



Matthews, N. (2015). The selection of party leaders in Northern Ireland. *Parliamentary affairs*, 69(4), 901–927.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsv058>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1093/pa/gsv058](https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsv058)

[Link to publication record on the Bristol Research Portal](#)  
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via OUP at <https://academic.oup.com/pa/article/69/4/901/2468894>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol – Bristol Research Portal

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/brp-terms/>

## The Selection of Party Leaders in Northern Ireland

This article provides an analysis of the leadership selection methods adopted by Northern Ireland's five main parties. Drawing on data from interviews with party elites and internal party documents, it sheds light on an important element of intra-party organisation in the region and constitutes a rare case-study of leadership selection in a consociational democracy. By accounting for instances of organisational reform this article also reveals the extent to which Northern Ireland's parties align with the wider comparative trend of leadership 'democratisation'. In terms of 'who' selects party leaders, the analysis finds a substantial degree of organisational heterogeneity and a reasonably high rate of democratisation. Northern Ireland's parties also prove rather exceptional in their universal adoption of short fixed terms for party leaders and, in the case of three of the parties, their preference for high candidacy thresholds.

Keywords: Democratisation, Intra-party democracy, Leadership selection, Northern Ireland, Party organisation, Power-sharing.

Leadership selection is widely regarded as one of the defining functions of a political party in a representative democracy (Gunther and Diamond, 2001). As a result, it is an area of decision-making with considerable significance at several levels. How parties select their leaders can, for instance, tell us a great deal about how they approach the issue of intra-party democracy, acting as a lens through which we can view the existing balance of power within a party as a political system (LeDuc, 2001; Cross, 2013). 'Who is empowered to participate in leadership selection', as Cross and Blais (2012: 9) explain, 'speaks directly to the issue of where power lies in [a] party'.

The process of leadership selection also has significance beyond any consideration of parties' internal democratic priorities and ethos. On account of parties' enduring position at the centre of representative democracy (Dalton *et al.* 2011), scholars are compelled to examine how those who lead these integral institutions are selected. More specifically, a party's choice of leader often has direct consequences for the identity and background of those who lead countries at a national level – be it in government or parliament (Cross and Pilet, 2014: 5). The ramifications of the choice of party selectorates can, therefore, extend beyond the intra-party realm to include the not insignificant matter of who acts as the head of government.

Party leaders in modern democracies have also become especially dominant figures over the past two decades, as their influence on intra-party and system-level decision-making has increased substantially (McAllister, 1996; Aaarts *et al.* 2011; Katz and Mair, 1994). Identifying clear growth in the authority of party leaders across several areas – including government formation, portfolio allocation, campaigning and the formulation of policy – commentators refer to the 'presidentialization' of party politics in parliamentary democracies with increasing confidence (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). This trend of party leaders as increasingly powerful figures is observable in all party systems, both majoritarian and consensus (Cross and Blais, 2012). Given such power, 'the methods through which party leaders achieve their position are important political institutions' (Kenig, 2009b: 240).

The past three decades have seen party scholars analyse leadership selection in a considerable array of cases. More recent years have seen several comparative studies of the topic (see Cross and Blais, 2012; Pilet and Cross, 2014). Collectively, such research has improved our understanding of what has long been an under-examined area (Cross and Blais, 2012: 3-5). One region which has escaped such newfound interest and scrutiny, however, is that of Northern Ireland. Despite the general importance of the topic and Northern Ireland's reputation as arguably 'the most heavily researched area on earth' (Whyte, 1990: vii), negligible attention has been paid to how its party leaders are selected. This is indicative of a general scarcity of research on intra-party democracy in Northern Ireland. Tonge and Evans (2002: 60) have highlighted the 'dearth of information concerning political parties in Northern Ireland', stating in an earlier study the need to address the 'lack of information concerning political parties' in the region (Evans and Tonge, 2001: 104). It also stands in stark contrast to the number of investigations of the leadership selection methods (and dynamics) of parties in both Britain and Ireland (see Marsh, 1993; Rafter, 2003; Cross and Blais, 2012; Alderman, 1999; Punnett, 1993; Stark, 1996; Quinn, 2005; Bale and Webb, 2014). The interest of party scholars in these two neighbouring jurisdictions has not led to an in-depth examination of the methods adopted by Northern Ireland's main parties.

To address this paucity of research, this study provides an empirical analysis of leadership selection in Northern Ireland. Drawing on data from 41 semi-structured interviews with party elites and historical party documents, it sheds light on an important element of intra-party organisation in the region, offering a rare insight into the democratic character of its main parties. As a consociational democracy Northern Ireland also constitutes a highly novel case-study of leadership selection. The most wide-ranging comparative study of the topic to date, for example, includes just one consociational democracy, Belgium (see Pilet and Cross, 2014). Indeed, the lack of interest in leadership selection in Northern Ireland is especially puzzling when we consider the central role afforded to and played by political leaders in the region. Consociational democracy is predicated upon accommodation among elites of competing groups within society. Party leaders, as the 'elites' in question, are therefore integral to the effective functioning of the system (to say nothing of its establishment) (Lijphart, 1977; Coakley, 2011). By definition then, power-sharing affords a greater number of party leaders with executive influence than is the case in other institutional settings. This sharing of power, therefore, serves to magnify the importance of understanding how each of these leaders gets elected to serve in the inclusive 'elite cartel' (Lijphart, 1969: 213). Furthermore, with the exception of Sinn Féin<sup>1</sup>, party leaders in Northern Ireland are also the 'chief nominating officers' for the formation of a power-sharing executive; meaning that when selecting a leader parties are also influencing the composition of a much larger regional leadership grouping. The sheer amount of leaders with viable political decision-making influence in the Northern Ireland case, therefore, lends a study of leadership selection in the region added significance.

In addition to providing a systematic comparative analysis of leadership selection in Northern Ireland – highlighting significant differences in the methods of the main parties – this study is longitudinal. This enables us to ascertain the degree to which the parties' procedures have changed over their respective lifetimes. One contemporary trend concerning party organisation is the 'democratisation' of leadership selection procedures (Caul-Kittilson

---

<sup>1</sup> By Sinn Féin we mean Provisional Sinn Féin which was formed as a result of a split in the Irish republican movement in 1970. This is the Sinn Féin referred to hereafter.

and Scarrow, 2003). While not a universal phenomenon, an increasing number of parties have widened the franchise in leadership elections in recent decades; replacing selection by an exclusive group of party elites (usually a parliamentary caucus) with either a delegate convention or closed party primary (Kenig, 2009b; Pilet and Cross, 2014; Cross and Blais, 2012; LeDuc, 2001). Grassroots members are, therefore, being granted (at least in a formal sense) greater direct decision-making authority regards leadership choice. With particular relevance to Northern Ireland, this ‘participatory revolution’ (Punnett, 1993: 272) has taken hold in the British and Irish party systems, where the majority of parties have made moves in recent decades to provide members a role in leadership election (Seyd, 1999; Bale and Webb, 2014; Farrell, 1994; Denham, 2012; Cross and Blais, 2012; Kenig, 2009). By accounting for instances of organisational change this study reveals and assesses the extent to which Northern Ireland’s parties align with such a trend.

The paper is divided into four sections. Firstly, the analytical framework is briefly outlined. Attention then turns to answering the important question of ‘who is the party leader?’ in the Northern Irish case. Following this, a detailed analysis of each of the main parties’ leadership selection procedures is provided, documenting any instances of organisational reform. A concluding section then summarises key findings, focusing on those features of the parties’ processes which are most noteworthy from a comparative perspective and the extent of ‘democratisation’ which has occurred in Northern Ireland.

## **1. Analytical framework**

In respect of intra-party elections, British and Irish law treats political parties as private organisations. As a result, there are no significant legal regulations concerning leadership selection in Northern Ireland with parties free to adopt any method they deem suited to the task. Given such potential idiosyncrasy this study utilises the analytical framework developed by Kenig (2009a) and adopted in other comparative studies of leadership selection (Cross and Blais, 2012; Pilet and Cross, 2014) to make sense of the parties’ selection methods. We analyse three key features when classifying Northern Ireland’s parties’ leadership selection methods: the selectorate; candidacy requirements; and deselection mechanism. Figure 1. provides a summary of the range of options available to parties for each of these three categories. As indicated, the options can be scaled according to an inclusivity continuum. For example, a selectorate composed of party members is a more inclusive body than one consisting of parliamentarians. Likewise, a process which allows every citizen to seek selection as leader is a more inclusive form of candidacy than that which is restricted to party members. In terms of deselection, a party which provides for a ‘no-confidence vote’ boasts a more inclusive process than a party which does not specify any formal mechanism for removing an incumbent.


	Selectorate	Candidacy	Deselection Mechanism
<b>Inclusive</b> 	Voters	Every citizen, no additional requirements	No-Confidence Vote
	Party members	Every citizen, with additional requirements	Leadership Review
	Delegates to a party convention	Party members, no additional requirements	Direct challenge at the end of a (short) fixed term
	Parliamentary party group	Party members, with additional requirements	
	Party council	Parliamentarians, no additional requirements	Direct challenge at the end of a (long) fixed term
	Single leader	Parliamentarians, with additional requirements	No formal mechanism for de-selecting a leader
<b>Exclusive</b>			

Figure 1 Party leader selection methods: a three dimensional classification

## 2. Who is the party leader?

Unlike in some cases (Pilet and Cross, 2014: 224-226), leaders are easily identified in Northern Ireland. With the exception of Sinn Féin, the main parties subscribe to the typical Westminster model, concentrating leadership authority into the hands of one person, accounting for a ‘party leader’ in their formal rules and granting them substantial executive powers.<sup>2</sup> Similar to the main British and Irish parties, the DUP, UUP, SDLP and Alliance provide for a single leader of the party both within and outside of parliament. Formally several positions of leadership may be maintained (e.g. a party Chairman or President) but these are not considered direct (or powerful) extra-parliamentary rivals to the party leader. Consociational democracy of course brings its own complexity to the common link between party leadership and premiership, with power shared among several parties. However, most party leaders, if eligible, have assumed the highest executive role afforded to them in

<sup>2</sup> DUP (2013) *The Constitution and Rules of the Democratic Unionist Party*; UUP (2007) *The Constitution, Rules and Standing Orders of the Ulster Unionist Party*; SDLP (2012) *Social Democratic and Labour Party Constitution*; APNI (2013) *Alliance Party of Northern Ireland Constitution and Rules*

Northern Ireland. Past exceptions to this rule have been the SDLP with John Hume (1998-2001) and Sinn Féin with Gerry Adams (2007-10).

The one exception to the generally unambiguous nature of party leadership in Northern Ireland is Sinn Féin. The ‘President’ of Sinn Féin has no formal executive powers within the party and is a co-equal member of a national leadership team (see below). As highlighted, Sinn Féin has also severed the common link between party leadership and premiership. There are several plausible explanations for this. A common feature of parties associated with socialist or revolutionary movements is a subscription to an ethos of ‘collective leadership’ and a reluctance to grant their parliamentary party a privileged position (Aaarts *et al.* 2011: 113). To ensure unity of purpose Sinn Féin delegates responsibility to a phalanx of prominent ‘leaders’ within the republican movement, thereby avoiding accusations of oligarchy. The exceptional nature of ‘party leadership’ in Sinn Féin is also likely explained by the fact that, as a self-proclaimed all-Ireland entity, it represents a rare case of a political party operating in two separate jurisdictions: the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In the pursuit of electoral representation in both states Sinn Féin has adopted a twin-track (and amorphous) approach to party leadership, with Gerry Adams acting as the party’s chief figurehead in Dáil Éireann and Martin McGuinness performing a prominent leadership role in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, while formally speaking we may not be able to identify a leader of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams is widely regarded as the undisputed leader of the party.

### **3.1. Democratic Unionist Party**

Leadership selection in the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is the preserve of its parliamentary party group, which includes those members of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, European Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>4</sup> The choice of the parliamentary party is subject to ratification by a Central Executive Committee (CEC); however, this second stage of the process can be (dis)regarded as a formal ‘rubber-stamping’.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of its selectorate the DUP would, therefore, be positioned at the more exclusive or closed end of our inclusivity continuum. The power of selection rests in the hands of a small number of elected representatives or the ‘party in public office’ (Katz and Mair, 2002) (see Figure 1.1). Prior to a rule change in 2013 this grouping was smaller still, with only Assembly members afforded selection rights. The broadening of the selectorate to include MEPs and MPs, however, represents a formal acknowledgement of previous practice. Accounts from the sole DUP leadership change in 2008 (with Peter Robinson replacing Ian Paisley) suggest considerable informal involvement of the party’s MPs in the process (Gordon, 2009). DUP interviewees also explained how the party’s MPs played a key role in the decision-making process in 2008, offering ‘advice, guidance and support’ to the party’s

---

<sup>3</sup> Adams was elected as a TD in 2011.

<sup>4</sup> DUP (2013) *The Constitution and Rules of the Democratic Unionist Party*

<sup>5</sup> At present, the CEC is comprised of delegates elected from constituency associations, university associations, and the Young Democratic Unionist Council; the party leader and deputy party leader; and those members who are an MP, MLA, MP or Peer (DUP, 2013). The voting method used by the DUP’s selectorate is not stipulated in party statutes.

MLA team.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, the change in 2013 does not represent a significant departure from the principle of selection by the parliamentary party group (PPG), which the party has been wedded to since its formation in 1971.<sup>7</sup> That the use of this exclusive selectorate has remained steadfast over the party's lifetime indicates that the DUP has been impervious to the trend of democratisation affecting leadership selection procedures in many Western party systems, including those in Britain and Ireland. The exclusive nature of selection in the DUP is also in keeping with widely-held perceptions of the party's internal structure and general organisational culture, which suggest a centralised and top-down order (see Tonge *et al.* 2014).

Foremost among the rationales offered by those in the DUP for the party's choice of leadership selectorate was that the party's elected representatives are the most qualified members to assess the credentials of leadership contenders. With any future candidate most likely to emerge from the party's Assembly group, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are especially well placed, 'to make the judgment call'.<sup>8</sup> As another DUP official explained: 'It is the MLAs that have to work with the leader, day in, day out. They see the qualities and leadership potential more clearly than the ordinary party members'.<sup>9</sup> This notion of parliamentarians being 'best suited to judge the relative merits of would-be-leaders' is reasoning provided in other cases where those in 'the party room' are solely responsible for selection (Cross and Blais, 2012: 169; Gauja, 2014: 196).

In terms of deselection, the DUP leader is elected annually before 30<sup>th</sup> April each year.<sup>10</sup> Formally speaking then, a leader is only in post for a short fixed term, with (re)selection a regular occurrence.<sup>11</sup> While a leader may face annual selection, candidacy requirements in the DUP for the position are of an exclusive nature. Although ordinary party members are eligible to stand for selection the width of this pool of aspirants is drastically reduced by the need to secure endorsement from two members of the PPG.<sup>12</sup> The 'gatekeeping' role performed by the parliamentary party in terms of leadership selection is, therefore, almost total. The initiative for a contest rests firmly with the party's parliamentarians and any challenge is likely to emerge from this body or at the very least enjoy its support. Notably, the candidacy requirements and deselection mechanism adopted by the DUP have remained unchanged over the course of the party's history.

On the prospect of the party adopting a more inclusive selectorate – one involving the party grassroots to a greater extent – the majority of those interviewed in the DUP expressed their reluctance (if not opposition) to change any aspect of what they regard as an organisational structure which has contributed to sustained electoral growth in recent decades. This view was perhaps best expressed by one senior party official: 'I am much more

---

<sup>6</sup> DUP 8 (2013, May) Interview with the author; DUP 2 (2013, April) Interview with the author; DUP 5 (2013, April) Interview with the author

<sup>7</sup> DUP (1982) *The Constitution and Rules of the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party*; (1996) *The Constitution and Rules of the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party*; (2009) *The Constitution and Rules of the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party*

<sup>8</sup> DUP 6 (2013, May) Interview with the author

<sup>9</sup> DUP 3 (2013, April) Interview with the author

<sup>10</sup> DUP (2013) *The Constitution and Rules of the Democratic Unionist Party*

<sup>11</sup> The DUP does not formally stipulate how an exceptional meeting of the parliamentary party group can be called outside of this annual window.

<sup>12</sup> While not formally outlined in the party rules this requirement was used in the leadership change of 2008 (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2008).

concerned with what *works* as opposed to the democratic legitimacy of all of it'.<sup>13</sup> Electoral success is also offered as an ameliorating factor for the membership in terms of the exclusive nature of the leadership process: 'If the strategy is electorally successful then I suspect whatever minor gripes people have are very small in comparison with the success'.<sup>14</sup> In adopting the model of organisation that it does, the DUP is asking to be judged not on the basis of the process but by the outcomes that it achieves. To borrow a phrase from Caul-Kittilson and Scarrow (2003: 66) the DUP's 'test of organizational quality' is electoral success. Such sentiment concurs with other studies of the DUP which highlight its 'electoral-professional' (Panebianco, 1988) credentials (Gormley-Heenan and MacGinty, 2008) and supports other more general findings that posit electoral underperformance as one of the main contributing factors towards the democratisation of leadership selection methods (Cross and Blais, 2012: ch. 3; Pilet and Cross, 2014: 229). Indeed, cold water was consistently poured on the prospect of future reform by most of those interviewed in the DUP and there is seemingly little in the way of an internal lobby (either at elite or grassroots level) for reform.<sup>15</sup> As with other instances of party organisational reform, leadership democratisation stems from a combination of exogenous and endogenous factors (Harmel, 2002). Put simply, without sufficient external pressure, such as an electoral setback, party elites will typically resist change and those who advocate change will lack compelling evidence to support their case. Equally, however, an internal lobby for reform has to exist if external pressures are to be brought to bear on the party organisation. Neither appears to exist to any significant extent in the DUP.<sup>16</sup>

### ***3.2. Ulster Unionist Party***

The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) is elected by the party membership – using the single transferable vote (STV) – at an annual convention.<sup>17</sup> Those entitled to vote must be fully paid-up members. While any member of the UUP may seek selection as party leader, a candidate must secure the support of a minimum of 35 members from at least nine constituency associations. This latter requirement, with candidates requiring support from half of the UUP's existing associations, protects incumbents from cases of arbitrary and spontaneous challenge – a scenario which has manifested itself on several occasions in the past. The UUP does not set a tenure limit for its leadership; however, the provision for an annual contest does constitute a short fixed term. The leader of the UUP could, therefore, face regular challenge to their position if a member satisfies the candidacy requirements.

The UUP's leadership selection procedures have undergone significant transformation over the course of its history, with selection moving from a decision taken by a parliamentary

---

<sup>13</sup> DUP 7 (2013, April) Interview with the author (emphasis in original)

<sup>14</sup> DUP 7 (2013, April) Interview with the author

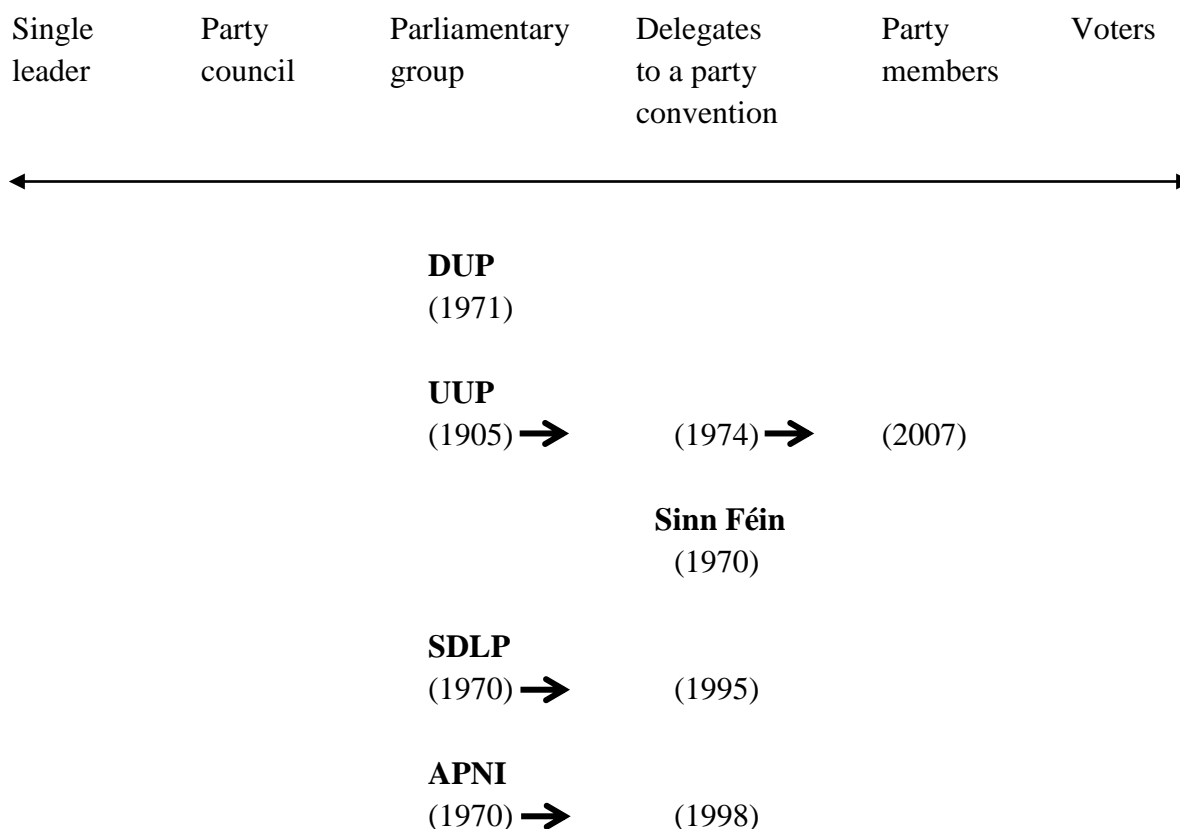
<sup>15</sup> DUP 9 (2014, May) Interview with the author; DUP 4 (2013, May) Interview with the author; DUP 1 (2013, May) Interview with the author

<sup>16</sup> If it so wishes, the party grassroots can initiate constitutional reform. The power to amend the DUP's constitution rests with the party's CEC which has majority representation for the extra-parliamentary party.

<sup>17</sup> UUP (2007) *The Constitution, Rules and Standing Orders of the Ulster Unionist Party*



party grouping to the current ‘One Member One Vote’ (OMOV) franchise. Indeed, the UUP is arguably one of the clearest examples available to party scholars of the contemporary trend of leadership selection ‘democratisation’ occurring in Western democracies. Between 1905 and 1974, leadership selection (and deselection) in the UUP was controlled by the party’s parliamentary grouping, essentially taking the form of elite peer-review (notwithstanding instances of tokenistic ‘ratification’ by other party agencies). Each of the nine leadership changes during this period saw a candidate selected by a small group of parliamentarians (Harbinson, 1973; Walker, 2004). From the initial leadership of Edward J. Saunderson (1905-06) to that of Terence O’Neill (1963-69), a single suitable candidate would be identified by the parliamentary caucus and invited to lead the party. The UUP leader, therefore, ‘emerged’ from a group of party notables in much the same way as occurred with the British Conservative Party prior to 1965 (Young, 1989: 91; Denham, 2009). The informal nature of leadership selection in this period also extended to candidacy requirements, with no specific provisos outlined in any official statute. There was also a tangible link between the confidence of the UUP’s PPG and the security of the leader’s position (Harbinson, 1973; Walker, 2004). In summary, leadership selection in the UUP during the period 1905-74 was predicated upon elite control.



*Figure 2* Inclusiveness of the leadership selectorate in Northern Ireland (1905-2014)

*Source:* adapted from Pilet and Cross (2014)

*Note:* Arrows indicate direction of change and years indicate date of adoption of new selectorate

Following the suspension of devolution in Northern Ireland in 1972, and with no parliamentary party grouping to speak of, the UUP moved to adopt a procedure in 1974 where the party leader would be elected using an eliminative-vote system at the Annual General Meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC), a delegate body.<sup>18</sup> While ‘an unwieldy and complex organisation representative of all classes and all shades of Unionist opinion’ (Harbinson, 1973: 59), the largest number of UUC delegates represented the local constituency associations. The introduction of a delegate selectorate, therefore, constituted a democratisation of leadership selection in the UUP, with the membership granted greater influence and a more decisive say in the selection of the party leader. However, the involvement of other powerful affiliated bodies in the process meant that the system used by the UUP was ‘impure’ (Kenig, 2009a), diminishing the influence of those delegates representing the membership.<sup>19</sup> Of these bodies the Orange Order was afforded the greatest number of delegates and was a body with substantial informal influence that leadership candidates actively courted (Jess, 2007).

With the election of Reg Empey as leader in 2005 the UUP launched a ‘root and branch’ review of its internal organisation. This would eventually lead to the introduction of a direct member vote for leadership selection in 2007. The UUP’s adoption of ‘OMOV’, a wholly leadership-led initiative, has seen it go further than any other party in Northern Ireland in terms of democratising its selectorate.<sup>20</sup> The UUP’s adoption of OMOV can be explained in several ways. Firstly, this reform should be situated within the context of a wider program of organisational reform enacted by the party in 2007. This constitutional review had three key related aims: shifting authority to the central party leadership from traditionally powerful and autonomous local constituency associations; modernising or ‘professionalising’ the party’s structures; and fostering a new culture of internal discipline and cohesion.<sup>21</sup> As a result, several features of the UUP’s organisation were centralised, including the administration of party finances and membership registration.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the most notable area of centralisation, however, occurred in respect of candidate selection – where a new central shortlisting process was introduced and the party leadership was afforded representation on a final selectorate. Crucially, above all other explanations, such centralisation informed the party’s adoption of party primaries for leadership selection. Democratising leadership selection was essentially a *quid pro quo* for diluting the autonomy of local constituency associations in several areas, not least that of candidate selection. Providing members with a greater say in the choice of leader effectively sweetened the pill of curbing the autonomy jealously guarded by local constituency associations. As one senior UUP official explained:

---

<sup>18</sup> Although UUP representation continued in Westminster, those MPs were not considered a powerful enough body to maintain control of leadership selection. The real ‘kingmakers’ under the previous PPG procedure were those who had held regional office in Northern Ireland, the MPs and Senators in Stormont.

<sup>19</sup> These included the Orange Order, which was granted representation on the UUC up until 2004 when it chose to sever its formal link with the UUP; the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council; the Ulster Young Unionist Council; the Ulster Unionist Councillor’s Association; and the Ulster Unionist Labour Association.

<sup>20</sup> To place the party in a slightly wider context, the only other main British political parties to afford their party members the sole say in leadership contests are the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru; while in Ireland, OMOV is adopted only in the case of the Greens and Fianna Fáil.

<sup>21</sup> UUP 6 (2013, April) Interview with the author; UUP 1 (2013, April) Interview with the author; UUP 7 (2013, April) Interview with the author

<sup>22</sup> UUP 3 (2013, March) Interview with the author; UUP 2 (2013, March) Interview with the author

[B]ecause we were accruing more power to the centre we felt it only right and proper that, in response for members agreeing to that, they should be getting something back in return. And, at the end of the day, the appointment of a leader is about as important a decision as you can get.<sup>23</sup>

A similar ‘trade-off’ dynamic has been identified in other cases of leadership (and candidate) selection reform, not least the British Conservative Party, with which the UUP has considerable affinity (Alderman, 1999: 273; Hazan and Rahat, 2010). It is, therefore, unlikely that the UUP would have widened its leadership franchise in 2007 if it were not engaged in a wider process of organisational reform.

<<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>>

Seen in context of a broader bid to centralise power and authority in the party, the adoption of OMOV has also served to bolster and protect the position of the UUP leader. Those in the party, for instance, referred to the importance of an annual mandate from the party membership for the leader’s standing and legitimacy within the party.<sup>24</sup> A full membership vote is often an important point of reference for a party leader and a useful tool with which to dispel potential challengers and silence critics (see Quinn, 2005: 807; Cross and Blais, 2012: 179; Katz and Mair, 2002). Current UUP leader, Mike Nesbitt, has, for instance, pointed to the 81% share of the vote he achieved in 2011 as a clear endorsement of his leadership by the party rank-and-file. In terms of the UUP leader’s job security, the concurrent changes to the candidacy requirements are also noteworthy. As outlined, the threshold to be met by a challenger – in terms of signatures and spread of support from the extra-parliamentary party – was substantially increased in 2007, making it more difficult to contest the leadership.

The move to OMOV was also presented by several of those in the UUP as a means through which the undue influence of certain powerful local elites (or activists) could be negated in the process. The process of appointing delegates for leadership conventions in the past was often dominated by senior local officials, including the area’s elected representatives.<sup>25</sup> This particular rationale has been identified in other similar cases of parties with traditionally autonomous associations and powerful affiliated bodies adopting OMOV (Wauters, 2014). To borrow a term from one such case, the UUP’s move to OMOV elections could be viewed as ‘a function of the strategic calculus of the party elite’ to bolster their position by reducing the influence of powerful activists at the local level (Lisi, 2010: 145). In some respects, therefore, the UUP has moved from a federalised structure, more typical of the ‘franchise party’ model (Carty, 2004) and where local elites enjoyed substantial influence over proceedings, to one which is much more centralised and favourable to an incumbent leader.

---

<sup>23</sup> UUP 6 (2013, April) Interview with the author

<sup>24</sup> UUP 8 (2013, May) Interview with the author

<sup>25</sup> UUP 9 (2014, May) Interview with the author; UUP 4 (2013, March) Interview with the author; UUP 6 (2013, April) Interview with the author

The adoption of OMOV for leadership selection also represented an attempt by the UUP to both incentivise its existing membership and attract newcomers to the fold. To quote one party report: ‘The core element of our new structure is the Party member’.<sup>26</sup> The party has suffered drastic membership losses in recent decades, shrinking from 50,000 in the 1970s to roughly 2,000 (McAllister and Nelson, 1979: 285; *Belfast Telegraph*, 2012).<sup>27</sup> Notably, the UUP does not set a minimum membership period for those comprising its electorate. As in other cases where a direct membership vote is used this could be viewed as a means to encourage membership recruitment during a leadership election campaign (see Carty and Blake, 1999). The introduction of OMOV as a selective incentive for membership recruitment (and organisational invigoration) within the UUP should, therefore, not be discounted.

On a final note, the UUP joins those parties in other cases which have introduced a more inclusive leadership electorate as a result of electoral defeat(s) (Pilet and Cross, 2014; Cross and Blais, 2012).<sup>28</sup> The losses suffered by the UUP in the 2005 Westminster elections and the 2007 Assembly elections were particularly painful for the party and triggered widespread introspective reform, including the measures pertaining to leadership selection. The changes to leadership selection, which were part of a larger package of organisational reform, could, therefore, be viewed as a direct response by the UUP to its electoral malaise since the late 1990s.

### 3.3. *Sinn Féin*

Sinn Féin has no stand-alone constitutional clause specifically governing the selection of a party leader *per se*. Rather, the party leader, known as the party President, is elected as part of a 19-strong executive at an annual delegate conference (Ard Fheis).<sup>29</sup> This represents long-standing practice by Sinn Féin. Indeed, analysis of the party’s rules from 1970 to the present day reveals that Sinn Féin’s selection procedure has remained remarkably consistent over time, with only minimal and inconsequential changes occurring.<sup>30</sup> The majority of delegates represent local party branches and selection is by secret ballot using STV.<sup>31</sup> Any party member can contest the Presidency so long as they receive endorsement from one internal party body. Given that this can include a local party branch (*cumman*) – the smallest organisational unit in Sinn Féin – the candidacy threshold could be regarded as relatively low and, therefore, inclusive. In terms of deselection, the provision of an annual election means that a leader can face a possible direct challenge to their position at the end of a short fixed

---

<sup>26</sup> UUP (2007) ‘Ulster Unionist Council Report and financial statements for the year ended 31 December 2007’

<sup>27</sup> Exact party membership figures are generally not disclosed by the main political parties in Northern Ireland.

<sup>28</sup> The most recent comparative study of leadership selection finds that two-thirds of the 31 parties which ‘democratized’ their electorate did so following electoral defeat (Pilet and Cross, 2014: 228-9).

<sup>29</sup> Sinn Féin (2013) *Constitution and Rules*

<sup>30</sup> Sinn Féin (1970) *Constitution and Rules*; (1975) *Constitution and Rules*; (1980) *Constitution and Rules*; (1986) *Constitution and Rules*; (1990) *Constitution and Rules*; (1999) *Constitution and Rules*; (2005) *Constitution and Rules*

<sup>31</sup> This conference consists of: the officers and members of the outgoing Executive; 2 delegates from each District and Regional Executive; 2 delegates from each local branch of 20 members or less; 3 delegates from each local branch of over 20 members; 2-8 delegates from the party’s youth wing; 2 delegates from a National Councillors’ Forum; 1 delegate each from a ‘Six-County’ and ‘26-County’ Parliamentary Group. Sinn Féin affords no delegate representation to any affiliated associations or external agencies.

term. Despite proposals brought forward by local party branches in 1981 and 1984 for a maximum three-year leadership term, there is no time limit placed on a leader's stay in office.<sup>32</sup> Opportunity also exists outside the annual window stipulated for a leadership challenge. An extraordinary conference can be summoned at any point; although the threshold for such an event is high, requiring support from either two-thirds of the party executive or one-third of all local branches of six months standing.

In some respects, Sinn Féin is remarkable in that it has not initiated any 'democratisation' of its leadership selection process. Of course, this is due in large part to the fact that, unlike most parties in Western parliamentary democracies, Sinn Féin has never seen the process governed by a grouping of elected representatives. As previously mentioned Sinn Féin has long rejected the notion of 'parliamentarianism' (or 'institutionalisation') and so does not afford its elected representatives a privileged position within the party structure. While a founding principle of Irish republicanism, the party's policy of abstentionism – a position formally abandoned for elections to Dáil Éireann in 1986 but maintained at Westminster – is also reflective of this general reluctance to see power concentrated in the hands of its parliamentary party at the expense of the wider organisation (Maillot, 2005: 90). The party has, therefore, always adopted one of the two most inclusive (and increasingly common) methods for leadership selection: the delegate assembly.<sup>33</sup>

Using leadership selection as a conduit for understanding the internal distribution of power within Sinn Féin is a difficult task. On one hand we are presented with a process which, on paper at least, is relatively inclusive and contains few barriers for challengers to overcome. The party President is not explicitly insulated from challenge and faces annual re-election. The means, therefore, almost certainly exist for leadership change. As one senior official stressed, 'there are no long-term guarantees built in; it is an annual process of renewal'.<sup>34</sup> Despite this, however, the party has experienced just one leadership change (itself uncontested) since 1970, with Gerry Adams retaining the position of President (without challenge) for the past 33 years. Indeed, with Adams' lengthy tenure in mind, some might regard any analysis of leadership selection (and deselection) in Sinn Féin as something of an irrelevance or misnomer. What we are able to suggest, however, is that the remarkable security of Adams' position is not on account of any exceptional and exclusionary structural incentives built into Sinn Féin's formal process for selecting its leader. Rather, those seeking to understand the nature of Adams' tenure – as argued by the vast majority of those interviewed in Sinn Féin – would be better served focusing on his status as virtual party founder and the sustained electoral success experienced during his time as leader. Sinn Féin's transformation from political pariah (and organisational weakling) to the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland and emerging electoral force in the Republic of Ireland is indelibly linked with Adams' leadership (Frampton, 2009). To quote one Sinn Féin interviewee: 'People outside of Sinn Féin don't get it. Republicans have a huge admiration for Gerry's leadership and the way that he has essentially built a political party from nothing'.

Another possible explanation for Adams' lengthy tenure is the style of leadership subscribed to by Sinn Féin. The party leader, as highlighted, is selected as part of a wider 'national leadership team' and is afforded no special executive powers. As a result, the term 'collective leadership' is often applied to the party, by both commentators and Sinn Féin

---

<sup>32</sup> Sinn Féin (1981) *Sinn Féin Ard Fheis Clár*; (1984) *Sinn Féin Ard Fheis Clár*

<sup>33</sup> A similar dynamic concerning leadership selection has been identified in the Hungarian case, where the starting point for most of the political parties – many of which are modelled on a 'socialist' basis – was not a closed party council or PPG but a delegate convention (Ilonszki and Varnagy, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Sinn Féin 1 (2013, April) Interview with the author

members alike (see Gormley-Heenan, 2007: 51-2; Maillot, 2005). Those interviewed from Sinn Féin made repeated reference to this division of leadership labour. On this point, Sinn Féin adopts a feature found in parties of similar origins and purpose, namely west European socialist and communist parties. Several parties which have emerged from revolutionary movements, such as the African National Congress, also subscribe to a similar mode of organisation. In addition to this organisational imperative, Adams has demonstrated an acute awareness of the need to delegate responsibility to a large and diverse cadre of ‘leaders’ from the commencement of his presidency, thus providing a ready defence against accusations of oligarchy while also ensuring influence over all factions of the party (Frampton, 2009; English, 2003). The most powerful of these figures, particularly with respect to the more militant circles within the republican movement, has been Martin McGuinness, a close ally of Adams. Gormley-Heenan’s (2007: 53) study of political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process observed how this spread of decision-making served to safeguard Adams’ position: ‘More than anything, it seems that collective leadership is protective in nature, since it is difficult to pinpoint and isolate any individual for criticism’ (see Bean, 2007 for a similar interpretation). It is distinctly possible that ‘collective leadership’ serves a similar purpose for Adams (and the party) today as it did during the high-stakes negotiations of the 1990s.

### ***3.4. Social Democratic and Labour Party***

The leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is elected at an annual delegate conference.<sup>35</sup> The majority of delegates on this selecting body represent local branches and the party enjoys no formal links with any auxiliary associations.<sup>36</sup> Selection is by secret ballot using STV. Those eligible to contest the leadership must be members of the SDLP ‘Assembly or Parliamentary Group’ and must be nominated by at least five branches of the party. The candidacy requirements adopted by the SDLP for leadership selection are, therefore, highly exclusive. In terms of deselection, the party does not set a maximum tenure limit for leadership and the provision of an annual election means that an incumbent is elected on a short fixed term. An extraordinary conference may be held if the SDLP Executive Committee so decides or if more than ten local branches request one be convened.

The SDLP’s leadership selectorate has become more inclusive over time. The delegate franchise was introduced in 1995 following 25 years of selection by the SDLP parliamentary party.<sup>37</sup> In the two leadership changes which occurred in the period 1971-95 the influence of the parliamentary party in the process can be clearly observed (see Farren, 2010; Murray, 1998). The first SDLP leader, Gerry Fitt, was elected unanimously by a small cabal, namely his fellow party co-founders (all of whom possessed an electoral mandate) (Farren, 2010: 31). Following Fitt’s departure from the party in 1979, John Hume was elected leader by a small cohort of parliamentarians (Farren, 2010: 155). Leadership selection in the SDLP was, therefore, exclusive in nature; no role was afforded to the party membership and those eligible for the position would have had to emerge from the party in public office.

---

<sup>35</sup> SDLP (2012)

<sup>36</sup> This conference consists of: delegates appointed by each branch on a scale according to their membership (2 delegates for a branch of 10-20 members and an additional delegate for every 10 members thereafter); 20 members of the outgoing Executive committee; the Party President; all SDLP elected representatives; two delegates each from the party’s youth wing, women’s group and other ‘support groups’.

<sup>37</sup> SDLP (1971) *Social Democratic and Labour Party Constitution*; (1995) *Social Democratic and Labour Party Constitution*

Another notable feature of the SDLP's early leadership selection practice was that rules and procedures governing the process were non-existent and seemingly not considered a priority. Indeed from 1971 to 1985 there was no formal statutory reference made to the position of 'party leader' within the SDLP. Conference agenda from the 1970s and 1980s reveal sustained agitation by party members to introduce a more transparent and inclusive form of selection. In 1977 a motion calling for the party leadership to be chosen according to OMOV was defeated.<sup>38</sup> Between Hume's election as leader in 1979 and 1984 a series of motions also called for a widening of the franchise. A number of options were proposed, including an Electoral College system<sup>39</sup>; election by a delegate conference every four years<sup>40</sup>; election by members of a 'Constituency Representatives Group'<sup>41</sup>; and election at an annual delegate conference.<sup>42</sup> There was, therefore, a clear drive from sections of the SDLP grassroots to be given a say in the selection of the party leader – albeit John Hume was a popular incumbent. This drive was met, however, by a central party leadership determined to ensure that selection remained under the control of the parliamentary party.<sup>43</sup> Eventually, in 1985 the SDLP endorsed a clause (proposed by the Executive Committee) outlining a process for the election of a party leader.<sup>44</sup> Incidentally, this was the first formal reference to the position of party leader in the SDLP's history, nearly 15 years after its formation. While this new procedure brought greater transparency to the process it did not result in a more inclusive mode of selection as the clause simply formalised the existing practice of selection by the parliamentary party. The chief selectorate was a newly-formed 'Constituency Representatives Group' (CRG), comprising the party's elected representatives at both Westminster or in a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>45</sup> In a nod towards some degree of 'democratisation' and involvement of the wider party, the PPG's selection was to be ratified by delegates at the subsequent Annual Conference. The new statute also confirmed that only members of the CRG were eligible for nomination, which ensured that the pool of potential leadership challengers was a shallow one. The likelihood of a 'stalking horse' candidate emerging under such a system was, therefore, greatly reduced. Furthermore, the regularity of selection was also left open-ended with no determined date. In effect, the position of party leader in the SDLP was a highly secure one.

Although never used in practice, the procedures agreed in 1985 would remain unchanged until 1995, meaning that for 25 years leadership selection in the SDLP was a highly exclusive process and the sole preserve of its parliamentary party. Candidacy was restricted to a small group of elected representatives who in turn comprised the only meaningful selectorate. Studies of the SDLP's organisation in this period have identified a more general top-down order in the party. McAllister's (1977: 45) analysis of the party in its formative years highlighted the 'oligarchic control' exercised by the party's elected representatives over internal affairs. Mitchell (1991) also deduced that the SDLP

---

<sup>38</sup> SDLP (1977) *SDLP, 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*

<sup>39</sup> SDLP (1980) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*; (1983) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*; (1984) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*; (1985) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*

<sup>40</sup> SDLP (1981) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*

<sup>41</sup> SDLP (1983) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*

<sup>42</sup> SDLP (1984) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*

<sup>43</sup> SDLP (1983) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*

<sup>44</sup> SDLP (1985) *SDLP, Annual Conference: Agenda and Other Reports*

<sup>45</sup> SDLP (1985) *Social Democratic and Labour Party Constitution*

parliamentary party exercised significant power vis-à-vis the extra-parliamentary party. Neither of these studies explicitly addressed the issue of leadership selection. However, our analysis of this process adds support to their general thesis: power and authority was centralised, with the most important actors being the party leader and senior elected representatives.

Following a special conference convened in 1995 to consider several of the party's organisational features the SDLP introduced the form of selection it uses today: an annual delegate conference.<sup>46</sup> This change, proposed by the party centre and endorsed by the wider membership, was primarily motivated by recent moves by parties in other cases, not least Britain and Ireland, to adopt more inclusive modes of selection for leadership.<sup>47</sup> As one SDLP respondent, closely involved in the implementation of this reform, explained, 'we were following the herd'.<sup>48</sup> Another senior party official remarked how the adoption of a more inclusive selectorate seemed 'the natural thing to do at the time'.<sup>49</sup> Given the popularity of the incumbent John Hume and the absence of serious electoral competition in Northern Ireland at the time this seems a valid (if arbitrary) explanation. Another system-level factor was also identified by those in the SDLP, as 'the more settled times' of the mid-1990s – with an IRA ceasefire and the prospect of peace in Northern Ireland – facilitated a period of (overdue) reflection on the party's organisational structures.<sup>50</sup> It would be fair to say that the procedures used for leadership selection were not a priority for the party throughout much of its early history.

The move to adopt a delegate system represented a clear extension of the leadership selection franchise, placing the SDLP alongside several other Western parties which have adopted more inclusive procedures in the past two decades. To view 1995 as a watershed moment in terms of a 'democratisation' of leadership selection or the emancipation of the SDLP's extra-parliamentary party is, however, ill-advised. Crucially, the changes to the process did not include a widening of the pool of potential leadership candidates, with candidacy restricted to the party's representatives in Westminster or the Assembly. Regardless of the SDLP's adoption of an annual delegate conference for leadership selection it is still, therefore, the party's elected representatives which play the most important role in deselecting a leader.<sup>51</sup>

### ***3.5. Alliance Party of Northern Ireland***

The Alliance Party selects its leader at an annual delegate conference (see Table 4.1). The majority of delegates on this selectorate, known as 'The Council', represent local

---

<sup>46</sup> SDLP (1995) *Social Democratic and Labour Party Constitution*

<sup>47</sup> SDLP 7 (2013, March) Interview with author; SDLP 5 (2013, April) Interview with author; SDLP 2 (2013, March) Interview with the author

<sup>48</sup> SDLP 6 (2013, March) Interview with the author

<sup>49</sup> SDLP 3 (2013, March) Interview with the author

<sup>50</sup> SDLP 1 (2013, March) Interview with the author; SDLP 4 (2013, April) Interview with the author

<sup>51</sup> The SDLP parliamentary party was actively involved in the party's most recent leadership change. Margaret Ritchie resigned in the face of criticism from her parliamentary peers over the party's poor performance in the 2011 NI Assembly and local government elections.



constituency associations.<sup>52</sup> Those eligible to contest the leadership must be an Alliance MP, MLA or MEP and, with the exception of the current party leader, must have their candidacy endorsed by 12 members of the delegate conference. Selection is conducted by secret ballot using STV. In terms of deselection, Alliance does not set a maximum tenure limit for leadership. However, the provision for an annual election does see an incumbent elected for a short fixed term. The provision of an annual election – a feature not commonly found in other Western political parties (Cross and Blais, 2012) – was presented by those within Alliance as an important means of protecting against ‘an autocratic leadership’:

Once somebody becomes leader nobody needs to lead a charge against them or there doesn't have to be some ‘Night of the Long Knives’ caper to get rid of them. They are very easily removed if people want to do that.<sup>53</sup>

A special meeting to deselect a leader can also be held upon request by 25 members of ‘The Council’ or if the Executive Committee so decides.

The selectorate used by Alliance has become more inclusive over time.<sup>54</sup> The current delegate franchise was introduced in 1998 following 28 years of selection by the party's elected representatives. The four leaders of Alliance in the period 1970-98 owed their positions to a determination from the party's elected representatives. Following its establishment in 1970 the Alliance Party initially rejected the notion of having a ‘Party Leader’ *per se*, opting for a ‘collective leadership’ approach.<sup>55</sup> As a result the party opted for a joint leadership of Phelim O’Neill and Bob Cooper in its first two years and possessed no formal rules on selection. Once the party had moved to a more secure organisational footing, Oliver Napier emerged as its sole leader in 1972.<sup>56</sup> Selection by the party's elected representatives was formally enshrined in 1976, with the party leader identified as ‘the leader of the Assembly Party’ and would remain party practice until 1998, with both John Cushnahan (1984-87) and John Alderdice (1987-98) elected by their peers.<sup>57</sup> Some evidence of agitation from the rank-and-file membership for a more inclusive selectorate can be identified in this period. In 1994 a motion calling for a delegate system in place of selection by the party's elected representatives was defeated at conference.<sup>58</sup> Four years later this reform would come to pass, with the party adopting its current selectorate. Such reform was introduced following the election of Séan Neeson as leader in 1998. Neeson replaced John Alderdice who was forced to resign his leadership following his decision to sit as Speaker in the new Northern Ireland Assembly, a move which meant that he no longer satisfied the candidacy requirements for leadership.<sup>59</sup> In light of past calls for reform, the election of Neeson by a small grouping of parliamentary representatives was deemed too exclusive a

---

<sup>52</sup> This conference consists of: 10 Party Officers; 12 members of the Executive Committee; all Alliance Party elected representatives; up to 5 Vice-Presidents; 10 delegates from the party youth wing; and 10 delegates per Constituency Association (APNI, 2013a: Clause 5).

<sup>53</sup> APNI 3 (2013, May) Interview with the author

<sup>54</sup> APNI (1971) *Alliance Party of Northern Ireland Constitution and Rules*; (1994) *Alliance Party of Northern Ireland Constitution and Rules*; (1999) *Alliance Party of Northern Ireland Constitution and Rules*

<sup>55</sup> APNI (1970) ‘Alliance Moves into Top Gear: First Party Council to elect leadership’ *Alliance Bulletin*, 20 October

<sup>56</sup> APNI 2 (2013, April) Interview with the author

<sup>57</sup> APNI (1976) ‘Extract of Constitutional Amendments passed at AGM of Council’

<sup>58</sup> APNI (1994) ‘Proposed revisions to: The Alliance Party of NI Constitution and Rules’

<sup>59</sup> The party leader was required to be a member of the party's Assembly group.

process and necessitated a constitutional amendment.<sup>60</sup> Alliance's direction of travel in terms of leadership selection, therefore, bears comparison with that undertaken by the SDLP and, to a lesser extent, the UUP. It represents yet another example from the Northern Irish case of a party replacing selection by a parliamentary caucus with a more inclusive selectorate.

As with the SDLP, Alliance's adoption of a more inclusive selectorate for leadership contests should be viewed alongside its retention of exclusive candidacy requirements. Prior to 2010 the party restricted candidacy to those in its Assembly grouping and, as demonstrated in the case of John Alderdice, this formal rule held in practice. However, with the election of deputy leader, Naomi Long, to Westminster in 2010 – 'an eventuality we hadn't planned for'<sup>61</sup> – the party widened this grouping to include both MPs and MEPs to ensure that she retained her leadership role.<sup>62</sup> Such expedience did not of course alter the principle of exclusive candidacy. The exclusive nature of the party's candidacy requirements is almost certainly a reflection of a wider norm in parliamentary democracies that the party leader will emerge from those residing in the party room (Cross and Blais, 2012: 78-79). Alliance (along with the SDLP) has adopted a feature of parties found elsewhere, not least Britain and Ireland.<sup>63</sup> As with the SDLP and DUP we can surmise that the restriction of candidacy to the parliamentary party (and MLAs more specifically) has certain implications for the internal balance of power within Alliance. This is the site from which a challenge to the leadership will develop and it is this body which can exert the greatest tangible influence on the act of removing a leader. For example, the resignation of Neeson in 2001 followed internal criticism (including the resignation of his deputy, Seamus Close) over the party's poor electoral showings in the 1999 European and 2001 Westminster and local government elections; such criticism would most likely have manifested itself in a direct challenge from one of his peers in the Assembly group.<sup>64</sup> The parliamentary party is, therefore, the most important grouping in the removal of an Alliance leader.

#### 4. Summary

This study has provided an original empirical analysis of leadership selection in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it sheds light on an important element of intra-party democracy and goes some way to addressing the clear gap in existing research on party organisation in the region. From a comparative perspective it also represents a rare study of leadership selection methods in a consociational democracy. The twin objectives of this study were to lay bare the 'nuts and bolts' of how Northern Ireland's main parties select their leaders and grasp the extent to which such methods have changed – or more specifically been 'democratised' – over time. To this end, a number of key findings present themselves.

Firstly, we find a considerable degree of heterogeneity in terms of the selectorate adopted by Northern Ireland's main parties. Two parties occupy the extreme ends of our inclusivity continuum, with the DUP concentrating decision-making authority in the hands of its parliamentary party and the UUP enfranchising its entire membership. The three

---

<sup>60</sup> APNI 1 (2013, April) Interview with the author

<sup>61</sup> APNI 5 (2013, May) Interview with the author

<sup>62</sup> APNI (2010) *Alliance Party of Northern Ireland Constitution and Rules*

<sup>63</sup> In the Irish case both Fine Gael and the Labour Party restrict candidacy to members of Dáil Éireann. In Britain both Labour and the Liberal Democrats adopt formal rules restricting candidacy to members of parliament.

<sup>64</sup> APNI 6 (2013, March) Interview with the author; APNI 4 (2013, June) Interview with the author

remaining parties – Sinn Féin, Alliance and the SDLP – leave selection to a delegate convention (albeit with varying degrees of representation afforded to regional, local and affiliated bodies). For comparative scholars, the most exceptional process would be that adopted by the DUP. The party is conspicuous in its retention of a selectorate which is now widely regarded as ‘undemocratic’ in the contemporary age (see Cross, 2013). Research across a wide range of party systems shows that a shrinking minority of parties formally restrict the franchise to the small elite grouping of the parliamentary party (Pilet and Cross, 2014: 227; Cross and Blais, 2012). The party also constitutes something of an anomaly when we consider the ‘participatory revolution’ which has affected virtually all of the main parties in both Britain and Ireland. Furthermore, the other main parties in Northern Ireland adopt (or have recently adopted) more inclusive methods of selection (see below). How long the party can rail against this pervasive trend remains to be seen. As one DUP respondent pondered: ‘the more the party modernizes is that going to be acceptable to the vast majority of the membership over the next five, ten years?’<sup>65</sup> Perhaps tellingly, comparative research finds that parties which outlast a founding (typically omnipotent) leader, such as the DUP, are eventually likely to ‘democratise’ and formalise participation of a larger selectorate (Cross, 2013: 103). Time, it seems, could eventually tell when it comes to the DUP’s approach to leadership selection.

The degree of democratisation which has occurred in Northern Ireland in respect of leadership selection is quite considerable. The trend towards more inclusive selectorates that has taken hold in many other parliamentary democracies has clearly materialised in the region. With the exception of Sinn Féin, the initial starting point for parties was selection by the parliamentary party. Three of the five parties (SDLP, Alliance, and UUP) have, however, moved to adopt more inclusive selectorates over the course of their lifetime. Indeed, as argued, the UUP represents a quintessential example of a party evolving from an oligarchic method to one involving a full member vote. On this point, however, there has, been nothing in the way of ‘organisational contagion’ in Northern Ireland. The UUP’s decision to introduce ‘OMOV’ in 2007 has exerted negligible pressure on the other main parties to (further) ‘democratise’ their own procedures.

One remarkable finding of the study is that all five parties in Northern Ireland adopt a fixed term for their leadership. Long-standing practice sees each party leader subject to an annual process of selection (or ratification). On this point the region’s parties prove rather exceptional when compared with other cases. Cross and Blais’ (2012: 177-9) study of 22 parties in four parliamentary democracies found that, ‘in most parties neither voters nor leaders know how long the leadership mandate is’. A more recent comparative study also found that a one-year term is only adopted by 1.4% of the 71 parties surveyed (Pilet and Cross, 2014: 230). Leadership selection in Northern Ireland, therefore, possesses a feature not typically found in party systems elsewhere. Incidentally, the requirement that party leaders face annual re-election is a feature advocated by party scholars, as it is consistent with democratic norms at the system-level (Cross and Blais, 2012: 180).

Although Northern Irish party leaders may be subject to a process of annual endorsement, challengers to their position typically face high candidacy thresholds. Exclusive candidacy requirements are, with the exception of Sinn Féin, the norm in Northern Ireland. In some ways this could serve to counterbalance the requirement that party leaders face regular re-election. Three parties (DUP, UUP and Sinn Féin) set party membership as the sole

---

<sup>65</sup> DUP 2 (2013, May) Interview with the author

candidacy requirement. Interestingly, the remaining two parties, Alliance and the SDLP, restrict candidacy to those in the parliamentary party. Again, comparative research of leadership selection shows this latter stipulation to be fairly exceptional: five of the 71 parties surveyed in Pilet and Cross's study adopt such a rule (2014: 230). As highlighted, Alliance and the SDLP's moves to adopt more inclusive selectorates in the 1990s should be viewed alongside their retention of exclusive candidacy requirements. All five of the parties also set a minimum threshold for endorsement. With the UUP we find evidence of a party moving to adopt a higher threshold for endorsement (and therefore candidacy) when widening the franchise. On this point the DUP possesses a feature shared by a tiny minority of parties in other cases, with a candidate requiring endorsement from members of the parliamentary party (Pilet and Cross, 2014: 230). In contrast, Sinn Féin sets the lowest threshold, with endorsement from a single local branch sufficient. Sinn Féin aside, the exclusive candidacy and endorsement requirements set by Northern Ireland's main parties can (theoretically) be seen to bolster the security of their leaders' positions, as they either face a small pool of potential challengers or the obstacles a challenger must overcome are considerable.

## References

- Aarts, K., Blais, A. and Schmitt, H. (2011) 'Political Leaders and Democratic Elections' Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Alderman, K. (1999) 'Revision of Leadership Election Procedures in the Conservative Party', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **52**, 260-74.
- Bale, T. and Webb, P. (2014) 'The Selection of Party Leaders in the UK' In: Pilet, J-B. and Cross, W. (eds.) *The Selection of Political Party Leaders in Contemporary Parliamentary Democracies: A Comparative Study*, London, Routledge pp. 12-29.
- Belfast Telegraph* (2008, 14 April) 'Robinson replaces Paisley as DUP leader'.
- Belfast Telegraph* (2012, 31 March) 'Mike Nesbitt elected Ulster Unionist Party leader'.
- Carty, R.K. (2004) 'Parties as Franchise Systems: The Stratarchical Organizational Imperative', *Party Politics*, **10**, 5-24.
- Carty, R.K. and Blake, D.E. (1999) 'The Adoption of Membership Votes for Choosing Party Leaders: The Experience of Canadian Parties', *Party Politics*, **5**, 211.
- Caul-Kittilson, M. and Scarrow, S.E. (2003) 'Political Parties and the Rhetoric and Realities of Democratization' In: Cain, B.E., Dalton, R.J. and Scarrow, S.E. (eds.) *Democracy Transformed? Expanding Political Opportunities in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press pp. 59-80.
- Coakley, J. (2011) 'The Challenge of Consociation in Northern Ireland', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **64**, 473-493.
- Cross, W.P. (2013) 'Party Leadership Selection and Intra-Party Democracy' In: Cross, W.P. and Katz, R.S. (eds.) *The Challenges of Intra-Party Democracy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 100-15.
- Cross, W. and Blais, A. (2012) 'Politics at the Centre: The Selection and Removal of Party Leaders in Anglo Parliamentary Democracies', Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Cross, W. and Pilet, J-B. (2014) 'The selection of party leaders in contemporary parliamentary democracies' In, Pilet, J-B. and Cross, W. (eds.) *The Selection of*

- Political Party Leaders in Contemporary Parliamentary Democracies: A Comparative Study*, London, Routledge pp. 1-11.
- Dalton, R.J., Farrell, D. and McAllister, I. (2011) 'Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy', Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Denham, A. (2009) 'From Grey Suits to Grass Roots: Choosing Conservative Leaders', *British Politics*, **4**, 217-235.
- English, R. (2003) 'Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA', London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Evans, J. and Tonge, J. (2001) 'Northern Ireland's third tradition(s): The Alliance Party surveyed', *British Elections & Parties Review*, **11**, 104-18.
- Farrell, D. M. (1994) 'Ireland: Centralization, Professionalization and Competitive Pressures' In Katz, R.S. and Mair, P. (eds.) *How Parties Organize: Change and Adaptation in Party Organizations in Western Democracies*, London, Sage pp. 216-41.
- Farren, S. (2010) 'The SDLP: the Struggle for Agreement in Northern Ireland, 1970-2000', Dublin, Four Courts.
- Frampton, M. (2009) 'The Long March: The Political Strategy of Sinn Féin, 1981-2007', London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gauja, A. (2014) 'Leadership selection in Australia' In Pilet, J-B. and Cross, W. (eds.) *The Selection of Political Party Leaders in Contemporary Parliamentary Democracies: A Comparative Study*, London, Routledge pp. 189-205.
- Gordon, D. (2009) 'The Fall of the House of Paisley', Dublin, Gill and Macmillan.
- Gormley-Heenan, C. (2005) 'Abdicated and Assumed Responsibilities? The Multiple Roles of Political Leadership During the Northern Ireland Peace Process', *Civil Wars*, **7**, 195-218.
- Gormley-Heenan, C. (2007) 'Political Leadership and the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Role, Capacity and Effect', Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gormley-Heenan, C. and MacGinty, R. (2008) 'Ethnic outbidding and party modernization: Understanding the Democratic Unionist party's electoral success in the post-Agreement environment', *Ethnopolitics*, **7**, 43-61.
- Gunther, R. and Diamond, L. (2001) 'Types and Functions of Parties' In Diamond, L. and Gunther, R. (eds.) *Political Parties and Democracy*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press pp. 3-39.
- Harbinson, J.F. (1973) 'The Ulster Unionist Party, 1882-1973: its development and organisation', Belfast, Blackstaff Press.
- Harmel, R. (2002) 'Party Organizational Change: Competing Explanations?' In Luther, K.R. and Müller-Rommel, F. (eds.) *Political Parties in the New Europe: Political and Analytical Challenges*, Oxford, Oxford University Press pp. 119-42.
- Hazan, R.Y. and Rahat, G. (2010) 'Democracy within Parties: Candidate Selection Methods and their Political Consequences', Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Jess, M. (2007) 'The Orange Order', Dublin, O'Brien.
- Katz, R.S. and Mair, P. (1994) (eds.) 'How Political Parties Organize: Change and Adaptation in Party Organizations in Western Democracies', London, Sage.
- Katz, R.S. and Mair, P. (1995) 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, **1**, 5-28.
- Katz, R.S. and Mair, P. (2002) 'The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office: Party Organizational Change in Twentieth-Century Democracies' In: Gunther, R., Ramon-

- Montero, J. and Linz, J.J. (eds.) *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*, Oxford, Oxford University Press pp. 113-34.
- Kenig, O. (2009a) 'Classifying Party Leaders' Selection Methods in Parliamentary Democracies', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, **19**, 433-47.
- Kenig, O. (2009b) 'Democratization of Party Leadership Selection: Do Wider Selectorates Produce More Competitive Contests', *Electoral Studies*, **28**, 240-7.
- LeDuc, L. (2001) 'Democratizing Party Leadership Selection', *Party Politics*, **7**, 323-41.
- Lijphart, A. (1969) 'The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands', Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Lijphart, A. (1977) 'Democracy in Plural Societies; A Comparative Exploration', New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Lisi, M. (2010) 'The Democratization of Party Leadership Selection: The Portuguese Experience', *Portuguese Journal of Social Science*, **9**, 127-49.
- Marsh, M. (1993) 'Selecting Party Leaders in the Republic of Ireland', *European Journal of Political Research*, **24**, 295-316.
- McAllister, I. (1977) 'The Northern Ireland Social Democratic and Labour Party', Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- McAllister, I. (1996) 'Leaders' In: LeDuc, L., Niemi, R.G. and Norris, P. (eds.) *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*, Thousand Oaks, Sage.
- McAllister, I. and Nelson, S. (1979) 'Modern Developments in the Northern Ireland Party System', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **32**, 279-316.
- Mitchell, P. (1991) 'Conflict regulation and party competition in Northern Ireland' *European Journal of Political Research*, **20**, 67-92.
- Murray, G. (1998) 'John Hume's SDLP', Dublin, Irish Academic Press.
- Panbianco, A. (1988) 'Political Parties: Organisation and Power', Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Pilet, J-B. and Cross, W. (eds.) (2014) 'The Selection of Political Party Leaders in Contemporary Parliamentary Democracies: A Comparative Study', London, Routledge.
- Poguntke, T. and Webb, P. (eds.) (2005) 'The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies', Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Punnett, R.M. (1993) 'Selecting the Party Leader in Britain: A limited participatory revolution', *European Journal of Political Research*, **24**, 257-76.
- Quinn, T. (2005) 'Leasehold or Freehold? Leader-Eviction Rules in the British Conservative and Labour Parties', *Political Studies*, **53**, 793-815.
- Rafter, K. (2003) 'Leadership changes in Fine Gael and the Labour party, 2002', *Irish Political Studies*, **18**, 108-19.
- Seyd, P. (1999) 'New Parties/New Politics? A Case Study of the British Labour Party' *Party Politics*, **5**, 383-405.
- Stark, J.P. (1996) *Choosing a Leader: Party Leadership Contests in Britain from Macmillan to Blair*, Basingstoke, Macmillan.
- Tonge, J. and Evans, J. (2002) 'Party Members and the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, **17**, 59-73.
- Tonge, J., Braniff, M., Hennessey, T., McAuley, J.W. and Whiting, S. (2014) *The Democratic Unionist Party: From Protest to Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

- Walker, G. (2004) 'A history of the Ulster Unionist Party: protest, pragmatism and pessimism', Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Wauters, B. (2014) 'Democratising Party Leadership Selection in Belgium: Motivations and Decision Makers' *Political Studies*, **62**, 61-80.
- Whyte, J. (1990) 'Interpreting Northern Ireland', Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Young, H. (1989) 'One of Us', London, Pan Books.

**Table 1** Rules organising the selection of party leaders in Northern Ireland

<i>Party name</i>	<i>Candidacy</i>	<i>Selectorate</i>	<i>Term (in years)</i>	<i>Voting rule</i>	<i>Deselection</i>
DUP	Party membership and endorsement from 2 members of parliamentary group	Parliamentary group (MP, MLA & MEP)	1	Unspecified	Parliamentary group
UUP	Party membership and endorsement from 35 members from 9 constituency associations	Party members	1	Single Transferable Vote	Party members
Sinn Féin	Party membership and endorsement from one party agency	Delegates	1	Single Transferable Vote	Delegates; extraordinary conference (delegates)
SDLP	Member of Parliamentary group (MP or MLA) and Endorsement from 5 local branches	Delegates	1	Single Transferable Vote	Delegates; extraordinary conference (delegates)
APNI	Member of Parliamentary group (MP or MLA) and endorsement from 12 delegates	Delegates	1	Single Transferable Vote	Delegates; extraordinary conference (delegates)



*Figure 1* Party leader selection methods: a three dimensional classification

*Figure 2* Inclusiveness of the leadership selectorate in Northern Ireland (1905-2014)

*Source:* adapted from Pilet and Cross (2014)

*Note:* Arrows indicate direction of change and years indicate date of adoption of new selectorate