

Candidate, Political

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A political candidate is the person who strives to win political offices, essentially through electoral procedures. The word originates from the Latin *candidatus*, “man in white,” referring to the white robe (*toga*) that Romans standing for a public office used to wear, which symbolized the untarnished moral qualities that were considered to be the indispensable characteristics of a political man.

David Easton’s analytical framework (1965) offers the best way to approach the subject. The “candidate” can be located in the fragile interconnection point that joins the flow of demands and support from the environment to the political system. Before their (first) candidacy, all candidates are part of the political community. Then, as candidates, they play the role of input carriers. They are messengers carrying demands, who strive for the support of the voters and of the political community at large. Finally, if elected, they form part of the authorities who convert demands into outputs, that is, who make legally binding decisions. The input–output process involves some procedures and some “rules of the game” that, according to Easton, are part of the *regime* and regulate the processes leading to a member of the political community being *selected* as a candidate and, if *elected*, becoming part of the authorities.

Selection

As long as political parties live and work, they will play a role in the selection processes of the candidates in all representative democracies. However, the role parties decide to play could depend on the electoral system which, to some extent, influences how much the larger public will be involved. There are, in fact, considerable differences in the incentives parties face if they are dealing with candidates’ selection processes in single-member districts or if they are selecting names to fill long party lists. It is also well known that the voters’ engagement in the choice of single elective positions is more significant than in the choice of representatives to form a large assembly. Yet, the role the electorate can play is mediated and limited by the parties’ choices. Apart from cases of independent candidates, who stand in an election on their own without having been nominated by a political party nor receiving its support, the role party organizations play is that of gate-keepers. The inclusiveness or the exclusiveness of candidates’ selection processes is in the parties’ hands, which means that, apart from countries where the procedures to select the candidates are defined by law (e.g., in the United States or in Argentina, where primaries are mandatory), parties can autonomously decide the inclusiveness of the *selectorate*, the set of people who will enjoy the right and power to choose

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approaches the electorate and there are few offices to be filled, individual characteristics and communications skills become more and more important. Finally, candidates can also be chosen by selected or nonselected party agencies, in a form of cooption validated by party members. Inside each party, the relative size of each agency is a sign of its inclusiveness: Conventions, central committees, bureaus, or other party executive bodies can be more inclusive or less inclusive, containing either delegates selected by party members or only representatives selected by such delegates.

The process of proposing and selecting candidates can also be multistage. This is the case of British parties, where small executive party agencies compile a list of centrally approved candidates from which the local constituency memberships can then choose. Multistage procedures often involve decentralization. Decentralization may be territorial or functional. The selection is functionally decentralized when parties allocate positions for candidates selected formally as representatives of social groups or sectors such as trade unions, women, minorities, etc. Frequently, to ensure functional representation, mechanisms of reserved places or quotas are used. Territorially, the selection is centralized when candidates are chosen by a national selectorate (which can be inclusive or exclusive as defined above). On the contrary, the process is decentralized when local selectorates nominate party candidates to run in local districts, as in many American primaries, or when local quotas are guaranteed in party lists. The literature argues that parties in decentralized countries reproduce the territorial decentralization by adopting more inclusive and decentralized selection processes, whereas parties in unitary countries tend to use more centralized and exclusive selection methods (Lundell, 2004). However, if the final decision remains in the hands of a few central party officers, who can veto local decisions, decentralization does not play an incisive role. This could have the effect of blocking popular candidacies that might have had a chance among party members, but also of promoting party cohesion besides personalization.

The inclusiveness/exclusiveness of the selectorate has some important implications. Different selection procedures can bring specific consequences on the legitimization of candidates and, therefore, on their behavior in the legislature, toward their parties, and toward their constituencies. But they can also impact upon the style of candidates' campaigns.

Framing the issue within the principal-agent theory helps explain some implications. Candidates who are chosen by an inclusive selectorate, such as in American open primaries or when voters have a say in the final ranking of candidates in the lists, owe their loyalty to their selectors, and not only to their party. In some cases, the political career of the (elected) candidates, and therefore their (re)nomination, does not depend on their loyalty to party leaders, but, on the contrary, on their ability to stand up and to be appreciated and recognized by their inclusive selectorate. Thus, a more inclusive selection process gives candidates a double source of legitimacy: from the party and from "the people." But this increased "popular" legitimacy can trigger a tendency in the candidate to act independently, in a manner that largely disregards party strategic choices and follows the unstable climate of opinion of an amorphous group known merely as "the voters" (i.e., the selectorate). In short, when the selection procedure is inclusive, the (narrower) candidate's interest can overcome the (more general) party

interest in an attempt to please the (even wider) numerous, divergent, and maybe conflicting voters' interests. In addition, without sufficient party discipline, the legislative process can turn out to be fragmented. A number of studies have tried to examine the effects of candidate selection processes on the behavior of the legislators. For example, selection by national party leader(s) is hypothesized to encourage legislators to behave in a party-centered manner and thus to follow party discipline more rigorously (Bowler, Farrell, & Katz, 1999).

This is evident also during the electoral campaign. The literature draws a line between the candidate-centered American campaigns and the party-centered Western European campaigns (Plasser & Plasser, 2002). In the United States, candidates "hire a campaign manager and campaign staff, they identify their own campaign message, do their own polling, and recruit and organise volunteers in the grass-roots campaign" (Karlsen & Narud, 2013, p. 84), and, therefore, they are the source of any and all political communication, while in Western Europe the party is the campaign manager and individual candidates are part of the party's campaign organization. However, the extent that candidates campaign independently from the party with candidate-centered organization, message, agenda, and instruments differs also among Western European democracies, due mainly to candidates' selection methods. According to Karlsen and Narud (2013), the process through which candidates are selected is the best predictor in explaining differences between countries concerning the extent of individual candidate campaigning. Campaign styles are linked to the selection method level of inclusiveness and level of decentralization. In general, if the party controls the nomination, candidates' campaign style will be party-centered, while if voters control the nomination, campaign style will be candidate-centered (but this depends also on the type of electoral system and the form of government, see below). As far as the level of decentralization is concerned, if the selectorate is broad and inclusive, the decentralized choice of candidates reduces the possibility of national campaigns based on the personality of national leaders. However, if parties are divided in more or less organized factions, it is still possible that the central faction leaders replace local candidates during the campaign, thus transforming the struggle for nomination into something like an all-out electoral campaign. Furthermore, an inclusive candidates' selection procedure can also foster the influence of the mass media on politics in general and on the candidate selection process in particular. As a consequence, it can increase the need to enhance financial resources in order to reach a wide selectorate.

Election

Sartori argues that electoral systems are "the most specific manipulative instrument of politics" (1968, p. 273) due to their effects on party systems and, which is more important here, due to the limits and incentives they offer to voters, candidate, and parties. The role a candidate can play in his/her election or reelection decisively depends on the electoral system. Electoral systems can be classified according to several variables: district magnitude, type of vote, electoral formula, etc. The electoral formula—how votes are converted into seats—affects candidates' incentives to campaign on a personal

rather than a party fashion. For example, it is widely acknowledged that, even if not all candidates and parties pursue the same strategy within a given electoral system, single-member plurality systems favor the development of candidate-centered electoral campaigns, while in closed-list proportional systems campaigns are party-centered. Electoral rules shape the extent to which individual politicians can benefit electorally by developing personal reputations distinct from those of their party and, sometimes, even by taking positions or actions other than those that would most benefit their party collectively.

Carey and Shugart (1995) have proposed a ranking of electoral systems according to the value of personal reputation based mainly on four variables. First, the degree of control party leaders exercise over candidates' selection or over ballot rank in list systems. "When leaders exercise strong ballot control, the incentive for a politician to cultivate a personal reputation is minimized; but when ballot control is weak, personal reputation is more valuable" (p. 421). Second, candidates can be elected in closed party lists, through preferences in party lists, or solely on the votes they earn individually (such as in plurality systems). If the votes cast for a candidate of a given party also contribute to the number of seats won in the district by the party as a whole (as in list systems) "a candidate's fortunes depend on the ability of her entire party to attract votes. The party reputation, then, is at a premium relative to personal reputation" (p. 421). If, on the contrary, all candidates are elected entirely by virtue of their personal ability to attract votes (as in single nontransferable vote or in systems that use primary elections), "the value of personal reputation is at its greatest relative to the collective reputation of the party" (p. 422).

Third, the number and types of votes cast—a single vote for a party, multiple votes, or a single vote for a candidate—can also influence the value of personal reputation. In the first case, typical of closed-list systems, voters simply choose a party and thus there is relatively little incentive for candidates to cultivate a personal vote through a candidate-centered campaign. If voters are allowed to cast multiple votes simultaneously (either within party lists, across parties, or in an ordinal system) or over time (as when primaries are used or in a two-round system), politicians' "personal reputation is more valuable than when votes are cast only for parties. However, when multiple votes are cast, personal reputation is not as overwhelmingly important relative to party reputation as when all candidates are competing simultaneously for the same indivisible support of each voter" (p. 422). In two-round systems, for example, candidates must have some incentives to cultivate personal votes but without differentiating too much from each other. In the second round they must broaden their appeals beyond the base that their party reputation brings them. In the single transferable vote as well as in the alternative vote, the ability of a candidate to be elected depends largely on how many personal votes he/she receives, since party labels are mainly an indication for voters to cast second and third preferences among lesser known candidates. However, since candidates and parties desire to conquer the second and third preferences of the voters, they are encouraged to moderate their positions. When each voter casts one vote for only one candidate, such as in open-list PR, alternative vote, or single nontransferable vote, "intra-party competition takes place simultaneously with interparty competition.

[...] Everyone competes against everyone else at once. Under these conditions, personal reputation is at a premium relative to party reputation” (p. 422). Thus, if there are multiple candidates per party per district, candidates must adopt some degree of personalized campaign as an electoral strategy to differentiate themselves and be elected. They will develop their own political communication.

Finally, the effect of district magnitude depends on the degree of control party leaders exercise over the selection of candidates or over ballot rank. Generally speaking, an increase in district magnitude corresponds to a decrease in the personalization of the campaigns. The existence of large districts increases the emphasis on party leadership and policy position and reduces the incentive for candidates to engage in an intense personal campaign. However, in systems where there is intraparty competition and voters have a say in the selection of candidates, as district magnitude increases, so does the value of personal reputation. Conversely, in systems without intraparty competition, as district magnitude increases, so the value of personal reputation decreases.

Following Bowler and Farrell’s (2011) conceptual distinction between *campaigning* (i.e., campaign style) and *electioneering* (i.e., using campaign tools, such as those identified in Norris’s (2000) taxonomy), numerous studies have shown that there is no meaningful relation between electoral systems and electioneering. The effects of electoral institutions on the extent to which candidates use premodern, modern, and postmodern campaign activities and communication tools are negligible. On the contrary, the effect of electoral institutions is more evident in campaigning.

Empirically, this means that in plurality systems, where voters can cast their ballots in favor of one candidate in single-member districts and where the relationship between voters and candidates is direct and accountability mechanisms are clear, the role candidates can play is more significant than in other systems. Their personality traits, their behavior and, last but not at all least, their communication skills, are fundamental in improving the probability of being elected. Thus, electoral institutions that encourage candidates to cultivate a personal vote are associated with higher levels of campaign personalization (Swanson & Mancini, 1996).

Of course, the role candidates play in the electoral process depends on a number of other features of the political system. This is evident comparing the role of candidates in the United States and in the United Kingdom. In both countries, in fact, national elections are structured around a plurality system in single-member districts and citizens expect their representatives to protect and promote constituency interests. However, candidates to the US Congress, especially those in marginal seats, devote much more of their time and resources to constituency service than their British colleagues, with the goal of being better known, more favorably evaluated, and, therefore, of securing their (re)election. “Although there are numerous similarities between the two countries, the differences are clear. [...] The American party and electoral systems lead to greater pay-offs for constituency service for congressmen than the corresponding British systems allow for MPs” (Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1987, p. 214).

The reasons are quite straightforward. First, despite the same electoral formula, the two countries have different forms of state and this implies a divergent understanding of representation (more territorially centered in the United States than in the United Kingdom). Second, the dissimilar form of government plays a central role. The American

system of “separate institutions sharing powers” does not favor the cohesion required from MPs in the UK parliamentary system, in which the government needs a strong and disciplined majority to get its laws approved. On the contrary, the American presidential system, with one of the two Chambers representing the States of the federation, does not require the same cohesive behavior from the Congressmen. This feature has a clear bearing on campaign style, which will be more party-centered in parliamentary systems, where the executive depends on party discipline in the legislature. Linked to the model of government, the structuring and rooting of national parties influence the role candidates can play in their campaign. Not surprisingly, in fact, party affiliations affect the reputation of representatives more in the United Kingdom than in the United States and, decisively, evaluations of national leaders affect much more the behavior of British than American voters, since in the United Kingdom party leaders exercise a much tighter control over the selection of candidates.

At the other extreme of the continuum, the role a candidate can play is minimum under closed-list proportional representation. In proportional systems, in fact, the most important elements affecting the role of candidates in the electoral process are district magnitude and the voters’ power through preferential voting (open vs. closed). In closed party lists, although using personal resources is potentially of electoral value to the party, individual candidates may wish to free ride on the activities of fellow party members since they will not personally enjoy all the benefits of their own efforts. However, even if there are fewer incentives to conduct a personal campaign, candidates are encouraged to campaign in order to maximize party seats and thus their chance to be elected. When, on the contrary, preferential voting is allowed, there is more uncertainty surrounding the electoral outcome and thus candidates are encouraged to use their personal resources, campaign skills, and communications strategies to attract the votes necessary to be elected.

Germany represents a good case to analyze and evaluate these statements. Half of its parliamentarians are elected from single-member districts and the remaining half are elected from party lists through a proportional system. Although comparing the behavior of candidates elected from party lists with those elected from districts is not a simple matter due to confounding factors, Fishel (1972) shows that district candidates employ more personal resources and engage in a more passionate electoral campaign than candidates in the proportional part. Zittel and Gschwend (2008) confirm the tendency of German single-member district candidates to campaign “in a fairly independent fashion from the party they represent,” which means actively seeking “a personal vote on the basis of a candidate-centred organization, a candidate-centred campaign agenda and candidate-centred means of campaigning” (p. 980).

Selection and election

The interplay between candidates’ selection methods and electoral systems is highly significant. There are many aspects of an electoral system that can influence the selection of candidates. For example, it has been argued that countries with a small district magnitude are associated with more inclusive and decentralized selection processes

while countries with a larger district magnitude tend to adopt more exclusive and centralized selection procedures. Using a classification of the electoral formulae instead of district magnitudes, Shomer (2014) finds that parties in open-list proportional systems, alternative vote, and single transferable vote, use more inclusive and decentralized selection processes compared to parties in closed-list proportional systems, while parties in plurality systems and in mixed-member systems do not systematically differ in their selection processes from those under closed-list proportional systems, where more exclusive and centralized selection procedures are employed.

Political science has also established some basic tenets on the relative importance of candidates' role and campaign style under various selection schemes and electoral systems. The interaction between selection methods and electoral systems has several consequences for campaign style. It is generally acknowledged that voters' influence on nomination, plurality systems, and preferential voting increases the value of personal traits and the level of individualized campaigning, while a party-centered campaign style is more common in systems where the party controls the nomination and in proportional systems without preferences. According to Karlsen and Narud (2013), besides the general distinction between party-centered and candidate-centered campaigns, even when the party nominates candidate selection the electoral system adopted can make a difference. In a plurality system with party nomination, the campaign will be party-centered with a candidate focus, while in proportional systems when the party nominates and there is no preference voting, the campaign will be fully party-centered. On the contrary, when the party nominates but voters can express one or more preferences, campaign style will be party-centered but with elements of individual focus.

The relative importance of personal voting in securing a politician's career has some important consequences on the functioning of Easton's political system. Candidates who believe themselves to be responsible for their own electoral fate and who are able to secure their reelection are less dependent on the success of their executives and less controlled by their party leaders. Thus they are less likely to accept government practices and institutions which deny them the means to exercise individual influence than are candidates whose fate lies in the hands of the national party or in its leadership. Obviously, this will have an impact also on legislative behavior (personalized representatives are less disciplined and more difficult to control) and on the relationship between the legislative and the executive (limited party loyalty and scarce party cohesion make the role of government even more difficult). By and large, in parliamentary systems, where the executive depends on parliamentary confidence, party cohesion is more important, and personal reputation thereby less important, than in presidential systems, where the origin and survival of the executive are independent from parliament and where, above all in the United States, the President and all Congressmen are in charge of their political communication strategy and practices.

SEE ALSO: Image, Political; Leadership, Political; Mass Communication; Political Communication; Propaganda

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Further reading

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