

The Polish and Romanian experiences show that party elites need to loosen control when introducing primary elections to select candidates

By Democratic Audit

*The Conservatives experimented with primaries at the 2010 general election, and Ed Miliband has recently proposed their wider introduction to choose Labour Party candidates. **Sergiu Gherghina** and **Michal Radecki** believe primary elections can bring significant benefits for parties and democracy as a whole, but warn that the UK needs to avoid mistakes made in Poland and Romania when primaries were first introduced in these countries.*

In the last couple of decades inclusive means to select the candidates for legislative elections have gained momentum throughout Europe. A growing number of political parties have introduced internal elections in the forms of primaries – often available only to party members.

Moves towards inclusive selection procedure are likely to bring political parties a series of benefits. One of them is that party membership becomes more attractive by opening the decision-making process and allowing members to make their voice heard. At the same time, primaries convey a message of transparency and intra-party democracy. Both features can be powerful vehicles to improve the party image and electoral performance. Since primaries are not common events, they bring media coverage and put the parties in the spotlight. Another important benefit is the quality of candidates since primaries enlarge the pool of recruitment, filter the most appropriate candidates and prepare them for competition with outside opponents.

However, the attempts to introduce primaries are not always successful. Two examples from Eastern Europe illustrate how mishandled primaries fail to deliver any promised expected benefits. Their mistakes can constitute a useful lesson for those parties planning to adopt inclusive selection mechanisms, including the Labour Party in the UK. In chronological order, the Polish Civic Platform (PO) and the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD) have abandoned primaries after a single use in 2001 and 2004 respectively. Both countries used at the time a proportional representation electoral system and primaries were organized to determine the position of candidates on the lists (compiled at regional / county level).

PO decided to use primaries immediately after its formation with two strategic aims. It emerged before the 2001 parliamentary elections as a loose civic movement and primaries were designed to attract potential supporters since the PO aimed to establish itself as a political actor. These primaries were presented as the first open and democratic event in Polish party politics and thus media coverage was quite likely to be high. Several decisions of the party leaders altered the functioning of primaries. They appointed regional coordinators, responsible only to them, and organized the regional primaries. Party leaders kept the final say regarding who could run in primaries and who was finally selected. The leaders could (and actually did) eliminate candidates from primaries on ethical or policy grounds and remove those already selected if compromising information showed up.

In addition to these top-down limitations, several problems occurred during primaries. One of them was the practice of conveyance by activists belonging to SKL (Conservative-People's Party, which was one of political groups that created PO) who transported party members by bus to vote for their candidates. Another problem was vote buying. Both SKL politicians and those close to the party founders accused each other of providing free alcohol and food to activists entitled to vote. Additionally, in a few cities allegations were made against the winners. Finally, internal tensions emerged after the leaders altered the results of primaries according to their own interests.

The PSD introduced primaries as a strategy to improve its image affected by corruption allegations and to gain electoral support in the fierce competition against the opposition coalition. Instead of achieving these goals, the organisation of the primaries was plagued by a great number of problems. One of these was the rigging of votes,

which even led to some winners having more votes than turnout. Another point of discontent among candidates has been the asymmetric access to resources. Local leaders competing in primaries were also in charge of their organisation and could thus appoint their supporters in key positions. Some complaints of electoral fraud referred to the activities of such supporters and even candidates who showed party members how to vote or even voted for them.

In addition, there was a structural problem with the voting process. The PSD used a computer-assisted voting system that had never been used before by any Romanian citizen (legislative elections are exclusively paper-based). The poor information provided to party members regarding this new system made them ask for help from the election committee. Thus, in many instances there was a public voting rather than a secret one. The intra-party tensions created by these problems were fuelled by the decision of the party leaders to change the results of the primaries.

What can the UK parties learn from these two examples? We argue that at least three things:

- First, primaries that remain controlled by the central elite make little sense. Both situations showed that top-down intervention has generated intra-party conflicts.
- Second, the shift to a more inclusive candidate selection has to be organised to the last detail. If not, there is a danger of boomerang effect in which envisaged benefits can go against the party. To refer to one of the examples, the PSD primaries are often qualified by its opponents as “masquerade” and they have many reasons to attach such a label to that process. In contrast, the PO appeared to learn its lesson: the 2010 primaries organized to nominate a presidential candidate for national elections were better organized and led to minimal internal conflict.
- Third, the primaries are not a smooth process for the party organization. Along the way, clashes between local branches may emerge (as in the PO) or between leaders (PSD). Also, the party may also expect to lose some important members unhappy with their defeat.

Nevertheless, if the British parties can cope with these challenges, the adoption of primaries will be rewarding in the short (for instance improving communication with members and voters) and the long-term (achieving a better quality of government). In light of their rich experience in democratic politics the obstacles are likely to be smaller than in the new European democracies.

This post is partly based on the following research paper: Gherghina, Sergiu, [One-Shot Party Primaries: The Case of the Romanian Social Democrats](#), *Politics*, Volume 33, Number 3, June 2013.

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