Selecting the ‘Right Sort’: Patterns of Political Recruitment in British By-elections

Elizabeth Evans*

Department of Politics and International Relations, Kingston University, Penrhyn Road, Kingston upon Thames KT1 2EE, UK

*Correspondence: elizabeth.evans@kingston.ac.uk

Analyses of by-elections traditionally focus on explorations of electoral behaviour, rather than on patterns of political recruitment. However, who the parties select is important, as the candidate essentially constitutes the temporary face of the party. Furthermore, each party adapts their selection rules during by-elections to facilitate a greater role for the centre in the process. Combining qualitative research with selection and election data, this article explores intra-party tensions regarding the candidate selection process by focusing on the success rates of three specific groups of candidates: political insiders, women and locals. Focusing on by-election political recruitment provides an opportunity to assess the various tensions that arise over candidate selection between central strategists and local party activists, during intense and high profile campaigns.

Candidate selection remains a contested and divisive issue within political parties, challenging power dynamics between national and local parties (see Ranney, 1965; Gallagher and Marsh, 1988; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995a,b). Indeed, control of candidate selection often reflects locations of power within political parties (see Denver, 1988). Whilst the national party is keen to ensure the (s)election of loyal members with expertise who can contribute to the Parliamentary party at Westminster, local associations are more concerned with selecting a candidate who will work well locally and fit in with the local party. These tensions are inevitably heightened during by-election candidate selections when normal rules are suspended in order to allow party headquarters more direct influence. This change of process is important, because analysing political recruitment at by-elections enables us to consider more broadly intra-party...
dynamics, the intentions and strategies of the party leadership, and the extent to which local party members can influence the selection process.¹

Interest in by-elections primarily focuses upon the implications of the result for the Government of the day, not least in terms of public approval of Government performance (see Cook and Ramsden, 1973; Norris, 1990). Given that the number of by-elections held per Parliament has declined in the post-war period,² it is perhaps unsurprising that political recruitment has attracted little interest. However, the principle function of a by-election remains to elect a Member of Parliament (Butler, 1973), thereby facilitating the election of ‘new blood’ into the House of Commons (Norris, 1990, p. 11). Previous research has noted two groups who have traditionally done well at by-elections: women and party insiders (see Norris, 1990, p.173; Rasmussen, 1981). This article is interested in exploring the success rate of these two groups, additionally it considers the growing importance of localism as a key determinate of selection and reflects upon how it might impact upon the selection of women and political insiders.³ Combining qualitative research with data on candidate selection, this article outlines both the formal and informal rules and norms that shape selection processes and considers the specific impact that they might have upon the types of by-election candidates selected.

Whilst by-elections are generally considered to be ‘low salience’ elections, they matter to both the Government and opposition alike; the former keen to avoid embarrassing defeats, and the latter eager to inflict damage upon the Government whilst demonstrating their own electability. For opposition parties, two further reasons underpin the importance they attach to by-elections: for smaller parties, and the Liberal Democrats specifically, by-elections are important opportunities to cause spectacular upsets and to demonstrate credibility, and in the run up to a general election, the official opposition can use by-elections not only to demonstrate electability, but also to build momentum (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005). For these reasons, central party strategists are keen to ensure that the ‘right’ sort of candidate is in place, one who will cope with acute levels of scrutiny during a brief yet intense and high profile campaign (Norris, 1990, p. 165). As such, who the party selects can tell us more about the type of image that political parties wish to project to the local and national electorate.

¹The importance of by-election candidate section has been noted previously as a way of understanding intra-party dynamics; see Ranney (1965) in particular.

²The average number held between 1945 and 1992 was 29.3, since 1992 this has dropped to 13.2 with a notable low of 6 held in the 2001 Parliament.

³See the work on localism and general election political recruitment (Childs and Cowley, 2011) [early access online]
Research into by-election political recruitment has noted that political insiders and women tend to do well. Political insiders and fast rising party stars have frequently fought by-elections; for example, Tony Blair in Beaconsfield, 1986; Michael Portillo in Enfield, 1984; William Hague in Richmond in 1989 are all examples of what Butler terms ‘special people’ (Butler, 1973, p. 5). This trend also reflects patterns in general election political recruitment, namely an increase in the number of political researchers and Westminster-based policy insiders being returned to Parliament (see for instance, Moran, 2005; Cairney, 2007). Additionally, and contra to general elections, by-elections have seen women disproportionately returned to Parliament (see Rasmussen, 1981; Norris, 1990; Crewe, 1997) Norris suggests that women do better in by-elections because of the more open nature of the contest and because of the absence of an incumbent (Norris, 1990, p. 165). This article explores the extent to which political insiders and women have continued to do well in by-elections.

There is ‘widespread acknowledgement’ from political parties that the selection of a local candidate can be an ‘electoral asset’ (Childs and Cowley, 2011, p. 3). Moreover, research has highlighted that the (s)electorate prefer a local candidate (Childs and Cowley, 2011). Compounding this emphasis on localism is the prominent role played by the Liberal Democrats in by-elections. The third party has not only overturned large majorities at by-elections but also typically select local candidates, whilst attacking political opponents for selecting ‘outsiders’ (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005, chp. 4). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that there may have been a contagion effect from the Liberal Democrats to the other parties, with local candidates becoming increasingly important for by-elections. The brief campaign period also means that the local ‘credentials’ of the candidate often come into sharp focus. Whilst selecting a local candidate is important to many local party associations who are keen to have a candidate with a demonstrable link to the constituency, they are also often motivated in their desire for a local candidate as a way of resisting interference from the centre in the selection process.

In his study of political recruitment in Britain, Ranney devoted much attention to the differences between candidate selection for general and by-elections, arguing, ‘candidates in by-elections are far more visible’ (Ranney, 1965, p. 8). As such, the national headquarters of each of the three main parties take a more active role in selecting by-election candidates, as they become the ‘human image’ of the party portrayed to the public (Ranney, 1965, p. 10). This central intervention is key as it speaks directly to the ongoing tensions within 4Looking at Ranney’s analysis of candidates selected with a local connection highlights that this was higher for by-election than for general election candidates amongst both the Conservatives and Liberals, the opposite was true for Labour, Ranney (1965, p.38, 151, 267).
political parties regarding democratic organisation (Gallagher, 1988). Across all parties tensions often erupt over the issue of candidate selection. This article considers how this tension affects the success of women, political insiders and locals in by-elections. These three types of candidates have been selected because inter-party tensions most often arise when women and political insiders are perceived to have been ‘parachuted’ into a seat at the expense of the local candidate.

1. Data and methods

This article adopts a two-stage approach to explore by-election political recruitment: analysis of the selection and election data from the 51 by-elections held between 1992 and 2010 is provided, and data gathered from interviews undertaken with MPs elected in by-elections is considered. The starting point of 1992 was primarily selected because the Labour party’s adoption of all women shortlists (AWS) at the point of selection in 1993 had a striking impact upon internal and external debates surrounding women’s (s)election. The use of AWS by Labour is important in terms of understanding shifts in intra-party democracy concerning the candidate selection process. For sure Labour was divided over the issue with many local parties hostile to the idea of having to select from a women-only shortlist; however, the precedent set by AWS arguably meant that local parties are typically more receptive to central interference during selection processes. Conversely, and stressing the importance of equality of opportunity, merit and local autonomy, neither the Liberal Democrats nor the Conservatives have adopted AWS (see Childs, 2008). This has subsequently led to charges from activists within and across the political spectrum that neither party is fully committed to increasing the number of women MPs (Ashe et al.).

Extant research exploring by-election political recruitment refers to pre-1992 data (Norris, 1990). Accordingly, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 18 out of the 51 MPs elected in by-elections between 1992 and 2010 (35 per cent): nine Labour, four Conservatives, four Liberal Democrats and one SNP. Interviews were conducted at the Palace of Westminster and constituency offices and were fully transcribed. MPs were asked specifically about the selection process and about their perceptions of the necessary characteristics for by-election candidates. Given that the research partially relies upon self-reported

---

5 Both by-elections Winchester (1997) and Haltemprice and Howden (2008) are excluded from this analysis, the former because it was simply a re-run of the general election and the latter because neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats fielded candidates against David Davis.

6 I would like to thank Mark Wickham-Jones for this suggestion.

7 In developing the research further obtaining data from interviews with unsuccessful candidates would be desirable.
claims care has been taken to avoid ‘over-reading’ the claims and to treat perceptions and recollections with caution. This is particularly important for research exploring political recruitment as issues of validity, accuracy and perhaps most importantly sour grapes often colour people’s recollections of candidate selection (see Norris and Lovenduski 1995a,b, pp. 14–15). Moreover, it is difficult to gauge the influence that specific individuals may have been able to wield behind the scenes (Gallagher, 1988, p. 5). As such, considerations of selection processes are situated within broader debates in the literature concerning selection processes and internal party democracy (Table 1).

Data pertaining to the unsuccessful candidates’ biographic details were gathered from a number of sources, including by-election campaign literature; the Parliament Information Office; informal requests to the political parties; the BBC; print-based media websites such as the Guardian, Telegraph and The Times. Despite the majority of information being readily available from either Internet sources from the parties themselves, there were a number of issues regarding the operationalisation of the variables that this research seeks to explore: sex, political insider status and localism.

Previous research has highlighted that analysis of the presence of women’s bodies does, on one level, mean using sex as a substitute for gender. This is of course distinctly problematic for those who understand gender to be a continuum and not simply a binary (Campbell, 2006). However, as this research is interested in the percentage of women selected and elected, the research necessarily has to rely upon sex as an indicator for women’s representation.

The increasing perception of the professionalisation of politics has witnessed a perceptive shift from politics as a vocation to politics as a job. Indeed, brokerage jobs, including working for an MP, for a political party,
as a special adviser or for a think tank, have become seen as an increasingly popular route into Parliament. This is a shift away from being required to ‘serve your time’ as activists or in local electoral politics. This perception of the career politician has negative connotations, which is not within the remit of this article to explore, suffice to say that the preference afforded to individuals during selections and once in Parliament has been noted in various quarters (see for instance, Riddell, 1996; Oborne, 2007; Mullin, 2010). For the purposes of this research, Butler’s ‘special people’ has been conflated with political heavyweights to create a political insider category. They can be crudely characterised as those who have either worked for their party or are former nationally elected politicians.

Finally, this article seeks to explore the importance of selecting a local candidate. Previous research has noted the difficulty with which this term can be defined—for instance, by birth, by ancestry or how long a resident has lived in a constituency (Childs and Cowley, 2011). For the purposes of this research, MPs and candidates are counted as local if they specifically define themselves as such in their election campaign literature. Whilst this is problematic, given the desire on the part of most candidates to emphasise their connection to the constituency, quantifying localism in this way is helpful as it tells us the extent to which localism is used in by-election campaigns.

2. Selection processes

There are a number of factors that help mediate the candidate selection process, including systemic aspects such as the electoral and party system; contextual issues such as party organisation; individual factors such as the resources and motivations of the aspirant candidates (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995a,b). By-elections, like general elections, are individualised elections carried out using the First Past the Post system. As this article is chiefly interested in exploring whether the ways in which political parties go about selecting their candidates for by-elections has an impact upon the types of people selected, exploring the impact of the contextual factors is of most relevance.

Standard selection processes adopted by the parties for general election candidates are adapted for by-elections. Whilst each party has a slightly different policy...
for choosing by-election candidates, all undertake a fresh selection process even if a candidate is already in situ ahead of the next general election. The selection procedures adopted for by-elections are significant in a number of ways: firstly, it gives party headquarters a chance to influence or even determine which candidate will be shortlisted and/or selected; and secondly it usually allows the local party a chance to pick from a wider pool of candidates. Inevitably, these two factors give rise to intra-party tensions between local associations and central party headquarters as each seeks to influence the outcome.

The tension between the core (central party) and periphery (local party) is important, specifically in terms of candidate selection. Across all parties, local members often perceive candidate selection to be one of the few spheres of influence available to them (Webb, 2000). Accordingly, local parties typically resent perceived interference from the centre during the selection process. Inter-party differences for the selection procedures (as set out in Figure 1) illustrates that for all parties there is a strong lead from the centre in the process, although the final decision is taken by local party members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Conservatives</th>
<th>Liberal Democrats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• All on the national list or those nominated by constituency organisations and party branches can apply.</td>
<td>• All on the party’s approved list can apply.</td>
<td>• All on the party’s approved list can apply.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• NEC draws up a longlist by exhaustive ballot of around six.</td>
<td>• CCHQ draws up a shortlist of around four.</td>
<td>• Constituency party draws up a shortlist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Candidates are interviewed and the NEC draws up a shortlist, typically of three.</td>
<td>• Shortlisted candidates attend a meeting of the local executive committee.</td>
<td>• A panel at party HQ interviews shortlisted candidates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shortlisted candidates meet party branches, answer questions and give a formal presentation.</td>
<td>• Shortlisted candidates deliver a speech and answer questions.</td>
<td>• Panel will produce the list from which the local party makes the final selection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Local party vote in eliminating ballot.</td>
<td>• Selection is then formally confirmed by constituency general meeting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• NEC must endorse selected candidate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1** Selection procedures for by-election candidates

During the interviews, MPs from all parties highlighted the tensions that arose between central headquarters and the local branch over the candidate selection process. The tension was perceived by many to be ‘inevitable’ given that a fresh campaign had to be launched and sustained within a relatively short period
of time. This tension typically arose when the central party tried to intervene to ensure the selection of a preferred candidate:

There was a real sense of achievement when I was selected – a sense that we’d shown central office that they couldn’t just parachute someone in. (Conservative)

Well I probably wasn’t their [party headquarters] first choice, in fact I know I was far from it, but the local party weren’t having any interference. (Labour)

The perceptions of many of the MPs suggested that whilst the centre had tried to influence the selection process their attempts were widely seen as having been unsuccessful. Moreover, some MPs highlighted that interference from the centre merely served to reinforce the preference for a local candidate. This is a critical point and will be explored in greater detail with reference to the selection and election data given later.

Interviewees highlighted that whilst local party selectorates were interested primarily in winning the by-election, the selection of the candidate was perceived to be the aspect of the campaign that generated the most discussion and tension—as might be expected. In reflecting upon their own selection processes the MPs gave a number of reasons why they had been chosen ranging from being a local candidate, to previous experience and (although less frequently) support from the party’s headquarters.

3. Political insiders

Political parties often use by-elections to select political insiders or to bring back former political heavyweights. Big shifts in the electoral landscape typically increases the potential number of former MPs who wish to return to the Commons; for instance, the Labour landslide in 1997 meant that there were potentially more Conservatives seeking to return to the Commons. There are of course a number of advantages and disadvantages associated with selecting a former MP or a high profile political insider to run as a by-election candidate.

In selecting someone with experience of Westminster, someone who already has a ‘name’ both within the party and in the national media, the party can be confident of a skilled political performer. Conversely, former MPs not only have to develop a relationship with a new local association and constituency, but they also have a record to defend. Furthermore, those who have worked for the party, whilst arriving with the approval and support of the party leadership, are often charged with a lack of ‘real world’ experience and are often
perceived to be too much a part of the Westminster village. Accordingly, the decision to select a political insider is often controversial.

General elections have seen an increase in the number of MPs who had formerly been politicians or political organisers: 9.5 per cent in 1997; 10.5 per cent in 2001; and 14.1 per cent in 2005 (House of Commons Library, 2005). Based on this trend, and given the opportunities that by-elections present for party leaders to promote their favoured candidates, it could be expected that similar figures would emerge for by-election MPs (Table 2).

Although, at the aggregate level, the percentage of political insiders returned at by-elections is relatively low (7 out of 51, 13.7 per cent), the data in Table 2 highlight that this group make up over a third of Conservative MPs returned, albeit on very small numbers. Of the three main parties, Labour selected the largest number of candidates from this group, although this was not translated into electoral successes. Looking in further detail at the kinds of seats they were selected for reveals that four of the Conservatives political insiders (57 per cent) and seven Labour (77 per cent) were selected for held seats. This is important because over 60 per cent of by-elections did not result in a change of party (34 of the 51 seats). Thus, although the number of political insiders selected and elected was not significant, they tended to be selected for held seats.

Indeed looking at the selection data, it is intriguing to note that 13 of those political insiders selected were not returned. Whilst there is no evidence to suggest that this is because of their previous experience, many of the interviewees felt that being too closely associated with Westminster either as a party worker or a former politician was of little help in getting (s)elected. When asked about what previous experience and knowledge of the party a by-election candidate should ideally possess, the MPs offered a range of opinions that highlighted both inter and intra-party differences.

Some local associations want someone who’s been around who knows how to deliver speeches who doesn’t get flustered. At a selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Political insiders (%)</th>
<th>Elected (% of elected total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cons.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>7 (13.7)</td>
<td>3 (37.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>9 (17.6)</td>
<td>3 (10.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4 (8.0)</td>
<td>1 (10.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC/SNP</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>20 (12.1)</td>
<td>7 (13.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Includes Blaenau Gwent by-election. Data categorised by the author.
meeting I can get up and I know how to answer questions because of my experience. (Conservative)

You need to know the party. You need to have the contacts even though you’ll get support from the campaigns people [...] you have to show the party that you can do it. (Labour)

Local parties want independent people not someone controlled by the centre, they don’t want some career politician they want someone who will work hard for them and has had a life away from Westminster. (Labour)

The MPs raised a number of important ideas regarding the qualities looked for in a by-election candidate. They highlighted the benefits of having, as one MP described it, ‘insider status’ when convincing a local party that you can win or hold the seat. Others, however, expressed reservations about the connotations associated with being a party worker or ‘Westminster insider’. This negative perception is also evident in by-election campaign literature where parties frequently attack their opponents for being Westminster-backed candidates (see, for instance, opposition campaign literature to Andrew Slaughter in Uxbridge, Hillary Benn in Leeds Central and Chloe Smith in Norwich North). Whilst the previous quotations differ in respect to those who are perceived as being, as one MP put it, ‘Westminster automatons’, all MPs believed knowledge of the party to be vital, preferably at both a local and national level.

There was a perception amongst some MPs that there was a ‘backlash’ against candidates who were thought to be high profile with obvious links to the party leadership. Indeed, several Labour MPs highlighted examples of where they had witnessed the leadership being thwarted by local party activists who were keen to avoid selecting a candidate who had been ‘parachuted’ in. For the Conservatives, there was a sense that certain constituencies ‘wouldn’t put up with’ candidates being foisted upon them, but largely it was not felt to be a significant issue for the party. For the Liberal Democrats with fewer staff and fewer former politicians to select from, the important criteria remained selecting a local candidate.

Many of the MPs felt that local associations were largely unimpressed by candidates who could boast senior party figures as friends or colleagues. Although it was acknowledged that good contacts added a bit of ‘star quality’ to your application, many felt that it enhanced the sense of ‘us and them’ amongst local party activists who often felt excluded from the decision-making processes during by-election campaigns, despite the fact that they knew the area best and had often spent many years campaigning in it.
Butler suggests that by-elections are used to elect ‘special people’ into Parliament; certainly looking at the careers of by-election MPs, this holds true (Butler, 1973, p. 5). Twelve of the MPs elected in by-elections since 1992 have gone on to serve as Ministers or Secretaries of State despite relatively brief Commons careers. However, MPs of all parties stressed that in selecting a by-election candidate, connections to the party leadership, high profile status or previous national electoral experience were not perceived to be a predictor of success. Indeed, many MPs suggested that occasionally connections with the party leadership had a negative impact upon the chances of selection with activists eager to ensure that the ‘local choice’ was successful.

4. Localism

Previous research has noted the increased importance of localism as a distinct characteristic in the candidate selection process (Childs and Cowley, 2011). Given that by-election candidates do not have a number of years to ensconce themselves in the constituency, selecting a candidate who knows the local area, with already well-established relationships, has obvious advantages. Indeed selecting a local candidate means that the campaign team can in many respects ‘hit the ground running’ as soon as the election date is named.

Nearly all of those interviewed stressed the advantages associated with being a local candidate. Many discussed the importance to local associations of feeling that someone who knew and understood their lives would be representing them at Westminster. Furthermore, and in line with previous research, there was a keen sense that in selecting ‘one of their own’, a more authentic voice would be added to the debates in Parliament. This sense of local connection between the candidates and the campaign team was thought to be critical, given that by-elections require intense campaigning on the part of local activists.

The data in Table 3 illustrate that well over half of the MPs elected in by-elections have been identified as local. In line with previous research, the inter-party differences demonstrate that Conservative MPs were least likely to be local,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Local (%)</th>
<th>Elected (% of elected total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cons.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>27 (52.9)</td>
<td>3 (37.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>30 (58.8)</td>
<td>20 (66.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38 (76.0)</td>
<td>8 (88.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC/SNP</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10 (76.9)</td>
<td>3 (75.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>105 (63.6)</td>
<td>34 (66.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
whilst Liberal Democrat MPs were most likely to be local; this difference is also reflected in the percentages of local candidates selected (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005; Childs and Cowley, 2011).

Turning to the type of seat where local candidates were selected highlights an interesting regional pattern; a significant number of Conservative local candidates stood in seats where they had come third or lower at the previous election, which tended to be in the Scottish and Welsh by-elections. Despite this the Conservatives have in recent by-elections been electorally successful when they have selected a local candidate in previously unwinnable seats (see, for instance, Norwich North and Crewe and Nantwich), although it is unwise to suggest that these results can be solely explained by the selection of a local candidate.

Interviewees were asked to consider whether they thought it was important to select a local candidate for by-elections; perhaps unsurprisingly those who were local believed it to be significant, highlighting the electoral benefits:

People like a local candidate. Someone who knows their lives, who knows what the specific challenges facing a local area are. (Labour MP)

The MPs broadly agreed that knowledge of the local area was critical to impressing the local party. Although a couple of interviewees felt that the local party went a little ‘overboard’ in terms of detailed questioning of the candidates on local issues, most recognised that local party activists often felt that this was their opportunity to ‘flush out’ candidates who had not bothered to take an interest in or learn about the local area. Of course, the selection process for by-elections is often much quicker than that for general elections, which means that there is less time for aspirant candidates to get to know both the area and local party members.

Issues of credibility and being able to ‘get along’ and ‘work well’ with the local party were seen as being of particular importance, and were explicitly linked to being local. Being able to demonstrate ‘service’ to the local party was perceived to be crucial in terms of getting local party activists to campaign for you, especially if the by-election looked to be a close race. For the Liberal Democrats specifically, being local was perceived to bolster their credibility, which fits with wider research concerning the third party’s campaigning themes (see Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005).

In addition to being a local candidate, some MPs also suggested that being a local councillor was desirable for an aspirant by-election candidate. Being a local councillor was felt to provide a recognised platform from which to demonstrate local knowledge and to highlight a track record of serving the local people:

It was important to be able to point to my record in local government to show that I already had a good track record in representing the local
people and working for the local party. It showed some of the people from the outside who fancied the seat that I was in a strong position.  

(Liberal Democrat MP)

Despite this perception, mainly from those who had been local councillors, the backgrounds of the by-election MPs show that only 40 per cent were or had previously been local councillors; this was similar to unsuccessful candidates, 38 per cent of whom were local councillors. This appears to suggest that being a local councillor is not as important as being local in terms of electoral success. Additionally, whether or not candidates or MPs had stood for the seat at the previous election was not an electoral advantage, and the vast majority of by-election MPs had not fought the seat before. Indeed, some MPs suggested that having been the PPC for the area previously might mean you were associated with an unsuccessful campaign, have made local enemies or be deemed an ‘election loser’. Therefore, the idea of localism could be construed as being less about ‘local service’ per se and more about the ability to claim a connection with the constituency.

However, not all MPs felt that being local or being able to point to a connection with the local area was an important characteristic for a by-election candidate, and some felt that the issue had been over-emphasised as a qualification for candidacy:

Yes, some constituencies like a local candidate who can talk about traffic lights etc, but other places want someone who will talk about the national picture. To be honest anyone can learn about an area - having to try and find some ancestral connection to a place in order to justify your application to be its candidate is a waste of time.  

(Conservative MP)

Well you know the Liberals in particular like to go about it [localism] as if it’s the most important quality in an MP. Whilst I wasn’t from that area I made it perfectly clear that if elected I would move to the constituency and would of course do my best to represent the local people in Westminster.  

(Labour MP)

Whilst some MPs may question the logic and value of demonstrating a local connection, it is clear that localism is important to both the electorate and local selectorate. Moreover, parties obviously perceive it to be a vote winner, given the extent to which campaign literature frequently makes reference to their candidate as ‘the local choice’. Using the local credentials of the candidate as a campaign theme in its own right has been illustrated most recently in both the Norwich North and Glasgow North East by-elections.
5. Women

All the political parties engage, to varying degrees, with strategies to increase the number of women MPs, ranging from AWS to women-only training sessions and targeted funding (Childs, 2008). Introduction of these measures often leads to tensions between local and national parties, with local party activists resistant to attempts to restrict or control their option to select the best candidate, regardless of sex. One consequence of this tension has been the frequency with which women candidates, and the campaign to increase their numbers, have become elided with top-down, central party interventions in the selection process.

Although women’s success rate at by-elections has been noted in the extant literature, looking at the aggregate data in Table 4, it is far from clear that this form of election has proved an overly favourable route for women into Parliament since 1992. What is particularly striking about the data in Table 4 is the fact that both the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives have out-performed Labour in terms of women’s representation at by-elections. This is in direct contrast to how the parties traditionally perform in general elections, where Labour have consistently returned women at a much higher rate.

Despite the relative success of the Liberal Democrats, none of their women candidates were selected for held seats; indeed all bar two of their women candidates stood in seats where the party had come third or lower at the previous election. The Conservatives largely replicate this pattern, although they did select one woman to fight a held seat. Conversely, Labour, who selected both the lowest number and percentage of women candidates, fielded half of their women candidates in held seats or seats where the party came second at the previous election. However, overall the story is of women candidates being selected for seats where the party came third or lower at the previous election (61.7 per cent). This is in line with Rasmussen’s findings from nearly 30 years ago, which highlighted that women are infrequently selected for held or winnable seats at by-elections (Rasmussen, 1981).

None of the three main parties have adopted any form of equality strategy to increase the number of women MPs during by-elections. This is despite the fact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
<th>Elected (% of elected total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cons.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>14 (27.4)</td>
<td>2 (25.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>10 (19.6)</td>
<td>3 (10.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18 (36.0)</td>
<td>3 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC/SNP</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5 (38.4)</td>
<td>1 (25.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>47 (28.4)</td>
<td>9 (17.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that all three parties typically undertake a fresh selection process when a by-election occurs. Moreover, given that the central party has more influence over the selection process during by-elections, they are arguably critical opportunities for parties to boost the number of women MPs. Whilst there were calls within Labour for the party to adopt AWS for by-elections, this was not implemented (Russell, 2005). Despite the noted central scrutiny associated with the selection of by-election candidates, this has not resulted in the selection of greater numbers of women.

In considering whether by-elections prove a particularly favourable route for women into Parliament, the interviewees were largely sceptical. Indeed, in considering the extent to which by-elections could be used to recruit more diverse MPs, nearly all sought to emphasise either the importance of localism or the value of meritocracy and equality of opportunity for all. This in itself is not unsurprising given that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats remain largely opposed to any ‘engineering’ of the selection process to ensure the election of more women. However, Labour MPs also discussed the importance of safeguarding local party associations’ freedom to select their preferred candidate, regardless of sex. This is despite the fact that AWS are implemented in a number of seats for general elections.

Conservative MPs were largely unconvinced by the idea that women could disproportionately benefit from by-elections. Intra-party criticisms of measures introduced by Cameron, such as the gender balanced Priority List and the use of open primaries, are widespread within the party, based upon a fear that the centre is trying to restrict the autonomy of the local party in the selection process. This has led to a negative and suspicious attitude amongst some towards securing a greater number of women MPs, as articulated by one MP:

They [CCO] tend not to have much influence over the selection process - what they’ve done recently regarding ensuring more of a female balance and ethnic, to some extent, can have a negative effect because local associations resent anyone being pushed in, so actually I would think that having the blessing of Central Office is not necessarily a blessing at all. (Conservative)

This perspective illustrates the premium placed upon autonomy in candidate selection by local party associations. In this MP’s response, the candidate ‘pushed in’ is understood to be a woman. The views of this MP were also reflected in the responses of other Conservative MPs, some of whom tended to interpret women’s representation as a form of imposition from the centre. Since 1992 the Liberal Democrats have secured the election of three women in by-elections. Accordingly, interviews with Liberal Democrat MPs highlighted that they felt that the party had ‘done well’ with regard to increasing the number of women MPs. A couple of MPs also made the link between women’s representation and debates...
surrounding quotas, leading one MP to argue that by-elections were ‘unique’ occasions, which were not well suited to advancing wider diversity strategies.

The association of women candidates with centrally backed strategies reflects wider opinion in both the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats. These intra-party debates have been illustrated in several by-election selections, for example the previous Liberal Democrat candidate for Crewe and Nantwich resigned from the party after what he claimed was a ‘shabby back room deal’ on the part of the party leadership to secure the selection of a woman candidate (Guardian, 1.5.2008). For both opposition parties, the centre takes more of an active role in candidate selection during by-elections. Some interviewees highlighted that this increased ‘interference’ was resented by local parties. One MP discussing by-election selection processes argued that local parties ‘had the right not to select a woman’ and it is this tension that could potentially disadvantage women aspirant candidates, who are perceived by the local party to be associated with centrally backed strategies.

Despite acknowledging the successful use of AWS, many Labour MPs argued that it was ‘not appropriate’ to use AWS in by-elections because of the specific nature of the by-election:

I’m in favour of AWS and frankly if it had been proposed I wouldn’t have quibbled, whereas in some local parties because there have been expectations built up – you know, about inheritances, which I think is wrong – they won’t have it. You know, a woman essentially being pushed on the local party. (Labour)

This quotation frames candidacy in such a way as to suggest that male aspirant candidates already have the local networks, whilst women require help from the centre to get selected. This tension between the core and periphery in selecting a candidate, juxtaposed with a binary that has at times meant women close to the party leadership, notably in the Labour party, have failed to get selected for held seats, was discussed by one Labour MP:

Well it was essentially me against this woman with very good links high up the party who the leadership wanted selected, but the local party were hugely supportive of me and in the end I got the selection. (Labour MP)

This situation was similar to the experiences of other male Labour MPs. This suggests that whilst the Labour party has tried to encourage the selection of greater numbers of women in held seats, it has been frustrated by the local parties’ commitment to maintaining their own autonomy and preference for selecting local candidates, who, as discussed already, are more likely to be male. Moreover, this is compounded by a perceived ‘backlash’ against AWS in the wider party.
The Labour party’s use of AWS has left deep divisions within the party; this was highlighted during the Blaenau Gwent by-election where an independent candidate was returned following the death of Peter Law, an independent MP who had resigned from the Labour party following the imposition of an AWS on the constituency.\(^1\) This explicit and high profile example of the backlash against AWS indicates the strength of feeling amongst local activists towards central party interference in the selection process. The strength of anti-AWS feeling is difficult to measure in relation to the selection of women candidates for by-elections; however, several Labour MPs suggested that local party activists felt that ‘enough’ had been done. This can be illustrated by the selection process for the Ealing Southall by-election where, despite the constituency party voting to use an AWS, it was over-ruled by the NEC following pressure from local male activists, a man was eventually selected and elected from an all male shortlist (Ealing Times, 10.2.2007).

6. Conclusion

Despite the recent decline in the overall number of by-elections, analysing political recruitment can offer an important insight into the selection process and how the tensions between locals party activists and national party strategists can help determine the types of people selected. Who a party chooses to select as its candidate for a by-election can of course be influenced by the winnability of the seat, the timing and the local situation; however, despite these variables, tentative inter-party differences and ongoing tensions can be identified in terms of patterns of political recruitment. These are important as they can tell us more about the state of internal party democracy and about the types of candidates that national party headquarters want to see more of.

Just as in general elections, candidate selection is a hotly contested issue for political parties, with the sometimes-competing priorities of central and local parties influencing the process. Given that for all parties a new selection process is adopted for by-elections, this further adds to the tensions between local and national party, with the latter afforded a greater amount of influence. The impact of central intervention is perhaps most evident in the Conservative and Liberal Democrats, two parties who have traditionally sought to reject interference from the centre. Conversely, for Labour by-elections appear to be opportunities for local party activists, freed from the perceived restrictions of AWS, to have, to a certain extent, a greater degree of freedom.

The tensions surrounding candidate selection are illustrated in the debates concerning the selection of political insiders, women and local candidates. Whilst

\(^{10}\)It is worth noting that whilst Law officially resigned from the Labour party due to the selection of a woman, it is also clear that he had many concerns about the Labour party see (Cutts et al., 2008).
central party strategists across the parties may seek to promote the selection of women and political insiders at by-elections, local party activists have often been determined to select a local candidate. Of course, it is not inconceivable that a candidate may tick all three boxes, Chloe Smith in Norwich North for instance; however, this is rare and the low number of women and political insiders returned at by-elections suggests that locals, and local men, do best at by-elections.

In exploring the success rate of the three types of candidates, an insider-outsider framework has emerged. Where local candidates represent insiders to local party activists, outsiders have come to be associated with political insiders and women. This framework stems from the tensions between local party activists and national party strategists. It is not a narrative confined to the selection processes; indeed, it also appears frequently in the campaign literature of all three main political parties. Further comparative work exploring localism in both general and by-election campaigning would help shed light on its impact on parties and voting behaviour.

The article has highlighted that MPs of all parties perceive local party activists to favour the selection of local candidates, whilst women and political insiders are viewed with some suspicion. Whilst, inter-party differences suggest that localism is more important for the Liberal Democrats than for Labour and the Conservatives, debates on party activist website Conservative Home have illustrated the increasing importance of localism to local party selectorates and to party members. This research has shown that by-election selections are an important site of analysis for those concerned with intra-party tensions and inter-party differences with regard to candidate selection. More importantly the research highlights that local parties remain particularly hostile to the idea of ‘outsiders’ being parachuted in, where these have been elided with women and political insiders, local candidates have benefited.

Acknowledgements

I thank Profs. Sarah Childs and Philip Cowley for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic Social Research Council (grant number PTA-026-27-2232).

References


