The British Labour Party's Leadership Election of 2015

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Abstract

This paper examines the British Labour Party's leadership election of 2015, which resulted in the unexpected victory of the radical-left candidate, Jeremy Corbyn. It looks at the contest using Stark's (1996) academic model of leadership elections, based on the tripod of selection criteria, acceptability, electability and competence, and finds it wanting. Selection rules, which are downplayed in Stark's model, are then examined, as Labour used a new selection system based on one-member-one-vote in 2015. While these are found to have had some impact, Corbyn's victory cannot be explained primarily by institutions. The paper reconsiders Stark's model and shows that it failed because of the diminished significance of electability as a selection criterion in the Labour leadership contest of 2015. That largely reflected the circumstances in which the contest took place, in the aftermath of a demoralising election defeat for Labour.

Key words: Labour Party; leadership elections; selection criteria; one-member-one-vote

Introduction

The British Labour Party's leadership election of 2015 was the most dramatic in the party's history. It witnessed the shock victory of a veteran left-wing candidate who had spent three decades opposing a succession of Labour leaders from the back-benches and who had started the contest as an also-ran. Jeremy Corbyn's election heralded the ascendancy of Labour's radical-left faction, which has since sought to impose its own policies and strategies on the party. Labour is a world away from where most commentators thought it would be a year after its general-election defeat of 2015.

Corbyn's victory is of more than just curiosity value for political scientists, however. It was unpredicted by the standard model of leadership elections, which views contests as being determined by the general selection criteria of acceptability, electability and competence (Stark, 1996). That raises the question of whether other approaches, based on the analysis of selection institutions, can perform better (Punnett, 1992; Quinn, 2004). Other aspects of Labour's 2015 contest seemingly contradict general trends identified in the academic literature. These include the decline in party membership – Labour's membership doubled in 2015; and the 'ascendancy of the party in public office' – Labour's MPs have since found themselves facing a revolt by the grassroots (van Biezen et al., 2012; Katz and Mair, 2002). Meanwhile, the 'law of curvilinear disparity', which predicts that activists are typically radical and MPs moderate, and which had fallen out of favour in Britain in recent years, now looks to have returned, with Labour's membership surge veering to the left (May, 1973; Norris, 1995). Something unusual is happening in the Labour Party and it is important for political scientists to understand it.

This paper examines Labour's leadership election of 2015. It looks at the contest using the traditional model (Stark, 1996) and finds that approach wanting. However, the paper shows that, although the party's selection rules, used in 2015 for the first time, did have some impact, this result cannot be put down entirely to institutions, as the system could easily have been used to stop Corbyn's

candidacy in the first place. Neither can a general shift to the left within the party explain the outcome – there was a shift but not by enough to account for the scale of Corbyn's victory. Instead, the paper returns to Stark's model and explains its failure in this leadership contest by the diminished importance of electability as a criterion. This development was largely a consequence of the special circumstances in which the leadership contest took place, namely, in the immediate aftermath of a surprisingly decisive Labour defeat in the 2015 general election, within an intra-party atmosphere of electoral pessimism but also staunch opposition to the Conservative government's austerity policies.

Analysing Leadership Selection

The analysis of intra-party leadership selection is a growing sub-field in political science. A comparative institutional literature on selection systems has emerged, examining the functioning of different selection rules, the contexts in which rules are changed, and the consequences for which types of leaders are chosen (Cross and Blais, 2012; Cross and Pilet, 2015; Kenig, 2009; LeDuc, 2001; Pilet and Cross, 2014). There is an extensive UK-specific literature, with cross-party studies (Bale and Webb, 2014; Punnett, 1992; Stark, 1996), single-party studies (Denham and O'Hara, 2008; Heppell ,2008, 2010), and a plethora of single-contest studies (Alderman, 1998; Alderman and Carter, 1995, 2000, 2002; Cowley and Bailey, 2000; Cowley and Garry, 1998; Denham and Dorey, 2007; Dorey and Denham, 2011; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011). Within this literature has emerged a theoretical framework for explaining the outcomes of leadership contests. Developed by Stark (1996) and extended by Quinn (2012), this approach questions the significance of selection systems, focusing instead on the criteria that selectors use. Since these criteria apply to all types of selectors, whether MPs, delegates or individual members, it is argued that variations in institutions rarely explain election outcomes.

Stark's model links selection criteria to party goals. These goals are internal unity, electoral victory and policy implementation, in that order of importance. Only if a party were united could it hope to win elections, because voters generally avoid divided parties, and only after electoral victory could it enter government and implement policies. Party selectors seek a leader who could deliver these goals. If a party were divided, uniting it would take priority and selectors would typically choose the candidate who was *acceptable*, ideologically or character-wise, to a broad range of opinion. If a party were not deeply divided – the normal state of affairs – electability would be the key criterion, i.e. which candidate could deliver electoral success. If the candidates could not be distinguished on that criterion, the decision would turn on *competence*, specifically, which one would make the best prime minister (Stark, 1996: 126).

Stark found that this framework explained most UK leadership elections from 1963-1995. In some cases, one candidate was strongest on all three criteria, including James Callaghan in 1976, Tony Blair in 1994 and John Major in 1995. In others, candidates won despite not being strongest on electability but where their greater acceptability proved decisive. These included Michael Foot in 1980 and Neil Kinnock in 1983. On only one occasion did a candidate who was weaker on all criteria triumph – Margaret Thatcher in 1975, when she trailed William Whitelaw on all three. Stark explained this anomaly with reference to peculiarities of the selection rules, namely, the provision for second-ballot entry that persuaded most candidates to sit out the first ballot, by which time Thatcher had built up momentum (Stark, 1996: 127). Quinn's analysis of UK contests from 1997-2010 found a similar pattern, with victories for right-wing Tory candidates on the basis of acceptability, not electability, in 1997 and 2001. The only partial exception was Labour in 2010, when ballots of MPs or members would have been won by David Miliband, whereas the party's electoral college, which split votes between MPs, party members and trade unionists, delivered victory to his brother Ed (Quinn, 2012: 161).

These contests entailed a range of selection methods, including parliamentary ballots, all-member ballots, hybrid parliamentary-membership ballots and electoral colleges using delegates or individual members (Alderman and Carter, 1995, 2002; Denham and Dorey, 2007; Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013; Punnett, 1992). That lends support to the notion that different categories of selectors use the same criteria and that institutions are usually of secondary importance in determining outcomes. However, it might not be so simple if different categories of intra-party actors were ideologically distinct, as per the law of curvilinear disparity (May, 1973). If members were more radical than MPs, the two groups might interpret ideological 'acceptability' differently, and then selection systems could matter more by determining the distribution and weighting of votes.

The Labour leadership contest of 2015 offers an intriguing test of Stark's model. It seems implausible to claim that Corbyn was the superior candidate on the three selection criteria. As a radical-leftist and parliamentary rebel, he looked unable to unite his party, especially its MPs. He did not enjoy any obvious electoral appeal, and as a backbencher of 32 years, he did not look a likely prime minister. Does that mean, therefore, that a rival explanation, such as one based on the importance of Labour's new selection institutions, is more appropriate?

Labour's Leadership Election

Before analysing Corbyn's victory, it is necessary to set out the main features of the contest, including the rules, the candidates and the campaign. After Labour's defeat in the 2015 general election, the presiding leader, Ed Miliband resigned and a leadership election was called. Labour's deputy leader, Harriet Harman, took over as interim leader but announced that she too would step down once a new deputy had been elected (*Guardian*, 8 May 2015).

New Rules

The contest was the first to be conducted under Labour's new selection system since its adoption in 2014. Previously, Labour had used a tripartite electoral college that gave MPs/MEPs, party members and members of Labour-affiliated trade unions one third of the vote each (Quinn, 2004; Heppell, 2010). The system controversially enabled Miliband to defeat his more experienced brother, David, in the leadership election of 2010. David won clear majorities of MPs and party members but Ed was the overwhelming choice of trade unionists and that tipped the balance (Dorey and Denham, 2011; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011). The new leader faced regular questions over his autonomy from the unions and these came to a head during a parliamentary-selection scandal, when Labour's largest affiliate, Unite, was accused of malpractice in seeking to ensure that one of its officials became the prospective parliamentary candidate in Falkirk (*Guardian*, 3 February 2014). Miliband responded by ordering a review of party-union links headed by a former Labour general-secretary, Ray Collins.

The Collins Review recommended a series of internal reforms, including the abolition of the electoral college (Collins, 2014). In its place would come a system of one-member-one-vote (OMOV) ballots for leadership elections, with each party member entitled to vote. Two new categories of participant would be created: affiliated supporters, consisting of Labour-affiliated trade unionists who had signed their agreement to the party's values and provided their contact details; and registered supporters, who could be ordinary members of the public not in either previous participant category but who signed their agreement to Labour's values. Affiliated supporters would not need to pay any fee in addition to the political levies they already paid to their unions, but registered supporters would have to pay a small fee, which turned out to be £3 in 2015. The party hoped that individuals would sign up as registered supporters before considering converting to full membership, which carried more participation rights in intra-party activity (Collins, 2014). All three categories of participants would vote in a single section in leadership elections without weighted votes. The registered-supporters provision had the capacity to turn contests into open primaries and copied the

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precedent of the French Socialist Party, which organised a primary (with a participation fee of €1) to choose its presidential candidate in 2011 (Scarrow, 2015: 189). This paper describes Labour's new system as *OMOV+* to capture the participation of affiliated and registered supporters alongside full members.

Ostensibly designed to reduce trade-union influence in leadership elections, the biggest effect of the reform was to abolish the MPs/MEPs section. Henceforth, each MP would cast a vote equal in weight to that of an ordinary member, whereas in the electoral college, each MP's vote was worth much more (Dorey and Denham, 2011: 293). To compensate MPs for this loss of voting power, the nomination threshold was increased to give them more gate-keeping power. Previously, each candidate for a vacant post required the nominations of 12.5% of Labour MPs. Under OMOV+, that was increased to 15%. As Labour had 232 MPs in 2015, each candidate needed 35 parliamentary nominations.

The Candidates

The contest began in May and was expected to see a Blairite-versus-soft-left battle as in 2010. Labour's principal Blairite, David Miliband, was not eligible to stand because he was not an MP. Other plausible candidates ruled themselves out, including Alan Johnson, a former home secretary, and Chuka Umunna, a shadow-cabinet member, who initially announced his candidacy only to withdraw days later, citing press intrusion into his family life. Eventually, the Blairite mantle was taken up by Liz Kendall, a junior shadow minister, who criticised Labour's performance under Brown and Miliband, saying the party spent too much money in government and failed to establish credibility on the economy and immigration in opposition. She urged a return to Blair's centrist strategy to improve Labour's electoral performance. Meanwhile, Dan Jarvis, a former special-services soldier not associated with any faction, was mentioned as a candidate but decided not to run because of family pressures. Two candidates from the soft left, both former cabinet ministers

and senior shadow ministers, did announce their candidacies. Andy Burnham finished fourth in the 2010 contest but hoped to do better in 2015 with support from the unions, while Yvette Cooper was a 'Brownite' and like Burnham had strong support among Labour MPs (Wintour and Watt, 2015).

Labour's radical-left faction had been excluded from intra-party power for decades and had minimal support among MPs. However, it had gained traction in the unions and its anti-austerity message chimed with many in the party. It too decided to run a candidate and settled on the 66-year-old Jeremy Corbyn, a veteran leftist and serial backbench rebel of 32 years. Little was expected of his campaign. Like many on the left, Corbyn believed Labour had lost in 2015 because it was not sufficiently distinct – more left-wing – than the Conservatives, especially on austerity. He also championed left-wing causes such as unilateral nuclear disarmament (Wintour and Watt, 2015).

Corbyn's immediate problem was overcoming the 15% nomination hurdle, given his lack of parliamentary support. He needed 35 nominations to get on the ballot but perhaps only 20-25 MPs supported him. In 2010, some moderate MPs had 'loaned' nominations to Abbott to ensure her participation (Dorey and Denham, 2011: 295). Crucially, up to 14 moderate MPs nominated Corbyn to 'broaden the debate', ensuring he reached the threshold minutes before the deadline (*Guardian*, 15 June 2015). Few would have considered it consequential as the left was expected to perform poorly. Burnham, Cooper and Kendall each passed the threshold with ease (Table 1).

[TABLE 1 HERE]

The Campaign

As parliamentary nominations closed, there were early signs that the contest might be unusual. Supplementary nominations remained open for several more weeks, and it was clear that Corbyn had more support within the extra-parliamentary party (Table 1). He was nominated by six trade

unions, including the two biggest, Unite and UNISON. Both had been expected to nominate

Burnham. Union leaders cannot deliver block votes but their endorsements can persuade trade

unionists to support a given candidate (Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011). Meanwhile, 152

constituency Labour parties (CLPs) nominated Corbyn, more than any other candidate.

To capitalise on interest in the contest, Labour announced that individuals joining the selectorate

would be eligible to vote provided that they signed up by 12 August. It became one of the stories of

the campaign, as Labour experienced a surge in membership. In May, individual membership stood

at 200,000 but by August, it had climbed to 294,000. In addition, 115,000 registered supporters and

147,000 affiliated supporters signed up. This influx strongly leaned to the left, enthused by Corbyn's

candidacy (see Table 5 below). Corbyn's website provided links to Labour's sign-up webpage and

directed sympathisers towards it (Wintour and Watt, 2015). His supporters spread the message

through social media to like-minded people. It reached its apogee on the final day before

registration closed, when over 160,000 people applied, taking the total to 610,000. After eligibility

checks, such as whether applicants were on the electoral register, ballots were eventually sent out

to 550,000 people (BBC, 2015b).

The campaign began slowly but a poll in July brought the stunning news that Corbyn led by 17% on

first preferences under the preferential (alternative-vote) system (YouGov, 2015b). There had been

press reports that Corbyn was being well-received in the hustings, his anti-austerity arguments and

insistence that Labour had to offer a clear alternative to the Conservatives striking a chord with

activists. His gentle demeanour and refusal to engage in personal attacks also won plaudits. Corbyn

was now the front-runner, drawing criticisms from the Labour elite, such as Tony Blair, who said that

anyone whose heart was with Corbyn should 'get a transplant' (Wintour and Watt, 2015). Moderate

MPs questioned the membership influx, raising the spectre of 'entryism', i.e. organised infiltration of

the Labour Party by members of far-left groups (*Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 2015). Labour's

opponents were also enthused: a Conservative-sympathising newspaper urged its readers to sign up as registered supporters to elect Corbyn and 'destroy the Labour Party' (*Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 2015). In response, the party began screening applicants for past support for other parties and 3,000 sign-ups were excluded on this basis, although moderates insisted many more slipped through the net. There was even talk of a legal challenge in the event of a close result (Wintour and Watt, 2015).

In the meantime, Corbyn, backed by a well-drilled campaign team that had worked for the former mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, spoke at a series of rallies packed out with enthusiastic young supporters (Wintour and Watt, 2015). As long queues formed on the streets outside his meetings, the press coined the term, 'Corbynmania'. The internet and social media also played key roles in Corbyn's campaign. Of particular significance was the politicking and campaigning conducted in online forums by ordinary supporters. The internet reduces the costs of collective action (Olson, 1971), as can be seen with online petitions that quickly generate hundreds of thousands of signatures in a way that would have been impossible in the past. Corbyn supporters were mobilised into the Labour Party by the same means. Social media enabled contacts to be made, talking-points swapped, tactics coordinated and signing up to vote encouraged. Critics claimed that Corbyn's supporters (not the candidate himself) also targeted opponents with abuse and intimidation (*Independent*, 12 August 2015).

Overall, the campaign enabled Corbyn to build momentum and his lead increased in August, including among long-standing members, indicating that it was not entirely down to the influx (YouGov, 2015d). By then, supporters of Burnham and Cooper were urging each other's candidate and Kendall to withdraw to allow a straight run at Corbyn, but to no avail. It was even proposed that all three should withdraw to invalidate the contest, but that idea also went nowhere (Wintour and Watt, 2015). Corbyn's victory had acquired an air of inevitability. At the special conference to announce the result in September, Corbyn secured 60% of the vote, far ahead of his rivals (Table 2).

He won outright majorities of affiliated and registered supporters and nearly did the same among full members. A former Brownite minister, Tom Watson, was elected deputy leader, but that was small consolation for despondent Labour MPs (Wintour and Watt, 2015).

[TABLE 2 HERE]

Stark's Model and the Labour Leadership Contest

The Labour leadership election of 2015 is the clearest example of Stark's model failing to explain the result of a major-party contest. Corbyn emerged victorious despite not being the strongest candidate on any of the three criteria of acceptability, electability or competence. Starting with competence, while Corbyn had the most parliamentary experience of the four candidates, he had the least front-bench experience. He had spent all of his 32 years in parliament as a backbencher in opposition to a succession of Labour leaders. He was Labour's most rebellious MP during its time in government from 1997-2010, voting against his own party 428 times (BBC, 2015c). In contrast, the other candidates had front-bench experience, with Cooper serving 11 years in government (two in the cabinet) and Burnham five years in government (three in the cabinet). Cooper also held two of the most senior jobs in opposition – shadow home secretary and shadow foreign secretary. Kendall had served only in a junior role in opposition (Table 3).

[TABLE 3 HERE]

Given Corbyn's history as a serial rebel, he also struggled to present himself as a unifier. His radical-left views were at odds with those of most Labour MPs, although as is shown later, they were closer to those of many Labour selectors, particularly on the issue of austerity. Kendall's Blairite politics were also out of tune with much of the party in 2015. Ever since Ed Miliband announced in 2010 that 'the era of New Labour has passed', the party had sought to move beyond the image it encapsulated

(Bale 2015). Kendall's 4.3% in the final vote was indicative of the diminished lustre of the Blairite brand. In contrast, both Burnham and Cooper appeared broadly acceptable to the party, as evident from their numbers of parliamentary nominations and the fact that they began the contest as the two favourites. Each was from Labour's soft-left mainstream, and both accepted the need to oppose austerity.

On electability, the widespread presumption was that Corbyn's radical-left ideology would be anathema to voters. Kendall based her campaign on electability, although questions were raised about her overall credibility after some weak performances during the hustings. She was rebuked by other candidates, including Cooper (who did not name Kendall personally), for 'swallowing the Tory manifesto' (*Guardian*, 31 May 2015). Burnham and Cooper were better known, more credible and assumed able to appeal beyond core Labour voters, although neither had the air of a clear vote-winner in the manner of Blair in the 1990s or even David Miliband in 2010 (YouGov, 2010a, 2010b).

Polling during the contest confirmed these assessments.[1] A sample of selectors was asked to state two or three reasons for voting for their preferred candidate (Table 4). Support for Burnham and Cooper could be understood through the traditional selection criteria. Both scored strongly on opposing the Conservatives – partly a competence indicator – and on winning the 2020 election (electability). Burnham was strong on uniting the party (acceptability), and many of Cooper's supporters also identified this motive. Kendall's supporters associated her Blairite politics with electability – winning in 2020 was by far the main reason for supporting her. The interest in her policies and the break she offered with Miliband reflected that. Like Burnham and Cooper, she was rated strongly on opposing the Conservatives.

Corbyn's supporters had different selection motives altogether. Barely any mentioned electability or unity, and although many thought Corbyn would best oppose the Conservatives, that seemed

primarily to reflect his ideological stance and policy outlook. Indeed, policies were the principal

reason for supporting him and two-thirds of his supporters cited the break he represented with New

Labour. They were not looking for lowest-common-denominator unity or for electoral success for its

own sake. Instead, they wanted a reorientation in Labour's strategy.

[TABLE 4 HERE]

The Effect of OMOV+

Stark's model assumes that, with few exceptions, selection rules do not strongly determine the

outcomes of leadership contests and that the winners would normally have won under other

systems (Stark, 1996). However, the failure of the conventional approach to explain Labour's 2015

contest raises the possibility that institutions might have been decisive. That question is particularly

relevant given Labour's new selection system.

To establish the effects of OMOV+ in 2015, it is necessary to determine whether the outcome would

have been different under other systems. It seems uncontroversial to say that Corbyn could not have

won had Labour MPs chosen the leader, as they did until 1980. He struggled to surmount the 15%

nomination threshold and up to 14 of his 36 nominations may have been 'loaned' to him. It is

inconceivable that he would have been deemed a credible candidate in a parliamentary ballot, let

alone won. On the basis of MPs' nominations, Burnham or Cooper would have won.

Corbyn's performance under electoral-college rules is trickier to establish although the likelihood is

that he would have lost. Votes would have been divided evenly into three sections – MPs/MEPs,

party members and trade unionists. Assuming party members would have voted identically to the

full members of 2015 and trade unionists would have divided for the candidates as the affiliated

supporters did, Corbyn would have won the first-preference votes of 49.6% of members and 57.6%

of trade unionists. That would have left him needing an unlikely 42.9% of MPs/MEPs to win on the first ballot. But what about later ballots? Using YouGov's poll of August 2015 (which slightly under-estimated Corbyn's support) and taking its weighting of the transfer of votes from eliminated candidates to others in later rounds, it is possible to estimate final-round votes.[2] If Burnham had faced off against Corbyn, the latter would have won an estimated 56.3% of members to Burnham's 43.7%, and 61.9% of trade unionists to Burnham's 38.1%. A Corbyn-Cooper run-off would have seen Corbyn win an estimated 56.9% of members to Cooper's 43.1%, and 69.3% of trade unionists to Cooper's 30.7%. Therefore, Corbyn would have needed to win 31.9% of MPs/MEPs in a run-off against Burnham or 23.9% against Cooper to secure victory. Again, given his struggle to pass the 15% nomination threshold, it seems likely that Corbyn would have been defeated in the electoral college, despite winning in two sections – the fate of David Miliband in 2010. The knowledge that MPs would vote solidly against Corbyn might even have stopped his momentum building in the first place.

It appears that institutions were important in 2015. OMOV+ enfranchised a selectorate that had decisively rejected the centrism offered by the moderate candidates. Yet few predicted that the membership would mobilise to the radical left. The system did not cause that surge but particular features of it – or the way in which they were operated – enabled it.

First, the nomination rules ought to have forestalled Corbyn's campaign. With the abolition of the electoral college and MPs' loss of their voting section, the gate-keeping power of nomination was the only real power MPs had. Once they discarded it, they had no other means to control events. Second, the provision of cheap membership/registration ensured minimal financial barriers faced potential selectors. Third, there was no qualification period before new members/supporters could vote in the leadership election. The contest started in May and immediately Labour experienced a membership surge. As news of the registered-supporter and affiliated-supporter provisions spread, these too increased. There is no doubt that those who signed up after May 2015 were more pro-

Corbyn than those who were already members (Table 5).[3] YouGov's final poll of the campaign in

September showed that one-in-ten selectors had voted for the radical-left Green Party in the 2015

general election, with the proportion rising to a quarter of registered supporters (YouGov, 2015e).

Fully 92% of these ex-Greens voted for Corbyn (Kellner, 2015b). Nevertheless, the poll indicated that

even 44% of pre-2010 members voted for Corbyn, considerably greater than Abbott's support in

2010. The first YouGov poll in July showed that, even among those selectors who had voted for

David Miliband in 2010, 20-30% now supported Corbyn (YouGov, 2015b). On the other hand, these

pre-2010 selectors constituted only a quarter of the selectorate in 2015 (Kellner, 2015b). Thus, while

Corbyn's victory was not only down to the influx of new selectors, they did propel his momentum.

The increased weight and visibility of Corbyn's support may even have encouraged longer-standing

members who were sympathetic to Corbyn but initially doubtful of his viability to vote for him.

YouGov (2015b, 2015e) suggested that first-preference support for Corbyn among pre-2010

members increased from 37% to 44% between July and September.

[TABLE 5 HERE]

The effect of the selection rules on Corbyn's victory was therefore mixed. On the one hand, it is clear

that he could not have won a parliamentary ballot and the likelihood is that he would have lost in

the electoral college, largely because he would have fared poorly in the MPs/MEPs section. The

removal of weighted votes for MPs undoubtedly helped Corbyn by preventing any parliamentary

brake on his progress. Yet MPs had it within their power to keep him off the ballot in the first place;

indeed, this power had been strengthened under OMOV+. Some MPs chose not to avail themselves

of that power, following the precedent of 2010 when moderate MPs nominated Abbott. Her poor

showing may even have lulled some MPs into a sense of complacency and led them to miscalculate

Corbyn's chances in 2015. The difference was that their own section in the electoral college gave

MPs a second bite of the cherry in leadership contests. That no longer existed in 2015.

Curvilinear Disparity and the Selectorate's Ideological Profile

Although Corbyn's victory was surprising, from at least one perspective, it was not completely unexpected. 'May's law of curvilinear disparity' asserts that activists are more 'extreme' than MPs, who are ideologically closer to voters (May, 1973; cf. Norris, 1995). Therefore, if activists choose leaders, the latter might be more radical than if MPs chose them. Corbyn's election in 2015 would, on the face of it, appear to be a straightforward confirmation of this thesis.

Reinforcing this view would be the frequent observation that Labour's selectorate had shifted sharply to the left since the last leadership election. The most moderate part of the electoral college, the MPs/MEPs section, had been removed under OMOV+ and so some shift to the left was likely. Additionally, the rapid influx of new members/supporters could have shifted Labour to the left.

Polling data on the ideological positions of selectors in 2010 and 2015 indicates *partial* support for this argument. Figure 1 shows the left-right distribution of Labour selectors (party members and trade unionists, but not MPs/MEPs) according to a self-placement poll during the 2010 Labour leadership election. On a -100 (left) to +100 (right) scale, the mean selector self-placed at -48 (the average of the mean party member at -51 and the mean trade unionist at -45). Selectors' mean placements of the Miliband brothers were -27 (Ed) and +1 (David), while Abbott was at -63 (YouGov, 2010a, 2010b).

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 2 shows a similar scale for the 2015 selectorate. It includes full members (who constituted 58% of the voting selectorate), affiliated supporters (17%) and registered supporters (25%). The mean selector self-placed at -57, somewhat more left-wing than in 2010. The proportion of selectors

in the very- and fairly left-wing categories increased from 53% to 64%. Corbyn's mean supporter was at -67 while selectors placed the candidate himself at -77.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

There was, therefore, a moderate shift to the left within Labour's selectorate – a 9-point shift in the mean on a 200-point scale. However, there are problems with putting Corbyn's victory down to the inevitable consequences of May's law. In the 2010 contest, David Miliband won a 9-point majority among party members in the final count, despite these selectors being left-wing. Indeed, the mean selector was ideologically closest to Abbott, who came last in that election (YouGov, 2010a, 2010b; see also Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013). The change in the selectorate's ideological composition cannot explain why the radical-left candidate won 7% in 2010 but 60% in 2015. Something else was happening to explain why left-wing selectors opted for moderate candidates (both Milibands) in 2010 but a radical one in 2015.

The Diminished Appeal of Electability

Although Stark's model failed to explain Corbyn's victory, the rival explanations of institutional determination and a shift to the left within the selectorate offered only partial answers. However, something had clearly changed among selectors in 2015. Left-wing preferences that were subordinated to electability in 2010 no longer were so in 2015. The principal change in selectors' preferences, therefore, related more to *strategy* rather than ideology.

The most notable feature of the leadership contest was the diminished importance of electability, the criterion that is dominant in a majority of leadership contests (Murr, 2015). It was a remarkable turnaround. In 2010, David Miliband was the preferred choice of party members, largely on the basis of his perceived electability. He was supported by many members who leaned to the left – indeed,

who saw themselves as more left-wing than the candidate – but who put electability above ideology (YouGov, 2010a, 2010b). In contrast, Corbyn's candidacy in 2015 was not viewed primarily in terms of electability, even by those who supported him (Table 4). What explained the changed?

It is important to understand the context in which the leadership contest occurred. A general election that most observers had expected to result in a hung parliament was won outright by the Conservatives (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016). Instead of the possibility of a minority Labour government, which many had thought likely, there was a majority Conservative government for the first time since the 1990s. Although Labour's vote share increased marginally, the party suffered a net loss of 26 seats, mainly because of a near wipe-out in Scotland, where it lost 40 of its 41 seats to the Scottish National Party (SNP). In total, Labour won 98 fewer seats than the Conservatives. It marked the continuation of a trend since 2001 in which Labour's seat share fell inexorably while the Conservatives' increased (Figure 3). The SNP's ascendancy now threatened Labour's ability to form majority governments, while English voters had demonstrated a clear fear of a minority Labour administration propped up by the SNP (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016: 376-378). Meanwhile, the Conservatives had re-established their hegemony in England by seizing former Liberal Democrat seats. Labour's road to victory in 2020 already looked arduous.

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

Electorally unsuccessful parties often seek change in the direction of more effective vote-seeking (Harmel and Janda, 1994). That tends to be understood conventionally as a shift towards the ideological centre-ground (Downs, 1957). Such arguments were made within the Labour Party in the days following its election defeat, including by Blair and Peter Mandelson, but also newer figures like Umunna (Wintour and Watt, 2015). It became the key demand of Kendall's leadership campaign.

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The problem for the Blairites was that Labour's declining electoral performance had coincided with centrist platforms. The Manifesto Project uses content analysis to code election manifestos on a right-left scale, where +100 is completely right-wing and -100 completely left-wing (Lehmann et al., 2015). During 1945-92, Labour's manifestos ranged from -48.5 to -10.3 (mean = -28.2). In contrast, from 1997-2010, the range was -3.1 to +8.1 (mean = +2.3). During that time, Labour's vote share fell steadily from 43% to 29%. That is not necessarily to say that centrism *caused* Labour's decline – there were many factors, including competence and leader evaluations (Whiteley et al., 2013). However, it was easier for the left to make the case that Labour had lost touch with its own supporters and that a return to traditional policies could work.

For the left, Labour had become too closely associated with big business, been too prepared to support cuts to welfare and public services, and not willing to argue for economic growth over austerity. Cuts would merely take money out of the economy and deepen the recession. To the extent that the deficit needed to be reduced, it could be achieved through other means, such as collecting more taxes from the wealthy and abandoning a replacement for Trident. Labour's fate in Scotland boosted the credibility of this narrative. The left argued that the party's Scottish wipe-out was a consequence of the SNP's strong opposition to austerity. Its view of Miliband's leadership was that he had been led astray by Blairites, unwisely accepting the need for spending cuts and not distinguishing Labour from the Conservatives (Milne, 2015).

Polling of Labour's selectorate suggested that it largely accepted this analysis (Table 6). Fully 60% of selectors believed that Labour lost because it failed to defend the actions of the previous Labour government, most notably in dealing with the financial crisis and increasing public spending. Furthermore, 57% believed that a major reason for the defeat was that Labour had not offered an alternative to the coalition government's austerity policies. Agreement was even greater among Corbyn's supporters. Blairite explanations of defeat saw weaker agreement. Only 31% thought

Labour lost because of Miliband (19% of Corbyn's supporters), while just 9% and 8% respectively agreed that being insufficiently tough on immigration and welfare, and lacking plausibility on the deficit were important.

[TABLE 6 HERE]

Given these beliefs about the reasons for Labour's defeat, the selectorate was receptive to an anti-austerity message and a break with New Labour centrism. Polls of the selectorate indicated that the overwhelming desire inside the party was to oppose the Conservatives on austerity. It could be seen by the anti-austerity positions adopted not only by Corbyn, but also by Cooper and especially Burnham, although the latter two undermined their credentials by abstaining with the rest of the shadow cabinet on the government's welfare cuts in July 2015 (*Guardian*, 21 July 2015). The narrative of austerity had dominated the coalition's time in office and Labour under Miliband had opposed many of its deficit-reduction measures, not least its welfare cuts (Bale, 2015). Polls of Labour's selectorate in 2015 showed that it rejected deficit-reduction in favour of growth, opposed proposals to limit certain benefits to households with children, and opposed the £26,000pa welfare cap (Kellner, 2015c).

It would not be wholly accurate to characterise this anti-austerity sentiment within the party as reflective of a deeper society-wide development. Polls showed that a plurality of voters supported deficit-reduction, and solid majorities supported the welfare cap and other benefit restrictions (Kellner 2015c). The radical left was able to enjoy electoral success in Greece (Syriza) and Spain (Podemos) on the back of popular opposition to austerity. But the unemployment rate in Greece and Spain in 2015 was 25.1% and 22.1% respectively, whereas in the UK it was 5.4% (HM Treasury, 2016: 28-29). YouGov's tracker poll on UK budget cuts from 2010-15 consistently found that about 55% of respondents accepted the necessity of cuts, with about 25-30% not accepting their necessity

(YouGov, 2016). It may be better to see Labour's opposition to austerity as reflecting the views of certain sections of British society, rather than a more general sentiment.

Perhaps as a consequence, the Labour left was ambivalent towards electability. Just 5% of Corbyn's supporters were motivated to vote for him because he had the best chance of winning the election in 2020, much lower than for supporters of other candidates (Table 4). Policy was their real motivation: 70% supported Corbyn because of his policies and 65% because he would break with New Labour. Selectors were reluctant to trade-off policies for electoral success, especially when the latter appeared distant and elusive. A later poll asked selectors whether major parties should compromise on their policies to win elections ('pragmatism') or adopt their preferred policies even if they lose elections ('idealism'). Fully 71% of Corbyn voters were idealists and 15% pragmatists, whereas 56% of selectors who voted for the other three candidates were pragmatists and 32% idealists (Kellner, 2015c).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that many Labour selectors, particularly those who voted for Corbyn, suspected that their preferred policies were electorally suboptimal. However, to cite a common refrain among his supporters, they believed there was little point in winning elections if doing so required policies they did not support (*Daily Telegraph*, 31 July 2015). Given that centrism had failed Labour in 2010 and 2015, it was time to try something else. It may be that what the party wanted was the immediate prospect of an effective opposition campaigning against austerity rather than the distant prospect of a centrist government-in-waiting.

A Weak Line-up?

One further factor undermining the centrality of electability was the uninspiring line-up of candidates. In 2010, David Miliband was widely seen as a strong candidate. He was a former foreign secretary who was well-known among voters (Dorey and Denham, 2011). In contrast, the line-up of

moderates in 2015 was weaker. A YouGov survey after Labour's election defeat in May 2015 asked a sample of ordinary voters to say whether various declared and undeclared candidates would or would not make a good Labour leader (Table 7). Seven candidates were listed – but not Corbyn, whose candidacy was not declared or even seen as viable – and in all cases, a majority of respondents either did not know whether they would make good leaders or did not know enough about them to say. Asked which candidate would most likely lead Labour to electoral victory, Umunna was cited by 17% of respondents, Burnham by 14%, Cooper 8%, Hunt 3%, Kendall 2%, Eagle 1% and Creagh 1%, but 55% replied 'don't know'.

[TABLE 7 HERE]

Although Burnham would become identified as the early favourite, his profile and appeal were limited to Labour members and trade unionists, not the electorate at large. Amid a weak field in which no-one stood out as an election-winner or prime-minister-in-waiting, the way was open for a more radical candidate whose analysis of what went wrong chimed with selectors' views. Electability was of less significance if the party's medium-term fate already appeared sealed.

Conclusion

The Labour leadership election of 2015 startled pundits, politicians and political scientists, with the landslide victory of a rank outsider. It was the biggest shock in the history of UK leadership elections, presenting problems for those who seek to explain such contests. Stark's model failed, as a candidate who lagged behind on acceptability, electability and competence nevertheless emerged victorious. However, rival explanations based on institutions or the law of curvilinear disparity go only so far in accounting for Corbyn. Institutions mattered because MPs failed to make full use of their nominating powers, and while Corbyn may not have won in the electoral college, of equal interest was why even pre-2010 selectors were now willing to support the radical left.

This paper showed that the unusual downgrading of electability provides the clue as to why Corbyn won. Amid fierce opposition to austerity within the party at a time when its immediate electoral prospects looked pessimistic, selectors chose a veteran left-winger who would take the fight to the Conservatives. For political scientists using Stark's approach to leadership elections, this contest held a lesson: a party's desire for electability may vary, particularly in contests held in the immediate aftermath of electoral defeat, when the road back to government typically looks hardest. Such occasions also offer parties the chance to debate future policy and strategy while starting with a blank sheet of paper. The call to focus on electability will be but one demand among a cacophony of voices in the post-election period. In the case of Labour in 2015, the party decided that other things, such as policy, were more important. The shift in priorities was epitomised by another veteran left-wing MP, Dennis Skinner, who had supported David Miliband in 2010. His support was not ideological but strategic, based on Miliband's electability and competence (Dorey and Denham, 2011: 305). Like many on the left, Skinner reversed his position and voted for Corbyn in 2015.

A further lesson on Stark's framework relates to the criterion of acceptability. The Labour leadership contest of 2015 saw party members choose a candidate completely unacceptable to MPs, reflecting the sharp divergence of ideological preferences of the two groups. One of the consequences of the three-way split in the electoral college had been that it made it difficult for either MPs or party members (or trade unionists) to impose a candidate unacceptable to the bulk of members of any other section. The removal of the MPs' section under OMOV+ made that easier. Selection systems can play an important role in dictating the result when they enfranchise groups of intra-party actors with different views of which candidates are ideologically acceptable (Quinn, 2012: 164). Nevertheless, to repeat: the 15% nomination rule ought to have helped prevent the emergence of a candidate unacceptable to Labour MPs.

The victory of Corbyn joins that of Thatcher in 1975 as an instance of a non-unifying candidate winning the leadership of a divided party. In both cases, a majority of selectors opted for the candidate offering a radical break with the past in the aftermath of an election defeat (Cowley and Bailey, 2000). Stark's emphasis on unity and electability underplays the extent to which parties are occasionally prepared to try something radically different after a period of division and failure.

There is also something to be said about the importance of selection rules. Labour's OMOV+ system represents an important departure in UK leadership selection. By opening the process to non-members in the form of affiliated and registered supporters, the system effectively creates partial primaries. Since the 1960s, there has been a trend towards more open selection processes, including OMOV and a few instances of open primaries (Bale and Webb, 2014; Pilet and Cross, 2014). That trend extends beyond the selection of party leaders to the selection of parliamentary and sub-national candidates (Alexandre-Collier, 2016; Hazan and Rahat, 2010). Such developments may be justified on the basis of widening participation, but they also erode the distinction between members and non-members. Moreover, while opening selection to non-members may increase participation, there is no guarantee that it will widen it. The lesson of Labour's experimentation with registered supporters is that they were ideologically skewed to the radical left. These were the individuals who were most enthused to become involved in the party after its election defeat, spotting an opportunity to reorient its ideological stance by flocking to Corbyn's cause. Centre-ground voters were seemingly less interested, many having just rejected the party in the election. The risk is perhaps less one of 'entryism' than of what has been pejoratively described as 'flash-mob' democracy (Rawnsley, 2015), as large unrepresentative groups of individuals suddenly sign-up and transform the composition of the selectorate. The possibility of that happening has increased in the era of social media, which has drastically reduced collective action costs. Like-minded people who are politically motivated can be electronically mobilised quickly and easily. Qualification periods for

voting rights in leadership elections could forestall destabilising influxes but they would also negate the purpose of primaries.

Stark's framework could not explain Corbyn's victory but his three selection criteria nevertheless directed attention to the reasons why Corbyn ultimately won. The diminished salience of electability and divisions between MPs and members/supporters over what counted as ideologically 'acceptable' were crucial factors. The new selection rules also played their role. If the experiment with primaries continues, then it is possible that sudden surges of new selectors similar to Labour's could occur, perhaps returning parties to an earlier model (May, 1973) that pitted parliamentarians against the grassroots.

Notes

1. This paper makes extensive use of YouGov's online surveys of the Labour selectorate. Questions were raised about the accuracy of opinion polling after the 2015 British general election, when most pollsters failed to predict a Conservative majority, resulting in an inquiry by the British Polling Council and the Market Research Society. The problems of accurately gauging opinion must be acknowledged and those difficulties may be magnified when sampling a smaller group, such as a party's membership. This point was noted by YouGov's former president, Peter Kellner (2015a), who nevertheless recalled YouGov's accuracy during the 2010 Labour leadership contest. YouGov provided the first solid evidence that Corbyn was winning in 2015 and its subsequent polls, based on carefully weighting the component parts of the selectorate, appeared accurate. However, care should be taken when interpreting polling data in this paper.

2. YouGov (2015d) showed Corbyn winning 49% of full members, Burnham 22%, Cooper 20% and Kendall 9%. In head-to-heads, the poll showed Corbyn defeating Burnham 56-44 and Cooper 57-43. Corbyn's transfer ratios from eliminated candidates are 7/29 against Burnham and 8/31 against Cooper. Applying these to the actual outcomes among members (Corbyn 49.6%) gives Corbyn 56.3% against Burnham and 56.9% against Cooper in head-to-heads. For trade unionists, the poll gave Corbyn 67%, Burnham 14%, Cooper 10% and Kendall 8%. In head-to-heads, Corbyn defeated Burnham 72-28 and Cooper 76-24. Corbyn's transfer ratios were 5/19 against Burnham and 9/23 against Cooper. These are then applied to the actual outcome (Corbyn 57.6%).

3. Consequently, care should be taken when comparing polling data from different stages of the campaign, as the selectorate was not static, but growing in size and changing in ideological composition between May and the close of registration in August.

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Table 1: Nominations for Labour Leadership Candidates

	MPs	MEPs	CLPs	Trade unions	Socialist societies
Burnham	68 (29.3%)	4	111	3	0
Cooper	59 (25.4%)	12	109	2	1
Kendall	41 (17.7%)	2	18	0	1
Corbyn	36 (15.5%)	2	152	6	2

Sources: BBC, 2015a; New Statesman, 2015.

Note: Not all eligible individuals/organisations nominated a candidate.

Table 2: Labour Leadership Election 2015

	Full members		Affiliated supporters		Registered supporters		Total	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
Corbyn	121,751	49.6	41,217	57.6	88,449	83.8	251,417	59.5
Burnham	55,698	22.7	18,604	26.0	6,160	5.8	80,462	19.0
Cooper	54,470	22.2	9,043	12.6	8,415	8.0	71,928	17.0
Kendall	13,601	5.5	2,682	3.7	2,574	2.4	18,857	4.5
Total	245,520	100.0	71,546	100.0	105,598	100.0	422,664	100.0
Turnout %	83.5		48.5		93.0		76.3	

Source: Labour Party, 2015.

Table 3: Political Experience of Labour Leadership Candidates

	Years as MP	Years as Govt frontbencher (cabinet)	Years as Opp. frontbencher (sh. cabinet)	Total years as frontbencher (cab./sh. cab.)	Prominent frontbench positions
Burnham	14	5 (3)	5 (5)	10 (8)	Sec. state health
Cooper	18	11 (2)	5 (5)	16 (7)	Sec. state work & pensions; sh. home sec.; sh. foreign sec.
Corbyn	32	0	0	0	None
Kendall	5	-	4 (0)	4 (0)	Sh. minister care & old people

Table 4: Selectors' Motives for Supporting Each Candidate

		Supporters of...			
S/he...	All	Burnham	Cooper	Kendall	Corbyn
Will be best opposition to Conservatives	53	(1) 52	(1) 70	(2) 59	(4) 43
Has best policies for country	49	29	(3) 35	(3) 36	(1) 70
Has best policies for people like me	36	(4) 30	23	21	(3) 49
Has best chance of winning in 2020	34	(2) 49	(2) 58	(1) 73	5
Is a break from New Labour & Blair years	33	12	7	8	(2) 65
Will unite party	22	(3) 48	(4) 34	10	5
Is a break from Ed Miliband's Labour Party	9	5	4	(4) 31	8

Source: YouGov, 2015c.

Notes: All figures % except those in parenthesis, which indicate ranking of motives for each candidate's supporters, defined as respondents saying they would give first-preference vote to that candidate. Some motives and 'don't knows' excluded from table.

Q. Which two or three, if any, of the following are the main reasons you will vote for [chosen candidate]? (Select up to three)

Table 5: Preferences of Labour Selectorate by Time of Joining

	All	Joined selectorate		
		Since 2015 election	After 2010 election	Before 2010 election
Corbyn	60	62	49	44
Burnham	19	19	23	25
Cooper	17	15	23	25
Kendall	5	4	6	6

Source: YouGov, 2015e.

Note: All figures %.

Table 6: Selectors' Beliefs about Why Labour Lost 2015 General Election

	All	Burnham	Cooper	Kendall	Corbyn
			Supporters of…		
Failed to defend the good things it did in government before 2010	60	57	65	51	67
Didn't provide clear enough alternative to coalition's austerity policies	57	49	56	40	73
Lost touch with working class roots	39	36	23	13	64
Failed to answer charge that minority Labour govt would be propped up by SNP	33	37	45	43	22
Ed Miliband wasn't good enough leader	31	34	43	51	19
Not tough on immigration & welfare spending	9	10	10	21	3
No plausible policy for reducing deficit	8	10	9	24	3

Source: YouGov, 2015c.

Notes: All figures %. Supporters of each candidate are those respondents saying they would give first-preference vote to that candidate. Some reasons (cited by <10% of respondents) and 'don't knows' excluded from table.

Q. Here are some reasons that different people have put forward for Labour losing the recent General Election. Which two or three do you think were the most important reasons? (Select up to three)

Table 7: Voters' Views of Which Candidates Would or Would Not Make a Good Labour Leader

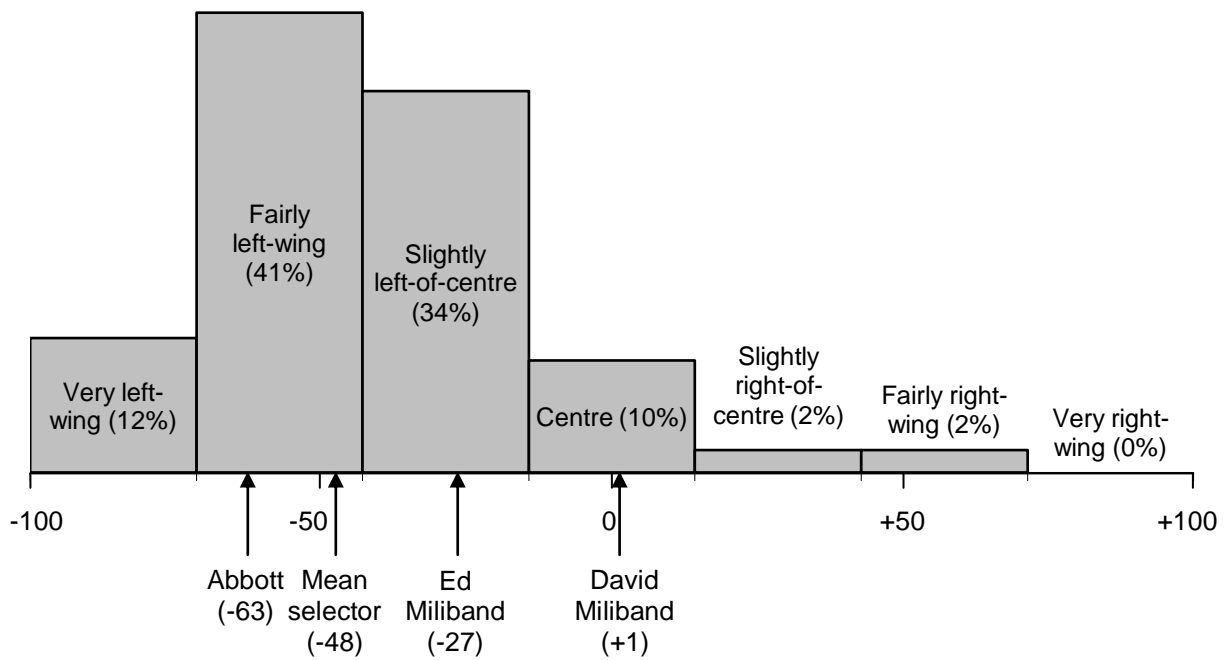|	Would	Would not	Neither	Don't know*	Net 'would'
Andy Burnham	22	14	8	56	+8
Chuka Umunna	21	14	5	60	+7
Yvette Cooper	18	20	8	55	-2
Liz Kendall	5	9	5	81	-4
Tristram Hunt	9	15	8	69	-6
Mary Creagh	2	8	5	85	-6
Angela Eagle	2	11	6	81	-9

Source: YouGov, 2015a.

Notes: All figures %. Respondents were representative sample of UK voters.

Q. Do you think each of the following would or would not make a good leader of the Labour Party?

* Full option was 'don't know, or don't know enough about this person to say'.
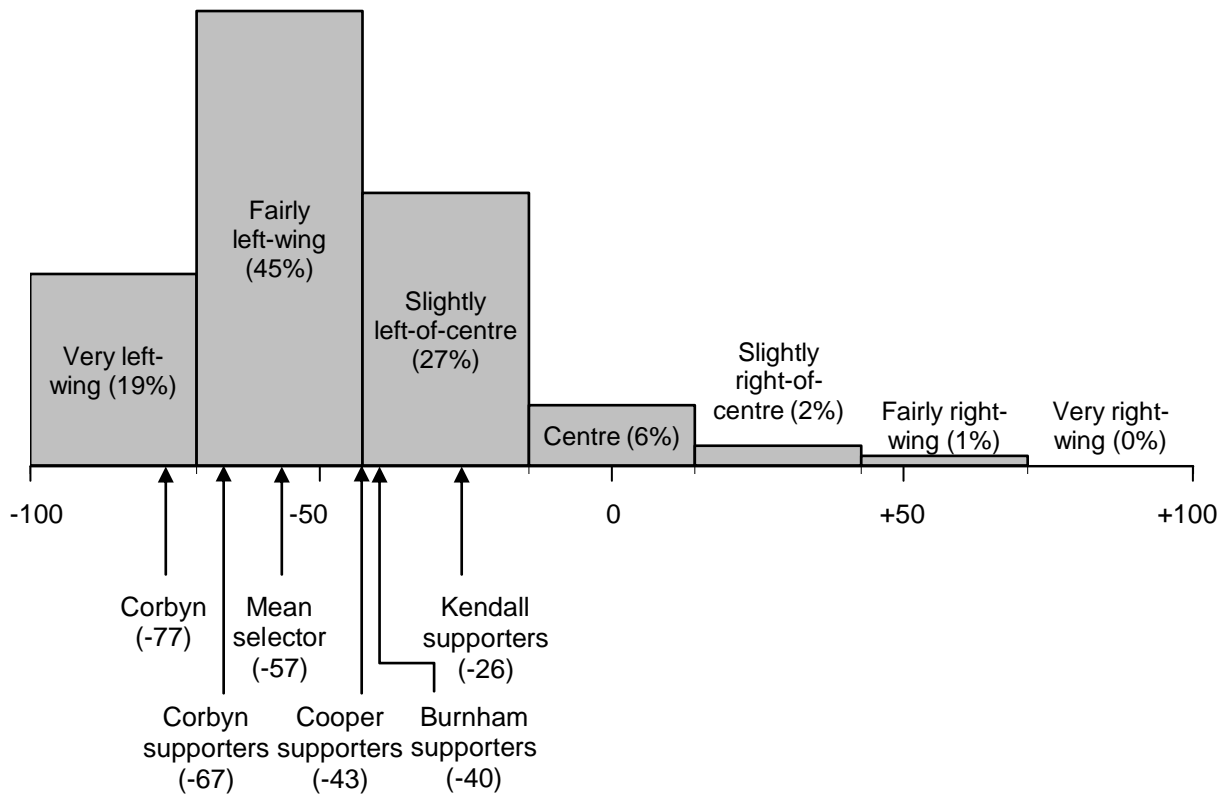
Figure 1: Ideological Distribution of Labour Selectors in 2010 (Self-Placements)

Sources: YouGov, 2010a, 2010b.

Notes: Selectors are Labour and trade-union members (no data for MPs/MEPs). Positions for Abbott and Miliband brothers are mean placements by selectors. Distributions of selectors recalculated to exclude 'don't knows'.

Figure 2: Ideological Distribution of Labour Selectorate in 2015 (Self-Placements)

Sources: YouGov, 2015f, 2015g (figures recalculated by author – original net figures inaccurate).

Figure 3: Percentage of Parliamentary Seats Won by UK Parties, 1997-2015