Original Article

Parliamentary candidate selection in the Conservative Party: The meaning of reform for party members and membership parties

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Abstract Parliamentary candidate selection reform was fundamental to the Conservative Party's organisational renewal, but local autonomy was always a potential obstacle. In the context of a falling membership, the leadership took action. Hence, this article addresses three questions. Firstly, it examines how power was utilised for the purpose of dismantling local autonomy in parliamentary candidate selection. Secondly, it discusses the implications of reform for party members. Thirdly, it assesses what the research findings mean for the notion of 'membership party' and the models that purport to explain party organisation. A qualitative research design was adopted that focused upon local activists and officials. The conclusion points towards a network approach to party organisation that projects local identity as the emerging organisational model. The research also provides an insight into how the Conservative Party leadership is managing its declining membership base.

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Introduction

Parliamentary candidate selection is the critical test of intra-party democracy. Ranney (1965, p. 10) asserted that it was central to battles concerning leadership and policy. Candidates, and ultimately MPs, determined the programme and image promoted to voters, provided the pool from which leaders and government ministers were selected and reflected the capacity for cohesive government. Importantly, Schattschneider (1942, p. 64) famously argued that 'the nature of the nominating procedure determines the nature of the party; he who can make nominations is the owner of the party'. However, Gallagher (1988, p. 277) maintained that no one group can achieve ownership or total control; candidate selection instead reflected how power was distributed rather than

determining it. Consequently, the extent to which it was centralised, and hence that the leadership was able to determine the rules and outcomes, was crucial. Such centralisation was typically apparent in larger parties owing to their complexity, hierarchy and bureaucracy (Lundell, 2004). Nevertheless, it needs to be considered in relation to the trend towards greater inclusiveness. Katz (2001, p. 277) suggested that a leadership strategy of broadening the number of participants might portray greater democracy while betraying the reality. This emulated Mair's (1994, p. 17) argument that 'democratisation on paper may actually co-exist with powerful elite influence in practice'. Mikulska and Scarrow (2010) thus added that enhanced inclusiveness has not necessarily been accompanied by decentralisation, but rather, in some cases, by stronger central veto powers and pre-selection mechanisms. Moreover, tools with inclusive connotations, such as 'open primary', might in practice reflect centralisation rather than inclusiveness. However, they found that greater inclusiveness could facilitate a closer alignment between the outlooks of candidates and the electorate.

As successful candidates represented individual constituencies, they performed an important linkage between the national and local context. For party members, therefore, given their limited influence over policy, the ability to select their own parliamentary candidate was jealously guarded, and indeed, could be regarded as a primary source of leverage (Shaw, 2001, p. 35). However, although the power of selection was formally ascribed to local parties, they were typically constrained by formal controls imposed by national party committees (Ranney, 1965, pp. 269–270). Conflict was thus inevitable. Katz (2001) suggested that different procedures would favour certain candidates or types of candidates. Central influence was likely in the pre-screening of applicants and post-selection approval, and possibly through the pre-emption of the decision, all to the detriment of local parties. Moreover, candidate selection would reflect conflict among the groups and interests present within the party, as well as the tension between centralisation and local autonomy. Hence, how committed activists would respond to candidate selection reform imposed by the party centre was a key question, particularly if local interests were significantly affected. In Hirschman's (1970) terms, activists had the choices of exit, voice and loyalty. A weakening or removal of candidate selection responsibilities could lead to exit, either through leaving the party or ceasing to campaign. However, this may not necessarily occur, as the action must be credible; for example, through the availability of an alternative political vehicle. Instead, loyalty to the party could encourage individuals to remain inside and fight through efforts to enhance voice. This, in turn, would depend upon member beliefs concerning central responsiveness to, for example, vocal threats to cease activity or leave the party.

Objectives and Methodology

In the Conservative Party, there was a growing vapidly locally. Membership was just 247 000 in 2006¹; this being compounded by a process of de-energisation in

important campaign activities such as canvassing and meetings (Whiteley *et al.*, 1994; Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). Scarrow (2000, pp. 100–101) thus questioned how party organisations would manage their declining membership base. She argued that falling member numbers did not necessarily negate their contribution to electoral success, suggesting instead that those remaining might become even more important, as leaders valued their continuing support. In this context, and in relation to the reform of local parliamentary candidate selection procedures, this article pursues three objectives. Firstly, it seeks to explain how power was utilised within the Conservative Party for the purpose of dismantling local autonomy in candidate selection. Secondly, the research findings are employed to assess the implications of candidate selection reform for party members. Thirdly, the findings are further employed to evaluate the future of the ‘membership party’ and the prominent academic models that purport to explain party organisation. The conclusion will stress that a network approach to party organisation that projects local identity is the emerging organisational model.

Activists are believed to have an innate desire to influence leadership, policy and candidate selection decisions, such that academic scholars typically view them as actors to be accommodated by the leadership. Therefore, they usually adopt a top-down approach to their analysis. By contrast, this article adopts a bottom-up research design in order to gauge the impact of central initiatives upon local activists. It examines their attitudes and behaviour through a qualitative approach that involved semi-structured interviews with local participants. The interviewees were associated with four marginal constituencies that were crucial to the party’s attempt to return to government at the 2010 general election. They were chosen because in these constituencies there would likely be tensions reflecting national and local interests concerning both the process and the outcome of the candidate selections, such that central professionals would seek to exert pressure. Diversity was essential for purposes of enhancing the credibility of the data. The constituencies therefore possessed northern and southern, urban and rural, and Labour- and Liberal Democrat-held characteristics. Moreover, different types of constituency in different parts of the country and with different political opponents would elicit perspectives from activists confronted with different political contexts: this would contribute to enhancing the generalisability of the data.

The Labour-held constituencies were Derby North and High Peak. Derby North forms part of the city of Derby and contains a variety of heavy and light industries. It has a mixed socio-cultural profile and was thus important for the Conservative Party’s aim of embracing all types of voter. High Peak is a rural constituency located within north Derbyshire, such that it tends to lean towards Manchester rather than the East Midlands. Boasting the Peak District, it is known for tourism as well as agriculture, and was historically a safe Conservative seat. The Liberal Democrat-held constituencies were Cheltenham, and Somerton and Frome. Cheltenham, also a formerly safe seat, is a prominent south west market town containing large service companies, defence and electronics concerns, but also the government communications

headquarters (GCHQ); it is especially notable for its race course and affluent community. Finally, Somerton and Frome is the largest constituency in England. It is located in the south west of England and is largely agricultural in nature, but it also possesses a large number of retired people and hence to both party members and professionals should be a naturally Conservative seat. Frome, however, acts as a commuter town for places such as Bath. Table 1 provides electoral information for each constituency.

The research interviews were conducted with local officers and activists, agents, area chairmen, and regional professionals. Forty-three interviews were conducted: the breakdown is shown in Table 2 along with the membership numbers for each constituency. Activists are defined as members who devote some time to the party each month, but where pertinent reference is made to local officers who were activists serving in the constituency association officer team, as distinct from those who were either no longer officers or had never assumed an officer position (Low, 2014a). All of the activists interviewed were, nonetheless, highly committed and active members of their local associations. Regional professionals were skilled political appointees of Conservative Campaign Headquarters in London, but located in regional offices and campaign centres. These professionals, along with local agents, were able to offer alternative or counter perspectives as well as corroborating the views of activists. Along with some experienced local officers, they were also able to express the views of the central political professionals. The latter are referred to as 'the centre' in this article. The empirical work was conducted during 2007 when the party was still lagging politically behind the Labour Party. Nevertheless, the opinions and behaviour of sub-national interviewees presented here provide a valuable insight into the dynamics of organisational life within the Conservative Party and hence how the critical issue of parliamentary candidate selection decision-making is evolving in the modern political context. They also provide an insight into how the party leadership is managing the decline in party membership numbers and activism rates. Therefore, the data remain appropriate for the purpose of addressing issues of power distribution, membership and organisational structure. Regarding candidate selection specifically, it was perhaps inevitable that many activists would hold a negative, or at least a sceptical, position towards the leadership's reforms, but it is believed that their views highlight a number of important perspectives that will address the paper's objectives.

Candidate Selection Reform in the Conservative Party

The ingrained nature of candidate selection within the Conservative Party had led Denver (1988, p. 69) to assert that 'there are unlikely to be any successful attempts to increase central influence ... any diminution of local control of candidate selection would be strenuously resisted by party members'. However, Layton-Henry (1976, pp. 400–402) had long ago noted a tacit intra-party consensus reflecting the party's

Table 1: Constituency information*1. Labour and Liberal Democrat majorities at the 2005 general election*

	<i>Votes</i>	<i>% of the Vote</i>
Cheltenham	2303	5.28
Derby North	3757	8.57
High Peak	735	1.47
Somerton & Frome	812	1.51

2. Conservative candidates selected for the 2010 general election

Cheltenham	Mark Coote
Derby North	Stephen Mold
Mid Derbyshire	Pauline Latham
High Peak	Andrew Bingham
Somerton & Frome	Annunziata Rees-Mogg

3. Swing to the Conservatives at the 2010 general election

	<i>Electorate</i>	<i>Swing to Conservatives</i>	<i>Result</i>
Cheltenham	78 998	-4.32%	Liberal Democrat Hold
Derby North	71 484	+7.39%	Labour Hold
High Peak	71 973	+6.54%	Conservative Gain
Somerton & Frome	81 548	-0.94%	Liberal Democrat Hold

4. Number of Conservative councillors in 2007

	<i>Pre-2007 election</i>	<i>2007 election</i>	<i>Full council</i>
Cheltenham	17	No election	40
Derby	11	12	51
High Peak	10	24	43
Mendip (Somerton & Frome)	27	24	47
South Somerset (Somerton & Frome)	15	17	60

Sources: *The Times* 7 May 2005 and 8 May 2010; BBC.co.uk website.

aims and values and, considering candidate selection, had asserted that a relapse would likely induce the 'development of formal procedures which would be more strictly enforced'. The need for greater inclusiveness concerning both candidates and selectorate meant that this now occurred. The party leadership had gradually increased its influence over candidate selection through mechanisms such as the Parliamentary Assessment Board and the candidate 'Approved List', so that the national process became professionalised to meet evolving electoral needs. Initiatives, however, consistently stopped short of curtailing local choice; local procedures had barely changed in decades. Ranney (1965) observed that local selection

Table 2: Interview information

1. Membership 2005 and number of interviewees

	<i>Membership</i>	<i>Interviewees</i>
Cheltenham	789	8
Derby (North & South)	458	8
High Peak	555	8
Somerton & Frome	1149	9

2. Breakdown of interview respondents

Local Officer Team Members	23
Prominent Activists	10
Agents	2
Area Chairs	4
Regional Officials	4

committees had the greatest influence over candidate selection decisions and that they were often dominated by one or two officers. A short list of three or four candidates was typically produced, with anyone deemed unacceptable omitted. Hence, there was small group decision making at a key stage in the process, potentially leading to a biased outcome. The problem was highlighted by the Commission on Candidate Selection's conclusion that party procedures, linked to the decline in member numbers and their socio-economic background, were responsible for producing a constricted base of candidates (Riddell, 2003, p. 5).

Mikulska and Scarrow (2010) noted three key factors underpinning a drive for greater inclusiveness in candidate selection. Firstly, the decline in popular support for both parties and party elites meant that there was a need to reconnect with grass-root supporters and for this to be seen to be taking place. Secondly, more open candidate selection rules would likely produce different results, as, for example, external party supporters might have different interests to party activists. In the Conservative Party, the local custom of meritocracy had left the party looking stale. This often meant local parties selecting the most appropriate candidate in their terms: white, middle-aged, middle-class men. However, the relative lack of women, black and ethnic minority candidates subjected the party to attack by its political opponents. The problem retained both supply and demand dimensions. In single member plurality electoral systems, local parties tended to seek (demand) the 'best' candidate rather than a more 'balanced ticket' achievable under proportionality; women suffered accordingly (Curtice and Steed, 2000, p. 194). This was underscored by a Fawcett Society report, which argued that Britain's political parties were 'institutionally sexist'; they did not want women. The supply of high-quality women reflected low demand because few would try (Shepherd-Robinson and Lovenduski, 2002).

It conceived three strategies: rhetoric by senior politicians towards members; positive action including training, voluntary targets, shortlist guarantees and encouragement to come forward; and positive discrimination, making selection mandatory. The latter was enshrined in the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which permitted positive discrimination measures in favour of women, but without compulsion. Nevertheless, Lovenduski (1997, p. 712) had earlier asserted that a change of party culture would be needed within the Conservative Party to address the lack of ethos for women. Conservative attitudes remained mixed, caught between the traditional family role and the need to attract women voters and party activists (Campbell *et al.*, 2006, p. 19). Similarly, the dearth of black and ethnic minorities reflected a wider concern about the party's willingness to promote a more inclusive brand of Conservatism (Sagger, 2001, p. 196).

The third factor was electoral competitiveness. There was a political expediency to address underrepresentation: for example, women were reportedly 'less satisfied with government, less likely to support the Conservatives and more disaffected by politics' (Campbell and Lovenduski, 2005, p. 839). Moreover, following a series of general election defeats, there was a need for competitive renewal to at least match opponents' processes. Heeding the success of the Labour Party, the party leadership became converted to the notion that success required a strong centre with a unitary command structure, which directed the resources of the party (Gould, 1998, p. 240). This meant enhanced professionalism in candidate selection, both nationally and locally, consistent with a political marketing outlook that all aspects of the political product required attention (Lees-Marshment, 2004, p. 393). Innovation in candidate selection had come primarily from Labour, with initiatives such as mandatory reselection and all-women shortlists; the Conservative Party by contrast had merely tinkered with existing rules (Criddle, 2002, 2005). The new party leader, David Cameron, was thus attuned to reform. He recognised that the party's electoral recovery depended upon it, asserting that:

I plan to change the face of the Conservative Party by changing the faces of the Conservative Party ... to create effective policy, we must involve those who are affected by it ... my plan for positive action is based on clear principles: 'guaranteeing' more women and ethnic minorities are selected in winnable seats ... and preserving the autonomy that constituencies have to select the candidate that is best for them.²

Candidate selection reform became central to his quest to show that the party had changed and was returning to the centre ground of British politics. However, the localities retained the capacity to frustrate the leadership's renewal strategy. Local autonomy – the right of local self-determination – was therefore deemed to require modification.

The party constitution that resulted from *The Fresh Future* organisational reform programme (Conservative Party, 1998) provided Cameron with the authority for

change. This had removed the legal autonomy of local associations. Furthermore, it had invested a central board with power over organisational matters. A revised set of largely mandatory rules was issued and associations were subjected to minimum performance criteria underpinned by the threat of 'supported status' for the recalcitrant. Candidate selection procedures indicated continuing local autonomy, but were couched in sufficiently vague terms to permit the leadership to strategically professionalise them in order to facilitate a greater alignment of national and local interests.

Cameron launched a two-pronged attack on the local constituency parties in order to achieve his strategic aim regarding women and ethnic minority candidates: a new priority list of centrally designated candidates and changes to local procedures. The former imitated Andrew Lansley's paper *Do the Right Thing* (2002). This had recommended an 'A-list' of 100 talented candidates, containing equal numbers of men and women and some ethnic minorities, from which associations in winnable seats would be encouraged to select. Cameron, though, went further, by stating that they would be expected to select from it, although exceptionally, local candidates could be considered. Hence, by tackling local demand, he demonstrated that exercising his authority over the perceived reactionary activists was integral to his leadership approach. At the launch of the priority list, the 50 per cent women and 10 per cent ethnic minority was all that CCHQ promoted; other forms of candidate diversity were dismissed and financial exclusion ignored.³ Elites from the professional and business classes still dominated, to the neglect of those with public and voluntary sector experience. The strategy inferred that the electorate viewed inclusiveness as being more important than elitism; the former was visual, the latter less so.

The second initiative was the reform of local procedures and this went through three incarnations. The first, announced in April 2006, introduced fundamental change and demonstrated that Cameron was no respecter of tradition. Initially, for each candidate, the local selection committee interview would involve a 10 min presentation followed by 15–20 min of questions, some of which would be set in advance. The committee would select at least three, but ideally 4–6, candidates to be interviewed by the executive council. In addition, associations were obliged to conduct a community consultation process or hold a primary; in practice, however, those holding a primary would also typically consult community representatives. The community representatives' involvement came after the selection committee. Representatives would interview and score candidates on a range of skills to provide the executive council with an overall impression of suitability. The executive council would then produce a shortlist of 2–4 candidates for the special general meeting of members or the primary; in the latter, external supporters were embraced. At this final stage, the set speech was abolished and instead each candidate was interviewed separately by an independent moderator, preferably a journalist, community leader or professional. This would be followed by questions from the floor, permitting an exploration of the previous answers given by candidates. Voting would finally take place by secret ballot.⁴

Unimpressed with progress,⁵ Cameron made further changes in August 2006. Target constituencies with less than 300 members would now be expected to employ an open primary. Associations with a greater number of members could do likewise, but where this was not used, the full membership would select a shortlist of four, of which at least two must be women, through a 'big event'; the final selection would then be made by the executive council after rigorous and professional job interviews. Finally, any association opting for an all-women shortlist could use the existing arrangements.⁶ As a result, this option became the sole method whereby ordinary members only retained the final decision, a clear challenge to local party democracy, and ultimately to local autonomy. In practice, the leadership preference for the use of primaries had been strengthened. These guidelines came closest to delivering Cameron's objectives,⁷ so it was surprising that his January 2007 review brought a partial retraction. In the third guidelines, Conservative-held and target seats could now choose from the full approved list, but at each stage of the process at least 50 per cent of candidates should be women. The rules on women were thus tightened, as associations using a primary had not been obliged to have a gender balance, or indeed any women. Primaries were also believed to favour local white men, often councillors.⁸ Hence, while reform was partially rolled back, local parties were still restricted to a choice of process from a set menu.

The four constituencies involved in the research had different selections. High Peak was able to re-select its previous candidate prior to Cameron's reforms being imposed on the constituencies. Somerton and Frome commenced their selection process under the April 2006 guidelines but were obliged to complete it using the August 2006 ones; as a result, they had a primary. Cheltenham used the August 2006 guidelines, with both community representatives and a primary. Neither constituency used the 'big event'. Finally, at the time of the research Derby North had not fully completed its selection process. However, this constituency was part of an enlarged local association which incorporated the new constituency of Mid Derbyshire; this selection took place under the April 2006 guidelines culminating in a special general meeting of members, and hence it will also be referred to. In all four constituencies activists held very firm views about the changes to the party's parliamentary candidate selection process.

Party Organisation

Local activists have traditionally been conceived in support terms within the Conservative Party, McKenzie asserting that 'it would be difficult to envisage a more tight-knit system of oligarchic control of the affairs of a political party' (1963, p. 291). This was consistent with the elite model of democracy: parliamentary government represented a 'vertical chain of responsibility' from the cabinet to the electorate; accountability was to the latter, rather than to any extra-parliamentary

body (*ibid.*, pp. 645–647). McKenzie was influenced by Michels’ maxim ‘who says organisation, says oligarchy’, power being concentrated at the apex of parties (1915/1962, p. 365). Leaders were formally and technically positioned to coordinate activities through their superior knowledge, control over communication channels and skills in the art of politics (Lipset, 1962, pp. 16–17). Moreover, psychologically, members deferred to them for direction and guidance.

Oligarchy is reflected in the models that address party organisation. Duverger (1959) identified cadre and mass parties. In the cadre, local elites employed their status, campaign skills and access to finance to secure election victory; quality of membership was preferred to people numbers. Mass parties, by contrast, engaged members for political education and campaign funds. Epstein (1967) challenged his view that mass parties would become ascendant, by alluding to cogent counter-organisational features such as new campaign techniques, professional skills and large monetary contributions. Consequently, a British constituency party would comprise 50–100 active members; this meant a flexible organisation capable of accommodating ‘electoral peaks’, and which deferred politically to the leadership (Maor, 1997, p. 106). This was further underpinned by the need for responsiveness to changes in the political environment. Here, Kirchheimer (1966) proposed that parties would adapt their policy making to a ‘catch-all’ position. This encapsulated not just a slackening of ideological commitment, but also a strengthening of the party leadership and a downgrading of party members who he regarded as a ‘historical relic’ with a capacity to undermine the catch-all image. Panebianco’s (1988) ‘electoral-professional’ model represented a further extension. This highlighted personalised leadership, which, together with policy activities, were better managed by professional management than by amateurish party bureaucrats. Power relationships were increasingly skewed towards the leadership; the inference was that modern parties should be controlled and directed from the top. He did, however, acknowledge that parties were unlikely to assume a pure electoral-professional form, as they possessed different legacies. Approximation depended upon the ability of members to find equivalent political benefits elsewhere and the degree of control that leaders and members possessed over ‘zones of uncertainty’, which included experiential political competency, formal party rules and the process of candidate recruitment.

The models of Kirchheimer and Panebianco reflected a party’s relationship with society. Katz and Mair (1995) argued that this ignored the association with the state. Political developments such as the decline of membership activity and the growth of single-issue groups were driving parties to utilise resources such as state subsidies and privileged access to the media. From these trends, they derived a cartel model, which contained the organisational characteristics of elite ascendancy and stratararchy. Leadership power was strengthened through control of the key party committees at the national level and an ability to appeal directly to an enfranchised passive membership. However, Mair (1994) also pointed to a ‘process of mutual and growing autonomy’, in which relationships were more stratarchic, each level of the party becoming more autonomous

of the others. The activist contribution was recognised through a need for autonomous local parties to manage local issues and to encourage members and supporters.

Carty's (2004) 'franchise party' model acknowledged Mair. It recognised interdependence between a party's various units, thereby reconciling stratarchy and coordination. The model enshrined a fixed contract, depicted as a 'stratarchical bargain'. The centre's responsibility was for overall product strategy, organisational management and finance, while local parties assumed the more basic tasks of product delivery, local organisation and campaign feedback; in this, they were supported by intermediary and specialist units. Each would work relatively independently, but the centre would have the authority to intervene against poorly performing constituency parties. Carty regarded the Conservative Party's formal constitution as a vivid realisation, as it delineated detailed responsibilities. Moreover, the consultation document *A 21st Century Party* explicitly outlined proposals to convert local associations into franchises, seemingly based upon his work (Conservative Party, 2005).⁹ However, Carty adopted the perspective of the franchisor; there was no consideration of the viewpoints, and hence the willingness, of the franchisees, the voluntary membership, to embrace the concept. It was difficult to envisage restrictive and binding contracts providing much incentive for membership.

Carty's model did infer some acknowledgement of the important geographical dimension of British politics. Recognising the salient characteristic of constituency diversity, contemporary scholars have shown that the local contribution can have a significant impact on electoral outcomes (Whiteley *et al.*, 1994; Johnston and Pattie, 1995, 2003; Denver *et al.*, 1998, 2002; Whiteley and Seyd, 2003; Pattie and Johnston, 2010; Fisher *et al.*, 2011). However, Denver *et al.* (2003) found that effective local campaigning required strong central direction to align national and local campaigns. Moreover, Fisher *et al.* (2006) highlighted the decisive role of the central organisation in modernising the Labour Party's campaigning in marginal constituencies. In the Conservative Party, modernisation was slow, but intensified after 2005 (Pattie and Johnston, 2010).

Fisher and Denver (2009) stressed activities, rather than the members, as being critical, but concluded that committed activists were still required to do the basic campaign work and maintain a local presence. Scarrow (1994, pp. 46–49) noted several organisational benefits of members: providing financial assistance through subscriptions and fundraising; contributing valuable ideas for policies; engaging in the electoral tasks of canvassing and leafleting; offering themselves as candidates at both national and local levels; multiplying votes through everyday contacts; and loyally voting themselves. Members thus performed the function of 'ambassadors' in the community. Nevertheless, they also incurred the costs of recruitment, maintaining offices, establishing representative committees, and organising meetings and conferences (Maor, 1997, p. 96). Members could be 'a source of demands of both a policy and a personal nature' (Katz, 1990, p. 152). Active members, particularly, were deemed to be ideologically motivated, such that they could hinder leaders wishing to remain flexible to accommodate voter needs; their role in selecting candidates

underlined this (Scarrow, 1994, p. 45). This argument was based upon May's (1973) 'law of curvilinear disparity', which suggested that middle-level elites or activists were likely to be the most radical and policy driven of the membership. However, leaders have been found to be more radical than followers to give their parties competitive differentiation, although the latter might adopt more extreme positions on selected issues (Pierre, 1986; Norris, 1995). Nevertheless, perceptions are crucial: it would suit leadership ambitions and strategies if the activist layer were perceived to be the most radical. It would provide an underlying dimension to the Conservative Party leadership's desire to dismantle local autonomy in candidate selection.

Candidate Selection Reform: Evidence from the Constituencies

The dismantling of local autonomy in parliamentary candidate selection was accomplished through changes to candidate selection strategy and procedures. However, a reinterpretation of local fitness for purpose and an increasingly formal approach to party management were also significant factors for realising this aim.

Candidate selection strategy

Candidate selection strategy was wrapped in the party leadership's right of political determination, underpinned by the constitution. Cameron sought change and was prepared to exercise the authority accordingly. The selection at High Peak provided a good illustration of the problems he faced. Before his accession to the leadership, the association had been able to fast-track its previous losing candidate. The selection was undertaken by a panel of officers, councillors and local elites through invitation from the chairman, rather than any formal process, and was expedited, with support from a regional professional being crucial. Nevertheless, there were allegations of nepotism and suggestions that the reselection was the equivalent of Labour heirs-apparent.¹⁰ The speed and approach caused some irritation, one local officer observing that 'quite a lot of pressure was put on people' to acquiesce. Early selection was also attempted in Somerton and Frome, but here the presence of Clive Allen, the losing candidate at the previous general election, split the association, with activists holding equivocal views. Importantly, the centre exploited this division. There was a relative lack of consultation with the association, an officer noting that 'they claimed to have consulted widely, yet they only called the new chairman'. Moreover, the centre's subsequent abrupt decision making to nullify the reselection indicated that it was solely concerned with its strategic candidate priority; any possibility of lasting damage to the association's campaigning capability from the conflict was not a consideration. Some officers and activists alluded to the association's refusal to sell its former office property, located in the town of

Wincanton, to release campaign funds as influencing the centre's stance. There was no explicit evidence of this, but it was strongly implied.

Fundamentally, reform was realised through the separation of formulation and implementation of candidate selection strategy; the centre attended to the former, the localities the latter. The introduction of the priority list of candidates, pre-selected by the centre, was a primary manifestation, local parties in winnable seats being expected to select from it. This approach resulted in a number of local concerns. Firstly, activists were irritated by, and in some cases appalled at, the 'filling of quotas' regarding women and ethnic minority candidates, as they undermined their ability to select the 'right' candidate to satisfy unique constituency characteristics. Pointedly, one officer asserted that 'there should be more women and in the right locality there should be more ethnic minority candidates, but not just across the board because each constituency knows what is suitable for them'. Similarly, there was disquiet over the leadership's apparent disinclination to seek candidates with experience in local politics; perceptions of elite queue jumping against hard-working local councillors were highlighted and it was clear that a number of officers were not aware of the option to include local candidates in the selection process. Critically, one experienced officer observed that 'certain members of the A-list I wouldn't even consider as council candidates, never mind parliamentary ones ... I have seen it in three constituencies ... appearance, policy knowledge, presentation, some are not capable of answering questions on the doorstep'. It was no surprise therefore that at the Mid Derbyshire selection, members demonstrated their preference for a solid track record of local political work. Candidate origin was also apposite, with much antipathy shown to non-local candidates 'being parachuted in' and towards their ability to win and effectively represent the constituency. Nevertheless, for the centre, social representativeness and the ability to add value to the House of Commons were the crucial attributes. It was attuned to obtaining the 'best' candidate on its strategic terms.

Not all activists were opposed to reform, but for those who were, there was an aura of powerlessness and concern over the local implications. Outwardly, one officer echoed the views of the more positive activists in that 'we knew that there was some candidate re-engineering happening, we need more women and if we can get a few ethnic minorities, great ... we had a pretty strong group of people that applied, so that we were not deprived in any way, but we were conscious that we could have been'. Supply-side improvement provided the critical face-saver: for both women and ethnic minority candidates, members were impressed by the choice. A professional thus commented that 'the calibre and the nature of the candidates made their (the members') acceptance of a controversial process that much more straightforward'. Along with white men, the candidates tended to be occupational 'high-flyers' from the business and professional worlds, and thus represented a neo-elite within Conservative Party politics rather than enhanced social representativeness; activists were generally comfortable with this.

At the core of the leadership's candidate selection strategy was the de-politicisation of local activists. This resulted in the essence of localism being challenged: to the centre, localism meant its trained candidate. Activists largely concurred, but in addition stressed that it also represented local interests and the preservation of local issues on the political agenda. For councillors in particular, candidate 'ownership' was apposite; they were observed to quickly develop close relationships with the candidate in order to fulfil their own agendas. The presence of councillors was a factor, along with fundraising capability, that led activists to readily discount the weakening of their power. Nevertheless, as one officer concluded, 'we now have to fight hard to maintain our rights over candidate selection ... we have to provide a good case'. Tension reflected the dichotomy between the higher order value of desperation for electoral success and lower order local autonomy: tradition remained powerful.

There was a common view that people would cease activity, or indeed membership, if the right of candidate selection was not retained. This was recognised by professionals, one stressing that 'people might think it bizarre that we start with a rigorous and finely honed selection procedure (at the national level), but then at the end throw it open to the membership in almost a lottery, but if they were not involved then they might not choose to be there when we need them (at the general election) ... it's a really fine balancing act'. The right to select candidates was part of this implicit, expectations-based, psychological contract between the party leadership and the membership. The centre recognised that selected candidates required local support to unseat well-resourced incumbent MPs. Consequently, for continuing activist motivation, Cameron did not impose all-women shortlists, despite the availability of legislation; they would have caused severe problems. In Somerton and Frome, an officer asserted people held strong views, suggesting that 'the officers would have resigned en masse, that is the only thing that we could do ... I don't think they (the centre) would dare do it ... I would be astonished if they did because they know there would be "blood on the carpet" which is in no-one's best interests'. This outlook was a little strong and in all likelihood would not have occurred, but it did illustrate the depth of feeling. Indeed, a professional concurred that 'all-women shortlists would have caused huge problems, which it did for the Labour Party ... it can be a crucial factor in the loss of a (parliamentary) seat'. Overall, activists largely concurred with Cameron's aims regarding social representativeness, but not with the method of achievement. Mass resignations did not happen, but candidate selection reform did strengthen the possibility of apathy among activists.

Local candidate selection procedures

Further de-politicisation of activists occurred through the reform of local procedures, as the centre was able to distinguish between the candidate selection activities and by implication people, in order to curtail local power. The operation of the selection

timetable was an initial manifestation. The Somerton and Frome selection revealed the centre's ability to amend local procedures after their commencement. Here, the local chairman was charged with massaging the dissent that inevitably occurred over the belated requirement for an open primary. Furthermore, by controlling the selection timetable, the centre could manipulate applications. Typically, just two or three weeks were allotted for receipt of applications for advertised constituencies, with the result that local candidates did not always discover that the process had commenced, as those on the priority list only were informed officially; local candidates were a constituency responsibility. They also lacked central support in the form of coaching that was believed to be offered to centrally preferred candidates.

Personnel involvement became formally stipulated. The initial 'paper sift', where applications were reviewed to produce the interim shortlist for the selection committee, was conducted by the association chairman and two deputy chairmen alone; accordingly, they were the only members who were permitted a full role in the candidate process. The paper sift was also performed in the presence of the agent and regional director, who acted in an advisory capacity. To ensure fairness, officers were provided with the curriculum vitae only to make their choices; photographs and other details were retained until afterwards. However, the application procedure itself was open to manipulation. For an advertised seat, candidates now applied to the centre, who forwarded the curriculum vitae to the professional regional director to convey to the paper sift meeting. The centre was hence provided with an opportunity to perform its own sift to ensure that certain candidates were given preference. Officials vehemently denied this practice occurred, but suspicions were aroused locally. An experienced local officer echoed the views of some activists by asserting that the centre 'much preferred their own candidates to be chosen ... I have no proof that they sifted them, but yes ... they allegedly notify everyone on the list that Cheltenham is looking for a candidate ... that's how they control it'.

Following the paper sift, the selection committee belatedly appeared at the second stage, in which candidates were initially interviewed. There was a new rule to ensure that it was as representative as possible of the electorate, at least with regard to gender. Previously, its composition had been an executive council decision. One officer illustrated local irritation in that 'there were various imperatives from Central Office about representation of those people on the selection committee, with the agent being very specific that the criteria were being adhered to'. Furthermore, in those constituencies where an open primary was employed, an officer noted that 'the executive council was largely sidelined in the selection process by a diktat from London that the association had no option but to accept, thereby ignoring the governing body of the association'. Involvement was instead confined to the final interview stage before the primary, and many activists thus felt disenfranchised. Moreover, the engagement of community representatives (local elites), who would interview and score candidates on a range of skills to provide the executive council

with a measure of suitability, further undermined the latter's influence. Cheltenham demonstrated that some leeway was allowed by employing ballots to choose the community panel and the eight members to join the three principal officers on the selection committee. It also showed a capacity for innovation by canvassing the survivors of the initial paper sift to demonstrate how they would perform in an election. Such modifications, though, were not strategic.

The introduction of open primaries, involving non-member supporters and the wider electorate, further contributed to activist depoliticisation. Although they were largely enjoyed by participants, they caused much local angst. Resentment was highlighted by a High Peak officer in that 'this business of having people from the general public in (the candidate selection process) ... we managed to avoid it, I'm glad we did'. Many activists were alarmed that party membership was no longer required to vote at the selection. One dismayed officer recounted that 'how would we know if non-members had the interests of the party at heart?' The point of being a member was therefore questioned: members might not leave, but new ones would be more difficult to attract. A particular consequence, however, was that the standing ovation that typically greeted a selection result was sometimes subdued. Activists consoled themselves in the face-saving retention of the 'final say' through a Special General Meeting immediately after the primary to confirm the result. Nevertheless, this was diluted, as it would have been politically explosive to overturn a decision that involved local voters. The professionals were euphoric at the 'success' of primaries, one enthusing that 'no-one can argue about the primary, we have opened it (the selection process) up so much, it's a wonderful idea'. Hence, they will likely be employed universally in future general elections. They were deemed to have politically wrong-footed the party's opponents and were an essential component of the centre's desire for voter-focused local identity in the community.

Critically, along with their inability to influence the composition of the priority list, activists were not consulted over the changes to local procedures. Their role has now become defined in very mundane terms, which negated political responsibility. Overall, given the breadth of local change, the depoliticisation of local activists in terms of their contribution to candidate selection has taken place. To the centre, it was fundamental to its efforts to diminish inward-looking local autonomy; this anachronism would not be allowed to impede electoral success.

Local fitness for purpose

The development of political capability was a leadership priority to enable the party to return to government. However, there was a political deficit locally, which influenced the centre's outlook concerning local involvement in candidate selection. The local association, which had been depicted by the Maxwell Fyfe

committee as an electoral machine, was more of a creaking machine.¹¹ For campaign activity, activists reported that just 10 per cent of members were politically active and a further 10 per cent socially so; some officers believed the combined figure was closer to 15 per cent. Yet, by contrast, around 30 per cent typically attended a candidate selection meeting. Relative inactivity meant that there was a wide constituency financial disparity. Many associations did not employ an agent and sustaining an effective local presence was difficult. Both regional professionals and local officers accepted that fundraising had become a serious problem, as over time there had been a noticeable decline in the number of social events and a lack of fundraising innovation. An assessment of 120 constituencies found a fundraising performance of merely £33.10 per member (excluding subscription income) for the general election year of 2005 (Low, 2014b). There was 'diminishing returns with diminishing members', a situation that was aggravated by the ageing profile of the membership. In addition, fundraising was generally not popular and hence some of the more politically motivated activists eschewed it (Low, 2014a). Professionals did, however, acknowledge local knowledge and contacts possessed by councillors and committed activists. These were significant factors as they enabled the localities to add value to campaigning and they were vital for the candidate to absorb.

The local political deficit permitted the centre to link local candidate selection responsibilities to reward, reflecting Whiteley and Seyd's assertion that it was a membership 'reward' for the hard work of campaigning and fundraising (2002, p. 7). This notion of reward was vociferously discounted by most activists who were adamant that candidate selection was a right of membership; although some qualified this in terms of leafleting activity. Right was clarified by one officer in that 'it's a right, it isn't any reward ... if you are running the (local) show, you have to be able to select your candidate ... don't forget that candidates have to present themselves to the members'. Another officer asserted that 'candidate selection is part of what you pay your subscription for and what you pound the streets for ... you have earned that, so it's certainly not seen as a reward from the centre ... the centre seems to forget this'. Such views illustrated the tension around the notion of reward: to activists, candidate selection was a fundamental right, but professionals increasingly saw it in reward terms. This was reflected in central decision making.

Fitness for purpose was reduced through a de-skilling process that was happening locally, although this assumed a purposeful as well as a natural form. Natural de-skilling was underpinned by an ageing membership, technological developments and activist reluctance to acquire training. Indeed, the age problem meant that officers widely acknowledged their lack of media, marketing and information technology skills, which were either weak or else were reliant on the capabilities of one or two members. As a result of such deficiencies, there were shortfalls in candidate introduction and canvassing activities in particular (Low, 2014a, b). Hence, the key

activist role of ‘ambassadors’ in the community was weakening. However, the centre was also indulging in purposeful de-skilling through a marked reduction of the local creative role. Professionals assumed control of campaign guidelines and literature template design; their remit was to remove as much as possible from local associations. Moreover, there was a closer monitoring and control of local communications in order to reinforce the national Conservative brand. Local candidate selection was seen as an extension of this branding exercise. The definition of capability was therefore broadened, so that in addition to campaigning skills, local fitness for purpose now included social representativeness. This was why the centre focused upon the three senior association officers (chairman and two deputy chairmen) for activities such as the initial paper sift, so that the potential for local prejudice would be reduced.¹² The engagement of outside expertise in the form of community representatives and an external moderator can be similarly interpreted; such people complemented the supporters engaged for the local primaries. The involvement of outsiders was aimed at countering the perceived lack of adequate visibility in the community. Hence, the development of supporter networks was integral to the centre’s local strategy. They were also free of the political constraints imposed by members; they added capability for no expected reward. The implication, nevertheless, was a purposeful de-skilling of local activists.

The local political deficit and the de-skilling process contributed to the view of many activists that the centre had a diminished opinion of local capabilities. Professionals thus deemed leadership to be the critical local competence. This emphasis on the importance of leadership was also generally shared by activists. Hence, the political tensions that underpinned the candidate selection process led significantly to a strengthening of the role of the association chairman, who was now expected to fulfil the role of local managing director in the business sense. This was stressed by both voluntary area officers and regional professionals. The chairman was given enhanced responsibility for choosing the selection committee and for appointing an external moderator, preferably a journalist, community leader or professional, for the primary so that candidates were interviewed professionally, thereby mirroring their role as an MP. ‘Hobby horse’ questions from local activists would therefore be avoided. Finally, he was expected to sell the need for change to the members and in addition to diffuse activist tensions caused by reform. In Somerton and Frome, for example, there were accusations that the selection committee was fixed. Hence, diplomatic, empathetic and motivational skills were apposite. Professionals, therefore, continually searched for strong, capable and centre-leaning people to become local chairmen and deputy chairmen for the purpose of providing leadership and to motivate activists to undertake mundane tasks.

The emphasis on local leadership, rather than a collective local capability, enabled the centre to interpret activist de-skilling and falling participation levels for reward purposes: essentially, relatively few activists undertook campaign work, so candidate selection involvement could be reduced accordingly. As a result, activist de-skilling

can be combined with de-politicisation highlighted above for purposes of undermining local autonomy. They helped to realise the leadership's strategic aims, but equally they impacted on the political motivation of activists.

The approach to party management

The dismantling of local autonomy in candidate selection was further facilitated through a more forthright approach to party management. This meant greater formalism, aligned with a movement towards mechanistic control, but equally with an imperative and dismissive management style. Formalism was manifested in the mandatory nature of the new local candidate selection procedures, designed to maintain activist behaviour within prescribed limits. Local parties were not permitted to deviate without permission, and even then initiatives were allowed for non-strategic activities only, such as Cheltenham's canvass test. Moreover, the tacit threat of 'supported status' was indicative of a more mechanistic control outlook; its unstated presence was a strong factor in ensuring compliance with the centre's wishes. Activists were conceived as the local face of the national party, hence their primary responsibility was to it.

Control was further reinforced by the enhanced power of regional professionals, who now assumed a multi-faceted role, and indeed of local agents who increasingly leaned towards the centre rather than to the local party that employed them. Close candidate selection involvement began at an executive council meeting convened to agree the specific selection process to be adopted. Here, the regional director outlined the new procedures and asserted Cameron's aim of achieving greater candidate diversity. In addition, the results of voter research conducted locally were communicated. This typically favoured health, education and law and order over the sensitive issue of Europe. The prioritisation of local issues was set accordingly. Furthermore, the regional director worked with the association selection committees to guide them towards the leadership's preferred interpretation of localism. Hence, one professional commented that 'I try to provide leadership, clarity and explanation ... on the controversial desire to increase the number of women, I made the case on behalf of David Cameron ... so we try to tow them (selection committees) in the right direction as we perceive it ... some of that comes down to my judgement'. The professional remit was therefore interventionist, and troubleshooting inevitably formed part of the regional director's toolkit. That the candidate, rather than the local party, now had responsibility for campaign leadership strengthened this professional stance.

There were mixed activist feelings over this expanded, more strategic, role of the regional professionals, but there was recognition that the centre had to retain some control. Some activists were in accord, thereby suggesting that professionalism was pervading the apex of localities. Indeed, professionals were often viewed as an

advisory resource concerning the suitability of candidates. For example, in Derby one officer confirmed that 'we asked him (regional director) what he thought of those candidates that he knew and he gave his opinion, but he didn't try to force anyone on us'. Moreover, a professional added that 'if a candidate lacked commitment because they may do the interview and then fly off somewhere ... I would tell the association about that, whereas in the past we were not allowed to'. Furthermore, the strengthened position of the professionals induced some ambitious local officers to 'go native' and form strong relationships with them for advancement within the party. However, while activists acknowledged the professional role in setting out Cameron's priorities and enforcing the rules, they vehemently dismissed any influence in the final selection decision. Nevertheless, formalism and control were the antithesis of voluntarism: the centre had to influence local activities for competitiveness reasons, but at the risk of losing key people.

Strongly linked to mechanistic control was a structured-imperative management style which also exuded dismissiveness. Cameron's stance was presidential, but, critically, peremptory. His aggressive assimilation of the demand thesis regarding women and ethnic minority candidates showed that exercising his authority over depicted reactionary activists was integral to his leadership ethos. Moreover, control over local selection procedures was essential to his candidate 'guarantee'; failure would undermine his credibility. Cameron's style was also structured, being designed to frame the local position in terms of permitted response limits. Local activists were actors to be managed. Importantly, he was able to utilise his access to the national media to reinforce his stance and make the public case for change. As a result, it would have taken a brave local association to repel his initiatives, one officer noting

what was the point of fighting the changes ... it would be very difficult to do and pointless at a time when we are up in the (national opinion) polls ... which association puts its head above the parapet and starts shouting about what the leadership is doing, when actually what we want is to get a good candidate, get working and get an MP ... what we don't want is headlines of 'local association riots against'.

Ultimately, Cameron was prepared to invest his personal political capital in the perceived need to be seen as a strong leader. Nevertheless, it was of little surprise that traditional member deference was no longer pervasive. There was a broad range of attitudes from total reverence to actual dislike, but among older members and people in the north particularly, he was not held in high esteem.

Cameron's leadership style mirrored the centre's position of announcing change by edict. A participatory approach involving activists at the outset was never a consideration. There was no local consultation over any aspect of candidate selection reform. Imposition of change was accordingly deemed counter-productive by many

activists. One officer asserted that 'it's the way that it has been done that is creating resentment ... it was the arrogant way that they said you will do it this way ... you should take people along with you'. However, the centre clearly believed that traditional persuasion would fail. Activists were seen as potential blockers of change. A few activists agreed, admiration reflected by one officer in 'you've got to be tough to do that, but it was necessary'.

The approach to party management signified that communication within the party was distorted. The flow of information was tailored to the centre's definition of constituency parties in campaign-support terms. Many activists thus spoke resignedly of an unwillingness to listen to their concerns. A regional official conceded that candidate selection reform 'was not the best handled announcement ... it did cause some resentment ... there was a lack of clarity ... Cameron is surrounded by an enthusiastic team who don't always understand the structure of the party'. Moreover, the communication deficit was accompanied by evidence of patronisation to psychologically demean activists. Condescending language was often employed to emphasise perceptions of local amateurishness and a need for guidance. The regional director's sermon before each stage of the selection process was apposite. In addition, in Mid Derbyshire, prior to the moderator interview, a video was shown and music relayed that one officer asserted 'virtually instructed selection meetings to choose a woman'. Some activists said that this harmed women, while others alluded to putting the man at a disadvantage. Later selections eschewed the video implying that the centre had learned that its patronising approach, at least in this, had backfired. Nevertheless, leadership attempts to get the best out of the voluntary membership were derisory. Given its commitment to bolstering supporter networks, this stance is unlikely to alter.

Overt resistance was confined to the rhetoric of relatively few. Most accepted the modernising agenda or recognised the practical reality. An agent related that 'there has been some resistance, but that's just something to do with being conservative with a small "c" ... it was always very minor amongst a certain hard core of activists, who feel that they are more important than they really are'. The abhorrence of the Labour government and the desire for power were key factors. Nevertheless, there was a partial change only in the collective local mindset. Parochial selection decisions indicated that Cameron's strategic priority was not fully grasped. Concerned officers alluded to 'attitudes being ingrained' and 'executive members where the mindset was stuck in the past', very much reflecting the fact that 'the demographics (age) of the membership have not changed significantly'. Candidate reform was also linked by some older members to an insufficiently strong Conservative message over Europe. Other activists, by contrast, asserted that Cameron had moved the party towards a more modern outlook. Importantly, these activists tended to be those who were actually engaged in campaign activity and who hence listened to, and understood, national concerns, although such people were comparatively few in number.

The four organisational dimensions discussed in this section revealed how local autonomy in parliamentary candidate selection was dismantled. The evidence has implications for members and membership parties, but also for party organisation generally.

The Implications of Reform for Members, Membership Parties and Party Organisation

Party members

Layton-Henry's (1976) prophecy of leadership intervention to correct any breakdown of understanding relating to the key activity of parliamentary candidate selection has been realised. The transformed position of local activists can be explained organisationally by both hard managerial and soft behavioural measures: activist de-politicisation and de-skilling, combined with formalism and mechanistic control, and a management style that exuded imperativeness and dismissiveness. Collectively, these organisational processes permitted an understanding of how power was utilised by the leadership to facilitate change. The nominal retention of local autonomy within the party constitution meant that associations were subjected to individual influence and control, with the practical result that the leadership was able to specify individual stages of the candidate selection process and who was involved at each one. The advent of community representatives and open primaries has not therefore been accompanied by greater devolved powers, but rather increased professional direction and intervention, as Mikulska and Scarrow (2010) surmised. Hence, the leadership was increasingly shaping the local context, so that professionals were largely able to prioritise the interpretation of localism as their trained candidate over the broader activist stance of local issues and interests. Fast-track selections such as the one at High Peak, for example, will likely not recur in winnable seats.

Not all members were opposed to reform, but most were frustrated by the manner in which it was imposed. Critically, however, purposive and solidary incentives for membership and activism (Clark and Wilson, 1961) were being undermined by, for example, the lack of local consultation, the perceived candidate 'quotas', the three senior officers only being involved in the full process, and the reduced role of the selection committee and executive council and hence of many committed activists. The supply-side face-saver of higher quality women and ethnic minority candidates only partially offset the feelings of dismay. These were reinforced by there no longer being a requirement to be a member to vote at the selection meeting. However, activists were deemed by the centre to deserve less reward owing to their diminished contribution to the overall party effort. In Scarrow's (1994) cost-benefit ratio, there was a potential high cost of them making an inappropriate decision. May's (1973) law of 'curvilinear disparity' thus reflected the leadership's thinking: it was content to

portray members as troublesome in order to achieve candidate selection progress. Moreover, professionals were aware that many more members attended candidate selection meetings than indulged in campaign activity. Members were becoming weaker at the 'ambassadors' in the community role, as there were fewer of them to spread the Conservative message, as well as the shortfall in their canvassing and candidate introduction and promotion effort. The ageing profile further underlined this. In addition, while activists still raised considerable funds for campaign purposes, their contribution was declining. Their position was compounded by the appointment of Lord Ashcroft as Deputy Chairman in charge of the party's target seats strategy and the work of regional and area campaign directors. Critically, his monetary assistance to local marginal seats helped to build local infrastructure and to finance the promotional effort (Pattie and Johnston, 2010; Cutts *et al*, 2012). Furthermore, activist input could be improved by politically insignificant supporters. Hence, for candidate selection, there was a move towards the sharing of local responsibilities, as outside expertise was embraced in the form of the community representatives and the primary moderator, and supporters were engaged for the open primaries. Local capability was now broadened to include social representativeness. This was consistent with McKenzie's (1963) advocacy of the elite model of democracy; broadening the selectorate to include outsiders enabled Cameron to declare that there was greater local democracy and a more representative parliamentary party.¹³ However, it was enhanced democracy at the system level, rather than enhanced intra-party democracy.

The decline in the campaigning contribution of local activists moderated their response to reform. There has inevitably been conflict, reflecting national and local interests and outlooks, as well as the Conservative tradition of member selection of their own candidate. However, overt conflict was tempered by the desperation for general election success; much discontent was thus inward in nature. Moreover, threats to leave the party were not considered disastrous by professionals. Therefore, even though many activists felt powerless to prevent change, rather than exiting the party in Hirschman's (1970) terms the politically active tended to stay and either fight hard for their rights because they could not achieve the same level of political benefits elsewhere, or else accepted the new reality. There was a very strong feeling among activists that a prominent role in candidate selection was a right of membership. It was at the local level where membership was meaningful to many people and there would be severe problems if it was severely curtailed or removed. Hence, all-women shortlists have thus far been eschewed, although further corrective action was feared if election outcomes were not positive. Ultimately, despite a reduction in their power, activists retained a significant, albeit diluted, input into the composition of the parliamentary party. The selection of locally orientated candidates was a reminder of the limits of central power.

The party leadership demonstrated through the three incarnations of local procedures the ability to make changes to suit its needs. Through the priority list, leadership placement power is now stronger and local procedures have undergone

some professionalisation. Continuing activist motivation for campaign activity, while not ignored by professionals, was not the primary consideration in its candidate selection strategy. However, the general election focused minds. Professionals recognised that constituencies possessed unique characteristics and acknowledged the importance of local activist leadership for coordinating the non-substitutable tasks of knowledge and contact accumulation, councillor recruitment and fundraising. These activities could not be effectively undertaken by professionals alone. Nevertheless, candidate selection reform has undoubtedly impacted adversely upon party members, and it has rendered attracting new members and increasing activism levels more difficult; increased apathy was a major concern to both local officers and professionals. Overall, there has been political progress for the centre, but with motivational regress locally.

Membership parties and party organisation

The approach taken to candidate selection reform was consistent with Panebianco's (1988) electoral-professional model. Personalised leadership was strongly projected, Cameron investing personal political capital in his 'guarantee' regarding women and ethnic minority candidates: failure was not an option. Moreover, his skilled use of the national media to make the case for reform showed his capacity to utilise the resources of the state within Katz and Mair's (1995) cartel framework. Furthermore, the evidence supported Katz's (2001) suggestion of leaders outwardly democratising the candidate selection process, while actually intensifying central control. Oligarchic tendencies were thus strengthened: Cameron's adept use of the party constitution, the enthusiastic pursuit of the candidate demand thesis, the mandatory changes to local procedures and the strengthening of the role of regional professionals emphasised this. Hence, organisationally within Panebianco's zones of uncertainty, the leadership's position has fortified in relation to political competency, the formal party rules and candidate recruitment. Moreover, party management reflected Michels's (1915/1962) technical skills in the art of politics and control over the internal means of communication; for example, as illustrated by the lack of communication with local candidates, the manipulation of the application process, the timetable changes, and the separation and control of each stage. However, his psychological dimension was undermined by the dismissive management style, further manifested through central edicts, regional director sermons and the video. As a result, a partial change in the collective activist mindset only has been achieved and traditional local deference towards the leadership has weakened; Cameron did not endear himself to many activists.

Reform indicated that the fundamental nature of the local party was moving towards a network approach. Although for successful local campaigning, activists remained germane, the importance of professional direction (Denver *et al*, 2003;

Fisher *et al.*, 2006) meant a relegation of their responsibilities. Their changing position regarding candidate selection can be viewed similarly, reflecting a need to both enhance the professionalism and the representativeness of local procedures. The engagement of external personnel at various stages of the candidate selection process reinforced this. As a result, structurally, the boundaries of the local constituency association were becoming blurred, so that it ceased to be a discrete entity but one which embraced both members and outside contributors. A core membership remained necessary to form the campaigning base and to coordinate the external personnel. As long as the party could attract this nucleus then the local party could function. Hence, the centre could contract out specific parts of the candidate selection process and reduce the activist responsibility accordingly. In addition, local leadership has become more diffused, with power distributed between the regional director, the agent and the local chairman, supported by his two deputy chairmen. The evidence thus pointed to a broadening of Panebianco's position, with a community-based local network approach being pursued to project a more visible and representative local identity to the electorate. Supporters and community personnel did not retain a stake in the party, unlike subscribing members. The evidence thus pointed to the notion of 'membership party' evolving into a broader and more flexible unit similar to Epstein's (1967) 'electoral peaks' ideal, but with the addition of outside supporter networks to enhance candidate legitimacy. Ultimately, therefore, a network of local political capabilities constituted the future of party organisation; this development was also observed with respect to the organisation of local general election campaigning (Low, 2014b).

The network concept also supersedes Carty's (2004) franchise party model. Outwardly, the strataarchical bargain was tipped further in favour of the leadership, as candidate selection, a vital component of the political product, was brought under enhanced central control: the centre was able to meticulously determine local procedures and personnel involvement, and acquired the power to intervene locally. However, the implementation of the leadership's candidate strategy meant that the notion of strataarchy can be challenged. Enhanced formalism and control, and the imperative and dismissive management style, pointed to a strengthening of hierarchy, and not strataarchy. The centre was increasingly coordinating local activities and capability development, such that local parties have become less autonomous. In addition, the blurring of local boundaries through the engagement of outsiders was in stark contrast to the clearly defined ones of organisational units under a franchise arrangement. Moreover, the alignment of national and local candidate interests, the positive sum outcome of franchise, was not fully realised as local-orientated candidates continued to be selected. Ultimately, candidate selection reform illustrated that Carty's model did not accurately address division of labour, coordination and accountability, the three primary characteristics of organisational structure. Carty adopted the perspective of the franchisor with a normative argument surrounding the ideal local party from a central perspective; he ignored local organisational dynamics.

Conclusion

The bottom-up methodological approach, which employed a qualitative research design, revealed how local activists have been affected by, and responded to, imposed reform of the one strategic activity that they still possessed: parliamentary candidate selection. They were unable to prevent fundamental change, as the electoral imperative has realised some professionalisation of local procedures. The party can no longer be accused of lacking innovation, so that it is now easier for women and ethnic minority candidates to succeed, although parity remains elusive. However, there was only partial support for Mikulska and Scarrow's (2010) hypothesis of more inclusive procedures leading to selected candidates being closer to voters: more women and ethnic minority candidates, but from elite occupations, an outcome that party members were comfortable with. Change has seen the distribution of power becoming skewed further towards the centre. Local autonomy has been preserved, but in a diluted form, reinforced by national and local communications espousing its presence with the purpose of maintaining the commitment of a core group of activists. However, the manner in which the leadership pursued its candidate strategy revealed little regard for their continuing motivation. Hence, central initiatives and the local political deficit have condemned activists to diminished candidate selection reward and therefore to a reduction in the relatively little intra-party democracy that already existed. Moreover, a more formal, but at the same time looser, approach to organisation now exists, in which outside expertise and supporters have been engaged to enable the projection of stronger voter-orientated local identity. This development was judged a success, both politically and organisationally by professionals, so that a network of local political capabilities became the prime concept governing the structure of local parties; it represented a dilution of the notion of 'membership party'. Previous studies have not fully recognised the importance and contribution of external supporter networks. Hence, this study has also provided an insight into how the Conservative Party leadership is managing its declining membership base. However, the consequence of the central strategy, if it were to go wrong, would be a lack of local activist depth and hence a further decline in both campaign and fundraising activity.

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Notes

- 1 Conversations with local officers in 2011 suggest the membership figure is now below 180 000.
- 2 Speech in Leeds on improving candidate selection, 12 December 2005.

- 3 'The costs of being a candidate'. ConservativeHome, 1 August 2006.
- 4 Maude, F. 'Conservatives announce new candidate selection guidelines'. www.conservatives.com, 11 April 2006.
- 5 Twenty-two selections had resulted in seven women and two black and ethnic minority men. Hurst, G. 'Cameron steps up campaign for more women'. *The Times* 21 August 2006.
- 6 'David Cameron announcement on priority list review'. www.conservatives.com, 21 August 2006.
- 7 The proportion of women peaked at 38.1 per cent in mid-December and they were doing well in marginal seats. 'A-list succeeding in increasing the number of female candidates', ConservativeHome, 11 December 2006.
- 8 White, M. 'Tory progress on election candidates may make Labour glee short-lived'. *The Guardian* 30 January 2007.
- 9 The *A 21st Century Party* proposals, outlining the franchise arrangements, were presented to the local parties as a response to the 2005 election defeat. They were eventually omitted from the Constitutional College vote thereby permitting the centre to try to implement them on a piecemeal basis.
- 10 The candidate, Andrew Bingham, was a local councillor and the son of a prominent local activist and councillor. He did, however, work hard for the constituency association, acting as its unofficial agent.
- 11 The Maxwell Fyfe Committee and subsequent report (1948–1949) was important for its examination of, and recommendations for, the structure of the Conservative Party organisation. Its fundamental conclusion was a need for an organisation that was an educative political force and a machine for winning elections; it reaffirmed the traditional leadership position that the point of the extra-parliamentary organisation was not to influence or control party policy and strategy.
- 12 Under rules introduced in the *Fresh Future* reforms, each constituency association elected a chairman and two deputy chairmen, one in charge of membership and fundraising and the other political and campaigning activity.
- 13 'David Cameron responds to your concerns'. ConservativeHome, 21 August 2006.

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