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Paper for presentation at Panel D-1 Candidate Recruitment in Comparative Perspective at the American Political Association Convention, San Francisco, August 30 to September 2 1990.

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Party Rules and Women's Representation: Reforming the British Labour Party

The British Labour Party needs more voters. To win them it has undertaken a process of policy and organisational reform which involves revitalising and increasing its membership, streamlining and modernising its organisation, and radically altering its image. The party, driven back to its declining industrial and inner-city heartland in the General Elections of the 1980s, is seeking to expand its appeal to the middle classes and the new social movements which have shaped the political agenda for the 1990s. Under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, and with the talents of a communications minded National Executive Committee (NEC) and headquarters staff, the party is generating a more effective image. The Labour Party is increasingly perceived as progressive, caring, democratic and, to the fashion conscious, occasionally even stylish.

Attempts to broaden its support include a direct appeal to women. There was no gender gap in the 1987 General Election, the Labour party received equal votes from women and men, a trend which continues in recent polls. Nevertheless research by the Shadow Communication Agency has persuaded the leadership that, on the basis of shared values, women are a key target group. Therefore women voters are being courted. The final report of the Labour Policy Review, Meet the Challenge: Make the Change (1989, 62-65) includes promises of a Ministry for Women, provision of comprehensive childcare services, and a commitment to Equal Opportunity policies which broaden the definition of indirect discrimination, shift the burden of proof to the employer, and move towards 'positive action' in employment and education. Party images are deep-rooted and durable, but there has been an effort to change Labour's, for example the cover of the June 1990 policy review document 'Looking to the Future' shows a strong, feminine image of a young woman and daughter.

But cosmetic changes are relatively painless to introduce, and relatively ineffective. The question is whether the Labour party reforms for women go beyond the Minnam of packaging and presentation. The answer at this stage seems to be a tentative 'yes'; substantive reforms to make the party less male dominated have been occurring within the internal organisation. Women members are being courted with agreements to increase the representation of women on party bodies via quotas and reserved places, a practice which has

been implemented all the way up to the level of the shadow cabinet and the new National Policy Forum. During 1989 a new women's committee was added to the NEC, which can monitor the impact of party reforms at the highest level. In July 1990 the NEC agreed Labour Women's Conference recommendations for affirmative action to achieve equality of representation for women at all levels of the party. And after the 1987 General Election there were a series of reforms designed by central office to increase the number of Labour women candidates running for Parliament in the next General Election. Whether the party leadership succeeds in this objective will prove a critical litmus test of their commitment to women's representation and women's concerns.

There is a consensus among Labour party leaders, members and voters that in principle more women should be selected for good Parliamentary seats. In the 1987 general election women were only 14% of Labour candidates, and 9% of Labour MPs. But there is far less agreement about the most appropriate, fair, practical and effective means of achieving this objective. Proposals range from pious exhortations to radical 50% positive quotas, with all stages in between. In electoral systems using national or regional party lists the mechanisms for promoting reform, should the party wish to adopt them, are relatively straightforward (Norris 1990). But solutions are far more difficult to implement in electoral systems using plurality single-member districts, such as Britain, where local party activists within each constituency have the greatest powers over selection. Therefore the aim of this paper is to evaluate the impact of Labour party reforms since 1987 which were designed to increase the number of women candidates for Parliament. The central questions to be considered: have reforms in the rules governing the process of nomination, shortlisting and selection been effective in increasing the proportion of women Parliamentary candidates in good Labour party seats? And what else could be done? This discussion highlights broader issues concerning barriers to women's representation, the nature of British parties as organisations, the impact of changes in formal rules on informal practices, and the influence of central party leadership over grass-roots party agencies.

costs and the candidate's campaigning expenses if nominated, which may prove attractive to certain constituencies. The list inclusion is by simple constituency nomination form signed by the CLP secretary and formally agreed by the NEC. Inclusion in the Union and Co-operative lists inclusion involves more or less demanding approval processes which may include intensive individual and group interviews, public speaking and discussion exercises and detailed scrutiny of their political, union, educational and other qualifications.

<Diagram 1 about here>

Rather than waiting for a call, aspirants need an active strategy to pursue good seats. The party press carries information about forthcoming selections and the candidates office supplies information about selection timetables for a subscription fee of £25 (\$36). Applicants may seek any seat in the country; there is no rule that applicants have to be resident in the locality. Those interested apply directly to the CLP secretary who transmits their curriculum vita to nominating branches. The number of applicants varies widely. In safe Labour seats there may be intense competition from more than one hundred applicants, compared with constituencies with hopeless prospects where willing candidates may have to be actively sought.

The nomination procedures are somewhat daunting for applicants, who may have to contact many seats across the country before succeeding in being shortlisted. Application normally consists of a brief curriculum vitae, which tend to outline political experience and interests, (but which often exclude such details as age, marital and family status), and a descriptive political statement. At this stage applicants may be invited to appear before party branches in a series of meetings, often on different nights. In a popular seat they should support their application by contacting and keeping in touch with members of branches who might support their nomination however this pressure must be carefully judged. The relevant individuals are volunteers and there is often resentment about possible carpetbaggers. Good seats therefore have to be identified and nursed, an expensive and time consuming practice, especially for distant constituencies.

TRADITIONAL SHORTLISTING:

Once the nomination process is complete the constituency Executive Committee draws up a shortlist. In some constituencies with few wards, such as Birmingham Sparkbrook, there may be only two or three people nominated. But the situation is different in competitive seats with many wards and branches, for example in the recent Vale of Glamorgan by-election there were sixteen nominees. The names have to be winnowed down by the Executive Committee to about four to six people who will be invited for the final interview. Within constituencies shortlisting has been often, but not always, the site of factional conflict (Denver 1988; Shaw 1988, 185-200). The Executive Committee agrees the shortlist by a series of ballots. The list was then sent to the General Committee for approval. The General Committee was entitled to add or delete names from the shortlist, which then went to the NEC for approval. In practice this last stage seems to have been merely a formality, with the NEC rarely intervening.

TRADITIONAL SELECTION:

Until 1987 the selection of a Constituency Labour Party's (CLP) parliamentary candidate was the task of the Constituency General Committee (GC), sometimes called the General Management Committee. The General Committee has to represent a constituency's two classes of members: affiliated organisations and individual members. According to the party's Rule Book, at constituency level affiliated organisations may consist of:

- a. trade unions or branches thereof affiliated to the Trades Union Congress or recognised by the General Council of the Trades Union Congress as bona fide trade unions.
 - b. Co-operative societies, branches of the Co-operative Party and other co-operative organisations.
 - c. Other categories including branches of socialist societies affiliated to the Labour Party nationally; branches of other organisations whose affiliation has been approved by the Party's National Executive Committee; local or area Trades Councils; women's sections; and other NEC approved organisations.
- Within each constituency, delegates to the General Committee are elected annually from affiliated organisations. Each affiliate can send at most five delegates to the General Committee. Affiliates include

By 1987 this objection lost some force due to the declining status of trade unions within the party. In recent years the party has been in the process of transforming itself from a party of trade union affiliates to a party of individual members. Labour's federal constitution was drawn up in 1918 by Arthur Henderson and Sydney Webb. Despite many revisions it retains its original character and reflects the era in which it was written, when the race and gender patterns of today's society were yet to take political form, and when the trade union movement was a diverse multiplicity of small unions. The Labour Party is a federation of component organisations, the most important of which have been the Trade Unions and the Cooperative Party, which coordinate with individual branches, women's sections and other groups at constituency level. Labour relies heavily upon trade union funding and resources to conduct its activities. The Cooperative Party is a somewhat less important affiliate which continues, nevertheless, to be influential in many constituencies. The move towards an electoral college reflect the diminished role of the trade unions, as the party tries to break with its past to appeal to a broader cross-section of the electorate. As a result in the last few years members have gained increased powers in candidate selection, in leadership elections, and in conference decisions. In April 1990 the NEC agreed proposed reforms which will enhance the constituency share of conference votes at the expense of the trade unions. The current trade union share of the conference vote will decrease from 90% to 70%, thus reducing the force of the much criticised 'block vote' of the three largest unions. Moreover, the constituency share of the conference vote will increase by 1% for every 10% increase in the number of paid-up individual members, for example if individual membership doubled, the union share of the conference vote will decline from 70% to 50% (Wintour 1990).

In addition the party leadership established a favourable general climate for constitutional reform. One of Neil Kinnock's highest priorities after being elected Labour leader in 1983 was to reestablish central managerial control, through a more efficient, coordinated, streamlined and modernised party. Reorganisation aimed to tackle the series of interrelated problems facing Labour in the mid eighties - the need to prevent continued public conflict between the left-wing dominated grassroots party activists, particularly members of the Militant Tendency, and the more moderate Parliamentary party; the need for a more effective campaign machine following the debacle of the 1983 general election; the need for a general

organisational shake-up of party headquarters in Watworth Road to cut costs and promote efficiency; the need to rethink the ongoing issue of the role of the unions in the party; the need for a revised machinery to produce an effective policy review; and last, but not least, the need to bail, or reverse, the long-term erosion of paid-up members at the Labour party grassroots (for a discussion of these issues see Kavanagh 1987; Cook and Taylor 1980; Whiteley 1981; Shaw 1988; Seyd 1987). Therefore the leadership produced a climate receptive to reform of the candidate selection process as part of this general party reorganisation and modernisation.

Last, but not least, women in the party were able to use the opportunity of this debate to add their own agenda: to increase the proportions of Labour women nominated and elected to the House of Commons. Groups had long argued that the selection process represented a critical barrier to women, as well as to applicants who were working class or from ethnic minorities. In the past there had been proposals to include one woman and one manual worker on every constituency shortlist. But it was difficult to persuade party Conference that reform should be given high priority since this threatened the established interests of union affiliates and party activists, who were often members of constituency Executive and General Committees, and who wanted to safeguard the principle of local autonomy in selecting 'their' prospective Parliamentary candidate.

These combined pressures for reform led the 1987 Conference to introduce three radical changes to the selection process: the General Committee lost its powers of selection to an electoral college involving individual party members and affiliated groups; there were new rules concerning shortlisting including the compulsory short-listing of women, where nominated; and there were new procedures for nomination. After a process of review and consultation by the NEC under the supervision of the Party Director of Organisation, Joyce Gould, selection under the new procedures began in January 1989. The effects have been monitored by party headquarters, to ensure their proper implementation and to assess their workability. In addition the Party Women's Officer, Vicky Phillips has monitored how the new procedures affect the chances of women who seek candidacy. It is too early to assess the full impact of these reforms but we can consider the initial evidence gathered by party headquarters concerning selection in 219

In theory the 40 per cent ceiling reduces the power of affiliates. But as the new rules have been implemented there has been considerable dissatisfaction with the level of influence exercised by affiliates.

Arguably the reform has made individual members more aware of the power of the affiliates and the unsatisfactory manner in which that power is sometimes exercised. Many affiliates determine their vote without seeing the hopeful candidate and the vote of the affiliates is still large enough to determine the outcome in many constituencies. Moreover it is in the Labour heartland that the affiliates are most influential therefore affiliates may have a disproportionate say in determining the composition of the PLP.

In the selection cycle British parties choose candidates for their best seats first, leaving the more difficult contests until later. This was reflected in the first selections after the reforms, which involved 219 constituencies. Types of seat within this sample can be analysed into four categories: reselections of incumbent Labour MPs (60%); open Labour seats where the incumbent Labour MP was retiring (6%); non-Labour marginal seats which the party classified as key winnable targets (24%); and safe non-Labour seats (11%). As indicated in Table 2, affiliates are entitled to their maximum vote in half of the Labour reselections and two-thirds of Labour open seats. Therefore affiliates are most influential where it matters most - in seats where Labour is most likely to win. Interestingly, this evidence indicates that the affiliates have rather less sway in those key marginals which Labour needs to win to gain a Parliamentary majority.

In addition the system of postal votes has proved less than satisfactory. Those participating through this mechanism may decide without sufficient information, indeed without ever seeing the candidates, since strict rules prevent personal canvassing. This might create a systematic bias towards certain types of candidates, for example those already known in the local constituency. At present any member can get a postal vote by claiming that they meet the required conditions, such as illness or work practices, which would prevent them from attending the selection meeting. But this system is open to abuse by those who would like to participate but do not want to sit through a lengthy evening meeting. It would therefore seem logical to move towards a system in which either every participant voted by post, or alternatively, in which only those attending the meeting were entitled to vote.

<Table 2 about here>

REFORMING THE SHORTLISTING PROCESS

The new shortlisting rules aimed to expand the range of candidates offered to the electorate, particularly the proportion of women. The new rules establish four principles which shortlisting committees must take into account: the compulsory shortlisting of women; the compulsory shortlisting of sitting MPs. If standing in reselections; the compulsory shortlisting of any nominee with at least 25 per cent of nominations (to include at least one from a party branch); lastly, where there is no sitting MP, there must be at least five on the shortlist, provided there are five or more nominees. The only exceptions to this last rule are shortlists of one for reselections of sitting MPs, and exceptional cases which are approved by the NEC.

The most controversial of the 1987 rules is the compulsory shortlisting of women. This rule does not compel shortlisters to search the land for any woman willing to stand in order to fulfil their obligations. Rather it says that, where a woman has been nominated, there must be at least one woman on the shortlist. The regulations require that shortlisting should be carried out by the Executive Committee following the usual procedure. If no woman has been shortlisted in this process by the Executive Committee, the final name on the shortlist should be dropped and a ballot held to determine which of the nominated women should be included.

What have been the results of these rules? Without evidence from shortlists in the 1987 election it is difficult to make any precise comparison. Nevertheless evidence from the Labour party selections from the June 1987 General election to March 1990, in 219 constituencies, on balance indicates positive news for women. If we classify seats according to the types which have already been used, Table 3 indicates that women are being shortlisted for interview where Labour candidates stand a good chance - in over three-quarters of all open Labour seats and non-Labour marginals. Over half the shortlists continued to have no women, although most of these were reselections of incumbent MPs with only one candidate. In all the selections during this period a quarter included one woman, while a fifth included two or more women. Of course this does not mean necessarily that women are being selected in these seats, but at least they are being interviewed. On the face of it women may be advantaged by the requirement that there should be at least one woman on the shortlist, but in practice their chances of being taken seriously relate to the same

THE EMERGING SYSTEM: WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?

Demands by party women for increased representation grew significantly during the 1980s. In June 1990 the Labour Women's Conference adopted a far reaching policy of positive action to increase the representation of women at all levels of the party. Notably the conference called on the party to draw up 'a phased programme' over the next ten years or three general elections that at least half of the Parliamentary Labour Party should be women. If this target is to be achieved selection practices will have to become more woman friendly. To argue this point we will look at each stage in turn to see what else could be done.

FURTHER REFORMS TO THE NOMINATION PROCESS

The measures to increase the number of women at the nomination stage have been mainly exhortation. The party women's officer, the NEC women's committee and the candidates office have encouraged women to come forward, constituencies have been encouraged to consider all woman shortlists and trade unions have been pressed to increase the number of women on the 'A' list. The 'V' list mentioned earlier is part of this strategy. But more could be done to publicise vacant seats more widely and, more significantly, to change the status of the nomination lists. It can be suggested that these strategies could well prove effective.

The most significant and radical proposal for reform would be changing the status of the nomination lists. Generally the fact that there is no requirement that selected candidates must be on an official approved list restricts the capacity of party leaders who would like to increase women's chances to act. The Labour party should therefore give serious consideration to introducing one centrally approved official list from which all nominees must normally be drawn. This would return to the situation in the 1950s when there was a list of NEC approved Labour candidates. A central list would have several advantages. By itself a central list would not automatically help women but it would allow the party to introduce a minimum quota of women on the list. This might be less controversial than establishing constituency-level quotas, for example at the nomination, short-listing or selection stages. It would identify a group of individuals to whom all

information regarding selections might be directed. It would allow the party to offer support services for candidates on the list, for example training programmes or financial assistance for attending nomination meetings. It would enable the party to establish qualifications for candidacy which could be widely known and understood, a practice which would reduce capriciousness in selection. Since candidates would already have official endorsement by the NEC, it would reduce the potential for intra-party conflict at the end of the candidate selection process, when constituencies feel committed to their choice and resent non-endorsements by the NEC. The Conservative party, which has a centrally approved list, experiences far less conflict over selection between party headquarters and constituency associations.

At the same time, it would still leave the choice of candidate to the local constituency. Party headquarters could shape the overall balance of candidates on the approved list, but the final decision about who should represent the CLP's would still be taken at local level. CLP's would therefore retain their autonomy. Trade union involvement might be maintained by the simple requirement that trade union sponsored candidates would have to qualify for inclusion on the party's list as well as for approval by the unions. Such a device might be managed in accordance with party policies of positive action affecting gender, class and ethnicity. It would deliver more power over selection to the party centre and for this reason it is controversial and might be difficult to get accepted. But its advantages for those who would improve party representativeness are enormous.

A central list would be a radical step but there are other ways to change the present lists which continue to be very short of women's names. As noted earlier, the Constituency 'B' list had 24% women, the Co-operative 'C' list had 15% women, but the 'A' list of Union sponsored MPs and aspirant candidates lagged behind this. The 'A' list contained 188 names in mid-February 1990, of which 10 per cent were women. These figures are indicative of union support for women parliamentary candidates generally. Seven sponsoring unions include no women on their lists, while few others have many (see Table 5).

< Table 5 about here >

from easy. Quotas of women candidates may be unpopular amongst party members and may be difficult to implement in single member constituency systems. The introduction of an official approved list would probably be the most effective measure for treating the problem, and would have a number of significant advantages for women, but this would alter the balance of central-local power over selection and may be difficult to get accepted.

Outcomes of party reform procedures, however carefully prepared, are never entirely predictable. A small change may turn out in practice to be a small change, or it may lead to a series of associated changes which alter the whole nature of the process. It may in some cases prove to be the opening of a Pandora's box of unpredicted unintended effects. The current phase of selection reform in the Labour Party suggests that the introduction of the transitional selection system may open the way for an emerging system which is more effective for women. The establishment of affirmative action targets of women in the PLP, quotas of women on party bodies, and the reform of selection procedures generally, may be a classic 'thin end of a wedge'. If the situation remains fluid this may provide exciting opportunities for proving a real break-through for women in the Labour party, and for adopting a full array of woman-friendly selection procedures. And, if the implementation is effective, this may well have a wider impact on Parliament if other parties seek to emulate Labour's reforms.

We are grateful to Joyce Gould and Vicky Phillips at Labour Party headquarters for their time and support, and constituencies which have allowed us to attend their meetings. The research for this paper represents part of a large-scale project funded by the ESRC 'The Candidate Selection Process in British Politics'. Dr Lovenduski is grateful for the support of the British Academy, the ESRC and Loughborough University's Research Fund for participation at this conference. Dr Norris is grateful to the Institute for Governmental Studies, University of California, Berkeley, for academic hospitality during the period this paper was written.

¹ NEC Consultation Document on Selection of Parliamentary Candidates, (Labour Party, London, April 1990).

² Ibid

Diagram 1
Stages in the Traditional Selection Process

Table 1: Labour Women in British General Elections, 1945-87

	Women Candidates N.		Women MPs N.	
	% All Lab Cand N.		% All Lab MPs	
1945	41	6.8	21	5.3
1950	42	6.8	14	4.4
1951	41	6.6	11	3.7
1955	43	6.9	14	5.0
1959	36	5.8	13	5.0
1964	33	5.2	18	5.7
1966	30	4.8	19	5.2
1970	29	4.6	10	3.5
1974 (E)	40	6.4	13	4.3
1974 (C)	50	8.0	18	5.6
1979	52	8.3	11	4.1
1983	78	12.3	10	4.8
1987	92	14.5	21	9.2
TOTAL	607	7.5	193	5.0

Source: Calculated from FMS Craig British Electoral Facts 1932-1987.

Table 4: Selections of Women Parliamentary Candidates by Type of Seat

Type of Seat	Women	All	% Women
Labour Reselection	17	131	12.9%
Labour Open	2	11	18.2%
Non-Labour Marginals	12	52	23.0%
Non-Labour Safe	8	25	32.0
All	39	219	17.8

Table 5: Union Sponsored Lists By Gender

	Men on List	Women on List	Total on List	% Women on List	% Women Union Members
AEU	20	0	20	0	10
UCATF	7	0	7	0	1
NGA	3	0	3	0	8
ISTC	7	0	7	0	na
NUM	18	0	18	0	4
NUR	6	0	6	0	5
TSS	12	0	12	0	na
NCU	15	1	16	6	20
ERTPU	13	1	14	7	na
USDAW	15	2	17	12	61
TGWU	34	5	39	13	18
UCW	5	1	6	17	26
GMB	11	7	18	39	30
NUPE	3	2	5	40	77
TOTAL	164	19	183	10	58

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