1   PUZZLES IN POLITICAL
RECRUITMENT

•

This book aims to provide the first full account of legislative recruitment in
Britain for twenty-five years. The central concern is why some politicians
succeed in moving through the 'eye of the needle' into the highest offices of
state. In democracies, many participate as grassroots party members, com-
munity activists, and campaign donors. Some become local or regional
elected officers, party leaders, or lobbyists. From this pool of eligibles, some
run for parliament, a few are elected, and even fewer rise into government
office. Recruitment operates for offices at all levels. *Legislative* recruitment
refers specifically to the critical step as individuals move from lower levels
into parliamentary careers. In practice, given the accidents of political life,
many careers are far from linear. During their lifetime, politicians may
transfer laterally, skip a step or two along the way, or move up and down
offices, like a game of snakes and ladders. This study of legislative recruit-
ment explores how and why people become politicians, and the con-
sequences for parties, legislatures and representative government.

Many different perspectives within political science provide insights into
this common concern.[1] Among the most traditional approaches, a rich
biographical and historical literature documents the careers of political
leaders based on memoirs, letters and public records. Early sociological
theorists such as Mosca, Pareto and Michels, and neo-marxists, were con-
cerned about the outcome of the recruitment process, the way legislative
elites restricted access, and their privileged class origins.[2] More recently,
increased concern has been expressed about the barriers to entry facing
women and ethnic minority candidates.[3] Institutionalists interested in party
organisations have studied the decision making process over candidate
selection, for the insights this provides into the distribution and
centralisation of power within parties. Following Lasswell, political psycho-
logists concerned with political motivation sought to identify a distinctive
personality among lawmakers, which drew them into public life.[4] Psepholo-
gists have concentrated on the electoral consequences of candidacies,
notably the 'personal vote' incumbents may attract.[5] Rational choice theo-
rists have sought to model the decision to run, based on the perceived costs

I

and benefits of different levels of office.[6] Legislative specialists have studied how the background and careers of politicians relate to their activities and roles, and the consequences of candidate selection for parliaments.[7]

Recruitment studies stand at the intersection of research on mass political participation, elections and voting behaviour, political elites, legislatures, party organisations, and interest groups, as well as, more recently, gender and racial politics. This intellectual diversity exerts centrifugal pressures which tend to fragment recruitment studies, as each perspective emphasises different theoretical frameworks, key questions and methodological approaches.[8] But the potential ability to draw on many subfields can also be a source of considerable intellectual strength.

To understand recruitment, this study seeks to reintegrate the literature from two primary subfields in political science. Studies of political elites have been concerned with the social composition of parliament. Studies of party organisations have focused on how the process operates and what the selection process tells us about the distribution of power within parties. This book seeks to build on this literature, developing a more comprehensive theoretical model and analysing new evidence – the British Candidate study (BCS). The aim is to link our understanding of the process of Candidate recruitment with the outcome for the social composition of parliamentary elites. This study provides a fresh exploration of three major questions:

(i) Who selects, and how?
(ii) Who gets selected, and why?
(iii) Does the social bias of the outcome matter?

Studies of party organisations: who selects and how?

Parties serve vital functions linking citizens with government: they structure electoral choice, provide a legislative agenda for government, and recruit legislative candidates. Candidate selection may seem at first sight like a routine and obscure function of political parties, conducted behind closed doors in small meetings long before the public drama and excitement of the election campaign. In marginal seats, who gets into parliament is determined by voters. But in safe seats with a predictable outcome the selectorate have *de facto* power to choose the MP. And in Britain, about three quarters of all seats are 'safe', with majorities greater than 10 per cent.[9] In choosing candidates the selectorate therefore determines the overall composition of parliament, and ultimately the pool of those eligible for government. In federal systems such as in Canada or the United States, there are multiple routes into government. But in Britain there is a single ladder into the highest offices of state; the first hurdle is adoption as a prospective parliamentary candidate in a local constituency.[10]

The main approach to studying recruitment in Britain has focused on identifying who controls selection decisions within parties, whether national leaders, local officers, or grassroots party members, and how this power has evolved over time. Studies have documented the basic steps in the selection process, and what this tells us about the distribution of power within party organisations. The recruitment process has commonly been evaluated according to whether the process is 'democratic' in the sense of involving local activists and grassroots members; 'fair' in treating all applicants equally; 'efficient' as a decision making process; and 'effective' in producing 'good' candidates. The appropriate weight given to these criteria, and whether the system meets these objectives, have been subject to heated debate.

The question of internal party democracy, particularly the appropriate role for national and local organisations, has been one of the most controversial issues. Ever since publication of Ostrogorski's classic work at the turn of the century,[11] studies have been interested in *who* has, and who should have, control over selection, comparing the role of the national party leadership, local constituency officers, party factions, and grassroots party members. Struggles to control the process have always been one of the prime areas of intra-party conflict, as Schattschneider notes, because gatekeepers who select ultimately control the composition of the party leadership:

> The nominating [i.e. candidate selecting] process ... has become the crucial process of the party. The nature of the nominating procedure determines the nature of the party; he who can make nominations is the owner of the party.[12]

In Ranney's words, factional struggles to control the nominating procedure are contests for 'nothing less than control of the core of what the party stands for and does'.[13] Placing candidates in safe seats, possibly for a lifetime political career, has more significant consequences than getting conference resolutions adopted, or supporters nominated to internal party bodies. In the Conservative party, disputes over nominations have usually, but not always, been resolved behind closed doors. In the Labour party, factions have struggled more publicly to control the selection process. In 1993 this was vividly illustrated by the heated Labour party debate about the appropriate powers of trade unions versus grassroots party members, with the conference argument over 'one member – one vote' which almost brought down the leadership.

The locus of control over candidate selection varies substantially cross-nationally. In most countries the recruitment process is governed primarily by internal party rules, rather than by law.[14] A comparative approach indicates that decision making in the recruitment process varies along two dimensions. First, there is the question of the dispersion of power. Is the

process centralised with the main decisions taken by the national party leadership, is it left to regional party officers, or is it dispersed with grassroots local party members exerting most influence? Secondly, there is the question of the formalisation of decision making. Is the process informal, a matter of tacit norms with few binding rules and constitutional regulations, or it is formalised so that the procedures at each step are standardised, rule-governed and explicit. These distinctions suggest six main types of selection process (see figure 1.1).

In *informal-centralised* systems (such as the French Union pour la Démocratie Française – UDF) there may be democratic constitutional mechanisms, but in practice the process is characterised by leadership patronage. Rules serve a largely symbolic function. Without any established tradition of internal party democracy, and with loose organisations, party members play little role in the process. In *informal-regional* systems (such as the Italian Christian Democrats) faction leaders bargain with each other to place their favoured candidates in good positions.[15]

In *informal-localised* systems (such as in the Canadian Progressive Conservatives), local ridings decide on the general procedures used for selection, as well as the choice of individual candidate. Without established guidelines, practices vary widely; some constituencies may nominate at large-scale meetings open to all 'members', while patronage by a few local leaders may be significant in others. Reflecting weak organisations, this system may be open to manipulation by small groups.

Alternatively, in *formal-centralised* and *formal-regional* systems (such as in the Liberal party in the Netherlands, the old Italian Communist Party (PCI), or the old Japanese Liberal Democrats), party executives or factional leaders at national and regional level have the constitutional authority to decide which candidates are placed on the party ticket. Lastly the most common pattern in European parties is one of *formal-localised* recruitment. Here constitutional rules and national guidelines are established to standardise the process throughout the party. The fairness of the system, ensuring all applicants are treated alike, rests on the implementation of
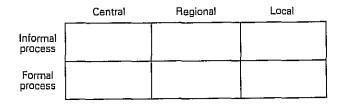
	Central	Regional	Local
Informal process			
Formal process			

Figure 1.1   Decision making agencies

clear, transparent and equitable rules. Within this framework the selection of individual candidates takes place largely by local agencies at constituency level.

Based on this classification, it becomes apparent that in the long term the main change in recruitment within British parties has been in process rather than power. There has been a gradual evolution from an 'informal-localised' system based on patronage in the nineteenth century towards a more 'formal-localised' system today based on more meritocratic standards. This change has gone further in some parties than others. At the turn of the century Ostrogorski provided one of the earliest accounts of the transformation of this system.[16] In mid-Victorian Britain, local patronage predominated; a few local notables would throw their weight behind candidates with sufficient independent resources and social connections for an effective campaign. The 1832 Reform Act led to the development of more formal Registration Societies. At local level the first Conservative associations developed during the mid-1830s to bring in regular subscriptions, organise electoral registration, and rally electoral supporters.[17] At national level the great political clubs – the Carlton and the Reform – provided a rudimentary party organisation, functioning as a social base bringing together politicians, party agents, local associations and influential supporters from the provinces. Formal party labels meant little, after the split over the Corn Laws, when there were shifting parliamentary factions based around political leaders.[18] Ostrogorski was concerned with the development of modern parties from small, informal factions into structured mass-branch organisations following expansion of the franchise, the introduction of the secret ballot, and reform of corrupt practices.[19]

The 1867 Reform Act provided the major catalyst for the organisation of mass parties. The Liberal party was transformed by Joseph Chamberlain's creation of the 'Birmingham Caucus' in 1867, and the subsequent development of the National Liberal Federation in 1877. The Conservatives were similarly transfigured by the creation of the National Union in 1867 to bring together the constituency associations, the creation of Central Office in 1870 to coordinate the professional services, and Lord Randolph Churchill's reorganisation of the National Union in 1886. From its earliest beginning, the organisation of the Conservative party outside of parliament was conceived as a servant of the party within parliament. Local branches were established as election machines, to mobilise the newly enfranchised voters who became too numerous to reach by traditional means.[20] Reflecting their stronger organisation, constituency associations were given two new functions: to enable supporters to influence the party programme, and to provide a more popular body for selecting candidates.[21] Ostrogorski's central anxiety was the effect of 'caucus control'; if MPs became accountable to

rank-and-file party members, he feared this would undermine the independence of members of parliament.

Following in his footsteps, McKenzie's authoritative study of British parties in the mid-fifties established that Ostrogorski's fears of caucus control were groundless.[22] McKenzie found that Conservative and Labour constituency associations had considerable autonomy over whom they adopted, within certain agreed rules. Nevertheless, once elected legislators were rarely accountable to local members. So long as they remained 'en rapport' with their constituency party, McKenzie concluded that British MPs could act as Burkean trustees, able to exercise independent judgement over issues. Due to the deference of party members, MPs rarely functioned as delegates mandated by local activists.[23] There were few cases of constituency de-selection of elected members. Nevertheless, the growth of organised parties did undermine the independence of MPs. Party discipline was applied directly through party whips and national officers, who could threaten the ultimate punishment; official withdrawal of the party label.[24] In short, McKenzie concluded that constituency powers over the selection process did not lead, as some had feared, to direct local control over MPs, although national party control increased.

This established the textbook wisdom for many years. Following in this tradition, the major books on the recruitment process in Britain, published in the 1960s by Austin Ranney and Michael Rush, were concerned with documenting the main steps in the selection process.[25] The focus was on identifying the influence of key actors and analysing sources of potential conflict between central party headquarters and local activists. The studies outlined the rules, examined the social characteristics of candidates on the basis of aggregate data, and compared case studies in some constituencies. The selection of candidates, the authors confirmed, remained the prerogative of local parties, with the main decisions in the hands of constituency officers. Indeed, this was one of the few areas where local parties remained largely autonomous. The outcome of the process – why some candidates were selected over others – was treated as an issue with few conclusive answers.

At the same time, Peter Paterson produced a strong case for reform, arguing that undue power rested with secretive and unrepresentative party cliques.[26] Influenced by the movement against caucuses in the United States, Paterson felt that small selection committees in Britain needed to be replaced by democratic party primaries, open to all members. This proposal was supported in the mid-1970s by the Hansard Society.[27] Subsequent work has focused on the causes and consequences of bitter internal splits over selection battles within the Labour party,[28] and left wing moves to introduce mandatory reselection, in an attempt to make the parliamentary

party accountable to Labour activists.[29] The debate about the appropriate influence of trade union affiliates over the choice of Labour candidates follows this tradition,[30] and proposals for greater internal democracy with 'one-member–one-vote' echo back to Paterson.

Previous studies established the characteristic 'formal-localised' nature of the recruitment process as it operated in British parties during the 1950s and 1960s. During this period constituency associations – mainly core activists and affiliated factions – made the major decisions about the choice of individual candidates. At the same time the national leadership determined the general rules, supervised the process, and exercised formal veto powers, to ensure that the process was fair and efficient.

It was commonly assumed that a formal-localised system was functional for British party organisations. Without some central management the process might become factionalised and divisive, since in moribund constituency associations small groups might 'capture' the party label for their preferred candidate. Standard procedures for selection and appeal help ensure that the rules are seen as uniform and legitimate by all participants. All British parties, except the Greens, have national guidelines, and formal vetting of all proposed candidates by national officers. On the other hand it is usually assumed that too much control by the national party leadership might cause resentment at the grassroots level. The constituency association has to work closely with their candidate on a day-to-day basis for an effective grassroots campaign. Local members are most in touch with the needs of their area. Therefore, many believe that local associations should exercise most power over the choice of individual applicants, working within nationally standardised selection rules.

Changes in the Selection Process

Given this literature there are several reasons for a fresh look at the recruitment process. First, there is a need to establish how the process has operated in recent years, taking account of changes over time. Observers of selection meetings today, reading accounts of the 1950s and 1960s, would recognise much that is strikingly familiar.[31] In time-honoured fashion candidates continue to apply for particular constituencies, undergo a process of interview and short-listing by local party bodies, until one becomes the official party standard-bearer. Nevertheless, during the last decades many aspects of the Labour and Conservative selection process have changed significantly. Reforms have usually been initiated during periods in opposition, when parties have sought to regain electoral popularity by improving the quality of their candidates. The selection process has altered in accordance with the dominant ethos and traditional practices in

each party. In the major parties the main impact of these changes has been two-fold: to increase the formality of the process; and to shift power slightly away from the core constituency activists, simultaneously upwards towards the central leadership and downwards towards grassroots members.

As described in chapter 3, the Conservatives revised the 'model' rules guiding procedures following the Chelmer report in 1972, slightly strengthening the role of party members at the expense of the constituency executive committee. In 1980, Conservative Central Office introduced managerialist selection boards to scrutinise the pool of eligibles on the Approved List before they could apply to particular constituencies. These boards were designed to produce better quality candidates and a meritocratic, open and fair system. This legitimised and thereby strengthened control over the pool of eligibles by Central Office. At the same time the Conservatives tried to make sure grassroots members in general meetings had a genuine choice of finalists.

Labour changed its rules during the 1980s, as part of the general process of party modernisation, described in detail in chapter 4. Driven by conflicting internal pressures, Labour implemented mandatory reselection for incumbent MPs, formalised the selection procedure, shifted power downwards from the constituency General Management Committee to an electoral college of all members, and allowed greater NEC intervention in the choice of by-election candidates. To encourage more women candidates, Labour altered the shortlisting rules, expanded training programmes, and has recommended the use of all women shortlists in half the seats where Labour MPs retire and half the Labour target marginals, although it remains to be seen whether there will be legal challenges, and if and how this will be implemented. The role of trade union sponsorship, and the power of union affiliates over selection, became subject to increased criticism in the 1980s. In October 1993 Labour decided to move towards a one-member-one-vote selection system, with trade unionists participating as individual members.

During the last decade, innovations have also been introduced in the minor parties. The SDP/Liberal Alliance, subsequently the Liberal Democrats, developed training programmes for candidates, introduced postal ballots for members, and initiated shortlisting quotas for women. The decentralised Greens adopted more informal procedures; local parties largely determine their own procedures, and all applicants stand for constituency hustings, unlike other parties there being no prior process of shortlisting. The Scottish National party uses a fairly rigorous series of exercises to establish whether applicants can be placed on their approved list.

The attitudes of party selectors

The second reason for a fresh study lies in the need to move beyond the formal process to analyse the attitudes, values, and priorities of party selectors. The continuing puzzle is to understand *why* some are chosen over others. Bochel and Denver produced a path-breaking survey of the attitudes of party selectors in the Labour party in Scotland and the north.[32] This survey was innovative but limited in scope, and has not been replicated. Recent surveys of party members allow the first systematic analysis of the political behaviour of grassroots activists.[33] But, somewhat surprisingly, these studies did not gather information about the experience of party members in the candidate selection process, or members' attitudes towards their elected representatives. These surveys have been limited to comparing members and voters. Without a broader theoretical model of representative democracy they have not envisaged activists as a middle stratum linking electors and MPs. The institutional focus of organisational studies means we know more about the main steps in the process than the experience and attitudes of the key actors. What are selectors looking for in candidates, when they make their decisions? Do participants feel that selection procedures are fair, democratic and efficient? Are party members and candidates satisfied with the process? What do members feel about the relative influence of national and local party agencies? To understand the experience and perceptions of the main actors we need to go beyond the formal steps in the process.

The sociology of political elites: who gets selected, and why?

The study of party organisations focuses on how the process operates and who has power over recruitment. This perspective can be understood as one half of the equation. It is supplemented by the extensive literature on political elites, concentrating on the outcome of the process. The traditional sociological study of political elites sought to explain how those in power reinforced and consolidated their position.[34] Robert Michels provided the richest theoretical account of how party leaders exercised control over grassroots members through the 'iron law of oligarchy', even in parties like the German Social Democrats which officially subscribed to notions of intraparty democracy.

Most of the empirical work on political elites in Britain has been concerned with documenting trends rather than with explaining the composition of parliament in terms of the process of recruitment. That is, studies have focused on *who* got into positions of power rather than *how* they