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A second chance elsewhere. Estimating the effect of winning (vs. being the runner-up) on future electoral prospects

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ABSTRACT

The effect of being the winner (vs. being the runner-up) on winning subsequent elections has been estimated across a series of countries using regression discontinuity design. We contribute to this literature by incorporating politicians who move across constituencies. The US and the UK are our case studies. UK–US differences are not apparent when comparing estimates of the *individual incumbency advantage*, i.e., winning the same office in the same constituency. UK–US differences in the *career advantage of winning office* are almost entirely driven by the ability of the UK's close-race runners-up to win elsewhere subsequently. Runners-up are more likely to move to safer seats. Marginal winners become locked-in to their seat. In the US, we observe negligible movement across constituencies.

In this paper we focus on the effect of winning a seat in a legislative chamber (versus being the runner-up) on a politician's future career in that same chamber, how to estimate such an effect, and how to compare it across countries. Let us call this object the 'career advantage of winning office'. At first look, the regression discontinuity (RD) estimate of the individual incumbency advantage proposed in De Magalhães (2015) could provide the statistic that allows us to pinpoint this object and compare it across countries. The estimate compares winners and runners-up for a given seat in period t on whether they win an election for the same seat in period $t+1$.[2] This strategy has been used widely.[3] A shortcoming of this strategy is that a successful outcome is restricted to a win in the same seat.

The comparison between the US and the UK is a good case study to illustrate this issue. Both in the UK Parliament and in the US House of Representatives a seat is clearly defined by its geographical boundary: an electoral constituency in the UK and a congressional district in the US. Movement across constituencies is common in the UK. UK political parties regularly reward politicians for running in seats that are considered safe to the other party (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). Margaret Thatcher herself and one-third of her cabinet fought unsuccessfully at least once before moving to safer seats and being elected for Parliament (King, 1981). Movement across districts is extremely rare in the US, but it is not prohibited. Two examples are Mario Diaz-Balart, who moved districts within Florida in 2010, and Edgar Franklin Foreman, who represented a district in Texas followed by one in New Mexico in the 60s.

The first contribution of this paper is to define and propose an estimation procedure for the *career advantage of winning office*, i.e., the treatment effect of being the winner (vs being the runner-up) for a given individual on her chances of winning a seat in the same legislative chamber in the subsequent election. The empirical estimation of this object is important because it allows us to quantify one of the building blocks of most political models, the assumption that, once in office, politicians use the powers of office to maximize their probability of re-election.[4] Cross-country comparisons of the career advantage allow us to infer whether there are differences in the power conferred by similar elected offices in different countries.

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[2] De Magalhães (2015)'s definition of incumbency advantage departs from the traditional comparison between incumbent and challenger (e.g., Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008) and Eggers (2017)) and instead compares winners and runners-up.

[3] US: (Lee, 2001); Finland: (Hyytinen et al., 2018); India: (Linden, 2004); Japan: (Ariga, 2015); South Korea: (Roh, 2017).

[4] Fouirnaies and Hall (2022) show how sitting politicians exert less effort when a term-limit binds.

[5] The RD comparing winners and runners-up in t is able to estimate the unconditional causal effect on winning in $t+1$ as long as we do not condition on either the self-selection or party selection to re-run on the same seat or on another seat. Both losing and not-rerunning must be coded as a 0 and a win as a 1. See De Magalhães (2015) and Rubin (2005).

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Our second contribution is to produce regression discontinuity (RD) estimates of the career advantage of winning office that are comparable across the UK and the US.[5] The UK case illustrates clearly that the *career advantage* is different to the unconditional and individual *incumbency advantage* measure suggested in De Magalhães (2015). The UK–US comparison illustrates how ranking across countries depend on whether one uses the individual *incumbency advantage* or the *career advantage*. We find that the career advantage is larger in the US than in the UK and that the difference is statistically significant. The point estimates are respectively 44 and 23 percentage points. We find no substantial differences across parties within a country. Importantly, had we ignored the possibility that winner and runner-up can win a seat elsewhere in the following election, we would have estimated an career/incumbency advantage for the UK that is not statistically different from that in the US.

The third contribution is to pinpoint the reason for the difference between the UK and the US. Close-race winners in both countries are rewarded with similar high probabilities of reelection for the same seat. Close-race runners-up in both countries win the same seat in a subsequent attempt at similar rates. However, compared to the US, a substantially higher share of close-race runners-up in the UK go on to win in *another* constituency. The UK–US difference in the career advantage of winning office is almost entirely due to the lack of close-race runners-up in the US who go on to pursue a seat in the House in another district. The RD shows that being the marginal runner-up (vs being the marginal winner) in the UK has the causal effect of increasing the probability of a politician being selected for another constituency. No such effect is present in the US. Moreover, the RD also shows that marginal runners-up in the UK are more likely to end-up in a safe seat than close winners. Marginal winners become locked-in to the constituency they just won.

These results are a contribution to a literature that has compared the incumbency advantage between the UK and the US (Cain et al. (1984), Gaines (1998), and Katz and King (1999)), and that has looked at the incumbency advantage in the UK in isolation (Smith (2013) and Eggers and Spirling (2017)). We depart from this literature by focusing our estimates at the individual candidate level, instead of the party level, and by accounting for the movement of candidates across constituencies. Our measure has the potential to be used in comparisons across multiple countries, particularly in settings in which winning the same seat may not be the unique objective of a politician: a member of the US House may wish to run for the Senate (Diermeier et al., 2005)[6]; a member of the Brazilian House may wish to run for mayor (Samuels (2003), De Magalhães and Hirvonen (2015)) ; a member of the French parliament may wish to also hold the position of mayor (Cirone, 2017); and members of state legislatures in the US may wish to run for Congress (McCrain and O'Connell, 2022).

In the final section we briefly discuss two questions that should be investigated in future research. First, what may be driving the lack of mobility among runners-up in the US compared to the UK? Second, what are the welfare implications of very localized political careers in the US compared to more national careers in the UK, i.e., should US parties create a more supportive path for close-race runners-up to pursue a nomination in a different district?

1. Data

Electoral data for the UK Parliament were compiled by Richard Kimber and Ian Outlaw.[7] The data set comprises all parliamentary elections held in the UK for the period 1966–1992 (eight elections).[8] We are restricted to this time span as the analysis requires the individual names of all candidates, not only winners. We restrict our attention to candidates from the Conservative and Labour parties and to races where either party was the winner and runner-up, as these represent the majority of races.[9] Electoral data on the US House of Representatives between 1976 and 2018 were gathered by MIT Election Data and Science Lab.[10] Similarly we restrict our sample to Democrat and Republican party candidates and to races where these parties took the first and second place. Candidates are matched across different elections and across constituencies based on their names. Duplicate matches are checked manually. As a robustness check, we re-do the US analysis restricting the US data to the period 1976–1992, to match more closely the UK sample.[11]

In the US, because redistricting takes place immediately after a census year, we exclude the following electoral cycles from the analysis: 1980–82, 1990–92, 2000–02 and 2010–12. In the UK, we restrict our sample to constituencies that have not changed name during at least two consecutive elections during the period (there may have been small changes to boundaries). Since we do not have data on boundaries, we use a change in names as a proxy to indicate major changes in boundaries. Boundary changes in Britain are not directly determined by elected politicians, instead they are redraw by an independent commission (Rossiter et al., 1999). Therefore, we do not expect this sample restriction to affect our results. There is a total of 301 constituencies that have stable names for the whole sample period. This represents 47% of all constituency-election observations in the UK. These constituencies do not differ in observable characteristics from other constituencies as shown in Table A1 (on-line appendix). When we estimate the career advantage of winning office, we consider all constituencies in the outcome variable (i.e., a electoral success is coded as a success if the candidate won in any constituency in the subsequent election — whether it changed name or not).[12]

In Table 1 we present the summary statistics. We tabulate the fraction of wins in $t+1$ separately for all winners and losers from period t, whether it was a close race or not. In columns 1 and 2, we restrict the exercise to those that won the same seat in $t+1$ that they campaigned for in t. In columns 3 and 4, we restrict the exercise to those that won a different seat in $t+1$ to the seat they campaigned for in t. In columns 5 and 6 we include both the same seat and a different seat in the count. Thus the entries in columns 5 and 6 are the summation from the previous columns.

In the UK, out of all winners in period t, 62% go on to win a seat in Parliament in period $t+1$, whereas out of all runners-up from period t in the UK, 2% go on to win the same seat in $t+1$ that they contested in period t and 7% go on to win a different seat in $t+1$. In the US, 73% of winners from period t go on to win a seat in the House in period $t+1$. Out of all runners-up from period t in the US, 1% go on to win the same seat in $t+1$ that they contested in period t and none goes on to win a different seat. Thus, Table 1 highlights that the electoral behavior across the US and the UK is very similar for winners: most win reelection for the same seat and 1% go on to win a different seat; but different for runners-up: whereas only 1% of runners-up in the US from period t go on to win a seat in period $t+1$, 9% of UK runners-up from period t win a seat in period $t+1$.

[6] Diermeier et al. (2005) shows that only 2% of House members attempt to run for the Senate by entering the primary system, and few are successful. Adding a win at the Senate in the outcome variable in our analysis would have no impact on the result.

[7] Accessible online at http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/outlaw/sheetindex.htm.

[8] Electoral results from by-elections were gathered from an archived version of www.by-elections.co.uk, compiled by David Boothroyd.

[9] For a discussion of the role of Liberal Democrats and estimates of party incumbency advantage, see Eggers and Spirling (2017).

[10] Accessible online at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IG0UN2.

[11] Results are robust and available in the on-line appendix Table A8.

[12] Our main result in Table 2 is robust to a further exclusion of the years 1970 and 1979 in the UK, when substantial redistricting took place without changing the name of constituencies. See the on-line appendix Table A5.

Table 1
All Candidates: Electoral success rates in $t+1$ among winners and runners-up from t.

	Same constituency +		Different constituency =		Any constituency	
Electoral success in $t+1$	US	UK	US	UK	US	UK
Winners in t	0.73	0.61	0.01	0.01	0.73	0.62
Losers in t	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.07	0.01	0.09
Number of observations						
Winners in t	6213	1263	6213	1263	6213	1263
Losers in t	6213	1263	6213	1263	6213	1263

Note: US House of Representatives elections from 1976 to 2018 with years 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010 excluded from the sample because of redistricting. UK Parliamentary elections from 1966 to 1992 in constituencies for which there were no name changes in the sample period. Cell entries indicate the fraction of winners and runners-up from period t on what is their status in period $t+1$; per country and averaged across the entire period.

Table 2
Career advantage of winning office vs Individual Incumbency Advantage — RD estimates.

	Any constituency		Same constituency	
	Career advantage		*Individual incumbency advantage*	
	US	UK	US	UK
Coefficient	0.44	0.23	0.43	0.32
Robust 95% CI	[0.29 ; 0.5]	[0.04 ; 0.39]	[0.29 ; 0.49]	[0.14 ; 0.45]
P-value different	0.083		0.31	
N for RD	3084	1030	3072	1090
Bandwidth	0.16	0.14	0.16	0.14

Note: Coefficients are estimated by local linear regressions with MSE-optimal bandwidth. CCT bias corrected robust 95%-Confidence Intervals estimated with the pilot bandwidth set being equal to the main bandwidth. Standard Errors are clustered at the election constituency. Row 3 reports p-value of a two sample Z-test under null hypothesis that there is no difference between US and UK.

2. Career advantage of winning office

The career advantage of winning office is defined as the treatment effect of being the winner (vs being the runner-up) for a given individual on her chances of winning a seat in the same legislative chamber in the subsequent election.[13] In a potential outcomes framework interpretation, we are comparing the same individual after two distinct outcomes in period t (win or lose), one of each is a counterfactual. Such interpretation makes it clear that any pre-determined characteristic of this individual (e.g., age, valence, place of birth, local connections, or party affiliation) is kept constant when comparing her potential outcomes in $t+1$.[14]

We use a regression discontinuity design to estimate the career advantage of winning office at the winning threshold, or cut off. We define the margin of victory as the distance – measured as a fraction of the total vote share – between the total votes received by the candidate and the total number of votes required for a win. The closer the margin of victory is to 0, the closer was the race in that constituency. A key identifying assumption is that the function relating the forcing variable and the outcome variable must be continuous approaching the cutoff. For the RD to be valid, winners and runners-up at the cutoff must be indistinguishable regarding their characteristics. As can be seen in Tables A1 and A2 in the on-line appendix, there are no discontinuities in observable characteristics (e.g., previously holding a seat in the national legislature). The identifying assumption is that there are no discontinuities in unobservable characteristics (e.g., local ties or ties with other constituencies). In addition, we find no evidence for sorting at the cutoff (robust bias-corrected method by Cattaneo et al. (2018), see Table A10). To help with interpretation, at the cutoff, race results can be seen to be *as if* random. We estimate local linear regressions with MSE-optimal bandwidth[15] calculated according to Calonico et al. (2014) and triangular kernel. CCT bias corrected robust 95%-Confidence Intervals are estimated with the pilot bandwidth set being equal to the main bandwidth. Standard Errors are clustered at the election-constituency level.

In Table 2 columns 1 and 2 we present our RD estimates for the career advantage of winning office at the winning threshold. In both countries the estimates are large and statistically different from zero. Winning a seat in the US versus being the runner-up has the causal effect to increase the probability of winning a seat in the next election by 44 percentage points. In the UK the increase in probability is smaller, at 23 percentage points. The estimates are statistically different at the 10% level. The point estimates suggest that the career advantage of winning office in the US is almost double that in the UK.

Had we ignored the possibility that winner and runner-up could subsequently have won elsewhere, however, we would have estimated effects that are similar and not statistically different in the US and the UK. This can be seen in columns 3 and 4, which present the estimates of the individual incumbency advantage as proposed in De Magalhães (2015); note the overlap in the confidence intervals.

The RD boundary point estimates show that the future electoral success of marginal winners is higher in the US than in the UK; respectively 53% and 42% of winners from period t go on to win a seat in period $t+1$. This barely changes once we allow for politicians to re-run elsewhere (compare Fig. 1(b) with 1(a), right of the threshold). Our boundary estimates of runners-up in t on winning in period $t+1$ in the *same* district is 9% both in the UK and in the US (Fig. 1(b), left of the threshold). Among runners-up in the UK, however, the success rate of winning a seat in *any* constituency in $t+1$ is 19% (Fig. 1(a), left of the threshold). Whilst in the US, the ability to re-run elsewhere has no impact on the probability of a runner-up winning a seat in the House. The UK–US difference in our RD estimates of the career advantage of winning office is mostly driven by the ability of UK runners-up to subsequently win elsewhere.

[13] In the on-line appendix Table A4 we allow the outcome to include winning a seat in any future election in our sample. Results are virtually identical.

[14] In the main text we show results comparing winners and runners-up independent of parties. In the on-line appendix Tables A5 and A6 we show that our results are robust to party centered estimates, i.e., comparing marginal conservative winners with conservative runners-up, for example. Party differences in estimates are minimal.

[15] Table A9 shows main results with half of the optimal bandwidth illustrating that our results are not sensitive for the choice of the bandwidth.

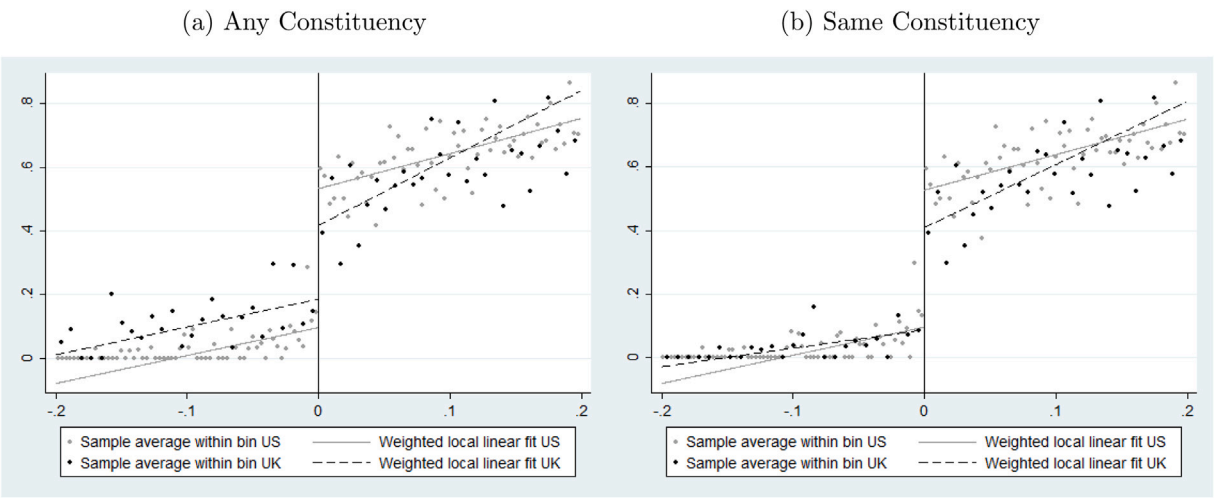

Fig. 1. Career vs individual incumbency advantage.
Note: Local linear regressions with a triangular kernel fitted by both sides of the cut-off. Bins sizes are chosen by a variance mimicking evenly-spaced method using spacings estimators according to Calonico et al. (2015).

Table 3
Winning elsewhere: RD estimates.

	Win different constituency		
	US		UK
Coefficient	0.0029		−0.081
Robust 95% CI	[−0.006 ; 0.012]		[−0.16 ; −0.019]
P-value different		0.011	
N	6272		1276
Bandwidth	0.29		0.17

Note: Coefficients are estimated by local linear regressions with MSE-optimal bandwidth. CCT bias corrected robust 95%-Confidence Intervals estimated with the pilot bandwidth set being equal to the main bandwidth. Standard Errors are clustered at the election constituency. Row 3 reports *p*-value of a two sample Z-test under null hypothesis that there is no difference between US and UK.

3. Runners-up: an advantage elsewhere.

In the UK, being the runner-up gives the politician a clear advantage in one aspect compared to being the winner. Being the runner-up has the causal effect of improving the chance of winning a seat *elsewhere*. Fig. 2 shows that being the winner in a close race makes a candidate 8 percentage points less likely to win in a different constituency compared to being the runner-up (see also Table 3, column 2). One reason runners-up are successful in other constituencies is that they are more likely than winners to be selected to compete in a safe seat by 7 percentage points (Table 4). This is an unconditional estimate that takes into account that runners-up are less likely to re-run in general and that incumbents are likely to rerun for their original seat. The results in Fig. 2 and Table 3 together suggest that winners of close races are 'locked in' highly competitive districts.

Note that despite this advantage elsewhere, future electoral prospects of winners are considerably larger than that of runners-up (Fig. 1(a)). The runner-up advantage on winning a seat elsewhere should be seen as a consolation prize. Thus, there is no reason to believe that the candidates would deliberately attempt to lose an election near the cutoff, thus invalidating the research design.

In the US, being the runner-up gives no such advantage, win or lose, a candidate is unable to win in a different district.

The success rate of those marginal runners-up in the UK who re-run in a different constituency is 76% (at the boundary 12% of runners-up are selected for a different constituency and 9% of runners-up win).[16]

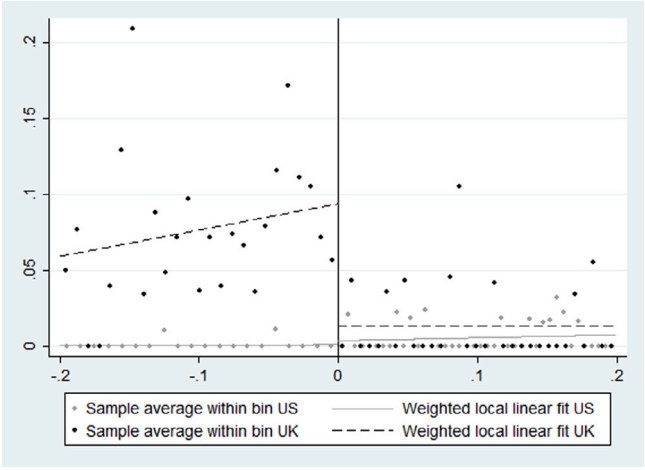

Fig. 2. Runner-up advantage elsewhere.
Note: Local linear regressions with a triangular kernel fitted by both sides of the cut-off. Bins sizes are chosen by a variance mimicking evenly-spaced method using spacings estimators according to Calonico et al. (2015).

This compares favorably with the success rate of UK marginal winners who are re-selected for the same constituency, at 57% (Fig. 1).

These success rates are not straightforward to compare since the choice to re-run and where to re-run depends on party decisions and self-selection. Nevertheless, they give us an important insight. The

[16] Boundary estimates of the RD presented in Figure A1 in the on-line appendix.

Table 4
Moves to safe seats UK - RDD estimates.

Outcome in *t+1*	Coefficient	95%-CI	Bandwidth	Winner/runner-up
Moved to Safe Seat 10% Margin	−0.07[c]	[−0.11,−0.02]	24.6%	1006/1102
Moved to Safe Seat 20% Margin	−0.04[b]	[−0.09,−0.01]	21.4%	878/957
Moved to Safe Seat 30% Margin	−0.01[a]	[−0.05,0.004]	21.5%	886/965

Note: Samples consist of politicians running in parliamentary elections from 1966 to 1992. We restrict the sample to close elections. The MSE-optimal bandwidth is calculated as in Calonico et al. (2014) and the coefficient estimated by a local linear regression using a triangular kernel. Confidence Intervals are robust for bias correction and calculated with the same bandwidth as the coefficient. Safe seat is defined as candidate's party having won the previous election with equal or greater than margin of 10% for the first row, 20% for the second row and 30% for the last row.

[a]p<0.1.

[b]p<0.05.

[c]p<0.01.

selection process in the UK is able to pick 12% of those marginal runners-up and give them a fair shot at winning a seat for the party elsewhere.[17] For this selected group at least, being an 'outsider' or 'carpetbagger' does not seem to be a hindrance.

4. Final remarks.

Our results open two issues that deserve further investigation and go beyond the scope of this research note. First, what drives the differences in the mobility of losers?

Differences in residency requirements can be ruled out as the main explanation. There is no residency requirement for a member of Congress to live in the same electoral district they represent as long as they live within the state they represent. This legal setting is similar to the UK as whole, where there is no requirement that a member of Parliament reside in the constituency they represent. The lack of movement of candidates to Congress across districts within one state cannot be explained by differences in legal requirements between the UK and the US. There are, however, legal requirements that a candidate reside within the state they represent. But note that this requirement only becomes active at the time of taking office. In 2000 the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals struck down a California residency rule for congressional candidates at the candidacy registration stage.[18] In 2013, Allan Levene was allowed by the Federal Election Commission to run in primaries in Georgia and Hawaii at the same time.[19]

A differential UK–US dislike by voters or donors for candidates who have the label of being a 'loser' is also unlikely to explain the lack of mobility in the US compared to the UK. Our results show that re-running and success rates of marginal losers for the same seat are similar in the US and in the UK. Moreover, Mack (1998) finds that repeat challengers in the US raise funding similar to an incumbent and do better than their first run. Voter preferences for local politicians may play a role, insofar as the personal vote is driven by local specificities. Cain et al. (1984) find that the personal vote plays a larger role in the incumbency advantage of US Representatives compared to UK members of Parliament (Gaines, 1998). This may explain why it is harder for a US party to impose candidates across districts or states, but there are recent cases of successful carpetbaggers in the Senate (Galdieri, 2019).

There are two main potential explanations for the difference in mobility of losers across districts/constituencies between the US and the UK.

First, despite there being no legal residency requirements in order to become a candidate for the US Congress, almost all states have a legal residency requirement in order to become a candidate for a seat in the state legislature. Candidates to the state legislatures are usually required to be a resident in the district for at least one year and a resident of the state for 1 to 3 years.[20] One potential explanation that we cannot rule out is that the local party and voters expect candidates to Congress to comply with the same residency requirements faced by candidates to the state legislature, even though these are not required by law. These informal residency requirements may have a large effect mechanically as approximately 50% of members of Congress previously held the position of state legislators (McCrain and O'Connell, 2022) and reelection rates for the same Congressional seat are very high.

There is, however, evidence in the US that the national party attempts to play a part in selecting candidates (Hassell, 2017). For example, state-wide or national parties may support moderate candidates (Hassell, 2018), but local parties push against this (Broockman et al., 2021). This rift between local and state-wide or national party may provide the best avenue of research in order to understand why outsiders are not welcomed even when they have proven their worth in another district.

Second, the UK national parties have considerable more say where candidates run than US parties. The possibility of movement across constituencies is built into the candidate nomination system for all main parties (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). Candidates must apply to each open seat separately. There is the requirement of some local support, but candidates usually also rely on recommendations from more senior national politicians. To illustrate this, we have quoted in the on-line appendix some extracts from Tony Blair' biography (Rentoul, 1996) and John Major's autobiography (Major, 1999). Blair applies to multiple constituencies both in Southern and Northern England, but fails to be selected as the Labour candidate before his selection and subsequent loss in Beaconsfield (1982), and his win in Sedgefield (1983). John Major is first selected as the Conservative candidate for St Pancras North but loses two elections, before being selected for a safe Conservative seat of Huntingdonshire. In between, he applies to seven constituencies in Southern and the West of England and fails to be selected.

The second issue that deserves further investigation regards the welfare implications of very localized political careers in the US compared to more national careers in the UK. A strict link between politicians and their constituency may increase representativeness. It may also restrict the pool of potential representatives, by excluding any politician who has run and lost elsewhere. Such an exclusion may be an important concern if 'almost winning' or 'running a good campaign but losing' is a sign of a high quality politician that the party should be able to deploy in order to maximize electoral success (Galasso and Nannicini (2011) and Cirone et al. (2021)). The RD exercise gives us a further insight as by design the average marginal runners-up and winners have the same observable and unobservable characteristics. From the UK

[17] There are no substantial differences in observed characteristics (past performance) of UK politicians who lost and then: ran in the same seat, ran in another seat, or did not re-run (Table A11 in on-line appendix). Selection is likely to be on unobservable characteristics. Tony Blair's biography extracts in the on-line appendix suggest endorsement from senior party figures may play a key role.

[18] See description of case in the LA Times June 22, 2000 (https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-jun-22-mn-43749-story.html).

[19] Politico April 23 2014 (https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/04/allan-levene-want-to-get-elected-to-congress-105965).

[20] https://ballotpedia.org/State_legislature_candidate_requirements_by_state

experience, we know some losers go on to have very successful careers (e.g., Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Tony Blair). The politicians excluded, however, are likely to be 'career politicians' (King (1981) and Mattozzi and Merlo (2008)) and the literature has studied the rise of the career politician in the UK as potentially problematic (Weinberg, 2020).

Ultimately, our results raise the following point for debate: the US political system (in comparison to the UK) may be discarding almost the entirety of candidates who have lost elections. Besides discarding runners-up for Congress, the US system also discards close runners-up from state legislature races, who are all but excluded from running for Congress when compared to close winners (McCrain and O'Connell, 2022). These results relate closely to the more often studied question of who enters politics (Thompson et al. (2019) and Gulzar (2021)) and how parties select and re-select candidates (Norris et al., 1997).

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102612.

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