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Selecting political candidates: A longitudinal study of assessment centre performance and political success in the 2005 UK General Election.

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Abstract

There has been surprisingly little consideration of how the selection of political candidates compares with employee selection, or whether individual differences predict electoral success. This study describes the design and validation of an assessment centre [AC] for selecting prospective Parliamentary candidates for a main UK political party. A job analysis was conducted to identify the key competencies required by a Member of Parliament [MP] and the selection criteria for a standardised assessment process. Analysis of the first 415 participants revealed no differences on exercises or dimensions in performance between male and female candidates. For the 106 candidates selected to fight the May 2005 UK general election, critical thinking skills [CTA] and performance in a structured interview were significantly associated with the 'percentage swing' achieved by a candidate ($r = .45$, $p < .01$; $r = .31$, $p < .01$). CTA was also associated with 'percentage votes' ($r = .26$, $p < .01$). These results are discussed in relation to the development of a theory of political performance.

Introduction

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is government of the people, by the people, for the people. As such the notion that politicians can somehow be 'selected' rather than 'elected' appears to run contrary to the idea of democracy itself. Yet, ironically, selection lies at the heart of many election processes. In the UK and most other European countries individuals who wish to represent a political party in government need first to be approved by that party and adopted by a constituency as a political candidate. Consequently, individuals must be selected before they can fight an election[1]. To date, however, little if any consideration has been given to how political selection compares with processes used by organisations to recruit employees. This is surprising for two reasons. First, despite a wealth of evidence that individual differences predict selection success and job performance (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Salgado, Anderson, Moscoso, Bertua, de Fruyt, & Rolland, 2003) little attention has been paid to whether political selection systems identify individuals who are more successful in political roles. Second, although political selection has been criticised as 'exclusive' in restricting access to political roles for groups such as women and Black and minority ethnic people (Elgood, Vinter & Williams, 2002; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Riddell, 2003; Saggar, 2001), few attempts have been made to apply what is known about diversity and employee selection to political selection. Consequently, there is little systematic evidence that political selection systems are fair or that they demonstrate good criterion-related validity.

The research described here resulted from an opportunity to redesign the process used by a major UK political party to approve prospective Parliamentary candidates. The primary aim of this was to make candidate selection more objective, rigorous and fair by following guidelines from personnel selection research. A detailed analysis of the Member of Parliament [MP] role was undertaken followed by

[1] The US is unique in that the two political parties that dominate do not control who can run (and be elected) for political office. These individuals are therefore comparatively independent of party discipline, policy and finance. This makes US politics unlike that of most countries and particularly unlike that of the highly disciplined European countries with which it is usually classed (Stokes, 2005, p. 121).

the development and validation of what we believe to be the first assessment centre [AC] for political selection. This process, together with a longitudinal follow-up of candidates selected to fight seats in the 2005 UK General Election, provided an opportunity to address two research questions: a) to what extent are individual differences associated with electoral performance, and b) is the performance of men and women comparable when assessed for political roles using a standardised selection process?

Predicting political success

Industrial/organisational [I/O] psychologists have paid remarkably little attention to political selection, despite clear parallels with how employees are selected. Possible reasons for this include an historical tendency for theorists to consider political roles as being very different to occupational roles (e.g., Phillips, 1998), and the fact that research access to political parties, especially their selection processes, has been very difficult to obtain. However, I/O psychologists have also treated political behaviour as something detrimental to effective organisational functioning (Hochwater, Kacmar, Perrewé & Johnson, 2003; Randall, Cropanzano, Bormann & Birjulin, 1999) rather than a potentially important focus for selection. Consequently, relatively little is understood about political skill in the workplace: this despite growing interest in its contribution to aspects of work performance such as effective leadership (see Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwater, & Ferris, 2002). The failure to draw parallels between political and employee selection is therefore surprising and unfortunate. First, because findings from personnel selection research may be used to develop more effective systems for identifying individuals capable of political roles, and; second, because an understanding of political skill in politicians could help to inform how political skill is developed and utilised in the workplace.

In order to design any selection process a first step is to undertake a job analysis to identify the knowledge, skills, abilities and other attributes [KSAOs] that are required to perform the role effectively. Whilst much has been speculated about the KSAOs required by politicians, there have been few systematic attempts to gather empirical evidence to support these relationships (Deluga, 1998; Lyons, 1997). In comparison, there is extensive evidence that individual differences predict

effectiveness in occupational roles. For example, general mental ability [GMA] has been identified as the single most important predictor of job performance across different work domains (Salgado et al. 2003; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Personality constructs such as conscientiousness and openness have also been associated with improved work performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991), as have other individual attributes such as communication skills and motivation (Silvester, Patterson, Koczwara & Ferguson, in press).

It is therefore possible to build on findings from studies of occupational roles to postulate which psychological attributes are likely to be associated with performance in political roles. For example, politicians (and aspiring politicians) must be able to deal effectively with conflict and rejection, they must be able to tolerate a 24/7 lifestyle where they can be contacted at any time of the night or day, and they must also be able to cope with intrusion into their personal lives. Personality characteristics such as motivation, resilience and-self confidence, are therefore likely to be important (Valenty & Feldman, 2002; Winter, 2002). In one of the few empirical investigations in this area Rubenzer, Faschingbauer and Ones (2000, 2002) looked at politicians' personality as rated by observers, and found that US presidents tended to be perceived as more extroverted, less open to experience, and less agreeable than typical Americans. They also found that observers rated presidents as having greater achievement striving, assertiveness and openness to feelings, but rated them lower on straightforwardness, modesty and openness to values. What we do not know, however, is whether these qualities were important determinants of success in political roles. Researchers exploring employees' willingness to engage in political behaviour at work have found an association with self-esteem, Machiavellianism, need for Power, and Locus of Control (Biberman, 1985; Ferris, Russ & Fandt, 1989), but again, there have been few longitudinal investigations of causal relationships.

In this study, we identified two characteristics likely to be important to effectiveness as a politician. First, politicians must be able to communicate effectively with members of the public; they must listen to the needs of their constituents and communicate these in government, and persuade potential voters of their intentions, competence and commitment. Politicians must therefore communicate effectively and persuasively across different audiences and types of communication media. We

predicted that individuals who demonstrate higher levels of communication skills during a political selection process would perform better in a general election (hypothesis 1a). Secondly, we identified critical thinking skills as an individual characteristic likely to be important in determining political success, because the role demands that politicians (and aspiring politicians) are able to quickly sift through large amounts of information, identify key arguments, balance conflicting demands and formulate responses (Silvester, 2006). We therefore predicted that individuals with higher levels of critical thinking skills, as measured during the political selection process, would also perform better during a general election (hypothesis 1b).

Diversity in Politics

Although the primary aim of this project was to develop a structured selection process for prospective Parliamentary candidates. capable of identifying those individuals most likely to be effective in political roles, a second important aim was to ensure that it was fair. Women are under-represented in politics both internationally and across political parties (Stokes, 2005). At present only 18% of all UK MPs are women, and in the US 14% of Senators and nearly 15% of the House of Representatives are women. With important exceptions, such as the Scandinavian countries where women make up nearly 50% of politicians, most Western politicians are white and male. As such, politicians are among the least diverse of all 'professional' groups (Lovenduski & Norris, 2003; The Electoral Commission, 2004). As the selection of political candidates has also been identified as a key point at which bias against women can occur (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Rao, 2000), the Candidates Department of this political party wanted to ensure that the process of approving political candidates was fair.

Previous efforts to address the under-representation of women in politics have typically involved positive discrimination strategies such as all-women short-lists (Elgood, Vinter, & Williams, 2002). Although these led to more women being elected as MPs in the UK in 1997 and 2001, they are not universally popular. Studies of positive discrimination strategies in the workplace have also found that they can help to maintain perceptions that women or minorities are less effective (e.g., Heilman & Haynes, 2003). As there has been no systematic comparison of male and female

performance in relation to political roles, there is no evidence to refute or support suggestions that women are less capable or that they demonstrate different political styles to men (Childs, 2004). Yet standardised selection processes with trained assessors using objective selection criteria have generally found few performance differences between men and women (Cleveland, Stockdale & Murphy, 2000). A second aim of this study was therefore to collect information about the relative performance of male of female candidates in a standardised political selection process, in order to provide evidence to support efforts to involve more women in politics.

Method

Context and Procedure

This research was undertaken between May 2001 and May 2005 within the Conservative Party, the main right of centre political party in the UK. It focuses on the first selection point for prospective Parliamentary candidates: the decision by the Candidates Department in Conservative Headquarters as to whether an individual should be included on the list of approved candidates. This is the list from which all Conservative local associations must select their representative. At the time of the research the second author was the Party's Director of Development and Candidates with responsibility for managing the assessment process and approved list.

With certain minor exceptions, the selection procedures for all UK political parties are similar: before party members at constituency level select their candidate, there is a central party process to decide whether individuals are suitable for constituency selection, effectively creating a pool of approved prospective candidates. Although the degree of control exerted over this process varies according to political party, in all cases an individual wishing to fight a general election must pass through two selection processes. The first controlled by the party and the second by the association. Importantly in the case of this research, however, associations do not have information about individual candidates' performance from those making decisions relating to selection onto the approved list.

A decision to develop an assessment centre [AC] was taken in conjunction with the Party's Candidates Committee, based on evidence that ACs generally demonstrate high levels of face and criterion-related validities among alternative predictors of job performance (Lance, Lambert, Lievens, Gewin & Conway, 2004; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). The project involved four stages: 1) a role analysis to identify the KSAOs associated with effective performance as a Conservative MP; 2) development of an assessment centre for selecting 'approved political candidates'; 3) evaluation of the validity and fairness of the AC for men and women based upon the performance of the first 415 participants, and; 4) evaluation of criterion-related validity based upon the performance of the 106 candidates selected to fight seats in the 2005 UK General Election.

Stage 1 Role Analysis: Semi-structured critical incident interviews were conducted with representatives of key stakeholder groups within the Party. These included current MPs (N=5), prospective Parliamentary Candidates (N=3), Members of the Shadow Cabinet[2] (N=6), past MPs and senior Party Members (N=7), Party Volunteers and Association Members (N=15), and Party Agents (N=8). All interviews were tape-recorded then analysed to extract positive and negative behavioural indicators. A further 16 party representatives were involved in focus groups to group and categorise the behavioural indicators into six competencies. At all stages care was taken to include equal numbers of men and women. The emergent competency framework and behavioural indicators were discussed with a final panel of Party representatives to identify any final amendments. Six competencies emerged from the process: 'Communication Skills' – a capacity to communicate messages clearly and persuasively across a variety of audiences and media contexts, recognises need to listen and create opportunities; 'Intellectual Skills' - understands, learns and prioritises complex information quickly, presents ideas in a transparent manner, is intellectually curious and open to new ideas; 'Relating to People' – an ability to relate easily to people from all backgrounds – demonstrates tolerance, approachability and a capacity to inspire trust in others; 'Leading and Motivating' – a capacity for leading and motivating people through recognition of their contribution, involving them, and

[2] These are the opposition party's senior politicians. They 'shadow' the ruling party's senior ministers who make up the Parliamentary Cabinet.

providing support when required - accepts responsibility for outcomes; 'Resilience and Drive' – an ability to cope effectively and positively with pressure (e.g., high work volume, long hours, work-home balance) and remain persistent in the face of challenge, set-backs and criticism; 'Political Conviction' – a commitment to Conservative Party principles and public service, including the need for integrity and courage in securing opportunities to disseminate and defend beliefs. Each competency was further defined in terms of four positive and four negative behavioural indicators.

Stage 2 - Assessment Centre: Critical incidents from the interviews and focus groups were used to develop role-related exercises for a typical MTMM assessment centre. Exercises included a group exercise, a competency-based interview, a public speaking exercise, and an in-tray exercise. All exercises were designed to reflect different aspects of the MP role. For example, the in-tray comprised a series of dilemmas that an MP might encounter as part of his or her work within the constituency, and required prioritising and producing a series of written responses within 50 minutes. The competency interview was semi-structured: participants were asked to provide examples of past behaviour in relation to each of the six competencies that were rated by assessors using a structured coding scheme. The group exercise involved four participants working to resolve a political issue. The public speaking exercise required participants to provide an impromptu public response to a topic in a one-to-one session with an assessor. Assessors rated participant performance using a 1-4 Likert-type scale (1 = no evidence of positive indicators and considerable evidence of negative indicators, 4 = no evidence of negative indicators and considerable evidence of positive indicators). In addition, participants completed the Watson and Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (CTA: Watson & Glaser, 1991). This consists of five test exercises (inference, recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation, and evaluation of arguments) each of which requires the application of reasoning skills. The CTA was chosen as being a reliable (α = .88, Watson & Glaser, 1991) and well-known assessment tool for critical thinking skills that had been identified as likely to be important to a politician's ability to work through competing arguments and deduce potential solutions. For the assessment centre, CTA scores were converted into a 1-4 Likert scale and treated as an exercise score for the 'intellectual skills' competency rating. However, subsequent statistical analyses used CTA raw scores.

Each AC lasted a day, and comprised of an introductory meeting, the exercises, during which time participants were observed and rated by trained assessors, and a wash-up session. Four assessors assessed sixteen candidates during each AC; two of these assessors were MPs and two were representatives from the voluntary side of the Party. All assessors completed a day's training in how to observe, record and evaluate participant behaviour using the competency framework and behavioural indicators. They were introduced to each of the exercises and were trained to be aware of sources of bias (including stereotypes) and how to avoid them. All ratings of participants were made independently by assessors and collated by facilitators, with final decisions to approve or not approve candidates made at the wash-up session. Once approved, names of individuals were placed on the Approved List of Candidates, these individuals could then apply to local associations to become a Parliamentary candidate for the 2005 General Election. Conservative Party rules prevent central party involvement in association selection panels therefore this second selection stage does not form part of the current study. However, it should be noted that information from the AC was not provided to associations; therefore selection of a Parliamentary candidate was not influenced by AC performance.

Stage 3 – Evaluation: The assessment centre was evaluated in two ways. First, results for the first 415 participants were investigated to identify inconsistencies in marks received across different exercises for different groups of participants. Second, results in the 2005 General Election achieved by those participants who were placed on the approved list of candidates following the AC and then selected by constituencies to fight seats were compared with their performance on the assessment centre. Invariably a number of factors are likely to influence a candidate's success in a general election, including performance of the political party nationally, local issues, and the relative popularity of a political party among the electorate in that area. Consequently, a candidate's electoral success will be influenced by the nature of the seat that they have been selected for (e.g., 'safe', 'marginal' or 'unwinnable'). Moreover, this study focused on new candidates who, having not fought a previous election, were far more likely to be selected to fight seats where support for the Party is weaker. For this reason, two electoral criteria were used (1) the percentage of total votes cast in that constituency secured by the candidate, and (2) the percentage swing they achieved -

defined as the percentage change in vote for the Conservative Party in that seat between the 2001 and 2005 General Elections[3].

Results

Of the first 415 participants in the AC, 337 (81%) participants were men and 78 (18.8%) were women; 389 (93.5%) described themselves as White and 26 (6.5%) as Black or ethnic minority origin. The age of participants ranged from 20-75 years (M = 40.59, SD = 9.40). Table one provides descriptive statistics and correlations for assessment centre exercises, competencies and overall ratings. Comparison of ratings for men and women in the AC revealed no significant differences in performance for either competencies or exercises, however participant age was negatively associated with critical thinking [CTA] scores (r = -.17 p < .05) and overall AC rating (r = -.20 p < .01). In order to determine criterion-related validity and test the hypotheses, a further investigation was conducted of the 106 AC participants selected by local associations to fight in the 2005 general election (86 men, 81.1%, 20 women, 18.9%; age range 23-61 years, M = 37.87, SD = 8.76). Table two shows correlations (corrected for direct range restriction: Schmitt & Chan, 1998, pp. 192-193) between AC ratings and two election performance criteria: 'percentage votes' and 'percentage swing'. For this analysis total performance scores (the sum of exercise ratings) were used. According to Cohen (1992), effect sizes for this type of data are considered small if r = .10, medium if r = .30, and large if r = .50.

'Percentage swing' (the difference in percentage votes achieved by the Conservative Party in that constituency between the 2001 and 2005 general elections) was significantly associated with candidate performance in the competency interview (r = .22, p < .05) and CTA scores (r = .45, p < .01): the latter almost a large effect size according to Cohen (1992). 'Percentage votes' (the proportion of the total votes in that constituency secured by the candidate) was also positively associated with CTA (r = .26, p < .01), performance in the public speaking exercise (r = .21, p < .05), competency interview (r = .31, p < .01) and in-tray exercise (r = .17, p < .05). For

[3] Constituency boundary changes, which could potentially affect these electoral outcome criteria, occurred in three constituencies. These candidates were excluded from subsequent analyses.

overall competency ratings, 'percentage votes' was significantly associated with communication skills ($r = .26$, $p < .01$) and relating to people' ($r = .21$, $p < .05$). The association between 'percentage swing' and communication skills also approached significance ($r = .16$, $p = .06$). Candidate total performance was also significantly associated with 'percentage votes' ($r = .25$, $p < .05$) and 'percentage swing' ($r = .23$, $p < .05$).

In order to test the hypotheses a series of hierarchical regressions were conducted. In the regression gender was entered first, followed by total AC performance, which was calculated as the sum of the ratings received by the candidate on the interview, public speaking, in-tray and group exercises (table 3). No significant effect was found for gender but total AC performance was a significant predictor of 'percentage votes' and 'percentage swing'. For the next regressions (table 4) CTA raw scores were entered first, followed by competency interview ratings, and public speaking ratings (all variables were normally distributed). Sample sizes for these regressions were 55 and 56 because CTA scores were not available for all of these candidates. CTA scores and competency interview ratings both contributed significantly to the variance explained by 'percentage swing'. CTA scores also approached significance for 'percentage votes'. Thus support was found for hypothesis 1b, which predicted that critical thinking skills would be associated with electoral performance, and partial support for hypothesis 1a.

Discussion

As far as we are aware, this is the first longitudinal study of individual differences as predictors of electoral success. It documents the application of I/O psychology methods to the selection of political candidates, using a structured and standardised process for evaluating individuals against agreed role-related criteria. This provided a further opportunity to collect the first comparative data on the equivalence of male and female performance when assessed for political roles. To summarise, the main findings were as follows:

1. Candidate critical thinking skills were significantly associated with both the percentage of votes secured by a candidate in the 2005 general

election, and the percentage swing they achieved (defined as the change in the proportion of votes received by the party in that constituency between the 2001 and 2005 general elections).

2. Total performance in the AC was significantly associated with 'percentage votes' and 'percentage swing'. Candidate performance in the interview, public speaking and in-tray exercises, and in the 'communication skills' and 'relating to people' competencies was also significantly associated with 'percentage votes'.

3. No significant differences were found between male and female performance in the AC, or between the performance of male and female political candidates in the 2005 UK general election.

These findings are important because they provide the first empirical evidence that individual differences can impact on electoral success over and above factors such as local issues, national performance of the political party, and the performance of other political parties. They provide support for hypothesis 1b, which predicted that critical thinking skills would be associated with electoral performance, and partial support for hypothesis 1a, which predicted that individuals with higher levels of communication skills would perform better in the election. Whilst there is a need for caution given the comparatively small size of some of the statistical relationships, the findings suggest interesting parallels with research into individual differences and performance in other work roles. For example, although factor analytic studies have shown critical thinking skills [CTA] to be a discrete and partly trainable ability (Follman, Miller & Hernandez, 1969; Furnham, 2006), there is also evidence of a strong relationship with general mental ability (GMA: e.g., Watson & Glaser, 1991). Findings from this study may point to a relationship between GMA and performance in political roles similar to that found in other work roles (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Intriguing though it is, however, the possibility that intelligence may relate to competence in politics requires considerably more investigation. Indeed, intelligence may be a necessary but not sufficient predictor of political effectiveness given historical examples of highly intelligent, yet amoral and dangerous political leaders.

One area of research that may have particular relevance to political roles is that concerned with values and workplace behaviour (e.g., Finegan, 2000). Whilst knowledge, aptitude and skills may be important in determining whether an individual can perform a political role – values are likely to determine how he or she performs the role. Silvester (2004) argues that although the KSAOs required by politicians are likely to be similar across political parties, the values that determine where an individual will direct their effort may be specific to a political party. Much may be gained from further research into the importance of values in selecting for political roles, as well as subsequent political performance.

Of greater potential interest, however, are the mechanisms by which individual differences impact upon political success. For example, we predicted that critical thinking skills would be associated with political performance because politicians need to be able to deal quickly and effectively with large amounts of complex and potentially conflicting information. In the case of an election, political candidates must be able to understand the needs of their constituents; identify key priorities and focus their campaign on the issues most likely to appeal to the electorate. As yet we know little about how individual differences such as CTA translate into behaviour that impacts on electorate voting. Is it the case, for example, that higher levels of CTA mean that a political candidate will be more effective at identifying important issues and translating these into campaign strategies? Or does higher CTA mean that candidates are less likely to be distracted by peripheral information and needs? Similarly, how do higher levels of communication skills, as demonstrated in the AC, manifest themselves in communication behaviour during election campaigning? Are individuals with better communication skills more flexible in their communication style when dealing with different audiences, or do they simply create more opportunities to communicate with their community? These are just a few of many questions about political effectiveness that we have little information about as yet, but where I/O psychology has much to contribute.

One of the key issues that emerged from this research is ‘what is meant by political performance?’ Comparing a candidate’s performance during a selection process with subsequent performance in a job is the most typical means of validating employee selection systems. In this study we used electoral performance (rather than

job performance) as the criterion of effectiveness. Although political parties may view winning an election as the ultimate indicator of success, we do not know whether election performance predicts how well an individual will perform once elected. As such we have side-stepped the issue of what is meant by effective performance for elected politicians. In fact, constructing performance measures for politicians is far more complicated than doing so for employees, because there are multiple legitimate stakeholder groups such as the electorate, party members, the media, and opposition parties. Not only can each of these hold different views of what makes an effective politician they may also differ in their judgements as to whether a particular politician is being effective in their role. In comparison performance criteria for employees, which are generally defined by senior management and communicated via performance management systems, are simpler. Schmitt and Chan (1998, p.98) argue that the most important concern in measuring work performance "…. should be the development and evaluation of theories of performance". The politician role poses a significant challenge to traditional I/O selection practices that rely on single source (usually managerial) ratings of performance. Thus, future research investigating whether individual differences can predict success in political roles will need to develop a theory of political performance that can accommodate pluralistic and potentially conflicting judgements.

Study limitations and practical implications

Several political theorists have argued that external constraints (such as the performance of a political party nationally or the nature of a particular constituency) are so powerful that demonstrating an individual's impact on electoral performance is almost impossible (Hargrove, 1993; Moe, 1993). Some of the relationships between individual differences and electoral performance in this study are undoubtedly small and should be treated with caution. However, there are other potential limitations associated with the two electoral criteria ('percentage votes' and 'percentage swing') that we used in this study. Both criteria may be influenced by factors other than the individual efforts of a particular candidate including: the popularity of the national party in that area, turnout in a particular constituency, the size of a constituency, the activity of the party association in that area, and the amount of money spent campaigning by the association and/or the individual candidate. Similarly, although

'percentage swing' was chosen as being more reflective of how an individual may have 'added value' in terms of improved electoral performance, this too can be influenced by the quality of the previous candidate and their performance at the last election. Indeed, not only can the performance of a particular candidate depend on the activities of candidates from other political parties in that area, there may be regional differences. In the case of this political party, performance in the 2005 general election was better in the Midlands and the South-East. To investigate this further we split the data into two groups of northern candidates (N=52) and southern/midland candidates (N=54). 'Percentage votes' and 'percentage swing' were significantly higher for the southern/midland group ($\underline{t} = -3.71$, $\underline{p} < .001$, $\underline{t} = -3.21$, $\underline{p} < .001$), and CTA was associated with 'percentage votes' and 'percentage swing' ($\underline{r} = .36$, $\underline{p} < .01$; $\underline{r} = .50$, $\underline{p} < .05$, both uncorrected) for the southern/midland group but not the northern group. As the sample sizes were very small for CTA (N=32 southern/midland and N=26 northern), extreme care needs to be taken in drawing conclusions from this. Moreover, there is considerable variability within regions: even within relatively small areas neighbouring constituencies often demonstrate stable traditions of voting for different political parties.

However, external factors do not militate against the importance of individual differences as predictors of political performance. An employee's work performance can be influenced by the level of support and resources provided by their organisation, as well as by regional differences (e.g., total sales per employee may be higher in retail outlets in areas of high economic growth). A candidate's performance might also be expected to vary according to the quality of support provided by their campaign team (although this in itself could be influenced by the motivational influence of the candidate), or the resources provided by the political party. Whilst these factors could weaken observed relationships with electoral performance, they do not rule out the importance of the individual characteristics needed by candidates to wage more effective electoral campaigns. After all, constituencies seek to appoint Parliamentary candidate whom they believe to be most capable of winning.

A final possibility that needs to be considered is that 'better' candidates, identified through the AC, were chosen to fight in more winnable constituencies. That is, could AC information have been used to allocate candidates? In reality, association

selection panels in this political party strive for independence when making their selection decisions. In this instance, they were also blind to performance data collected during the AC, although they would have had CVs from prospective candidates. A more likely possibility is that candidates who impressed during the AC also impressed constituency selection panels. However, relatively little is known about the selection criteria used by associations, and whether they are consistent or valid. Therefore much more research is needed, involving a much larger sample and controlling for external factors such as regional effects and campaign resources, in order to refine our understanding of individual differences as predictors of electoral success and politician effectiveness once elected.

Finally, although we have focused on predictors of electoral success, the second aim of the project was to collect comparative evidence on the performance of men and women in political roles. The fact that no gender differences were found for the AC or electoral performance appears to support arguments that men and women possess equal competence for political roles. Little evidence was also found for claims that women demonstrate a more nurturing, people-oriented style of politics (Childs, 2004). In this study, for example, men and women received equivalent ratings for the competencies ‘leading and motivating’ and ‘relating to people’. However, care is needed when comparing group mean scores (Schmitt & Chan, 1998). The absence of differences in outcome criteria does not necessarily mean they result from the same processes: group ratings may still have been were differentially inflated or deflated by bias. Unfortunately there were too few women in the sample to determine whether different predictors of electoral success operated for men and women, although this would clearly be an area worthy of further empirical investigation.

Although fairness can be improved by creating standardised political selection processes, political selection is only one of the barriers for women seeking success in political roles. Achieving a fully diverse organisational membership, with women and ethnic minorities fully represented at all levels, will require complex organisational change (Ridgeway, 2001). More importantly, if the under-representation of women in political roles cannot be explained by a lack of competence or skills, attention needs to shift to the failure to attract, retain and promote women within political parties. This is likely to involve multiple strategies, most importantly, an increase in the

number of women applying to become political candidates (Lovenduski & Norris, 2003). A standardised selection system based upon merit will only help to redress an imbalance if equal numbers of men and women participate. In recruitment terms attention shifts to supply-side (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993) or the attraction of candidates. Yet, there is currently a dearth of candidates for political roles that spans political parties, levels of government, nation, as well as gender (ODPM, 2005). Focusing on the applicant pool by encouraging more women to get involved in politics, and by providing opportunities to develop appropriate knowledge and skills, are further important means of tackling inequities.

Conclusions

This research was made possible because of an effort on the part of this political party to create a more objective and fair process for approving prospective Parliamentary candidates. As such it is important to consider the practical implications of these findings. Political parties in the UK, and most other Western democracies, select political candidates. Thus, selection decisions must be based upon some form of selection criteria – whether explicit or implicit. What has not been investigated until now is what these selection criteria are, and whether they are valid and fair. That is, do political selection processes ensure that those individuals who are most likely to be effective in political roles are chosen to fight elections? We argue that political parties can enhance democratic process by adopting objective and rigorous selection processes based on decision criteria that are transparent to both candidates and the electorate. After all, whilst the electorate has the right to vote for whomsoever they choose, it is equally the responsibility of political parties to ensure that the individuals who represent them are the most competent and able individuals, broadly typical of the people they represent.

Knowledge and expertise from I/O psychology selection research could be used to maximise the effectiveness of political selection, and potentially, the competence of those elected. However, much has yet to be done. This study raises many questions that are pertinent to selection research and practice in general: including the fundamental issue of what is meant by ‘effective political performance’. Consequently, there is a need for much more research to investigate the relationship

between individual differences, electoral campaigning and politicians' performance post-elections.

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Table 1: Correlations between exercises and outcome ratings for participants in political assessment centre

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Age	40.59	9.40													
2. Gender	1.19	.39	.10												
3. CTA	58.79	10.78	-.17	-.16											
AC Exercises															
4. Public Sp.	2.87	.80	-.16	-.05	.28										
5. Interview	3.20	.68	.10	.10	.20	.36									
6. Group Ex.	2.59	.80	-.13	.05	.17	.18	.19								
7. In-tray	2.75	.73	-.05	.06	.22	.27	.13	.24							
AC Competencies															
8. CS	2.78	.71	-.14	.04	.21	.57	.35	.42	.46						
9. IS	2.84	.81	-.21	-.02	.46	.56	.47	.27	.33	.51					
10. RP	2.83	.60	-.16	.07	.02	.30	.42	.39	.29	.42	.31				
11. LM	2.68	.68	-.10	.04	.24	.32	.45	.48	.44	.49	.49	.47			
12. RD	2.78	.70	-.10	.01	.19	.30	.40	.48	.42	.44	.42	.32	.57		
13. PC	2.93	.70	-.14	.03	.23	.47	.50	.20	.39	.48	.45	.40	.47	.44	
14. OAR	2.72	.59	-.20	.09	.32	.48	.48	.42	.39	.56	.58	.52	.60	.48	.52

N = 395-415 for all variables except CTA. Age, Gender (1= male, 2 =female), All ratings for the assessment centre exercises, overall competency ratings and overall rating (OAR) were on 1-4 Likert scales (4=high performance). 'Public Sp' = public speaking exercise, Interview' = competency interview, and 'Group Ex.'= group exercise, CS = communication skills, IS = intellectual skills, RP = relating to people, LM = leading and motivating, RD = resilience and drive, PC = political conviction: r's .16 to .19 $p<.05$, r's .20 to .21 $p<.01$, r's .22 and above $p < .001$. N = 175-181 for CTA (Critical Thinking raw scores).

Table 2: Correlations between AC ratings and election outcome for individuals selected as political candidates

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Age	37.87	8.76														
2. Gender	1.19	.39	.07													
3. CTA	61.14	10.10	-.29*	-.16												
AC Exercises																
4. Public Sp.	3.20	.75	-.22*	-.03	.32**											
5. Interview	3.38	.63	.08	.19*	.23*	.38**										
6. Group Ex.	2.75	.74	.03	.16	.18†	.24**	.19*									
7. In-tray	2.95	.69	-.11	.07	.23*	.20*	.13*	.24**								
AC Competencies																
8. CS	3.04	.62	-.01	.09	.27*	.50**	.25**	.26**	.56**							
9. RP	3.02	.55	-.18*	.21*	-.12	.30**	.36**	.28**	.28**	.39**						
10. LM	2.80	.62	.03	.16	.13	.32**	.29**	.30**	.39**	.38**	.30**					
11. RD	3.00	.61	.01	.08	-.17	.30**	.23*	.42**	.45**	.37**	.20*	.47**				
12. PC	3.23	.65	-.10	.17*	.12	.49**	.23*	.20*	.41**	.45**	.28**	.41**	.44**			
13. Total perf.	14.66	2.29	-.15*	-.06	.68**	.32**	.38**	.46**	.47**	.43**	.19**	.39**	.33**	.23*		
Election Criteria																
14. % Votes	27.45	9.18	.00	-.10	.26**	.21*	.31**	.12	.17*	.26**	.21*	.03	.13	.10	.25**	
15. % Swing	-.36	3.00	.00	.00	.45**	.16†	.22*	-.02	.15	.16†	.00	.11	.04	.10	.23*	.43**

N= 102-106 for Age, Gender (1=male, 2=female), Public Speaking, Competency Interview, Group Exercise, In-tray, % Votes and % Swing (higher ratings = better performance), N= 58 CTA (Critical Thinking raw scores), * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, † p=.06 (% Votes and % Swing are corrected r's). According to Cohen (1992) effect sizes for this data are: r = .10 (small), r = .30 (medium), and r = .50 (large).

Table 3 Regression analyses for candidate assessment centre performance and 2005 electoral performance

	Percentage Swing			Percentage Votes		
	R^2	ΔR^2	Beta	R^2	ΔR^2	Beta
Step 1 – Gender	.01	-.00		.03	.02	
			-.08			-.16
Step 2 – Mean AC performance	.06	.04		.09	.07	
			.23*			.25*

Note: N = 94 for Percentage Swing and Percentage Votes, * $p<.05$

Table 4 Regression analyses for performance on assessment centre exercises and electoral performance

	Percentage Swing			Percentage Votes		
	R^2	ΔR^2	Beta	R^2	ΔR^2	Beta
Step 1 - CTA	.14	.14**		.06	.06†	
			.38**			.24†
Step 2 - Interview	.23	.08*		.07	.03	
			.29*			.11
Step 3 - PS	.24	.02		.07	.00	
			.14			.03

Note: N = 56 for Percentage Swing, N = 55 for Percentage Votes, * p<.05, ** p<.01, †= p<0.1

CTA= Critical Thinking Skills raw scores, PS = Public Speaking Exercise