

Ideological mavericks or party herd? The effect of candidates' ideological positions on intra-party success

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ABSTRACT

Political candidates' ideological positions have been used to explain success in inter-party competition, but little is known about how they impact success in intra-party competition. Here, candidates' positions on the Left–Right and GAL–TAN dimensions are analysed in three Finnish parliamentary elections (2011, 2015, 2019). Candidates' ideological positions are measured in terms of their ideological distance from their own party's median candidate. Absolute ideological distances between candidates and their party's median candidate decrease candidates' preference votes. Furthermore, the effects are contingent on the general ideological position of the candidate's party. However, these interactions do not follow any clear pattern, as more rightist candidates in right-wing parties and more green-alternative-libertarian candidates in traditional-authoritarian-nationalist parties all experience a decrease in their preference votes. This effect is large enough to be a decisive factor in intra-party competition between the last candidate that was elected and the first one that was not.

1. Introduction

In open-list proportional representation (OLPR) systems, voters are confronted with a difficult task in polling booths, as they must select their preferred candidate from a large pool of available options. For example, in the biggest electoral district in the Finnish parliamentary elections, voters must choose their candidate from lists that comprise a total of almost 500 candidates. A situation like this can be frustrating, because making an informed choice would necessarily involve obtaining information on all relevant aspects of each of the candidates. As this is practically impossible, it is not surprising that voters are likely to resort to cognitive short-cuts or heuristics in order to select their candidates. These heuristics often relate to procuring easily obtainable information on candidate traits or party labels, which allow voters to infer the ideological and issue-based stances of candidates via stereotyping (McDermott, 1998).

Accordingly, it is no wonder that a majority of the previous studies on candidate success in proportional open-list systems have emphasized the importance of personal vote earning attributes (PVEAs), such as candidates' incumbency, personal characteristics or locality, while candidates' ideological positions have received only negligible attention in this literature. However, a recent article, based on the Finnish case, demonstrates that candidates' intra-party electoral performance is not

only influenced by the easily accessible PVEAs of candidates, but rather that ideological positions also matter and that candidates who are ideologically close to their party's median candidate tend to win more votes than those who distance themselves from their co-partisans (von Schoultz and Papageorgiou, 2019). In the following, we continue exploring the effect of candidates' ideological positions in more detail. More precisely, we provide a more robust empirical test of the effect of ideological positions, covering several elections. Furthermore, we explore the extent to which the most advantageous ideological positions of candidates are contingent on the prevailing ideological position of their party. In practice, we analyse how the direction of the distance from parties' median candidates' positions affects intra-party success, for example, if it is more costly for a right-wing party candidate to be even further to the right of their party's median candidate than to position themselves more to the left, i.e., closer to the overall electorate's median voter.

Our analyses are based on data from the Finnish open-list proportional representation system in which the casting of (a single) preferential vote is mandatory (Karvonen, 2010). Voters are not able to vote for a collective party list, but all votes for an individual candidate are pooled at the party level, creating interesting political conditions, marked by strong rivalry between parties as well as between candidates standing for the same party. Thus, the Finnish system provides an

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optimal environment for the study of candidate performance in the context of strong intra-party competition.

In our analysis, we combine two data sources for the three Parliamentary elections of 2011, 2015 and 2019: data from two widely-used Finnish voting advice applications (VAAs) and a dataset on Finnish candidates, which contains bibliographic and official register data in combination with election outcomes. VAAs provide voters with a relatively low-cost option for gaining insight into candidates' ideological positions and they have become widely used in many European countries (Garzia and Marschall, 2012). However, only in a small number of countries do VAAs allow individual candidates' positions to be directly compared to voters' own responses (Dumont et al., 2014, 147). In the Finnish VAAs, this comparison is possible, which may be one of the reasons that the use of VAAs in Finland has been steadily increasing. According to Statistics Finland survey, 49% of the electorate had used at least one voting advice application during the 2019 parliamentary election campaign, compared to 45% in 2015 (Suomen virallinen tilasto, 2019). Voters' enthusiasm towards VAAs has been used by candidates, as more than 85% of the eight parliamentary parties' candidates created their own profiles in the two most used VAAs (the Finnish Broadcasting Company [Yle] and Helsingin Sanomat) in the last three elections.

We analyse the extent to which candidates' ideological positions significantly impacted intra-party competition in three Finnish elections. We further explore, if the effect of an individual candidate's ideological position is contingent on the ideological position of their party. Our hypotheses are derived from two central voting theories: the proximity model (Downs, 1957) and the directional voting model (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989). Furthermore, we test the hypotheses on two political dimensions: the Left–Right dimension and the GAL–TAN dimension.

The results confirm that the distance of the candidates' ideological positions from those of their party's median candidate, across both dimensions, decrease candidates' individual vote shares. While the effects are small, in comparison to some other control variables used in the analysis, they are often large enough to be a decisive factor in the intra-party competition between the last candidate that was elected and the first one that was not. The results on the direction of the distance are more diverse. Our analysis shows that, in right-wing parties, candidates who position themselves even further to the right than their own party's median candidate are more likely to lose personal votes compared to their more moderate co-partisans. However, in populist or radical right TAN parties, ideological purity is rewarded, as candidates positioning themselves ideologically towards the centre are penalized by voters. Among the leftist or GAL parties we do not observe similar effects.

2. Candidate strategy under OLPR

The literature on electoral systems suggests that optimal campaign strategies for vote-maximizing candidates look very different, depending on the electoral context. While single-member districts incentivize candidates to pursue the median voter, systems with high levels of intra-party competition encourage candidates to target discrete voter cohorts (Ames, 1995; Cox, 1990). When there are many candidates competing for votes under the same party label, and many seats to be distributed, there is little need to try to appeal to all voters in the district; rather, attracting a small slice of the electorate can be enough to secure a seat. This niche-strategy receives empirical support in the growing literature on intra-party competition, demonstrating the electoral value of local roots (Shugart et al., 2005; Tavits, 2010; Put and Maddens, 2015) and the friends-and-neighbour effect (Put et al., 2020). Candidates can ensure success in these systems by building their support locally and by appealing to sub-sections of the constituency (party) vote.

This niche strategy is further fuelled by the candidate nomination process. For seat-maximizing parties, high levels of intra-party competition, in combination with pooled voting (i.e., where all votes for individual candidates contribute to the party vote total) are considered

relatively easy contextual factors for parties to navigate, since they are not necessarily concerned about the distribution of votes across their nominated candidates (Shugart and Taagepera, 2017). The main focus of parties is to make sure that they do not miss any potential votes, which they can do by applying a niche-strategy, which involves fielding a diverse set of candidates to attract as many potential (sub-sections of) voters as possible (Swindle, 2002; Arter, 2013). The problem with such a strategy is that it may undermine the ideological cohesion of parties (Kitschelt and Smyth, 2002; Tavits, 2009; Crisp et al., 2013; Hix, 2004). It also provides a playground for so-called 'Mavericks', i.e., candidates with a strong personal reputation and an individualistic electoral support base (Tavits, 2009).

With regard to candidates, most of the growing literature on intra-party competition has focused on their personal attributes, such as their previous electoral experiences, local roots or name recognition from outside of politics and how these attributes equip them with an electoral advantage over their co-partisan competitors (Shugart et al., 2005; Tavits, 2010; Put and Maddens, 2015; Bengtsson, 2016). Such studies show that candidates need personal vote-earning attributes in order to stand out from their co-partisan candidates and that they use these attributes to cultivate a personal vote. Personal attributes, hence, assist candidates to attract personal votes by appealing to different sub-sections of the party electorate. Far less attention has, however, been devoted to determining the electoral value of the political message, in the context of high levels of intra-party competition, or the extent to which the candidates' ideological positions are related to their vote-winning capacity (cf. von Schoultz and Papageorgiou, 2019).

The relative lack of previous studies on the impact of the political message does not come as a surprise. Electoral systems with high levels of intra-party competition are considered complex for voters to navigate, due to the high number of candidates standing and the need for voters to monitor two-levels of competition (i.e., competition between and within parties). Under such conditions, voters tend to be more responsive to simple cues that allow them to reduce the time and effort devoted to deciding how to vote (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006). Thus, under these settings, voters are more responsive to easily accessible personal characteristics of candidates, such as gender, age, looks, name recognition, experience and connections to the local setting. Ideology and policy positions are generally believed to be of lower importance.

The effect of ideological positions is, however, explored in a recent study by von Schoultz and Papageorgiou (2019), where the authors, based on a single Finnish Parliamentary election, demonstrate that the ideological position a candidate adopts has an impact on their electoral outcomes. It therefore appears as if voters are able to incorporate candidates' ideological positions into their deliberations concerning which candidate to elect. The effect of these positions does, however, appear to be meagre compared to that of other personal attributes related to experience, locality and visibility.

As mentioned above, the literature on candidate electoral strategies suggests that candidates do not benefit from pursuing the median voter under high levels of intra-party competition. Instead, they should target a sub-section of the party's electorate and adopt distinct positions, enabling them to distinguish themselves from their co-partisan candidates (Ames, 1995; Cox, 1990). This assertion does not, however, find support in the study by von Schoultz and Papageorgiou (2019). According to their initial findings, candidates do not benefit from advocating distinctive ideological positions; rather, the overall pattern is that candidates who position themselves at the median of the intra-party ideological spectrum win more votes. This, in turn, suggests that the original median voter theorem (Downs, 1957), taking the full electorate as the point of departure, can be translated into the more limited intra-party context, providing candidates who adopt a more centrist position than their co-partisans with an electoral advantage since they are able to attract a greater share of their party's electorate.

While the findings by von Schoultz and Papageorgiou (2019) offer an interesting contribution, the findings are based on a single election and

do not differentiate between parties. In this paper, we build on their work and make two distinct contributions to the field. First, we will further explore the robustness of the effect of ideological positions by expanding the number of elections analysed and by developing an analytical model, which includes other potentially influential factors, such as campaign spending. This is covered by our first hypothesis to be tested:

H1. Increasing the ideological distance between a candidate and their party's median position provides an electoral disadvantage.

Second, and more importantly, we analyse the extent to which the effect of ideological positions on the two dimensions is contingent on the ideological position of the candidate's party. The findings by [von Schoultz and Papageorgiou \(2019\)](#) are based on the presumption that the effect of ideological positioning is equal across parties and ideological dimensions. We will loosen this assumption to explore potential heterogeneities and presuppose that the direction of candidates' distancing matters. For example, we hypothesize that, for candidates in leftist parties, it makes a difference whether a candidate positions themselves (within their party) to the right, towards the median voter of the whole electorate or to the left, away from the electorate's median voter. Theoretically, we derive inspiration for our reasoning from the directional model ([Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989](#)), which states that voters will prefer candidates that represent clear alternatives, i.e., candidates who advocate more extreme positions than those held by the voter.

For parties positioned to the left, the directional model would imply that candidates benefit electorally from positioning themselves further to the left of the median candidate within their party; candidates in right-wing parties, on the other hand, would benefit from positioning themselves to the right of the party's median candidate. This expectation is also supported by [Sartori \(1976, 350\)](#), who states that extreme parties 'neither desire nor have much to gain in competing centripetally. Their goals are best furthered by tearing the system apart'. This notion might be applicable to candidates within parties representing distinct ideological positions, who can benefit from venturing further in the dimensional space, away from the direction of the overall (inter-party) spectra. The above examples were related to the Left–Right dimension, but we assume that similar mechanisms apply also for the GAL–TAN dimension.

It is, however, less clear how to apply the mechanisms of the directional model to candidates standing for centrist parties. In which ideological direction would candidates in such parties benefit from traversing? After all, the original model was developed in the context of plurality electoral systems, with single-member districts; a context in which there are usually only two relevant candidates competing, making the concept of centrist parties less relevant. We find it plausible that the directional model is less applicable to candidates standing for centrist parties and anticipate that such candidates, on average, will accrue greater electoral benefit from targeting the within-party median voter by adopting party-moderate positions. From this expectation, we derive at two directional hypotheses, one for centrist parties and one for ideologically distinct parties:

H2.1. In non-centrist parties, more ideologically extreme candidates will enjoy an electoral advantage over their less ideologically extreme co-partisan candidates.

H2.2. In centrist parties, candidates that take on positions closer to their party's median candidate will enjoy an electoral advantage over more ideologically extreme co-partisan candidates.

3. The Finnish electoral and party system

The Finnish electoral system is an open-list proportional representation (OLPR) system with relatively large district magnitudes ([von Schoultz, 2018](#)).¹ In this system, voters need to assign their (single) preference vote for a candidate in their district of residence, taking into consideration that these preference votes are pooled at the party-level. It is not possible to cast a vote only for a party list. The conversion of votes to seats is calculated by the D'Hondt method, where each individual candidate obtains a score that is based on the number of party votes divided by the candidate's ranking within the party list. Most parties present their candidates in alphabetical order² and the number of personal votes determine which candidates will become elected from each party list. Thus, the Finnish electoral system is highly competitive at both *inter-party* and *intra-party* levels ([von Schoultz, 2018](#)). In practice, candidates compete against other intra-party candidates by organizing personalized campaigns, but there is little room for negative campaigning as it could hurt the party's overall vote share ([Karvonen, 2010, 96](#)). Therefore, the Finnish system provides an optimal testbed for identifying the factors determining candidate success in intra-party competition, as it is evident that candidates possess very different prospects of getting elected ([Paloheimo, 2007, 333–334](#)).

The Finnish multiparty system is one of the most fractionalized in Europe ([Bengtsson et al., 2014](#)). The three major parties at the core of the system have been the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the National Coalition Party (NC) and the Centre Party (Centre). According to [Rokkan and Hagtvet \(1987, 81–95\)](#), these parties represent the interests of labour, business and farmers, respectively. The populist challenger for the stability of the system has been the Finns Party (Finns), mostly taking votes from the Social Democrats and from the Centre Party (see e.g., [Borg, 2012, 197–198](#)). Two medium-sized parties, the Green League (Green) and the Left Alliance (Left), both enjoy relatively stable support, the first of which represents the emergence of postmaterialist values in Finnish politics ([Westinen, 2015, 87](#)), whereas the latter is a successor of the socialist/communist Finnish People's Democratic League. There are also two other minor parties that have had a continuous presence in the Finnish parliament: the Christian Democrats (CD) and the Swedish People's Party (SPP), the latter formed in response to ethno-linguistic societal cleavages and continues to represent the linguistic interests of the Swedish-speaking population ([Karvonen, 2000, 132](#); [Medeiros et al., 2019](#)). Parties' electoral results in the three parliamentary elections are presented in online [Appendix A](#).

4. Ideological dimensions

In this paper, we use candidates' responses to VAA questions to construct two latent ideological dimensions: Left–Right and GAL–TAN. Many authors identify these dimensions as capable of illustrating the main cleavages within the contemporary political conflict, as the Left–Right spectrum encompasses the economic conflict and the GAL–TAN captures the cultural value-based conflict ([Hooghe et al., 2002](#); [van der Brug and van Spanje, 2009](#); [Bornschieer, 2010](#)). The Left–Right dimension has been the most dominant political dimension and it has been referred to as a 'super issue which summarises the

¹ District magnitude ranged between 1 and 36 in the three elections covered in the analyses (2011, 2015, 2019). The number of districts was 15 in the 2011 election and 13 in the 2015 and 2019 elections. The only single member district, the Åland islands, is not included in the analyses.

² During the three elections under scrutiny here, only two of the parties represented in Parliament used ranked lists, and they only did so in a few districts. In 2011, it was the Left Alliance (South Savo) and the SDP (Häme, Kymi, North Karelia, Oulu). In the last two elections, only SDP stood with ranked lists (2015: Uusimaa, Häme and Southeast Finland, 2019: Uusimaa, Häme).

programmes of opposing groups' (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976, 244). Moreover, voters' perceptions of parties' Left–Right positions have served as a tool enabling voters to conveniently associate parties with the bundle of important issues tied to the dimension (e.g., Dahlberg and Hartevel, 2016).

Although the Finnish party system was originally formed mostly around the Left–Right dimension, the current party system reflects also other ideological dimensions. Paloheimo (2008) has identified as many as seven dimensions that have been relevant for Finnish party politics in the past: 1) Left–Right, 2) centre–periphery, 3) national–international, 4) people–elite, 5) Finnish–Swedish, 6) conservative–liberal, and 7) ecology–materialism. However, we believe that *within-party* candidate-level ideological differences in modern Finnish politics can be modelled successfully with merely two dimensions: Left–Right and GAL–TAN. This is because, first, stances on cultural issues reflected in dimensions 3), 4), 6) and 7) have started to converge towards a single dimension, the GAL–TAN, which over the last three elections has emerged as a new major conflict dimension, complementing the Left–Right.³ In fact, issues related to either the Left–Right or the GAL–TAN dimension have been most salient political issues structuring political debates in the past three Finnish parliamentary elections.⁴ Second, the conflicts on centre–periphery and Finnish–Swedish language dimensions mainly take place between parties, hence positions on these dimensions are not as important from the intra-party perspective as Left–Right and GAL–TAN positions.

Although cultural dimension related issues have been prevalent in Western European political systems since the 1970s (see e.g., Inglehart, 1977), the GAL–TAN dimension has become more salient in Finland only recently. GAL–TAN stands for green-alternative-libertarian (GAL) on one end and traditional-authoritarian-nationalist (TAN) on the other (see Marks et al., 2006; Rovny and Edwards, 2012). The dimension encompasses stances on environmental issues, immigration, rights of sexual minorities, international co-operation, traditional values and authoritarian rule. The increased saliency of the dimension has been linked to the growing electoral influence of green and populist radical right parties in Western European party systems (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Jungar and Jupskås, 2014; Westinen, 2015). In Finland, these parties have also taken up opposite stances on sociocultural issues and are largely responsible for politicizing cultural and EU issues (Grönlund and Westinen, 2012; Westinen, 2015). EU and cultural issue stances are in practice often overlapping (Oskarson, 2010) and therefore, we treat both to be part of the GAL–TAN.

In Finland, the ideological dimensions of Left–Right and GAL–TAN have been mostly unrelated to each other. This is also evident in Chapel Hill expert survey data, as the Pearson correlation coefficient between economic Left–Right and GAL–TAN party positions for years 1999–2014 is 0.23 ($n = 39$) and not statistically significant (Polk et al., 2017; Bakker et al., 2015).⁵

We use candidates' VAA responses to measure their positions on the Left–Right and the GAL–TAN dimensions. For the mechanism of

candidate ideologies to work, voters are expected to be informed, at least to some extent, of candidates' positions on these ideological dimensions. There is growing evidence that voting advice applications indeed increase their users' knowledge about parties' issue positions (see e.g., Munzert et al., 2020). However, we do not expect the VAAs to be the only mechanism through which voters are exposed to the information on candidate positions. They are able to learn about the candidates' political messages on social media or through other modes of campaigning, such as advertisement in traditional and digital media. Furthermore, candidates often use TV and radio appearances or personal campaign materials to advertise their distinctiveness from competing candidates. The nuances of the ideological differences between candidates may not reach all voters, but at least a significant portion of attentive voters are informed about these differences as, under fierce intra- and inter-party competition, candidates are incentivized to demonstrate publicly their distinctiveness.

5. Data and methods

Our analysis builds on a unique dataset, which combines Finnish parliamentary candidates' VAA responses from the two most popular VAA platforms, namely the publicly-owned Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle) and the privately-owned most popular daily newspaper in Finland, Helsingin Sanomat, with a database on candidates' background information and their election results in three elections (2011, 2015 and 2019).⁶ Both Yle and Helsingin Sanomat have nation-wide coverage and it is therefore not surprising that over 85% of the eight parliamentary parties' candidates created profiles in both VAA platforms during the last three elections (see online Appendix B).⁷

We restricted the candidate dataset only to candidates in parties that at the beginning of the elections campaigning held a seat in the parliament.⁸ This narrowed the number of candidates in our analyses from 6929 to 4837. The reason for the exclusion of parties without representatives in the parliament was that they have little electoral significance.

In addition, the dataset was also limited to candidates that responded to all question items used in the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for each election (4230 candidates). Finally, the dataset was further filtered in two ways: 1) the smallest number of candidates per party in a district had to be 10 or more and 2) if a party was in an electoral alliance, the party needed to nominate at least one third of the list's candidates. The first condition was used to ensure that a party in a district exhibits a reasonable level of intra-party competition. The second condition removes cases where voters might have an incentive to direct their votes toward a single candidate of the minor alliance party. Filtering the dataset by these conditions reduced the number of candidates from 4230 to 4177.

5.1. Dependent variable

Our dependent variable, the candidates' intra-party success, was measured as a candidate's preference vote share. The preference vote share is a ratio of the votes for an individual candidate divided by the number of all votes that the candidate's party obtained in the district

³ It was in 2011 election, when according to Grönlund and Westinen (2012) cultural dimension became the second most important value dimension influencing party choice after the Left–Right. Arter (2020) highlights that the 2019 election marked a growing salience of GAL–TAN, as parties strongly related to the dimension won 40 percent of the votes.

⁴ In the 2011 election, debates regarding the EU, including Finnish government's financial assistance to Greece, were the most salient issues in the media (Perna, 2012). In 2015 campaigning period, economic concerns regarding the growing national debt were dominating the political discourse (Railo and Ruohonen, 2016). In the 2019 election, climate change, immigration and elderly care became most salient issues (Arter, 2020).

⁵ However, it should be noted that in the Chapel Hill expert survey data the correlation between general Left–Right and GAL–TAN is 0.48 ($p < 0.001$), but this is not relevant for our case as we define Left–Right dimension in economic terms.

⁶ The main source for election results and candidates' biographic data was the vaalit.fi website, which is maintained by the Ministry of Justice of Finland.

⁷ Yle VAA data for 2011 and 2015 are publicly available (see Yle Uutisten vaalikone, 2011; Yleisradio, 2015). The Yle 2019 VAA dataset was provided by Yle's editorial staff (Yleisradio, 2019). The Helsingin Sanomat, 2015 VAA data were obtained from the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (Helsingin Sanomat, 2015), whereas the 2019 Helsingin Sanomat VAA data were collected directly from the VAA application (Helsingin Sanomat, 2019).

⁸ This also meant the exclusion of Liike Nyt, a political movement that succeeded in obtaining one seat in the 2019 election.

where the candidate stood. This measure was chosen to indicate candidate success as it is not affected by changes in parties' overall level of support and focuses only on intra-party competition. The measure is thus comparable across elections, districts and parties. Candidates' preference vote shares are clustered based on these three categorical variables (in total there are 267 different election-district-party combinations in the data). It is also important to note that the sum of candidate preference vote shares within each cluster is one, meaning that the preference vote shares are not independent from each other within clusters.

The distribution of the preference vote shares is presented in Fig. 1. It ranges from 0.000877 to 0.824 (mean = 0.0591, sd = 0.0749). As the values vary between 0 and 1 and the distribution is highly skewed towards zero, a logit transformation was performed to the variable. The transformed variable had a mean of -3.301 (sd = 1.110), its values ranging from -7.038 to 1.542.

5.2. Control variables

Our control variables are mostly related to candidates' demographic attributes or to their personal vote-earning attributes (PVEAs). Demographic attribute controls included age, age squared, gender and native language (native tongue either being one of two official languages, i.e., Finnish/Swedish or other). PVEAs used in the analysis were related to political experience and celebrity status. Individual incumbency, a form of political experience, has proved to be advantageous for candidates in the Finnish open-list PR system (Kotakorpi et al., 2017). In our analyses, we apply a broader concept of experience, serving in the parliament anytime in the past, rather than current incumbency, which captures cases of electoral success in any previous elections. Moreover, our operationalization provides us the means to overcome issues with current incumbency, as it, for instance, overlooks cases where candidates are rotated in and out of the parliament during parliamentary terms.

Political experience was measured by multiple indicators: 1) the candidate was currently a municipal councillor, 2) ran for parliament in the same district also in the previous election, 3) had formerly served in the parliament and 4) was currently a party leader, i.e., chairman of the party. Enjoying a celebrity status outside of the political realm is also beneficial to candidates, due to increased name recognition among voters (see e.g., Zwarun and Torrey, 2011). Celebrity status was assigned to candidates by media ascribing them this status. Celebrity status was removed from a candidate, if elected (thus, in the next election the candidate was labelled as an incumbent, not a celebrity). In addition, candidates' campaign spending was included in the analysis. It is expected that increased campaign spending enhances a candidate's chances of winning a seat (see Maddens et al., 2006). Finally, a variable measuring the number of candidates on the party list was added since a larger number of co-partisans will contribute to decreasing the average preference vote share of candidates. Summary statistics of all control variables are presented in online Appendix A.

5.3. Ideological distance from the party median

Our main variables of interest measure a candidate's ideological distance from their own party's national median candidate. First, two ideological dimensions were constructed by performing exploratory factor analysis with oblimin rotation via *psych* R package (Revelle, 2018) on selected VAA questions. Using all VAA questions (see online Appendix C) would have resulted in incomparable ideological dimensions over the election years, as a majority of VAA questions vary by content and focus from one election to another. Hence, we first narrowed down the list of possible questions by requiring that the questions substantively belong to either the Left-Right dimension or the GAL-TAN dimension. In the second step, emphasis was placed on continuity, meaning that only small changes between questions over the election

years were allowed and that the underlying policy topics, (e.g., immigration, social benefit programmes, and taxation) would be represented in similar proportion in each set of selected VAA questions per election year, thus ensuring comparability between ideological dimensions over the years. We also explored party average positions on the selected VAA items, which indicate distinctive party-level patterns. The selected VAA questions are listed along party average positions in online Appendix C.

Before conducting the factor analysis, Bartlett's test of correlation adequacy was performed to ensure that the selected questions had strong enough correlations to construct stable factors. Additionally, scree plots were visually inspected to confirm that the two-factor model was adequate for all election years.

The factor analysis results are presented in detail in online Appendix D. The factor loadings for all items were above 0.30 and in most cases much higher. However, double loadings emerged for questions regarding EU membership (2011 and 2015) and for traditional values (2015). In both cases, we did not consider this problematic, as the support for the EU has been traditionally high among the Finnish centre-right and support for traditional values has also been consistently part of right-wing politics in Finland, thus explaining why these questions contribute to both Left-Right and GAL-TAN dimensions. Next, we calculated Cronbach's alphas for the question items constructing the factors. They are clearly on an acceptable level, ranging between 0.73 and 0.87. Moreover, all calculated fit indices, including CFI, TLI, RMSEA and RMSR, were acceptable. Notably, the correlation between the two factors increased from 0.19 in 2011 to 0.26 in 2015 and finally reached 0.32 in 2019. This suggests that right-wing (left-wing) positions are becoming increasingly associated with TAN (GAL) stances, suggesting that a possible convergence is taking place between the two dimensions.

Subsequently, candidates' factor scores were calculated by the regression scores method (see DiStefano et al., 2009, 4). Hence, the mean value of each factor was as close as possible to zero [-0.002 , 0.007] and their standard deviations close to one [0.887 , 0.954]. Candidates' ideological positions are visualized in Fig. 2.

Next, we classified the parties on the Left-Right dimension into three categories: left-wing, centre and right-wing parties. The inherent difficulty of constructing these categories on an empirical basis is that there are no natural cut-off points.⁹ Here the cut-offs were set to -0.5 and 0.5 , which are roughly 0.5 standard deviations from the mean of the ideological scale.¹⁰

This meant that a party was categorized as a left-wing party, if its median candidate position was below -0.5 and conversely a party was assigned to right-wing category, if its median candidate was above 0.5 . Thus, the centre category encompassed parties with medians between -0.5 and 0.5 . It is noteworthy that median party positions were derived from factor scores that were scaled around the mean of the data, but the absolute mean values to the Left-Right issue statements are slightly leftist (2.33–2.73 on a five-point scale). Hence, the ideological centre, calculated from factor scores, might not equate with the exact political centre in terms of policy positions, but for the purposes of this analysis, these empirically constructed categories serve as sufficient proxies. Out of 24 median party positions, 25% were left-wing ($PP_{left-wing}$), 50% centrist ($PP_{centre-R}$), and 25% right-wing ($PP_{right-wing}$).

The same procedure was performed for the GAL-TAN dimension. In terms of party positions GAL-TAN resulted in more parties with median candidates at the GAL and TAN ends of the dimension, compared to in

⁹ We also used continuous party position variables as an alternative operationalization, but these variables did not seem theoretically credible, as our expectations for the parties in the ideological centres deviate from the parties closer to the poles of the ideological dimensions.

¹⁰ Robustness tests confirmed that the optimal number of ideological categories was in fact three (as opposed to zero, two and four), as we had initially thought. Further, the cut-off points used here [-0.5 , 0.5] provided the best fitting model in comparison to the other alternatives.

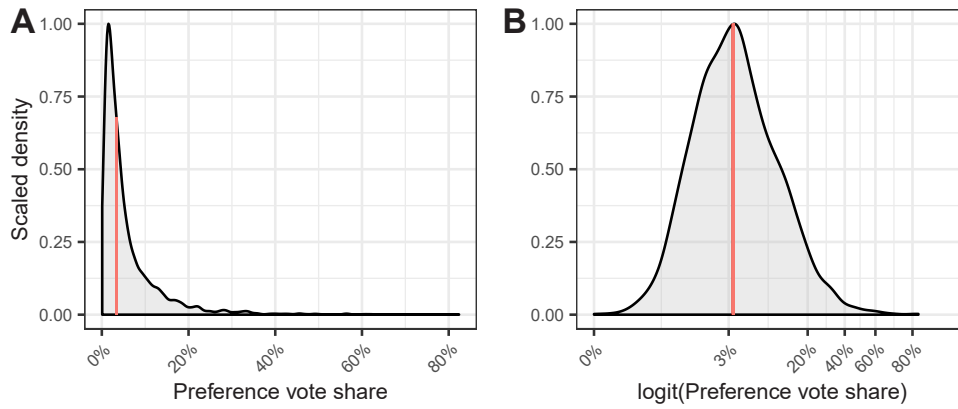


Fig. 1. Distributions of preference vote share variables. Panel A displays the original variable's highly skewed distribution and panel B displays the same variable after logit transformation, which is used in the analysis.

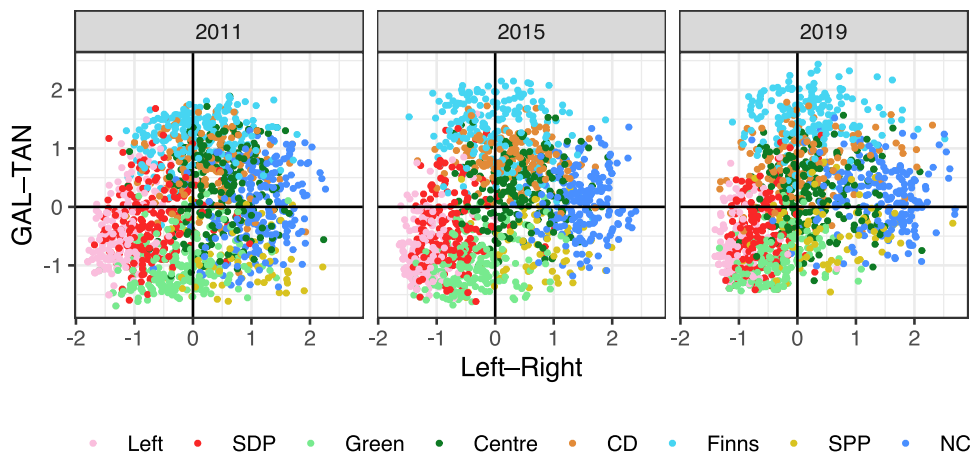


Fig. 2. Candidates' factor scores on the Left-Right and GAL-TAN dimensions by election year.

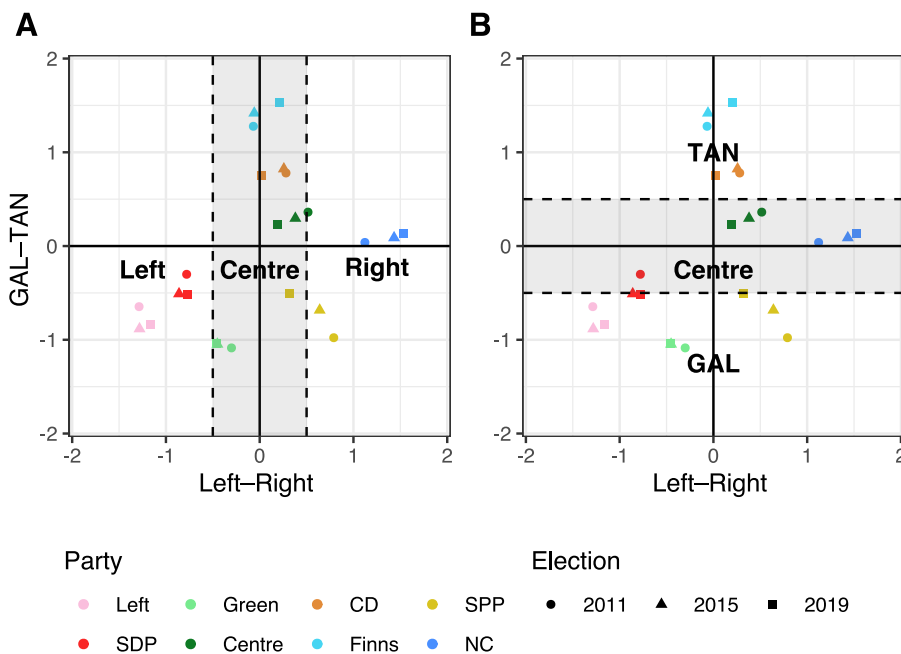


Fig. 3. Parties' median candidate positions for each year and their ideological categorization.

the middle, in contrast to the Left–Right dimension. GAL had 46% of national median party positions (PP_{GAL}), 29% were in the centre ($PP_{centre_{GAL-TAN}}$) and 25% TAN (PP_{TAN}). All median party positions in their respective categories are presented in Fig. 3.

Finally, individual candidates' ideological positions were compared to those of their party's median candidate and, at first, the absolute distance from the median was calculated. This measure is not affected by the direction of the distance, i.e., whether the candidate was above or below the party median:

$$|d_{L-R,med}| = |c_{L-R} - p_{L-R,med}|$$

where c_{L-R} means candidate's position on Left–Right dimension and $p_{L-R,med}$ represents party's median candidate position on the Left–Right dimension. The candidates' distance distributions and party-level variations are presented in online Appendix E.

In order to test whether the direction of the ideological distance from the party's median is important, the distance from the party's median was split into two categories:

$$d_{right|L-R,med} = c_{L-R} - p_{L-R,med} \quad \text{if } c_{L-R} > p_{L-R,med}$$

$$d_{left|L-R,med} = c_{L-R} - p_{L-R,med} \quad \text{if } c_{L-R} < p_{L-R,med}$$

where $d_{right|L-R,med}$ is the distance from the party's median candidate, when the candidate is situated further to the right (above the party's district median) of the ideological spectrum than the party's median candidate. In a similar way, $d_{left|L-R,med}$ is a distance from the party's median candidate for candidates that are more leftist (below the party's median). If a candidate occupies the median party position, the distance from the party's median is zero. The similar procedure was then performed with the GAL–TAN to measure distances from the party's median on this dimension.

5.4. Multi-level regression analysis

Our dataset is nested as the candidates exist in their parties within specific districts and across election years. Thus, multi-level regression was considered to be the most suitable method of analysis. The total number of unique election-district-year clusters is 267. Multi-level regression models with a random intercept were fitted to the data with the maximum likelihood method implemented by the *lme4* R package (Bates et al., 2015) using logit transformed dependent variable.¹¹ The fixed effects' p-values were obtained by Satterthwaite's method for approximating degrees of freedom for the *t*-test using the *lmerTest* R package (Kuznetsova et al., 2017). Coefficient interaction plots were created with the *interplot* package (Solt and Hu, 2018), after which linearity assumption of interaction effects was scrutinized according to suggestions presented by Hainmueller et al. (2019a, b) and Berry et al. (2012). Interaction diagnostics are presented in online Appendix H. Lastly, predictor effects on the dependent variable were calculated with *effects* R package, which is capable in handling multi-level model objects (Fox and Weisberg, 2019, 2018).

6. Results

To test the first hypothesis, on the effect of ideological distance on intra-party candidates' success, two multi-level models were fitted (Table 1). The first model includes only control variables for the purpose of comparison with subsequent models. Almost all control variable coefficients were statistically significant with expected signs.

¹¹ As a robustness check, instead of transforming the dependent variable, we also fitted multi-level beta regression model with logit link function on the data with *glimmTMB* package (Brooks et al., 2017). Beta model results did not differ from models with logit-transformed dependent variable (see Appendix H).

Table 1
Multi-level regression analysis.

	Dependent variable:		
	logit(Preference vote share)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
$ d_{L-R,med} $		– 0.117*** (0.033)	
$ d_{G-T,med} $		– 0.113*** (0.034)	
$PP_{Right-wing}$			– 0.132 (0.084)
$PP_{Left-wing}$			– 0.198** (0.073)
PP_{TAN}			0.735*** (0.088)
PP_{GAL}			0.571*** (0.075)
$d_{right L-R,med}$			– 0.057 (0.044)
$d_{left L-R,med}$			– 0.231*** (0.059)
$d_{GAL G-T,med}$			– 0.021 (0.066)
$d_{TAN G-T,med}$			– 0.057 (0.065)
$PP_{Right-wing} \times d_{right L-R,med}$			– 0.253* (0.101)
$PP_{Right-wing} \times d_{left L-R,med}$			0.086 (0.094)
$PP_{Left-wing} \times d_{left L-R,med}$			0.054 (0.169)
$PP_{Left-wing} \times d_{right L-R,med}$			– 0.049 (0.094)
$PP_{TAN} \times d_{GAL G-T,med}$			– 0.225* (0.103)
$PP_{TAN} \times d_{TAN G-T,med}$			– 0.059 (0.136)
$PP_{GAL} \times d_{GAL G-T,med}$			– 0.113 (0.116)
$PP_{GAL} \times d_{TAN G-T,med}$			– 0.029 (0.083)
Age (scaled)	0.263*** (0.072)	0.261*** (0.072)	0.247*** (0.073)
Age ² (scaled)	– 0.380*** (0.072)	– 0.378*** (0.072)	– 0.363*** (0.073)
Gender _{female}	0.207*** (0.022)	0.199*** (0.022)	0.208*** (0.022)
Language _{other}	– 0.217** (0.073)	– 0.219** (0.072)	– 0.221** (0.072)
MP previously	0.970*** (0.040)	0.962*** (0.040)	0.962*** (0.040)
Party leader	1.715*** (0.152)	1.700*** (0.151)	1.650*** (0.151)
Municipal councillor	0.382*** (0.026)	0.378*** (0.026)	0.373*** (0.025)
Num. of party cand. (scaled)	– 0.424*** (0.038)	– 0.422*** (0.038)	– 0.435*** (0.028)
Stood in prev. election	0.266*** (0.027)	0.266*** (0.027)	0.260*** (0.027)
Celebrity	0.710*** (0.086)	0.709*** (0.086)	0.714*** (0.085)
Campaign spending ₁₀₋₂₀ 000	– 0.411*** (0.040)	– 0.409*** (0.040)	– 0.432*** (0.040)
Campaign spending ₅₋₁₀ 000	– 0.814*** (0.041)	– 0.809*** (0.041)	– 0.841*** (0.041)
Campaign spending _{Less than 5000}	– 1.240*** (0.040)	– 1.233*** (0.040)	– 1.269*** (0.041)
Campaign spending _{Not reported}	– 0.735*** (0.054)	– 0.726*** (0.054)	– 0.755*** (0.054)
Election ₂₀₁₅	– 0.107 (0.074)	– 0.116 (0.073)	– 0.220*** (0.057)
Election ₂₀₁₉	– 0.090 (0.074)	– 0.097 (0.073)	– 0.211*** (0.057)
Intercept	– 2.999*** (0.064)	– 2.897*** (0.067)	– 3.129*** (0.087)
	0.212	0.207	0.106

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

	Dependent variable:		
	logit(Preference vote share)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Random effects			
Var(Year-district-party)			
n (Level 1)	4,177	4,177	4,177
N (Level 2)	267	267	267
Log Likelihood	- 4,613.751	- 4,600.994	- 4,516.044
Akaike Inf. Crit.	9,265.503	9,243.987	9,102.089
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	9,385.912	9,377.072	9,323.896

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Age had a curvilinear relationship with the preference vote share. Candidates' success at first increases with age, but, at some point, the peak is reached after which age detrimentally affects votes. The coefficient for female candidates was positive (0.207), indicating that they had a higher mean preference vote share than male candidates. The effect of the candidate's native language, when it is not Finnish or Swedish, was negative and off the same magnitude as gender. All measures of political experience were positively associated with the share of the party vote that the candidates attracted. The smallest effect was for those standing in a previous parliamentary election (0.266). This was slightly surpassed by the effect of holding a municipal councillorship (0.382). Having previously served in parliament had a significantly larger coefficient (0.970) and being a party leader had the strongest effect of all the variables (1.715). Celebrity status also had a positive (0.710) coefficient. In terms of campaigning resources, over 20,000-euro campaign budgets were used as a comparison group for other lower campaign spending categories. The smallest campaign budgetary category had the strongest negative effect (-1.240) of all control variables. In addition, the number of candidates in the party list had a negative effect (-0.424), meaning that a larger number of candidates decrease the preference vote shares of individual candidates. Variance of the random intercept at the election-district-party level was 0.212.

The second model included two ideological distance variables: absolute distances on the Left-Right ($d_{L-R,med}$) and GAL-TAN dimensions ($d_{G-T,med}$) from the party's median candidate: both variables had small statistically significant negative effects, -0.117 for the Left-Right and -0.113 for the GAL-TAN distance. The second model showed no significant changes in the control variable coefficients, but the variance of the random intercept slightly decreased (0.207). Moreover, the second

model improved model fit indices (AIC and BIC) in comparison to the first model.

In sum, the results of the second model are in accordance with hypothesis H1, which stated that increasing the ideological distance between a candidate and their party's district median position provides an electoral disadvantage. To better understand the magnitude of the effect of the ideological distance variables on preference vote shares, effects plots were drawn (Fig. 4). These plots show the predicted values of preference vote shares when the absolute ideological distance from the party's median candidate changes while all other predictors are held constant. On average, one standard deviation distance from the party's median, on both the Left-Right and GAL-TAN dimensions, decreases the preference vote share of the candidate by 0.4 percentage points. A distance of two standard deviations on Left-Right and GAL-TAN have both a negative effect of 0.7pp on a candidate's preference vote share.

In the next stage, we set out to test our second set of hypotheses, focusing on whether the effect of a candidate's ideological distance from their party's median is contingent on the direction of the distance. The third model in Table 1 expands on the first model. It includes four party position (PP) variables (the centre position in both dimensions was set as a comparison group), four ideological distance variables (two for each ideological dimension) that measured whether the candidate was below or above the party median, and interactions between party positions and ideological distance variables (e.g., $PP_{Right-wing} \times d_{right|L-R,med}$). We also fitted interactions with continuous party position variables and performed linear interaction effect diagnostics suggested by Hainmueller et al. (2019a). The diagnostics figures revealed that the interaction effects were not linear with continuous party position variables. This was in line with our hypothesis which states that ideological distance effects are different in centrist parties than in non-centrist ones (see online Appendix H).

The AIC and BIC fit indices were best for the third model. However, the interpretation of the directional distance variables is difficult as multiple interactions take place simultaneously. To assist the interpretation, interaction plots are displayed in Fig. 5. For left-wing party candidates, the distance from the party's Left-Right median position, in either direction, did not have a statistically significant effect. For candidates in centrist parties, moving to the left of the party's median candidate had a statistically significant negative effect (-0.231). Positioning oneself more to the right of the median did not have a significant effect. For right-wing party candidates, more rightist positions had a negative effect on the candidate's preference vote share (-0.310), as was the case with those adopting more leftist positions (although these positions had much smaller negative effect).

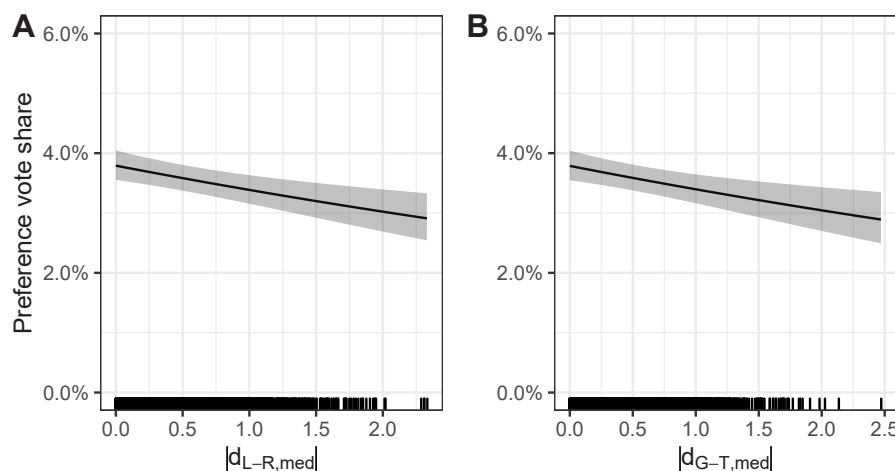


Fig. 4. Marginal effect of a candidate's absolute distance from their party's median candidate in the Left-Right and the GAL-TAN dimensions on candidate's preference vote share.

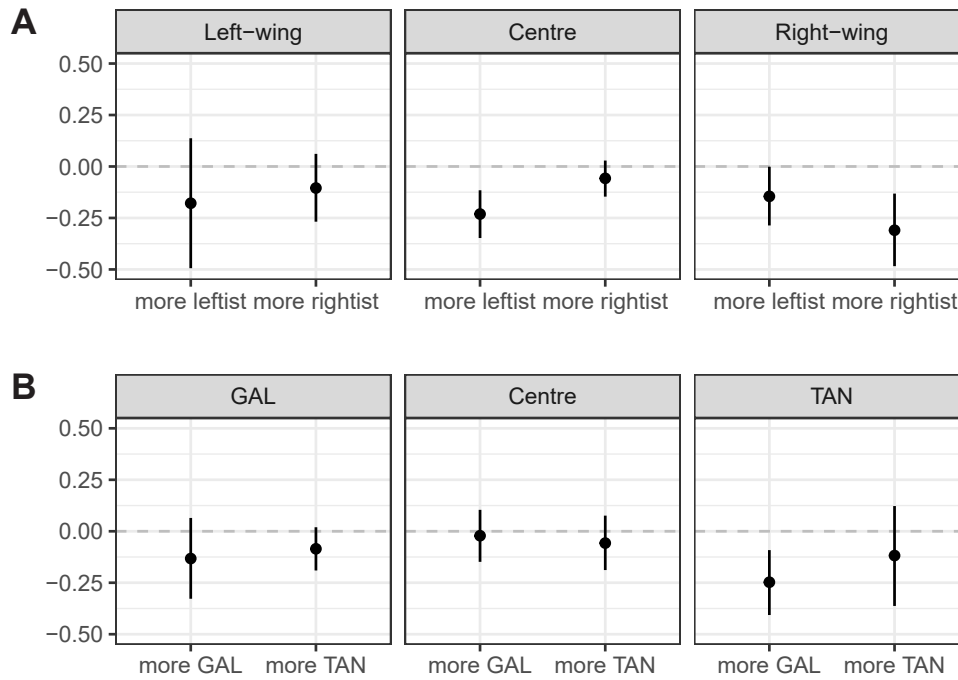


Fig. 5. Coefficient interactions between the ideological distance from the party’s median candidate and the party position (PP).

Ideological distances on the GAL–TAN dimension were not significant for candidates standing in GAL or centrist parties. Candidates standing in traditional-authoritarian-nationalist parties, on the other hand, suffered a statistically significant negative effect, if they were more green-alternative-libertarian than their party’s median candidate (–0.247). Moving to the other direction (more TAN) did not have significant effect. These findings were replicated with multiple robustness tests by calculating ideological distance from the party’s leader instead of the median party candidate, omitting campaign spending variables, changing party position categories’ cut-offs and varying the number of party position categories. The results of these robustness tests are presented in online Appendix H.

Fig. 6 shows marginal effect plots for the significant interactions of the third model. In addition, marginal effects of six control variables are presented in online Appendix F. The effect of one standard deviation distance to the left of the party’s median candidate on the Left–Right dimension decreases the preference vote share, by on average 0.8pp, for

candidates in centrist parties. For right-wing party candidates, positioning themselves one standard deviation to the right of their party’s median candidate decreases the preference vote share on average by 0.9pp. Candidates in parties with the most traditional-authoritarian-nationalist tendencies decrease their preference vote share on average by 0.9pp if they locate themselves one standard deviation from their party’s median candidate towards the GAL-end of the GAL–TAN dimension. In these three cases, the predicted average preference vote share continues to decrease, as the candidate’s distance from the party’s median increases, although confidence intervals of the predicted values tend to widen as the number of candidates with extreme distances are fewer than candidates close to the party median.

Our hypotheses H2.1 and H2.2 considered whether the effect of a candidate’s ideological distance from their party’s median candidate does indeed depend on their party’s overall ideological position and the direction of the distance; however, all of the interaction terms in model 3 were not as initially hypothesized. Thus, neither of the hypotheses

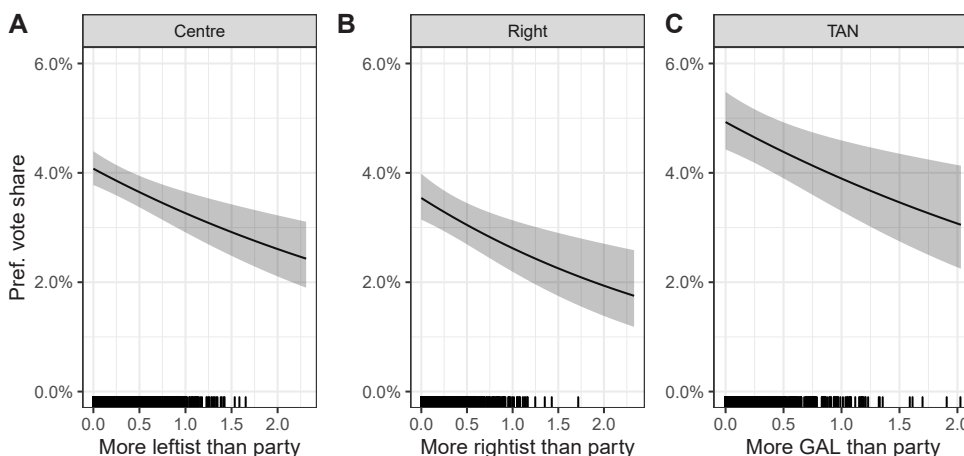


Fig. 6. Marginal effects of a candidate’s distance to their party’s median candidate with an interaction to party’s ideological position. Panel A shows a situation when a candidate is from a centrist party on the Left–Right dimension and positions themselves left of the party’s median candidate. In panel B a candidate is from a right-wing party and has a position right of the party’s median candidate. In panel C a candidate is from a TAN party and has a position more GAL of the party’s median candidate. Marginal effects of statistically significant interactions shown.

received strong support. Hypothesis H2.1 stated that more ideologically extreme candidates would perform better in non-centrist parties. There is some evidence for this, as more centrist TAN party candidates seem to be at disadvantage in comparison to their more TAN colleagues. The main proof against H2.1, however, is the result that more extreme right-wing candidates' electoral support is negatively affected by ideological distance. Furthermore, on the other side of the ideological dimension, candidates in left-wing and GAL parties were not affected by their ideological distances from their party median candidate.

The third hypothesis H2.2 stated that candidates that are ideologically close to their party's median candidates, in centrist parties, have an advantage over their more distant co-partisans. There was some partial support for this hypothesis, as party candidates from centrist parties who position themselves further to the left are negatively affected; interestingly, other directions did not seem to have a similar effect.

To gain a deeper understanding of the magnitude of the ideological distance's effect, preference vote share differences for each party's last elected candidate in a district, along with those for the first candidate from the same party not winning a seat, were calculated. These preference vote differences, i.e., intra-party winning margins, are presented in online Appendix G. In 26% of the cases ($n = 61$), intra-party winning margins were within one percent. They were particularly narrow for large parties, including the National Coalition Party, the Centre Party and the Finns Party. Moreover, SDP and the Greens appeared to have many intra-party races that were decided by small margins. Smaller parties displayed, on average, much larger differences between the last candidates that won a seat and first ones not to win it. For example, the joint effect of Left-Right and GAL-TAN distances can reach an average of 1.7pp decrease in the preference vote share for Finns Party candidates that locate themselves one standard deviation further to the left and one standard deviation more towards the GAL-end of GAL-TAN from the party's median candidate. Thus, when assessing the effect of the ideological distance variables in relation to the intra-party winning margins, one can conclude that the ideological distance can be a decisive factor in narrow races.

7. Discussion

The main findings of this paper are, first, that we confirm the finding of von Schoultz and Papageorgiou (2019) that candidates' absolute ideological distances in relation to their party's median candidates do have negative effects on their preference vote share. This effect can be seen both in the Left-Right and the GAL-TAN dimensions. However, it should be noted that the effect sizes were rather small in comparison to most of the other control variables (only a 0.4pp decrease in personal vote share for the increase of one standard deviation in the distance from the party median). Second, a more detailed picture of the effects emerged when the direction of the distance was considered, although our results here are relatively weak and the directional hypothesis does not apply similarly to all candidates in both ideological dimensions. Neither of the hypotheses concerning the direction of ideological distances (H2.1 and H2.2) received definite support. However, the results showed that centre-leaning candidates performed better in right-wing parties than their more right-wing co-partisan competitors. More extreme candidates on the GAL-TAN dimension had an advantage in TAN parties over relatively more GAL candidates within their own party. The effects for both cases predicted about a 0.9 percentage point decrease in preference vote shares for an increase of one standard deviation in distance.

Thus, the results indicate that, while intra-party ideological distancing from the party median can result in a loss of votes for candidates, it is mostly candidates in right-wing and centre parties on the Left-Right spectrum and TAN parties on GAL-TAN dimension that appear to be affected. Explanations for these deviations from the general theoretical expectations derived from the directional model – which assumes that the benefits from moving towards extreme ideological

positions would be equal for left- and right-wing parties or for GAL and TAN parties – might be found in context specific circumstances related to Finnish politics. The negative effect of a more rightist position for candidates in right-wing parties could be explained by the fact that extreme economic right positions are quite unpopular with the Finnish electorate, as voters tend to support the welfare state and dislike the idea of increasing income inequality (Westinen et al., 2016, 284). Furthermore, one reason why candidates in left-wing parties are not penalized for their advocacy of extreme economic left positions is that the left side of the dimension is 'short', as there are no VAA questions identifying candidates' positions on far-left policies, such as radical redistribution of wealth or nationalization of industry. In contrast, the right pole of the ideological spectrum, constructed via VAA questions, has a much longer tail of extreme values.

We also observed that centrist parties' candidates, in line with our expectation, are disfavoured when their ideological position is to the left of the party's median candidate, which affirms that the widespread appeal of these parties rests in their adoption of a centrist position, enhancing their ability to attract votes from both sides of the Left-Right dimension. Interestingly, candidates holding more rightist positions within these parties are not penalized. Lastly, candidates in TAN parties are penalized for having more centrist GAL ideological positions, which may be explained by the fact that many Finnish voters vote for parties over candidates (Isotalo et al., 2019, 16); this could also explain why voters might not be willing to risk their vote by opting for a candidate with centrist values in a TAN party. It is also possible that the GAL-TAN dimension is more polarizing than the Left-Right dimension, which is traditionally very familiar to voters and parties alike.

There are also limitations regarding our data and methods. Using the VAA responses to measure the ideological dimensions is not without its difficulties. As VAA questions are created mostly for journalistic purposes, they often change in attempt to reflect the political agenda of the particular election. It is also possible that candidates use VAA profiles to intentionally signal mixed messages to voters, by affirming one standpoint in the VAA and another in their campaigning, (e.g., social media or public events) to broaden their appeal to different audiences. Furthermore, it is also conceivable that parties may want to regulate their candidates' VAA responses, for example, in attempt to elucidate their party's policy positions and to emphasize their party's ideological coherence.

Finally, even though ideological distances did not prove to be as decisive in winning a seat as most of the political experience variables, they do have the potential to determine the winner in narrow intra-party races. It is also possible that candidates' ideological positions matter more when they are standing for the first time for national or local elections. First-time candidates often lack sufficient resources to win a seat compared with experienced candidates. Therefore, ideological positioning might be one of the few 'selling points' these candidates have at their disposal. It is left for future research to investigate whether the effects of ideology vary among candidate groups and to test if ideological positions prove to be of greater significance in narrow intra-party races. Alternatively, one might focus on individual issues instead of dimensions, even though we perceive dimensions consisting of multiple issues to be more robust metrics than individual issues, as single issues are more susceptible to changes in saliency, which would need to be accounted for, thus complicating analyses ranging over multiple elections. Issue-based approach would also be more exploratory and context-specific in nature.

In general, our results show that, even in open-list proportional electoral systems with strong incentives for individual candidates to differentiate themselves from their co-partisan candidates, ideological distancing is usually not a winning strategy. Optimal personal results are achieved by following the party line. This means that, instead of ideological originality, candidates need to emphasize other personal vote-earning attributes, such as experience, gender, localness or celebrity status, if they are to distinguish themselves from competing candidates.

From the voters' perspective, this is both bad and good. More ideological variation among candidates within a party presents voters with greater choice, which might enhance the representativeness of the electoral process. On the other hand, ideological mavericks often muddle parties' ideological message, which, in turn, makes voters' choice of party more difficult. After all, ideologically cohesive parties are likely to improve voters' ability to make informed choices and are also likely to encourage more cross-party cooperation in the parliament.

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Appendix. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102187>.

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