For presidential candidates in Latin America, close ties to an outgoing president can increase the importance of the economy to voters

It is an old trope that the economy matters to voters in presidential elections. But how do voters think about the economy in elections where the incumbent president does not stand? Using evidence from Latin American elections, **Ignazio De-Ferrari** *finds that the identity of presidential candidates matters in how people think about the economy when they vote. He argues that candidates that are seen as successors to an outgoing president are more likely to be punished or rewarded by voters depending on their predecessor's economic performance.*

It has long been established that evaluations of the state of the economy matter in how people vote. Political pundits as well as researchers consistently emphasize the importance of the economy during election campaigns, and in post-election analyses. The evidence shows that when voters perceive the economy to be strong, they usually stick with the incumbent party, and when they think the economy is underperforming they switch to the opposition. Economic voting is considered to be a scientific fact in regions as diverse as Asia and Latin America, and across different political systems, such as U.S.-type presidentialism and West European parliamentarism. In new research, I find that the identity of presidential candidates matters as well: candidates that are the preferred option of the outgoing president – successors – are more likely to be punished or rewarded for their predecessor's economic failures or successes than candidates who are not the preferred option of the president.

It is, of course, hardly surprising that the economy – or the performance of the government – affects voting behavior. It is puzzling, however, that most academic studies assume that a good or a bad economic performance benefits or hurts the incumbent party in the same way, irrespectively of who its leading candidate is. Most economic voting studies assume that voters evaluate parties as *a whole*. This is puzzling because in some contexts party leaders have a stronger connection to the economic policies of the government than in others. For example, a president running for re-election has direct responsibility for the economic record of the government. A candidate from the incumbent party who belongs to a different faction, or advocates different policies from the ones put in place by the outgoing executive, on the other hand, is less likely to be identified with the latter's performance.

In contemporary democracies, parties center their national election campaigns around their leading candidate, and, depending on the leader's trajectory, parties and the media emphasize different issues: If incumbents run for re-election, their campaigns emphasize their accomplishments, and the media hold their record in office under great scrutiny. When a non-incumbent from the same party seeks election, parties and the media underline the candidate's links – or lack thereof – to other prominent party figures, such as the outgoing head of government. As a result, voters are usually well aware of the identity and background of the candidate of the incumbent party. Voters are likely to understand the difference between being the presidential candidate of the *incumbent party*, and being the presidential candidate of the *government*.

I argue that voters across Latin America weigh the past executive's performance differently, depending on the degree to which the presidential candidate is identified with the performance of the government. I distinguish between presidents running for re-election, successors, and non-successors. A successor is the preferred option of the outgoing president among the group of candidates seeking to clinch the presidential nomination of the incumbent party. Conversely, I categorize presidential candidates as non-successors when they are not the preferred option of the president.

When incumbent presidents run again, voters can directly punish the person in charge of running the government. There is no discrepancy between the policies of the government and the individual politician in charge of them. Discounting major external shocks, voters can expect the president to follow a similar policy trajectory in her next term. Thus, I expect electoral sanctioning to be highest when presidents re-run. When presidents do not re-run, the nomination of a successor signals to voters that the presidential candidate has at least some association with the policies of the outgoing government. The nomination of a successor gives voters greater certainty that the new government will follow similar policies to the one already in place. I thus expect greater punishment from the electorate when the candidate is a successor than when she is a non-successor. When incumbent parties nominate a non-successor, it is not evident that the presidential candidate has a clear association with the performance of the government. Non-successors are opponents of the president from within their party, and usually do not share the same policy preferences as the outgoing government. Moreover, during election campaigns, the media usually highlight the fact that these candidates do not belong to the same faction as the president, or that they do not have the president's support.

Empirically, I rely on a dataset that combines information on the three types of candidates with survey-level data from 51 election years in Latin America between 1995 and 2012. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate my findings. Figure 1 shows predicted probabilities of voting for the incumbent party by evaluations of the national economy, and Figure 2, presidential approval for a re-running president, a successor, and a non-successor. The purpose of the figure is to show how the differences in the probability of voting for each type of candidate change as a function of economic evaluations and presidential approval.

Figure 1 – Predicted probabilities of voting for the incumbent party by evaluations of the national economy

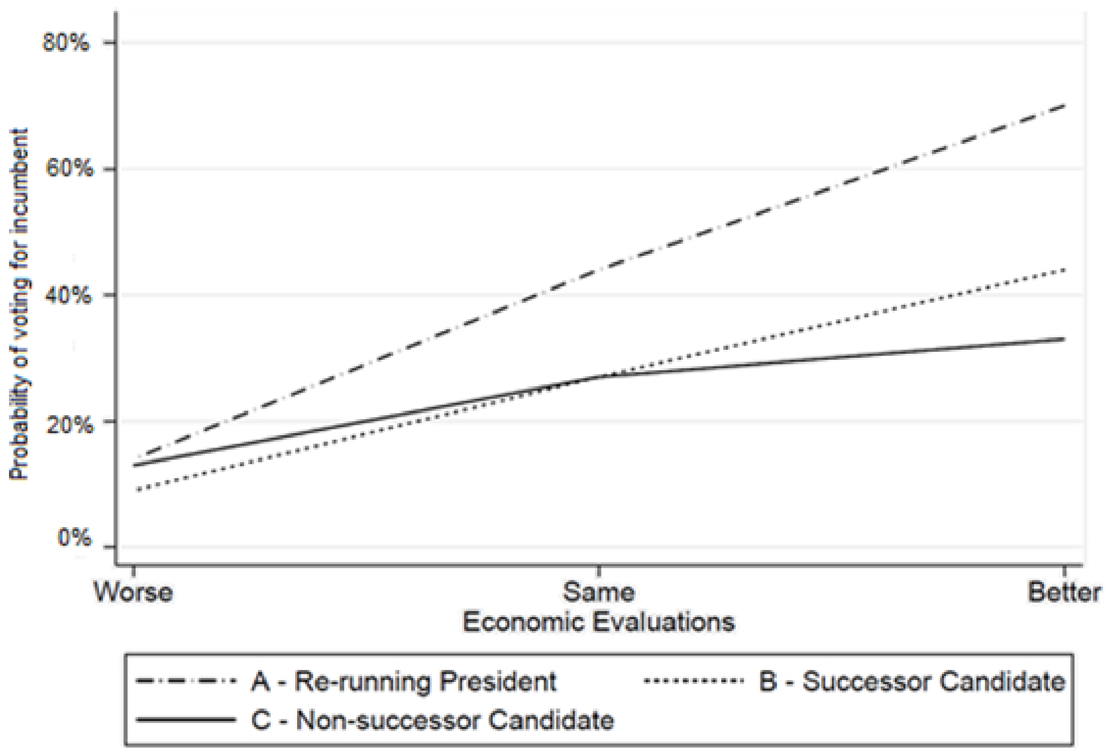

Figure 2 – Predicted probabilities of voting for the incumbent party by presidential approval

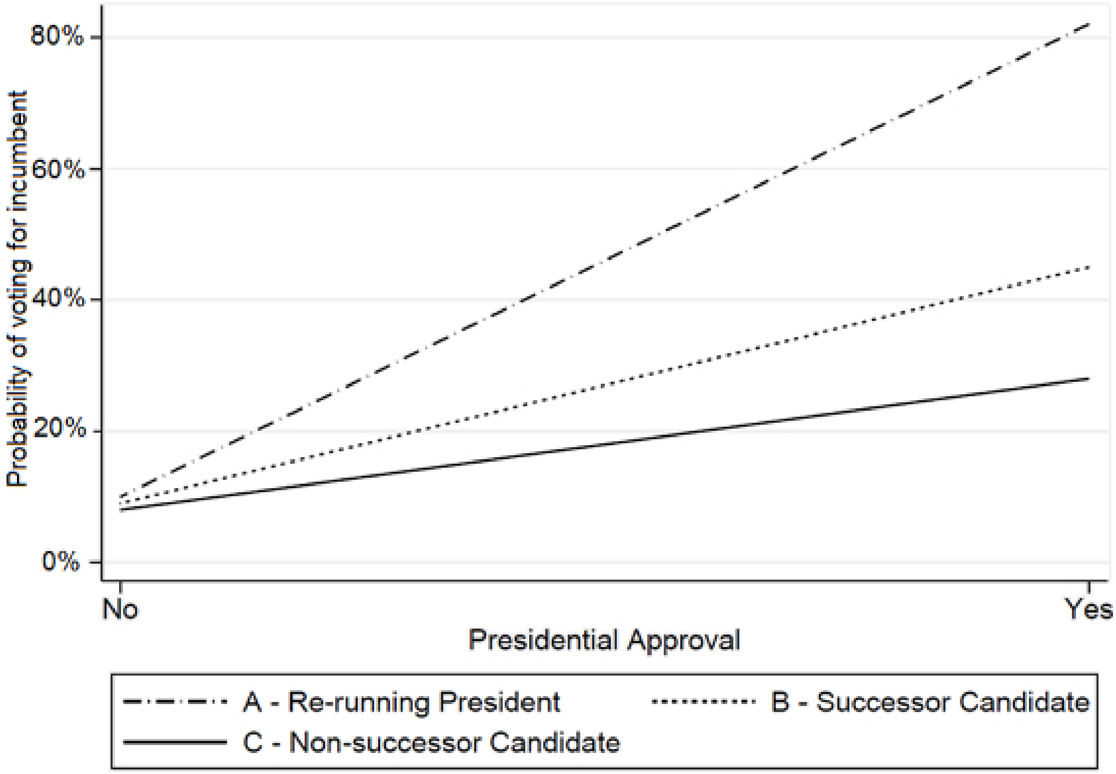

Figure 1 shows that the three types of candidates are subject to different levels of economic voting. The three slopes are statistically significantly different from each other. The slope for re-running presidents is clearly steeper than the slope for successors and non-successors, while the slope for successors is steeper than the one for non-successors. Figure 2 provides a similar picture. The line for re-running presidents is clearly the steepest, while the line for successor candidates is steeper than that of non-successors. Re-running presidents get on average 37 percent more votes than successors, and 54 percent more than non-successors when voters approve of the president.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of electoral accountability. First, they suggest that incumbent parties may avoid responsibility for their time in office by nominating a candidate with weak ties to the executive.

Second, they indicate that voters are attentive to dynamics within political parties and, in particular, to the cues they receive from party leaders and the media. This is true even in Latin America, where voters have been described as poorly informed. Third, they have direct implications for the debate about the advantages of allowing presidents to run for consecutive terms. I show that the re-election rule is an important tool for enhancing electoral sanctioning. As long as elections are not subject to fraudulent practices, the advantages of allowing presidents to run for re-election seem to be clear. Thus, if the re-election provision enhances accountability when used in the right context, we should start thinking about the stage in the process of democratic consolidation at which a country can start contemplating its introduction.

Do my findings travel well to other contexts? While Latin America is a region in which several party systems are weak and individual politicians are very influential, there are no reasons to think that the connection between the outgoing head of government and the candidate of the incumbent party would not matter for electoral accountability in other contexts as well. The analysis conducted here could be replicated using data from presidential elections and gubernatorial elections in the U.S. Executive elections with term limits constitute an important scenario for which to further test my theory.

This article is based on the paper 'The Successor Factor: Electoral Accountability in Presidential Democracies', in Comparative Political Studies.

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Ignazio De Ferrari holds a PhD in Political Science from the London School of Economics. His research interests are electoral behavior and the study of differences in public opinion across individuals and countries in Latin America. His current research explores variations in electoral accountability, with an emphasis on Latin America. “The Successor Factor: Electoral Accountability in Presidential Democracies” is forthcoming in *Comparative Political Studies*.