Discussion of: Candidate Selection by Parties: Crime and Politics in India

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Motivation

Two levels. Both important:

- Broad: How do parties select candidates?
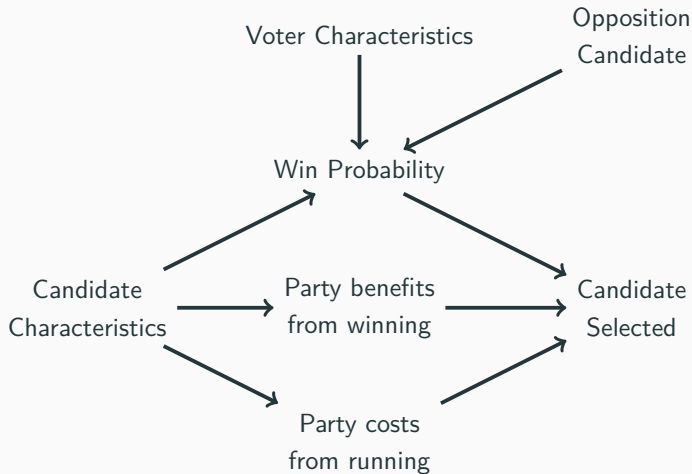- Narrow: Why are criminal candidates so common in India?

Context in the literature:

- Milan Vaishnav (2016,2017) provides descriptive evidence and simple regressions exploring criminality in Indian politics.
    - In 2009, ~1/5 state legislators faced a pending criminal case
    - Documents a strong correlation between wealth, criminality, and electoral success.
    - Argues that selecting criminal candidates is a rational for parties and voters:
        - Wealthy candidates can finance their own campaigns
        - Criminal candidates can be more effective in the context of India's weak institutions.
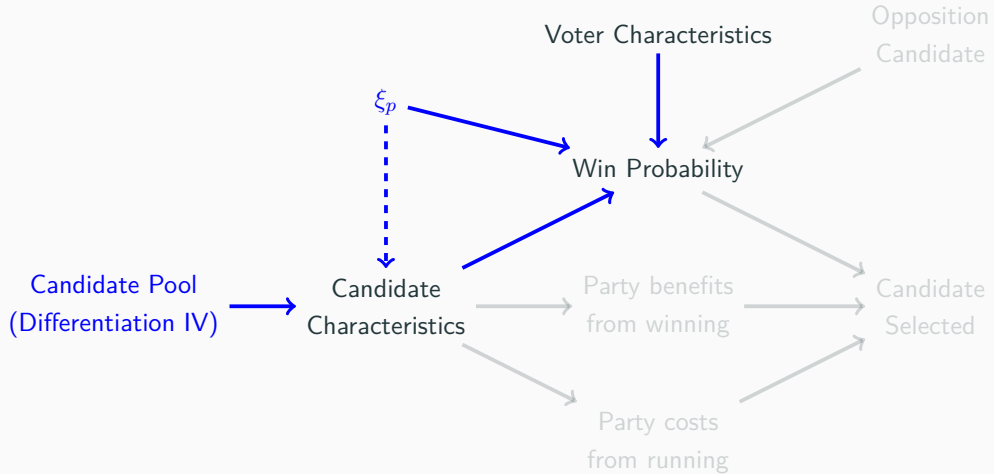
Contribution of this paper:

- Structural approach linking data to rational decisions by voters and parties
- Careful consideration of identification issues

Goal: Decompose effect of candidate characteristics on candidate selection into voter and party preferences
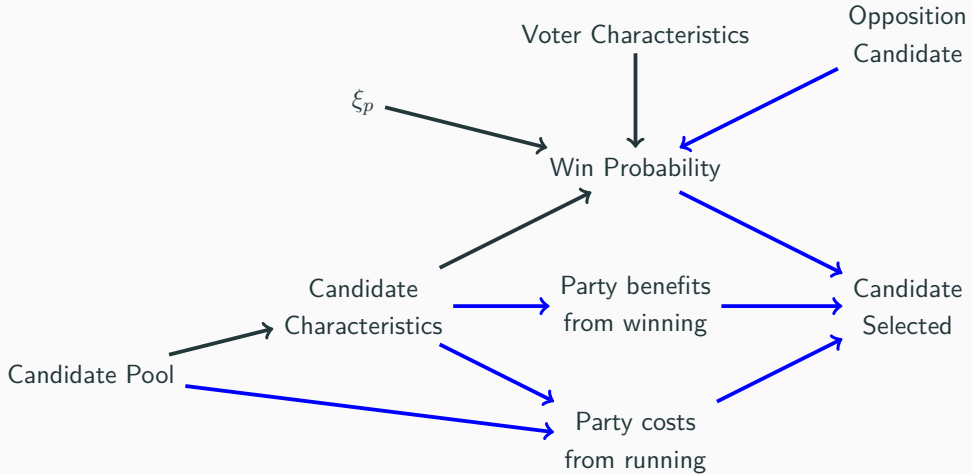

This is a challenging causal mediation problem!

Step 1: Estimate how win probabilities are determined by candidate and voter characteristics
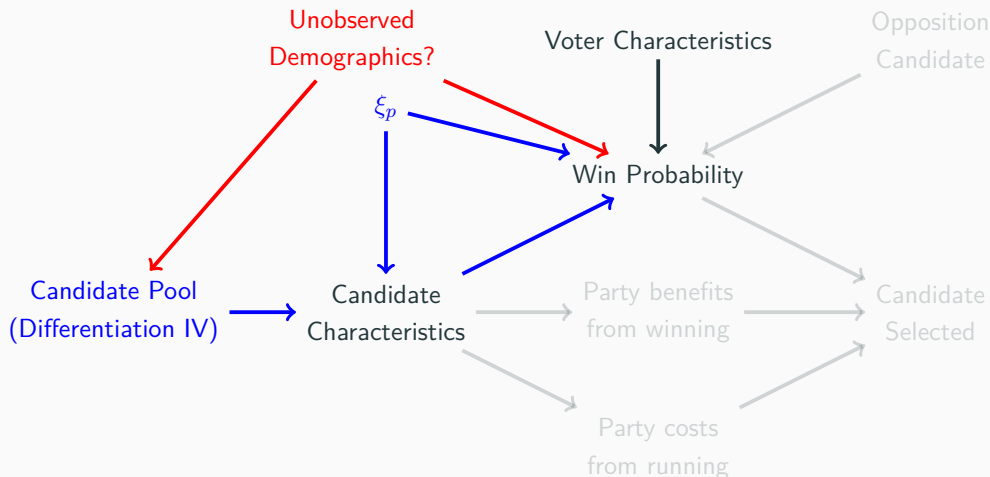
Step 2: Estimate candidate selection process as strategic game between parties with payoffs that depend on win probabilities and candidate characteristics

Results:

- "Party preferences over candidate types are the main forces that shape candidate selection."
    - (Not easy read this out from the model)
- Parties prefer winning with non-criminals, but cost of running criminals is low.
- A counterfactual ban on criminal candidates results in decreased vote share for main parties.
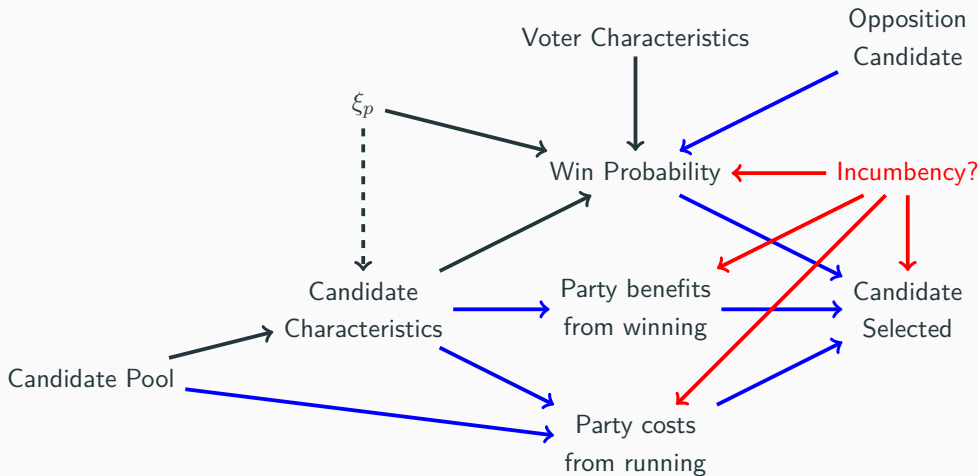
Concern 1: Is the IV exclusion restriction valid in step 1?

. . . And is the candidate pool really unaffected by a ban on criminal candidates?

Concern 2: Is the model missing important confounders in step 2?

Concern 3: Criminality or wealth?

Authors cluster candidates into four "types" using k-means clustering.

Type	Description
1	Educated
2	Uneducated
3	Muslim
4	(wealthy) criminal

- Criminal types are also wealthy (the assets of other types!), so it is hard to separate the effects of these characteristics.
- K-means objective function doesn't necessarily capture the distinctions that voters, parties, or researchers care about.
- Need to make sure results are robust to different clustering approaches

Wrapping up

- This is an ambitious project that demonstrates how we can model and estimate party preferences while taking identification concerns seriously, an interesting and important setting.
- Results suggest party preferences matter a lot for candidate selection
- Helps us understand how criminals are selected into and persist in politics.
- The paper is a pleasure to read