

Incumbency and Party Cues in British Elections 1832-2024



Frederick Robertson
frederick.p.robertson@durham.ac.uk

Supervised by Dr Resul Umit
School of Government and International Affairs



Introduction

Britain's politics and its voters have changed dramatically over the past 200 years, transitioning into a primarily party-based system. When deciding how to vote, the party label cue now dominates over the candidate, and many scholars see party and incumbency cues as alternatives to each other: as one goes up, the other comes down. This project challenges such a relationship, finding that the two are positively correlated, and that a party cue is not a substitute for an incumbency cue.

Using a large dataset and regression analysis, my project calculates the variance in vote share caused by both factors, and plots with lines of best fit, illustrated in the below figures.

Further, I construct a theoretical mechanism which complements both figures, suggesting that the professionalisation of the candidate selection process is the centrepiece of this relationship. As party cues dominate, parties centralise and improve this process, leading to a greater incumbency advantage. Both cues may be, therefore, complements.

Methodology

This project worked with a 90,000-entry dataset created by my supervisor (Umit, 2022). Using manual and automated record linkage, I transferred a new incumbency variable to better answer my research question. I then ran fixed effect regressions and calculated a nested R^2 value for both incumbency and party. These values were plotted on figures 2 and 1 respectively. F-tests were then run to determine significance, and visual analysis undertaken alongside theoretical research to interpret results

$$y = \alpha_1 r + \alpha_2 n + \alpha_3 p + \epsilon$$

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$$R^2(1) - R^2(2) = R^2(\text{Diff})$$

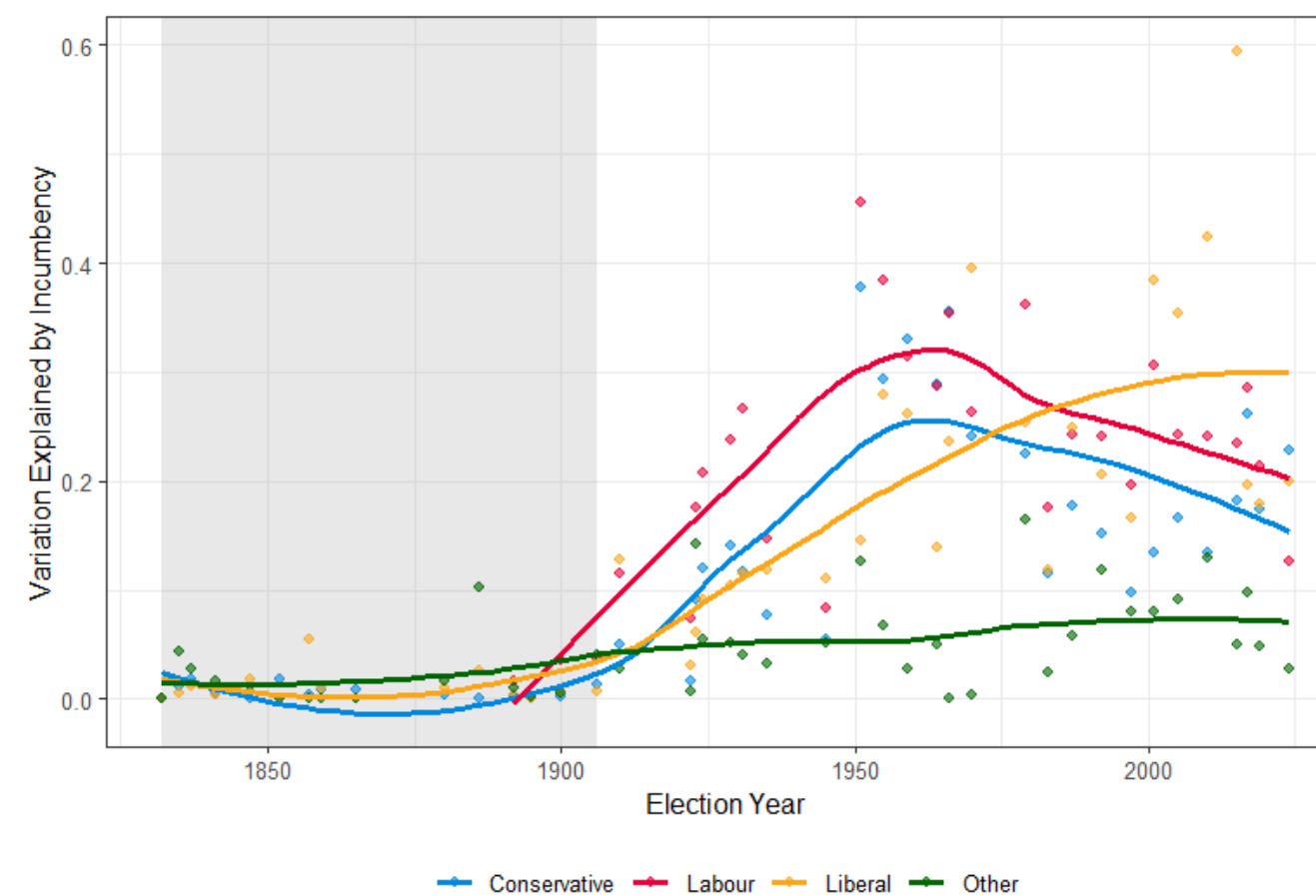


Figure 2: Variation in vote share caused by incumbency status, split by party affiliation

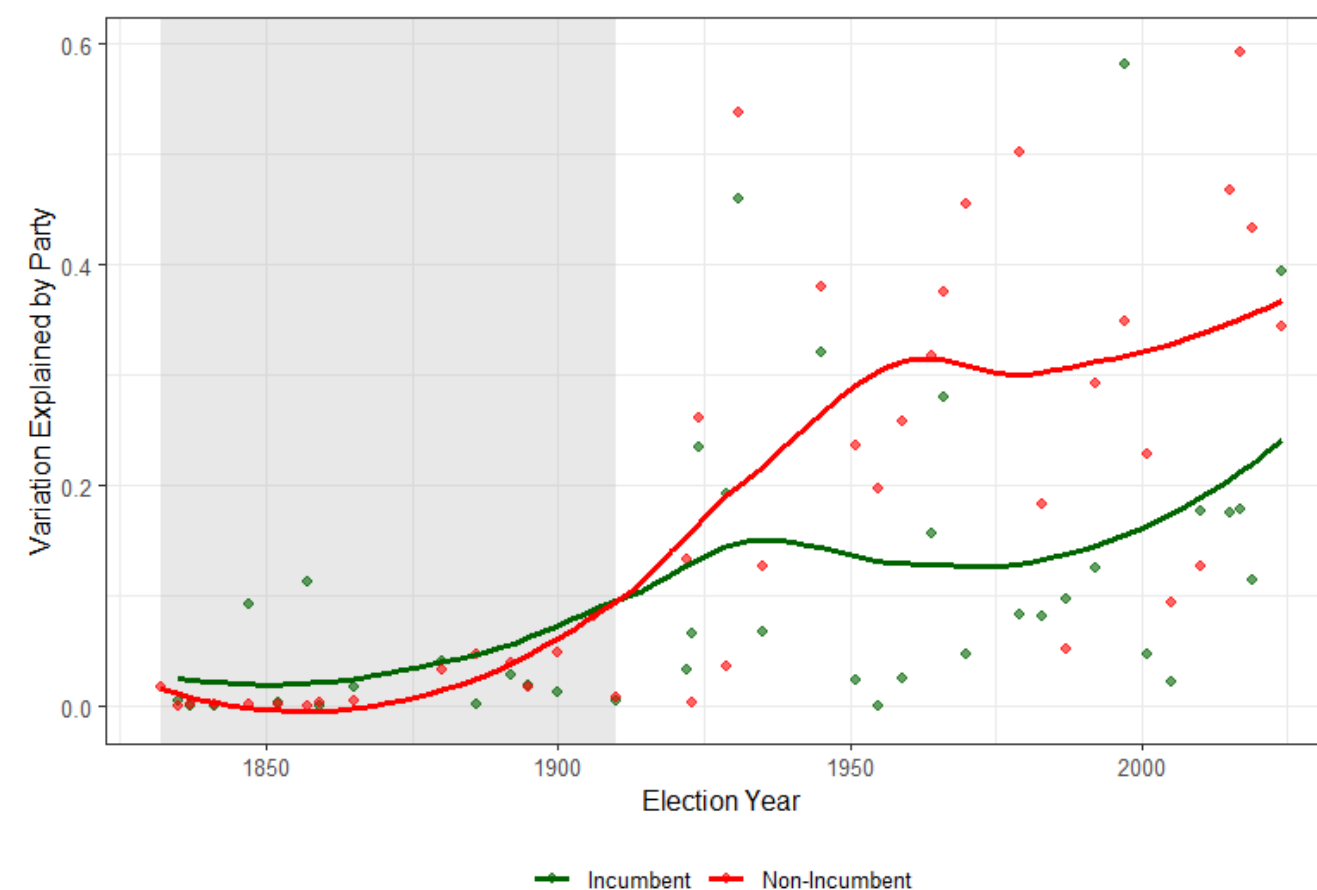


Figure 1: Variation in vote share caused by party affiliation split by incumbency status

Results

Main project findings:

- **Incumbency and party are both insignificant factors in 19th century elections**
- **Incumbency and party rise together at the turn of the century**
- **Theoretically and empirically, party and incumbency may be complements**

Though the research undertaken here is insufficient to test a causal claim, my proposed mechanism is consistent with both figures, and builds upon previous scholarship. I suggest firstly that the rise of party R^2 at the turn of the century can be attributed to the decline in legislative influence of backbench MPs and executive dominance.

Second, I suggest that the lack of incumbency advantage in the 19th century may be attributable to an expanding electorate with changing tastes (Eggers and Spirling, 2014), allowing challengers the unique advantage of adapting to these preferences and selecting constituencies wisely. Incumbents are stuck with “yesterday’s model” of candidate. Parties centralised in accordance with partisan voting, and I therefore posit a link between the two.

Further Study

Though consistent with my empirical findings, this project's current level of statistical analysis is insufficient to properly test the mechanism. A future operationalisation of candidate quality, and a deeper study of party centralisation would enhance my findings.

Access Paper

