Not All Political Dynasties Are Equal:

Organizational Configurations and Electoral Entrenchment

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Abstract

Political dynasties can shape economic institutions, public policy, and the distribution of resources in ways that reinforce their political dominance. Yet although dynasties are, by definition, organizations spanning multiple elected offices, existing research has largely treated them as organizationally homogeneous. Using the universe of Philippine local elections from 1992–2025, I exploit close elections in regression discontinuity designs to estimate the causal electoral advantage of alternative dynastic configurations. Most configurations confer little or no electoral advantage. One transforms incumbency: families spanning both the mayoralty and the district's House seat retain power substantially more often and win subsequent elections by much larger margins. Dynastic entrenchment depends less on family lineage than on the organizational configurations through which political families span different levels of government.

Keywords: political dynasties; political entrenchment; electoral competition; organizational configurations; regression discontinuity; Philippines

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1 Introduction

Entrenched political families can shape economic institutions, public policy, and the distribution of resources in ways that reinforce their political dominance (Acemoglu et al., 2008; Smith, 2018). For this reason, political dynasties have long attracted scholarly attention, nowhere more than in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, where family rule has been linked to weak accountability, persistent poverty, and the gradual erosion of electoral competition (McCoy, 1993; Coronel et al., 2004; Mendoza et al., 2016; Purdey, 2016). Yet the literature has largely treated dynasties as organizationally homogeneous. Existing research explains dynastic persistence through inheritance: candidates benefit from family names, political networks, and political capital accumulated across generations (Dal Bó et al., 2009; Feinstein, 2010; Asako et al., 2015; Chandra, 2016; Querubin, 2016; Cruz et al., 2017; Van Coppenolle, 2017; Fiva and Smith, 2018; Smith, 2018).[1] In practice, however, political families simultaneously occupy different combinations of elected offices. Some control only a municipal council seat; others span the mayoralty, governorship, or congressional representation. These organizational configurations need not confer the same capacity for political entrenchment. Although recent work has begun to distinguish between different forms of dynastic organization (Mendoza et al., 2019; Dulay and Go, 2022; Labonne et al., 2021), which configurations causally produce durable political entrenchment remains unknown.

This paper answers that question using the universe of Philippine local elections from 1992 to 2025, comprising roughly 628,000 candidacies across twelve synchronized election cycles. I focus on mayoral elections because the mayoralty is the central executive office of Philippine local government and the office around which dynastic organizations are most visibly assembled. Throughout, the mayoralty serves as the analytical vantage point: outcomes track a family's hold on the mayoralty, and other offices enter the analysis as configurations that may—or may not—reinforce it. The Philippines provides an unusually revealing set-

[1] See Geys and Smith (2017) for a survey of this literature, and the accompanying symposium (Rossi, 2017; Folke et al., 2017) on the mechanisms of dynastic persistence.

ting because constitutional term limits repeatedly force political families to reorganize across offices while elections continue to be held on schedule, making these reorganizations observable election after election. I first document a long-run decline in electoral competition: uncontested mayoralties increase from 1 to 18 percent, victory margins nearly double, and in nearly half of all municipalities the mayor now runs unopposed or wins in a landslide. I then exploit close elections in regression discontinuity designs to estimate the causal electoral advantage associated with alternative family configurations.

The results reveal a striking discontinuity. Family ties to municipal councils, provincial boards, vice-mayors, vice-governors, and even governors generate little or no electoral advantage once overlapping configurations are accounted for. One organizational configuration transforms incumbency: families simultaneously holding the mayoralty and the district's House seat retain power substantially more often and win subsequent elections by much larger margins. The finding is symmetric. Regression discontinuity designs exploiting close congressional elections show that randomly acquiring the House seat produces the same increase in local electoral dominance. Political entrenchment therefore depends less on family lineage than on the organizational configuration through which political families span different levels of government.

These findings make three contributions. First, they shift the study of political dynasties from inheritance to organizational configuration. The political advantage of a dynasty depends less on its name or history than on the combination of offices it simultaneously controls. Second, they help explain why incumbency advantages often appear weak at the level of individual politicians yet substantial at the level of political organizations. Electoral advantage emerges not from officeholding alone but from a specific vertical configuration linking local and national office. Finally, they speak more broadly to theories of political persistence and institutional design. Constitutional term limits successfully remove individuals from office, yet organizations can retain power by reallocating offices among relatives. Institutions that govern individuals therefore need not produce organizational turnover.

The implications extend beyond political dynasties or the Philippines. Parties, political machines, and other political organizations frequently adapt to institutional reforms by redistributing authority internally while preserving collective control over political resources. Families make this adaptation especially visible because kinship identifies organizational membership and term limits repeatedly force organizational restructuring into the open. More generally, the paper suggests that understanding political persistence requires studying how organizations—not simply individual politicians—assemble complementary positions across institutions.

The next section describes the data and documents the long-run decline in electoral competition. I then present the regression discontinuity designs identifying the causal effects of alternative family configurations on subsequent electoral performance. The final section discusses the implications for the comparative study of political dynasties and political persistence.

2 Data

The analysis uses the universe of Philippine local election results from 1992 to 2025, covering every candidate for representative, governor, vice-governor, provincial board member, mayor, vice-mayor, and municipal councilor across twelve synchronized elections since democratization. The dataset contains 627,960 candidacies spanning roughly 1,650 municipalities and cities. Each record includes candidate name, office, party affiliation, and vote totals. Municipalities are matched to congressional districts using a precinct-based crosswalk that accounts for redistricting.[2]

Political families are identified using paternal surnames, the standard approach in studies of Philippine political dynasties (Querubin, 2016; Cruz et al., 2017). Two officeholders are classified as belonging to the same family if they share a paternal surname within a province. This measure misses maternal and marital ties while occasionally linking unrelated

[2]Appendix A describes the data construction.

namesakes, both of which attenuate estimated differences across family configurations.

For each mayoral election, I identify whether the incumbent family simultaneously holds other elected offices, including municipal council, provincial board, vice-mayor, vice-governor, governor, and the district's House seat. These family configurations constitute the treatment of interest. Section 5 compares otherwise similar families that narrowly win or lose mayoral or congressional elections to estimate the causal electoral advantage associated with each configuration.

Descriptive analyses use the full panel of elections. The regression discontinuity analyses use the subset of close elections described in Section 5. Replication data and code accompany the article.

3 The Costs and Benefits of Family Configurations

Viewed as an organization, a political family faces an allocation problem: it has a limited supply of viable candidates and must decide which offices to contest. Each office contributes something different to the family's hold on the mayoralty, and each carries costs—a relative who runs for one office cannot hold another, every additional candidacy consumes campaign resources, and every additional officeholder is a potential rival within the family.

The offices differ sharply in what they control, and the differences are institutional rather than incidental. Under the 1991 Local Government Code, the mayor is the municipality's chief executive: the office controls local revenue collection, business permits, personnel, and the execution of every locally funded project.[3] Municipal councilors and provincial board members legislate and appropriate but execute nothing; the vice-mayor and vice-governor preside over those councils and stand first in the line of succession, which makes them the natural parking places for benchwarmers when term limits bind, but they command no administrative apparatus of their own. The governor administers devolved provincial

[3] Republic Act No. 7160 (1991). The Code also fixes each tier's share of the internal revenue allotment by formula—23 percent to provinces, 23 percent to cities, 34 percent to municipalities—so intergovernmental transfers are largely outside any single politician's discretion.

functions—hospitals, provincial roads—yet does so from formula-driven transfers spread across every municipality in the province, diluting what the office can deliver to any one of them (Hutchcroft and Rocamora, 2003). The House member is different in kind. The office holds no formal executive power, but it sits astride the flow of discretionary national money into the district: through the congressional allocations institutionalized as the Countrywide Development Fund and later the Priority Development Assistance Fund, and, since the Supreme Court voided the PDAF in 2013, through line-item insertions in the national budget and the programming of district public works (Coronel, 1998; Kawanaka, 2007).[4] These are precisely the resources a mayor cannot raise locally, and their allocation across the district's municipalities is the congressman's to shape. The mayor controls delivery and credit-claiming on the ground; the congressman controls what there is to deliver (Sidel, 1999).

Three further asymmetries explain why the vertical pairing dominates the seemingly grander combination of mayoralty and governorship. First, the tiers draw on different pots. Provinces and municipalities both live off the same formula-driven national allotment, and their devolved mandates overlap; a governor–mayor family divides one revenue stream and duplicates one portfolio, while a congressman taps channels the local tiers cannot reach at all. Second, the Code grants the governor only *general supervision* over component municipalities—not control—and municipal allotments flow directly from the national treasury rather than through the provincial capitol, so the governorship carries little leverage over any mayor; the congressman, by contrast, holds resources every mayor in the district wants. Third, rotation under term limits requires nested electorates: a mayor and the representative of the district containing that municipality face largely the same voters, so family members can swap between the two offices without surrendering the machine, whereas the provincial electorate dwarfs any single municipality and makes a governor–mayor swap a mismatch of scale. The pairing is also cheap to defend: its returns arrive partly as deter-

[4] *Belgica v. Ochoa*, G.R. No. 208566 (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 19 November 2013).

rence, discouraging credible challengers from filing at all—a mechanism consistent with the rising share of uncontested races documented below.

The currency of the pairing, moreover, largely bypasses the municipal books. Field research on Philippine machines documents that the exchange runs through continuous, personalized assistance—medical and burial aid, scholarship slots, relief goods—delivered between campaigns as much as during them, and through the village-level brokers who mediate between families and voters (Aspinall et al., 2022; Ravanilla et al., 2022,?). A family that has held the mayoralty for successive terms has, in effect, retained the entire intermediary class of its municipality; the congressman's discretionary funds keep that apparatus supplied. Little of this appears as local revenue or expenditure, which is why the configuration's advantage should be expected to surface in electoral outcomes rather than in administrative accounts.

This logic yields a simple prediction. Configurations that duplicate the mayor's existing capacities—horizontal ties within the municipality, or provincial offices without discretionary funds—should add little to the family's electoral position, whatever their defensive or succession value. The configuration that complements the mayoralty with resources it cannot otherwise obtain—the vertical pairing with the district's House seat—should be the one that entrenches. Because families choose their configurations, and choose them where they are already strong, observed correlations between configurations and electoral success cannot test this prediction; the close-election designs of Section 5 can.

4 The Hollowing of Local Electoral Competition

Figure 1 documents a sustained decline in municipal electoral competition across the twelve post-democratization election cycles. Every indicator moves in the same direction. The effective number of mayoral candidates falls from 2.74 in 1992 to 1.74 in 2025 (panel A), uncontested mayoralties increase from 1 to 18 percent (panel B), and the median victory margin in contested races nearly doubles from 12 to 22 percentage points (panel C). By 2025, nearly half of all municipalities either had no meaningful mayoral contest or one decided by a landslide before election day (Figure 2). Electoral competition has become progressively hollowed out.

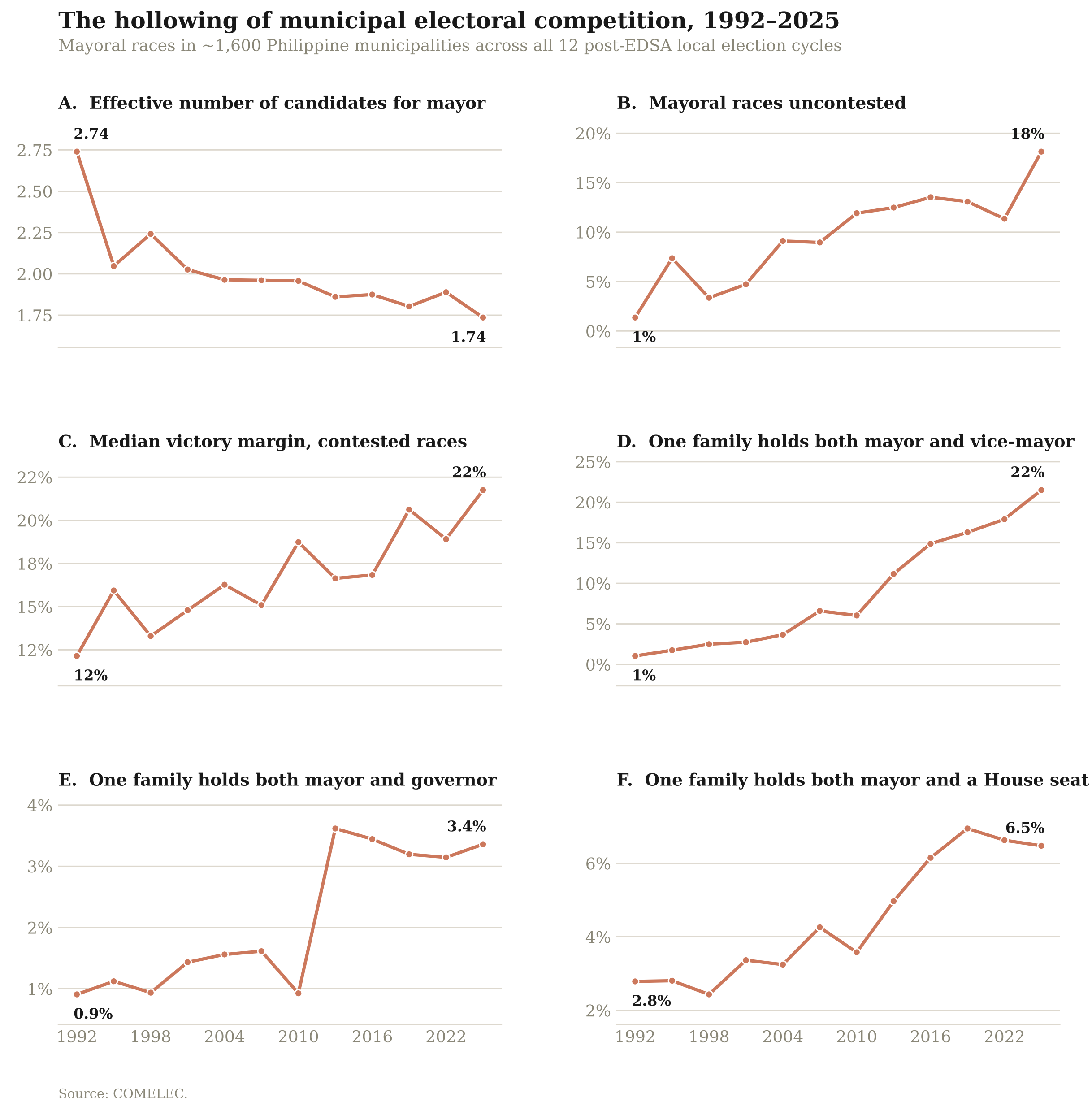

Figure 1: The hollowing of municipal electoral competition, 1992–2025.

At the same time, political families increasingly expanded their organizational reach. The share of municipalities in which a single family simultaneously held both the mayoralty and

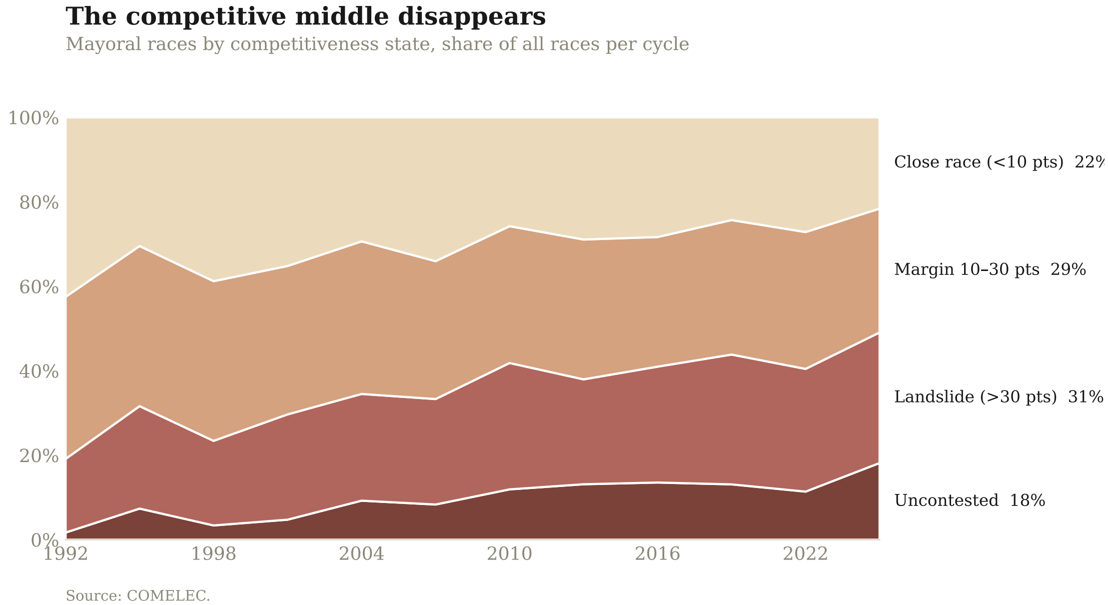

Figure 2: Mayoral races by competitiveness state, 1992–2025. Shares of all races per cycle that were uncontested, won by a landslide (margin above 30 points), won by a margin of 10–30 points, or closely fought (margin under 10 points). By 2025, the uncontested and landslide categories together account for 49 percent of all races.

vice-mayoralty rose from 1 to 22 percent (panel D). Vertical integration also became more common: the share of mayoral families simultaneously holding the provincial governorship roughly tripled, while the share also holding the district's House seat more than doubled (panels E and F). These descriptive patterns establish that increasingly complex family organizations emerged alongside declining electoral competition, but they cannot identify which organizational configurations actually generated durable electoral advantage.

Figure 3 illustrates how these organizational adaptations increasingly circumvented the constitutional three-term limit. Among municipalities where an incumbent mayor reached the legal limit, the share of seats passing to another family member increased from 31 percent in 2001 to 47 percent in 2025. At the same time, termed-out mayors became substantially less likely to return after one term out of office, suggesting that families increasingly retained control through permanent intra-family succession rather than temporary placeholders. Term limits continued to remove individuals from office, but they became progressively less effective at producing organizational turnover.

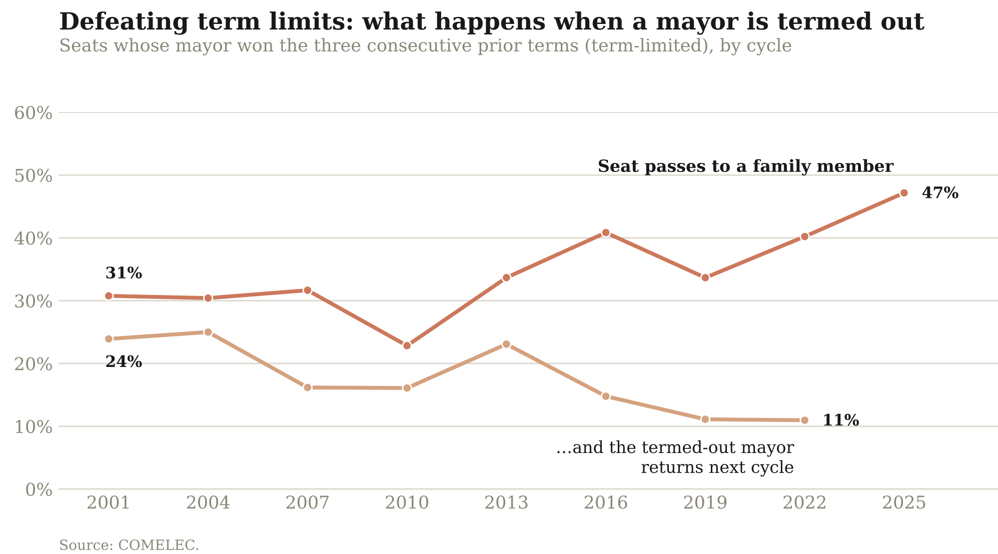

Figure 3: Seats of term-limited mayors passing to family members, 2001–2025.

These descriptive trends motivate the causal analysis but cannot resolve it. Families may accumulate offices because they are already electorally dominant, or organizational expansion may itself generate electoral dominance. The next section exploits elections decided by narrow margins to identify which family configurations, if any, causally produce political entrenchment.

5 Which Family Configurations Entrench?

The empirical strategy compares political families that narrowly won and narrowly lost the mayoralty. For each family configuration, I retain races in which exactly one of the top two candidates belongs to a family holding the configuration of interest and the other does not. The running variable is the tied candidate's vote margin. Within a narrow window around zero, whether the tied or untied family captures the mayoralty is as good as random. Outcomes are measured at the following election and track the incumbent family rather than individual politicians, so that term-limit successions within the family are correctly treated as continued incumbency rather than exit. Estimation uses local linear regression with MSE-optimal bandwidths and robust bias-corrected inference (Calonico et al., 2014). Appendix B reports balance tests and density diagnostics.

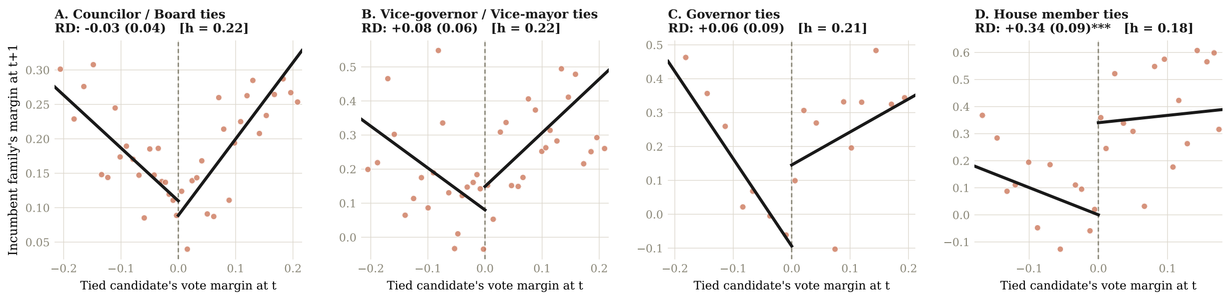

Figure 4: Family configurations and the incumbency premium. Each panel plots binned means of the incumbent family's victory margin at $t+1$ against the tied candidate's vote margin at t. Only the House-member configuration produces a discontinuity.

Table 1: Incumbent-family premium by type of family tie (close mayoral races)

Outcome at $t+1$	Councilor/ Board	Vice-gov./ Vice-mayor	Governor only	House member
Family retains mayoralty	-0.08	$+0.07$	$+0.18$	$+0.36^{***}$
	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.18)	(0.11)
Family's victory margin	-0.03	$+0.08$	$+0.06$	$+0.34^{***}$
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Races	4,003	1,740	415	782

Robust bias-corrected RD estimates (MSE-optimal bandwidths); pooled specification with hierarchy-pure arms at common bandwidth for the governor/legislator columns. Legislator premium differs from every other column (pairwise Wald $p = .005$–$.03$ on margin). $^{***}p < .01$.

The results reveal a striking step function (Table 1; Figure 4). Family ties to municipal councils, provincial boards, vice-mayors, vice-governors, and even governors produce little or no electoral advantage. These estimates are precisely estimated and statistically indistinguishable from zero. One organizational configuration changes the picture entirely. Families simultaneously holding the mayoralty and the district's House seat retain the mayoralty 36 percentage points more often and win subsequent elections by margins 31 percentage points larger than otherwise comparable families. The House premium is significantly larger than every other configuration. Political entrenchment therefore does not increase smoothly with the number or seniority of offices a family controls. Instead, it exhibits a sharp threshold at the office linking local politics to national resources.

Table 2: Symmetric identification: close races for the allied office

Outcome at $t + 1$ (mayor's family)	Councilor/ Board	VG/VM	Governor	House member
Family retains mayoralty	+0.03	+0.05	+0.01	$+0.23^{**}$
	(0.04)	(0.10)	(0.14)	(0.12)
Family's victory margin	−0.02	−0.00	+0.04	$+0.22^{**}$
	(0.03)	(0.07)	(0.13)	(0.10)
Observations (races)	7,608	1,811	564	965

Mayor's family taken as given; running variable is the kin candidate's margin in the allied office's race (multi-seat offices: margin around the last seat). SEs clustered by allied-office race. $^{**}p < .05$.

Table 2 provides a complementary test by randomizing the other half of each organizational configuration. Rather than exploiting close mayoral races, the design conditions on an incumbent mayor and uses close elections for the allied office to determine whether the mayor's family narrowly acquires an additional position. The pattern is identical. Narrowly gaining a council seat, provincial board seat, vice-mayoralty, vice-governorship, or governorship produces no detectable electoral advantage. Narrowly gaining the district's House seat increases subsequent mayoral retention by 23 percentage points and victory margins by 22 percentage points. The two designs rely on different close elections, different running variables, and different complier populations, yet both identify the same discontinuity. The organizational advantage appears only when families span the mayoralty and the congressional seat.

6 Conclusion

Forty years of Philippine local elections reveal two parallel developments. Electoral competition has steadily weakened: fewer candidates contest office, victory margins have widened, uncontested races have become increasingly common, and constitutional term limits increasingly produce intra-family succession rather than political turnover. At the same time, political families have assembled increasingly complex organizational configurations across elected offices. Exploiting close elections shows that these developments are connected, but only through one configuration. Families spanning both the mayoralty and the district's House seat acquire a durable electoral advantage; every other configuration produces little or no measurable effect.

These findings shift the study of political dynasties from inheritance to organizational configuration. The political advantage of a dynasty depends less on its name or history than on the combination of offices it simultaneously controls. More broadly, the findings help explain how democratic competition can erode even when formal institutions continue to operate as intended. Philippine term limits successfully remove individual politicians from office, yet they do not prevent political organizations from retaining power by reallocating offices among relatives. Institutions that govern individuals therefore need not produce organizational turnover.

The implications extend beyond political families or the Philippines. Parties, political machines, and other political organizations frequently adapt to institutional reforms by redistributing authority internally while preserving collective control over political resources. Families make this adaptation especially visible because kinship identifies organizational membership and term limits repeatedly force organizational restructuring into the open. More generally, the findings suggest that understanding democratic persistence requires studying not only who holds office, but also how political organizations assemble complementary positions across institutions. Institutional reforms aimed at promoting electoral competition should therefore be evaluated not only by whether they replace individual officeholders, but also by whether they disrupt the organizational configurations that sustain political power across elections.

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A Data Construction

Sources. The dataset combines official Commission on Elections candidate-level returns for every local election from 1992 to 2025, covering representatives, governors, vice-governors, provincial board members, mayors, vice-mayors, and municipal councilors across the twelve synchronized post-democratization election cycles. Each record includes candidate name, office, party affiliation, vote totals, and contest identifiers. Winners follow official proclamations for single-member offices and the top S vote-getters for multi-member bodies.

Family coding. Political families are identified by paternal surname, normalized for spelling variants and suffixes. A candidate is classified as holding a given family configuration if another office won on the same election day is held by an individual sharing the same surname within the relevant geographic jurisdiction. Municipalities are assigned to congressional districts using a precinct-level crosswalk that follows contemporaneous district boundaries.

Estimation samples. For each family configuration, the regression discontinuity design retains mayoral elections in which exactly one of the top two candidates belongs to a family holding that configuration. The running variable is the tied candidate's vote-share margin over the rival. The complementary designs instead exploit close elections for the allied office while conditioning on an incumbent mayor. Family outcomes at the subsequent election are measured using the same surname linkage, so intra-family successions are treated as continued incumbency. Replication code reproducing all figures and tables accompanies the article.

B Empirical Specification and Validity

Regression discontinuity design. For each family configuration, the treatment group consists of mayoral races in which exactly one of the top two candidates belongs to a family holding that configuration. Let x_{mt} denote the tied candidate's vote-share margin over the untied rival, and define treatment as

$$D_{mt} = \mathbf{1}\{x_{mt} > 0\},$$

so that treatment occurs when the tied family narrowly captures the mayoralty. The estimand is the discontinuity in the incumbent family's subsequent electoral outcomes at the zero threshold.

Estimation follows the local linear regression framework of Calonico et al. (2014):

$$Y_{m,t+1} = \alpha + \tau D_{mt} + \beta_1 x_{mt} + \beta_2 D_{mt} x_{mt} + u_{mt}, \qquad |x_{mt}| \leq h, \tag{1}$$

using a triangular kernel, MSE-optimal bandwidths, and robust bias-corrected confidence intervals throughout. The complementary specifications replace the mayoral running variable with the kin candidate's vote margin in the allied office while conditioning on an incumbent mayor. Standard errors are clustered by the allied-office race because one contest determines the treatment status of multiple municipalities. The pooled specification estimates all configurations simultaneously to separate overlapping family ties.

Identification. Identification requires continuity of potential outcomes at the cutoff. Figure 5 reports McCrary density tests, which show no evidence of manipulation around the threshold. Table 3 reports covariate balance tests for electorate size, number of candidates, and prior family incumbency; all predetermined characteristics are balanced across the cutoff, with no systematic discontinuities. Together these diagnostics support the identifying assumption that families narrowly winning and narrowly losing are comparable except for treatment assignment.

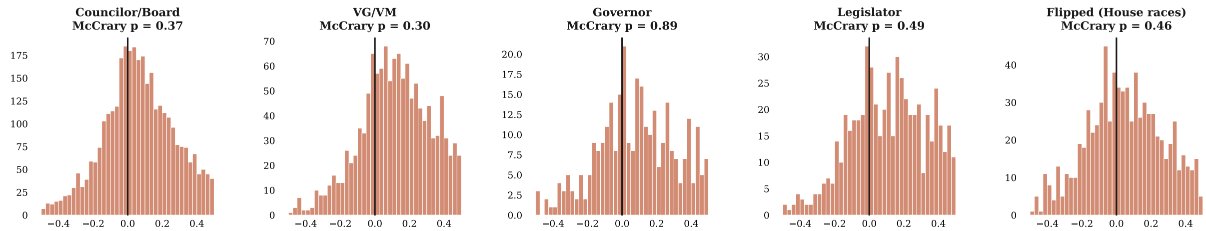

Figure 5: Density of the running variable at the cutoff, by design.

Table 3: Validity tests: density and covariate balance at the cutoff

	Councilor/ Board	VG/VM	Governor	House member	Symmetric (House races)
Density of the running variable					
McCrary test (p)	.37	.30	.89	.49	.46
Binomial test, $\lvert x \rvert < .02$ (p)	.55	.55	.49	.49	.69
RD estimates on predetermined covariates (p-values)					
Log votes cast at t	.14	.49	.70	.12	.55
Number of candidates at t	.19	.53	.997	.43	.038
Family held mayoralty at $t-1$	—	—	.72	.28	—
Races	4,003	1,740	415	782	965

Each cell reports the p-value from the indicated test. Covariate rows are robust bias-corrected RD estimates of the discontinuity in the covariate, estimated exactly as the outcome equations. One of eleven covariate tests is significant at the five percent level (candidate counts in the symmetric design), consistent with chance; results are unchanged when this covariate is included in estimation.