

## Primary Elections for Britain

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The coalition's programme for government promises to fund 200 postal primaries during the current Parliament. Targeted at seats which have not changed hands for many years, funding will be allocated to all parties which take up their seats in Parliament in proportion to their share of the vote in the 2010 general election. Speaking at the press conference launching the government's programme, Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg commended postal primaries as a way of increasing public engagement, accountability and choice.<sup>1</sup>

The leaders' enthusiasm for postal primaries notwithstanding, they were in neither of the parties' manifestos. The idea originated with the Conservative party which had used a variety of primary formats after 2001 to select candidates for parliament and mayor of London. In 2009, the constituency associations in Totnes and Gosport, prompted by central office, used postal primaries to replace retiring MPs disgraced by the expenses scandal. During the general election campaign David Cameron championed postal and open meeting primaries in a speech in Thurrock. Entitled *Big ideas to give Britain real change*, the speech bore the same name as a party policy document which proposed nine political reforms, including postal primaries.<sup>2</sup> The document added detail to the plan for primaries, reproducing the guidelines which had framed the contests in Totnes and Gosport. The local party produces a shortlist of a maximum of four. Voting takes place 20 days after candidates have been shortlisted. Every voter on the constituency's electoral roll receives a ballot paper through the post with a prepaid envelope for its return. Candidates are asked to observe a £200 limit for their campaign costs. Funding for the 200 primaries, estimated at £8 million (£40, 000 per constituency), comes from cuts in the budget of the Electoral Commission.<sup>3</sup>

Though restricted to the dominant party in a third of constituencies, the introduction of postal primaries will mark a significant departure in how parliamentary candidates are chosen in Britain. The lessons from the two postal primaries used in 2009 are that it will change the numbers and characteristics of those involved in choosing candidates, the criteria for selection and the type of candidates chosen. Much will remain unchanged. Primaries are unlikely to affect the controlling influence of party in the House. The limits to their number and duration will leave most safe seats unaffected and prevent the development of any new form of accountability. Primaries will provide some voters with intra-party competition but inter-party uncompetitiveness will remain the norm.

### **Primaries in Totnes and Gosport**

In 2009 constituency associations in Totnes and Gosport organised postal primaries open to all registered voters to replace MPs pressed into retirement after two of the most notorious expenses scandals. Totnes MP Sir Anthony Steen claimed £87, 000 for the upkeep of his country house. Criticised for such excesses by constituents, Steen accused them of jealousy. Following a public warning from Cameron that further misconduct would result in expulsion from the party, and two before an appearance before local members, Steen decided to stand down. Approximately hundred aspirants applied to succeed him. Under pressure from Conservative Central Office, the local association decided to hold an open postal primary. The constituency executive drew up a long list of eleven candidates to interview. Three were shortlisted to enter the primary: Nick Bye, the elected mayor of the Torbay local authority in which the constituency is located; Sara Randall Johnson, chair of East Devon Council; and Sarah Wollaston, a GP from central Devon with no experience of public or party office. Wollaston won with 47.9 per cent of the vote, followed by Randall Johnson (33.3 per cent) and Bye (18.7 per cent). Wollaston went on to hold the seat for the Tories at the general election with a majority increased by more than 2, 000, registering a 2.3 per cent swing from the Liberal Democrats.

The Gosport the vacancy arose from the retirement of Sir Peter Viggars whose expenses claim of £32,000 for gardening included £1645 for a floating duck house. Viggars announced his retirement under threat from Cameron of loss of the party whip. There were 190 applications to succeed him. From a long list of six, four were shortlisted to contest the primary: James Bethell, head of communications agency in London, candidate for Tooting in 2005; Caroline Dinenage, a sales director from East Hampshire, who contested Portsmouth South in 2005; Sam Gyimah, head of a training and development business in London and former chair of the Bow Group; and Julia Manning, head of a London health think tank, who had been the candidate for Bristol East in 2005. Dinenage won with 38.6 per cent of the vote, followed by Bethell (23.4 per cent), Gyimah (22.6 per cent) and Manning (15.3 per cent). At the general election the Conservative majority increased by more than 8,000 votes, aided by a 1.3 per cent swing from the Liberal Democrats.

### **New rules, new game**

Thirty years ago parliamentary candidates in Britain were chosen by the small fraction of party members who served on the constituency selection committees. Writing in 1988, the political scientist Michael Gallagher estimated that the participants constituted approximately 1 per cent of all party members and a negligible proportion of the electorate.<sup>4</sup> From the 1980s participation widened to include all members. Selection by all members still confined participation to a tiny fraction of the electorate. By 2005 membership of the three major British parties was estimated to total 571,000.<sup>5</sup> Had every member participated in selecting a candidate this would have involved less than 1.5 per cent of the electorate. In practice, a much smaller fraction participates. An MP seeking re-selection normally has an uncontested readoption. Where a new candidate is being chosen, participation is depressed by the substantial numbers of inactive party members, unlikely to join in selecting a candidate even though they are eligible. Surveys by political scientists Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd et al found that 40 per cent of Labour members, 48 per cent of Conservatives and 29 per cent of Liberal Democrats confessed to being completely inactive. Majorities in each party had not attended a

party meeting in the previous five years.<sup>6</sup> Given these filters on the numbers able and wanting to participate in candidate selection, it is likely that only a minority do so. For the 2005 election, participation by 0.5 per cent of the electorate is a generous estimate.

Postal primaries vastly increases the numbers involved in candidate selection. Compared to selection by party members, the turnout in the two primaries represented a 35-50 times increase in participation. In Totnes 24.5 per cent of the total electorate cast valid votes (16, 497), 82.4 per cent of the party's vote at the 2005 general election. In Gosport valid votes totalled 12,659, 17.8 of the electorate and 65.7 per cent of the 2005 Conservative vote. Reproduced in 200 average size constituencies (an electorate close to 70, 000 in 2010), turnout rates similar to Totnes and Gosport would yield a total primary vote of 2.5-3.5 million. Voting in primaries would become as widespread as forms of participation such as taking part in demonstrations, being active in a political campaigns and giving money to political parties.

Involving voters is likely to increase the social representativeness of selectorates. None of the parties' members are a microcosm of their supporters let alone the electorate. Like most forms of political activism, party membership is skewed towards the more educated and those in middle class occupations. In contrast, the working class voters make up from two to four times more of each party's share of the vote as they do members. Women are a majority of Labour's voters but only 39 per cent of its members. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats members diverge markedly by age from their parties' voters. Even though Tory electoral support is greatest amongst those aged 55 and above, they are only half the share of its vote compared to its membership. Most members of the Liberal Democrats are aged over 55 whereas the party's electoral strength is greatest amongst the under 35s.

Primaries also change the behaviour of candidates. When selection was an internal party affair canvassing for support was discouraged or forbidden though not always absent. Most selectors first encountered the candidates at selection meetings. The candidates sought to win support through their formal presentations, responses to questions and their curricula vitae. It was these sources, available at

the selection meeting, which were solely relied upon by most of the participants to make their choices.<sup>7</sup> These meetings excluded the public even as spectators. Under a primary system of selection, campaigning becomes permissible and public. Voters are the targeted for persuasion, employing activities typical of election campaigns. Candidates in Totnes and Gosport communicated with voters, using leaflets, websites, blogs, e-mails, sites on Facebook and Twitter. Most candidates went looking for votes in public places. Candidates in Gosport appeared at the local market where one established a stall. Other methods of encountering voters included standing at the ferry terminal, holding placards at the roadside on one of the principal commuter routes, attending the local half marathon and conducting a constituent surgery in a pub. Both constituency parties held a public meeting where the candidates spoke and answered questions. Attendance was around 400 in each constituency and there were facilities for casting a vote at the end of the meeting. Video excerpts from the Gosport meeting were posted on the website of the local newspaper.

Voters are likely to use different selection criteria compared to members. The most recent study of internal party selection (conducted before the inception of one member, one vote by the two major parties) showed that members attached priority to the ability to win votes and being a good speaker. Other desired qualities, in descending order of importance, were energy and enthusiasm, compatible political views, knowledge about issues and political experience. Local connections and character were of little importance.<sup>8</sup> No surveys of primary voters were conducted Totnes or Gosport so there is a lack data about how the primary voters arrived at their choices. However, choices can only be made on the basis of the cues provided to voters. How the candidates presented themselves can thus offer some clues as to the criteria voters could have used.

Public speaking, a selection priority and the principal communication form in internal party selection, loomed low in the primaries. There was a single public meeting, the candidates speaking before an audience numbering less than 5 per cent of the total primary vote. In contrast to the requirements of internal party selection, the primary candidates emphasised character, local connections and plebeian experience. Reflecting the circumstances that had brought about the incumbents departure, they sought to assure voters of their trustworthiness. The candidate who was a GP noted that doctors are

the profession most trusted by the public. Several candidates promised regular, online statements of their expenses. A Gosport candidate pledged to stand down as MP if petitioned by voters for betraying their trust.

Local connections were claimed by most candidates. One reported the most frequently asked question to be ‘Are you local?’ In claiming such connections ‘local’ possessed some elasticity. One Totnes candidate characterised herself as ‘Devon born and bred’. Another said she had lived in the county for 16 years, claiming connections to the constituency through her children’s attendance in one of the local authority’s schools and the area covered by her husband’s work as a psychiatrist. The third defined himself as ‘I am local, likeable and enjoy a high profile in the area.’ A Gosport candidate said she had spent her whole life within 15 miles of the port. A second recalled her childhood in the neighbouring constituency and looked forward to coming home. A candidate who lacked local connections sought to deflect their significance, pointing out that they were possessed by the outgoing disgraced MP and thus were no guarantee of fitness for office. At the Gosport public meeting, all four candidates undertook to move to the constituency if elected.

The candidates strove to demonstrate real life experience. Their upbringing, family lives and occupations were used to show their normality. In Gosport the winning candidate described herself as ‘Local businesswoman, navy wife and mum.’ Being typical of voters, the candidates claimed to be appreciative of their needs as well as being committed to being responsive to them. Several drew on their occupations to show that they were used to taking responsibility for others, dedicated to their interests and worthy of their trust.

The success of Wollaston and Dinenage suggests that primary voters differ in their preferences from a selectorate of party members. Both open primaries were won by women. In Totnes the two women candidates accrued over 80 per cent of the vote. In Gosport their counterparts gained over 50 per cent of the vote. In other constituencies, in contrast, men continued to prevail, accounting for three-quarters of all new Tory candidates. Wollaston also had a very untypical political profile for a Tory candidate. She had been a member of the party for only three years whereas Lovenduski and Norris

found the average Conservative candidate to have been a party member for 17 years. She had never held party office or been a candidate in a local election. In contrast, 90 per cent of candidates had held office in a local party, three-quarters had contested a local government election and 44 per cent had been successful.<sup>9</sup> Rather than hiding her inexperience Wollaston made it a virtue, asking ‘Can someone with no background in politics become a politician?’ Nick Bye, one of her defeated rivals, conceded that she was more attuned to the priorities of primary voters than he was. At the public meeting he made disparaging remarks about the Liberal Democrats which ‘would have worked well before a party executive but fell flat as a pancake before a wider audience’.<sup>10</sup> When her two rivals attacked the Liberal Democrat candidate, Wollaston declined to do so, saying she did not want to get dragged into party politics, ‘The Punch and Judy politics is not my style. I will not be attacking the other parties. It's not what people want to hear.’<sup>11</sup>

A nonpartisan style was suited to an open primary where the selectorate extended far beyond Conservatives to include supporters of other parties (who accounted for over half the total vote in both constituencies in 2005). In the absence of polls it is not known how many non-Conservatives participated. The experience of American open primaries is that crossovers (from other parties) can amount to a substantial minority of the vote, the numbers varying according to the competitiveness of the contests in their own party's primary. As the other parties in Totnes and Gosport did not hold primaries, and every voter received a postal ballot effectively inviting their participation in the Tory's contest, it is likely that a substantial minority of the vote was cast by non-Conservatives.

Allowing non-Conservatives to participate raised fears of raiding –supporters of other parties seeking to select the weakest candidate to sabotage the Tories' election prospects. Such an intention surfaced in Totnes when the Liberal Democrat M.P. in the adjoining constituency, Adrian Sanders, called on his party's supporters to vote for Nick Bye as the most beatable of the three candidates. Few can have responded to this call as Bye came last. The failure of raiding in this instance, and the absence of such an effort in Gosport, is consistent with its rarity in American open primaries. There crossover voters support the candidate they judge to be the best rather than the weakest candidate. Moreover, party supporters

and crossovers often share the same candidate preference. Rarely are crossovers sufficiently numerous or distinctive in their preferences to impose a nominee on a party whose supporters prefer a different candidate.<sup>12</sup>

### **Challenging incumbents**

If there are to be 200 postal primaries in safe seats before the next election most will involve sitting MPs. At the last five general elections an average of 98 vacancies arose from members retiring. Forcing MPs from safe seats to face a primary contest was obviously intended by the party leaders. Commending the reform plan, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said ‘We’ve got scores and scores of MPs in constituencies where they basically have their seats for life, no questions asked, where the constituency has been in the same hands since the Second World War.’<sup>13</sup> The Prime Minister responded that he was taking nothing for granted and would be conducting his weekend constituency surgery as usual.

Some MPs from safe seats will thus be confronted by a new source of electoral uncertainty. In the past, provided they preserved harmonious relations with party leaders and constituency parties, they would be re-selected. Even during the period when a re-selection process was mandatory in the Labour party, incumbent defeats were few. It is for parties to decide where to hold their share of the primaries, and the choice is likely to be source of some tension amongst MPs whose seats are selected. Where a primary is designated it may encourage MPs to stand down, and party leaders may use it for that reason.

Incumbents who stay on to fight a primary should possess sufficient assets to win. The 2010 Audit of Political Engagement shows that 44 per cent of the public could name their name MP, a higher figure than for their equivalents in the US House of Representatives, where incumbents are rarely beaten in primaries or general elections. To be known is largely to be known favourably as those satisfied with their MP outnumber those dissatisfied by more than two to one.<sup>14</sup> Incumbents are likely to be more experienced campaigners than their opponents, and to be able to call upon the loyalties of party



activists to assist their efforts. Being the MP establishes the local connection that opponents may struggle to replicate. If the campaigning rules outlined in *Big ideas to give Britain Real Change* apply, they too will aid incumbents. In a less than three-week campaign the challengers will struggle to establish the name recognition and popularity which the incumbent enjoys at the outset. To have any chance of doing so would require a lavish publicity campaign which the £200 spending limit proscribes.

### **Weakening party discipline?**

In the United States primaries contribute to weak party cohesion in government. Candidates are often self-starters, entering a primary without prompting or support from activists in the party organization. They assemble their own campaign teams, raise their own funds and appeal for support around their individual qualities and issue positions. The primary winner captures the party's title and is then aided by its organization in the general election but a separate candidate organization, and personal appeals, persist. In office, the winner has few obligations to, or constraints imposed by, the party organization. It did not select them, cannot deselect them and usually was no more than a modest aid in electing them. Popular rather than party support will secure re-selection and re-election, leading officeholders to pursue individualistic survival strategies. Party unity in government owes more to ideological cohesion than party discipline.

However, these effects are unlikely to transfer to Britain. Other incentives to party discipline, such as the needs of a parliamentary system and prospects of career advancement, remain. Moreover, the plan in *Big ideas to give Britain real change* combines a measure of party control and accountability with public participation to sustain party discipline. Parties control access to the primary ballot. Candidates will still have to be approved by central office and shortlisted by constituency executive committees to be put before the primary electorate. In most American states, in contrast, the party organization has no role in filtering candidates. A candidate appears on a primary ballot by satisfying legal requirements (such as signatures on a petition and payment of a fee) but is not vetted by the party.

The brevity of the British primary campaign and the limit on spending (assuming it is adhered to) offer little scope for building a personal following amongst voters. These limits of time and money are not matched in American primaries where candidates, virtually guaranteed access to the ballot, can begin primary campaigning months in advance and spend as much as they can raise to communicate with voters. As there is no long-term plan for primaries beyond the current parliament Britain, there is no guarantee that an MP will have to face a primary more than once. This removes any incentive for incumbents to remain attentive to the primary electorate, rather than the party. As parties will have discretion as where to hold primaries they may even afford party leaders a new weapon in promoting discipline.

### **Limits of space, time and competition**

The magnitude of change that will result is capped by its limited application in space and time. Confined to just 200 constituencies, two-thirds of the electorate will have no opportunity to vote in a primary. Even a majority of safe seats will be excluded by the 200 constituency limit. At the 2010 general election 454 seats were won by a margin of more than 10 per cent. Although safe seats are the norm, primaries will be the exception. Most of the voters located in safe seats will continue without the opportunity to participate in a genuine contest either between parties or within the dominant party.

Confined to the current parliament, the plan removes the potential for primaries to effect more extensive and enduring change. Unless made permanent, primaries will never reach most constituencies, including the majority of safe seats. Without continuity, neither will primaries increase accountability. Accountability requires that those who select are able to de-select if dissatisfied by the incumbent's performance. An MP has no accountability to a body which disbands after their selection, never to be reconstituted. Rather the relevant body for subsequent re-selection will become the local party members, who may have preferred a different candidate in the original primary and differ from voters in evaluating their MP's performance.

Allowing voters a choice in intra-party contest leaves undisturbed the shortage of electorally competitive constituencies. Primaries will be choices between persons not policies or government

performance. On those features of collective responsibility, rewarding sound performance with victory and inadequacy with defeat will continue to reside with the electorates in the several dozen marginal seats. A drastic overhaul of electoral boundaries or a more proportional electoral system offer more effective remedies for widespread uncompetitiveness but on these 'big ideas' the coalition partners are unlikely to agree.

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- <sup>1</sup> Press conference, 'The Coalition: our programme for government', 20 May, 2010,  
<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/05/press-conference-on-the-coalition-our-programme-for-government-50401>
- <sup>2</sup> David Cameron, 'Big Ideas to give Britain Real Change', 24 April, 2010,  
[http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David\\_Cameron\\_Big\\_ideas\\_to\\_give\\_Britain\\_Real\\_Change.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David_Cameron_Big_ideas_to_give_Britain_Real_Change.aspx)
- <sup>3</sup> *Big ideas to give Britain Real Change*, London, Conservative Party, n.d., p.4.  
[http://www.conservatives.com/News/News\\_stories/2010/04/~/\\_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Big%20ideas%20to%20give%20Britain%20Real%20change.ashx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/04/~/_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Big%20ideas%20to%20give%20Britain%20Real%20change.ashx)
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Gallagher, 'Conclusion' in Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh, eds, *Candidate Selection in Perspective: The Secret Garden of Politics*, London, Sage, 1988, p.246.
- <sup>5</sup> John Marshall, 'Membership of UK political parties', London, House of Commons Library, 2009,  
<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snsg-05125.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Jeremy Richardson, *True Blues; The Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp.68, 74; Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *New Labour's Grassroots: The Transformation of the Labour Party Membership*, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp.82, 88; Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Antony Billinghamurst, *Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p.44.
- <sup>7</sup> Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.124.
- <sup>8</sup> Norris and Lovenduski, pp.139-40.
- <sup>9</sup> Norris and Lovenduski, p.160.
- <sup>10</sup> Nick Bye, 'A popular raspberry against yah-boo politics', *The Times*, 6 August, 2009, p.23.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Tory two in attack on Lib Dem opponent', (Torquay) *Herald Express*, 27 July, 2009, p.5.
- <sup>12</sup> Alan Abramowitz, John McGlennon and Ronald Rapoport, 'A Note on Strategic Voting in a Primary Election', *Journal of Politics*, 43, 1981, pp.899-904; Ronald Hedlund and Meredith W. Watts, 'The Wisconsin Open Primary 1968 to 1984', *American Politics Quarterly* 14, 1986, pp.55-73. Hedlund, Gary D. Wekkin, 'Why Crossover Voters Are Not Mischievous Voters: The Segmented Partisanship Hypothesis', *American Politics*

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*Quarterly* 19, 1991, pp.229-47. Bruce E. Cain and Elisabeth R. Gerber, eds, *Voting at the Political Fault Line: California's Experiment with the Blanket Primary*, London, University of California Press, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Press conference, 'The Coalition: our programme for government'.

<sup>14</sup> *Audit of Political Engagement* 7, London, Hansard Society, 2010, pp.88, 93.