

2 Local Politicians: Ambition or Drift?

If they could find somebody better, I would not be heartbroken, as I don't really want to be a councillor . . . [but] I feel we are letting our own supporters down if we don't offer them a candidate of the party of their choice. (Monika Beaufort, Labour candidate)

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we discussed the pressures and uncertainty surrounding the role of councillors, and indicated how this reflects a long debate concerning the democratic nature of local government. The crux of this debate is whether local government is primarily a means of citizen participation rather than an instrument for the efficient delivery of national policies at the local level. These issues were raised in the discussions leading to the reorganisation in 1974, but, as we can now see, the new local government system has raised other questions of great importance; for example, the extent of involvement by political parties in the making of policy, and the decline both of independent councillors and of uncontested seats. There has also been some associated small change in the type of people recruited to councils.

In this chapter we assess the significance of these changes for the recruitment of individuals to local government. We start with an examination of the socio-economic characteristics of councillors. We then go on to look at the role of political parties in the recruitment process, before presenting a model of councillor recruitment in which individual resources, opportunities and motivations are considered together. This model is the starting point for our account of why certain individuals are more or less likely to stand as candidates and subsequently become councillors.

Who are the councillors?

The legal rules relating to local government are such that almost anyone can become a candidate. The requirements – that one is over 21, eligible to vote, and resident in the area covered by the authority for which one is standing – are easy to meet. The most significant disqualification is that candidates must not be simultaneously employed by that authority. Only a tiny proportion of adults, however, ever contest an election.

Prior to the reorganisation of local government in 1974, the total number of councillors on all types of authority (excluding parish councils) was over 40 000. In their analysis of the electoral process in local government in the early 1960s the Maud Committee observed that ‘recruitment of candidates was a problem in almost all the authorities we visited’ and concluded that ‘in some areas it was difficult if not impossible to find sufficient people . . . willing to accept nomination’ (Maud 1967a, p. 134). In rural districts and some counties, for example, 60 per cent of seats were uncontested. In the elections of 1965, 38 per cent of councillors overall were returned unopposed (Maud 1967b, p. 45).

In recent years the situation has changed. One consequence of the reorganisation of local government in 1974 was a significant reduction in the total number of councillors to 26 000. On the face of it, this would seem to have eased the problem of finding candidates. The number of uncontested seats has certainly fallen dramatically: in the 1985 local elections virtually all the seats in shire counties were contested and the proportion of uncontested seats for other authorities in the immediately preceding period had fallen below 10 per cent. These seats were located mainly in Scotland and Wales and the more rural areas of England (Widdicombe 1986b, p. 42). This situation was also confirmed by our research: in the three county councils which we studied, there were no uncontested elections.

There is no necessary correlation, however, between the decline in the number of uncontested seats and the absolute reduction in the total number of councillors. It may be that the increased involvement of political parties at all levels of local government has been responsible for the dramatic increase in the number of contested elections (see Chapter 1, and Widdicombe 1986b, p. 23).¹ We discussed in Chapter 1 the forces that brought about the ending

of consensus in local government. In the light of our discussions with councillors, we support the views of Widdicombe and others that political parties now play a dominant role in the recruitment of councillors. (Gyford *et al.* 1989) The outcome is that an electoral contest is now a normal prerequisite for entry to a council. This represents a major change in the operation of local government in many areas since the 1960s and has led to a consequent reduction in the number of independent councillors.

Is there a typical councillor?

The findings of the three main inquiries into Local Government (Maud 1967, Robinson 1977, Widdicombe 1986) are broadly in agreement that councillors, at least in respect of their socio-economic backgrounds, are unrepresentative of the population as a whole. As the Widdicombe Report claims, 'the traditional councillor stereotype is a white, middle aged, white-collar male' (1986a, p. 26). The authors of the research volume on the councillor also observed that,

when the personal characteristics are compared across the three studies, perhaps the most remarkable aspect is the stability of the population, particularly since the Robinson Report . . . elected members as a group are still highly unrepresentative of the overall population. (Widdicombe, 1986c, p. 19)

However, in the Report, they qualify this conventional view in stating that

overlaid on this traditional stereotype, a common perception is that the type of people who are becoming councillors is changing. There are thought to be increasing numbers of younger and female councillors . . . Our research shows that the traditional stereotype disguises a far more diverse picture in reality, and also that recent changes in the characteristics of councillors have matched popular perceptions in only a few authorities. (Widdicombe 1986a, p. 26)

Essentially, they are arguing that there still appears to be little change at the aggregate level, but that in a few local authorities members come from more diverse backgrounds. This interpretation has been confirmed in a number of recent studies including our own (Jennings 1982, Gyford 1984, Walker 1983, Barron *et al.* 1987, Bristow *et al.* 1983).

Gender

The unrepresentative nature of members is clearly seen in relation to the position of women in local politics.² At the time of the Maud survey only 12 per cent of all councillors were women. Their numbers had increased to 17 per cent by 1976, but in the most recent survey there was only a small further increase to 19 per cent. As the Widdicombe research makes clear, however (Widdicombe 1986c, p. 19), these figures disguise variations between types of authority and different regions in Britain. Moreover, these variations are longstanding, and similar patterns were evident in the findings of previous reports and academic research (Robinson 1977, Bristow 1980). In Wales, for example, the representation of women was much below average and particularly so in the case of Welsh counties where women constituted only 5 per cent of the total number of councillors. In Scotland, the proportion of women was also below average, except for the Scottish districts. In England the main variation is between type of authority. The highest proportion of women occurs in metropolitan districts (23 per cent), London boroughs (22 per cent) and the shire counties (21 per cent). We will look at the reasons for the under-representation of women in a later section of this chapter.

Age

The Maud Committee was also concerned with the overall age profile of councillors. At the time of their survey, in 1965, 61 per cent of female councillors and 52 per cent of male councillors were over the age of 55 and only 15 per cent of women and 21 per cent of men were below 45 years of age. These figures were grossly out of line with the age distribution of the population as a whole. Ten years later, there had only been a slight change. The proportion of men under the age of 45 had increased to 26 per cent and for

women councillors to 24 per cent. Since that time, there has been no further change, so that, in 1985, approximately 50 per cent of all councillors are still over 55 years old (Widdicombe 1986c, p. 21).

As with gender differences, the overall figures conceal variations between type of authority and region. For example, in the metropolitan areas, London boroughs and Scottish districts there has been, since 1976, a disproportionate increase in the number of councillors under the age of 45 (Widdicombe 1986c, p. 20, McGrew and Bristow 1983, Gyford 1984). In contrast, in the Welsh and English shire districts the number of councillors over the age of 60 has increased. As the Widdicombe researchers suggest, 'the increase in the proportion of younger councillors in the metropolitan areas would appear to explain the image of the councillor as distinctively younger than before' (1986c, p. 20) and conclude that 'the changes may be summed up as councillors as a body having become more diverse, rather than younger'.

Education

Diversity is also in evidence when we examine the educational background of councillors. Taken as a group, the evidence in all the surveys referred to in this chapter indicates that councillors spent more time at school, and that a far higher percentage received post-school education, than is the case for the population as whole and that they are far more likely to possess formal educational qualifications at every level of academic attainment. However, as the Widdicombe evidence confirms, this overall average conceals considerable divergence, and councillors in the London boroughs and the metropolitan areas are more than twice as likely to possess degrees than councillors in Wales or in English shire districts.

Employment

Turning to employment status, there has been, in recent years, a marked change, identified in the Widdicombe report, in the proportion of councillors in paid employment. This had declined since the Robinson committee reported nine years earlier, from 72 per cent to 60 per cent of all councillors. In part, this is due to a small increase in the number of unemployed councillors, but the

main reason for this change is an increase in the number of retired councillors, made up principally of those taking early retirement or made redundant and no longer actively seeking paid work (Widdicombe 1986c, p. 28). Only a quarter of women councillors were in full-time paid employment, with a further sixth engaged in part-time employment. (Since neither Robinson nor Maud give separate figures for the employment of women councillors, we are unable to say whether there has been any change in this respect in recent years.) The low proportion of employed women is, as we shall argue later, almost certainly due to the particular difficulties for women in combining full-time employment with council work, (and, in many cases, family commitments as well), and not (as Bristow suggested) simply because women councillors have no 'need' of paid work because they are invariably the wives of high-earning men (Bristow, 1980).

The decline in the numbers in paid employment has not disturbed the pattern identified in previous studies that councillors are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of employers, professional and managers. Recent figures show that 41 per cent of all councillors came from these occupations compared to 14 per cent for the population as a whole (Widdicombe 1986c, p. 30). Also, only 5 per cent of councillors had a semi-skilled or un-skilled manual occupation compared to 24 per cent for the general population. (In the case of women, these data have to be treated with some caution, as in many cases they relate only to the occupational background of their husbands.) Once again, the aggregate figures disguise significant variations. In the London boroughs, English shire and metropolitan counties, and shire districts, there were a disproportionately large number of councillors with professional and managerial occupations, sometimes in excess of 50 per cent of the council. But in metropolitan districts, Welsh authorities and Scottish regions, approximately one-third of councillors came from manual occupations.

A 'new breed' of councillor

Although the general picture today in terms of gender, age, education and employment is not so different from 1976, some researchers have identified a new breed of younger councillors,

many of whom are in non-manual public sector employment (Gyford 1984, Walker 1983). We have already looked at the age distribution (above) but the second point requires more discussion. Overall, the proportion of councillors employed in public sector organisations mirrors exactly the 36 per cent of the total workforce employed in this sector, but – as with occupational distribution generally – there are considerable regional variations. Some metropolitan councils and London boroughs draw up to 50 per cent of their members from the public sector, and of these over half are employed by local authorities. David Walker (1983) found that in certain inner London boroughs and the GLC, education, local government and voluntary organisations accounted for 41 per cent of those councillors in paid employment. This concentration in densely populated urban areas is – as Gyford (1984) points out – not at all surprising, given the ease of access from one's place of employment to serving as a councillor on a neighbouring authority.

In some of these authorities, also, the proportion of younger women has grown much faster than in others. These changes are related, since a high proportion of women work as teachers or other local government employees. Nevertheless, there is no authority on which the proportion of women even approaches that within the population as a whole. Gyford points out that the differences between type of authority in respect of gender, age and employment status of councillors are overlaid by party differences (Gyford *et al.* 1989). Younger members, women and those in manual occupations are found in larger numbers on councils where Labour is the majority party. In consequence, Labour councillors tend to be more representative of the population as a whole than are Conservative or Alliance³ members.

The problem of 'twin trackers'

Those who are employed by one local authority while working voluntarily as councillors for another have been defined as 'twin trackers'⁴ (Widdicombe 1986a, p. 111). Their activities have been criticised by the government and some sections of the media. In the first place it is argued that their numerical dominance on some authorities accentuates the problem of the limited range of

occupations from which members are drawn, contributing further to the unrepresentative nature of some councils. Secondly, there may be a conflict of interest – which is not, incidentally, confined exclusively to local government employees – when a council member chooses to vote in accordance with the interests of his or her employing authority rather than the one she or he is nominally representing. (A rather different kind of conflict of interest, identified by the Widdicombe inquiry but of limited relevance to us here, is the position of officers who are supposedly neutral, but are politically identified by their elected membership on another authority.) Thirdly, the issue which has particularly concerned the Conservative government and other commentators in the media and elsewhere, is the amount of time these individuals are not giving to the job for which they are being paid. By implication, there is also the strong suspicion that local authorities of the same political persuasion collude with each other to allow an officer in the one to become a full-time politician in the other. This is close to the popular definition of the term ‘twin trackers’ which refers only to those councillors who give ‘too much’ time to their voluntary commitments at the expense of their paid work or otherwise abuse their dual role. This definition is clearly ideological, however, and fails to specify how much time is ‘too much’; i.e. at what point is such a person abusing her/his position, and thereby, in this definition, becoming a ‘twin tracker’?

Whichever definition we use, ‘twin tracking’ is a localised phenomenon which may occur because of the difficulties experienced by some private sector employees in obtaining sufficient time off to fulfil increasingly demanding roles as elected members in inner city authorities. Moreover, in the Widdicombe definition, this phenomenon has existed for many years. There may well be a problem in relation to widening the occupational background of council members, and in making opportunities equally open to all. The issue of ‘twin tracking’ has, however, been grossly exaggerated. On the Widdicombe evidence, only a minute proportion of those they define as ‘twin trackers’ came close to abusing their position, and there were no such individuals at all in our study. If there is a problem, however, this can best be solved by providing all employees with statutory time off sufficient to allow them to take on the demands of a council role. Moreover, to widen recruitment still further, issues such as child care and adequate

remuneration for councillors have to be tackled effectively. Changes in these respects (which we look at in more detail in later chapters) could then mean that manual workers, women and the unemployed could take their place beside public sector employees and self-employed business men on local authorities throughout the country.

The turnover of councillors

The dramatic increase in contested elections, resulting from increased involvement of political parties in local government has influenced directly the rate of turnover of council membership and the continuity of members' experience on councils. Evidence collected for the Widdicombe Inquiry demonstrates that the average turnover rate of councillors between 1981 and 1985 was over 30 per cent. This evidence also reveals that between 1964 and 1985 the proportion of councillors with ten plus years of continuous service declined from 48 per cent to 35 per cent of all councillors and that the proportion with 21 years service fell from 10 per cent to 3 per cent (Widdicombe 1986c, p. 35).

The general pattern of an increased turnover of councillors disguises important variations. Gyford and his colleagues identify two types of turnover: voluntary and involuntary (Gyford *et al.* 1989). Involuntary turnover may occur at a higher rate in those authorities where 'whole council' elections occur every four years. If this happens at a time of extreme unpopularity for one of the national parties then there can be widespread change in the party composition of local councils. This, combined with the increased volatility of the electorate, means that a party may lose in excess of 50 per cent of its seats at one election, only to recover their position substantially at the next election four years later. They demonstrate that this is more likely to be the experience of councillors in the counties, Scottish authorities, London boroughs and the 60 per cent of shire districts which chose elections every four years. It is the London boroughs and the erstwhile metropolitan counties in which, in respect of the personal characteristics of members, we can identify the main differences from the general pattern of councillors described above. The emergence of younger councillors and the increased involvement of women on these councils

may, therefore, in part, be explained by the vagaries of the electoral process.

Voluntary turnover, on the contrary, may occur more frequently when councillors experience increased stress from council work, or when their private commitments cannot easily be reconciled with their public ones. Factors which we found led to increased voluntary turnover include age, ill-health, the lack of time, family and domestic pressures, problems associated with paid employment and a sense of disenchantment with local government. Both the Maud and Widdicombe reports also suggest these as reasons for councillors retiring prematurely from councils; they do not, however, provide any conclusive evidence.

In many respects, the considerations councillors take into account in deciding to give up a council position are counterparts to those they and other activists advance for their decision to stand (or not) for council membership in the first place. Members contemplating retirement from a council have, however, experienced the burden of office and the consequences for other aspects of their lives, whereas those embarking on a council career are aware of the probable burden of office in general terms, but nonetheless are prepared to undertake this task. We found that both candidates and councillors were equally aware of the potential pressures of council membership, and will argue later in this chapter that entry to a council may be seen – in the main – as a process in which individuals balance a range of considerations before committing themselves to a candidature. A similar process operates when a councillor finally decides to retire from council membership.

The ‘classic model’ of the recruitment process

We have seen that, despite the recent changes in recruitment patterns to include people from a wider range of backgrounds, it remains true that the vast majority of councillors are still drawn from a narrow section of society. Councils are not in any respect microcosms of society as a whole. Implicit recognition of this has led some authors to conclude that in explaining political recruitment, it is sufficient merely to document the personal characteristics shared by a majority of councillors (Budge and Fairlie 1975).

Other writers have gone further and suggested that this correlation is due to unspecified 'forces' which make it more probable that people such as professionals, managers and the self-employed will succeed in becoming councillors (Stanyer 1977).

This account has laid the basis for what we describe as the 'classic' model of political recruitment. Central to this model is the claim that political activism is best seen as a movement up a hierarchy of involvement which starts with voting, moves to party membership, then to office-holding in the party and culminates in the achievement of elected office at the local or national level. It is further assumed that progress up this political ladder is inextricably linked to the individual's socio-economic status.

There is certainly evidence that an increasing number of MPs from all parties have previous experience as local councillors (Radice *et al.* 1987). This would apparently lend support to the classical model. We believe, however, that this model of political recruitment provides a partial description, only, of the end state, i.e. membership of a council. It cannot, in principle, explain the process whereby particular individuals become councillors rather than the many others who share the same personal characteristics and are equally active in political parties but who never choose to stand for a council.

Political parties and recruitment

Faced with this dilemma, some commentators have argued that it is necessary to go beyond a consideration of the socio-economic status of activists and explore the role of political parties in the recruitment process (Brand 1973, Dearlove 1979, Bochel 1966). In their view, the parties, in their selection of candidates, open up opportunities for a few and close off opportunities for others. Furthermore, these writers assume that, in making their choice of candidate, the party selectors have in mind a list of qualities which would characterise the ideal recruit, and only those who measure up to this ideal will be selected. Where such 'ideal' candidates fail to present themselves, the selectors will actively try to recruit people with the relevant qualities but, in the absence of suitable prospective candidates, may be obliged to compromise.

We found, however, that the reality is rather different: it is very common for party selectors to be faced with very few, if any, individuals willing to come forward as candidates. The 'compromise' candidate may therefore be more common than the 'ideal' one, and the 'selection' process, in consequence, provides little or no scope for choice by party selectors.

Different parties respond to this situation in different ways. The Conservative Party, as a number of writers have observed, is quite willing to accept non-party members as candidates so long as they demonstrate some voluntary activity in the local community (Brand 1973, Collins 1978a). In a study of councillor recruitment in Glasgow, Brand noted that the Progressive (anti-socialist) Party would recruit promising individuals who were not members of the party (Brand 1973). Our research endorses this finding: in our discussions with both candidates and councillors we met a number of Conservative Party candidates who achieved their candidature before joining the party. In contrast, selectors in the Labour Party are more concerned to secure candidates who have served a period of apprenticeship in the party. They are, however, also frequently faced with a shortage of candidates and find it necessary to exert considerable pressure on party activists to ensure a full slate of candidates at local elections. In this situation the qualities of the candidates take second place to the tactical judgement that it is necessary for the party to fight in all wards.

Our findings, along with the evidence of other studies, therefore confront directly the allegation that party selectors have a bias in favour of certain categories of people and are particularly prejudiced against women. In our view, the notion that discrimination occurs at the selection stage runs counter to the general picture of local parties struggling to find sufficient numbers of party activists willing to stand as candidates at local elections.

Motivation and recruitment

Any analysis of political recruitment which focuses simply on socio-economic status or the role of selectors can provide only a partial understanding of a most complex process. All the studies referred to above suffer from the limitation that they focus on one or at most two aspects of the recruitment process. This may

provide some necessary factual information but does not enhance our understanding of the recruitment process as a whole. A particular weakness is that they do not examine the councillor's own perception of the factors influencing her or his decision to stand as a candidate. They therefore ignore or take for granted individual motivations, and fail even to consider the reasons why a majority of 'suitable' people do not even contemplate seeking public office.

The importance of motivation was acknowledged in a somewhat limited study conducted for the Maud Committee more than twenty years ago. The interviewers approached a sample of councillors with the preamble, 'it would be useful to know how you yourself became a councillor'. They immediately followed this up, however, with a series of specific probes asking councillors to respond to a preconceived set of alternative motives. In effect, they were making assumptions concerning the probable factors influencing recruitment, largely ignoring the councillor's own interpretation of their situation at the time they decided to become candidates. They were also attempting to categorise motivation in isolation from the social, political and institutional context in which it develops.

A more fruitful starting point to the study of recruitment is to follow Gordon's model (Gordon 1979). He argued that an adequate explanation must incorporate three essential considerations: individual resources, including social position and skills; the opportunities available, including the nature of the party and electoral systems, and the party selection process; and personal motivations such as ambition, expectations and attitudes towards the perceived costs of council membership. Although analytically distinct, these dimensions are each conditioned by the others (Barber 1965).

An alternative approach

While in principle endorsing Gordon's model, we feel it is necessary to employ rather broader definitions of the concepts of resources, motivations and opportunities than Gordon proposed. For example, those writers who have focused on socio-economic factors are essentially looking at one kind of resource. We would wish to add to this any attribute which enables an individual to

attain a desired goal: for example, experience, self-confidence and relevant skills, which may be acquired in party and community activity, or family activities, as well as those derived from their education and employment.

We also adopt a broader interpretation of opportunities than that discussed by Gordon and see opportunities of two kinds: first the opportunities provided by the parties in their selection procedures; secondly the opportunities individuals provide for themselves, by being in the right place at the right time (or, in the case of the reluctant candidates, the wrong place at the wrong time).

Finally, we look at motivations, as reported to us by the individuals themselves.

This more integrated approach became evident to us during our initial research into councillors' perceptions of the relationship between their public and private worlds, and we developed it in our subsequent study of the recruitment of women candidates. Many of the data in this chapter therefore refer directly to women's recruitment but we have indicated the relevance to men at appropriate points.

Why do they do it?

As we have indicated, a major lacuna in the literature on political recruitment relates to the dimensions of individual motivations. In view of this, we decided to ask political activists (councillors, candidates and non-candidates) a series of deliberately open-ended questions regarding their decision to stand – or not – for their local council. We received a wide variety of responses, of which the following are examples:

I'm not the sort of person to be able to sit back if I don't agree with what's going on. I can't just sit back and do nothing, I have to become involved. (Daphne Herriott, Conservative candidate and town councillor)

Mrs Carlisle asked me if I would stand for selection. I didn't think I was ready. There may come a time . . . But I didn't feel I was ready then, I hadn't thought about it enough. (Audrey Lightfoot, Conservative Party member and non-candidate)

At the time, my branch was rather small and it took me three months to decide whether I'd do it or not – with very little confidence, I might add . . . I know what I wanted to do, and what I wanted to change, but I didn't really know that [the council] was the avenue I wanted to do it through. (Pauline Smith, Labour backbencher)

How can we make sense of these various reactions? In our view, these responses suggest a subtle interplay between the resources available to them, the opportunities open to them and personal motivations and intentions. Our general conclusion was that candidature was not necessarily a deliberate or consciously worked-for objective, as the classic model would lead us to expect, but nor was it strictly an 'accidental' outcome. Borrowing from Matza, we see this as a process of drift, 'a gradual process of movement, largely unperceived by the actor', the outcome of which may at any stage be accidental or unpredictable (Matza 1964, p. 29). Some individuals who eventually become councillors engage initially in sporadic community activity, may become party members, hold party office and stand for an unwinnable seat before successfully contesting a local election. For these people, the final decision to stand for election may be seen as the culmination of an extended process which commences long before the formal selection stage. There is, however, no inevitability about this progression. People may drift between activity and inactivity. Some individuals may move to candidature, others may strongly resist, whereas others again may be catapulted on to the council with little or no prior involvement in party politics.

Moreover, we found that an individual's identity as an activist was often unclear and changeable. There was no clear distinction between councillors, candidates (some of whom subsequently became councillors) and non-candidates; and indeed, as it turned out, some of the declared non-candidates became candidates soon after our interview. Some candidates – having been persuaded merely to fly the flag for their party – had no real intention of becoming councillors and felt it would be personally disastrous if they were elected. On the other hand some of our non-candidates fully intended standing as candidates at some later date, and were, in effect, more serious potential councillors than some of those who were currently standing.

Resources

Political awareness and self-confidence are part of our wider definition of 'resources'. These may stem from being brought up in a politically active household which, in turn, may have the effect of broadening an individual's understanding of the political process and enhancing political skills, which may lead to a desire for a political career. Previous researchers have recognised the importance of this factor in disposing people to activism, but have not defined it specifically as a political resource. Both Maud (1967) and Budge and his colleagues (Budge *et al.* 1972) found that at least 50 per cent of councillors came from politically active backgrounds. Our work suggests that, whereas only a quarter of councillors and candidates in our studies came from such backgrounds, a substantial majority nonetheless claimed to come from families where there was a 'keen interest' in politics and where political events were 'frequently discussed'. In itself, this may be sufficient to enhance an individual's self-confidence to engage in political dialogue and this may lead to the development of effective political communication.

The acquisition of such skills does not, of course, mean that such individuals will necessarily embark on a political career. In our study, for example, non-candidates were more likely than candidates to come from households where some relatives were politically active in local government. The demands of employment or family life, or the lack of opportunity or absence of any real motivation may well offset any resource advantage. It is, however, noteworthy that women were much more likely than men to stress the need for a longstanding interest in politics. We suggest that women who persist in their political activism in the face of obstacles unlikely to be experienced by men may perhaps need more resources (including self-confidence) and more determination than men, in similar circumstances.

Self-confidence as a resource

Many of the councillors and candidates we talked to emphasised the importance of self-confidence. This is developed in a number of ways. For example, those from a professional and managerial

background who have experienced higher education are more likely to feel confident in their ability or skills to complete certain tasks such as chairing meetings, writing reports and raising issues. This self-assurance may then be reinforced by their involvement in the decision-making process where they work. On the other hand, many women do not have the kind of work experience which can enhance their self-confidence; and those who have withdrawn from employment (albeit temporarily) are also less likely to continue to share this degree of self-confidence.

I find it hard to talk, not to individuals but to groups of people. I think that's something women find in general, just standing up and talking to a group of people is very hard. I can do it, but I don't think I do it well, and I don't enjoy it at all. (Lucy Waite, Labour non-candidate)

A lot of women we've asked, their self-image doesn't include being a councillor. They actually have to be told, 'You'd be a good one.' (Nancy Dixon, Liberal Chair)

I had been interested, but to be quite honest, I didn't really . . . feel I had the nerve or the confidence to do it My first reaction was, 'What, me? No, never!' (Myra Green, Liberal candidate)

We believe that, more than anything else, it is this lack of self-confidence which explains the under-representation of women on many local authorities, and, conversely, the predominance of (white) male professionals. It is not, as we have said earlier, that party selectors discriminate against women; nor do we accept Bristow's claim that a high level of affluence explains the higher than average proportion of women on some councils. While superficially correct, this is in no sense an explanation, and there are serious flaws to his argument. The socio-economic data on which he was drawing relate to male occupations only; therefore, any implications for women members of that authority must, at best, be extremely tentative. Many of the wives of businessmen have relatively few resources on their own account, particularly if they have not been employed for many years, and have few educational qualifications (Barron 1989).

Employment as a resource

While it is true that a majority of Conservative women councillors were non-employed 'housewives' married to professional and managerial partners, the same may be said of many other women who share many of the same attributes but who do not embark on a political career.

Moreover, many Labour and Liberal members did not conform to this pattern at all. Many of them were taking a break of a few years from a professional career while their children were young. Others tried, with difficulty, to combine paid employment with a council career. Many of those who were non-employed bemoaned the loss of income and the expense of council work (see Chapter 6). On the Labour side, certainly, the proportion of women who neither 'needed' to take paid work nor wanted to do so was minimal. Nor, in our view, was this necessarily a disadvantage to them, since it is through occupational experience that people (women and men) often gain useful resources, including self-confidence. It is in our view this which helps to explain the predominance of white middle-class males both on local councils and in parliament.

Where resources of any kind – educational attainment, voluntary group involvement, or work experience – build up in a cumulative manner, an individual will feel increasingly able to engage in political action of some kind. (This is not to say that they *will* do so.) Conversely, where class, gender, race or occupational experience limit resources (as they do particularly for women) those individuals are less likely to acquire that minimal level of self-confidence which is a necessary (if not sufficient) prerequisite for embarking on a political career.

Opportunities

Whatever resources the individual possesses, she or he may still not have the opportunity to embark on a political career. Women, in particular, are therefore in a 'Catch-22' situation. Non-employed women whose children are grown up are likely to have both time and opportunity to devote to council work, but, as we have seen, may have relatively few resources, and if they have been out of the

job market for some time, may lack self-confidence. Those in employment may in principle be more confident and possess relevant skills (and therefore have some of the required resources to stand for the council) but they are often faced with undertaking the main burden of family care in addition to their paid jobs (Mansfield and Collard 1988, Oakley 1974 and 1976; see Chapter 4 for further discussion). They may therefore find it more difficult than non-employed women to combine their existing commitments with a political career. That some of them nevertheless do so is an indication of the strength of their motivation and persistence. The question therefore becomes not 'Why so few women?' but, given the factors working against them, 'Why are there are so many?' (Stacey and Price 1981).

Most previous commentators have concentrated on the opportunities provided by political parties through their selection procedures. As we have seen, however, any selection process relies on the availability of individuals who put themselves in a position where they may be selected. Within the total pool of potential candidates – which is almost the entire local electorate – there is that very small minority who, by joining and actively involving themselves in a political party or other voluntary organisations, show themselves able and willing to take on the larger task of local representative; i.e. they have, in one sense, put themselves in a position where they may be considered for a candidature.

Although the councillors and candidates in our studies did not always distinguish these two kinds of opportunity, the two-sided nature of the selection process is implicit in their comments. If party membership is the starting point for creating an opportunity then a high proportion of candidates and councillors do place themselves in a position where they will be invited to stand. A majority have been active members of their parties for some years prior to candidature and many explained their recruitment in terms of a development from these activities. While this apparently confirms the classic model of political recruitment, and may have some relevance in explaining the political activities of Labour members in particular, it is far less apposite in explaining the recruitment of Conservative and Alliance candidates. In both these parties, as we saw earlier, candidates are frequently recruited from amongst non-party members, and selectors in the Conservative Party, in particular, are quite likely to invite non-members who are

active in voluntary organisations to stand as candidates, as the following comment illustrates:

It really wasn't my idea in the beginning, you know. I wasn't aching to get into public life. But I was actually, after the initial few minutes [after he approached me], interested If I didn't get in, I would in fact join the [party] committee for this ward because I think they do a terrific support job I was the sort of dregs at the bottom of the barrel, they were desperate! (Linda Taplow, Conservative candidate)

In the case of the Labour Party where the selection process tends to be more formal, and requires a shortlist made up of established party members, the party also faces considerable difficulty in many areas in finding candidates. In consequence, considerable effort is expended to persuade or cajole party members to stand for election. The result is that many individuals 'volunteer' in circumstances where there are no readily available alternative candidates.

There was nobody else! They were all sitting there saying, 'Who's going to do it this year?' Edna did it last year and she said, 'I'm not going to do it . . .'. (Emily Poole, Labour candidate)

For the majority of candidates and councillors the idea that they should stand for election was suggested by others, usually by party members. These party members are thereby offering to other members the opportunity to become candidates. Nevertheless, each individual, in becoming a party activist, is to some extent also helping to provide that opportunity for her or himself. In this respect, the opportunity is created jointly by party selectors and those who allow themselves to be selected.

Council work offered a rather different kind of opportunity to some married women who, having given up employment to care for their families, were looking for an interesting and challenging activity outside the home. Many of these were Labour and Liberal members who were willing to become councillors for one term only before returning to paid work. Other older women whose partners were employed in professional or managerial positions could perhaps more easily than other people afford the additional expense of council work, and neither wanted nor needed to earn

a wage themselves. These women, who were more likely to delay their decision to become candidates until their children had left home, were predominately Conservative party members.

Motivations

We have said that the classical model takes motivations for granted. Implicit in this model is the idea of some clear personal ambition on the part of potential candidates; that is, that they actively want to become councillors. Our study, however, does not entirely support this interpretation. The evidence from our own research and other studies strongly suggests that very few candidates are 'self-starters' in the sense that they have a clear ambition to become a local councillor and plan the route accordingly. Instead, the step from party or voluntary group activity to candidature often seems to be taken without much preparation. There is remarkably little evidence of burning ambition and most of those who accept the invitation – unlike those who resist the offer – do so reluctantly because they do not wish to let the party down.

The sitting member decided to stand down, and it was really – I hadn't planned to be a councillor but people in the branch were putting pressure on me and saying 'We'd like you to stand', and it was sort of a culmination (Sarah Hibbert, Labour Chair)

In spite of differences in their experiences, however, neither Sarah Hibbert nor Linda Taplow (whom we quoted earlier, p. 48) initially saw herself as the right person for the job, but each was persuaded by others to stand when no alternative candidates were available. There is some evidence from both our own and other studies, that women are more likely than men to need to be persuaded to stand for public office (Skar, 1981, Means 1971). Men also, however, pointed out that they had needed considerable persuasion to take on council work:

The local party [wherever I lived] always coerced me into going I've always been approached I didn't intend to go on. (Leonard Wilson, Conservative councillor)

While councillors could often recall that they were asked to stand, and by whom, their reasons for going ahead were usually couched in terms of public issues, and often involved a sense of moral obligation or social pressure. The most frequently cited reason for becoming a candidate was to assist the local party in the absence of any other suitable or willing individual. As we have seen, this is related to the question of opportunities, and it seems that the motivation here is an unwillingness to disappoint one's colleagues in the party.

The secretary asked me if I would stand He said, you won't get in, but we've got to have somebody here. I said, well, I'll have a try. (Dora Charles, Conservative candidate; see also Emily Poole, above, p. 48).

Other councillors were motivated by a concern to care for the local community and believed that people with local knowledge should be involved in local policy-making. Some also referred to specific issues such as education or the provision of local amenities as the reason for their involvement in local politics.

I wanted to do something for local people and thought I had something to offer. (Pat Curry, Labour candidate)

I decided to try to become a county councillor because I was absolutely appalled at the state of the town. (Eleanor Mansfield, Liberal backbencher)

Many candidates and councillors commented in general terms that the burdens of domestic life, which bear more heavily on women than men, might explain the under-representation of women on councils. Surprisingly, however, they did not see this as a significant factor in their own particular case. Nevertheless, they did acknowledge their need for a supportive partner (who was perhaps able to take on some of the domestic burden – see Chapter 4) many of them emphasising that, without this support, their current level of political activity would be impossible.

Very few indeed presented their initial involvement in terms of ideological commitment or ambition. This is consistent with the view that only a minority of activists give high priority to

ideological issues and that personal experience and social influences are far more important (Stack 1970, Rose 1962, Bochel 1966, Gyford 1984).

The only mention of any ideological perspective was from those women who felt the need to put forward a 'women's viewpoint' in contrast to the predominant male view of the existing council; and a very few people who wanted to resolve a particular issue, or 'change society' generally. Others, however, had more personal reasons for standing, but normally they could not explain them any more clearly than by saying simply, they wanted to become councillors, or it was the 'right time' for them now:

I suppose I thought, well, the time's right, I'll do it Let's say I'm getting older and perhaps the more active avenues that I've been pursuing, perhaps I've gone over to being not quite so active. (Doreen Peel, Conservative candidate)

Some people suggested that women and men tended to have different reasons for standing for the council. Whereas women only did so if they had fairly clear objectives which they wished to fulfil, men – in their view – were more likely to see it as the next inevitable step, and take it without much thought or because they were taken with the image or the status of becoming a councillor. These remarks, however, were mostly made by *women* about *other* prospective candidates or councillors, and there was no indication from councillors or candidates themselves that issues of status or prestige had great importance for them.

Why NOT be a councillor?

The other side of motivation concerns the people who do *not* want to be councillors: why is this? What reasons did our non-candidates give for turning down repeated requests that they stand for the local council? Reasons fell into four main categories. Firstly there were those (a minority) who cited family reasons, such as the age of their children or their partner's refusal to countenance it. Secondly, and often related to family-centred reasons, were reasons relating to lack of time, or the need to give up other activities if they were to take on additional commitments. Thirdly, there were those who

criticised the councillor role, or certain aspects of it, and did not like the necessity of representing a particular party and toeing the party line. Finally, many women, in particular, felt they lacked the necessary qualities to become effective councillors. Some of them simply said they did not want to do it, whereas others said they were not 'front' people, could not give speeches, or lacked experience or self-confidence:

I find it quite confusing at times. If it was just to be mainly practical things, that would be a piece of cake, but I find it very difficult actually to speak at meetings I think it's lack of confidence, to be honest. (Margaret Wilson, Labour activist)

This therefore returns us back to the dimension of 'resources' with which we started.

In the light of this evidence, we believe there is a distinction between those who take on the role of candidate or councillor, who give 'public' reasons for doing so, or at least for failing to resist the pressure to stand; and those who *do* resist, who are more likely to give private and personal reasons relating either to their family circumstances, their lack of time, or their personal qualities and lack of experience.

Conclusion

In our view, the classical model of political recruitment is too simple, though elements of it are present in many cases. Extensive party experience is neither necessary nor sufficient for council membership, but it makes a candidature more likely, and the association is certainly stronger for Labour Party activists. As we have seen, however, a significant number of Conservatives are catapulted into a candidature and thereby into council membership without any prior 'apprenticeship' in their parties. In all parties, there are people who are nudged reluctantly into taking on a candidature. If, against their own expectations, they are elected, then the notion of 'drift' we referred to earlier is not wide of the mark. Those who drift are seen by selectors as suitable prospective candidates, and fail to resist the moral pressure to stand. In contrast, other equally suitable potential candidates with consider-

able experience and enthusiasm for party activism, nevertheless stand firm in their decision to remain as activists outside the council chamber. This resistance may take different forms and operate at different stages in the recruitment process. Some of the candidates we interviewed could be regarded as having drifted into candidature, but they had allowed this to happen in the knowledge that the seat they were contesting was not, realistically, winnable for their party.

We believe that drift and resistance may be seen as opposite reactions to pressure from fellow activists and selectors. That is, when the opportunity to stand for a council is presented to them, drifters acquiesce, albeit reluctantly, but resisters stand firm in their refusal. This may be, in some cases, because they lack any real motivation to become councillors; in other cases, it may be that their assessment of their own qualities convinces them, even in the face of considerable pressure, that they must persist in their refusal. In a rather different position are those who positively want and actively seek out an opportunity to stand for a candidacy. The classic model, notwithstanding its lack of a motivational perspective, perhaps best fits this pattern, which we term the 'intender' approach.

All three types – the drifter, the resister and the intender – are characterised primarily by their contrasting motivations. It is, however, important to be aware of the dimensions of resources and opportunities which provide the context in which motivations must be considered. For example, it is only those with sufficient resources in a situation of opportunity of whom a response – either to drift or resist – will be demanded. Some intenders fail to become selected as candidates in local council elections for lack of opportunity.

The decision to stand is easier for those whose paid employment is flexible, is not a significant or enjoyable part of their lives, and is not – as is the case for some married women councillors – seen as essential for financial survival. With regard to women also, council membership may be easier for those who have neither partners nor children, or whose partners share their ideological beliefs. However, family and employment situations, important though they are, are not the sole deciding factors.

Nor is wanting to become a councillor enough in itself: several women who wanted very much to be selected were not selected –

though in most cases we do not believe this was due to deliberate bias and on the face of it we see no reason why men should not, on occasion, be in a similar position. Others, who were successful in becoming candidates were not elected; nor, because of the area in which they lived, was there much chance of their obtaining a winnable seat in future. Others were deterred from doing what they wanted to do by their partners who made it clear that becoming a councillor would not be welcomed. This, we feel, is less likely to deter men, who will carry on regardless of their partner's misgivings, and, in most cases, will be able to ensure sufficient tacit support to do so.

In contrast, others, both men and women, were indifferent or even mildly hostile to the idea of standing for the council, but ended up with a seat because of outside pressures. That many of these reluctant recruits later made excellent councillors fulfilling their role efficiently and conscientiously and gaining considerable satisfaction from so doing is to their credit rather than to that of a system which provides so little official encouragement to our locally elected and voluntary council members.

Notes

1. Evidence presented to the Widdicombe committee demonstrates that 83 per cent of all candidates are party members and that over 30 per cent of independents are also members of political parties. Gyford *et al.* (1989) suggest that in 1987, 90 per cent of councillors were party members.
2. Ethnic minorities also appear to be significantly under-represented and particularly so in areas where they constitute a sizeable proportion of the local community, but there are no reliable data.
3. As they then were.
4. This definition is to some extent at odds with the popular use of the term.