History-bound Reelections

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Abstract

Often political races are not really competitive, and the path to reelection is smooth for many incumbents. In two-candidate races for office we suggest the introduction of a new re-election rule, which we call the "Score-replication Rule." This rule requires that, to be reelected, any incumbent has to obtain a percentage of votes that is at least as high as the highest vote-share he/she obtained in any previous election (reduced by some margin). Such a delimiter would restrain negative "incumbency advantages," and render reelection competitive again. It could also reduce polarization in the United States Congress. Moreover, we suggest how history-bound reelections could be used in European-style proportional election systems.

1. The Problem

Elections are, of course, central to democracy. The median voter theorem suggests that the competition of potential office-holders yields an outcome that is in accordance with the median voter's desires (Downs (1959)). This result has attained a status similar to the first welfare theorem for a market economy. The literature has identified, theoretically and empirically, many deviations from the median voter result. Central to many of such deviations is that the candidates' competition for office is not perfect because candidates may be heterogenous and may indulge in their own preferences once they are in office. What can be done if political competition does not work optimally? In this article, we outline a new election rule that is able to deal with this issue. In particular, we tackle the problem when candidates are heterogenous simply because one of the candidates has been in office in the last term.

In democracies, elected office-holders often seem to be reelected quite easily, so that first-time candidates have a hard time dislodging them – often irrespective of these office-holders' performance. The so-called "incumbency advantages" that often make reelection easy can feed from several sources, be it mere name and face recognition, the assumption that an office-holder's performance benefits from experience in office, better access to financial sources, closer ties to constituencies or plain gerrymandering. These advantages seems to weaken some office-holders' incentives for good performance: As reelection has proven easier than election, good performance in office might lose some of its importance.

Ideally, negative incumbency advantages should be reduced, but they seem difficult to assess precisely. Thus, limiting negative incumbency advantages directly might be complex, all the more because the phenomenon seems to have grown in the past few years, in particular in the US (see Buchler (2007), for instance).

It might be useful to address the issue from another point of view and rather than mitigate incumbency advantages, one might try to reintroduce competition in reelection races. If so many office-holders are reelected more easily than any first-time candidate, their policies and performance in office might not have been pivotal for winning. Easy reelection might lead to non-competitive elections and to polar policies, and to office-holders reducing their efforts. In the worst case, a less able office-holder might be reelected at the expense of a more apt first-time candidate.

Thus, what we need is an election process that (i) includes a fettering device for the incumbent and (ii) increases – or at least maintains – the strength of this device over as many reelections as necessary. The core idea pursued here is to tie the vote-share for reelection to an incumbent's previous electoral results. It would work as follows: Instead of simply having to gain more votes than his challenger, an incumbent's vote-share in reelection should never fall below his best previous electoral performance. Such a rule would preserve those effects of the incumbency advantages that are beneficial to society and mitigate the office-holders' incentives to reduce his efforts. In short, we suggest tying reelection to the incumbent's electoral history.

2. Election History and Reelection Scores

For any two-candidate election for office, we suggest to use the following election rule if one of the candidates is the incumbent:

Score-replication Rule for Elective Offices:

1. *If a candidate is not the incumbent, a simple majority of votes will suffice for election.*

2. *If a candidate is the incumbent, he/she must attain – or surpass – the highest percentage of votes he/she has ever obtained for this same office.*

3. *If the incumbent fails to obtain the highest past percentage, he/she will not be elected.*

This sets the reelection hurdle higher than the hurdle for election, and weakens the influence of possible incumbency advantages, as they have to be compensated by a higher vote-share. To win, the incumbent has to mobilize all his forces, including the best-possible performance. Thus, competition would be revived, and there would be a better chance to reelect only those office-holders who have performed well. As the best vote-share of past elections cannot be undermatched, competition would be guaranteed even if an incumbent remains in office for several office terms: In need of every single vote he can get, he could never afford to perform less well.

Of course, numerous variants of this rule can be developed. The vote-share necessary for reelection could be lowered by a certain percentage compared to the best past score, for instance. In an even weaker variant, one could implement the rule only after the first reelection, so that no office-holder would feel compelled to become popular early. Another option would be to set the necessary vote-share at the average of all previous elections, or to halve the current vote margin above 50%, with the resulting figure having to be achieved in ensuing reelections.

If an incumbent fails to equalize – or surpass – his/her best past result, two consequences are possible: The challenger could win. Yet, he might have received quite a small percentage of votes, which would cast doubt on his legitimacy. To ensure that the new office-holder is supported by at least 50% of the voters, there should be a run-off between the challenger and a new candidate.

3. Advantages of Score Replication

Our suggestion to tie reelection to an incumbent's past electoral results promises a variety of benefits:

- It reduces the incumbency advantage to a level that makes political races competitive again. This corresponds to the core idea of democratic elections. As it improves the challenger's chances, incumbents may be deselected earlier than with standard elections if they perform poorly or pursue polarized policies. But if an office-holder is considered to be experienced, able, hard-working, and not too far away from the median policy position, he/she will receive strong reelection support and obtain (at least) the percentage of votes received in previous elections. In this case, the incumbency advantage would be based on welfare-improving factors, and such an office-holder would not be deselected as a result of stricter requirements for reelection.

- Despite the fact that the incumbent may have superior financial resources, enjoy greater name recognition, or be supported by powerful interest groups, our Score-replication Rule may make it easier to find and set up a "real" challenger. For a traditional two-candidate race against an incumbent, such challengers may be reluctant to stand as they can be more or less sure of losing the election. With our Score-replication Rule for incumbents, a challenger would have a better chance of winning, a fact that is likely to facilitate the recruitment of able challengers.

- For standard elections, parties will generally prefer to nominate the incumbent, as he/she is perceived as a "safer bet" than a new candidate. With our Score-replication Rule, office-holders who are not perceived to be tremendously good performers or who have to obtain an especially high percentage of votes for reelection may be forced to step aside earlier to make way for new candidates.

- Office-holders whose incumbency advantages do not stem from good performance may find their percentage of reelection votes diminishing unless they bolster it up with good performance

in office. Accordingly, even a potentially harmful incumbency advantage could be rerouted toward better performance by our Score-replication Rule.

- With the Score-replication Rule, incumbents need broader support to be reelected. This may encourage them to seek alliances and moderate their policy proposals. It may foster bipartisan compromises, as these have a better chance of being approved by a parliament such as the US Congress.

- In political competition, although a vote-share of 50% plus one means winning election, a vote-share that is higher offers better support for the policies to be implemented. Thus, winning is not all in political competition, as "winning well" – by a higher vote-share – allows office-holders to implement policies more easily and efficiently. Thus, the Score-replication Rule promises to have a beneficial effect on policy implementation.

4. Possible Drawbacks

Our Score-replication Rule would fundamentally affect the way we understand and practice democracy. A variety of delicate issues needs to be addressed with regard to its implementation.

- The Score-replication Rule could punish politicians for being popular, and for becoming popular early on, in particular. For instance, if the Score-replication Rule were applied, it might foster concerns that experienced and able office-holders would be deselected and replaced by "risky" new candidates when their support drops slightly. If an incumbent is first receives 60% of the votes, but only earns 59% in an ensuing election, he will be deselected. Yet, good office-holders benefit from an incumbency advantage that is growing over time. Increasing name recognition, together with proven ability and expanding knowledge of the policy an office-holder stands for will be rewarded with a number of votes that grows with every reelection. To further alleviate this concern, one could also envisage weaker variants of our rule, as discussed above. Such variants would make the Score-replication Rule less strict, as required.

- The Score-replication Rule might foster more energetic electioneering efforts and make political campaigns more expensive. While diminishing marginal returns to campaign efforts partially offsets these tendencies, the campaign contributors' reaction to rising costs needs to be addressed. As reelection races would tend to become closer, incentives for private contributors would increase as well. Whether the election campaigns are financed publicly or privately would entail different implications. While private contributors would simply adjust

to the situation, one might argue that publicly-financed elections require large support for the candidates. However, this may not be needed. Incumbents regularly outcompete their challengers by large margins, such that under weaker versions of the Score-replication Rule, incumbents are still so strong that no further financial support would be needed.

- Of course, as an office-holder would want to be perceived as a particularly good performer before reelection, the Score-replication Rule might encourage short-lived policies. Farsighted policies might be given lower priority – if they are undertaken at all. This is also a concern in traditional elections, and only office-holders in their last term (i.e., who are no longer in need of election support) are entirely free to implement long-term policies that yield no immediate results. Surprisingly, our Score-replication Rule may also encourage first-term candidates to implement long-term policies – if they are farsighted enough with regard to the Score-replication Rule. If they implement a certain number of long-term policies – such as comprehensive structural reform – along with the short-term policies that will yield votes for their first reelection, they will be able to harvest the results of these long-term policies at a later stage, together with the corresponding votes. These supplementary votes will come in handy for the second or third reelection, when the office-holders have to equalize or surpass their own past election results. Among the milder variants of our rule discussed above, a Score-replication Rule that only comes into effect for the second or third reelection appears to be particularly suitable to lessen this concern. This would make it easier for new office-holders to implement long-term policies in their first term.

- Variations in voter turnout might be problematic: they are difficult to foresee, and an office-holder subject to the Score-replication Rule might fall prey to a turnout drop that has nothing to do with his performance. Yet, as assessed by Geys (2006), voter turnout seems to be connected to the "closeness" of elections, that is, to the probability of affecting the election result by casting one vote. With the Score-replication Rule, reelections tend to be close and thus, the sinking of voter turnout should be less likely than in traditional, less competitive elections.

- Incumbents who succeed in getting broad support become vulnerable in the next reelection. For instance, what if a third, valuable candidate enters the competition? This would render it much more difficult to attain a best past result that was earned in a two-candidate competition. One way to solve this issue would be to re-calculate the score to be attained by taking the third

candidate's presence into account. The score needed by the incumbent could be reduced by a certain amount, for instance, or by a fraction of the vote-share achieved by the third candidate. An alternative solution is to imagine a two-stage election, the first stage determining which two candidates remain in the competition, and a second stage using the Score-replication Rule.

- A more general concern is that our Score-replicating Rule might endanger democracy itself by violating its basic principles, one of which is that incumbent and challenger should be treated equally. At first sight, it may well seem inequitable to treat first-time candidates and office-holders differently. But the election chances are not evenly distributed either, and, as we have seen, better election prospects for the incumbent do not always result from good performance. Accordingly, election rules that counteract the incumbency advantage and put incumbent and challenger on a more equal footing deserve to be actively welcomed. And our rule would be the same for everyone, across all elections and terms of office: initial election requires a simple majority, reelection has to comply with the Score-replication Rule. There is no denying, however, that the Score-replication Rule is an entirely new selection method for office-holders, one that would significantly broaden the traditional notion of political competition – and would introduce a host of new strategic aspects into election races.

5. Conclusion

In its original form, the Score-replication Rule would ensure that an office-holder's percentage of votes never falls below his/her best past mark. While our rule can – and probably must – be implemented in the form of more moderate variants, what all these variants have in common is that an incumbent's best election result serves as the calculation basis for the percentage of votes to be attained for reelection. This generates an entirely new species of political competition, which has the potential to motivate office-holders to perform better.

The application of the Score-replication Rule is not limited to two-party systems or to plurality-majority voting. Let us consider the case when a set of legislators has to be elected in a multi-member district and the number of seats that a party wins is proportional to the share of votes it receives in the election for its candidates list. Suppose also that the slate of candidates a party offers is an open list that can be modified by voters to make some candidates of a party more popular than others on that same list. Open lists are common in many European democracies. Then, an incumbent legislator from a party is reelected if that party obtains seats and if the incumbent

legislator matches the tally of votes he has received in the last election. Again, it is advisable to use weaker forms of the Score-replication Rule in that case.

This article is too short to examine the strategic considerations, consequences and drawbacks of the Score-replication Rule we propose.[2] However, this rule opens a new field of inquiry – and triggers a fresh approach to democracy.

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[2] For a first analysis, see Gersbach (2015).

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13/188 S. Hector

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13/187 J-P. Nicolai

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13/186 C. Christin, J-P. Nicolai and J. Pouyet

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