

In the right place, at the right time: Opportunity structures and candidates' chances of getting elected for the first time

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ABSTRACT

The foundational principle of representative democracy is that legislative elites can be replaced in elections. Yet, first-time parliamentary entries have received little attention. We present the first systematic attempt to examine the conditions of first-time parliamentary entry in multimember district PR systems. We introduce an overlooked explanatory factor, candidates' short-term opportunity structure. While controlling for personal vote-earning attributes (PVEAs), we examine how competitive context shapes newcomers' chances in a pure OLPR system where party elites cannot skew competition between candidates. Our register-based analysis of candidacies in seven Finnish parliamentary elections (1995–2019, $n = 7548$) shows that while personal qualities enhance candidates' chances, first-time entry is restricted by the competitive context, especially the decisions of incumbent MPs. The strong impact of exceptional PVEAs suggests that other “big fish” candidates may also shape competitive contexts. Overall, the study indicates that electoral competition can be rather restricted even in the most competitive electoral systems.

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1. Introduction

The foundational principle of representative democracy is that legislative elites can be held accountable and replaced in elections. The capacity of electoral systems to reflect this function is thus a significant question and well worthy of empirical exploration. At the individual level, the question boils down to the possibilities of newcomers to enter parliament. To enhance their chances, contenders can build their personal qualities and reputation. However, as we stress in this paper, even a staunch and prolonged personal effort might never lead to a seat, because external factors like the changing fortunes, resources and decisions of parties and co-contenders keep the competitive context – and candidates' relative chances – in constant motion. The reality of renewal of legislative elites may thus differ considerably from the ideal of merit-based electoral competition. Surprisingly, thus far first-time

parliamentary entries have largely avoided explicit scholarly attention. For these reasons, we specifically focus on the question of first-time entries and how these are affected by the short-term opportunity structure candidates face prior elections in multimember district PR systems.

Thus far, studies on candidate careers have mostly analysed how candidates' personal qualities impact their vote shares. The most prominent strand has focused on MPs. The substantial electoral advantage of incumbency, and MPs' efforts to use this position to their own benefit, have been thoroughly documented, both under candidate-centred open list PR systems (OLPR) and more party-dominated electoral systems (Put and Maddens 2013; Golden and Picci 2015; Moral et al., 2015; Dahlgard 2016; Dettman et al., 2017; André et al., 2017; Poyet 2021). Recently, scholars have put more attention on non-elected candidates, analysing the impact of personal attributes on vote shares under different levels of intra-party competition (e.g., Shugart et al. 2005; von Schoultz & Papageorgiou 2019; Put and Maddens 2015). Only a few studies, however, analyse seat-winning (compared to vote-earning), and none of these studies have focused explicitly on first-time entries (Tavits 2010; Bengtsson 2016). Regarding them, conceptually the closest efforts are the few recent studies that

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investigated the factors behind candidates' chances of reaching a viable list position in closed- (CLPR) or flexible-list (FLPR) systems – a position that equals parliamentary entry if a party can expect to win seats (Put et al., 2021; Ceyhan 2018; Chiru and Popescu 2017; Folke et al., 2016; Put and Maddens 2013). However, as party elites control the composition of candidate lists in these systems, the ability of these cases to illuminate the impact of other contextual factors and candidates' personal qualities beyond mere party loyalty is very limited (as also noted by Put et al., 2021). To summarize, from the perspective of first-time parliamentary entry, existing studies are hence limited by 1) by the choice of the dependent variables (re-election, vote shares and list positions, not entries) and 2) institutional contexts that systematically skew inter-candidate competition. We therefore know little about how the competitive context affects first-time parliamentary entry in candidate-centred electoral systems that more clearly reflect the ideal of elite reshuffling through competitive elections.

In this study, we make three contributions to these literatures. First, we introduce a dependent variable that, as we explain below, captures a career step that can be considered the most significant for the candidate: the moment when s/he wins a seat for the first time. Second, we study first-time entries under conditions where non-incumbent candidates can (theoretically) make a difference through their public efforts and personal qualities. Compared to CLPR and FLPR where party elites (largely) control parliamentary entry, in OLPR voters decide which of the nominated candidates get in. Hence, OLPR electoral rules maximise personalised campaigning and intra-party competition, reflecting the ideal of elite renewal through open electoral competition. Our third and most important contribution concerns the determinants of first-time entry. We theoretically outline and empirically test how the opportunity structure candidates face influence their chances of getting elected for the first time. We argue that even in formally unrestricted inter-candidate competition under OLPR rules, factors which ordinary candidates cannot control, like parties' electoral fortunes, decisions of incumbent MPs to run again (or not), and perhaps even the possible emergence of exceptional candidates, can significantly impact candidates' possibilities to win a seat.

In terms of main electoral institutions, Finland provides a good setting for exploring these dynamics. In addition to its highly candidate-centred electoral system, Finland is one of the few countries in the world to mandate membership ballots in candidate selection, which limit the ability of party elites to manage intra-party competition (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). Thus, as Passarelli (2020, 250–251) has noted, even among countries which use preferential voting systems, Finnish voters have the greatest influence on MP selection. We reason that the personal qualities of candidates should 'most likely' impact parliamentary entry in Finland and, consequently, minimise the impact of structural factors, making Finland a suitable place for trying the contextual effects. However, as we acknowledge the limits of single-country case study for generalisation, we envisage our effort as a "plausibility probe", i.e., an introduction and a preliminary exploration of new potentially significant theoretical factors that seeks to inspire and give empirical benchmark for future research (see Eckstein 2000).

In developing our theoretical position, we used existing research literature and 22 in-depth interviews of Finnish district- and national-level party elites that we conducted in 2019–2020. The empirical section of the paper is based on register data of all candidacies across seven Finnish parliamentary elections (1995–2019, $n = 7548$). We use it to analyse how candidate qualities, like electoral experience and Personal Vote Earning Attributes (PVEAs) (Shugart, 2005) compare with the impact of situational factors in competitive contexts.

Broadly in line with our expectations, we find that factors relating to candidates' short-term opportunity structure, such as MPs of the same party stepping down, indeed matter for their chances of entering parliament for the first time. Prolonged effort (several subsequent attempts) and local-level political experience increase candidates' chances, but often being elected or not is contingent on the intra-party

competitive circumstances. Emphasising this dynamic, we observed that certain exceptional personal attributes (national-level celebrity and party leadership position) strongly increase candidates' chances of first-time entry. While reflecting personal qualities, the emergence of such "big fish" candidates can also be interpreted as an external shock comparable to a sudden exit of an incumbent MP – but in reverse fashion, limiting the chances of 'ordinary' newcomers. Overall, our study demonstrates that even in the institutionally most competitive electoral context inter-candidate competition and elite renewal is limited by structural factors operating outside of the control of individual candidates. However, compared to party-dominated closed-list systems, in candidate-centred systems the gatekeeping role falls from party elites on powerful individual candidates whose decision to run (or not run) for office significantly impacts the general competitive dynamics.

1.1. First-time parliamentary entry: institutions, personal qualities and situational opportunities

Although shifts in personal vote-shares reveal important features of electoral competition (e.g., von Schoultz & Papageorgiou 2019; Put and Maddens 2015), an aspiring career politician's overarching goal is to win a seat in parliament. In many ways, it is the most significant career step for politicians in advanced democracies. Entering parliament for the first time signifies the apex of candidate's campaign path, which likely began in the meetings of local party branches and municipal boards. For most candidates, a seat in parliament also constitutes the ultimate goal, as only a small number continue to take on government positions. Most importantly, first-time entry significantly impacts future campaigning, since after being elected, MPs' success becomes significantly conditioned by incumbency advantage (Erikson 1971; Dahlgaard 2016). Getting in for the first time differs fundamentally from all subsequent entries, in terms of causes and consequences.

Theoretically, three types of factors can impact candidates' chances of achieving first-time entry: 1) the institutional setting (electoral system and parties), 2) candidates' personal qualities and, 3) the short-term opportunity structures candidates face. We next examine and relate these factors into a process model that details our main argument. In essence, it posits that even in strongly candidate-centred electoral systems inter-candidate competition and parliamentary entry can become severely and systematically limited by factors that individual challenger candidates cannot control.

In all cases, political institutions shape the incentives of individuals and thus describing challenger's path to parliament should begin from clarifying them. The literature has drawn an illustrative difference between closed-list systems and open-list systems. In the former case, party elites determine who will appear on the party list and in which order the candidates fill the seats that the party wins, so prospective candidates should primarily seek to please party elites and not individual voters. When the list order is decided by party leaders, voters have only a limited say on who gets in and not much incentive to study the qualities of individual candidates. Hence, in these systems candidate qualities like loyalty, ideological purity and dedication tend to be emphasised. (Carey and Shugart 1995; Shugart, 2005; Chiru and Popescu 2017).

In OLPR systems, too, district party heads can control list entry (Norris, 1997; Gallagher, 1988), but the final ordering of the candidates, i.e., who fills the seats parties win, depends on candidates' personal vote shares. Prospective candidates thus face two "principals", in sequential fashion: they must first convince *party elites* to get on the list and then they need to convince *voters* to choose them over their co-partisan contenders. To succeed in the latter, candidates need to cultivate a personal vote, i.e., the portion of votes that does not relate to candidates' party affiliation (that all candidates of the same party share) but to their personal qualities (Cain et al., 1987).

The second category of factors that can impact first-time entries include several types of personal qualities that have been linked to candidates' competitiveness. Naturally, the varying preferences of

voters and the efforts of parties to balance them in multi-member district PR systems means that objectively ideal candidates cannot really exist (Put et al., 2021). On a more general level, however, candidates can develop and possess qualities that enhance personal vote. So-called personal vote-earning attributes (PVEAs) function as informational heuristics that allow voters to differentiate between candidates, making them particularly relevant in intra-party competition. The reputation-enhancing quality of PVEAs relates to visibility and name recognition. Important local-level factors range from a candidate's birthplace to experience in local offices, which signal inside knowledge and accomplishments to voters (Shugart & Carey 1995; Shugart, 2005; Tavits 2009). In national contexts, PVEAs are gained and work somewhat differently. There, they relate to exceptional public exposure that has been attained through high-ranking public positions or leisure-related celebrity (former sports stars, etc.) (Crisp et al., 2013). Especially the latter reflect candidates' past careers that have been pursued with no electoral intention. Although positions in local parties and representative assemblies can also be pursued without direct intention to enhance one's future electoral prospects, they are generally considered as steppingstones for more demanding positions. While both types of PVEA enhance name recognition, local and national PVEAs are thus essentially different categories.

Recently, scholars have recognised a more general personal quality which reflects the candidate's overall effort and motivation. According to Put and Maddens (2013), electoral experience (i.e., competing in several consecutive elections) is not only beneficial for candidates in OLPR seeking to increase their personal recognition and vote share, but it also benefits candidates in closed-list systems, as continuing efforts display commitment and dedication to party elites. Electoral experience also builds resources that are generally valuable: campaigning experience, networks, name recognition and visibility. Like local PVEAs, and perhaps even more so, electoral experience reflects candidates' deliberate efforts to become an MP. While this is not of course true for all candidates – sometimes individuals run just to fill party lists, for example – consecutive attempts are a good empirical measure for candidates' general effort level.

Finally, we introduce situational dynamics of competitive contexts that can impact candidates' chances for first-time entry in party systems that are competitive also at inter-candidate level. In general, we understand the competitive context as a 'short-term opportunity structure', using the well-established concept of 'political opportunity structure' that originated in the literature on social movements (Tarrow, 1989). There, it has been used to identify 'specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others' (Kitschelt, 1986, 58). More recently, the concept has been used to identify various contextual configurations which might influence the opportunity for political actors to succeed (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Spicer et al. 2017; Chiru et al., 2020). This is also how we conceive "opportunity structure" in relation to parliamentary entry.

Our understanding of the situational forces that shape the opportunities of prospective MPs builds primarily on the varying relationship between candidates and parties in different electoral systems. As was noted above, in the party-dominated closed-list systems candidates are heavily dependent on the wills of incumbent party elites who determine both list entry and rankings whereas in OLPR systems candidates are strongly incentivised to also develop a personal vote base which allows them to differentiate from co-partisan competitors (Shugart, 2005). Our theoretical addition to this general dynamic concerns the incentives of parties and voters. Under closed-list system, due to voters' limited chance to impact which individuals get elected, vote choice generally relates more to collective party labels. Instead, under OLPR parties' seat share results directly from the pooled preference votes gained by *individual candidates* and therefore parties, too, essentially benefit from the deliberate activities and personal qualities of candidates that increase

their personal votes. Compared to closed-list systems, OLPR's higher overall dependency on personal votes strengthens the mutual dependence between parties and candidates and empowers the latter vis-à-vis the former. In OLPR candidates' personal qualities and efforts should pay more dividends for first-time entry.

However, instead of leading to unrestricted competition, due to party- and voter-related dynamics inter-candidate competition under OLPR is also likely unequal and systematically skewed, hindering the overall value of newcomers' personal qualities and efforts. While parties and candidates ideally share the incentive and effort to maximise *all personal votes*, parties' heavy dependence on *well-performing candidates* affects candidates' relative value. List formation phase is an illustrative example. Although even in OLPR party elites might be nominally empowered to fix candidate lists, in practice the heavy dependence on preference votes limits party elites' leverage considerably. If a candidate is crucially important for party's success in a particular district, e.g., an incumbent MP who possess significant personal support base, it becomes very difficult for the district party elite to remove him/her from the list, even if it had good political reasons to do so. While shifting power from party elites to dominant candidates, the personalised dynamic that rests on candidates' formidable personal standing impacts the incentives and relative chances of potential co-contenders.

Considering the perspective of voters, the idea that the actions of incumbent MPs might condition the possibilities of new contenders can be traced from the extensive literature on the incumbency advantage, which has demonstrated under various contexts that the electoral advantage of holding legislative office is substantial and difficult for challengers to overcome (Erikson 1971; Gelman and King 1990; Dahlgard 2016). The advantage is theorised to derive from the larger resources that incumbents have at their disposal (Gelman and King 1990), such as office-related perks (Abramowitz 1991), better access to media, and more extensive fundraising abilities (Coates 1995). Incumbents are also generally considered as high-quality candidates (Ansolabehere et al., 2000) due to their extensive political experience, and they might be perceived as less risky vote choice, compared to candidates without a record of service.

For these reasons, an incumbent MP's decision to re-run should significantly lower the relative chances of challengers. Conversely, when an incumbent MP decides to step down, the probabilities of new candidates to enter parliament should increase significantly. However, in addition to this basic dynamic we must also recognise the possibility of more complex, interactive dynamics. For example, an opening of a seat may incentivise party officials to look for new hopefuls to join the game, increasing supply and competition, and lowering the relative probabilities of newcomers. Overall, all changes in the existing group of district MPs are likely to create less predictable dynamics, which might have a substantial impact on the relative value of the local and national level PVEAs mentioned above and well-established in previous research on candidates' vote-earning.

We also acknowledge that a change in the opportunity structure of ordinary challenger candidates does not necessarily only relate to incumbent MPs. For example, the emergence of a "big fish", a non-MP candidate who enjoys exceptional name recognition can also be a hurdle for an aspiring "ordinary" candidate. Compared to incumbent MPs whose career stage and moves are likely rather well known among party activist groups from which majority of challengers emerge, the emergence of a "big fish" may be more unexpected, and more detrimental from a career perspective. In addition, volatility in vote choices, created by overall shifts in party popularity, can also create new opportunities for challengers, as the party may gain new seats. When a party experiences a tailwind and manages to bring in enough votes to secure a new seat, a similar beneficial context for aspiring candidates arises. The opposite situation, a headwind in popularity and a lost seat, in turn involves a change to more negative opportunity structure for aspiring candidates. As the luring of "big fishes" and shifts in parties' general popularity can result from the actions of national parties, in such cases

the local competitive conditions are even less in the hands of district-level hopefuls.

To sum up, our rather self-evident but previously understated point is that even in highly candidate-centred, personalised and competitive OLPR systems intra-party competition should not be conceived as free competition between individual candidates that always have an equal opportunity to enhance their position. Instead, besides the qualities and resources of candidates, their opportunities are always shaped by external factors beyond their control. These factors are situational, meaning that they actualise in the short-term, perhaps rather unexpectedly, and they impact how far a candidate gets with his/her personal resources and qualities that are temporally more fixed.

Deriving from the reasoning outlined above we propose the following hypotheses related to the personal qualities of candidates, the short-term opportunity structure which they face and the interactions between these, to be tested in our empirical section:

Personal qualities of candidates.

H1. The chances of first-time entry increase with the personal vote-earning attributes that a candidate exhibits.

H2. The chances of first-time entry increase with electoral experience, i.e. with the number of consecutive attempts.

Short-term opportunity structure.

H3. The chances of first-time entry increase with the number of MPs representing the same party list stepping down.

H4. The chances of first-time entry increase with the number of MPs in the district stepping down.

Interactions.

H5a. The effect of personal vote-earning attributes on first-time entry is conditioned by the number of MPs representing the same party list stepping down.

H5b. The effect of personal vote-earning attributes on first-time entry is conditioned by the number of MPs in the district stepping down.

1.2. The Finnish electoral context

Our study focuses on the OLPR electoral system in Finland, which is characterised by high levels of both inter- and intra-party competition. This means that most voters are influenced by both parties and individual candidates when they cast their vote. Several institutional factors increase candidate-centredness in Finland. During candidate nomination, Finnish party elites are relatively weak, as the law grants exceptionally significant powers to party members take part in the process of list formation via membership ballots (Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Helander, 1997). Another aspect that distinguishes Finnish elections from many other list PR systems, is that the fully open lists make it impossible for parties to guarantee the election of any individual candidate. The preference votes determine which candidates are elected, and most parties present their candidates in alphabetical order.¹ Parties are allowed to nominate 14 candidates in each district or as many candidates as there are seats to be distributed. During the time period of this study (1999–2019) the number of electoral districts on the mainland has varied from 12 to 14, with a district magnitude ranging from 7 to 36.²

¹ Certain Finnish parties have used rank-ordered lists in some districts (primarily the Social Democratic Party). The share of rank-ordered lists has, however, decreased substantially over the period of study. In 1999, they constituted 38% of all lists fielded by the eight main Finnish parties. In 2019, the share of rank-ordered lists fielded by the same parties had decreased to 5% (Söderlund et al., 2021).

² There is an additional single-member district, the Åland Islands, which is excluded from our study.

Votes are cast for individual candidates and all candidate votes are pooled at party level within each district. Vote pooling provides parties with low incentives to manage the distribution of votes across candidates and encourages them to field full lists (Shugart and Taagepera 2017). In the 2019 election, the number of candidates running in the largest district of Uusimaa (Nyland) was 492. The large number of candidates meant that many of these could be described as ‘top-up candidates’ (Arter 2013), i.e., candidates without a chance or the ambition to win a parliamentary seat. These candidates were nominated to bring in votes from specific voter subgroups and to ensure that the list was balanced in terms of gender, age and geography, so that all potential party voters were able to identify a suitable candidate. The large number and the alphabetical ordering of candidates creates a challenging setting for voters, since they do not have easily accessible information regarding the candidates, considered by the parties to be the most qualified to represent the party in parliament. This in turn contributes to intense and open competition for seats, in which name-recognition, especially stemming from national-level incumbency, celebrity status or a strong, geographically-determined platform in the form of local office holding, have proven to be valuable attributes for candidates to display.

The high level of competition between candidates does, however, not imply that parties are irrelevant in Finnish politics. In fact, the contrary is the case. Notwithstanding certain local peculiarities established parties have gained a monopoly over candidate nomination that is protected by law. Over half of the voters consider the choice of party to be more important than that of candidate (Karvonen 2010), and primarily look for a suitable candidate for whom to vote among the nominated candidates of a particular party. All parties act as cohesive groups in parliament (Pajala 2013) and in this respect, the Finnish political system very much resembles that of other European proportional electoral systems using closed or flexible lists.

1.3. Data and measures

We derive our main data from an extensive Finnish candidate database that includes electoral and biographic data at candidate level, combined with relevant data at district and party-list level. The biographical data in the register span seven elections during the period from 1995 to the most recent 2019 election. Our analysis includes party lists³ that gained seats in at least two consecutive elections. In Finland, local, small or fringe parties that do not manage to win a seat in parliament are usually short-lived and do not participate in more than a few elections. Two or more parties can also form a district-level alliance list with candidates from several parties. In total, our analysis considers 599 lists of which 77% are non-alliance lists and 23% are alliance lists.

Our dependent variable, namely parliamentary entry, is a dummy variable that assumes the value of 1 when a candidate secures a seat in the Finnish parliament, *Eduskunta*, for the first time, and 0 when a candidate does not get elected. As we are focusing on the first time a candidate enters parliament, incumbent MPs and MPs who lost their seats and then ran again as non-incumbents, are excluded from the analysis.

The independent variables of our study are the following:

Short-term political opportunity structure: within the concept, ‘short-term political opportunity structure’, we consider variables that are not candidate specific but are related to the general competitive situation which candidates face in an election, and which might substantially affect their chances of entering parliament. In this category, we firstly include a variable that captures the total number of MPs who stepped

³ The parties included in the analysis are: 1995: Social Democratic Party, National Coalition Party, Centre Party, Christian Democrats, Swedish People’s Party, Left Alliance, The Green League; 1999–2019: Social Democratic Party, National Coalition Party, Centre Party, Christian Democrats, Swedish People’s Party, Left Alliance, The Green League, The Finns.

down from the list following previous elections ('MPs stepping down (list)'). In addition, we have a variable, similar to the previous one, that calculates the number of MPs who stepped down across the whole district after the previous election ('MPs stepping down (district)').

PVEAs: due to their fundamental differences that we explained in the theory section, we divide our measures of personal vote earning attributes (PVEA) into local and national attributes. Local PVEAs include two variables that typically increase name recognition only within a limited area in the electoral district, i.e., in candidates' home municipalities or municipalities close to them. These include a dummy variable that shows whether a candidate was elected councillor in a previous municipal election and is still living in the same municipality in which he/she was elected, and a dummy indicating if the candidate held leadership positions in the local or regional party in the district. National level PVEAs refer to positions in publicity that are visible throughout the whole country. The first of these variables measures if a candidate has a personal reputation outside politics, i.e., if she/he is a national celebrity.⁴ The second indicates whether the candidates hold a visible national level role in their parties. These national party leadership positions are defined as party leaders, party deputy leaders, party secretaries and party members, who served as ministers during the previous electoral period.

Electoral experience: this variable captures the number of times a candidate runs in consecutive elections. The variable ranges from 1 to 13 and captures a candidate's runs in consecutive elections, for example, if a candidate ran in the 1999 and 2003 elections and subsequently in the 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections, the candidate is recorded as having run for election on no more than three consecutive occasions. When counting the number of previous runs, we do not need to consider left censoring, as we have information on whether a candidate has run since the 1972 elections. Unfortunately, this dataset, covering a longer period, does not include the other variables in our analysis, which are only available since the 1995 elections. In the models, we include this variable also in a squared form, as the previous studies indicate a clear non-linear relationship between winning and electoral experience (Put et al., 2021).

Control variables: lastly, the analysis controls for gender, age and alliance, namely a dummy (0/1) which indicates whether a candidate ran for an alliance list (a common list of two or more parties) or a non-alliance list. Furthermore, we have two more variables that control for district and party-list level factors. We include in the models a variable measuring the number of MP seats in every district (district magnitude). Lastly, we include a variable that captures the change in the number of MPs on the party list. Negative values indicate that the list lost seats, positive values that the party gained seats.

During the seven parliamentary elections between 1995 and 2019 there were altogether 6904 candidates running for the parliament. As many of these candidates ran multiple times, there were actually 10 304 individual attempts, i.e., campaigns, by these candidates. Because our interest is restricted to the first-time entry into the parliament, after dropping incumbent and previous MPs from the data, we end up with 7548 campaigns run by 5739 individual candidates. Consequently, in our multilevel logistic regression there are 7548 first-level observations that are, on the second level, grouped into 5739 clusters.

Before considering the actual multivariate analysis, we describe some of the general features of the Finnish parliamentary candidacy process, to contextualise the more detailed findings. Fig. 1 (panel a) shows how the number of consecutive candidacies for parliament are distributed among all candidates (this figure also includes the incumbent candidates who are not included in the multivariate analyses). As

many as two thirds of the candidates run for election only once, which means that many hopefuls put themselves forward, however, following a disappointing result or an unpleasant overall experience, they do not wish to participate a second time. Only a minority of candidates run for election again and considering that this group also includes the incumbent MPs, a relatively small percentage of non-MP candidates attempt to win a seat in parliament on more than one occasion. As this group includes both serious candidates and list fillers, and the number of the latter is likely to be quite high, as parties always try to run with a full list, the number of prospective politicians that seek to enhance their chances by means of concerted efforts, may eventually be rather small. Around 18% of all candidates run for election twice and 7% try three times. Only 1% of candidates run for election more than six times (the maximum number of consecutive runs for a candidate in our data is 13). Panel b in the same figure shows how the share of incumbents increases sharply among those candidates running for election multiple times, which was expected, as incumbency is probably the greatest motivator for any candidate to attempt re-election. Of the candidates running for election a second time, the share of incumbents was 12%, among those running for third time 39% and among those running for eighth time already 76%.

As we are interested in first-time entry into parliament, we concentrate only on the candidacies of non-incumbents in the following analyses (the descriptive statistics for the data are provided in Table A1 in the Appendix). Among these candidates, the average number of candidacies is 1.3 and the maximum number of times that a candidate has run for election without winning is eight. Of all the candidacies, around 5% result in winning a seat. Approximately half of the candidacies are run by candidates who serve in the municipal council; only around 2% of these are classified as celebrity candidates and less than 1% of candidates are part of the national party leadership. When examining party lists (i.e., lists in districts) the mean value of MPs stepping down is around 0.5 and the maximum number of MPs giving up their seat is four. Naturally, the average number of MPs stepping down at district level is larger (around four).

In the multivariate analysis, we applied a similar design as in previous comparable studies (Put et al., 2021; Chiru and Popescu 2017). Our observations focus on individual candidacies in the seven Finnish parliamentary elections in Finland between 1995 and 2019, held every four years. In practice, this means that the unit of observation is a candidate running for parliament in each election in which he/she participates. The outcome variable is a binary variable that measures whether the candidate is elected to parliament for the first time (1) or not (0). As we are interested in parliamentary entry, incumbent candidates elected in previous elections are not included in the analysis. Furthermore, candidates who have served in parliament and have subsequently lost their seat but are running for election again are not included as, if they win, they are not entering parliament for the first time. As candidates often run for election multiple times before either winning a seat or dropping out of the running, we use a multilevel logistic regression version of the discrete time model in which individual election campaigns are nested within party lists (Barber et al., 2000). In addition, we use fixed effect dummies to control for potential year, party or district-level confounders that are not included in our independent variables.

2. Empirical results

The multivariate logistic regression results on parliamentary entry are shown in Table 1. The first Model 1 includes all our independent variables but not the interactions. Model 2 includes variables in which the number of same-party MPs stepping down and the PVEA variables have been interacted. Finally, the third model includes interaction variables between the total number incumbent MPs stepping down in the district and the PVEA variables.

The results show that the two electoral experience variables are

⁴ Newspaper searches were conducted to code the celebrity status of candidates. The major Finnish outlets generally present lists of nominated celebrities. These lists have been used as a point of departure for the classification, complemented by additional media sources, books and subjective evaluations.

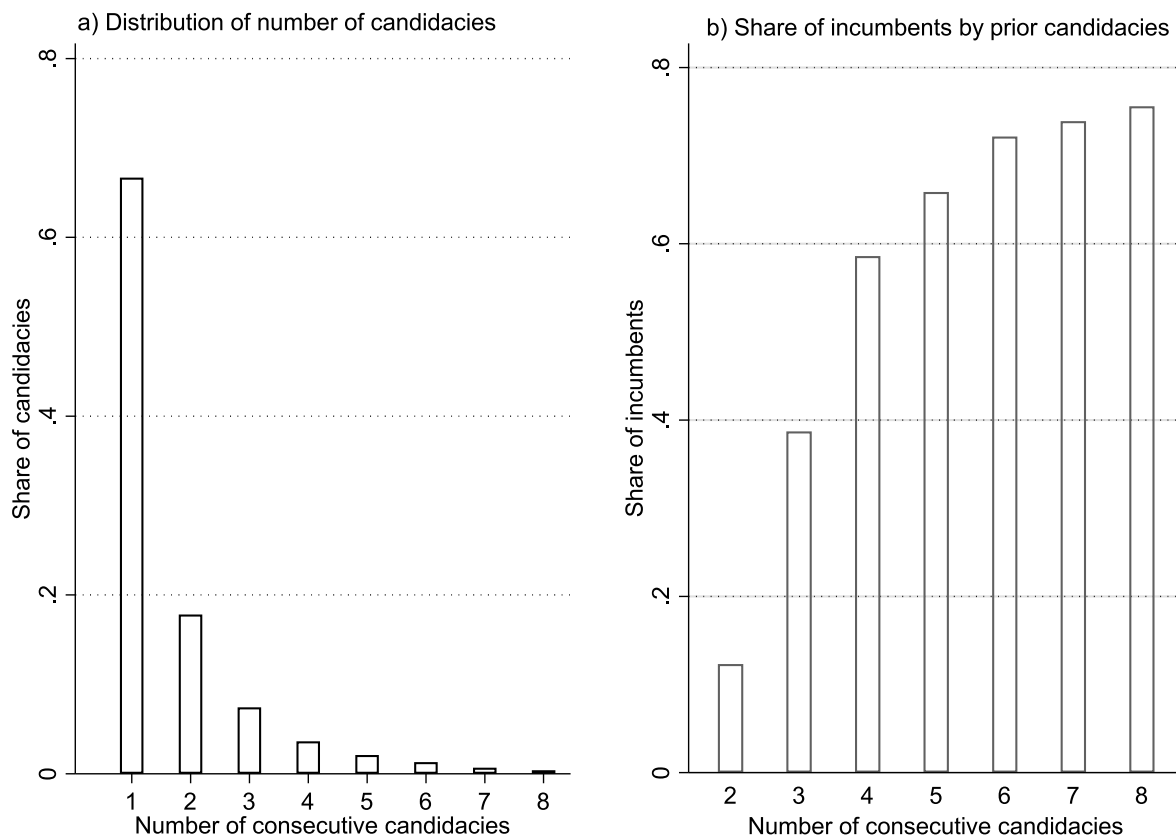


Fig. 1. The distribution of candidacies (a) and the share of incumbents by number of candidacies (b) 1995–2019.

statistically significant, showing that, at first, prior electoral experience increasingly helps to gain a seat in parliament, but after a while the marginal difference starts to drop.⁵ As expected by Hypothesis H1, being a celebrity candidate or having a party leadership position at national level considerably increases the probability of first-time entry, while the effects of occupying a local or regional party leadership position or being a municipal councillor are significantly lower.

Yet, much also depends on factors pertaining to the short-term political opportunity structure, i.e., the actual electoral situation in the district. When incumbent same-party MPs step down, space is created for new entrants and the likelihood of a candidate gaining a seat is increased (supporting H3). However, the variable measuring the number of incumbent MPs standing down across the whole district is not statistically significant in any of the models, indicating no support for our fourth hypothesis. This suggests that, of the factors related to the opportunity structure, it is particularly the intra-party competition that matters for the chances of an individual candidate.

Models 2 and 3 test our interactive hypotheses H5a and H5b. They show the coefficient estimates for the interactions between the competitive context (incumbents not running) and the personal vote-earning attributes. Only one of the coefficients is statistically significant. It appears that the coefficient for municipal councillors is smaller when the number of same-party incumbents stepping down is higher. However, the actual significance of the interaction terms requires a more careful treatment, as their marginal effect is dependent on the values of their constituent variables.

Hence, as actual effect sizes are very difficult to evaluate from the coefficients in a non-linear model, especially with interaction variables,

⁵ We repeated the same analysis with the total number of prior candidacies (not prior *consecutive* candidacies), however, the results remained substantially the same.

we illustrate certain examples of the changes in the probability of being elected for the first time in figures. This helps us to assess the relative impact of personal factors versus situational factors relating to the political opportunities. We calculated the change in parliamentary-entry probability, based on changes in the particular independent variables, when all other variables were set to their mean, median or mode values (depending on whether these variables were continuous or categorical).

First, in Fig. 2, we illustrate in detail how the electoral experience, measured as the number of previous candidacies affects the chances of being elected. The right side of the figure shows the marginal effects. It demonstrates how the probability of gaining entry increases with first few attempts, but then the positive effect wears out into a statistical insignificance and, finally, turns to negative. The left side of the figure shows how the average predicted probability of being elected is highest (around 10%) in the third or fourth attempt but the declines. This is partly in line with our Hypothesis H2. Experience helps, but at some point, too many attempts start to decrease the chance of getting elected.

The results in Table 1 suggest that national level PVEAs are more important in getting elected than local PVEAs. Fig. 3 shows how the PVEAs interact with the number of incumbent MPs stepping down from the party list, because, when interactions are used, the statistical significance of effects cannot be directly deduced from the coefficients.⁶ The plots show the predicted probabilities of becoming elected (corresponding marginal effect plots are available in the Appendix).

As the upper row in Fig. 3 shows, having a national party leadership position or being a well-known celebrity matter most in terms of the personal variables, which is not surprising. It is also evident that having these national level PVEAs increases the likelihood of being elected more when the number of same-party incumbents dropping out of the

⁶ We do not present a figure for interaction effects in Model 3 as they all were non-significant, even when analysed with similar plots.

Table 1

Logistic regression results on parliamentary entry, 1995–2019 (n = 7548; standard errors clustered within party lists, models include fixed effects for parties, districts and years).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
MAIN VARIABLES			
Number of candidacies	1.422** (0.290)	1.450** (0.300)	1.435** (0.295)
Number of candidacies squared	-0.196** (0.063)	-0.203** (0.066)	-0.199** (0.064)
MPs stepping down (district)	-0.040 (0.039)	-0.045 (0.040)	-0.066 (0.053)
MPs stepping down (list)	0.396** (0.075)	0.610** (0.125)	0.405** (0.076)
Municipal councillor	0.790** (0.153)	1.066** (0.186)	0.714** (0.222)
Local/regional party leader	0.489* (0.244)	0.385 (0.292)	0.769* (0.369)
Celebrity candidate	2.400** (0.252)	2.531** (0.309)	2.068** (0.400)
National level party leader	2.997** (0.294)	2.617** (0.381)	2.554** (0.449)
INTERACTIONS			
Municipal councillor x MPs stepping down (list)		-0.296** (0.114)	
Local party leader x MPs stepping down (list)		0.116 (0.248)	
Celebrity candidate x MPs stepping down (list)		-0.112 (0.218)	
National party leader x MPs stepping down (list)		0.752 (0.494)	
Municipal councillor x MPs stepping down (district)			0.018 (0.037)
Local/regional party leader x MPs stepping down (list)			-0.094 (0.101)
Celebrity candidate x MPs stepping down (list)			0.070 (0.074)
National party leader x MPs stepping down (list)			0.109 (0.089)
CONTROLS			
Gender	-0.114 (0.113)	-0.114 (0.113)	-0.115 (0.113)
Age	-0.026** (0.005)	-0.027** (0.005)	-0.027** (0.005)
Alliance list	-0.058 (0.225)	-0.032 (0.222)	-0.054 (0.221)
District magnitude	0.055 (0.049)	0.049 (0.048)	0.055 (0.048)
Change in party seats in district	0.116** (0.043)	0.115** (0.043)	0.116** (0.044)
Intercept	-5.367** (1.151)	-5.450** (1.144)	-5.257** (1.139)
Var(intercept)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Observations	7548	7548	7548

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. **p < .01, *p < .05.

competition is larger.

Compared to these, the positive advantages that municipal councillors or local/regional party leaders gain is quite small. This, too, is not very surprising, as being a municipal councillor does not differentiate much between candidates, as over half of these are councillors. The share of local or regional party leaders in the data is smaller, but these positions are not particularly visible to the average voters, and hence do not carry a similar weight as a member of the national party leadership.

Based on these results, the dynamics of parliamentary entry seem more complex than a simple, linearly ascending career path model based on accumulating personal qualities would suggest. If candidates are celebrities, known widely in society, or if they occupy a nationally visible party leadership position, the possibilities of becoming an MP are greatly enhanced. However, most candidates do not possess these attributes. Fewer than 2% of candidates in our data are classified as celebrities and even fewer (slightly less than 1%) have national-level party leadership positions. In addition, it should be remembered that quite

likely the celebrities did not acquire these qualities to become MPs, so from the perspective of career-enhancing prospective politicians these qualities are rather redundant. For most candidates, the most significant element is previous candidate experience, in combination with a beneficial opportunity structure that will assist them in becoming elected. Moreover, since the windows of opportunities, opened by MPs stepping down, are the same for all candidates on the same list and cannot be controlled by prospective politicians, previous electoral experience often determines the winning candidate. Therefore, notwithstanding the “shocks” created by the exit of incumbent MPs or the sudden entry of “big fish” candidates, experience in running for election appears to pay dividends.

3. Conclusions and discussion

In this study, we make three contributions to the literature on individual-level electoral success. First, instead of personal vote shares we focus on first-time parliamentary entries which can be regarded as the ultimate goal of prospective politicians. Second, we study first-time entries under OLPR where voters, not parties, have the power to determine which candidates are to be elected. And thirdly, alongside personal candidate qualities we examine systematically the impact of candidates’ opportunity structure, i.e., the competitive context in which the candidates are running.

Empirically, we analysed first-time entries in the Finnish pure OLPR system which maximises inter-candidate competition and the expected impact of candidates’ personal qualities. We analysed these dynamics over the course of seven parliamentary elections with exclusive candidate-level register data. Reflecting our theoretical expectations, our results suggest a rather complicated and yet somewhat reasonable-sounding general dynamic in which candidates’ electoral experience and personal qualities, as well as the short-term political opportunity structure which candidates face, all condition parliamentary entry. Three aspects are especially important.

Firstly, regarding ordinary individual-level predictors our main finding is that running for election on multiple occasions pays off, if only for a limited amount of time: the probability of entry does not increase after the fourth attempt. Considering the Finnish four-year electoral cycle, this still amounts to more than a decade of deliberative effort, signalling that for most candidates, entering parliament is “a marathon” rather than “a sprint”. This also reflects in the smaller but positive impact of other traditional, local-level PVEAs, which most candidates have accumulated in the councils of municipalities and local parties. Secondly, and more importantly, our results also show that parliamentary entry is clearly related to the short-term political opportunity structure which candidates face, especially the exit of an incumbent MP from the same party list. We can thus detect another side of incumbency advantage: it does not only help a candidate get into parliament (again), it also heavily restricts the opportunities of newcomers and, thus, parliamentary renewal. While this may appear detrimental to ordinary career candidates, it should be kept in mind that such engaged party activists likely possess insider information regarding the plans of incumbent MPs and might design their own careers in relation to these. However, our third main finding, the very strong impact of exceptional PVEAs (national-level celebrity or party leadership position) on first-time entry may cause much more harm to prospective career politicians. If such a “big fish” candidate suddenly emerges, perhaps coincidentally with the retirement of an incumbent MP, the hopes of ordinary career candidates who have patiently waited their turn may evaporate rapidly. However, while the relative impact of a “big fish” can be very significant, these candidates tend to be rare.

At the same time, the possibility of such a dynamic, which is accentuated by the contemporary tendency to emphasise fame over a traditional party career, produces incentives that can be harmful for democratic representation and thus deserve to be noted. For the “big fish” who already enjoys a significant personal reputation and perhaps

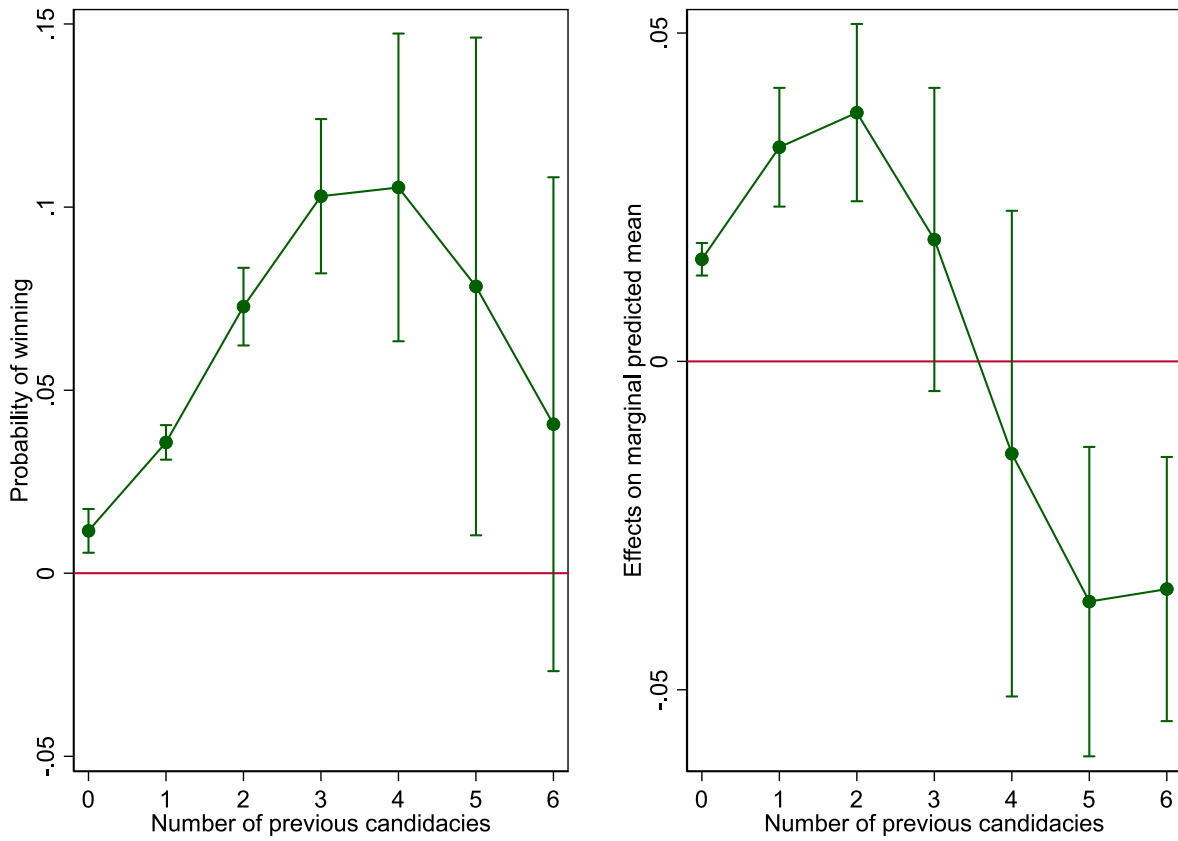


Fig. 2. Predicted values of winning (left) and the corresponding marginal effects (right) by electoral experience with 95% confidence intervals.

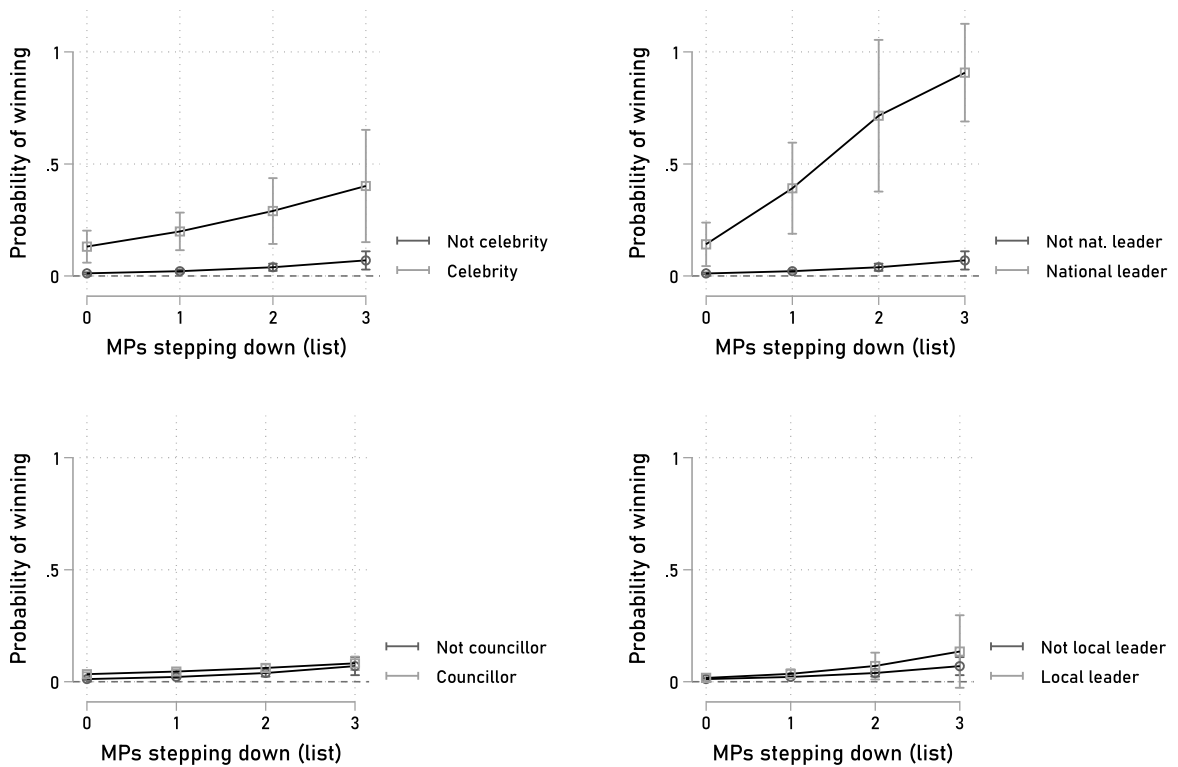


Fig. 3. Predicted probability of first-time entry by PVEAs and the number of previous MPs stepping down from the party list.

also societal influence outside party politics, a “shortcut” to legislative elite may seem riskless, exciting, and even beneficial if his/her field of action is regulated in parliament. If such dynamics become more general, which is possible due to the increasing prominence of social media “influencers”, the stability of political representation that party careers have maintained could become at risk, increasing electoral opportunism and political instability through decreasing cohesion. On the other hand, as our results demonstrate, on average political careers still clearly benefit from political merits.

Finally, what can we learn from this study from a broader perspective? As we noted in the introduction generalising from the findings of a single-country study is always a dubious exercise. Oftentimes, the devil is in the details and electoral systems and parties tend to have many of those. Due to the clear-cut design of the OLPR system used in Finland we do, however, consider it a very informative case. All other things being equal, the single preference vote in combination with unranked lists and limited ability of party elites to manage intra-party competition

produces a close approximation of the democratic ideal of uninterrupted competition between candidates from which voters choose the next legislative elite. While keeping in mind the unique features of the Finnish political system, this study can be used for theoretical inspiration and as an empirical reference point for future studies on the interplay between candidate quality and the political opportunity structure.

Declaration of competing interest

We declare that we do not have known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Appendix

Table A1
descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value
Elected	0.049	0.217	0	1
No. of candidacies	1.333	0.690	1	8
Municipal councillor	0.508	0.500	0	1
Celebrity candidate	0.022	0.147	0	1
Local/regional party position	0.034	0.181	0	1
National party leadership position	0.009	0.097	0	1
MPs stepping down (list)	0.526	0.814	0	4
MPs stepping down (district)	3.662	2.804	0	13
Gender	0.450	0.497	0	1
Age	43.703	11.930	18	85
Alliance list	0.126	0.331	0	1

Table A1. Descriptive values of the variables.

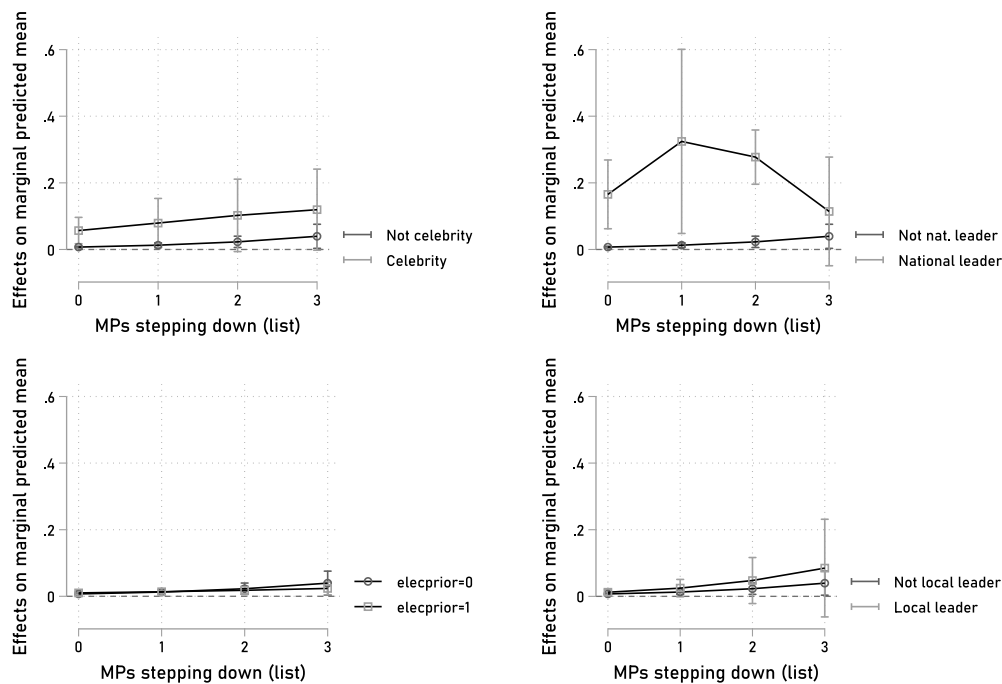


Fig. A1. Marginal effects for results presented in Fig. 3 in the main text.

Table A2

Models with the numbers of MPs stepping down measured as a share of the total number of seats (=district magnitude) in the district, MPs only (models include fixed effects for parties, districts and years).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Number of candidacies	1.397** (0.288)	1.390** (0.290)	1.409** (0.290)
Number of candidacies squared	-0.190** (0.061)	-0.189** (0.062)	-0.194** (0.062)
MPs stepping down (district)	-1.309* (0.598)	-1.250* (0.590)	-1.417 (0.882)
MPs stepping down (list)	11.563** (1.418)	18.114** (3.106)	11.706** (1.420)
Municipal councillor	0.770** (0.153)	1.035** (0.177)	0.748** (0.244)
Local/regional party leader	0.457 (0.248)	0.476 (0.275)	0.886* (0.389)
Celebrity candidate	2.399** (0.259)	2.520** (0.307)	2.488** (0.414)
National level party leader	3.025** (0.284)	2.789** (0.335)	2.644** (0.419)
Municipal councillor x MPs stepping down (list)		-8.665** (3.340)	
Local party leader x MPs stepping down (list)		-0.930 (4.709)	
Celebrity candidate x MPs stepping down (list)		-3.799 (7.156)	
National party leader x MPs stepping down (list)		19.959 (17.507)	
Municipal councillor x MPs stepping down (district)			0.116 (0.860)
Local/regional party leader x MPs stepping down (list)			-2.413 (1.833)
Celebrity candidate x MPs stepping down (list)			-0.366 (1.713)
National party leader x MPs stepping down (list)			1.726 (1.338)
Gender	-0.111 (0.114)	-0.113 (0.114)	-0.111 (0.114)
Age	-0.027** (0.005)	-0.027** (0.005)	-0.027** (0.005)
Alliance list	-0.029 (0.223)	0.004 (0.225)	-0.024 (0.221)
District magnitude	0.053 (0.050)	0.045 (0.048)	0.049 (0.049)
Change in party seats in district	0.226** (0.045)	0.225** (0.044)	0.228** (0.044)
Intercept	-4.828** (1.160)	-4.880** (1.132)	-4.722** (1.143)
Var(intercept)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)
Observations	7548	7548	7548

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. **p < .01, *p < .05.

Table A3

Logit analysis with (previous and current) MPs only (models include fixed effects for parties, districts and years).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Number of candidacies	-0.299 (0.177)	-0.309 (0.176)	-0.284 (0.177)
Number of candidacies squared	0.030 (0.016)	0.030 (0.016)	0.027 (0.016)
MPs stepping down (district)	-0.060 (0.056)	-0.060 (0.055)	0.038 (0.094)
MPs stepping down (list)	0.286* (0.139)	1.011** (0.319)	0.267 (0.142)
Municipal councillor	-0.292 (0.245)	0.199 (0.298)	0.102 (0.415)
Local/regional party leader	-0.117 (0.418)	-0.388 (0.520)	-0.749 (0.734)
Celebrity candidate	-0.461 (0.319)	-0.544 (0.431)	-0.379 (0.594)
National level party leader	1.458** (0.280)	1.648** (0.333)	1.504** (0.446)
Municipal councillor x MPs stepping down (list)		-0.922** (0.355)	

(continued on next page)

Table A3 (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Local party leader x MPs stepping down (list)		0.691 (0.477)	
Celebrity candidate x MPs stepping down (list)		0.145 (0.306)	
National party leader x MPs stepping down (list)		−0.285 (0.294)	
Municipal councillor x MPs stepping down (district)			−0.123 (0.089)
Local/regional party leader x MPs stepping down (list)			0.214 (0.168)
Celebrity candidate x MPs stepping down (list)			−0.018 (0.115)
National party leader x MPs stepping down (list)			−0.010 (0.080)
Gender	−0.141 (0.201)	−0.133 (0.204)	−0.151 (0.204)
Age	−0.046** (0.010)	−0.046** (0.011)	−0.046** (0.010)
Alliance list	−0.179 (0.281)	−0.169 (0.289)	−0.196 (0.277)
District magnitude	−0.131 (0.077)	−0.130 (0.078)	−0.119 (0.078)
Change in party seats in district	0.215** (0.066)	0.215** (0.066)	0.214** (0.067)
Intercept	6.949** (1.888)	6.572** (1.894)	6.328** (1.940)
Var(intercept)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Observations	934	934	934

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. **p < .01, *p < .05.

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