Slow and Steady wins the Race? The Effect of Candidate Electoral Experience on Ballot Placement in List Proportional Representation Systems

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Abstract

This article investigates how candidate experience in previous elections, measured by the number of prior candidacies, affects ballot placement in list PR systems. We argue that selectorates find experienced candidates attractive because of proven loyalty and higher voter recognition. Moreover, prior candidacies strengthen candidates' familiarity with intra-party selection processes. Returning candidates, however, also risk becoming victims of a seniority trap: after not succeeding to access realistic positions after a number of elections, additional candidacies become harmful as selectorates lose interest. Using data on 18,393 candidacies by 9,905 candidates of parties in Flanders (Belgium) (1987-2019), we run logit and Cox models to test the hypothesized curvilinear effect of prior candidacies on access to realistic positions. Both approaches lead to similar outcomes, confirming that experience positively affects ballot placement but with decreasing marginal utility. Our findings have important implications for career strategies and contribute to knowledge on nomination processes and candidate turnover.

Key words: Electoral experience, Belgium, candidate selection, Cox regression, list PR systems

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Introduction

This article investigates how candidates' electoral experience, measured by the number of prior candidacies, affects their future placement on candidate lists in list proportional representation (PR) systems. Surprisingly, the role of candidate experience – and not office experience – in selectorate decisions has been largely neglected by candidate selection scholars. Only a limited number of studies have looked into the effects of candidates' previous electoral experience on party nomination processes (e.g. Ceyhan 2018; Chiru and Popescu 2017) and report rather mixed findings.

We argue that electoral experience has positive effects on candidate careers in list PR electoral systems, specifically leading to better list placement on ballot lists in future elections. More experienced candidates benefit from higher voter recognition, have demonstrated party loyalty and are more knowledgeable about selectorate preferences, selection processes and intra-party politics in general than inexperienced candidates. Therefore, electoral experience can be considered a valuable asset in intra-party nomination battles.

Simultaneously, however, it can be expected that the marginal returns of electoral experience decrease. After a certain number of candidacies, party elites lose interest in candidates who did not succeed in getting elected for parliament or selected in top list positions. We therefore contend that a candidate seniority trap exists where selectors withdraw their support for candidates who run time and again without success. Put another way, our argument is that electoral experience has a curvilinear effect on ballot list placement in future elections.

To test the way electoral experience affects list placement, we use candidate-level data from elections in Flanders (Belgium) between the years 1987 and 2019. Specifically, this dataset covers information on 18,393 candidacies of 9,905 different candidates for Flemish political parties in 32 parliamentary elections. We collected data on nine elections for the federal Lower House, six elections for the federal Senate, six for the Flemish regional Parliament, six for the

Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region and five for the European Parliament. This expansive longitudinal dataset allows us to develop the most systematic empirical effort to date as concerns the role of electoral experience in candidate selection processes. Belgium uses a flexible-list PR system where intra-party seat allocation is largely determined by the pre-electoral rank order of candidates. Based on previous election results, a set of *realistic* list positions – with realistic chances of getting elected – can be demarcated. The outcome variable is the dichotomous realistic/unrealistic list position, which we operationalize in four different ways to assess the robustness of our empirical results. The independent variable of interest is the number of prior candidacies of candidates. Moreover, we gathered data on candidate sex, age, local office and incumbency status.

We follow two modelling strategies to analyze the effect of electoral experience on obtaining realistic list positions. First, we present the results of a logistic regression model with party, election year and election type fixed effects. In this model, *candidacies* in parliamentary elections are the units of analysis and each individual candidate who runs for election several times between 1987 and 2019 therefore accounts for multiple observations. This cross-sectional approach is in line with extant work, however we test the hypothesis of electoral experience's decreasing marginal returns by adding a polynomial term to the model.

Second, we fully make use of the longitudinal nature of our candidate dataset by running Cox regression models with electoral experience as the independent variable of interest. To this end, we transform our dataset as to obtain a data structure where *candidates* in parliamentary elections are the units of analysis. For each candidate, we register the first election year in which they have run and subsequently create an 'event' variable indicating whether – and after how many election years – candidates were able to secure a realistic position at some point during their careers. From the moment a candidate succeeds in securing a realistic position, the follow-

up time ends and subsequent candidacies are not taken into account by the model. Therefore, the Cox regressions provide a more strict empirical test of the hypothesis.

The results of the logistic models provide support for both hypotheses, indicating that prior candidacies generally improve candidates' prospects on realistic list positions but at a decreasing rate. The findings of the Cox regression models lead to highly similar results. We also run a battery of robustness tests that are in line with the main models and thus strengthen the credibility of these results.

What constitutes a Strong Candidate?

Understanding political recruitment patterns and analyzing the dynamics of political selection (e.g. candidates, ministers, party leaders) lies at the heart of comparative politics. However, whereas the literature on recruitment and selection is vast, empirical efforts have largely focused on the question of who selects – the formal and informal mechanisms of candidate selection – rather than who gets selected and why (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Hazan and Rahat 2010). Moreover, regarding the latter question, the existing literature reveals a strong discrepancy between majoritarian and proportional electoral systems regarding the number of 'candidate nomination criteria' studies.

In majoritarian electoral systems with single-member districts, it has been well-documented that parties look for what is coined 'quality candidates'. Quality is often gauged by the candidate's level of previous political experience and fundraising capacities. Political experience is operationalized as having prior office-holding and elected experience (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Meserve et al. 2020). Experience in office increases a political candidate's attractiveness in the eyes of the party selectorate, as this personal trait demonstrates the capacity to run a successful campaign, build an electoral support base and win

elections. Besides, fundraising abilities are also considered a convincing cue for candidate quality (Stone, Maisel and Maestas 2004). A candidate who autonomously attracts campaign funding can make a strong contribution to the party campaign and clearly mobilizes societal actors to get politically involved.

A notable difficulty in pinpointing candidate nomination criteria is the unavailability of data on non-selected aspirant-candidates. Juxtaposing the selected candidates with unsuccessful aspirants would allow to identify the ‘quality criteria’ applied by party selectorates. Even though intra-party candidate selection processes have become more transparent and inclusive (Sandri et al. 2015), it remains very difficult to get a representative sample of non-selected ‘potential’ candidates. In systems where rank order plays a crucial role in determining who gets elected, an alternative approach is to analyze which candidate characteristics are associated with higher positions on the ballot list (anonymized).

The nature of party selectors’ recruitment exercise is fundamentally different in multi-member districts as not just one single candidate but a group of candidates needs to get selected. Whereas single-member districts require party selectorates to select that single candidate who stands out, a multi-member district incentivizes to balance the body of candidates in terms of political and sociological profiles. According to Valdin (2012: 741), a distinction can be made between those personal candidate traits that are appealing in all electoral settings, such as incumbency, party loyalty, personal wealth and local roots (Shugart et al. 2005), and other personal traits that are used to diversify the list of candidates, such as gender, race or religion.

The act of list- or ticket-balancing feeds into the internal organizational cohesion as well as electoral fortunes of political parties (Norris 2004; Ware 1996). As regards the intra-party dimension, nomination battles take place where party factions aim for attractive list positions. A balanced ticket shows the party’s commitment to all relevant societal cleavages and subgroups, and attracts electoral support from those voters that are guided by social group

membership in their electoral choice (Plutzer and Zipp 1996). As a result, it appears more difficult to pinpoint the meaning of ‘candidate quality’ in list proportional systems. A candidate can thus be valuable for the party selectorate for multiple reasons: the possession of universally attractive traits, or because of the compatibility with co-partisan candidates in terms of specific ideological and sociological traits which parties need to balance on the list.

In recent years, the question of what makes a candidate attractive to party selectors in proportional systems has gained more traction in empirical studies analyzing the outcome of candidate selection processes for national legislative (Ceyhan 2018; Chiru and Popescu 2017) and European Parliament (EP) elections (Gherghina and Chiru 2010; Meserve et al. 2020). Similar to majoritarian systems, party selectorates in proportional settings prefer incumbents and candidates with previous elected experience over novices. Empirical work that links list composition for EP elections to the electoral result also shows that parties with top candidates (i.e. experienced) are rewarded (Hobolt and Hoyland 2011).

Those studies that claim to investigate the role of candidate experience in recruitment processes narrow the concept to actual office experience. In this article, we instead look at *electoral* experience: the level of campaign experience a candidate has built up throughout prior electoral candidacies.

Electoral Experience as Nomination Criterion: Argument and Hypotheses

A candidate’s electoral experience, measured by the number of prior candidacies in parliamentary elections, is a remarkably under-researched aspect of intra-party nomination processes in PR systems. To our knowledge, there are only two notable exceptions. First, the work of Ceyhan (2018) focuses on the 2013 German Bundestag election (closed list component), and brings evidence of a positive effect of prior candidacies on viable list

placement. Second, Chiru and Popescu (2017) focus on the closed-list PR case of Romania and present the first study on electoral experience to apply a longitudinal approach. However, support for the effect of prior candidacies is mixed and the presented models explaining list placement are limited to three elections.

Why would we expect to see a positive effect of electoral experience on list placement? We argue that the number of prior candidacies demonstrates a candidate's loyalty to the party cause, allows the candidate to gain familiarity among the electorate regardless of getting elected, and to develop intra-party networks and campaigning skills. For all these reasons, experienced candidates can be considered as being more attractive than first-time candidates both from the selectorate and the voters' viewpoint.

Again, literature on electoral experience appears more developed on majoritarian cases. In candidate recruitment processes for nineteenth-century congressional elections, which were substantially more party-centered than contemporary electoral contests, party caucuses particularly looked for these loyal candidates (Bensel 2004). In proportional settings which foster personal vote-seeking incentives, politicians are more likely to exhibit individualistic behavior (Tavits, 2009). This can imply defecting from the party's central campaign message or even ideological positioning, which could lead to intra-party divisiveness (Crisp et al. 2013).

As to reduce the risk of such maverick behavior, party selectorates might opt for more experienced candidates who have shown to toe the party line during previous election campaigns. Parties can also benefit from the electoral capital these experienced candidates have built up during prior candidacies. Experienced challenger candidates are more successful in beating an incumbent (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). As a result of campaign efforts in previous elections, voters might recognize these candidates quicker and consider them as familiar faces of the party.

Finally, experienced candidates are also more familiar with the campaign cycle and require less coaching and training than first-time candidates. Carson and Roberts (2005) demonstrate that experienced candidates' entry decisions are highly strategic, taking into account when national and local electoral conditions are favorable to their candidacy. Also in terms of the intra-party candidate selection process, electoral experience can provide candidates with a competitive edge over inexperienced competitors. First-time candidates need to get acquainted with the different – formal and informal – steps of the internal procedure and are less likely to be well aware of the selectorate composition, preferences and sensitivities. By contrast, experienced candidates are more familiarized with the ins and outs of the selection process, and already had the opportunity to build long-term relationships with members of the selectorate. Therefore, candidates with prior candidacies are more inclined to know where, when and how to lobby to secure attractive list positions in subsequent elections.

In sum, candidates that run time and again will either be rewarded for their loyalty by party selectorates with a realistic list position, or are more able to coerce this position as a result of their profound knowledge of the intra-party selection process.

H1: *The number of prior candidacies increases a candidate's odds of being rewarded realistic list positions by party selectorates.*

There are, however, limits to the attractiveness of electoral experience. Candidates who were not able to convince the selectorate in earlier elections or, in the case of flexible-list PR systems, to get elected by beating the rank order in a long sequence of previous intra-party selection processes might be labeled as 'eternal candidates' at some point. Regardless of their proven loyalty and campaign experience, these candidates' momentum to get placed into a realistic list position has passed: party selectors lose interest in them and withdraw their support for their bid on one of the top list slots. Moreover, selectorates in proportional systems are likely to strive for at least some level of candidate turnover as part of their ticket-balancing efforts (Matland

and Studlar, 2004). A group of inexperienced candidates is assigned to a slot on the party list for the first time at the expense of experienced contestants. The group of candidates with the highest level of seniority, but without previous office experience is likely to be the victim of these candidate turnover dynamics.

H2: *The marginal returns of prior candidacies on getting a realistic list position decrease.*

Research Design

To test for the effect of electoral experience on list placement, we use candidate-level data from parliamentary elections in Flanders (Belgium) between 1987 and 2019. We registered the sociographic and political characteristics of all electoral candidates of Flemish political parties running for 32 parliamentary elections organized during this period of time.ⁱ Table 1 gives an overview of the included elections, and shows that on each of the eleven election days several legislative assemblies were elected simultaneously.ⁱⁱ

This data collection effort led to a dataset of 18,393 candidacies by 9,905 individual candidates. For each candidacy, we have information on list placement, gender, age, incumbency and local office status. We only include candidacies of the six Flemish parties with continuous legislative representation throughout the election years under consideration: liberals (PVV/VLD/Open Vld), Christian-democrats (CVP/CD&V), socialists (SP/sp.a), greens (Agalev/Groen), nationalists (VU/N-VA) and far-right (Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang).

Table 1: Concurrent parliamentary elections in Belgium (1987-2019).

Election day	Elected parliament
<i>13 December 1987</i>	LH, S
<i>24 November 1991</i>	LH, S

<i>21 May 1995</i>	LH, S, FP, B
<i>13 June 1999</i>	LH, S, FP, B, EP
<i>18 May 2003</i>	LH, S
<i>13 June 2004</i>	FP, B, EP
<i>10 June 2007</i>	LH, S
<i>7 June 2009</i>	FP, B, EP
<i>13 June 2010</i>	LH, S
<i>25 May 2014</i>	LH, FP, B, EP
<i>26 May 2019</i>	LH, FP, B, EP

Note: LH=Lower House; S=Senate; FP=Flemish Parliament;

B=Parliament of Brussels Capital Region; EP=European Parliament.

At all levels of electoral competition, Belgium applies a flexible-list proportional representation (PR) electoral system. Belgian voters are allowed to either cast preference votes for individual candidates, or a list vote which implicitly signals voters' approval of the pre-election rank order determined by the party selectorate (Wauters et al. 2010). In practice, it is mainly the rank order of candidates and not the number of preference votes which determines who gets elected. To get into parliament, candidates need to reach a specific vote threshold which is challenging to obtain on the basis of preference votes alone. List votes are therefore distributed over individual candidates starting at the top of the list to help them reach this threshold.

As a consequence, the highest positions on the lists are always the most attractive ones and yield the most realistic chances of getting into parliament. We follow a coding scheme where realistic positions are determined based on the number of seats for the party list in the previous election (P). To ascertain that the results are robust against this specific choice of operationalization, we provide additional models with identical specifications but following three alternative operationalizations. Two of these alternative approaches are more strict, and consider the first P-1 and P-2 positions on the list as realistic. The third alternative

operationalization follows a more flexible interpretation of realistic list positions which has been used in previous research (anonymized): apart from the first P positions, the final list position is also considered realistic as these are traditionally assigned to prominent and senior politicians which are frequently able to reach the vote threshold by themselves (van Erkel 2017). The first successor candidate is also considered realistic.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, if a party list is competing in the largest districts ($M \geq 10$) *or* had a large party magnitude in the previous election ($P \geq 5$), one additional realistic position is added after the first P positions. If both these conditions are met, two additional realistic positions and the second successor are added. The results of these additional models are reported in the Online Supplemental Material.

As this article asks how candidates' electoral experience affects list placement, the distinction between realistic and unrealistic positions is central to our empirical analysis. The dichotomous outcome (1: realistic position; 0: unrealistic position) is the dependent variable and will be modelled in two distinct ways. We first run a logistic regression model with fixed effects to capture the unobserved heterogeneity between parties, election years and election types. Put differently, we control for the fact that a candidate running for a given party in a given election year has a different likelihood of getting a realistic position than his co-partisans in other election years or candidates from other parties. Indeed, previous research has shown that politicians' access to specific political positions can be affected by aggregate trends in parties' political performances (O'Brien, 2015).

Individual *candidacies* in parliamentary elections are the units of analysis and each candidate that runs for election several times between 1987 and 2019 therefore accounts for multiple observations. This cross-sectional approach is in line with the scarce empirical studies on the role of electoral experience (e.g. Ceyhan 2018; Chiru and Popescu 2017). The independent variable of interest is the electoral experience of a candidate, measured by the number of candidacies *prior* to the candidacy under consideration, a non-negative integer variable (min.:

0; max.: 14). To capture the hypothesized curvilinear effect of experience, the logistic model includes a polynomial term of degree 2 (i.e. squared term of electoral experience). Although 1987 and 1991 are the first election years under consideration, we verified which of those candidates also ran in the earlier 1977, 1978, 1981 and 1985 elections to measure their prior electoral experience as well. Including four prior elections taking place over ten years prior to the first election year in our sample substantially reduces the potential for systematically underestimating the electoral experience of candidates in the earliest elections under consideration. The last election before 1977 was organized in 1974, 13 years prior to 1987, the first election year under consideration.

In list proportional representation systems, we have to acknowledge the existence of candidates who run time and again without any form of ambition to get elected. These ‘list fillers’ only run to support their party and to fill the empty slots on the list. Therefore, list fillers potentially bias our findings and conclusions regarding the link between prior candidacies and ballot placement.

We provide an additional robustness test (Online Supplemental Material, Table D) including only those candidates who spent personal money during their election campaigns ($n=7,875$). For each election from 1999 onwards, we registered how much personal campaign expenses all candidates have spent. In Belgium, due to severe restrictions on donations, individual campaigns are almost entirely financed by the candidates themselves and, increasingly, by the parties. For the most recent elections, the parties financed 80% to 86% of the individual campaigns. An individual campaign costs 5.500 Euro on average, but only 1.100 Euro of this amount is financed by the candidate (anonymized).

It can be assumed that candidates who rely only on the party and do not even spend the smallest amount from their personal means are not motivated at all and run only to fill empty list slots.^{iv} By applying a very low cut-off point, i.e. eliminating only the candidates who spend zero

personal means (57.2% of all observations), we avoid obtaining a subsample of only relatively wealthy candidates.

Subsequently, we follow the alternative and novel approach of running a survival analysis where *candidates* in parliamentary elections are the units of analysis. The dependent variable is the number of *election years* until the candidate reaches that first realistic list position. We thus consider the time (i.e. number of election years) from a fixed starting point (i.e. the election year of the first candidacy for the candidate) to a terminating event (i.e. the election year when the candidate received a first realistic list position). Referring back to Table 1, if a candidate has started her selectoral career in 1995 and landed a realistic position in 2003, the time to event is three.

Some candidates have not experienced the event of obtaining a realistic position during any of the included election years. As the parliamentary elections in 2019 constitute the end of the follow-up time, we are unable to predict whether these candidates will access a realistic position in future elections. All we know is that the candidates did not succeed in realizing this first realistic position between 1987 and 2019.

The maximum-likelihood Cox estimation allows us to deal with these right-censored data without losing any information on these candidates. For censored candidates, the end of the follow-up time depends on the last election year in which they were registered or ‘detected’ on one of the party lists. Candidates that have been running for election on a regular basis between 1987 and 2019 are assigned the election year 2019 as the end of the follow-up time. Those candidates that remained ‘absent’ from party lists for a relatively long time period are treated differently. More specifically, the dataset shows that only 0.67% of the candidates who have not run for four consecutive election years return on future candidate lists. As a consequence, for candidates who did not run for four consecutive elections, we take the election year of the last candidacy as the end of the follow-up time.

The independent variable of interest in the survival analysis is again the electoral experience of a candidate. However, the level of experience changes over the course of a candidate's career, as do some of the other covariates potentially (e.g. local office status). When running the survival analysis, we do not fix these time-varying independent variables at their initial values at the time of the first candidacy but allow them to vary over time during the follow-up time, as it is exactly this cross-temporal variation which can have a significant impact on getting a realistic position. We analyze the effect of electoral experience on the time to event with the Cox regression model.

In both approaches, we control for a number of covariates associated with candidate selection dynamics and access to realistic list positions in particular: the candidate's local office status (1: local office; 0: no local office) (anonymized), age (centered around its empirical mean) (Stockemer and Sundström, 2018), gender (Luhiste, 2014), party switching and party leadership change. Switching parties can be viewed as an extreme manifestation of partisan disloyalty (O'Brien and Shomer, 2013) and might negatively affect a candidate's nomination prospects, not the least in a party-centered electoral system with extremely cohesive parties such as Belgium. Yet empirical work has demonstrated that politicians are more inclined to switch parties in the event of electoral opportunities, such as nominations for elected office or intra-party promotions (Desposato, 2005). We include a dummy variable that identifies whether a candidate is running for a different party than before.^v

A change in leadership might affect selection criteria and practices within political parties as well. Particularly the party leaders' tenure is expected to somehow condition the role of a politicians' loyalty to the party in general and its leadership in particular. Horiuchi et al. (2015) argue that leadership longevity strengthens a party leader's grasp on intra-party decision-making. A competing argument is that newly elected party leaders enjoy a 'honeymoon effect'

(Nadeau and Nevitte, 2013), allowing them to favor their preferred candidates over others with, for instance, more electoral experience.

Over the last decades, the tenure of Belgian party leaders has sharply decreased from 7.1 years in the 1960s to 4.5 years in the 1990s and even 2.6 years after 2000, which is even shorter than the typical four year leadership terms (Wauters and Pilet, 2014). Of the 66 party-in-election-year units included in the analysis (i.e. six parties over eleven election years), more than half (37 or 56.1%) shows a new party leader compared to the previous election year. As a result, it is relatively common in Belgium to ‘serve’ under two different party leaders in two consecutive election years. This culture of high leadership turnover makes it difficult for Belgian candidates to develop a successful loyalty strategy directed at a specific party leader. Nevertheless we take into account leadership change by including a dummy variable indicating a new leader for the party since the previous election year.

Figure 1: The share of sitting incumbents and challengers among candidates with increasing levels of electoral experience.

Finally, we also control for incumbency status, a dichotomous predictor (1: incumbent; 0: challenger) with expectedly a substantial impact on a candidate's access to realistic list positions, which is being controlled for in the logistic regression model. Figure 1 shows that incumbency and the number of prior candidacies are highly correlated. As we move towards the candidates with higher levels of electoral experience, the share of incumbents increases significantly. Electorally experienced candidates are more often than not career politicians, who run for office as a sitting incumbent.

Among those candidates who are showing high levels of prior candidacies but lack political office are several cases that can provide some flesh-and-blood examples of the hypothesized curvilinear pattern in a descriptive manner. We see several 'eternal' candidates who run time and again, climbing and approaching the set of realistic list positions over the years, but eventually falling back to a symbolical place as 'list filler'. A good example is Gerda Schotte, who ran no less than seven times for the ecologist party in the electoral district of West-Flanders. In 1995, she started her career as a mere list filler, on the fourth position. In 2007 and 2009, Schotte got promoted to the second list position in the enlarged provincial electoral district: a much more visible place, but still unrealistic. In retrospect, that was the zenith of her career as a candidate. From 2010 to 2019, Schotte had to content herself with an invisible position at the bottom of the list. Walter Zelderloo from the liberal party suffered a similar fate. He ran in eight elections, starting in 1991 on the very modest fifth position in the district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde. It was only at his fifth try, in 2007, that he climbed to the second position and came in sight of a realistic place. However, afterwards Zelderloo sank back to invisible positions as a mere list-filler, for the last time in 2014.

Incumbency status is not included as covariate when testing the effect of electoral experience on list placement using a Cox regression model with time-dependent covariates. Recall that for

this analysis, we registered the election year in which the candidate was running for the first time. Subsequently, we tracked if the candidate succeeded in accessing a realistic list position at some point in the career, and how many election years this has taken. What happened *after* this first realistic position (‘event’) is not included in the follow-up time. It is impossible for candidates to be sitting incumbent at the time of their first election, and their incumbency status will only change after the follow-up time has ended.^{vi}

It is crucial to emphasize that we look at *election years* instead of elections to calculate time-to-event for candidates. On several occasions, Belgium has organized concurrent elections, where parliaments on several government levels take place on the same day (see Table 1). Before 2014 candidates were legally allowed to simultaneously run for several parliaments on the same election day. Additionally double candidacies are also possible if candidates run simultaneously as an effective and a successor candidate. Therefore, whenever a candidate had multiple candidacies, we looked at the ‘most important’ of those candidacies. To this end, we established a hierarchy between candidacies: candidacies from realistic list positions are prioritized over those from unrealistic positions, otherwise candidacies as effective candidate are prioritized over successor candidacies. If the multiple candidacies did not differ on these criteria, we looked at the specific rank on the ballot list (i.e. higher is prioritized). As a final discerning criterion, candidacies in federal elections are prioritized over regional and European elections.

Results

The empirical section starts with an overview of descriptive statistics on the variables used in the logistic regression model using electoral candidacies as units of observation. Our dataset consists of 18,393 observations, of which 1,865 (10.14%) were realistic candidacies. Electoral experience is measured as the number of prior candidacies of the candidate (mean: 1.4; st.dev.:

1.91; median: 1; min.: 0; max.: 14). Further, 13.78% (2,534 observations) are candidacies filled in by sitting incumbents, and 48.74% (8,965 in absolute terms) of all candidacies are by local office-holders.

Table 2: Logistic regression analysis modelling the chance of getting a realistic list position.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	Odds Ratios	SE	B	Odds Ratios	SE
Prior candidacies	0.139***	1.149	(0.018)	0.426***	1.523	(0.042)
Prior candidacies squared	-			-0.034***	0.967	(0.005)
Incumbent	3.552***	34.884	(0.081)	3.342***	28.280	(0.083)
Local office	0.262***	1.299	(0.070)	0.178**	1.195	(0.078)
Party switch after previous election	-0.501	0.606	(0.306)	-0.586	0.557	(0.303)
1 st election with new party leader	0.087	1.091	(0.072)	0.095	1.100	(0.072)
Gender (male = 1)	0.007	1.008	(0.070)	0.027	1.027	(0.070)
Age (centered)	-0.021***	0.979	(0.004)	-0.022***	0.979	(0.004)
Intercept	-3.621***	-	(0.156)	-3.553***	-	(0.142)
Party fixed effects		Included			Included	
Election type fixed effects		Included			Included	
Election year fixed effects		Included			Included	
Max-rescaled R-square		0.467			0.472	
N		18,393			18,393	

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

Table 2 reports the results of two logistic regression analyses modelling the probability of getting a realistic list position. Whereas Model 1 shows the estimates for a model where electoral experience is included as a linear predictor, Model 2 includes the independent variable of interest as polynomial predictor as to examine the hypothesized curvilinear relationship. In Model 1, the number of prior candidacies positively affects list placement outcomes for candidates in parliamentary elections (H1). In terms of effect size, one additional prior

candidacy leads to a 14.9% increase in the odds of getting a realistic position on the list. As expected, the strongest predictor is the candidate's incumbency status: an incumbent candidate has 35 times higher odds of receiving a realistic list position than non-incumbents. Further, local office status also helps candidates to access these top list positions. Switching parties or having a new party leader since the previous election does not significantly affect the chances on a realistic list position.^{vii} Finally, the other individual controls show that age decreases a candidate's prospect on attractive list placement.

Model 2 includes prior candidacies as a polynomial predictor to test whether the effect of electoral experience lessens as candidates run time and again in parliamentary elections. The results support the hypothesis of decreasing marginal returns (H2): whereas the number of prior candidacies increases the chance of obtaining a realistic list position, the squared term is negative which shows that the effect lessens as the number of prior candidacies increases. Simple calculations based on the regression equation yielded by Model 2 indicate that the marginal utility becomes negative starting from the seventh prior candidacy. Figure 2 plots the predicted probability of getting a realistic position for the different values of prior candidacies, based on Model 2. All other covariates are fixed at either their respective means (continuous variables) or their respective modal values (categorical variables). The plot confirms the decreasing marginal returns of prior candidacies, and shows that any additional candidacy after six works against the candidate's access to attractive list positions.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of getting a realistic list position as the level of electoral experience increases.

The Online Supplemental Material includes several robustness tests: three logistic regression models with identical model specifications but with alternative operationalizations of the dependent variable, and two additional subsample analyses. As concerns the alternative operationalization of realistic positions, Table A, B and C show highly similar results to the models reported in Table 2: prior candidacies increase the odds of getting a realistic position, but at a decreasing rate.

Table D in the Online Supplemental Material presents the results of a first subsample analysis, i.e. including only those candidates who spent personal campaign money. Recall that we consider personal campaign expenses as a proxy for personal ambition. The results for the ‘spenders only’ model are again in line with the main models: prior candidacies increase the

odds for realistic positions, however after the sixth candidacy the added value of additional candidacies decreases.

As a final robustness check to the logistic regression model, we run a set of additional subsample analyses excluding candidates with decreasing levels of prior candidacies. Put differently, we exclude candidacies by candidates with more than 10,9,8,7 and 6 consecutively. By doing this, we want to verify whether the curvilinear effect persists when the maximum number of prior candidacies in the sample is much more limited. Table E in the Online Supplemental Material shows results consistent with the other models, boosting confidence that our empirical results are robust.

The second part of the results section fully instrumentalizes the longitudinal nature of the dataset by analyzing each candidate's time-to-event, i.e. number of election years until the first realistic position. We run Cox regression models with time-dependent covariates to analyze the effect of prior candidacies on ballot placement over the course of candidates' selectoral careers.^{viii} The variable prior candidacies and its polynomial term are added as time-dependent covariates, as are local office status and age which are changing over the included election years. Schoenfeld residuals confirm the effects of these variables to co-vary with time (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2006). Key diagnostics are shown in the Online Supplemental Material (Table I).

Only 6.03% of all candidates reached a realistic list position at some point in their career, among which 30.32% immediately during the first candidacy, 27.97% during the second and 15.91% during the third candidacy. Put differently, only 25.8% of these successful candidates still attain a first realistic position after the first three electoral candidacies.

Table 3 shows the results of two Cox regression models. In Model 1, the number of prior candidacies yields a hazard ratio of 1.555. This means that, while controlling for local office,

gender, age and political party the rate of candidates with a realistic position is about 1,5 times higher for candidates with an additional election year of electoral experience. Again we see that while local office helps candidates to access top positions on the list, increasing age decrease candidates' chances to reach the top of the list. Moreover, switching parties or having a new party leader since the previous election does not significantly change selectoral fortunes.

Table 3: Cox regression models modelling the hazard ratio of getting a realistic position.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Exp(B)	SE	Exp(B)	SE
Prior candidacies (time-dep.)	1.555***	(0.028)	2.419***	(0.077)
Prior candidacies squared (time-dep.)	-	-	0.917***	(0.015)
Local office (time-dep.)	2.745***	(0.089)	2.646***	(0.089)
Party switch after previous election (time-dep.)	1.626	(0.360)	1.365	(0.360)
1st election with new party leader (time-dep.)	0.886	(0.098)	0.886	(0.098)
Gender (male = 1)	1.006	(0.086)	1.021	(0.086)
Age (centered, time-dep.)	0.964***	(0.004)	0.962***	(0.004)
Party fixed effects	Included		Included	
N (candidates)	9,905		9,905	
Events	585		585	

Note: Hazard ratios are reported, standard errors between parentheses. Significance levels: ***: $p < 0.001$; **: $p < 0.01$; *: $p < 0.05$.

The results of Model 2 again indicate that previous electoral experience positively affects ballot list placement but to a lesser extent as the number of prior candidacies increases. By confronting expected hazard ratios against the number of prior candidacies, the seniority gap which was shown in Figure 2 can be confirmed. More specifically, the marginal returns of having more electoral experience declines and after seven prior candidacies the expected hazard ratio of getting a realistic position is beyond its maximum.

Conclusion

This article investigated whether previous electoral experience, measured by the number of prior candidacies, helps candidates to access the highest list positions on the party ballot in future elections. We approached this question empirically using two different modelling strategies. On the one hand, we ran a logistic regression analysis modelling the chance of accessing a realistic list position, using candidacies as the unit of analysis. On the other hand, we performed a Cox regression analysis with time-dependent covariates, using candidates as units.

Both approaches led to highly similar results, confirming the argument that experience leads to better list positions, even though with decreasing marginal returns. Put another way, after a certain number of prior candidacies the effect of an additional candidacy on list placement becomes negative. To our knowledge, a contribution based on more than 18,000 candidacies running for 32 different parliamentary elections over a time span of 32 years presents the most systematical empirical test of this question yet. Our findings also prove robust to different operationalizations of the response variable and to different subsamples of the dataset.

The analysis was focused on the case of Flanders (1987-2019), which organizes all of its parliamentary elections using a flexible-list PR electoral system. If we consider prior candidacies as a token of party loyalty, then finding a correlation between this form of experience and high list placement might not come as a large surprise in an electoral system where ballot control is firmly in the hands of party elites. Even though Flemish voters are allowed to ‘disturb’ the list by casting preference votes, legislative seats are mainly allocated based on pre-electoral rank order determined by the party selectorate. The relatively high threshold for candidates to ‘jump off’ their list rank to be elected potentially limits the generalizability of our findings on the Belgian case. In addition, we acknowledge that the *partitocratic* nature of its political system (i.e. an excessive domination of party organizations

via patronage in parliament, public administration, the judiciary and sections of civil society) makes Belgium perhaps even a critical most likely case. As the combination of a most-likely case and positive findings does not provide the most ideal scenario for generalizability and theory-building, there is a need for further research on the link between electoral experience and list placement based on other country cases or even a comparative setup.

While the preference vote option in flexible list PR stimulates candidates to engage in personalized behavior, this system still provides very strong incentives for party-oriented behavior. We therefore argue that these findings can be considered relevant mostly to the broader family of electoral systems with strong party vote seeking incentives, i.e. other flexible-list PR cases and closed list PR systems. As regards open-list PR systems, our expectation is that previous electoral experience might still prove beneficial for candidates as a result of more developed intra-party networks and higher recognition levels amongst voters. This will be particularly the case in open-list systems with non-randomized list positions.

As this study makes use of observational candidate-level data, we are unable to dig deeper into the underlying mechanism causing the curvilinear relationship between electoral experience and ballot placement. More specifically, one might question the direction of causality: is the negative effect of too much electoral experience caused by the selectorate's decision to abandon the 'eternally recurring' senior candidate, or is it rather the case that the candidate herself gives up after a certain number of times but wishes to keep supporting the party by running from an unrealistic position voluntarily?

Indeed, the existence of such a group of highly experienced candidates who seem satisfied with the status of eternal candidate might explain the significance of the polynomial term of candidate experience in our empirical models. If those candidates are willing to run from an unrealistic position, party selectorates will still welcome them as they are electorally valuable and require little mentoring. In that case, this loyal group of candidates embraces the status of

eternal candidates and does not have the ambition to get into office, but instead run with the sole purpose of supporting their party by bringing in their vote-earning potential and campaign experience, carefully built up during prior electoral candidacies.

The role of candidate ambition as a potential confounder should therefore not be underestimated. Even though a subsample analysis of candidates who invested personal financial resources – i.e. a proxy for personal ambition – shows highly similar empirical results, future research efforts should also be directed at combining observational data with surveys gauging candidate ambition and motivational levels.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ We do not include the 1989 election for the Parliament of the Brussels Capital Region, as this regional election took place before the fourth state reform (1993), which turned Belgium into a full-fledged federal state with directly elected regional assemblies. All regional elections involving Flemish parties after this state reform are included in the analysis.

ⁱⁱ We unfortunately have no access to a similar longitudinal data set on the careers of francophone Belgian candidates.

ⁱⁱⁱ Successor candidates form a separate list of candidates who will replace the effectively elected representatives in the event of resignation, death or illness. Similar to intra-party seat allocation amongst effective candidates, successors are ordered on the basis of ballot position and preference votes.

^{iv} In the literature on campaign spending effects in list PR systems, several authors have excluded irrelevant challengers, low quality candidates or ‘list fillers’ from the analysis as these candidates would exaggerate the differences between incumbents and challengers in terms of spending (Green and Krasno, 1988; Samuels, 2001). These studies assume that list fillers only invest very moderately in the campaign, as their candidacy is merely symbolical.

^v Alternatively, in a second approach we consider all subsequent candidacies by a candidate that at some point switched parties as ‘party-switching’, to assess whether the label of party-switching affects nomination prospects throughout the remaining electoral career.

^{vi} In some very exceptional cases, candidates are in fact sitting incumbent at the time of their first participation in Belgian parliamentary elections: the category of co-opted and provincial Senators, did do not need to run for election but were instead appointed by the language groups in the Senate and the provincial councils respectively; members of federal or regional government that were appointed by their parties without having run for election previously. This explains why the percentage of challengers amongst the candidates with zero prior candidacies (see Figure 1) does not equal 100%.

^{vii} As regards party switching, the alternative operationalization of considering the switching as a ‘sticky’ characteristic for candidates did not yield any significant results either.

^{viii} The flexibility of this semi-parametric approach is an advantage to check for the hypothesize curvilinear effect of prior candidacies. For the sake of robustness, however, we also show the results following three alternative modelling choices, of which all lead to similar results. First, we run a parametric model with a lognormal baseline distribution (Table J). The latter is appropriate given that it allows for hazard functions that are first increasing to a maximum and then decreasing. A plot of the baseline hazard is also included in the Online Supplemental Material (Figure A). Second, we display the results from an accelerated failure time (AFT) model (Table K). As we specify a polynomial term, we opt for an AFT model with normally distributed errors. Third, a piecewise constant hazards (PCH) model was estimated where each election year is considered a cut-off point to define the intervals (Table L).

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