

Choosing Party Leaders: Anglophone Democracies, British Parties and the Limits of Comparative Politics

Andrew Denham (Reader in Government, University of Nottingham)

Abstract

Since 1965, Britain's major political parties have radically, and repeatedly, changed the ways in which they choose their leaders. Building on a recent comparative study of party leadership selection in the five principal Anglophone ('Westminster') parliamentary democracies (Cross and Blais, 2012a), this article first outlines a theoretical framework that purports to explain why the major parties in three of those countries, including Britain, have adopted such reform. It then examines why five major British parties have done so since 1965. It argues that, while Cross and Blais' study makes a significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding of processes of party leadership selection reform in Anglophone parliamentary democracies, it has limited explanatory power when applied to changes enacted by the major parties in modern and contemporary Britain. Instead, the adoption of such reform in the British context is ultimately best understood and explained by examining both the internal politics and external circumstances of individual parties.

Keywords: party leaders; leadership selection; Anglophone democracies; comparative politics; British politics.

Choosing Party Leaders: Anglophone Democracies, British Parties and the Limits of Comparative Politics

Introduction

Since 1965, Britain's major political parties have radically, and repeatedly, changed the ways in which they choose their leaders (Punnett, 1992; Stark, 1996; Denham and O'Hara, 2008; Heppell, 2008; Heppell, 2010; Quinn, 2012; Bale and Webb, 2014). Consistent with developments in other parliamentary democracies (LeDuc, 2001; Kenig, 2009a; Kenig, 2009b; Cross and Blais, 2012a; Cross and Blais, 2012b; Pilet and Cross, 2014; Cross and Pilet, 2015) they have expanded their leadership selectorates beyond parliamentary elites to include party members (Quinn, 2010), delegates and members of affiliated organizations, particularly trade unions (Drucker, 1981; Quinn, 2004; Wickham-Jones, 2014) and even latterly, in the case of the Labour Party, their affiliated and registered supporters (Quinn, 2015; Dorey and Denham, 2016). Building on a recent comparative study of party leadership selection in the five principal Anglophone ('Westminster') parliamentary democracies (Cross and Blais, 2012a), this article first sets out its theoretical framework that purports to explain why the major parties in three of those countries, including Britain, have adopted such reform. It then examines why five major British parties—the Liberal Party, the Labour Party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative Party—have done so since 1965. It argues that, while Cross and Blais' study makes a significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding of processes of party leadership selection reform in Anglophone democracies, it has limited explanatory power when applied to changes enacted by the major parties in modern and contemporary Britain. Instead, the adoption of such reform in the British context is ultimately best understood and explained by examining both the internal politics and external circumstances of individual parties.

Anglophone Democracies: A Comparative Approach

In a major work on party leadership selection in Britain between 1963 and 1995, Stark (1996, p. 2) argues that modern communications technology has focused unprecedented attention on party leaders.

‘Leaders are symbols of their parties, so much so that inter-party competition is frequently portrayed as a battle between leaders. The Question Time confrontations between the Prime Minister and ... Leader of the Opposition further foster this leader-centric view of politics. Party leadership is also the pathway to the premiership. Since World War Two, every Prime Minister has been a party leader. To a great extent, party leadership contests are gatekeepers to Number 10 Downing Street, drastically narrowing the pool of possible Prime Ministers’.

From a comparative perspective, Cross and Blais (2012a, pp. 145-146) argue that leadership selection is one of the most important activities engaged in by political parties. Party leaders, they explain, are crucial figures in both the electoral and organizational activities of parties and in the legislative and executive arenas.

‘The influence leaders have within their parties, and more broadly on public decision-making, makes the question of who selects them crucial to any enquiry about who wields democratic influence. Given the changing norms of intra-party democracy and the growing influence of party leaders, it is not surprising that we find significant change in selection methods in recent years. While not universal, the trend is away from selection by a small group of party elites towards empowerment of a party’s rank and file members’.

This trend, they find, is almost universal among the major parties in three of the five principal Anglophone (‘Westminster’) parliamentary democracies (Britain, Canada and Ireland), but less evident in the other two (Australia and New Zealand), where factors such as the perceived

organizational chaos of the New Zealand ACT and Australian Democrats after including their memberships in leadership selection, the absence of regional imbalance of parliamentary representation found in Britain, Canada and Ireland and their shorter electoral cycles have contributed to the reluctance of the major parties to adopt such reform.

Party organizational reform, Cross and Blais argue, is best explained by considering changes in a party's external environment and/or internal circumstances. In terms of the former, change in a party's competitive position relative to others is a key factor; 'as a basic rule, winners seldom innovate', whereas a negative change in a party's competitive position often stimulates reform. Hence, a first hypothesis to explain why parties choose to expand their leadership selectorates is that they will only do so after an electoral setback. In other words, party organizational change of this sort tends to be 'proximally preceded by poor electoral performance' (Harmel et al, 1995, p. 3). A second is that parties are more likely to do so when in opposition than in government. Opposition parties, they explain, are 'more amenable to change', because of two factors: 'a reluctance to expand the selectorate when choosing a Prime Minister and a shift in the balance of power away from the parliamentary to the extra parliamentary party with removal from government' (Cross and Blais, 2012a, pp. 129-130).

Cross and Blais' third hypothesis is that new parties will more readily adopt leadership selection rules that allow a greater role for rank-and-file members than their older, more established counterparts.

'These parties typically have smaller parliamentary caucuses, and so the extra parliamentary party has more influence and faces less opposition from an entrenched parliamentary group protecting what it sees as its natural turf. New parties are trying to differentiate themselves from their established competitors and adopting organizational innovation is one way to do so'.

A further relevant contextual factor, they argue, is contagion. Parties live in a competitive environment and internal party democracy is generally welcomed by voters and activists as a sign that a party is inclusive and responsive, committed to openness and participation, and hence 'democratic'. In addition, when one party innovates in the direction of enhanced internal party democracy, there is increased pressure on others to do the same. The perceived success of reformers in one party encourages their counterparts in others and provides the latter with additional ammunition in advocating such reform. Hence, a fourth hypothesis is that parties are more likely to expand their leadership selectorates when at least one of their competitors (or historical antecedents) has done so already.

Testing each hypothesis in turn, Cross and Blais identify 16 major parties in Britain, Canada and Ireland that increased the influence of party members in leadership selection between 1965 and 2009. They find strong support for the hypothesis that parties are more likely to adopt such reform when in opposition than in government. A second hypothesis, that change is particularly likely to take place after an electoral setback, is similarly confirmed.

'Our evidence suggests that an electoral setback highlights the need within a party for organizational rebuilding. Particularly after a defeat resulting in the loss of government, the leadership often acquiesces to arguments that the membership party was allowed to wither and needs to be revitalized in order to again succeed electorally.... Party officials suggest that expanding the leadership selectorate is a way of being responsive to activists and providing them with a greater role in party decision-making. These factors were particularly important for the Canadian and [British] Conservatives and Ireland's Fine Gael'. (Cross and Blais, 2012a, p. 134)

A third hypothesis, that new parties are more likely to adopt such reform, is also confirmed. Of the seven new parties, four granted full authority to their members from the outset, while two others did so shortly after their creation.

The evidence, Cross and Blais discover, is also consistent with the fourth hypothesis, that there is, indeed, a contagion effect.

‘For example, young members of Fine Gael advocating ... change pointed to the expanded leadership selectorate in other Irish parties and parties abroad.... Similarly, activists in the [British] Conservative Party used [New] Labour’s earlier extension of the franchise to bolster their case, and activists in the Canadian parties drew support from earlier adoption of member votes at both the provincial and federal levels... once one competitive party in a system expands its leadership selectorate it becomes more difficult for the other parties to resist change’. (Cross and Blais, 2012a, pp. 135-136)

While generally supported by the evidence, however, the four hypotheses appear to be merely necessary, not sufficient, conditions. Based on the British, Canadian and Irish experience, Cross and Blais argue, parties only adopt such reform when in opposition and after an electoral setback. Many of these parties, however, had experienced earlier electoral setbacks when they did not do so (though they may well have adopted other forms of organizational change).

‘What appears to be essential is to understand which organizational changes are at play and thus on a potential reform agenda. Particularly relevant here is the contagion factor. The adoption of a wider leadership selectorate by one party within a system is evidence that this is on the menu of potential reforms’. (Cross and Blais, 2012a, p. 136)

In short, Cross and Blais argue, while it is not always possible to explain the first instance of innovation within a system, we can generally predict the subsequent behaviour of the remaining parties.

‘After the first party adopts change, others initially resist, notwithstanding occasional pressure to reform, until they are in opposition and suffer an electoral setback. The first time they meet all three conditions — the availability of a contagion, being in opposition [and]

suffering an electoral defeat — they adopt reform. New parties adopt the reform early on, with the exception of those created around a powerful parliamentary figure’.

The same pattern, Cross and Blais argue, can be seen in all three countries (Britain, Canada and Ireland). In this sense, they argue, ‘our conditions appear to be both necessary and sufficient’. Having set out this general framework, the next four sections seek to explain how and why five major British parties (the Liberal Party, the Labour Party, the SDP, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative Party) adopted such reform.

A Study in Miniature: The Liberal Party

The first ‘major’ British party to expand its selectorate beyond its parliamentary caucus was the Liberal Party in 1976. As Punnett (1992, p. 132) explains, from the Party’s birth in 1868 until its merger with the SDP in 1988, Liberal leaders were chosen by a variety of means.

‘Indeed, the Liberals constitute a study in miniature of the range of possible selection methods. Their experience extends from the most closed of processes (selection of the leader, in effect, by the Monarch) to the most open (election by a ballot of party members). Between these extremes, Liberal leaders were produced by a ballot of MPs, or by the mutual agreement of Ministers, MPs or the potential leaders themselves’.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Liberal and Conservative parties shared two assumptions about the Party’s leadership. First, when the Party was in office, the choice of Party Leader was subject to the Monarch’s prerogative of appointing the Prime Minister. Second, when in opposition, the Party would require a leader in both the Commons and the Lords, but not (necessarily) an overall ‘Party Leader’. The latter position was filled only when a former Prime Minister was available, and willing, to serve in that capacity. If not, it would remain vacant and be subject to the Monarch’s prerogative when the party next won a General Election. The Monarch’s

choice of Prime Minister would then be endorsed by the Party's MPs and peers. Neither party had a written constitution, formally prescribing one selection system or another. The Liberals, for their part, had 'a philosophical commitment to the principle of producing a leader through mutual agreement rather than by a staged battle' (Punnett, 1992, pp. 132-133).

In 1967, the Liberal Party's leadership was formally contested for the first time, by three of its 12 MPs. A secret ballot was held the day after the announcement of Jo Grimond's resignation as Party Leader. Jeremy Thorpe received six votes, his two opponents three apiece. Despite Thorpe's failure to win an overall majority—even after second preferences had been counted—his opponents agreed to withdraw and Thorpe was duly elected by unanimous 'consent'. The whole procedure was 'haphazard' and the manner of Thorpe's election subject to much criticism within the Party and 'bitter protests' from its rank and file. Some objected to the unseemly haste with which MPs had resolved the succession. Moreover, although the Party had thousands of members and, in a typical General Election, millions of voters, the electorate had comprised a mere dozen individuals, including the candidates themselves. The fact that a quarter of Liberal MPs had stood for the leadership was a further source of ridicule within the Party, and beyond (Stark, 1996, pp. 70-71). Claims by MPs to be representative of the Party as a whole were negated by the fact that most served rural constituencies in the Celtic fringe, whereas the bulk of Liberal activists lived in urban areas (Punnett, 1992, p. 136).

By 1976, two of Cross and Blais' necessary conditions were in place. The Liberal Party was in opposition and had suffered a (minor) loss of parliamentary seats in the preceding General Election of October 1974 (Cross and Blais, 2012a, p. 135). These two factors alone, however, provide an insufficient explanation of its decision to adopt reform. By this time, the Liberals had been the third largest party in terms of parliamentary seats for more than half a century. In the 1970 General Election, it had returned only six MPs. This increased to 14 in February 1974, when it received over six million votes. In October 1974, the Liberal Party's vote declined by 1 million, and the size of the

parliamentary Party was reduced by one, to 13 MPs. In short, the Liberal Party's opposition status was, by now, long-established and the electoral 'setback' it had suffered in the previous General Election more evident in terms of votes than parliamentary seats.

In addition to the Party's opposition status, the 'setback' it had suffered in the previous General Election and the specific internal factors highlighted above — the 'haphazard' procedure used and manner of Thorpe's election in 1967, the modest size of the parliamentary Party and a regional imbalance in its parliamentary representation — a sufficient explanation for its adoption of reform must also include the increasing pressure during the 1970s for a more open method of selecting the Party Leader from a growing number of new members in local constituency parties who were 'determined to apply within the Party the sort of participatory democracy they were preaching in government and industry' (Steed, 1977, p. 32) and the growing strength of the extra parliamentary Party within the Liberal organization (Kavanagh, 1983).

In May 1976, Thorpe resigned as leader, not for electoral reasons (although the Liberal vote had fallen significantly in the English local elections and single parliamentary by-election held in 1975) but because of allegations of serious misconduct in his personal and business affairs (Steed, 1977, pp. 32-33). In June, a special Assembly was held in Manchester to decide on a new system for choosing his successor. As Stark (1996, p. 73) explains,

'The new rules were passed, on a show of hands, just nine months after the Party had endorsed its traditional system of election by MPs. It would likely have reaffirmed this position in 1976 had it not been for the crisis created by the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Thorpe's downfall. Instead, the Liberals became the first British party to adopt an all-party ballot to elect its leader'.

Although the franchise was extended to Party members, MPs retained control of nominations. Prospective candidates had to be MPs, proposed by five members or one-fifth of the parliamentary

Party, whichever was the lower figure. Each constituency party was allocated a quota of votes according to a complex formula that took into account the size of its membership, year of affiliation to the national Party and the number of votes polled by the Liberal candidate in the previous General Election.

In the words of its designer, Michael Steed, this system, 'balancing ... election by the Party membership with a special role for MPs', was a 'cunning mix of parliamentary and mass-Party influences, of traditional Liberal and Radical ideas about democracy' (Steed, 1977, p. 32). In the event, it was to be used, like its 'haphazard' predecessor in 1967, by the Party only once, and replaced by the principle – never, as it turned out, the practice – of a strict system of 'One Member, One Vote' in 1981.

From Factions to Fractions: The Labour Party

The same year, the Labour Party replaced its long-standing system of election by MPs with an Electoral College. As Stark (1996, pp. 36-37) explains, the Labour Party's origins were very different from those of its Conservative and Liberal counterparts.

'Conservative [and Liberal] Members of Parliament created their mass party organization in the nineteenth century for the purpose of strengthening the MPs' support. By contrast, the Parliamentary Labour Party was founded at the turn of the [twentieth] century by the labour movement to represent its interests in parliament. The PLP was intended to play an important, though decidedly subservient, role within the labour movement'.

The post of 'Chairman of the PLP' was held by a succession of MPs from 1906 until 1922, when it evolved into that of 'Leader of the PLP' because of the change in Labour's parliamentary status. Following the 1922 General Election, Labour became the second largest party in the House of Commons and was, accordingly, required to fill the office of Leader of the Opposition. Ramsay

MacDonald was duly elected 'Chairman and Leader of the PLP', having formally challenged and narrowly defeated the incumbent Chairman, John Clynes. Unofficially, MacDonald, and his successors until 1978, when the post of Party Leader was officially endorsed as Party policy, was recognised as leader not only of the PLP, but of the Party as a whole (Stark, 1996, pp. 37-39, 44; Punnett, 1992, p. 81).

Until 1981, the Labour leader was elected exclusively by MPs, in one or more secret ballots. Prospective candidates were required to declare themselves at the outset, and a series of eliminative ballots be held until one of them secured an overall majority. The rationale for this system was twofold. First, it was seen as straightforward and efficient, in that it would produce a decisive result, within a relatively short period of time. Second, it was seen as imperative that the party leader should enjoy the confidence of a majority of the PLP. Labour MPs, it was argued, and they alone, should choose the party leader, being (literally) best placed to assess their colleagues' actual or potential leadership credentials.

As Stark (1996, p. 41) explains, the campaign to extend the franchise began as early as 1969. Although the previous two Labour Party Conferences of 1978 and 1979 had voted to retain the system of election by MPs alone, a National Executive Committee (NEC) resolution in 1980 gave delegates a further opportunity to change their minds. This was carried, by the narrowest of margins, and an 'emergency resolution' approved to hold a special conference at Wembley in January 1981, to consider how to implement the wider franchise. At Wembley, the option of creating an Electoral College was overwhelmingly approved on the first ballot. After three further ballots to determine its exact composition, delegates chose to allocate 30 per cent to MPs, 30 per cent to Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and the remaining 40 per cent to trade unions and other affiliated organizations (Drucker, 1981).

By 1981, two of Cross and Blais' necessary conditions were in place. Labour was in opposition, having lost the previous General Election in 1979. In addition to these factors, a sufficient

explanation for its adoption of reform must also include the efforts of a broader participatory movement in the Party and the 'extraordinary' determination and mobilization skills of the reformers, both before and after the General Election (Russell, 2005; Stark, 1996). As with the Liberal Party in 1976, there is no evidence of a contagion effect, even though the Liberals had recently moved in a similar direction. In Labour's case, the creation of an Electoral College was already on the 'menu' of potential reforms, following the recommendations of a working party in 1977 (Stark, 1996, p. 44). Labour's decision to adopt a 30—30—40 per cent division of votes between MPs, CLPs and affiliated organizations was also protracted and made in bizarre circumstances. As Garnett (2006, p. 148) explains, this option would have been defeated, but the engineers' union, which had been mandated to cast its block vote only in support of motions which gave the majority of Electoral College votes to MPs, 'took its instructions too literally and abstained, thus ensuring the success of a system it opposed'.

In 1992, Labour lost a fourth successive General Election, prompting renewed consideration of the Party's relationship with the trade unions. By now, almost the entire PLP leadership wanted to reform the Electoral College, on the grounds that the influence of the unions and their leaders was excessive and illegitimate. Following a review, the NEC recommended that the PLP section, which had been extended to include Labour Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in 1991, CLPs and affiliated bodies should henceforth receive an equal (one-third) share of the votes. Union block voting was abolished, and replaced by a system of postal ballots, to be conducted on the basis of One Levy-Payer, One Vote (OLOV). CLP block voting was similarly abolished; instead, all Party members would henceforth be entitled to participate in a postal ballot: One Member, One Vote (Quinn, 2004; Wickham-Jones, 2014).

Designed to counter the impression that Labour was 'dominated' by the unions, the adoption of these changes sought to return primary importance in Labour leadership contests to the PLP, in terms of both its 'gate-keeping' powers over nominations (the initial threshold of five per cent of

MPs for challenges and vacancies alike had been increased to 20 and 12.5 per cent respectively by 1993) and its ability to shape such contests a whole. Despite this, a candidate who trailed another in terms of backing from the PLP could still emerge as the eventual winner, once individual Party members' and/or union levy-payers' votes were aggregated and counted (Quinn, 2004). This duly happened when, having received a far greater number of votes from union members and more second preference votes from the PLP and Party members, Ed Miliband narrowly defeated his older brother—and erstwhile favourite and front-runner—David, in 2010 (Dorey and Denham, 2011; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011; Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013).

In 2014, following controversy over the selection of Labour's prospective parliamentary candidate for a by-election in Falkirk, the Electoral College was abolished and replaced by a new system, consisting of three categories of voter: Party members, including MPs and MEPs; levy-paying members of trade unions and other organizations affiliated to the Party, who were obliged to register as 'affiliated supporters'; and 'registered supporters', who were neither of the above. The latter were entitled to vote in future leadership elections provided they signed a declaration that they supported the 'aim and values' of the Labour Party and not rival organizations and agreed to pay a modest fee of three pounds. The new system proved to be highly controversial on its first outing in 2015, with allegations that members and supporters of rival organizations had registered to vote (Quinn, 2015; Dorey and Denham, 2016). As with the creation and subsequent reconfiguration of the Electoral College, Labour's new system was adopted when the Party was in opposition, having lost the General Election of 2010, but these were merely necessary, not sufficient, conditions. Given that other major British parties, including the Conservatives, had previously extended the franchise to their memberships, it is conceivable that there was a 'contagion effect', although there is no concrete evidence that this was a 'particularly relevant' factor in Labour's decision.

'New' Parties: The SDP and the Liberal Democrats

Had the Labour Party not adopted an Electoral College to elect its leader, the SDP might never have existed. All but one of the 14 MPs who launched the Party in March 1981 had recently defected from Labour. As one of their number, David Owen, later explained, 'What we could never believe was that a leader of the party elected on the basis of an Electoral College, which would put the leader in the pocket of the trade unions, would ever have the power to win back the vital policy ground that had been lost' (Stark, 1996, pp. 74-75). Despite the key role that leadership selection had played in their decision to leave Labour, however, the SDP's MPs disagreed among themselves as to how the leader of their new party should be chosen.

In contrast to Labour, the SDP resembled the nineteenth-century Conservative and Liberal parties in that its organization in Parliament pre-dated its structure beyond the House of Commons. As Punnett (1992, pp. 138-139) explains,

'The Party was built 'from the top down' by prestigious MPs who had left the Labour Party after many years in Parliament and, in some cases, in government. What is more, they had left the Labour Party, to a great extent, because they felt that the parliamentary [Labour] party was being subjected to unacceptable levels of control by the activists in the constituencies. Thus they were determined to avoid the same situation developing in the new party'.

As Drucker (1986, p. 119) notes, the MPs who founded the SDP created a structure in which its leaders — all of whom would be MPs — had 'considerable incentive to be attentive to the interests and wishes of ordinary party members, but in which both initiative and final decision rested ultimately with the leaders'. The Party's extensive extra-parliamentary structure, created quite rapidly at local, regional and national levels, was, however, disproportionate to the size of the parliamentary party. The expectation of SDP MPs was that their numbers in Parliament would

rapidly increase. Initially, however, a significant feature of the new party was 'the imbalance between the authoritative but small parliamentary party and the extensive extra-parliamentary organization based on a growing number of individual members' (Punnett, 1992, p. 139).

The competing claims of the SDP's parliamentary and extra-parliamentary elements revealed themselves clearly in its internal debates over which method the Party should use to select the leader. While there was unambiguous rejection of the activist democracy that had led to the creation of Labour's Electoral College, there was disagreement over the competing claims of 'parliamentary democracy' (election of the leader by MPs) and 'popular democracy' (election via a ballot of party members). In an attempt to reconcile these two points of view, two compromise proposals were considered. The first was that SDP MPs would elect a leader who would then be assessed by the Party's governing body, the Council for Social Democracy. If the MPs' choice of leader was not acceptable, Party members would be invited to choose between the original candidates via a postal ballot, conducted on the basis of One Member, One Vote. The second was that the SDP's first leader should be selected by a ballot of Party members, but that the choice should then revert to MPs after 1984, by which time it was anticipated the new party would have more MPs.

Three options were presented to a constitutional convention in February 1982. Delegates were asked to decide whether (a) MPs alone should always elect the leader, (b) OMOV should always be used, or (c) the Party's first leader should be chosen by OMOV and all subsequent leaders by MPs. OMOV was supported by 166 delegates, 73 voted for the compromise proposal, while only 63 preferred election by MPs from the outset. This did not yet resolve the issue. Party members still had to endorse the constitution. Besides voting on the constitution as a whole, the ballot also reiterated the three options for leadership selection listed above. Ballot papers were sent out in April and the results announced in May. OMOV received 16,196 votes, 12,560 backed the compromise proposal and 8,500 voted for election by MPs. Most of the latter preferred the

compromise proposal to OMOV, so that when second preferences were redistributed OMOV defeated the compromise proposal by 16,618 votes to 15,670. Barely half of the supporters of election by MPs had listed a second choice. Had more of them done so, the SDP might not have adopted OMOV (Stark, 1996, p. 77). While Party members would form the electorate, control over nominations remained firmly with MPs. Candidates had to be MPs, nominated by at least 15 per cent of their parliamentary colleagues.

In the case of the SDP, Cross and Blais' hypothesis that 'new' parties will more easily adopt leadership selection rules that allow a greater role for their members than their more established counterparts and that adopting a selectorate beyond the parliamentary caucus is 'more easily managed' by new parties is highly problematic. In fact, the SDP found the adoption of a wider selectorate anything but 'easy' to adopt and manage. As noted above, OMOV was eventually adopted by Party members, but only by the narrowest of margins, and the Party's MPs retained exclusive control over the nomination of candidates.

As Punnett (1992, pp. 140-141) notes, the SDP's new system was specified in considerable detail, and emerged from many levels of consultation. Hence, it is 'somewhat ironic' that it was to be so little used. A new SDP leader was chosen on only three occasions between its adoption in 1982 and the Party's eventual merger with the Liberals in 1988, and on two of these there was only one candidate. In March 1988, the memberships of both parties were balloted. Both endorsed the final merger agreement, which included OMOV for leadership elections. As Stark (1996, p. 80) notes, 'Despite the difficulty both parent parties had previously encountered in formulating their leadership selection rules, this was one matter which never became contentious during the negotiations which created the Liberal Democrats'. Prospective candidates had to be MPs, and nominated by MPs and at least 200 members from 20 local parties. This involvement of party members in the nomination process distinguishes the Liberal Democrats from the Labour and

Conservative parties, both of whom leave the nomination of candidates exclusively in the hands of the Party's MPs, as did the SDP and the Liberals in 1976.

From Grey Suits to Grassroots: The Conservative Party

In 1967, the Liberal Party became the last of the (then) major British parties to elect its leader via a secret ballot of MPs. In 1976, the Liberals became the first to do so via a ballot of its membership. The Conservative Party formally elected its leader for the first time, via a secret ballot of MPs, in 1965. In 1998, the Conservatives became the last of the major British parties to expand the leadership selectorate beyond its parliamentary caucus, to include Party members.

Prior to 1965, the Conservative Party leader was not formally elected, but 'emerged' through processes of informal consultation.

'Senior Party figures within the Party assessed opinion on the relative merits of potential leaders and a name was evolved through these deliberations. The person who was chosen in this way was duly adopted as leader at a gathering of the Party's parliamentarians and others, but this was ... merely the coronation of someone selected by a process that was essentially informal and mysterious'. (Punnett, 1992, p. 27)

This system, known as the 'magic circle', was used until the controversial succession to Harold Macmillan in 1963. Macmillan's sudden resignation in October that year turned the Party's annual Conference into an unofficial leadership convention, a situation for which there was no historical precedent. The subsequent 'emergence' of Lord Home as Prime Minister and Party Leader, while acceptable to most senior Party figures, was wholly unacceptable to others, and hence divided opinion. To make matters worse, the Conservatives went on to lose the 1964 General Election. The all-too-visible contrast between the 'fourteenth Earl' and his recently elected Labour opposite number, Harold Wilson, made the 'magic circle' appear anachronistic, and hence an electoral liability

in a self-consciously 'modern' era. The solution to this problem was the introduction in 1965 of a formal procedure for electing the Conservative leader. Between 1965 and 1997, six elections were held, with an electorate restricted to the Party's MPs.

The unruly behaviour of the parliamentary Party from 1992 to 1997 had angered many Conservatives in the country, some of whom had long been unhappy with their virtual exclusion from the process of choosing the Party Leader. Consequently, one of William Hague's promises during his campaign for the leadership in 1997 had been to change the system if he won. The following year, the system introduced in 1965 which restricted the franchise to Conservative MPs alone finally came to an end.

The changes to the existing rules were essentially twofold. First, the rule allowing an annual challenge to the incumbent — long regarded as unsatisfactory — was scrapped and there would now be an additional hurdle for a would-be challenger to surmount. In order to trigger a contest in future, 15 per cent of the Party's MPs would have to write to the Chairman of the 1922 Committee demanding a vote of confidence, which could be held at any time. Should the incumbent win this initial vote (a simple majority of MPs would suffice), he would be immune to any further challenge for 12 months; if not, he would have to resign and be barred from standing in any subsequent contest. Instead, there would be a series of eliminative ballots among MPs. Once MPs had reduced the field to two candidates, the second change could come into effect: Party members would have the final say by means of a postal ballot.

As Cross and Blais (2012a, p. 138) note, the Conservatives adopted this reform shortly after returning to the opposition benches in 1997. Following the Party's landslide defeat, there were 'widespread demands for an immediate change to give the extra-parliamentary Party a share of the votes in deciding the succession', but these were ignored by MPs, who not only elected the next leader themselves, but in choosing William Hague also ignored the clear preference of constituency

chairmen representing local parties for the vastly more experienced and popular Kenneth Clarke (Alderman, 1999, p. 265). As Cross and Blais explain,

‘The need to rebuild the extra parliamentary Party after a long run in government and the 1997 electoral defeat, a demand for greater party democracy among activists and the view that leadership selection should not be decided by a minority parliamentary Party with no representation from Scotland and Wales came together to make the demands for change unstoppable’.

In addition to these factors, a sufficient explanation for the Conservatives’ adoption of reform must also include the fact that giving Party members a say in electing the leader was ‘used as a *quid pro quo* by a leader (William Hague) for wide-ranging (and centralizing) organizational reforms that might otherwise have been rejected at grassroots level’ (Bale and Webb, 2014, p. 18). As Kelly (2003, pp. 86-87, 102) explains,

‘According to one of Hague’s supporters ... what the new leader really wanted all along was the “New Labourfication” of the Conservative organization, based on Hague’s covert admiration for Labour’s approach to opposition after 1994.... as with New Labour, the leadership’s use of OMOV was less a sign of thoroughbred democracy than of short-term party management, helping to stifle the leader’s critics within the parliamentary party while making the Party look more “modern” and “inclusive”’.

Although there is clear evidence here of a ‘contagion effect’, Cross and Blais’ account makes no mention of the fact that, Party members having elected Iain Duncan Smith as Hague’s successor in 2001, Conservative MPs had lost patience with him by 2003 and, fearing another long, divisive and expensive contest in the country, then contrived, having deposed Duncan Smith in a vote of confidence, to nominate a single candidate, Michael Howard, as their next leader. Having resigned after a third consecutive General Election defeat in 2005, Howard then attempted – in the end,

unsuccessfully – to narrow the selectorate for choosing his successor and ensure that MPs alone would have the final say in selecting future Party leaders (Denham and Dorey, 2006, pp. 35-36; Denham and O’Hara, 2008; Heppell, 2008).

Conclusion

As this article has shown, British political parties, like their counterparts in other Westminster parliamentary systems, have radically changed the ways in which they choose their leaders since 1965. Expanding on Cross and Blais’ study of party leadership selection in the five principal Anglophone democracies – Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland and New Zealand – it first identified four hypotheses that purport to explain why the major parties in three of those countries, including Britain, have adopted such reform: first, that parties will only expand their leadership selectorates beyond the parliamentary caucus after an electoral setback; second, that they are more likely to adopt such reform when in opposition than in government; third, that new parties adopt and manage such reform more easily than their older and more established counterparts; and fourth, that parties are more likely to adopt such reform when at least one of their competitors (or historical antecedents) has done so already.

Having outlined this general framework, the article then examined why five major British parties have expanded their leadership selectorates beyond parliamentary elites since 1965. Broadly speaking, the British experience confirms each of Cross and Blais’ necessary conditions outlined above. On every occasion, the party in question chose to expand the selectorate for choosing its leader when in opposition. In most cases, they adopted such reform following a setback in the previous General Election. The two ‘new’ parties, the SDP and the Liberal Democrats, adopted OMOV more swiftly and easily than their more established counterparts and (almost) from the outset, and the Liberal Democrats did so more swiftly and easily than the SDP. A further relevant

factor was, arguably, contagion. Like their counterparts in other Anglophone parliamentary democracies, the major British parties, with the exception of the Liberals in 1976, expanded the selectorate for choosing their leaders when at least one of their competitors – or, in the case of the Liberal Democrats, parental antecedents – had done so already.

As this article has shown, however, these general factors were merely necessary, not sufficient, conditions to explain why the major British parties have adopted such reform. It is no surprise to discover that the two main parties, Labour and Conservative, did so when in opposition, not in government, and after an electoral setback. They were highly unlikely to have done so after an electoral triumph which saw either party cruising to victory in a General Election. The case of the SDP also shows that ‘new’ parties do not necessarily find the adoption of such reform easier to manage than their older, more established counterparts. Finally, with the exception of the Conservative Party in 1998, Cross and Blais provide no evidence to suggest that contagion was a ‘particularly important’ factor in the British context.

In its defence, Cross and Blais’ landmark study is merely one example of the inherent limits of comparative politics, something the authors themselves acknowledge in the following disclaimer (2012b, p. 43):

‘[W]e examine cases of change and non-change in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada, beginning with the first party to adopt reform in each country. Space permits only a brief overview of the context surrounding reform.... We cannot provide a full, detailed account of change in each party.... Readers are encouraged to consult the cited party and country-specific literature for a full account of the individual cases’.

In sum, while Cross and Blais’ study makes a significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding of party leadership selection reform in Anglophone democracies, it has limited explanatory power when applied to the British experience. Instead, the adoption of such reform in

the British context is best understood and explained by examining the internal politics and external circumstances of individual parties.

References

Alderman, K. (1999) Revision of leadership election procedures in the Conservative Party. *Parliamentary Affairs* 52(2): 260-274.

Bale, T. and Webb, P. (2014) The selection of party leaders in the UK. In: J-B. Pilet and W.P. Cross (eds.) *The Selection of Political Party Leaders in Contemporary Parliamentary Democracies: A Comparative Study*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 12-29.

Cross, W. P. and Blais, A. (2012) Who selects the party leader? *Party Politics* 18(2): 127-150.

Cross, W.P. and Blais, A. (2012b) *Politics at the Centre: The Selection and Removal of Party Leaders in the Anglo Parliamentary Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cross, W.P. and Pilet, J-B. (eds.) (2015) *The Politics of Party Leadership: A Cross-National Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Denham, A. and Dorey, P. (2006) A tale of two speeches? The Conservative leadership election of 2005. *Political Quarterly* 77(1): 35-42.

Denham, A. and O'Hara, K. (2008) *Democratising Conservative leadership selection: From Grey Suits to Grass Roots*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Dorey, P. and Denham, A. (2011) O, brother, where art thou? The Labour Party leadership election of 2010. *British Politics*, 6(3): 286-316.

Dorey, P. and Denham, A. (2016) The longest suicide vote in history: the Labour Party leadership election of 2015. *British Politics*, IN PRESS.

- Drucker, H. (1981) Changes in the Labour Party leadership. *Parliamentary Affairs* 34(4): 369-381.
- Drucker, H. (1986) 'All the King's horses and all the King's men': The Social Democratic Party in Britain. In: W.E. Paterson and A.H. Thomas (eds.) *The Future of Social Democracy: Problems and Prospects of Social Democratic Parties in Western Europe*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 108-126.
- Garnett, M. (2006) *Principles and Politics in Contemporary Britain*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Harmel, R., Heo, U., Tan, A. and Janda, K. (1995) Performance, leadership, factions and party change. *West European Politics* 18(1): 1-33.
- Heppell, T. (2008) *Choosing the Tory Leader: Conservative Party Leadership Elections from Heath to Cameron*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Heppell, T. (2010) *Choosing the Labour Leader: Labour Party Leadership Elections from Wilson to Brown*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Jobson, R. and Wickham-Jones, M. (2011) Reinventing the block vote? Trade unions and the 2010 Labour Party leadership election. *British Politics* 6(3): 317-344.
- Kavanagh, D. (1983) Organization and power in the Liberal Party. In: V. Bogdanor (ed.) *Liberal Party Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 123-142.
- Kelly, R. (2003) Organizational reform and the extra-parliamentary party. In M. Garnett and P. Lynch (eds.) *The Conservatives in Crisis: The Tories after 1997*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, pp. 82-106.
- Kenig, O. (2009a) Democratization of party leadership selection: do wider selectorates produce more competitive contests? *Electoral Studies* 28(2): 240-247.
- Kenig, O. (2009b) Classifying party leaders' selection methods in parliamentary democracies. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 19(4): 433-447.

- LeDuc, L. (2001) Democratizing party leadership selection. *Party Politics* 7(3): 323-341.
- Pemberton, H. and Wickham-Jones, M. (2013) Brothers all? The operation of the electoral college in the 2010 Labour leadership contest. *Parliamentary Affairs* 66(4): 708-731.
- Pilet, J-B. and Cross, W.P. (eds.) (2014) *The Selection of Political Party Leaders in Contemporary Parliamentary Democracies: A Comparative Study*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Punnett, R.M. (1992) *Selecting the Party Leader: Britain in Comparative Perspective*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Quinn, T. (2004) Electing the leader: The British Labour Party's electoral college. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6(3): 333-352.
- Quinn, T. (2010) Membership ballots in party leadership elections in Britain. *Representation* 46(1): 101-117.
- Quinn, T. (2012) *Electing and Ejecting Party Leaders in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Quinn, T. (2015) Explaining the result of the Labour leadership election of 2015. *The Plot*, October 5th. <http://www.the-plot.org/2015/10/05/explaining-the-result-of-the-labour-leadership-election-of-2015-2/>
- Russell, M. (2005) *Building New Labour: The Politics of Party Organization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stark, L.P. (1996) *Choosing a Leader: Party Leadership Contests in Britain from Macmillan to Blair*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Steed, M. (1977) Foreword. In: A. Cyr, *Liberal Party Politics in Britain*. London: John Calder, pp. 11-35.
- Wickham-Jones, M. (2014) Introducing OMOV: the Labour Party-Trade Union Review Group and the 1994 leadership contest. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 52(1): 33-56.