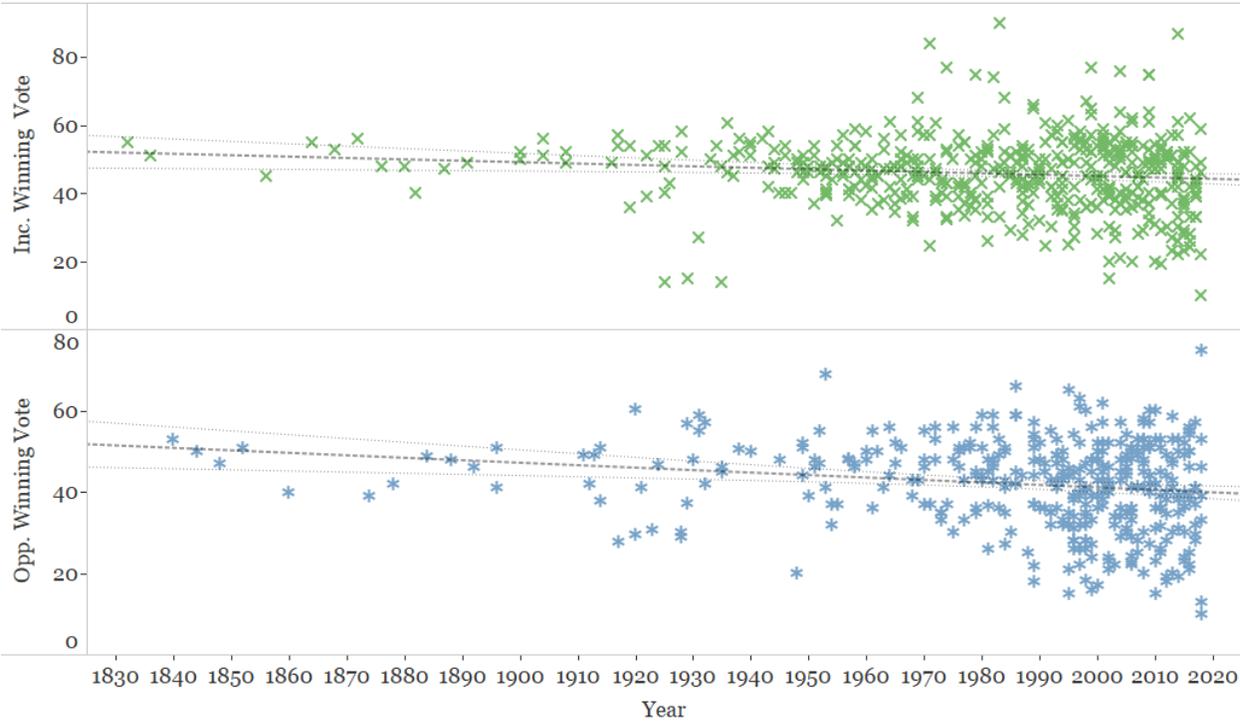
Figure 5. Winning Vote: Incumbent and Opposition

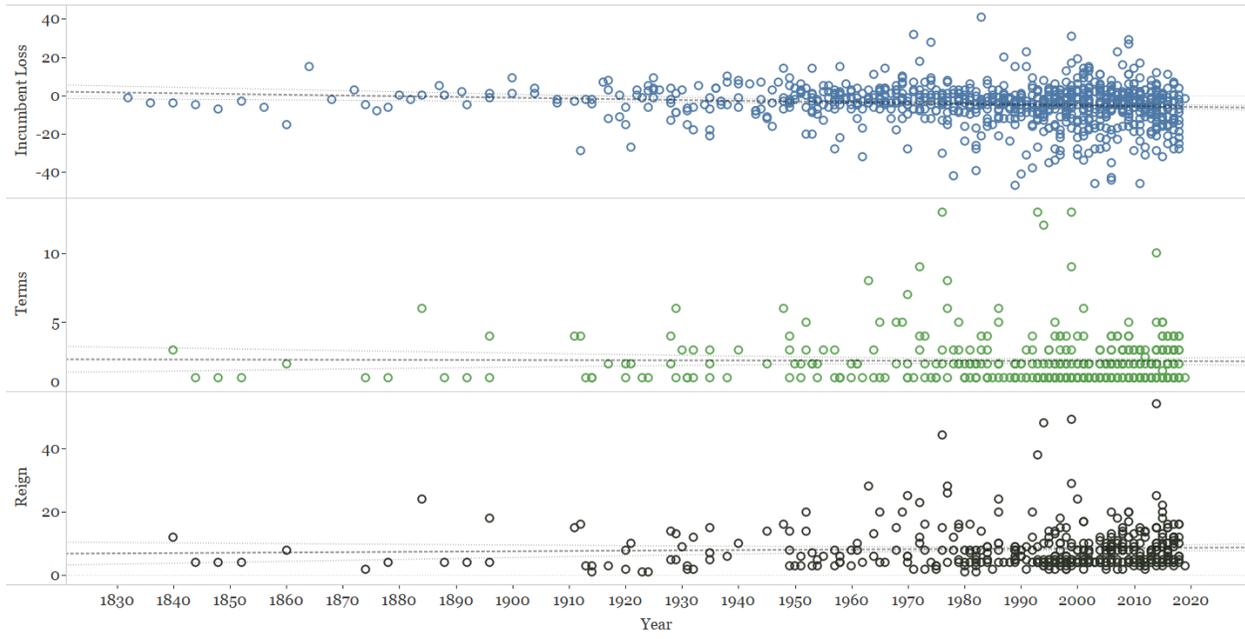Figure 6. Incumbent Loss, Terms, and Reign

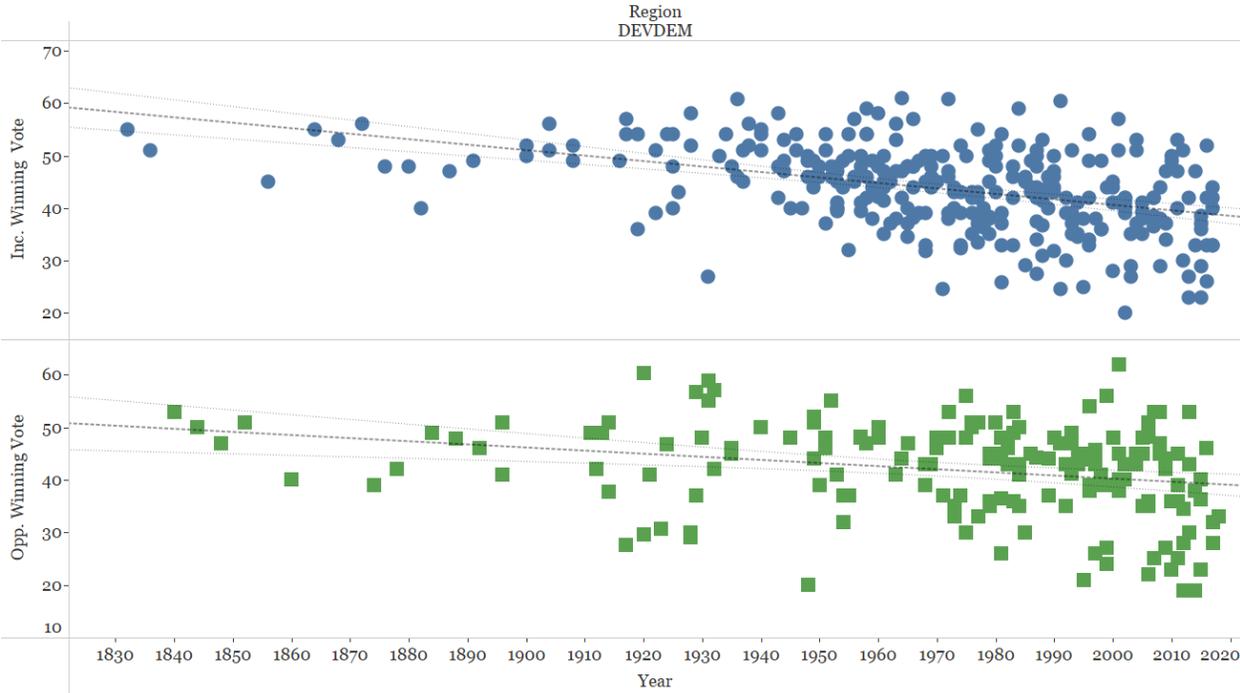Figure 7. Winning Vote, Incumbents and Opposition, Developed Democracies
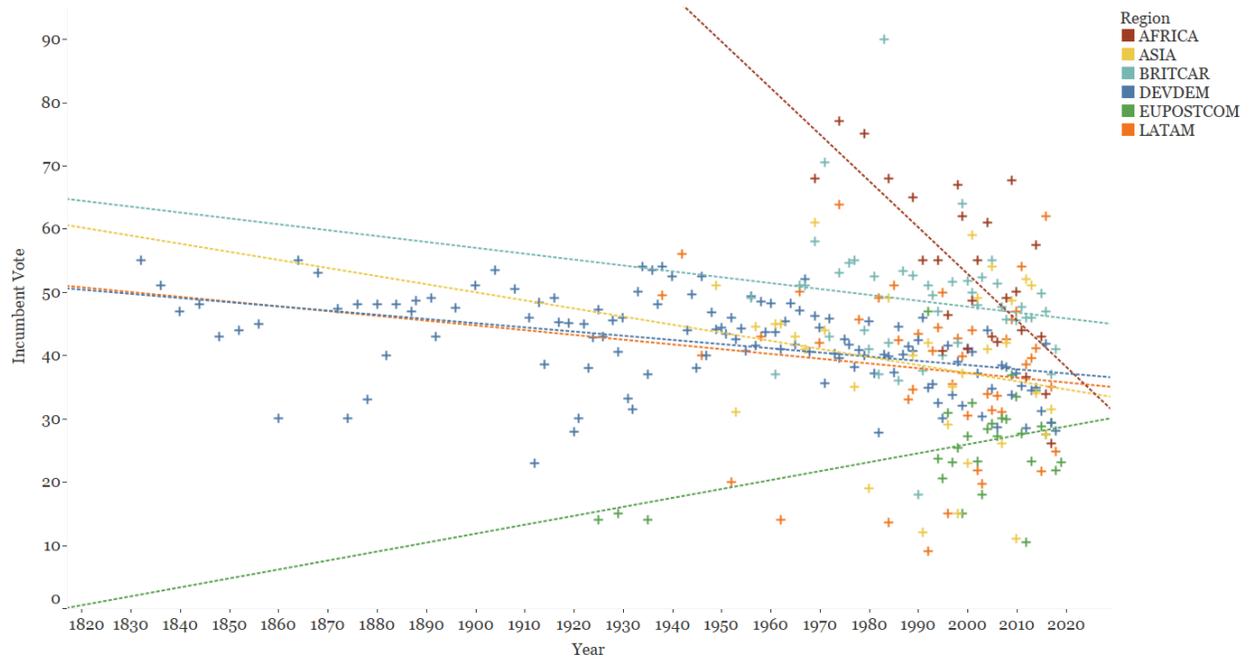
Figure 8. Incumbent Vote by Number of Elections

Figure 9. Convergence of Regions on Incumbent Vote

Appendix. Distribution of Countries and Elections by Region and Type

Type / Region

Country	Parliamentary					Presidential				
	AFRICA	ASIA	BRITCAR	DEVDEM	EUPOSTCOM	AFRICA	ASIA	DEVDEM	EUPOSTCOM	LATAM
Australia				42						
Canada				42						
New Zealand				34						
Sweden				34						
Denmark				27						
Ireland				26						
UK				26						
Japan				25						
Austria				22						
Belgium				22						
Israel				20				3		
Germany				19						
Italy				19						
Norway				19						
Greece				17						
Portugal				15				9		
France				14				10		
Spain				13						
Albania					8					
Argentina										8
Bahamas			10							
Barbados			15							
Belize			8							
Benin						6				
Bolivia										8
Botswana	11									
Brazil										7
Bulgaria					9					
Cape Verde	6									
Chile										15
Colombia										12
Costa Rica										17
Czech Rep					8					
Czechoslovakia					4					
Dom. Rep.										14
Ecuador										11
El Salvador										7
Estonia					8					
Ghana						7				
Grenada			8							
Guatemala										6
Guyana			6							
Honduras										10
Hungary					8					
India		16								
Indonesia							3			
Jamaica			13							
Latvia					9					
Lesotho	6									
Lithuania					7					
Macedonia					8					
Mauritius	7									
Mexico										8
Moldova					6					
Mongolia							7			
Mozambique						5				
Namibia	5									
Panama										5
Paraguay										6
Peru										4
Philippines							12			
Poland					6				6	
Romania									7	
S. Korea							7			
Sao Tome-P						5				
Seychelles						6				
Slovakia					8					
Slovenia					8					
St. Lucia			13							
St. Vincent G			9							
Taiwan							6			
Trinidad-Tobago			14							
Uruguay										7
USA								48		

NOTES

[1] I put the word "law" inside quotation marks in deference to those who are skeptical that a relationship as strong as a scientific law is operative in politics. As in the original article, Wikipedia was the source of election data. On the use of this resource for academic purposes, see Brown (2011), Cassel (2018), and Tomaszewski and Macdonald (2016).

[2] Actually, the calculation of Incumbent Vote or Outcome omits 89 elections because they were the first in a country's series (85) or because the previous winner was an independent candidate or head of a party that disappeared or did not contest the election. In a few cases, it was clear that the incumbent party had lost; this was noted in the Outcome, but the vote could not be determined. As discussed in the original article, some countries presented special challenges due to highly fractured party systems and changes of government between elections.

[3] For the most part, the rules for including countries or elections in the dataset in Cuzán (2015) were retained in this follow-up article. On publication, a detailed summary of the rules and the data will be available at uwf.edu/acuzan, with a standing request for corrections of any errors found in the data. I also will post on my website an appendix in which elections are grouped by country, region, and type.

[4] The countries in figure 1 are colored by region, a feature that will appear in the online but not the printed edition of the article. The regions are Africa (10 countries), Asia (6), British Caribbean (9), Developed Democracies (19), European Post-Communist (14), and Latin America (16). (Incidentally, all figures were made using Tableau. Many thanks to the company for making the program available free of charge for educational purposes.)

[5]Explanations for this "law" range from an instance of the well-known statistical law of regression to the mean Budge (2012) to Wlezien's thermostatic model of the relationship between policy and public opinion (Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

[6]Although these empirical estimates are inductively arrived at,Colomer (2016) constructed a mathematical model that proceeds from a country's population to assembly size. Then, taking into account district magnitude, he arrived at the number of parliamentary parties and the size of the largest party—usually but not always the prime minister's party—which is 40%. Taagepera (2018) suggested a simple logical way for arriving at other estimates. Theoretically, the maximum value of Turnout is 100% (the actual in the data is 97% in Austria in 1949 and 1953). At the opposite end, it can be argued that no democracy could sustain itself for long if turnout fell below 50%. Taking the mean between the two extremes yields 75%, which is almost the same as the actual overall value shown in table 1 (Taagepera2018). Indeed, if less than half of the electorate repeatedly showed up at the polls, it can be said that the body politic was suffering from something analogous to anemia. Happily, however, fewer than 5% of the observations of this variable fell below 50%, spread across 15 countries—most of which did so only once or twice, Colombia and Poland excepted. Therefore, although it is not an absolute or theoretical minimum, a 50% floor on Turnout seems about right. A similar calculation applied to Outcome yields a mean value of 0.5—again, this is close to the actual overall value. Regarding Terms and Reign, the theoretical minimum would be 1; however, Reign could be only a few days, weeks, or months—but there is no theoretical maximum for either variable. Taking the actual maxima (i.e., 13 for Terms and 54 for Reign), the geometric mean for each yields 3.6 (versus actual overall of 2.2) and 7.3 (versus 8.4), respectively. For his part, Gelman (2018) suggested that the 60% maximum reflects the fact that any attempt to achieve more than that would take the party so far

from the median voter that one or more rival parties would move in to its left or right, as the case may be. In fact, as shown herein, most incumbents do not receive much more than 50% of the vote; therefore, this represents a hard constraint and is in line with "the law of partials."

[7]All of these differences are statistically significant at 0.05 or less. Technically, statistical significance has no meaning because the elections analyzed constitute a population, not a sample. Nevertheless, in conformity with convention, it is reported here.

[8]The opposite end, averaging less than 25% of the vote, is occupied almost exclusively (Guatemala is the only exception) by new, post-Communist European democracies characterized by highly fractured party systems (Cabada, Hlousek, and Jurek 2014).

[9]That the incumbents' victory margin shrunk relative to that of the opposition does not negate the Law of Incumbent Advantage because the gap has not been closed and Terms and Reign show no change over the same period. Time may tell whether Colomer's (2012) pronouncement that the incumbent advantage had vanished turns out to have been prescient or in error.

[10]On the need to establish constants in the social sciences, see Taagepera (2008).

[11]Budge et al. (2012) argued that evaluating democratic performance requires tracking its behavior over time.

[12]Budge et al. (2012) discussed factional infighting within political parties. The United States is an example: George Washington was the only president in the country's history to have been unanimously elected (by the Electoral College). Even within his administration, struggles between Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson at State (in cahoots with James Madison in the House of Representatives) were a constant irritant. After Washington's retirement, the splits between President John Adams and Vice President Thomas Jefferson and between Madison and Hamilton only worsened.

[13]See Shugart and Taagepera (2017, 80–84) on the strategic uses of alliances under different electoral rules and number of parties in the legislature.

[14]In "A Constitutional Framework for a Free Cuba" (Cuzán [2000], 2013), I recommended a three-year presidential term and that one third of the national congress be up for reelection every year. As it turns out, the latter idea was proposed by John Dickinson at the Constitutional Convention that met in Philadelphia in 1787. See Madison's *Notes* on June 21 (available at Gutenberg.org.EBook #40861).