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The Personal Vote in Parliamentary Systems:
A Western Australian Case Study,
1911-2001

Michelle Garvey
Department of Political Science
University of British Columbia
C472-1866 Main Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1
garvey1@interchange.ubc.ca

Abstract

The conventional wisdom regarding Westminster parliamentary systems argues the irrelevance of local candidates to electoral results, focusing instead on the importance of party label and the image of party leaders. The professionalization of politics over the past half-century calls for a reexamination of this notion, however. Members of parliament are performing more constituency services, backed by more extensive resources, than has been the case in the past in the hope of cultivating a base of personal support within their districts. Recent studies in Great Britain and Canada have highlighted the existence of a significant electoral advantage for incumbents, yet statistical studies of the electoral impact of incumbency in the Australian context are lacking. This paper seeks to investigate whether the emergence of the career politician has resulted in tangible electoral benefits on polling day. Specifically, the paper will test for the existence and potential growth of an incumbency advantage in the state of Western Australia between 1911 and 2001.

In the Western Australian state election of 2001, Liberal incumbent Dan Sullivan enjoyed an increase in his primary vote share over that of the previous election, enabling him to hold his rural seat of Mitchell despite a state-wide electoral swing of slightly less than 9 per cent against his party. Sullivan was widely regarded as an adept campaigner and his campaign was noted for its tendency to downplay the incumbent's affiliation with the Liberal Party. Results such as this are suggestive of the importance of local candidates to electoral outcomes. Yet the textbook assumption of the limited relevance of local candidates to election results in parliamentary systems remains dominant. In essence, this argument stems from the institutional understanding of parliamentary government as party government. It is widely assumed that the fusion of the legislative and executive branches in parliamentary systems causes voters to cast their ballot according to the party they would like to see form the government, or increasingly the party leader they would like to see become Prime Minister or Premier, rather than as a consequence of the appeal or service of the local candidate. In addition, strict party discipline within parliament provides members with little opportunity to effectively represent their local constituency which in turn provides little incentive for voters to cast their ballot on the basis of the service of the individual candidate. The central theme is "party matters" and, by implication, local candidates do not (Criddle in Butler and Kavanagh 1988; Jaensch 1983; Milne and MacKenzie 1954). An emerging literature on the personal vote in Great Britain and Canada has called this contention into question, however (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Ferejohn and Gaines 1991; Krashinsky and Milne 1991; Norton and Wood 1994). These authors contend that local level visibility and the performance of constituency services enables MPs to carve out a small, but significant, vote bonus. This argument is buttressed by the work of Carey and Shugart (1995) and Norris (2004) who use an institutional analysis to demonstrate that electoral systems based upon single-member districts that utilize candidate-ballots provide significant incentives for the local member to cultivate a personal vote.

In this paper I pursue three main questions. First, I seek to determine whether an incumbency advantage in the form of a personal vote exists for candidates in Western Australian general elections between 1911 and 2001. Second, I assess whether this advantage has increased with the professionalization of politics in the early 1970s. And finally, if a personal vote for incumbents is found, I examine its significance in terms of its impact on electoral outcomes. In accordance with Cain *et al* (1984; 1987) the personal vote is here defined as the fraction of a candidate's electoral support that is attributable to factors *other* than partisan affiliation, national conditions, and evaluations of the governing party. The personal vote is assumed to stem from the reputation and qualities of the candidate, including their level of activity in the electorate, qualifications and record.

The Advantages of Incumbency beyond the United States

In sharp contrast to the industry that constitutes the study of incumbency in the American context lies the relative paucity of such analyses elsewhere. Nonetheless, the advantages of incumbency need not be considered a peculiarly American phenomenon. Clearly, Congressional incumbents hold a comparative advantage over their parliamentary

counterparts given the separate election of legislators and executives, the existence of a weak party system, the possession of superior resources, and their ability to bring home the “pork” to their local districts (Cain *et al* 1987; Cover 1977; Fenno 1978; Fiorina 1977; Stokes and Miller 1966). Yet political incumbents across systems enjoy a privileged position within their own districts in terms of both their visibility, which may provide an indirect vote bonus on the basis of name recognition, and their capacity to build on their personal vote by providing services to constituents.

An emerging literature, founded on an acknowledgement of the inherent advantages of incumbency, has challenged the credibility of the conventional wisdom regarding the irrelevancy of local candidates to electoral outcomes in parliamentary systems composed of strong parties. These arguments stress that the ability of parliamentary incumbents to build a personal vote has been assisted by the “professionalization” of politics during the 1960s and 1970s (Cain *et al* 1987; Norton and Wood 1990; Searing 1994; Wood and Norton 1992). During this period, the resources of MPs in Australia, Canada and, to a more limited extent, Great Britain were gradually expanded to include permanent staffs, electorate offices and a host of perquisites that accompany office-holding such as printing allowances, travel entitlements, and the franking privilege. Members’ salaries increased as politics became a full-time career. Parliamentarians across these systems reported dedicating increasing amounts of time to constituency service and observers noted the growing capacity of incumbents to respond to the needs of their electorates (Cain *et al* 1987; Docherty 1997; Ferejohn and Gaines 1991; Heitshusen, Young, and Wood 2005; Norris 2004).

Studies of the personal vote in Great Britain support the contention that constituency service is important to voters and contributes to a small but significant vote bonus for incumbents (Cain *et al* 1987; Norton and Wood 1990; Wood and Norton 1992). In a comparative study of the personal vote in the United States and Great Britain, Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina (1987) utilize surveys of politicians and constituents to demonstrate that MPs are able and willing to cultivate modest personal bases of support within their districts. Specifically, the authors find that favourable reputations for constituency service serve to moderate the impact of national vote swings on incumbents, in this case enabling some Labour members to retain their seats in the general election of 1979 despite a large national swing toward the Conservatives.¹ Following in this vein, Norton and Wood (1990) and Wood and Norton (1992) argue that the growth of the welfare state and the concomitant professionalization of politics resulted in the emergence of an increasingly service-seeking electorate alongside an increasingly service-oriented MP. According to the authors, this has increased the capacity of sitting members to build personal votes, providing them with some protection from broader partisan swings. To support this theory, Wood and Norton use aggregate constituency level data to demonstrate that first-term incumbents enjoy substantial electoral gains reflective of their initial attempts to build a personal following. Further, by introducing a measure of sitting members’ involvement in the community, Wood and Norton demonstrate that

¹ Note Gaines (1998) quantitative questioning of the validity of Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina’s (1987) findings.

constituency-specific increases in vote shares are positively related to the efforts of sitting members to please their constituents.

In Canada, Cunningham (1971) was the first to posit an independent effect of local candidates on electoral outcomes. Using survey data of constituents in three Hamilton ridings prior to the federal election of 1968, Cunningham discovered that the appeal of the local candidate accounted for as much as 10 per cent of the vote.² Quantitative studies by Krashinsky and Milne (1983; 1985a; 1985b; 1986; 1991) of electoral returns have revealed significant vote bonuses for incumbents at both the federal and provincial levels. The authors' analysis of the effect of incumbency in Ontario provincial elections demonstrated that sitting members enjoyed an advantage of between 6 and 12 per cent of the vote over the period 1971 to 1981 (1983). In a series of later works, Krashinsky and Milne extend their examination of incumbency effects to the federal level (1985a; 1991). Results are suggestive of the fact that incumbency has a significant impact on the vote at both levels of government, although the effect is smaller at the federal level (between 3.4 and 4.3 per cent). The authors conclude that these effects are stable and consistent at both levels over time (1985b; 1986).

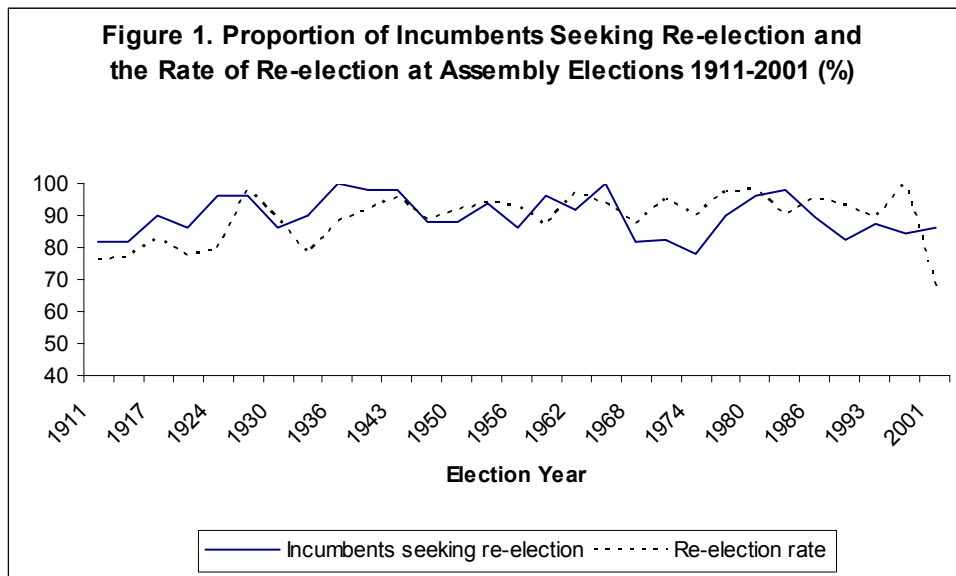
The conventional wisdom regarding the limited importance of local candidates remains pervasive in the Australian context (Jaensch 1983). This view rests on the twin pillars of very high, and seemingly resilient, levels of partisan identification in the electorate and the existence of extremely strict discipline within the country's parliamentary parties (Studlar and McAllister 1996: 73). However, the theory has largely escaped any rigorous theoretical or empirical investigation. Electoral studies that have delved beyond the primacy of partisan identification have usually centred on the importance of the image and appeal of party leaders (Bean and Mughan 1989; McAllister 2003). Two notable exceptions are the works of Bean (1990) and Jackman (2005). Bean (1990) sought to uncover the size and source of the "personal vote" in Australian federal elections by utilizing cross-sectional survey data from the Australian National Social Science Surveys of 1984-85 and 1987. Bean contends that positive attitudes toward local members (measured using the feeling thermometer method) result in a personal vote of up to three percent when factors of party and social background are controlled. In a more recent paper, Jackman (2005) utilizes aggregate constituency-level data to investigate the existence of an incumbency advantage in the 2004 Australian federal election. Jackman's results depict an asymmetric advantage of incumbency (in the order of 2 to 2.5 per cent) flowing to the Liberal Party. It may be argued that Jackman's findings highlight the difficulties associated with measuring the impact of incumbency when using only one pair of electoral results. Effectively, the time-bound nature of Jackman's study makes it impossible to ascertain whether the results are reflective of anything other than the particular idiosyncrasies of the 2004 election.

² These results are challenged by Irvine (1982).

The Personal Vote in Western Australia 1911-2001

The absence of any longitudinal study of incumbency effects in the Australian context constitutes a significant analytical void in the literature. This paper tests for the existence of a personal vote in the state of Western Australia at the 29 general elections spanning the period 1911-2001. In accordance with the findings of Krashinsky and Milne in the Canadian context, it is expected that an analysis of a sub-national unit may provide more robust results than those uncovered at the federal level as a consequence of both smaller district populations and the closer proximity of the lower level of government to the everyday lives of citizens.

The Western Australian Legislative Assembly has grown little over the century, containing 50 seats in 1911 and expanding to only 57 by the end of the period. Sitting Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) have been well rewarded, on average, for their attempts at re-election. Figure 1 demonstrates that the proportion of incumbents seeking re-election never drops below 82 per cent and the proportion that are successful falls below three quarters only once (in 2001) with a long-run re-election average of 89 per cent.



Although free elections in Western Australia date back to 1890, the election of 1911 was chosen as the point of origin for this study as it is broadly accepted as the time at which the state's party system crystallized with the emergence of the Liberal Party in response to Labor's successful organization a few years prior (Sharman 2001). In 1914 the Country Party contested its first election and this two-and-a-half party system still characterizes the state today.³ For the first half a century, however, the party system was not what one would usually refer to as competitive. Large numbers of uncontested seats, occasionally running as high as 40% of all races, were frequent occurrences as each party

³ Both the Liberal and Country parties changed their names multiple times over the period under study, however, for simplicity these labels are used throughout.

enjoyed a number of regional strongholds and chose to focus their resources on “winnable” contests. The professionalization of the parties’ campaigning strategies in the 1960s resulted in the rapid decline and virtual elimination of uncontested seats by 1970 (Buxton 1979; Sharman 2001). Given this reality, it is imperative to account for the impact of uncontested seats on estimates of the personal vote over time.

Western Australia, like most Australian states, is characterized by a single large urban centre surrounded by a vast expanse of generally sparsely populated rural regions. This geography, combined with the state’s economic dependence on primary resources, contributed to the institutionalization of rural malapportionment (Buxton 1979). Over the century, rural voters have enjoyed at least twice the voting power of their metropolitan counterparts. Institutionalized malapportionment provides fertile ground for a comparative study of the personal vote in urban and rural districts. It is reasonable to expect that the personal vote enjoyed by rural MLAs will be greater than that experienced by representatives of metropolitan districts as a consequence of both smaller district size and the related existence of tightly-knit social networks. In accordance with the literature, fewer electors should enable the local member to both help a larger proportion of constituents directly and to enjoy more extensive “reputational” benefits.

The existence of the Country Party presents an added wrinkle in the assessment of the personal vote. Over time the party has fielded candidates selectively on the basis of expected success. Unlike the Labor and Liberal parties, however, the sectional focus of the party prevented it from expanding into a state-wide force in the 1970s (Layman 1979). As a result, the number of seats contested and won by the Country Party has declined over time as the party increasingly restricts its resources to its traditional strongholds. Compounding this is the fact that the two main parties have been traditionally reluctant to challenge sitting Country Party members: the Liberals as a result of a historical dependence on the Country Party as a coalition partner when in power and Labor because of the limited likelihood of success in these electorates. As a consequence, Country Party incumbents often face poor quality competition in the form of independents or minor party candidates, potentially inflating personal vote estimates. To control for this factor it is essential to test for the size of the personal vote of Country incumbents using “genuine” contests, that is those contests in which candidates face major party competition. It is expected, that controlled estimates of the personal vote for Country Party incumbents will be comparable to those enjoyed by rural MLAs of the Liberal and Labor parties.

Politics emerged as a full-time, well-resourced profession in Western Australia in the early 1970s (Phillips 2001). MLAs enjoyed salaries sufficient to rule out the need for a second occupation and they were well supported by staffed electorate offices and a range of parliamentary privileges. If the arguments of the *Personal Vote* scholars hold true, one would expect an increase in the personal vote following the professionalization of constituency service as MLAs go to greater lengths, supported by more generous resources, to build a stock of personal support to protect themselves from the vagaries of partisan swings. Theoretically, given that the new resources were equally available to all members, an increase in the personal vote should be expected across all parties post-1970.

Method and Model

This paper uses aggregate constituency-level data to estimate the size of the incumbency advantage at the 29 general elections to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly held between 1911 and 2001.⁴ To gain an accurate estimate of the size of the personal vote it is essential to control for factors that vary between constituencies but not over time, that is, the districts underlying “normal vote”, and factors that vary over time but not across constituencies, that is, the inter-election swing. To enable this, it is possible to treat a series of elections contested on a common map as constituting panel data. This technique allows for the production of estimates of the normal vote and inter-election swings and facilitates the isolation of effects such as incumbency advantage that are particular to a given set of districts at a given election (see Gaines 1998). The elections under review were divided into 5 distinct time periods for analysis: 1911-1927, 1930-1947, 1950-1965, 1968-1980, 1983-2001.⁵

TABLE 1
Incumbency Status of Seats in Western Australian General Elections 1911-2001

Type of Incumbent	Period				
	1911-1927	1930-1947	1950-1965	1968-1980	1983-2001
None (open seat)	35	22	27	42	49
Labor	119	147	136	96	135
Liberal	82	57	86	96	119
Country	31	57	45	25	25
All Other ¹	33	17	6	4	14
TOTAL SEATS	300	300	300	263	342
ELECTIONS (N)	6	6	6	5	6

1. The “All other” category includes seats in which incumbents were Independents or minor party members, and incumbents of the three major parties who changed seats between elections. These incumbents are excluded from any further analysis.

⁴ The analysis conducted here is based on first preference vote shares only. In accordance with the broader literature, by-election results are dropped from the data set given their tendency to produce anomalous results.

⁵ Post-1950, to overcome the problem of frequent redistributions, a common map is assumed if the district name is unchanged between elections. Abolished districts and new districts are included in the analysis (contributing to a slightly unbalanced panel); however, they do not contribute to the estimates of the inter-election swing.

Given the three party composition of the Western Australian electoral landscape, the logical approach is to estimate separate regression models for each party. The model constitutes a fixed-effects regression and may be specified as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \eta_t + \beta X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Y_{it} denotes the proportion of the vote won by the Labor candidate, for example, in district i at election t . α_i represents the underlying normal Labor vote in that electorate in the absence of year-specific electoral trends (η_t) and other significant candidate effects (X_{it}). The measure of candidate effects, X_{it} , is here restricted to the single candidate trait of incumbency status.⁶ One benefit of the model is that it forces the advantage of Labor incumbency, for example, to be equal in magnitude to the electoral disadvantage encountered by a Labor candidate facing a Liberal or Country incumbent, both relative to running in an open seat. I repeated the regression for all parties first including, then excluding, uncontested seats and finally by restricting the analysis to “genuine” electoral contests. For the Liberal and Labor parties, this limited the sample to races in which candidates of both parties were present. For the Country Party, the sample was restricted to seats in which the candidate faced, at least, a Labor Party challenger. To test the contention that incumbents in rural districts are able to build a larger personal vote than incumbents of metropolitan districts I repeated the regression for the Labor and Liberal parties, including a binary variable for region.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents ordinary least squares regression estimates of the effect of incumbency status on vote shares. The table contains three separate regression models. The first model includes uncontested seats in the analysis, the second excludes seats won uncontested and seats in which the party did not compete, and the third excludes all “non-genuine” contests, that is, contests lacking major party competition. The coefficients have been converted to vote percentages.

Including uncontested seats in the regression analysis produces estimates of the personal vote that range from 2.8 per cent for the Labor Party in period 5 to a high of 12.7 per cent for Liberal incumbents in the 1930s and 1940s. Across parties and over time the trend appears to be toward a slight increase in the personal vote until 1965 followed by a notable decline in periods 4 and 5. That this is the case is unsurprising given that this date coincides with the professionalization of the parties’ campaign strategies and subsequently the end of uncontested seats.

⁶ Given the historical nature of the data it was not feasible to include a measure of challenger quality in Legislative Assembly elections over this period.

TABLE 2
 Regression Estimates of Incumbency Effects on Vote Shares by Party
 (vote percentages; standard errors in parentheses)

	Party	Coefficient Including Uncontested			Coefficient Excluding Uncontested			Coefficient Genuine ¹ Party Competition		
		Seats	N	Adj R ²	Seats	N	Adj R ²	Party Competition	N	Adj R ²
Period 1 (1911-1927)	Labor	5.50* (1.56)	300	0.79	1.66 (1.04)	191	0.68	0.20 (1.12)	137	0.73
	Liberal	9.12* (1.68)	300	0.49	5.82* (1.55)	167	0.40	5.46* (1.92)	137	0.33
	Country	8.37* (1.76)	300	0.63	5.70 (3.34)	84	0.30	7.95 (5.03)	46	0.43
Period 2 (1930-1947)	Labor	8.78* (1.73)	300	0.80	5.08* (0.91)	184	0.78	4.65* (1.15)	110	0.70
	Liberal	12.72* (1.82)	300	0.66	5.74* (1.90)	122	0.43	5.61* (1.85)	110	0.38
	Country	11.76* (1.96)	300	0.81	8.16* (2.83)	94	0.57	4.89 (3.16)	64	0.60
Period 3 (1950-1965)	Labor	9.63* (2.02)	300	0.83	3.89* (1.15)	184	0.82	4.51* (0.99)	154	0.85
	Liberal	11.35* (2.68)	300	0.68	5.72* (1.78)	180	0.65	5.28* (1.46)	154	0.73
	Country	12.37* (2.39)	300	0.81	12.22* (5.32)	45	0.46	7.23 (7.07)	29	0.40
Period 4 (1968-1980)	Labor	6.31* (1.32)	263	0.76	4.09* (0.67)	232	0.89	4.20* (0.66)	218	0.89
	Liberal	6.73* (1.43)	263	0.70	3.73* (0.78)	228	0.81	3.70* (0.78)	218	0.80
	Country	10.16* (1.89)	263	0.73	16.30* (4.76)	43	0.58	7.72 (4.30)	32	0.72
Period 5 (1983-2001)	Labor	2.81* (0.75)	342	0.83	3.14* (0.51)	333	0.91	3.06* (0.53)	321	0.90
	Liberal	5.86* (0.84)	342	0.73	4.48* (0.73)	329	0.74	4.43* (0.70)	321	0.77
	Country	6.34* (1.08)	342	0.78	11.31* (2.86)	68	0.71	7.92* (2.15)	63	0.85

* p<0.05

1. "Genuine" party competition refers to electoral contests in which the candidate faces at least one challenger from another of the three major parties. Under this definition a contest between a Labor Party candidate and a Communist Party candidate, for example, would be excluded.

In an attempt to remedy the inflation of the incumbency advantage caused by the inclusion of uncontested seats, model 2 excludes such races. In period 1, this reduces the Labor and Country coefficients to statistical insignificance. Liberal candidates, however, still appear to enjoy an advantage of just less than 6 per cent. This may be a reflection of the unbalanced nature of party competition in this period in which the Labor and Country candidates enjoyed the vast majority of uncontested seats while the Liberal Party was more likely to encounter competition. In later periods, as competition between the two major parties became more even, the results return to traditional levels of statistical significance. What is striking about model 2 for the two main parties is the small variation in the personal vote over time. Estimations of the personal vote for Liberal and Labor incumbents range from 3.7 to 5.7 per cent and 3.1 to 5.1 per cent respectively.

The personal vote estimates for Country Party incumbents in model 2 appear distinct from those of Labor and Liberal sitting members. Post-period 1 Country Party coefficients are consistently larger than those of the other two parties, ranging from 8.2 per cent of the vote to a high of 16.3 per cent. In reality, this is reflective of the distinctive nature of the Country Party as a regional party. The party, as the name suggests, focuses exclusively on a set of rural seats where their chances of success are high. Given the self-selective nature of the party's candidacies, the aforementioned tactical non-competition by the two major parties, and the typically small constituencies that they focus on, the party's larger personal vote estimates are unsurprising.

To account for the peculiarities of Country Party candidacies, model 3 in Table 2 restricts the regression analysis to electoral contests in which there exists "genuine" party competition. Genuine party competition is argued to exist where the electoral contest contains at least two major party candidates of opposing ideologies. The personal vote estimates are little changed from model 2 for the Liberal and Labor parties as once uncontested seats were excluded the remaining races usually contained candidates of the two parties. The Country Party coefficients are reduced, however, their lack of statistical significance in periods 1 to 3 render any strong claims suspect. It may be tentatively suggested that the personal vote advantage flowing to Country Party incumbents when facing major party competition is approximately 7 per cent.

Table 2 offers no conclusive evidence in support of the notion that improved resources and the rise of the "career politician" have resulted in an increased capacity for incumbents to build a personal vote. When uncontested seats and genuine party competition are controlled for, there appears to be no significant change in the personal vote between the first three periods and periods 4 and 5. It is plausible to contend that the combination of greater resources for politicians and their increased commitment to constituency service has stemmed a potential deterioration of the personal vote in an era of heightened constituent expectations. Unfortunately, however, such a contention must here remain speculative.

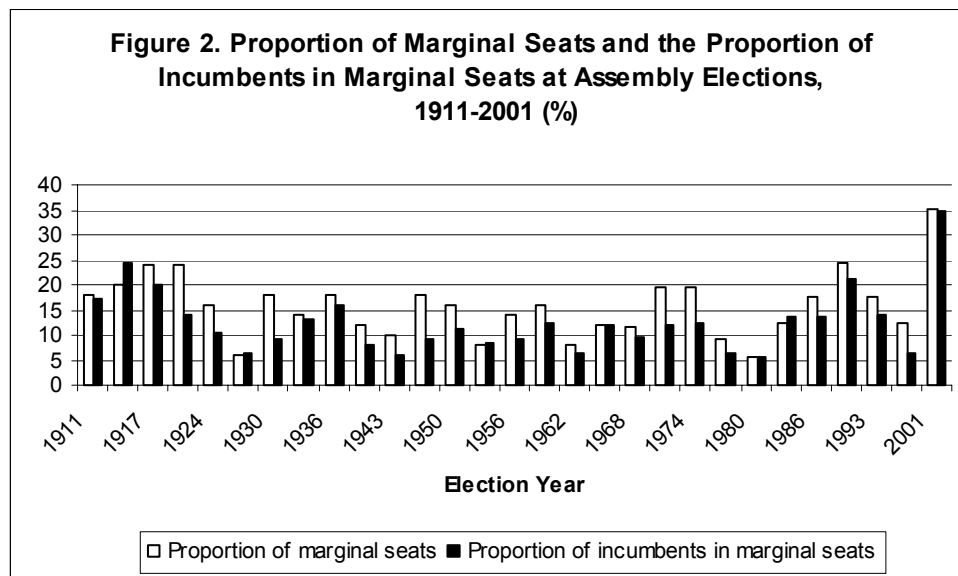
TABLE 3
Regression Estimates of Incumbency Effects on Vote Shares for the Liberal and Labor Parties by Region
(vote percentages; standard errors in parentheses)

	Party	Region	Coefficient Including Uncontested Seats	N	Adjusted R ²	Coefficient Excluding Uncontested Seats	N	Adjusted R ²
Period 1 (1911-1927)	Labor	Urban	8.39* (2.60)	78	0.58	1.01 (1.34)	65	0.72
		Rural	5.37* (1.98)	222	0.83	3.16* (1.48)	126	0.69
	Liberal	Urban	10.46* (2.22)	78	0.48	7.49* (1.96)	68	0.43
		Rural	8.98* (2.33)	222	0.47	3.53 (2.49)	99	0.39
Period 2 (1930-1947)	Labor	Urban	5.54 (3.27)	108	0.65	3.04* (1.16)	82	0.78
		Rural	10.32* (2.05)	192	0.84	6.47* (1.29)	102	0.78
	Liberal	Urban	10.13* (3.78)	108	0.44	5.79* (2.39)	75	0.45
		Rural	14.87* (1.18)	192	0.73	4.80 (3.40)	47	0.33
Period 3 (1950-1965)	Labor	Urban	6.08 (3.26)	138	0.72	2.13 (1.60)	111	0.84
		Rural	12.26* (2.60)	162	0.87	6.46* (1.53)	73	0.83
	Liberal	Urban	4.88 (3.35)	138	0.61	2.70 (2.41)	109	0.46
		Rural	16.31* (4.37)	162	0.71	7.49* (2.63)	71	0.81
Period 4 (1968-1980)	Labor	Urban	2.74 (1.41)	141	0.79	3.44* (0.78)	136	0.91
		Rural	9.61* (2.18)	122	0.73	5.14* (1.04)	96	0.88
	Liberal	Urban	0.90 (1.69)	141	0.72	1.41 (0.96)	132	0.84
		Rural	11.58* (2.18)	122	0.69	6.07* (1.19)	96	0.80
Period 5 (1983-2001)	Labor	Urban	1.61* (0.64)	212	0.92	2.35* (0.48)	209	0.95
		Rural	4.45* (1.42)	130	0.75	4.02* (0.89)	124	0.89
	Liberal	Urban	3.85* (0.80)	212	0.82	3.55* (0.67)	210	0.85
		Rural	7.78* (1.59)	130	0.69	5.53* (1.46)	119	0.66

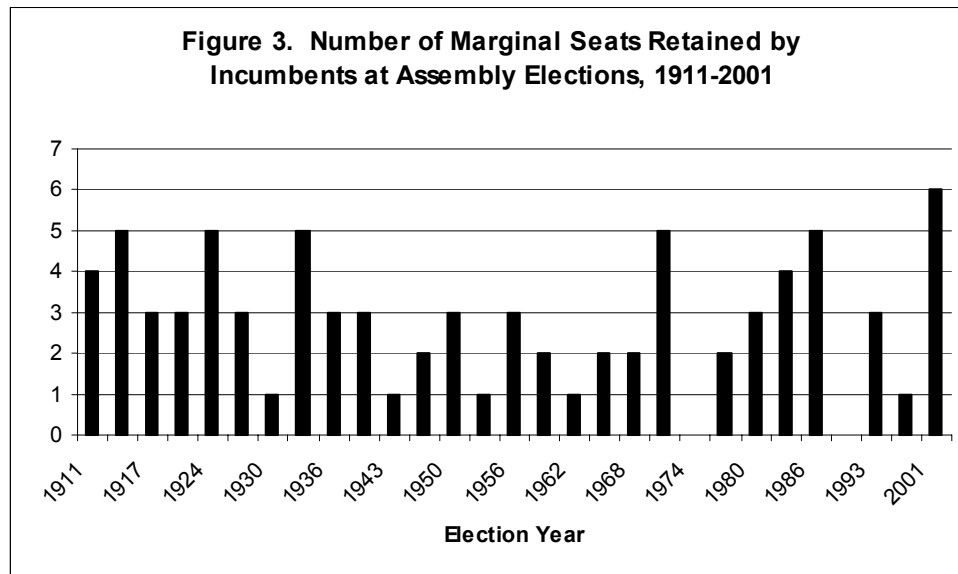
* p<0.05

The comparatively large size of the personal vote bonus enjoyed by Country Party incumbents suggests that the peculiarities of rural electorates and, more specifically, reduced district size, may be playing an important role. Table 3 displays the regression estimates of the personal vote for Labor and Liberal candidates by region. It is apparent that for the majority of the period under review, rural incumbents have enjoyed a personal vote of a larger magnitude than their urban counterparts. The personal vote of urban liberals between 1911-1927 runs against the overall trend, however, this may reflect the strength of early local notables within metropolitan districts that still contained relatively small numbers of constituents. This hypothesis is supported by the large personal vote garnered by urban Labor incumbents in the first period; however, the effect falls away for that party with the removal of uncontested seats. On balance, it appears that rural incumbents of the Liberal and Labor parties enjoyed a personal vote between 2 and 3 per cent greater than metropolitan incumbents.

Given the existence of extensive electoral malapportionment these results are unsurprising. Running in rural electorates normally half the district size of their metropolitan counterparts presents an obvious advantage in terms of servicing constituents and building a reputation likely to support a personal vote. What is interesting is that Country Party incumbents enjoy a slightly larger vote bonus than rural Labor and Liberal candidates. It may be speculated that Country Party candidates are a slightly different breed of politician. It is highly likely that Country Party incumbents over time have been more strongly rooted in the local community than their major party counterparts, a fact that has been found to be strongly associated with an increased personal vote (Studlar and McAllister 1996: 84). In addition, these incumbents are often more occupationally representative of their constituencies in a way that modern day Liberal and Labor candidates are not.



If, as the results here suggest, incumbent candidates do possess a significant electoral advantage in terms of the accumulation of a personal vote the question remains: does it matter? Does the personal vote make the difference between winning and losing for incumbents, or is it the case that they are incumbents because they happen to sit in a safe party seat? Figure 2 displays the proportion of marginal seats and the proportion of incumbents contesting marginal seats at Legislative Assembly elections over the period under study. A seat is here defined as marginal if the difference between the first preference votes of the first and second candidates is less than 6 per cent. Clearly, the majority of seats that comprise the legislature may be considered “safe” for one party or another. However, the proportion of marginal seats when measured as a long-run average is just under 16 per cent with a high of 35 per cent in 2001. This suggests that a significant number of seats are decided by a few percent, a situation in which a personal vote may be critical. Predictably, the vast majority of incumbents over the past century have enjoyed the luxury of sitting in a safe party seat. However, on average, slightly less than 12 per cent of incumbents have endured the misfortune of running in a marginal seat at Assembly elections.



It is here argued that incumbents re-elected in marginal seats may attribute a significant part of that success to their personal vote. This is viewed as justifiable as those incumbents who have retained their seats with less than a 6 per cent lead in first preferences may realistically have lost in the absence of the incumbency vote bonus. Figure 3 represents the number of incumbents re-elected in marginal seats between 1911 and 2001. Although the number never exceeds 6 MLAs at any given election, in a house comprised of between 50 and 57 members a few seats may make all the difference in the formation of government. A preliminary examination of the distribution of seats over the past century suggests that the retention of seats by incumbents potentially affected the party forming government on two occasions: in 1914 in favour of the Labor Party and in 1962 in favour of the Liberal and Country coalition.

Conclusion

The limited importance of local candidates to electoral outcomes in Westminster parliamentary systems is an often stated, yet infrequently tested, contention. This paper has demonstrated that incumbent members of all parties in the Western Australian Legislative Assembly experienced a significant vote bonus over that expected in an open-seat contest. This advantage is particularly pronounced for sitting members in rural districts. This result is consistent with studies that have emphasized the greater personalization of politics characteristic of rural settings (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978: 269-85). The fact that Country Party incumbents appear to enjoy a personal vote larger than Liberal and Labor incumbents of rural electorates suggests that such members may maintain a distinct relationship with their constituents. This is certainly a contention worthy of further investigation.

The professionalization of politics thesis finds no support here. By the early 1970s, Members of the Legislative Assembly were provided with significant resources, both human and financial. The amount of services provided to constituents undoubtedly increased, however, there appears to have been little gain in terms of votes. MLAs in 1939 were apparently as successful as those in 2001 at garnering a personal vote of significant magnitude. Of course, it is possible to argue that the services provided by MLAs in an era of increasing district size and constituent demands have served to preserve the existence of a personal vote that may have deteriorated otherwise. On balance, however, the picture appears to be one of long-term stability.

Does any of this matter? In terms of electoral outcomes, does the personal vote have a significant impact? In short, yes. A handful of MLAs at almost every Assembly election owe the retention of their seats to the personal stock of support that they have built in their electorate. Although this has only affected the control of government on two occasions, members are clearly well advised to serve their constituents and work towards the development and maintenance of a good reputation in their local constituency in order to protect themselves from the fluctuations of partisan fortunes.

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