



Playing by the rules? The formal and informal rules of candidate selection

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ABSTRACT

Studies of candidate selection have shown that formal rules alone cannot explain the low number of female candidates. Scholarship focusing on both demand and supply sides of political recruitment, and those attentive to the interplay between formal and informal rules, provide fuller explanations. This article shows how informal and formal rules interact in *accommodating* and *competitive* ways to produce differing gendered effects within nine Dutch political parties. Formal rules were mapped by content analysis, and informal rules from 23 semi-structured elite interviews. The findings show that the institutional rules and norms which positively increase the selection of male candidates are: being an active party member; having political experience; the incumbency bonus. This study contributes to established literature(s) on the underrepresentation of women by studying candidate selection across parties, with specific emphasis upon the interplay between formal and informal rules and their gendered effects, through the lens of feminist institutionalism.

Introduction

Candidate selection is one of the defining features of political parties (Kirchheimer, 1966). It not only signals who has power in the party but more importantly, it influences who will eventually be in parliament (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Lovenduski, 2016). Thus, it constitutes one of the key stages in the recruitment process of politicians; it is the 'ante-chamber of parliament' (Hillebrand, 1992). Since candidate selection can help to explain who and which groups are represented in parliament, it can also help in understanding which groups are, or are not, underrepresented in parliament. For this reason, scholars that want to explain the underrepresentation of women, increasingly study candidate selection (e.g., Aldrich, 2020; Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015; Colley & van Acker, 2020; Josefsson, 2020). However, despite the increasing number of studies about candidate selection that have contributed to discovering the 'secret garden of politics' (Gallagher & Marsh, 1988), there are still gaps in contemporary understandings of how candidate selection affects the number of women in politics.

Hazan and Rahat (2010) created a framework to distinguish between different types of candidate selection procedures. Based on this framework, it has been theorized that an exclusive and centralized selectorate could be beneficial for female aspirants (e.g. Kenig & Pruyssers, 2018; Kenny & Verge, 2013; Vandeleene, 2014). However, empirical studies have generated mixed results (Aldrich, 2020; Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger, 2015; Vandeleene, 2014). Arguably, these studies focused primarily on formal rules, giving less attention to the ways in which

informal rules can surpass or even erode their import (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). To understand the interplay of formal and informal rules and their potential effects on the number of female politicians, feminist institutionalist scholars place greater emphasis on informal rules and their gendered effects.

Although the number of studies focusing on informal rules have rapidly grown (Bjarnegård, 2013; Kenny, 2013; Kenny & Verge, 2016), scholarship specifically attentive to the gendered effects of the interplay between formal party regulations and informal rules *within* parties is still scarce. Recent work discusses elements of this puzzle: for example, there are studies on the gendered effects of informal rules (Kenny & Verge, 2016), formal selection criteria (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2019), and the interplay between both (Vandeleene & van Haute, 2021), although the latter does not necessarily analyze the gendered effects. A further stream of literature examines the interplay between informal rules and rules that have been specifically designed to increase women's participation (Colley & van Acker, 2020; Gatto & Wylie, 2022). This article contributes to the literature with an overarching exploration of the interplay between formal and informal rules *and* their gendered effects, through a feminist institutionalist analysis. By trying to apply Helmke and Levitsky's framework (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, 2006) on the interplay of formal and informal institutions and their gendered effects, I identify how informal institutions can result in gendered effects, both negative and positive for women. Therefore, this paper contributes to the third generation of candidate selection literature, which stresses the need for formal frameworks to identify and compare the effect of formal

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an informal institutions (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2017).

The Dutch case is rather interesting since political parties are relatively free to design their own procedures, offering the opportunity to understand the interplay between different formal and informal rules. For example, there is no legislation covering gender quotas that parties need to comply with. Moreover, the large number of political parties (17 parties were elected to the most recent parliament) allows the consideration of diverse parties who differ in terms of ideology, size, and the number of female candidates. Political parties are still the main gatekeepers for women in politics, especially in the Dutch case, where the semi-closed lists grant parties the ability to make or break a political career.

The article is organised by first considering how formal and informal rules have been conceptualised in the key scholarship, before moving on to consider the interplay between them in terms of how they generate gendered effects. The core of the article details the data collection and analysis of 23 semi-structured elite interviews with selectors that enabled the mapping of formal and informal rules. In this section, the selection process is divided into four stages: selecting applicants; testing applicants; ranking candidates; and approving candidates, which facilitates the analysis of how formal rules interact with informal structures at each stage. The findings show how the formal rules Dutch parties adopt are somewhat similar in, while informal rules, such as the importance of incumbency and party experience, differ. These informal institutions interplay in both an accommodating and competitive way and intensifies the gendered effects of the established formal rules in each case.

Formal and informal rules of candidate selection

One way of studying candidate selection is to examine party regulations and ask three different questions (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2019). First, are there rules in place? Secondly, does the content of the rules describe in detail how the procedure must be followed? In other words, do the regulations consider the four features of candidate selection distinguished by Hazan and Rahat (2010): eligibility requirements of candidates; the selectorate; decentralization; and the appointment or voting method. Thirdly, are these rules actually being followed, or to put it differently are the rules-in-form also the rules-in-use (Ostrom, 1999)?

By studying these rules and answering these questions, we can, for example, try to establish how far the selectorate is inclusive and centralized (e.g. Gallagher & Marsh, 1988; Krook, 2009; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Ranney, 1981). These rules are considered to be especially important for the representation of women. For example, some theorize that an inclusive selectorate decreases the representativeness of the candidate list. However, empirical evidence about the effect of inclusiveness is still mixed (Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger, 2015; Hazan & Rahat, 2005; Rahat, 2007; Rahat et al., 2008; Vandeleene, 2014). Similarly, there is consensus among scholars that a centralized selectorate will produce a more representative list. The logic behind this, is that a centralized selectorate will have an overview of *who* is running and can therefore solve potential free-rider problems (Murray, 2010), and moreover, they could enforce rules about gender equality (Kenny & Verge, 2013; Kittilson, 2006). However, empirical evidence to back these theoretical claims is again mixed (Aldrich, 2020; Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger, 2015; Vandeleene, 2014).

These mixed findings can be explained by the neoinstitutionalist idea that institutions are not only formal but also highly informal. While formal institutions are understood as consciously designed and identifiable through formal rules and procedures (Chappell & Mackay, 2017), informal institutions are not. Chappell and Mackay (2017, p. 41) attribute four defining traits to informal institutions: (1) they are enduring rules, norms, and practices that shape collective behaviour that can be recognized or unrecognized by the actors involved; (2) they have a collective effect; (3) they are not codified, and finally, (4) they are

enforced through sanctions and rewards from within but also outside the institution. For example, an informal rule that can influence candidate selection is 'localism' (Culhane, 2018). Although not one of the formal selection criteria, there can often be an informal preference for a local candidate, a phenomenon found in political parties in Ireland as a means of justifying male dominance (Culhane, 2018), in the Scottish Labour Party (Kenny, 2013) and the Thai Rak Thai party in Thailand (Bjarnegård, 2013). This not only influenced the perception of a what a good candidate was, but also influenced *who* should be selected. For example, in the Thai Rak Thai, this was the formal responsibility of the national party, but in practice, it often became 'the responsibility of the incumbent or a local party strongman to find a new candidate' (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016, p. 383).

The interplay of informal and formal rules and their gendered effects

Informal institutions rarely operate in a vacuum, rather they interact with formal institutions. Helmke and Levitsky (2004, 2006) provide a deductive framework to categorize this interplay. They use two different dimensions to classify how informal institutions interact with formal ones. The first concerns the outcome: do informal and formal institutions have divergent or convergent outcomes? The second dimension concerns the effectiveness of formal institutions: do actors expect that the formal institutions will be enforced and thus act accordingly. If this is indeed the case, the formal institution is effective. If the rules are not followed, then the contrary applies; it is an ineffective formal institution.

When the outcomes of formal and informal institutions are similar, when they converge, informal institutions can *complement* and reinforce an effective formal institution, but when the formal institution is ineffective, the informal institution can *substitute* for the formal one. When they diverge, informal institutions can produce a different result to what formal institutions were intended to, informal institutions perform different roles. When the formal institutions are effective, but the outcomes diverge, informal institutions are *accommodating*: this is to say that they provide incentives to change the effect of the formal institutions, but they will not violate them. Finally, this interplay can be *competitive*: informal institutions provide diverging outcomes when the formal institutions are weak (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, 2006), in that case, the informal institutions take over.

Feminist institutionalists also focus on this interplay of formal and informal rules (Kenny, 2013). In contrast to neoinstitutionalism, feminist institutionalists argue that institutions are in themselves gendered. As Mackay et al. (2010), puts it gender is seen as a:

'constitutive element of social relations based upon perceived (socially constructed and culturally variable) differences between women and men and as a primary way of signifying (and naturalizing) relationships of power and hierarchy' (Mackay et al., 2010, p. 580).

One form of gendered institution is the existence of rules about gender, such as gender quotas (Lowndes, 2020). Gatto and Wylie (2022) showed how informal institutions could undermine the effectiveness of a rule about gender, such as gender quota, by identifying different accommodating and competitive informal institutions. For example, they found that an accommodating informal institution was the nomination of women as sacrificial lambs: although this was not in violation of the formal rules, it did create a divergent outcome.

Besides rules about gender, Lowndes (2020) argued that institutions also have rules that appear to be gender-neutral but can still produce gendered effects. Such a rule, for instance, is the idea that a good leader needs to work long hours and must be 'seen in parliamentary bars or clubs', which almost by definition negatively affects primary caregivers, mostly women, who would find it difficult to live up to these standards (Lowndes, 2020, p. 546). A formal rule can thus not be explicitly about gender, but its outcome can indeed be gendered.

It is also possible to apply Helmke and Levitsky's framework (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, 2006) to identify how informal institutions interact

with these 'gender-neutral' rules. To do so, we need to reconceptualize the outcome dimension of the interaction of the formal and informal institution. When a formal institution is not about gender and the interaction with an informal institution does not provide gendered effects, we could say that the outcome is non-gendered and, therefore, converges with the formal institution. However, when the interaction of the informal institution with the formal institution does provide gendered effects, the informal rule diverges from the formal institution. Thus, in order to use Helmke and Levitsky's framework to identify how informal institutions can produce gendered effects when interacting with 'gender-neutral' formal institutions, we need to equate the concepts of converging and diverging outcomes with non-gendered and gendered outcomes (see Table 1).

By using this framework, if the interaction of the formal and informal institution results in gendered effects, the informal institution can take two forms: either accommodating or competing. A gendered accommodating informal institution will create incentives that ensure its effects will be gendered, whilst maintaining behaviours that are consistent with the formal rules. A gendered competitive informal institution will structure incentives in such a way that they are *incompatible* with the formal rules: to follow one rule, the actor must violate another, and this violation is what produces gendered effects.

The Dutch case

In the Netherlands, the study of the interaction between formal and informal rules, and their gendered effects produced some intriguing outcomes. The 2021 elections produced a parliament where 39 % of MPs were women, a level of underrepresentation¹ that at first glance is puzzling since the Dutch political system seems 'friendly' to women. Arguably, the institutional electoral rules ought to be beneficial for women, especially the extremely proportional system and the 150 member-district (Andeweg et al., 2020).² Unlike single member constituencies, female candidates do not threaten or 'push away' male candidates from the list in multimember districts (Matland, 2005; Matland & Brown, 1992), which implicitly suggests advantages for female candidates. Not only is the electoral system beneficial for women, but voters seem less likely to openly discriminate against women, in fact, they evaluate them more positively (Van Dijk & Van Holsteyn, 2022).

Table 1
The gendered interplay of informal and 'gender-neutral' formal institutions.

Outcome	Formal effective institutions	Formal ineffective institutions
Not gendered (converge)	Complementary	Substitutive
Gendered (diverge)	Accommodating	Competing

Note: based on Helmke and Levitsky's (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, 2006) typology of informal institutions.

¹ Compared to other countries, one could argue that the underrepresentation of women in the Dutch case is not that severe. However, since women have never been equally represented in Dutch parliament, I still believe that the Netherlands is a case of the underrepresentation of women. Moreover, the number of women in Dutch parliament seems to be stagnating. It is therefore important to study these cases with stagnating numbers as well, since this can inform us about remaining gender inequalities in seemingly 'friendly' system.

² The extreme proportionality is caused by the fact that there is no electoral threshold, and that the electoral quotient is calculated by dividing the total number of votes by the total number of 150 seats. It is therefore classified as one of the most proportional systems in the world (Andeweg et al., 2020).

Moreover, the percentage of preference votes for women has been around 40 %³ (Van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2012). Since the underrepresentation of women cannot be easily explained by the institutional setting or by the Dutch voters, it is crucial to explore how political parties influence the representation of women.

Thirty seven political parties participated in the 2021 elections; those elected were comprised of 17 parties. These parties are far from homogeneous: they differ in terms of age (i.e., the oldest party was founded in 1918 and the newest in 2020); ideology (far left to far right); size (ranging from 1 seat to 30 seats) and also the number of women representing these parties (from 100 % to 0).⁴ This heterogeneity is useful when studying the formal and informal rules of candidate selection and their interplay because the wide variety of parties provides plenty of rules to investigate.

Dutch parties are also important political gatekeepers as voters cannot substantively influence the order of party lists. Despite the opportunity to cast preference votes, the high number of preference votes candidates actually require to obtain a seat in parliament, makes candidate lists rather closed in practice (Louwerse & van Vonno, 2021).⁵ Not only do voters have limited influence over the ranking of the candidate list, but there is also no gender quota legislation in place to ensure the representation of women on candidate lists. These features endow parties with high degrees of freedom to create their own rules, and considerable power over their procedures for candidate selection.

Candidate selection in most liberal democratic states is a complex, multi-stage process; this is also true for the Dutch case. Hazan and Voerman (2006) classified the Dutch system as highly exclusive and centralized (see also Table 2), a feature largely explained by the fact that the electoral system treats the whole country as one constituency (Louwerse & van Vonno, 2021). In the initial stages, the selectorate is especially exclusive, however, most parties allow their members to ratify and re-order the list at party conventions or party referendums, ensuring that the final stage of candidate selection can be classified as having a veneer of inclusivity. This article is attentive to the preceding stages where candidates are selected, tested, and ranked.

The information in this table is based on content analysis of party regulations that were used in the elections of 2021.

Data collection and analysis

To study the formal rules of candidate selection, the official party regulations (party statutes and internal regulations) were examined (see appendix 2 for an overview).⁶ All parties have a specific chapter concerning candidate selection procedures in their statutes. All the articles that concerned each of the four stages of the process (testing applicants; selecting candidates; ranking candidates; and approving candidates) were coded. The length of the articles varied. For some parties, articles only constituted a single sentence, but for others, articles numbered up to three pages with each aspect consisting of several sub-clauses. After coding the different stages, the content of the rules were coded by focusing on three of the four dimensions of candidate selection identified by Hazan and Rahat (2010). The last dimension (appointment and voting system) is not coded, since this dimension reflects the final stage

³ In 2021 however, the number of preference votes on women has decreased to 20 %. This decline can be explained by a very popular male candidate of the Christian Democrats (see Nagtzaam, 2021)).

⁴ For a more elaborate overview of the different characteristics of the Dutch parties, see appendix 1.

⁵ The number of votes an individual needs to be elected despite their place on the list is 25 % of the electoral quotient. In 2021 this was 17.527 (Kiesraad, 2021). Three candidates were because of their preference votes able to 'jump' on the candidate list and were elected despite their place on the candidate list.

⁶ If the regulations were not online available, parties were requested to provide the regulations. All parties in this study collaborated to do this.

Table 2

The inclusivity of the selectorate of the multi-staged candidate selection process of Dutch parties included in this study.

	Selecting	Testing	Ranking	Approving
GroenLinks	Candidate selection committee	Candidate selection committee	Candidate selection committee	Members
PvdA	Party board or candidate selection committee	Party board or candidate selection committee	Party board or candidate selection committee	Members at party convention
D66	Party leader, party board, advisors	Party leader, party board, advisors	Party leader, party board, advisors	Members
CU	Party board or candidate selection committee	Party board or candidate selection committee	Party board or candidate selection committee	Party delegates / members at party convention
CDA	Party board	Advisory committee	Party board	Party delegates
SP	Candidate selection committee	Candidate selection committee	Candidate selection committee	Party delegates / members at party convention
VVD	Party board	Party board	Party board	Members
SGP	Local departments and party board	Candidate selection committee	Party board	Party board
CO	Party leader	Party leader	Party leader / party board	–

of candidate selection: approving candidates and is not the concern here.

As well as identifying formal rules from key documents, the selectorates were also interviewed in order to elicit more nuanced data on the candidate selection process. To get a better understanding how the formal and informal rules that shape candidate selection intersect, talking to those close to the process is crucial. Interviews are a common method in candidate selection studies (e.g. [Bjarnegård, 2013](#); [Kenny, 2013](#)) and by asking ‘how are things done around here?’ or ‘why do you do X but not Y?’ it is possible to reveal which informal rules are in place ([Lowndes, 2005](#), p. 306). The interviews undertaken for this research were attentive to four main topics, but were nevertheless flexible to allow a reflexive consideration of topics that arose during the conversation ([Seidman, 2006](#)). The four main topics examined in all interviews are the following: (1) the nominating and recruiting phase; (2) characteristics of the ‘perfect politician’; (3) talent management and recruitment; and (4) the specific rules and procedures of the party. A topic guide with example questions is presented in appendix 3.

The sampling strategy consisted of purposive sampling, meaning that interviewees were selected based on their specific characteristics ([Arthur & Nazroo, 2013](#)). In this case, the main criterium was that the participant was officially involved in the candidate selection process of a Dutch political party for the national elections of 2021. The sampling frame was constructed based on official party websites, and in instances where selection committee members were not listed on the website, the official party organization was contacted. All 13 political parties represented in parliament during 2017–2021 were contacted; however, some parties refused to participate (Forum voor Democratie), or failed to answer after multiple requests (Partij voor de Dieren, PVV, DENK, 50PLUS). In total, 8 incumbent parties collaborated. During the election period, new parties emerged that on the basis of polls could have delivered parliamentary representatives, and they too were contacted (JA21, BIJ1, Code Oranje, Volt, and BBB). Of these, only Code Oranje participated. In total, 23 people were interviewed. The sample includes various actors with different backgrounds (for an overview of the gender composition of the candidate selection committees, see appendix 4). An anonymized overview of the interviewees can be found in appendix 5.

Interviews were conducted over a broad time span, from May 2020 until May 2021. This is because some parties only wanted to participate after the selection procedure had ended.⁷ All interviews took approximately 1 h and were conducted either face-to-face or online to comply with COVID measures. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded in NVivo using an inductive approach. The first round of coding was performed using descriptive codes, while the second round extracted higher-level themes ([Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019](#)).

Prior to each interview, the participants were informed about the research process, and informed consent was obtained. The consequent data were then stored and managed in a way that ensures the privacy of the participants. The research design was approved by the appropriate ethical boards.

Results

This section reflects my division of the candidate selection procedure into three stages: selection; testing; and ranking. As noted above the final stage – approval – is not considered here. Dividing the process into three stages enables the disentangling of formal and informal rules in so far as they apply to the process of candidate selection. After describing the formal and informal rules (for an overview see appendix 6), the interaction between the formal and informal rules and their gendered effects will be discussed.

Selecting applicants

In this stage, the selectorate decides which applicants can enter the selection procedure. As previously indicated, the formal rules indicate that this stage is exclusive: party elite committees and, in some cases, party chairs are (partly) in charge of selecting applicants (CO and D66). Although decision-making takes place at the national level, in most parties, local departments play a role too. For the SGP, candidates needed to be nominated by local branches, since they cannot apply themselves. Similarly, for the CDA, CU, and PvdA, local departments could nominate candidates, whilst candidates for the VVD, although needing to apply individually, required the additional endorsement of a local network.

With the exception of the PvdA, local branches are free to decide which candidates they nominate or endorse. In their case, the party board provided some extra rules for local departments tasked with nominating candidates. In addition to the three candidates they were nominally required to, they were permitted to extend this to four if: two of the candidates were women; one of the candidates was younger than 35; and if one candidate was not active within the party organization. In this way, the party aimed to increase diversity [PvdA_01]. These endorsed candidates were automatically invited to the interview round and had a so-called ‘star behind their name’ [PvdA_01]. For other parties, nominated candidates were not formally rewarded during the process.

The formal rules regarding candidacy at this stage are clearly stated in most party regulations. The most prominent regulation for candidates to be admitted into the procedure, is that party membership is mandatory.⁸ Another common requirement is that candidates sign a declaration that they endorse the party's procedure (D66 and CDA); and commit to party loyalty by, for example, giving up their seat if they leave the party (CDA, D66 and PvdA). Some parties (GL, SP, D66, and PvdA) also require applicants to collect the signatures of fellow party members who endorse their candidacy. To prevent conflicts of interest, candidates need to give up their positions on the party board or selection

⁷ We do not expect this to have any effect on the results that are found.

⁸ CDA, D66, SGP require applicants to be a member for 1 year, GL, PvdA, SP and VVD do not specify the term. For Code Oranje being a party member is not a requirement, because they perceive themselves as a network of local parties.

committees (CDA, D66, GL and VVD). Finally, only PvdA, D66 and CDA, have strict term limits for incumbents in their party regulations, however, when these are in place, the regulations also leave opportunities to deviate from this.

Besides these formal requirements, there are few strict rules regarding the evaluation of application letters. The statutes of the CU dictate that all applicants must be invited to the interview round,⁹ whilst the SP invited all applicants, despite no formal rules dictated this procedure [SP_01]. In most party regulations it is notable that candidate profiles were used to evaluate the aspirants (D66, GL, PvdA and VVD). In this regard, interviewees also stated that the profile was used (CU, D66, PvdA, GL, SGP and CO), but the way in which it was used differed between parties. While for GroenLinks it was not a strict benchmark: “[...] you'll have the profile in mind of course, but you don't directly compare” [GL_02]; for others, the selection of the letters was the “most strict ‘compare-to-the-profile-exercise’” [D66_04]. It was noteworthy, that the SP, CO and SGP barely had any formal rules to evaluate applicants at this stage.

An important informal rule within this stage concerns the advantage inherent to incumbency, where almost all parties admit to ‘automatically’ selecting incumbents for the interview rounds. D66, for example, requires incumbents to apply with a letter, but they are nevertheless automatically selected. CDA has the same requirement, but incumbents are not even interviewed and automatically included, whilst for the CU, the selection committee interviewed MPs *before* the application deadline. When incumbents expressed their wish to continue, they were automatically involved in the ranking process. GroenLinks also expressed that incumbents were automatically invited for interview if they applied. Other parties stated in their call for candidates, or the task description of the selection committee, that they wanted to retain a certain level of experience and expertise (PvdA).

The SGP's statutes specifically state in the party regulations that women cannot be excluded as candidates. It was only in 2006, after a lengthy discussion, that women were allowed to become party members, and only in 2012, after a court ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, passive female suffrage was accepted (Post, 2018). However, women have never applied to be on the national candidate list [SGP_01], a point which the party board takes a passive stance: “Well, yes, the party also said, we remove all the barriers, so it's now up to the party to decide on its own. What you do see is that... people do not want to bring it to a head, so to speak” [SGP_01]. Even though party membership has been open to women since 2006, barely any women join the party: “[...]it remains the tradition, especially when we talk about a married couple, for example, a man and a woman, that the man becomes a member, and that the woman thinks ‘oh, I will not pay contribution twice, my husband is a member and that is for the family as a whole.’ [SGP_01]. The interviewee raised an additional reason for the lack of female candidates, suggesting that being a party member is hard to combine with family activities. The party board does not actively encourage women to apply, but leaves this to the local departments: “We're not pushing that, we're just letting the organic change do its job. [...] There are many different thoughts, and you see that if you let the regions decide on their own, there is less commotion and it's an organic process” [SGP_01].

Testing applicants

When applicants are tested, the selectorate is again exclusive and centralized (see Table 2), and formal rules regarding candidacy are scarce. Only four parties mention in their party regulations that they use predetermined criteria to assess the applicants (CDA, D66, PvdA, GL),

and only one party is specific about which methods are possible to use in evaluating applicants (CU) or that it is possible to ask for references (GL, PvdA and CU). Because of the few formal regulations about this stage, informal rules become especially important in testing the applicants.

Despite the lack of formal rules at this stage, parties do design their testing procedure thoroughly. There are three test methods parties employ: interviews, a practical round, and integrity checks. To evaluate candidates in these tests, parties use a variety of tools. PvdA ranks all candidates on score sheets based on the eight competencies in the candidate profile. VVD has a similar practice to ‘objectively compare candidates’ [VVD_03]. Other parties use the candidate profile more loosely without score sheets or forms. Members of the selectorate mainly evaluate candidates based on their idea of a good candidate. Two principal characteristics were valued in a manner that could be classified as an informal rule: the norms recognized by most interviewees was that having political experience and having party experience is a necessity.

Political experience is a crucial requirement for all parties: it shows that applicants have political skills and have some understanding of the political system. When candidates already have experience in local or regional politics, this is perceived as an asset. It can also be a sign of electoral appeal: the candidates are able to show how they performed in previous elections, thus giving parties the ability to assess the candidate's electoral potential [CDA_01]. The importance of political experience is reinforced by testing rounds, where people must show that they have sufficient political skills in assessments (VVD and GL) or practical rounds (PvdA, D66 and CU). These practical rounds consist of, for example, a simulation of the weekly question hour [D66_01], a crisis simulation [VVD_01, GL_03], creating written questions [D66_01], being interviewed by the media [GL_03, CDA_01], or solving a policy case [CU_01, PvdA_02].

One of the CU interviewees described the dilemma of selecting either people who have societal experience and can be good representatives; or selecting candidates with previous political experience. They preferred candidates with political skills because the size of the party (5 seats) did not allow them to select inexperienced candidates [CU_02]. The interviewee also pointed out that if this cycle was to be broken, potential candidates must be trained *before* the selection process, so that they can acquire appropriate political skills. GroenLinks, for instance, did train candidates. Prior to the candidate selection process started, they scouted potential talent for a training program, focusing on those with a migration background [GL_02]. The goal of the program was not to prepare talents for a job as an MP, but to “[e]xplore if there was a match between both the party and the participant with regard to competences, experiences, [...] whether they are specifically interested in being a member of parliament” [GL_03]. With these kinds of procedures, candidates could explore whether they liked the job and whether they felt skilled enough to be an MP. Afterwards, it was informally agreed that participants would be automatically invited for the interview rounds if they wished to apply.

A somewhat similar endeavour could be found at VVD and D66, where there is also a strong preference for politically experienced candidates: “you want people who are tested in the local or provincial setting. You prefer them. People you know, people you can understand” [VVD_03]. The selection committee at the VVD is a permanent committee that also exists during non-election periods. Party members can contact them to discuss their political career and the committee also tries to scout for talent. They actively advise interested members to gain political experience [VVD_03]. A separate scouting committee (not involved in the selection process) functions in a similar way for D66. They create a longlist of potential candidates who were invited to participate in a bootcamp, where participants were tested for the competencies and

⁹ However, when the number of applicants is too high, they can make a selection based on the letters. Because of the high number of applicants (141), the selection committee of the Christian Union decided to make a first selection based on the letters.

skills necessary to be an MP.¹⁰ However, unlike VVD and D66, GroenLinks designed its talent program specifically for underrepresented groups.

The second criterion of what constitutes the good candidate is someone who has party experience. For some parties, it matters greatly whether applicants have been active within the party organization, and whether they have 'earned their stripes'. It is seen as a logical step on the path to a political career: *[S]ometimes you get a letter and then you think, well, nice that you want to do something for the Greens, but wouldn't it be more logical to start at a local meeting? Or join a workgroup about the economy? Sometimes you have the idea that people think 'oh, I want to become active, let's start at the national parliament.'* And that is of course in most cases a weird order" [GL_04]. Alternatively, it is seen as a reward for party loyalty: *[P]eople are connected to the party for a long time, so there is a certain kind of loyalty, or there is a certain... yes, retention, no, you may not offend these people.* [D66_02]. Being known in the party also helps in the testing stage. Some interviewees admit that when aspirants underperform, they can get the benefit of the doubt when a member of the committee knows the aspirant [GL_04 & D66_02].

It is worth noting that there were attempts within PvdA to counter the idea that party experience was the crucial ingredient to candidate success. During this election cycle they experimented with the endorsement procedure: they tried to open the selection procedure [PvdA_03] by changing the necessity to collect 100 signatories by party members, to a process whereby only 3 substantive statements by citizens was required. This was also reinforced by the option for local departments to nominate a fourth person who did not have party experience.

Ranking candidates

Candidate selection committees rank candidates for a final proposal for the approval stage. In most parties, candidate selection committees are formally in charge, but the party chair or party leader is also involved as an advisor. At CDA, the candidate selection committee stops and the extended board¹¹ (*Verenigingsraad*) takes over. The ranking procedure is formally an exclusive process, informally, it is even more exclusive. Again, it is a centralized procedure; in all the parties studied, very few rules exist to describe this procedure. During this stage, the *focus* of the decision-making process changes: instead of evaluating one single candidate, a list of candidates needs to be created. There is little to be gained by focusing on individual 'candidacy requirements', rather, it is more revealing to focus on rules about the candidate list.

Two parties have rules in their regulations about the composition of the list. The party regulations of GroenLinks (GL), state that when compiling the list, attention needs to be given to: "diversity, a mix of expertise and experience, and team roles". PvdA is even more specific. They state that for the parliamentary group the goal is to achieve "equal representation of women and men, and a balanced distribution regarding age, region and diversity". This requirement only concerns the parliamentary group and not the list, which in theory, creates room to deviate from this aspiration for the non-eligible seats. Moreover, it is obligatory that for the eligible positions, at least one candidate from every region is placed.

Since there are few formal rules concerning the list, informal rules become very important. At GroenLinks and PvdA, the informal norm is that candidate lists need to be gender balanced. Despite the lack of a strict number being mentioned in the regulation is, the informal norm of

¹⁰ The outcome of this assessment would be shared with the selection committee and the participants would be automatically invited for the second round of interviews. However, because of the covid-crisis the bootcamps could not be finished, therefore the candidates still had to do the full selection process.

¹¹ This is a council (*Verenigingsraad*) in which the party board, representatives of provinces and networks are represented.

gender parity is very strong: "It is such a strong culture, that... no chair must try to not do this, because if that happens, the congress will be really mad" [PvdA_03]. This is also true for GroenLinks: "[...] for us it is unthinkable to have a list on which men are over-represented. For us, it has always been fifty-fifty, or maybe even more women" [GL_01].

An informal rule that returns in this stage is the incumbency bonus. When creating an order, incumbents are a complicating factor. Incumbents may be insulted if they are ranked lower than in previous elections, moreover, giving incumbents a high rank safeguards quality within the parliamentary group. At the VVD, they have the following norm: "We always have the point of view that people that are in the legislature who are evaluated positively and continue, never get a lower ranking than they had the previous time they were on the list" [VVD_04]. According to the SP, this incumbency bonus explains the male majority in their top 10. It is an "inheritance of the past" [SP_01], precisely because they preferred continuity with the previous parliamentary group in which men were overrepresented; the top 10 are mainly men.

All parties stressed their goal to compile a representative list, naming all sorts of criteria: region, religion, age, minority backgrounds, education, sexuality, and (dis)ability. Except for the SGP, all parties stated that gender was an important criterion. However, to create a representative list, it is crucial to keep track of these criteria during the process. In previous stages, most parties were looking for 'qualified' individuals and were surprised that the remaining candidates were not as representative as they would have liked. GroenLinks prevented this 'surprise' by tracking the ratios of different representation criteria (gender, 'roots', size of the municipality, generation, lgbt+, and region). That way, they could check every round whether their goal of a representative list, was still within reach [GL_02].

The gendered effects of accommodating and competing informal rules

An important informal rule that was especially apparent in the testing stage, was the necessity for candidates to have political and party experience. The emphasis on having political experience seems self-evident: when you apply for a political job, you must have political experience. Or, as one of the PvdA interviewees said: "[...] it is similar to when you apply for a job as a typist, then you also need to know how to handle a typewriter" [PvdA_02]. Equally, it also makes sense that political parties seek trustworthy candidates who know how the party works and support its ideals. But if these are important requirements, it is also not hard to see why some parties find it is difficult to attract women, not least because in almost all parties, the majority of party members are men (Den Ridder et al., 2019). Moreover, within party organizations, men are often more active because, in general, they enjoy more free time and have higher incomes, which makes it easier for them to contribute to the party organization (Murray, 2015). Finally, if you want to select candidates with political experience on for example the local level, this also has consequences for the gender balance. In the Netherlands, only 31.6 % of local politicians are women, and only 27 % of the members of the municipal executive are women (Bouwman, 2018). Thus, emphasizing political experience indirectly makes men more appealing as candidates.

The informal rule of equalling party and political experience with necessary qualities neatly dovetails with most formal requirements. The rule that applicants need to collect signatories, or the requirement that a candidate needs support from a local department, also eases the application stage for specific candidates. The informal institution performs in an accommodating way: the formal institution is effective – i.e., the rules are being followed –, and the informal institution does not create behaviour that violates the formal rules. However, the informal rule does accommodate and intensify the gendered effects.

A further strong accommodating informal institution is the incumbency advantage: this informal rule does not violate the formal rules, but once again does produce gendered effects. This manifests itself

in different ways across almost all parties: automatic admission to the procedure; the exemption from being interviewed; or a higher ranking than their previous list position. In the ranking stage, this informal rule is prevalent in CU, CDA, VVD, SP and SGP. This can hamper the increase of women since it favours the existing political elite: as noted above, it is 'an inheritance of the past' [SP.01]. In parliamentary groups the majority is still male, the chances are high that most incumbents will be men as well. This has the effect of hampering the entrance of newcomers, who can be more diverse. This can be amplified if women's legislative turnover is higher than men's because of a political institutions' family-unfriendly and male-oriented culture (Dolan et al., 2010). This is further influenced by the size of the parliamentary group: small factions showed a stronger preference for incumbents because they wanted to retain experience. In the increasingly fragmented character of Dutch politics, this can strengthen the incumbency bonus even more.

One of the most apparent informal institutions is the competitive informal rule at the SGP, where the prevailing view is that that women do not want to become politicians or should not become politicians. Although the formal rules do not make a distinction between men and women, the informal rule undermines the party regulations. Another competitive informal rule is that of scouting. Although this rule has gendered effects, they are not against, but *in favour* of women. The fact that some parties (GL and PvdA) were scouting prior to the procedure to recruit women, violates the requirement of the formal institution that candidates should come forward themselves. However, the informal rule of scouting women or other minority groups and granting them access to the testing stage clearly benefit these groups.

Conclusion

This article has identified formal and informal rules within Dutch parties' candidate selection procedures and considered how far their interplay produces gendered effects. It was found that formal rules of candidate selection neither harm nor benefit women in any straightforward or identifiable way: formal structures are roughly the same for most parties. However, the informal rules did differ between parties, especially in the testing and ranking stages. In this respect, five informal rules were most prevalent: (1) the importance of party experience; (2) the importance of (local) political experience; (3) an incumbency advantage; (4) scouting with a specific focus on underrepresented groups; and (5) the idea that women do not want to become active in politics.

The first three informal rules interact with the formal rules in an accommodating way. Although the formal rules are not specifically gendered, the informal rules prove to be disadvantageous for women. Emphasizing that having party and political experience is crucial for candidates favours the already active dominant group within the party: men. Besides accommodating informal rules, there are also two competing informal rules that produced different gendered effects. The first concerns scouting. Although formal rules did not provide privileges to previously scouted candidates, the informal rule that these candidates were treated differently had a meaningful effect. This can have positive gendered effects if scouting is done with a specific focus on underrepresented groups that can become (more) active or acquire the political skills that selectors are looking for. However, if scouting is done without such a focus, the risk arises that the dominant group who is already active will become even more involved.

Finally, the informal rule that interacted in a competitive way with the formal rules was the idea that women did not want to be active within the party. This was an informal rule only for the SGP and it violated the formal rule that women and men should not be treated differently. This resulted in clear gendered effects: no woman was nominated.

This research focused on the exclusive selectorates of Dutch political parties and provided a unique insight into a hitherto closed group. However, an account that relies only on perceptions of the selectorate

can be problematic because of social desirability. Selectors may say or think that they are in favour of recruiting women, but in practice, they can still (unconsciously) discriminate (Kenny, 2013). Moreover, the focus on the exclusive selectorate is not a complete picture since in the last stage the selectorate becomes more inclusive: party members can influence the list. More research needs to be undertaken to reveal what party members find important in candidate selection procedures: do they value the same candidates' characteristics as the exclusive selectorate? Do they strengthen the already existing informal structures that are disadvantageous for women? It could, for example, be that voters vote more on incumbents because they are already known to the wider public, which strengthens the incumbency bonus even more.

A limitation of this study is its sole focus on the process of candidate selection, while the recruitment chain starts *before* a party member applies. Strategies of scouting, stimulating political ambition, the wording of the candidate profile, and encouraging members to run for office, were outside the scope of this research. However, these processes do have a say in designing the eligibility pool. This is also mentioned by many of the interviewees in their plea to diversify the supply of candidates. These supply features, however, interact with the informal rules identified in this paper, and might influence the candidate emergence process in a gendered way (Piscopo & Kenny, 2020).

In short, this paper provided a unique insight into the secret garden of Dutch politics. It showed that there are different paths within the 'secret garden' of candidate selection; there are long official paths for newcomers, while the paths for insiders are shorter. If parties really want to achieve gender equality, they first need to map these paths, close some of the unofficial short-cuts, and give underrepresented groups the secrets to find their way within and through this garden.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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