Winning Alone: The Electoral Fate of Independent Candidates Worldwide

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Independent candidates are widely believed to influence the quality of representation through issues as fundamental to democracy as government accountability, responsiveness, and electoral turnout. Their impact, however, hinges on their electoral strength, which varies widely within and across countries. In order to explain this variation, this study examines which aspects of electoral systems affect independents the most and why. Based on a statistical analysis of 34 countries around the world between 1945 and 2003, this study finds that electoral systems influence the electoral strength of independent candidates by defining the opportunities for independents to compete for office (i.e., ballot access requirements), the degree to which politics is candidate centered versus partisan driven (i.e., majority/plurality rule, district magnitude, open-list PR, and democratic transitions), and the extent to which small vote getters win seats (i.e., district size and electoral thresholds). Accordingly, not only do independents influence the nature of representation, but so too do the ways in which electoral systems influence independent candidates.

I nnovative, catalysts and unconventional are all words that have been used to describe independent candidates. But, so are dreamers, half-baked, and hopeless. Without the label, not to mention the financial backing of political parties, independents face tremendous obstacles winning political office. In the United States these obstacles are nearly insurmountable with independents winning less than 1% of the national vote on average. In other countries, however, like Pakistan and Russia, where independents win as much as 20 and 40% of the vote, these obstacles are not nearly as formidable. The ability of independents to attract votes varies not only across countries, but within countries as well, with independents winning more votes in different legislatures of the same countries and different districts of the same legislatures. Why are independent candidates able to overcome these barriers better in certain contexts and not others? In other words, what explains the extraordinary variation in the electoral strength of independent candidates?

Understanding the answers to these questions can help illuminate important political issues of representation and democracy. Almost invariably, scholars consider political parties as essential to democracy and independents, conversely, as superfluous to it at best and antithetical to it at worst. In particular,

independents are theorized to lower voter turnout by dampening the public's interest in politics, failing to present voters with discernible policy alternatives (Moser 1999), and disenfranchising poor and uneducated voters (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Wright and Schaffner 2002). Independents are also believed to hinder challengers from defeating incumbents, to facilitate less preferred candidates winning over more preferred ones, and to increase the saliency of race in electoral politics (Lacy and Burden 1999; Sherrill 1998; Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001). Finally, independent candidates are thought to reduce government accountability since parties structure and stabilize legislative decision making, while independents promote deadlock and extremism (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Sherrill 1998; Wright and Schaffner 2002).

Although dominant, this view of independent candidates is not universal. A sizeable number of scholars, policy makers, and activists suggest that independents, arising from the failure of existing parties to address societal interests, enhance democracy by proposing new and innovative legislation (Costar and Curtin 2004; Greenberg 1994; Menendez 1996; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1986). Others suggest that independents strengthen democracy by reducing corruption, restoring government integrity,

and reinvigorating citizens' interest in politics (Co-star and Curtin 2004). For these reasons and others, some countries, including the United States, hold nonpartisan local elections while a handful of others, such as Bermuda (pre-1963), Pakistan (1985), and Afghanistan (2005), have even held nonpartisan national elections.

Explaining the extraordinary variation in the electoral strength of independent candidates both within and across countries is, thus, an important but challenging issue. With this goal in mind, I examine the effects of three fundamental features of electoral systems, namely ballot access requirements, seat allocation procedures and the age of the electoral system. These elements define the opportunities for independents to compete for office, the degree to which politics is candidate centered versus party driven, and the extent to which small vote getters win seats. Ultimately, the analysis indicates that bans on independents (but not signature or deposit requirements), large districts, and electoral thresholds reduce the electoral strength of independents, while majority/plurality systems, open-lists, and democratic transitions augment their strength. Increasing district magnitude also bolsters independents, but only in multimember district (MMD) plurality systems where higher district magnitudes foster more candidate-focused party systems.

Notwithstanding the importance of this issue, only a handful of studies have examined the effects of electoral systems on independent candidates. Many of these studies, though, have lumped independents in together with minor or third parties in the United States (Abramson et al. 1995; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1986), believing that the causes of minor parties are the same as those of independents when, in fact, the two are quite distinct.[1] Independents, unlike party candidates, are not tied to the fate of other candidates and cannot draw on party resources to run campaigns. As a result, they are often affected differently by the same institutions and uniquely by one institution but not another.

Previous studies of independents have also focused almost exclusively on certain independent candidates, such as Ross Perot or Ralph Nader (Abramson et al. 1995; Alvarez and Nagler 1995) and on particular countries, such as Australia (Costar and Curtin 2004), the United States (Abramson et al. 1995; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1986) or Russia

(Golosov 2003a, 2003b; Moser 1999; Stoner-Weiss 2001). Thus far, no studies have examined independent candidates cross-nationally, although some have looked at this issue comparatively by capitalizing on within country variation in Russia (Golosov 2003b; Stoner-Weiss 2001). The single-case study design of these analyses makes it impossible, however, to disentangle the effects of competing factors from each other. It also leads to conclusions that are sometimes contradictory and not necessarily generalizable to other countries.

U.S.-based analyses, for example, claim that majoritarianism *discourages* independent candidates because of the high vote threshold it imposes on candidates to win seats (Abramson et al. 1995), while studies of Russia argue, in contrast, that majoritarianism *encourages* independents by inhibiting party consolidation (Golosov 2003b; Moser 1999; Stoner-Weiss 2001). Russia-based studies also point to factors specific to post-communist Russia, which promote independents but which may not be relevant to other countries, such as dual political and economic transitions (Stoner-Weiss 2001), clientelism (Moser 1999), regulations on parliamentary factions (Moser 1999), and intra-elite conflict (Golosov 2003a, 2003b). Similarly, analyses of the United States highlight certain features of the U.S. political system that inhibit independent candidates, such as the Electoral College (Abramson et al. 1995).

In this study, however, I examine the effects of electoral systems on independents cross-nationally, combining insights from candidate- and country-specific studies of independents in hopes of rectifying their sometimes contradictory claims and of offering new insights into this issue as well. In looking beyond a single country, this study also explores variation within types of electoral systems and disentangles the effects of different elements of these systems from each other. The analysis is based on national legislative elections for 34 democracies around the world from 1945 to 2003. The election results are broken down to the constituency- or district-level of government, which is the level at which seats are distributed in an election. This allows for precise measurement of certain features of electoral systems that vary at this level, including the method used to allocate seats, district magnitude, and district size. It also helps to explore within country, as well as cross-country, variation. The analysis uses country- and year-fixed effects to adjust for correlation among multiple observations within the same country and the same year.

In examining this issue, the remainder of this article is organized as follows. After defining and

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[1] The entry for independent candidates in the index of Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus (1986) epitomizes this perspective. It says only three words: "*See* third parties."

describing the characteristics of independent candidates in the first section, I examine the potential effects of different features of electoral systems on independents in the second. In the third section I describe the data and method I use, while in the fourth, I present the results of the statistical analysis. In the conclusion I consider the implications of these findings and discuss possible avenues for future research.

Defining Independence

The one defining characteristic of all independent candidates is that they are not affiliated with any political party, which is a major obstacle to their electoral success since parties serve a number of functions: they lower the costs of voting (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991); they allow individual candidates to benefit electorally from association with fellow party members via straight-ticket voting (Campbell and Miller 1957; Popkin 1991); and they provide candidates with significant organizational and financial support. Parties, however, can still endorse independent candidates and encourage people to vote for them, which often occurs if parties do not have their own candidates competing in a district and prefer a particular independent winning over all other candidates.

In the most basic sense, lacking a partisan affiliation means that the name of an independent appears alone on a ballot instead of alongside a particular party. As such, independents do not subscribe to the platform of any political party. Nevertheless, their policies are not necessarily more extreme than existing parties or even notably different from them, although the latter is often the claim of independents.[2] In devising their own agendas, frequently independents do not develop full political programs, but compete based on single issues, such as gun regulations and hospital closures.

Since independent candidates do not receive funding from political parties, they rely principally on donations, government funds, and, in many cases, personal resources to finance their campaigns. For this reason successful independents generally have considerable organizational and financial support, as well as strong name recognition (Golosov 2003a). Although the subject of this article is national legislative elections, it is worth mentioning that H.

Ross Perot, an independent who ran an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. presidency in 1992, reportedly spent over $60 million of his own money to bankroll his election campaign. Evidence from U.S. and British elections, albeit not explicitly about independents, further suggests that campaign spending is an important determinant of success with increased campaign spending elevating support for candidates challenging incumbents (Jacobson 1990; Pattie, Jahnston, and Fieldhouse 1995).

While all independent candidates are similar to each other in terms of their lack of partisan affiliation, they are distinct from each other in a number of respects. Many independents are political outsiders with no experience in government. Often outsiders are drawn into the political arena by a single issue about which they feel passionately. Many even use their positions as outsiders to portray themselves as the only ones who can purge the government of corruption, bridge ties among parties, and successfully negotiate deals with different parties to the benefit of their own constituencies.

Some outsiders, however, do not have political objectives but use their candidacies to promote non-political goals, such as hawking a music CD or publicizing a film. Sill others have political goals, but the strangeness of them makes one question the seriousness of their intentions, such as one adult film star's platform for California's 2003 recall elections, which advocated hiring adult film stars to negotiate better wholesale electricity prices and creating a "Porno for Pistols" program.[3] Of those candidates with serious political goals, some desire to win elections to implement policies while others seek to nudge the major parties' platforms more toward their own policy prescriptions (Costar and Curtin 2004; Greenberg 1994; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1986).

Many independents, in contrast, are political insiders who previously participated in the government as members of particular political parties or the government bureaucracy. Many of these insiders split from their original parties because of disputes over their parties' direction, personal conflicts with other party members, or the failure to earn a place on their parties' ballot. Defining independent candidates and understanding their underlying motives is only the first step in explaining why independent candidates have stronger positions in some countries than in others. Identifying the conditions that facilitate

[2]H. Ross Perot, who ran as an independent for the U.S. presidency in 1992, was considered more moderate than George Bush and Bill Clinton on economic and cultural issues, like abortion, gay rights, and the environment (Menendez 1996).

[3]"Porn Star Says She'll Seek Governor's Office," http://www.nbcsandiego.com/politics/2383654/detail.html.

politicians acting on their motivations and the factors that encourage voters to vote for them is the subject I turn to next.

The Impact of Electoral Systems on Independents

While electoral systems are defined by many different features, I focus on three elements in particular, which I believe are essential to explaining the variation in the electoral strength of independent candidates, namely ballot access requirements, seats allocation rules, and the age of the electoral system. These features determine not only the opportunity for candidates to compete as independents, but also the strength of party-voter linkages and the ability of small vote earners to win seats.

Ballot Access Laws

Ballot access requirements present the first barrier to independents and some might even argue the most formidable (Abramson et al. 1995; Ansolabehere and Gerber 1996; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1986). This is particularly the case in the United States and the United Kingdom—where the latter's government rejected a 2003 electoral commission proposal abolishing deposit requirements in order to prevent an explosion of frivolous candidates.[4] Elsewhere the deterrent effects of ballot access laws are considered similarly large, but are viewed in a less favorable light. In Egypt, for example, stringent ballot access requirements blocking independents from participating in the country's first ever multiparty presidential elections are blamed for the country's weakly competitive elections and Hosni Mubarak's landslide victory in 2005.[5] The same year Mexico's Supreme Court ruled that bans on independents are unconstitutional, while the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights declared them a violation of human rights.[6]

Nevertheless, many countries still ban independents or limit the types of legislatures and elections in which they compete.

Most countries, which allow independents to compete in elections, impose either signature or deposit requirements on candidates in order to register. The former require independents to have petitions signed by a certain number of eligible voters or by associations with a certain number of eligible voters as members in order to register, as is the case in Finland. Usually, signature requirements are not very large, but without the massive infrastructure of parties to collect signatures door-to-door, independents may have difficulty meeting even small signature requirements. Some countries, such as Belgium and Luxembourg, make exceptions to these requirements. In these countries candidates without the requisite number of signatures can still get on the ballot if they have the support of a certain number of parliamentarians, a practice which inevitably favors political insiders. In Slovenia exceptions are not made based on political connections but on ethnicity, with independents of Italian or Hungarian descent needing fewer signatures than others.

Monetary deposits also pose a challenge to candidates, especially to less affluent independent candidates. Not surprisingly, therefore, deposits are also considered undemocratic in some circles, as in Ireland, where the High Court deemed a deposit of only 300 pounds unconstitutional in 2002. Although deposit requirements are generally not very large, in some countries they are quite onerous, including the Netherlands where the deposit is more than US$15,000 or Turkey where it exceeds US$30,000. In most countries deposits are defined in absolute terms, but in some they vary from year to year depending on a country's average monthly salary (e.g., Lithuania) or minimum wage (e.g., Estonia). Usually, however, deposits are refundable if candidates win a legislative seat, but sometimes even the deposit of an unsuccessful candidate is refundable if that candidate wins a certain percentage of the vote.

The difficulty candidates face in meeting deposit requirements depends not only on the size of the deposit, but also on a country's level of economic development. Obviously, a thousand dollar deposit in the United States is much easier to meet than a thousand dollar one in Turkey or Niger. As in the case of signature requirements, some countries provide exceptions to deposit requirements under specific conditions. In India, for example, independent candidates representing Scheduled Castes and Tribes pay a deposit that is half that of other independent candidates.

[4]"The Government's Response to the Electoral Commission's Report," presented to the Parliament by the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, Cm6426, December 2004.

[5]Sharp, Jeremy M., 2005, "Egypt: 2005 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections," CRS Report for Congress, Washington: Congressional Research Services - Library of Congress.

[6]The Commission ruling was in response to a plea by Mexican politician Jorge Castaneda, who sought to run as an independent in the country's presidential elections.

In addition to ballot requirements placed on independents, those imposed on political parties can influence a candidate's decision to run as an independent. If, that is, the requirements to compete as an independent are demanding, while those to run as a party are not, a candidate may choose to form a new party instead of running as an independent. In this situation strict ballot access requirements may not pose as much of a challenge to representation as some might suggest, since the electorate's interests may still be represented in government albeit through different vehicles. Some countries, however, such as Canada, Lithuania, and Turkey, prevent candidates from creating parties composed of single candidates by requiring parties to have a certain number of candidates that exceeds one in order to register.

Seat Allocation Procedures

After elections occur and votes are tallied, countries may use one of three basic procedures to allocate parties seats: majority rule, plurality rule, or proportional representation (PR). Majority and plurality systems, which distribute seats to candidates winning either a majority or plurality of the vote, are typically expected to decrease the electoral strength of independent candidates for the same reason that they reduce the electoral vitality of small parties (Abramson et al. 1995; Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus 1986; Stoner-Weiss 2001; Wattenberg 1996). Operating through a mechanical and psychological effect, these systems prevent candidates without a large portion of the vote in a given district from winning a seat and, thus, discourage voters from casting their ballots for candidates unlikely to win seats in the first place (Duverger 1951). Subsuming independents under the category of third parties, Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus write, for example, that "[t]he single member district plurality system is the single largest barrier to third party vitality" (1986, 18) while Gillespie describes it, along with other features of the U.S. system, as an exceedingly high fence "lined with barbed wire and broken glass" (1993, 37). This view of majority and plurality systems is staunchly held by numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), think-tanks, and pressure groups, such as the Center for Voting and Democracy, which has successfully campaigned for the use of PR in a number of local elections around the United States.[7]

By this logic, PR systems—where seats are allocated to parties or candidates in accordance with their vote share—are more open to small parties and, thus, also independent candidates. Sharing this view, legislators in Scotland recently jettisoned their region's plurality rule system in favor of a more proportional one, which they expected to expose the political system to new voices and possibly give independents a greater chance of being elected.[8] In most PR systems voters elect independents by casting ballots for particular independent candidates whose names are listed individually on ballots alongside the names of political parties. In these systems independents are assigned seats if they win enough votes to earn one, but they are not assigned more than one seat even if their vote totals qualify them.

In some PR systems independents are only allowed to compete in elections with their names included on the list of a particular party even though they are not members of this party, as in the Czech Republic (lower house), Portugal, and Slovakia. Parties typically place independents on their lists because independents are notable personalities, experts on certain issues, or significant financial backers, so that they can draw attention to their parties, produce more informed legislation, or pay back favors. This type of system, however, undermines the independence of these candidates, which are not considered, therefore, independents for the purpose of this study.

In contrast to these expectations, I argue that majority and plurality systems encourage independent candidates, despite the higher threshold they impose on candidates in order to win seats, because they weaken ties between parties and voters (Carey and Shugart 1995; Huber, Kernell, and Leoni 2005; Wattenberg 1991). Party-voter linkages are more tenuous in these systems because they base electoral competition more on the qualities of individual candidates rather than those of their parties. Consequently, voters in these systems are more informed about candidates' particular attributes than voters in PR systems and less likely to rely on party cues to make decisions about which candidates to support.

Russian-based studies of independents also suggest that PR systems reduces the electoral strength of independents while promoting the consolidation of party systems (Golosov 2003a, 2003b; Moser 1999; Stoner-Weiss 2001). Russia ostensibly jettisoned its

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[7]Hill, Steven, 1999, "An Argument for PR from the Left: Winner-Take-All Elections Make the Left Losers," Takoma Park, MD: The Center for Voting and Democracy.

[8]Local Governance (Scotland) Bill, Policy Memorandum, SP Bill 14-PM, 2003.

mixed electoral system in 2005 in favor of a pure PR system for this reason. Although the mechanisms through which PR systems affect independents are not well delineated in these studies, their bottom line is that PR systems favor parties, not independents. Given the single case-study design of these analyses, however, it is impossible to distinguish the effect of Russia's electoral system from democratization, or the many other factors that Russia-based studies cite as encouraging independent candidates, such as dual political and economic transitions (Stoner-Weiss 2001), clientelism (Moser 1999), rules regulating the formation of parliamentary factions (Moser 1999), and intra-elite conflict (Golosov 2003a, 2003b).

In looking, furthermore, beyond the dichotomy between majority/plurality systems and PR systems, it is apparent that certain types of these systems also favor independents more than others. Multimember district (MMD) plurality systems, known as either block or limited voting systems—depending on whether voters have as many votes as seats in a district or not—should favor independents over plurality systems with single-member districts (SMD). MMD plurality systems are more candidate focused than SMD plurality systems because they allow candidates from the same party to compete against each other. Intraparty competition, in turn, compels candidates to distinguish themselves from each other based on personal attributes (Carey and Shugart 1995). The higher district magnitude of these systems also favors independents because it reduces the degree to which voters waste their votes on independent candidates unlikely to win seats.

Open-list PR systems, where voters can express their preferences for particular candidates on a party list, should also favor independents over closed-list PR systems because the former tend to be more candidate focused than the latter (Chin and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Shugart, Valdini, and Svominen 2005). PR systems, however, with electoral thresholds should disadvantage independents candidates. In fact, independents face even greater challenges in surpassing thresholds than parties since parties pool votes across districts while independents do not. In most countries, moreover, electoral thresholds are the same for parties as for independents, ranging between 3 and 5%. Moldova, in contrast, imposes a lower electoral threshold (3%) on independents than political parties (6%) but few, if any, countries make similar exceptions.

Finally, preferential voting systems, regardless of whether they utilize majority and plurality systems or proportional representation, should favor independ-ents over nonpreferential based versions of these systems. Preferential voting encourages independent candidates because it reduces the likelihood of voters wasting their votes on independents unable to win seats and the possibility, therefore, of independents acting as spoilers. Preferential voting, in other words, reduces the likelihood that voters, by casting their ballots for independent candidates failing to win seats, unintentionally help elect candidates from parties they prefer less than candidates from other parties.

Age of the Electoral System

No matter the type of electoral system in a country, independents are likely to have stronger positions in the first few democratic elections in a country than in subsequent ones. At first blush, one might not expect independents to have stronger positions in transi-tions since parties competing in these periods may have existed under previous regimes and, thus, have an advantage over independents and other parties. Not only may former-regime parties already enjoy the loyalty of substantial parts of the electorate, but they may have also helped design their countries' new electoral systems in ways favoring their own parties over all others (Boix 1999). In Tajikistan, for exam-ple, the government devised complicated registration requirements for independents on the basis of which it blocked potential rivals from arising in the coun-try's first democratic elections following the end of civil war in 1997.[9]

Despite these obstacles, democratic transitions are likely to favor independents for a number of reasons. Politicians have an incentive to run as independents during transitions, especially if the first democratic elections held in a country occur soon after the advent of democracy. During transitions, politicians may not have the time or opportunity to locate like-minded people with whom to form political parties. The shorter this time period, the less likely politicians are to do so and the more likely they are to run as independents. Former regime leaders may also com-pete as independents themselves if they are already well-known personalities and do not need the support of a party to attract votes, as they did in Afghanistan's first parliamentary elections held in 2005.

Voters, meanwhile, have an incentive to vote for independents during transitions since partisanship tends to be low in these periods (Brader and Tucker

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[9]Human Rights Watch, 2000, "Tajikistan's Parliamentary Elec-tions," New York: Human Rights Watch.

2001; Huber, Kernell, and Leoni 2005). Low levels of partisanship, in turn, liberate people from routinely voting for the same parties and open them up to the possibility of voting for independents. Partisanship tends to be low in transitions since voters often lack clear understandings of parties' positions in these periods (Campbell et al. 1960). Voters also have no basis on which to positively evaluate the performance of new parties in government during this period and cannot inherit their parents' loyalties for defunct political parties (Fiorina 1981). Over time, however, as parties accumulate experience in government and clarify their agendas, voters may build up loyalties to certain parties over others and may even pass these loyalties on to their children. Survey evidence indicating that partisanship in postcommunist Russia was highest among supporters of the communist party is consistent with this argument (Colton 2000; Rose, White, and McAllister 1997).

To summarize the main hypotheses developed in this section, I expect that the electoral strength of independent candidates to be greater in countries with less stringent ballot access requirements and majority and plurality systems rather than PR systems. Within majority and plurality systems, I expect independents to have stronger positions in systems with multimember districts and preferential voting rather than those with single-member districts and no preferential voting. Within PR systems, I expect independents to have stronger positions in systems with open-lists, low electoral thresholds, and preferential voting, but not necessarily in those with high district magnitudes since this can reduce the extent to which elections are candidate focused. Regardless of the type of electoral system in a country, the electoral strength of independent candidates should be greater in new democracies than in established ones.

Data and Measurements

In order to analyze the effect of electoral systems on independent candidates, I compiled a dataset of independent candidate strength based on an original dataset of constituency-level election results for 52 democracies worldwide from 1945 to 2003.[10] From this dataset, known as the constituency-level elections

(CLE) dataset, I exclude 18 countries where independent candidates are not allowed to compete in elections.[11] The final analysis includes the following 34 countries: Australia, Belgium, Bermuda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Botswana, Canada, Colombia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mauritius, Moldova, Netherlands, New Zealand, Niger, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Venezuela. Elections in Western Europe constitute the largest part of the dataset (43%), followed by Oceana (14%), North America (12%), Latin America (10%), Eastern Europe (8%), Asia (4%), the Caribbean (4%), the Middle East (4%), and Africa (1%).

This distribution is consistent with the number of democratic elections held in these regions after WWII, although two regions of the world, Asia and Latin America, are slightly underrepresented in the dataset. With Asia underrepresented, this study does not examine the effects of single nontransferable vote (SNTV) systems on independents. However, I expect SNTV systems to behave like block or limited voting systems because of their commensurate focus on candidates over parties and tendency toward high levels of intraparty competition. All remaining types of electoral systems, as well as ballot access requirements, included in the analysis are well represented in the dataset. The underrepresentation of Latin America, in contrast, does not have any obvious implications for the analysis. While many democratizing countries in Latin America are distinct from those in Eastern Europe because they have experienced multiple transitions that are not very far apart from each other in time, the democratizing countries in this dataset are not dominated by Eastern Europe and vary in the length of time that separates democratic episodes and transition periods.

Using the CLE dataset, I measure the electoral strength of independent candidates in three different ways: (1) the percentage of candidates that are

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[10]I collected this dataset by contacting every country in the world that held at least two democratic elections in this period, from 52 of which I obtained data. I consider countries democracies if they score 5 or higher on the Polity IV index of democracy, which ranges between 0 and 10.

[11]Including these countries, as well as an indicator variable for bans on independents, yields the same substantive and statistical results as the models to follow. The following countries do not allow independent candidates to participate in elections: Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Iceland, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, and Uruguay. The Czech Republic (lower house), Portugal, and Slovakia are also excluded from this analysis because they permit independent candidates to compete for office in principle, but limit their independence in practice, by requiring independent candidates to compete for office on lists of political parties. The PR aspect of Russia's lower house is also excluded since independents are banned from this part of the country's mixed electoral system.

independents in an election,[12] (2) the percentage of votes that independent candidates receive in an election, and (3) the percentage of seats that independent candidates win in an election.[13] In this study 7% of the candidates that compete for office are independents. They win about 2% of the vote and 1% of the seats, indicating that many more politicians opt to run as independents than citizens choose to elect them.

Independent candidates are strongest in Russia and Pakistan. In Russia they constitute on average about 45% of the candidates that compete for office in single member districts and win almost 40% of the vote and about 23% of the seats. In Pakistan, meanwhile, they comprise 40% of all candidates and win about 16% of the vote and 15% of the seats. Independents have more moderate positions in eight countries in the dataset (i.e., Australia, Bermuda, Estonia, Ireland, Malaysia, Moldova, Turkey, and Poland). No more than 15% of the candidates that compete for office are independents in these countries, where they win between about 2 and 5% of the vote on average.

Their presence is notably weaker in 15 countries where independents win approximately 1% or less of the votes and seats on average, but constitute as much as 5% of the candidates competing for office. These countries include: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Botswana, Canada, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Malta, New Zealand, Niger, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, the United Kingdom, and the United States. And, finally, independent candidates have no presence in nine countries in the dataset (i.e., Belgium, Colombia, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mauritius, Netherlands, and Venezuela) even though they are permitted to compete for office in these countries.

Every country in the dataset imposes either signature or deposit requirements on independents and most impose both.[14] To capture this information

[12]I calculate this measure by taking the total number of independent candidates in an election and dividing it by the total number of candidates in an election. For party-list systems I only calculate this measure when I have information about the number of candidates on each party list, which considerably reduces the number of countries in this part of the analysis and so should be taken with a grain of salt.

[13]Candidates that run as independents but once in office join parliamentary factions or closely align themselves with political parties in the legislature are included in the analysis. While the reasons that candidates adopt these behaviors are interesting, they are a subject for future research.

[14]The following countries impose signature requirements on independent candidates but not deposit requirements: Belgium, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, and Venezuela. Estonia and Turkey are the only two countries that require the opposite—deposit requirements but not signature requirements.

TABLE 1   Descriptive Statistics (Electoral Districts)

Variable	Mean	Range
Independent Candidates (percent of total)	6.94	0–100
Independent Votes (percent of total)	1.73	0–100
Independent Seats (percent of total)	1.03	0–100
Ballot Access Requirements (independents)	1.85	1–2
Ballot Access Requirements (parties)	1.02	0–2
Candidate Minimum (parties)	0.20	0–1
Number of Signatures (% of district total vote)	0.31	0–12.41
Deposit Amount (% of GDP per capita)	74.93	0–1427.82
Majority/Plurality Systems	0.85	0–1
Mixed Electoral Systems	0.06	0–1
Open-List PR Systems	0.12	0–1
District Magnitude	1.70	1–150
Electoral Thresholds	1.61	0–10
First Elections	0.02	0–1
First Ten Years of Democracy	0.12	0–1
District Size	127625	119–1.09e+07
Single National Districts	0.001	0–1

For indicator variables the value in the mean column refers to the proportion of districts in the dataset that have a value of 1.

I create a single measure for the number of requirements demanded of independents for a particular election. Based on information from countries' individual electoral laws and the *EPIC Project (Election Process Information Collection)*, this measure takes on the value 1 if there are either deposit or signature requirements for independents, and 2 if there are both deposit and signature requirements.[15]

In order to take into account the size of these requirements, I create two additional measures.[16] For signature requirements this measure is the number of signatures required of independents as a percentage of the total number of votes cast in a district. Absolute signature requirements in this study range

[15]It was not possible to determine this information for two countries—Greece and Luxembourg—in the analysis.

[16]I was not able to identify the information needed to calculate one or both of the size measures for 19 countries, significantly reducing the number of countries in this analysis. These countries are: Bermuda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Botswana, Colombia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mauritius, Netherlands, Niger, Pakistan, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

between 2 and 5000 signatures. Some countries do not require specific numbers of signatures but require signatures from a certain proportion of registered voters in a district.[17] For deposit requirements this measure is the deposit amount as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. The GDP data are based on *Global Financial Data*, which presents GDP data in local currency units compatible with the deposit data.

I create a similar measure for the ballot access requirements imposed on parties. This measure ranges between 0 to 2, where 0 indicates that neither ballot nor signature requirements are required of parties, 1 that either ballot or signature requirements are required, and 2 that both ballot and signature requirements are required. I also create an indicator variable denoting if the number of candidates in parties must exceed 1 in order for a party to register, as in Canada, Lithuania, and Turkey. I do not take into account the size of these requirements as I do with independents, since these requirements are not comparable across countries with some based on parties and others on the number of candidates within parties or on other factors.

I measure majority and plurality systems, which vary both within and across countries in this study, with a single indicator variable coded 1 if seats are assigned in a district based on majority or plurality rule and 0 otherwise. In the analysis to follow, I measure them jointly because there are only four majority systems in this study, and I expect both systems to affect independents in the same way.[18] If I, nonetheless, separate them out, both individually have statistically significant positive effects on the percentage of votes and seats that independent candidates win. In this study independents win almost 1.79% of the vote and 1.10% of the seats in majority/plurality systems, while in PR systems they win about 1.37% of the vote and 0.57% of the seats on average.[19] I measure mixed systems with an indicator representing 1 if a legislature's electoral system combines either majority or plurality rule with PR, and 0 otherwise.

Although preferential voting should favor independents, I do not include a measure of it in the statistical analysis because only a handful of countries

in the world have ever used preferential voting systems for national elections—three of which are in the dataset, namely Australia, Ireland, and Malta. The conclusions that one can draw about preferential voting in any statistical analysis are, therefore, limited. A comparison, however, of the average vote received by independent candidates in preferential versus nonpreferential voting systems suggests that independent candidates have stronger positions in preferential voting systems. On average, the percentage of votes and seats that independent candidates win in preferential voting systems is 1.58 and 1.11 points greater than in nonpreferential voting systems.[20]

I measure district magnitude with a simple continuous variable indicating the number of seats that are open for contestation in a district. The average district magnitude is about 2 in this study and ranges between 1 and 150. The high end of this range is occupied by five countries that have electoral districts encompassing entire countries (i.e., Belgium (Senate), Estonia, Moldova, Netherlands, and New Zealand).[21] There are also a number of plurality systems in this study for which district magnitude exceeds 1 including: Bermuda's House of Assembly (pre-2002), Mauritius' National Assembly, Poland's Senate, and Spain's Senate.

District magnitude is related to but distinct from district size, which refers to the number of voters in a district, which I approximate using the total number of votes cast in a district. Typically, district size is smaller in majority and plurality systems than in proportional representation systems. As a result, candidates in PR systems generally need a larger absolute number of votes to win seats, but a smaller relative number. Having small districts should bolster independent candidates since it reduces their costs of competing in elections.

Distinguishing PR systems from each other, I measure open-list PR systems with a single indicator variable coded 1 if voters can indicate their preferences for particular candidates on a list, and 0 otherwise. On average independents win 1.58 and 0.69% of the votes and seats in open-list PR systems compared to 0.36 and 0.00%, respectively, in closed-list PR systems.[22] I measure electoral thresholds in this

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[17]These countries include: Romania, Russia, Spain, and Venezuela.

[18]They are: Australia (lower house), Lithuania (lower house), part of Hungary (lower house), and Trinidad and Tobago (lower house)—one of which also allows for preferential voting (Australia).

[19]These differences are statistically significant at the p $\leq$ 0.01 level.

[20]These differences are statistically significant at the p $\leq$ 0.01 level.

[21]These are not the only districts, however, in some of these countries (e.g., Belgium, Estonia, and New Zealand).

[22]These differences are statistically significant at the p $\leq$ 0.05 level.

TABLE 2   **Ballot Access Requirements**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Number	Vote	Seat	Number	Vote	Seat
Ballot Access Requirements (Independents)	0.46 (7.96)	−3.16 (3.34)	−1.40 (3.00)			
Ballot Access Requirements (Parties)	−3.45 (2.96)	−0.08 (1.62)	−0.55 (1.48)			
Candidate Minimum (Parties)	−3.57 (2.43)	−0.51 (0.49)	−0.61 (0.41)	−1.71 (2.01)	−0.03 (0.65)	−0.07 (0.47)
Size of Signature Requirements				−2.81** (0.88)	0.02 (0.32)	0.09 (0.20)
Size of Deposit Requirements				0.0004 (0.006)	0.002 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
Constant	8.91 (11.50)	6.91 (4.30)	3.93 (3.77)	5.98* (2.31)	0.94 (0.69)	0.51 (0.53)
R^2	0.078	0.038	0.011	0.104	0.037	0.010
Observations	14864	28142	28142	9877	20005	20005

Standard errors are in parentheses and clustered by election. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$

analysis with a continuous variable indicating the percentage of votes that independents must win in order to earn a seat.[23] Most thresholds range between 3 and 5%. The country with the highest threshold in this study is Turkey, which has had a 10% threshold since 1983.

Finally, I measure the first elections in a country with a simple indicator variable coded 1 if elections are the first democratic ones in a country and 0 otherwise. Since partisan ties may take more than one election cycle to solidify, I also create an indicator variable identifying the first 10 years of democracy (i.e., the ten-year period following the first democratic elections in a country), which generally encompasses two to three election cycles. To further explore if countries, which transitioned to democracy in different periods of history are more or less favorable to independents, I also create indicators for first-wave (pre-1945), second-wave (1945-1973), and third-wave (1974-present) democracies.

Results

Unless otherwise noted, the analyses to follow use ordinary least squares regression with country- and year-fixed effects to adjust for correlation among

multiple districts of the same countries and to control for any unexplained country- and year-specific factors that may affect independents. The number of observations (N) or districts in the analysis varies across models because I restrict some models to particular types of electoral systems to explore variation within these systems. It also varies because of limitations in the availability of certain data, such as ballot access requirements or district magnitude. To ensure, however, that the latter changes do not drive the results, I conduct additional analyses on the subset of countries for which all data is available. All robustness tests are provided in a supplementary appendix.

In Models 1–3 (Table 2), I examine the effect of having ballot access requirements on the electoral strength of independent candidates.[24] On the whole, the results of these models suggest that having more ballot access requirements decreases the percentage of votes and seats that independents win, but these effects are not significant. The results for ballot access requirements imposed on parties, and those for candidate minimums are not significant either, which is consistent with the findings of (Hug 2001), who finds that signature and deposit requirements do not discourage new parties from arising in developed democracies.

In Models 4–6 (Table 2), I examine how the size of signature and deposit requirements imposed on independents affect their electoral strength. In these

[23]This threshold is based on the first tier at which seats are distributed. Greece had a 17% threshold between 1971 and 1981 that applies only to the second tier. Cyprus, which has a 1.8% threshold that applies to the second tier, bars independents entirely from this second tier.

[24]In Models 1–6 country-fixed effects are not used because ballot access requirements do not vary very much within countries. Instead, standard errors are clustered by country.

TABLE 3   Seat Allocation Procedures

	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12
	Number	Vote	Seat	Number	Vote	Seat
Majority/Plurality Systems	0.28 (0.29)	1.33** (0.22)	1.42** (0.36)	0.14 (0.33)	1.42** (0.24)	1.53** (0.41)
District Magnitude	0.01 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
District Size	3.79e-7 (2.14e-7)	−2.73e-7** (4.63e-8)	−2.06e-7** (5.55e-8)	3.85e-7 (2.14e-7)	−2.78e-7** (4.71e-8)	−2.12e-7** (5.67e-8)
Mixed Electoral Systems				0.84 (0.72)	2.22** (0.49)	1.59** (0.58)
Majority/Plurality × Mixed Systems				0.87* (0.38)	−0.75* (0.35)	−0.93 (0.55)
Constant	5.91** (0.44)	0.36 (0.23)	−0.32 (0.35)	5.90** (0.46)	0.18 (0.25)	−0.46 (0.39)
R^2 (within)	0.008	0.005	0.002	0.009	0.005	0.002
R^2 (between)	0.116	0.020	0.036	0.210	0.077	0.065
Observations	14922	28063	28063	14922	28063	28063

Standard errors are in parentheses. Country- and year-fixed effects are not shown. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$.

models size does not significantly decrease the electoral strength of independent candidates with the exception of signature requirements and the percentage of independent candidates that compete in an election (the analysis of which is based on a recognizably smaller N).

In Models 7–9 (Table 3), I examine the effect of majority/plurality systems, district magnitude, and district size on the electoral strength of independent candidates.[25] According to these models, majority/plurality systems increase the percentage of votes and seats that independents win by 1.3 and 1.4 percentage points, respectively. Also noteworthy is that the effect of district magnitude is not significant. Increasing district size, however, reduces the percentage of votes and seats that independents win in an election although the effect is moderate. Raising district size by 150,000 votes (i.e., the approximate difference between an average PR and an average majority/plurality district), reduces the percentage of votes that independents win by about 0.04 percentage points.

In Models 10–12 (Table 3), I interact mixed electoral systems with the electoral system used in a particular district. According to these analyses, while mixed electoral systems increase the electoral strength of independent candidates, majority/plurality systems that occur in mixed electoral systems increase the percentage of votes and seats that independent

candidates win less than those that occur in pure majority/plurality systems, and vice versa for PR systems.[26]

In Models 13–15 (Table 4), I introduce a control for first elections, which raises the percentage of candidates that are independents in an election and the percentage of votes and seats that independents win by about 4–5 percentage points. In separate models (not shown), the first 10 years of democracy increases the percentage of candidates that are independents in an election by as much as 7 percentage points and also increases the percentage of votes that they receive by only 0.90 percentage points, but does not have a significant effect on the percentage of seats that they win. This suggests that the first elections in a country are the most pivotal. Third-wave democracies are also associated with stronger independent candidates, but since all third-wave democracies are new democracies, it is unclear whether third-wave democracies will behave more like first-and second-wave democracies over time.

In Models 16–18 (Table 4), I interact first elections with majority/plurality systems to explore the relationship between the two. Here I find that the effects of first elections are greater in majority/plurality systems, where they increase the percentage of candidates that are independents in an election by 5.9 percentage points, and the percentage of votes and seats that they win by 5.5 and 6.2 points, respectively. Conversely, those that occur in PR systems only increase the percentage of candidates that are

[25]Ballot access requirements are excluded from the model since they significantly reduce the number of observations in the dataset. Colombia, Cyprus (pre-1991), Germany (PR only), and Turkey (pre-1999) are excluded from this analysis because I do not have data for them on district magnitude. However, if I drop district magnitude from the models so that they are included, the main results are substantively and statistically the same.

[26]F-tests indicate that the main effects and interaction terms are jointly significant for these models at the $p \leq 0.01$ level.

TABLE 4 Age of the Electoral System

	Model 13	Model 14	Model 15	Model 16	Model 17	Model 18
	Number	Vote	Seat	Number	Vote	Seat
Majority/Plurality Systems	0.29 (0.30)	1.34** (0.22)	1.44** (0.36)	−0.33 (0.31)	0.81** (0.23)	0.78* (0.39)
District Magnitude	0.01 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
District Size	3.91e-7 (2.15e-7)	−2.64e-7** (4.75e-8)	−1.97e-7** (5.67e-8)	3.87e-7 (2.14e-7)	−2.64e-7** (4.87e-8)	−1.97e-7** (5.79e-8)
First Elections	5.26** (0.81)	4.41** (0.81)	4.83** (1.17)	1.62** (0.55)	1.14** (0.30)	0.78** (0.25)
First Elections × Majority/Plurality				4.31** (1.03)	4.40** (1.02)	5.45** (1.46)
Constant	5.83** (0.44)	0.35 (0.23)	−0.32 (0.36)	6.38** (0.44)	0.81** (0.24)	0.24 (0.37)
R^2 (within)	0.013	0.012	0.006	0.014	0.013	0.007
R^2 (between)	0.132	0.013	0.031	0.117	0.017	0.049
Observations	14922	28063	28063	14922	28063	28063

Standard errors are in parentheses. Country- and year-fixed effects are not shown. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$.

independents by 1.62 percentage points, and the percentage of votes and seats that they win by 1.14 and 0.78 points.[27]

In Models 19–21 (Table 5), I restrict the analysis to only majority and plurality systems in order to explore variation within these systems. These models reveal that increasing district magnitude increases the electoral strength of independents. In order to increase the percentage of votes and seats that independents win by 1 percentage point, district magnitude needs to increase by approximately three seats.

In Models 22–23 (Table 5), I restrict the analysis to only proportional representation systems in order to test the effect of open-lists, district magnitude, and electoral thresholds on the strength of independent candidates in PR systems.[28] Open-lists increase the vote that independent candidates win by 0.85 percentage points, but do not have a significant effect on seats. In contrast, a 5% threshold reduces the vote for independent candidates by 0.40 percentage points. Dropping Turkey from the analysis, which has a threshold twice as large as any other country in the dataset, does not change the threshold results for either votes or seats, nor does excluding single national districts. District magnitude also decreases the percentage of votes that independents win, but its effect on seats is only significant at the $p \leq 0.10$ level.

Throughout the foregoing presentation of my results, I have highlighted a number of additional models conducted using alternative measures of my independent variables and different restrictions of the data. In addition to these robustness tests, I perform a number of others to ensure that the previous results are not driven by case selection or the estimation procedure used. In order, for example, to determine if the results for majority/plurality systems are driven by countries in which independent candidates have the strongest presence, I repeat the previous analysis dropping Russia and Pakistan from the analysis, which both have plurality systems. They are not. In models excluding these countries, majority/plurality systems continue to increase the electoral strength of independent candidates, as does increasing district magnitudes within these systems.

Conversely, in order to determine if the results are driven by the countries or districts in which independent candidates are weakest, I repeat the previous analysis excluding countries in which independents have never competed or won any votes or seats. In these models, which have an overall better fit, majority/plurality systems continue to increase the strength of independents, while in models of only PR systems, open-list systems increase the vote that independents win and thresholds reduce them. Increasing district magnitude also reduces the percentage of votes independents win at the $p \leq 0.10$ level.

Finally, I repeat the previous analysis using standard errors clustered by election instead of fixed effects. These models show that majority/plurality systems and open-list PR systems increase the electoral strength of independents over closed-list PR systems. District size and first elections, which

[27]The main effects for first elections and majority/plurality systems and the interaction term for the two are jointly significant in these models at the $p \leq 0.01$ level.

[28]I do not show the results for the percentage of independent candidates in an election because there are too few PR systems for which information on thresholds, and the percentage of independent candidates in an election is available to produce reliable results.

TABLE 5   **Majority/Plurality and PR Decomposition**

	Model 19	Model 20	Model 21	Model 22	Model 23
	Majority/ Plurality	**Majority/ Plurality**	**Majority/ Plurality**	**PR System**	**PR System**
	Number	**Vote**	**Seat**	**Vote**	**Seat**
District Magnitude	0.08 (0.17)	0.35* (0.15)	0.44* (0.18)	−0.02* (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)
District Size	2.78e-7 (2.26e-7)	−3.01e-7** (6.21e-8)	−2.39e-7** (7.75e-8)	−1.47e-7 (1.17e-7)	−1.38e-7 (1.30e-7)
First Elections	5.79** (0.94)	5.70** (1.06)	6.41** (1.56)	0.76* (0.33)	0.47 (0.25)
Open-List PR systems				0.85** (0.26)	−0.04 (0.29)
Electoral Threshold				−0.08** (0.03)	−0.06 (0.03)
Constant	6.00** (0.40)	2.96** (0.28)	1.52** (0.35)	2.66** (0.99)	2.53** (0.93)
R^2 (within)	0.012	0.013	0.007	0.016	0.012
R^2 (between)	0.095	0.006	0.000	0.033	0.016
Observations	13628	24931	24931	3132	3132

The analysis of the number of candidates in PR systems is not included because of insufficient data. Country- and year-fixed effects are not shown. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$

explain well the variation in the strength of independent candidates within countries according to the fixed-effect models, however, do not have significant effects on independent candidates across countries according to the clustered model, potentially because some unexplained country-specific factors are masking the results in the latter.

Conclusion

At the most basic level, this study has provided a thick description of the ways in which independent candidates compete worldwide. The statistical analysis builds on this thick description by identifying which electoral systems advantage independents the most and why. In so doing, the analysis casts doubt on certain country- and candidate-specific theories about independent candidates, such as U.S.-based claims that ballot access requirements and majority/plurality systems are major stumbling blocks to independent candidates.

Adding a layer of complexity to these findings, the analysis also distinguishes among different features of electoral systems while clarifying the mechanisms through which they influence independent candidates. While, for example, majority and plurality systems have low district magnitudes, which disadvantage small vote getters, majority and plurality systems strengthen independent candidates overall because they emphasize candidates over parties. The small district size typical of these systems also

promotes independents because it reduces campaign costs, a fact that more generally may help explain why the United States has very weak independent candidates despite having a plurality system.

The analysis further highlights the interaction among different elements of electoral systems. Democratic transitions occurring within majority and plurality systems, for example, are more prone to independent candidates, which may help to explain why Russia's party system has been so slow to consolidate. Majority and plurality systems, however, which occur within mixed electoral systems are less supportive of independents than those that do not. In part, this analysis, most notably its results regarding democratic transitions, are part of a broader discussion about party consolidation, since independents may be one indication of their lack of consolidation (transitory parties and party switching are others).

This study also unpacks how variations within electoral systems affect the strength of independent candidates. In majority and plurality systems raising district magnitude strengthens independent candidates by weakening partisan ties, while in PR systems it reduces independents, albeit weakly, by lessening intraparty competition. Having open-lists in PR systems has the opposite effect by making politics more candidate focused, while electoral thresholds reduce the electoral strength of independents by preventing small vote getters from winning seats.

Although this study sheds light on how electoral systems influence independent candidates more broadly, it is by no means exhaustive. Additional research is needed to enrich the baseline findings

established here from either a macro- or microlevel perspective. At a macrolevel, future research may explore how additional institutions, such as presidentialism, affect the electoral strength of independent candidates and uncover in the process different mechanisms through which institutions influence independents, such as party discipline. At the microlevel, this research may explore the interaction between the individual reasons why candidates run as independents and voters vote for them or other institutional factors, such as the internal organization of political parties. Although many interesting questions have yet to be studied, this analysis has helped clarify how one of the most fundamental features of political systems, namely the electoral system, influences the strength of independent candidates, which new studies may build on whether the ultimate goal of decision makers is to enlarge the presence of independent candidates or curtail it.

Acknowledgments

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