

Democratizing urban governance through mayoral term limits: Quasi-experimental evidence from a reform in Chilean municipalities

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ABSTRACT

Term limits on elected mayors are often advocated because they eliminate the incumbency advantage and promote higher representativeness and citizen participation through a more open and reinvigorated electoral competition in local governments. We examine whether key dimensions of local democracy (election competitiveness, turnout, invalid voting, descriptive representation of women) are affected by the imposition of term limits. This article uses a quasi-experimental technique (difference-in-differences design) which leverages a unique and rare institutional reform in Chile that exogenously imposed term limits on some - but not all - mayors in 2020. The as-good-as random assignment of municipalities to either group allows to exploit comparisons which yield robust causal estimates. The overall contribution of term limits to local democracy has been positive because they promote electoral competition, the emergence of female candidates and voter participation, as well as reduce invalid voting rates.

1. Introduction

As countries have increasingly adopted the direct election of mayors and these mayors have assumed greater importance as political actors in urban governance (Stren & Friendly, 2019; Sweeting & Hambleton, 2020), analyzing urban government structure has gained renewed relevance (Reese, Li, & Remer, 2020). Despite substantial advances in understanding the effects of direct mayoral elections on political, social, economic and leadership outcomes in cities across the globe (McQuestin & Drew, 2018; Sweeting, 2017; Wollmann, 2014), little is known about the role of the specific electoral procedures used to elect mayors. Furthermore, only a few studies have explored how these rules affect the main initial promise of the direct election of mayors – the reinvigoration of democracy in urban politics. This article aims to address these lacunae by examining the effect of an overlooked institutional rule: whether directly elected mayors face term limits or not, and link this rule to democratic outcomes at the municipal level.

Part of the existing research on term limits has focused on their economic consequences (Klein & Sakurai, 2015; McGlynn & Sylvester, 2010) and government outcomes (Arvate, 2013; Ferraz & Finan, 2011). However, imposing term limits on elected officials is also expected to improve the democratic governance (Corrales & Penfold, 2014; Heyl &

Llanos, 2022; Kouba & Pumr, 2023; Leininger & Nowack, 2022; Negretto, 2022). In the subnational political arena in general and urban politics in particular, the adoption of term limits is intended to drive this democratizing outcome by limiting the incumbency advantage and in doing so promoting higher representativeness of elected bodies, and citizen participation through a more open and reinvigorated electoral competition. A large body of scholarly work has explored whether these expectations are substantiated. The results are mixed. Some find support for that proposition, while an emerging body of literature casts a skeptical doubt on all the causal steps: term limits may neither generate more competitive electoral contests (they might even have a negative effect), but may also fail to increase voter participation (or may even decrease it) and may make the composition of elected bodies even less representative.

In light of these contradictory theoretical expectations, the main goal of this article is to re-examine these two competing perspectives using quasi-experimental techniques which leverage a unique institutional reform in Chile that exogenously imposed term limits on some - but not all - mayors in 2020. The reform, which was applied retroactively, prohibited a third consecutive reelection (i.e. a fourth straight mandate) and affected incumbent candidates in the 2021 municipal election. Of all the mayors in the 345 municipalities, over a quarter (96) were suddenly

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prevented from running in the upcoming elections because they had already served for three or more terms. Using municipal-level data from five election waves (2004, 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2021) and comparing the differences between the treatment group (municipalities with a term-limited mayor in 2021) and the control group (non-term-limited mayors), this reform provides the basis for a robust empirical test by identifying the causal effects of term limit reform and of electoral competition based on two quasi-experiments. The effects of term limits are assessed leveraging the difference-in-differences approach. This approach improves methodologically on most existing research on the consequences of term limits.

Analyzing the consequences of mayoral term limits is critical for understanding the quality of local democracy. The important role of electoral-institutional rules that apply to municipal officials has been already acknowledged by research focusing on urban governance (Dansou & Carrier, 2023; Reese, Li, & Remer 2020). Moreover, important connections between the design of such rules and participatory democratic outcomes have been recently explored by related urban research (Correia, Feio, Marques, & Teixeira, 2023; Maškarinec, 2023; Rodrigues & Tavares, 2020; Saradín, Meislová, & Zapletalová, 2022). This article expands this research agenda by theorizing and testing whether mayoral term limits affect all the three main dimensions of local democracy. Drawing on national-level concepts of democratic quality (Altman & Pérez-Liñán, 2002; Coppedge, Alvarez, & Maldonado, 2008; Vanhanen, 2000), high levels of both electoral competition and participation indicate a healthy local democracy also at the subnational level (Kouba & Dosek, 2022a). Vibrant competition is necessary for democracy because it implies ex ante electoral uncertainty (Przeworski, 1991). Democracy is deficient where such uncertainty is minimal and where incumbents are expected to win heavily by wide margins (Gerring, Palmer, Teorell, & Zarecki, 2015). But such competition should also result in representative outcomes, especially in terms of women's descriptive representation. Following the pioneering work of Paxton (2008) on the necessity to consider female suffrage in the definitions of democracy, recent works underscored the presence of women, both as candidates and elected authorities, in our understanding democratic representation (Freidenberg, Gilas, Garrido de Sierra, & Saavedra Herrera, 2021). The absence of women implies a democratic deficit (Miranda Leibe & Suárez-Cao, 2018). In sum, local democracy is maximized where highly participatory publics are drawn into a vibrant electoral competition which produces representative political outcomes. Where large victories by incumbents in non-competitive contests meet low citizen participation and lead to non-representative elected bodies, deficient local democracy – or even subnational authoritarianism – ensues.

The term limits literature has usually approached these three dimensions separately. Building on these studies, this article provides an integrated perspective. First, part of the literature has explored the effect of term limits on levels of electoral competition, measured usually by victory margins or the number of candidates (Carey, Niemi, & Powell, 2009; Daniel & Lott, 1997; Veiga & Veiga, 2018). Second, in order to gauge the representative dimension of local democracy, we examine the emergence and election of women candidates, a key issue in the literature on the consequences of term limits (Bernstein & Chadha, 2003; Caress, 1999; Carroll & Jenkins, 2001; Labonne, Parsa, & Querubin, 2021; Petter, 2018; Schraufnagel & Halperin, 2006; Schwindt-Bayer, 2005; Smith, Reingold, & Owens, 2012). The participatory dimension of local democracy is approached by looking at voter turnout and invalid voting rates, another important focus of the term limit literature (De Benedetto & De Paola, 2019; Korzi & Hoddie, 2018; Kuhlmann & Lewis, 2017; Nalder, 2007; Veiga & Veiga, 2018). Despite being separate political phenomena, the connection between both women's descriptive representation and voter turnout on one hand and term limits on the other hand is mediated by the effects that term limits perform on electoral competition.

The structure of this article is the following. First, we contrast the

two perspectives (one that assigns positive consequences of term limits on competition, participation and representation, and the other that finds no support for such effects) by reviewing the existing theoretical and empirical literature. Second, we describe the context of the Chilean electoral reform and the operationalization of variables. Third, we examine the effects of term limits on local democracy using the difference-in-differences framework. The concluding section places the findings in theoretical context and discusses its policy implications.

2. Perspective 1: term limits increase competition, participation and representativeness

Term limits affect who runs for office and with what motivations. Because the value of the office is changed, term limits affect the effort and resources expended by candidates and thereby the overall competitiveness of an election (Carey et al., 2009, 19). In particular, open seat contests (i.e. races where incumbents cannot run) introduced by term limits give opposition candidates a fighting chance, thus contributing to enhanced competition (Veiga & Veiga, 2018). More candidates are expected to run in such races and – absent the incumbency advantage that concentrates the electoral contest – also more candidates with more equal chances of winning. For example, term limit imposition in Californian state legislatures was accompanied by dramatic increases in election competitiveness expressed by the closeness of the race (measured by victory margins), an increased number of candidates and fewer single candidate races (Daniel & Lott, 1997).

2.1. Term limits increase voter participation

Turnout is expected to rise as a result of such increased competition. The voluminous literature on the determinants of voter turnout includes two principal theoretical perspectives which provide rationale for such an effect. First, the effect of term limits may be approached based on the instrumental theories of turnout. The decision to vote depends on the probability of the vote being pivotal (i.e., the likelihood the vote will influence the outcome) which is more likely in more competitive close races (Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). Term limits remove incumbency advantage and level the playing field, which in turn energizes electoral competition, increases the number of open seats and attracts quality candidates to the race (Kuhlmann & Lewis, 2017; Nalder, 2007; Veiga & Veiga, 2018). As elections become more competitive and closer under term limits, voter participation is expected to increase.

The second relevant theoretical approach to turnout emphasizes the expressive dimension of the decision to vote, whereby turnout is a result of attitudinal and affective considerations such as trust in democratic institutions and confidence in the political process (Cox, 2003; Hooghe & Marien, 2013). The frustration with incumbency advantage generates mistrust and alienation with the political system and dissuades voters from participating. By eliminating incumbency advantage and opening up the electoral competition, term limits therefore inspire trust and confidence in politics and increase turnout (De Benedetto & De Paola, 2019; Nalder, 2007; Veiga & Veiga, 2018).

The share of invalid (blank and null) votes is expected to decline as a result of term limits for both theoretical reasons that explain the concomitant rise in turnout. First, as for the instrumental motivation, valid voting (relative to invalid voting) is expected and found to be maximized in races where voters might expect to cast the decisive vote, that is in close elections (De Paola & Scoppa, 2014; Kouba & Lysek, 2016). This suggests that to the extent that term limits promote competition and the closeness of electoral race by opening up the competition to new candidates, they should also depress invalid voting. Second, similar to the decision to turn out, casting and invalid vote has a strong expressive component. Invalid votes are cast as an intentional protest against weak democratic governance, increased corruption or poor government performance (Cohen, 2018a; Driscoll & Nelson, 2014), but also by alienated, untrusting and disenchanted voters who protest

against the weak political competition reflecting their conviction that it does not matter who wins the election (Cisneros Yescas, 2013; Kouba & Lysek, 2019; Singh, 2019). In this sense, the increase in the effective number of candidates has been shown to decrease invalid voting because voters feel better represented by this energized competition (Cohen, 2018b). Term limits have the potential to reinvigorate political competition in this way as they open up the running field to a wider selection of candidates.

There is a solid empirical support for these expectations. A cross-section time-series analysis of all US state legislatures reported a substantial positive effect of term limits on turnout consistent with the theoretical expectation (Kuhlmann & Lewis, 2017). Robust causal estimates come from two studies which rely on quasi-experimental design and leverage policy reforms as treatment variables in Portugal (Veiga & Veiga, 2018) and Italy (De Benedetto & De Paola, 2019). Both coincide on a positive effect of term limits. A cross-national comparison suggests that in presidential elections where an incumbent president was running, invalid voting indeed increased as a result, and this effect was more pronounced in low-quality democracies (Kouba & Lysek, 2016). This provides some support to the notion that incumbency generates invalid votes as a protest in elections where opposition candidates stand little chance of being elected and invalid votes become the only expression left of voicing voter disenchantment.

2.2. Term limits promote descriptive representation of women

Instituting term limits is expected to increase women's political representation because it transforms the structure of political competition. Existing theories coincide that the principal mechanism helping women politicians is the emergence of open seats after long-serving politicians are disabled from running again (Petty, 2018). The incumbency "disadvantage" for female politicians occurs because men hold the dominant positions in systems which permit unlimited re-elections. This makes the election of women unlikely and men will be advantaged as a result (Schwindt-Bayer, 2005, 229). Incumbency is therefore a barrier to women candidates due to advantages gained by male candidates as a result of personal vote, familiarity, media attention, access to political funding, political networks or name recognition (Caress, 1999; Norris, 2006; Studlar & McAllister, 1991; Thompson & Moncrief, 1993). One way of increasing women's political presence is to undermine such male-dominated incumbency advantage by term limits in order to create more room for the election of female candidates. Term limits are expected to help the emergence of female candidates (without necessarily making the election of women more likely) (Petty, 2018).

It is suggestive that the findings from US studies where a reform movement since the 1990s introduced term limits in some states contrast with the three non-US analyses. A cross-national comparison of legislatures reports a sizable 5 percentage point higher share of female legislators in countries with term limits (Schwindt-Bayer, 2005), while a comparison of Latin American countries found that term limits help the electoral success of female candidates in presidential elections (Kouba & Poskočilová, 2014). The introduction of term limits for mayors in the Philippines has been shown to greatly increase the number of female mayors (Labonne et al., 2021).

The distinction between women candidate emergence and election is also important because electoral competition, in part driven by term limits, is expected to impact both stages of women's representation differently. As for candidate emergence, a more fragmented electoral competition provides women with more access points to run for office (Maskarinec, 2022; Norris & Inglehart, 2001). But on the other hand, a less fragmented competition dominated by a few strong parties is likely to lead to more elected women (Reynolds, 1999). Paradoxically then, party system fragmentation is theorized to have opposite effects on the emergence and election of women candidates.

3. Perspective 2: term limits do not increase (or even decrease) competition, participation and representativeness

Term limits might not be a universally applicable means of raising electoral competition. In fact, part of experience with term limit reforms shows that they are neutral, or even detrimental to competitiveness. This was apparently the case following the Californian reform where the number of competitive races actually dropped after the introduction of term limits (Sarbaugh-Thompson, Thompson, Elder, Strate, & Elling, 2004, 31) and open-seat races have not been any more competitive under term limits than before them (Masket & Lewis, 2007).

3.1. Term limits do not increase voter turnout

The disputable effect of term limits on electoral competitiveness perhaps explains findings that report null effects of term limits on turnout. The introduction of term limits since the 1990s in some US states inspired two such analyses. No direct effect on turnout of term limits of mayors and municipal council members was found in Californian municipalities (Hajnal & Lewis, 2003). A study focusing on Californian state legislators did not find support for the positive term-limits – turnout nexus and even reported a small negative effect (Nalder, 2007). Moreover, a cross-national comparison of presidential elections concluded that term limits are actually associated with lower turnout, and this effect is much more pronounced in less democratic societies possibly due to turnout buying by clientelist incumbents (Korzi & Hoddie, 2018). Such negative effect is supported by another test, which examined the effect of term limits indirectly (by looking at whether a presidential incumbent ran in an election) (Dettrey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2009).

3.2. Term limits are neutral to or have a negative effect on descriptive representation of women

It is particularly the US experience which suggests that the introduction of term limits has had no effect on the overall women's political representation (Carey, Niemi, & Powell, 1998; Caress, 1999; Schraufnagel & Halperin, 2006; Smith et al., 2012). Other studies have even reported an overall negative effect of term limits after their introduction (Bernstein & Chadha, 2003; Carroll & Jenkins, 2001). The explanations for such empirical patterns that fail to support the theory vary. Some argue that the effect of term limits is conditioned by other variables, such as partisanship – for example, Democratic women candidates in the US legislatures are advantaged by the introduction of term limits, but Republican women are not (O'Regan & Stambough, 2018). Or women might be advantaged by term limits only in the initial phase of emergence of female candidacies but this does not necessarily translate into a higher success rate of actually being elected (Petty, 2018). Still other authors note that the null findings are attributable to a lack of effect of term limit introduction on the intensity of political competition (measured by margins of victory) which then does not translate into a stronger female representation (Schraufnagel & Halperin, 2006).

4. Term limit reform and local democracy in Chile

Latin American municipal politics is an appropriate setting for understanding the effects of term limits on competitiveness, participation and women's representation. By the late 2010s, roughly, half of the countries in the region allowed for indefinite reelection (Dosek, 2019), making it propitious settings for the reproduction of local caudillos that enjoy an important incumbency advantage. At the same time, women are severely underrepresented in local executive offices with only about 10 % of elected authorities and <15 % of candidates in the region (Kouba & Dosek, 2022b), and with turnout rates that lag behind participation in elections for national offices (Kouba & Dosek, 2022a).

The Chilean case illustrates this panorama. Since the transition to

democracy and the first municipal elections in 1992, many mayors remained in power for several consecutive mandates mainly thanks to their centrality within the local governments and no reelection restrictions. Since 2004, they were elected directly by popular vote and separately from members of the local councils. The reelection rates, although oscillating in time, were always around 60 % of the mayors who decided to run for a next mandate (Bunker & Navia, 2010; Tele13, 2016) and some of them remained in power even for over two decades. In parallel, women's descriptive representation, particularly in the local executive office, has been always low and women faced considerable informal barriers to gain access to these positions (Hinojosa & Franceschet, 2012). The proportion of female mayors never surpassed 15 % and their candidacies did not reach 20 % (Martínez Ossa & Navia, 2019). The number for councilwomen has been higher, but in neither case did it reach one third of the candidates (PNUD, 2020). Breaking the male-dominated incumbency advantage could also be an effective means of increasing the descriptive representation of women because Chilean female incumbents (including mayors) are as likely as male ones to be re-nominated and reelected (Shair-Rosenfield & Hinojosa, 2014).

Thus, the 2020 reelection reform that imposed term limits of no more than three consecutive mandates was a response to this situation and reflected the need to rejuvenate the (local) political system, counter the crisis of political representation and low trust in political institutions.

In the Chilean context, the national legislation does not distinguish between the municipalities based on their size. Thus, all the municipalities have the same status. Despite differences in the size of the districts (*comunas*) and the concomitant variations in the size of the municipal councils, all the local administrations are homogenous and have the same functions, responsibilities and attributions (Pressacco, 2012; Vial, 2016). The municipal administrations are exclusively in charge of local development and regulation plans, transport and urbanization within the district and beautification and cleaning. They also take part in the responsibilities in areas such as education, culture, health or social assistance, among others, sharing these responsibilities with other state institutions and government levels. Within the local administration, mayors enjoy a predominant position and relatively few checks and oversight on their power (OECD, 2017; Pressacco, 2012).

5. Data and variables

Three sets of variables operationalize electoral competition, citizen participation and political representation of women respectively. As for electoral competition, we use three related indicators that tap into its different dimensions. The first is the absolute number of candidates that compete in the mayoral race. We also calculated the effective number of candidates in those races following the formula of the Laakso-Taagepera index (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979). This improves on the raw number of candidates by weighing the contribution of each candidate by their vote share. Finally, we calculated the vote margin between the vote share of the winner and the second most voted candidate. Closer margins identify a more intensive electoral competition.

Participation is measured as the percentage share of registered voters who cast a ballot. In order to operationalize invalid voting, we respected an important differentiation between blank and null ballots. Both categories of invalid ballots might occur for different reasons - blank ballots are cast principally by those with low information and political skills, while distrustful and opposing voters intentionally spoilt their ballot (cast a null ballot) as a form of protest (Driscoll & Nelson, 2014). Chilean electoral statistics record both categories.

In order to gauge the emergence of women candidates we used three indicators. As to the first (candidacy) phase, a dummy variable indicates whether at least one female candidate competed in the election or not. We also counted the number of female mayoral candidates and their percentage share on the total number of candidates in the municipality. As for the second (election) phase of women's political presence we recorded whether a female mayor or male mayor was elected.

All this electoral data was compiled from official elections statistics provided by the Chilean electoral authority (Served, 2022). In order to cover a longer time period and because it is necessary for performing the tests of the parallel trends assumption to validate the difference-in-differences approach (see below) not only the last pre-treatment election (2016) is compared with the 2021 election, but also the preceding three elections in 2004, 2008 and 2012 (due to a lack of official data, the number of registered voters is missing in 2004 so turnout could not be calculated for that election and this variable is therefore missing for this election year). We provide descriptive statistics calculated from these five election waves (2004, 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2021) in the Online Appendix.

6. Analysis of the effects of term limits: difference-in-differences approach

Correlational research examining the effects of term limits faces many challenges that include biases arising from endogeneity, the potential of spurious correlation or inability to accommodate alternative explanations (Mooney, 2009). The mixed results of existing research might be attributable to the methodological choices of these studies. In some research contexts, term limits were not exogenously imposed, leading to reverse causality issues (De Benedetto & De Paola, 2019: 197). The present research design follows a strand of research which avoids this problem by leveraging exogenously imposed term limit reforms and using a quasi-experimental approach based on the adoption of term limits in municipalities following term limit reforms in the Philippines (Labonne et al., 2021), Portugal (Lopes da Fonseca, 2017; Veiga & Veiga, 2018) and Italy (De Benedetto & De Paola, 2019). It identifies Chile as another such setting in which the policy reform exogenously affected incumbent mayors.

As a methodological response to problems of confounding variables, reverse causation and model misspecification, institutional analyses are advised to exploit policy change that closely mimics the ideal counterfactual to determine what would happen if the policy was not adopted (Fowler, 2013). The difference-in-differences approach used to assess the Chilean reform allows to leverage such a policy change. This design uses a control group that is experiencing the same trends as the treatment group but is not exposed to the policy change. Consequently, outcomes before and after the policy change are compared between the control group without the intervention and the treatment group that was exposed to the policy intervention. This allows to subtract out the background changes in outcomes (Dimick & Ryan, 2014). The difference-in-differences approach differences out all unobserved time-constant confounders (Angrist & Pischke, 2009).

Chile adopted term limits for mayors in 2020 and applied them for the first time in the 2021 mayoral election. The law stipulated that mayors who had served for three or more consecutive terms were not eligible to stand for reelection. It applied retroactively, meaning that mayors elected for their third (or further) term in the last pre-reform election in 2016 were suddenly barred from running in 2021. Since 96 of the 345 mayors became term limited and were not allowed to run in 2021, their municipalities are considered as the treatment group, while those remaining municipalities where the mayors were eligible to run compose the control group. Fig. 1 maps the geographical distribution of municipalities where term limits applied in 2021 (in black) and where they did not (in white). There is no apparent spatial clustering of term-limited municipalities which are spread out over the whole of Chilean territory.

The baseline difference-in-differences model can be summarized in the following way:

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \delta TL_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where y is the appropriate dependent variable (each of the 11 indicators for the given dimension of local democracy) in municipality i in election



Fig. 1. Chilean municipalities in which incumbent mayors were not allowed to run due to term limits in 2021.

Note: Municipalities with term-limited mayors in 2021 are marked by black color; municipalities without term limits are left blank. Scale 1:14000000.

year t . TL_{it} is a dummy variable that equals 1 in 2021 in municipalities that had term limited mayors and equals zero otherwise. The parameter δ measures the treatment effect, μ_i is the specific effect of municipality i , and λ_t are fixed time effects, and ε_{it} is the error term. The strength and validity of the difference-in-differences (and other quasi-experiments) estimates originates from the requirement that there is no selection into treatment (Lechner, 2011; Dunning, 2012). That is, treatment assignment is “as if” random, independent of factors that might explain differences in average outcomes across treatment and control groups. The extent to which the assumption of “as if” random assignment holds in each research setting needs to be validated. The reform in Chile was exogenously imposed by national legislation, so individual mayors were unable to self-select whether term limits apply to them or not. Importantly, the Chilean law was retroactive – it affected the sitting mayors by counting their previous and current terms towards the term limit.

Another potential concern is that the as-if-random assignment did not produce treatment and control groups balanced on pre-treatment covariates (Dunning, 2012, 239). For example, if treated municipalities were disproportionately smaller than those in the control group, this could bias the results because municipality size is expected to affect the levels of both competition and voter participation (Kouba & Dosek, 2022a). To check for this possibility, it is possible to perform balance tests on key variables across both treatment (with term limited mayors) and control (with non-term-limited mayors) groups of municipalities. Data collected from the 2017 census (INE, 2022) were used to describe 10 key social, economic and demographic variables that might affect electoral and political outcomes. The results of the two-sample t -tests are presented in the Online Appendix. The treatment municipalities are on average no bigger or smaller than the control ones and they are not more or less urban or poor than the control groups. The differences in their gender composition and age structure, as well as in their shares of immigrant (foreign born) and urban populations are also statistically insignificant. Both groups are also no different in terms of economic activity measured by poverty rates and the type of employment (primary sector workers include primarily agricultural and extractive activities, secondary sector indicate employment in industry and manufacturing, and territory sector workers correspond to services).

In sum, the results indicate that the Chilean municipalities across both groups did not differ in key demographic, social and economic respects. They are indeed similar in observables. The as-if randomization produced two balanced groups without the possibility of units self-selecting into them. This suggests that the plausibility of the as-if random assignment is quite high on the continuum.

A critical feature of the difference-in-differences approach is the parallel trends assumption. It requires that the outcome would on average have parallel trends across units in the absence of treatment (Fowler, 2013). The DiD assumes that the control units experience the same magnitude of time-varying confounding as the treated units. The pre-treatment trends in outcomes are assumed to be the same between the treatment and control groups (Ryan, Kontopantelis, Linden, & Burgess, 2019). If the trends between treatment and control units are not parallel, then the effect of unobserved confounders could be erroneously attributed to the treatment effect (Gibson & Zimmerman, 2021). The parallel trends assumption cannot be tested directly because it relates to a counterfactual, but a common test of its plausibility compares the pre-treatment trends of the treated and control groups (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Germann, 2021). We use two ways of checking whether the pre-treatment trends are parallel.

The first approximation is to check these pre-trends visually by plotting the means of the outcome variables for both groups. More formally, we conduct placebo tests which is the standard procedure to test the plausibility of the parallel trends assumption (Kroth, Larcinese, & Wehner, 2016; Morgan-Collins, 2021). If data from earlier pre-treatment period is available, then the placebo test can serve to “pretend” that the treatment occurred earlier and then measure the outcome after such pretended treatment. Evidence of an effect of such artificial

treatment could be a result of either anticipation (which raises concerns about endogeneity), or because the parallel trends assumption does not hold (Lechner, 2011). In the Chilean context, this assumption implies that the imposition of term limits in the treated group of municipalities did not coincide with any changes in other variables that could have independently influenced the outcome variables. The placebo test uses data from the 2016 election together with the 2004, 2008 and 2012 election to create this placebo setting. The municipalities where actually term limits applied to mayors in 2021 where artificially treated already for the 2016 election. The results of the placebo tests are included in the Online Appendix.

6.1. Term limits and electoral competition

Table 1 provides results for the DiD estimation of term limit effects on the three dimensions of electoral competition. The substantive effect sizes are large. Term limits add on average 1.1 additional candidates to the electoral contest compared to municipalities where mayors were not term limited. This is a big increase considering that the mean number of mayoral candidates has been relatively low in Chile (only 3.4 in 2012, 3.5 in 2016 and 4.2 in 2021). While mayoral races in the control group remained on average with roughly similar numbers of contenders, registering a modest growth, their number shot up as a result of the term limit reform in the treated municipalities. In that group, the mean number of candidates was only 3.2 but it increased by one half to 4.8 following the reform. This is further corroborated by the large effect on the effective number candidates, as term limits are predicted to spur this number by an average of 0.7 candidate in each mayoral race (in 2016 the mean was 2.4 effective candidates). Similarly, the elections became more competitive as a result of term limits because these greatly reduced the margin of victory between the winner and the runner-up (by 11 percentage points).

The evidence is strongly consistent with the theoretical model which views term limits as highly supportive of an energized and more intensive electoral competition. Because the incumbency advantage is eliminated, new candidates enter the open seat contests where outgoing mayors are unable to run. Where mayors are eligible for reelection, this freezes and concentrates the electoral competition and dissuades new potential entrants from running in the election. The newcomers make the contests in term-limited municipalities more competitive.

6.2. Term limits and voter participation

The evidence is more mixed with respect to the indicators of electoral participation (Table 2). The DiD estimates indicates that turnout increases by 1.4 percentage points term-limited municipalities. However, the pre-treatment turnout trends are not parallel, so the parallel trends assumption may be violated. A placebo test suggests that the artificial treatment in 2016 would have depressed turnout by 2.5 points. However, the pre-treatment parallel trends on both categories of invalid votes and the significant coefficients suggest strong reductive effect of term limits. Surprisingly, term limits affect blank and null votes in the same direction and with an almost equal force. Regardless of whether

Table 2

Effects of term limits on participation (difference-in-differences).

	DV: turnout	DV: blank votes (%)	DV: null votes (%)	DV: invalid votes (%)
Term limits	1.44* (0.77)	−0.30*** (0.10)	−0.54** (0.22)	−0.84*** (0.28)
R ²	0.70	0.25	0.23	0.29
Observations	1380	1725	1725	1725

All estimates include municipality and year fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are robust to heteroscedasticity and clustered at the municipality level. DV = dependent variable.

* p < 0.1.

** p < 0.05.

*** p < 0.01.

blank and null votes represent different expressions of voter distrust and dissatisfaction as suggested by some studies (Driscoll & Nelson, 2014; Kouba & Lysek, 2019), both categories are uniformly depressed where term limits apply. The graph in Fig. 2 suggests that while the rates of invalid voting (summing the blank and null categories) were falling already prior to the 2021, the term limit reform substantially accelerated this decrease.

6.3. Term limits and women's representation

The effect of term limits on the four indicators used assess the descriptive representation of women are presented in Table 3. The evidence is divided. There is strong support for the notion that term limits help to foster more female candidacies. About one fifth (21 %) of municipalities in the treated group avoided being male-only contests in 2021 only because of the adoption of term limits there. Whereas at least one woman competed in only 45 % percent of municipalities in the treatment group prior to the reform (and the remaining 55 % were male-only contests), this figure rose to 80 % after the reform was implemented. But the imposition of term limits did not only terminate the male-only contests in a substantial part of municipalities; it also increased the presence of female candidates overall. An average 0.6 female candidate was added to each electoral contest. One must bear in mind that the number of male candidacies also increased by a comparable amount (0.6) as a consequence of term limits. However, the increase comes from a much higher baseline presence (there were one average 2.9 male candidates and only 0.7 female candidates in 2016 in the 345 municipalities). In other words, women were disproportionately supported by term limits compared to their male counterparts. This is evidenced by the coefficient on the percentage share of women candidates which shows that their share rose by 9.4 percentage points as a result of term limits. In 2021, on average 30.6 % of mayoral candidates were women in the treatment group, a sharp rise from merely 18.5 % in 2016 prior to the reform (see Fig. 3). The biggest part of this increase is attributable to term limits.

On the other hand, the evidence regarding the hypothesized effect on the probability of electing a female mayor is inconclusive. The coefficient does not reach statistical significance at the conventional level. It, however, suggests, that the share of women in term-limited municipalities was higher by 9 percentage points. In 2021, only 13.7 % of mayors were women in municipalities where term limits did not prevent any incumbent from running, while full 26 % of mayors were women in the 96 municipalities where term limits applied to incumbents. Almost twice as many women were elected in term-limited municipalities than in the remaining ones.

As robustness tests, we recalculated all the 11 models on two different subsamples of Chilean municipalities. We present details and the results of these tests in the Online Appendix. First, we compare municipalities with term-limited mayors to those municipalities where the incumbent already served twice and is close to a term limit (the control group, unlike the original model, therefore excludes all

Table 1

Effects of term limits on electoral competition (difference-in-differences).

	DV: number of candidates	DV: effective number of candidates	DV: margin of victory
Term limits	1.10* (0.20)	0.71* (0.13)	−11.04* (1.82)
R ²	0.06	0.12	0.01
Observations	1725	1725	1725

All estimates include municipality and year fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are robust to heteroscedasticity and clustered at the municipality level. DV = dependent variable.

* p < 0.01.

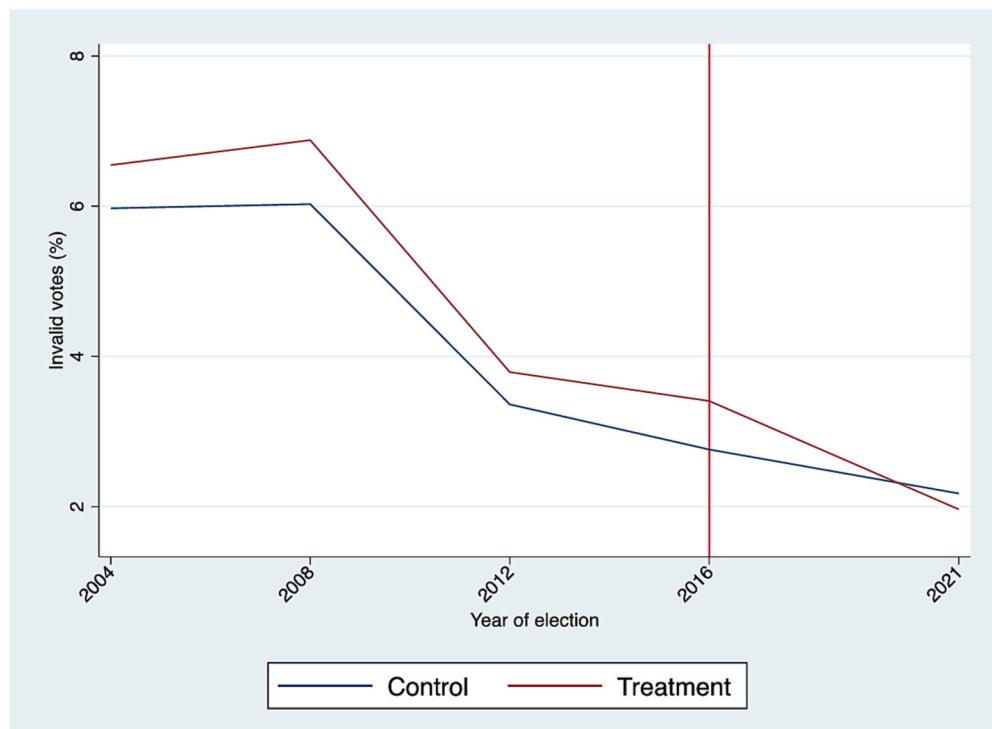


Fig. 2. Term limits and invalid voting.

Table 3

Effects of term limits on women's descriptive representation (difference-in-differences).

	DV: at least one woman candidate	DV: number of women candidates	DV: women candidates (%)	DV: women mayor elected
Term limits	0.21* (0.06)	0.61* (0.13)	9.36* (2.99)	0.09 (0.06)
R ²	0.03	0.06	0.02	0.01
Observations	1725	1725	1725	1725

All estimates include municipality and year fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are robust to heteroscedasticity and clustered at the municipality level. DV = dependent variable.

* $p < 0.01$.

municipalities where mayors did not serve at least two consecutive terms). This reduces the concern of different preferences across municipalities because it might make a difference whether cities have been led by a long-serving mayor or by a freshly elected incumbent - and all this may depend on unobservable local characteristics. Second, we compare municipalities with term-limited mayors to those without an incumbent candidate in order to isolate the effects of term limits from incumbent participation. The results of the tests performed on both of these subsamples do not challenge the conclusions from the main models (see the Online Appendix).

7. Mayoral term limits and urban governance

The vast majority of Chilean population (88.4 %) lived in urban areas in 2021 according to the National Statistical Office, and concomitantly the large majority (92.2 %) of the 346 Chilean municipalities were either fully urban or mixed. Still, in order to highlight the relevance for urban studies, it is useful to understand whether the term limit imposition impacts local democracy differently in urban versus rural municipalities. This is especially important since municipal size is an important factor affecting a variety of democratic outcomes (Avellaneda & Gomes,

2015; Gendźwiłł & Kjaer, 2021; Kouba & Dosek, 2022a; Voda, Svačinová, Smolková, & Balík, 2017). Fig. 4 displays the results of models that interact city size with the variable indicating municipalities with term limited mayors. Each of the three rows represents each of the three democratic dimensions (competitiveness, participation and representation). Each graph displays the predicted marginal effects of term limits on one of the democratic outcomes as city size changes. The horizontal axis of the graph shows the whole range of observed values of the city size in Chile (measured as the natural log of registered voters), while the vertical axis shows the estimated marginal effect of term limits on each of the outcome variables. A horizontal line at 0 is also plotted to indicate the point where the marginal effect is equal to 0, which represents no effect of term limits.

The results indicate that whether a municipality is rural or urban is an important moderating variable that shapes the consequences of term limits for most democratic outcomes. For example, imposing term limits reduces invalid voting in urban environments (by as much as 2 percentage points in the largest municipality) but its estimated effect in small rural municipalities is indistinguishable from zero as indicated by the confidence intervals. Similarly, the difference term limits make on electoral competition rises as the city size increases. More candidates enter the electoral race due to the inability of incumbent mayors to run in elections in bigger cities than in small municipalities. Interestingly, the predicted effects of term limits on turnout push in opposing directions depending on whether they are imposed in small or big municipalities. Whereas in the smallest rural municipalities, term limits actually decrease voter participation, the sign changes to positive as the city size increases (contributing about 12 percentage points of turnout) in the largest municipalities. This is a substantial estimated effect on one of the most important dimensions of democracy. Conversely, city size does not appear to make a difference whether term limits contribute to the margin of victory or the percentage of women candidates as the slope is almost horizontal. Overall, the results of these interaction models suggest that the adoption of mayoral term limits maximizes democratic outcomes the most in large urban environments. While its contributions are smaller (or even negative as in the case of voter

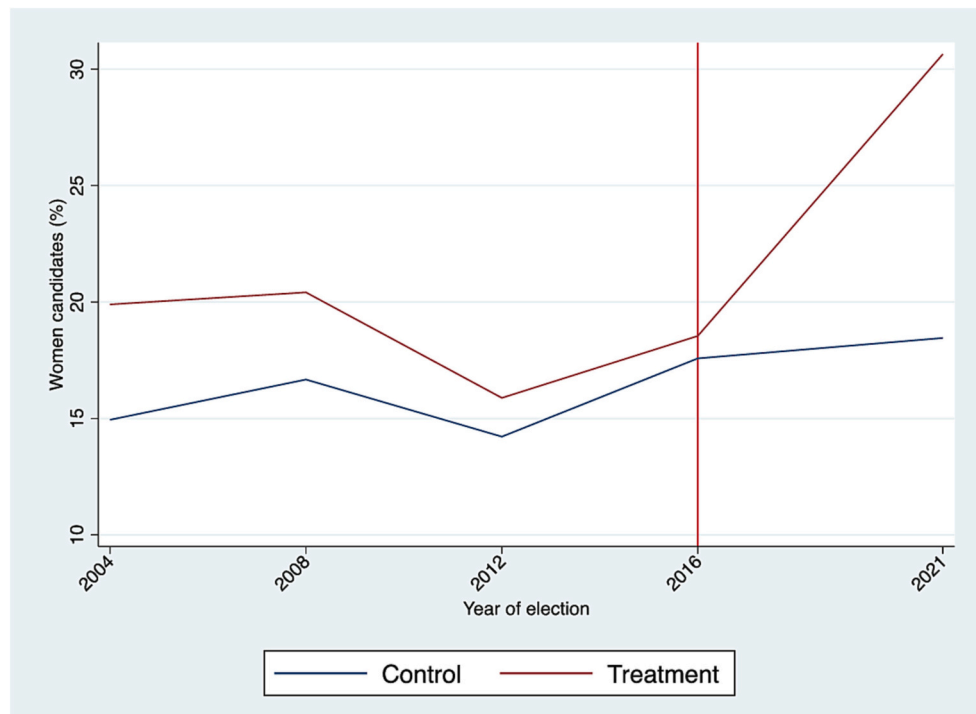


Fig. 3. Term limits and the share of women candidates (%).

turnout) in small rural municipalities.

8. Discussion and conclusions

Local democracy is not a unidimensional concept. Drawing on national-level theories of democracy, we identified its three constituent dimensions (competitiveness, participation, and representation) and asked whether these are fostered by the imposition of term limits on elected politicians. The results suggest that imposing term limits on mayors has the potential to democratize urban governance. The overall contribution of term limits to the three dimensions of local democracy in Chile has been positive but did not fulfill all the maximalist expectations. At the very least, the evidence strongly suggests that term limits did not harm local democracy on *any* of the measurable outcomes. It can be safely claimed that the adoption of term limits in Chile has not produced negative outcomes reported by research in other settings, such as declines in election competitiveness (Sarbaugh-Thompson et al., 2004), lower turnout (Dettrey & Schwandt-Bayer, 2009; Korzi & Hoddie, 2018) or reduced chances for female politicians (Bernstein & Chadha, 2003; Carroll & Jenkins, 2001). But it did not buttress local democracy on all of these dimensions either. While term limits are clear boon to one of them (competitiveness), the evidence is more mixed with respect to the remaining two.

Term limits massively increase the competitiveness of elections. This is a key dimension of local democracy because it promotes the ex ante uncertainty about the winner of the election. Where entrenched incumbents were made ineligible for reelection, this spurred the emergence of new candidates who stood a better chance of winning in these vacated open seats. This increased both the number of candidates and decreased the winners' margins of victory.

Term limits are not a panacea for increasing voter participation. The estimated effect has not been able to counter the secular decline in voter turnout during the last election waves in Chile. Moreover, because the pre-treatment trends in turnout do not satisfy the parallel trends assumption, even this estimated effect should be treated with caution. Importantly, the overall participation of those who actually turn out to vote is energized and these voters feel more efficacious as they cast their

ballot. This is strongly evidenced by the powerful effect of term limits on reducing the number of both blank and null ballots. As elevated rates of invalid ballots indicate voter dissatisfaction, political distrust and a lack of perspective that the vote matters, term limits help to restore trust in the political process by providing viable political alternative to voters. Local democracy is helped in this way.

The results show that term limits powerfully help the emergence of women candidates. But at the same time, this does not directly translate into a higher likelihood of reaching the mayoral office for those women. This paradoxical finding is consistent with earlier analysis of US state legislators (Petty, 2018). One potential explanation concerns the gendered access to electoral resources of political newcomers. An analysis of all candidates for legislative the 2017 Chilean election found that non-incumbent women received far less money (in all categories including party transfers, bank loans, own resources, or donations) than non-incumbent men (Piscopo, Hinojosa, Thomas, & Siavelis, 2022). In this way, women candidates in Chile face an uneven playing field as gender serves as a powerful heuristic for who makes a good candidate (Piscopo et al., 2022, 246). It is reasonable to expect that similar considerations operate with respect to mayoral candidates. When more newcomer women enter the electoral competition vacated by long-term incumbents as a result of term limits, this advantage is not converted into their electoral advantage because women candidates wield fewer resources than men. The findings have direct relevance for policies aimed at enhancing local democracy. In terms of voter participation, there is a strong policy advantage of adopting term limits and fostering electoral competition compared to alternative institutional reforms aimed at increasing turnout. As the findings suggests, they escape an unfortunate tradeoff of many other key variables whereby increasing turnout also substantially increases invalid voting rates. This tradeoff might be so substantial that any gains to citizen participation can be eliminated by casting of invalid votes. Paradoxically, while citizens are more likely to vote as a result of these reforms, they are at the same time less likely to express any political preference by their ballot. The electoral participation of a substantial part of the electorate can thus become purely formal and artificial. An example of such tradeoff is compulsory voting which has always been the surest candidate for turnout-

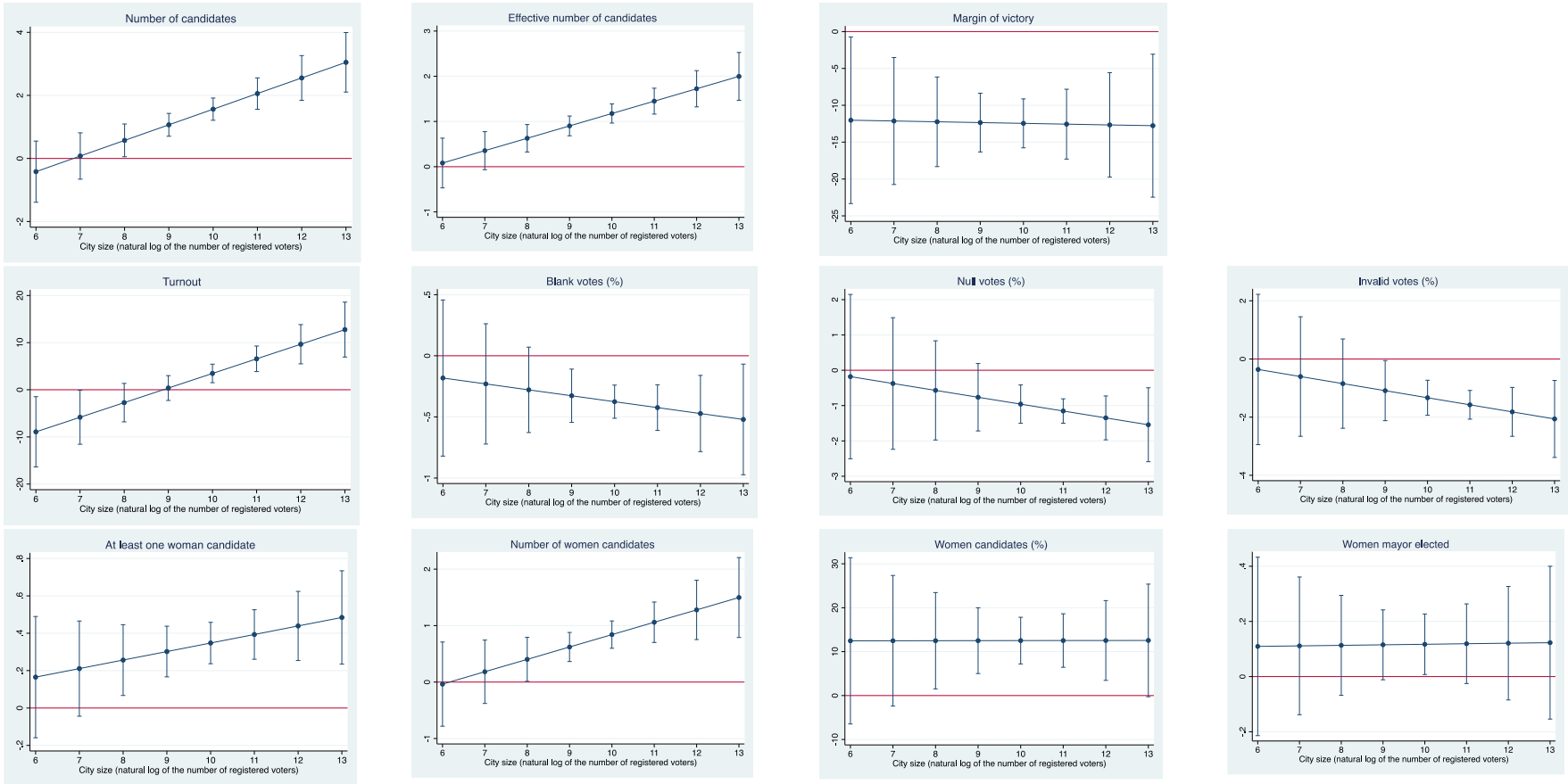


Fig. 4. Conditional effects of term limits on all democratic outcomes as city size changes.

Note: The horizontal lines in each graph cover the full range of observed values of the city size measured as the natural logarithm of the number of registered voters in each municipality (the largest municipality having 399 thousand registered voters). The vertical lines indicate the conditional marginal effects of a term limits on each of the individual dependent variables. The horizontal bars indicate 95 % confidence intervals.

increasing effects based on theory and existing meta-analyses (Cancela & Geys, 2016; Stockemer, 2017). Numerous studies report large substantive effects. The downside is that compulsory voting is also the most consistent variable that positively *increases* the share of invalid voting in all aggregate-level (Kouba & Lysek, 2016) as well as individual-level (Cohen, 2018a; Singh, 2019) studies according to a metaanalysis of invalid voting research (Kouba & Lysek, 2019). The net effects are substantial and might powerfully counteract (and even erase) any advantage of compulsory voting on turnout. In this sense, the energized competition spurred by term limit adoption in Chile escapes this tradeoff because it not only increases turnout but decreases invalid voting at the same time.

Another policy relevant conclusion concerns the effect on women's representation. In general, Chilean female candidates in local politics face historical and structural inequalities (reconciling of the public and private life, access to financial resources, more limited networks, gender stereotypes, harassment, and even violence) between men and women in access to political offices, particularly the executive ones (Martínez Ossa & Navia, 2019). Political parties continue to be the gatekeepers in the access of women to electoral lists in Chile (Martínez Ossa & Navia, 2017). The separate elections of mayors and councilpersons since 2004 provided more institutional opportunities for the election of women for entering local politics but the presence of women in the mayoral executive offices remained very low and women continue to face greater hurdles than men in Chilean municipal politics (Hinojosa & Franceschet, 2012). The sizeable effect of term limits on female candidate emergence might counteract some of the institutional and structural barriers that women face when entering politics and might even match the effect of gender quotas. Because term limits are not primarily intended to foster women's representation, their imposition is a less normatively objectionable device than the introduction of quotas. But they could have a similar effect on women's political presence.

Finally, term limits relate differently to the three dimensions of democracy depending on the size of the municipality in which they are adopted. The results suggest that most gains for democratic governance would be achieved in large urban municipalities while they do not seem to make as much difference in small communities. The interactive models reveal that the positive effects on competition - and concomitantly on turnout - are maximized in urban municipalities. In the largest ones, turnout might be increased by as much as 10 percentage points as a result of term-limiting their mayors. This is in large part a result of a reinvigorated electoral competition as the estimated number of candidates is increased on average by 3 additional candidates who compete in the largest municipalities for the mayoral post. The moderating effect of city size does not appear to operate with respect to the overall share of female candidates. Term limits seem to impact the representation of women in local politics regardless of the size of the community in which they compete.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Karel Kouba: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Tomas Dosek:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicting interests.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104446>.

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