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ARTICLE

The Electoral Implications of Legislative Candidate Selection Democratization

Jorge M. Fernandes[1], Alon Yakter[2], Yael Shomer[2] and Gert-Jan Put[3]

[1]Institute of Public Goods and Policies, CSIC, Madrid, Spain, [2]Telaviv University, Telaviv, Israel and [3]KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
Corresponding author: Jorge M. Fernandes; Email: jorge.fernandes@csic.es

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Abstract
Amid declining public standing, many political parties seek to regain disaffected voters through various institutional strategies. One key approach is democratizing legislative candidate selection to grant party members or voters greater influence and signal improved responsiveness, transparency, and legitimacy. Yet does this strategy pay off electorally? The growing literature on this topic provides conflicting answers and limited evidence. We argue that more inclusive candidate selection does not have meaningful effects at the polls despite its merits. Whereas voters favor such procedures in principle, as some suggest, they underprioritize them in favor of other considerations when electing parties. We support this argument with observational and experimental data, including a matching difference-in-differences estimation of party performance across thirty-four democracies and a survey democracies and a survey experiment in three countries. This article contributes to our understanding of the relationship between party institutions and voter behavior in an age of eroding public trust and rising anti-establishment sentiment.

Keywords: candidate selection; primaries; attitudes; matched difference-in-difference; elections; political behavior

Introduction

Representative democracy is experiencing a continued crisis across the West. Established political parties, a key vehicle of democratic representation, have consistently eroded their commitment and ability to channel voter demands, structure broad electorates, and organize party government accordingly (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Mair 2013; Schattschneider 1942). As a result, public trust in parties has been significantly worn down in many countries (Dalton and Weldon 2005; Bøggild 2020; Devine 2024), fostering more volatile voting patterns and greater support for anti-establishment alternatives (Caramani 2017; Berman 2019; Grzymala-Busse 2019). Party elites, in turn, have sought various strategies and institutional reforms to regain disaffected citizens (Cain, Dalton and Scarrow 2003; Meguid 2005).

An increasingly common tactic to win back voter support involves democratizing intra party decision making, particularly candidate nomination procedures (for example, via public conventions, delegates, or primaries). These practices give party members and voters greater influence and signal better responsiveness, transparency, and procedural fairness worthy of their vote (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Cross and Blais 2012; Siavelis 2012; Sandri and Seddone 2021). While such values may have merit in themselves, party reformers have been primarily driven by

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their instrumental potential to maximize votes, both as an end goal and as a means to other objectives (Strøm 1990; Scarrow 1999; Lisi 2010; Gauja 2016).

Yet is the democratization of legislative candidate selection effective in winning back votes, as elites may hope? Despite growing scholarly attention to this question, the existing literature offers mixed answers and findings. Some studies argue that inclusive nomination methods appeal to voters and pay off at the polls (for example, Carey and Polga-Hecimovich 2006; Ramiro 2016; Astudillo and Lago 2021; Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021; Schwenk 2023), whereas others do not find sufficient support or imply an opposite electoral effect (for example, Katz 2013; De Luca and Venturino 2017; Shomer 2017; Wauters and Kern 2021). Furthermore, these works rely on limited case studies or consider voter perceptions in isolation from their multifaceted electoral behavior.

Our article addresses this gap both theoretically and empirically. Do more inclusive candidate selection methods sway voters at the polls? We posit that these practices may appeal to voters in principle but require sufficient importance at the ballot box to outweigh other salient considerations. By this logic, we expect that candidate selection methods only have a secondary priority, particularly compared to ideological and partisan preferences, and therefore little effect on electoral outcomes even if voters favor them in isolation.

Empirically, we test these expectations using comparative analyses of both electoral outcomes and individual-level behavioral mechanisms. Using a matching difference-in-differences estimation of party vote shares in legislative elections across thirty-four democracies and several decades, we find that switching to more inclusive candidate selection procedures does not have a statistically discernible effect. Subsequently, we support our theoretical explanation for this weak result using a preregistered conjoint experiment fielded in three countries – France, Israel, and Sweden – representing different institutional, historical, and cultural contexts. We find that more inclusive candidate selection appeals to voters when other considerations are held constant. However, when forced to decide between competing party attributes, voters prioritize ideological proximity over intra party democracy. Moreover, most voters cannot tell or recall the candidate selection procedures used by the real-world party for which they last voted, corroborating its low salience in practice. These findings replicate across all three countries.

Our argument and findings make several key contributions to ongoing debates on democratic representation, institutional procedures, and voter behavior. First, from a top-down institutional viewpoint, our analysis suggests that reforming intra party procedures is not a winning strategy in party elites' uphill battle to regain popular support. Although many correctly assume that candidate selection democratization is appealing to voters in itself, it is ultimately underprioritized at the ballot box. Political elites, therefore, should look for other remedies that could simultaneously help their public standing and achieve their vote-seeking goals. At the same time, candidate selection democratization should be debated on its other important merits – for example, empowerment of activists and core voters, intrinsic democratic values, and improvement of institutional trust – than through a narrow electoral lens.

Second, from a bottom-up behavioral perspective, this article improves our understanding of voters' electoral priorities given multiple considerations and trade-offs. A large literature underscores the importance of ideological and partisan identification, polarization, and sorting (for example, Levendusky 2009; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018; Gidron, Adams and Horne 2020), yet others suggest that many voters mix left and right preferences, do not feel close to any political party, and focus on valence issues such as accountability, competence, and corruption (Hill and Tausanovitch 2015; Incerti 2020; Boas, Hidalgo and Toral 2021; Becher and Brouard 2022; Fowler et al. 2023). We make a twofold contribution to this discussion. Firstly, we find that ideological positioning trumps procedural party practices when the two clash.[1] Secondly, the lesser priority given to inclusive candidate selection indicates that some valence considerations

[1]See Hjortskov and Andersen (2024) for a similar conclusion about the dominance of partisan labels.

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are electorally weaker than others. As such, our findings emphasize the need for better theoretical frameworks that differentiate and typologize different non-ideological considerations.

Third, our experimental analysis underscores the distinction between preferences in isolation and more complex, and realistic, choices involving multidimensional trade-offs. This difference is particularly important when discussing effective electoral tactics, which may correctly identify certain popular appeals but must also consider their importance relative to other dominant forces. This conclusion also demonstrates the limits of survey experiments in identifying real-world behavior without additional adjustments in their analyses (Incerti 2020).

Party Elites and Candidate Selection Democratization

Existing Theoretical and Empirical Analyses

Facing mounting disaffection among voters, party elites have increasingly turned to intra party mechanisms of democracy, especially after electoral letdowns (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Katz 2013; Sandri and Seddone 2021). In particular, extensive scholarly work illustrates the increasing use of inclusive candidate selection methods in Western Europe for both legislative office and party leadership (Cross and Blais 2012; Pilet and Cross 2014; Sandri, Seddone and Venturino 2015). Similar trends have been documented in Latin America (Carey and Polga-Hecimovich 2006; Kemahlioglu, Weitz-Shapiro and Hirano 2009; Siavelis 2012) and Africa (Ichino and Nathan 2022; Casey, Kamara and Meriggi 2021).

More inclusive candidate selection procedures can appeal to voters for several reasons. First, broader findings show that most people support the general notion of democracy (Inglehart 2001; Voeten 2016; Adserà, Arenas and Boix 2023). intra party democratization, in particular, can improve democratic values such as accountability, procedural legitimacy, and responsiveness (Carey and Polga-Hecimovich 2006; Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021; Shomer, Put and Gedalya-Lavy 2016; Wauters and Kern 2021; Smith and Tsutsumi 2016). Second, studies show that primaries raise the likelihood that parties nominate more electable candidates (Adams and Merrill III 2008; Serra 2011; Snyder and Ting 2011; Ascencio 2023). Indeed, while party elites prioritize loyalty and core constituencies, more inclusive selection increases candidates' perceived legitimacy and representation of broader preferences (Casey, Kamara and Meriggi 2021; Schwenk 2023). Finally, bottom-up selection procedures typically gain media visibility that draws public attention to their democratic nature and candidate positions (Pedersen and Schumacher 2015; Mahéo 2017; Put and Shomer 2023b).

Other works, however, argue that more inclusive candidate selection can have potential downsides. First, a growing debate links primaries to greater polarization. Primary candidates often adopt more ideologically extreme positions than the general electorate when they compete for the support of the party's core voters and activists (Lehrer 2012; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018; Broockman et al. 2021; Amitai 2024). Second, general voters might perceive primaries as corrupt 'window dressing' mechanisms, with the added peril of potential vote buying (Charron and Schwenk 2023). Finally, there is mixed evidence about the linkage between primaries and the selection of historically disadvantaged groups (Hinojosa 2012; Astudillo and Lago 2021; Ichino and Nathan 2022).

Given the existing competing explanations, are inclusive candidate selection methods electorally effective in practice? The evidence is limited and mixed. On the one hand, several studies indicate that such rewards do exist in certain contexts. In Latin America, for example, parties that select presidential candidates by open primaries gain an estimated 4–6 per cent electoral bonus (Carey and Polga-Hecimovich 2006). In Canada, Germany, and Spain, parties with closed nomination procedures for legislative candidates face an electoral penalty if rival parties use more inclusive methods (Astudillo and Lago 2021). Timing also matters: multiple findings show a short-term boost in polling scores for parties embracing open selection procedures for either leadership or parliamentary candidates, deeming them particularly

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beneficial closer to the general elections (Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021; Pedersen and Schumacher 2015; Ramiro 2016).

On the other hand, several works dispute the empirical link between inclusive candidate selection and electoral outcomes. In France and Italy, parties that select parliamentary and presidential candidates by primaries exhibit inconsistent electoral patterns (De Luca and Venturino 2017). Similarly, experimental data from Belgium suggest that open leadership selection does not yield higher voter support (Wauters and Kern 2021). Democratic candidate selection can also have negative electoral effects. For instance, primaries might hurt parties' general performance when they put the limelight on internal disputes and legislative dissent that are often weaponized during internal campaigns (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Shomer 2017).

Legislative Candidate and Leadership Selection

The literature discussed above gives equal attention to two arenas: party leadership contests and the choice of legislative candidates. While they select candidates for different offices, the two processes share motivational and behavioral assumptions about how and why party elites decide to democratize primaries and the benefits they hope to reap. As Kenig, Rahat and Hazan (2016: 39) argue, 'both leadership [. . .] and candidate selection share many commonalities in terms of the relevant dimensions for their delineation, and both are going through a clear process of democratization exhibiting somewhat similar consequences.' Indeed, for our purposes, the signaling of responsiveness, openness to the electorate, and procedural legitimacy remains fundamentally similar in both candidate and leadership contests.

Given this similarity, we henceforth focus on legislative candidate selection rather than party leader nomination. First, legislative candidates are typically selected relatively close to election day, increasing the procedure's potential effect on voter behavior. Party leaders, by contrast, are often chosen long before the next elections while their nomination method has only short-lived influences (Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021; Pedersen and Schumacher 2015). Second, while party leaders may enjoy greater national visibility and personalization (Wauters et al. 2016), legislative candidates represent voters more directly, are personally accountable to specific communities and districts, and maintain more immediate contact with their constituents. Finally, from a practical standpoint, the limited number of leadership nomination reforms constrains robust empirical conclusions about their impact. Nevertheless, as we discuss in the article's conclusion, we believe that our findings could generalize to leadership selection as well.

In sum, whether democratized candidate selection sways voters in the polls remains an open question. Although existing studies examine different levels of candidate selection – party leaders, legislators, and local candidates – two issues stand out in particular. First, empirically, the current literature offers mixed evidence based on limited case selection, contexts, and data. Second, theoretically, it focuses primarily on the presumed appeal (or lack thereof) of inclusive methods to voters. This perspective neglects the subsequent link from isolated preferences to actual voting decisions. Next, we discuss the latter issue by suggesting a broader theoretical perspective. Subsequently, addressing the empirical puzzle, we test our argument using comparative observational and experimental data covering multiple countries and contexts.

From Isolated Preferences to Voting Decisions

Party elites that democratize candidate selection for electoral gain must assume that it affects voter behavior. That voters prefer inclusive methods to top-down selection procedures is a necessary condition for such a direct influence. However, it is insufficient without considering its relative priority in the voting decision itself. An isolated preference, in its simplest form, represents one's favored option on a given subject out of a set of possible alternatives (Druckman and Lupia 2000). Multiple preferences are then organized in broader attitudinal networks that connect positions on

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different public issues at varying levels of internal coherence and tensions (Converse 1964; Conover and Feldman 1984).

Given this multidimensionality, a concrete choice requires one to select between different preferences, some of which may point in different directions. Discussing the cognitive mechanisms involved in this process, some works emphasize stable hierarchies of preferences, particularly among voters with higher political sophistication (Achen 1975; Peffley and Hurwitz 1985; Jennings 1992; Goren 2004). Others suggest messier and inconsistent position-taking that vary by short-term stimuli (Converse 1964; Achen and Bartels 2016). Others still underscore reliance on elite and partisan cues as rational shortcuts that prime particular preferences over others (Zaller 1992; Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994). Nevertheless, all explanations agree that choices reflect preferences at sufficiently high priority and cognitive availability in the moment of actual selection. Moreover, preferences with consistently high importance tend to be more stable, better informed, and more cognitively accessible (Howe and Krosnick 2017).

Voting is a paradigmatic case of these processes. By its essence, it requires voters to collapse multiple attitudinal dimensions into a unidimensional choice of party or candidate at the ballot box. Accordingly, some preferences would be electorally ineffective if consistently dominated by other considerations during the election (McGraw, Lodge and Stroh 1990; Fournier et al. 2003; Bélanger and Meguid 2008). Such weaker priorities could influence voting only if stronger preferences are irrelevant or equal across all parties.[2] Consequently, party elite cues about candidate selection inclusiveness could affect voter behavior directly if, and only if, two necessary conditions are met. First, enough voters prefer more inclusive selection methods over other procedures. Second, they lend sufficiently high priority to this issue relative to other relevant attributes (for example, if they have no stronger priorities or if higher-priority attributes are equal across parties). Table 1 summarizes this basic argument.

How do more inclusive candidate selection methods fit into this general framework? Starting with preferences, the existing literature discussed above yields mixed intuitions about whether voters prefer more open selection procedures. On the one hand, greater inclusiveness can increase the party's perceived legitimacy, transparency, and attentiveness to voters. On the other, it could also repel general voters by encouraging extremer positions, drawing attention to internal corruption, and decreasing descriptive representation. A closer examination of studies that specifically test voter judgment of such methods, namely by survey or experimental data, reveals mixed findings as well (for example, Shomer, Put and Gedalya-Lavy 2016, Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021, and Schwenk 2023 versus Charron and Schwenk 2023 and Wauters and Kern 2021). Given this unresolved debate, we remain agnostic and consider either positive or no voter preferences for inclusive selection methods as plausible expectations.

Unlike the direction of preferences on candidate selection procedures, their relative priority in voting decisions has received much less scholarly attention. Studies on voting behavior identify other key considerations instead. First, voters are more likely to select a party with policy agendas closer to their ideological orientations (Downs 1957; Van der Eijk, Schmitt and Binder 2005; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008) and express discontent if it fails to deliver or drifts too far (Fiorina 1981; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Second, beyond concrete policy positions, many voters also decide based on broader partisan identification (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002; Johnston 2006; Dias and Lelkes 2022), especially given increased social and political polarization (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2018; Gidron, Adams and Horne 2020). Partisanship, moreover, links to ideological orientation by serving as a rational heuristic for policy positions on low-information issues (Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994). Third, many voters also consider party valence, that is, non-ideological attributes such as competence, integrity, and fair

[2]This logic resembles lexical prioritization, whereby preferences are ordered by their relative importance. For instance, if one's priorities for party attributes are ordered $A > B > C$, then one would select between two parties by first comparing differences on A. If both parties have similar values of A, one would then compare their differences on B, and so on.

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Table 1. The combined electoral effect of isolated preferences and their relative priority

		Isolated preference	
		No	*Yes*
Relative priority	*Low*	Not effective	Not effective
	High	Not effective	***Effective***

representation (Clark 2009; Abney et al. 2011; Barnes and Córdova 2016; Incerti 2020; Boas, Hidalgo and Toral 2021; Becher and Brouard 2022).

By and large, the debate on voting considerations neither mentions candidate selection methods nor shows evidence that they play a noteworthy role. Existing evidence does indicate that transparent candidate selection methods can increase citizen trust in political parties and perception of procedural fairness (Shomer, Put and Gedalya-Lavy 2018; Scarrow 2005; Wauters 2010).[3] However, most of this research focuses on isolated preferences for particular selection methods rather than their weight in voting decisions.

We believe that this is not a coincidence. Other factors, especially party ideology and partisan brands, tap directly into the core bases of voter decision making, namely self-interest, core values, and social and group identities. Candidate selection methods, by contrast, are a secondary mechanism to improve party advancement of these goals given sufficient ideological and partisan appeal. Moreover, some valence-related considerations, such as party competence or corruption, are easily visible through policy outcomes and party actions. Candidate selection methods, meanwhile, involve procedural rules and technical details that are less cognitively accessible and more costly to follow and comprehend. Hence, relative to these other dominant factors, we expect voters to pay low relative priority and attention to candidate selection practices when making voting decisions. This expectation, in turn, suggests that more inclusive candidate selection should not have a notable electoral effect regardless of whether voters prefer them in isolation or not.

To sum up, our argument considers the direct mechanism by which voters react to more inclusive candidate selection procedures. Voters weigh their preferences for candidate selection inclusiveness and its corresponding relative priority against other considerations. They will support parties due to open candidate selection only if this issue is favored in itself and has a high priority compared to other considerations. In all remaining combinations, factors like ideology, partisanship, or key valence considerations should dominate candidate selection preferences. Consequently, the electoral benefits that party elites expect to gain from open candidate selection should not materialize. This discussion establishes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. ***(Electoral Outcomes)****: All else equal, more inclusive candidate selection procedures do not improve a party's electoral performance.*

Hypothesis 2.a. ***(Positive Preferences)****: All else equal, voters prefer parties with more inclusive candidate selection procedures over parties with more exclusive ones.*

Hypothesis 2.b. ***(Null Preferences)****: All else equal, voters do not prefer parties with more inclusive candidate selection procedures over parties with more exclusive ones.*

Hypothesis 3. ***(Low Priority)****: Voters lend low relative priority to candidate selection procedures compared to other key considerations when choosing a party.*

[3]Nevertheless, other factors might mitigate perceptions of procedural fairness under inclusive candidate selection methods. These include, for example, the capacity of party elites and brokers to exert influence in the decision-making process, inequalities in access to resources, and increased intra party factionalism.

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Our hypotheses consider the primary mechanism through which candidate selection methods could sway voters directly. Nevertheless, as the literature implies, inclusive selection could also influence voter behavior indirectly in other ways, for example, candidate quality, media attention, or supporters' engagement levels. While we do not discuss these indirect mechanisms in depth, we remain skeptical about the extent of their influence. First, as discussed above, past works disagree on whether these mediating factors improve under inclusive candidate selection or not. Second, elites can activate these mechanisms more directly, efficiently, and cheaply – for example, by nominating qualified candidates from above or by various campaign strategies – without conceding power and incurring the costs and uncertainty associated with institutional reforms (Shepsle 2001). That being said, if these alternative explanations are sufficiently effective, they should shift the findings against our combined hypotheses and set a higher bar. We revisit this possibility in the article's conclusion.

Empirical Strategy

We test our theoretical expectations using a comparative analysis of both electoral outcomes and individual-level attitudes. First, we examine comparative observational data from thirty-four countries from 1970 to 2019. Using a matching difference-in-differences estimation, we examine the causal relationship between candidate selection democratization and electoral gains (Hypothesis 1). Second, we analyze an original, preregistered conjoint experiment fielded in three countries with different electoral institutions: France, Israel, and Sweden. To test voter preferences (Hypotheses 2.a and 2.b), we estimate whether more inclusive selection methods affect voting decisions while holding other party attributes constant. Then, to test their importance relative to other considerations (Hypothesis 3), we study only cases where they collide and force a choice with the latter. We further look into their cognitive availability using a knowledge question included in our surveys.

This empirical strategy offers several advantages. First, the combination of observational and experimental data provides a fuller view of both the macro-level outcomes and micro-level behavioral mechanisms underlying our theoretical argument. Second, contrary to most prior studies, both components provide a comparative examination extending beyond single cases and institutional contexts. Given the mixed findings in the literature, this outlook increases the generalizability and external validity of our findings. Third, both empirical parts focus on causal inferences within the data's limitations. The observational analysis leverages reforms in candidate selection methods to compare parties that increased inclusiveness with matched control parties that share similar attributes and electoral trajectories but remain more exclusive. The experimental analysis, meanwhile, relies on the randomization of party attributes to asses both their isolated causal influence and their priority relative to competing party attributes. The following sections discuss each empirical component in turn.

Observational Analysis: Electoral Outcomes

Data and Variables

Our observational analysis leverages party reforms in candidate selection procedures to causally identify whether shifts toward more inclusive methods yield electoral returns. To do so, we compiled data on party organizations and election results in thirty-eight democracies between 1970 and 2019. To ensure a comparable democratic baseline, the countries in our sample were selected by two criteria. First, we only include Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development member states. Second, we require a score of 0.75 or higher in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Additive Polyarchy Index (0–1) in a given election year (Coppedge et al. 2024). We include all parties that gained at least 5 per cent of electoral votes in each relevant

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election. Our overall sample includes 576 parties with 2,421 party-election observations. Supplementary Appendix (SA) A.1 lists the sample's countries and election years.

Our main outcome of interest is each party's electoral performance. Our dependent variable is the *vote share* that party i gets in election j, drawing on *ParlGov* data Döring and Düpont (2020).[4] Our primary explanatory variable is the candidate selection inclusiveness level of party i in election j. We measure inclusiveness using a shortened version of Hazan and Rahat's (2010) five-point scale. Specifically, we collapsed the latter into an ordinal three-point index: (1) candidates are selected top-down by the party leader or an executive committee of party leadership; (2) candidates are selected by delegates of local/regional party organizations; or (3) candidates are selected by party members or all registered voters via primaries/caucuses.[5] This classification is measured using candidate nomination data from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party) V2 dataset (Lindberg et al. 2022).

Method

Isolating the impact of candidate selection methods on electoral results poses two inferential challenges. The first challenge is that most parties maintain stable candidate selection procedures over time, making their influence difficult to disentangle from other fixed party attributes. To deal with this issue, we leverage party reforms that switch between different candidate nomination categories. This empirical strategy provides two advantages. First, it examines variations in candidate selection methods while holding other party and country attributes constant. Second, candidate selection methods are likely more visible and politically salient right after such reforms, heightening their potential electoral impact. Since greater inclusiveness is ordinal and relative, we use two alternative measures of change in our scale: *moderate inclusiveness* from category 1 to 2/3 (leadership $\rightarrow$ delegates, members, or voters) and *strict inclusiveness* from categories 1/2 to 3 (leadership or delegates $\rightarrow$ members or voters).

The second inferential challenge is that party elites choose to reform candidate selection neither randomly nor independently of other factors affecting party vote share, including the party's prior electoral performance, expected electoral prospects, and institutional incentives (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Katz 2013; Shomer 2017; Sandri and Seddone 2021). Thus, a simple cross-sectional estimation could be confounded by other factors that explain both the reform and the party's electoral outcomes.

To overcome this problem, we employ a difference-in-differences estimation of matched time-series cross-sectional data (Imai, Kim and Wang 2023). This method compares the electoral performance of 'treated' parties, which reformed their candidate selection, against a matched set of 'control' parties that share parallel electoral trends and similar observable attributes but did not change their selection procedure.

The method involves several steps, summarized in Figure 1. First, we identify parties that democratized their candidate selection based on our scale. Second, we match them with parties that did not make such a change but share a parallel prior trend in both the treatment (pre-change candidate selection method) and the dependent variable (pre-change electoral performance). Third, we refine the matched sets' balance on the lagged treatment status, lagged outcome, and additional party covariates that could otherwise affect electoral performance. Finally, with sufficient balance on these factors, we use a difference-in-differences estimator to infer the

[4]For proper comparability, we use only lower-chamber or unicameral election results.

[5]We compress the scale for two reasons. First, due to their substantive equivalence to voters, we combine selection by a single party leader and by a small leadership committee into the first category. Second, the third category does not differentiate between selection by party members and by all voters since the latter is rarely used in practice. Nonetheless, as discussed below, we include selection by all voters as a separate category in the experimental design, which gauges voter attitudes about hypothetical procedures regardless of actual ubiquity.

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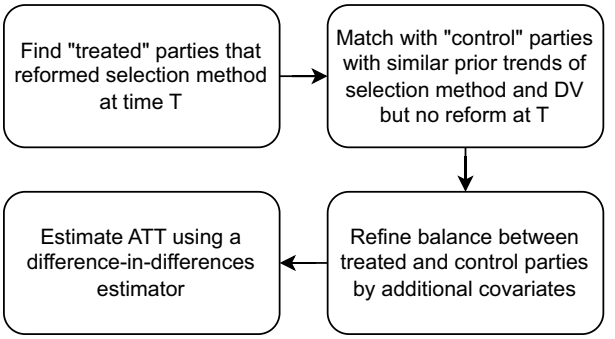


Figure 1. Steps for difference-in-differences estimation using matching with time-series cross-sectional data, based on Imai, Kim and Wang (2023).

Average Treatment effect on the Treated (ATT) of such reforms on vote shares in the subsequent election. We calculate the standard errors using block bootstrapping (1,000 iterations).

The design addresses several additional concerns. First, while most matching techniques assume strictly cross-sectional data, ours are both cross-sectional and time-series with multiple elections per party. Hence, matching on both dimensions fits this data structure better. Second, candidate selection reforms occur sporadically and occasionally more than once, ruling out standard difference-in-differences specifications that assume a single concurrent change in all treated units. By contrast, our approach can accommodate staggered or repeated treatments as part of the matching parameters. Third, since different countries run elections in different years, our observations do not share identical timelines. Moreover, not all parties compete in all election years due to splits, mergers, and alliances. Our selected method bypasses this problem by matching parties on their relative trajectories over time – that is, their ordinal continuum of elections in our data (election 1, 2, 3, etc.) regardless of exact years – before a reform took place.[6] Finally, matching on electoral outcomes in the cycles preceding the treatment reinforces the parallel trend assumption.

Since election cycles are several years apart, we match parties by their selection method and electoral performance in the two elections prior to the reform ($L = 2$). We further refine the matching sets by several relevant covariates that could generate differences in party vote shares. First, we use V-Party data to balance treated and control parties by their positions on three key issues – *economic left-right views*, *cultural liberalism* (gender equality), and *immigration* – shaping electoral competition across the West in recent decades (Kriesi et al. 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2018). Second, we balance parties by their *incumbency status* prior to the election, which often adds an electoral advantage (Ansolabehere and Snyder, Jr. 2002; Cox and Katz 1996), using a dummy variable indicating government membership after the prior election based on V-Party data. Third, we balance parties on whether they compete as part of an *electoral alliance* or not, which can artificially inflate electoral gains by pooling voter bases from multiple parties. Fourth, we balance on country-level *electoral institutions*, which influence strategic incentives for both elite and voter behavior (Cox 1997; Kedar 2009), using V-Dem's classification of lower-chamber electoral systems as majoritarian, proportional, mixed, or other. Fifth, to account for the electoral influence of national economic conditions (Duch and Stevenson 2008), we balance parties on country-level *GDP per capita* in the treated election year. Finally, since candidate selection reforms

[6]This solution assumes that voter reactions to candidate selection reforms are similar throughout the sample period. Nevertheless, as noted below, we estimate a robustness test that adds the election's specific decade as a matching parameter to rule out period effects.

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may be a reaction to other parties' selection methods (Astudillo and Lago 2021), we include a dummy variable indicating whether *any other party in the country reformed its selection method in the prior election cycle*.[7] SA A.2 summarizes the descriptive statistics of all dependent, treatment, and matching variables. We refine the matching using propensity score weighting.[8]

The above procedure yields several matched treatment–control sets. The group of treated parties that implemented moderate inclusiveness reforms – that is, their switched from leadership-based selection to delegates, members, or voters – includes 20 cases with matched sets ranging from 0 to 84 control parties per treatment (the median control set has 59 parties). For strict inclusiveness reforms, which shifted from leadership/delegates to selection by members/voters, there are 7 treated parties. This lower number trades off positively with larger matched control sets, which range from 29 to 169 per treatment (the median control set has 57 parties). Overall, the moderate measure's sample includes $n = 1,037$ parties and the stricter measure's sample includes $n = 632$ parties. SA A.4 elaborates on the treated parties and matched control sets.

Findings

Our analysis calculated the difference-in-differences estimations of the ATT of increasing candidate selection inclusiveness on vote share (Imai, Kim and Wang 2023). We examined the subsequent election after the reform, assuming that their direct influence on voters should be immediate and considering the long periods between election cycles. Figure 2 plots the point estimates with 95% and 90% confidence intervals (thin and thick horizontal lines, respectively) by our two treatment measures.

The findings corroborated Hypothesis 1. Candidate selection democratization did not have a statistically discernible electoral benefit. Parties that underwent moderate democratization of candidate selection had a near-zero ATT of −0.52 points in vote share compared to matched control parties. The estimated ATT of stricter reforms was slightly higher, reaching 2.83 per centage points more than control parties, but had noisy error margins that failed to reach conventional levels of statistical significance at the 95% and 90% levels. Moreover, substantively, a 2-point gain is relatively small except in very close races and contexts (for example, winner-takes-all rules or parties close to the electoral threshold). Thus, although stricter reforms did showcase a weak potential signal, we did not find sufficient evidence that either a moderate or a strict shift to more inclusive candidate selection had a clear electoral benefit.

These null findings are robust to several alternative specifications, detailed in SA A.5. First, despite the lengthy period between election cycles, we extended our estimation to include the second election after the reform. A longer and/or lagged effect would be consistent with alternative explanations underscoring indirect and gradual mechanisms, such as better candidate recruitment and internal recalibration of party operations. The results, however, remained null, suggesting no delayed or longer-term effects on vote shares. Second, the null findings held when we matched on the parties' vote share in three prior cycles instead of two. Third, to verify that the importance of candidate selection methods did not change over time, we re-estimated our analysis while also balancing parties by the particular decade in which their elections took place. The results remained substantively unchanged. Finally, given the noisy but positive signal for strict reforms, we re-estimated the confidence intervals with 10,000 bootstrap iterations instead of 1,000 but found similar outcomes.

[7]This final parameter was omitted from the actual weighting since it exhibits insufficient variation between treatment and control parties.

[8]Alternative matching methods, including Mahalanobis distance and propensity score matching, produce weaker covariate balances. SA A.3 compares each method's covariate balance tests.

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Experimental Analysis: Voter Preferences and Relative Importance

Data and Case Selection

What explains this insignificant effect? Our hypotheses suggest two main reasons. First, voters may have weak isolated preferences for greater candidate inclusiveness. Second, voters may give a low relative priority to candidate selection inclusiveness in their voting calculi. We examined both mechanisms using a preregistered conjoint experiment[9] conducted in three developed democracies with different electoral systems: France, Israel, and Sweden. All three countries held elections in 2022, offering a similar temporal distance from the most recent electoral cycle.

Existing research suggests that institutional and cultural differences across countries – such as electoral rules, electoral traditions, democratic and social norms, and so on – may influence citizen preferences for candidate selection methods (Cross 2008). Thus, fielding the experiment in three different institutional and cultural contexts adds external validity and assuages concerns about idiosyncratic political vagaries due to these differences.

Institutionally, France represents a majoritarian electoral system. Although France's two-round majority-plurality rules are not a pure first-past-the-post system, its multiparty system offers greater variation in candidate selection procedures and lower public association of this issue with particular parties. In the United Kingdom, for instance, candidate selection reform has become publicly identified with the Conservative Party (Alexandre-Collier 2016) and could thus introduce partisan bias. In Canada, another potential case study, all dominant parties (Conservative, New Democrats, and Liberals) use party members as the selectorate with little variation. Israel, by contrast, is a closed-list proportional system with many small to medium parties, where voters choose a single-party ballot with a preset candidate list determined by the parties. Sweden has a preferential-list proportional system, which has become more popular over the past decades (Renwick and Pilet 2016). The country's flexible-list procedure allows voters to choose either a generic party ballot with preset candidates or a specific candidate from one of the lists.The three countries also differ in the type and internal variation of candidate selection methods used by their parties, as detailed in SA B.2. Finally, the cases also differ in various cultural aspects, including gender norms, ethnic heterogeneity and multiculturalism, religion and secularism, political trust, and others.

The survey samples include approximately 1,300 respondents per country (1,301 in France, 1,312 in Israel, and 1,337 in Sweden).[10] Surveys in France and Sweden were both fielded by Dynata on 9–15 October 2023, 2023. Due to the 7 October terror attack and subsequent War in Gaza, the Israeli survey was fielded belatedly on 29–30 January 2024, using the Midgam Project Panel. Both Dynata and Midgam sampled respondents from regularly maintained online panels using nationally representative quotas by age, gender, and region. Due to practical sampling limitations of Arab-Israeli citizens, the Israeli sample includes only Jewish respondents. For quality assurance, we screened respondents with two attention checks at the beginning and middle of the surveys. SA B.1 presents the samples' demographic distributions and compares them with the general population in each country.

Experimental Design

Our experimental study uses a conjoint design, a popular instrument for studying multidimensional preferences (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014; Bansak et al. 2021). Conjoint experiments ask respondents to select their preferred option from a pair of hypothetical choices with randomly assigned attributes. In so doing, they estimate whether the inclusion of particular attributes increases the odds of choosing a given alternative over others. This design is particularly fitting to simulate voting decisions, which consider multiple party characteristics as part of a single choice at the ballot box.

[9]The anonymous preregistration and pre-analysis plan (PAP) files are available at: https://osf.io/69sja/?view_only=814b95ee66224e0d844fbe4e65304391. Our analysis closely follows and extends our PAP, as elaborated in Appendix B.3.

[10]See SA B.1 for a power analysis of this sample size.

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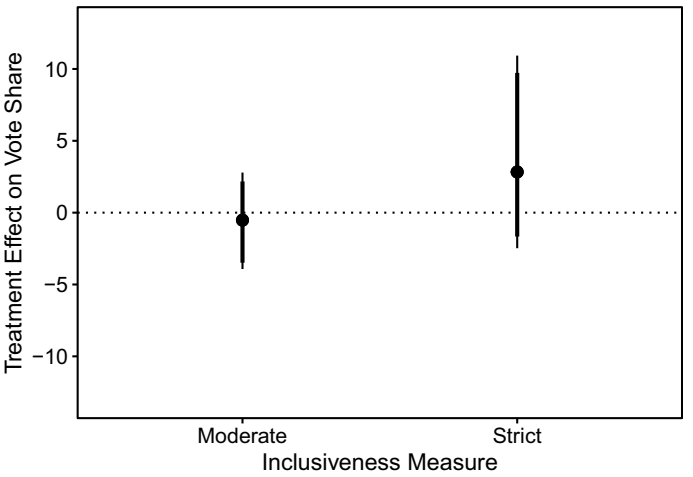


Figure 2. The estimated average treatment effects of candidate selection inclusiveness on treated parties' vote share. The thin and thick horizontal lines indicate 95 per cent and 90 per cent confidence intervals, respectively.

The experiment asked respondents to choose between two profiles of fictional parties, Party A and Party B, assuming an election was held today. We did not use real-world party labels to ensure cross-country comparability and to prevent bias due to partisan attachments and idiosyncratic influences (Brutger et al. 2023).[11] The profiles randomly varied by five party attributes, summarized in Table 2. Whereas parties can differ by many more dimensions, we limited the experiment to five attributes to ease respondents' cognitive burden. We chose a mix of attributes that include ideology, party institutions, and valence, which can apply across cases.

First, as our main attribute of interest, we presented respondents with each fictionalized party's candidate selection procedure (leadership selection, party delegates, party members, or all registered voters). This attribute was listed third rather than first to avoid revealing our goals.[12] Second, to capture the influence of ideology and partisanship, the parties randomly differed by their ideological leaning (left, center-left, center, center-right, right). After the survey, we recoded this variable to reflect each fictional party's relative ideological distance from respondents' own self-identified position on the same 5-point scale, gauged earlier in the survey.[13]

Finally, our experiment included three attributes that capture additional valence considerations: the party leader's professional background and experience (politics, business, or the media), the party's political status (incumbent, opposition, or new party), and the party's female representation (above or below the national average). These attributes convey key aspects of party valence – descriptive representation, experience in government, seasoned leadership, and potential outsider appeal – using real-world cues rather than crude statements about their corruption or competence levels.[14] SA B.4 presents the full questionnaire.

[11]Brutger et al. (2023) demonstrate that experiments that use fictional or unnamed actors remain effective, whereas named actors or additional contextualization may inflate effects due to prior attitudes.

[12]We did not randomize the order of attribute presentation following recent findings of little to no order effects and of a potential cognitive-burden bias by such practices, especially when attributes vary in importance (Rudolph, Freitag and Thurner 2024).

[13]The relative distance is calculated by subtracting respondents' ideological score from the party's score in absolute value ($|I_p - I_r|$).

[14]Using direct descriptions of parties as more or less corrupt or incompetent would not resemble real-world narratives and likely dominate voter selection due to its bluntness; few voters would prefer an explicitly incompetent or corrupt party regardless of position.

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Table 2. Conjoint experiment: randomized attributes and levels

Attribute	Levels
The party's method for selecting candidates for parliament	1. Candidates are selected by the party's national leadership 2. Candidates are selected by delegates of the party's branches 3. Candidates are selected in primaries by the party's registered members 4. Candidates are selected in primaries by all registered voters
The party's ideological leaning[a]	1. Left 2. Center-left 3. Center 4. Center-right 5. Right
The party leader's primary experience	1. Highly experienced in politics 2. Highly experienced in private business 3. Highly experienced in the media
The party's current status	1. The party is currently in government 2. The party is currently in the opposition 3. The party is running for election for the first time
The party's female representation	1. The number of women candidates is below the national average 2. The number of women candidates is above the national average

[a]In the analysis, ideological leaning is recoded to capture their distance from respondents by subtracting the latter's self-identification on the same scale.

Each respondent completed three consecutive selection tasks.[15] The dataset's observations consist of all randomized party profiles presented to every respondent. The outcome variable indicates whether a profile was chosen or rejected and the explanatory variables are its randomly assigned attribute levels. Given the number of profile pairs shown per respondent, the samples include 6,924 observations in the French survey, 7,842 in the Israeli survey, and 6,996 in the Swedish survey.

Voter Preferences

We begin by examining voter preferences for inclusive candidate selection in isolation: *ceteris paribus*, do voters favor parties with more inclusive candidate selection methods over parties with more closed procedures? To answer this question, we regressed the outcome (whether a hypothetical party is chosen over its paired alternative) on a series of dummies indicating all attribute levels listed above. We then calculated each level's Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) compared to their attribute's baseline condition (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014; Bansak et al. 2021). Our main focus was on whether more inclusive selection methods increase the likelihood of party choice compared to leadership-based selection, the baseline level, while controlling for other attributes. Recall that, unlike the observational analysis above, in the experimental setting we break down primaries into more categories to better simulate hypothetical choices.[16]

Figure 3 plots the model's estimates. Our findings supported Hypothesis 2.a and rejected Hypothesis 2.b. All else equal, more inclusive candidate selection procedures increased the odds of

[15]According to past tests, three pairs fall within the number of choice tasks respondents can answer before their response quality degrades (Bansak et al. 2018). SA B.5 verifies profile and task-order neutrality and the lack of carryover or degradation effects.

[16]In the observational analysis, we conducted the analysis in fewer categories because of data availability constraints (see Footnote 3 above).

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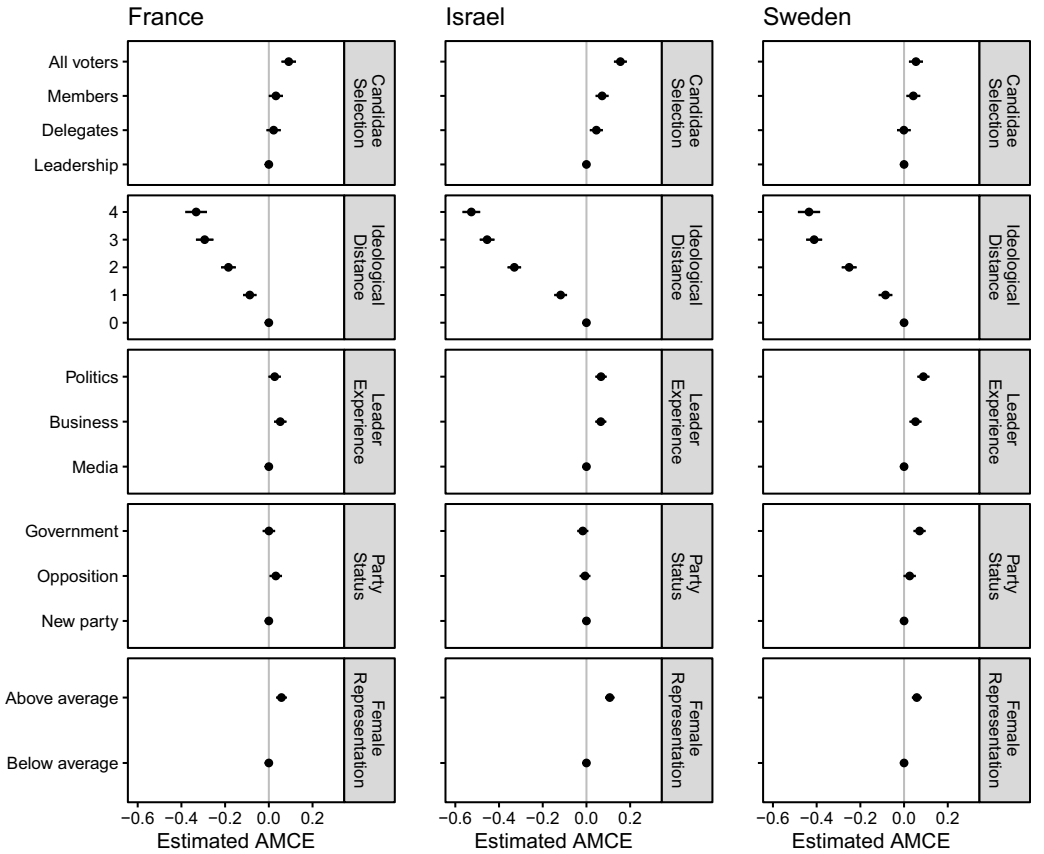


Figure 3. AMCEs of different party attribute levels. The dots and horizontal lines indicate point estimates with 95 per cent confidence intervals. Standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

voting for a party compared to leadership-based selection methods. This pattern was particularly pronounced for parties with open primaries for all registered voters, whose choice probability was higher by 5.4 to 15.5 per centage points (depending on the country) than parties with leadership-based methods. Primaries for party members also raised the odds by 3.2 to 7.1 per centage points. Despite some differences in effect magnitude, the clear replication across all three countries attests to this finding's generalizability and robustness.

Our analysis also revealed preferences on the other attributes. As expected, ideological distance had a significant and strong effect. The gap in selection likelihood between parties with a perfect ideological fit to respondents and parties with the highest distance was 33.3 to 52.7 per centage points. Higher female representation also mattered, raising a party's selection odds by 5.7–10.7 per centage points compared to below-average representation. Leader experience showed a less consistent pattern. While Swedish and Israeli respondents prefered parties whose leaders have meaningful political or business experience over a background in the media, French respondents favored business experience over both. Finally, party status showed the weakest direct influence. Respondents in France and Israel did not favor a particular incumbency status, whereas Swedish respondents were more likely to vote for an incumbent party over new parties by 7.1 per centage points.

As a robustness test, our surveys also included a second conjoint experiment. To further control for the strong influence of ideological considerations, the second experiment asked respondents to choose between pairs of institutional reform packages for a party with which they already agree

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ideologically. The reform's randomized attributes included more/less inclusive candidate selection (our main attribute of interest), more national/local focus, greater/lower parliamentary discipline, donor/member-based funds, and more/fewer female candidate quotas. The results corroborated our main findings. In all three countries, respondents prefered institutional reforms that increase candidate selection inclusiveness. SA B.8 elaborates on this test.

Relative Priority

How does the positive preference for more inclusive candidate selection align with the insignificant electoral outcomes we found earlier? Hypothesis 3 suggests that voters put low relative priority on democratized candidate selection compared to other considerations. To test this possibility, we wanted to see how respondents prioritized different attributes when forced to choose between them rather than hold them constant.

To do so, we leveraged the conjoint experiment's paired forced-choice design and created four subsetted datasets. Each subsample retains only observations with less appealing levels on one other attribute, in turn, than their paired alternative. Thus, each dataset represents profiles that necessarily trade off another dimension if chosen: farther ideological distance (first subsample), lower leader experience in politics (second subsample), no incumbency status (third subsample), or less female representation (fourth subsample).[17] The subsetted datasets ranged from 1,764 to 2,747 observations. SA B.6 demonstrates the subsetting procedure using a hypothetical example.

In each subsample, we regress the outcome – whether the suggested party, which necessarily sacrifices another attribute, was preferred – on all other attribute levels and estimate their marginal means (MMs). Contrary to AMCEs, which measure relative differences compared to an attribute's baseline level, MMs in paired-choice conjoints can be interpreted as predicted probabilities (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley 2020). An attribute level with an MM value above 0.5 indicates a favorable probability (over 50%) of selecting a party featuring it over an alternative. Conversely, an attribute level with MM values below 0.5 signifies a greater likelihood of losing to competing parties, whereas 0.5 represents a null influence (that is, akin to a coin toss). In this case, since each subset forces a loss in one other attribute, candidate selection methods with MMs above 0.5 indicate greater priority than the former. By contrast, MMs below 0.5 suggest unwillingness to sacrifice the other attribute even at the cost of more exclusive selection methods.

Figure 4 showcases the results in each of the four subsetted datasets. For brevity, we only display the coefficients for candidate selection levels.[18] Each panel exhibits the estimated MMs of different candidate selection methods given a forced trade-off with another dimension. As a baseline reference, the top-left panel shows the MMs of candidate selection methods in the full and unconstrained sample.

The findings reveal the dominance of ideological distance. As the top-center panel shows, parties that face a competitor with closer ideological proximity to respondents always lose – that is, have an estimated MM below 0.5 – regardless of their candidate selection method. Although the most inclusive selection procedure has slightly higher MMs than more exclusive ones, its values remain below 0.5 and reflect a 30 to 36.6 per cent probability of being selected. Meanwhile, the most closed method, selection by leadership, exhibits the lowest MM estimates (14.5 to 29.5 per cent).

Female representation poses another notable counter-force, albeit not as strong as ideology. Any selection method except by all voters is more likely to lose if it trades off with lower female representation. Facing this sacrifice, the selection probabilities of these procedures ranged from

[17]Loss of leader experience in politics assumes the following favorability order: political experience > business experience > media experience. Loss of incumbency assumes the following hierarchy: party in government > new party > party in opposition. Loss of ideological proximity and female representation are ranked straightforwardly.

[18]SA B.7 presents the full results with all attributes.

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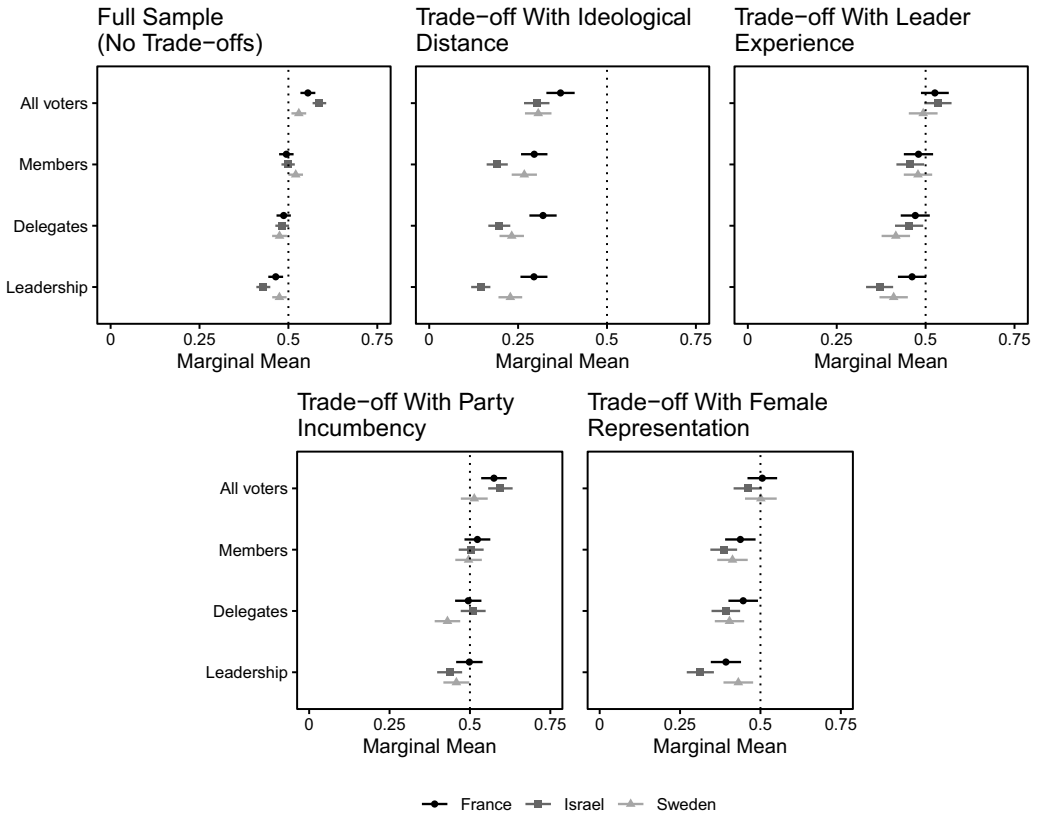


Figure 4. MMs of different candidate selection methods under forced trade-offs with different attributes. The dots and horizontal lines indicate point estimates with 95 per cent confidence intervals. Standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

38.6 to 46 per cent depending on the exact method and country. At the same time, opening candidate selection to all voters, the most inclusive procedure, balances the loss of female representation. In such as case, neither alternative – a party with exclusive selection and high female representation versus a party with open primaries for all voters but lower female representation – consistently wins over the other (MM values statistically indistinguishable from 50 per cent at a 95 per cent significance level).

Leadership experience and incumbency status showed the weakest priority compared to candidate selection. Although the MM values of selection methods decreased slightly under a leader with lower political experience, the differences from the full baseline model (top-left corner) were relatively small. Nevertheless, they did neutralize the positive edge of open primaries for all voters. The loss of incumbency status, meanwhile, did not have a noteworthy effect on MM values compared to the baseline model, indicating that it was dominated by candidate selection methods within respondents' priorities.

Taken together, these findings supported Hypothesis 3. When selecting a party, respondents prioritize its ideological position above all other considerations. Although parties with open primaries fare slightly better than more closed ones, they are still likely lose to ideologically closer parties. Additionally, female representation dominates most selection procedures except for all-voter primaries. This result is meaningful given this method's rarity in the real world: only three

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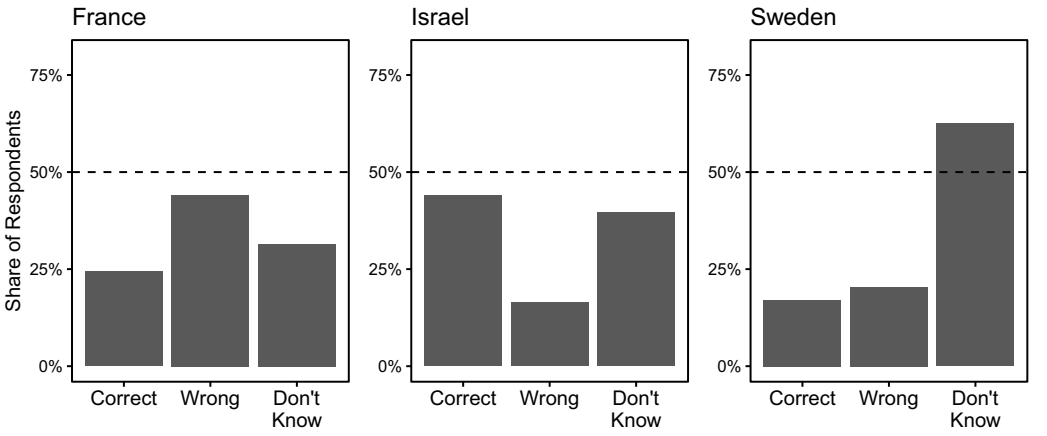


Figure 5. Respondents' recall of their elected party's candidate selection method in the most recent election.

parties in our observational data opened their primaries to all registered voters.[19] At the same time, candidate selection is not the weakest consideration, especially compared to leadership experience and party status, indicating some non-zero priority. These results, too, replicated across all three countries despite their different institutional and political contexts.

Real-World Knowledge

Alongside its advantages, our conjoint design is limited by its explicitness, which presents voters with clearly stated party attributes. In reality, however, voters do not pay equal attention to all party characteristics, a sign of their internal priorities in itself. Thus, some respondents may overstate dormant preferences when asked about them directly but overlook them in real life. Real-world attention, therefore, provides an additional indication of an attribute's relative priority and cognitive availability to voters when thinking about electoral politics.

To address this limitation and reaffirm our experimental findings, we concluded our survey with a simple multiple-choice knowledge question. We first requested that respondents state the party for which they voted in the most recent elections, which were held a year prior (2022) in all three countries, and estimate their attachment to it on a 0–10 scale. Next, we asked whether they recall this party's candidate selection method in the last elections, as follows: 'Think of the party that you voted for in the last election. To the best of your knowledge, how did this party select its candidates for parliament? If you cannot remember or are unsure, please mark the appropriate answer (option 4) without guessing or checking the correct answer.' The answer scale included five options: (1) 'Candidates were selected by the party's leaders'; (2) 'Candidates were selected by an internal body of party representatives, like a committee or a convention'; (3) 'Candidates were selected by primary elections'; (4) 'I do not know or currently cannot remember'; (5) 'I did not vote in the last election.' We then collected real-world data on party procedures in each country and recoded the answers into the following categories: a correct answer, a wrong answer, or a stated lack of knowledge/memory.[20]

Figure 5 presents the distribution of answers. To reduce bias, we employed survey weights representing each country's adult population by gender, age, and education. The results aligned with our earlier findings. In all three countries, only a minority of voters knew/remembered the

[19]These include Iceland's Social Democratic Party (1971–1996) and Italy's Democratic Party and Five Star Movement (both in 2013).

[20]SA B.9 lists our coding scheme of the correct answers in each country.

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candidate selection method used by the party for which they voted only one year earlier. This pattern was most pronounced in France and Sweden, where less than a quarter of respondents (24.4 and 17.1 per cent, respectively) answered correctly. Israeli respondents fared better, with 43.9 per cent answering successfully, but the majority still answered wrongly or could not remember.[21] The findings, therefore, supported our expectation that voters devote low attention and cognitive resources for candidate selection methods when supporting a party.

Conclusion

Facing high public distrust, party elites have increasingly turned to intra party democracy procedures to win back discontented voters. Inclusive candidate selection methods, in particular, cue voters about parties' willingness to better represent and empower their supporters and to promote transparency and accountability. The popular appeal of this strategy has received growing scholarly attention, particularly as developed democracies face growing anti-establishment forces. Nevertheless, existing research provides inconclusive theoretical and empirical answers about its electoral success.

In this article, we explore this question both theoretically and empirically. We argue that the democratization of legislative candidate selection should lead to an electoral gain only if voters both prefer it over exclusive procedures and prioritize it highly enough when voting. Our analysis establishes that only the former condition holds. In isolation, voters prefer parties with more inclusive practices. However, when facing real-world trade-offs, they prioritize ideological considerations and female representation even at the cost of more exclusive nomination procedures. Voters also exhibit low knowledge and memory of real-world candidate selection methods, another indication of the latter's weak cognitive priority. Indeed, we found that parties that democratize their candidate selection did not perform electorally better than comparable parties that remained more closed. These conclusions are supported by observational and experimental data from multiple countries, reinforcing their generalizability, external validity, and robustness.

Our analysis examines the direct and seemingly strongest pathway through which more inclusive candidate selection methods could influence voters. However, as discussed earlier, such influences could also operate indirectly by improving candidate quality (Adams and Merrill III 2008; Serra 2011; Snyder and Ting 2011; Ascencio 2023; Ichino and Nathan 2022), increasing a party's media visibility (Mahéo 2017; Pedersen and Schumacher 2015; Put and Shomer 2023b), or energizing core activists (Shomer, Put and Gedalya-Lavy 2018; Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021). On the face of it, all three channels could benefit parties electorally even if voters disregard the institutional procedures themselves.

Could such mechanisms operate in the background? On the one hand, due to their indirect nature, such influences could be compatible with our behavioral argument and experimental findings. Moreover, they may help explain the noisy but positive signal in our observational analysis of strict reforms. On the other hand, the overall null pattern in our estimations and robustness tests, as well as prior mixed findings, do not bode well for indirect explanations. If true, we should have seen clearer electoral gains across countries and years. Instead, the empirical inconclusiveness implies that these mechanisms may operate inconsistently or too weakly across cases, if at all. Furthermore, this uncertainty also fits competing arguments about the potential risks of inclusive nomination methods, such as more extreme and less representative candidates

[21]This difference may reflect two unique aspects of Israeli politics. First, the country has experienced a prolonged political crisis with five election cycles between 2019 and 2022, likely raising public attention to party nominations. Second, several of the country's parties use obvious candidate selection methods that are easy to guess. For instance, ultra-Orthodox parties are famously governed by small committees of rabbis that select candidates from above. Several other parties were established ad hoc around individual politicians who set candidate lists on their own.

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(Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018; Broockman et al. 2021; Hinojosa 2012), increased perceptions of corruption (Charron and Schwenk 2023), and negative public attention (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Shomer 2017).

Such indirect channels notwithstanding, our argument and findings tell a consistent story about the weak electoral effectiveness of candidate selection democratization. Contrary to the strong media and political attention devoted to candidate selection procedures and reforms, voters do not seem to attach sufficient priority to the secret garden of politics. As such, our analysis emphasizes the limits of narrow procedural reforms without addressing deeper systemic issues underlying voter dissatisfaction with the current political and democratic system.

While our article focuses on legislative candidate selection, we believe that our findings inform party leadership contests as well. On the one hand, some factors may generate stronger voter reactions in the latter case. In an age of growing political personalization, leaders enjoy greater national prominence, media coverage, and personal appeal than legislative candidates (Wauters et al. 2016). Accordingly, their selection may be more salient and consequential for the party's image and ideological direction. On the other, these characteristics are true regardless of selection method, potentially limiting the latter's importance. Moreover, party leaders are often selected long before the election, further weakening the procedure's influence on later voting. Finally, as Kenig, Rahat and Hazan (2016) show, the fundamental behavioral and institutional assumptions behind both selection types are largely the same. Accordingly, partisanship and leader attributes likely overshadow leadership selection procedures, too. Nevertheless, the electoral implications of candidate versus leadership nomination procedures have not been directly compared, inviting further examination of this question.

Our contribution lays the foundation for several other directions for future research as well. One path should examine the impact of the indirect mechanisms discussed above more rigorously. This line of work could leverage broader comparative data and develop more nuanced arguments about the contexts in which certain influences may be more effective. A second avenue should explore heterogeneous attitudes and behavior across voter subgroups. Specifically, younger, better-informed, or more strongly partisan voters may have different priorities and political interests than other subgroups. Accordingly, they may respond differently to candidate selection reforms. Perceptions of political participation, trust in institutions, and other cultural norms may also shape voter reactions to democratized selection processes in non-trivial ways. Finally, future research could also study whether voter prioritization of candidate selection methods is sensitive to external influences, including media framing, elite rhetoric, and peer pressure.

Our conclusions, lastly, carry practical implications for party elites looking to increase the political legitimacy of their decisions and heighten trust in political parties. A main lesson from our analysis is that party elites should look elsewhere for effective mechanisms that signal voters about their commitment to better representation, transparency, and accountability. For instance, such alternative avenues could include national reforms toward more proportional electoral systems and better representation of historically disadvantaged groups (Karp and Banducci 2008; Stauffer 2021). At the same time, our findings suggest that parties cannot neglect the bread and butter of representative democracy: ideological competition and proper representation of voter positions and group identities.

Nevertheless, our analysis does not imply that intra party democratization is unimportant. An equally significant lesson is that such procedures should be debated and judged on other intrinsic merits. One potential advantage may be functional: involving activists and core voters in party decision making can strengthen internal cohesion, political socialization, and campaigning, which could also yield electoral benefits in the long run. Another potential benefit may be the fortification of a broader democratic culture. Even if they do not bring new votes, party procedures that lend greater voice to supporters can improve public deliberation, transparency, and attentiveness to voter grievances. Moreover, they can cultivate stronger voter perceptions of political self-efficacy, democratic values, and public trust in political institutions. Indeed, past

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research shows that democratized legislative candidate selection processes can enhance citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Webb, Scarrow and Poguntke 2022; Shomer, Put and Gedalya-Lavy 2016), political engagement (Shomer, Put and Gedalya-Lavy 2018; Put and Shomer 2023a), and visibility of political activity (Frech and Hug 2024). These goals are significant in themselves in an age of growing anti-democratic sentiments and challenges to representative democracy.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425100744

Data availability statement. Replication data for this article can be found in Harvard Dataverse at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VWCZWD.

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