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Gendered Candidate Selection and the Representation of Women in Northern Ireland

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In an attempt to account for the exceptionally low levels of female representation in Northern Ireland, this paper provides an analysis of the contemporary candidate selection procedures of the region's five main political parties. Drawing on evidence gathered from 29 elite interviews, plus official internal party documents, the study finds that the localised nature of the parties' selection procedures may disadvantage women aspirants. Also important are 'supply-side' factors influencing legislative recruitment and female participation rates, namely the strongly embedded social norm of female domestic responsibility, a masculinised political culture and the lack of confidence of potential female candidates.

Despite greater moves towards achieving gender equality in other spheres (Inglehart and Norris, 2003, pp. 3–7; Scott *et al*., 2010) the political underrepresentation of women in modern states persists, with the most recent estimate showing that women comprise just 19.8% of the world's parliamentarians (IPU, 2012). Accounting for such disparity is a complex and difficult task. The literature suggests that political gender inequality is essentially a multi-dimensional crisis, forged by a medley of cultural, socioeconomic and political forces (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995) which often combine or overlap and can differ in respective strength in individual case studies (see Galligan and Tremblay, 2005; Sawer *et al*, 2006; Gelb and Palley, 2010). Unsurprisingly, such convolution poses a problem for analysts when determining causality, as Tremblay (2008, p. 9) asks: 'do cultural factors precede socioeconomic and political factors, or is it the opposite?' In the last two decades, however, a global research trend has emerged that asserts the primacy of political or institutional factors—such as electoral systems, party organisation or party procedures for the selection of candidates—over cultural and socio-economic variables in producing and maintaining political gender inequality (Lovenduski and Norris, 1994; Inglehart and

Norris, 2003, p. 132; Caul Kittelson, 2006; Dahlerup, 2006; Tremblay, 2008, p. 15). As Stokes (2005, p. 63) explains: 'In the search for understanding why there are relatively few women elected to the majority of parliaments, analysis from around the world comes down firmly on the side of political factors'.

This trend is certainly evident in the case of the UK (Mackay, 2004, p. 103), where comparatively extensive attention has been paid to the key institutional variable of candidate selection. In a comprehensive summary of the research conducted on gender and political representation in the UK, Mackay (2004) shows that from the mid-1990s onwards political parties have assumed 'centre stage' (p. 105) in the search for understanding political gender inequality, with several studies focused exclusively on how 'gender plays out in the seemingly gender-neutral institutions, practices and rules that comprise candidate selection' (see Squires and Wickham-Jones, 2001; Elgood *et al.*, 2002; Shepherd-Robinson and Lovenduski, 2002; Mackay, 2004, p. 106). Sustained in part by the wider debate on the role and impact of gender quotas (Hazan and Rahat, 2010, pp. 5–6), as well as the signing of the 2002 Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act which permits the use of equality guarantees by political parties (Childs, 2002), gendered candidate selection represents a vibrant sub-topic within the UK representation literature. Several studies have analysed the selection procedures adopted by parties in England, Scotland and Wales in respect of the low levels of female representatives (Norris and Lovenduski, 1993; Bradbury *et al.*, 2000; Harrison, 2005; Campbell *et al.*, 2006; Evans, 2008; Childs *et al.*, 2008) and a more recent House of Common's Speaker's report on political representation further highlighted the culpability of the main British political parties' selection procedures in maintaining political gender inequality.[1]

Absent from the UK literature, however, is a gendered analysis of the contemporary candidate selection procedures adopted by the main political parties in Northern Ireland. The few studies which have addressed candidate selection (or legislative recruitment) in the region interrogate party commitments to intra-party gender recognition strategies (Wilford and Galligan, 1999; Ward, 2004), such as the implementation of positive discrimination measures (Miller *et al.*, 1996), as opposed to how the procedural 'demands' or institutional makeup of selection might affect the levels of female candidates. Furthermore, attempts to account for the levels of female political representation focus primarily on the systemic obstacles, or 'the opportunity/constraint structure' (Wilford, 1999, p. 84), which determine the 'supply' of women candidates. Foremost among these 'supply-side' obstacles are an aggressive, masculinised political culture and the

[1]House of Commons Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation), paragraph 11, p. 48. Final report published 11 January 2010, available at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/239/23902.htm.

prevalence of traditional conservative gender-based social roles. That so little attention has been paid to the parties' selection methods is surprising, not least because of the well-established link between candidate selection and representation (Crotty, 1968, p. 20; Gallagher and Marsh, 1988, pp. 12–14; Caul-Kittelson, 2006, p. 2; Hazan and Rahat, 2010, p. 107). 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, acting as 'the true superintendents of the parliamentary representation of women' (Tremblay, 2008, p. 12). In short, candidate selection represents an important point of inquiry for those interested in improving levels of female representation in Northern Ireland.

This study, therefore, addresses this need for a procedural, gendered analysis of candidate selection in the case of Northern Ireland by casting new light on the selection procedures implemented by the five main political parties in the region. The adopted approach—one utilised to great effect in other 'neo-institutional' studies of candidate selection and elite recruitment (see Gallagher and Marsh, 1988; Caul-Kittelson, 2006; Kenig, 2009*a*,*b*; Hazan and Rahat, 2010)—focuses on certain key aspects of the methods of selection in Northern Ireland in a bid to determine whether they might disadvantage female aspirants and serve to replicate gendered representation patterns. These include candidacy requirements, the inclusivity of the selectorate and the decentralised nature of selection. The study also interrogates potential 'supply-side' problems, most notably the cultural context which may hinder female participation in politics.

1. Data

This paper draws on data gathered from 29 semi-structured, elite interviews conducted in 2009 with elected representatives and party officials from Northern Ireland's five main political parties. Those interviewed included 7 from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, respectively, 5 from the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), 6 from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and 4 from Alliance. The sample contained 12 local councillors, 11 MLAs, 5 senior party officials and 1 non-elected party representative. The gender breakdown was 22 women and 7 men. Although the primary focus of the study is on women's experiences with candidate selection, a decision was taken to interview men who were uniquely positioned to provide in-depth information on the selection process. On average, interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and, in an attempt to encourage candid discussion about the issue of gender discrimination and other potential discrepancies at the stage of selection, those interviewed were assured of anonymity. Previous studies of candidate

selection detail a notoriously secretive process with respondents often reluctant to discuss what is regarded as a sensitive intra-party matter (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988; Lundell, 2004, p. 26). Furthermore, political elites in Northern Ireland have been shown to be preternaturally 'defensive' in the face of external scrutiny or requests for intra-party information (McEvoy, 2006). This study, therefore, focused on a potentially obstinate research topic: one in which a universally secretive process is policed by especially tight-lipped elites. Finally, as well as interview data, the study also utilises information on selection contained in party rulebooks obtained by the author from official party sources in 2009.

2. Extent of female under-representation in Northern Ireland

As Table 1 clearly shows, female under-representation is entrenched across all levels of government in Northern Ireland. At a district council level, 23% of available seats are currently held by women (Ark, 2011). Indeed, in local government contests between 1993 and 2011 only 17.6% of those elected have been women, with none of the main parties achieving a gender balance. Gender inequality has proved even more fixed in higher office. For instance, the recent 2010 general election saw women secure 4 of the 18 Westminster seats; a record return construed by some commentators as a success for those pursuing gender equality (Tonge and Evans, 2010, p. 744). Lauding such a result is justified on the grounds that it virtually doubled the overall number of women elected to Westminster since 1983 to nine, a paltry 7.3% of MPs. Furthermore, of the UK's

Table 1. Female elected representatives in Northern Ireland 1983–2011 (% total number of elected representatives per party)

Party	Local government (1993–2011) *n* (%)	NI assembly (1998–2011) *n* (%)	Westminster (1983–2010)[a] *n* (%)	European Parliament (1984–2009) *n* (%)
DUP	107 (15.7)	11 (8.9)	2 (6.1)	1 (16.7)
Sinn Féin	106 (21.3)	27 (27.3)	2 (11.1)	2 (100)
UUP	103 (13.7)	6 (6.7)	2 (4.3)	0 (0)
SDLP	121 (21.9)	15 (20.8)	1 (5)	0 (0)
Alliance	61 (32.6)	7 (25.9)	1 (100)	0 (0)
Other	14 (5.8)	3 (14.3)	1 (25)	0 (0)
Total	512 (17.6)	69 (16)	9 (7.3)	3 (16.7)

Source: Author's calculations based on the information available at https://www.ark.ac.uk.
[a]Including UUP as UCUNF in 2010 general election.

four devolved regions, Northern Ireland is rooted to the bottom of the gender league table. In the current regional Assembly only 20 (18.5%) seats are held by women (Ark, 2011). Despite the optimism of some accounts (Barnett Donaghy, 2004, pp. 30–32), the anticipated positive effects of devolution, as clearly evidenced in post-devolution Scotland and Wales (Sawer *et al.*, 2006), have largely failed to emerge in Northern Ireland. Four Assembly elections have seen 69 women elected, just 16% of the total number of MLAs overall.[2] At the European Parliamentary level women have also struggled for representation, making up just 16.7% of MEPs between 1984 and 2009. Sinn Fein's 100% female representation at this level is remarkable, with Bairbre de Brún the party's sole MEP since 2004.[3] A final point worthy of note is the clear difference that exists between the main parties in terms of female representation. There is a neat ethno-national split, with the two unionist parties, the DUP and UUP, trailing behind their nationalist counterparts, Sinn Féin and the SDLP. This split is particularly stark at the Assembly level, with the combined number of female nationalist MLAs (42) more than double that of the two unionist parties (17). The party with the best overall record on women's representation is the non-confessional Alliance Party.

Looking beyond the composition of government, the figures on female representatives are largely mirrored by the number of women candidates selected to contest elections in Northern Ireland (Table 2). Over a substantial time period the total percentage of female candidates at each of the four levels of government falls below 20%. In local government elections—a crucial entry point for those seeking future selection and election to higher office—women have comprised just 19.4% of candidates, with the UUP posting the worst record (15.2%) and the Alliance Party the best (33.4%). In the four Assembly elections to date, just 17.1% of candidates have been female. At Westminster and European elections women have also represented just 15.9 and 17.4% of approved candidates, respectively—percentages which are somewhat inflated by female candidates independent of the five main parties. Again, across all four levels, there is a clear difference in terms of female candidacy between the unionist and nationalist parties. This is perhaps best represented by figures from Assembly elections, with the DUP and UUP's combined tally of 32 female candidates less than half that of Sinn Féin and the SDLP's sum (67).

[2]These figures are correct at election; no account is taken of substitution or cooption between elections.

[3]Bairbre De Brún was replaced by Martina Anderson in May 2012, continuing Sinn Féin's 100% record at European level.

Table 2. Female candidates in Northern Ireland elections 1983–2011 (% total number of electoral candidates)

Party	Local government (1993–2011) *n* (%)	NI assembly (1998–2011) *n* (%)	Westminster (1983–2010) *n* (%)	European Parliament (1984–2009) *n* (%)
DUP	166 (17.4)	20 (12.3)	5 (6.1)	1 (16.7)
Sinn Féin	158 (22.6)	38 (25)	14 (12.5)	3 (37.5)
UUP	161 (15.2)	12 (7.6)	7 (6.4)	0 (0)
SDLP	197 (24.7)	29 (21.2)	23 (20)	0 (0)
Alliance	117 (33.4)	28 (33.7)	25 (24.8)	1 (20)
Other	131 (13.9)	48 (14.4)	39 (20.4)	5 (19.2)
Total	930 (19.4)	175 (17.1)	113 (15.9)	10 (17.5)

Source: Author's calculations based on the information available at: https://www.ark.ac.uk.

3. Candidate selection methods of Northern Ireland's political parties

Beginning with the degree of formality afforded to the selection process—a criterion identified in other similar studies (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988)—each of the parties possessed an official set of internal rules on selection which were standardised and implemented by party officials. Without exception, those interviewed made reference to a bureaucratised process with a transparent set format. Some respondents explained that, while ostensibly formalised, the process in the past has occasionally proved rather 'laissez-faire' (male UUP representative, interview, 27 July 2009) or has been 'short-circuited' (female DUP councillor (1), interview, 16 July 2009) to suit practical circumstances. Importantly, such inconsistency in observing formal guidelines was not considered a gendered obstacle by respondents. Instead these deviations were framed as acceptable and almost inevitable, affecting all candidates equally regardless of gender.

In terms of candidacy eligibility, full-party membership with relevant fees paid was a criteria set by each of the parties for prospective candidates. Alliance and Sinn Féin were the only parties who specified a required length of membership before a candidate could seek selection, 6 weeks and 12 months, respectively. Three of the parties—Alliance, UUP and Sinn Féin—also specified that in exceptional circumstances special dispensation could be made for non-members seeking selection. In terms of candidate profile none of the parties set any guidelines that either restricted or facilitated aspirants on gender grounds. An additional requirement contained in the Alliance, UUP and Sinn Féin constitutions was that prospective candidates sign a written pledge before seeking selection.

These pledges serve a dual purpose: to ensure candidates possess a degree of ideological affinity with the party and that they adhere to the party whip if elected. Although not specified in the party rulebook, the DUP has also introduced a similar requirement in the past (Gormley-Heenan and McGinty, 2008, p. 55), and pre-election contracts are a common feature of parties in the Republic of Ireland (Hazan and Rahat, 2010, p. 26). For the purpose of this study, none of those interviewed suggested that candidacy eligibility was a factor in explaining the low levels of female candidates or that supplementary requirements existed in addition to formal party rules. The foremost hurdle to candidacy concerns party membership and even that may be circumvented on occasion. In short, it is difficult to square the low levels of female candidates in Northern Ireland with the inclusive candidacy requirements set by the main political parties.

Notably, none of the parties' constitutions outlined a specific hustings format. Previous studies elsewhere have drawn attention to gender discrimination at this stage in the process, highlighting inconsistency or a gendered bias in the questions posed of female candidates (Shvedova, 1998, p. 46; Elgood *et al.*, 2002). However, respondents from all parties outlined a standard practice in which prospective candidates deliver a speech or presentation to the members in attendance and then answer questions from the floor. There was an admission that hustings can be a 'nerve wracking' (female DUP councillor (2), interview, 16 July 2009) or 'intimidating' experience (female SDLP councillor, interview, 24 July 2009). When asked to consider whether this format militated against female candidates in particular, however, respondents answered with an emphatic 'no'. One female Alliance MLA explained: 'Standing up in public and making an argument as to why you should be the candidate can be a very difficult thing for anyone to do. I don't think it is particular to being a woman' (interview, 11 June 2009). Another female DUP councillor stressed: 'a lot of the issues that happen are just general human nature issues. It is not gender specific … To lay all that at the gender door I think isn't right' (interview (2), 16 July 2009). It appears, from the information gathered in the interviews, that any claim of explicit gender bias at the hustings stage in Northern Ireland is unsubstantiated. The vast majority of respondents defended their selection procedures from any accusation of gender bias, providing little evidence of explicit gender discrimination on the part of the selectorate.

The absence of explicit gender discrimination at the hustings stage, however, does not rule out the possibility that discrimination manifests itself implicitly. Studies conducted elsewhere reveal how ostensibly gender-neutral recruitment processes are in actual practice gendered, as male characteristics are emphasised and often become the criteria in selecting candidates (Randall, 1987; Lovenduski and Norris, 1989; Shepherd-Robinson and Lovenduski, 2002; Krook, 2009). These masculinist norms and values exhibit a powerful discriminatory effect,

with party selectorates conditioned to regard women as unsuitable for public office. In the British context, Chapman (1993) illustrated how the typical profile of women candidates resembled those of 'losing men', while in a more recent study Evans documented how female aspirants in the Liberal Democrats, 'were expected to conform to certain male stereotypes of the role of politician' (2008, p. 599). Given that the women interviewed for this study were successful candidates it is difficult to arrive at a confident conclusion as to the masculinist attitudes, values and priorities of party selectorates in Northern Ireland. Future research should, therefore, focus on what Norris and Lovenduski dub 'the experience of losers' (1995, p. 12), profiling unsuccessful female candidates in the region's parties. What this study does provide, however, is some insight into how the perceived norms and values of party selectorates help determine the supply of female aspirants. Crucially, the male-gendered norms and values supposedly prized by selectorates are believed to impinge negatively on the numbers of women seeking selection. Female aspirants internalise the male-ordered assumptions underpinning candidate recruitment. This is central to Norris' consideration of 'feedback', whereby if successful candidates seem mainly affluent, white, male, middle-class professionals, those who do not fit this category may be discouraged from applying, on the grounds that they may be unlikely to succeed (1993, p. 329–30). The issue of supply in the case of Northern Ireland is explored in greater depth below.

4. Democratic Unionist Party

Selection in the DUP is a primarily localised process with intermittent central party involvement. For District Council and Westminster contests, selection is performed exclusively by members of the party in the relevant constituency using a secret ballot vote. Only full members of the party, as defined by the party rules, are entitled to vote. There is no vetting of candidates by any central agent prior to a selection meeting; those who satisfy the candidacy criteria are deemed eligible to seek selection. As one respondent said of the process: 'It is very much grass-roots membership picking who they want to represent them in any given level' (female DUP councillor, interview, 2 July 2009). In a final stage of selection, candidates are then ratified by the party's Central Executive Committee (CEC).

For Assembly contests, the DUP's process differs slightly in that there is greater room for central party involvement. In a constituency where the party has opted to field multiple candidates, guidelines allow for the CEC to select one candidate only and the Constituency Association no less than one candidate (DUP, 2009: Rule 16b). A secret ballot majority vote cast by full DUP members determines the Assembly candidate(s) selected by the Constituency Association. When

asked about this degree of involvement by central office, DUP respondents explained it was a measure designed to ensure the most high-profile candidates are safely selected, such as sitting MPs:

> It is to stop a situation which could happen with everybody going to a meeting and everybody voting for the weaker candidate because they think the MP is home and dry. [You] have to ensure that your high-profile people are there to bring others [running mates] in [elected] with you. (male DUP MLA, interview, 30 June 2009)

Another of those interviewed explained how the inclusion of this CEC 'wild-card' candidate was to accelerate selection of what is in betting terms a sure-thing (i.e. a high-profile incumbent). It was also framed as a protective measure to avoid 'the machinations where people group together to keep other folks out. It means that if somebody deserves to be there and is being shafted . . . there is a mechanism in place to make sure that [doesn't happen]' (female DUP councillor (2), interview, 16 July 2009). It is evident then that such a practice is designed to primarily benefit incumbents. Crucially, when the majority of incumbents are male, as is the case with the DUP, incumbency can represent a significant obstacle to enhancing representation (Hazan and Rahat, 2010, p. 113). On this point, the granting of 'automatic candidacy' to incumbents in the DUP has served to reinforce gender inequality amongst its electoral candidates at a Assembly level.

A final facet of selection worthy of note is that the DUP issues 'Party Guidelines on Gender' applicable to all selection meetings. These state that: 'there should be a representative character to every group and committee formed by its members' and that 'unless there are extenuating circumstances, it is not expected that any Association would nominate representatives from one gender only' (DUP, 2009: Rule 18). The affirmative nature of these guidelines is, however, tempered by the clarification that any gendered awareness 'should not be at the expense of the merit principle'.

5. Sinn Féin

According to formal party guidelines, Sinn Féin conducts a multi-stage selection process which could be categorised as localised recruitment (Sinn Féin, 2009: Rule 10). Each of those interviewed from the party stressed that selection was ultimately determined by '[the] people on the floor' (Sinn Féin party officer, interview, 9 July 2009). However, some evidence did emerge to suggest that the extent of central party involvement can at times prove considerable. Responsibility for the conduct of elections at all levels lies with the relevant Comhairle Cuige (Regional Executive) which summons a selection convention, the guidelines of which are subject to instruction from An Ard Chomhairle (National Executive).

The selection convention is overseen by an independent agent, appointed by central office, with candidates elected by full party members of the relevant constituency using secret ballot. All candidates are then subject to ratification by the National Executive.

It is at the point of ratification where Sinn Féin adopts the most strident approach to ensuring gender equality of any of Northern Ireland's main parties and also where we are afforded a glimpse of the influence of central office in the process. Although not specified in the party constitution, according to those interviewed (including two well-placed party officers), Sinn Féin is committed to achieving a minimum target of 30% for female candidates contesting winnable seats. This setting of a desirable target coincides with the party's overall commitment to achieving gender equality in elections to party positions, which includes gender equality provisos for every internal election and an imposed 50–50 gender balance on its National Executive. Several of those interviewed stressed how this minimum target was a key consideration when ratifying proposed candidates and failure to satisfy this requirement has led to the rejection of candidate lists in the past (Sinn Féin party officer, interview, 9 July 2009).

There appears, therefore, a willingness within Sinn Féin's central office to address political gender inequality, reflected in the party's high numbers of female elected representatives and candidates in comparison with its political rivals. The use of such measures also belies a comparatively substantial degree of centralised control of selection to its electoral rivals. In this respect Sinn Féin is somewhat atypical of the majority of contemporary British and Irish parties, who, as studies have revealed, initiate highly localised selection processes (Denver, 1988; Hopkin, 2001, p. 350; Galligan, 2003). By extension, for those interested in intra-party power dynamics (of which candidate selection is a prime indicator) central interference in recruitment also suggests a high level of compliance or subservience amongst Sinn Féin party members. Those interviewed registered little unease with central party occasionally interfering in a process devolved to the local party level. Nor, when pressed, did they allude to any widespread discontent among the party membership with such measures.

6. Social Democratic and Labour Party

Selection in the SDLP is a local affair. The guidelines contained in the party constitution and evidence from interviews indicated a multi-stage process where local bodies determine selection and central party performs a limited validation role. For District Council, Assembly and Westminster contests the first stage of selection is a convention attended by full party members within the relevant constituency. This convention is overseen by an independent chairperson appointed by the Elections and Organisation Committee (E&O), a body charged with

several campaigning duties. No further vetting of candidates takes place. Instructions for the hustings are determined by the E&O Committee and the candidate(s) will be elected by secret ballot using STV. Notably, provision is made for the Party Leader to add candidates to the official party ticket in any election. Central party involvement also extends to the ratification of proposed candidates by the party's Executive Committee, upon consultation with the E&O Committee. Besides these provisions, however, selection is primarily a decision taken locally.

The SDLP's gender equality measures concerning candidate selection are minimal. The sole provision for gender equality concerns selection at a district council level only, where the party constitution stipulates: 'Each District Executive must take all practical steps to ensure a gender balance if there are two or more candidates' (SDLP, 2009: Clause 18.8). Considering the localised nature of selection in the SDLP, a passive stance on ensuring gender equality is perhaps unsurprising. Those interviewed were keen to stress the democratised nature of selection in the party, with several expressing concern at greater central involvement in the process, prioritising local judgement above the promotion or pursuit of gender equality. When asked how local party branches might react to a greater centralisation of selection, respondents intimated the potential for internal conflict: '[the SDLP] is a very democratic party. They [branches and local members] would be far from happy' (female SDLP MLA, interview, 30 June 2009). One female SDLP councillor did, however, call for a greater engagement by central party in the process: 'I think it is [about] moving towards a bit more control at the centre. If you leave it [candidate selection] sometimes to local fiefdoms it can go belly-up' (interview, 16 April 2009). Protective branches unwilling to relinquish control over selection certainly fits the popular image—albeit one largely propagated by the media—of the SDLP as an ostensibly localised party.

7. Ulster Unionist Party

Another party with a notably decentralised structure is the UUP. The 'lack of central domination of party business' (Tonge and Evans, 2002, p. 61) within the oldest unionist party has been a well-documented feature (Tonge and Evans, 2002; Walker, 2004) and, along with the clear ideological factions that exist within its ranks, the autonomy enjoyed by its 18 local constituency associations has resulted in the party presenting a particularly fractured and ill-disciplined front, even in more recent times (Matthews, 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly, for much of the party's history, candidate selection was a highly localised process. However, in 2007—in reaction to a particularly disappointing performance in the 2007 Assembly elections (UUP MLA, interview, 11 June 2009)—the party introduced several constitutional amendments, including one

which wrought substantial reform to its candidate selection methods. To consider selection within the UUP, therefore, necessitates reflection on two distinct processes.

Prior to 2007 selection in the UUP was conducted almost totally by the local constituency associations. According to those interviewed, central office exercised little control over the process, with local associations representing 'semi-autonomous bodies who picked whomever they wanted' (UUP party officer, interview, 18 June 2009); 'independent little fiefdoms which essentially were controlled by a small group of men' (UUP representative, interview, 27 July 2009). Crucially, on the topic of gender discrimination, respondents reflected that the extremely localised nature of selection allowed for an 'old boy's network' or 'Buggin's turn' culture to structure selection and disadvantage women who sought selection (UUP party officer, interview, 18 June 2009). Several of those interviewed alluded to the predominance of 'the right handshake' (female UUP councillor, interview, 17 July 2009) within the party, a handshake of common identity between UUP men: 'For a very, very long time selection was done by men in an Orange Hall or in their Church Hall, and it was done by handshakes and any [Ulster] Unionist who tells you otherwise is essentially lying through their teeth' (female DUP councillor, interview, 2 July 2009). An assessment of the UUP's pre-2007 methods of selection, therefore, suggests that women who sought selection had to overcome some substantial obstacles. As one UUP party officer surmised, 'basically in truth a woman had very little chance of electoral success in the Ulster Unionist Party' (interview, 18 June 2009).

The programme of reform in 2007 triggered, however, in the words of one respondent, a 'remarkable turnaround' in how the UUP conducted selection for District Council, Assembly and Westminster contests. The first stage of selection now consists of an applicant seeking admission to a Central Candidates List (CCL) through undergoing a series of training and 'competency' exercises set by central party officers. Officers then decide if candidates are eligible to seek selection for part-time (local government) or full-time (Westminster and/or Assembly) office. All sitting councillors, MLAs, MPs and MEPs are automatically included on the CCL. At a constituency-level a formal hustings attended by full UUP members is convened and a vote cast by secret ballot. In a change to procedures prior to 2007, local associations are required to elect two candidates instead of one for each available candidacy. A newly formed bespoke Election Committee, consisting of four officers from central party and three from the relevant local association, elect a final candidate by simple majority vote; a decision then ratified by the UUP Executive Committee.

Such reform has, therefore, resulted in a substantial centralisation of the UUP's selection process, with the final vote cast by an exclusive selectorate with an in-built central party majority. One male UUP MLA explained: 'It is

clear [that] the authority lies with the final selection committee. There is no doubt about that' (interview, 11 June 2009). In terms of ensuring a more representative UUP candidate slate in future election contests this appears a positive development. With the realignment of power from the local periphery to the centre comes the opportunity, according to several of those interviewed, to avoid past mistakes and ensure a greater diversity of candidates. One UUP MLA explained:

> [The new procedures] will allow for more of an overview. Have we got an appropriate gender balance? . . . So when it comes to the final selection in every constituency we have more of an overview rather than simply allowing each individual constituency to democratically select the candidates independently and then potentially have the result that we had last time [2007 Assembly elections], where we didn't have a gender balance and we had a very poor mix. (interview, 11 June 2009)

Besides the potential impact on gender diversity, the changes wrought by the UUP are also intriguing in light of a contemporary trend in the internal organisation of political parties. In the last two decades a clear process of 'enhanced democratisation' (Mair, 1994, p. 15) has occurred within parties in Western democracies, whereby they are engaging in organisational innovation which grants their membership greater say in the selection of both its electoral candidates and party leadership (Kenig, 2009*a*, p. 434; Kenig, 2009*b*, p. 241; Cross and Blais, 2012). By recentralising candidate selection the UUP, therefore, represents a rare case of a political party 'undemocratising' its selection methods. However, as previous studies show, in order to placate the disgruntled party masses, the reassertion of central control over candidate selection is often offset by the accompanying democratisation of another decision-making process. In the case of the UUP, the 2007 reform programme also saw the introduction of 'One Member One Vote' for its leadership selection contests. Even with this sweetening of the pill, however, establishing central control over a process long devolved to the local level can be a politically difficult task, and the question remains how the UUP's historically strong local associations feel about such reform. One female UUP councillor did, however, offer some insight into the potential grumbling at the grassroots:

> I think it is wrong. The association members [will] have no say in the party. All we would be is fundraisers and the money that they pay into the party to be a member is of absolutely no meaning. So it is being completely taken away, the selection process from party members. They [central office] can foist somebody upon us and I just don't

> think that is democratic. You are undermining the people, the association members. (interview, 8 July 2009)

8. Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

The Alliance Party also implements a multi-stage selection process which despite certain elements of central control is primarily localised in nature. In a change from the other Northern Irish parties (with the exception of the UUP post-2007), candidate ratification occurs at the outset of the selection process, with a central Candidate Approval Committee verifying and interviewing prospective candidates. For the purpose of this study, this vetting process appears wholly concerned with issues of competency rather than facilitating or impeding candidates from particular societal groups. Once on the party's central list of approved candidates, eligible candidates for Westminster, Assembly or District Council elections attend a selection meeting, led by an independent, centrally appointed Chair and attended by all Alliance members resident within the relevant constituency. Those eligible to vote must satisfy minimum membership tenure of at least six weeks prior to the date of the notice of the meeting (Alliance, 2009). Candidates are preferentially elected by secret ballot for each vacancy, with no further ratification from any other party body required. On a further note, the party does not possess any specific selection guidelines on gender. The Alliance Party's selection process is, therefore, typical of Northern Ireland's parties in general (with the exception of the UUP post-2007), in that, despite some central involvement, it is primarily a decision taken by local constituency associations and the grassroots party membership. One party officer underscores that: 'once somebody is selected by their local association they are there' (interview, 16 April 2009).

9. Localised decision-making and women's representation

It is clear from the processes outlined above that candidate selection in Northern Ireland is—with the exception of the UUP post-2007 and to a lesser extent Sinn Féin—a highly localised and inclusive affair, where party members at the constituency level represent the key selectorate. In many ways, such decentralised selection could be serving to disadvantage women in Northern Ireland's main parties and maintain existing gender representation patterns. Several studies have stressed the negative relationship between highly inclusive, decentralised selection procedures and the representation of women (as well as other underrepresented social groups) on candidate slates. In a recent cross-national comparative study, Kittelson (2006) finds that higher women's representation positively correlates with centralised selection. Hazan and Rahat (2010, p. 114) also stress that

'smaller, exclusive selectorates are more capable of balancing representation', while Rahat (2007, p. 166) highlights in a separate study, 'the tendency between the fullest participation and the most comprehensive representation, since maximising the former may impinge upon the latter'. Parties with inclusive selectorates, as confirmed by those within the UUP, simply find it difficult to implement and coordinate effective strategies aimed at producing a final group of socially representative candidates. In such instances, party selectorates prioritise territorial local representation over all other types of representation, a choice clearly illustrated in the case of parties in the neighbouring jurisdiction of the Republic of Ireland (Gallagher, 2003; Marsh, 2005). Unless tempered or offset by corrective mechanisms aimed at ensuring gender equality, such as candidate quotas, then inclusive selectorates more often than not produce unrepresentative candidate slates. Notably, none of Northern Ireland's main political parties implement any formal gender quota for their electoral candidates, the choice of their inclusive selectorates going largely unchecked.

Inclusive and localised selection methods, where territorial local representation trumps gender representation, also inevitably entails the setting of the informal candidacy requirement of a track record in the party organisation and the local constituency. This criteria has been identified in cross-national studies elsewhere (Norris and Lovenduski, 1993, p. 377; Norris, 1997, p. 3; Pedersen *et al.*, 2007) and is addressed in the work highlighting the prominence of 'the local' in both British (Childs and Cowley, 2011) and Irish political parties (Gallagher, 1980; Weeks, 2008; Hazan and Rahat, 2010, p. 118). Evidence of party selectorates' predilection for 'local candidates' was also found in the case of Northern Ireland's parties. One SDLP MLA stated, 'it is important [for candidates] to be of the area' (interview, 8 April 2009); another UUP officer explained how prospective candidates were expected to 'go on the rubber chicken circuit' in the local association (interview, 18 June 2009); while one DUP councillor stressed that: 'a lot of it comes down to local issues. Do they [the selectorate] know you and are you going to put the work in on the ground' (interview, 2 July 2009). Crucially, for women the cultivation of an adequate local support base through long-time political activity is especially difficult, as they do not possess the resources—in terms of both time and money—to compete against better positioned male candidates. For that reason, the highly localised and inclusive nature of selection in Northern Ireland could be seen to discriminate against women.

Stressing this point further, with the exception of the UUP post-2007 the main parties also use proportional voting systems for selection which tend, by definition, to be highly personalised (Hazan and Rahat, 2010, p. 311). Respondents across all parties identified the prominence of the 'personal' or 'popular' vote, with candidates investing a large amount of time and effort into securing

support for their candidacy amongst the local selectorate. A key factor behind the changes made to the UUP's selection procedures, for instance, was to place a greater emphasis on a candidate's formal qualifications, thereby negating the strength of the local popular vote, which, according to several of those interviewed, had produced maverick candidates and impeded succession management. Several female respondents also echoed findings elsewhere that highly democratised selection along with incumbency strength can have a dulling effect on competitiveness (Rahat and Hazan, 2001; Riddell, 2003). A common picture emerged of non-competitive hustings, where incumbents seeking reselection rarely faced significant challenge. Several female respondents registered their frustration at facing the often insurmountable obstacle of the popular vote. Reflecting on several failed attempts to supplant a male incumbent with a formidable track record, one female SDLP councillor described selection as a 'demoralising' affair (interview, 24 July 2009). Another female SDLP councillor intimated: 'we have been calling for some time for a more formal process, almost like an interview, like a job, to make sure we get the best candidates' (interview, 16 April 2009). Another female DUP councillor explained:

> [In] my personal experience I don't think they [central party] exercise enough control. I think they could be a bit more discerning in terms of the criteria for the selection of candidates but unfortunately selection tends to be a popular vote. Although we did the whole hustings at the end of the day it wouldn't have mattered if the MLAs had stood at the front of the room and recited "Mary had a little lamb", it was a popular vote. (interview (1), 26 July 2009)

The emphasis placed on a candidate's experience and their close proximity with the local constituency, therefore, produces an 'incumbency effect' (Harrison, 2005, p. 89) or 'incumbency advantage'. In such circumstances reselection rates are extremely high, while increases in the number of elected opportunities for underrepresented groups move at a glacial pace (Darcy *et al.*, 1994). On the subject of incumbency Northern Ireland represents a particularly curious case. Not only are reselection rates consistently high in the province, but a large number of incumbents have held or continue to hold multiple mandates (Ark, 2011), meaning they occupy several governmental offices at the same time. It is even possible to refer to cases of politicians holding three mandates at once. Following the 2011 Assembly election, for example, 36 of Northern Ireland's 108 MLAs were also district councillors. That the majority of those holding multiple mandates have been male has undoubtedly helped the high level of gender inequality remain in stasis.

On a final note, given the importance of a local political track record in the eyes of party selectorates, it is perhaps unsurprising that this study also found evidence to suggest that local government service is an almost essential qualifying

criterion for candidates seeking selection to higher office (i.e. Assembly or Westminster). The value of local government service as a launch-pad to higher office has been identified in other case studies, including the UK (Mackay, 2004, p. 104; Wilson and Game, 2006). Most political careers begin at the local level (Norris and Lovenduski, 1993, p. 399), with District Councils framed as 'breeding grounds' for future MPs or the entry point to the political 'pipeline' (Duerst-Lahti, 1998, p. 15). For women in particular, local government service in Britain 'assumes importance as a necessary, if not sufficient, legitimating mechanism' for their entry into higher office (Hills, 1983, p. 40). Evidence gathered in this study also suggests that local government service is almost completely necessary for any candidate with aspirations to Assembly office:

> It would be very unusual for someone to come in at short notice and establish themselves as a candidate. You tend to have people who have been in local councils for a long, long time . . . Basically if you are not prepared to sit there and argue over where the new public loo is going to go or the dog-pound then you haven't proved yourself prepared to do the nitty-gritty to be an MLA. If you come through that with flying colours you have proved yourself able enough to be an MLA and also dedicated enough. (male DUP MLA, interview, 30 June 2009)

The most worrying figures then for those campaigning for gender equality in Northern Ireland at all levels of government should be both the low number of female representatives and candidates at a local government level. That this realm of government remains dominated by male politicians is depriving women of satisfying a central candidacy criterion set by party selectorates who value territorial local representation above all. This reinforces a point made by Galligan and Wilford (1999, p. 136) that local government in Northern Ireland represents 'a key site for the development of women's political careers, but one that remains largely unexploited'. What is more, the paucity of women seeking selection to or residing in local government has a clearly identifiable knock-on effect for gender equality in higher office. To reference the previously mentioned analogy, there appears something of a blockage in the political 'pipeline' for women in Northern Ireland.

10. Supply-side factors: 'a problem in the pool'?

The localised nature of the main parties' processes could be presented as an institutional barrier to improving gender representation in Northern Ireland. Equally, however, it could be argued that democratised selection cannot be considered a comprehensive, stand-alone explanation for the enduring political under-representation of women in the region. For instance, little evidence was found to support previous claims of women, particularly those within the

unionist community, facing explicit gender discrimination at the stage of selection (Ward, 2002, pp. 173–174). Furthermore, all of the men interviewed were supportive of women's candidacy, with several registering their dissatisfaction with the present gender deficit both within their party ranks and in Northern Irish politics in general. One Sinn Féin MLA spoke approvingly of his party's proactive stance on gender equality stressing, 'the ultimate objective is to get a 50–50 gender balance' (interview, 14 June, 2009); a sentiment shared by another male Alliance officer: 'we would like it to be more. Thirty-three per cent is better than everybody else, but it is still less than 50%. So I wouldn't say we are entirely satisfied' (interview, 16 April 2009). Male representatives from the two unionist parties also acknowledged the importance of encouraging more women to seek political office: 'there is an attitude that we need to encourage more women to become members of the party, to become elected representatives of the party, to hold positions in the party at all levels' (DUP MLA, 30 June 2009). As already highlighted, the changes to the UUP's selection process were also enacted with one eye on improving the gender equity of future candidate slates. While admittedly consisting of a small sample, the views expressed by male respondents suggest that those women who do aspire to political office in Northern Ireland face little resistance from their male party colleagues.

Rather, instead of blaming existing levels of political gender inequality on the demands of the selection process, the overwhelming majority of respondents stressed that we should focus our attention on the weak *supply* of female aspirants to political office and the structural gender inequalities which determine this supply. Citing a host of systemic and cultural factors—which will be outlined in this final section—the overall picture painted by the majority of respondents was one in which Northern Ireland's parties suffer from a serious deficit of women seeking to stand for selection. This situation was once described by the former UUP leader David Trimble as a 'problem in the pool' (cited in Racioppi and O'Sullivan-See, 2001, p. 103). As one female Alliance MLA explained:

> I don't know that many political parties who are having their door knocked down by women wanting to put their head above the parapet and stand for selection. There is a degree of competition in every selection process but there isn't the flood that people imagine [and] so the notion that parties are rejecting vast numbers of women and trying to keep them out of politics is actually a really flawed notion. (interview, 11 June 2009)

The insistence of those interviewed of a clear gender gap in terms of political activism is supported by public opinion in Northern Ireland. Longitudinal analysis of a region-wide survey of the general population on the question of women's underrepresentation has shown that over 70% of men and women agree with

the view that 'women don't come forward to be considered as candidates' (Galligan and Dowds, 2004, p. 3). What is more, support for the belief that political parties discriminate against women candidates has weakened over time, with the blame firmly attached to the inclination and personal choices of women not to pursue a political career.

In terms of supply, past studies have highlighted the region's sparse pool of eligible candidates in general, with political party members representing a small percentage of the population (2.1% male, 1.6% female; Miller *et al.*, 1996, p. 160). In an age of declining party membership and an increasingly non-competitive intra-party arena (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Webb, 2009) it is likely that current figures (and the pool of potential candidates) are even lower still. Intriguingly, however, studies have also revealed a gender imbalance in favour of women in the membership of each of Northern Ireland's main parties (Ward, 2004, pp. 5–6), albeit with women occupying the lower echelons of the party hierarchy (McCoy, 2000, p. 5; Ward, 2002; 2006). Several of those interviewed also enthused about the number of women elected to intra-party posts (e.g. treasurer, chairperson, party officer, etc.), as well as the degree of work undertaken by women behind the scenes.

This of course begs the question, if women are engaged in party political affairs and operating in the background of formal politics in Northern Ireland what is preventing them from taking the next step into elected office? Answering this question requires engagement with the concept of candidate emergence, focusing on the systemic factors which 'inform the calculation of potential candidates and political elites' (Ashe *et al.*, 2010, p. 456). For several scholars, the manner in which gender interacts with the initial decision to run for office represents the crux to achieving a 'complete understanding of prospects for gender disparity in our political institutions' (Fox and Lawless, 2004, p. 269; cf. Norris and Lovenduski, 1993; Phillips, 1995), a sentiment shared by several of those interviewed:

> It's not the selection process . . . Actually the problems take place before that, because by the time you get to selection you have either got your candidate or you don't. What you need to look at is what deters women from standing for elections. (Sinn Féin MLA, interview, 30 April 2009)

> There are plenty of women there. Wanting to run is a whole different ball game. (female DUP councillor (2), interview, 16 July 2009)

11. Northern Ireland's socio-political culture

The overwhelming majority of the explanations offered by respondents for the weak supply of female candidates related directly to the overarching issue of Northern Ireland's socio-political culture. Those interviewed emphasised the

clear sexual division of labour in a region which displays traditional conservative attitudes to women's role in society and politics. As previously hinted, the role played by the complex culture and politics of Northern Ireland in determining levels of women's political representation has been considered in depth elsewhere. Studies reveal how 'male-supremacist religious codes'—with conservative Catholicism and an atypically non-progressive brand of Protestantism (Galligan and Knight, 2011, p. 599)—have reinforced conservative gendered discourses found within the two competing ethno-national identities of unionism and nationalism. Furthermore, the decades-long conflict in the region afforded Northern Irish politics a martial character, which not only buttressed an inauspicious context for women's entry into electoral politics (Miller *et al.*, 1996, p. 15), but also scuppered attempts at prioritising a meaningful debate on political gender equality (Galligan, 2006). The highly aggressive political climate also generated clear gender differences in political interest and participation (Wilford *et al.*, 1994, p. 144; Rouslton and Davies, 2000). As a result, women in Northern Ireland have been normatively assigned the domestic role of caring and nurturing, their sole purpose one of 'reproduction of the body politic' (Dowler, 1998, p. 163). Under these circumstances, a political career is 'coded as male' (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 46), with those women who deviate from their ascribed domestic role often subject to patriarchal treatment: 'There are men in councils who really don't have a lot of time for women being in that position. They don't respect them in that position' (female DUP MLA, interview, 10 July 2009).

Evidence of the sexual division of labour proving inimical to women's political participation in Northern Ireland abounded. The majority of respondents explained how women have internalised their domestic political identity, with several female representatives providing personal accounts of how the sexual division of labour impacted enormously on their decision to pursue a career in politics. Again this finding is supported by the aforementioned public opinion survey data, with over 70% of men and women supporting the claim that women put their families above a political career (Galligan and Dowds, 2004). One female UUP councillor explained how concerns around childcare had delayed her entry into politics: 'The main thing is that the family comes first and your children. I didn't get involved in politics until my girls were well into their teens' (interview, 8 July 2009). One female DUP councillor explained how her domestic situation will ultimately inform her decision to defend her seat:

> Now people have said to me, "Oh you have one term in council and you will go forward to the next". I am just not so sure that I will and the thing that would affect that [decision] would be my domestic situation and I can't say exactly what my domestic situation at the next selection process will be. (interview (1), 16 July 2009)

Other female representatives spoke of the sense of guilt which came with 'abandoning' (female SDLP MLA, interview, 8 April 2009) their children for a political career, a confession commonplace in traditional conservative societies where deviating from the accepted feminine norm of child rearing is 'considered the grossest betrayal of one's community' (Edgerton, 1987, p. 61). For several, striking a balance between their political and domestic roles was only made possible by supportive partners or family members. A number of respondents also outlined how the rhythm of political engagement militates against those with child-rearing responsibilities. They framed a political career as one with increasingly onerous and unpredictable demands on time, where a late-night culture disproportionately affects women. One female SDLP councillor explained: 'It is very difficult to have a home life and to have a secure home life when you are working into the small hours and have a constituency to run as well' (interview, 24 July 2009). Another female DUP councillor spoke of how political institutions have failed to take into consideration women's domestic commitments:

> There isn't [a] realization that women in politics are juggling a lot of these balls and if one falls the whole thing comes down around your ears. I mean I find it the greatest pain in the backside that we have meetings at half seven at night. It's the kids' bedtime. (interview, 2 July 2009)

Judging by the testimony of several of those interviewed, the sexual division of labour in Northern Ireland continues to present a gendered obstacle to political office for potential women candidates.

One question we might ask is what role do male political elites play in perpetuating the domestic social role assigned to women in Northern Ireland? On this issue, the majority of those women interviewed acknowledged the comparative freedom of male political elites from the domestic burden traditionally assigned to women. However, very few women directly blamed these same men for contributing to or sustaining such a reality. Instead several female respondents chose to apportion a notable degree of blame to women themselves for either accepting the social status quo or failing to reconcile their domestic role with a political career. This attitude is best represented by the view of one female Sinn Féin councillor: 'I think that sometimes the obstacle is actually the person themselves [sic] and that would be the woman. . . . So I don't think you can blame an organisation or the male members. I think the women themselves need to push themselves more at all times' (interview, 16 June 2009). Another female SDLP councillor shared a similar opinion: 'I think the obstacles are very much in the woman's own self and in terms of maintaining some sort of a family balance and other responsibilities' (interview, 16 April 2009). Again, such testimony suggests that women's internalisation of certain gendered social norms, primarily their role as domestic carers, represents a hugely significant barrier to improving

levels of female representation in Northern Ireland. Rather worryingly—for those pressuring political parties and institutions to introduce more proactive or assertive gender equality strategies—the women in this study have overlooked the social inequality itself and placed the responsibility for achieving political gender equity firmly onto women.

Other related cultural obstacles were identified by respondents. Several spoke of how a highly masculinised political culture has structured the nature of political debate in Northern Ireland in such a way that is particularly off-putting to women. It has been argued that Northern Ireland shares much of the gendered characteristics attributed to British political culture, where institutions display a 'deeply embedded culture of traditional masculinity' (Evans, 2008, p. 598; cf. Galligan, 2006) and where debate is typified by its aggressiveness. Several of those interviewed described politics as 'rough and tumble' or a 'blood sport'. Of course, in the case of Northern Ireland, it is important to acknowledge the impact of the region's history on its political culture, the viciousness of its politics resulting in, what one commentator coined, an 'armed patriarchy' (Galligan, 2006). Perhaps unsurprisingly certain vestiges of this style of political conduct continue to disproportionately deter women from pursuing a political career. Even in the power-sharing age, political discourse in Northern Ireland remains divided and oppositional. Several female respondents explained how this uncompromising, bullish political culture has disillusioned women in particular:

> Women don't want to be involved in what they see as the dirty game of politics in Northern Ireland. It has always been very aggressive. It is an aggressive, nasty game at times. It gets very personal and there is that very combative element. "It is a fight, we will fight, smash"; that kind of terminology and attitude puts women right off. (DUP councillor, interview, 2 July 2009)

By expressing such an opinion, several respondents evoked the substantive claim made on behalf of women that they favour a more passive, consensual political conduct (Galligan and Tremblay, 2005, p. 5). Perceiving a political career to be one characterised by ardent aggression and a one-upmanship mentality women may choose to direct their energies elsewhere.

Indeed, the characteristics and ideological motivations attributed to women by substantive theorists (see Fox and Lawless, 2004) are evident in the fact that women in Northern Ireland have historically represented the mainstay of the region's vast array of voluntary, single-issue political bodies (Wilford, 1996; Ward, 2002, p. 171). With a narrow base existing for formal political participation over several decades, Northern Ireland has played host to a proliferation of local and ad hoc, community-based groups. Opting to take action in spaces removed from the terrain of traditional mainstream politics, long associated with stalemate

and dysfunction, women have instead devoted themselves to the 'situated politics of everyday life' (McCoy, 2000, pp. 19–20). Several female respondents empathised with those women who participate in such 'small p' politics, identifying a reluctant transition from informal to formal political activism. One female UUP representative, referring to her continued involvement in the community sector, stressed:

> I can understand why politics is just not tangible enough for women because you can go to forty meetings and you just talk around and around in circles and that really doesn't suit women by nature … and people like me in community settings, when we do all these programmes, we can have instant gratification. (interview, 3 August 2009)

Another female Sinn Féin councillor explained how upon entering public office women 'used to street politics and out working in the community' have become bemused with the 'bureaucracy' of political office, deterring them from seeking reselection or selection to higher office (interview, 3 August 2009). An argument could, therefore, be made that the weak supply of women aspiring to political office in Northern Ireland is a partial product of the continued strength, tangibility and efficacy of the region's community sector which competes directly with the formal political realm.

One final individuated supply-side obstacle identified by respondents in this study, concerned the issue of confidence and self-esteem. Studies elsewhere show that women often display inhibitions about the appropriateness of their qualifications (Lovenduski, 1993, p. 12), their substantive credentials and their policy expertise (Stevens, 2007, p. 88). As a result, women tend not to contemplate selection until invited to do so by senior party figures. Each of these assertions was confirmed in this study. Several of those women interviewed explained how the encouragement from senior party figures was crucial, and in some instances decisive, in their decision to seek selection. On the issue of confidence, one female Sinn Féin MLA explained: 'You deal with a lot of internal stuff as a woman. You know, "do I have the knowledge? Do I have the skills? Am I suitably qualified to be a politician?"' (interview, 30 April 2009). Another female DUP councillor confirmed that, 'by and large women are more sensitive to their own limits [than men]' (interview (2), 16 July 2009). On the issue of whether a lack of confidence might stymie women's emergence as candidates another female councillor again referenced the presence of highly capable but ultimately reluctant women in the ranks of her party: 'I know some very, very good women in the DUP. Incredibly bright, incredibly focused. And I have said to them, "would you not run?"? "Ohhhh", they just seize up' (interview, 2 July 2009).

12. Conclusion

Equipped with a fresh insight into the candidate selection procedures adopted by the main political parties in Northern Ireland, gender scholars are better placed to determine the extent to which these methods have served to produce the comparatively low numbers of female candidates in the region. It would appear that rather than being the site of explicit gender discrimination, certain aspects of candidate selection present implicit gendered barriers to women aspirants. In a general sense, the decentralised nature of selection ensures that territorial local representation trumps all other considerations for party selectorates, including social representation. Not only does the emphasis on 'localism' benefit incumbents, the majority of which are male, but given the clear gender gap in terms of the resources required to establish and maintain a sufficient local support-base, women are at a serious disadvantage in this respect. With experience at the local government level representing a crucial candidacy requirement for selection to higher office, the low numbers of women candidates and representatives at this level should also be cause for alarm. Furthermore, there appears some reluctance on the part of central party officers to interfere in a process jealously guarded by local constituency members to ensure a suitably diverse candidate slate. On this point, Northern Ireland's parties appear typical of the wider trend where, in an age of party membership decline, democratised candidate selection represents an important tool with which members can be incentivised to either join or remain within the party fold. As has been shown, however, with the changes introduced by the UUP in 2007 and a seemingly more assertive stance taken by Sinn Féin on occasion, there exists some exception to this rule of passive central involvement in the quest for improved gender representation.

Armed with a better understanding of the nature of the parties' selection processes we are inevitably invited to consider the relative weight of this key political variable alongside the socio-cultural obstacles faced by women in Northern Ireland. In other words, having identified how certain aspects of the parties' methods might disadvantage women in particular, where does candidate selection rank in the assortment of gendered barriers to political representation? To refer back to Stoke's analysis (2005, 63), does our search for understanding Northern Ireland's gendered representation patterns fall firmly on the side of the party political? Answering this question requires exploring the tension between the demands of the process and the supply of women seeking selection. The testimony of those interviewed for this study would suggest that, above all else, the low numbers of women candidates and representatives in Northern Ireland reflects an endemic reluctance on the part of women to seek a career in public office. This supply is determined by

certain well-entrenched and suitably documented socio-cultural values, not least 'the persistence of the ideology of domesticity' (Scott *et al.*, 2010, p. 2) when it comes to women's political participation in the region. Having internalised the traditional, conservative domestic role normatively assigned to them, very few women seek a career in public office. While the socio-cultural factors identified in this study can be found in case studies worldwide (see Inglehart and Norris, 2003), they have arguably acquired greater strength in the particular social, historical and cultural milieu of Northern Ireland. Certainly in the context of the UK, Northern Ireland exhibits the most regressive attitudes to women's formal political involvement and the substantial socio-cultural factors which exist in the region must not be understated.

However, in recognising the weak supply of female candidates in Northern Ireland this study does not intend to dismiss the existence and importance of demand-side factors. There is an inherent danger in couching gender inequality solely as a supply issue, as doing so may imply that above all else it is the reluctance of individual women to seek political candidacy that is to blame for existing levels of gender inequality. While this study has shed light on certain procedural demands of the parties' selection methods, its remit only allows it to make tentative claims concerning the implicit gendered norms and values which structure the attitudes and criteria of the party selectorates. In that sense, our understanding of the demands entailed in candidate selection in Northern Ireland remains incomplete, and pales in comparison with our appreciation of the supply side of the gender puzzle. Furthermore, gender scholars' stress that at the individual level both supply- and demand-side factors work alongside one another; combining and overlapping to structure the recruitment process (see Norris and Lovenduski, 1993, p. 381). An appreciation that the socio-cultural barriers that exist in Northern Ireland are reinforced by other structural and party-political factors serves to charge political parties with the chief responsibility of equalising the opportunities for women to become candidates. On the multivariate nature of gender inequality, Tremblay (2008, p. 9) advises: 'it is probably more instructive to assume that cultural, socioeconomic and political factors interact to create a dynamic that acts as a global incubator for the election of women'. Heeding this advice, the reality of political gender inequality in Northern Ireland is most likely more complex and circumscribed than a predominantly supply-based explanation allows for. Just as we should avoid assuming the primacy of party-political factors over all others in Northern Ireland, acknowledging the particularly virulent socio-cultural barriers in the region, we should refrain from treating the concepts of supply and demand as dichotomous.

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