

Nomination rules and the calculus of mobilization: Theory and evidence from Mexico[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Does party organization shape candidates' electoral mobilization efforts? I develop a novel theoretical account linking candidate selection rules to electoral mobilization. Nomination rules that require aspiring candidates to compete in electoral races, such as primary elections, create incentives for them to make considerable investments in order to win the party's nomination. Using a decision-theoretic model, I show how these initial investments at the nomination stage shape the candidates' mobilization expenditures in the general election. The main theoretical result establishes that primaries increase candidates' mobilization efforts only when the general election is not expected to be competitive; when a close race is expected, candidates mobilize at the same rates regardless of how they were nominated. Analysis of an original dataset on candidate selection and electoral mobilization in Mexico provides strong support for the theory.

How do parties mobilize voter support? An extensive literature in comparative and American politics has studied the strategic role of parties, candidates, and, more generally, political elites in mobilizing voters and activists (Morton, 1987; Uhlaner, 1989). Following insights first advanced by Key (1949), a central argument in these works is that the elites should invest more resources, or exert greater efforts, when the likelihood that their involvement decides the election is greater. For this reason, following a similar logic to calculus-of-voting models (e.g., Riker and Ordeshook, 1968), the elites' efforts are expected to increase in closer races (Aldrich, 1993; Cox, 1999).

A strand of this literature has focused on how institutions shape the elites' incentives to engage in costly mobilization. Scholars have linked mobilization levels to the proportionality of the electoral system (Rainey, 2015), the use of runoff elections (Fauvelle-Aymar and François, 2016), and the electoral calendar (Fukumoto and Horiuchi, 2016). Absent from this literature, however, is research on how candidate selection rules might shape the elites' mobilizational efforts. This absence is surprising because these rules could affect several factors related to the candidates' campaigning capacity, such as their fundraising effectiveness or even the decision to seek the nomination.

This paper presents a novel theoretical account linking nomination rules to electoral mobilization. The theory has two building blocks. First, in order to engage in electoral mobilization, a candidate must pay the costs of building an electoral machine, or campaign team,

responsible for executing the tasks that mobilization requires. That is, effective mobilization requires not only access to resources but also an organized group of people who can channel those resources. Second, certain nomination rules – in particular primary elections – encourage the entry of resource-rich contenders and create incentives for aspirants to office to make sizable investments in order to obtain a party's ticket. Consequently, many aspirants pay the costs of building an electoral machine during the primary campaign, when it is unclear whether they will run in the general election.

I incorporate these two realistic features of electoral politics into a decision-theoretic model to analyze how nomination rules affect the candidates' general-election mobilization efforts. The main result is that candidates selected in primaries mobilize at higher rates than those nominated through other rules, but only in races that are *not* expected to be close. The reason is that, when deciding whether to engage in mobilization, candidates nominated in primaries do not need to take into account the cost of building an electoral machine, since they already have one in place. In contrast, other candidates decide whether to build the machine based on the expected competitiveness of the general election and, as traditional models would predict, they are more likely to do so in close races. Therefore, in non-competitive races, primary-nominated candidates put their preexisting electoral machines to work, while other candidates exert no effort.

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I provide empirical support for the theory using data from legislative elections in Mexico, a country where electoral mobilization is characterized by clientelistic exchanges (Cantú, 2019; Larreguy et al., 2016). A challenge for studying mobilization in this type of setting is that the tactics used, which range from hiring buses to drive supporters to the polls to handing gifts in exchange for turning out, are often illegal and thus hard to observe. To circumvent this challenge, I take advantage of a feature of the Mexican electoral law – described in more detail next – that allows me to indirectly measure the mobilization expenditures of each candidate.

In Mexico, as in other countries, parties are allowed to send representatives to the polling stations on election day. Although, on paper, the main duty of these representatives is to prevent electoral irregularities, recent research has documented the key role they play in candidates' mobilization strategies (Ascencio and Rueda, 2019; Larreguy et al., 2016; Mercado, 2013). Party representatives work hand in hand with brokers, and often use their privileged position at the polls to help in the enforcement of clientelistic transactions. Candidates invest hefty sums of money to guarantee that the polling stations will be covered, and thus the degree to which candidates are able to have representatives at the polls provides information about their mobilization expenditures.

Using the presence of party representatives at the polls as a measure of mobilization has several advantages over alternative measures. First, the theory establishes a link between a party's nomination rules and that party's mobilization efforts. Proper empirical assessment of the theory, then, requires a party-specific measure, unlike turnout, which only captures aggregate mobilization levels. Furthermore, in contrast to other party-specific measures, such as campaign-finance figures, the presence of representatives is easily verifiable and the incentives to misreport are minimal.

The analysis focuses on two of the major parties in the country, the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) and the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD), both of which have consistently used different nomination mechanisms. In each legislative election during 2003–2009, some of these parties' candidates were nominated in primaries, and the rest were appointed by their party leaders. I exploit this rich variation, within each party and within each election, to analyze whether different nomination rules shape the candidates' incentives to invest in electoral-mobilization activities.

I find a strong positive association between the use of primaries by a political party and that party's mobilization efforts in patterns consistent with the model. In districts where a party expects a non-competitive race, candidates nominated in primaries have higher party-representative coverage at the polls than handpicked candidates. In contrast, where a party expects a close race, all candidates have similar coverage levels regardless of nomination rules. Additionally, I present several pieces of evidence that suggest these patterns are not driven by selection effects.

In addition to the literature on mobilization, this paper contributes to the study of candidate selection. Recent work studies the effects of nomination rules on different outcomes, including electoral results (Ichino and Nathan, 2013), as well as the candidates' ideological positions (Bruhn, 2013; Gerber and Morton, 1998), professional backgrounds (Langston, 2006), and behavior in office (Hix, 2004). This study shows that nomination rules not only affect the type of candidates that are nominated but also their behavior during campaigns. Moreover, to the extent that mobilization strategies are effective, this paper advances a mechanism by which primaries can affect election outcomes that has been largely overlooked.

This paper also contributes to the debate on the relationship between primaries and political participation. Supporters of the so-called “divisive primary hypothesis” argue that hotly contested primaries reduce participation by making supporters of losing aspirants less likely to turn out in the general election (Kenney and Rice, 1987; Lengle et al., 1995), while others claim primaries can boost party membership and

activism by strengthening the activists' sense of involvement and incentives to engage in campaigns (Pennings and Hazan, 2001; Scarrow, 2000). In contrast to these works, which emphasize how nomination rules affect the citizens' incentives to participate in campaigns, the theory presented here sheds light on how these rules shape the politicians' calculations to strategically mobilize the electorate.

Finally, this paper contributes to a literature that studies how parties mitigate free-rider problems in the provision of electoral mobilization (e.g., Rosas and Lucardi, 2020). The possibility of electoral spillovers means that mobilizing voters is a public good that benefits all party members. However, because electoral mobilization is costly, individual candidates often have incentives to shirk, particularly when running in “safe” or “hopeless” races (Cox et al., 2021). This paper shows that using primaries can provide incentives for even these candidates to make costly investments in mobilization. A similar logic applies to the study of party building (Levitsky et al., 2016; Mainwaring, 2018). The argument and findings presented here highlight the potential role of candidate selection in building strong party organizations. By democratizing candidate selection, party leaders can create pressures for ambitious politicians to pay the costs of assembling and sustaining grassroots organizations even in regions where their party is not electorally competitive.

1. A model of electoral mobilization

I develop a decision-theoretic model of electoral mobilization to show how different nomination rules affect a candidate's mobilization efforts. These rules are often classified along a continuum depending on the inclusiveness of the *selectorate*, i.e., the body that selects a party's candidates (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). However, for purposes of this analysis, I classify them on a different basis. The argument presented below rests upon the fact that some rules require candidates to compete in electoral races, leading ambitious aspirants to make sizable investments in order to be nominated. I argue that these investments at the nomination stage shape the candidates' mobilization efforts in the general election. Since the mechanism at work is the link between electoral competition and these investments, I make a starker distinction and classify candidate selection rules into two groups, depending on whether they involve competition in an electoral race.

Although the focus is on the influence of nomination rules, I first lay out the setup of a model of electoral mobilization in a general-election race. After introducing the main result, I use the model to characterize the mobilization choices of candidates nominated through different rules.

1.1. Setup

Consider a general-election candidate who must decide whether to engage in costly electoral mobilization. I depart from existing models (e.g., Cox, 1999; Rainey, 2015) by assuming that mobilization is possible only after the candidate has invested resources into building an organization that will execute the tasks that effective mobilization involves. In practice, this team could include party operatives, brokers, activists, and volunteers. Throughout, I refer to this organization as the *electoral machine*. The candidate's problem consists of two parts. First, she takes action $a \in \{0, 1\}$ and decides whether to build an electoral machine ($a = 1$) or not ($a = 0$). Building the machine entails a one-time sunk cost $k > 0$, which captures all expenses associated with starting an organization (see Schlesinger, 1984). Following this decision, she chooses an amount of resources $s \geq 0$ to spend on electoral mobilization.

The candidate's payoffs are as follows. First, I consider a function $u : \mathbb{R}_+ \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ that maps from the office-seeker's spending choices to her payoffs. I assume that u is single-peaked in s . This assumption captures two important features: (1) campaign spending has decreasing

marginal returns, and (2) raising campaign funds is costly.¹ Let s^* be the maximizer of u . The candidate builds the machine and spends s^* only if the following condition holds

$$u(s^*) - k > u(0). \quad (1)$$

It is important to distinguish the candidate's *optimal spending* s^* , which is the amount the candidate would invest if she did not have to pay the cost of building the machine, from the candidate's actual spending choice, which I call *observed spending* and denote by \bar{s} . These two spending levels need not be the same. Indeed, if Eq. (1) does not hold, the candidate's observed spending is zero even if her optimal spending is strictly positive. In this framework, a solution to the candidate's problem takes one of two forms. She either builds the electoral machine ($a = 1$) and invests her optimal spending ($\bar{s} = s^*$), or does not build the machine ($a = 0$) and spends no resources ($\bar{s} = 0$).

Next, in order to explore how the expected competitiveness of the race affects this decision, I parametrize the utility function by the *expected margin of victory*, denoted by m . Thus, a candidate who spends s in a race with expected margin $m \in [-1, 1]$ gets payoff $u(s, m)$. This parameter has a natural interpretation. As m approaches -1 , the candidate expects her opponent to get all the vote, and as m gets closer to 1 she expects to get all the vote herself. Intermediate values of m indicate a close race is expected, with $m = 0$ being the closest possible race.

I make two assumptions about how the margin shapes the candidate's payoffs. First, I assume u is increasing in m for any s . In words, for fixed amount s , the candidate receives a higher (lower) payoff as her expected margin of victory increases (decreases). Intuitively, if we could observe the candidate investing the same amount of resources into two races with different margins, the candidate should receive a higher payoff from the race with the larger expected margin. Second, I assume that, for all s , the derivative of u with respect to s , denoted $u_s(s, m)$, is single-peaked in m with a peak at $m = 0$. In words, the *marginal impact* of spending is largest in races expected to be competitive, specifically those with $m = 0$, and decreases in races expected to be less competitive. This assumption is well in line with the mobilization literature, which predicts candidates should exert greater mobilization efforts in close elections because it is in these races that their investments have the largest influence (Aldrich, 1993; Cox, 1999; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993).

1.2. Analysis

When making her decision, the candidate compares her payoff when she does not spend any resources with her payoff from building the machine and investing her optimal spending, $s^*(m)$. To make this comparison more systematic, I define function $\gamma : [-1, 1] \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ that maps from the candidate's expected margin to her *change* in utility from optimally spending in mobilization. I refer to γ as the *gains from optimal spending* function, and define it as

$$\gamma(m) = u(s^*(m), m) - u(0, m). \quad (2)$$

Therefore, $\gamma(m)$ captures the shift in utility that a candidate competing in a race with expected margin m receives when she invests her optimal amount $s^*(m)$ relative to spending no resources. The candidate's behavior is guided by comparing $\gamma(m)$ to the cost of building the machine, k . When the gains exceed the cost, the candidate builds the electoral

¹ This is analogous to assuming there is a probability of winning function p that is increasing in s , and a cost of raising funds function c that is convex. If winning the election results in benefit $\beta > 0$, the payoff from building the machine at cost k and spending s is: $\beta p(s) - c(s) - k$. Given that c is convex, under reasonable assumptions about the shape of p , the payoffs will be single-peaked in s .

machine and her observed spending is $\bar{s}(m) = s^*(m)$. Otherwise, she does not build the machine and her observed spending is $\bar{s}(m) = 0$.

Existing works assume that the gains from optimal spending are large in close elections, but as elections are expected to be less competitive, the gains from spending go down until they disappear, making it optimal for candidates running in non-competitive races to spend no resources. In this setting, too, the gains from optimal spending are largest when m is zero and monotonically decrease as m changes in either direction.² At the same time, given that I incorporate the cost of building the machine k , the current framework allows for the possibility of positive spending only in races expected to be competitive even if the gains from optimal spending are strictly positive for all levels of competitiveness, i.e., even if $\gamma(m) > 0$ for all m . The next result states this formally.

Proposition 1. *Suppose the gains from optimal spending, $\gamma(m)$, are strictly positive for all expected margins of victory, m . The cost of building the electoral machine, k , can be classified into high and low in such a way that:*

- (1) *If the cost is high, the candidate does not build the machine and her observed spending, $\bar{s}(m)$, is equal to zero regardless of the expected margin of victory, m .*
- (2) *If the cost is low, the candidate builds the machine and her observed spending, $\bar{s}(m)$, is equal to her optimal spending level $s^*(m) > 0$ if she expects the race to be sufficiently competitive. Otherwise, the candidate does not build the machine and her observed spending, $\bar{s}(m)$, is equal to zero.*

All proofs and a more formal statement of the results are in Appendix A.1. The intuition for Proposition 1 is as follows. Because we assume the gains from optimal spending are positive for all m , the candidate's choices are completely determined by the cost of building the machine, k . Case (1) is trivial. If k is high, the candidate does not build the machine and her observed spending $\bar{s}(m)$ equals zero regardless of her expected margin. Similarly, (2) allows for some trivial cases. If k is sufficiently low, the candidate builds the machine and her observed spending equals $s^*(m) > 0$ for all m . Substantively, the only relevant case is (2), excluding the trivial scenario just described. This is so because only when the costs of building the machine are in that range does the expected margin of victory influence the candidate's decision. Therefore, the rest of the results presented in this paper assume that k falls in this substantively relevant range.³

As mentioned before, it can be shown that the gains from optimal spending function is single-peaked in m and attains its maximum at $m = 0$. Thus, the candidate builds the machine and invests her optimal spending $s^*(m) > 0$ only when m is sufficiently close to zero. Otherwise, she does not build the machine and spends no resources. This result should not be surprising; it is, in essence, a restatement of the main prediction of the mobilization literature, according to which candidates' efforts should be greater in close races (Aldrich, 1993; Cox, 1999). That said, the mechanism driving Proposition 1 is substantively different from previous works. In this setting, the candidate would always be willing to invest a positive amount of resources if she did not have to pay the cost of building the machine. The next section shows this distinction has important implications for the relationship between mobilization and nomination rules.

1.3. Mobilization under alternative nomination rules

As mentioned previously, I categorize nomination rules into two, depending on whether they involve competition in an electoral race. To facilitate the discussion, I refer to these sets of rules as *primaries* and *appointments*. The key assumption of the argument advanced here is that

² See Lemma 2 in Appendix A.1.

³ Formally, the assumption is: $\max\{\gamma(-1), \gamma(1)\} < k < \gamma(0)$.

candidates nominated in primaries are more likely than appointed candidates to reach the general-election stage with an electoral machine in place. Below, I first characterize the behavior of the candidate in two different scenarios – one in which she was selected in a primary and another in which she was nominated through an appointment – under this assumption, and then discuss the plausibility of the assumption as we move from the model to real-world elections.

Let $s_r(m)$ be the observed spending of the candidate selected by rule $r \in \{A, P\}$, where A and P denote appointment and primary, respectively. First, consider the decision of an appointed candidate. Since she does not have a machine in place, her observed spending $s_A(m)$ is as in Proposition 1. Next, consider the candidate's calculus when she is selected in a primary. Since she already has a machine, her observed spending $s_P(m)$ is always equal to the optimal spending $s^*(m)$. Thus, given a fixed margin m , any differences in the choices of the candidates are exclusively driven by the willingness of the appointed candidate to build a machine.

Proposition 2. *Suppose the gains from optimal spending, $\gamma(m)$, are strictly positive for all expected margins of victory, m . Then:*

- (1) *If the race is expected to be competitive, the observed spending levels under appointment and under primary are equal to the optimal spending level, which is strictly positive.*
- (2) *If the race is not expected to be competitive, the observed spending under primary is equal to the optimal spending level, which is strictly positive, and the observed spending under appointment is zero.*

Fig. 1 illustrates the intuition behind Proposition 2. The two left panels show $s_r(m)$, the observed spending of a candidate nominated using rule $r \in \{A, P\}$ as a function of the absolute value of m . The dotted vertical line indicates the value of $|m|$ such that the gains from optimal spending equal the cost of building the machine, k . The first panel corresponds to the appointed candidate. When m is sufficiently small, the gains from optimal spending exceed the cost of building the machine, and thus she builds the machine and her observed spending, $s_A(m)$, equals her optimal spending, $s^*(m) > 0$. Otherwise, she does not build the machine and spends $s_A(m) = 0$. The second panel shows the choices of a candidate nominated in a primary. Because she already has an electoral machine, her observed spending $s_P(m)$ is equal to $s^*(m) > 0$ for all m . Taken together, these characterizations suggest the following pattern:

Hypothesis 1. In non-competitive races, primaries have a positive effect on candidates' mobilization efforts. In competitive races, primaries have no effect on candidates' mobilization efforts.

This hypothesis is illustrated in the right panel of Fig. 1, which calculates the difference of observed spending levels, $s_P(m) - s_A(m)$, from the two left panels. When the candidate expects a sufficiently close race (left side of the dotted line), she invests her optimal spending whether she was appointed or selected in a primary, and thus $s_P(m) - s_A(m) = 0$. Otherwise, the candidate invests her optimal spending $s^*(m) > 0$ if she was selected in a primary and invests zero if she was appointed, which means that in non-competitive races $s_P(m) - s_A(m) = s^*(m) > 0$.

1.4. Discussion

The theoretical result behind Hypothesis 1 follows from the assumption that candidates nominated in primaries are more likely to reach the general-election stage with an electoral machine in place than appointed candidates. Here, I discuss the plausibility of this assumption and how the model's expectations might change when this assumption does not hold.

There are, at least, three mechanisms by which primaries can result in the nomination of candidates who have a machine in place by the time they receive the party's ticket. The first of these is *electoral*

competition. Since primary aspirants face a decision analogous to the one described in the baseline model, candidates who ran in closely fought primary races are likely to have built a machine during the primary campaign. Second, building an electoral machine could be part of an *entry deterrence* strategy. That is, an aspirant might invest into assembling a machine in order to deter others from entering the primary. Notice that, in contrast to the competition mechanism, which requires that a primary election is competitive for the electoral-machine assumption to hold, the deterrence mechanism suggests primaries can result in the nomination of a candidate with a machine even when the primary is not contested, let alone competitive. Third, there is also a *selection* mechanism, meaning politicians who enter primaries might be systematically different from those nominated through other methods (Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Serra, 2011). For instance, aspirants who already control an electoral machine or similar structures in place (e.g., unions, neighborhood associations) will face relatively lower costs of entering primaries than others—and, in fact, parties might adopt primaries in an attempt to recruit these types of candidates. These claims are consistent with a literature that shows that the use of more inclusive nomination rules affects the composition of the candidate pool (e.g., Bruhn, 2013; Langston, 2006).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that there are instances in which the availability of an electoral machine is not shaped by candidate selection rules—that is, instances in which the model's main substantive assumption is unlikely to hold. Most notably, in settings where a party machine is already in place, the party's nominees might have the option of investing resources into activating this (pre-existing) party machine regardless of how they were nominated.

In order to evaluate how the presence of a party machine affects the model's expectations, it is essential to answer whether candidates selected in primaries or appointments will be in a better position to use the party machine. The answer to this question is *a priori* unclear. On the one hand, aspirants running in primaries have great incentives to seek the support of the elites who control the local party machine during the nomination stage, since their backing is essential for getting the party's ticket (Hijino, 2014; Ichino and Nathan, 2012). Therefore, one might argue primaries create pressures for aspirants to forge connections with the local party elites, increasing the likelihood that – in line with the model's assumption – the party's nominee will reach the general-election stage with the support of the party machine.⁴

On the other hand, however, the presence of a strong party machine could decrease the likelihood that a party uses primaries in the first place (e.g., Bruhn, 2014; De Luca et al., 2002). Nominations by appointment are more frequent when there is local party boss who can “impose his candidates, co-opt potential opponents, and/or successfully negotiate an agreement with other party factions” (De Luca et al., 2002, 423).⁵ Moreover, controlling the party machine or having the support of those who do should considerably increase an aspirant's perceived electability. The presence of one strong contender relative to the rest of field decreases the intensity of intraparty competition and creates incentives for party leaders to handpick the strong aspirant outright (e.g., Ascencio, Forthcoming; Poiré, 2002). Therefore, it is also possible that – in contrast with the model's assumption – appointed candidates will have an electoral machine (i.e., the party machine) at their disposal come general election time.

Overall, then, the model is better suited to capture the dynamics of real-world elections in settings without strong party machines. When

⁴ In practice, getting the support of these elites is costly, as it often involves particularistic exchanges in the form of material goods and patronage commitments (Freidenberg and Levitsky, 2006; Kemahlioglu, 2006). This is consistent with an interpretation of the model in which k is the cost of getting the support of the local party machine rather than the cost of building an electoral machine from scratch.

⁵ More generally, the presence of a strong local party boss (e.g., governor, mayor) can make intraparty races less competitive (see, e.g., Skigin, 2022).

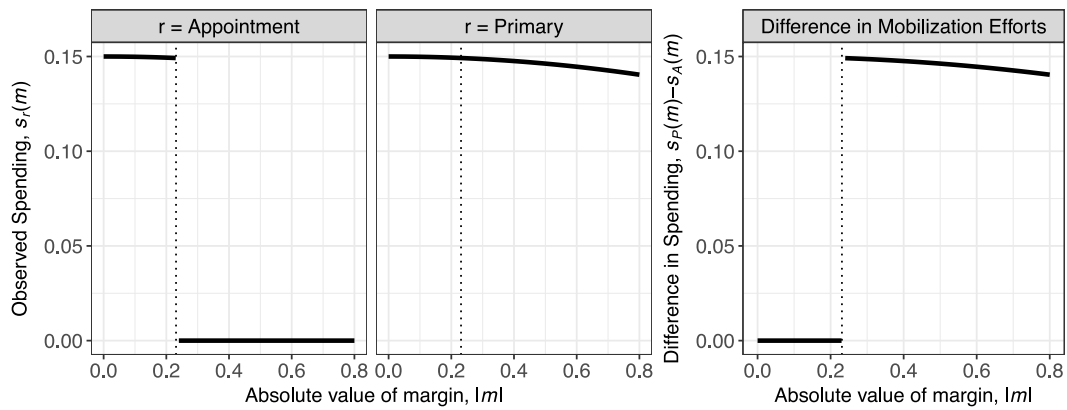


Fig. 1. Mobilization under alternative nomination rules.

the party machine is non-existent or weak, the model’s key assumption should hold well, and thus the observed mobilization levels should match the patterns described in Hypothesis 1. By contrast, when there is a strong party machine, this assumption may not hold, as it is possible that at least some appointed candidates either control this machine or have been backed up by those who do. This discussion suggests an additional empirical expectation:

Hypothesis 2. The patterns described in Hypothesis 1 should be more pronounced in the absence of a strong party machine.

2. Candidate selection and mobilization in Mexico

I study the implications of the model using data from legislative elections in Mexico. Below, I describe the features that make this an attractive case to study the link between nomination rules and mobilization, and discuss how these inform the empirical analysis.

Nomination rules. Mexico’s lower chamber consists of 500 legislators, with 300 elected in single-member districts (SMDs) and 200 by proportional representation. My focus is on SMD nominations by the PAN and PRD. During 2003–2009, these parties exhibited substantial variation in their nomination rules across SMDs. In each election, the National Executive Committee (i.e., the national leaders) of each party handpicked a subset of all candidates and allowed the rest to be selected in local-level primaries (see Table 1). This type of variation is ideal to study the implications of the model, as it allows me to compare mobilization level across districts that used different nomination rules while holding constant any party- and election-specific factors.⁶

Although exploring the factors that drove the leaders’ choice of nomination rules is beyond the scope of this paper, Appendix A.2 provides a detailed account of the parties’ candidate selection processes during this period.

Legislative candidates. A central assumption of the model is that candidates nominated in primaries reach the general-election stage with an electoral machine in place, whereas other candidates do not. There are a number of reasons that suggest this assumption holds well

⁶ The other major party at the time, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), is not included in the analysis due to the minimal within-election variation in nomination rules: the PRI appointed six candidates in 2003, all 300 candidates in 2006, and only seven candidates in 2009. This makes it impossible to disentangle the effect of nomination rules from any election-specific effects; the comparison would be between outcomes of the 2006 election to those of 2003 and 2009. This is problematic because, regardless of nomination rules, parties’ mobilization and electoral outcomes are considerably different depending on whether the legislative elections are concurrent (as in 2006) or nonconcurrent (as in 2003 and 2009) with the presidential one (e.g., Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993).

Table 1

Candidate selection rules across electoral districts.

	PRD				PAN			
	2003	2006	2009	Total	2003	2006	2009	Total
Appointment	256	215	251	722	144	140	195	479
Primary	44	85	49	178	156	160	105	421
Total	300	300	300	900	300	300	300	900

Note: Tables uses data from General Council of the *Instituto Nacional Electoral* (INE). See *Acuerdos del Consejo General*: CG59/2003, CG76/2006, and CG173/2009.

in the Mexican case. To start, during the period of study, the electoral law did not allow legislators to run for consecutive reelection, which means that in any given election all seats were open seats. This is useful because it implies that, by focusing on this case, we need not worry about incumbency affecting the likelihood of a candidate having a machine.

Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that, in line with the model’s main assumption, candidates nominated in primaries have closer connections to the party’s base, which should facilitate building an electoral machine within their party. When asked whether candidates selected in primaries were different from others, a former PAN chairman indicated that the party appointed people who they thought would be successful general-election candidates and who, despite having good name recognition among the electorate, did not have what he called the “apparatus” to win a primary.⁷ This view was shared by a former member of the party’s National Executive Committee (CEN by its Spanish initials), who said appointed candidates were usually seen as outsiders with weak links to the party’s base, whereas primary winners generally “have been affiliated to the party for much longer, and thus have done much more groundwork”.

Bruhn (2013) offers more systematic evidence that matches these views. Using survey data from a sample of legislative candidates, this author finds that candidates selected in primaries were more closely connected to the party organization than those appointed by the party elites, as measured by both their number of years in the party and by whether they had held a post in the party. I supplement Bruhn’s analysis, which only includes data from 2006, by collecting data on the backgrounds of deputies elected in 2003 and 2009. Results of difference-in-means tests for several characteristics of the deputies’ backgrounds confirm her findings (see Appendix A.3).

⁷ In his words, “I do not think there are too many differences in the skills of candidates [selected in primaries or appointed]. It really is just their circumstances: some got to the party first and the others later; some have [the support of] a solid network of party activists and the others do not”. Interview by the author. All audios are available.

Electoral machines and mobilization. In Mexico, parties and candidates rely on brokers for the purpose of mobilization. Whereas some brokers are partisan, meaning they actually support or are even affiliated to a party, others are “free agents” who are willing to work for the highest bidder.⁸ The tasks they perform include rallying potential supporters, distributing goods among them, providing transportation to the polling stations, and, importantly, monitoring voters at the polls. This last activity is facilitated by an institutional feature discussed in detail next.

The electoral law authorizes parties to have up to two representatives in each polling station (COFIPE, 2008, Art. 245).⁹ Although their main responsibility is to safeguard the interests of their parties by preventing electoral irregularities, recent work shows they also play a key role in the enforcement of clientelistic transactions (Ascencio and Rueda, 2019; Larreguy et al., 2016; Mercado, 2013). In the weeks prior to the election, brokers and party activists create lists of supporters – either genuine party sympathizers or people who have received bribes from the broker – who intend to vote for the party in each polling station. On election day, the representatives use these lists to monitor whether voters on the brokers’ lists have turned out to vote as well as to update the brokers on their progress so that they can adjust their efforts accordingly.¹⁰

Having representatives at the polls is an essential part of a campaign’s mobilization strategy, and thus candidates invest substantial amounts of resources to guarantee that most polling stations will be covered (Larraz, 2018; Mercado, 2013). Different types of investments are required. First, people are recruited and trained to serve as representatives. On election day, candidates must invest into getting the representatives to the polls and providing the right incentives for them to keep working throughout the day. Some of these expenditures involve transportation costs,¹¹ food,¹² and the representatives’ wages. According to Mercado (2013), representatives receive 150–300 pesos (7–15 USD),¹³ plus bonuses for performance, but others document candidates paying up to 500–2500 pesos (25–125 USD).¹⁴ Therefore, in the empirical analysis, I use data on the presence of representatives as a proxy for candidates’ mobilization expenses.¹⁵

3. Empirical analysis

The main claim of the theory is that primaries have a positive effect on candidates’ general-election mobilization efforts *only* in races that are expected to be *non-competitive*. This section uses an original dataset on nomination rules from three Mexican elections to assess this expectation.

⁸ For a detailed discussion, see Mercado (2013) and Larreguy et al. (2016).

⁹ Although the COFIPE was replaced in 2014, it was the electoral law in force throughout the period of study.

¹⁰ For additional details on the mechanics of this monitoring system, sometimes called the “bingo system”, see Ascencio and Rueda (2019) and Larreguy et al. (2016).

¹¹ As a PAN activist puts it: “it is heavy duty to move so many people. At the same time you move them [the representatives], you need to move other people, communities. Unfortunately, we have to operate like this, we go to remote places with our fleet of taxis and we instruct them to take everyone to vote ... [we look for] people that can provide resources because you really need an army of people whose job is just that, electoral mobilization. On D-Day they are in charge of mobilizing everyone, the representatives and the voters”.

¹² Most interviewees mentioned hunger as a key reason why representatives cut their work day short.

¹³ The daily minimum wage in 2016 was 73.04 pesos.

¹⁴ See records CG31/2013 and CG258/2013 of the INE’s General Council.

¹⁵ We highlight that, even if the representatives’ main role is preventing electoral manipulation (see Ascencio and Rueda, 2019), their presence provides information about the candidates’ mobilization expenses. As a seasoned campaign operative for the PRD puts it, “if a candidate spent money on having representatives, it means he also spent money on mobilization, you know? On vote buying, [paying the] taxi drivers, all that stuff...”

3.1. Data

I assemble a dataset with information on nomination rules and electoral mobilization for the legislative elections of 2003, 2006, and 2009. The unit of analysis is the party-district-election.

Outcome variable. I measure mobilization as the share of polling stations in the district in which the party had at least one representative on election day. This variable was built using data from the *Instituto Nacional Electoral* (INE), which keeps records of all the information in the polling-station tallies, including whether they were signed by the representatives of each party.

Explanatory variables. The main variable of interest is *Primary*, a dummy that indicates whether the party’s candidate was nominated in a primary. To measure expected competitiveness, I calculate the party’s margin of victory in the previous legislative election. *Margin* is calculated as the difference between the party’s vote share in the previous election minus that of its rival that got the most votes.¹⁶ This variable takes values between -1 and 1 , with larger (lower) values indicating that a safe win (loss) is expected, and values close to zero that a close race is expected. I also use a dummy variable, labeled *Non-competitive*, that takes the value of one if the party either won or lost the previous election by a margin of at least ten percentage points (p.p.).¹⁷

Controls. The analysis uses several political and demographic characteristics that could be associated with both the use of primaries and mobilization levels. These include an indicator of whether the district is in a state with a copartisan governor, an indicator of whether state elections were concurrent with the legislative election, the share of municipalities in the district ruled by a copartisan mayor, and the district’s population share living in such municipalities. Other covariates are the district’s area, an index measuring the level of development, the share of illiterate population, the shares of households that have dirt floors, have electricity, own a television, and own a computer. Appendix A.5 shows data sources, variable operationalization, and descriptive statistics.

3.2. Main results

The first piece of evidence comes from a set of OLS models. I estimate equations of the form

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Representatives}_{ipt} = & \alpha + \beta \text{Primary}_{ipt} + \gamma \text{Non-competitive}_{ipt} \\ & + \phi(\text{Primary}_{ipt} \times \text{Non-competitive}_{ipt}) \\ & + x'_{ipt} \theta + \mu_p + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{ipt}, \end{aligned}$$

where i is an electoral district, p is a political party, and t is an election year. The equation also includes a vector of controls, x_{ipt} , a set of party fixed effects, μ_p , and a set of election-year fixed effects, δ_t . Some specifications include party-election-year fixed effects, η_{pt} , which capture common shocks to all districts in a given election for each party. Finally, the error term, ε_{ipt} , captures all other factors affecting the measure of mobilization.

According to [Hypothesis 1](#), primaries should have a positive effect on a candidate’s mobilization efforts only when the candidate does not expect a close race. Support for the theory requires that $\hat{\beta}$ is indistinguishable from zero and that $\hat{\phi}$ is positive. More specifically, the marginal effect of *Primary*, given by $\hat{\beta} + \hat{\phi} \text{Non-competitive}$, should be equal to zero when *Non-competitive* equals zero and positive when *Non-competitive* equals one.

[Table 2](#) presents the main results. Column (1) shows the baseline specification. Consistent with [Hypothesis 1](#), the use of primaries is as-

¹⁶ Letting Vote_i^p denote party p ’s vote share in district i : $\text{Margin}_i^p = \text{Vote}_i^p - \max\{\text{Vote}_i^k | k \neq p\}$.

¹⁷ Formally, $\text{Non-competitive} = \mathbb{1}\{|\text{Margin}| > 0.1\}$ where $\mathbb{1}\{\cdot\}$ is the indicator function.

Table 2
Legislative primaries and electoral mobilization in Mexican elections, 2003–2009.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: <i>Representatives</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Primary	0.019 (0.019)	0.001 (0.016)	−0.003 (0.015)	−0.009 (0.016)	−0.008 (0.015)	−0.019 (0.014)
Non-competitive	−0.112 *** (0.013)	−0.066 *** (0.012)	−0.068 *** (0.012)			
Primary × Non-competitive	0.082 *** (0.020)	0.057 ** (0.019)	0.060 ** (0.018)			
Abs(Margin)				−0.532 *** (0.042)	−0.292 *** (0.043)	−0.315 *** (0.042)
Primary × Abs(Margin)				0.377 *** (0.076)	0.256 *** (0.069)	0.302 *** (0.067)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lagged dependent variable		✓	✓		✓	✓
Party FE	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Election-year FE	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Party-election-year FE			✓			✓
N	1,790	1,790	1,790	1,790	1,790	1,790
Mean dep. variable: 0.705						

Notes: OLS estimates. Control variables: copartisan governor, local election, district's area (km²), municipalities ruled by copartisan mayor (%), population ruled by copartisan mayors (%), rural, illiterate population (%), households w/TV (%), households w/dirt floors (%), households w/electricity (%), and households w/computer (%). Standard errors clustered by electoral districts in parentheses. Significance levels: p : * <0.05 ; ** <0.01 ; *** <0.001 .

sociated with higher mobilization levels only in non-competitive races. The coefficient of *Primary* is not statistically significant, meaning that, when a party expects a close race, holding a primary is not associated with an increase in party-representative coverage.¹⁸ In contrast, when the party does not expect a competitive race, the marginal effect of a primary is equal to $0.101 \approx 0.019 + 0.082$ (p -value < 0.001). Model (2) controls for the lagged dependent variable to account for the possibility that parties predominately use primaries in districts where they have covered a larger share of polling stations in the past. Again, the results are in line with the expectations, except the effect of interest goes down to 0.058 (p -value < 0.001). Column (3) shows these results are robust to the inclusion of party-election-year fixed effects. As Fig. 2 shows, the marginal effect of a primary is indistinguishable from zero where a party expects a close race, and close to 5.7 p.p. where it expects a non-competitive one.

The models in (4)–(6) use the absolute value of *Margin* as a measure of competitiveness. Using the absolute value of this measure facilitates the interpretation, since it takes higher values as a race is expected to be less competitive—whether the party won or lost the previous election. To start, notice that the estimate of $|Margin|$ is negative and statistically significant, indicating that candidates invest more resources in races expected to be more competitive. This is exactly what the mobilization literature would predict, providing additional confidence that party-representative coverage is, indeed, an accurate measure of candidates' mobilization efforts.

These results are also supportive of *Hypothesis 1*. The coefficient of *Primary* in (4) is not statistically significant, meaning that primaries are not associated with higher levels of mobilization in competitive races, and the positive and statistically significant coefficient of the interaction term indicates that primaries are associated with higher party-representative coverage when $|Margin|$ is sufficiently large. Models (5) and (6) reveal the same pattern. Fig. 2 presents marginal effects of interest from (6). The right panel shows that the marginal effect of a party holding a primary on the share of polling stations with representatives from that party is positive and statistically significant only when the absolute value of *Margin* is above 13 p.p.—this includes

¹⁸ Additionally, I test the hypothesis that primaries have negligible effects in competitive areas using the two one-sided tests procedure (Rainey, 2014); the results, confirm primaries have no substantive effect on mobilization in competitive districts (see Appendix A.8).

districts where the party either won the previous election or finished behind the winner by at least that margin.¹⁹

All results in Table 2 are robust to the use of different measures of expected electoral competitiveness; Appendix A.10 replicates the models in columns (1)–(3) using several alternative thresholds to classify non-competitive districts, and Appendix A.11 replicates the models in (4)–(6) using the party's average margin in the previous three legislative elections. These results are also robust to the use of state fixed effects; Appendix A.12 shows the estimates from the models as well as figures of the marginal effects of interest. Finally, all the results above hold for *each political party*; Appendix A.13 reports a series of party-specific analyses that confirm these are not driven by only one of the two parties under study.

Next, I leverage the geographic variation in the strength of local party machines to test *Hypothesis 2*, according to which the patterns reported above should be more pronounced in areas where the party machine is relatively weak. Again, the logic for this expectation is that the presence of a party machine affects the validity of the model's central assumption—that candidates nominated in primaries are more likely than appointed candidates to reach the general election with an electoral machine at their disposal. Where the party machine is non-existent or weak, this assumption should hold well, and thus the observed mobilization patterns should match those in Fig. 2. However, in regions with a strong party machine, whether or not this assumption holds is *a priori* unclear. In these cases, any positive effect of primaries on mobilization should be weaker, since *at least some* appointed candidates might be able to use the party machine during the general election.

I test *Hypothesis 2* by subsetting the data into two by the strength of the local party machine using the presence of at least one copartisan mayor in the district as a proxy of strength, and then running models analogous to those in Table 2 on each subset. The results of this analysis are summarized in Fig. 3, which shows the marginal effects of interest for the two measures of electoral competitiveness (the regression estimates are available in Appendix A.14). Two points are worth highlighting. First, as before, the overall patterns are supportive of *Hypothesis 1*. As can be seen, primaries are associated with an increase in electoral mobilization only in races that are expected to be non-competitive. Second, and in line with *Hypothesis 2*, this increase is

¹⁹ Models (4) and (5) reveal a similar pattern (see Appendix A.7). Additionally, Appendix A.9 provides tests of linear interaction effects (Hainmueller et al., 2018).

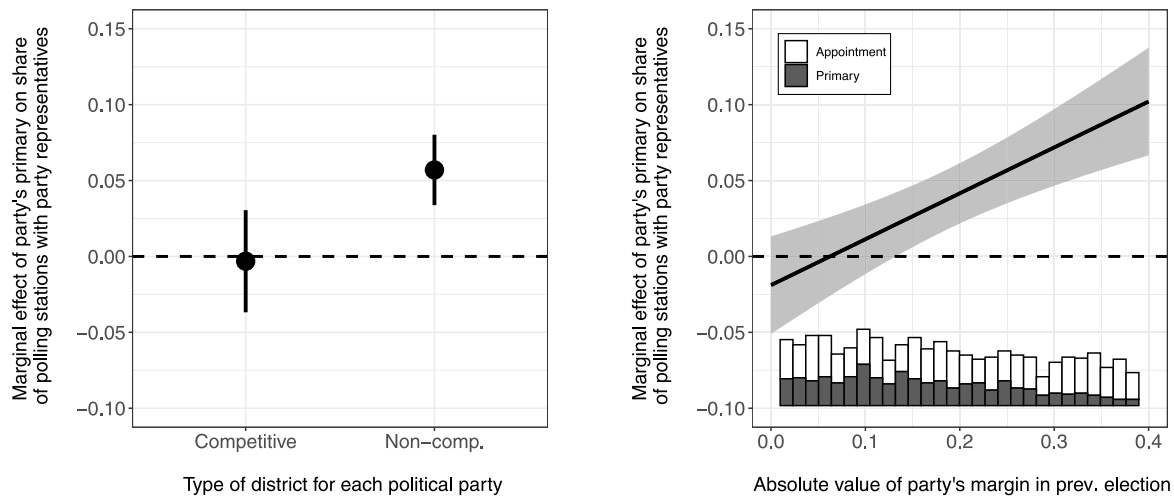


Fig. 2. Marginal effects of primaries on electoral mobilization. **Notes:** Left panel shows marginal effects of *Primary* as a function of *Non-competitive* (Table 2-(3)); the black dots show the effects and the lines are 95% CI. Right panel shows marginal effects of *Primary* as a function of *Margin* (Table 2-(6)); the black lines show the marginal effects and the shaded area are 95% CI.

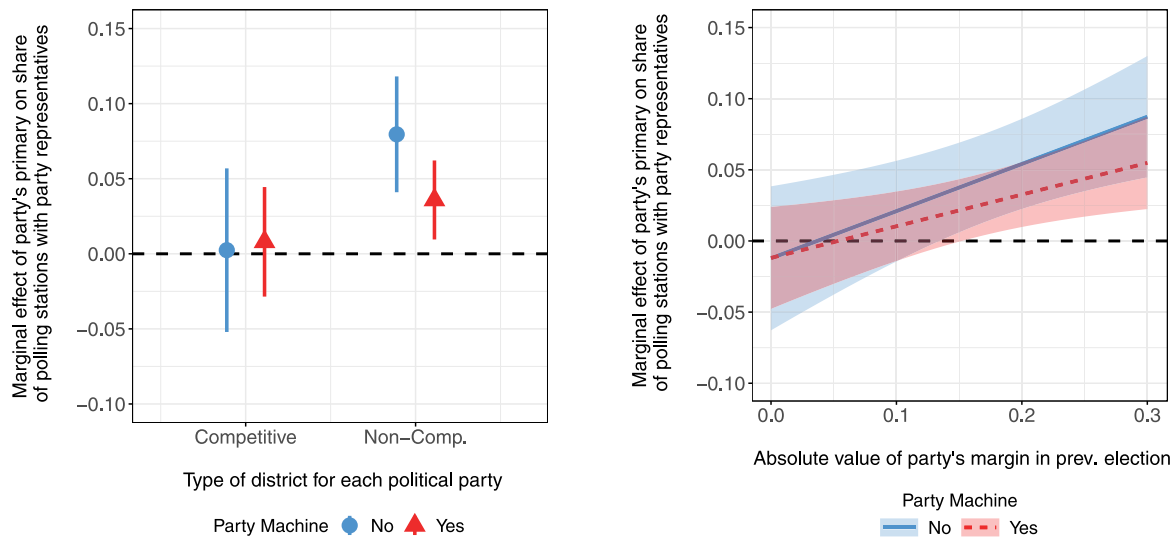


Fig. 3. Marginal effects of primaries on electoral mobilization by presence of strong local party machine. **Notes:** The figure uses model estimates reported in Appendix Table A8. Left panel shows marginal effects of *Primary* as a function of *Non-competitive* in regions with/without a local party machine (estimates from columns (1) and (3), respectively). The dots and triangles show the effects and the lines are 95% CI. Right panel shows marginal effects of *Primary* as a function of the absolute value of *Margin* in areas with/without a local party machine (estimates from columns (2) and (4), respectively). The lines show the size of the effects and the shaded area are 95% CI.

considerably larger in regions where the party does not have a strong local machine—that is, where the model’s key assumption should hold well. In Fig. 3 (left panel), the gap between the estimates from regions with a party machine is 2.8 p.p. while the one for regions without a party machine is 7.7 p.p.

These results are robust to the use of a different measure of the strength of the local party machine. In Appendix A.14, I repeat the previous analysis except districts are classified as having a strong party machine only if at least 25% of voters live in municipalities ruled by their party. The results of this exercise are substantively identical. The only difference of note is that the gap in mobilization levels between places with (0.1 p.p.) and without (7.5 p.p.) a strong local party machine is even starker.

3.3. Robustness checks

The findings from the previous analysis provide strong support for the model’s expectations. Interpreting these results as causal, however,

is not automatic. Because parties do not assign primaries to districts randomly, it is necessary to rule out the possibility that the association between primaries and mobilization is driven by omitted confounders. This section presents additional evidence that suggests the findings above are indeed a consequence of the use of primaries, and not a reflection of the factors that explain the choice of primaries in the first place.

Before presenting the additional pieces of evidence, I briefly highlight that the previous analyses are informed by an extensive empirical literature that explains the adoption of primaries (e.g., De Luca et al., 2002; Ichino and Nathan, 2012; Kemahlioglu et al., 2009), including research on candidate selection in Mexico (e.g., Ascencio, Forthcoming; Bruhn, 2010; Langston, 2006; Wuhs, 2006). Therefore, the selection-on-observables strategy employed above includes a wide set of controls that could confound the relationship between primaries and mobilization.

Placebo test. First, I take advantage of an unusual episode in Mexican politics to perform a placebo test. In November 2011, the

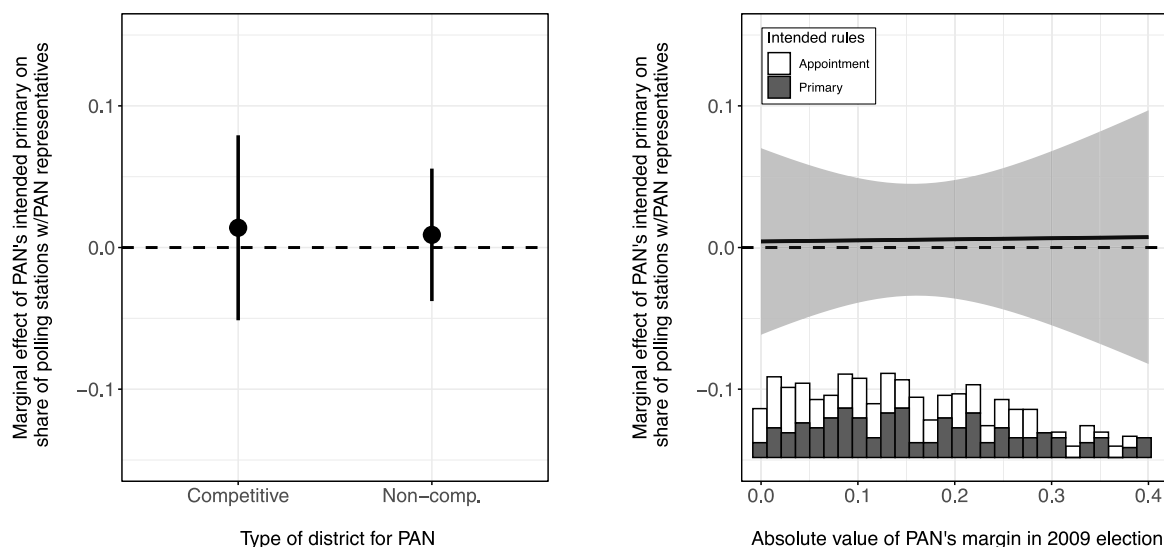


Fig. 4. Placebo test (PAN 2012): intention to use primaries before tribunal's intervention has no effect on electoral mobilization.

Notes: Left panel shows marginal effects of *Intended Primary* as a function of *Non-competitive* (Table A12-(3)); the black dots show the effects and the lines are 95% CI. Right panel shows marginal effects of *Intended Primary* as a function of *Margin* (Table A12-(4)); the black lines show the marginal effects and the shaded area are 95% CI.

PAN's chairman announced the decision to appoint candidates for the 2012 legislative elections in almost half the country's SMDs and to use primaries in the remaining ones. After the announcement, hundreds of activists presented complaints before the electoral tribunal, which had recently been given authority to solve some instances of intraparty conflict (Martín Reyes, 2012). The tribunal's ruling authorized the PAN to appoint candidates in only 20 out of the 138 districts in which they originally intended to do so, which lead the party to select practically all its candidates via primaries.

These events offer a unique opportunity to compare districts where the PAN intended to hold primaries to those where they intended to appoint candidates. Since practically all nominees were actually selected in primaries this comparison serves as a placebo test. Support for the previous results requires that the PAN's *intended* nomination rules do not explain any differences in the levels of polling-station coverage by PAN representatives; finding otherwise would suggest that the previous findings are driven by the determinants of primaries rather than primaries themselves.

To conduct the placebo test, I first subset the sample to the 280 (out of 300) districts in which the PAN's 2012 candidates were selected in primaries. Next, I create a dummy variable, labeled *Intended Primary*, that indicates districts where the PAN planned to use a primary before the tribunal's ruling, and then run models analogous to those from the previous section using data from the 2012 election. The results of this test are illustrated in Fig. 4, which shows the marginal effects of interest for the two measures of competitiveness (Appendix A.17 shows regression estimates). As can be seen, the intention to use primaries – as announced by the PAN before the electoral tribunal's intervention – is not associated with the measure of mobilization. In other words, when comparing all the districts that ultimately used primaries, the PAN leader's initial choice of nomination rule is not correlated with the observed mobilization levels.

Although this test does not isolate any causal effects, the evidence presented here does provide additional reassurance that the main results are not driven by selection effects. This exercise shows that the factors that shaped the PAN leaders' decision to (attempt to) use primaries in 2012 are not associated with the measure of mobilization in 2012. To the extent that this was true in previous years, these findings are very suggestive that the main results do capture a causal effect.

Party strongholds. Finally, I show that the results in Table 2 are robust to the exclusion of party strongholds. It is possible that the

expected competitiveness levels – and party strongholds, in particular – confound the association between primaries and mobilization. Recent work on candidate selection in Mexico shows that parties (including the PAN and PRD) are significantly more likely to use primaries in their strongholds, where multiple high-quality aspirants will seek the party's nomination (Ascencio, Forthcoming). At the same time, parties often have more representatives at the polls in their strongholds, since they have access to greater human and material resources (Aparicio, 2009).²⁰ Consequently, the positive correlation between primaries and electoral mobilization could reflect the influence of a third variable – the expected competitiveness levels – rather than an actual effect of primaries.

The results presented so far document a strong positive association between primaries and mobilization in *non-competitive districts*. However, it is important to remember that the category *non-competitive* includes two types of districts: (1) those where a party is expected to win by large margins (party strongholds), and (2) those where a party expects to lose by large margins. The discussion above suggests that the main results could be exclusively driven by the first group.

I rule out this possibility using two different strategies. First, I replicate the analysis in Table 2 but excluding the subset of strongholds for each political party—a district is classified as a stronghold if the party won the previous election by a margin of at least 10 p.p. In other words, the analysis only includes districts where the party expects a close race *and* where the party is electorally “hopeless”. The results of this analysis are substantively identical to those presented in the previous section (see Appendix A.15). In districts where the party expects a close race, primaries have no effect on the measure of mobilization; by contrast, in districts where the party expects to lose by a large margin, primaries are associated with a 5.6 p.p. increase in electoral mobilization.

Second, I subset the data by the level of competitiveness—a district is classified as a stronghold (hopeless) if the party won (lost) the previous election by a margin of at least 10 p.p., and as competitive otherwise. Then, I run separate regressions of the measure of mobilization on *Primary* and the full set of controls (see Appendix A.16). The results

²⁰ Although parties are involved in the recruitment/training of representatives, *candidates* also play a key role in their recruitment, organization, and mobilization. Appendix A.4 shows evidence from interviews supporting this point.

provide strong support for the theory: (1) the effect of primaries from the subset of party strongholds (0.044, p -value \approx 0.005) is remarkably similar to the one from the subset of “hopeless” districts (0.049, p -value \approx 0.003), and (2) the effect of primaries from the subset of competitive districts is indistinguishable from zero.

These sets of results show that primaries have a positive effect on mobilization on all types of non-competitive districts—whether the candidate expects to win or lose by relatively large margins. Although, as discussed above, this pattern could reflect selection effects in party strongholds, the same is not true for “hopeless” districts. In all, this evidence is consistent with the model’s insight that, by using primaries, parties can provide incentives for ambitious politicians to make costly investments in mobilization even in regions where their party is not electorally competitive.

4. Conclusion

This paper presents a novel argument linking mobilization efforts during general-election races to political party’s nomination rules. The main theoretical innovation of the paper is that it incorporates two realistic features of electoral politics into a standard model of mobilization. The first is that mobilization requires investing resources into building an *electoral machine*. While the idea of candidates paying an initial cost for entering a race is a standard modeling assumption (e.g., Osborne and Slivinski, 1996), this work illustrates the importance of attaching more substantive meaning to what those costs represent and how these might affect the candidates’ campaigning strategies. The second is that certain nomination rules, in particular primaries, create incentives for aspirants to office to make these initial investments *before* they know whether they will run in the general election. This shift in the timing of the initial investments can lead candidates nominated in primaries to exert greater efforts than if they had been nominated through other mechanisms.

The implications of this study can be interpreted in two different lights. On the one hand, there seems to be some merit to the argument that using primaries can strengthen the party organization and encourage participation among the party’s base. In contrast with voter- or activist-based accounts (e.g., Pennings and Hazan, 2001; Scarrow, 2000), the theory presented here highlights the way in which primaries can shape the incentives of *aspirants to office* to invest resources into the party organization and into fostering the involvement of the party’s rank and file. This candidate-based mechanism was best described by Schlesinger, who noted that “in a political party it is clear enough which people have the best defined personal stake: those with ambitions for office. Their payoffs, substantial and personal, *are worth the costs of organization*. Office-seekers thus are the entrepreneurs of the party” (1984, 388, emphasis added). On the other hand, primaries might weaken parties by encouraging individual politicians to build their own organizations, and thus contributing to the personalization of politics. In other words, if party leaders fail to incorporate the candidates’ electoral machines into the party, there is real concern that using primaries could undermine the party apparatus by making aspirants to office less dependent on it.

Finally, it should be noted that mobilization can take different forms, from traditional get-out-the-vote efforts, such as canvassing or direct mail, to irregular tactics, such as turnout and vote buying. Scholars have suggested that electoral institutions that promote intraparty competition lead candidates “to adopt personal electoral strategies, including vote buying” (Hicken, 2007, 47). While the theory advanced in this paper is mute about this point, an implication of the main theoretical result is that, in contexts in which electoral competition is already clientelistic, the use of primary elections can exacerbate the prevalence of these irregular mobilization strategies.

Data availability

Upon publication, the data and replication code will be made available on my personal website

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102578>.

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