
Reelection, Reanimation, Rise, Reattempt, Rookie (5R): Political Career Paths in Open-List Proportional Representation Systems

Jarosław Flis¹, Katarzyna Lorenc²

Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical and empirical analysis of the electoral process within Open-List Proportional Representation (OLPR) systems and introduces the 5R model (Reelection, Reanimation, Rise, Reattempt, Rookie) for examining career paths, access rules, and elite circulation in OLPR contexts. The theoretical section breaks down the electoral process into five stages: from candidate auto-selection, through pre-selection and list hierarchization by party leaders, to gaining votes and seat allocation. A particular emphasis is placed on differences in politicians' career paths and the strategies party leaders employ in list construction. The empirical analysis demonstrates the impact of the OLPR system on different types of parties and candidates, showing how both party structures and candidates' career paths are influenced by this system. The study utilizes an extensive dataset of official electoral results spanning 20 years of Polish democratic elections (1990–2019), covering both general and local elections, with strong internal comparability. Thus, based on these findings, the paper introduces the 5R model, which can serve as a framework to interpret elite circulation, political career paths, and access rules in OLPR systems. This model serves as a foundation for future research on candidate demographics, particularly gender, age, and territorial representation.

Keywords: open list, proportional representation, OLPR, party list construction, political career path.

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Introduction

Electing members of parliament (MPs) is a complex process that has been examined from various perspectives, typically focusing on specific stages of the process rather than the electoral mechanism as a whole. Multiple studies address how voters select their representatives, exploring topics such as election outcome prediction, voter participation, and the characteristics of elected representatives (Ashenfelter & Kelley, 1975; Caldeira, Patterson, & Markko, 1985; Walker, 2006; Feddersen & Sandroni, 2006; Dahlberg, 2013; Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Chauhan, Sharma, & Sikka, 2021). Another area of research investigates the motivations behind candidates' decisions to run for office and parties' reasons for nominating specific individuals on ballot lists (Mattozzi & Merlo, 2008; Silvester, 2012; Dal Bó *et al.*, 2017). These studies address questions such as what differentiates those who actively engage in politics from general voters and why candidates choose to participate in elections (Fox, Lawless, & Feeley, 2005; Lawless & Fox, 2010; Balian & Gasparyan, 2017; Hall, 2019). More detailed research on electoral systems has led to additional topics of interest, including the specific rules for translating votes into parliamentary seats (Levin & Nalebuff, 1995), contamination effects across different tiers of electoral systems (Ferrara, Herron, & Nishikawa, 2005; Guinjoan, 2014), and ballot list construction (Flis, 2014; Blom-Hansen *et al.*, 2016; Cox *et al.*, 2021; Buisseret *et al.*, 2022). However, a gap exists in research that examines the broader mechanism of electing MPs within different electoral systems, especially within the context of open-list proportional representation (OLPR) systems, and one that considers factors such as career paths and the role of varying types of political parties.

This article aims to address this research gap in two primary ways. First, it seeks to logically deconstruct the electoral process within OLPR systems – from auto-selection of candidates through pre-selection by party leaders to final mandate allocation. Special attention is given to the diverse career paths of politicians, and the strategies party leaders pursue when constructing party lists. Second, it empirically decomposes the practical effects of the OLPR mechanism, examining how different types of parties and their candidates are impacted. Our findings present a model for analyzing career paths, access rules, and elite circulation in OLPR electoral systems, referred to as the 5R model (Reelection, Reanimation, Rise, Reattempt, Rookie), which can serve as a basis for future research on candidate characteristics such as gender, age, and regional ties.

Literature Review

An open-list proportional representation (OLPR) electoral system operates under two opposing dynamics. On one side, voters can select a preferred candidate from one of the registered party lists. Because mandates are awarded to candidates with the highest vote counts, voters have a direct influence over who obtains a mandate (open list), contrasting with closed-list systems in which voters only select a party list and the candidate hierarchy is pre-determined (Buisseret & Prato, 2022). Conversely, proportional representation requires that the seats available within a district are distributed proportionally among party lists, introducing an

intermediary factor between the number of votes a candidate receives and their likelihood of securing a mandate. Furthermore, as party leaders control the construction and order of party lists, and candidates' chances of winning are significantly affected by being situated in the first few "winning" places on a party list (Flis, 2014; Gendźwiłł & Marcinkiewicz, 2019), candidate's election outcome is influenced not only by vote count but also by additional factors, including the primacy effect in list construction. The primacy effect is well-documented in the literature (Linder, 2021), including studies of Polish elections (Flis & Kaminski, 2022).

In a comprehensive analysis, Passarelli (2020) investigates the significance of the preferential vote for voter engagement and intra-party competition. Comparisons across countries with varying degrees of preferential voting highlight its positive impact on voter turnout and a non-obvious role in MPs' reelection prospects. A deeper consideration of intra-party competition can be achieved by expanding the analysis to encompass the pre-election, election, and post-election phases, as well as distinguishing among the perspectives of candidates, voters, and the party organization (Put & Coffe, 2024). Additional research points to the importance of incumbency advantage and candidate visibility in elections (Bräuninger, Däubler, & Pilet, 2024). In an extensive study, Sikk and Köker (2023) emphasize that political parties are dynamic entities undergoing continuous change due to multi-level, multidirectional competition. Pursuing this line of research highlights the diversity of candidates based on their initial status, the varying types of political parties, and the ongoing political process from a candidate's decision to run to assuming office.

These characteristics of an OLPR system produce several logical implications for the quantity and quality of candidates participating in elections. First, party lists inevitably include more candidates than the number of seats the party ultimately wins. This is not only because parties aim to cover all potential seats in a given district and rarely secure all of them but also because the supply of candidates is larger as there is a real chance that a challenger wins over an incumbent. Flis (2014) notes that only about one in five seats is won by a candidate positioned outside the few "winnable" top spots on a party list, often held by incumbents. Nevertheless, this possibility still results in the surplus of candidates in OLPR systems and requires incumbents to directly compete with challengers. This situation contrasts sharply with first-past-the-post (FPTP) systems, where "safe" and "hopeless" seats often correlate closely with incumbents versus challengers.

Another factor contributing to the large candidate pool is the absence of an "optimal" number of candidates in OLPR systems, unlike in FPTP systems, where the optimal number equals the number of available MP seats plus one (Cox, 1997). In OLPR systems, vote pooling incentivizes parties to maximize candidate numbers due to factors such as local support and neighbor-based voting (Bergman, Shugart, & Watt, 2013). Moreover, the larger candidate pool results in less stringent selection criteria as the number of "prizes" – or spots on party lists – increases and the individual candidate's impact on overall party performance decreases.

The substantial number of candidates and the diversity in their career trajectories make candidates within OLPR systems a compelling research focus, suggesting they should not be regarded as a homogenous group in studies on electoral process mechanisms. We identify five distinct candidate categories based on their political experience and electoral capital (e.g., past runs and electoral victories). This typology, referred to as the 5R model, includes the following categories:

- Reelection;
- Reanimation;
- Rise;
- Reattempt;
- Rookie.

In this article, *Reelection* refers to direct incumbency (Gelman & King, 1990), where a candidate for MP has held a parliamentary seat in the term immediately preceding the current election. *Reanimation* – a term inspired by Kjær’s (2012) “respirator” concept – describes candidates who have served as MPs in the past but not in the most recent term. These individuals may have pursued other political or non-political roles in the interim yet do not qualify as direct incumbents. *Rise* represents a gradual political career path, aligning with Kjær’s (2012) “incubator” concept. This category includes local or regional councilors or, in some cases, local mayors (Cirone, Cox, & Fiva, 2021) with prior experience in local politics who are now attempting to transition to parliamentary office. This path, which utilizes the local political arena as an “incubator,” reflects a career progression in which individuals ascend step-by-step, akin to climbing a ladder.

In addition to these three categories of politically experienced candidates, we identify two types of candidates with no prior elective office experience at either the local or national level. *Reattempt* includes candidates who have previously run for office unsuccessfully. We assume these candidates may possess greater voter recognition and a familiarity with the election process, potentially offering an advantage over first-time contenders. Lastly, *Rookie* refers to candidates who have never run for office, either locally or nationally. These candidates may face unique disadvantages relative to incumbents (Koskimaa *et al.*, 2023).

The abundance of candidates in OLPR systems, combined with limited resources – such as available spots on party lists, especially in top positions and parliamentary seats – results in a multi-stage selection process. The electoral mechanism includes five sequential steps: auto-selection, pre-selection, hierarchization, verification, and calculation, at each of which some candidates consolidate or lose their position.

As described by Swianiewicz and Olszowiec (2013), *auto-selection* involves a potential candidate’s decision to enter an electoral race. This decision is influenced by the candidate’s unique characteristics and motivations (Mattozzi & Merlo, 2008; Silvester, 2012) and the political capital they have accumulated. *Political capital* refers to the influence a politician has gained among voters and other policymakers, which can be leveraged for various political objectives (Banfield, 1961). If political capital is perceived as high, the candidate may feel more confident about their prospects and thus more inclined to run. A way to estimate political capital in this context is *electoral capital*, understood as the number of votes won by a candidate in previous elections (Flis, Matuszewski, & Wojtasik, 2022).

The second phase, *pre-selection*, is a process in which party leaders choose candidates to appear on the party list, effectively serving as gatekeepers. Usually, there are more politicians willing to run in the election than places on party lists, meaning party officials must select which candidates will represent the party (Flis, 2016). This stage introduces a tension between individual and party interests. From the party’s perspective, the primary goal should be to select candidates with high popularity among voters and strong political capital, as candidates

with significant voter support from previous elections contribute to the party's overall vote and improve its chances of securing seats in the proportional distribution. Several candidate-specific factors also influence the pre-selection process, such as strong local recognition, connections to prominent political figures, celebrity status (Millard, 2014), and incumbency (Erikson, 1971). The incumbency advantage means that candidates who have previously held the office they seek again tend to have an edge over challengers, increasing their likelihood of winning (Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2002). This advantage is often associated with greater name recognition, resource access, experience, and accumulated political capital (Gelman & King, 1990).

In addition to maximizing the number of votes for the party list, list creators may have other motivations, such as ideological or individual payoffs (Crutzen, Konishi, & Sahuguet, 2021) or valence and intra-party value (Svitáková & Šoltés, 2020). Another potential influence on list construction is *electoral contamination*, which Guinjoan (2014, p. 19) defines as “a situation where either voters or party elites determine their political behaviour on the basis of other arenas, rather than the specific arena being contested.” The incentives here may be twofold: institutional and sociological, and organizational. The institutional and sociological incentives arise from the presence of multiple election levels occurring on the same or consecutive dates, which may lead parties to include candidates not necessarily for their immediate electoral prospects but to make a statement, serve some kind of audience, or gather support for a different level of elections. On the other hand, organizational incentives include generating political externalities such as showing the image of party strength to the voters, cultivating relations with local party members, and defending the party values (Guinjoan, 2014).

Once candidates are selected for the party list, the *hierarchization* phase begins. As Buisseret *et al.* (2022) explain, a candidate's position on a party list in PR systems significantly impacts their chances of winning a seat – ranging from the top position, or *Capolista*, which nearly guarantees a mandate, through several *Safe* and *Advantaged* positions, down to the bottom, where candidates are either *Disadvantaged* or face a *Certain Loss*. In OLPR systems, a candidate may secure an MP seat from any position on the list based on individual vote counts, and conversely, a candidate can lose a seat even if positioned near the top. That said, candidates ranked in the first few “winnable” spots generally have a higher likelihood of obtaining parliamentary mandates than those lower on the list (Peszyński, 2011). This occurs partly because party identification often drives voter behavior, leading voters to select the first candidate on the list when voting for a party (Lutz, 2010). Another reason is that in party-list proportional representation systems, top-listed party leaders tend to capture votes that might otherwise go to lower-ranked candidates, as they are more frequently covered by mainstream media and thus better known to voters (Rakowski, 2012). As observed by Flis, Matuszewski, and Wojtasik (2022), the impact of list placement can be approximately represented by the reciprocal of the candidate's position on the list ($1/n$, where n is the candidate's list rank).

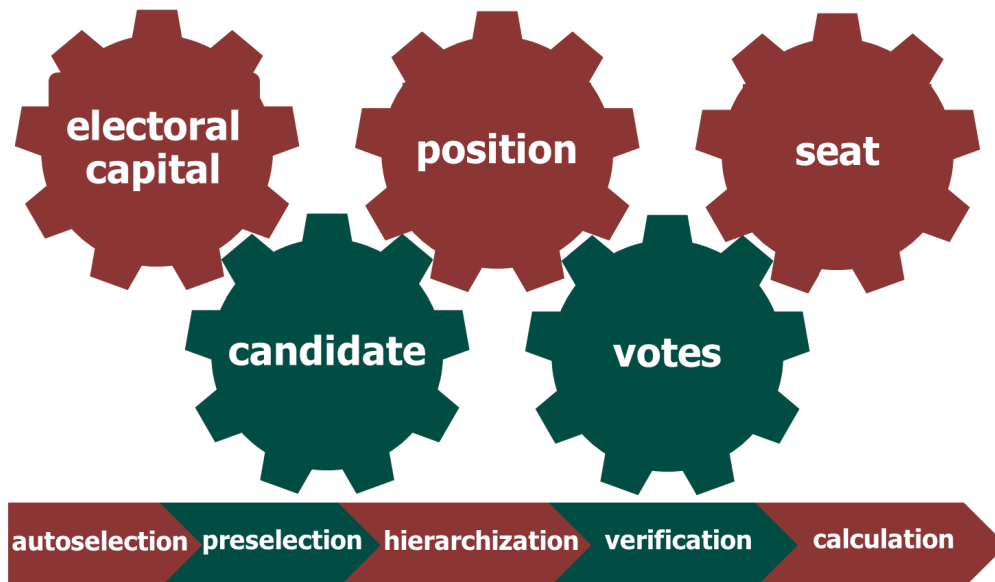
The electoral process concludes with two final steps: *verification* and *calculation*. Verification refers to the election, during which voters select a candidate from among those listed on a registered party list. Calculation involves the allocation of MP seats and occurs in two phases. In the first phase – allocating seats to the party list – the candidate's direct influence is limited, as the number of MP seats assigned to each list is based on the party's overall performance and the district size. In the second phase, candidates on a party list are ordered by the number of votes they received, with the top vote-getters securing MP seats. The number

of candidates from each list who obtain seats corresponds to the number of seats allocated to the party in the first phase.

In Poland, the OLPR system examined in this study, electoral districts vary significantly in size and structure. Consequently, an MP may be elected with a few thousand votes or tens of thousands. Moreover, there are notable differences in outcomes and candidate support between the district's main city and its surrounding villages or among several towns of similar size within the district (Flis, 2014). Votes are allocated among parties using the D'Hondt method, with a 5% electoral threshold for individual parties to gain representation in the Sejm and an 8% threshold for coalitions on a single ballot list. This means that the distribution of votes and seats is not strictly proportional but tends to favor bigger parties and, thus, their candidates.

Considering the five phases discussed, the election process can be deconstructed into a complex electoral mechanism where each gear – from electoral capital to the technical seat distribution in parliament – affects the outcomes. A simplified model of this process is presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Mechanism of the Electoral Process in OLPR Systems



Source: own elaboration.

The logical deconstruction of the mechanism of the electoral process in OLPR systems presented above is summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Summary of Candidate Types in the 5R Model and Stages of the Electoral Process in OLPR Systems

Type	Candidates types		Selection procedure	
	Type	Features	Phase	Metric
Reelection	incumbents-parliamentarians		auto-selection	electoral capital
Reanimation	former parliamentarians		pre-selection	candidates
Rise	incumbents-councilors		hierarchization	position
Reattempt	unsuccessful candidates		verification	votes
Rookie	novices		calculation	seat

Source: own elaboration.

Methodology

After logically deconstructing the electoral process within OLPR systems, we will now present our empirical research, which examines the practical effects of this electoral mechanism on candidates and parties.

Our study focused on data from four consecutive elections to Poland's Lower House of Parliament, the Sejm, spanning the years 2007 to 2019. We selected Poland as our case study for several important reasons. First, during this period, the Polish OLPR electoral system was stable and relatively simple at both the parliamentary and local levels. The system itself did not undergo major changes, with no significant amendments to election regulations, the size of parliament (460 seats in the Sejm), or the areas of electoral districts (41). The open-list format, where the vote counts, plays a decisive role in securing mandates and enhances voters' understanding of the system. Second, Polish elections during this period followed a consistent four-year electoral cycle, consisting of local-level elections followed a year later by parliamentary elections. This structure contributes to the internal comparability of the dataset and stabilizes electoral contamination effects (Guinjoan, 2014). Third, Poland's political landscape in this period was both stable and diverse, dominated by two primary parties – one typically designating the Prime Minister and the other acting as the key opposition force – alongside two smaller yet stable parties and a steady influx of new parties vying for electoral success. Moreover, the Polish party system does not exhibit significant regional or ethnic anomalies at the national level. While certain grassroots parties perform well in local or regional politics, they remain almost invisible on the national stage. Finally, the Polish case study offers a valuable dataset encompassing parliamentary candidates' sociodemographic characteristics and election outcomes, dating back to the first free parliamentary election in 1990. Together, these factors make the Polish OLPR system an effective model for comparative research, facilitating both internal comparisons across different party types and analyses of varied political career trajectories.

The first comparative dimension of this study examined the distinct political career paths of candidates within elections, as outlined by our 5R model. Therefore, the first research question was:

RQ1: What are the implications of the OLPR system's electoral mechanisms for candidates with different political career paths?

The second comparative dimension aimed to explore the differences among political parties within OLPR systems. This analysis considered both party size and its significance in national politics alongside each party's developmental trajectory. We identified four types of parties: primary, secondary, new, and defeated. In Poland, the primary parties are two main parties that currently dominate the political scene: Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform, PO) and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS). These two dominant parties have been consistently present in the Sejm during the study period (stability), holding similar sizes and alternating positions as the leading party and primary opposition. Combined, they have maintained a stable seat share and typically secured from three to five seats per electoral dis-

trict in the studied period. Secondary parties, while also stable and retaining seats each term, are smaller and do not play a leading role in politics. In Poland, this group includes Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (Democratic Left Alliance, SLD) and Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish People's Party, PSL), typically winning between one and two seats per district. New parties, such as Nowoczesna (.N), Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (KWN), Kukiz'15 (K15), and Ruch Palikota (RPI), were recently established before the elections in question and did not have stable voters group. Meanwhile defeated parties, such as Samoobrona (SO), Liga Polskich Rodzin (LPR), Polska Jest Najważniejsza (PJN), and KORWiN (KRW), were parties in crisis that used to play an important role in the national politics but their significance has declined and they did not secure seats during the study period.

With these party types in mind, our second research question was:

RQ2: What are the implications of the OLPR system's electoral mechanisms for different types of parties?

As data for this research, we utilized official datasets of candidates, their ballot positions, and electoral outcomes (votes and seats won) collected by the National Electoral Commission across all local and parliamentary elections in Poland from 1998 to 2019. For electoral capital estimation and general context, we utilized data spanning 1998 to 2019, while the comparative analysis of candidates and MPs was based specifically on results from the 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 parliamentary elections.

We considered five phases of the OLPR electoral process, each measured by specific metrics as outlined in Table 1. In the auto-selection phase, electoral capital was operationalized as the number of votes a candidate received in previous elections at either the national or local level. The pre-selection phase was measured by the total number of candidates on official party lists. For hierarchization, we adopted the approach of Flis, Matuszewski, and Wojtasik (2022), who weigh the candidate's position on the party list by calculating the reciprocal of their position ($1/n$, where n is the candidate's list position). The verification phase was measured by the number of votes each candidate received in the given election. Finally, the calculation phase measured the number of seats allocated to each studied group. Each metric was normalized to percentages for enhanced comparability.

Results

The factors outlined above enabled us to create a three-dimensional comparison across candidate career paths, party types, and stages in the electoral process.

As Figure 2 shows, a general pattern emerged across all parties: the party machinery consistently advantages incumbents (the Reelection group) while posing significant disadvantages to challengers, particularly those in the Rookie group. Notably, in all parties, the Reelection group occupied a relatively small portion of ballot lists (ranging from 17% in primary parties to 0% in new parties) but held a several times larger share of the total electoral capital compared to their share of total candidates. From the pre-selection phase onward, this group's representation expanded rapidly. Their share in the overall weight of list positions exceeded

their share of candidates on these lists, indicating that politicians from the Reelection group tend to be placed higher on the ballot lists. Furthermore, the Reelection group's share of votes was greater than their share of list weight, highlighting the advantage they gain from prime ballot list placements and substantial electoral capital. Finally, the Reelection group's share in seats won was the largest of all these measures, often even surpassing their share of electoral capital – except in cases of new parties and defeated parties, which did not secure any seats in parliament.

FIGURE 2. Three-Dimensional Comparison of Candidates' Career Paths, Party Types, and Stages in the Electoral Process



Note. Calculations are based on the official electoral outcomes from the 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 parliamentary elections.

Source: own elaboration.

Conversely, this pattern also highlights a clear disadvantage for political novices, specifically those in the Reattempt and Rookie groups. Across all parties, the combined share of electoral capital for the Reattempt and Rookie groups was smaller than their collective share on ballot lists. Given that Rookie candidates lack prior electoral capital, defined here as previous electoral attempts or successes, their lower capital was expected. However, this pattern also held for the Reattempt group in most parties, except for new parties, where Reattempt candidates previously ran unsuccessfully with other parties. This trend suggests that novice candidates start with a smaller base of voters who know and trust them compared to candidates who previously held office.

Despite lower electoral capital, the Reattempt group, and in new parties – the Rookie group, constituted the largest share of candidates on ballot lists across all career paths in the 5R model. Combined, the Reattempt and Rookie groups' share significantly exceeded the collective share of the Reelection, Reanimation, and Rise groups (except for primary parties, where this threshold divided candidates approximately in half). This result supports our initial observations regarding candidate surplus, their willingness to challenge incumbents, and the inclination of party officials to include lesser-known candidates on the party list.

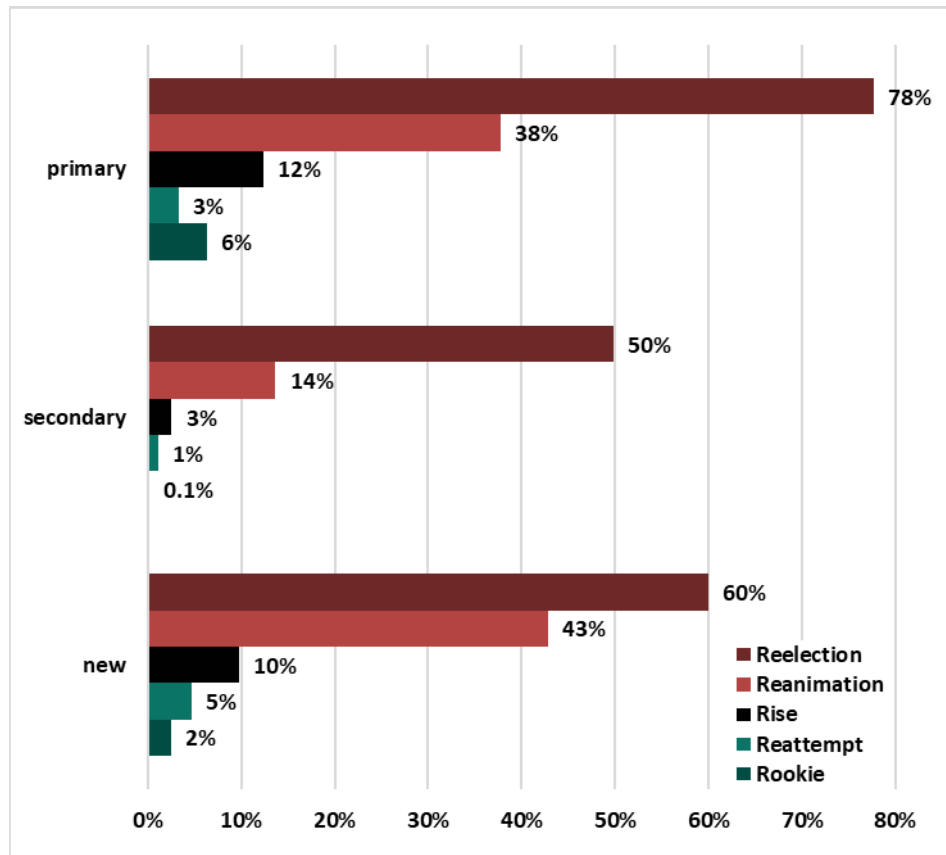
Even though a lot of the candidates in the Reattempt and Rookie groups make it onto ballot lists, they face clear disadvantages in the subsequent phases of the electoral process (again, except for new parties). Their share in list position weight is lower than their candidate share, indicating that they tend to receive lower placements on ballot lists – often much lower than other career paths in the 5R model. Their vote shares, and eventually their shares of parliamentary seats, are also minimal, particularly among stable parties, where their parliamentary representation remains marginal (9% for primary parties and 20.4% for secondary parties). These patterns indicate a consistent incumbent advantage (the Reelection group) and a growing disadvantage for challengers (the Reattempt and Rookie groups) at each subsequent stage in the electoral process.

In addition to the common patterns observed across parties, notable party-specific differences also emerge in the results. Primarily, the Reelection group dominated the ballot lists of the two primary parties. Although they constituted only 17% of the candidates on these lists, their share of electoral capital exceeds 50%. The Reelection group also accounted for 47% of the list position weight – nearly three times their proportion of candidates – and garners 59% of the total votes, matching their electoral capital share. Ultimately, over two-thirds of the parliamentary seats won by primary parties were filled by candidates from the Reelection group. As illustrated in Figure 3, the Reelection group's success rate was substantial at 78%. This pattern suggests that primary parties tend to reinforce the success of their previous officeholders, often positioning them even higher on the ballot lists.

A similar trend appeared within the secondary parties, albeit with a smaller base of MPs, resulting in a lower overall share of the Reelection group across each phase of the political selection process compared to primary parties. Interestingly, the limited number of Reelection candidates on secondary party lists demonstrated a high success rate of 50% and a seat share of 51%. This indicates that within secondary parties, mainly candidates placed at the very top of the ballot list, many of whom are former MPs, are likely to secure a parliamentary seat.

In both types of stable parties, the presence of the Reelection group among candidates is largely attributable to the party's status and its established parliamentary base.

FIGURE 3. Success Rates (Seats Won) Across Different Party Types



Note. Calculations are based on the official electoral outcomes from the 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 parliamentary elections.

Source: own elaboration.

The situation of the Reelection group differs notably in new and defeated parties. In new parties, Reelection candidates were nearly absent from the ballot lists, with only a few members transferred from other parties. These candidates secured no more than 2% of the seats won. This reflects the lack of an established voter base of the Reelection group in new parties, where most candidates are new to politics and, therefore, start on a similar footing.

In defeated parties, the Reelection group also constituted a small share of candidates on the ballot lists – only 2%. Unlike in new parties, these candidates possess significant electoral capital, which leads to high placement on ballot lists and a strong share of votes. Nonetheless, these parties ultimately fail to meet the electoral threshold required to secure seats in parliament.

Beyond the Reelection group advantage, both primary and secondary parties showed a notable presence of local politicians aspiring to advance within party ranks. The Rise group represented 33% of candidates in primary parties and 23% in secondary parties, yet their final outcome in seats won was comparable, with 20% in primary and 18% in secondary parties. This marks a significant contrast to new and defeated parties, where the Rise group constituted only 2% to 4% of the ballot lists and reaches a maximum of 7% in subsequent phases of political selection (apart from seat shares in defeated parties). Notably, the Rise group had a similar position in both primary and secondary parties, while their influence is considerably

weaker in new and defeated parties. However, the Rise group occupies a relatively small fraction of the ballot lists even in stable parties.

Similar patterns are observed across all parties with regard to the Reanimation group. The Reanimation group's presence is a distinctive feature of an OLPR system, where even candidates placed high on the ballot list may not secure a seat. Moreover, some former MPs may temporarily suspend their careers or serve in different elected roles but later seek to return to parliament. However, such cases remain infrequent. The Reanimation group consistently constitutes the smallest share of candidates across the 5R model and shows little variation among party types.

Nevertheless, party-specific differences exist. The Reanimation group is more prominent in stable parties than in new and defeated parties. The highest share of Reanimation candidates appears in secondary parties, where they also achieve the best results – winning 11% of seats despite comprising only 3% of candidates. As shown in Figure 3, Reanimation candidates have a relatively high success rate – 38% in primary parties and 14% in secondary parties. By contrast, the Reanimation group is nearly absent in new and defeated parties, which rely heavily on candidates from the Reattempt and Rookie groups.

Differences across party types are especially visible for the Reattempt and Rookie groups. In most parties, except new ones, Reattempt candidates form the largest candidate share. This share was 38% in primary parties and 35% in new parties, but it rose to as much as 57%–58% in secondary and defeated parties. However, these proportions do not always correspond to electoral outcomes. In primary parties, Reattempt candidates secured only 6% of seats, and in secondary parties, 20%. In new parties, by contrast, the Reattempt group captured 45% of seats, while in defeated parties, they accounted for 56% of votes. These outcomes suggest that in stable parties, Reattempt candidates are often seen as fillers of a ballot list with limited chances of winning seats. However, in new parties, the Reattempt group has greater opportunity and they capture a seat share that exceeds their ballot list representation.

The Rookie group experiences a similar disadvantage across all party types, though their candidate share varies significantly from the Reattempt group. In primary and secondary parties, Rookie candidates make up 10%–13% of the ballot lists. However, while Rookie candidates in primary parties have a small chance of winning seats (3%), those in secondary parties have minimal prospects. In defeated parties, Rookie candidates comprised 36% of the ballot list, and while they could potentially secure seats, these parties fail to meet the parliamentary threshold and thus gain no seats at all. The most favorable conditions for Rookies are in new parties, where they formed the largest group on the ballot list (63%) and the second largest group in seat shares won (43%).

Discussion

The complex structure of the Polish electoral system motivated us to conduct an extensive quantitative analysis to understand how party lists are constructed and to identify the characteristics of candidates placed on these lists, as well as the features distinguishing those who ultimately secure parliamentary mandates. This study focused on two primary factors: a candidate's political career development path (5R model) and the type of political party with

which they are affiliated. We examined how these factors influence various stages of the political selection process, including electoral capital, the number and position of candidates on ballot lists, vote counts, and seats won.

Our findings reveal a general pattern, which we call a “cascade,” where advantages for the Reelection group increase while disadvantages accumulate for the Reattempt and Rookie groups across all party types. Beyond electoral capital, each successive phase of the selection process further amplifies the opportunities for incumbents (the Reelection group) while diminishing the chances for the Rookie group.

However, there are also notable differences among primary, secondary, new, and defeated parties in terms of the career development paths of their candidates. The Rise group fares better in stable parties with established local party structures. Conversely, for Reattempt and Rookie candidates, joining a new party may be a favorable strategy, as their electoral prospects are substantially higher in new parties than in stable ones, where their chances remain minimal.

Our research also underscores the intricate nature of the Polish OLPR system, suggesting that even minor changes to any “gear” in the electoral machinery may yield unforeseen effects throughout the process. Differentiating the nature of parties, the status of candidates, and the stages of political competition – and understanding their interrelationships – are essential for addressing issues that only become apparent in the final electoral outcomes. Expanding our knowledge of the mechanisms of internal competition can aid in understanding issues related to territorial representation (Vučićević & Bursać, 2024) and the contested effects of gender quotas (Jones & Navia, 1999; Górecki & Kukołowicz, 2014; Jankowski & Marcinkiewicz, 2019). These issues merit examination and challenge the notion that intra-party competition is an impenetrable “black box.” The “gears” of the political machine are too significant to remain obscured.

Acknowledgements

Financial support of the Polish National Science Center under Grant no. 2016/21/B/HS5/00437 entitled “Success and retreat paths - electoral career and elite circulation patterns in Polish multilevel system of electoral competition” is gratefully acknowledged.

The authors would also like to thank Marek Kamiński, Dariusz Stolicki, Michał Gulczyński, and all participants of the *Warszaty Badań Ilościowych nad Polityką* for their valuable insights and suggestions, which helped to improve this paper.

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