"If not me, who?": An analysis of political ambition amongst first-time elected and aspiring
millennial politicians in Lithuania

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in International Studies: Russia, East Europe and Central Asia

University of Washington

2019

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies

ProQuest Number: 13900221

ProQuest 13900221

www.manaraa.com

University of Washington

Abstract

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The primary aim of this study was to investigate how and why young people enter

politics in Lithuania. The research observing youth political ambition tends to focus on lack of

ambition, alternative strategies of political involvement (such as protest), and to a lesser extent,

budding and expressive ambition to run for office. While the majority of the latter studies focus

on established Western democracies, this paper seeks to provide some insight into political

motivation in the post-Soviet democracies, using Lithuania as a case study. This qualitative

study is based on semi-structured interviews with 10 first-time elected and 7 aspiring

politicians, educated in democratic Lithuania. The key findings indicate that family influence on

political motivation is only a minor factor in the decision-making process to enter politics. At

the same time, being exposed to a civically engaging school or youth group environment plays a

significant role in nurturing participants' political ambition. Two major routes to entering

politics emerged – those who were more strategic about the future in politics could be

described as 'self-starters'; and those whose motivation was sparked by elite recruitment, usually by a senior political actor, already participating in politics or considering candidacy. The analysis of the interviews also uncovered a clear trend in disassociation with party membership and a growing appetite for nonpartisan path to candidacy. This is particularly vivid in municipal elections, in which a new vehicle to enter politics - public electoral committee – has taken a firm place and allows politically ambitious millennials to enter the office without a party stamp.

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1. Introduction

Nobody elected us (…), we got together, around 40 people; we're looking at each other, thinking 'what's next?'. We understood that we had to choose the head of the city council and the leader of the council - like they do with the heads of the Parliament and Government - but nobody knew how it is meant to be done. Jonas and I had a chat and decided to go see the bishop for some advice.

Simas, a former councilman of a Lithuanian town, 1991 – 1995 term

Such stories of lack of knowledge and confusion about entering politics in the wake of democratic consolidation could be told across the new democracies of Central Eastern Europe (CEE). National and municipal level politicians were crucial cogs in understanding the components required for the development of stable democratic systems in the states that re-emerged as independent after the collapse of the USSR. While the degrees of enthusiasm and success varied, they modelled their paths to democratic consolidation by looking westward – to the established Western democracies.

Fast forward thirty-five years and the dominating narrative on Western democracy is its backsliding. The victories of the newcomers, President Trump in the US and President Macron in France, as well as the electoral victories of previously marginal populist parties have swept the global political landscape startling voters and experts. A sense of a paradigm shift is undisputable – politics *as we know it* is changing shape, responding to voters' dissatisfaction with the status quo. From disillusionment with established parties to disenchantment with the European Union, from right-wing populism to eco-socialism, the flux is real and is deemed to affect all aspects of the democratic system.

This paper seeks to address the implications of the changing landscape of democratic participation through the analysis of political ambition. In other words, it asks how this ongoing shift impacts those entering politics or aspiring to enter politics.

Political ambition has been observed and documented with abundance in the last few decades. The theory developed by Schlesinger (1966) remains influential and has paved way for the scholarship investigating progressive ambition (Rohde, 1979), intra-institutional ambition (Herrick & Moore, 1993), nascent ambition (Fox, 2005; Fox & Lawless, 2004; 2014), and to a lesser extent, generational divide in political representation (Haddad, 2012) with a specific focus on the new generation of political actors - millennials' interest in political careers (Lawless & Fox, 2015; Shames, 2017).

While the studies on political motivation suggest that the millennials find it hard to identify with the hierarchical structures of the party politics (Adnan, Nesta, 2018) and do not believe that the best way to create change is through a career in politics (Shames, 2017), an increasing number of those born in 1983 and later enter the office. The 2018 US election saw a significant boost in number of millennials entering the House of Representatives (Pew Research Center, 2018), particularly among the Democrats. The average age of non-incumbent winners was 49, making 2018 cycle the youngest in the past three cycles (Jin, Politico, 2018). The results of the most recent Lithuanian elections demonstrate that the councilmen and councilwomen as well as the members of Parliament and the municipal councils are growing younger, making the last national and municipal election cycles the youngest in at least the past three cycles. On the day of the last Parliamentary election the average age of the Members of Parliament was 50,6

(The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2016). In the last municipal council election, the average age of the elected municipal council members (including the Mayors) was 51 (The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2019). This may suggest that the most apathetic demographic of voters (Ramonaitė, 2014; Jastramskis, 2018) are not equally apathetic about democratic representation.

It has been long acknowledged that party identification and party membership is gradually declining and that it is the case in all established democracies. This decline has been one of the most pressing issues concerning political scientists (Katz & Mair 1995; Dalton, 2002; Whiteley, 2011; Van Biezen et al, 2012), as parties continue to play a vital role in democratic governance and are still being perceived as main vehicles for democratic representation.

Scholars analysing the political systems in the new European democracies are exposed to similar challenges. Young, lesser established democracies of Eastern Europe have been subjected to an additional set of tests to their political systems – in Lithuania, for example, all but one major party have been involved in bribery or corruption scandals in the last 10 years[1] which has had considerable effect on the citizens' trust in parties and politicians. In spite of being a regular feature topic in the media, the broader impact of the corruption scandals has not been yet investigated (Jastramskis, 2018), including the influence on an individual's decision

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[1] Some of the corruption scandals that involved the key political parties:
    a) "Vijūnėlės dvaras" scandal broke out in 2013, involving a Mayor of Druskininkai (Lithuanian Social Democratic Party) and his illegally built property. The case is still pending a decision.
    b) In 2016 E. Masiulis, a former leader of the Liberal Movement was caught with an alleged bribe of €106,000.
    c) In 2016 after a 10-year investigation, the Labour Party was found guilty of keeping fraudulent accounts.

Petronytė-Urbonavičienė (2018) provides a comprehensive study on the public perceptions on recent political scandals in Lithuania.

to enter politics.

In addition, a growing range of value systems informed by a vast array of experiences exist in the societies of these young democracies – from Soviet occupation, communism, independence movement, Soviet resistance, to being born and educated in the independent, democratic Lithuania.

This context forms a backdrop for the thesis. Its primary aim is to understand why the millennials - the first democratically educated generation - are believed to enter politics in Lithuania. In addition to investigating the relationship between their decision making and their perceptions of the current Lithuanian political climate, this thesis also seeks to explore the impact of the following factors: the Soviet – anti-Soviet cleavage, identified by Ramonaitė (2007; Ramonaitė et al, 2014; Jastramskis, 2018) and the family and school dynamics in encouraging nascent political ambition (Lawless, 2014).

The secondary objective relates to locating the role of partisanship in the decision making. In response to the dramatic increase of a number of the public electoral committees in the recent Lithuanian municipal elections, the second part of the research addresses the question of the non-partisanship through the prism of the millennial political representation. The main questions raised by this thesis can be summarised in the following way:

(1) Why do millennials decide to go into politics?
(2) How do they enter politics?

(3) To the extent that ideology influences the decision making on party affiliation, how is the role of ideology perceived by the new generation politicians?

(4) How are the parties perceived?

(5) How does the emergence of public electoral committees impact the decision to enter politics?

While this qualitative study is unable to measure dissatisfaction with the current political climate amongst politically ambitious young Lithuanians or provide a key to enticing young generation into entering politics, it allows to view and analyse the logic behind certain choices made by those willing to join the political apparatus.

In addition, it demonstrates the following broader insights. Firstly, it provides understanding into experiences of the new democracies, particularly the development of their civil societies. Secondly, political processes currently unfolding in Poland and Hungary have successfully transformed the governing systems of the formerly liberal democracies to illiberal in a very short time. This worryingly presents a model to follow to the other formerly Eastern Bloc countries with similar tendencies, seriously challenging the EU cohesion and further integration from within. Lithuania and other Baltic states have managed to rebut the lure of populist politicians in the most recent elections. However, a clearer understanding of patterns unfolding within established party institutions in Lithuania can provide insights into fragmenting and challenges to the political system as a whole.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining political ambition

In her book *Becoming a candidate: Political ambition and the decision to run for office*, Lawless (2012) provides a comprehensive and up to date study on political ambition in the US – the desire to seek political office (Lawless & Fox, 2004). Using a mixed-method approach - a combination of a survey, telephone interviews and an analysis of media, the author investigates why some professionals are more interested in running for elective office than others. Introducing the distinction between nascent and expressive political ambition, Lawless argues that political opportunity structure variables explain why people enter politics (expressive political ambition), but they do not provide much insight into why people might at some point run for office (nascent political ambition). According to Lawless, many reasons why people develop political ambition lie outside the structure of the political opportunity.

Observing nascent political ambition in Britain, Allen & Cutts (2018) paint a picture of an aspiring politician using first systematic study of political ambition conducted as part of the online survey ran by YouGov in 2017. Attempting to explain why British political institutions do not look like Britain itself, they find that the Britons who display political ambition are "unlike other people" – they share a set of characteristics such as gender, ethnic group, socio-economic status, family involvement in politics and these factors set them apart from the ordinary people. In other words, there is little that is left to imagination when it comes to describing who runs for office in Britain according to this study.

In addition, Lawless' (2012) addresses the role of the gatekeepers – political parties - in

individuals' decision to run for office. According to Lawless, the encouragement of the party gatekeeper, especially of the party leader has a significant impact on increased political ambition. Similarly, Broockman argues that "having been asked to run [is] the modal explanation for candidacy or the factor most positively associated with interest in running" (2014, p. 109).

While Allen & Cutts do not address this question directly, they suggest that the party gatekeepers are the reason for people of the same characteristic becoming political candidates in Britain. A similar conclusion to that offered by Lawless and Broockman can be drawn based on Allen & Cutts acknowledgement that a party is "the primary vehicle through which private citizens become publicly-elected politicians" (2018).

Political ambition of young people seems to be more commonly studied from the perspective of lack of thereof. *Running from Office*, the first ever study of youth political ambition (Lawless & Fox 2015) focuses on why young people are not motivated to run for office in the United States. Exploring how they view government via surveys of the high school and college students, Lawless & Fox find that young people see the politics as argumentative and dysfunctional and that this message is reinforced in the family as well as the school environment.

Shames (2017) approaches the topic in a similar manner, focusing on a smaller, harder to reach and less explored population of political hopefuls, those "best positioned for politics in terms of qualifications". The author's findings demonstrate that that the millennials are not uninterested in running for office; they lack the belief in the "broken" political system and the

trust that the change is possible. For Shames, the desire to run for office depends on conscious or unconscious process of cost-benefit analysis (ibid). She suggests that "such ambition is rationally lacking in those for whom the costs outweigh rewards – the American society has made running today so costly, in so many ways" that many great potential candidates are put off.

While similar survey or interview-based studies on youth political ambition in the young European democracies are lacking, Žiliukaitė (2008) observed political participation from the generational divide perspective. As civic participation patterns are tightly linked to those of democratic representation, this analysis is useful to explore.

It is often expected that the generations that grow up in the democratic settings can be characterized by higher levels of civic and political activity, stronger pro-democratic values than the generations that reached their adulthood during the Soviet period. However, the findings of the Žiliukaitė's research revealed that the youngest generation of adults differed from older generations by low electoral activity and weak support for political community. According to the author, Lithuanian youth did not stand out when compared to the older people by higher levels of participation in voluntary organizations; they were also characterized by weaker communal solidarity and philanthropic attitudes than those of older generation. Žiliukaitė also found that civic and political involvement of the older generations of Lithuanian population were based on "sense of duty" and traditional moral values (importance of family, patriotism, religion) while younger generation were characterized by secular-rational values (priority is given to measures of personal benefit and efficiency).

While Žiliukaitė's study is undoubtedly insightful; it could be argued that what the author considered a "new generation of people whose values were formed in a democratic system" was instead a generation whose values formed during a period of particular uncertainty, 1990s – 2000s. Although *theoretically* democratic, the system was filled with instability and uncertainty, with organised crime and racketeering flourishing and the democratic state apparatus still in a stage of inception. As a result, such environment "might have formed even more problematic values in population than the system before" (A. Ramonaitė, personal communication, August 22, 2018). This suggests that in order to understand the democratic values and civic engagement levels of the young population, it might be useful to study the generation that can be described as "millennials".

2.2. Candidate party identification and the lack of thereof

It his seminal book "Parties without Partisans" Russel Dalton states that "feelings of partisanship tap the popular vitality of representative democracy" (2002, p. 21). In spite of globally observed decline in party identification, an opinion of the majority of scholars on the importance of partisanship remains unchanged: public attachment to political parties is at the core of the democratic system.

Sartori (1976) in his renowned "minimal definition" of a party described it as "any political group that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections, candidates for public office" (as quoted in Farrell & Webb, 2002), nodding to the importance of

the link between the candidate and the party.

Rahn argues, that the voters may rely on any number of shortcuts, including retrospective evaluations, endorsements, or candidates' personal characteristics, but party identification tends to be the most potent heuristic (1993). Popkin and Cotta & Best reinforce this view - Popkin describes party identification as a ''shortcut or default value, a substitute for more complete information about parties and candidates''(1991, as quoted in Kirkland & Coppock, 2017). Cotta & Best suggest that a record of party service may be seen as facilitating a political career and therefore it is likely to be used as a path to legislative recruitment (Whiteley, Seyd & Richardson, 1994; McAllister, 1997, as quoted in Cotta & Best 2007).

The decline in party identification has led to a large increase of scholarship on non-partisanship. Whiteley argues that party membership and activism decline is due to the ever-closer relationship between parties and the state which is characterised by excessive state regulation and which has the effect of stifling voluntary activity at the grassroots level (2011). According to Berman, the reason for the decline is parties' abuse of their gatekeeper role in politics, leading to the gridlock and hyper-partisanship in the US (The Atlantic, October 2015).

The importance of the voter strategies to candidate selection is rightfully acknowledged in the research on nonpartisan candidacy. According to Kirkland & Coppock, nonpartisan candidacy and nonpartisan elections "operate on the logic that voters will choose different candidates depending on the presence or absence of partisan information" (2018). It usually means that the voters have more difficulty in establishing the ideological leanings of the candidates and therefore pay attention to different characteristics, especially candidates'

political experience (ibid).

2.3. (Non)partisanship in Lithuanian politics

Looking at the existing research on the trends of Lithuanian voter selection, the opposite seems to be the case – the newness of the candidate and her lack of political experience are seen as favourable characteristics (Jastramskis, 2018). The reasons for this lie in the process of the political party system formation.

Lithuania's multi-party system formed in the early 1990s. The classic economic ideological measures, such as "the role of the market versus government regulation in the economy" (Vegetti, 2019, p. 78) do not define the Left–Right scale in Lithuania. In the first post-Soviet decade the Lithuanian party system appeared to be based on a stable competition between two parties that were rooted in the Lithuanian popular front (forming the "right" scale) and former communist parties (forming the "left" scale) (Auers, 2015, p. 79). This Soviet-Anti-Soviet cleavage has been seen as a defining cleavage of the Lithuanian political system (Ramonaitė, 2007; Ramonaitė et al, 2014; Jastramskis, 2018); a result of the scars of 50 years of Soviet occupation, "externally imposed communism as well as the strains of the economic, social and political transition" (Auers, 2015, p. 109).

For Duvold and Jurkynas (2013) municipal elections of 2000 marked a change in the Lithuanian party system, representing a different dimension other than the regime-oriented conflict. Ramonaitė (2004) is of similar opinion, arguing that the 2000 election changed the

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configuration of ex-Communist - anti-Communist dimension, adding a third – pro-liberal "section" to it, which was neutral in regard to the communist – anti-communist dimension.

The trend toward non-partisanship is noted in the Jastramskis & Ramonaitė's (2015) analysis of the 2015 election in which they claim that "the addition of direct mayoral elections in 2015 […] provided impetus for nonpartisan electoral committees which were regarded by voters as a fresh alternative to the political establishment".

Ramonaitė's chapter "The secret to the success of the Farmers and Greens Union: value niche or "the hopeful voter?" (2018) provides an insightful observation of the most recent election Parliamentary election. By analysing the surprise win of an outsider - Farmers and Greens Union in the 2016 election, she discovers that the party's values, although "splashed" all over the ideological spectrum, upon closer inspection of leading party members combine conservative morals and fiscal left-leaning. This demonstrates that the value cleavages do not play an important part in voter decision making, confirming the ideological inconsistency and the fragmentation of political beliefs amongst the Lithuanian voters.

Ramonaitė's analysis also shows that non-partisanship leaves an impression on voters disappointed with the parties but does not guarantee an electoral success. She highlights the significance of the *hope* motive – in the eyes of the voters, a new political power provides a sense of hope that the ruling of the new party will be better (p. 171). This coincides with Sikk's (2012) findings that newness itself can be a viable project for a political party in the societies of the Central Easter Europe, that are largely disappointed with the established parties.

Observing the most recent (2019) municipal election and the rise of PECs, Jastramskis argues that the success of the public electoral committees was programmed in the political outlook of Lithuanian citizens and direct municipal election reform. He sees a parallel with Presidential election in which the majority of the candidates are affiliated with the parties, but the absolute majority of the votes always goes to the nonpartisan candidates (Delfi, March 2019).

Monthly national surveys regularly find the parties at the very bottom of the trusted government and state institutions and actors' list. In 2018 and early 2019 approximately 5% of the population said they trust parties, approximately 62% expressing distrust (Vilmorus 2018, 2019). While the reasons for such state of affairs have been widely researched (Ramonaitė 2006, 2014; Bakutis et al 2017); the analysis of the ways it informs those who are or seeking to actively participate in politics on national and municipal levels remains scarce.

2.4. The rise of the public electoral committee (PEC)

An amendment to the Law on Elections to Municipal Councils (26 June 2014) set out that candidates for municipal councils including mayoral candidates may be nominated by electoral committees as well as political parties (Central Electoral Commission of Lithuania). In the municipal council election, the public electoral committee should consist of the voters of the municipality in which the candidates are nominated, and the size of the committee must be at least twice larger than the number of council members elected in that municipality (ibid).

Non-partisan candidates were already able to compete in municipal elections after the 2007 decision of the Constitutional Court which removed political parties' monopoly on electoral nominations (Constitutional Court 2007, as quoted in Jastramskis & Ramonaitė, 2015). However, the restrictions associated with the naming of the committees meant low interest in forming them.

As a result, 2011 municipal election witnessed the appearance of the first few committees alongside the parties, winning 5% mandates. The phenomenon grew in 2015, when 58 public electoral committees appeared in the electoral lists, winning just over 9% of mandates in the municipalities; local electoral committees won 116 mandates in the municipal councils and mayoral posts in four of the six largest cities (ibid). During the 2019 election under new, relaxed rules, 99 public electoral committees stood for election in 48 out of the total of 60 municipalities and won almost 27% of the mandates in total.

The 2019 municipal election was triumphant for the public election committees – together they won more mandates than any single party. In the five biggest cities winning mayoral candidates stood for election and won their seats as leaders of committees.

A recent study (n=962) conducted by Vilnius Institute of Political Analysis, led by Šumskas, found that the voters, who can clearly define their position on the political spectrum ("left" or "right"), perceive the PECs less favourably. This allows to draw a conclusion that the voters occupying the ideological "centre" are the most likely to support the committees. The same study found that the committees are favoured by the educated, higher income receiving individuals.

While the committee phenomenon is not new – entities similar to public electoral committees take part in municipal elections in Estonia[2], Finland, Latvia and Poland - thus far, non-partisanship, or more specifically – non-partisanship through electoral committee membership has not been widely researched and the analysis is mostly concentrated in the form of political commentary in the media and increasingly, in the social media.

2.4.1   A brief media analysis - PEC

The challenge to the established party system presented by the emergence of the alternative vehicle to entering local office - public electoral committees - has attracted a significant media attention.

While many experts see it as a trend that will pass (Dumbliauskas, Delfi, 2018; Urbonaitė. Delfi, 2018), some political analysts believe that public electoral committees provided an unprecedented opportunity for nonpartisan active citizens who know their localities to step up and get directly involved in solving problems. In a recent radio interview political scientist Lauras Bielinis argued that:

(..) "committees are appearing because the parties are losing the attention of the

voters. In the [party trust] rankings (…) they are always practically the last. Certain worry

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[2] According to Šumskas (Delfi, 2019), around a quarter of the municipal council mandates are won annually by the entities similar to PECs in Estonia.

arises that the society will turn away from political processes only because the parties are not popular, so the committees sort of brighten up and liven up the political field. It is understandable that committees are not parties in the true sense of the word, most of them will disintegrate after the election; but it is a stimulus to activate political life, that's most important." (LRT, 2018)

Many political scientists are apprehensive about the raise of PECs, referring to them as "small businesses at a local market – more competition, less regulation" (Ramonaitė, Lietuvos Žinios, 2015), "one day butterflies" (Dumbliauskas, Verslo Žinios, 2019) that disintegrate after the election and have no responsibility to continue functioning.

Jastramskis suggests that the fact that one of the most prominent and visible politicians (former *Liberal Movement* leader) Remigijus Šimašius stood for the election with a committee, not with a party, does not mark a very optimistic future for the parties (15min, 2019). Gritėnas is even more pessimistic - he recently argued that the popularity of the committees marks the crisis of the Lithuanian party system (Delfi, March, 2019).

The leaders of the major parties have been outspoken about PEC phenomena; some expressing concerns about the lack of ideological background of the committees as well as the issues related to their regulation and funding. The majority however were in support of this new phenomenon.

Vytautas Landsbergis, the honorary chairman of the *Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats* party has been quoted referring to the committees as "handfuls of little gangs"

(Delfi, November, 2018) as well as "misunderstanding" and "a threat to democracy" (Delfi, March, 2019). But according to Gabrielius Landsbergis, the chairman of the party, public electoral committees were expected to bring more democracy as well as attracting nonpartisan candidates with a good knowledge of their cities (ibid).

Ramūnas Karbauskis, the leader of the ruling *Farmers and Greens Union* on PECs: "I hope we will continue to work together successfully. The victory of the committees in Siauliai and Kaunas as well as in Vilnius shows that there is a lot the parties need to catch up with. And I hope they will work with the 'Farmers' because we do the work that is needed at the national level as well" (Delfi, March, 2019).

Gintautas Paluckas, the leader of the *Social Democratic Party* claimed he does not support the "artificial encumbrance" for the committees, but is for the initiatives put forward by the ruling *Farmers and Greens Union* to level the conditions for the committees and parties, in particularly when it comes to the legal aid and liability for possible violations (15min, March, 2019).

Šimašius, the former leader of the *Liberal Movement* and the current Mayor of Vilnius, elected through a public electoral committee argues that the committees represent "healthy democracy": "most important is to remember what the goal of the civil society is and of the democracy. The goal is for the people to be involved, and for them to have a choice. (…) in this regard it is healthy to have a traditional party system, and it is healthy to have the committees participating in it, that formed for the specific election" (Delfi, November, 2018).

3. Method

3.1. Design

Open-ended interviews were chosen as the methodology for the study. 17 interviews were conducted between June – September 2018, all except one in person (one telephonically). All interviews were conducted in Lithuanian; they were recorded, translated and transcribed into English. At the beginning of most of the interviews, a narrative interview was chosen in order to put the respondents at ease; semi-structured interview style was used at later stages of each conversation.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this qualitative study were first-time elected politicians (2015 municipal council election and 2016 Parliament election) and members of the party-affiliated political organisations, seriously considering careers in politics. 17 participants were interviewed in total - 9 were elected politicians; 7 of them were serving as members of the municipal councils, 2 were serving as MPs at the time of the interview. 1 participant worked as an advisor for a Member of Parliament. The remaining 7 were active members of party-affiliated youth organisations; 5 of them elected as chairs (formerly or at the time of the interview) of the organisations they represented.

9 of the participants were male, 8 were female. The common denominator between two groups of participants was their age - all the politicians and politically active youth

interviewed were born in 1984 and later, meaning that all of the participants were educated in the independent and democratic system. While Lithuania became independent in 1990, its democratic consolidation was not immediate, therefore the author of this thesis is of opinion shared by Lithuanian political experts (A. Ramonaitė, personal communication, August 22, 2018; V. Bachmetjevas, personal communication, September 17, 2018) that Lithuanian democratic system was nearer consolidation in 1996-1998. One additional participant was interviewed due to his unique experience of serving as a councilman in one of the municipalities between 1991 – 1996 in newly independent Lithuania; his experience was particularly useful in understanding the state of democratic consolidation in the early 1990s.

It is worth to note that out of 7 elected members of municipal councils interviewed, 4 ran again in 2019 election and 2 of them were elected. In addition, 2 active members of party-affiliated youth organisations ran in the same election, 1 participant was elected to a city council. The remaining participants did not run in 2019 municipal council elections but continue working in politics in various capacities – either moved on to governmental roles locally or nationally or joined political NGOs. The paths of two participants (1 from the "elected" group and 1 from the "aspiring" group) are unknown.

Different strategies were employed when recruiting the two – "elected" and "aspiring" - groups. Elected politicians were selected using The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania data. After a list of elected officials born in 1984 and later was identified, they were contacted via email provided on the council webpage or via Facebook. The first three participants who were members of party-affiliated political organisations were contacted via

Facebook, the rest were selected utilising a snowball technique, meaning that at the end of the interviews the participants were asked to recommend other suitable research participants.

In order to represent a wide array of experiences of "running for office" in Lithuania, a variety of respondents in terms of geographic location and party affiliation were acquired. The majority of the elected council men and women were from the smaller regional towns, one was from Vilnius, one from Kaunas. The national level politicians were all based in Vilnius, the aspiring politicians were largely based in Vilnius, one was based in Kaunas.

In terms of party affiliation, efforts were made to interview young people in or affiliated with the four major parties holding mandates in the Parliament (2016 – 2020) at the time of the interviewing process. As a result, 4 members of and 2 affiliated with the *Liberal Movement* were interviewed; 2 members of and 2 affiliated with the *Homeland Union – Christian Democrats* were interviewed; 1 member of and 1 affiliated with the *Social Democratic Party* were interviewed; 1 participant was an elected politician affiliated with the *Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union*.

In order to represent the realities of the 2015 municipal council election in which public election committees appeared and won a significant number of municipal council seats, efforts were made to interview elected officials who come to office via this route: 2 young politicians interviewed were elected as members of public electoral committees.

While local government is the more common path for the first-time politicians, two Members of Parliament without previous local government experience were also interviewed.

Table I:

Participants' details and pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Age Group	Gender	National/Municipal/Youth	Elected	Party membership
Arunas	30-35	M	Municipal	Y	Y
Dominykas	25-30	M	Municipal	Y	N
Donatas	25-30	M	Municipal	Y	Y
Jurga	30-35	F	Municipal	Y	Y
Martynas	30-35	M	Municipal	Y	Y
Saulius	30-35	M	Municipal	Y	Y
Tadas	30-35	M	Municipal	Y	N
Renata	25-30	F	National	Y	N
Vilma	30-35	F	National	Y	Y
Dainora	20-25	F	Youth	N	N
Felicija	20-25	F	Youth	N	N
Elena	20-25	F	Youth	N	Y
Laimonas	20-25	M	Youth	N	N
Jonas	25-30	M	Youth	N	N
Ginta	20-25	F	Youth	N	N
Gerda	25-30	F	National	N	N
Laurynas	25-30	M	Youth	N	Y
Simas	60-65	M	Municipal	N	N

3.3. Analysis

Interpretive, inductive thematic analysis was chosen due to its suitability for small sample studies and ability to describe patterns of data in rich detail. Due to lack of previous research dealing with the topic, inductive analysis approach was chosen, meaning that the themes were data-driven rather than informed by the analysis of the existing literature.

3.4. Reflective Statement

As a Lithuanian female in early 30s, I was able to gain access to the participants relatively easily. I believe that the fact that I was studying in the US (rather somewhere in Europe) created a perceived sense of distance and comfort in the eyes of some of the participants.

It is possible that my background or preconceptions may have influenced the way in which some of the participants were chosen or the themes were emphasised. However, I took care to develop themes in a bottom-up manner to minimise any biases.

The major weakness of my study is a sample size and the variety of the sample in terms of levels of governance – it consists of elected members of the local council (7), Members of Parliament (2) and party-affiliated youth displaying nascent political ambition (7). While the common denominator amongst the three groups (or two groups if to view them from the elected/not yet elected perspective) is nascent or expressive political ambition, it would have been worthwhile to study one of these groups instead.

While an in-depth analysis of each of these groups is beyond the scope of this study, focusing on each of the groups individually would present a richer source for the analysis. It would be particularly interesting to see a longitudinal study exploring these first-time local council members' expressive political ambition and its motivating factors.

4. Results

Table II

Themes and subthemes:

Research questions (summarised)	Themes	Sub-themes
Q1. What is the impact of the school environment and individuals' family when deciding to enter politics?	Theme I Factors outside the structure of the political opportunity	Sub-theme I The role of high school as a civic involvement motivator Sub-theme II Family influence or influencing family? Sub-theme III Impact of family history and the Soviet occupation experience
Q2. Why go into politics?	Theme II "Who then, if not me?"	Sub-theme I "The planners" Sub-theme II "The recruits"
Q3. To the extent that one's ideology influences the decision making on party	Theme III The importance of the ideological background in party politics	Sub-theme I Questioning the necessity of the ideological background in the party system

affiliation, how is the role of ideology perceived by the new generation politicians?		<u>Sub-theme II</u> Seeing own ideological stance as matching that of party's <u>Sub-theme III</u> Seeing ideology as a backbone for the party system, theoretically
Q4. How are parties perceived?	<u>Theme IV</u> Perceptions of the Lithuanian parties	<u>Sub-theme I</u> Disillusionment with parties <u>Sub-theme II</u> Party membership as a means to an end <u>Sub-theme III</u> Party membership as a limitation, as a "stain"
Q5. How does the emergence of public electoral committees impact the decision to enter politics?	<u>Theme V</u> Non-partisanship as a reflection of the current political climate	<u>Sub-theme I</u> Non-partisanship as a "clean", "transparent" alternative to party politics – everything that partisanship is not <u>Sub-theme II</u> PECs as a way to get "things done" in local context <u>Sub-theme III</u> An alternative path that provides access for the new players

Q1. What are the motivating factors when deciding to enter politics?

<u>Theme I: Factors outside the structure of the political opportunity</u>

Sub-theme I: The role of high school as civic involvement motivator

It is argued that democratic education plays an important part in evoking civic mindset (Lipset, 1981; Haddad, 2013). This was a case for more than half of the participants. Only four participants reported being completely civically disengaged and unmotivated at school. The majority were keen participants in extra-curriculum activities such as Scouts, debate clubs and sport teams and were able to trace back their initial involvement in civic and political organisations to their time at high school.

> *"At school I joined Scouts and it all started from there. They delegated me to my town's chapter of the Youth Association Roundtable (…)"* (Felicija)

> *"There was a project called 'A School of Citizenship' which is a simulation of self-governance, I took part (…), soon later someone asked, 'maybe you want to join?' [the local youth chapter of the political party] and I did"* (Elena)

> *"…the very beginning reaches back to my time at school, everything seems to have led step by step to where I am now"* (Renata)

It is important to note, that while high-school time is perceived as foundational for the raise of political ambition, when asked about the role of the civic education classes specifically, the participants were apprehensive about crediting them, instead suggesting the importance of extra-curricular activities. Four participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with the civic education classes specifically and remembered being politically demotivated as the result of the teachers' political biases or perceived lack of knowledge on related (political) topics.

<u>Sub-theme II: Family influence of influencing family?</u>

Another important factor discussed in the scholarship of political ambition is the influence and support of the family members. A majority of the participants reported having no influence from parents when considering entering politics; the opposite was reported – their active involvement in politics encouraged the parents and family members to participate more actively.

"In 2016 I finally forced my parents to go voting" (Jonas)

"My family, ordinary middle class (…), politics was never in their interest" (Laimonas)

"My family have no political leanings, they don't follow politics at all, I'm like a white crow [a phrase similar to 'black sheep']" (Elena)

<u>Sub-theme III: Impact of family history and the Soviet occupation experience</u>

Four participants mentioned being influenced by their grandparents and their involvement in the freedom fighting. For some, the impact of family history was perceived as an "awakening factor":

"[…] my grandfather and his family were deported to Siberia, and this event, as well as others got me interested in looking for answer in historic context to what happened and why it happened. And looking deeper into these experiences, what did people do when there was a threat of dying had impact on me, formed me and I naturally thought if people act,

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participate in spite of the possibility of dying why don't we act/participate, why don't we

engage civically?" (Dainora)

Two of the participants highlighted that their political leanings do not reflect those of their

families:

"…my grandparents…the older Landsbergis is like a cross to the devil [for them]. That

doesn't bother me, maybe they are happy about my achievements […], they are proud of

me…as much as I've noticed when we talk, and I think they have gotten used to the idea

that I've gone to the other…[side]" (Elena)

Q2. Why go into politics?

Theme II: "Who then, if not me?"

The majority of the participants spoke of dissatisfaction with current state of affairs and

need for change when asked about motivating factors. Four participants - two elected

politicians, two aspiring politicians – used the expression "who then, if not me?" when asked

about the reasons that impacted their decision making. When deconstructing the initial drive to

go into politics, two larger groups emerged; one - motivated internally, the other – activated by

an external factor – an elite recruiter.

Sub-theme I: The planners

The first group (8 of the participants) can be described as deeply motivated self-starters, engaged in various political organisations for a duration of time, strategic about their goals to run for office.

"on one hand I'm thinking – maybe it is worth trying [to get elected into the] city council, even if I understand that I would not win. But then you've already stepped into that sphere of the politics, already [can say] 'hello, I'm here'." (Felicija)

"(…) to tell the truth, it was my, I wouldn't say a dream, but to some extent you can call it that. I always thought, had an idea that once my career [in sport] is going towards the end I could perhaps start glancing at politics (…)" (Vilma)

Sub-theme II: The recruits

The second group (5 participants) could be described as "the recruits" – the individuals who were not initially interested in a political path, although were civically engaged and somewhat active.

"I was contacted by the people from my hometown […], people I knew when growing up, […] These were the people I trusted, I respected." (Tadas)

"(…) one call changed my life - newly elected Mayor called asking whether I want to be his advisor" (Donatas)

These young politicians have displayed the qualities that were perceived valuable and promising by the elites recruiting new candidates. While not actively planning to enter politics, they have responded positively to the invite and view that moment as the epicentre of their political motivation.

Q3. To the extent that one's ideology influences the decision making on party affiliation, how is the role of ideology perceived by the new generation politicians?

Theme III: The importance of the ideological background in party politics

When contemplating on the role of ideology in their decision to join a particular party, the majority of the participants were keen to stress that there is stark difference between the theory and the practice. Two groups stood out the most; those who were apprehensive about the need for ideological background and those who were firmly rooted in their beliefs and linked those directly to their decision to join a particular party.

Sub-theme I: Questioning the necessity of the ideological background in the party system

The majority of the participants holding this view were from the "elected" group, only Dainora represented the "aspiring" group. Having experienced the practical, not just the theoretical side of politics, they seemed disenchanted with the necessity and saw it as a potential pitfall when seeking agreement. One participant (Jurga) talked about the lack of knowledge of the party's political program amongst the majority of the party members.

"My opinion has changed after all these events [the bribery scandal of the Liberal

Movement] – the ideological dependence is maybe not even essential. I think that

universalism which is essentially also a part of the liberal ideology, a liberal assumption

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that was taken over from Christianity, meaning that people sitting together at the same time, although of different interests, interest groups, representatives of different parties can come to an agreement. I think Macron has livened up this style, demonstrated that it works […], he looks at a practical level and is trying to unite (…)" (Dainora)

"[…] Officially we always say that our party is centre left […], honestly speaking not everything in current politics matches what the textbook says […]" (Renata)

"How do people choose a party to join – their choice is based on faces: 'I like this one, I will join, I no longer like this one, I will leave'. At the moment it is like that. But there is a part [of aspiring politicians] that get involved because of the ideas. […] but if you asked party members, many probably would not know the programs" (Jurga)

Sub-theme II: Seeing own ideological stance as matching that of party's

Some of the participants were eager to share their thoughts in regards to their ideological background and the influences that led to joining or affiliating with a particular party of youth organisation:

"Their ideology is my ideology. […] and we studied ideologies and based on that…of course, I had some thoughts – perhaps liberal…but I'm not very liberal. […] I'm not categorical but I'm quite conservative. Family, the place you come from, protecting it, stimulating business…that's my ideology. […] same with Conservatives, they want to protect our language, our traditions" (Martynas)

"[…] the fact that the stronger is defending the smaller is important to me, I really like this principle. […] we learned about ideologies and the teacher gave an example - if there was socialism, you can take the shoes from the shop but if you're a hairdresser you'd have to give a haircut to the shop assistant. I thought 'wow, what an idea!', I was really motivated by this non-monetary measure. So, the social and economic aspects drew me to Social Democrats". (Felicija)

"[…] this understanding that less regulation and influence's on people's economic choices, more they can flourish and actualize. […] maybe that capitalist, free market related way of thinking defined my realisation, that if I don't fight for my freedom, nobody else will. This is what motivated me the most to join and to act" (Laimonas)

Q4. How are the parties perceived?

Theme IV: Perceptions on the Lithuanian parties

A majority of the participants, including the members of the parties were eager to share critical views about the parties that currently exist in Lithuania. The most recent bribery and corruption scandals were referenced frequently when talking about the parties, as if the topics were the extensions of one another.

Sub-theme I: Disillusionment with the parties

In their definitions of parties, these participants used stark references to corruption, money, distrust and bureaucracy. They also talked about the implications such as unwillingness of the politicians to associate themselves with the parties.

"I think in Lithuania parties do not exist. There are narrow groups of interest in which ideological struggle doesn't exist, in which common sense criteria no longer exist, there is no understanding what political debate is, what is a discussion, what is a struggle of ideas. There is money, parties are like kites, I have this association: 'wherever the wind blows I'll fly'" (Dominykas)

"[…] such as Liberal Movement, when the corruption scandal happened, one of their Mayors decided to be a candidate in the next election not with the party, put with the electoral committee. With such a societal distrust of parties, no wonder the choice of the politicians is: 'maybe I don't want to bind myself to a party'" (Renata)

"(…) seeing what the political system is moving towards in Lithuania, all these non-partisan committees…their members are non-partisan therefore they are somehow better than the party members who are corrupt, hopeless, without ideas, super bureaucratic…" (Saulius)

Sub-theme II: Party membership as means to an end

Other participants were a little more pragmatic about party membership or party affiliation and saw it as vehicles to reach their goals:

"I make decisions in stages and see what decisions can define the opportunities for my next stage. […] I decided to join the […] party and work in more depth, talk about politics, and the opportunity that I have now is to be a Mayoral candidate. The decision was made using logic so I can have that opportunity." (Donatas)

"I was in the Liberal Movement previously. A month or two ago I left the party after the scandal, I was nonpartisan and now I have just joined the Conservatives. They are also on the right. Based on ideology, my values I am more liberal than the general position of the party but I don't see a big issue as the economic side matches. Why I chose it – it is the only party that is on the right at the moment in Lithuania" (Arunas)

Sub-theme III: Party membership as a limitation, as a "stain"

This theme has encapsulated the majority of the participants opinions about the parties in Lithuania. Even those considering joining the party in order to progress their careers in politics displayed considerable levels of apprehension, particularly in relation to the outsider perceptions and the potential future implications of such decision:

"I am a member of Liberal Youth, but I was never in the party and I really don't want to be in one in the near future. I think it isn't a smart step looking from a young person's perspective". (Dainora)

"I never saw myself in a party because being in some kind of structure, particularly in a party structure… I believe you limit yourself significantly" (Dominykas)

"We [members of PEC] were not political, not affiliated to parties, we were able to say that. People are disappointed with parties, disappointed with politics. That is a very sad thing" (Tadas)

"Even the teachers can look at you differently because you belong to some political organisation – even though it isn't a party, the organisation simply supports a certain ideology -   they [the teachers] think 'something is up'" (Felicija)

"I'm thinking about joining the party, I have been thinking about it the past year. I always make decisions very fast but have been really taking my time with this one, probably because of the societal outlook on parties; […] and the numbers of party members are shrinking. You can be seen as a weirdo – 'this one is in a party, something is not right here…'". (Felicija)

"[…] even today I'm not officially a member of this party, even during the 2016 election there were many of us, nonpartisan candidates, that was a difference about that election. […] theoretically party membership is nothing bad, stronger the parties, stronger the democracy, representation, […] but current circumstances allowed me not to join the party, so I thought […] it is not necessary to bind myself, let's look how well I'm going to do this job and then decide." (Renata)

As the above quotes suggest, a certain weight is associated with joining a party, it is not an easy decision and if circumstances allow, the politicians and aspiring politicians interviewed preferred as little party association as possible. Interestingly, some participants have referred to the party membership as if they were describing a stain that cannot be removed.

Q5. How does the emergence of public electoral committees impact the decision to enter politics?

Theme V: Non-partisanship as a reflection of the current political climate

All of the participants interviewed were eager to share their thoughts about the phenomenon of the public electoral committees. Two participants (both elected into municipal councils with a party they were members of) were strongly opposed to the idea of PECs. The others, not those not that enthusiastic about public electoral committees, justified their emergence as a result of the political climate.

Sub-theme I: Non-partisanship is perceived as a cleaner, more transparent alternative to party politics – everything that partisanship is not

Using an example of the famously non-partisan former President Valdas Adamkus elected in 2004, this participant sees non-partisanship as a growing trend in Lithuanian politics:

"[…] I think it could get stronger, that non-partisanship. […] when Valdas Adamkus won the presidential election […] he didn't have links to any party, that is why he was seen as more transparent [candidate]. While I personally understand it's not the most 'correct' option, but it is tenacious still and I think it will remain strong going forward" (Renata)

Sub-theme II: PEC as a way to "get things done"

Some participants, particularly those elected to the regional municipal councils associated public electoral committees with action and getting things done while viewing parties as primarily concerned with power maintenance:

"I think that a voluntarily gathered team of people of the same values wanting to do something good for their town is hundred times better than the team that is a party, which sits there and year after year tries to get into the council". (Dominykas)

Sub-theme III: An alternative path that provides access for the new players

These participants have shared concerns about the lack of the internal "lifts" in the party institutions and highlighted opportunities available to those who chose the committee path:

"young, progressive people are not let in, not let into the top. […]. The renewal is being declared – we've attracted new people; we are now renewed – it is not really the case". (Dominykas)

"[…] they said the law has changed and you don't have to be a party member, you can gather as a collective to try doing something, they said we need to do something. That's how I got hooked" (Tadas)

5. Discussion

The studies of nascent political ambition in the US showed that motivation for entering the office strongly correlates with family support (Lawless, 2012). The same could be said about nascent political ambition in Britain (Allen & Cutts, 2018). The trend was not as pronounced in this research – politically ambitious millennials interviewed do not consider family support, political leanings or their absence influential. In contrary, many assumed that their family

members became more interested in politics due to their involvement. This relates to Ramonaitė's conclusions on party identity; while in the US and in Europe it develops during childhood and is unlikely to change, in Lithuania the generation factor outweighs the family factor when explaining the political leanings (2014).

With a caveat that the size of the sample was small, weakening influence of the Soviet – anti-Soviet cleavage was observed. While a "Landsbergis as a cross to devil" metaphor used by one of the participants to describe her grandparents' relationship with a party she is affiliated with marks the existence of the tension that describes the cleavage, the fact that the grandparents were described as "happy" for the achievements of the participant in the political party on the conflicting side of the cleavage could be seen as a the weakening of the cleavage itself.

The experience of the democratic education can certainly be considered as a factor influencing the motivation to enter politics amongst young people in Lithuania. The majority of participants were actively involved in extra-curricular activities while at school or were active members of the youth chapters of the political parties they are now affiliated with. Haddad's (2012) model of generational tipping point provides insight into this process, highlighting the link between democratic education and the willingness of the individuals to participate and make profound changes in political practices, that would better reflect their values (Haddad, 2012).

When it comes to the rationale of entering politics, two distinct directions were observed: those who have described themselves as having a long-term ambition to enter

politics and those who were selected by an elite recruiter, usually an established politician. The individuals belonging to the first group typically were the members of youth organisations, affiliated to the political parties. They have gained experience and built networks while working their way up into the "real" politics and were strategically thinking about their future prospects. They could be defined as career politicians[3], individuals who have chosen a more traditional path into the office. Even though many of the participants matching the above described criteria received some support or nudging by the senior colleagues, they have themselves created the necessary capital for that to happen.

While the role of the authoritative persons and role models in the decision-making is beyond the scope of this study, it is noteworthy that three female participants named an individual or two individuals (also female) who inspired them to seek political career.

It could be argued that the emergence of the second group – "the recruits" - nods to the existence of the trend of needing *new faces* in politics in order to please the electorate. Ramonaitė (2014, 2018) and Jastramskis (2018) have observed this phenomenon from the voter behaviour perspective, which is primarily informed by the lack of trust in major elements of the political system – parties and candidates. While a significant number of incumbents do get re-elected, the *new faces*[4] – individuals elected for the first-time appear to perform increasingly better in the national as well as municipal elections.

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[3] It should be noted that although only 4 of the elected participants ran in the 2019 municipal election, the others remained close to the apparatus in some capacity and can be expected to re-emerge in the next election cycle.
[4] to borrow Ramonaitė's (2018) definition

This relates to the themes that emerged from the analysis of the conversations about the existing political parties. The interviews took place a few months after the latest political corruption scandal which saw the leader of the *Liberal Movement* arrested as a result of alleged bribery[5]. This could be an explanation for the dominance of scandal-related narratives in the majority of the conversations.

Belonging to a party, being a member of the party was seen as unfavourable by the majority of the participants, including those who were elected and members or affiliates of the parties. While the bribery and corruption scandals are hardly the only reasons for such distrust, they have played a major part in shaping citizens' opinion of political parties, politicians and political representation in general and have influenced those seeking to enter office to look for the ways to belong without really belonging.

The themes related the role of ideology support these findings, as the individual voices about the importance of the role of ideology in politics were trumped by the views that juxtaposed the theory vs the practice. The slight majority of the participants talked about the importance of ideological position in their motivation, at the same time describing the ideology as something that matters in theory rather than in practice.

The success of public electoral committees in the 2015 Lithuanian municipal election has prompted further questions about the role of partisanship in Lithuanian politics. When looking at the role of PEC's in the millennials' motivation to run for office, the following key findings emerge: Entering municipal council through public electoral committees, either when

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[5] The bribery scandal that involved then leader of the party Eligijus Masiulis had significant consciences for the party. Part of the former leadership split away, formed a committee and eventually formed a new - Freedom Party.

approached by a political elite or out of self-motivation appears to be an alternative entry to politics for those who might have never considered running for office via more traditional – party membership route. The option has brought in *new faces* and expanded the demographic of those involved in the political process on the municipal level.

On the other hand, this demonstrates the level of disillusionment with the parties in Lithuania and a further splintering of municipal politics from the national politics.

6. Conclusion

A conversation with a participant (and a former council member) Simas about his political ambition and his unawareness of democratic processes reminds the state of democracy three decades ago - prior its unravelling and establishment. Conversations with the participants of the generation that was educated in the independent Lithuania appear to carry a mixture of emotions ranging from disappointment, disillusionment to optimism and pure enthusiasm associated with entering politics. It seems that there is no more space for the unawareness of *how things should be.*

The themes that emerged after employing thematic analysis demonstrate that the role played by the individual's family in sparking political ambition is outweighed by that of the civically engaged secondary school of after school club environment; the major paths to politics can be described as that of "self-starters" and that of "recruits". Finally, the study revealed a clear trend in seeking to disassociate with party membership and a growing appetite for

nonpartisan path to candidacy. While even the national level elected politicians express apprehensiveness about party membership, this is particularly noticeable in the case of municipal elections. This at least partially explains how the new vehicle to enter politics - public electoral committee – has taken a firm place and allows politically ambitious millennials to enter the office.

It can be concluded, that although echoing some universal trends, the paths that politically motivated millennials in the young democracies take do not simply reflect those of their counterparts in the established democracies. Public electoral committees, while seen as "means to an end" in the current political climate represent a certain flexibility in both, citizens' perceptions of the political system and the political system itself; a flexibility that could be exploited by populist forces or even unfriendly powers.

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