

# Turnover: How lame-duck governments disrupt the bureaucracy and service delivery before leaving office\*

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## Abstract

Electoral accountability is fundamental to representative democracy. Yet, it can also be costly for governance because it generates turnover among bureaucrats (not just politicians) and disrupts the delivery of public services. Previous studies on the connection between political and bureaucratic turnover emphasize how incoming governments reshape the bureaucracy. This article argues that election losers also engage in bureaucratic shuffling before leaving office, and that this can depress public service delivery. I employ a close-races regression discontinuity design to demonstrate these turnover dynamics, using administrative data on the universe of government employees and healthcare services in Brazilian municipalities. The results show that the incumbent's electoral defeat causes dismissals of temporary employees, the hiring of more civil servants, and declines in healthcare service delivery before the winner takes office. These findings highlight the political strategies of lame-duck politicians and the consequential bureaucratic politics that follow elections.

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Przeworski famously defined democracy as “a system in which parties lose elections” (1991, 10). Indeed, political turnover is central to many concepts of democracy, including theories of retrospective (Manin, 1997) and prospective accountability (Fearon, 1999), elitist theories of democracy (Popper, 1962), and populist and libertarian critiques of professional politics (Kurfirst, 1996). The recurrence of turnover is often taken as an indicator of democratic consolidation (Schedler, 2001).

Yet despite its many benefits (Marx et al., 2022), I argue that political turnover imposes important costs, at least in the short term, through concurrent dynamics of bureaucratic turnover and disruptions to public service delivery.<sup>1</sup> I build on recent studies in political science, public administration, and economics that have demonstrated important connections between political and bureaucratic turnover, in both high- and low-income settings. Prior research has overwhelmingly focused on how election winners shape the bureaucracy upon taking office, either by hiring their supporters (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Brassiolo et al., 2020) or firing or transferring existing bureaucrats (Akhtari et al., 2022; Fagernäs and Pelkonen, 2020; Iyer and Mani, 2012). Studies of high-income democracies have focused almost exclusively on the turnover of high-level bureaucrats, resulting from decisions by the new government (Cooper et al., 2020; Dahlström and Holmgren, 2019; Kim and Hong, 2019) or resignations by bureaucrats who anticipate or respond to conflicts with the incoming administration (Bolton et al., 2020; Doherty et al., 2019a,b).

In contrast to previous research, this article emphasizes the political strategies of lame-duck<sup>2</sup> governments and their detrimental effects on the delivery of public services. I argue that –at least where politicians have formal or informal discretion over the bureaucracy, and where bureaucratic norms for autonomous performance are weak– an electoral defeat of the incumbent leads to both dismissals and hires of bureaucrats, as well as declines in public service delivery, during the transition period before the winner takes office. These effects are driven by lame-duck politicians’ unique political incentives and bureaucrats’ strategic responses to them. By studying how bureaucracies are disrupted immediately after elections, this article highlights the bureaucratic politics of transition periods, which have received scant attention to date. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate how lame-duck politics can jeopardize the delivery of public services.

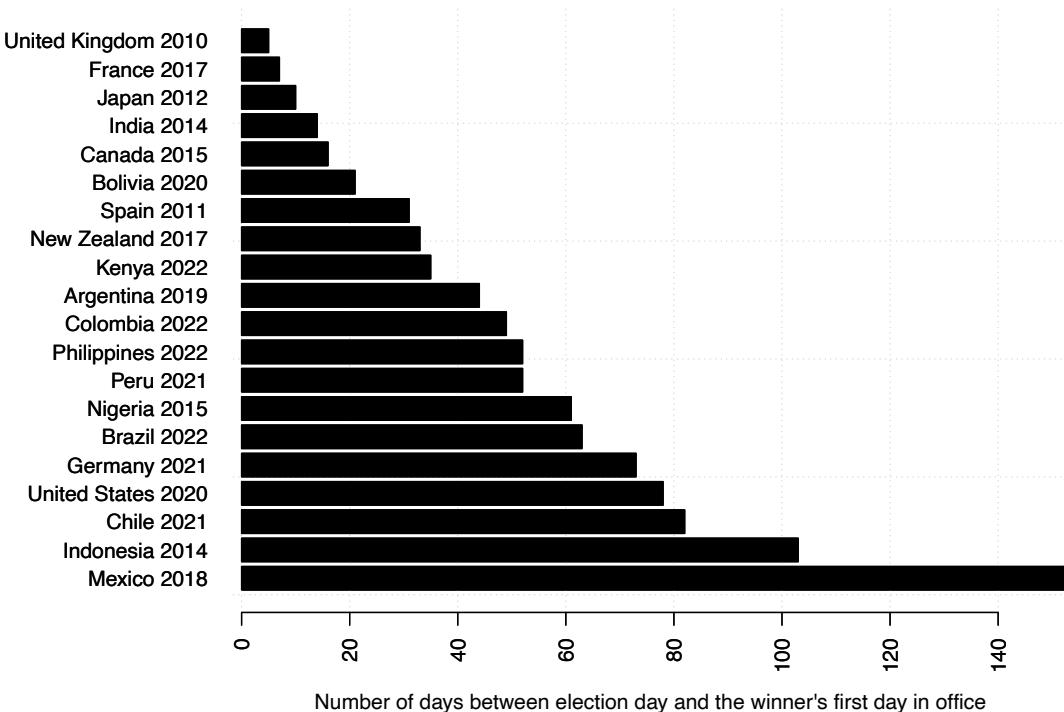
Understanding the strategic uses of transition periods (i.e., the time between election day

<sup>1</sup>I refer to the political turnover that occurs in consolidated democracies as a result of regular and generally accepted elections. Turnovers resulting from coups, revolutions, and irregular elections are likely to have more disruptive effects on bureaucracies and service delivery.

<sup>2</sup>I use “lame-duck” to refer to incumbents in the period between their electoral defeat and the end of their time in office.

and the winner's first day in office) is important for at least two reasons. First, election losers have a unique set of concerns and motivations, which they can pursue through their executive authority while they are still in office. Chief among lame ducks' concerns is preparing for the vulnerability that comes after losing office, and laying the groundwork for their (or their party's) return to office. At the same time, lame ducks have diminished incentives and ability to monitor bureaucrats and to ensure they deliver services to citizens. The link between electoral defeat and bureaucratic disruptions highlights lame ducks' unique incentives and their impact on democratic politics. Second, transition periods are often long: incumbents frequently remain in office for weeks or months after a challenger is elected (Figure 1). The longer the transition period, the easier it is for election losers to strategically pursue their goals before leaving office, and the more consequential the bureaucratic politics of lame-duck periods may be.

Figure 1: Recent transition periods after national-level elections in a sample of 20 countries



*For each country, data correspond to the latest instance (up until January 1, 2023) when a new party reached national-level executive office through popular election – either direct elections in (semi-)presidential systems, or legislative elections in parliamentary ones. See Appendix A for details.*

Although accounts of the influence of lame-duck governments on the bureaucracy are common, we have little systematic evidence on how election losers affect the composition and the performance of the bureaucracy before leaving office, and how deep these effects go. Does electoral turnover lead

to the hiring and firing of bureaucrats during the transition? If so, what kinds of bureaucrats are impacted? Does electoral defeat depress the delivery of essential public services in the period before the winner takes office? What mechanisms drive such disruptions? These issues have important implications for policy debates on public sector reform, including the role of civil service systems and anti-corruption efforts for improving bureaucratic performance.

This article empirically investigates the effects of electoral turnover on bureaucratic shuffles and public service delivery using a close-races regression discontinuity design ([Eggers et al., 2015](#)), leveraging data on public employment and healthcare services in Brazilian municipalities. To identify the causal effect of an incumbent's electoral defeat, I compare outcomes in municipalities where the mayor barely loses to those in which they barely win the reelection. I complement these causal estimates with qualitative evidence from in-depth interviews I conducted with politicians and prosecutors in several states (details in Appendix B).

Brazilian municipal governments are an ideal case to study the strategic uses of transition periods and their impact on service delivery. Municipalities in Brazil hire large numbers of bureaucrats to provide primary healthcare, education, and social assistance services to over 200 million people. Mayors, who are elected in majoritarian elections, have considerable authority over the bureaucracy they oversee. Bureaucrats can be hired either on civil service contracts (which have life tenure) or temporary contracts. Elections are held in all municipalities on the first Sunday of October every 4 years, and winners take office on January 1st. Another critical advantage of the Brazilian case is the availability of detailed administrative data on public employment and healthcare services.

I focus on healthcare provision for two additional reasons. First, healthcare is the most salient local policy area for voters ([Boas et al., 2019](#), 395; [Reis, 2016](#)). Thus if we observe effects on healthcare, we are also likely to find impacts in other areas of government activity that are less visible and/or important to citizens. Second, municipal healthcare services in Brazil have been shown to reduce child mortality ([Rocha and Soares, 2010](#); [Aquino et al., 2009](#)), a common proxy for health outcomes in the developing world. If election results depress the delivery of these basic healthcare services, they may therefore harm human development.

I examine the effects of an electoral defeat of Brazilian mayors on the turnover of bureaucrats at various levels of the bureaucracy (from managers to frontline service providers) and under different contracts (temporary or civil service), as well as on the delivery of key healthcare services. I leverage administrative data on the universe of government employees –which allows me to identify effects

on dismissals, hires, and resignations— and administrative healthcare data. Combining data for four election cycles (2004-2016), I examine how an incumbent’s electoral defeat affects each outcome in the last quarter of their term, before the winner is sworn in. Using quarterly rather than yearly data allows me to overcome a key limitation in previous studies and differentiate the effects of electoral turnover under lame-duck government versus the incoming administration.

The regression discontinuity results demonstrate that electoral defeat triggers significant dynamics of bureaucratic turnover in the months following the election, both in the bureaucracy as a whole and among frontline service providers. This counters two common assumptions in the literature on turnover – that the link between political and bureaucratic turnover is driven only by the actions of election winners, and that turnover only affects high-level bureaucrats. In contrast, I find that under lame-duck governments there are significant increases in the dismissal of temporary workers and the hiring of civil servants. Evidence from interviews, media reports, and heterogeneity analyses suggests that lame-duck politicians engage in dismissals to improve their compliance with legal rules about hiring before leaving office, and that they sometimes hire civil servants to limit the election winner’s fiscal capacity to hire their own supporters after taking office. Bureaucrats are also more likely to resign in the period following an incumbent’s defeat. Last, and in line with previous studies, I find that political turnover causes significant increases in the hiring of temporary workers once the election winner takes office.

An incumbent’s electoral defeat also causes a significant drop in healthcare services during the transition period. Home visits by nurses and doctors, prenatal check-ups, medical consultations with infants and children, and immunizations for infants and pregnant women all decline in the last quarter of the mayor’s term. These effects suggest that lame-duck politics can jeopardize citizen welfare, at least in the short run. Declines in healthcare services appear to be driven by a combination of turnover in the healthcare bureaucracy, disruptions to non-human resources (e.g., transportation), and weakening bureaucratic accountability under lame-duck governments, where politicians and senior officials are less able and/or willing to monitor and motivate bureaucrats.

In sum, this article advances our understanding of political turnover –a critical moment in democratic politics– by highlighting the unique political incentives of lame-duck politicians, how they strategically reshape the bureaucracy before leaving office, and their impact on the delivery of essential services. These are key aspects of political turnover that previous research has generally overlooked. I support this argument with quasi-experimental evidence from the Brazilian case, complemented by qualitative insights from interviews with politicians and prosecutors.

# Bureaucratic politics during transition periods

Does political turnover disrupt the bureaucracy? Previous studies have shown that it does, especially through the turnover of high-level bureaucrats (Bolton et al., 2020; Doherty et al., 2019a; Dahlström and Holmgren, 2019; Christensen et al., 2014) and the decisions election winners take once in office (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Akhtari et al., 2022; Brassiolo et al., 2020). Still, this literature has neglected the critical role that election losers play in the connection between political and bureaucratic turnover, and how lame-duck governments can depress public service delivery. This article fills that gap by offering and testing a theory of lame-duck incumbents and how they shape both the composition of the bureaucracy (through hiring and firing) and its performance.

I argue that the dynamics of turnover are shaped by the incentives, concerns, and constraints of politicians in executive office. Turnover dynamics thus differ systematically under lame-duck governments and new administrations, and for temporary versus civil service employees. While election losers and winners both make use of their (formal and informal) discretion over the bureaucracy to pursue their goals, their diverging incentives and concerns generate distinct turnover dynamics before and after the winner takes office.

Political institutions may moderate or amplify the intensity of these dynamics. First, institutional constraints on politicians' discretion over the bureaucracy and strong bureaucratic norms may moderate these turnover dynamics, although they are unlikely to completely eliminate them.<sup>3</sup> Second, very short transition periods are likely to severely limit lame-ducks' ability to disrupt the composition and activities of the bureaucracy, thereby concentrating turnover dynamics in the election winner's term. Finally, institutions that allow incumbents to stay in office longer (e.g., unlimited terms) or that make transitions after elections more uncertain (e.g., parliamentary systems with proportional representation) may amplify these turnover dynamics by making it easier and more desirable for lame-ducks to disrupt the bureaucracy before leaving office.

I assume two key motivations shape the strategies of lame-duck governments: laying the groundwork for a return to power, and preparing themselves for the vulnerability that comes after losing office. Office-seeking politicians who fail to get reelected are arguably concerned with

<sup>3</sup>A change in government has been shown to lead to the turnover of bureaucrats with strong employment protections and formally insulated from politics, even in contexts of high state capacity. Examples include agency heads in Sweden (Dahlström and Holmgren, 2019), chief executive officers of state-owned firms in South Korea (Kim and Hong, 2019), and senior civil servants in the United States (Doherty et al., 2019b).

maximizing their (or their party's) chances of returning to office. On the other hand, politicians who lose their bid for reelection become more vulnerable to prosecution and conviction for three reasons. First, where legal systems allow incumbents some degree of immunity from prosecution, they lose it after leaving office. Second, they also lose some of their ability to exert formal and informal pressures on horizontal accountability actors. Third, their opponents gain access to the government's accounts and thus obtain information about potential malfeasance. Recent studies on India and Brazil have shown that losing power increases politicians' chances of being prosecuted ([Michaelowa et al., 2019](#)) and convicted ([Poblete-Cazenave, 2023; Lambais and Sigstad, 2023](#)), despite judges' strong formal protections against political pressure in both countries. In the United States, opposition politicians are more vulnerable to prosecution ([Davis and White, 2019; Gordon, 2009](#)). The conviction of a large number of former heads of government on corruption charges ([Da Ros and Gehrke, 2022](#))<sup>4</sup> suggests that, at least in some contexts, the risk of being prosecuted is an important concern to politicians after losing a re-election campaign.<sup>5</sup>

Viewing lame-duck politicians as actors who seek to maximize their chances of returning to power and minimize their vulnerability to prosecution suggests they may engage in two strategic uses of bureaucratic shuffles before leaving office.<sup>6</sup> First, lame-duck governments may use dismissals to "clean the accounts" and thus reduce their chances of prosecution for malfeasance after leaving office. Politicians around the world frequently expand the bureaucracy ahead of elections to boost their chances of reelection, in contexts as diverse as the United States ([Cahan, 2019](#)), Indonesia ([Pierskalla and Sacks, 2019](#)), the Philippines ([Labonne, 2016](#)), and Brazil ([Toral, 2023a](#)). Where such hiring strategies violate electoral, procedural or fiscal rules, politicians may seek to undo some of that bureaucratic expansion after the election to avoid prosecution. I thus hypothesize that dismissals of temporary workers will increase after the incumbent loses the election (Hypothesis 1).

On the other hand, lame-duck governments may use civil service hiring to constrain their opponents,<sup>7</sup> in either policy or fiscal terms. Election losers may hire senior civil servants in order

<sup>4</sup>30 former heads of government were convicted for corruption in the 2010s ([Da Ros and Gehrke, 2022](#)).

<sup>5</sup>Further evidence comes from journalistic accounts. For example, US President Donald Trump was reportedly concerned about prosecution before leaving office, and considered pardoning himself ([New York Times, 2021](#)). Argentinean President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was reported to be increasingly concerned with judicial causes against her as the end of her term approached ([La Nación, 2015](#)).

<sup>6</sup>While I focus on how lame ducks pursue these goals through bureaucratic shuffles, they may advance them by other means (e.g., regulation or procurement).

<sup>7</sup>This rationale mirrors that of so-called midnight judicial appointments ([Turner, 1960](#)) or midnight regulations ([Brito and De Rugy, 2009](#)) approved by US presidents before leaving office. In a similar vein, Mexican states are more likely to pass transparency laws during lame-duck governments ([Berliner and](#)

to preserve their policy legacy by constraining their successor's actions. For example, some US presidents "burrow" political appointees into the civil service at the end of their term (Lewis, 2008; Mendelson, 2003). Alternatively, election losers may hire civil servants (who have significant job security) to reduce the new administration's fiscal capacity to hire their own supporters. Civil service hiring is typically seen as insulated from politics because civil servants are selected after passing objective, competitive examinations. In practice, however, candidates who pass the exams are not always hired automatically: at least in some civil service systems of the Napoleonic tradition, approved candidates are added to a ranked list, and are hired in order of performance as personnel needs arise. In certain contexts, therefore, lame-duck governments can legally expand the civil service by simply hiring pre-approved candidates. By strategically using their discretion over the timing of civil service hiring, election losers can reduce their opponent's ability to hire their own supporters and thus increase their own chances of returning to power in the future. Hypothesis 2 is therefore that civil service hiring will increase under lame-duck governments.

This hypothesis builds on and expands debates about the political origins of civil service reform. Geddes (1994) famously described politicians as facing a dilemma about whether to establish a civil service system, torn between their individual need for political control and their collective interest in building state capacity. Politicians would therefore make a collective investment in civil service reform where patronage is distributed evenly among key players. Others have built on her work to argue that politicians are more likely to pass civil service reform when their exit from office is imminent (Ting et al., 2013) or certain (Schuster, 2020), in an attempt to constrain the incoming government. In countries where a civil service regime already exists that logic can be extended to expansions of civil service hiring, which lame-ducks can use to tie the hands of their opponent.

The strategy of hiring civil servants before leaving office can pay off politically because election winners typically seek to hire their political supporters, either to reward campaign supporters (Colonnelli et al., 2020; Brassiolo et al., 2020) or to better control public policy and implementation (Toral, 2023b; Lewis, 2008; Peters and Pierre, 2004). Either way, we should see election winners increase the hiring of temporary workers during their first few months in office.

Incumbent bureaucrats can actively respond to the political strategies of outgoing and incoming politicians, thereby shaping the turnover dynamics of transition periods. One way bureaucrats may react to the changing political environment is by resigning. Bureaucrats may choose to leave the

Erlich, 2015). These phenomena reflect a key insight in the work of Moe (1989) – that political actors use bureaucratic structures, and in particular insulating strategies, to lock in their policy positions.

bureaucracy if they prefer to work in organizations whose leaders have preferences aligned to theirs, or if they anticipate new leaders will mistreat them, for example by firing or transferring them (Bolton et al., 2020; Doherty et al., 2019a). Resignations could also ensue if bureaucrats simply dislike working during the transition period, when responsibilities are less clear and organizational and policy changes abound. In any case, we would expect civil servants' resignations to increase in the months following electoral turnover.

An incumbent's electoral defeat affects not only the composition of the bureaucracy but also its performance. Hypothesis 3 maintains that public service delivery declines in the months after an incumbent is voted out. Several mechanisms may drive such an effect. The few studies that have measured the impact of political turnover on development outcomes focus on bureaucratic turnover as the main mechanism (Akhtari et al., 2022; Fagernäs and Pelkonen, 2020). Several factors can connect bureaucratic turnover and declines in service delivery. First, firing and hiring can lead to the exit of bureaucrats with job-specific experience and know-how, and to the entry of other bureaucrats with lower endowments of both (Akhtari et al., 2022). Second, turnover can lead to the selection of systematically worse bureaucrats, for example if politicians prioritize loyalty over competence (Colonnelli et al., 2020). Third, the mere disruption of teams of providers stemming from the turnover of some of their members may negatively affect public service delivery (Fagernäs and Pelkonen, 2020; Hanushek et al., 2016) because bureaucratic effectiveness often depends on the stability of the organizations and teams in which bureaucrats are embedded (Kraft et al., 2016). Renewed leadership and the inflow of new employees may well have a positive effect on performance, but those effects are unlikely to be visible in the first few months of a new administration due to the costs of policy and managerial switches as well as learning. In sum, bureaucratic turnover can impact public service delivery through a variety of mechanisms, especially in transaction-intensive services like healthcare or education, which are very dependent on human resources.

I argue that an incumbent's electoral defeat can also undermine bureaucratic performance through at least three additional mechanisms. First, an electoral defeat may lead to disruptions in procurement and contracts for goods and services on which bureaucrats depend to do their job. Second, an electoral defeat may harm performance if bureaucrats respond strategically to the changing political environment by exerting less effort. At least in the developing world, bureaucrats' effort and performance can benefit from monitoring and accountability pressures from politicians (Raffler, 2022; Dasgupta and Kapur, 2020; Gulzar and Pasquale, 2017). Yet, politicians and senior officials are likely much less able and/or willing to monitor and motivate bureaucrats if the government is about to change. Third, bureaucrats may be less able to perform during transition

periods given the higher levels of ambiguity and uncertainty, which can jeopardize implementation ([Matland, 1995](#)). These mechanisms, together with bureaucratic turnover itself, can lead to significant declines in service delivery during transition periods.

In sum, I advance a theory of the politics of transition periods that predicts an incumbent's electoral defeat will cause bureaucratic turnover and degrade public service delivery during the transition period. In contrast to previous research on turnover, my theory emphasizes the critical role of election losers as well as bureaucrats' response to a changing political environment, and their detrimental effect on public service delivery.

## Institutional setting

Brazilian local governments have a number of characteristics that make them an ideal case to examine the effects of political turnover on bureaucratic turnover and on service delivery. In this context, elections are generally competitive, transition periods are relatively long, bureaucracies are large and responsible for major public services, and politicians have some discretion over the hiring and firing of bureaucrats. In this sense, it may be easier to observe dynamics of turnover under lame-duck governments in Brazil, in contrast to other settings where bureaucracies are smaller and/or more insulated from political discretion, or where transition periods are significantly shorter. On the other hand, Brazil is a successful case of civil service reform ([Cortázar Velarde et al., 2014](#)) and of progress in the professionalization of the local bureaucracies ([Wampler et al., 2020](#)). In that sense, the effects of turnover we observe in Brazil may be modest compared to those in other middle- or low-income environments where public administration is more politicized.

Municipal elections take place every four years on the first Sunday of October, and consist of simultaneous elections for a mayor, who is elected through a majoritarian system,<sup>8</sup> and for a variable number of city councilors, who are elected through a proportional, open-list system. Mayors can run for reelection only once. Local elections are generally competitive – in the 2016 elections, about 47% of the incumbents who ran were defeated.<sup>9</sup> Politicians are overseen by a network of horizontal accountability actors, including judges, auditors, and prosecutors, which previous studies have demonstrated reduce rent extraction ([Litschig and Zamboni, 2019](#); [Avis et al., 2018](#)). There

<sup>8</sup>Municipalities with over 200,000 inhabitants (fewer than 3% in 2016) hold a runoff election on the last Sunday of October if no candidate obtains an absolute majority.

<sup>9</sup>In fact, Brazilian mayors have an incumbency *disadvantage* ([Klašnja and Titiunik, 2017](#)).

are currently 5,570 municipalities,<sup>10</sup> most of which are small and poor.<sup>11</sup>

Municipal governments are responsible for providing primary services in healthcare, education, and social assistance. Therefore, the local government workforce is typically large. On average, municipal governments hired in 2016 4.9% of the local population and 38.2% of those employed in the formal labor market.<sup>12</sup> Municipal employees enjoy a wage premium relative to the private sector ([Colonelli et al., 2020, 3090](#)), similarly to other developing contexts ([Finan et al., 2017](#)). Despite major improvements in social policy, municipalities face substantial development challenges ([Wampler et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2019](#)). Healthcare is typically the most salient policy area for voters in local elections ([Boas et al., 2019, 395; Reis, 2016](#)).

Municipalities provide free primary healthcare services to all residents under the umbrella of the Unified Health System ([Castro et al., 2019](#)). To do so, they maintain clinics, each led by a manager who is typically appointed by the mayor or the secretary of healthcare ([Toral, 2023b](#)), and staffed with doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. To assist with the provision of basic healthcare services, especially preventive care and particularly in rural areas, municipalities also hire community health agents (CHAs). CHAs work promoting health, preventing diseases, and providing maternal and child services in their own community ([Ministério da Saúde, 2012d](#)). More complex services, like specialist consultations and hospitalizations, are generally provided by state governments, especially for residents of small municipalities. Private healthcare provision is common in larger municipalities, but most citizens rely exclusively on the public system.<sup>13</sup>

Mayors and the secretaries they appoint have some discretion over the hiring and firing of bureaucrats in all policy areas, including healthcare. Such discretion differs significantly between the civil service and other hiring modes with fewer employment protections. The Brazilian constitution requires all permanent staffing needs to be filled with civil service contracts. Candidates with the best performance on competitive examinations are eligible for a position, which has tenure for life after a probationary period.<sup>14</sup> Critically, the best performers are not automatically appointed. While

<sup>10</sup>The number of elected local governments in the period I study ranges from 5,558 in 2004 to 5,568 in 2017. Two localities (Brasília and Fernando de Noronha) do not elect mayors.

<sup>11</sup>According to the 2010 census, the median municipality had fewer than 12,000 inhabitants and a per capita income of less than 500 Brazilian reais (about USD284 at the exchange rate at the time). According to the administrative labor dataset described below, the median municipality had 459 employees in 2009.

<sup>12</sup>Figures are from the administrative labor data described below.

<sup>13</sup>In 2013, 61.13% of Brazilians used the services of a public clinic and 20.3% received care from public hospital, compared to 18.53% who used the services of a private provider ([Castro et al., 2019, 5](#)).

<sup>14</sup>Tenured employees can be fired only in extraordinary circumstances (e.g., a corruption conviction).

politicians have no discretion over the ranking of candidates, they can choose the timing and number of civil service hires.<sup>15</sup> About a third of municipal employees are hired on temporary contracts,<sup>16</sup> which can legally be used to hire political appointees or to fill short-term or urgent staffing needs but are sometimes used where the civil service should prevail. Temporary employees generally have 1-year contracts (typically running until the end of December), which can be terminated by the employer much more easily than civil service contracts. Other laws further constrain politicians' discretion over public employment. For example, the Fiscal Responsibility Law limits personnel expenses to 54% of the municipal government revenue, and forbids increases in personnel expenses during the last 6 months of an election year. The Electoral Law also constrains hiring around elections. Appendix C has more details on the legal rules surrounding public employment.

Politicians can be prosecuted for deviating from these legal rules on public employment. If found guilty, they are subject to important penalties, including the loss of their post, having their political rights suspended, substantive fines, and even imprisonment.<sup>17</sup> Prosecution of politicians for corruption charges is not rare. [Lambais and Sigstad \(2023\)](#) estimate that about 7.7% of mayoral election winners or runner-ups are involved in a court case accused of corruption charges.<sup>18</sup> Additional evidence of the prosecution of former mayors comes from news reports. I scraped all news in the website of the Prosecutor's Office of Brazil's most populous state (São Paulo, with 645 municipalities) and found 275 reports from 2013 to 2022 mentioning former mayors. At least 32 of those reports relate to violations of public employment laws (details in Appendix D).

## Research design

To estimate the causal effect of electoral turnover on bureaucratic turnover and public service delivery I use a close-races regression discontinuity design, essentially comparing instances where the incumbent barely loses the election to instances where they are barely reelected. I focus on the electoral performance of the incumbent mayor rather than their party because Brazilian

<sup>15</sup>This is not unique to Brazil: Mexico for example uses a similar system.

<sup>16</sup>I use the term temporary contracts to refer to all non-civil service contracts. These contracts can use a variety of labor regimes, all of which lack tenure.

<sup>17</sup>See Appendix C.5 for details on the legal penalties for breaches of public employment laws, as detailed in the Constitution, the Administrative Impropriety Law, the Electoral Law, and the Penal Code.

<sup>18</sup>The authors also find that politicians who lose their reelection bid are 65 percent more likely to receive a penalty than those who are reelected.

municipal politics are characterized by weak partisan attachments (Boas et al., 2019) and pervasive party switching by politicians (Klašnja and Titunik, 2017).<sup>19</sup> It would therefore be misleading to examine the electoral performance of the incumbent party.

This quasi-experimental design is important because simple comparisons of cases in which incumbents win or lose the reelection are likely to be biased. If local actors anticipate that the incumbent will lose the reelection, bureaucratic turnover may be higher (and public service lower) before the election. In those cases, low levels of service delivery may be more a cause than a consequence of the election result. Descriptive data reported in Appendix G show that municipalities in which the incumbent loses the election have systematically different patterns of public service delivery in the quarter before the election. By examining what happens in close elections, where the outcomes are uncertain *ex ante*, we can estimate the causal effect of political turnover.

The regression discontinuity design allows me to identify the causal effect of the mayor's electoral defeat on dynamics of bureaucratic turnover (fires, hires, and resignations) and healthcare service delivery in the two quarters immediately after the election, i.e. in the 3 months between the election day and the winner being sworn, and in the first 3 months of the winner's term in office. I use quarter-level data because the hypotheses relate to turnover dynamics under the lame-duck government, which lasts a quarter in Brazil.<sup>20</sup>

## Identification

The core of regression discontinuity designs is a forcing variable, with treatment determined sharply at a given threshold along its distribution. Here, the forcing variable for municipality  $i$  in election cycle  $c$  is the difference between the vote share of the strongest opposition candidate and that of the incumbent:  $D_{ic} = V_{ic}^o - V_{ic}^g$ . Treatment is the electoral defeat of the mayor, which is determined sharply when the forcing variable is positive:  $T_{ic} = \mathbb{1}(V_{ic}^o > V_{ic}^g)$ . Intuitively, this allows us to interpret a discontinuous jump in the outcome at the threshold as the causal effect of the mayor's electoral defeat. The goal is to identify the difference in potential outcomes under treatment versus control (i.e., the incumbent is defeated versus reelected), namely  $\tau = \mathbb{E}[Y_{1ic} - Y_{0ic}]$ . We can

<sup>19</sup>In my calculations using official election data, 30.4% of mayors ran for reelection in 2008 under a different party than the one they were elected under 4 years earlier, 19.1% in 2012, and 26% in 2016.

<sup>20</sup>Results using monthly data are of similar substantive and statistical significance.

estimate the local average treatment effect (LATE) for municipalities around the threshold<sup>21</sup> by taking the difference between the limits from above and below the cutoff:

$$\tau = \mathbb{E}[Y_{1ic} - Y_{0ic}|D_{ic} = 0] = \lim_{D_{ic} \downarrow 0} \mathbb{E}[Y_{1ic}|D_{ic} = 0] - \lim_{D_{ic} \uparrow 0} \mathbb{E}[Y_{0ic}|D_{ic} = 0] \quad (1)$$

The key assumption of this design is that potential outcomes are continuous around the threshold. While this assumption is empirically untestable, we can examine some of its observable implications. Appendix I shows that there are no signs of sorting or discontinuity around the threshold and that pre-treatment covariates are continuous around the cutoff.

## Estimation and inference

I follow the standard practice of using local linear regression with a triangular kernel smoother ([Cattaneo et al., 2019](#)),<sup>22</sup> and apply it to the following estimating equation:

$$Y_{ic} = \alpha + \beta_1 T_{ic} + \beta_2 D_{ic} + \beta_3 T_{ic} D_{ic} + \gamma_c + \delta \tilde{Y}_{ic} + \varepsilon_{ic} \quad (2)$$

$Y_{ic}$  is the outcome of interest (e.g., dismissals of temporary workers during the last quarter of the mayor's term) for municipality  $i$  in electoral cycle  $c$ . Since the outcomes are count variables with skewed distributions, I take the log (after adding 1 to retain observations where the outcome equals zero).<sup>23</sup>  $T_{ic}$  is the treatment indicator.  $D_{ic}$  is the forcing variable.  $\gamma_c$  is an electoral cycle fixed effect and  $\tilde{Y}_{ic}$  is a measure of the outcome in the quarter before the election, which I add as controls to increase efficiency ([Calonico et al., 2019](#)).  $\varepsilon_{ic}$  is the error term. If potential outcomes are continuous around the threshold,  $\beta_1$  identifies the LATE. For statistical inference I use the robust bias-corrected procedure developed by [Cattaneo et al. \(2019\)](#). To choose the optimal bandwidth I use the algorithm of [Calonico et al. \(2020\)](#). I then demonstrate the sensitivity of the results to a broad range of alternative bandwidths.

<sup>21</sup>That is, municipalities in which the mayor runs and their vote share is close to that of the strongest challenger. Appendix H characterizes municipalities with close elections.

<sup>22</sup>The results are similar using quadratic or cubic polynomials, and using uniform or Epanechnikov kernels.

<sup>23</sup>Results are similar when using the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation.

## Data

I leverage administrative data on elections, public employment, and healthcare service delivery in Brazilian municipalities. While previous studies generally examine yearly variation in employment (and in some cases development outcomes), I focus on quarterly variation to identify turnover dynamics associated to both lame-duck and incoming governments.

To measure the performance of incumbents and their challengers I use candidate-level data from Brazil's Supreme Electoral Court (TSE, *Tribunal Supremo Eleitoral*). This data has unique identifiers for mayors, which allows me to observe whether they run for re-election and how they perform. I use data across four election cycles (from 2004 to 2016) to increase statistical power.

To measure how election results affect the turnover of public employees I leverage the Ministry of the Economy's Annual Social Information Report (RAIS, *Relação Anual de Informações Sociais*) from 2004 to 2017. Formal employers are legally obliged to report all their contracts to the Ministry of the Economy every year.<sup>24</sup> RAIS therefore contains data on the universe of municipal employees, including contract type, start and end dates, salary, reason for termination, and professional category, among other variables. Using RAIS, I generate counts of dismissals, hires, and resignations, by type of contract, for each municipality in each quarter before and after elections.<sup>25</sup>

To measure effects on public service delivery, I use data from the Ministry of Health's Basic Healthcare Information System (SIAB, *Sistema de Informação da Atenção Básica*).<sup>26</sup> The data are collected by municipal secretariats of healthcare, consolidated by state governments, and published by the federal government at the municipality-month level from 2004 to 2015.<sup>27</sup> I use SIAB to generate counts of healthcare services for each municipality in each quarter around elections. First, I use data on the number of home visits done by CHAs, nurses, and doctors. Second, I use data on the number of prenatal care check-ups, medical consultations involving infants (less than 1 year old), and medical consultations with children (1-5 years old). Third, I use data on the numbers of pregnant women and infants who are up to date with the vaccines mandated for those groups.

I focus on these dimensions of healthcare service delivery for three main reasons. First, these

<sup>24</sup>Additional details of the labor dataset are reported in Appendix E.1.

<sup>25</sup>I consider dismissals to be contract terminations initiated by the employer (*exonerações a iniciativa do empregador*), and resignations terminations initiated by the employee (*exonerações a pedido*).

<sup>26</sup>Additional details of the healthcare services dataset are reported in Appendix E.2.

<sup>27</sup>The 2016 election cycle is thus excluded from these analyses.

activities are at the core of Brazil's municipal healthcare system. Indeed, studies seeking to assess the effectiveness of the system often include these variables as outcomes (Castro et al., 2019; Aquino et al., 2009). Second, these activities are of substantive importance, since they help keep the local population alive and healthy. Vaccinations have been shown to reduce death and disease (Andre et al., 2008). Prenatal and child healthcare are critical for lifelong health (Forrest and Riley, 2004) and frequently used as proxies for the quality of healthcare systems.<sup>28</sup> Home visits help provide care to people with reduced mobility (including people in rural areas) and complement services provided in healthcare facilities (Ministério da Saúde, 2012b).<sup>29</sup> Last, these healthcare services are mandated rather than elective, so they are less subject to variation in citizen demand and sociodemographics than other healthcare services. Brazil's Ministry of Health recommends at least 1 monthly visit to every registered household (Ministério da Saúde, 2012b), 6 prenatal check-ups during pregnancies (Ministério da Saúde, 2012a), 7 medical consultations for children in their first year of life, and at least 1 per year for children older than one (Ministério da Saúde, 2012c). The national vaccination schedule mandates a series of immunizations for infants and pregnant women (Appendix F).

## Results

Regression discontinuity results demonstrate that, in Brazilian municipalities, mayors' electoral defeats cause significant increases in the firing of temporary workers and the hiring of civil servants, as well as declines in the delivery of healthcare services, in the months before the election winner takes office. These results highlight the importance of lame-ducks' political strategies and their impact over the composition and the performance of the bureaucracy.

### Effects of electoral defeat on bureaucratic turnover

Figure 2 displays the effects of electoral turnover on the dismissal, hiring, and resignation of temporary and civil service employees. Each panel in Figure 2 shows three sets of results. On the left, the effect of the incumbent's electoral defeat on a given outcome during the 3 months before the elec-

<sup>28</sup>For example, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health are two of the eight main United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

<sup>29</sup>For example, home visits allow healthcare providers to change citizens' practices in order to prevent diseases and improve health outcomes.

tion (July through September, or the fifteenth quarter of a mayor's term). Reassuringly, all these placebo tests return statistically insignificant effects. In the center, each panel reports the effect of an incumbent's electoral defeat on bureaucratic turnover during the 3 months between election day and the start of the winner's term in office (October through December, or the sixteenth and final quarter of the incumbent's term). On the right, each panel shows the effects of the mayor losing the election on outcomes in the first quarter of the winner's term (January through March).

Table 1 details the regression results for the effects during the last quarter of the incumbent's term.<sup>30</sup> Figure 3 visualizes the discontinuity for the main results. Figure 4 demonstrates that discontinuity estimates are robust to a broad spectrum of bandwidths. Placebo tests moving the discontinuity threshold return insignificant results (Appendix N). These effects are not only driven by the turnover of employees working directly for local politicians, such as managers, advisors, or assistants. Similar effects can be observed if we exclude managerial jobs (Appendix O), or if we examine only frontline providers in the healthcare sector (Appendix P) or in education (Appendix Q).

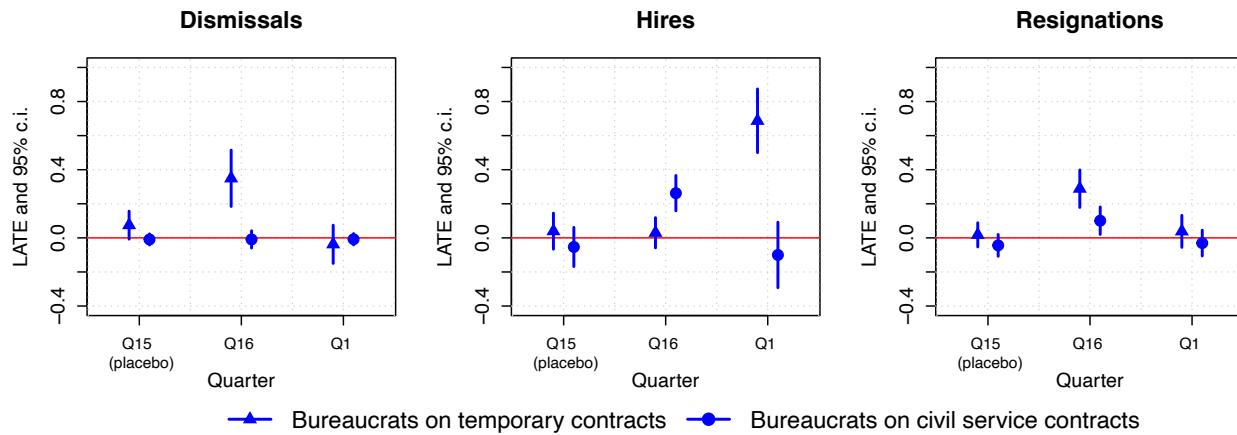
In line with Hypothesis 1, an incumbent's electoral defeat leads to a large and statistically significant increase in the dismissal of temporary workers, as shown in the left-hand panel of Figures 2 and 3. Election losers increase dismissals of temporaries by 41.9% in the last 3 months of their term,<sup>31</sup> compared to incumbents who win the reelection ( $p < 0.001$ ). The election results do not affect dismissals of civil servants, which are uncommon due to the legal protections they enjoy.

In-depth interviews with prosecutors and politicians suggest that dismissals of temporary workers after an incumbent's defeat are intended to balance the accounts before handing the government over to the winner. When asked about the transition period before their term, a municipal secretary of administration (in charge of human resources) in the state of Rio Grande do Norte explained: "There were cuts in personnel to hand the accounts cleaner, with resources in the account. Expenses were cut to hand over a more balanced city hall. [...] If there is no political turnover expenses do

<sup>30</sup>Regression tables for all models, with and without controls, are reported in Appendices J and K. Statistically significant results for all models in Figure 2 are robust to the omission of controls, with the exception of the effect for the resignation of civil servants in Q16 ( $p < 0.1$ ). The main results are robust to specifying outcome variables with the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation, using the log and dropping observations where the outcome equals zero, or as binary variables for whether the count is larger than zero (Appendix L).

<sup>31</sup>Since outcomes are log transformed, coefficients should be interpreted as follows: the LATE of a mayor's electoral defeat is a change of  $(100 \times e^{\hat{\beta}_1} - 100)\%$  in the outcome.

Figure 2: Effect of an incumbent's electoral defeat on bureaucratic turnover



*Each point and its robust bias-corrected confidence interval (c.i.) comes from a separate local linear regression discontinuity model, as per Equation 2. Dependent variables are in the log scale. Q15 corresponds to the 15th quarter of a mayor's term (i.e., July to September of its last year). Q16 corresponds to the 16th and final quarter of a mayor's term (October to December). Q1 corresponds to the first quarter of the election winner's term (January to March). Elections take place on the first Sunday of October, and winners are sworn in on January 1st. Results for Q15 are placebo tests.*

Table 1: Effect of an incumbent's electoral defeat on bureaucratic turnover in the quarter after the election (Q16)

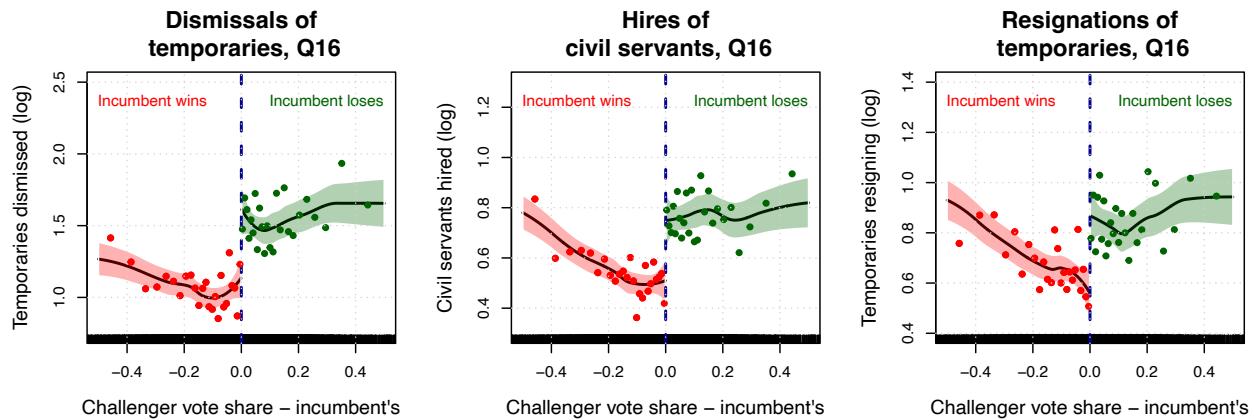
	Temporaries			Civil servants		
	Dismissals	Hires	Resignations	Dismissals	Hires	Resignations
Incumbent defeated	0.35*** (0.084)	0.03 (0.045)	0.289*** (0.056)	-0.009 (0.026)	0.262*** (0.053)	0.101* (0.041)
Bandwidth	0.168	0.182	0.127	0.184	0.164	0.186
Observations	6227	6566	5083	6596	6142	6629
Control mean (untransformed)	23.244	5.505	5.352	0.657	2.49	2.333

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . The bandwidth is determined by the algorithm of Calonico et al. (2020). Robust standard errors in parentheses. All regressions follow the specification in Equation 2. Dependent variables are in the log scale. The last row reports the mean of the outcome, untransformed, in municipalities within the bandwidth where the incumbent wins the reelection.

not drop.<sup>32</sup> Horizontal accountability actors also point to this phenomenon. A prosecutor in Rio Grande do Norte said: ‘‘When a mayor loses the election, they try to save money and they try not to hand out the accounts in a bad state. [...] Once the mayor is out of office they are not able to

<sup>32</sup>Municipal secretary of administration interviewed in the state of Rio Grande do Norte in June 2018.

Figure 3: Regression discontinuity plots for the main results in Figure 2



*Colored dots are local averages for equally-sized bins. Lines are loess regression lines estimated at both sides of the threshold with no controls. Shaded regions denote 95% confidence intervals.*

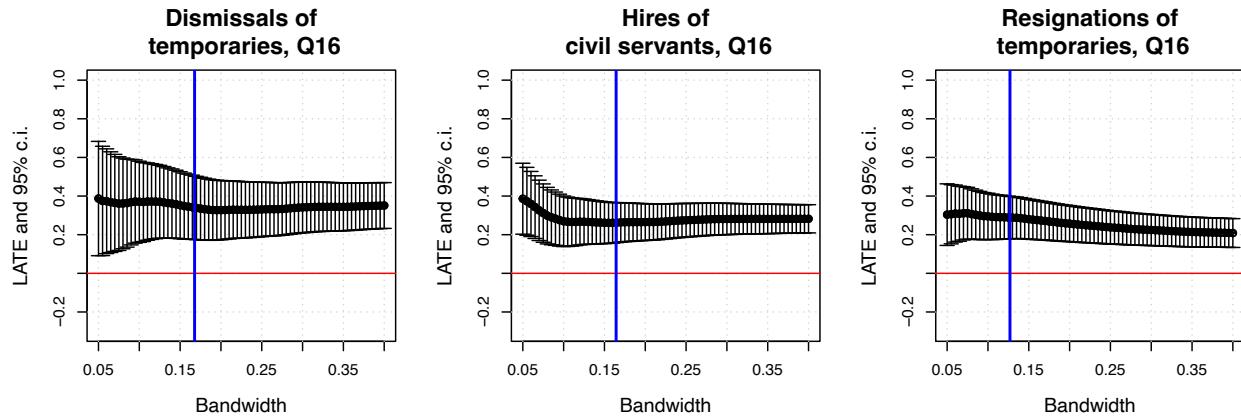
afford equally good lawyers, and they know that [legal problems] can arrive later.<sup>33</sup>

Media reports provide additional qualitative evidence on how election results affect the dismissal of temporary workers. For example, the mayor of Miracema, in the state of Tocantins, reportedly dismissed about 150 employees after she lost the reelection, alleging the municipality was experiencing financial hardship and needed to comply with the Fiscal Responsibility Law ([G1, 2016a](#)). In Porto Nacional, in the same state, the local government reportedly dismissed large numbers of employees immediately after an electoral defeat. The mayor argued this was necessary to adjust public expenses before leaving office ([G1, 2016b](#)). Media reports about this phenomenon are common in other states as well. For example, dismissals were reported following the mayor's electoral defeat in multiple municipalities in the state of Amazonas ([A Crítica, 2016](#)) and in the state of Rio Grande do Sul ([G1, 2012](#)). A recurrent theme in all these reports is the negative impact of dismissals on the delivery of education and healthcare services.

Heterogeneity analyses provide additional, suggestive evidence consistent with dismissals being driven by lame-ducks' motivation to clean the accounts before leaving office. First, an incumbent's electoral defeat causes a larger increase in dismissals among high-pay bureaucrats than among low-pay bureaucrats, although this difference is not statistically significant (Appendix R). Second, the effect on the dismissal of temporaries is larger in municipalities previously exposed to a random anti-corruption audit (Appendix Y), although that difference is also not statistically significant.

<sup>33</sup>State prosecutor interviewed in the state of Rio Grande do Norte in June 2018.

Figure 4: Robustness of the main results in Figure 2 to alternative bandwidths



*Vertical blue lines indicate the optimal bandwidth.*

The results displayed in the central panel of Figures 2 and 3 show that the hiring of civil servants increases as a result of the incumbent losing the election, in line with Hypothesis 2. On average, electoral defeat leads to an increase of 30% in the hiring of civil servants, when compared to municipalities without electoral turnover ( $p < 0.001$ ). This effect is significantly smaller in absolute terms than that on the dismissal of temporaries. That, together with the constitutional precedence of civil service hiring and the fact that these hires correspond to people who have previously passed a competitive exam, helps explain why this effect coexists with the dismissal of temporaries.

Data from in-depth interviews suggest that these increases correspond to a strategy of hiring civil service employees to decrease the opponent's ability to hire their own supporters after taking office, and thus facilitate their return to power. Another secretary of administration in the state of Rio Grande do Norte illustrated this with a report about the preceding government: "The previous mayor hired many people [who had previously passed the civil service exam], especially after they lost the election, to make things harder for the new administration."<sup>34</sup> The fact that about half of the mayors who narrowly lost their reelection in 2008 or 2012 ran again four years later helps understand why election losers would seek to undermine the incoming government.<sup>35</sup>

The hiring of civil servants to constrain the opponent is not unique to Brazil. A qualitative

<sup>34</sup>Municipal secretary of administration interviewed in the state of Rio Grande do Norte in June 2018.

<sup>35</sup>50.75% (49.2%) of the mayors who lost their bid for reelection in 2008 (2012) by less than 10 points ran again 4 years later (TSE data).

study of the Dominican Republic, for example, notes that incumbent politicians there gave tenure to bureaucrats as a form of “insurance against an opposition party successor,” since “tenure would reduce the number of public sector jobs [... an] opposition party President could exchange for political support” ([Schuster, 2020](#), 36).

Lame-ducks’ use of civil service hiring can hurt their opponents because election winners in fact use their discretion to hire as soon as they take office. The hiring of temporary workers increases on average by 98.7% in the first quarter of a post-electoral year in municipalities with a new mayor, compared to those where the incumbent is reelected ( $p < 0.001$ ).<sup>36</sup> These results are in line with previous findings that new mayors in Brazil use bureaucratic appointments to reward their supporters ([Barbosa and Ferreira, 2023](#); [Colonelli et al., 2020](#)). Consistent with this, and similarly to other horizontal accountability actors I interviewed, a prosecutor in the state of Ceará said that temporary contracts are often used as “political currency.”<sup>37</sup>

An alternative explanation for lame-ducks’ hiring of civil servants might be that they seek to protect their policy legacy before leaving office, an argument that has been made for a similar phenomenon in the US ([Lewis, 2008](#); [Mendelson, 2003](#)). To test this possibility, I examine how this effect differs when the incumbent belongs to a large programmatic party and thus can be expected to have stronger policy concerns. The results, reported in Appendix S, show that in those cases an incumbent’s electoral defeat does not trigger an increase in the hiring of civil servants in the last quarter of the election year. In fact, in the Brazilian institutional context it would be hard to use civil service hires to constrain the new government in policy terms: only pre-approved candidates can be hired, they need to be appointed for the role for which they passed a competitive process, and their specific placement within the local bureaucracy can easily be changed. This, together with the interviews and the null result for programmatic parties, suggests that these hires are driven by a strategy to constrain opponents in fiscal rather than policy terms.

This finding contradicts the common view that civil service hiring is politically neutral. Whereas civil service systems dramatically reduce (or eliminate) politicians’ discretion over *who* to hire, they often do not eliminate their discretion regarding *how many* people to hire or *when* to do so. The quantity and timing of hires are important dimensions of human resources management in any organization, and these results suggest that politicians can use them strategically for political gain.

While lame-ducks’ use of civil service hiring is politically motivated, in practice it may be

<sup>36</sup>Localities without turnover hire on average 93 bureaucrats in the first quarter of the post-election year.

<sup>37</sup>State prosecutor interviewed in the state of Ceará in August 2017.

beneficial for governance. At least if new civil service hires occupy a job that would have gone to less qualified political appointees ([Colonnelli et al., 2020](#)), and to the extent that civil servants perform better, this effect can have an unintended but salutary effect over the bureaucracy.<sup>38</sup>

Electoral turnover also causes an increase in resignations immediately after the election, as shown in the right-hand panel of Figures 2 and 3. While researchers have often noted the difficulty of differentiating voluntary from involuntary bureaucrat turnover ([Hong and Kim, 2019](#); [Dahlström and Holmgren, 2019](#)), the RAIS dataset allows us to neatly separate the two. On average, an electoral defeat of the incumbent causes an increase in resignations of 33.6% among temporaries ( $p < 0.001$ ) and a 10.7% among civil servants ( $p < 0.05$ ) in the quarter after the election.

This increase in resignations could be due to strategic exit by bureaucrats who anticipate conflicts with the incoming government ([Bolton et al., 2020](#); [Doherty et al., 2019a,b](#)). Consistent with this interpretation, resignations by high-pay employees increase more after an electoral defeat than those among low-pay bureaucrats, although the difference is not statistically significant (Appendix R). Resignations could also rise if bureaucrats simply dislike the post-election environment of policy and organizational switches. In any case, a key implication of the effect of election results on resignations is that previously hired bureaucrats are not passive subjects of election losers' political strategies. Instead, they sometimes actively respond to the changing political environment, thereby shaping the bureaucratic politics of transition periods.

Finally, it is worth noting that the effects on bureaucratic turnover during the lame-duck period are quantitatively and qualitatively different from those under the incoming administration, on which other studies have focused. First, turnover is more pronounced in absolute terms under the new administration. On average, an incumbent's electoral defeat leads to about 13 contract changes (dismissals, hires, or resignations affecting temporaries and civil servants) in the final quarter of their mandate, compared to about 92 in first quarter of the following year. Second, the dynamics of turnover are more diverse under the election loser than under the winner (when we only observe an increase in the hiring of temporaries). Third, despite the effects during the transition period being relatively small, the next section demonstrates they lead to declines in public service delivery.

<sup>38</sup>I find no evidence consistent with these civil service hires being targeted to political supporters, or with politicians obtaining the political support of those civil servants in the future. As shown in Appendix T, there is no jump at the discontinuity in the share of civil servants hired in the last quarter of the year who run to city council in the previous or in the following election. In this context, running for city council is a good proxy for political support ([Colonnelli et al., 2020](#)).

## Effects of electoral defeat on public service delivery

The results displayed in Figure 5 demonstrate that, in line with Hypothesis 3, electoral turnover has large, negative effects on healthcare service delivery during the transition period.<sup>39</sup> Regression results, discontinuity plots, and plots showing the robustness to alternative bandwidths are in Table 2 and Figures 6 and 7, respectively.<sup>40</sup>

The left-hand panel in Figure 5 shows that an incumbent's electoral defeat causes declines in home visits of healthcare professionals. Visits by nurses and doctors decline by 24.9% and 39%, respectively ( $p < 0.001$ ). The decline in home visits by CHAs is not statistically significant. These declines are not compensated for by increases in the first quarter of the new administration.

Electoral turnover also causes declines in maternal and child healthcare services, as shown in the central panel of Figure 5. Prenatal care check-ups go down by 13.5% in the last quarter of the mayor's term as a result of their defeat ( $p < 0.01$ ). This effect persists into the first quarter of the new administration, where we observe 14.6% fewer prenatal check-ups than in municipalities where the mayor wins the reelection ( $p < 0.05$ ). Medical consultations with both infants and children also decrease after an incumbent loss, by 19.4% and 23.1%, respectively ( $p < 0.001$ ). As with home visits, these declines are not compensated for by increases when the winner takes office.

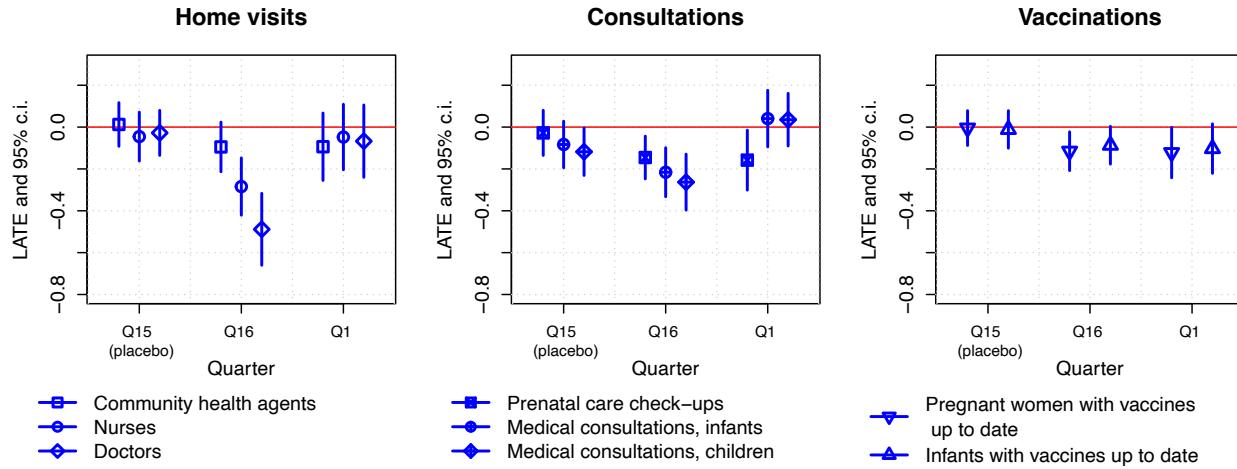
Finally, the right-hand panel of Figure 5 shows that the mayor losing the reelection also causes declines in immunization. The number of pregnant women with their vaccines up to date goes down by 10.9% in the last quarter of the electoral year as a result of an incumbent defeat ( $p < 0.05$ ). There is a similar decline of 8.3% in the number of infants with their vaccines up to date, although it is marginally insignificant ( $p = 0.06$ ). These effects are also not compensated for by an increase in immunizations after the winner takes office.<sup>41</sup> Given the critical role that vaccines play in preventing death and disease (Andre et al., 2008), these results suggest that the declines in healthcare services caused by electoral turnover may hurt health outcomes.

<sup>39</sup>Placebo tests using healthcare services in the quarter before the election return null effects, with the exception of the one for medical consultations with children.

<sup>40</sup>Regression tables for all models, with and without controls, are included in Appendices J and K. The significant results for home visits are robust to the omission of controls, yet those for other health services are not. The main results are robust to specifying the outcome variable with the inverse hyperbolic sine transformation, or using the log and dropping observations where the outcome equals zero (Appendix L).

<sup>41</sup>In fact, the negative effect on vaccinations among pregnant women persists in the first quarter of the post-election year (10.9%,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Figure 5: Effect of an incumbent's electoral defeat on the delivery of healthcare services



*See notes under Figure 2.*

Table 2: Effect of an incumbent's electoral defeat on healthcare service delivery in the quarter after the election (Q16)

	Home visits			Prenatal	Medical consultations		Vaccines up to date	
	CHAs	Nurses	Doctors	Check-ups	Infants	Children	Pregnancies	Infants
Incumbent defeated	-0.095 (0.061)	-0.284*** (0.07)	-0.488*** (0.088)	-0.145** (0.052)	-0.216*** (0.06)	-0.263*** (0.068)	-0.115* (0.047)	-0.087 (0.046)
Bandwidth	0.166	0.14	0.108	0.219	0.166	0.139	0.167	0.183
Observations	4648	4126	3348	5413	4632	4090	4673	4956
Control mean (untransformed)	13060.803	374.842	182.083	365.441	139.004	288.786	277.806	627.861

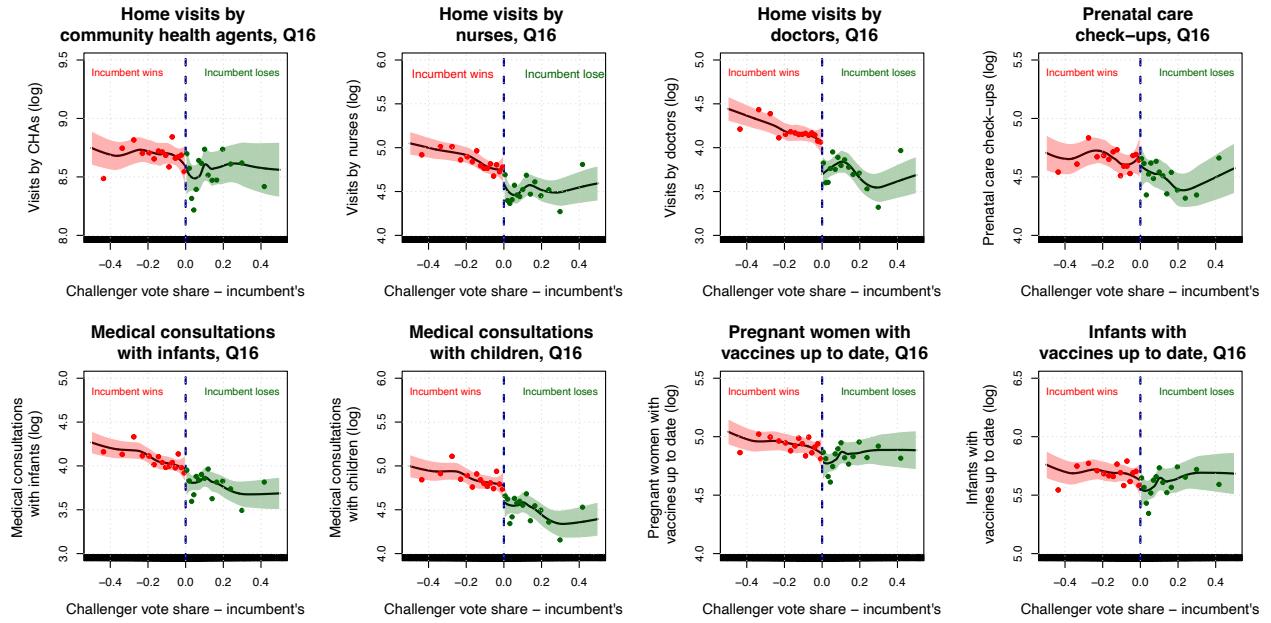
*See notes under Table 1.*

In sum, an electoral defeat of the incumbent causes significant declines in the delivery of healthcare services. In an average municipality, these effects add up to a loss of about 306 encounters between citizens and healthcare providers. Since these services are mandated rather than elective, effects are unlikely to be driven by variation in demand. Given that these services are central to the mission of local healthcare systems in Brazil, which are highly visible and salient for local voters, these declines suggest other services may also suffer as a result of an electoral defeat of the incumbent – at least in policy areas where delivery depends on human resources.

What drives these declines in public service delivery? Bureaucratic turnover is likely a key mechanism.<sup>42</sup> Human resources are the main input to primary healthcare in this context and

<sup>42</sup>An alternative explanation for these results could be that services are being provided at the same rate but healthcare professionals are failing to register them. Two findings suggest this is not the case. First,

Figure 6: Regression discontinuity plots for the main results in Figure 5

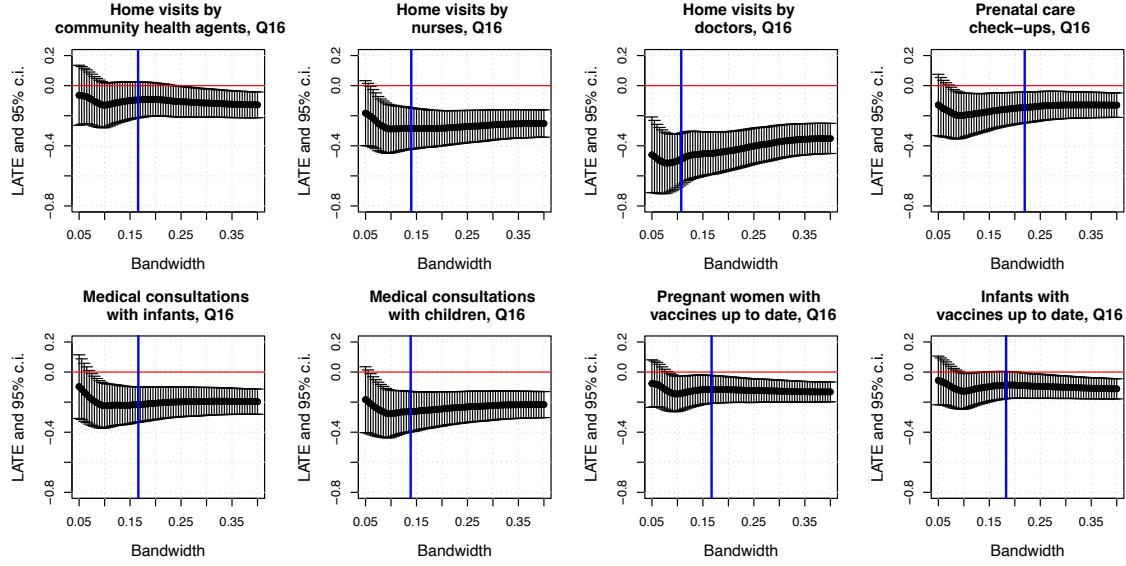


*See notes under Figure 3.*

the largest spending category ([Medeiros et al., 2017](#)). While the effects documented in Figure 2 correspond to the bureaucracy as a whole, very similar patterns emerge when focusing on specialized healthcare professionals like doctors, nurses, and CHAs (Appendix P). Additional evidence on the turnover of healthcare personnel comes from examining effects on the net change in the total stock of municipal healthcare professionals, as measured by the National Registry of Health Establishments (CNES, *Cadastro Nacional de Estabelecimentos de Saúde*), as shown in Appendix V. In fact, news reports about the dismissal of employees in the aftermath of elections often refer to its deleterious impact on the delivery of healthcare services ([A Crítica, 2016](#); [G1, 2012](#)). The turnover of healthcare professionals can negatively affect the operation of clinics not only by limiting human resources, but also by disrupting teams of providers. Even the mere threat of dismissals (e.g., if bureaucrats know of firings in previous administrations, in neighboring municipalities, or in other policy sectors) can depress service delivery by increasing uncertainty and ambiguity among clinic personnel.

While previous research on the connection between political turnover and service delivery has focused on bureaucratic turnover as the main mechanism ([Akhtari et al., 2022](#); [Fagernäs and Pelkonen, 2020](#)), other concurrent dynamics can also contribute to explain the results in Figure 5. results are similar when we exclude observations where the outcome equals zero (Appendix L). Second, there are null effects on placebo outcomes measured in the same dataset (Appendix U).

Figure 7: Robustness of the main results in Figure 5 to alternative bandwidths



*Vertical blue lines indicate the optimal bandwidth.*

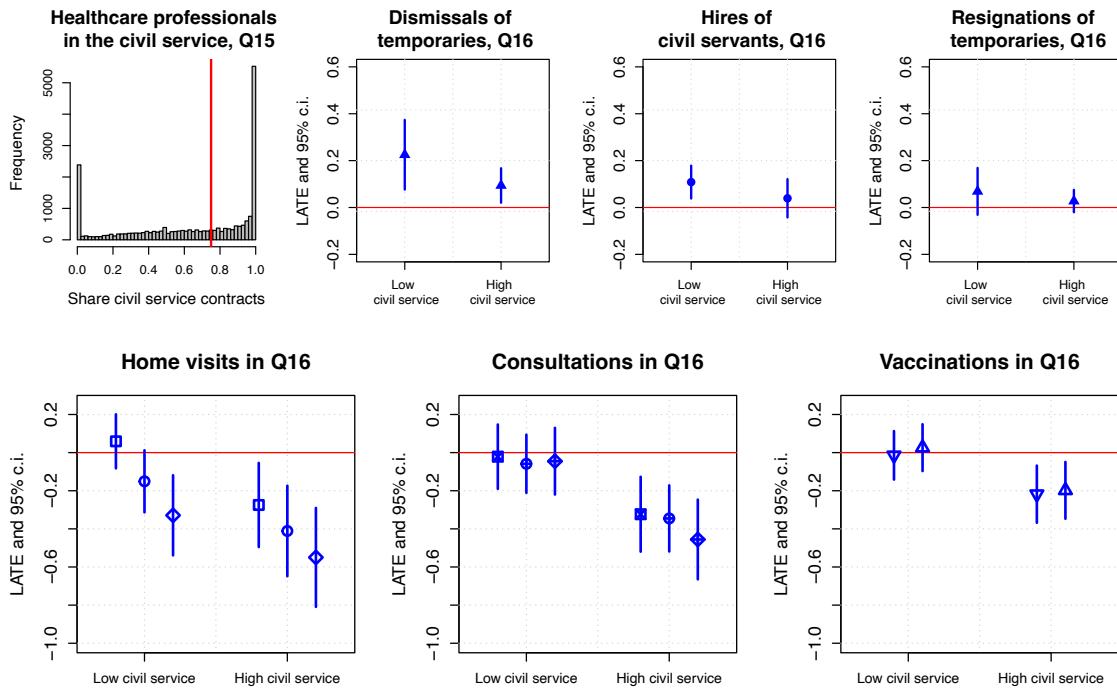
A municipal secretary of healthcare in the state of Ceará referred to multiple mechanisms operating at the same time: “A change in government stops everything, because of the transition... The population suffers as a result. For example, we were a reference municipality in the fight against dengue, but because of that transition dengue cases have increased by over 500%. Pregnant women who used to do prenatal check-ups regularly stopped. [...] Workers stop working. Those who are in temporary contracts are dismissed, and contracts for example for transportation are canceled. The outgoing mayor does not want to have any more expenses. [...] Tenured professionals stay but with no conditions to do their job, with no materials.”<sup>43</sup>

To examine whether disruptions to service delivery can occur with limited bureaucratic turnover I exploit variation in the prevalence of civil service hiring among healthcare bureaucrats before the election. The larger the share of healthcare bureaucrats with civil service contracts, the less pronounced bureaucratic turnover is likely to be.<sup>44</sup> This comparison provides variation in municipalities’ vulnerability to bureaucrat turnover in the healthcare sector while avoiding conditioning on post-treatment variables, which would introduce bias. Figure 8 shows that municipalities where a larger share of healthcare workers have civil service contracts (and thus are protected from dismissal) ex-

<sup>43</sup>Municipal secretary of healthcare interviewed in the state of Ceará in August 2017.

<sup>44</sup>Appendix W characterizes municipalities with a larger share of civil service bureaucrats in healthcare – they tend to be smaller and poorer.

Figure 8: Effect of an incumbent's electoral defeat on the turnover of healthcare bureaucrats and on services they provide, by prevalence of the civil service in the healthcare bureaucracy



*Low (high) civil service corresponds to localities where the share of healthcare bureaucrats with civil service contracts is below (above) the median (the vertical line in the histogram). See notes under Figure 2.*

perience less turnover in the healthcare bureaucracy but larger declines in service delivery.<sup>45</sup> These results imply that bureaucratic turnover is not the only factor connecting electoral defeat and public service delivery under lame-duck government. More generally, these results suggest that insulating bureaucrats through civil service protections does not necessarily eliminate the connection between an incumbent's electoral defeat and declines in service delivery, at least in this context.

The interview quote above suggests that disruptions to transportation may also be contributing to the decline in service delivery during the transition period. This would be consistent with outgoing mayors seeking to contain expenses as a strategy to protect themselves from prosecution. The fact that home visits by nurses and doctors see larger declines than the services they provide in the clinics (prenatal care check-ups and consultations) is consistent with that hypothesis. Yet

<sup>45</sup>Effects are similar when comparing municipalities where either all or none of the healthcare bureaucrats have civil service contracts in the quarter before the election (Appendix X).

disruptions to transportation cannot explain the declines in consultations. Moreover, declines are not more pronounced in municipalities with a larger geographical area, where transportation should be a more relevant input (Appendix Z). Disruptions in transportation are thus likely to play only a partial role in driving the results in Figure 5.<sup>46</sup>

A temporary loss of bureaucratic accountability is another mechanism that interviewees highlight. Three reasons make lame-duck politicians and senior officials less able to monitor and exert pressure on bureaucrats in their last months in office. First, lame-duck mayors and secretaries of healthcare are likely more concerned with preparing themselves for transitioning out of office than with improving service delivery. Second, clinic managers –who are typically political appointees– may lose some of their ability to coordinate and mobilize healthcare personnel once their patron (and themselves) are about to leave their job ([Toral, 2023b](#)). Third, civil servants (who know they cannot be fired) and politically-active temporaries (who know their contracts are unlikely to be renewed by the incoming administration) have limited incentives to work hard in the particularly uncertain and ambiguous environment of the transition period. This logic was illustrated by a different municipal secretary of healthcare in the state of Ceará, who stated that decreased bureaucratic responsiveness was the main problem for healthcare services during transition periods: “tenured bureaucrats close their arms, because no one is holding them to account. [...] Temporaries do not work because they know their days [in the job] are counted.”<sup>47</sup>

Two additional pieces of evidence support the idea that bureaucratic accountability plays a role in the connection between political turnover and service delivery. First, as can be seen in Figure 5, the declines in service delivery generally disappear after the election winners take office, when political and organizational uncertainty ends, new principals are established, and incentives become more aligned. Second, as shown in Figure 9, wealthier municipalities experience comparable effects on the turnover of healthcare bureaucrats after the election, but smaller (and often statistically insignificant) declines in service delivery compared to poorer municipalities.<sup>48</sup> Wealthier localities may have features that help alleviate the impact of political turnover on service delivery, including stronger bureaucratic norms, more robust social accountability, and less politicized bureaucracies.<sup>49</sup>

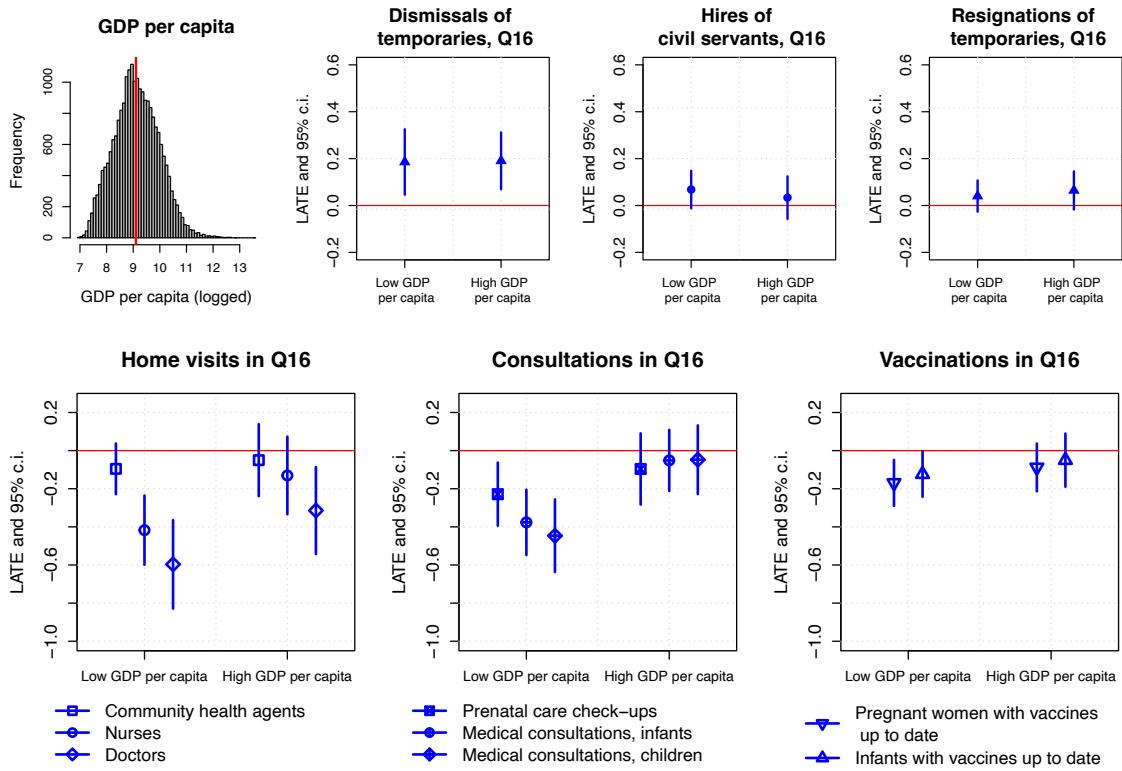
<sup>46</sup>Disruptions in other material inputs could play a role too, but they are unlikely to be central. Human resources and infrastructure are the main inputs to primary healthcare delivery in this context.

<sup>47</sup>Municipal secretary of healthcare interviewed in the state of Ceará in August 2017.

<sup>48</sup>There is no noticeable heterogeneity by municipality population.

<sup>49</sup>In less politicized bureaucracies, temporary workers may expect that their good performance on the job will be rewarded with another contract by the incoming administration, which could contain drops in performance during the transition period.

Figure 9: Effect of an incumbent's electoral defeat on the turnover of healthcare bureaucrats and on services they provide, by per capita GDP in the municipality



*Low (high) GDP per capita corresponds to localities below (above) the median (the vertical line in the histogram). See notes under Figure 2.*

These results are suggestive rather than conclusive, but point to a variety of mechanisms driving the connection between political turnover and declines in service delivery, including bureaucratic turnover, disruptions to other inputs like transportation, and a worsening of bureaucratic accountability during the transition period. Future research might seek to uncover more direct evidence on the causal mechanisms driving the results in Figure 5.

## Conclusion

Political turnover is central to the theory and practice of representative democracy. This article argues that, despite its many benefits, political turnover also has costs, at least in the short term, as it leads to bureaucratic turnover and depresses public service delivery. Whereas previous studies

of turnover emphasize the actions of election winners, this article advances a theory centered on the political strategies of lame-duck governments and how they affect the composition and performance of the bureaucracy. I demonstrate these turnover dynamics using a close-races regression discontinuity design with administrative data on public employment and healthcare service delivery in Brazilian municipalities.

To summarize, the results show that an incumbent's electoral defeat causes increases in the dismissal of temporary employees and the hiring of civil servants before the winner takes office. The evidence presented here suggests these effects are driven by lame-ducks seeking to improve their compliance with legal rules about temporary hiring before leaving office, on the one hand, and to constrain their opponent's fiscal capacity to hire their own supporters on the other hand. At the same time, the delivery of major healthcare services declines in the months immediately following the election. The negative effects on service delivery appear to be driven by a combination of bureaucratic turnover, disruptions to other bureaucratic inputs, and a worsening of bureaucratic accountability during the transition period.

These findings have important implications for how we think about political turnover and lame-duck governments. While previous studies on the connections between political and bureaucratic turnover typically examine yearly variation in outcomes, political turnover is best analyzed as a process that starts when the uncertainty characteristic of competitive elections turns into the certainty of the incumbent's defeat and the ensuing transition of power. Despite formal and informal rules limiting what lame-ducks can do, in practice these governments use their remaining time in office to exercise their discretion over the bureaucracy by pursuing unequivocally political strategies. Bureaucrats also behave strategically during the transition period, by either resigning or changing their level of effort.

A second key implication of this study is that the fear of being prosecuted after leaving office can powerfully influence the behavior of lame-duck politicians during their remaining time in office. This suggests that there is an incumbency advantage in the control of information about government irregularities, even in contexts with strong anti-corruption institutions, and that the prospect of losing that advantage can lead to disruptive decisions in the months before the election winner takes office.

A third important implication of the results is that neither public employment in the civil service nor the performance of civil servants is as insulated from political influence as is typically

assumed. Whereas the targeting of civil service jobs is generally protected from political influence through competitive examinations, politicians often retain discretion over the scale and timing of civil service hiring. Lame-ducks can strategically mobilize this discretion by hiring civil servants before leaving office to reduce their opponents' fiscal capacity to hire their own supporters after taking office. This perspective highlights the need to extend the comparative research on civil service reform to study when and why politicians widen the scope of civil service hiring once legal reforms are passed.

Finally, the findings in this article suggest that the dynamics of political turnover can jeopardize citizen welfare, at least in the short run. If political turnover depresses service delivery in a policy area that is both salient to voters and consequential for human development, it is plausible that it also disrupts other areas of government activity, at least those that depend heavily on human resources. From a policy standpoint, this study suggests that shortening the transition period between election day and the start of the winner's term can enhance citizen welfare. While there may be good administrative reasons to allow a few days or weeks for the transition, longer lame-duck periods may carry significant costs in terms of bureaucratic turnover and government standstill. Future research may seek to exploit cross- or within-country variation in formal institutions (including the length of the transition period, the electoral system, and constraints on politicians' discretion over the bureaucracy) to better understand their effects on the dynamics of turnover.

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