

# **Primary consequences. The effects of candidate selection through party primaries in Iceland.**

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## **Abstract**

Are the effects of candidate selection through party primaries largely disruptive for political parties or do they have some redeeming features? Icelandic parties have used inclusive nomination procedures since the early 1970s on a scale that is without parallel in other parliamentary democracies. The Icelandic primaries thus offer a unique opportunity to study the effects of primaries in a context that is quite distinct from the most studied primary election system, i.e. the U.S., which is characterized by federalism, presidential government and two-party competition. Our findings indicate that despite four decades of primaries, the Icelandic parties remain strong and cohesive organizations, suffering almost none of the ailments predicted by critics of primary elections. We are careful to point out, however, that context matters and the way parties have adapted also plays a role.

Key words:

Selecting candidates, party change/adaptation, Iceland.

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The literature on political parties reflects a growing sense of crisis brought on by lower rates of turnout, decline in party identification, a reduced number of registered party members and loss of confidence in parties and politicians (Dalton 2004; Mair 2008; Stoker 2006, Whiteley 2011). At the same time, and partly in response to this, there is a growing interest in alternative forms of participation, including the use of referenda (Setälä and Schiller, 2009) and other democratic innovations (Smith, 2009) that partially or wholly bypass the established parties (Cain et. al., 2003). The parties have in some cases responded to the crisis by democratizing their internal processes through more inclusive procedures for leadership and candidate selection (Cross and Blais, 2012; Bille 2001; Kittilson and Scarrow, 2003).

**The trend towards greater personalization of electoral systems is a noteworthy form of participatory reform (Colomer 2011; Pilet and Renwick 2011). Such reforms are generally popular among voters as greater personalization offers greater opportunities to hold individual politicians accountable. They may also be attractive to the political parties in times in which parties have fallen into disrepute and politics have become increasingly more focused on personalities (Pilet and Renwick 2011; Poguntke and Webb 2005). This trend is interesting for, at least, two reasons. First, while greater choice and accountability sounds attractive, the literature has shown that many of the consequences of personalization are negative (McAllister 2007). While personalized electoral system have pros and cons, it is fair to say that the verdict is not yet in. Second, the move towards greater institutionalization of personalization has primarily been made at through electoral reform. Many of the same goals could, however, be achieved by adopting party primaries.**

**Party primaries have attracted far less attention as a method of participatory reform, especially in proportional representation systems. In part, the reason may be that primaries have a rather poor reputation, which to a considerable degree derives from the U.S. experience with primaries. U.S. primaries are, e.g., seen as giving privileged position to organized interests because of their costliness, as leading to the selection of more extreme candidates (Gerber and Morton 1998) and as attracting**

weaker candidates to primary contests (Banks and Kiewiet 1989). Drawing on the U.S. experience, parties are understandably reluctant to adopt primary elections as these effects might have detrimental effects on electoral performance. Carey and Polga-Hecimovich (2006) argue, however, that the U.S. experience may be a poor guide. They argue that some of the negative effects may no longer be present in multi-party contests and find that Latin American parties reap an electoral benefit from adopting primaries. Bruhn (2012) similarly finds that candidates selected via primaries in Mexico are ideologically more moderate than those selected internally by the party. Overall, the consequences of primaries are generally not well understood outside the US context. In addition to being a two party system, the generalizability of the U.S. experience is limited as the U.S. is a presidential system. In parliamentary systems, which are based on the fusion rather than separation of powers, political parties have an important role that parties in presidential systems do not perform, i.e., to provide the government with support against votes of no confidence.

There are, thus, sound theoretical and empirical reasons to examine whether primaries have similar effects elsewhere. Hazan and Rahat (2010) present the most comprehensive analysis of candidate selection methods to date but in terms of systematic analysis they rely primarily on data from Israel. Iceland offers a unique opportunity to study the effects of primaries. Although other instances of inclusive primaries in parliamentary systems may be found, none have comparable experience over time and across parties. Even among the Nordic countries, which also use a relatively decentralized system of nominations, Iceland stands out as far more inclusive (Naarud 2008). The Icelandic parties have selected parliamentary candidates using primaries for over four decades and are, thus, prime candidates for examining the effects of primary elections. Importantly, the use of primaries has varied over time, parties, and even between the district organizations of the same parties.

We argue that primary elections need not exhibit many of the negative effects that critics have maintained they have. Instead, inclusive primary elections are likely to work in the manner that the proponents of participatory reforms maintain. This is not to deny that primary elections possibly create perverse incentives by increasing intra-party competition and the importance of the personal vote that could be detrimental to the

**parties and the political system. Those incentives have undoubtedly shaped politics in Iceland but they have also been kept in check by the political parties. In part, the parties have been able to weather the change because loyalty to the parties is crucial – because it is the key for the parties to control the executive branch and for the MPs to gain higher office. In addition the parties have learned to tailor the primary system as to minimize their negative effects for the party organization.**

**We start by describing the Icelandic primaries and how the unique electoral system employed by the parties works. We then turn to a theoretical consideration of the effects of party primaries and focus on the four main types of consequences highlighted in Hazan and Rahat’s study, namely participation, representation, competition and responsiveness, and develop hypotheses about each of these. The hypotheses are examined using data on the Icelandic primaries in 1970-2009. Finally we discuss how the Icelandic parties have dealt with the potentially harmful effects of the primaries.**

### **The development of party primaries in Iceland**

Modern political parties emerged in Iceland during the inter-war period as class parties with a strong clientelist orientation. Access to clientelist values was to a considerable extent controlled by the parties but individual members of the Alþingi played a linkage role with the clientele on a face-to-face basis (**Kristinsson 1996**). This task became more complicated after a change in the electoral system in 1959 created much larger constituencies, as proportional representation replaced a hybrid system of plurality and proportional methods (Hardarson and Kristinsson 2010). **The new system allowed little scope for preferential voting and although it was expanded in 2000, attempts by voters to influence the selection of individuals (by changing the order of candidates or striking them from the list) have never in recent history affected which candidates were elected to parliament.**<sup>1</sup>

Prior to 1959, candidate selection was in practice relatively decentralized (i.e. made by the constituency party) although party leaders on rare occasions used their formal powers to intervene. The left-socialist People’s Alliance was an exception in this respect, being an electoral alliance of two or three factions and hence with a more centralized system of nominations. After 1959 the

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<sup>1</sup> The only instance of a candidate losing his seat due to preferential voting occurred in 1946. There are only four additional instances in which preferential voting has altered MPs order on the party lists (Helgason 2006, 2008, 2010).

nominations were formally decentralized in all the main parties, including eventually the People's Alliance. Candidates were nominated within the constituency party organizations (cf. Kristjánsson 1994).

After 1959, frictions over nominations became more common, partly through competition between different localities within the enlarged constituencies. Demands for representation made by young people, women and in some cases occupational groups added to the unrest surrounding nominations. The introduction of PR in 1959 also made unrest in the constituency parties potentially more harmful than before by lowering the electoral threshold and, therefore, making splinter candidacies more likely. The parties responded to the challenge by introducing inclusive party primaries around 1970 in an attempt to increase the legitimacy of the candidate selection process. The change quickly caught on and party primaries have, since then, been an equally common method of candidate selection as the older one of selection by party organs.

By primary election, in this context, we mean a selection process which includes a selectorate beyond the representative organs and committees of the party. The way they are carried out differs in several respects. In the first place they vary with regard to inclusiveness. A *closed primary* is confined to registered members of the party and effectively bars ordinary party supporters and voters from participating. A *partially open primary* is one in which anyone who is willing to give a formal declaration of support for the party or hand in an application for membership is allowed to vote. An *open primary* is one where anyone eligible to vote in the upcoming election can take part.

How binding the results of the primaries are varies. In some cases the primaries are merely consultative and the final composition of lists is up to the party organs. In others the outcome is binding if certain conditions are met, e.g. with regard to the number of votes obtained by candidates for a given seat or the gender balance of the list. Finally, the results may be unconditionally binding for a certain number of the top seats on the list. In practice, the parties tend not to depart much from the primary results, whatever their formal status, at least with regard to places with a fair chance of yielding seats in the legislature in the subsequent election. The use of **gender quotas and** “zipper” lists in left-leaning parties, however, can affect the order of candidates if primaries produce gender biased results.

Finally, some variations exist in the electoral formulae used. In the early primaries the most common method of election was limited voting, where voters would distribute a fixed number of votes among their favoured candidates without ranking them. Limited voting tends to punish controversial candidates and could in cases of internal disputes lead to unpredictable results (as it did in the Independence Party in 1983 when party leader Hallgrímsson fell to 7<sup>th</sup> place on the party list in Reykjavík and lost his seat in parliament, see Jóhannesson 2010, 537-8). Hence, it has given way to a more structured method of voting where voters rank-order a certain number of candidates and places are awarded on the basis of the number of votes for each seat and higher.

**Table 1.** Result of the Social Democratic Alliance primary in South-West District, 2009.

<u>Candidate</u>	Votes for seat							
	1.	1.-2.	1.-3.	1.-4.	1.-5.	1.-6.	1.-7.	1.-8.
Árni Páll Árnason	1184	1488	1887	2056	2160	2251	2274	2299
Katrín Júlíusdóttir	93	1415	1789	2018	2134	2250	2303	2337
Lúðvík Geirsson	1127	1324	1599	1754	1880	1956	1992	2025
Pórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir	296	607	836	1104	1289	1464	1531	1595
Magnús Orri Schram	24	95	537	927	1287	1527	1647	1738
Magnús M.Norðdahl	13	87	291	660	1006	1217	1321	1382
Amal Tamimi	25	135	327	543	823	1105	1257	1402
Sara Dögg Jónsdóttir	12	115	224	396	613	891	1053	1200
Íris Björg Kristjánsdóttir	4	60	197	386	635	845	967	1067
Valgerður Halldórsdóttir	4	125	231	407	582	786	894	1005
Ragnheiður Jónsdóttir	4	74	162	335	503	741	863	981
Svanur Sigurbjörnsson	11	33	117	214	356	576	690	766
Skarphéðinn Skarphéðinsson	3	23	95	170	282	493	599	690
Gunnlaugur B.Ólafsson	3	13	65	133	262	393	462	521
Valgeir Helgi Bergþórsson	2	16	58	117	211	332	410	471

To clarify how the electoral system works, table 1 presents the results of a SDA primary in the South-West district in 2009. The first numerical column shows the number of votes each candidate received for the top place on the party list. The second numerical column shows the sum of votes received by each candidate for the first and the second seat on the party list. For example, Júlíusdóttir received 93 votes for the first seat and 1322 votes for the second seat for a total of 1415 votes. The remaining columns similarly show the sum of votes for all seats above the seat in question.

In the example Árnason wins first place because he gets the plurality of votes (1184) for that seat. Júlíusdóttir wins the second seat on the basis of plurality for first and second place ( $93+1322=1415$ ). Geirsson wins third place on the basis of plurality for first, second and third place ( $1127+197+275=1599$ ) and so on. The fact that Geirsson received a significant number of votes for the top seat on the party list while Júlíusdóttir received very few such votes did not increase Geirsson's chances of securing the second seat. In allocating the second seat, no distinction is made between a vote for the first seat and vote for the second seat. Thus, if the voters that wanted Sveinbjarnardóttir, the fourth placed candidate, to lead the party preferred Geirsson to Árnason they could have achieved that outcome by switching their ranking of Sveinbjarnardóttir and Geirsson without affecting Sveinbjarnardóttir's chances of holding onto the fourth seat.

An additional feature which has tended to structure competition in the primaries is the practice of candidates indicating which seats they are aiming at (e.g. 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> place). The candidates often seek to form informal alliances with candidates that seek other seats on the party list with each candidate encouraging 'their' voters to support the other candidate as well.

An important feature of this electoral formula – which might be termed rank-ordered plurality – is its majoritarian nature. A bare majority can obtain all the seats on the lists although in practice factional competition is not that well organized. Consider a primary where 5.000 voters choose between 10 candidates for 5 seats. If 2.501 voters rank order the same 5 candidates in precisely the same way they are guaranteed all five seats. As with other plurality systems even smaller coalitions of voters may be required as the number of candidates increases and the votes are distributed more widely. Although in practice things never happen quite like that the majoritarian feature of the election system may add an incentive for candidates not to stray too far from accepted party policies.

**We have collected data on candidate nominations in each constituency for the four main parties in Iceland between 1971 and 2009, i.e., the conservative *Independence Party*, the rural *Progressive Party*, the *Social Democrats* (first the *Social Democratic Party* and, later, the *Social Democratic Alliance*) and *Left-greens* (which replaced the *People's Alliance* as the most left-leaning party in 1999). The electoral system in Iceland currently consists of six constituencies with a district magnitude of 9-11 members, making the total size of parliament (Alþingi) 63 members.<sup>i</sup> Our sample includes the nomination of candidates for 348 party lists**

Table 2 shows the nomination method used in each constituency for each election held in the time period.

**Table 2.** Nominations in the Icelandic parties 1971-2009

Type of nomination	Frequency	Percent
<i>Party delegates</i>		
Party organs nominate	169	49
Extended party organs	20	6
<i>Primaries</i>		
Closed primary	44	13
Partially open primary	57	16
Open primary	57	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>100</b>

**Note:** With four parties and eight constituencies in 1971-1999 the number of observations per election is 32 in this period. After that, with six constituencies, the number of observations is 20 per election in 2003-2009 as the parties coordinate nomination in the two Reykjavík constituencies.

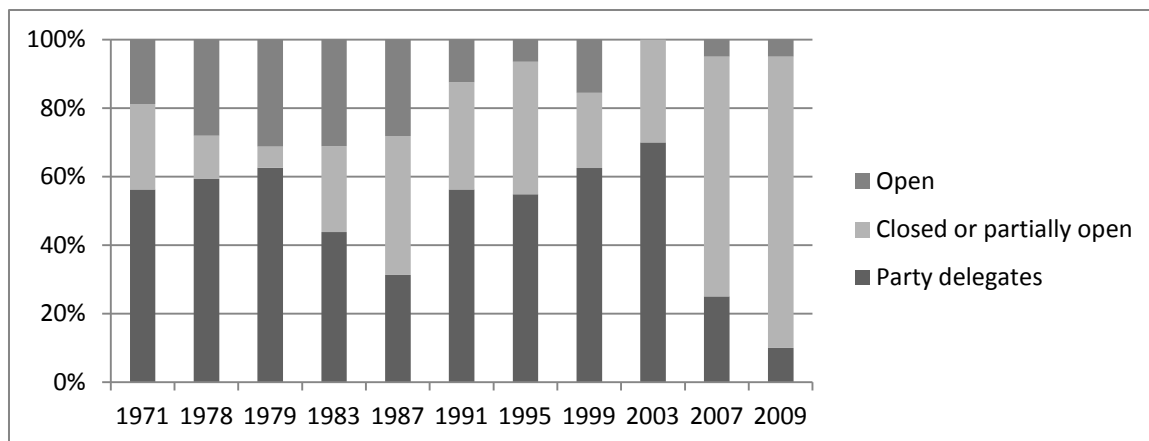
In the present context we are primarily interested in the effects of inclusiveness on the parties. Inclusiveness of the Icelandic party primaries is very high but depends on the type of primary used. Turnout tends to be high as well.

**Table 3.** Votes cast in primaries as % of votes received by party in subsequent parliamentary election 1971-2009 (means)

Type of primary	Mean %	N	Std. Dev.
Closed primary	22	39	18
Partially open primary	58	56	33
Open primary	76	57	31

In the closed primaries the number of voters participating is on average 22% of the votes received by the party in the subsequent election. In the case of partially open primaries the corresponding figure is 58% and in the open primaries it is an impressive 75%.





Note: An early election was called in 1974 for which the parties opted not to hold primaries.

**Figure 1.** Types of nominations in the Icelandic parties 1971-2009 (%)

Figure 1 shows that the use of open primaries has become less common over time while party institutions remain common until the last two elections. In those, however, the use of closed or partially open primaries has become the standard method of nominating in the Icelandic parties.

The parties which make greatest use of the primaries are normally the Social Democrats and the Independence Party, while the party farthest to the left, the Left-greens (and previously the Peoples' Alliance) uses them least. In 1971-2009 the Social Democrats used primaries in 58% of their nominations and the Independence Party in 55%. The Progressive Party used primaries 37% of the time and the Left-greens in 32% of cases.

The decision whether to have primaries or not (or which form to adopt) is not without political significance. The party statutes usually leave a fair amount of autonomy to the constituency branches in deciding on the method of candidate selection. Even in the case of the Social Democratic Party which made open primaries mandatory in 1976-1984, this was not always followed in practice. In some cases weak incumbents with strong control in the local party are able to avoid challenges by confining decisions to party organs. In all the parties there is a certain amount of scepticism of primaries, which may be played on in such instances. Only in the Left-greens, however, is this mainstream opinion. The

Left-greens not only use primaries less than the other parties but also use only closed primaries.

### **The political consequences**

Parties, presumably, adopt primaries to deal with problems or gain competitive advantage, but the consequences of adopting them may be either beneficial or harmful. Hence, some parties adopt primaries and others don't, depending on their evaluation of the overall balance. There seems to be increasing interest in adding a personal element to representation, which primaries are essentially only one manifestation of (Colomer 2011). On the plus side may thus be the belief, mistaken or not, that primaries offer an electoral advantage. The comparative literature seems quite ambivalent on this point. According to Carey and Enten (2011) the standard proposition about the U.S. is that "primaries mobilise ideologically extreme electorates which, in turn, choose candidates unappealing to the general electorate" (83). Very little research has been done outside the U.S. on the electoral effects of primaries even if a growing number of parties in Latin America and Africa have adopted such nomination procedures (Ichino and Nathan 2012). Carey and Enten's conclusions with regard to Latin American elections, is that candidates selected by primaries "win higher vote shares, other things being equal, than do candidates selected by less inclusive methods" (2011, 97). In the Icelandic case the belief that primaries provide an electoral bonus is clearly prevalent among their adherents and existing research seems to support this belief to some extent. Indridason and Kristinsson (2012) find that primaries yield marginally higher vote shares than traditional nomination methods and the effect is reduced when other parties in the district also hold primaries as one would expect.

Other reasons for adopting primaries may be based on a belief in their positive effects within the party organization. Katz (2001) suggests that the empowerment of ordinary party members or even a broader group of supporters may be a strategy used by party leaders to gain autonomy from the middle level activists, who might resist the pragmatism which is a necessary condition for effective participation in cross-party cartels. In the Icelandic case the adoption of the primaries around 1970 was partly intended, as indicated above, to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the nomination process and calm different claimants for representation.

**The case can be made, however, that the consequences of adopting the primaries were more harmful than anticipated. Adherents of institutionalized mass parties and responsible party organizations would certainly regard the introduction of primaries with suspicion.** In discussing potential harmful consequences we take the lead from Hazan and Rahat (2010) who point out that democracy within parties does not necessarily serve the broader goals of democracy in society. The case against inclusive primaries seems generally to be based on a *de-institutionalization* thesis, according to which primaries lead to haphazard external intervention in the life of parties, undermining their organizational boundaries, making them less representative of the party base and less responsive to it, in the sense of losing some of its capacity to act cohesively.

The case for primaries is not necessarily based on refuting the de-institutionalizing effects of primaries but rather on the more *organic* perspective that excessive institutionalization may be dysfunctional for competitive organizations such as political parties operating in a dynamic environment. **Scarrow, et al. 2000 point out that the “electoralist” parties which have in some cases developed in place of the older mass parties may still need the democratic legitimacy of a membership organization. To the extent that members need incentives to join, they point out “political rights within the party are among the least costly” (p. 132). Primaries may provide both legitimacy and potentially the corrective mechanism of a linkage to the party base. In a parliamentary democracy this does not necessarily happen at the expense of party cohesion since, as we shall show, there are other mechanisms to encourage or force co-operative behaviour in the parliamentary party groups.**

Following Hazan and Rahat (2010), we focus on the effects of inclusive party primaries on participation, representativeness, intraparty competition and responsiveness. Below we address each of these in turn and present pairs of hypotheses for each of the four areas that inclusive selection methods may affect. The first hypothesis from each pair is derived from Hazan and Rahat's (2010) theoretical analysis and is labelled *HR* while the second hypothesis derives from our theoretical perspective that gives greater weight, e.g., to how primaries enable parties to engage with voters and the institutional context.<sup>ii</sup> While the resulting pairs of hypotheses may suggest that two theoretical perspectives are being pitted against one another, we wish to avoid such

interpretation. Rather, we think both theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights into the effects of inclusive primary elections, which often run in opposite directions. The empirical analysis that follows evaluates whether one effect dominates the other with the aim of providing a more nuanced view of the effects of inclusive primaries.

### *Participation*

Participation is valued by many democratic theorists and in the context of candidate selection it can refer to both to the inclusiveness of the selection process and turnout. Party research indicates that party membership, on the whole, is declining in most of the well-established democracies (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000). According to Whiteley (2011) the share of self-reported active members pooled across 36 countries in 2004 was 3.4% while an additional 7.2% reported inactive membership.

According to Hazan and Rahat (2010, ch. 6) more inclusive nomination procedures fail in the long run to increase the number of party members significantly. Moreover, they maintain that the ‘quality’ of participation declines with inclusiveness leading to several ‘pathologies’ of participation, such as the enlisting of weakly committed and uninformed members or even completely non-attached.

*Hypothesis HR1. Inclusive nominations fail in the long run to increase the number of party members significantly and lead to the enlisting of weakly committed members.*

On the other hand, inclusive primaries do establish contacts between parties and their supporters, creating opportunities for the development of ‘weak ties’, which in some cases may be an important resource (Granovetter 1973). Whiteley (2011) notes that membership in most European parties is defined in terms of paying a subscription whereas no fully comparable demarcation between members and non-members exists in the United States. Consequently, self-reported membership in the United States is higher than in any other state, but the meaning of such membership in organizational terms is somewhat unclear. Our second hypothesis may thus take the following form:

*Hypothesis 2. Inclusive primaries increase the number of party supporters who regard themselves as party members.*

### *Representativeness*

**Representativeness is empirically often taken to mean descriptive representation. The representativeness of a group of candidates, in this limited sense, can be studied on the basis of its demographic composition.** Primaries are sometimes cited as an obstacle to the representation of women in Iceland. Primary elections, the argument goes, raise the threshold of representation for women because success in the primaries depends on access to financial resources as well as a developed network of supporters. Men can be seen as being in an advantageous position with regard to both factors. There is a well established gender gap in income in Iceland, although the size of the gap has been debated from time to time, and it seems likely that men are wealthier than women although there is no concrete evidence to that effect. Men are also better connected than women within and outside of the parties. Party politics have long been male-dominated – men, on average, therefore, have greater experience within the political parties and a stronger network of connections that they can call upon in the primaries. Hazan and Rahat argue that selection by a party oligarchy increases the chances different social groups (e.g. women and minorities) will capture ‘realistic positions on the party list, or realistic constituency seats’ (114). More inclusive candidate selection methods, on the other hand, produce less representative candidates.

*Hypothesis HR3. Inclusive nominations lead to less representative candidates, e.g. in terms of the number of women and age cohorts.*

Hazan and Rahat's argument clearly assumes that party oligarchs care more about representative issues than primary voters but the barriers to entry may well be higher when party lists are decided by party institutions other than primary elections. When candidate selection is not open up to the party membership, party lists are likely to be chosen by a more close-knit network of party insiders who, historically, have predominantly been male. Primaries may have an important role in breaking down such barriers and opening up an avenue of mobilization for women to achieve greater representation.<sup>iii</sup> An alternative to hypothesis HR3 may thus be the following:

*Hypothesis 4. Inclusive nominations pose no barrier to the representation of women and may increase their chances of representation.*

#### *Intraparty competition*

*Intraparty competition* may be approached in a number of ways, e.g. by studying renewal of leading candidates and elected MPs. Competition, in this sense, is a

positive value in that it makes incumbents less secure and more responsive, although excessive competition may also be destructive. There is no consensus among researchers on the effects of party primaries on intraparty competition. A few authors, such as Kristjánsson (1998) in the Icelandic case, maintain that inclusiveness increases intraparty competition, making incumbents less secure in their seats. Others (e.g. Rahat and Hazan 2010; Rahat, Hazan and Katz 2008) suggest a more complicated relationship. Selection by party delegates, they suggest, is the most competitive selection method, with selection by party members less competitive and selection open to the entire electorate quite low.

*Hypothesis HR5. Highly inclusive nomination methods should lead to low intra party competition among candidates in the sense of increasing incumbency advantage.*

On the other hand it may well be that the effects of inclusiveness are smaller than these authors suggest. Both in the case of selection by party delegates, selection by party members or open primaries, incumbency advantages may be expected to be quite strong under normal circumstances, although for different reasons. Incumbents are likely to cultivate party delegates if they depend on them for re-selection and stand a fair chance of winning against non-incumbent challengers. In a more inclusive scenario incumbents may face greater uncertainty with regard to who is likely to vote and hence have greater difficulties in securing their positions, although probably they enjoy an advantage there as well.

*Hypothesis 6. Incumbents enjoy a smaller advantage in inclusive nominations than in selection by delegates.*

### *Responsiveness*

The important question with regard to responsiveness is ‘to whom’ candidates are responsive. Rahat and Hazan suggest that if party lists are assembled “not by the party organs, but, for example by a more inclusive selectorate, such as the party members”, this may seriously weaken the parties and hamper their “ability to aggregate policies and to present a cohesive ideological image. ... The result could be a drastic weakening of partisan discipline and cohesiveness, leading to a decline in the ability of the parties to function as a stable basis for the political process and to operate effectively in the parliamentary arena” (2001, 312-13)

Hence ‘there is a trade-off between democracy within parties and responsiveness to a party’s voters’ (156).

*Hypothesis HR7. Inclusive nominations undermine the capacity of parties to act in unison.*

Intuitively it seems likely that contestants in party primaries have an incentive to cultivate a personal vote and attract individual attention in the hope of improving their chances of being elected. Deviating from the party line may be an effective way of doing this. Carey and Shugart point out, however, that other factors affect the value of individual attention for candidates, including the structure of the executive. “Generally”, they point out, “if an assembly’s primary function is to select and maintain in office an executive dependent on parliamentary confidence, we can expect party cohesion to be more important, and personal reputation thereby less, than when the origin and survival of the executive is independent of the assembly” (1995, 432).

In line with Carey and Shugart's (1995) argument, we expect party primaries to have little or no effect on party cohesion in parliamentary systems. Moreover, party leaders reward loyal party members and punish dissenters in order to maintain party discipline. Seats in the cabinets are an important means of rewarding loyalists (Kam 2009). **Such incentive structures are likely to be highly effective in parliamentary systems where party leaders control a number of valued positions, including those of junior ministers, committee chairs and even positions to be held after exiting from politics in addition to cabinet positions.<sup>iv</sup> In sum, we don't expect primaries to have a significant effect on party cohesion in parliamentary systems and particularly not where government parties are well equipped to discipline their MPs.**

*Hypothesis 8. Primaries do not undermine party cohesion in parliamentary systems.*

## **Data**

Our data covers the four major parties in the period 1970–2009. Data on party primaries was gathered from primary and secondary sources. Data on party membership comes from the national election studies and party headquarters (Kristinsson 2010; Icenés 2012). Data on party cohesion is based on voting records in the Alþingi (Kristinsson 2011). **In general we present data for all the major parties collectively rather than for each party separately. The**

**party constitutions are sufficiently similar to justify this mode of presentation. All the parties are decentralized membership organizations with a similar structure of internal representation and similar status of elected representatives.**

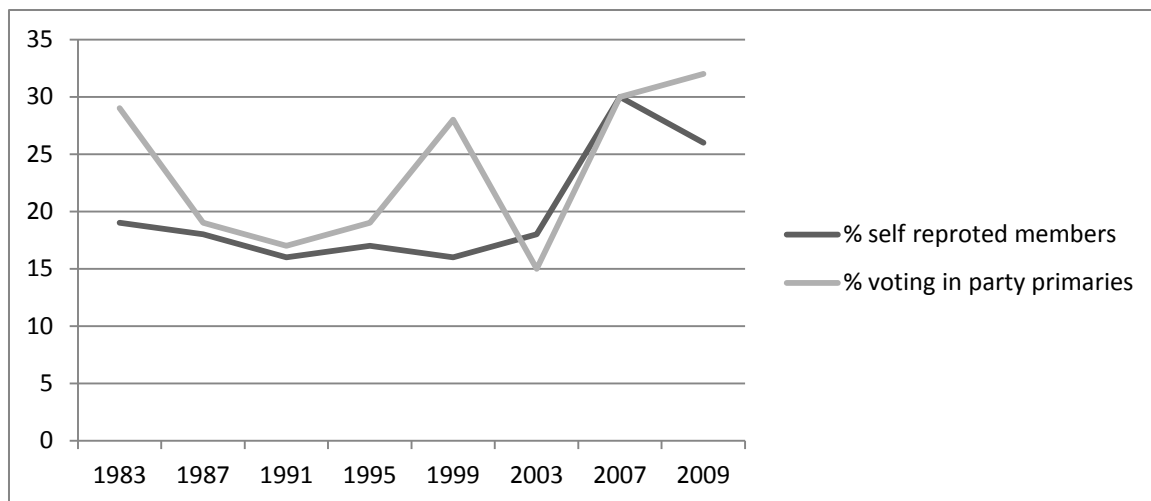
### **Inclusiveness and party members**

To test hypotheses HR1 and 2 we look at the development of membership in the Icelandic parties over time to examine whether greater use of primaries has affected party membership.

As membership fees are collected only on an irregular basis by the Icelandic parties and in many cases not at all, party membership in Iceland resembles membership levels in the U.S. more than the European ones. This is in part due to the use of primaries. Mobilization by primary candidates, combined with more or less free membership, inflates the membership while there is no corresponding mechanism for tidying up after the primaries. This is especially the case of partially open primaries where voters need not be current party members but have to apply for membership. Kristinsson (2010) has calculated membership density (members as per cent of voters) in the Icelandic parties 2009-10 according to different criteria. According to figures from party headquarters, 42.5% of the electorate are members of the Icelandic parties. However, self-reported membership in a survey conducted in 2009 amounted to 27.3% of respondents while only 12% claimed to be “active” party members. In many cases being “active” means nothing more than voting in the primaries. Using in-depth local interviews to estimate the number of members who attend at least some party meetings, Kristinsson’s conclusion is that around 1% of the voters are active in this more limited sense. Although he notes that there may be a large margin of error in these figures, they nonetheless suggest that high membership figures in the Icelandic parties are unlikely to indicate especially active party organizations.

Data from the Icelandic election study provides an opportunity to examine the development of self-reported membership over time. Figure 2 shows the proportion of respondents reporting membership of a political party in 1983-2009 and who claim to have voted in party primaries.





Source: Data from the Icelandic National Election Study

**Figure 2.** Self-reported membership in the Icelandic parties and voters in primaries (% of all respondents)

Figure 2 shows a close correlation between party membership and voting in the primaries ( $r^2 = .42$ ). A greater tendency by the parties in the period shown to replace open primaries with closed or partially open ones probably has the side-effect of boosting membership figures in the political parties. Closed or partially open primaries – which have become the norm in recent elections – provide an incentive for supporters to join, even if they have no intentions of participating in other party activities or paying membership fees.

Inflated membership files are not necessarily regarded negatively by party headquarters. Although debated in some of the parties, party managers often find it convenient to have access to membership files for disseminating information and propaganda. Since the parties are largely financed by methods other than membership subscriptions anyway access to contact information for large numbers of party supporters is mainly seen as an asset.

It is clear, from our data that the boost given by the primaries to membership figures has – contrary to hypothesis HR1 – not been followed by a long term decline. On the contrary, the membership figures in 2007 and 2009 are the highest ever. The question is whether a large bulk of the party members consists of weak supporters or even non-supporters. Data from the 2009 National Election Study allows us to address the latter possibility.

**Table 4.** Party identification of party members 2009

Feel closest to:	SDA members	PP members	IP members	LG
------------------	-------------	------------	------------	----

				members
SDA	80	6	6	12
PP	0	76	3	3
IP	1	4	74	0
LG	4	0	3	74
Other parties	4	0	4	0
No party/don't know	12	14	10	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source:* Icelandic National Election Study, 2009. For further detail, see ICENES 2012.

While the fit between party membership and party identification is not perfect, party membership is by no means meaningless or accidental. Most of the party members identify with their own parties (74-80%) and among those who don't the largest group normally identifies with no party (10-14%). Importantly the party with the least inclusive form of nominations, the Left-Greens, does not have a higher proportion of identifiers among its registered members than the other parties.<sup>v</sup> Overall there is slight indication that more inclusive methods of candidate selection increase the share of party members that regard themselves party supporters (hypothesis 2). In contrast, if the second part of hypothesis 1 were true, lower levels of party support would have been expected in the parties, e.g., the Independence Party and Social Democrats, which have used more inclusive methods.

### **Inclusiveness and candidate representativeness**

We now turn to the question of how primaries affect representation, focusing on gender and age. Women have long been underrepresented and their representation in Alþingi was approximately 30-35% over the last three electoral terms and reached 43% following the last election. There are, of course, two problems with drawing inferences about the effects of the primaries on the basis of the number of female MPs. First, at the advent of the primaries in the 1970s, female representation hovered around 5%. Thus, things have improved considerably since the parties began adopting primaries – whether or not that has something to do with their adoption. Second, to show that primaries adversely affect female representation it must be demonstrated that primaries somehow advantage men over women. It is certainly true that party lists are populated by men to a greater degree but one would only expect gender parity on the lists if

an equal number of men and women ran in the primaries. Sigurjónsdóttir and Indriðason (2008) show that this is not the case. Far fewer women offer themselves as candidates in primaries – in the past couple of decades women have only accounted for about 35% of the candidates. However, it appears women are more likely to be successful in achieving their goals where primaries are held except that women are less likely to win the top seats on the party list.<sup>vi</sup>

Those claiming that primaries have detrimental effect on female representation have also failed to consider the counterfactual – what would the situation be like without primaries. Because primaries have not been adopted uniformly across parties and districts in Iceland, we can address this question. To do so, we compare whether the number of women on the party lists where primaries were held with those where no primaries were held. We focus on the last three elections; the data consists of 60 party lists; 39 established via primaries and 21 by party nomination. The parties held a single primary for nominating candidates to the party lists for both the Reykjavík districts.

Each party list includes 18-22 candidates. We measure the representation of women in three ways. First, we consider the number of women as a share of the total number of candidates on the list. One limitation of this measure is that where parties have employed primaries, they often only use the primaries to select the first places on the party list with party institutions filling out the list, usually, with recognizable faces. **Second, we consider the share of women among the candidates that ended up winning a seat in parliament (Winners). There is a qualitative difference between occupying one of the top seats of the list as opposed to any place sufficiently far down the list to make winning a seat virtually impossible. Finally, we consider the share of women among the competitive candidates, i.e., candidates that either won a seat or were the first or second runner up on the party list (Winners+2). In other words, we focus on the candidates that can be considered to have had a change of winning a seat in parliament.**<sup>vii</sup>

**Table 5.** Share of female candidates

% Women among:	Party Selection	Primary Election	Total
Winners	27.2	34.9	32.5
Winners +2	51.9	44.8	47.3
All candidates	46.6	48.6	47.7

As shown in table 5, there are some notable differences between party lists depending on whether party institutions or primaries are used for nomination. First, focusing on only the candidates that won seats in parliament, primaries do somewhat better in terms of female representation – the share of women is almost eight percentage points higher where primaries are employed. The opposite is true when the competitive seats are considered where selection by party organization outperforms primaries by about five percentage points. There is little difference between the two methods of nomination when all the candidates are considered. However, the differences fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance, which is not all that surprising given the limited number of observations. As females have become better represented over the years, and our data covers a six year period, it is worthwhile considering the possibility that the observed relationship holds up when we control for the election year. Table 6 presents the results of regression models which control for election year.

**Table 6.** Share of Female Candidates<sup>viii</sup>

	(1) Winners	(2) Winners +2	(3) All Candidates
Primary Election	0.083 (0.10)	-0.120* (0.050)	0.0009 (0.017)
Election Year 2007	-0.079 (0.109)	0.085 (0.054)	0.050* (0.019)
Election Year 2009	0.019 (0.113)	0.099 (0.058)	0.025 (0.020)
Constant	0.288*** (0.078)	0.49*** (0.038)	0.45*** (0.013)
Observations	57	60	60

Standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The regression results reflect the findings in table 5 above. Primary elections appear to provide a slight, albeit statistically insignificant, advantage to women in terms of winning seats in the legislature while it reduces significantly – substantively and statistically – the share of women when competitive seats are considered. One interpretation of this finding is that where party institutions are responsible for nominations, women are less likely to be awarded places on the list that are likely to result in a seat in parliament but instead women are more likely to receive places on the list that place them just out of reach of parliament (except if the party makes unanticipated electoral gains). The effect is quite big

in substantive terms; the difference in the share of women depending on nomination method is 12 percentage points. The primaries may also affect representation in another way. Historically, politics has been dominated by old men. Selection within party institutions gives privileged access to established party members that have worked their way up through the party hierarchy and nomination by party institutions are, therefore, likely to allow experienced, and older, party members greater influence, which in turn may lead to the selection of older candidates, i.e., candidates that resemble the nominators to a greater degree. Primary elections open the nomination of candidates up to a wider section of party members and, in some cases, voters in general. Thus, primary elections open up the possibility for younger candidates to mobilize support more easily, e.g., calls for fresh new blood may resonate better with primary voters than party insiders who are invested in the party organization.

Table 7 shows very small differences in average age across the two nomination methods except for the candidates that were able to secure a seat in parliament. Among those candidates, the average age of candidates selected in primaries was four years lower.

**Table 7.** Average age of candidates

Average Age:	Party Selection	Primary Election	Total
Winners	51.8	47.9	49.2
Winners +2	45.3	45.6	45.5
All candidates	44.5	45.2	45.0

Table 8 examines whether these differences hold up when we control for the year of the election and the party. These might be confounding factors as the candidates for office have tended to become younger over time and ideology has occasionally been associated with age. The results above hold up when these factors are controlled for. Candidates that win a seat in parliament are on average five years younger but when we expand the seat of candidates to include the two runners up or all candidates there are no significant differences.

**Table 8.** Average Age of Candidates

	(1) Winners	(2) Winners +2	(3) All Candidates
Primary Election	-4.98** (2.02)	-0.64 (1.53)	1.12 (0.96)

Election Year 2007	2.31 (2.01)	0.20 (1.49)	-0.47 (0.93)
Election Year 2009	-0.41 (2.11)	-1.29 (1.60)	-1.80* (1.01)
Independence Party	8.08*** (2.05)	6.59*** (1.57)	2.17** (0.99)
Social Democrats	6.27*** (2.17)	4.73*** (1.68)	3.85*** (1.05)
Left-Green Movement	10.60*** (2.08)	3.45** (1.52)	5.03*** (0.96)
Constant	50.69*** (2.92)	43.25*** (2.15)	41.12*** (1.35)
Observations	57	60	60

Standard errors in parentheses. The baseline categories for the dummy variables are the 2003 election and the Progressive Party. **The first model has fewer observations as in three cases a party won no seat in the district.**

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

To summarize, overall we find some evidence that women are disadvantaged where primary elections are used but that younger candidates are favoured. If we restrict our attention to those that actually win representation rather than those that run the evidence is in favour of the primaries - women fare no worse than men and the young are better represented.

### **Inclusiveness and intraparty competition**

Above we argued that inclusiveness of candidate selection might be expected to affect intraparty competition. In order to test the hypotheses regarding the effects of inclusiveness we use data on the renewal in competitive seats on party lists in each constituency and the renewal of elected MPs. Competitive seats were regarded as the number of seats the party won last time plus one. Renewal of MPs is the share of non-incumbents among new members. In each case the focus is on per cent change in the period 1991-2009.

**Table 9.** Renewal of MPs and nominated candidates in competitive seats.

Type of nomination	MPs		Candidates in competitive seats	
	Mean	N	Mean	N
Party organs	19.5	82	43.8	144
Extended party organs	16.7	36	36.8	57

Closed primaries	20.0	60	35.9	78
Partially open primaries	18.5	146	28.6	189
Open primaries	29.6	27	37.8	37
Total	19.9	352	35.8	506

Table 9 shows the mean renewal among MPs and candidates in competitive seats by nomination method. The average renewal rate for MPs is close to 20% for all nomination methods except open primaries where it is close to 30%. **The renewal rates for the competitive seats are higher and decline as inclusiveness increases except that moving from partially open to open primaries increases the renewal rate by 10% points - this pattern is the exact opposite of that posited by hypothesis HR5, which predicts that inclusive nominations increase incumbency advantage. It must be kept in mind, of course, that the decision to hold a primary (which is taken by the district party organization) may in some cases reflect a weakness in the position of leading incumbents. However, there are no strong indications that MPs are very successful in avoiding challenges to their positions in this way - the renewal rates in primaries, especially open primaries, among MPs suggest that there are clearly limits to how well incumbents are able to protect themselves in this manner. Hypothesis 6 fares only slightly better, it is consistent with the renewal rates among MPs but the high renewal rates where party organs are in charge contradict our predictions.<sup>ix</sup>**

### **Inclusiveness and party cohesion**

If inclusive primaries reduce party cohesion we should expect party cohesion in Iceland to be lower than in other parliamentary systems, lower after the introduction of the primaries in Iceland than before, and lower in the parties which have adopted more inclusive nominations than in others.

Party cohesion is most commonly measured by the Rice index (Rice 1925). The Rice index is based on a comparison of the proportion of party members voting for a proposal with the proportion voting against it. Where no-one votes against the party majority the index is 100 while a 50-50 split gives a score of 0. We use a variant of the Rice index that takes account of abstentions (Hix, Noury & Roland, 2005, 215).

**Table 10.** Party cohesion in government and opposition: Index of agreement for final votes on bills 1991-2010

	Final votes on bills	
	Government	Opposition
Independence Party	99.11 (18)	96.06 (1)
Left Greens*	98.66 (1)	95.35 (18)
Progressive Party	99.40 (12)	95.27 (7)
Social Democrats**	99.35 (7)	96.33 (12)
Weighted average	99.3	95.75

Note: Only parties which have been in government at least once in the period are covered. The number of years is listed in parentheses. Data from Kristinsson (2011).

\*People's Alliance 1991-1998

\*\*Social Democratic Party 1991-1998

Electronic roll calls in the Icelandic Alþingi exist for every vote since 1991. Despite the primaries all the major parties in Iceland show high levels of cohesion. Government parties have almost a perfect record of cohesion while opposition parties exhibit slightly lower levels of cohesion. Parties using more inclusive forms of nominations (i.e. Independence Party and Social Democrats) don't suffer from a lower degree of cohesion. Whether parties are members of the government coalition, however, affects cohesion to a certain extent. In parliamentary democracies governing parties are under pressure to prove that they enjoy the confidence of parliament. While opposition parties may also be under pressure to show that they are fit for government, they do not have to constantly prove they have sufficient backing in parliament. Thus, our findings suggest that parliamentary government rather than the form of nominations is the main factor influencing party cohesion in Alþingi. This is in line with the findings of authors such as Ozbudun (1970) and Owens (2006) and fits the fact that party cohesion in Iceland is basically at a similar level to other parliamentary democracies in Northern Europe, despite a far more inclusive nomination process (cf. Kristinsson 2011). Kristinsson's (2011) analysis of roll call data back to the early 1960s indicates that the primaries do not account for trends in party cohesion at different points in time either. Party cohesion is actually at a higher level in the 1990s and 2000s than it was in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Hypothesis HR7 may thus be rejected while the results are consistent with hypothesis 8.

### **Primaries and learning**



**The introduction of primaries may have several unintended consequences, which the parties gradually learn about and seek ways of minimizing when harmful to them. In the Icelandic case we have several examples of this.**

First, all the parties seem to prefer closed or partially open primaries over open primaries. In the closed or partially open primaries voters leave contact information with the parties that helps the parties in their campaigns and in identifying likely supporters. In addition, incumbents are likely to prefer less inclusive forms of primaries as the open primaries resulted in greater turnover of candidates and MPs.

Secondly, the parties all adopted a similar voting formula which tends to structure the competition by encouraging candidates to announce what seat they aim for. Moreover, the system's majoritarian nature reduces the temptation of candidates to depart from party policy. Under a more proportional system, e.g., the single transferable vote, it might be feasible for candidates to cultivate a personal following composed of a minority within the party. In fact, the primaries have proven a less risky method of getting rid of unpopular cabinet ministers than sacking by party leaders which invites disunity and splinters from the party (Kristinsson 2009).

Thirdly, there is some evidence that although access to finance may affect the performance of candidates in the primaries, this may be restrained by regulation. A comparison between the primaries of 2007, which were unregulated, and those of 2009, which were held after the introduction of legislation on the finance of political activities, indicates that this may be the case. The legislation in question placed strong restrictions on campaign spending in the primaries and introduced a disclosure requirement. The indications are that not only was spending much smaller in the 2009 election (although the economic crash in 2008 must also be taken into account) but also had a smaller influence on the results (Indriðason and Kristinsson 2012).

Fourth, the party leaders have developed new ways, since the 1980s, to encourage team playing in the parliamentary groups which counteract whatever unsettling effects competition in the primaries has. Party leaders have taken much firmer control of the handing out of positions such as ministerial posts and committee chairs than before, rewarding loyalty and punishing disobedience. Increasing control over such patronage has strengthened the hand of the party leaders and contributed to party cohesion (Kristinsson 2009).

Finally, the parties have learned to minimize the disruptive electoral effects of the primaries. In Iceland, the primaries are often thought of as a warm-up for the “real” contest with the other parties. The problem is that wounds inflicted during the primaries have not always healed before the election. There are instances where dissatisfied candidates have split from their parties. The parties have responded to the threat of disunity by conducting the primaries earlier, so that hostility created by infighting may dissipate. The average number of days between primaries and elections was 90 in 1983 but 171 in 2007.

## **Conclusions**

The primaries in Iceland are a unique opportunity for studying the effects of inclusive nomination processes outside the more familiar U.S. context. The de-institutionalization thesis suggests that primaries should mainly have a disruptive effect on party politics, undermining participation, representation, intraparty competition and responsiveness. By contrast, a more organic perspective on party organization might suggest that they inject parties with healthy dynamism, extend the network of supporters and provide more opportunities for standing up to established power structures.

In this paper we have sought to compare the two perspectives by drawing on a variety of data sources available about the parliamentary system that has the longest and the most extensive experience with the use of party primaries. Each of the four consequences of inclusive selection methods identified by Hazan and Rahat (2010) deserves an extensive treatment but the approach we have taken here is to re-examine some of the basic claims made in the literature. The available data does not always allow us to delve as deeply into each question as we would have liked but, even so, we are able to evaluate some of the very basic implications of the theories.

In short, we find little support for the de-institutionalization thesis in Iceland. The parties have more members than before, even if some of them are weak supporters, women fare slightly better in the primaries, intraparty competition is not reduced through greater inclusiveness and party cohesion remains unaffected. In other words, the Iceland parties have stayed strong despite the primaries and may even have grown healthier on some ways, e.g., women and younger people are better represented now than they used to.

**Thus, the organic perspective seems to do better. It correctly predicts the development of party membership, descriptive representation and party**

cohesion. However, limited support was found for the hypothesis that intraparty competitiveness would increase with greater inclusiveness. Part of the reason for this may be that the parties have learned ways of dealing with the potentially disruptive qualities of the primaries, e.g. through the adoption of a majoritarian electoral formula.

The effects of primaries should not be assumed to be independent of the context in which they take place – the different ills primaries have been adopted as a cure for suggests as much. In the U.S., the introduction of primaries in the beginning of the twentieth century has been seen as an attempt at institutionalizing the parties (Ware 2002), whereas for many contemporary West European parties the effect would probably be de-institutionalization. In the Icelandic case the primaries developed in the context of struggling clientelist political organizations and provided a way to enhance their democratic legitimacy. Among the factors contributing to their relative success in the Icelandic context were not only growing criticism of the old party methods but also the fact that parliamentary government and an improved electoral formula in the primaries have helped party cohesion. Uncertainty remains, primarily with regard to political financing. Primaries are likely to increase the reliance of individual politicians on financial contributions, which may have negative effects on policy making. To what extent this can be dealt with by regulating political finance is part of an on-going learning process.

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<sup>i</sup> In 1959-1999 there were eight constituencies with district magnitude ranging between five and nineteen seats.

<sup>ii</sup> Note that Hazan and Rahat do not state the hypotheses attributed to them in the explicit manner we do below. We believe, however, that the hypotheses are a fair representation of their theoretical claims.

<sup>iii</sup> This might, e.g., be expected to be the case in parties where neither party elite nor primary voters exhibit a bias against women or younger candidates. In the absence of such biases, the selection of candidates by party elites may still be influenced by their social networks, which may remain male dominated as a result of gender biases in candidate and leadership selection in the past.

<sup>iv</sup> Alþingi, to take an example, has 63 seats and government majorities tend to be fairly small. Thus, roughly 1/3 of the government parties' MPs occupy a seat in the cabinet at any given time.

<sup>v</sup> Even if the partially open primaries sometimes attracts non-supporters of the parties it has to be kept in mind that in some cases voters have changed their party allegiances but may recognize that they remain registered members of their old party.

<sup>vi</sup> It must be noted that these findings may not capture all of the effects of the primaries, i.e., primaries might, e.g., discourage women from participating or seeking the top seats on the party list.

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<sup>vii</sup> For simplicity we focus here on the number of seats won in the current election although an argument that the parties' current number of seats might be a better measure of the parties and voters expectations about how many seats the party is likely to win.

<sup>viii</sup> There were three constituencies in which one of the parties didn't win a seat.

<sup>ix</sup> **It is worth noting that if endogeneity is a problem is ought to bias the results in favor of hypothesis HR5 and against hypothesis 6.**