CANDIDATE ENTRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Abstract

The competence of public officials affects state performance and economic growth, yet building this capacity is difficult: it requires protocols to identify more capable, representative individuals; their willingness to run for office; and party interest in supporting their candidacies. We evaluate an experiment designed to parse these problems of identification, entry and gatekeeping in advance of the 2023 local elections in Sierra Leone. A combination of community nominations and technocratic screening identifies individuals who are substantially higher quality and enjoy broader popular support than both incumbents and status quo aspirants. One quarter of top nominees formally enter politics, positively self-selected on quality, and their entry improves the maximum quality observed in candidate applicant pools. Party gatekeepers, however, are not more likely to select these capable, popular nominees and instead favor their own re-running incumbents. Results suggest that the challenge for political renewal is less about supply than demand in this context: there are indeed better potential candidates out there who are willing to run, but institutional party incentives work against selecting them.

Key words: Political entry and selection, economic development, local government, elections

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I. Introduction

Worldwide, citizen esteem for politicians and representative institutions is perilously low (Valgarðsson et al 2025). Only 16 percent of Americans trust the federal government and roughly a third identify politicians as the "biggest problem with the political system" (Pew Research Center 2023). Across dozens of wealthy nations, those who lack trust in government outnumber those who have trust (by 44 to 39 percent, OECD 2024). And while a strong majority (75 percent) of citizens in thirty African countries believe that elections are the best way to choose leaders, only 37 percent are satisfied with how their democracy is working (Afrobarometer 2024). Politicians are viewed as unresponsive, incompetent or self-serving, creating a disconnect between voters and the state (Mahmoud 2014, Mettler 2018, Schäfer & Zürn 2023).

The contribution of inclusive political institutions to economic growth makes this fracture particularly troubling for lower-income countries (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Characteristics of individual leaders are key drivers of the link between politics and economics at both the national (Jones and Olken 2005, Besley, Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2011, Marx, Pons and Rollet 2025) and local level (Martinez-Bravo 2017, Besley, Pande and Rao 2005). This raises the question of whether it is possible to improve state performance by bringing "better"—higher human capital, more honest, more representative—people into elected office.

The challenge in doing so is threefold. First, societies may lack the protocols and technology to identify individuals who would make for more effective politicians. Second, even if highly capable individuals can be identified, they may be unwilling to run for office. And third, even if they can be convinced to run, political parties' incentives may not align with selecting these new entrants as their candidates. We experimentally evaluate an intervention that aims to parse these problems—of identification, entry and gatekeeping—and assess which one(s) pose binding constraints on political renewal for the 2023 Local Council elections in Sierra Leone.

Collaborating with the government and both major parties, we situate this exploration in local politics for a few reasons. The work of Council focuses on the provision of basic public goods and services, which is important for economic development, and benefits from general competence rather than specialized expertise. Barriers to entry are relatively low (requiring few resources to contest, only part-time service and minimal eligibility requirements), suggesting a viable pathway in for new talent, and yet parties retain significant control over who runs and gets elected.

The intervention studied approaches the first issue of identifying political talent from the perspectives of representation and technocratic merit. Field teams began by asking a representative sample of voters to nominate individuals in their jurisdictions who have the skills needed to perform well in local government, people they think would do a good job in office, and whom they would want them to represent them. Individuals could name up to three people in a first unconstrained round and up to an additional three women in a second round. Nominations were elicited via household visits in the three largest communities per ward, which is the

administrative unit tied to a Local Council seat.[1]

Technocratic screening then winnowed the field of popular names to the two highest quality nominees per ward, whom we refer to as top nominees. Enumerators privately screened up to ten of the most frequently named individuals in each ward on skills that empirically correlate with on-the-job performance. The screening instrument collates measures from multiple studies in this context and focuses on those that predict favorable Parliamentary audit reports (from Casey, Kamara and Meriggi 2021), success in winning competitive infrastructure grants (Casey, Glennerster, Miguel and Voors 2023), and positive anonymous peer reviews among sitting incumbents. We use the same instrument to assess all incumbents and status quo applicants (those not involved in the intervention who filed a candidate application with a political party), which enables a rare profiling of the universe of potential candidates.

To assess whether this strategy identifies "better" potential candidates, community nominations and technocratic screening were randomized across 250 wards within fourteen of the fifteen rural district Councils nationwide. As each treated ward was available to both participating parties, this generates a full national sample of 500 party-ward units. We focus much of the discussion on observations in the respective regional stronghold of each party, as this is where they are most likely to win seats in the general election (all full sample counterparts are in the Appendix).

Headline estimates show that the intervention succeeded in finding individuals of substantially higher quality than both incumbents and status quo applicants. In the full national sample, top community nominees scored on average 0.28 standard deviation units (standard error of 0.02) higher on the quality index than status quo applicants and 0.17 units higher than incumbents (standard error 0.03). Their quality premium reflects differences across multiple components including measures of human capital like education, numeracy and cognitive ability; exercises that capture managerial ability; and a behavioral measure of how they handle discrepancies in the token compensation provided for survey participation, which we refer to as conscientiousness but can also be thought of as a proxy for integrity or attention to detail.

These potential candidates command broad support among local residents. Top community nominees were named by an average of 16 percent of households in their respective wards, which is 9 percentage points higher than incumbents and 13 percentage points higher than status quo applicants (both differences are significant at the 99 percent confidence level). While these comparisons suggest improvements in representation, interpretation is subject to the caveat that status quo applicants were not known until after the nominations process concluded, so any errors matching their names back to the nomination dataset may underestimate their popularity.

Community nominees are new to electoral politics. Compared to status quo applicants, they are less likely to be registered with a party (by 21 percentage points), to have held political office (at

[1] Census data estimates suggest that this household sampling strategy is representative of roughly 29 to 37 percent of the total ward population.

28 versus 41 percent), or have relatives in a party office (by 5 points). Other characteristics position them as an alternate elite within the local political landscape. Compared to voters, they are wealthier, better educated, somewhat older and more likely to be male. They are disproportionately drawn from so-called "ruling" families—63 percent of top nominees versus 21 percent of status quo—which are traditional governance structures headed by chiefs who wield authority over land, labor and justice. While studies suggest that chiefs themselves may not be optimal for development outcomes (Acemoglu, Reed and Robinson 2014; Casey et al. 2023), this intervention identifies their younger relatives and descendants. Survey data indicates substantial support for traditional authorities in Sierra Leone (Afrobarometer 2024), and they have been productively brought into state service elsewhere (Balán et al. 2022), yet how open political parties are to candidates associated with these parallel institutions is unclear (Henn 2022, Baldwin 2016).

Evidence thus far suggests that there indeed exists a talented, popular cadre of potential candidates on the margins of politics. The next question is whether they run for office. We define entry as filing a candidate application with a political party, which requires time, effort and financial dues.

There are several reasons why the intervention might encourage entry. First, household respondents may internalize that someone needs to be a good fit for politics to be worth nominating, thereby identifying individuals near the entry margin. Consistent with this, 89 percent of top nominees said they were "interested" or "very interested" in running for Local Council. Second, screening protocols provided information to nominees about how many people had put their name forward and shared testimonials from the household data about why respondents thought they would make a good Councillor. Enumerators further explained that the purpose of the initiative was to work with parties to "identify high-quality candidates" and that there was a possibility, but no guarantee, that information collected during screening would be shared with party leadership. Eighty-nine percent of top nominees gave consent to share their information with parties if such an opportunity arose. Third, for a subset of top nominees, we randomized a follow-up nudge in the form of a phone call explaining that they had attained the highest merit score and that the research team would indeed share their profile with party leaders.

Using administrative data obtained from the parties, we calculate an entry rate of 16 percent for community nominees ranked below the top two positions on the merit-based screening. Strong positive self-selection on quality raises this rate to 25 percent for top nominees, a difference that is statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level. The phone call nudge increased entry among top picks by an additional 6 percentage points, which is sizeable but not statistically distinct from zero (standard error 4.3).

The entry induced by the intervention had limited impacts on the overall size of ward-level candidate applicant pools but did increase the maximum quality of individuals found in the pools. We estimate a treatment effect in the stronghold sample of 0.22 additional applicants per ward (on a control mean of 2.83), which moves in the expected direction but is not statistically distinct from zero. The maximum quality score found among all who filed candidate applications from a

particular ward is 0.09 standard deviation units higher in the nominations and screening arm compared to control wards (*p*-value 0.08). The corresponding estimate for impacts on the mean score is also positive (0.05 units), but not statistically significant (*p*-value 0.23).

We use our rich data to simulate impacts that would have obtained under higher realized entry rates for the best quality nominees. These counterfactuals retain the top nominees who applied in practice, and then for wards where no top picks applied, randomly boost the entry rate of the highest scoring nominee. Boosting these top non-applicants' entry by 25 percent generates a 0.12 standard deviation unit increase in the maximum quality of the pool (*p*-value 0.02) and 0.06 unit increase in the mean (*p*-value 0.15). Simulating a 50 percent boost yields a 0.15 unit increase in the maximum (*p*-value 0.01) and 0.07 unit increase in the mean (*p*-value 0.09). These simulations reveal additional value that could be unlocked by investing more in converting the best nominees to applicants, which was the lightest touch link in the intervention (i.e., the phone call nudge).

Whether the observed entry rates are large or small is difficult to say. While entry is a rare event, its rarity depends on the reference pool, ranging from all eligible individuals to the politically ambitious (Gulzar 2021). There are only a few related estimates in the literature. In the U.S., the civil society organization Run for Something aims to identify young progressives and encourage them to run for local office. Their conversion rate from website intake forms to candidacy in 2018 was 11.6 percent (Green, Conroy and Hammond 2024). In Brazil, Dal Bo et al (2024) find that 16 percent of people who applied for a candidate training program ran for municipal office, and that participating in the training doubles this figure. In Pakistan, Gulzar and Khan (2025) find entry rates of 2 to 4 percent among randomly selected male household heads for new, nonpartisan village council elections. In Sierra Leone, the fact that high-quality community nominees entered politics at nontrivial rates suggests that the nominations and screening protocols developed with government partners seem to have solved the technology challenge in this context.

As neither finding new talent nor encouraging them to run are binding constraints on political renewal, we turn to the third issue of party gatekeeping. Gatekeeping is strong in Sierra Leone: of those elected to Local Council in 2018, only 12 percent were from a minor party and 1 percent ran as Independents. Party power increased in 2023 with an abrupt shift from first-past-the-post ward-level elections to district-level proportional representation (PR), where parties submitted closed candidate lists twice as long as the number of wards in the district. The reform was controversial: the opposition decried it as a brazen power grab to wrest control of Parliament, while the incumbent regime cited previous experience with PR (in the 1996 and 2002 elections) and potential benefits for reducing one-party dominance in strongholds. Notable for our purposes is how the closed list feature severs the link between voters and the selection of individual candidates, placing party leaders firmly in control (Ahuja and McClendon 2026). This isolates gatekeeping from electoral accountability and allows us to observe what party leaders prioritize when their choices over individuals are largely unconstrained by voter preferences.

The last set of estimates thus moves from investigation of political entry decisions (on the supply

side) to downstream impacts on party selection of candidates (on the demand side). In the raw data, top community nominees who entered politics performed somewhat better than status quo applicants in getting selected onto candidate lists (at 71 versus 67 percent) and winning seats (at 27 versus 16 percent). Almost all corresponding regression estimates, however, are null. While modest realized entry rates limit statistical power for this analysis, the main lever constraining the advancement of new talent—both nominees and status quo challengers—is the overwhelming preference parties exhibited towards incumbents.

The privileging of incumbents marks a substantial departure from previous elections. Under the old majoritarian system, only 14 percent of incumbents ran for re-election in 2018 and 37 percent of those re-won a seat. Both rates increased with the change to PR: 48 percent ran again and 64 percent won in 2023, thereby reducing the effective rate of political renewal from 94 to 69 percent in a single electoral cycle. By far the strongest predictor of party selection of candidates is incumbency, accompanied by mixed or null results for the quality measures collated in the screening instrument.

The fact that parties passed over top nominees in favor of re-running incumbents can be interpreted in multiple ways. It can be seen as bad for voters in that nominees are more popular and higher quality than incumbents. But perhaps parties have better information than the research team collected, which they used to reward experience in office or party loyalty in ways that enable the returning cohort to function better as a group, to the ultimate benefit of citizens. Or maybe the rushed electoral reforms left parties with too little time to both adjust to the new rules and vet new types of candidates, meaning the null results reflect an unlucky shock. Research conducted in the previous election showed that parties were open to accommodating information about voter preferences under the previous majoritarian system (Casey, Kamara and Meriggi 2021), so perhaps institutional rules are what matters. Setting interpretation aside, what is clear is that for this election, efforts to bring new people into public office drew to a halt at party gates.

One last feature of the research design that we cannot say much about due to low statistical power is how sharing profiles impacted party selections. The profiles promised in the phone call nudge were indeed produced and given to party leaders but faced two implementation challenges. First, to mitigate potential econometric issues raised by the shift to PR that places wards in zero-sum competition over finite slots on the list, we assigned profiles to only a subset of treated units using a saturation design (to measure spillovers, as in Baird et al. 2018). Second, only a third of profiled nominees ended up filing an application with a party, leaving a small number of profiles with a real chance of shaping candidate selection decisions. Thus, while the potential to have one's profile shared may have operated on the supply side in encouraging nominees to enter, we have little to say about demand-side effects of delivering profiles on party choices.

This study contributes to the literature on political selection (see Dal Bó and Finan 2018 and Gulzar 2021 for reviews). Demographic representation, often studied through the lens of quotas, shapes policy choices and economic outcomes (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004, Clayton 2021, Pande

2003). Party gatekeeping has been shown to limit entry for women and minorities, independent of their qualifications (Cheng and Tavits, 2011, Fujiwara, Hilbig and Raffler 2025, Karpowitz, Monson and Preece 2017). Under weak institutions, patronage and kinship networks distort selection toward politically connected candidates over those stronger on merit (Colonnelli, Prem and Teso 2020, Jia, Kudamatsu and Seim 2015, Querubin 2018, Riaño 2023). While such frictions suggest that institutional reforms can improve both representation and competence simultaneously (Besley et al. 2017), questions remain about potential tradeoffs therein (Dal Bó et al. 2017). Our data show that it is possible to promote the entry of highly qualified people who also enjoy broad support among local voters. While their ultimate electoral success was limited by parties stacking incumbents atop candidate lists, this finding itself is interesting as it captures party behavior in response to an abrupt shift to PR, a change with potentially broader implications for policy (Chang and Golden 2007, Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman 2005, Persson, Tabellini and Trebbi 2003), political turnover and voter accountability (Bowles and Marx 2023, Marx, Pons and Rollet 2025).

Our analysis contributes most directly to work on supply-side interventions designed to improve who runs for office. Stronger financial incentives have been found to attract higher ability candidates who perform better in political and front-line service jobs (Ashraf et al. 2020, Dal Bó, Finan and Rossi 2013, Gagliarducci and Nannicini 2013, Leaver et al. 2021). Other successful approaches focus on talent re-allocation (He and Wang 2017), pro-social messaging in candidate recruitment (Gulzar and Khan 2025, Gulzar et al. 2025), and training workshops (Ravanilla 2016, Dal Bó et al 2024). We add new evidence about the role of community participation in identifying political talent and self-selection in shaping the quality profile of entrants. Returning to the three-pronged challenge of improving political selection, our results suggest that identifying high caliber potential politicians and inducing them to enter are margins that can be constructively moved, while unlocking party gatekeeping presents a binding constraint in this context.

II. Institutional Context

II.A. Local Government

Sierra Leone is a low-income country with weak state capacity, ranking in the 10th percentile for government effectiveness (World Bank 2024). Local government is organized into 22 district and town councils, with representation tied to ward population, the most local administrative unit of the formal state. Local Council wards, of which there are 446 nationwide, nest neatly inside Parliamentary constituencies, the next higher unit of state administration, which in turn nest neatly inside district boundaries (see Appendix Figure A1).

Local Councils promote economic development primarily through providing local public infrastructure and monitoring the performance of line ministries in delivering public services. Eligibility criteria to serve on Council are minimal: one must be at least 18 years of age, registered to vote, up to date in tax payments, and ordinarily resident in the ward for the past three years

(Government of Sierra Leone 2022). The work of Council is part time, so elected officials can keep their primary employment while serving.

Voters express high levels of dissatisfaction with the politicians currently serving in local government. In the latest round of Afrobarometer data (2024), 70 percent of respondents "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of the performance of their Local Council, 38 percent claim that "most" or "all" Local Councillors are corrupt, and 33 percent say they do not trust their Councillor "at all." This contrasts with voter opinions of the chieftaincy system, which is an older, parallel system of traditional authority, open to descendants of what are known locally as "ruling" families. The same dataset shows that only 19 percent of rural respondents claim that "most" or "all" traditional leaders are corrupt, and only 11 percent claim to not trust them "at all."

One way to address voter dissatisfaction is to recruit new talent into local politics. If party incentives align with voter preferences, then improving the supply of people who file applications to be considered as candidates could be a sufficient strategy. Previous research on Parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone suggests that voters and party leaders have similar views about what makes for a good candidate, like having a strong record of participating in local development projects (Casey, Kamara and Meriggi 2021). This idea motivates the main treatment arm studied here (T1), which combines community nominations to identify individuals with broad popular support with technocratic screening to elevate the most competent nominees. It complements the previous study, which focuses on primary-stage selections over a fixed set of applicants, by turning to supply-side considerations about how to expand and enhance the quality of applicant pools.

Parties also face information and logistical constraints in screening over 400 applicant pools in a setting with high transport and communication costs and few, if any, firms engaged in political polling. Indeed, when the earlier study asked party leaders which applicant would win if voters were to select one directly, 90 percent said it would be their own first choice applicant, which was in fact true in voter polling data only about half the time. When the voter data was shared with party leadership, they became 23 percentage points more likely to select the applicant who ranked first among voters, for a 61 percent increase on the base rate. Party responsiveness to information in that study motivates the inclusion of a second treatment arm here (T2) that shares information about top nominees' popularity and quality with party leaders via one-page profiles. Profile sharing was randomly assigned to a subset of T1 wards.

To engage parties in the design and implementation of these interventions, the research team worked in partnership with the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC), the government agency with the constitutional authority to regulate the conduct of parties with respect to their members and the broader electorate. The PPRC invited all registered parties to join the initiative and associated research. Party leaders decided whether or not to opt in. Both major parties, the All People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), joined the initiative and were assigned equal numbers of treatment and control units in the experimental design.

II.B. Electoral Reforms and Research Adjustments

Since the end of the civil war (in 2002) and the reintroduction of decentralization (in 2004), Local Councils in Sierra Leone have been organized as single-member jurisdictions with first-past-the-post (FPTP) elections held at the ward level. In a controversial decision, the Government of Sierra Leone changed from this majoritarian system to proportional representation (PR) organized at the district level shortly before the 2023 election studied. This reform was hotly contested by the opposition party, including Supreme Court Challenges, but was ultimately enacted for both Local Council and Parliamentary elections. For each district council, parties were asked to compile a closed list of candidates that was twice as long as the preexisting number of seats (equivalent to the number of wards) (see Appendix Figure A2). Voters saw only party labels and not the list of individual candidate names on the ballot. The government also enacted a long-discussed quota for thirty percent women's representation in politics. In practice the quota translated into every third slot on the candidate list being occupied by a female candidate.

While switches between electoral systems are uncommon, they have occurred recently in Sierra Leone, which used PR for the 1996 and 2002 elections, switched to FPTP for 2007, 2012 and 2018, and went back to PR in 2023. Neighboring Liberia also switched from FPTP to PR in 1997 and back again in 2005. Among countries that use PR, three quarters use closed lists and one quarter use open lists (Cruz, Keefer and Scartascini 2021). While systematic data on the visibility of candidate lists is harder to come by, web search identifies several African countries that join Sierra Leone in printing only party labels on the ballot (including Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Namibia and Niger).

It was unclear *ex ante* how the switch to PR might impact geographic representation, which is an outcome of interest and affects the way we structured our research design. It could be minimal, as an easy response for party leaders is to adhere to the old system and simply pick two candidates per ward to place on their district list. Or, parties could switch to a somewhat higher administrative unit, like Parliamentary constituency or traditional chiefdom, still broadly reflecting the geographic variation of the district. Alternatively, parties could abandon geographic considerations altogether and pick candidates from the highest density town, ignoring outlying areas. Conversations with party leaders at the time made this last concentrated approach seem unlikely, however their ultimate strategy was not revealed until they submitted finalized candidate lists to the National Electoral Commission, which was, by construction, after this field experiment concluded.[2]

Econometrically, movement away from the ward as the organizing unit for the parties' lists introduces the risk of partial interference between units for estimating treatment effects of profile sharing (T2). This is because PR places wards in competition with each other for representation via a finite number of slots on the district-level list. So, if parties respond to an applicant profile

[2] Note that the home ward of all eventual candidates is knowable, as voter identification and registration remained tied to wards, so answering these questions was an issue of timing and not missing data.

by adding that person to the list and making space for them by dropping someone from a control ward, this biases upwards estimates of how profiles enhance the geographic representation of T2 wards. This issue should not affect estimates of how nominations and screening (T1) impact candidate entry, as there is no cap on how many people can file candidate applications from a particular ward.

To proactively mitigate this risk, we followed Baird et al (2018) and adjusted the random assignment for profile sharing upwards to the constituency-level with varying degrees of saturation to enable estimation of potential spillovers. A constituency contains 3.4 wards on average, so this seemed like a reasonable level to capture the likely scope of local spillovers. *Ex post*, both parties largely adhered to the old ward-based system: the modal ward had two candidates on each party's respective district-level list and ended up with exactly one elected representative, so the risk of partial interference proved to be not much of a problem in practice. Appendix Exhibit A4 details this part of the empirical strategy and shows evidence that spillover estimates are null.

III. Research Design

III.A. Sample

To evaluate the interventions, which were collectively referred to among our partners as the "Local Champions Initiative," we first selected an experimental sample of wards within the district councils. The sample excludes wards where the intervention was piloted and those whose boundaries cut across chiefdom boundaries (to avoid confusion since chiefdom divisions may be more salient to citizens than wards). This generates a sample of 250 wards, located in 92 distinct Parliamentary constituencies.

Since the initiative was done in collaboration with the two major political parties, each sampled unit was available to both parties, which yields a full national sample of 500 party-wards and 184 party-constituencies. Considering clear regional patterns of support for each major party, we delineate a stronghold sample (250 wards, 92 constituencies) that assigns wards to the party that historically dominates politics in that locality (see Figure 1). Strongholds arise from allegiances between ethnic groups and political parties that date back to the post-Independence period (Kandeh 1992). As community nominees are most interested in contesting for the dominant party and individuals placed on (the top half of) their candidate list have a high chance of getting elected, we focus much of our discussion on this sample. We present corresponding estimates for the full 500 party-wards in the Appendix.

III.B. Treatment Assignment

At a high level, there were two rounds of treatment assignment (see Figure 2). The first, at the ward level, randomly allocated approximately two thirds of the 250 sample wards to the nominations and screening procedure (T1) and the remaining third to a pure control group (C),

stratified by district and partisan competitiveness (as measured by 2018 electoral returns). This was completed under the presumption that the preexisting majoritarian electoral system would remain intact. Field teams conducted nominations and screening procedures in T1 wards and community nominees indicated which party they were potentially interested in having their profile shared with, thereby making each treated unit available for both parties (conditional on finding enough qualified and willing nominees per party).

The second round, at the constituency level, randomly assigned the profile information sharing component (T2) among the T1 units, which created three groups (T1 only, T1 plus T2, and C). This was completed after it became clear that the switch to PR would go through, and in response, uses a saturation design to measure potential spillovers across wards within a given district-level candidate list. To do so, it grouped wards into their 92 distinct host constituencies and assigned constituencies to three levels of treatment saturation, stratified by district: (i) zero saturation constituencies (no information sharing in any wards), (ii) low saturation constituencies (treat one third of wards with information sharing), and (iii) high saturation constituencies (treat two thirds of wards). Assignment of profile sharing was done independently for the two parties.

Note that the constituency-level assignment was blind to the results of the nomination process, so was not conditional on the field team finding any minimum number of high-quality nominees who were willing to participate. Expecting that some wards would have an insufficient number of willing nominees, we assigned more constituencies to the high saturation arm (40 percent) than the low saturation arm (33 percent), and more to the low saturation arm than to pure controls (27 percent). Appendix Figure A3 displays the distribution of effective saturation levels, after accounting for how many wards in a given constituency were available for the information treatment (e.g., if a constituency contains only a single ward where nominations were held, high levels of effective saturation are not possible).[3] Appendix Table A1 shows that the constituency-level randomization achieved reasonable balance on measures of population, population density, electoral outcomes in the 2018 elections, and number of wards per constituency.

Once the constituency-level saturation was assigned, we randomly assigned the required number of T1 wards within each party-constituency to the T2 information sharing condition. Given the effective saturation levels, we end up with 40 percent of the party-wards in our sample receiving both T1 and T2. For the stronghold sample this number is 99 (T1 plus T2) wards, alongside 88 nominations-only wards (T1), and 63 pure control (C) wards. Appendix Table A2 shows that assignments to nominations and profile sharing are reasonably balanced across population, population density and 2018 electoral outcomes at the ward level.

IV. Implementation

[3] Another restriction on high saturation is that effective saturation is measured for all wards within a constituency, even those that cross chiefdom boundaries and are thus out of the research sample.

Fieldwork for the main T1 arm proceeded in a sequence of structured community nominations followed by technocratic screening. The T2 profiles collated and shared information from this two-step process in a subset of T1 wards.

IV.A. Representation via Community Nominations

A key aspect of representation is the support of local voters. To assess this, field teams elicited the names of popular individuals via household visits in each of the 3 largest communities per ward. Field teams divided each community into geographic sectors, with enumerators conducting random walks to visit households along both main and side roads to ensure coverage of both central and peripheral areas. Sampling protocols required one respondent per dwelling, balancing across gender, age cohorts (18-35 versus above 35 years), and ethnic groups where relevant. This approach was designed to achieve representative demographic coverage while minimizing geographic clustering in the nomination process. Coarse estimates using census data suggest that the household sample is representative of roughly 29 to 37 percent of the total ward population.[4]

At each household, enumerators first explained the skills and competencies that are needed to be an effective Local Councillor (see script in Appendix Exhibit A1). They then asked respondents to list up to 3 individuals from their ward that they thought would make good candidates (unconstrained round). Respondents were then asked to think of up to 3 additional names of female nominees in particular (second gender round). Teams implemented these elicitations with, on average, 84 individuals per ward. To facilitate aggregation across households, respondents were asked to provide relevant nicknames and contact details for each person they nominated.

Field teams also targeted a standard set of local leaders at the community level. In each community they interviewed the town chief and the women's leader, as well as five respondents from the following list of positions: ward development committee member, youth leader, master farmer, religious leader, traditional society head, community health worker, traditional birth attendant, head teacher or principal of a local school, and town speaker. Some individuals from the household elicitation also held leadership positions. Overall, on average 27 respondents per ward hold leadership positions.

IV.B. Quality via Technocratic Screening

Field Protocols

The research team selected up to ten of the highest ranked nominees by frequency of household nominations for private screening. This search was independent of party affiliation and included provisions to include the most popular women even if they obtained slightly fewer votes than some

[4] More specifically, teams visited the headquarter community of each of the 3 largest chiefdom sections per ward (there are on average 3.3 sections per ward). A section is a geographic sub-unit within the boundaries of the traditional chieftaincy system that is salient to voters. In 2015 census data, a headquarter community contains about a third of its section's population (median 32 percent, mean 41 percent). Thus, the share of the total ward population represented by our household sample is: 3/3.3 sections x 32 (41) percent median (mean) share = 29 (37).

of the nominated men. On average, enumerators successfully contacted 86 percent of highest ranked nominees by frequency of household nominations. In the stronghold data, where we focus exclusively on nominees from the party most likely to win the general election, our data includes on average 7 nominees for the dominant party per ward.

The enumeration script for the screening session includes information that could plausibly encourage entry (see Appendix Exhibit A2). When approaching a nominee, field enumerators explained that part of the purpose of the research program was to help political parties locate high-quality candidates. They told the nominee the number of household nominations they had personally received from residents of their ward. The enumerator also read aloud reasons household respondents had given for why they thought that individual would be a good Local Councillor, text that was preloaded directly from the nominations dataset. Such social recognition could motivate these individuals to enter politics. For example, Gulzar and Khan (2025) show that messaging matters for political entry and that pro-social phrasing about the benefits of serving in politics is more effective than emphasizing private returns in encouraging Pakistani men to stand for local elections.

Nominees were informed that there was a chance, but no guarantee, that some of the information from the screening would be shared with political parties. All nominees were asked if they consented to have their profiles shared with party leaders and if so, with which parties they were willing to share. Overall willingness was high: 85 percent (89 percent) of all (top scoring) nominees were willing to share their profile. For female nominees, these numbers were 80 (88) percent. In practice, nearly all nominees (95 percent) who consented listed only one party, and the vast majority (78 percent) picked the locally dominant party. After processing the screening results, the research team identified the top two highest scorers in each ward. If one of these had not consented to have their profile shared, they were replaced by the third highest scorer so long as the drop in scores was not too severe, in which case no replacement was made. We refer to this popular, high-scoring, consenting set simply as "top nominees."

Enumerators also asked nominees whether they were interested in running for Local Council. Stated interest was high: among top nominees, 89 percent said they were "interested" or "very interested" in running. This number was 85 percent among top female nominees. Those who ranked lower on the quality screening expressed less interest: only 67 percent said they were "interested" or "very interested" in running. Their lower intent to run foreshadows the positive selection on quality for filing candidate applications that analysis below documents.

At the end of the screening, nominees were clearly informed that the research team would not share all profiles, that their particular profile may not be shared with party leaders, and that even if it were, the parties were under no obligation to use the profile. The script closes with "We provide information to the parties. We cannot control what parties do with that information."

Quality Measures

To pin down quality in a meaningful way, we selected measures that have been empirically validated in related work to positively correlate with observable outputs of politician performance in Sierra Leone. Specifically, we pulled measures from three separate validation exercises.

We first used data from Casey, Kamara and Meriggi (2021) to select measures of Parliamentary candidates that positively predict the subsequent public spending of elected Members (MPs), as verified by field audits. Second, we use measures from a screening instrument in Casey et al. (2023) that identifies high-skill members of rural communities. These individuals were involved in drafting proposals for local infrastructure that were submitted to a district-level grants competition, and we use measures that positively correlate with proposal quality and winning a grant. Third, during the piloting for the current research, we surveyed all sitting Local Councillors. We collected both self-reported performance measures (like amount of development spending in their wards and number of visits to their constituents) and anonymous peer ratings of competence in office and lack of corruption. We select measures that positively predict either type of outcome.

To avoid overfitting our prediction of quality, particularly with variables that are biased towards groups over-represented among elected politicians (namely older, elite males), we add measures that are widely perceived to be associated with quality and human capital, like years of education, professional experience, and IQ proxies. Our main empirical specifications roll the full set of indicators up into an equally weighted index expressed in standard deviation units. We deploy the same instrument to collect data on status quo applicants and incumbents to fully characterize the potential candidate pool. The text box below lists the individual component measures with superscripts linking them to the validation exercises.

Text Box 1: List of Quality Measures

1. Human capital:
    a. Years of education
    b. Indicator for literacy and numeracy[*,+]
    c. Score in Ravens Test
    d. Score in digit memorization test
2. Work experience:
    a. Wage in previous job
    b. Indicator of experience in sectors like health, education, NGOs[*]
3. Local experience
    a. Number of ward development projects involved in before holding elected office[*]
    b. Number of ward community activities involved in before holding elected office
    c. Number of leadership roles in ward before holding elected office[*]
    d. Indicator for knowledge of NGOs working in ward[*]
4. Managerial capital
    a. Score in project proposal exercise[+]
    b. Indicator for experience managing projects (e.g. budgets, supervising people)[+]
5. Conscientiousness
    a. Returned extra transport subsidy[†]

* predicts the performance of sitting Local Councillors in self- or peer-evaluations
† predicts the public spending performance of elected MPs in audit data
+ predicts the quality of local infrastructure grant proposals developed by community members

Because a key part of our argument rests on quality measures reflecting real differences in relevant political competencies, let us flesh out a few examples of how index components map to performance data. Starting with conscientiousness, we adapt the transport subsidy exercise deployed among Parliamentary candidates in the previous election (Casey, Kamara and Meriggi 2021). As enumerators asked respondents to meet them in the nearest headquarter town to conduct the survey, it is common practice to offer a transport reimbursement and ask the individual to sign for receipt. In that study, the reimbursement was 150 thousand Leones (roughly $20 at the time), yet in the envelope, there were eighteen instead of fifteen 10,000 Leone notes. The conscientiousness measure indicates whether the individual noticed and returned the extra bills, where the mean return rate was 46 percent. The subsample of candidates who won seats were later audited on how they spent the constituency facilitation fund, which is public money entrusted to them for transport to and development projects in their constituencies. Correlations over time suggest that returning the extra notes as candidates is associated with 60 percent more verified development expenditures by elected MPs in the audit data. For the current study, where enumerators met respondents closer to their home or workplace, cash notes were replaced by mobile telephone top-up cards. Instructions stated the respondent would receive four 10,000 Leone cards (worth $8 at the time), but there were six cards in the envelope.

For managerial capital, we draw from instruments used and validated by Casey et al. (2023). Individual community members were asked a battery of questions and exercises to assess their managerial ability as it relates to local public infrastructure provision. This included their experience managing others or coordinating local projects, and a simulated grant writing exercise for agricultural infrastructure that required knowledge about project management, procurement and budgeting. Communities later submitted actual proposals to their relevant district Council who evaluated them and competitively allocated infrastructure grants to fund the best submissions. In that study, a one standard deviation increase in the managerial capital test score of community members involved in the proposal process correlates with a gain in measured proposal quality of 0.29 standard deviation units (standard error 0.05) and an increased probability of winning a grant by 4.1 percentage points (standard error 1.8). Breaking out these correlations for each of eight core competencies covered by the test, local infrastructure experience, literacy and numeracy have the most predictive power for proposal quality.

For human capital, the literacy of incumbent Local Councillors was assessed in the current study by asking them to read a short passage aloud which the enumerator judged whether they read with ease or struggled. While only a small subset of incumbents were judged illiterate (4.3 percent in our research sample), that literacy divide is highly predictive of anonymous peer ratings. Literate incumbent Councillors on average score 16 percent higher (standard error 3.4) on peers' review of

their effectiveness in office.

IV.C. Information Provision via Profile Sharing

The two-track process above generates lists of representative, high-quality potential candidates. For a randomly selected subset of these nominations and screening (T1) wards, the research team compiled short profiles of top nominees to share with political party leaders for their consideration as they screened applicants and awarded party symbols (T2). Profiles present information under free disposal, with no obligation on parties to select any of the nominees.

The profiles include the nominee's name and photo, along with basic information on their age, education, occupation and residence (see Figure 3 for example). To summarize relative quality, it includes one chart that compares the nominee's score on the quality screening instrument to the average score of sitting incumbents in that district on the same instrument.[5] For popularity, it explains how many households were surveyed in the ward, how many unique names they generated, and that this nominee received more votes than $[X]$ percent of nominees in their ward. The profile further lists relevant work experience and skills the nominee possesses and highlights areas within the screening instrument where the nominee excelled. It closes with a quotation from the household nominations data, labeled "community testimonial." The testimonial in Figure 3 reads, "He is helpful to the community, bold, educated, can speak well, developmentally oriented, and has humanitarian feeling for his community." Delivery rates of generated profiles to party leaders was high, at 92 percent for constituency-level officials (signed on average by at least three different leaders) and 82 percent for district-level officials (signed on average by two).

While the sharing of profiles focuses on the demand-side of parties selecting candidates, it also includes a supply-side "nudge" to top nominees. The nudge was a phone call to top nominees in T2 wards informing them of their strong performance in the screening process and explaining that their profile would be shared with party leaders. The call included a reminder to file a candidate application with their preferred party by the relevant deadline, if they had not already done so. The research team successfully contacted 84 percent of the top nominees assigned to T2. This nudge operates in addition to the social recognition that all nominees received when originally contacted for screening (in T1), both of which might encourage individuals to enter the applicant pool.

V. Identifying New Political Talent

To tackle the first hurdle for political renewal, namely finding new talent, this section explores whether there exists a pool of high-quality potential candidates, who enjoy broad support among local voters, that can be tapped for public service. Analysis assesses the intervention's efficacy in

[5] Scores are presented at the decile level, so each individual scores a 1, 2, 3, …10. The average for the district is the average of these deciles for all incumbents serving on the relevant Council, all of which was explained to the party officials receiving the profiles.

identifying such new talent and compares their characteristics to those who enter politics via the status quo channels.

V.A. Who Runs in the Status Quo?

Compared to the average voter in rural districts, individuals who run for local office, and those who win, tend to be drawn from the socioeconomic elite. Table 1 shows that applicants for local candidacy are more likely to be male (at 73 percent versus 50 percent for voters), somewhat older, and wealthier as measured by various proxies including asset counts, monthly wages and being less likely to work in agriculture (26 versus 63 percent). They are also positively selected on educational attainment, including higher literacy rates (82 versus 49 percent) and higher primary school completion (92 versus 37 percent). They are more likely to come from a ruling house lineage of the chieftaincy system (21 versus 16 percent). Sitting incumbents are somewhat more strongly selected on most of these dimensions, including male gender, age, assets, educational attainment and ruling house lineage.

Such positive selection on education does not imply no room for improvement. In the applicant pool, only about half have pursued education beyond secondary school and 18 percent are illiterate. There is certainly scope to improve descriptive representation for women and those from lower socioeconomic status.

Previewing differences that we unpack below, top nominees appear similar to status quo applicants on the core demographic and economic indicators. They diverge by being better educated: 14 percentage points more likely to work in education, all are literate, and 11 percentage points more likely to have completed post-secondary schooling. The emergence of teachers through the nomination system resonates with the motivation to find high human capital individuals who are well known in their communities and involved in public service provision. Top nominees are much less likely to be registered with a party (by 22 percentage points), signaling their relative newness to politics. Strikingly, nominees are more heavily drawn from traditional chieftaincy lineages, at 63 percent, than status quo applicants (and incumbents at 36 percent). Note that nominees are not traditional leaders themselves, as only 4 percent of them report being a section or town chief, but rather their younger relatives. Overall, these differences characterize top nominees as alternative elites who possess high human capital, strong standing in their communities, and connections with the traditional governance system that runs largely in parallel to elected government.

V.B. Assessing Relative Quality

Quality analysis focuses on whether the intervention identified individuals who are strong on dimensions that are empirically correlated with performance in office, and whether they are stronger on those dimensions than others whom parties consider for candidacy. To do so, analysis compares the characteristics of community nominees (CN) to incumbent Local Councillors (INC) and status quo applicants (the omitted group), using the following specification:

$$Q_{iw} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CN_{iw} + \beta_2 INC_{iw} + \boldsymbol{s}_w + \varepsilon_{iw} \quad (1)$$

where Q is the index of quality measures (from Text Box 1), $\boldsymbol{s}$ is a vector of randomization strata (by district and competitiveness), and ε is an idiosyncratic error term. Construction of the index follows Kling, Liebman and Katz (2007) by orienting each variable so that higher values indicate more favorable outcomes, transforming them into standard deviation units by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation of the omitted group, imputing missing values at the respective group mean, and weighting each variable equally. The estimand of interest is β_1, where $\beta_1 \geq 0$ indicates that the intervention identified nominees who were at least as high quality as status quo applicants. We also test $\beta_1 \geq \beta_2$, which indicates that the intervention identified nominees that were at least as high quality as sitting incumbents at their *previous* election.[6] The sample includes the 187 wards assigned to community nominations and screening (T1).

Table 2 shows that individuals identified by community nominations and private screening score substantially higher on the technocratic quality index than both status quo applicants and incumbent Councillors. The first row of Table 2 shows that on average top nominees scored 0.275 standard deviation units (0.023 standard error) higher than status quo applicants on the index in the full national sample. Incumbents also scored higher, by 0.172 standard deviation units (0.030 standard error) than status quo applicants. Post-estimation tests of the equality of these two coefficients strongly rejects (with associated p-value < 0.001), indicating that top nominees are higher quality than the incumbents they seek to unseat. Column 2 repeats these estimates restricting consideration to the stronghold sample. Top nominees again strongly outperform status quo applicants, by 0.200 standard deviation units (0.027 standard error) and sitting incumbents (p-value rejecting equality < 0.001). Incumbents' scores are higher but not statistically distinct from status quo applicants' scores in the strongholds (coefficient of 0.016, standard error 0.033).

Figure 4 breaks the index into its five clusters of components and shows that top nominees dominate status quo applicants across the board. The mean score of status quo applicants in the full national sample is standardized to zero, as indicated by the red dashed vertical line, and the coefficient and confidence interval estimating how top nominees' scores differ is shown by the blue horizontal lines. Top nominees display higher levels of human capital, relevant work and local experience, managerial ability, and conscientiousness in the top-up card behavioral exercise. Incumbent scores (depicted by red horizontal lines) are higher than status quo applicants for human capital and local experience, and indistinguishable for work history and managerial capital. Note that conscientiousness was not measured for incumbents due to our data collection partner's reluctance to provide any token compensation to elected public officials for survey participation. Corresponding regression estimates are presented in Appendix Table A3 and regression estimates for each individual variable are in Table A3-2.

[6] While most of the quality measures are time invariant (like highest completed education), for indicators that vary over time, like political experience, we measure them for incumbents at the point of candidacy for the previous election.

Are the nominees new entrants to politics?

Figure 5 substantiates the claim that top community nominees are new to politics, and not simply the same set of people who would have run for local office in the absence of the intervention. As the most direct measure, only 28 percent of top nominees have held elected office before, which is less than status quo applicants (at 41 percent) and incumbents (100 percent of whom hold office now, and 39 percent did prior to their previous election). Nominees are also less connected to existing political networks, as they are less likely to be registered with a political party, have less political experience, and are less likely to have a family member working in a party office.

A further test of whether these are truly a different set of individuals choosing to run leverages the pure control sample, where no interventions were implemented. We compare the best people who emerged organically and applied to political parties in control wards to the best people identified by the intervention in treatment wards. Panel A of Table 3 compares the characteristics of the top nominees in T1 wards to the two highest quality status quo applicants found in control wards in the stronghold sample. Estimates show that top nominees are more likely to be female and from a ruling family, are less wealthy and politically experienced, and are overall higher quality (by a highly significant 0.102 standard deviation units, standard error 0.042). Panel B takes one step further, retaining only top nominees who formally entered politics (i.e., filed a candidate application with a party) in T1 wards. The patterns remain similar: nominee entrants are more likely to be female, from a ruling family, and higher quality (by 0.151 standard deviation units, standard error 0.060). Appendix Table A4 shows similar patterns for the full sample of 500 party-ward units, including positive and highly significant advantages of nominees on the quality index. These results argue against the notion that those identified by community nominations and screening would have run for office anyway, by showing that nominees who did in fact run differ on observables than the best people who ran in pure control wards.

Heterogeneity

We explore whether there is variation in how well the intervention worked in identifying high-quality nominees along prespecified dimensions of gender, party and competitiveness. Table 4 does so by comparing average quality scores among community nominees (dropping incumbents and status quo applicants) in the full national sample. The first column is largely mechanical and shows that top nominees are on average 0.273 standard deviation units (0.023 standard error) higher quality than lower ranked nominees, which is consistent with technical screening winnowing consideration to high scorers.

Column 2 shows that lower ranked female nominees are substantially lower quality, by 0.304 standard deviation units (0.036 standard error), than their lower ranked male counterparts. The screening process reduces this gender disadvantage by sixty percent, as the coefficient on the interaction between female and top nominee is a highly significant 0.182 standard deviation units (0.058 standard error). This highlights potential for the intervention to be particularly useful in identifying high-quality women at a time when parties were working to greatly expand the number

of female candidates they select in response to the introduction of the quota.

There is not much evidence of heterogeneity by political party in column 3, indicating that community nominations and screening perform largely equivalently in generating potential candidates for both major parties. Column 4 shows that the average quality of nominees is higher in more electorally competitive wards, by 0.142 standard deviation units (0.045 standard error), where competitiveness is defined at the ward-level based on previous electoral results. Screening had less impact on driving differences in quality, given the higher baseline, but top nominees are still somewhat better, by 0.062 standard deviation units (0.045 standard error),[7] than lower ranked nominees in competitive areas. The average quality of nominees is also substantially higher in the stronghold sample, by 0.266 standard deviation units (0.028 standard error), compared to the parties' respective weakholds. Top nominees outperform lower ranked peers in weakholds (by 0.209 units, standard error 0.036), and appear similar in quality to other nominees in strongholds.

V.C. Representation

Analysis next explores whether the intervention successfully identified potential candidates with broad support among local voters. While the answer to this question is largely, "yes, by design," we can probe further in two ways. First, we characterize the amount of local support evidenced in the community nominations data, and second, we draw comparisons between nominees and other applicants, with some caveats.

Nominations Data

There is large dispersion of nomination "vote" shares in Figure 6. On average, 47 unique names were generated per ward. Aggregating across households, the nomination shares range from 1 to over 70 percent. Panel A shows the distribution for all community nominees (shaded in gray), where it is evident that the vast majority are nominated by only one or two individuals. The average nomination share is 5 percent. We selected up to the ten most popular individuals to carry forward to the private screening component. The average nomination share for this group (in red outline) is 13 percent, which is mechanically higher. Using the screening data, we selected the top scoring of these popular nominees to potentially carry forward to parties via the profiles. For these top nominees, their average nomination share (in blue outline) is 16 percent. This additional increase is not mechanical and suggests that those who score higher on merit are more popular, which is consistent with households possessing information about who holds the relevant skills that field enumerators emphasized were useful for the work of Local Council.

Panel B limits the distribution to female nominees. There are many fewer women than men in the sample because households nominated fewer women: 69 percent do not name a woman before being prompted to do so in the second elicitation round, and 50 percent do not name any in the

[7] Post-estimation calculation of the difference between the mean score of top nominees in competitive wards (sum of all three coefficients = 0.204) compared to the mean of low ranked nominees in competitive wards (0.142) yields a *p*-value = 0.173.

second round, either. As mentioned above, women performed less well on the quality screening, so the share of top nominees falls further. Overall, women compose 30 percent of community nominees and 20 percent of top nominees, indicating that identifying popular women with strong local support proved challenging. That said, once these women were identified, they held similar average nomination shares: among all female nominees the average is 4 percent, which rises to 12 percent for the set carried forward to screening, and 15 percent for the top scorers on the quality instrument.

Relative Comparisons

To draw comparisons between household support for nominees and other potential candidates, we estimate the following regression:

$$VS_{iw} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CN_{iw} + \beta_2 INC_{iw} + \boldsymbol{s}_w + \varepsilon_{iw} \quad (2)$$

where VS is the "vote" share of household nominations for individual i in ward w and all other terms remain as defined above for Equation (1). This is estimated for the 187 wards where community nominations were conducted.

An important caveat is in order before exploring results: estimates will be biased in favor of community nominees given the difficulty of matching other applicants back (in time and name) to the household nominations data. This is unavoidable as the set of status quo applicants could not be known until the candidate application deadline, which was well past the conclusion of the community nominations process. *Ex post* matching of names can be difficult, especially as many politicians are known by various nicknames among voters. To facilitate accurate matches, we used text-similarity algorithms that were manually checked by a research assistant. A second issue is that we sampled voters in the largest communities in the ward, so if someone had a base of support across many more rural villages, we would not pick this up (see footnote 3). Both issues are somewhat less of a problem for incumbents, as they were known at the time of the nominations process and represent the entire ward. Nevertheless, consider the following estimates as suggestive in nature only.

Table 5 shows that community nominees have higher shares of household nominations than incumbents, who in turn have higher shares than status quo applicants. This advantage is apparent for measures of the share of household nominations, the total number of unique nominations, and the extensive margin of whether any household nominated that individual. For example, status quo applicants in the full national sample have on average a recovered household nomination share of 2.4 percent in column 1, compared to incumbents whose vote share is 4.2 percentage points larger and community nominees whose vote share is 13.4 points larger (both differences are significant at the 99 percent confidence level). Similar extensive and intensive margin differences in magnitude and significance obtain in the stronghold sample (columns 4 to 6). Post-estimation tests of equality across coefficients for nominees versus incumbents reject at 99 percent confidence for all six estimates.

Figure 7 breaks out vote share differences by type of household respondent in the nomination data, normalizing shares to zero for status quo applicants (again depicted by the red dashed vertical line). Interestingly, the popularity advantage for top community nominees is apparent among all types of voters: female and younger voters (defined as aged 18 to 35 years), community leaders, chiefs and elders. For all respondent types, vote shares for incumbents fall in between those of top nominees and status quo applicants and are statistically distinct from both at the 99 percent confidence level. The data provides a consistent ranking where nominees have higher nomination shares than incumbents, who in turn have higher shares than other applicants, across all specifications and subsamples.

VI. Entry into Politics

The second hurdle to clear in improving political selection is the willingness of new talent to enter politics. We define entry as filing an application with a political party to be considered as a candidate. For status quo applicants, this rate by construction is 100 percent as the data on who applied comes from the parties themselves. What this number might be for the community nominees was unknown *ex ante*, particularly as there are few empirical estimates of inducing political entry in the literature. It was also unclear how many incumbents would appear in the applicant pool, as the shift to proportional representation could influence their re-run decisions.

VI.A. Entry of Community Nominees

The revealed baseline entry for lower ranked (outside the top two) nominees in the full national sample is 16.3 percent in Table 6. Interestingly, there is evidence of strong self-selection on quality into entry, as top nominees were 9.6 percentage points (standard error 3.0) more likely to enter than their lower ranked peers, a difference that is significant at 99 percent confidence. As a sanity check, profile sharing had no impact on the entry rates of lower ranked nominees, who did not receive any nudge (estimate of -1.4 points, standard error 2.1). The profile nudge, which recall was a phone call to a subset of top nominees explaining that they performed best on the screening and would have their profiles shared with parties, did increase entry of top nominees by a sizeable magnitude (6.0 percentage points), however it is not statistically significant at conventional levels (standard error 4.3). While imprecise, these estimates are causally identified, as recall that T2 was randomly assigned among T1 wards.

Heterogeneity

Column 2 shows that female nominees enter at lower rates than males, by 5.0 percentage points, a difference that is significant at 95 percent confidence (standard error 2.0). Column 3 limits the sample to female nominees and shows that they too exhibit strong positive self-selection on quality, where top women were 11.0 percentage points more likely to enter than lower ranked women, a difference that is significant at 90 percent confidence (standard error 5.7). The randomized nudge again led to large but imprecisely estimated impacts on entry: the phone call increased entry by

9.3 percentage points (standard error 8.3), which accounts for a 40 percent increase over the rate observed for top women who were not contacted (22.9 percent).

The last set of estimates compares entry rates within and outside party strongholds. Entry of lower ranked nominees does not vary along this margin in Column 4, while the likelihood that top nominees enter is lower in strongholds (by 10.3 percentage points). Importantly, though, there are vastly more nominees in strongholds than weakholds (recall that 78 percent of nominees indicated that they were only interested in running for the locally dominant party). Thus estimates in column 5 that restrict attention to the stronghold sample (retaining 1,251 of the total 1,597 individual observations) are very similar to column 1: baseline entry of 15.8 percent for lower ranked nominees and strong positive self-selection on quality of 10.0 percentage points (3.6 standard error) for top nominees. Note that there is no discernable response to the profile nudge among top picks in the stronghold sample (coefficient of 0.2 percentage points, 4.9 standard error).

Relation to the Literature

Are these entry rates, which range from an average of 11.9 for lower ranked women to 29.5 for top males, low or high? For starters they are much lower than the community nominees' stated interest in running for local office, which recall was 89 percent for top nominees. They are in the broad range of estimates in the literature, notwithstanding stark differences in context and intervention. An NGO targeting young progressives for local U.S. races saw a conversion rate from website intake forms through to candidacy of 11.6 percent in 2008 (Green, Conroy and Hammond 2024). A candidate training program in Brazil saw that application to the program accounted for a 16 percent entry rate, which doubles with participation in the training (Dal Bo et al 2024).

Does a nudge effect of 6 to 9 percentage points align with expectations? The phone call informing top nominees of their status increased entry from 25.9 to 31.9 percent on average in the national sample, which is a 23 percent increase. In Pakistan, Gulzar and Khan (2025) find that using a pro-social versus neutral prompt increased the likelihood that male household heads stood in nonpartisan village council elections from 3 to 4 percent, or a 33 percent increase on base. By comparison, baseline entry rates in Sierra Leone are higher, which is consistent with leveraging community knowledge to target more likely prospects than randomly selected citizens. The percent increase is somewhat lower, perhaps reflecting the lighter touch nature of a phone call versus in-person promotion of public service, which was used in the Pakistan study and worked only when delivered in a group setting.

Self-selection on Quality

The observed self-selection on quality measures is a striking and potentially optimistic result. Figure 8 unpacks this result and shows that all five component areas of the quality index positively predict entry among nominees. In addition, those who have more local support in the nominations data are also more likely to run (recall that all nominees were informed when contacted for

screening of the number of households who had put their name forward), as are those who expressed stronger interest in running when asked by the survey screening team (measured in a 5-point Likert scale). Nominees from ruling families were significantly less likely to enter, which could align with them realizing that in the existing political equilibrium, ruling house descendants constitute a minority of those selected.

Panel B shows that other characteristics that predict entry suggest that costs matter. For example, wealthier nominees and those already registered with a party (so do not need to pay registration fees or catch up on past membership dues) are more likely to enter. Also, those already plugged into politics, either because they have some political experience or family members in party office, were more likely to enter.

VI.B. Re-running by Incumbents

Historically, there has been very high political turnover from year to year in Sierra Leone. Based on calculations using publicly available data from the National Electoral Commission, of those elected to Council in 2012, only 8 percent (30 of 394 incumbents nationwide) appear again as candidates for the 2018 elections. Of those who re-ran, only 11 were elected for a second time (conditional 37 percent), which implies near total churn: only 2.8 percent of the 2012 cohort served again in the 2018 elected cohort. The switch to closed-list proportional representation in 2023 will encourage more incumbents to run again if they perceive this as tipping the balance from voters to parties in candidate selection and they are in relatively good standing with their party's leaders.

Re-run rates are indeed much higher for the 2023 elections studied. Homing in on rural areas for comparability with the study sample, Table 7 estimates these differences in incumbent behavior using regression analysis with district fixed effects.[8] The baseline rate in rural areas for those elected in 2012 and running again in 2018 is 14.0 percent. The re-run rate more than tripled for the 2023 election, jumping by a highly statistically significant 34.1 percentage points (standard error 3.5 points) for those elected in 2018. This implies that in roughly half of stronghold wards sampled there is an incumbent seeking re-election.[9]

VI.C. From Entry to Compliance

As the experimental design is anchored to ward-based geographical assignment, it is useful to explore how individual entry rates map to ward-level measures of treatment compliance. This matters because individual entry decisions in the 12 to 30 percent range aggregate up to ward-level compliance far below 100 percent, with implications for statistical power under an intention-to-treat design, the severity of which varies by sample and treatment arm.

This conception of compliance goes beyond the intervention happening where it should (which is

[8] There are more ward observations in the estimation (293) versus research (250) sample as the latter excludes wards that cross chiefdom boundaries and where piloting activities took place.
[9] We reference the stronghold sample because incumbents naturally come from the locally dominant party.

near perfect) to it generating new applicants for parties to consider, as otherwise it is unclear what exactly there is for parties to respond to in selecting candidates. For the full sample, 133 of the 522 identified top nominees applied for candidacy (or 25 percent). This maps to nominees filing an application in 103 of the 186 wards where nominations and screening occurred, for 55 percent "full" compliance rate for T1 wards. The vast majority of these fully complying wards (76 of the 103, or 74 percent) are in the parties' respective strongholds, which makes sense given earlier discussion and the intuitive fact that individuals are more excited to vie for the party that is likely to win the general election. This immediately implies that estimation will be higher powered for the stronghold sample compared to the full national sample, as compliance in the latter is diluted by observations in the respective weakholds.

Impacts on power will be more consequential for the profile sharing arm as the starting sample for T2 is already smaller than that for T1 and compliance is lower. The T2 design aimed to share profiles in 195 party-wards in the full national sample, but because there were often no nominees interested in sharing their information with the weakhold party, in practice profiles were available in only 120 party-wards (62 percent of T2 wards). Crossing this with applications data, we observe 72 applications from profiled individuals in 60 distinct wards. This implies an effective "full" compliance rate of 31 percent for T2 wards. In the stronghold sample, the numbers are only slightly higher: we aimed to share profiles in 99 wards and did so successfully in 89; however, we only observe an application from a profiled nominee in 38 wards, implying an effective T2 compliance rate of 38 percent. Low levels of realized compliance for T2 suggest that statistical power to detect party leader responses to profiles will be limited as receiving a profile of someone who did not apply for candidacy is of little use.

VII. Impacts on the Applicant Pool

This section investigates how the entry of community nominees affects the pool of applicants available for parties to consider when assembling their candidate lists. We first look at ward-level measures of the size of the pool, where estimates point in the expected direction but are low power. We gain statistical power when turning to individual measures of quality within the pools, where estimates suggest positive treatment effects.

VII.A. Geographic Representation

To see how the observed individual-level entry rates impact the size and quality of the applicant pool, we start with ward-level estimates of the form:

$$Y_w = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_w^1 + \beta_2 T_w^2 + \boldsymbol{s}_w + \varepsilon_w \quad (3)$$

where Y is the number of candidate applications filed by individuals registered to vote in ward w; T^1 is an indicator equal to one for assignment to the nominations plus screening treatment arm; T^2 is an indicator for assignment to the profile sharing arm (the omitted category is pure control

wards where no interventions were implemented); and $\boldsymbol{s}$, ε remain as defined above. We focus on the stronghold sample of 250 wards and report full sample analogues in Appendix Table A5. Hypothesis tests of interest are $\beta_1 \geq 0$, which indicates that the combination of community nominations and technical screening expands the applicant pool; and $\beta_2 \geq 0$ indicates that the encouragement aspect of the profile component has an additional marginal effect. For T^1, recall that the script of the private screening included data on how many people in the individual's ward had nominated them and quotations about why those voters thought the person would be a good candidate for Local Council, information that could encourage entry. For T^2, recall that a subset of top nominees received a phone call informing them that they were in fact the top scorers and that their profiles would be shared with parties, which could have an additional effect beyond their learning about voter support. For these entry outcomes, the T^2 nudge works only on the supply-side of encouraging applicants and does not reflect demand-side actions by party leaders, who did not receive the profiles until after the candidate application deadline.

The first tests concern geographic representation. On the extensive margin, the control mean in column 1 of Table 8 shows that nearly every ward (98.4 percent) had at least one local applicant. This leaves little scope for treatment effects, rendering this test moot. (Indeed, the estimated treatment effect for nominations is a null 1.4 percent, standard error 1.3.) Column 2 shows a noisily estimated treatment effect of community nominations and screening on the intensive margin, an increase of 0.22 people (0.24 standard error) on a base of 2.83 applicants per ward, which is not statistically distinct from zero. While it points in the expected direction, realized entry rates limit statistical power for this test: the minimum detectable effect size here is 0.68 people, and reaching this would have required an additional 9.7 percentage points increase in the observed entry rate, or a 61 percent boost.

For women, there are again no effects of nominations and screening on the extensive margin in column 3, yet now in column 4 there is a positive and marginally statistically significant impact on the number of female applicants, of 0.22 women (standard error 0.13) on a base of 0.51 female applicants, or a 43 percent increase. This is an early indication that the intervention may have been more impactful in helping parties recruit women, which could operate as a complement to the introduction of the gender quota. Estimates for the full sample exhibit similar patterns across all four outcomes but are more imprecise (Appendix Table A5).

There is no evidence of marginal treatment effects for the phone call nudge at the level of the applicant pool: no estimates in the second row are statistically distinct from zero and three are negative in sign. The lack of effect is unsurprising given earlier null estimates in the stronghold sample for individual responses to the phone call in making entry decisions as shown in Table 6.

VII.B. Quality of the Applicant Pool

The second area of exploration is whether the interventions enhanced the quality of the applicant pool. These analyses take the form:

$$Q_w = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_w^1 + \beta_2 T_w^2 + \boldsymbol{s}_w + \varepsilon_w \quad (4)$$

where Q_w is the ward-level measure of the average or maximum quality observed in the applicant pool; and all other terms remain as defined above. We standardize the quality index with respect to the mean and standard deviation of applicant quality in pure control wards.

Table 9 presents evidence of positive treatment effects of the nominations arm on quality, using first the observed and then higher simulated entry rates. The first two columns show standard treatment effect estimates for the realized level of entry by community nominees. Column 1 reveals a positive, but noisy estimate of a 0.052 standard deviation unit (0.044 standard error) increase in the average quality of applicants in wards assigned to nominations and screening. Estimates in column 2 show an improvement in the maximum quality of applicant observed equal to 0.092 standard deviation units, which is significant above the 90 percent confidence level. To gauge magnitude, the control mean is 0.267, which implies that the best applicant observed in control wards scored 0.267 standard deviation units higher than the mean for all applicants in control wards. Relative to this, the estimated treatment effect suggests that nominations and screening increased the quality of the top scorer in T1 wards by roughly 34 percent. As expected based on null results in Tables 6 and 8, there is no evidence for treatment effects of profile nudges.

A useful feature of the experimental design and data collection is that we can simulate treatment effects that would have obtained if more community nominees had filed candidate applications. We conduct a Monte Carlo simulation with 500 replications, drawing a new random sample of simulated entrants in each replication. Columns 3 through 6 do this by retaining the top nominees who filed applications in practice and, for wards where no top nominee applied, we take the highest quality top nominee who was interested in running and boost their entrance randomly at different rates. Columns 3 and 4 add these top nominees with a probability of 25 percent. This leads to limited changes in mean quality, but substantial and precisely estimated increases in the maximum quality observed in the pool, equivalent to 0.121 standard deviation units (0.053 standard error). Columns 5 and 6 boost entry by 50 percent and uncover positive and statistically significant impacts on both the mean and maximum quality of the ward-level pools. These estimates suggest an increase in the mean of 0.074 standard deviation units (standard error 0.044) and an increase in the maximum of 0.149 standard deviation units (standard error 0.053). Analogous simulations for the full 500 party-ward sample are all positive but more noisily estimated (Appendix Table A6).

The simulations reveal untapped potential that could be unlocked through greater investment in converting high-quality nominees to applicants. Greater effort to convert just one top pick in each ward identified by communities would have provided party leaders with unambiguously better options to consider in selecting candidates. The simulated entry analyses further resonate with the evidence presented in Table 3, showing that the top nominees who did enter are of measurably higher quality than the best status quo applicants found in pure control wards. We interpret this collection of estimates as proof of concept: the intervention succeeded in identifying higher quality people and encouraging them to run, but detecting impacts in ward-level analyses with greater

precision would have required either (i) higher realized entry rates, or (ii) a larger sample of wards. For the former, the encouragement component of phone calls to top nominees was the lightest touch aspect of the intervention. Evaluating what types of conversion effort or resources would be more effective is a priority for future research. On the latter, the experimental sample already exhausts the national population of rural wards, so further expansion is not possible in this context.

VIII. Party Gatekeeping and Candidate Selection

The translation of upstream impacts on identifying new talent and encouraging entry, to potential downstream impacts on candidacy and elected seats, depends crucially on the third and final issue of party gatekeeping. This marks the transition from studying candidate entry issues (a supply-side feature) to candidate selection (on the demand side). To better assess the scope for such translation, we first use the data to characterize party strategy in candidate selection and how it may have responded to the switch to PR and then consider their responsiveness to the interventions.

VIII.A. Party's Geographic Strategy

An informative place to start in characterizing party strategy is through some basic statistics about geographic representation in the raw data. The first thing to investigate is whether the switch to PR skewed representation, on candidate lists and elected seats, away from uniform representation across wards as mandated by the old majoritarian structure.

Figure 9 suggests that parties largely adhered to the old ward-based system. Using National Electoral Commission data, covering both parties across all rural districts nationwide, panel A shows that the modal ward has two candidates on each party's district list. There are wards with only one candidate and others with two or more, but overall, there are very few wards (only 6.2 percent) with no representation on a district list of one party or the other. This is consistent with parties taking a straightforward approach to the electoral reform by simply doubling the number of candidates they selected from each ward.

Panel B shows a similar pattern for ward representation in elected seats. This panel takes the National Electoral Commission's official results on everyone who won a seat in a Local Council, regardless of their party, and traces these elected officials back to the ward where they are registered to vote. It shows that the vast majority of wards can be linked to exactly one elected official. This pattern is broadly consistent with parties ordering their respective lists so that each ward has one candidate in the top half of the list (which covers the maximum number of seats they could possibly win), and one in the bottom half of the list (which has no chance of being elected outright but comprises the waitlist to replace anyone who leaves office during their term). Nonetheless, a nontrivial minority of wards (22 percent) lost direct geographic representation in their elected Local Council.

Econometrically, the fact that parties largely adhered to the old ward-based system suggests that

potential interference between units for T2—i.e., selecting profiled candidates from treatment wards directly at the expense of status quo candidates in control wards—is unlikely to present a major challenge for estimating potential treatment effects. But we can test this formally, leveraging the constituency-level saturation design in the assignment of profile sharing. Appendix Exhibit A4 provides details on the motivation and structure of the empirical specifications. As expected, estimates for spillover effects on geographic representation are null (in Appendix Table A13).

VIII.B. Strongest Predictors of Party Selections

We next examine individual characteristics that predict whom parties select from the applicant pool to advance to candidacy on a district list. These estimates are run on the realized applicant pools, which include all status quo applicants, incumbents who ran for re-election and community nominees who filed a candidate application. For simplicity we focus on regression estimates of how different traits influence the probability of candidacy within our randomization strata (i.e., fixed effects by district and competitiveness).

The two characteristics that stand out across the panels of Figure 10 are incumbency and female gender, which are the strongest positive predictors of candidacy. Gender straightforwardly responds to the quota, and the new policy achieved an overall share of elected female Councillors just shy of its 30 percent target. Incumbency preference breaks with past precedent.

Party leaders' preference for incumbents is observable in the raw data tracking how the three different groups of potential candidates progress through the selection process. Figure 11 shows that conditional on filing an application, sitting Councillors are the most likely to get selected onto a candidate list (at 80 percent in panel A), followed by top nominees (69 percent) and status quo applicants (57 percent). Ordering these groups by size shows top nominees (84) and incumbents (85) are almost the same size, well behind status quo applicants (269). Conditional on candidacy, incumbents are vastly more likely to win a seat (at 68 percent), compared to nominees (33 percent) and status quo applicants (32 percent). This is consistent with party leaders stacking the top of candidate lists with incumbents.

Placing this in historical perspective, the shares of both those who reached a second candidacy and re-won seats increased dramatically compared to the 2012 to 2018 political cycle (see Figure 12). In regression analysis, conditional on running again, incumbents increased their re-election rates by 21.6 percentage points (standard error 8.7 points) on a base rate of 36.6 percent (in Table 7). Overall, this increases the stickiness of representation from an average of 5.1 percent incumbent carryover in 2018 to 30.7 percent in 2023. This reduction in political renewal substantially narrows the space for new entrants, including both community nominees and those challenging incumbents in the status quo.

Increased privileging of incumbents is consistent with a broader literature showing that closed-list proportional representation systems concentrate power in party leadership, benefiting incumbents through party-controlled list placement at the expense of voters. This provides an explanation for

why the incumbency advantage is substantially larger under closed-list versus open-list systems (Fiva and Smith 2018; Fiva and Røhr 2018). The lack of entry and incumbent preference can further reduce individual accountability and explain why closed-list proportional representation systems tend to exhibit higher levels of rent-seeking relative to plurality systems (Kunicová and Rose-Ackerman 2005). This is of particular concern in weaker states that struggle to control corruption more generally. It is in these same settings that one hopes that higher quality leaders might compensate for lower quality institutions (Carreri 2021), compounding the political selection problem.

VIII.C. Selection on Quality

Returning to Figure 10, parties do not demonstrate a strong overall pattern of selection with respect to our quality measures. Parties appear to positively select on local knowledge and elected political experience, and somewhat on popularity as measured by the community nominations data. Parties appear to negatively select on human capital and work experience, and somewhat so on managerial capital, all of which are areas that the intervention sought to identify people with strength in.

Tracking selection on quality throughout the pipeline of entry, candidacy and winning a seat, Figure 13 illustrates the degree of observed selection on the quality index for each type of applicant. For entry, the first set of columns compares the mean quality score for each type with reference to the average score among all status quo applicants (shown by the first green bar which is standardized to zero). The positive bars for incumbents who ran for re-election (red bar) and top community nominees who filed applications (blue bar) demonstrate strong positive self-selection on quality at the entry stage. The negative (yellow) bar for lower ranked nominees (on the screening instrument) suggests that nominees outside the top picks who filed applications are relatively lower quality than those filing in the status quo.

The next set of columns reflects candidate selections by parties. The heights of all four bars remain similar to their counterparts at the application stage, implying neutral selection by parties with respect to quality in choosing candidates to place on their district lists. The final set of columns are for election, which is driven by how parties ranked individuals on the list. The heights of the blue and green bars increase, indicating that parties positively select on quality in ordering status quo and top nominee candidates toward the top of their lists. The red and yellow bars hold their heights, suggesting quality-neutral ordering of incumbents and low ranked applicants on the candidate lists.

VIII.D. Treatment Effect Estimates on Candidate Selection

To evaluate how parties responded to treatment, we start with geographic representation and test whether the intervention impacted the likelihood that a given ward had a candidate on the party's district-level list, and whether anyone from that ward won a seat. Analysis takes the form of Equation (3). A key difference in interpretation is that the β_2 estimated for T^2 no longer reflects the phone call nudge and instead captures whether the information shared with parties impacts the

probability that they select a profiled nominee.

As presaged in the raw data on ward representation from Figure 9, baseline rates of geographic representation on the dominant party's list are high, leaving little scope for treatment effects. The control mean in Table 10 column 1 shows that 93.7 percent of wards in this sample did indeed have at least one local candidate on the dominant party's list. The estimated treatment effect for nominations and screening, which this high base renders largely moot, is correspondingly small in magnitude and imprecisely estimated (0.9, standard error 3.7).

For geographic representation by female candidates, estimates in column 2 suggest that the nominations and screening may have been helpful in this regard. In control group wards, the baseline rate of having a female candidate from the ward on the dominant party's district list was 34.9 percent, which increases with nominations by 13.8 percentage points (standard error 7.8 points). This effect is marginally statistically significant and concentrated in areas where no profiles were shared.

There is no evidence that nominations and screening impacted either the rank on the candidate list or the likelihood that someone registered to vote in the ward got elected. Estimates in columns 3 and 4 are small in magnitude and not statistically distinct from zero. This is perhaps unsurprising in light of parties' newly increased preference for rerunning incumbents.

For profile sharing, the one notable estimate in Table 10 is a positive and statistically significant treatment effect on the inverse rank of candidates from profile sharing wards on the list. On average, candidates from T2 wards are ranked 4.4 positions higher (as in closer to the first rank on a descending list) on their district lists relative to candidates from wards with nominations but no profile sharing. Given power issues, it is useful to complement this with a look at the raw data. Figure 14 compares outcomes for top nominees in the T1 only arm (in red) to those in the T1+T2 arms (in blue), which recall was randomly assigned. The share of top nominees is higher at each stage of entry, candidacy and election, although these differences are not statistically significant. Panel B maps the probability density functions of candidates' numerical ranks on party lists separately for wards randomly assigned to profile sharing (T2) versus those assigned to T1 only and pure controls. The dashed vertical line at rank 22 denotes the average last rank on the dominant party's list to win a seat in its regional stronghold. Profile wards have more density to the left of this line (or ranks closer to the top of the list), suggesting that parties may have been open to information in ranking candidates.

Turning to the quality of the candidate pool, effects in Table 11 mirror those seen earlier for the applicant pool. The nominations intervention shifted the maximum quality observed among candidates on a list upwards, by 0.117 standard deviation units of the quality index, which is marginally statistically significant (standard error 0.061). Treatment effect estimates on the mean quality of candidate are positive but imprecise. Coefficient estimates for impacts on the mean and maximum quality of elected politicians from treatment wards are positive in sign but not statistically distinct from zero. These last estimates also face the issue that quality is not observed

for wards with no winning candidate (roughly a quarter of the sample), so is run on a selected subset of wards with winners. There is no evidence that profile sharing had any additional marginal effects on the quality of selected candidates or elected officials, as all four corresponding estimates and small in magnitude, negative in sign and imprecisely estimated. Estimates for the full sample are null (Appendix Tables A7 and A8), as are estimates that adjust for multiple inference testing across all pre-specified hypotheses in both the stronghold and full samples (Appendix Table A9 and Exhibit A3).

VIII.E. Interpretations of Party Gatekeeping

There are multiple ways to interpret the fact that parties privileged incumbents over top community nominees and status quo challengers in ordering their candidate lists. While multiple factors are at play, and statistical power to estimate treatment effects is limited, several empirical patterns help inform the potential consequences for the productivity of elected Councils.

First, it is clear that parties passed over higher quality community nominees, as measured by our screening protocol, to advantage incumbents. When we restrict estimates of relative quality to include only nominees who applied for candidacy and incumbents who ran for re-election, top nominees retain a large and highly significant quality advantage (of 0.225 standard deviation units, p-value < 0.001 in Appendix Table A10). This quality advantage survives when further limiting to wards where nominees and incumbents ran against each other (of 0.184 units, p-value 0.026).

Second, parties also passed over higher quality status quo applicants to favor incumbents. To see this, Appendix Figure A7 compares the observed shares of elected Councillors by type, with a simulation of the shares that would obtain under a strict ranking using the quality index. If parties had ranked applicants by the quality index and ordered their lists accordingly, the share of incumbents making it high enough on the list to win a seat would fall from 30 to 16 percent (dropping 52 incumbents). These winning ranks would be replaced by more top nominees (increasing from 8 to 18 percent for a gain of 29 individuals) and also high-quality status quo challengers (whose share would increase from 51 to 61 percent, for 29 more people). Lower ranked nominees would decrease somewhat, from a low base (10 to 5 percent).

To the extent that the quality components with their empirical correlates robustly predict Council performance, this suggests negative impacts on productivity for the elected group. Yet parties might be responding to other indicators of quality unobservable to the research team, which might net out positively for performance. To assess the scope for this, we focus on one characteristic we can observe, experience in office, which Figure 10 shows positively predicts party selection of candidates. We use our incumbent anonymous peer reviews (efficacy and honesty) and other metrics of performance in office (engagements with voters, mobilizing development projects) to benchmark the likely productivity returns to experience against components in the quality index. Appendix Figure 8 does so by running an omnibus model of items that predict all these proxies for good performance in office from the incumbent survey, replicated over 500 LASSO simulations per proxy variable. Years in Council is indeed positive and significant, ranking fourth in the most

frequently selected predictor of favorable ratings (with an average coefficient of 1.20 and 95 percent confidence interval of 0.58 to 2.04). Yet the three higher ranked positive and significant predictors—namely, knowledge of local NGO organizations, past development project experience and knowledge of NGO contacts—are all items in the quality index (coefficients ranging from 1.01 to 1.21). Thus, one would have to roughly believe that an increase in experience in office translates to roughly three times the impact on productivity than comparables increases in these other measures to rationalize only prioritizing experience. Plus, this does not account for the other components of the quality index, such as literacy and experience supervising people, that even if they rank below Years in Council, they still consistently predict some proxies for performance.

IX. Discussion and Conclusion

Widespread discontent with politicians and their performance calls for creative solutions to bring new talent into public office. While appealing in theory, there are reasons to doubt whether this can be accomplished in practice. It may be difficult to identify individuals with the right skills and sufficient public support; promising recruits might be unwilling to endure the hardships of campaigning or frustrations of government service; and even if they were, political parties may not be interested in sponsoring them as candidates. Breakdowns at any point in this chain will undermine efforts to improve political selection.

The intervention studied in Sierra Leone successfully cleared the first two supply-side hurdles. It identified popular, high-quality individuals and induced many of them to file an application to be formally considered by a party for candidacy. Structured household consultations surfaced names of individuals with broad support for their fitness for office, lists that were honed on quality using measures that correlate with on-the-job performance validated in related studies. With screening data on all party applicants—including those associated with the intervention, re-running incumbents, and others who applied in the status quo—analysis shows that these new entrants were on average higher quality than their competitors. While they were also more representative in the sense that a larger share of household respondents said they would like the person to represent them in local government, they were nonetheless socioeconomic elites, strongly selected from traditional chiefly lineages.

Patterns of entry among community nominees reveal strong self-selection on measures of quality, with those who scored highest on technocratic screening entering at rates more than 50 percent higher than others. If we were to run this study again, we would invest more resources in converting the best quality nominees into applicants. This part of the intervention was light touch: consisting of providing nominees with information about their popularity and testimonials from community members about their fitness for office, as well as an encouragement phone call (to a subset). Using data on all actual nominees, simulations show how boosting their entry rates even by a little yields large and precisely estimated impacts on the quality of applicants available for parties to choose in selecting candidates.

The Government of Sierra Leone implemented a gender quota for the first time in these 2023 elections, which raises the importance of finding strong women to run. While women faced higher barriers to entry than men, those that cleared them performed relatively well. Voters showed bias against women in nominating fewer of them, but those women whose names surfaced enjoyed broad support. Female nominees on average performed less well than their male peers on the merit-based screening, but those who ranked highly on merit closed much of this gender performance gap compared to top ranking men. There is suggestive evidence that nominations and screening helped women from treatment wards get onto party lists. These results collectively highlight potential for recruitment efforts to complement gender quotas, as parties need to source many more female candidates than they are used to while respecting tight electoral calendars.

The impacts of community nominations, screening and profile sharing ground to a halt when it came to securing a rank at the top of party lists, the essential final step in getting elected. This demand-side breakdown reflects intensified party gatekeeping that favored incumbents in response to the abrupt shift from majoritarian to proportional representation seen in the election studied. By increasing the rate at which incumbents both sought and won re-election (from 5 to 31 percent), political renewal dropped dramatically in the space of a single electoral cycle. This reduced scope for any challengers—from both within and beyond the intervention studied—to gain a foothold in elected office, including those of demonstrably higher quality. Another potentially pernicious impact of the switch to proportional representation is that 21 percent of wards in the research sample lost geographic representation in that they no longer have any elected official from their ward serving in their Local Council.

In sum, gathering local information on who is best fit for public office from community nominations, and sharpening it with merit-based screening, proved highly effective in identifying new political talent. A quarter of the top nominees filed candidate applications with parties, providing proof of concept that there is new talent out there that can be brought into politics. Getting them elected, however, requires greater protection against party gatekeeping that favors incumbents, and particularly so for electoral systems like PR that privilege parties over voters in selecting individual candidates.

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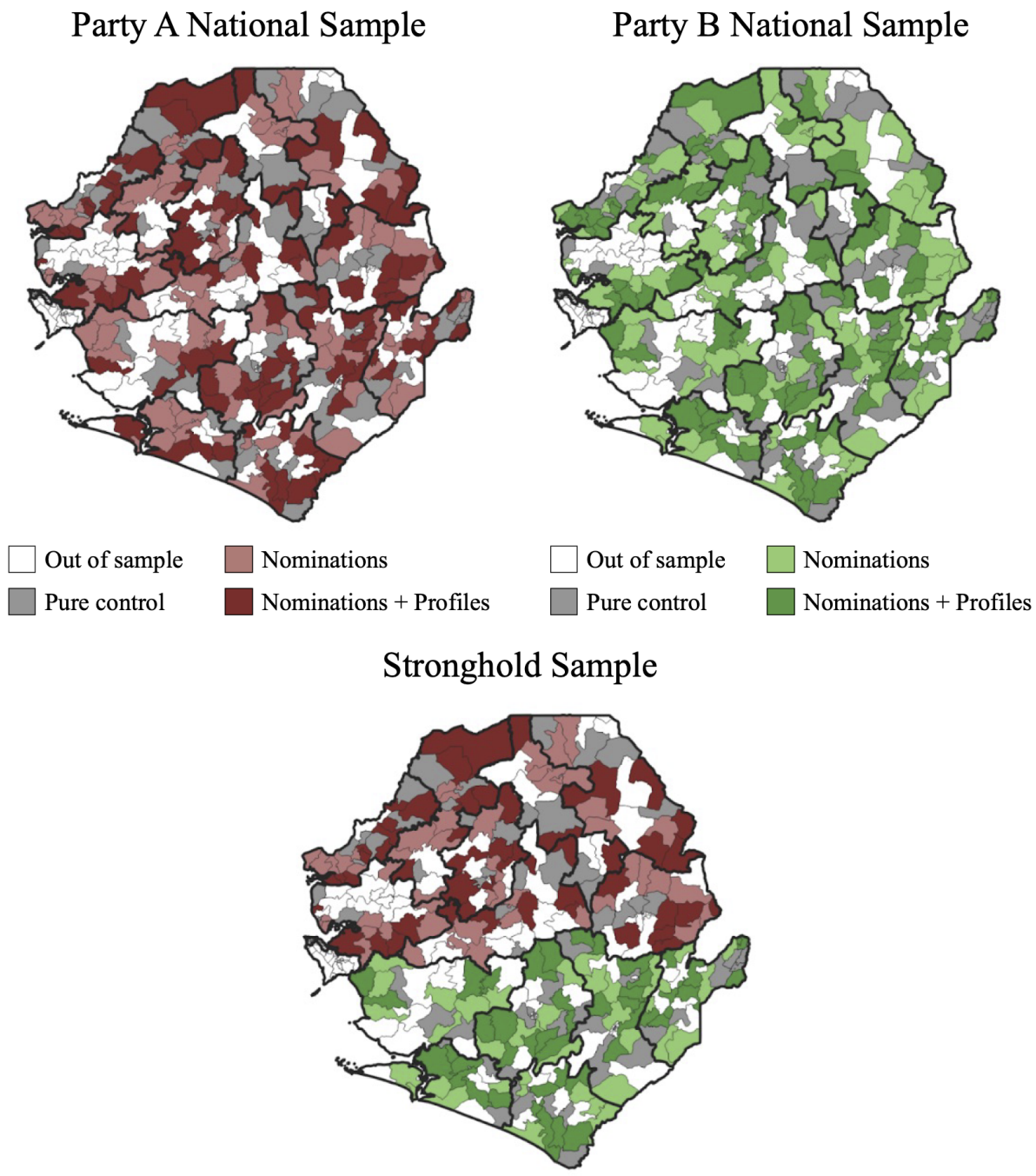
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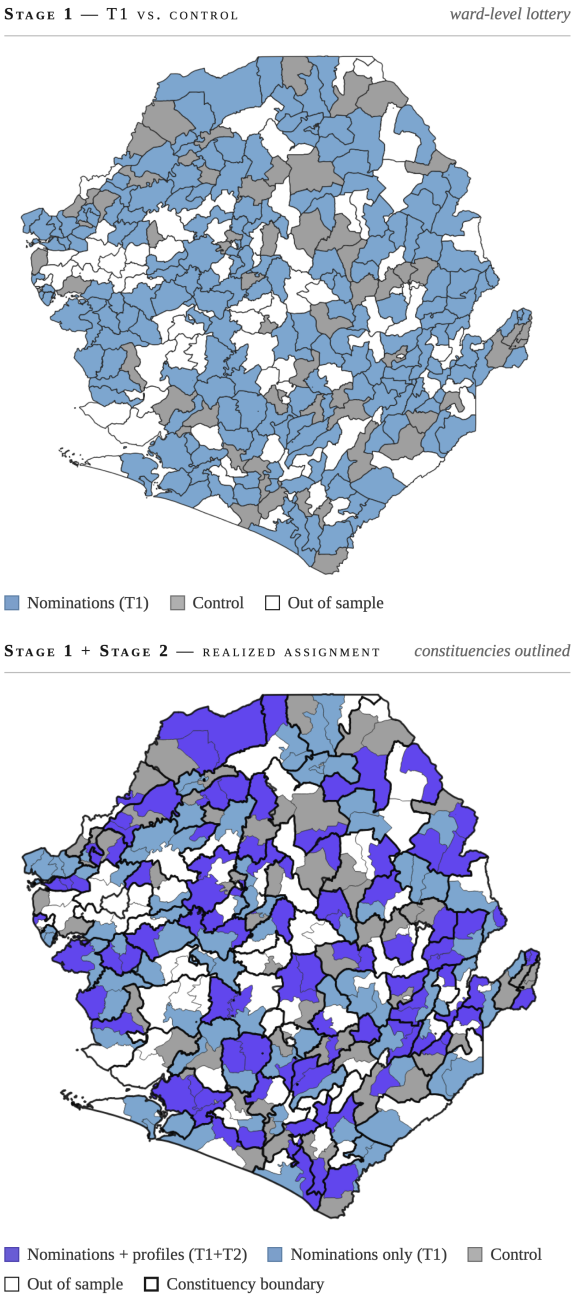
Figures and Tables

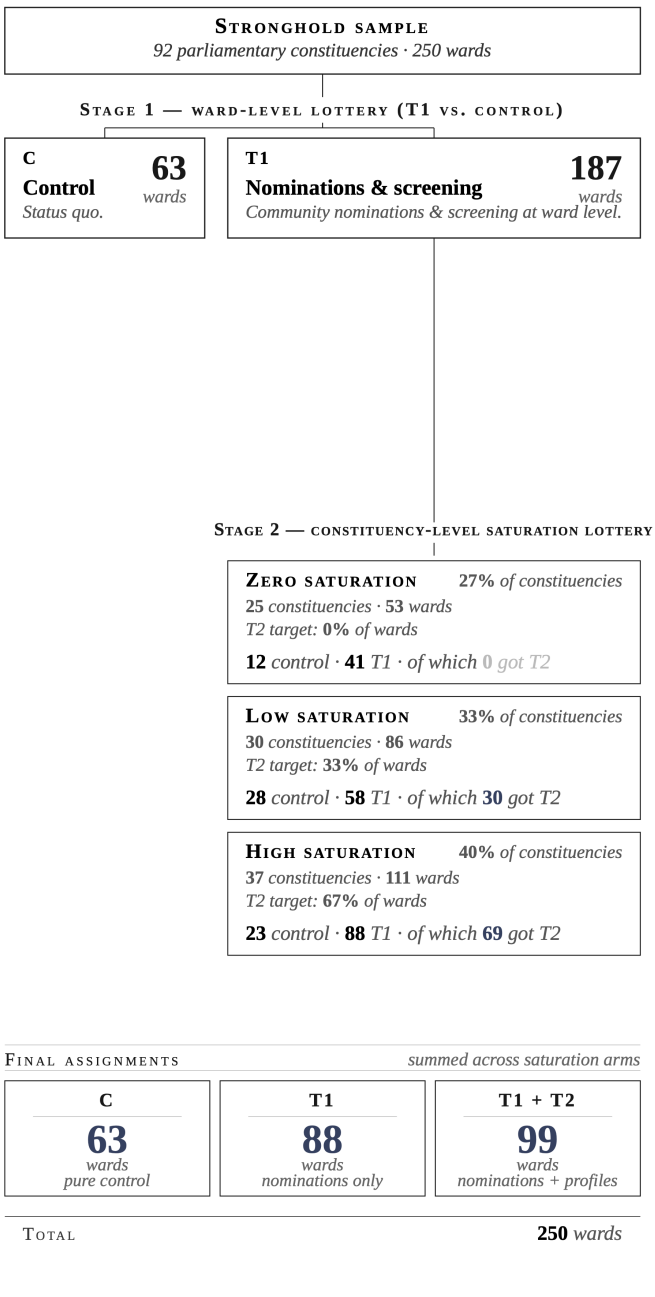
Figure 1: National Party Samples and the Stronghold Sample



Notes: This figure maps the geographic scope of the study. The top panel shows wards assigned to treatment for both parties in the full sample. This comprises the full sample of 500 party-ward units. The bottom panel delineates the stronghold sample of 250 wards, which assigns each ward only to one party, the locally dominant one based on 2018 district-level electoral data.

Figure 2: Experimental Design for the Stronghold Sample





Notes: Maps (left) show the realized ward-level assignment across Sierra Leone for Stage 1 (T1 vs. control) and the combined Stage 1 + Stage 2 outcome (T1 only vs. T1+T2, with host constituencies outlined). Diagram (right) shows how this multi-stage randomization was implemented: a first lottery randomizes the 250 wards (for the stronghold sample) to control (C) or to community nominations & screening (T1); a second lottery then randomizes the 92 host constituencies to one of three saturation arms, which sets the fraction wards in each constituency to be randomized into profile sharing (T2).

Figure 3: Profile Example (redacted)

In this ward, 75 households nominated 70 unique names. We took the most popular 10 and of these, First Name is one of two who are the highest quality

First Last NAME



Councillor Nominee for Bombali District

Contact: ### ### ###

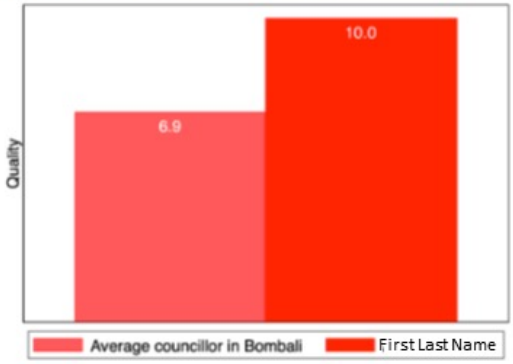
Age: 29 years

Education level: University

Current occupation: Teacher

Resident of Ward 118, Masuba Section, Gbanti Chiefdom

APC member



Popularity: Received more votes than 93% of nominees in their ward

Experiences and Skills

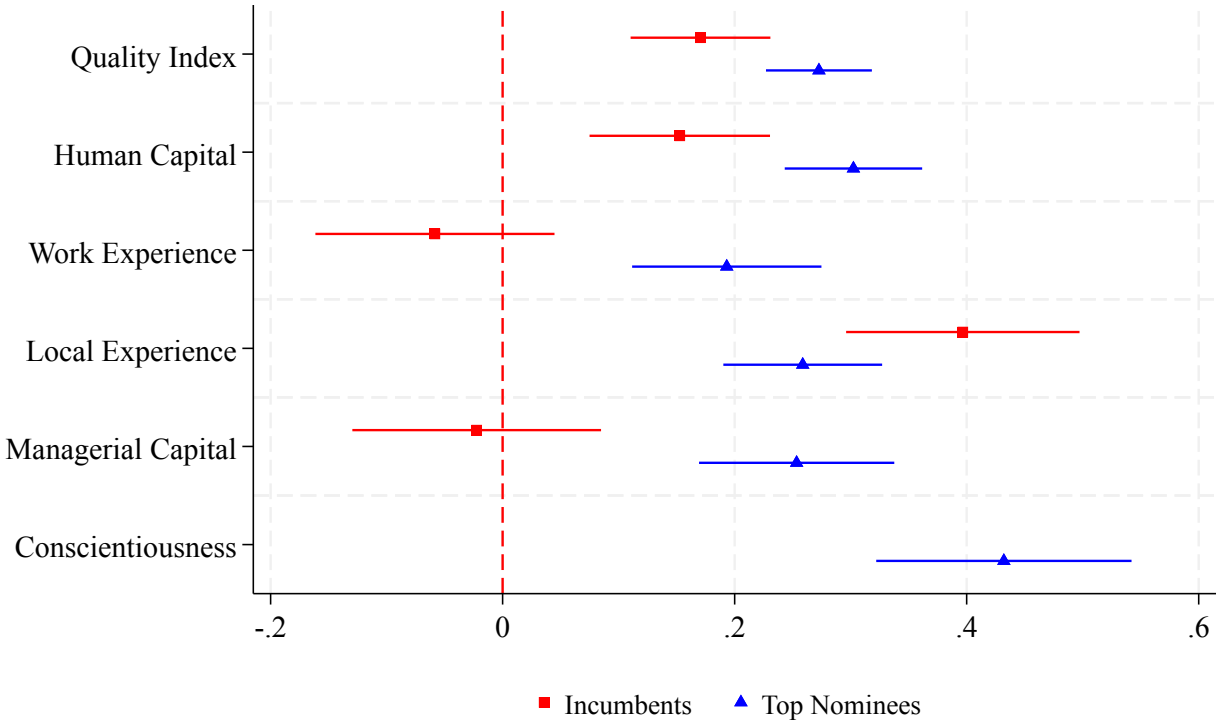
- Experience in fundraising, recruiting and procuring development projects in the transportation sector, including road construction
- Relevant job experience in managing projects, budgets and teams in the NGO / development sectors
- Strong numeracy, reasoning and project proposal skills, as verified by the survey team

Community Testimonial

'He is helpful to the community, bold, educated, can speak well, developmentally oriented, and has humanitarian feeling for his community' -

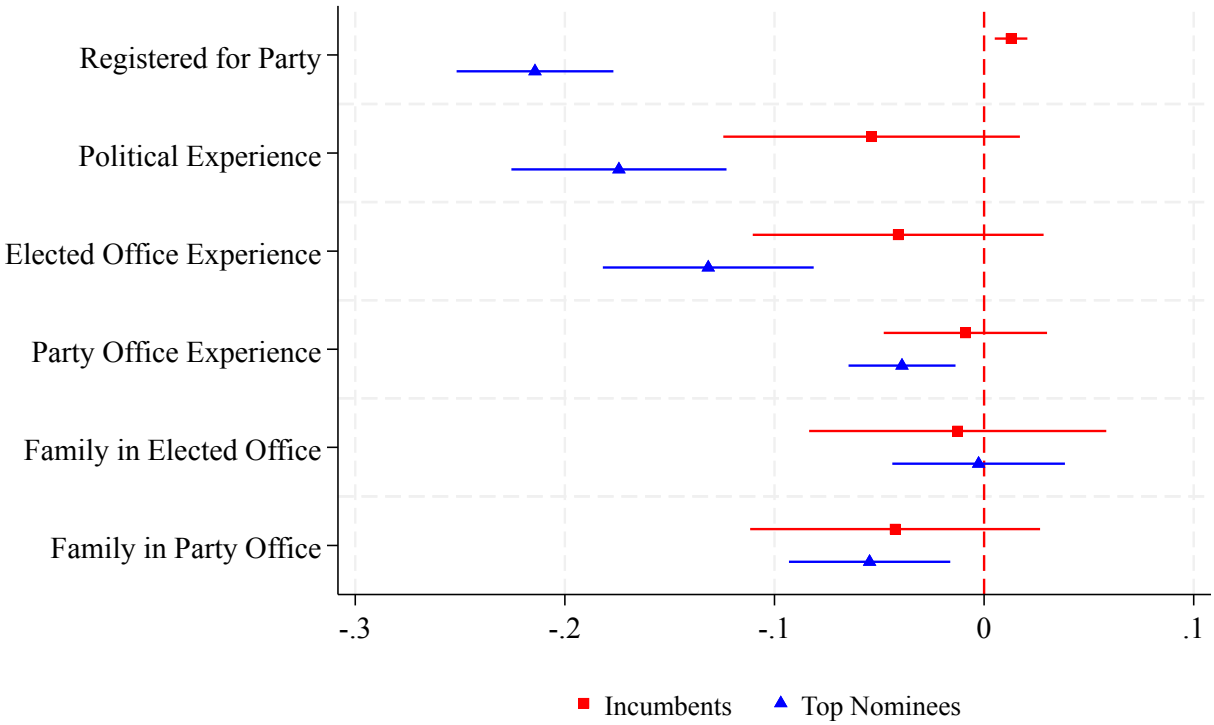
Notes: This figure presents a redacted example of the candidate profiles shared with party leaders in wards assigned to the profile sharing treatment (T2)

Figure 4: Comparisons of Quality Sub-components



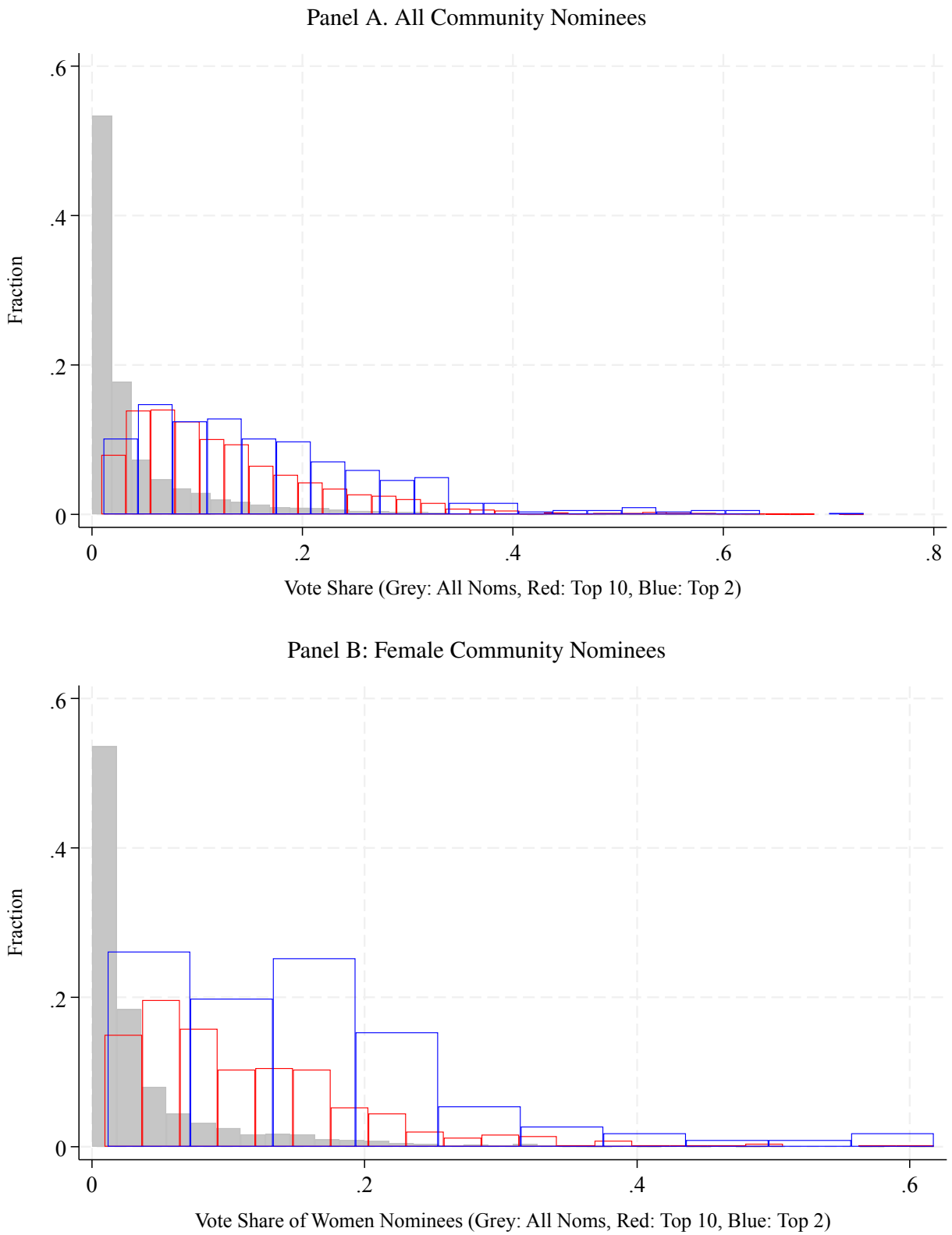
Notes: This figure shows regression coefficients with 95% CIs comparing incumbents and top nominees to status quo applicants in our full sample. The first outcome is the quality index and other outcomes indices created with the same methodology grouping variables by category. The mean score of status quo applicants is standardized to zero and used as the control group, indicated by the red dashed vertical line. Regressions control for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Figure 5: Indicators that Nominees are New to Politics



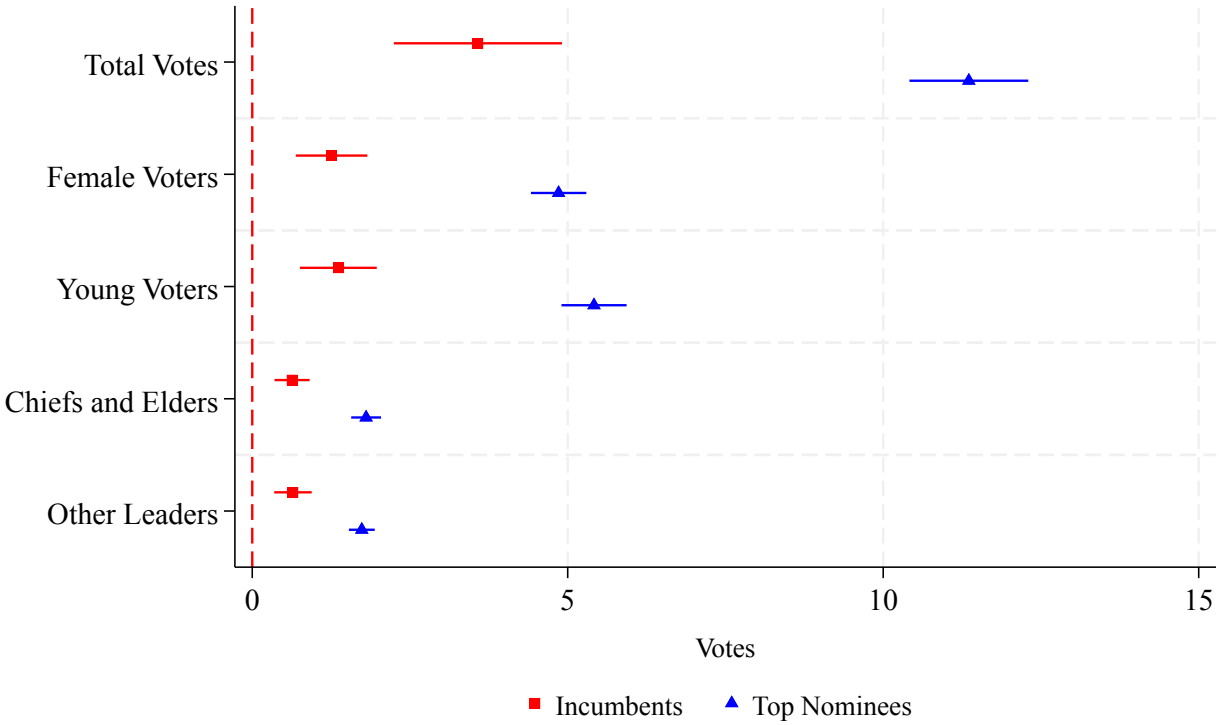
Notes: This figure shows regression coefficients with 95% CIs comparing incumbents and top nominees to status quo applicants in our full sample. All outcomes are binary variables. Regressions control for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Figure 6: Distribution of Community Nomination Shares



Notes: This figure plots the distribution of community nominations shares garnered by each individual who was nominated by at least one respondent (Panel A) and separately for female nominees only (in Panel B).

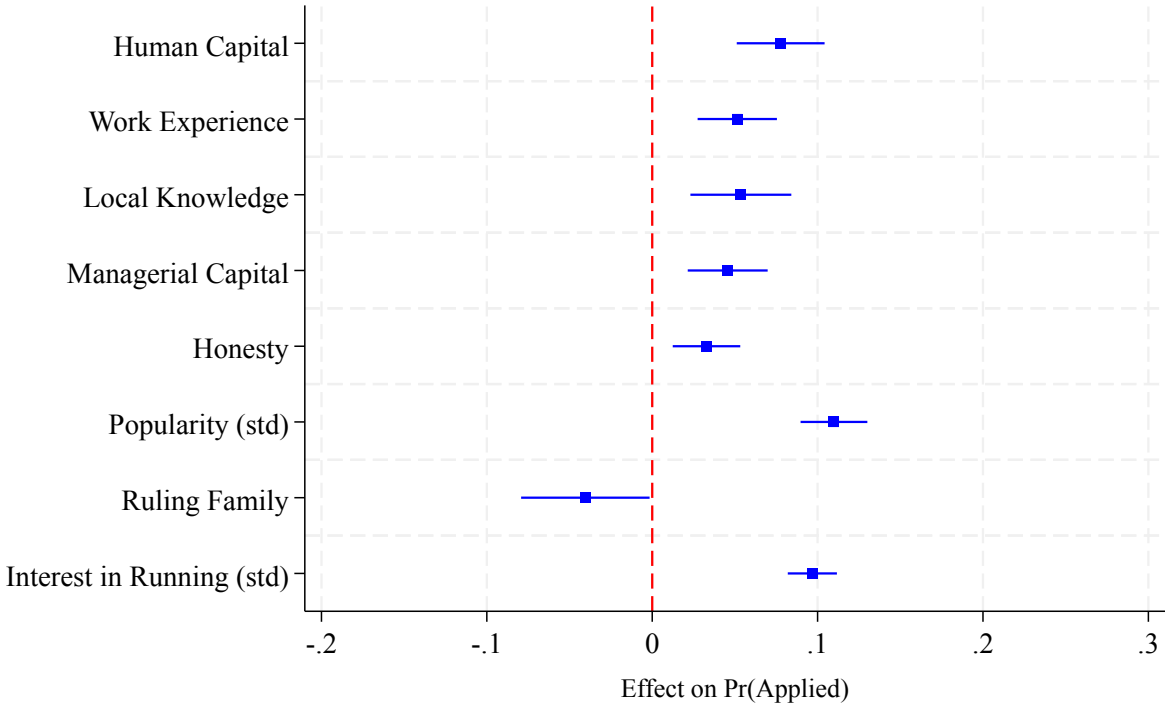
Figure 7: Differences in Local Support by Household Respondent Type



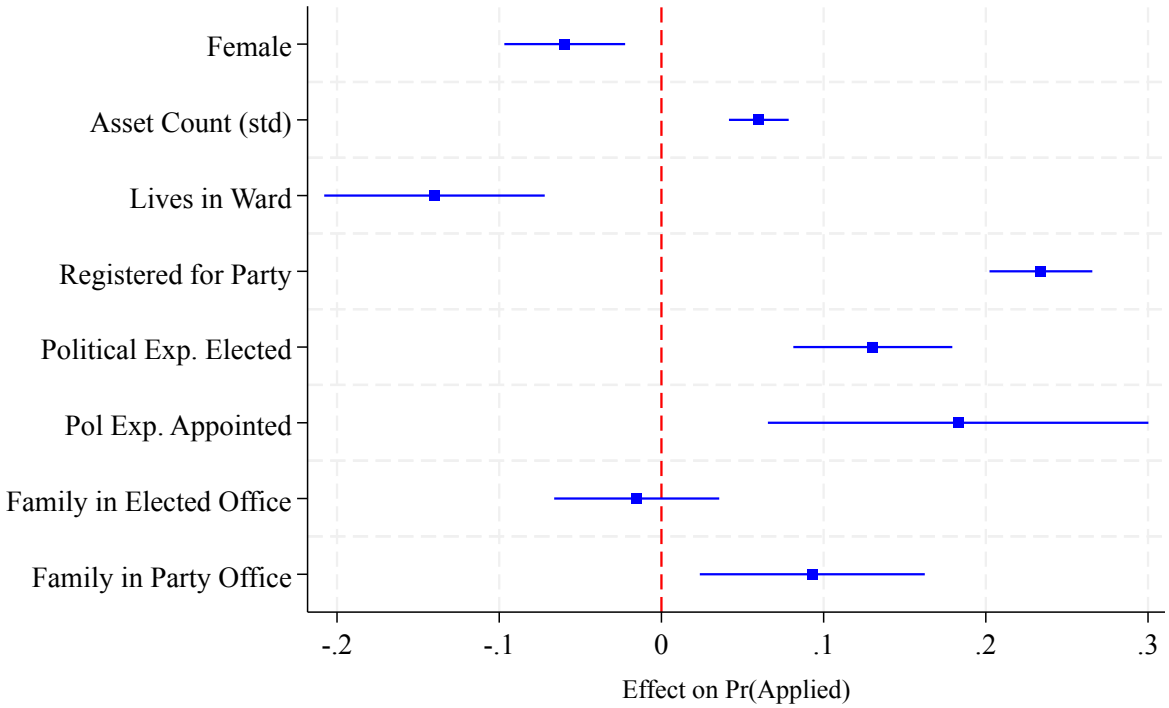
Notes: This figure shows regression coefficients with 95% CIs comparing incumbents and top nominees to status quo applicants in our full sample. All outcomes are raw number of votes from private nominations. Regressions control for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Figure 8: Drivers of Self-selection into Entry among Nominees

Panel A: Components of quality, popularity, ruling house membership and interest

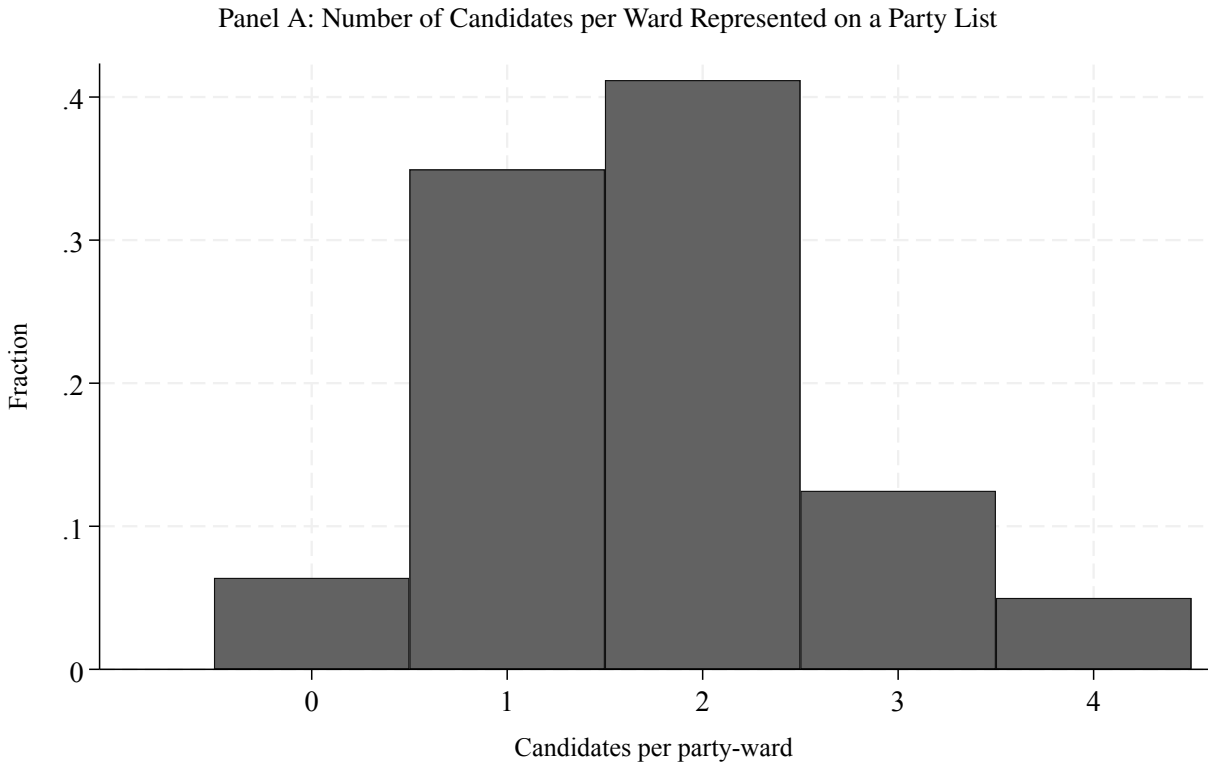


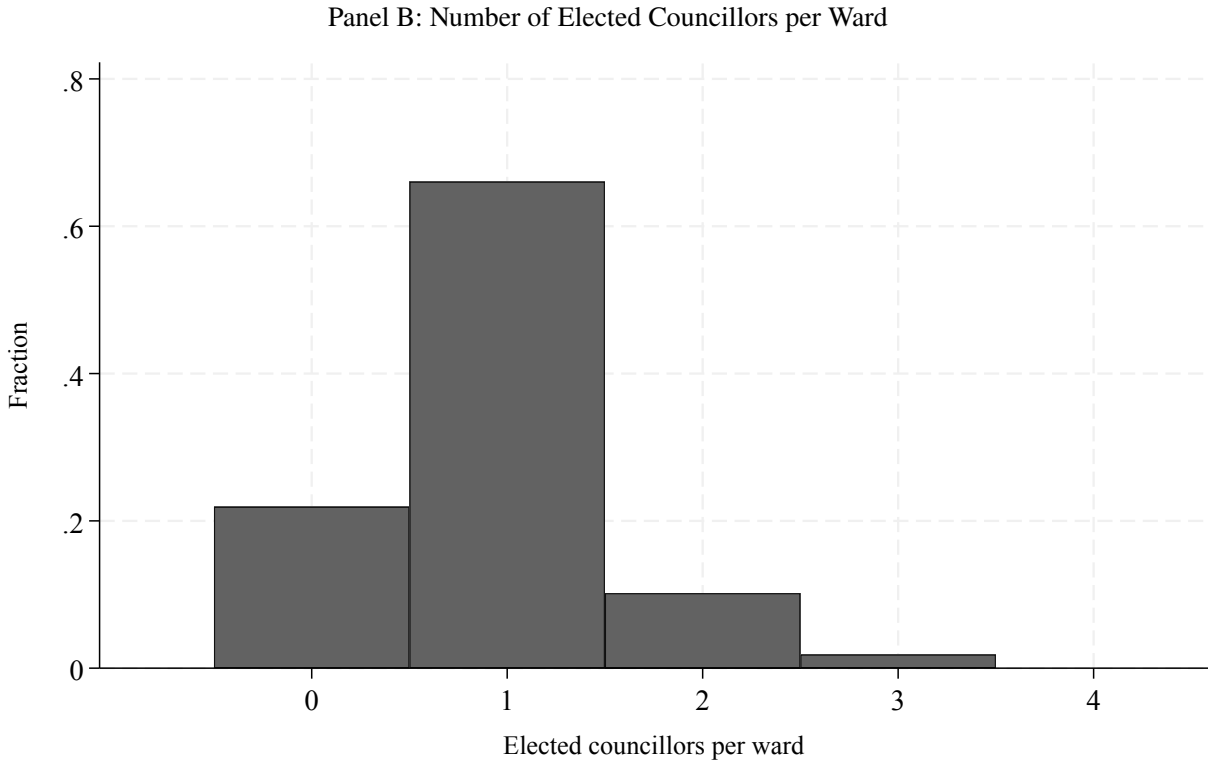
Panel B: Measures associated with costs of entry or political connections



Notes: Figure shows simple regressions of how different variables predict which nominees in our full sample apply to become councillors. Regressions control for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Figure 9: Parties Largely Adhered to the Old Ward-based System

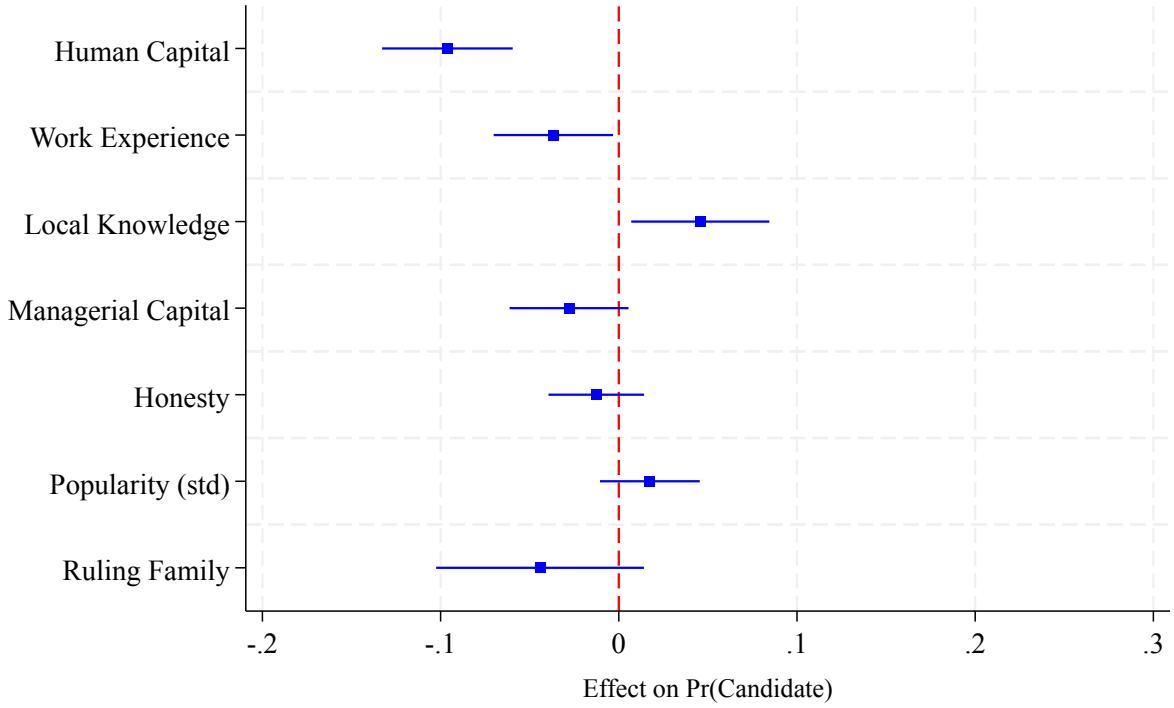




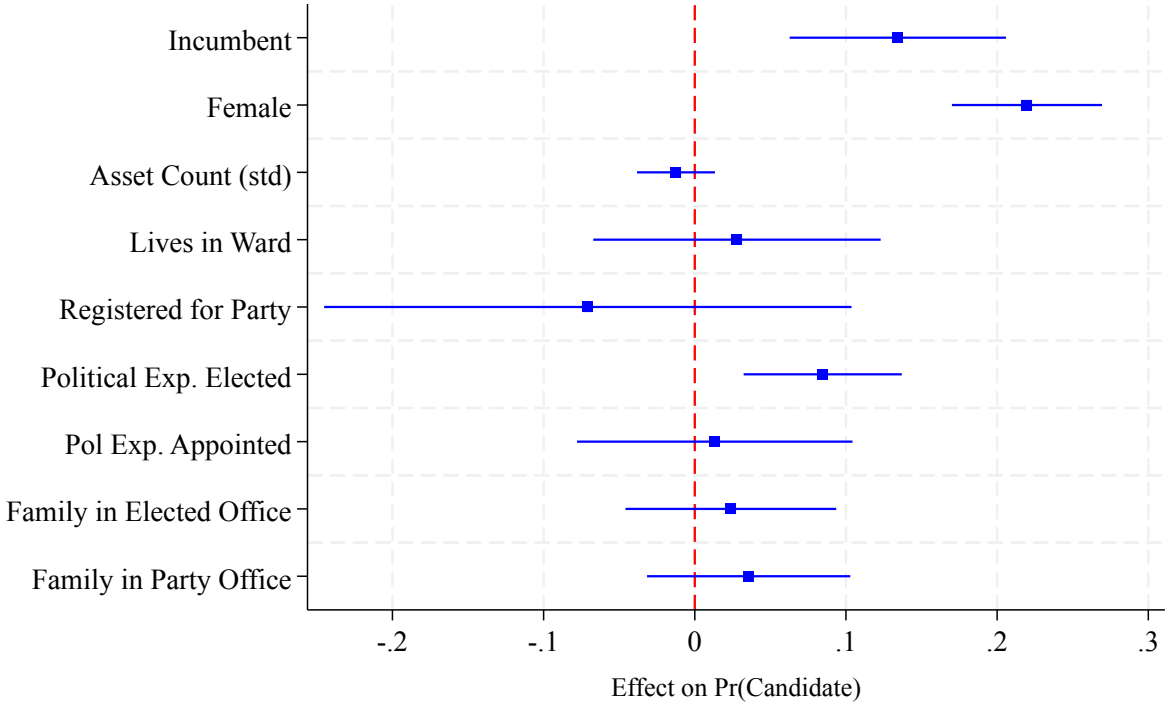
Notes: This figure uses electoral data for both major parties across rural districts part of our research sample. Panel A plots the distribution of the number of candidates per ward that appear on a party's district candidate list. Panel B shows the distribution of the number of elected councillors per ward.

Figure 10: Predictors of Party Selection of Candidates

Panel A: Components of quality, popularity, ruling house membership and interest



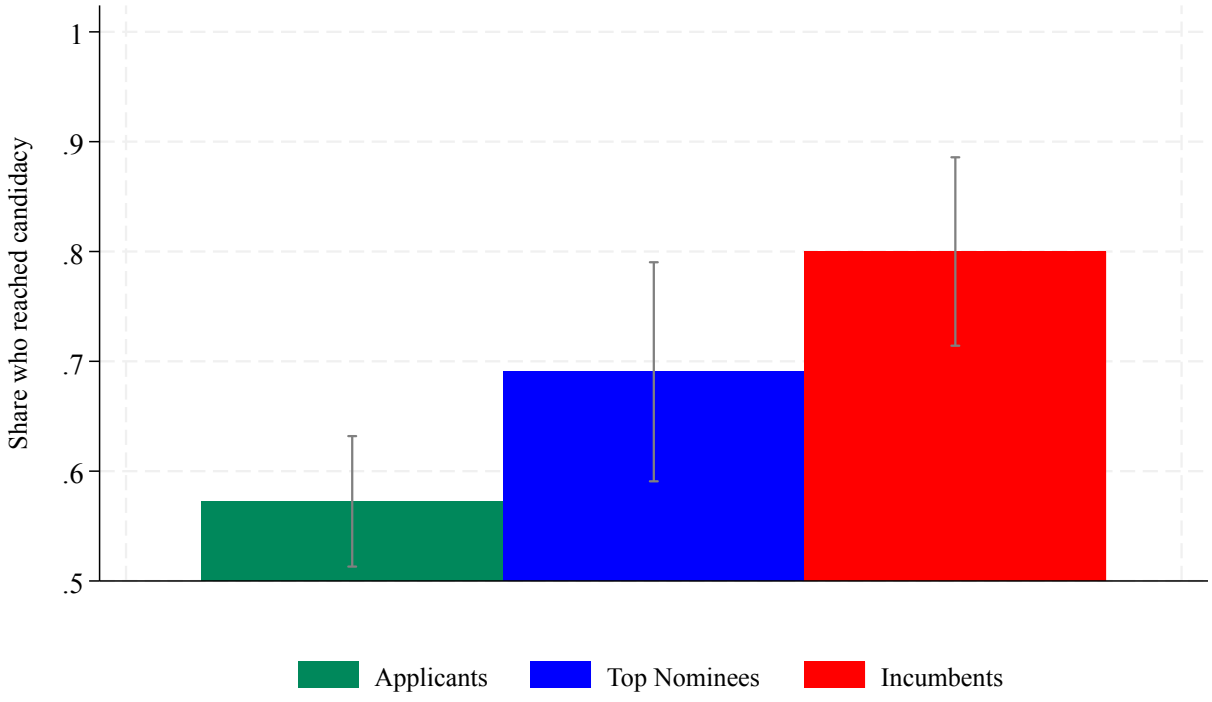
Panel B: Measures associated with costs of entry or political connections



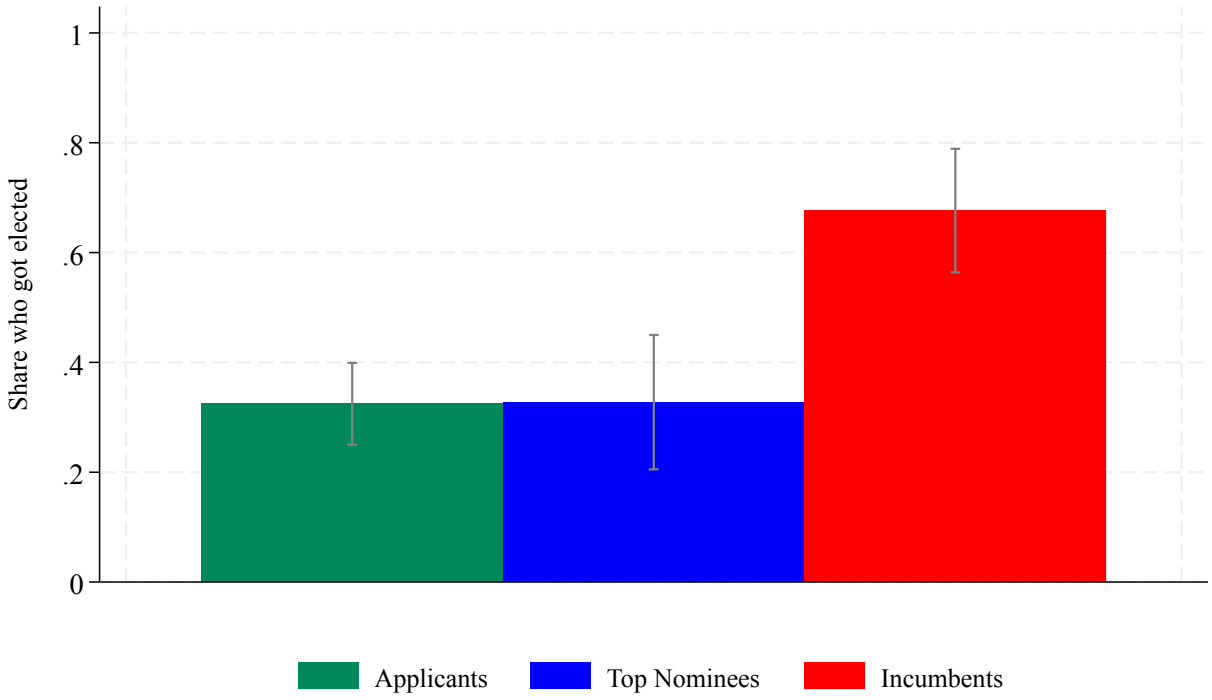
Notes: Figure shows simple regressions of how different variables predict which individuals in our full sample who applied to become councillors go on to be selected as candidates. Regressions control for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Figure 11: Raw Data on Progression from Entry to Election by Type

Panel A: Conditional Likelihood of Candidacy Selection by Applicant Type

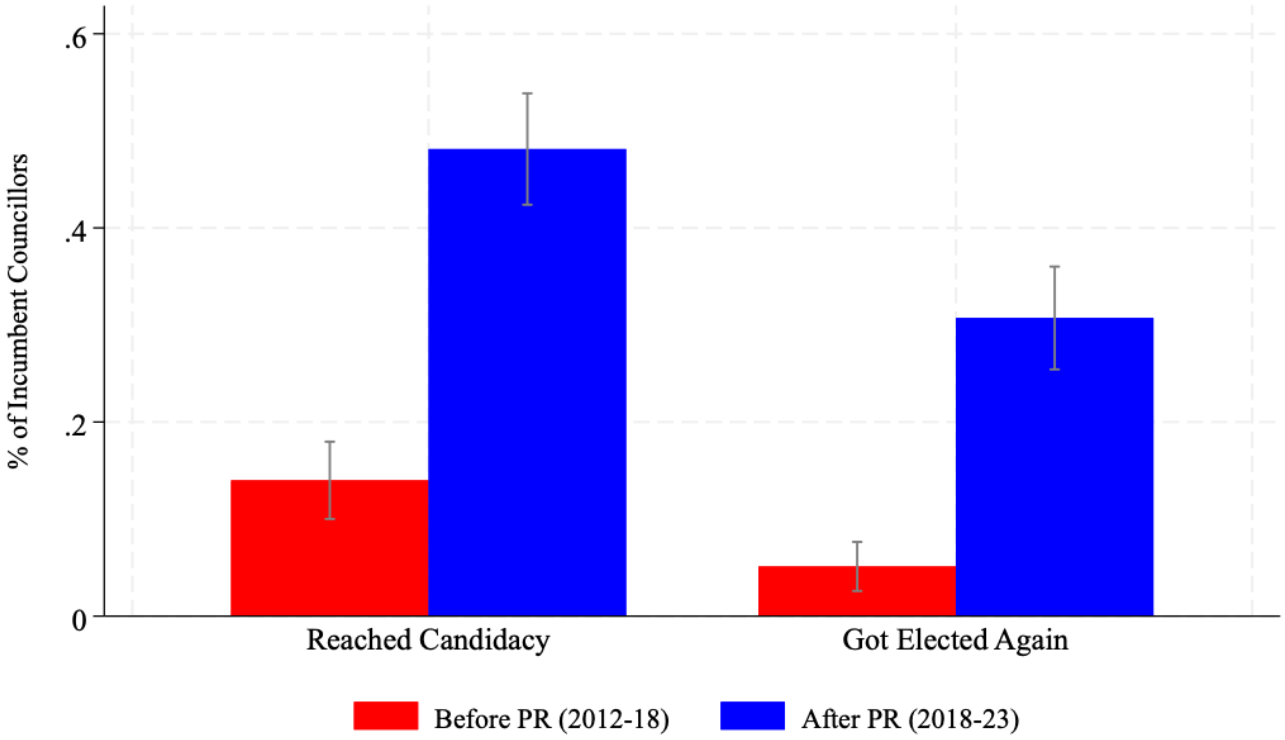


Panel B: Conditional Likelihood of Election by Candidate Type



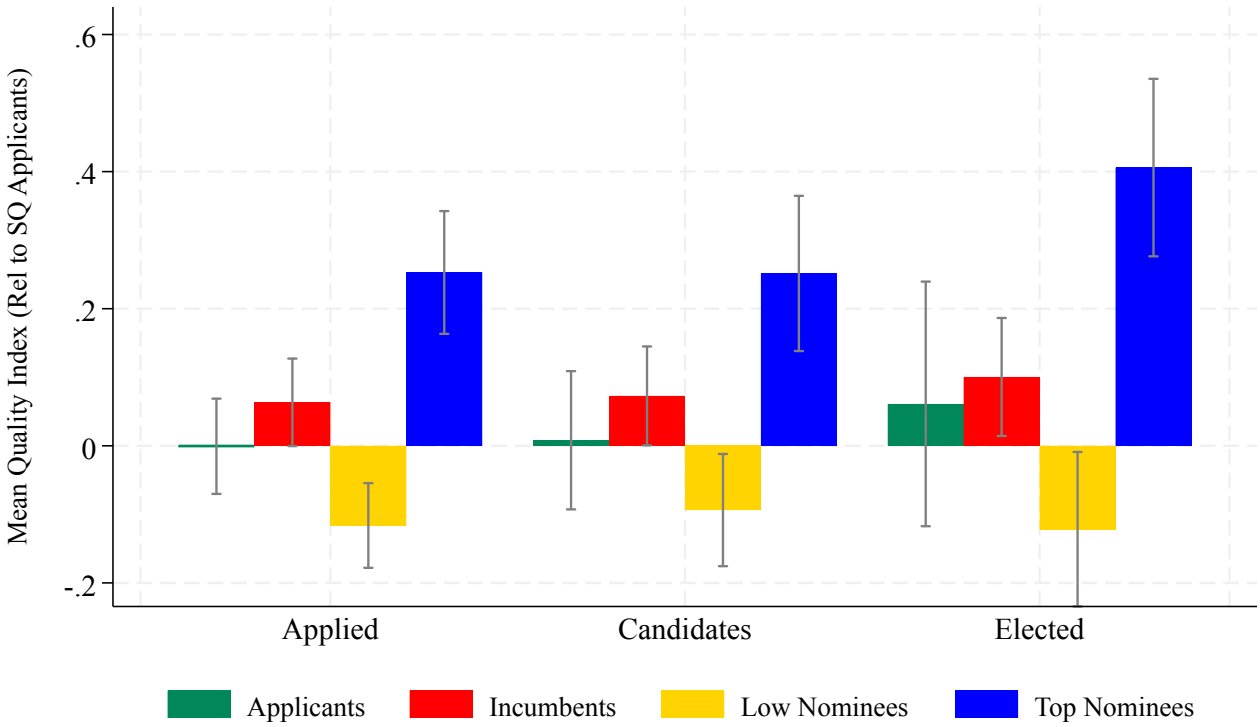
Notes: This figure plots the conditional likelihood of progressing to candidacy and being elected for the potential candidates in the stronghold sample of our study: incumbents, top nominees, and status quo applicants. Panel A shows the share of each type that, conditional on filing an application, was selected onto a party's candidate list. Panel B shows the share of each type that, conditional on being placed on a candidate list, won a council seat.

Figure 12: Incumbency Advantage After PR



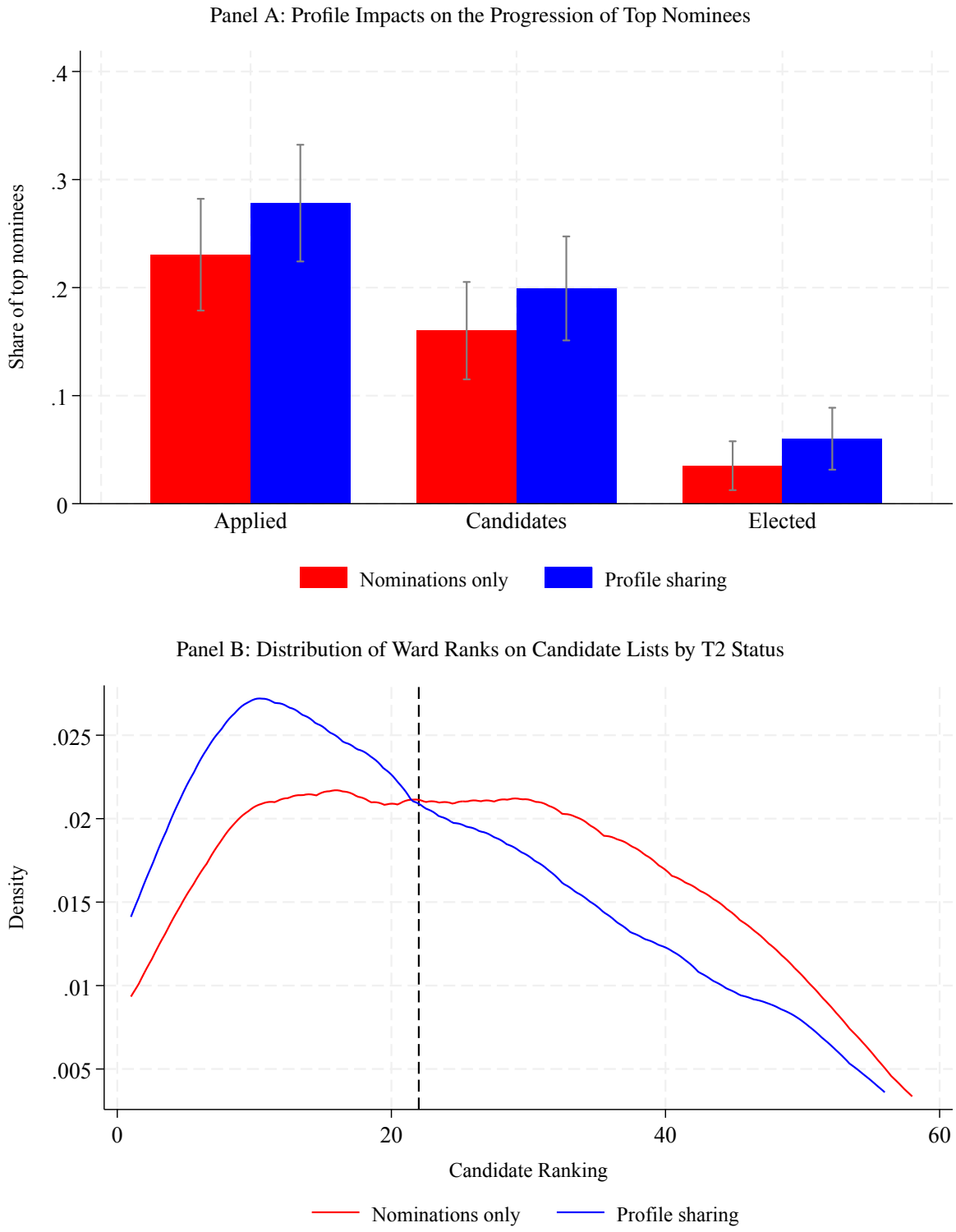
Notes: This figure shows raw number of incumbent councillors and their performance in the next elections. It shows the percentage of them, across 293 wards, that appear as candidates and that win again.

Figure 13: Party Selection on Quality



Notes: This figure illustrates the degree of selection on the quality index at each stage of the political entry process, for each type of potential applicant in the stronghold sample. Each column is the average quality index within each group relative to status quo applicants (first applicant bar in green is 0 by construction). Figure uses 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 14: Raw Data on Profile Sharing Impacts



Notes: This figure presents evidence on the impact of the profile sharing treatment (T2) using raw electoral data for the stronghold sample. Panel A shows the share of top nominees who reached each stage of the process: applied to a party, were selected as candidates, and won a seat. This top panel compares wards assigned to nominations only (T1, in red) and wards assigned to both nominations and profile sharing (T1+T2, in blue). Panel B compares the same two sets of wards, now plotting the probability density function of candidates' numerical ranks on party candidate lists. The dashed vertical line at rank 22 denotes the average last winning rank on the dominant party's list in its regional stronghold.

Table 1: Characteristics of Potential Candidates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Voters	Applicants (N=1,218)	Incumbents (N=293)	Top Nominees (N=522)
Male %	50.1	72.8	86.4	78.7
Age	35.4	38.9	45.8	39.7
Asset Count	3.8	8.9	10.2	9.3
Monthly Wage (USD)	17.5	51.2	47.1	46.1
Household Size	7.7	8.8	10.7	9.3
Works in Education %	6.0	21.1	29.8	35.2
Works in Business %	8.5	23.7	15.8	19.7
Works in Farming %	62.6	26.2	31.6	24.7
Literacy %	49.0	82.0	95.6	100
Primary Completed %	36.9	91.8	98.6	99.0
Any Post-Secondary %	6.2	53.3	71.9	64.3
Registered to a Party%	17.8	98.8	100	76.8
Ruling Family %	15.7	20.5	35.5	62.6

Notes: All data in columns 2, 3, and 4 was collected via surveys for this experiment. Column 3 includes all sitting Councillors surveyed in rural districts. Column 4 includes top nominees in our full sample. Data for voters in column 1 is obtained from multiple sources. Sex, age, and party registration data come from the households surveyed during the private nominations (N=10,365). Assets, wages, household size, and ruling family data come from a separate study conducted by one of the coauthors covering 6 rural districts during the same period of time as this project (N=1,974). The data on sector of employment and education completion come from Round 9 of the Afrobarometer Survey done in Sierra Leone, restricting to respondents in rural areas and approximating occupations based on their classification (N=1,200). Literacy rate among adults is from 2022 and was obtained from the World Bank Data.

Table 2: Quality Index by Type of Potential Candidates

	(1)	(2)
	Outcome: Quality Index	
	Full Sample	Stronghold
Top Nominees	0.275***	0.200***
	(0.023)	(0.027)
Incumbents	0.172***	0.016
	(0.030)	(0.033)
Observations	1,670	979
P-value β_1=β_2	0.001	<0.001

Notes: Regression outcome is standardized relative to omitted group in each regression which are status quo applicants. Regressions include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table 3: Top Nominees Differ from the Best Applicants in Control Wards

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Female	Asset Count	Ruling Family	Political Experience	Family in Politics	Family in Party	Quality Index
Panel A: Top nominees vs best two status quo applicants in Control wards							
Top Nominees	0.096**	-0.261**	0.461***	-0.265**	0.008	-0.013	0.102**
	(0.039)	(0.113)	(0.046)	(0.110)	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.042)
Observations	448	448	448	448	448	448	448
Panel B: Top nominees that applied vs best two status quo applicants in Control wards							
Top Nominees	0.121**	0.053	0.367***	0.056	-0.024	0.038	0.151**
	(0.059)	(0.140)	(0.067)	(0.148)	(0.054)	(0.050)	(0.060)
Observations	185	185	185	185	185	185	185

Notes: Regressions only include stronghold sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table 4: Heterogeneity in Identifying High Quality Nominees

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Outcome: Quality Index				
Top Nominee	0.273***	0.216***	0.224***	0.335***	0.209***
	(0.023)	(0.025)	(0.033)	(0.027)	(0.036)
Female		-0.304***			
		(0.036)			
Female × Top Nominee		0.182***			
		(0.058)			
Rulling Party			0.040		
			(0.030)		
Rulling Party × Top Nominee			0.088*		
			(0.048)		
Competitive Ward				0.142***	
				(0.045)	
Competitive Ward × Top Nominee				-0.273***	
				(0.053)	
Stronghold					0.266***
					(0.028)
Stronghold × Top Nominee					-0.000
					(0.046)
Observations	1,442	1,442	1,442	1,442	1,442
Share in Het. Category		23%	49%	22%	58%

Notes: Regressions compare all top nominees to lower ranked nominees in the full sample. Regressions include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table 5: Measures of Local Support by Type of Potential Candidate

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Full Sample			*Stronghold*		
	Vote Share	Tot. Votes	Any Votes	Vote Share	Tot. Votes	Any Votes
Top Nominees	0.134***	11.320***	0.737***	0.130***	11.013***	0.677***
	(0.006)	(0.486)	(0.018)	(0.008)	(0.670)	(0.029)
Incumbents	0.042***	3.715***	0.301***	0.030***	2.710***	0.225***
	(0.008)	(0.704)	(0.042)	(0.010)	(0.841)	(0.049)
Observations	1,297	1,297	1,297	769	769	769
P-value $\beta_1=\beta_2$	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Control Mean	0.024	2.036	0.259	0.031	2.602	0.322

Notes: Regressions include only individuals from wards were we conducted the nominations exercise. We used name matching algorithms to search ex-post for the names of status quo applicants and incumbents in the nominations data. The omitted category is status quo aspirants. Regressions include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table 6: Formal Entry Rates of Community Nominees

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Outcome: Applied to Party				
Top Nominee	0.096***	0.111***	0.110*	0.204***	0.100***
	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.057)	(0.042)	(0.036)
Profile Sharing	-0.014		-0.019		-0.004
	(0.021)		(0.030)		(0.023)
Top Nominee × Profile Sharing	0.060		0.093		0.002
	(0.043)		(0.083)		(0.049)
Female		-0.050**			
		(0.020)			
Top Nominee × Female		0.038			
		(0.050)			
Stronghold				0.044	
				(0.027)	
Top Nominee × Stronghold				-0.103**	
				(0.049)	
Observations	1,597	1,597	510	1,597	1,251
Sample	All Nominees	All Nominees	Female Nominees	All Nominees	Stronghold
Control Mean	0.163	0.184	0.119	0.181	0.158

Notes: Regressions use nominees in our full sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table 7: Incumbency Advantage After PR

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Re-run	Re-elected given re-run	Re-elected
After PR	0.341***	0.216**	0.256***
	(0.035)	(0.087)	(0.029)
Observations	586	182	586
Control Mean	.140	.366	.051

Notes: Regression includes incumbent councillors elected both in 2012 and 2018, meaning they we-re up for re-election in 2018 and 2023 respectively. The main outcomes are whether each incumbent re-ran in the subsequent election and whether they were re-elected. Only councillors from the same 293 wards are included for both election cycles. This covers wards in rural districts where the experiment happened. Regression includes district fixed effects.

Table 8: Estimated Impacts on the Size of the Ward-level Applicant Pool

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Any Applicant	Num. of Applicants	Any Women Applicant	Num. of Women Applicants
T1 Nominations	0.014	0.222	0.125	0.222*
	(0.013)	(0.237)	(0.079)	(0.125)
T2 Profiles	0.004	-0.221	-0.121	-0.087
	(0.004)	(0.215)	(0.074)	(0.129)
Observations	250	250	250	250
Control Mean	0.984	2.825	0.397	0.508

Notes: Regressions estimated with observations collapsed at the ward level using the stronghold sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table 9: Estimated and Simulated Impacts on the Quality of the Applicant Pool

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Applicant Pool		+25% App. Rate		+50% App. Rate	
	Mean	Max	Mean	Max	Mean	Max
T1 Nominations	0.052	0.092*	0.063	0.121**	0.074*	0.149***
	(0.044)	(0.051)	(0.044)	(0.053)	(0.044)	(0.053)
T2 Profiles	0.002	-0.040	0.008	-0.034	0.013	-0.027
	(0.038)	(0.048)	(0.038)	(0.051)	(0.038)	(0.051)
Observations	249	249	249	249	249	249
Control Mean	0.018	0.267	0.018	0.267	0.018	0.267
P-value $\beta_1 = 0$	0.234	0.075	0.148	0.021	0.090	0.005
Individuals in Sample	728	728	753	753	778	778
Top Noms in Sample %	11.5	11.5	14.5	14.5	17.2	17.2
Ward Compliance %	40.6	40.6	54	54	67.4	67.4

Notes: Regressions estimated with observations collapsed at the ward level using the stronghold sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1. Main outcome is quality index aggregated in different ways for each ward observation: Average across all applicants and maximum quality of applicant pool. Columns 3 to 6 report results from a Monte Carlo simulation with 500 draws. In each draw, for wards where we did not observe a top nominee entering, we select the highest quality top nominee who expressed interest in running but did not apply and we boost their entry, first adding them to the pool with a 25% probability (columns 3 and 4) and then with a 50% probability (columns 5 and 6). Coefficients are pooled means across simulations. Standard errors and p-values reported combine within-simulation sampling uncertainty and across-simulation variance. Individuals in sample, top nominees in sample, and ward compliance are averages across simulations.

Table 10: Estimated Impacts on the Selected and Elected Candidates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Any Candidate	Any Women Candidate	Inv.Candidate Ranking	Any Elected
T1 Nominations	0.009	0.138*	-2.751	-0.035
	(0.037)	(0.078)	(1.694)	(0.068)
T2 Profiles	0.026	-0.122*	4.406***	0.044
	(0.027)	(0.073)	(1.421)	(0.058)
Observations	250	250	235	250
Control Mean	0.937	0.349	-21.525	0.714
P-value $\beta_1 + \beta_2 = 0$	0.286	0.828	0.319	0.884

Notes: Regressions estimated with observations collapsed at the ward level using the stronghold sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table 11: Estimated Impacts on the Quality of the Candidate and Elected Pool

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Candidate Lists		Elected Officials	
	Mean Q	Max Q	Mean Q	Max Q
T1 Nominations	0.076	0.117*	0.105	0.108
	(0.053)	(0.061)	(0.077)	(0.078)
T2 Profiles	-0.001	-0.077	-0.030	-0.043
	(0.042)	(0.048)	(0.057)	(0.057)
Observations	239	239	175	175
Control Mean	-0.004	0.158	-0.001	0.020
P-value $\beta_1 + \beta_2 = 0$	0.146	0.504	0.296	0.373

Notes: Regressions estimated with observations collapsed at the ward level using the stronghold sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Online Appendix

Contents

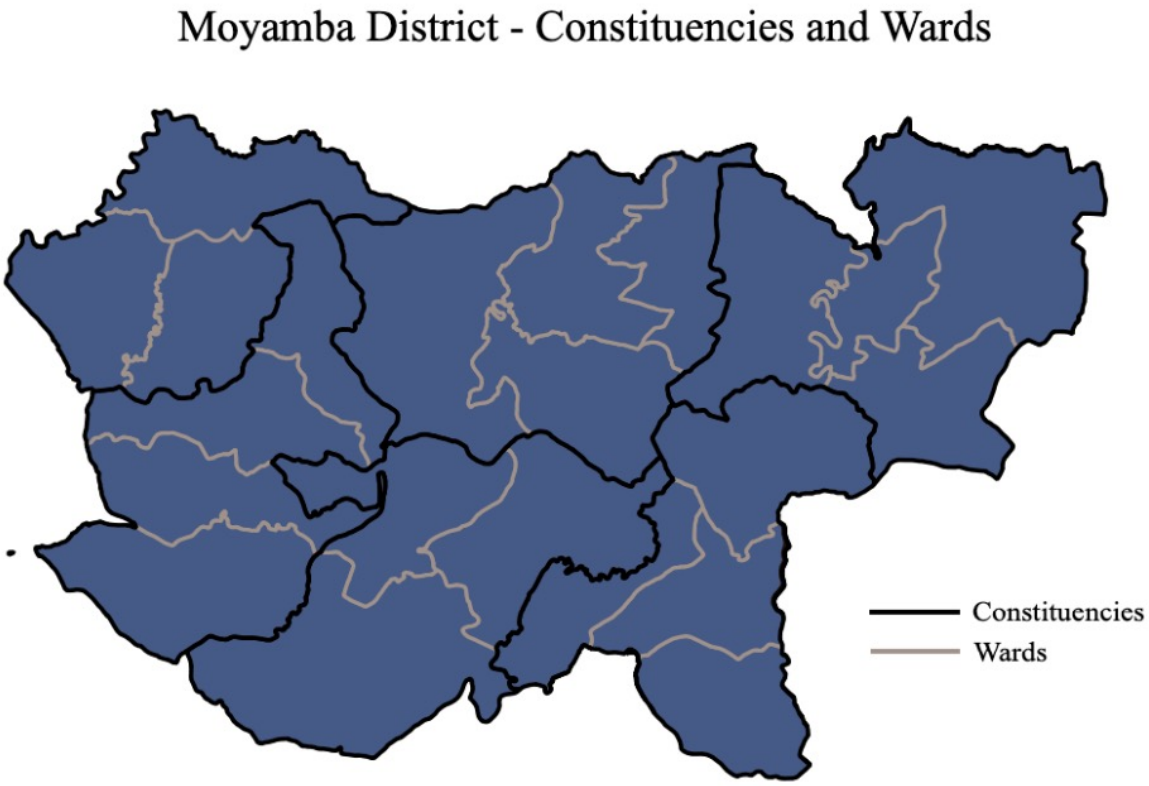
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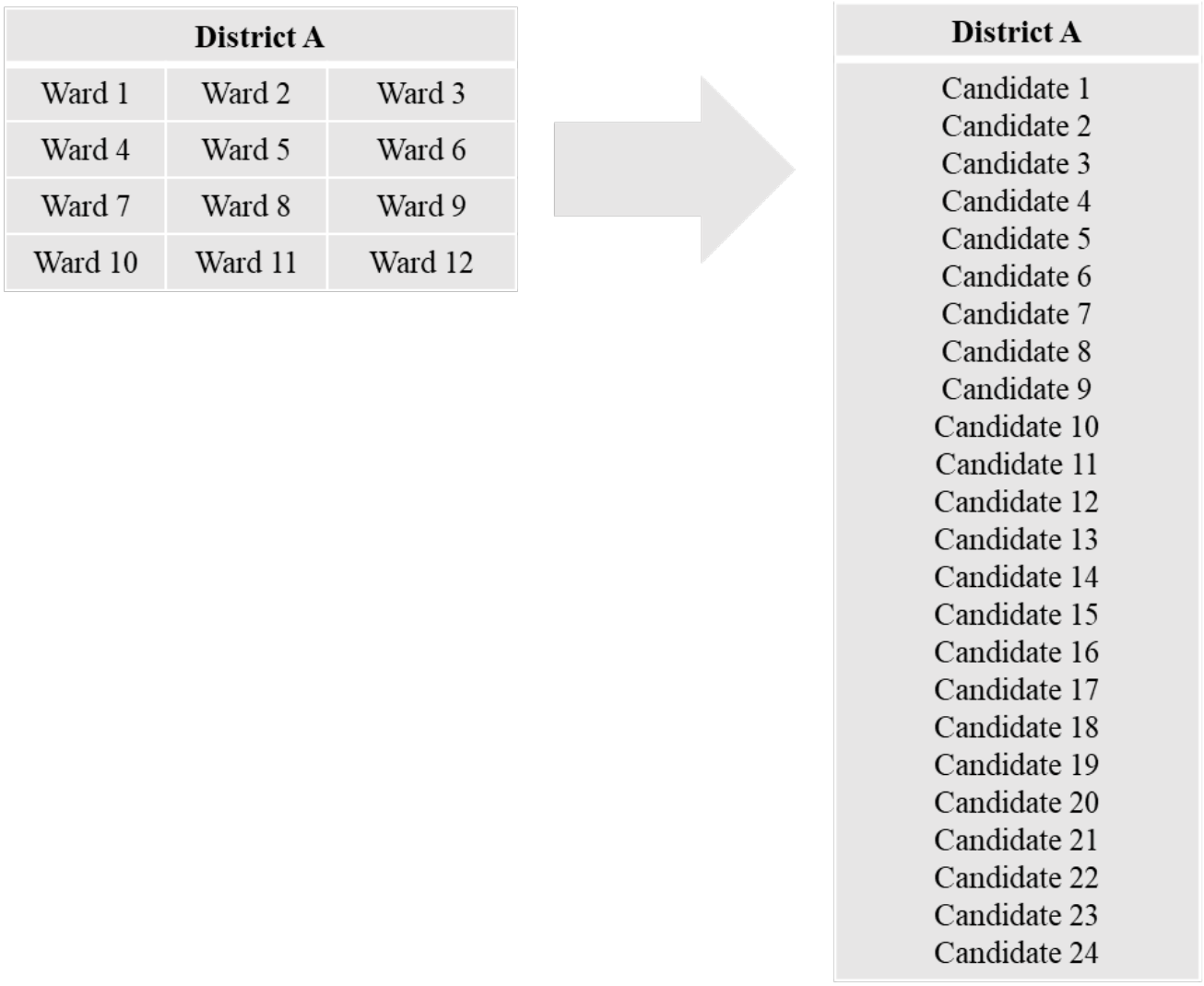
1 Supplemental Figures

Figure A1: Map of Nested Wards and Constituencies for Moyamba District



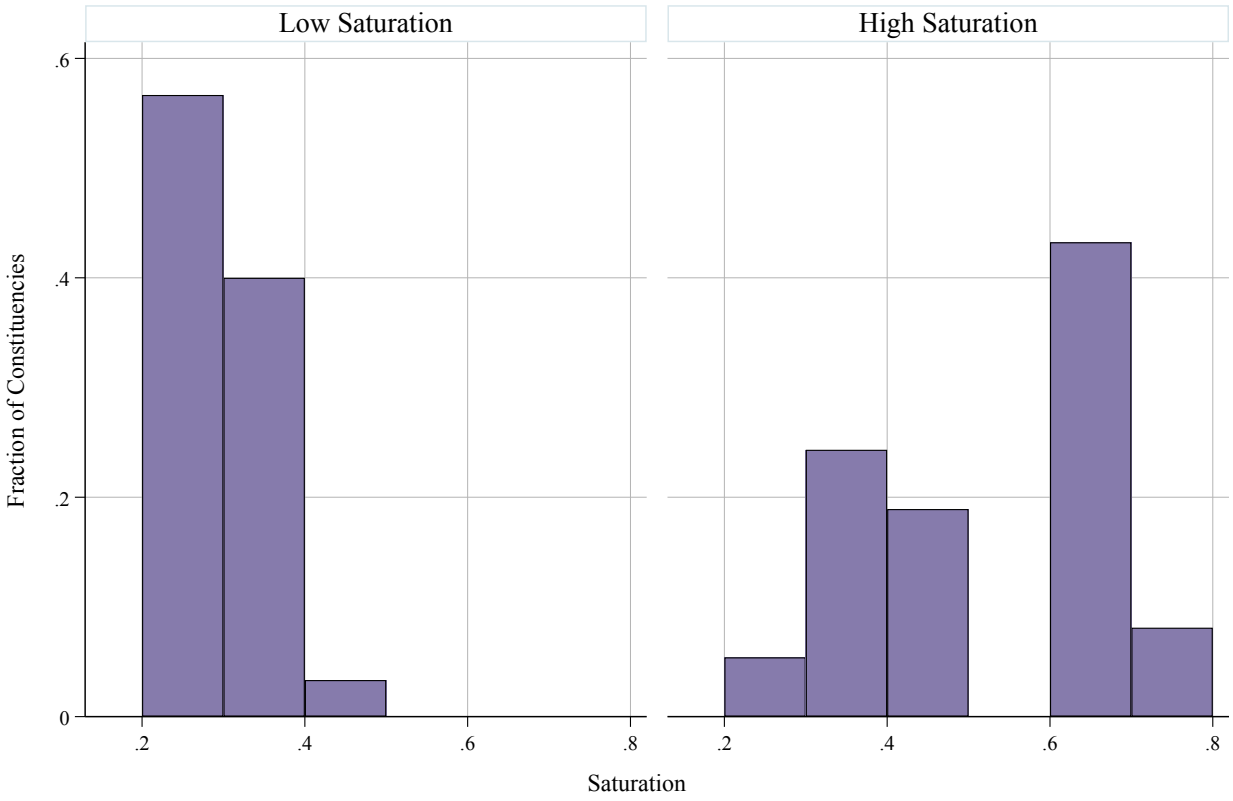
Notes: This figure shows how Local Council wards nest neatly inside Parliamentary constituencies, which in turn map neatly into district boundaries. This neat mapping, with roughly 3 to 4 wards per constituency, motivates our choice of constituency as the level to assign the profile sharing treatment (T2) as a reasonable level to capture potential interference between ward units in party selections of candidates to put on their respective district-level candidate lists. Moyamba District Council is one of the Local Councils in the research sample.

Figure A2: Illustration of Electoral Reform



Notes: This figure illustrates the electoral change from first-past-the-post majoritarian single-member jurisdictions (image on left) to district-block proportional representation (image on the right) that was enacted shortly before the 2023 elections studied. In the hypothetical district presented, there were originally twelve wards, each of which elected a single Local Councillor to represent them in the district council. After the electoral change, political parties prepared candidate lists that were twice as long as the original number of wards, so a list of 24 in this example. These are closed lists, implying that on election day voters simply choose between the party lists, without without seeing or ranking individual candidates.

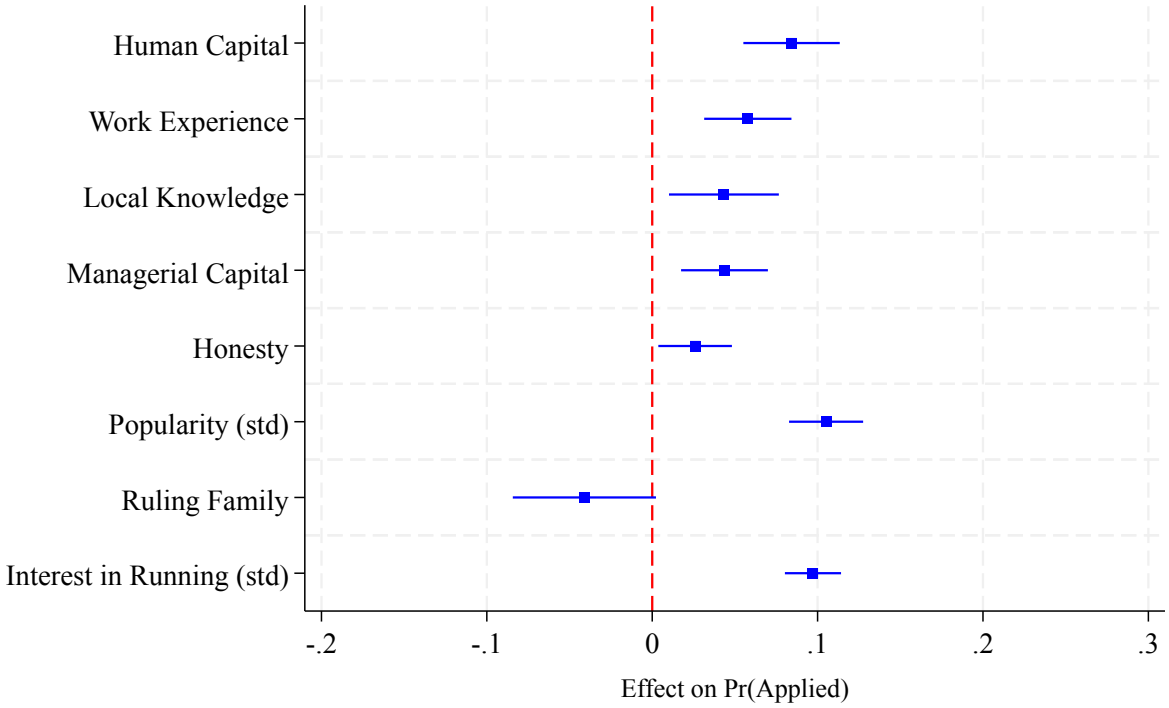
Figure A3: Effective Saturation Levels Across Constituencies



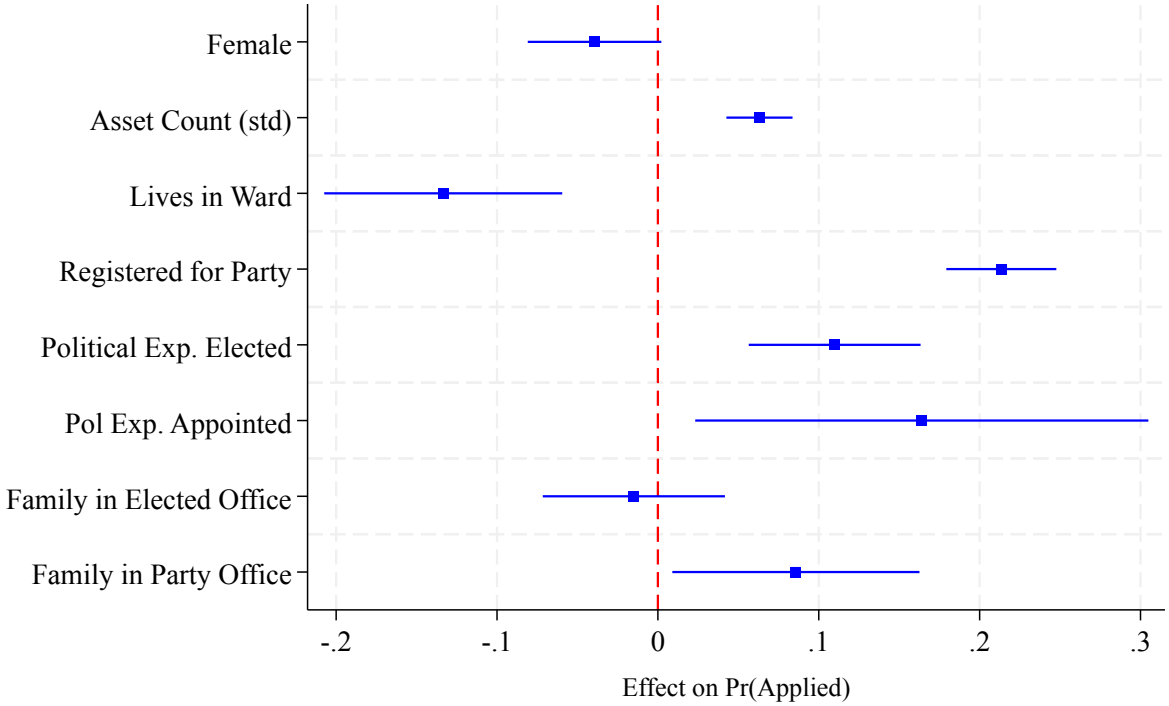
Notes: This figure plots the distribution of effective saturation levels of T2 treatment wards across constituencies. The X-axis shows the share of wards located within a given constituency that were assigned both the nomination and screening process in the first round of ward-level randomization and then assigned to the profile sharing treatment in the second round of ward-level randomization. The group of zero saturation constituencies are omitted from the figure as they contain no T2 treatment wards (saturation share = 0.0).

Figure A4: Drivers of Self-selection into Entry among Nominees

Panel A: Components of quality, popularity, ruling house membership and interest



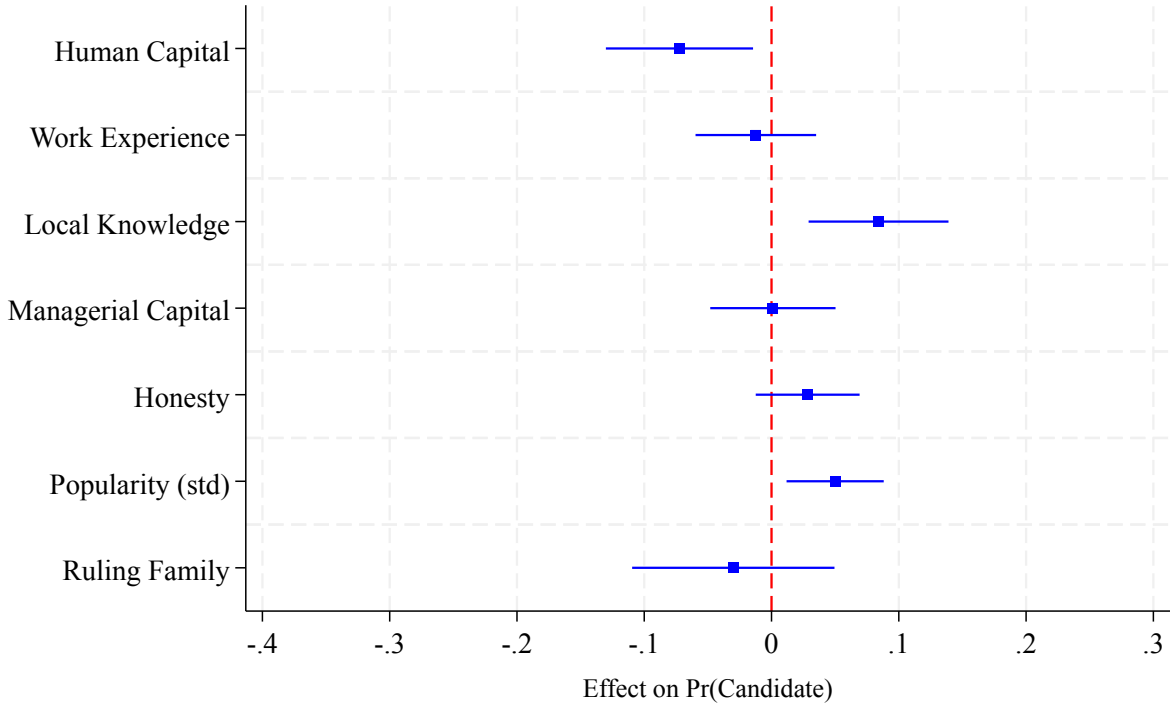
Panel B: Measures associated with costs of entry or political connections



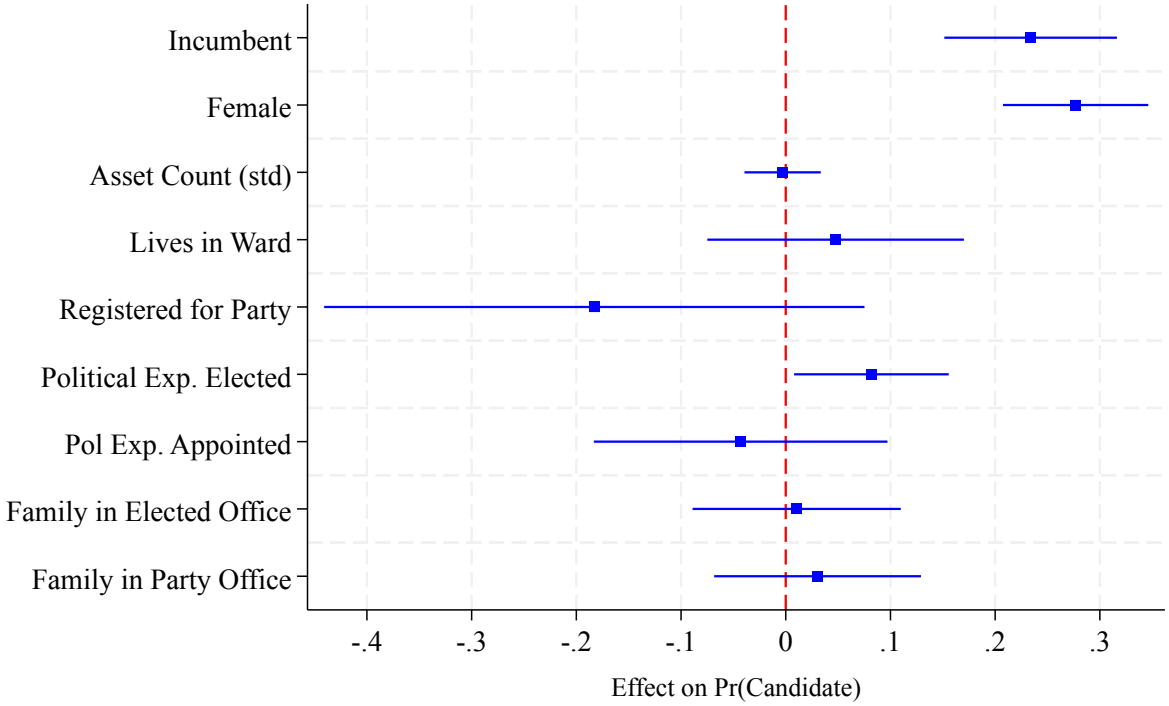
Notes: Figure shows simple regressions of how different variables predict which nominees in our stronghold sample apply to become councillors. Regressions control for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Figure A5: Predictors of Party Selection of Candidates

Panel A: Components of quality, popularity, ruling house membership and interest



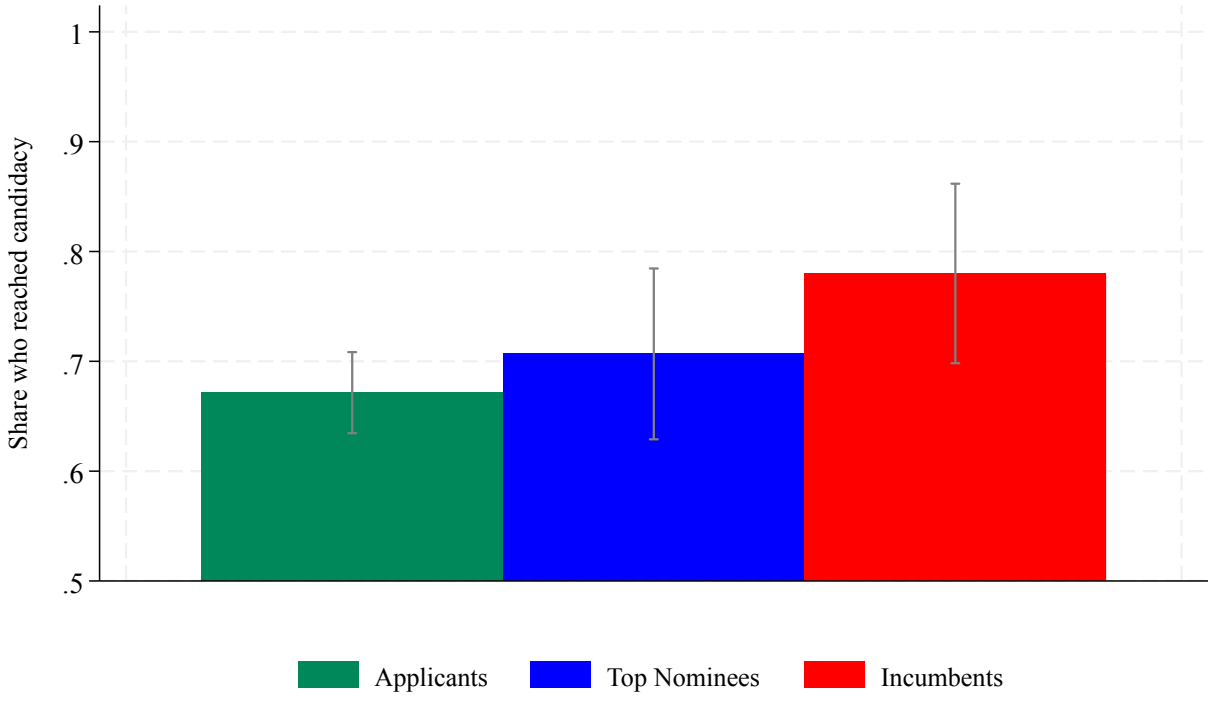
Panel B: Measures associated with costs of entry or political connections



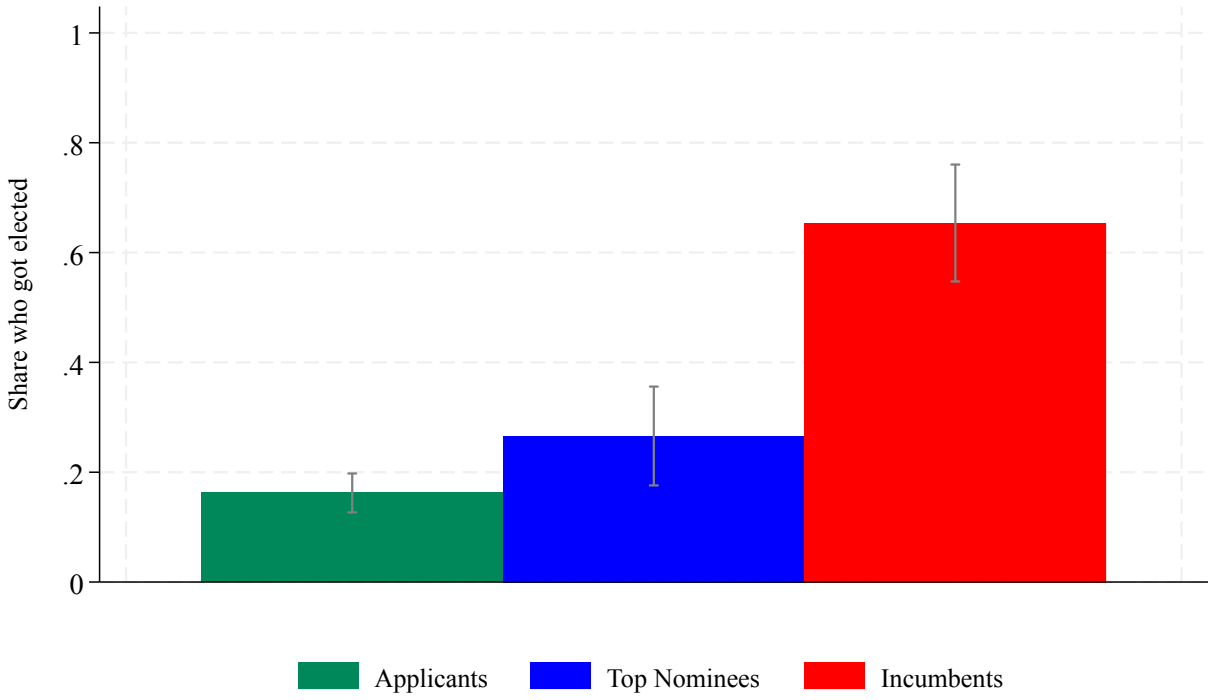
Notes: Figure shows simple regressions of how different variables predict which individuals in our stronghold sample who applied to become councillors go on to be selected as candidates. Regressions control for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Figure A6: Raw Data on Progression from Entry to Election by Type

Panel A: Conditional Likelihood of Candidacy Selection by Applicant Type

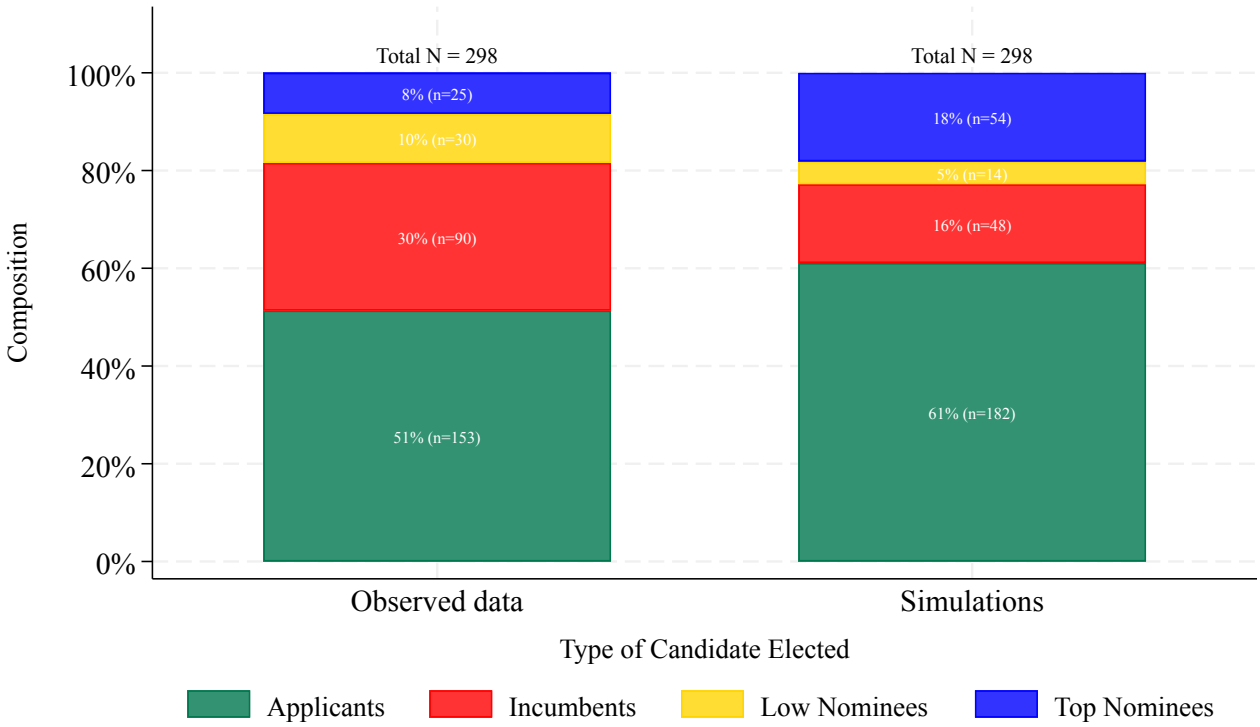


Panel B: Conditional Likelihood of Election by Candidate Type



Notes: This figure plots the conditional likelihood of progressing to candidacy and being elected for the potential candidates in the full sample of our study: incumbents, top nominees, and status quo applicants. Panel A shows the share of each type that, conditional on filing an application, was selected onto a party's candidate list. Panel B shows the share of each type that, conditional on being placed on a candidate list, won a council seat.

Figure A7: Observed and Simulated Elected Councillors by Type



Notes: This figure shows the composition of elected Councillors among the different types of candidates, in contrast to the composition we would have observed if candidate lists were made based on our quality index.

2 Supplemental Tables

Table A1: Constituency Measures of Balance Across Saturation Assignment

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Population	Pop. Density	Turnout	Win Margin	Num. Wards
Low Saturation	-1,261	-23.82	-968.0	-0.014	-0.027
	(1,417)	(76.38)	(768.9)	(0.032)	(0.104)
High Saturation	-2,314*	-68.26	-509.7	-0.003	-0.066
	(1,379)	(74.35)	(748.5)	(0.032)	(0.101)
Observations	184	184	184	184	184
Control Mean	54341	223.3	16993	0.610	3.520
F-Test p-value	0.246	0.632	0.453	0.892	0.797

Notes: This table tests for balance on observable characteristics across constituencies assigned to the three levels of full treatment saturation. Assignments for the two major political parties were conducted independently, which are pooled in this analysis, yielding a sample of 184 party-constituency observations. Population data comes from the 2015 census, and population density is measured in people per square kilometer. Turnout and Win margin are based on the presidential race of 2018.

Table A2: Ward-level Measures of Balance Across Treatment Assignment

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Population	Pop. Density	Turnout	Win Margin
Partial Treatment	529.9*	-105.6	27.53	-0.034*
	(272.3)	(101.1)	(158.02)	(0.019)
Full Treatment	254.1	-109.0	-82.52	-0.019
	(242.5)	(90.0)	(140.70)	(0.017)
Observations	500	500	500	500
Control Mean	14661	309.5	4,593	0.585
F-Test p-value	0.143	0.458	0.630	0.199

Notes: This table tests for balance on observable characteristics across wards assigned to treatment arms. Assignments for the two major political parties were conducted independently, which are pooled in this analysis, yielding a sample of 500 party-ward observations. Population data comes from the 2015 census. Turnout and Win margin are based on the presidential race of 2018.

Table A3: Quality Sub-Components by Type of Potential Candidates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Quality Index	Human Capital	Work Experience	Local Experience	Managerial Capital	Conscientiousness
Top Nominees	0.275***	0.305***	0.197***	0.260***	0.257***	0.432***
	(0.023)	(0.030)	(0.041)	(0.035)	(0.043)	(0.056)
Incumbents	0.173***	0.157***	-0.061	0.394***	-0.016	
	(0.030)	(0.038)	(0.052)	(0.051)	(0.053)	
Observations	1,670	1,670	1,670	1,670	1,670	1,433
P-value $\beta_1=\beta_2$	0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.016	<0.001	

Notes: Regression outcomes are standardized relative to omitted group in each regression which are status quo applicants. Regressions include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Quality Variables by Type of Potential Candidates

Outcome	Nominees	Incumbents	p-value ($\beta_1 = \beta_2$)	Control Mean	N
Years of Education	1.490***	1.326***	0.256	11.435	1,669
	(0.138)	(0.153)			
Literate	0.174***	0.133***	0.006	0.821	1,670
	(0.012)	(0.019)			
Number Score	0.071*	0.080*	0.854	2.073	1,670
	(0.038)	(0.047)			
Ravens Score	0.544***	0.249	0.081	3.133	1,669
	(0.114)	(0.154)			
Digits Score	0.332***	-0.357***	<0.001	3.337	1,670
	(0.090)	(0.109)			
Monthly Wage (USD)	-5.385*	-4.245	0.784	61.263	1,598
	(3.038)	(3.874)			
Exp. in Social Sector	0.507***	-0.082	<0.001	1.275	1,670
	(0.062)	(0.075)			
Exp. with Development Projects	0.219***	0.205***	0.869	0.926	1,670
	(0.060)	(0.078)			
Exp. with Community Activities	-0.059	0.114*	0.009	1.317	1,670
	(0.049)	(0.061)			
Leadership Roles	0.309***	0.278***	0.699	1.002	1,670
	(0.054)	(0.071)			
NGO Knowledge	0.359***	0.600***	0.004	0.247	1,670
	(0.043)	(0.078)			
Project Proposal Score	0.339***	-0.005	0.005	3.602	1,670
	(0.095)	(0.109)			
Managerial Experience	0.317***	-0.028	<0.001	1.745	1,670
	(0.058)	(0.073)			
Conscientiousness	0.140***	0.000	<0.001	0.138	1,433
	(0.023)	(0.000)			

Notes: Outcomes presented in raw units. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Equality p-value tests whether the Nominees and Incumbents coefficients are equal. The omitted group in each regression which are status quo applicants. Regressions include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table A4: Top Nominees Differ from the Best Applicants in Control Wards - Full Sample

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Female	Asset Count	Ruling Family	Political Experience	Family in Politics	Family in Party	Quality Index
Panel A: Top nominees vs best two status quo applicants in Control wards							
Top Nominees	-0.002	0.054	0.448***	-0.310***	0.037	-0.034	0.176***
	(0.033)	(0.081)	(0.034)	(0.078)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.034)
Observations	719	719	719	719	719	719	719
Panel B: Top nominees that applied vs best two status quo applicants in Control wards							
Top Nominees	0.003	0.218**	0.381***	-0.068	0.003	0.005	0.201***
	(0.045)	(0.108)	(0.049)	(0.106)	(0.038)	(0.040)	(0.046)
Observations	347	347	347	347	347	347	347

Notes: Regressions include all observations in full sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table A5: Estimated Impacts on the Size of the Applicant Pool - Full Sample

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Any Applicant	Num. of Applicants	Any Women Applicant	Num. of Women Applicants
T1 Nominations	0.006	0.011	0.030	0.076
	(0.017)	(0.156)	(0.058)	(0.088)
T2 Profiles	0.014	-0.053	-0.071	-0.063
	(0.011)	(0.137)	(0.052)	(0.083)
Observations	500	500	500	500
Control Mean	0.976	2.651	0.492	0.635

Notes: Regressions estimated with observations collapsed at the ward level using the full sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table A6: Estimated and Simulated Impacts on the Quality of the Applicant Pool - Full Sample

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Applicant Pool		+25% App. Rate		+50% App. Rate	
	Mean	Max	Mean	Max	Mean	Max
T1 Nominations	0.015	0.025	0.022	0.041	0.029	0.056
	(0.037)	(0.043)	(0.038)	(0.044)	(0.038)	(0.044)
T2 Profiles	0.019	-0.007	0.019	-0.006	0.020	-0.004
	(0.033)	(0.040)	(0.033)	(0.041)	(0.033)	(0.041)
Observations	493	493	494	494	495	495
Control Mean	0.006	0.274	0.006	0.274	0.006	0.274
P-value $\beta_1 = 0$	0.695	0.564	0.558	0.350	0.450	0.205
Individuals in Sample	1321	1321	1351	1351	1381	1381
Top Noms in Sample %	10.1	10.1	12.1	12.1	14	14
Ward Compliance %	32.4	32.4	40.4	40.4	48.4	48.4

Notes: Regressions estimated with observations collapsed at the ward level using the full sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1. Main outcome is the quality index aggregated in different ways for each ward observation: average across all applicants and maximum quality of the applicant pool. Columns 3 to 6 report results from a Monte Carlo simulation with 500 draws. In each draw, for wards where we did not observe a top nominee entering, we select the highest quality top nominee who expressed interest in running but did not apply and we boost their entry, first adding them to the pool with a 25% probability (columns 3 and 4) and then with a 50% probability (columns 5 and 6). Coefficients are pooled means across simulations. Standard errors and p-values combine within-simulation sampling uncertainty and across-simulation variance. Individuals in sample, top nominees in sample, and ward compliance are averages across simulations.

Table A7: Estimated Impacts on the Selected and Elected Candidates - Full Sample

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Any Candidate	Any Women Candidate	Inv.Candidate Ranking	Any Elected
T1 Nominations	-0.002	0.064	-0.666	-0.039
	(0.029)	(0.058)	(1.265)	(0.058)
T2 Profiles	0.011	-0.073	0.947	-0.014
	(0.024)	(0.051)	(1.161)	(0.052)
Observations	498	498	463	498
Control Mean	0.935	0.419	-22.537	0.468
P-value $\beta_1 + \beta_2 = 0$	0.720	0.869	0.823	0.350

Notes: Regressions estimated with observations collapsed at the ward level using the full sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table A8: Estimated Impacts on the Quality of the Candidate and Elected Pool - Full Sample

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Candidate Lists		Elected Officials	
	Mean Q	Max Q	Mean Q	Max Q
T1 Nominations	0.016	0.013	0.065	0.073
	(0.043)	(0.048)	(0.068)	(0.069)
T2 Profiles	0.028	-0.024	0.004	-0.013
	(0.038)	(0.043)	(0.057)	(0.056)
Observations	468	468	217	217
Control Mean	0.005	0.201	0.000	0.017
P-value $\beta_1 + \beta_2 = 0$	0.302	0.817	0.275	0.349

Notes: Regressions estimated with observations collapsed at the ward level using the full sample and include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1.

Table A9: Multiple Hypothesis Testing Corrections

	p-value	Sharpened q-value
Panel A: Stronghold Sample		
Number of applicants — Nominations	0.170	0.542
Number of applicants — Profiles	0.866	0.971
Avg. quality applicants — Nominations	0.124	0.542
Avg. quality applicants — Profiles	0.461	0.542
Number of candidates — Nominations	0.176	0.542
Number of candidates — Profiles	0.985	0.971
Avg. quality candidates — Nominations	0.069	0.542
Avg. quality candidates — Profiles	0.524	0.542
Panel B: Full Sample		
Number of applicants — Nominations	0.472	1.000
Number of applicants — Profiles	0.651	1.000
Avg. quality applicants — Nominations	0.361	1.000
Avg. quality applicants — Profiles	0.300	1.000
Number of candidates — Nominations	0.443	1.000
Number of candidates — Profiles	0.942	1.000
Avg. quality candidates — Nominations	0.351	1.000
Avg. quality candidates — Profiles	0.235	1.000

Notes: p-values are from the primary regressions. Sharpened q-values are false discovery rate (FDR) adjusted following Anderson (2008) and Benjamini, Krieger and Yekutieli (2006). The adjustment is applied jointly across the 8 estimates in each sample (two coefficients, Nominations and Profiles, for each of four outcomes: number of applicants, average quality of applicants, number of candidates, and average quality of candidates)

Table A10: Quality Index by Type of Potential Candidates Who Applied

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Outcome: Quality Index			
	Stronghold	Only Applicants	Applicants in Wards Incumbent Applies	Applicants in Wards Both Apply
Top Nominees	0.200***	0.223***	0.248***	0.263***
	(0.027)	(0.049)	(0.073)	(0.087)
Incumbents	0.016	-0.002	0.021	0.079
	(0.033)	(0.039)	(0.044)	(0.078)
Observations	979	616	322	106
P-value β_1=β_2	<0.001	<0.001	0.002	0.026
N Wards	322	313	152	31

Notes: All columns are only the stronghold sample. Regression outcome is standardized relative to omitted group in each regression which are status quo applicants. Regressions include fixed effects for geographic strata used in the randomization of T1. Column 2 restricts to Top Nominees and Incumbents who apply to parties. Column 3 only includes wards where an incumbent re-applies. Column 4 uses only wards where an incumbent re-applies and a top nominee from that ward also applied.

3 Supplemental Exhibits

Exhibit A1: Enumerator script for household elicitation

We are helping all political parties find the best candidates for local council by including the people in this process of nominations. However, the political parties are not required to accept the nominations; they will simply be encouraged to consider the people's choices.
Good Councillors have the following skills: • Hardworking • Honest • Have administrative skills • Listen to people • Represent their community well on council. The job of councillor involves the following: • Deciding how to use council resources • Councillor is a part-time job • Councillors are not paid (other than sitting fees and transport), so people keep other jobs while being a Councillor.
Every adult that lives in this ward regardless of their sex, ethnicity, or other characteristics are able to fill this role. Think of people in the whole ward (not just your own town). Also think about sons or daughters of the soil, even if they are not currently living in the ward. Councillors must be able to read and write English and speak Krio.
I am now going to ask you to identify people in your community who would be good candidates to run for local council. Can you think of any such community members? **Only identify people who can read English and speak Krio**
What is the full name of this person? *ENUMERATOR NOTE: Enter their name as it would appear on a **legal government document** in all capital letters. Enter any nicknames in the next question.*
Does this person have any nicknames?
What is this person's sex?
What is this person's phone number?
Which village / town does this person live in right now?
Where could we find this person? *ENUMERATOR NOTE: We want instructions on how to find this person, this person's house, this person's job, etc. Also record other useful information, such as if this person is out of town. This is the information you will use to locate nominees to survey.*
Why do you think this person would be a good candidate for councillor? *ENUMERATOR NOTE: Summarize what the respondent said to 1 sentence*
**** REPEAT UNCONSTRAINED NOMINATION UP TO 3 NAMES ****

I am now going to ask you to identify women in your community who would be good candidates to run for local council. Can you think of any such community members? **Only identify women who can read English and speak Krio**
**** IDENTICAL DATA COLLECTION ON NOMINEE ****
**** REPEAT CONSTRAINED NOMINATION UP TO 3 NAMES ****

Exhibit A2: Excerpt of enumerator script for community nominees

We are working with political parties to identify high quality candidates. We are talking to you because at least [number_nominations] person(s) in your community said you would make a good Councillor *ENUMERATOR NOTE: You cannot tell the respondent who nominated them*
Specifically, people mentioned the following as why you would make a good Councillor: *ENUMERATOR NOTE: Summarize the following and read to respondent:* "[nominee_why_prefill]" *ENUMERATOR NOTE: You cannot tell the respondent who nominated them, or gave this reason for nominating them*
Can we give your name and profile to party leadership as a candidate for Councillor in this area? If you say yes, you would consent to us sharing information we collect in this interview with party leadership. If you say you are not interested in sharing this information, it will all remain a secret. Regardless of your answer the interview will continue as normal.
Which parties would you be ok with receiving this information?
Can I take a headshot photo of you? We will include this photo when we send your photo to the political parties *ENUMERATOR NOTE: Take a photo that would be used for an ID card, only showing their face and shoulders*
Thank you for your interest. Please know the following: 1) We will not share the information of everyone we interview 2) There is a chance your information will not be shared with any party 3) If your information is shared, the parties are not required to consider your application, advance you in the selection process, or select you as a candidate 4) We provide information to the parties. We cannot control what parties do with that information.

Exhibit A3: A Note on Preregistration

We submitted our pre-analysis plan for this paper to the Journal of Development Economics Registered Reports on Feb 15, 2024. At the moment of pre-registration the research team had only partial access to the data used in this paper and could not construct the main outcomes needed for the analysis. This was possible because Innovation for Poverty Action in Sierra Leone committed to withhold key data from the research team until February 21, 2024 as part of our pre-registration. The data withheld included ward-level identifiers and survey data needed for quality metrics for all aspirants and candidates in their research sample. The table below maps the questions and hypothesis from our PAP to the Figures and Tables in the paper.

Test proposed in the Pre-analysis Plan	**Corresponding table or figure in this paper**
Q1: Does the intervention identify high quality potential candidates?	Figure 4, Table 2
Q2: Does the intervention identify popular potential candidates?	Figure 7, Table 5
Q3: Does the intervention identify new entrants into politics?	Figure 5
Q4: Do the nominees enter politics?	Table 6
Q5: Did party leaders accept the nominee profiles?	Text passage on page 14
H1: The intervention expands the aspirant pool	Table 8
H2: The intervention enhances the quality of the aspirant pool	Table 9
H3: The intervention enhances geographic representation on the candidate lists	Table 10
H4: The intervention increased the quality of selected candidates	Table 11
H5: The intervention enhanced geographic representation in the elected Local Council	Table 10
H6: The intervention increased the quality of elected Councillors	Table 11
Estimation of potential spillover effects	Table A-10
Adjustments for multiple inference	Table A-9
Dimensions for potential heterogeneous effects	Table 4
Full sample analogs of stronghold results	Tables A - 4, 5, 6,7 8

Exhibit A4: Discussion and Analysis of Spillovers

A key issue with the switch from ward-level majoritarian elections to district-level proportional representation is that it creates scope for potential interference between treatment and control wards when analyzing how parties responded to the receipt of nominee profiles, as in essence all wards are competing for representation on fixed-length district-level candidate lists. How much of a risk this posed to analysis could not be known until political parties submitted their official candidate lists to the National Electoral Commission, which is after all interventions were delivered. In anticipation of, and to mitigate any realized interference, we use a saturation strategy for profile sharing at the constituency level. As it turned out, parties largely stuck to the old system, allocating two candidates from each ward onto the list, making this analysis largely moot. We include below our strategy from our pre-analysis plan and formal estimation of spillovers here for transparency and completeness.

To see how bias could arise, consider first estimates for geographic representation, or whether the intervention boosted the likelihood that at least one applicant registered in a treated ward was selected for the candidate list. Suppose that in the absence of treatment, parties would select exactly 2 candidates from each ward to include on the district list. Suppose further that when they received a nominee profile from a treated ward, they added that nominee to the list and removed a candidate from a control ward to maintain the specified length of the list (which recall is two times the number of wards in the district). In this scenario, the estimated treatment effect would be biased upwards, as it combines the positive effect observed for treated wards with the negative spillover effect on control wards.

On the other hand, partial interference could lead to downward bias for estimates of treatment effects on candidate quality. Extending the scenario above, suppose that in the absence of treatment, parties select one high quality (H) and one low quality (L) candidate per ward. After seeing the profile, they add a second high quality candidate (the nominee) to a treated ward and drop a low-quality candidate from a control ward. As a result, average quality in treated wards becomes $2/3$ while in control wards it is equal to 1. In this case the treatment effect estimate would be biased downwards, and would be negative in sign, even though the intervention in fact succeeded in improving the quality of the aggregate pool (which, under equal allocation of wards to treatment and control, would have increased from $1/2$ to $3/4$).

To explore the relevance of potential interference, we leverage the saturation design at the constituency level. We illustrate the method for the outcome of number of selected candidates per ward on the district list. If we find no evidence of spillovers here, there is little cause for concern about bias in estimates for any of the other hypotheses. Moreover, if the candidate lists submitted by parties to ECSL adhere closely to two candidates per ward, which they in fact did, spillovers are unlikely to matter. Yet if we had found evidence of interference, a similar specification could have been applied to the other hypotheses.

To do so, we follow the approach in Baird et al. (2018) where our randomized saturation design can be characterized by saturation vector $\Pi = \{0, 0.33, 0.67\}$ and cluster share vector $f = \{0.27, 0.33, 0.40\}$. Let indicator $S_{wc} = 1$ indicate a ward that is a within-cluster control, i.e., a ward in a cluster with positive treatment saturation that did not have any nominee profile shared with party leaders. Let $L_c = 1$ indicate a constituency cluster c allocated to low saturation treatment ($p = 0.33$), and $H_c = 1$ indicate a cluster allocated to high saturation treatment ($p = 0.67$).

To assess whether there are spillovers from treated to control wards, we estimate:

$$Y_{wcs} = \beta_0 + \beta_{1L} Profiles_{wcs} L_c + \beta_{1H} Profiles_{wcs} H_c + \gamma_{1L} S_{wc} L_c + \gamma_{1H} S_{wc} H_c + \alpha_s + \varepsilon_{wcs} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{wcs} is the number of selected candidates from ward w in constituency cluster c; $S_{wc} = 1$ indicates

a within-cluster control, or ward in a cluster with positive treatment saturation that had no nominee profile shared with parties; $L_c = 1$ indicates a constituency cluster allocated to low saturation treatment ($p = 0.33$), and $H_c = 1$ a cluster allocated to high saturation ($p = 0.67$). Hypotheses of interest are: $\gamma_{1L} \neq 0$ or $\gamma_{1H} \neq 0$ which would indicate the presence of interference whereby the treatment of wards within a cluster has a spillover effect on control wards within the same cluster; $\beta_{1L} \geq 0, \beta_{1H} \geq 0$ would indicate positive intention-to-treat effects for treated wards in low, high saturation clusters respectively; and $\gamma_{1L} < \gamma_{1H}$ would indicate the spillover effects are increasing with saturation. If the spillover effects are non-zero, the key estimate of interest for policy makers is the weighted averages $0.33\beta_{1L} + (1 - 0.33)\gamma_{1L}$ and $0.67\beta_{1H} + (1 - 0.67)\gamma_{1H}$ which are the total causal effect of the profile sharing for each saturation level.

Appendix Table A3 presents results, where we see that spillover estimates for the stronghold sample are null. The point estimates are small in magnitude, vary in sign across outcomes, and none are statistically significant at conventional levels. This aligns with the evidence in the raw data presented in the main text Figure 12 that shows how parties largely stuck with the old system: panel A shows that the modal ward has 2 candidates on the list, and panel B shows that the vast majority of wards ended up with a single elected Local Councillor.

Table A13: Estimation of Spillover Effects

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	No. Candidates		No. Elected		Quality Candidates		Quality Top Candidates	
Profile sharing	-0.221*		0.029		0.024		0.010	
	(0.129)		(0.074)		(0.046)		(0.064)	
Profiles (Low)		-0.304		0.079		0.115		0.157
		(0.210)		(0.111)		(0.081)		(0.110)
Profiles (High)		-0.245		0.098		-0.063		-0.066
		(0.168)		(0.108)		(0.046)		(0.069)
Spillover (Low)		-0.151		0.064		-0.060		0.012
		(0.198)		(0.109)		(0.065)		(0.091)
Spillover (High)		0.048		0.134		-0.031		-0.042
		(0.183)		(0.117)		(0.058)		(0.094)
Observations	250	250	250	250	239	239	196	196
Control Mean	1.967	2.057	0.742	0.679	0.166	0.176	0.221	0.224

Notes: This table estimates potential spillover effects from wards assigned to profile sharing (T2) onto neighboring control wards within the same constituency, using the saturation design at the constituency level. Columns 1–2 report effects on the number of candidates, columns 3–4 on the number of elected councillors, columns 5–6 on the mean quality of candidates, and columns 7–8 on the quality of the top candidate per ward. In each pair of columns, the first reports results for the raw treatment effect of profiles and the second estimates direct and indirect effects within constituencies. Regressions use the stronghold sample and follow the saturation specification detailed in Exhibit A4, including geographic strata fixed effects.