

Finding the One: Ease of Candidate Choices in High Information Open-List PR Systems

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Vote choice in an open-list proportional representation (OLPR) electoral system can be considered a complex process. In systems where votes are cast for individual candidates the choice is complicated by the large number of candidates, the two layers of competition involving both individual candidates and parties, and the amount of information required to make an informed choice. Hence, voters are expected to apply strategies to narrow down the pool of candidates from which the actual choice is made, that is, to create a delimited consideration set using cognitive heuristics. The types of strategies that facilitate voters' candidate choice are studied. More specifically, the voters' perceptions of the ease with which they choose their candidate and how this is related to three decision-making patterns are studied: the party-centric, in which the voter looks for party-related and ideological cues; the socio-normative, in which the voter considers their social in-group; and the candidate-related, in which the voter puts emphasis on specific features of the candidates, such as political experience, age and gender. Our study is situated in the Finnish OLPR system, characterized by many candidates, intense intra-party competition and mandatory preferential voting. Using data from the 2019 Finnish National Election Study and ordinal probit selection models, the mechanisms that facilitate the ease of candidate choice are outlined. Our findings suggest that voters feeling close to a political party and knowing the candidate personally or through friends or family perceive their candidate choice as easier.

Introduction

Vote choices can often be perceived as demanding by voters, especially in information-intensive environments. Hence, voters tend to search for accessible cues to ease their party and candidate choices. The self-perceived ease of reaching a choice has, however, received scarce scholarly attention, especially when it comes to candidate (and not only party) choices. In this

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study, we aim to address this gap in the existing literature by analysing voters' perceptions of how difficult or easy they find their candidate choice, and how these perceptions are related to factors that we derive from theories on the role of cues and heuristics in citizens' political choices. More specifically, we are interested in the extent to which voters find the choice of candidate easy when resorting to three different decision-making patterns: party-centric voting, socio-normatively motivated voting or voting motivated by candidate-specific evaluations.

An informed decision in an electoral system with multimember districts where voters are required to cast a preference vote for a single candidate out of a large pool of competitors poses a significant challenge to voters. It involves comparing information about multiple candidates, a process which is much more demanding than casting a vote for a party list (Marsh 1985; André et al. 2012). While there is a relatively extensive literature on factors that influence voters' choice of a candidate in such contexts (see, e.g., Chen et al. 2012; Campbell & Cowley 2014; Berggren et al. 2017; Arnesen et al. 2019; Pedersen et al. 2019), little is known about the cognitive effort that voters themselves ascribe to this task. It is important, however, to investigate the effort and perceived ease in order to understand how different candidate and party attributes can assist voters when forming their vote choice.

This article aims to answer the question: *Are information cues related to party-centrism, social norms or candidate characteristics associated with the self-perceived ease of candidate choice in Finland?* This research aim can be motivated by at least two central reasons. First, it is important to know more about the ease of candidate choice as it may be related to both to the general level of turnout and the differences in turnout between various groups of voters. This is because the more difficult it is to choose a candidate, the more citizens may be dissuaded from turning out which, in turn, leads to heightened inequalities in turnout. As Gallego (2015) shows in her study, this problem is particularly pertinent in Finland with its demanding electoral system. Although turnout as such is not the topic of this study, looking into the vote choice mechanisms, and especially the ease attributed to these choices, contribute to a better understanding of issues linked to encouraging and increasing voting participation. Second, a vast majority of research concerning decision-making heuristics in voting decisions have been conducted in electoral context which are, from the voters' point of view, less complex than the Finnish system. Due to their proportional representation multiparty electoral systems, the Nordic countries can be considered to provide a context where vote choices are perceived as complex. But even in the Nordic context, Finland stands out, as it has a candidate-centred electoral system, in which one candidate has to be chosen from among hundreds of contenders. Hence, our results add to the general knowledge of voters' decision-making heuristics in different electoral contexts.

The Finnish electoral system of open-list proportional representation (OLPR), with large multimember districts and mandatory preferential voting, can be characterized as a very complex and information-intensive setting and, hence, challenging for voters to navigate. In addition to being exposed to a multitude of parties, voters are confronted with a large number of candidates from which they need to choose one (von Schoultz 2018). The data used in the empirical analysis are taken from the 2019 Finnish National Election Study (FNES), a post-parliamentary election survey with a rich variety of questions related to candidate choice.

In general, our empirical results are rather encouraging. Regardless of the electoral complexity, for most Finnish voters, the task of finding their own candidate is easy, at least according to their own perceptions. In addition, we find that in all identified decision-making patterns – the party-centric, socio-normative and candidate-related – there are factors which correlate with the ease voters ascribe to the voting decision. Our results show that those who feel close to a party, know the candidate personally or through a friend or family member, as well as those who appreciate the previous political experience of the candidate find the candidate choice perceivably easier. This seems to indicate that social connections are important for the perceived ease of vote choices in information-intensive election systems, such as the Finnish OLPR system. The importance of feeling close to a party, as well as the previous political experience of the candidate indicate that voters create certain consideration sets from which the candidate choice is made. More generally, this points to a tendency of looking for easily accessible information from trusted sources in complex decision-making processes.

Voting Strategies in Information-Rich Settings

Research on candidate choice and the heuristics applied by voters when deciding which candidate to vote for is a relatively advanced and growing field of research. It has demonstrated that voters are influenced by a variety of aspects related to the specific candidate, such as their social characteristics (Campbell & Cowley 2014; Pedersen et al. 2019), personalities (Klein & Rosar 2005; Chen et al. 2012), looks (Berggren et al. 2017) and policy positions (Arnesen et al. 2019). According to our knowledge, however, there are few – if any – empirical explorations of the extent to which voters perceive the choice of candidate as easy and the factors that might explain the variation in such perceptions.

The aim of this study is to examine how the perceived ease of candidate choices relates to the information voters apply in their decision-making processes. As information acquisition can be difficult to assess, we concentrate on the cognitive heuristics individuals apply to reach their candidate choice. Cognitive heuristics, as outlined by Lau and Redlawsk (2001)

– party affiliation, ideology, endorsements, viability through polls and candidate appearance – have been widely recognized as important information shortcuts and choice determinants, especially in complex and information-intensive electoral settings (Coleman 1988; Feld & Grofman 1991; Ambady & Rosenthal 1992; Canache et al. 1994; Cox & Katz 1996; Quinn et al. 1999; Lachat 2008; Benjamin & Shapiro 2009; Jessee 2010; Joesten & Stone 2014). According to rational behaviour theory, voters see the act of voting as a means to increase their own benefit by selecting a representative in government while being fully informed about all the choices available to them (Downs 1957). However, in reality, voters have incomplete information and often refer to more relatable cues such as party ideology, as well as easily accessible cues through social interactions and media (Downs 1957). Moreover, decision-making processes are characterized by information acquisition stages, which ease voters' decision-making process through decreasing uncertainty. Acquiring information can, however, be costly and voters need to adjust their losses against the gains from voting, and thus not always vote purely 'rationally' (White 1969). Due to these considerations, it has been established that without other incentives, such as social pressure, the complexity of voting might deter people from turning out to vote (Harbaugh 1996; DellaVigna et al. 2016). Hence, it has been noted that although voting purely rationally might not be possible for all voters – especially in information-intensive settings – the vote can be cast in ways resembling full information through the use of cognitive heuristics (Lupia 1994; Popkin 1995).

Furthermore, cognitive heuristics are connected to consideration sets – a personalized list of types of candidates that seem viable for the voter (Wilson 2008; Eliasz & Spiegler 2011; Oscarsson & Rosema 2019). Information and consideration sets have often been linked, as low-cost information can induce consideration sets (Wilson 2008). Consideration sets represent a cognitive way of sorting an overwhelming amount of information into smaller sets, constructed on base of personal and even subconscious criteria. This is similar to what Lau and Redlawsk (2006) describe as editing or pruning, that is, a process in which voters limit the scope of their search by restricting attention to a specific group of candidates or candidates with a specific trait. The use of heuristics and consideration sets happens simultaneously and when needed (Oscarsson & Rosema 2019). This is the reason why it is best to consider decisions in terms of patterns, affected by the cognitive workings in information accumulation, processing and option consideration, rather than as a stage-by-stage process. Both the use of cognitive heuristics and the construction of consideration sets imply that there is a certain hierarchy in the voter's perception of relative attributes to look for in viable candidates. This means that the voter would rarely acquire information on all candidates, but rather, concentrate on individuals corresponding to relevant attribute

groups, such as being of certain gender, representing a certain party or being perceived as trustworthy. Most of the previous literature on consideration sets has concentrated on party choices. However, we see that the choice set mechanisms are even more relevant in the case of candidate choices.

Decision-Making Patterns

In our study, we look specifically into three established decision-making patterns that voters can apply (see, e.g., Lau & Redlawsk 2006): party-centric motivated voting, socio-normatively motivated voting or voting motivated by candidate-specific evaluations. In the party-centred decision-making pattern, we are specifically interested in the role that party attachment plays in narrowing down the choice set of voters (to representatives of the certain party), which is assumed to make the choice of candidate easier for voters. Party affiliation is one of the most recognized information heuristics used by all voters, regardless of political sophistication (Downs 1957; Brown 1970; Jessee 2010; Joesten & Stone 2014). Stronger identification with a party has been associated with faster information retrieval and the creation of reference groups (Jacoby 1988). It is through these effects that the voters with stronger party identification would be assumed to take into consideration the members of the party they feel close to and not look for information on other parties' members. Moreover, party considerations have especially proven to be of essence when forming candidate choices in the Finnish case (Coffé & von Schoultz 2021).

In the socio-normative decision-making pattern, we study how the social environment is connected to political opinions and the familiarity to the candidate through social interactions. Some of the most easily accessible pieces of political information come from social networks like friends and family, and research has demonstrated that voters are influenced by the messages they receive from their social contexts (Beck et al. 2002; Christensen et al. 2021). Furthermore, with familiarity come behavioural expectations and norms, which can manifest as social pressure and impact the vote choice (Coleman 1988; Harbaugh 1996; Ajzen 2006).

In the candidate-specific decision-making pattern, we look into the importance of candidate characteristics that can provide voters with a more limited choice set, such as candidate's political experience, age and gender. Overall, research states that specific candidate characteristics, such as incumbency, looks or locality, matter largely for candidate selection even if they are unrelated to the candidate as a political figure (Banducci et al. 2008; Benjamin & Shapiro 2009; Lawson et al. 2010; Berggren et al. 2017). There is also an extensive literature on descriptive representation that suggests that voters use candidate traits such as gender as a cue to the substantive political views of candidates (Phillips 1995; Mansbridge 2009); this can

have an effect on the candidate choice of voters (Banducci & Karp 2000; Holli & Wass 2010) or on the preference of the most personally relevant (or utility-maximizing) candidate (Sanbonmatsu 2002).

All of the three decision-making patterns outlined above are expected to be associated with the perceived ease with which voters choose their candidate, by assisting them in creating a consideration set of candidates from which the actual vote choice is eventually made. Party belonging driven voters are expected to mainly consider candidates from one or a few parties as viable and hence not to include candidates running for other parties. We further expect that socio-normative cues help the voters to identify which candidates are perceived as viable representatives for the in-group with which they identify. Lastly, we expect voters who are candidate-centred to create a consideration set of potential candidates with the desirable trait, for example, female candidates, candidates of a certain age or candidates with previous experience in politics.

While there is not much research on the ease that voters ascribe to the choice of candidate, a relatable literature to our study can be found in PR systems with party lists where it is possible for voters to combine the party vote with an expressed preference for a specific candidate (or several candidates). In these flexible-list systems, researchers have often been concerned with the intuitive question of which type of voters choose to cast a preference vote (or several preference votes when applicable) compared to those who do not. While the subjective experience of ease or difficulty that voters attach to the choice of candidate (when forced to do so) is a different question, we might expect that similar mechanisms to some extent apply. Voters who are not likely to use the opportunity to cast a preferential vote in a context where this is a voluntary activity are probably more likely to be the ones experiencing the choice of candidate as demanding. This related line of research indicates that preference voting is systematically related to political interest, where voters with higher interest are more likely to cast a preference vote (van Holsteyn & Andeweg 2010; André et al. 2012; Bengtsson et al. 2014; Thijssen et al. 2018). Some studies also indicate that casting a preferential vote is more generally connected to the level of political sophistication, finding a positive relationship between political knowledge, internal political efficacy and education (van Holsteyn & Andeweg 2010; Bengtsson et al. 2014). Political sophistication has also been largely discussed in relation to information seeking in vote choice formation (Brown 1970). It has been recognized that more politically knowledgeable individuals find it easier to search for and interpret information cues (Lau & Redlawsk 2001; Ryan 2011). Although knowledge and sophistication are not the main focus of our study, we acknowledge this line of research by controls in our empirical explorations.

Study Context

Our study is situated in the Finnish OLPR system, which is characterized by a high degree of inter- as well as intra-party competition. Finnish elections, as elections in most Western European countries, are fought between parties. Voters, however, are not able to vote for a party list. Candidates are presented to voters on party lists, but votes are cast for individual candidates by writing the number allocated to that candidate on the ballot paper. These preference votes are then pooled at the party level in order to determine the number of seats each party wins and the seats are filled according to the number of preference votes the candidates nominated by that party have received. The combination of mandatory preference voting and open lists makes it impossible for parties to guarantee the election to parliament of any individual candidate and incentivizes candidates to run personal campaigns (Carey & Shugart 1995). These candidate campaigns complement the national party-centred campaigns and are run at the district level (of which there are 13). Most parties present their list of nominated candidates in alphabetical order, leaving voters without cues as to which candidates the party internally considers to be the most viable (von Schoultz 2018).¹

From the perspective of voters, this means that during the election campaign they are exposed to a variety of information about parties and candidates, which can be challenging to interpret. In order to cast a vote, voters need to choose one candidate out of many, and an ideologically oriented voter would need to keep track of which party the individual candidates are running for. In the district of Uusimaa, there were 492 candidates in the 2019 election (Statistics Finland), from which voters were required to single out one for whom to cast their vote. The extensive number of candidates and the individualized style of campaigning, in combination with the national party-centred campaigns, implies that voters are easily overloaded with information to process, while receiving little guidance or shortcuts from parties as central actors. The system can accordingly be characterized as rich in politically relevant information and as complex for voters to navigate.

Research Design

Data

The empirical analyses are carried out using the FNES from 2019, a post-election study carried out after the parliamentary elections on 14 April 2019. The FNES is a national representative cross-sectional survey based on quota sampling performed in two stages, involving face-to-face interviews with a total of 1,598 respondents and a self-administered questionnaire

filled in by 753 respondents.² Data are weighted to match the sample with the population regarding mother tongue, age, gender and electoral district distributions, and the actual vote share of parties in the elections. The dependent variable – the perceived ease of choosing the candidate to vote for – was featured in the face-to-face interviews. However, because of missing data in some of the variables, the actual number of observations in our analyses is 1,277.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the perceived ease of candidate choice, which is operationalized by the following item: ‘How easy or difficult was it for you to find a suitable candidate?’ This is an ordinal variable with four response categories ranging from very difficult (0) to very easy (3). The respondents who did not vote were not asked the ease of candidate choice question.

It is important to note that subjective evaluations of personal behaviour, such as our dependent variable, should be interpreted with caution. Previous research has demonstrated that these types of answers may be subject to rationalization, meaning that voters may report reasons that sound rational and systematic and fail to mention considerations based on emotions (Rahn et al. 1994). It is hence possible that a subjective evaluation of the ease by which the voter identified a suitable candidate provides an overly positive view compared to the actual decision-making process. Some scholars have, however, suggested that an introspective approach provides valuable information regarding citizens’ behaviour (Kelley 1983; Blais et al. 1998). We support this view but emphasize that our dependent variable should be interpreted cautiously. Experiences regarding the grade of ease are likely to be highly individual and may hence vary from one voter to another. The main interest of this study is therefore not on the level of experienced easiness as such, but on how this expressed experience varies according to the decision-making patterns voters apply.

Independent Variables

To grasp the three different decision-making patterns related to party-centric, candidate-related and socio-normative factors, we use eight different indicators. For *party-centric*, we expect that voters use party related cues in their decision-making to make the candidate choice easier. Hence, our variables aim at grasping the extent to which voters narrow down their vote choice to candidates representing specific parties, or if they are open to voting for candidates from across the political landscape. We apply two different indicators: one measuring the strength of party identification and one comparing the relative value respondents attach to parties and candidates respectively when making their choice. The strength of party identification

is measured by gauging the extent to which voters feel close to a specific party (2), somewhat close (1) or not close (0). The second indicator is binary and measures the relative value voters attach to the party (1) versus the candidate (0) when making their vote choice. The actual wording of the question is: 'For your voting choice, which was ultimately the more important, the party or the candidate?'

For the cues related to the *socio-normative* decision-making pattern, we apply three different indicators. The first is a binary variable indicating whether voters knew the candidate they voted for personally or through a friend or a member of their family (1), or not (0). This was measured as a separate question, asking the respondents how they knew the candidate they voted for. The selected response categories refer to knowing the candidate in a personal manner.³ The second and third variables are based on the voters' evaluation of the importance of family members and friends voting for the same candidate. Both variables are scaled from not at all influential (0) to decisive for the choice (3).

The third and last decision-making pattern is *candidate-related*. These characteristics help voters to narrow down the potential candidates to a smaller consideration set, making the choice easier. Here we apply three different indicators, exploring the subjective evaluations related to descriptive representation, namely the extent to which the gender, age and political experience of the candidate was important for voters when deciding which candidate to vote for. The perceived influence of the candidate's gender, age and experience are presented through a scale of not at all influential (0) to a decisive choice factor (3).

It should be noted that we are unable to determine the causal relationship between the dependent and our independent variables for several reasons. Our variables are all based on self-evaluations and asked in the same cross-sectional survey. We are, hence, for example, unable to fully rule out the possibility that voters who found it easy to identify a suitable candidate used this as a cue to infer that he or she identifies strongly with the party that candidate represents. We do, however, find this unlikely. The fact that the question used as a dependent variable in our study was not asked in close proximity to any of the questions used to tap our independent variables, further strengthens this belief. Furthermore, since our data come from a post-election survey, it is possible that voters engage in rationalizing behaviour and find their vote choice easier than it actually was. On a more general level, the kind of research design and data we use does not allow us to make causal inferences as we cannot fulfil all the conditions needed to identify such relationships.

Control Variables

Our control variables include sociodemographic factors that are well known to influence political behaviour, such as age (continuous), gender (dummy) and education (two dummy variables indicating respondents who have secondary and tertiary education levels). Moreover, we control for political interest (measured on a four-point scale), political knowledge (an additive index based on five questions of factual knowledge) and frequency of political discussions (a five-point scale), since we expect these to correlate with several of our central variables. However, as political sophistication is not of interest and does not seem to be related significantly to the cues in the three decision-making patterns, this aspect remains out of the scope of this study. We also control for the possibility that the vote choice is perceived as more difficult with a large number of candidates, since this potentially increases the amount of information the voter has to process. Hence, we added the number of candidates per seat per district⁴ as a control variable. For more information regarding the variables included in the analyses, see Table A1 in the Appendix.

Analytical Strategy

The fact that our dependent variable, the perceived ease of candidate choice, is only asked of respondents who voted, presents a problem for the empirical analysis. In our dataset of 1,277 observations, 1,049 respondents indicated of having voted while 179 were non-voters. As we can assume that the experienced ease of selecting candidates is also related with the likelihood of voting – as those having difficulties in choosing a candidate may be less likely to vote – the sample of only those who voted is no longer representative of the whole population, which may bias results in standard regression analysis. We alleviate this problem by using a sample selection model which estimates two equations simultaneously. One equation is used to predict which of the respondents voted or not (selection equation) and the other to predict how they perceived the ease of candidate choice, if they voted (outcome equation). These two equations are linked through their correlated error terms. The size of the correlation between these error terms is an indicator of the strength of the selection process and the extent to which the results would have been biased if the selection effects had not been controlled for. However, the direction of the bias, that is, if controlling for the selection process decreases or increases the coefficient sizes, is not a priori self-evident and depends on the data and the model (Certo et al. 2016). In our case, the selection model typically decreased the coefficient sizes when compared to a standard ordinal probit model.

As the main outcome variable in our analysis is ordinal, we use an ordered probit model with sample selection in our empirical analysis (De Luca &

Perotti 2011). We run four regression models; the first three introduce the indicators for each decision-making pattern separately (with controls) and the fourth features all variables simultaneously. We present the results of our analyses visually with coefficient plots and display the strength of the relationships with probability plots. We present only the results from the outcome equations in the main text, as only they are relevant for our substantial research problem. The full result tables with the selection equation included are available in the Appendix.

Empirical Results

Overall, most of the respondents who voted (73 percent) reported that their candidate choice was rather easy, with 40 percent reporting the choice as fairly easy and 33 percent as very easy, whereas 22 percent found the candidate choice fairly difficult and 6 percent very difficult. Thus, in general, the large number of candidates in the Finnish elections does not seem to make the choice for voters very difficult according to their own assessment. It hence appears as if many voters efficiently apply shortcuts that assist them in their candidate choice.

We present the results of the ordinal probit selection models as coefficient plots (Figure 1, full results are displayed in Appendix). The correlation coefficients between errors in the selection and outcome equations are quite strong in all four models (ranging from 0.61 to 0.72). This suggests that the choice of whether to vote at all is related to the perceived ease of candidate selection. The types of people who are more likely to vote are similar to those who find the candidate selection easier. This implies that people who find candidate selection difficult are more inclined to abstain from voting.

The first plot in Figure 1 shows the results from the party-centric model. It includes two factors of substantive interest: the level of party identification and whether the respondent thinks that the choice of a party is more important to them than the choice of a candidate. The results show that the respondents who have a strong or a somewhat strong connection to a party report that it is significantly easier to identify the candidate to vote for. This suggests that by feeling close to a political party, the voter creates a narrower consideration set of candidates from within that party, thus making the actual candidate choice easier.

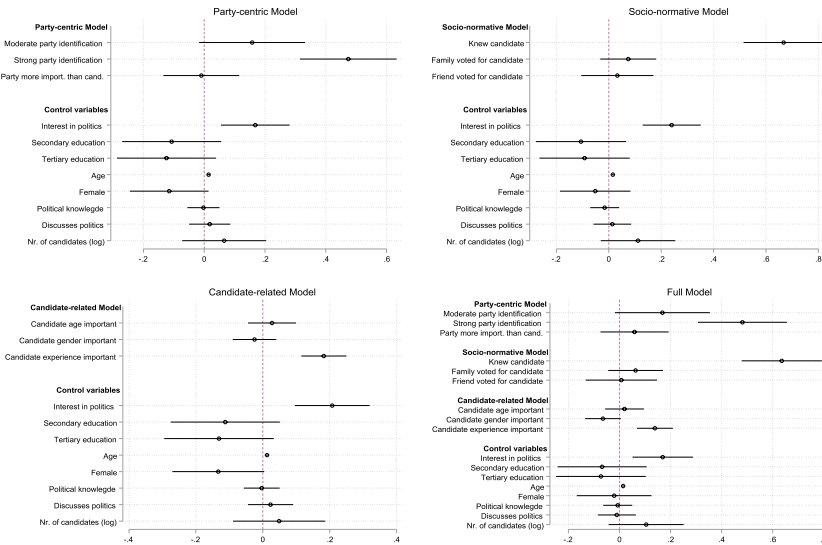
The second model includes the socio-normative factors and shows the positive relationship between ease of choice and the variable measuring whether the respondent knew the candidate personally or she/he was known by a family member or friend is very substantial. This is not surprising, given that Lau and Redlawsk (2006) stated that referring to someone known strongly restricts the evaluation of candidates, narrowing the

candidates considered to include only those falling in this category. Thus, the choice would also become increasingly easier.

The third model is the candidate-related model. Here, the results show that the ease of candidate choice is not related to the weight that the voter puts on the candidate's gender or age. This is somewhat surprising, as there seems to be literature suggesting age and gender are common heuristics (Phillips 1995; Mansbridge 2009) and would thus indicate an easier candidate choice. However, candidates' experience in politics matters. When voters put emphasis on political experience, they report that finding a candidate becomes easier. This finding is probably related to the incumbency effect (Cox & Katz 1996; Lawson et al. 2010; Dahlgaard 2016) leading voters to support a candidate with a proven track record, most likely already familiar to them.

The final plot in Figure 1 shows that the results do not change much when all variables from the three models are included in the analysis simultaneously. The control variables indicate that candidate selection becomes easier as voters get older, but gender is not associated with the perceived ease. While education is strongly correlated with people's decisions on whether to vote at all, it is not related to the ease of candidate choice. This is not the case for interest in politics, which is positively related to easier candidate choice.

Figure 1. Four Models on Ease of Vote Choices – Ideological, Socio-Normative, Candidate-Related and a Full Model Displaying Variable Coefficients with Confidence Intervals. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



As the strengths of the relationships are very difficult to directly interpret from the coefficients in non-linear models, we present the magnitudes of the relationships of the substantially most important statistically significant variables as a probability plot in Figure 2. As there are four categories in our dependent variable, we show how the distribution of respondents in these categories changes given the value of the independent variables. In this plot, we assume that all the other variables take on their mean values.

The top left panel in Figure 2 shows the relationship between party identification and the ease of candidate choice. Feeling close to a party particularly increases the share of those who find candidate choice very easy. Their share grows from 20 percent (not close to party) to 34 percent (very close). Similarly, the share of respondents who perceive the choice to be very difficult drops from 14 percent to 7 percent. This highlights the importance of party evaluations even in a candidate-centred electoral system such as Finland.

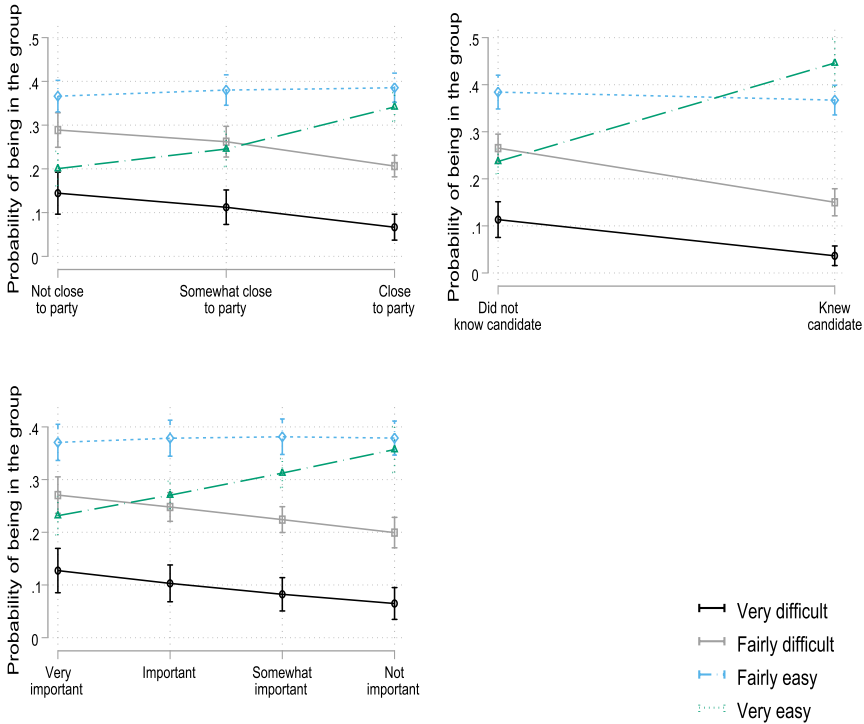
The top right panel in Figure 2 shows the relationship between personally knowing the candidate and the ease of candidate choice. The share of respondents reporting candidate choice to be very difficult is about 11 percent when they do not know the candidate, which gets noticeably smaller if they do (4 percent). However, changes in other categories are more noticeable. Among those who do not personally know their chosen candidate about 62 percent report that the choice was easy or very easy, compared with 82 percent of those who know the candidate. Thus, knowing the candidates personally makes a relatively large difference. The large number of candidates in Finnish elections may actually make the choice easier for some voters, as the likelihood of personally (or vicariously through family or friends) knowing some of the candidates grows when the number of candidates increases. Quite a large share of respondents in our sample, about 23 percent, report knowing their chosen candidate personally or through friends or family.

Finally, the relationship between emphasizing political experience and ease of selecting a candidate is presented in bottom left panel. Again, it is clear that those respondents who indicated that they value political experience in their choice of candidate were more likely to find the actual candidate choice easier. The share of those reporting that finding a candidate was very easy is 23 percent among those who do not consider experience as an important criterion while the same share among those who do is 36 percent.

Concluding Discussion

In this study, we set out to investigate the perceived ease of choosing the candidate to vote for by looking into the decision-making processes voters apply. We situate our study in the Finnish OLPR, which is a highly complex

Figure 2. The Ease of Candidate Choice by Personally Knowing the Candidate, by Feeling Close to a Political Party and by Emphasizing Political Experience (95% Confidence Intervals). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



and information-intensive environment in which the voter has to select one candidate from a multitude of party lists, in multimember districts. This electoral environment induces the voter to apply cognitive heuristics to create consideration sets of candidates. We study three decision-making patterns – party-centric, socio-normative and candidate-related – with the expectation that these would have different implications for the perceived ease of candidate choices. Our analyses, based on the 2019 FNES, demonstrate that the three decision-making patterns contribute to making the choice of candidate perceived as easier for voters.

Our empirical results show that those who vote in elections, contrary to our expectations, perceive the candidate choice as fairly easy. These figures should however be interpreted with caution, since they are based on voters’ self-evaluations, and since it only includes those voters actually turned out to vote. To further complicate matters, we lack previous studies on the topic to compare with. Overall, our findings are encouraging for proponents of PR systems with preferential voting, as the highly perceived ease of the

candidate choice could be linked to Finland's relatively high voter turnout (72.1 percent⁵), as well as higher trust in the parliament (60 percent⁶). It could be thus speculated that the complex electoral system does not deter voters from turning up or trusting the parliament, and their representation. Furthermore, at least for those who end turning up, the choice seems to be perceived as easy regardless of the multitude of candidates and abundance of information.

Party affiliation and ideological cues are widely established heuristics in politics. In line with expectations, we found that when a voter feels close to a party, they report their choice being fairly or very easy, with over 77 percent probability. In contrast, the probability of reporting a fairly or very easy choice with respondents who do not feel close to a party is around 65 percent. Although these findings are not surprising, they clearly indicate that voters experience that their choice is made easier by being able to look for a candidate from a specific party they feel close to. Although Finland has a candidate-centred electoral system, parties play a major role in structuring political decision-making and the political choices voters make. We find that party identification facilitates the decision-making process of voters. In particular, established parties have a reputation of government and legislature, which can signal certain expectations to voters and thus induce them to consider only the candidates of that given party.

To our knowledge, socio-normative decision-making patterns have not previously been studied in the context of information-rich electoral systems or with regard to the perceived ease of candidate choices. However, the literature seems to agree that social interactions influence vote choices, either through in-group identification or through information source credibility. Our analysis shows that knowing the candidate, either personally or through friends and family, is the most influential heuristic for perceiving the candidate choice as easy. From the respondents who knew their candidate (23 percent), a clear majority (87 percent) found the choice of a candidate very easy. This shows that voters see familiarity as an easily attributable heuristic, even in the full choice model where other patterns are considered. Overall, socio-normative information cues are regarded as easily accessible and low cost because they do not require strenuous cognitive effort.

Candidate-related decision-making patterns have been largely discussed in the literature. In the descriptive representation literature, gender and age have received the most attention, as these are easily deducible information cues. Thus, we used them in our model of candidate-related decision-making patterns. Surprisingly, these two characteristics do not seem to be related to voters' perceived ease of candidate choice. This finding might speak to the Finnish voter relying more on substantive than descriptive representation. On the other hand, it may be related to the fact that relying on characteristics like gender or age on their own may not restrict the pool of potential

candidates far enough, as the Finnish districts are so large that there are still quite a few, for example, female candidates to choose from.

In conclusion, our study on the perceived ease of candidate choices in a highly complex and information-intensive electoral context seems to concur with previous literature, as it identifies that personal knowledge of the candidate, stronger party ties and the previous political experience of the candidate are the most notable factors that influence ease of choice. The higher age of the voter and interest in politics also contribute to ease of choice. A more in-depth investigation into vote choice mechanisms is needed to establish what makes candidate choices seem easy to voters in a complex and information-intensive electoral system.

Throughout the party and candidate choice literature, it has been highlighted that voters search for information shortcuts – especially easily accessible cues – and create consideration sets based on some relevant characteristics, in order not to overload themselves with information and still be able to make a sensible choice. It is particularly interesting to look into the perceived ease of vote choices in a complex candidate-centred system, as this gives indication of which paths and heuristics are of most importance to voters. The Finnish OLPR system might not be the most complex electoral system applied in democratic elections, but due to the hundreds of candidates running, it constitutes a case in which it is to be expected that voters will be looking for strategies to facilitate their candidate choice.

As the study is based on cross-sectional survey data and deals with voters' self-perceptions, we acknowledge that we cannot draw causal links between the information cues and the perceived ease of candidate choice. However, we identify that there is a significant correlation between stated usage of certain information cues and the perceived ease of candidate vote choice, which means that these are connected to each other. Further investigation into the exact mechanisms and their links to the perceptions of candidate choices are needed in order to causally determine the specific effect different information cues have on candidate choices.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used for the purposes of this study have not yet been given wider access. It can be received upon request from the Finnish Election Study Consortium and will be made publicly available via the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (<https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/>) in 2021.

NOTES

1. Rank-ordered lists can be perceived as less challenging for voters, since parties tend to place prominent, experienced and publicly known candidates at the top of the list and hence provide voters with a strong cue. The decision of how to present candidates is made at the district level, which means that the type of list applied can vary within the same party. Rank-ordered lists have dropped significantly over the last 20 years. In the 2019 parliamentary election, only on four out of 77 districts level list representing the eight main parties were rank-ordered (Söderlund et al. 2021).
2. The quotas were based on age, gender and province of residence of the respondents.
3. The response categories were: 'I knew the candidate personally' and 'My friend, acquaintance or family member knew the candidate personally'. The three other categories referred to knowing the candidate through the media or their campaign, or not knowing the candidate they voted for.
4. The number of candidates per seat per district was coded by matching the district numbers from FNES with the numbers of candidates on ballot lists per corresponding districts from Statistics Finland (Eduskuntavaalit 2019, ehdokasasettelu, Tilastokeskus). These numbers of candidates per district were then divided by the available number of seats in that district.
5. *Source:* Statistics Finland (2019).
6. *Source:* Isotalo et al. (2019).

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics

	Range	Mean	St. dev.	Total n
How easy or difficult was it for you to find a suitable candidate? (3 = very easy)	0–3	2.00	0.88	1,285
Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party? (2 = feel close to a party, 1 = feel a little closer to one party than the others, 0 = no)	0–2	1.34	0.81	1,285
For your voting choice, which was ultimately the more important, the party or the candidate? (1 = party)	0–1	0.56	0.50	1,285
In what way was the candidate you voted for known to you? – personally or through a friend/family member (1 = yes)	0–1	0.24	0.42	1,285
To what extent did the following influence your choice of candidate? Family member(s) voted for the candidate (3 = decisive factor in my choice)	0–3	0.23	0.64	1,285
To what extent did the following influence your choice of candidate? Friend(s) voted for the candidate (3 = decisive factor in my choice)	0–3	0.18	0.50	1,285
To what extent did the following influence your choice of candidate? The candidate's gender (3 = decisive factor in my choice)	0–3	0.73	1.02	1,285
To what extent did the following influence your choice of candidate? The candidate's age (3 = decisive factor in my choice)	0–3	0.87	0.89	1,285
To what extent did the following influence your choice of candidate? The candidate's previous experience in politics (3 = decisive factor in my choice)	0–3	1.48	0.95	1,285
Gender (1 = female)	0–1	0.51	0.50	1,283
Age	18–93	52.06	18.53	1,275
Secondary education (1 = yes)	0–1	0.53	0.50	1,285
Tertiary education (1 = yes)	0–1	0.35	0.48	1,285
How interested are you in politics? (3 = very interested)	0–3	2.06	0.76	1,285
Generally, that is, not only during elections, how often do you discuss political and social issues with people? (4 = daily or almost daily)	0–4	2.41	1.07	1,285
Political knowledge (5 = correct answer in all 5 questions)	0–5	3.11	1.41	1,285
The number of candidates running per district	122–492	249.39	123.70	1,285

Note: All results are for weighted data.

Source: 2019 Finnish National Election Survey and Statistics Finland (for the last variable).

Table A2. Ordered Probit Regression Results (Probit Coefficients and Standard Errors in Parentheses)

	Dependent variable			
	Perceived ease of candidate choice			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Party identification (strong)	0.474*** (0.081)			0.482*** (0.089)
Party identification (some)	0.158* (0.089)			0.168 (0.095)
Party more important	-0.009 (0.064)			0.059 (0.068)
Candidate known		0.668*** (0.078)		0.636*** (0.080)
Family voted		0.074 (0.054)		0.063 (0.055)
Friends voted		0.033 (0.070)		0.007 (0.071)
Candidate age			0.028 (0.037)	0.020 (0.039)
Candidate gender			-0.025 (0.033)	-0.065 (0.036)
Candidate experience			0.183*** (0.034)	0.139*** (0.036)
Age	0.014*** (0.002)	0.015*** (0.002)	0.013*** (0.002)	0.014*** (0.002)
Female	-0.115* (0.066)	-0.052 (0.069)	-0.133 (0.0700)	-0.021 (0.075)
Secondary education	-0.107 (0.083)	-0.106 (0.088)	-0.112 (0.083)	-0.068 (0.089)
Tertiary education	-0.124 (0.083)	-0.092 (0.089)	-0.131 (0.083)	-0.073 (0.090)
Knowledge of politics	-0.003 (0.027)	-0.016 (0.0281)	-0.003 (0.027)	-0.007 (0.029)
Interest in politics	0.168*** (0.058)	0.240*** (0.056)	0.207*** (0.057)	0.170*** (0.060)
Discussing politics	0.018 (0.035)	0.013 (0.037)	0.023 (0.034)	-0.010 (0.038)
Candidate count (log)	0.066 (0.071)	0.111 (0.073)	0.049 (0.070)	0.106 (0.075)
<i>Selection model results</i>				
Constant	-1.962*** (0.351)	-2.113*** (0.352)	-2.087*** (0.357)	-2.137*** (0.353)
Age	0.035*** (0.014)	.0405*** (0.014)	0.038** (0.014)	0.040** (0.014)
Age ²	-0.0002 (0.0001)	-0.0003** (0.0001)	-0.0002 (0.0001)	-0.0003 (0.0001)
Female	0.143 (0.101)	0.143 (0.102)	0.159 (0.101)	0.165 (0.103)
Secondary education	0.408*** (0.122)	0.476*** (0.124)	0.428*** (0.123)	0.482*** (0.124)

Table A2. (Continued)

	Dependent variable			
	Perceived ease of candidate choice			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tertiary education	0.235* (0.126)	0.280** (0.128)	0.223 (0.128)	0.261* (0.129)
Knowledge of politics	0.059 (0.040)	0.062 (0.040)	0.075 (0.040)	0.073 (0.041)
Interest in politics	0.525*** (0.073)	0.524*** (0.073)	0.530*** (0.073)	0.513*** (0.073)
Discussing politics	0.0181 (0.035)	0.057 (0.055)	0.057 (0.054)	0.059 (0.055)
Correlation between errors	0.607*** (0.169)	0.670*** (0.146)	0.547** (0.184)	0.691*** (0.134)
Observations (N)	1,215	1,096	1,235	1,048
Log likelihood	-1,865.393	-1,694.640	-1,891.95	-1,603.75
Wald Chi ²	163.28	214.33	142.81	262.98

Note: The results from the outcome equation (dependent variable; ease of candidate choice) are on the top and from the selection model below (dependent variable); 0 (did not vote) 1 (voted).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.