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# The Electoral Benefits and Limitations of Incumbency

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by Alex Marland

*Conventional wisdom holds that the key to re-election is to offer a range of constituency services while in office, and then organize a formidable campaign team. During campaigns, grassroots electoral operations (such as canvassing) attempt to increase the local candidate or party vote share. After the contest, winners are congratulated for a strong local campaign and for understanding the electorate, while losers tend to attribute defeat to factors beyond their control. This article examines the assumption that local electoral activities are crucial to the result.*

With an eye towards re-election, incumbents maintain a range of constituency services although the types of services range widely, and the extent to which they are offered differs depending on the member.

Specific services include addressing constituent correspondence, answering phone calls, scheduling constituent appointments, writing for community newspapers, maintaining constituency offices, attending ceremonial functions and constituency gatherings, dealing with constituents' concerns (which often means directing them to the proper official), distributing congratulatory letters, and generally engaging in informal contacts with constituents. Because riding population levels influence expectations, service provision ranges widely between legislatures, political parties, and incumbents (regardless of party affiliation).<sup>1</sup> Canadians' demand for their politicians to be loyal to their constituents has helped produce incumbents who are frequently motivated by a desire to serve their community.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, emphasis on constituency work comes naturally to MPs and provincial politicians who typically have previously worked

for a political party or have been elected at the municipal level.<sup>3</sup>

Incumbents can be classified as three types: "local representatives," who represent local or regional constituency interests and are locally involved in the constituency; "partisans," who promote party policies and the party leader; and "legislators," who emphasize policy work in Parliament.<sup>4</sup> Although partisan and legislator incumbents are less preoccupied with service provision than are the "local representatives", they do not ignore their constituents – all incumbents maintain some level of constituent communication.

Incumbent-constituent interaction may occur through "symbolic responsiveness" (communication through newsletters, quarterly householders, and congratulatory messages), "policy responsiveness" (attempts to represent the constituents' views and opinions), "service responsiveness" (interception with bureaucrats to improve government), or "allocative responsiveness" (lobbying for projects, grants or contracts for the constituency).<sup>5</sup> To maintain communication, members must balance several constituent-focused roles: the "case work" role (where staff obtain information for, and forward the concerns of, constituents), the "constituency-based policy" role (where the incumbent searches for constituency benefits in programs or legislation), the "national policy concerns" role (where the member expresses the views of constituents in policies), and the "so-

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*Alex Marland is a research analyst with Ekos Research Associates Inc. This article is an extract from his M.A. thesis submitted to the Department of Political Science at Memorial University, Newfoundland.*

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cial" role (where the incumbent attends constituency events).<sup>6</sup>

Why do elected representatives offer such a wide range of services? Incumbents tend to believe that it is very important in securing re-election. Multiple studies have found that Canadian incumbents believe in their ability to shape voter support, and that the importance of providing constituency services has been increasing over time.<sup>7</sup> Recently, surveys of MPs from the 34th and 35th Parliaments found that a majority believed that their constituency work had the most influence on their re-election.<sup>8</sup> These surveys also indicated that Members of Parliament, particularly rural ones, and their office staff devote many resources and over 40 percent of their working day to constituency services. Cabinet members and more senior MPs tended to distance themselves from constituency service provision.

What are the electoral benefits of these services? There are indications that although the provision of constituency services is not an essential component to re-election, it does increase incumbents' re-election chances.<sup>9</sup> Constituency services likely do not sway non-supporters but they may maintain previous supporters and those constituents who are satisfied with the service.<sup>10</sup> Unless they wish to face being voted out by those who are angered by inactive representation, incumbents must provide a level of services expected by constituents.

Considering the resources and effort that they require, the electoral benefits of constituency service provision are certainly limited. In single-member plurality systems, constituency services do not ensure re-election because party dominance frequently limits the rewarding or punishment of incumbents. However, incumbents are advised to provide constituency services if only to protect themselves from unfavorable national electoral party waves.

### **The Electoral Benefits of Incumbency**

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Although the ability to capitalize on their condition differs, numerous electoral advantages exist for all incumbents. In Canada, these benefits are believed to increase incumbents' vote share between 3 and 14 percent.<sup>11</sup> Incumbents are typically able to secure this advantage throughout their term in office.

Incumbents' electoral advantage begins with their position as office-holders. This affords them the opportunity to unofficially campaign by repeated exposure through newsletter and press release distribution at constituents' expense. While in office, incumbents can develop an understanding of riding issues and concerns, can better measure the positions of interest groups, and receive briefings from experienced office staff. They are

able to establish contacts with voters, groups, reporters, and other politicians (even potential opponents). They can contact constituents more frequently through the use of free mailing and telephone, paid staff, and free transportation. Moreover, incumbents are contacted by people who might not otherwise become politically involved.

Further incumbency benefits emerge during a re-election campaign. Incumbents can usually argue that they are more qualified for the position, and can claim credit for riding projects. As candidates who have already won an election, they are experienced campaigners who have campaign teams familiar with issues and previous mistakes. They are able to rely on proven strategies which facilitate even the most elementary of decisions, such as which function to attend. Overall, they can rely upon a "learning advantage," where the experiences of winning an election aids in re-election.<sup>12</sup>

***Incumbents normally do not have the disadvantage of having to run against an incumbent themselves.***

The list of advantages over challengers goes on and on. Name recognition is another benefit associated with the position, but in Canada this is more advantageous in party nominations.<sup>13</sup> There are other advantages:

- Incumbents generally do not face quality challengers, because those candidates are scared off by incumbency. Moreover, an incumbent is less likely to be challenged than a non-incumbent.
- Many voters in the riding support, or have considered supporting, the political party of the incumbent.
- Incumbents belonging to the governing party enjoy additional advantages because the government can manipulate the economy, time elections to coincide with a prosperous economic climate, and can manipulate the media so that government activity becomes political coverage.

More important than any single advantage, the pre-eminent benefit of incumbents is their increased fundraising ability and their access to capital. This is particularly noticeable because their presence inhibits challengers' ability to fundraise (for this reason, incumbents are wisest if they focus their fundraising efforts on challengers' potential financial supporters). The relationship between spending and votes creates a challengers' conundrum: although they need a currency advantage to

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overcome their other disadvantages, challengers typically have less finances than incumbents.

### **Incumbents' Likely Receive More Personal Votes**

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Personal voting exists where a candidate attracts a personal electoral advantage among select voters who vote for the candidate as an individual. While a partisan electoral advantage belongs to all candidates of the favored party, the personal vote is restricted to the individual candidate. Because they endeavor to build personal votes by utilizing their office resources and because they have already been elected, incumbents have a significantly higher personal electoral advantage than challengers. While this has been extensively documented in the United States, some recent studies have determined that this is also true in Canada.

Docherty has found that personal voting increases with the duration of incumbency. From 1980 to 1993, first-term Canadian MPs attracted a personal vote of between 3.3 and 5.9 percent. This increased among mature MPs (2 to 4 terms served), who attracted 3.7 to 8.8 percent, and veteran MPs (5 or more terms), who attracted 7.5 to 10.7 percent.<sup>14</sup> While "retirement slumps" (where there is a vote loss for parties whose candidates won an election, but not the one before the current one) do not appear to exist to any great extent, evidence of "sophomore surges" (where a party's riding vote increases when a first-time winner runs for re-election) have been found.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Electoral Limitations of Incumbency**

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Incumbency advantages significantly outweigh all disadvantages, except one: the association with a government which has fallen out of favour with the electorate. If voters wish to "throw the rascals out," a government incumbent's advantages are all but neutralized. The most evident example of this was the case of 1993 Progressive Conservative incumbents, of whom all but one seeking re-election was defeated. In such a case, increased media coverage is damaging if there is a perceived government error; weak partisanship leads to a loss of support from marginal voters; and the government might be blamed for economic or social problems, particularly when changes in personal or disposable income directly affect incumbent support.<sup>16</sup> Although they benefit elsewhere, non-government incumbents jointly suffer when a government is rejected, for they are unable to capitalize on running against a government incumbent voters wish to defeat.

There are a number of hazards which incumbents may face during an election campaign. During their term, they may have created an image of invisibility, especially

compared to previous campaign periods. Their use of staff or associated privileges might be attacked, and they may have to continue official business obligations. Their record is readily apparent to the media and challengers, and they might represent the "political establishment" image. Furthermore, while challenger campaigning has been found to be productive, incumbent campaigning may have few effects. In fact, increased spending on an incumbent's campaign may cause anti-incumbent and tactical voting.<sup>18</sup>

As a rule, challengers are the primary beneficiary of election campaigns. This is particularly true where incumbents have fallen out of favour with the constituency, and challengers can take advantage of an incumbent's vulnerabilities. Challengers can be active in the riding while the incumbent is away; they can aggressively challenge the incumbent's record (while not having to defend their own); they can present a non-political image; and they can go on the offensive without needing to provide solutions to problems.

***Constituency contests are more meaningful for challengers than incumbents.***

Generally, in constituency contests the incumbent has the most to lose while challengers have the most to gain. Elections afford challengers the opportunity to overcome incumbent advantages and to develop a personal vote, particularly as the incumbent's performance is scrutinized by challengers, constituents and the media.

It has been determined that Canadian incumbency advantage may be overcome as direct contacts between challengers and constituents increase, and as challengers' spending increases. Here, increasing volatility and turnout benefits challengers more than incumbents.<sup>19</sup> Incumbents must thus avoid becoming the focus of a constituency contest for fear of attracting an intense campaign. Moreover, while all-candidates debates likely increase the importance of local candidate considerations in vote choice, it is widely believed that they tend to benefit candidates (typically challengers) who have the most to gain.<sup>20</sup> This is but one of the benefits the constituency campaign offers challengers: they also provide challengers an opportunity to obtain campaign experience, increase name recognition, and attract supporters in an effort to build a support base for a second attempt.<sup>21</sup>

While they may benefit challengers and place incumbents in difficult situations, the primary benefactor of constituency campaigns and constituency service provision is undoubtedly the electorate. Campaigning for

votes is democracy's way of ensuring elected officials maintain contact with citizens. It stimulates political awareness and interest, politically educates, and informs the public of policy positions.

The necessity of extensive incumbency service provision and constituency campaigning is clearly debatable. The wisest incumbents will protect themselves by offering some level of constituency services, and by campaigning to some degree during elections. Generally, if incumbents wish to be re-elected, those who devote too little (or too many!) resources to either activity need to re-evaluate their approach based on the evidence provided here.

## Notes

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