



Bringing the members back in? Democratizing candidate selection in Britain and Spain

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**Bringing the Members Back In?:
Democratizing Candidate Selection in Britain and Spain**

Jonathan Hopkin

Abstract

Primary elections and membership ballots are becoming more common as a means of selecting candidates in European parties. This article assesses the likely implications of these changes for party cohesion by examining the American experience of primaries and contrasting US candidate selection with the membership ballots and primaries recently adopted by parties in the UK and Spain. It is argued that, in the absence of state regulation of candidate selection in European parties, these changes are unlikely to undermine party organizations as primaries have in the US. Instead, the European experience suggests that party leaders have been able to retain ultimate control over candidate selection, and that the democratization of the process has been more formal than real.

Key words: candidates - selection - cohesion – primaries - membership

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Bringing the Members Back In?

Democratizing Candidate Selection in Britain and Spain

Introduction

Candidate selection in West European parties has traditionally been the preserve of small numbers of party officials operating in less than transparent conditions, leading Gallagher and Marsh to describe it as the 'secret garden' of politics in their 1988 study. However a decade later forms of candidate selection involving membership ballots of various kinds are becoming an increasingly visible feature of West European party politics, with major parties in a number of countries, including Spain and the UK, including members in the party 'selectorates' which elect candidates for public offices. This article assesses the causes and consequences of parties extending membership participation in candidate selection, and examines the emerging empirical reality in two cases where parties have made such changes.

Candidate Selection and Party Models

The classic ideal types of party organization each appear to have their own characteristic forms of candidate selection (Ware 1996: 258). In the cadre party, candidate selection as such is an inappropriate concept: parties are loose and informal organizations built around candidates who are self-selecting. In the mass party, in contrast, candidate selection is formalized and under tight party control. Parliamentary elites become mere spokespeople for the *classe gardée*, paving the way for party organizations to exercise close control over their selection (Duverger

1954, Katz in this issue). Newer party types reflect changes in the balance of power between organizations and holders of public office which have impacted on candidate selection processes. Kirchheimer's catch-all party (1966) emphasizes electoral success rather than class allegiance, suggesting a strengthening of the party in public office over the extraparliamentary structure (Panebianco 1988: 264). To this extent, public office-holders have become more autonomous of extraparliamentary party structures, and electoral attractiveness has begun to take priority over organizational loyalty in candidate selection. The steady decline in grassroots membership and partisan identification seen across West European mass parties further undermines the position of parties' extraparliamentary structures (Mair 1997: 128).

Parties are perceived by electors as being increasingly remote from society (Mair 1997: 153), and this remoteness is a key feature of the contemporary cartel party (Katz and Mair 1995). The cartel party is characterized by an increasingly close relationship with the state, and an increasing distance from civil society. Although this emphasis on parties' detachment from civil society is coherent with Kirchheimer's account of party change, other variables move in counterintuitive directions. Declining ties with civil society may weaken party organizations, but parties can use state resources to compensate for their loss of capacity for social mobilization. The move from the mass party to the catch-all party unquestionably undermined the role of grassroots party members in organizational decision-making (Kirchheimer 1966), and the cartel party's detachment from civil society would be expected to marginalize grassroots members even further. Instead Katz and Mair identify an increasing role for individual party members in party decision-making, and specifically candidate selection, as a characteristic of the cartel party (1995: 21, also Katz in this issue). The cartel party appears to bring the members back in.

Of course, individual party members' participation in candidate selection does not

necessarily amount to an enhancement of their role in a party. The atomizing effect of membership ballots (Katz and Mair 1995: 21, Katz in this issue), and the various ways in which party authorities can condition the process, suggest caution; this point will be addressed later. But to the extent that membership involvement in candidate selection at least *appears* to empower grassroots party members, the cartel party's lack of social presence may be the key to explaining this development. Parties with declining memberships and ever fewer partisan supporters, dominated by political professionals and financed by state subsidies, suffer an apparent 'democratic deficit'. However unnecessary memberships may be to the basic functions of cartel parties, the 'legitimizing myth' that they contribute is a key element of parties' public images as representative organizations (Katz and Mair 1995: 18, Table 1, Scarrow 1996). By taking measures to extend the role of individual members in party decision-making, cartel parties can defend themselves against accusations of elitism and detachment from society.

The potential benefits of internal democratization provide useful clues as to why some European parties have recently extended the inclusiveness of candidate selection processes through the use of individual membership votes (the 'One member one vote' principle, or OMOV) and even party 'primaries'. As well as an improved image, candidate selection reform can generate organizational advantages. Although contemporary parties increasingly rely on capital-intensive methods of electoral mobilization, a mass membership is still almost invariably seen as a practical asset: members provide stable electoral support, encourage non-members to vote for the party, and constitute a source of human and financial resources (Scarrow 1996: Ch.2, also Seyd and Whiteley 1992). The prospect of helping select candidates may encourage party voters to join, expanding the pool of resources available to parties.

Ironically therefore, it can be hypothesized that the more closed-off and remote a party is, the more likely it is to embark on internal reforms to empower party members. In particular,

parties suffering electoral decline or defeat, haemorrhaging of membership, or legitimacy problems are especially likely to follow this path. Reforms of candidate selection can be presented as a 'new departure' which will engage party supporters and overturn discredited elites (LeDuc, in this issue). Of course, how genuine these intentions are will depend on the role played in the reforms by the possible victims of membership choice; entrenched elites cannot be expected to embrace such changes if their position is likely to be threatened. In fact, proposals to reform candidate selection may emerge as weapons in internal battles between rival factions or 'faces' of an organization. This suggests a further explanation for candidate selection reform: extending membership participation may also be a strategy for shifting the internal balance of power between rival groups of party elites (Katz in this issue).

Candidate Selection Through Primary Elections: Reflections on the US Case

One option for reform of candidate selection is the primary election, which dominates political recruitment in the United States. Of course, US primaries are open to non-party members, a level of inclusiveness which remains rare in Western Europe. Moreover, the high levels of state regulation of the primaries process, and the variations in this regulation across American states, mark important differences with West European party systems (Ranney 1981, Katz and Kodolny 1994). So although the American case provides a wealth of evidence on the consequences of primaries, it is only a starting point for our analysis of the Western European case.

Primaries were initially hailed as a stimulus to mass participation in politics (Ware 1979), although the comparatively high levels of electoral abstention in the US would suggest this argument is flawed. Another more plausible advantage claimed by advocates of primaries is

their contribution to responsiveness. In the traditional mass party, partisan voters can be faced with the unpleasant choice of voting for an unpopular candidate from their preferred party, or abstaining, an action likely to favour the party they most oppose. In Hirschmanian terms, they are denied the option of *voice*, and are instead left with only *exit* as a means of pressurizing their party (see Ware 1979: 78). Primaries may prevent parties ignoring the wishes of their core support in the search for vote maximization, and therefore contribute to anchoring the parties more tightly in their respective ideological spaces. A variant of this view is that primaries ensure parties respond to changes in the nature of their core support. Ware (1979: 80-81) suggests that the 'membership style of party organization' produces ideologically and organizationally rigid parties whose responsiveness to their electorates, rather than their memberships, is limited. 'Membership parties' acquire a character and become institutionalized, entrenching particular interests and preventing new conflicts from being expressed politically (1979: 81). If party candidates are selected by party voters, rather than activists, then parties cannot ignore the emergence of new issues, and challengers have a much greater chance of winning nominations and injecting new blood into the parties (Epstein 1980: 214).

Primaries may also favour 'retrospective' responsiveness. Michels (1962) famously argued that party elites can easily abandon or de-emphasize their party's ideological objectives when it suits them to do so. Primaries are not a panacea for such problems, and elites' control of information and state resources help them to persuade, cajole or buy the assent of party selectorates. However primaries do present party voters with a useful means of calling incumbent politicians to account retrospectively. This can act as a strong incentive for politicians to be seen to meet voter expectations, an incentive missing in many West European parties, where incumbents merely have to persuade party workers of the case for their reselection. The retrospective responsiveness inherent in primaries can serve to deny the

nomination to politicians whose credibility has been undermined by corruption or other kinds of misbehaviour (Ware 1996: 288). This does provide an effective solution to one of the more obvious problems of West European parties: the relatively impregnable position that party elites can enjoy when they control the party machinery. From this perspective, primaries serve as a useful means of 'getting the rascals out', cutting off a potential escape route for discredited politicians¹.

Perhaps the most powerful argument against primaries on the US model is that they can lead to political parties effectively disappearing as cohesive organizations (Katz and Kodolny 1994, Boix 1998; for a more ambivalent view see Sorauf and Beck 1988). From the moment candidates are chosen by a selectorate of non-party members, party candidates cease to depend in any meaningful way on the party as an organization, and become in effect independents with their own campaign finance and their own campaign teams. This detachment between party as organization and candidates has led to party membership becoming a vacuous concept in US politics (Katz and Kodolny 1994: 31). Whereas in Western Europe parties show high levels of parliamentary discipline, in the US parliamentary parties are loose collections of political entrepreneurs who have achieved election largely off their own efforts, and with widely varying political messages. This fragmentation results in a strong tendency for parliamentarians to concentrate on the distribution of benefits to their own geographical areas rather than any broader, ideologically defined programme. The high levels of autonomy enjoyed by candidates and elected politicians leave party workers in a peculiar position. Party activists (except in 'pre-primaries', where party workers are able to select primary candidates) have barely more influence over candidate selection than any registered party voter (or in some cases, voters of the rival party!). There is therefore little incentive for political activism of the kind associated with party membership in Western Europe. There are therefore grounds

for asserting that primaries in the US, rather than democratizing political parties, have in fact led to their disappearance as such.

Democratizing Candidate Selection in Western Europe: Some Hypotheses

Candidate selection in Western Europe has up to now been founded on a more restrictive understanding of membership, and the findings on American primaries discussed above need to be adapted to this very different context. This involves disentangling the various features of candidate selection methods (Rahat and Hazan, in this issue). In Western Europe, party selectorates are generally less inclusive than in the US, even in cases where democratizing reforms have been adopted. Moreover, different selectorates, some inclusive, some exclusive, may be involved in the selection of the same candidates. In the standard party primary, the party membership – the inclusive selectorate – is free to vote for any candidate fulfilling basic requisites, and the winning candidate obtains the nomination. However in other cases (such as the ‘One Member One Vote’ membership ballots in British parties) a more exclusive selectorate is able to filter the range of candidates taking part in the process, and may even override the ballot result. The following analysis offers some hypotheses on the implications of these different combinations.

As far as participation is concerned, party primaries only formally enfranchise party members (and in isolated cases, such as the Catalan Socialist Party, registered ‘sympathizers’), and therefore the opportunities for greater involvement in politics are only enjoyed by what is already the most politically active sector of the population. However, the adoption of party primaries is a useful mobilizing strategy and has often been accompanied by membership recruitment drives (for instance in Israel; Rahat and Sher-Hadar 1999), although it is unclear

whether this can amount to a long term strategy for membership growth. Different hypotheses can be proposed regarding the effects of primaries and internal selection ballots on party membership, according to whether individuals are primarily motivated by solidary, purposive or material incentives (Wilson 1973). Here I assume that most citizens are free-riders (Olson 1965) and will eschew party membership, whilst recognizing that for a minority of citizens ideological or civic-minded motivations drive them to become party members and activists despite the absence of selective incentives².

A rational choice analysis would suggest that more inclusive candidate selection methods will make little difference to party membership levels. Individual votes cast in primaries do not determine outcomes, so citizens have no incentive to pay for the privilege. Worse still, most primaries are unlikely to have the resonance of a general election, where the intense media and citizen interest provide at least solidary incentives to participate. Primaries for important candidacies may have some impact, but party members will be less enthusiastic about voting in routine elections for minor offices, especially by postal ballot. Novelty value may increase participation temporarily³, but in the long run party membership is likely to be broadly unaffected. Citizens attracted by involvement in primaries are probably already party members or political activists of some other kind, and a marginal expansion of the membership role is unlikely to stir the emotions of the politically unmotivated free-riding majority. Participation in candidate selection votes may well decline over time as party members realize that reforms have left their individual influence more or less unchanged.

More inclusive candidate selection processes may increase levels of leadership responsiveness so long as inclusiveness is also extended to all aspiring candidates. In primaries and membership ballots, party candidates do become more clearly subject to the approval of the party rank and file, who have the opportunity to exercise *voice* if the party elite's performance is

unsatisfactory. This upsets the balance of power within party organizations, as votes by individual members isolated from the party intermediary elites are less easily controlled than conventions or selection meetings attended by party officials. Much depends, however, on the competitiveness of the process. Individualized membership votes can just as easily discourage participation, by isolating party members from each other and making collective action more difficult (the use of postal votes exacerbates this effect). Power is redistributed to individual party members at the expense of the intermediary elites whose organizing work on behalf of rival leaders is necessary to make the selection process competitive. Activists are left with little more influence than passive members, undermining purposive incentives for activism (Seyd 1999: 399). The absence of any 'differential of influence' could undermine the supply of purposively motivated activists, leaving party structures under unmitigated leadership control. In this context, primaries and OMOV ballots risk becoming an exercise in rubber-stamping the choices already made by party leaderships.

Even if candidate selection reform increases leadership responsiveness to party memberships, parties' responsiveness to their electorates will not necessarily benefit. In US primaries candidates must win the support of non-party members in order to be nominated. Party primaries and OMOV membership ballots give no such say to ordinary party voters, and unless the party membership is a faithful reflection of the party's electoral base, including members in the selectorate cannot prevent parties from ignoring their core support. 'Retrospective' responsiveness may be enhanced by an inclusive selectorate, as party members are more likely to dislodge corrupt or discredited politicians than party committees, which can be manipulated more easily by party leaders. However this rests on the assumption that party grassroots members are as intolerant of malpractice amongst their own party leaders as non-members. Some discredited politicians are able to insulate themselves from the hostility of the

wider electorate by building up a personal following inside their party. The size and composition of the party membership is therefore important: small, socially homogeneous memberships may make the same choices that a party executive would make. An inclusive selectorate may make a difference where there is unease amongst the grassroots about the record of the party's elected representatives. Much depends, again, on the inclusiveness of candidacy (Rahat and Hazan, in this issue).

The limitations of candidate selection reform as a means of enhancing party responsiveness suggest that increasing inclusiveness will not necessarily weaken party cohesion in Western Europe as it apparently has in the US⁴. The key point is that US primaries are regulated by the state authorities and the parties are unable to decide who is entitled to stand for selection or vote. West European parties regulate their own candidate selection processes with little or no state interference and therefore stand more chance of keeping the process under party control (Rahat and Hazan, in this issue). By imposing requirements on candidates and members of the selectorate parties can ensure that outside influences will not take over the process, and that party representatives in public office will have some basic attachment to the organization. Party membership will not lose its meaning if payment of membership dues is a prerequisite for participation in the selection process. While the empowerment of more passive members may undermine the position of activists, incentives for activism will persist if members can gain additional status and influence by involving themselves in candidates' selection campaigns. As long as parties' organizational resources are necessary for electoral success, candidates will have incentives to remain loyal to the party. In short, party organizations can continue to function despite the extension of voting rights in candidate selection processes, particularly when they retain substantial control over the regulation of candidate selection.

Democratizing Candidate Selection in Practice: Cases from Britain and Spain

The diversity of motivations for participation in political parties makes it difficult to predict the impact of changes to candidate selection procedures. The arguments presented above should be seen as working hypotheses to guide the empirical research necessary to establish precisely the impact of more inclusive candidate selection in West European parties. This section examines the candidate selection reforms recently adopted in some British and Spanish parties and draws preliminary conclusions on the causes and consequences of these reforms.

British Parties and ‘One Member One Vote’

The major British parties allow individual party members a significant degree of formal influence over the selection of party candidates. Democratizing reforms have recently been adopted by all three significant nationwide parties, and all candidates for these parties are in principle subject to some kind of membership vote prior to nomination. This trend lends strong support to the argument that democratization of candidate selection is related to party organizational weakness. Although Britain has one of the least ‘cartelized’ party systems in Europe, its individual parties resemble the cartel party ideal type in the weakness of their grassroots organizations and their detachment from civil society.

All three British parties have suffered substantial declines in their memberships (and in the case of Labour and the Conservatives, electoral support) over the past three decades. The Liberal Democrats claimed 100,000 members in 1992, compared with the 243,600 declared by the Liberal Party in 1961; Labour’s individual membership dropped from 790,192 (almost

certainly exaggerated) in 1960 to just 279,530 in 1992; the Conservatives claimed 2,800,000 members in 1953, but just 500,000 in 1992 (Webb 1994: Table 5.2). This leaves the British parties with exceptionally low member/voter ratios⁵, a sign of organizational detachment from their social bases. Whilst the Liberals and now Liberal Democrats have recovered from their poor electoral performances in the post-war years to poll around 16-18% of the vote, the other two parties have suffered a gradual electoral decline in the same period⁶. The decline of the 'parties on the ground' and the growing detachment of parties from voters provide the ideal conditions for democratizing the candidate selection process. Important reforms followed Labour's traumatic election defeats of 1979, 1987 and 1992 (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: Ch.4), whilst the Conservative's electoral collapse in 1997 led to (albeit limited) proposals to democratize their candidate selection process (CCO 1998). Enhancing membership participation was one possible strategy for overcoming the legitimacy and credibility crises resulting from these defeats.

'Democratizing' reforms of candidate selection were also a function of internal power games. In the two largest British parties reforms of the selection process tended to shift power downwards towards individual party members and upwards towards the party leaderships, with party intermediary elites emerging as the key losers (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: 8). With the exception of mandatory reselection of MPs introduced in 1980 – the result of pressure from the Labour left to weaken the parliamentary party in favour of the party branches – Labour's reforms have moved precisely in that direction, a strategy Webb describes as 'democratization as emasculation' (1994: 120). In part these changes were aimed at limiting the influence of trade union delegates wielding bloc votes. In 1988 Labour established an electoral college which limited party affiliates (mainly trade unions) to a maximum of 40% of the votes in each constituency, with remaining portion allocated to individual party members (Scarrow 1996:

167). In 1993 the electoral college was replaced by a straight OMOV ballot (with postal votes available) which completely eliminated the trade union bloc vote, although union members could accede to the process by joining the party with a discounted subscription. As well as reducing trade unions' influence within the organization, these changes were deliberately aimed at limiting the power of allegedly extremist local party activists, and enhancing the role of less active party members, who were generally more moderate (Scarrow 1996: 168; Driver and Martell 1998: 13). The adoption of a more inclusive selectorate therefore complemented the centrist political strategy adopted by Kinnock, Smith and Blair.

These reforms have coincided with a growing centralization of power around the Labour leadership, which can be seen in the relatively high levels of cohesion in the present parliamentary Labour party, and its disciplined support of a government which has abandoned much of the ideological and policy baggage of recent Labour history. This could be interpreted as a temporary consequence of short term political success, but the steady linear increase in the party's internal cohesion after the mid-1980s suggests otherwise. Candidate selection reforms in Labour had more to do with undermining an intermediary elite seen as reluctant to embrace a centrist political strategy, than about genuinely enhancing the voice of the party grassroots. In fact there is little firm evidence that this intermediary elite is any more extremist than non-activist members in the Labour party of the late 1990s; surveys of the membership have shown little difference between the two groups on issues of ideology and strategy, and OMOV elections to the party executive have produced strong support for radical candidates (Seyd 1999: 396). Instead, the favourable consequences of candidate selection reform for Labour's cohesion are perhaps best understood in terms of the powers that were not redistributed to party members. Labour candidate selection does not amount to a primary election: instead members get to vote on a choice of potential candidates filtered by party institutions. Local executives initiate the

process, seek applications from approved party lists of aspiring MPs, draw up a shortlist which is then submitted to the national party executive (NEC) for approval, and only then does a OMOV ballot take place. The contest is conditioned by party rules stipulating the automatic shortlisting of incumbents, as well as a series of positive discrimination measures. Finally, the NEC retains the right to veto selected candidates after the vote has taken place (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: Ch.4). In short, OMOV candidate selection protects party cohesion because the party structures intervene at all stages in the process.

Evidence of this has accumulated in recent years. The left-winger Liz Davies, elected by OMOV to contest a winnable seat in the 1997 election, was vetoed (on the grounds of disloyalty) by the NEC, which imposed a rerun of the process. A left-wing Westminster MP (Dennis Canavan) was blocked from standing for the new Scottish Parliament in 1998, and although the pool of candidates for the 1999 European elections was determined by an OMOV ballot, the order of candidates on the party lists was decided by the party leadership without reference to the scores candidates received in this ballot. The latest illustration of the Labour leadership's intervention in candidate selection processes is the saga of the party's candidacy for mayor of London in 1999-2000. Faced with the emergence of a strong left-wing aspirant candidate, Westminster MP Ken Livingstone (former leader of the Greater London Council), the leadership decided against vetoing Livingstone from the shortlist, and instead designed a procedure whereby the candidate would be elected by an electoral college, in a throwback to the pre-1993 system. The OMOV ballot of London party members (in which Livingstone was expected to win) provided only a third of the votes, the remaining two thirds going to affiliated trade union bloc votes and Labour London Westminster MPs, MEPs, and candidates for the new Greater London Authority (expected to follow the leadership's instructions). This dilution of OMOV balloting was designed to ensure that Livingstone was not selected, suggesting

that democratization of Labour candidate selection will only be permitted to the extent that it reinforces central authority. The ultimate failure of the strategy (Livingstone instead stood as an independent and won the election comfortably) shows the limitations of Labour's current 'control freakery'.

Changes in Conservative party candidate selection have been less profound. The Reform White Paper *The Fresh Future* published in early 1998 (CCO 1998) envisaged OMOV ballots for the selection of the party leader, candidates for Westminster and European elections, and the candidate for the mayor of London (described as a 'primary'). The most significant of these changes was the introduction of membership participation in leadership elections, previously limited to party MPs: party members already had the right to vote in selection meetings in their constituencies, and the mayor of London is a new institution for which a candidate was being selected for the first time. In the case of Westminster MPs, the party retains strong central influence through the national lists of approved candidates (Norris and Lovenduski 1995: Ch.3), although local constituency associations enjoy considerable autonomy in choosing from these lists. The process of selecting a candidate for mayor of London in 1999-2000 fell way short of constituting a 'primary': the winner Jeffrey Archer was forced out by the party leadership after revelations about his past, whilst the runner-up Steven Norris was excluded from the shortlist for the rerun by the London selecting committee, then ultimately reinstated by the national leadership. As in the Labour party, the impact of more inclusive selectorate is attenuated by the oversight of less inclusive bodies which exert tight control over which aspirants can take part in the process.

In the case of the Conservatives, it is too soon to assess the impact of reforms on membership and activism. Labour's membership has grown significantly since OMOV was introduced, from 279,530 in 1992 to 405,000 in 1997. This can largely be explained by Tony

Blair's forceful leadership and the party's increase in popularity during the 1992-7 parliament, although the prospect of members being able to vote (by postal ballot) in candidate selection processes may have constituted an additional incentive. The reforms have coincided with a shift in membership composition. A survey of party members found that those who had joined after 1994 tended to be less active than more long-serving members (Seyd 1999: 398-9), a trend consistent with my hypothesis that inclusive candidate selection can undermine activism, leaving a largely passive membership unable to coordinate forceful opposition to the leadership. However alternative explanations, in terms of the party's changing political environment or the strategic choices made by the leadership, could equally well account for some of these developments.

There is little evidence of any improvement in leadership responsiveness towards the party grassroots. Labour's clear shift to the right after 1994 suggests that OMOV does not prevent parties from following electoralist strategies which place the interests of non-partisan voters before loyal party voters and even members. Although changes in the Labour membership may have made the party more tolerant of centrist strategies and the need for pragmatism, there is at the very least strong anecdotal evidence that many longstanding party supporters are disenchanted with Tony Blair's 'Third Way'. The inability of the party structures to register this disenchantment suggest that the extensive use of OMOV in candidate selection and other forms of consultation does not constitute an adequate forum for *voice* to be expressed. Instead, the drop in party membership after the 1997 election suggests that OMOV is not seen by disgruntled members as a good reason for delaying *exit* (Seyd 1999: 396). The example of the London mayoral election suggests that leadership control over shortlists is crucial in ensuring internal opposition is not registered in candidate selection processes. This confirms the point made earlier that the competitiveness of the procedure is just as important as its

inclusiveness. Democratizing reforms of Labour candidate selection have enabled party leaders to neglect the traditional Labour constituency in favour of an aggressive strategy of electoral competition with the Conservatives. The result of the London election has made the limitations of this strategy quite clear.

Primaries in Spain: The Democratization of the PSOE?

The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) is one of the relatively few West European parties to have adopted party primaries, with immediately dramatic consequences. A primary election held in Spring 1998 to choose a candidate for Prime Minister for the 2000 elections produced the completely unexpected defeat of the party secretary in favour of a relatively low-profile rival. Although most of the polls to select candidates for local and regional offices passed off without major surprises, the party leader's defeat was a remarkable example of the destabilizing potential of primaries, even when they are limited to party members.

The PSOE modelled its reform of candidate selection on the system of primary elections adopted by its affiliate the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC). The primaries are used for 'elections in which the personality of the first candidate is an essential element of the electoral campaign' (PSOE 1997: V.17), and select only the individual candidates for public executive offices – Prime Minister, regional presidents and mayors of major municipalities. The reform can be interpreted in terms of the party's recent history. The PSOE achieved a crushing election victory in 1982, only five years after emerging from illegality under the Franco dictatorship, and subsequently enjoyed a period of practically unchallenged government power in the 1980s. On gaining power the PSOE was still organizationally fragile, with a small membership (112,591) and strong ideological divisions, and its all-powerful leadership (Prime Minister Felipe

González and his deputy Alfonso Guerra) adopted a rigid, closed and highly centralized structure to guarantee cohesive support of the government (Gangas 1995: Ch.3). Patronage was used extensively to recruit cadres and activists and calm ideological rancour, and little attempt was made to open the party up to its electoral base (Méndez-Lago 1998: Ch.5). This model, successful in providing the Socialist governments of the 1980s with cohesive parliamentary support and an adequate electoral machine, was incapable of reacting to a series of corruption scandals in the 1990s which wrecked the party's credibility. Defeated in 1996, the PSOE was perceived by many voters as a corrupt and ideologically lifeless organization, led by a now discredited generation of leaders who were out of touch with Spanish society. It had suffered a steady electoral decline from the heights of 1982, and had a low member-voter ratio (1:28 in 1993, 1:25 in 1996). The electoral defeat at the hands of an unimpressive conservative opposition (the Partido Popular) was a traumatic event for a party accustomed to political dominance. In this context, the disciplined structure of careerists, functionaries and clientelistic bosses was patently inappropriate to the PSOE's new needs (Vargas-Machuca 1998: 17).

These circumstances provided a compelling rationale for a process of internal party democratization to breathe new life into the party, recruit new members and overcome the stagnation of the organization's decision-making structures. But the decision to adopt primaries was also a response to short-term strategic considerations on the part of the party leadership. González, party leader since 1974, resigned without warning at the party's 34th congress in 1997, taking advantage of the resulting confusion to place a close (and subordinate) ally, Joaquín Almunia, at the helm. Elected in such controversial circumstances, Almunia lacked legitimacy as party secretary, and quickly embraced the idea of primaries to select the party's candidates for political offices. It was assumed that a primary would provide Almunia with a demonstration of ample backing from the party faithful, overcoming his democratic deficit and

presenting an image of renewal. Instead a rival candidate, the left-wing ex-minister José Borrell, won the primary by a clear margin (55% to 45%). There were few other surprises in the primaries held to select candidates for regional presidencies and for mayors of the major cities, although in Madrid the local party boss Joaquín Leguina lost out to marginalized former minister Fernando Morán.

This indicates just how different primaries are from traditional mechanisms of party democracy. In the case of Almunia (and indeed of Leguina) individual party members voted in their majority against their party leaders, who had been elected as leaders by party assemblies in the tradition of delegatory internal democracy. The results of the PSOE primaries confirm that traditional internal democracy is a blunt instrument for reflecting membership opinion. This was particularly the case for the PSOE, a highly disciplined party in which central control had been vigorously exercised. By the 1990s some 70% of delegates to party congresses were public office holders (Gillespie 1994: 55), whose living depended on the continued favour of a powerful party apparatus. Without primaries, the party decision-making structures were relatively easy for the party leadership to control, and since the leadership had a vested interest in preventing significant changes in organizational practice or personnel, delegatory democracy was a source of stagnation and ideological decay (Pradera 1996). This points to candidate selection reforms on the primary model constituting a useful vehicle for party adaptation.

The vast majority of primaries did however produce the expected result, electing candidates supported by the party elites. This is not to deny the destabilizing potential of primaries which is more than adequately demonstrated by Almunia's defeat. However, the primary election took place in a period of transition to a new leadership, and it is inconceivable his predecessor Felipe González could have suffered such a defeat at the hands of the membership. To this extent, primaries have produced a renovation of the party elite in an

organization which was in a state of flux and already undergoing important changes of personnel. The party secretary was not an authoritative figure and owed his position to dubious manoeuvring at the party congress. Primaries would be less of a challenge for a leader who had emerged through 'normal' procedures and enjoyed a clearer mandate from the party's structures. Almunia's position was in many ways quite weak; the strength of entrenched elites is indicated by the large number of 'officialist' candidates elected in the rest of the primaries held in 1998.

Subsequent events have reinforced this interpretation, as the 'candidate' Borrell lasted little more than a year before resigning in response to revelations of corruption amongst senior functionaries he had appointed while still a minister. If delegatory democracy and primaries produce contrasting results, there is potential for friction between party officials elected in assemblies and candidates elected in primaries. In this case friction emerged immediately at the level of the party's national leadership, as Borrell assumed the role of *de facto* party leader, whilst Almunia retained formal control of the organization as party secretary. An uneasy arrangement was eventually agreed affording Borrell the more prominent role, but his resignation allowed Almunia to reassert his leadership and take over the candidacy for the 2000 elections without resort to a further primary. The potential for primaries to fragment party leadership is evident, and the confusing situation created by Borrell's victory hampered attempts to use the primaries to improve the party's image. Borrell was facing an election campaign at the head of a party whose secretary, executive committee, secretariat and parliamentary group had overwhelmingly opposed him in the primary election. This uncomfortable situation may explain the candidate's swift decision to resign over allegations which did not implicate him personally.

The PSOE primaries suggest candidate selection reform can enhance party responsiveness to some extent. Borrell's victory shows potential for the grassroots' *voice* to be expressed in a way which delegatory democracy would not permit. The primary for the

candidate for Prime Minister allowed the party membership to protest against the immobilism of the party structures and González's manipulation of the party congress to elect an uncharismatic sidekick as party leader. Borrell's resignation meant that the effect of this protest was shortlived, but it may yet have more durable consequences. The election of a left-winger such as Borrell also suggests that party primaries enhance responsiveness to the membership rather than to the broader electorate, tying parties' to their ideological foundations and limiting electoral opportunism. An opinion poll published prior to the vote showed that while Borrell enjoyed a significant lead amongst party members, Almunia was the preferred candidate amongst socialist voters (Boix 1998: 36). Primaries can therefore tie parties to political projects which may have membership support but which are unrepresentative of the party's broad social base.

In this sense, the PSOE's primaries have little in common with the experience of OMOV in the Labour party, suggesting a substantive and significant difference between the systems. The PSOE's primaries are more competitive, as access to the contest is not filtered by any party committees approving shortlists; instead any party member who has fulfilled his/her financial obligations to the party will be allowed to stand (PSOE 1998: Art.23). There are no central 'approved lists', and party members able to win the support of a given number of party members or members of party governing bodies⁷ are eligible. The results of the primaries are public, and although the party executive must then formally approve the nomination, there is no indication that this amounts to a power of veto (Art.30). The process is therefore more difficult to control than Labour's OMOV election on the basis of a shortlist subject to leadership veto, which could explain why the PSOE's reform led to the selection of a candidate with little support in the party elite, whilst Labour's procedures have tended to select moderates favourable to the leadership's centrist strategy.

The consequences for party cohesion are less clear. In the short term, Borrell's election divided the party leadership into rival camps, undermining cohesion (inevitably so, according to Boix [1998: 35]). His subsequent resignation, and the reemergence of the party executive as the dominant force in the organization, suggests otherwise. It is too soon to calculate the long term impact of primaries, but Borrell's ultimate defeat implies that primaries in themselves are insufficient to undermine a cohesive party organization. Much depends on what primaries are selecting. In the PSOE's 'mixed' candidate selection system primaries are not used to select parliamentary candidates. The dominant coalition of the party secretariat and executive, elected through delegatory democracy, and the parliamentary group, consisting of deputies selected by the party's delegatory structures, constitutes a formidable counterweight to any rival groups able to win selection through the primary system. Any candidate for Prime Minister, the presidency of a region or the mayor of a city would have to work with parliamentarians or councillors selected by the delegatory party structures. Unless an organized faction is able to win nominations across the board and constitute a united front, the party apparatus may be capable of isolating and defeating any unwanted candidates produced by primaries. Primaries may exacerbate already existing party divisions, but appear inadequate in themselves to undermine a cohesive organization, particularly when they are not used to select all the party's candidates. Borrell's greater success in the regions where the PSOE is least strongly implanted as an organization (such as Catalonia, Madrid and Galicia), and Almunia's comfortable lead in the party's heartlands of Andalusia and Castile-La Mancha (Boix 1998: 37), lend some support to this view. For the moment then, the Spanish Socialists' experience of primaries has merely dented the dominance of party elites.

Conclusions

Extending participation in candidate selection is a natural development in West European democracies where parties are increasingly distant from their traditional social bases, and politics is increasingly seen as a profession. If the great ideological battles of the past are widely taken to be over, then party politics is likely to be downgraded to a Schumpeterian competition for office, serving only to turf out the corrupt or incompetent. In this context increased competition for party nominations makes sense and further cases of internal party 'democratization' can be expected. The theoretical discussion and empirical analysis presented here suggest there is good reason to doubt the use of the term 'democratization' to describe this process. Primaries and OMOV may include party members in the 'selectorate' which chooses party candidates, but as long as party leaderships are able to regulate and condition the process members' choices will remain constrained. Inclusive selectorates do reduce party leaders' control over candidate selection processes, but they also provide them with opportunities to increase their power by marginalizing alternative centres of internal power, such as parties' intermediate structures.

This is why pessimistic predictions that candidate selection reform hastens the disappearance of European-style membership parties appear off the mark. Party cohesion in the two cases studied has not been seriously undermined by membership participation in candidate selection, for the very reasons outlined above. The powers that party leaders retain ensure organizational cohesion. Party primaries may create greater uncertainty over some key party decisions, but candidates will not be independent of party if their nominations have to be formally approved by party committees and their campaigns rely on party resources. Parties appear to face a dilemma between organizational cohesion and responsiveness. The involvement of individual party members, or even party voters, undermines cohesion by

creating rival sources of internal legitimacy, challenging leadership authority. Party cohesion is more likely in closed party structures where leaderships leave nothing to chance and the internal opposition has restricted opportunities for *voice*. The parties studied here have maintained their cohesion at the expense of a genuine democratization of their internal procedures.

Notes

¹ Although the use of primaries in both Israel and the US has not significantly undermined the strong position enjoyed by incumbents (Rahat & Sher-Hadar 1999: 243).

² Similar 'pluralistic' approaches, which recognize the diverse motivations for political action, can be found in Kitschelt (1989), and Seyd and Whiteley (1992).

³ This has been the case in Israel, where membership did rise after the introduction of primaries, although accompanied by dubious manoeuvrings by candidates and special interests (Rahat and Sher-Hadar 1999: 244-7).

⁴ Although some scholars argue that primaries are a symptom, rather than a cause, of American parties' organizational weakness (for example Epstein 1980).

⁵ In 1997 Labour had one member for every 33 voters, whilst the Conservatives' ratio was 1:24. These are low figures by European standards.

⁶ The Conservatives' vote share has declined from 48-49% in the 1950s to 42-43% in the 1980s and early 1990s to just over 30% in 1997; Labour polled 44-48% in the 1950s, 37-43% in the 1970s and 27-30% in the 1980s, before recovering to 43% in 1997.

⁷ At national level, candidates require either a majority backing from the national executive (Comisión Ejecutiva Federal), backing from 15% of the party's standing assembly (Comité

Federal), majority backing of the party's territorial assembly (Consejo Territorial), or the signatures of 7% of party members (PSOE 1998: Art.22).

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