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13 What makes a Successful Candidate in the Finnish Open-list Proportional Electoral System?

Veikko Isotalo and Åsa von Schoultz

Introduction

In this chapter, continuing on from Chapter 12 and its analysis of voter's choice of candidates, we study individual candidates and their *electoral support* in the Finnish proportional (PR) electoral systems with open lists and mandatory preferential voting, which has been described as one of the most candidate-centered systems in the world (Raunio, 2005). The open and unranked party-lists used in Finnish elections make the system very competitive at the intraparty dimension and provides voters with the power to decide not only how many seats each party will get but also which candidates will fill these seats. These features create very different dynamics in elections and political representation compared to the more common variants of PR electoral systems with closed or flexible lists. It makes the system more focused on individual candidates and their behavior, and it has substantial influence over how candidates behave. The open lists mean that in order to obtain personal electoral success, candidates need to cultivate a personal relation with voters and run an individual campaign where they promote their personal experiences, attributes, and policies. It is generally not sufficient to enter the election as a collective party player, and to run strictly following the party platform to win a high list position. The research question that we seek to answer in this chapter is *which types of candidates that are successful under these circumstances*.

Finnish elections tend to feature many candidates, presented to voters in alphabetical order. According to the official electoral rules, parties can nominate 14 candidates or as many candidates as there are seats to be filled in the district, which was 36 in the largest electoral district of Uusimaa in the 2019 parliamentary election. Since votes are pooled at the party level, and each nominated candidate generally contributes at least a few votes to the party total, parties have an incentive to nominate as many candidates as possible (Shugart & Taagepera, 2017). Therefore, candidates running for one of the established parties typically face 13–36 competitors within the same party, depending on the district in which they are standing.

Previous research has clearly demonstrated that in order for individual candidates to be successful under such circumstances, it is important for them to have a personal reputation, and to cultivate a personal relation to voters (Shugart, 2001, 83). Being well-known, having political experience or being perceived as a credible

representative for a local community are all well-established strategies used by candidates (see also Chapter 12 on how voters find their candidates). In this chapter, we explore the impact of personal characteristics and personal vote-earning attributes, highlighted in the literature on the personal vote and competition within parties (Cain et al., 1987; Carey & Shugart, 1995; Shugart et al., 2005). We will also explore the extent to which the ideological positioning of candidates (von Schoultz & Papageorgiou, 2019; Isotalo et al., 2021) and their campaign spending influence their electoral fortunes.

The chapter begins with a short review of the literature on individual vote-earning in personalized electoral systems with intraparty competition, followed by the empirical part, where we first present descriptive patterns of the development of changes in candidates' personal vote-earning attributes. The second part of the chapter will seek to explain recent intraparty candidate vote-winning using data from the past six elections (1999–2019). Possible factors of success include socio-demographic, ideological, and political experience-related variables. The chapter ends with a discussion of prospects of intraparty competition and its effects on Finnish democracy as a whole. The analyses build on register data on candidates' electoral fortunes, personal attributes, and contextual data. We also employ data from voting advice applications (VAAs).

Candidates' vote earning in open-list PR systems

In candidate-oriented electoral systems, candidates need to emphasize traits and engage in activities that set them apart from other candidates while also allowing them to reach out to and earn the support of voters. This is particularly true in systems where there is a high level of competition between candidates running for election on the same party list (Carey & Shugart, 1995), as is the case in Finland. Reaching out to voters in these circumstances requires candidates to engage in activities which can bring support from voters, which they tend to do by utilizing their connections to the electorate, and by emphasizing personal traits and attributes that voters are likely to find attractive. In literature, the latter are commonly referred to as *personal vote-earning attributes* (PVEAs) (Shugart et al., 2005; Put et al., 2018). PVEAs are attributes, which voters use as cues, and that are emphasized by candidates to signal their competences, qualities as representatives of certain interests or subgroups, and to make them known among voters (Gschwend & Zittel, 2015).

Personal vote-earning attributes can come in many different forms. Previous research has emphasized the vote-winning capacity of *ties to the local community* (Shugart et al., 2005; Tavits, 2010; Put & Maddens, 2015). It is generally assumed that voters prioritize locally based candidates since they are expected to “know the area and its interest” (Shugart et al., 2005) and to act on these local interests (Campbell et al., 2019). Having served in local elective office can also contribute to greater name recognition (Put & Maddens, 2015) and signal familiarity with local issues and problems (Tavits, 2010). In the Finnish context, several points speak in favor of an important local perspective in national politics. The geographical representativeness of the 200 MPs in the Parliament can be considered extensive.

Although MPs in the Finnish mainland are elected from 12 relatively large constituencies (varying from six to 37 seats) they represented as many as 89 different municipalities (of a total of 311) in the 2019 election. Moreover, when asked about their views on representative roles and foci, Finnish voters, as well as their elected representatives, tend to downplay the role of parties and emphasize the importance of the local perspective (Bengtsson & Wass, 2016).

Another, and perhaps the most well-established vote-earning attribute is *political experience*, in particular acting as a representative at the national level (Erikson, 1971; Butler, 2009; Kotakorpi et al., 2017; Dahlgaard, 2016). While it is difficult to distinguish between the experiences gathered as an MP and the personal qualities that help this candidate to become elected in the first place, it is clear that the advantage of being an incumbent MP is highly beneficial when it comes to winning personal votes. The incumbency effect is, however, considered to be smaller in PR multi-member districts with open lists compared to single-member districts (Maddens et al., 2006). This is supported by data from Finland, where the level of defeats to another co-partisan (intrapartisan defeats) has tended to be relatively high, while the level of inter-partisan defeats has tended to be substantially lower (Arter, 2009). Although weaker than in single-member districts, the incumbency advantage in Finnish politics has traditionally been highly significant. During the period 1962–2003, 85 percent of MPs ran for re-election, of which 76 percent were successful (Paloheimo, 2007, 334). Also, having previous experience from standing for election without being successful can be beneficial since this allows the candidate to cultivate a reputation (Shugart et al., 2005) and to gain valuable experience from campaigning. Moreover, they might have a previously established campaign team ready to be activated when deciding to run again (Eder et al., 2015). Under the broad label of political experience, we can also count leadership positions within the party organization, which can provide visibility and signal political credibility.

A different way to earn votes in personalized electoral systems is to have an established reputation outside of politics. Such candidates are often labeled *celebrity* candidates, which is an established concept in Finnish politics (Karvonen, 2010), but also recognized in the international literature (e.g., Knecht & Rosentrater, 2021). A celebrity candidate denotes a candidate that is well known and involved in other areas of public life, for example, from media or sports, when entering the field of politics. Celebrity status entails name recognition that expands beyond traditional political circles and can translate into valuable political capital (Arter, 2014). To be well known from other contexts has been considered an advantage in the electoral arena, especially for rookies (Arter, 2009) since these candidates tend to receive more extensive and favorable media coverage (Abramowitz & Segal, 1986). In the Finnish parliamentary election of 2007, as many as 15 percent of the rookies could be classified as celebrity candidates (Arter, 2009).

While the literature on PVEAs depart from the idea that voters primarily respond to relatively simple cues that can be used as a shortcut to more valuable political information, recent studies have demonstrated that voters also appear to act upon more cognitively demanding information such as ideological positions of candidates (von Schoultz & Papageorgiou, 2019; Isotalo et al., 2020; Schmit,

2021). While ideologies are generally connected to parties as collective actors, candidate-centered electoral systems enable individual candidates to take different ideological positions within the context of their party lists and to signal this to voters. In the literature, it has been theorized that candidates in open-list PR systems like Finland can benefit electorally from carving out distinct ideological positions (Cox, 1990; Ames, 1995; Persson et al., 2005) and offering voters a unique issue or ideological alternative. However, recent empirical findings from Finland suggest the opposite, indicating that candidates benefit from positioning themselves centrally within the party (von Schoultz & Papageorgiou, 2019; Isotalo et al., 2020).

In addition to the classical PVEAs discussed above, the analyses in this chapter will also encompass the effect on vote-earning of the demographic attributes, such as age and gender, considered particularly valuable in list systems since they can be used for balancing the list and reaching out to different groups of voters (Valdini, 2012). In particular, the impact of gender has received attention in previous studies, and it has been suggested that the general underrepresentation of women in politics is less severe in multimember districts compared to single-member districts (Matland & Brown, 1992; Rule, 1987). It has been proposed that women might have an advantage in open-list systems, specifically, if there are fewer women than men running (Rule, 1994; Shugart, 1994). In Finnish elections, the share of elected women has increased substantially over the years, from 15 percent elected in 1948 to an all-time high of 47 percent in the 2019 election (von Schoultz, 2016; von Schoultz et al., 2020). The share of women among the nominated standing for election has developed in accordance (von Schoultz, 2016; Sipinen & Koskimaa, 2020). In our analyses, we further account for campaign spending, which can be expected to increase vote-winning and the experience of being a candidate in previous election.

Results and analysis

Descriptive analyses

The main data used in this chapter consist of Finnish parliamentary election results (on a candidate-level) and characteristics of the candidates in 12 elections (1975–2019). We begin our empirical explorations by descriptive analyses, where we investigate long-term patterns in candidates' background characteristics in the two time periods: 1975–2019 and 1999–2019. For each variable, we present three metrics of interest: (1) share of elected candidates having the characteristic, (2) vote share among candidates with the characteristic, and (3) overall prevalence of the characteristic among the candidate population. Only two variables were available for the whole time period: candidate gender and incumbency status. As shown by Figure 13.1, the share of female candidates has nearly doubled between 1975 and 2019. The female candidate vote share and share of the elected have developed similarly, falling only a few percentage points short of 50 percent. The share of re-elected incumbents among newly elected has fluctuated around 60 percent; however, the combined vote share of the incumbent candidates has declined slightly over time. Similarly, the share of incumbent candidates has decreased to under ten

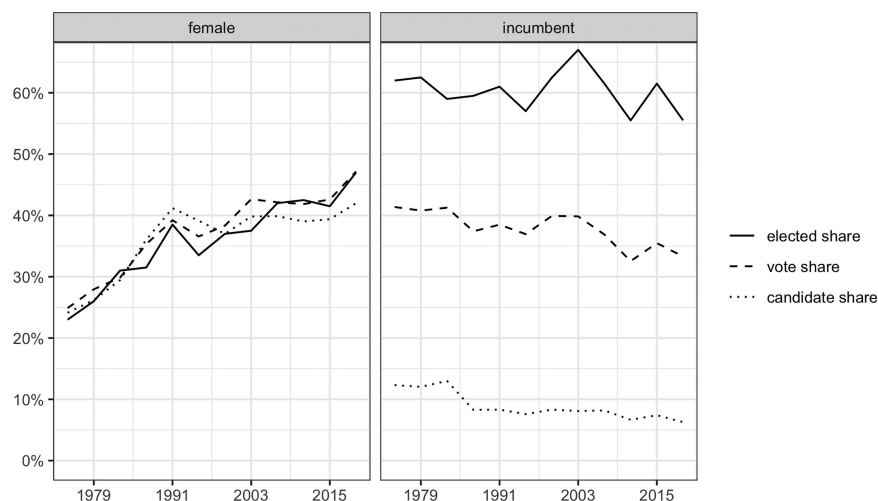


Figure 13.1 Finnish parliamentary candidates' incumbency status and gender over time.

Source: Ministry of Justice and Statistics Finland.

percent. The number of incumbents running for re-election has decreased by five percentage points (from 83 percent in 1975 to 78 percent in 2019).

We continue with four political experience and name recognition variables among the main eight parties in the latest six elections (1999–2019), reported in Figure 13.2. The share of elected candidates that are local councilors has increased to over 80 percent even though the share of candidates with the local political experience has remained relatively stable (around 50 percent). We consider this an important development. The trends in other three variables: ran in previous election, party leadership position, and celebrity status have not changed significantly. Returning candidates, i.e., candidates that have previously run for election account for more than one-third of the candidate pools in the main eight parties and they account for approximately 60 percent of their parties' votes. Party leadership positions have not increased their importance during the time period even though there have been some fluctuations. Candidates with celebrity status have remained as a fringe phenomenon in Finnish politics and their numbers have been on the decline in the last two elections. Next, we will inspect the multivariate results covering several elections.

Multivariate analyses

In the following section, we focus on explaining intraparty candidate success. To determine the importance of personal vote-earning attributes and other personal traits for candidates' intraparty electoral success, we first present a pooled OLS regression for a dataset containing the eight parliamentary parties in years 1999–2019 ($n = 8,590$). Our dependent variable is the preference vote share, i.e., the candidates'

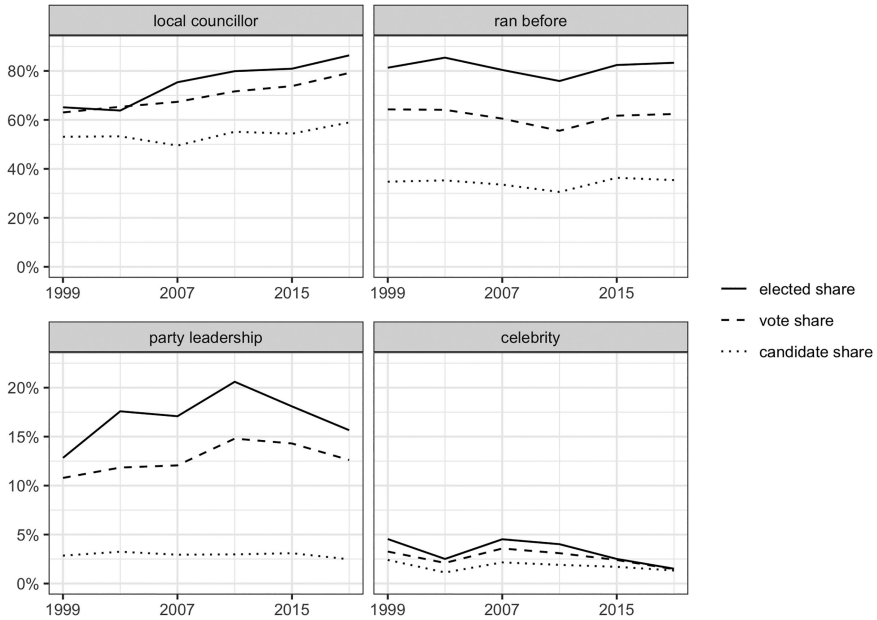


Figure 13.2 Finnish parliamentary candidates' political experience and celebrity status over time.

Source: Ministry of Justice and Statistics Finland.

share of their party's vote in the district where they were running. The variable is log-transformed due to the skewed distribution with many candidates winning small shares of the total party vote. The model consists of eight independent variables. In addition to central vote-earning attributes, we also add candidates' mother tongue, party, election year, and district controls. All variables are presented in Appendix replace with: Table 13.A1.

The main results are presented in Figure 13.3, which shows effects of the central variables on the dependent variable (replace with Table 13.A2 in Appendix). The effects are calculated by setting all other variables of the model, except the variable in question, to their mean values.¹ Here, we notice that political experience has a significant positive effect on candidate vote shares. Being a member of the European parliament (MEP) and being an elected MP affect candidates' predicted preference vote share the most. Even though the effect of being a MEP is large, one should note that there are only 16 MEPs in the dataset, which means that this estimate is not very reliable. The incumbency effect instead has been well established in pluralist single-member district electoral systems, and additionally there is growing evidence that incumbency effect plays a part in proportional representation electoral systems with multi-member districts too (see, e.g., Dahlgard, 2016; Kotakorpi, 2017). Being an elected MP, for example, increases a candidate's predicted intraparty vote share from 3 percent to 10 percent (an increase of seven percentage points). The second most impactful variables are

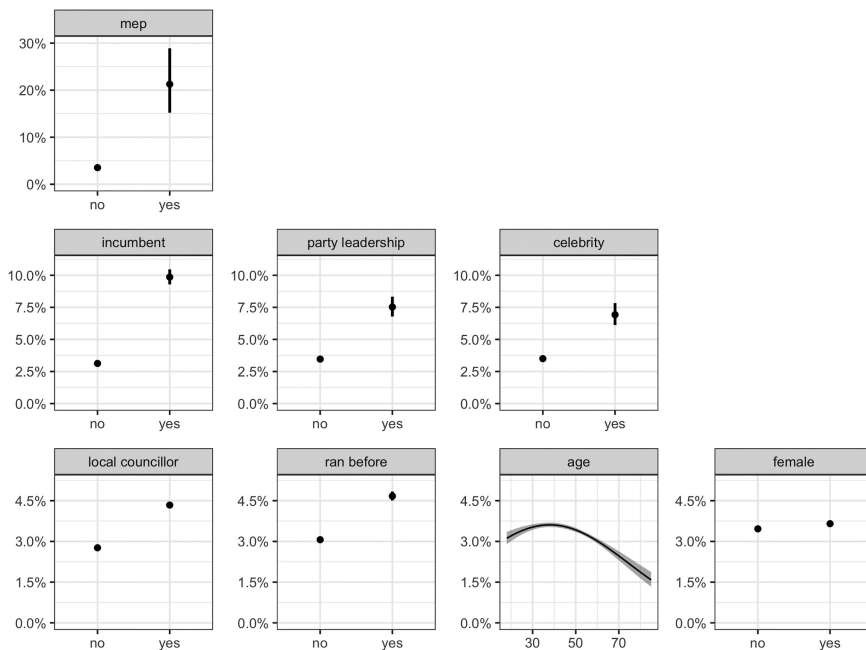


Figure 13.3 Effects of individual variables in 1999–2019.

Source: Ministry of Justice and Statistics Finland

having a party leadership position and being a celebrity candidate. The strength of these PVEAs is unsurprising as party leadership positions are visible roles that increase name-recognition of the candidates. Moreover, celebrity status has been suggested of being a decision heuristic for voters (see Zwarun & Torrey, 2011).

The magnitude of these variables' effects is half of the incumbency effect. The last two political experience variables are holding a local councillor position and having been nominated in the previous election. These two variables increase the predicted preference vote from 3 percent to 4.5 percent, which is an increase of 1.5 percentage points (half of the increase of the celebrity and party leadership variables). Previous political experience in the local level serves as useful cue for voters, as candidates with local roots can be expected to be aware of the local issues which can increase their local vote (Shugart et al. 2005).

The last two graphically presented variables relate to candidate demographics. In terms of candidate age, the relationship with intraparty vote share is non-linear. The age effect increases till the age of 40, after which age has a negative effect on candidate success. This reflects voters' preference of middle-aged candidates (peak of the curve being around 40). Even though the impact of age seems to be favoring relatively young candidates, one should keep in mind that older candidates have had more chances of obtaining previous political experience than young candidates, which might offset their relative age disadvantage.

Lastly, being a female candidate is associated with a marginal increase (0.1–0.2 percentage points) in intraparty success. Women enjoy an electoral advantage over men, which is in line with previous results in other proportional representation systems (see Rule, 1994; Shugart, 1994). This most likely stems from the fact that fewer women are running than men, which allows women to concentrate their votes to numerically fewer female candidates.

To test whether candidates' ideological positions and economic resources play a role in their electoral success, we expand the original model by adding four additional variables which were only available in the last three elections: candidates' ideological distance from party median candidate in Left–Right, ideological distance from party median candidate in GAL–TAN, having a university education, and a categorical variable for estimated campaign spending. Here, we utilize candidates' responses to two of the most popular Finnish voting advice applications (VAAs) for the latest three elections (2011, 2015, and 2019). VAA datasets were obtained directly from Helsingin Sanomat (the largest newspaper in Finland) and Yleisradio (The Finnish Broadcasting Company) websites and per request (Yle Uutisten vaalikone, 2011; Yleisradio, 2015; Yleisradio, 2019; Helsingin Sanomat, 2015; Helsingin Sanomat, 2019). The full regression results are found in Appendix (Table 13.A3).

In Figure 13.4, we can see that the newly added ideological distance variables, both Left–Right and GAL–TAN, have a negative effect on candidates' preference vote shares. However, only Left–Right has a statistically significant effect at conventional levels ($p < 0.05$). A negative effect means that candidates deviating from the party's median candidate position win fewer votes, compared to candidates that are centrally positioned.² As deviations from the party position tend to be often small (less than one standard deviation), so are the effects. The other key variable of interest in this model, campaign spending, in turn, displays a substantial effect on vote-earning. If a candidate's estimated spending is above 20,000 euros, the candidate is predicted to win eight percent of the district's party vote (holding other variables constant), whereas spending less than 5,000 euros predicts only two percent intraparty vote share. Similar results regarding the impact of campaign spending have been noted in other open or flexible list systems (see, e.g., Maddens et al., 2006).

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have empirically demonstrated which types of candidates earn personal votes in the Finnish open-list proportional electoral system; a system in which candidates generally are presented in alphabetical order to voters, and where there is a high level of competition among candidates nominated by the same party. We have also theoretically established the mechanisms behind the personal vote-earning attributes and how these types of attributes assist candidates in cultivating a personal vote.

Our empirical analysis of 8,590 candidates in six Finnish Parliamentary elections confirm much of what we know from previous studies in the field. We show

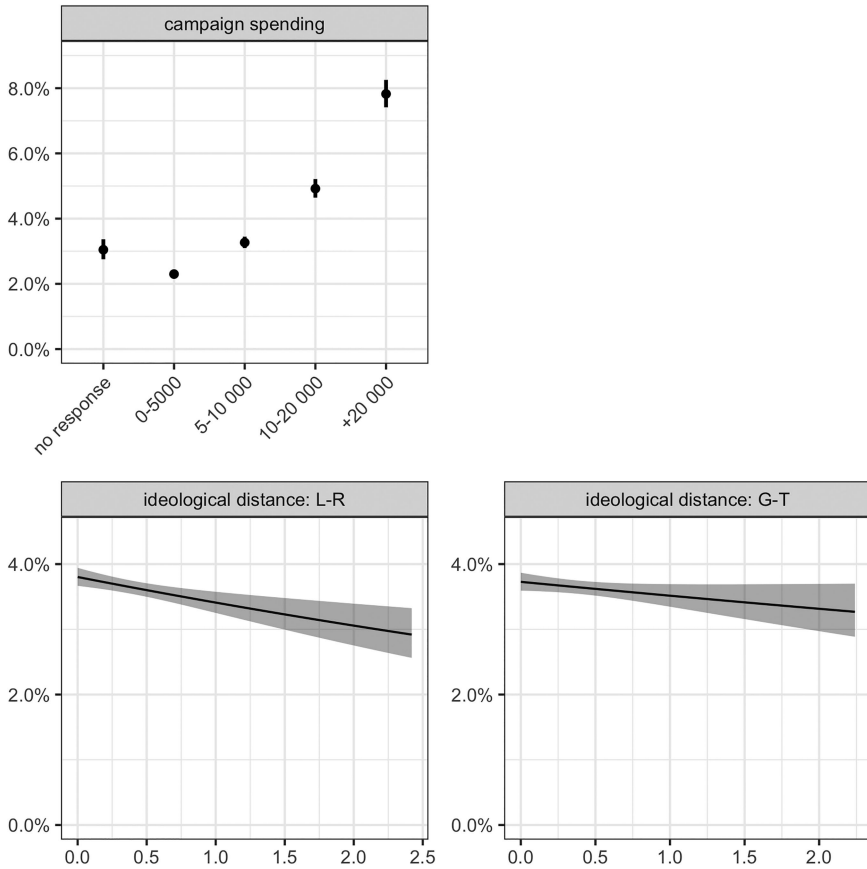


Figure 13.4 Predictor effects of additional variables in the 2011–2019 model.

Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistics Finland, and Voting Advice Application data from the Finnish broadcasting company YLE and Helsingin Sanomat.

that holding office, i.e., being an incumbent MP, is highly valuable trait in this competitive context. Other experience-related attributes, such as being a member of the European Parliament, holding office at the municipal level or a leadership position within the party, also significantly contribute to candidates winning large shares of preference votes. The only route to electoral success is, however, not the political one. Candidates that have established a reputation outside of politics, so-called celebrity candidates, are also on average more successful than the average co-partisan. Our more detailed analysis of the last three elections further demonstrates that campaign spending is an important factor in bringing in votes and that candidates that ideologically position themselves along the party line, are more successful compared to candidates that take deviating positions.

Next, we will assess the implications of our results for elections and democratic outcomes. A positive democratic feature of open-list PR electoral systems is that it

allows voters to have a substantial say in which candidates that become their political representatives. On the one hand, it is a system which tends to reward candidates with political experience (Shugart et al., 2005), which might enhance the quality of representation. On the other hand, the high rewards from being well known and established in politics or media can make it difficult for young, less experienced candidates to enter national politics. Most nationally elected politicians have taken the relatively long route, where they first establish a political platform at the municipal level, after which they make one or several attempts to get elected in parliamentary elections (Koskimaa et al., 2022). The system has further been criticized for incentivizing politicians to deliver particularistic services to their constituencies (Ames, 1995; Carey & Shugart, 1995; Grimmer et al., 2012) and to engage in corruption (Chang & Golden, 2007). However, these risks are not universal and are potentially linked to only certain cultural contexts (e.g., post-war Italy) or to countries with a less established democratic system compared to Finland. Moreover, open-list system might be a viable way to fight institutionalized party-level corruption, as open lists provide voters a direct say in eliminating the “bad apples” in elections.

Another point of critique is that the dual structure with competition both between and within parties, and the large number of candidates at display puts a high cognitive burden on voters. This burden may push voters towards sub-optimal or even irrelevant decisions or discourage them from participating in the first place (Cunow et al., 2021; Söderlund et al., 2021). Yet, recent research points towards that Finnish voters are able to select politicians that are on average more competent, motivated, and honest compared to the general population (Jokela et al., 2022).

Notes

- 1 The analyses were performed with R statistical software. These predictor effects were calculated with *effects* package and figures were constructed with *ggplot2* R package (Fox and Weisberg 2018; Fox and Weisberg 2019; Wickham 2016).
- 2 Ideological distances are calculated as absolute distances from their parties' national median candidate positions, and these distances are measured in standard deviations.

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Appendix

Table 13.A1 Analysis variable information

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Availability</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>
University education	Self-reported in Yle VAA	2011–2019	Binary (0 = no or 1 = yes)
Ideological distance: Left–Right	Calculated by using EFA on VAA statements (see detailed description in Isotalo et al. 2020)	2011–2019	Continuous
Ideological distance: GAL–TAN	Calculated by using EFA on VAA statements (see detailed description in Isotalo et al. 2020)	2011–2019	Continuous
Campaign spending (cf. No answer)	Self-reported in Yle VAA (corrected for candidates that submitted the official expense report)	2011–2019	Categorical (cf. No answer, 0–5,000, 5–10,000, 10–20,000, +20,000)
Language (cf. Finnish)	Ministry of Justice database & Statistics Finland	1999–2019	Categorical (cf. Finnish, Swedish, Other)
Female	Ministry of Justice database & Statistics Finland	1975–2019	Binary (0 = no or 1 = yes)
Age and age-squared	Ministry of Justice database & Statistics Finland	1999–2019	Continuous
Celebrity	Coded based on media articles	1999–2019	Binary (0 = no or 1 = yes)
Ran for election	Ministry of Justice database & Statistics Finland	1999–2019	Binary (0 = no or 1 = yes)
Incumbency	Ministry of Justice database & Statistics Finland	1975–2019	Binary (0 = no or 1 = yes)
Mun. councilor	Ministry of Justice database & Statistics Finland	1999–2019	Binary (0 = no or 1 = yes)
Party leadership	Ministry of Justice database & Statistics Finland	1999–2019	Binary (0 = no or 1 = yes)
MEP	Ministry of Justice database & Statistics Finland	1999–2019	Binary (0 = no or 1 = yes)

Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistics Finland, and Voting Advice Application data from the Finnish broadcasting company YLE and Helsingin Sanomat.

Table 13.A2 OLS regression 1999–2019 model

<i>Dependent variable: logit (Preference vote share)</i>		
Language: Other (cf. Finnish)	−0.488***	(0.062)
Language: Swedish	0.062	(0.053)
Female	0.055**	(0.018)
Age	0.029***	(0.005)
Age-squared	−0.0004***	(0.0001)
Celebrity	0.717***	(0.068)
Stood for election	0.439***	(0.023)
Incumbent	1.220***	(0.035)
Mun. councilor	0.467***	(0.020)
Party leadership	0.818***	(0.057)
MEP	1.998***	(0.209)
Constant	−3.910***	(0.140)
<i>Controls</i>		
Year	Yes	
Party	Yes	
District	Yes	
Observations	8,590	
R2	0.464	
Adjusted R2	0.462	
Residual Std. Error	0.831 (df = 8549)	
F Statistic	185.360*** (df = 40; 8549)	

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

Source: Ministry of Justice and Statistics Finland.

Table 13.A3 OLS regression 2011–2019 model

<i>Dependent variable: logit (Preference vote share)</i>		
University education	0.174***	(0.024)
Ideological distance: Left–Right	−0.113***	(0.033)
Ideological distance: GAL–TAN	−0.061	(0.034)
Campaign spending: 0–5,000 (cf. No answer)	−0.289***	(0.055)
Campaign spending: 5,000–10,000	0.072	(0.058)
Campaign spending: 10,000–20,000	0.499***	(0.060)
Campaign spending: +20,000	0.994***	(0.060)
Language: Other (cf. Finnish)	−0.217**	(0.075)
Language: Swedish	−0.110	(0.067)
Female	0.156***	(0.023)
Age	0.011	(0.006)
Age-squared	−0.0002**	(0.0001)
Celebrity	0.579***	(0.087)
Stood for election	0.278***	(0.028)
Incumbent	0.675***	(0.046)
Mun. councilor	0.292***	(0.026)

(Continued)

Table 13.A3 (Continued)

	<i>Dependent variable: logit (Preference vote share)</i>	
Party leadership	0.627***	(0.069)
MEP	2.352***	(0.319)
Constant	-2.823***	(0.170)
<i>Controls</i>		
Year	Yes	
Party	Yes	
District	Yes	
Observations	4,179	
R2	0.598	
Adjusted R2	0.594	
Residual Std. Error	0.708 (df = 4136)	
F Statistic	146.327*** (df = 42; 4136)	

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

Source: Ministry of Justice, Statistics Finland, and Voting Advice Application data from the Finnish broadcasting company YLE and Helsingin Sanomat.



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