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**EXPLAINING THE ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE
OF INCUMBENTS IN DEMOCRACIES**

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Belén Barreiro is *Doctora Miembro* of the Juan March Institute. This Working Paper is part of a CEACS collective project on empirical democratic theory.

The paper examines electoral performance for incumbents in democratic regimes. I explore whether parties in government lose and win votes for the outcomes produced under their mandates. In other words, the work investigates whether electoral support for incumbents depends on key economic, social and political indicators. The study includes a total of 83 democracies from the 1950s to 2000.

This paper is structured as follows. I first discuss the state of the discipline and I present the principal objectives of the research. Then I test three main hypotheses. First, electoral variations for ruling parties may not only depend on pure economic indicators, such as economic growth or inflation. Voters may also hold governments accountable for other policies. They may care about the role of the state in the economy, in particular the size of the state¹. Second, right wing governments may be judged differently from left wing governments. Citizens may reward conservative parties for fostering economic freedom, and left wing parties for increasing the size of the state. Third, accountability may work differently in rich and poor democracies. Voters may be more demanding in rich democracies, or they may not be.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE

The analysis of electoral performance for parties in government contributes to our understanding of how accountability works. Rulers are accountable when voters sanction them for their actions, making the probability of survival in office depend on their performance (Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, 1999). We know that changes in government are not necessarily due to elections, but a fall in votes for the incumbent may easily produce its removal from cabinet. When incumbents lose or win votes for their outcomes, citizens are being sensitive to government performance. It is this sensitivity which may trigger the retrospective mechanism of accountability.

¹ The size of the state refers exclusively to central government expenditures, and not to the state's regulation of economic activity nor to the size of the public sector, that includes public enterprises.

Results on whether democracies are accountable are not conclusive. A huge amount of empirical work has examined whether parties in government are punished when things go wrong, but conclusions are uncertain. Most of the research focuses on the impact of the economy on electoral support, showing that citizens punish the incumbent when economic indicators turn out to be bad (Lewis-Beck, 1988).

Accountability is questioned in other studies. Cheibub and Przeworski show that governments are not accountable to voters for economic outcomes. Using a sample of 135 countries, which includes all democracies, covering the period 1950-1990, they demonstrate that 'the survival of prime ministers is slightly sensitive to the growth of employment, but this is all, and this result is weak. The survival of presidents appears to be completely independent of economic performance' (1999: 229).

Findings on accountability are not conclusive. Variations in accountability have been attributed to the institutional design of democracies (Stein, 1990; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Atkeson and Partin, 1995). If citizens are able to attribute responsibility for economic performance, they can punish or reward incumbents (Anderson, 2000; Chappell and Gonçalves, 2000; Kiewiet, 2000). Voters should be able to clarify responsibility for voting for or against incumbents. Several political or institutional factors may reduce responsibility: minority governments, coalition cabinets, the lack of voting discipline of parties in government, or the opposition's control of the second house.

Accountability may also vary according to the heterogeneous nature of policies (Barreiro, 2003). Three factors may alter representation across policies: saliency (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Erikson, 1976; Page and Shapiro, 1983; Monroe, 1998), the amount of available information on a particular policy (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Kuklinski, 1978; Page and Shapiro, 1983, 1992; Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, 1999), and the extent to which a policy is determined by exogenous conditions. Two main exogenous factors condition political decisions: international constraints and the state's financial capacity. When saliency is low, information obscure and issues are conditioned by exogenous events, policy representation and accountability are low.

Despite of the number of studies that have been undertaken, the discipline still lacks a global account of whether democracies are accountable. Research in this field has two main limitations. On the one hand, studies are usually based on small and biased samples. On the other hand, studies are normally limited to economic indicators. Obviously, any research on electoral performance has to confront a trade off between the size of the sample and the range of governmental outcomes that explains the vote for the incumbent. Large samples restrict the number of indicators of governmental performance that can be considered, since for poor democracies data are less available. Small samples allow the inclusion of more indicators, but conclusions will always be biased.

With one partial exception, there is not a single study that includes in its sample all democracies. The range varies from 'one country, one election' studies to 'cross-country (or area), cross-time' analyses. The most ambitious study is Cheibub and Przeworski's work (1999) on accountability for economic outcomes, based on a sample of 135 countries, which includes all democracies. Nevertheless, the authors do not explain electoral performance: they focus on the survival of heads of government. But we know that permanence in office is often independent of elections. As Cheibub and Przeworski show, 48 percent of changes of prime ministers in parliamentarism are not caused by elections, and only four of 70 peaceful changes of presidents in presidentialism were decided by voters.

Studies with limited samples may be very useful, but they do not properly respond to the question of whether there is accountability in democracies, which should be answered irrespective of space and time. It is necessary to include, if not all democracies, then at least an unbiased sample of them. This opens the possibility of comparing how accountability works in different political and economic contexts. The reward-punishment mechanism may or may not be different under right wing and left wing governments and in rich and poor democracies.

We know very little about how accountability works in different ideological and economic contexts. On the one hand, although an important amount of research focuses on how parties' ideology affect governmental outcomes (Hibbs, 1987; Budge, Roberston, Hearl and, 1987; Boix, 1998), studies usually do not take into account the effect of the incumbent'

ideology on accountability. However, there are some partial exceptions. Examining government survival, Warwick (1992) suggests that ‘governments are vulnerable only on the economic indicator they are generally less adept at handling’ (1992: 884). Lowry, Alt and Ferree (1998: 759) demonstrate that in the United States, ‘Republican gubernatorial candidates lose votes if their party is responsible for unanticipated increases in the size of the state budget; Democrats do not and indeed they may be rewarded for small increases’. Carlsen (2000: 141) shows that government popularity depends on its ideology: ‘right governments are hurt by unemployment but not by moderate inflation. The results for left governments are less conclusive’.

On the other hand, most of the economic voting research focuses on developed countries, and those studies that include in their sample less developed countries usually exclude Western democracies. For example, Pacek (1994) pays attention to national elections in four East Central European democracies, Bulgaria, the former Czech and Slovak Federated Republic, and Poland. Some analyses focus their attention exclusively on Latin America (Remmer, 1991; Roberts and Wibbels, 1999), while other studies are cross-continental but their sample only considers the underdeveloped world (Pacek and Radcliff, 1995).

The second limitation is that most studies focus on the impact of economic outcomes on electoral losses, and they exclude others dimensions of governmental performance. But it may be the case, as Przeworski and Cheibub note, that voters ‘keep governments accountable for matters other than economic’ (1999: 237). Assuming that accountability may not exclusively depend on the economy, some studies show that citizens hold also incumbents accountable for foreign policy (Nickelsburg and Norpoth, 2000), fiscal policy (Kone and Winters, 1993; Lowry, Alt and Ferree, 1998), corruption (Uslaner and Conway, 1985; Fackler and Lin, 1995), social policies (Fraile, 2001), or abortion (Cook, Jelen and Wilcox, 1994; Abramowitz, 1995). But none of these studies integrate more than two dimensions of governmental performance, and they are all limited in time and space.

This article provides a global explanation of how electoral performance works in democracies. The paper aims to fill two gaps in the literature on accountability and democratic theory: the effect of parties’ ideology and of a country’s economic development

on electoral punishment. I explore whether right wing governments are judged differently than left wing governments. In general terms, citizens may expect *economic freedom* from conservative parties and *social equality* from left wing parties. Voters support right wing parties, in their conservative, liberal or Christian democratic guise, both when they reject a strong involvement of the state in the economy, and when they do not favour radical social equality programmes. From socialist incumbents, people want policies oriented towards workers' protection and redistribution. Obviously, citizens, whether conservative or socialist, may also agree on certain matters. They may all attribute the same value to certain economic outcomes (economic growth). Consequently, governments may be accountable for some particular matters independently of their ideological adscription.

The paper also analyses whether accountability works differently in rich and poor democracies. The effect of governmental performance may differ in relation to the economic context. Bad outcomes may be more costly for citizens in poor economies: outcomes tend to be worse, variations in performance are more dramatic, and poorer countries have lower levels of welfare spending, exposing the population to less social protection. As Pacek and Radcliff (1995: 44) state, 'the economy plays less of a role in states with high levels of spending, regardless of the direction of economic change'.

Finally, another merit of the paper lies in its empirical ambition. The analysis is based on a sample of nearly all democracies for a period of 50 years. Consequently, indicators on governmental performance have been inevitably restricted, even if not only pure economic outcomes are included. The explanation of electoral performance I offer is incomplete, but relatively unbiased.

ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE IN DEMOCRACIES

Sample

The sample includes all countries that are actually democracies for which data on elections results are available, and that have had at least two successive elections. Therefore, countries that were democracies in the past, but are dictatorships right now, are not included (for example, Peru, which became a dictatorship in 1990). A total of 83 democracies forms the data set². A maximum period of approximately 50 years, from the 1950s until 1999, is covered.

I have used the Alvarez, Cheibub, Limongi and Przeworski (ACLP) index for classifying a country as democratic. For my purposes, the ACLP index presents two principal advantages: first, it subscribes to a minimalist definition of democracy, which permits the inclusion in the analysis of a larger number of cases. The authors define democracy as ‘a regime in which those who govern are selected through contested elections’ (2000, 15); second, the index enables us to divide the world between dictatorships and democracies, facilitating in this way the decision of which countries to include. None of the other existing indices on regime type are categorical. In the other data sets the measurement level is ordinal or interval (Munck and Verkuilen 2002).

² For the following democracies no data on election results have been found: Marshall Islands, Nauru, Micronesia, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Suriname and Mauritius. Moreover, for several particular elections of countries included, no data are available: Panama, 1989; Saint Kitts, 1993 and 1995; Bahamas, 1992 and 1997; Dominica, 1995; Dominican Republic, 1966 and 1970; El Salvador, 1984; India, 1997; Trinidad and Tobago, 1966 and 1971. For other different reasons, the data set excludes the following elections: Portugal, 1976; Ecuador, 1996; Venezuela, 1998; Guatemala, 1991 and 1995; Armenia, 1995.

Measuring electoral performance

My purpose is to explain electoral performance in democracies. Vote variation is measured by looking at the losses or gains of the incumbent between two successive elections³. For example, the Labour Party in the United Kingdom won in 1997 the support of 30.9 percent of the electorate and in 2001 24.2 percent. Therefore, the electoral loss for Labour is 6.2 percentage points. Note that electoral performance considers the percentage of vote of the electorate, and not the percentage of vote of total voters. I assume that citizens may punish the incumbent not only by voting for another party but also by abstaining.

In the creation of this dependent variable, two problems had to be confronted: how to measure electoral performance in presidential systems and in coalition governments, particularly when parties are not the same for the whole legislature. The dependent variable computes losses and gains in parliamentary elections for parliamentary systems and vote fluctuations in presidential elections for presidential systems. Contrary to parliamentary systems, the constitution of governments under presidential systems depends entirely on the President, who can form a cabinet without the support of the legislature. The only exception to this rule is Bolivia, where the Constitution establishes that when no candidate obtains a majority in presidential elections, Parliament selects the President through majority rule. Because in presidential systems it is up to the President to decide whether or not to form a coalition cabinet, I assume that it is the President who is truly responsible for the making of policies, and therefore accountable for the whole incumbent's performance. Consequently, electoral performance only computes gains and losses for the President's party in presidential elections, leaving out electoral variations for other parties when they happen to be in government.

³ Two different alternatives for measuring electoral losses or gains may be used: the difference between the vote percentage for each party in two consecutive elections (Paldam, 1991), or the vote percentage in the current election controlling for the vote percentage in the previous election (Powell and Whitten, 1993). They both lead to the same result.

In parliamentary democracies, the electoral performance of coalition governments is measured by summing the variations of votes for all parties in the coalition. The simplest case is one in which all members of the coalition win or lose votes. In the 1998 German election, the two ruling parties CDU/CSU and the FDP were punished: the former lost 3.7 percentage points and the latter 0.3. Therefore, for this observation the value of the dependent variable is ‘-4’. However, in most cases, some members of the coalition are punished while others are rewarded. Under such circumstances, electoral performance is still measured by summing variations in votes, so that losses and gains may partially cancel each other out. Between 1998 and 2002, a coalition between the SPD and the Greens ruled in Germany. In the last election, the SPD lost 3.1 percentage points of the electorate, while the Greens gained a 1.3 percentage points. Consequently, in 2002 the total loss for the coalition is 1.8.

Computing electoral losses or gains is more complex when cabinets are unstable. I have followed several rules. If between two elections different governments are formed, the dependent variable takes the variations of votes of the parties that were in the last cabinet if its duration is of at least 12 months. When this is not the case, the variable computes the longest government between two elections. If two governments have the same duration, the variable computes the last of the two governments with the same duration.

Table 1. Description of electoral performance in democracies

N	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value
477	-3.9	8.3	-49.49	31.20

The dependent variable has a total of 477 observations. Table 1 describes the variable. The mean is -3.9, which indicates that the tendency for incumbents in democracies is to lose votes. The minimum value is -49.5 and the maximum is 31.2. The greatest loss corresponds to the 1992 Romanian election and the greatest gain to Jamaica in 1989. Extreme variations in votes for the incumbent are discussed in the next section.

Extreme variations in electoral performance

Extreme losses are a combination of uncommon incidents and bad contexts. Huge electoral variations happen when certain extraordinary events take place in contexts of bad economic and political conditions. Table 2 shows extreme electoral losses in democracies. Losses are above 20 percentage points in a total of 16 elections, where different events occur: the resignation of the head of State or of Government, the death of the Head of State or his decision not to seek re-election, parties' internal struggles, and violations of democratic rules. Resignation of the Head of State or Government has taken place in 7 cases. Corruption was the main cause of the resignation in three elections: Lithuania (1996), Venezuela (1993) and Brazil (1994). A financial crisis was the principal reason for the resignation of the Albanian Prime Minister before the 1997 elections, while a severe economic crisis and the failure to find a solution over the Quebec problem caused the dismissal of the Canadian Head of Government in 1993. Institutional conflicts led to resignations in Saint Tomé (1994) and Romania (1992), where a general strike also contributed to the electoral failure in the latter case. Conflicts between the state's institutions were also the reason for the Head of State's decision not to seek re-election in Ecuador (1988). In the Dominican Republic's election of 1996, the Head of State renounced did not seek to re-election because he was accused of electoral fraud. In Grenada in 1990, the death of Herbert Blaize produced the electoral collapse. His death gave citizens the opportunity to put an end to a very authoritarian style of government.

Parties' or coalitions' internal struggles were the main reason for extreme electoral losses in Saint Lucia (1982) and Ecuador (1984 and 1992). Finally, disturbs against democratic rules caused the electoral failure of the incumbents in Colombia, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago.

Table 2. Description of extreme electoral losses in democracies

Event	Cases			
	Country	Year	Electoral loss	Main cause
<i>Resignation of Head of State or of Government</i>				
	Lithuania ^a	1996	27	Corruption
	Venezuela ^b	1993	28.8	Corruption
	Brazil ^c	1994	42.3	Corruption
	Albania ^d	1997	32.1	Financial crisis
	Canada ^e	1993	21.1	Economic crisis and territorial conflict
	Saint Tome ^f	1994	30.6	Institutional conflicts
	Romania ^g	1992	49.5	General strike and institutional conflicts
<i>Head of State does not seek reelection</i>				
	Ecuador ^h	1988	26.8	Institutional conflicts
	Dominican Republic ⁱ	1996	27	Electoral fraud
<i>Death of Head of State or of Government</i>				
	Grenada ^j	1990	38	Authoritarian style of government
<i>Parties' or coalitions struggles</i>				
	St. Lucia ^k	1982	26.5	Conflict over budgetary policy
	Ecuador ^l	1984	46.3	Coalition split
	Ecuador ^m	1992	31.5	Coalition split
<i>Disturbs against democratic rules</i>				
	Colombia ⁿ	1962	34.6	Arranged elections
	Jamaica ^o	1983	48.3	Electoral boycott
	Trinidad and Tobago ^p	1991	27.6	Attempted coup d'état

(a) Prime Minister Adolfas Slezevicius was dismissed on January 1996 after the legislature approved a decree calling for his resignation, when it had been known that he had withdrawn personal savings from the Lithuanian Incorporated Innovation Bank before its collapse, which froze the assets of many Lithuanians. Slezevicius also stood down as chairman of the Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party.

(b) Carlos Andrés Pérez was suspended from office on 21 May 1993 after he had to face corruption charges.

(c) Fernando Collor de Mello resigned two years before the election after he was found guilty of corruption.

(d) On March 1997, President Berisha ordered the resignation of Prime Minister Alexander Meksi. Violent demonstrations had taken place in January as a response to the collapse of several pyramid financial schemes.

(e) Brian Mulroney resigned as Prime Minister and as leader of the Progressive Conservative Party eight months before the election. With his resignation, he intended to improve the electoral support of his party. A severe economic recession and the failure to find a solution to the Quebec problem made him very unpopular.

(f) President Trovoda forced Alegre's government to resign due to continuous conflicts between both institutions.

(g) Prime Minister Petre Roman, from the FSN, resigned after the violent general strike of 1991. Before the 1992 elections, President Iliescu splits from the FSN and founded the FDSN. Both parties competed separately in the 1992 election.

(h) President Febres was kidnapped in January 1987 by Air Force paratroopers after he refused to promulgate a bill of amnesty for General Vargas, approved by the left majority in parliament. Vargas had been held in custody since 1986 following two attempted rebellions. Although in 1987 Congress failed to introduce impeachment measures against the President, the Congress passed a resolution accusing Febres of violating human rights and of aggression against the Congress.

(i) Balaguer's presidential term was shortened to two years because of electoral fraud in the previous election (1994). Balaguer, who was not on the ballot, refused to support the candidate of the ruling PRSC, Peynado. Many commentators believed that Balaguer supported the PLD's candidate Leonel Fernández in order to prevent the victory of the Dominican Revolutionary Party's candidate, Francisco Peña.

(j) Prime Minister Herbert Blaize died on December 1989. He had ruled with an authoritarian style since 1984.

(k) Allan F.L. Lousy resigned as Prime Minister on April 30, 1981 when the leader of the more radical faction of his Labour Party, George Odium, challenged him in Parliament by voting against budget proposals that were defeated. Odium broke with the ruling party to form the Progressive Labour Party, which competed in the 1982 general election.

(l) The coalition DP-CFP, which allowed the electoral triumph of 1984, broke up during the legislature.

(m) The Democracia Popular-Unión Demócrata Cristiana (DP-UDC) broke the coalition with the President's party, ID. Moreover, the President of the Congress, Averroes Bucaram, leader of the CFP, began a campaign against the government, accusing several ministers and civil servants of corruption.

(n) Between 1958 and 1974, the Frente Nacional was in power, alternating between liberals and conservatives, independently of electoral results.

(o) The PNP boycotted the 1983 elections arguing that government broke its promise to update electoral registration and to implement antifraud measures. Therefore, the JLP won the total control of the House but with a turnout of 28.9%.

(p) Five months before the 1990 election, members of a Moslem sect attempted an unsuccessful coup d'état. The country was plunged into a severe and prolonged economic crisis.

While an extremely bad electoral performance is normally produced by extraordinary events, all these democracies have very much in common. With the exception of Canada, none of these democracies belong to the OECD. I have included in table 3 a brief description of some political and socio economic indicators, comparing the context of extreme losses with the rest of the observations. The table only has an illustrative purpose.

With regard to political indicators, elections with extreme losses have taken place in countries with a shorter period of democracy: while the mean of democratic length is of 44.3 years in elections that do not have an extremely bad electoral performance, it falls to 17.1 years in elections with losses over 20 percentage points. These elections are also more frequent in presidential systems, although the institutional design of democracy does not necessarily account for this finding. Presidential countries are economically and politically weaker. Only 4.8 percent of the elections for OECD countries correspond to presidential systems, while among the non OECD countries, 43.5% are presidential elections. Moreover, the length of democracy is shorter for presidential systems (23.4) than for parliamentary systems (41.4). Extreme losses have also occurred in generally more corrupt countries. In an indicator that goes from 1 (more corruption) to 6 (less corruption), the mean is 3.3 for democracies with extreme losses, 1.2 under the mean for the remaining observations.

Greater differences emerge if we look at some socio economic indicators. Data on real GDP per capita, inflation and, to a lesser extent, unemployment show that extreme losses are associated with fragile economies. While the mean real GDP per capita is 4,647.4 (1985 international prices) for the sample that includes only elections with extreme losses, it rises to 7,903 for the remaining observations. Inflation is more than four times bigger in democracies with extremely bad electoral performance, although much lesser differences (3.5 points) are found in unemployment.

Table 3. Political and socio economic indicators in elections with extreme losses

	Extreme losses		Rest of observations	
	Mean	Percentage	Mean	Percentage
<i>Political indicators</i>				
Years of democracy*	17.06		44.26	
Presidential systems*		43.75		17.35
Corruption*	3.31		4.53	
Variations in corruption	0		-0.2	
<i>Socio economic indicators</i>				
Real GDP per capita*	4647.37		7903.02	
Variations in real GDP per capita*	-129.92		664.06	
Inflation	196.25		43.45	
Variations in inflation	21.83		-45.02	
Hyperinflation		31.2		23.4
Unemployment**	11.8		8.3	
Variations in unemployment	1.86		0.43	
Total central government expenditures as a total of GDP***	26.82		33.00	
Variations in total central government expenditures as a total of GDP	0.94		0.96	
Infant mortality**	32.94		20.77	

*** Statistically significant at 0.01

** Statistically significant at 0.05

* Statistically significant at 0.10

Moreover, incumbents that lose more than 20 percentage points in the share of votes have a worse economic record, measured by variations between elections in economic indicators, than the other governments. The mean variation in real GDP per capita indicates that elections with extreme losses have been celebrated in a context of smaller economic growth than elections with ‘normal’ losses. The same can be said about variations in inflation: large electoral losses coincide with a negative performance, something that does not take place in elections without extreme losses. Huge punishments are also more frequent when there is hyperinflation (an inflation rate of 100 percent or more). Differences, however, are again smaller with regard to variations in unemployment.

Finally, total central government expenditures as a percentage of GDP are smaller in democracies with extreme electoral losses, but no differences are observed in the variations of this indicator. Infant mortality is also higher in unstable elections than in more stable ones.

What can be said about extreme electoral gains? Rewards above 20 percentage points are less frequent than extreme losses. Of a total of 477 elections, huge electoral gains took place only twice, in Jamaica in 1989 and in Uruguay in 1999. Incumbents in democracies are more often radically punished than rewarded.

Moreover, as table 4 shows, extreme gains are the consequence of changes in the electoral arena. In Jamaica, the People's National Party (PNP) boycotted the 1983 election, arguing that the government had broken its promise to update electoral registration and to implement antifraud measures. Consequently, the Jamaica Labour Party won with only 2.4 percent of the vote (of registered voters), all the seats in the low House. The increase in votes in the next election was the result of a normal electoral turnout.

In the 1999 election in Uruguay, the electoral law was reformed. While with the previous system a plurality of votes was sufficient to win the election, with the new law the winner need to reach an absolute majority in a second round to obtain the Presidency. Therefore, the extreme gain was produced by the inevitable concentration of votes in the second round.

Table 4. Description of extreme electoral gains in democracies

Country	Year	Electoral gain	Main cause
Jamaica	1989	31.2	Previous electoral boycott
Uruguay	1999	20.8	Reform of the electoral system

In sum, the general tendency for incumbents in democracies is to lose votes, moderately. Extreme losses, above 20 percentage points, have taken place in 16 out of 477 observations, and extreme gains only twice. Huge electoral variations are produced by extraordinary events in bad economic and political contexts, while extreme gains respond to changes in how electoral competition is structured.

The incumbent's performance

My objective is to test whether governments are accountable for the outcomes they contribute to producing. Governmental performance does not only include economic results. Voters may also pay attention to the intervention of the state in the economy, the degree of economic freedom versus the size of the state. It is not, however, an easy task to look at other dimensions of governmental performance. While data on economic growth and inflation are easily available for most democracies since 1950s, other indicators of incumbents' performance are more difficult to find. For example, for the total of 477 observations of the dependent variable, we have data for 409 cases on per capita real income, and 438 on inflation, but there are data on public spending on health for only 190 observations. Consequently, multivariate analysis has been inevitably restricted to those dimensions that did not reduce dramatically the sample. These are mainly per capita real income, inflation and central government public expenditures⁴.

Per capita real income, inflation and unemployment are usually included in studies on economic voting. I had to exclude unemployment because the dataset contains information for only 228 observations⁵. Data on central government public expenditures are also scarce, but it is the variable with more observations among those that measure the role of the state in the economy. Moreover, its correlation with public expenditure on education (0.51) and on

⁴ The dimensions concerning universal social goods and the quality of politicians are excluded from the final regressions. However, indicators on universal social goods, such as infant mortality or life expectancy, do highly correlate with per capita real income. The Pearson coefficient of the logarithm of per capita real income and the logarithm of infant mortality is -0.83 , and the coefficient is 0.79 for the correlation between the logarithm of per capita real income and the logarithm of life expectancy.

An index of corruption from the International Country Risk Guide to Corruption in the Political System may be used for testing whether voters care about the quality of politicians. But since this index starts in the 1980s, the variable reduces considerably the size of the sample. Previous multivariate regression analysis does, however, show that the variation of corruption does not have a statistically significant effect on electoral performance.

⁵ I explored the possibility of using the increase of the labour force as a proxy of creation of employment, as Cheibub and Przeworski have done, but no clear results were found. Variations in the labour force correlate with variations in population (0.6).

health (0.64) is relatively high. The variable, therefore, may be a good proxy of the dimension on economic freedom versus redistribution.

For each dimension of the incumbent's performance I have constructed a variable that measures variations since the last election. I assume that at election times, citizens may look at how certain indicators have evolved since the last election. If things improve, incumbents win votes, and if they deteriorate, incumbents lose votes.

Next, I specify the independent variables considered in the regression models:

- Variations in per capita real income (measured at 1985 international prices). Data come from Alvarez, Cheibub, Limongi and Przeworski (ACLP). For example, in France real GDP per capita was 13663 in 1993 and 14650 in 1997. Therefore, for the 1997 election, variations in per capita real income were of 987, which indicates economic growth.

- Variations in inflation, consumer prices (annual %). Data come from ACLP. In France, inflation was 2.1 in 1993 and 1.2 in 1997. For the 1997 election, the variable computes a decrease of -0.9.

- Variations in total central government expenditures as a percentage of GDP. Data come from ACLP. Governments expenditures represented 47.1 percent of GDP in 1993 in France, and 46.6 percent four years later. Therefore, variations in total central government expenditure decreased 0.58 points in four years.

Control variables

Five control variables are considered in the analysis. Three of them are related to the degree of responsibility that voters may attribute to incumbents for their performance, and the other two concern the conditions under which elections take place.

Electors have certain beliefs about the extent to which outcomes are the result of political actions, or are rather the product of both policies and *exogenous conditions*. The

consequences for electoral accountability are obvious: if voters do not blame governments for certain results, they should not automatically punish them for bad performance. Exogenous conditions include all those circumstances that may diffuse political power. Political circumstances are crucial: when there is a coalition cabinet, the implementation of their political program would be rather difficult. This circumstance is considered in the analysis.

Other factors may also interfere with political action. Consider a democracy in which a party wants to expand public expenditure, by investing more economic resources in education or health. This party may be unable to implement its expansive policy if it has to confront a debt that absorbs a considerable part of public expenditure. A main function of the IMF is to provide loans to countries with balance-of-payments problems, so that they can restore conditions for sustainable economic growth. In the database, 18.1 percent of the observations correspond to elections that took place under an agreement with the IMF. This agreement may not only prevent an expansion of public expenditure, but may also prevent current public expenditure from improving the quality of life of citizens. Therefore, a dummy variable takes this circumstance into account.

Voters' reactions to governmental performance may vary according to certain political or economic conditions: the type of political system, presidentialism or parliamentarism, the percentage of seats that parties in government hold in the lower house, and the degree of economic development.

Presidential systems are frequently associated with weak and unstable democracies. This variable is included to check the effect of governmental performance when presidentialism is taken into account. But its inclusion will also tell us whether this type of political system makes democracies less accountable.

Incumbents' support in the lower house is introduced as a control for the size of the parties in power. I assume that the greater the support that a party or a coalition has in parliament, the greater the potential for electoral losses. A party that has 30 per cent of the vote may easily lose 8 points, but this decrease is rather unlikely for a party that has the support of 9 per cent of the electorate.

The control variables are specified as follows:

- The inclusion in the model of economic development is necessary in order to identify the determinants of electoral performance, and it also tells us whether incumbents in richer democracies win more or less votes than in poorer ones. I list next the control variables included in the analysis:

- Number of parties in government
- Agreement with the IMF. Source: James R. Vreeland, 2002.
- Type of political system: presidential versus parliamentary
- Incumbents' percentage of seats in the lower house
- Logarithm of per capita real income. Real GDP per capita at 1985 international prices. Source: ACLP.

Multivariate results

Two multivariate models are discussed in this section. The technique used is a robust regression, as the sample has severe outliers whose high influence is set aside with this method. Although the database includes variables across time, no problems of autocorrelation have been detected in previous ordinary least square regression analyses. The dependent variable is electoral performance. Table 5 specifies the descriptive statistics for the independent variables.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for variables entering regression models

Variable	N	Mean	St.Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Variations in per capita real income	439	622.52	737.93	-2596.86	5263.4
Variations in inflation	360	-40.55	870.50	-11734.5	7450.05
Hyperinflation	438	0.04	0.19	0	1
Reduction of 100 in variations in inflation	360	0.03	0.17	0	1
Variations in central government public expenditures	247	0.93	5.3214	-39.19	14.18
Logarithm of per capita real income	509	8.64	0.7603	6.4118	10.0758
Agreement with the IMF	502	0.18	0.3856	0	1
Years of democracy	583	37.59	32.8932	1	130
Incumbents' percentage seats in low camera	483	57.36	15.18	11.17	100
Single government	589	0.50	0.50	0	1
Presidential system	583	0.21	0.40	0	1

A total of 215 observations enter the first model, as is shown in table 6. Three variables have a statistically significant effect on the dependent variable: variations in per capita real income, the incumbent's percentage seats in the lower house, and per capita real income. Moreover, variations in central government public expenditures are statistically significant at 0.15. Signs are the expected ones. When there is economic growth between elections, the incumbent wins votes. The same is true for variations in the size of government: increases in public expenditure are rewarded⁶. Incumbents have a better electoral performance when there is economic growth and more public expenditure.

A greater percentage of the incumbent's seats in the lower house leads to a decrease in votes. Bigger parties or coalitions lose more votes than smaller ones. Finally, higher per capita real income produces an improvement in electoral performance. Incumbents lose more votes in poor countries. Variations in inflation and in the rest of the control variables do not

⁶ Public expenditure reflects central public expenditure. It may be argued that this variable does not really reflect welfare spending, as in federal or semi federal systems public expenditure in education or health may be decentralized. The model should have introduced 'federalism' as a control variable, but this has not been possible as the number of observations for this variable is too low, reducing dramatically the sample in regression analysis.

affect the vote for parties in government. An agreement with the IMF is not statistically significant. Moreover, although in presidential systems the mean of electoral losses is double that in parliamentary systems (6.3 against 3.3), the institutional system does not account for this finding, as the variable does not have a statistically significant effect. Finally, the type of government, single versus coalition cabinet, does not affect electoral variations. Electors do not seem to be sensitive to political responsibility.

To make sure that inflation is irrelevant to explaining electoral performance, the second model introduces the effect of both hyperinflation and a severe anti inflationary policy. It is possible that small variations in inflation do not affect the vote for the incumbent, but it may be that extreme variations do have an influence. The hyperinflation variable includes those cases in which inflation is equal to or higher than 100 percentage points. There are 18 in the sample, but only 7 enter the regression: Israel 1981, Israel 1984, Argentina 1989, Nicaragua 1990, Romania 1992, Brazil 1994, and Bulgaria 1997. In two of these cases, losses were above 20 percentage points. Hyperinflation is, obviously, disruptive for the economy and for the life of citizens.

Anti-inflationary policy reflects those cases in which reductions in inflation are equal to or higher than 100 percentage points. In the database, there is not a single case of anti inflationary policy with hyperinflation: all incumbents that have reduced inflation by more than 100 points, have automatically taken their country out of hyperinflation. The sample has 11 cases of anti inflationary policy: Albania in 1996, Argentina in 1995, Bolivia in 1989, Brazil in 1998, Bulgaria in 1994, Croatia in 1995, Israel in 1988, Lithuania in 1996, Macedonia in 1998, Nicaragua in 1996, and Romania in 1996. They all enter into the regression. In none of these cases, have parties in government won votes, but in eight of them the fall in votes was below the mean losses for all elections in each of these countries. Therefore, successful anti inflationary measures reduce electoral losses.

When hyperinflation is introduced in the analysis, variations in inflation change its sign, but the variable does not yet have statistical significance. But hyperinflation has a significant effect on electoral performance. It is when inflation is over 100 that incumbents lose votes. The model also shows that anti inflationary policies have a positive and

statistically significant effect on electoral performance. Incumbents are rewarded for fighting successfully hyperinflation. A look at regression coefficients shows that the effect of high inflation on electoral losses is strong, much greater than the effect of economic growth.

No other significant changes are detected in this second regression. The coefficient of the relative variations in public expenditure slightly increases and gains significance, but it is not significantly different from the coefficient of the previous model.

Table 6. Explaining electoral performance in democracies

Dependent variable: Electoral performance		
	Robust regression coefficients	
	Model 1	Model 2
	All incumbents	All incumbents
Variations in per capita real income	0.1672*** (0.0367)	0.1515*** (0.0374)
Variations in inflation	-0.0001 (0.0003)	0.0005 (0.0004)
Variations in central government public expenditures	0.0985 (0.0680)	0.1321** (0.0733)
Incumbents' percentage seats in lower house	-0.0868*** (0.0272)	-0.0820*** (0.0269)
Single government	0.2492 (0.8176)	0.3519 (0.8136)
Agreement with the IMF	-0.3854 (1.1430)	-0.0366 (1.1284)
Presidential system	-0.8005 (1.0721)	-0.6928 (1.0527)
Logarithm of per capita real income	1.1637** (0.7021)	1.1790** (0.7048)
Hyperinflation (inflation of 100 or more)		-5.6844** (2.2168)
Anti inflationary policy (reduction of inflation by 100 or more)		4.9395** (2.9365)
Constant	-11.0413 (7.0467)*	-11.3910 (7.1130)
Number of observations	215	215
F	5.98***	6.28***

*** Statistically significant at 0.01

** Statistically significant at 0.05

* Statistically significant at 0.10

Standard errors in parentheses

In sum, governments win votes when there is economic improvement and when public expenditure increases. Electoral performance also depends on the percentage of seats that the ruling parties have in parliament: a greater control of the house involves more punishment. Finally, the richer the country, the greater are electoral gains for the incumbent.

ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF DIFFERENT IDEOLOGICAL GOVERNMENTS

The incumbent's ideology

Now I want to test whether voters judge right wing and left wing governments differently. I assume that there is a main axis around which parties mobilize voters in democracies, the left-right cleavage. Other dimensions that may also structure political competition, such as nationalism, religion or rural versus urban, are excluded. The left-right cleavage divides parties along a socio economic dimension, regarding principally the degree of state control of the economy.

Data on incumbents' ideology are taken from Beck, Clarke, Groff, Keefer and Walsh, from the World Bank. Their categorization has three values, left (value 1), centre (value 2) and right (value 3). Parties on the right are from the conservative and Christian democratic families, while left wing parties include communists, socialists or social democrats. In the centre fall those political organizations that support at the same time the strengthening of private enterprise and a certain redistribution by government. Parties are simply not categorized when it is impossible to place them on a left-right dimension.

Parties, however, are not incumbents. When a party governs alone, the attribution of an ideological label to the executive presents no trouble: the government adopts the party's ideology. But to give a unique value to ruling coalitions is more complex, particularly because it is often the case that parties' share of governmental power is asymmetric. Let us

look at the following example. In Sweden, between 1952 and 1956, a coalition was formed by the Social Democrats (SDA) and the Agrarian Party (CP). In the database, ideology has value 1 for the SDA (left) and value 2 for the CP (right). If both parties had had the same weight in government, the ideology of the incumbent would have been the average of the ideology for the two parties. But they did not. Therefore, it has been necessary to weight ideology by party's governmental power⁷. As the data set does not contain information on the number of ministries that each party holds, I have used as a proxy of their power in government the proportion of seats that each party has in the lower house. The formula is $\frac{\sum s_i i_i}{\sum s_i}$, where s_i is the proportion of seats of party i and i_i stands for the ideology of party i .

In 1956, the SDA had 47.8 percent of seats and the CP 11.3 percent. Therefore, the ideology of the SDA-CP coalition is 1.2, which substantively means that the incumbent is very close to the left but it is not a totally left wing government.

The obvious consequence of this procedure is that the ideology is transformed into a continuous variable that goes from 1 to 3. As my purpose is to repeat the previous analysis for samples with left wing and right wing incumbents, the following step has been taken to convert ideology into a dichotomous variable. Two different procedures have been followed. The first assumes that centre parties are closer to right wing parties on the socio economic dimension, while the second adheres to the opposite assumption. Consequently, both variables have two values: parties on the right and centre versus parties on the left and right wing parties versus centre and left wing parties.

The first ideology variable has value 0 when the incumbent's ideology is between 2 and 3 (centre and right) and has value of 1 for the rest of the cases (left). The variable has 412 observations, which means that 166 incumbents do not have an ideology, either because on a particular party no data are available, or because it is not possible to place a party's ideology

⁷ The assumption is that the impact of governmental performance is stronger for parties with more responsibilities (Hibbing and Alford, 1981).

on a left-right dimension. As table 7 reports, 42.2% of incumbents are left wing while 57.7% may be considered as right wing or centre governments.

Table 7. Distribution of incumbents by their ideology

	N	Percentage
Variable 1	412	100
Right wing and centre	238	57.7
Left wing	174	42.2
Variable 2	412	100
Right wing	194	47.1
Left wing and centre	218	52.9

In the second variable, value 1 corresponds to left wing and centre governments (from value 1 to 2 of the original variable) and value 0 to right wing incumbents (from value 2.09 to 3 of the original variable). Left wing and centre cabinets represent 52.9% of the sample, while right wing cabinets 47.1%.

Multivariate results

I present next multivariate analysis for four samples that include different ideological types of incumbents: right wing and centre, left wing, right wing, and left wing and centre. Results are reported in table 8.

The first model is restricted to right wing and centre governments. There are 108 observations. Two variables have a statistically significant effect on electoral performance: economic growth and economic development. They both have the expected signs. In the third model, the sample is right wing and centre governments (88 observations). Now, the percentage of seats of the incumbent gains significance.

Table 8. Explaining electoral performance for incumbents of different ideological signs

Dependent variable: Electoral performance				
	Robust regression coefficients			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Right wing/centre	Left wing	Right wing	Left wing/centre
Variations in per capita real income	0.1485*** (0.0548)	0.2071*** (0.0760)	0.1282** (0.0537)	0.2464*** (0.0750)
Variations in inflation	-0.0005 (0.0004)	0.0131 (0.0516)	-0.0007 (0.0007)	0.0008 (0.0010)
Variations in central government public expenditures	0.1616 (0.1400)	0.3698** (0.1470)	0.1820 (0.1362)	0.2996** (0.1474)
Incumbents' percentage seats in lower house	-0.0521 (0.0407)	-0.1691*** (0.0525)	-0.1078** (0.0414)	-0.0805** (0.0457)
Single government	0.1849 (1.3501)	0.4616 (1.2771)	0.0415 (1.3300)	1.2369 (1.2952)
Agreement with the IMF	-2.1192 (1.8987)	0.8756 (1.8966)	-2.1062 (2.332)	-0.5324 (1.5885)
Presidential system	-0.2825 (1.5712)	-0.8001 (1.9840)	-1.5332 (1.7675)	1.1333 (1.6305)
Logarithm of per capita real income	2.6362** (1.2716)	0.4627 (1.1853)	2.3484** (1.3440)	1.0855 (1.1257)
Constant	-26.3203** (12.9234)	-0.9470 (12.7486)	-20.4305 (13.4330)	-12.1791 (11.9786)
Number of observations	108	87	88	107
F	3.61***	3.29**	3.80***	3.11**

*** Statistically significant at 0.01

** Statistically significant at 0.05

*Statistically significant at 0.10

Standard errors in parenthesis

The second model includes left wing governments (87 observations) and the fourth, left wing and centre cabinets (107 observations). In both models, economic growth and the incumbent's percentage of seats in the lower house have a statistically significant effect on the vote for the incumbent, but per capita real income does not affect the dependent variable. Economic wealth is relevant if conservatives are in power, but is not when the country is ruled by the left. It may be that in poor countries the cost for citizens of a right wing cabinet is too high.

On the other hand, another variable becomes statistically significant: variations in central government expenditure. While for right wing and centre cabinets the reward for an increase in public expenditure is not statistically significant, it becomes so for left wing

cabinets. A look at the fourth model reveals that when centre cabinets join left wing governments, the coefficient of the variations in central government expenditure remains significant, although it is lower than the coefficient for pure left wing incumbents. Increases in public expenditure are then rewarded when parties in government are left wing, although citizens do not punish conservative cabinets for increasing public expenditure.

In conclusion, right wing incumbents are a little more frequent in democracies than left wing governments. For both conservative and left wing ruling parties, economic growth is rewarded. But increases in public expenditure only win votes to for leftist incumbents.

ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF GOVERNMENTS IN RICH AND POOR DEMOCRACIES

We already know that in poorer democracies ruling parties lose more votes than in richer ones. But do voters react differently to governmental performance in rich and poor democracies? What explains electoral variations for ruling parties in rich and poor democracies?

The sample is now divided according to economic development. The richer countries are those that have a per capita real income equal to or over the 75th percentile, which corresponds to Belgium in 1978, while the poorer are those under this percentile. Results are presented in table 9.

The first model includes 112 observations for the poorer democracies and the second 103 cases for the richer ones. Increases in per capita real income and the percentage of seats in the legislature have a significant effect in both models, although coefficients are higher for rich democracies.

Table 9. Explaining electoral performance for the poorest and richest democracies

Dependent variable: Electoral performance				
	Robust regression coefficients			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Poorest countries (below 75% of income level)	Richest countries (below 75% of income level)	Poorest countries (below 75% of income level)	Richest countries (below 75% of income level)
Variations in per capita real income	0.1587*** (0.0460)	0.2328*** (0.0731)	0.1767*** (0.0446)	0.2364*** (0.0744)
Variations in inflation	-0.0002 (0.0003)	0.0433 (0.0589)	-0.0002 (0.0003)	0.0431 (0.0597)
Variations in central government public expenditures	0.0502 (0.0810)	0.1464 (0.1517)	0.0386 (0.0784)	0.1464 (0.1534)
Incumbents' percentage seats in low camera	-0.0540 (0.0364)	-0.1291*** (0.0432)	-0.0325 (0.0354)	-0.1269*** (0.0440)
Single government	0.6789 (1.3475)	-0.3438 (1.0698)	1.0630 (1.3098)	-0.2567 (1.1008)
Agreement with the IMF	-0.2234 (1.2399)	Dropped	0.2977 (1.2243)	Dropped
Presidential system	-0.6281 (1.3414)	1.2579 (2.4406)	-0.0252 (1.3009)	0.8877 (2.5199)
Logarithm of per capita real income	1.9308* (1.0115)	-9.0043** (4.0603)	1.4613 (0.9952)	-9.5886** (4.3077)
Years of democracy			0.0890*** (0.0283)	0.0071 (0.0212)
Constant	-19.8525** (9.5634)	87.2019** (38.5167)	-20.4340** (9.2553)	92.0079 (40.2535)
Number of observations	112	103	112	103
F	3.80***	3.18**	4.91***	2.76***

*** Statistically significant at 0.01

** Statistically significant at 0.05

*Statistically significant at 0.10

Standard errors in parenthesis

We know that the degree of economic development and the length of democracy keep a straight relationship. Weak democracies have usually weak economies (or the other way around). In the sample, the correlation between per capita real income and the years of democracy is 0.75. Therefore, it is possible that in our previous analysis the variable of per capita income included the effect of the length of the democratic system.

The last two models check whether economic development has an impact on electoral performance when the length of democracy is taken into account. Model 3 shows that while in richer countries per capita real income is statistically significant but not so the length of

democracy, in poorer countries both variables have an effect on electoral performance. In poor countries, taking into account the effect of economic development, ruling parties win more votes if their democracy is older. In other words, the incumbent's electoral losses are bigger in newer democracies. The degree of institutionalization of parties may explain this finding. As Stokes points out (2001: 103-107): 'When parties are uninstitutionalized and party discipline is weak, governments may have trouble dealing with legislatures, and may become immobile and unstable. [...] strong parties do make governments more responsive and predictable'.

CONCLUSIONS

The principal findings are the following:

1. Incumbents in democracies tend to lose votes, moderately. Extreme losses (above 20 percentage points) are normally the result of extraordinary events in countries with weak economies and a new democratic system. Extreme gains, much more unusual, are the consequence of changes in the conditions of electoral competition.
2. Governmental performance accounts for the vote for the incumbent. Voters care about the economy. They reward economic growth and a successful anti inflationary policy, and they punish hyperinflation. But voters are also concerned about the role of the state in the economy. They care about the size of the state. Governments win votes when there is an increase in public expenditure.
3. Accountability varies according to political circumstances. When ruling parties hold more seats in parliament, they lose more votes. Citizens are able to clarify political responsibility.

4. Right wing and left wing ruling parties are both rewarded for economic growth, but, in one respect, accountability works differently for both types of governments. Voters clearly reward left wing ruling parties for increases in public expenditure, while the effect (also positive) is not significant for right wing parties.

5. Incumbents in poor democracies lose more votes than in rich ones. An inferior electoral performance cannot, however, be attributed to certain institutional factors. Presidentialism, more frequent in poor democracies, does not have any influence on electoral variations. Moreover, results suggest that although both in rich and poor democracies voters reward economic growth, they are more sensitive to performance in the more wealthy democracies. Accountability works slightly better in rich countries. Finally, an important determinant of the vote for the incumbent in poor countries is the length of democracy. More time, more votes.

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