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The Labour Party Leadership Election:
The Stark Model and the Selection of Keir Starmer

Abstract

This paper considers the selection of Keir Starmer as the new Leader of the Labour Party within the context of the Stark model for explaining leadership election outcomes. The paper seeks to achieve three objectives. First, to provide an overview of the nomination stages and the candidates who contested the Labour Party leadership election. Second, to provide an analysis of the underlying academic assumptions of the Stark model on leadership selection and to assess its value as an explanatory model. Third, to use opinion polling evidence to consider the selection of Starmer in relation to the criteria of the Stark model – i.e. that party leadership (s)electorates are influenced by the following hierarchy of strategic goals: acceptability or select the candidate most likely to unify the party; electability or select the candidate most likely to expand the vote base of the party; and competence or select the candidate most likely to be able to implement their policy objectives.

Keywords:

Keir Starmer; Labour Party; Leadership Elections; Leaders of the Opposition; Parliamentary Labour Party; Labour Party Unity.

Introduction

This paper contributes to the academic literature on leadership elections within the British Labour Party by profiling the leadership election of 2020. There is a long tradition of academics offering agency driven accounts of Labour Party leadership elections – i.e. profiling the candidates and the campaigning period, before offering explanations as to who won and why by examining their bases of support and their mandate to lead (Drucker, 1976; 1984; Alderman and Carter, 1993, 1995; Heppell, 2010a, 2010b; Heppell et al, 2010; Heppell and Crines, 2011; Dorey and Denham, 2011, 2016; Quinn, 2016; Crines et al, 2018; Heppell and McMeeking, 2020). Alongside these agency driven accounts are more institutionally orientated analyses, which have concentrated on the importance of the rules for selecting the party leader, including debates on nomination procedures; ejection procedures; membership participation and the trade union link (Drucker, 1981; Alderman and Carter, 1994; Quinn, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2018; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011; Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013; Wickham-Jones, 2014; Bennister and Heppell, 2016; Johnston et al, 2016).

Within the academic literature on leadership selection within the Labour Party, the model advanced by Leonard Stark (1996), focusing on candidate acceptability, electability and competence, has repeatedly been cited in terms of explaining who won and why (see for example, Heppell, 2010a; 2010b; Heppell et al, 2010; Heppell and Crines, 2011; Dorey and Denham, 2011, 2016; Quinn, 2012; 2016; Denham and Dorey, 2018; Denham et al, 2020). The utility and objectivity of the Stark model has been questioned, however, in a recent paper in *British Politics* by Maiguashca and Dean (2020) as part of their wider critique about the biases inherent within political science research on British politics (see also Allen, 2020 and Allen and Moon, 2020).

This paper uses the Labour Party leadership election of 2020 as a case study through which to test the legitimacy of their critique in relation to the Stark model. In doing so the paper will be broken down into the following three sections. The first section will provide an analysis of how the leadership election was conducted – i.e. profiling the nomination stages and assessing the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. The second section will explain the criteria of the Stark model – acceptability, electability and competence – and it will explore its potential value (and limitations). Having identified the contribution of the Stark model to academic debates on leadership elections within British politics, the third and final section will

exploit opinion polling – on both the membership who participated in the leadership election (whose support they already have as their core vote) *and* opinion polling data on the wider electorate (whose support they need to acquire to regain power) - in order to determine whether the Stark model has explanatory value in the case of the selection of Starmer.

Nominations and the Leadership Ballot

The Labour Party leadership election of 2020 was triggered by the resignation of Jeremy Corbyn in the aftermath of defeat at the General Election of December 2019. Contested against the backdrop of the dilemma of whether to exit the European Union and to respect the outcome of the referendum of three years earlier[1], and if so how, the Labour Party struggled to hold together their coalition of remain and leave leaning supporters (Cutts et al, 2020). They were unable to match, or improve upon, their performance in the General Election of 2017, as their vote shrunk from 12,878,460 to 10,269,510 (their vote share fell from 40.0 to 32.1 percent) and their parliamentary representation fell to their lowest level since the General Election of 1935, as they returned only 202 seats (Cutts et al, 2020; Goes, 2020). Corbyn signalled his intention to step aside within hours of the exit poll, in the early hours of December 13th, setting off the fight for the succession.

The deadline for nominations from within the parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) was set at January 13th (stage one); the deadline for nominations from within constituency Labour parties (CLPs) and trade union affiliates was set at February 15th (stage two); and the Labour Party selectorate received their postal ballot and online voting forms (stage three) on February 24th. Voting closed on April 2nd with the outcome of the ballot declared on April 4th (Bush, 2020).

Stage one of the nomination process stipulated that candidates would need to be nominated by at least ten percent of the current (PLP n= 202) and the European Parliamentary Labour Party

[1] The parliamentary logjam over Brexit and the governmental paralysis of the 2017-2019 Parliament undermined the governing Conservatives but it failed to translate into increased support for the opposition (Russell, 2020; Goes, 2020). The starkest realisation of this was the performance of the two main parties in the European Parliamentary Elections of May 2019. The Conservatives finished fifth on 8.8 percent of the vote, as they haemorrhaged support to the newly formed Brexit Party, whose promise of a hard Brexit based on World Trade Organisation rules saw them finish first on 30.5 percent of the vote. However, the Labour Party vote also fell to 13.6 percent and they were in third place behind the Liberal Democrats on 19.6 percent (Cutts et al, 2019).

(EPLP) n=10, making the threshold for participation 22 (Bush, 2019). Clive Lewis, the shadow Treasury minister, withdrew his candidature just prior to the deadline, meaning that a total of five candidates proceeded having passed the nomination threshold. From the backbenchers were the candidatures of Jess Phillips (23 nominations) and former shadow Energy Secretary, Lisa Nandy (31 nominations). From within the Corbyn shadow Cabinet came the candidatures of the shadow Foreign Secretary, Emily Thornberry (23 nominations); the shadow Business Secretary, Rebecca Long-Bailey (33 nominations), and the shadow Brexit Secretary, Starmer (86 nominations) (Labour Party, 2020a). Starmer had the momentum of being backed by 41.5 percent of his fellow parliamentarians and held a significant lead over Long-Bailey (16 percent) and Nandy (14.5 percent) as the candidates proceeded to stage two of the leadership election (at this stage Phillips withdrew her candidature) (Rea, 2020).

Stage two involved securing the nominations of CLPs and affiliated trade unions, with candidates needing to secure the backing of at least five percent of CLPs (i.e. 33), or at least three affiliates which would include at least two trade unions that together represented over five percent of affiliated members (Bush, 2019). Of the 641 CLPs (out of 648) who indicated their preference Starmer secured 374 nominations (57.7 percent); Long-Bailey 164 nominations (25.3 percent); and Nandy 72 nominations (11.1 percent). Thornberry was eliminated as she failed to pass the nominations threshold – she had the backing of 31 CLPs or 4.8 percent. Amongst nominations from the affiliates Thornberry secured no backers, whereas Starmer secured the support of 15 (out of 32 affiliates), Long-Bailey secured the backing of seven and Nandy was supported by four (Labour List, 2020).

Stage three was a one-member one vote ballot and involved a campaigning period which was to last for six weeks. This would generate considerably less media attention than normal due to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. As they proceeded to the actual ballot the characterisation of the three candidates was clearly established and it remained largely unchanged throughout the campaign. Securing the endorsement of Momentum confirmed that Long-Bailey was the continuity Corbyn candidate (Maguire, 2020a). Her alignment to the Corbynite agenda was long standing: she nominated and voted for him in both the 2015 and 2016 Labour Party leadership elections and she remained loyal to him when other members of the shadow frontbench resigned in July 2016 (Syal et al, 2016). That Long-Bailey was a Corbynite was also confirmed from the findings of the loyalty list, drawn up by members of the Corbyn inner circle in March 2016, and leaked to the *Guardian*. Each Labour

parliamentarian was positioned on a spectrum of loyalty with a neutral grouping in the centre (n=71) alongside loyalists to the left (n=75) and critics to the right (n=85). Those left-right groupings had further subdivisions within them. The left was subdivided into the truly loyal core group who believed in the Corbyn project (n=19) and a core group-plus (n=56), made up of those who could work with the Corbyn leadership. The critics on the right were also subdivided into two groupings – i.e. core group negative (n=49) and hostile (n=36). Long-Bailey was identified as one of the nineteen in the core group of Corbynites (Asthana and Stewart, 2016).

The leaked list positioned both Nandy and Starmer on the left of the spectrum and within the core group plus grouping (alongside Thornberry) (Asthana and Stewart, 2016). They took alternative routes during the Corbyn era thereafter, although both of them partook in the mass resignations of July 2016 which were designed to force Corbyn to resign (Syal et al, 2016). Nandy remained on the backbenchers thereafter and became a critic of the leadership capability of Corbyn, notably in relation to the tribalism that existed during his leadership tenure and his handling of the antisemitism crisis (Walker, 2020). Nonetheless, she campaigned as an anti-austerity candidate who aimed to reconnect the party to their lost voters from the red-wall of traditional northern and midland constituencies (Nandy, 2020). She claimed that she could do so because she was a northern Labour parliamentarian, who was one of the nineteen members of the PLP who eventually voted for the Withdrawal Agreement in October 2019, having argued that Parliament should respect the result of the referendum (HC Deb, Vol. 666, Col. 917-20, 22 October 2019). Given that remain sentiment was dominant within the party membership (Bale et al, 2020: 66-8), her acceptance of the decision to leave (although she voted remain and was a defender of free movement) was always going to be problematic for her (Jones, 2020).

Starmer was ideologically enigmatic. He was initially positioned in the core-group plus grouping in the leaked list in March 2016, and during the leadership campaign he made it clear that he was an advocate of many aspects of the Corbynite agenda – e.g. challenging austerity; abolishing tuition fees; and bringing water, rail, mail and energy under public ownership (Maguire, 2020b; Fielding, 2020). Yet he did resign from the frontbench in July 2016. Whereas so many of those who resigned languished on the backbenchers thereafter – either refusing to serve and not being asked back – Starmer turned this into an opportunity for his own career advancement. He was willing to serve again and by late 2016 Corbyn had appointed him to the

high-profile role of shadow Brexit Secretary. This was potentially helpful for him in terms of developing his reputation in preparation for a hypothetical post-Corbyn leadership succession contest – i.e. it enabled him to showcase his political ability to a remain leaning movement by critiquing and undermining the efforts of the May and Johnson administrations on Brexit. It was also potentially problematic for him, however: it left him somewhat tainted by the accusation that he was one of the architects of the manifesto commitment of a confirmatory referendum, a position which contributed to them losing a number of leave leaning constituencies (Cutts et al, 2020). His unwillingness to criticise the Corbyn era might have been calculated to appease potential Long-Bailey supporters who had doubts about his convictions. And maybe these reassurances were necessary: not only was he was willing to participate in the mass resignations; he voted for Andy Burnham and then Owen Smith in the Labour Party leadership elections of 2015 and 2016 respectively; and he voted in favour of Trident renewal in 2016 (Heppell, 2020).

Table One: The Result of the Labour Party Leadership Election of 2020

	Candidates		
	Keir Starmer	Rebecca Long-Bailey	Lisa Nandy
Party Members			
Votes	225,135	117,598	58,788
Percentage	56.1	29.3	14.6
Registered Supporters			
Votes	10,228	650	2,128
Percentage	76.6	5.0	17.4
Affiliated Supporters			
Votes	40,417	16,970	18,681
Percentage	53.1	22.3	24.6
Total			
Votes	**275,780**	**135,218**	**79,597**
Percentage	**56.2**	**27.6**	**16.2**

Turnout: 62.6 percent
Source: Labour Party, 2020b

Despite these reservations Starmer was to secure a comfortable victory as evident in Table one. Starmer secured an overall support level of 56.2 percent, which was broken down into 56.1 percent of party members; 53.1 percent of affiliated supporters; and 76.6 percent of registered supporters. The next two sections of the paper consider first, the Stark model and, second, its value in terms of explaining the selection of Starmer.

The Stark Model

The central rationale of the Stark model is that the party (s)electorate, whether they are using parliamentary ballots, all-member ballots, hybrid parliamentary-membership ballots or electoral colleges using delegates or individual members, will be motivated by the goal of securing governmental power as a consequence of electoral success (Stark, 1996).

Exploiting the work of Sjoblom (1968) on what motivates parties within parliamentary systems, Stark constructed his hierarchy of strategic goals for parties when selecting their next party leader – see table two below. The first strategic goal will be to secure internal unity – i.e. the leader selected must pass the unity-acceptability test so that they can then present the party as a viable candidate for office at the next general election. The second strategic goal flows from the first – i.e. as the party moves into the electoral arena, where the goal is voter maximisation, then the leader with the greatest voter appeal would be deemed the most logical choice. The Stark model comes across as sequential – once the party has addressed the first order issue of unity-acceptability, by eliminating the most divisive candidate(s) - they then move onto the selecting the most electorally appealing, with this assumed to be influenced by opinion polling evidence. The third strategic goal, arrived at having eliminated the ideologically divisive and less popular candidates, will be to select the candidate who is perceived to be the most competent – i.e. they will identify the candidate who could be the most effective Leader of the Opposition or Prime Minister. This reflects the desire to effectively implement policy (once in office) with the consequence of effective policy implementation and governmental competence being re-election (Stark, 1996, pp. 125-6).

Table Two: Strategic Goals and Selection Criteria in Leadership Elections

Order	Arena	Goal	Criterion
First	Internal	Unity	Acceptability
Second	Electoral	Victory	Electability
Third	Parliamentary	Policy	Competence

Source: adapted from Stark, 1996, p. 126; Quinn, 2012, p. 12

When applying the criteria of the Stark model, the challenge has been a). how to determine which candidate is superior in relation to each of the criteria; and b). how to explain outcomes when the most superior candidate differs depending on which criteria is being considered?

On the first challenge, it could be argued that the judgements being made are unmeasurable and thereby subjective. However, qualitative insights can be gathered from interviews from within the campaign teams of the different candidates and their support bases, and these can be supplemented with descriptive quantitative insights derived from opinion polling data about the respective candidates (Stark, 1996; Quinn, 2012, 2016; Heppell, 2010a; Denham et al, 2020).

On the second challenge, table three below suggests that there are some leadership elections in which it appears clear that one candidate is superior in all three criteria – e.g. 1963, 1976, 1988, 1992 and 1994 (for profiles of these leadership elections, see Drucker, 1976; Alderman and Carter, 1993, 1995; Heppell, 2010a, 2010b; Heppell et al, 2010). When the most superior candidate differs across the three criteria of acceptability, electability and competence then the first order criteria of unity-acceptability takes precedence. This applied to the Labour Party leadership elections of 1980, 1983 and 2010 – see table three. In these leadership elections, Denis Healey, Roy Hattersley and David Miliband, were stronger candidates in terms electability and perceived competence (as compared to Michael Foot, Neil Kinnock and Ed Miliband), but they were defeated because their opponents were deemed to be superior in the first order criteria of unity-acceptability (see Stark, 1996; Quinn, 2012; Denham and Dorey, 2018).

The Stark model has been widely cited in studies not just on the Labour Party, but on leadership elections within the Conservative Party as well – (on the Conservatives see Denham, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2017; Heppell, 2010a, 2010b; Heppell et al, 2010; Heppell and Crines, 2011; Denham et al, 2020; Roe-Crines et al, 2020). In the period since 1963 and covering both the Labour and Conservative parties, only two leaders have been selected who were said to be inferior to others across *all* three criteria – i.e. Corbyn in winning the Labour Party leadership election of 2015; and Margaret Thatcher in winning the Conservative Party leadership election of 1975 (Quinn, 2012, p. 160; Quinn, 2016; Denham and Dorey, 2016).

Table 3: Labour Party Leadership Successions 1963-2010

			Criteria			Key
Year	**Electorate**	**Winner**	**Acceptability**	**Electability**	**Competence**	**Criteria**
1963	MPs	Wilson	Wilson	Wilson	Wilson	All
1976	MPs	Callaghan	Callaghan	Callaghan	Callaghan	All
1980	MPs	Foot	Foot	Healey	Healey	Acceptability
1983	Electoral College*	Kinnock	Kinnock	Hattersley	Hattersley	Acceptability
1988	Electoral College*	Kinnock	Kinnock	Kinnock	Kinnock	All
1992	Electoral College*	Smith	Smith	Smith	Smith	All
1994	Electoral College**	Blair	Blair	Blair	Blair	All
2007	Uncontested ***	Brown	-	-	-	-
2010	Electoral College**	E Miliband	E Miliband	D Miliband	D Miliband	Acceptability

* Electoral College Block Vote Rules 1981-1993
** Electoral College OMOV Rules 1993-2014
*** Gordon Brown was the only candidate to pass the nomination thresholds for entry and thus he was automatically elected leader of the Labour Party without activating the Electoral College.

Sources: adapted from Stark (1996); Quinn (2012); Denham and Dorey, (2018).

Although widely cited the Stark model and its criteria have been subjected to only limited critical analysis. However, as was mentioned in the introduction, Maiguashca and Dean (2020) *have* questioned the utility and objectivity of the Stark model, arguing that it is constructed on problematical assumptions. Moreover, they suggest that this is reflective of a wider 'Corbyn problem' within political science, a community of scholars which, they claim, advance 'politicised scholarship' in which 'normative opposition all too often spills over into un-reflexive and un-rigorous scholarship' (Maiguashca and Dean, 2002, pp. 56, 63). From a similar perspective, Allen has spoken of a group of political scientists, who are 'intensely

politically motivated individuals', who demonstrated a 'dismissive attitude' towards the Labour Party under Corbyn (Allen, 2020; see also Allen and Moon, 2020).

In questioning the Stark model, Maiguashca and Dean challenge the criteria that are used and how they are interpreted. When discussing acceptability, Maiguashca and Dean ask acceptable to whom – the parliamentary party or the wider membership? When discussing electability, they questioned the demonising of Corbyn amongst political scientists, e.g. Diamond, 2016, Bale, 2016. They responded by emphasizing a). the increase in their membership from 198,000 to 552,000 between 2015 and 2017 (Whiteley et al, 2019, p. 81); and b). the increase in their vote between the General Elections of 2015 and 2017, from 9, 347,273 votes (30.4 percent) to 12,877,860, votes (40.0 percent) (Dorey, 2017). Finally, when discussing competence, they bypassed the extensive academic literature on competence-valence politics; voter choice and leadership effects (see for example, Stewart and Clarke, 1992; Clarke and Stewart, 1995; Clarke et al, 2000; Clarke et al, 2009; Stevens et al, 2011; see also Denver and Garnett, 2012; Whiteley et al, 2013; Clarke et al, 2016) and challenged the narrow definition of what constitutes leadership competence as they praised Corbyn for his ability to intellectually reenergise left politics (Maiguashca and Dean, 2020, p. 55). In doing so they challenged the consensus view that Corbyn was a 'bad' leader (Maiguashca and Dean, 2020, p. 55).

However, their critique has been undermined by events. The initial hostility of political scientists towards Corbyn did seem open to question in the immediate aftermath of the General Election of 2017 – e.g. back in 2016 Dorey and Denham had argued that in selecting Corbyn the Labour Party made themselves 'ideologically pure but politically impotent' (Dorey and Denham 2016: 261), whilst Bale had argued that 'Labour cannot possibly win, nor even come close to winning, the next General Election unless it somehow gets shot of Mr Corbyn in pretty short order' before adding that 'if he lasts very much longer as leader then there is every chance that Labour will gift the Tories control of government for a decade or more to come, so great will be the damage done to its already fragile brand' (Bale 2016: 18). However, their arguments seemed more credible in the aftermath of the General Election of December 2019, just as Maiguashca and Dean's (2020) defence of Corbyn was undermined by the fact that doubts

about Corbyn's leadership competence had been identified as one of the key reasons why the Labour Party lost support between the General Elections of 2017 and 2019[2].

Moreover, their critique about political science being biased against the left is problematic when considering the Stark model. Academics studying the Labour Party have used the Stark model as a basis around which to explain how and why more leftward leaning candidates have won the Labour Party leadership elections of 1963 and 1980[3] (Heppell, 2010c). The more leftish leaning Harold Wilson defeated the social democratic right candidate, George Brown, in the 1963 Labour Party leadership election because he was deemed to be more acceptable; more electable and more competent (Heppell, 2010a, 2010b). The socialist left Michael Foot defeated the social democratic right candidate, Healey in the 1980 Labour Party leadership election, despite Healey being perceived as more electable and competent; as Foot was more acceptable (Heppell, 2010a; Heppell and Crines, 2011). In addition, the rejection of David Miliband – perceived to be the continuity New Labour candidate - in the Labour Party leadership of 2010 can also be explained by the Stark model. His superiority in terms of electability and competence, was trumped by the fact that his younger brother's willingness to transcend aspects of the Blairite past made him more acceptable to parts of the (s)electorate within the Electoral College – as per the Stark model emphasis on the ordering of the criterion (Dorey and Denham, 2011).

Furthermore, if you want to examine the problematical assumptions of the Stark model within a wider debate on political science biases, this does require an understanding of how the Stark

[2] Of those who voted for the Labour Party in the General Election of 2017 but who defected away from them at the General Election of 2019, the opinion polling evidence suggested that 16 percent defected due to doubts about their economic competence; 19 percent defected due to concerns about their Brexit policy; and 35 percent abandoned Labour due the leadership of Corbyn (Curtis, 2019). As to why Corbyn had become a liability this could be attributed to a). the internal factionalism between the Corbynite and non-Corbynite factions, b). the increasing focus on antisemitism within the party; and c). the tone of the journalistic coverage or media (mis)representations which framed perceptions of Corbyn negatively (see Goes, 2020; Philo et al, 2019; Cammaerts et al, 2020).

[3] Studies into leadership selection within the Labour Party tend to define candidates on a spectrum of Labour political thought based on five positions: on the socialist left, either the old left associated with legacy of Nye Bevan or the new left thinking of Tony Benn; the loyalists in the centre; the old right in the tradition of Hugh Gaitskell and the positioning of New Labour and the leadership of Tony Blair – see Plant, Beech and Hickson, 2004, pp. 2-3.

model has been applied to studies on Conservative Party leadership elections. As was mentioned earlier the model fails to explain the selection of Thatcher in the 1975 Conservative Party leadership election – where she was deemed to be inferior to William Whitelaw against all three criteria in the second-round ballot (Quinn, 2012, p. 160; see also Cowley and Bailey, 2000). This could imply that the model is problematical for the more ideological candidates – either left or right - but it cannot be used to support the argument that the Stark model holds a bias solely against candidates of the ideological left.

Moreover, the Stark model provides scholars with a credible way of explaining the selections in each of the other Conservative Party leadership elections since the onset of democratisation. This includes selections in times when the Conservatives have been riven within internal ideological conflict and they have selected the most economically liberal and Eurosceptic candidate available to them - i.e. the selections of the more ideologically acceptable candidatures of William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith in 1997 and 2001 over the more electable and competent candidate, which on both occasions was Kenneth Clarke (Alderman and Carter, 2002; Heppell and Hill, 2008; 2010; Hayton and Heppell, 2010).

However, the primary problem with Maiguashca and Dean critique of the Stark model is the evidence which demonstrates that it *does* help explain the selection of Starmer in the Labour Party leadership election of 2020. The final section of this paper will demonstrate this by considering the candidatures of Starmer, Long-Bailey and Nandy in relation to the opinion polling evidence that corresponds to the Stark model criteria of acceptability (unifying capability); electability and competence.

The Stark Model and the Labour Party Leadership Election of 2020

The evidence from the opinion polling of those who participated in the leadership ballot is clear. Pollsters asked the selectorate to compare and contrast the candidates, in relation to a series of questions that captured the themes associated with the Stark model on acceptability, electability and competence (see table four, below).

Starmer was clearly viewed as the most unifying of the candidates: he held a 23 percentage-point lead over the second most unifying candidate (Nandy). He was also viewed as the most likely to win the next General Election: he held a 37 percent lead over the next best placed

candidate, Long-Bailey. A range of questions relating to competence were asked – i.e. opposition effectiveness; policy expertise; media performance; and leadership strength – and all of them provided Starmer with double-digit leads over his rivals, with his scores ranging from 59 to 70 percent on these, whilst his rivals ranged between 20 to 48 percent (YouGov, 2020a). Moreover, those members who decided to select Starmer did so with an expectation that the image and positioning of the Labour Party would change as compared to the Corbyn era. Opinion polling on the voting selectorate identified how 92 percent of participants expected Starmer to make the Labour Party 'different' to the Corbyn era – with 3 percent seeing no change, and five percent don't know - as compared to Long-Bailey on 25 percent different, 70 percent no change and 5 percent don't know (Nandy was 80 percent change; 9 percent no change and 11 percent don't know) (YouGov, 2020b).

Table Four: Labour Party Leadership Electorate 2020 and Attitudes Towards Candidates

	Starmer	Long-Bailey	Nandy
Acceptability			
• Could unite the Labour Party	50%	18%	27%
Electability			
• Could win next General Election	63%	26%	24%
Competence			
• Could provide effective opposition	65%	34%	33%
• Understands policy detail	70%	48%	37%
• A good media performer	65%	33%	41%
• Would be a strong leader	59%	28%	20%

Source: YouGov, 2020a.

In addition to noting opinion polling in relation to those who would participate in the actual Labour Party leadership election of 2020, it is also worth identifying opinion towards the candidates within the wider electorate: after all, the Labour Party are selecting a new party leader in order to broaden their electoral appeal. Although no opinion polling data was made available on the question of which candidate was the most unifying, data was available in terms

of the other two measures within the Stark model – i.e. perceptions of electability and perceptions of competence.

Table five below identifies the wider electorates views of the candidates' electability. Based on prior voting at the General Election of 2019, Starmer was the candidate the wider electorate were most likely to vote for, but not by much. Starmer was also the candidate most likely to retain the votes of those who already voted Labour. Most significantly, Starmer was the candidate who was most likely to secure the support of centrist Liberal Democrat voters (which totalled around 3.6 million). A total of 50 percent of Liberal Democrat voters indicated that they were more likely to vote Labour under Starmer (and 46 percent unlikely), but the feedback on Long-Bailey was significantly worse – 19 percent more likely and 75 percent unlikely (Ipsos, 2020).

Table Five: Voter Preferences and the Labour Party Leadership Candidates 2020

		General Election 2019 Voter		
	Total	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats
Starmer				
Likely	35	9	81	50
Unlikely	52	83	11	46
Don't know	13	8	8	4
Net	-17	-74	+70	+4
Long-Bailey				
Likely	28	3	73	19
Unlikely	60	90	19	75
Don't know	12	7	8	6
Net	-32	-87	+54	-56
Nandy				
Likely	32	10	76	31
Unlikely	53	81	14	57
Don't know	15	9	10	12
Net	-21	-71	+62	+26

Source: IPSOS, 2020.

Table six provides the evidence of voter perceptions of the candidates and competence. The findings replicate those in relation to perceived electability in that Starmer was perceived to be

the most favourable candidate amongst known Labour supporters and amongst known Liberal Democrat voters. Running parallel to the positive impression that Starmer made amongst Liberal Democrats – with a +31 percent net rating on favourability - was the negative impression that Long-Bailey made with Liberal Democrat voters - she had a -30 percent net rating on favourability.

Table Six: Competence and the Labour Party Leadership Candidates 2020

		General Election 2019 Voter		
	Total	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats
Starmer				
Favourable	24	14	38	45
Unfavourable	22	42	8	14
Don't know	54	44	54	41
Net	+2	-28	+30	+31
Long-Bailey				
Favourable	10	5	22	9
Unfavourable	31	48	19	39
Don't know	59	47	60	51
Net	-23	-43	+3	-30
Nandy				
Favourable	13	11	21	22
Unfavourable	18	30	11	16
Don't know	68	59	68	63
Net	-5	-19	+10	+6

Source: YouGov, 2020c

Therefore, the Labour Party leadership election of 2020 demonstrates that the ongoing relevance of the Stark model for analysing leadership selections in British political parties. The paper can make this claim not only on the basis of the preference that parliamentarians showed towards Starmer at the nomination stage, but from insights from opinion polling of Labour Party members who participated in the leadership election. They voted for Starmer because they believed that he was the most acceptable candidate; the most electable candidate; and the candidate most capable of being an effective leader of the Opposition and potentially Prime Minister. Using opinion polling from the wider electorate the paper demonstrates the broad

correlation between the opinion of the Labour Party membership, and the wider electorate, in relation to electability and competence.

Conclusion

This paper used the Labour Party leadership election of 2020 to test the ongoing validity of the Stark model for explaining leadership election outcomes. It also used this as a means by which to engage with the debates that have opened up on bias within political science research in relation to political parties and political leadership. The paper does not argue that such debates should not be engaged in. However, it does challenge the claims that Maiguashca and Dean (2020) have made with regard to the Stark model – i.e. that it lacks utility and objectivity.

On the first issue of its utility this paper argues the following. Using either qualitative insights from interviews from within the campaign teams of the respective candidates; or via descriptive statistics from opinion polling about the candidates, academics have used the Stark model to reach judgements about which candidates were the most acceptable, electable and/or competent. Within studies on the Labour Party there have been occasions when one candidate was felt to be the strongest candidate across all three criteria – e.g. the Labour Party leadership elections of 1963, 1976, 1988, 1992 and 1994. On other occasions the best candidate across each of the criteria has been disputed: in these cases, the Stark model has emphasised the first order criteria of acceptability, which explains the leadership election outcomes in 1980, 1983 and 2010. Overall, then, the Stark model has provided useful explanations into the outcomes of all leadership elections since 1963 with the exception of the selection of Corbyn (see Heppell, 2010a; 2010b; Heppell et al, 2010; Heppell and Crines, 2011; Dorey and Denham, 2011, 2016; Quinn, 2012; 2016; Denham and Dorey, 2018; Denham et al, 2020).

When broadening that out to leadership elections within the Conservative Party it has contributed to explaining outcomes in all of their leadership election since 1963 with one exception: the selection of Thatcher in 1975. Taken together the Stark model has been applied to twenty-four leadership elections across the two main parties between 1963 and 2020 and the criteria (and ordering) aid our explanations in all but the selections of Corbyn and Thatcher (see Heppell, 2008; Denham, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2017; Quinn, 2012; Jeffery et al, 2018; Denham et al, 2020).

That the selection of Corbyn was an exception, provided the basis for Maiguashca and Dean (2020) to critique the Stark model, but the selection of Starmer reaffirmed its explanatory value. This is explained in section three of this paper and the polling evidence provided in tables four to six provides us with the evidence in relation to which candidate was deemed the *most* acceptable, electable and competent. Moreover, the most recent Conservative Party leadership reaffirms its explanatory value as Boris Johnson was selected primarily as he fulfilled the first order criteria of acceptability – as the lead Brexiteer Conservative in a party, especially at the membership level, that believed in leaving the European Union (Jeffery et al, 2020).

On the second issue of objectivity this paper offers the following response. The argument being made by Maiguashca and Dean (2020) is that political science research on British politics and political leadership was characterised by biases against Corbyn, and it implied that the Stark model was reflective of those biases.

However, the argument that the Stark model is being used to demonise candidates of the left, like Corbyn, is undermined when we consider leadership selection studies within the Conservative Party, in which the selection of Thatcher is the only selection in which the Stark model struggles to explain. This could indicate that the Stark model struggles to explain the appeal of ideological candidates, but it cannot be used to argue that the Stark model specifically demonises candidates on the left alone. Therefore, it cannot be aligned to the biases against the left argument being advanced.

Furthermore, any suggestion that the Stark model tends towards centrist candidates – i.e. those tending towards the social democratic right or New Labour end of the ideological spectrum or towards the one-nation economically wet wing of the Conservative ideological spectrum – lacks sufficient supporting evidence. Such an implication can be challenged by the selections made by the Labour Party in the leadership elections of 1963, 1980 and 2010 in which the candidates that were closer to the social democratic wing – Brown, Healey and David Miliband – were all defeated, as argued by Heppell, 2010a, 2010b, Dorey and Denham, 2011; see also Quinn, 2012; Denham and Dorey, 2018; Denham et al 2020. It also lacks evidence in relation to previous Conservative Party leadership elections – e.g. candidates that were closer to the one-nation economically wet wing such as Michael Heseltine (in 1990) and Kenneth Clarke (in 1997 and 2001) have been defeated, with their defeats being in part explained by the criteria within the Stark model – see for example, Heppell 2008a; Heppell and Hill, 2008; 2010; see

also Quinn, 2012; Denham et al, 2020. Given that the Stark model has been used by academics to explain the selection of such ideologically diverse figures as Foot for the Labour Party in 1980, to the arch-Brexiteer Johnson for the Conservatives in 2019, it is clearly not a model infected with an ideological bias.

Therefore, the question marks that have been placed against the Stark model in relation to its utility and its objectivity can be challenged. It remains a legitimate means by which academics can seek to explain leadership selection, and it has been used to explain the selection and rejection of an ideologically diverse range of candidates from within both the Labour and Conservative parties. Given that the Stark model aims to help explain who *did* won and why – and not who *should* have won – it should be detached from the critique that has been developing around biases within the scholarship of British politics and political leadership.

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