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Candidate selection in Northern Ireland: a cold house for women?

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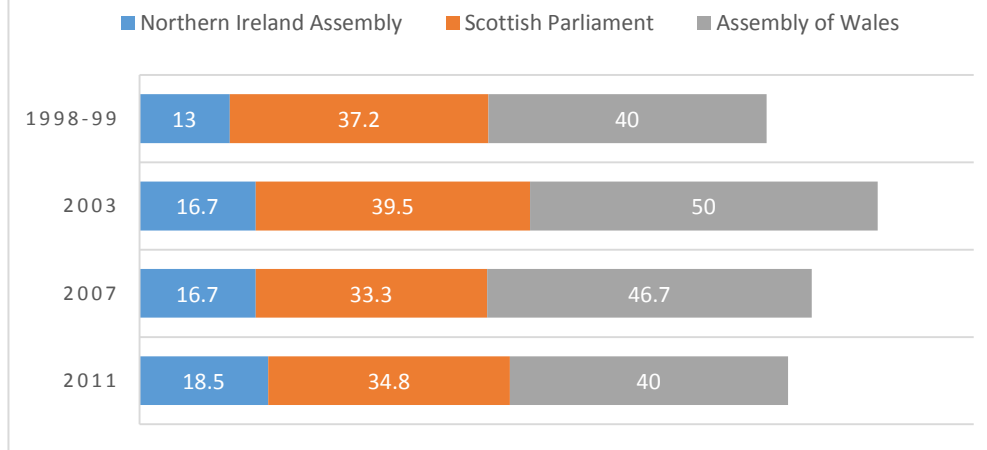
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Introduction

Gender represents a key determinant of access to political office in Northern Ireland. In line with OFMDFM's Gender Equality Strategy (2006-2016), improving the levels of women involved in politics at all levels has been a priority issue for the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive in the 2011-2016 mandate. In 2015 the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) published its *Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly* which contained 29 recommendations for political parties, the Assembly and Executive to address the under-representation of women in politics. This report was underpinned by a cross-party consensus that, 'more needed to be done by political parties to address the current gender imbalance in the Northern Ireland Assembly and to encourage more women into politics' (AERC, 2015: 14).

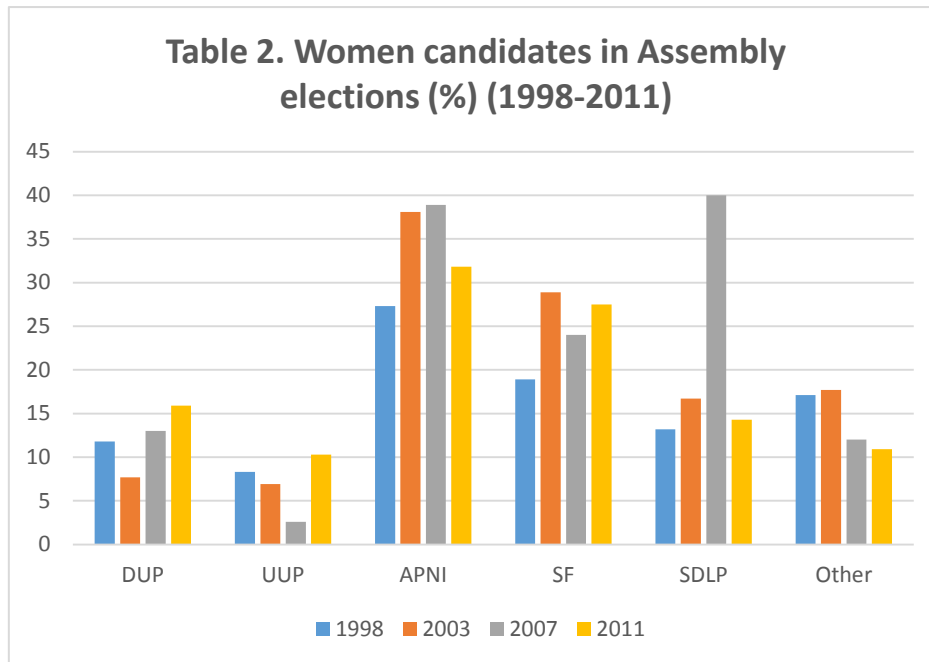
The Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) has been described as 'one of the most unequal legislatures in western Europe' (*Belfast Telegraph*, 10 March 2015). By both regional and international standards, the extent of political gender disparity in Northern Ireland is remarkable. Since the establishment of devolved power-sharing in 1998, 69 women have been elected to the NIA – 16% of the total number of MLAs. Women's representation in the NIA has not broken the 25 per cent mark and the institution has lagged considerably far behind other devolved assemblies in the United Kingdom (see Table 1.). Within a European context, minus the exception of the Italian regional legislatures, the NIA has the lowest female representation of comparable devolved institutions (Potter, 2013: 3). For an international comparison, the NIA in its current composition (21.3% women) would rank 80th in the world, if it were a national parliament (IPU, 2016).

**Table 1. Women in devolved assemblies
(%) (1998-2011)**



Political gender inequality is a multi-dimensional crisis, forged by a range of cultural, socioeconomic and political forces which differ in respective strength in individual contexts (see Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Galligan and Tremblay, 2005). The classic obstacles to women’s political participation and representation are often described as the 5 C’s – cash, confidence, childcare, culture and candidate selection (Kenworthy and Malami, 1999). Although analytically distinct, they interact with each other to distort the opportunities for women with ambitions to enter political life (Galligan, 2014). This paper’s primary focus is on one of these five obstacles: candidate selection. Given that 75 per cent of the total number of candidates contesting the 2011 Assembly elections represented the DUP, UUP, SDLP, Sinn Féin or Alliance, the paper considers candidate selection in these five parties.

As is the case in most modern democratic countries, Northern Ireland’s political parties exercise virtually unrivalled control over legislative recruitment. Through their role as ‘gatekeepers’ they determine not only the volume of candidates but also the identity of those standing for election. Candidate selection, therefore, holds great significance for representative democracy, as it determines the degree to which candidates are demographically, geographically and ideologically representative (see Cross and Gauja, 2014; Hazan and Rahat, 2010: ch. 7; Caul Kittilson, 2006). Historically, we can observe a disparity in the gender of candidates contesting Assembly elections for the main parties in Northern Ireland (see Table 2).



Source: Electoral Office for Northern Ireland; ARK Northern Ireland

Party procedures

All five parties adopt a candidate selection procedure with multiple stages – combining both local and central selectorates (see Appendix).¹

Democratic Unionist Party

In the Democratic Unionist Party, the first stage of selection sees Party Officers (i.e. the central party leadership) compile a shortlist of ‘competent candidates’ eligible for selection. Such ‘short-listing’ (which involves submission of a CV and interview) is a recent development, introduced following a review of the party’s organisational structures in 2013. Once this list of ‘pre-approved’ candidates is compiled, the process then, if necessary, becomes twin-track in nature. Party Officers determine how many candidates will be selected by party members in the relevant Constituency Association and how many will be selected by the central party leadership. Such an approach is established practice in the DUP. However, the present arrangements – introduced in 2013 – differ slightly to those previously adopted by the party. In all Assembly elections since the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998, and in constituencies where the party opted to field multiple candidates, the DUP allowed for the party centre to select no more than one candidate and the party members no less than one candidate (Matthews, 2014). The removal of this cap on the number of Assembly candidates possibly ‘appointed’ by the central party leadership is, therefore, a notable development as it extends the capacity to which the party centre can ensure the selection of candidate(s) separate from any grassroots determination. Finally, a third stage of selection involves all candidates being ratified by the CEC.

¹ See Matthews (2015) for an in-depth historical overview of candidate selection procedures in Northern Ireland. The synopses provided in this paper are adapted from this research.

Alliance Party

The first stage of selection in the Alliance Party involves a central party committee screening prospective candidates – this can entail an interview process. Successful candidates are then added to a central list of ‘Approved Candidates’ and proceed to face a final selectorate of members within the relevant constituency association. Once through the second stage of selection candidates do not require any further ratification or endorsement by another party body. This two-stage approach to selection has been unchanged since the party’s foundation in 1970.

Social Democratic and Labour Party

The first stage of selection in the SDLP consists of a central party committee screening prospective candidates. This short-listing stage was first introduced in 2004 (and has been used consistently since 2011) and can involve an interview process. The second stage sees candidates selected by the party membership of the relevant constituency association. The SDLP is the only main party to have witnessed a ‘democratization’ of its selectorate for Assembly elections. Between 1971 and 2000 the party selected its candidates at a convention of delegates appointed by local branches within the respective constituency association. There are no post-selection ratification measures adopted by the SDLP. However, the reforms of 2004 also saw the party adopt a new clause granting the party leader the power to add candidates to the official party ticket. While noteworthy this new power does not allow for the party leadership to overturn a decision taken by the party membership.

Ulster Unionist Party

The first stage of selection in the UUP consists of a central party committee short-listing prospective candidates. Such short-listing, modelled on the procedure used by the UK Conservative Party, can involve several assessment exercises and a panel interview. Shortlisted candidates then face a selectorate comprised of party members of the relevant constituency association. At this stage members will, if required (and possible), select twice the number of candidates which the party proposes shall stand in the election. At this stage, if the party leadership deems that the candidates selected by party members ‘do not entirely represent the Party’s needs’ they can nominate an additional candidate(s) to go forward to the final selection stage. This final stage sees all candidates – those selected by party members or nominated by the leadership – interviewed by Party Officers, who determine who the final candidate(s) shall be.

The candidate selection process adopted by the UUP is, at least in a formal sense, the most centralized of all the main Northern Irish parties. While it affords party members a role in selecting candidates it contains several provisions for both central oversight and intervention from the party leadership. Such a process represents a significant departure from previous practice. Prior to 2007, candidates were selected at a convention of party members resident within the constituency association – with selection conducted on a ‘One Member One Vote’ basis. There was no other selectorate involved and no explicit provisions for the central party leadership to involve itself in the process. Candidate selection was, therefore, highly localised.

Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin candidates are selected by the party membership of local branches within the relevant constituency area. Unlike the other main parties, Sinn Féin does not shortlist or ratify candidates before they face selection by the party membership. Once nominated by the membership candidates are then forwarded to the Party Executive. This stage of selection involves the proposed candidates facing an interview committee, a practice which dates back to 1997. Following interview, the Party Executive either ratifies a candidate or vetoes their

selection, in the latter case ruling that another selection convention take place. This overall process of membership selection followed by ratification by the central party leadership represents long-standing practice in Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin is also the only main party to adopt an internal gender quota for candidate selection, stipulating that at least 30 per cent of those on final candidate lists should be women.

Candidate selection in Northern Ireland: overview

Although key differences exist between the parties, the general picture of candidate selection in Northern Ireland is of a process which combines a local membership-led determination with opportunities for central party leadership involvement. All parties attempt to strike a balance between a locally and centrally-taken decision. An integral stage of the process for all parties is that of a ‘closed party primary’ involving ordinary party members from the constituency association (on a ‘One Member One Vote’ basis). Indeed, Northern Ireland’s main parties have always privileged party members with a high degree of influence in the process. There is a long history and tradition of grassroots membership involvement in candidate selection. For members of all parties, candidate selection is a crucial selective-based incentive; involvement in the process is essential for encouraging and sustaining a high rate of grassroots activism, which itself is vital to parties’ electoral campaigning and fundraising purposes.

Crucially, such ‘localised’ or decentralised selection could be serving to disadvantage women in Northern Ireland’s main parties and maintain existing gender representation patterns. Research reveals the negative relationship between highly decentralised selection procedures and the representation of women (as well as other underrepresented social groups) on candidate slates (Caul Kittelson, 2006; Hazan and Rahat, 2010: 114). Parties with localised (or decentralised) and inclusive selectorates find it difficult to implement and coordinate effective strategies aimed at producing a final ticket of socially representative candidates. Unless tempered or offset by corrective mechanisms aimed at ensuring gender equality, such as quotas or intervention by central bodies, then inclusive, decentralized selectorates are more likely to produce unrepresentative candidate slates.

However, while undoubtedly privileged in the process, Northern Ireland’s parties do not bestow complete responsibility for candidate selection onto rank-and-file members. Opportunities exist for central party leaderships to regulate the process. All of the parties formally adopt stages designed to ‘shortlist’, ‘screen’ or ‘approve’ candidates at a central level. Indeed, in terms of organisational change, there has been a distinct *centralisation* of candidate selection methods in recent years. Northern Ireland’s parties have adopted more exclusive procedures which allow for increased central oversight and intervention. With the exception of the Alliance Party, all of the main parties have reformed their formal procedures in the past two decades to afford the party centre greater control and influence. The testimony of party elites reveals that the (increasingly) centralised nature of candidate selection in Northern Ireland is indicative of a commitment by the parties to present the electorate with more representative candidate tickets (e.g. gender, youth and geographical spread). The involvement of the party centre enables consideration of the ‘bigger picture’ and the adoption of a more holistic approach to the process in respect of representation.

This centralisation trend – with party leaders acquiring greater decision-making authority vis-à-vis party members – should, therefore, come as a welcome development to those keen on seeing more women nominated to candidate lists in NI. The parties’ selection procedures have, from a theoretical standpoint at least, become more ‘women friendly’ in recent years. A more exclusive approach to selection – while appearing ‘undemocratic’ to some – is an important means of seeing greater numbers of women selected. In terms of system-level democracy then this centralising trend within the parties could be considered a positive development. While Sinn Féin remains the only party with formal measures designed to achieve gender

equality among its elected representatives, the SDLP, UUP and DUP have adopted procedures which allow for the representative nature of their candidate slates to be improved. These parties now possess 'protective' measures which allow (potentially) for party leaders to influence the representative profile of candidate slates through a means other than a quota or other positive discrimination mechanisms.

The issue of candidate supply

From a gender equality standpoint, this trend towards a more strategic, centralised approach to candidate selection is encouraging. However, candidate selection is of course also a question of supply. For women to be selected, they must first seek selection. Research demonstrates that all parties in Northern Ireland attest to suffering from a weak supply of female aspirants (at all levels of government, including local council) and the low levels of women involved in politics have been attributed to this dearth of supply (Matthews, 2014; see also AERC, 2015).

The reluctance of women to seek political office in Northern Ireland owes to a combination of individual-focused and macro socio-cultural factors. Research suggests that the dearth of female representation is largely due to a long-standing conservative and masculinised political culture that reinforces traditional gender-based social roles (Matthews, 2014: 619; Galligan and Knight, 2011). A political career in Northern Ireland is, to borrow a phrase from one leading gender scholar, 'coded as male' (Lovenduski, 2005: 46). Testimony from women within the main parties also reveals a chronic lack of self-confidence among female activists when it comes to putting themselves forward for selection. Many women regard themselves as lacking the required skills to stand for selection (Matthews, 2014). On these and other factors which negatively impact women's proclivity to participate in electoral politics the AERC report on 'Women in Politics' contains numerous recommendations as to how they could be effectively tackled. Crucially, these recommendations, which are mainly exhortative in nature, remove responsibility for increasing women's representation from individual women and place it squarely on the shoulders of political parties, the Assembly and the Executive.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland has yet to witness an election which could be described as a 'gender earthquake'. As others have noted, much of the promise of devolution for advancing political gender equality has failed to bear fruit (see Side, 2009; Braniff and Whiting, 2016; Barnett Donaghy, 2004: 30-2). Given the low numbers of women selected by the main parties to date, the 2016 Assembly election is unlikely to see a great leap in terms of political gender equality. Responsibility for addressing this issue rests primarily with political parties, not least their approach to candidate selection and the support and encouragement they provide to their women members to seek selection.

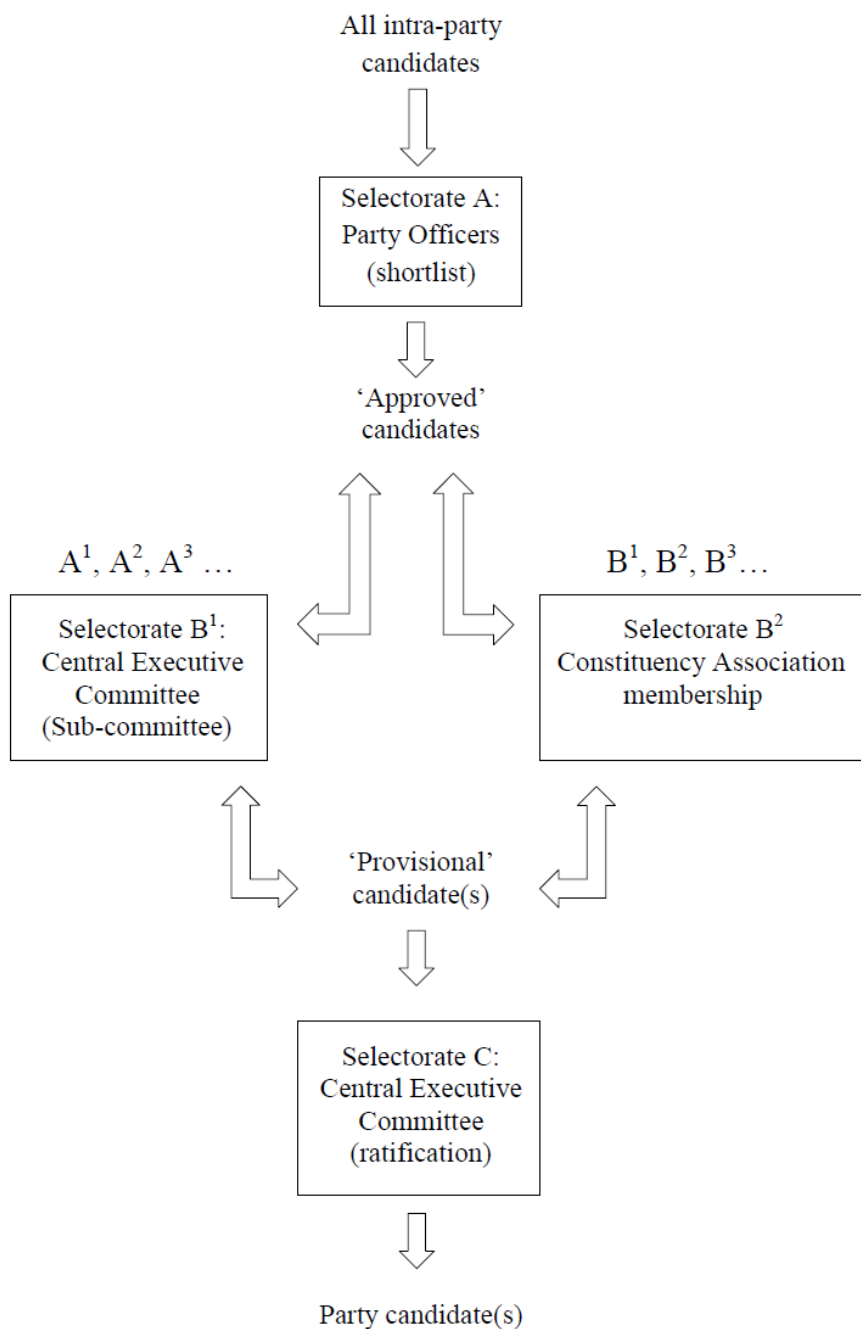
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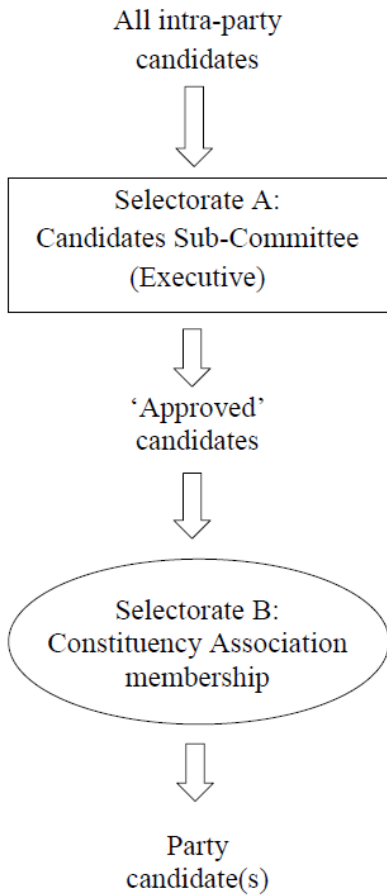
Appendix

Candidate selection procedures for Northern Ireland Assembly elections

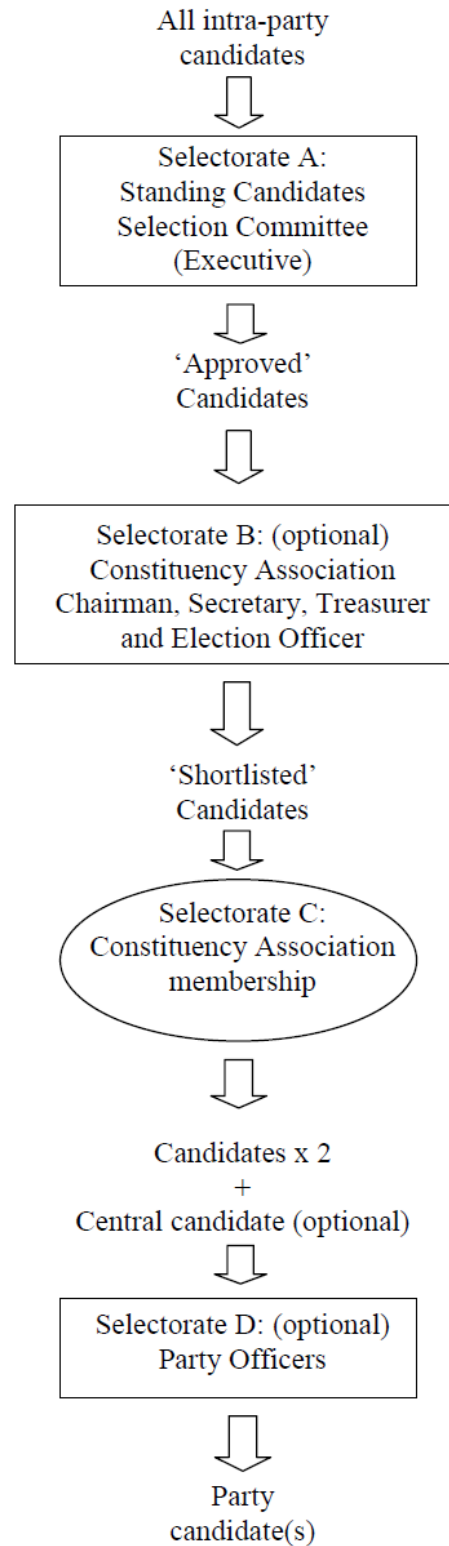
Democratic Unionist Party



Alliance Party

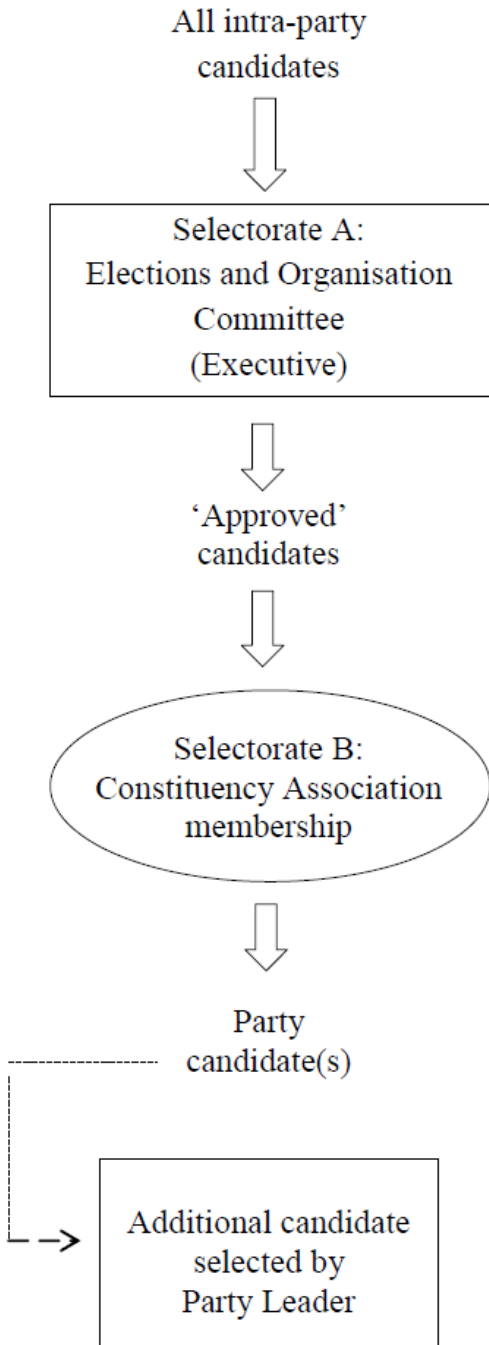


Ulster Unionist Party



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Social Democratic and Labour Party



Sinn Féin

