

# Electoral Colorism: Candidate Skin Color and List Placement in Ecuador

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## Abstract

To what extent does candidate skin color influence party list placement in proportional representation systems? While candidate skin color is increasingly understood to play an important role in politics, the extent to which it shapes electoral opportunities and outcomes remains unclear. In this paper, we investigate whether party elites in list proportional representation systems place darker-skinned candidates in lower, less advantageous list positions than their lighter-skinned copartisans. Drawing on party lists from Ecuador's 2021 National Assembly elections and an original measure of candidate skin color, we find evidence that candidate skin color is a significant determinant of list placement. This finding indicates that party lists reinforce color-based inequalities in political representation and reveals that a candidate's skin color shapes their chances of winning elected office.

Keywords: Elections, List Placement, Political Parties, Skin Color, Ecuador

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# Introduction

In many democracies, racial and ethnic groups are not descriptively represented by elected officials. Political scientists have traditionally documented such ethno-racial disparities in representation and sought to explain them. Focusing on race or ethnicity alone, however, may yield an incomplete picture of the barriers that members of traditionally underrepresented groups face (Weaver 2012). A growing body of scholarship suggests that the skin color of politicians shapes electoral outcomes (Lemi and Brown 2019; Swain 1993; Terkildsen 1993).

Research on the importance of skin color in politics largely focuses on colorism, a form of skin tone based discrimination in which lighter skin is prized (Dixon and Telles 2017). Experimental work shows that candidate skin color affects voters' evaluations and observational studies indicate that it is correlated with electoral outcomes (Brown and Lemi 2021; Burge, Wamble and Cuomo 2020; Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera 2021; Leigh and Susilo 2009; Terkildsen 1993; Weaver 2012). Nonetheless, research on skin color, which largely focuses on the United States, has paid limited attention to the role of party elites. In many countries, party gatekeepers determine who runs for elected office and influence their chances of victory (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Hazan and Rahat 2010; Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

In party list proportional representation systems (PR-list systems), party leaders draw up lists of candidates that are presented in general elections. Although party elites are thought to rank candidates on these lists strategically, they may favor certain types of candidates over others (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Hazan and Rahat 2010). Building on research on colorism, we investigate whether party gatekeepers in PR-list systems place lighter-skinned candidates in higher, more advantageous list positions than those with darker skin. In closed, free, and open-list proportional representation systems, this type of behavior can be expected to reduce dark-skinned candidates' chances of winning public office.

We examine the relationship between candidate skin color and party list placement in Ecuador, a diverse democracy in which those with light skin are privileged and dominate electoral politics (Castro and Alexandra 2012; Htun 2016). In 2020, Ecuador adopted a closed-list system to fill

seats in its national assembly (*Asamblea Nacional*). Using data on the party lists put forward in the 2021 national assembly elections, we show that party elites place lighter-skinned candidates in higher, more advantageous list positions than their darker-skinned copartisans. This result holds even when we control for the political experience and education level of candidates.

Our analysis provides new insight about the importance of candidate skin color in electoral politics. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to examine how party gatekeepers rank candidates of different skin colors in a PR-list system. Our findings suggest that party elites reinforce skin color-based inequalities in political representation by placing light-skinned candidates higher than darker-skinned candidates on the party lists they control.

## **Electoral Systems and Opportunities**

The design of electoral systems has important consequences for political representation. Proportional representation (PR) systems are considered to be most conducive to producing representative assemblies (Schmidt 2009). In PR systems, seats are distributed to political parties in proportion to the votes they receive. Which politicians come to occupy those seats, however, is conditional on the type of PR system in place. In open-list systems, seats are awarded to candidates based on how many preference votes they receive. In contrast, in closed-list systems, seats are distributed according to candidate placement on party lists.

In closed-list systems, party leaders' control over the placement of candidates on party lists gives them substantial power. By placing a candidate higher or lower on the list, party elites can improve or reduce their chances of victory. Research suggests that party officials use their discretion over the order of party lists to improve the electoral chances of their preferred candidates (Gallagher and Marsh 1988). Studies show that party gatekeepers place former lawmakers and party loyalists in high, relatively secure list positions (Gherghina and Chiru 2010; Pemstein, Meserve and Bernhard 2015). On the other hand, aspiring politicians with limited experience and those deemed less qualified are often relegated to lower list positions (Gallagher and Marsh 1988).

Although party leaders are presumed to order party lists strategically, a growing body of ev-

idence suggests that they discriminate against certain types of candidates. Research shows that women are often underrepresented on party lists and that when they are included, they are likely to be placed lower than men (Cheng and Tavits 2011; Lühiste 2015; Lühiste and Kenny 2016; Murray 2014). Studies also indicate that party elites fail to support ethnic and racial minorities (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Like women, when party elites nominate members of these groups, they place them in unfavorable list positions (Dancygier et al. 2015; Htun 2016; Van der Zwan, Lubbers and Eisinga 2019). To improve the electoral chance of members of marginalized groups, some activists and politicians advocate for the adoption of quotas and list placement mandates (Bird 2003). While inclusionary policies have been implemented in some countries, they have not always proven effective (Htun 2016; Krook 2010).

When ethnic and racial boundaries are opaque, the enforcement of quotas and placement mandates is likely to be particularly difficult. Moreover, when policies are enforced, party elites may favor certain types of individuals within each ethno-racial category. Due to globalized preferences for whiteness and light skin (Dixon and Telles 2017), there is reason to suspect that party elites favor light-skinned members of traditionally marginalized groups over coethnics with darker skin.

## **Colorism and Party Gatekeeping**

Skin color variation is a strong predictor of virtually every objective measure of well-being and success (Hunter 2007; Keith and Herring 1991; Monk Jr 2021; Telles 2014; Villarreal 2010). Both within and across racial groups, lighter-skinned individuals hold more advantaged positions in society than those with darker skin. Scholars typically attribute skin tone stratification to colorism, a form of discrimination in which light-skinned individuals are favored over those with darker skin (Dixon and Telles 2017).

Considering that skin color is known to shape life outcomes, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholars have found that it also affects politics. Studies show that the skin color of politicians shapes voter attitudes in the U.S. and abroad (Aguilar 2011; Ahuja, Ostermann and Mehta 2016; Burge, Wamble and Cuomo 2020; Leigh and Susilo 2009; Terkildsen 1993; Weaver 2012). Obser-

vational work on candidate-centric elections reveals that politicians with dark skin receive fewer votes than their lighter-skinned competitors and have a lower probability of winning elected office (Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera 2021; Leigh and Susilo 2009). Candidate skin color may affect electoral outcomes, though, even before election day.

In PR-list systems, party officials order the lists of candidates that voters see in general elections. Party elites may choose to rank light-skinned candidates higher than their darker-skinned copartisans for a variety of reasons. One plausible reason is because of ingroup favoritism (Brewer 1999). When party officials are light-skinned, they can be expected to positively evaluate light-skinned candidates and place them in favorable list positions (Doherty, Dowling and Miller 2019).

It is also possible that skin color prejudice influences list placement. Party elites may personally prefer light-skin or believe that voters do. While there is virtually no research on elites' skin color preferences, a number of studies indicate that members of the public favor light skin (Chen and Francis-Tan 2022; Dixon and Telles 2017; Nosek et al. 2007). If party elites believe that voters prefer politicians with light skin, they may “strategically” discriminate against darker-skinned candidates and place them low on party lists (Bateson 2020).

- **Hypothesis:** Party elites place light-skinned candidates in higher, more secure positions on party lists than dark-skinned candidates.

To test this hypothesis, we turn to Ecuador, a diverse and unequal democracy. Despite free and fair elections, white and light-skinned mestizo politicians have traditionally dominated Ecuadorian politics (Castro and Alexandra 2012; Htun 2016). We explore whether the placement of candidates on party lists may explain the political power of light-skinned Ecuadorians.

## **Case Selection and Application**

In any PR-list system, party leaders may place darker-skinned candidates in lower list positions than their lighter-skinned competitors. It may be especially common in Latin America, though, where skin color is a central axis of stratification (Telles 2014). Political elites in Latin America

historically promoted racial mixing with the goal of decreasing the size of Indigenous and African descendants populations (Loveman 2014). The mixture of Spanish colonizers, Indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans has blurred ethno-racial boundaries, yet light skin continues to be prized (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames and Organista 2014; Telles 2014; Villarreal 2010).

In Ecuador, skin color is an important determinant of life outcomes (Johnson 2007). Individuals with dark skin are less educated and poorer than those with light skin (Bailey, Saperstein and Penner 2014; Canache et al. 2014). Studies suggest this inequality is partially attributable to color-based discrimination (Larrea et al. 2007; Martinez Novo and de la Torre 2010). As in other parts of Latin America, light skin in Ecuador is preferred and those with dark skin are negatively stereotyped (Beck, Mijeski and Stark 2011; Canache et al. 2014; Telles and Steele 2012).

Elected officials in Ecuador's 137 seat National Assembly are predominately white or light-skinned mestizos (Castro and Alexandra 2012; Htun 2016). Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorians, each of which comprise about 7 percent of the population and typically have darker skin, hold only a small number of seats.<sup>1</sup> In Ecuador's 2021 assembly elections, only 13 Indigenous and 3 Afro-Ecuadorian politicians were elected.<sup>2</sup> The actions of party officials, who play an important role in shaping candidate fields and assembling party lists, may explain why.

Political candidates in Ecuador are selected via party primaries and any party member can theoretically seek their party's nomination (Barragán and Bohigues 2018). In practice, though, party officials shape who stands for nomination via their recruitment activities and encourage party members to vote for their preferred nominees. Party elites are known to encourage long-time party militants as well as party outsiders with strong personal reputations (West 2020). While they do recruit Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants, extant research suggest their inclusion is often symbolic (Madrid 2012; West 2020). Depending on where party officials place them on party lists, members of marginalized ethno-racial groups may have virtually no chance of winning elected office.

In 2020, Ecuador adopted a closed-list electoral system to fill the seats in its national assem-

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix Figure A.1 for more information.

<sup>2</sup>Authors' own calculations.

bly. In this system, Ecuadorian voters cast a ballot for a party list at the district level and a ballot for a party list at the national level. Votes are totaled at the district and national levels respectively, and seats are distributed to political parties at each level in proportion to the percent of votes they receive. Like other closed-list electoral systems, the order of the party list determines which candidates fill any seats obtained by their respective parties. If party officials, who have the authority to rank party nominees as they see fit, place darker-skinned candidates lower than their lighter-skinned counterparts, politicians with dark skin will be at a major disadvantage.

There is virtually no empirical research on the organization of party lists in Ecuador's closed-list system. There is reason to suspect, though, that party elites privilege the same types of candidates as in its old electoral system. When Ecuador had a free-list system, party officials placed political incumbents, highly educated candidates, and those with prestigious occupations in advantageous list positions (West 2020). Moreover, they regularly assigned men to higher list positions than women (Carrión-Yaguana, Carrington and Velástegui Moya 2022). Finally, some research suggests that they typically placed Indigenous and Afro-descendant candidates in low list positions (West 2020).<sup>3</sup>

Although Ecuadorian parties have always put forth a list of candidates, the shift to a closed-list electoral system has increased the significance of a candidate's position on that list. In Ecuador's free-list system, candidates in low list positions could still win office if they received enough preference votes. In its new closed-list electoral system, however, this is no longer the case. Candidates at the top of their respective party lists now have an electoral advantage that their list mates cannot overcome. Drawing on an original dataset, we explore whether party leaders place darker-skinned candidates in less advantageous list positions than their lighter-skinned copartisans.

## **Data and Methods**

To assess the relationship between candidate skin color and party list position, we draw on data from Ecuador's 2021 National Assembly elections. The primary source of this data is the Ecuado-

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<sup>3</sup>This practice, however, may vary across parties (Becker 2010; West 2020).

rian National Electoral Council (CNE), which publishes official party lists and information about the candidates on them. Using party lists, we determine how candidates are ranked as well as obtain color photographs of all candidates. The dataset we construct using this information features 82 political parties, 484 unique party lists, and 2,088 candidates. We use this dataset and OLS regression to determine if lighter-skinned candidates are placed in higher, more advantageous list positions than their darker-skinned counterparts.

Party lists in Ecuador vary in length based on district magnitude. For example, party lists have five candidates when the district magnitude is five and fifteen when the district magnitude is fifteen. To facilitate comparison across lists, we use the relative list position of individual candidates as our dependent variable.<sup>4</sup> We calculate the relative list position as follows:  $\frac{(T_i - P_j)}{(T_i - 1)} * 100$ . According to this measure, which is proposed by van der Zwan et al. (2019),  $T_i$  stands for the total number of candidates on list  $i$  and  $P_j$  stands for the position of candidate  $j$  on list  $i$ . Our relative list position measure ranges from 0 to 100, with zero being the last position on the party list.

Ecuadorian ballots feature color photographs of the competing candidates. We obtained these photographs from the CNE and had three coders independently classify the skin color of each candidate's face using the PERLA skin color palette. The PERLA palette, which is shown in Figure 1, was designed to capture the range of skin tones found in Latin America and has been used to assess the skin color of political elites as well as members of the public (Campos-Vazquez and Rivas-Herrera 2021; Johnson 2020; Telles 2014). It features eleven skin tones arranged on a continuum. The lightest color has a score of 1 and the darkest color has a score of 11.

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<sup>4</sup>In Appendix Table D.1 we show that our results are robust when we use first position on the party list as the dependent variable.



Figure 1: PERLA Skin Color Palette



Note: Figure 1 shows the PERLA skin color palette.

The PERLA palette’s eleven-point scale allows coders to precisely classify the skin color of candidates. To assess intercoder agreement, we calculate Cohen’s kappa, Gwet’s AC, and Krippendorff’s alpha with quadratic weights. The use of quadratic weights accounts for the ordered nature of the color categories. The Cohen’s kappa is .61, Gwet’s AC is .95, and Krippendorff’s alpha is .61. According to the benchmarks proposed by Landis and Koch (1977) and Gwet (2014), the Cohen’s kappa coefficient and Gwet’s AC coefficient indicate a “substantial” level of agreement. Krippendorff’s alpha score, though, suggests intercoder agreement is lower. To account for variation in how coders perceive the skin color of candidates, we average their assessments and generate a measure of *Candidate Skin Color*.<sup>5</sup>

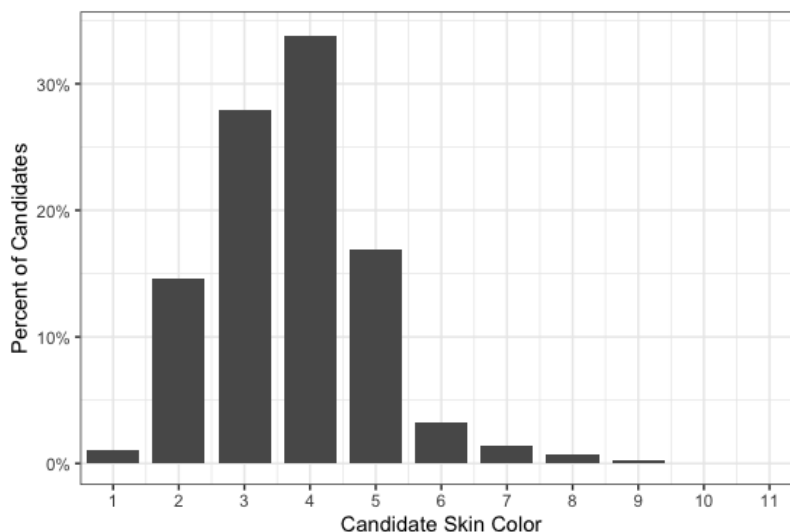
Figure 2 shows the skin color values of Ecuadorian candidates. Most of the politicians in the dataset were classified as being light-skinned. The average skin color score was 3.72 and the distribution of skin color values has a slight positive skew. The darkest politicians were classified as having skin color scores of 9. It is exceedingly rare though for Ecuadorian politicians to have skin this dark. Only 3 of the 2,088 politicians in the dataset have a skin color value of 9. Variation

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<sup>5</sup>In Appendix Table D.2, we show that using the median skin color value for each candidate yields similar results.

in the color candidates does not substantially differ from that of the Ecuadorian population.<sup>6</sup> If our hypothesis is correct and lighter-skinned candidates occupy higher positions on party lists than darker-skinned candidates, then those elected are likely to be lighter skinned. Accordingly, we expect the *Candidate Skin Color* variable will produce a negative, statistically significant coefficient.

Figure 2: Histogram of Ecuadorian Candidate Skin Color Values



Note: Figure 2 shows the skin color scores of Ecuadorian candidates. The skin color measure is rounded to the nearest integer for display purposes.

Party elites are likely to consider candidate characteristics besides skin color when ordering party lists. Building on evidence that party officials favor certain types of candidates, in the second model we control for candidate incumbency status, education level, gender, and age. The *Incumbent* variable takes the value “1” if a candidate is running for reelection and “0” if they are not. Although the electoral system has changed, we expect incumbents to occupy higher positions on party lists than non-incumbents. We also include a measure of post-secondary education. The *College Degree* variable is coded “1” if a candidate has a college degree and “0” otherwise. We expect candidates who have graduated college to be ranked higher positions on party lists than political aspirants without a college degree. Building on evidence that party officials favor men over women, we include the *Woman Candidate* variable, which takes the value “1” if a politician

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<sup>6</sup>See Appendix Figure B.1

identified herself as a woman when she registered to run for public office and “0” otherwise.<sup>7</sup> We do not expect the coefficient on this variable to reach statistical significance because parties are required to alternate men and women on their candidate lists.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, the *Candidate Age* variable we include is a nominal measure of a candidate’s age at the time of the election. Party elites may perceive older candidates to be more capable and therefore rank them higher on party lists.

## Results

Table 1 presents the results of two OLS regression models. In each model we include party district fixed effects.<sup>9</sup> Model 1 provides preliminary support for our hypothesis. Consistent with our expectations, it indicates that darker-skinned candidates are placed in lower list positions than their lighter-skinned copartisans. The coefficient on the *Candidate Skin Color* variable is negative and statistically significant.

In Model 2, which includes candidate controls, we find further evidence that party elites place dark-skinned candidates in lower, less secure positions on party lists than light-skinned candidates. Again, the coefficient on the *Candidate Skin Color* variable is negative and statistically significant. All else equal, a one-unit increase in candidate skin color is predicted to decrease relative list placement by 4.7 positions.<sup>10</sup> This implies that in Ecuador’s national district, where party lists feature 15 candidates, just a two-unit increase in skin color is predicted to decrease a candidate’s list position by one spot. Although the effect may appear small, it is substantively important. One position can make the difference between being the last candidate on the list to win a seat or the first candidate not to.

The control variables perform as expected. The coefficients on the incumbency, education, and

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<sup>7</sup>We investigated the possibility of an interaction between skin color and gender, but the results were fragile and model dependent. See Appendix E for more detail.

<sup>8</sup>An examination of party lists reveals that parties do comply with the alternation requirement, but more often than not have a man head the list. Of the 484 party lists put forward in 2021, 73 percent were headed by a man. Because party lists routinely have an odd number of candidates, this also means that slightly more men run than women. In 2021, 52.6 percent of candidates on party lists were men.

<sup>9</sup>In Appendix Table D.3, we show the results are similar when we include controls for party ideology.

<sup>10</sup>In Appendix Table D.4, we explore whether the impact of candidate skin color on list position is linear.

Table 1: List Position Regression Result

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Relative List Position	
	(1)	(2)
Candidate Skin Color	-5.010*** (0.941)	-4.744*** (0.881)
Incumbent		44.855*** (7.863)
College Degree		14.679*** (2.052)
Woman Candidate		-0.604 (1.853)
Candidate Age		0.857*** (0.080)
Constant	68.614*** (3.614)	22.381*** (5.220)
Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,088	2,088
R <sup>2</sup>	.012	.116

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

age variables are each positive and statistically significant. Moreover, the coefficient on the *Woman Candidate* variable is negative, but does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Although it is unsurprising that candidate attributes like incumbency status, education, and age are significant determinants of list position, the fact that the *Candidate Skin Color* variable is statistically significant even when they are included is noteworthy. This suggests that darker-skinned candidates are placed lower on party lists not because of their electoral experience or education, but rather, in spite of it.

## Discussion

Elected assemblies in many democracies do not descriptively reflect the electorate. Research indicates that this is in part because political aspirants from underrepresented groups face difficulties at the candidate selection and nomination stages (Dancygier et al. 2015; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Wylie 2018). The importance of party elites, however, does not just end at the nomination stage (Janusz, Barreiro and Cintron 2021; Van der Zwan, Lubbers and Eisinga 2019). In PR-list systems, party elites directly influence the electoral prospects of nominees by ranking them on party lists. Although party gatekeepers are presumed to order party lists strategically, factors besides electoral potential may influence list placement. Building on the burgeoning literature on skin color politics, this study explores whether party elites place darker-skinned candidates in lower, less advantageous list positions than their lighter-skinned counterparts.

Drawing on original data from Ecuador, we find compelling evidence that skin color and party list placement go hand in hand. Our analysis shows that in Ecuador's 2021 National Assembly elections, party officials placed candidates with lighter skin in more secure list positions than their darker-skinned copartisans. In this way, the organization of party lists perpetuate the political exclusion of dark-skinned Ecuadorians.

Party elites may rank light skinned candidates higher than those with dark skin for a variety of reasons. While in-group favoritism and prejudice are plausible explanations, the available data do not allow us to identify the mechanism or rule out alternative explanations. It may be possible to

determine why lighter-skinned candidates occupy more advantageous list positions through qualitative interviews with political elites as well as by using surveys and experiments. To ameliorate skin color inequalities, it is critical to understand why they occur.

Future studies should explore whether candidate skin color affects placement across parties and districts. It is possible that ethnic parties and those that market themselves as inclusionary do not place darker-skinned candidates lower than their lighter-skinned copartisans.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, party elites may tailor the organization of party lists according to the composition of the electorate. In some Ecuadorian electoral districts, voters are primarily Indigenous or African descendants. If party elites believe that darker-skinned voters prefer darker-skinned candidates, they can be expected to place them in prominent positions in districts with sizable nonwhite populations.

The relationship between skin color and list position we uncover is unlikely to be unique to Ecuador. In fact, it may even be more pronounced outside of Latin America (Dixon and Telles 2017). Research on colorism indicates that East Asians have the highest color bias in the world (Bettache 2020; Chen and Francis-Tan 2022). Future work should explore the relationship between candidate skin color in party lists in other parts of the world.

It would also be valuable to look at the relationship between candidate skin color and list placement across PR-list systems. Although our analysis focuses on Ecuador's closed-list system, dark skinned-candidates may be placed in unfavorable list positions in free and open-list proportional representation systems as well. In these types of list systems, voters can alter the order of party lists, and therefore minimize the impact of skin color on electoral success. Nonetheless, many voters interpret list position as a signal of candidate quality and routinely choose not to alter the original list (Dancygier et al. 2015; Silva and Crisp 2020). If candidate skin color is correlated with list position, even when voters can choose among candidates, it is likely to influence electoral outcomes.

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<sup>11</sup>Appendix Table D.5 suggests that the relationship between skin color and list position does vary across parties, but more work is needed.

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