Accepted Manuscript

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Jon H. Fiva, Helene Lie Røhr

PII: S0014-2921(17)30175-7
DOI: 10.1016/j.euroecorev.2017.09.011
Reference: EER 3055

To appear in: *European Economic Review*

Received date: 9 August 2016
Accepted date: 21 September 2017

Please cite this article as: Jon H. Fiva, Helene Lie Røhr, Climbing the Ranks: Incumbency Effects in Party-list Systems, *European Economic Review* (2017), doi: 10.1016/j.euroecorev.2017.09.011

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Climbing the Ranks: Incumbency Effects in Party-list Systems*

Jon H. Fiva† Helene Lie Røhr‡

September 27, 2017

Abstract

Incumbents tend to have a solid electoral advantage in candidate-centered electoral settings. Do similar incumbency effects exist in more party-centered environments? We estimate incumbency effects in an open-list proportional representation system, exploiting that seats are first allocated *across* parties, and then to candidates *within* party lists. Using data from Norwegian local elections 2003-2015, we document that a candidate that barely wins a seat in the local council has about a 9 percentage points (43 percent) higher probability of being elected in the next election compared to a candidate that just misses out on a seat on the same party list. We find no evidence that voters contribute to this personal incumbency advantage. Rather, it seems as if party elites are instrumental in securing the electoral success of their party affiliates. We show that incumbents and non-incumbents run again in the subsequent election at about equal rates, but that incumbents tend to advance in the party hierarchy and obtain safer ballot positions in future elections, which is what ultimately leads to electoral success.

Keywords: Incumbency Advantage, Proportional Representation, Regression Discontinuity Design.

JEL Classification: C21, D72

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*We are grateful to the Associate Editor, three anonymous referees, Jørgen Andersen, Ron Freier, Ben Geys, Andy Hall, Askill Halse, Leif Helland, Heléne Lundqvist, Pär Nyman, Dan Smith, Jim Snyder, and Rune Sørensen for helpful comments and suggestions. We thank Dag Arne Christensen and Johannes Bergh for sharing data and Ingar Petterson, Kristoffer Sanner, and Reidar Vøllo for data collection assistance.

†BI Norwegian Business School. E-mail: jon.h.fiva@bi.no

‡BI Norwegian Business School and Telenor Research. E-mail: helene.l.rohr@bi.no

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