

Whose primaries? Grassroots' views on candidate selection procedures

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Abstract

Opening-up processes of candidate selection is often viewed as a means for political parties to regain legitimacy, and perhaps more crucially, members and voters. Despite a widespread belief that citizens want more democracy, including within parties, little research has questioned what sort of *opening-up* is desired—e.g., open or closed primaries—if at all, and by what type of citizens. Using data of the 2014 PartiRep voter survey in Belgium, we examine the diversity of preferences regarding candidate selection, and the extent to which preferences for open or closed primaries relate to voters' participation in party organisations. Given the diversification of party affiliation types, we operationalise participation through two distinct variables: the formal party membership status of the respondents, and their party activism. We show that both membership and activism influence individual preferences, and that their effects are in fact conditional upon each other. Findings also raise crucial issues regarding the consequences of the multiplication of affiliation modes, the motivations and direction of intra-party reforms, as well as feed the debate on their expected versus genuine consequences.

Keywords

Intra-party democracy

Candidate selection

Public opinion

Belgium

Introduction

The decline in party activism and party membership is a largely acknowledged feature of Western democracies (Katz and Mair 1992; Mair and Van Biezen 2001; Scarrow 2000; Whiteley and Seyd 1998). Over the past decade, many European political parties have implemented reforms aimed to halt this decline, and to encourage participation in party activities. Some parties have even been created with the specific aim of fleshing out involvement in party activities (such as *Podemos* in Spain or the Five-Star Movement in Italy), while others have rejected the party denomination on that ground (*En Marche* in France, etc.). Involvement in political parties nowadays takes a plethora of different forms. Organisational innovations have included the introduction of new, more direct and less demanding forms of affiliation. At the same time, processes of intra-party democratisation have granted—at least formally—a greater say to party members, and eventually to party supporters, in the formulation of party policy as well as in intra-party procedures of leader and candidate selection (Cross and Katz 2013; Gauja 2013, 2015; Pilet and Cross 2013; Sandri et al. 2015; Scarrow 2015).

Internal democratisation processes and the diversification of affiliation options are not independent phenomena (Gauja 2015, 2016; Scarrow 2015). While both seek to set up the new participatory opportunities (Cross et al. 2016; Gauja 2016), they however contribute to blur the distinction between party members and non-members (Bernardi et al. 2017, p. 219; Gauja 2016) and hence to create a more intermittent and undefined membership basis (Carty 2013). Crucially in that regard, extreme types of intra-party democratisation and of new affiliation types—that can go as far as social media affiliates and ‘friends’ (Scarrow 2015, p. 31), by confiscating at least some power from the party and its middle-level elite, may be argued to further contribute to members’ disenfranchisement. The party cartel thesis (Katz and Mair 1995; Katz 2001) precisely rests on the assumption that parties may simply not want their members to be active and rather fancy passive or inactive members (Gauja 2015).

This expected negative consequences also feed in the debate of party linkage function and legitimacy; increased participation is largely recognised to make parties less effective in terms of representation (Rahat and Hazan 2001; Hazan et al. 2008), in part because electorates in primaries are often themselves misrepresentative (as relentlessly underlined by the US literature), but also because the opening-up of candidate selection processes notably lowers party unity and hence threatens party decision-making all together.

Despite these potentially problematic effects, parties and established elites advocate for reforms based on the perceptions that there is a public demand for more participation (Gauja 2012, 2016), and that fostering such participation would hence help them regain legitimacy, attract voters, and recapture members. The assumption that citizens want a greater say in intra-party processes, and how so, however, remains to be proven.

The first aim of this paper is to empirically explore the extent to which citizens support more inclusive processes, and which type of processes, by exploring the preferences of Belgian citizens regarding the way candidates *should be selected*. In that way, the paper provides unique empirical data regarding public support for several types of selection, especially open primaries (candidate selection by voters) and closed primaries (candidate selection by party members). Second, this paper asks *who* supports open or closed primaries, and explores the influence of citizens' relationship to political parties, defined by two intertwined elements: (1) their membership status; and (2) their degree of party activism. We believe that these two elements, despite being largely seen as the two faces of the same coin, are in fact two different options and may relate to different logics. This distinction allows identifying a specific type of citizens, the party supporters, which are not formally linked to a party but still participate in party activities and thus contribute to the party life (Fisher et al. 2014). In that way, the paper attempts to articulate the debates related to the diversification of party affiliation and to the democratisation of intra-party processes, by investigating what do diverse types of party 'affiliates' want in terms of candidate selection.

Using data of the 2014 PartiRep voter survey in Belgium, the paper shows that citizens' views on candidate selection are at least partly determined by their participation in party organisations. Our findings also suggest an equivocal distinction between party members and non-member supporters, and contribute to the literature on the uneasiness of the delineation of party borders. They also raise crucial issues regarding the motivations and direction of intra-party reforms, as well as feed the debate on their expected versus genuine consequences.

The paper is structured as follows: In a first section, we review the existing literature examining party affiliates' attitudes towards intra-party procedures and democracy, and we formulate some expectations regarding the effect of membership and activism on citizens' preferences for closed or open primaries. Second, we present our case study, Belgium. Third, we describe the data and method. Fourth, we expose the analysis and findings, before drawing general conclusions.

Theoretical arguments and expectations

Intra-party democratisation is an issue that has become central to any discussion on party organisations. The normative question of whether need to be more democratic in their internal functioning in order to improve democracy in the political system at large has attracted renewed public and scholarly attention over the past decade (Cross and Katz 2013; Scarrow 2005; Teorell 1999). Clearly, this question has largely revolved around the role of the party grassroots, and the extent to which increased participation is a necessary or sufficient condition thereof. If the problems of representation associated with IPD have well been underlined (Rahat et al. 2008), an issue that remains to be settled is whether intra-party democracy improves the quality of participation (Cross et al. 2016). In other words: does more participation mean better participation?

In the background of this normative debate, descriptive studies have attempted to define and measure intra-party democracy (IPD). IPD, like democracy in general, has appeared to be multi-dimensional (Cross and Katz 2013; Rahat 2009; Rahat et al. 2008; Rahat and Shapira 2017). The main dimension of party decisions generally retained to gauge the level of IPD is inclusiveness—i.e., the involvement of a larger pool of participants, especially delegates, members, and eventually supporters. This dimension is largely recognised as of overwhelming importance when considering potential intra-party reforms, as extreme degrees of inclusiveness—namely, allowing non-member voters to intervene in intra-party affairs—move power *outside* the party, thereby questioning the nature of intra-party democracy, and potentially involving a form of *extra*-party democracy.

Descriptive studies have also examined which specific party structures and practices could be reformed to broaden participation. Three main areas of party life have been explored: party policy formulation and decisions—especially the making of political programmes—and two party ‘politics’ decisions, namely leadership and candidate selection (Cross and Blais 2012; Gauja 2013; Hazan and Rahat 2010; Kenig 2009). Although these processes are arguably equally important in that regard, it is most often candidate selection procedures which have served as a yardstick to assess a party’s degree of IPD. In fact, the question of ‘who’ nominates the candidates is often interpreted as echoing that of ‘who holds power in a given party’ (Ranney 1981; Schattschneider 1942, p. 103). Besides, processes of candidate selection make up straightforward, easily readable and regularly repeated intra-party processes, where policy formulation endeavours are more difficult to trace back and account for, and leader selection processes more infrequent and dispersed over time.

The literature has evidenced many reasons why parties may modify their intra-party processes (apart from legal regulations and requirements)¹. Externally,

popular pressure resulting from ongoing disaffection with political parties has first yielded the idea that parties *should* change to survive, and hence to cure the democratic malaise (Gauja 2012). Internally, party organisations may also reform their internal procedures to alter the internal balance of power to the advantage of specific party actors. As exposed by Katz (2001), party elites may decide to increase the formal power of the party grassroots (top-down process) in order to decrease that of middle-level activists, thereby increasing the autonomy and power of the leader. In this context, identifying support and opposition to change is crucial, and this support or opposition is to be analysed among party actors who ultimately settle on party procedures. The potential disputes over the choice of the selection method itself could be even more important than the choice of candidates per se. In particular, willingness to reform may emanate from the grassroots, who are looking for a greater say in intra-party decision-making, and a greater accountability of the party elites. In sum, different intra-party actors may ask for reforms, because they expect specific effects that should benefit them.

Asking what the grassroots want is crucial when looking at preferences over the organisation of parties, as their opinion will largely determine the retained alternative. Previous studies have precisely aimed at better understanding the opinion of party members towards IPD on specific intra-party processes, mostly open and closed primaries. While some have looked at *support* for IPD (Gauja 2012; Kabasakal 2014; van Holsteyn and Koole 2009), others have questioned the *satisfaction* of party members when intra-party democratisation reforms have been implemented (Bernardi et al. 2017; Sandri and Amjahad 2015). These studies have also tried to put forth potential factors explaining the diversity of opinions among party members (e.g., age, activism, or party specificities).

Examining reforms of candidate selection methods in British and Australian parties, Gauja (2012) has observed that demand for reform towards open primaries has typically come from party elites; in particular, parliamentarians. By contrast, she found that ‘when [open] primaries have been put to party members for consideration, the reception was mixed’ (Gauja 2012, p. 650). Party members would support inclusive procedures, but the ones empowering party members. Using interview data collected in 1997 among current and former local leaders of the six largest parties in Turkey, Kabasakal (2014) shows that 40% of the respondents think that party members should select the party’s candidates in parliamentary elections, while only 19% supported a selection by all voters. In the Netherlands, van Holsteyn and Koole (2009) find that a plurality of members across parties thinks that in a democratic party, the members should make the most important decisions. Interestingly, a majority of members also consider as problematic if non-member supporters can join intra-party discussion on the

same footing as party members. Overall, these studies suggest that party members are overwhelmingly in favour of intra-party processes empowering party members, but are more sceptical of processes open to non-members.

Bernardi et al. (2017) take the case of the Democratic Party (PD) in Italy, which in 2007 adopted open primaries to select the leader and candidates, and examine the opinion and attitudes of members on the use of these open primaries. Interestingly, the authors distinguish between two categories of members: old style (members of the former mass organisations that merged into the PD in 2007) and new style members (which join after the merger, in a newly organised party). Their findings indicate that these two categories have a positive judgment of open primary elections, though new style members are a bit more satisfied. Furthermore, their findings indicate that the degree of activism is inversely correlated with a positive evaluation of open primaries: the more time members spend for the party, the less positive is their evaluation of open primaries (Bernardi et al. 2017, pp. 233–234). As suggested by Bernardi et al. (2017), ‘internal democratisation might have actually stripped activists² of some important responsibilities and this has led to an increase of their frustration and dissatisfaction’ (Bernardi et al. 2017, p. 235).

Hence, these existing studies provide valuable clues regarding party grassroots’ opinion towards IPD and candidate selection: party members do value IPD, though they appear quite reluctant to empower voters (non-members). Besides, their opinion towards IPD might vary according to their status in the organisation (e.g., old style or new style member), and according to their level of activism. They however miss one important point: what is the opinion of non-member activists—those which could actually gain from the opening-up of party organisations towards voters? This issue is particularly important when one considers the recent transformation of party affiliation. In her *multi-speed model*, Scarrow suggests ‘an imperfect overlap between partisan activists and party members’ that blurs the ‘lines of (...)activism, membership and supportership’ (Scarrow 2015, p. 29). Hence, not all activists are party members, while at the same time some formal party members may do little for their party. At election time, the work provided by non-member supporters (those who volunteer without formally joining) may be as crucial for the party as that done by formal members (Scarrow 2015; Webb et al. 2017).

This research offers to examine the preferences of various party affiliates towards the way candidates should be selected, especially closed and open primaries, by distinguishing between two dimensions: formal membership status and activism. Hence, this research allows contrasting the opinion of both voters (*out*) and party members (*in*), whereas previous research has mostly concentrated

on the views of the *in*. In addition, by disentangling the degree of involvement from membership, we are able to go beyond the ‘easy’ distinction between the formal ‘in’ and ‘out’, and consider party activism as a distinct aspect from formal membership status.

Our first set of expectations is based on the idea that the ‘in’ and ‘out’ should have clear preferences. The ‘in’—i.e. current party members—should support closed primaries, whereas the ‘out’, the non-members, are likely to be in favour of open primaries. This expectation is based on a rational or strategic perspective: each category should support the process that would empower them respectively. A question that comes out and go beyond this simplistic differentiation is then what *former* members—i.e. those who have left a party—prefer in terms of candidate selection. As former ‘in’ but current ‘out’, former members represent a specific category of party affiliates. Consequently, we are left with several, potentially contradictory, expectations. We might expect that disaffiliated members’ opinion on intra-party organisational processes might differ from that of current members, precisely because their ‘exit’ might have resulted from their dissatisfaction with party procedures and a lack of internal democracy (Amjahad 2013). Accordingly, former members should support closed primaries. Yet, since they have left the party and are now in the position of non-members, former members might want more inclusive forms of selection to be able to participate from the outside. If that is the case, former members should support open primaries.

A second set of expectations introduces a distinction between active and non-active party affiliates. We argue that active party affiliates are more likely to favour closed primaries than passive respondents, as they would want only the most active individuals to be empowered—and closed primaries guarantee that those who participate have a minimum degree of involvement in the party. By contrast, passive respondents would be more supportive of open primaries, which require a lower degree of involvement.

Third, we argue that given the above-mentioned overlapping and contrasted expectations, activism and formal membership should be analysed in interaction, in order to compare active and passive respondents in each category of affiliates. This is especially crucial in the case of non-members. On the one hand, we can expect active non-members (i.e. supporters) to be more likely to support open primaries than passive non-members, as they would be more willing to be given the opportunity to participate in intra-party decision-making. On the other hand, a more psycho-sociological perspective would lead us to different expectations. Non-member activists would in fact highly value activism, and would consider that only those involved should be given power over political processes such as

candidate selection. In that perspective, we should expect that active non-member would prefer to see the most active to be empowered, and hence, would rather support closed primaries.

Candidate selection in Belgium: a ‘guided’ democracy?

While it is often argued that the control of the selection process is paramount to the control of who gets elected, this is all the more true in Belgium. In this country, despite the flexible-lists system, the effects of preference voting on the allocation of seats among candidates remain marginal. What matters most to gain access to the federal and regional parliaments is hence the composition of the lists, making it a major locus of power within parties. The current simultaneity of elections further increases this focus.

Belgium is further an interesting case when it comes to (intra-party) democratic reforms. At the system-level, Belgium has known similar trends as other Western countries, among which a (comparatively modest) decline in party membership figures (Van Biezen et al. 2012; Van Haute et al. 2013), as well as growing electoral volatility (Dassonneville et al. 2014) and disaffection with political institutions and parties in particular (Henry et al. 2015). But Belgium is also a singular case, often described as *pillarized* and *partitocratic* (Brans et al. 2009; Deschouwer 2009). The current political landscape includes three party families built around the socio-economic and religious cleavages, and then divided along the linguistic cleavage (between Dutch- and French-speaking): the Christian Democrats (CD&V and cdH), the Socialists (sp.a and PS) and the Liberals (Open VLD and MR). Other parties have emerged around ‘new values’: the Greens (Groen and Ecolo); and the Radical Right (VB and FN). Regionalist parties have known different electoral fortunes: while the N-VA became the first party in the Flemish community in 2014, DéFI is implanted mostly in Brussels. Party elites are powerful actors, and there exist few alternatives to party government that would allow direct citizens’ participation in the policy-making process. For instance, the Constitution does not provide for the organisation of national referendums, although referendums are possible at the local level (Scarrow 2001).

At the party-level too, Belgian parties are still very much in control. Unlike other countries, there is no regulation on how parties organise in the constitution or a specific party law (Pilet et al. 2009, 2015; Venice Commission 2008). Apart for some candidacy requirement (including gender quotas) in the candidate selection process, most of the power lies in the parties’ hands, and they design their own rules regarding internal decision-making.

Regarding leadership selection, today, after a wave of reforms, most Belgian parties apply the one member one vote system (OMOV) (Pilet and Wauters 2014; Wauters et al. 2015). Yet, the requirements for candidacy have been tightened over the years, and in most parties, competition is quite limited during leadership contests. In addition, granting members a say in the selection of Belgian party leaders has not been found to lead to an increase in party membership (such as in Canada, see Carty 2013).

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Regarding candidate selection, there is much more variance and much less transparency in the way Belgian parties conduct their nominations for federal legislative elections. Candidate selection is often a complex process, with a multiplicity of selectorates involved (see Table 1).

	Exclusive ←			→	Incl
	Leaders	Delegates	Members		Vot
DéFI, MR, N-VA, sp.a, VB					
cdH					
CD&V, Ecolo, Groen, PS					
OpenVLD					

Table 1

Typology of candidate selection methods for the Chamber of Representatives in Belgian parties (based on Vandeleene et al. 2013)

Belgian parties do have a tradition of membership involvement in candidate selection processes (De Winter 1988), although in practice party members rarely reject or modify the model list (Vandeleene and Winter 2013; Wauters 2009, p. 21). Some parties have progressively implemented a more active involvement of their members, especially under the stimulus of the Greens and the Flemish Liberals (Deschouwer 1994; van Haute and Pilet 2007). However, in most parties, rules still ensure that the party leadership and/or party delegates control the drafting of electoral lists. Therefore, candidate selection procedures in most Belgian parties follow a form of ‘guided democracy’ (Fiers and Pilet 2006). Delegation is still the dominant model of intra-party democracy, although more direct and inclusive forms have emerged.

In sum, no Belgian parties have implemented voters' primaries to select their candidates (nor their leader). By contrast to parties in other contexts (e.g. Labour Party in the UK and in Australia, see Gauja 2012), voting rights are still strictly speaking the preserve of formal fee-paying members. Participation of non-members or supporters is encouraged in party activities (e.g. local meeting, social events), and often supporters may receive the same information as formal members (newsletter, invitations to events). Some parties are formally open to supporters (*sympathisants*): for instance, the Greens (Ecolo) recognise the existence of a supporter category, which participates in the party discussion, receive materials, go to meetings, but is not granted with formal rights to vote. The same applies to the Liberals (MR), where there is little distinction between a member and a supporter except for voting rights. Thus, despite a general discourse pledging for increasing citizens' involvement in decision-making and re-enchanting the relationship between citizens and institutions, there has been only few attempts or arguments in favour of implementing open primaries in Belgian parties. In the absence of a willingness of party elites to implement change, there is hence a need to grasp public opinion, and specifically that of party members, on that issue.

Data, method and measurement

This article employs data from the first wave of the PartiRep Election Study 2014, which provides a panel sample of 1008 Flemish and 1011 Walloon voters (total N = 2019). Interviews in this first wave were conducted face-to-face in the two month-period before the regional, federal and European elections that took place on the same day, the 25th of May 2014. To ensure representativeness, we applied demographic weights that adjust the sample for gender, age, level of education, and region. Besides, we cluster the data into regions (Wallonia and Flanders), as party systems in Belgium have become quite autonomous (Brack and Pilet 2010), and provide different contexts.

Measuring support for closed and open primaries

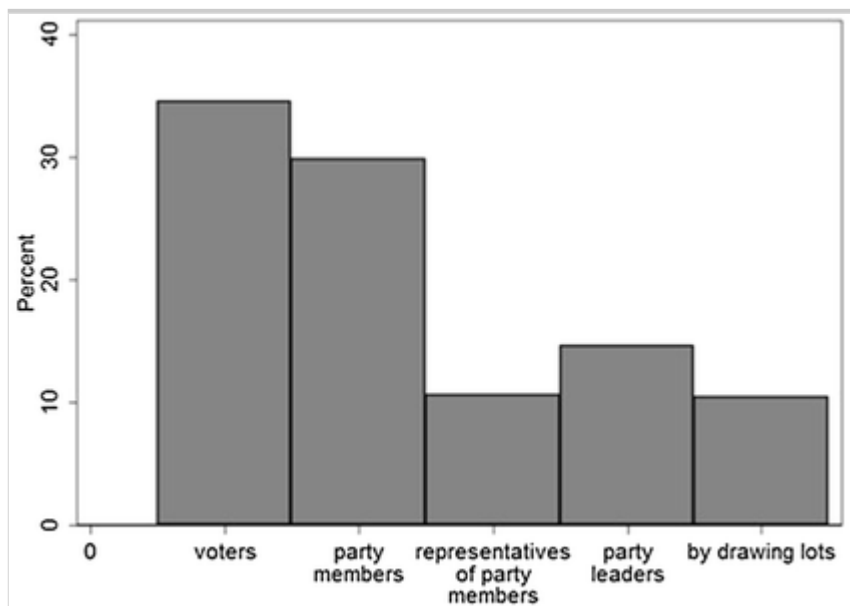
For the measurement of our dependent variable, we use the question: 'Before the elections, candidate lists for each party have to be drafted. In your opinion, who should determine who should be on the list?' The possible answer categories were (1) all voters, (2) party members, (3) representatives of party members, (4) party leaders at the provincial level, (5) party leaders at the national level and (6) by means of a lottery among the interested. Given the complexity of candidate selection processes, it is reasonable to assume that most voters are unaware of the way candidates are selected in the various Belgian parties and are hence not influenced in their response. In a study conducted among Belgian voters, Wauters

(2009, pp. 14–15) showed that they tend to overestimate the degree of intra-party democracy. Yet, this does not imply that voters have no opinion on how candidates *should be* selected. Quite to the contrary, the level of no response obtained to this question is very low: only 32 respondents (1.6%).

In the analysis, we focus on the first two categories of responses, which grasp respondents' preference for open or closed primaries, and which are the ones which received the highest support. In Fig. 1, we see that a third of the respondents consider that voters should be entitled to choose who is going to stand on the list, and another third thinks that party members should be the main selectorate. Inclusive procedures are thus favoured by citizens, as assumed by the literature and by established elites pledging for reform, but, there is no overwhelming support for empowering extra-party actors (open primaries).

Fig. 1

Preferences on candidate selection procedures—Frequency distribution. *Source* PartiRep 2014 Election Study. *N* = 1987, Missing = 32. *Note* The answer categories 'party leaders at the provincial level' and 'party leaders at the national level' were recoded into one category which captures respondents who prefer party leader(s) to select candidates



As we seek to explain what determines the preferences for open and closed primaries, we use binary logistic models³ that contrast respondents' preferences for open or closed primaries with all other possibilities, except the drawing lots category. Indeed, 'drawing lots' seems quite difficult to interpret in terms of inclusivity of the selectorate: it does not increase the size of the selectorate, nor does it extend the participation dimension of the selection process. We have

therefore left out from the sample the 208 respondents who choose the ‘drawing lots’ category⁴.

Party membership and activism: measurement and interaction

We use a question that asked respondents whether they are member of a political party or whether they had been a party member before, and how actively they were involved. The question’s wording⁵ implies that the activism level of the respondents is based on their self-perception, not on reported activities. The questionnaire identifies six categories of party *affiliates*, along two dimensions (see Table 2): first, the party membership status (current member, former member, never been/non-member); second, an activism dimension (if the respondent is or was a member, whether s/he was an active or a passive member; and if s/he has never been a party whether, whether or not s/he has participated in party activities).

Table 2

Frequency distribution—categories of voters and party affiliates

	Party activism		
	Passive	Active	Total
Non-member			
N	1605	139	1744
%	(92.03)	(7.97)	(100)
Former member			
N	85	53	138
%	(61.59)	(38.41)	(100)
Current member			
N	87	48	135
%	(64.44)	(35.56)	(100)
Total			
N	1777	240	2017
%	(88.10)	(11.90)	(100)
<i>Source</i> PartiRep 2014 Election Study			

Regarding the membership variable, non-members constitute clearly the largest category, capturing about 86.5% of the respondents, whereas 6.7% of the respondents are current members and 6.8% are former party members. According to recent studies, the percentage of voters registered as party members for Belgium scored 5.2 in 2006 (Delwit 2011) and 5.5 in 2008 (Van Biezen et al. 2012). The percentages found in the survey might therefore be somewhat of an over-estimation, or they might alternatively be the result of a contextual effect, with more voters having joined parties during the election year. The percentage of former members in the survey also seems coherent with what Whiteley (2011) has found: in his study of party membership in 36 countries, he shows that the percentage of current members is roughly equivalent to the percentage of former members, much like we do.

Looking at the ‘activism’ dimension, on the whole, about 12% of the respondents are classified in the active category. 36% of current members describe themselves as active members; 38% of former members said they were rather active members. A majority of both former and current members thus describe themselves as rather passive. These percentages are in line with existing party membership studies, which have highlighted that active members constitute a minority in most parties (Heidar 1994; Scarrow 2000, p. 95; van Haute and Gauja 2015; Whiteley and Seyd 1998, p. 115). Interestingly, among the non-member category, 8% declared they have participated in party activities (N = 139), without formally adhering to any party organisation. We consider this category as a type of party *supporters*: voters who participate in party activities without being formally enrolled.

It should be noted that the relatively low level of party membership implies that some of the categories we identify (see Table 2) contain a limited number of respondents (around 50 respondents for the active former and current members). This could partly affect the validity of our findings, which should further be tested based on a larger sample of respondents.

Control variables⁶

First, the models control for the effect of socio-demographic variables (age, gender and education). Second, the models control for political attitudes (interest in politics, trust in parties and ideological placement). Education is coded into three broad categories, capturing respondents with (1) no formal or primary education, (2) secondary education and (3) tertiary education. As most people have accomplished secondary education, we use it as the reference category. Interest in politics is measured on a 0–10 scale, where 0 accounts for ‘no interested at all’ and 10 accounts for ‘very interested’. Trust in parties is also

measured on a 0–10 scale, where 0 stands for ‘no trust at all’ and 10 for ‘high trust’⁷. Logically, a high trust in parties should be related to support for closed primaries, while a low trust in parties should be related to support for opening-up the selection process to non-party actors (voters). Respondents’ self-placement is measured on a 0–10 left–right scale (0 = left; 10 = right). Note that correlation between all these predictors is limited.

It should be noted that these characteristics greatly vary across the independent variables, party activism and membership status. As already highlighted in membership studies (van Haute and Gauja 2015), party members are unrepresentative of the general electorate in terms of age, gender and education. This is confirmed in our data, while some differences also appear between active and non-active respondents, across membership status. For instance, supporters (active non-members) appear significantly more male, better educated and more interested than voters (passive non-members)⁸.

Finally, the models include party-level controls. Information on which parties respondents are or were members of is unavailable, but we can control for voting intention. Even for those with little to no affiliation to a party, support for a given party may indeed suggest an agreement with its organisation or way of doing things. Given the very high number of parties in Belgium (in the survey, respondents could pick more than 16 parties, in addition to ‘blank vote’, ‘will not vote’, ‘prefer not to say’, and ‘other party’), we include dummies for the main parties: N-VA, CD&V, Open VLD, sp.a and Groen in Flanders; PS, MR, Ecolo and cdH in Wallonia.

The impact of activism and membership status on support for open and closed primaries

Tables 3 and 4 test the effect of activism and party membership on citizens’ preferences towards the way parties should select their candidates. The reported coefficients are the odds ratio: a value below 1 indicates that the variable decreases the probability to support the dependent variable (negative effect), a value above 1 indicates an increase (positive effect). Model 1 introduces the two sets of factors independently; Model 2 tests their interaction; and Model 3 adds the control variables to this interaction effect. Finally, Model 4 introduces the region of the respondent as a control instead of party dummies, for reasons explained later. In Models 2, 3 and 4, the effect of activism is thus observed as the variable party membership is set at 0 (non-member); the effect of membership is observed as activism is set at 0 (passive), and the interaction variables test the effect of these two variables combined (activism set at 1, and membership set at 1 and 2). In other words, in Models 2, 3 and 4, the effect of

‘activism’ is in fact the effect of the supporter category (active non-member), and the effect of former and current member should be read as the effect of former and current *passive* members. Figures 2 and 3, which are based on the final models of each table, further help to interpret these interaction effects in terms of predicted probabilities.

Table 3

The impact of membership and activism on support for open primaries—logistic regression (odds ratio)

Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	CS by voters	CS by voters	CS by voters	CS by voters
CS by voters				
Passive	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)
Active	0.60 (0.22)	0.53** (0.13)	0.76 (0.16)	0.78 (0.18)
Non-member	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)
Former member	0.39** (0.12)	0.28** (0.11)	0.33** (0.13)	0.36** (0.13)
Current member	0.64 (0.18)	0.66 (0.29)	0.99 (0.47)	0.98 (0.42)
Passive # no member		1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)
Passive # former member		1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)
Passive # current member		1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)
Active # no member		1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)	1.00 (.)
Active # former member		2.74***	2.44***	2.39***
Note: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses				
+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$				

Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	CS by voters	CS by voters	CS by voters	CS by voters
		(0.70)	(0.03)	(0.11)
Active # current member		0.96	1.11	1.05
Control variables		(0.65)	(0.62)	(0.47)
Age			0.99***	0.99***
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Women			1.42***	1.35***
			(0.02)	(0.04)
Secondary educ.			1.00	1.00
			(.)	(.)
No or primary educ.			1.13	1.12
			(0.23)	(0.22)
Tertiary/university educ.			0.59***	0.61***
			(0.07)	(0.06)
Trust in parties			0.81***	0.80***
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Political interest			0.92+	0.92*
			(0.04)	(0.03)
LR self-placement			0.98	0.99
			(0.06)	(0.05)
Groen			0.39**	
			(0.12)	
Open VLD			0.62***	
			(0.09)	
CD&V			0.59***	
			(0.09)	
N-VA			0.61***	

Note: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	CS by voters	CS by voters	CS by voters	CS by voters
			(0.09)	
sp.a			0.59*	
			(0.14)	
Ecolo			0.82	
			(0.16)	
MR			1.05	
			(0.08)	
PS			0.91	
			(0.26)	
cdH			0.62***	
			(0.07)	
Wallonia (ref. Flanders)				1.29***
				(0.06)
Observations	1777	1777	1659	1734
Adjusted R^2	0.013	0.013	0.075	0.070
Pseudo R^2	0.017	0.018	0.095	0.082
Note: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses				
+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$				

Table 4

The impact of membership and activism on support for closed primaries—Logistic regression (odds ratio)

Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	CS by members	CS by members	CS by members	CS by members
CS by members				
Passive	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Note: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses				
+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$				

Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	CS by members	CS by members	CS by members	CS by members
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Active	1.59*	1.88+	1.37	1.38
	(0.29)	(0.67)	(0.40)	(0.46)
Non-member	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Former member	1.39***	1.55	1.26	1.25
	(0.08)	(0.51)	(0.54)	(0.53)
Current member	1.19	1.40*	1.17	1.15
	(0.27)	(0.22)	(0.43)	(0.35)
Passive # no member		1.00	1.00	1.00
		(.)	(.)	(.)
Passive # former member		1.00	1.00	1.00
		(.)	(.)	(.)
Passive # current member		1.00	1.00	1.00
		(.)	(.)	(.)
Active # no member		1.00	1.00	1.00
		(.)	(.)	(.)
Active # former member		0.66	0.91	0.83
		(0.54)	(0.94)	(0.79)
Active # current member		0.55+	0.51*	0.52
Control variables		(0.18)	(0.17)	(0.23)
Age			1.00+	1.00***
			(0.00)	(0.00)
Women			0.94	0.96
			(0.15)	(0.16)
Secondary educ.			1.00	1.00

Note: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	CS by members	CS by members	CS by members	CS by members
			(.)	(.)
No or primary educ.			0.75	0.80
			(0.24)	(0.29)
Tertiary/university educ.			1.20*	1.25***
			(0.10)	(0.07)
Trust in parties			1.06	1.05
			(0.06)	(0.05)
Political interest			1.13*	1.13*
			(0.07)	(0.05)
LR self-placement			0.97	0.98
			(0.04)	(0.03)
Groen			1.44	
			(0.61)	
OpenVLD			0.71	
			(0.26)	
CD&V			0.82	
			(0.28)	
N-VA			1.14	
			(0.36)	
sp.a			1.05	
			(0.40)	
Ecolo			1.22	
			(0.33)	
MR			0.79	
			(0.17)	
PS			0.80	

Note: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

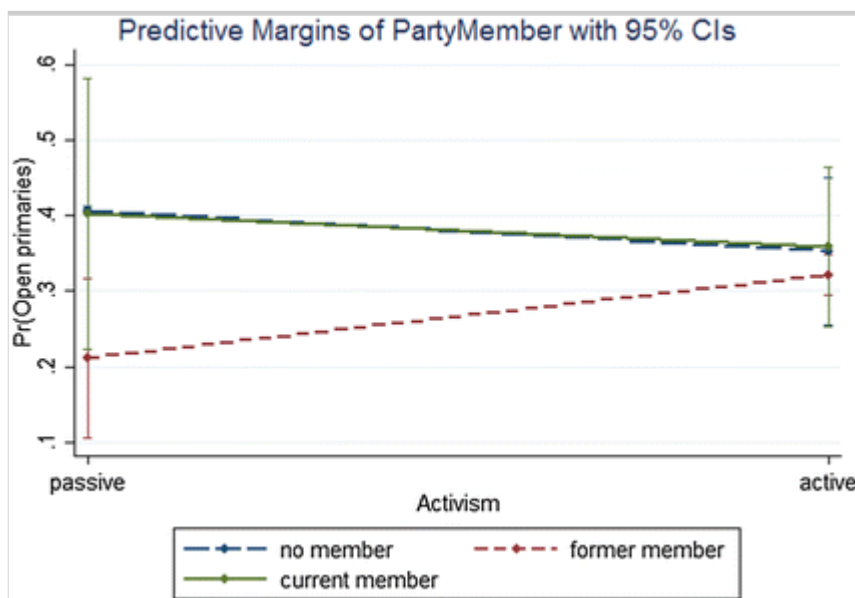
Independent variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	CS by members	CS by members	CS by members	CS by members
			(0.33)	
cdH			1.22	
			(0.45)	
Wallonia (ref. Flanders)				1.07***
				(0.01)
Observations	1777	1777	1659	1734
Adjusted R^2	0.003	0.003	0.022	0.022
Pseudo R^2	0.007	0.008	0.043	0.035

Note: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

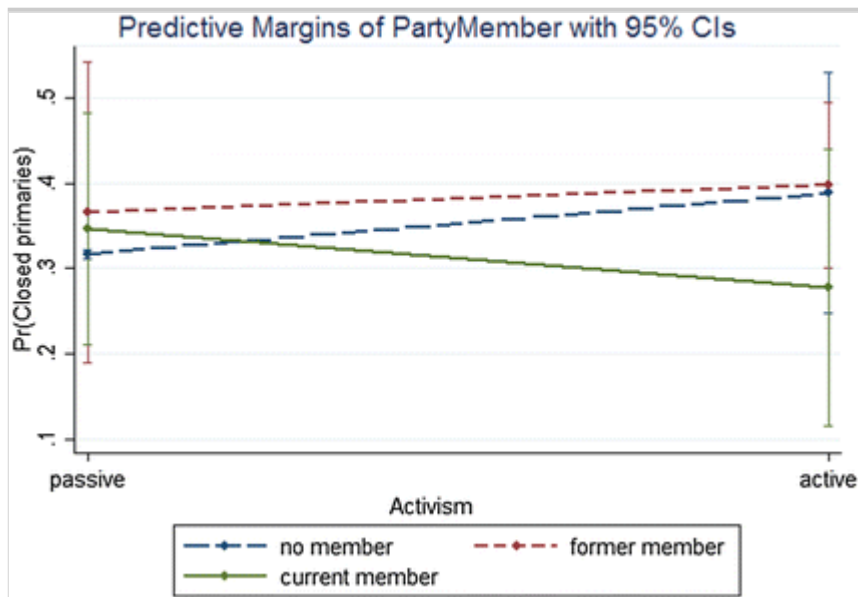
+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Fig. 2

Predictive margins—open primaries (all other variables at their means)

**Fig. 3**

Predictive margins—closed primaries (all other variables at their means)



Regarding our first set of expectations which delineated between the ‘in’ and ‘out’ circles of the party, findings indicate that former members appear significantly less likely than non-members to support open primaries (Table 3, Model 1), and significantly more likely to favour closed primaries (Table 4, Model 1). Current members display similar patterns, although the coefficients are not statistically significant. Thus, despite being themselves ‘out’ of the party, former members seem to value intra-party processes that would give (current) members the final word, and, more crucially, even if these processes would formally exclude them. Regarding the effect of the second independent variable, party activism, Model 1 in Table 4 indicates that it increases the probability to prefer closed primaries; thus lending some support to the idea that those who are active value intra-party processes that have a certain degree of selectiveness. Hence, both membership status and activism matter: the (former) ‘in’ are less likely than the ‘out’ to prefer open primaries, and active respondents are more likely to prefer closed primaries over other selection methods⁹. When running the models with each independent variable separately (not displayed), we see that activism better predicts preference for closed primaries (McFadden’s adjusted $R^2 = 0.006$) than the membership status does (0.002), while the membership status better predicts preference for open primaries (0.007) than activism does (0.004).

While introducing the interaction effect, Model 2 indicates that activism has a different impact depending on membership status (or vice versa). Non-members who are active—i.e. supporters—are less likely to prefer a candidate selection process where voters decide (Table 3; Fig. 2), even if paradoxically such process would allow them to participate. Active non-members (supporters) are in fact more likely than passive ones (voters) to support closed primaries (Table 4; Fig. 3), i.e. a process that would not grant them a say. We may conclude that psycho-sociological more than rational motivations might be at play here:

supporters value activism, and would still prefer to see the most active being empowered.

By contrast, for former members, their past activism significantly increases their probability to prefer a candidate selection by voters. As far as current members are concerned, current passive members are significantly more likely to support closed primaries, by contrast to current active members who are less likely to do so. Previous analyses (not displayed here) have shown that active current members are instead more supportive than the other categories of affiliates¹⁰ of a selection by party delegates. This seems quite logical, and in line with the argument that the ‘active’ wants ‘the most active’ to be empowered: active current members do probably already participate in the party organisation as middle-level elites (or aspire to do so) and prefer these very active members to be empowered.

Once control variables are introduced, many of these relationships lose their statistical significance. This is not surprising given the significant differences in the profile of the different categories of voters and party affiliates (see above). Interestingly, the significant relationships which hold mostly concern former members: as shown in Fig. 2, former passive members have a lower probability to favour open primaries ($p = 0.21$), compared to other categories (p between 0.3 and 0.4)¹¹. These findings are quite relevant to the field of party membership decline, and bring interesting insight especially to the phenomenon of disaffiliation. Former members, regardless of whether they were active or not, show similar probabilities to favour a selection by members (around 0.37–0.40). But depending on their degree of activism, former party members differ as regards their preferences for opening-up the party toward the ‘outside world’ of supporters. By extrapolating these results, we could postulate that former active members are quite critical of a lack of intra-party democracy or at least critical of an excessive power given to the leader, while former passive members would rather appear critical of an *extra*-party democratisation that deprives members of its key prerogative(s). In other words, intra-party reforms that tend to include voters would please only a part of former members, the most active ones. Besides, opening-up the party is unlikely to re-attract former members, as open processes essentially blur the distinction between supporters and formal members in terms of (voting) rights, and thus make party membership less attractive.

Another interesting pattern is visible on the graphs: current members and non-members have similar probabilities on the two graphs; except that current active members have a lower probability to prefer closed primaries ($p = 0.28$)—as mentioned above, by contrast to other categories, they are more likely to prefer a selection by delegates. Passive non-members and passive current members

appear as the two categories which are the most in favour of open primaries ($p = 0.40$), and open primaries appear as their most preferred selection method. Problematically, given their passivity, there is no guarantee that these categories of affiliates would truly participate if they had the opportunity to do so; except if they perceive open primaries ‘as a lighter way of participating in party life’ (Bernardi et al. 2017, p. 235). Interestingly as well, closed primaries appear as the preferred selection method of former active members, former passive members and active non-members (supporters) (respectively, 0.40, 0.37 and 0.39); although these categories are formally ‘out’ of the party and would have no voting right in such process. These results underline the ongoing primacy of the intra-party solutions, even for those who would not benefit from it.

Finally, regarding the effect of control variables, education and trust in parties appear as relevant factors predicting support for intra-party versus extra-party actors, which can be related to the disaffection thesis (see Close et al. 2017). Political interest increases the probability to prefer closed primaries, but decreases the probability to prefer open primaries. Regarding party-level controls (Model 3), significant variations are in fact related to regional differences, with voters of traditional Flemish parties being significantly less supportive of party primaries (though this is also true for voters of the French-speaking cdH). Hence, overall there is no clear evidence of a ‘party support effect’, but rather of a regional difference. This is further illustrated in Model 4, which introduces region as a dummy and shows that Walloon voters are more supportive of both open and closed primaries than Flemish are.

Conclusion

Over the past decades, traditional political parties have implemented reforms aiming to encourage participation in party activities, in the form of more open or inclusive intra-party processes of party policy formulation or selection of party personnel. New parties or movements have also been created precisely upon this ‘opening’ philosophy, and have tried to go beyond the traditional party model. Along these transformations, and partly as a result, party affiliation modes have considerably changed, and the distinction between the ‘in’ (party members) and ‘out’ (non-affiliated supporters) has become more blurred.

By examining what different categories of party affiliates want in terms of candidate selection processes, this research contributes to both the literature on intra-party democratisation and that on party membership and its transformations. While reforms towards more intra-party democracy are usually implemented and predicated upon the perceptions of a general public demand and approval, this research has allowed examining (1) the extent to which

citizens in Belgium support inclusive candidate selection methods; (2) the extent to which they favour open primaries (involving all voters) or closed primaries (involving all party members); (3) the extent to which citizens' preferences for open or closed primaries are related to their membership status, their level of party activism, and to the interaction between these two factors.

The findings indicate that these two dimensions of party affiliation affect citizens' preferences for open or closed primaries, and that the distinction between the active and passive respondents matter as much as the distinction between the 'in' and 'out' of the party. Opening-up the party, and the extent of this opening-up (the participation of all members or of all voters), would please certain categories of affiliates while creating dissatisfaction with others.

Depending on *who* the party aims to (re)engage, different reforms should be envisaged. Implementing open primaries does not appear to meet the desires of all former members, and does not appear as a good way to-engage them in the party, since open processes would make party membership less attractive. In a similar way, closed-primaries appear as the most preferred selection method of non-member supporters, despite the fact that closed primaries would exclude these non-affiliated members from the process. Open primaries would be welcomed by current and non-members, especially the more passive ones—though their passivity offers not guarantee that they will actually participate in these processes. If closed primaries are supported by most categories, active current members—those who constitute the core of the party organisation—appear as those mostly attached to a selection that remains in the hand of the party delegates.

Reforming intra-party processes constitute a real challenge (Gauja 2016), and the reasons motivating the sense of reforms should be re-appraised in light of these findings. As stated by Sanches et al. (2017) 'democratising reforms may be a double-edged sword by attracting members who value this kind of change but at the same time fostering critical appraisals' (Sanches et al. 2017).

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Appendix

See Table 5.

Table 5

Robustness checks: the impact of membership and activism on support for open or closed primaries versus all other categories (including ‘drawing lots’ as zero)—Logistic regression (odds ratio)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	CS voters versus all	CS voters versus all	CS voters versus all	CS members versus all	CS members versus all	CS members versus all
<i>Main</i>						
Passive	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Active	0.63**	0.84	0.85	2.11+	1.46	1.48
	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.84)	(0.51)	(0.56)
Non-member	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Former member	0.30*	0.36*	0.39*	1.55	1.30	1.30
	(0.15)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.64)	(0.60)	(0.59)
Current member	0.80	1.11	1.10	1.63***	1.32	1.29
	(0.41)	(0.57)	(0.51)	(0.15)	(0.39)	(0.30)
Passive # no member	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Passive # former member	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
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	CS voters versus all	CS voters versus all	CS voters versus all	CS members versus all	CS members versus all	CS members versus all
Passive # current member	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Active # no member	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)	(.)
Active # former member	2.29**	1.82***	1.88***	0.58	0.81	0.75
	(0.66)	(0.02)	(0.21)	(0.46)	(0.80)	(0.69)
Active # current member	0.79	0.90	0.86	0.46*	0.45*	0.45+
	(0.56)	(0.56)	(0.46)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.21)
Age		0.99*	0.99*		1.00+	1.00***
		(0.00)	(0.00)		(0.00)	(0.00)
Women		1.26***	1.20***		0.86	0.87
		(0.03)	(0.03)		(0.15)	(0.17)
Secondary educ.		1.00	1.00		1.00	1.00
		(.)	(.)		(.)	(.)
No or primary educ.		1.03	1.03		0.70	0.75
		(0.18)	(0.18)		(0.24)	(0.27)
Tertiary/university educ.		0.67*	0.68**		1.24***	1.29***
		(0.11)	(0.10)		(0.06)	(0.02)
Trust in parties		0.83***	0.82***		1.06	1.05
		(0.02)	(0.02)		(0.07)	(0.05)
Political interest		0.95	0.94*		1.13*	1.13**
		(0.04)	(0.03)		(0.06)	(0.04)

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6)

	CS voters versus all	CS voters versus all	CS voters versus all	CS members versus all	CS members versus all	CS members versus all
Left–right self- placement		0.97	0.98		0.97	0.97
		(0.06)	(0.05)		(0.04)	(0.03)
Wallonia			1.19**			1.03***
			(0.08)			(0.00)
Groen		0.43***			1.46	
		(0.09)			(0.63)	
OpenVLD		0.69***			0.77	
		(0.03)			(0.29)	
CDV		0.60***			0.81	
		(0.03)			(0.29)	
NVA		0.67***			1.16	
		(0.05)			(0.39)	
SPA		0.68*			1.08	
		(0.11)			(0.43)	
Ecolo		0.79*			1.19	
		(0.08)			(0.35)	
MR		1.06			0.79	
		(0.04)			(0.18)	
PS		0.85			0.77	
		(0.17)			(0.33)	
CDH		0.67***			1.27	
		(0.02)			(0.48)	
Observations	1985	1843	1932	1985	1843	1932
Adjusted R^2	0.009	0.047	0.043	0.005	0.031	0.031
Pseudo R^2	0.013	0.066	0.054	0.009	0.051	0.043
Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses						
+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$						

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¹ See Müller and Sieberer (2006); van Biezen and Piccio (2013).

² Note that in the case of Bernardi et al. (2017), ‘activists’ should be understood as active party members.

³ We have nevertheless cross-checked the robustness of our findings using multinomial modelling. We use binomial modelling for two reasons. First, we think it makes more sense to examine each category in comparison to all others: it reflects in a closer way how respondents had to give their preferences. Second, multinomial modelling with all the five categories of answers implied a dependent variable with too many combinations of selection choices, which made it difficult to interpret the results.

⁴ We also tested the models by considering ‘drawing lots’ as zero on our scale. Results (see Appendix) were highly similar than when excluding this category. Besides, we also computed a logit model with ‘support for candidate selection by drawing lots’ as the dependent variable, and found that more active voters (supporters) were significantly less likely to support drawing lots. The McFadden’s adjusted r^2 scored at 0.045.

⁵ ‘Political parties are central actors in politics. Can you indicate for each of the items below which one relates to you? (1) I am currently an active member of a political party; (2) I am currently a member but I am not active; (3) In the past, I have been an active member; (4) In the past, I have been a member but I wasn’t active; (5) I have never been a member but I have participated in party activities; (6) I have never been a member and I have never been related to any political party’.

⁶ Close et al. (2017) test the effect of other variables on Belgian citizens’ preferences towards candidate selection, such as political efficacy and party identification. In this research, we restrict

the number of control variables for reason of clarity, but also because political efficacy is significantly correlated with political interest and education.

⁷ Note that this variable is significantly correlated with ‘satisfaction with democracy’ (Pearson’s coefficient = 0.4, p value 0.000).

⁸ Cross-tabs available on demand.

⁹ Similar results were found using multinomial modelling (comparing preference for closed primaries over open primaries).

¹⁰ Around a quarter of the active current members prefer a selection by delegates, compared to 10 percent of the respondents on average.

¹¹ Previous analyses show in fact that former passive members are significantly more likely than other categories to prefer a selection by the leader ($p = 0.3$ instead of 0.13 on average).