Vetting for Virtue: Democracy's Challenge in Excluding Criminals from Office*

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Abstract

This paper assesses the effectiveness of democratic systems in barring individuals with criminal backgrounds from political office. Unlike many countries, Norway has no legal restrictions against electing convicted felons to public office, underscoring the challenges democratic institutions face in vetting candidates. We analyze a comprehensive dataset that includes all local election candidates from 2003 to 2019, combined with detailed administrative records on criminal offenses. Our analysis shows that candidates running for office are less likely to have criminal records than the general population, with elected officials less likely to have criminal backgrounds than their unelected peers, and mayors being the most lawful. Both self-selection by candidates and selection by political parties are likely to influence decisions regarding candidacy and the attainment of high-ranking positions on electoral lists. Voter influence on the exclusion of candidates with criminal histories appears negligible.

Keywords: Political selection, criminal backgrounds, voter behavior, political parties

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1 Introduction

The infiltration of political institutions by criminals poses a serious threat to democratic governance. When individuals with criminal histories ascend to public office, they can corrupt public policies and undermine trust in democratic institutions. People with a criminal past are statistically more prone to reoffending, thereby having a higher risk of abusing political power for personal gain.[1] Several countries, such as Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, and Turkey, have therefore enacted constitutional provisions and election laws that prohibit certain convicted felons from running for office. Other countries, such as Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States (specifically, the US Congress), rely solely on democratic processes to exclude criminal offenders from elected positions.

Other factors being equal, it is reasonable to assume that citizens favor politicians who are honest and committed to the common good rather than pursuing their personal interests. Given this assumption, parties will recruit honest candidates who can make credible campaign promises (see, for example, Besley, 2005, 2006). Parties led by individuals with a corrupt record will find it nearly impossible to claim they serve the public interest. In contrast, theoretical models have identified several channels that allow low-quality candidates to pursue and secure political office (cf. Besley, 2006; Brollo et al., 2013; Caselli and Morelli, 2004; Dal Bó and Finan, 2018). These models suggest that voters do not always oust corrupt politicians, aligning with empirical studies indicating that voters may be reluctant or unable to remove candidates who prioritize their own interests over the public good.

A prominent example of this phenomenon is former President Donald J. Trump, the Republican candidate in the 2024 US presidential election, which represents a strong case of voter disregard for candidate malfeasance. Despite facing multiple felony charges in

[1] Andersen and Skardhamar (2013) use Norwegian register data to analyze repeat crime. They report that among those charged with a crime, 29 percent reoffended within the first year, leading to new charges. This figure rises to 40 percent after two years, 45 percent after three years, and after four years, this proportion has increased to 49 percent.

various cases, including those related to the January 6 Capitol attack, he continues to enjoy substantial support among Republican voters.[2] Similarly, during the 2009 British expenses scandal, several members of Parliament were charged with filing false expense claims, and some were convicted. Yet, in constituencies with strong partisan divisions, voters frequently continued to support their preferred party, even when its representative was implicated in the scandal (Eggers, 2014). Finally, candidates linked to crime appear to have a solid electoral advantage in India; between 2004 and 2014, a candidate with a criminal case was nearly three times more likely to win than one without any legal accusations (Vaishnav, 2017, p.12). This phenomenon is so pronounced that, according to the New York Times, having jail time can be considered a 'Badge of Honor' in Indian politics.[3] These patterns underscore the challenges in relying solely on electoral mechanisms to enforce accountability among elected representatives.

Against this backdrop, our paper examines the representation of individuals with criminal records in Norwegian local politics. Norway is an ideal case for studying political selection based on lawfulness for several reasons. First, with no legal barriers against electing convicts, Norway provides an ideal environment to assess democracy's capacity to prevent unlawful individuals from entering and advancing in politics. Second, we have access to criminal records for all candidates running for office from 2003 to 2019, which we can compare with the general adult population, controlling for characteristics such as gender, age, and municipality of residence. The data on criminal records, covering the period from 1998 to 2022, includes information on types of crimes, timing, and punishment. Third, local elections are decided by a flexible-list system where both political parties and voters influence candidate selection. This institutional feature helps us understand which political agents, if any, are vetting for virtue. Finally, we study small communities, where personal familiarity plays a major role in voting (Cox et al., 2024). Even though

[2]After Donald Trump's verdict in the lead-up to the 2024 election, a YouGov survey revealed that fewer Republican and independent voters considered criminality a significant concern. Most Republicans appeared to be comfortable with electing a criminal as president. Source: `https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/49617-opinion-change-post-trump-hush-money-guilty-verdict`.

[3]Source: `https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/14/world/asia/in-indias-politics-jail-time-is-a-badge-of-html`

criminal records are rarely directly observable, political agents will have some information allowing them to select on lawfulness.

We analyze population-wide register data with detailed information on serious as well as non-serious offenses.[4] Focusing on crimes that result in a court-issued penal sanction, we find that first-time nominees are less likely to have been convicted compared to the general population. This positive selection on lawfulness persists as we progress up the political hierarchy. Elected officials exhibit lower rates of crime involvement compared to their unelected counterparts, while mayors are displaying the lowest levels of lawbreaking behavior. Both self-selection and party selection play crucial roles in decisions regarding candidacy and the attainment of high-ranking positions on electoral lists. While self-selection may have a greater impact on the initial decision to accept a nomination, party selection exerts more influence during the later stages of the selection process.

An event study shows that the probability of candidates engaging in criminal activities remains unchanged before and after the election, regardless of whether they are elected as council members or mayors.[5] These findings imply that criminal tendencies could be intrinsic traits of the candidates, not influenced by the electoral outcome.

Our findings highlight the positive selection of local candidates to elected councils, which is particularly noteworthy given the low prevalence of crime in the population. That political parties play a role in discarding candidates with criminal backgrounds corroborates previous studies of political scandals in Norway; scandals are detrimental to candidates' political careers - but do not significantly impair party support (Midtbø, 2012; Jenssen, 2014). The study further supports papers on rent extraction in the low-corrupt Scandinavian countries. Aligning with our findings, Svaleryd and Vlachos (2009) that information tends to reduce legal rents, while Folke et al. (2017) demonstrate that relatives of top politicians do not appear to reap significant economic benefits. Andersen

[4]Non-serious offenses encompass minor infringements such as speeding tickets. In fact, 22% of the Norwegian population committed some sort of non-serious offense in the 5 years leading up to the elections we are studying in this paper. Similarly, only 1.83% of the population committed a crime that resulted in a court-issued legal sanction in the same period.

[5]These null findings are not due to a lack of statistical power. In the Appendix, we document significant economic returns to office using the same research design and data.

and Sørensen (2022) show that mayors in Norwegian local governments experiencing substantial positive revenue shocks do not abuse these opportunities for personal enrichment. These results further indicate that individuals with criminal intent might be deterred from standing for election, which is consistent with our observation that first-time nominees are less likely to have a criminal conviction. The Norwegian setting is characterized by high transparency, including openness in decision-making processes, external auditing, and active media scrutiny (Andersen and Sørensen, 2022; Bruns and Himmler, 2011), which offers little scope for the illicit exploitation of elected positions.

We also contribute to a rapidly expanding literature leveraging register data to study the selection of quality attributes to politics (for review, see Gulzar (2021)). In an infuential study, Dal Bó et al. (2017) show that elected politicians in Sweden are positively selected on cognitive skills, a pattern also observed in Norway (Cox et al., 2021), Denmark (Dahlgaard and Pedersen, 2024) and Finland (Jokela et al., 2023). As far as we know, our paper is the first study to document that a representative democracy can prevent criminals from entering politics and to identify the mechanisms that facilitate this result.[6]

2 Our empirical case: Norway

We contend that studying the lowest level of political office in Norway is beneficial for three primary reasons. First, about 75% of national-level politicians began their political careers at the local level (Cirone et al., 2021). Second, Norwegian local elections are decided by a flexible-list system whereby both political parties and voters affect candidate selection. This system provides insights into the dynamics of political selection by both voters and parties. Third, the abundance of local politicians allows for meaningful statistical inferences. This significance is amplified by the rare-event nature of the criminal

[6]Jokela et al. (2023) find that Finnish politicians are positively selected on a self-reported measure of honesty. Their 'dutifulness score' captures "how honest a person is—it tells us how closely he follows social norms and considers them to be important (e.g., whether the person would return money if given back too much change at a store)" (p.14). Rather than using self-reported survey data, we rely on a behavioral outcome capturing candidates' honesty.

sentences that we study.

This section provides an overview of Norway's institutional framework, starting with an examination of the fundamental characteristics of the political system and the criminal justice system, including the various types of punishments for different crimes and the institutions responsible for administering penal sanctions. Following this, we discuss the data, how we construct the final estimation sample, and the potential biases inherent in this process.

2.1 Institutional setting

Norwegian local governments provide essential welfare services, including schooling, elderly care, and child care. Each local government is governed by a council of 11 to 77 members, who make decisions by simple majority rule. Elected every four years in September, these councils ensure democratic representation for all citizens over 18, including eligible foreign residents.[7] During the first council meeting after the election, members elect both a mayor and an executive board. As the council's key figure, the mayor directs the activities of the executive board.

Local elections operate under a flexible-list proportional representation system. The process begins with local party organizations initiating their nomination procedures approximately a year before the election, culminating in the submission of their candidate lists by March 31 of the election year. Election authorities then have until June 1 to formally approve the lists. Beyond this point, candidates generally cannot withdraw from the list or decline a political appointment if elected (Fiva and King, 2024).

The election system permits parties to grant certain candidates a 'head start,' equiv-

[7]Anyone eligible to vote in the election and listed in the population register as residing in the municipality on the election day, and who isn't excluded or exempted, is both eligible for candidacy in the municipal council and required to accept nomination. There are no legal constraints preventing convicts from holding key political positions at the local and national levels. Neither has the national government authority to dissolve the locally elected councils as consequence of criminal activities. This stance is supported by a Supreme Court ruling from 1961, where a council member convicted of illegal alcohol sales was allowed to retain office, with the court emphasizing respect for voter preferences (Rt. 1961, p. 899)

alent to 25% of the party's total vote count. This advantage renders it nearly impossible for other candidates to rival 'head start' candidates within the same party (Fiva and Røhr, 2018).[8] The advantaged candidates are listed in bold letters at the top of the party list. The initial ranking of candidates does not otherwise play any formal role, except if there is a tie. The top-ranked candidate on a party's list is its mayoral candidate.

Voters cast a ballot for a party, determining the across-party seat distribution, and can indicate their preference for specific candidates by marking checkboxes on the party list. This process, along with the candidates' bonus, establishes the basis for the within-party seat distribution.

2.2 The criminal justice system

The justice sector in Norway encompasses key institutions such as the police (*politiet*), the public prosecutor's office (*påtalemyndighetene*), and the courts (*domstolene*), with each entity playing a crucial role in ensuring criminal justice. The police are responsible for upholding laws and regulations, investigating, and prosecuting legal infractions. The police initiate investigations promptly upon discovering or suspecting a criminal offense, or upon receiving reports of offenses. The police can issue a fixed penalty for the less severe crimes, such as minor traffic infringements or breaches of customs regulations. The public prosecutor's office investigates criminal matters and determines whether to press charges. About half of the police reports result in a formal criminal charge, and of these, the public prosecutor advances about 40% to the court (Bhuller et al., 2024). The remaining of these cases are either dismissed, transferred to an alternative conflict resolution process, or assigned a fine. The courts' responsibility is to determine guilt and, upon conviction, to decide a suitable punishment. With an independent position, neither

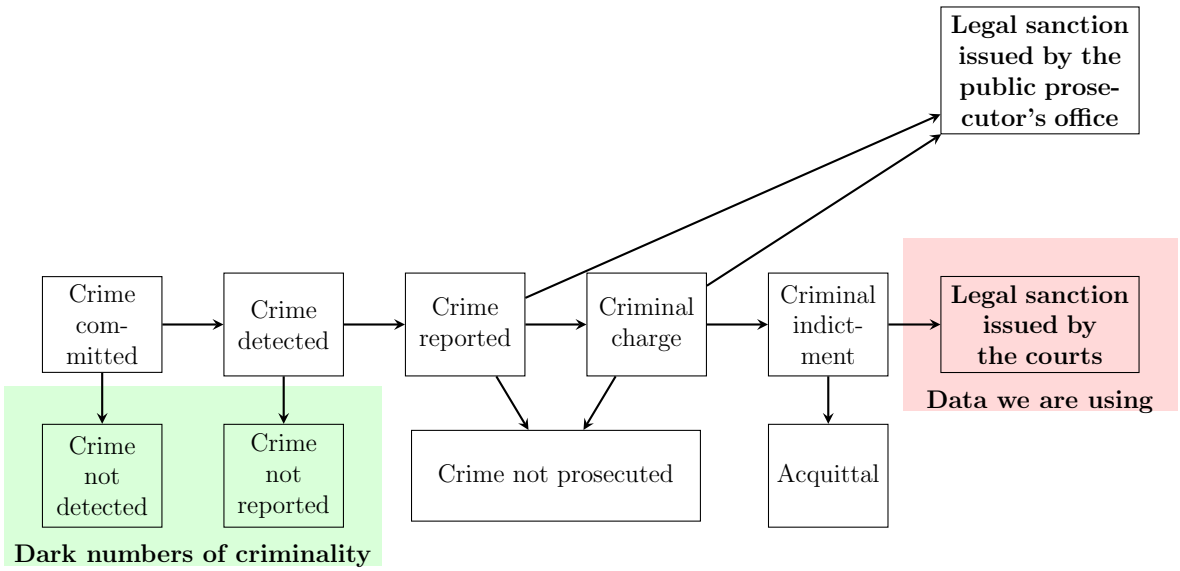
[8] In councils comprising fewer than 23 members, parties may grant an advantage to up to 4 candidates. In those with 23 to 53 members, up to 6 candidates can receive this benefit, and in councils with over 53 members, the limit increases to 10 candidates. Appendix Figure A.1 Panel a) display the fraction of candidates with a head start by list position for our main estimation sample. About 91.5% of first-ranked candidates, 71.6% of second-ranked candidates, and 37.8% of third-ranked candidates are awarded a head start.

the parliament (*Storting*) nor the government (*regjering*) holds the authority to dictate the rulings of the courts in any particular case.

The Norwegian court system consists of three tiers: the district court (*tingretten*), the court of appeals (*lagmannsretten*), and the supreme court (*høyesterett*). All criminal proceedings commence at the district court level, where the majority of cases are resolved (Bhuller et al., 2020). Decisions at one level can be appealed to the next level by both the convicted and the prosecutor. Unlike the United States, where plea bargains are common, both confession and non-confession cases proceed to trial. While the confession is admitted as evidence, the prosecution must still present a complete case, and the judge might still find the defendant innocent.

Figure 1 illustrates the various pathways a crime can take within the criminal justice system. It details the process from the initial detection of a crime to the relevant institution responsible for handing out the legal sanction, as well as the possible outcomes of the crime not being detected, not being reported, not being prosecuted, or ending in acquittal.

Figure 1: The legal trajectory of a criminal offense



Notes: This table outlines the different pathways a crime can take within the legal system from the moment it is committed. The public prosecutor's office oversees three main types of legal sanctions: fixed penalties, penalty charge notices, and conditional dismissal of criminal proceedings. The courts are responsible for administering five additional sanctions: fines, probation, imprisonment, community punishment, and special sanctions.

2.3 Legal sanctions

Legal sanctions are broadly categorized into seven distinct subgroups.[9] The least severe crimes are punished with a fixed penalty (*forenklet forelegg*), which is a fine typically issued immediately upon apprehension of an offense by the police. These fines are predominantly issued for minor traffic infringements, constituting around 90 % of the fixed penalty cases.

The penalty charge notice (*forlegg*) represents a more severe form of penalty compared to the fixed penalty. The penalty charge notice also constitutes a fine, which magnitude depends on the nature of the offense and the financial situation of the offender. If the penalty charge notice is accepted, the case is resolved, thereby precluding further judicial action. However, if the accused maintains his innocence or believes the fine is disproportionate to the crime committed, he can opt not to accept the prosecution's offer, leading the case to proceed to court. Individuals over 18 years old who fail to pay the fine may face imprisonment.

Our focus in this paper is on the judicial sanctions administered by the courts which include fines, probation, imprisonment, community punishment, and special sanctions. Special sanctions encompass compulsory psychiatric care, juvenile punishment, or detention. Courts frequently impose a combination of these sanctions, such as a imprisonment alongside a fine.

2.4 Data

2.4.1 Crime register and other administrative data

The crime register (*Straffesaksregisteret*) compiles all recorded penal sanctions from 1998 to 2022 in Norway for people aged 15 and above.[10] It includes detailed information about all offenses, such as the type of offense, sentencing, conviction year, and the year

[9]The mildest form of judicial sanction, conditional dismissal of criminal proceedings (*betinget påtaleunnlatelse*), is often coupled with factors like youth, minor infringements, or first-time offenses.

[10]The age of criminal responsibility in Norway is 15 years.

the offense occurred. Offenses in the register range from minor infractions like speeding to serious crimes such as rape, homicide, or robbery. Each offense is categorized under the most severe legal maximum sentence when multiple subgroups apply, with precedence given to the most recent offense when penalties are identical.

Table 1 summarizes the number of criminal incidents that have led to court-issued legal sanctions from 1998-2021. The data reveal that imprisonment is the predominant form of punishment, accounting for nearly 50% of all legal penalties handed down by the courts. This table also highlights the variation in sentencing across different types of crimes, providing insight into how the courts punish different offenses. For example, while prison sentences are imposed in 50% of economic crime cases, they are significantly less common in traffic-related offenses, where only 27% of the convictions result in incarceration.

Table 1: Summary of reactions for Norwegian population 1998-2021

Sentence	Drug	Economic	Violence	Traffic	Other	N
Prison	0.458	0.501	0.611	0.268	0.309	207,845
Probation	0.430	0.299	0.197	0.313	0.231	143,297
Community punishment	0.069	0.164	0.127	0.092	0.053	46,555
Fine	0.043	0.033	0.049	0.327	0.401	43,305
Other type of reaction	0.001	0.002	0.016	0.000	0.005	2,003
Sum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	443,005

There is a delay in the recording of crime for two primary reasons. Firstly, certain offenses may go undetected for several years following their occurrence, or they may only be reported by the victim at a later stage. Secondly, the legal process involved in resolving crimes can be protracted. Bhuller et al. (2024) records an average span of six months from the initial charging of a defendant to the commencement of the court trial. Following this, the average duration for the entire court processing is approximately three months. Subsequently, the entire court processing typically takes around three months. Moreover, the possibility of appeals can further extend the time before a final verdict is reached. Consequently, it could take years before a committed crime is formally documented in the crime register. Appendix Table A.1 summarizes the share convicted for different subgroups of legal sanctions relative to the year in which the crime was committed. The

lag between the year a crime is committed and the year of conviction is unlikely to affect our results. However, to ensure data completeness, we exclude crimes committed in 2022 (the final sample year) from our analysis, as the data for that year may be incomplete.

Because the crime register is highly sensitive, our access to administrative records on the Norwegian population is more limited than usual. However, we do have access to key variables that are essential for understanding criminal behavior in Norway. This includes information on the entire Norwegian population residing in the country, along with details such as their municipality of residence, gender, and year of birth. Additionally, we have data on their employment status and income decile, which provide valuable insights into their socioeconomic context.

2.4.2 Politician data

We rely on a comprehensive dataset of candidates running for local office in Norway from 2003 to 2019, encompassing approximately 60,000 candidates annually (*Local Candidate Dataset; LCD*) (Fiva et al., 2024). This publicly available dataset includes election outcomes for every candidate, along with comprehensive information about party affiliation, list rank, win margins, and leadership positions. Statistics Norway has merged LCD with their administrative registers, enabling us to track criminal sentences and extract other key variables such as gender, municipality of residence, and labor market outcomes.

To compare the criminal records of candidates with the general population, we construct a panel consisting of individuals aged 20 and above residing in Norway during the local election years of 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. This balanced panel tracks each individual from five years before the election year $(t-5)$ to five years after $(t+5)$. We exclude individuals aged 19 and below as their full criminal history cannot be observed in the pre-period ($t-5$ to $t-1$) due to the age of criminal responsibility being 15 years. The balanced panel is then divided into two groups: 1) individuals who ran for local office, and 2), individuals who did not.

The group of political candidates includes individuals that ran for local office in the

years 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. Each election saw approximately 60,000 candidates, resulting in a total of 301,283 candidates across these years of which 295,419 are older than 20 years in the election year. After excluding party-independent and minor party lists[11], our sample comprises 263,933 candidates. Statistics Norway match these candidates with the administrative records. However, Statistics Norway are unable to match 1,341 (about 0.5%), leaving us unable to observe any of their administrative records. These candidates are excluded from our analysis, leaving us with 262,592 candidates. To construct a balanced panel, we also only keep candidates that are alive throughout the whole pre- and post-period. Specifically, we exclude individuals who died in the post-period, or individuals who were not permanent residents in Norway throughout the whole pre- and post-period. After these exclusion, we are left with a sample of 255,580 candidates.

In some of our analyses, we focus on comparing individuals at the start of their political careers with the general population, with a special interest on those who self-select into politics. Due to the sensitivity of the crime data, we are unable to directly link the crime register with information about the first year a candidate ran for office. However, we can observe candidates who participated in elections in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. For these analyses, we define a "first-time nominee" as a candidate who did not run for office in 2003 but appears in our data for the first time in the elections of 2007, 2011, 2015, or 2019. This definition may result in cases where someone who first ran in, for example, 1999 is classified as a first-time nominee if they did not run in 2003 but did so in 2007. However, after thoroughly reviewing the original LCD, we find that this scenario applies to fewer than 2,000 candidates, making it unlikely to significantly impact our results.

[11]The nine main parties considered in our study are classified based on their political orientation as follows: left-leaning (*Labor Party* (A), *Socialist Left Party* (SV), *Rødt* (R)); center (*Center Party* (SP), *Miljøpartiet De Grønne* (MDG), *Christian Peoples' Party* (KRF), *Liberal Party* (V)); and right-leaning (*Conservative Party* (H), *Progress Party* (FRP)).

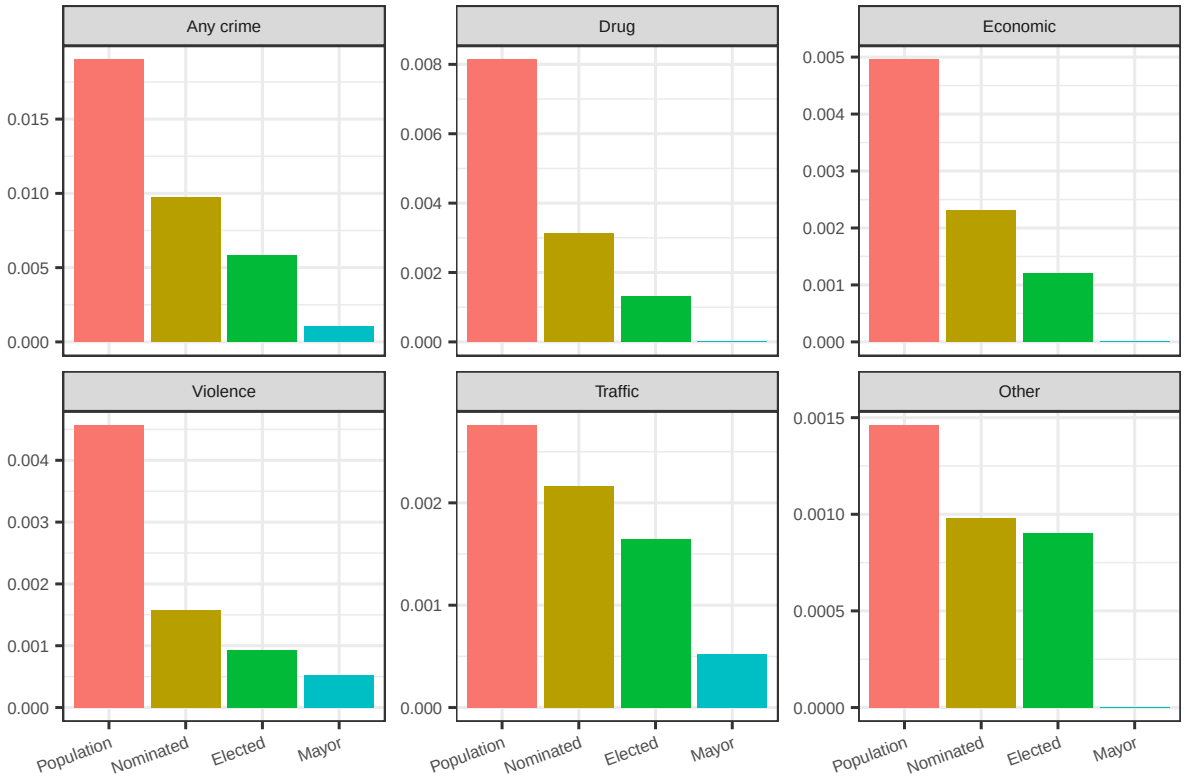
2.4.3 A first look at the data

The upper left Panel of Figure 2 illustrates the average share of individuals who committed a crime in the five years leading up to the election year (i.e., from $t-5$ to $t-1$) across various distinct population groups. The data suggest a positive selection for lawfulness among politicians, with mayoral candidates exhibiting the lowest rates of criminal involvement. This trend extends to elected municipal council members, who show lower criminal involvement than candidates who ran for office but were not elected. Even among unsuccessful nominees, the criminality rate is lower than that of the general population. The remaining panels of Figure 3 further break down criminal convictions by the type of offense, reinforcing the observation that politicians are generally selected for lawfulness across all crime categories in our data.

However, some of these differences can likely be attributed to compositional differences among the groups. For instance, younger individuals are more likely to be convicted of crimes, and mayors tend to be older on average than the general population. To highlight some of these variations, Appendix Figure A.2 illustrates the differences in crime convictions across other factors such as gender, working status, and income levels. These differences emphasize the importance of controlling for these variables when comparing the general population and politicians, as politicians differ significantly from the general population in terms of age, gender, employment status, and income.

In our primary analyses, we investigate how much of the pronounced differences between the general population and political candidates, as seen in Figure 2, are due to variations in socio-economic background characteristics across different groups. By accounting for these factors, we aim to ensure that the observed differences in criminal convictions are not simply due to underlying demographic and socioeconomic disparities but reflect genuine differences in behavior and lawfulness between politicians and the general population.

Figure 2: Criminal Involvement by Political Office in the Five Years Before Local Elections



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). The upper left panel presents data on any crime committed, while the other panels provide a breakdown by the type of crime. The sample is divided into four mutually exclusive categories: a random sample of individuals not running for local office in year t ('population'; N=3,500,000), candidates running for local office in year t that are not elected ('nominated'; N=208,249), candidates elected to local office in year t who do not serve as mayors ('elected'; N=45,429), and those elected to local office in year t who are appointed mayors ('mayor'; N=1,902). We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

2.5 Potential biases

The crime register only includes recorded crimes, thus omitting the dark figure of criminality – crimes that either went undetected or unreported, and thus did not result in any penal sanction in the judicial system. Furthermore, the crime register does not encompass non-prosecuted crimes, or crimes that resulted in acquittal. Politicians might be able to influence the probability of a crime being recorded, which could influence the interpretation of this paper's findings for several reasons.

First, being a politician might be positively correlated with being a "skilled criminal", which affects the probability of a crime being detected. If this is the case, the observed differences in criminal involvement between politicians and the general population might

be overestimated, as the skill-level affects the probability of the crime being detected. A somewhat related concern is that certain types of criminal activities are more easily detected than others. If politicians are more prone to committing white-collar crimes, which are typically harder to detect, their criminal activities might be underrepresented in the data. While we cannot entirely eliminate this issue, we mitigate some of the potential bias introduced by the potential that politicians are more "skilled criminals" by comparing politicians to individuals from the general population with similar characteristics such as age, gender, municipality of residence, employment status, and income decile. We categorize crimes into five distinct subgroups, allowing us to observe any differences in the types of crimes committed by politicians compared to the general population.

Second, becoming a politician can itself affect the probability of detection or reporting of a crime. On one hand, politicians running for election are subject to increased media scrutiny, increasing the probability of detection or reporting of crimes committed. On the other hand, politicians in power might leverage their positions to conceal their criminal activities, affecting the probability of reporting of crimes. We mitigate some of this potential concern by focusing on criminal activities pre-office.

Third, a politician might be able to exert influence that affects the probability of a crime being prosecuted or that it might lead to acquittal in court. Research from other countries has shown that, although the courts in theory are independent of political influence, politicians are able to affect court outcomes (Lambais and Sigstad, 2023). By focusing on the pre-office criminal involvement, we ensure that the politicians are not in any official position of power to affect the outcomes of any criminal investigation. Furthermore, the centralization of the Norwegian court makes it unlikely that local candidates exert any influence over judges or courts (NOU 2020:11). In Norway, the appointment of judges is formally determined by the King in Council, which means the government has some influence over the selection process.[12] In practice, although politically motivated ju-

[12]According to the Norwegian Constitution, judges are appointed by the King in Council (Grunnloven § 21). A Judicial Appointments Board (JAB) formally nominates three candidates for consideration by the King in Council, from which the government makes its selection. Although the government has the theoretical option to choose a candidate outside the JAB's list, this has never occurred in practice

dicial appointments are a possibility, the established practice is to adhere an independent nomination-procedure. The possibility of politically motivated influence on the courts is even less likely when considering candidates running for local office.

3 Methods

We consider political selection as a dynamic process occurring throughout an individual's career, starting from their initial nomination and extending to potential executive positions. In this section we describe a series of tests designed to quantify the extent to which lawful and unlawful citizens advance in the political hierarchy at different career steps. The flexible-list electoral setting provides an ideal context for this study. It enables us to explore the underlying forces behind any positive selection, specifically, whether voters or party leaders play a more significant role in this process. In addition, we study the disciplining effects of serving in office using an event-study design.

3.1 Initial nomination

Being a local politician in Norway is a part-time position held concurrently with other sources of income. Previous research from Norway (Cirone et al., 2021) and other Nordic countries (Berg, 2020; Kotakorpi et al., 2017) find that the economic returns from winning a seat in the local council is small or non-existent. It is nonetheless conceivable that some dishonest individuals might pursue local political office to further their personal enrichment. They could, for example, seek elected positions to influence public procurement processes in dubious ways.

To analyze self-selection into public office, we consider the initial nomination on a party list, depending on both the candidate's willingness to stand for election and the party's decision to include them on the ballot. We run regression analyses that compares

(NOU2020:11). Thus, while politically motivated judicial appointments are theoretically possible, the established practice is to adhere to the nominations made by the JAB. The members of the JAB and their personal deputies are appointed by the King in Council following recommendations by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

the criminal records of first-time candidates to those of other individuals drawn from the general population, as specified in the following model:

$$C_{it} = \sum_{j} \alpha_j \cdot \mathbf{I}[j = t] + \beta \cdot \mathbf{I}[Run_{it}] + \gamma \cdot \mathbf{I}[female_{it}] + \sum_{l} \delta_l \cdot \mathbf{I}[l = age_{it}] + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Here C_{it} is an indicator variable equal to one if individual i has been committed for any serious crimes in the 5 years prior to the election year.[13] Run_{it} is a dummy variable turned on for individuals running for office for the first time in election year t. The parameter of interest, β, captures the relative crime propensity of candidates' running for office to individuals with the same age and gender in the general population (who never run for office during our sample period).

3.2 The best at the top?

In electoral systems with flexible lists, political parties play a crucial role in determining election outcomes by assigning ranks to their candidates on the ballot (Buisseret et al., 2022; Cox et al., 2021; Crutzen et al., 2024). Research by Dal Bó et al. (2017) demonstrates that in Sweden, which employs a flexible-list system, political parties successfully promote positive selection based on cognitive abilities and leadership skills. A remaining question, and the focus of our study, is whether parties also possess the capability to select candidates based on integrity and adherence to the law.

As discussed in Section 2.1, a critical decision in our context is selecting the candidate to be placed at the top of the list, effectively nominating them as the party's mayoral candidate. Another significant decision involves determining which candidates should get top-ranks.[14] To assess the role of political parties as gatekeepers, we estimate the following regression model:

[13] In our baseline analysis, we restrict the analysis to crimes committed in year $t-5$ to $t-1$.

[14] In the criminal records data set, we do not have information about which candidates the parties have given a 'head start' (corresponding to 25% of the total number of votes received by the party). Appendix Figure A.1 show, however, the strong relationship between rank and head start status using data from Fiva et al. (2024). In our sample period, the median number of candidates receiving a bonus is two.

$$C_{it} = \sum_{j} \alpha_j \cdot \mathbf{I}[j = t] + \sum_{r} \beta_r \cdot \mathbf{I}[r = rank_{it}] + \gamma \cdot \mathbf{I}[female_{it}] + \sum_{l} \delta_l \cdot \mathbf{I}[l = age_{it}] + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

This model is identical to equation (1), except that $\mathbf{I}[Run_{it}]$ has been replaced with list position fixed effects ($\sum_r \beta_r \cdot \mathbf{I}[r = rank_{it}]$). These fixed effects run from list position $r = 1$ to list position $r = 9$, leaving lower-ranked candidates as the reference group ($r \geq 10$). If political parties prioritize 'clean candidates' we expect to see that the β's are falling in absolute value by r, and in the extreme case with perfect sorting $\beta_1 < \beta_2 < ... < \beta_9 < 0$.

3.3 Do voters prioritize lawful candidates?

Electoral systems with preference voting allows citizens to actively reject candidates they perceive as untrustworthy and endorse those they believe to be more honest. Even if voters cannot observe candidates' criminal activities they might be able to screen candidates on this dimension using information shortcuts, based on, for example, campaigning activities and expressed ideology (Jokela et al., 2023).

To investigate if voters prioritize lawful candidates when casting their preference votes, we run the following model:

$$Climb_{it} = \sum_{j} \alpha_j \cdot \mathbf{I}[j = t] + \eta C_{it} + \gamma \cdot \mathbf{I}[female_{it}] + \sum_{l} \delta_l \cdot \mathbf{I}[l = age_{it}] + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

Here $Climb_{it}$ is a dummy indicating if candidate i in year t ascended on the party-list relative to his initial rank, i.e. if the final rank was better (numerically lower) than the initial rank. Hence, popular candidates who get sufficient personal votes to overtake other candidates will have $Climb_{it} = 1$. The parameter of interest, η, captures the extent to which voters prioritize lawful candidates when casting their personal votes.

3.4 What happens after the election?

We study changes in criminal activity around elections using two strategies. First, we implement an event-study comparing candidates elected to local office for the first time in year t to individuals who were nominated in year t but not elected. We rely on the following specification:

$$C_{it} = \sum_{j \neq -1} \iota_j \cdot \mathbf{I}[j = t] + \sum_{j \neq -1} \kappa_j \cdot \mathbf{I}[j = t] \cdot \mathbf{I}[elected_{it}] + \lambda \cdot \mathbf{I}[elected_{it}] + \sum_{p} \rho_p \cdot \mathbf{I}[p = party_i] + \epsilon_{it} \tag{4}$$

In Equation (4), the parameters of interest, κ_j, measures the differences in crime propensity between candidates elected in t and candidates not elected in t relative to the differences in $t-1$. Our baseline empirical specification also includes list fixed effects ($\sum_p \rho_p \cdot \mathbf{I}[p = party_i]$), which means that all inference is drawn from candidates running for the same list in $t = 0$.

We also implement the same type of event study comparing candidates promoted to mayor in year t to mayoral candidates in year t. For this type of analysis, we use municipality fixed effects, rather than list fixed effects (as each list has only one mayoral candidate).

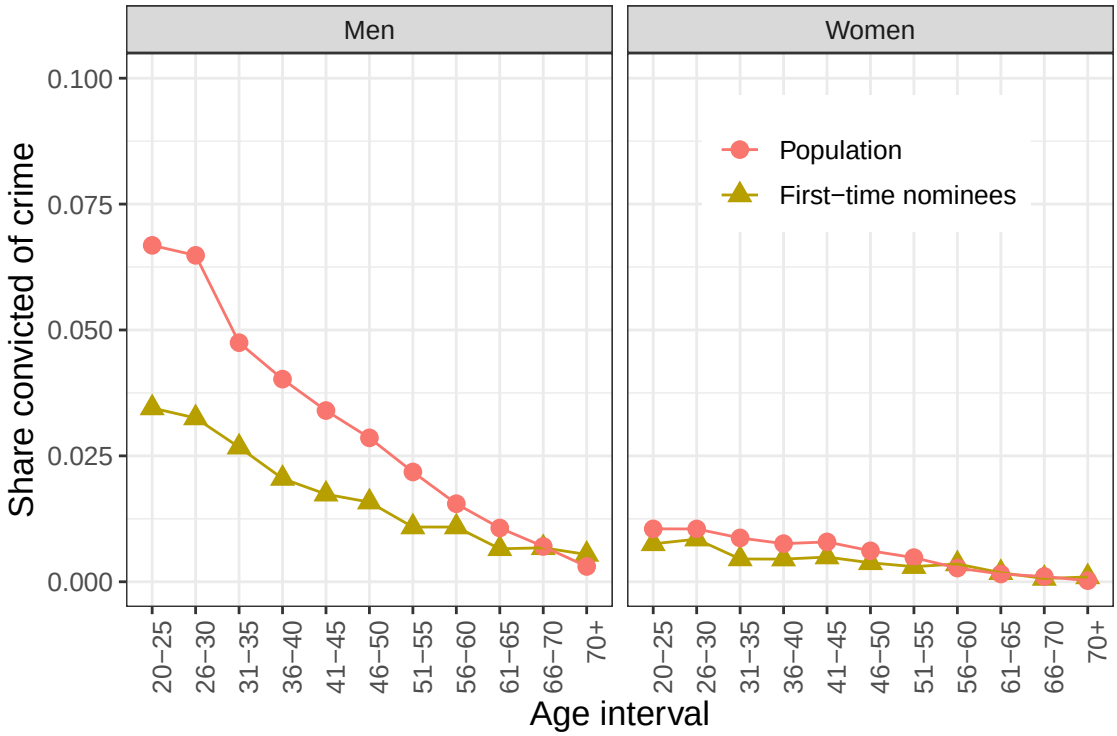
4 Results

In this section we present our main results. For each of the four tests that we described in the previous section, we first present graphical analyses and then proceed with the formal estimation framework, as laid out in Equation (1) to Equation (4).

4.1 Initial nomination

In Figure 3, we analyze the criminal records of first-time nominees in comparison to those of the general population within the same five-year age group.[15] Given the substantial influence of gender on crime propensity, we conduct this comparison separately for each gender. The left-hand panel of Figure 3 displays the general male population with red circles, while the data for first-time male nominees is represented by brown triangles. The right-hand panel presents the corresponding plot for women.

Figure 3: Criminal Conviction Rates by Age: First-Time Nominees vs. General Population, Split by Gender



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). We split the sample into two mutually exclusive groups: a random sample of individuals not running for local office in year t (N=2,800,000), and individuals who are running for local office for the first time in year t (N=81,991). We use data from elections held in 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Figure 3 illustrates two well-known empirical regularities. First, beyond the late teens, the propensity to commit crime declines rapidly as individuals age (see, e.g., Farrington, 1986; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). Second, men are much more likely to be involved

[15] Appendix Figure A.3 shows that individuals aged 25 to 55 are overrepresented as first-time nominees compared to the general population.

in criminal activities than women (see, e.g., Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996).

The key take-away from Figure 3 is this: First-time male nominees are significantly less likely to have been convicted of a crime in the five years preceding the election compared to their peers in the general population of the same age group. For instance, among the youngest age group (20—25), the likelihood of having been convicted of a crime is approximately half for candidates compared to the general population. This pattern is consistent across all other age groups, except for the oldest cohort (70+), where the overall crime propensity is nearly zero for both first-time candidates and the general population. Overall, there appears to be a strong positive selection on lawfulness for first-time male nominees.

Also first-time female candidates appear to be positively selected, as the brown triangles representing candidates consistently fall below the red circles representing the population. However, the difference in criminal involvement between female first-time nominees and the general female population appears to be quantitatively unimportant. While, men running for office for the first time tend to adhere more strictly to legal norms when compared to the general male population, women running for office for the first time tend to adhere to the legal norms at a similar level to the general female population.

We further explore the difference in criminal involvement between first-time nominees and the general population by estimating Equation 1. In line with the graphical analysis, Table 2 shows that the estimated difference in pre-election criminal propensity is negative, indicating that first-time nominees are less likely to have a criminal background than the general population across all specifications in Columns (1) through (5). All estimates are statistically significant at the 5% significance level. In Column (1), we estimate the difference in the proportion of individuals with a criminal record between first-time nominees and the general population, while including only election year fixed effects. The coefficient in Column (1) indicate that first-time nominees are 0.70 percentage points less likely to engage in criminal activities when compared to the general population. Considering that 1.83% of the full sample has been involved in criminal activity within

the five years leading up to the election, this estimate reflects a 38% reduction relative to the average value of the dependent variable.

Table 2: Initial Nomination: Comparison Between First-Time Nominees and the General Population

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variables					
First-time nominee = 1	-0.0070***	-0.0092***	-0.0102***	-0.0071***	-0.0064***
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Mean dep. var	0.0183	0.0183	0.0183	0.0183	0.0183
Fixed-effects					
Election year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender			Yes	Yes	Yes
Working status				Yes	Yes
Income decile				Yes	Yes
Municipality					Yes
Fit statistics					
Observations	2,881,991	2,881,991	2,881,991	2,881,991	2,881,991
R^2	0.00044	0.00929	0.01808	0.02944	0.03015

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 1, comparing criminal involvement between first-time nominees ($N = 81,991$) and the general population ($N = 2,800,000$). In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

As demonstrated in Figure 3, there are strong life-cycle trends in criminal activity. Because many individuals enter politics at a relatively young age, when the general propensity for crime is quite high, failing to control for life-cycle effects can lead to an underestimation of positive selection on lawfulness.[16] Indeed, column (2) of Table 2 shows that the parameter estimate of interest increases in absolute value to -0.0092, when birth-year fixed effects are used to control for these life-cycle effects non-parametrically.

In Columns (1) and (2), we are essentially comparing a predominantly male group of first-time nominees[17] – who have a higher propensity for criminal activity – with a general population that has a more balanced distribution of men and women. Therefore, by

[16]The average age of first-time nominees is 44.7, while for the general population it is 48.5.

[17]In our sample, 54.3% of first-time nominees are men.

including a control for gender, as we do in column (3), we expect the absolute value of the estimated difference in criminal involvement between first-time nominees and the general population to increase, reflecting the impact of this demographic disparity. Column (3) of Table 2 confirms this expectation: the parameter estimate of interest increases in absolute value to -0.0102.

Employment status and income are additional important factors for understanding criminal behavior. Controlling for these compositional differences between first-time nominees and the general population, as shown in Column (4), yields a parameter estimate of -0.0071. The slight reduction in the absolute value reflects that unemployed and low-income individuals are more likely to appear in the crime register and less likely to run on party lists.[18]

In Column (5), our preferred specification, we include municipality fixed effects. Understanding criminal behavior in Norway requires recognizing that crime rates are typically higher in densely populated areas, particularly in larger cities. By including this control, we ensure that the comparison is made between individuals living within the same municipality. As a result, the estimate shifts from -0.0071 in Column (4) to -0.0064 in Column (5), indicating that first-time nominees are 0.64 percentage points less likely to have been involved in any crime in the five years leading up to the election year. This estimate is statistically significant at the 5% level. Given that 1.83% of the full sample was convicted of criminal activity, this represents a 35% reduction compared to the mean of the dependent variable.

Although the results in Table 2 suggest that individuals who self-select into politics are generally more law-abiding than those from the general population who do not, we cannot entirely rule out the influence of political parties in determining who is allowed to run for office. Candidate selection has previously been labelled "the secret garden of politics" (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988). In our setting, we are only able to observe candidates that are running for the first time, implying that we are not able to observe

[18] On average, politicians are higher earners and more likely to be employed than the general population (see Appendix Table A.2).

candidates that wanted to run but for some reason were unable to. Initial screening of a candidate made by a party might reveal that this individual is unwanted due to his criminal background, or due to some other unwanted trait that is positively correlated with having a criminal background. The party might prevent these types of individuals to run for election after this initial screening. Hence, the estimates in Table 2 represent some compound effect of self-selection and party-selection.

In Table A.3 we break down the criminal involvement variable into different criminal activities by type, to check if first-time nominees are less likely to be involved in certain types of criminal activity than the general population. Specifically, we run our preferred regression specification as we did in Column (5) of Table 2, but instead we break the variable for criminal involvement into the five categories drug, economic, violent, traffic and other crimes.

The results in Table A.3 reveal that first-time nominees are estimated to be less likely to be involved in criminal activities across all categories. The estimated difference in criminal involvement are statistically significant at the 5% level for the categories drug, economic, violent, and other crimes, while the estimated difference in criminal involvement for traffic crimes is statistically insignificant at the 10% level. The coefficients represents the estimated difference between the general population and the first-time nominees after including controls for election year, age, gender, working status, income decile and municipality. I.e. the estimate in Column (1) shows that first-time nominees are 0.34 percentage points less likely to be involved in drug crimes when compared to the general population. Considering that the mean of the sample that had been involved in drug crimes in the five years leading up to the election year is 0.78, this estimate represents a 44% decrease compared to the mean of the dependent variable.

4.2 The best at the top?

In this section, we analyze the role of political parties in preventing candidates with criminal backgrounds from attaining office. Parties have significant discretion in shaping

electoral outcomes by providing certain candidates with a "head start." This advantage often makes it nearly impossible for other candidates within the same party to compete effectively with those who receive this early support (Fiva and Røhr, 2018). Candidates with a head start are positioned at the top of the ballots, and the top-ranked candidate is usually the parties mayoral candidate. If parties were truly committed to promoting virtuous candidates, they would place those with the least criminal involvement highest on the ballot, thereby increasing their chances of being elected.

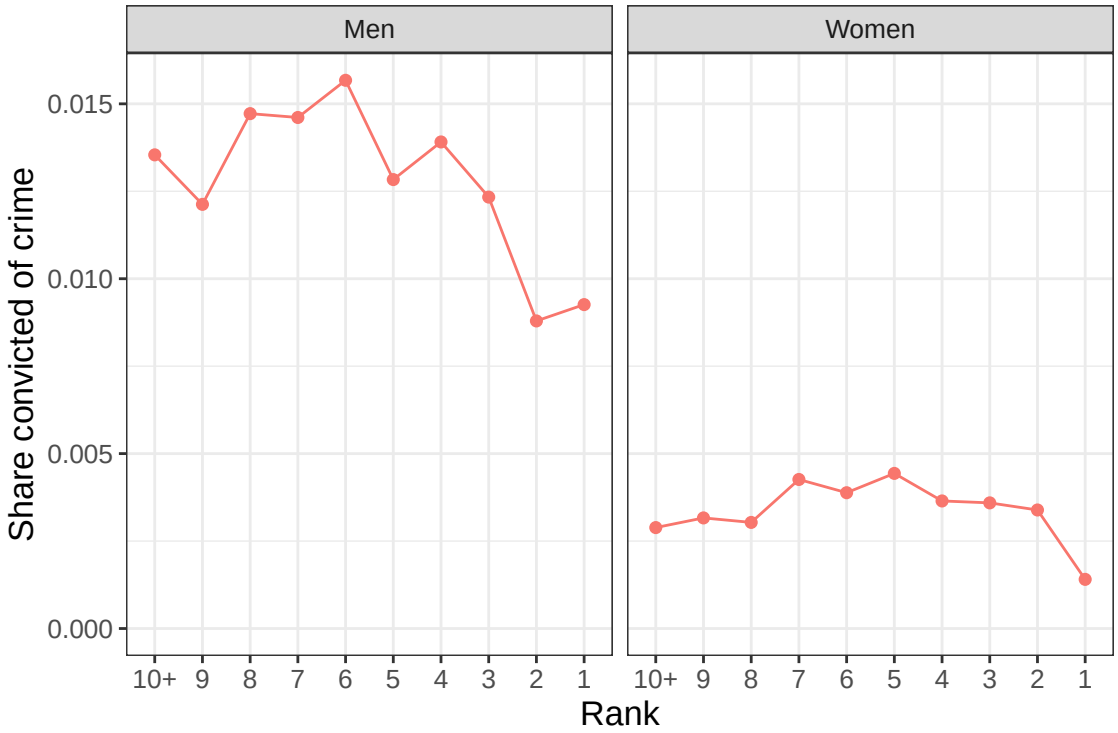
The strategic placement of candidates on the ballot reveals important insights into party priorities. Analyzing how candidate characteristics vary by rank uncovers some notable trends. For instance, candidates ranked 1st on the ballot tend to be older than those ranked lower. Even when comparing the top-ranked candidate with those in 2nd and 3rd positions, the mayoral candidate is, on average, three years older. Additionally, the 1st position has the highest proportion of male candidates.[19] This analysis also highlights a zig-zag pattern in gender distribution, consistent with previous research (Cirone et al., 2021), where parties tend to alternate genders on the ballot, placing men in the 1st, 3rd, and 5th positions, while women are typically positioned 2nd, 4th, and 6th.

In Figure 4, we examine the relationship between criminal involvement and candidate rankings, split by gender. As noted earlier, gender plays a significant role in crime propensity, and this remains true when analyzing candidates' rankings. Figure 4 reveal a clear pattern: among male candidates, those ranked 1st and 2nd on the ballot are less likely to have criminal records than those ranked lower on the ballot. A similar trend is observed among female candidates, where those ranked 1st are the least likely to be involved in criminal activities compared to their counterparts positioned further down the ballot. This suggests that parties may be strategically prioritizing candidates with cleaner records for the top ballot positions, particularly for the highest-ranked spots which is almost always the mayoral candidate of the party.

To more formally assess the role of political parties as gatekeepers, we estimate Equa-

[19]For a more comprehensive analysis of how candidate characteristics vary with rank position, refer to Figure A.1.

Figure 4: Crime Convictions by Political Rank, Split by Gender



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$) per their initial rank. The x-axis is arranged inversely, positioning higher-ranked (numerically lower) individuals towards the right, with the mayoral candidates occupying the prime position at rank one. Candidates ranked tenth and lower are collectively categorized under rank "10+." The y-axis displays the average share who committed a crime for all candidates at the given rank position. We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

tion (2), and report the results in Table 3. Each estimate represents the difference in the proportion of candidates with a criminal record between those in the reference category (rank 10, or lower). We progressively add more controls, following the same approach as in the previous analyses. Across all specifications, we consistently find that the top-two candidates are the most law-abiding. In our preferred model, reported in Column (5), we find that candidates ranked $1-2$ are about 0.2 percentage points less likely to have a criminal record compared to those ranked 10 and above. None of the other coefficient estimates are statistically significant at conventional levels.[20]

Although we cannot entirely discount the possibility that candidates self-select for higher-ranked list positions, the results presented in Table 3 are clearly consistent with the hypothesis that political parties serve as gatekeepers in the candidate selection process.

[20] Appendix Table A.4 provides the corresponding results, split by type of crime.

Table 3: Best at the Top: Comparison Between Top-Ranked and Lower-Ranked Candidates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variables					
Rank = 1	-0.0022***	-0.0020**	-0.0033***	-0.0019**	-0.0016**
	(0.0008)	(0.0008)	(0.0008)	(0.0008)	(0.0008)
Rank = 2	-0.0034***	-0.0045***	-0.0030***	-0.0022***	-0.0020***
	(0.0007)	(0.0008)	(0.0008)	(0.0007)	(0.0007)
Rank = 3	-0.0003	-0.0014	-0.0016*	-0.0011	-0.0009
	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)
Rank = 4	-0.0004	-0.0018*	-0.0008	-0.0005	-0.0003
	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)
Rank = 5	0.0005	-0.0007	-0.0011	-0.0009	-0.0007
	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)
Rank = 6	0.0009	-0.0002	0.0004	0.0005	0.0008
	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)
Rank = 7	0.0014	0.0005	0.0003	0.0002	0.0005
	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)
Rank = 8	0.0002	-0.0007	-0.0002	-0.0003	-2.36×10^{-5}
	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)	(0.0010)
Rank = 9	-0.0006	-0.0014	-0.0016*	-0.0016*	-0.0014
	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)
Mean dep. var	0.0090	0.0090	0.0090	0.0090	0.0090
Fixed-effects					
Election year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender			Yes	Yes	Yes
Income decile				Yes	Yes
Working status				Yes	Yes
Municipality					Yes
Fit statistics					
Observations	255,556	255,556	255,556	255,556	255,556
R^2	0.00021	0.00316	0.00628	0.00796	0.01111

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 2, comparing criminal involvement across candidates of varying ranks. In this Table criminal involvement, is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). We use candidates ranked 10 and above ($N = 143,141$) as the reference group. Each estimate represents the difference in the proportion of candidates with a criminal record between those in the 10+ category and those ranked 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and so on. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

These findings indicate that parties are statistically more likely to select candidates with relatively lower levels of criminal involvement for their top-ranked positions, specifically those ranked 1st and 2nd. However, beyond these top positions, there is no clear evidence to suggest that candidates ranked 3rd through 9th are any less criminally involved than those ranked 10th and above. This suggests that while parties may prioritize virtue for their most viable candidates, this criterion appears to diminish as we move down the ballot.

4.3 Are non-convicted politicians more likely to climb the ranks?

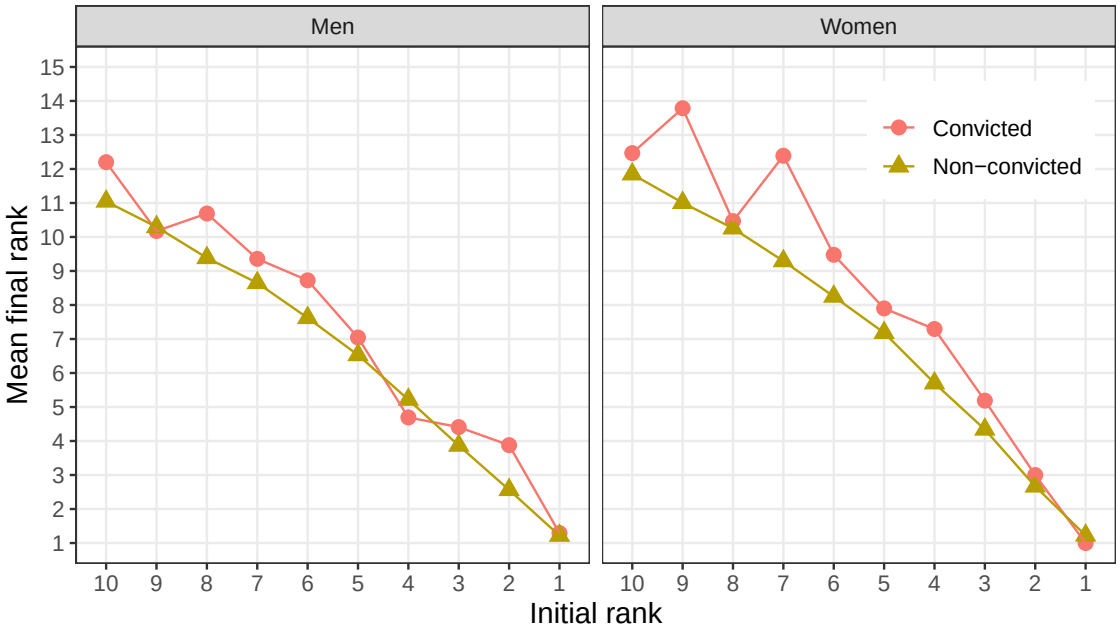
The Norwegian municipalities that we study, have a median population size of about 5,000 inhabitants, and are typically close-knit communities. In the 2015 Norwegian local elections, personal familiarity played a major role for 40% of respondents casting a personal vote (Cox et al., 2024). This familiarity with candidates, many of whom are well-known within these small communities, may allow voters to gauge the lawfulness and honesty of candidates, even in the absence of easily accessible criminal records, and cast their personal votes accordingly.

For data availability reasons, we are not able to directly examine personal vote counts. Instead, Figure 5 explores how the final ranking of candidates – after incorporating personal votes – deviate from their initial positions on the ballot, comparing those with and without criminal records, separately by gender. If voters favor lawful candidates when casting personal votes, candidates with criminal backgrounds should fall to lower final ranks (higher numerically) compared to non-criminal counterparts starting from identical initial positions.

In Figure 5 the red circles (representing convicted candidates) do tend to be positioned above the brown triangles (representing non-convicted candidates), suggesting that voters are positively selecting politicians based on lawfulness when casting their personal votes. However, the pattern in the data appears relatively weak.

In Table 4 we report the regression results from estimating Equation 3. Across all

Figure 5: Final Rank Changes After Personal Votes: Comparison Between Convicted and Non-Convicted Politicians, Split by Gender



Notes: This figure displays how the mean final rank of candidates after incorporating personal votes deviate from their initial position on the ballot. In the two panels we split into two mutually exclusive groups; nominees who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$), and those who did not. We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

specifications, we find that individuals with a criminal record are statistically significantly less likely to climb the ranks (or retain their original ballot position) compared to their non-convicted counterparts. The point estimate of approximately 0.06 indicates that individuals with a criminal background are about six percentage points less likely to improve or maintain their position compared to their peers, which is relatively small compared to the average proportion of candidates who advance in rank within the estimation sample. On average, 57% of candidates in our sample advance or retain their rank, so the estimated effect corresponds to an 11% reduction in the probability of climbing the ranks relative to the average.

In the Appendix Table A.5, we repeat the analyses, but instead of using a single explanatory crime variable, we include dummy variables for each of five mutually exclusive categories of crime. The results, taken at face value, suggest that candidates convicted of economic crimes are punished more harshly by voters, followed by those convicted of drug

Table 4: Final Rank Changes After Personal Votes: Comparison Between Convicted and Non-Convicted Politicians

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variables					
Crime	-0.0544***	-0.0581***	-0.0778***	-0.0570***	-0.0560***
	(0.0109)	(0.0109)	(0.0109)	(0.0108)	(0.0110)
Mean dep. var	0.5690	0.5690	0.5690	0.5690	0.5690
Fixed-effects					
Election year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender			Yes	Yes	Yes
Income decile				Yes	Yes
Working status				Yes	Yes
Municipality					Yes
Fit statistics					
Observations	243,728	243,728	243,728	243,728	243,728
R^2	0.00039	0.00162	0.00608	0.01750	0.02296

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 3, analyzing the share of candidates climbing the ranks due to personal votes between criminal and non-criminal politicians.In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). We split the sample into two mutually exclusive groups: 1) Candidates who were convicted of having committed a crime ($N = 2,151$), and 2) candidates who were not ($N = 241,577$). Each estimate represents the difference in the share climbing the ranks due to personal votes between convicted and non-convicted politicians. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

crimes. However, the large standard errors prevent us from drawing strong conclusions.

4.4 Post-election dynamics

Individuals with criminal backgrounds who seek public office might exploit their positions for personal gain, potentially leading to higher levels of criminal behavior and corruption once elected. However, several factors mitigate this risk within the context of Norwegian local councils.

Firstly, local politicians operate within an institutional environment characterized by multiple checks and extensive transparency, which monitor the actions of elected officials. These mechanisms serve as significant deterrents against corrupt behavior. Furthermore, elected representatives are not immune to criminal prosecution, ensuring that any mis-

conduct is subject to legal repercussions.

Secondly, election to public office imposes a responsibility on candidates to serve the broader public interest. Elected officials work in an environment influenced by their peers, and evidence suggests that only a small minority are lawbreakers. In councils where law-abiding standards prevail, those with criminal motives are less likely to engage in illicit activities due to the influence of their colleagues.

Finally, elected council members are subject to local media scrutiny and public attention, creating an environment where criminal behavior is more likely to be exposed. This heightened visibility serves as a strong incentive for council members to adhere to legal and ethical standards during their tenure.

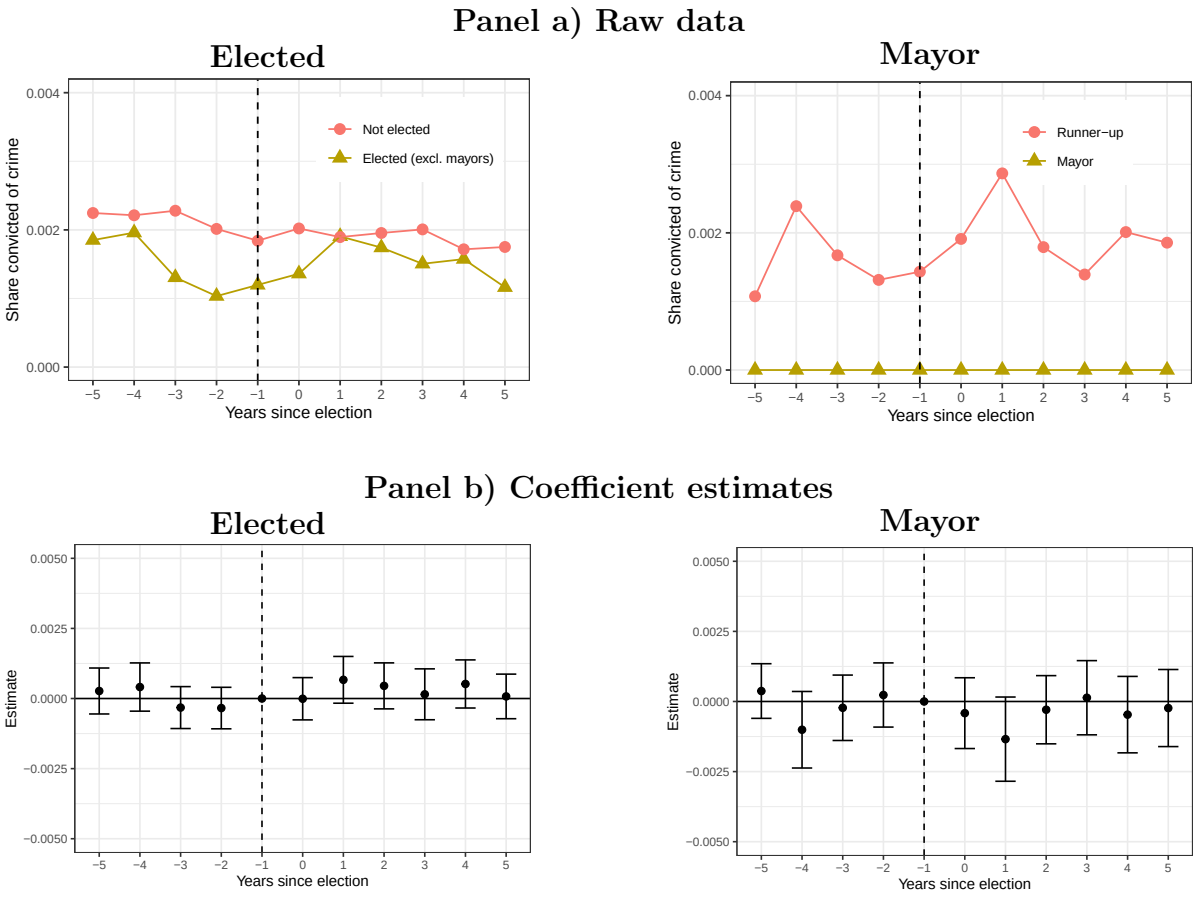
Figure 6 displays standard event study plots, where the fraction who committed a crime at event time t is split between a treated group (brown triangles) and a control group (red circles). In the left-hand panel, the treated group consist of individuals elected to local office for the first time in year $t = 0$[21], while the control group consist of individuals who were nominated in $t = 0$ but not elected in $t = 0$ or any previous year. In the right-hand panel, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to mayor for the first time in $t = 0$, while the control group consist of individuals who were first-ranked but not elected mayor in year $t = 0$ or in any previous year.

Both event plots show no evidence that winning office impacts criminal involvement. For elected mayors (N=780), the treated line lies exactly at zero, indicating that no individuals engaged in any criminal activity in the years surrounding the election. In both event study analyses, the post-treatment estimates are quantitatively small and not statistically different from zero. These findings contrast with those reported in Appendix Figure A.4, where we document substantial and statistically significant economic returns to office using the same data and research design. This suggests that the null findings reported in Figure 6 are not due to a lack of statistical power, but rather reflect that criminal tendencies appear to be an inherent characteristic, unaffected by electoral outcomes

[21] We are excluding those who get elected mayor.

in our setting.

Figure 6: The effect of winning office on criminal convictions



Note: Panel a) displays the fraction of treated (brown triangles) and untreated (red circles) for whom the outcome variable is equal to one at each event time t. Panel b) contains the estimates of the parameters of interest, κ_j, from Equation 4, along with the 95% confidence intervals. In the two left panels, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to local office for the first time (excluding those who were elected for mayor) in election year $t = 0$ (N=18,370), while the control group consist of individuals who were nominated in $t = 0$ but not elected in $t = 0$ or in any previous year (N=150,919). In the two right panels, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to mayor for the first time in $t = 0$ (N=780), while the control group consist of individuals who were first-ranked but not elected mayor in year $t = 0$ or in any previous year (N=8,371). The reference category is event period $t = -1$. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. Numerical results are available in Table A.6.

5 Decomposition of effects

The previous analyses have shown that the electoral process positively selects candidates based on lawfulness through three steps: initial nomination, party ranking of candidates, and voter selection. To decompose the relative importance of each step, we rely on a set of counterfactual election outcomes.

We observe a total of 45,361 candidates elected in the local elections in the election years 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. In the counterfactual exercises, we will draw a new set council members from the population for each municipality in each election year. We then compare the average criminal involvement between the randomly drawn council members and the actual council members.

In the first counterfactual exercise, we randomly select individuals for the local council from the eligible population within the relevant municipality-year. For these counterfactual council members, we calculate the average crime involvement during the five years preceding the relevant election. This random draw is repeated 50 times, before we take the average of these 50 randomly drawn councils. This counterfactual outcome constitutes our population benchmark.

In the second counterfactual exercise, we begin by calculating the actual number of individuals elected from each party list. Next, we randomly select candidates from the relevant party list, disregarding their original rank and personal votes, and measure their crime involvement during the five years preceding the election. We carry out the process 50 times and then take the average. This counterfactual shows how important initial nomination is for political selection on lawfulness.

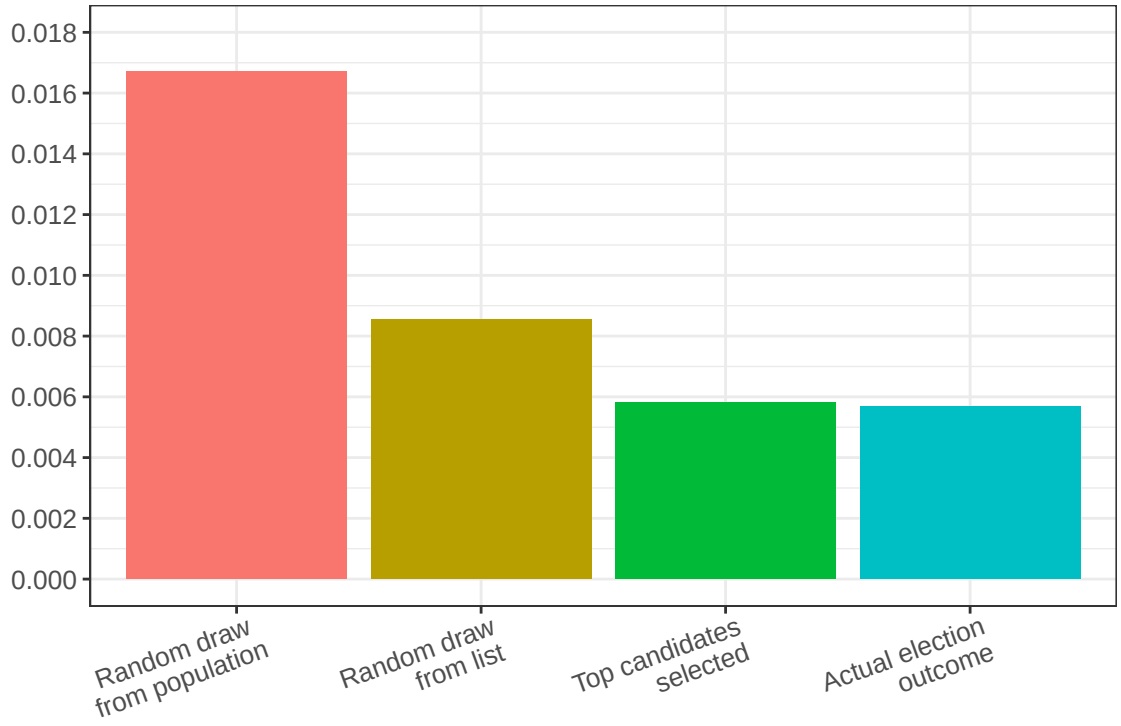
The third counterfactual exercise isolates the combined effect of initial nomination and party rankings. In this exercise, we choose candidates from a party list in the order they appear on the ballot, disregarding personal votes, thereby mimicking a closed-list electoral system.

The bar chart in Figure 7 presents the results of this exercise, showing the three counterfactuals alongside the actual election outcome. As we move from the counterfactual based on the general population (left-most bar, in red) to the actual election outcome (right-most bar, in turquoise), we observe that the largest decrease in criminal involvement occurs between the first and second counterfactual outcomes. This suggests that initial nomination on a list is a crucial step in explaining why Norwegian local politicians are more law-abiding than the general population.

There is also a substantial decrease from the second to the third counterfactual election outcome, indicating that political parties play a crucial role in excluding candidates with criminal records from local councils. This is a direct consequence of the empirical pattern established in Table 3 where political parties tend to reserve their best spots on the list to the most law-abiding candidates.

Because the third counterfactual and fourth actual election outcome feature a similar fraction of individuals with criminal records, personal votes have a negligible impact on the exclusion of criminals from local politics.

Figure 7: Criminal Involvement in Local Councils in Counterfactual Election Outcomes



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$) for different randomly drawn local councils. The left-most bar (red) represents council members randomly drawn from the entire eligible population residing in the municipality ("Random draw from population"). The next bar to the right (brown) shows council members randomly drawn from the relevant electoral list within the municipality ("Random draw from list"). The subsequent bar (green) represents top candidates selected from a party list in the order they appear on the ballot, ignoring personal votes, thereby simulating a closed-list electoral system ("Top candidates selected"). Finally, the right-most bar (turquoise) depicts the actual share of council members who were involved in criminal activities ("Actual election outcome").

6 Conclusion

Our study offers new insights into the dynamics of political selection, with a focus on the selection of individuals with criminal backgrounds for political office. Utilizing administrative data on criminal records, we examine the criminal involvement of candidates running for local elections in Norway. Our findings reveal a clear pattern along the political hierarchy: 1) Politicians nominated for office who were not elected exhibit, on average, lower levels of criminal involvement than the general population, 2) Elected candidates have, on average, lower levels of criminal involvement compared to their unelected counterparts, and 3) Mayors demonstrate, on average, the lowest levels of criminal involvement among those elected to local office. We further investigate these differences in criminal involvement and find that self-selection and party screening processes play a critical role in reducing the presence of individuals with criminal records in political office. However, once these factors are accounted for, voters do not seem to significantly discriminate candidates with criminal backgrounds.

Our findings add to the existing body of research by offering compelling evidence that democratic systems can effectively prevent individuals with criminal intentions from gaining political power, even in the absence of formal legal barriers. Although Norway is a country with low levels of corruption and crime, our results emphasize the important role that political processes can play in protecting the integrity of democracy. This aligns with cross-national research suggesting that democratic selection processes tend to enhance the integrity of politicians compared to autocratic methods (see, for example, Charron and Lapuente (2010)). If criminals are deterred from pursuing political office and parties effectively are vetting their candidates, strict legal disqualification rules may not be necessary.

As this paper has ventured into largely uncharted territory, several issues inevitably remain for future research. Our research design does not allow us to clearly separate the effects of self-selection from party selection in the critical decisions of running for election

and attaining high-ranking list positions. Though it is likely that both play a role, we believe parties have the upper hand in decisions regarding the allocation of candidates to the top positions on the ballot. Future research should focus on implementing research designs that allow better identification of relative significance of self-selection and party selection. Strengthening the role of political parties, particularly in scenarios where voters lack sufficient information to exclude undesirable candidates (Ferraz and Finan, 2008), could improve the overall quality of elected officials. However, this proposition may be path-dependent, as it assumes that corrupt party leaders are less likely to exclude their peers, potentially trapping the elected bodies in a low-quality equilibrium.

A related issue is whether the processes of self-selection and party selection are shaped by anticipatory electoral responses. Although our data suggest that voters play a minimal role in vetting candidates, would their influence have been greater if individuals with criminal backgrounds were more prevalent on the elected lists? Future research should examine whether parties exclude candidates with criminal records primarily due to anticipated negative voter reactions, or if this exclusion is driven by the ethical standards of party leaders. The cleaner track record of Norwegian mayors is particularly interesting since they are not elected by the voters, but by members of the municipal council, often following negotiations among political parties. Further research is needed to determine whether a clean criminal record is explicitly considered by the council members or if it is simply a byproduct of internal and strategic council dynamics.

As indicated in the introduction, many countries differ from the Norwegian context as criminals actively seek political positions and party leaders and voters either overlook their backgrounds or even support candidates with criminal histories (Eggers (2014); Vaishnav (2017)). However, what is missing are comparative studies that examine the relative effectiveness of electoral versus legal restrictions on the eligibility of individuals with criminal backgrounds. Given that legislative frameworks for local government levels are typically defined at the national level (at least in unitary states), such cross-national studies on local candidate selection could offer valuable insights. By tracking the pro-

portion of representatives with criminal backgrounds in countries with similar levels of criminality but differing eligibility and disqualification rules, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

In conclusion, while legal measures for preventing criminals from entering politics are very widespread, democratic systems can also uphold high standards. Future research should explore the cultural and institutional conditions that facilitate effective candidate vetting, as well as compare the relative effectiveness of legal versus democratic mechanisms for disqualifying candidates with criminal backgrounds.

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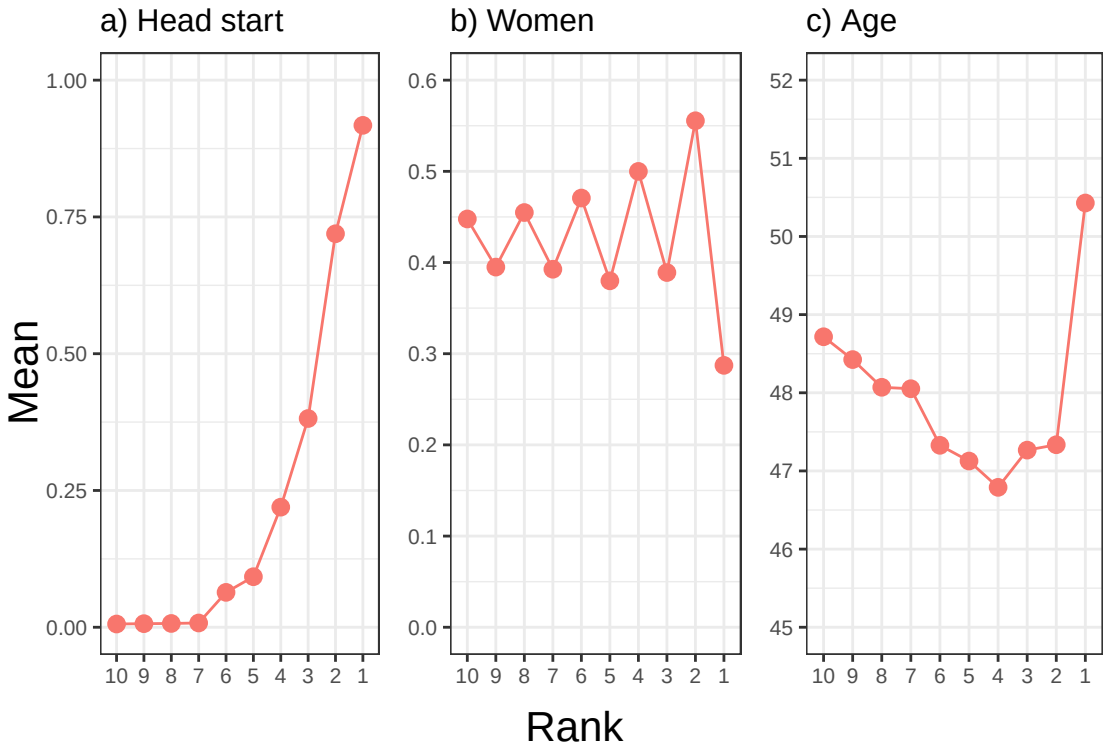
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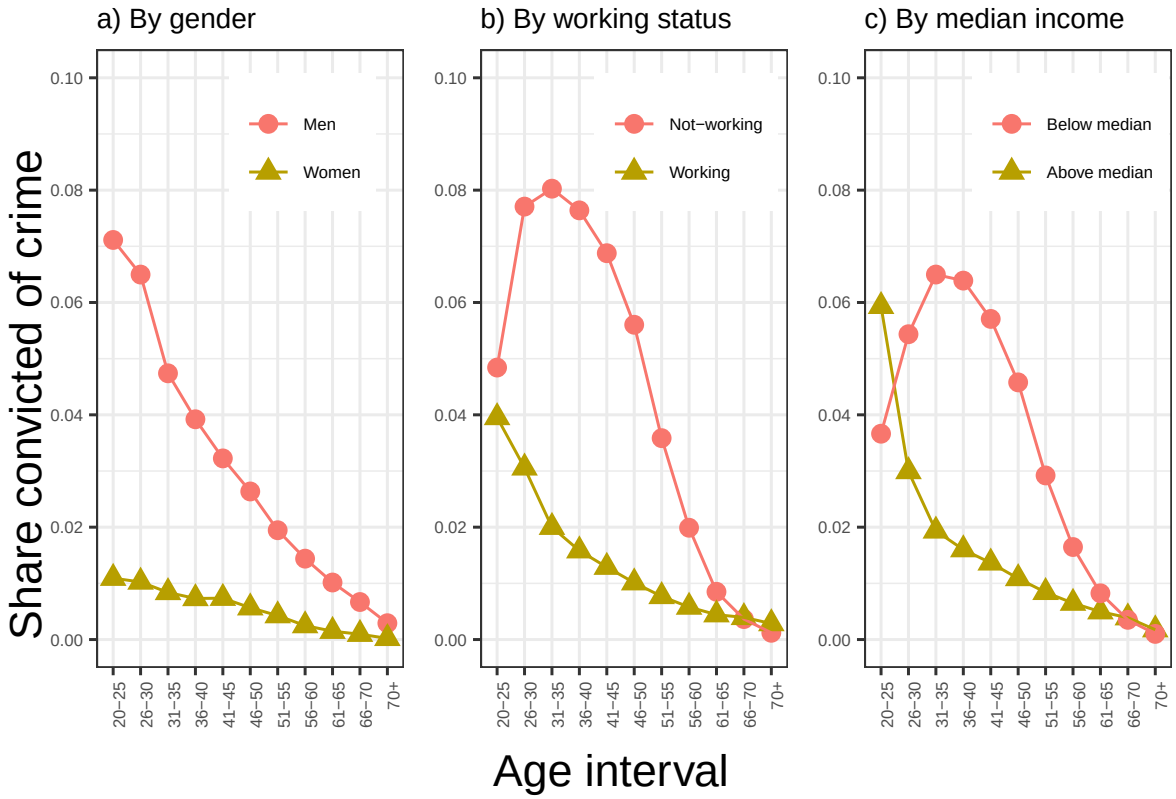
Appendix

Figure A.1: Characteristics by initial rank position



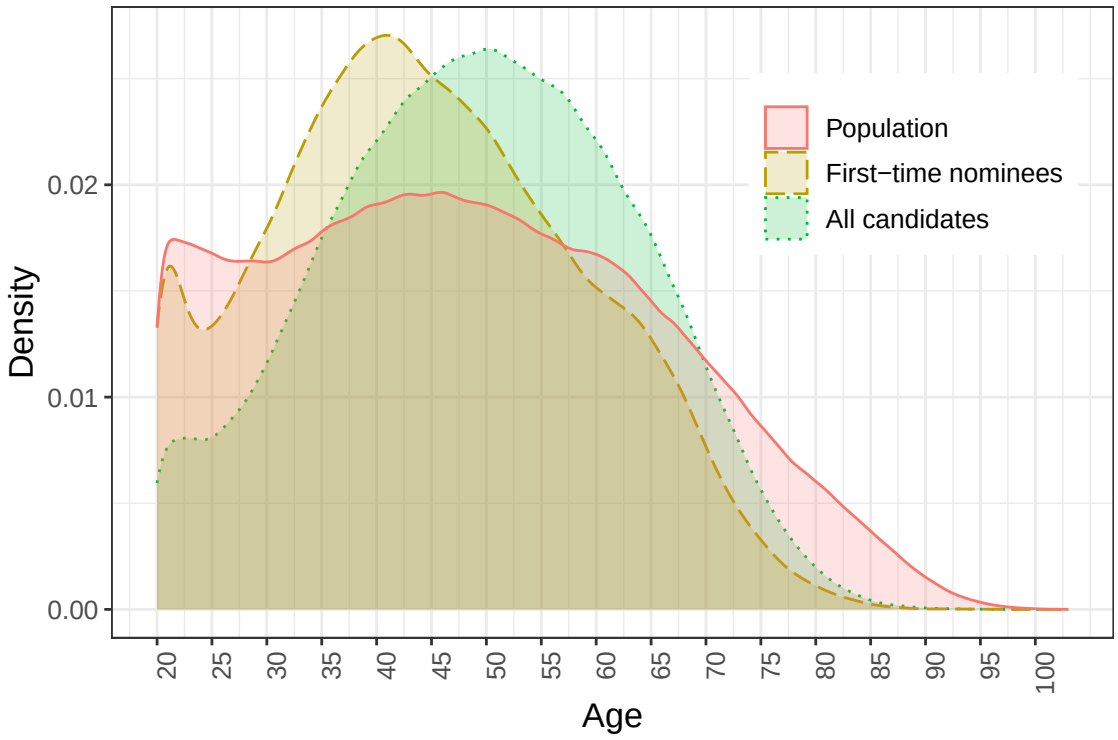
Notes: This figure displays the share with a head start, the share of women , and the mean age by initial rank position. We use data from our main estimation sample.

Figure A.2: Criminal involvement by socio-economic background in the five years preceding the election year



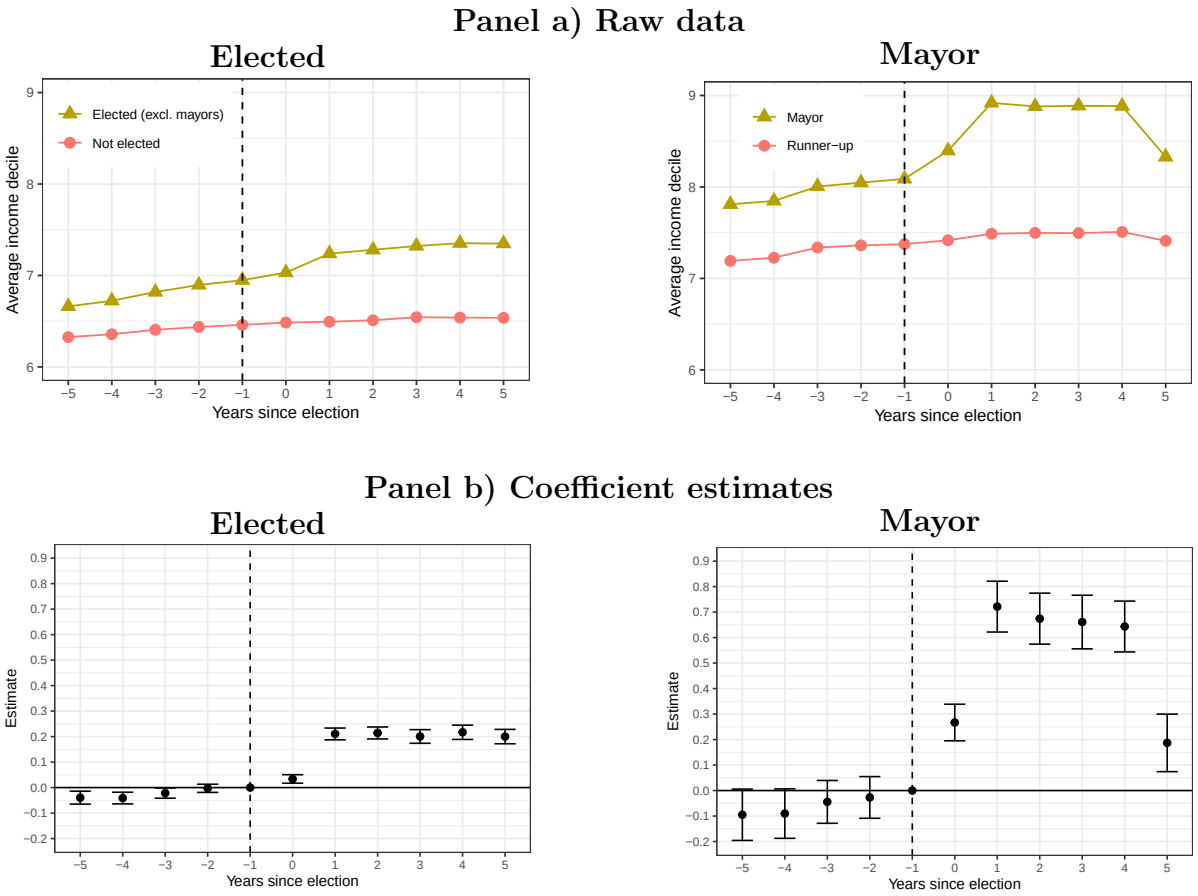
Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$) by different subgroups of the population residing in Norway. Panel a) shows the conviction rates by gender, panel b) by employment status, and panel c) by income level (above or below the median income). We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Figure A.3: Age Distribution of General Population, First-Time Nominees, and All Candidates



Notes: This figure displays the age composition of different subgroups of the population. We split the sample into three groups: a random sample of individuals not running for local office in year t (N=2,800,000), individuals who are running for local office for the first time in year t (N=81,991), and all candidates (including first-time nominees) running for local office (N=255,580). We use data from elections held in 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Figure A.4: The Effect of Winning Office on Income



Note: Panel a) displays the average income decile of treated (brown triangles) and untreated (red circles) at each event time t. Panel b) contains the estimates of the parameters of interest, κ_j, from Equation 4, along with the 95% confidence intervals. In the two left panels, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to local office for the first time (excluding those who were elected for mayor) in election year $t = 0$ (N=18,539), while the control group consist of individuals who were nominated in $t = 0$ but not elected in $t = 0$ or in any previous year (N=150,919). In the two right panels, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to mayor for the first time in $t = 0$ (N=780), while the control group consist of individuals who were first-ranked but not elected mayor in year $t = 0$ or in any previous year (N=8,371). The reference category is event period $t = -1$. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Table A.1: Share Convicted by Year Since Crime was Committed

Type of penalty	t=0	t+1	t+2	t+3	t+4	t+5
Prison	0.27	0.77	0.93	0.97	0.99	0.99
Probation	0.28	0.79	0.93	0.98	0.99	0.99
Community punishment	0.23	0.73	0.92	0.98	0.99	1.00
Other type of reaction	0.10	0.61	0.86	0.94	0.97	0.98
Fine	0.29	0.80	0.95	0.99	1.00	1.00

Notes: This table summarizes the number of years between the crime was committed and the issuance of the penalty for different legal sanctions. For each type of penalty, the table shows the proportion of cases where the penalty was issued in the same year as the crime was committed ($t = 0$), within the year following ($t + 1$), and so on up to five years after the crime ($t + 5$).

Table A.2: Summary statistics

	Population			Nominated			Elected			Mayor		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Age	48	17	3,500,000	50	14	208,249	48	12	45,429	51	8.7	1,902
Men	0.49	0.5	3,500,000	0.57	0.49	208,249	0.61	0.49	45,429	0.75	0.43	1,902
Income decile	5.8	2.2	3,500,000	6.5	2	208,249	7.3	1.8	45,429	8.4	1.2	1,902
Working status	0.69	0.46	3,500,000	0.82	0.38	208,249	0.93	0.25	45,429	0.96	0.19	1,902

Notes: This table presents summary statistics for the estimation sample. The income decile and working status variables reflect their values in the year preceding the election year ($t-1$). The sample is divided into four mutually exclusive categories: a random sample of individuals not running for local office in year t ('population'; N=3,500,000), candidates running for local office in year t that are not elected ('nominated'; N=208,249), candidates elected to local office in year t who do not serve as mayors ('elected'; N=45,429), and those elected to local office in year t who are appointed mayors ('mayor'; N=1,902). We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Table A.3: Initial Nomination: Comparison Between First-Time Nominees and the General Population By Type of Crime

	Drug	Economic	Violence	Traffic	Other
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variables					
First-time nominee = 1	-0.0034***	-0.0014***	-0.0025***	-0.0004*	-0.0003**
	(0.0002)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)
Mean dep. var	0.0078	0.0045	0.0045	0.0028	0.0014
Fixed-effects					
Election year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Working status	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Income decile	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics					
Observations	2,881,991	2,881,991	2,881,991	2,881,991	2,881,991
R^2	0.01461	0.00924	0.01067	0.00439	0.00330

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 1, comparing criminal involvement between first-time nominees ($N = 81,991$) and the general population ($N = 2,800,000$). In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). Criminal activities are broken down into five mutually exclusive categories. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table A.4: Comparison of Criminal Background Between Top-Ranked and Lower-Ranked Candidates

	Drug	Economic	Violence	Traffic	Other
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variables					
Rank = 1	-0.0010***	-0.0004	0.0003	-0.0009**	0.0002
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0003)
Rank = 2	0.0002	-0.0004	-0.0008***	-0.0008**	-0.0001
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0002)	(0.0004)	(0.0002)
Rank = 3	-0.0004	-0.0004	0.0002	-0.0009**	0.0004
	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0003)
Rank = 4	0.0003	-0.0005	-0.0008***	-8.81×10^{-5}	0.0005
	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0003)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Rank = 5	-0.0001	-0.0003	0.0009*	-0.0003	-0.0004
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0002)
Rank = 6	0.0005	0.0004	-0.0005	7.3×10^{-5}	0.0001
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0003)	(0.0005)	(0.0003)
Rank = 7	-0.0003	-0.0002	-0.0001	0.0004	0.0008*
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0005)	(0.0004)
Rank = 8	-0.0003	-0.0005	0.0007	-0.0004	0.0005
	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Rank = 9	0.0003	-0.0011***	-0.0005	-0.0003	-8.44×10^{-5}
	(0.0005)	(0.0004)	(0.0003)	(0.0005)	(0.0003)
Mean dep. var	0.0028	0.0021	0.0015	0.0021	0.0010
Fixed-effects					
Election year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Income decile	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Working status	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics					
Observations	255,556	255,556	255,556	255,556	255,556
R^2	0.00564	0.00438	0.00508	0.00491	0.00318

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 2, comparing criminal involvement across candidates of varying ranks. In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). Criminal activities are broken down into five mutually exclusive categories. We use candidates ranked 10 and above ($N = 143,141$) as the reference group. Each estimate represents the difference in the proportion of candidates with a criminal record between those in the 10+ category and those ranked 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and so on. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table A.5: Final Rank Changes After Personal Votes: Convicted vs. Non-Convicted Politicians by Type of Criminal Activity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variables					
Drug	-0.0734***	-0.0767***	-0.0946***	-0.0654***	-0.0625***
	(0.0201)	(0.0199)	(0.0199)	(0.0196)	(0.0196)
Economic	-0.0918***	-0.0977***	-0.1105***	-0.0863***	-0.0856***
	(0.0240)	(0.0239)	(0.0237)	(0.0239)	(0.0241)
Violence	-0.0307	-0.0338	-0.0561**	-0.0360	-0.0357
	(0.0263)	(0.0264)	(0.0264)	(0.0260)	(0.0259)
Traffic	-0.0277	-0.0304	-0.0527**	-0.0474**	-0.0505**
	(0.0230)	(0.0230)	(0.0227)	(0.0226)	(0.0227)
Other	-0.0028	-0.0037	-0.0205	-0.0064	-0.0005
	(0.0344)	(0.0344)	(0.0346)	(0.0351)	(0.0366)
Mean dep. var	0.5690	0.5690	0.5690	0.5690	0.5690
Fixed-effects					
Election year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birth year		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender			Yes	Yes	Yes
Income decile				Yes	Yes
Working status				Yes	Yes
Municipality					Yes
Fit statistics					
Observations	243,728	243,728	243,728	243,728	243,728
R^2	0.00043	0.00167	0.00612	0.01753	0.02299

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 3, analyzing the share of candidates climbing the ranks due to personal votes between criminal and non-criminal politicians. In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). We split the sample into two mutually exclusive groups: 1) Candidates who were convicted of having committed a crime ($N = 2,151$), and 2) candidates who were not ($N = 241,577$). Criminal activities are broken down into five mutually exclusive categories. Each estimate represents the difference in the share climbing the ranks due to personal votes between politicians who committed the specific type of crime. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table A.6: Event Study Regression Table

	Councillor		Mayor	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables				
Treated × t = -5	0.0002	0.0003	0.0002	0.0003
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0005)	(0.0005)
Treated × t = -4	0.0004	0.0004	-0.0011	-0.0011
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0007)	(0.0007)
Treated × t = -3	-0.0003	-0.0003	-0.0001	-8.99×10^{-5}
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0006)	(0.0006)
Treated × t = -2	-0.0003	-0.0003	-3.18×10^{-14}	0.0001
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0006)	(0.0006)
Treated × t = -1	ref	ref	ref	ref
Treated × t = 0	6.81×10^{-5}	7.62×10^{-5}	-0.0006	-0.0005
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0006)	(0.0007)
Treated × t = 1	0.0005	0.0006	-0.0012*	-0.0013
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0007)	(0.0008)
Treated × t = 2	0.0004	0.0004	-0.0005	-0.0005
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0006)	(0.0007)
Treated × t = 3	0.0003	0.0003	-7.28×10^{-5}	-1.67×10^{-6}
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0007)	(0.0007)
Treated × t = 4	0.0006	0.0006	-0.0007	-0.0006
	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.0007)	(0.0007)
Treated × t = 5	8.49×10^{-5}	9.87×10^{-5}	-0.0006	-0.0006
	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0007)	(0.0007)
Fixed-effects				
Election year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Age		Yes		Yes
Gender		Yes		Yes
Party		Yes		
Municipality				Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	1,702,516	1,702,516	90,764	90,764
R^2	5.74×10^{-5}	0.00186	0.00029	0.01370

*Notes: This table contains the estimates of the parameters of interest, β, from Equation 4, along with the 95% confidence intervals. In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). Column (1) and (2) reports the estimated treatment effect of being elected for the first time. The treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to local office for the first time in election year $t = 0$ (N=17,907), while the control group consist of individuals who were nominated in $t = 0$ but not elected in $t = 0$ or in any previous year (N=146,846). Column (3) and (4) reports the estimated treatment effect of being elected mayor for the first time. The treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to mayor for the first time in $t = 0$ (N=750), while the control group consist of individuals who were first-ranked but not elected mayor in year $t = 0$ or in any previous year (N=8,041). The reference category is event period $t = -1$. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*