Coordination and Incumbency Advantage in Multi-Party Systems - Evidence from French Elections

**Author:**Kevin Dano, Francesco Ferlenga, Vincenzo Galasso, Caroline Le Pennec, Vincent Pons

In theory, free and fair elections can improve the selection of politicians and incentivize them to exert effort. In practice, incumbency advantage and coordination issues may lead to the (re)election of bad politicians. We ask whether these two forces compound each other. Using a regression discontinuity design in French two-round local and parliamentary elections, we find that winning an election increases candidates' chances to win the next election by 25.1 percentage points. Close winners are more likely to run again and more likely to win, conditional on running, than close losers. Incumbents personalize their campaign communication more and face fewer ideologically close competitors, indicating that parties coordinate more effectively on the winning side than on the losing side. A complementary RDD reveals that marginally qualifying for the runoff also enables candidates to rally new voters, but does not affect the number of competitors on their side. We conclude that party coordination and voters rallying candidates who won or gained visibility in an election both contribute to their success in future races, even absent any actual difference in quality with candidates on the losing side.

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