

Candidate selection in Northern Ireland: A cold house for women?

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Across the UK, there is *likely to be an increase* in the number of women elected as MPs. However, this does not appear to be the case in Northern Ireland. In this post, [Neil Matthews](#) argues that formal candidate selection mechanisms are not to blame for the dearth of women competing in Westminster election. Rather, a variety of socio-cultural factors means there is a lack of supply of female candidates for the current election.



What best explains the relative absence of women from public office in the United Kingdom? Of the departing 2010 class of MPs, 22.8 percent were women – placing the UK 57th in the [global rankings](#). In the last two decades the spotlight in the search for understanding such inequality has turned firmly onto [the practices of political parties](#). More specifically, the process of candidate selection – the often overlooked ‘[choice before the choice](#)’ – has been shown to have an important effect on the ability of under-represented groups, such as women, to be elected in greater numbers.

While much is known about the candidate selection procedures adopted by [the main British political parties](#) – and their implications for levels of gender equality – the internal workings of Northern Ireland’s political parties have, [until recently](#), been shrouded in secrecy. Such mystery is surprising given the especially low numbers of women selected to contest elections in the region (at all levels). Between 1983 and 2010, just 14.3 percent of the candidates nominated by the five main parties – the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Sinn Féin, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Alliance Party – in all elections have been women. Of the [85 candidates](#) representing these parties in the 2015 UK general election, 21 are women. A closer look reveals that the DUP – the party likely to return the most MPs from Northern Ireland on May 7 – has an all-male candidate slate.

How then do Northern Ireland’s main political parties select their Westminster candidates? And does the nature of these procedures account for the low number of female candidates in the region?

Who are the gatekeepers?

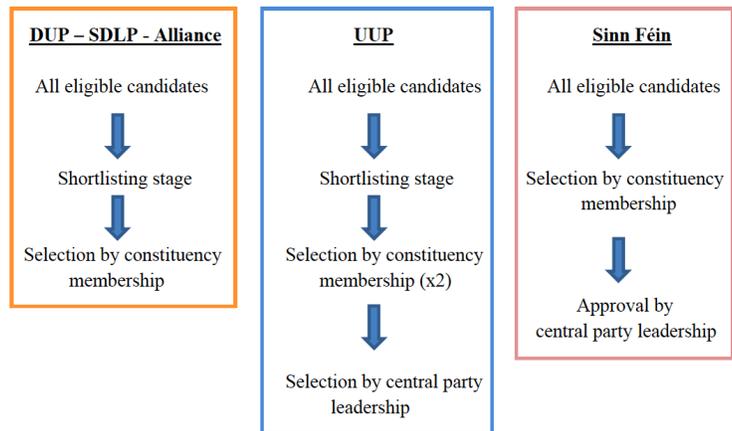
All five of the main parties adopt multi-stage selection processes for Westminster contests – combining local and central selectorates (see Figure 1). The first hurdle to overcome for prospective candidates in the DUP, SDLP, UUP and Alliance is to gain entry onto a centrally approved candidate ‘shortlist’. Those shortlisted then proceed to a hustings of local party members, where the final candidate is selected on a ‘one member one vote’ basis. If necessary, the UUP instructs local members to nominate twice the required number of candidates, from which a panel of central party officers will select the final candidate. Sinn Féin reverses the ‘central to local’ model adopted by the other four parties, with a candidate chosen by the party grassroots and then interviewed (and ratified) by the party leadership.

There is, therefore, a significant degree of organisational convergence in Northern Ireland when it comes to the selection of Westminster candidates. All parties attempt to strike a balance between a locally and centrally-taken decision. Indeed, in terms of organisational change, there has been a distinct *centralisation* of candidate selection methods in the region in recent years. While Sinn Féin and Alliance have allowed for some central oversight of the selection process since the 1970s, it is only in the last four years that the other three parties have (at least formally) adopted such a stage (the DUP in 2013; UUP in 2014; SDLP in 2011). This development sees Northern Ireland run contrary to a wider trend in contemporary party organisation where candidate selection procedures have become ‘democratised’ – with members, and even supporters, granted greater voice in the process. Rather than widen the franchise, the Northern Irish parties have adopted more exclusive procedures which allow for increased central

oversight and intervention.

Figure 1: Candidate selection methods for Northern Ireland parties

This centralisation of candidate selection – with party leaders acquiring greater decision-making authority – should come as a welcome development to those keen on seeing more women nominated to candidate lists in Northern Ireland. A more exclusive approach to selection – while appearing ‘undemocratic’ to some – is an important means of seeing greater numbers of women added to a ticket. Previous research on [candidate selection in Northern Ireland](#) (which predated this recent spate of centralisation) argued that the highly ‘localised’ nature of selection could be deemed a contributing factor to the low levels of female candidates.



Decentralised procedures, where party members are tasked with the sole responsibility for selecting candidates, [have been shown](#) to produce less representative candidate lists. Indeed, those within the DUP, UUP and SDLP have attested that the changes made to their respective selection procedures were introduced in an attempt to improve the representative profile of future candidate lists.

A ‘supply’ issue?

Of course, with greater opportunities for central involvement in candidate selection than ever before, the question remains: why have so few female candidates been selected for the 2015 general election? One explanation is that party leaders have been reluctant to interfere with a process which is still widely regarded as the preserve of local activists. Candidate selection remains an important incentive for grassroots members to both campaign and fundraise. Party leaders, therefore, tread lightly for fear of disenchanting large swathes of the rank-and-file.

Perhaps the primary explanation for the low levels of female candidates in Northern Ireland, however, concerns the ‘supply’ of female aspirants. Rather than finding evidence of explicit discrimination at the selection stage or unfairly ‘gendered’ structural practices (the ‘demand’ side), research has demonstrated that few women seek selection at all levels in Northern Ireland. Such reluctance, which affects all political parties in Northern Ireland, owes to an especially potent cocktail of socio-cultural factors. Of prime importance here is the clear sexual division of labour in a region which displays almost ‘hyper-traditional’ conservative attitudes to women’s role in society and politics. A political career in Northern Ireland is, to borrow a phrase from one [leading gender scholar](#), ‘coded as male’. In addition, testimony from women within the main parties has revealed a chronic lack of confidence among female activists when it comes to putting themselves forward for selection. Many women regard themselves as lacking the required skills to stand for selection.

Crucially, the weak supply of female candidates in Northern Ireland extends to both local government and Assembly level. This has considerably negative implications for the number of women selected to contest Westminster elections, as experience at these levels is regarded as an important prerequisite for higher office. Both local government and the Assembly are framed as key ‘pipelines’ or training grounds for Westminster. As the situation currently stands – with women firmly in the minority as [candidates for council or regional office](#) – it is, therefore, unlikely that we will see vast improvements in the number of women standing in future general elections in Northern Ireland.

So, to conclude, it is difficult to pin the blame for the dearth of female candidates in Northern Ireland on the political parties’ candidate selection methods. Indeed, short of gender quotas, the procedures adopted by the main parties

for Westminster are, comparatively speaking, 'women friendly'. While party members retain a key role in the process, opportunities exist for central party leaders to attempt to address any gender imbalance. It appears instead that the greatest hurdle to achieving political gender equality in Northern Ireland remains the lack of appetite among women to seek selection in the first instance. And for that there is no easy fix.

About the Authors

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