

# Dynastic Partisanship: Oligarchic Political Competition in Brazil\*

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## Abstract

Strong partisanship is traditionally conceptualized as a feature of modern, consolidated democracies with stable and competitive party systems. By contrast, patrimonialism is typically seen as a pre-modern basis for political loyalty that persists mainly in less democratic enclaves of the developing world. In this paper, we argue that patrimonialism can function similarly to modern partisanship in terms of structuring robust competition between opposing political factions and influencing voting behavior. Leveraging original kinship data on mayoral candidates in Brazil, we show that many municipalities are characterized by robust competition between two or more family-based political groups. Then, drawing on a face-to-face survey vignette experiment in ninety municipalities, we show that a candidate's affiliation with a local political family has a similar effect on vote intention as does party affiliation. The results underscore that partisan-like competition and voting behavior can emerge even in places that present seemingly unfavorable conditions for party politics.

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# 1 Introduction

Mass partisanship is most commonly conceptualized as a feature of modern, consolidated democracies with stable and competitive party systems. In the traditional Michigan School view, party identification is a social identity like religion, race, or class, inherited via childhood socialization and changing little, if at all, throughout one's adult life (Campbell et al., 1960; Green, Palmquist and Schickler, 2002; Miller and Shanks, 1996). Implicit in this view is that parties' social bases and programmatic positions are sufficiently well-defined and different from one another to constitute meaningful "brands" (Lupu, 2013, 2014, 2016). Consequently, the ideological polarization of a party system contributes to mass partisanship, both cross-nationally and over time (Hetherington, 2001; Lupu, 2015). In newer democracies, partisan and anti-partisan attitudes are most likely to form around mass parties that are programmatic, have well-defined social bases, and have ties to local civil society (Poertner, 2021; Samuels and Zucco, 2015, 2018).

While some new democracies have favorable conditions for the development of mass partisanship, a different logic structures political loyalties in much of the Global South. Citizens obtain state benefits not via programmatic policies administered by rules-bound bureaucrats, but rather based on clientelistic ties to politicians and brokers. Voters favor politicians who are most likely to deliver personal benefits rather than those who are ideologically most proximate. Across offices and electoral cycles, victorious politicians may be more likely to belong to a family dynasty than a common political party. In the pre-modern world, Max Weber (2019 [1921]) described such systems of political authority based on kinship ties and personal loyalties as "patrimonial." The concept of patrimonialism has subsequently been extended to modern political systems where personalistic rule lies beneath a veneer of electoral competition and a bureaucratic state (Pereira, 2016; Pitcher, Moran and Johnston, 2009; Roett, 1999; Theobald, 1982).

According to traditional arguments, patrimonial systems and political dynasties present unfavorable conditions for the development of mass partisanship. Parties in such contexts are often ideologically ill-defined, weakly rooted in society, and unlikely to win voters' loyalty (Mainwar-

ing, 1999; Roett, 1999). When personal ties to a political boss are what matter for gaining access to benefits, voting consistently for a party label regardless of its candidate makes little sense. Those partisan exceptions that succeed in building a stable base of support in such contexts, such as Brazil's Workers' Party, may be seen as "threatening to the patrimonial order" (Roett, 1999, 20). In short, partisanship and patrimonialism, while not opposite concepts per se, are seen as having little overlap.

In this paper, we argue that patrimonialism can function similarly to modern partisanship in terms of structuring robust competition between opposing political factions and influencing voting behavior. We develop this argument via a study of municipal elections in northeastern Brazil, a region commonly seen as a redoubt of clientelism, weak partisanship, and domination by traditional elites. Leveraging original kinship data on Brazilian politicians, we show that many municipalities are characterized by robust competition between two or more family-based political groups. Then, drawing on a survey vignette experiment conducted in seven states of northeastern Brazil, we show that a candidate's affiliation with a local political family has a similar effect on vote intention as does party affiliation. We supplement the analysis with insights drawn from focus groups with local voters and qualitative interviews of dynastic politicians. The results underscore that partisan-like competition and voting behavior can emerge even in places that present seemingly unfavorable conditions for party politics.

## **2 Theory**

The main reason that political scientists care about mass partisanship is that, in many democracies, it is a powerful influence on vote choice. For Miller and Shanks (1996, 117), "party identification is the most enduring of political attitudes, responsible for shaping a wide variety of values and perceptions, and, therefore, an appropriate starting point for any analysis of a partisan political preference, such as a choice between presidential candidates." In newer democracies with more fragmented party systems such as Brazil, partisan attitudes may not be so enduring, but opinions

for or against major parties still influence voters' choices on election day (Samuels and Zucco, 2018).

Yet a candidate's party affiliation is just one of a variety of heuristics that might influence voters' electoral choices (Conover and Feldman, 1982, 1989). A candidate's name, which features prominently in campaign materials and on the ballot in most electoral systems, can convey a variety of cues, including gender, ethnicity, and parentage (Byrne and Pueschel, 1974; McDermott, 1997; Mechtel, 2014). Endorsements by prominent individuals or non-party groups are another heuristic that can influence voting decisions (Arceneaux and Kolodny, 2009). In contexts of weaker party identification and more fragmented and volatile party systems, alternative cues such as these may convey more meaningful information, and exert a stronger effect on voting behavior, than does partisanship.

How would we expect a politician's association with a political dynasty, and voters' support for or opposition to this alternative group affiliation, to compare to the effect of partisanship on voting behavior? The existing literature on political dynasties in modern democracies has clearly established that, at least in candidate-centered electoral systems, dynastic connections favor a candidate's electoral chances (Asako et al., 2015; Bragança, Ferraz and Rios, 2015; Chandra, 2016; Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder, 2009; Feinstein, 2010; Fiva and Smith, 2018; Ishibashi and Reed, 1992; Querubín, 2016; Rossi, 2014; Smith, 2018; Van Coppenolle, 2017). In contexts as diverse as Argentina, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States, winning election or reelection to the congress or parliament makes it more likely that a relative will be elected in the future. Most of this literature has focused on national legislative bodies, but Bragança, Ferraz and Rios (2015) demonstrate a similar effect involving mayoral candidates in Brazil.

The main hypothesized mechanism underlying the dynastic electoral advantage concerns family name as a political brand. A recognizable surname is likely to serve as a heuristic, allowing voters to make inferences about a candidate's policy priorities, political loyalties, and patronage networks. Voters who were loyal supporters of a family patriarch are likely to transfer that support to a descendant or spouse who bears the family name. A second, more indirect mechanism for winning

votes concerns inherited political capital, such as ties to party leaders, campaign donors, personal support networks such as Japan's *koenkai*, and favors that can be redeemed by the next-in-line (Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder, 2009; Feinstein, 2010; Ishibashi and Reed, 1992; Laband and Lentz, 1985; Smith, 2018).

The role of family name in the dynastic electoral advantage is implicitly a hypothesis about voting behavior and political psychology, but existing research has not tested this hypothesis using individual-level data.<sup>1</sup> Studies have most commonly taken the form of a close elections regression discontinuity design in which the dynastic electoral effect is estimated using aggregate data (Bragança, Ferraz and Rios, 2015; Dal Bó, Dal Bó and Snyder, 2009; Fiva and Smith, 2018; Querubín, 2016; Rossi, 2014; Van Coppenolle, 2017). This approach provides a strong basis for causal inference regarding the effect of winning office (or reelection) on the political fortunes of future relatives. However, it offers no direct insight into individual-level causal mechanisms such as the value of a family political brand.

Political brands can attract support, but they can also repel, and rival brands have the capacity to structure political competition (Lupu, 2013, 2014, 2016). In the broader comparative politics literature on parties and party systems, strong brands maintain a stable base of support for parties over time, and a system of multiple parties with strong brands generates predictable patterns of competition, a key component of party system institutionalization (Mainwaring, Bizzarro and Petrova, 2018). Personalistic brands are generally seen as weaker, and less conducive to party system institutionalization, than those based on program or ideology (Mainwaring, 2018). However, a family name brand implies multi-generational consistency in what a political movement stands for, how it distinguishes itself from opponents, and how it channels benefits to supporters. By lengthening politicians' time horizons (Bragança, Ferraz and Rios, 2015; George and Ponattu, 2018; Laband and Lentz, 1985), dynastic politics ought to transform personalistic brands into something much closer to that of a traditional programmatic party in terms of its implications for stable political competition.

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<sup>1</sup>Smith (2018) comes closest, using a conjoint experiment to examine how family history in elected office affects voters' preferences for hypothetical candidates, but this treatment does not examine actual family names.

Indeed, the notion of families rather than parties structuring political competition is a core idea in the historical and political anthropology literature on local politics in Brazil. In municipalities throughout the country, especially in rural areas, mayoral competition traditionally pitted one faction of the elite against another (Gross, 1973; Singer, 1965, 72–73; Lanna, 1995). In many instances, rivals belonged to one of two dominant families (e.g., Carvalho, 1966; Lewin, 1987, 417–418; Silva, 1960). Where the local elite was more pluralistic, multiple families often consolidated into two rival groups (e.g. Chilcote, 1990). Some contexts were less competitive, with a dominant landowner-cum-political boss, or *coronel*, pitting his dynasty against a weak or divided opposition (Leal, 1948; Rêgo, 2008; Vilaça and Albuquerque, 2003). Family-based competition was not strictly dynastic; dominant families might endorse political allies rather than running blood relatives in a particular election, and ritual kinship, such as godparenting, could bring outsiders into a family (Lewin, 1987, 11). But family, rather than party, often served to structure local competition. Dynastic candidates' party affiliation could shift from one election to the next, as alliances with state-level politicians were renegotiated (Carvalho, 1966, 172–173; Greenfield, 1977; Gross, 1973; Lewin, 1987, 417–418; Rêgo, 2008; Silva, 1960, 243). Consanguineous marriage, while primarily an elite strategy to prevent the dissolution of property via inheritance, also served as a hedge against political divisions, as tightly bound families were less likely to split into rival partisan camps (Lewin, 1987, 157–158).

The traditional basis of support for local political dynasties in Brazil was coercion and clientelism, not brand loyalty in a context of voter free choice. Prior to the introduction of the secret ballot in the 1950s–1960s, local political bosses had extensive control over subject populations' voting behavior (Gingerich, 2019). Voters were often brought to the polls on election day, handed party-printed ballots for the candidate they were to support, and carefully watched until they deposited that ballot in the urn. Their vote may have been bought with one-off material benefits, coerced through intimidation, or simply cast without question given an ongoing clientelistic relationship, but it was not won in the context of vibrant democratic competition. Many voters were illiterate, coached to sign their name on the registration paperwork and likely to vote as they were

told. Votes were often highly concentrated geographically, with the most effective ward heelers (*cabos eleitorais*) able to deliver nearly all of their district's support for a particular candidate (Carvalho, 1966; Gingerich, 2019; Gross, 1973; Rêgo, 2008).

Despite the constraints on voter choice, evidence suggests that subject populations often identified strongly with the political boss or local family that they supported. Competition between factions of elites was not limited to politics; supporters would often frequent different commercial establishments and root for rival soccer teams (Gross, 1973; Lanna, 1995). In such cases, non-party political groups effectively “encapsulated” their support base in a similar fashion as traditional mass parties, with their partisan sports and social clubs, youth leagues, and so on (Duverger, 1954). In this respect, political dynasties did approximate Lupu's (2013; 2014; 2016) concept of a party brand, even if supporters were not exactly free to switch to a rival. Municipal residents were likely to form mental prototypes of supporters of one family versus another.

Most of Brazil's traditional authoritarian dynasties have declined over time, with industrialization, economic development, mass media penetration, and the welfare state all serving to undercut the coercive power of the *coroneis* (Leal, 1948; Rêgo, 2008; Vilaça and Albuquerque, 2003). Yet family connections remain common among Brazil's political class (Bragança, Ferraz and Rios, 2015), with many newer “democratic dynasties” taking the place of traditional authoritarian ones. Democratic dynasties are a feature of modern competitive electoral politics, where the borders of the political elite have become more porous, and newcomers can potentially break in and establish their own family tradition (Chandra, 2016; Smith, 2018). Most of the empirical literature on dynastic advantage is implicitly examining democratic dynasties; if traditional families already monopolized the political field, newcomers' winning office would not be expected to favor their relatives in the future.

In the context of vibrant democratic competition, voters' choices among competing brands are likely to play a more significant role in electoral outcomes. Where local parties are strong, party brands may influence voting behavior. In Brazilian state capitals, for example, political parties are comparatively well organized, and the mayoral race is often nationalized, with prominent national

politicians campaigning on behalf of their co-partisans. In such contexts, partisanship often does influence voting behavior (Lavareda and Telles, 2011). Yet as we demonstrate below, contemporary political competition in many smaller Brazilian municipalities is structured around families rather than parties per se. In the words of one former mayor interviewed for this project, “parties are not so strong in the countryside... the name still matters more than the party” (authors’ interview, October 3, 2023).<sup>2</sup> In such a context, a candidate’s affiliation with a local political dynasty may influence voting behavior more than party affiliation. Votes may still be geographically concentrated, especially in rural areas, but local brokers are more likely to act as free agents, negotiating constituents’ support for the candidate offering the greatest benefits (Cooperman, 2022).

Given the logic outlined above, we advance the following hypothesis:

*H1: A candidate’s affiliation with a local dynasty will influence voting behavior and assessments of candidate strength.*

As with partisan affiliation, a candidate’s affiliation with a local dynasty is likely to attract some voters and repel others, depending upon their preference among competing options. As one dynastic mayor stated: “Some of those who voted for me said they voted for me because of my father. Some others who did not vote for me said that they did not vote because of my father” (authors’ interview, October 5, 2023). A null effect in the aggregate might well mask offsetting positive and negative effects among voters with different preferences. Hence, our approach to testing this hypothesis examines the degree to which votes are moved in either direction when a candidate is affiliated with a local dynasty.

We also advance a comparative hypothesis:<sup>3</sup>

*H2: The dynastic endorsement effect on voting behavior and assessments of candidate strength will be greater in magnitude than the effect of a candidate being affiliated with*

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<sup>2</sup>Interviews with former and current mayors, city councilors, and municipal-level secretaries linked to family groups were conducted via video conference between August and November 2023. They are described further in the Appendix.

<sup>3</sup>In our pre-analysis plan, we specified only H2. However, H2 logically implies H1, since treatment effects as we measure them are always positive.



a locally competitive political party.

### **3 Measuring Dynastic Politics with Administrative Data**

We begin our empirical analysis by measuring the prevalence of dynastic politics in Brazil, using two sources of data. The first source consists of legal documents filed by candidates in compliance with electoral laws. These documents frequently include the names of the candidate's parents, which we use to identify candidates whose parents were also politicians. The second source of data is simply the surnames of candidates, which we use to identify candidates who share a surname with other candidates in the same municipality. While each data source introduces measurement error of varying magnitude and direction, the two sources are complementary and together provide a more complete picture of the prevalence of dynastic politics in Brazil.

#### **3.1 Candidate Parents**

Our first source of data relies on documents filed with the Superior Electoral Tribunal (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, TSE). We convert these PDF documents to text and use regular expressions to extract the parents' names of candidates running for mayor in the 2020 municipal elections. Of the 17,925 candidates, we obtain the name of at least 1 parent for 79% and the names of 2 parents for 61%. The main reason for missing data is that in some states, the legal documentation submitted by candidates does not list the parents' names. For example, documents submitted by candidates in the state of Piauí virtually never list the parents' names, while in the state of Bahia, they almost always do. To address this issue, we subset our analysis to states with at least 50% of candidates with known parents' names: Acre, Alagoas, Amazonas, Bahia, Espírito Santo, Maranhão, Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso do Sul, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Norte, Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Sergipe, and São Paulo. These states are quite diverse with respect to geography and socio-economic development and together account for about 76% of Brazil's population. In these states, we obtained parents' names for 88% of candidates.

To match parent names with candidate data, we first condition on the municipality and then use a supervised learning method proposed by Kaufman and Klevs (2022) to match extracted parent names with all mayoral candidates since the 2000 municipal elections. This method uses a combination of string distance metrics and machine learning to match names. We compute a variety of string distance metrics between the parent names and potential matches and other features of the names, such as string length. In addition, we compute the difference in ages between the 2020 election candidate and the potential parental match from prior elections. This quantity is useful because children and parents with similar or extremely different ages are unlikely to be a match. Finally, we also use the `genderBR` package (Meireles, 2021) to compute the difference in the probability of each parental name being a female name. We use these variables to train a random forest model on a sample of manually labeled data and classify two names as a match if the model predicts a match with a probability greater than 0.5.

### **3.2 Candidate Surnames**

Our second method of measuring dynastic politics is to calculate the extent to which 2020 mayoral candidates share surnames with previous mayoral candidates in the same municipality. While the parents data extracted from legal documents is likely to have a high degree of accuracy, it will fail to measure other family relationships, such as siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and so on. To measure these other relationships, we first lightly process the last names of candidates by removing prepositions and words signifying familial status (i.e. “filho,” son, or “neto,” grandson) and then check whether the 2020 candidate and previous mayoral candidates share at least one word in their surname. The chief limitation of this approach is that common surnames will generate false positives and inflate the estimated prevalence of dynastic politics. To address this issue, we rank the surnames by their frequency among all candidates running for all offices since 2020 and exclude candidates with the 20 most common surnames. An Appendix figure shows how our estimate of the prevalence of dynastic candidates would change when varying this arbitrary threshold.

Sample	% with a Parent who was a		% with Shared Surname with a	
	Mayoral Candidate	Elected Mayor	Mayoral Candidate	Elected Mayor
All Mayoral Candidates	5.5%	3.5%	21.6%	11.5%
Mayoral Candidates in Small Municipalities <sup>1</sup>	6.3%	4.3%	21.1%	12.4%
Elected Mayoral Candidates	7.7%	5.5%	24.6%	13.8%
Mayoral Candidates in Northeastern States	8.7%	6.3%	42.6%	25.2%

<sup>1</sup>Municipalities with electorates below the first quartile.  
Data shown for 16 states with available administrative data.

**Table 2:** Prevalence of Candidates with Dynastic Connections.

### 3.3 Prevalence of Dynastic Politics

Using the two measurement approaches described above, we compute the percentage of mayoral candidates in the 2020 election who either had a parent who was a previous mayoral candidate or shared a surname with a previous mayoral candidate. We use data from all local elections since 2000, for a total of 5 election cycles. Table 2 shows the results of this analysis. The first row shows the rate of dynastic politicians across the entire sample, and the subsequent rows show rates in various subsets of the data. Prior literature suggests that dynastic politics is likely to be more prevalent in smaller municipalities (second row) and the Northeast region (fourth row). Moreover, if dynastic connections aid a candidate’s electoral prospects, then the rate of dynastic connections among elected mayors is likely to be higher than among all candidates (third row).

As one would expect because of the measure’s more narrow scope, the proportion of candidates whose parents were also candidates or elected mayors is lower than the proportion of candidates who share a surname with a previous candidate or elected mayor. The percentage of candidates with a parent who was a previous mayoral candidate is 5.5%, while the percentage of candidates with a shared surname with a mayor candidate is 21.6%. The percentages for dynastic connections with previous *elected* mayors is a bit more than half of what we find for connections with elected or unelected candidates: 3.5% and 11.5% for parents and surnames, respectively. These figures tend to be somewhat higher for elected mayoral candidates (row 3), which is consistent with dynastic ties conferring an electoral advantage.

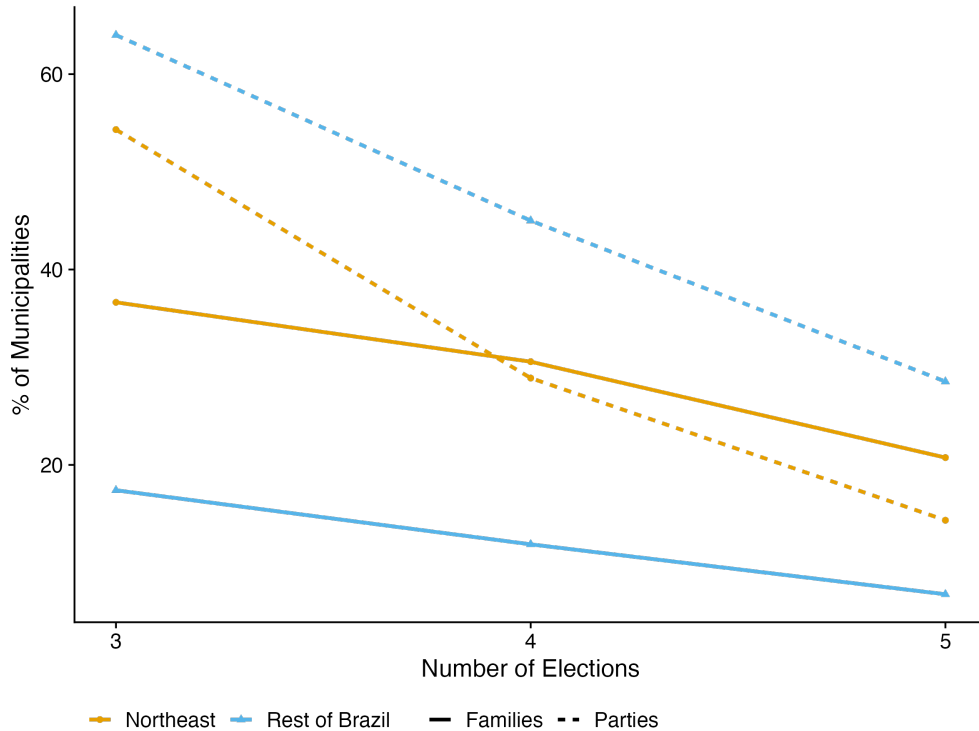
The prevalence of dynastic politics varies with municipality size and region as indicated by the historical literature on Brazilian local politics. While rates of dynastic connections are higher in smaller municipalities, the most pronounced source of heterogeneity is regional. In the Northeast, the percentage of candidates with a parent who was previously elected mayor is nearly double that of the national average (6.3% vs 3.5%). The contrast is even starker using the overlapping surname measure: 25.2% in the Northeast vs. 11.5% in the country as a whole.

## **4 Families versus Parties in Brazilian Municipal Politics**

We use the measures described in the previous section to assess how parties and family connections structure municipal politics in Brazil. First, we examine variation in the extent to which parties and families persist as important electoral actors in the same municipalities over time. Second, we measure how much geographic voting patterns for candidates belonging to the same party or family tend to endure across elections. In general, we find that family connections play an important role in structuring municipal politics in Brazil and that this role is comparable to that of political parties, particularly in the Northeast region.

### **4.1 Families and Parties as Persistent Electoral Competitors**

A simple means of gauging the importance of parties or families in shaping electoral outcomes is to measure whether parties or families *persistently* win the votes of large fractions of the electorate. Given Brazil's fragmented party system, parties that win one election may completely disappear in the next. In contrast, parties with strong allegiances among the electorate are likely to garner substantial shares of the vote over consecutive electoral cycles. If in some municipalities, local political families function like parties in terms of structuring electoral competition, then we would expect to see similar patterns of persistence. To examine the persistence of parties or families, we use electoral data and ask the following question: Among the parties or families who received at least 20% of the vote in 2020, in how many previous elections in the same municipality did the

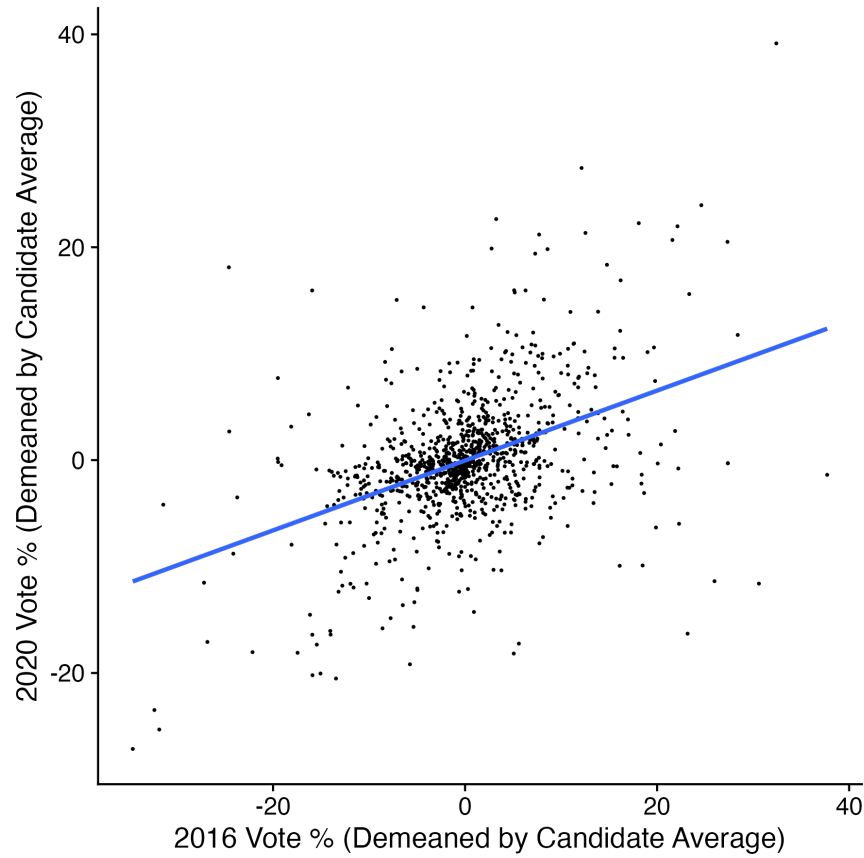


**Figure 1:** Persistence of Families and Parties in Brazilian Local Elections. This figure shows the percentage of municipalities with a party or family competing in the 2020 elections that has received more than 20% of votes in 3, 4, or 5 previous elections.

party or family receive at least 20% of the vote? If a given party or family was a major competitor in 5 elections, for example, we can probably say that it plays an important role in structuring that municipality’s electoral politics. For this question, we use the overlapping surname data, as parental ties are too restrictive an indicator of family connections.

Figure 1 shows the results of this exercise, broken out by the Northeast region and the rest of Brazil. The figure shows the percentage of municipalities with a party or family competing in the 2020 elections that has received more than 20% of the vote in 3, 4, or 5 previous elections. Outside of the Northeast, we can see that parties are more persistent than families. Over 60% of these municipalities have parties that have been meaningful electoral competitors in at least 3 elections, but fewer than 20% have a political family that has endured 3 or more elections.

In the Northeast, however, the picture is quite different. While the number of municipalities with significant parties persisting 3 elections or more outstrips the number of municipalities with simi-



**Figure 2:** Correlation of Vote Shares Across Elections for Candidates Belonging to the Same Family. Each point represents a polling station. Vote shares are demeaned by average vote share for the candidate across all polling stations in the municipality in that year. Blue line is an OLS fit.

larly long-lived families, the gap is much smaller when compared to the rest of Brazil. Compared to municipalities in other regions, Northeastern municipalities have fewer parties with a consistent presence over time and more families that attract votes election after election. Moreover, when examining patterns across 4 or 5 elections, there are more municipalities with a persistent family than a persistent party. In other words, in the Northeast, families are as likely as parties to be an enduring feature of local politics.

## 4.2 Party versus Family in Geographic Voting Patterns

As another measure of the importance of families in structuring electoral competition, we examine the extent to which candidates belonging to the same family receive similar vote shares across

	2016-2020	2012-2020	2008-2020
2016 Vote %	0.330 (0.064)		
2012 Vote %		0.276 (0.052)	
2008 Vote %			0.230 (0.038)
N	1035	2061	2896
Family FE	X	X	X

**Table 3:** Relationship between child and parent vote shares across time. Estimates are from linear models with family fixed effects. Units are polling stations. Each column represents a different pair of elections.

polling stations in the same municipality over time. If family serves as a meaningful brand for voters, we would expect to see a high degree of correlation in vote shares across polling stations for candidates belonging to the same family. In other words, we would expect the geographic basis of support for a father or mother to be similar to that of their son or daughter. To assess this, we use the parent data described in the previous section and calculate the linear correlation in vote shares across polling stations for candidates belonging to the same family across pairs of elections. Figure 2 shows the relationship for the 2020 and 2016 elections. In Table 3 we show the results of a linear model with family fixed effects. The fixed effects account for the family’s overall level of support and allows us to isolate geographic variation. For comparison, in Table 4 we present the analogous models for distinct unrelated candidates sharing the same party across pairs of elections.

In general, we find that the correlation in vote shares across time is stronger for families than it is for parties. For example, the slope coefficient on 2016 vote share in a model predicting 2020 vote share for two distinct candidates belonging to the same family is 0.33, while the analogous coefficient for two candidates sharing the same party is 0.284. The increased predictive power of family over party is consistent for all three election pairs we examine.

These data suggest that, where there are local political families in Brazil, they may serve as more meaningful brands than political parties. Parties still do more to structure electoral competition in

	2016-2020	2012-2020	2008-2020
2016 Vote %	0.284 (0.014)		
2012 Vote %		0.213 (0.022)	
2008 Vote %			0.198 (0.021)
N	84 008	82 379	73 412
Municipality-Party FE	X	X	X

**Table 4:** Relationship in vote shares between different candidates sharing a party label across time. Estimates are from linear models with municipality-party fixed effects. Units are polling stations. Each column represents a different pair of elections.

Brazil as a whole, since they exist in every municipality, while local dynasties do not. Yet in towns where significant political dynasties do exist, they may do more than parties to influence voting behavior in local elections.

### 4.3 Qualitative Evidence on Families as Political Brands

Evidence from focus groups conducted in several small towns in Pernambuco, a state in Brazil’s Northeast region, suggest that people may think of family-based and other non-party political groups as their local political parties in terms of both structuring competition and consistently capturing voters’ loyalties.<sup>4</sup> Participants often used the term “party” to refer to these non-party groups, even when their formal party affiliation has changed frequently over time. In Flores, one focus group participant remarked that “all my life it’s been two parties, either one of them has 5000 votes guaranteed, and there are 2–3000 votes left for them to dispute.” In Tabira, a focus group member said that “whoever votes for that party never ceases to be [loyal]. . . it’s a real tradition. They are people that put on the shirt of their team and never take it off.” In Itaíba, referring to a local political group that was perpetually in opposition to the dominant family, one person said

<sup>4</sup>These focus groups were conducted in January 2017 for a prior research project.



that “all my life I supported Lombada, and all my life I lost, but I loved them.”

Partisan competition has not been particularly stable in these municipalities, in part because members of dominant families changed affiliations. From 1988 to 2016, the top two finishers in mayoral races were drawn from 6–10 different parties, depending on the municipality. In such a context, non-party groups effectively stand in for parties in terms of structuring electoral competition and gaining voters’ loyalties, to the extent that residents may even refer to them using the word “party.”

The municipality of Castro Alves in the Northeastern state of Bahia offers another example of family stability amidst partisan fluidity. Since 2000, members of the Araujo family have held the mayorship four times, each with a different party. Gilvandro Araujo was elected in 2000 with the Liberal Front Party (PFL), then reelected in 2004 with the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB). His son, Thiancle Araujo, was elected mayor in 2016 on the ticket of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), then reelected in 2020 with the (similarly named but distinct) Social Democratic Party (PSD). Given the fluidity of many local politicians’ partisanship, it is plausible that family name exerts a stronger influence on voting behavior than does party affiliation.

Interviews conducted with dynastic mayors lend support to this hypothesis. All of the interviewees minimized the importance of party brands during local elections and were skeptical that changing parties could affect their performance. One opined that “wherever I go, to whichever party, I bring my votes with me” (authors’ interview, August 9, 2023). Another stated bluntly that changing parties from one election to the next “had no electoral impact” (authors’ interview, October 5, 2023). When local politicians do change parties, they are typically focused more on partisan connections with higher-level elected officials, such as Federal Deputies and Senators, who facilitate their access to public resources. As one mayor explained, “the deputy that we supported changed parties, and we automatically followed him, because we already had that connection” (authors’ interview, October 10, 2023). Another opined, “I’ll say this and repeat it: my party is Daniel and Bobô,” the federal and state deputies who routinely looked after the town’s interests (authors’ interview, November 24, 2023).

## 5 Survey Vignette Experiment

### 5.1 Research Design

To test our hypothesis regarding family brands and voting behavior, we use a survey vignette experiment. The experiment was administered via a face-to-face survey, conducted in October 2019, that interviewed members of the mass public and local political elites in 90 municipalities across seven states of Brazil’s Northeast region (Table 5). Our sampling procedure sought to reach rural populations and smaller towns where dynastic politics is most common, so we excluded municipalities with more than 50,000 residents. In each sampled municipality, enumerators surveyed 40 residents and 4 local political elites—city councilors and municipal secretaries—for an overall N of 3,600 mass respondents and 360 elite respondents.

State	Municipalities
Alagoas	4
Bahia	30
Ceará	18
Paraíba	10
Pernambuco	14
Piauí	5
Rio Grande do Norte	9

**Table 5:** Number of Municipalities Sampled per State

Embedded in both the elite and mass surveys was a vignette experiment that sought to measure the effect of endorsements from local parties and families on voter attitudes towards a fictitious candidate. The experiment took the form of the following text, with enumerators substituting in the name of the respondent’s municipality:

Now I will tell you one more story. Imagine that the next municipal election is this Sunday and that a person named José Carlos is a candidate for mayor of [MUNICIPALITY] [from the group of FAMILY / from the PARTY / *no text*]. He is a businessman, is 48 years old and has a college degree.

Outcomes were measured via two questions: “In your opinion, what is the chance that you would vote for José Carlos for mayor?” and “In your opinion, what is the chance of José Carlos winning the election for mayor?” Response options were “a great chance,” “some chance,” “little chance,” and “no chance,” rescaled 4–1, in that order. For the elite survey, we only asked the question about the candidate winning the election.

Respondents were block randomized into one of three experimental conditions.<sup>5</sup> In the *Control* condition, José Carlos is not endorsed by any group. In the *Party* condition, he is supported by a locally competitive party. For each respondent, we sampled parties with probability proportional to the number of times they had won the mayoral election between 2000 and 2016.

In the *Family* condition, the candidate is supported by a politically relevant local family, which we referenced by surname—for example, “the group of the Batistas.” We define a political family as a group of two or more politicians that are related either by blood or by marriage. To identify local political families, we had research assistants conduct qualitative research on each sampled municipality via web searches, reviews of local media, and interviews with local journalists, union leaders, and city councilors. We identified at least one politically relevant family in 68 of 90 municipalities; the remaining municipalities are dropped from the analysis. The Appendix offers additional details on the experiment, including an alternative version of the treatment, not analyzed here, that referenced local non-party groups by something other than a shared surname.

## 5.2 Specification and Results

As discussed above, we hypothesize that a candidate’s affiliation with a local political dynasty affects voting behavior *in either direction*, depending on the respondent’s attitude toward that family. Thus, to estimate treatment effects in the vignette experiment, we use the following pre-registered approach:

- Among respondents in the same experimental block, subtract the mean of the control group

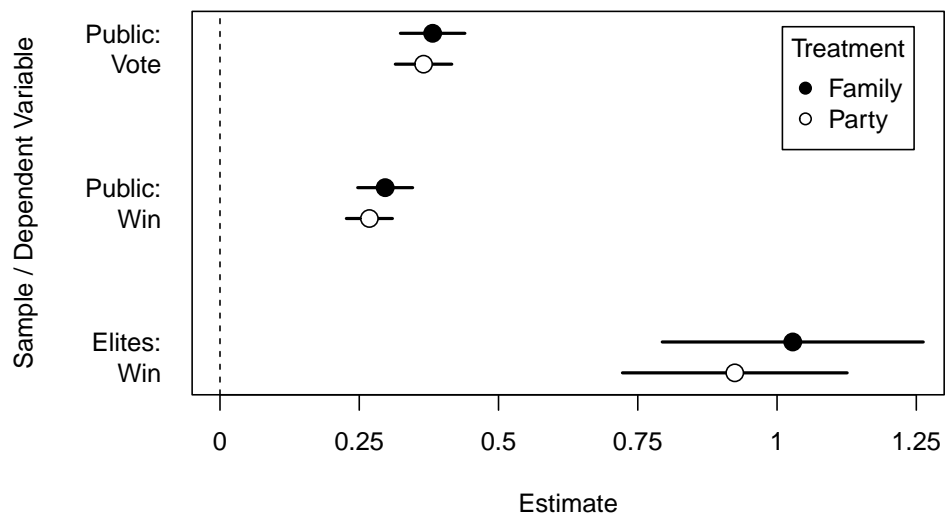
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<sup>5</sup>For the mass survey, census tracts served as experimental blocks; for the elite survey, the blocks were municipalities.

from all observations in both the party and family treatment conditions.

- Take the absolute value of the transformed observations in each treatment group, which gives each observation's distance from the control group mean as a positive number.
- Conduct a regression of the transformed distance on a treatment indicator and block fixed effects, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

Results from the vignette experiment are summarized in Figure 3. As expected, we find support for *H1*: a candidate's affiliation with a local political family has a significant effect on voting behavior as well as assessments of the candidate's likelihood of winning. The latter relationship holds both for the general public as well as for local political elites, where it is especially strong. Since a majority of our elite respondents were local elected officials themselves, we expect that they are particularly attuned to the electoral effect of being affiliated with a local dynasty, hence the larger treatment effects.



**Figure 3:** Vignette Experiment Average Treatment Effects

While we expected that a candidate's affiliation with a local political family would matter more than being affiliated with a local political party (*H2*), we find that the two effects are very similar in magnitude for both dependent variables and samples of respondents. Point estimates are slightly larger for the family treatment, but the differences are minuscule and statistically insignificant.

Why do we find similarly-sized effects for both our party and family treatments? One possibility is that, while some family-dominated municipalities exhibit high levels of partisan fluidity, in other places families may have established relatively stable relationships with major political parties. By mentioning parties that have recently held the mayorship, in some instances we may be effectively cueing families or individual politicians that have become closely associated with those parties.

Our qualitative research offer several examples of close relationships between party and family. In the state of Ceará, we interviewed several local politicians from a prominent political dynasty that has almost always competed with the Brazilian Democratic Movement (Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, MDB). A close relative of our informants was one of the national founders of the party, and another is married to the state party president, “so the party is like family” (authors’ interview, August 9, 2023). Family members have frequently occupied the presidency of the municipal party directorate, and they routinely suggest candidates for the party to run in local elections. While the party is not obligated to accept their suggestions, it usually does, given the family’s influence (authors’ interviews, August 9 and October 3, 2023). Another example concerns a local dynasty in the state of Pernambuco that has almost always competed with the Brazilian Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Brasileiro, PSB). A family member who headed the party’s municipal directorate (and was married to the incumbent mayor) underscored that the family “has always had a good relationship with the party” when it comes to suggesting candidates for local elections (authors’ interview, November 7, 2023).

Moreover, our approach to identifying local political families likely involved some measurement error, whereas there was no error in measuring which party won recent mayoral elections. Our research may have identified some family names that do not resonate with local voters, perhaps because the family is not a political dynasty at all, because it is an older dynasty that is no longer relevant to political competition, or because the family is commonly referenced by something other than the surname we provided.<sup>6</sup> With a less precise treatment, we may be underestimating

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<sup>6</sup>While many residents know traditional family names, it is also common that dynastic politicians profile themselves using the first name of their political patrons, as in “Pedro de Manuel,” where Manuel would be the family patriarch. In such cases, family name might represent a less meaningful reference for local voters.

the effect of being supported by a local dynasty, compared to running on the ticket of a locally competitive political party.

## **6 Conclusion**

Mass partisanship occupies a special place in the study of voting behavior. In the classic Michigan School model in American politics, it is the “unmoved mover,” an exogenous, inherited identity that exerts a particularly strong effect on decisions at the polls (Campbell et al., 1960). In newer democracies, mass partisanship is something to aspire to—a key facilitator of party system institutionalization, which has favorable implications for democratic stability (Mainwaring, 2018; Mainwaring, Bizzarro and Petrova, 2018). When a party’s brand—what it stands for, and how it differs from competitors—is diluted over time, partisanship ceases to move voting behavior on its own, and parties are more vulnerable to collapse, with typically adverse consequences (Lupu, 2013, 2014, 2016).

In this article, we focus on the effect of voters’ attitudes toward a different type of organization that may present candidates for office and structure electoral competition: political dynasties. In democracies around the world, from Argentina to Japan, politicians’ associations with political dynasties have been shown to favor their electoral prospects. The main hypothesized mechanism underlying this effect concerns family name brand as a heuristic influencing voting behavior, but no scholarship has yet sought to test this hypothesized effect. Using original data on Brazilian politicians’ kinship as well as their surnames, we show that in many municipalities, dynastic politics structures competition as much or more than party, especially in the traditionally clientelistic Northeast region. Then, leveraging a survey experiment and original data on dynasties in 90 northeastern municipalities, we show that a candidate’s affiliation with a local dynasty has a similar effect on voting behavior as does affiliation with a locally competitive political party. These findings underscore that, even in contexts more closely associated with patrimonialism than with conditions thought to give rise to mass partisanship, partisan-like competition and voting behavior

can emerge and endure.

Our analysis suggests that there is more logic to Brazil's party system than is often apparent at first glance. Traditionally, Brazil has been considered a classic case of a fragmented, volatile, and weakly institutionalized party system (Mainwaring, 1995, 1999). An institutional explanation (Duverger, 1954; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989) would point toward Brazil's system of open list proportional representation with high district magnitude, which helps account for the multiparty system in the lower house of Congress and in state legislatures. We would expect something closer to a two-party system for executive positions, which effectively has emerged in presidential elections (Mainwaring, Power and Bizzarro, 2018) and at the gubernatorial level in many states as well. But outside of some state capitals heavily influenced by national political dynamics, local mayoral races are not generally characterized by stable two-party competition. Nor is a sociological or cleavage-based explanation (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) a likely candidate for explaining Brazil's fragmented party system; small rural municipalities tend to be ethnically homogeneous, and most Brazilian parties do not appeal for votes based on ascriptive identities. We argue that stable, and often highly competitive, two-party systems are much more common in Brazilian local politics than has been recognized, as long as one conceptualizes parties the way many residents do—as local, often family-based groups that present candidates for office but may not have consistent ties to any formally constituted political party at the state or national level.

While strong mass partisanship is generally considered a good thing for democracy, there are normative downsides to dynastic partisanship as a substitute for traditional programmatic partisanship. One negative consequence concerns implications for accountability. Traditional partisanship and strong partisan competition are a double-edged sword for politicians' accountability to voters through the electoral process. At the mass level, intense partisan competition and voters' partisan ties to candidates inhibit holding corrupt politicians accountable (Anduiza, Gallego and Muñoz, 2013; Eggers, 2014; Muñoz, Anduiza and Gallego, 2016). Yet for political elites, partisanship provides positive incentives for accountability, especially in large federal democracies, because it links competition at multiple levels and over time. A corrupt mayor could drag down the party's

performance for higher-level offices or its future performance for the same office, so parties have incentives to sanction corrupt copartisans and maintain a clean party brand (Klašnja and Titiunik, 2017). By contrast, in large federal democracies like Brazil, political dynasties rarely structure competition beyond the state level, and most are limited to one or a few municipalities, so brand maintenance incentives are more limited. Dynastic politics, therefore, arguably generates the worst possible combination for accountability: strong substitute partisanship among the masses, which can prompt voters to overlook malfeasance (Boas, Hidalgo and Melo, 2019), and weak connections between the logic of competition at the local, state, and national levels, which limit elites' incentives to control corruption within their political organizations.

Dynastic partisanship also has clear negative implications for traditional party building in Brazil. Novaes (2018) argues that parties' reliance on local notable brokers for votes helps explain party weakness in Brazil because brokers have limited incentives to remain loyal to parties and provide a consistent base of support. Our analysis adds an individual-level, voter psychology logic to this politician-level, institutional argument: we argue that the strength of dynastic brands may serve as an additional impediment to building meaningful partisanship at the local level. Voters support local notable brokers not only because of the material benefits they provide but because they identify with the brands—often family-based—that these politicians have built. Voters' weak identification with national parties not only gives brokers leeway to switch partisan allegiances from one election to the next (Novaes, 2018); their strong identification with local brands also serves as a barrier to parties' efforts to rectify the situation. National-level parties that can leverage ties to local civil society organizations can build partisanship from the ground up (Poertner, 2021; Samuels and Zucco, 2015, 2018), but not all municipalities have strong local civil society organizations, and not all parties are likely to be able to establish such ties. And the challenge is not just about building partisanship where it is absent. Parties also face the daunting task of displacing loyalties to family-based groups—which may be how voters have long understood the concept of party, at least at the local level—and getting them to identify with a national party based on program or ideology.



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