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Does media attention lead to personal electoral success? Differences in long and short campaign media effects for top and ordinary political candidates

Does media attention lead to personal electoral success?

Differences in campaign media effects for top and ordinary political candidates

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Abstract

Although elections are not won in the media, scholars agree that media visibility impacts politicians' electoral success. This study examines what effect media visibility has on the individual electoral success of all political candidates competing in PR-list system elections. We focus on media effects during the short and long campaign and investigate how these effects vary between types of candidates. We position media attention in a broader framework of factors influencing electoral success. Our findings show that for top candidates long campaign media attention predicts their electoral success, whereas for ordinary candidates attention during the short campaign matters most. Candidates also differ regarding indirect media effects, which is reflected especially in the gender bias of the media. Therefore, future research ought to be aware of candidate differences and temporal dynamics when inferring the electoral effects of media coverage. Overall, our findings indicate that the choices journalists make to report about some politicians and not about others have an actual impact on the electoral outcome and political careers.

Keywords: Preferential votes, media, elections, campaigns

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Introduction

In its essence politics is a struggle for power; politicians compete for votes, aim to get political mandates, and ultimately hope to influence policy. However, this struggle for power is not limited to the political arena, but takes place in the media arena as well. With the increasing 'mediatization of politics' (Strömbäck & Esser 2014), attracting media attention is of vital importance for political actors. In particular, because campaign studies show that citizens get most of their political information from the media (Sparks 2010) and that media attention hence impacts electoral success.

While many studies have pointed out that visibility and tone in election news coverage influence party choice (e.g. Hopmann et al. 2010; Semetko & Schoenbach 1994) or presidential choice (e.g. Dalton et al. 1998; Schmitt-Beck 2003), few studies have investigated the role of media in the competition for preferential votes *within* parties. However, intra-party preference voting is a common feature in the majority of European electoral systems (Carey & Shugart 1995). In these systems the competition is not only between political parties or single candidates representing a party, but also between candidates fielded on the *same* ballot list. Although the specific form of intra-party competition differs based on the electoral system, the general idea is the same; voters have to choose a political party and subsequently can or are obliged to cast a preferential vote for one or multiple candidates from this list. Intra-party preference voting is important as it plays a role in determining which candidates get elected and therefore influence the composition of parliament. Additionally, more preferential votes help candidates to obtain executive mandates or in getting better ballot list positions in future elections (André et al. in press; Folke et al. 2016).

More recently, there is growing interest in investigating factors that determine whether candidates are successful in obtaining preferential votes. These studies find that a wide range of factors, such as ballot list position, gender and political experience, influence electoral success (e.g. Marcinkiewicz 2014; Thijssen 2013). However, almost none of these studies include media attention in their model, leaving the question open to what extent the media impacts the intra-

party competition. Therefore, this paper tries to fill this lacuna and makes three contributions to the literature on media effects in election time. First, it not only focuses on the short campaign, but also asseses the long-term impact of media, during the so-called long campaign, which starts more or less one year before Election day. The distinction between the two types of campaigns was introduced by Miller and colleagues (1990) and used in several other, mainly British elections studies (e.g. Norris et al. 1999). Most campaign studies, however, still examine media effects exclusively in the few weeks before the elections. Yet, images of and awareness about candidates may already build longer before the elections. Second, most studies consider the effect of the media to be homogenous for all candidates. However, we argue this is not the case and investigate how effects differ for top and ordinary candidates, as the mechanisms through which media attention impacts their electoral success may be different. Finally, we integrate media in a traditional model of electoral success, following the idea of a 'funnel of causality' (Campbell et al. 1960). This enables us to better isolate the effects of media attention during the long and short campaign, as well as shed light on how they influence how other factors, such as socio-demographic factors and political experience, affect electoral success. In order to study these relations we employ Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). We focus specifically on Belgium, a PR-list system where political parties present long lists of candidates and voters have the option to cast one or multiple preference votes.

Our findings show that for top candidates long campaign media attention predicts their electoral success, whereas for ordinary candidates attention during the short campaign matters most. Candidates also differ regarding indirect media effects, which is reflected both in the political experience bonus and the gender bias of the media. In the conclusion we discuss what these findings mean for future electoral media research and journalists covering election campaigns.

The impact of the media on vote choice: A heterogeneous effect

Compared to the *inter-party competition*, we expect the media to exert a stronger influence when it comes to the *intra-party competition*. In the inter-party competition most voters have at least some ideological preference or identify themselves to some extent with a party. Therefore, in order for media attention to lead to a change in voting behavior, citizens have to be persuaded. Consequently, the media effect is often limited to floating voters, who are more easily persuaded (Chaffee & Rimal 1996). However, in the intra-party competition the mechanisms through which the media may influence one's vote are expected to work differently. Classical factors that are taken up in vote choice models, such as party identification, issue salience and ideology, are less important in intra-party preference voting, as candidates belong to the same political party and are therefore ideologically more homogenous. Instead other factors, such as name recognition and personal character traits, increase in importance (Collingwood et al. 2012). Consequently, in the intra-party competition media effects are less cushioned by party identification. This is identical to the primary elections in the United States where media effects are found to be much stronger than in general presidential election, as the party labels play less a role (Latimer 1987). Rather than changing vote choice through *persuasion*, in the intra-party competition the media can already impact voters by providing *information*. As political parties present long lists of candidates – ranging between up to 33 candidates per list in Belgium to 75 in The Netherlands – the most important prerequisite for a candidate, in order to become electorally successful, is to be recognized by voters and one of the easiest way to do so is through the media. A previous study conducted in Belgium indeed finds preliminary evidence that in general candidates who receive more media attention obtain more preferential votes (Van Aelst et al. 2008).

Yet, we argue that the mechanisms through which the media impacts electoral success will not be the same for all candidates and distinguish between what we label top and ordinary candidates. We realize that there are multiple ways of distinguishing between different types candidates (e.g. Put and Maddens, 2013). Most often researchers use a narrow definition of top candidates in terms of candidates that are extremely well-known such as party presidents and a

handful of candidates who figure in lists of most popular politicians. The definition for top candidates we use in this study is broader and more in line with the opportunity structure of electoral systems with multiple districts and a large number of candidates, such as in Belgium.. In our definition, top candidates should literally occupy a position on top of the ballot list. Recent research such as André et al. (in press), point out that parties position their most popular and most important candidates, such as incumbents and those that occupy an important executive mandate, on the top spots of the ballot list. Other research (e.g. van Erkel & Thijssen 2016; Miller & Krosnick 1998) points out that in their evaluation of candidates on a ranked list also voters seldom go further than the third candidate. Thus, we define all candidates that occupy the top spots on the ballot list as top candidates, as these are the candidates deemed most important by parties and voters (a.k.a. as the top candidates *within* the party). In general, top candidates have a good chance of getting elected, while the large majority of ordinary candidates participates to support their party or improve their position within the party. Of course how many top candidates there are and whether just the first candidate or the first three candidates should be seen as top candidates is dependent on the size of the party and the district, as otherwise for smaller parties or smaller districts this purely 'locational' criterion might lead to classifying candidates as top candidates who are actually perceived as unknown or fairly unimportant by other representatives or voters. Therefore we also use a second criterion in terms of the electability of candidates which is a function of party magnitude. Hence, for smaller parties and districts we will use a more selective 'locational' criterion than for larger parties. We go more detailed into this operationalization in the method section below.

For what we define as top candidates we expect that media attention during the long campaign matters most. These candidates have a higher news value, either because they have important functions within their party, or because they occupy an executive mandate. Therefore, most of them already receive news attention in between elections. Consequently, they do not need media visibility shortly before the elections in order to raise name recognition. Rather, these candidates aim for constant media attention in the long campaign, as this can make them

seem more viable during the actual election campaign (Abramowitz 1989). Media attention during the long campaign can help to create a reputation which spills over to the rest of the campaign and ultimately to the number of preferential votes obtained. In other words, top candidates who do not get enough coverage in the long campaign may 'miss the boat' and will not be considered by voters as the campaign leaders. It will be difficult for top candidates to make up for this backlog in the short campaign, as the cards have already been shuffled in the long campaign. This mechanism is in line with studies on the American primaries, which have shown that especially media attention at the beginning of the campaign serves to persuade voters to vote for certain candidates, as information levels are low and opinions have not yet been crystalized (West 1994), whereas media attention later in the campaign mostly serves to reinforce this popularity (Haynes et al. 2004).

For ordinary candidates, on the other hand, we expect that media attention during the short campaign matters most. As stated before, for them the most important reason to get in the media is to receive name recognition. More attention in the media raises a candidate's salience (Goldenberg & Traugott 1987). According to the recency effect, citizens are more likely to vote for candidates who are at the top of their heads and cognitively more accessible at the moment of casting a vote (Hong & Nadler 2012). It can be expected that a candidate is especially salient in the voters' mind when attention in the media is close to Election Day. Media attention earlier in the campaign matters less as they may already be forgotten by the day of elections, or at least will be not be in the top of the heads of voters. Furthermore, the large majority of these candidates have little or no news value outside the short campaign, and therefore hardly receive any media attention before the short campaign. Based on these expectations we formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: *For top candidates media attention during the long campaign influences their individual electoral success.*

Hypothesis 1b: *For ordinary candidates media attention during the short campaign influences their individual electoral success.*

Media within the 'funnel of causality'

In the previous section we explained how media attention can influence the number of preferential votes political candidates obtain and how we expect this effect to vary between candidates. However, in practice it is difficult to isolate the effect of media attention as it is embedded within a broader framework of factors that affect electoral success and which also influence or are influenced by media attention. If we fully want to comprehend how media attention influences the process of preferential voting, we should therefore not only focus on the direct effects, but also study it in relation with other characteristics that determine individual electoral success. Figure 1 provides a schematic overview of common factors which the literature have found to influence individual electoral success and the position of the media in this chain. The figure is inspired by the classical idea of a 'funnel of causality' (Campbell et al. 1960), although rather than a voter perspective it takes a candidate perspective. Thus, some factors, such as media attention during the short campaign, can be positioned close to individual electoral success in time and content, whereas other factors such as political experience and especially gender should be positioned more at the beginning of the chain. Positioning long and short campaign media attention in this broader causal funnel not only helps to better separate the two effects, but also sheds insights on how media attention acts as a mediator for other determinants of electoral success.

[Figure 1]

At the basis of the funnel we find the socio-demographic characteristics of candidates. Previous studies indicated that, holding everything else constant, women win more preferential votes than men (e.g. Thijssen 2013). These extra votes for women can be explained by the fact that

they are still underrepresented in politics, instigating women to vote for female candidates. However, while women may receive extra votes due to identity-voting, other studies have suggested that the thresholds to get in the news are higher for them (Adcock 2010; Kahn 1994; Vos 2013). Additionally, Aalberg & Strömbäck (2011) show that men are more media-driven and search more contact with journalists than women. We therefore expect that the electoral identity bonus women receive, will be (partly) suppressed by their disadvantage of receiving less media attention.

Moreover, we expect this suppression to be stronger for ordinary candidates than for top politicians. Previous studies indicate that the gender bias in news attention is especially strong for ordinary candidates, and less so for top politicians (Kahn 1994). In the case of leading politicians, journalists are more guided by political function to determine newsworthiness. Yet, when information about candidates is sparse, such as for ordinary candidates, journalists are more inclined to rely on the gender of a political actor to determine newsworthiness, creating a bias. Thus, we expect the news thresholds to be higher for ordinary female candidates, suppressing their identity bonus, and more easy to pass for top female candidates.

Hypothesis 2a: *For ordinary candidates, the electoral identity bonus female candidates receive is suppressed by the fact that they receive less media attention.*

Hypothesis 2b: *For top candidates, the electoral identity bonus women receive is not suppressed by a lack of media attention.*

The second factor in the funnel is political experience. Because retrospective voting is a common and sensible cue for many voters, previous studies indicate that political experienced candidates are electorally more successful (e.g. Gelman and King, 1990). At the same time they are also more likely to receive media attention (both in the long and short campaign). According to the news value theory (Galtung & Ruge 1965) politicians 'with power' display a higher news value

and will therefore be more covered in the news (Helfer & Van Aelst 2016). Moreover, the public is expected to be more interested in stories about persons they know, stimulating journalists to write about well-known politicians. Thus, when it comes to obtaining preferential votes, we expect politicians with legislative and executive functions to profit directly from their political function, as well as due to the fact that this effect is further inflated by the extra media attention they receive because of their function. With regard to this effect of political experience, we have no concrete expectation about a difference between top and ordinary candidates.

Hypothesis 3: *The electoral bonus of candidates with a) legislative and b) executive political experience is inflated by the extra news attention they receive.*

A final factor in the funnel is ballot list position. We use this variable to make the crucial distinction between top and ordinary candidates. However, also more subtle differences in ballot position within these categories can have important consequences. Previous research has shown ballot list position to be one of the most important predictors for individual electoral success. When presented with a long list of options, people tend to pick the first options (e.g. van Erkel and Thijssen 2016). Next to this primacy effect citizens may also vote for higher ranked candidates, because they trust the party to put the best candidates on the top spots (Miller and Krosnick 1998). However, ballot list position is also related to media attention. On the one hand, it may influence which candidates receive media attention during the short campaign, as like political experience it is an indicator for journalists for political status and future political influence (Vos, 2013). At the same time, we can expect ballot list position itself to also be influenced by media attention as political parties tend to be more inclined to give popular politicians, who appear more frequently in the media, the highest positions on the list. In this sense ballot list position is positioned somewhat between the long and the short campaign, as the long campaign may impact where a candidate is positioned, whereas this position impacts the amount of coverage during the short campaign. We are aware, however, that ballot list

position is also potentially influenced by the electoral success of the previous election (André et al, in press). In this sense, ballot list position at least partially precedes even the long campaign in our funnel of causality. Nevertheless, recent research (Yildirim et al. 2017) points out that even the effect of electoral success in the preceding election is somehow mediated by the parliamentary speeches and personal initiatives of individual representatives during the long campaign and the media attention it generates.

Data and method

To test the hypotheses, we focus on the 2014 Belgian elections. Belgium is a federal state that is characterized by three separate regions; Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, each with their own party system, political candidates and media system. Citizens from one region cannot vote for parties or candidates from the other region, nor do most Flemish-speaking citizens follow the news from Wallonia or vice versa. Therefore, we focus specifically on Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, reflecting over 60% of the population. It is a clear example of a PR-list system with a flexible list. This means that political parties determine the order of their ballot list beforehand, but that citizens can change this order by casting enough preferential votes for a candidate. Citizens can opt for two kinds of votes: a list vote or a preferential vote. When citizens cast a list vote they vote for the party as a whole and agree with the order in which candidates are presented on the ballot list. With a preferential vote citizens support one or multiple candidates. Belgian voters can cast as many preferential votes as they want, as long as these candidates belong to the same party. Candidates receiving enough preferential votes to surpass a quota immediately get elected. Other candidates can complement their pool of votes using list votes. These votes first go to the number one on the list, until (s)he has enough votes to reach the quota, then to the number two, etc. Once half of the list votes are distributed, the last empty seats, if still any left, go to the remaining candidates with the most preferential votes.

We believe Belgium is a good case to study preferential votes, as it offers a number of analytical benefits. First, due to the option of a list vote, we know that the vote for the list puller

is indeed a personalized vote, whereas in systems where a candidate vote is compulsory many citizens voting for the list puller actually want to support the party, biasing the results in favor of the first candidate on the list. Using the Belgian case we avoid this pitfall. Second, the fact that citizens can cast multiple preferential votes, makes political candidates more analytical independent from each other. In systems with a single preferential voting, the success of a candidate is dependent on the features of the other candidates on the list. Finally, the number of candidates competing in Belgium is high. Given the high number of cases needed for SEM analyses, this is an extra advantage.

We use data on the Flemish and Federal elections, both first-order elections. Given our interest in individual electoral success we use candidates as unit of analysis. In total 1435 Flemish candidates participated for seven different parties. Data on these candidates were gathered using a number of official documents. We use the official electoral lists for information on the candidates' political party, district and ballot list position. Moreover, we collected data on their gender, age and political experience. In order to get information about their political experience databases were used that keep track of all political mandates in Belgium (http://www.cumuleo.be and http://directory.wecitizens.be).

We distinguish between top and ordinary candidates. As argued earlier we use ballot list position as an important criteria for this operationalization and categorize the first three candidates of the ballot list, as well as the last candidate on the list, the list pusher, as top candidates. In Belgium list pushers are often well-known politicians with a good chance to get elected. An exception is the PVDA which is a very small party, where we decided to categorize the list pusher as ordinary candidate.

However, this operationalization may still be too broad and based on this purely locational operationalization we may categorize some candidates as top candidates who are actually perceived by other representatives and voters as "ordinary", especially in smaller districts or for electorally smaller parties. Therefore, we use a second criteria of party magnitude, the number of seats a party is expected to win the elections. When the party

magnitude of a party in a district is 1 or 2 we limit its top candidates to only the first or first two candidates and the list pusher.[1] On this basis there are one (list puller) to four (first three candidates on the list + list pusher) top candidates per party list, depending on the size of the party and on the district. So for example in the district of Antwerp for the smallest party, the PVDA, we only coded the first candidate on the list as top candidate, whereas for the winner of the elections, the N-VA which won seven seats in the district, we coded the first three candidates on the list and the list pusher as top candidates. Using this operationalization we have 212 top and 1223 ordinary candidates. Given that certain choices on which we base our classification of top and ordinary candidates may be contested, we will test whether our findings remain robust with slightly different ways of operationalizing top and ordinary candidates.

To measure the dependent variable, electoral success, we use a relative proportion of preferential votes. We do not use the absolute number of preferential votes, because candidates participate in different constituencies and elections, and the district magnitude and number of voters in these constituencies strongly influence the number of votes candidates receive. 2.000 preferential votes for a candidate of a small party in a small district does not have the same meaning as 2.000 votes for a candidate from a large party in a large district. Rather, we divide the number of preferential votes of a candidate by the total number of preferential votes being cast in the district for his or her political party list.[2] The distribution of the dependent variable is heavily skewed. Most candidates score below 10% of the votes on their party list, while a few candidates score 20% or higher. This is problematic as it means that the residuals of our analysis have a non-normal distribution when running a linear regression. To solve this problem, a natural log transformation of the dependent variable is necessary (Marcinkiewicz, 2013). In this

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[1] There is a discussion about whether to use party magnitude of the same election or party magnitude of the previous election. In this paper we use the former. However, a robustness check with party magnitude of the previous election gives similar results.

[2] Note that this means that we do not look at the number of list votes a party receives, but only the number of preferential votes.

case, a log transformation of the dependent variable leads to residuals that are approximately normally distributed.

To measure *media attention* we use newspapers because of their extensive attention of the election campaign. Since television coverage is more narrowly focused on top candidates this medium is less suited for this study. More specifically we used *Gopress*, a database and search function which archives all Belgian newspapers. We counted the number of newspaper articles in which a candidate was mentioned in a given time period. In the search we include the major Flemish broadsheets *De Morgen, De Standaard* and *De Tijd*, the popular newspapers *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad,* and the free daily *Metro.* Given that candidates run for election in only one district, we also included the most important regional newspapers *Het Belang van Limburg, de krant van West-Vlaanderen* and *De Gazet van Antwerpen.* For each politician we used the full name as search string. However, we verified whether all articles were indeed about this candidates and whether there was not another person with a similar name who also appeared in the newspaper. In our search we made a distinction between attention during the short campaign and during the long campaign. We operationalize the short campaign as the month before the election, so all media reports from 25 April 2014 to 24 May 2014, and the long campaign as the year before Election day, all articles between 25 May 2013 and April 24 2014. Taking the short campaign as the period between April 25 and May 24 is not only in line with the operationalization of Norris et al. (1999), but this timeframe is also chosen because it immediately follows the Easter break in which the campaign was relatively low key, and thus captures the most intense phase of the campaign. Similar to electoral success, media attention is skewed, so again we take the natural logged transformed variables.[3]

Next to media attention, we include gender and political experience in order to test the second and third hypotheses. For political experience we distinguish executive and legislative experience. Candidates were coded to have legislative experience if they had a seat in one of the

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[3] We have no indication of any multicollinearity problems between the short and long campaign in the analyses.

parliaments, either Federal, regional or European. They were coded to have executive experience if they either had experience as a minister or as mayor. With regard to list position for top candidates, we include separate dummies for each position, with the list pusher being the reference category. The reason to include these dummies is that the electoral benefit number one has over number two, might be stronger than the benefit number two has over number three. For the model with ordinary candidates we include ballot list position as one single continuous indicator since for these lower position the ballot list position effect does follow a more or less linear pattern. Finally, we include one exogenous control variable, namely district magnitude. It is important to do so, as candidates will score a higher proportion of preferential votes in districts with lower magnitudes, because there are less candidates participating. Not controlling for this would strongly skew our results.

Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptives. It demonstrates strong differences between top and ordinary candidates with regard to their electoral score. Top candidates receive almost five times as many preferential votes as ordinary candidates (respectively 22583 and 4437 votes). Top candidates also appear more frequently in the news. Outside the campaign period, they receive on average fifteen times the attention of ordinary candidates (291 versus 19 articles). During the short campaign this difference is even stronger as top candidates appear on average in 31 news items, while ordinary candidates appear on average in just 1.5 articles. However in all cases the variance is quite high indicating that there exist also strong differences within the two groups.

[Table 1]

In order to test our hypotheses, we employ path models. SEM is very suitable to test such path models, as it allows the researcher to include multiple dependent variables at the same time (Kline 2011). Thus, one can test a complex causal model where different factors influence each

other.[4] We run two separate models, one for top candidates and one for ordinary candidates and compare similarities and differences between them. Due to the fact that some of the endogenous variables are binary and others continuous, some paths are estimated by means of linear regression, and others by means of logistic regression (GSEM). We use robust clustered standard errors to account for the fact that our candidates are nested in election-district combinations.

We first include paths from gender to all factors later in the funnel, then add paths from executive and legislative experience to the different factors later in the model, etc. Additionally, we add a path from district magnitude to individual success and, in the case of ordinary candidates, also to ballot list position. These models fit the data well.[5] In the next step we go from a full model to a more parsimonious model. Hence, we omit all paths that were insignificant in order to reach a model that fit the data best. However, given our theoretical interest we do keep the path from our media attention variables to electoral success, even when the analyses indicate these paths should be submitted to get a better model fit. In appendix A we provide a graphical overview of the final, parsimonious models for top and ordinary candidates, while Table 2 shows in more detail the unstandardized coefficients of each effect and the model fit measures. Figure 2 and 3 highlight the paths relevant to our hypotheses.

[Table 2]

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[4] We are aware of alternative methods to analyze mediation such as described by Imai et al. (2010). However, since we analyze multiple mediations at the same time, we employ SEM instead.

[5] Note that using GSEM (or clustered standard errors for that matter) makes it impossible to retrieve fit indices. Therefore we estimated our model fit using a normal SEM model without clustered standard errors. Considering that both models are derived from the same correlation matrices, and the specification of both models is similar, we would argue this is the most correct way to handle this problem. For top candidates the fit indices are as follow: $\chi^2(5)=4.04$, p=0.54, RMSEA=0.00 (90%-CI: 0.00–0.074), CFI=1.000. For ordinary candidates we get the following fit indices: $\chi^2(3)=3.60$, p=0.31, RMSEA=0.017 (90% CI:0.00-0.068), CFI=1.000.

Results

When comparing the model for top politicians with the model for ordinary candidates, it immediately becomes clear that the extent to which media attention affects electoral success differs between these groups. For top candidates the effect of news attention during the *long* campaign is significant, whereas for ordinary candidates the effect of media attention during the *short* campaign is significant (Table 2 and Figure 2). This indicates that the common idea that politicians should attract as much media attention as possible during the short campaign to boost their popularity does not hold for top politicians once we take previous news attention into account. For them the electoral competition already starts during the long campaign. The coefficient indicates that for each increase in news attention by 10% the proportion of preferential votes increases by .5%.[6] For ordinary candidates on the other hand long-term media has no direct effect. Rather, for them any extra attention shortly before Election Day is beneficial. For each increase in news attention by 10% the proportion of preferential votes increases with .1%. While this effect may seem low at first instance, it can be quite impactful as it means that candidates who get mentioned in three articles will score 3% better than fellow party members who get mentioned only once. We should not totally neglect the effect of news coverage in the long campaign for ordinary candidates as it does affect the likelihood to get covered during the short campaign, but insofar that long campaign news matters it is only indirectly. These differences between top and ordinary candidates are in line with our first hypotheses (1a and 1b).

[Figure 2]

The models in Table 2 also provide evidence for our second set of hypotheses. We expected that female politicians benefit from "identity" voting, but that for ordinary candidates this advantage is partly suppressed because these groups appear less in the media. Figure 2 highlights the

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[6] $e^{\left(\log\left(\frac{100+10}{100}\right)\right).053}$

relations between gender, media attention and electoral success, based on the results of the full model in Table 2. Focusing on ordinary candidates, we find a significant positive effect of being female. In general the proportion of preferential votes increases by 18.6% for female candidates.[7] However, at the same time the results show that ordinary female politicians receive significantly less coverage in the media. This negatively affects their electoral success. Thus, for ordinary candidates we find that the electoral advantages of female candidates are partly suppressed by their lack of media attention, supporting hypothesis 2a. For top candidates we also find a direct positive effect of being female on electoral success, with the proportion of preferential votes increasing by 19.8% for female top candidates. Yet, unlike for ordinary candidates, there is no difference between male and female candidates in their media coverage. Hence, the electoral identity bonus of these candidates is not suppressed by their lack of media coverage, supporting hypothesis 2b.

[Figure 3]

Figure 3 provides an overview of the political experience effects. When we look at the top candidates, we see that having experience in an executive and legislative does affect electoral success, but only indirectly through the extra media attention these candidates receive in the long campaign. By the extra media attention they generate, the proportion of votes that candidates with executive and legislative mandates receive increases by 9.1% and 6.4% respectively. Interestingly, and partly going against hypothesis 3, we do not find a direct effect of political experience on electoral success for top candidates. For top candidates, media attention does not inflate the incumbency bonus, but fully mediates it. Hypothesis 3 does hold for ordinary candidates, at least regarding legislative experience. The proportion of votes that ordinary candidates with legislative mandates receive, increases by 28.7%, simply due to being experienced. At the same time ordinary candidates with legislative experience also receive more

[7] $e^{(.171)}$

votes because they are covered more frequently in the media, both in the long and short campaign. This leads to an additional bonus of 2.5%.[8] For executive mandates we find a similar result for ordinary as for top candidates, with an indirect effect through the media.

All in all, the results show a significant media bonus for candidates with executive and legislative political experience, but rather than inflating the political experience bonus it seems to fully mediate it. Only for ordinary candidates do we find both a direct and a mediated effect for candidates with legislative experience. This difference may be partly explained by the distribution between these groups (Table 1) given that candidates with a legislative or executive mandate really stand out amongst the ordinary candidates. Nevertheless, also for top candidates only 33% of the candidates occupied an executive mandate, yet these candidates do not seem to be able to distinguish themselves directly, but only receive more votes because they obtain more attention from the media.

We end the result section with two robustness checks in order to gauge the sensitivity of our operationalization for top and ordinary candidates. We use alternative operationalizations in which we consider all candidates at the first three positions of the ballot list as top candidates and a second test in which we consider all candidates at the first two positions to be a top candidate.[9] In both cases we also code list pushers as top candidates. The results of these sensitivity analyses, which can be found in online appendix B, indicate that almost all of the findings are robust. With both alternative model specifications we still find that for top candidates the long campaign matters most, whereas for ordinary candidates coverage in the short campaign is the most important. Our other hypotheses are also confirmed in almost all circumstances, although we do find that when we take for all parties and districts the first three ballot list positions as top candidates, there is also a direct effect of having a legislative mandate

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[8] $e^{(2.666*.323*.011)} + e^{(1.434*.011)}$

[9] Ideally, we would have performed a third sensitivity test in which we further distinguish the list puller from other candidates or make three categories. Unfortunately this is not possible given the fact that we would not have enough statistical power for the SEM analysis.

for top candidates, which is more in line with hypothesis 3. Additionally, when systematically taking the first two ballot list positions as top candidates, there is an indication that female top candidates might get less media coverage during the long campaign after all, but this is not significant at the p<.01 level.

Conclusion and discussion

To what extent can media attention boost electoral success for different types of candidates? In answering this question, we provide three main conclusions that are of value for future studies on media effects in election time.

First, this study shows that media matter for the intra-party competition. Candidates who appear more in the media attract more votes, even when taking into account that these candidates are more likely to occupy better ballot list positions or have more political experience. This means that the media spotlights are not neutral and can influence the electoral success of individual candidates. Second, the findings show that it is relevant to distinguish between different types of candidates when it comes to the direct media effect. In the case of ordinary candidates, the large majority of people on the electoral lists, especially media attention during the short campaign impacts electoral success. This can be explained by the fact that for these candidates the most important reason to get in the media is to obtain name recognition and become salient in the voter's mind. Thus, the closer this attention is to Election Day the better. For top candidates, media attention during the long campaign leads to more preferential votes. For them media attention matters not so much to get name recognition, but rather it determines who are the most viable candidates in the mind of voters. Top candidates need to build a reputation before the heat of the final campaign. This can be as successful legislator, cabinet member or opposition leader. A candidate on top of the list cannot just appear out of nowhere. These findings are in line with the seminal work of Miller and colleagues (1990: 59) who stressed in their longitudinal study of the 1987 British campaign that for political parties, in particular those in government, the long campaign is more important than the short

official campaign. Parties can build a reputation during the long campaign and changes in popularity are usually greater than during the short campaign. More general, our study shows the value of including the "long campaign" or a longer period before the start of the official campaign in the study of media effects. Not doing so can lead to incomplete conclusions.

Third, our results clearly show that media attention should not be studied in isolation, as it is part of a larger set of factors which determine electoral success, but which also influence each other. In this sense media attention not only affects electoral success on its own but also impacts how other factors influence electoral success. For example, we demonstrate that the identity bonus ordinary female politicians receive is suppressed by a lack of media attention. In addition, we show that the electoral bonus candidates with political experience receive, can fully be attributed to the fact that these candidates receive more coverage in the media, especially in the case of top candidates. In short, we recommend that personal media effects in an electoral context should be studied in a broader causal model, that allows to distinguish between direct and mediating effects.

This study only focused on the case of Belgium and future studies should therefore investigate whether these findings can be confirmed in other contexts. In general, we expect similar mechanisms to be at play. Many of the elements of the Belgian system of intra-party preference voting can also be found in other European countries. For instance, 12 out of the 21 countries with a preferential-list PR system share the combination of optional and multiple preferential voting (e.g. Iceland, Norway, Switzerland). Of course, we are aware that certain differences in the specific electoral rules exist. In some countries, such as the Netherlands and Finland, preference voting is compulsory. Also, differences exist with the number of preferential votes that voters can cast, sometimes limiting this to just one vote. This could actually increase the importance of media attention for candidates even further. Especially when multiple voting is not possible, citizens may be less inclined to support candidates lower on the list (Nagtzaam and van Erkel 2017), meaning that it becomes even more important for ordinary candidates to

attract coverage in the media. Future research should provide more insight in how the specific electoral configurations impact preference voting and moderate media effects.

A second shortcoming of this study is that it focuses on media visibility, and not on *how* candidates are portrayed. We know from previous studies that for political actors the tone or favorability of coverage matters (e.g. Shaw 1999). Similar to the main media effect, we speculate that also with regard to tone, differences exist between top and ordinary candidates. We specifically expect that the tone of attention is more important for top candidates than for ordinary candidates, as for the latter group media attention is about raising salience, so every article, positive or negative, is welcome. For top candidates, on the other hand, it is not so much about getting known, but more about creating a favorable image. Therefore, for this group we expect that tone matters more, which could nuance the finding that for top candidates media attention during the short campaign is less relevant. At this stage, we can only conclude that the amount of attention for top candidates during the short campaign is not contributing to personal electoral success.

Third, although SEM is a useful method to study deeper relations between different variables, like all methods based on regression it cannot proof causality. Based on the fact that our variables are situated at different points in time - with the long campaign being measured before the short campaign which is measured before the election result - we have some leverage on internal validity. Nevertheless, for future research it would be useful to study candidates over the span of multiple elections in order to get an even better grasp on the causal relations between the different factors.

Our results have implications that are useful for the literature on campaigns and preferential voting. The study demonstrates that media effects should not be considered as homogenous since they vary between types of candidates, and between the long and short campaign. Future media research therefore ought to be aware of candidate differences and temporal dynamics when inferring the electoral effects of media coverage. These implications apply to multimember district proportional systems where the electoral struggle between

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candidates is to a large extent an intra-party competition, but may also hold in majoritarian systems, where candidates compete in an inter-party competition. Finally, our findings also have implications for political journalists and editors. The choices they make to report more about some candidates and not or less about others have a moderate but significant impact on the electoral outcome. This influence does not need to be negative, as journalists inform voters about politicians they would otherwise know little about, but they should be aware of the fact that their coverage is not without consequences.

8534 words (without abstract)

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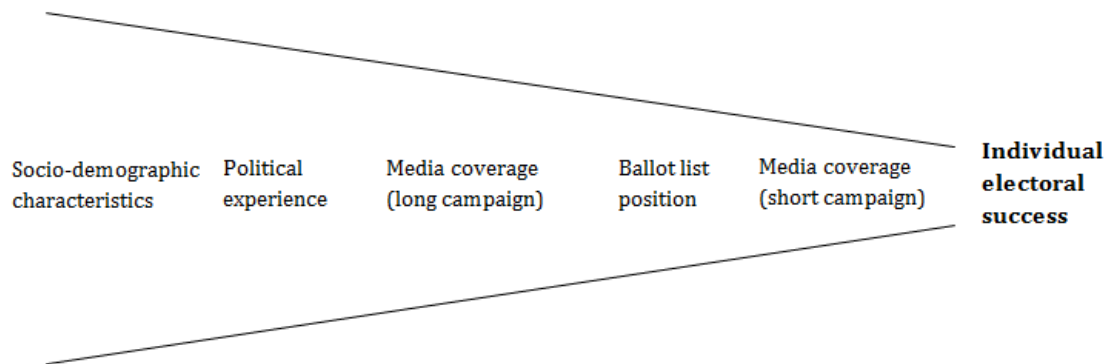
Figure 1: The funnel of causality

Socio-demographic characteristics — Political experience — Media coverage (long campaign) — Ballot list position — Media coverage (short campaign) — **Individual electoral success**

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of variables used in analysis

Variable	Top candidates		Ordinary candidates	
	Mean(S.E)	Freq.(%)	Mean(S.E)	Freq.(%)
Number of preferential votes	22583.02(30152.05)		4436.90(3663.33)	
Media attention (short campaign)	31.30(81.69)		1.46(3.67)	
Media attention (long campaign)	291.25(568.31)		19.06(45.42)	
Gender				
- Male		63.68%		51.84%
- Female		36.32%		48.16%
Legislative mandate				
- Yes		67.92%		4.82%
- No		32.08%		95.18%
Executive mandate				
- Yes		33.49%		6.21%
- No		66.51%		93.79%

Table 2: Results of the SEM model

	Top candidates b(SE)	Ordinary candidates b(SE)
Electoral success (log) on		
Media long campaign (log)	.053(.02)**	.003(.00)
Media short campaign (log)	.016(.01)	.011(.00)*
List puller (Ref = List pusher)	1.377(.06)**	-
Nr.2	.396(.05)**	-
Nr.3	.299(.07)**	-
Ballot list position	-	.030(.00)**
Female	.171(.05)**	.181(.02)**
District magnitude	-.013(.00)**	-.036(.00)**
Legislative mandate	.109(.06)	.252(.04)**
Media short campaign (log) on		
List puller	1.621(.39)**	-
Media long campaign (log)	.848(.21)**	.323(.04)**
Female	-	-.393(.14)**
Legislative mandate	-	1.434(.30)**
Executive mandate	-	.733(.37)*
District magnitude	-	-.042(.02)*
List puller on		
Media long campaign (log)	.548(.14)**	-
_Nr.2 on_		
Female	1.922(.50)**	-
_Nr.3 on_		
Female	-.541(.41)	-
Ballot list position on		
Media long campaign (log)	-	.270(.05)**
District magnitude	-	-.521(.02)**
Legislative mandate	-	5.845(.87)**
Executive mandate	-	1.494(.81)**
Media long campaign (log) on		
Legislative mandate	1.091(.27)**	2.666(.31)**
Executive mandate	1.642(.22)**	3.266(.26)**
Female	-	-1.156(.14)**
District magnitude	.046(.02)*	-
Executive mandate on		
Legislative mandate	.921(.33)**	1.709(.35)**
Female	-.769(.31)*	-1.561(.33)**
χ^2(df)	19.83(21)	3.75(5)
RMSEA	.001	.001
RMSEA CI	.000-.055	.000-.034
CFI	.999	1.000
N	212	1223

*p<.05; **p<.01

Figure 2: Direct and indirect effects of gender and minority status for top (left) and ordinary (right) candidates.
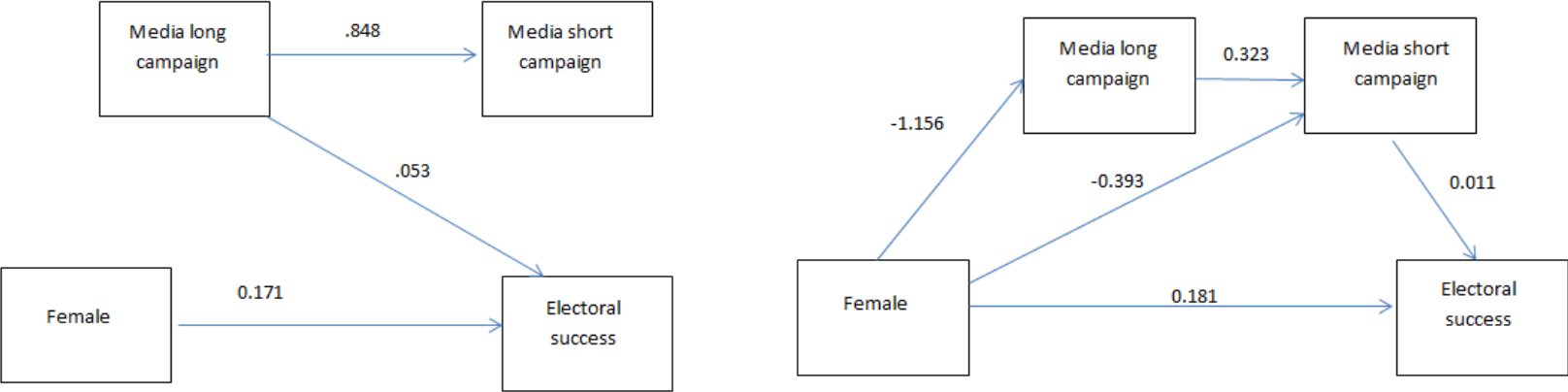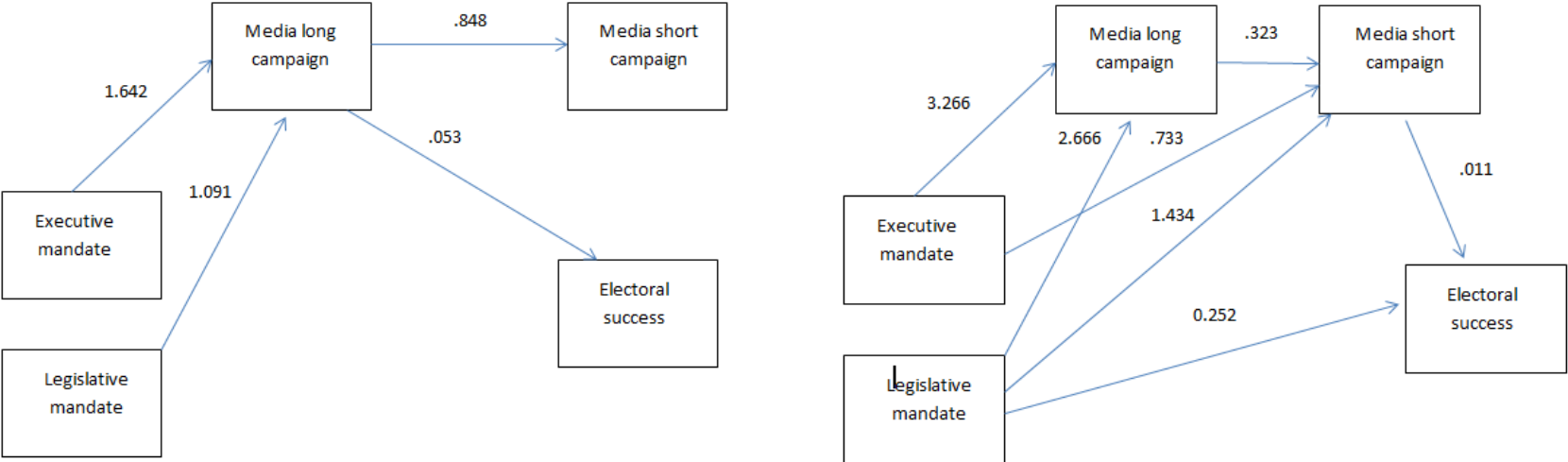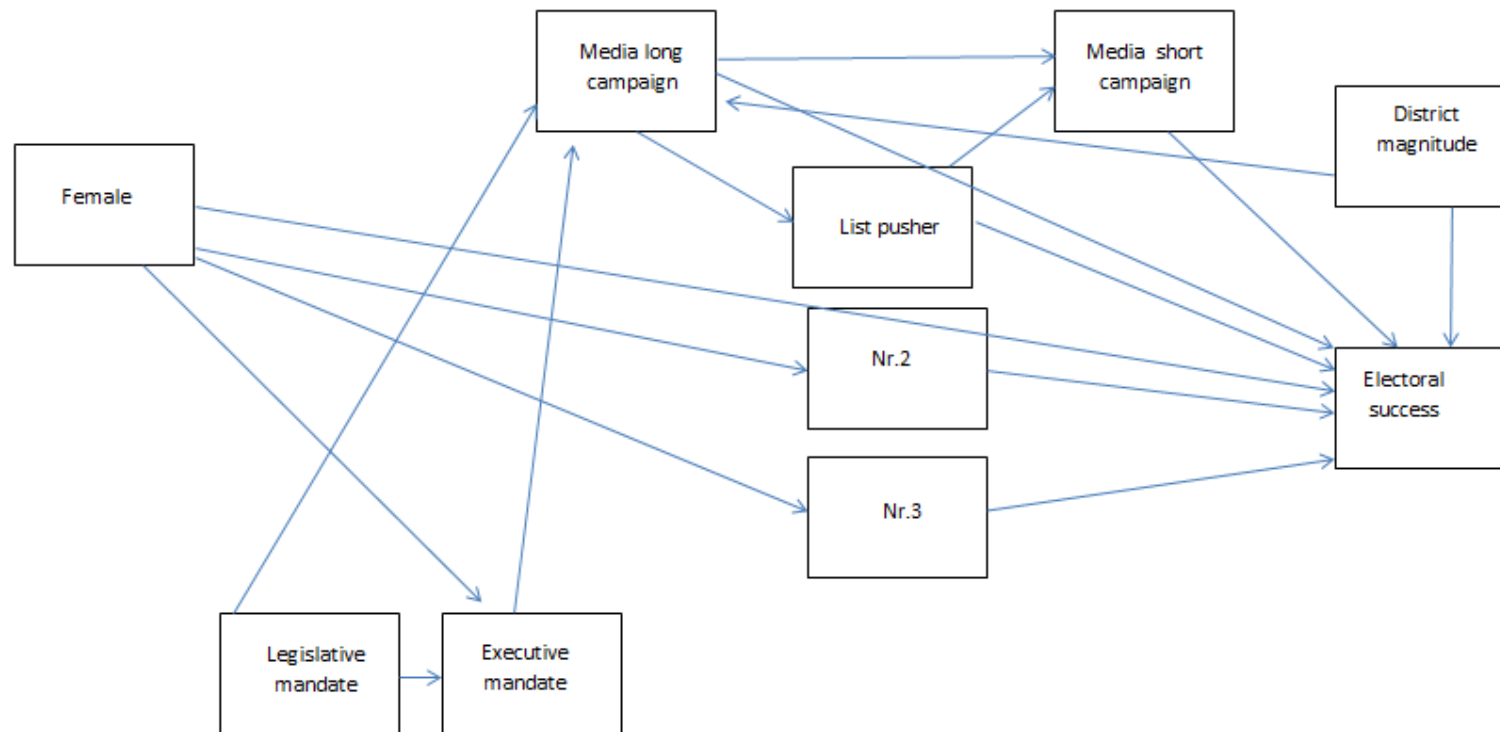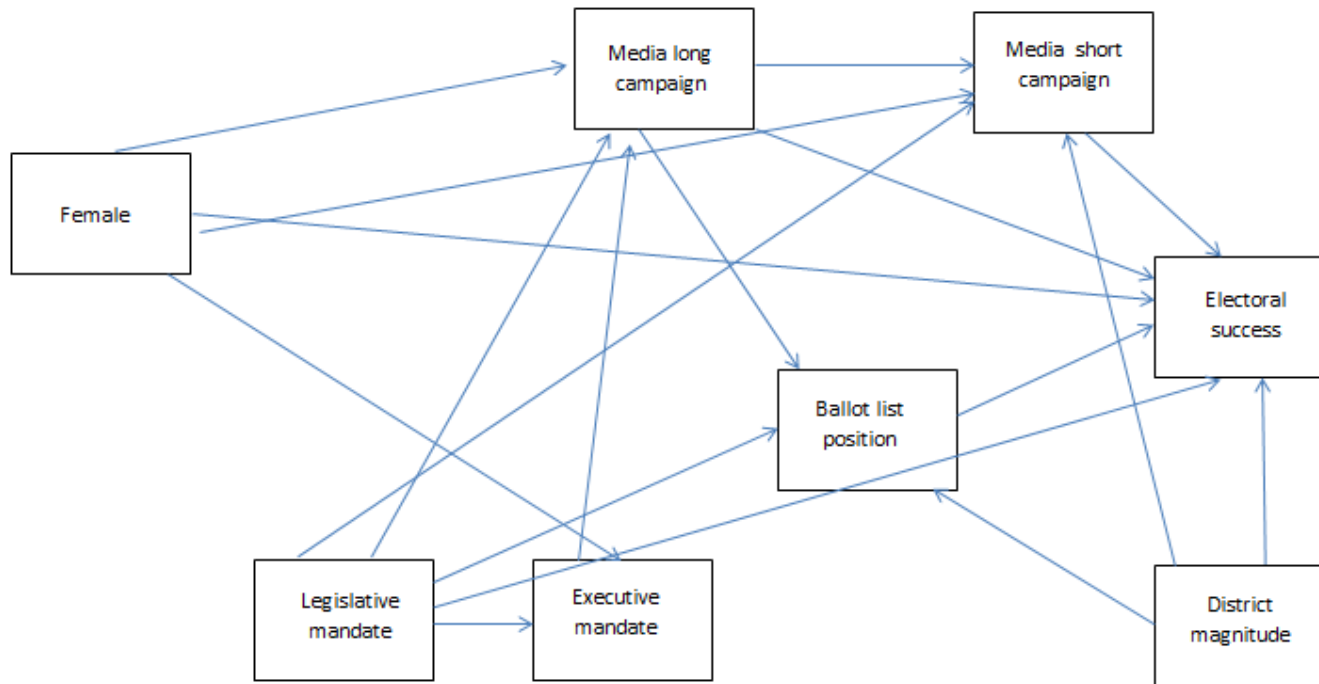
Figure 3: Direct and indirect effects of political experience for top (left) and ordinary (right) candidates.

Appendix A: The full GSEM models for top (above) and ordinary (below) candidates

Table B1: Top candidates operationalized as top 3 and list pusher

	Model for top candidates b(SE)	Model for ordinary candidates b(SE)
Electoral success (log) on		
Media long campaign (log)	.043(.01)**	.000(.00)
Media short campaign (log)	.009(.01)	.011(.00)*
List puller (Ref = List pusher)	1.392(.06)**	-
Nr.2	.393(.05)**	-
Nr.3	.246(.05)**	-
Ballot list position	-	.027(.00)**
Female	.214(.04)**	.185(.02)**
District magnitude	-.019(.00)**	-.035(.00)**
Legislative mandate	.098(.05)*	.276(.05)**
Media short campaign (log) on		
List puller	1.797(.31)**	-
Media long campaign (log)	.732(.09)**	.314(.04)**
Female	-	-.400(.13)**
Legislative mandate	-	1.514(.31)**
Executive mandate	-	.713(.38)
District magnitude	-	-.043(.02)*
List puller on		
Media long campaign (log)	.684(.12)**	-
Nr.2 on		
Female	2.135(.44)**	-
Media long campaign (log)	-.150(.03)**	-
Nr.3 on		
Female	-1.040(.30)**	-
Ballot list position on		
Media long campaign (log)	-	.223(.04)**
District magnitude	-	-.506(.01)**
Legislative mandate	-	5.646(1.07)**
Media long campaign (log) on		
Legislative mandate	1.801(.30)**	2.713(.34)**
Executive mandate	2.019(.23)**	3.299(.28)**
Female	-	-1.130(.15)**
District magnitude	.065(.03)*	-
Executive mandate on		
Legislative mandate	1.408(.32)**	1.981(.38)**
Female	-.759(.30)*	-1.616(.33)**
χ^2(df)	25.85(20)	7.51(6)
RMSEA	.032	.015
RMSEA CI	.000-.064	.000-.043
CFI	.994	1.000
N	280	1155

*p<.05; **p<.01

Table B2: Top candidates operationalized as top 2 and list pusher

	Model for top candidates b(SE)	Model for ordinary candidates b(SE)
Electoral success (log) on		
Media long campaign (log)	.048(.01)**	.002(.00)
Media short campaign (log)	.014(.01)	.013(.00)*
List puller (Ref = List pusher)	1.395(.06)**	-
Nr.2	.407(.05)**	-
Ballot list position	-	.031(.00)**
Female	.211(.05)**	.172(.02)**
District magnitude	-.016(.00)**	-.034(.00)**
Legislative mandate	-	.373(.05)**
Media short campaign (log) on		
List puller	1.795(.74)**	-
Media long campaign (log)	.750(.12)**	.324(.04)**
Female	-	-.412(.13)**
Legislative mandate	-	1.470(.27)**
Executive mandate	-	.861(.33)
District magnitude	-	-.038(.02)*
List puller on		
Media long campaign (log)	.615(.11)**	-
Female	-.859(.39)*	-
_Nr.2 on_		
Female	1.981(.44)**	-
Media long campaign (log)	-.213(.04)**	-
Ballot list position on		
Media long campaign (log)	-	.283(.05)**
District magnitude	-	-.500(.02)**
Legislative mandate	-	6.187(.76)**
Media long campaign (log) on		
Legislative mandate	1.880(.34)**	2.889(.25)**
Executive mandate	1.848(.29)**	3.144(.25)**
Female	-.591(.26)*	-1.181(.14)**
District magnitude	.059(.02)*	-
Executive mandate on		
Legislative mandate	1.403(.38)**	1.823(.32)**
Female	-1.025(.30)**	-1.436(.30)**
χ^2(df)	19.67(20)	12.243(6)
RMSEA	.000	.029
RMSEA CI	.000-.058	.000-.053
CFI	1.000	1.000
N	210	1225

$p<.05$; ** $p<.01$