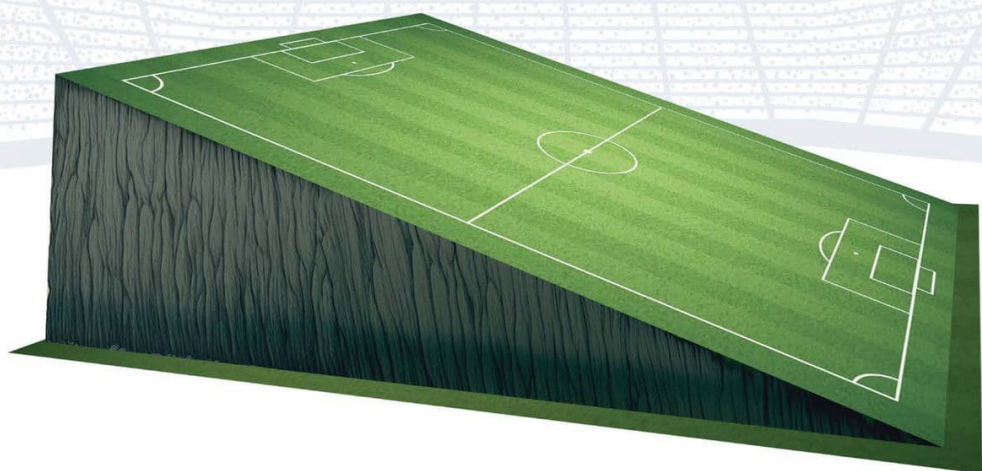


CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

# INCUMBENCY BIAS

Why Political Office is a Blessing *and*  
a Curse in Latin America



**LUIS SCHIUMERINI**

“Why are incumbent mayors more likely to lose reelection in Brazil but win it in Argentina? Why is the electoral playing field skewed against the opposition in some countries and against the government in others? We often deceive ourselves by assuming that political performance operates in equilibrium – where good governance is rewarded, and bad governance is punished. But what happens when all local incumbents are either flooded with resources or deprived of them? In his groundbreaking study, Luis Schiumerini reveals that, in low-information environments, incumbents’ performance rarely reaches equilibrium. Retrospective voting can be overly lenient toward those in power – or, at times, far too harsh.”

—Ernesto Calvo, Professor of Government and Politics,  
University of Maryland

“Incumbency was once believed to yield an overwhelming advantage in Latin America. But today, at least in parts of Latin America, incumbents are being thrown out like never before. In this pathbreaking study, Luis Schiumerini offers a compelling new framework to understand why incumbents succeed or fail. Drawing on impressive research, *Incumbency Bias* shows why incumbency continues to benefit politicians in some contexts but undermines them in others. This is by far the best book I have read on the comparative politics of incumbency. A must-read for anyone who studies – or cares about – electoral politics in Latin America.”

—Steven Levitsky, David Rockefeller Professor of Latin American  
Studies, Professor of Government, and Director of the  
David Rockefeller Center for Latin American  
Studies, Harvard University

“Political bias due to incumbency occurs all over the world, not just in the US. But it is a complicated thing. Politicians or parties running to stay in office can either be helped or hurt by their status of incumbency. In this skillful analysis, Luis Schiumerini shows the ins and outs of the matter in Latin America.”

—David R. Mayhew, Sterling Professor of Political Science  
Emeritus, Yale University

“*Incumbency Bias* offers a novel twist on a long-established assumption that politicians benefit from being in office. Instead of an incumbency *advantage*, in some contexts politicians suffer from an incumbency *disadvantage* – not because they performed poorly but because voters in some contexts ‘expect too much’ of their elected officials, and thus punish them ‘excessively’ at the ballot box.”

—David Samuels, Distinguished McKnight University Professor,  
University of Minnesota



## Incumbency Bias

The conventional wisdom in political science is that incumbency provides politicians with a massive electoral advantage. This assumption has been challenged by the recent anti-incumbent cycle. When is incumbency a blessing for politicians, and when is it a curse? *Incumbency Bias* offers a unified theory that argues that democratic institutions will make incumbency a blessing or curse by shaping the alignment between citizens' expectations of incumbent performance and incumbents' capacity to deliver. This argument is tested through a comparative investigation of incumbency bias in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile that draws on extensive fieldwork and an impressive array of experimental and observational evidence. *Incumbency Bias* demonstrates that rather than clientelistic or corrupt elites compromising accountability, democracy can generate an uneven playing field if citizens demand good governance but have limited information. While focused on Latin America, this book carries broader lessons for understanding the electoral returns to office around the world.

**Luis Schiumerini** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame and a faculty fellow at Kellogg Institute for International Studies. He is the coeditor of *Campaigns and Voters in Developing Democracies* (2019), and his research has appeared in the *Journal of Politics*, *British Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *Perspectives on Politics*.

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# Incumbency Bias

*Why Political Office is a Blessing and a Curse in  
Latin America*

LUIS SCHIUMERINI

*University of Notre Dame*



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*Para Jazmín. Sos todo*





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## The Puzzle of Incumbency Bias

Why is incumbency an electoral blessing for politicians in some countries but an electoral curse in other countries? Democracies across the world exhibit striking variation in *incumbency bias* – the average (positive or negative) difference in electoral success between incumbents and opposition candidates or parties. Take the visual illustration shown in Figure 1.1. Officeholders in many democratic countries have an *incumbency advantage*, including Argentine governors, Indonesian mayors, and American legislators. Yet, officeholders suffer from an *incumbency disadvantage* in many other democracies, such as Indian Members of Parliament, as well as mayors in Peru and Romania. Even within the same country, officeholders may experience contrasting electoral fortunes. While Brazilian governors enjoy an incumbency advantage, mayors suffer from an electoral disadvantage.

We know little about why incumbency bias emerges and varies so widely across democratic settings. This book explores four key questions about incumbency bias. The first question concerns its *causes*. Theories of electoral accountability maintain that citizens select good representatives by rewarding desirable personal attributes such as shared policy preferences, competence, or integrity (Fearon 1999; Mansbridge 2009). Incumbency status per se says nothing about these attributes. Officeholders and challengers should therefore have an equal chance of winning free and fair elections. So why do voters systematically reward or punish officeholders?

Existing explanations contend that incumbency bias arises in the developing world because political elites deliver bad governance by engaging