# Recruiting politicians: Designing competency based selection for UK Parliamentary candidates.

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According to George Bernard Shaw: "democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few" (1903), yet selection and election decisions both play an important part in determining who will ultimately become a politician. Most politicians represent a political party, and successful democratic elections in the UK and a majority of other Western countries[1] depend on the ability of political parties to <u>attract</u> and <u>select</u> the best possible candidates. In fact, recruiting individuals to legislative office is seen as a core function of political systems, with the quality of candidates selected impacting ultimately on the quality of government delivered (Gallagher & Marsh, 1988; Katz, 2001). As gatekeepers to political roles political parties therefore bear an important responsibility to their members, and the public they hope to represent, to identify the best possible candidates through fair and effective selection procedures (Lovenduski, 2005).

Despite clear parallels between political recruitment and employee selection, there has been surprisingly little exploration of how selection research might inform our understanding of how and why certain individuals become politicians (Silvester & Dykes, 2007). Indeed, industrial and organizational (I/O) psychologists have paid remarkably little attention to politics and political work in general (Bar-Tal, 2002; Silvester, 2008). This chapter sets out to redress this situation by exploring how knowledge and practice relevant to employee selection research might be usefully applied to the political context. More specifically, it considers whether such knowledge and practice might be used to improve how political parties select candidates and identify those individuals likely to perform well in government. Beginning with a review of existing research on political recruitment (conducted

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[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).

mostly by political scientists), the chapter considers potential advantages and disadvantages of applying traditional employee selection methods to political recruitment. Finally, two examples of competency based selection procedures for approving prospective UK Parliamentary candidates are described; one with the Conservative Party and one with the Liberal Democrat Party. Although the chapter takes a predominantly UK perspective, focusing on the role of Member of Parliament (MP), similarities with political recruitment and implications for practice in other countries are discussed.

*Political Selection*

Candidate selection is one of the most important functions of a democratic organisation (Katz 2001). It is the primary mechanism by which a political party decides whether an individual has the qualities needed to become an elected representative and perform the role well. Historically, decisions about who could or could not become an MP in the UK were in the control of aristocratic families and the monarch, who between them controlled patronage of most constituencies. Although the 1832 Reform Bill reduced this influence, it was not until Prime Minister Disraeli introduced a further Reform Bill in 1867, allowing men who did not own land to become MPs, that the pool of individuals eligible to become a parliamentary candidate significantly increased. A challenge to the power of patronage it resulted in a need for political parties to adopt tighter forms of organization and exert more influence over the choice of political candidates (Weber, 1918).

Nearly 150 years later the process of becoming an MP can still be a complex and protracted affair. In their comparison of political selection practices in three Western democracies (Canada, Australia and the UK), Norris, Carty, Erikson, Lovenduski and Simms (1990) identify five common steps to becoming a national politician. First, individuals must be eligible to stand for election. Next they need to be approved as a prospective candidate by a political party. Thirdly, once a local constituency announces a vacancy for a candidate, individuals must apply and be short-listed by a constituency committee. Short-listed applicants are then invited to participate in a selection process that can involve speaking at a public meeting and being interviewed by a panel of local members. Finally, if successful in being selected, the candidate

begins campaigning within the constituency in the hope of being elected to Parliament at the next election. Figure one illustrates this process, together with key decision points(sifts) and the groups that have most influence over them.

INSERT FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

Selection procedures are broadly similar for each of the three main UK political parties, although there are some differences in the level of influence that the party's national executive can exert (or is willing to exert) over later selection stages. In the case of the Labour Party, for example, there is no strict requirement that applicants for constituency selection should be approved. For all political parties, however, local candidate selection in particular is the setting for attempts at influence from different groups, each competing to get their preferred candidate selected. Shepherd-Robinson & Lovenduski (2002) describe how senior party members frequently seek to improve the chances of 'favourite sons' (and daughters) by publicly supporting their campaign efforts. Yet there are also efforts to influence selection decisions that are sanctioned by the parties, for example strategies such as A-lists (Conservative Party), all-women short-lists, twinning and zipping[2], have all been adopted at different times in an effort to improve the diversity of the pool of candidates. These strategies are generally unpopular with local selection panels where members are likely to vigorously defend their right to choose a candidate. As Norris et al. (1990, p.229) point out, candidate selection is "one of the few areas of party life in which local parties continue to exert their independence". This means that whilst national party executives retain the power to veto a local association's choice of candidate, most are very reluctant to do so in practice.

Figure One makes clear the fact that local association selection is only one stage of a more extensive selection process, which can take longer for some prospective MPs than others. Seats vary widely in terms of their 'win-ability' for a particular party and therefore in terms of their attractiveness to potential candidates. The most sought after are 'safe' seats, where there has been strong historical support for a party and the

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[2] "Twinning" and "zipping" are strategies that have been used to encourage equal representation in politics. Twinning involves neighbouring seats selecting a man and a woman candidate, and in zipping male and female candidates are alternated on local association candidate lists.

likelihood of a candidate being elected to Parliament is therefore high. However, new prospective Parliamentary candidates are usually expected to first 'cut their teeth' as the candidate for a marginal seat. This means that they can learn how to campaign effectively and also demonstrate their level of commitment to the political party. It also means that with general elections taking place on average every four years an individual may have to wait many years before becoming an MP: if indeed they ever do. A good example of this is former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who whilst initially selected as Parliamentary candidate for Dartford in 1949, had to wait a further ten years before securing the safe Conservative seat of Finchley and being elected to Parliament as MP. The journey was much shorter for Tony Blair, but he too fought and lost a by-election in Beaconsfield in 1982 before being adopted as Parliamentary candidate for Sedgefield in May 1983. Blair was elected to Parliament as MP in the general election that followed five weeks later (Rentoul, 2001).

Local candidate selection is the most visible and easily accessed stage of political recruitment, and perhaps not surprisingly has been the focus of most research into political selection. Yet, arguably the most important part of the selection process, and the point at which political parties can exert greatest influence over who will become an MP, involves decision-making about who to approve or not as prospective parliamentary candidates. Described as the 'secret garden' of politics (Lovenduski, 2009), these processes take place far from the glare of public scrutiny and as such have received little attention from researchers (Lundell, 2004). This constitutes an important gap in our understanding of how individuals become politicians for two reasons. First, approval decisions determine the pool of candidates eligible for local party selection (and therefore those able to become MPs), and secondly decisions made earlier in a selection process remove a greater proportion of individuals from the talent pool, with potentially important consequences for political diversity.

*Employee Selection and Political Recruitment*

So how can employee selection research help us to understand political selection processes and highlight particular challenges? In broad terms, employee selection practices are concerned with identifying the most suitable individual for a position on the basis of person-job fit. This usually involves selecting individuals who possess the

knowledge, skills and abilities [KSAs] that a particular role requires on the basis that a better match between job requirements and individual capabilities will result in higher levels of performance. Developing a selection process involves five stages: (1) a job analysis to establish the tasks and activities that are expected of a job incumbent, (2) a person-needs analysis to determine the KSAs a person will need in order to perform the job effectively, (3) identification of discrete selection criteria to guide decision-making about applicants, (4) recruitment activities to attract the widest possible pool of applicants, and (5) design standardised assessment methods (e.g., assessment centres and psychometric tests) to evaluate reliably whether applicants possess the necessary KSAs and differentiate those likely to perform better or worse in the role (Anderson & Cunningham-Snell, 2000). In short, selection procedures should discriminate between individuals on the basis of job-relevant characteristics: selection decisions are deemed 'good' if they demonstrate high criterion-related validity, that is, they reliably identify those individuals who perform well in the role and reject individuals who would perform poorly. Similarly, decisions are considered 'fair' if they are based on role-relevant criteria, such as skills, as opposed to non-role relevant criteria such as patronage or membership of particular groups (Arvey & Faley, 1988).

Although employee selection provides a useful lens through which to examine political selection, any attempt to apply selection practices used in the public or private sectors to the political context is unlikely to be straightforward. In particular, the democratic nature of political roles presents several challenges. Despite the fact that, arguably, politicians perform 'political work' few parallels have been drawn between this and the work undertaken by individuals in other types of employment. In fact, for many people political roles are fundamentally different to other types of work roles and should not be treated as equivalent (Phillips, 1998). The most obvious difference between politicians and other workers is that the former are elected rather than selected and it is the democratic legitimacy of political roles, which derives from being elected, that is central to claims of non-equivalence. Elected by constituents, politicians have a democratic mandate to wield power, govern, and take decisions on behalf of others (Morrell & Hartley, 2006). This power is limited by their election for a fixed term (up to five years in the case of UK MPs), meaning that they must face the

electorate again and be accountable for their actions before they can secure a further period in power.

Yet, for many people the very idea that politicians can be 'selected' appears to run counter to democracy, because it undermines the belief that political roles should be open to people from all sections of society. Selection based on pre-specified criteria risks perpetuating those powerful elites who are responsible for shaping selection criteria, and 'cloning' individuals who share characteristics with existing MPs or powerful party members. Although similar fears often exist in employee selection (Schneider, 1987), politics is potentially more vulnerable because restricting access to political roles can result in less diversity and fewer elected representatives who can understand and act on the needs of different sections of the electorate (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993).

Additional practical challenges to the application of employee selection processes to political selection may be easier to address. For example, it is possible that characteristics such as role-related knowledge and skills traditionally used in employee selection are less relevant for political roles than, for example, knowing why an individual wants to become a politician. Do they want to secure power to serve their own needs or the needs of others? Understanding an individual's motivation or 'calling' to become an MP and whether their values fit with those of the political party might be more useful indicators of how they will act once in power and where they will invest their time and energy. Another important difference between selection and election is that the selection decisions are usually made by a small number of senior managers on the basis of agreed criteria. In contrast election decisions result from the individual judgments of large numbers of voters who are free to base their decisions on whatever criteria they believe to be important. This means that in an election each voter has 'a voice' to decide who they perceive to be the most suitable political candidate. Unlike recruiters, however, voters do not usually have information about a candidate's competence to perform the role and typically base their decisions on different criteria, including whether a political candidate shares similar interests (Moskowitz & Stroh, 1996). Interestingly, it seems that increased media exposure may be leading voters to pay more attention to the personalities of political candidates (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). Perhaps we may see

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this exposure leading to more public questioning about whether political candidates also have the competence to perform the roles expected of them (Silvester, 2008).

Fundamentally, however, there are two basic requirements of employee selection: knowing what the job requires the job incumbent to do (which is usually derived from a job analysis), and knowing what a person requires in order to perform the role well (the KSAs, normally identified from a person analysis). Yet, in reality, we know very little about what the role of an MP entails and there has been no investigation of the knowledge, skills and abilities required to perform the role well. These are the two most important areas that need to be addressed if political selection practices are to become more like those used for selection in other work contexts.

*a) What is the MP role?*

There has been surprisingly little systematic study of the role of an MP and the closest approximation to a job description is the Code of Conduct for MPs. The purpose of which is "to assist Members in the discharge of their obligations to the House, their constituents and the public at large" (House of Commons Information Office, 2009, p.7). According to the UK Parliament web site, MPs are elected by members of the public to "represent their interests and concerns in the House of Commons" (Parliament, 2009) The site goes on to describe MPs normally splitting their time between working in Parliament, work within their constituency and work for their political party. In Parliament MPs attend debates, vote on new laws and join committees that scrutinise government policy. In their constituency, MPs hold 'surgeries', where local people can come along to discuss any matters that concern them, they also attend functions, visit schools and businesses and generally try to meet as many people to understand the needs of their constituency.

Although there are rules and regulations about how MPs should behave, in reality politicians have considerable independence to pursue the goals they consider important in the way they want (March & Olsen, 1999). As an MP commented to the author in a recent interview 'you have total autonomy, you are essentially self-employed and can do the role in what ever way you choose'. This means that the experience of being an MP can vary considerably from person to person. The nature

of the role also varies depending on whether a politician belongs to the party in government or opposition, and on their additional responsibilities within their party or Parliament (e.g., member of a select committee, party whip, minister or backbencher). To make things more complicated MPs are accountable to multiple stakeholders including their constituents, their Party and Government. All of these factors complicate matters for those developing selection procedures, because prospective parliamentary candidates are not selected for a single role, but a multitude of different roles within government over the course of a political career. Therefore, whilst there may be a core set of responsibilities for MPs (e.g., representing people, holding government to account and legislating), political selection decisions need a greater focus on criteria such as an individual's ability to learn and adapt quickly to changing circumstances and different roles.

*b) What qualities and skills do MPs require?*

The second important question asks what are the KSAs that MPs require in order to perform these roles and responsibilities effectively? Selection decisions are usually based on whether or not individuals possess these necessary characteristics, but in the case of political roles there has been very little study of how individual KSAs impact on political performance. Indeed, many political scientists argue that individual differences among political actors will matter little given the multitude of other factors that can influence both political performance and outcomes like elections (Hargrove, 1993; Moe, 1993). For example, Greenstein (1992) argues that group behaviour will be a more dominant influence in political environments than the actions of any individual political actor. Similarly, electoral performance is influenced by a range of contextual factors such as historical patterns of voting, the performance of a political party nationally, levels of campaign resources available to a candidate, and the strength of their political opponents. That said, if individual differences do not play a part in determining political outcomes there would be little need to select political candidates in the first place.

In fact, most active campaigners believe that the personal vote (i.e. votes attributable to the actions of a particular candidate) is important. When interviewed about her campaign efforts in the previous general election Kate Hoey, Labour MP for Vauxhall

commented "it would be miserable if there were no correlation between all that work, effort and support" (Norris, Vallance & Lovenduski, 1992). In support of this, other researchers (mainly psychologists) have argued that the personal characteristics of politicians are important in politics (e.g., Hargrove, 1993; Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, & Ones, 2002; Simonton, 1988). Neustadt (1990), argues that as the constitutional power base of the US presidency is so narrow, effective leadership will depend more on personality related factors such as reputation, persuasiveness, political skills, and self-confidence of the office holder. Yet, once again there has been little systematic study of politicians' characteristics and their job performance, although a growing body of research concerned with political skill in organisational contexts may have relevance for future studies (Ferris et al. 2005).

*Developing Competency Based Selection Processes for Political Parties*

Despite the lack of an evidence base to support decisions about suitability and competence for political roles, there have been growing calls for improved political selection processes across all political parties and areas of government. In his report for the Electoral Commission, Riddell (2003) argues for greater transparency about how political Parties attract and select prospective parliamentary candidates, and identifies seven principles of good candidate selection that political parties should demonstrate:

1. Inclusiveness: by adopting and publishing policies to encourage selection of a broad range of candidates for all levels of elected representation.
2. Diversity: by encouraging a balance of gender, ages, ethnic groups and occupations among individuals on their approved lists.
3. Community Activity: by aiming to recruit people who are active in their localities, for example in community groups or as volunteers.
4. Transparency: by taking a professional approach to candidate selection that specifies the skills sought, and the responsibilities of the elected representative.
5. Suitability: by looking beyond political activity to the skills needed to hold elected office and give effective representation to their constituents.
6. Collegiality: by offering candidates full support and training.

7. <u>Participation</u>: by enabling as many party members as possible to participate in the selection process.

Two of these (transparency and suitability) are relevant to employee selection, because they relate to the premise that roles demand particular qualities, and that political parties should communicate publicly what they consider to be the qualities that are important for their candidates. Suitability also relates to criterion-related validity and the assumption that selection systems should reliably differentiate between those individuals capable of performing well in political roles and those who will not. Yet, political parties rarely change their selection processes (Norris & Lovenduski, 2004). Like other large-scale institutions, bureaucratic entrenchment can lead to difficulties in adapting quickly to changing circumstances and the ability to foster effective organisational learning. Decision-making in political parties is also far less centralised than in other types of work organisation (Norris, 2004). Whereas most large private and public sector organisations have human resource (HR) departments that take responsibility for selecting and developing staff, political parties do not. This can mean that political parties lack the capacity and resources required to create and manage new selection systems. Responsibility for political selection procedures can also lie with several committees, made up of representatives from different groups within the party. As such no one person is responsible for strategic decisions, and any changes to selection practices will require the collective agreement of many people and groups, each with potentially conflicting views.

However, political parties are most likely to change and innovate when they are in opposition and seeking new ways to build power. This can include identifying new ways to attract and recruit candidates likely to be popular with the electorate and capable of winning back control. This is what happened in the following two examples, each of which describes a separate project by the author with the Conservative Party (2002) and the Liberal Democrat Party (2008). Both involved the redesign of party approval processes for prospective parliamentary candidates, using methods and practice from traditional selection procedures.

*a) The Conservative Party*

In 2001 the Conservative Party lost its second consecutive general election following a period of 17 years in power. At that time 15% of Conservative MPs were women, and there was a perceived need within the Party to attract and select a more diverse group of political candidates to better engage with and reflect the needs of the general population. Part of the solution to this was recognised as a need to re-examine the Party selection process for approving prospective Parliamentary candidates. After initial discussions with Christina Dykes, Director of Candidates and Development for the Party and other senior politicians a decision was taken to adopt modern selection practices and redesign the approvals process based upon an agreed set of competencies to perform the role of MP. This meant that the Candidates Committee maintained control over the list of approved candidates, but a rigorous assessment procedure ensured that all candidates on the list and therefore eligible to apply to local selection panels would already have been assessed as having the qualities necessary to become an MP.

Development of this system began with an analysis of the MP role to identify shared beliefs about the competencies and skills associated with being effective and behavioural indicators of good and poor performance. Competency models are common in organisational settings; they make explicit important role-related behaviour and enable organisations to facilitate a shared understanding and common language around what is required of role incumbents (Schippmann et al. 2000). The MP role analysis involved Silvester and Dykes undertaking critical incident interviews and focus groups with representatives from different stakeholder groups, including current and past MPs, prospective parliamentary candidates, senior party members, party volunteers and party agents. By involving people from all sectors of the Party it was possible to capture the views of people with different experiences and perspectives on MPs and their work. In addition, participants were asked to describe how the role had changed, how it might change in future and the skills and abilities that were likely to be important. A visionary approach was considered important, because like most other work roles the MP role is continually changing (Silvester & Dykes, 2007). The six competencies that emerged from an analysis of the interviews and focus groups were:

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(1) <u>Communication Skills</u>: the capacity to communicate messages clearly and persuasively across a variety of audiences and media contexts.

(2) <u>Intellectual skills</u>: the ability to understand, learn and prioritise complex information quickly and present ideas in a transparent manner.

(3) <u>Relating to People</u>: the capacity to relate easily to people from all backgrounds, demonstrate tolerance, approachability and the ability to inspire trust in others.

(4) <u>Leading and Motivating</u>: the capacity for leading and motivating people by recognising their contribution and providing support when required.

(5) <u>Resilience and Drive</u>: an ability to cope effectively and positively with and remain persistent in the face of challenge, setbacks and criticism.

(6) <u>Political Conviction</u>: a commitment to Party principles and public service, including integrity and courage in disseminating and defending beliefs.

Each of these competencies was further defined by using four positive and four negative behavioural indicators, which could be used as anchors for rating prospective parliamentary candidates during selection procedures. All competencies and indicators were discussed and further refined in consultation with the Party's candidates department.

The second stage of the process involved using the competencies and interview material to develop an assessment centre [AC]. Assessment centres are a popular selection method for management level positions, which generally demonstrate good levels of criterion-related validity and face validity (Hough & Oswald, 2000). A process not a place, ACs involve different assessment methods (e.g., work sample measures, group discussion, interviews and psychometric tests) and exercises that reflect different aspects of the role. Participants are observed and rated by different assessors in different exercises, and assessors are trained to use the same standardised criteria based on the competency framework. The AC developed for the candidate approvals process involved a competency-based interview, a group exercise, a public speaking exercise, an in-tray exercise, and a critical thinking questionnaire. Each AC involved four assessors: two MPs and two Conservative Association members, all of whom were trained in fair and

objective assessment practices, including awareness of the potential for bias. Efforts were also made to ensure that assessors had no prior knowledge of applicants' experience or background before observing them during the AC, to minimise the influence of factors such as prior links with key party members.


INSERT FIGURE TWO HERE


The new approvals process was evaluated in two ways. First, as it was intended to reduce potential bias against women and minority applicants, performance across competencies and exercises was compared for male and female applicants for the first 400 participants in the AC. There were no significant differences between men and women either for different competencies or exercises, providing support for the argument that men and women are equally suited to political roles. Secondly, as 106 participants in the AC were successful in being selected to stand as Parliamentary candidates in local selection, their AC performance could be compared with performance in the 2001 UK general election (see figure 2). Two criteria were used: 'percentage votes' - the proportion of votes secured by a candidate and the 'percentage swing' in votes to their political party achieved by the candidate in that constituency. Regression analyses revealed that critical thinking raw scores and competency interview ratings were significantly associated with 'percentage swing'. The relationship between 'percentage votes' achieved by a candidate and critical thinking scores also approached significance (Silvester & Dykes, 2007). These findings provide 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. The revised approvals process continues to be used by the Conservative Party.


*b) The Liberal Democrat Party*


A similar project to redevelop the candidate approval process for the Liberal Democrat Party was undertaken by the author between 2007 and 2008. The Liberal Democrat Party is the third largest party in UK politics and has a much smaller base of sitting MPs than either Conservatives or Labour. Yet the Liberal Democrats

maintain a policy of fielding a candidate in each constituency eligible to return an MP (650 in the 2010 general election). This presents the party with the challenge of attracting and selecting a greater proportion of individuals who are willing to stand for election in marginal seats. Whilst the ultimate aim of a selection process is to select a candidate capable of winning, in marginal seats it is also important to select individuals capable of building support and developing the Party's profile in that area.

In order to understand how the approvals process could be developed interviews were first conducted with representatives of groups involved in the former assessment process (assessors, facilitators, candidates department, regional chairs and senior party members) to identify those aspects most in need of change. Perhaps the most important issue related to flexibility. The former approvals system was seen as too unwieldy and resource intensive, requiring substantial time investment from those involved in setting up and running assessment days, as well as people providing follow-up support and development for applicants. This made it difficult to respond quickly and flexibly when there was a need to approve candidates, which in turn could mean that at times applicants had to wait a long period before being able to attend an assessment day. There was also some concern that the former assessment process was more complicated than it needed to be. The main challenge was therefore to produce a flexible and fair system that was comparatively easy to implement. As with the Conservative Party project, a decision was taken to undertake a role analysis and develop an assessment centre based on a competency framework. The six competencies were:

(1) <u>Communication Skills</u>: Communicates clearly and persuasively with a variety of audiences and in a variety of contexts, generates opportunities for communication for self and others.

(2) <u>Leadership</u>: Motivates self and others, delegates and provides support as appropriate, demonstrates flexibility, accepts responsibility for outcomes and has integrity.

(3) <u>Strategic Thinking and Judgment</u>: Understands and prioritises complex information; looks at the bigger picture and promotes overall team and campaign objectives.

(4) <u>Representing People</u>: Relates well to people from all backgrounds by being aware of their effects on others, demonstrating tolerance, approachability and by inspiring trust.

(5) <u>Resilience</u>: Copes effectively with pressure and remains positive and pro-active in the face of challenge, setbacks and criticism.

(6) <u>Values in Action</u>: Works hard to develop a campaign team, secure resources, promote Liberal Democrat values and maximise Party profile.

Not surprisingly there were many similarities between the projects, particularly as the same procedures were adopted for the role analysis and designing the AC. However, certain differences demonstrate the importance of political context in determining the shape and content of political selection procedures. For example, whilst the competencies, skills and knowledge, required for MP work may be the same irrespective of Party, the two role analyses revealed the importance of capturing political values and incorporating these into selection exercises. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, this involved creating an exercise that asked AC participants to describe what their values were and how these impacted on their political activities.

Another difference that influenced development of the new approvals process was the fact that the Liberal Democrat Party is a federal party, and decisions are delegated to the local level wherever possible. Responsibility for approval decisions for English seats lies with the English Candidates Committee, and there are separate committees for Scotland and Wales. Regional groups also have an important say in deciding whether changes can be made to the overall approval process. This meant that a much longer consultation process was required in order to accommodate different views and perspectives. A survey was also undertaken with all Party chairs to check the validity of the competencies and behavioural indicators were valid and to gain commitment to the process.

Although involving different groups in deciding and agreeing changes takes longer, it also makes the process more democratic ensuring that a majority of stakeholders understand what changes are being made and are more engaged in the new process. The Liberal Democrat Party is also keen to encourage more people to become

prospective parliamentary candidates by rendering the approvals process more open and transparent.

*Discussion*

These two examples show that, whilst Norris and Lovenduski (2004) suggest that political parties rarely alter their selection processes, at times fundamental changes are possible. To conclude it is worth considering why these changes may have occurred now rather than at any other point in time. One obvious reason may be that standardised selection practices have become so much part of the normal work experience for the general public that political parties cannot remain immune to the need for more objective processes. However, in recent years the media has also become increasingly important in shaping public perceptions of politicians and challenging assumptions about political practices (Katwala, Whitford & Ottery, 2003). Lobbyists have continued to be vocal in advocating the need for more diversity and greater efforts to tackle the under-representation of certain groups, and as such have done much to raise public awareness of the lack of fairness in selecting who becomes a politician. There have also been an increasing number of questions about the relative competence of individuals to perform as politicians and the types of support they might need in order to be effective (c.f. Pickard, 2009). Therefore, this may herald the beginning of a period of greater interest in the demands of political work.

That said there is also a need for caution before we embrace wholeheartedly the idea of HR practices in politics. Decision making in political organisations may appear overly protracted, inefficient and frustrating, but this may simply be an inevitable feature of more democratic forms of organisation. We may have to accept that if we want democracy, it takes longer to persuade people to commit to a particular course of action, or to make organisational changes, than it would do in other types of organisations. Equally, we need to be aware that HR practices themselves are political (Ferris & King, 1991) and can serve to institutionalize power relationships through organizational members' acceptance of the way in which they are governed and led (Novicevic & Harvey, 2004). Therefore unthinking application of HR processes, like selection, may act to undermine rather than enhance democracy. The challenge will be

for industrial/organisational psychologists to create systems that accommodate the

unique needs of political environments, and support politicians in their efforts to

govern more successfully on behalf of the people they represent.


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**Party**    Local Association Control    Public Control

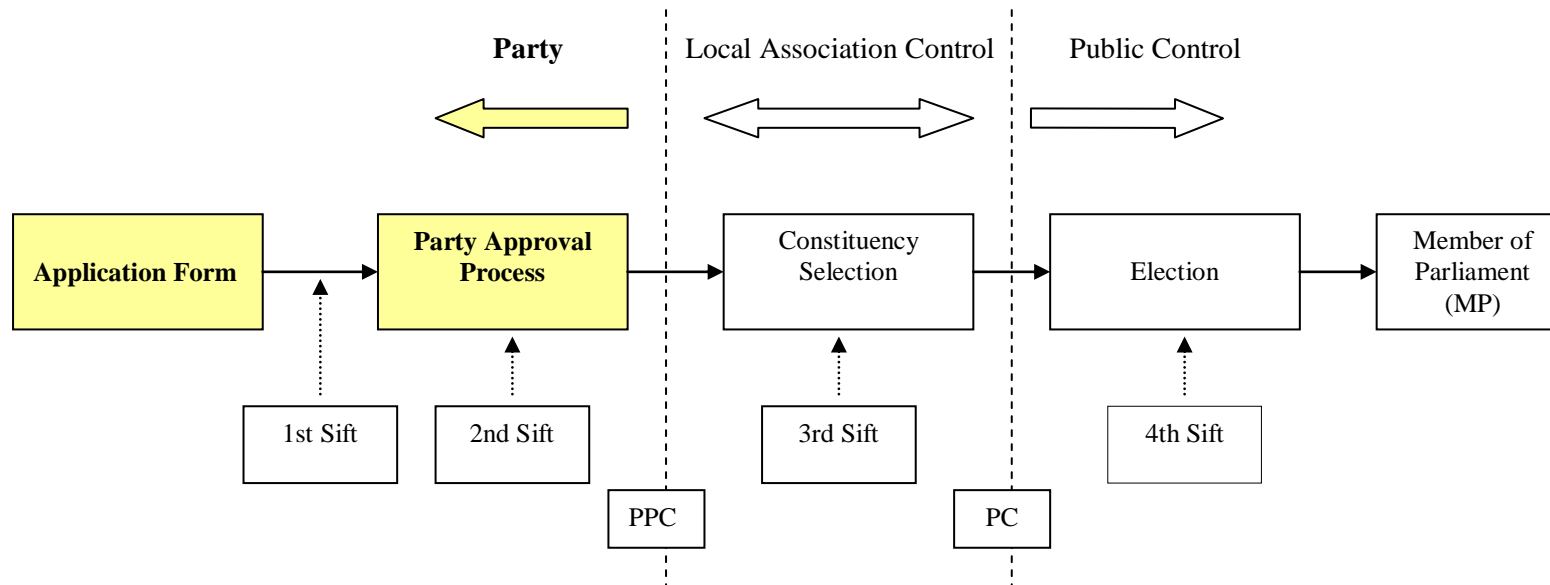| Application Form | → | Party Approval Process | → | Constituency Selection | → | Election | → | Member of Parliament (MP) |

1st Sift    2nd Sift    3rd Sift    4th Sift

PPC    PC

Figure 2: Predicting political performance in the 2005 UK General Election



(N = 106)
Critical Thinking (r=.45**/.23*)
Competency Interview (r=.31*/.21*)

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┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
│ Application  │ ──►  │ Party Approval│ ──► │ Constituency │ ━━► │   Election   │ ──► │     MP       │
│    Form      │      │   Process     │      │  Selection   │      │              │      │              │
└──────────────┘      └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘

                                    ┌─────┐                 ┌─────┐
                                    │ PPC │                 │ PC  │
                                    └─────┘                 └─────┘
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