

What determines parties' choice of incumbent-renomination methods? The case of Labour, 1979-2019



The Labour Party changed its incumbent-renomination process six times between 1979 and 2019. Using it as a case study, [Alona O. Dolinsky](#) proposes a two-part theory explaining parties' choice of incumbent-renomination methods: who controls the party, and whether they believe MPs are bound by dictates of the parliamentary leadership or the extra-parliamentary party.

In the run-up to general elections, parties decide on the candidates that will stand for them, be it new candidates or incumbent MPs. Decisions regarding the latter constitute a distinct process because incumbents hold unique intra-party positions. Unlike new candidates, they are familiar with their constituencies and intra-party politics, have more legislative and electoral experience, more intra-party influence, and are more likely to reach leadership positions. Most parties renominate incumbents (almost) automatically, but in some, renomination is more difficult.

An important question is what determines intra-party incumbent-renomination methods? It is important because renomination and the debate surrounding it are not merely technical. At their heart is a debate over the nature of intra-party democracy, the relationship between MPs and constituents, and the relationship among parties' different parts. All of these are vital for parties' functioning and development.

[My main argument](#) is that we can explain why parties choose the incumbent-renomination method they do by examining the interaction between two factors. First, which party face controls the party – the party in public office (the party in parliament or government) or the party on the ground (the extra-parliamentary party, made up of activists and members at different levels primarily motivated by policy). Second, what is the prevailing conception of MPs' representative style: do MPs see themselves as being accountable to the leadership of the party in public office (PPO), or to the party on the ground (POG)?

The combination of these factors is key because these different conceptions lead to different incumbent-renomination methods. If the PPO controls the party, and its leaders think that MPs should be accountable primarily to it, renomination will be (almost) automatic. If the POG controls the party, and its leaders think that MPs should be accountable primarily to it, incumbent renomination will be under greater control of the POG.

Explaining real-world phenomena – the Labour Party

Labour's debates of the relationship between its MPs and its extra-parliamentary bodies date back to its founding. Over four decades, the party made six changes to its incumbent-renomination methods. Of these, the 1980 adoption of Mandatory Reselection is the most well-known example of a party denying incumbents automatic renomination.

Technically, Labour's extra-parliamentary party always controlled incumbent renomination through Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs), but the process was prolonged and complicated, leaving ultimate control in the hands of the National Executive Committee and making the process effectively automatic. This is partly explained by tensions between Labour's two main factions—Labour Left and Labour Right, with each holding, generally speaking, radically different conceptions of the party's role and purposes. Labour Left organised both within and outside Labour, with strong ties to grassroots organisations, holding MPs' to be accountable to the POG. Labour Right organised mainly inside Labour and less publicly, with strong ties to non-ideological elements of trade unions and not much grassroots organisation, holding MPs accountable to the PPO. The strong trade-union ties meant that Labour Right (almost) always controlled the National Executive Committee and Parliamentary Labour Party, keeping renomination practically automatic.

The 1980 Conference adopted the first change to Labour's incumbent renomination. It followed trade unions' drifting left in the 1960s and Labour Left dominating the party by the late 1970s. Within Labour Left, the grassroots group Campaign for Labour Party Democracy strongly advocated for intra-party structural reforms. These aimed to weaken and even terminate PLP independence by shifting power to activists and unions, asserting de facto the authority they already held in principle. Among the reforms was Mandatory Reselection: all renomination-seeking incumbents would face a constituency reselection procedure within three years of the last general election, though MPs retained an automatic right to be shortlisted.

While it took nearly 60 years for the POG to gain de facto control over incumbent renomination, the second change was adopted merely seven years later when Labour Left was again much weaker. Coupled with a third consecutive electoral defeat in 1987, that year's Conference adopted local electoral collages dividing selection votes in CLPs between affiliated organisations (up to 40%) and individual rank-and-file members (the rest).

The first concrete move to end Mandatory Reselection came shortly after with the 1991 Conference, making the third change to the process by introducing trigger ballots that let constituency general committees decide whether to hold a contested renomination rather than hold them automatically for all MPs.

This was followed by the fourth change as the 1993 Conference adopted the one member, one vote method and unopposed renomination for incumbents with at least two-thirds of CLP nominations.

The fifth change came at the height of New Labour and the PPO's dominance, as Blair believed that MPs ought to be accountable to the PPO. In the run-up to the 2001 general election, 'affirmative nomination' was adopted, reducing the number of CLP nominations needed to avoid a contested renomination from two-thirds to half.

After that, Labour's incumbent-renomination process remained unchanged for nearly two decades until Labour Left became powerful again in the 2010s, marked by the formation of Momentum and the selection of Jeremy Corbyn as Leader in 2015. During his leadership, the debate over incumbent renomination reignited with leading actors in the POG demanding MPs be more accountable to them and calling to reinstate Mandatory Reselection. These calls culminated in the sixth and latest change to incumbent renomination in 2018, increasing the threshold of CLP nominations needed to avoid a contested renomination back to two-thirds. While this wasn't Mandatory Reselection, obstacles to renomination increased again during a time of the POG's dominance within Labour.

Conclusion

Although it's difficult to reach generalisable conclusions based on a single case-study, this is a necessary first step in developing this area of research. Analysing the debates within Labour shows that the theoretical framework is useful in explaining real-world cases. The respective timing of the changes to incumbent renomination suggests that the adopted methods were shaped by the prevailing conception of MPs' representative roles as partisans among the leading actors in the face controlling the party.

Selecting candidates is a key function of political parties in established democracies. Once selected and elected, these candidates determine much of parties' nature and characteristics, influencing legislatures, governments, and oppositions. Extensive archival research is needed to evaluate intra-party debates over incumbent-renomination methods, but this research agenda is worthwhile. It sheds important light on intra-party dynamics, exposing how internal power struggles and different understandings of the appropriate relationship between parties' various parts shape intra-party processes. Future work can evaluate the theory's generalisability using other case studies and pose alternative or complementary explanations for what determines incumbent-renomination methods.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *Representation*.

About the Author



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