



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Silvester, J. (2014). Selecting and Developing Strong Political Leaders: Applying Occupational Psychology to Politics. REF2014.

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://city-ref-test.eprints-hosting.org/id/eprint/16866/>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

Institution: City University London
Unit of Assessment: 4 Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience
Title of case study: Selecting and Developing Strong Political Leaders: Applying Occupational Psychology To Politics
1. Summary of the impact Since 2001 Professor Jo Silvester of City University London and academic colleagues have pursued a programme of applied occupational psychology research designed to improve the selection, development and performance of UK politicians. Original research with the Conservative Party (2001 to 2003) aimed to improve the quality and diversity of prospective parliamentary candidates by analysing the competencies required by MPs and designing the first evidence-based selection process for political candidates. The research triggered wide media interest and led to further projects creating and implementing evidence-based development practices for elected members in local government. In 2008 Silvester redesigned candidate selection procedures for the Liberal Democrat Party and today approximately 60% of UK parliamentary candidates are assessed using procedures developed by Silvester based on best practice in occupational psychology.
2. Underpinning research Politicians are notoriously difficult to access for research (Simonton, 1998). Only a handful of studies have captured self-report data from MPs and political candidates and very little is known about the individual qualities, skills and knowledge required to perform political roles and of how individuals develop these capacities. In particular, very little is known about how political parties approve prospective parliamentary candidates and therefore act as gate-keepers to political office. The research underpinning this impact was the first to apply occupational psychology research on diversity and employee selection to political roles. Its broad aim was to introduce transparent, robust and fair selection practices for approving prospective parliamentary candidates. The work was carried out with the Conservative Party by Professor Jo Silvester at City University London (1997 to 2002 and 2006 to date) and Goldsmiths College (2002 to 2006), supported by PhD students (Madeleine Wyatt, Anna Koczwara and Helen Scott). The invitation to work with the Conservative Party arose following media reporting of an invited talk by Silvester at the British Psychological Society Centenary Conference (2000), where she discussed her research in diversity and employee selection (c.f. Silvester, Anderson-Gough, Anderson & Mohammed, 2002). Silvester was contacted by Christina Dykes, the Conservative Party's Director of Candidates and Development, who asked her to review existing procedures for approving prospective parliamentary candidates and to identify how they could be improved to increase the candidates' quality and diversity. In 2001 only 8% of Conservative MPs were women. Silvester recommended a programme of action research, building on existing employee selection and diversity research, to identify selection criteria for Conservative MPs and to develop a transparent, evidence-based procedure for assessing aspiring political candidates. Conducted between 2001 and 2002, the research involved three stages: (1) critical incident interviews and focus groups with stakeholders from different parts of the Party (i.e., the Party Leader, backbenchers, shadow ministers, parliamentary candidates, party volunteers, political agents and regional chairs) to capture, analyse and agree competencies and behavioural indicators for assessing 'good' and 'poor' performance as an MP; (2) design and implementation of a new multi-trait, multi-method assessment centre for assessing prospective parliamentary candidates (this included exercises to reflect different aspects of the MP role and training for assessors, who included MPs, in evidence-based rating using agreed competencies); and (3) a longitudinal empirical evaluation to monitor diversity and how candidates performed in the 2005 general election. Collecting and analysing longitudinal data on candidate performance was important for two reasons: (1) it provided the first empirical evidence of equivalent male and female performance across all exercises and competences, refuting widely-held stereotyped assumptions that the political style of women is different and less effective than that of men; and (2) it generated the first

evidence that psychological characteristics are important for electoral performance by showing that political candidate critical thinking skills and communication skills, measured during the assessment centre, predicted the percentage votes and percentage swing in votes they achieved in the 2005 general election (c.f. Silvester & Dykes, 2007).

3. References to the research

- Silvester J., Anderson-Gough F.M., Anderson N. & Mohammed A.R. (2002). Locus of control, attributions and impression management in the selection interview. *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, 75 59-76 [10.1348/096317902167649](https://doi.org/10.1348/096317902167649)
- Silvester J. & Dykes C. (2007). Selecting political candidates: A longitudinal study of assessment centre performance and electoral success in the 2005 UK General Election. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 80, 11-25 [10.1348/096317906X156287](https://doi.org/10.1348/096317906X156287)
- Silvester J. (2008). The good, the bad, and the ugly: Politics and politicians at work. *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 23 107-148 [10.1002/9780470773277.ch4](https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470773277.ch4)
- Silvester, J. (2009). *Developing skills for government: Political mentoring*. ESRC follow-on funding (£80,000), co-sponsored by the Improvement & Development Agency (£20,000) RES-189-25-0010.
- Silvester J. (2012). Recruiting politicians: Introducing competency-based approval processes for prospective parliamentary candidates. Chapter 2 in A. Weinberg (ed.) *The Psychology of Political Leadership*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Silvester, J., Wyatt, M., & Randall, R. (2014). Politician personality, Machiavellianism and political skill as predictors of performance ratings in political roles. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 87 [10.1111/joop.12038](https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12038)

The Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology is a peer-reviewed journal published by Wiley. It is ranked within the top 11% in the area of Psychology by SJR (Scientific Journal Rankings).

4. Details of the impact

Original research with the Conservative Party led to impact in two areas: (1) it resulted in increased use of evidence-based selection procedures for parliamentary candidates; and (2) it led to increased availability and take-up of development activities by politicians.

Political Selection: When the Conservative Party launched the new approvals process for parliamentary candidates, the use of occupational psychology research received wide media attention (see section 5). Mrs Theresa May, Home Secretary (then responsible for candidate diversity within the Party), was reported in several newspapers as saying “*we have now got something that is a professionally based, rigorous assessment....a bold and innovative approach, which shows how serious we are in making sure our candidates have the skills to be good members of parliament. This sends a clear message that becoming a candidate in our party is not about decisions taken by grey suits behind closed doors. It is about proper rigorous assessment of people’s capabilities and skills*” (Anne Perkins, Guardian Unlimited 9.1.2003).

A key finding of the research was that male and female performance was equivalent. This had important implications. As women comprised only 20% of Conservative prospective parliamentary candidates, empirical findings of equivalence prompted greater realisation that the Party needed to adopt more proactive strategies to increase the number of women MPs. The findings contributed to the Party’s development of an ‘A’ List of political candidates balanced for gender in 2004 which had impact in trialling of primaries ahead of the 2010 general election. While it is difficult to attribute direct causality, the use of psychological methods to capture empirical data on the selection and performance of candidates undoubtedly provoked greater awareness of the need for positive action to increase political diversity. The number of Conservative women MPs increased from 8% in 2001 to 16% in 2010.

In 2008, as a direct result of her research with the Conservative Party, Silvester was invited to redesign the Liberal Democrat Party’s procedures for approving prospective parliamentary candidates. Following a similar procedure this involved working with the Liberal Democrat

Candidates' Office and conducting critical incident interviews and focus groups with stakeholder groups from across the Party, then creating a competency framework for political candidates and an evidence-based assessment process. The project built on earlier findings by developing a web-based pre-application process to increase aspiring candidates' awareness of how the Party assessment process works and to encourage a more diverse pool of applicants. In addition, Silvester worked with the Party Campaigns Office to implement a 360-degree review procedure for political candidates fighting seats in the 2010 general election. This provided the Party with information about individual and organisational predictors of electoral performance and candidates with feedback about campaign strengths and development needs.

The new approvals process was launched at the 2009 Liberal Democrat Party Conference at a panel discussion that included Silvester and Nick Clegg (Party Leader, now Deputy Prime Minister). The process was also explained to Party members on the Liberal Democrat Party home page [1] and to Liberal Democrat MPs at a briefing in the House of Commons by Silvester in December 2009. It was also discussed by the Liberal Democrat Chief Executive at the House of Commons Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation [2].

As a direct consequence of Silvester's work to redesign selection procedures, approximately 60% of all UK parliamentary candidates are now assessed using methods based on best practice from occupational psychology. There has also been growing international interest. Silvester was invited to deliver workshops on selecting and developing candidates for political parties in Iceland (2012) and to address Members of the Legislative Assembly of Northern Ireland at Stormont (2013). She was also invited to develop a competency-based approval process for politicians in Botswana, sponsored by the Westminster Fund 2012.

Political Development: The research on political selection led to impact in a second area: identifying development needs and providing methods of support for politicians. The Labour Government (1997 to 2010) invested considerable effort into building capacity in local government, including the provision of development support for local councillors via agencies such as the Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA) and the Leadership Centre for Local Government (LCLG). However, they faced resistance, in part because the majority of councillors were from Conservative-held local authorities.

Following media reports that the Conservative Party had successfully adopted evidence-based selection practices, the IDeA commissioned Silvester to undertake a cross-party project to analyse the role of local councillors and develop a 'Political Skills Framework' that could be used to improve awareness of what councillor roles involve and the competencies needed to perform them. Interviews were conducted with local councillors and officers from 12 authorities across the UK; and questionnaires were sent to more than 300 councillors and officers. The Political Skills Framework was developed in 2005 and further work to develop it as a toolkit was undertaken by Silvester in 2006 and 2012.

The Framework formed the basis for a series of projects undertaken by Silvester and her colleagues, all aimed at encouraging development for local councillors and sponsored by the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Local Government Association, IDeA, LGLC, Councillors Commission, the ESRC, the Centre for Public Scrutiny and local councils (e.g., Westminster, Lambeth, Waltham Forest, Newham and Wiltshire). Individual projects (detailed below) included a 360-degree review programme for cabinet members, a review of political mentoring activities and a new political mentoring toolkit, a review of support needs for councillors, development of a toolkit for new unitary councillors, the design and implementation of development centres for cabinet members, evaluation of the IDeA leadership academy for council leaders, a review of scrutiny officer roles, an evaluation of top-team working within local councils and political skills training for councillors.

Commissioned reports and toolkits based on Silvester's research and produced for users (i.e., politicians and local government officers) since 2008:

Political Skills Framework: A Councillor's Toolkit. Local Government Association (2012): This toolkit is available as a free web-based resource and given to all newly-elected councillors as part

of support offered to all local authorities in England and Wales by the Local Government Association.

The Political Mentoring Toolkit. ESRC (2011) Launched at a cross-party event hosted by the Improvement & Development Agency, this free resource is available to officers and politicians in local government to support mentoring activities.

Mapping Scrutiny Officer Roles: A Competency Framework & Review of Training Needs. Centre for Public Scrutiny (2008). Funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Association, this provides a competency framework for selecting and developing scrutiny officers.

A Toolkit for Change: Preparing for the New Unitary Councillor Role. IDeA (2008). With support from the late Sir Simon Milton, this toolkit provided an overview of the changes to local authority structures and the implications for the role of local councillors.

Politics Matters: Making Cabinets more Effective (2008) Leadership Centre for Local Government. This explains and publicises the use of development centres with senior politicians and encourages participation by providing case examples from e.g., Westminster City Council.

Invited talks for politicians by Silvester during the assessment period include:

- 2008 Recruiting Political Leaders (Local Government Association Conference), Developing Councillors (Wiltshire County Council Democracy Day)
- 2009 Mentoring in Politics (British Council event for Government of Romania), Political Leadership (Home Office), Developing Councillors (IDeA Young Councillors Conference)
- 2010 Transition into Parliament (briefing for Conservative Whips, House of Commons)
- 2011 Political Selection (Political Communication Conference (British Council/LUISS University of Rome))
- 2012 Selecting and developing political candidates (Icelandic Parliament/University of Iceland)
- 2013 The search for good political leadership: What can psychology offer? Invited seminar at Stormont for Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly and advisers.

Silvester's research with the Conservative Party was widely reported following the launch of the new candidate approvals process. Recent interviews have included: BBC Radio 4 *'The Politics Hour'*, BBC Radio 5, Radio Scotland (2010), BBC1 Daily Politics

www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20222003, Financial Times, and The Economist

www.economist.com/news/britain/21571928-how-parties-pick-would-be-mps-supply-side-politics.

In addition to the resources more generally available, more than 3,000 local politicians and officers from all political parties have either contributed to the design of evidence-based practice or have participated directly in development activities provided by Silvester and her colleagues. The value of her work in reaching 60% of serving politicians is clearly highly significant.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[1] www.libdemvoice.org/author/jo-silvester.

[2] www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/449/449.pdf (p. 38) (Responses to the Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation) Final Report of Session 2009-2010).

Political Skills Framework: A Councillor's Toolkit. Local Government Association (2012) public access at www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=0847a1ac-3eb6-43ad-ab1a-858b28e31cc4&groupId=10171.

The Political Mentoring Toolkit. ESRC (2011) www.city.ac.uk/interdisciplinary-city/centre-for-performance-at-work/research/publications/political-mentoring-toolkit.

Mapping Scrutiny Officer Roles: A Competency Framework & Review of Training Needs. Centre for Public Scrutiny (2008) <http://cfps.org.uk/publications?item=6942&offset=100>.

A Toolkit for Change: Preparing for the New Unitary Councillor Role. IDeA (2008) public access at <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/8425024>.

Politics Matters: Making Cabinets more Effective (2008) Leadership Centre for Local Government, public access at www.localleadership.gov.uk/images/politics_matters.pdf.