



# The Power of Incumbency: Measuring Accountability and Advantage in Indonesia's Legislative Elections

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## ABSTRACT

Elections serve as a primary mechanism of democratic accountability, allowing voters to reward effective representatives and remove underperformers. In Indonesia's open-list proportional representation system, incumbency offers a tangible record for retrospective evaluation. Using candidate-level data from the 2019 and 2024 legislative elections and an Ordinary Least Squares linear probability model, this study finds that incumbents hold a decisive advantage: winning in 2019 increases the likelihood of winning in 2024 by 61.4 percentage points. These results indicate that voters strongly value demonstrated performance over partisan loyalty, reinforcing incumbency as a channel for political accountability. However, such advantages may also limit political renewal, highlighting the need for institutional designs that balance accountability with electoral competitiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

Elections are widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic governance, serving as the primary institutional channel through which citizens exercise their political rights and hold elected officials accountable for their actions and decisions. Accountability arises when incumbents design and implement policies that align with voters' preferences, thereby enhancing their prospects for re-election (Duggan & Forand, 2025). In democratic contexts, elections function as both an evaluative and constraining mechanism for political leaders, as voter preferences significantly influence the likelihood of political survival (Wang & Zhao, 2025).

Competitive electoral systems, particularly when coupled with programmatic political parties, empower citizens to shape policy agendas, compelling governments to demonstrate greater responsiveness and transparency (Alence & Ndlovu, 2025). Kholmi, Triyuwono, Purnomosidhi, & Sukoharsono (2015) emphasize that accountability lies at the heart of effective governance, underscoring the obligation of political actors to remain answerable to the public they serve.

Similarly, Gupta, Dhungana, & Lamsal (2025) argue that party accountability demands full public responsibility for policy decisions and political actions, thereby reinforcing transparency, responsiveness, and adherence to ethical standards.

These practices are essential for sustaining public trust and strengthening democratic institutions. Zupan (1990) further expands the conceptualization of accountability, suggesting that it can be maintained not only through the threat of electoral defeat but also via other institutional mechanisms, provided that voters behave rationally. Extending this logic to political parties, their survival depends heavily on the consistent support of constituents, necessitating robust accountability principles in both organizational conduct and internal decision-making. In practice, however, accountability is often narrowly construed as the disclosure of financial information, rather than a comprehensive responsibility for policy outcomes (Kholmi et al., 2015)

Bunker (2020) frames elections as the central means through which citizens in democratic systems exercise sovereign authority to determine political leadership—not as symbolic rituals, but as foundational institutions ensuring that governments remain responsive to collective preferences. In Indonesia, the regular conduct of competitive elections has been crucial in rebuilding public trust in political institutions following the centralized dominance of the New Order era (Utami, Ikhsan, Dartanto, & Mallarangeng, 2024). The expansion of media freedom and the widespread use of social media have further strengthened this accountability function by enhancing voter access to information on candidates' policy positions and achievements. Consequently, elections have evolved into arenas of public deliberation in which competing claims about competence and integrity are openly contested, reinforcing their role as mechanisms of political accountability (Birnil, Okthariza, Agustyati, & Pratama, 2025)

Incumbency is a well-established feature of electoral politics, shaping both the dynamics of political competition and the mechanisms of accountability. A substantial body of research has shown that incumbents often enjoy measurable advantages over challengers, derived from factors such as name recognition, access to institutional resources, established political networks, and a demonstrated record of legislative or policy achievements (Redmond & Regan, 2015a).

In Indonesia, Dettman, Pepinsky, & Pierskalla (2017a) document consistent personal incumbency advantages in open-list proportional representation (PR) systems. Here, incumbents not only leverage their public reputations and strategic positioning on party lists but also benefit from voter evaluations of past performance, suggesting that re-election frequently reflects positive assessments of their responsiveness and legislative activity.

Thus, incumbency operates both as a structural advantage and as an evaluative process within democratic systems. When incumbents are re-elected, it signals public endorsement of their governance record, reinforcing the broader principles of political accountability. This cyclical interaction—where competence is rewarded with electoral reward for recognized performance and established reputations (Dettman et al., 2017a)

Re-election thus often signifies more than structural benefit—it reflects voter approval of legislative achievements, delivery of public services, and effective representation of constituency interests (Utami et al., 2024). Incumbents frequently receive advantageous positions on party lists, enabling them to capitalize on voters' reliance on list placement as a decision-making shortcut. Alongside this structural benefit, incumbents enjoy personal advantages such as heightened public recognition and the ability to mobilize official and informal resources to consolidate electoral support (Dettman et al., 2017a)

Evidence from the 2024 Indonesian legislative elections illustrates how visible achievements—such as infrastructure development, welfare programs, and parliamentary advocacy—translate into reputational capital. Such accomplishments align closely with retrospective voting theory, which posits that electoral choices are shaped primarily by evaluations of past governance rather than abstract partisan loyalty, thereby reinforcing the accountability function of elections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Institutional Incentives and Voter Trust**

Trust in political and state institutions is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of democratic stability and a prerequisite for sustained economic performance. Yet the degree to which direct elections foster such trust remains empirically unsettled, particularly in developing democracies where robust causal evidence is scarce (Al Izzati, Dartanto, Suryadarma, & Suryahadi, 2024)

International evidence offers mixed perspectives. In the United States, Dyck (2009) observes that direct democracy—allowing citizens to vote directly on policy proposals or enact legislation via referenda—can sometimes foster skepticism toward government institutions. By contrast, in Indonesia, granting villagers the right to directly determine local development priorities has been shown to enhance citizen satisfaction and increase willingness to participate in governance (Olken, 2010)

Institutional design can also amplify the role of incumbency in shaping voter trust. Studies in proportional systems, such as Irish elections, reveal that incumbents benefit from a re-election probability increase of up to 18 percentage points (Redmond & Regan, 2015a). Such incumbents frequently secure targeted local projects, improved constituent services, and direct advocacy for their districts (Jacobson, Legislative, Quarterly, & May, 1981). These tangible benefits signal responsiveness to constituent needs and reinforce the perception that elected representatives act as effective agents of public interest.

In this context, direct elections tend to strengthen trust in most state and political institutions, with the notable exceptions of the police and political parties. Importantly, the positive effect on trust appears concentrated in electoral districts where campaigns and voting processes occur in peaceful or low-conflict environments, underscoring the significance of electoral conditions in shaping public confidence (Al Izzati et al., 2024)

### **Incumbency as a Mechanism for Political Accountability**

In proportional representation systems, incumbency can substantially shape electoral outcomes by enhancing a candidate's credibility and perceived effectiveness (Ilmar, Ilyas, & Hasrul, 2018). Empirical evidence from the United States and Ireland indicates that voters frequently reassess their preferences based on incumbents' observable performance during prior terms, rewarding those who have met expectations and sanctioning those who have underperformed (Lee, 2008; Redmond & Regan, 2015a).

Although descriptive analyses of incumbency exist in Indonesia, rigorous causal estimates remain limited, leaving an important research gap in understanding how incumbency status translates into vote share under open-list PR rules. Nonetheless, the available evidence suggests that incumbency serves more than self-preservation—it can contribute to political stability by retaining experienced legislators, ensuring policy continuity, and preserving institutional memory (Jacobson et al., 1981)

From the perspective of democratic accountability, incumbency offers voters a clear track record for evaluation. Re-election campaigns enable constituents to judge whether promises have been fulfilled, thereby reinforcing the principal-agent relationship central to representative democracy (Lee, 2008). Moreover, in mixed electoral systems, incumbency may generate positive spillovers for parties, increasing their proportional vote shares (Hainmueller & Kern, 2008). According to Lewis, Nguyen, & Hendrawan (2020) voter behavior in Indonesia reflects varying degrees of accountability toward elected representatives for enhanced service delivery within districts. In this sense, incumbency strengthens both individual and party accountability, incentivizing political organizations to nominate capable, reputable candidates whose continued presence enhances legislative effectiveness.

### **Incumbency and Democratic Reform in Emerging Democracies**

While incumbency advantages are well-documented in established democracies, their expression in emerging democratic systems reflects distinct institutional challenges and political opportunities. Such contexts often feature greater electoral volatility, uneven institutional development, and variable patterns of voter engagement.

Evidence from India and South Korea highlights the disadvantages incumbents may face in these environments. Public dissatisfaction with governance and persistent perceptions of corruption have repeatedly resulted in significant electoral defeats for sitting officials, as documented by Linden (2004), Uppal (2009), and Roh (2017). In these cases, voter backlash has acted as a corrective mechanism against underperforming political elites, demonstrating that incumbency is not an unqualified advantage.

In Indonesia, the relationship between political competition and economic growth remains ambiguous: while competition can stimulate development, it may also risk triggering political instability (Rezki, 2022). Nevertheless, greater electoral rivalry and political decentralization are generally associated with reduced rent-seeking behavior, as voters can more effectively hold incumbents accountable for poor performance.

Within this framework, incumbency in newer democracies can serve as a stabilizing bridge between fluid party systems and evolving institutions (Moral, Ozen, & Tokdemir, 2015). In Indonesia's open-list PR system, incumbents often emerge as the most recognizable and trusted candidates, providing continuity in representation and clarity in an otherwise fragmented political marketplace. Their re-election, when grounded in demonstrable service delivery and constituency engagement, signals that the democratic system is capable of rewarding competence and sustained performance.

### **METHODS**

This study uses official candidate-level data from Indonesia's 2019 and 2024 legislative elections to the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (DPR), obtained from the Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU), Indonesia's independent electoral management body (KPU, 2024). The dataset covers vote counting, seat allocation within each electoral district, and the application of the Sainte-Laguë method as stipulated in electoral regulations. It includes candidate attributes such as name, gender, party affiliation, and total votes received, as well as electoral indicators such as the number of registered voters on the Permanent Voter List (DPT) and total valid votes per district. The dataset from the KPU comprises 4,550 candidates from the 2019 legislative election and 4,623 candidates from the 2024 legislative election, all contesting seats in the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (DPR).

Pre-estimation checks are performed to ensure data quality and model validity. Multicollinearity is assessed using correlation matrices and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with a threshold of 10 indicating potential concern (Gujarati, 2021). In addition, to mitigate potential problems from heterogeneity, robust standard errors available in Stata's estimation commands are employed, ensuring that coefficient estimates remain valid even when error variances are not constant across observations.

The empirical strategy applies an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) linear probability model to estimate the relationship between incumbency and electoral success. The OLS framework is advantageous in this context as it yields coefficients that can be directly interpreted as the change in the probability of winning the 2024 election associated with a one-unit change in the explanatory variable, holding other factors constant (Wooldridge, 2020). In light of the accessible data, gender and party affiliation are specified as control variables to ensure the robustness of the empirical estimates. The dependent variable (*Win\_2024*) is coded 1 for candidates elected in 2024 and 0 otherwise. The main independent variable (*Win\_2019*) is coded 1 for candidates elected in 2019 and 0 otherwise, capturing incumbency status. Control variables include gender,

equals 1 if male and 0 if female. In addition  $id\_Partai$ , a set of party dummies to control for systematic party-level variation. The model is specified as:

$$Win_{2024_i} = \alpha + \beta_1 Win_{2019_i} + \beta_2 gender_i + \beta_3 id\_Partai_i + \epsilon_i$$

## RESULTS

The original datasets consist of 4,550 candidates in the 2019 legislative election and 4,623 candidates in the 2024 legislative election. Applying the inclusion criteria, only candidates who contested in both elections were retained, resulting in an analytical sample of 895 candidates from 34 provinces. This sample forms the basis of the analysis.

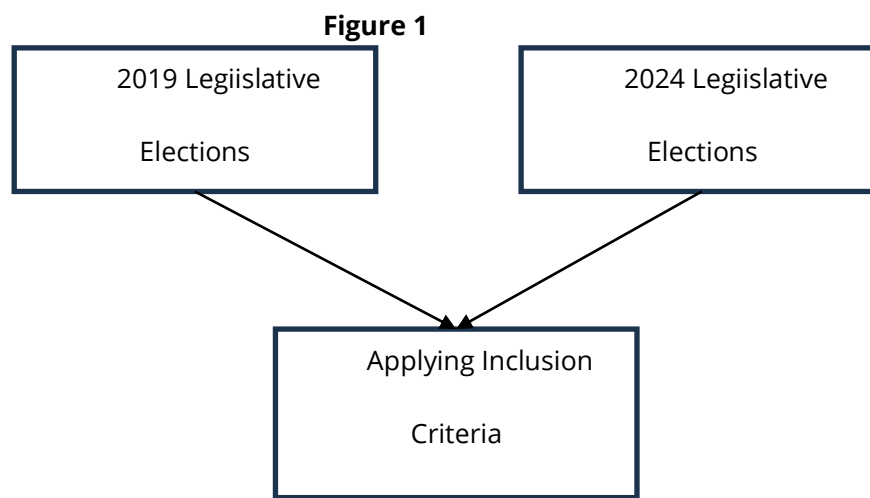


Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the 895 candidates in the analytical sample, including electoral outcomes, gender, and party affiliation variables. Approximately 36% of the candidates in the sample won a seat in the 2024 election, while 45.4% were incumbents who had won in 2019. Male candidates constitute about 69.7% of the sample. The table also reports the share of candidates by political party affiliation.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
win 2024	895	.36	.48	0	1
win 2019	895	.454	.498	0	1
gender	895	.697	.46	0	1
id political party					
1. Partai Amanat Nasional	895	.072	.258	0	1
2. Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan	895	.194	.396	0	1
3. Partai Demokrat	895	.094	.292	0	1
4. Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya	895	.145	.353	0	1
5. Partai Golongan Karya	895	.215	.411	0	1

6.	Partai Keadilan Sejahtera	895	.084	.277	0	1
7.	Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa	895	.105	.307	0	1
8.	Partai Nasdem	895	.092	.289	0	1

Pre-estimation checks include a multicollinearity test using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which yields a mean value of 2.14, with all individual variables well below the conventional threshold of 10. This indicates that multicollinearity is not a problem in the regression model. In contrast, the Breusch-Pagan/Cook-Weisberg test yields a  $\chi^2(1)$  value of 123.10 with a  $p$ -value of 0.0000, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis of constant variance and suggesting the presence of heteroskedasticity. To account for this, robust standard errors are employed in the estimation to ensure valid inference.

Table 2 reports OLS linear probability model estimates for the incumbency effect on the probability of winning in the 2024 election. Model (1) includes only incumbency status, Model (2) adds gender as a control variable, and Model (3) further includes political party dummies. Across all specifications, incumbency status in 2019 is a strong and statistically significant predictor of electoral success in 2024. The coefficient for `Win_2019` is 0.614, indicating that, holding gender and party affiliation constant, candidates who were elected in 2019 have on average a 61.4 percentage point higher probability of winning in 2024 compared to non-incumbents. This substantial effect size underscores the magnitude of incumbency advantage in Indonesia's open-list proportional representation system.

**Table 2. Incumbency Effect Estimation**

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)
	<code>win_2024</code>	<code>win_2024</code>	<code>win_2024</code>
<code>win_2019</code>	0.622***	0.612***	0.614***
<code>gender</code>		0.0609**	0.0579**
1.id_politicalparty (Reference)			-
2.id_politicalparty			-0.0915*
3.id_politicalparty			-0.0871
4.id_politicalparty			-0.0190
5.id_politicalparty			-0.0727
6.id_politicalparty			-0.0222
7.id_politicalparty			-0.108*
8.id_politicalparty			-0.0386
Constant	0.0777***	0.0397**	0.102**
Observations	895	895	895
R-squared	0.416	0.419	0.425

Robust standard errors in parentheses

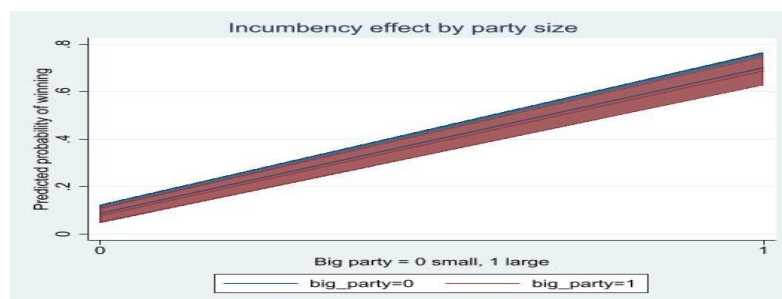
\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

Gender also exhibits a statistically significant effect on electoral success, with male candidates having a 5.79 percentage point higher probability of winning compared to female candidates (coefficient = 0.0579), after controlling for incumbency and party affiliation. While the effect size is notably smaller than that of incumbency, its statistical significance suggests that gender dynamics may still play a role in electoral outcomes.

The political party dummy variables show no statistically significant differences for most parties relative to the reference category, indicating that once incumbency and gender are

considered, party affiliation has a limited direct effect on win probability. Figure 1 reinforces this result by plotting predicted probabilities of winning across large and small parties, where nearly parallel slopes and overlapping confidence intervals reveal that incumbency provides a substantial electoral advantage regardless of party size. Overall, the incumbency effect appears broadly consistent across party categories, underscoring that personal political capital and candidate-level attributes outweigh partisan factors in shaping electoral outcomes under Indonesia's open-list proportional representation system.

**Figure 2 Incumbency Effect by Party Size**



Note: Big parties are defined as the three parties with the highest number of parliamentary seats in the 2019 legislative election: PDI-P, Golkar, and Gerindra

## DISCUSSION

Findings confirm the central role of incumbency as a decisive factor in determining electoral outcomes within Indonesia's open-list proportional representation system. A large and statistically significant coefficient for Win\_2019, equivalent to a 61.4 percentage point increase in the probability of winning in 2024, is consistent with previous research documenting incumbency advantage in both established and emerging democracies (Dettman, Pepinsky, & Pierskalla, 2017b; Redmond & Regan, 2015b).

Studies in various contexts have emphasized that incumbents benefit from name recognition, established political networks, and demonstrable legislative track records, all of which appear relevant in the Indonesian case. Incumbents often highlight tangible achievements such as infrastructure development, social programs, and effective parliamentary advocacy, which enhance reputational capital and provide a persuasive rationale for re-election (Ansolabehere, Snyder Jr, & Stewart III, 2000; Buehler & Vermonte, 2012; Dettman et al., 2017b; Redmond & Regan, 2015b).. Persistence of this effect suggests that voters view past performance as a reliable indicator of future representation quality.

A statistically significant effect of gender, though smaller in magnitude, adds nuance to the findings. Male candidates' 5.79 percentage point advantage indicates the persistence of gender disparities in political representation. Structural challenges such as limited access to campaign financing, lower media visibility, and entrenched gender norms may contribute to these disparities. This highlights the potential value of targeted interventions to promote gender parity in electoral competition.

Lack of consistent statistical significance among party affiliation variables suggests that, in Indonesia's open-list system, candidate-level attributes, particularly incumbency, weigh more heavily than party brand in shaping voter decisions. This finding supports (Carey & Shugart, 1995) argument that open-list PR systems incentivize voters to prioritize personal reputation and direct service provision over party platforms.

From a governance perspective, the magnitude of the incumbency effect carries both positive and cautionary implications. While incumbency can contribute to political stability and

legislative continuity, enabling experienced legislators to advance long-term policy agendas, excessive entrenchment of incumbents may hinder political renewal and limit the entry of new voices into the legislature. Balancing accountability with electoral competitiveness is therefore essential to sustaining democratic responsiveness in Indonesia.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides robust evidence that incumbency is a dominant predictor of electoral success in Indonesia's open-list proportional representation system, with incumbents from the 2019 legislative election enjoying a 61.4 percentage point higher probability of winning in 2024, even after controlling for gender and party affiliation. The results underscore the enduring influence of personal political capital, manifested through name recognition, established networks, and perceived performance, over partisan factors, while also revealing a modest but significant gender gap favoring male candidates. These findings highlight the dual nature of incumbency advantage: it can enhance legislative continuity and stability, yet also poses challenges to political renewal. Strengthening electoral competitiveness while preserving accountability will be essential to ensuring that Indonesia's democratic process remains both representative and responsive.

## LIMITATION

This study relies on candidate-level data from only two consecutive election cycles, which provides a useful baseline but also narrows the scope of inference to a subset of candidates who contested in both elections. The absence of richer variables—such as campaign finance, local patronage networks, or constituency-level characteristics—further constrains the analysis, making it difficult to capture unobserved heterogeneity that may influence electoral outcomes. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as preliminary descriptive evidence of incumbency effects. Future research could build on this foundation by employing more granular datasets and advanced identification strategies, such as regression discontinuity designs (RDD) or panel approaches, to generate stronger causal claims and to trace incumbency dynamics across multiple electoral cycles.

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