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Ulrik Kjaer & Mona Lena Krook

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DIALOGUE: STILL NOT THERE: CONTINUED CHALLENGES TO
WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION



The blame game: analyzing gender bias in Danish local elections

Ulrik Kjaer ^a and Mona Lena Krook ^b

^aDepartment of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark Odense M, Denmark; ^bDepartment of Political Science, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

ABSTRACT

Diagnosing women's under-representation in electoral politics often involves a "blame game," seeking to identify the primary factor responsible for depressing the share of women among candidates as well as elected officials. The Danish electoral system – in which parties present ordered lists of candidates but voters have the option to cast preference votes that can rearrange the list order – provides an opportunity to assess the relative role of elite versus voter bias in shaping women's electoral fortunes. Using data from local elections in 2009, we find greater evidence for elite bias against women. We also observe, however, that voters do not widely exploit their preference votes. In an original post-election survey, we discover that "candidate gender" is less important for male and female voters than a host of other characteristics when deciding for which candidate to cast a preference vote.

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Women have made major gains in political representation around the world in recent decades, but still constitute a minority of elected officials (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018). As put in the introduction to this *Dialogue*, women are "still not there." Although some scholars argue that women's under-representation is due to a low supply of women coming forward (Lawless and Fox 2005), a growing consensus in research points to weak demand for female candidates (Krook 2010). On the demand side, however, the relative role of elite versus voter bias in shaping women's electoral fortunes continues to be debated, generating a "blame game" attributing women's under-representation to nomination processes inside political parties versus decisions made by voters themselves during elections.

In this article, we shed new light on these dynamics using original data from local elections in Denmark in 2009. Historically high levels of women's political representation in Denmark might generate expectations that gender bias would be minimal to non-existent, making its continued presence notable. At the same time, the design of the Danish electoral system – based on open-list proportional representation (PR) – provides a privileged vantage point for assessing elite versus voter bias. Parties present ordered lists of candidates, ranking these individuals in terms of priority for election. However, voters have

the option to cast preference votes that have the power to rearrange the list order, affecting which candidates are elected.

Although studies of other countries with open-list PR have explored these questions, our analysis utilizes data from local rather than national elections, dramatically expanding the number of observations. The richness of the Danish data also enables us to enhance the robustness of the empirical findings in a second key way by including information on incumbency status. While incumbency is often seen as a key explanatory variable in political recruitment (Schwindt-Bayer 2005), it is rarely included in studies of gender and electoral bias due to lack of data – despite potentially influencing the conclusions drawn (see however Scott et al. in this issue). Finally, we improve upon the prevailing approach of using public opinion polls to extrapolate voter attitudes with a post-election survey asking voters about the gender of the candidates they voted for and their motivations for casting preferential votes.

Our results reveal several interesting – and unexpected – patterns. First, although our initial analyses replicate the finding that parties discriminate negatively against female candidates, while voters discriminate positively, this pattern changes once we control for incumbency. We find that party nominators also favor female candidates, but that the magnitude of this effect is reduced by the fact that they discriminate even more positively towards incumbents, many of which are men.

Second, voters do not widely exploit the opportunity to cast preference votes for female candidates, despite the potential this has to substantially increase the numbers of women elected. Third, this intuition is borne out by the evidence from the post-election survey, in which voters – male and female – emphasize a long list of other characteristics motivating their choice of candidates. Taken together, these results lend nuance to the assumptions behind the “blame game,” indicating that voters are more positively inclined towards female candidates than are party elites. However, the effects of candidate gender *per se* are limited in both cases: party recruiters mainly express an incumbency bias, rather than a gender bias, while voters do not significantly prioritize candidate gender in their vote choices.

Analyzing elite versus voter bias

Norris and Lovenduski (1995) theorize two forms of discrimination against women in candidate selection. Direct discrimination occurs when aspirants are judged by party selectors on the basis of characteristics associated with their group (*elite bias*). Imputed discrimination is present when selectors overlook aspirants from a certain group based on fears that the party might lose votes by nominating such candidates (*voter bias*). Both processes systematically disadvantage members of traditional under-represented groups, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, and working-class people, reinforcing their political marginalization.

New research employs a host of methodological strategies to parse out these effects using comparative as well as single-country data. Studies emphasizing elite bias attribute women’s disadvantage to the perceptions and practices of party elites responsible for political recruitment. Work on voter bias measures the presence and impact of prejudice and its negative impact on female candidates. Seeking to adjudicate between these accounts, recent studies exploit aspects of electoral system design to compare elite and voter

behavior in determining election outcomes. The overwhelming conclusion is that party and not voter discrimination plays the main role in sustaining women's under-representation.

Elite bias: arguments and evidence

Discrimination occurs during the candidate selection process, according to Norris and Lovenduski, when selectors draw on "background characteristics as a proxy measure of abilities and character" (1995, 14). As an "information shortcut," gender tends to privilege men and disadvantage women, because men predominate among those serving on selection panels and leader sex often interacts with a tendency to rely on traditional, insular networks for recruiting candidates (Bjarnegård 2013). The result is between elite perceptions about qualifications and the actual pool of qualified aspirants (Sanbonmatsu 2006).

Consequently, Murray, Krook, and Opello (2012) find that inferior outcomes for women in French legislative elections are the direct result of seat placement by parties rather than voter discrimination. Controlling for safety of seat, swing, and incumbency, candidate sex is no longer relevant to electoral outcomes. Evidence from Canada and Belgium shows that women tend to be nominated as "sacrificial lambs" (Thomas and Bodet 2013), while men enjoy access to better seats and greater campaign support (Wauters, Weekers, and Maddens 2010). Through such tactics, parties contribute to women's ongoing under-representation by engineering their electoral failure.

Voter bias: arguments and evidence

During elections, stereotypes may lead to voters to draw inferences regarding personality traits, ideological stances, and policy priorities based on a candidate's gender (McDermott 1997). Voters holding traditional views may view women's place as in the home and believe that women are too "soft" to be successful at governing (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu 2009). Perceptions that women are weaker candidates may also explain why female incumbents face stiffer competition (Lawless and Pearson 2008).

Research from different national settings suggests that candidate gender does indeed influence how respondents evaluate the competence and characteristics of candidates. Yet these stereotypes rarely translate into voting behavior, with party affiliation playing a much greater role (Matland and Tezcür 2011; Dolan 2014). Evidence from Ireland, however, also finds that voters do not discriminate against women even when they have the opportunity to choose between male and female candidates of the same party (McElroy and Marsh 2010).

An alternative explanation for these patterns is that stereotypes may both hurt and help female candidates, with women being viewed as more reliable and conscientious, less corrupt, and more likely to be concerned with social justice (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu 2009). For this reason, perhaps, Aguilar, Cunow, and Desposato (2015) uncover a strong and consistent pro-female bias among Brazilian voters. Taken as a whole, these studies indicate that voter bias may work against women – but may also favor or have a neutral effect on the election of female candidates.

Adjudicating bias: electoral system design

To isolate the role of party versus elite bias, a growing number of studies exploit elements of electoral system design, noting that that open-list PR systems using ordered lists offer “a unique opportunity to simultaneously consider the roles of voters and parties in the election of female candidates” (Kunovich 2012, 174). In closed-list PR, voters can choose only among previously decided lists, with candidates being elected in the order in which they appear. In contrast, when ordered lists are used in conjunction with open-list PR, voters have the option of casting preference votes that can alter which candidates are ultimately elected.

In an attempt to ascertain how the same voters would behave according to different electoral systems, Golder et al. (2017) conducted an experiment during the 2014 European Parliament elections. They find that more open systems – open lists with preference voting and “panachage” systems, with the possibility of casting preference votes across different parties – were associated with more votes for women, a relationship that holds for men and women as well as voters across the political spectrum. Additionally, parties with more women on the ballot received more votes overall. The implication is that voter demand for female candidates outpaces elite demand.

Similar conclusions emerge from empirical studies of preference voting in open-list PR systems. In Poland, Kunovich (2012) finds that, in three consecutive elections, voters improved women’s list placements through preference voting. Czech data reveals that women’s representation increased dramatically between 2006 and 2010, due to new rules giving voters more power over which candidates won seats by expanding the number of preference votes permitted and lowering the threshold of votes needed for candidates to move up the party lists (Stegmaier, Tosun, and Vlachová 2014). Comparing party and voter preferences through within-case research designs thus bolsters the case for elite bias, and not voter bias, as the main factor responsible for women’s underrepresentation.

Comparing party rankings and preferential votes

The electoral system in Denmark includes a combination of open list and semi-closed list PR. Parties rank-order the candidates on the ballot, but can opt for an open list, in which voters have full discretion over which candidates are elected, or a semi-closed list, in which party rankings and voter preferences combine to determine winning candidates. Seats are allocated in two steps. First, seats are distributed among the lists using the d’Hondt system, after each list’s total vote is calculated by summing the list votes plus the preferential votes cast for the candidates on the list. Second, seats won by each list are distributed among the list’s candidates. In the open allocation formula, candidates attracting the highest number of votes are elected. In the semi-closed formula, candidates with enough preference votes to achieve the quota threshold are elected, after which the remainder of seats are distributed among the remaining candidates according to preference votes and list rankings.

This electoral system design permits a variety of hypotheses to be tested regarding the respective roles of elite and voter bias, an opportunity we maximize by using data from local elections. Our dataset for the 2009 elections includes party, sex, and incumbency status for 9049 candidates on 903 lists contesting 2468 seats in 98 Danish municipalities.

on the candidates ranked first, second, and third on the list. The proportion of women among these high-ranking candidates is 30.7%, a drop of 0.6 points. If election outcomes were due to party preferences alone, therefore, the representation of women on local councils would fall.

At the third stage, we examine the impact of preference voting. If the open allocation formula was applied to all lists the preferential votes would lead to 32.6% of the successful candidates being women. Given the option to cast a preference vote, citizens thus slightly favor women as compared to their share of candidates, reflecting a net gain of 1.9 points.

In the fourth stage, we analyze the data from the parties applying the flexible list formula (22.6% of the lists). We find that the effect of preferential voting is dampened by taking party rankings into consideration, dropping with the share of women dropping 0.8 points. As noted above, 7.2% of candidates won their seats due to their rankings on flexible lists; these candidates were disproportionately male.

The cumulative effect of these shifts is a modest increase in the proportion of women elected, from 31.3% of all candidates to 31.8% of those elected. Cumulatively, however, greater swings can be observed: parties discriminated negatively against women (−1.4 points), while voters discriminated positively (+2.1 points).

We repeat this analysis at the party level. Table 1 reports the results, with parties arranged from the left to the right of the political spectrum. The aggregate level finding is largely confirmed, with parties having a negative impact and voters a positive impact on the election of women. However, left-wing parties are more likely to favor women, with the Social Democratic Party and Danish Social-Liberal Party being the most positive towards female candidates.

In contrast, right-wing parties are the most negative, with the far-right Danish People's Party reducing support for women by more than 14 percentage points. Yet voters – especially on the right – do compensate for negative bias on the part of elites. In the case of the Danish People's Party, preference voting reduced the overall gap to −1.5, suggesting that voters sought to correct the strong bias in favor of men. Nonetheless, election outcomes support the general candidate-level trends, with the share of elected women being consistently higher within parties of the left in comparison to parties of the right.

Table 1. Isolating the effects of party versus voter preferences for female candidates.

	Party								Total
	∅	F	A	B	C	V	O	Others	
Women among candidates	39.9	42.7	28.5	33.6	30.2	25.4	29.5	28.5	31.1
Elected parties	+2.6	0.0	0.0	+1.2	0.0	0.0	−0.2	+4.2	+0.2
Party nominations	−6.8	−1.5	+5.5	+3.2	0.0	+0.1	−11.0	−6.8	−0.6
Preferential voting	−7.1	+6.9	−2.0	+6.0	−1.2	+2.0	+12.9	+1.1	+1.9
Effect semi-closed lists	+7.1	−3.4	0.0	0.0	−0.4	−0.3	−3.2	+1.4	−0.8
Women among elected councilors	=35.7	=44.7	=32.0	=44.0	=28.6	=27.2	=28.0	=28.4	=31.8
Effect parties	+0.3	−4.9	+5.5	+3.2	−0.4	−0.2	−14.2	−5.4	−1.4
Effect voters	−4.5	+6.9	−2.0	+7.2	−1.2	+2.0	+12.7	+5.3	+2.1
Total effect	−4.2	+2.0	+3.5	+10.4	−1.6	+1.8	−1.5	−0.1	+0.7
N (candidates)	461	1166	1856	812	1116	1773	597	1268	9.049
N (elected)	14	340	801	50	262	699	186	116	2.468

Notes: ∅ (Unity List), F (Socialist People's Party), A (Social Democratic Party), B (Danish Social-Liberal Party), C (Conservatives), V (Liberal Party) and O (Danish People's Party).

Source: Calculation based on data from Statistics Denmark on the local elections of 2009.

Ranking and incumbency

Our second analysis seeks to ascertain whether these patterns are due to bias against women or originate in personal traits of the candidates. For this, we turn to the more detailed data we have on the ranking of all candidates by the parties and voters, respectively, as well as the incumbency status of all contenders. Table 2 presents the percentage of women in each list position, excluding the 83 lists with only one candidate. Perhaps the most striking finding is the mere 17.9% women occupying the number one list position.

The data in column 1 shows few differences in the share of women in other ranks. Yet, the meaning of these positions also varies substantially across parties. If a list wins five seats, for instance, being elected in the fifth position is more important than being ranked fifth on a list that only elects one candidate. In the second column of Table 2, therefore, we adjust the rank position to the number of seats won by the candidate's list. For each candidate, we subtract their rank position from the total number of seats won by their party. We find, notably, that women are better represented among the candidates placed just below the ranking required to be elected (value -1 compared with value 0), if only the party rankings determined election. Thus while it appears that parties do not systematically rank women lower than men when taking all list positions into account, they do in fact rank women relatively low on those list positions that matter for election.

The third column in Table 2 illustrates how voters alter the rank ordering made by parties, calculating how many ranks the candidate moves up or down as a result of the preference votes. For example, if a candidate is ranked third on the list but obtains the most votes, achieving the top rank, the movement is $+2$ positions. If the same candidate only received the fifth highest share of votes, the movement would be -2 . This reveals that voters do indeed move female candidates up the list: women were 37.2% of those advancing two list positions but only 26.9% of those who fell two ranks. There is no clear pattern, however, when adjusting for the number of seats won by each of the parties, as shown in column 4.

Our third analysis considers other variables that might influence candidates' list rankings and preference votes. Incumbency is perhaps the most obvious factor, implying some

Table 2. Comparing the rankings of female candidates by parties and voters.

Nomination				Election			
Rank-order position		Rank-order position adjusted to number of seats won by party		Preferential vote ranking compared to rank-order position		Preferential vote ranking adjusted to number of seats won by party	
Position	% women	Position	% women	Movement	% women	Movement	% women
1	17.9	3+	31.6	3+	31.6	3+	31.1
2	35.1	3	28.9	3	36.6	3	29.0
3	39.0	2	28.7	2	37.2	2	35.4
4	36.1	1	32.1	1	38.7	1	31.9
5	31.6	0	30.0	0	31.3	0	35.2
6	36.3	-1	36.5	-1	28.9	-1	34.6
7	36.6	-2	35.1	-2	26.9	-2	35.2
8	31.9	-3	32.8	-3	25.4	-3	39.6
9	31.2	-4	36.6	-4	26.2	-4	32.5
10+	28.5	<-4	28.9	<-4	27.1	<-4	27.5
N = 8.966		N = 7.748		N = 8.966		N = 7.748	

Source: Calculation based on electoral statistics from Statistics Denmark on the local elections of 2009.

level of political experience. Two other factors emerging from the Danish context are age and whether the candidate lives in the center or periphery of the municipality. Danish parties have long been concerned with recruiting young people. The center versus periphery conflict is more recent: after amalgamations to join up existing municipalities in 2007, actors in the periphery have mobilized voters to use their preference votes to get candidates from the periphery elected (Jakobsen and Kjaer 2016).

To do this analysis, we recode the actual rankings into “relative” and “adjusted” rankings. The relative rankings take list length into account, distinguishing between two candidates ranked third on their respective party lists, when one appears third on a list of 27 candidates while another is third on a list of four candidates. To facilitate interpretation, we reverse the ranking, assigning a value of 1 to the highest rank and a value of 0 to the lowest. The adjusted rankings incorporate the number of seats that parties actually win. This results in four different dependent variables in the multivariate analysis, estimated using OLS: relative list position, adjusted list position, list position according to preferential votes won, and list position adjusted to the number of seats won by the list.²

The results of the four models are presented in Table 3. All four models include gender and three control variables: age, peripheral residency and incumbency. The last two models also include the relevant party rank-order (relative or adjusted).

The results demonstrate the central role of incumbency in shaping a candidate’s nomination and election opportunities (see also Scott et al. this issue). Once this control is introduced, parties in fact discriminate *positively* towards women. Because incumbents tend to be male, however, an emphasis on incumbency means that men tend to be ranked higher on lists. Controlling for party rank and incumbency status, voters remain positive towards female candidates – and in so doing, move women up the list positions.

This finding points to the importance of taking incumbency effects into account, with statistical results changing if this factor is left out of the analysis. Comparing these effects,

Table 3. Rank ordering of the candidates by parties and voters.

	Nomination		Election	
	Party rank order (relative)	Party rank order (adjusted)	Voter rank order (relative)	Voter rank order (adjusted)
Woman	.019** (.007)	.534*** (.132)	.059*** (.005)	.519*** (.094)
Age	-.003*** (.000)	-.034*** (.005)	-.001*** (.000)	-.018*** (.004)
Peripheral residency	-.013 (.006)	.464*** (.128)	.006 (.005)	.437*** (.092)
Incumbent	.355*** (.008)	6.996*** (.149)	.176*** (.007)	3.168*** (.121)
Party rank-order (relative)			.600*** (.008)	
Party rank-order (adjusted)				.647*** (.008)
Constant	.563*** (.013)	-3.523*** (.258)	.214*** (.011)	-1.298*** (.188)
R^2	.19	.22	.53	.60
N	8.966	7.748	8.966	7.748

Notes: Only lists with more than one candidate included and for the adjusted rank-orders only lists which obtained seats are included.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Source: Calculation based on electoral statistics from Statistics Denmark on the local elections 2009.

moreover, we find that incumbency is by far the strongest predictor of a candidate's ranking, while the effect of gender is more limited. Being a woman moves a person up approximately half (0.52) of a list position, while being an incumbent advances a candidate more than three (3.2) list positions. Half a list position sometimes makes a difference between getting elected or not, but in most cases it does not. Consequently, the total positive effect on women's representation of preferential voting is a mere 1.9 percentage point net increase.

The two other control variables also have notable effects. With regard to age, the models show that both parties and voters are positively predisposed to young candidates. Although the effect is smaller, peripheral residency also explains the high ranking of some candidates, with preference voting enhancing the electoral success of candidates coming from smaller communities.

Exploring voter motivations

Existing studies infer patterns of discrimination using candidate and electoral statistics, in some cases supplementing these results with data from public opinion polls revealing attitudes towards women as political leaders (Valdini 2013). However, these approaches can only indirectly ascertain voters' motivations during elections, as voters are not asked about their reasons for choosing one candidate over another. We fill this gap – and supplement our analysis above – with results of a survey distributed to a representative sample of 3336 Danish voters in the weeks following the 2009 local elections.³

The Local Election Survey asked respondents whether they cast a preferential vote, and if so, whether the candidate they voted for was a man or a woman. By a statistically significant margin, women were more likely than men to cast a preference vote for a female candidate. At the same time, however, women are not overwhelmingly partial to female candidates. More than 70% of female voters either selected a male candidate (43.0%) or cast a list vote (28.6%). Only a minority of female voters (28.4%) took the opportunity to utilize the open list system to increase women's representation on the local councils.

In contrast, more than half of the men (52.7%) in the survey cast a preference vote for a male candidate. Less than one-fifth (19.8%) voted for a woman and about a quarter (27.5%) voted for a list. Similar to findings from Finland (Giger et al. 2014), male voters were thus far more likely than women to engage in same-sex voting: about one-quarter of female voters cast preferential votes in favor of female candidates, while more than half of male voters voted preferentially for male candidates. The vast majority of women in the electorate thus did not use this option to advance female candidates, although they did so to a greater extent than did men, the majority of who supported male candidates over other possibilities.

To get a better sense of voter motivations, the survey asked why those who cast a preferential vote chose the candidates that they did. Recognizing that candidate gender may be only one of many characteristics that could come into play, our survey included a list of other characteristics, such as age or occupational background. Strikingly, Danish voters as a whole do not appear to have strong gendered preferences: only 11.2% claimed that the gender of the candidate was a consideration when casting their preferential vote ($N = 2121$). However, when disaggregated by voter gender, an interesting difference emerges:

women (15.2%) were more likely than men (7.8%) to say that candidate gender played a role, a gap that is statistically significant at the $p = .000$ level.

Conclusions

Diagnosing women's under-representation in electoral politics often involves a "blame game," seeking to identify the primary factor responsible for depressing the share of women among candidates as well as elected officials. Our study aims to inform these debates by focusing on local elections in Denmark, where the electoral system provides a means for comparing the impact of elite and voter preferences on women's electoral fortunes. We then supplement this analysis with a post-election survey to determine the degree to which these patterns are due to a greater propensity among voters to favor female candidates. Our data suggest that traditional perspectives on the "blame game" require greater nuance to reflect the respective role of elite versus voter bias, as well as the importance of gender in relation to voter support for female candidates.

Our research design, nonetheless, is also limited in terms of the conclusions it can draw. Perhaps the key omitted variable is candidate quality. Recent work demonstrates that women tend to face a more demanding path to political leadership than do men (Lawless and Pearson 2008; O'Brien 2015), suggesting that female candidate may need superior skills and experience than their male counterparts in order to achieve the same goals. Few studies on voter bias incorporate a control for quality, but those that do reach opposition conclusions. Exploring whether negative voter bias might be obscured or offset by women's superior qualifications, Black and Erickson (2003) find no such effect. Fulton (2012), in contrast, documents a gender-based quality gap among political incumbents in the U.S.

A second issue relates to the causal story that we present, which may better resemble an ongoing cycle of transformation, rather than simply capturing more stable views held by parties and citizens towards female candidates. A study of the 2009 parliamentary elections in Indonesia suggests that the presence of female incumbents in political office may lead to a reduction in gender bias on the part of both elites and voters (Shair-Rosefield 2012). Data from Finnish elections over time indicates, similarly, that as there are more equal numbers of men and women as candidates and elected officials, both male and female voters become more willing to vote for women (Giger et al. 2014). Without data from other points in time, it is difficult for us to test this theory – although it may help explain the relatively high share of women as both candidates and elected councilors in Denmark.

Our analysis, nonetheless, provides new insights into long-standing debates. Controlling for incumbency, for example, not only reduces but reverses the apparent bias that elites hold against women. At the same time, voters do not make full use of the preference voting option to elect more women. Our post-election survey, indeed, finds that gender is low among the list of characteristics that voters prioritize when making decisions regarding which candidate to support. Yet another way to interpret this finding is to point out that while gender is not a positive factor for voters, it is also not a negative one either – indicating broad acceptance by voters that women should run for and win political office. Party elites, therefore, should not fear retribution from voters for nominating

and electing more women, but rather view their candidacies as a potential means to capture greater voter support.

Notes

1. This is comparable to, although slightly lower than, women's representation in the Danish parliament, which currently stands at 37.5% (see <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>).
2. The four dependent variables are calculated as
 Party rank-order (relative) = $1 - ((\text{PARTYRANK}-1) \times (1/(\text{LENGTH}-1)))$, where LENGTH is the number of candidates on the list and PARTYRANK is the list position assigned to the candidate on the ballot by the party.
 Party rank-order (adjusted) = SEATS - PARTYRANK, where SEATS are the number of seats won by the party and PARTYRANK the list position assigned to the candidate.
 Voter rank-order (relative) = $1 - ((\text{VOTERRANK}-1) \times (1/(\text{LENGTH}-1)))$, where VOTERRANK is the ranking of the candidates is based solely on the preferential votes, ignoring the parties' rank ordering.
 Voter rank-order (adjusted) = SEATS - VOTERRANK
3. The Local Election Survey was conducted December 4-31, 2009, by Capacent Epinion using a mix of telephone interviews (n = 1625) among selected voters and web-surveys (n=1711) among participants in a well-established voter-panel. For more information on the survey, see (Kjaer 2013).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Ulrik Kjaer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9731-692X>

Mona Lena Krook  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8347-6095>

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