

# Information, Candidate Selection, and the Quality of Representation: Evidence from Nepal

Short title: Information, Candidate Selection, & Quality of Rep

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## Abstract

How do we improve the quality of representation in new democracies? This paper studies candidate selection by party leaders and asks whether poor information about public preferences can lead elite choices to diverge from mass opinion. Working with a political party in Nepal, we show that while elites value voter preferences, these preferences only explain one-third of elite candidate selection. Next, we embed an experiment in actual candidate selection deliberations for this party and find that party leaders not only select different candidates when polling data are presented to them, but that their updated decisions also improve the party's vote share. By opening the black-box of candidate selection, this paper demonstrates that closing the information gap between elites and voters has the power to improve the quality of representation.

Key words: Information, Candidate Selection, Representation, Party Politics, Elections, Polling.

*(a) Supplementary materials are available in an online appendix; (b) replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse; (c) the human subjects components of this study received institutional review board approval from Stanford University; (d) the authors worked as unpaid consultants for the political party to carry out this research.*

# 1 Introduction

While selecting candidates for the upcoming local elections, the Kailali District Committee of the Nepali Congress party faced a difficult choice about who should receive the party's nomination. Party leaders had forwarded the District Committee a ranked list of eight prospective candidates for the Ward Chair position in the Tikapur municipality. Of the top-ranked choices, one prospective candidate had greater family wealth, while the other had served the party longer. Giving the nomination to the former would mean the campaign would be better funded, but the more experienced candidate would perhaps not need as much money to convince voters that the Nepali Congress was the right choice for them. The District Committee struggled to decide which candidate would maximize the party's chances of victory and best serve the Tikapur municipality.

Parties in new democracies often face problems of this sort while nominating candidates with relatively limited information about them. Evidence to date shows that candidate selection is often the product of backroom deals where a small political elite in a 'smoke-filled' room curates the electoral ballot by choosing who is awarded the party's nomination.<sup>1</sup> How well elites perform this job determines the party's electoral success and policy influence. This elite-driven candidate selection has a direct bearing on the quality of representation as those not on the ballot cannot be voted into office by voters. This is particularly important in new democracies where entrenched interests can distort systems of representation (Ichino and Nathan, 2013; Cruz, Labonne, and Querubin, 2017; Auerbach and Thachil, 2018; Gulzar and Khan, 2018; Dunning and Harrison, 2010; Schneider, 2019; Liaqat, 2019; Stokes, 2005).

We show that even in entrenched low-information political systems a better information environment has the potential to improve the way candidate selection works. With public opinion data, party elites choose candidates that are different from their status-quo choices. This improves the party's electoral performance by providing voters candidates on the ballot they otherwise would

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<sup>1</sup>Some democracies employ primaries to reduce reliance on elites (Ichino and Nathan, 2013), but research suggests that even the primary election institution carries costs in terms of nominating extremists (Hall, 2015), or that even in the presence of primaries, the party elite's nod matters the most in who shows up on the ballot (Cohen et al., 2009; Hassell, 2017).

not have seen. Our results show that systems of elite-driven candidate selection are potentially malleable, and that bridging information gaps between elites and voters in nascent democracies can significantly improve the quality of representation (Norris, 1997; Diamond and Morlino, 2005; Dahl, 1973; Lipset, 1959).

We document these effects through a field experiment that is embedded in actual candidate selection deliberations of a political party in Nepal (Wantchekon, 2003). Recent work takes a top-down approach in examining party elites' preferences over candidates (Broockman et al., 2019; Auerbach and Thachil, 2019), or uses a bottom-up approach in trying to understand voter preferences over political elites (Auerbach and Thachil, 2018; Carnes and Lupu, 2016). We combine these two approaches by studying how elite preferences update in light of mass preferences over candidates, thereby shedding light on the 'blackbox' of party deliberations on candidates that typically remain hidden to researchers (Green, Ha, and Bullock, 2010). In this sense, we provide the first evidence of how changes in candidate selection procedures of a party can directly impact its electoral performance as well as giving voters a chance to elect someone they prefer.

Candidate selection is a complex decision problem for political elites. Research shows that elites rely on a host of signals to make these choices: they choose candidates accounting for voter preference for co-ethnics (Dunning and Harrison, 2010), they reward loyalty to the party with nominations (Auerbach and Thachil, 2019), and they carry out assessments of who is able to fund a campaign (Vaishnav, 2017). When balancing these different concerns, it is not obvious that elite preferences should align with voter preferences. We outline two theoretical explanations for the deviation. First, it could be the case that deviations from public opinion are the result of a deliberate electoral strategy undertaken by party leaders to improve the electoral performance of the party (McCarty, 2015; Hacker and Pierson, 2006). On the other hand, it could be the case that party elites *want* to align their decisions with public opinion, but the information available to them is deficient (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildemberger, and Stokes, 2018). Indeed, recent work from India and developing democracies like Pakistan shows that political elites imperfectly identify partisans (Schneider, 2019) and their policy preferences (Liaqat, 2019). Even in relatively high information environments like the United States and other advanced democracies, party elites do not understand public opin-

ion with high accuracy (Broockman and Skovron, 2018), exhibit behavioral biases when making decisions (Sheffer et al., 2018), and are unwilling to correct their misperception of public opinion when given the chance (Kalla and Porter, 2019). Even when party elites want to align their views with the electorate's, a discrepancy may still arise: research shows that typical ways of constituent outreach can be biased, with often the loudest getting the most attention (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Fenno, 1977; MacGuffie, 2009; Bussell, 2019).

If the effects of the first interpretation dominate, then public opinion data should have no impact on candidate selection as party leaders have all information they need to optimize their decisions effectively. If the second interpretation is dominant, then public opinion should bring leader selection closer to citizen preferences, and improve the party's electoral performance because voters can now vote for candidates that they prefer over status-quo candidates.

We work with leaders from a political party in Nepal during the process of candidate selection for the local government elections of 2017. Nepal can be characterized as a case of early development of an electoral system, where limited and deficient information available to party elites may contribute significantly to divergent candidate choices between elites and voters. First, we obtain from party leaders a ranked list of all people they are considering for the party nomination for a particular race, but on whom a decision is not yet taken.<sup>2</sup> The ranking represents the party's expectation of who is likely to be awarded the party ticket for that particular seat. It also provides us with the feasible set of candidates for that position. We compare this ranked list with citizen preferences that are collected through a poll of the electorate. The poll asks voters who they are most likely to vote for from the set of potential candidates identified by the party leaders.

With this information in hand, we first describe status-quo candidate selection. Research shows that while party elites incorporate public opinion in their decisions,<sup>3</sup> key deviations from the preferences of voters may still exist. Our data allow us to make significant progress on this descriptive

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<sup>2</sup>In South Asia, receiving a party nomination is called receiving the party 'ticket'.

<sup>3</sup>For instance, canonical models view parties as representing the median voter (Downs, 1957), empirical work suggests that party elites respond to information on citizen preferences (Bergan, 2009; Butler and Nickerson, 2011).

question that is ordinarily hard to study, especially in the context of candidate selection. First, we are able to observe the full set of feasible candidates which usual election data do not record because party elite preferences are typically unknown. Second, we observe party *and* voter rankings over this feasible set of candidates, allowing us to study deviations. Third, through the survey of prospective candidates, we are able to control for several candidate characteristics that might be important to political party leaders when deciding whom to award party tickets to. We find that, even with all these controls, the most important predictor of a party nomination is citizen preference which means that party leaders value public opinion. However, citizen preferences only predict a third of the nominations, suggesting that there is scope to improve candidate selection to be closer in line with citizen preferences.

Can public opinion data improve candidate selection procedures or is the deviation we observe the result of strategic misalignment by the elites? We make progress on this question by embedding a field experiment directly in the candidate selection process of the party. This allows us to observe real-world behavior and electoral outcomes with actual stakes. We experimentally provide information before candidate selection deliberations to party leaders on how voters rank the prospective candidates.

We report three results. First, we show that providing information on voter ranking changes the actual ticket allocation behavior of party leaders: leaders are more likely to pick people who were not their top preference ex-ante. Second, we find that that this effect is strongest for races where elite priors and voter rankings have large differences, suggesting that information matters most when it is most surprising. Finally, we show that presenting information on voter rankings to party elites has a large *positive* effect on the party's electoral performance: the vote share goes by up 3.7 percentage points, a large increase over their baseline vote share of 19.7 percent. This final result is important because it shows that closer correspondence between elite behavior and public opinion has the potential of improving the electoral performance of the party as well as aligning who is elected to office with voters' preferences – factors that together improve the quality of representation.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the the status-quo candi-

date selection procedure in Nepal, embedding the discussion in our theoretical setup. Section 3 presents empirical correlates of status-quo candidate selection. In Section 4 we describe the field experiment, while Section 5 presents the results. We conclude in Section 6.

## **2 Status-quo Candidate Selection in Nepal**

In this section, we describe the details of our case, provide the logic of elite-driven candidate selection in nascent democracies, and provide descriptive data on how candidate selection works in our case. We document that there exists a preference gap in candidate selection between party leaders and the electorate.

### **2.1 The Organization of Candidate Selection in Parties**

Nepal is a multi-party democratic republic, with eight main parties competing in the recent elections.<sup>4</sup> The second largest of the three main parties, the Nepali Congress, was formed in 1946 around the time of the country's transition from absolute rule to constitutional democracy and has remained a major electoral competitor since then. In the 1999 legislative elections, the latest federal election preceding the 2017 local elections that we study in this paper, the Nepali Congress won a plurality of 37.2% of votes for seats in the House of Representatives. After the 2017 legislative elections, the Nepali Congress is the main opposition party with 32.8% of the votes. Political parties exercise considerable influence over local politics, with the distribution of development and education funds, for example, being allocated according to priorities of political parties that have influence in a given region (Carter Center, 2011).

Our fieldwork was conducted before the 2017 local government elections in Nepal. These were mandated by the new 2015 constitution of Nepal and were part of a range of government reforms in the wake of the Nepalese Civil War (1996-2006) and subsequent transition from a constitutional monarchy to a federal parliamentary republic (see Muni (2015) for an overview). The constitution established four types of local government bodies: the municipality, the rural municipality, the

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<sup>4</sup>Khalid, Saif, and Alia Chughtai. "Nepal Elections Explained." Elections 2017- Al Jazeera, 7 Dec. 2017, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/11/nepal-elections-2017-explained-171126103009857.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/11/nepal-elections-2017-explained-171126103009857.html).

sub-metropolitan city, and the metropolitan city. Our experiment was conducted in the Kailali district in the western province number 7 of Nepal. We worked in 3 out of thirteen municipalities within Kailali.<sup>5</sup>

Each of the municipal level local government bodies are made up of wards, where elections are held for seats/races at both the municipality and the ward level. We focus on ward level elections where multi-member councils are elected by voters. Election for each ward council are conducted for two broad types of races: the ward chair and the ward member. The ward member races are further sub-divided into two general member seats, a seat reserved for women, and a seat reserved for Dalit (a historically marginalized caste) women. Elections for all positions are conducted at-large. Political parties nominate a person to contest elections for each race separately. Voters cast one ballot for each of the five races in the ward council elections: ward chairperson, ward female member, ward dalit female member, ward member, and a second ward member.

In the majority of democracies, candidate selection works through party leaders rather than primaries.<sup>6</sup> The preferences of party elites therefore play a key role in who is able to contest an election (Cohen et al., 2009; Chandra, 2000; Hassell, 2017). The Nepali Congress awards party tickets using multiple tiers of party leadership, which is similar to many political parties in South Asia more broadly. The names of prospective candidates progress from party committees at the ward level (called ‘ward committee’) to the party committee at the district level (hereafter the ‘district

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<sup>5</sup>We chose Kailali due to prior connections to the party in the district. Although the party did not guide our selection of district, differences between Kailali and other parts of Nepal are relevant for external validity. In Appendix Section A.1 we present more details the salient features of Kailali district, and discuss why our findings may travel to other multi-party democracies.

<sup>6</sup>Broadly, candidate selection theories can be binned into four groups (Smith, 2018, p. 75-103). The first refers to the supply of candidates — factors related to reasons why people themselves decide to enter public life. A second relates to the systemic factors such as the rule of the electoral system that make it hard or easy for certain types of candidates to emerge. The third theory has to do with individual level factors like whether one’s relatives are have been office (Querubin et al., 2016). The final, which comprises the focus of this paper, is about how political elites select candidates.



committee'), which makes the final decision to award party tickets.<sup>7</sup> Initially, prospective candidates for ward-level posts are ranked by ward committees. If a committee selects more than one candidate for a ward-level seat, the list of prospective candidates is sent to higher party bodies until a decision is made.

## 2.2 Balancing Multiple Objectives in Candidate Selection

Party elites typically balance a host of concerns when deciding on party nominations. In our setting, local leaders in-charge of selecting candidates receive broad strategic directives from senior leaders. While such directives are usually unobserved to researchers, during fieldwork we discovered that the third largest party in Nepal, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) – CPN(M), which was a part of the Left coalition government in Nepal at the federal level in 2017, produced a document that provides details of their strategic objectives from the candidate selection procedure.<sup>8</sup> The CPN(M) circular notes that: “In places where we are indifferent on winning or losing or in places where our defeat is certain, is it important for us to forward our candidate for the sole reason of forwarding our ideological political agenda or to protect our voters and organizations?” This position is congruent with research that suggests that party leaders may choose to forgo more competent candidates in favor of loyal ones (Auerbach and Thachil, 2019), or those that may best represent the party’s ideological position to voters.

Besides a history of service to the party, leaders may also be looking for candidates who will do a good job on policy once in office. Such candidates may solidify the party’s position in the long term by delivering on the party’s policy agenda. The CPN(M) notes that a good candidate should be capable of “building and leading a local government body which is capable of exercising its democratic rights and which will carry out development activities.” It further notes in the ‘criteria

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<sup>7</sup>We obtained details of the party’s selection procedure through detailed interviews with leaders. As the selection procedure is not formally codified, we obtained the relevant details in our conversations with the party leaders.

<sup>8</sup>Note that the CPN(M) party is different from the Nepali Congress. While, our fieldwork is with the Nepali Congress, understanding the kinds of directives issued in our setting is instructive of the broader concerns that political elites have.

for selecting a candidate' that "The candidate who is capable of: i. applying our party policies, programs and directions; ii. expanding the organizational structure of the party and creating a support base for our party among the people of the area" should be selected.

The above is just a partial list of factors considered by party leaders when selecting candidates. All such potential gains and losses to the party are scaled by the probability that the chosen prospective candidate is going to win the election (Broockman et al., 2019; Smith and Tsutsumi, 2016). For example, the Indian National Congress increasingly gave tickets to criminals as the party's grasp over politics weakened presumably because of their ability to win (Vaishnav, 2017). Electability is important even in the Nepali context. The first section of the CPN(M) circular is titled "Matters to be considered before selecting a local level candidate." The first point under this section asks the selection committee to consider the following: "Is it certain that our party will win the local election in the local unit in which the candidate is to be nominated?" Based on several years of work with parties in Nepal, we are confident that similar concerns determine how candidate selection operates across most mainstream parties in the country.<sup>9</sup>

Given these multiple concerns, one way to conceptualize the party's decision problem is to assume that the party wants to maximize its overall utility from the process of candidate selection. In doing so, party elites use their expert judgement about potential candidates and make inferences for how candidates may reflect the interests of the party once in office (Stone and Abramowitz, 1983). We outline a simple framework that helps elucidate the complicated candidate selection decision process. The party's expected utility from selecting candidate  $i$  is:

$$EU_i = \underbrace{p_i}_{\substack{\text{probability } i \\ \text{will win if} \\ \text{selected}}} * \underbrace{v(X_i)}_{\substack{\text{value from } i \\ \text{being in of-} \\ \text{fice}}} + \underbrace{n(X_i)}_{\substack{\text{value purely} \\ \text{from selecting } i}}$$

Here,  $X_i = (x_1, x_2, \dots, x_k)$  is a vector of candidate  $i$ 's characteristics, and  $v(X_i)$  is the value the

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<sup>9</sup>Indeed, a post-project de-briefing with a central committee member, and former Minister, of the Nepali Congress on June 12, 2018 confirmed that the party balanced these multiple concerns and was interested in aligning its selection more with citizen demands. During this meeting, the party leader also expressed an interest in scaling up the experiment we describe below nation-wide.

party gets from  $i$  being in office. For instance, these can relate to policy pay-offs from nominating someone ideologically close to the party.  $n(X_i)$  captures the value from simply selecting  $i$  to be the party's candidate for a race, but has nothing to do with the candidate's value as an elected official. This can be thought of as the party's value of rewarding a loyal member or a member of a preferred social group. In this way, this utility function captures two important interests of party elites, which could be complementary or competing.<sup>10</sup>

$p_i$ , the probability that  $i$  will win if selected, is an equilibrium object that includes the reactions of other parties to the selection of  $i$  as the party's preferred candidate for office. This framework therefore captures the multi-party setting of Nepal. Notice that as  $p_i$  increases, so does the importance of the value from the candidate once in office ( $v(X_i)$ ) relative to the value from simply selecting a particular candidate ( $n(X_i)$ ). This has implications for the types of candidates selected.

Given this set up, how will party leaders decide to allocate tickets? For two potential prospective candidates  $i$  and  $j$ , the party will prefer  $i$  if  $EU_i > EU_j$ . There might be many reasons for preferring one potential candidate over another, and considerations of greater electability and value from a candidate being in office might be tempered by rival considerations of rewarding a party member with specific characteristics like loyalty.

### 2.3 Party leaders' perception of public opinion

We are also interested in incorporating the strategic and behavioral concerns of party elites in our framework. In their classic article on constituency influence, Miller and Stokes argue that one way of conceptualizing a political party is through the idea that political elites hold "perception[s] of constituency's attitudes" and that these perceptions can differ from constituents' true attitudes (1963, p.50). Indeed there is also recent evidence for this from developing and advanced democracies on how political elites imperfectly identify partisans (Schneider, 2019) and the constituents' policy preferences (Liaqat, 2019; Gulzar and Khan, 2018; Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Sheffer et al., 2018).

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<sup>10</sup>Specifically, if  $sign(\frac{\partial v}{\partial X_i}) = sign(\frac{\partial n}{\partial X_i})$ , the two interests are complementary, while if  $sign(\frac{\partial v}{\partial X_i}) \neq sign(\frac{\partial n}{\partial X_i})$ , the two interest are competing.

How can we integrate divergent leader *perceptions* about mass opinion in the framework we outlined earlier? We introduce a temporal dimension to the party's strategic decision-making. Let us assume that elections are held at time  $t$  and leaders select candidates at preceding time  $t - 1$ . Let  $p_{i,t}$  be the expected probability of election for a candidate  $i$  given voter preferences on election day,  $t$ . Let  $p_{i,t-1}$  be the expected probability of  $i$  winning given voter preferences at the time of candidate selection,  $t - 1$ .<sup>11</sup>

Consider the situation where the party's valuations from two candidates  $i$  and  $j$  are equal such that  $v(X_i) = v(X_j)$  and  $n(X_i) = n(X_j)$ . Then the party's decision boils down to selecting candidate  $i$  if the leaders' beliefs about the probability of candidate  $i$  winning at candidate selection time are higher for  $i$  than  $j$ . We denote these party leader beliefs by  $p'$  such that  $i$  is preferred over  $j$  when  $p'_{i,t-1} > p'_{j,t-1}$ .

There are at least two possible interpretations of the case where party leaders' candidate selection behavior may seem to deviate from what  $p_{i,t-1}$  dictates at candidate selection time. A first interpretation, that we label **strategic deviation**, is that party leaders have private information which they use to deliberately deviate from actions that a simple calculation would suggest (McCarty, 2015; Hacker and Pierson, 2006). More formally, this can be denoted by party leaders holding beliefs that differ from voter preferences such that  $p'_{i,t-1} \neq p_{i,t-1}$ . They might hold such beliefs because they expect  $p_{i,t-1}$  to not be equal to  $p_{i,t}$ . This is not surprising; party elites are domain experts on politics and potentially carry a superior understanding of strategic choices other parties are likely to make during the campaign. We should therefore *expect* them to exercise their judgement and adjust their expected utility calculations.

As an illustration, consider the case where party leaders are good strategists who take actions as best responses. It may be the case that changing their own candidate to one that voters prefer could elicit a response by other parties' campaigns such that the new candidate party leaders chose is no a longer the winning candidate. Similarly, party leaders may have superior knowledge of the

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<sup>11</sup>We can think of  $p_{i,t-1}$  as an unbiased measure of the expected probability that a candidate  $i$  will win on election day given how all actors are acting as of  $t - 1$ . A public opinion poll could be one estimator for this probability.

electoral landscape and expect that key events will shape public opinion in a way that the public's preferred candidate right now may not end up being the preferred candidate on election day.

A second interpretation of why party leaders' candidate selection might diverge from voter preferences, which we label **uninformed leader deviation**, is that leaders have a biased perception about the electability of prospective candidates, that is  $p'_{i,t-1} \neq p_{i,t-1}$  and  $p_{i,t-1} = p_t$ . This is not surprising in nascent democracies where we would expect party leaders to have limited means of ascertaining how voters' preferences work. Recent research suggests that political elites can carry a biased understanding of public opinion in the context of issue positions (Schneider, 2019; Liaqat, 2019; Broockman and Skovron, 2018), and that the polity might have distinct preferences for political leaders (Auerbach and Thachil, 2018). This problem is likely compounded in developing countries, where polling information about voter preferences is often unreliable or unavailable (Fenno, 1977; MacGuffie, 2009; Bussell, 2019; Butler and Nickerson, 2011).

In reality, deviations may be the result of a combination of strategic and uninformed decisions by party leaders. To better tease apart which of these might explain the deviation we observe in our data, we conduct a field experiment where we estimate the effect of providing information about voter preferences over prospective candidates to party leaders. We collect this information through a public opinion poll, which we can think of as an unbiased estimator of the probability of election at candidate selection time,  $\hat{p}_{t-1}$ .

If the party's decisions to deviate from voter preferences are purely strategic, additional information should not influence the party's candidacy choices. However, to the extent that deviations from voter preferences reflect a lack of information about what voters prefer, we should observe candidate selection to respond to information about voter preferences. In this case, information has an important role to play in improving the quality of representation in nascent democracies.

## 2.4 When will party leaders update their nomination decisions?

If leaders do update their decisions in light of new information, under what conditions are they more likely to more likely to do so? Recent literature stresses the importance of priors in understanding the effects of information (Adida et al., 2017; Arias et al., 2018; Dunning et al., 2019).

Suppose, using these priors, the party ranks prospective candidates  $S = \{i, j, k\}$  for a particular seat/race  $s$  as  $\{\mathbf{r}\}_S = \{r_i^1, r_j^2, r_k^3\}$  if  $p'_i > p'_j > p'_k$ . In any given time period, the party updates this ranking given signals it receives from the world. For a candidate selection period  $t - 1$ , other differences between candidates being equal, we can reasonably assume that the party wishes to align its preference ranks with those of voters. We can express this by the party choosing new ranks  $\{\mathbf{r}\}_{S,t-1}$  to solve  $\min \left[ \sum_S -(p'_{t-2} - \hat{p}_{t-1})^2 \right]$ . That is, the party chooses new ranks by minimizing the distance between its own ex-ante evaluations ( $p'_{t-2}$ ) and those of voters ( $\hat{p}_{t-1}$ ) that it observes. The substantive interpretation of the quadratic functional form of this distance we assume is standard: the party loses more by ranking a candidate high when voters really are unlikely to vote for them. Conversely, the loss is much smaller if the deviation is small.

In the experiment detailed below, we present the party with voter rankings that approximate a signal of new probabilities  $\{\hat{p}\}_S$ . We expect the party to update its nomination decisions more for races where the sum of the quadratic distance between the voter ranks and the party's initial ranks is higher versus races where the deviation is small.

### 3 Empirical Estimation of the Correlates of Baseline Selection

#### 3.1 New data on elite and citizen preferences

Given the simple theoretical setup, we now bring to bear new data to describe the correlates of candidate selection in the status-quo system in our empirical setting. With the blessing of central party leadership, our team met with local local Nepali Congress leaders in Kailali on April 14th and 15th 2017 to discuss candidate selection for the upcoming elections. In close collaboration with the party, we collected data from three sources.

**Party Leaders' Priors** Our first aim is to understand existing preferences of political elites. To do this, on April 18th 2017, we obtained a ranked list of all the people party leaders were considering giving tickets to. We label this set the 'prospective candidates'. These lists were compiled by ward committees and sent up the party organization to the regional committee, the point at which we gain access to them, suggesting that the exercise was part of the party's routine process and that

the list was drawn carefully. In total, 166 prospective candidates were ranked for an average of 3.2 prospective candidates per seat.<sup>12</sup> This initial ranking provides an overview of the relative position of each of the candidates in the eyes of the party prior to treatment. These preferences are typically unobserved in studies of candidate selection.

**The Prospective Candidate Survey** Next, we collect data on the prospective candidates so that we can measure factors that are important to party elites when deciding who should receive the nomination. We recruited 13 local enumerators associated with the Nepal Student Union, a student wing of the Nepali Congress, and interviewed all prospective candidates who were being considered by the party for a possible nomination between 24th April and 3rd May 2017.<sup>13</sup> This feature of the experiment makes it particularly relevant to real world applications as political parties often engage their local workers to carry out surveying activities and other data gathering tasks. The district committee leaders of Nepali Congress suggested that using student members of the party would help establish trust with prospective candidates, and would be closer to how party leaders would carry out such activities in practice. The survey recorded various demographic and party-related characteristics of the prospective candidates. It was designed in close consultation with party leaders, where an effort was made to measure variables that are relevant to the party's candidate selection decisions.

**The Public Opinion Poll** Finally, we want to understand the degree to which elite preferences overlap with those of the electorate, where the preferences of the electorate are assumed to provide a proxy for the term  $p_{t-1}$ . Concurrent to the candidate survey, our enumerators surveyed a random sample of voters in the wards where the experiment took place. Every tenth household within a ward was visited by an enumerator and a randomly selected voter within the household was

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<sup>12</sup>Two prospective candidates withdrew before the nomination process, so we drop them from the experimental analysis.

<sup>13</sup>The enumerators were unable to survey five of the prospective candidates, due to either unwillingness of the prospective candidate to participate or absence from their residence. We therefore retain information on 161 of the 166 prospective candidates in the sample.

interviewed and asked to pick their top choice among all the prospective candidates the Nepali Congress was considering for each seat in the ward. We use the number of votes received by a prospective candidate to construct a ward-seat specific ‘voter rank’ for each prospective candidate: the prospective candidate for a race who received the most votes is ranked first and so on.

In total, 7309 voters were surveyed in the 21 wards in which we conducted the experiment for an average of 348 polled voters per race. This ranking provided us with a measure of the electability of a prospective candidate. 166 prospective candidates are considered for 52 seats for an average of 3.19 prospective candidates per seat.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2 Elite Preference and Public Opinion (Mis)alignment

While the classic political science question of whether elite preferences match mass preferences has been tackled in various contexts before, including identification of partisans (Schneider, 2019), the identity of elites and the electorate (Thachil, 2014) and policy congruence (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Liaqat, 2019; Broockman and Skovron, 2018), we know relatively little about this in the context of candidate selection. Perhaps the reason for limited work here is that answering this question with data is tough as we never observe the preferences of party leaders *and* voters over the entire set of feasible candidates who are actually under consideration for a nomination by party elites.

Yet, gathering evidence on this descriptive question is important because preference divergence in issue positions between elites and the public could be emerging *through* the candidate selection route. That is, it could be the case that party leaders are putting on the ballot people that are not representative of the preferences of the broader electorate and, as a consequence, voters are unable to vote people who match their preferences into office (Carnes and Lupu, 2016).

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<sup>14</sup>Survey respondents seemed readily willing to identify their top choice, suggesting that they held relatively strong preferences over candidates. Although we do not know the full extent of voter knowledge of prospective candidates, we can compare their ranking behavior to the benchmark of voters who are randomly guessing. On average, the top ranked person received 11.5% more votes than the second top ranked person, a difference that is highly unlikely if voters were randomly guessing. This is shown through a simple simulation exercise: we estimate that 348 voters randomly choosing between 3 prospective candidates will feature a difference at least this large 0.1% of the time. See Appendix Section A.2 for further details.



Our data allow us to explore the degree to which elite and mass preferences overlap in addition to examining the general correlates of candidate selection. Controlling for the type of seat, we find that the rank correlation between the party ranking and voter ranking is 0.35 ( $t = 4.94$ ). This suggests that the party and voter preferences over candidates were aligned to a certain extent, though far from perfectly. We make progress on this question by analyzing our unique data on voter and party ranks over the feasible set of candidates. We use regression of the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{RankedFirstParty}_{i,s} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{RankedFirstVoters}_{i,s} + \beta_2 \text{Demographics}_{i,s} + \\ & \beta_3 \text{PartyHistory}_{i,s} + \beta_4 \text{Competence}_{i,s} + \alpha_s + \epsilon_{i,s} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  indexes prospective candidates and  $s$  indexes a seat.  $\alpha_s$  is a seat type fixed effect that absorbs common shocks that might affect the chairperson seat differently than regular member seats for example. *RankedFirstParty* is an indicator for whether a prospective candidate was ranked 1st by the party at the initial party ranking exercise. 85 percent of those the party ranked first end up receiving the nomination in the status quo. In this sense, the initial ranking is a good measure of the elites' true preferences. The equivalent measure on the voters' side is *RankedFirstVoters* which is an indicator for whether a prospective candidate was ranked first by voters in his or her district, as measured by the voter survey.<sup>15</sup> Therefore,  $\beta_1$  captures the percentage of voters' top ranked prospective candidates that the party also had ranked as their top choice.

Table 1 shows that the person preferred by the voters is likely to match the party's top ranked candidate in only a third of the cases, even when we control for factors that party leaders say are important in their candidate selection procedures.<sup>16</sup> Since the prospective candidate survey was designed in consultation with party leaders, we are able to control for prospective candidate characteristics that are relevant for the decision. These controls include *Demographics* <sub>$i,s$</sub> , *PartyHistory* <sub>$i,s$</sub> , and *Competence* <sub>$i,s$</sub> . Adding all controls increases the coefficient of  $\beta_1$  from 0.239 to 0.306 suggesting that they account for some of the information that party leaders use,

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<sup>15</sup>For the 'member' position, the top two are coded as 1 in both variables as there are two 'member' seats in each ward for which the ticket allocation is decided jointly as described above.

<sup>16</sup>In Table A10, we recode the ranked first variables to the actual ranks and find similar results.

though the correlation remains far from suggesting the leader and voter preferences match.<sup>17</sup>

Table 1: Correlates of Candidate Nominations

	Dependent Variable: Ranked 1st by Party?				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Polling Information</i>					
Ranked 1st by Voters	0.239** (0.091)	0.224** (0.099)	0.248** (0.101)	0.285** (0.106)	0.306** (0.105)
<i>Demographics:</i>					
Age		0.002 (0.004)	0.005 (0.006)	0.003 (0.005)	0.009 (0.007)
Female		0.034 (0.333)	-0.074 (0.294)	0.054 (0.344)	-0.065 (0.286)
<i>Party History:</i>					
Years in Party			-0.004 (0.005)		-0.007 (0.005)
Committee Member?			0.033 (0.089)		0.070 (0.091)
Have any Relatives Contested in an Election?			-0.151 (0.091)		-0.115 (0.098)
Are any Relatives in Politics?			0.080 (0.081)		0.132 (0.092)
<i>Competence:</i>					
In a Business Profession?				-0.003 (0.097)	-0.009 (0.099)
Log(Income)				-0.034 (0.049)	-0.028 (0.049)
Highest Level of Education				0.011 (0.011)	0.012 (0.010)
Constant	0.237*** (0.034)	0.160 (0.178)	0.112 (0.194)	0.268 (0.568)	0.088 (0.556)
Seat FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
# Unique Ward-Seat Types	40	40	40	37	37
# Nominees	166	161	160	132	132
R squared	0.087	0.082	0.103	0.131	0.167

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . The unit of analysis in all columns is a prospective candidate. The outcome is a binary variable denoting whether the prospective candidate was the top ranked choice of the party. Standard errors are clustered at the unique ward-seat type level, and reported in parentheses. The highest level of education variable is the highest number of years of formal education attained (including passing that year's final exams).

The patterns in the data thus far suggest the strongest predictor of status-quo party nomination is the electability of the person being considered. This relationship is robust to including a host of controls that the party elites *themselves* have said are important in their decision calculus. Yet, the

<sup>17</sup>In appendix A.9 we test whether the weak explanatory power of the **Demographics**<sub>*i,s*</sub>, **PartyHistory**<sub>*i,s*</sub>, and **Competence**<sub>*i,s*</sub> variables are due to their explanatory power being absorbed by the 'Ranked 1st by Voters' Variable. Although these voter ranking does seem to be predicted by these controls, a regression of 'Ranked 1st by Party' on **Demographics**<sub>*i,s*</sub>, **PartyHistory**<sub>*i,s*</sub>, and **Competence**<sub>*i,s*</sub> (omitting voter ranking) shows that these variables on their own also fail to significantly predict being ranked 1st by the party. Nevertheless, we must be cautious in interpreting the lack of statistical significance of these variables. It is possible that these features matter for party leaders and that the party used these characteristics to decide who makes it to this stage of candidate selection in the first place.

correlation remains weak.<sup>18</sup>

A natural question is whether the weak correlation we observe in the data indicates a *low* correspondence between party and voter choices. For instance, it could be the case that the party leaders prefer to align their decisions to the preferences of partisans or swing voters, instead of the ‘average’ voter (Stokes, 2005; Liaqat, 2019). This would mean that the correlations above are biased downwards. However, there are three issues with conducting a poll of only partisans or swing voters: first, the poll itself could affect people’s partisan identity<sup>19</sup>; second, it is difficult to separate party and personal voters; and third, the party may also care about turnout and not just who the partisans are, and the decision to turnout itself will be affected by who the party chooses as a candidate. Because the decision to engage with specific voters may itself affect outcomes directly, independent of changes in candidates on the ballot, we chose to run the simplest poll of getting the average voter’s preferences.<sup>20</sup>

However, we are able to compare our correlations to *one* benchmark: random selection.<sup>21</sup> If we divide the number of seats by the number of prospective candidates, we get the probability that a person who is randomly assigning prospective candidates to seats would successfully identify voters’ first preference. This probability equals 31.3 percent, which is about the same as the probability that party elites’ top candidate corresponds to the first preference of voters. Given this comparison to the random benchmark, we conclude that the correlation between party and voter ranks is potentially low. In a world where we view party leaders as stand-ins for the electorate, this low correlation signals that leaders are unable to reproduce voter preferences when selecting candidates.

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<sup>18</sup>In Appendix Table A12 we also probe whether the party’s choices differ when the *strength* of voter preferences change. Although we lack sufficient power to draw strong conclusions from that exercise, the results suggests that the correlations are weaker for people who voters prefer more strongly and vice versa.

<sup>19</sup>This concern is differenced out in the experiment below.

<sup>20</sup>There are no previous experiments on candidate selection with a polling treatment to provide guidance on this issue. To the extent that the correlation is biased downwards, the experimental effects below should also be biased downwards.

<sup>21</sup>Recently, Liaqat (2019) compares politician knowledge against this benchmark.

## 4 Embedding an Experiment in Party Deliberations

This section describes an information field experiment that was embedded in the actual candidate selection deliberations of the Nepali Congress before the local government elections in 2017. The experiment tests if an improved information environment through the provision of public opinion data can improve the quality of representation in democracies like Nepal via candidate selection.

Under the assumption that public opinion approximates the voters' perceptions of electability ( $p_{i,t-1}$ ), any change in leader behavior can be ascribed to the changes in the expected utility calculation induced by changes in these perceptions. If elite decisions are completely explained by the first interpretation, that we called strategic deviation, the provision of public opinion information should have no effect on party leader behavior. This is because, all else equal, party leaders' decisions are already optimizing expected utility based on a strategic (deviated) understanding of the probability of election. On the contrary, if the second interpretation, called uninformed leader, explains leader behavior, there is scope to improve the representativeness of democracy simply by removing the informational asymmetries through the provision of public opinion data to party leaders. This is because under this interpretation, party leaders *want* to align their actions with what the public opinion would dictate but are unable to do so because of the information they possess.

**Implementation:** We work in the district of Kailali, where we consider candidate selection for ward level electoral races. We construct our main treatment of interest ('polling information') using information from citizen polling as described above. This comprises the presentation of *evaluation forms* that report to party leaders their initial ranks as well as voter ranks over all prospective candidates at the time of candidate selection deliberations. A prospective candidate's party loyalty and competence also emerged as potentially important considerations in our pilot work with party leaders. We therefore also created parallel treatments that presented data on these dimensions to the party. Specifically, the 'party loyalty information' treatment consisted of information about a prospective candidate's length of party service, current position within the party (if any), and family connections to the party. The 'competence information' treatment consisted of information

about education, electoral experience, what issues the prospective candidate thinks are salient for constituents, and how he or she plans to address them. As the experiment is not pre-registered, we report results on all three treatments in our tables below. Figure 1 shows an example of an evaluation form for a prospective candidate receiving all three treatments.

		FirstName LastName
Polling Information	Party Ranking:	3
	Voters Ranking:	3
Party Loyalty Information	Party Service:	28 years
	Current Position:	No
	Family Members in Politics:	No
Competence Information	Education:	Bachelor's, Management
	Contested in Previous Election:	No
	Requirement of People:	Bridge, Road, Public Toilet, Other normal Infrastructure.
	Ways to address:	Work as per the policy of party and Nepal Government.

Figure 1: **Party Evaluation Form** - Forms like this were presented to the party leaders when they were deciding whom to allocate tickets to. Actual forms were presented in Nepali and the group labels were not included.

We briefed and handed over the prepared candidate evaluation forms after the randomization (described below) to the District Secretary of the party. The Kailali district committee of the Nepali Congress met on the 22nd and 23rd May 2017 to finalize candidates for the ward and municipal level seats. A few remaining cases were settled at the party's central committee (at the national level) meeting on June 11, 2017. Though the research team was not allowed to attend the meetings, de-briefing with participants later suggests that the forms we handed over to the Secretary were used during the discussion. The District Secretary informed us that he and the District Chairman went through all the evaluation forms that were prepared for them, and in some cases, the Secretary also briefed the participants on the specifics of the information provided.

This can be interpreted as partial compliance with our treatment protocol, and as such, any intent-to-treat effect we observe will be biased towards zero. These can also be interpreted as real-world effects of a policy intervention with a political party where compliance is unlikely to be perfect. At the same time, not having an outsider present during the meetings ensures that the effects we observe are as realistic as possible. Finally, district leaders felt at ease in denying permis-

sion to the research team to attend party deliberations, suggesting to us that they felt no pressure from our presence in adjusting their procedures or decisions. Overall, there is minimal chance of response bias or pressure on a decision that is already a critical one for the party.

As with any organization, information asymmetries and decision-making is influenced by the strategic concerns of actors at various levels of the organization. Indeed, research on parties shows that local level party operatives might relay information strategically to higher level party bosses to maximize their benefits (Stokes, 2005; Larreguy, Marshall, and Querubin, 2016). While we broadly consider the party as a unitary actor in the analysis below, it is worth noting that similar dynamics are potentially at play even in our setting. Indeed, any evidence of the uninformed leader hypothesis we find could be the result of removing such information asymmetries within the party.

Finally, while understanding how political parties select candidates and what impact their decisions have on real world outcomes is important, there are some ethical considerations related to audience, agency, consent, and the possibility of negative outcomes that are important. Following the advice in Humphreys (2015) and Desposato (2015), we discuss these considerations in detail in Appendix A.3.

**Randomization:** The experiment was conducted between April 18th and 22nd of May 2017 in three municipalities within the Kailali district (see figure A2). All stages were completed before the election on the 28th of June 2017. Of the 52 Seats (or Races) in our data, 27 were seats for which the party and voters agreed on the first choice candidate. Blocking on this variable, we randomize across 8 possible combinations of the three treatments described above: polling information, party loyalty information, and competence information.

Party leaders were presented the same set of information for all prospective candidates for a given seat/race. The profiles for all prospective candidates being considered are presented next to each other to party leaders in a consolidated form.<sup>22</sup> The randomization schedule is presented in

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<sup>22</sup>Except for the Ward Member seat, this randomization effectively translates into a seat level randomization. A complication arises because the party needs to nominate two people for two 'member seats' concurrently. Party leaders jointly decide on ticket allocation for these two seats such that the top two prospective candidates are likely to get the nomination. As shown in Table A8, while the number of races/seats in our

Table 2. Appendix Table A9 shows that there is good balance on various pre-treatment characteristics of prospective candidates.

Table 2: **Randomization Scheme**

	<i>Type of Information Presented to Party Leaders</i>	<i>Eight Treatment Conditions Cross-Randomized</i>							
		✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	×	×
<i>Total</i>	Polling	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	×	×
	Party Loyalty	✓	×	✓	×	✓	✓	×	×
	Competence	✓	✓	×	×	✓	×	✓	×
166	# Prospective Candidates	18	23	25	27	18	17	26	22
52	# Seats (Races)	6	7	6	6	7	7	7	6

If we find that party leaders do not update their behavior when public opinion data are presented to them, we can conclude that the information is not important enough to warrant a change in the expected utility calculations of leaders. That is, the status quo calculations were sufficient for leaders to decide on who should receive the party’s nomination. This result would be consistent with the first interpretation of leader perception divergence discussed above where strategic concerns dominate.

On the hand, if we *do* observe that leaders update their behavior in light of new public opinion data we can conclude that leaders expected utility calculations changed as a result of the information. This change would be consistent with the second interpretation highlighted above. That is, party leaders’ evaluations differ from public opinion possibly because leaders are misinformed about public opinion but would like to align their actions with the preferences of the electorate.

However, in order to conclude the above, is not enough to check if party leaders update their behavior more where the information we present to them differs from their priors. It could be the case that party leaders update their behavior in light of new information but they do this because they draw inference from the act of being informed, similar to experimenter demand effects in other contexts.

To rule out this channel, it is important to study the effects of new information on equilibrium sample equals 52, the number of unique ward-seattypes equals 40. When analyzing the party’s decisions, we cluster standard errors at the ward seat-type level to account for the joint decisions. This accurately takes account of spillovers in party leader and voter decisions. Appendix Section A.2 discusses this further.

outcomes related to the electoral performance of the party in addition to outcomes on party leader behavior. If party leaders do not update their behavior, the party's electoral performance stays at status-quo. If they update based on experimenter demand effects instead of the value of that information, then the party leaders are making their expected utility *worse* by biasing them away from a previous optimal. In this case, the candidates they pick should perform worse in the elections and the party's vote share should decrease. On the other hand, if party leaders update their behavior because the information is valuable in the sense that it narrows the gap between  $p'_i$  and  $p_i$ , the candidates leaders pick should be closer to the preferences of the public and the party should do better in terms of electoral outcomes.

## 5 Public Opinion, Candidate Selection, and Electoral Performance

This section presents results from the experiment where we randomly provided public opinion information to party leaders. We first show that party leaders adjust their candidate selection when we randomly provide public opinion data to them. We also show that public opinion data positively affect the party's electoral performance as measured by the vote share. We also probe the mechanisms for the change in leader behavior and show that leaders are more likely to update their behavior for seats where their misalignment with voters is large.

Finally, taken together, these results are consistent with the *uninformed leader* hypothesis and not with the *strategic deviation* hypothesis. In Appendix Section A.10, we examine alternative explanations for our findings.

### 5.1 Leaders update behavior in light of public opinion

We first show that party elites adjust their behavior when new polling information is presented to them. We create an outcome variable that measures if party leaders select candidate differently from their *expected* behavior. This variable equals one if the party's chosen candidate, the one who gets the nomination, is not the person who was ranked first by party elites before the experiment. If that person is the same, then the variable equals zero.



We study if the treatment affected this outcome by estimating the following equation:

$$Y_s = \gamma_1 \textit{Poll Information}_s + \gamma_2 \textit{Party Loyalty Information}_s + \gamma_3 \textit{Competence Information}_s + \mathbb{X}_s + \epsilon_s \quad (2)$$

where  $Y_s$  is an outcome defined for each seat/race  $s$  in the data. *Poll Information* is the treatment indicator of interest that is assigned to a seat. *Party Loyalty Information* and *Competence Information* are analogous treatments for party loyalty and competence. There are two sets of controls that we include in the vector  $\mathbb{X}$ . First, we include block fixed effects which indicate whether or not, for a particular seat, the top ranked nominee was the same for the party and voters. Second, we also include seat type fixed effects as the party's decision making process is likely to be very different across different types of races.

With only 52 electoral races in our sample, and 40 unique ward-seat type observations, the asymptotic reference distributions for our test statistics may be invalid. We therefore report Fisher exact p-values which do not require a limiting distribution (Gerber and Green, 2012). This test assumes a null of no treatment effect for any unit.<sup>23</sup> We present these p-values in square brackets below the estimates and their standard errors. Reporting exact p-values is increasingly the recommended choice for robust inference in clustered experiments where smaller samples is a potential concern (Young, 2018).

Table 3 shows that polling data increase the probability that party leaders select a candidate who was not ranked first by them initially. We note first that in the control condition only about 14.3 percent of nominations went to a prospective candidates not ranked first initially by the party. This suggests that absent polling information, party elites mostly rely on their initial ranking when allocating tickets. Some flexibility is not unreasonable, however, since political campaigns and the electoral environment change fairly quickly and good party leaders adapt their strategies.

Of interest to us is the question of whether party leaders' propensity to rely on their initial

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<sup>23</sup>We perform this test by creating a set of 5,000 artificial treatment assignments. The effect estimated using the actual treatment assignment is compared against the effects with these artificial treatments. The exact p-value is the share of artificial treatment effects that have a larger magnitude than the true treatment effect.

Table 3: **Polling information changes party leader’s candidate selection**

	Dependent Variable: Party selects candidate not initially ranked first by leaders			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Polling Data Presented	0.184 (0.129) [0.071]*	0.184 (0.129) [0.078]*	0.184 (0.130) [0.087]*	0.180 (0.125) [0.085]*
Party Loyalty Presented	0.042 (0.126) [0.360]	0.042 (0.126) [0.336]	0.031 (0.127) [0.402]	0.057 (0.123) [0.334]
Competence Presented	0.148 (0.129) [0.117]	0.148 (0.129) [0.149]	0.153 (0.132) [0.121]	0.127 (0.122) [0.167]
Block FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Seat Type FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Control Mean	0.143	0.143	0.143	0.143
# Seats	52	52	52	52
# Unique Ward-Seat Types	40	40	40	40

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Standard errors are clustered at the unique ward-seat type level and reported in parentheses. Exact p-values are in square brackets.

ranking changes when public opinion information is provided to them. We find that providing this information increases the likelihood that a person not ranked first by party leaders gets a ticket by about 18 percentage points (exact p-value = 0.085), a doubling of the baseline rate of 14.3 percent. Given that elite-voter preferences only align about a third of the time, this change in elite behavior can have important consequences for who is elected to office.

We observe no systematic evidence that the provision of information on party loyalty and competence affects the party’s selection of candidates who are not originally top ranked. Since we do not observe the party’s priors here, we are unable to say whether this is because our treatment presented already known information, whether the party does not care about competence and/or loyalty as much, or whether the informational treatments bundle together positive and negative information.

## 5.2 Polling information improves the party’s vote share

We have shown that revealing polling information changes the candidate selection of party elites. We next show that polling information also positively affects the electoral performance of the party.

It was posited earlier that if party elites were strategically diverting from public opinion, updating their behavior in the direction of the polling information would weaken the party’s electoral performance. On the other hand, however, if party elites update behavior and we see no change in electoral outcomes, it could either be the case that voters primarily base their votes on party labels instead of the specific identity of who is running, or that other parties adjust their electoral strategies to yield a null effect on electoral outcomes. Finally, a positive change in electoral outcomes would suggest that party elites may indeed be misinformed about public opinion, and correcting their behavior improves the party’s electoral performance.

Table 4: **Polling Information Improves the Party’s Vote Share**

	Dependent Variable: Vote Share			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Polling Data Presented	0.040 (0.028) [0.106]	0.037 (0.029) [0.125]	0.035 (0.022) [0.090]*	0.035 (0.022) [0.092]*
Party Loyalty Presented	-0.005 (0.028) [0.450]	-0.003 (0.028) [0.465]	-0.022 (0.022) [0.204]	-0.022 (0.023) [0.208]
Competence Presented	0.006 (0.028) [0.440]	0.002 (0.027) [0.481]	0.008 (0.023) [0.387]	0.008 (0.023) [0.390]
Block FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Seat Type FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Control Mean	0.197	0.197	0.197	0.197
# Seats	52	52	52	52

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. Exact p-values are in square brackets.

We examine the net effect of these competing hypotheses by running a race level regression on the actual vote share for the party in the election. The results, presented in Table 4, show that revealing polling information to the party leadership increase the vote share of the party by 3.5 percentage points, which corresponds to an 17.8% effect (exact  $p=0.092$ ). These positive changes to the electoral prospects of the party are consistent with the third explanation highlighted above: party leaders may be updating their behavior because they are uninformed about public opinion, and once they select people more aligned with citizen preferences, voters are more likely to vote for their party.

As before, we find no statistically significant treatment effects for either the competence or party loyalty treatments. This makes sense given that the party did not change its ticket awarding

behavior as a response to this information.

### 5.3 Information matters most for sub-groups where it is most surprising

When do party leaders respond to information? In Subsection 2.4 we hypothesized that party leaders are more likely to update their decisions when their initial ranking deviates most from voter ranks. In the ideal scenario, we would have access to party leader posterior ranks which would allow us to conduct a Bayesian analysis of the degree to which party leaders update. However, in the data we only observe the actual nomination decisions of leaders. Therefore, following the analysis in Table 3 above, we ask: when are party leaders most likely to nominate candidates they themselves did not rank first initially?

If party leaders are indeed poorly informed about certain candidates, then they should be most likely to update their decisions when the information presented to them is most striking. We generate a variable that captures whether, for a given race, party leaders encountered such striking information by calculating the quadratic distances between the party's initial rank and the voters' rank for each race as follows:

$$Difference_{i,s} = Party Rank_{i,s} - Voter Rank_{i,s}$$

$$Sum\ of\ Squared\ Differences_s = \sum_S \left[ sign(Difference_{i,s}) * (Difference_{i,s})^2 \right]$$

where  $\left[ sign(Difference_{i,s}) * (Difference_{i,s})^2 \right]$  is the *signed* squared distance between the party rank and voter rank for each prospective candidate  $i$  in race  $s$ . The quadratic distance gives greater weight to larger changes and smaller weights to smaller changes. For instance, for a 4 candidate race, if the party initially ranks candidates as  $A > B > C > D$ , but voters rank them  $D > A > B > C$ , then the sum of squared rank differences equals  $(3^2) - (1^2) - (1^2) - (1^2) = 6$ . If instead, voters rank candidates as  $A > C > B > D$ , then the sum of squared differences equals  $(0^2) + (1^2) - (1^2) - (0^2) = 0$ . Because we are limited in the number of races we have, we bin all

racess that are positive or negative on the sum of squared ranks as follows:

$$Deviation\ Direction = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if Sum of Squared Differences}_s > 0 \\ 0, & \text{if Sum of Squared Differences}_s = 0 \\ -1, & \text{if Sum of Squared Differences}_s < 0 \end{cases}$$

Our first result is descriptive. Empirically, races with large deviations between party and voter preferences are more likely to be characterized by the presence of prospective candidates highly preferred by voters but relatively ignored by party leaders instead of prospective candidates highly preferred by party leaders but relatively ignored by voters. This is shown by the large number of positive deviation cases in Table 5 relative to the few cases of negative deviation. There are also a large number of cases with minor (zero) deviations.

**Table 5: Distribution of Seats by Deviation Direction**

	Deviation Negative	Deviation Zero	Deviation Positive
# of Seats/Races	4	28	20
Mean Sum of Squared Deviation	-2.8	0	5.3

Our second result is that the party updates its decision most where polling information deviates most from it’s priors. To do this we estimate how the effects of polling information on seat-level behaviour differ by the sub-groups of deviation direction. As we observe only four cases of seats having a negative deviation direction, we focus on positive and zero deviation cases in our analysis below. The specification is similar to that in Subsection 5.1, in that the unit of analysis is the seat/race and the dependent variable is whether for that seat the party selected a candidate who was not originally ranked first.

Column 1 of Table 6 reproduces column 4 of Table 3, which showed that polling information changed party behavior at the seat level. Column 2 decomposes this average effect into subgroups of deviation direction by running a model with no constant. That is, the non-interacted coefficients on each deviation direction sub-group provide averages of the outcome in the control (no polling information) condition. The interactions of these sub-groups with polling information present heterogeneous treatment effects within each sub-group of deviation direction.

We find that among seats that featured positive deviation –that is, prospective candidates were ranked much higher by voters than by the party– polling information increased the likelihood that the party awarded the ticket to a person who was not originally top ranked by 52.1% (exact  $p=0.012$ ). By contrast, for seats with a zero net deviation, the same treatment effect is substantively small (8.6%) and highly noisy (exact  $p=0.326$ ). The difference between these two sub-group effects is positive and statistically significant as Panel B shows (exact  $p=0.077$ ).

**Table 6: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by Leader-Voter Deviation**

	Dependent Variable: Party selects candidate not initially ranked first by leaders	
	(1)	(2)
<b>Panel A: Effects by Deviation</b>		
Polling Data Presented	0.180 (0.125) [0.085]*	
Polling Data Presented X Deviation Negative		-0.249 (0.295) [0.422]
Polling Data Presented X Deviation Zero		0.086 (0.184) [0.326]
Polling Data Presented X Deviation Positive		0.521*** (0.181) [0.012]**
Deviation Negative		0.958*** (0.195) [0.332]
Deviation Zero		0.430* (0.243) [0.189]
Deviation Positive		0.438*** (0.161) [0.094]*
Party Loyalty Presented	0.057 (0.123) [0.334]	0.033 (0.130) [0.416]
Competence Presented	0.127 (0.122) [0.167]	0.159 (0.132) [0.137]
<b>Panel B: Linear Restrictions</b>		
Polling Data Presented X (Deviation Positive - Deviation Zero)		0.435 (0.283) [0.077]*
Constant Added?	Yes	No
Block FE	Yes	Yes
Seat Type FE	Yes	Yes
Control Mean	0.143	0.143
# Seats	52	52
R squared	0.147	0.584

Notes: \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Standard errors are clustered at the unique ward-seat type level and reported in parentheses. Exact p-values are in square brackets. The regression in Column (2) does not include a constant term.

**Discussion:** Since *Deviation Direction* is not randomly assigned, the analysis above could be driven by a host of seat level characteristics. Nevertheless we learn three important findings about candidate selection from this heterogeneous treatment effects exercise. Firstly, there exist many prospective candidates who are highly popular among voters relative to their rather pessimistic party

evaluations. There is little evidence to suggest that the reverse is true. Second, one source of this deviation is the initial selection of the *set* prospective candidates, highlighting the importance of internal party procedures in generating elite-mass preference discrepancies. In Appendix Table A11 we find suggestive evidence that races where voters significantly prefer some people over party elites, party elites are likely to have initially nominated more elite candidates.<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, party leaders are also more willing to update their choices in subgroups (races) where this misalignment is highest to begin with, suggesting that these are precisely the cases in which polling information can be most impactful. Overall, we learn that preference divergence between the party and voters might be leading the party to significantly discount prospective candidates who are very popular among voters, and that this might be the result of the party's lack of information about the relative popularity of prospective candidates.

## 6 Conclusion

How can we enable new democracies to incorporate institutions that set them on a path towards being more representative? We know from past work that good performance by democratically elected leaders improves citizen's trust in government as well as their sense of efficacy (Braithwaite and Levi, 1998; Miller, 1974; Norris, 2011).

In this paper we focus on an important task carried out by party leaders around the world: candidate selection. We document that political elites can take decisions that diverge significantly from mass preferences, and that at least a part of this gap stems from party elites' lack of understanding about the preferences of voters. We find that such gaps are most likely to be the result of the party having a relatively pessimistic evaluation of some prospective candidates who are highly popular among voters.

This opens space for policies that close these informational gaps such that the quality of representation in new democracies can be improved. This paper finds that that when information about the preferences of voters over potential candidates is presented to party leaders, they update their

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<sup>24</sup>The first ranked prospective candidate in these seats tends to have spent more years in the party ( $p = 0.031$ ) and be older ( $p = 0.137$ ). The small sample size prevents us from making robust conclusions.

selection of candidates such that the electoral performance of the party improves. We find that the party updates more in cases when the information presented to them differs starkly from their priors. This also improves the quality of representation as candidates listed on the ballot are more representative of citizen preferences. This interpretation is consistent with the work of both Dahl (1973, p. 2) and Lipset (1959, p. 45) who recognize that government actions that are in line with constituent preferences are essential to strengthening democracy.

Although our empirical setting is a new democracy, our findings have relevance for a range of contexts. One might expect parties like the Nepali Congress to be particularly ill-informed about voter preferences since the specific electoral institution we study is new. However, the Nepali Congress is the second largest party in Nepal and was formed in 1950. The party has formally established local cadres which comprise officials from their own communities. In this sense the party leaders likely possess good institutional knowledge and are seasoned political workers and we can perhaps expect our findings to carry to other contexts where party leaders operate in a low-information environment. Indeed, evidence from more consolidated democracies in the region like India (Schneider, 2019), and democracies that are still consolidating, such as Pakistan (Li-aqat, 2019), suggests that leaders face similar issues in systems that are more advanced but where leaders face similar hurdles.<sup>25</sup>

There are also other reasons to suggest that the degree of knowledge party leaders have in Nepal may be close to the knowledge that party leaders possess in advanced democracies. For example, recent research shows that even in advanced democracies like the United States political elites still have an imperfect understanding of voter preferences (Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Butler and Nickerson, 2011). If this interpretation is correct, our results perhaps represent a larger phenomenon about party leaders and the knowledge they carry about citizen preferences. One reason this claim may not be surprising is the fact that party leaders are typically also elites of

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<sup>25</sup>Kalla and Porter (2019) study if legislators in the US are willing to engage with public opinion data on a dashboard (they are not), and whether they update their perceptions when they see the data (they do not). While we do not study public opinion on policy, the results and discussion are consistent with our theoretical setup: that is, policymakers may decide to strategically deviate from public opinion.



the societies where they operate and may therefore have a skewed understanding of what citizens want (Carnes, 2018; Dal Bó et al., 2017; Gulzar and Khan, 2018).

Finally, there is also the concern that local elections might be low salience events for parties in developing countries. There are a few reasons that support the interpretation that local elections carry a lot of importance for political parties. First, it is theorized that party elites care about who runs at the local office as those comprise the feasible set for future leaders in the party (Myerson, 2014). Second, voters in developing countries care about (for example, transport infrastructure and municipal services) are the purview of local governments (Gulzar and Khan, 2018). Therefore, voters, and consequently parties, may then devote just as much attention to these elections as national ones. In fact, data suggests that, unlike more advanced democracies like the US, turnout in the 2017 local government elections in Nepal (71%) was roughly comparable to the turnout in the 2017 parliamentary elections (65 to 70%), further suggesting that these are highly salient events (Gurubacharya, 2017; Carter Center, 2017).

The key contribution this paper is to show that better polling information makes the party leaders update their behavior *and* improve their electoral performance. These two results together indicate that *one* reason for the divergence of elite preferences from citizen preferences is that elites are not perfectly aware of citizens' preferences. Our results, therefore, point towards the gains to be made by helping parties understand the preferences of voters. Future research could build on our findings and assess the consequences of this informational problem for governance outcomes. What are the impacts on policy, for instance, when party leaders curate the ballot in a way that is closer to citizens' true preferences? Does a party's efforts to be better informed about voter preferences engender responses by other parties? We hope our findings can help inform these research agendas.

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