

# The study of political candidates

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## Introduction

Although there exists a wide range of views about what democracy means, there is a general consensus in defining democratic regimes in terms of regular, free and fair elections. In many countries, parties are the primary actors in organizing elections, so that a widely accepted statement in political science affirms that they “created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties” (Schattschneider, 1942: 1). Parties define the rules governing the electoral competition and control the recruitment of candidates for elective offices, hence determining the distribution of power and the identity of political elites, and finally shaping the chain of democratic accountability that links citizens and elected representatives. The study of political candidates – who eventually form the teams that compete for popular support, defining the composition of parliaments and governments – is therefore related to the very nature of representation, and allows to cast light on important issues such as party competition, intra-party politics and the functioning of legislative assemblies.

The focus on individual candidates is also driven by a methodological interest in going beyond the empirically disputable “parties-as-unitary-actors” assumption, as well as by a substantial desire to understand the trend towards the personalization of politics (Karvonen, 2010; McAllister, 2007; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007) and the recent changes in the workings of parties as intermediaries between citizens and the state (Katz and Mair, 1995; Thomassen, 2014). The goal of this contribution is to provide a thorough review of the research that has been conducted on candidates. We discuss the theoretical approaches developed by scholars on the subject in the first section, the main conclusions of the empirical research in the second section, the methods and data employed in candidate research in the third section, and finally some possible trajectories for future research.

## Theoretical approaches

Theoretical works on political candidates have most of the time focused on the relationships between political institutions and candidates’ characteristics and

behaviour. In rational choice accounts, individual politicians are typically assumed to seek election – or re-election in case they already hold a legislative seat – as this enhances their ability to pursue offices or policies (Mayhew, 1974; Fenno, 1978; Strom, 1997). Politicians will thus spend time and effort doing what they believe voters will reward in the next election. Vote-seeking strategies are sought after within a set of political institutions, which create opportunities and constraints on individual behaviour and shape the incentives faced by would-be legislators. Regime type, electoral rules, methods for selecting candidates and the hierarchies of elective offices can be treated as independent variables, as they are expected to have an impact on the traits of candidates and the choice of their behavioural repertoire. In what follows we concentrate on three major topics in theoretical research on candidates for political office: the effects of electoral systems, candidate selection, and career patterns. Each of these is related to prominent political institutions influencing not only who enters the legislative elites, but also how candidates behave during the electoral campaign and in the legislature if elected.

The most well-developed theoretical framework for the study of candidates and individual politicians focuses on electoral institutions (André et al., 2014). Electoral rules differ in terms of whether they strengthen or weaken politicians' incentives to cultivate personal reputation rather than the party reputation (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Shugart et al., 2005). Specifically, in electoral systems in which intra-party competition is present – such as open-list PR systems – politicians are rewarded by voters for their personal reputation. Candidates are hence expected to cultivate a personal vote by maintaining a close connection with their constituency. On the contrary, under electoral rules that discourage intra-party competition – like closed-list PR or STV – the (re)election prospects of political aspirants are inextricably tied to their party's electoral performance. This weakens candidates' incentives to nurture a personal reputation among voters.

In order to become members of the legislature, prospective politicians must pass two barriers, not just the electoral one. Before being elected by the general public, would-be representatives must be chosen by a party selectorate – that is, the body that chooses the party candidates. The same happens for incumbents, who have to be re-selected by their own party. Candidate selection – labelled by Gallagher and Marsh (1988) as the “secret garden” of politics due to the difficulties encountered in collecting empirical data on parties' internal nomination processes – is the object of

a second major theoretical approach to the study of candidates which has developed more recently (Ramney, 1981; Norris, 1997). Just like electoral rules, also the mechanisms governing candidate selection can be either more personal or more subject to the control of the party leadership (see Hazan and Voerman [2006] on the connection between the two types of rules) and can then have important consequences for the behaviour of individual candidates (Hazan and Rahat, 2005).

Two crucial aspects of candidate selection rules emphasized in this literature are the decentralization of the recruitment process and the inclusiveness of the party selectorate. Concerning the former, territorial or functional decentralization of candidate selection is expected to increase nominees' responsiveness to the demands of their constituency (Hazan, 1999). As for the latter, which has been highlighted as more fundamental, a negative relationship has been theorized between inclusiveness and party cohesion. Since in order to be (re-)selected politicians need to satisfy and respond to the selectorate, more exclusive selectorates are expected to push candidates to engage in party-centred activities. In this case, to raise their chance of being recruited, politicians need to be responsive to a small partisan "oligarchy" formed by the party leadership or a restricted group of party delegates. In contrast, a more inclusive selectorate – composed by all party members or the entire electorate – implies the involvement of non-party actors in candidate selection, which can lead individuals to promote interests that are at odds with those of the party. This results in more candidate-centred behaviour (Rahat and Hazan, 2001; Hazan, 2014). While in the above mentioned studies candidate selection has been treated as an explanatory factor, a number of works have analyzed it as an outcome to be explained. This strand of the literature has mainly sought to explain the degree of democratization and decentralization in the selection procedures adopted by parties (Scarrow et al., 2000; Lundell, 2004).

A third relevant perspective in theoretical research on candidates deals with career patterns. Early studies hypothesized a relationship between political institutions and political careers (Schlesinger, 1966) and analyzed the aggregate-level consequences of institutions on career patterns (Polsby, 1968). Starting from Jacobson and Kernell's (1981) study of congressional candidates, more recent works have analyzed individual career choices in a micro-level perspective (e.g. Kiewiet and Zeng, 1993). In this view, politically ambitious candidates make their career choices in a given structure of political opportunities defined by a hierarchy of

elective offices. Politicians attempt to move upward from less desirable offices to the smaller set of highly sought-after positions, while the availability, accessibility and attractiveness of offices condition individual ambition (Borchert, 2011). Career patterns have also been considered as an independent variable affecting intra-party politics, legislative behaviour and legislature's policymaking capacity (Kousser and MacKenzie, 2014). At the same time, the sociological study of political elites has paid considerable attention to analyzing the composition of legislative assemblies, the gradual transformation of legislative elites in terms of their socio-demographic and political background, as well as the consequences of these changes for representative democracy (Best and Cotta, 2000).

### **The empirical study of candidates**

The main hypothesis emerging from the personal vote literature described above is that incentives translate into different forms of behaviour that are commonly considered to be personal vote-seeking. In particular, general indicators of a conduct aimed at cultivating personal reputation are whether candidates carry out individualized electoral campaigns (Zittel and Gschwend, 2008), and – once elected – whether they engage in constituency service (Martin and Rozenberg, 2012; Searing, 1994), promote particularized legislation that primarily benefit their local community (Crisp, 2007), or break with party discipline in legislative voting in order to advocate on behalf of constituents (Carey, 2007, 2009; Cain et al., 1987).

Comparative research has focused mainly on the link between electoral rules and legislative voting behaviour, using aggregated data of elected candidates' roll-call votes. Contrary to expectations, Sieberer (2006) found that party unity is marginally stronger in candidate-centred than party-centred environments, while Depauw and Martin (2009) did not find a consistent effect of electoral rules on cohesion. Analyses comparing the voting behaviour of candidates elected with a mix of ballot structures have allowed further country-specific investigation, moving from party- to individual-level data. However, even in these cases the results are inconclusive (Martin, 2014). Following the format of single-country studies, scholars have shifted their attention to individualized campaigns. Contrary to legislative behaviour, campaign activities are more directly linked to electoral incentives and are not simultaneously affected by other factors such as legislative organization and regime characteristics. Furthermore, the study of personalized campaigns casts light on the role of candidates at the electoral level, openly

addressing the concept of the personalization of politics. A review of case studies focusing on candidates' campaign activities shows that, in general, electoral incentives fail in explaining cross-country differences, highlighting the relevance of additional factors affecting the behaviour of candidates (Zittel, 2014).

The inconclusiveness of empirical results have pushed scholars to explore complementary explanations of candidates' behaviour. Tavits (2009), examining comparative data on voting behaviour, found that candidates with local-level political experience tend to be electorally more successful, and, once in parliament, to behave more independently. Shomer (2009), studying bill initiation, found no support for the connection between candidate selection procedures and vote-seeking behaviour, discovering instead that career patterns better account for individual-level variations. Similarly, Russo (2012), attempting to explain the cause of variation in parliamentary questioning – a proxy of constituency service engagement – found that, despite the closed-list electoral system, Italian elected candidates with a genuine local profile are those most likely to focus on constituency-oriented questions.

## **Research methods in candidate studies**

Building on the exploratory studies on parliamentary roles and norms conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, research on candidates and elected representatives has usually been carried out using interviews and surveys (Bailer 2014). Elite surveys – whether personally administered as in interviews or self-administered as in structured questionnaires – are considered one of the most valuable sources of data for studying the attitudes and behaviour of candidates and representatives as they provide direct measures of the orientations and intentions of individual politicians.

Recent prominent examples of surveys on political elites include: the European Parliament Research Group (EPRG), PartiRep, the European Election Candidate Survey (EECS), and the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS). The first two projects focus on elected candidates: the EPRG (Scully et al., 2012) provide data on individual members of the European Parliament, while PartiRep surveyed national and regional legislators in 15 advanced democracies (Deschouwer and Depauw, 2014). Rather than concentrating on elected representatives only, the EECS – which is included in the PIREDEU project (Giebler and Wüst, 2011) – and the CCS have

collected data about candidates running for European and national parliamentary elections, respectively.

In particular, the CCS has collected data in 20 countries and 25 elections, using a common core questionnaire to allow for cross-country comparability. The topics covered in the survey include candidates' socio-demographic profile and political background, previous political career, elite recruitment and candidate selection, engagement and mobilization, usage of campaign instruments, intra-party democracy, value orientations and attitudes towards political issues and representation. The Italian module of the CCS constitutes the Italian Candidate Survey, which was carried out during the months immediately after the 2013 elections in Italy (Di Virgilio et al., 2014).

## **Future Research**

The impressive amount of information available on legislators has biased empirical research towards legislature-specific in-depth studies of the behaviour of elected representatives. However, the recent efforts in collecting cross-country survey data on many aspects of politicians' activities and attitudes may open a new era of research in a wide range of areas. In particular, CCS data, which contain material on both candidates and elected representatives, are mostly yet to be explored. Specifically, the possibility to match self-reported information with other sources of data, such as the content of electoral campaigns and parliamentary questioning, or the patterns of bill initiation and roll-call votes in a comparative framework, gives the opportunity to generalise results beyond specific examples and better evaluate the effect of institutional variations. These developments could prove useful for scholars working in many sub-fields of political science, such as legislative studies, electoral studies, political behaviour and party politics.

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