Candidate selection and informal soft quotas for women: Gender imbalance in political recruitment in Zambia

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Abstract

What does it take for a female aspirant to win a party nomination in a candidate-centered electoral system in an emerging democracy? Three decades after the third wave of democratization hit Africa, we still know little about women's entry into politics in countries without formal gender quotas. In this paper we use qualitative interview data on the nomination processes of Zambia's three main political parties to explore formal and informal aspects of the candidate selection process. A key reason the literature is inconclusive about which candidate selection rules favor gender balance is that these rules tend to be poorly institutionalized, particularly in countries with weak party organizations and strong leaders. Although having local patronage networks may help to garner local support for a candidacy, often the central party leader is the critical decision-maker. Strikingly, Zambia's main political parties tend to nominate the same number of female candidates, suggesting collusion by the political parties. Ultimately, all political aspirants—irrespective of gender—gain bargaining power by displaying personal funds and local popularity. Their loyalty to a particular party is less important.

Keywords

Introduction

Using Zambia as a case, this paper explores what it takes for a female aspirant to win a party nomination in a candidate-centered electoral system in an emerging democracy that does not have a gender quota. African political party organizations are centralized at the national level and excessively weak (Carbone 2007). Still, most parties wish to popularize and localize parts of the candidate selection, by opening up for activities that include the local branches in the process of decision-making. Such activities, like primaries or adoption meetings, help parties to put down roots in local communities, as local party members screen aspirants and provide recommendations to the central leadership about who the party should nominate to stand for election. Zambia is no different. While Zambia has had regular multiparty elections for the national legislature since 1991, political parties and the political party system are weakly institutionalized (Muriaas, Rakner, and Skage 2016). The candidate selection procedures of the main political parties leave it to local party members to identify aspirants and come up with recommendations for the national leadership which then make the final decision about who should be selected. These procedures result in a selection process which suffer from a lack of transparency and also represent a high risk for aspiring candidates. Aspirants engage in costly campaign activities in order to be recommended by local branches, but according to formal party rules the recommendations are not binding. Party leaders have the final say in any decision about candidacies.

Yet in this context, and without any formal quotas for women in politics, the major political parties in Zambia over the past two general elections have nominated exactly the same number of female candidates, although, on average, women represented only 14 percent of

members of parliament (MPs) in Zambia from 1996 to 2016. Rules for selecting candidates are becoming increasingly formalized, while the requirement to nominate a certain number of women remains informal.

To shed light on the puzzle of how women have gained party nominations in Zambia, we ask the following questions: How do formal selection procedures and an informal requirement of nominating a fixed number of women interact in Zambia's political parties? What effect does centralized decision-making power have on women's motivation to win a nomination when they have to compete in costly, non-decisive primaries at the local level?

This article contributes to the literature on gendered political recruitment by studying how an ongoing process of formalizing selection rules within political parties interact with informal expectations of gender balance in a single member district plurality rule system (hereafter, SMD system) in a democratizing state. Within the recent politics and gender scholarship, an emerging literature addresses not only the role of political parties as gatekeepers of women's political representation, but which mode of candidate selection is most favorable to women, and more specifically, how the degree of party centralization and inclusiveness affects the likelihood of women being selected (see, e.g., Kenny 2013; Hinojosa 2012; Rahat 2007). The literature on formal selection rules is however inconclusive when it comes to how they affect gender imbalance. While some studies argue that inclusive, decentralized decision-making is most favorable to women (Ichino and Nathan 2012; Lovenduski and Norris 1993), others provide examples of why an exclusive, centralized process is more effective in correcting gender imbalance in candidate selection (Kenny and Verge 2013; Murray 2010; Caul 1999).

The discussion of what type of candidate selection system that is most conducive to gender balance is only relevant in contexts where formal rules are effective. As argued by

Freidenberg and Levitsky (2006: 179), if decisions "pass through informal networks rather than a party bureaucracy, then analyses that focus only on formal structures will produce a flawed understanding of how party functions". We argue that in emerging democracies, as well as in established ones, centralized nomination processes both enable and disable women in contexts where gender quotas are not adopted. Centralization may help enforce an informal "soft quota" that guarantees that at least a fixed number of women are nominated, despite male-dominated local party branches and a commercialized selection process. According to Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2017: 3), who the main party gatekeepers are becomes crucial. Party gatekeepers actively encourage certain types of individuals to stand for office. In the Zambian case, gatekeepers could be both local party branches and the party leader. An informal soft quota could lead to a situation where local branches value a different set of merits than party leaders.

Although Bjarnegård (2013) is in general critical to how informal rules such as clientelistic networks affect women's chances to get recruited into politics, she also highlights that informal institutions might achieve what formal institutions cannot. Lauth (2000: 26) stresses how informal institutions provide additional channels of influence for political participation. Yet, as he warns, political participation shaped by informal institutions can limit and relativize existing democratic participation. Thus, an informal soft quota, in centralized candidate selection systems that includes an aspect of localism, may lead to less transparent processes and legitimize other informal avenues. Consequently, centralized decisions drive informality, and as argued by Bjarnegård (2013), informal institutions rarely benefit women more than men. Furthermore, informal soft quotas may act as a glass ceiling that keep more women from being nominated, since party leaders rarely will go beyond the informal quota threshold.

Our findings are based on a qualitative study of the nomination processes of Zambia's three main political parties and they focus on how gender balance, meritocracy, and selection procedures interact. The field study was carried out in Lusaka, Zambia, in June and July 2015. In all, we conducted 41 semi-structured interviews with MPs, representatives of women's organizations, secretaries of political parties, government officials, international donors, and academic consultants. During these interviews, we explored the role of party leadership in the political recruitment process, as well as which factors local selectorates (that is, members of local party committees) prioritize when they identify their preferred candidates. Through both conversations and carefully selected questions from an interview guide, we identified some of the crucial mechanisms at play when candidates are nominated to stand on a party ticket.

Parties and gendered candidate selection

African party systems are characterized by instability and a generally low level of institutionalization. Individual party organizations are frequently excessively weak, centralized, and dominated by personalist and informal practices (Carbone 2007). This mix of weak party institutionalization and executive dominance provides fertile ground for neopatrimonialism or what has been termed "big man" politics—where power is concentrated in "big" men (i.e., party leaders) and their allies who informally make decisions and are linked through personal, patronage, and clientelist networks. Party leadership has typically been dominated by men, while women have often been relegated to separate women's structures within the parties (Tripp et al. 2009, 147). Political parties in Zambia are no exception. Most political parties are formed around a powerful and ambitious leader, rather than around an ideology; this leads to fractious party splits and undermines cooperation in policy making (Rakner and Svåsand 2012).

Three decades after the third wave of democratization hit the African continent, however, candidate selection procedures within political parties are becoming increasingly formalized. Yet, we know little about how selection processes unfold in African parties or their gendered consequences (Field and Siavelis 2008). Academic literature on the topic is limited to a handful of case studies, and most do not explicitly focus on the gendered consequences of selection procedures (on South Africa and Namibia, see Giollabhuí 2013; on Ghana, see Ichino and Nathan 2012, 2016; Osei 2016; Öhman 2004).

Certainly, the mode of candidate selection may have gendered effects. Early research into this relationship finds a tension between highly inclusive candidate selection methods and achieving diversity and balance in representation (Caul 1999; Rahat 2007, 166). In a more recent study, focusing on Latin America, Hinojosa (2012, 43–50) analyzes degrees of centralization and exclusivity in selection processes, including the informal nature of candidate selection. She finds that exclusive-centralized selection is most advantageous in terms of increasing women's representation, implying that procedures often considered as most "democratic" (that is, inclusive-decentralized procedures) are less beneficial to female candidates. Intriguingly, in a comparative study of Thailand and Scotland, Bjarnegård and Kenny (2016) find that, despite candidate selection being *formally* centralized in both cases, it is *informally* decentralized, localized, and marked by clientelism and patronage. In this informal recruitment system, key local party actors in positions of power (mainly men) are able to use informality to keep outsiders (mainly women) from taking part in their networks. They thus argue that localized processes are likely to be marked by informal practices of local patronage and clientelism and that these mechanisms tend to "operate differently for men and women, with women positioned as "gendered 'outsiders' to the process and therefore unable to gain access to political power"

(Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016, 386–387). Consistent with this, Medeiros, Forest and Erl (this issue), point to how local party cultures and networks in Canada may act as obstacles in the recruitment of women candidates.

Findings from the nascent scholarship on Africa show that there is a trend towards the holding of party primaries to elect candidates. In their study of candidate selection in Ghana's ruling party, Ichino and Nathan (2016) find that primaries increase the number of aspirants seeking nomination, including the number of women. Their reasoning is that patronage-based politics are more difficult in open primaries and consequently female aspirants (who often have a lower capacity to buy votes) face a smaller disadvantage. However, the question remains whether female aspirants have the *merits* required to be selected as candidates. The scholarly literature provides no common understanding of how "merit" should be defined, and the criteria tend to range from objective to subjective, according to who you ask (Murray 2015).

Although research on gendered candidate qualifications is scarce in the African context, we do, know something about voter expectations in Africa, in particular, that constituents fiercely demand community development and even personal benefits (Hyden 2013, 51; Lindberg 2010). Vote-buying and hand-outs to mobilize voters are widespread during general elections and are even common phenomena during primaries (Ichino and Nathan 2012; Lindberg 2010). This naturally affects the priorities of party selectorates. What is less discussed is the effects of vote-buying on formal candidate selection procedures in many African parties. Since parties usually originate as election vehicles for party leaders, party leaders typically formally have the final say in who gets nominated. The need to open up and popularize the selection process, to meet demands from the communities, have resulted in the organization of recommendation meetings at the local level. Both these processes are formalized, but they tend to create frictions

when party leaders do not follow the recommendations of the local branches, by for example, nominating a female candidate not favored by local branches.

Candidate selection and gender imbalance in Zambia

Zambia is a typical case of a democratizing African state that introduced multiparty elections in the 1990s and has experienced at least one turnover in the executive party as a consequence of popular elections (Bwalya and Maharaj 2017). Compared to some of its neighboring countries, Zambian opposition parties are relatively strong (LeBas 2011), and elections are highly competitive (Goldring and Wahman 2016). Still, the major parties remain highly centralized and the ruling party prefers to build coalitions with individual opposition MPs rather than negotiating with opposition parties (Muriaas, Rakner, and Skage 2016). This characteristic fit the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) when it was in power and later the Patriotic Front (PF). Party loyalty is thus minimal due to constant party switching.

Within this context, gender balance in political recruitment has remained low. Still, for a sub-Saharan country with SMD and no electoral gender quotas, Zambia is performing rather well (see figure 1), although it remains well below the regional average of 23.7 percent women in parliament in 2017.

Figure 1. Percentages of female members of parliament in countries in sub-Saharan Africa with a single-member district electoral system and no quotas, 1997–2016
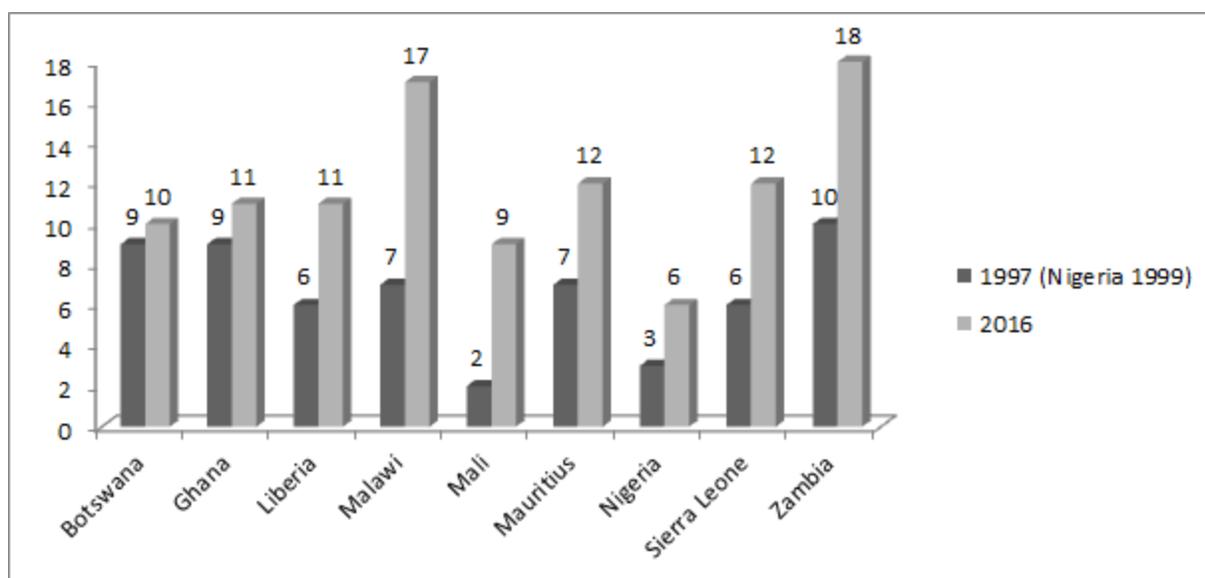
Taking a closer look at candidate nominations, only one out of six candidates were women in the 2011 and 2016 elections. This low number of female candidates indicates that the source of women's underrepresentation stems from what takes place during the candidate nomination process within the political parties. Table 1 shows a striking pattern between the nomination of female candidates in the 2011 and 2016 elections. In 2011, the three main political parties were MMD, PF, and the United Party for National Development (UPND), and each party nominated 20 female candidates.

Table 1. Candidate success rates (%) by gender

	2011 Parliamentary Elections				2016 Parliamentary Elections			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
PF	41.7	(127→53)	40.0	(20→8)	53.6	(125→67)	44.8	(29→13)
UPND	23.7	(114→27)	10.0	(20→2)	37.5	(128→48)	34.5	(29→10)
IND	2.6	(116→3)	0.0	(21→0)	12.6	(95→12)	25.0	(8→2)
MMD	38.3	(128→49)	30.0	(20→6)	11.5	(26→3)	0.0	(10→0)
FDD	4.0	(25→1)	0.0	(5→0)	0.0	(90→0)	5.3	(19→1)
Others	0.0	(135→0)	4.5	(22→1)	0.0	(85→0)	0.0	(10→0)

| Total | 20.6 | (647→133) | 15.7 | (108→17) | 23.7 | (549→130) | 24.8 | (105→26) |

In parentheses: number of candidates→number of winners; Patriotic Front (PF), United Party for National Development (UPND), IND (Independent candidates), Movement of Multi-Party Democracy (MMD), Forum for Democracy and Development (FDD)

In 2016, there were only two main parties contesting, since MMD dismantled after PF won the 2011 presidential elections. The outcome of the selection process was that PF and UPND nominated 29 female candidates each (see table 1). If the similarity in female candidates nominated by key parties is not coincidental, but an understanding agreed upon by party leaders, we see the contours of an informal soft quota for women. If so, the enforcement of the agreement is made possible due to the centralized decision-making power of party leaders during the selection processes.

Centralization: Soft party quotas, but hard glass ceilings

As argued by Caul (1999, 80), "[i]n a highly centralized party, leaders have the control to create openings for women—when they want to do so." The Zambian case clearly illustrates this point, but highlights that centralized party decisions can be both enabling as well as disabling for female aspirants. Centralization is enabling because, regardless of how the rest of the selection process plays out, the party leader can select a woman if he or she so wants, and can even enforce a soft quota that establishes a fixed number of female candidates. A soft quota aims to increase women's representation indirectly through internal party quotas or more directly through informal targets and recommendations (Krook, Lovenduski, and Squires 2009, 786). Yet centralization can also be disabling if soft quotas create a glass ceiling because party leaders informally and secretly collude to decide that only a set number of women will go through.

However, the centralized nomination process is preceded by an elaborate and locally grounded nomination process. Aspirants seek to obtain support from their parties at the local and

provincial levels, so that leaders at those levels will recommend them for nomination at the national level. Therefore, to understand the gendered consequences of party recruitment processes, it is important to explore how the selection processes within the main political parties unfold at all levels, as well as the role that party leaders play.

Although the main parties have formal rules regarding how the selection process should be organized, the transparency of the process tends to be affected by the expectations of those involved, the party leader's control, and features of a weakly institutionalized party system in a post-authoritarian setting. Under Zambia's prior one-party-rule, the United National Independence Party (UNIP) had forced membership and open primaries where candidates were elected to political offices. The post-authoritarian party MMD, which emerged as the new ruling party, introduced a more exclusive system of candidate selection, and MMD's splinter party (PF) also adopted this system. As shown in Table 2, the formal route towards party candidacy in MMD and PF, similar to what has been defined by Momba (2005), is that aspirants are interviewed at three different levels of the party organization. The recommendations from each level are noted and passed on to the next level; ultimately, the national party leadership makes the final decision.

<insert table 2>

UPND has a slightly more inclusive system than the other parties. It has an advisory primary at the constituency level, where aspirants present themselves and members of the local committees vote by secret ballot. The results of this election are passed on to the party leadership, which decides whether it will follow the advisory results. Nonetheless, party leaders do take into account recommendations from lower party branches, and the aspirant favored by the local branch is in a strong position to be nominated.

In this system, at least three factors make it difficult for women aspirants to succeed in becoming the favored candidate at the local party branch level, according to a representative from the Center for Intra-party Dialogue (as well as others we interviewed). First, the composition of nominating committees affects gender balance; "women are disadvantaged because they [nominating committees] are heavily male populated. There are so many men. So the chances of men thinking about a woman is very small." Second, the male selectorate has a very specific image of the homo politicus: "Parties are patriarchal, they have the image of a father figure, the father of the party." Third, women have a difficult time accessing the money that plays an important role in Zambian politics: "Women are economically disempowered in this part of the world. They are not financially prepared to have the kind of campaign that brings victory. You know, Zambian elections are highly commercialized, mostly it is the men that have that resources to give to the party to do elections" (interview 1 July 2015).

The importance of sufficient finances was highlighted in all the interviews with both successful and unsuccessful candidates, as well as with members of international and domestic NGOs in Zambia. One female MP explained, "In Zambia, the system is such that the parties have to finance their own candidates, but the parties don't have money. So at the end of the day, it is the individual candidates that finance their own elections." She continued by giving an example of how aspirants go about convincing the local selectorate about their merits: "The male aspirants say, 'I can bring in vehicles, I'm going to put in maybe the equivalent of 20,000 dollars,' and then the women say, 'I can put in 2,000 dollars.' So the parties get discouraged" (interview 15 July 2015). Zambia is ranked as number 116 out of 145 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report of 2015 (World Economic Forum 2015). This indicates the existence of gendered structural differences, not only in who has financial resources to fund their own

campaign, but also which networks they are able to tap into for funding. This is further stressed by work finding that women's lower socio-economic positions mean that women "may lack the economic independence to pursue a political career" (Ballington and Kahane 2014: 304). Even elite women are likely to be affected by such relations as it produces cultural expectations and gendered stereotypes.

Not only the elections themselves, but also the grassroots selection processes within political parties (particularly in party strongholds) are very expensive. According to a news source, the UPND aspirants in some constituency primaries gave up to K500 (US$52) to each member of the selectorate to be placed at the top of the recommendation list (Lusaka Times 2016). A representative of the Zambia National Women's Lobby also highlighted the issue of money when she commented on the corrupt selectorate, "The ones that have paid the most are the ones that they normally adopt [nominate]" (interview July 9, 2015).

Centralization could thus be seen as a remedy against the negative gendered effects of commercialized nomination processes, male-dominated selectorates, and gendered stereotypes about a father-like "ideal" candidate. Yet a party leader's centralized powers can also disadvantage women. Participation in localized selection processes can clearly be discouraging, but some women can be well-known in their communities and have support from influential local leaders, although they have never been in a position where they have to negotiate with the party leadership in the capital. In a centralized nomination system, aspirants participate in several rallies and are interviewed at different stages, but may end up not winning the nomination, even if they are the most popular person at the local level. As one female parliamentarian explained, "Well, it's the corruption, you have to pay some people to support you. . . . But there is not so much transparency, so in the constituency you come out as number one, in the district number

five. . . .There is this fluctuation. There is no consistency" (interview July 15, 2015). Since the central party leader can overrule the recommendations of local party branches, the local selection process is in danger of being reduced to keeping local party branch members happy by giving them food, sugar, transport, or cash, without knowing if these personal outlays will lead to personal success. Still, as argued by Norris (1996), different actors are important at different stages of the process, and it is difficult to determine which part of the process that is most decisive in terms of the final outcome.

Under current candidate selection systems in Zambia, aspirants cannot know based on their experience at the local level whether they will be nominated. The final result of the selection process is announced when the nomination list is submitted to the national electoral commission by the party leader. Until then, it is unclear whether recommendations given at the subnational level will be followed. For example, the UPND national leadership ignored local level protests when it selected Patricia Mwashingwele as a candidate in Katuba constituency, even though the primary was won by a man (Daily Nation 2016). By contrast, a well-known women's rights activist was led to believe that she was ranked as the favorite by all subnational branch selection committees, but was turned down by the central committee, which picked a man (interview July 10, 2015). The combination of centralized decision making and a fairly inclusive system of local recommendation formation makes the nomination process costly and the outcome uncertain. Hence, what women potentially might gain from an informal soft quota deal among party leaders is lost by the discouragement of having to participate in primaries where local-level recommendations are not necessarily followed by the central party leadership.

The informal soft quota is also a hard ceiling. It is difficult for women to gain the necessary leverage vis-à-vis the central party leader, since there are few opportunities for women

to build a career within the party organization. Women interested in participating in politics are typically relegated to the women's wings of the parties. MPs and party politicians, however, made it clear that women's wings rarely advance the candidacy of its own members. The reason for this is that women's wings are used as mobilizing engines, that sings and dance at rallies, rather than a place for those who sympathize with the parties' platform and use the structure to build a career. Consequently, this formally crucial party structure does not constitute an avenue for recruiting female candidates. If female candidates are not backed by the women's wing and not backed by local recommendations, but handed over by party leaders, their power base is bound to be shaky if elected.

Conclusions

In Zambia, the combination of strong party leaders and demands for primaries from local communities produces noteworthy effects. Although the local party branches would like to see their recommendations being followed, primaries also serve an additional purpose. The local-level candidate nomination processes represent an opportunity for local party members to benefit from their party loyalty. Aspirants must provide payments, bribes, food, and transportation to show off their resources and popularity, even though their successful efforts at the local level might have no bearing on the central party leader's final nomination decision. Although the local candidate selection process could be seen as a necessary ritual for aspirants, time and time again it is demonstrated that a good bargain with the party leader may be the only critical key to coming out as a top nominee.

This article addresses the gendered effects of leader-centered candidate nomination processes in Zambia, a democratizing country. Indeed, centralized nomination processes make it

possible for party leaders to enforce an informal soft quota that ensures that a certain number of women are nominated as candidates. However, this soft quota can also act as a glass ceiling that keeps qualified women from being nominated, thereby undermining increased gender balance in political recruitment. Party leaders hold the power to decide how many women will actually win a nomination and appear to informally collude and coordinate their decisions.

During the selection process, many female aspirants run their campaign on false hopes that focus on convincing the local selectorate, but often the selected few who end up being nominated as candidates win their selection through a bargain with the central party leader, not through the support of their local committees. Furthermore, party leaders are highly unlikely to go beyond the soft quota in nominating female candidates, even if there are more qualified women in the race. Based on our study, we encourage more work on candidate selection in democratizing states without gender quotas, in particular, studies that focus on how political financing affects candidate selection. Zambia has hardly any formal regulations on party funding and no public funding. Perhaps political finance could be used as a tool to assist female aspirants in becoming candidates.

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