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What Does It Take to Get Elected in a Post-Communist Democracy? Explaining the Success and Failure of Parliamentary Candidates in Estonia

Siim Trumm

Abstract:

The literature on post-communist democracies has traditionally suggested that organisational strength is considerably less important for electoral success than extensive media-based campaigns. Recent studies on party-level electoral dynamics, however, indicate that this might not be the case any longer. Building on these insights, this study goes beyond the party-level analyses of electoral success and failure by focusing on the electoral fortunes of individual candidates in a post-communist democracy. Using original data from the 2011 Estonian Candidate Survey, this paper looks at the comparative impact of candidates' campaign spending and the strength of their local party organisation, alongside other potentially relevant characteristics, on their likelihood of getting elected and vote share. The findings suggest that candidates' electoral performance in Estonia is still first and foremost shaped by their own campaign spending. In addition, I find evidence that candidates fare better if they have prior local-level and national-level political experience, conduct more personalised campaigns, and are positioned higher up on their party's district-level list.

Keywords: electoral performance, party organisation, campaign spending, post-communist politics

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Introduction

The role that money plays in politics has once again taken centre stage in public debates and become a major source of public disillusionment with politicians and politics more generally. One has to look no further than the expenses scandal in the UK or the Silvergate affair in Estonia to find recent high-profile cases in advanced Western democracies as well as post-communist democracies that problematise politicians' handling of money. This is only to add to the long-standing concerns about the lobbying power of political donations, and the increasingly frequent calls to tighten-up campaign finance regulations and limit how much candidates can spend on their electoral campaigns (e.g., Chari et al. 2007; Hasen 2012; Johnson 2009; Linde et al. 2007; Singer 2007; Smilov 2007). Consequently, it is important that we truly understand the complex role that money plays in contemporary politics, including its relevance in shaping electoral outcomes.

Whereas studies of electoral politics in advanced democracies have consistently shown that both campaign expenditure and party organisational strength are positively related to electoral performance (e.g., Carty and Eagles 1999; Coleman 1996; Jacobson 2006; Pattie and Johnston 2003), the conventional understanding of post-communist politics suggests that party organisation is substantially less important for electoral success than sophisticated and expensive media campaigns (e.g., Biezen 2003; Chan 2001; Kopecky 1995; Mair 1997). This discrepancy is, however, being challenged by an emerging body of party-level literature, indicating that organisational strength might have become as important for parties' electoral success as campaign spending in post-communist democracies (Ibenskas 2012; Tavits 2012, 2013). With the contemporary evidence on the relative role that money plays in post-communist democracies vis-à-vis party organisational factors still being sporadic, and deriving from party-level analyses, it is important to build upon the existing insights by shifting the debate towards the political actors whom voters ultimately cast their votes for; i.e., individual candidates.¹

This article studies the influence of candidates' individual-level *campaign spending* and their local party *organisational strength* on their electoral performance in the post-communist

¹ Almost all post-communist democracies use voting systems for parliamentary elections where voters, at least at some stage of the process, have an option to vote for a specific candidate. Serbia remains a rare exception to this as ballots are cast for electoral lists only and voters have no ability to indicate a preference for any particular candidate (Republic Electoral Commission 2015). The widespread use of personal votes in post-communist democracies emphasises the importance of shifting the debate on electoral success towards individual candidates.

Estonia.² It does so by linking these characteristics, alongside other factors that existing studies have shown to influence the success and failure of would-be MPs, with individual-level electoral results. I advance two core arguments. First, building on previous studies of electoral politics in advanced democracies (e.g., Benoit and Marsh 2010; Cox and Thies 2000; Forrest et al. 1999; Palda and Palda 1998), I expect campaign spending to be positively related to candidates' vote share and likelihood of getting elected. Second, utilising insights from the general organisational theory in sociology and economics (e.g., Pfeffer 1997; Scott 2004), I expect those candidates to fare better who belong to parties with stronger local organisations in the district that they stand for election in. These factors should influence candidates' electoral performance even when controlling for the impact of other potentially relevant characteristics.

I evaluate these arguments using an original 2011 Estonian Candidate Survey, and find that the success and failure of parliamentary candidates is still best explained by how much they spend on their own electoral campaigns. The strength of their local party organisation, however, does not produce a significant individual-level effect vis-à-vis candidates' vote share or their likelihood of getting elected. In addition, I find that incumbent and challenger spending have similar effects on candidates' electoral performance, while it is those politicians who are incumbents, have past local-level political experience, conduct more personalised electoral campaigns, and are higher up on their party's district-level list who win more votes and are more likely to get elected.

These findings are important for two reasons. First, I demonstrate that the patterns associated with campaigning and campaign effectiveness in post-communist democracies continue to follow the traditional understanding that electoral outcomes in these countries are shaped, to a large extent, by campaign spending. Whereas an emerging body of party-level literature on the electoral success and failure of parties in post-communist democracies indicates that party-level organisational strength also matters (Ibenskas 2012; Tavits 2012, 2013), a corresponding effect is not found on the more fundamental candidate-level. The findings presented here indicate that the individual-level patterns of campaign effectiveness in post-communist democracies still don't quite mirror those associated with advanced democracies.

² Note that campaign spending is a candidate-level measure that refers to how much candidates spend on their own personal campaigns, while organisational strength is a district party-level measure that refers to the institutional capacity of the district-level party organisation to galvanise public support for its candidates.

Secondly, these findings emphasise the continuing difficulties in incentivising politicians in post-communist democracies to contribute their time and effort to the development of local party organisations and, through that, closer and more extensive links with voters on the grassroots level. As money can win seats for would-be MPs, with the strength of their local party organisation seemingly unimportant, the electoral context simply does not create a need for politicians to invest in the longer-term party development. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the existing party structures remain quite centralised and, arguably, still not embedded in the underlying fabrics of the society. Whereas there were good reasons for top-down party formation in post-communist democracies (Biezen 2003; Kopecky 1995; Mair 1997; Olson 1998; Toole 2003), far-reaching and active local party organisations are generally seen as desirable for stable and healthy democracy (Hofmeister and Grabow 2011; Posner 2004; Thomas 1992). Although the party system has become more stable over the last two decades in Estonia (Herron 2009; Sitter 2002; Tavits 2005), it still appears necessary to ‘force’ the limits on the role that money can play at elections through changing campaign funding regulations (i.e., cap campaign spending) in order to incentivise politicians to invest their time and effort in building influential local party organisations and, through that, closer and more permanent links with voters. This has not yet appeared naturally; at least when looking at the individual-level electoral dynamics.

Explaining Success at Parliamentary Elections

Existing literature on elections and campaigning in advanced democracies has found several individual-level and contextual characteristics to influence electoral outcomes, with campaign spending and party organisational strength being among the more salient ones. It has consistently been shown that campaign spending is positively related to candidates’ electoral performance (e.g., Benoit and Marsh 2010; Gerber 1998; Jacobsen 2006; Pattie et al. 1995), while parties with strong local organisations tend to get more of their candidates elected (e.g., Carty and Eagles 1999; Pattie and Johnston 2003; Pomper 1990; Whiteley and Seyd 1994).³ Meanwhile, utilising insights from party system development in post-communist democracies, described as a top-down affair which saw no need for parties to build extensive organisations

³ In addition, challenger spending is perceived to be more effective than incumbent spending in single-member districts and as effective in multi-member districts with open lists (Cox and Thies 2000; Denver and Hands 1997; Johnston and Pattie 2006; Maddens et al. 2006; Milligan and Rekkas 2008; Samuels 2001), while incumbents and politicians with local-level political experience fare better than their counterparts (Alford and Brady 1993; Benoit and Marsh 2008; Shugart et al. 2005; Tavits 2010).

to win elections (Biezen 2003; Kopecky 1995; Mair 1997; Olson 1998; Toole 2003), traditional understanding suggests that elections in these countries can be won with expensive campaigns and that party organisational strength has little or no electoral value (Biezen 2003; Chan 2001; Kopecky 1995; Mair 1997). There is a discrepancy in the perceived comparative relevance of campaign spending and party organisational strength in influencing electoral outcomes in post-communist and advanced democracies.

The conventional wisdom on how campaign spending and party organisational strength affect electoral outcomes in post-communist democracies is, however, being challenged. Recent studies by Tavits (2012, 2013) find no consistent evidence for the impact of campaign spending on electoral results across different post-communist democracies, but show that parties with stronger organisations – defined as having extensive networks of branch offices, large membership, and professional staff – do consistently fare better. Also, Ibenskas (2012) shows that party membership organisations – measured through the number of delegates that parties are able to put forward to serve as members of electoral commissions and electoral observers – and campaign spending have roughly equal effects on the electoral persistence of political parties in Lithuania.⁴ There are indications that party organisations might influence electoral outcomes in post-communist democracies more than traditionally perceived.

Whereas these studies have highlighted the need to revisit our interpretation of what shapes electoral performance in contemporary post-communist democracies, uncertainty remains about the comparative importance of campaign spending and party organisational strength in determining electoral success and failure as the emerging evidence is still rather sporadic and somewhat inconsistent. For example, the analysis by Tavits (2012) indicates that campaign spending is negatively related to parties' vote share in Estonia, which is highly inconsistent with our understanding of electoral politics, while Ibenskas (2012) focuses predominantly on electoral persistence rather than performance. In addition, no study has yet, to my knowledge, utilised individual-level campaign spending measures alongside other potentially relevant characteristics to explain the electoral performance of individual candidates in a post-communist democracy. There is room to build on the existing studies, particularly at the time

⁴ Earlier evidence on how party organisation influences election results in post-communist democracies has been rather sporadic as some case studies suggest that party organisations matter (Golosov 1998; Kostecky 2002; Szczerbiak 2001), while others find no link between the two (Enyedi and Toka 2007; Fink-Hafner 2006; Spirova 2005).

when our conventional understanding of electoral dynamics in post-communist democracies is being challenged.

Valuing Short-Term Campaign Spending and Long-Term Organisation-Building

A common feature of contemporary parliamentary elections is the growing ability of electoral campaigns to influence who gets elected. While campaigning is unlikely to influence some voters (e.g., party members), there is a widespread and growing rise in the number of late-deciders, swing voters, and in split-ticket voting (Caramani 2011; Hayes and McAllister 1996; McAllister 2004; Salit 2012). With the potential of extensive campaign activities to galvanise more ‘last-minute’ support and spending less than one’s rival to have more detrimental effects on one’s electoral chances, it is unsurprising that campaigning is becoming a highly sophisticated and expensive global business.

Candidates who spend more on their electoral campaign are able to print and distribute more leaflets, hire more staff to work on their campaign, pay for additional advertisement slots on TV and radio, develop a more professional-looking website etc. These, and other campaign activities, are all potentially beneficial for raising candidates’ profile, promoting their policy-positions, and helping candidates to distinguish themselves from their fellow co-partisans. This latter point is particularly relevant in Estonia where, given the use of open lists and large district magnitudes, candidates compete with their co-partisans as well as candidates from other parties. While no guarantee exists that candidates spend money wisely, negative campaign spending effects are unlikely given the increasingly professional nature of polling and campaigning.⁵ In addition, the positive effect of any additional campaigning spending is further aided by the supportive framework that is present for short-term pre-election activities to influence the voting choices of a larger proportion of the electorate.

Hypothesis 1: Candidates’ campaign spending is positively related to their likelihood of getting elected and vote share.

Whereas the short-term strategy of campaign spending should influence candidates’ electoral fate, it is also likely shaped by the ability of their party to mobilise local-level support for its

⁵ A recent high-profile exception to this is the campaign of Eric Cantor, the majority leader in the US House of Representatives, who lost a primary to Tea Party challenger Dave Prater in June 2014. Campaign spending filings show that Eric Cantor’s campaign spent more in one steakhouse than his opponent spent on the whole campaign (FEC 2014). Examples like this, however, remain rare. With the trend being towards greater professionalisation of electoral campaigns (Farrell and Webb 2000; Negrine et al. 2006; Plasser and Plasser 2002), it is fair to expect that the vast majority of these promote, as opposed to hinder, candidates’ electoral chances.

district-level candidates at large.⁶ The latter is likely influenced by the extent to which the longer-term efforts to build strong local party organisations have succeeded.

Stronger local party organisations are better at attracting and mobilising voters. As Tavits (2012) points out, parties with strong organisations tend to be more effective in reaching voters as they can have more immediate and frequent contact with more of the electorate in a more organised manner, while they are also more persuasive by appearing more competent and reliable. In addition, greater local presence is likely to increase parties' awareness of local issues and improve their ability to better tailor their campaign efforts to the concerns of the district-level electorate or, at the very least, it adds credibility to the claim of being more in touch with local issues and public opinion. As such, it is reasonable to believe that parties with strong local organisations have a greater capacity to engage with and convince potential voters, and in doing so, are likely to increase the number of people who end up casting their ballot for a candidate of that party.

More specifically, a wider membership i) increases the pool of loyal voters for all local party candidates in the district, ii) helps candidates to be more in touch with local public opinion (Scarrow 1994), iii) facilitates more personalised campaigning on candidates' behalf as party members are likely to take up an active role in promoting their party's candidates and be more willing to seek face-to-face contacts with the electorate through community outreach, and iv) is more likely to offer access to the full range of different minority groups in the district. At the same time, a more extensive network of branches i) offers the structures necessary to better mobilise voters during elections (Bartolini 2000; Coleman 1996), ii) increases the permanent visibility of the local party in the district, and iii) increases support for party candidates by bringing the party closer to voters.

Hypothesis 2: The strength of candidates' local party organisation is positively related to their likelihood of getting elected and vote share.

Using an Original Survey to Explain Individual-Level Electoral Success

I evaluate these arguments using an original 2011 Estonian Candidate Survey.⁷ As candidates in Estonia, with the exception of independents, do not disclose personal campaign spending,⁸

⁶ Picking a candidate to vote for can effectively be seen as a two-stage process in Estonia, with parties offering the initial broader set of choices and candidates within parties the more specific set of choices thereafter. As such, candidates' electoral success is likely shaped by both their parties' ability to draw voters to their party in the first place and, then, their own ability to become their party's preferred candidate.

a survey of candidates offers an opportunity to collect unique information on their individual-level campaigns. Moreover, it provides information on candidates' political background that, together with their campaigning choices, can be linked to their electoral performance.

As part of data collection, all 789 candidates were approached. It was a post-election survey, carried out between May and June 2011.⁹ The survey used a mixed-mode design – postal and online – to minimise measurement error (De Leeuw 2005; Dillman et al. 2009). The final sample used in the following analysis, i.e., the number of candidates for whom information on all explanatory variables was available, is 143 candidates. The sample appears reasonably representative. When using the Duncan index of dissimilarity on the distributions of two major characteristics – the district and the party list that the candidate stood for election in – within the full population of candidates and the sample used, it yields values of 0.16 and 0.20, respectively.¹⁰ Moreover, the proportion of women among all candidates and those in the sample is very similar at 23% vs. 26%, as is the candidates' mean age (47 vs. 48 years), and the proportion of successful candidates (13% vs. 18%).

Variables and Model Choice

Two parallel dependent variables are used in the study to capture the electoral performance of parliamentary candidates.¹¹ To start off, a simple binary measure of *elected* is used. All candidates who became MPs after the election were scored '1' and all candidates who did not were scored '0'. In order to tease out even more variation regards to candidates' electoral performance, a second dependent variable – *vote share* – is also used. It is measured as the percentage of district-level votes received by the candidate, ranging from 0 'no votes' to 100 'all votes'.¹² The inclusion of the latter is particularly important given the use of open lists

⁷ For further information, see www.siiimtrummm.com/surveys.html.

⁸ Campaign regulation in Estonia remains rather unrestrictive. In addition to not requiring individual party candidates to disclose their campaign spending, there is also no legally defined campaign period, and campaign spending remains uncapped both for individual candidates and parties.

⁹ The survey was implemented close to the election to ensure that candidates had a good recollection of their campaigns, including their campaign spending.

¹⁰ The Duncan index ranges from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate greater discrepancies between the full population and the sample (Duncan and Duncan 1955).

¹¹ Additional descriptive information on all dependent and independent variables is provided in Appendix A.

¹² Data for both dependent variables is obtained from the Electoral Commission (VVK 2011).

and large district magnitudes in Estonia, which can lead to considerable variations in the vote shares of both successful and unsuccessful candidates.¹³

The first main explanatory variable in the analysis is candidate's *campaign spending*.¹⁴ It is an individual-level measure, operationalised by dividing a candidate's self-reported campaign expenditure on his/her electoral campaign¹⁵ by the mean campaign spending of all candidates in the same district, and then, taking a natural log of the obtained measure.¹⁶ Two aspects should be noted about this operationalisation. First, a natural logarithm is used to prevent outliers from distorting the analysis and to capture the marginally diminishing returns produced by increases in campaign expenditure.¹⁷ Second, a relative measure (i.e., how much a candidate spent relative to the mean campaign spending of his/her district-level competitors) is preferred to the absolute measure (i.e., how much a candidate spent) to address the endogenous nature of campaign spending. It is widely acknowledged that candidates' spending decisions are influenced by their expectations about votes (e.g., Benoit and Marsh 2010; Cox and Thies 2000; Maddens et al. 2006). Although the problem of endogeneity is weaker in Estonia,¹⁸ the use of a relative measure will allow accounting for the context where the (mis-)fortune of one affects the (mis-)fortune of another. If spending can actually help candidates obtain more votes, then a candidate should outspend his/her direct rivals; with the extent to which s/he gains more votes and increases his/her likelihood of getting elected being

¹³ The two indicators of electoral performance complement each other very well. Whereas *vote share* is a more detailed measure of how candidates fared, *elected* provides a more consequential, punchline account of electoral success and failure.

¹⁴ Data for the variable is obtained from the 2011 Estonian Candidate Survey.

¹⁵ The reliance on self-reported campaign spending is necessary due to the lack of objective data on candidates' individual-level campaign spending in Estonia. However, it is a widely accepted and used proxy in electoral research for describing individual-level campaign effort (e.g., Giebler and Wüst 2011; Sudulich et al. 2013).

¹⁶ To emphasise, this measure relates to candidates', as opposed to parties', electoral campaigns. While parties often contribute money to their candidates' campaigns and candidates may opt for party-centred campaigns, it is the candidate who is in control of his/her campaign spending. As such, the campaign spending measure relates to the individual-level campaigns of candidates that run parallel to the broader campaigns of their parties.

¹⁷ This is also a common practice in electoral research (e.g., Benoit and Marsh 2003; Sudulich et al. 2013).

¹⁸ The use of open lists and large district magnitudes means that all candidates need to compete with both their co-partisans and politicians from other parties. Also, polls normally ignore the fortunes of individual candidates or even district parties in Estonia, focusing instead on the support for nation-wide parties. As such, there is a lot of uncertainty about individual-level electoral results and very few politicians can be certain to get elected prior to campaigning. It is, therefore, unsurprising that candidates commit significant funds to their campaigns across the board. Survey evidence shows that incumbents outspent challengers by ~€2,000 but the latter still spent over €2,100 on average, candidates with no experience in local legislature spent almost as much as those who were local MPs at the time of the election (€2,000 vs. €2,100), candidates who held a party office were even outspent by those who did not (€2,400 vs. €2,500) etc. Candidates with possibly higher success expectations still feel that they need to spend on their campaign to get elected, while candidates with possibly lower success expectations still seem to believe that they can get elected and find significant campaign spending worthwhile.

influenced by the extent to which s/he outspends those rivals. The relative measure accounts for district-level dynamics and mitigates the endogenous nature of campaign spending.¹⁹

In line with the theoretical approach, the second main explanatory variable in the analysis is the *organisational strength* of candidate's local party. Two separate indicators are used in parallel to measure the concept.²⁰ *Organisational strength: members* describes the number of party members in the district that the candidate stood for election in as the percentage of total district electorate, divided by the number of party candidates in the district. Since Estonia has a rather high level of political party membership among post-communist countries (Biezen et al. 2012), an alternative indicator is also used to provide an additional robustness check for the effect that local party organisational strength has on candidates' electoral performance and increase the generalizability of the findings. *Organisational strength: branches* describes the number of municipal-level party branches in the district that the candidate stood for election in, divided by the total number of municipalities in the district and by the number of party candidates in the district. This operationalisation mirrors closely that of Tavits (2012) in her seminal study on electoral politics in post-communist Europe, departing only by adding the 'per candidate' element (i.e., dividing district-level party organisational strength by the number of party candidates in the district). This is preferred given the individual-level nature of the study. It is reasonable to expect that local parties with equal organisational strength are more beneficial for their candidates when this strength is shared by fewer candidates, i.e., the organisational strength does not get 'diluted' as much as it would if more candidates could draw from it.²¹

To control for rivalling explanations, five additional variables are introduced: three relate to candidates' political capital and two affect their electoral capital. Starting with the former, candidates' electoral performance is likely linked to how competent and in touch with local issues they are able to present themselves. Candidates who are incumbents are likely to fare

¹⁹ See Benoit and Marsh (2003) for further discussion on the usefulness of using relative spending. Alternative ways to mitigate the endogeneity problem include Instrumental Variable approaches (Gerber 1998; Benoit and Marsh 2010; Johnston and Pattie 2008). Although it can produce more efficient estimates, finding good predictors for campaign spending that are not related to candidates' electoral performance remains problematic, and the very value of dealing with the simultaneity problem by means of 2SLS is not unanimously accepted (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991). As such, the use of a relative campaign spending measure is preferred here.

²⁰ Data for both indicators is obtained from a combination of sources. Initially, secondary literature (Tavits 2012) and official party membership registry (Ärire register 2014) was consulted to inform the inquiry. It was followed by communication with party staff, archival search, and a study of national and local newspaper content.

²¹ Estimates from logit and OLS models that include organisational strength in absolute terms (i.e., not using the 'per candidate' approach) are, however, robust to the findings presented here and available upon request.

better than challengers as they can claim to have a proven track-record of working as an MP and tend to be more well-known.²² *Incumbency* is operationalised as a dichotomous variable, with incumbents coded '1' and challengers '0'. At the same time, candidates who are local-level representatives are likely to fare better than those without such experience as they are able to claim greater knowledge of local issues and tend to be better-known to the district-level electorate. Candidates are, therefore, differentiated between those who have never been members of their local-level legislature '0', those who have been members in the past '1', and those who are members at the time of the election '2' as part of the *local political experience* variable. Finally, candidates who are active members of their local party might benefit from being more involved in the local political scene. *Local party membership* ranges from '0' if a candidate has never been an active member of his/her local party organisation to '3' if s/he is an active local party member and officeholder.²³

Moving on to the two variables that relate to electoral capital, a variable called *campaign aim* is included to capture the substantive content of candidates' campaigns. Describing the self-perceived objective of a candidate's campaign, it ranges from 0 'to attract as much attention as possible for my party' to 10 'to attract as much attention as possible for myself'.²⁴ Given that Estonia uses an open list system, it is reasonable to expect a positive relationship between campaign aim and electoral performance. Finally, candidates' placement on the district-level party lists is controlled for. Although voters are required to vote for a specific candidate, it is likely that not all voters are informed enough to differentiate between all the candidates. It is reasonable to expect that some voters use list placement as a cue of a candidate's standing within the party's district-level candidates. As such, being higher up on a district-level party list is likely to improve one's electoral performance independent of other factors. *List position* is coded as a candidate's placement on his/her district-level party list, with list leaders coded as '1' and other candidates '2', '3' etc. based on their list placement.²⁵

Utilising the variables highlighted above, two sets of models are run to explain the success or failure of parliamentary candidates. The variation in candidates' likelihood of getting *elected*

²² Incumbency is also introduced as part of the incumbency*campaign spending interaction term to test whether there are significant differences in the effectiveness of incumbent and challenger spending.

²³ Data for these three explanatory variables is obtained from the 2011 Estonian Candidate Survey.

²⁴ Data for the variable is obtained from the 2011 Estonian Candidate Survey.

²⁵ Data for the variable is obtained from the Electoral Commission (VVK 2011).

is assessed via logit model with standard errors clustered by districts, and the variation in candidates' *vote share* is assessed via OLS model with standard errors clustered by districts.²⁶

Which Candidates Performed Better?

To determine how these characteristics shape the success and failure of parliamentary candidates, I begin by comparing the actual electoral performance of different candidates. Table 1 groups the candidates by shared characteristics, presenting how many of them got elected and their median district-level vote share.²⁷ It suggests preliminary support for H1. Candidates who spend more do in fact fare better, with the percentage of candidates who got elected rising from 4.1% to 61.5% when comparing candidates who spent less than the district mean on their campaign to those who spent over twice the district mean. The corresponding rise in these candidates' average vote share is from 0.4% to 2.5%. At the same time, no trend appears present when comparing candidates whose local party organisation is strong vs. weak. This initial evidence does not seem to support H2. However, incumbents do perform better than challengers (72.7% vs. 14.2% got elected; 2.9% vs. 1.2% average vote share), and those who lead their party's district-level list have an advantage over those with a low list placement (42.9% vs. 5.6% got elected; 1% vs. 0.3% average vote share). Small increases are also visible when comparing candidates with vs. without previous local-level political experience and candidates with personalised vs. party-centred campaigns. Finally, this initial evidence suggests that no significant difference exists between the incumbent and challenger spending effects, and that electoral performance is not influenced by local party membership.

²⁶ Estimates from logit and OLS models that use i) robust standard errors, and ii) standard errors clustered by districts and parties are, however, robust to the findings presented here and available upon request.

²⁷ Median is preferred to mean because of the skewed nature of *vote share*.

Table 1. How did Different Candidates Perform?

Characteristic	Elected	Vote share
Campaign spending (non-logged)		
Low	4.1%	0.4%
High	61.5%	2.5%
Campaign spending: incumbents		
Low	33.3%	1.9%
High	80.0%	3.0%
Campaign spending: challengers		
Low	3.2%	0.4%
High	57.1%	2.4%
Incumbency		
Challenger	14.2%	0.5%
Incumbent	72.7%	2.6%
Organisational strength: members		
Weak	9.8%	0.4%
Medium	25.5%	0.7%
Strong	19.5%	0.8%
Organisational strength: branches		
Weak	16.9%	0.6%
Medium	23.8%	0.9%
Strong	13.9%	0.3%
Local party membership		
Never	6.3%	0.2%
In the past	11.1%	0.4%
Current member	22.4%	0.9%
Current member and officeholder	16.7%	0.5%
Local political experience		
No	6.8%	0.3%
Yes	23.2%	1.2%
Campaign aim		
Party-focused	10.0%	0.4%
Candidate-focused	27.0%	1.0%
List position		
List leader	42.9%	1.0%
Low placement	5.6%	0.3%

Although the initial analysis does not support H2 when looking at all candidates, local party organisational strength might still be useful for some of them. Similarly, it is important to see if the positive effect of campaign spending (H1) is consistent across the different sub-sets of candidates. Table 2 divides candidates into various sub-sets by combinations of explanatory characteristics, presenting how many candidates got elected and their median district-level vote share. Note first that campaign spending has a positive effect on electoral performance when looking at all combinations of explanatory characteristics. At the same time, no sub-set of candidates appears to significantly benefit from strong local party organisations, offering further support to the idea that campaign spending (and not local party organisational strength) drives the patterns associated with candidates' electoral performance.

Table 2. Candidates' Electoral Performance by Multiple Characteristics

	Organisational strength: weak		Organisational strength: strong	
	Incumbent	Challenger	Incumbent	Challenger
Campaign spending: low	0% (2.2%)	5.5% (0.4%)	100% (1.9%)	0% (0.3%)
Campaign spending: high	66.7% (3.0%)	42.9% (1.4%)	100% (2.9%)	37.5% (1.5%)
	Aim: Party	Aim: Candidate	Aim: Party	Aim: Candidate
Campaign spending: low	0% (0.3%)	0% (0.3%)	6.7% (0.3%)	0% (0.5%)
Campaign spending: high	20% (1.3%)	55.6% (1.2%)	54.6% (0.8%)	62.5% (2.8%)
	List leader: Yes	List leader: No	List leader: Yes	List leader: No
Campaign spending: low	0% (0.4%)	5.7% (0.4%)	0% (0.7%)	2.6% (0.3%)
Campaign spending: high	100% (5.3%)	40.9% (1.3%)	80% (4.8%)	44.8% (1.5%)

Note: Percent of candidates who got elected; median vote share in parentheses.

Explaining Electoral Performance

As already seen in Table 1 and Table 2, candidates' electoral fortunes vary considerably with regards to their characteristics. Focus is now turned to going beyond the descriptive statistics. Table 3 presents the multivariate models that explain variation in candidates' likelihood of getting elected and their vote share.

Table 3. Explaining Electoral Performance

	DV: Elected		DV: Vote share	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Campaign spending	1.73*** (.43)	1.93*** (.60)	.40*** (.08)	.39*** (.08)
Incumbency	2.76** (1.34)	3.48** (1.74)	.87*** (.27)	.90*** (.23)
Campaign spending*incumbency	-.40 (.47)	-.24 (.54)	.03 (.29)	.08 (.27)
Organisational strength: members	301.19 (525.23)		63.49 (197.54)	
Organisational strength: branches		-19.85 (8.01)		-4.08 (3.16)
Local party membership	.36 (.36)	.52 (.34)	-.06 (.15)	-.06 (.14)
Local political experience	1.09** (.45)	1.14** (.44)	-.00 (.17)	.03 (.17)
Campaign aim	.47** (.20)	.50** (.23)	.09* (.04)	.09** (.04)
List position	-.35** (.15)	-.40*** (.14)	-.13*** (.03)	-.14*** (.02)
Constant	-5.24*** (1.65)	-4.54** (1.78)	1.97*** (.53)	2.24*** (.53)
Observations	143	143	143	143
Districts	12	12	12	12
R ² / pseudo R ²	.60	.62	.36	.37

Note: Values within parentheses are standard errors; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

The findings presented in Table 3 confirm H1 (*campaign spending* hypothesis), but offer no support for H2 (*organisational strength* hypothesis). With regards to the former, positive and statistically significant coefficients of 1.73/1.93 and 0.40/0.39 show that candidates who spend more on their campaigns are indeed more likely to get elected and receive larger proportions of district-level votes. At the same time, no consistent and statistically significant evidence is found that candidates fare better when their local party organisation is stronger, regardless of whether looking at membership levels or the density of municipal-level

branches.²⁸ These findings lend further support to describing the individual-level electoral patterns in the post-communist Estonia as rather fluid and shaped less by the more formal organisational structures than those associated with advanced democracies.

Four of the control variables also have significant effects in the expected direction, increasing the confidence in the findings overall. Two relate to candidates' political capital (*incumbency* and *local political experience*) and two affect their electoral capital (*campaign aim* and *list position*). Candidates are likely to come across as more competent and be better-known if they are representatives in the national legislature, while members of the local-level representative body can additionally claim to be more in touch with local issues. As a result, it is unsurprising that incumbents perform better than challengers and those with local-level political experience do better than those without such experience (shown by coefficients of 2.76/3.48 and .87/.90 for the former; 1.09/1.14 for the latter²⁹). In addition, candidates with more personalised campaigns fare better (shown by the positive coefficients of .47/.50 and 0.09/0.09), which is unsurprising given that voters need to cast their ballot for an individual candidate. Similarly, candidates who are higher up on their party's district-level list perform better (shown by the negative coefficients of -.35/-.40 and -.13/-.14) as they benefit from voters who use list placement as a cue for differentiating between their preferred party's candidates. At the same time, local party membership does not appear to affect electoral performance, and no difference is found in the effects of incumbent and challenger spending.

To illustrate the effect sizes of the independent variables, Table 4 presents predicted values for candidates' likelihood of getting elected and vote share. For each effect, a particular characteristic is allowed to vary while others are held constant at their mean.

²⁸ The question remaining is why this might be the case? It is likely that local party organisational strength plays no significant part in candidates' electoral success due to the highly cartelistic nature of Estonian parties (Pettai et al. 2008; Saarts and Lumi; 2013; Toomla 2011). This party organisational model leads to campaigns that are almost exclusively capital-intensive, professional and centralised, with party members (even if in large numbers) being largely decorative and used mainly for their legitimising function (Katz and Mair 1995). As such, the electoral influence, positive or negative, that local party organisations can have is very limited.

²⁹ *Local political experience* has a significant positive effect on candidates' likelihood of getting elected only.

Table 4. Predicted Values for Electoral Performance

Characteristic	Pr (Elected)			
	Min	Mean	Max	Δ Min/Max
Campaign spending	.00 (.00 .00)	.17 (.09 .24)	.60 (.42 .78)	0.60
Incumbency	.16 (.10 .21)	-	.38 (.19 .57)	0.22
Local political experience	.10 (.04 .17)	.16 (.12 .20)	.23 (.14 .31)	0.13
Campaign aim	.07 (.01 .12)	.18 (.14 .23)	.35 (.17 .54)	0.28
List position	.28 (.17 .39)	.09 (-.02 .20)	.01 (-.05 .08)	0.27
Characteristic	Pr (Vote share)			
	Min	Mean	Max	Δ Min/Max
Campaign spending	-.48 (-.97 .01)	1.61 (1.22 2.01)	2.40 (1.74 3.07)	2.88
Incumbency	1.19 (.90 1.48)	-	2.04 (1.33 2.75)	0.85
Local political experience	1.26 (.75 1.76)	1.26 (.97 1.55)	1.26 (.84 1.68)	0.00
Campaign aim	.86 (.29 1.43)	1.31 (1.04 1.59)	1.77 (1.23 2.31)	0.91
List position	1.87 (1.44 2.29)	.80 (.50 1.10)	-.14 (-.73 .45)	2.01

Note: Predicted values based on estimates in Model 1 and Model 3; 95% confidence intervals in parentheses.

Note first that the effect size associated with *campaign spending* stands out when comparing the impact that minimum-to-maximum shifts in the explanatory characteristics have on candidates' predicted electoral performance. As Table 4 demonstrates, the probability of getting elected increases by 60% when comparing candidates who spend nothing on their campaigns to those who spend eight times the district-level mean, while the corresponding increase in the predicted vote share is 2.88%. These are the largest differences in candidates' electoral performance that are brought about as a result of changes in the explanatory characteristics. In addition, three control variables, one affecting candidates' political capital and two relating to their electoral capital stand out. Regarding the former, incumbents have a 22% higher predicted likelihood of getting elected than challengers (38% vs. 16%) and are expected to receive 0.85% more of the district-level vote (2.04% vs. 1.19%). Regarding the latter, list leaders are 27% more likely to get elected than candidates with the lowest list placement (28% vs 1%) and are expected to win 2.01% more of the district-level vote (1.87% vs. -0.14%). The respective advantages of conducting a candidate-centred as opposed to a party-centred campaign are 27% (34% vs. 7%) and 0.86% (1.74% vs. 0.88%). These findings lend further support to the understanding that individual-level electoral performance in the post-communist Estonia is driven by how much candidates spend on their own campaigns; expensive campaigns can indeed win elections for individual candidates. While some characteristics that relate to political and electoral capital are also relevant, their impact on the success or failure of individual candidates remains of secondary scope.

Conclusions

Whereas the conventional understanding of electoral patterns in post-communist democracies suggests that elections can be won by expensive media campaigns and the strength of party organisation is of little relevance in these countries (Biezen 2003; Chan 2001; Kopecky 1995; Mair 1997), there is a growing body of literature to indicate that, at least on party-level, both factors are now substantially contributing to parties' success and failure (Ibenskas 2012; Tavits 2012, 2013). However, with the latter insight deriving from party-level analyses, it is also important to assess the comparative role of campaign spending and party organisational strength in shaping the electoral fortunes of actors whom voters ultimately cast their votes for; i.e., individual candidates.

Building on previous studies of individual-level campaign effects in advanced democracies and the more general organisational theory, I argue that short-term strategies (i.e., increased campaign spending) and long-term strategies (i.e., development of stronger local party organisations) should both contribute to parliamentary candidates' electoral success. Whereas candidates who spend more on their own campaigns have increased ability to raise their profile and 'sell themselves', stronger local party organisations have greater capacity to raise support for all of its candidates. I test for these effects using original 2011 Estonian Candidate Survey data, but find support for the former only. On individual-level, electoral performance in the post-communist Estonia is still driven first and foremost by candidates' own campaign spending. Contrary to the theoretical expectation, I find no evidence that candidates benefit from strong local party organisations. Instead, it is candidates' greater political capital (i.e., incumbency and experience in local-level legislature) and electoral capital (i.e., personalised campaign strategy and being high up on the district-level party list) that have impacts of secondary nature on their electoral performance.

My findings contribute to our understanding of electoral dynamics in post-communist democracies in several ways. First, I show that the individual-level electoral performance is still first and foremost influenced by how much candidates spend on their own campaigns. While some longer-term strategies that involve building up more permanent structures that could be called upon to support one's campaign do have positive effects, these relate to candidates' political capital, as opposed to the organisational strength of their local party, and bring about considerably weaker electoral benefits. From the perspective of candidates, it is still possible to approach elections as short-term processes and opt for the 'smash-and-grab'

strategy. As expensive campaigns, particularly those that are candidate-centred and promote candidates high up on the district-level party list, remain sufficient to get elected, the individual-level patterns of campaign effectiveness in post-communist Estonia still do not quite mirror those associated with advanced democracies.

The dominance of short-term factors in shaping the success and failure of candidates standing for election also has implications for the development of more active and far-reaching local party organisations. As money can win seats for would-be MPs, and the support of their local party organisation is seemingly unimportant, the current context does not create the need for politicians to invest time and effort in party development. Strong local party organisations are, however, widely seen as desirable for stable and healthy democracy (Hofmeister and Grabow 2011; Posner 2004; Thomas 1992). Particularly in the post-communist democracies, where party formation was a top-down affair (Biezen 2003; Kopecky 1995; Mair 1997; Olson 1998; Toole 2003), developing local party organisations that are more prominent features of the societal fabric allows moving away from the centralised and elite-driven party democracy to a more participatory and grassroots democracy. This would likely contribute to the stability of the party system and promote political participation, but should also enhance policy responsiveness and effectiveness through better awareness of public opinion and local context. As it stands, however, the patterns related to individual-level electoral performance offer little in terms of incentivising politicians to contribute their time and effort for such a shift.

So what can be done about it? In the context of electoral politics, the findings presented here suggest that it would be necessary to ‘force’ limits on campaign spending through changing campaign finance regulations (i.e., cap campaign spending) in order to reduce the role that money can play in politics via its dominating impact on individual-level electoral outcomes. By limiting the extent to which candidates can rely on the short-term ‘smash-and-grab’ strategy to get elected, the more incentives they have to think long-term and develop a greater structural capacity to connect to the electorate. Strong local party organisations would be able to do exactly that by offering a closer connection with the electorate on the grassroots level through a more permanent and visible presence in the district.

There are of course many other aspects that can influence candidates’ electoral performance; individual-level characteristics such their campaign spending strategy, and contextual factors

like electoral rules. This study represents a first-cut empirical effort to assess the comparative relevance of individual-level campaign spending and local party organisational strength in shaping the success and failure of parliamentary candidates in a post-communist democracy. Therefore, it adds useful depth to our comparative understanding of contemporary electoral processes in advanced and post-communist democracies. At the same time, it leaves room for (and highlights the need for) expanding this research agenda. Future research should consider how different campaign spending strategies affect electoral performance, and apply a similar research design to other, and ideally multiple, post-communist democracies.

Appendix A. Dependent and Independent Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent variables				
Elected	0.18	0.39	0	1
Vote share	1.26	1.72	0.01	8.39
Independent variables				
Campaign spending (non-logged)	1.12	1.55	0.01	7.26
Incumbency	0.08	0.27	0	1
Organisational strength: members	0.00	0.00	0	0.00
Organisational strength: branches	0.05	0.04	0	0.17
Local party membership	2.01	0.90	0	3
Local political experience	1.12	0.85	0	2
Campaign aim	4.40	2.78	0	10
List position	5.57	3.32	1	16

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