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# Behind the Defeat of Local Incumbents: A Systematic Review of Economic Voting, Patronage, Party Conflict, and Electoral Accountability in Democratic Elections

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**Abstract:** Local elections constitute a crucial arena for democratic accountability because local governments control public services, welfare distribution, public expenditure, bureaucratic appointments, and access to state resources. Yet local incumbents sometimes lose despite possessing the structural advantages of office. This systematic review synthesizes 48 studies identified through Scopus and related bibliographic checking to explain why such defeats occur. Using a mechanism-based qualitative synthesis, the review integrates evidence from studies on economic voting, patronage and clientelism, party organization, candidate selection, opposition coordination, electoral integrity, institutional trust, and democratic alternation. The synthesis shows that local incumbent defeat is rarely caused by a single factor. Economic voting matters when citizens can attribute unemployment, welfare retrenchment, fiscal choices, crisis response, or service delivery to incumbents. Patronage may protect incumbents when networks remain credible and morally legitimate, but it may also generate backlash when voters associate distributive politics with corruption, arrogance, exclusion, or manipulation. Party conflict and candidate selection may weaken incumbents before the general election, especially when nomination rules, factional competition, elite bargaining, or opposition coordination reduce campaign capacity. Ultimately, incumbent defeat becomes democratically meaningful only when electoral institutions are credible, losing actors concede defeat, and transitions preserve governmental continuity. This review provides an integrated framework that treats local incumbent defeat as both an electoral outcome and a governance process.

**Keyword:** Local Incumbent Defeat, Economic Voting, Patronage Politics, Party Conflict, Electoral Accountability

## INTRODUCTION

Subnational elections are a direct test of democratic accountability. Citizens evaluate governors, regents, and mayors based on their proximity to public services, welfare programs, infrastructure, crisis response, bureaucratic access, and fiscal choices. These officials usually benefit from official visibility, budget authority, party networks, intermediary organizations,

and the chance to claim credit for developmental policies. The puzzle motivating this review is clear: why do local incumbents lose elections despite these structural advantages?

The literature offers several partial answers, yet these explanations are often dispersed across different bodies of research studies. Studies of economic voting emphasize performance-based sanctioning, particularly when voters can attribute unemployment, welfare retrenchment, taxation, public spending, inflation, public goods provision, or crisis response to incumbent officials. Research on incumbency advantage shows that officeholding can provide resources but can also become a liability under conditions of weak party organization, term limits, poor performance, or corruption. Studies of patronage and clientelism demonstrate that distributive networks may protect incumbents, distort accountability, or generate voter backlash, depending on their credibility and local moral expectations. Research on party organization shifts analytical attention from voters to internal nomination rules, party primaries, elite bargaining, factionalism, and opposition coordination. Finally, scholarship on electoral accountability and democratic alternation asks whether incumbent defeat strengthens trust, produces peaceful transfers of power, or generates institutional tension.

This review develops a mechanism-based synthesis rather than a single-factor explanation. It treats incumbent defeat as the outcome of interactions among economic, clientelistic, organizational, and institutional mechanisms. Economic voting, when voters reward or punish incumbents based on perceived economic performance, explains when voters punish performance. Patronage politics the distribution of state resources in exchange for political loyalty explains how resources, intermediaries, and vote buying may stabilize support or trigger rejection. Party conflict, internal disagreements, and leadership struggles within incumbent parties explain how incumbents may become vulnerable even before the general election. Electoral accountability mechanisms by which voters hold leaders responsible explain why defeat matters for democratic legitimacy, trust, concession, and governmental continuity. Incumbents are most likely to lose when several mechanisms converge, such as visible performance failure, declining legitimacy of patronage, organizational fragmentation, credible challengers, and institutions capable of translating dissatisfaction into alternation.

This framework draws on the theory of retrospective voting, which assumes that voters evaluate incumbents on the basis of past performance even when policy information is incomplete. Healy and Malhotra (2010), Roberts (2008), Hernández and Kriesi (2016), and Bennett and Long (2019) show that voters may punish incumbents for economic losses, unemployment, recession, or policy failure when responsibility is visible. The framework also draws on theories of incumbency advantage and the incumbency curse. Klačnja and Titunik (2017) demonstrate that local officeholding may generate subsequent partisan disadvantages under conditions of weak parties and term limits, while Schraufnagel (2020) shows that Indonesian local incumbents retain advantages but remain vulnerable to locally visible spending and accountability dynamics. Clientelism theory further complicates the picture because material exchange is not merely instrumental, but also moral and relational. Lockwood (2019), Poteete (2019), Komarudin et al. (2025), and Martin et al. (2024) show that patronage functions electorally only when it is perceived as credible, legitimate, and reciprocally meaningful.

This review advances a central argument: local incumbent defeat results from the interplay of voter evaluation, distributive politics, party dynamics, challenger coordination, and electoral accountability, rather than any single factor. Defeat is conceptualized as a multi-stage process that extends beyond the electoral outcome to encompass post-election governance and loser behavior. The analysis is driven by one main question: why do local incumbents lose despite their office advantages? and structured by four supporting questions: the impact of economic voting; the role of patronage, vote buying, and clientelistic networks; the influence of party conflict and candidate selection; and the functioning of electoral accountability through institutional trust and peaceful alternation of power.

## **METHOD**

### **Search Strategy and Eligibility Criteria**

This study employs a systematic literature review design to synthesize empirical and theoretical evidence on local incumbent defeat, electoral turnover, and democratic accountability. A systematic review procedure was selected because this topic is conceptually dispersed across multiple fields, including electoral studies, comparative politics, local governance, public administration, democratization, and political economy. This review follows a transparent logic of searching, screening, eligibility assessment, data extraction, and qualitative synthesis, consistent with methodological guidance on review typologies and transparent reporting (Chandler et al., 2019; Grant & Booth, 2009; Page et al., 2021).

Scopus was used as the primary database due to its broad coverage across political science, public administration, comparative governance, local politics, and electoral studies. Bibliographic checking was used to clarify metadata and methodological sources. The main Boolean string was: (“regional head” OR governor OR mayor OR “local executive” OR “subnational leader” OR incumbent) AND (defeat OR loss OR “electoral defeat” OR “failed re-election” OR turnover OR alternation) AND (“general election” OR election OR “local election” OR “subnational election” OR “regional election”) AND (democracy OR democratic OR “democratic countries”). Additional terms, including economic voting, retrospective voting, patronage, clientelism, vote buying, money politics, party conflict, candidate selection, electoral integrity, institutional trust, and accountability, were incorporated during screening and thematic classification.

Studies were included if they examined incumbent defeat, re-election loss, electoral vulnerability, leadership turnover, or electoral alternation in democracies or contexts of electoral competition. Priority was given to subnational elections involving governors, mayors, regents, state-level offices, and local party competition. National-level studies were kept only if they provided mechanisms directly applicable to local incumbent defeat. These mechanisms included economic voting, welfare retrenchment, peaceful alternation, institutional trust, electoral integrity, opposition coordination, or loser compliance. Studies were excluded if they did not address elections or the replacement of incumbents. They were also excluded if they focused solely on authoritarian overthrow, lacked relevance to democratic accountability or party competition, or failed to provide adequate bibliographic or methodological information.

### **Screening, Extraction, and Synthesis**

The initial search in Scopus identified 158 documents. All documents were screened based on title, abstract, language, source type, and substantive relevance. Database refinement retained records in the social sciences, journal articles, and English-language publications. Following eligibility assessment, 48 studies were included in the final synthesis. The selection process is summarized in Figure 1. The resulting evidence base is methodologically diverse, including regression discontinuity designs, cross-national datasets, panel survey analyses, historical-institutional accounts, ethnographic fieldwork, mixed-methods research, case studies, formal models, and literature-based political analysis.

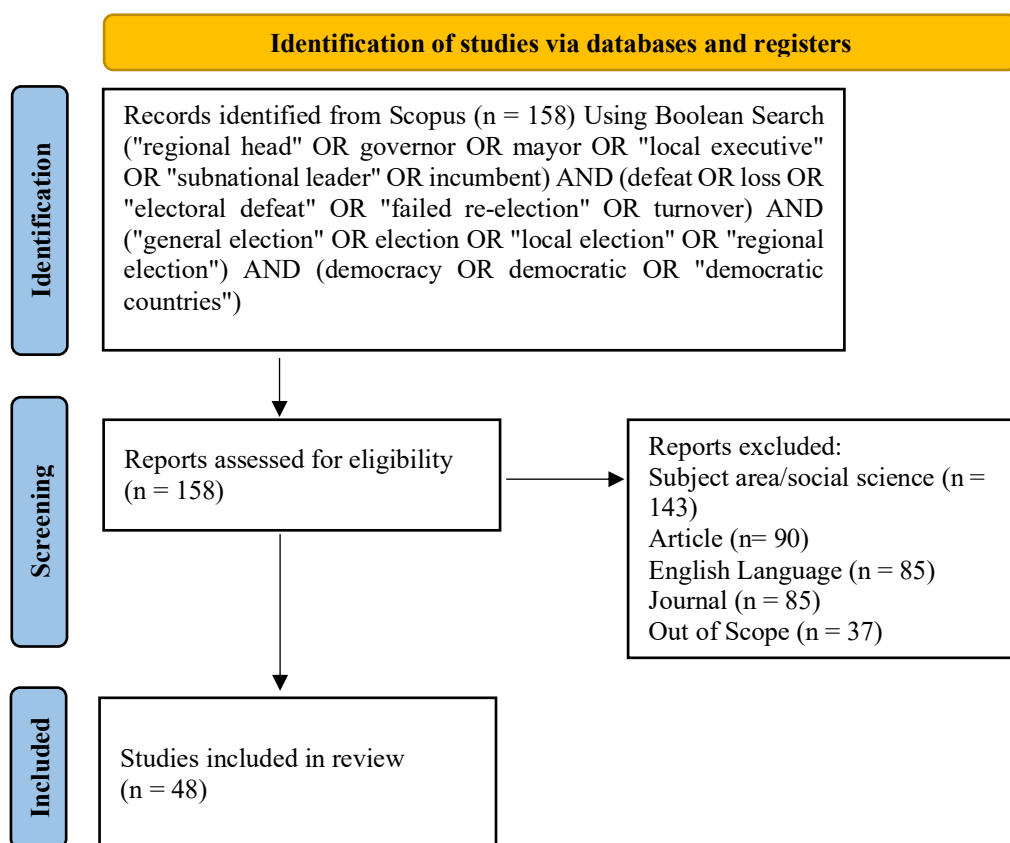


Figure 1. The PRISMA flow diagram detailing the screening and selection process of literature.

Data extraction recorded the author, year, country or region, electoral level, type of incumbent, research design, data sources, explanatory mechanisms, core findings, and relevance to local incumbent defeat. However, because the studies varied in their units of analysis, regime contexts, definitions of incumbency, outcome measurements, and causal identification strategies, quantitative pooling was not appropriate. As a result, this review applies a qualitative thematic synthesis organized around recurring mechanisms. Specifically, four themes emerged: economic voting and performance-based sanctioning; patronage, vote buying, and clientelistic breakdown; party conflict, candidate selection, and elite fragmentation; and electoral accountability, institutional trust, and democratic alternation. Finally, this synthesis compares evidence across established democracies, new democracies, developing democracies, and electorally competitive settings while carefully avoiding overgeneralization across dissimilar cases.

### Findings: Four Mechanisms Of Local Incumbent Defeat

Table 1 summarizes the evidence base into the four mechanisms used in the synthesis. It reports the mechanisms, core evidence, methodological scope, and their relevance to local incumbent defeat.

Table 1. Mechanism-based synthesis matrix.

Mechanism	Evidence base	Methodological	Core finding for regional incumbent defeat
Economic voting and performance sanctioning	Bennett & Long (2019); Klačnja & Titiunik (2017); Schraufnagel (2020); Kogan (2022); Healy & Malhotra	Quantitative electoral analysis, discontinuity, experiment,	Incumbents lose when voters can attribute unemployment, fiscal choices, welfare cuts,

Mechanism	Evidence base	Methodological	Core finding for regional incumbent defeat
	(2010); Roberts (2008); Hernandez & Kriesi (2016); Bartels (2013); Fossati & Trein (2021); Heinrich & Loftis (2019); Konitzer-Smirnov (2005); Toral (2024)	national datasets, administrative data, constituency analysis	recession, crisis response, or service delivery failure to officeholders. Economic voting is strongest when responsibility is visible and institutions make sanctioning credible.
Patronage, money politics, and clientelistic breakdown	Komarudin et al. (2025); Lockwood (2019); Poteete (2019); Hazis (2015); Bellodi et al. (2024); Johnson (2015); Martin et al. (2024); Warren (2022); Orey (2006); Chen (2022); Okolie et al. (2021); Pora et al. (2018)	Mixed methods, ethnography, qualitative historical analysis, close-election design, cross-national regression, party primary data, campaign analysis	Patronage protects incumbents only when distribution is credible and morally legitimate. It can backfire when voters perceive corruption, arrogance, exclusion, identity manipulation, or failed reciprocity.
Party conflict, candidate selection, and elite fragmentation	Farole (2026); Fashagba & Nwankwor (2020); Moliki et al. (2025); Buehler & Nataatmadja (2019); Warren (2022); Kwarteng (2018); Ayee (2017); Rybar (2019); Ozpek et al. (2025); Muharemovic (2024); Millard (2006); Pora et al. (2018)	Original party datasets, descriptive statistics, mixed methods, election analysis, comparative case studies, archival and political analysis	Incumbents may become vulnerable before voters decide. Nomination rules, primaries, factionalism, elite gatekeeping, candidate quality, and opposition coordination influence whether dissatisfaction becomes defeat.
Electoral accountability, institutional trust, and democratic turnover	Sishuwa (2022); Kerr et al. (2024); Bob-Milliar & Paller (2018); Ayee (2017); Lodge (2013); Dettman (2020); Ng et al. (2022); Rakner (2021); Duley & Gai (2024); Roussias & Ruiz-Rufino (2018); Scranton (1995); Van Peski (2013); Cleary & Ozturk (2022); Muirhead & Tulis (2020); Gaughan (2021)	Longitudinal analysis, panel survey, case study, comparative institutional analysis, formal model, cross-national monitoring dataset, historical-legal analysis	Incumbent defeat deepens accountability only when elections are credible, opposition actors coordinate, institutions enforce outcomes, losing actors concede, and transitions preserve public trust and service continuity.

### Economic Voting and Performance-Based Sanctioning

The first mechanism links incumbent defeat to voter punishment for visible economic and policy performance. Bennett and Long (2019) provide direct evidence from United States gubernatorial elections that declining economic freedom, unemployment, fiscal policy, taxation, and migration are associated with the defeat of incumbent governors. Kogan (2022) shows that welfare retrenchment can generate electoral punishment when voters directly experience policy losses, as in the case of Medicaid disenrollment in Tennessee. Healy and Malhotra (2010) refine the theory of retrospective voting by demonstrating that voters punish incumbents most clearly when disaster-related economic losses are not followed by an adequate governmental response. These studies indicate that economic sanctioning depends on attribution: voters must be able to identify the official or party responsible.

Comparative and subnational evidence complicates a mechanistic explanation of economic voting. Roberts (2008) describes hyper-accountability in Central and Eastern Europe, where incumbents were frequently punished for unemployment under unstable party systems. Hernández and Kriesi (2016) show that the Great Recession produced substantial losses for incumbent parties and destabilized party systems in Europe, while Bartels (2013) demonstrates the importance of visible economic conditions in the United States. At the local level, Klačnja

and Titunik (2017) show that mayoral officeholding in Brazil can generate an incumbency curse under conditions of weak parties and term limits, and Schraufnagel (2020) finds that Indonesian local incumbents remain advantaged but are not insulated from accountability, particularly where local spending becomes visible. The implication is that local incumbents lose when economic grievances can be locally attributed, politically understood, and are not offset by party loyalty, patronage, or institutional ambiguity.

The literature also links performance-based defeat to administrative consequences. Toral (2024) shows that defeated municipal officials may disrupt bureaucracy and service delivery before leaving office, suggesting that defeat is not only an outcome of democratic accountability but also a source of transitional risk. Heinrich and Loftis (2019) further argue that economic voting may be strengthened by democracy assistance and accountability structures, while Konitzer-Smirnov (2005) shows that local executives in Russia and Ukraine faced different accountability dynamics depending on institutional context. These findings support a conditional argument: economic voting matters, but only when voters possess sufficient information, can assign responsibility, and have a credible alternative through which dissatisfaction can be translated into votes.

### **Patronage, Money Politics, and Clientelistic Breakdown**

The second mechanism concerns the dual roles of patronage, vote-buying, and clientelism. Local incumbents often possess distributive resources, intermediary networks, prominent local figures, party machines, and access to public goods. These assets may protect incumbents by linking voters to material benefits and social obligations. However, the same networks may become liabilities when voters interpret them as corruption, arrogance, exclusion, or moral failure. Komarudin et al. (2025) provide direct evidence from Subang Regency, where 69.75% of surveyed voters reported that financial incentives shaped their voting choices, and money politics was crucial in the incumbent's defeat. This case shows that transactional politics can shape electoral outcomes without necessarily protecting officeholders.

Lockwood (2019) offers a complementary ethnographic account from Kiambu County, Kenya, where cash distribution failed to save the incumbent governor. Voters evaluated patronage through moral authority, respect, public conduct, and legitimacy. Poteete (2019) also shows that clientelism in Senegal can interact with electoral competition in ways that direct benefits to both elites and ordinary voters. Hazis (2015) demonstrates that patronage, rural party machines, and ethnic consolidation can sustain dominance in East Malaysia, but Martin et al. (2024) show that political resources assist incumbents only where corruption is low; under conditions of high corruption, resources may reduce re-election prospects. The general lesson is that patronage is not a fixed advantage. It must be socially credible, institutionally tolerated, and morally acceptable in order to remain electorally beneficial.

Other studies examine the interactions among patronage, identity, corruption, and campaign narratives. Johnson (2015) finds that leadership turnover in Latin America can temporarily improve perceptions of corruption control, suggesting that turnover itself may serve as a signal of accountability. Bellodi et al. (2024) show that populist commitments can worsen procurement and bureaucratic performance, creating future vulnerability. Orey (2006), Chen (2022), and Okolie et al. (2021) show that appeals grounded in race, ethnicity, or religion can reshape the meaning of electoral accountability, while Pora et al. (2018) highlight how elite conflict and cadre defection weaken party capacity in local competition. Thus, patronage becomes electorally dangerous when voters perceive distributive politics as illegitimate, disrespectful, unfair, or connected to broader institutional deterioration.

### **Party Conflict, Candidate Selection, and Elite Fragmentation**

The third mechanism shows that incumbent defeat often begins within political parties. Local incumbents continue to face multiple stages of political filtering, including nomination procedures, party elites, factional bargaining, campaign organization, coalition strategy, and challenger coordination. Farole (2026) shows that mayoral re-election under centralized candidate nomination in South Africa is shaped by ethnic similarity with the president, indicating that the survival of local incumbents may depend on national party elites rather than solely on citizen evaluation. Fashagba and Nwankwor (2020) similarly find that many Nigerian incumbents exit during party primaries rather than general elections because intraparty competition and gubernatorial influence weaken them before voters make their final choice.

Candidate selection and party cohesion affect whether voter dissatisfaction becomes actual defeat. Warren (2022) shows that party primaries in Botswana can produce controlled turnover, replacing some entrenched incumbents while protecting senior elites. Buehler and Nataatmadja (2019) argue that turnover in new democracies may indicate democratic circulation, weak institutionalization, or oligarchic control, depending on the context. Evidence from Ghana by Kwarteng (2018), Ayee (2017), and Bob-Milliar and Paller (2018) shows that intraparty disputes, campaign organization, reform pressures, and opposition vigilance can combine to weaken incumbents. In Slovakia, Rybar (2019) shows that opposition coordination and independent candidates defeated many incumbent governors backed by Direction–Social Democracy (Smer), illustrating that dissatisfaction becomes electorally decisive when credible alternatives emerge.

Nevertheless, the relationship between party conflict and defeat is conditional. Moliki et al. (2025) find that factionalization within Nigeria's People's Democratic Party disrupted internal democracy and cohesion but was not statistically associated with electoral defeat. This counterexample is important because it prevents an overly deterministic interpretation of party conflict. Party conflict is most influential when it damages candidate quality, reduces mobilizational capacity, fractures elite support, encourages defection, weakens message discipline, or enables opposition coordination. Evidence from Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Poland, and North Maluku further shows that opposition mayors, constrained ruling elites, value-based challenger strategies, and internal elite disputes can alter the balance between incumbency advantage and vulnerability (Millard, 2006; Muharemović, 2024; Ozpek et al., 2025; Pora et al., 2018).

### **Electoral Accountability, Institutional Trust, and Democratic Turnover**

The fourth mechanism concerns the institutional conditions under which incumbent defeat becomes democratically meaningful. Elections discipline officeholders only when citizens believe that votes are credibly counted. Losers must accept the results. Opposition actors must be able to compete. Public institutions need to manage the transfer of power. Sishuwa (2022) explains Zambia's incumbent defeat in 2021 through economic grievances, opposition unity, impartial election management, a depoliticized military, and collective memory of previous alternations of power. Kerr et al. (2024) show that, after the defeat of Zambia's ruling party, confidence in electoral quality increased among both winners and losers. This finding is theoretically important. It demonstrates that alternation can strengthen electoral legitimacy even in imperfect democratic environments.

Ghana offers a similar institutional logic. For example, Bob-Milliar and Paller (2018) interpret the 2012 election petition as a democratic rupture that exposed weaknesses, educated citizens, and strengthened opposition vigilance before the incumbent's defeat in 2016. In addition, Ayee (2017) shows that the 2016 election reflected competitive party organization, electoral management, and transition dynamics. Further, Lodge (2013) treats orderly leadership succession as a benchmark of democratic consolidation, whereas Dettman (2020) cautions that

Malaysia's 2018 alternation created opportunities for reform but did not guarantee deep democratization. Finally, Ng et al. (2022) further show that trust mediates the relationship between life satisfaction and voting for the incumbent in Malaysia. Collectively, these studies indicate that alternation is valuable not simply because rulers lose, but because institutions render defeat credible, consequential, and acceptable.

The broader literature highlights both promise and risk. For instance, Rakner (2021) shows that civil society resistance to constitutional manipulation can protect alternation in pluralist regimes. Similarly, Duley and Gai (2024) argue formally that doubts about electoral integrity affect concession, while protest can discipline compliance. Additionally, Roussias and Ruiz-Rufino (2018) find that election monitoring constrains incumbents, especially in dictatorships, and not uniformly across democracies. However, Scranton (1995) and Van Peski (2013) show that alternation can strengthen confidence while leaving institutional fragility unresolved. Further, Cleary and Ozturk (2022), Muirhead and Tulis (2020), and Gaughan (2021) warn that loser behavior, rejection of majority rule, and opposition strategies can threaten democratic continuity. Thus, incumbent defeat enhances accountability only when electoral integrity, concession, transition management, and institutional trust mutually reinforce one another.

## DISCUSSION

This review shows that local incumbent defeat should be understood as a combined process. Economic voting remains central, but it is not sufficient on its own. Poor economic performance may fail to unseat incumbents if patronage networks remain credible, party organization is cohesive, and opposition challengers are fragmented. Conversely, even moderate dissatisfaction can be electorally decisive when clientelism loses legitimacy, parties are divided, candidate selection produces weak nominees, and opposition actors coordinate around a credible alternative. The interaction among mechanisms matters more than any single mechanism in isolation. Local elections especially generate such interactions. This is because local politics connects service delivery, distributive exchange, interpersonal reputation, party intermediaries, identity, and institutional trust in a highly visible electoral arena.

This synthesis also challenges the assumption that incumbency advantage is always protective. The office provides local leaders with access to resources, but these resources may be seen as evidence of privilege, corruption, or manipulation. Incumbency may therefore shift from an advantage to a liability when voters reinterpret public spending, patronage, bureaucratic control, or personal visibility as arrogance or abuse. This helps reconcile seemingly contradictory findings: incumbents often benefit from visibility and spending, yet they may also face an incumbency curse in contexts of weak parties, limited accountability, term limits, factional competition, or deteriorating trust. The difference lies in whether the benefits of office are perceived as legitimate performance or illegitimate domination.

These findings contribute to democratic theory by reframing incumbent defeat as both an electoral and a governance process. From an electoral perspective, defeat signals that citizens, parties, and institutions can discipline officeholders. From a governance perspective, defeat may also create transitional risks, bureaucratic disruption, or declining service delivery. Outgoing incumbents may change bureaucratic arrangements and reduce essential public services before leaving office. Thus, the democratic value of alternation depends not only on whether incumbents lose. It also depends on whether institutions can preserve public service continuity, prevent retaliation, and manage administrative transition.

The practical implications are clear. Electoral reform should not be limited to vote counting alone. Subnational accountability requires credible performance information, transparent candidate selection, enforcement of campaign finance rules, restrictions on money politics, anti-corruption monitoring, civil society oversight, and transition rules that protect the

bureaucracy and service delivery after leadership turnover. Political parties should treat the evaluation of local incumbents as a process of democratic accountability, not merely as a nomination strategy. Election management bodies, the media, and civil society organizations can strengthen accountability by making performance information visible and by monitoring whether patronage, identity appeals, or campaign finance distort voter choice.

This review has limitations. The included studies differ in electoral level, country context, regime classification, data structure, measurement of incumbency, and causal design. Some provide strong causal leverage through close-election or regression-discontinuity designs; others provide historical interpretation, ethnography, formal modeling, or qualitative case evidence. This heterogeneity precludes statistical meta-analysis but supports a mechanism-based synthesis. Future research should build comparative datasets on local incumbent defeat, distinguish primary-election defeat from general-election defeat, measure opposition coordination more systematically, and investigate the post-defeat consequences for bureaucracy, service delivery, trust, and policy continuity. More research is also needed on how voters distinguish local performance from national party responsibility in decentralized systems.

## CONCLUSION

This systematic review explains why local incumbents lose elections despite the advantages of office. The main finding is that incumbent defeat is not simply a matter of voter dissatisfaction. Incumbents are more vulnerable when citizens directly attribute unemployment, welfare retrenchment, spending decisions, crisis response, or service delivery outcomes to them. Patronage and vote buying may protect incumbents or cause backlash, depending on credibility, reciprocity, moral legitimacy, and perceptions of corruption. Additionally, party conflict, candidate selection, elite fragmentation, and opposition coordination can undermine incumbents before election day. Finally, the consequences of defeat either strengthen democratic legitimacy or generate instability, depending on electoral accountability, institutional trust, integrity, concession, and transition management.

The defeat of a local incumbent should therefore be treated as a multi-mechanism process, in which the structural advantages are specifically counteracted by economic, clientelistic, organizational, and institutional pressures. These pressures interact to undermine incumbency. This review provides an integrated framework for understanding local democratic accountability by showing that alternation is valuable only when it disciplines officeholders and preserves effective governance. Future studies should directly examine how specific causes of defeat affect bureaucratic continuity, public service delivery, institutional trust, and the quality of the democratic transition.

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