

PARTY PEOPLE

How do – and how should – British political parties select their parliamentary candidates?

Foreword

The Parti Socialiste primary in France ought to concentrate the minds of all democrats in Britain. An astonishing 2.9 million French voters identifying with the Left took part in the second run-off round of the national primary to select the party's candidate to contest next year's presidential election. More than 2.7m took part in the first round. They even paid for the privilege, at a euro a vote.

The aim of the primary was to engage far beyond the confines of party members, recognising that party membership, in an age of dwindling party activism, is increasingly divorced not only from the electorate at large but even from the portion of the electorate supporting the Left. Political parties in Britain face the same challenge, and they are starting to think in equally radical terms.

The two biggest innovations in recent years have been Labour's introduction of all-women shortlists to boost the representation of women, and the Conservatives' use of primary ballots, and meetings open to non-members, to select candidates in the run-up to the 2010 general election. This paper evaluates these and other innovations. It suggests best practice guidance on how such innovations can be taken forward by the political parties. And it discusses their impact in boosting democratic engagement and improving the representative credentials of Parliament and the political parties.

Primaries, and other innovations in candidate selection considered here, are not panaceas. They raise big – sometimes fundamental – questions about the role of parties and party members, on which there are sharply conflicting views. But they deserve to be considered seriously. This paper, prepared in close consultation with all three of the major parties, contributes to the debate.



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Summary and recommendations

This is a report about how the three main British political parties select their parliamentary candidates. Given the preponderance of safe seats in the country, it is at this stage – rather than on election day itself – that the identity of many, if not most, Members of Parliament is determined.

The Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats have all reformed their internal processes in recent years, often in highly innovative ways. In so doing, each party has sought to achieve some combination of the following objectives:

- Increasing the diversity of parliamentary candidates;
- Enhancing public participation and engagement in politics;
- Ensuring that candidates have the requisite skills and competencies;
- Minimising conflict between party leaders and grassroots members.

We assess the effectiveness of the three parties' most significant recent reforms in achieving these different goals, noting that there are frequently tensions between them.

Strong action by party leaderships has been effective in increasing the diversity of MPs, through the imposition of restrictions in the selection process on (often reluctant) local parties. In particular, Labour's all-women shortlists and the Conservative A-List delivered impressive results in terms of increasing the number of women and (A-List only) ethnic minority MPs.

But while centrally-imposed "positive action" can deliver a quick win in terms of diversity, this comes at the price of party unity, with relations between leaders and activists suffering. Also, parties can be criticised for focussing on "descriptive representation" alone, while in other ways (notably in terms of professional and class background), Parliament may have become less diverse.

Further, positive action of this kind does little to tackle the underlying problem of a skewed "supply" of candidates. In all parties, those putting themselves forward to become approved candidates are overwhelmingly white, male and middle-class, as are the majority of party members themselves.

In response, the parties have developed strategies to encourage candidates from under-represented groups, with mentoring, training and support schemes tailored to specific groups (such as the Liberal Democrat Leadership Programme and Labour's Future Candidates Programme).

These initiatives are important, and can help candidates overcome barriers that may previously have blocked their progress. The parties should go further, however, in encouraging a more diverse range of people to enter party politics at all levels.

Action is also needed to address perhaps the most significant hurdle facing many candidates: the cost of standing for Parliament. Candidates in all parties report spending tens of thousands of

pounds campaigning for election (in lost income and direct costs) – an obvious deterrent to poorer candidates. The high cost of childcare means this problem may disproportionately affect women. And disabled candidates can face a particular set of costs around transport and personal support.

For these reasons, we favour the development of means-tested bursaries (as recommended by the recent Speaker's Commission on Parliamentary Representation) for parliamentary candidates of all major parties to enable a wider range of people to come forward. We also welcome the government's commitment to establishing a ring-fenced fund to support disabled candidates.

A further proposal the government should consider is to create a statutory right to time off work for participation in an election campaign (as applies to jury service, for instance).

All parties have also developed more professional assessment processes through which aspirant politicians are approved for membership of parties' official lists of candidates. The rationale is sensible: to create a more meritocratic system in which discrimination and patronage is minimised.

Care should be taken, however, to ensure that assessment procedures do not bias the selection process towards people with a narrow range of professional backgrounds, at the expense of diversity. Assessment processes should seek to identify those with *potential* to become an effective MP, with subsequent training and support provided as appropriate.

Parties should also develop assessment processes in an open and consultative way. The perceived secrecy of candidate selection has contributed to party members' doubts and fuelled suspicions that candidates have been approved for political reasons rather than on merit.

Further, criteria used during the initial candidate assessment process should be better integrated into the local selection stage, while recognising that different constituencies and local parties may prefer different types of candidate.

While much candidate selection reform has sought to influence *who is selected*, the other side of the coin concerns *who does the selecting*. Here, since Labour reformed its processes (ending direct union involvement) in the 1990s, all parties have converged on a model where candidates are selected by local members at a constituency level on a one-member-one-vote basis.

Recently, however, there has been growing interest in reforms that open out the process to a wider 'selectorate', for instance through primary elections in which members of the public can participate. So far only the Conservatives have used primaries to select parliamentary candidates, although Labour is now reforming its leadership election process to give some non-members a say.

We welcome this trend. With party membership having declined significantly, MPs in safe seats are often in effect chosen by a few dozen (or at most a couple of hundred) party activists. Giving the public a role in candidate selection can enhance the legitimacy of the process, raise the profile of individual candidates, and reduce public disengagement from the political system.

Of the experiments before the 2010 election, the "postal primaries" held by the Conservatives in Totnes and Gosport appear to offer the best model. They both attracted significant media attention

and a high turnout among the public (25% and 18% respectively). They also seemed to favour candidates with a local profile over those with a strong background in party politics.

By contrast, the caucus-style “primary meetings” held in over 100 seats had a limited impact. Turnout was low and the process was little different from the traditional members-led selection.

We recommend that all parties consider trialling postal primaries to select candidates in some seats for the next election. Most appropriate would be to introduce this process in safe seats where incumbent MPs are retiring.

An important element of the Totnes/Gosport primary was its “hybrid” nature. By this we mean that while the public made the final choice of candidate, the shortlisting process remained in the hands of local activists, while the national party designed the process and ensured that a diverse shortlist was selected (through the imposition of a gender quota). The candidates eventually selected were acceptable to all three selectorates, and the process was generally seen as fair.

Postal primaries are expensive, however. The Conservatives spent around £40,000 in each of the two seats where the process was used. Given the benefits of greater public engagement, we believe that state funding should be provided for postal primaries (as the coalition committed to in its Programme for Government), or other similar processes designed to boost public participation.

Any such new funding scheme should be managed at arm’s length from government, for instance by the Electoral Commission, which should seek to develop cross-party agreement about how the scheme should operate (including deciding upon eligibility criteria for access to the funding).

A key question is whether funding should be provided only for processes in which *all* voters can participate (open primaries) or whether processes limited to registered supporters also qualify too. A minimum threshold of public participation before funding is provided might be needed.

An alternative funding model used by the French Parti Socialiste was to charge members of the public one euro to participate in the selection of the party’s presidential candidate. UK parties might learn from this approach, though it would be difficult to operate in a postal ballot system.

Parties could opt to run their primary processes using different electoral systems, although an AV-style system, which guarantees that successful candidates gain backing from a majority of voters, might be preferable to first-past-the-post, in which a candidate could win with far less than 50% in cases where there was a shortlist of four or more candidates.

Since selection of parliamentary candidates is likely to be delayed until the revised constituency boundaries are confirmed, the first opportunity to trial primary processes will be during selection of candidates for mayoral elections in English cities (subject to approval in forthcoming referendums), and for the new Police and Crime Commissioners.

These polls are to elect single-person executives so are well-suited to the focus on individuals rather than parties that primaries tend towards. Since these are new posts, primaries could also help to entrench the legitimacy of the positions as well as the successful candidates themselves.

We therefore recommend that all parties introduce primary elections to select their candidates for these posts, and that public funding is provided for these processes.

The parties (and independent bodies such as the Institute for Government) should then assess how these initial trials of primary elections have worked, and build lessons from these experiments into parliamentary candidate selection processes in time for the 2015 election.

List of recommendations

To sum up, we recommend the following:

1. A greater focus on addressing the unrepresentative “supply” of candidates, including by encouraging a more diverse range of people to participate in party politics at all levels.
2. Action to address perhaps the most significant hurdle facing many candidates: the cost of standing for Parliament.
3. Specifically, the development of means-tested bursaries for parliamentary candidates of all major parties.
4. A statutory right to time off work for participation in an election campaign.
5. Assessment procedures that do not bias the process towards people with a narrow range of professional backgrounds.
6. Assessment procedures that are developed in an open and consultative way between party headquarters and members.
7. Better integration of criteria used during the candidate assessment process into the local selection stage, along with recognition that different constituencies may prefer different types of candidate.
8. Greater use by the parties of primary elections to select candidates, especially in safe seats where incumbent MPs are retiring.
9. Development of primary processes with a “hybrid” nature, meaning that while the public makes the final choice of candidate, shortlisting remains in the hands of local activists, while the national party designs and oversees the process.
10. State funding for postal primaries or other similar processes designed to boost public participation.
11. A funding scheme for primaries that is managed at arm’s length from government, perhaps by the Electoral Commission, and which is developed on the basis of cross-party agreement.
12. Trialling of primary processes during selection of candidates for mayoral elections in English cities and for the new Police and Crime Commissioners, with lessons from these experiments built into parliamentary candidate selection processes in time for the 2015 election.

1. Why candidate selection matters

*The background against which this conference has conducted its work is sombre. Many citizens feel themselves to be distant from Parliament and the wider democratic process.*¹ - Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, 2010

*MPs are not chosen by 'the people' - they are chosen by their local constituency parties: thirty-five men in grubby raincoats or thirty-five women in silly hats.*²
- Sir Humphrey Appleby, Yes Minister

The health of representative democracy rests upon the participation of the public in the political process and the effective representation of the people by elected parliamentarians. Yet in the United Kingdom public participation in traditional democratic politics is in decline, trust in politicians is low, and the House of Commons does not look like the diverse society it seeks to represent.

The role of political parties in addressing these problems is crucial. Political parties are central to the functioning of Parliament and they are the gatekeepers to parliamentary representation; it is through the parties that virtually all candidates progress into the House of Commons. How parties select their candidates therefore has a significant impact on the representativeness of Parliament and the level of public engagement in the political system.

As a result of the UK's First Past the Post system a majority of MPs are elected in 'safe seats', where one party consistently holds power – 382 (59%) out of 650 seats were classified as safe before the 2010 election.³ Consequently, "selection is tantamount to election in the majority of constituencies".⁴ Candidate selection processes therefore play a highly important role in determining the composition of the House of Commons. Recognising this, the major UK political parties have introduced a number of reforms into candidate selection processes over the past two decades. These reforms have been applied at both the initial approval stage, when aspirant candidates are assessed by parties for their suitability to stand for election, and at the subsequent local selection stage, when candidates are chosen to fight particular constituencies.

The parties have introduced reforms into these processes in order to achieve a number of specific goals:

- Increasing the diversity of parliamentary candidates;
- Enhancing public participation and engagement in politics;
- Ensuring that candidates have the requisite skills and competencies;
- Minimising conflict between party leaders and grassroots members.

Diversity

All parties have taken action to improve diversity among candidates, in recognition of the unrepresentativeness of the House of Commons. The Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation published in 2010 stated that: "Ensuring a diverse representation within parliament is one way to rebuild trust and restore a dialogue between parliament and those whom it represents."⁵ As well as helping to restore legitimacy, the conference recognised the impact representativeness can have on the effectiveness of governance, stating that "Parliament can do its work effectively only if its Members are in tune with the experiences of the people they represent".⁶

Most action to date has focussed on addressing the under-representation of women. Labour and the Liberal Democrats both introduced quotas for gender balance on local shortlists in the 1980s. Labour then went further, introducing all-women shortlists in many seats ahead of the 1997 election. On the Conservative side, the major development came after David Cameron became leader in 2005, through the introduction of an "A-list" of preferred candidates that included a majority of women. The Conservatives also imposed a requirement for gender-balanced shortlists in many selection processes. Such initiatives have helped raise the number of women MPs to an all-time high of 137 in 2010, up from just 23 in 1983. But this still represents only 22% of the House of Commons.

Parliament is also unrepresentative of the UK population in other ways. As recently as 1983, there were no non-white MPs. This picture has changed significantly since then, due in part to efforts by the parties, and there are now 27 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) MPs. However, this is still significantly below the 75-80 non-white MPs that would signify a truly representative House.⁷

Members of Parliament are also unrepresentative in terms of their educational and professional backgrounds. Notably, 35% of current MPs attended public, fee-paying schools⁸ compared with just 7% of the current school-age population.⁹ With 29% of MPs, Oxbridge graduates are also significantly over-represented, though the figure has fallen in recent years.¹⁰ Overall, around 90% of all MPs are graduates, compared with 34% of the UK population aged between 25 and 64.¹¹ The evidence also shows that most MPs come into Parliament from a well-paid professional career, while the proportion of those with a background in manual work has fallen to just 4%.¹² Most strikingly, perhaps, research by the Hansard Society found that a majority of MPs newly elected in

2010 actually took a pay cut in becoming MPs (who earn £65,738 per annum), and that just 13% previously earned less than the London average wage of £33,380.¹³

Data on the number of MPs with disabilities is more difficult to come by, but it is widely recognised that disabled candidates face a number of particular barriers – including higher costs – in campaigning for election, and that the proportion of disabled MPs is below that of the general population.¹⁴ Following the recommendation of the Speaker’s Conference on Representation, the government launched a consultation on whether to establish a dedicated fund to support people with disabilities wishing to stand for election.¹⁵ Other options for improving representation among this group, such as tailored training and support, are also under consideration.

Participation

There is growing recognition that candidate selection procedures can be used to encourage greater public participation in the political process and to reconnect voters with the political parties. Even at their peak in the 1950s, the membership of political parties comprised just 5% of the population. Today, less than 1.5% of the electorate belong to one of the three major political parties.¹⁶ Consequently, only a tiny fraction of voters in most constituencies have any say in the selection of parliamentary candidates. In 2010, for instance, it has been estimated that an average of just 40 people participated in the selection of Labour candidates.¹⁷

The Conservatives have been the most innovative in opening up their selection processes to a wider electorate. In over 100 constituencies, the party’s candidates were selected at ‘primary meetings’ in which all voters (not just Conservative members) were able to participate. The party also experimented with “postal primaries” in two seats, attracting the participation of up to a quarter of registered voters. In May 2010, the new Coalition Government committed in its Programme for Government to funding up to 200 postal primaries,¹⁸ though there has been no further announcement since then about how and whether this will be taken forward.

A debate is also under way in the Labour Party about whether to introduce primary elections. At the party’s September 2011 conference, it was agreed that in future party leadership elections a new network of ‘registered supporters’ would be granted the vote (though initially, only a tiny share of the electoral college will be allocated to this group), and some prominent voices favour extending this approach to selection of parliamentary candidates too.

Skills and competencies

Alongside these measures to improve representativeness and participation, all the political parties have taken steps to ensure that candidates have the requisite competencies and skills to be effective as candidates and MPs. Candidates in all parties now have first to pass through more formalised assessment processes, such as competency interviews, psychometric and written tests, group exercises and so on. In addition, the parties have increased the amount of training and other forms of support provided to candidates.

This more rigorous selection process and training framework for parliamentary candidates, akin to modern HR techniques in most careers, seems sensible from the perspective of government effectiveness. Better prepared and more effective candidates should make for a better quality of MP, and therefore a more talented pool from which future ministers will be appointed. There are, however, concerns that such developments are part of a wider 'professionalisation' of politics and the growth of a political class, which is in some ways less representative of the country (even if more diverse in purely demographic terms).

Avoiding conflict within parties

While seeking to boost diversity, enhance participation, and improve the quality of candidates, political parties have had to beware the risk of internal party conflict, as local activists resist changes to selection processes. In all major parties, the constituency has historically been the prime level of organisation for fundraising, campaigning, and candidate selection. But most recent reforms to candidate selection are centrally-driven, and restrict the autonomy of local party associations to choose their own preferred candidates.

There are different views about this trend. On the one hand, local party democracy can, as noted, mean that MPs are effectively chosen by a few dozen activists in a closed room. But at the same time, parties remain at the heart of our system of parliamentary democracy. And if centralisation of political parties undermines and alienates the grassroots membership, this might in turn lead to a greater disconnect between MPs and the communities they represent.

Our report

In this report, we assess how successful various reforms implemented in the three major parties have been in achieving this set of objectives. In particular we have looked at the following mechanisms:

- All-women-shortlists, where Labour's National Executive Committee mandates that local parties in specified seats can choose only women candidates.
- The 'A-List', a preferred list of candidates compiled by Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ), balanced to be representative of the UK population. In certain winnable seats, local associations were required to select an A-List candidate.
- Primary meetings (also termed open primaries), akin to caucuses in the USA, in which members of the public were invited to attend and vote for the candidate (used extensively in the Conservative Party).
- Postal primaries, used by the Conservatives in two seats, where all registered voters in a constituency were able to participate in voting for their preferred candidate by postal ballot.
- Shortlist quotas, used in some form by all three parties, and enshrined in the Liberal Democrat constitution. These specify that a certain proportion of local candidate shortlists must be from a certain group, such as women.

- We also look at the development in all parties of more professionalised assessment and recruitment procedures for the approval of aspirant parliamentary candidates.

We have found that no candidate selection process at present achieves all of the desired goals simultaneously, partly because the different selectorates involved in choosing parliamentary candidates (PPCs) often have divergent priorities. Consequently the goals have so far proved difficult to reconcile. We believe that to better manage the tradeoffs, the parties need to address underlying causes of unrepresentativeness of candidates and low public participation, and also to develop hybrid systems where party leaders, party members and the public each have a say at different stages of the selection process.

Below we discuss developments in each of the three main parties in turn, before, in a final chapter, pulling together our findings into a set of conclusions.

2. Candidate selection in the Conservative Party

I plan to change the face of the Conservative Party by changing the faces of the Conservative Party. - David Cameron, 12 December 2005¹⁹

Are we doing things that are opening up politics to people who had not previously considered it; are we involving people more in the political process; are we giving them ownership of a really important step, which is choosing a candidate?

- David Cameron, October 2009²⁰

Conservative candidates have traditionally been selected by autonomous local constituency associations. The Conservative Party has long operated an 'Approved List of Conservative Candidates' (the 'Approved List' or General List) able to apply to any vacant constituencies. However, local parties were until recently not forced to choose from this list and could nominate their own local candidates.

The traditional process rested upon a strong commitment to local democracy within the party, combined with antipathy to the notion of positive discrimination (such as Labour's all-women shortlists). The traditional candidate approval process was also marked by an informality that tended to benefit privileged and well-connected men over more diverse candidates. A pamphlet published in 2005 by the Tory Reform Group argued that "historically a tap on the shoulder or a congenial conversation... [was] all that was necessary to put someone on the Conservative Party's approved list".²¹

The party had in fact used a formal process for several decades to approve candidates for the Approved List, but there was increasing criticism that this process – the Parliamentary Selection Board (PSB) – which was based on Sandhurst's army officer training procedure, focussed too narrowly on (unsystematically) assessing candidates debating and rhetorical skills at the expense of other attributes, inadvertently prejudicing the process in favour of public school educated men.²² More seriously, one study conducted after the 2001 election had also concluded that "institutionalised sexism" and even "sexual harassment" at the constituency selection stage, was a particular problem for the Conservatives.²³

Following the electoral defeats of 1997, 2001 and 2005 and the loss of support among women voters in particular, calls for far-reaching reform grew louder, and came from prominent figures including Theresa May and Andrew Lansley.²⁴ The push for more diversity began under William

Hague and Iain Duncan Smith, though progress was limited, and Hague later declared that his failure to introduce positive action to help women and non-white candidates was one of his biggest mistakes.²⁵

Over the past decade, a number of significant changes designed to help women and ethnic minority candidates into parliament have been introduced, and the role of Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ) in the selection process has grown more prominent, at the expense of local party autonomy. At the same time, experiments in new methods to increase public participation in the selection process have also taken place. These reforms are assessed below.

The Parliamentary Assessment Board (PAB)

In 2001 the party decided to replace the process by which its Approved List was drawn up.²⁶ Working with organisational psychologist Jo Silvester, Christina Dykes, then Director of Candidates and Development introduced the Parliamentary Assessment Board (PAB), a new process designed with two specific objectives in mind. Firstly, “to create a modern, rigorous and objective selection process based on best practise from industry”, and secondly, “to make the process more transparent and fair, both to women and ethnic minority candidates”.²⁷ Around this time it was also decided that all candidates, whether seeking a place on the Approved List or being nominated by a local association for a specific constituency, would be required to pass a PAB.

The PAB encompasses a standard competency framework designed to identify the highest quality candidates in terms of their skills and aptitudes, irrespective of gender and ethnicity. This framework was drawn up following interviews and focus groups with several dozen key party stakeholders, with care being taken to involve an equal number of men and women.²⁸

Under this new framework, aspiring parliamentary candidates are assessed on their performance in five tasks and marked against six criteria (see Box 1). Assessments are carried out by four-person assessment panels (usually two MPs and two party members) which are also overseen by an external assessor. Members of the assessment panel are trained in the process and are not given access to candidates’ CVs during the assessment, to avoid the possibility of bias.

One candidate we spoke to who had been through the process over a decade earlier stated that the party had changed “out of all recognition” in the last 20 years, and that in particular the changes had made it easier for women candidates to progress. Other Conservative candidates we spoke to seemed to agree stating that the current approach was both fair and rigorous. However, there have been occasional controversies about CCHQ apparently bending the rules for favoured candidates.²⁹

One change made since the PAB was first created was the replacement of the psychometric test stage of the assessment with an essay-writing requirement. A former party official expressed concern to us about this change on the grounds that crediting essay-writing ability would tend to bias the process to graduates and those in literate careers, whereas the psychometric test had been designed to test pure intellectual ability and to identify candidates’ *potential* to become MPs with subsequent training and support helping to build up specific skills necessary to do the job.

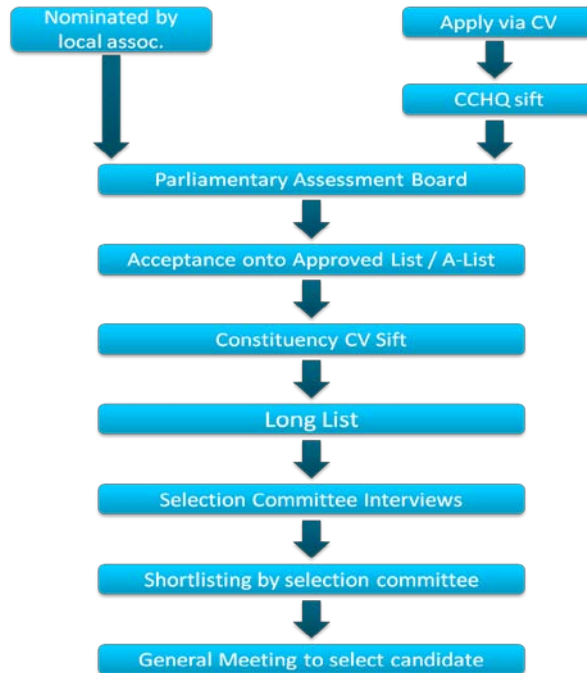
Before aspirants can sit the PAB they must attend an informal meeting with either a member of the party field staff or a senior party volunteer. They must also complete and return to CCHQ candidates department an application form, requiring three references. We were told that candidates who are not approved at this stage are given feedback and advice about the steps they should take to gain the relevant skills and experiences necessary to pass the PAB in future. The possibility remains, however, that this preliminary stage could be used as a pretext to block candidates for reasons other than a lack of appropriate skills.

Box 1: The Parliamentary Assessment Board Framework

<u>Tasks</u>	<u>Competencies</u>
1. Competency interview	1. Communication skills
2. Public Speaking	2. Intellectual skills
3. In Tray exercise	3. Relating to people
4. Group Exercise	4. Leading and motivating
5. Psychometric test (later changed to a written essay)	5. Resilience and drive
	6. Political Conviction

In 2001, changes were also made to the constituency selection stages, with the aim of removing perceived discrimination: aspirant candidates’ CVs sent to local associations had dates of birth, photos and the institutions at which they had studied (but not what they had studied and what qualifications they had obtained) removed. In 2005 changes were also made to the composition of local association selection committees. These bodies had formerly consisted of up to 15 local party members but the sift of candidate applications would in future be conducted by just three party officers, usually the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Treasurer of the Association, who were considered more biddable by the party leadership. These officers could also be obliged to conduct a secondary sifting process with representatives from CCHQ’s Candidates Office, who sought to ensure that strong candidates had not been unfairly excluded. Figure 1, below, illustrates the revised standard selection process.

Figure 1: Standard Conservative candidate selection process (2010)



Reflecting on the performance of the Parliamentary Assessment Board in 2005 the former Director of Candidates, Christina Dykes wrote that “As yet there has been no systematic effort to marry the findings of the assessment centre to the selection process of the wider party”,³⁰ and it would seem that there continues to be a disconnect between the skills and competencies assessors are looking for in the Parliamentary Assessment Board, and the attributes sought by local party selectorates in PPCs. This failure to connect national assessment and local selection processes partly explains the level of distrust some party members feel towards party HQ, and towards central candidates’ lists.

The A-List

If we cannot find 50 grade-A top-class women who want to offer themselves as Conservative Party candidates we should probably give up now - Theresa May, May 2005³¹

After becoming leader in 2005, David Cameron swiftly made it clear that increasing the number of women and ethnic minority Conservative MPs was a priority, stating that: “The conversation we have in the Conservative party must reflect the conversation in the country, and the sound of modern Britain is a complex harmony, not a male voice choir.”³²

To achieve this goal, a new list of preferred candidates was introduced, known as the “priority list” or more commonly the “A-List”.³³ The strategy was to increase the ‘supply’ of female and BAME

candidates from which local associations could select, seen by many as the key problem in the party, rather than to impose strict obligations on the 'demand' side, through mechanisms such as all-women shortlists.³⁴

Positive discrimination was applied in drawing up the A-List, which was designed to mirror the characteristics of the country as a whole. Of 152 A-Listers named in two tranches in the first half of 2006, a slight majority (86) were women. 19 BAME candidates, (12.5% of the list), were also selected. By contrast the share of women on the party's Approved List was reported in 2006 to be only 27%, with an identical gender ratio among those awaiting PAB assessment (implying that men and women applicants had an equal chance of passing the PAB).³⁵

However, while the A-List was reflective of society in this 'descriptive' sense, it was not particularly representative in other respects. BBC analysis of 100 A-Listers in October 2006 showed that 89% had worked or stood for the party previously at some level of government. 61% were also from the South of England and 52% had attended private schools.³⁶

Initially, at least, there was a requirement that local associations in priority seats had to select A-List candidates. In practice, however, exceptions were granted in many constituencies.

In the end, 70 of the initial 152 A-Listers were selected as prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs), including 38 women (54.3%) and 6 BAME candidates (8.5%). Female A-Listers were therefore selected as PPCs almost exactly in proportion to their presence on the list; BAME candidates slightly underperformed, though the sample is too small to draw firm conclusions from this.

Of these 70 candidates, a large majority (51) were successful in getting elected to Parliament. However, of the 19 unsuccessful candidates, no fewer than 15 were women, suggesting that female A-Listers may have found it harder to gain selection in winnable seats. Nonetheless, the A-List played an important role in increasing the diversity on the Conservative benches: 23 female A-Listers entered the Commons in 2010 (along with 13 other new female MPs). Also, out of nine newly elected BAME MPs, five were A-Listers, with just one BAME A-List candidate defeated at the election.

The A-List can therefore be judged a success in its aim of increasing diversity. Yet its impact was limited by the depth of local resistance to the A List concept. In a Conservative Home poll of party members in September 2006, 54% saw the A-List as "just a politically correct list that has excluded many of the party's most experienced male and local candidates", and a mere 6% believed that the A-list included "the most talented candidates in the party".³⁷ These sentiments were fuelled by opposition to positive discrimination, and the limited transparency about how candidates came to be on the list. CCHQ was suspected of using the device to block right-wing candidates in favour of moderates sympathetic to David Cameron's agenda. As a consequence, A-List status proved to be far from a golden ticket for many aspirants; 82 out of 152 A-Listers failed to get selected in any constituencies.

Dissatisfaction with the A-List led CCHQ to loosen the rules early on. In a number of seats local candidates were given a 'passport' entitling them to run in their home constituency alongside A-Listers. This was supposed to be an exceptional procedure, but in the event local candidates were selected in 43 of the first 88 selections using the A-List rules. Notably, only 6 of these 43 successful local candidates were women.³⁸

David Cameron's frustration with the low take up of women candidates in particular led him to threaten the use of all-women-shortlists (AWS) at various points.³⁹ Ultimately, this nuclear option was not used. Instead, associations were offered a deal in which if they opted to use an AWS, they would be permitted to retain the traditional selection process in which members had the final say. However, none took up this offer. Instead, following changes in August 2006, most local associations opted to use one of two new selection processes: a primary meeting (discussed below) where members of the public could participate, or a 'Big Event' at which local association executives, not members, made the final choice from a shortlist which had to include at least 50% women. The gender quota was subsequently introduced for primary meetings too.

The use of shortlist quotas

Shortlist quotas subsequently became the most common form of positive action in Conservative selection processes, with a standing requirement that local associations shortlist an equal number of male and female candidates. However, the evidence suggests that this approach had a limited impact on the number of women MPs elected. This was sometimes simply because too few women came forward in the first place (the problem of "supply" that we discuss further below). In Dudley North, for instance, just eight women and 36 men applied, leading the local party to disregard the 50/50 rule. In response CCHQ suspended the selection process.⁴⁰

But there was also active resistance to the gender quota within the party. Indeed, a 2009 poll found that 91% of Conservative members were opposed to shortlist quotas.⁴¹ As a result, their introduction may even have been counter-productive, with members inclined to think that women candidates were not on shortlists on merit grounds, and therefore disinclined to select them. This view was expressed to us by a number of interviewees, and on the Conservative Home website.⁴² In Totnes, a woman candidate reported being told by the local parliamentary agent that "you don't stand a gnat's chance in hell but we need more women on the shortlist".⁴³ As it happens, the candidate in question (Sarah Wollaston) ended up being successfully selected via a primary election (discussed below), so in this case the quota did have its desired effect.

After the A-List

By the summer of 2009 the A-List rules were no longer being used, and A-List candidates competed for selection alongside candidates on the Approved List.⁴⁴ The 50% quota was the final remaining positive discrimination mechanism used across each of the different selection processes. At the height of the expenses scandal, in May 2009, David Cameron also re-opened the candidates list, making a speech encouraging people with a "belief in public service, and a desire to clean up our political system" including those with no Conservative Party background, to come forward as

candidates.⁴⁵ His appeal had an unexpected impact, with over 4000 enquiries received between May and July 2009. Of these, approximately 400 eventually took the PAB and over 150 were added to the Approved List.⁴⁶ A handful, including the writer and academic Rory Stewart, Colonel Bob Stewart and NHS doctor Daniel Poulter went on to become MPs.

With the Conservative Party facing an expectedly high number of retirements following the expenses scandal and with a general election imminent, further changes were made in July 2009 to streamline the selection process. For selections made in autumn 2009, the new rules specified that the final shortlist would be drawn up at a meeting between local association executive members and CCHQ officials. This new process was seen by some party activists as yet another centralising step at the expense of local members' rights.⁴⁷ It was also announced that any vacancies after 1 January 2010 would be filled using the party's 'by-election' rules, whereby CCHQ was able to impose a shortlist of candidates, after consultation with the local association. In some cases, CCHQ used this as an opportunity to push A-Listers who had thus far been unsuccessful. Below, we look at the East Surrey selection process as an example of this.

The A-List in practice: The East Surrey case

In East Surrey the incumbent MP Peter Ainsworth resigned in January 2010, two days after the cut-off date for the introduction of the party's by-election rules, entitling CCHQ to select a shortlist from which the local association would have to pick their candidate.

Following a sifting process led by party chairman Eric Pickles, CCHQ told the East Surrey Conservative Association (ESCA) that they would be offered a choice of just three candidates. However, after negotiations between local party officers and CCHQ it was agreed that the shortlist would be extended to six. The ESCA then submitted a list of their preferred choices to CCHQ, which included three men and three women. Of this list just two, including local councillor Sally Marks were included by CCHQ in the final list. Alongside them, CCHQ selected four London-based candidates with no previous connection with the constituency. These included one woman and three male A-Listers, one of whom was gay, one black (the eventual winner, Sam Gyimah) and one British Asian.

This shortlist, decided 10 days before the selection meeting, was greeted unfavourably by East Surrey Conservatives, who were unhappy at having their traditional autonomy over candidate selection infringed by CCHQ. There were also concerns that the candidates imposed by CCHQ were unrepresentative of the constituency and would attract less support among voters. One local councillor was quoted in a local paper asking whether these candidates who had been "parachuted in from out of the area" were "there just to tick boxes".⁴⁸

Between 120 and 150 party members, roughly 10-15% of the local association membership, attended the selection meeting. Each candidate gave a ten minute speech before questions were asked to candidates individually by the audience. The process was overseen by a moderator and representatives from CCHQ. Following several rounds of voting, the final choice was between Sally Marks and Sam Gyimah, the latter ultimately triumphing by a narrow margin.

Following the selection, however, allegations about the candidate's business ventures led to talk of the candidate being de-selected.⁴⁹ Annoyance at the imposition of the shortlist, compounded by the perception that CCHQ had not properly vetted the candidate, put the candidate's position in jeopardy. Several meetings were held between the local association and representatives from CCHQ, who persuaded the association to stick with their choice, but could not prevent the story receiving negative coverage in the national media.⁵⁰ The rancour surrounding the selection process, we were told, led to the resignation of many local party members.

The East Surrey case illustrates a number of themes that emerged across many selection processes between 2006 and 2010. Firstly, CCHQ attempted to skew the supply of candidates in favour of under-represented groups, in this case by imposing a shortlist under the by-election rules. This led to resentment at the local level, and pressure to allow local candidates also to be considered. Ultimately, however, despite the granting of two 'passports' to local candidates, it was one of the external A-Listers that won the selection.

There are a number of reasons why this happened in East Surrey and elsewhere. First, local associations were often impressed with the quality of candidates on the A-List, perhaps against their expectations. Second, despite professing to want local candidates, local members also value an MP who is likely to be a 'rising star', and may go on to hold ministerial office. And third, local candidates' existing profile can prove to be a hindrance as well as an asset, since they may have made local enemies as well as allies.⁵¹ Indeed, available evidence actually suggests that fewer than 20% of Conservative candidates between 1979 and 2005 had connections to the local constituency, compared to over 50% of Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates.⁵²

Broadening participation: The experiment with primary elections

In time, [primaries]...will have a transformative effect on our politics, taking power from the party elites and the old boy networks and giving it to the people. - David Cameron, 26 May 2009⁵³

Alongside attempts to boost female and ethnic minority representation, the Conservatives have introduced changes designed to broaden participation in the candidate selection process. One innovation was the 'Big Event' mentioned above. Introduced in spring 2006, this format gave local community representatives – non-party figures such as policemen, teachers and clergymen – the opportunity to interview shortlisted candidates and to report their findings to the selection committee. As noted, however, the final decision under this system was taken by the executive committee alone.

More radical was the introduction of primary elections, where all registered voters in a given constituency were entitled to participate in the selection of the local Conservative candidate. The party tried two different types of primary. First and far more widely used was the 'open primary' or 'primary meeting'. More akin to caucus meetings in the USA, these invited members of the public to attend and vote in the final selection meeting. The process used was identical to that shown in figure 1 (the traditional selection process) except that following the shortlisting process, a primary meeting with members of the public in attendance replaced the general meeting of party members.

Over 100 open primaries were held between 2006 and 2010,⁵⁴ having first been piloted before the 2005 election, but turnout was generally low. The party then devised an even bolder experiment, offering all registered voters in two constituencies the chance to vote by postal ballot for the Conservative candidate, an approach that had far greater success in attracting a sizeable level of public participation. Some of the issues that emerged in these different primary processes are illustrated in our case study discussions, below.

Primary meetings: The Bracknell and Beckenham cases

The Bracknell and Beckenham primaries were held in late 2009 after the incumbent MPs stepped down amidst controversy about their expenses claims.

In Bracknell, over 200 applications were received. Using the new rules introduced in summer 2009, six local association members drew up a final shortlist of seven candidates following a CV sift conducted at a meeting with CCHQ representatives. The same process was used in Beckenham, with six candidates shortlisted (though one withdrew after being selected in another seat). The involvement of CCHQ in Bracknell was controversial, with claims that local candidates including the local council leader were excluded from the shortlist.⁵⁵ In other selections using similar rules disputes over CCHQ's role in the short-listing process led to resignations by local party officers.⁵⁶

At this point in time local associations were allowed to select candidates from either the Approved List or the A-List. Nonetheless, in Bracknell, five of seven candidates were A-Listers; while in Beckenham the figure was two of six. The associations were, however, required to select a gender-balanced shortlist. In both constituencies the shortlists caused some controversy among local members. One complaint was about the lack of candidates with connections to the local area, although the eventual winner in Bracknell was in fact born 12 miles away and worked in the area as a GP.

In interviews with party officials we were told that roughly 300 people attended each of these primary meetings, and that members of the public (i.e. non-party members) accounted for slightly over half of those present. Starting in the early afternoon, each candidate was given 30 minutes to deliver a speech and answer questions from the audience. Attendees were also given printed materials prepared by each candidate. After the final speech and Q&A, the candidate was selected using an 'exhaustive ballot' electoral system, with all present entitled to vote. After members of the public had left, the selection was then subject to ratification by party members alone. In Bracknell and Beckenham, this ratification was granted without controversy, though in two other constituencies, Plymouth Sutton and Bethnal Green and Bow, the public vote was overturned by party members. In the Plymouth Sutton case, the candidate backed by voters but then vetoed by the association was a prominent local councillor and former council leader. Instead, local members installed the candidate who had stood in the seat at the two previous elections, a London-based PR firm director. This again demonstrates that a local profile can just as easily be a liability as an asset, particularly when party members take the final decision.⁵⁷

In Bracknell the final three consisted of Phillip Lee (A-List), Iain Dale (A-List) and Rory Stewart, with Lee the eventual winner. In Beckenham Colonel Bob Stewart, who was not on the A-List, was

ultimately successful. Notably, in both Bracknell and Beckenham the three women candidates were eliminated early in the process, further illustrating that gender quotas used on their own may have limited impact.

Postal primary elections: The Totnes and Gosport cases

Two postal primaries were held in the run up to the 2010 election, in Totnes in August 2009, and in Gosport four months later. These two seats were chosen by CCHQ after the incumbent MPs stepped down having been embroiled in the expenses scandal.

Totnes received 100 applications and in Gosport 190 aspirant MPs put their names forward. However, candidates did not know at this stage that the postal primary process would be used. The decision to use this system was initially unpopular with some in the local parties, who were unhappy at members losing their right to choose the next parliamentary candidate. In Totnes, the decision was taken after David Cameron personally contacted the chairperson of the local party to discuss the process.

Figure 2 shows the multi-stage process used in Totnes to whittle down the initial 100 applicants. CCHQ were involved at the initial shortlisting stage that narrowed down the choice to seven candidates. The local party then held two rounds of interviews before selecting a final three to be put to the voters. No A-List candidates were included in this final three. Instead three candidates with strong local connections, including two women, were chosen.

In Gosport a similar process was used, though the intermediate stage of interviews between the meeting with CCHQ and the final short listing by the executive council was also skipped. The final four candidates, all on the original A-List, included two women and two men.

The ballot papers in both seats were organised by the Electoral Reform Society and sent to all local voters, at an estimated cost to the party of around £40,000 per constituency.⁵⁸ Literature from each of the candidates was included with the ballot papers. In Totnes the campaign was two weeks long, whilst in Gosport the campaign lasted one week longer. The electoral system used (unlike in the primary meetings discussed above) was first past the post, and voters could cast their ballots by post or at the final hustings meeting.

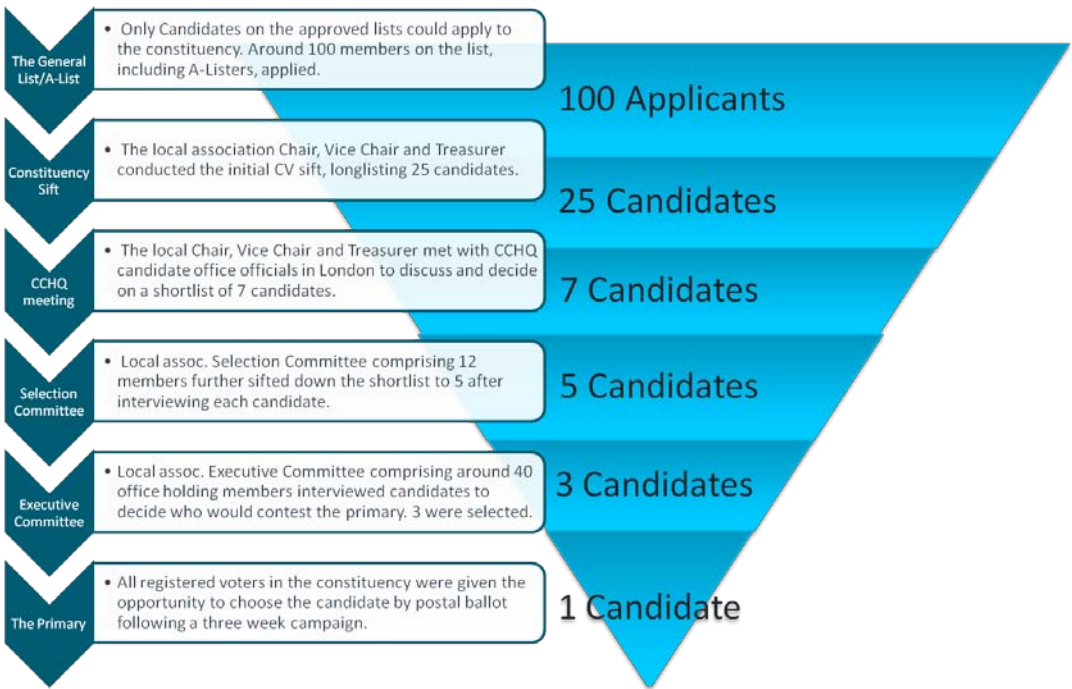
We were told that a large proportion of those who voted in Gosport did so in the first 72 hours after receiving their postal ballots, suggesting that the level of public engagement in the primary campaign was relatively limited. In Totnes, on the other hand, the reverse appeared to be the case, with many voters waiting to learn more about the candidates during the campaigning period before returning their ballots.

During the campaign both constituency associations organised several events to give the public an opportunity to meet the candidates. Candidates were restricted to spending £200 on their campaigns so had to be creative in their vote winning strategies. Many used social media. In Gosport, one candidate stood by the side of a main road holding a placard; another set up a street stall and conducted a constituency surgery in a pub. The eventual winner mobilised a team of supporters to canvass target areas in the constituency and attended the local half-marathon.⁵⁹

Both constituencies received considerable media attention, giving the candidates an unusually high level of exposure including on major national news programmes such as Newsnight. Interviewees told us that the media coverage had benefitted certain candidates, and that the winning candidates in both seats had received highly positive local media coverage. The end of the campaign was marked by a public hustings meeting. In Totnes 450 people attended, with each of the candidates making a speech followed by an open Q&A session. Those present could then vote for their preferred candidate.

In both constituencies women candidates with local connections and limited previous party political experience were ultimately successful. In Totnes, Sarah Wollaston, a local GP, comfortably defeated two more obviously political candidates: the leader of East Devon Council and the Mayor of Torbay.⁶⁰ In Gosport, the winner was Caroline Dinenge, a local businesswoman who had also run in the neighbouring seat of Portsmouth South in 2005. She defeated three London-based candidates. The turnout was 24.6% in Totnes and 17.8% in Gosport, representing significant public participation in the process.

Figure 2: The Totnes postal primary process



Lessons from the primary elections

A number of lessons can be drawn from the Conservatives’ experiments with primary meetings and postal primaries.

First, there is no evidence to suggest that primary elections, when used on their own, are a remedy for the unrepresentativeness of MPs. In fact, the evidence available suggests that primary meetings result in less diverse candidates being selected: Out of the first 70 primary meetings that were held, where the A-List rules were not imposed, only 15% of candidates selected were women. The percentage of women selected almost doubled where constituencies were required to select an A-Lister, though is still well below the 55% of A-Listers who were women.⁶¹

Second, there were only two *postal* primaries, so it is impossible to draw firm conclusions about the type of candidate this process may favour. However, it is notable that in both Totnes and Gosport a local woman ultimately triumphed over men with more of a background in professional politics. This is in line with polling evidence showing that the public at large (a) are just as happy to be represented by a female as a male MP,⁶² and (b) prioritise localness over other characteristics such as political experience.⁶³ Indeed, in Totnes, Sarah Wollaston's lack of political experience proved an asset in the context of the parliamentary expenses scandal. Caroline Dinéage's local profile and "normalness" similarly helped her against three London candidates, including one with an aristocratic background that was put under the spotlight by a local newspaper.⁶⁴ Many close to the processes believe that neither candidate would have won if the traditional selection mechanism had been used. And having come through the primary process, the new MPs (Sarah Wollaston in particular) seem to have come to view their role as a representative of the local area first and foremost.

Third, while the Totnes and Gosport cases appear to support the notion that primaries might produce a different kind of MP, the two successful candidates were reliant on central party encouragement and the 50/50 gender quota to reach the final shortlist. Without this backing, neither might have had the chance to put their case to the voters. Control of shortlisting therefore remains a crucial part of the process.

Fourth, primary meetings have a negligible impact on participation, their principal objective in the first place. On average, the Conservatives' primary meetings have been attended by 300-400 people, around 0.5% of the electorate. Furthermore, around half of these were party members in any case. Those who have attended are also unrepresentative of the electorate, typically much older and more politically active.

The requirement to give up six or seven hours out of the weekend to attend a selection meeting is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a barrier too high for most people. There is also likely to be a cultural bar, in that primary meetings are so dominated by Conservative activists that they may feel like unwelcoming places to many non-politically engaged members of the public. This high participation bar renders it unlikely that primary meetings will attract many new people into politics.

Fifth, by contrast, the two postal primaries managed to attract a reasonably high share of local voters to participate: 18% and 25% in the two constituencies. This helped give the candidates themselves a good level of name and face recognition, thanks to high media interest, though it is impossible to say whether they benefitted significantly from this at the election itself. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those who voted were generally older than average and already more

politically-active. But the turnout figures of a quarter to a fifth do show that the party managed to reach well beyond its membership base. Further, we were told that following the primary election the number of party members in Totnes increased by 10%.

Sixth, both forms of primary election cost the party significant sums of money. Primary meetings are estimated to have cost £10,000 each, while postal primaries were around four times more expensive.⁶⁵ These costs are one reason why the other parties have not followed suit. Given the far higher participation rate in postal primaries, however, these seem to offer better value for money than primary meetings despite their higher cost. On a per participant figure, postal primaries offer parties significantly more bang for their buck in terms of engaging voters directly in the political process.⁶⁶ But the cost remains prohibitively high. Without alternative sources of finance or the development of much cheaper ways to run such processes, political parties are unlikely to be able to fund many primaries next time round.

3. Candidate selection in the Labour Party

I am proud of the record in extending representation over these last 25 years, but we have not done enough yet to address under-representation in our society. Seen from the outside, Parliament is not yet fit for the 21st century. - Prime Minister Gordon Brown, 20 October 2009⁶⁷

More than in either the Conservative or Liberal Democrat parties, candidate selection in the Labour Party has been the source of controversy and internal struggles between unions, activists and parliamentary leaders. Both the left and the right of the party have sought to amend processes in pursuit of particular political objectives, whilst trade unions and activists have defended their rights in the selection process. Consequently candidate selection in the Labour Party has undergone many changes in the past 30 years. Reforms have focussed on expanding participation within the party and increasing the diversity of parliamentary candidates and MPs. Labour have also professionalised their selection process through the introduction of national candidate panels similar to the Conservative PAB, although since the 2010 election, the party may be moving back to a more localised approach.

Democratising the selection process

Labour Party candidates were traditionally chosen at the constituency level. However, the final decision used to be taken not by individual members but by the General Committee (GC) at a selection meeting where officials elected to represent local branch parties, affiliated societies and trade unions voted on behalf of their members for their preferred candidate.

A series of reforms in the early 1990s saw the direct role of trade unions in candidate selection limited, then ended altogether in 1994: individual affiliate members were subsequently required to join the Labour Party itself if they wished to participate. In 1994 the party also introduced one member one vote (OMOV) in place of voting by local branch officials for the selection of parliamentary candidates. This change was opposed by the left of the party who viewed it as an attempt by the leadership to sideline party activists represented on the GC, in favour of the more centrist membership at large.⁶⁸ The GC however retained its responsibility for drawing up a shortlist of candidates, with members gaining the right to make the final choice either in person at the final selection meeting or by postal ballot.

Suspensions that candidate selection reform was being manipulated by the leadership for its own ends grew following the 1999 controversies over selection of Labour's candidates for Mayor of London and leader of Labour in the new Welsh Assembly. In both cases, the national leadership

abandoned OMOV and instead imposed selection processes (including the old union block vote) seemingly designed to prevent the candidacy from being won by popular left-wing figures – Ken Livingstone and Rhodri Morgan. Both these men ended up in office regardless, and learning their lesson, the leadership subsequently took a more hands-off approach.

OMOV has subsequently become entrenched within the party as the favoured method for selecting candidates. But, particularly since Labour's 2010 election defeat, the debate in the party has changed again. Many prominent voices in the party, including David Miliband⁶⁹ and the New Labour pressure group Progress⁷⁰ have called for participation in candidate selection to be opened up further through the use of open primaries in which a new category of registered "party supporters" and perhaps even the general public could participate. They argue that primaries will enable the party to reconnect with lost voters and communities in areas where the party's shrinking, ageing and unrepresentative membership increasingly lack the resources to sustain Labour's presence.

The party leadership has also signalled an interest in opening up decision-making within the party to a wider group of voters. Following a consultation exercise launched shortly after Ed Miliband became party leader,⁷¹ a package of reforms was passed at the 2011 Labour Party Conference which included the creation of a registered supporters network comprising members of the public sympathetic to the Labour Party, but unwilling to join outright. This group will be involved in some party activities, but at this stage, they will not be allowed to participate in the selection of parliamentary candidates. The party acknowledged that "there is widespread support for involving supporters more formally and consistently in the party, but not at the expense of the rights of members" before going on to say that "in order to safeguard the membership offer, there should be no formal rights for Registered Supporters in CLPs [Constituency Labour Parties] or Branches, only local members and affiliates are to be involved in selections...".⁷²

Registered supporters will, on the other hand, be able to participate in future leadership elections. The initial proposal was to give registered supporters a 10% share of Labour's electoral college (currently split equally between three sections: MPs and MEPs, party members, and affiliated trade unions) and for this 10% to come solely from the union section. Following behind-the-scenes haggling, the agreement eventually struck was to grant registered supporters just 3% of votes in the first instance, to take these votes equally from the three sections, and to activate the new system only after a minimum of 50,000 supporters are registered. The registered supporters' share of votes may rise further to a maximum of 10%, subject to success in recruitment of this group. The reform eventually agreed upon therefore represents a relatively minor change in its own right, but it could possibly pave the way for more radical experiments with primaries, including in parliamentary selection and perhaps in the selection of candidates for elected mayors.

Encouraging Equality and Diversity

In the 1990's, at the same time as the party was seeking to widen participation in candidate selection to all party members, changes were introduced designed to increase the representation of women. Although shortlist quotas had been introduced in the late 1980's (with limited effect), the

key moment was the 1993 decision to introduce all-women shortlists (AWS) in 50% of all vacant or winnable seats (winnable being defined as those within a 6% swing).

The adoption of AWS marked the culmination of a long campaign by Labour women activists and groups who wanted to see more women in prominent positions in the party. In 1989 a motion had been passed ensuring equal representation for women at all levels within the party including on the National Executive Committee (NEC). The prominence of women in leadership positions guaranteed by this change was an important first step which paved the way for the success of the 1993 AWS motion. It has also helped ensure that gender equality and representation issues remain firmly on the party agenda.

The introduction of AWS was also the result of strong electoral imperatives which showed the party needed to do more to attract women voters. A majority of women voters had voted Conservative in every election since 1945 and women's support for the Conservatives in 1992 proved decisive in Labour's defeat.

The implementation of the AWS policy between 1993 and 1996 resulted in the selection of 38 women candidates, 35 of whom became MPs in 1997. Owing to Labour's landslide victory a further 30 women were also elected having been selected through other processes.⁷³ In total the number of women MPs in the Labour rose from 37 to 101 at the 1997 election.

The policy, however, was unpopular with large sections of the party who were unhappy at the rights of local constituency parties being overridden by the leadership. In 1996 two male trade unionists, Peter Jepson and Robert Dyas-Elliot, took the party to an employment tribunal claiming that the AWS policy was in breach of the Sex Discrimination Act and won their case. Labour was forced to drop AWS for the remaining selections ahead of the 1997 election.

The impact of this ruling was felt ahead of the 2001 election. Unable to use AWS the Labour Party instead introduced a requirement that local party shortlists had an equal number of men and women candidates (the approach used between 1987 and 1992). Also, where BAME candidates had applied for the seat at least one BAME candidate had to be short-listed. However these quotas produced disappointing results. Both the number and the proportion of women in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) fell slightly, and overall there was the first decrease in the number of women in parliament since 1979 (though the number of BAME MPs rose slightly, from 9 to 12). In 37 seats where the new shortlist quota rules were imposed following the retirement of a Labour MP women were selected in only four cases. This led the Fawcett Society to conclude that "without positive action, the Party members reverted to their customary unwillingness to select women for winnable seats."⁷⁴

This experience led many in the party to conclude that AWS were the only way to reach the goal of gender parity among MPs, which the NEC in 2002 declared was the "long-term objective".⁷⁵ Consequently the Labour Government passed the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act in 2002, granting political parties the freedom to use positive discrimination measures. The party promptly reintroduced AWS for the 2005 and 2010 elections.

This move was not without controversy. Notably, in Blaenau Gwent, the female Labour candidate selected via an AWS was defeated by former party activist Peter Law, who ran as an independent after being denied the right to stand for the seat. Overall however, the reintroduction of AWS achieved its intended impact, with the proportion of women MPs in the PLP rising to new highs of 27% in 2005 and then 31% in 2010, though this fell short of the declared target for the 2010 election that 40% of Labour MPs should be women.⁷⁶

One reason why the trend towards gender equality has been slower than the party leadership had hoped is that in seats where AWS were not imposed, male candidates were far more likely to be selected, as party members (whether consciously or not) compensated for the positive action elsewhere. Ahead of the 2010 election, AWS were used in 43 of 95 seats with retiring Labour MPs. But of the 52 cases where AWS were not used, women were selected in just four.⁷⁷

Yet the general conclusion from the history of AWS is that by creating an artificial demand for women candidates in Labour's safe and marginal seats, the party significantly increased the number of women MPs from a far smaller pool of women candidates overall. Between 1983 and 1992 Labour's women candidates were significantly less likely to be elected than their male counterparts: in 1992, for instance, just 27% of women PPCs became MPs, compared with 43% of men. But in the elections since the introduction of AWS, women candidates' success rate has almost exactly mirrored the chances of male PPCs. In 2010, 42% of women candidates were elected to parliament, compared to 40% of men. This demonstrates the success of AWS in helping women get selected in safe and target seats, and in creating a core of incumbent women MPs who can sustain their presence in the house over decades.

The focus on increasing gender representation has led to some concerns that the BAME issue has not been given sufficient priority. Indeed, in 2002 the national coordinator of Operation Black Vote said that "Labour's equality agenda shoves blacks and Asians to the back of the queue. Labour's AWS will be all-white women shortlists".⁷⁸ Indeed of 48 MPs elected in 1997 and 2005 via AWS, just one (Oona King) was non-white.

One option that has been floated to tackle this discrepancy is to emulate the AWS model by introducing all-BAME shortlists. Keith Vaz MP introduced a bill that would allow political parties to do just that in 2008.⁷⁹ Labour has so far declined to formally adopt this policy, although in one case – in Brent South in 2005 – a BAME shortlist (comprising two men and two women) was imposed to replace the retiring MP.⁸⁰

To defuse the criticism that AWS would privilege white women candidates, the party has also avoided using this mechanism in some safe seats with a large BAME population. But BAME candidates have also become more successful at getting selected via AWS, with four new BAME MPs elected in 2010 via this mechanism (including the first Muslim women MPs). In 2010, the total number of Labour BAME MPs rose from 13 to 16 – even while Labour as a whole lost 91 seats (see appendix). This gives Labour the highest proportion of BAME MPs of all the parties, though at 6%, the figure is still some way off the 12% of the overall population falling into this category.

Labour has tended to perform better than the other main parties in maintaining a diverse mix of MPs in terms of socioeconomic background, in large part due to the party's historic links to the trade union movement. Today, however, just 9% of Labour MPs came into politics from a background in manual labour (by contrast, 20% came from an existing career in professional politics).⁸¹ But using an alternative measure, a recent study by the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that 64% of Labour politicians (including MEPs, MSPs and Welsh Assembly Members as well as MPs) had parents classified as middle or lower class (C1, C2, D or E), compared to 47% of Lib Dems and only 29% of Conservatives.⁸² The party therefore remains notably more diverse in terms of class than the other two main parties.

The National Parliamentary Panel

In 2001 the NEC introduced a professionalised training and assessment process for aspirant candidates, with successful applicants being added to Labour's equivalent of the Tory Approved List, the National Parliamentary Panel (NPP). The new framework consisted of four-person selection panels, comprised of one NEC member, one member of the Regional Executive, an 'experienced party member' and one independent assessor. Initial applications were scored 'blind' by two of these assessors and had to achieve a fixed minimum score against a set list of criteria to progress to the next stage. Here candidates had to complete a 20-minute interview and a written test. Candidates' performance on these three stages determined whether they were admitted to the NPP, which permits them to apply to all open selections. CLPs retained the right to nominate candidates not on the NPP. However, these candidates remained subject to post-selection approval by the NEC.⁸³

Before being considered by the NPP aspirant candidates must first complete an application form explaining how they meet the job and person specification for a Member of Parliament. The most recent version of the job specification requires aspirant candidates to demonstrate Labour Party and other relevant experience, and a number of competencies including communications, campaigning, interpersonal and teamwork skills.

Since the 2010 election, however, the system was changed again, with the NPP placed in abeyance for the mean time. For early selections, the party is instead trialling a process based on the principles of self-nomination and local selection. This experiment will be reviewed after the first 26 selections, as part of a wider reconsideration of selection processes.

Levelling the playing field

A number of further changes to the selection process have recently been introduced to improve the chances of candidates from under-represented groups being selected. In order to minimise the risks of discrimination, the current rules for selection meetings specify that "No questions on financial means of support, religion, or of a racist, sexist, homophobic, or anti-disabled nature shall be permitted. Neither should there be any questions about a candidate's marital state or domestic circumstances."⁸⁴

Local party selection committees are also now required themselves to be gender-balanced and to reflect the diversity of the constituency. The entire selection process, including the longlist and shortlist stages, is overseen by an NEC representative who has a particular responsibility to “ensure that due consideration is given to applications from BAME candidates, from people with disabilities and from LGBT candidates”. There is also a standing gender balance requirement on shortlists where AWS are not used.⁸⁵

Another important change is a new limit placed on the campaign activities of shortlisted candidates as they seek the support of local members. There was previously no cap on the amount candidates could spend on their campaigns, but they are now limited to producing just three printed items. The intention of this is to level the playing field given that candidates seeking selection before the 2010 election spent as much as £4000 on their campaigns, although the average (median) spend was just £90.⁸⁶ Given that the costs of seeking candidacy are often cited as a barrier to people from under-represented groups, this reform could help at least some candidates to compete better against rivals with greater personal financial means and/or union backing.

Further to these rule changes to make the selection procedure fairer, the party this year introduced a Future Candidates Programme “to build and support a diverse pool of talented individuals from which local Labour Party members can select their candidates for the next General Election”.⁸⁷ The programme provides successful applicants with training in the role of a prospective parliamentary candidate, how to be an effective community campaigner and how to organise selection campaigns. Programme members will also be allocated a mentor to provide them with advice, guidance and coaching. This programme will help the party fulfil its commitment to develop “targeted action” to increase the representation on the NPP of women, BAME and disabled candidates and people from “manual and clerical backgrounds”.⁸⁸ Future research will be required to assess the efficacy of these recent reforms.

4. Candidate selection in the Liberal Democrats

I want the Liberal Democrats to be a party that represents the whole of Britain. We simply cannot represent modern Britain until modern Britain is represented in us.

- Nick Clegg, February 22, 2008⁸⁹

As in the other parties, local Liberal Democrat constituency parties have traditionally been responsible for selecting parliamentary candidates. Like the Conservatives, initial sifting and short listing is conducted by a selection committee chosen from among the membership, with the final selection decided by a vote of all members at a hustings meeting and via postal ballot.

The Liberal Democrats have also had an approved candidates list (in fact separate lists for the English, Scottish and Welsh 'state parties') since the party's founding in 1988. Unlike in the other two main parties, local associations have never been authorised to select candidates from outside this list. Again, like Labour and the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats have professionalised their selection procedures and have made changes to encourage more diversity among their parliamentary candidates. The Liberal Democrats have, however, been particularly reluctant to use stronger measures such as all-women shortlists.

Instead, the party has taken increasing steps to provide training, support and mentoring to candidates from under-represented groups in a strategy of "equality promotion", for instance through bodies such as the Campaign for Gender Balance. However, the Lib Dems remain the most "male and pale" of the major parties, to use leader Nick Clegg's words. At the 2010 election the number of Lib Dem women MPs actually fell, and the party remains without a single BAME MP. In response the party has introduced a new "Leadership Programme" designed to fast-track selected candidates from under-represented groups, a mechanism similar to the Conservative A-List.

While the Liberal Democrats are clearly committed to addressing its lack of diversity, the party has shown little interest in processes such as primaries that would widen participation beyond the party membership.

A lack of diversity

The party, and its predecessors, has often struggled to get women candidates into parliament: between 1951 and 1987 Shirley Williams was the only female Liberal or Alliance MP, and she held her seat for just two years following a by-election victory in 1981. Likewise, although the Liberal Party was the first to elect an ethnic minority MP (in 1892), the party and its successors has had just one more non-white MP since then (Parmjit Singh Gill, who served just a year in the House of Commons following a 2004 by-election win). Following the 2010 General Election only 7 (12%) of

the party's 57 MPs are female – a decline on the 10 women MPs (16%) elected in 2005. The party is also unrepresentative in socioeconomic terms: 39% of its MPs attended private schools (though this figure used to be significantly higher),⁹⁰ and 28% studied at Oxbridge.⁹¹

The problem of under-representation has been the cause of much internal debate; however since the Lib Dem selection rules are codified in the party constitution the party leadership has less leeway to introduce reforms than their Labour or Conservative counterparts.

In 2001, the party explicitly rejected all-women shortlists (AWS), voting against the proposal at party conference. Opposition to positive discrimination runs deep in the party due to strong adherence to the principles of local party autonomy and gender-blind meritocracy, which Tim Farron called “good liberal reasons” at a recent conference event.⁹² However, he and others also argue, the lack of safe Liberal Democrat seats and the difficulty the party often faces in holding onto seats when incumbents retire (eight Lib Dem MPs stood down in 2010 – just two of their seats were held) means that this mechanism would probably have a limited effect in any case. Indeed Tim Farron confessed that if he believed AWS would work he would be willing to suspend his “liberal sensibilities” and impose them.

The party has, however, experimented with positive action in non-Westminster elections. Notably, for the European Parliamentary elections in 1999, the party introduced a “zipping” mechanism, whereby male and female candidates were placed alternately on the regional lists of candidates, with half of all lists headed by women.⁹³ The use of this mechanism resulted in equal numbers of men and women Liberal Democrats being elected, and despite this approach not being used since, the gender balance among the Lib Dem group in Strasbourg has continued.

In addition, the party has always used quotas to ensure a degree of gender balance on local shortlists for the selection of parliamentary candidates. The relevant article of the party's constitution prescribes that: “short lists of two to four must include at least one member of each sex and short lists of five or more must include at least two members of each sex”. There is also a weaker requirement to have “due regard for the representation of ethnic minorities”.⁹⁴

However, the evidence shows that quotas have had limited effect. As we discuss below, and as is the case in the other two parties, one of the main reasons for this is that too few women and candidates from other under-represented groups put themselves forward in the first place. This underlying problem has led the party to introduce a series of reforms over the past decade, which are designed to promote equality at the various stages of the selection process as well as to ensure that effective candidates are chosen.

The candidate approval process

One area of significant reform has addressed the process by which candidates are selected for the approved lists from which all local constituencies must choose.⁹⁵ In 2008, a new process was launched, which was designed to ensure greater “clarity and transparency” in the approval process and to be “accessible to all candidates”.⁹⁶ The objective of the reform was also to ensure that those likely to be the most effective and electorally successful candidates were identified, a key factor

given the party's lack of safe seats, and the importance of personal votes to the success of Liberal Democrat candidates. Partly inspired by the Conservative PAB (indeed working with the same organisational psychologist), the Liberal Democrats created an assessment procedure that judges candidates against a standard set of competencies.⁹⁷ The assessment involves completing group and in-tray exercises, a policy and values questionnaire, and a competency interview.

There are, however, some important differences between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat assessment procedures. First, the Liberal Democrats conducted a wider consultation conducted prior to the introduction of the new system, involving all parliamentarians, approved candidates, local Chairmen and party officials. Sessions were also held at Regional and Federal Conference to get feedback from delegates, before the programme was launched.

Also, under the Liberal Democrat system, assessments are conducted across the country by trained volunteers and officers in each of the regional parties, as well as in London. The cost of undergoing the assessment is just £50 (compared to £250 for the Conservatives PAB), and the fee can be waived on request. There is also no screening interview with regional officials before candidates are allowed to take the assessment. Instead, aspirant candidates are invited to complete a self-assessment questionnaire to help them determine if they are ready to undergo the test. Information about how to approach the assessment and where to get training is provided at this stage too. Applicants must then complete an application form and provide three references, one of whom must be a Liberal Democrat office holder.⁹⁸ Candidates must also have been a party member for 12 months (except in Scotland, where 9 months suffices). According to the guidance provided to candidates, the only screening conducted by party officials involves a Google search though this is done "in order that we can discuss any potential issues, it **does not** mean that... you will not be able to proceed..." (emphasis in original).⁹⁹

The Liberal Democrats have also taken steps to link the central assessment framework to the local selection process; a consultation involving party members was used initially to determine the criteria the assessment centre would test and regional and federal conferences were used to explain and train party members in the process. Selection committees are also now required to designate their own criteria, which are mapped on to the criteria used in the assessment framework, and to create a clear marking system to decide whether to approve or reject applicants. Whilst it is too early to draw firm conclusions, it would seem that the closer linking of these processes is helping the Liberal Democrats to minimise internal party disputes about candidate selection.

The selection process

In a further step to ensure the selection process at the local level advances the objective of increasing the diversity of the parliamentary party, the compositions of selection panels are themselves now subject to rules designed to promote equality. Selection committees are required to be gender balanced and have members from different geographical areas within the constituency. They must also contain a balance between councillors, officers and members.¹⁰⁰ The composition of the selection committees, between three and seven members in size, has to be approved by an accredited Returning Officer from outside the constituency, appointed by the Regional Candidates Chair.

In priority seats all members of the selection committee receive equality and diversity training, and in all other seats at least two members must be trained. Further, only members who have undergone this training may chair selection committees. Application forms received from prospective candidates are sifted with the applicants' names removed, so that the committee is unaware of the gender of applicants until the initial grading is completed. Local parties are required to draw up their own essential criteria and to develop a marking system and minimum requirements to be used when interviewing candidates for the final shortlist. If, following the grading of all applicants, not enough candidates from either gender achieve a high enough mark to ensure that the shortlist complies with the mandated quota, then action is taken to ensure that the best candidates from the under-represented gender are given a place on the shortlist.

At the hustings the Returning Officers are required "to make it clear to the meeting any questions they will not permit ... [such as] questions which discriminate against groups of applicants such as women",¹⁰¹ with members then able to ask questions of the candidates, who are interviewed and questioned separately. Members can vote in person at the final selection meeting or by postal ballot, with the final candidate decided by the Alternative Vote (AV).

There are signs that the party's strategy is delivering results. Male and female candidates on the approved list were just as likely to be selected as candidates.¹⁰² Further, women candidates appear to get selected in a fair share of winnable seats, including in four of eight Liberal Democrat held seats where the incumbent MP was standing down in 2010. The party also stood 43 BAME candidates in 2010, representing 8% of all Lib Dem candidates (though none were elected). Again, the number of BAME candidate selected was roughly in proportion to those on the candidate list. The party also has the highest number of BAME candidates of all the parties. However, it has proved difficult to convert women and BAME candidates into MPs. Of nine new Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 2010, in seats mostly low down the target list, only two women were elected, and all four women candidates replacing a retiring Lib Dem MP were defeated.

The supply problem

The big problem for the party remains the under-supply of people from diverse backgrounds aspiring to become candidates. This imbalance means that reform of assessment and selection procedures alone cannot deliver a fully representative slate of candidates. Thus, for instance, women accounted for only 25% of candidates on the approved list for selections for the 2010 General Election (and only 21% of Liberal Democrat PPCs), in spite of the fact that women are slightly more likely to pass the party's assessment process than men (78% of women passed, compared to 71% of men), and more likely to be selected by local parties when present on the shortlist.¹⁰³

In fact, such was the scarcity of women candidates that in many seats, including some target seats, the party ended up with "all-male shortlists" despite the party's gender balance quota rules. Jo Swinson MP, former Lib Dem spokesperson on Women and Equality, has been particularly critical of this phenomenon, finding that out of a sample of 237 seats only 90 had a woman on the shortlist, indicating that in the majority of constituencies no women came forward at all.

The reasons for this pattern of under-supply of women candidates are complex, and apply to varying extents across all parties. The Women Liberal Democrats group suggested that part of the explanation might be that women are motivated less than men by “the achievement of status through public office”. Another explanation put to us was that on average women may be less likely to have the self-confidence to put themselves forward. At a seminar at the Liberal Democrat 2011 conference,¹⁰⁴ three women who had stood in 2010 emphasised this factor. Echoing points made at a similar panel at the Conservatives’ 2011 conference,¹⁰⁵ they went on to argue that “being asked” and encouraged by established party figures often made the difference between women choosing whether or not to stand. The support of the Campaign for Gender Balance was also acknowledged by one candidate as having made the difference to her.

As in all parties, the time burden of standing for election acts as a powerful deterrent to candidates from under-represented groups. The party estimates that their candidates spend an average of 20 hours per week campaigning, often alongside a full-time job. As the party recognises: “This is obviously a difficult balance for all candidates, but is extremely difficult for people with childcare responsibilities, or those on low incomes. Women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and disabled people are disproportionately likely to be affected by this.”¹⁰⁶

Candidates face high financial costs too, which inevitably contributes to a dearth of candidates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Newly elected MP Tessa Munt explained: “I sold my house in order to get elected” whilst Councillor Karen Hamilton, who was unsuccessful in her bid to become an MP, had been left seriously indebted and would not choose to stand again. One Lib Dem councillor considering becoming a candidate even told us that she had been “told to expect to spend between £50,000 and £250,000 with a timescale of 10-15 years”. Analysis by the party has also found that childcare significantly increase the costs of campaigning for parents (and especially mothers) of children under five. “Politician or good mother – there’s the choice”, according to one woman with aspirations to stand for Parliament (but serious doubts).

These are problems that affect the supply of candidates across all parties, but they may be particularly problematic for the Liberal Democrats, who argue that due to the “relative lack of funds available” their candidates “tend to contribute more to their campaign costs than may be the case in other parties”.¹⁰⁷

Equality promotion

In place of positive action, the party has tended to rely on “equality promotion” as the key to overcoming the problems discussed above. Since 2001, the party has had a Campaign for Gender Balance, tasked with increasing the number of women on the approved candidates list by providing training, mentoring and support for current and aspirant female candidates.

More recently, in 2009, the “New Generation” initiative was created along similar lines to provide targeted support, training, networking and development opportunities to candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds. Overseeing the party’s diversity agenda, a National Diversity Unit was also created within party HQ to deliver a programme designed to “widen participation and proactively engage with individuals and communities from a wide range of backgrounds”.

Nick Clegg recently conceded that his party is “too male and too pale” and that the situation was “shameful”.¹⁰⁸ To correct this, further steps to improve diversity were approved at the Liberal Democrat Party Spring Conference in March 2010.¹⁰⁹ New regional targets were set for improving the diversity of approved candidates and other party officials, with the onus placed on regional and local parties to encourage members from under-represented groups to become more active.

In an even bolder step, the party created its own lighter-touch version of the Conservatives’ A-List in October 2011. Titled the Leadership Programme, the new strategy will provide support (including financial support to cover costs such as travel and childcare) and training both before and after selection to a minimum of 30 approved candidates. 50% of places on the Leadership Programme are reserved for women, 20% for candidates from BAME backgrounds, 10% for candidates with disabilities, and 20% for other under-represented groups, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) candidates and people from self-declared low income backgrounds. Party Chairman Tim Farron endorsed the new approach, saying it would “unashamedly rig the system” to help diverse candidates get selected in winnable seats.¹¹⁰

Leadership Programme candidates will also be provided with additional advantages over other candidates through the use of a new type of shortlist quota. Where Leadership Programme candidates apply to target and held seats at least two of them must be shortlisted. Like the Conservative A-List rules, preferred candidates will be targeted at specific seats and local parties will be required to consider them. In contrast to the Conservatives’ original A List rules, however, local Liberal Democrat parties will be free to shortlist other candidates from the approved list alongside Leadership Programme members.

Another proposal being considered would require groups of seats to join together to select parliamentary candidates in clusters. The idea is that when constituencies are selecting more than one candidate at a time they are more likely to pick a diverse range of candidates. Meanwhile, members of the Women Liberal Democrats advocate the introduction of a 50/50 quota for federal party committees (there is already a one-third quota), to encourage greater women’s participation and influence within the party. This would emulate reforms adopted by Labour in the early 1990s, which were considered to have increased the voice and influence of women in the party, and to have paved the way for the party’s decision to adopt all-women shortlists in 1993.¹¹¹

Whether these steps will help the Liberal Democrats to increase the diversity of the party’s MPs cannot be judged until the next election. However, as in 2010 the biggest barrier to improvement remains the relatively low number of winnable seats for the party, as well as the unpredictability of where these will be. Ultimately, the party faces a problem of election, not selection.

Broadening participation?

Unlike Labour and the Conservatives, there has been relatively little interest within the Liberal Democrats in opening out candidate selection to the wider public, although the Conservative experiments in Totnes and Gosport did spark debate among some activists.¹¹² The Liberal Democrats remain strongly committed to internal party democracy, and there is therefore

opposition to diluting the privileges of membership by allowing outsiders to select party candidates.

Party officials also emphasised to us that as a strong grassroots campaigning organisation that prides itself on building strong links with local communities the Liberal Democrats suffer less from the problem of public disengagement than the two larger parties (though this situation may change following the party's period in government). In any case, with the Liberal Democrats having even fewer financial resources than Labour or the Conservatives primaries are currently viewed as unaffordable. Some Liberal Democrat bloggers have also made the point that the party's preferred form of electoral reform – the Single Transferable Vote – effectively provides for a primary within an election, by permitting voters to choose between different candidates from the same party.¹¹³

5. What works in candidate selection?

In this report, we have discussed the wide range of candidate selection innovations introduced across the three major parties in recent years. The parties' principal objectives have been to improve diversity and the representativeness of candidates, to increase public participation and engagement, and to ensure that candidates have the requisite competencies and skills. At the same time, parties have had to be careful not to alienate party members by excessively encroaching upon local party autonomy. Below, we draw out our general conclusions about what works and what does not in candidate selection reform in achieving these objectives, and what lessons the parties should take from recent experience.

1. There is no perfect candidate selection system; there are often tradeoffs between the different objectives that selection processes are designed to deliver.

No single candidate selection system can deliver it all: a more representative set of candidates, increased public participation, candidates with the requisite skills, and harmonious relations within the party. For instance:

- Strong control by central leaderships of the selection process (for instance through all-women shortlists or the A-List) can be an effective way to increase diversity. However, such mechanisms work by restricting the autonomy of local party members to choose their own candidates and consequently risk causing internal party discord.
- Selection processes that are open to the public can successfully promote wider participation in candidate selection but do not necessarily promote diversity, in the absence of complementary equality promotion measures.
- Toughening up assessment processes for aspirant candidates can improve the quality of candidates but may come at the expense of widening diversity. These processes do not discriminate against candidates in terms of gender or ethnicity but may limit the likelihood of people with fewer academic qualifications and from a broader range of professions being accepted.

2. Different selectorates have different priorities in the selection of candidates.

In designing a party's candidate selection system, one challenge is that the various 'selectorates' that can be involved – party leaders, party members, and the wider public – each appear to look for different qualities in prospective MPs. Party leaders seek candidates with the potential to become effective ministers and spokespeople for their party. They are also likely to prefer candidates with whom they have a personal relationship, and those whose ideological position is similar to their own. Since leaders must take a view of the electability of the party as a whole, they are also more

likely to take diversity into account. Consequently, leaders in recent years have combined more centralised and/or professionalised assessment processes with positive action mechanisms, such as all-women shortlists and the A-List, which give advantages to candidates from groups currently under-represented in the House of Commons.¹¹⁴

Local party associations, on the other hand, often emphasise the importance of finding candidates with a connection to their constituency and a proven record of party service. But in practice, the desire for local candidates is often overridden, with party activists likely to pick candidates they believe have the potential to hold ministerial office.

Meanwhile, the wider electorate, when involved in candidate selection through primary elections, appear strongly to favour local candidates and have little interest in candidates' previous party service or ideological viewpoints. The available evidence also suggests that few voters discriminate according to gender or ethnicity. For instance, a 2008 poll found that three quarters of the electorate would vote for local candidates of the opposite sex rather than non-local candidates of the same sex.¹¹⁵ The postal primaries held in Totnes and Gosport, where two local women candidates were selected, reflected this. In Totnes, Sarah Wollaston won despite lacking the political experience of her rivals and, in Gosport, Caroline Dinéage triumphed over three non-local candidates.¹¹⁶

3. Strong action by party leaders can increase the diversity of candidates and MPs

The most common objective of candidate selection reforms in recent years has been to increase the diversity of candidates and ultimately of MPs. The general lesson from these innovations is that strong action by the party leadership is the surest way to deliver a quick win in terms of diversity. Much of the recent rise in women and ethnic minority MPs in the Labour and Conservative parties is down to strong and concerted action by party leaders and other senior figures. The increasing role of central parties in shaping candidates' lists and the introduction of rules limiting the choices available to local associations have counteracted the natural tendency of local members to pick their preferred candidate irrespective of concerns about diversity across the party as a whole.

The introduction of all-women shortlists in the Labour Party following the 1992 General Election has had a dramatic impact on the number of women MPs and on the gender balance within the Labour Party. Since 1992, 87 women have become MPs after being selected through all-women shortlists. In 1992 only 14% of Labour MPs were women; in 1997 this jumped to 24%, and following the 2010 General Election women MPs now account for 31% of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The A-List of preferred candidates also resulted in a rise in women and BAME MPs in the Conservative Party. Before the 2010 General Election the Conservative Party had only two BAME MPs, however a further nine were elected in 2010, five of whom were A-Listers. The Liberal Democrat leadership has taken the most hands-off approach and, not coincidentally, has made the least progress in increasing the diversity of its MPs.

4. In the two *postal* primaries held in 2010 public participation was high. However, the use of primary *meetings* had only a limited impact on public participation in candidate selection.

Primary meetings appear to have had only a negligible impact on public participation. In general, Conservatives' primary meetings were attended by between 100 and 500 people (representing 0.5% of the local electorate at most) of whom around half were party members. By contrast the two postal primaries held in Totnes and Gosport saw participation by 25% and 18% of the constituency electorate respectively, indicating that participation reached well beyond the local party membership.

Whilst after just two cases, one cannot make broad claims about the impact postal primaries would have if used nationwide, they do appear to have the potential to engage a far larger section of the electorate in candidate selection than primary meetings. This is partly because participation is so much easier in the former than the latter, with voters needing only to return a ballot in a pre-paid envelope rather than attend a selection meeting.

Parties however should not over-estimate the extent to which primaries can encourage participation among politically disengaged voters: Those who participated in both types of primary were unrepresentative of the electorate as a whole, typically much older and more politically active. Opening up candidate selection through the use of primaries may be a necessary step to encourage greater public participation. However on their own they may not be sufficient to bring new voters into party politics or increase the number of active local party members. One further problem with primaries may be that candidates themselves may be put off from participating; postal primaries appear to be more demanding in terms of time and costs than any other selection process, since candidates must take their case to the electorate at large, not just to party members.¹¹⁷

5. Primaries used on their own will not necessarily deliver greater diversity among parliamentary candidates. The best balance can be struck by “hybrid systems” where party HQ, local activists and the public all play a role.

The available evidence suggests that primary meetings, used by the Conservatives in over 100 constituencies, actually resulted in less diverse candidates being selected. A study of the first 70 primary meetings held found that where the A-List rules were not imposed, only 15% of candidates selected were women.¹¹⁸ The candidates who did best in this process were local party figures, usually white men.

However, primary elections need not represent a barrier to diverse candidates being selected: where the A-List was imposed, the odds of a woman being successful doubled (though that still makes a success rate of just 29%).¹¹⁹ The lesson is that combining equality promotion mechanisms like the A-List with procedures that encourage public participation may help to produce positive outcomes against both these goals. Whether or not either type of primary will result in more diverse candidates being selected depends on the shortlist of candidates chosen by the local party officials, which is presented for the public vote. We believe that a better balance between the different goals of political parties and the different priorities of party selectorates can be struck through the use of “hybrid” systems in which party HQ, the local association and the wider public are all involved at different stages in the selection process.

The Totnes primary provides a good example: Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ) played an active role in encouraging the local association to include diverse and local candidates on their long-list. Local party officers and members were then able to select their preferred candidates to create the shortlist, subject to a gender balance requirement imposed by CCHQ. Then the general public were given the opportunity to make the final choice in a postal ballot. The end result was that a local woman candidate, acceptable to all three selectorates, was chosen. Hybrid systems like these may enable party HQ to ensure diverse candidates are considered, whilst giving local parties enough choice to select a shortlist with which most party members are satisfied. Similarly much controversy over all-women shortlists has dissipated because although local associations are only able to nominate a women candidate, they retain a high degree of autonomy over the rest of the selection process.

6. The cost of primaries is a major barrier to their introduction. State funding for such processes should be considered.

The biggest drawback to the use of primaries is their significant cost. Primary meetings are estimated to have cost £10,000 each, while postal primaries were around four times more expensive.¹²⁰ These high costs make it highly unlikely that the parties will adopt and expand the use of primary selections further without additional sources of funding.

One novel approach to funding primaries was used in October 2011 by the French socialist party during the selection process of its presidential candidate. This was a major exercise, with nearly ten thousand ballot boxes set up across the country and over 40 million citizens and residents entitled to take part. To recoup the costs of this process, participants were required to contribute one euro on polling day (as well as signing a statement committing to the values of the left). Over five million voters took part over the two rounds of the poll, more than paying for the exercise and marking a significant achievement in terms of public engagement. However, it would be harder to rely on this funding model in a postal ballot, and people may also be less willing to pay to take part in parliamentary selection processes where candidates may be relatively unknown (by contrast the French primary was a clash between very well-known national figures).

Consequently, a more secure method of paying for these processes might be through state funding. In the Programme for Government the Coalition proposed to do just this, committing to fund two hundred postal primaries. There is a case for public funding for processes that enhance public involvement, but rather than the government prescribing precisely the type of selection process that parties should adopt, funding should perhaps be offered for any selection processes designed with the objective of increasing public participation, subject to Electoral Commission regulation.

7. All parties have introduced more professionalised and/or centrally controlled assessment processes to improve the quality and diversity of PPCs; available evidence suggests that they operate in an objective and non-discriminatory way.

Increasing control over candidate approval procedures by the central party organisations has led to the introduction of standardised, competency-based, assessment processes, to replace more informal and variable approaches in local parties that were more prone to patronage and bias.

Research into the Conservative Party assessment centre process (the PAB) suggests that discrimination is not present at this stage of the process, where the number of women passing the PAB is roughly in proportion to the number applying.¹²¹ Equally, A-List candidates, who had to pass a PAB to reach the final list, also succeeded in many constituencies over local candidates partly as a result of their performance at local selection meetings, suggesting that the perceived quality of these candidates was enough to ensure their success over local candidates that party members might have been expected to favour. In the Liberal Democrats too, data shows that women have an equal chance of succeeding in the party's assessment centres.

8. Central control over selection mechanisms can come at the expense of the health of local parties, which may undermine public engagement in the political system further.

The downside of centralised control of selection processes is the risk of demotivating current party members. Many recent centralising reforms have been resisted by party members. At the extreme, this led to the resignation of some local Conservative Party members in East Surrey following the imposition by CCHQ of a candidate shortlist in 2010, and in Blaenau Gwent in 2005 after the Labour Party imposed an all-women shortlist on the local party. Centralisation might also put off prospective new members, since one major reason why people choose not to participate is the belief that their involvement will have little impact.¹²² Centralisation of selection processes therefore risks undermining the health of political parties as locally-rooted membership organisations. Without the presence of strong local parties able to build networks and connections with local communities, the public may become further disengaged from the political process. As the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation concluded; "The absence of a visible party presence in many areas tends to reinforce perceptions that the political parties nationally are irrelevant, or not listening."¹²³

9. More can be done to ensure that assessment procedures are understood, trusted and supported by party members. To achieve this greater transparency will be needed.

Parties should make their selection procedures more transparent: the perceived secrecy of candidate selection has fuelled suspicions that candidates have been approved for political reasons rather than on merit. In future a greater degree of information about how candidates come to be on candidates lists should help to improve understanding among party members. This should also encourage a wider range of potential candidates to put themselves forward: a lack of knowledge about how to become an MP remains a key barrier that deters people from pursuing politics as a career.¹²⁴ Parties should also do more to educate and consult with members about the process and criteria to be used, and to ensure that candidates are judged according to similar criteria at the national assessment stage and at the local selection stage.

This has been recognised as a problem in the Conservative Party in particular, and as a factor in the disputes that marred a number of selection processes before the last election. In some cases the gulf in opinion between members of different selectorates may be too large to overcome. But we believe that a greater degree of consultation and transparency within the parties about how

candidates are approved and selected will help parties to reconcile the priorities of the selectorates in most instances, resulting in a more coherent selection process.

The Liberal Democrats have taken the biggest steps to link together the central assessment and local selection stages, through consultation and alignment of criteria, and partly as a result, the party seems to have avoided the level of contention that surrounds selection procedures in the Labour and Conservative parties.

Further research may also be required to assess whether the efficacy of the parties' assessment processes, and to test the assumption that those who score highly in these tests will go on to be successful as candidates and as MPs.

10. The parties have made gender and ethnic representation a higher priority than diversity in terms of socioeconomic and professional background. The parties need to cast their net wider in their search for suitable candidates if they intend to diversify the skills and experience base of MPs.

Whilst recent reforms have succeeded in improving the gender balance and ethnic diversity of the House of Commons they have done little to increase the diversity of MPs in terms of socioeconomic and educational background. This is partly because all-women shortlists, the A-List and other positive action mechanisms can be targeted at clearly identifiable demographic groups such as women, but cannot be so easily applied towards broad and ill-defined socio-economic groups. Recent initiatives, such as the parties' respective "leadership programmes" have recognised this issue, but whether these approaches make a significant difference remains to be seen.

Further, while centralisation of the candidate assessment and approval process may be an effective way to entrench diversity and reduce the power of local patronage, it may also have the effect of narrowing the pathways into parliament. For one thing, centralisation of candidate selection is likely to benefit candidates with strong connections and networks in Westminster, rather than a strong local presence. Aspirant candidates therefore need to develop relationships in and around party HQ and Westminster to stand the greatest chance of advancement.

The characteristics of Conservative A-List candidates appears to confirm this, with a majority (61%) coming from the South of England, and an even higher proportion (89%) having worked for the party or stood as a PPC in 2005.¹²⁵ In the Labour Party too, a similar phenomenon is evident, with 34% of new MPs in 2010 having worked previously in national politics, many as advisers or researchers for Labour MPs and Ministers.¹²⁶

More rigorous assessment procedures and professionalised recruitment interviews may also accelerate the rise of the career politician class by favouring those with certain types of professional background. Parties also increasingly expect candidates to have political experience and a university degree as a prerequisite, which further narrows the field from which candidates are drawn. Indeed, only 6% of MPs newly elected in 2010 do not have an undergraduate degree.¹²⁷

Part of the problem is the contested nature of the goals the parties are seeking to achieve. Many of the competencies tested in the parties' assessment centres (communication and intellectual skills, for example) are undoubtedly those one would wish for MPs to have. However, it can be argued that being an MP is *not* a profession like any other and that Parliament ought in fact to comprise individuals with a variety of experiences and backgrounds, in order that the widest range of perspectives are brought to bear on matters of public debate. The objective of assessment processes should be to identify those with the *potential* to perform effectively as a candidate or MP and then to provide them with the necessary training, mentoring and support to fulfil this potential. Parties should not aspire, at the assessment stage, simply to identify candidates they perceive as the finished article, who are most likely to be people already working in party politics. Parties should also recognise that different constituencies and local parties may prefer different types of candidate.

11. The lack of diversity in the *supply* of aspiring parliamentary candidates remains a significant problem. Without improvement, ongoing central control will be needed to maintain the trend towards a more representative House of Commons.

All three parties have made progress in recent decades with the number of women and BAME candidates standing for Parliament rising gradually. This is partly the result of broader societal changes as well as concerted efforts by party leaders to make their parties more accepting of women and BAME candidates. However despite these efforts women still only accounted for a quarter of the three main parties' PPCs at the 2010 general election,¹²⁸ and the rise in the number women candidates has slowed, increasing by just 7% since 1992. The problem is increasingly not overt or covert discrimination within political parties, but a lack of women applying to become candidates in the first place. The same is true for other under-represented groups.

As noted, centralising measures can succeed in increasing the selection of women and BAME candidates, but they work by imposing restrictions on local party autonomy, and do not increase the diversity of the pool of candidates overall. As Nick Clegg put it to the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, strong action by party leaders can provide a "temporary, one-off shot in the arm" but will not provide a sustainable solution to the problem of an unrepresentative Parliament unless action is also taken to address the lack of supply of candidates from non-traditional backgrounds.¹²⁹

Without a more balanced supply of candidates, only continuing central control of selection processes will maintain momentum towards a fully representative House of Commons. These mechanisms are likely to continue to cause friction within the political parties due to many members' perception that artificial barriers have been placed in the path of more traditional candidates, in particular white men. In the long-run parties will therefore need to do more to encourage greater participation within the political process by people from under-represented groups.

12. Barriers to participation across all selection mechanisms contribute to the lack of candidate diversity.

All the parties have taken steps to seek to offset the barriers that deter candidates from under-represented groups. Support, training and mentoring is offered, for instance through groups such as women2win in the Conservatives, the Labour Women's Network and the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Gender Balance. All three parties have also started leadership programmes to provide training to the next generation of political leaders, with an emphasis on attracting BAME, women, disabled and candidates from lower socio-economic groups to participate. However many barriers continue to exist across all the selection mechanisms which contribute to the lack of candidates from under-represented groups.

First, the costs incurred by candidates are prohibitive; candidates' expenditure on completing the formal approval process is estimated at anything up to £1,000.¹³⁰ Campaigning for selection involves further costs in terms of accommodation, transportation and campaign material. When lost income is factored in, it is estimated that the average costs of being a PPC can run as high as £41,000 over a four-year period.¹³¹

In Labour selections before the 2010 election there was no spending limit imposed on shortlisted candidates vying to be selected (this has now changed). In safe seats, as a result, aspirant candidates in safe seats spent as much as £4,000 each. These high costs meant a large number of successful candidates had to rely on trade union support: in Labour-held seats in 2010, 71% of successful candidates received support (often financial) from unions.¹³²

It may be that only financial support will create a level playing field, for example through mechanisms such as the "Democracy Diversity Fund" recommended by the Speaker's Conference¹³³. This would help local parties support and develop talented individuals from under-represented groups and provide bursaries for candidates for whom the costs of candidacy are prohibitive. Given the particularly high costs faced by disabled candidates, there is a strong case for ring fenced funding to support participation of this group, and we welcome the government's commitment to establishing such a scheme.

Aside from cost, being a candidate entails a huge time commitment, estimated by the Liberal Democrats as 20 hours per week on average for their PPCs.¹³⁴ This can be a particular disincentive for candidates with family and childcare responsibilities, especially women, and those from lower incomes who find it more difficult to take time off work. Consequently, candidates with careers that are more flexible and accepting of political commitments or those who work in organisations linked to political parties have a distinct advantage. A statutory right to time off from work in order to participate in an election campaign (as applies to those selected for jury service, for instance), would be one way to overcome this problem.

13. Participation and representation are two sides of the same coin, with today's active participants becoming tomorrow's parliamentary candidates. Barriers to under-represented groups becoming PPCs also limit those groups' participation in politics in general.

The small pool of aspirant candidates from under-represented groups is a reflection of the far bigger issue that relatively few people from these groups participate in mainstream politics at all.

The campaign group Involve conclude from this that “participation is unequal across different sections of society, reflecting the unequal distribution of power and resources in society.”¹³⁵ This is reflected in the political parties themselves, where members and activists are disproportionately white, middle-class, affluent and educated, similar in fact to the House of Commons itself. A further example of this can be seen by looking at the makeup of local government in the UK, one of the main training and recruiting grounds for future MPs: only 31% of local councillors are women, 3% non-white and 13% aged under 45.¹³⁶

People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those with less education may also be put off by party structures and procedures, which can be complex and bureaucratic. Meanwhile local gatekeepers and elite networks may discourage others who feel they do not fit the mould, feeding a general perception of political participation as an elite activity.¹³⁷

Within the literature on public participation it appears that ‘being asked’ is one of the major reasons why people become involved in voluntary organisation, join political parties and stand for election.¹³⁸ This was confirmed by candidates we spoke to. The problem remains that only those with existing connections to the political parties are likely to be approached.

Ultimately, rebuilding party membership may be the only way to increase the supply of diverse candidates, assuming local associations can open up beyond their traditional networks. However the conundrum remains that if members’ role and influence in party decisions such as candidate selections are diminished many politically interested people will question whether joining a political party is the most worthwhile use of their time.

These are complex issues and parties should be careful not to over-estimate the benefits of candidate selection reform. The unrepresentativeness of Parliament and low public participation in the political process are symptomatic of broader societal problems for which there is no quick fix. Candidate selection reforms, however, may be more effective and less controversial if parties focus on increasing the supply of candidates from under-represented groups, instead of focussing their attentions on ‘demand-side’ restrictions alone, as well as taking greater effort to involve and consult party members in the reform process.

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- ¹⁰⁵ See: www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-events/120/camerons-candidates-primaries-the-alist-and-the-way-forward
- ¹⁰⁶ *Responses to the Speaker’s Conference*, Appendix 6: The Liberal Democrat Party’s response, at: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/449/44909.htm, para. 38.
- ¹⁰⁷ Speaker’s Conference, *Final Report*, p. 73
- ¹⁰⁸ ‘Nick Clegg: Lib Dem MPs are ‘too male and too pale’’, *The Telegraph*, 10 October 2011, at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/liberaldemocrats/8816495/Nick-Clegg-Lib-Dem-MPs-are-too-male-and-too-pale.html
- ¹⁰⁹ ‘Motion carried with amendment: Improving the Diversity of our MPs’, *Liberal Democrats*, 12 March 2011, at: www.nickclegg.com/policy_motions_detail.aspx?title=Motion_carried_with_amendment%3a_Improving_the_Diversity_of_our_MPs_&pPK=b8eb68e8-abba-4881-a6c7-3c0e6a764972
- ¹¹⁰ Tim Farron MP made this statement at the Liberal Democrat Party fringe event organised by the Institute for Government and Policy Exchange entitled, ‘Opening up the Party: How to encourage diversity through candidate selection’ held on 17 September 2011.
- ¹¹¹ Russell et al, *Women’s Political Participation in the UK*, p. 21
- ¹¹² Stephen Tall, ‘Open primaries: should the Lib Dems adopt the ‘Totnes model?’’, Lib Dem Voice blog, 4 August 2009, at: www.libdemvoice.org/open-primaries-should-the-lib-dems-adopt-the-totnes-model-15820.html
- ¹¹³ James Graham, ‘Should we have primaries in Britain?’’, Lib Dem Voice blog, 8 January 2008, at: www.libdemvoice.org/should-we-have-primaries-in-britain-1931.html
- ¹¹⁴ For a discussion of the electoral incentives behind Labour’s adoption of All-women shortlists in 1993 see: Squires, *The Implementation of Gender Quotas in Britain*, pp. 4-7.
- ¹¹⁵ Less than a tenth of those polled preferred the latter option: Childs and Cowley, ‘The Politics of Local Presence’, p. 5.
- ¹¹⁶ One participating candidate stated that the most frequently asked question by voters was, ‘Are you local?’. See: McSweeney, ‘Primary Elections in Britain’, p. 540.
- ¹¹⁷ One candidate we spoke to described the primary campaign process as “arduous, hellish”.
- ¹¹⁸ With thanks to Robert McIlveen for this data.
- ¹¹⁹ With thanks to Robert McIlveen for this data.
- ¹²⁰ See: Gay and Jones, *Candidate Selection – Primaries*, p. 4.
- ¹²¹ Silvester and Dykes, ‘Selecting Political Candidates’, pp. 11-25.
- ¹²² Involve, *Understanding participation: A Literature Review*, December 2009, p. 8, available at: www.involve.org.uk/understanding-participation-a-literature-review
- ¹²³ Speaker’s Conference, *Final Report*, p. 33.
- ¹²⁴ See: Speaker’s Conference, *Final Report*, chapter 2: Citizenship and Engagement, pp. 22-30.
- ¹²⁵ ‘Newsnight reveals social background of Cameron’s Conservative A-List’, *BBC Newsnight*, 3 October 2006, at: www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2006/10_october/03/newsnight.shtml
- ¹²⁶ Durose et al, *Pathways to Politics*, p. 33.
- ¹²⁷ Sutton Trust, *The Educational Backgrounds of Members of Parliament in 2010*, p. 2.
- ¹²⁸ Byron Criddle, ‘More Diverse, Yet More Uniform’, p. 313.
- ¹²⁹ Speaker’s Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), *Examination of Witness* (Questions 460-469), House of Commons, HC 239-I, The Stationery Office Ltd, February 2010, available at: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/239/9102004.htm
- ¹³⁰ Speaker’s Conference, *Final Report*, p. 46.
- ¹³¹ Speaker’s Conference, *Final Report*, pp. 71-72.
- ¹³² Straw and Ajumogobia, *Labour’s selection process*, pp. 5-7.
- ¹³³ Speaker’s Conference, *Final Report*, p. 74.
- ¹³⁴ Speaker’s Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), *First Special Report*, House of Commons, HC 239-I, The Stationery Office Ltd, January 2010, p. 46, available at: www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/speakers-conference-on-parliamentary-representation/publications

¹³⁵ Involve, *Understanding participation*, p. 27.

¹³⁶ Durose et al, *Pathways to Politics*, p. 50.

¹³⁷ For a full discussion of what factors encourage and discourage public participation see: Involve, *Understanding participation*, Chapter 4, pp. 21-33.

¹³⁸ Involve, *Understanding participation*, p. 29.

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