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

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

## Abstract

This paper assesses the effectiveness of democratic systems in preventing individuals with criminal backgrounds from holding political office. Unlike many countries, Norway 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. Through a series of counterfactual exercises, we demonstrate that the most significant reduction in criminal involvement occurs at the nomination stage, especially within established local party organizations.

JEL-Codes: D720, D730, J240.

Keywords: political selection, criminal backgrounds, voter behaviour, political parties.

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# 1 Introduction

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

Other factors being equal, it is reasonable to assume that citizens favor politicians who are honest and committed to the common good rather than pursuing their personal interests. With informed voters, parties are incentivized to recruit honest candidates who can make credible campaign promises (see, for example, Besley, 2005, 2006). Conversely, parties led by individuals with a criminal record will struggle to credibly claim they serve the public interest. However, theoretical models have identified several mechanisms that allow low-quality candidates to pursue and secure political office (cf. Besley, 2006; Brollo et al., 2013; Caselli and Morelli, 2004; Dal Bó and Finan, 2018). These models suggest that voters do not always oust criminal politicians, aligning with empirical studies indicating that voters may be reluctant or unable to remove candidates who prioritize their own interests over the public good (Bågenholm, 2021; De Vries and Solaz, 2017; Klačnjak, 2017).

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

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<sup>1</sup>According to Andersen and Skardhamar (2013), 29% of those charged with a crime in Norway reoffend within a year, and 49% within four years.

various cases, including those related to the January 6 Capitol attack, he continues to enjoy substantial support among Republican voters.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, candidates linked to crime appear to have a solid electoral advantage in India; between 2004 and 2014, a candidate with a criminal case was nearly three times more likely to win than one without any legal accusations (Vaishnav, 2017, p.12). Finally, during the 2009 British expenses scandal, several members of Parliament were charged with filing false expense claims, and some were convicted. Yet, in constituencies with strong partisan divisions, voters frequently continued to support their preferred party, even when its representative was implicated in the scandal (Eggers, 2014). These patterns underscore the challenges in relying solely on electoral mechanisms to enforce accountability among elected representatives.

Against this backdrop, our paper examines the representation of individuals with criminal records in Norwegian local politics. First, with no legal barriers against electing convicts, Norway provides an ideal environment to assess democracy’s capacity to prevent unlawful individuals from entering and advancing in politics. While Norway ranks among the least corrupt countries worldwide, 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.<sup>3</sup> A considerable share of the population also believes that representatives abuse their power for personal gain (Appendix Figure A.1). Second, we have access to criminal records for all candidates running for office from 2003 to 2019, which we compare with the general adult population, controlling for characteristics such as gender, age, and municipality of residence. The data on criminal records, covering the period from 1998 to 2022, includes information on types of crime, timing, and punishment. Third, local elections are decided by a flexible-list system where both political parties and voters influence candidate selection. This institutional feature helps us understand

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

<sup>3</sup><https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/JQApEP/aftenposten-avdekker-46-straffedoemte-er-valgt-inn-i-de-nye-kommunestyrene>

which political agents, if any, are vetting for virtue. Although criminal records are not usually directly observable, party elites and voters typically possess information that enables them to select on lawfulness as a latent trait.<sup>4</sup>

We find that first-time nominees are less likely than the general population to have received a court-issued penal conviction. This positive selection on lawfulness strengthens as we move up the political hierarchy. Elected officials exhibit lower rates of crime involvement compared to their unelected counterparts, with mayors showing the lowest levels of lawbreaking behavior. This strong empirical pattern persists after adjusting for observable characteristics from administrative data (e.g., age, gender, working status, income, and municipality of residence). Through a series of counterfactual exercises, we demonstrate that the most significant reduction in criminal involvement occurs at the nomination stage, particularly within established local organizations. This highlights the critical gatekeeping role of political parties. An event study shows that the probability of candidates engaging in criminal activities remains unchanged before and after the election, regardless of whether they are elected as council members or mayors.

We contribute to a rapidly expanding literature that leverages register data to study the selection of quality attributes to politics (for a review, see 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, 2024), and Finland (Jokela et al., 2023). Britto et al. (2024) examine the prevalence of criminal charges among political candidates in Brazil, where convicted individuals are legally barred from holding elected office. Contrary to our results, which show positive selection on lawfulness across all main political parties, Britto et al. (2024) find that those charged with crimes are overrepresented in politics.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In the 2019 Norwegian local election survey, personal familiarity played a major role for about one third of respondents casting a personal vote (Appendix Figure A.2; Cox et al., 2024).

<sup>5</sup>Britto et al. (2024)’s study, carried out at the same time as ours, differs from our work in several significant ways. First, while Britto et al. (2024) focus on criminal charges, we rely on individuals convicted of crimes. Although Britto et al. (2024) use population-wide data like us, they match candidates based on unique names within states. In contrast, we use multiple administrative data sources, which we link together using unique individual identifiers. Most importantly, while we perform a series of tests to examine how law-abiding and non-law-abiding individuals progress through the political hierarchy at

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.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Our empirical case: Norway

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

This section provides an overview of Norway’s institutional framework, starting with an examination of the fundamental characteristics of the political system and the criminal justice system. Following this, we discuss the data, how we construct the final estimation sample, and the potential biases inherent in this process.

### 2.1 Institutional setting

#### 2.1.1 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

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various stages, Britto et al. (2024) emphasize the consequences for local public outcomes, finding that mayors with criminal charges leads to higher rates of underweight births and infant mortality.

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



September, these councils ensure democratic representation for all citizens over 18, including eligible foreign residents.<sup>7</sup> During the first council meeting after the election, members elect both a mayor and an executive board. As the council’s key figure, the mayor directs the activities of the executive board.

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

The election system permits parties to grant certain candidates a ‘head start,’ 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 and Røhr, 2018).<sup>8</sup> The advantaged candidates are listed in bold letters at the top of the party list. The initial ranking of candidates does not otherwise play any formal role, except if there is a tie. The top-ranked candidate on a party’s list is its mayoral candidate.

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

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<sup>7</sup>Anyone 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 (Rt. 1961, p. 899).

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

### 2.1.2 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 et al., 2024). 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.

### 2.1.3 Legal sanctions

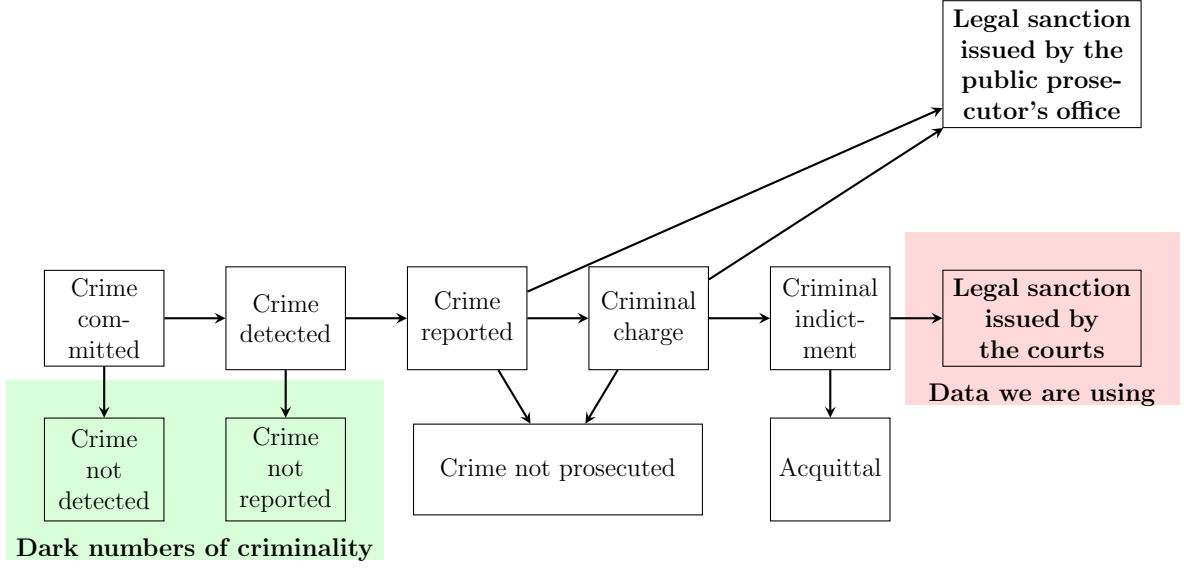
Legal sanctions are broadly categorized into eight distinct subgroups.<sup>9</sup> The least severe crimes are punished with a fixed penalty (*forenklet forelegg*), which is a fine typically issued immediately upon apprehension of an offense by the police. These fines are predominantly issued for minor traffic infringements.

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

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<sup>9</sup>The 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: The legal trajectory of a criminal offense



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

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.<sup>10</sup> Courts frequently impose a combination of these sanctions, such as a imprisonment alongside a fine.

## 2.2 Data

### 2.2.1 Politician data

We rely on a comprehensive dataset of candidates running for local office in Norway from 2003 to 2019, encompassing approximately 60,000 candidates annually (*Local Candidate Dataset; LCD*) (Fiva et al., 2024). This publicly available dataset includes election outcomes for every candidate, along with comprehensive information about party affiliation, list rank, win margins, and leadership positions.

<sup>10</sup>Prison sentences include detention, prison sentences, and electronic monitoring. Special sanctions encompass compulsory psychiatric care, juvenile punishment, or detention.

Our starting point is the 301,238 candidates running for local office in the years 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 of which 295,519 are older than 20 years in the election year. After excluding party-independent and minor party lists<sup>11</sup>, our sample comprises 263,933 candidates. Statistics Norway match these candidates with the administrative records. However, they are unable to match 2,191 (about 0.8%), leaving us unable to observe any of their administrative records. These individuals are excluded, as well as those who did not reside in Norway throughout the pre-period, leaving us with a final sample of 259,992 candidate-year observations, and 17,627,265 non-candidate-year observations. Appendix Table A.1 presents summary statistics.

## 2.2.2 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 information on the entire population’s municipality of residence, gender, year of birth, employment status, and income decile, offering valuable insights into their socioeconomic context.

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

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

<sup>12</sup>The age of criminal responsibility in Norway is 15 years.

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 average share of individuals who committed a crime in the five years leading up to the election year (i.e., from  $t - 5$  to  $t - 1$ ) across various 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.

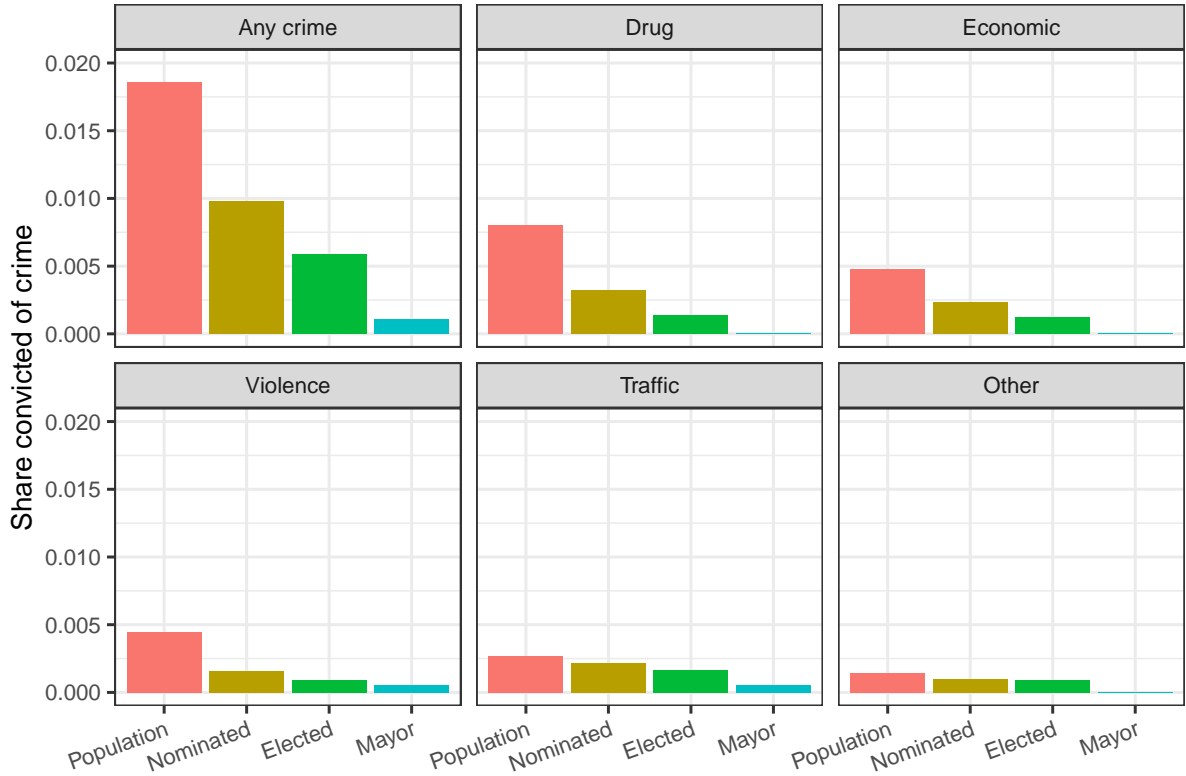
### 2.2.3 Potential biases

The crime register only includes recorded offenses, excluding undetected or unreported crimes, as well as non-prosecuted or acquitted cases. This omission might influence our results if politicians are able to influence the likelihood of a crime being recorded.

First, politicians might be “skilled criminals”, reducing the probability of detection, potentially leading to an overestimation of criminal involvement compared to the general population. To address this, we compare politicians with similar individuals from the general population (controlling for age, gender, municipality of residence, employment, income).

Second, becoming a politician can itself affect the probability of detection or reporting of a crime. On the one hand, political status could increase media scrutiny and the likelihood of crime detection. On the other hand, political status might, in principle, allow politicians to influence prosecution outcomes (see for example Lambais and Sigstad (2023)). However, this is implausible for two reasons. First, Norwegian local

Figure 2: Criminal Involvement of Politicians and Citizens



*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';  $N=212,207$ ), candidates elected to local office in year  $t$  who do not serve as mayors ('elected';  $N=45,867$ ), and those elected to local office in year  $t$  who are appointed mayors ('mayor';  $N=1,918$ ). We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

politicians have no influence over judicial careers. Second, the data used in our analyses measures pre-office criminal behavior, which reduces concerns about political interference in criminal cases.

### 3 Methods

We consider political selection as a dynamic process occurring throughout an individual's career, starting from their initial nomination and extending to potential executive positions. In this section we describe a series of tests designed to quantify the extent to which lawful and unlawful citizens advance in the political hierarchy at different 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 leaders play a more significant role in this process. In addition, we study the disciplining effects of serving in office using an event-study design.

### 3.1 Initial nomination

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

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 run regression analyses that compares the criminal records of first-time candidates to individuals from the general population, as specified in the following model:

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

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  $t$ .<sup>13</sup> We control for gender ( $Female_i$ ) and one-year age fixed effects from 20 to 100 ( $\sum_{l=20}^{100} \delta_l \mathbf{I}(l = Age_{it})$ ).<sup>14</sup> The parameter of interest,  $\beta$ , captures the relative crime

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<sup>13</sup>We define a “first-time nominee” as a candidate who did not run for office in 2003 but appears in our data for the first time in the elections of 2007, 2011, 2015, or 2019.

<sup>14</sup>The age of criminal responsibility is 15, so for individuals aged 18 or 19 in the election year, we cannot track their complete criminal records.

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.

### 3.2 The best at the top?

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

As discussed in Section 2.1, a critical decision in our context is selecting the candidate to be placed at the top of the list, effectively nominating them as the party’s mayoral candidate. Another significant decision involves determining which candidates should get the top-ranks.<sup>15</sup> To assess the role of political parties as gatekeepers, we estimate the following regression model:

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

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

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<sup>15</sup>In the criminal records data set, we do not have information about which candidates the parties have given a ‘head start’ (corresponding to 25% of the total number of votes received by the party). Appendix Figure A.3 show, however, the strong relationship between rank and head start status using data from Fiva et al. (2024). In our sample period, the median number of candidates receiving a bonus is two.



$r = 9$ , leaving lower-ranked candidates as the reference group ( $r \geq 10$ ). If political parties prioritize ‘clean candidates’ we expect to see that the  $\beta$ ’s are falling in absolute value by  $r$ . 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).<sup>16</sup>

### 3.3 Do voters favor candidates with clean records?

Electoral systems with preference voting allow citizens to actively reject candidates they perceive as untrustworthy and endorse those they believe to be more honest. Even if voters cannot directly observe a candidate’s criminal activities, they may still use informational shortcuts to screen candidates based on this dimension. Individuals with criminal tendencies often exhibit related types of antisocial behaviors, such as a reluctance to voluntarily contribute to public goods. In this context, such behaviors may manifest as limited campaign efforts or through the candidate’s expressed ideology (Jokela et al., 2023).

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

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

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,  $\eta$ , captures the extent to

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<sup>16</sup>Since each municipality constitutes a single electoral district, local party list fixed effects effectively also control for municipality fixed effects.

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.

### 3.4 What happens after the election?

To study post-election dynamics, we implement an event study comparing individuals elected to local office for the first time in event year  $e = 0$  to those nominated but not elected in the same event year. We rely on the following specification:

$$Crime_{ie} = \sum_{j \neq -1} \iota_j \cdot \mathbf{I}[j = e] + \sum_{j \neq -1} \kappa_j \cdot \mathbf{I}[j = e] \cdot \mathbf{I}[elected_{ie}] + \lambda \cdot \mathbf{I}[elected_{ie}] + \sum_l \rho_l \cdot \mathbf{I}[l = list_i] + \epsilon_{ie} \quad (4)$$

In Equation (4), the parameters of interest,  $\kappa_j$ , capture the differences in crime propensity between treatment and control relative to the differences in  $e = -1$ . We use an event window spanning from  $e = -5$  to  $e = 5$ . Our baseline empirical specification also includes local party list fixed effects ( $\sum_l \rho_l \cdot \mathbf{I}[l = list_i]$ ), which means that all inference is drawn from candidates running for the same list in  $e = 0$ .

We also conduct a similar event study comparing candidates promoted to mayor with other mayoral candidates, namely, first-ranked candidates who were not ultimately promoted.<sup>17</sup> Since each local party list nominates only one first-ranked candidate, we substitute local party list fixed effects with municipality fixed effects, meaning that inference is drawn from different mayoral candidates running for office within the same municipality.

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<sup>17</sup>In our sample, 98% of mayors are first-ranked on their party list.

## 4 Results

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

### 4.1 Initial nomination

In Figure 3, we analyze the criminal records of first-time nominees in comparison to those of the general population within the same five-year age group.<sup>18</sup> Given the substantial influence of gender on crime propensity, we conduct this comparison separately for each gender. The left-hand panel of Figure 3 displays the general male population with red circles, while the data for first-time male nominees is represented by brown triangles. The right-hand panel presents the corresponding plot for women.

Figure 3 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).

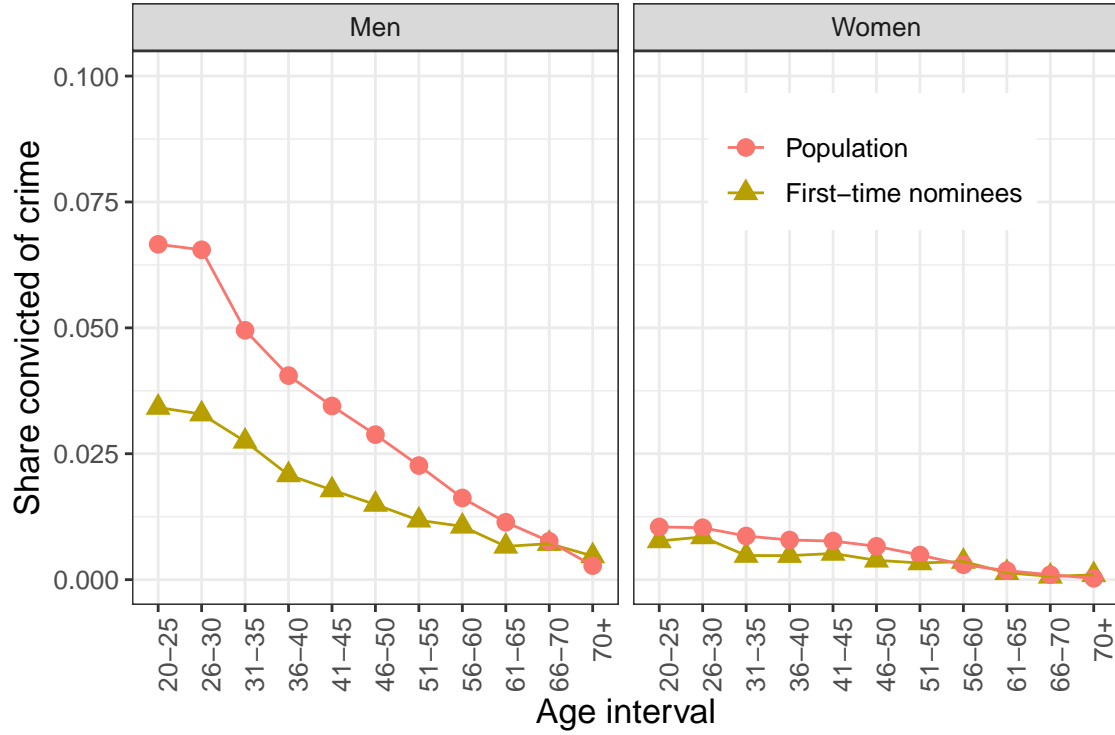
The key take-away from Figure 3 is this: First-time male nominees are significantly less likely to have been convicted of a crime in the five years preceding the election compared to their peers in the general population of the same age group. For instance, among the youngest age group (20–25), the likelihood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

Also first-time female candidates appear to be positively selected, as the brown tri-

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<sup>18</sup>Appendix Figure A.4 shows that individuals aged 25 to 55 are overrepresented as first-time nominees compared to the general population.

Figure 3: Conviction Rates of First-time Nominees versus Citizens



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.

angles representing candidates consistently fall below the red circles representing the population. However, the difference in criminal involvement between female first-time nominees and the general female population is small. While men running for office for the first time tend to adhere more strictly to legal norms when compared to the general male population, women running for office for the first time tend to adhere to the legal norms at a similar level to the general female population.

Estimates of  $\beta$  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.<sup>19</sup> 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

<sup>19</sup>Appendix Table A.2 breaks down criminal involvement by type of crime. The results show that first-time nominees are statistically significant 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.

year fixed effects. The coefficient in Column (1) indicate 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)).

Table 1: Initial Nomination: Comparison Between 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 <sup>2</sup>	0.00037	0.01009	0.01881	0.02976	0.03029
Mean dep. var.	0.0181	0.0181	0.0181	0.0181	0.0181

*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  $t - 1$ ). Standard errors are clustered at the municipality-level. Significance levels: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1*

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 discrepancy in results underscores the significance of contextual factors in shaping candidate selection and behavior. The gatekeeping role of political parties in Norway is more stringent than in Brazil, likely resulting in better screening of candidates with criminal records—an issue we revisit in Section 5.2. Additionally, the higher potential for rent extraction in Brazil may attract individuals with criminal tendencies to run for

public office more often than in Norway.<sup>20</sup>

## 4.2 The best at the top?

In Figure 4, we examine the relationship between criminal involvement and candidate rankings, split by gender.<sup>21</sup> 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 their counterparts positioned further down the ballot. This suggests that parties may be strategically prioritizing candidates with cleaner records for the top ballot positions, particularly for the highest-ranked spots which is almost always the mayoral candidate of the party.

To more formally assess the role of political parties as gatekeepers, we estimate 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. Only a few of the other coefficient estimates are statistically significant at conventional levels.<sup>22</sup> This suggests suggesting that parties prioritize virtue only for their most viable candidates, with this focus diminishing further down the list.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>For example, Ferraz and Finan (2008) show that Brazilian mayors are often involved in criminal behavior and rent extraction, while Lambais and Sigstad (2023) demonstrate that winning mayoral elections reduces the likelihood of being convicted for past misconduct by local judges.

<sup>21</sup>Appendix Figure A.3 examines the relationship between head start, gender, and age and candidate rankings.

<sup>22</sup>Appendix Table A.3 provides the corresponding results, split by type of crime.

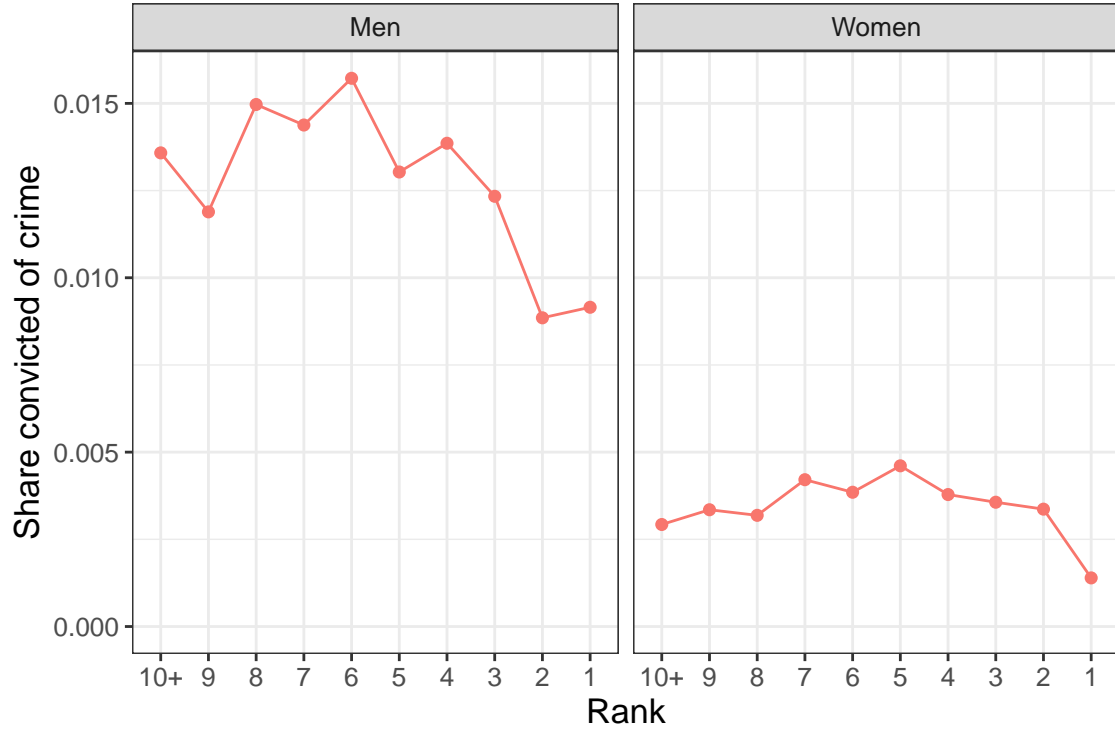
<sup>23</sup>Hangartner et al. (2019) examine local candidate data from Colombia, focusing on candidates' prior involvement in election fraud. In contrast to the results reported in Table 2, Colombian municipalities employing the open-list system exhibit only minor differences in the occurrence of fraudulent behavior

Table 2: Best at the Top: Comparison Between Top-Ranked and Lower-Ranked Candidates

	(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 <sup>2</sup>	0.00019	0.00356	0.00664	0.00812	0.07074
Mean dep. var.	0.0090	0.0090	0.0090	0.0090	0.0090

*Notes: This table displays the regression results from Equation 2, comparing criminal involvement across candidates of varying ranks. In this Table criminal involvement, is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ( $t - 5$  to  $t - 1$ ). We use candidates ranked 10 and above ( $N = 152,085$ ) 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. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Significance levels: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1*

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



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

### 4.3 Do voters favor candidates with clean records?

The Norwegian municipalities that we study have a median population size of about 5,000 inhabitants and are typically close-knit communities. This familiarity with candidates, many of whom are well-known within these small communities, may allow voters to gauge the lawfulness and honesty of candidates, even in the absence of easily accessible criminal records, and cast their personal votes accordingly.

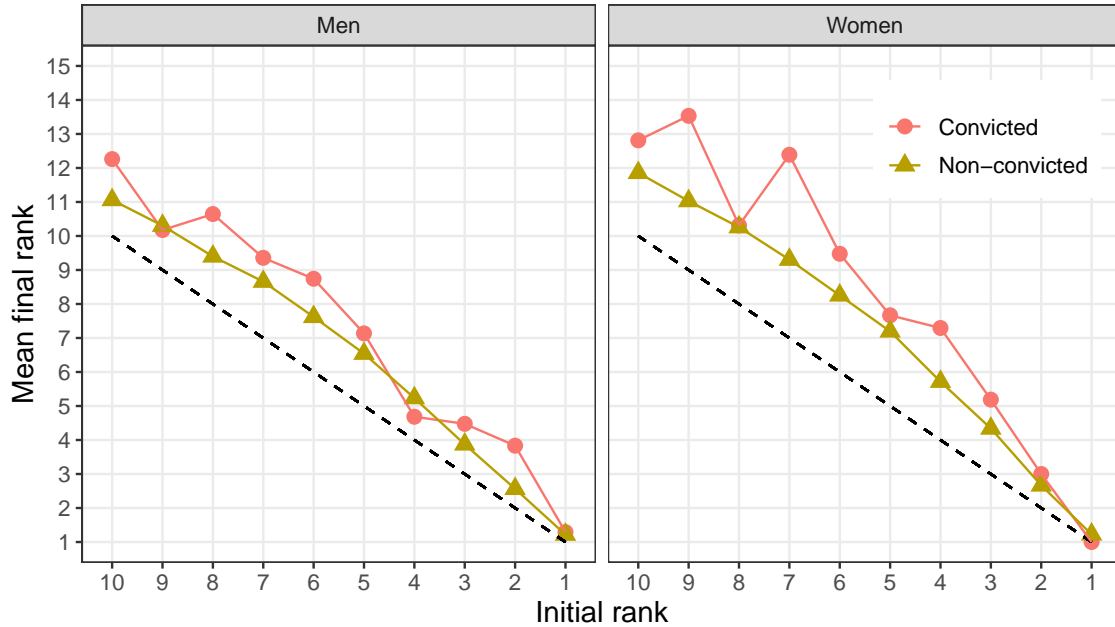
For data availability reasons, we are not able to directly examine personal vote counts. Instead, Figure 5 explores how the final ranking of candidates – after incorporating personal votes – deviate from their initial positions on the ballot, comparing those with and without criminal records, separately by gender. If voters favor lawful candidates when across list positions.



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.<sup>24</sup> However, the pattern observed in the raw data appears relatively modest.

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



*Notes:* This figure displays how the mean final rank of candidates after incorporating personal votes deviate from their initial position on the ballot. In the two panels we split into two mutually exclusive groups; nominees who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ( $N = 2,202$ ), and those who did not ( $N = 245,651$ ). The dashed line indicate a situation where the mean 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

<sup>24</sup>The dashed gray line represents the scenario where the mean initial rank equals the mean 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.

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

Table 3: Final Rank Changes After Personal Votes: Comparison Between 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 <sup>2</sup>	0.00735	0.00976	0.01414	0.02523	0.09453
Mean dep. var.	0.5682	0.5682	0.5682	0.5682	0.5682

*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. In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ( $t - 5$  to  $t - 1$ ). We split the sample into two mutually exclusive groups: 1) Candidates who were convicted of having committed a crime ( $N = 2,202$ ), 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. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Significance levels: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1

In Appendix Table A.4 we repeat the analyses but instead of using a single explanatory

crime variable, we include dummy variables for each of five mutually exclusive categories of crime. The results, taken at face value, suggest that candidates convicted of economic crimes are punished more harshly by voters, followed by those convicted of drug crimes. However, the large standard errors prevent us from drawing strong conclusions.

#### 4.4 Post-election dynamics

Individuals with criminal backgrounds who seek public office might exploit their positions for personal gain, potentially leading to higher levels of criminal behavior and corruption once elected. Figure 6 displays standard event study plots, where the fraction who committed a crime at event time  $t$  is split between a treated group (brown triangles) and a control group (red circles). In the left-hand panel, the treated group consist of individuals elected to local office for the first time in year  $t = 0$ <sup>25</sup>, while the control group consist of individuals who were nominated but not elected in  $t = 0$  or any previous year. In the right-hand panel, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to mayor for the first time in  $t = 0$ , while the control group consist of individuals who were first-ranked but not elected mayor in year  $t = 0$  or in any previous year.

Both event plots show no evidence that winning office impacts criminal involvement. For elected mayors ( $N=780$ ), the treated line lies exactly at zero, indicating that no individuals engaged in any criminal activity in the years surrounding the election. In both event study analyses, the post-treatment estimates are quantitatively small and not statistically different from zero. These findings contrast with those reported in Appendix Figure A.5, where we document statistically significant economic returns to holding office using the same data and research design.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that the null findings reported in Figure 6 are not due to a lack of statistical power, but rather reflect that criminal

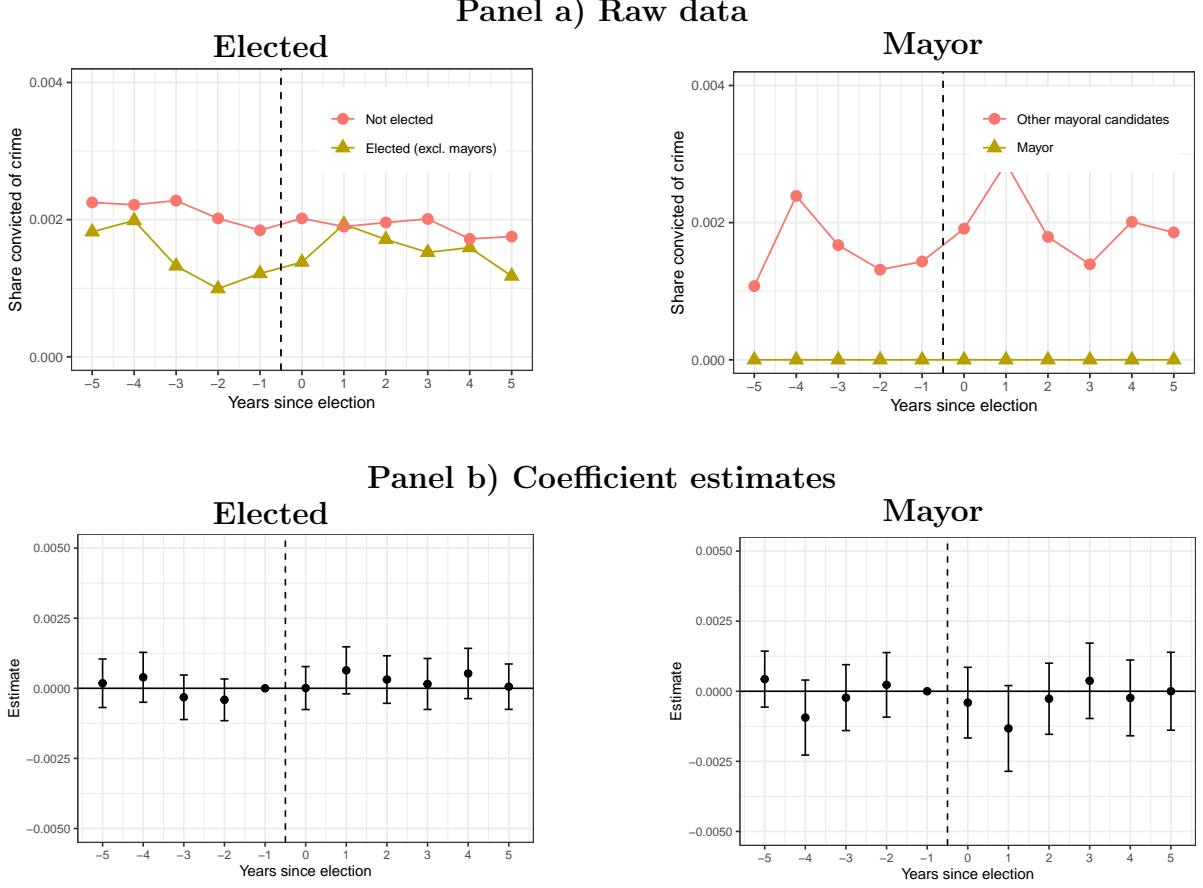
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<sup>25</sup>We are excluding those who get elected mayor.

<sup>26</sup>Being elected as a local councillor is estimated to increase income by about NOK 40.000 (USD 4.000) in the year following the election, while being elected as mayor is estimated to raise income by about NOK 160.000 (USD 16.000) in the same year. These results align with those of Cirone et al. (2021), who also report significant economic returns for elected mayors (using an event study design comparing mayors and mayoral candidates in 2011) and smaller, statistically insignificant returns for elected local councillors (using an RD design for candidates running for office during 2003–2011).

tendencies appear to be an inherent characteristic, unaffected by electoral outcomes in our setting.

Figure 6: The effect of winning office on criminal convictions



*Note: Panel a) displays the fraction of treated (brown triangles) and untreated (red circles) for whom the outcome variable is equal to one at each event time  $t$ . Panel b) contains the estimates of the parameters of interest,  $\kappa_j$ , from Equation 4, along with the 95% confidence intervals. In the two left panels, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to local office for the first time (excluding those who were elected for mayor) in election year  $t = 0$  ( $N=18,110$ ), while the control group consist of individuals who were nominated in  $t = 0$  but not elected in  $t = 0$  or in any previous year ( $N=150,614$ ). In the two right panels, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to mayor for the first time in  $t = 0$  ( $N=780$ ), while the control group consist of individuals who were first-ranked but not elected mayor in year  $t = 0$  or in any previous year ( $N=8,371$ ). The reference category is event period  $t = -1$ . Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. Numerical results are available in Appendix Table A.5.*

## 5 The role of parties and voters in candidate vetting

### 5.1 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 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.<sup>27</sup> For these counterfactual council members, we calculate the average crime involvement during the five years preceding the relevant election. This random draw is repeated 100 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 100 times and then take the average. This counterfactual shows how important initial nomination is for political selection on lawfulness.

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

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<sup>27</sup>This 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.

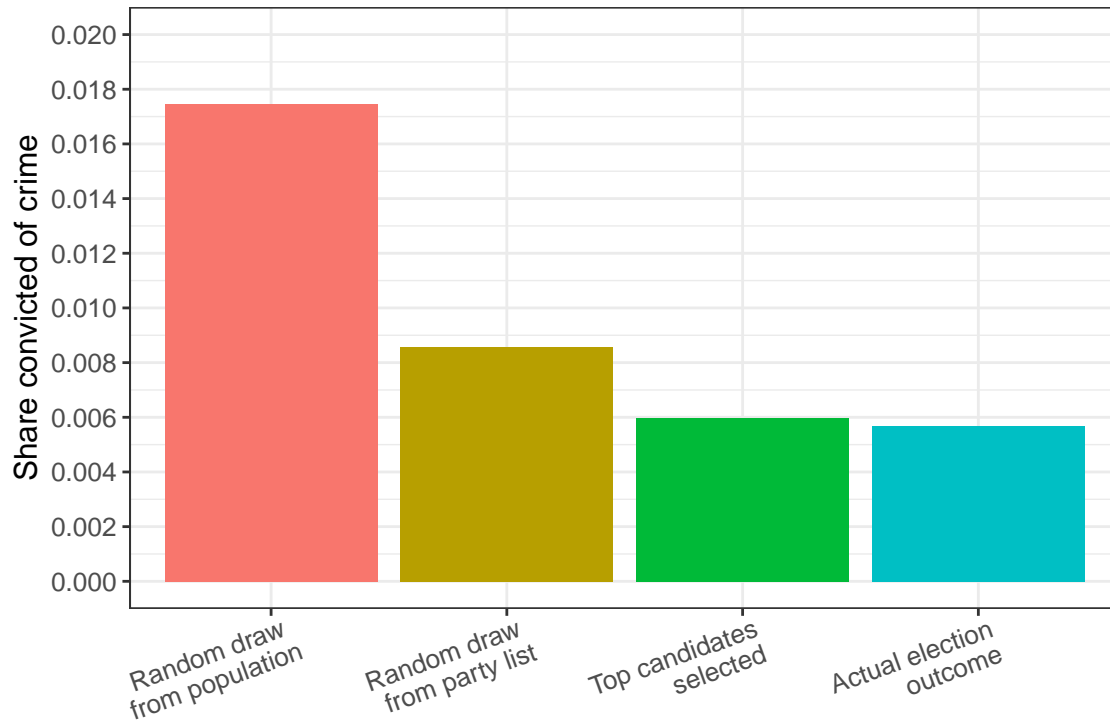
The bar chart in Figure 7 presents the results of this exercise, showing the three counterfactuals alongside the actual election outcome. As we move from the counterfactual based on the general population (left-most bar, in red) to the actual election outcome (right-most bar, in turquoise), we observe that the largest decrease in criminal involvement occurs between the first and second counterfactual outcomes. This suggests that initial nomination on a 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 undesirable candidates, in line with empirical research on political scandals in Norway (Midtbø, 2012; Jenssen, 2014).

## 5.2 Party organization strength

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 7 based on whether the local party organization in question was in operation in the previous local election, using this as a proxy for the strength of the local party organization.

The left-hand panel of Figure 8 shows that in municipality-years where the local party organization was already active (i.e., they ran a list in the previous election cycle), candidate vetting appears to be strong. There is a substantial decrease in criminal involvement from the general population to the party list, followed by another notable decrease considering the counterfactual election outcome mimicking a closed-list electoral system. As in Figure 7, there is no evidence that voters play any role in the positive selection on

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



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

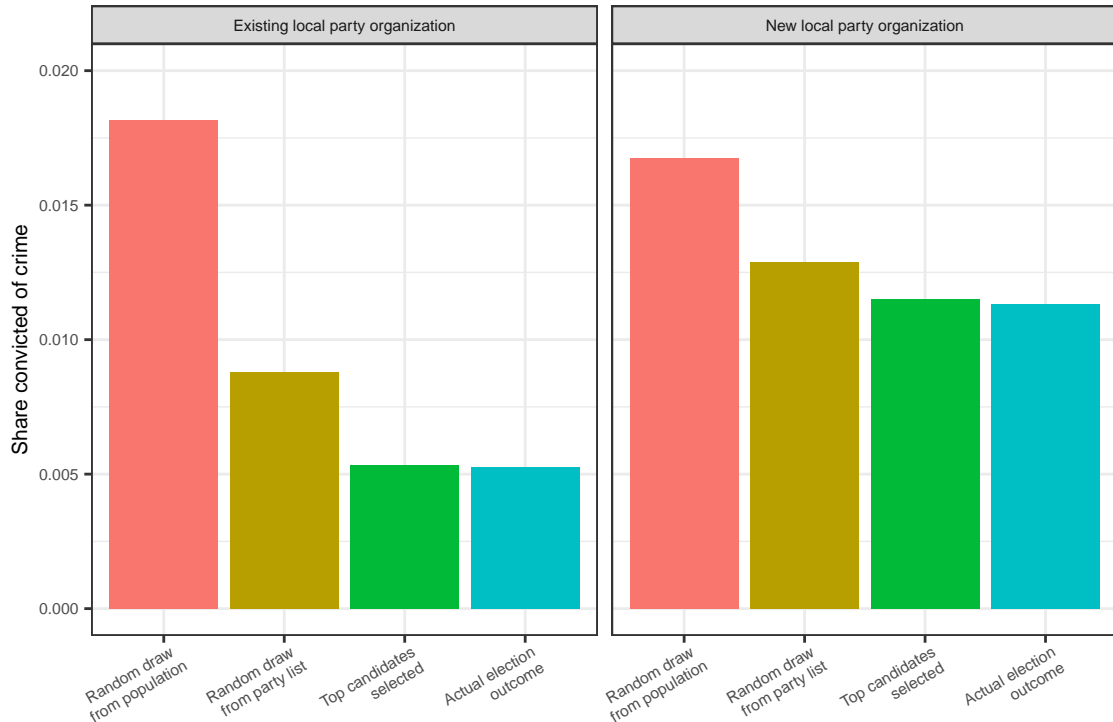
lawfulness.

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 A.6 we provide results by national party brands. It is striking that among the political parties that were established over a century ago<sup>28</sup> selection on lawfulness is much stronger than for political parties that more recently have entered the political stage and who have weaker party organizations, such as the Green Party (est. 1988)<sup>29</sup> and the far-left Red party (est. 2008).<sup>30</sup>

Figure 8: Criminal Involvement in Local Councils in Counterfactual Election Outcomes By Relative Strength of Party Organization



*Notes:* This figure illustrates 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  $t - 1$ ) across various randomly selected local councils. 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 population'). The next bar (brown) shows council members randomly drawn from the relevant electoral list within the municipality ('Random draw from list'). The following bar (green) represents top candidates selected from a party list based on their position on the ballot, simulating a closed-list electoral system ('Top candidates selected'). The right-most bar (turquoise) depicts the actual share of council members who had criminal involvement ('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. The analysis is based on data from the election years 2007, 2011, and 2015.

<sup>28</sup>The Liberal Party (1884), Conservative Party (1884), Labor Party (1887), and Centre Party (1920).

<sup>29</sup>Although the Green Party was established already in 1988, it ran lists in only 11 municipalities in 2003, a number that increased to 202 by 2015.

<sup>30</sup>The far-right Progress Party (established 1973) appears to be an outlier, as neither the party organization nor its voters select strongly based on lawfulness.



## 6 Conclusion

The belief that democratic processes are sufficient to keep dishonest individuals out of 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 station filled by characters pre-eminent for ability and virtue.”<sup>31</sup> 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 on criminal records from Norway, we find that criminal involvement decreases as individuals ascend the political hierarchy: 1) Politicians nominated for office who were not elected exhibit, on average, lower levels of criminal involvement than the general population, 2) Elected candidates have, on average, lower rates of criminal activity compared to their unelected counterparts, and 3) Mayors demonstrate, on average, the lowest levels of criminal engagement among those elected to local office. Counterfactual analyses reveal that the decrease in criminal involvement occurs already at the nomination stage, especially within well-established local party organizations, underscoring the importance of party screening processes.

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, external auditing, 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 et al.,

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<sup>31</sup>[https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed68.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed68.asp)

2017; Svaleryd and Vlachos, 2009).

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

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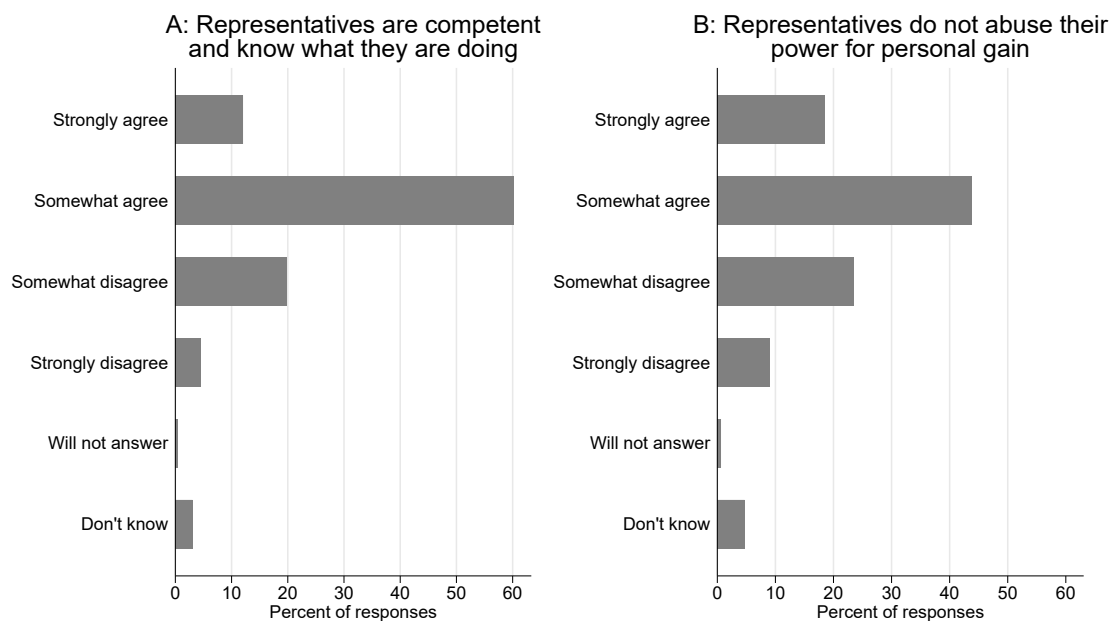
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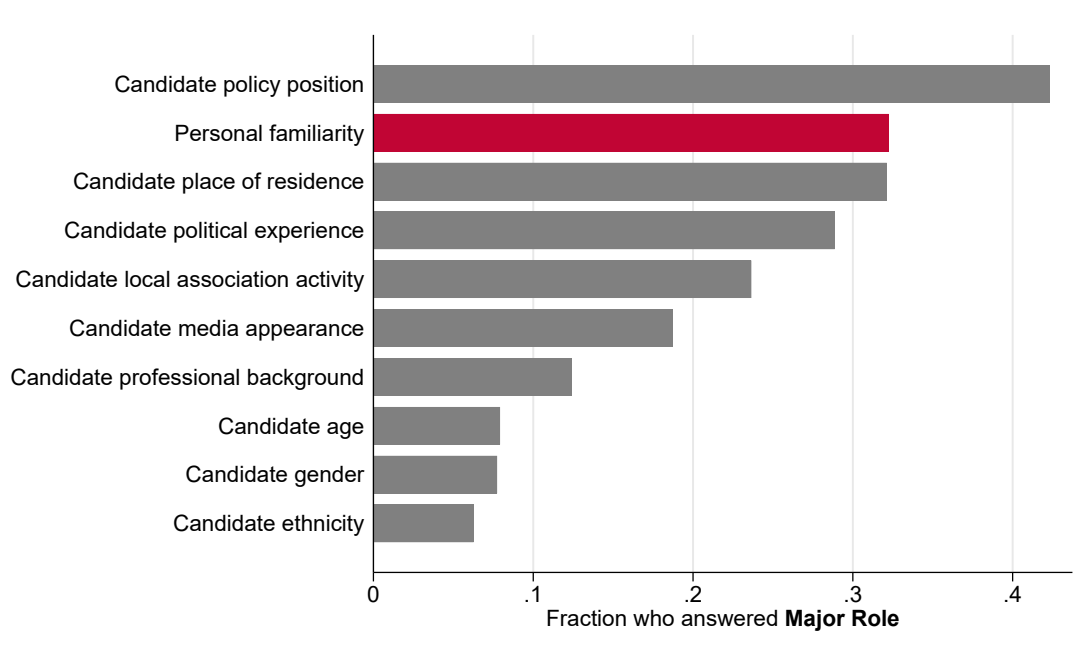
# Appendix A: Supplementary analyses

Figure A.1: Public perceptions of elected representatives' competence and integrity



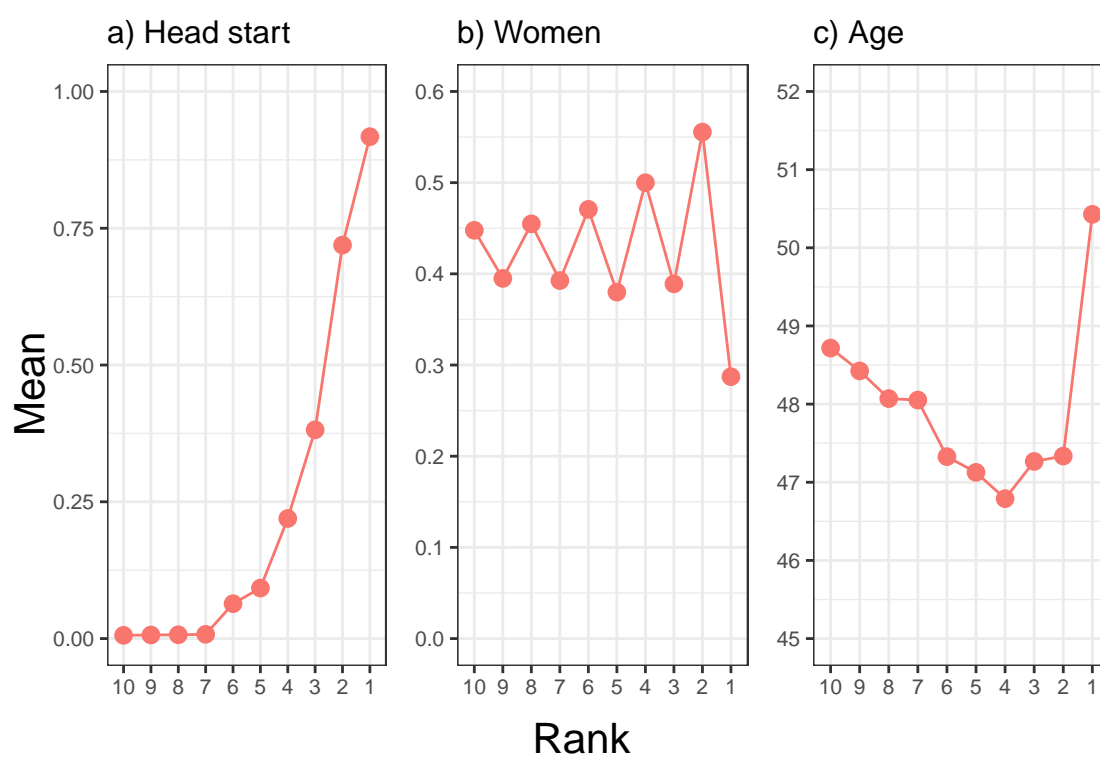
Notes: This figure shows the fraction of survey respondents who agree with the statements given in each panel heading. The data comes from the 2019 Local Election Survey (Lokalvalgsundersøkelsen). Panel A reports responses to the statement: “Most of the elected representatives in this municipality are generally competent and know what they are doing” ( $n=3,954$ ). Panel B reports responses to the statement “The elected representatives in this municipality do not abuse their power for their own personal gain” ( $n=3,936$ ).

Figure A.2: Reasons for casting personal votes



*Notes: This figure, adapted from Cox et al. (2024), presents survey evidence of voters' reasons for casting personal votes. Reported are the fraction of survey respondents answering that they cast a personal vote because the reason given in the legend played a 'major role'. Alternative responses are 'don't know', 'no role', and 'some role'. Data from the 2019 Local Election Survey (Lokalvalgsundersøkelsen) (n= 2,612). The analysis is restricted to the 1,628 respondents who report that they cast a personal vote.*

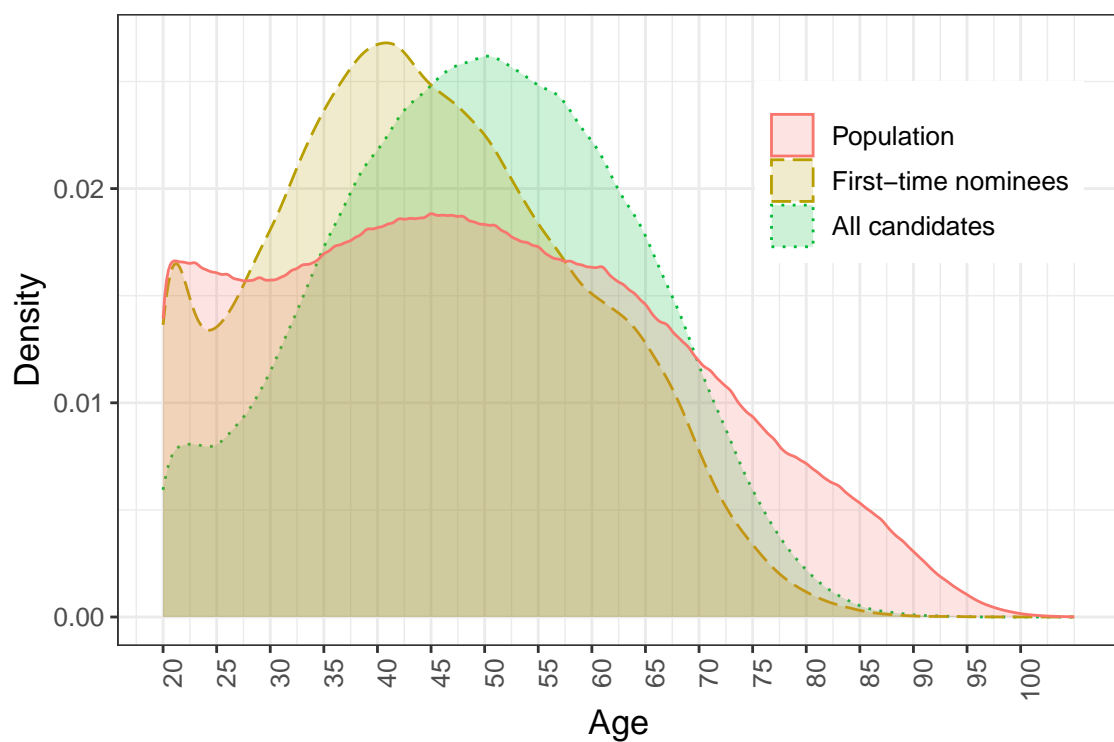
Figure A.3: Characteristics by initial rank position



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

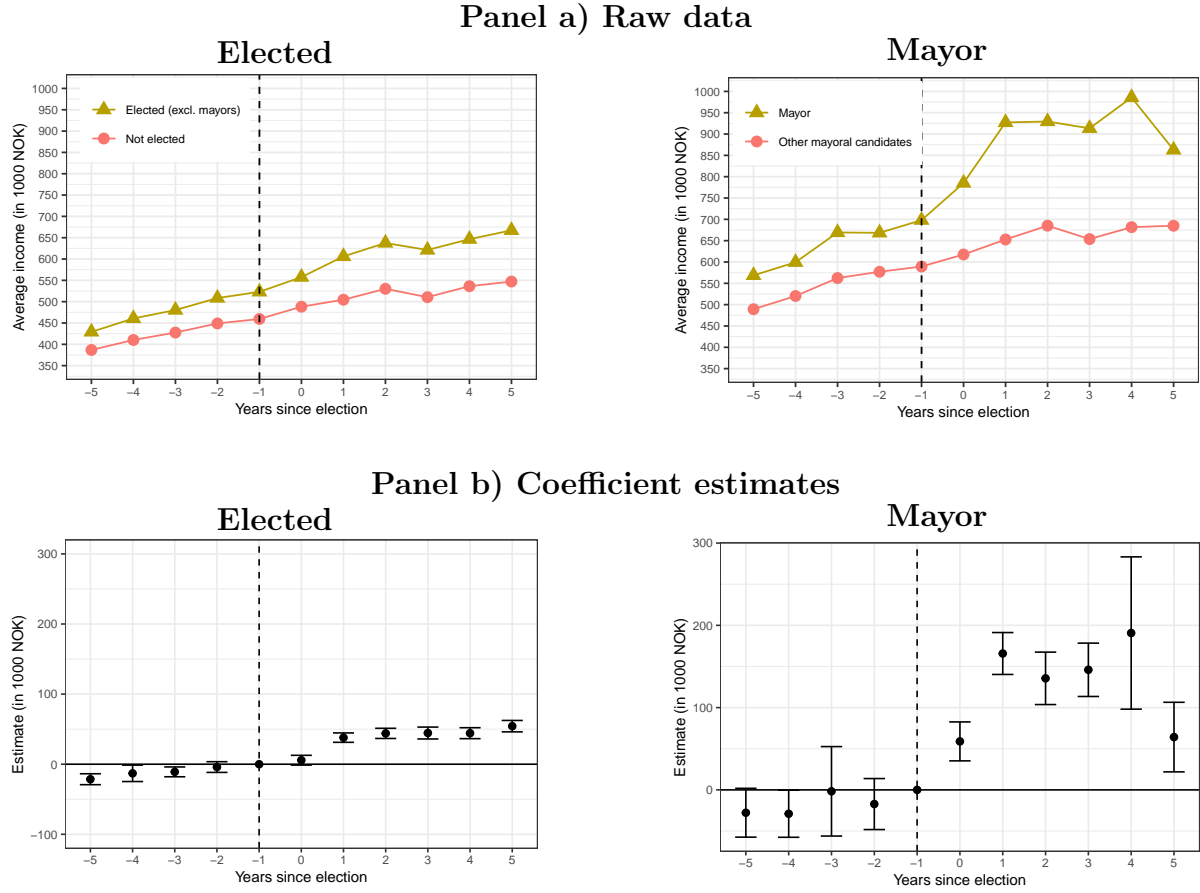


Figure A.4: Age Distribution of General Population, First-Time Nominees, and All Candidates



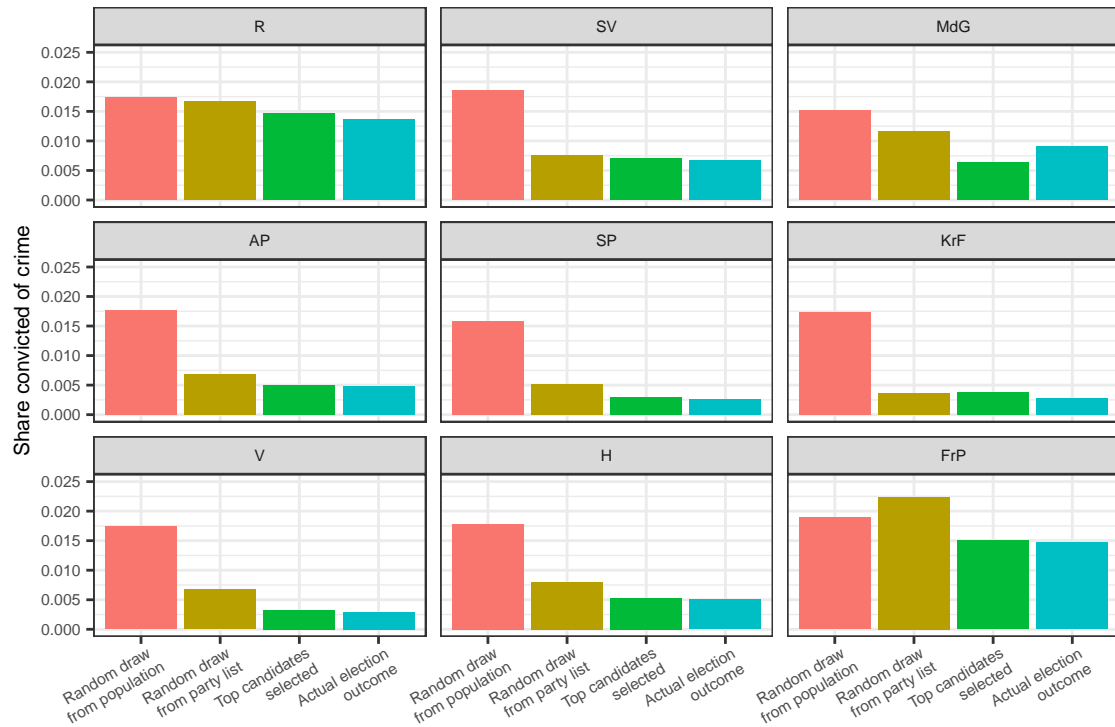
*Notes: This figure displays the age composition of different subgroups of the population. We split the sample into three groups: individuals not running for local office in year  $t$  ( $N=17,627,265$ ), individuals who are running for local office for the first time in year  $t$  ( $N=81,213$ ), and all candidates (including first-time nominees) running for local office ( $N=259,992$ ). We use data from elections held in 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.*

Figure A.5: The effect of winning office on income



*Note: Panel a) displays the average pre-tax income of treated (brown triangles) and untreated (red circles) at each event time  $t$ . Panel b) contains the estimates of the parameters of interest,  $\kappa_j$ , from Equation 4, along with the 95% confidence intervals. The estimation is done on a sample for which we have access to a broader set of administrative data from Statistics Norway, which we therefore are unable to merge with the criminal records. In the two left panels, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to local office for the first time (excluding those who were elected for mayor) in election year  $t = 0$  ( $N=18,831$ ), while the control group consist of individuals who were nominated in  $t = 0$  but not elected in  $t = 0$  or in any previous year ( $N=155,016$ ). In the two right panels, the treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to mayor for the first time in  $t = 0$  ( $N=786$ ), while the control group consist of individuals who were first-ranked but not elected mayor in year  $t = 0$  or in any previous year ( $N=8,486$ ). The reference category is event period  $t = -1$ . Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.*

Figure A.6: Criminal Involvement in Local Councils in Counterfactual Election Outcomes By Political Party



Notes: This figure displays the share of individuals who committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ( $t-5$  to  $t-1$ ) for different randomly drawn councilor members from each political party: The Red Party (R; established in 2008), Socialist Left Party (SV; 1961), Green Party (MdG; 1988), Labor Party (AP; 1887), Centre Party (SP; 1920), Christian Democratic Party (KrF; 1933), Liberal Party (V; 1884), Conservative Party (H; 1884), and Progress Party (FrP; 1973). The left-most bar (red) represents council members randomly drawn from the entire eligible population residing in the municipality ('Random draw from population'). The next bar to the right (brown) shows council members randomly drawn from the relevant electoral list within the municipality ('Random draw from list'). The subsequent bar (green) represents top candidates selected from a party list in the order they appear on the ballot, ignoring personal votes, thereby simulating a closed-list electoral system ('Top candidates selected'). Finally, the right-most bar (turquoise) depicts the actual share of council members in that party who were involved in criminal activities ('Actual election outcome').

Table A.1: Summary statistics

Variable	Statistic	Population	Nominated	Elected	Mayor
Age	Mean	49.7	49.9	47.8	51.1
	SD	(18.3)	(14.3)	(12.1)	(8.7)
Men	Mean	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.7
	SD	(0.5)	(0.5)	(0.5)	(0.4)
Income	Mean	5.7	6.5	7.3	8.4
	SD	(2.2)	(2)	(1.8)	(1.2)
Working	Mean	0.7	0.8	0.9	1
	SD	(0.5)	(0.4)	(0.3)	(0.2)
Observations	N	17,627,265	212,207	45,867	1,918

*Notes: This table presents summary statistics for the estimation sample. The income decile and working status variables reflect their values in the year preceding the election year ( $t - 1$ ). The sample is divided into four mutually exclusive categories: 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';  $N=212,207$ ), candidates elected to local office in year  $t$  who do not serve as mayors ('elected';  $N=45,867$ ), and those elected to local office in year  $t$  who are appointed mayors ('mayor';  $N=1,918$ ). We use data from elections held in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.*

Table A.2: Initial Nomination: Comparison Between First-Time Nominees and the General Population By Type of Crime

	Drug (1)	Economic (2)	Violence (3)	Traffic (4)	Other (5)
<i>Variables</i>					
First-time nominee = 1	-0.0035*** (0.0002)	-0.0015*** (0.0002)	-0.0025*** (0.0002)	-0.0003 (0.0002)	-0.0004*** (0.0002)
<i>Fixed effects</i>					
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Age	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Working status	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Income decile	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>					
Observations	14,453,044	14,453,044	14,453,044	14,453,044	14,453,044
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01500	0.00890	0.01047	0.00430	0.00301
Mean dep. var.	0.0078	0.0044	0.0045	0.0027	0.0014

*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  $t - 1$ ). Criminal activities are broken down into five mutually exclusive categories. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Significance levels: \*\*\*, 0.01, \*\*, 0.05, \*, 0.1*

Table A.3: Comparison of Criminal Background Between Top-Ranked and Lower-Ranked Candidates

	Drug (1)	Economic (2)	Violence (3)	Traffic (4)	Other (5)
<i>Variables</i>					
Rank = 1	-0.0020*** (0.0003)	-0.0005 (0.0004)	-0.0002 (0.0004)	-0.0009** (0.0004)	0.0000 (0.0003)
Rank = 2	-0.0005 (0.0005)	-0.0006 (0.0004)	-0.0012*** (0.0002)	-0.0009** (0.0004)	-0.0003 (0.0002)
Rank = 3	-0.0010* (0.0005)	-0.0005 (0.0004)	-0.0002 (0.0004)	-0.0010** (0.0004)	0.0003 (0.0003)
Rank = 4	-0.0006 (0.0005)	-0.0006 (0.0004)	-0.0011*** (0.0003)	-0.0002 (0.0004)	0.0005 (0.0004)
Rank = 5	-0.0006 (0.0005)	-0.0004 (0.0005)	0.0008 (0.0005)	-0.0004 (0.0005)	-0.0005** (0.0003)
Rank = 6	-0.0002 (0.0005)	0.0003 (0.0005)	-0.0009*** (0.0003)	0.0000 (0.0005)	0.0000 (0.0003)
Rank = 7	-0.0011** (0.0005)	-0.0003 (0.0005)	-0.0005 (0.0004)	0.0003 (0.0005)	0.0007* (0.0004)
Rank = 8	-0.0007 (0.0005)	-0.0005 (0.0004)	0.0005 (0.0005)	-0.0005 (0.0004)	0.0004 (0.0004)
Rank = 9	-0.0001 (0.0005)	-0.0012*** (0.0004)	-0.0007* (0.0003)	-0.0004 (0.0005)	-0.0001 (0.0003)
<i>Fixed effects</i>					
Year					
Age	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gender	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Working status	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Income decile	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
List-year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>					
Observations	259,966	259,966	259,966	259,966	259,966
R <sup>2</sup>	0.06891	0.05620	0.06625	0.05640	0.06184
Mean dep. var.	0.0028	0.0021	0.0015	0.0021	0.0010

*Notes:* This table displays the regression results from Equation 2, comparing criminal involvement across candidates of varying ranks. In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ( $t - 5$  to  $t - 1$ ). Criminal activities are broken down into five mutually exclusive categories. We use candidates ranked 10 and above ( $N = 152,085$ ) 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. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Significance levels: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1

Table A.4: Final Rank Changes After Personal Votes: Convicted vs. Non-Convicted Politicians by Type of Criminal Activity

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Variables</i>					
Drug	-0.0738*** (0.0193)	-0.0755*** (0.0192)	-0.0929*** (0.0192)	-0.0646*** (0.0188)	-0.0859*** (0.0194)
Economic	-0.0958*** (0.0229)	-0.1052*** (0.0230)	-0.1177*** (0.0228)	-0.0935*** (0.0230)	-0.0961*** (0.0237)
Violence	-0.0373 (0.0250)	-0.0403 (0.0249)	-0.0618** (0.0249)	-0.0449* (0.0246)	-0.0734*** (0.0254)
Traffic	-0.0240 (0.0232)	-0.0262 (0.0233)	-0.0482** (0.0230)	-0.0458** (0.0227)	-0.0527** (0.0228)
Other	-0.0005 (0.0305)	0.0000 (0.0305)	-0.0168 (0.0306)	-0.0058 (0.0308)	-0.0122 (0.0316)
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 <sup>2</sup>	0.00740	0.00982	0.01419	0.02525	0.09456
Mean dep. var.	0.5682	0.5682	0.5682	0.5682	0.5682

*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. In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ( $t - 5$  to  $t - 1$ ). We split the sample into two mutually exclusive groups: 1) Candidates who were convicted of having committed a crime ( $N = 2,202$ ), and 2) candidates who were not ( $N = 245,651$ ). Criminal activities are broken down into five mutually exclusive categories. Each estimate represents the difference in the share improving (or maintaining) the ranks due to personal votes between politicians who committed the specific type of crime. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Significance levels: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1

Table A.5: Event Study Regression Table

	Councillor		Mayor	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Variables</i>				
Treated $\times$ t = -5	0.0002 (0.0004)	0.0002 (0.0004)	0.0004 (0.0005)	0.0004 (0.0005)
Treated $\times$ t = -4	0.0004 (0.0005)	0.0004 (0.0005)	-0.0010 (0.0007)	-0.0009 (0.0007)
Treated $\times$ t = -3	-0.0003 (0.0004)	-0.0003 (0.0004)	-0.0002 (0.0006)	-0.0002 (0.0006)
Treated $\times$ t = -2	-0.0004 (0.0004)	-0.0004 (0.0004)	0.0001 (0.0006)	0.0002 (0.0006)
Treated $\times$ t = 0	0.0000 (0.0004)	0.0000 (0.0004)	-0.0005 (0.0006)	-0.0004 (0.0006)
Treated $\times$ t = 1	0.0007 (0.0004)	0.0006 (0.0004)	-0.0014* (0.0007)	-0.0013* (0.0008)
Treated $\times$ t = 2	0.0004 (0.0004)	0.0003 (0.0004)	-0.0004 (0.0006)	-0.0003 (0.0006)
Treated $\times$ t = 3	0.0002 (0.0005)	0.0002 (0.0005)	0.0000 (0.0007)	0.0004 (0.0007)
Treated $\times$ t = 4	0.0005 (0.0005)	0.0005 (0.0005)	-0.0006 (0.0007)	-0.0002 (0.0007)
Treated $\times$ t = 5	0.0001 (0.0004)	0.0001 (0.0004)	-0.0004 (0.0007)	0.0000 (0.0007)
<i>Fixed effects</i>				
Year	Yes		Yes	
Age		Yes		Yes
Gender		Yes		Yes
List-year		Yes		
Municipality-year				Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
Observations	1,743,800	1,743,800	94,436	94,436
R <sup>2</sup>	0.00006	0.01442	0.00031	0.02707

*Notes:* This table contains the estimates of the parameters of interest,  $\beta$ , from Equation 4, along with the 95% confidence intervals. In this Table, criminal involvement is defined as having committed a crime resulting in a court-issued legal sanction within the five years preceding the election year ( $t - 5$  to  $t - 1$ ). Column (1) and (2) reports the estimated treatment effect of being elected for the first time. The treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to local office for the first time in election year  $t = 0$  ( $N = 18,110$ ), while the control group consist of individuals who were nominated in  $t = 0$  but not elected in  $t = 0$  or in any previous year ( $N = 150,614$ ). Column (3) and (4) reports the estimated treatment effect of being elected mayor for the first time. The treatment group consist of individuals who were elected to mayor for the first time in  $t = 0$  ( $N = 780$ ), while the control group consist of individuals who were first-ranked but not elected mayor in year  $t = 0$  or in any previous year ( $N = 8,371$ ). The reference category is event period  $t = -1$ . Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Significance levels: \*\*\*, 0.01, \*\*, 0.05, \*, 0.1

## Appendix B: Overview of court-issued legal sanctions

Appendix Table B.1 reports the 25 most common crimes that resulted in court-issued legal sanctions in 2019 by subgroups of crimes. Driving under the influence (DUI) 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.

While modest speeding as such is considered a minor infringement in Norway, some cases are considered so serious that they end up in court. In 2019, 175,655 cases of speeding resulted in the less severe punishments issued by the police or the public prosecutor's office, highlighting how special the 1,311 cases that ended up in court were. Similarly, minor drug offenses such as possession or personal use are usually punished with a penalty charge notice, whereas more serious offenses such as distribution, import, or possession of large quantities receive punishments issued by the courts.<sup>32</sup>

Appendix Table B.2 summarizes the number of criminal incidents that have led to court-issued legal sanctions in our full sample. The data reveal that imprisonment is the predominant form of punishment, accounting for nearly 50% of all legal penalties handed down by the courts. This table also highlights the variation in sentencing across different types of crimes, providing insight into how the courts punish different offenses. For example, while prison sentences are imposed in 50% of economic crime cases, they are significantly less common in traffic-related offenses, where only 27% of the convictions result in incarceration.

Appendix Table B.3 summarizes the conviction rates for different subgroups of legal sanctions, relative to the year the crime was committed. There are two primary reasons for delays in crime recording. First, certain offenses may go undetected for several years

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<sup>32</sup>Of the 16,026 drug-related crimes in 2019, less than half resulted in a court-issued legal sanction. Of the 4,875 drug-related crimes that were punished according to the penal code of Norway, about half resulted in a court-issued legal sanction. DUI offenses constitute a violation of the Road Traffic Act (*vegtrafikkloven*) but are recorded in the register as drug related crimes. While 858 DUI-offenses resulted in less severe punishments issued by the police or the prosecutor's office in 2019, whereas 3,735 of the DUI-offenses ended up with a court-issued legal sanction. DUI penalties: Fine for blood alcohol concentration (BAC) up to 0.05%, fine with conditional/unconditional imprisonment for BAC between 0.05% and 0.12%, and fine with unconditional imprisonment for BAC over 0.12%.



Table B.1: Top 25 Most Common Offenses in the Norwegian Population (2019)

Main Crime Group	Detailed Description	N
Drugs	Driving under the influence	3,735
Drugs	Drugs, the penal code	2,771
Traffic	Speeding	1,311
Violence	Assault	747
Violence	Violence against an officer	705
Violence	Bodily harm	602
Economic	Fraud	585
Economic	Aggravated fraud	470
Traffic	Other or unspecified breach of the Road Traffic Act	434
Economic	Theft	416
Violence	Threat against an officer	341
Economic	Aggravated theft	329
Other	Obstructing and opposing public authority	301
Traffic	Driving without a valid driver's license	282
Violence	Other or unspecified sexual offence	223
Violence	Rape	221
Other	Document- and ID-breach	218
Violence	Abuse in intimate/familiar relationship	209
Other	Arms, fire and explosives legislation	208
Violence	Reckless behavior and personal harassment	166
Violence	Threat	139
Violence	Robbery	129
Other	Immigration legislation	125
Economic	Accounting violation	121
Economic	Receiving stolen property	119

*Notes: This table presents a summary of the 25 most common offenses that resulted in a court-issued legal sanction in 2019. In total, there were 16,625 offenses that led to a court-issued legal sanction in 2019. The "Main Crime Group" column categorizes the offenses as recorded in the administrative crime register we use in our main analysis. The "Detailed Description" column provides a further breakdown of these crime types using aggregate information from Statistics Norway (<https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/13579/>).*

following their occurrence, or they may only be reported by the victim at a later stage. Second, the legal process involved in resolving crimes can be protracted.<sup>33</sup> In our analysis, we exclude crimes committed in 2022, the final sample year, as the data for that year is likely incomplete.

<sup>33</sup>Bhuller et al. (2024) records an average span of six months from the initial charging of a defendant to the commencement of the court trial. Following this, the average duration for the entire court processing is approximately three months. Moreover, the possibility of appeals can further extend the time before a final verdict is reached.

Table B.2: Summary of reactions for Norwegian population 1998-2021

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

*Notes: This tables summarizes the total number of court-issued legal sanctions from 1998-2021.*

Table B.3: Share Convicted by Year Since Crime was Committed

Type of penalty	t=0	t+1	t+2	t+3	t+4	t+5
Prison	0.27	0.77	0.93	0.97	0.99	0.99
Probation	0.28	0.79	0.93	0.98	0.99	0.99
Community punishment	0.23	0.73	0.92	0.98	0.99	1.00
Other type of reaction	0.11	0.63	0.87	0.94	0.97	0.98
Penalty by judgment	0.28	0.80	0.95	0.99	1.00	1.00

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