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Inclusive or exclusive? Candidate selection methods do not affect descriptive representation

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ABSTRACT

Candidate selection practices are often highlighted as a key factor in explaining the political underrepresentation of marginalised groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, or youth. Conventional wisdom holds that exclusive candidate selection methods, such as selection committees, tend to yield more descriptively representative outcomes than inclusive methods, such as primaries. However, these conclusions are often drawn from cross-sectional comparisons between parties with different selection methods. This article leverages an original conjoint experiment in Sweden to compare the demand for different candidate profiles, including women, youth, and immigrants, among party members ($N=6400$) and selection committee members ($N=1300$) under two modes of candidate selection: primaries and selection committees. The findings reveal strikingly similar preferences for underrepresented candidate profiles across both groups and selection modes. These results suggest that, within a favourable institutional framework, both inclusive and exclusive selection procedures can be equally effective in promoting descriptive representation.

KEYWORDS Political recruitment; descriptive representation; political parties; primaries; conjoint experiment

Are open primaries a threat to political parties' efforts to ensure a more equitable representation in politics? Despite efforts to increase diversity in politics and recent gains, major gaps in the descriptive representation of different demographic groups remain across contexts. Political parties are crucial gatekeepers to elected office, and their recruitment practices are key to understanding the existing variation in descriptive representation (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Rahat 2007; Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008). Conventional wisdom holds that exclusive modes of candidate selection involving narrow groups of party officials are better at promoting descriptive representation than open primaries

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involving a broader spectrum of actors (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Lublin and Bowler 2018; Matland 1993; Pruysers *et al.* 2017). However, the existing empirical evidence concerning the validity of these claims is mixed (Gauja and Cross 2015; Hinojosa 2012; Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015).

Political parties in the party-dominated systems of Western Europe are increasingly making their candidate selection processes more inclusive in response to growing demands for greater internal democracy and transparency (Folke *et al.* 2016; Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015; Indriðason and Sigurjónsdóttir 2014; Smrek 2023; Wauters *et al.* 2024). In some cases, primaries have been introduced to complement or replace the more exclusive candidate selection processes traditionally controlled by selection committees (Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015; Indriðason and Sigurjónsdóttir 2014; Pansardi and Pinto 2020; Wauters *et al.* 2024). This makes it crucial to consider the potential consequences of such reforms for political parties' ability to promote descriptive representation.

The expectation that different selection methods have distinct effects on descriptive representation stem from their design and the discretion they afford political actors (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Hinojosa 2012; Matland and Studlar 1996; Norris 1997). It is generally believed that it is easier to shape the behaviour of a small group of party insiders—tasked with assembling a candidate slate on behalf of the party—than that of a broader and more diverse group of party members or registered voters (Murray 2023; Norris 1997; Smrek 2022a). The former are seen as more likely to follow centrally determined party guidelines, such as quotas, due to the nature of their mandate (Baldez 2007; Hinojosa 2012; Sobolewska 2013). In contrast, the latter are considered less susceptible to such influence—not only because of their size and heterogeneity, but also because the structure of primaries tends to encourage the expression of individual preferences, which often favour politically dominant candidate profiles (Bech Seeberg and Wahman 2024; Culhane 2017; Hinojosa 2012; Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015; Murray 2023). While this argument is intuitive, it is important to note that rank-and-file party members are not isolated from internal party discourse or broader societal debates about the need to address inequalities in access to elected office. Such discourses may also shape the preferences of party members at large.

Existing research is primarily based on cross-sectional comparisons between parties with different candidate selection methods. Our study leverages the Swedish context, where political parties combine consultative, member-wide primaries with a more exclusive mode of candidate selection through selection committees (Grahn and Thisell 2024). In primaries, party members vote for their favourite candidates without further instructions. In contrast, selection committee members (SCMs) are tasked with assembling a multi-candidate ballot and determining the

order in which individual candidates should be elected. We employ a conjoint experiment to simulate both primaries and the candidate selection process led by selection committees, allowing for a comparison of preferences for different candidate profiles under different selection rules.

The Swedish case is particularly relevant given its long-standing tradition of party-led efforts to address imbalances in descriptive representation. Most parties employ voluntary quotas for women, youth, and immigrants, which apply exclusively to the work of selection committees rather than to open primaries (Folke *et al.* 2015; Freidenvall 2021; Soininen 2010). We leverage this institutional variation to examine whether SCMs exhibit a stronger preference for candidate profiles targeted by party quotas.

Our original conjoint experiment involves 6400 ordinary party members and 1300 SCMs from six political parties; and is divided into two parts. In the first part, all respondents were asked to choose which of two candidate profiles they would be more likely to support in a primary. In the second part, respondents with experience of serving on selection committees were asked to select the candidate they would rank highest on a multi-candidate ballot. This design allows us to assess whether Swedish party members' candidate preferences vary by their role in the selection process and the method of selection.

We find that candidate preferences are remarkably similar between rank-and-file party members and SCMs, regardless of the selection method. This alignment in preferences extends to both candidate traits targeted by party quotas and those that are not. Both selectorates exhibit clear preferences for women and younger candidates; and both selectorates from left-wing parties prefer candidates with an immigrant background. These findings suggest that the idea of increasing descriptive representation in Swedish politics is widely shared across a broad range of political actors. Similar to SCMs, ordinary party members without selection committee experience also favour incumbents, candidates with extensive political experience, and those with professional backgrounds requiring a university degree. Some notable differences emerge across party families: respondents from left-wing parties tend to prefer public sector employees, whereas right-wing party members favour candidates with private sector experience. Crucially, we observe no significant variation in candidate preferences *within* party families. Taken together, these findings suggest that inclusive and exclusive candidate selection methods may not yield substantially different candidate pools, given the shared prioritisation of similar candidate attributes across both selectorates and selection rules.

The debate about introducing primaries to enhance internal party democracy is prominent in various contexts (Bech Seeberg and Wahman 2024; Indriðason and Sigurjónsdóttir 2014; Renwick and Pilet 2016;

Smrek 2023; Wauters *et al.* 2024). This study contributes to the ongoing discussions about the impacts of candidate selection methods on descriptive representation by showing that rank-and-file party members do not seem to desire a different type of politician than SCMs within the same party context. The Swedish case is notable due to its political parties' longstanding efforts to increase the demand for politically underrepresented candidate traits among SCMs (Besley *et al.* 2017; Freidenvall 2021; O'Brien and Rickne 2016). By demonstrating that this demand also exists among the wider pool of Swedish party members, we provide insights into the potential effect of open primaries on party-led efforts to enhance descriptive representation.

We recognise that the candidate recruitment process is influenced by multiple factors, not just selector preferences (see e.g. Anzia and Berry 2011; Fox and Lawless 2010; Lajevardi *et al.* 2024; Piscopo and Kenny 2020; Smrek 2020). Previous research highlights that both the appeal and political ambition of different candidate groups are affected by inequalities in access to important resources, such as campaign finance, senior political roles, and education (see, for instance, Grahn 2023; Grumbach and Sahn 2020; Kilborn 2018; Muriaas *et al.* 2020; Piscopo *et al.* 2022; Smrek 2022b). Such inequalities may be remedied by for example SCMs consulting with women's wings and youth wings to locate suitable candidates among underrepresented groups who may lack access to conventional resources. Nevertheless, if other aspects of the political career ladder are more favourably designed for the inclusion of social strata who have historically been underrepresented in politics, our results suggest that the method of candidate selection might be inconsequential. Rather than revolutionising political representation, giving more weight to primaries in candidate selection may keep the composition of political representatives intact.

Modes of candidate selection and descriptive representation

While much research has focused on the relationship between electoral system types and descriptive representation, the role of candidate selection methods in shaping descriptive representation remains less explored (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Hinojosa 2012; Norris 1997; Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008). This oversight may stem from the common association between specific electoral systems and candidate selection models (Hazan and Rahat 2010). Primaries are typically associated with majoritarian systems, whereas PR systems often use more exclusive candidate selection committees (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008; Smrek 2022a). However, these associations are not absolute. For instance, the Conservative Party in the UK and the Liberals in Australia

employ exclusive and centralised candidate selection models, at least in the initial phase of candidate selection (Gauja and Cross 2015; Hill 2013). Similarly, some parties in PR contexts utilise open primaries for candidate selection (Baldez 2007; Hinojosa 2012, 88; Indriðason and Sigurjónsdóttir 2014; Pansardi and Pinto 2020; van Dijk 2023). These heterogeneities might partly explain the lack of consistent effects of electoral systems on descriptive representation outcomes (see Gauja and Cross 2015; Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015; Pruyssers *et al.* 2017).

Previous literature offers expectations regarding the potential effects of the exclusivity of candidate selection on descriptive representation (e.g. Gauja and Cross 2015; Hazan and Rahat 2010; Hinojosa 2012; Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015; Norris 1997; Rahat 2007; Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008). Exclusive candidate selection models, where power over candidate recruitment is concentrated in the hands of a few party officials, are thought to be better equipped for producing more balanced candidate bodies (Norris 1997; Pruyssers *et al.* 2017; Rahat and Hazan 2001; Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008). When a few individuals manage candidate selection with a clear mandate from the party to do so, they are more incentivised to take party-wide guidelines about how the process ought to look like into consideration (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Hinojosa 2012). For instance, an exclusive selectorate in majoritarian settings might choose to place conventionally less electable candidates in safe races and field candidates with high voter appeal in toss-up races, especially in contexts where voters and/or party members demand better descriptive representation (Hill 2013; Sobolewska 2013).

This is primarily due to the nature of candidate selectors' mandate: SCMs are chosen to conduct the candidate selection process on behalf of the party and are therefore more clearly incentivised to take the party's general preferences and goals into account when deciding on the candidates (Norris 1997). This makes these actors more likely to consult party-wide rules about how the process ought to be conducted, but also take into the account the role candidate selection plays in shoring up local support for the party and maintaining within-party cohesion.

Conversely, inclusive models of candidate selection, such as primaries, are thought to disadvantage candidates who deviate from the dominant norms of an ideal politician or a capable constituency servant (Bech Seeberg and Wahman 2024; Culhane 2017; Doherty *et al.* 2019; Murray 2023). As the number of actors involved in the process increases, it becomes more complicated to impose a complex institutional framework on the process, beyond simply asking the participants to express their preferences for one or more of the proposed candidates. This selection model is therefore thought to amplify the impact of general attitudes about what constitutes a suitable politician, reinforcing the advantages of

historically privileged groups in politics (Buckley *et al.* 2014; Dittmar 2015; Murray 2023; Schwindt-Bayer 2005).

Existing research on the effects of candidate selection modes on descriptive representation offers mixed results (Dhima *et al.* 2021; Golder *et al.* 2017; Kerevel *et al.* 2019; Roberts *et al.* 2013). Exclusive candidate selection by committee has been shown to be more effective than open primaries in recruiting successful non-white candidates for the Conservatives in the UK (Sobolewska 2013). However, the opposite appears to be true for women in the same context (Murray 2023). In Iceland, exclusive candidate selection benefits women candidates more than open primaries (Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015). Conversely, in Italy, women are more likely to secure political candidacy through primaries than through exclusive modes of candidate selection (Pansardi and Pinto 2020). Similarly, Baldez (2007) finds that primaries are more favourable to women's candidacy in Mexico. Gauja and Cross (2015) identify heterogeneities within Australian parties regarding the impact of exclusive candidate selection on women's inclusion. Meanwhile, Pruyers *et al.* (2017), in their cross-sectional study, do not find any significant impact of candidate selection type on descriptive representation. Likewise, van der Zwan *et al.* (2019), comparing different modes of candidate selection across Dutch political parties, find no difference in the levels of immigrant representation.

While the study of candidate selection modes and their effects on representational outcomes is gaining traction, two key areas require further research. First, most existing studies focus primarily on selection outcomes, making it difficult to determine whether observed differences across selection rules are driven by supply or demand factors. This study addresses that gap by explicitly examining the demand side of candidate selection, investigating how different selection modes might shape preferences for various candidate profiles. This focus is crucial: understanding whether demand for certain candidate traits shifts—or remains stable—across selection modes can help scholars better explain the link between selection methods and descriptive representation. It can also provide policymakers with more concrete tools to make candidate selection processes more egalitarian. Second, much of the existing evidence comes from cross-sectional comparisons between parties with different selection methods, which are potentially vulnerable to endogeneity bias. In contrast, our study leverages within-party comparisons across different selection rules, offering a more robust design.

Expectations

In this article, we study whether there are differences in preferences for various candidate traits among Swedish party members, depending on

candidate selection method (exclusive vs inclusive) and party members' own experience with exclusive candidate selection. Crucially, this is a setting where party quotas are used to promote underrepresented groups in politics—hard quotas with specified targets for women and youth under the age of 35, as well as soft quotas aimed at increasing the inclusion of people with an immigrant background (Folke *et al.* 2015; Freidenvall 2021; Soininen 2010). While selection committees are expected to consider these quotas when creating candidate ballots, party members voting in primaries are simply asked to choose their preferred candidates. This offers a unique opportunity to investigate how different candidate selection rules might shape individual preferences for various candidate profiles within the same political context.

Our experimental setup allows us to focus explicitly on preferences—or demand—for different candidate attributes across various candidate selection modes, isolating these from other factors that influence representational outcomes, such as who chooses to step forward under different selection rules. We aim to avoid creating artificial scenarios that place respondents in roles they have never experienced. While all party members have the opportunity to participate in candidate selection primaries, only a small portion of Swedish party members have experience serving as SCMs. Consequently, respondents without selection committee experience complete only one experimental task, simulating a primary. In contrast, respondents with selection committee experience partake in two experiments: one simulating a primary and another simulating the ballot creation process.

Following the existing literature, we expect the degree of candidate selection exclusivity to be associated with preferences for distinct candidate profiles. In contexts where diversity measures are in place to boost the representation of particular demographics, an exclusive mode of candidate selection might be better at accommodating these measures (Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008). This is because the coordination costs for a smaller group of selectors are markedly lower (see Hazan and Rahat 2010; van Dijk 2022). Furthermore, SCMs are tasked with selecting candidates on their party's behalf, and their choices are explicitly expected to reflect the party's goals and aspirations. This limits the influence of personal preferences for different candidate traits. In contrast, primary electorates are expected to let their personal preferences shape their candidate choices. As the primary voters' mandate is to vote for their most preferred candidate(s), the process is vulnerable to the influence of existing norms about candidate competitiveness and appeal; norms which tend to favour traditional candidate profiles.¹

H1: Compared to rank-and-file party members in a primary election context, SCMs in a ballot creation context will have a stronger preference for politically underrepresented candidate profiles.

However, the mixed nature of the existing evidence on the representational outcomes of different candidate selection modes points us in a different direction. Party members are not insulated from internal party discourses about the need to boost descriptive representation within the party's candidate and/or incumbent body. Indeed, there are times when pressures from the grassroots predate the enactment of positive action (Freidenvall 2006). In fact, past literature on candidate selection suggests that party selectorates comprised of senior party officials are often risk-averse and promote candidate profiles that have proven successful in the past (Kenny 2013; Murray 2010). There is also literature on resistance to candidate quotas and the new candidate ideals they embody among party selectors (Danbold and Huo 2022; Josefsson 2024; Krook 2016; Zetterberg 2008). Hence, in a context of successful quota enactment, such as Sweden, rank-and-file party members might have similar preferences for candidates from politically underrepresented groups as those with candidate selection experience (Weeks 2018). If this is the case, we should not expect significant differences in candidate preferences between party members and selection committee members. This leads us to expect the opposite of H1.

H2: Rank-and-file party members in a primary election context and SCMs in a ballot creation context will have equivalent preferences for politically underrepresented candidate profiles.

The case of Sweden

Electoral system, mode of candidate selection, and external validity

Sweden uses a proportional representation (PR) system for elections at all levels of government. Candidates are elected in multimember constituencies from multicandidate party ballots. The eight major political parties use candidate selection committees to create these ballots (Folke *et al.* 2015; Folke and Rickne 2020; Widenstjerna 2020). These committees are made up of experienced party figures, including retired politicians and representatives from various party factions (Grahn and Thisell 2024). Candidates are elected in the order predetermined by the committees, making them particularly influential in shaping the composition of Sweden's elected bodies (Folke *et al.* 2016).² Although the candidate selection process is decentralised, it is regulated by national party guidelines.

Despite the central role of selection committees in the candidate selection process, most major parties also allow for complementary primaries in their statutes (Grahn and Thisell 2024; Håkansson and Grahn 2025). In such cases, party members can express their preferences for aspirants listed on the selection committee's long lists before the committee makes

its final rank-ordering of candidates. However, these primaries typically serve only a consultative role. The fact that Swedish political parties have begun experimenting with primaries as a mode of candidate selection is methodologically desirable. It increases the chances that respondents perceive our experiment as realistic, thus boosting the ecological validity of our investigation.

Sweden is also suitable case for this inquiry from the perspective of external validity. While the exclusive, decentralised mode of candidate selection used by Swedish political parties is relatively common across Western Europe and beyond, Sweden—together with e.g. Belgium or Iceland, is one of the pioneers for the adoption of primaries within a PR context. This makes the insights from this study relevant for a broad group of Western European countries whose parties might want to make their candidate selection processes more inclusive in the future (see Hinojosa 2012; Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015; Pansardi and Pinto 2020; van Dijk 2023; Wauters *et al.* 2024).

Congruence or divergence? Party quotas and descriptive representation

Swedish political parties are recognised for their efforts to improve descriptive representation (Freidenvall 2016). Starting in the 1970s, Swedish political parties gradually enacted various quotas and recommendations for the inclusion of politically marginalised social groups (Folke *et al.* 2015; Freidenvall 2016; Soininen 2010). These measures have been shown to increase the representation of the targeted groups. The most effective of these quotas are those for women and youth, which set concrete targets. Women's political representation rose to 40% in the 1990s and has remained stable since, at least partly due to the implementation of gender quotas (Folke *et al.* 2015; Freidenvall 2016).³ Sweden's Riksdag, where 7% of MPs are under 30 and 29% are under 40, also ranks among the parliaments with the highest representation of youth worldwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023). This development is also attributed to the successful implementation of youth quotas (Belschner 2023). However, the softer quotas for the inclusion of individuals with an immigrant background have been less successful in improving immigrant representation (Folke *et al.* 2015; Freidenvall 2016). This is perhaps not surprising as these quotas lack clear candidate targets. Politicians with an immigrant background are significantly underrepresented at all levels of government. In the past two decades, the share of municipal and regional councillors with an immigrant background has been about 10 percentage points lower than their population share (Statistics Sweden 2020). In the Riksdag, they make up 8% of members, compared to 14% of the enfranchised population.

Despite these differences, the literature shows that Swedish candidate quotas have created a demand for the quota-targeted candidate traits among the SCMs (Folke *et al.* 2015; Freidenvall 2021). What remains unknown is to what extent the norms about inclusion are internalised by party members at large.⁴ This is a crucial question in light of recent trends within Swedish political parties to experiment with more inclusive forms of candidate recruitment.

One reason for the potential alignment between party members and SCMs in their preferences for underrepresented candidates is that Swedish political parties are well-functioning organisations that actively engage their rank-and-file members (Bolin and Jungar 2024). Interaction within local party chapters fosters a culture of consensus and unity (Grahn and Thisell 2024). This increases the likelihood that the norms of inclusivity, which SCMs appear to have internalised, are also shared by rank-and-file party members. Whether we find discrepancies or not, investigating the degree of convergence in the candidate trait preferences between rank-and-file party members and SCMs in a context like Sweden provides important insights on the implications of modes of candidate selection for descriptive representation. Taking Sweden's history of political inclusion into account, the findings will offer clues regarding the relationship between descriptive representation and different modes of candidate selection.

Methods

We conducted an original conjoint survey experiment study in collaboration with six Swedish political parties: comprising both left- (the Left and the Greens) and right-wing (the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, the Moderates, and the Sweden Democrats) parties. While the survey was designed by us, the parties disseminated it to their members. The study consisted of two experimental stages: the first, directed to all respondents, simulated a primary election scenario, while the second, simulating the ballot creation process, was directed only to respondents with selection committee experience. The strength of a conjoint experiment setup is random assignment of candidate characteristics, which allows us to estimate the effect of each chosen candidate characteristic, such as age, level of political experience, or migration background, on the overall candidate appeal (Hainmueller *et al.* 2014). Conjoint experiments are also considered to be better at mitigating the effects of social desirability bias than other survey approaches aiming to study personal preferences. In this case, the experimental approach allows us to identify and compare candidate preferences among different actors under different candidate selection rules.

Table 1. Example of a conjoint task in the first round (primary round).

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2
Name	Marwa Saad	Karl Larsson
Age	24	31
Occupation	Nurse	Engineer
Political experience	None	Suppliant in a municipal committee
Party membership	6 months	3 years
Ideological orientation	Slightly to the left within the party.	Slightly to the right within the party.

Notes: The table shows two sample candidate profiles from the first leg of our experiment, simulating a primary. We drew inspiration from real-life Swedish primary elections when selecting candidate attributes for this round.

In the first stage of the experiment, simulating a primary election, the respondents were asked to choose between two fictitious candidate profiles, selecting the one they would be most likely to vote for in a primary. The profiles were inspired by real-life candidate presentations sourced from Swedish party chapters that hold primary elections (see Table 1). Each profile included information about the candidate's name (indicating gender and immigrant background), age, length of party membership, political experience, and ideological leaning within the party. This task was repeated five times. This experiment leg allowed us to study the preferences among both rank-and-file party members and SCMs for key candidate traits of interest in a simulated primary.

Second, respondents with recent experience (from 2010 onward) of serving on candidate selection committees completed another experiment leg, simulating the ballot-creation process. After completing the first experiment, we asked the respondents questions about their experiences—if any—from serving on a selection committee for their party. This helped determine who would progress to the next experimental stage while also creating a clear break between the two experimental legs. Asking about their selection committee experiences also prompted respondents to explicitly think about their role as an SCM before entering the second survey stage. Additionally, a new prompt informed the respondents that they were now entering the ballot-creation phase of the experiment. Their task was now to indicate which one, out of two candidates, they would rank highest on a multicandidate ballot. In this leg, the respondents were presented with more complex fictitious candidate profiles (see Table 2), similar to what is available to selection committees during their work, including details on each candidate's track record of supporting the party line, media engagement experience, and experience of holding senior party office (see Håkansson and Grahn 2025). Crucially, the profiles also contained information about each candidate's gender, age, immigrant background, and profession.

Our study design enables us to compare preferences for key candidate characteristics between party members participating in a primary and

Table 2. Example of a conjoint task in the second round (ballot creation round).

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2
Name	Marwa Saad	Karl Larsson
Age	24	31
Occupation	Nurse	Engineer
Incumbent	Yes	No
Experience of political duties	5 months	4 years
Has had leadership duties within the party	Yes	No
Performance in political duties	Slightly better than expected	Slightly better than expected
Loyalty	Never prioritises their own political opinions when these clash with the party line	Often prioritises their own political opinions when these clash with the party line
Media visibility	Often engages with media about democracy issues	Often engages with media about welfare issues

Notes: The table shows two sample candidate profiles from the second leg of our experiment. The profiles reflect the type of information that party selectors are likely to have about aspirants.

those with selection committee experience in ballot creation setting. This provides a measure of the extent to which giving more weight to primaries in candidate recruitment might result in candidate ballots that differ from those produced by selection committees. Second, our approach also allows us to investigate whether party members with selection committee experience exhibit different candidate preferences in the primary and ballot creation contexts since those with selection committee experience partook in both stages of our experiment. This approach enables us to examine whether the preferences of these actors are influenced by the mode of candidate selection. Indirectly, it also allows us to assess whether the norms of inclusion, which have been shown to affect candidate recruitment outcomes in Sweden, are linked to a specific method of candidate selection. If individuals with selection committee experience have divergent preferences for the same candidate characteristics under different candidate selection rules, this highlights the potential role that the mode of candidate selection plays in shaping these preferences.

We pre-registered this experiment as part of a larger project.⁵ Our pre-registration includes an expectation of congruence in the preferences for various candidate traits between rank-and-file party members and SCMs (see [Online Appendix E](#)). In this article, we explore that expectation.

We estimate respondents' preferences for candidate attributes using both Marginal Means (MMs) and Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs). These methods serve similar purposes: they assess the relative importance of each candidate attribute while holding all other attributes constant, and they reveal the preference structure within each attribute. AMCEs require a reference category and report preferences for each attribute level relative to that reference. In contrast, MMs capture the

average appeal of each attribute level, *ceteris paribus*, offering a more straightforward interpretation. Specifically, MMs indicate the absolute likelihood that a candidate will be chosen based on each attribute level (see Leeper *et al.* 2020). Given their intuitive interpretability, we focus on MMs in the main text and present AMCEs in the [Online Appendix](#) (see [Figures D1 and D2](#)). The results are substantively identical across both estimation methods.

We investigate our hypotheses by analysing the MMs for our two selector groups in the full sample, as well as disaggregated by party family (left *vs.* right) and gender. H1 is supported if the MMs for women, immigrant, and youth candidates are significantly more positive among SCMs in the ballot creation context than among rank-and-file party members in the primary context. H2 is supported if SCMs in the ballot creation context and rank-and-file party members in the primary context exhibit equivalent preferences for women, youth, and immigrant candidates. We also compare SCM estimates across ballot-creation and primary contexts to assess whether candidate preferences among these actors differ depending on the mode of candidate selection (see also van Dijk 2022).

Results

Congruence or divergence on politically underrepresented candidate traits?

In this section, we present the results from both experimental stages, focusing on key attributes of interest: gender, age, and immigrant background, as well as educational and professional background.⁶ We present separate estimates for: (i) party members without SC experience in a primary context, (ii) SCMs in a primary context, and (iii) SCMs in a ballot-creation context. As described above, the estimates from the primary context are drawn from the first stage of our survey, while the estimates for SCMs in the ballot-creation context come from the second stage. It should be highlighted that although both stages included candidate attributes relevant to this study, each also featured additional candidate information designed to credibly simulate the two different selection contexts (see [Tables 1 and 2](#) above). As a result, the coefficient sizes for individual candidate traits should be compared with caution between the two legs due to the context effects (Hainmueller *et al.* 2014).⁷ However, the key attributes used in this study were intentionally designed to mirror each other: they have the same number of levels and the levels were identically phrased. Thus, the results, while not directly comparable, still provide a meaningful indication of the relative popularity or unpopularity of each trait in the different candidate selection contexts we simulate through our experiments.⁸

Turning to the results in [Figure 1](#), the dominant trend is that the party members' preferences for the traits targeted by Swedish candidate quotas largely align with those of SCMs. We find that the preferences of party members with and without a selection committee experience are virtually identical in a primary context. What is more, there are no notable differences in candidate-trait preferences between the two simulated modes of candidate selection. Regarding gender and age, both groups exhibit similar preferences. Women are consistently favoured over men. Younger candidates are preferred, with senior candidates being the least favoured in both primary- and ballot-creation contexts. There is only one trait where preferences diverge: having an immigrant background is seen as a neutral trait in the primary context but not in the ballot-creation context. SCMs appear to prefer candidates without an immigrant background in the ballot-creation context.

Turning to traits not currently covered by Swedish candidate quotas—education and professional background—we find strong preference congruence between the respondent groups, regardless of the candidate

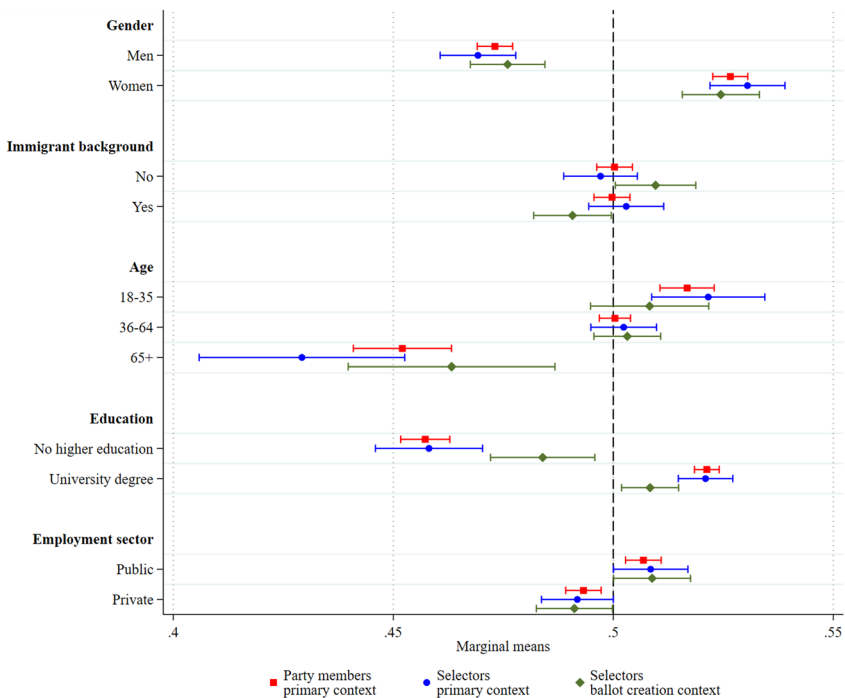


Figure 1. Candidate preferences among rank-and-file party members and SCMs, in primary and ballot creation contexts.

Notes: The figure reports MMs for each candidate characteristic based on separate estimations among the two groups of selectors in different selection contexts, with 95% confidence intervals and standard errors clustered at the respondent.

selection mode. Candidates with a university degree and a public sector background are favoured by all groups of respondents. Unlike some previous studies in other contexts (Carnes and Lupu 2016), we find that respondents consistently favour candidates with higher education degrees over those without a degree, with this preference being most pronounced in the primary context. A likely explanation is that the candidate profiles in the ballot creation survey contain more information than those in the primary survey. With less information available, education may act as a cue for inferring a candidate's competence. Since our design aims to replicate the type of information available in real-world scenarios, this highlights the importance of showcasing one's competence in primary contests.

While the exact estimate sizes between the primary and ballot-creation experiment stages should be compared with caution due to context effects, the results reveal a clear pattern regardless of the amount of information provided about the candidate. There is a considerable degree of congruence in candidate preferences regardless of who does the selecting and the selection rule. The strong alignment between the candidate preferences of rank-and-file party members in the primary context and SCMs in the ballot creation context supports H2 and challenges H1.

Furthermore, our results indicate that SCMs exhibit similar candidate preferences regardless of whether they act as ordinary party members or as party selectors. One possible explanation is that these respondents are so deeply socialised into the existing norms of inclusion that these norms shape their candidate preferences regardless of the mode of selection. This could account for the close alignment in preferences between SCMs in the primary and ballot creation contexts. However, party members without selection committee experience have not undergone the same socialisation process. Despite this, they tend to hold preferences that closely mirror those of SCMs. This suggests that the norms of inclusion—reinforced by quotas and other diversity measures for Swedish party selectors—are widely shared by rank-and-file party members without selection committee experience as well.⁹

Sensitivity and robustness analyses

We now turn to discussing the sensitivity of the main results. First, we have examined how influential each candidate attribute is in relation to other attributes. Candidates' sex and age turn out to be particularly influential in shaping respondents' choices. [Figure E3](#) suggest that, in the primary context, candidate sex is the third most important factor determining the overall appeal of each candidate profile. It is about as important as the candidates' level of education, while the candidate's age is about as

important as candidates' ideological orientation within the party (Figures E1 and E3). Figures E2 and E4 demonstrate that our key attributes of interest also influenced candidate profile appeal in the ballot-creation survey stage, though to a lesser extent.¹⁰

Our party-ideology sensitivity analyses, presented in Figures C1 and C2, reveal that preferences diverge primarily on three traits. Respondents from right-wing parties prefer candidates without an immigrant background, while left-wing respondents prefer candidates with an immigrant background. Additionally, left-leaning respondents appear to drive the positive preference for candidates with a background in the public sector, whereas right-wing respondents show no strong preferences in this area. While respondents from both party families prefer candidates with a university degree, this preference is even stronger among respondents from right-wing parties (see Figure C2). Importantly, these patterns are consistent within party ideology groups, with no significant differences in preferences among different actors within the same group (Figure C1).¹¹

Moreover, there are few notable differences between men and women respondents, as illustrated in Figures C3 and C4. Interestingly, the preference for women candidates is similarly strong among both men and women respondents. However, women show a stronger preference for candidates with a public sector background. This is in line with previous research documenting that women tend to be more in favour than men of public sector spending on e.g. healthcare and education (see e.g. Barnes *et al.* 2021; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Clayton and Zetterberg 2018). While no clear differences emerge within the groups of men and women SCMs, women and men rank-and-file party members hold opposing views regarding candidates with an immigrant background. Women tend to favour candidates with an immigrant background, while men prefer candidates without an immigrant background.¹² Although some differences exist between men and women, the preferences among our three groups of selectors are largely similar within each gender group. Hence, our results indicate that while the gender composition of selectors may matter, the same candidate traits would likely be given priority regardless of the method of candidate selection.

Overall congruence across all candidate attributes?

In this section, we present analyses of party members' and SCMs' preferences regarding candidates' experiences and ideological leanings, as illustrated in Figure 2. While Swedish candidate quotas target only gender, youth, and immigrant background, it is important to examine whether candidate trait preferences diverge along other key dimensions known to influence candidate appeal in selection processes (Norris 1997; Rehmert 2022). Here, we focus only on estimates for SCMs and party members in

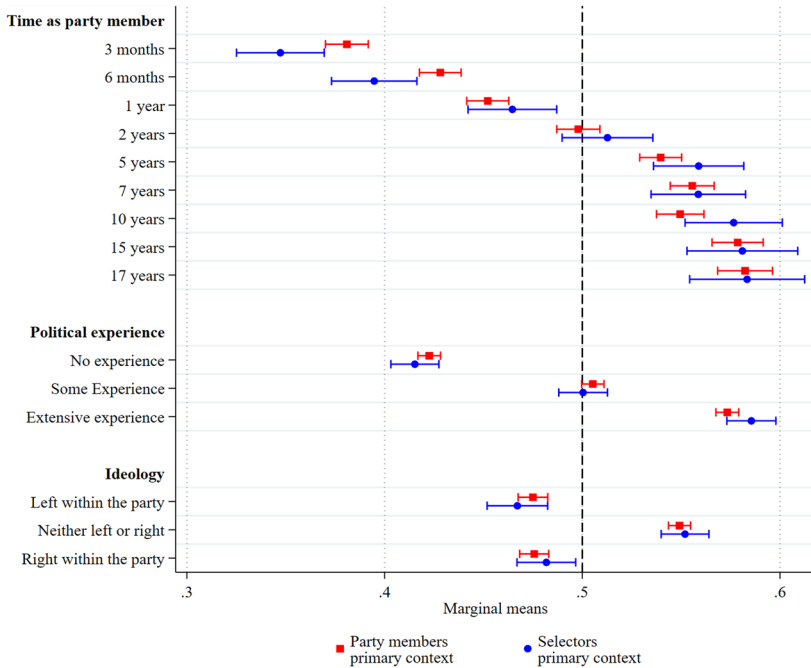


Figure 2. Candidate experience preferences among rank-and-file party members and SCMs.

Notes: The figure reports MMs for each trait based on separate estimations among two groups of selectors, with 95% confidence intervals and standard errors clustered at the respondent.

the primary context, as these attributes were not part of the ballot creation survey. Consistent with our main analysis, these results indicate no significant difference in the attributes that party members at large and individuals with selection committee experience have been socialised to prioritise. Both SCMs and party members share strong preferences for candidates with longer party memberships, extensive political experience, and ideologies aligned with the party mainstream. This finding suggests that parties need not fear that increasing the influence of rank-and-file members in candidate selection would lead to fewer party loyalists being chosen. Additionally, party members do not appear to hold the belief that elites are systematically selecting the wrong candidates or that the candidate selection process favours certain privileged segments within the party. If such perceptions were widespread, we would expect party members to be more inclined to select non-incumbents.

Similar to the findings presented in [Figure 1](#), the results in [Figure 2](#) indicate that giving more weight to party members' preferences would not result in a radical shift in the profile of selected candidates. Overall, our findings demonstrate that preferred candidate characteristics are largely

consistent across different groups of potential selectors. This implies that the method of candidate selection may not necessarily significantly impact the representativeness of candidate bodies in the Swedish context.

Conclusions

In this article, we compare candidate preferences among Swedish party members under different selection rules, taking into account their previous experience with candidate selection. Political parties in proportional representation (PR) systems are increasingly adopting inclusive forms of candidate selection, such as primaries, and Sweden is no exception to this trend (Hinojosa 2012; Indriðason and Kristinsson 2015; Wauters *et al.* 2024). The goal of the study was to examine whether giving rank-and-file party members a greater voice in the candidate selection process could have a noticeable impact on the composition of the candidate pool in Sweden. Using a conjoint experiment distributed to party members in six major Swedish political parties, we studied the demand for different candidate profiles among party members with and without selection committee experience under different modes of candidate selection (exclusive selection committees and member-wide primaries). We find a high degree of congruence in candidate preferences, regardless of respondents' prior experience serving on candidate selection committees or the method of candidate selection.

This study is particularly relevant given that Swedish political parties are internationally recognised for their efforts to enhance the descriptive representation of various groups through candidate quotas (Besley *et al.* 2017; Folke *et al.* 2015; Freidenvall 2021). While SCMs are expected to follow these quotas in the ballot-creation process, party members participating in primaries are not. Our study focused primarily on the three demographics targeted by these quotas. Our results suggest that the gender and youth quotas are mirrored in candidate trait preferences among our respondents: rank-and-file party members and SCMs alike. The softer quotas for people with an immigrant background do not appear to have taken root to the same extent: we do not find evidence of a strong preference for candidates with an immigrant background, neither among party members without a selection committee experience nor those with such an experience.

These preference patterns align with the development in descriptive representation in the country, where women and youth are now fairly well represented, but immigrants remain significantly underrepresented (Besley *et al.* 2017; Folke *et al.* 2015; Soinen and Qvist 2021). Previous literature suggests that exclusive forms of candidate selection are particularly effective in implementing candidate quotas (Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008).

By showing that there are no significant differences in key candidate trait preferences between party selectors and ordinary party members, this study suggests that adopting more inclusive primaries might not necessarily undermine Swedish political parties' initiatives to improve descriptive representation. Nor does it seem to constitute a remedy to immigrants' continued underrepresentation in Swedish politics.

Given the quality of our data, we have also examined whether candidate preferences diverge along characteristics not covered by positive action measures currently used by Swedish political parties. We find no evidence of such discrepancies across multiple traits, including education, professional experience, incumbency status, or ideological positioning within the party. These results suggest that the idea of increasing descriptive representation in Swedish politics—part of the political discourse since at least the 1980s—has deeply influenced political actors' perceptions of the ideal candidate.

It is important to note that Sweden provides a most-likely setting for finding no significant differences in candidate trait preferences between ordinary party members and party selectors. Swedish political parties are well-functioning democratic organisations with strong party membership bases. Members actively participate in local chapters, where they are socialised into the party's key positions and practices. It is therefore not surprising that party members express similar candidate preferences as their colleagues who have experience of creating candidate ballots. Furthermore, Swedish political parties embraced candidate quotas more than three decades ago and their enactment was preceded by heated internal party debates (Freidenvall 2006, 2016). These two conditions alone might account for the fact that party members appear to have internalised the demand for candidate traits that are targeted by positive action measures in Sweden. We call upon future research to replicate this study's results in less favourable contexts to help establish the scope of the results' external validity. Furthermore, future research might explore the potential importance of having served on selection committees several times and to what extent this experience impacts norm internalisation.

Our results suggest that introducing primaries in Sweden and similar contexts with strong norms of political inclusion could be a relatively harmless electoral innovation, especially if attention is paid to designing these primaries in a way that is conducive to egalitarian political representation. However, it is important to note that our research design does not account for the likely changes in opportunity costs for those seeking elected office if primaries were introduced. Specifically, primaries would likely bring about individual campaigns, potentially disadvantaging politically marginalised groups (Ditonto 2017; Dittmar 2015; Grumbach and Sahn 2020). Additionally, in a real-world shift in candidate selection methods, negative

biases party members may hold about candidates from politically underrepresented groups could worsen (see Bauer 2020; Bos 2011; Carnes and Lupu 2016; Ditonto 2017; Doherty *et al.* 2019; Fiske 2019; Portmann 2022). Future research should explore these dynamics further.

One area in need of more investigation concerns the opportunities for running individual campaigns in contexts with quotas for politically underrepresented groups. For example, previous research has found that women and racial minority candidates often have to signal their competence more strongly to avoid negative prejudice (see e.g. Bauer 2020; Ditonto 2017; Fiske 2019; Portmann 2022). These findings typically emerge from contexts where candidates are chosen in primaries, and where there are no quotas for politically marginalised groups. Our study shows that when the candidates' competence is signalled identically, politically marginalised candidates are more desirable than candidates from the traditionally dominant social groups and that this holds regardless of the mode of candidate selection. It is possible that the political parties' voluntary quotas and the comparatively strong norms for inclusion in the Swedish case affect this result. A way to take these findings further would be to investigate more in-depth whether signalling competence is equally important for the selection of different candidates in systems with quotas for underrepresented groups, and how that interacts with the mode of candidate selection. Our study highlights the complex relationships between different norms and policy regimes and their implications for the representativeness of candidate bodies. To understand how to foster political inclusion, it is crucial to keep disentangling the distinct roles of the candidate selection mode, quotas for political inclusion, informal norms privileging different social groups.

Notes

1. This study is part of a pre-registration for a larger project. Our pre-analysis plan stipulates the expectation that there will be congruence in the preferences for politically underrepresented groups between party members and SCMs. We have not added any additional tests compared to our pre-registration plan, but deviate from our pre-registered hypotheses by developing theoretical foundations for expecting the preferences of SCMs and rank-and-file party members to differ.
2. Voters may cast up to two preference votes for candidates listed on their chosen party's ballot. However, these votes rarely alter the party-predetermined order in which individual candidates are elected.
3. However, it should be highlighted that women's political representation has never surpassed 40% and women remain numerically underrepresented in all top political positions (Alnevall 2009; Statistics Sweden 2020). This means that women remain politically underrepresented *vis-à-vis* men in Sweden.

4. While the literature examining the size of the demand for different candidate traits is gaining significant traction (Schwarz and Coppock 2022; van Oosten *et al.* 2024), the main question of this article is whether there is congruence in candidate-trait preferences between different groups of party members. At this stage, we refrain from hypothesizing about the magnitude of preferences for different candidate traits *within* these two groups of potential selectors.
5. See OSF: <https://osf.io/b64t2/>.
6. While our main focus in this article is on the groups targeted by Swedish candidate quotas (women, youth, and people with an immigrant background), we also include education and professional background, as these, too, are significant sources of underrepresentation in politics worldwide and relevant attributes shaping candidate selection outcomes (Norris 1997).
7. Context effects means that a particular attribute is likely to play a different role in determining a candidate profile's appeal depending on which other attributes it is surrounded by. On this front, we have followed the existing recommendations for ensuring a degree of comparability across the two stages of the experiment (Hainmueller *et al.* 2014). This includes making sure that the key attributes of interest are phrased identically and have the same attribute levels.
8. Note that the coefficient sizes between those with and without SCM experience in a primary context are directly comparable.
9. Additional, non-preregistered analyses suggest that possessing a politically underrepresented trait can compensate for undesirable attributes, such as deviating from the party's mainstream ideology (see Figure E5). Women and young candidates who deviate from the mainstream ideology are just as likely to be selected as men and older candidates who align with it. However, this compensatory effect does not extend to candidates with an immigrant background.
10. Figure E4 indicates that the most important attribute in the ballot creation context is loyalty to the party line, followed by performance track record. Candidate sex is about as important as prior leadership experience and almost as important as incumbency. Women are preferred over men to the same extent as incumbents are preferred over non-incumbents in the ballot creation context, and the negative impact of high age is similar to that of not having any leadership experience (Figure E2). Whether the candidate has an immigrant background is awarded less significance in both survey stages (Figures E1–E4).
11. In a non-preregistered additional analysis, we find no differences in candidate trait preferences based on the length of party membership (see Figure C5). This suggests that party members adhere to the norms of recruiting politically underrepresented groups regardless of their tenure in the party.
12. These patterns correlate with the gender composition of different parties. Men make up 72% of respondents from the Sweden Democrats, 67% from the Christian Democrats, and 65% from the Moderates. Conversely, women account for 53% of respondents from the Left Party and 59% from the Greens.

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