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Editorial: Beyond the secret garden of politics: Internal party dynamics of candidate selection

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Beyond the secret garden of politics: Internal party dynamics of candidate selection](#)

Gallagher and Marsh (1988) referred to candidate selection as the secret garden of politics. At that time, little information was available about the process of candidate selection in most countries. Since then, inclusiveness and decentralization of the selection process has been focused extensively in the literature on candidate selection, and to a lesser extent the openness of candidacies when it comes to selection criteria (Hazan and Rahat, 2010).

During the last decade the outlook of party systems in Europe has been transformed where some have begun to fragment, in some realignment or dealignment has occurred, and in many countries new parties have entered the stage (Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2017; Hellwig et al., 2020). In several cases those changes seemed to have been triggered by the Great Recession which started in 2008 (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015).

Many of those new parties used intra party democracy to a greater extent than older parties, for example in the form of online platforms to take decisions and select candidates implementing more inclusive mechanisms (Coller et al., 2018). Following a pattern of contagion effect, some older parties did adopt more open selection methods, while others did not.

Now more than a decade since the Great Recession it is timely to evaluate whether this trend of more intra party democracy has survived, or whether parties, old and new have taken a step back to a more exclusive and centralized candidate selection.

The seven articles included in the Research Topic can be divided into three overlapping themes, candidate and party leader selection (Vandeleene and van Haute; Reiser; Rombi), descriptive representation (Verzichelli et al.; Kakepaki; Reidy), and support within parties for use of online tools for candidate selection (Bloquet et al.).

Vandeleene and van Haute focus on the interplay between formal party rules for candidate selection and the informal preferences of the selectors about certain types of candidates. They find centralized selectors that value offices are more likely to prioritize the competence of the candidate for office instead of ideology, while decentralized selectors are more likely to select candidates that they believe can win votes in their constituency.

Reiser explores the strategies of selectors of district candidates in three German parties. Her findings reveal that when the district seat is safe selectors prioritize candidates that are more likely to be loyal to the party. Whereas, when the seat is not safe, they prioritize the electability of the candidate. Given that the selection process in the parties is highly decentralized the selectors prioritize local representation over other types of representation such as social representation.

The paper by Rombi is about voters' motivation behind their choice of a party leader in leader primaries of the Italian Democratic Party. Younger voters, more educated, more interested in politics, left-wing, members of the party and those who are loyal to the party, are more likely to base their choice for a party leader on their own personal values and on the values of the party—which in both cases are soft reasons for voting a leader. Those who are motivated to vote for a leader based on hard reasons, such as the electability of the party leader or the personal characteristics of the leader, are in general older, less interested in politics, more centrist and more likely to have voted for the winner of the leader election.

Considering whether descriptive representation has been transformed in Italian politics, Verzichelli et al. find that the number of younger MPs, females MPs and MPs that have less political and institutional experience have grown in the last decade. That could indicate that today the composition of Italian MPs is closer to reflecting the background of Italian voters than were before. However, the career paths of Italian MPs once elected has changed less where less experienced MPs and female MPs are less likely to obtain a parliamentary office compared to more experienced ones and male MPs.

In Greece, Kakapaki argues that the Great Recession offered opportunities for parties to become more democratic and open in their candidate selection. Parties' responses to the long-term discontent of Greek citizens and protests in the years after the Great Recession, seemed in some cases to move toward a more descriptive representation and open selection for party leaders and candidates. However, it turns out that those Greek parties as for example SYRIZA, have later taken a step back and made the process more centralized and moving closer to the cartel model of politics instead of emphasizing intra party democracy.

Reidy argues that while Irish parties were among the early ones in Europe to move toward more inclusive candidate selection in the 1990's, the increase in intra party democracy is only part real. The Irish electoral system and the locality of Irish

politics creates an incentive for the party leadership to interfere with candidate selection at the constituency level, making the selection more exclusive. While the socio-economic background of Irish MPs has in some way diversified, Irish parties continue to favor those with family connections in politics and incumbents over newcomers.

The last paper by Bloquet et al. examines the level of support within German parties for the use of online tools for a more open and inclusive process of candidate selection. Selectors who opposed online consultation were more likely to be closer to the decision-making centers of their party and were more satisfied with the level of inclusion that was already in place. This indicates that those selectors will not risk loss of power and control over the selection by moving it online and by that creating an opportunity to make it more inclusive and less centralized.

Taken together, papers show that while from a formal perspective some parties have moved toward more open and inclusive candidate selection, the party leadership and leaders in many of the parties still very much control or impact the selection process through informal mechanisms. The outlook of the parties could in some ways be said to be more democratic in the sense that there is more intra party democracy in terms of candidate selection and that they are more diverse than they were before. However, electability and personalisation of politics creates incentives for party leader and party leaderships to impact candidate selection, making the secret garden of politics more exclusive and centralized than it appears.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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