



Article

# Paying attention and the incumbency effect: Voting behavior in the 2014 Toronto Municipal Election

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**Aaron A Moore**

University of Winnipeg, Canada

**R Michael McGregor**

Bishop's University, Canada

**Laura B Stephenson**

The University of Western Ontario, Canada

## Abstract

The importance of incumbent evaluations for voting and the existence of an incumbency effect are well-established. However, there is limited research on the effect incumbency has on voters' engagement with election campaigns. This paper examines whether the use of incumbency as a cue when voting is associated with there being less interest in an election and whether campaign period attentiveness affects incumbent support. We consider these questions using data from the Toronto Election Study, a large-N, two-wave survey of Torontonians conducted around the time of the 2014 Toronto Municipal Election. We find that attentiveness, on its own, does not make voters more likely to support an incumbent or non-incumbent candidate. However, among individuals with high knowledge, attentiveness decreases the likelihood of supporting the incumbent, as opposed to a non-incumbent candidate.

## Keywords

Incumbency, attention, low information, non-partisan, election, wards, city council, Toronto

Incumbency has been long recognized as a major predictor of candidate success in US federal and state elections (Hinckley, 1980; Jacobson, 1987). Its importance tends to be even greater at the municipal level, as many studies have shown that incumbency is the strongest predictor of candidate

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## Corresponding author:

Aaron A Moore, Department of Political Science, University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Ave., Rm 6L08, Winnipeg MB, R3B 2E9, Canada.

Email: [aa.moore@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:aa.moore@uwinnipeg.ca)

success in local elections (see, for instance, Krebs, 1998; Kushner et al., 1997). Incumbents have a significant edge when it comes to election campaigns—they have name recognition, track records to tout, prestige and all of the trappings of office when they set out to court voters.

Much research has studied the magnitude of the incumbency advantage (Abramowitz, 1991; Cox and Katz, 1996; Krebs, 1998) and the importance of incumbent evaluations for voting is well-established. One might interpret these findings as indicating that having an incumbent in a race makes vote choice easy—voters can just support the person they are familiar with. However, this raises an important question: does having an “easy option” affect whether voters pay attention to the campaign? To the best of our knowledge, no academic research has focused on whether the presence of an incumbent affects attentiveness in an election or how campaign period attentiveness is related to support for incumbents. In this paper we address this gap in the literature with two specific research questions. Firstly, what effect does incumbency have upon voters’ engagement with election campaigns? The presence of an incumbent candidate can provide an easy voting cue that enables voters to make easier and earlier vote decisions. Is simplifying the vote decision associated with being less interested in an election and “tuning out” during a campaign? Secondly, how does campaign period attentiveness affect incumbent support? Voters who are aware of who the incumbent is should be best able to use that cue when voting, and we wish to consider whether engagement with the campaign moderates the incumbency advantage. To that end, we assess whether those with more knowledge tend to support incumbents, and whether that support is conditioned by campaign attentiveness.

We consider these research questions using data from the Toronto Election Study (TES), a large-*N*, two-wave survey of Torontonians conducted around the time of the 2014 Toronto Municipal Election. The 2014 election is ideal for studying incumbency effects, as 36 of 37 incumbents were re-elected. There were also seven wards in which incumbents did not compete, providing an important control group for comparison.<sup>1</sup> The TES contains a series of measures that enable us to study the effect of incumbency upon voters and to determine how the attitudinal characteristics of voters combine to affect incumbent support.

Our analysis reveals, not surprisingly, that incumbency had a significant impact on vote choice in the 2014 Toronto election. More importantly, our findings show that it also influenced how voters engaged with the campaign. Voters in wards without incumbents were more attentive to ward campaigns and made later vote decisions than those in wards with incumbents, suggesting that the campaign period is more important in contests without incumbent candidates. We also find that attentiveness, on its own and in conjunction with political knowledge, influences the likelihood of voting for an incumbent. Attentiveness does not, by itself, make voters more likely to support an incumbent or non-incumbent candidate. However, among those individuals with high knowledge, attentiveness decreases the likelihood of supporting the incumbent, as opposed to a non-incumbent candidate. Such a pattern suggests an interesting relationship between the incumbency cue, political knowledge and paying attention to a campaign.

## **Explaining incumbent success**

In many settings, incumbents have a significant, often almost insurmountable, advantage at election time. Much of the scholarship on the determinants of this “incumbency advantage” is from the United States (although see Altman and Chasquetti (2005), Martinussen (2004) and Samuels (2000) for examples of studies in other settings). In that country, incumbent success rates have long been a focus of scholars, at both the national and state levels, in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government (Baum, 1983; Bond et al., 1985; Carey et al., 2000; Cover, 1977; Hogan, 2004; Mann and Wolfinger, 1980; Tompkins, 1984).

A variety of explanations have been offered to account for the incumbency effect. The most common explanations are related to institutional advantages enjoyed by incumbents. Such candidates tend to be better known than their challengers, as they enjoy franking privileges and media exposure, and also because they may perform casework for their constituents (Erikson and Palfrey, 1998; Fiorina, 1977; King, 1991; Mayhew, 1974). Incumbents also tend to have a significant fundraising advantage over their challengers (Abramowitz, 1991; Krasno et al., 1994). These factors often deter high-quality challengers from entering races, thus providing an indirect advantage to incumbent candidates (Cox and Katz, 1996; Levitt and Wolfram, 1997).

The incumbency effect is not inevitable, however. The setting and timing of an election can affect an incumbent's success rate: incumbency is known to matter less in the US Senate than in the House of Representatives and incumbency effects depend upon whether a presidential election is also occurring or not (Krashinsky and Milne, 1993). The quality of an incumbent, as well as the policy choices such candidates make during their time in office, also have an impact upon incumbent success (Mondak, 1995; Whitby and Bledsoe, 1986).

The study of incumbency and its correlates is less extensive in Canada. Notable contributions include Krashinsky and Milne (1985, 1986), who document an incumbency effect in both federal and provincial elections, and Kendall and Rekkas (2012), who quantify the incumbency effect. The literature indicates that Canadian incumbents at the federal and provincial levels tend to be less successful than their American counterparts, perhaps due to stricter party discipline that ties the fate of individual candidates to party performance more than personal performance. In a leader- and party-centered political atmosphere such as Canada, research also suggests that local candidates have very little impact upon election outcomes (Blais et al., 2003). As a result, the Canadian literature on incumbency tends to focus upon retrospective evaluations, such as sociotropic and egocentric economic considerations, and emphasizes party success more than individual candidate success (Carmichael, 1990; Gidengil et al., 2012; Happy, 1992).

The incumbency effect in municipal elections has received relatively little attention, but studies that do exist echo the findings for other levels of government. Several American studies establish the existence of high rates of incumbency in municipal council and mayoral elections in that country (Hajnal et al., 2002; Krebs, 1998; Schaffner et al., 2001; Trounstine, 2011). Kushner et al. (1997) and Stanwick (2000) also observe high levels of incumbency in Ontario municipalities, including Toronto.

There is also literature that explores the determinants of incumbent success at the local level. Krebs (1998) and Kushner et al. (1997) find that campaign spending and newspaper endorsements are correlated with high rates of incumbency, and conclude that incumbent councilors are able to raise more money and maintain a higher profile than their competitors. Research also shows that incumbents fare better in larger municipalities than in smaller ones (Kushner et al., 1997), and that the effects of incumbency can differ in suburban and urban areas (Oliver and Ha, 2007). The presence of incumbents in a campaign tends to reduce the number of candidates running, which by definition should increase the likelihood of incumbent success (Hajnal et al., 2002).<sup>2</sup> Krebs (1998) also finds that the likelihood of incumbent success decreases if non-incumbent candidates have held office at other levels of government, and are thus familiar to voters. Finally, and of relevance to this study, the effect of incumbency on voter decision-making has been found to be particularly prevalent in elections where party cues are lacking (Hajnal et al., 2002). Most municipal elections in Canada, including Toronto, are non-partisan in nature.

Regardless of the setting, incumbency can provide an important and powerful cue for voters (Alford and Hibbing, 1981; Ferejohn, 1977; at the local level, see Oliver and Ha, 2007; Schaffner et al., 2001; Trounstine, 2011). This harkens back to the assumption that voters desire to minimize information seeking costs and simplify their choices when going to the voting booth. Key, for

example, describes the electorate “as an appraiser of past events, past performance, and past actions” and explains that “[v]oters may reject what they have known; or they may approve what they have known” (1966: 61). Fiorina (1981) also notes that retrospective judgments demand less of voters than prospective judgments. Thus, voters can take advantage of the presence of an incumbent to greatly simplify their vote decisions.

In keeping with this explanation of the incumbency effect, low information among voters has been identified as the most likely cause of high incumbency at the municipal level (Krebs, 1998; Schaffner et al., 2001; Trounstone, 2011). Voters need not be particularly engaged in a campaign in order to be able to identify an incumbent, but they do need to recognize who the incumbent is in order to use the cue. Seeing names on a ballot but not recognizing which candidate is the incumbent is not going to lead to an incumbent advantage. Voters with general knowledge are most likely to be able to identify an incumbent without paying attention to the campaign, and even low information voters can learn who the incumbent is with only minimal attention. If low information voters factor fewer considerations into their vote choices than do their more knowledgeable counterparts (Roy, 2009), then the importance of incumbency can increase.

This line of argumentation suggests that when elections are low information contests, voters take the “easy” route to deciding their vote choice. For those with high general knowledge, this means relying on the incumbency cue. For those with low general knowledge, this means gathering enough information to make the incumbency cue relevant. We are interested in whether the presence of an incumbent actually contributes to the low information of voters in these instances, by discouraging further information gathering. If voters can use incumbency as a primary cue when voting (that is, there is an incumbent and they know who he/she is), and they approve (or at least do not disapprove) of the incumbent, there is no reason for them to seek out additional information during the campaign. Thus, election campaigns may become less important as easy (and early) decisions make paying attention to the campaign unnecessary. This may also contribute to the strength of the incumbency effect. Despite all the research on incumbency, scholars have yet to consider this implication of incumbency for election campaigns. This is the task and contribution of this paper.

## **Toronto, where incumbents are king**

The 2014 Toronto municipal election is an excellent case for studying the incumbency effect, in part because of the unusually high historical success of ward incumbents in the city. Over the last four elections, incumbents have been re-elected 93% of the time,<sup>3</sup> which is similar to the rate observed in the notably incumbent-friendly US House of Representatives (Huckabee, 1995). They are also likely to receive majority support. From 2003 to 2010, an average of 67.3% of incumbents running in Toronto council races won their contest with a majority. Toronto is also an interesting case for studying incumbency in Canada, because its elections are non-partisan. As a result, the leader- and party-centered politics present at the federal and provincial level, which seem to depress the incumbency effect in Canada (Blais et al., 2003), are absent. While it would be ideal if we could analyze the effect of incumbency in multiple non-partisan municipal elections, little survey data is available. The TES, the basis of this research, is the only study of its kind in Canada. Thus, we see this study of Toronto as an initial step that will lay the groundwork for future research and studies of other Canadian cities.

The 2014 Toronto Municipal Election was notable on many fronts. The turnout rate of 54.9% was higher than any election since the city amalgamated in 1997, and also higher than the most recent Ontario provincial election.<sup>4</sup> This is likely due to the nature of the mayoral race. This contest included a number of high-profile candidates, including Olivia Chow, a former city councilor,

federal MP and wife of the late Jack Layton;<sup>5</sup> Doug Ford, city councilor and brother of Toronto's notorious former mayor; and the eventual winner, John Tory, former CEO of Rogers Telecommunication, former leader of the Ontario Progressive Conservatives and a 2003 mayoral candidate. The election also received a great deal of media coverage both domestically and internationally due to the actions taken by Rob Ford during his term as the City's mayor. Rob Ford's last minute decision to drop out of the mayoral race due to health reasons, and his brother Doug's decision to replace him, added a whole new dimension to the election. The high turnout rate suggests that voters were interested in and paying attention to the election.

While the lack of an incumbent candidate meant that, no matter the winner, Torontonians would have a new mayor, the picture at the ward level was very different. Indeed, once the ballots were counted Toronto's City Council remained largely intact. Voters returned 36 of the 37 incumbent councilors (97.3%) that sought re-election to City Council. Of the re-elected incumbents, 67.6% won with a majority of the vote, and the average vote share of incumbents in the election was 59.8%. Although high incumbency rates in local elections have been observed elsewhere (see, for instance, Hajnal et al., 2002), incumbents seem to perform particularly well in Toronto.

The high rate of incumbent success suggests that Torontonians are quite content with their city councilors. However, TES data question this assumption. While a plurality of respondents (45.2%) indicated that they were very or fairly satisfied with their current councilors, and only 19.9% were either not very satisfied or not at all satisfied, a substantial number (34.9%) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Depending on how one understands neutrality, the picture can change from one of satisfaction to one of dissatisfaction. Similarly, 34.3% provided neutral responses when asked about their attitudes toward Council as a whole, compared to 26.8% who were satisfied and 38.9% who indicated dissatisfaction.<sup>6</sup> Council was clearly less popular than individual councilors, but overall many voters were simply neutral toward their representation on Council.

We think that one potential explanation for the disconnect between the satisfaction expressed for City Council and individual councilors and the high incumbent re-election rate in Toronto is the effect of incumbency on attention to the campaign. Given the reported rates of satisfaction, if voters rationally evaluated their options during the election we should see greater turnover on Council. We suspect that the high incumbent success rate has little to do with satisfaction and more to do with whether voters were paying attention to the contest, or simply voting for the incumbent as a default (easy) choice. Municipal elections in general are low-information contests, and we suspect that the presence of an incumbent may be decreasing campaign attention by enabling voters who are satisfied (or who are, at least, not unsatisfied) with the performance of the incumbent to "tune out" during the campaign, thus contributing to the incumbent vote advantage. In the following pages, we test this expectation in two ways. Firstly, we consider whether there is evidence of less attention in contests with incumbent candidates. Secondly, we consider whether the incumbency advantage is greater among those with lower levels of campaign attentiveness.

## **Data, methodology and expectations**

We investigate our research questions using data from the TES. The TES is a two-wave internet survey that was administered in the weeks leading up to election day (27 October) and in the days after the election. Three thousand respondents were interviewed in the weeks before election day (after the candidate nomination deadline of 12 September). Nearly 75% of those respondents also completed the post-election wave of the survey, which was administered in the week after the election.<sup>7</sup> The TES includes a variety of questions about attitudes and behavior, similar to those contained in many national or provincial election studies, and is the first dataset of its kind that allows for a thorough consideration of voting behavior in a non-partisan Canadian municipality.

The dataset thus provides us with individual-level information that allows us to conduct three related sets of analyses to consider the effects of incumbency.<sup>8</sup>

We measure campaign attention using a question that asked TES respondents how much attention they paid to the Council race in their ward. Using this measure, we examine the effect of incumbency upon campaign attentiveness in two ways (see the Appendix for information on all TES questions employed in the analyses).<sup>9</sup> Firstly, we compare voters in wards with an incumbent candidate to those without to test whether the presence of an incumbent is related to lower levels of attention. We assume that incumbency influences attentiveness, rather than the reverse—it does not make sense that an incumbent would run in an election based upon the attention level of the electorate.<sup>10</sup> By considering how the presence of an incumbent affects voters' campaign attentiveness, we address the effect of incumbency upon the importance of campaigns themselves. Our first hypothesis is thus:

*H1: The presence of an incumbent candidate leads to a decrease in voter campaign attentiveness.*

Secondly, we examine whether the presence of an incumbent influences the timing of vote decisions. Early decisions indicate that the campaign had no influence on vote choice, and could also be taken as a sign of disengagement—all other things equal, voters who know long before an election for whom they will vote have less of a need to be attentive during the campaign than do undecided voters. The pre-election wave of the TES asked respondents who they intended to vote for at the ward level (over 60% expressed a vote intention). This information can be compared to actual vote choice, reported in the post-election wave of the survey, to determine whether respondents changed their preferences over the course of the campaign. Many voters knew quite early whom they were going to vote for, and expressed the same vote preference in both surveys (early deciders). However, the preferences of many other voters changed between survey waves (switchers), and a third group of respondents had no vote preference at the time of the pre-election interview and made their decision sometime during the actual election campaign (late deciders). We assume that the election campaign is more likely to have had an effect on the preferences of switchers and late deciders than early deciders. We compare voters in wards with incumbents to those in wards without an incumbent to determine if the presence of an incumbent is related to the proportion of early deciders. If the presence of an incumbent influences the time of vote decisions, leading to early decisions, it suggests that incumbency also decreases attention to campaigns. Following this logic, our second hypothesis is:

*H2: The presence of an incumbent leads voters to make early vote decisions.*

Finally, we consider the effect of general knowledge and campaign period attentiveness upon support for incumbents. Our measure of general political knowledge is an index based upon a series of questions about municipal, provincial and federal politics (see the Appendix for details). We expect that political knowledge is relevant for the use of the incumbency cue, as it should make voters better able to identify the incumbent candidate. We thus expect that, *ceteris paribus*, incumbent support will be higher among knowledgeable individuals, as they are more likely to be able to use the incumbency cue. We also expect that the interaction between knowledge and attentiveness may have an effect on support for incumbents. Campaign attention should make all candidates better known and therefore reduce the tendency for knowledgeable voters to rely upon the limited information provided by the incumbency cue. We therefore expect the incumbent advantage to be weaker among highly attentive, highly knowledgeable individuals. Our final two hypotheses are thus:

*H3: Incumbent support will be higher among knowledgeable individuals.*

*H4: Attentiveness decreases support for incumbents among highly knowledgeable voters*

We include an important robustness check in our tests of hypotheses 3 and 4. As noted above, incumbent councilors in the 2014 Toronto Municipal Election were extremely successful, and almost all won re-election. In order to ensure that knowledge and attentiveness are acting as described in responses to an incumbency cue, rather than simply in response to a victorious candidate, we replicate the analysis for wards where no incumbent was present and consider support for winning candidates.

## Results

### *Campaign period attentiveness*

The first question we consider is whether the presence of an incumbent affects campaign attention. We find that voters are less attentive during the campaign period when an incumbent is present. Voters in wards without an incumbent candidate reported an average attentiveness score of 6.2 (on a scale from 0 to 10). In wards with an incumbent, the average attentiveness score was 5.8 (the difference is significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). We therefore find support for *H1*. As a point of comparison, attention to the mayoral campaign,<sup>11</sup> which is unlikely to be affected by a City Council incumbent but may reflect differences in attention by ward, is not significantly different (average scores for this variable are 8.1 in wards without an incumbent and 8.0 when an incumbent is present). Incumbency therefore leads voters to pay less attention to campaigns, a finding that is compatible with *H1*.

### *Incumbency and the timing of preference formation*

We now turn to consider our second hypothesis: that the presence of an incumbent cue leads to early vote decisions. By definition, campaigns can have no effect on the choices of those who make an early vote decision that does not change. Therefore, we are interested in determining whether there is evidence that, when there is no incumbent, voters wait to make their decisions until they have more campaign information. We determine this by comparing voter preferences at the time of the pre-election interview ( $T_1$ ) to post-election vote recall ( $T_2$ ), and grouping individuals according to the typology established above: early deciders, late deciders and switchers.

Table 1 shows clearly that residents in wards with incumbents are more likely to form early vote preferences than their counterparts in wards without incumbents. At the time of their pre-election TES interview, only 27.1% of voters in wards with incumbents were undecided (late deciders, in our typology), as compared to 39.8% in wards without an incumbent (this difference of 12.7 points is significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). Unsurprisingly, the majority (64.4%) of early deciders in wards with incumbents supported their current councilor. Voters in incumbent wards were also less likely to be switchers, or change their vote preferences between questionnaire waves. Of voters in wards with incumbents, 60.7% displayed a stable vote intention from  $T_1$  to  $T_2$ , while the value is only 46.3% in wards without incumbents (this difference of 14.4 points is significant at  $p < 0.01$ ). The presence of an incumbent is therefore associated with early, stable vote decisions.

Another way to examine the effect of incumbency upon the influence of campaigns is to compare the amount of switching that occurred in wards with and without incumbent candidates. If the presence of an incumbent decreases attentiveness to the campaign, as we found above, then switching should be less prominent in wards with incumbents. Although there is no statistically significant

**Table 1.** Timing and stability of vote preference.

	Without incumbent	With incumbent	Difference
Stable preference from $T_1$ to $T_2$ (early decider)	46.3%	60.7%	14.4%
Change in preference from $T_1$ to $T_2$ (unstable)	13.9%	12.2%	-1.7%
Undecided at $T_1$ (late decider)	39.8%	27.1%	-12.7%
N	231	1122	

difference between the share of switchers in the two types of wards in Table 1, this is due to the fact that fewer voters expressed a pre-election preference in wards without an incumbent. If we focus only on those voters who express a preference at  $T_1$ , thus temporarily ignoring those respondents in the third row in Table 1, we find that voters are indeed more likely to shift preferences in the absence of an incumbent. When an incumbent was present, 16.7% of respondents who expressed a preference at  $T_1$  changed preferences by  $T_2$ . By contrast, this value is 23.1% in wards with no incumbent. This difference is significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

We therefore have solid support for  $H2$ . The presence of an incumbent is associated with early vote decisions and stable voter preferences. These findings indicate that the presence of an incumbent tends to decrease the importance of election campaigns. Since earlier decisions mean less potential for campaign influence, and stability means that campaign information did not shift preferences, our findings suggest that this large group of voters paid little attention to the election campaign.

### Explaining incumbent support

Having established that incumbency influences voter attentiveness, we complete our analysis by considering how knowledge and attentiveness affect support for incumbents. More specifically, we examine how campaign period attentiveness interacts with political knowledge to affect the choices of voters in the presence or absence of an incumbent. We do so through a series of logistic regression models, where the dependent variable is vote choice.

We ran separate models for wards in which an incumbent was running (37 wards) and wards without incumbent candidates (seven wards). The nature of competition in each set of wards requires different dependent variables for these two models. In wards where an incumbent was present the dependent variable is a vote for a non-incumbent candidate (0) versus a vote for the incumbent (1). If an incumbent was not present, the values are a vote for the losing candidate (0) versus a vote for a winning candidate (1). As only one of 37 incumbents lost his/her bid for re-election, these two outcome variables are very similar to one another in practice.<sup>12</sup> Comparing the two types of elections allows us to understand whether the results we find are due to supporting a winning candidate (in which case the results should be the same), or whether there are real incumbent candidate effects.

We expect that general political knowledge will be related to support for incumbent candidates, as more knowledgeable voters are more likely to recognize the incumbent councilor. We do not, however, expect political knowledge to affect support for the winning candidate in ward contests without incumbent candidates. After all, general knowledge will not make people more aware of the competition or the likely frontrunners.

Table 2 reports the results of four models—two for wards with incumbents and two for wards without. For each type of ward we ran models with and without the interaction of knowledge and attentiveness.<sup>13</sup> We also controlled for some standard sociodemographic factors (gender, age and



**Table 2.** Knowledge, attentiveness and candidate support—wards with and without incumbents.

	Incumbent versus non-incumbent		Winner versus loser	
	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
Knowledge	0.34 (0.16)**	0.71 (0.19)***	-0.12 (0.18)	0.10 (0.38)
Attentiveness	-0.06 (0.14)	0.32 (0.18)*	0.44 (0.36)	0.66 (0.35)*
Knowledge × attentiveness		-0.66 (0.24)***		-0.36 (0.60)
Female	0.12 (0.17)	0.14 (0.17)	0.13 (0.37)	0.13 (0.37)
Over 50	0.09 (0.17)	0.10 (0.17)	0.44 (0.41)	0.43 (0.41)
University educated	0.01 (0.16)	0.01 (0.16)	-0.23 (0.28)	-0.23 (0.28)
Constant	0.05 (0.20)	-0.17 (0.19)	-0.58 (0.49)	-0.71 (0.46)
N	1212	1212	252	252
Clusters	37	37	7	7
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	0.0063	0.0108	0.0216	0.0228

Entries report coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses).

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

education, all of which are coded as dummies). Respondents were clustered by ward in order to account for ward-specific factors.

Table 2 reveals several important findings. The results of Model A, for wards with an incumbent, reveal that knowledge is positively associated with support for the incumbent. We interpret this as indicating that knowledgeable individuals are more likely to make use of the incumbency cue when making their vote decision, as they are more likely to know who the incumbent is. In contrast, campaign period attentiveness has no effect upon the choice of voters (the attentiveness term is insignificant in Model A). For voters in wards with incumbents, therefore, it is general political knowledge, rather than campaign period attentiveness, that appears to be the primary driver of incumbent support.

Model B reveals, however, that the interaction of knowledge and attentiveness has a significant impact upon vote choice when an incumbent is present. Specifically, the interaction term is statistically significant and negative, meaning that attentiveness has a dampening effect upon incumbent support among knowledgeable individuals. The coefficients of the constituent knowledge and attentiveness terms also suggest that high attention, low knowledge voters tend to be drawn toward the incumbent, as opposed to a non-incumbent candidate (although this pattern is significant only at  $p < 0.10$ ). This finding suggests that voters who are knowledgeable or attentive (but not both) are pre-disposed to using incumbency as a cue.

In terms of our expectations, we interpret the results as showing that knowing the identity of the incumbent—whether through general knowledge or being attentive during the course of the campaign—leads to incumbent support. Individuals who are both knowledgeable and attentive, however, are more likely to support a candidate other than the incumbent. This finding suggests to us that those who knew the incumbent, but chose to follow the campaign anyway, did so because they rejected supporting the incumbent from the outset. Attentiveness to the campaign is therefore related to receiving but not following the incumbency cue among knowledgeable voters.

The results in Models C and D (based upon data from voters in wards without an incumbent) differ from those in Models A and B in two important ways. Firstly, general political knowledge is not positively associated with support for the winning candidate. This null finding makes intuitive sense. If an incumbent is present, knowledge enables voters to minimize their resource outlay and simply follow the heuristic of voting for the incumbent candidate. Without an

**Table 3.** Knowledge, attention and support for incumbents (predicted values).

	Low knowledge	High knowledge
Low attention	48.9%	66.0%
High attention	56.9%	58.2%

incumbent, however, knowledgeable voters are unable to rely upon an incumbency cue and would be unlikely to turn, en masse, to a single candidate. The second noteworthy difference is that, in Model D, the interaction term is insignificant. The combination of high knowledge and high attention is not related to vote choice in these wards, and high knowledge, attentive electors behave no differently than their low knowledge, low attention counterparts. Models A and B therefore provide support for *H3* and *H4*, and Models C and D show that our conclusions apply only to those wards with incumbents.

In order to provide greater context for the results in Model B, and thus the effect of knowledge and attentiveness upon incumbent support, we present Table 3. While regression results indicate the direction and statistical significance of effects, they do not provide information on the share of respondents who supported incumbent candidates for each combination of the attention and knowledge variables. Table 3 shows the predicted rate of support for incumbent candidates for each combination of knowledge and attention. The results were generated by post-estimation (based upon Model B), with the values of knowledge and attentiveness manipulated and the values for the control variables left unchanged.

Table 3 demonstrates that knowledge is clearly associated with support for an incumbent candidate. However, the effect of this variable is significantly moderated by attention to the campaign. Among low knowledge voters, attentiveness increases incumbent vote share by an estimated 8 percentage points (increasing from 48.9% to 56.9%). The effect of attentiveness is in the opposite direction, however, among high knowledge voters, who are estimated to be 7.8 points less likely to support an incumbent if they are attentive (decreasing from 66.0% to 58.2%). While incumbents still receive significant support among this group of voters, attentiveness clearly dampens the incumbency advantage.

## Conclusion

What do these results tell us about voters and high incumbency in Toronto? Firstly, the presence of an incumbent candidate in a ward election has important effects upon voters. Compared to wards without an incumbent, electors in wards where an incumbent is present were less attentive to the campaign and made earlier and more stable vote choices. These results have implications for the study of campaigns and campaign effects, and suggest that campaigns have a differential impact upon election outcomes depending upon the presence of an incumbent. Such findings should be of interest not only to academics, but to political actors themselves. For instance, this pattern suggests that campaign donations might be more wisely targeted at races without an incumbent, as voters in such races are less likely to be tuned out, having made their decisions early.

In addition, our analysis of the TES data reveals important relationships between knowledge, attention and incumbent support. We find that general political knowledge is related to support for incumbent candidates, but not support for the winning candidate in the absence of an incumbent. We interpret this as indicating that when no incumbency cue is available, general political knowledge does not help electors simplify their vote choices. However, attentiveness dampens the effect of general knowledge upon incumbent support.

Our key findings are that having the option of following an incumbent cue decreases the amount of attention paid to an election campaign, and that those who receive the cue but pay attention anyway are less likely to support the incumbent. Taken together, these findings suggest that incumbent re-election is bolstered by fewer voters paying attention to the campaign and learning about non-incumbent candidates. In short, incumbents win because voters are inattentive and voters are inattentive because an incumbent is competing.

Our findings build upon existing literature on incumbency effects by helping to explain the mechanism underlying incumbent success in low information elections, such as the 2014 Toronto Municipal Election. That said, further research is required to determine the extent to which our findings are generalizable to other cities with other contextual features. For instance, our findings may apply in other non-partisan settings like Toronto, but may not be applicable in partisan settings. In addition, the high-profile nature of the 2014 mayoral election, and the unprecedented voter turnout resulting from it, may have driven more voters to participate in the election than would have been the case if a more mundane mayoral race was taking place. Nevertheless, although we recognize that our case is unique, we believe that our results represent a noteworthy advance in understanding incumbency advantage, and hope that this research encourages future tests of our findings in other elections at the local, regional and federal level.

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## Notes

1. Incumbents were present in all wards except 2, 3, 4, 5, 16, 20 and 39.
2. This is consistent with Toronto elections. Between 2003 and 2014, the average number of candidates in wards without incumbents was 12.9, compared to 7.29 in wards with incumbent candidates.
3. All election data are drawn from Toronto's City Clerk's Official Declaration of Results for the 2003, 2006, 2010 and 2014 Toronto Municipal Elections.
4. On 1 January 1998, the former City of Toronto was amalgamated with five other lower-tier municipalities (Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, East York, and York) and the former upper-tier Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto to create the new City of Toronto. The first election for the new city occurred prior to amalgamation in 1997. In that election, voters elected two councilors from 26 wards. For the 2000 election, the City adopted the 44-ward single-councilor system that is currently in place.
5. Jack Layton was the much revered leader of the federal New Democratic Party. Shortly before his death, he led the party to its best federal election result, for the first time capturing the position of Official Opposition.
6. These results are in keeping with research on approval of senators and congressman versus approval of the Senate and the House of Representatives in the United States, which suggests a disconnect between voters' attitude toward legislative bodies as a whole and their assessment of individual elected officials (Cook, 1979; Friedman and Wittman, 1995). More recent results confirm this pattern. Just prior to the 2012 American election the approval rating of Congress was a mere 10%, while 83% of Americans disapproved of the way Congress was doing its job (Gallup Poll, 2012). Nevertheless, 90% of House incumbents and 91% of Senate incumbents were re-elected.
7. The first wave was administered from 19 September until 26 October, while the second was administered from 28 October until 3 November.
8. All analyses are weighted by age, gender and education.
9. Note that the variable is measured in the post-election wave of the survey and is scaled from 0 to 10.
10. As a test to ensure that our study does not suffer from endogeneity, we compared voters in wards with and without incumbents on the basis of how interested they are in municipal politics. There were no

statistically significant differences between these groups with respect to this variable, which suggests that any observed differences with respect to attentiveness are due to campaign dynamics and, specifically, the presence of an incumbent.

11. The mayoral and city council elections run concurrently in Toronto. The mayor runs city-wide and is elected by the popular vote.
12. The substantive conclusions of the paper remain unchanged if we exclude the ward where the incumbent lost.
13. Knowledge and attentiveness are coded here as dummies for ease of interpretation. Both variables were divided at the median. Note that the substantive conclusions of Table 2 are unchanged if these variables are instead coded as ordinal measures.

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### **Author biographies**

Aaron A Moore is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Winnipeg and a fellow at the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance, Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto.

R Michael McGregor is an assistant professor in the Department of Politics and International Studies at Bishop's University.

Laura B Stephenson is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario.

**Appendix (available online at: <http://ips.sagepub.com/>)**