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

Abstract

Since 1965, Britain’s major political parties have radically changed the ways in which they choose their leaders. Expanding on Cross and Blais’ study of leadership selection in Anglophone democracies, this article first identifies four hypotheses that purport to explain why the major parties in Britain, Canada and Ireland have adopted such reform. It then explains why five major British parties have done so since 1965. It concludes that Cross and Blais’ study has limited explanatory power when applied to the British experience. Instead, the adoption of reform is best explained by the internal politics and external circumstances of individual parties.

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Introduction

Since 1965, Britain’s major political parties have radically, and repeatedly, changed the ways in which they choose their leaders. Consistent with developments in other English-speaking ‘Westminster’ parliamentary systems, notably Canada and Ireland, they have expanded their leadership selectorates beyond parliamentary elites to include party members, affiliated organizations and registered supporters. Expanding on a major cross-national study of party leadership selection in five Anglophone democracies (Cross and Blais, 2012), this article first identifies four general hypotheses that purport to explain why the major parties in three of those countries – Britain, Canada and Ireland – have adopted such reform. It then explains how and why five major British parties have done so since 1965. It concludes that, while Cross and Blais’ comparative approach 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 contemporary Britain is best understood and explained by examining the internal politics and external circumstances of individual parties.

Anglophone Democracies: A Comparative Approach

In a major work on party leadership selection in British politics between 1963 and 1995, Leonard 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 the 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 cross-national and comparative perspective, Cross and Blais (2012, pp. 145-6) argue that leadership selection is one of the most important activities engaged in by political parties. Party leaders, they argue, 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 argue, is almost universal among the major parties in three of the five principal Anglophone 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 the other three countries 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 following an electoral setback. A second is that parties are more likely to adopt such reform when in opposition than in government. Opposition parties, they argue, 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, 2012, pp. 129-30).

Cross and Blais’ third hypothesis is that new parties will more readily adopt leadership selection rules that allow a greater role for their rank-and-file members than their 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 [more] established competitors and adopting organizational innovation is one way to do so’.

Another relevant 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 consequently ‘democratic’. In addition, when one party innovates in a way that is consistent with public expectations, 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. Hence, a fourth hypothesis to explain the adoption of such reform is that parties are more likely to expand
their selectorates when one or more of their competitors (or historical antecedents) has done so already.

Testing these four hypotheses in turn, Cross and Blais identify 16 major parties in Britain, Canada and Ireland that increased the relative 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 also 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, 2012, p. 134)

A third hypothesis, that new parties are more likely than old ones to adopt a wider selectorate, is also confirmed. Of the seven new British, Canadian and Irish parties, they argue, four granted full authority to their memberships from the outset, and two other Canadian parties (Reform and Bloc Quebecois) did so shortly after their creation.

The evidence, Cross and Blais argue, is also consistent with the fourth hypothesis, that there is 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 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, 2012, pp. 135-6)

While generally supported by the evidence, however, these four hypotheses appear to be necessary, not sufficient, conditions. Based on the British, Canadian and Irish experience, they argue, parties only make the change when in opposition and after an electoral setback. Many of these parties, however, had earlier electoral setbacks when they did not (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, 2012, p. 136)

In short, Cross and Blais argue, the evidence suggests that, while we cannot always explain the first 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 outlined this general framework, the following sections seek to explain why five major British parties have adopted reform since 1965.

**A Study in Miniature: The Liberal Party**

The first major British party to expand its selectorate beyond parliamentary elites was the Liberal Party in 1976. As Punnett (1992, p. 132) explains, from the Liberal Party’s birth in 1868 until its merger with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1988, its 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 Liberals shared with the Conservatives 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, and 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 and returned to office. 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 Liberal Party, 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.
Like the Conservatives, the very idea of a formal contest between rival candidates was considered anathema.

In 1967, the Liberal leadership was formally contested for the first time, by three of the Party’s 12 MPs. A secret ballot was held the day after the announcement of Jo Grimond’s resignation as leader. Jeremy Thorpe received 6 votes, his two opponents 3 apiece. Despite Thorpe’s failure to win an overall majority—even after second preferences had been counted—he 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. 70-1). Claims by MPs to be representative of the Party as a whole were undermined 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 following the previous General Election of October 1974 (Cross and Blais, 2012, p. 135). These two general factors alone, however, provide an insufficiently nuanced 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, the Party had returned only six MPs. This increased to 14 in February 1974, when it received over six million votes. In October that year, the Liberal vote declined by a million, and the size of the parliamentary party was reduced by one, to 13. In short, the Party’s opposition status was, by now, long-established and the electoral ‘setback’ it had
suffered in the preceding General Election more apparent in terms of votes than parliamentary seats.

In addition to the Liberal 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 leader from a growing number of new members in the constituencies 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 Party’s 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. 32-3). In June, a special Assembly was held in Manchester to decide on a new system. 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. 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 (Punnett, 1992, pp. 137-8).

According to its designer, Michael Steed, this system, ‘balancing the 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 used, like its predecessor in 1967, by the Liberals 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 (Kavanagh, 1983, p. 140).

**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. 36-7) explains, the origins of the Labour Party were very different from the Conservative and Liberal parties.

‘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. 37-9, 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 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’ leadership credentials (Stark, 1996, p. 44).

As Stark (1996, p. 41) explains, the campaign to extend the franchise began as early as 1969. Although the previous two Labour Conferences had voted to retain the system of election by MPs alone, a National Executive Committee (NEC) resolution to Conference in 1980 gave delegates another opportunity to change their minds. This was carried, by the narrowest of margins. An ‘emergency resolution’ was then approved to hold a special conference at Wembley in January 1981 to consider how to institute 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 (Stark, 1996, p. 56).

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 of 1979 (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 consecutive General Election, prompting renewed consideration of its relationship with the trade unions. By this time, 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 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. CLP block voting had already been abolished in 1989; instead, all individual Party members would henceforth be entitled to participate in a postal ballot: One Member, One Vote.

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 the latter figure was subsequently raised again to 15 per cent in 2014) and its ability to shape such contests a whole, a role it inherited from union leaders. 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. As with the original introduction of the Electoral College in 1981, and its subsequent reconfiguration, Labour adopted this new system when in opposition, having lost the General Election of 2010; on each occasion, however, these were merely necessary, not sufficient, conditions. Nor, despite the fact that other major British parties had also moved in a similar direction since the introduction of the Electoral College in 1981, was there any evidence of a ‘contagion effect’. 
‘New’ Parties: The SDP and the Liberal Democrats

Had the Labour Party not adopted an Electoral College to elect its leader, there might never have been a Social Democratic Party (SDP). All but one of the 14 MPS who launched the SDP 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’. 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 (Stark, 1996, pp. 74-5).

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. 138-9) 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 (Punnett, 1992, p. 139).

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 (Punnett, 1992, p. 141).

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 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 manage, OMOV was eventually adopted by Party members, but only by the narrowest of margins, and SDP MPs retained control over the nomination of candidates. In addition, Cross and Blais’ statement that ‘Both the Social Democrats and the Liberal Democrats adopted membership votes for their leadership at the time of their formation’ (Cross and Blais, 2012, p. 137) is incorrect in respect of the SDP.

As Punnett (1992, pp. 140-1) explains, 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’. 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 Labour and the Conservatives, which leave nominations exclusively in the hands of MPs, as did the SDP and the Liberals in 1976 (Punnett, 1992, pp. 143-4).

From Grey Suits to Grassroots: The Conservative Party

In 1967, the Liberal Party became the last of the (then) major British parties to formally elect its leader via a (secret) ballot of MPs. In 1976, the Liberals became the first to elect their leader via a ballot of Party members. 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 Conservatives had never chosen a new Party Leader while in opposition. The Conservative 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)

As Punnett (1992, p. 33) explains, this distinctive method of selecting a party leader was not consciously adopted at any specific time, but emerged from the practices of nineteenth-century politics.
'The Conservatives were a parliamentary party before they acquired an extra-parliamentary organization towards the end of the nineteenth century. Thus their practices were established long before it was felt that the views of the Party outside Parliament had any significance. The process of informal consultations among a limited number of Party notables also fitted the elitist values that were central to Conservative ideology'.

This system of informal consultation among Party notables – subsequently 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 note, the Conservatives adopted this reform shortly after returning to the opposition benches, having won four consecutive General Elections between 1979 and 1997. Following the 1997 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 selected the next leader themselves, but in choosing William Hague ignored the clear preference of Party members for Kenneth Clarke (Alderman, 1999, p. 265). As Cross and Blais (2012, p. 138) 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 this reform would have to include the fact that giving Party members a say in electing the Party 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. 86-7, 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 him 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 for his party 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. 35-6; 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 in particular – Britain, Canada and Ireland – 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 tend to do so more easily than their more established counterparts; and fourth, that parties are more likely to do so when 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’ general hypotheses 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, arguably the most fully ‘democratic’ system, more easily than their more established counterparts and the Liberal Democrats did so more easily than the SDP. A further relevant contextual factor was, arguably, contagion. Like their counterparts in other Anglophone democracies, the major British parties, with the single exception of the Liberal Party in 1976, expanded the selectorate for choosing their leaders when at least one of their competitors – or, in the case of the Liberal Democrats in 1988, Liberal and SDP parental antecedents – had done so already.

As this article has shown, however, these general contextual factors were necessary, but not sufficient, conditions to explain why the major British parties adopted such reform. It is hardly surprising that they did so when in opposition, not in government, and after an electoral setback. They were hardly likely to do so after an electoral triumph and winning the previous General Election. The case of the SDP also demonstrates that ‘new’ parties do not necessarily find the adoption of such reform easier to manage than their more established counterparts. Finally, with the exception of the Conservative Party in 1998, there is no specific evidence of a contagion effect.
In short, while Cross and Blais’ study makes an important contribution to our knowledge and understanding of party leadership selection reform in Anglophone democracies, their comparative approach has limited explanatory power when applied to the specific of the British experience. Instead, as this article has shown, the adoption of such reform in contemporary Britain is ultimately best understood and explained by examining the internal politics and external circumstances of individual parties.

References


