The Use of Primaries in the UK Conservative and Labour Parties: Formal Rules and Ideological Changes

Agnès Alexandre-Collier (University of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté) & Emmanuelle Avril (Sorbonne Nouvelle University)


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Abstract
In recent years both the Conservative and Labour parties have experimented with primaries (open, closed or partial) for the selection of their candidates (parliamentary candidates and/or party leaders). At one level this reveals a mimetic effect between different levels of primary use within parties. At another level this highlights the mimetism between parties in the context of a global “democratic push”. The adoption of primaries has indeed been justified on grounds of democratisation, opening up processes which had henceforth been the preserve of party members, party activist - or even parliamentarians - to a larger constituency including the wider public, in a bid to make parties more responsive to voters’ expectations and more representative of the diversity of British society.

The new mechanisms have had some unexpected effects, often resulting in the selection of candidates according to criteria which do not seem to match those classically outlined by Stark, i.e. party cohesion, electability and competence. This reflects the tension between contradictory motivations of party reforms and shows that internal decision-making processes cannot be seen in isolation from the wider context, since analysis of the specific uses of primaries indicates that the same mechanism may produce widely different effects depending on the environment in which it takes place.

Specifically, we propose to investigate the impact of selection rules changes on the ideological profile of successful candidates. An intriguing effect of the experimental selection methods, designed to reinforce party cohesion by attempting to establish a more direct link between party leaderships and the wider electorate and thus to bypass the activist stratum, has been to paradoxically favour the emergence of more candidates whose ideological positioning marks a departure from that of the mainstream of the parliamentary party.

Introduction
Like many western European countries such as France, Italy, Greece, Portugal or Spain, Britain, the cradle of parliamentarianism, has also been affected by the process of ‘primarisation’ of political life which now seems to stand as the new international standard (Gauja, 2012; Lefebvre and Treille, 2016: 22). The Habermasian ‘participative imperative’ accounts for the two main British parties, Labour and the Conservatives, striving to find ways to compensate for the decline of party identification (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002) and respond to the voters’ growing demand for more direct forms of participation. Even if the recent membership boost in the Labour Party, the Scottish National Party and the Greens seems to be reversing the long term trend of decline, British citizens today are much less likely to join a political party than they were thirty years ago: according to House of Commons Library data, a mere 1.6% of British people are currently members of one of the main parties, compared to about 3.8% in 1983 (Keen and Audickas, 2016: 4). This erosion of party membership has come with a historic slump in election turnout: from a high of 83.9% in
the 1950 general election, turnout fell to a record low in 2001, at only 59.4%, and even if subsequent elections have seen a slight increase, turnout remains well below the historical average.

From the 1990s, the New Labour discourse of *empowerment* created favorable conditions for the development of participative innovations and mechanisms designed to foster better citizen participation. The New Labour governments were able to mobilise the newly available technological tools and platforms to develop large scale participative experiments such as e-petitions and citizens’ juries, which were later to be continued by the Conservatives. These reforms, which aimed to restore the link between government and civil society at a time when the parliamentary democratic model was blamed for the growing gap between the elites and the people, were also seen at the level of internal party structures. The two main UK parties, like most western parties, thus embarked on a project to ‘democratise’ themselves by adopting more inclusive, open decision-making processes in a bid to align their ideological and socio-demographic profile with that of the wider circle of their voters. The adoption of various forms of primary elections in the main UK parties flows from this long term evolution.

This paper examines the context in which the primary mechanisms were introduced in each party, the way they functioned and their impact on the two main UK parties (Hazan and Rahat, 2010), focusing on two main types of procedures: the election of the party leader and the selection of parliamentary candidates. The starting point of this evolution, which really took off when Tony Blair became Labour leader in 1994, was the decision by the Labour party conference in 1993, under John Smith’s leadership, to adopt the principle of One-Member-One-Vote (OMOV) within two of the sections of the electoral college to elect the leader - the trade union division and the CLP division - as well as for the selection of parliamentary candidates. This complex system of ‘semi-closed’ primaries paved the way for the Conservatives’ 1998 reforms which for the first time gave a say to ordinary party members in the election of the leader. The realisation that deep societal changes had transformed the way citizens engaged with politics and that political parties must, in order to survive, adapt to these changes, also underpinned the reforms conducted under Labour leader Ed Miliband (2010-2015). The 2010 *Refounding Labour* project aimed to update Labour’s organisational practices which were considered too obsolete and no longer adapted to citizens’ expectations in the 21st century, and to open party structures to supporters so as to reach out beyond the circle of party members (Labour Party, 2010). The Conservative Party was the first to take the step in 2005 in this direction by adopting a system of open primaries for the selection of
parliamentary candidates: in the Conservative associations which made the request, all voters in the constituency were to be allowed to take part. The new system was only experimented with in a limited number of Conservative associations (about twenty in 2015). Labour waited until 2014 to take the step of abolishing the electoral college for the election of the leader and to replace it with a full OMOV system open to party supporters.

The comparison between the two parties helps identify the level of experimentation which each party has been prepared to engage with and the game of catch up between the two organisations. The two UK majority parties have traditionally been defined as broad churches, able to accommodate a wide range of opinions and ideas, with an essentially pragmatic outlook which makes of them an ideal terrain for this kind of experimentations (Alexandre-Collier and Avril, 2013). In addition, because of the symmetry induced by the British two-party system, the comparison between Labour and the Conservatives also brings out some interesting mimetic effects. Indeed, the systems of primaries which they have put in place have tended to bring the two parties closer to each other. In terms of leadership elections, closed and open primaries are to be regarded as placed on a continuum since the inclusion of party members (closed primaries) can be often be seen as a preliminary step towards the inclusion of voters (open primaries). The comparison between Labour and the Conservatives nevertheless helps pinpoint such contagion effects and to posit the gradual organisational convergence between the two parties towards a common model of open or semi-open primaries, which would now stand as the new democratic template.

1. A shared participative imperative

From the mid-1990s, in the context of a global democratic ‘push’, the Conservative and Labour parties started to modernise and ‘democratise’ party structures, inherited from their long history and which no longer seemed adapted. In this respect, the Liberal Democrats, who have used a system of closed primaries since the creation of the party in 1988, have stood as the model to emulate and have not felt the same pressure to upgrade their structures. To some extent, democratic experimentations such as primaries therefore reflect efforts made by the Conservatives and by Labour to align their structures with the new organisational model.

Regarding the Labour Party, the long period of opposition from the beginning of the 1980s, punctuated by four successive election defeats (in 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992) in a climate of growing citizen disaffection for political engagement, opened the way for a series of innovations designed to revitalise the party and to institute more direct relations between the leadership and the grassroots (Quinn, 2004; Russell, 2005; Avril, 2007) as well as more
consensual decision-making processes so that internal divisions would not be expressed so publicly. This quest for consensus led to the adoption of more participative and more deliberative mechanisms. According to the *Partnership in Power* document implemented from 1997, the organisational reforms introduced under Tony Blair’s leadership as part of the party organisational and ideological renovation project known as ‘modernisation’ - which had been launched under Kinnock - aimed to progressively open all decision-making processes to non-members as well as members. Policy-making was the first focus of the reforms, with the new mechanisms, of which ‘policy forums’ were the most emblematic, gradually opening up party structures to wider and wider circles. Decisions were no longer the preserve of party activists; they now also included ‘passive’ members on the basis that, in keeping with May’s law of curvilinearity, they were seen as ideologically closer to the voters. Thus the party was to be aligned with the opinions of the voters. A similar thinking was applied to the reform of the election of the *National Executive Committee* (NEC) and then to the election of the leader. The adoption of OMOV to replace the traditional system of delegatory democracy where votes were cast by delegates mandated by their local parties (Constituency Labour Parties), aimed to bypass the traditional intermediary bodies such as the annual conference or CLP general committees so as to establish a direct relationship between an enlarged and supposedly more docile membership and a leadership eager to increase their strategic autonomy.

In parallel with these organisational reforms, the Blair government deployed a whole series of innovative participative mechanisms. The New Labour government launched in 2003 a nationwide consultation exercise called the ‘Big Conversation’, to discuss the challenges facing Britain through online and offline forums (some of the ideas thus generated were included in Labour’s 2005 manifesto), and in 2006 a consultation exercise on public service reform called the ‘Let’s Talk’ initiative, which consisted in ‘listening to the opinions of people inside the party and the interests of people outside of it’. In opposition, Labour then launched in June 2011 the ‘Fresh Ideas’ online platform for members of the public to be able to generate ideas on a number of key topics, which was reinforced in 2013 through the ‘Your Britain’ online policy hub. At the time of writing the Party’s National Policy Forum webpage advertises the fact the ‘Labour Party policy is made democratically, through discussion and consultation with members, the public, businesses, experts and civil society groups.’ While some of these mechanisms have been very short-lived and quickly disappeared, others, such as e-petitions, became institutionalised.

The successive reforms of the mode of election of the Labour leader, from the
establishment of the electoral college system in 1981 following a tripartite system awarding a share of the vote to the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), the Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and the affiliates (among which the trade unions who initially weighed more than the other two sections with 40% of the vote, the other sections holding 30% of the vote each), to the rebalancing of the sections in 1993 to give all three sections equal weight, then to the 2014 reforms, all go in the same direction: they progressively awarded greater and greater say to the whole membership rather than just the activists, and then to supporters rather than just full members. Thus the move to OMOV within the sections of the electoral college can be seen as a first step in the ‘primarisation’ of the Labour leadership election. The abolition of the electoral college in March 2014 and the adoption of a full OMOV system, open to new categories of voters, is the endpoint of this process, as confirmed by a similar evolution of the rules for electoral colleges for the selection of parliamentary (Alexandre-Collier and Avril, 2015). Although the adoption of this system in the name of the ever increasing ‘democratisation’ of party structures was largely a result of contingent factors (which will be made explicit in the following section of the paper), it may also be regarded as the final stage of a thirty-year long process of gradual individualisation of the vote, which began under John Smith’s leadership, in the context of a global democratic push.

These changes also result from internal power struggles and from the need for each party to catch up with their main competitor. The ‘democratisation’ of party structures, whose main benefit is increased room for maneuver for the leadership through the limitation of the influence of internal opponents, is also a powerful campaigning and communication tool within a more general ‘organisational branding’ strategy (Gauja, 2017: 57), with each party now claiming to be the most democratic, thus converging towards a common model of participative democracy.

The 1997 Labour landslide victory prompted the Conservatives to tackle the gap between the leadership and the grassroots members, illustrated both by the unrepresentative character of the parliamentary elites and a feeling of alienation among the party members which seemed to adversely affect levels of activism, in parallel with the growing disaffection among voters. This seemed to call for some degree of organisational democratisation, particularly regarding the selection of the leader, until then and since 1965 elected exclusively by the Conservative MPs and situated at the apex of an organisation seen by many members as «a feudal oligarchy, where power is concentrated in the leader’s office» (quoted by Kelly, 2003: 84). The party was also hampered by the formal separation between parliamentary and the extra-parliamentary, inherited from the party’s Victorian roots, in keeping with the
Disraelian view that the party outside parliament should be subordinate to the parliamentary elites (Kelly, 2003: 82, 83). The reforms introduced by the new leader William Hague, set out in the *The Fresh Future* document, erected democracy and openness as the key objectives to guide reforms designed to quieten members’ unrest (Hague, 1997). The centerpiece of the reforms was the introduction of new leadership election rules which, for the first time, gave grassroots members a say, in the shape of an individual vote of the whole membership in the last round, in which members were now required to choose their preferred candidate among the two finalists chosen by Conservative MPs.

This new system of closed primaries and the unprecedented inclusion of the grassroots members in the process was hailed by the party leadership as the most visible manifestation of an ongoing democratic revolution. Indeed, a vast communication exercise entitled *Listening to Britain* was organised around the reforms, with 1,400 meetings open to members as well as the public, to help the leadership get feedback on the evolution of the party and its modernisation project (Kelly, 2003: 95). The move towards open structures was continued by David Cameron who announced upon his election in December 2005 the advent of a ‘post-bureaucratic era’ and called for a ‘massive redistribution of power from the elite to the people’ (Cameron, 2009).

The conservative party reforms were clearly inspired from the New Labour reforms which were universally regarded as very successful. William Hague himself expressed his admiration for Blair’s approach and his intention to implement what Richard Kelly called a « New Labourification » of the Conservative Party (Kelly, 2003: 86). Beyond specific party reforms, the whole blairian rhetoric of empowerment and the innovative character of New Labour’s organisational reforms had a strong influence on Conservative leaders such as Hague and Cameron for whom they stood as an ‘organisational myth’ (Faucher, 2014). The way the Conservatives subjected themselves to the dictates of this participative imperative is a reflection of the ‘functional mimetism’ (or ‘contagion effect’, Sandri, Seddone and Venturino, 2015; Gauja, 2017) which is also seen in other countries (Lefebvre and Treille, 2016: 16).

However in practice the rhetoric of democratisation translated into very centralised processes, with grassroots members being in fact offered a very limited choice. As Richard Kelly has explained, this reflects a vision of party ‘democracy’ as resulting not from a bottom-up push originating in the grassroots, but from a top-down ‘reformed oligarchy that occasionally trusted the membership’. As a result the new mode of election was soon perceived as nothing more than cosmetic and a ‘dilution of party democracy’ (Kelly, 2003: 94-101).
2. Leadership election rules: towards a common template of semi-open primaries?

In the Conservative Party, the 1998 reforms put the election of the leader at the heart of organisational innovation (Alderman, 1999; Denham, 2010). To a large extent the new procedure established by the reform flowed from the traditional procedure, with the addition of an extra stage, in the shape of a closed primary for the last round of voting. Candidates were to be elected by the MPs first, following the multi-round procedure with had prevailed until then. The choice between the two finalists was then to be handed over to the party membership. The blanket term of ‘primaries’ to describe the new mode of election of the Conservative leader is too vague and needs to be refined to a more specific category. Indeed, it is best described as a multi-stage mixed primary (Kenig, Cross, Pruysers and Rahat, 2015), with a final inclusion of the grassroots. The new system was first used following the 2001 general election defeat and led to the election of Iain Duncan Smith, who had distinguished himself as one of anti-Maastricht rebels in the 1990s. The new leader had not managed to get the support of a majority of MPs, who preferred Kenneth Clarke (and Michael Portillo, who came ahead in the first round but was knocked out in the last round after revelations about his sexuality), but won the membership vote unequivocally, with 60.8% of the vote against 39.2% for Kenneth Clarke (with a 21% abstention rate, there were 256,797 votes cast in total). He thus became the first party leader ever to be chosen by the party grassroots against the wishes of the parliamentary party (Kelly, 2003: 100). His subsequent unseating by the MPs through a no confidence vote in October 2003 triggered a new leadership election which led to the appointment of Michael Howard in the absence of any competitors. This points to the limitations of the procedure, in particular the potentially explosive gap between grassroots support and MPs’ lack of confidence. The election of David Cameron in December 2005, also chosen by the party members over the favourite, David Davis, gave him the legitimacy required to carry out his modernisation agenda.

In the Labour Party, the main drawback of the electoral college, which is well suited to the federal structure of the party despite the controversy over the imbalance between the sections as well as the relative weight of voters, is the visibility it gives to the trade unions, leaving the party open to accusations of being dictated to by sectional interests. Indeed, decision-making processes are part and parcel of the image the party’s wishes to communicate to media and voters (Avril, 2015). Ed Miliband was thus dogged by the fact that he owed his 2010 victory over his brother David, who was regarded as the favourite and the natural heir, to the support of the trade unions: he won 19.9% of the votes in this section of the college.
against 13.3% for David, but obtained fewer votes than his brother in the other two sections, the PLP section (15.5% against 17.8% for his brother) and the CLP section (15.1% against 16%) (Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011). Ed Miliband, eager to restore his legitimacy and to shake this image of a leader in thrall of the unions, ordered an internal report on organisational reform. This report, written by Ray Collins and published at the beginning of 2014, recommended the abolition of the electoral college and the establishment in its place of a full OMOV system open to supporters (known as OMOV+) (Collins, 2014; Quinn, 2016).

The adoption of the new system, which was also to apply to the selection of mayoral candidates, was also precipitated by an incident during the selection of the candidate for the Falkirk by-election the previous year, in which trade unions were accused of having paid the fees of many members to weigh on the result (on party reform as a damage control tool see Gauja, 2017: 60-63). At a special conference organised on March 1st to officially adopt the new procedure, the reform was approved by 86% of those present.

According to the new rules, voters would be allowed to take part in the leadership election on a par with fully paid party members provided they acquired the status of registered supporter and paid a £3 fee. Members of the unions and other affiliates (such as socialist societies) had to undertake a similar procedure (but without having to pay extra monies) so as to acquire the status of affiliated members giving them the right to cast a vote. It must be stressed that the new system has retained the gate-keeping power of the PLP, since, in order to be able to stand, each candidate needs to gather a sufficient number of nominations, a reflection of the fact that the leader is as much the leader of the parliamentary as that of the extra-parliamentary party. The threshold to stand in the leadership election shortlist was even raised from 12.5% of the PLP to 15%. Therefore, in order to be in the running in the 2015 leadership election, candidates needed the backing of a minimum of 36 MPs. Whereas Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall had no difficulty in getting the required number of nominations, Jeremy Corbyn only got his at the last minute and thanks to the support of a few MPs who only nominated him for the sake of diversity but did not wish him to win. To everyone’s surprise, including Corbyn’s himself, Burham, who was the favourite, was soon overtaken by an outsider whose popularity among the members and, particularly, supporters, soared throughout the summer, until his eventual victory, in the first round, on 12 September. With 59.5% of the vote, he had clearly distanced his main rival who only managed to gather 19% of the vote. The new procedure generated a sharp rise in the two new categories of voters, registered supporters and affiliated supporters, a majority of whom supported Corbyn: 83.7% of registered supporters and 57.6% of affiliated supporters chose Corbyn as their first
choice, as opposed to a little under half of full members. The outcome of opening up the leadership election process beyond the restricted circle of party members, was the election of a leader at odds with the overwhelming majority of the PLP. To some extent, the selection of Sadiq Khan as the London mayoral candidate for the May 5, 2016 election following the same procedure (Labour Party, 2015) against the more blatantly blairite Tessa Jowell also marked a turn to the left (he was among the Labour MPs to have nominated Corbyn for the leadership).

To date, the Conservative Party has been the only party to experiment with open primaries as such, albeit in a limited number of constituency associations, for the selection of parliamentary candidates. As soon as he was elected leader in 2005, David Cameron pushed for the modernisation of the party structures, so as to improve the representativeness of the parliamentary party. The introduction of the A-list, whose purpose was to increase the number of female and BAME candidates in the name of a better inclusion of minorities and the need to fight the stereotypical image of the Conservative MP as a white well-educated middle-class male, was the centrepiece of the new system (McIlveen, 2009). Thus between August 2006 and January 2008 the first open primaries for the selection of parliamentary candidates in constituency associations of under 300 members were organised on the basis of this A-List (Williams and Paun, 2011). This was presented by David Cameron as emblematic of a redistribution of power in the party and as part of a strategy for ‘decontaminating’ the conservative brand. ‘One of the reforms I’m most proud of – he declared – is the widespread introduction of open primaries for the selection of Conservative parliamentary candidates in recent years. I want to see that continue with much greater use of open primaries for the selection of parliamentary candidates – and not just in the Conservative Party, but every party. In time, this will have a transformative effect on our politics, taking power from the party elites and the old boy networks’ (Cameron on Politics Home, 26 May 2009, quoted by Rahat, 2013: 145).

The open primary system adopted by the Conservative Party is a very complex system comprising several stages, with first a pre-selection stage by party HQ combining interviews and consultation of the local party, and then a final choice given to the members between the 3 or 4 shortlisted candidates. Two types of primaries were then organised: primary meetings of members and voters (which in practice never reached more than 3-400 participants in total), and, from 2009, the first postal ‘open primaries’ in Totnes and Gosport. These experiments increased participation significantly (24.5% and 17.8% of registered voters in the two constituencies cited), and opened the pool of potential candidates, some of whom, such as Sarah Wollaston in Totnes, had only joined the party very recently. Another postal primary
was organised in 2014 in Rochester and Strood.

However overall, up until the May 2010 general election, only about 100 constituency associations had used the new procedure, and only 26 did so in the run up to the 2015 general election (Alexandre-Collier, 2016). This was taken by the leadership as the sign that the experiment was running out of steam. In addition, the cost of organising postal primaries (between £30,000 and £40,000) made it difficult to continue with the scheme. As for primary meetings, they turned out to be very poorly attended and a far cry far from the participative ideal which underpinned the experiment, as these small scale gatherings of members and supporters produced a very limited and not very inclusive selectorate whose choice was in fact largely restricted by decisions made at national level at the preselection stage.

Nevertheless the system of open primaries was shown to have a number of advantages, one of which was to allow candidates to test voters’ interest and promote themselves at local level. In the constituencies of Twickenham as well as Morley and Outwood, for example, open primaries allowed Conservative candidates Tania Mathias and Andrea Jenkyns, who were completely unknown to the public, to win seats which have so far been held by high profile politicians such as Lib Dem Vince Cable and Labour Ed Balls. Also, although limited to a small number of constituencies, the experiments turned into electoral successes since 19 out of the 26 conservative associations which organised open primaries went on to win the seat, a 73% success rate compared to the 50.8% overall success rate in 2015.

The Conservative Party experimentation with open primaries needs to be set in the context of the decline in activism and the quest for strategies to compensate for the slump in some constituencies which found themselves almost deserted. The creation of registered supporters is another example of such strategy (Fisher, Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2013), as seen with the ‘Team2015’ scheme set up by Paul Abbott at CCHQ, which consisted in bussing young supporters and voters around marginal seats in the 2015 election campaign (Bale, 2016: 404). This evolution shows the emergence of a new form of political participation where the boundary between different the categories (voters, supporter, member) is very thin (Scarrow, 2015).

In the Labour Party, if there had been talk of extending the system of primaries to the selection of parliamentary candidates), the unexpected outcome of the first leadership election using the system has quietened the ardours of reformists. The implementation of the semi-open primaries has turned out to be much more complex than its initiators had anticipated. Indeed, the eligibility criteria for the new category of voters became a main bone of contention during the first leadership campaign in the summer of 2015, mainly because of
suspicious of entryism from the far left and from the Conservatives, who were said to want to use the primary as a means to destroy the party from within. In the subsequent 2016 leadership election, triggered by a PLP rebellion following the Brexit vote, the rules defining the selectorate were altered to counter some of the negative effects of the first election. The National Executive Committee retroactively established a new condition whereby only full members having acquitted this status before or on January 12 2016 would be eligible to take part in the vote this time. As for registered supporters, they were given a three day window (from 18 to 20 July 2016) to pay a £25 fee - a steep hike compared to the £3 fee required the previous year - to become eligible to vote. But these attempts to put the genie back in its bottle did not prevent Corbyn from winning an even more decisive victory over his challenger Owen Smith (61.8% against 38.2%) with the support of 70% of registered supporters. The irony of the reform is that the decision to open the party structures to the wider circle of supporters, who were supposed to be ideologically and socio-demographically closer to the voters, had the opposite effects to those sought by the reformers. This raises the wider issue of the profile and motivations of those who take part in primary elections.

3. The effect of primaries on leadership types

In Britain, the various experiments with primaries (mixed multi stage, open or closed) have produced very different results in terms of the representativeness and responsiveness of leaders (Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Sandri, Seddone and Venturino, 2015). The comparison between the Conservatives and Labour is only valid to a point, as there are major differences between the type of primary system used by each party, which presuppose a different type of competition (several candidates in the Labour Party, only two final candidates in the Conservative Party) with different degrees of openness to different types of selectorates (party members for the Conservatives; supporters for Labour) and therefore different levels of participation (150,000 members for the Conservatives; 500,000 members and supporters for Labour).

Interestingly however, the two main parties share similarities when it comes to the profile of party leader emerging out of the new procedures, since both have experienced the emergence of leaders whose ideological profile is clearly at odds with that of their parliamentary party. Indeed, the effects of primaries in terms of representativeness and responsiveness (Sandri, Seddone and Venturino, 2015: 192-197) are similar in both parties, especially if one compares the profile of the most recent leaders, David Cameron for the Conservatives and Jeremy Corbyn for Labour. In both cases the leader’s profile diverges
quite clearly from the ideological positions of their parliamentary party (Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2015). David Cameron as an MP was close to the modernising faction in his party, a minority group before 2005, even if he rarely rebelled, merely abstaining on a 2001 Bill to allow same sex couples to adopt. As soon as he became party leader, Cameron found himself at loggerheads with his parliamentary group, as shown by the record number of rebellions during his first term as Prime Minister: whereas rebellions had never passed the 10% threshold in the four postwar parliaments, before increasing in the 1970s and then decreasing in the Thatcher and Blair years, they rose to 35% from 2010 and 2015 (from 8% between 1997 and 2010), 25% of which were among Conservatives (Russell, 2016: 107). October 2011 saw the biggest ever rebellion on Europe, which was also the largest on any topic since 1945 (Cowley and Stuart, 2012: 402), in which 81 MPs voted in favour of a motion for the organisation of a referendum on Britain remaining in the EU, a quarter of all Conservative MPs. The vote for Brexit in the 23 June 2016 referendum was interpreted as a rejection of Cameron’s leadership and revealed the depth of the schism between Conservative Party members and MPs.

As for the Labour Party, the ideological gap between Jeremy Corbyn and the PLP is even more visible and constitutes his main weakness. According to figures compiled by Philip Cowley (available on revolts.co.uk), Corbyn was the most rebellious of all MPs during the years 1997-2010 (the New Labour years), a period during which he is recorded to have voted 428 times against the Labour government. Another way to measure the gap between Corbyn and the PLP is the number of MPs who rebelled against him following the Brexit vote: in total 172 out of 212 Labour MPs (81% of the PLP) signed a no confidence motion against the leader after 65 frontbenchers had resigned. Corbyn’s ideological stance may seem all the more incongruous that the recruitment of Labour candidates throughout the 1990s had tended to homogenise the profile of the PLP through a gradual process of ideological alignment (Heppell, 2010: 14; Alexandre-Collier and Avril, 2015).

If we take the categories established by Beech, Hickson and Plant (2004) - Old Left (or soft left), New Left (or hard left), Centre, Old Right (soft right) and New Right (the modernisers) to measure the ideological gap between Corbyn and his colleagues in the Commons, we see that the tension between Corbyn, who comes from the radical left, a small minority among parliamentarians, and the dominant group, that of the New Right, reflects the strongest degree possible of polarisation between two extremes. What is distinctive about Corbyn is that his popularity among the party’s grassroots is inversely proportional to the one he enjoys among the PLP, which puts the party in a very difficult position considering his dire
poll ratings. Therefore the organisational consequences of his election as leader are disastrous since: it resulted in a leader drawing from the legitimacy conveyed to him from an enlarged grassroots base to challenge the majority of his colleagues in the Commons whose legitimacy is drawn from the voters. As a result, following a string of coup attempts, rumours of splits and threats of deselection of MPs hostile to Corbyn, the Labour Party’s standing in the polls has plummeted (in January 2017 Labour was trailing 11 points behind the Conservatives in the polls).

Corbyn’s election would thus seem to contradict Stark’s hypothesis (1996), later developed by Quinn (2012) which posited that the opening up of party structures to a wider selectorate would have no effect on the type of leadership emerging out of the process. It was supposed that the members of mainstream UK parties were guided in their choice by the same criteria of party cohesion (the ability of the leader to preserve party unity), electability (the ability of the leader to win elections) and competence (the ability of the leader to implement a programme) used by parliamentary elites to make their choice. In this view it was believed that outsiders and serial rebels such as Corbyn, who never have held government positions, do not benefit from any support within the parliamentary party and who therefore lack the qualities and skills expected from a leader, would never be able to get to take control of a party such as Labour. Putting Stark’s theory to the test, Denham and Dorey (2016) as well as Quinn (2016) track all Labour leadership elections to show that, between 1963 and 1994, four winners (among whom Blair) were chosen according to all three criteria, and two according to the criterion of cohesion alone. As for Gordon Brown in 2007, he succeeded Blair without an election, but was also chosen on the basis of the same criteria. The election of Corbyn on the first round therefore constitutes an exception to the rule, a situation which highlights the divergence between the criteria used by the MPs and the attributes which the recently enlarged grassroots were looking for in a leader. Indeed, only 5% of Corbyn supporters were expecting him to maintain party unity and the same small proportion expected him to deliver election victory for the party in 2020 (Quinn, 2016: 773). The influx of new members motivated by ideological and expressive motivations, rather than the more pragmatic consideration of election victory which tend to guide the choices of older members, requires the Stark model (Quinn, 2016) to be revisited.

But to conclude that it is the new mode of election which in itself accounts for the Labour Party’s current situation would be going one step too far since the effects of the semi-open primaries are only part of the picture. Indeed, the selection of open primaries used to select Sadiq Khan as London mayoral candidates in 2015 did not preclude eventual election
victory in May 2016. The election of Ed Miliband against his more Blairite brother in 2010 had already signaled a turn to the left since this choice expressed a rejection of the New Labour legacy, which was confirmed in 2015. It would be more accurate to see the new rules as having amplified a trend. And even more significant, one main reason for the success of the radical left-wing candidate against the wishes of the majority of the PLP, was the failure of Labour MPs to play their gatekeeping role. However, an undeniable effect of the primary is linked to the fact that the opening up of the decision-making process to non-members as well as members has come with a lengthening of the campaign (Denham and Dorey, forthcoming) which gives candidates who do not start off as favourites (Duncan Smith in 2001 and Cameron in 2005 for the Conservatives; Ed Miliband in 2010 and Corbyn in 2015 for Labour) the time and opportunity to raise their profile and to generate a momentum around their candidacy.

The thinking behind the innovations analysed in this paper and the power shift towards the grassroots base they generated was that ‘democratisation’ of the party must be achieved through the opening up of the party structures to the wider circle of supporters and voters, so that that decision-making would no longer be the preserve of full members. In that matter the Labour party stands as a pioneer, with the creation in 2004 of a Labour Supporters’ Network, through which the party aimed to recruit 200,000 supporters with the expectation that 20% of them would later take the step of becoming fully paid up members. Even if this objective was not reached, the thinking behind the scheme gradually spread to other parties who strove to draw to themselves those to whom the prospect of formally joining a party did not appeal, partly because of the fee that came with it but also because they did not feel like engaging in traditional party activities. This has allowed parties to build databases of supporters who can be mobilised at election time and who are prepared to carry out non intensive tasks such as forwarding emails to their contacts or sharing them on social networks. The adoption of semi-open primaries and the granting of voting rights to this wider circle of members was a necessary tradeoff.

But a mechanical effect of this power transfer towards a much enlarged grassroots base is the erosion of the prerogatives of full members - especially of the small circle of activists. Although during the 2015 election campaign the parties took care to emphasise the differences in status, the frontiers between the various categories of members is becoming more fluid, so that different levels of membership – and thus of engagement - now co-exist within each of the main parties, on the model of the multi-speed membership party theorised by Scarrow (2015). The impact that such changes will have on parties is still unclear.
Traditional activists now have less and less influence on the strategic choices of the leadership and find themselves at odds with the new category of members, as epitomised by the culture clash between old and new Labour party members. This may result in a decline in levels of activism among traditional members, which will not be compensated for by the increase in the number of ‘light’ members who are little inclined to carry out time consuming activities such as attending meetings, canvassing or leafleting (Fisher, Fieldhouse and Cutts 2013; Ponce and Scarrow 2013). Thus, paradoxically, the gradual erosion of members’ prerogatives through the process of primarisation and the massive extension of party size which goes with, may lead to a weakening of the organisational strength of traditional parties. As a Labour Party insider put it: “The bigger question for the future is where to draw the line between having a committed, secure membership and an open democratic process that encourages participation.” (McHugh, 2015).

Conclusion

The experimentations with systems of primaries for candidate selection in the Conservative Party and for leadership election in the Labour party have been guided by very distinct procedures and motivations in each party. For the Conservatives, the timid experimentation with open primaries has been part and parcel of a modernisation agenda modelled on New Labour’s organisational reforms. But the very low turnout at primary meetings for the selection of parliamentary candidates does not mark them as a move towards what could be regarded as a model of successful open primaries. Primary meeting have at best given candidates increased public visibility and helped the party be more responsive to local expectations, even drawing new voters to the party. But as such they do not provide a very convincing answer to the problem of party dealignment, so tenuous and artificial is the link among voters engaging in the process. In the Labour party, the opening up of the leadership election process to supporters fulfilled a different role as it aimed to reinvent activism by including active supporters who were expected to evolve towards the activist sphere (Scarrow, 2015). But the implementation of the new rules in 2015 and 2016 has exacerbated the tensions between a much enlarged 500,000 strong grassroots party and the PLP. The system was first restricted in 2016 and many in the PLP and the traditional membership are now so disillusioned with the process that it may be completely phased out.

Therefore the process of ‘primarisation’ cannot be regarded as irreversible and the open primaries model does not necessarily stand as the natural endpoint of recent organisational reforms. This is because, despite the wider trends towards increased party
democracy (in the sense of an opening of party structures), motivations behind the democratic innovations detailed in this paper have been tactical and their implementation contingent. This means that parties may decide at any point to reverse or bypass the new processes. In July 2016, after all other candidates had withdrawn, Theresa May was chosen as the new Conservative leader by the parliamentary party to replace David Cameron without the membership being consulted. This election illustrates the tension which may arise between the two imperatives of efficiency and legitimacy. At the other end, Jeremy Corbyn’s case symbolises even more strikingly this conflict between two competing sources of legitimacy.

In the final analysis, what the study of the two main British parties illustrates is that, despite the rhetoric of democratisation, leadership election rule changes are not so much about testing new democratic mechanisms as they are the result of internal power struggles between different groups, each seeking to strengthen their position through the adoption of a procedure which they imagine to be favourable to their camp (Stark, 1996: 64-66; Heppell, 2010: 197). Democratic innovation is also thought of as an electoral asset to be mobilised as part of the party’s presentational tactics. Therefore, far from the democratic ideal advocated in official discourse, and even if the failure to control the adverse effects of the new rules of the game may produce results far removed from anticipated outcomes and sometimes at a polar end of the very spirit of the reforms, the adoption of various forms of primaries by the two largest British parties is essentially a function of factional opportunism. Both parties have taken care to retain the required locking mechanisms to protect themselves from the potentially damaging organisational effects resulting from the emergence of a leader unable to maintain internal party cohesion.

But if small scale isolated experimentations, such as the selection of parliamentary candidates in the Conservative Party, may be easily abandoned to restore a more reliable system, the ‘primarisation’ of the election of the leader, which takes place in the national public eye, is a process which may not be so easily reversed, however much parties would wish to do so. The fact that Conservatives MPs kept control of the process leading to the election of Theresa May could generate a backlash in the next leadership election. The Labour party may choose to discard the new system altogether, or, as is more likely, make full use of existing limitations to control it better, with potentially disastrous effects on the organisation. New rules may become quickly entrenched and almost instantly acquire the status of a new democratic right, thus establishing themselves as a new normative imperative.
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It must be stressed however that the idea of there being a clear linear progression from one form to the other is highly debatable (Lefebvre and Treille, 2016; Katz, 2001).

Historically, the right has pushed for the adoption of OMOV of the whole membership as a means to dilute the influence of local activists deemed hostile to the leadership.

A vote of confidence is triggered when 15% of conservative MPs make a written request to the 1922 Committee chairman, which gathers all the conservative MPs in the Commons.

An MP’s vote carries much more weight than that of an ordinary party member, and an MP may vote in two or three of the sections.

In 2010, the radical left candidate Diane Abbott had been able to stand for the same reason and had been eliminated in the first round.

The voting system used is alternative vote, where candidates are ranked by voters in order of preference; if no candidate manages to get over 50% of the vote in the first round, the bottom candidate is eliminated and his/her second preferences redistributed to the other candidates, and so on until one of the candidates reaches an absolute majority.

As had already been the case with Michael Howard in 2003.