Do primaries Improve Evaluations of Public Officials? Experimental Evidence from Mexico[*]

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Do nomination rules shape how voters evaluate their representatives? Some scholars argue that, in places where trust in political parties is low, primary elections can be an electoral asset by improving how politicians are regarded by voters. Yet, this claim has received little empirical scrutiny. A survey experiment in Mexico, where parties have employed several nomination rules in recent years, allows us to assess this argument. We find that, by and large, providing information about the method by which a politician was nominated to office—relative to not providing such information—has virtually no impact on how voters evaluate the politician. At the same time, we uncover evidence of a *relative advantage* of primary elections over more centralized nomination rules. Specifically, learning that a politician was nominated in a primary election—relative to learning that they were appointed by party elites—improves voter perceptions of politician quality and increases their reported willingness to vote for the politician in the future. Our results have important implications for political parties in many developing countries and new democracies, where intraparty democracy is increasingly popular.

1 Introduction

Over recent decades, an increasing number of political parties in developing countries and new democracies have adopted primary elections to nominate their candidates for office. The rise in the number of Latin American parties that have used primaries to select their presidential nominees is well documented (Kemahlioglu et al., 2009), and several countries in the region have passed legislation making primaries mandatory (Freidenberg and Došek, 2016). Evidence from Africa reveals a similar pattern—there are 15 countries in which at least one major party has used legislative primaries in the last decade (Ichino and Nathan, 2018).

These trends motivated the emergence of a literature that studies why party leaders relinquish control over candidate selection and allow the use of primaries (e.g., Adams and Merrill, 2008; Serra, 2011). One influential argument is that parties adopt primaries because they provide an electoral advantage, often called the "primary bonus." This view was first advanced by Carey and Polga-Hecimovich (2006), who argue that, in the Latin American context, primaries are an electoral asset because they are more open and transparent than the more closed and centralized nomination rules commonly used in the region (e.g., appointment by party leaders). Because primaries possess certain features voters intrinsically value, they argue, candidates selected in primaries should be more appealing to voters than those nominated through other methods.

Despite its wide acceptance, the primary bonus hypothesis has been subject to relatively little empirical scrutiny. Some studies document positive associations between parties' use of primaries and their electoral performance (e.g., Astudillo and Lago, 2021; Ramiro, 2016), while others find systematic differences in the profiles of candidates selected through different rules (e.g., Langston, 2017; Smith and Tsutsumi, 2016). Although these patterns are suggestive of a primary bonus, to the best of our knowledge there is no direct evidence that voters prefer candidates nominated via primaries. Perhaps more important, while several theoretical mechanisms could explain the primary bonus, the relative merits of these mechanisms have not yet been assessed empirically.

Do nomination rules shape how voters evaluate elected officials? This paper examines this question using data from Mexico, a country in which, for decades, major parties experimented with different rules—including primaries—to nominate their candidates for all types of offices (Wuhs, 2008). A key feature of the Mexican case is that there is a strong connection between the use of centralized nomination rules and the country's history of autocratic rule by the *Partido*

Revolucionario Institucional (Langston, 2006). Thus, the assumption that primaries confer candidates a democratic "stamp of legitimacy" (Carey and Polga-Hecimovich, 2006, 533) should hold well.

We design a survey experiment to study whether disclosing information about a legislator's path to office—specifically, the method by which they obtained their party's nomination—influences how voters evaluate the legislator. The experiment uses information from real politicians—former Mexican legislators—and exploits the fact that major parties have consistently used different rules to select their legislative candidates within the same election. This allows us to identify same-party politicians who entered Mexico's Chamber of Deputies through different nomination rules. The experiment presents respondents with a short biography of one of these legislators. Critically, we randomly assign whether the biography discloses the rule by which the politician received their legislative nomination. Next, we ask respondents to evaluate the politician along different dimensions, including personal attributes, electability, and policymaking skills.

Our analysis has two main findings. First, providing information about how a legislator was nominated to office—relative to not providing such information—has virtually no impact on how voters evaluate the politician. This holds true regardless of the method by which the legislator received their party's ticket. At the same time, however, we uncover evidence of a *relative advantage* of primaries over centralized nomination rules (e.g., party elite appointments). Specifically, learning that a legislator was nominated in a primary—relative to learning that they were appointed by party elites—has a positive effect on respondents' assessments of the legislator's capacity to make improvements in different policy areas, and boosts their reported willingness to vote for them.

This paper is part of a group of works that examine the political consequences of democratizing candidate selection. Several studies explore the effects of nomination rules on different elite-level outcomes, including politicians' personal and political backgrounds (Langston, 2017; Smith and Tsutsumi, 2016) and behavior in office (Ascencio and Kerevel, 2021; Preece, 2014), while others focus on voter-level outcomes, such as citizens' trust in parties (Cross and Pruysers, 2019) and satisfaction with democracy (Shomer et al., 2016). We link these two types of outcomes by showing that nomination methods can shape voter attitudes towards elected officials. Moreover, the within-party election variation in nomination rules afforded by the Mexican case combined with our use of an experimental design, allow us to overcome the

challenges inherent in identifying causal effects with observational data that are common in the literature.

Finally, we also contribute to a literature that uses experimental methods to identify what traits of elected officials are most salient in shaping how voters evaluate them. Several politician attributes, such as their gender, ethnicity, class, and experience, have been shown to consistently affect citizen support (e.g., Carnes and Lupu, 2016; Franchino and Zucchini, 2015). Recent work explores whether institutions shape the relative importance of these factors. For instance, Horiuchi et al. (2020) take advantage of Japan's mixed-member electoral system to study how voter preferences over candidate traits vary when they are primed to think about different electoral rules. We contribute to this literature by showing that institutions themselves can be an important component of politicians' paths to office and, as such, influence how they are evaluated by voters. In particular, we show that politicians' past experiences in office can have substantively different effects depending on how they were nominated to office in the first place.

2 Nomination rules and evaluations of public officials

We develop hypotheses on how candidate selection can shape voter evaluations of elected officials. Nomination rules are often classified along a continuum, depending on the inclusiveness of the selectorate, i.e., the body in charge of choosing a party's nominees (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). Here, we focus on the two extremes of this continuum, which we generically call *elite appointments* and *primaries*. There are two reasons for this. First, this distinction is consistent with the primary bonus literature, which compares primaries to highly centralized rules, usually described as closed-door deals, elite agreements, or nominations "in smoke-filled rooms" (Serra, 2011). Second, voter perceptions might not be sensitive to small changes in the composition of the selectorate. Thus, by focusing on the extremes of the continuum, we can provide an upper bound on the potential effect of nomination rules on voter evaluations of elected officials.

At the most general level, the primary bonus hypothesis states that candidates nominated in primaries should enjoy an electoral advantage relative to candidates appointed by party elites (Carey and Polga-Hecimovich, 2006). Notably, this advantage is *not* driven by changes in the policy positions of candidates nominated by different rules—in fact, the primary bonus emerges even though primaries might lead to the nomination of relatively more extreme candidates (Gerber and Morton, 1998). Instead, the primary bonus hypothesis highlights the politicians' *quality*, which

is typically conceptualized as a composite of valence characteristics, i.e., traits of politicians that voters intrinsically value (e.g., competence, integrity, diligence) (Groseclose, 2001).

Existing research describes two mechanisms behind the primary bonus. On the one hand, there is a *candidate-side* mechanism, according to which nomination rules shape the types of aspirants that are selected to run for office. Specifically, an extensive literature argues that primaries allow parties to select candidates of higher quality than those who are handpicked by party elites. This effect is the result of two related processes. First, primaries reveal information about the quality of potential aspirants to office, increasing the chances that the candidate selected by the primary voters will be of high valence (Adams and Merrill, 2008; Serra, 2011). In contrast, under elite appointments this information remains unobserved, and party leaders must select candidates based on other attributes, such as the aspirant's connections within the party or expected loyalty levels (Kam, 2009). Second, primaries increase the size and improve the composition of the pool of aspirants to office. While party leaders handpick candidates from a small set of party insiders, primaries encourage the entry of candidates who "might have a large appeal to voters but would not come to the party's attention through an inside-track elite nomination" (Serra, 2011, 30).

On the other hand, there is also a *voter-side* mechanism, which refers to how nomination rules shape voter evaluations of candidates for office. We discuss three separate theoretical channels that suggest that primaries, relative to elite appointments, should improve voter perceptions of candidate quality. First, the candidate-side mechanism could lead to positive statistical discrimination in favor of politicians nominated via primaries. That is, if over time voters learn that primaries select objectively better types on average, in the future they might infer that candidates nominated via primaries are of higher quality, independent of the characteristics of specific candidates. This channel should play a more important role in places with longer experiences with intraparty democracy, as it requires voters to learn from past experiences and use this knowledge to make inferences about the pool of candidates.[1]

A second channel is based on the concept of procedural fairness and highlights how different nomination rules are perceived to vary in terms of how fair and transparent they are. Procedural fairness theories hold that individuals evaluate institutions based not on the outcomes they produce but on their judgments that the process by which those outcomes are achieved are

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[1] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this valuable insight.

just, impartial, and transparent (Lind and Tyler, 1988). Consistent with this view, empirical research shows that assessments of procedural fairness enhance trust in institutions as well as the perceived legitimacy of a wide range of political outcomes (e.g., Arrington, 2021; Grimes, 2006; Shomer et al., 2016). In the context of candidate selection, since primaries are generally seen as more just and transparent than elite appointments, we expect candidates selected in primaries to be perceived as more trustworthy and legitimate. This logic is at the core of Carey and Polga (2006, 534)'s argument that primaries "provide a stamp of legitimacy" that improves candidates' electoral prospects.

The third channel emphasizes the connection between selection rules and merit. Research on organizational psychology and public administration shows that recruitment practices presumed to promote (undermine) merit principles have a positive (negative) impact on evaluations of aspirant competence. There is extensive evidence that, regardless of employees' objective performance and qualifications, those believed to have been hired not solely on merit—e.g., who benefited from nepotism or from affirmative action measures—are perceived less favorably and seen as less competent and qualified than their peers (e.g., Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021; Padgett et al., 2015; Son Hing et al., 2002). Notice that, in contrast to the previous channel, which focuses on the perceived fairness of the recruitment procedure, this one highlights the importance that the procedure assigns to the candidates' merit.[2] We argue primaries should be generally seen as more consistent with meritocratic recruitment than elite appointments, not only because they involve competition between aspirants, which is a component of merit-based selection (e.g., Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021), but also because elite appointments are often associated with practices opposed to merit, such as nepotism, cronyism, and corruption (Chhibber et al., 2014; Langston, 2017; Stockemer, 2011). To the extent that this is the case, then candidates selected via primaries should be perceived as being more competent and qualified than handpicked candidates.

The empirical support for the candidate-side mechanism is well documented. There is evidence that candidates' backgrounds systematically vary depending on the method by which they received the party's nomination (e.g., Langston, 2017; Smith and Tsutsumi, 2016). Paradoxically, the existence of this candidate-side mechanism has prevented researchers from

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[2] These dimensions need not be aligned. For example, lotteries might be seen as a fair recruitment method, but aspirants selected via lotteries should be of average quality. In contrast, regardless of their perceived fairness, procedures consistent with merit recruitment (e.g., open competition) are expected to select the most qualified aspirants.

testing the empirical validity of the voter-side mechanism.[3] Even if public opinion data revealed that candidates selected via primaries are evaluated more positively than appointed ones, it would be hard to know whether this is an actual effect of primaries on voter perceptions (voter-side mechanism) or merely a reflection of any objective differences between the two types of candidates (candidate-side mechanism).

Our goal in this paper is to conduct an empirical test of the voter-side mechanism. Consequently, rather than directly comparing voter evaluations of candidates nominated through different rules, we study whether providing candidate selection information to voters changes their attitudes towards public officials. We present the following hypotheses on how voters are expected to react upon receiving information about whether a politician was selected by party elites or in a primary:

> *Hypothesis 1a. Learning that a politician was nominated in a primary election increases the politician's perceived quality.*
> *Hypothesis 1b. Learning that a politician was nominated through an appointment of the party elites decreases the politician's perceived quality.*

The preceding discussion suggests that providing information about how politicians obtained their party's ticket should impact their perceived quality. To the extent that candidate quality is a significant component of vote choices, we also have the following expectations:

> *Hypothesis 2a. Learning that a politician was nominated in a primary election increases citizens' willingness to vote for them.*
> *Hypothesis 2b. Learning that a politician was nominated through an appointment of the party elites decreases citizens' willingness to vote for them.*

3 Candidate selection in Mexico

We conduct a survey experiment in Mexico to assess our hypotheses. Three features make Mexico an ideal case to conduct this test. The first is the connection between party elite appointments and

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[3] We are not aware of any work that provides direct evidence for this mechanism.

the country's authoritarian past. Second, for years, major parties consistently used both primaries and appointments. This enables us to empirically disentangle the impact of nomination rules from any party-specific effects. Third, the country's ban on consecutive reelection[4] created an environment in which public knowledge of legislators is extremely low. Thus, although our experiment uses data from real politicians, the risk that voters know details of a legislator's career is minimal. Below, we describe these features in greater detail and discuss how they inform our analyses.

The Mexican *dedazo*. From 1929 to 2000, Mexico was an authoritarian regime. During this time, the ruling party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), held regular elections for all levels of office, allowed some opposition parties to organize and compete, and continuously replaced government officials—including the president—via the ballot box. Through the use of electoral fraud, co-optation and repression of regime opponents, and abuse of public resources, among other strategies, the PRI was able to stay in power for over 70 years, consolidating "the longest-lived autocratic regime of the twentieth century" (Magaloni, 2006, 1).

A hallmark and a key source of stability for the regime was a practice known as the *dedazo* (literally, the "finger tap"), which allowed the sitting president to "single-handedly (or in consultation with his close political allies) determine who would succeed him as the PRI's presidential candidate, and to impose that choice on the party's political elite" (Langston, 2006, 144). Since the election was a foregone conclusion, in practice, the *dedazo* allowed the sitting president to handpick his own successor. In the heyday of PRI hegemony, the president also had effective *dedazo* power at the state level, naming gubernatorial and congressional candidates (Weldon, 1997; Wuhs, 2008).

In contrast to the PRI, the two main opposition parties at the time, the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) and the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD), typically selected their candidates to legislative and municipal offices using more inclusive and participatory rules (e.g., local-level conventions and primaries). These parties' use of intraparty elections is often characterized as an attempt to distinguish themselves from the hegemonic party. According to Wuhs (2008), opening their nomination processes allowed the PAN and PRD to denounce the PRI's authoritarian nature while presenting themselves to voters as opposition parties committed to democratic rule.

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[4] This prohibition was established in 1933 and lifted in 2014.

Throughout the 1990s, the PRI experimented with more inclusive nomination mechanisms. By the end of President Ernesto Zedillo's administration, in 2000, the PRI had employed primaries to select at least 13 gubernatorial candidates (Poiré, 2002). Even more significant, in 1999, Zedillo abstained from appointing his successor by *dedazo*. Instead, the PRI held an open primary to select its nominee for the 2000 presidential race. Although the motivations behind Zedillo's choice involved strategic calculations (Poiré, 2002), the rhetoric surrounding this decision stressed the party's need to transform itself and embrace democracy (Smith, 1999).

The PRI's presidential primary, and the party's defeat in the 2000 election, mark the death of the *dedazo* as an informal institution of the regime (Langston, 2006).[5] However, the imposition of candidates by party leaders has persisted well into present times. Since the country's transition to democracy, every president has been suspect of either appointing or trying to appoint gubernatorial and presidential candidates by *dedazo*. Similarly, national and local leaders of several parties have continued to handpick candidates for legislative and municipal offices (e.g., Pérez, 2005; Saldaña, 2019). These days, the appointment of candidates is no longer exclusively associated with the PRI, and the term "*dedazo*" is still widely used in Mexico to describe situations in which a candidate or official was handpicked by a higher-up rather than democratically elected.[6]

The previous discussion suggests that Mexico is the model of a case in which primaries are perceived as more open and transparent than other nomination rules. Not only is there a strong connection between party elite appointments and the country's authoritarian past but also, and most importantly, parties have strategically highlighted their use of primaries for electoral purposes.[7]

Legislative candidate selection. After the country's transition to democracy, parties adjusted to the new electoral landscape by adopting different nomination rules. These adjustments were particularly apparent in the rules used to nominate legislative candidates. Before discussing these changes, it is important to mention that the Chamber of Deputies is elected every three years

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[5] This does not mean sitting presidents have stayed out of their parties' presidential nominations, e.g., Ascencio (2021) argues President Calderón (2006-2012) influenced the PAN's presidential primary in favor of his preferred aspirant.

[6] Since 2001, major newspaper Reforma has published 2,200 pieces using the word "*dedazo*" (see Appendix A).

[7] For instance, during a 1994 presidential debate, the PAN's nominee attacked his rivals by pointing out that his party was the only one that selected its candidates for all offices in democratic conventions (Weldon, 1997).

using a mixed-member electoral system. Sixty percent of its members (300 deputies) are elected by plurality in single-member districts (SMDs), while the rest are elected through closed-list proportional representation. The discussion below focuses on the nomination of aspirants running in SMDs for the three elections held during 2003-2009.

According to information provided to the electoral commission, during this time, the PRI used different rules from one election to the next. In 2006, all 300 SMD candidates were appointed by the party leaders, whereas in 2003 and 2009, the party reported to have nominated most of its candidates through some type of internal election.[8] On paper, these elections took the form of district-level delegate conventions or closed primaries, but in practice, candidates were selected by local party bosses, who exerted considerable influence in the nomination process and could guarantee that their preferred aspirants got the ticket (Wuhs, 2008). In fact, Langston (2017) argues PRI governors were in charge of SMD nominations in their states, while those in states governed by other parties were under control of the party's National Executive Committee (NEC). Overall, then, candidate selection within the PRI continued to be dominated by party elites.

At the same time, the improved prospects of winning office created incentives for PAN and PRD leaders to selectively centralize their nomination processes (Wuhs, 2008). During 2003-2009, both parties exhibited substantial variation in their rules to nominate SMD candidates *within the same election*. The variation is so rich that it was relatively common for these parties to use different rules in neighboring districts. For example, looking at the PAN candidates from the state of Sinaloa in 2006, we see that the candidate running in District VII (Culiacán) was elected in a primary, while the one from District VI (Mazatlán) was appointed by the party's NEC.

Table 1 summarizes the rules used by these parties during this period as well as information on the electoral performance of legislative candidates by the type of nomination rule. Consistent with the primary bonus hypothesis, the data reveal that candidates nominated via primaries won at much higher rates than their appointed counterparts. As explained before, the goal of this study is to explore the possibility that at least part of this pattern is driven by nomination rules shaping voter evaluations of politicians—what we call the voter-side mechanism.

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[8] According to reports of the electoral commission (see CG59/2003, CG76/2006, CG173/2009), the PRI leaders appointed six candidates in 2003 and seven in 2009.

Table 1: Nomination rules used by PAN and PRD (2003-2009)

	PRD				PAN			
	2003	2006	2009	Total	2003	2006	2009	Total
Appointment	256	215	251	722	144	140	195	479
% won	16.8	14.1	7.6	12.9	17.4	25.7	16.4	19.4
Primary	44	85	49	178	156	160	105	421
% won	29.6	70.6	40.8	52.3	35.3	63.1	36.2	46.1
Total	300	300	300	900	300	300	300	900

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

Our experiment uses biographical data from real legislators elected during this period. Specifically, we assess whether disclosing the method by which legislators received their party's nomination shapes how they are evaluated by voters. We briefly highlight two advantages of the high variation in candidate selection rules both across and, especially, within parties. First, this variation minimizes the risk that knowing a legislator's party automatically reveals the method by which they were nominated to office, which would attenuate the effect of providing candidate selection information. Second, because nomination rules and political parties are not perfectly correlated, we are able to estimate the effects of each nomination rule using legislators from different parties.

Low-information environment. Another feature that makes the Mexican case particularly attractive to study the effects of providing candidate selection information to voters is that the baseline levels of information are very low. Public opinion data show that Mexican voters have very limited knowledge of the members of Congress (Animal Político, 2012). This is partially explained by the fact that, until 2014, legislators were banned from running for consecutive reelection. This prohibition not only led to a complete turnover of the Chamber of Deputies every three years, preventing the emergence of career legislators, but also created no incentive for voters to pay attention to their legislators' profiles or voting records. However, even post-2014 surveys show that 83% of voters could not name a single legislator, and less than 10% said they knew their legislator's name (Centro Mexicano Para la Filantropía, 2018).

This environment is ideal for conducting an experiment on the effects of providing information to voters, since it is very unlikely that respondents will know the information presented to them beforehand. In other words, this setting minimizes the risk of non-compliance with the treatment assignment. Overall, we believe that the low-information environment, along with the

historical significance of the *dedazo*, makes Mexico a likely case for strong effects of candidate selection information on voter evaluations of public officials. Thus, our results should probably be interpreted as an upper bound on the effects of interest.

4 A survey experiment in Mexico

4.1. Research design

We conducted a survey experiment with a national sample of Mexican citizens in May 2019. The participants were recruited proportionally to gender, age, and residence region, via Qualtrics. In total, 1,043 respondents participated in the experiment. Their average characteristics are 39 years old, with a monthly household income of 12,500 pesos, and a formal education up to the second year of high school.

The structure of the survey (conducted in Spanish) was as follows. First, participants were asked a battery of questions related to demographic factors, voting behavior, and political attitudes. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of five experimental conditions that summarized key facts of a legislator's background (e.g., partisanship, experience). Finally, respondents were asked a set of questions to gauge their opinions about the legislator along several dimensions.

As mentioned before, we purposefully decided to use information from *real legislators*. This approach has several advantages. Notably, it strengthens the external validity of the study, guarantees that the information provided to voters is realistic, and does not involve the use of deception. That said, this choice required us to weigh these advantages against two potential limitations. The first is the possibility that respondents might know the politician in their vignette. We do not perceive this to be a threat to the analysis. We expect respondents who know the politician to either (1) have a more solidified opinion of the politician or (2) already know the information provided in our treatment—either one of these possibilities would decrease the effectiveness of our information treatment. Therefore, we think that using real politicians allows us to conduct a harder test for the hypotheses. Second, since in reality each legislator was either appointed or selected in a primary, we cannot *directly* compare the effect of providing information about different nomination rules. This required us to take additional steps in order to make this type of comparison, not only when selecting the profiles to be included in the experimental vignettes, as we detail in the rest of this section, but also when analyzing the data. We return to this point in a later section, where we detail our empirical strategy to overcome this limitation.

Experimental conditions. Our main interest is how voter evaluations of a legislator are affected by receiving information that the legislator was either (1) selected in a primary or (2) appointed by the party leaders. To estimate the effects of primaries, we use two experimental conditions that vary only in terms of whether respondents are informed that, while running for congress, the politician in question was selected in a primary. Throughout, we refer to these two conditions as *Primary–No Information* and *Primary–Information*. We estimate the effects of interest by comparing respondents' evaluations of the legislator between the two conditions.

To estimate the impact of appointments, we proceeded in a similar fashion. We create two conditions, labeled *Appointment–No Information* and *Appointment–Information*, that are analogous to the ones described above. Here, the only difference between the two conditions is whether it mentions that the legislator was appointed by the party leaders to run for congress. As before, to estimate the effect of interest, we compare responses between the two conditions. Additionally, we include a condition labeled *Appointment–Information Dedazo*, which is virtually identical to *Appointment–Information* except that it explicitly uses the word "*dedazo*" when disclosing that the legislator was nominated by an elite appointment. We expect that, by delivering the information using a term that is more familiar to voters, and still commonly used in the media, we can assess the impact of interest as it would operate in the real world.

For illustration, Table 2 shows the English translations of sample vignettes used for the appointment conditions; the ones for the primary conditions are analogous. Appendices B and C show the original vignettes (in Spanish) and their English translations, respectively.

Table 2: English version of sample vignettes (Appointment Conditions)

(Appointment–No Information, PAN)

Now, we will talk about Rubén Alfredo Torres Zavala, a politician from the state of Guanajuato:
- Has a college degree in engineering
- Member of the PAN for over 25 years
- Started his political career as Secretary of the PAN's youth movement in Guanajuato
- During 2003-2006, he was a federal deputy of Guanajuato and member of many committees in the Chamber of Deputies

(Appointment–Information, PAN)

Now, we will talk about Rubén Alfredo Torres Zavala, a politician from the state of Guanajuato:
- Has a college degree in engineering
- Member of the PAN for over 25 years
- Started his political career as Secretary of the PAN's youth movement in Guanajuato

- **Was handpicked by the PAN leaders to run for federal deputy in 2003**
- During 2003-2006, he was a federal deputy of Guanajuato and member of many committees in the Chamber of Deputies

(Appointment–Information Dedazo, PAN)

Now, we will talk about Rubén Alfredo Torres Zavala, a politician from the state of Guanajuato:

- Has a college degree in engineering
- Member of the PAN for over 25 years
- Started his political career as Secretary of the PAN's youth movement in Guanajuato
- **Was handpicked by a *dedazo* of the PAN leaders to run for federal deputy in 2003**
- During 2003-2006, he was a federal deputy of Guanajuato and member of many committees in the Chamber of Deputies

Legislator profiles. As mentioned previously, our interest is in the effects of providing information about how a legislator received their party's nomination. Because we use information from real politicians, we must employ information from different politicians, some of whom were appointed by their party leaders while others were nominated in primaries. To mitigate potential selection bias stemming from the effects of interest being conditional on idiosyncratic attributes of any one candidate (e.g., partisanship), we use two different legislators *for each nomination rule*.

At the same time, we wanted to be able to compare, at least descriptively, the size of the effects of primaries vis-à-vis appointments. To make this comparison more plausible, we selected pairs of legislators with very similar backgrounds but who were nominated through different rules. First, we used a matching algorithm on a dataset with biographical information from legislators elected in one of the three legislative elections during 2003-2009. We matched exactly on the following attributes: gender, state, partisanship, and election year. This process created a short list with several pairs of legislators from the PAN and PRD.[9] Next, we took this list and read the legislators' profiles in the *Sistema de Información Legislativa*, which contains information on other dimensions of interest, such as the politicians' educational background, previous positions within the party, and number of years in the party.[10] We used this information to find pairs that, at least on paper, seemed the most similar.[11] By the end of this process, we identified two pairs of legislators, one pair from the PAN and another from the PRD. *Within each pair*, the legislators had

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[9] No matches were identified for the PRI. Since there was practically no within-election variation in the rules used by the party, it was impossible to find exact matches on election year.
[10] See http://sil.gobernacion.gob.mx/portal.
[11] For example, pairs in which both politicians were lawyers were considered to be more similar than a pair in which one was a lawyer and the other an accountant.

virtually identical profiles in terms of the factors mentioned above. In fact, the backgrounds were so similar that, for each pair, we were able to write a single vignette with biographical information that, in the absence of a name, could describe the career of either politician.[12]

We illustrate this last point by describing one of our pairs: José Erandi Bermúdez Méndez and Rubén Alfredo Torres Zavala. Both of these men are natives of Guanajuato, graduated from college with engineering degrees, have been members of the PAN for over 25 years, at some point held the position of Secretary of *Acción Juvenil* (the PAN's youth movement) in their state, and were elected to the Chamber of Deputies in the 2003 period. However, while Mr. Bermúdez Méndez was nominated in a primary, Mr. Torres Zavala was handpicked by the national PAN leaders. Therefore, as Appendix C shows, these legislators' careers are so similar that the only difference between the *Primary–No Information* and *Appointment–No Information* conditions is the politician's name.

To summarize, the vignettes use information from four legislators, two of which were selected in primaries, while the other two were appointed by their respective party leaders. For each nomination rule, we have a PAN and a PRD legislator, which ameliorates potential bias on the effects of interest due to idiosyncratic attributes of a particular candidate. At the same time, across nomination rules, we have selected very similar legislators, which should allow us to make, at the very least, descriptive comparisons between the effects of the two nomination rules.

4.2 Data

Table 3 summarizes our dependent variables. We start with politician quality, which we measure in two ways. The first follows the definition of quality as valence, i.e., as a composite of personal traits of politicians that voters intrinsically value (Groseclose, 2001). Accordingly, we asked respondents: "In your opinion, how well or poorly do the following attributes describe this person? Please answer to each attribute: honesty, competence to govern, experienced, academically prepared." Responses were recorded in a 4-point scale, ranging from 'Not at all' (0) to 'Very well' (3). Our first outcome, *Personal attributes*, is the average of the responses to the four individual components.

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[12] Thus, for each pair, the only difference between *Primary–No Information* and *Appointment–No Information* is the politician's name.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Personal attributes (average)	979	1.497	0.801	0	3
Honest	989	1.270	0.891	0	3
Competent	997	1.358	0.928	0	3
Experienced	1,001	1.624	0.933	0	3
Academically prepared	993	1.757	0.957	0	3
Policymaking effectiveness (average)	1,007	1.645	0.969	0	4
Improve economy	1,015	1.692	1.061	0	4
Reduce corruption	1,013	1.557	1.052	0	4
Improve education quality	1,013	1.736	1.086	0	4
Fight organized crime	1,010	1.597	1.078	0	4
Vote choice	1,015	1.021	0.916	0	3

Another group of works conceptualizes quality as a politician's policymaking effectiveness (e.g., Miller, 2011). Thus, we include a question to measure the legislator's perceived efficacy in addressing certain policy issues. To guarantee that we capture perceptions of politicians' policymaking effectiveness—rather than policy preferences—we focus on valence issues (Stokes, 1963). We asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement that, if the politician were elected as mayor of their municipality, he would accomplish the following goals: improve the city's economy, reduce corruption, solve the organized crime problem, and improve the quality of education. For each statement, responses were recorded using a 5-point scale, from 'Strongly disagree' (0) to 'Strongly agree' (4). As before, we take the average of these responses to create our second measure of politician quality, labeled *Policymaking effectiveness*.

Our last outcome is *Vote choice*, which measures the likelihood that the respondent would vote for the given politician. We asked respondents: "If this person was running in an election to become the mayor of your town, how likely is it that you would vote for them?" Responses to this question are measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 'Not likely at all' (0) to 'Very likely' (3).

Prior to the analysis, we verified that the random assignment of the respondents to experimental conditions was implemented effectively by conducting balance tests on a large battery of covariates (see Appendix D). These tests show that the random assignment was well achieved, except for an indicator of whether the respondent had heard of the politician in their vignette prior to the study. This question was asked *before* the experiment; specifically, respondents were presented with a list of politicians' names and were asked to indicate whom they

had heard of before.[13]

5 Results

We proceed in two steps. First, we present our main effects, which come from comparing the *No Information* and *Information* conditions within each nomination rule. Next, we compare voter evaluations of handpicked politicians relative to those who were selected in primaries.

5.1 Main results: the effects of candidate selection information

To estimate the effects of interest, we first subset respondents according to whether they were assigned to a *Primary* or an *Appointment* condition. Then, we estimate equations of the form:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta \, Information_i + \gamma \, PRD_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where y_i is one of our outcomes and *Information$_i$* is an indicator of whether respondent i was exposed to the *Information condition*, i.e., *Primary–Information, Appointment–Information*, or *Appointment–Information Dedazo*, depending on the sample.[14] Thus, the causal effects of interest are captured by β. Finally, *PRD$_i$* indicates whether respondent i was exposed to a vignette with a PRD politician.

For ease of interpretation, we graphically report OLS estimates in Figure 1 and show the associated regression tables in Appendix E.[15] In each panel, the symbols represent the causal effects of interest, i.e., the estimated coefficients of the *Information* condition $(\hat{\beta})$, while the thick and thin lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. We first consider the

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[13] To address any potential issues this may cause, we verify that our main results—described in detail in the next section—are robust to: (1) controlling for the entire battery of covariates (Appendix H), and (2) excluding respondents who said they knew the politician in their vignette (Appendix I).

[14] Overall, we estimate this model on three different subsets. The first only includes respondents in the *Primary* conditions, that is, *Primary–Information* and *Primary–No Information*. Since the appointment information is delivered in two ways (with and without the word *dedazo*) we use two different subsets to estimate the effect of the appointment information. One includes respondents in *Appointment–Information* and *Appointment–No Information*, and the other those in *Appointment–Information Dedazo* and *Appointment–No Information*.

[15] Using ordered logistic regressions produces substantively identical results, as reported in Appendix F.

effects on politician quality (Hypotheses 1a-1b), which we test using *Personal attributes* and *Policymaking effectiveness*. Since both these measures are averages, we also report results of their constituent traits so that readers have more information about which of these could be driving the results.

Figure 1: Effects of candidate selection information
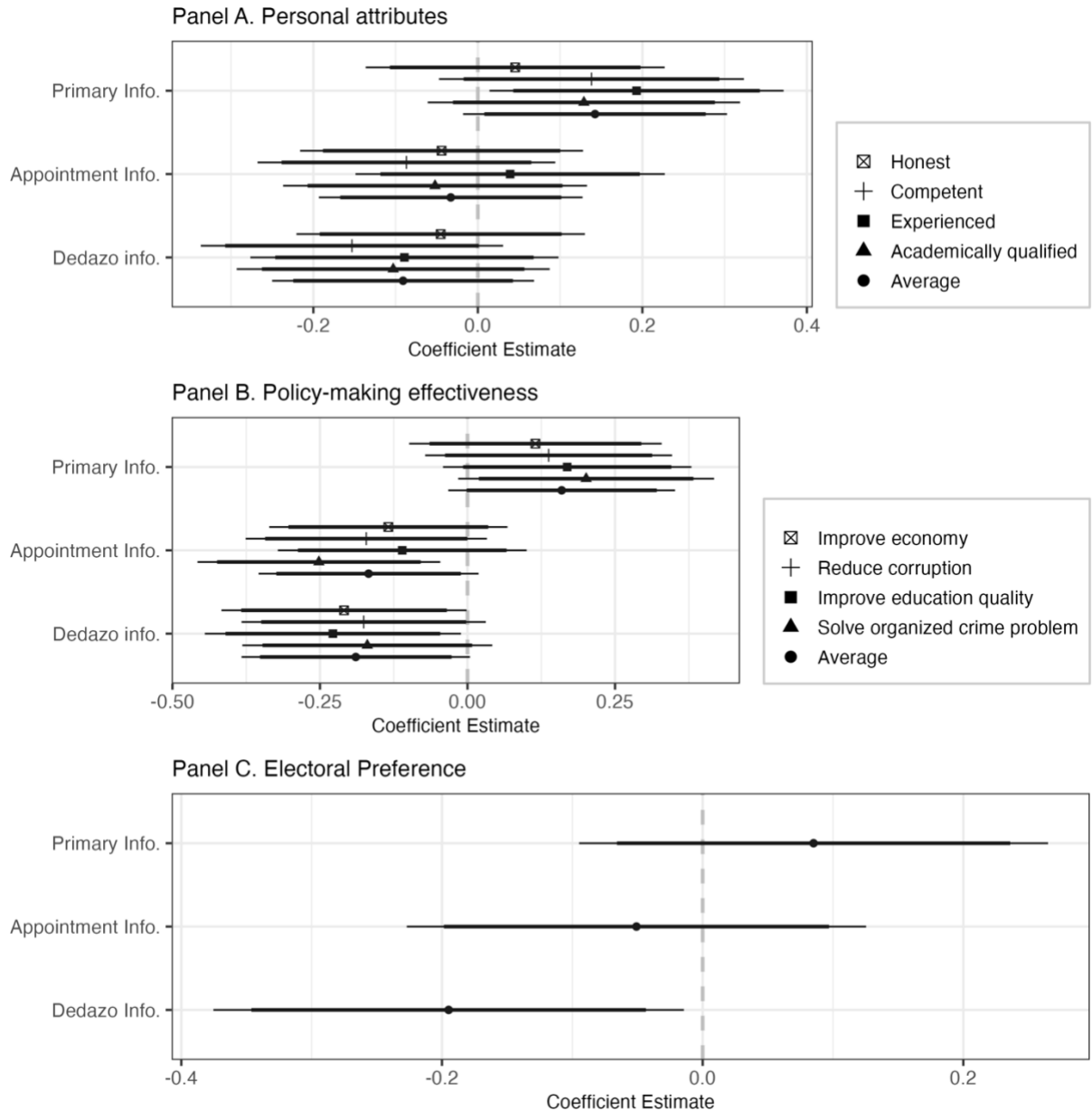
Note: Symbols represent the OLS estimates of the Information condition (β in Equation (1)); thick and thin horizontal lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively.

The overall patterns in Figure 1 (Panel A) match Hypothesis 1a in terms of the coefficients' signs, but these are not statistically significant at conventional levels. Disclosing that a legislator was selected in a primary improves their perceived quality, as measured by *Personal attributes*, but this effect is only significant at the 10% level (p-value = 0.082). Looking at the individual components, we find that revealing that a politician was nominated via primaries boosts the politician's perceived competence, experience, honesty, and academic qualifications—although only the effect for experience is significant at the 5% level. Similarly, the data provide little support for Hypothesis 1b. The estimate on *Personal attributes* is negative but not significant at the 5% level—this is true whether the information that the politician was handpicked by party leaders was delivered using the word *dedazo* or not. The attributes-specific results reveal an almost identical pattern; the estimates have the expected sign but fall short of statistical significance in virtually all instances.

Measuring politician quality in terms of policymaking skills produces similar results, as shown in Figure 1 (Panel B). Revealing that a politician won a primary positively impacts *Policymaking effectiveness*, but this effect is not statistically significant (p-value = 0.103). The issue-specific results are analogous—although all the estimates are positive, as expected in Hypothesis 1a, they are not statistically significant at conventional levels. Likewise, the data provide limited support for Hypothesis 1b. While revealing that a legislator was appointed by party leaders has a negative effect on the legislator's perceived policymaking effectiveness, this effect is significant only at the 10% level—whether or not this information was revealed using the word *dedazo* (p-values are 0.078 and 0.055). That said, the issue-specific analysis shows that the appointment information has negative and significant effect at the 5% level for some of the policy issues. Specifically, disclosing that a politician was appointed decreases their perceived capacity to improve the quality of education and to solve the organized crime problem, provided that this information was revealed with and without using the word *dedazo*, respectively (p-values are 0.039 and 0.016).

Finally, Figure 1 (Panel C) shows the impact of the candidate selection information on voters' likelihood of voting for the politician. While the signs of the coefficients are in line with Hypotheses 2a and 2b, only that of the *Appointment–Information Dedazo* condition is significant at the 5% level (p-value = 0.034). Given that the appointment (*dedazo*) information has practically no impact on the politician's perceived quality, it is unclear what is driving this effect. One possible

explanation is that voters punish appointed candidates because they view them as "party hacks" who put their party leaders' interests over those of voters (Bøggild, 2020). In Appendix G, we explore this possibility but find that the appointment information has no effect on the politicians' perceived independence from party leaders. Thus, while we cannot conclusively identify the factors driving this result, we can at least rule out this potential mechanism.[16]

5.2 Additional results: primaries versus appointments

The previous analysis examines the effects of providing information about each candidate selection rule relative to not having this information. A related question has to do with the effect of revealing information about one nomination rule relative to the other. That is, one might want to know how voters evaluate handpicked candidates relative to those selected in primaries. Given that we use real legislators, the inferences we can make in this regard are somewhat limited when compared to the experimental evidence presented above. However, we are able to estimate the effect of the primary information relative to the appointment information using a difference-in-differences (DiD) design.

The logic for using this strategy is as follows. We are interested in the effect of revealing that a legislator was selected in a primary, relative to disclosing that they were appointed by the party leaders, on some outcome *y*. The challenge for estimating this effect is that we cannot compare the *Primary–Information* and *Appointment–Information* conditions directly. Since these conditions are different along two dimensions—the politicians' names *and* the nomination rules information—any observed differences between the outcome *y* across conditions could be driven by either one of these factors. The DiD design incorporates information from comparing the *Primary–No Information* and *Appointment–No Information* conditions, which differ only in terms of the politicians' names, to parse out the effect of the candidate selection information from that of the names.

We pool the data from all of our experimental conditions (except for *Appointment–*

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[16] We conduct several robustness checks (in addition to those described in footnote 13). First, we estimate the model in equation (1) but interact *Information$_i$* with *PRD$_i$* (Appendix J). The results show no substantial heterogeneity by whether respondents were presented with a vignette from PAN or PRD politician. Also, we test for heterogeneous effects by whether the respondent supports the party of the politician in their vignette (Appendix K) and by the partisanship of the respondents (Appendix L). As before, we find virtually no evidence of heterogeneous effects.

Information Dedazo), and estimate equations of the form:

$$y_i = \mu + \phi Primary_i + \rho Information_i + \delta(Primary_i \times Information_i) + \lambda PRD_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where *Primary$_i$* is an indicator of whether respondent *i* was in either one of the *Primary* conditions (i.e., *Primary–No Information* or *Primary– Information*), and *Information$_i$* indicates whether *i* was assigned to either one of the *Information* conditions (i.e., *Primary–Information* or *Appointment– Information*). Due to space constraints, we do not report results of the individual components of our composite measures, *Personality attributes* and *Policymaking effectiveness*.

There are two quantities of interest. The first is ϕ, which captures the effect of being assigned to the *Primary–No Information* condition relative to *Appointment–No Information*. As mentioned, by design, these two conditions are identical except for the politicians' names. Therefore, this coefficient captures any baseline differences in the outcome of interest that are explained by the fact that our vignettes use different politicians. The causal effect of interest is given by δ, the DiD coefficient.[17] This estimate captures differences between the *Primary–Information* and *Appointment–Information* that are only explained by the candidate selection information, i.e., after removing the impact of the politicians' names (ϕ).

We report the results of this analysis in Figure 2 (Panel A), and present regression tables in Appendix M.[18] For each outcome, we report two estimates: that of ϕ, depicted as circles, and that of the causal effect of interest δ, depicted as triangles. To start, we note that the estimates of ϕ are negative for every outcome. This means that when comparing the two conditions that did not provide any candidate selection information, *Primary–No Information* and *Appointment–No Information*, the legislators nominated in primaries received worse evaluations compared to those who were appointed in every single dimension. We emphasize, once again, that because these vignettes did not provide any candidate selection information, these two conditions were identical, except for the politicians' names. Thus, despite our efforts to select pairs of legislators with very similar backgrounds, the fact that the vignettes used different names had an effect on how the politicians were evaluated by voters. This illustrates why comparing the Information conditions
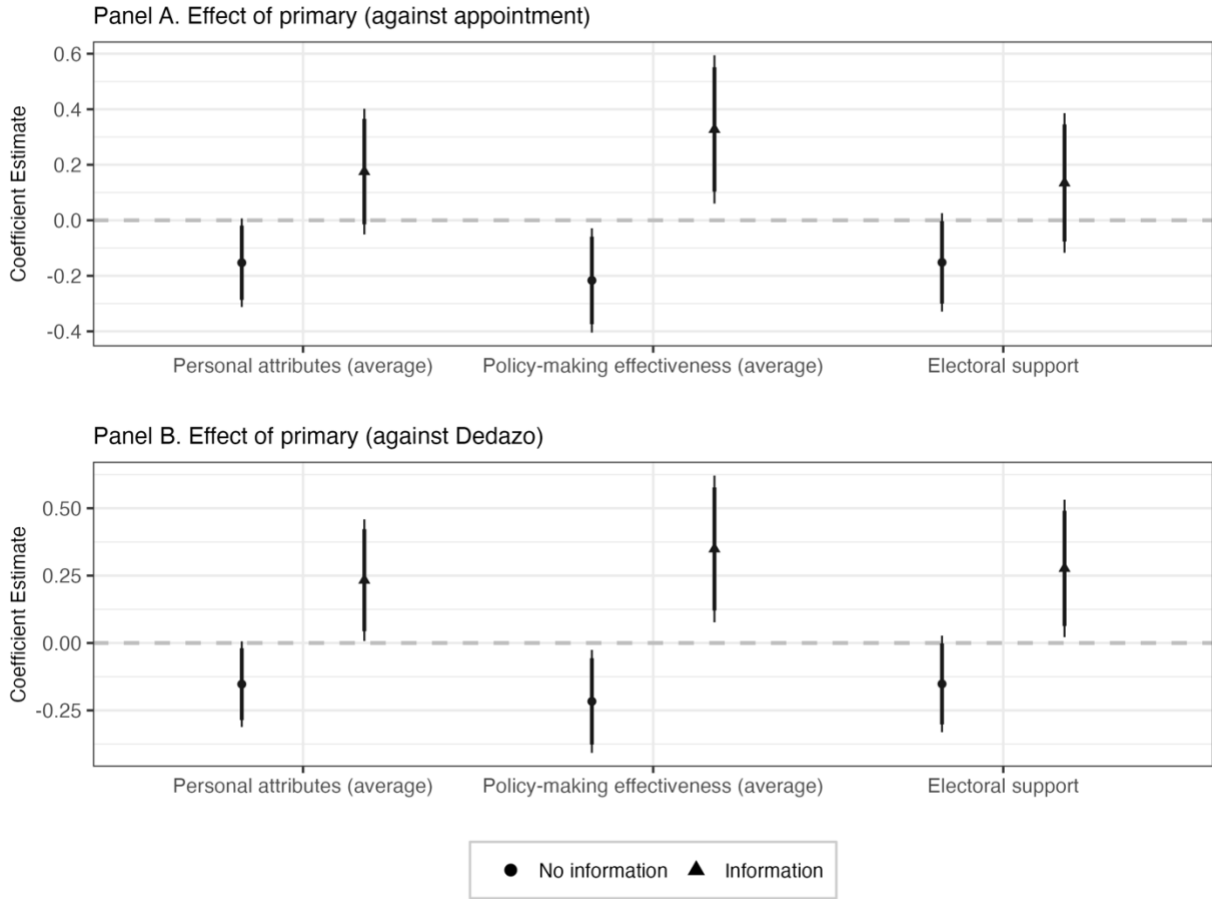
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[17] We clarify that the causal interpretation of δ follows from the DiD assumptions and not from randomization.

[18] Appendix N reports models with controls.

directly would be problematic and confirms the need to analyze the data using a DiD approach.

Figure 2: Primary effect versus appointment and *dedazo*

Note: Symbols represent the OLS estimates: circles show the coefficient of the Primary condition (ϕ in Equation (2)), while triangles are the difference-in-differences coefficients (δ in Equation (2)). Thick and thin horizontal lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively.

In terms of the main results, the DiD estimates are positive in all instances. This means that providing the information that a legislator was selected in a primary, relative to providing the information that they were handpicked by party leaders, improves the politician's perceived quality. However, this effect is statistically significant at the 5% level only when quality is measured in terms of policymaking effectiveness. The effect on the vote intentions question is not statistically significant. We emphasize that these estimates $(\hat{\delta})$ already take into account the impact of the politicians' names, which means the effects we just described can be attributed to the candidate selection information alone.

Finally, we replicate the analysis to estimate the effect of the primary information versus the appointment (*dedazo*) information. As before, we pool the data from all the experimental conditions, except this time we exclude *Appointment–Information*. The results are summarized in Figure 2 (Panel B). The estimates of ϕ, which capture baseline differences between the conditions that provide no candidate selection information, are again all negative. More importantly, the DiD estimates are all positive and statistically significant at the 5% level. This means that learning that a legislator was nominated via primaries, relative to learning that he was appointed by a *dedazo* of party leaders, improves not only the legislator's perceived quality but also respondents' willingness to vote for them in the future.

6 Conclusion

We conclude by discussing the implications of our results for the study of the electoral consequences of primaries. First, we find that informing voters that a politician was selected in a primary—relative to not disclosing this information—has no impact on either voter perceptions of politician quality or their willingness to vote for them. However, previous research, including work on Mexico, has uncovered positive associations between parties' use of primaries and their electoral performance using aggregate-level election data (e.g., Astudillo and Lago, 2021; Bruhn, 2010; Ramiro, 2016). Thus, we think our findings suggest that the primary bonus identified in these studies is likely driven by what we labeled the candidate-side mechanism, that is, by primaries selecting objectively higher-quality candidates. Moroever, while Mexican parties adopted primaries for a variety of reasons (see, e.g., Ascencio, 2023; Bruhn, 2010; Poiré, 2002), one could speculate that the inability of primaries to improve how voters evaluate politicians explains, at least partially, why they have virtually stopped using them in recent times.

Second, we uncover evidence of a relative primary bonus. Under certain conditions, learning that a candidate was selected in a primary—relative to learning that they were handpicked by party leaders—improves voter perceptions of the politician's quality and boosts their reported willingness to vote for the politician. This matches Astudillo and Lago (2021)'s finding that, for the primary bonus to materialize, it is necessary that only one party uses primaries—while its main rivals do not. Our results indicate that one additional condition is necessary for this effect to emerge: voters must know how different aspirants were nominated. Thus, in the style of Mexico's opposition parties in the 1990s, candidates nominated in primaries might attempt to benefit from

strategically highlighting this information during their general-election campaigns. In fact, this appears to still be a common tactic in present-day Mexican politics; despite the limited use of primaries, candidate selection continues to be a hotly debated campaign topic, with parties denouncing the undemocratic nature of their opponents' nomination procedures.[19]

Finally, we highlight two avenues for future work. The first has to do with our experimental design. Although using information from real politicians served the goal of enhancing the study's external validity, we also acknowledge that this choice implied some tradeoffs. Notably, we could not directly compare the effects of providing information about different nomination rules, which required us to employ a DiD approach. Consequently, we encourage follow-up studies to employ designs better suited for this task (e.g., vignettes with hypothetical politicians, conjoint designs). The second relates to the generalizability of our findings. As explained, we believe Mexico is a most-likely case for identifying effects of candidate selection information on public opinion. Thus, replicating this study in other settings could validate our findings and provide additional insights about the conditions under which primaries can improve voter evaluations of elected officials.

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[19] As we completed this manuscript, Mexican parties selected their candidates for the 2024 presidential election. Throughout this process, the ruling party (MORENA) and its main rival (Frente Amplio por México) disqualified each others' nomination methods—calling them, e.g., a *dedazo*, farce, shady elite agreement—while claiming that their own method was truly democratic/legitimate (see Cruz, 2023; Raziel, 2023)

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