The Art of Self-selection or Voter intervention? The 2023 Election and the Shifting Social Bias of Slovak Parliamentary Elites since 2006

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Abstract

Recent research has shown a trend towards more participatory nomination procedures in new as well as more established parties. However, in Slovakia most politically relevant parties have equally centralised, leadership-dominated, and exclusive candidate selection modes. In the first part of the article I draw on the elite literature to investigate cross-party variation in the social bias of parliamentary elites since 2006. Using the 2023 election as a point of departure, I go on to assess how representative MPs are of their own voters, and why social bias varies across parties despite their similar selection modes. The analysis demonstrates that the impact of the selection mode as well as of voter preferences is contingent on the nomination practices of the individual parties. I found strong elements of self-selection in nearly all parties: the members of the presidium nominated themselves, and the composition of the parliamentary elites thus to a considerable extent reflects who the presidium members are. The influence of the voters is limited, because they tend to confirm the priorities of the selectorates; however, in the case of the four smallest parties in 2023, preference voting to some extent mitigated the effect of self-selection. The main drivers of preference voting were the idiosyncratic nomination practice of Ordinary People, and the presence of organised groups and parties on the list (informal alliances).

Keywords: Slovakia; parliamentary elites; new parties.

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1. Introduction

In 2023, Progressive Slovakia became the first Slovak party ever to employ the zipper system for its parliamentary candidate list, and the first party to have a perfectly gender balanced caucus. It also had the youngest members of parliament (MPs). By contrast, the election winner Direction – Social Democrats (Smer-SD) had the oldest MPs and the lowest share of female MPs. The 2023 election was one for the record books also in other respects. A total of 85 seats changed hands, more than in any other election since the transition to democracy. The newcomers Progressive Slovakia (PS) and Voice – Social Democrats (Hlas-SD) accounted for 59 of these, but the comeback of two perennials in Slovak politics – the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) – also contributed to the high seat turnover. Moreover, a record-high number of MPs were elected due to preference votes. However, none of the MPs of the three largest parties – Smer, Hlas, and PS – owed their election to preference votes; voter preferences only had an impact on the caucuses of the four smallest parties and alliances: KDH, SNS, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), and the alliance headed by Igor Matovič and his Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO).

To be sure, middle-aged, well-educated men in high-status professions are still overrepresented among MPs in Slovakia as well as elsewhere in Europe (Bakke, 2020; Best & Cotta, 2000; Semenova, Edinger, & Best, 2014). However, as illustrated above, there are some interesting differences between parties.

In the first part of this article I draw on the elite literature to investigate how the social bias of parliamentary elites in Slovakia has varied over time between new and more established parties, and between ideological clusters of parties. The analysis of new parties is limited to electorally successful newcomers *in their first election*, while parties that made comeback are treated as old parties.[2] I apply a definition of newness that includes 'genuinely new parties' (Sikk, 2005, p. 399) as well as new parties founded by leading figures of established parties.

In the second part of the article I focus on the most recent parliamentary election and investigate how representative the MPs elected in 2023 are of their own voters; why the social bias varies between the three most successful parties despite their arguably quite similar modes of candidate selection; and how and why preference votes disrupted the original ranking of only the four smallest parties and alliances. The analysis is based on a unique dataset covering all individuals who have served in the National Council of the Slovak Republic since the end of communism, as well as on structured party interviews. To assess how

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2   The party register lists 272 parties since 1990, of which 59 are currently active, at least on paper, while 106 are under liquidation. The rest have been dissolved or are Czechoslovak parties that no longer operate in Slovakia. See party register website at https://ives.minv.sk/PolitickeStrany/.

representative the current parties are of their voters, I also use data from the exit poll conducted by the FOCUS agency for TV Markíza, 30 September 2023.[3]

My point of departure is Norris and Lovenduski's (1993) conceptualisation of elite recruitment as a funnel, in which the pool of aspirants is filtered through the nomination processes of the parties and the voters have the final say. It is generally assumed that social bias increases from the top to the bottom of the funnel; however, the inclusiveness of the selectorate and the centralisation of the nomination process is believed to matter (Hazan & Rahat, 2010). More specifically, list balancing – and thus descriptive representation – should be easier to achieve in proportional representation (PR) systems when the parties' nomination processes are centralised and the selectorates narrow (Rahat & Cross, 2018). In Slovakia, most politically relevant parties have equally centralised, leadership-dominated, and exclusive candidate selection modes, which should theoretically make list balancing easier. However, this also means that selection mode as such is not a plausible explanation of *cross-party variation*. Such variation may instead occur because parties attract different types of contenders (supply of aspirants); because the gatekeepers' selection criteria or the relative importance of these criteria differ across parties; or because the voters of individual parties prefer different types of candidates (demand).

The article contributes to the research literature in two ways. First, it extends the focus from cross-national and longitudinal variation in the social bias of parliamentary elites to include cross-party variation. Second, it demonstrates that the impact of the selection mode as well as of voter preferences on parliamentary elites is contingent on the nomination practices of individual parties. In Slovakia, equally centralised, leadership-dominated, and exclusive candidate selection modes produce diverging outcomes across parties; and moreover, these differences in social bias to a large extent reflect who the selectorates are.

I start with an overview of the research literature. In the next section I introduce the parties and institutional framework for candidate selection in Slovakia. The analysis starts with an overview of cross-party variation in social bias over time, before I zoom in on the 2023 elite.

2. State of the art: the elite literature

This article is about descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967) – how and why the social bias of parliamentary elites varies between parties. While important, whether and how this matters for party cohesion, for policy output, or for the quality of democracy is outside the scope of the article (Rahat & Cross, 2018).

The social bias of parliamentary elites is well documented. Across Europe, members of parliament (MPs) are predominantly male, older than the average citizen, better educated, and drawn from higher status occupations. Women, ethnic and religious minorities, rural populations, peasants, and workers have traditionally been underrepresented, while the share of MPs with politics as a profession has increased since 1945. The level of professionalisation was naturally initially lower in the post-communist region than in Western Europe, but male dominance was even stronger, and MPs were found to be even better educated than their West European counterparts (Best & Cotta, 2000, pp. 497–504; Cotta & Best, 2007; Semenova et al., 2014, p. 298). Slovakia is no exception (Bakke, 2020).

In modern democracies, candidate selection is – in practice, if not always in principle – the prerogative of political parties. The Constitution and/or electoral law regulate who is eligible to vote and stand for election, how votes are translated into seats, and the degree of personalisation – the extent to which voters can influence 'which individual candidates […] are to be elected' (Jaklič & Setnikar, 2022, p. 199). Some countries, such as Germany, also have detailed legal regulations for candidate selection (Reiser, 2022, p. 4). In most cases, however, it is up to the individual parties to decide their own candidate selection procedures: party by-laws and/or internal guidelines typically determine who adopts the candidate list, while formalisation and institutionalisation of nomination practices vary across parties. Older, more established parties tend to have more institutionalised practices than newer parties (Reiser, 2014). Moreover, in the Czech Republic as well as in Slovakia I found the nomination processes of new parties to be quite informal in their first election (Bakke, 2020; 2022).

Following Hazan & Rahat (2010), scholars distinguish between two main dimensions of candidate selection: the inclusiveness of the selectorate and the centralisation of the process. The former dimension is about the size of the selectorate, while the latter is about where candidate selection takes place – at national or constituency level. The trend is towards more participatory procedures in new as well as established parties (Cordero & Coller, 2018, p. 4). Party primaries are often regarded as more inclusive, and thus more 'democratic', than the convention model, but this is true only if parties have more than a handful of members. Moreover, this trend does not apply to all new parties. Coller et al. (2018, pp. 263–265) found that some entrepreneurial new parties had more centralized, leadership-dominated, and exclusive selection modes. In Slovakia this applies to most parties (see below).

Norris and Lovenduski (1993) conceptualise candidate selection as a funnel, in which the pool of aspirants is filtered through the nomination process of the parties and the voters have the final say. The aspirants are those who fulfil the legal criteria (typically citizenship and age) as well as the party-specific criteria (such as party membership), and have sufficient political interest, ambition, time, and/or money to pursue a political career (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993, p. 381). Since neither party membership nor willingness to run for election is equally distributed, the pool of aspirants is a limited, unrepresentative subset of the voters. In Denmark, only 11% of party members would run for election to the parliament if encouraged by their party, while another 13% 'would consider' it. Moreover, with the exception of age, those who were willing to run were even less representative of the voters than rank-and-file members (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019, pp. 162–163). Based on data from advanced democracies, Heidar & Wauters conclude that women, young people, the less educated, and people in low-status occupations were consistently underrepresented among party members, whether compared to the electorate at large or the parties' own voters. Party members thus did not mirror the population, and probably never have (Heidar & Wauters, 2019, pp. 8, 171).

The selectorate (aka 'gatekeepers') select candidates from among the eligible and willing, and put together a ranked list. Besides personal qualifications, traditionally important selection criteria (especially for top positions) are party loyalty, political experience, incumbency, and wealth. To counter social bias, selectorates sometimes employ additional list-balancing criteria such as gender, age, minority status, and geography (Valdini, 2012, p. 741; Reiser 2022, p. 2). It has been argued that while inclusive and decentralised selectorates (such as party primaries at the constituency level) are less capable of coordinating and controlling the overall results of the process, list balancing is easier when the selectorate is narrow and the process centralised (Rahat & Cross, 2018; but see Pruysers, Cross, Gauja, & Rahat, 2017). However, candidate selection involves trade-offs – between party loyalty and electability, and between descriptive representation and skills needed to win elections or serve as an MP, such as communication skills and expertise. Based on German data, Reiser found that the priorities of the party selectorate depended on whether the constituency was 'safe' for the party: selectorates prioritised party loyalty in safe seats and electability in contested seats (Reiser, 2022, p. 2; Bakke, 2022, pp. 365, 369). Agency clearly matters: selection criteria vary across parties, and so does the will to promote underrepresented groups (Keith & Verge, 2018).

Finally, the influence of the voters depends on the personalisation of the electoral system. In closed-list PR systems, party selectorates have a monopoly on candidate selection. In open and flexible-list PR systems such as the Slovak one, the voters can influence the ranking – and thus who gets elected – by casting preference votes for their preferred candidate(s). This introduces an element of intra-party competition (André, Depauw, Shugart, & Chytilek, 2017; Crisp,

Olivella, Malecki, & Sher, 2013). In the Czech context, Balík and Hruška (2022) found that individual features such as female gender, university education, incumbency, and politics as a profession had a positive effect. Voters rely on primary information (e.g. incumbency and celebrity status) as well as secondary information reported on the ballot (e.g. gender, age, education, profession, place of residence, and party membership), but beyond this, they use the party's ranking as a cue. Top-ranked candidates therefore tend to get more preference votes than lower-ranked candidates, and candidates in the first and last positions get a bonus (see e.g. Marcinkiewicz & Stegmaier, 2015; Spáč, 2016). The ballot position effect reduces the impact of voter preferences on the composition of the parliamentary elites.

Cross-national and longitudinal variation in the social bias of parliamentary elites has so far received more attention than cross-party differences. In this article I look at cross-party differences from two perspectives. On the one hand, I look at differences between new and more established parties. New parties may attract people from a wider range of social backgrounds (supply), and they may be more open to socially more diverse candidates, and potentially also independent candidates (demand), both because traditionally important selection criteria such as incumbency and party loyalty are less relevant (Valdini, 2012, p. 741), and because new parties often have fewer members and/or limited financial resources and material incentives to offer (Bolleyer, 2011, pp. 8, 11). However, the need to raise public awareness and present themselves as competent will not be any less pressing. Criteria such as name recognition, communication skills, and expertise are therefore likely to be more important, which favours well-educated candidates from high-status professions.

On the other hand, I look at differences between ideologically similar clusters of parties. The gender gap in *voting behaviour* is well documented, with women voting more conservative until the late 1960s and more leftist since then (for an interesting recent contribution, see Koeppl-Turyna, 2020). The *membership* of leftist parties also tends to be more gender-balanced, and in Western Europe left-wing parties have been found to outperform right-wing parties in terms of female *representation*, although recent research shows variation within the left along the GAL-TAN axis (Keith & Verge, 2018). Beyond this, voters of green/left-libertarian parties tend to be younger and better educated, while far right voters are more likely to be male and less educated (Santos & Mercea, 2024). Likewise, members of new parties are on average younger, green parties have more female and more young members, and the members of (some) radical right parties are more representative in terms of income and education (Heidar & Wauters, 2019, pp. 8, 171–172; see also Dassonneville & McAllister, 2023, pp. 17–21). The EurElite project did suggest that the social profile of candidates and MPs vary by party family at least to some extent (Cotta & Best, 2007).

3. Electoral system, parties, and candidate selection in Slovakia

The electoral system for parliamentary elections is regulated by the current electoral law (§42–71), and since 2023 also by the Constitution (§74).[4] Slovakia's flexible-list proportional representation (PR) system combines the Hagenbach-Bischoff formula with one electoral constituency, a 5% threshold for parties, and a 7% threshold for electoral alliances of two or three parties. Under the current rules, voters may endorse individual candidates on the list of their choice by casting one to four preference votes, and if more than 3% of those voting for a list endorse a candidate, he or she moves up; otherwise, the ballot ranking stands. Since 2006, between 74% and 84% of the voters of parliamentary parties have cast preference votes, and these voters on average use three of the four votes at their disposal. Each party/alliance can nominate a maximum of 150 candidates, and only registered parties can run for election. To register a new party, 10,000 signatures are needed (Zákon 85/2005, §6). However, since the party law allows registered parties to change their name and statutory organs, an easier way out is to buy off the stakeholder of a 'sleeping' party.[5] (For more details on electoral system reform, see Charvát, 2023; Mesežnikov, 2014; and Lebovič, 1999).

The party system has arguably been quite unstable, especially since the turn of the millennium. There is no party with an unbroken presence in parliament since 1990, new parties have won representation in every election but one, and electoral volatility has been consistently high (Gyárfášová, Hlatky, & Slosiarik, 2024). The strong personalisation of Slovak politics is part of the reason for this: charismatic political leaders have played an important role in party formation, and party brands have been strongly associated with the founder. The most obvious examples are perhaps Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), and Robert Fico's Direction – Social Democrats (Smer-SD), but there are several more recent examples, such as Richard Sulík's Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), Igor Matovič's 'Slovakia' (formerly Ordinary People and Independent

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4   Constitutional protection applies to PR elections and Slovakia as one constituency. To change any of these elements a 3/5 supermajority is needed. See the Constitution (Ústava Slovenskej Republiky z 1. septembra 1992) and the electoral law (Zákon 180 z 29. mája 2014 o podmienkach výkonu volebného práva) for details. Both are available at Slov-Lex, https://www.slov-lex.sk/.

5   Two of the three newcomers in the 2016 election used this loophole in the election law. Kotleba's People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) was first registered as the Wine Lovers party in 2000. In 2009-2010, Martin Beluský and Rastislav Schlosár (who later were to become MPs) took over the party. In late 2015 Boris Kollár took over the rights to first one party, and, when the members protested, a second party – the party of Slovak citizens. Two more recent examples are the 2019 transfer of the rights to Independent Forum (registered in 1998) to Anna Záborská, who founded the Christian Union (KÚ), and the 2021 transfer of the rights to the party Voice of the People (registered as HZD in 2002) to Milan Uhrík, who founded the party Republika. Another less successful example is the transfer of the rights to the party ANO from Pavol Rusko to Nora Mojsejová in 2011.

Personalities, OĽaNO), Boris Kollar's We are Family (Sme Rodina), and Peter Pellegrini's Voice – Social Democrats (Hlas-SD).

Most first-generation parties in Slovakia were modelled on the mass party, organised bottom-up, and combined a hierarchical structure with substantial membership, and a network of branches roughly corresponding to the levels of state administration (Ondruchová, 2000; Rybář, 2011). Only two of the five parties that constituted the core of the party system in the 1990s are currently in parliament: the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). Both returned to parliament in 2023 after a spell 'out in the dark', but by then their memberships had declined to a fraction of their original size. The once dominant Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the ex-communist Democratic Left Party (SDĽ) are defunct, while the Hungarian Coalition (MK) merged with two other Hungarian parties into the extra-parliamentary Hungarian Alliance (Aliancia) in 2021.

Smer is the only surviving second-generation party. Having started out as a centrist populist party in 1999, it merged with electorally weaker social democratic parties (including Fico's former party SDĽ) in the run-up to the 2006 election, adopted a social democratic platform, and went on to occupy the centre-left. By contrast, Smer's main competitor on the left–right dimension in the early 2000s, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ), collapsed in the wake of the Gorilla corruption and surveillance scandal in 2012. Neither party had many members in 2002 (a little over 5,000), but while the organisation of SDKÚ resembled the bottom-up structure of KDH, Smer was leadership-dominated and organised top-down from the beginning (Rybář, 2006, p. 167; Bakke & Sitter, 2020; Zvada, 2023).

Four third-generation parties won seats in the 2023 election, three of which belong to the volatile centre-right. The oldest of these is the market liberal SaS, founded by the circle around Richard Sulík in 2009. The four founding (and until 2019 only) members of Ordinary People[6] were elected from the bottom of the SaS list in 2010 and once they had registered as a separate 'movement' in late 2011, they applied the same rule to all incumbents seeking re-election. Ordinary People was the brainchild of Igor Matovič, and has never even pretended to be a party (Bakke, 2020, p. 358). In addition to providing a platform for independent candidates, Matovič has allowed candidates for small parties and groups to run on the OĽaNO ticket. The caucus has comprised quite conservative as well as more liberal MPs, but the main agenda has been to fight corruption. In 2020, OĽaNO unexpectedly won the election and formed a four-party coalition government with SaS, the

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6 Because of amendments to the electoral law in 2018 (in force since 2019) and the party law in 2020, it is in practice no longer possible to have fewer than 45 members. The party law (Zákon 85/2005, §6) requires parties to have an executive body of at least nine members, and the electoral law (Zákon 180/2014, §50) stipulates that in order to run, parties must attach signatures at least equalling five times the number of members in the executive body, i.e 45. These 45 must be registered party members.

conservative For the People (Za ľudí), and the populist We are Family. Despite a number of defections, the coalition struggled on until Sulík finally had enough and left in September 2022. By then OĽaNO was perilously close to the electoral threshold. It nevertheless entered into a formal alliance with two electorally marginal parties for the 2023 election: For the People and the ultra-conservative Christian Union (KÚ), which had run on the OĽaNO ballot also in 2020.

The most successful newcomer in 2023 was the social liberal Progressive Slovakia (PS). It was founded in 2017 and did well in two consecutive elections in 2019: First its former vice-chair Zuzana Čaputová won the presidential election, and then the alliance of PS and Together (Spolu), a liberal-conservative party, won the European Parliament election. The current PS chairman Michal Šimečka was one of his party's MEPs. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, however, the same alliance closely missed the 7% electoral threshold.

Finally, upon leaving the Smer caucus along with ten other MPs, former prime minister Peter Pellegrini founded the social democratic Hlas in 2020. By the time of its official registration in September that year Hlas had already surpassed Smer in the polls and remained the most popular party in Slovakia until early 2023. Compared to Smer, Hlas came across as more pro-European, less culture conservative, and considerably more moderate than Smer in its rhetoric, with Pellegrini repeatedly stressing the value of decency in politics.

An additional four parties have won seats on their own in at least one election since 2010. Béla Bugár founded Bridge (Most–Híd) in 2009, after leaving the Hungarian Coalition (MK). The party won representation in three consecutive elections, but fell below the threshold in 2020 and merged with MK in 2021. All the three newcomers in the 2016 election have failed. The centre-right Network party (Sieť#) failed in 2020 and is now defunct, while Boris Kollár's We are Family and Marián Kotleba's far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) failed in 2023. Republika, an offshoot of Kotleba's party founded by MEP Milan Uhrík in 2021, did not cross the electoral threshold in 2023 despite promising polls. (For more on party system development, see e.g. Sekerák & Němec, 2023).

Today, most of the politically relevant parties are organised top-down, and on average have lower membership and fewer branches than parties used to have in the 1990s. While HZDS peaked at 72,000 in 2000, all current parties in Slovakia – including the two surviving first-generation parties SNS and KDH – have fewer than 14,000 members and five of the parties that have won representation in the last two elections have fewer than 1,000 members (Table 1).

Table 1:
Party membership of selected parties as per 31.12.2023

Party	Smer-SD	Hungarian Alliance	KDH	We are Family*	Hlas-SD	SNS	Republika	Kotleba	PS	SaS	For the People	OĽaNO
Members	13,264	10,285	5,834	2,781	2,711	2,105	1,475	807	714	258	170	62

Source: Annual reports of the respective parties for 2023. *We are Family had only 466 paying members.

Apart from being subject to general eligibility requirements (Slovak citizenship and age above 21), candidate selection in Slovakia is not regulated by law, and parties are thus free to organise the nomination process as they please. Party by-laws of all major parties since 2006 specify which body formally adopts the candidate list, and in many cases also who drafts the proposal, while selection criteria and nomination practices are less formalised.[7]

Because the whole country is one constituency (since 1998), candidate selection is equally centralised in all parties, while the inclusiveness of the selectorates has been declining. Among the first-generation parties, the now defunct HZDS had on paper the most inclusive selectorate (a congress of 500–600 delegates, also representing local branches), but in practice party chairman Vladimír Mečiar had a lot of influence (V. Mečiar, interview, 28 May 2008). Likewise, fairly large nomination congresses adopted the lists of the ex-communist SDĽ. In KDH, MK, and, until 2005, SNS, medium-sized councils (80–90 persons) dominated by the regions adopted the lists, but the party leadership proposed the ranking. After the merger of SNS and the True Slovak National Party (PSNS) in 2005, new by-laws gave the then seven-member presidium the power to adopt candidate lists. Both SNS (albeit with a bigger presidium) and KDH have retained their level of inclusiveness. As for the second-generation parties, SDKÚ is to my knowledge the only party ever to use party primaries, while the lists of Smer were originally adopted by the wider party leadership, including the regional chairmen (Bakke, 2012; Bakke, 2020; see also Outlý et al., 2013, pp. 214–230).

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7   This section is based on party by-laws, and on the author's party interviews. Party by-laws are available on party webpages (for defunct parties, see Wayback Machine). While the by-laws of first-generation parties were silent about who was responsible for compiling the draft, second- and third-generation parties are much more likely to state this explicitly. The by-laws of Smer, Hlas, SaS, OĽaNO, For the People, We are Family, Most–Híd, and Republika explicitly place the responsibility for compiling the list in the hands of the party leader, while Aliancia by-laws give this responsibility to the gremium (6 persons). At the point of the interview, the party leader also had this role in PS (interview, 2023), and SNS (interview, 2017), while the presidium (13 persons) compiles the KDH list, but with the chairman in a leading role (interview, 2024).

With the exception of KDH, where the Council (approx. 120 members) adopts the list (and the Hungarian Alliance), all current politically relevant parties have narrow selectorates. The presidium (9–24 members) approves the list, and in most cases the party leader proposes the ranking, sometimes based on input from e.g. the regions. Among the parliamentary parties this applies to the party leaders of Smer, Hlas, For the People, SaS, and OĽaNO (the whole list), as well as Progressive Slovakia and SNS (only the first 30). In the case of SaS, the Republican Council (13 members) admittedly approves the list; however, this body is equivalent to the presidium of the other parties in size as well as function. Major extra-parliamentary parties are no different: the chairman proposes and the presidium approves candidate lists of We are Family, Republika, and probably Kotleba's People's Party Our Slovakia.[8] In short, candidate selection in Slovakia is not only centralised but also quite exclusive, and this applies to (nearly) all parties.

This means that the members of the presidium in practice decide the composition of the candidate list and ultimately the social bias of the parliamentary elite – unless the voters interfere. Selection and ranking criteria are therefore paramount. If we are to believe the research literature, one single list with 150 names should make list-balancing straightforward – if the presidium is so inclined. However, the trade-off between descriptive representation and other important criteria such as electability and expertise is more likely to pose a dilemma for new and electorally marginal parties than for larger and more established parties. Smaller parties are also more vulnerable to voter interference in the ranking of the list.

4. Who are the 2023 parliamentary elites, and how did they change?

This section first gives an overview of the changes in the composition of the parliamentary elites in Slovakia after the 2023 election, and second, assesses variations in social bias over time between new parties and more established parties as well as between party clusters.

While a record-high number of 85 seats changed hands, 30 seats more than in 2020, the number of re-elected incumbents remained almost the same and the number of MPs with previous experience as an MP was actually higher (Figure 1). The elites are thus in a sense more stable than the parties. A closer look reveals that 18 of the 60 re-elected incumbents were elected for a different party, as were

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8 Kotleba's party repeatedly refused to grant an interview, but considering the strong position of the chairman in that party, it is likely that he compiled the list, also because Republika does it this way. (Parties in Slovakia formed through splits tend to 'inherit' their mother party's organisational practices).

nearly half of the MPs who made comeback (eight of 17 MPs). This testifies to the fluidity of the Slovak party system. Smer stands out in that none of their MPs had run for a different party in the previous election. Conversely, the incumbents who won re-election for Hlas were (unsurprisingly) identical with the eleven who had left the Smer caucus in 2020. In its comeback, SNS had three incumbents re-elected, all representing Life – National Party (Život), a 2019 split from KDH, who had run on the ballot of Kotleba's party in 2020. Likewise, three of the nine incumbents re-elected for SaS had been elected on the ballot of For the People in 2020. The same applies to the single incumbent re-elected for Progressive Slovakia. Of the ten incumbents re-elected for the alliance of OĽaNO, For the People, and the Christian Union, six (including the NOVA chairman) were nominated by OĽaNO, two represented the Christian Union, while only chairwoman Veronika Remišová won re-election from For the People. All four party leaders ran from the bottom of the list.

Despite the high turnover, the overall changes in the social bias of the parliamentary elites were rather marginal. The gender balance improved slightly, from 21% to 22% female MPs (Figure 2), but Slovakia lagged even farther behind the European (31.5%) and global (27%) average (IPU Parline, 2024). Moreover, the parliamentary elite was even more socially biased than before in terms of age, education, and place of residence (Figures 3–5).[9] The already disproportionally large share of Bratislava residents increased by three percentage points to 43%; MPs elected in 2023 were on average one year older (at 49) than those elected in the previous election; a record-high number were university graduates (97%: up nine percentage points compared to 2020), and a substantial share (17%) even held a PhD degree.[10] Finally, the occupational backgrounds of the MPs are still distinctly (upper) middle-class, with managers, lawyers, and businessmen as the most numerous groups besides professional politicians (Figure 6). The most striking difference compared to the 2020 election is the lower share of professional politicians (mayors, governors, assistants of MPs, etc.) among the new MPs. Overall, engineers, technicians, economists, and scholars have lost ground compared to the 1990s, while managers, lawyers, businessmen, and professional politicians have gained. Together they have consistently comprised around half of the new (non-incumbent) MPs since 2006.

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9   There was no new party in 2006. New parties are therefore marked with bars in Figures 2–5.

10   Lesser doctorates like JUDr., MUDr., and Ph.Dr. have been quite common all along. These are on a level below PhD.

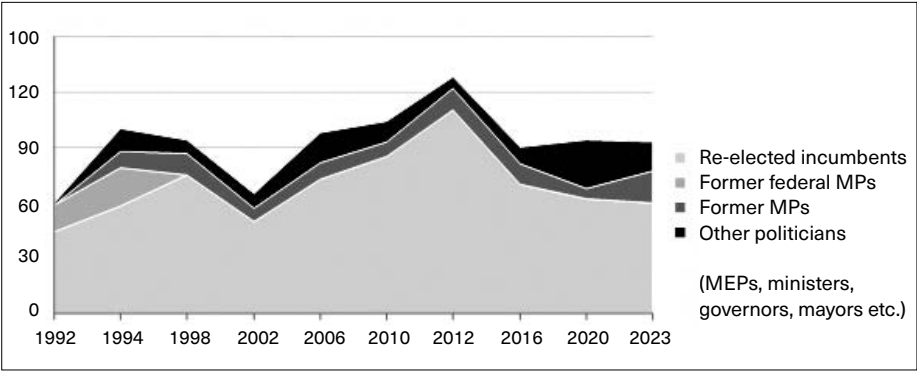Figure 1:
MPs with prior experience (absolute numbers)

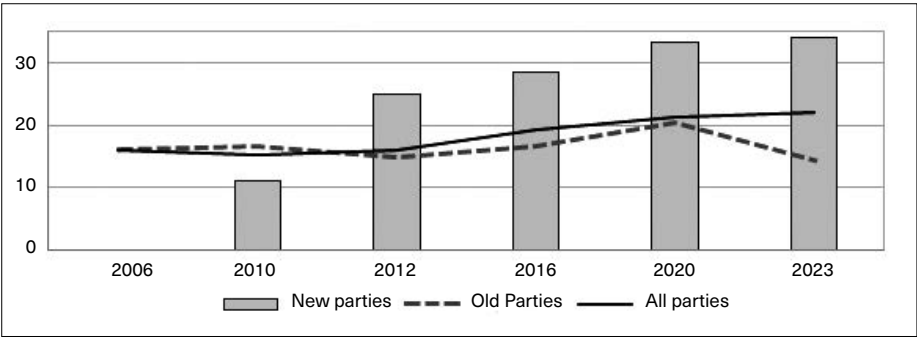

Figure 2:
Female MPs (%) – old versus new parties

Figure 3:
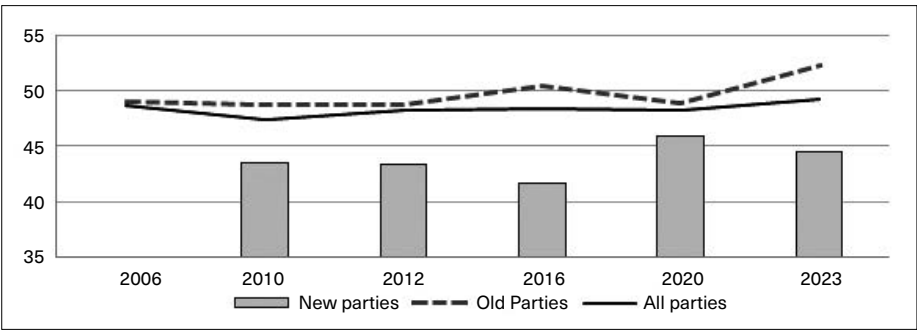**MPs by average age (in years) – old versus new parties**

Figure 4:
University graduates among MPs (%) – old versus new parties
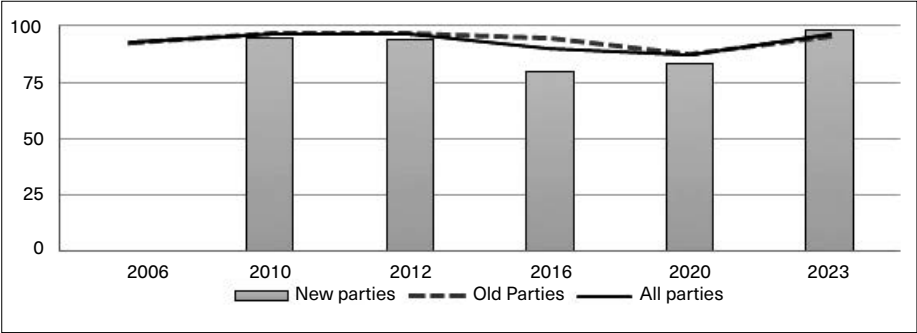

Figure 5:
MPs residing in the Bratislava region (%) – old versus new parties
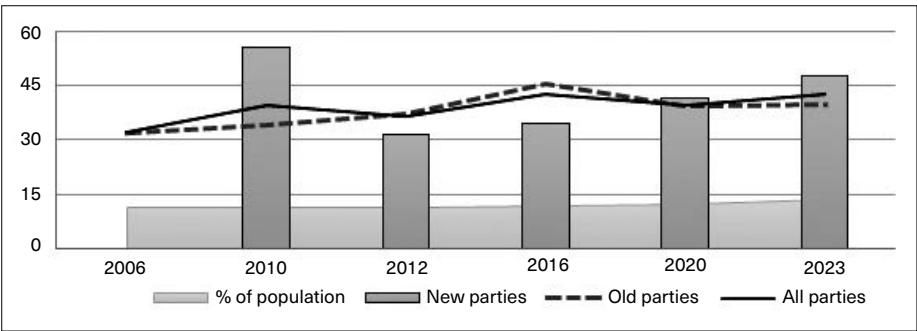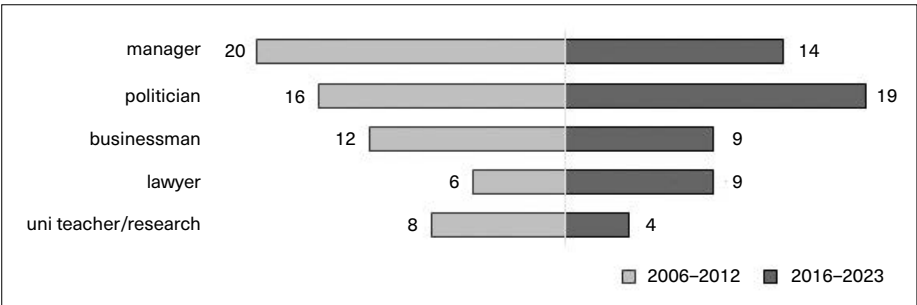

Figure 6:
New MPs by 5 largest occupation groups since 2006 (%)

Source: the author and (for Figure 5 only) Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

Finally, while the number of ethnic Hungarian MPs remained historically low because no Hungarian party won representation, and national minorities generally are underrepresented, Roma representation peaked at six MPs, which is more than three times their official share of the population (Census, 2021). Five of the nine minority MPs (a Hungarian and four Roma) were elected for Ordinary People; in addition, two Roma were elected for Progressive Slovakia, a Ruthenian for Hlas, and a Ukrainian for SaS.

While the overall changes are limited, social bias varies across parties. The most striking difference between 'new' and more established parties is that newcomers have younger MPs. Progressive Slovakia had the youngest, at 42, while Hlas MPs were five years older (but under 44 if we exclude the 11 who left the Smer caucus). This is consistent with the difference I found between genuinely new parties and parties founded by elites who split off from an older party (Bakke, 2020). Conversely, Smer MPs were the oldest, followed by the MPs of the first-generation parties SNS and KDH. This age difference probably reflects the age profile of the members and activists and fits well with earlier findings that new parties tend to have younger members (cf. Heidar & Wauters, 2019).

Other differences evidently had little to do with newness. While new parties had scored below average on education in 2016 and 2020 (Figure 4), all except one Hlas MP were university graduates in 2023, and a full third of Hlas MPs and 22% of PS MPs even held a PhD degree. Moreover, Progressive Slovakia in practice accounted for most of the difference between old and new parties in terms of gender and place of residence (Figures 2 and 5): Its perfectly gender-balanced caucus comprised nearly half of the female MPs elected in 2023, and it had the second-highest share of Bratislava residents at 56%, only surpassed by SaS. Hlas, the other new party, scored well below average on both counts.

As expected, female representation varies across ideological party 'clusters' (Figure 7), but somewhat surprisingly the mainstream centre–right and populist parties (including HZDS) outperform social democracy, which has scored well below average in the last three parliamentary elections. Less surprising is the low female representation of nationalist and radical right parties, as well as of the conservative KDH and the two ethnic Hungarian parties (not in the figure; see also Bakke, 2012). To be sure, Smer is not a conventional social democratic party. Gender equality is not on the agenda, it never adopted post-materialist values (Zvada, 2023, p. 203), and since 2006 it has gradually moved closer to the TAN end of the GAL-TAN axis (see Chapel Hill Expert Survey). The strong performance of PS and the weaker performance of social democracy in Slovakia does suggest that libertarian parties may be more likely to promote gender equality than leftist parties (Keith & Verge, 2018, p. 401). Likewise, the fact that the dip in education level in 2016 and 2020 was primarily driven by populist parties and Kotleba's ĽSNS is also consistent with the finding that radical right voters and party members tend to be less well-educated.

The picture is more mixed when it comes to residence. Kotleba's party was the least Bratislava-dominated in 2016 and 2020 (Bakke, 2020). Conversely, mainstream centre-right parties are consistently the most Bratislava-dominated along with We are Family (not in the figure), while Smer (since 2010), Hlas, and Ordinary People have scored below average (Figure 9). Finally, social democratic and mainstream centre-right parties account for most of the strong presence of managers, politicians, and businessmen among MPs (Figure 10).
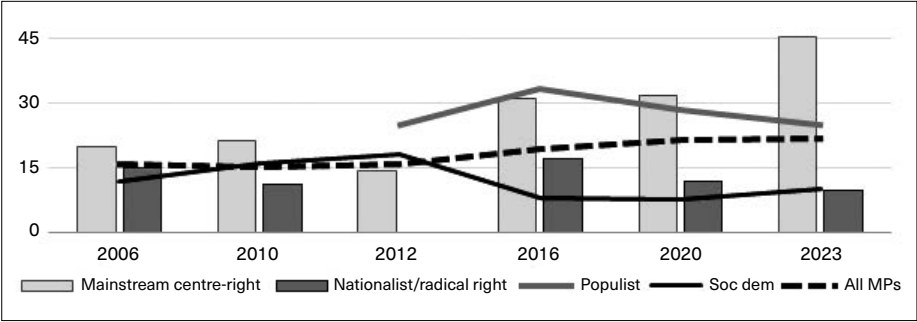
Figure 7:
Female MPs by party cluster (%)

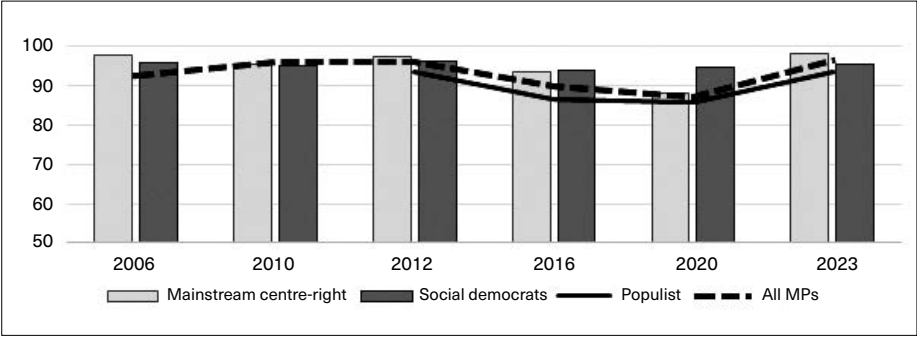

Figure 8:
University graduates among MPs by party cluster (%)

Bratislava residents among MPs by party cluster (%)
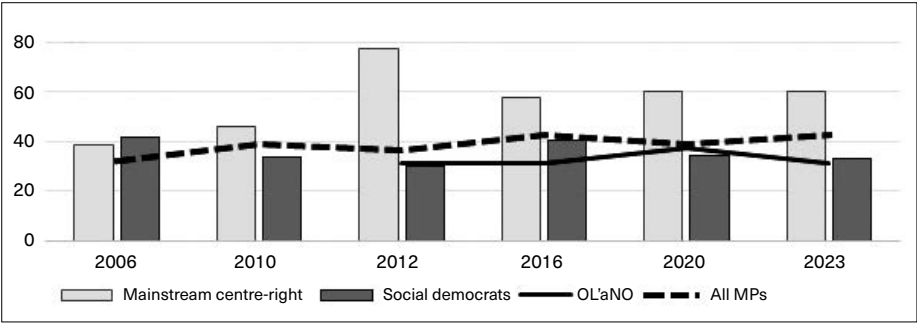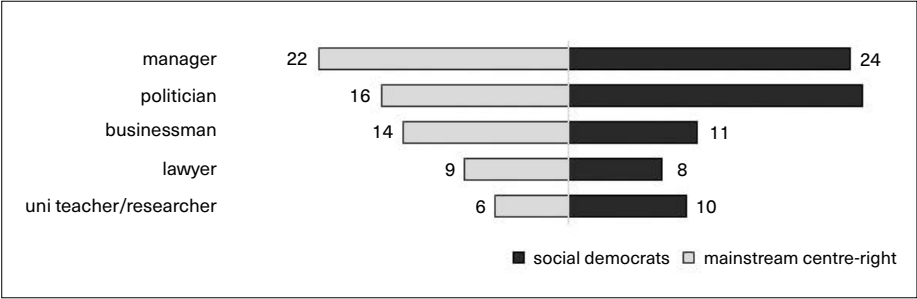

Figure 10:
New MPs by party cluster and profession group, 2006–2023 (%)

26

Source: the author.

5. How representative are Slovak MPs of their voters?

In this section I assess how representative the parliamentary elites of the current parliamentary parties are of their own voters. To do this, I compare my elite data to social background data for the parties, drawn from the exit poll conducted by the FOCUS agency for TV Markíza. The exit poll contains information on gender, age group, education, and nationality.[11] To make the age and education data more comparable, I amended the categories. The exit poll employs four age categories: 18–21 (first-time voters), 22–39, 40–59, and 60+. However, because all candidates

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11 The exit poll sample comprises 19,945 respondents in 170 wards, and the data have been weighed according to the actual election result. Data on selected professions were unusable because they did not comprise any of the profession groups in Figure 10.

are required by law to be over 21, figure 12 below combines the two youngest age categories into one 'under 40' category. The data also contain four education categories: elementary, secondary with and without graduation, and university education. Because the elite dataset only registers whether or not MPs are university graduates, the figure below only reports the results for the latter category.

A quick glance at the figures confirms that MPs are not representative even of their own party's voters. In terms of gender and education, Progressive Slovakia and SaS legislators match their voters best, while Smer, Hlas, and KDH have the least representative caucuses. Paradoxically, women are strongly underrepresented among the MPs of three of the four parties in which female voters constituted a majority (Smer, Hlas, and KDH); female representation was thus evidently not a priority for these voters. The two social democratic parties are also least representative of their voters in terms of education, followed by SNS and OĽaNO, while SaS and PS (as may be expected for centre-right parties catering to an urban electorate) have well-educated voters as well as MPs. Conversely, SNS and Smer match the age of their voters best, while the age distribution of the SaS and OĽaNO caucuses is quite far removed from their voters. Note that people under 40 are (in line with previous research) under-represented among the MPs of all parties. Finally, while Bratislava residents are strongly over-represented in all parties, the Smer, OĽaNO, and Hlas caucuses match their voters best. SaS stands out as the most Bratislava-dominated party in terms of voters as well as MPs.

When it comes to nationality, a huge majority of the voters of all parliamentary parties were (predictably) Slovaks. Part of the reason is that a majority of ethnic Hungarian voters voted for extra-parliamentary Hungarian parties. Only the OĽaNO alliance had a substantial share of minority voters: 6% were Hungarian, while 1% belonged to other minorities.

I now turn to the question of why social bias varies across parties, and I start with the three biggest parties.

Figure 11:
MPs and voters by gender, 2023 (%)
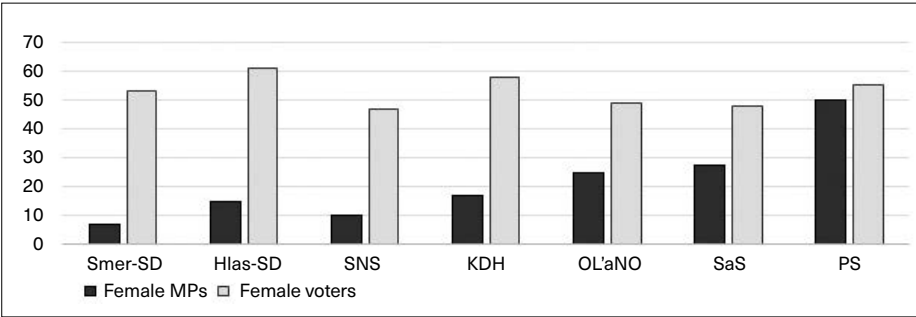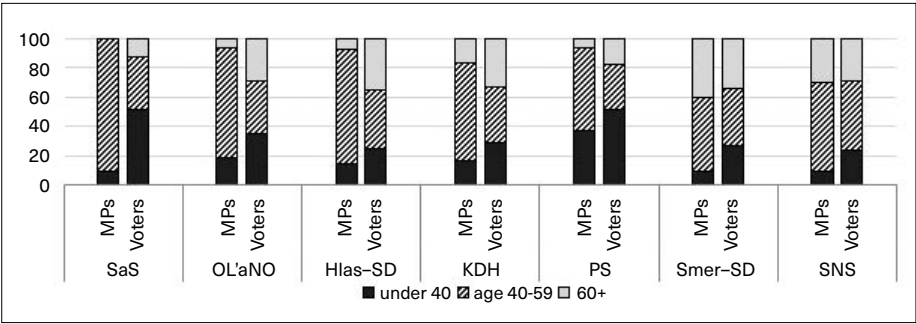
Figure 12:
MPs and voters by age group, 2023 (%)

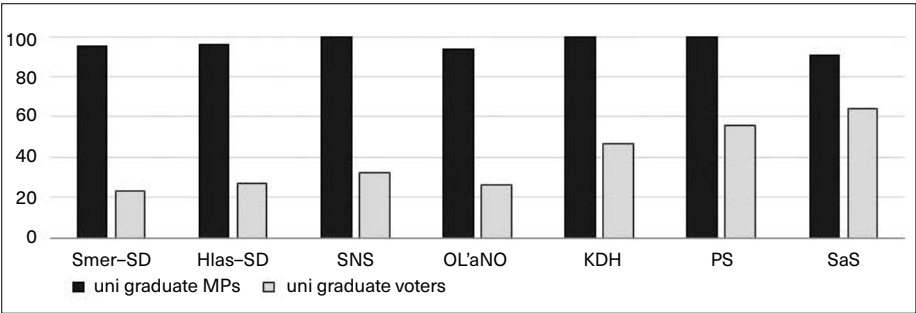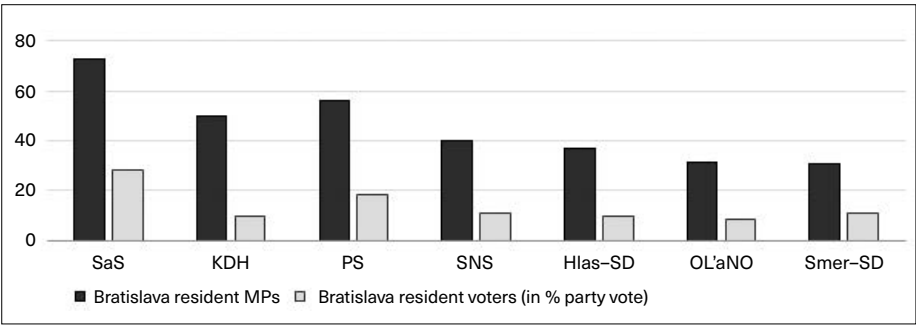Figure 13:
MPs and voters by education, 2023 (%)

Figure 14:
Bratislava resident MPs and voters, 2023 (%)

Source: the author and FOCUS exit poll for Markíza, 30 September, 2023.

6. The art of self-selection: Hlas, PS, and Smer

In this section I set out to explain differences in social bias between the three electorally most successful parties, using Norris and Lovenduski's model of candidate selection as a point of departure. To summarise, Smer legislators were on average eight years older than Hlas legislators; otherwise the profile of these two parties was similar although Hlas had higher female representation. By contrast, the caucus of Progressive Slovakia was on average 13 years younger than Smer legislators, perfectly gender balanced, and much more Bratislava-dominated. Apart from two MPs elected for Smer and one elected for Hlas, the caucuses of all three parties consisted of university graduates, and a substantial share even held PhDs. The main difference was of course the share of professional politicians: Of the MPs elected for Smer, 62% were incumbents and an additional 19% were former MPs or professional politicians. Among Hlas MPs, 41% were incumbents and another 18% were experienced politicians, which is still high for a new party. By contrast, PS had one incumbent MP (3%) and six other experienced politicians (19%). Those who were not politicians generally came from white-collar or high-status occupations.

How can these differences in social bias be explained? First, preference votes had no impact whatsoever on who was elected in any of the parties. There were some reshuffles, but only between candidates who were ranked high enough to be elected anyway. Second, candidate selection is equally centralised and exclusive in all three parties: the party leader compiles and ranks the list, and the presidium adopts it. In the case of Progressive Slovakia in 2023, this applied only to the first 30 slots, while three members of the presidium were tasked with completing the rest of the list. Local chairmen (PS) or regional chairmen (Hlas) participate in the vetting of candidates; in the case of Smer, regional branches also rank candidates from their own region. The formal decision-making body was nevertheless the same. This leaves two principal explanations: either the pool of aspirants, or the party-specific nomination criteria and the trade-off between them (or both) differ systematically between parties.

Unfortunately, precise information on aspirants is virtually impossible to find. To receive state subsidies, parties are only obliged to report total membership, not to keep records of the gender, age, or education of their members – although most of them collect this information (membership applicants must fill in a form and often even attach a CV). Moreover, even if party membership were an absolute eligibility criterion (which is certainly not the case)[12], it would still

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12 The precise share of non-party members is hard to assess because party membership is no longer reported on the ballot paper. In 2002 (the last election it was reported), independents did not exceed 8% for any parliamentary party. However, the frequency may be higher now, especially in parties with low membership.

be difficult to separate the willing from the eligible. Of the three large parties, only Progressive Slovakia could provide recent social background information: 'Perhaps a third' of the party members were women, most were in their 30s or 40s, and 'basically everybody' had higher education. About a third of the members expressed their interest in being on the list (interview, PS, 16 June 2023) – which is a higher share than in Denmark (cf. Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019). Hlas does not register this information centrally, and Smer did not respond to my enquiry, but had around 30% female members in 2010 (Smer party headquarters).[13]

If we turn to individual selection criteria, all three parties emphasised active participation in party work, Smer and PS also experience from regional and municipal assemblies, while incumbency naturally was more important for Smer and Hlas. All 11 Hlas incumbents were re-elected, and all but one Smer incumbent (who did not run). Moreover, all three considered expertise to be important. For Smer, an academic title was not enough; the candidate must also have worked politically within his or her field of expertise (Smer, interview, 26 May 2008). For Hlas, university education 'did not hurt', but was by no means a condition (Hlas, interview, 17 July 2023). For PS, it was more important that candidates possessed 'skills or experience' the party needed. My informant added apologetically that most of the members were university graduates, so this could not be used to tell them apart (PS, interview, 16 June 2023). PS also mentioned communication skills and media appeal; it wanted candidates to share its values (especially human rights); and it tried to avoid people who were known for creating their own campaign, were hard to work with, or communicated on social media in unhelpful ways.

As for list balancing criteria, only Progressive Slovakia aimed for gender balance, whereas all three parties strived for some measure of regional balance, but without using geography as a ranking criterion. PS reportedly wanted the list to be as diverse as possible, in terms of region, age, and gender, and also had Roma and LGBT people high enough on the list to be elected. While confessing that it had been hard work, my PS informant was visibly proud of the party's perfectly gender balanced list. 'Men are more eager to run, while women must be persuaded that it is possible, that they are qualified, etc. First, we decided to aim for 40%, but that was quite easy, so we decided it would look good if we went for 50–50. With the zipper system, women are not just in the bottom part of the list. We are actually pioneers since we also have quotas in the party presidium. We have two male and two female chairpersons, and a great, highly professional, balanced presidium' (PS, interview, 16 June 2023). By contrast, Smer and Hlas did not have gender quotas, and female candidates were on average ranked lower

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13 Scattered data from the last two decades suggest that most parties in Slovakia, as in Western Europe, are male dominated. The share of female members was 16% for SaS (2024), around 35% for SDKÚ (2010), and 39% for HZDS (2010). SNS before the merger with PSNS (49% in 2004), and KDH (55% in 2010) were exceptions.

on the list than their male counterparts; together this explains the difference in female representation. In fact, the highest ranked female Smer candidate was number 33!

What did it take to get a high enough rank on the list to be elected? Surprisingly, the answer is the same for all three parties, but it was the interview with Hlas that solved the puzzle: 'The chairman proposed the list according to the following key: first the chairman, then the vice-chairmen and the rest of the presidium, then regional chairmen' (Hlas, interview, 17 July 2023). In other words, the presidium nominated itself. In the case of Hlas, 24 of the 27 MPs were members of the presidium or regional chairmen. Of the remaining three, two were former high-ranking politicians of the party Good Choice (Dobrá voľba), which had merged with Hlas in the run-up to the election, and one was a former Olympic silver medallist.

Likewise, 19 of the 20 members of the PS presidium were elected (one was an MEP and did not run). PS made sure to have experts in all fields within the first 30 slots (the number of seats the party realistically hoped to win), that were also diverse in terms of age, gender, and region. This included some public figures and experts in fields in which the party lacked competence, about five of whom were not party members (PS, interview, 16 June 2023). Most of the remaining 13 MPs were thus the party's experts in various fields, including a former police-force president. There were also two Roma and two openly gay people among them.

Finally, in the case of Smer, the presidium naturally comprised a lower share of the MPs, but 22 of 23 presidium members (including regional chairmen) ran and were elected. Of the 42 MPs elected for Smer, 33 were either incumbents, presidium members, or both. Among the nine exceptions were a former chief of police, the Smer spokesman, the current chief of staff at the PM's office, a former MP and mayor, and two females – one of whom was young. When I interviewed Smer in 2008, the most important criterion for being allotted a high ranking was expertise in combination with dedication to the party. A video interview with former vice-chairman Robert Kaliňák (Pravda, 2 August, 2023) suggests that Smer and Hlas use the same ranking criteria.

In short, the selectorates selected themselves, and the social bias of the respective caucuses (and the differences between them) mainly reflects who the presidium members were. This is of course most striking in the case of Hlas. In Progressive Slovakia, the decision to employ the zipper system to ensure gender balance, as well as the emphasis on diversity, had an impact beyond this. Finally, the emphasis on incumbency strengthened the profile of Smer as a party of professional politicians. At the same time, the few exceptions suggest that even Smer tried to improve its social profile by nominating women and younger people.

7. The last will be first,
    or intervention of the voters

In the 2023 election, a record-high number of MPs were elected because of pref-erence votes. In this section I investigate why the impact of preference votes increased, and then turn to whether and how this influenced the social bias of the parliamentary elites. Do flexible lists help or hinder descriptive representation in Slovakia?

First, the overall effect of preference votes on the composition of the par-liamentary elites in Slovakia has been low in most elections (Table 2). Moreover, OĽaNO has accounted for much of the increase since 2010. High district magni-tude (and before 2006 high thresholds) in combination with ballot position effects explain why the voters have had very little influence on the composition of the parliamentary elites. Top-ranked candidates typically have a better chance of getting preference votes than lower-ranked candidates: the list leader normally gets the highest share of preference votes, and the average number of votes drops rapidly after the first 10–15 candidates. The voters thus to a large extent *confirm* the priorities of the party selectorates. Arguably, this even applies to the habitual re-election of Igor Matovič and other high-ranking OĽaNO politicians running from the bottom of the list.

Second, however, large parties (defined as parties that won 25 seats or more in that particular election) have empirically been much less vulnerable to voter interventions than smaller parties, for two reasons: voters of larger parties tend to cast preference votes for top-ranked candidates, and besides, altering the rank-ing of the first 25+ candidates makes no difference. In fact, Smer has never had a single MP elected due to preference votes, and neither did HZDS while it was still a big party. OĽaNO, the 2020 election winner, was seemingly an exception, but a closer look reveals that all the seven MPs who owed their election to the voters were incumbents who ran from the bottom of the list. This shows that the ballot position effect is contingent on the nomination practices of the parties: a party leader running from the bottom of the list will still draw a large number of preference votes.

Table 2:
**MPs elected because of preference votes (absolute numbers)**

	2002	2006	2010	2012	2016	2020	2023
Elected due to preference votes	1	7	11	15	13	15	25
– OĽaNO				5	8	7	10
– SaS			4	3		2	4
– SNS			1		2		8
– KDH		4	1	2			3
– MK/Most–Híd	1	2	4	2	1		
Female MPs, net effect	-1	2	-1	-2	-4	-2	0
University degree, net effect	1	0	3	1	2	1	-1
Incumbent MPs, net effect	0	0	-1	4	6	10	2
Average age, net effect (years)	-1.0	3.7	1.4	-3.5	5.7	4.0	4.2

Source: Own calculations based on volby.statistics.sk. The threshold for preference votes to take effect was 10% until 2002, and has been 3% since 2006.

Historically, preference votes have thus primarily influenced the composition of the caucuses of smaller parties. In 2023, a little over half of the MPs elected for the four smallest parties and alliances won representation from otherwise unelectable slots. The voters thus disrupted the ranking of all four. Moreover, all the MPs of these parties, as well as 4–6 substitutes in three of the parties, got more than the 3% preference votes needed to advance on the list. The result was most dramatic for SNS, where eight of ten MPs owed their election to preference votes. Moreover, four of these advanced from slots below #100, and the same applies to two of the three first substitutes. Likewise, ten of the 16 MPs of the OĽaNO alliance were elected due to preference votes, and the same applies to four of 11 SaS MPs and three of 12 KDH MPs (Table 2). In all four cases the bottom-ranked candidate was elected (Figure 15). This may be a double contagion effect from OĽaNO: parties put high-profile candidates in the last slot, and voters elect them.

Why did the impact of preference voting increase in 2023? First, in the case OĽaNO, the main reason for the high number of MPs elected because of preference votes was, as always, the idiosyncratic nomination practice of this 'party' (incumbents running from the bottom). The election of four Roma candidates from otherwise unelectable slots was nevertheless a distinctive feature of the 2023 election. All four represented the platform Pačivale Roma (responsible, decent, or honest Roma), and only one of them was an incumbent. This was widely interpreted as a result of strong mobilisation in the Roma communities which arguably helped the OĽaNO alliance over the electoral threshold (Vančo & Kozinková, 2023, see also map).

Figure 15:
Preference votes by ballot position (%) and number of parties where the candidate got more than 3% (right axis)
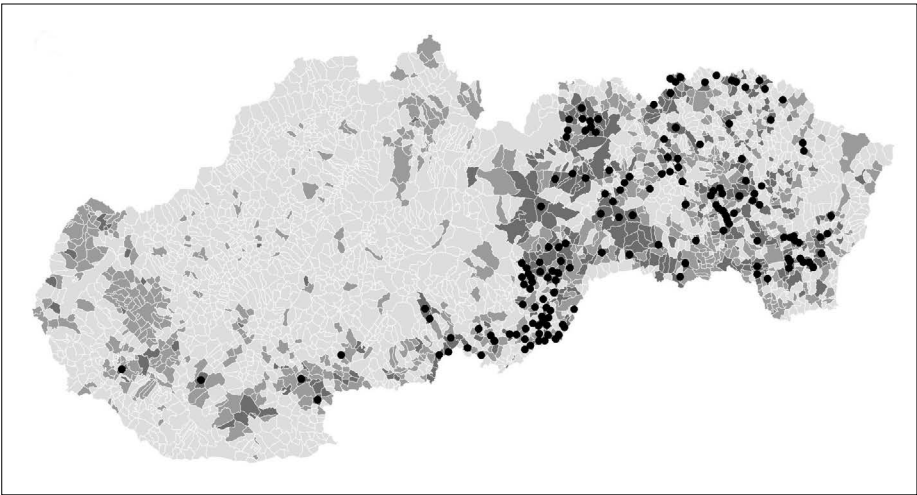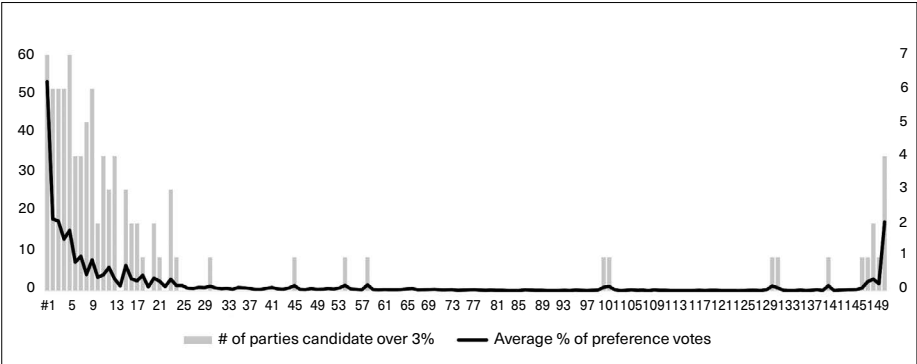
Source: Vančo & Kozinková (2023). OĽaNO strongholds (grey) and Roma settlements (black dots).

Second, the fate of SNS is an extreme example of the dangers involved in allowing members of other parties or groups onto the list. Informal electoral alliances have indeed been one of the main drivers of preference voting in Slovakia. In 2010, for instance, both newcomers allowed organised groups onto their lists. Besides the four future founding members of OĽaNO on the SaS list, four members of the Civic Conservative Party (OKS) were elected for Most–Híd, one of whom was ranked high enough to be elected even without preference votes.[14] However, preference votes had an unprecedented impact on the SNS caucus in 2023.

A few months before the election, SNS polled well below the electoral threshold, and in order to mobilise nationally oriented voters, its chairman Andrej Danko invited representatives of other, electorally marginal, far-right parties and groups to join the list. Leading figures of Život, National Coalition, and Slovak Patriot were presented at a press conference on 21 May 2023.[15] Several of these also took an active part in the electoral campaign, but only Život had candidates among the top ten. However, while helping SNS over the threshold, this strategy backfired: Danko was the only SNS member to win a seat, the National Coalition got two, and Život three MPs (all incumbents), while the Slovak Patriots got the second and third substitute.[16] The remaining MPs were three independents supported by the far-right National Revival, and a high-profile TV presenter and former MP for We are Family.

As for the remaining two parties, name recognition is a likely explanation: in the case of SaS, two incumbents (the OKS chairman and a transfer from For the People), a health professional, and a well-known former MP and KDH chairman were elected out of turn; in the case of KDH, the same applies to a well-known former MP and MEP, a long-time mayor, and a profiled health professional whose last name happens to be the same as the chairman's (no relation).[17]

Next, the question is what impact voter intervention had on the social bias of the parliamentary elites. The short answer is: very limited (Table 2). The overall effect on female representation is slightly negative and was zero in 2023. The voters strengthened the educational bias and reduced elite turnover slightly, and in most elections MPs who owed their position to the voters were on average older

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14 The voters also helped the OKS chairman win re-election for SaS in 2020 and 2023; father and son Kuffa (Život) depended on preference votes to win seats for Kotleba's party in 2020; and members of NOVA, Change from Below, Christian Union, and (in a formal alliance in 2023), For the People won seats on the OĽaNO ballot in 2016, 2020, and 2023.

15 See the footage of the press conference at Andrej Danko's Facebook page (in Slovak), here: https://www.facebook.com/andrej.danko.71/videos/1407177353435605.

16 In Slovakia an MP must relinquish his or her seat temporarily while serving in the government (as minister or state secretary) or permanently if elected president, MEP, or appointed to certain public offices. In the meantime s/he is replaced by a substitute. It therefore matters who the substitutes (especially of government parties) are. None of the figures in this article include substitutes.

17 Fun fact: two of the MPs elected due to preference votes for Kotleba's party were his brothers. One was elected in 2016 and the other in 2020.

than the candidates they replaced. In 2023 this was primarily driven by OĽaNO and SaS, whose deselected candidates were 10 and six years younger, respectively, than the MPs elected due to preference votes.

Beyond the slight changes in social bias, what would the caucuses of the four smallest parties have looked like in 2023 without voter intervention? When I cross-checked the original ranking of the candidate lists against the lists of presidium members, I found evidence of self-selection also in these parties, albeit to a varying extent. If the voters had not intervened, eight SNS presidium members would have been elected, along with two from Život. Voter intervention resulted in the de-selection of seven presidium members for SNS, while the smaller parties gained three. The original ranking was consistent with the nomination practice described in 2017, when the SNS hierarchy was used as a point of departure: first the chairman, then the vice-chairmen and the regional chairmen (SNS, interview, 7 March 2017). Likewise, KDH presidium members (three of whom were deselected) occupied nine of the top 12 slots on the party list. Besides being a member of the presidium, the most important criterion to get a high ranking was to be a well-known expert on a current issue of importance to the voters (KDH, interview, 20 May, 2024). In the case of SaS, expertise, celebrity, and the ability to promote the party's goals if elected are decisive for a high ranking. The party chairman was list leader, followed by eight team leaders in various fields of expertise (SaS, interview, 20 May, 2024). All four presidium members (one was deselected) were nevertheless ranked among the top nine, along with two additional members of the Council (the party executive). Besides presidium members the top-ranked KDH and SaS candidates were (former) MPs or experts.

Finally, the OĽaNO alliance is (unsurprisingly) partially an exception. The presidium members were divided between the top 20 and the bottom of the list: the four party leaders ran from the bottom, three presidium members were among the top seven, and the rest occupied the slots from slot ten onwards. The MEP Peter Pollák senior was the only member of the OĽaNO presidium who did not run. The net effect of preference votes was two deselected presidium members for OĽaNO. A closer look at the original ranking reveals that OĽaNO is now a party of professional politicians. In previous elections, the chairman Igor Matovič chose people from outside politics as mock list leaders, and the top-ranked candidates were 'ordinary people'. After a profiled male list leader quit in disgust less than five weeks before the 2012 election (Balogová, 2012), Matovič opted for rather untried female list leaders in 2016 and 2020. However, in 2023 he somewhat surprisingly went with co-founder Erika Jurinová, the governor of Žilina. In addition to Jurinová and a second founding member and governor (Jozef Viskupič), the top ten included the general secretary, two young MPs' assistants, the leader of the media team, a former state secretary, and two incumbents who were also former ministers. Moreover, incumbents and former ministers occupied the slots from nine onwards.

8. Summary and conclusion

The analysis has demonstrated, first, that MPs of (genuinely) new parties still differ from MPs of more established parties primarily in terms of age (Bakke, 2020), while differences between parliamentary elites in terms of gender, education, profession, and place of residence seem to be more associated with party clusters. Perhaps a little surprisingly, Slovak main-stream centre-right and populist parties score better than social democrats on gender balance. The strong performance of PS and the weak performance of Smer (and Hlas) in 2023 suggest that libertarian parties may be more likely to promote gender equality than leftist parties, which is consistent with the findings of Keith and Verge (2018, p. 401).

Second, as expected, none of the current parties' parliamentary elites are particularly representative of their own voters. There are nevertheless some interesting patterns. The main-stream centre-right PS and SaS appeal to young, urban professionals, and are predictably the most Bratislava-dominated in terms of voters as well as MPs. Both parties have well-educated voters as well as MPs, and the same applies to their members (party interviews). They are also the two parties that match their voters best in terms of gender. Conversely, the parties of the current government coalition (Smer, Hlas, and SNS) diverge most from their voters in terms of gender and education, while SNS and Smer are closer to their voters in terms of age. Most current parliamentary parties are to some extent generational parties.

Third, self-selection is the main reason for the differences in social bias between the three electorally most successful parties, and to some extent even between the smaller parties (see below). Apart from KDH, all seven parliamentary parties have equally centralised, leadership-dominated, and exclusive nomination processes, where the party executive adopts the list. In the case of the three largest parties, the single most important qualification needed to make it into the top 20 was in practice to be a presidium member: this especially applies to Hlas, where all top 20 candidates were members of the presidium – in the case of PS and Smer, the same applies to 18 and 15 of 20, respectively. The age and gender profiles of the three parties thus to a considerable extent reflected who the members of the respective presidia (and in the case of Smer the incumbents) were. Beyond this, however, the strong emphasis on expertise and experience explains the strong educational and professional credentials of the MPs of all three parties, and in the case of PS, the decision to use the zipper system explains the party's perfectly gender balanced caucus. Selection criteria (and the pool of aspirants) thus matter more than selection mode as such.

Fourth, the voters had limited influence on the composition of the parliamentary elites in most elections. Despite the record-high number of MPs elected due to preference votes, the impact on social bias was marginal even in 2023, with the exception of age. Voter preferences nevertheless mitigated the effect of self-se-

lection in the four smallest parties and alliances somewhat – most dramatically for SNS, where seven presidium members were deselected. Based on the original ranking, presidium membership was clearly a key qualification in both SNS and KDH. SaS prioritised 'expertise, celebrity, and the ability to promote the party's goals' (SaS, interview, 20 May, 2024), but all four presidium members were ranked among the top ten. The OĽaNO alliance is partially an exception, in the sense that presidium members were divided between the top and the bottom of the list.

Finally, the analysis has demonstrated that the impact of preference votes is contingent on nomination practices. Whether parties put their most well-known and experienced people in the top of the list (like Smer and Hlas in 2023) or in the bottom of the list (like OĽaNO in all elections since 2012), these candidates draw the most preference votes. Interestingly, the idiosyncratic nomination practice of OĽaNO seems to generate a double contagion effect: the smaller parties put profiled candidates in slot number 150, and the voters elect them. Besides this, however, the main driver of preference votes in Slovakia has been informal electoral alliances. This is when a party allows members of other, electorally marginal parties or organised groups onto the list in order to increase its own chances in the election, while giving the 'guest' candidates the opportunity to win a seat through preference votes. SNS in 2023 is an extreme example of the dangers involved. What went wrong? First, SNS allowed not only one, but several parties and groups onto the list. Second, leading figures of the other parties were more visible in the SNS campaign than many of the not-too-profiled SNS presidium members among the top ten. Most importantly, under a flexible list system, the relative strength of the parties in the alliance and the number of candidates for each party matter. Unless the 'host' party is much more popular than the other parties in the alliance (which was not the case here), a large number of candidates will be a disadvantage because it makes it more difficult for the voters to concentrate preference votes (see Balík & Hruška, 2022, for a Czech example).

Party names and acronyms

Aliancia	Hungarian Alliance, merger of Hungarian Community and Bridge (Most–Híd)
Hlas-SD	Voice – Social Democrats
HZDS	Movement for a Democratic Slovakia
KDH	Christian Democratic Movement
MK	Hungarian Coalition, later renamed Hungarian Community
Most–Híd	Bridge
OKS	Civic Conservative Party

OĽaNO	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, renamed 'Slovakia' in 2023
PS	Progressive Slovakia
Republika	Republic
SaS	Freedom and Solidarity
SDKÚ	Slovak Democratic and Christian Union
Sme Rodina	We are Family
Smer-SD	Direction – Social Democrats
SNS	Slovak National Party

Acknowledgements

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