1 Introduction

In parliamentary democracies, party leaders hold a crucial role that extends beyond the traditional responsibilities of managing a political party. They are central to shaping government policies, determining cabinet composition, and influencing the overall direction of national politics (O'Brien et al. 2015; O'Neill, Pruysers, and Stewart 2021). The increasing personalization of politics, a trend observed across many parliamentary systems, has elevated the significance of the party leaders (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Cross, Katz, and Pruysers 2018). As the focus shifts from parties to individual leaders, their public image often becomes key for electoral success (Banducci and Karp 2000). This shift, often referred to as the "presidentialization" of parliamentary systems (Mughan 2000), has made leaders the primary faces of their parties, with media coverage and election campaigns increasingly centered around them (Poguntke and Webb 2005).

The impact of party leaders extends beyond election campaigns, persisting throughout their tenure in government. They play a decisive role in forming and sustaining governments and often define the policies their party pursues while in power (O'Brien 2015). Leadership changes within a party can significantly alter voter perceptions (Somer-Topcu 2017), and these perceptions significantly affect partisanship and voting behavior (Garzia 2011; Garzia, Ferreira Da Silva, and De Angelis 2022).

Given these increasingly pivotal roles party leaders play in the parliamentary systems, a growing literature aims to answer questions like how these leaders are selected (LeDuc 2001; Kenig 2009; Lago and Astudillo 2023), how different selection processes affect leader evaluations and party performance (Cozza and Somer-Topcu 2021; Cozza, Di Landro, and Somer-Topcu 2023), and what affects leaders' tenure in office (Andrews and Jackman 2008; Somer-Topcu and Weitzel 2023). Yet, only a few studies explore how the personal characteristics of leaders themselves interact with this process and have mostly focused on how specific personality traits of leaders affect their evaluations by the voters (see, e.g., Bittner 2011), and not on the gender of party leaders (saving the fine exceptions we cite in this Element).

Perhaps this paucity of leader gender focus occurs because party leaders are usually drawn from a similar pool of elite, white, and male political leaders, leaving little diversity among them. The advancement of women into political leadership positions, while significant, remains fraught with challenges and gendered dynamics that perpetuate inequality. Despite an increase in women's representation in national parliaments and cabinet positions globally, women continue to face barriers to attaining and retaining top leadership roles. Our data

from 11 advanced parliamentary democracies covering 40 years show that only 58 of the 276 leaders across 53 political parties (about 20% of all leaders) have been women, and even fewer women have risen to the positions of heads of state or prime ministers (Huidobro and Falcó-Gimeno 2023).

Gender diversity in party leadership is important, and understanding the factors that affect their candidacy, selection, and tenure, therefore, is critical for several reasons. The presence of women in party leadership positions plays a pivotal role in advancing gender equality within political systems, impacting both the representation and the perception of women in governance. Women in politics have been shown to improve public perceptions of women's leadership, challenging traditional gender biases and making citizens more accepting of women in positions of power, such as in cabinets or as prime ministers (O'Brien et al. 2015). Their influence extends beyond their own parties, often creating spillover effects that encourage other parties in their countries to select female leaders (Jalalzai and Krook 2010; O'Brien and Piscopo 2019). They can significantly enhance both descriptive and substantive representation by increasing the number of female candidates and elected officials and by prioritizing policies that address social justice issues (Kittilson 2011; Kroeber 2022; O'Brien et al. 2015). Studies have shown that when women hold leadership roles, they foster greater participation and influence among other female politicians, such as in parliamentary debates (Blumenau 2021).

Given these important roles of women leaders, there is an urgency to study the life cycle of women in party leadership positions. Only a comprehensive analysis would allow us to better understand the factors that encourage them to run, get elected, and survive longer in office. Our Element aims to help with this inquiry and pave the way forward for potential prescriptions to help women run, win, and keep party leadership positions.

We are, of course, not the first to study women's leadership. Astudillo and Paneque (2022), Dingler and Helms (2023), Morgenroth et al. (2020), O'Brien (2015), O'Neill and Stewart (2009), and Thomas (2018) unpack the selection of women party leaders, showing the importance of performance, selection processes, and party-level factors, such as ideology, in helping women to control the party leadership. A growing literature examines the consequences of women leaders for political party positions (Kroeber 2022), voter perceptions of political parties (O'Brien 2019), women attaining cabinet positions and portfolios (O'Brien et al. 2015), and voter evaluations of party leadership (Bridgewater and Nagel 2020; Chen et al. 2023; Dassonneville, Quinlan, and McAllister 2021). Women's tenure in party leadership has attracted less attention but important work by O'Brien (2015) and O'Neill, Pruysers, and Stewart (2021) shows that performance and harsher

standards cut women's tenure short. It is to this important and growing literature that we seek to contribute by examining when women run as candidates, become party leaders, and how long they stay in office.

Through the study of the candidacy, selection, and tenure processes of women versus men politicians, we examine two important theories developed in the gender and politics literature: the *glass ceiling* and *glass cliff* theories. The glass ceiling argument points to barriers preventing women from reaching higher positions, and previous research provides reasons to believe that the selection of leaders is a gendered process in several different ways. Access to political leadership positions, like cabinet posts, follows different patterns for men and women (Aldrich and Perez 2021; Davis 1997; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009; Krook and O'Brien 2012). Within the party, gender bias could prevent party elites from recruiting members of the opposite sex for high-level positions (Niven 1998; Devroe and Van Trappen 2022). Women in leadership roles frequently encounter biases in recruitment and selection processes, and those who do break through the glass ceiling are more likely to be assigned to less prestigious cabinet positions or to step down following electoral setbacks (Baumann, Bäck, and Davidsson 2019; O'Brien 2015). Seminal work on party leader gender by O'Brien (2015) and O'Neill and Stewart (2009) shows that women are more likely to become leaders of parties on the left, those that are less competitive in elections or minor parties, and those that are losing seat share.

The latter finding that women are more likely to become leaders in difficult times is the main premise of the glass cliff theory. Women are often appointed to leadership positions in politically challenging contexts, such as when their parties are unpopular or facing crises, a phenomenon known as the "glass cliff" (Ryan and Haslam 2005, 2007; O'Brien 2015). The main rationale behind this theory is that a weak party is seen as a risky investment, and career-oriented men do not want to take the risk and run. Women in this context (for whom stereotypes may make other party elites think that they are not career politicians) are seen as sacrificial lambs, encouraged to "take one for the team" (Stambough and O'Regan 2007). Women may also want to capitalize on this context by running in these less competitive elections for a high-risk position to further their career (Armstrong et al. 2023).[1] All this creates a window of opportunity for women to run and get elected for an otherwise undesirable position, which we analyze in detail in Section 3.

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[1] As Armstrong et al. (2023) emphasize, glass cliff theory does not suggest women have no agency – the circumstances a low-performing party creates can allow women to capitalize on an empty field, even though it is a high-risk position.

Once elected, how does women's tenure differ from men's? The average tenure across the two genders in our dataset is similar. The average tenure for women and men has been 5.5 and 5.6 years, respectively. Despite the similarities in tenure length, we argue the leader position is like *quicksand* for women, sucking and sinking them more quickly than the cement men rule on. Existing literature suggests gendered patterns for how women in office/high-rank positions are treated differently than men. Expectations about when and where women leaders are most competent are often conditioned by gender stereotypes (Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och 2023). Women are rewarded when their leadership conforms to these expectations but are punished when they do not (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2011). This makes it more difficult for women to use their leadership power in assertive ways to solidify their control of the party. In addition, O'Brien (2015) presents comparative evidence that unfavorable electoral outcomes have more devastating consequences for women leaders. Voters also have gendered preferences for leaders under different crisis conditions, preferring male leaders in times of national security threats and women in more peaceful times (Lawless 2004), and women are often excluded from powerful positions in defense, finance, and foreign policy (Barnes and O'Brien 2018), which prevents them from gaining experience that allows them more authority in these areas as leaders. This literature suggests that potentially different factors come into play as parties decide to replace men and women leaders in office.

Our original *quicksands theory* for women's tenure argues that while performance in office has been cited as the main reason for party leaders (Andrews and Jackman 2008) and especially for women's shortened tenure (O'Brien 2015), the factors that agitate the quicksand and make women sink go beyond just performance. Women leaders often find themselves navigating an unstable political environment, much like standing on quicksand, where their position can be easily threatened by their performance, the specifics of their election, and the prevailing attitudes toward women in leadership. The obstacles they face are varied, including gender biases, unrealistic expectations, and doubts about their legitimacy. The quicksand they stand on can be easily disturbed by any of these setbacks, leading to potentially shorter leadership tenures for women. We unpack all these factors in Section 4.

Despite this growing research on women as party leaders we discussed earlier, we still lack a comprehensive analysis of how the party and system-level features affect the candidacy, selection, and removal of women party leaders. Building on this important work and pushing it forward, our goals in the research we present here are to test the glass ceiling, glass cliff, and quicksand theories for women leaders to understand (1) when leadership contests include

women candidates, (2) when they become party leaders, and (3) what affects women leaders' time in office compared to men. Not only do we expand the scope of research on women and party leaders with the addition of our unique, cross-national data, but we also contribute a more detailed analysis of the complete leadership life cycle of both men and women. In what follows, we briefly present the three categories of variables that we will be using in the following sections to explain when women run for party leadership, when they get elected as leaders, and how long they last in office: (1) performance indicators, (2) (s)election details, and (3) the gender inclusiveness of the political culture.

Performance Effects

We argue that there are both demand-side and supply-side reasons for why women are more likely to run for party leadership and get elected to the party leadership position during times of weak party performance. On the demand side, party losses, particularly major losses, motivate parties to undertake a significant brand change for the party to signal the efforts the party is engaging in to recover from the losses and rise up from its ashes. A woman leader is a significant change in the party's brand, given the continuous rarity of women party leaders at the top of political parties. In addition, a woman would signal the salience the party gives to recovery, given that crises require more collaboration or consensus-building within the party, which is the type of leadership that women are typically perceived as being especially skilled at (Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och 2023). On the supply side, men are less likely to run for party leadership when the party is performing weakly in order to save their faces and to wait until the party recovers. Building on the glass cliff theory, women are more likely to be elected to leadership positions when the party is experiencing a crisis (O'Brien 2015; Ryan and Haslam 2005). This change in the competition dynamics creates opportunities for women to run for and become party leaders (Beckwith 2015), even though they are often treated as sacrificial lambs in those circumstances (Stambough and O'Regan 2007).

Once elected as leaders, women are also more likely to lose their leadership positions for weak performance. The stereotypes of women not being effective leaders and not fit for leadership positions more easily play against women when the party performs poorly (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2011; O'Brien 2015; Perdue 2016; Yates 2019). Any performance downturns, regardless of their size and impact, would be more likely perceived as the woman leader's failure, increasing their likelihood of replacement. Hence, we argue, similar to O'Brien (2015) but taking her findings of the detrimental

effects of seat change further, that a broader definition of performance that includes seat changes, government loss, polling losses, and a combination of these need to be taken into account to examine women's tenure.

Selectorate and Leadership Election Effects

Moving beyond party performance, we also argue that structural party-level factors, especially leader election details, have important consequences for who runs and becomes the party leader and how long they survive. Cozza and Somer-Topcu (2021) show that inclusive leadership elections increase the number of candidates and competition. While more candidates mean that the likelihood of women running for leadership increases with inclusive elections, there is mixed evidence on how much risk women will accept in a competition. On the one hand, some competition environments can deter women from running if they are more averse to a campaign environment that cannot guarantee truthful competition (Kanthak and Woon 2015). On the other hand, the ability to compete as individuals may encourage other women to be more risk accepting (Folke and Rickne 2016; Magalhães and Pereira 2024). Therefore, we do not have clear expectations for how the inclusive selectorates and the level of competition (i.e., the number of candidates) affect women's candidacy. Yet, we expect inclusiveness to negatively affect the likelihood of women getting elected to the leadership position. Selectorates that include members may use gender stereotypes as information cues (Fox and Oxley 2003) and may be less likely to agree on priorities that promote women to leadership (Kenny and Verge 2013) compared to more exclusive selectorates (Rahat and Hazan 2010).

While we expect inclusive selectorates to be less likely to elect a woman, we expect those women who clear this hurdle and become party leaders following inclusive elections, who defeat a large number of competitors, and who achieve all this with a high margin of victory to be more likely to stay in office for a long time. Our argument builds on the literature that shows that the selection process and the details of leadership elections (Cozza, Di Landro, and Somer-Topcu 2023) can affect the legitimacy of a leader's power (Astudillo and Lago 2021). If the selectorate is small, and the win is less impressive (with a small number of challengers or a small margin of victory), the choice of leader may be viewed as an elite and/or indirect mandate. Women are more likely to be susceptible to these negative effects of selectorate size on their tenure, given they may start at a more disadvantageous point compared to men in terms of their legitimacy as leaders, and these effects may be exacerbated if the selected leader performs weakly.

Gender-Inclusiveness of Political Culture Effects

Building on Krook and O'Brien (2012) and O'Brien (2015), we argue that a gender-inclusive environment, both within the party and in the broader political environment, increases the likelihood of women running for and getting appointed to party leadership. When a party has already had a woman as its leader, it would indicate a more welcoming environment for women who are considering running for party leadership. Parties that already have a large share of women in their parliamentary delegation will have a larger pool of qualified women. More inclusive national parliaments represent more gender-equal societies and provide examples of women's leadership in politics. The presence of women in institutions like parties and legislatures also has a role model effect on potential political aspirants (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007) and can encourage more women to seek leadership roles. Thus, we posit that parties with previous women leaders and with a large share of women members of parliaments (MPs), and national parliaments with large numbers of women MPs are more likely to include women in the selection process for party leadership, more open to electing women leaders, and less likely to punish women in office. We also argue that the performance, selection, and political culture effects likely work in an interactive manner for women's candidacy decisions, elections to leadership, and survival in office. In Sections 3 and 4, we test how these factors separately and jointly affect women's careers at the top of the parties in advanced parliamentary democracies.

A Quick Glance at What's Coming

Our novel Party Leaders Dataset (details in Section 2) allows us to test our expectations across eleven parliamentary democracies, covering four decades of party history in most of these cases. Our results, therefore, provide generalizable evidence that can help us confirm or challenge existing arguments regarding the gendered nature of politics, especially at the top positions of the political parties in parliamentary democracies.

Our findings are very interesting, and while they support some of the existing expectations raised in the literature, they sometimes also go against some established arguments about women's political careers. First, we find that performance downturns, which have been cited as the most critical factor in helping women to get to the top positions, only impact women's *candidacy* and in interesting ways. Parties experiencing performance-related leadership resignations are more likely to include women in the next leadership contest, but we find no evidence that this effect carries through to leadership selection, contrasting the glass cliff theory expectations. In addition, when we use the more objective

performance indicators, like seat change or government loss, we find that if any coefficient is significant, it is positive, indicating that parties that perform well are more likely to have more women as candidates or leaders. Women's tenure, on the other hand, heavily depends on performance downturns, particularly on seat losses and major losses. Second, the selectorate type, whether it is by membership or delegates, compared to more exclusive, elite-based selectorates, has conflicting results for women's likelihood to run for party leadership elections and women's success in leadership elections. Inclusive selectorates encourage women's inclusion in leadership contests (we see higher shares of women candidates in these elections) but negatively affect their selection as leaders. Party electoral structure, therefore, has contrasting effects for candidacy and selection of women. As opposed to our expectations that membership elections should help women's tenure by increasing their legitimacy evaluations, we find that they only help women if the elected leaders perform well in office, suggesting again that performance is a big driver of tenure.

In terms of competition, our unique data allows us to investigate how the composition of candidate pools for leadership and their size impacts each stage of a woman's leadership career. We show that competition follows very gendered patterns: when women are selected as leaders, they generally face less competition and are selected most often with no competition at all. As the number of men in a contest increases, women are far less likely to be elected. Thus, the candidacy stage is a crucial step for women. If they are included in leadership contests, they most likely win. For tenure, on the other hand, we show that the smaller the pool, the better for women's tenure. Given that most of the women leaders in our data did not experience any competition, this finding suggests that either women leaders take on a less-desirable position or are very high-quality and dominant powers that are not easily challenged in office. The margin of victory, on the other hand, does not affect tenure.

What is consistently very important for the candidacy and selection of women leaders is the gender-inclusiveness of the political culture. The parliamentary culture, specifically the shares of women MPs in the party and the national parliament, substantively and significantly increases the chances of seeing more women candidates and leaders, respectively. Interestingly, though, gender-inclusivity does not affect or condition the other factors for women's tenure. It appears that while the inclusiveness of the political culture is essential for the candidacy and selection of women, once they do break that glass ceiling, the cultural factors no longer impact their careers directly or through other key variables.

Finally, one of our most important contributions, which we unpack further later in this Element, is showing how women's careers as political party leaders have three distinct stages with their own gendered patterns. Inclusion in the

leadership contest as candidates is crucial, but different factors affect these stages in varying ways, making it hard to make one-for-all prescriptions for women leaders. Once elected, their tenures are defined mostly by office performance, while the inclusiveness of the political culture no longer affects women.

Our results have important implications for, and contributions to, the scholarship on women's access to power and their careers in politics, intra-party politics, and political leadership in general. In addition to a rich empirical analysis of novel data on women's experience in party leadership, we also offer a rich theoretical story about the internal functioning of political parties. By going inside the "black box" of the party with data on internal selection processes, we are able to contribute to the understanding of how political parties work and how they navigate power struggles, as well as make a significant advancement of our knowledge of when and to what extent these power relationships are gendered.

In what follows, we first present the details of our Party Leaders Dataset (Section 2) and present some descriptive details about party leadership candidates, elected leaders, and their tenure in office. In Section 3, we focus on women's candidacy for and election to party leadership before we turn to the analysis of women's tenure in Section 4. We conclude in Section 5 with a summary of our findings, the implications of our results, and a discussion of further suggested directions to examine women leaders' careers in parliamentary democracies.

2 The Party Leaders Dataset

Before theorizing and systematically testing our expectations on when women run for party leadership, are elected as party leaders, and how long they last in office once elected compared to men, it is important to understand how political parties in advanced parliamentary democracies elect and replace their leaders and to descriptively examine how gendered party leadership elections and removals are. To that end, we have coded a novel dataset, Party Leaders Dataset (PLD), which covers party leadership details from eleven advanced democracies across forty years. These countries are Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The dataset includes all political parties with at least 5% vote share in at least two consecutive elections between 1980 and 2020 and excludes those parties that have shared/dual leadership and those that had only one leader in this time period.[2] The interim leaders, who were placeholders

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[2] If a party only had one leader between 1980 and 2020, that leader will be censored in our survival analyses due to the lack of termination. For this reason and to be consistent across the different sections, we opted to exclude those parties with only one leader during the covered period from the analyses.