

## **Expectations, competitiveness and electoral systems**

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### **Abstract**

We examine voters' capacity to determine which parties will and will not win seats in their districts. We use internet surveys conducted by Harris just before the 2011 Ontario provincial election and the 2011 Spanish election. We find that the better educated and the better informed are better at predicting the outcome of the election in both systems. But information and education matter more in Spain, presumably because the task of determining whether a party will win a seat or not is more demanding in a PR system and more sophistication is thus required. Voters in the plurality election are also able to better predict which party will win in the district when the election is not competitive, that is, when there is large gap between the winner and the second candidate. Lack of competitiveness has no effect in PR elections, possibly because the information is not as easily available. It would seem that voters rely on whether the party won a seat or not in the previous election.

Key words: Expectations, district magnitude, competitiveness

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## **1. Introduction**

Voters' expectations about parties' electoral chances are crucial for explaining decision making in mass elections. The decision, which party to support, can be influenced by a party's viability. As shown by studies of strategic voting, citizens can abandon their preferred party when it is not perceived to have real chances of winning the election, or of winning a seat (Abramson et al., 2010; Cox, 1997). Being on the winning side influences political support even more strongly than ideological congruence (Brunell and Buchler, 2009; Singh et al., 2011). Thus, how voters form their perceptions of parties' chances of winning deserves a special attention in political behavior research.

There is an extant literature about the individual-level determinants of voters' electoral expectations: Political motivation, knowledge, and party identification have been shown to strongly influence the accuracy of electoral expectations (Blais and Bodet, 2006, Meffert et al, 2011). Citizens with a higher degree of political sophistication tend to have more accurate perceptions of parties' chances. But voters also have biased perceptions. Party identifiers, whether politically sophisticated or not, are subject to a wishful thinking bias and tend to overestimate the chances of success of their preferred party (Babad and Yacobos, 1993; Blais and Bodet, 2006; Uhlener and Grofman, 1986). The previous literature, however, has not paid enough attention to how voters' ability to form accurate perceptions is affected by the nature of the electoral context.

We expect that political contexts help in explaining differences in the accuracy of electoral expectations. Similar to what happens in research on economic voting (Anderson, 2007), we argue that the formation of accurate expectations is contingent on two mediating variables: district magnitude (i.e., the number of seats to be allocated in a district) and the district level degree of electoral competitiveness. First, as district magnitude increases, the harder it is to determine who is 'out of running'. Under conditions of high uncertainty about the identity of trailing and front-running parties or candidates, it can be hypothesized that expectations are less accurate. Second, what matters is not only who is going to win in the district but also by how much. The higher the difference between the winner of the last allocated seat and the first loser (i.e., the

less competitive the election is), the more accurate the voters' perception of the parties' chances of winning.

We rely on data from elections in a single-member district plurality system (Ontario, Canada) and in multi-member district PR systems (Catalonia and Madrid, Spain) to assess the ability of voters to form 'correct' expectations about election outcomes in different types of settings.

We test the following hypotheses:

1. In both systems, the better educated and the better informed have more accurate expectations about the outcome of the election.
2. In both systems, partisans' perceptions are more distorted, because they are more prone to indulge in wishful thinking.
3. The impact of education and information is stronger in multi-member district PR elections. It is more difficult to sort out who is and who is not viable with higher district magnitude and as a consequence political sophistication is a more crucial resource in PR systems.
4. In both systems, the more competitive the election, the more error-prone are voters' expectations.

## **2. Data and methods**

Our analysis is based on elections in Canada and Spain. In Canada, we examine the October 6, 2011 provincial election in Ontario, which was held under the first-past-the post system in 107 districts. Table 1 presents the official results. The incumbent Liberal party was re-elected with 38% of the vote and 53 seats, one seat shy of a majority. The right-wing Conservative party formed the official opposition, with 35% of the votes and 37 seats, while the New Democratic Party (NDP) received 23% of the vote and 17 seats. The Green party failed to elect any candidate with 3% of the vote.

Table 1: Results of the 2011 Ontario election, seats won and percentage of votes.

Party	# Seats / % Valid votes in the election (Previous election)
Liberals	53 / 37.73 (71 / 42.25)
Conservatives	37 / 35.44 (26 / 31.62)
NDP	17 / 22.74 (10 / 16.77)
Green	0 / 2.94 (0 / 8.02)

Source: [www.elections.on.ca/en-ca](http://www.elections.on.ca/en-ca).

Our second set of cases is the November 20, 2011 Spanish general elections, based on a PR electoral system. We focus here on two provinces, Catalonia and Madrid. While Madrid is a single 36-seat district, Catalonia is divided into four districts, Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona whose magnitudes are 31, 6, 4, and 6 seats, respectively. The official results of that election are shown in Table 2. The two major parties (PSOE and PP) won seats in each district. IU was successful only in the two large districts of Barcelona and Madrid and UpyD only in Madrid. Among the Catalonian regional parties, CIU obtained seats in each of the four Catalonian districts and ERC only in Barcelona, while PxC did not manage to win a seat anywhere.

Table 2: 2011 Spain election in Catalonia and Madrid

Party	# Seats / % Valid votes in the election (Previous election)				
	Barcelona (31 seats)	Girona (6 seats)	Lleida (4 seats)	Tarragona (6 seats)	Madrid (36 seats)
PSOE	10 / 27.80 (16 / 46.77)	1 / 21.44 (3 / 39.53)	1 / 20.35 (2 / 37.23)	2 / 26.1 (4 / 44.92)	10 / 26.05 (15 / 39.68)
CiU	9 / 27.15 (6 / 19.58)	3 / 39.23 (2 / 27.21)	2 / 41.32 (1 / 28.57)	2 / 30.53 (1 / 21.13)	–
PP	7 / 20.93 (6 / 16.81)	1 / 16.21 (0 / 12.20)	1 / 19.44 (1 / 15.05)	2 / 23.64 (1 / 17.77)	19 / 50.97 (18 / 49.19)
ERC	2 / 6.48 (2 / 6.59)	1 / 10.78 (1 / 13.19)	0 / 8.59 (0 / 12.88)	0 / 7.42 (0 / 9.40)	–
IU/ICV-EUiA	3 / 9.07 (1 / 5.56)	0 / 5.48 (0 / 3.21)	0 / 3.89 (0 / 2.57)	0 / 5.35 (0 / 3.04)	3 / 8.04 (1 / 4.66)
PxC	0 / 2.03 (- / -)	0 / 0.86 (- / -)	0 / 0.56 (- / -)	0 / 0.89 (- / -)	–
UPyD	0 / 1.27 (0 / 0.19)	0 / 0.59 (0 / 0.11)	0 / 0.56 (0 / 0.09)	0 / 1.06 (0 / 0.13)	4 / 10.30 (1 / 3.74)

Source: [www.elecciones.mir.es](http://www.elecciones.mir.es)

Our individual-level data come from panel surveys that have been conducted in the framework of the project *Making Electoral Democracy Work* (Blais, 2010). These were two-wave (pre-post) panels, conducted online. We rely here only on data from the pre-electoral studies. In Ontario, 1347 respondents participated in the survey. The corresponding figures are 1025 in Catalonia and 1065 in Madrid.<sup>1</sup>

The dependent variable is the *accuracy of voters' electoral expectations*. To that end, we rely on a battery of questions in which respondents were asked to evaluate the electoral chances of all parties in competition. For each party, they were invited to indicate how likely it was that the corresponding party would win the election in their district (in SMD elections), or that it would win at least one seat (in PR elections). Answers were given on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 (no chance at all) to 10 (certain to win). On this basis, we create a measure of accuracy, following a two-step procedure. First, voters' perceptions of parties' chances were recoded into 3 categories. Values from 0 to 4 mean that the party will not win seats; values from 6 to 10 mean that the party will win at least one seat, and the value 5 or the *Don't know* option mean that voters don't have a clear expectation. Second, if the expectation coincide with the results of the upcoming election, the value of the dependent variable is 1, *correct expectation*; if the expectation does not coincide with the results of the upcoming election, the value is 0, *wrong expectation*; finally, when voters don't have clear expectations, they are excluded from the analysis.

The key contextual variables are based on official electoral results. *Competitiveness* is defined separately for each party and district. For a party that won one or more seats in a given district, the measure of competitiveness is derived from the percentage of votes in the district that the party would have to lose in order not to win any seat. For parties that did not succeed in winning any seat, competitiveness is based on the additional percentage of votes in the district that these parties would need to win one seat. In both cases, a larger percentage indicates that the party is further away from

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<sup>1</sup> These surveys were conducted by Harris International, relying on their panel of respondents. The sampling was based on a stratified, quota-based approach. Quotas were set by controlling for age, gender, education status, and region. In Ontario, the pre-election survey was conducted between September 25 and October 5, 2011. In Spain, the interviews were realized between November 10 and 19, 2011.

winning at least one seat, or of not winning any seat. For the analyses presented below, we take the log of this percentage, and we multiply it by -1. A higher value of this variable thus indicates a more competitive race for the corresponding party, that is, one in which it should be more difficult for voters to form accurate expectations. *Previous Viability* is a dummy variable that equals 1 if the party got at least one seat in the previous election, 0 otherwise. The variable is a constant for some parties (the CiU, the PSOE, and the PxC in Spain, and the Green Party in Ontario). We do not have clear predictions about that variable. Previous research suggests that voters ascertain parties' viability on the basis of whether the party had won at least one seat in the previous election. We simply test whether voters are able to form more accurate expectations about parties which have succeeded in obtaining at least one seat in the past.

In addition to these key contextual variables, we include some important voters' characteristics. *Political information* is a dummy variable that equals 1 in Spain for those individuals who know that a party needs at least 3 per cent of the list votes to be represented in the regional Parliament, 0 otherwise. In Ontario the variable equals 1 for those individuals who know that in order to be elected a candidate in the provincial election does not need to win a majority of the votes cast in the district, 0 otherwise. *Political interest* is measured on a scale running from 0 (no interest at all) to 10 (a great deal of interest). *Party identification* is a dummy variable that equals 1 for those individuals who are close to the corresponding party, 0 otherwise. *Education*, finally, indicates, on a scale from 1 to 6 in Spain and from 1 to 12 in Ontario, the level of educational attainment with 1 corresponding to the lowest level of educational attainment and 6 in Spain and 12 in Ontario to the highest level.

### **3. Results**

We start our discussion of the empirical results by looking at the distribution of our dependent variable. The accuracy of electoral expectations for every party in Ontario and Spain is displayed in Tables 3 and 4. In Ontario voters' predictions proved to be right 74% of the time, accuracy reaching its peak with respect to the Greens, which everybody agreed had little chance of winning anywhere, and being lowest for the Conservatives (at 60%). The percentage (79%) of accurate perceptions is a little bit higher in Spain. Predictions are particularly on the mark concerning the PP and least

reliable in the case of the ERC. The overall accuracy of expectations is thus broadly similar in the two systems.

Table 3. Summary statistics for the accuracy of perceptions in Ontario

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Obs</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<i>Liberal expectations</i>	826	0.67	0.47	0	1
<i>Conservative expectations</i>	828	0.61	0.49	0	1
<i>NDP expectations</i>	876	0.76	0.43	0	1
<i>Green expectations</i>	939	0.98	0.15	0	1

Table 4. Summary statistics for the accuracy of perceptions in Spain

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Obs</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<i>CiU expectations</i>	799	0.85	0.36	0	1
<i>ERC expectations</i>	733	0.61	0.49	0	1
<i>PxC expectations</i>	730	0.84	0.37	0	1
<i>PSOE expectations</i>	1683	0.89	0.32	0	1
<i>PP expectations</i>	1736	0.92	0.27	0	1
<i>IU/ICV expectations</i>	1608	0.71	0.45	0	1
<i>UPyD expectations</i>	1533	0.74	0.44	0	1

In order to analyze the role of individual and contextual variables on the capacity to anticipate whether or not a given party will win, we estimate binary logistic regressions. The dependent variable is a dummy for accurate expectations, and the observations are respondent by party combinations. That is, for each respondent in the survey, we have a number of observations corresponding to the number of parties for which electoral chances were evaluated. In both Ontario and Spain, we estimate two models, which differ in the specification of the contextual effects. While the effects of competitiveness and previous viability are expected to be additive in Model 1, the second model also includes an interaction effect. This will allow testing whether the effect of competitiveness differs between incumbent and non-incumbent parties. In all models, the observations are weighted by age, gender, education level, and region. We compute robust standard errors, clustering the observations by party-district.

Table 5 presents the corresponding results in the Ontario election. As expected, those who follow politics more closely, who are better educated and better informed are

able to better predict the party's chances in the district. We also note that those respondents who identify with a party tend to make more mistakes in evaluating the electoral chances of their preferred party. The present model does not allow telling whether party identifiers are systematically overrating or underrating that party's chances. Yet, in line with previous research, we can be quite confident that this reflects partisans' greater vulnerability to wishful thinking, that is, their propensity to overestimate the popularity of their party (Blais and Bodet, 2006).

Table 5. Accuracy of electoral expectations in Ontario

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
Political interest	0.05* (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)
Political information	0.27* (0.11)	0.27* (0.11)
Party identification	-0.53** (0.15)	-0.52** (0.15)
Education	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
Party (ref. Liberals)		
Conservatives	0.30 (0.17)	0.32 (0.17)
NDP	1.02** (0.17)	1.01** (0.17)
Greens	3.39** (0.32)	3.35** (0.32)
(log) Competitiveness	-0.58** (0.10)	-0.64** (0.13)
Previous viability	1.82** (0.19)	2.21** (0.58)
(log) Competitiveness*Viability		0.15 (0.20)
Constant	-2.51** (0.41)	-2.66** (0.48)
N	3610	3610
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.22	0.22
# Clusters	427	427

Logistic regression. Standard errors in parentheses. \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01.

As for contextual effects, expectations tend to be more accurate with low levels of competitiveness, that is, when the winner's lead over the second party is substantial. Predictions are also more reliable with respect to parties that won a seat in the previous elections. Prior research has shown that people use proxies like whether the party won a seat in the previous election to determine whether the party is viable or not (Lago, 2008). Our results indicate that it is easier to predict the success of incumbents than the failure of non-incumbents. Finally, in the case of Ontario, model 2 shows no sign of an interaction effect between competitiveness and past viability. Competitiveness in the



present election matters in the same way for parties that won or did not win seats in the previous election. This can be seen in Figure 1, which presents predicted probabilities for an accurate expectation, computed from Model 2. The accuracy of predictions varies strongly with party competitiveness, and there is a large gap between incumbent and non-incumbent parties.

Figure 1. Predicted probability of having accurate expectations in Ontario, by party competitiveness and incumbency.

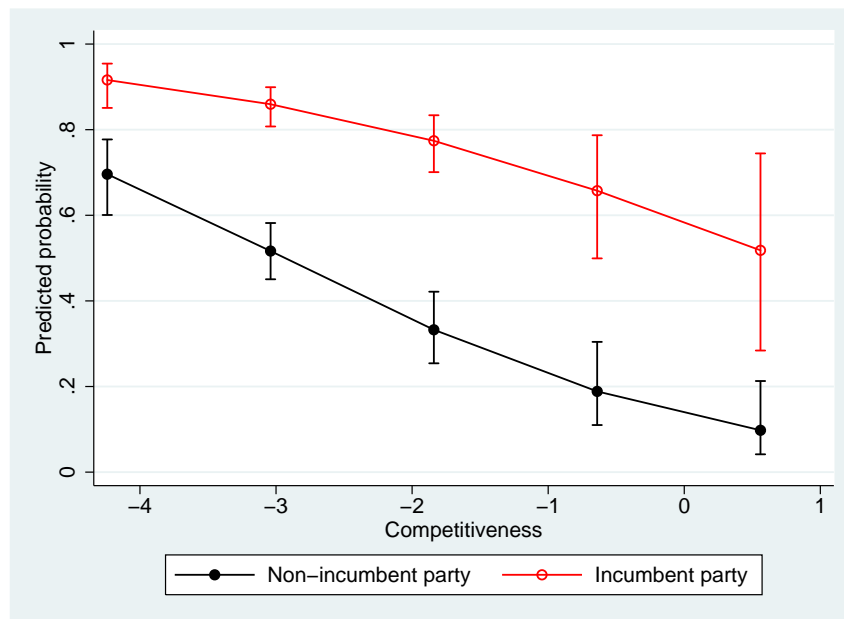


Table 6 presents similar findings for Spain. As was the case in Ontario, the better educated and the better informed tend to have more accurate perceptions. We note, however, that education and information have much stronger effects in Spain than in Ontario. This suggests that the task of determining which parties are and are not viable is more complex in multi-member districts and that, as a consequence, the capacity to predict the outcome of the election is more contingent on cognitive abilities and political sophistication. Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that in Spain partisans are better than non-partisans at forming accurate expectations. As noted above, we find the opposite pattern in Ontario. While it may first appear to be a very surprising finding, it does not mean that the milder climate of Spain prevents from wishful thinking. In the five Spanish electoral districts we investigate, only few parties did not manage to win any seat. And these are small parties with relatively few partisans. For

the vast majority of party identifiers, their traditionally preferred party did succeed in winning one or more seats. As a consequence, the positive effect of party identification on voters' accuracy simply reflects partisans' propensity to be even more confident than non-partisans about their party's chances of success – and they were right to be so!

Table 6. Accuracy of electoral expectations in Spain

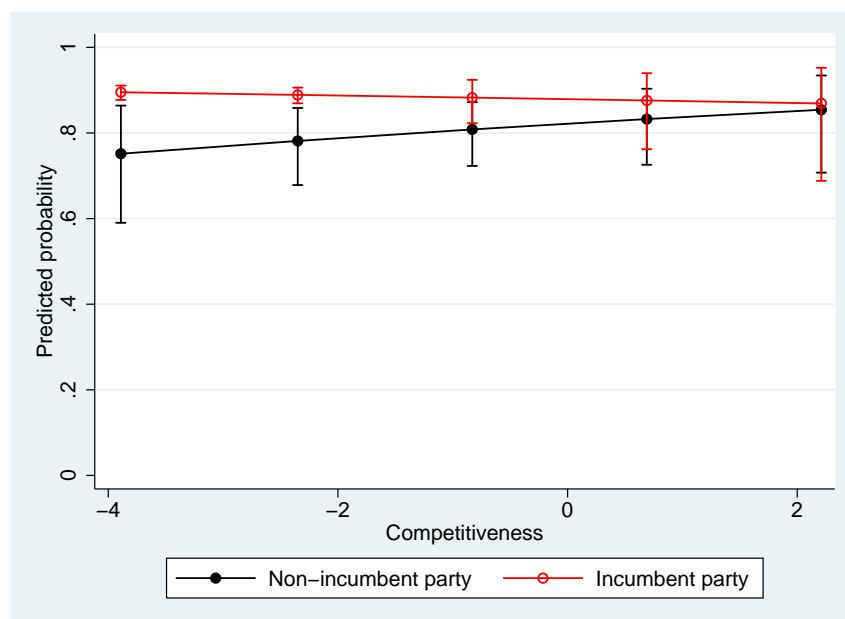
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
Political interest	0.06* (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)
Political information	0.43** (0.10)	0.43** (0.10)
Party identification	1.25** (0.23)	1.25** (0.24)
Education	0.22** (0.03)	0.22** (0.03)
Party (ref. PSOE)		
IU	-1.13** (0.14)	-1.01** (0.17)
PP	0.38 (0.21)	0.37* (0.18)
UPyD	-0.67** (0.26)	-0.59* (0.25)
CiU	-0.38** (0.09)	-0.39** (0.09)
ERC	-1.63** (0.16)	-1.47** (0.22)
PxC	0.27 (0.24)	0.37 (0.24)
(log) Competitiveness	0.04 (0.07)	0.11 (0.11)
Previous viability	0.70** (0.19)	0.45 (0.30)
(log) Competitiveness*Viability		-0.15 (0.16)
Constant	0.19 (0.37)	0.19 (0.34)
N	8787	8787
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.10	0.10
# Clusters	32	32

Logistic regression. Standard errors in parentheses. \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01.

As far as contextual level factors are concerned, the results in Spain differ from those observed in Ontario. In Madrid and Catalonia, competitiveness (or the lack of it) does not matter. This is not surprising. The information that is required to ascertain competitiveness is much simpler to acquire in single-member districts. It suffices to look at the margin that separates the top two contenders. In multi-member districts, in contrast, it is necessary to consider how far each party is from having one more or one less seat. This is in line with the argument that in PR systems with relatively large

districts the only information that voters pay some attention to is whether the party won a seat in the previous election (Lago 2008). This result is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows predicted probabilities computed from Model 2. Voters' expectations tend to be very accurate, and they are virtually unaffected by the degree of electoral competitiveness. The change in predicted accuracy for non-incumbent parties is not statistically significant. In the same vein as in Ontario, expectations about chances of winning at least a seat are more reliable in the case of incumbent parties. When the interaction effect between incumbency and competitiveness is not considered (Model 1), incumbency shows a significant effect on accuracy. Based on the results of the full model, in contrast, this incumbency effect only holds at low and moderate levels of competitiveness.

Figure 2. Predicted probability of having accurate expectations in Spain, by party competitiveness and incumbency.



#### 4. Conclusion

People's capacity to vote strategically depends on their ability to form expectations about the viability of the various parties, and their ability to form *accurate* perceptions. Yet, as far as we can tell, no previous study has examined specifically which factors contribute positively or negatively to voters' capacity to predict election outcomes.

We have distinguished two types of variables: contextual level and individual level. At the individual level, we have looked at the role of political sophistication on the one hand and partisanship on the other. At the contextual level, we have focused on the role of competitiveness on the one hand and the electoral system on the other hand.

We have examined the role of these individual and contextual level variables in two different settings: single-member districts with the plurality rule in the Canadian province of Ontario and multi-member districts with PR in two Spanish regions (Madrid and Catalonia).

Unsurprisingly, we find that the better educated and the better informed are better at predicting the outcome of the election in both systems. But information and education matter more in Spain, presumably because the task of determining whether a party will win a seat or not is more demanding in a PR system and more sophistication is thus required. The opposite pattern emerges with respect to partisanship. Partisans are more likely to be off the mark in the plurality election (Ontario), presumably because supporters of the losing parties overestimate the chances of their party. Partisans are more accurate in the PR system, not because they are immune to wishful thinking but simply because in a PR system there are more winners than losers, that is, most of the main parties manage to win at least one seat in most districts.

Finally, as anticipated, voters in the plurality election are able to better predict which party will win in the district when the election is not competitive, that is, there is large gap between the winner and the second candidate. Expectations become less accurate as the race gets closer. Interestingly, lack of competitiveness has no effect in PR elections, possibly because the information is not as easily available. In such contexts, it would seem that voters just rely on whether the party won a seat or not in the previous election.

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## Appendix

Table A1. Summary statistics, Ontario

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Obs</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
Competitiveness (log)					
<i>Liberal</i>	826	-2.54	0.85	-4.00	0.56
<i>Conservative</i>	829	-2.73	0.84	-4.00	0.56
<i>NDP</i>	876	-3.12	0.67	-4.09	-0.49
<i>Green</i>	939	-3.78	0.13	-4.24	-3.48
Incumbency					
<i>Liberal</i>	826	0.65	0.48	0	1
<i>Conservative</i>	829	0.27	0.45	0	1
<i>NDP</i>	876	0.11	0.31	0	1
<i>Green</i>	939	0.00	0.00	0	0
Political interest	3470	6.75	2.67	0	10
Political knowledge	3470	0.30	0.46	0	1
Education	3470	6.68	1.99	2	11
Party identification	3470	0.10	0.30	0	1

Table A2. Summary statistics, Spain

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Obs</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
Competitiveness					
<i>CiU</i>	799	-3.23	0.10	-3.54	-3.16
<i>ERC</i>	733	-1.14	0.87	-2.45	2.21
<i>PxC</i>	730	-1.17	0.85	-2.45	2.21
<i>PSOE</i>	1683	-3.15	0.13	-3.23	-2.20
<i>PP</i>	1736	-3.39	0.52	-3.88	-2.39
<i>IU/ICV</i>	1608	-1.74	0.18	-2.77	-1.73
<i>UPyD</i>	1533	-1.49	0.76	-2.99	-0.54
Incumbency					
<i>CiU</i>	799	1	0	1	1
<i>ERC</i>	733	0.88	0.32	0	1
<i>PxC</i>	730	0	0	0	0
<i>PSOE</i>	1683	1	0	1	1
<i>PP</i>	1736	0.98	0.15	0	1
<i>IU/ICV</i>	1608	0.92	0.28	0	1
<i>UPyD</i>	1533	0.54	0.50	0	1
Political interest	8822	6.35	2.85	0	10
Political knowledge	8822	0.31	0.46	0	1
Education	8822	3.51	1.07	1	6
Party identification	8822	0.08	0.27	0	1