Vertical Careers and Multilevel Institutional Experience

A typology of parliamentary candidates in Switzerland

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Abstract

In this paper we are interested in the relative influence of sub-national party and office experience on political careers in federal and decentralised systems. We contend that by studying all candidates for parliamentary office – and not merely elected ones – we can learn more about both the “vertical” organisation of political parties and the properties and incentives of the institutional environment in which they operate. We first develop a typology of candidates with or without sub-national party experience and/or with or without sub-national public office experience. We then use survey data of candidates in the Swiss parliamentary elections of October 2011 to draw conclusions on its analytical usefulness. We find that, on the one hand, our typology is able to capture important attributes of the Swiss political system, such as highly integrated vertical careers with a strong emphasis placed on prior office experience. Significant cross-cantonal variation, on the other hand, calls for further, refined analysis.

Keywords: Switzerland, vertical careers, parliamentary candidates

1. Introduction

In this paper we are interested in vertical political career paths in multilevel systems¹ and their connections to party organisation. The study of political recruitment, and especially of members of parliament (MP), can draw on an important legacy in political science (Laski 1928; Dogan 1961; Herzog 1975; Putnam 1976; Norris & Lovenduski 1995; Olsch 1998; Best & Cotta 2000; Cotta & Best 2007; Davidson; Oleszek & Frances 2011). The study of candidates, on the other hand, remains largely underdeveloped, although MPs are only a subset of the wider population of candidates, with the simple (but essential) distinction that they have made it into parliament. Even within studies of political careers concerned with territorial representation, either with regard to party executives (Detterbeck 2011) or parliaments (Nay 1998; Stolz 2003; Montero 2007), candidacy is far from being a research issue. By contrast, what we contend here is that by studying all candidates – and not only the elected ones – we can learn more about both the properties and incentives of the institutional environment in which parties operate and the organisation of political parties – especially in multilevel contexts, where the territorial variable figures prominently alongside the partisan dimension of democratic competition.

Analyses of parliamentary recruitment, such as those answering questions about the impact of party experience on career paths or the role of (what kind of) sub-national experience – e.g. regional legislative, local executive, etc. – on electoral success, directly profit from widening their scope to all candidates for two reasons. First, where candidate selection depends on
parties, studying the former helps to better understand the latter. Parties are essential to the workings of democracy precisely because they remain the only agents to undertake political recruitment. But while scholars recognise that “the (s)electoral game takes place in two arenas: not only between parties, but also within them” (Hazan & Rahat 2010, 165; see also Rahat et al. 2008), they have tended to focus on candidate selection methods at the expense of (the resulting) pool of candidates.

The lack of academic attention to candidates is even more surprising given the recent tendency in the literature to emphasise the multilevel nature of political systems, which of course also impacts on political parties (Hopkin & van Houten 2009). With some exceptions (e.g. Thorlakson 2009; Lundell 2004; Borchert & Stolz 2011; Fabre 2011), the multilevel character of parties in terms of candidate selection is understudied in comparative analyses. Because parties select candidates, the process of selection is taken as one of many indicators of the multilevel character of parties (Bolleyer 2012). But while perfectly valid, the reverse approach adopted in this paper complements this view: studying the functional and territorial attributes of candidates allows us to describe the preferences of (or the necessary adaptation by) individual political parties in multilevel environments as they are actually manifested in times of elections. Hence, a snapshot of all candidates renders an equally, if not even more, accurate picture of parties than tracing the candidate selection process.

The second reason to study candidates is that we can learn more about the properties and incentives of the institutional environment that shapes politics between and within parties. As under many electoral systems candidates are not equally likely to be elected (Hazan & Rahat 2010, 11-12), it is the surplus of candidates over the number of offices to be filled that enables the electorate to have a choice in the first place. If we are interested in why some are elected but others not, it is as important to know about the characteristics of the former as it is to know about those of the latter (Rahat et al. 2008, 669). But the existing literature on candidates for parliamentary office is more interested in the socio-cultural and professional background of individual candidates, their functional competences and ties to public office, and less in their party experience (Norris 1997). This is so because “[i]n the academic division of labour, party research is a field apart from legislative research, and national politics is the domain of other people than regional politics or local politics“ (Borchert & Stolz 2011, 108). But if simple party belonging generally is a common requirement for candidacy, party service, such as extensive party office experience at the regional level, often is a crucial condition for success (Fiers & Secker 2007, 137; Geser 1994, 15).
Moreover, prior institutional experience with legislative and/or executive power, for example at regional level, represents a proof of a specific political know-how. But whether MPs are mostly seasoned regional politicians with extensive party ties, as we will see they are in Switzerland, or whether the regional and national arenas form two distinct universes, as in Canada (Stolz 2003, 230-1), primarily depends on the pool of candidates, which in turn is shaped by political parties as much as by the (formal) design and (real) working of the multilevel settings in which they operate. In sum, since the pool of candidates is what the electorate is ultimately faced with, we need to pay more attention to its partisan and institutional experiences; and because a) candidates are (usually) put forth by parties and b) their prior political experience also depends on “institutional opportunities” (Borchert 2011) such as “meaningful” regional and/or local tiers of governance, studying candidates informs our understanding both of parties and their relations with multilevel institutions.

In this paper, we thus link the individual-level approach of career studies with both political party research, which operates at the aggregate level, and federal/regional studies, which speak about the (macro-)institutional properties and practices of multilevel systems. We do this by proposing a functional-political typology of candidates for national parliaments, which we deduce and present in the next section. After briefly introducing the Swiss political system (section 3), the heuristic power of our typology is then illustrated by the pool of candidates for the Swiss parliamentary elections in October 2011 (section 4) before we discuss (section 5) and conclude.

2. Political careers in multilevel systems: typology and hypotheses

The goal of this section is to develop a typology and derive a set of testable hypotheses from it. Typologies have a long legacy in social and political science (Sartori 1991; Collier et al. 2012; Maggetti et al. 2013). They can serve different descriptive and analytical purposes. Elman (2005) distinguishes three functions of typologies: description, classification and explanation. Descriptive typologies help to conceptualize a certain phenomenon (for example multilevel career patterns) by identifying the most relevant dimensions of it. In this regard, typologies represent an important step towards forming or revising a concept. The classificatory function of typologies is straightforward and means the ability to classify cases into cells or types. By doing so, scholars can discuss and compare cases and their properties in a systematic fashion. The explanatory function of typologies is possibly the most demanding for scholars, but arguably also the most valuable. Here, cells and the distribution of cases across cells can be related to theoretical propositions either as an outcome or a cause. In what
follows, we have all three functions in mind but, given the limited empirical evidence (pertaining to one country only), we focus on description and classification and, based on that, merely discuss the explanatory potential of our typology.

In order to construct our typology of multilevel career patterns, we need to identify at least two dimensions. A first is public office: multilevel political systems are characterised by at least two levels of government, each with significant autonomy in at least one policy area. Typically, each level has its own legislative and executive institutions to be filled through free, fair, secret and competitive elections. Since the advent of universal suffrage, these in turn have come to depend on political parties (Sartori 2005 [1976], 18). However, it is important to understand that both institutional settings and party organisations “determine participants, power relations, and arenas for political struggle” (Chandler 1987, 149). In other words, multilevel democracy is shaped by partisan, institutional and territorial aspects, which makes such political systems not only more complex, but also more interesting to theorise about the relation between career, party, and office than unitary ones. Hence, political party forms a second dimension. Table 1 displays the ensuing four-cell matrix for the sub-national level, that is by not distinguishing between local and regional layers. For the sake of this paper, we call “wild cards” those politicians that have neither sub-national office nor sub-national party experience; “career politicians” those that have both; and “activists” and “technocrats” those that have only sub-national party (but not office) and only sub-national office (but not party) experience, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-national party experience</th>
<th>Sub-national office experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild cards</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technocrats</td>
<td>Activists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activists</td>
<td>Career politicians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: A multilevel candidate typology

What do we aim to capture by this? The precise structural environment obviously varies with national and sub-national context (Massetti & Schakel 2011), and its impact differs from party to party, too (Bolleyer 2012). Nevertheless, two general observations on potential cause and effect of multilevel party competition can be made. First, to the extent that sub-national office experience is possible, meaningful, and hence individually desirable, parties will aim to occupy sub-national institutions as much as national ones – if not more or even exclusively so, if these parties are regionalist in the strictest of senses (Stolz 2009). Second, sub-national
experience – both in institutional/office and party-political/partisan terms – can be linked to the vertical integration of parties themselves, that is to “the extent of formal and informal organizational linkages and political co-operation between national and regional party units” (Detterbeck 2011, 249; Thorlakson 2009). As institutions stretch out vertically, so do parties. However, in this paper we are primarily interested in office experience and two related institutional tensions: a first, territorial one between the regional and local level and a second, functional one between executive and legislative office experience. This calls for a further refinement of our typology, presented in Table 2, where ten combinations are logically possible (or nine, if the none/none category is excluded).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive only</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative only</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both executive and legislative</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Type and level of sub-national office experience

Our analytical purposes remain, at this exploratory stage, rather modest. Starting from the empirically well-founded assumption that career paths of politicians are influenced by both their respective party organisations and the institutional set-up in which they compete (Panebianco 1988; Detterbeck 2011; Stolz 2003), we first of all expect the distribution of candidates across the four cells of Table 1 to differ across national political systems. For if we so treat this typology as a dependent variable, we expect that

H1a: the more regionalised/decentralised but integrated a given political system, the more candidates will tend to be career politicians. Conversely, in centralised systems where parties are hierarchically organised (Bolleyer 2012), most candidates will be wild cards.

The reason for this is that parties will prefer candidates loyal to them – and to them only – if they compete in a more centralised system; on the other hand, in more decentralised or regionalised political systems the need to integrate lower levels incentivises candidates with significant lower-level experience. By the same token, in contexts where candidate selection is influenced by the regional level, we expect there to be variation across regions depending their internal degree of centralisation:

H1b: internally centralised regions will privilege candidates with only regional experience, while in more decentralised regions more candidates with also local experience will stand.
On the other hand, and using the more fine-grained typology of Table 2 as an independent variable, we conjecture that candidates in the different cells have different chances to get elected. To be more specific,

H2a: in regionalised/decentralised political systems candidates with no prior office experience at any sub-national level (=type 1) are least likely to win parliamentary elections at the national level.

Moreover,

H2b: candidates with both regional and local office experience are best equipped to win parliamentary elections at the national level, because they combine institutional competence of various levels and are well-known personalities. In sum, we suppose our two typologies to serve two main purposes: as a simple proxy for the categorisation of political systems and solid empirical foundation for comparative analysis, it is a valuable starting point to discuss a) the relation between territorial-institutional and partisan properties of a given political system and b) candidate selection strategies of political parties. To highlight this double validity, in what follows our study is devoted to Switzerland, whose federal system leaves a high degree of autonomy with the regions (i.e. cantons), both in terms of competencies and resources (Vatter 2006; Horber-Papazian 2006).

3. The Swiss context: weak national parties, integrated multilevel careers?

In general, the Swiss party system is rather fragmented and decentralised – but relatively stable – and party organisations are considered weak, reflecting specific properties of the Swiss political system more generally (Fagagnini 1978, 90). But direct democracy, which removes the most contentious issues from the parties and strengthens ad-hoc interest groups, makes Swiss parties even more candidate-centred (Neidhart 1986, 37). Moreover, the Swiss party system is divided into twenty-six different cantonal party systems, where party organisations are of different strength and present different ideological legacies (Ladner 2001, 2011). Last but not least, the seats in the two federal legislative chambers (246) usually represent a small part of the amount of candidates (more than 3,500 in 2011). For all these reasons, and although the analysis of candidacy in national elections remains relatively rare (Gruner et al. 1975; Mazzoleni et al. 2010), Switzerland represents an interesting case.

Based on Thorlakson (2009, 161), who classifies the Swiss party system as vertically integrated with a strong role for sub-national parties in determining national careers (see also Bolleyer 2012 and Stolz 2003), we expect the number of career politicians to dominate overall. Prior studies confirm this: Swiss political careers usually start at the local level,
leading to a legislative or executive office in the municipality, the canton, and finally the federation (Plüss & Rusch 2012, 55; Geser 2002, 437-438). Swiss parties are differently organized in different cantons and are based on different constituencies (Selb 2006). According to Mueller (2011, 219–21), there are cantonal differences with regard to the presence of *cumul des mandats* (i.e. holding a cantonal legislative and local executive office at the same time), which can be perceived as an important way of vertical integration within cantons. More importantly, the territorial dimension of candidate selection for cantonal parliamentary elections varies with the cantonal electoral system, from cantons where candidate selection is entirely done at the local level to cantons where candidates are selected at the cantonal level only (Mueller 2011, 228–30). Because the many small, rural and German-speaking cantons are also the ones that are most decentralised internally, meaning that local autonomy and hence local office is more important than in the few centralised, French-speaking and/or city-dominated cantons, we expect more technocrats and career politicians to come from the latter and activists to dominate in the former (see also Pilotti 2011, 118). To empirically verify these stipulations, we draw on the 2011 Swiss Electoral Studies Candidate Survey. In the next section, we apply our typology to this dataset and present prevalent Swiss multilevel career patterns.

4. **Data and results: the 2011 Swiss federal elections**

The Selects 2011 database comprises 34 candidates to the Upper Chamber (*Ständerat*, SR) and 1,642 candidates to the Lower Chamber (*Nationalrat*, NR), all for the autumn 2011 elections. Only 18 were eventually elected to the SR and 101 to the NR. The sum total of candidates in the database is thus 1,676, with 116 (6.9%) eventually elected to either of the two chambers (i.e. excluding the three candidates who were elected to both chambers). Of the 13 SR incumbents in the sample, only one was not re-elected to the SR (but to the NR, instead), while of the 72 NR incumbents, eight were not re-elected to the NR (but two were elected to the SR, instead). All in all, 89.4% of all incumbents were re-elected to either of the two chambers, while the success rate of non-incumbents barely reaches 2.5%. Because the overall share of elected candidates is very low, and for the reasons given above, we primarily focus on *all* rather than only on successful candidates; however, when talking about success we shall briefly present some findings on elected candidates only. Table 3 displays the distribution of candidates across our general typology.
At first sight, this seems to confirm H1a on the relative preponderance of career politicians (shaded cells: 41%) for a vertically integrated multilevel system such as Switzerland. With the total count now reduced to 1,372 (that is, excluding candidates with missing values in either of the two dimensions), the second largest group, with 29% (bottom left), is composed of candidates with no sub-national office but only party experience (activists), while 25% of all candidates have neither (wild cards, top left). Only 6% profess to have no sub-national party but office experience instead (technocrats, top right). To make a brief comparison with four years before, in 2007 there were 418 career politicians (34%), 351 activists (29%), 347 wild cards (28%), and 109 technocrats (9%) (SELECTS Candidate Survey 2007). Thus, since then the share of career politicians has increased by 7%, the shares of technocrats and wild cards have each slightly decreased (-3%), while the proportion of activists has remained stable.

Turning to inter-cantonal variation, Table 4 shows the distribution of candidates across more or less ‘centralised’, ‘balanced’ and ‘decentralised’ cantons. We can see that in 2011 there are less activists in the centralised cantons (20%) compared to balanced and decentralised cantons (31-32%), while nearly half of all candidates in this group are career politicians. In the group of ‘decentralised’ cantons, in turn, the number of activists, wild cards and career politicians is about the same, whereas technocrats are again most prominently represented in the ‘centralised’ cantons. Hence, internal decentralisation seems to incentivise candidates with no experience at all, while centralisation seems to correlate to office plus party. Intuitively, this makes sense: the more centralised a canton, the more professional its candidates, on average; the more decentralised, the more open to newcomers the electoral system.
However, what does the picture look like if we distinguish between cantonal and local office experience, on the one hand, and legislative and executive mandates, on the other? Applying our more refined typology gives us the following snapshot (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of institutional experience</th>
<th>Level of institutional experience</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Cantonal only</th>
<th>Local only</th>
<th>Cantonal and local</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td>766</td>
<td>(54%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive only</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5 (0.5%)</td>
<td>74 (5%)</td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
<td>5.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary only</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>150 (11%)</td>
<td>180 (13%)</td>
<td>101 (7%)</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41 (3%)</td>
<td>105 (7%)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>11.50%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14.10%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

In other words, a majority of candidates (half of which are sub-national party members) has served in no sub-national office whatsoever, while the biggest group of those with sub-national office experience are those with local parliamentary office only (13%), followed by those having served as cantonal MPs only (11%). “Classic” career politicians, i.e. those with both cantonal and local as well as both legislative and executive experience, come only fourth, together with ‘double legislators’ (7%). Thus, in Switzerland at least, sub-national office does not currently seem to be a condition for candidacy, while party membership clearly is. So despite its overall non-professional and fragmented appearance, party ties are key to vertical careers. Comparing across columns, the local level seems to be more important than either the cantonal or the local-cantonal combined, while if we compare across rows, parliamentary experience is three times more often represented than a combined parliamentary-executive experience.

A final question to be addressed is how these patterns are distributed across types of cantons. For lack of space, we merely report the share of candidates for the most prominent categories. In centralised cantons, 18% of candidates have both executive and legislative experience, while the corresponding figure for balanced cantons is 9% and 6% for decentralised cantons.
Moreover, 11% of all candidates have both types of experience at both sub-national levels in centralised cantons (balanced: 7%; decentralised: 5%). However, contrary to what we expected, the number of candidates with only cantonal experience is highest in balanced cantons (13%), middle in decentralised (10%) and lowest in centralised ones (8%). Instead, half of all candidates in centralised cantons have either local only or local and cantonal experience. Paradoxically, then, the internally most centralised cantons are also the most localist ones, at least in terms of the number of candidacy types put forth. Both these findings – the dominance of localism and combined parliamentary-executive experience in centralised cantons – are confirmed if we exclude the institutional wild cards, i.e. all those with no office experience whatsoever, from the calculations.

If we now look at which type of candidates is the most successful, we find that not the local only/parliamentary only category represented the most, but rather the type of candidate with a) cantonal and local as well as both parliamentary and executive experience (25%); b) cantonal parliamentary experience only (also 25%); and c) cantonal MPs with also local experience (21%). Only 8% of elected candidates have no sub-national office experience, which is less than candidates with only executive (and be it local only) experience, who stand at 9% (Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of institutional experience</th>
<th>Level of institutional experience</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Cantonal only</th>
<th>Local only</th>
<th>Cantonal and local</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 (8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive only</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary only</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19 (25%)</td>
<td>9 (12%)</td>
<td>16 (21%)</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>19 (25%)</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Successful candidates to the National Council

What if we split the successful candidates up by the degree of centralisation of their canton? Table 7 shows that the overall pattern – cantonal and local as well as both executive and parliamentary experience results in a large number of elected candidates in all three groups of cantons. However, in the centralised cantons there are more elected candidates still with only parliamentary experience, and in balanced cantons the most successful contenders are those with only cantonal parliamentary experience. In decentralised cantons, finally, an equally strong group of candidates has only local parliamentary experience.
Centralised Cantons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of institutional experience</th>
<th>Level of institutional experience</th>
<th>Cantonal only</th>
<th>Local only</th>
<th>Cantonal and local</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive only</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary only</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Balanced Cantons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of institutional experience</th>
<th>Level of institutional experience</th>
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<th>Local only</th>
<th>Cantonal and local</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive only</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Decentralised Cantons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of institutional experience</th>
<th>Level of institutional experience</th>
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<th>Local only</th>
<th>Cantonal and local</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive only</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Number of elected candidates by type and canton

5. Discussion

What do these results tell us? For candidacies overall, sub-national resources in terms of experience both in public and party office clearly play a key role. The one group without any such resources, which we have labelled wild card politicians, stand almost no chance, unless they are active at the national party level. Moreover, in the larger constituencies, only the cumulative presence of both types of sub-national experience, party and office, appears to contribute to the winning formula. Hence, party support is determinant, more so than institutional (“technical”) or personal knowledge: at the very basic level, a large majority of candidates (69%; see also Table 2 above) and even more so of elected MPs (85%) is characterised by party office experience (that is activists and career politicians together).

Moreover, of the 30% of all candidates with no sub-national party office experience, only those with public office experience, such as the “technocrats”, those with high “personal” resources (education, associational network etc.), and those providing more independent forms of campaign have a chance to win a seat. But while there are nearly as many wild cards as party activists in our sample, the success rate of the former is more than double that of the latter, suggesting that party activists also fulfil the ungrateful role of filling the party lists. In
return, they might be promoted to local and then cantonal office (thus achieved the run of career politicians, in our terminology) so that, by the next election, their success rate will be maximised. This would again point to the party as the crucial driver of candidates: the crucial role of cantonal branches of mainstream parties in candidate selection has persisted, at least thus far. Traditionally seen as “light weight”-party organisations with amateur structures and, since recently, under increasing pressure of the instantaneous, candidate-centred mass-media system, one could expect personal and institutional resources to be more important candidate selection criteria. But, quite the contrary, party linkages remain crucial. Not simply because of the importance of career politicians, but also because the party activists serve the party by filling the list today (and perhaps winning seats tomorrow).

Because in the mainstream parties public office experience figures more prominently, this further highlights the role and the influence of the stability of cantonal party systems. Moreover, there is not only media pressure to give salience to personal resources. The electoral system for lower chamber elections, which has remained very stable for decades, is a multi-member proportional system with personal vote (including panachage, that is free lists). Within this frame, non-party personal attributes such as institutional/public skills and one’s reputation represent, together with party support, essential resources. Finally, since career politicians in our typology include a high rate of incumbents, this confirms that the cursus honorum (a career path including both sub-national and national public office) remains an imperative feature of (successful) Swiss parliamentary candidacy.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to bridge the gap between political party (organisation) research, on the one hand, and legislative/career studies, on the other hand, when it comes to the study of multilevel political systems. Because in these systems a complex interplay of different levels of territorial governance and partisan ideologies and organisations takes place, we have built a simple fourfold typology of legislative candidates in which we distinguish career politicians (with both sub-national public office and party experience), technocrats (only sub-national office but no sub-national party experience), party activists (only sub-national party but no office experience so far) and wild cards (neither sub-national office nor sub-national party experience). In applying this classification to the pool of candidates in the Swiss federal elections of October 2011 gathered by a national survey, we have then shown the usefulness of our typology. What have we found and how do our findings inform our knowledge about multilevel parties and political systems, in Switzerland and beyond?
First of all, in showing that a majority of candidates belong to the group of career politicians, Switzerland neatly fits into the institutionally and organisationally highly decentralised but politically highly integrated type of multilevel system. We thus confirm several previous studies, e.g. those by Thorlakson (2009) on vertical party integration, by Stolz (2003) on bottom-up legislative careers, or, most specifically, by Gruner et al. (1975, 391-403) on the importance of local and cantonal experience (both institutional and party office). Although some authors (e.g. Ladner 1996, 21–22; Selb & Lutz 2006, 433) begun to question the validity of this *cursus honorum* paradigm under the twin aspects mainly of mediatisation and professionalization, the sub-national level continues to play an important role for Swiss politics. What we could detect – by comparing their share in 2011 with that in 2007 – was an even stronger emphasis placed on career politicians, which together with the high share of candidates with sub-national party experience (70%) can be read as indicative of the continued importance of political parties. So although – possibly precisely because – Switzerland is a federal, fragmented and semi-direct democracy, political parties remain the sole recruiter for legislative office at the federal level.

Beyond our study of the Swiss case, we have shown that a focus on candidates can provide an interesting and complementary approach to enhance our knowledge about both multilevel career patterns and party organisation. Most vertical career studies have focused on MPs (Stolz 2003 & 2009, Borchert 2011, Montero 2007) or party executives (Detterbeck 2011), but MPs themselves form part of the total pool of candidates. Particularly in free-list electoral systems like Switzerland has one, it is important to know what that distinguishes successful from unsuccessful candidates. Our typology not only captures standard attributes such as age and education, but also the availability of institutional experience and party support. It would be most interesting to extend our typology to other multilevel political systems to see if for seasoned career politicians the chances to get elected are equally high; if young party activists similarly fill up the lists in expectation of a sub-national office “reward” to then, at the next federal elections, stand as career politicians themselves; if the share of wild cards is proportionally higher in internally decentralised regions; or if technocrats are, overall, very few in number but more often to be encountered in internally centralised regions. The empirical data for cross-sectional analysis is already available.\(^6\)

The study of party organisation, finally, already possesses a well-argued and extensive treatment of candidate selection methods across the globe (Hazan & Rahat 2010). However, the selection process is but one aspect, the other being the resulting sum total of candidates. Because these candidates are what the electorate is ultimately confronted with, candidates
deserve to be the starting point for analytical enquiry as much as obscure and complicated, formally prescribed but empirically different internal party processes.

References


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**Endnotes**

1 While we use „multilevel“ as an umbrella term for federal, regional and devolved political systems, we do not claim that important distinctions between these sub-types vanish.

The total number of official candidates (that is excluding the six cantons with only one seat, where no party lists are filed and hence no official candidates exists) to the NR was 3458, so our sample represents a good 47% (cf. Statistische Angaben zum Wahljahr 2011, at http://www.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/nrw11/list/stat/stat2011.html; last accessed on 6 January 2013). No central registry of candidates to the SR exists as they are organised by the cantons (Mueller and Dardanelli 2012).

The sample is largely representative in terms of the main parties except for the SVP, which with 9.2% is underrepresented.

This classification captures the cantonal-local balance of fiscal, administrative, legal and political power – centralised cantons comprise Geneva, Fribourg, Vaud, Neuchatel, Ticino; balanced cantons Berne, Jura, Basel-City, Basel-Country, Uri, Aargau, Solothurn, Valais, Lucerne, St. Gall, Schaffhausen; and decentralised cantons Schwyz, Nidwalden, Thurgau, Zurich, Appenzell Inner-Rhodes, Obwalden, Glarus, Zug, Grisons, and Appenzell Outer-Rhodes; see Mueller (2012) for details.

See the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS) at http://www.comparativecandidates.org/, last accessed 3 August 2013.