

The new Labour leadership contest rules are responsible for the lacklustre pre-campaign

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Labour Party is currently in the (long) process of electing its new leader, with the eventual victor likely to fight a 2020 General Election. This is the first election to be fought under the party's new system, following the recent controversy over trade union involvement with the process. **Eunice Goes** argues that these new rules are stifling the current contest, which so far can be characterised as monotone and lacklustre.*



The official campaign to elect the new leader of the Labour Party has not started yet (the official contenders will be announced on the June 12) but it has already proved to be a disappointment. Instead of offering an opportunity to discuss in a frank and dispassionate manner the causes of Labour's devastating defeat and deliberate about possible pathways for the future, the new rules to elect the leader have had the effect of narrowing the scope of that debate.

The candidates to the leadership of the Labour Party are not responsible for this state of affairs. In fact, they are the guinea pigs of new rules, outlined by the [Collins Report on Party Reform](#) to elect the Labour leader that were approved in 2014 at a special conference. The purpose of the new rules was to reduce the power of the trade unions in the party's decision-making (by putting an end to block voting), the power of MPs in the election of the party leader and ultimately to open the party to new voices and democratise its structures. So far, the results have been disappointing.

Under the new rules, the party leader will be elected by the one-member-one-vote system. So that means that the vote of an MP counts as much as the vote of any Labour member or supporter, but under the old Electoral College system (divided in three sections), the vote of one MP was worth the votes of 608 party members and 12,915 affiliated members.

But if MPs were forced to accept the reduction of their voting rights, they retained an important power. The new rules establish that each candidate needs to be nominated by at least 15 per cent of the Parliamentary Labour Party, which at moment amounts to a minimum of 35 nominations. By deciding who will be on the shortlist, MPs pretty much decide the shape and tone of the leadership election.

This effect has been visible in the past weeks. The leadership contest quickly polarised around three candidates, making it very difficult for other voices to participate. Andy Burnham quickly became the front-runner collecting more than the 35 nominations required to stand. Yvette Cooper has also secured the 35 nominations and at the time of writing Liz Kendall is [very close to achieve that magic number](#). By contrast, Mary Creagh and Jeremy Corbyn are struggling to get the sufficient number of nominations. In addition, Tristram Hunt was forced to abandon his leadership ambitions because he was not able to secure the support of a sufficient number of MPs.

The losers of this situation are the 220.000 party members and (unknown number of) registered supporters who will decide the election of the new Labour leader and deputy leader by the 10th of September (the result will be announced two days later). Instead of having a wide pool of candidates representing different factions and sensibilities in the party, they will have to choose one of three or four candidates whom, despite their best efforts to amplify their differences, have similar backgrounds and perspectives.

The great unknown in this election is about the power of trade unions. The new party rules have [led some to believe](#) that, despite the changes, the trade unions are still quite powerful. The right of the party in particular is quite worried about their ability to determine the electoral outcome, as UNITE has declared its support for Andy Burnham. But in reality no one really knows.

At this stage, it is hard to calculate how many members of trade unions have bothered (or will do so by the August 12 deadline) to register as members or supporters of the Labour Party. According to some rumours UNITE is recruiting one thousand party members a day, but as the New Statesman's [Stephen Bush showed there are good reasons to question this figure](#).

What is clear is that the turnout amongst trade unions members tends to be low (only 9 per cent of affiliated members voted in the 2010 [Labour leadership election](#)). Moreover, not all trade unionists are Labour voters. [An Ashcroft poll](#) found that only 49 per cent of UNITE members was planning to vote Labour at the general election. The secretary general of the trade union GMB Paul Kenny seems to [have confirmed this trend](#) when he recently told the Today programme that 'there's a minority of unions that are affiliated' with Labour.

On the other hand, Labour has been very active on social media in the hope of recruiting new members and/or supporters for the party. If the party's new recruitment strategy succeeds it will have the effect of reducing the power of the trade unions, as new members or supporters tend to support more mainstream candidates that have been well-received by the media.

Hopefully, from the 12th of June the different candidates, secured in their official nominations, will feel freer to inject some energy and passion to the different hustings and televised debates that will take place in different parts of the country. Indeed, they will have to, as the registered party members and supporters need all the encouragement they can get to participate in what so far has been a monotone and lacklustre leadership campaign.

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