A second chance elsewhere. Re-running for parliament after a close race defeat: UK vs US.

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Abstract

In parliamentary elections in the UK it is common for candidates to move across constituencies from one election to another. To correctly estimate the effect of holding office (vs. being the runner-up) on future electoral prospects, the outcome variable must include individuals that re-run in other constituencies. In the US we find that very few winners or runners-up re-run in a different district. In the UK we find runners-up move and win elsewhere more frequently than winners in both parties – overall and in close races. Our results reveal a clear difference in the *career advantage* of holding office between the US and the UK that is almost entirely driven by the ability of UK runners-up to re-run and win elsewhere. Such UK-US difference is not apparent when comparing estimates of the individual *incumbency advantage*.

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What advantages holding a seat in Parliament gives a politician? How do these differ across countries? In this paper we focus on whether winning a seat in Parliament has a causal effect on a politician's future career in that same Parliament. Let's call this object the 'career advantage of holding 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 office in period t on whether they re-run and win an election for that same office in period $t+1$.[1] A potential shortcoming of this strategy is that a successful outcome is restricted to a win in the same constituency. Such a restriction is inconsequential for House races in the United States (US); we show that very few winners or runners-up chose to rerun in another district. Such a restriction, however, is not inconsequential in the United Kingdom (UK). A substantial number of candidates, runners-up in particular, run again in another constituency and win.

Estimates of the career advantage of holding office do not address the issue of electoral competition between two parties (Mayhew (1974) and Jacobson (1987)). Instead, they address the issue of how a political system rewards and punishes candidates that either win or lose an election.[2] Our results raise a different point for debate, that the US political system (in comparison to the UK) maybe discarding almost the entirety of candidates who have lost elections; even though some of them (the comparison with the UK suggests) would have had successful careers if given an opportunity to run again elsewhere. This can be seen as a barrier to entry, and it may have consequences for representativeness (Thompson et al. (2019)).

Margaret Thatcher provides a clear example. She ran for Parliament and lost twice in the constituency of Dartford (a safe Labour seat), before moving to Finchley (a Conservative safe seat) where she won. Moreover, King (1981) notes that one-third of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet also fought unsuccessfully at least once before being elected member of Parliament. Had these successful UK career politicians faced the same re-running restriction as in the

[1]This strategy has been used widely. For example, US: Lee (2001), Finland: Hyytinen et al. (2018); Norway: Fiva and Røhr (2018).

[2]Of course, a career advantage has policy consequences as, once in office, incumbency advantage kicks in and politician do not respond promptly to changes in voter preferences (Fowler and Hall (2017)).

US, they might not have made it that far.

Candidates who win a seat in the US or in the UK have a similar subsequent behaviour and electoral outcome in both countries. This is clear in Table 1.[3] Candidates who win a seat in their respective parliament re-run for that same seat in very high rates; respectively 81% and 70% for the US House of Representatives and the British Parliament. Only approximately 1% and 2% of incumbents in both countries chose to re-run in a different seat. Moreover, a similar proportion of candidates who lose a race for the UK Parliament or for the US House re-run for the same seat, 12% in the US and 10% in the UK; only 1% and 2% win respectively. The most substantial difference between the two countries is the proportion of candidates who lose a race and then go on to re-run elsewhere. Among candidates for the US House who lose, 2% go on to re-run elsewhere. This barely changes the overall number of re-runners. In the UK, 19% of candidates who lose a seat for the UK Parliament go on to re-run in another seat, almost double the rate of losers who re-run for the same seat. The success rate those losers who re-run elsewhere is 49%. The UK political system does not prevent losers from trying again elsewhere and UK voters do not prevent movers from electoral success.

The first contribution of our regression discontinuity (RD) estimates is to show that the effect of being the marginal winner (vs being the marginal runner-up) has a causal effect in improving the chances of a continuing parliamentary career. The effect is larger in the US than in the UK and the difference is statistically significant. The point estimates are respectively 44 and 23 percentage points. A marginal defeat is substantially more likely to put an end to an individual's political ambitions in the US than in the UK, even if such an individual is 'committed to politics' and would be classified as a 'career politician' by King (1981).[4] Thus, our results support a view that the UK has relatively more career politicians – as opposed to individuals pursuing a career in politics (Mattozzi and Merlo (2008)) – than the US.

[3]UK electoral data and information were compiled by Richard Kimber and Ian Outlaw (http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/outlaw/sheetindex.htm). US House of Representatives election data gathered by MIT Election Data and Science Lab (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IG0UN2).

[4] King (1981) points to repeated unsuccessful attempts to run for Parliament as a clear sign of such a commitment.

Table 1: All Candidates: Re-running and Electoral success rates in $t+1$ among winners and losers in t.

	Same constituency		Any constituency		Different constituency	
Re-running in $t+1$	US	UK	US	UK	US	UK
Winners	0.81	0.70	0.82	0.72	0.012	0.022
Losers	0.12	0.10	0.14	0.29	0.024	0.19
Electoral success in $t+1$	US	UK	US	UK	US	UK
Winners	0.77	0.63	0.77	0.64	0.009	0.016
Losers	0.012	0.023	0.016	0.12	0.005	0.093
Number of observations						
Winners	6213	1263	6213	1263	6213	1263
Losers	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.

The second contribution of our RD results is to narrow down the reason for the difference in the career advantage of holding office between the UK and the US. It is entirely due to the lack of willingness or opportunity for runners-up in one district to move to another district to pursue a seat in the House. In the UK, the opportunity structure implies that an individual must put their name forward to a committee who decides using past work for the party as a deciding factor. Standing for local or national office in low prospect seats is seen as a important requirement (Norris and Lovenduski (1995)). The RD shows that being the marginal runner-up (vs being the marginal winner) has the causal effect of increasing the probability that a politician moves constituencies in the UK, but no effect on the probability of a move in the US. The US system may be better understood through the view of ambition and opportunity as proposed by Schlesinger (1966). An individual with political ambitions runs for office once a local opportunity arises. Our results show that once a candidate runs

and fails in the US, the chances of a new opportunity decreases substantially, if not entirely. Moreover, our results show that the very few opportunities to run in another district are as likely to appear for marginal winners as for marginal runners-up.

We present our results in detail in the next section. In the concluding remarks we discuss what may be driving the differences between the UK and the US, and what explanations can be ruled out.

Data

Electoral data on the UK Parliament were compiled by Richard Kimber and Ian Outlaw.[5] The data set comprises all parliamentary elections held in the UK from 1966 to 1992 (eight elections).[6] 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.[7] Electoral data on the US House of Representatives between 1976 and 2018 were gathered by MIT Election Data and Science Lab.[8] Similarly we restrict our sample to Democrat and Republican party candidates and to races where these parties took the first and the second place. Candidates are matched across different elections and across constituencies based on their names. Duplicate matches are checked manually.

In the US, because of redistricting, we exclude the two-year electoral cycles starting in 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010. 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. 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. When we estimate the career advantage of holding 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 -

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

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

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

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

whether it changed name or not).

Career advantage of holding office

The career advantage of holding 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 national legislature in the subsequent election. In a potential framework interpretation, we are comparing the same individual after two distinct outcomes, 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 $t + 1$.[9]

We use a regression discontinuity design to estimate the career advantage of holding 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 count – 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). To help with interpretation, at the cutoff, race results can be interpreted to be *as if* random.

In Table 2 column 1 and 2 we present our RD estimates for the career advantage of holding 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

[9]In the main text we show results comparing winners and runners-up independent of parties. In the on-line appendix Tables A3 and A4 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.

effect to increase the probability of winning a seat in the next election by 44%. In the UK the increase in probability is smaller, at 23%. The estimates are statistically different at the 10% level. The point estimates suggest that the career advantage of holding office in the US is almost double as larger as in the UK. Had we ignored the possibility that winner and runner-up could have run again elsewhere, 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).

Table 2: Career advantage of holding office - RD estimates

	Any constituency		Same constituency	
	US	UK	US	UK
Coefficient	0.44	0.23	0.44	0.33
Robust 95% CI	[0.28 ; 0.49]	[0.04 ; 0.39]	[0.28 ; 0.49]	[0.14 ; 0.46]
P-value different	0.096		0.39	
N for RD	3359	1072	3139	1096
Bandwidth	0.17	0.14	0.16	0.15

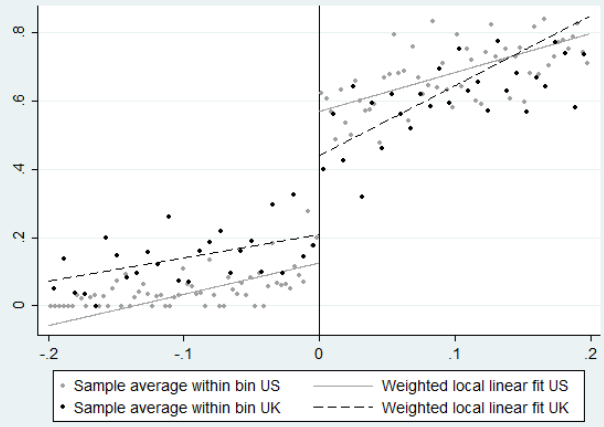
Note: Coefficients are estimated by local linear regressions with MSE-optimal bandwidth, with CCT bias corrected robust 95%-Confidence Intervals estimated with the pilot bandwidth set being equal to the main bandwidth. Standard Errors are clustered at the election constituency. Row 3 reports p-value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

The RD boundary point estimates show that the future electoral success of marginal winners is higher in the US than in the the UK; but in both approximately 50% of UK and US 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 Figure 1b with 1a, 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 (Figure 1b, 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 21% (Figure 1a, left of the threshold). Whilst in the US, the ability to re-run elsewhere has almost no impact on the probability of a runner-up winning a seat in in the House. The UK-US

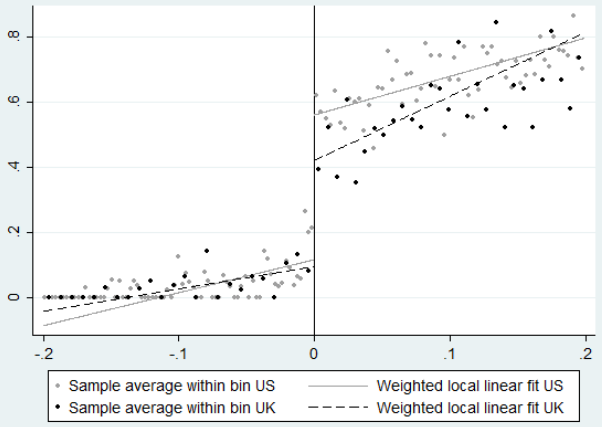
difference in our RD estimates of the career advantage of holding office is almost entirely driven by the ability of UK runners-up to re-run elsewhere and win.

Figure 1: Career vs Incumbency Advantage

(a) Any Constituency



(b) Same Constituency



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).

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. It improves the chance of running and winning a seat elsewhere. This is a causal positive effect of being the runner-up (versus being the winner) on the probability a politician will go on to re-run and win a seat in Parliament in another constituency (Table 3, column 2 and 4).

Table 3: Re-running and winning elsewhere: RD estimates

	Run different constituency		Win different constituency	
	US	UK	US	UK
Coefficient	-0.011	-0.12	-0.0078	-0.092
Robust 95% CI	[-0.02 ; .023]	[-0.21 ; -0.019]	[-0.021 ; 0.011]	[-0.17 ; -0.005]
P-value different	0.02		0.053	
N	4551	1194	5475	1178
Bandwidth	0.22	0.16	0.26	0.16

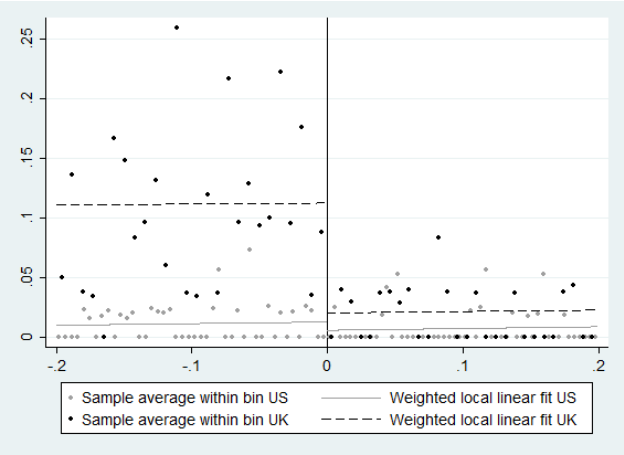
Note: Coefficients are estimated by local linear regressions with MSE-optimal bandwidth, with CCT bias corrected robust 95%-Confidence Intervals estimated with the pilot bandwidth set being equal to the main bandwidth. Standard Errors are clustered at the election constituency. Row 3 reports p-value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

In the US, the runner-up has no such advantage. The probability of re-running elsewhere is not causally affected by whether a politician is the bare winner or the bare loser in a race for a House seat (Table 3, column 1). Neither is the probability of winning a seat elsewhere (Table 3, column 3). The likelihood of winning a seat elsewhere in the US is the same for marginal runners-up and marginal winners of a House race.

In Figure 2 we can see the boundary estimates. Approximately 1% of runners-up and 0.6% of winners in the US are successful in winning a seat in a different electoral district. In the UK, whereas 2% of winners go on to win a seat in a different constituency (a similar number to the US), 11% of losers go on win a race in a different constituency.

The success rate of those marginal runners-up in the UK who re-run in a different constituency is 68% (at the boundary 17% of runners-up go on to run again in a different

Figure 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).

constituency and 11% of runners-up win).[10] This compares favorably with the success rate of UK marginal winners who go on to re-run in the same constituency. Boundary estimates (Figure 1) show that 74% of winners re-run in the same constituency and 42% of winners win a seat in the same constituency, a success rate of 57%.

These success rates are not straightforward to compare since the choice to re-run and where to re-run depends on party and self-selection. Nevertheless, they give us an important insight. The selection process in the UK is able to pick 17% of those marginal losers and give them a fare shot at winning a seat for the party elsewhere. For this selected group at least, being an 'outsider' does not seem to be a hindrance.

In the US, according to boundary estimates, the selection process only picks 2.3% of runners-up to re-run elsewhere, but this small group has a success rate of 61%. This success rate and the UK experience suggests that there should be scope for more across district movement for marginal losers in the US beyond 2.3%. Why don't more runners-up attempt a re-run elsewhere in the US? In the next section we briefly discuss these and other questions raised by our results.

[10]Boundary estimates of the RD in Table 3, column 4.

Final Remarks.

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

The lack of mobility in the US is not due to stringent residency requirements. The US constitution does not impose district specific residency requirements for candidate running for the US House (a candidate may live in different electoral district). The requirement that the candidate must live in the state is difficult to enforce. In 2000 the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals struck down a California residency rule for congressional candidates at the candidacy registration stage; the state residency rule should only apply at the point of taking office.

A potential 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 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. This suggests that a lost but close race may be a signal of quality for both voters and donors.

Voter preferences for local politicians may play a role, insofar as the personal vote is driven by local specificities. Cain et al. (1984) finds 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. There are, however, cases of successful carpetbaggers in the Senate such as Hillary Clinton and Robert Kennedy and the case of Edgar Franklin Foreman, who represented Texas's 16^{th} congressional district from 1963 to 1965 and New Mexico's 2^{nd} district from 1969 to 1971 (Galdieri (2019)).

The main contender in explaining the difference in mobility rates of politicians is the selection system. The UK national parties have considerable more say where candidates run than in the US (Norris and Lovenduski (1995)). Nevertheless, national parties in the US do play an important role in determining candidates despite the primary system (Hassell (2017)). State-wide or national parties may support moderate candidates (Hassell (2018)),

but local parties push against this (Broockman et al. (2021)).[11] 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.

The second issue 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)). 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. Since we know that marginal winners go on to have long political careers in the House, marginal losers, who have similar attributes, are excluded from such a career. From the UK experience, we know some losers go on to have very successful careers (e.g., Margaret Thatcher). This suggests that the US system, in comparison to the UK, may be excluding politicians who we know have all the necessary attributes to be successful parliamentarians. The politicians excluded, however, are likely to be 'career politicians' (King (1981) and Henn (2018)) and the literature has studied the rise of the career politician in the UK as potentially problematic (Allen and Cairney (2017) and Weinberg (2020)).

The third issues regards cross-country comparisons of the effects of holding office, i.e., incumbency. Comparisons of the career advantage of holding office may not be as straightforward to compare as estimates of the individual incumbency advantage (De Magalhães (2015)). Had we ignored candidates for parliament who move after a defeat, we would have erroneously conclude the causal effect estimated by RD of holding office on future electoral success was similar in the UK and in the US. In fact, the advantage is the US is almost double that in the UK. This concern carries over to other contests, for example, in cases where other political offices may have a similar standing to being a national legislator (Samuels (2003)), or where a politician may hold multiple offices at the same time (Cirone (2017)).

[11] Even though extremists are less likely to win elections (Hall (2015)).

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A On-line Appendix

Table A1: Covariate Continuity UK

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Won t-1	Ran t-1	Party Conservative
Coefficient	-0.018	-0.052	0.021
Observations	930	932	1276
Robust 95% CI	[-0.1 ; 0.29]	[-0.2 ; 0.2]	[-0.28 ; 0.055]
Bandwidth	0.16	0.16	0.17

Note: Dependent variable in column (1) is the candidate having won an election at t-1, in column (2) is the candidate had ran in an election at t-1, and in column (3) the party of the candidate being Conservative party.

Table A2: Covariate Continuity US

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Won t-1	Ran t-1	Party Democratic
Coefficient	0.073	0.027	0.12
Observations	2635	3103	3776
Robust 95% CI	[0.053 ; 0.28]	[-0.022 ; 0.22]	[-0.018 ; 0.2]
Bandwidth	0.15	0.17	0.19

Note: Dependent variable in column (1) is the candidate having won an election at t-1, in column (2) is the candidate had ran in an election at t-1, and in column (3) the party of the candidate being Democratic party.

Table A3: By Party UK

	(1) Labour Only Same Constituency	(2) Conservative Only Same Constituency	(3) Labour Only Any Constituency	(4) Conservative Only Any Constituency	(5) Labour Only Different Constituency	(6) Conservative Only Different Constituency
Coefficient	0.32	0.34	0.21	0.27	-0.12	-0.061
Observations	637	400	657	449	594	429
Robust 95% CI	[0.12 ; 0.49]	[0.027 ; 0.55]	[-0.034 ; 0.38]	[0.017 ; 0.55]	[-0.24 ; -0.024]	[-0.16 ; 0.11]
Bandwidth	0.17	0.11	0.18	0.12	0.16	0.12

Note: For columns (1), (3) and (5) the sample is restricted to Labour party candidates only. For columns (2), (4) and (6) the sample is restricted to Conservative party candidates only.

Table A4: By Party US

	(1) Democratic Only Same Constituency	(2) Republican Only Same Constituency	(3) Democratic Only Any Constituency	(4) Republican Only Any Constituency	(5) Democratic Only Different Constituency	(6) Republican Only Different Constituency
Coefficient	0.41	0.52	0.4	0.52	-0.012	-0.0065
Observations	2018	1935	2094	2073	3033	1460
Robust 95% CI	[0.21 ; 0.45]	[0.37 ; 0.63]	[0.21 ; 0.45]	[0.37 ; 0.62]	[-0.036 ; 0.02]	[-0.019 ; 0.014]
Bandwidth	0.2	0.19	0.21	0.21	0.28	0.15

Note: For columns (1), (3) and (5) the sample is restricted to Democratic party candidates only. For columns (2), (4) and (6) the sample is restricted to Republican party candidates only.