Willing to stand ... if asked: Candidacy for local council elections in the Netherlands and Norway

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1. Introduction

The availability of people willing to stand for elected political office constitutes a critical node in the study of democratic political systems. On the one hand standing for election is a form of political participation where, just as with all other forms of political activity, the question of who does and who doesn’t – or who will and who won’t – is an important issue in its own right. At the extreme, without people who are willing to compete for elected office, representative democracy is by definition impossible. But the act of standing for elected office carries with it some special implications. As Figure 1 indicates: Being a candidate is part of a recruitment and selection process that may be depicted as a pyramid in which there is a narrowing down of those who, if elected, will comprise the choir of office holders that serves to represent and express the people’s voice – a choir that sings, if not from the “bully pulpit”, at least from the “hallowed halls” of legislative assemblies and executive offices on a day-to-day basis.1 In this latter respect the issue is to what degree the choir is in harmony with the people: does the choir sing in tune with the people in substantive and/or social terms? 2

Given this dual significance of candidacy for elected office, the processes by which individuals emerge as candidates have understandably been the object of extensive empirical research. It is nonetheless striking that despite the voluminous literature which this topic has generated, relatively little attention has been devoted to an important aspect of the selection or filtering process – namely the question of who might be willing to stand as a candidate were they to be asked. Most of the literature in this field has concentrated on one of two matters: either the characteristics of those who are actual candidates for office (e.g. Norris a. Loven-duski 1993, 1995) as well as those who have been successful in achieving elected office (e.g. Norris 1996; Reynaert 2012; Steyvers a. Verhelst 2012; Verhelst et al. forthcoming), or how the political system may influence the opportunity structures surrounding

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1 The term “bully pulpit” is perhaps best known from President Teddy Roosevelt’s use of the term to describe the position held by the US president. Norris (1996, S. 192) also makes use of a pyramid analogy, but does so without specifically highlighting the level of willingness which is the focal point of this chapter.

2 The literature on representation is enormous, reflecting the fact that the notion itself is multifaceted and highly contested. Among well-known treatments of the concept in recent times are those of Pitkin (1967) and Pennock and Chapman (1968). In the present chapter we do not focus on any of the issues raised in the debates found in the literature on political representation. We merely look at the composition of those who might be willing to stand as a candidate for local council elections and what implications this might have.
Figure 1: The electoral pyramid

the recruitment process itself (cf. the overview by Norris 1997). But surprisingly little attention is paid to the base of the pyramid and the stratum of individuals who make up what may be termed “the pool of willing”.

There are to be sure studies that investigate aspirations to office holding among various groups. In particular a good number of studies have probed the political ambitions of men and women as one explanation for the differences in gender representation among candidates and office holders observed in many countries (e.g. Carroll 1985; Costantini 1990; Fox & Lawless 2004, 2005; Fox et al. 2001; Fulton et al. 2006; Palmer & Simon 2003; Sapiro 1982). But there is a difference between aspiring and being willing. Those who aspire to elected office frequently place themselves within the pool of willing; they move from the ranks of the eligible electorate to the willing on their own initiative. But beyond these self-starting candidates there is often another group of individuals — the potentially willing — who do not cross this threshold without an invitation or some form of solicitation.

That being asked is an important consideration underlying many forms of political participation has been highlighted in the work of Sidney Verba and his associates in developing the Civic Voluntarism Model (see especially chapter 9 in Verba et al. 1995) as well as in the CLEAR framework formulated by Vivien Lowndes and her colleagues (cf. Lowndes et al. 2006). As this work emphasizes, there are in many instances people who may be willing to participate, but do not do so unless they are asked — i.e. unless they are mobilized in one fashion or another. This is well-recognized in connection with other forms of political participation. As a consequence political parties, for example, exert substantial effort in mobi-