

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

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Abstract

How effective are democratic systems in preventing individuals with criminal backgrounds from holding political office? We investigate this question for the case of Norway, which has no legal restrictions against felons running for office. We analyze local election candidates from 2003 to 2019, paired with administrative records of criminal offenses. We demonstrate that individuals with criminal records are systematically penalized at every stage of their political careers. Candidates are less likely to have criminal records than the general population, with elected officials less likely to have criminal backgrounds than their unelected peers, and mayors being the most lawful. In Norway’s flexible-list PR system—where parties rank candidates and voters can cast personal votes for preferred candidates—our evidence shows that party gatekeeping accounts for most filtering, while personal votes contribute little at the margin.

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Introduction

The election of individuals with criminal backgrounds to public office can compromise democratic governance by distorting policymaking and eroding public trust. Against this backdrop, several countries—including Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, and Turkey—have enacted constitutional provisions and election laws that bar certain convicted felons from running for office. Others, such as Norway, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States (specifically, the U.S. Congress), rely on democratic processes to exclude criminal offenders from elected positions. Must democracies rely on institutional bans to keep criminals out of office, or can we count on democratic processes to do the job?

Political parties act as gatekeepers by determining who appears on the ballot and, in list-based systems, how candidates are ranked. Because many political careers develop through long-term involvement in party activities—such as youth organizations, committee service, and campaign work—parties have repeated opportunities to observe prospective candidates, giving them insight into competence and integrity (Mattozzi and Merlo, 2015). However, limited candidate supply, inadequate vetting procedures, factional interests, or strategic considerations may still lead them to nominate individuals with publicly documented criminal histories. Voters can serve as an independent check through their electoral choices, rewarding trusted candidates and penalizing those they doubt. Still, voter judgments are often made under conditions of limited information, shaped by ideological commitments, media narratives, and campaign messaging (see, e.g., Anduiza, Gallego and Muñoz, 2013; De Vries and Solaz, 2017; Eggers, 2014).

These dynamics raise key empirical questions: To what extent can parties and voters prevent candidates with criminal backgrounds from gaining office—and who plays the more decisive role? We investigate these questions in the context of Norwegian local politics, a setting that is especially suitable for three main reasons.

First, with no legal barriers against electing convicts, Norway provides an ideal en-

vironment to assess democracy’s capacity to prevent unlawful individuals from entering and advancing in politics. While Norway ranks among the least corrupt countries worldwide,¹ news coverage shows that individuals with criminal backgrounds have been elected to public office. For example, the national newspaper *Aftenposten* identified 46 convicts that entered municipal councils following the 2023 local elections.² Public skepticism is evident as well—Appendix Figure A.2 shows that many Norwegians believe representatives misuse their authority for personal gain.

Second, local elections are decided by a flexible-list system: voters can express their preference for individual politicians (as in open-list systems) and parties can choose to assign an advantaged position to some of their candidates (akin to closed-list systems). Candidates placed in these advantaged positions are placed on the top of the list and receive a “head start” in personal votes, making it more difficult for other candidates to compete in the intra-party contest (Fiva, Izzo and Tukiainen, 2024). Nevertheless, voter preferences still significantly shape the electoral outcome: about 24 percent of elected council members in our sample were chosen directly because of personal votes, which means they would not have been elected based on party rankings alone.

Third, our study benefits from an exceptional dataset: detailed criminal records for every candidate who ran for local office in Norway from 2003 to 2019. This comprehensive dataset allows us to compare politicians with the general adult population, controlling for characteristics such as gender, age, working status, income, and municipality of residence. The data on criminal records, covering the period from 1998 to 2022, includes information on types of crime, timing, and punishment.

It is the combination of these three features that makes Norway an unusually valuable research case. The absence of formal bans on electing convicts provides a clear test of democracy’s ability to self-police; the flexible-list electoral system—situated between

¹Appendix Figure A.1 characterizes the Norwegian case along two dimensions: the scores on political corruption perceptions and liberal democracy (Coppedge et al., 2025). The plot places Norway in the upper-left corner - low corruption and high democratic quality - similar to neighboring European countries as well as, for example, Australia, Canada, Chile, Japan and the United States.

²<https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/JQApEP/aftenposten-avdekker-46-straaffedoemter-valgt-inn-i-de-nye-kommunestyrene>

open and closed lists in Carey and Shugart (1995)’s typology—allows us to observe both party gatekeeping and voter-driven candidate promotion; and the exceptional individual-level data permits a systematic analysis of selection across the different stages. These conditions create an ideal setting for identifying the relative effectiveness of party vetting and voter selection. These selection mechanisms are not uniquely Norwegian: in proportional representation systems, parties play a central gatekeeping role in determining which candidates appear on the ballot, while voters ultimately evaluate them at the ballot box.³ Given that these mechanisms are fundamental features of democratic systems, analyzing their operation in this context sheds light on potential vulnerabilities elsewhere. Our findings clarify not only the extent to which criminal candidates are excluded but also when and how vetting occurs.

We document a clear downward pattern in criminal involvement across the political hierarchy. Candidates who are nominated but not elected are less likely to have received a court-issued legal sanction than the general population. Among elected officials, the prevalence of criminal involvement is even lower, with mayors displaying the lowest levels of lawbreaking behavior.

We uncover three distinct mechanisms behind this pattern. First, the sharpest reduction in criminal involvement occurs at the initial nomination stage, particularly within established local party organizations. While the initial nomination reflects both a candidate’s willingness to put themselves forward and a party’s willingness to endorse them, long-established local parties are likely to have stronger vetting procedures and deeper knowledge of prospective candidates. The fact that established local party organizations systematically field fewer convicted candidates suggests that parties play a central role in screening out individuals with criminal backgrounds.

Second, parties reinforce this selection by strategically placing their most law-abiding nominees at the top of their ballots. Since the mayor is almost always chosen from

³Proportional representation (PR) is the most common electoral system worldwide: according to the Database of Political Institutions (Cruz, Keefer and Scartascini, 2021), 97 of 180 countries use PR, and about one fourth of those are flexible-list or open-list rules.

among these first-ranked candidates, the office represents the clearest manifestation of party vetting. The extremely low incidence of criminal backgrounds among mayors thus reflects how party organizations shape not only who enters politics but also who reaches its highest local positions.

Third, voters provide only modest additional filtering at the polls through their personal votes. Their contribution to keeping convicted individuals out of office is negligible compared to the vetting carried out by party organizations. This may partly reflect that the voters take for granted that the nomination process already has filtered out undesirable candidates.

To probe the scope conditions of our findings, we analyze variation in candidate supply, information contexts shaped by municipality size, and local crime prevalence through a set of heterogeneity analyses. These analyses allow us to assess whether the filtering mechanisms we identify operate similarly under more demanding local conditions.

We contribute to the growing literature on political parties as gatekeepers in candidate selection. One strand of research investigates how party leaders incentivize candidates to align with party goals and invest in costly campaign efforts (e.g., Invernizzi and Prato, 2025; Mattozzi and Merlo, 2015). Along these lines, scholars examining list-based electoral systems have debated whether parties strategically assign high-quality candidates to the top or middle positions on their electoral lists (e.g., Buisseret et al., 2022; Cox et al., 2021; Crutzen, Konishi and Sahuguet, 2024). Our study advances this literature by empirically examining how a candidate’s lawfulness—a novel measure in this context—affects their position on party lists.

Another strand of literature examines how parties leverage their gatekeeping power to further strategic interests, such as ensuring positions for preferred candidates (e.g., Buisseret and Prato, 2022; Fiva, Izzo and Tukiainen, 2024). Incumbent party leaders may see highly capable or well-regarded candidates as threats, leading them to prioritize loyalty over competence (Besley et al., 2017). A crucial decision is the selection of the candidate placed at the top of the list, effectively nominating them as the party’s mayoral

candidate. Our contribution is to empirically assess whether mayoral candidates are selected positively or negatively on lawfulness compared to council members, and to determine the role of party versus council vetting.

We also contribute to an expanding literature that leverages register data to study the selection of quality attributes to politics (for reviews, see Dal Bó and Finan (2018); Gulzar (2021)). In an influential study, Dal Bó et al. (2017) show that elected politicians in Sweden are positively selected on cognitive skills, a pattern also observed in Norway (Cox et al., 2021), Denmark (Dahlgaard and Pedersen, 2025), and Finland (Jokela et al., 2025). Similarly, Sørensen (2024) shows that Norwegian politicians are positively selected on pro-social attitudes as measured by charitable giving. As far as we know, our paper is the first study to document that a representative democracy can prevent criminals from entering politics and to uncover the processes that drive this outcome.⁴

Elsewhere, democratic processes appear less effective at filtering out criminally linked candidates. Between 2004 and 2014, Indian candidates accused of criminal activities were almost three times more likely to secure election victories compared to candidates without such allegations (Vaishnav, 2017, p.12). This phenomenon is so pronounced that jail time has been described as a ‘badge of honor’ in Indian politics.^{5,6} Similarly, Britto et al. (2024) document the overrepresentation of criminally charged candidates in Brazilian politics, even though convicted individuals are legally barred from holding elected office. By focusing on an established democracy, our study speaks directly to the broader challenge of how even robust systems can falter and pose a threat to democratic norms and stability.

⁴Jokela et al. (2025) find that Finnish politicians are positively selected on a self-reported measure of honesty. Their ‘dutifulness score’ captures “how honest a person is—it tells us how closely he follows social norms and considers them to be important (e.g., whether the person would return money if given back too much change at a store)” (p.1921). Rather than using self-reported survey data, we rely on a behavioral outcome capturing candidates’ commitment to legal norms.

⁵See <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/14/world/asia/in-indias-politics-jail-time-is-a-badge-of-honor.html>.

⁶However, a vignette experiment conducted in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh—where one in four state legislators has a serious criminal record—found that allegations of criminality or corruption significantly decreased voters’ support for tainted candidates, even when those candidates were affiliated with the voters’ preferred caste-based parties (Banerjee et al., 2014).

Our Empirical Case: Norway

This section reviews Norway’s institutional setting, focusing on local government and elections—the arena where most political careers start and where our data are drawn—before outlining the criminal justice system that defines how crimes are sanctioned.

Local Politics

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

Local elections in Norway operate under a flexible-list proportional representation system, with local party organizations beginning their nomination procedures about a year before the election. While Norwegian election law sets formal requirements for the content of list proposals, it does not specify how they should be determined. Local party organizations typically appoint a nomination committee to recruit candidates, but senior party members—including the incumbent leadership—often have significant influence over the final composition of the lists (Fiva, Izzo and Tukiainen, 2024). The final ballot is usually decided at a nomination meeting open to all local party members.

The election system permits parties to grant certain candidates a ‘head start,’ equivalent to 25% of the party’s total vote count. This advantage renders it nearly impossible for other candidates to rival ‘head start’ candidates within the same party (Fiva, Izzo

⁷Anyone listed in the population register as residing in the municipality on election day, and not excluded or exempt, is eligible for candidacy in the municipal council and must accept nomination. There are no legal barriers preventing convicts from holding political office at any level. The national government also lacks authority to dissolve elected councils due to criminal activities. A 1961 Supreme Court ruling upheld this, allowing a convicted council member to stay in office, emphasizing voter choice (Valglovutvalget, 2020, p.204).

and Tukiainen, 2024).⁸ The advantaged candidates are listed in bold letters at the top of the party list. The initial ranking of candidates does not otherwise play any formal role, except if there is a tie. The top-ranked candidate on a party’s list is its mayoral candidate.

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

In systems where parties allocate nominations for elected and appointed offices based on seniority, as in Norway, candidates must invest significant time and effort to reach positions where they can extract rents (Cirone, Cox and Fiva, 2021). This extended career path increases the costs of running, discouraging individuals primarily motivated by short-term personal gain.⁹ Even so, some individuals may still view local political office as an opportunity to secure personal benefits, despite the limited immediate financial returns. While large-scale rent extraction in general is lower in Norway than in high-corruption settings, local office still provides discretionary power, budget influence, and privileged networks that can be leveraged for personal gain.¹⁰

⁸In councils comprising fewer than 23 members, parties may grant an advantage to up to 4 candidates. In those with 23 to 53 members, up to 6 candidates can receive this benefit, and in councils with over 53 members, the limit increases to 10 candidates. Panel A of Appendix Figure A.3 displays the fraction of candidates with a head start by list position for our main estimation sample. About 91.5% of first-ranked candidates, 71.6% of second-ranked candidates, and 37.8% of third-ranked candidates are awarded a head start.

⁹Being a local politician in Norway is a part-time position held concurrently with other sources of income. Previous research from Norway (Cirone, Cox and Fiva, 2021) and other Nordic countries (Berg, 2020; Kotakorpi, Poutvaara and Terviö, 2017) find that the economic returns from winning a seat in the local council is small or non-existent.

¹⁰The Norwegian system relies heavily on trust rather than systematic audits, making it easier for such behavior to go unaudited (see e.g., The Norwegian Agency for Public and Financial Management, 2025). This is evident at both local and national levels. At the local level, although there are few instances of outright corruption, mayors have been implicated in cases of misuse of public funds. At the national level, several members of parliament have benefited from lenient oversight of reimbursement schemes, commuter housing allowances, travel expenses, and severance pay.

The Criminal Justice System

The justice sector in Norway includes the police (*politiet*), the public prosecutor's office (*påtalemyndighetene*), and the courts (*domstolene*), each playing a key role in criminal justice. The police enforce laws, investigate crimes, and issue fixed penalties for minor offenses. They also initiate investigations upon discovering or receiving reports of criminal activity. The public prosecutor decides whether to press charges, with around 40% of formal charges going to court, while the rest are dismissed, fined, or resolved through alternative processes (Bhuller, Khoury and Løken, 2025). The courts determine guilt and appropriate punishment.

The Norwegian court system consists of three tiers: the district court (*tingretten*), the court of appeals (*lagmannsretten*), and the supreme court (*høyesterett*). All criminal cases start in the district court where most cases are resolved (Bhuller et al., 2020), and both the convicted and the prosecutor can appeal decisions.

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

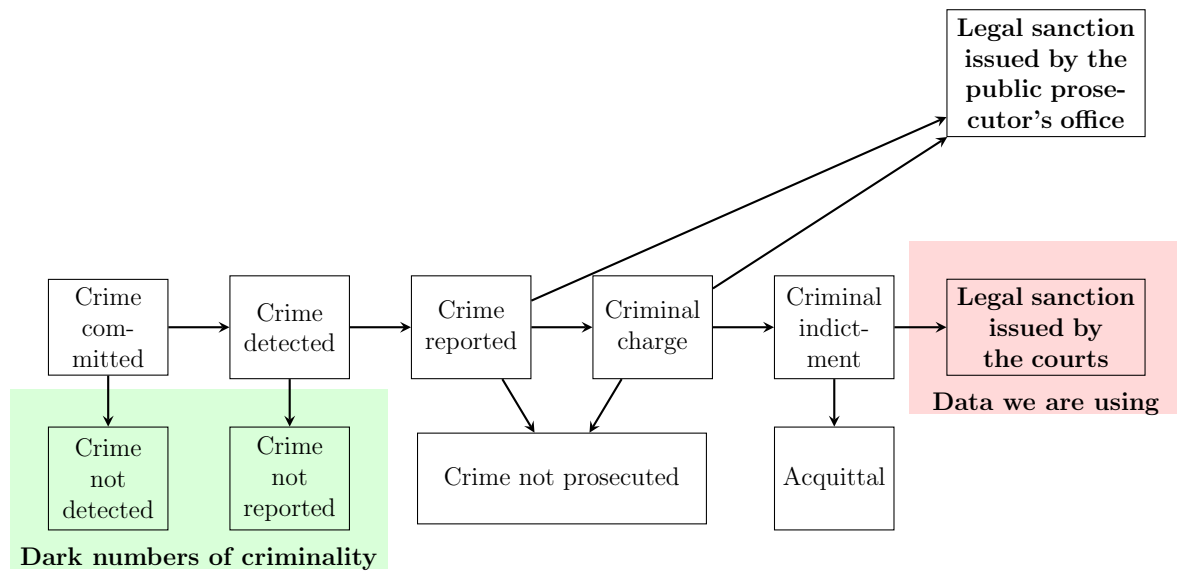
Norwegian politicians do not enjoy legal immunity, and holding office does not shield individuals from criminal liability. While the Norwegian Constitution (§ 20) grants the government discretionary power to issue pardons, such decisions are rare, politically costly, and do not erase convictions. Moreover, local politicians have no institutional authority over judicial outcomes, so holding office offers no protection in legal matters.

Legal Sanctions

Legal sanctions are broadly categorized into eight distinct subgroups.¹¹ The least severe crimes are punished with a fixed penalty (*forenklet forelegg*), which is a fine typically

¹¹The mildest form of judicial sanction, conditional dismissal of criminal proceedings (*betinget påtaleunntatelse*), is often coupled with factors like youth, minor infringements, or first-time offenses.

Figure 1: Stages From Crime to Legal Sanction in the Norwegian Justice System



Notes: This figure is adapted from Thorsen, Lid and Stene (2009), and outlines the different pathways a crime can take within the legal system from the moment it is committed. The public prosecutor's office oversees three main types of legal sanctions: fixed penalties, penalty charge notices, and conditional dismissal of criminal proceedings. The courts are responsible for administering five additional sanctions: fines, probation, imprisonment, community punishment, and special sanctions.

issued immediately upon apprehension of an offense by the police. These fines are predominantly issued for minor traffic infringements.

The penalty charge notice (*forelegg*) is a more severe penalty than a fixed fine, issued by the public prosecutor's office. It includes a fine based on the offense and the offender's financial situation. Acceptance resolves the case without court involvement, but refusal sends it to court. If individuals over 18 fail to pay, they may face imprisonment.

The focus in this paper is on the five most severe legal sanctions, i.e. judicial sanctions issued by the courts which include fines, probation, imprisonment, community punishment, and special sanctions.¹² Courts frequently impose a combination of these sanctions, such as a imprisonment alongside a fine.

¹²Prison sentences also include detention and electronic monitoring. Special sanctions encompass compulsory psychiatric care, juvenile punishment, or detention.

Party Gatekeeping and Voter Choice in List-based Proportional Representation Systems

Electoral rules structure the balance of influence between parties and voters in candidate selection. In closed-list systems, parties exercise near-total control by determining candidate rankings (e.g., Cox et al., 2021; Crutzen, Konishi and Sahuguet, 2024). In open lists, by contrast, candidate ranking is established by voters' preference votes rather than by the party, shifting power away from parties (e.g., Carey and Shugart, 1995; Carey, 2007; Persson and Tabellini, 2000). Norway's flexible-list system lies in between: parties assign candidates to advantageous slots, but voters can use personal votes to influence which candidates are elected. Yet the scope for voter influence is limited by information asymmetries—while parties learn about aspirants through years of internal engagement (Cirone, Cox and Fiva, 2021; Mattozzi and Merlo, 2015), voters often have less insight into candidates' qualifications. This difference in access to information creates an asymmetry that shapes the candidate selection process. The following discussion reviews theoretical perspectives on this process and their relevance to our empirical analysis.

Political Parties as Gatekeepers

Political parties act as gatekeepers in the political selection process by determining which candidates appear on the ballot and where they are placed. In our empirical analysis, we examine the start of political careers through initial nominations on party lists, which reflect both a candidate's willingness to run and the party's decision to include them on the ballot. Party leaders carefully consider candidates' attributes, as the right mix enhances electoral success and ultimately shapes the party's identity. When assembling a list of candidates, political parties balance several objectives.

First, party leaders aim to incentivize individual candidates' behavior in order to get them to contribute to the party's goals and invest in costly campaign efforts (e.g., Cox et al., 2021; Invernizzi and Prato, 2025). In closed (or semi-closed) electoral systems,

candidates who only care about securing their own seats have little incentive to exert effort if they hold safe, top-list positions. This suggests that placing high-quality candidates in the middle of the list could improve the party’s overall electoral success by motivating all candidates to campaign more actively (Crutzen, Konishi and Sahuguet, 2024). However, if candidates also value executive positions and parties commit to assigning these positions strictly by list rank, the strongest candidates will instead be placed at the top (e.g., Cox et al., 2021).¹³ We empirically examine whether lawfulness follows a hump-shaped pattern, increases with rank, decreases with rank, or remains flat; the latter could occur if candidates with questionable legality are rare, reducing the need for party screening.

Second, parties may also use their gatekeeping power to advance strategic interests, such as securing positions for preferred candidates (e.g., Fiva, Izzo and Tukiainen, 2024). If unlawful individuals attain influential positions within a party, they may view other candidates as threats to their leadership. As a result, incumbent party leaders might resist nominating highly competent individuals, prioritizing loyalty over quality (Besley et al., 2017). In our empirical context, a key decision is selecting the candidate placed at the top of the list, effectively nominating them as the party’s mayoral candidate. We examine whether mayors are positively or negatively selected compared to council members.¹⁴

Third, when candidate quality is fully observable to voters, electoral competition incentivizes parties to exclude all low-quality candidates (Galasso and Nannicini, 2011). However, parties may sometimes face a limited pool of high-quality candidates. As a result, party leaders must balance trade-offs among various candidate attributes, such as criminal background, campaign effectiveness, ideological alignment, party loyalty, and managerial competence. To assess the empirical significance of candidate supply, we will split our analyses by parties’ list length (a proxy for candidate supply).

¹³A similar conclusion arises in Buisseret et al. (2022), where parties, responding to strategic voters, must balance maximizing votes with ensuring high-quality governance.

¹⁴The municipal council elects the mayor by majority vote. If no party holds a majority, coalition negotiations decide the outcome. We also examine whether councils contribute to positive or negative mayoral selection.

Fourth, screening capacity likely varies significantly across local party organizations. Long-established local parties typically have stronger vetting procedures and local networks, allowing for more effective candidate screening. We examine this by using a party's presence in the previous local election as a proxy for screening capacity.

Voter Selection

Norway's flexible-list PR system enables voters to express candidate preferences through personal votes. If parties and voters share the same information and prioritize integrity similarly, voters have little reason to alter the party's proposed ranking.

However, these conditions are not necessarily met (e.g., Ferraz and Finan, 2011; Chong et al., 2015). First, information asymmetry may limit voters' ability to evaluate candidates. Media coverage tends to focus on high-profile politicians, while privacy and rehabilitation laws may restrict access to public records, including criminal convictions.

Second, new information that was previously unknown to parties may emerge during the election campaign. Voters may also have private knowledge about specific candidates that the party lacks, prompting them to cast preference votes.

Third, even when credible information about criminal records is available, voters may discount its relevance due to partisan bias, in-group loyalty, or selective exposure to media sources. In polarized environments, the voters may view a party's criminal involvement as a lesser evil compared to its main rival, reducing their incentives to prioritize clean candidates (Eggers, 2014; Mares and Visconti, 2020; Solaz, De Vries and De Geus, 2019). A further possibility is that voters who distrust political elites may actually favor candidates with criminal records, interpreting them as disruptive outsiders capable of challenging the status quo.¹⁵

Although court decisions are public in Norway, perpetrators' identities are often

¹⁵Klašnja and Tucker (2013) conduct a vignette experiment in Sweden (low corruption) and Moldova (high corruption) and find that Swedish voters consistently punish corruption, regardless of economic conditions, while Moldovan voters do so only when the economy is weak. This supports the notion that countries may settle into "good corruption" or "bad corruption" equilibria (Andvig and Moene, 1990).

anonymized to protect privacy and support rehabilitation. This limits voters' ability to vet candidates through official records. However, media coverage and the close-knit nature of many communities (the median municipality has around 5,000 inhabitants) may compensate for this through social networks and local reputation. Moreover, Norway's multi-party system provides voters with alternatives: rather than being confined to a flawed list, they can shift support to an ideologically similar party or even establish a new local list if the preferred party repeatedly nominates undesirable individuals.

Although we cannot directly test how information about criminal records influences voter behavior, we examine whether personal familiarity influences candidate selection by comparing municipalities of different sizes. If informal networks substitute for formal knowledge, positive selection may be stronger in smaller municipalities, where social ties and local reputations play a larger role.

Discussion

Our analysis so far has emphasized how candidate selection unfolds in the Norwegian flexible-list context. To place these mechanisms in a broader perspective, it is important to note that voters in some settings often tolerate or even support candidates with criminal backgrounds. Studies on Brazil (Britto et al., 2024), India (Vaishnav, 2017), Italy (Daniele and Geys, 2015), and the Philippines (Teehankee and Thompson, 2016) show that such candidates are frequently elected to prominent political positions. The 2024 U.S. presidential election further illustrates how voters may overlook or reinterpret a candidate's criminal record. President Donald J. Trump became the first convicted felon to win the presidency, with many of his supporters viewing the legal cases against him as politically motivated rather than legitimate prosecutions.¹⁶ His victory highlights how ideological polarization and skepticism toward established institutions can outweigh

¹⁶Jacobson (2024) uses various survey data to study reactions to Donald Trump's indictments and trials in the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Following Trump's conviction in the so-called 'hush money' case, a criminal record appeared to be viewed as less of a disqualifying factor. Only a small share of voters indicated they would withdraw their support for him.

concerns about candidate integrity. These recent developments in the U.S. have intensified concerns about democratic backsliding by linking the electoral success of candidates with criminal records to the erosion of democratic norms and institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019; Lieberman et al., 2019).

The cases discussed differ from Norway regarding factors such as crime prevalence, electoral systems, and political contexts.¹⁷ Yet, the recent example from the 2024 U.S. presidential election illustrates that even well-established democracies are not immune to candidates with criminal records achieving political success. By focusing specifically on Norway—another stable, long-lasting democracy—this paper explores how effectively democratic mechanisms can filter out such candidates.

Data

Politician Data

We rely on a comprehensive dataset of candidates running for local office in Norway between 2003 and 2019, encompassing approximately 60,000 candidates per election (Fiva, Sørensen and Vøllo, 2024). This publicly available dataset provides detailed information on candidates' background characteristics—such as year of birth, gender, and place of residence—along with election outcomes, party affiliation, list rank, and leadership positions.

Our starting point is the 300,176 candidates running for local office in the years 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. After excluding party-independent and minor party lists¹⁸, our sample comprises 268,477 candidates.

¹⁷Empirical evidence on whether more candidate-centered or party-centered electoral systems yield higher-quality candidates remains mixed; cf. Chang and Golden (2007); Persson, Tabellini and Trebbi (2003). Studies from Brazil and Italy indicate that voter information can shift outcomes in candidate-centered systems toward accountability and competence, underscoring that the comparative advantage of list type may be context-dependent (Ferraz and Finan, 2011; Galasso and Nannicini, 2011).

¹⁸The nine main parties considered in our study are classified based on their political orientation as follows: left-leaning (*Labor Party* (A), *Socialist Left Party* (SV), *Rødt* (R)); center (*Center Party* (SP), *Miljøpartiet De Grønne* (MDG), *Christian Peoples' Party* (KRF), *Liberal Party* (V)); and right-leaning (*Conservative Party* (H), *Progress Party* (FRP)).

Since 2003, Statistics Norway has collected data on local election candidates, making it possible to match more than 99% of candidates in our sample to their unique 11-digit personal number (*personnummer*), which is assigned to all Norwegians. These data are further linked to other registry databases maintained by Statistics Norway, including the Crime Register (Statistics Norway, 2025), and provided to us in de-identified form. As a result, we have access to a panel dataset containing near-complete records of criminal convictions for every local politician and Norwegian citizen during our sample period.¹⁹

After excluding individuals whom Statistics Norway could not match, as well as those below the age of 20 in the election year and those who did not reside in Norway in the five years preceding the election year, we are left with a final sample of 259,992 candidate-year observations and 17,627,265 non-candidate-year observations.

Crime Register and Other Administrative Data

The crime register (*Straffesaksregisteret*) compiles all recorded penal sanctions from 1998 to 2022 in Norway for people aged 15 and above.²⁰ It includes detailed information about all offenses, such as the type of offense, sentencing, conviction year, and the year the offense occurred. Offenses in the register range from minor infractions such as speeding to serious crimes such as fraud, rape, or homicide.

Due to the sensitivity of these records, our access to other administrative data from Statistics Norway is limited. However, we have key variables crucial for understanding criminal behavior in Norway, including a de-identified municipality-of-residence variable, gender, year of birth, employment status, and income decile, offering valuable insights into individuals' socioeconomic context.

In our main analysis, we study crimes in five broad sub-groups: drug, economic, vi-

¹⁹In 2003, Statistics Norway only has records of *elected* candidates. As a result, for non-winning candidates, Statistics Norway rely on information such as candidate names, municipality of residence, birthyear, and information about whether a candidate is identified in a later election year. In the 2003 election, Statistics Norway were unable to match 1,344 candidates (approximately 2.3%). In the 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 elections, we matched close to 100% of candidates (only 27 out of 210,454 candidates were unmatched).

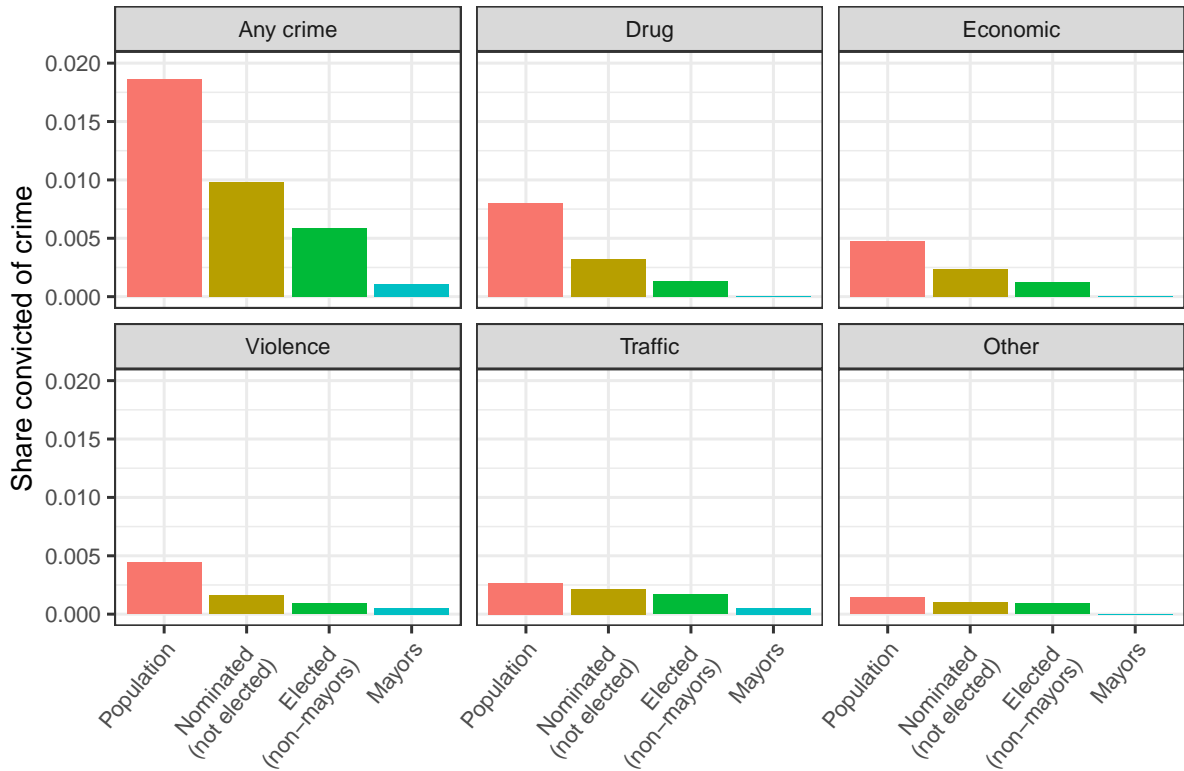
²⁰The age of criminal responsibility in Norway is 15 years.

olence, traffic, and other crimes. In Appendix Table B.1, we display aggregate statistics from Statistics Norway to illustrate the specific crimes that dominate our sample. Driving under the influence was the most common crime that resulted in a court-issued legal sanction, followed by drug-related offenses under the penal code, speeding, assault, and violence against an officer. Appendix Table B.2 reveals that imprisonment is the predominant form of punishment, accounting for nearly 50% of all legal penalties handed down by the courts. Another 30% of the convictions resulted in probation. Appendix B gives further details about court-issued legal sanctions.

To give a sense of what the crime data looks like in combination with the data on local politicians, we plot the share of individuals who committed a crime in the five years leading up to the election year (i.e., from $t - 5$ to $t - 1$) across various population groups in Figure 2. The upper left panel of Figure 2 shows that candidates running for office are less likely to have criminal records than the general population, with elected officials being even less likely than their unelected counterparts, and mayors having the cleanest records. In the remaining panels, we find that this pattern persists when we further break down criminal convictions by type of offense.

To shed light on whether a criminal record signals broader behavioral patterns relevant for public office, we examine in Appendix D the association between past convictions and other observable behaviors. Using data on recidivism, compliance with tax regulations, and charitable giving, we find that individuals with prior convictions are substantially more likely to reoffend, more likely to incur penalty taxes for inaccurate or incomplete reporting, and less likely to make charitable donations than those without a criminal record. These patterns hold both for the general population and for elected politicians, reinforcing the view that a criminal record reflects persistent traits relevant to candidate integrity.

Figure 2: Share of Politicians and Citizens With Criminal Convictions, by Crime Type



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t - 5$ to $t - 1$). The upper left panel presents data on any crime committed, while the other panels provide a breakdown by the type of crime. The population is divided into four mutually exclusive categories: individuals not running for local office in year t ('Population'; $N=17,627,265$), candidates running for local office in year t that are not elected ('Nominated (non-elected)'; $N=212,207$), candidates elected to local office in year t who do not serve as mayors ('Elected (non-mayors)'; $N=45,867$), and those elected to local office in year t who are appointed mayors ('Mayors'; $N=1,918$). We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Methods

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

Initial Nomination

The start of a political career is reflected in the initial nomination on a party list, which depends on both the candidate’s willingness to stand for election and the party’s decision to include them on the ballot. We estimate the following model using ordinary least squares (OLS) to compare the criminal records of first-time candidates with those of individuals from the general population:

$$Crime_{it} = \alpha_t + \beta Run_{it} + \gamma Male_i + \sum_{l=20}^{100} \delta_l \mathbf{I}(l = Age_{it}) + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Here, $Crime_{it}$ is an indicator variable equal to one if individual i has been convicted of any serious crime within the five years prior to the election year. Run_{it} is a dummy variable that is equal to one for individuals running for office for the first time in election year t .²¹ We control for gender ($Male_i$) and one-year age fixed effects from 20 to 100 ($\sum_{l=20}^{100} \delta_l \mathbf{I}(l = Age_{it})$).²² The parameter of interest, β , captures the relative crime propensity of candidates running for office compared to individuals of the same age and gender in the general population (who never ran for office during the sample period). In extensions, we also include fixed effects for individuals’ working status, income decile, and municipality of residence. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level in this and all subsequent analyses.

The Best at the Top?

In electoral systems with flexible lists, political parties play a crucial role in determining election outcomes by assigning ranks to their candidates on the ballot (Buisseret et al., 2022; Cox et al., 2021; Crutzen, Konishi and Sahuguet, 2024). As discussed above, a

²¹We define a “first-time nominee” as a candidate who did not run for office in 2003 but appears in our data for the first time in the elections of 2007, 2011, 2015, or 2019. Our analyses are conducted using candidate data from these election years only. This definition does not account for prior political experience at the local level before 2003 or at higher levels of government. However, previous research shows that political careers in Norway overwhelmingly begin at the local level, with only a small minority starting at the regional or national level (Cirone, Cox and Fiva, 2021).

²²The age of criminal responsibility is 15, so for individuals aged 18 or 19 in the election year, we cannot track their complete criminal records.

critical decision in our context is selecting the candidate to be placed at the top of the list, effectively nominating them as the party’s mayoral candidate. Another significant decision involves determining which candidates should get the top-ranks.²³ To assess the role of political parties as gatekeepers, we estimate the following model using OLS:

$$Crime_{it} = \alpha_t + \sum_r \beta_r \mathbf{I}(r = Rank_{it}) + \gamma Male_i + \sum_{l=20}^{100} \delta_l \mathbf{I}(l = Age_{it}) + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

This model is estimated for candidates running for office only. It is otherwise identical to equation (1), except that Run_{it} has been replaced with list position fixed effects ($\sum_r \beta_r \mathbf{I}(r = Rank_{it})$). These fixed effects run from list position $r = 1$ to list position $r = 9$, leaving lower-ranked candidates as the reference group ($r \geq 10$). If political parties prioritize ‘clean candidates’ we expect to see that the β ’s are falling in absolute value by r . As noted above, theoretical expectations about the relationship between candidate traits and list rank vary: parties may place their most law-abiding candidates at the top, distribute them evenly, or even position them in the middle of the list, depending on how they weigh electoral strategy, effort incentives, and internal politics. Also for this model, we will check the sensitivity of the results to the inclusion of various fixed effects (working status, income decile, and local party list).²⁴

Do Voters Favor Candidates with Clean Records?

Electoral systems with preference voting allow citizens to endorse candidates they perceive as more law-abiding. Even if voters cannot directly observe a candidate’s criminal activities, they may still use informational shortcuts to screen candidates based on this dimension.²⁵ Individuals with criminal tendencies often display patterns of lower prosocial

²³In the criminal records data set, we do not have information about which candidates the parties have given a ‘head start’ (corresponding to 25% of the total number of votes received by the party). Appendix Figure A.3 show, however, the strong relationship between rank and head start status using data from Fiva, Sørensen and Vøllo (2024). In our sample period, the median number of candidates receiving a head start is two.

²⁴Since each municipality constitutes a single electoral district, local party list fixed effects effectively also control for municipality fixed effects.

²⁵Although criminal records are not usually directly observable, voters typically possess information that enables them to select on lawfulness as a latent trait. In the 2019 Norwegian local election survey,

engagement (see Appendix D), which in the electoral context may be reflected in reduced campaign effort or in the ideological positions they articulate (Jokela et al., 2025).

To investigate if voters favor lawful candidates when casting their preference votes, we estimate the following model using OLS:

$$Improve_{it} = \alpha_t + \eta Crime_{it} + \gamma Male_i + \sum_{l=20}^{100} \delta_l \mathbf{I}(l = Age_{it}) + \theta Rank_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

Here, $Improve_{it}$ is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if candidate i in year t either ascended in the party-list or remained in the same position relative to their initial rank; in other words, if the candidate’s final rank was numerically lower or equal to their initial rank. Hence, popular candidates who receive enough personal votes to surpass others will have $Improve_{it} = 1$. Since lower-ranked candidates have a greater potential to improve their position compared to higher-ranked candidates, we control for initial rank ($Rank_{it}$) in Equation (3). The parameter of interest, η , captures the extent to which voters favor lawful candidates when casting personal votes. Note that if voters *switch parties* to support candidates with a clean record, this behavior is not captured by Equation (3). As above, we will assess the sensitivity of the results to the inclusion of working status, income decile and local party list fixed effects.

Results

In this section we present our main results. For each of the three tests that we described in the previous section, we first present graphical analyses and then proceed with the formal estimation framework, as laid out in Equation (1) to Equation (3).²⁶

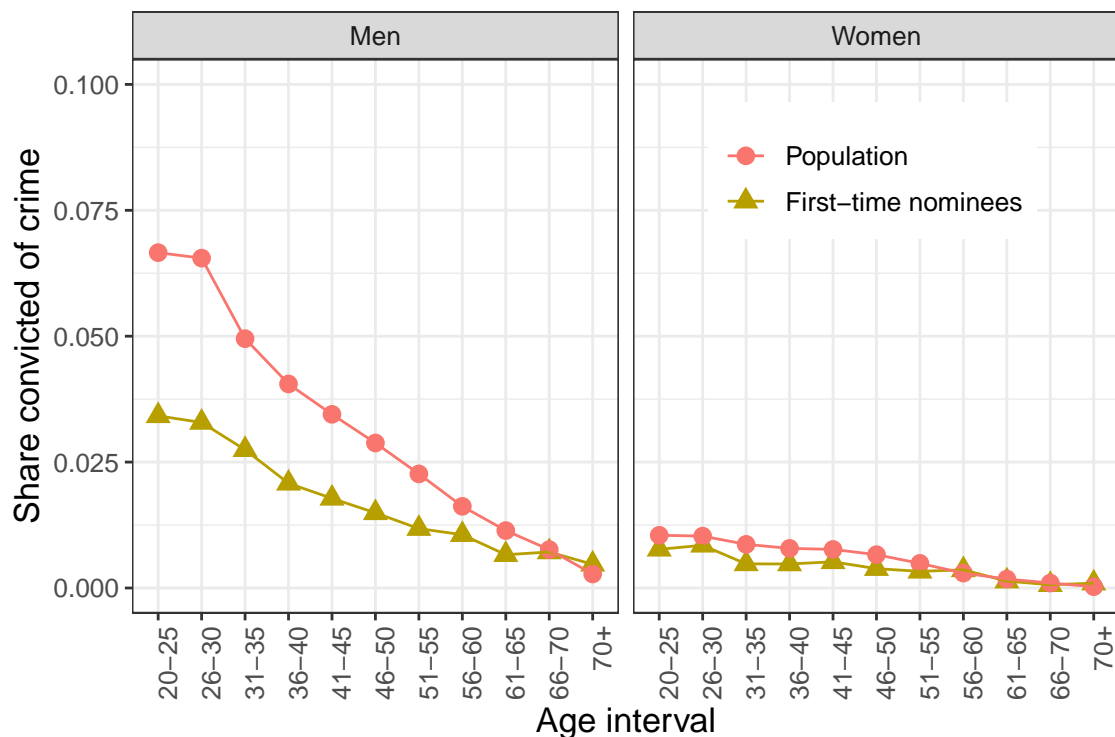
personal familiarity played a major role for about one third of respondents casting a personal vote (Appendix Figure A.4; Cox, Fiva and King, 2024).

²⁶We also examine whether elected officials increase their criminal behavior after taking office. An event study comparing first-time elected candidates to non-elected nominees shows no post-election uptick in criminal involvement (Appendix E).

Initial Nomination

In Figure 3, we analyze the criminal records of first-time nominees in comparison to those of the general population within the same five-year age group.²⁷ The left-hand panel of Figure 3 displays the general male population with red circles, while the data for first-time male nominees is represented by brown triangles. The right-hand panel presents the corresponding plot for women.

Figure 3: Share of First-Time Nominees and Citizens With Criminal Convictions, by Age and Gender



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t-5$ to $t-1$). We split the sample into two mutually exclusive groups: individuals not running for local office in year t ($N=14,372,180$), and individuals who are running for local office for the first time in year t ($N=81,213$). We use data from elections held in 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Figure 3 illustrates two well-known empirical regularities. First, beyond the late teens, the propensity to commit crime declines rapidly as individuals age (see, e.g., Farrington, 1986; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). Second, men are much more likely to be involved in criminal activities than women (see, e.g., Steffensmeier and Allan, 1996).

²⁷Appendix Figure A.5 shows that individuals aged 25 to 55 are overrepresented as first-time nominees compared to the general population.

The key take-away from Figure 3 is that first-time male candidates tend to exhibit lower levels of criminal behavior than the general male population, whereas first-time female candidates display similar levels of legal compliance as their counterparts in the general female population.

Estimates of β in Equation (1) are reported in Table 1. In line with the graphical analysis, the estimated difference is negative, indicating that first-time nominees are less likely to have a criminal background than the general population.²⁸ In Column (1), we estimate the difference in the proportion of individuals with a criminal record between first-time nominees and the general population, while including only election year fixed effects. The coefficient in Column (1) indicates that first-time nominees are about 0.7 percentage points – 36% relative to the mean – less likely to engage in criminal activities when compared to the general population. This result is robust to controlling non-parametrically for life cycle effects (Column (2)), gender (Column (3)), employment status and income decile (Column (4)), and municipality fixed effects (Column (5)).

In Appendix Figure C.1 and Appendix Table C.1, we present results broken down by party affiliation. Among seven of the nine major parties, first-time nominees show lower levels of criminal involvement compared to the general population. However, two anti-establishment parties—the Red Party on the far-left and the Progress Party on the far-right—are notable exceptions. First-time nominees from the Red Party show no statistically significant difference in criminal involvement compared to the general population, whereas first-time nominees from the Progress Party display *higher* levels of criminal involvement.

In contrast to our findings, Britto et al. (2024) find that Brazilian first-time nominees are about twice as likely to have a criminal charge compared to the general population. This disparity may partly reflect Brazil’s political context, where opportunities for rent extraction are greater (see, e.g., Ferraz and Finan 2008) and winning a mayoral election

²⁸Appendix Table A.1 breaks down criminal involvement by type of crime. The results show that first-time nominees are less likely than the general population to be involved in drug, economic, violent, and other crimes. We do not find any difference in involvement in traffic crimes.

Table 1: Comparison of Criminal Convictions Among First-Time Nominees and the General Population

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Variables</i>					
First-time nominee = 1	-0.0066*** (0.0004)	-0.0092*** (0.0005)	-0.0102*** (0.0005)	-0.0073*** (0.0004)	-0.0067*** (0.0004)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>					
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Age		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender			Yes	Yes	Yes
Working status				Yes	Yes
Income decile				Yes	Yes
Municipality					Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>					
Observations	14,453,393	14,453,393	14,453,393	14,453,044	14,453,044
R ²	0.00037	0.01009	0.01881	0.02976	0.03029
Mean dep. var.	0.01811	0.01811	0.01811	0.01811	0.01811

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 1, comparing criminal involvement between first-time nominees ($N = 81,213$) and the general population ($N = 14,372,180$). Criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t - 5$ to $t - 1$). Appendix Table F.1 provides summary statistics for the estimation sample. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Full model results are reported in Appendix Table G.1. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

can lower the risk of conviction for past misconduct (Lambais and Sigstad, 2023), in turn increasing the attractiveness of public office for individuals with criminal histories compared to Norway.

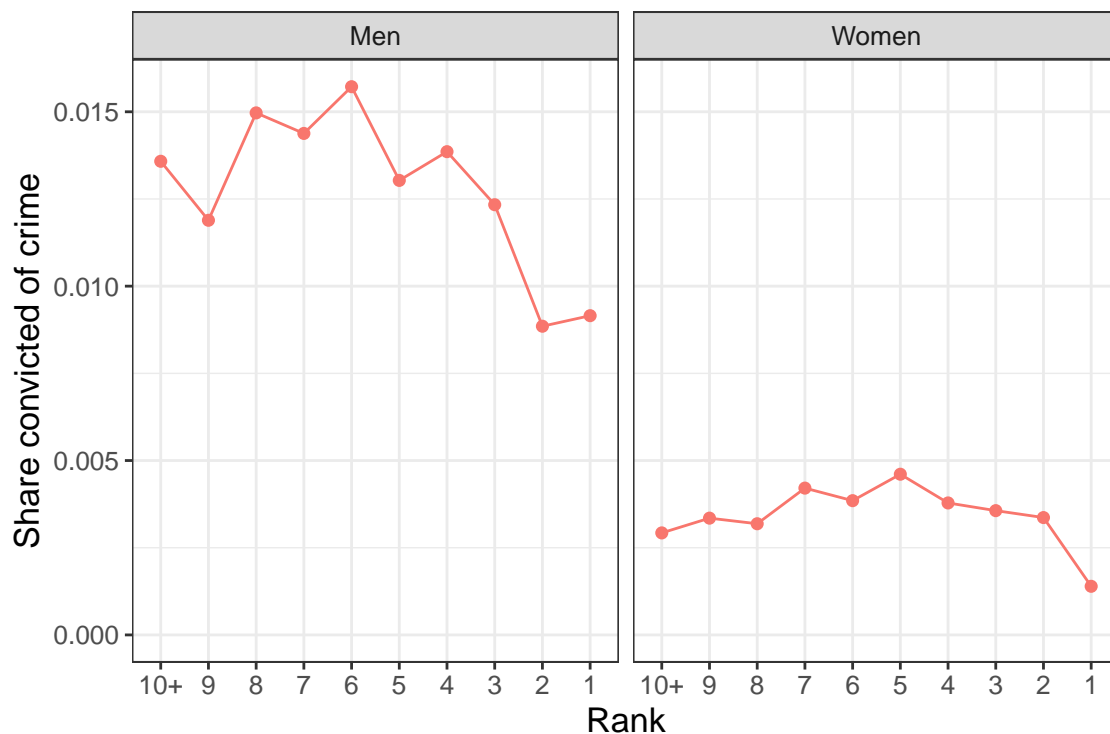
The Best at the Top?

In Figure 4, we examine the relationship between criminal involvement and candidate rankings, split by gender.²⁹ Figure 4 reveals a clear pattern: among male candidates, those ranked 1st and 2nd on the ballot are less likely to have criminal records than those ranked lower on the ballot. A similar trend is observed among female candidates, where those ranked 1st are the least likely to be involved in criminal activities compared to

²⁹Appendix Figure A.3 examines the relationship between head start, gender, and age and candidate rankings.

their counterparts positioned further down the ballot. This suggests that parties may be strategically prioritizing candidates with cleaner records for the top ballot positions, particularly for the highest-ranked spots which is the mayoral candidate of the party.

Figure 4: Share of Candidates With Criminal Convictions Across Initial Ranks, by Gender



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

To more formally assess the role of political parties as gatekeepers, we estimate Equation (2), and report the results in Table 2. Each estimate represents the difference in the proportion of candidates with a criminal record between those in the reference category (rank 10, or lower). We progressively add more controls, following the same approach as in the previous analyses. Across all specifications, we consistently find that the top-two candidates are the most law-abiding. In our preferred model, reported in Column (5), we find that candidates ranked 1 – 2 are about 0.35 percentage points less likely to have a criminal record compared to those ranked 10 and above.³⁰ Only a few of the other co-

³⁰In Appendix Table C.2 we break down the result in Table 2 Column (5) by political party. Although

efficient estimates are statistically significant at conventional levels.³¹ This suggests that parties prioritize virtue only for their most viable candidates, with this focus diminishing further down the list.³²

This pattern likely reflects the environment in which parties operate. As discussed above, the incentives to exclude candidates with criminal backgrounds hinge on reputational and institutional constraints surrounding political leadership. In Norway, these constraints appear strong enough to generate the clear pattern at the top of the lists that we document. But in systems where individuals with criminal records already hold senior roles, parties may settle into a high-crime equilibrium in which promoting similarly unlawful candidates carries little political risk and loyalty to the entrenched leaders is valued over lawfulness.

Do Voters Favor Candidates with Clean Records?

Figure 5 explores how candidates' final rankings – after incorporating personal votes – deviate from their initial positions on the ballot, comparing those with and without criminal records, separately by gender. If voters favor lawful candidates when casting personal votes, candidates with criminal backgrounds should fall to lower final ranks (higher numerically) compared to non-criminal counterparts starting from identical initial positions.

In Figure 5 the red circles, representing convicted candidates, tend to be positioned above the brown triangles, representing non-convicted candidates, suggesting that voters are positively selecting politicians based on lawfulness when casting their personal votes.³³

the estimates are somewhat noisy, they suggest a general trend across the political spectrum for parties to place candidates with lower levels of criminal involvement at the top of the ballot.

³¹Appendix Table A.2 provides the corresponding results, split by type of crime.

³²Hangartner, Ruiz and Tukiainen (2019) examine local candidate data from Colombia, focusing on candidates' prior involvement in election fraud. In contrast to the results reported in Table 2, Colombian municipalities employing the open-list system exhibit only minor differences in the occurrence of fraudulent behavior across list positions.

³³The dashed gray line represents the scenario where the initial rank equals the final rank. Both lines in both panels lie above this line because lower-ranked candidates, of which there are many, tend to overtake candidates ranked in the top ten.

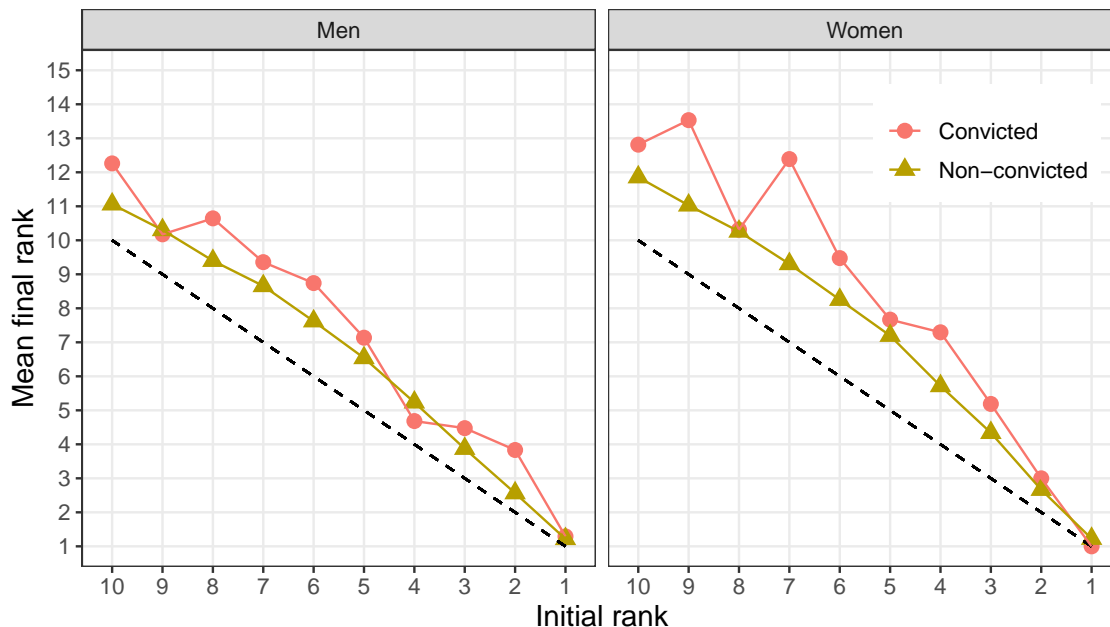
Table 2: Criminal Convictions Among Top-Ranked and Lower-Ranked Candidates on Party Lists

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Variables</i>					
Rank = 1	-0.0023*** (0.0008)	-0.0020** (0.0008)	-0.0033*** (0.0008)	-0.0021*** (0.0008)	-0.0033*** (0.0008)
Rank = 2	-0.0034*** (0.0008)	-0.0043*** (0.0008)	-0.0028*** (0.0008)	-0.0022*** (0.0008)	-0.0036*** (0.0008)
Rank = 3	-0.0003 (0.0009)	-0.0013 (0.0009)	-0.0015 (0.0009)	-0.0012 (0.0009)	-0.0022** (0.0010)
Rank = 4	-0.0004 (0.0010)	-0.0017* (0.0010)	-0.0007 (0.0010)	-0.0005 (0.0010)	-0.0016 (0.0010)
Rank = 5	0.0006 (0.0010)	-0.0005 (0.0010)	-0.0009 (0.0010)	-0.0007 (0.0010)	-0.0016 (0.0010)
Rank = 6	0.0008 (0.0009)	-0.0002 (0.0009)	0.0004 (0.0009)	0.0005 (0.0009)	-0.0006 (0.0009)
Rank = 7	0.0011 (0.0010)	0.0003 (0.0010)	0.0001 (0.0010)	0.0000 (0.0010)	-0.0009 (0.0010)
Rank = 8	0.0003 (0.0010)	-0.0005 (0.0010)	-0.0001 (0.0010)	-0.0001 (0.0010)	-0.0010 (0.0010)
Rank = 9	-0.0007 (0.0009)	-0.0015* (0.0009)	-0.0017* (0.0009)	-0.0017* (0.0009)	-0.0023** (0.0009)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>					
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Age		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender			Yes	Yes	Yes
Working status				Yes	Yes
Income decile				Yes	Yes
List-year					Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>					
Observations	259,968	259,968	259,968	259,966	259,966
R ²	0.00019	0.00356	0.00664	0.00812	0.07074
Mean dep. var.	0.00903	0.00903	0.00903	0.00903	0.00903

Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 2, comparing criminal involvement across candidates of varying ranks. Criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t - 5$ to $t - 1$). We use candidates ranked 10 and above ($N = 152,085$) as the reference group. Each estimate represents the difference in the proportion of candidates with a criminal record between those in the 10+ category and those ranked 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and so on. Appendix Table F.2 provides summary statistics for the estimation sample. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Full model results are reported in Appendix Table G.2. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1

However, the pattern observed in the raw data appears relatively modest.³⁴

Figure 5: Final Candidate Rank After Personal Votes, by Initial Position, Conviction Status, and Gender



Notes: This figure plots candidates' mean final rank of candidates against their original position for those ranked 1-10 initially. This figure displays how the mean final rank of candidates after incorporating personal votes deviate from their initial position on the ballot for the candidates with initial rank 1-10. In the two panels we split into two mutually exclusive groups; nominees who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($N = 975$), and those who did not ($N = 111,482$). The dashed line indicate a situation where the initial rank equals the mean final rank. We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

In Table 3 we report the regression results from estimating Equation (3). Across all specifications, we find that individuals with a criminal record are statistically significantly less likely to improve their rank (or retain their original ballot position) compared to their non-convicted counterparts. As expected, lower-ranked candidates (those with higher numerical values for *Initial rank*) have a greater potential to improve their position compared to higher-ranked candidates, as reflected in the positive estimate for the control variable *Initial rank*. The key point estimate of approximately 0.075 in Column (5) indicates that individuals with a criminal background are about 7.5 percentage points less likely to improve or maintain their position compared to their peers, which is rel-

³⁴Among the 2,202 candidates in our sample with a recent criminal record, 246 were elected. Of these, 73 won a seat because of personal votes (they would not have been elected based on party ranking alone), 88 failed to win a seat because of personal votes (they would have been elected based on party ranking alone), and 173 were elected in either case, because personal votes did not change their outcome.

atively modest compared to the average proportion of candidates who advance in rank within the estimation sample.³⁵ On average, 57% of candidates in our sample advance or retain their rank, so the estimated effect corresponds to a 13% reduction relative to the average.

Table 3: Rank Improvements After Personal Votes Comparing Convicted and Non-Convicted Politicians

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Variables</i>					
Crime	-0.0562*** (0.0105)	-0.0601*** (0.0104)	-0.0794*** (0.0104)	-0.0602*** (0.0103)	-0.0751*** (0.0108)
Initial rank	0.0038*** (0.0003)	0.0040*** (0.0003)	0.0040*** (0.0003)	0.0040*** (0.0004)	0.0096*** (0.0005)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>					
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Age		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender			Yes	Yes	Yes
Working status				Yes	Yes
Income decile				Yes	Yes
List-year					Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>					
Observations	247,853	247,853	247,853	247,851	247,851
R ²	0.00735	0.00976	0.01414	0.02523	0.09453
Mean dep. var.	0.56823	0.56823	0.56823	0.56823	0.56823

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 3, analyzing the share of candidates improving or maintaining their rank due to personal votes between criminal and non-criminal politicians. Criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t - 5$ to $t - 1$). We split the sample into two mutually exclusive groups: 1) Candidates who were convicted of having committed a crime ($N = 2,202$), and 2) candidates who were not ($N = 245,651$). Each estimate represents the difference in the share improving or maintaining the ranks due to personal votes between convicted and non-convicted politicians. Appendix Table F.3 provides summary statistics for the estimation sample. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Full model results are reported in Appendix Table G.3. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

In Appendix Table A.3 we repeat the analyses but instead of using a single explanatory crime variable, we include dummy variables for each of five mutually exclusive categories of crime. The results, taken at face value, suggest that candidates convicted of economic

³⁵We find no clear evidence of heterogeneous effects by party affiliation. Appendix Table C.3 indicates that candidates with a criminal record are less likely to improve or maintain their rank across all parties, with statistically significant effects in five of the nine.

crimes are punished more harshly by voters, followed by those convicted of drug crimes. However, the large standard errors prevent us from drawing strong conclusions.

The Role of Parties, Voters, and Councils in Filtering Criminal Candidates

Decomposition of Effects

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

We observe a total of 47,785 candidates elected in the local elections in the election years 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. In the counterfactual exercises, we draw a new set of council members from different populations. We then compare the average criminal involvement between the randomly drawn council members and the actual council members.

In the first counterfactual exercise, we randomly select individuals for the local council from the eligible population within the relevant municipality-year.³⁶ For these counterfactual council members, we calculate the average crime involvement during the five years preceding the relevant election. This random draw is repeated 1000 times, before we take the average. This counterfactual outcome constitutes our population benchmark.

In the second counterfactual exercise, we begin by calculating the actual number of individuals elected from each party list. Next, we randomly select candidates from the relevant party list, disregarding their original rank and personal votes, and measure their crime involvement during the five years preceding the election. We carry out the process 1000 times and then take the average. This counterfactual shows how important initial

³⁶This approach differs slightly from the national population averages reported in Figure 2. However, in practice, the raw data and the simulation-based method yield similar results.

nomination is for political selection on lawfulness.

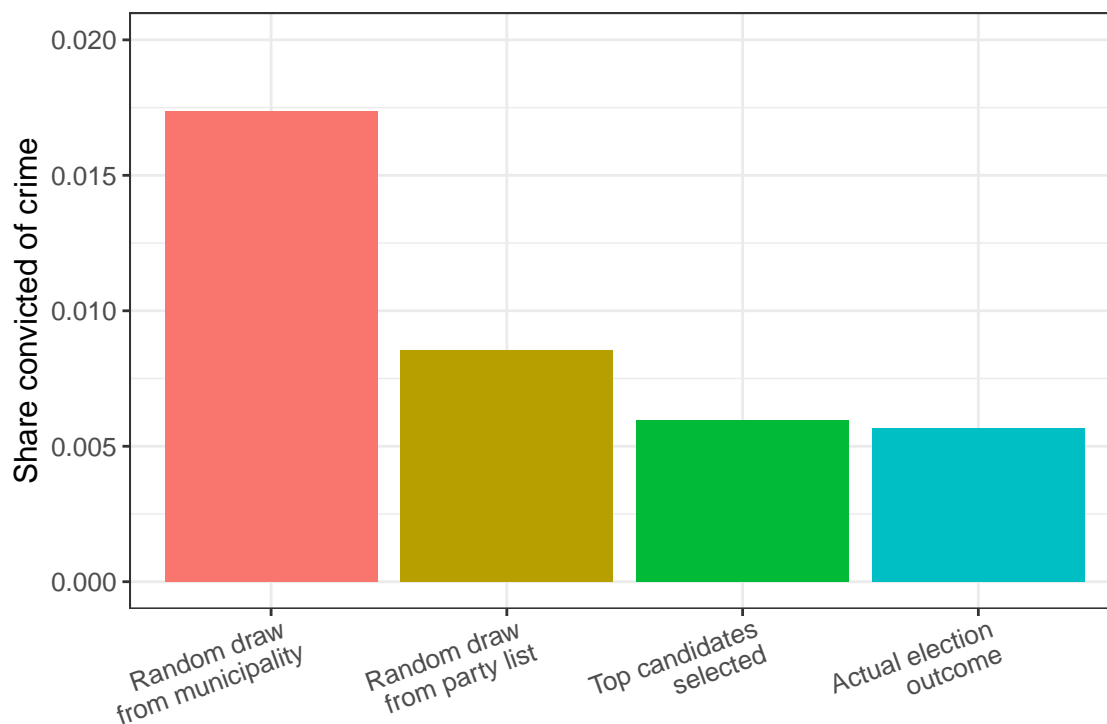
The third counterfactual exercise isolates the combined effect of initial nomination and party rankings. In this exercise, we choose candidates from a party list in the order they appear on the ballot, disregarding personal votes, thereby mimicking a closed-list electoral system.

The bar chart in Figure 6 presents the results of this exercise, showing the three counterfactuals alongside the actual election outcome. As we move from the counterfactual based on the general population (left-most bar, in red) to the actual election outcome (right-most bar, in turquoise), we observe that the largest decrease in criminal involvement occurs between the first and second counterfactual outcomes. This suggests that initial nomination on a party list is a crucial step in explaining why Norwegian local politicians are more law-abiding than the general population. There is also a substantial decrease from the second to the third counterfactual election outcome, reflecting that parties tend to reserve top spots on the lists to the most law-abiding candidates (Table 2). Since the third counterfactual and the actual election outcome show a similar proportion of individuals with criminal records, personal votes appear to have a negligible impact on excluding criminals from local politics. This may be because voters (correctly) assume that the nomination process has already filtered out (most) undesirable candidates.

Party Organization Capacity

Our analyses suggest that political parties can effectively screen out individuals with criminal backgrounds from their electoral lists and ensure that they are represented in local councils to a small extent. To further examine the validity of this claim, we split Figure 6 based on whether the local party organization in question was in operation in the previous local election, using this as a proxy for the screening capacity of the local party organization. This test follows from the theoretical expectation that long-established local parties are better equipped to vet candidates due to stronger networks and organizational capacity (see above).

Figure 6: Share of Council Members With Criminal Convictions Under Actual and Counterfactual Election Outcomes



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t - 5$ to $t - 1$) for different counterfactual and actual election outcomes. The left-most bar (red) represents council members randomly drawn from the entire eligible population residing in the municipality (“Random draw from municipality”, based on 1,000 draws). The next bar to the right (brown) shows council members randomly drawn from the relevant electoral list (“Random draw from list”, 1,000 draws). The subsequent bar (green) represents top candidates selected from a party list in the order they appear on the ballot, thereby mimicking a closed-list electoral system (“Top candidates selected”). Finally, the right-most bar (turquoise) depicts the actual election outcome (“Actual election outcome”).

The left-hand panel of Figure 7 shows that in municipality-years where the local party organization was already active, candidate vetting appears to be strong. Criminal involvement drops substantially from the general population to those on the party list, and declines further when considering the counterfactual election outcome mimicking a closed-list electoral system. As in Figure 6, there is no evidence that voters play any role in the positive selection on lawfulness.

In contrast, the right-hand panel shows that in municipality-years where local party organizations did not field a list in the previous election, their ability (or willingness) to vet candidates appears significantly weaker. The reduction in criminal involvement from the general population to the actual election outcome is quite modest, and once again,

there is no indication that voters contribute to this positive selection.

The existing local party organizations tend to nominate fewer candidates with criminal records when compared to newer local party organizations. However, voter influence in filtering out criminal politicians appears minimal in both cases, suggesting that voters' decisions are not significantly impacted by the number of criminal candidates running in this setting.

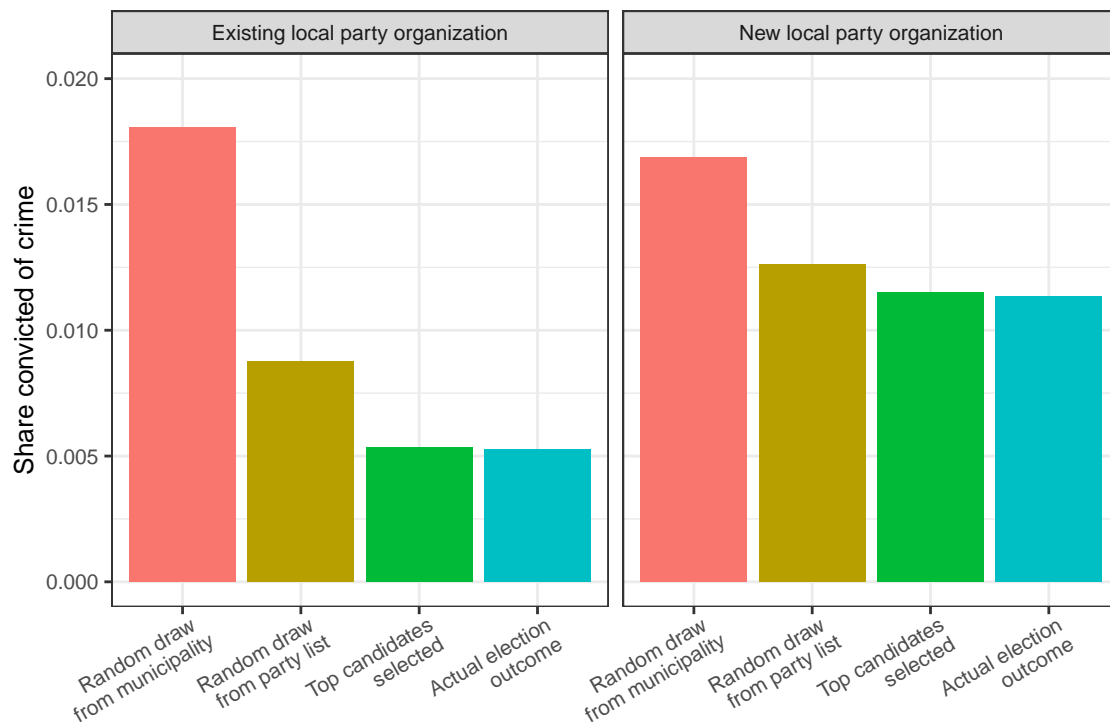
In Appendix Figure C.2 we provide results by national party brands. Notably, among political parties established over a century ago, selection based on lawfulness is stronger than in newer parties with weaker organizational structures, such as the Green Party, Red Party, and Progress Party.

Heterogeneity in Candidate Selection

Parties often face a limited supply of highly qualified candidates and must weigh trade-offs among attributes such as criminal background, campaign effectiveness, ideological fit, party loyalty, and managerial skills. To proxy candidate supply, we divide parties by list length, splitting the sample into those with a list length below or above the municipal median in a given year (Appendix Figure A.6). This test follows from our theoretical expectation that limited candidate supply may constrain party selection. The underlying assumption is that longer lists reflect a broader candidate pool, increasing intra-party competition and allowing party leaders to be more selective. Consistent with this expectation, we find that parties with above-median list lengths have a lower share of candidates with criminal backgrounds, both overall and at the top of their lists.

In Appendix Figure A.7, we test whether candidate selection differs by municipal population size, reflecting our expectation that informal networks may substitute for formal information. If informal networks are important, positive selection should be stronger in smaller municipalities, where social ties and local reputation matter more. However, Appendix Figure A.7 shows no meaningful differences between municipalities above and below median population size.

Figure 7: Council Members’ Criminal Convictions Under Counterfactual Outcomes, Comparing New and Established Party Organizations



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t - 5$ to $t - 1$) for different counterfactual and actual election outcomes. The sample is divided into two mutually exclusive groups: parties that had a list in the municipality during the previous local election (‘Existing local party organization’) and parties that did not (‘New local party organization’). The left-most bar (red) represents council members randomly drawn from the entire eligible population residing in the municipality (‘Random draw from municipality’, based on 1,000 draws). The next bar to the right (brown) shows council members randomly drawn from the relevant electoral list (‘Random draw from list’, 1,000 draws). The subsequent bar (green) represents top candidates selected from a party list in the order they appear on the ballot, thereby mimicking a closed-list electoral system (‘Top candidates selected’). Finally, the right-most bar (turquoise) depicts the actual election outcome (‘Actual election outcome’). We exclude data from 2003 due to unavailability of previous party list data for that year. Similarly, data from 2019 is excluded due to municipal mergers, which caused many established parties to appear as new in some municipalities.

One might hypothesize that parties’ ability to filter out candidates with criminal backgrounds is particularly effective in a low-crime country like Norway, potentially making it an outlier. In higher-crime environments, the pool of reputationally viable candidates may be smaller, making screening more challenging and costly; at the same time, higher crime can strengthen parties’ and voters’ incentives to vet carefully. Within Norway, average crime rates (defined as the share of residents with a criminal conviction in the past five years) vary substantially across municipality-year observations, ranging from 0.8% in the lowest decile to 3% in the highest decile. This within-country variation offers a useful test of whether our findings travel to more adverse settings. Appendix Figure A.8

shows a moderately positive relationship between the share of criminals in the municipal population and the share among politicians. Yet, even in the highest-crime municipality-years—where 3% of residents have a recent criminal record—fewer than 1% of elected officials do. This pattern indicates that the filtering mechanisms we identify operate even under demanding local conditions, bolstering the external validity of our results.

Do Local Councils Vet Mayors?

In its first meeting after the election, the municipal council elects the mayor by majority vote. If a single party holds a majority of council seats, its first-ranked candidate will almost certainly fill the mayoral role, and within-council dynamics are unlikely to alter the outcome. However, in most cases, no party holds a majority, allowing for post-election negotiations about which candidate should be promoted to mayor.³⁷

As noted above, political parties almost always place their mayoral candidate at the top of their party list.³⁸ Thus, when council members vote on whom to promote to mayor, their choice is effectively restricted to the first-ranked candidates. To investigate whether local councils are more likely to promote first-ranked candidates with a clean track record to mayor, we run the following regression:

$$Crime_{imt} = \theta_{mt} + \tau Mayor_{imt} + \psi SeatShare_{p[i]mt} + u_{imt} \quad (4)$$

Here, $Crime_{imt}$ is an indicator variable equal to one if the first-ranked candidate i , elected in municipality m in year t , was convicted of any serious crime within the five years preceding the election year. $Mayor_{imt}$ is an indicator variable equal to one for candidates promoted to mayor. Municipality-year fixed effects (θ_{mt}) are included to ensure that inference for the parameter of interest, τ , is derived from comparisons of first-ranked candidates elected to the same council at the same time (in different parties). Additionally,

³⁷In the 2003–2019 period, the mayor is from the largest party in 75% of cases, from the second-largest party in 18%, and from the third-largest or smaller parties in 7% (Appendix Figure A.9).

³⁸In our sample, 15.1% of top-ranked elected candidates were ultimately promoted to mayor, compared to only 0.01% of other elected candidates.

we control for the seat share of the party p represented by candidate i .

Because first-ranked candidates that belong to the same political party ($p[i]$) can be particularly useful for predicting counterfactuals, we replace the municipality-year fixed effects (θ_{mt}) with party-year fixed effects ($\theta_{p[i]t}$) or municipality-party fixed effects ($\theta_{mp[i]}$) in alternative specifications.

We present the results in Table 4. The estimate in Column (1) shows that mayors are 0.57 percentage points less likely to have a criminal record than the first-ranked candidates from other parties elected to the same council.

The difference is statistically significant at all conventional levels. This implies that first-ranked candidates who are not promoted to mayor resemble other elected candidates more closely than they do mayors (see Appendix Figure A.10). In Column (2), we introduce a linear control for each candidate's party seat share to account for the influence of party size on mayoral selection. With this adjustment, the coefficient of interest falls with 75% and loses statistical significance.

In Column (3), we replace municipality-year fixed effects with party-year fixed effects. Thus, instead of comparing mayoral candidates from different parties on the same council, we compare mayoral candidates from the same party across different councils. Here, we again observe a substantial and significant negative effect, suggesting that councils select candidates with fewer criminal records for mayor. When we add a control for seat share in Column (4), the absolute value of $\hat{\tau}$ increases, although statistical precision falls.

Finally, we introduce municipality-party fixed effects ($\theta_{mp[i]}$), meaning that we compare first-ranked candidates running for the same local party across different years. The point estimates in Columns (5)-(6) again indicate that mayors are less likely to have a criminal record than other mayoral candidates, though this difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

While all the fixed effects regressions suggest that councils vet mayors, the specifications that control for party size indicate that this effect is partly or entirely driven by larger parties securing the mayoral positions. The largest party groups rarely secure a

majority of council seats but can often claim the mayoralty due to their better negotiating position and/or informal norms within the council. The overlap of confidence intervals with zero precludes any firm conclusions.

Table 4: Criminal Records of Mayors Compared to First-Ranked Candidates Not Selected as Mayor

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Variables</i>						
Mayor	-0.0057*** (0.0012)	-0.0014 (0.0016)	-0.0039*** (0.0014)	-0.0048 (0.0032)	-0.0034 (0.0022)	-0.0028 (0.0022)
Seat share		-0.0189*** (0.0068)		0.0055 (0.0151)		-0.0061 (0.0102)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>						
Municipality-Year	Yes	Yes				
Party-Year			Yes	Yes		
Municipality-Party					Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>						
Observations	11,039	11,039	11,039	11,039	11,039	11,039
R ²	0.20637	0.20687	0.00757	0.00761	0.34848	0.34849
Mean dep. var.	0.00616	0.00616	0.00616	0.00616	0.00616	0.00616

*Notes: Estimates correspond to Equation 4. Crime equals 1 if the first-ranked candidate committed an offense that resulted in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ($t - 5$ to $t - 1$). Mayor equals 1 for candidates promoted to mayor in the council's post-election meeting. The sample includes 11,039 first-ranked candidates from the nine major parties, of whom 1,872 became mayors. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Significance levels: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Conclusion

The belief that democratic processes are sufficient to prevent unfit individuals from attaining public office has deep historical roots. For example, in defense of the electoral college, Alexander Hamilton, the likely author of the 68th essay of The Federalist Papers, argues that “the process of election affords a moral certainty, that the office of President will never fall to the lot of any man who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications” and that “there will be a constant probability of seeing the sta-

tion filled by characters pre-eminent for ability and virtue.”³⁹ This paper demonstrates that electoral processes can indeed effectively screen out individuals with criminal backgrounds from elected bodies, thereby making stringent legal disqualification rules less necessary.

Using population-wide administrative data from Norway, we find that average criminal involvement declines across stages of the political hierarchy: nominees have lower rates than the general population, elected officials lower than unelected nominees, and mayors the lowest of all. This pattern shows that democratic filtering is possible without legal bans, but it operates mainly through party organizations rather than voters, with established parties providing more effective filtering.

These results should be understood in context; the electoral institutions are embedded in an environment characterized by high transparency, including openness in decision-making processes and active media scrutiny (Andersen and Sørensen, 2022; Bruns and Himmler, 2011). Criminal backgrounds are more likely to be exposed when candidates are elected to office and elected representatives are not immune to criminal prosecution. This setting facilitates political processes that deter individuals with criminal backgrounds from seeking office, incentivize political parties to exclude such candidates, and ultimately sustain the integrity of democracy (see, e.g., Folke, Persson and Rickne, 2017; Svaleryd and Vlachos, 2009). Clearly, the effectiveness of such party vetting is likely to vary across institutional and political environments, and our findings should be interpreted with this scope in mind.

Several important issues remain for future research. The finding that anti-establishment parties are less effective at filtering out criminal politicians raises significant questions about the trade-offs between political integrity and representativeness, particularly when candidates with criminal records symbolize anti-establishment sentiment or advocate for radical change. Further research is needed to understand how parties balance voter expectations with democratic ideals.

³⁹https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed68.asp

Moreover, this paper underscores the crucial role of established party organizations in vetting candidates, suggesting that candidate-centered electoral systems—which rely more heavily on voters’ capacity to remove unsuitable candidates—may be especially susceptible to criminals entering political office. Future studies should focus on developing rigorous research designs to empirically test this proposition and clarify the vulnerabilities inherent in different electoral systems.

Supplementary Material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at *INSERT LINK*.

Data Availability Statement

The analyses rely on Norwegian administrative register data provided by Statistics Norway under a restricted-use agreement. These data cannot be publicly shared for legal reasons, but qualified researchers may apply for access through Statistics Norway (<https://www.ssb.no/en/data-til-forskning/utlan-av-data-til-forskere/soknad-offentlig-myndighet>). All replication code is available at the *American Political Science Review* *Dataverse*: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PE5NTH>.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm that this research adheres to APSA's *Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research*. The analyses rely on de-identified administrative data provided by Statistics Norway under a restricted-use agreement that ensures confidentiality and legal compliance.

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