Electoral Accountability and Incumbency Effect in Latin American Presidential Elections

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Introduction

The way the accountability process plays out in Latin American presidential regimes presents an interesting puzzle. When presidents re-stand for a consecutive term, they are re-elected 85 per cent of the time. However, when they are not allowed to re-run, their parties lose in seven out of ten cases. How can this be explained? Why do voters choose to reward individual presidents but punish their parties when incumbents do not re-stand? Or, more precisely, how do institutional and contextual variables - the re-election rule and, in its absence, the relationship between outgoing presidents and their party’s candidate - mediate the economic vote?

While scholars of electoral accountability have assessed the impact of the re-election provision on presidential elections, they have only looked at whether presidents re-stand or not, without taking into consideration the relationship between the outgoing president and her successor inside her party when she does not re-run. This paper argues that this relationship needs to be accounted for, because it helps explain why voters choose to vote for incumbent parties and, more precisely, under which conditions they do so. Following the economic vote tradition, this research shows that re-standing presidents profit most from good evaluations of the state of the economy and pay a higher political cost for bad evaluations. Candidates that have a strong tie with the outgoing president do not benefit as much from a good economic evaluation, but are not as heavily punished when things go wrong. Finally, candidates that are not linked to the president are neither rewarded nor punished for economic performance. In terms of the puzzle presented above, the re-election rate goes up to 50 per cent when presidents do not re-stand and the successor candidates are closely tied to them.

In contrast to most research that looks at elections either as an ex-post device to sanction governments or as an a priori mechanism to select good policymakers, this paper develops a model of presidential accountability in which individual voters use elections both to retrospectively evaluate the incumbent's record in office, and to prospectively select a good government. Following this, when presidents re-stand, voters have a clearer signal of what the future performance of the government will be like, which leads to a higher performance-based vote, i.e. a higher economic vote. Similarly, when successor candidates are strongly linked to incumbent presidents as opposed to being independent from them, voters can better predict the future behaviour of the executive.

Besides looking at the incumbency effect, this research also accounts for other institutional and contextual variables that may mediate the economic vote. In contrast to research conducted on established parliamentary democracies (e.g. Powell/Whitten 1993), this paper does not find evidence that clarity of responsibility - i.e. whether the government is in a majority position – mediates the economic vote.

Methodologically, this paper departs from most research conducted on Latin America by relying on individual level-data from the Latinobarómetro survey for the 1995-2008 period. The dataset combines over 50000 individual observations from election years in 18 Latin American countries with contextual and institutional data. The multi-level structure of the data calls for a multi-level modelling strategy. In terms of case selection, the study of presidential elections in Latin America is justified by the
wide variation in the relationship between the incumbent president and her party's candidate, which provides a unique opportunity to test these arguments.

**It’s not (only) the economy, stupid!**

“I consider our defeat as a contribution to democracy in Latin America. It is not customary for a party in power to lose an election”. The statement belongs to president José María Figueres, whose Partido Liberación Nacional was defeated in the 1958 Costa Rican presidential election. What was an exception in 1958 – i.e. incumbent parties losing elections – is no longer so 53 years later. In contemporary Latin America, individual presidents are generally rewarded and parties generally punished. In 109 elections in the democratic era, presidents have achieved re-election in 11 out of 14 cases – i.e. 84.6% of the time – while their parties have lost in 68 out of 93 elections – i.e. 70.8% of the time (see Table 1).

How can this be explained? In their simplest form, theories of retrospective accountability – which conceptualize elections as a mechanism to hold governments responsible for the results of their past actions (Manin et al. 1999) – would explain these re-election patterns in terms of government performance: voters re-elect either a party or a re-standing president that performed well. This would imply, however, that the economic vote is neither mediated by political institutions or contextual factors, nor by psychological concerns, as the recent literature has claimed (see Anderson 2007). Well-performing presidents or, in the case of no re-election, parties would be rewarded for a good economic performance or punished for a poor one irrespectively of other factors. Is this really the case?

Recent literature on the performance of Latin American incumbent presidents and parties shows that the economy is not always the main factor shaping electoral results or approval ratings. And even when it is, the relationship is not as straightforward as the classic economic voting model suggests. Studying Peru, Kelly (2003) argues that Fujimori’s approval ratings during the 1990s were shaped more by prospective rather than retrospective concerns, and that other factors besides the economy – mainly political issues such as the capture of Sendero Luminoso leaders – had a considerable impact on the president’s popularity. Similarly, a cross-country study of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela by Weyland (1998), claims that draconian market reforms only find support in the electorate if they promise to revert a deep crisis and avert further loses. Two further case studies that look at public opinion support the trend identified by Weyland. Stokes (2001) and Echegaray and Elordi (2001) suggest that citizens’ reactions to economic trends during the 1990s fluctuated between an exonerating and an intertemporal posture – i.e. the idea that things need to get worse before they get better. In Peru, when things went wrong – e.g. wages fell and prices rose – people did not turn against the government, but turned from support to uncertainty. In Argentina, president Menem benefited from a mixed of intertemporal politics and exonerating arguments.

During the 1990s, Menem and Fujimori were not the only Latin American presidents that won consecutive terms despite mixed economic records. In Brazil, Cardoso was
re-elected in 1998 in the midst of the Asian financial crisis, which had a severe impact on the Brazilian economy. Having stabilized the country once by designing the 1994 Plano Real as a minister of economic affairs, Cardoso was perceived by a majority of Brazilians as the right man to handle the new crisis (Bustani 2001: 312). In fact, Cardoso had no choice but to make the real the central theme of his campaign, as he had failed to deliver on the main promises of his 1994 platform – most notably fiscal reform.

Weyland’s study as well as the cases of Menem, Fujimori and Cardoso, suggest that voters are willing to reward presidents despite mixed economic records. While the market reforms that these presidents implemented in their first terms were successful in curbing hyperinflation, they also resulted in long periods of extended unemployment. For different reasons, these presidents were nevertheless given the benefit of the doubt. This contrasts starkly with the cases of well-performing governments which, in the context of term limits, were not re-elected despite strong economic performances. The failure of Eduardo Frei to get the ruling Concertación re-elected in Chile after the very successful term of Michelle Bachelet as president, is only the latest example.

In a cross-country study using aggregate-level data, Benton (2005) argues that due to years of economic hardship, Latin Americans have developed sophisticated economic long-term memories. Since more than one party has exposed them to difficult economic conditions, voters hope to punish multiple parties at the polls. However, they are only able to do so when the electoral context is more permissive, i.e. when political institutional arrangements allow the entry and survival of a plurality of parties. Instead, in more restrictive institutional settings, the limited number of viable contenders forces voters to behave more strategically. “To avoid wasting votes on parties unlikely to win, citizens consider only incumbents’ performance when deciding whom to support” (Benton 2005: 418). The main point is that the institutional and political contexts of elections matter.

**Clarity of Responsibility and Separation of Powers**

Benton’s contribution regarding the impact of institutional and political contexts in shaping electoral results is far from an exception in the literature. In fact, most studies on retrospective accountability have focused in recent years on elucidating how a performance-based vote – i.e. the economic vote – is mediated by these political and contextual factors (Fisher/Hobolt 2010, Duch/Stevenson 2005, Duch/Stevenson 2008, Anderson 2000, Hellwig/Samuels 2007). The notion of “clarity of responsibility” has been at the centre of this debate (Powell/Whitten 1993, Powell 2000). Behind this concept lies the idea that voters are more likely to reward or punish incumbents for their past performance when they can clearly identify who has been in charge of policy outcomes. Thus, in their seminal work – a cross-national study of Western democracies – Powell and Whitten (1993: 410) identify five political and institutional factors that impact the responsibility assignment: the majority/minority status of the government, whether there is a coalition government in place, the level of party/legislative cohesion, the opposition control of committee chairs, and the opposition control of upper chambers in systems with strong bicameralism. In a later
contribution, Powell (2000) shows that the majority status of the government captures most of the variance in the voters’ ability to assign responsibility.

At the empirical level, most cross-national studies that have looked at the impact of political context and institutional variation on the economic vote, have focused on Western developed democracies (Lewis-Beck 1997, Evans/Andersen 2006). As a result, only the U.S. American type of presidentialism has received considerable attention (Campbell 2005, Erikson 1989), leaving many of the complexities of separation of powers regimes in other regions understudied. Only recently have scholars started to theorize the impact of presidentialism on responsibility assignment (Samuels/Shugart 2003), and to test these arguments on a comparative basis (Samuels 2004, Samuels/Shugart 2010). The message from this literature is clear: presidential regimes generate particular forms of accountability that are different from those of parliamentary systems.

At the core of the debate about the particularities of presidential systems lies the notion of separation of powers. The fact that presidents and legislatures are elected separately, allows voters to hold both bodies accountable independently. According to Samuels and Shugart (2003), the degree to which these separate judgements actually take place depends on the institutional setting. Concurrent presidential and legislative elections generate ‘unity of purpose’ by creating close electoral linkages between the executive and the legislature, i.e. a sense of “unified democratic legitimacy” is created that resembles elections in parliamentary regimes. Empirically, this means that in concurrent presidential and legislative elections, both the executive and its legislative supporters are held accountable for the state of the economy, a situation that does not take place in non-concurrent presidential and parliamentary elections (Samuels 2004: 433).

In sum, a first hypothesis can be derived from this section:

**H1: The effect of the economic vote will be stronger when elections take place in a majority situation, i.e. when clarity of responsibility is high.**

**Electoral Accountability and Re-election in Latin America**

While the notion of clarity of responsibility is well established in the literature, little attention has been paid to the issue of presidential re-election on a cross-national perspective. This is somehow striking considering the fact that, outside of the United States, the re-election debate has been at the centre of the institutional and political debate of most presidential regimes since their foundations.

In Latin America, the presidential re-election issue defined the constitutional and political debate in the new republics from the beginning of their national histories. In a continent full of strong caudillos, the fear of continuismo led most Latin American countries to establish prohibitions on immediate re-election. As a result, the 19th century saw repeated attempts to avoid or overturn these constitutional restrictions. The iconic Latin American independence fighter Simón Bolívar changed his position on re-election in a span of only seven years. In 1819, while delivering a Constitutional plan to the Venezuelan Congress, he argued that “the origins of usurpation and
tyranny” lay in allowing “one citizen to retain power for an extended period”. Seven years later he recommended a lifetime presidency for Bolivia arguing that “a fixed point [was] needed about which leaders and citizens, men and affairs [could] revolve” (Bierck 1951: 175, cited in Carey 2003: 121). The lifetime president was, of course, going to be Bolívar himself.

Bolívar may have been the first, but certainly not the last politician to change course when it became politically convenient. Porfirio Díaz campaigned on an “effective suffrage and no re-election” platform in Mexico’s 1871 presidential election. However, after winning the presidency five years later, he amended the constitution to remove term limits, and stayed in power for 34 years. The case of General Juan Perón in Argentina is not much different. Midway through his first presidency in 1948, he still argued that re-election “would be an enormous danger to the political future of the republic and a threat to public service” (Congreso de Argentina 1948: 17, cited in Carey 2003: 123). A year later he had already changed his mind, and his main party organ justified the constitutional amendment on the grounds that it was “equally undemocratic to require a voter to vote for an unwanted choice as to prevent a vote for the desired option” (Serrafero 1997: 123, cited in Carey 2003: 124).

The cases of Bolívar, Díaz, and Perón, as well as other recent experiences in Latin America, show that there is a huge disparity between normative arguments and empirical realities. The case put forward by Perón’s supporters in favour of re-election is difficult to refute on normative grounds because, after all, prohibiting re-election does restrict voter choice. However, the strong legacy of caudillismo has often led to evident abuses of power, in the end leading to “a reaction against continuismo and the reestablishment of constitutional prohibitions on reelection” (Carey 2003: 124). In the last two decades, however, a movement in favour of abolishing term limits has taken place, with Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru (for a short period) allowing presidents to re-stand for a consecutive term.

Despite the importance of presidential re-election in the Latin American political context, scholars have not paid enough attention to this issue, focusing instead on legislative term limits (Carey 1996) and the idiosyncrasies of the American presidency (Nadeau/Lewis-Beck 2001). This is particularly striking considering the fact that, since the last transition, the possibilities for incumbent presidents to systematically abuse their powers have been rather limited and elections in Latin America have been mostly free and fair. Among the few scholars that have discussed the re-election issue have been Carey (2003) – from a theoretical perspective – and Samuels (2004) in an empirical article. The former defends the re-election provision from a normative standpoint by stating that it improves “democratic responsiveness and accountability by aligning the incentives of incumbent presidents more closely with those of voters” (Carey 2003: 126). In this view, presidents who aspire to be re-elected are more likely to be attentive of citizens’ preferences than constitutional lame ducks.

Samuels, on the other hand, downplays the importance of the immediate re-election provision. Focusing on the sanctioning model, he argues that whether voters get to hold individuals accountable is not that important. Instead, what matters for the accountability process is that voters get to sanction the incumbent party. According to
Samuels, this is the case because even last term presidents care about their performance in office, if only to secure a benevolent view from history. Since their legacy is shaped by who succeeds them, they care “about who that person turns out to be” and attempt therefore “to convince voters that they share a personal and political affinity with their successor-candidate” (Samuels 2004: 426).

The problem with this understanding of the re-election issue is that it assumes that voters necessarily evaluate the president and her party in a unified manner. Samuels (2004: 426) argues that “[i]n presidential systems, the vote for or against the party of a term-limited president or legislator is necessarily a judgement of both the individual incumbent and the incumbent’s party” and adds that there is “no reason why voters could not hold political parties as a whole and presidential governments as a whole – even those populated by term-limited politicians – accountable in a retrospective fashion”. That unified evaluation, however, does not always take place. There may be several reasons for this.

As Samuels suggests, a lame duck president may want to show voters that she shares “a personal and political affinity” with the candidate of her party, but if her government performance has been weak, her successor may want to avoid being identified with the outgoing incumbent and, therefore, choose to distance herself from the latter. In other circumstances presidents who are not allowed to re-stand may prefer to undermine the candidacy of their own party, so as to avoid losing the status as the main figure inside the party. The case of Peruvian president Alan García in 1990, who sought to undermine the presidential campaign of his party’s candidate, with whom he had a personal feud for the control of the party apparatus, is well documented (Schmidt 1996). Finally, the successor of a popular lame duck president may not be able to benefit from these high levels of support if she belongs to a different faction – or to a different party in the case of a coalition. This is precisely what happened in the last Chilean presidential election, where the Christian democratic candidate of the ruling Concertación, Eduardo Frei, could not ride on the popularity of the socialist president Michelle Bachelet.

In this paper I suggest that the re-election provision has a huge impact on the voters’ ability to hold governments accountable. When presidents re-stand, voters can use the incumbents’ past performance more efficiently to predict the outlook of the future government’s policies. This is because the incumbent has already occupied the post and, as a result, voters have better quality information about her than about any of the other candidates. If the incumbent does not re-run, voters do not have the same quality of information to derive how the policies of the new government will look like. This is particularly important in the Latin American context where, as Wiesenhomeier and Benoit (2009) have shown, presidents’ policy positions systematically differ from their own parties’ positions by being closer to the median voter in the electorate and to the median party in parliament. If the party – which does not necessarily advocate the same policies as the lame duck president – is in charge of selecting the successor candidate, how informative can the performance of the outgoing government be?

In this point, this research departs from most of the theoretical and empirical literature that seeks to conceptualize and measure the incumbency effect. I suggest that it is not only relevant whether the incumbent re-stands or not, but also where the successor candidate stands in relation to the outgoing administration, i.e. how close is the
successor to the outgoing president. When assessing the performance of a last-term president in order to predict the policy outlook of the new government, voters will be able to use that information more efficiently if the candidate is someone close, e.g. from the same intra-party faction as the incumbent. In contrast, if the candidate is from a different faction or someone who is not closely identified with the outgoing president, voters may have problems deriving information from past performance. In practical terms, I claim that voters differentiate between a Dilma Rousseff, “Lula’s candidate” in the last Brazilian election, and a candidate like Eduardo Frei, Bachelet’s successor inside the ruling Chilean coalition, who was not really identified with the president. The former benefited from Lula’s popularity and good economic performance, while the latter was not able to ride on Bachelet’s coattails.

In terms of the operationalization of my main explanatory variables, I follow Duch and Stevenson (2008) in suggesting that the quality of the competency signals that voters extract from the observed economy may vary across different contexts – i.e. by type of candidate – and, hence, induce different amounts of economic voting. Thus, the following hypotheses can be derived from this section:

\[H2: \text{The economic vote will be highest when the president re-stands.}\]
\[H2a: \text{When the successor candidate is endorsed by the outgoing president the economic vote should be higher than when the candidate is not supported by the president.}\]

Presidents, Candidates and Government Performance: An Analysis

Are re-standing presidents and their successors electorally punished or rewarded for their performance in the same way? What if the president does not re-run? Does the type of candidate that the incumbent party presents – someone with close ties vs. someone with no ties to the outgoing president – make a difference? Does political context – i.e. clarity of responsibility – matter? In this section I test the arguments developed earlier by modelling the effect of the type of candidate and the political context on the probability of voting for the candidate of the incumbent party. I make two important points: 1) the type of candidate matters. Re-standing presidents profit most from good economic evaluations and pay a higher political cost for bad ones. Candidates that are endorsed by the outgoing president do not benefit as much from good economic evaluations, but are not as heavily punished when things go wrong. Finally, candidates that are not linked to the president, are neither rewarded nor punished for economic performance; and 2) the clarity situation - i.e. whether the government is in a majority position – does not mediate the economic vote. This result comes somehow as a surprise.

Data and Measurement

This paper tests the impact of candidate type, clarity of responsibility and government performance in 45 presidential elections in 18 Latin American countries over the 1995-2008 period. To test these theoretical propositions, the study combines time-
series cross-section individual-level data from Latinobarómetro\(^1\), with institutional and political data that captures the type of candidate and the political context of the election. The Latinobarómetro survey is conducted every year in every Latin American country, usually during the same time of the year. The same questionnaire is administered in each country each year, and the questionnaires vary from year to year\(^2\). The sample size fluctuates between 1000 and 1200 respondents. In total, the dataset comprises 52834 individual observations from 45 different surveys – one survey for every democratic\(^3\) election in which there was an incumbent candidate\(^4\).

The dependent variable is a measure of national vote intention, using the standard formulation of: “If there was an election tomorrow/this Sunday, which party would you vote for?”\(^5\). The response variable is binary in all models – 1 for the vote for the incumbent party or parties, and 0 otherwise (“no answer” and “don’t know” are left out of the dataset).

The main predictors are measures of government performance, candidate type and the interaction between these two variables. Regarding the performance of the government, I use a standard economic voting question – “Do you consider the country’s present economic situation to be better, about the same, or worse than 12 months ago?” – and for a subset of cases, a question of presidential approval – “Do you approve or disapprove of the current administration headed by [NAME OF PRESIDENT]?”. I have recoded the economic voting variable so that “worse” is coded -1, “same” 0, and “better” 1. The presidential approval question is a dummy, 1 for those that approve of the president, and 0 for those who disapprove. I also use dummy variables to capture the type of candidate, i.e. whether the incumbent president is re-running, whether the party successor is endorsed by the outgoing president, or whether she has no links to the incumbent. The rationale for interacting the performance and candidate type variables is that voters are not only sensible to who is the candidate, but choose to punish or reward them differently based on how the government has performed.

As secondary predictors I use two more dummy variables that capture the political context, i.e. the majority/minority status of the government, and whether the presidential candidate of the incumbent party belongs to a proper political organization, as opposed to a personalistic political machine – these are re-standing presidents most of the time. Once again, I interact these variables with government performance. The model controls, in all cases, for gender, age, education, marital status, religiosity, socio-economic level, and ideological self-placement. These are, however, not reported, as they offer no particularly striking results.

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1 The Latinobarómetro Corporation is a non-profit NGO based in Santiago, Chile. Its annual public opinion survey involves some 19,000 interviews from 18 Latin American countries, representing more than 400 million inhabitants.

2 This is in some cases problematic, as the same variables are not available for all the years.

3 I qualify as democratic elections those that took place in countries with a level of six or more on the Polity IV scale. As a result I excluded the 1995 and 2006 Peruvian and Venezuelan elections.

4 In some elections some incumbent parties did not have a presidential candidate from their own ranks, and did not go into a coalition either. Perú Posible, the party of Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo in 2006 is an example. These cases were left out of the dataset.

5 The problem with this question is that it asks for a party, instead of the name of the presidential candidate. This can be an issue when the party has low recognition despite having a well-known figure as its candidate.
Estimation

Due to the hierarchical structure of the data, this study employs multilevel models in order to test whether the type of presidential candidate, the political context and the economic evaluations impact the accountability process. In this hierarchical structure a set of individual characteristics affect vote choice, while case-specific variables predict differences in the effect of the individual-level variables across cases\(^6\). I estimate hierarchical logit models in which the first level dependent variable is a dummy variable for the vote in favour or against the incumbent party. The second level includes explanatory variables at the case level. I estimate varying-slopes, varying intercepts models with case-level predictors for intercepts and slopes, i.e. models with interactions between individual and case-specific variables with additional random errors for the cases. The controls in the first level include gender, age, education, marital status, religiosity, socio-economic level, and ideological self-placement.

I estimate two first-level models of the following form:

\[
\text{Logit}[\Pr(Vote_i)] = \beta_{0j(i)} + \beta_{1j(i)} \text{economic}_{vote} + X_j + \varepsilon_i \\
\text{Logit}[\Pr(Vote_i)] = \beta_{0j(i)} + \beta_{1j(i)} \text{economic}_{vote} + \beta_{2j(i)} \text{presidential}_{approval} + X_j + \varepsilon_i
\]

\(\text{Logit}[\Pr(Vote_i)]\) is the probability of voting for the incumbent (1, 0). \(\beta_{0j(i)}\) is the intercept for individual \(i\) in country \(j\). The coefficient \(\beta_{1j(i)}\) estimates the economic perception of voter \(i\) in country \(j\). \(X_j\) is a vector of controls for individual characteristics, while \(\varepsilon_i\) is the error term. The second model adds a further coefficient \(\beta_{2j(i)}\) for presidential approval.

There are three further models at the second-level, one for each interaction and one for the intercept. These models have the form

\[
\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \text{type of candidate}_j + \gamma_{02} \text{political context}_j + \gamma_{03} \text{party}_j + Z_j + \eta_{0j} \\
\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} \text{type of candidate}_j + \gamma_{12} \text{political context}_j + \gamma_{13} \text{party}_j + Z_j + \eta_{1j} \\
\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} \text{type of candidate}_j + \gamma_{22} \text{political context}_j + \gamma_{23} \text{party}_j + Z_j + \eta_{2j}
\]

where \(Z_j\) is a vector of case-level controls and \(\eta_{0j}, \eta_{1j}, \text{ and } \eta_{2j}\) are case-level errors. Equation 3 estimates the main effects of the macro-level predictors – “type of candidate”, “political context” and “party” – on the baseline individual. Equation 4 and 5 estimate the main effects of the macro-level predictors on the economic vote and on presidential approval.

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\(^6\) There are as many cases as election years, i.e. 45 cases from 18 countries.
Results

The first model in Table 3 reports the coefficients and standard errors for the most parsimonious model. The dependent variable is the vote for the incumbent party or president (1, 0), and the main predictors are the economic vote, and its interaction with the type of president. Two secondary predictors are included: an interaction between political context and economic perceptions, and an interaction between the economy and a dummy, indicating whether the incumbent candidate belongs to an organized party.

In line with studies that rely on individual-level data, the economic vote proves to be significant at any conventional level, while pointing in the predicted direction. This means that, controlling for all other factors, the probability of voting for the incumbent increases with better evaluation of the state of the economy. Regarding the secondary predictors, only the party*economic vote interaction is statistically significant and in the expected direction: controlling for everything else, parties are more generously rewarded for good economic perceptions than candidates from weak organizations. The majority situation*economic vote points in the right direction but is not statistically significant.

The main story in Model 1 (Table 2) is that the interaction between the type of candidate and the economic vote is also significant, and in the expected direction: the coefficient for the interaction of the economic vote and the re-standing president is .71, .30 higher than in the case of candidates endorsed by last-term presidents, and .50 higher than in the case of candidates from the same party of the incumbent, but not directly chosen by her. This means, in short, that re-standing presidents benefit more from good perceptions than the two other types of candidates.

Figure 1 makes this effect more clear. The y-axis reports the probability of voting for the incumbent, and the x-axis the economic perceptions (-1 “worse”, 0 “same”, and 1 “better”). The three lines show fitted probabilities of voting for the incumbent president or party by type of candidate and economic evaluation for a catholic married man aged 40, who is ideologically moderate, and has a university degree. Re-standing presidents are punished more severely than candidates that are endorsed by the lame duck president – they get on average 5% less – but also profit more from good economic evaluations as they get an average of five extra points when evaluations of the economy improve. The slope for re-standing presidents is clearly steeper than the other two. Candidates that are not supported by the lame duck president are treated equally by voters that hold positive and negative opinions about the state of the economy, as shown by the flat slope.

The second model (Table 3) adds presidential approval and its interaction with economic evaluation. In this model, the interaction between a candidate endorsed by the incumbent and the economy becomes no longer significant. Regarding the
secondary predictors, the majority situation\text{*}presidential approval interaction is not statistically significant, but party\text{*}presidential approval is, and also points in the predicted direction: again, incumbent candidates that belong to political parties profit more from better economic evaluations. But the main story that is confirmed by the second model is that re-standing presidents profit more from good economic perceptions than the other two types of candidates. The coefficient for presidential approval for a re-standing president is 1.93, 1.01 higher than for a candidate that is endorsed by the outgoing president, and 1.90 higher than for a candidate that is not supported by the president.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 2 shows this pattern more clearly. The y-axis reports the probability of voting for the incumbent president or party, and the x-axis the approval of the government – 0 “disapproves” and 1 “approves”. The three lines show, again, fitted probabilities of voting for the incumbent by type of candidate and whether the voter approves or disapproves the performance of the president. The picture is very similar. Re-standing presidents are punished more severely when they are disapproved, even more than candidates not endorsed by the lame duck president, although the difference is very small. The biggest margins, however, are in cases of approval. When their performance is approved, re-standing presidents get on average 20\% more votes than candidates that are endorsed by the outgoing president, and 40\% more than candidates who are not supported by the incumbent. The latter are again treated equally by voters that hold positive and negative opinions about the state of the economy.

Discussion

The literature on electoral accountability, which has mainly focused on parliamentary democracies, assumes that voters sanction or reward incumbent politicians and their parties in a unified manner. At the centre of this conception lies the “responsible party government” model, which proposes that, at the time of an election, voters evaluate the government performance of the incumbent party in order to hold it accountable (Committee on Political Parties 1950). This is also the line followed by Samuels (2004) who, as already stated, argues that whether voters get to sanction the individual is not that important, as long as they get to hold the party accountable.

The results of this analysis show that incumbency does matter. Re-standing presidents are more generously rewarded for good economic perceptions and more severely punished for weak economic evaluations. The results also suggest that incumbency is not the only thing that matters, as the relationship between the successor candidate and the lame duck president inside the government camp also impacts the accountability process: candidates endorsed by the outgoing president benefit more from a good performance than candidates that are not close to the president.

These results are especially significant if one considers the fact that, as Wiesenhomeier and Benoit (2009) show, Latin American presidents’ policy positions systematically differ from their own parties’ policy positions. In this context, the fact that a president re-runs or that, at least, the candidate of the incumbent party is someone close to the outgoing president, considerably reduces the uncertainty about
the policies of the future government. This is a huge advantage from the voters’ perspective.

Does the fact that the “responsible party government” model does not fully apply to Latin American presidential democracies mean that parties are irrelevant for the accountability process? For all the discussion about the weakness of parties in Latin America (Mainwaring 2006, Mainwaring/Scully 1995, Levitsky/Cameron 2003), this research shows that when incumbent candidates are from an organized party, voters are more likely to reward them for their performance than when the candidate is from a weak organization. As with the type of candidate, the message seems to be that voters consistently value information. Thus, once all other factors are controlled for, voting for a party is clearly better informed than voting for an individual.

The results of this analysis are especially telling in the light of another important development in intra-party politics. Even if Latin American parties are in general quite hierarchical, they are not, in most cases, monolithic entities in which there is no level of dissent at all. Factions compete for power and for nominations, especially presidential nominations. As a result, even well performing lame duck presidents, like Michelle Bachelet in Chile, are not able to impose their favourite candidates if they do not control the party or coalition apparatus. Similarly, weak performing or unpopular presidents often manage to stay in control of the party machine and impose the nomination of a member of their own faction, like president Nicanor Duarte did in Paraguay before the 2008 election. This suggests that the effect of the dependent candidate*economic vote interaction is not necessarily driven by the performance of the outgoing president – i.e. not every well performing lame duck gets to pick his successor – but by an intra-party dimension. Future research needs to clarify how this intra-party dimension plays out.

Finally, this research contradicts the main findings of the literature on the political context of elections by suggesting that clarity of responsibility does not mediate the economic vote. Why this is the case is not completely clear and more research is needed in this regard. Two hypotheses come into mind: 1) following the “Linzean” tradition, presidents in presidential regimes are by far the most identifiable figure. As a result, voters focus on their performance, irrespectively of the political context in which they govern; and 2) Latin American legislatures have been labelled as reactive (Cox/Morgenstern 2001), which means that, in general, they cede the initiative to the president, who gets to pass legislation by one way or another. If this is the case, whether presidents hold a majority or not is not that important.

Whatever the reason, the significance is quite clear: executives in presidential systems are subject to greater sanctioning than their counterparts in parliamentary regimes, as adopting a strategy of diffusing political responsibility in minority situations is not electorally rewarded by their voters.

Conclusions

The premise of this paper was that Latin American voters reward re-standing presidents by giving them a consecutive term, while they punish political parties when presidents do not re-run. Does the story change after accounting for the type of
candidate? Actually, it does. As Table 4 shows, candidates that are openly endorsed by an outgoing president – the Dilma and Cristina Kirchner type of candidate – win 50 per cent of the times, while the successors that have no strong ties to the lame duck incumbent still lose at a very high rate in 71.9 per cent of the cases. What does this mean?

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

First, the results of this study have important implications for the debate about the different forms of accountability that are particular to separation of powers regimes. Samuels (2004) argues that the separate election of the president and Congress allows voters to hold both bodies accountable independently, but this research also indicates that voters in presidential systems can use the past performance of the government – and not only of the legislative party – in order to hold the president and her party accountable in separate ways. This is not something common to parliamentary systems, where party leaders need their parties’ support in order to be elected prime ministers, and cannot therefore adopt a different platform. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Wiesenhomeier and Benoit (2009) cited in previous sections.

Second, the results of this paper also have important implications for the re-election debate. This study shows that the re-election provision is an important tool for enhancing electoral accountability, as shown by the fact that the economic vote is considerably higher when presidents re-stand. The advantages of the re-election provision seem, thus, to be clear on normative grounds. This should, however, not be misinterpreted. The re-election provision only enhances accountability when it is used in truly democratic elections, in which all candidates are allowed to compete in equal conditions. In this point, it is particularly striking that only 16 presidents in the third wave were allowed to re-stand for a consecutive term, which suggests that, for all the progress made in the democratization process, policymakers still fear that presidents will abuse their powers in order to stay indefinitely in government. There should therefore be a shift in the debate from thinking about the convenience of re-election to the timing of its introduction. If the re-election provision is positive when used in the right context, we should start thinking about the stage in the democratization process at which a country can start contemplating its introduction.

Third, the reward/sanction patterns found in this analysis, tell something about the sophistication of voters. The fact that candidates that are endorsed by incumbents are more generously rewarded for a good economic perception than candidates that are not closely linked to the outgoing president, suggests that, after all, voters are not as uninformed about the different candidates as many commentators of Latin American politics have grown to believe. Voters do seem to identify who is who inside the parties, and choose to assess them accordingly. The fact that they do so implies, moreover, that they value this information, and that if they are going to reward politicians for their past performance, they want to reward the right people.
References


Mainwaring, Scott (2006): “State Deficiencies, Party Competition, and Confidence in Democratic Representation in the Andes”, in Mainwaring, S.; Bejarano, A. M. and


Surveys

**Latinobarómetro** 1995-2008
Appendix

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Nr. of presidential elections</th>
<th>109</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Re-election cases</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re--election cases</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Re-standing president wins</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Re-standing president loses</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President chooses not to re-stand</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No re-election cases</td>
<td>93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incumbent party wins</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incumbent party loses</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
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<td>Incumbent party has no candidate</td>
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Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1: Vote for the Incumbent</th>
<th>Coef. (Std. Err.)</th>
<th>P&gt; z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard economic vote</td>
<td>.71 (.16)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate dependent*economic vote</td>
<td>-.30 (.19)</td>
<td>0.133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate independent*economic vote</td>
<td>-.50 (.15)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate dependent</td>
<td>.09 (.55)</td>
<td>0.861</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate independent</td>
<td>-.79 (.43)</td>
<td>0.066</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate belongs to party</td>
<td>.92 (.37)</td>
<td>0.013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party*economic vote</td>
<td>.22 (.09)</td>
<td>0.020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Majority situation</td>
<td>.98 (.49)</td>
<td>0.044</td>
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<tr>
<td>Majority situation*economic vote</td>
<td>.16 (.12)</td>
<td>0.184</td>
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### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 2: Vote for the Incumbent</th>
<th>Coef. (Std. Err.)</th>
<th>P&gt; z</th>
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<tr>
<td>Standard economic vote</td>
<td>.45 (.10)</td>
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<td>Candidate dependent*economic vote</td>
<td>.05 (.15)</td>
<td>0.714</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate independent*economic vote</td>
<td>- .31 (.12)</td>
<td>0.007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidential approval</td>
<td>1.93 (.49)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<td>Candidate dependent</td>
<td>-.19 (.99)</td>
<td>0.845</td>
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<td>Candidate independent</td>
<td>.06 (.85)</td>
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<td>Candidate dependent*pres. approval</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate independent*pres. approval</td>
<td>-1.90 (.49)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate belongs to party</td>
<td>-.09 (.59)</td>
<td>0.866</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party*presidential approval</td>
<td>1.05 (.34)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority situation</td>
<td>.86 (1.20)</td>
<td>0.489</td>
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<tr>
<td>Majority situation*presidential approval</td>
<td>1.05 (.71)</td>
<td>0.141</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Table 4

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Total Nr. of presidential elections</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-election cases</td>
<td>9 (-1)</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<td>Re-standing president wins</td>
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<td>87.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Re-standing president loses</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>President chooses not to re-stand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No re-election cases</td>
<td>39 (+1)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
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<td>Dependent candidate wins</td>
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<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent candidate loses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent candidate wins</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent candidate loses</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>71.9</td>
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