



FREE DEMOCRACY INSIGHT EXPLAINER

How Candidates Are Selected

The Hidden Process Behind Who Appears on the Ballot Paper

In one sentence: Before voters choose between candidates, parties and independents have already gone through a process of recruitment, approval, selection and nomination.

Why candidate selection matters

Most voters first notice candidates when leaflets arrive or ballot papers are printed. But the choice has usually been shaped much earlier. Parties decide who will represent them, independents decide whether to stand, and legal nomination rules decide who can appear on the ballot.

Candidate selection matters because elected representatives make real decisions. The quality of the people selected affects Parliament, councils, committees, scrutiny and public trust.

Party approval

Political parties normally have some form of approval process. This may include an application, interview, assessment, training, vetting, reference checks or agreement to follow party rules. The details vary by party.

Approval is meant to test whether someone is suitable to stand under the party label. Parties will usually consider political judgement, communication, campaigning ability, values, past conduct and whether there are risks that could damage the party.

Shortlisting

For contested seats, parties may shortlist several potential candidates. Local members, panels or party officers may be involved. In some cases, national or regional party bodies play a strong role, especially for high-profile contests.

This is one reason selection can be controversial. Local members may want local control. National parties may want a candidate who fits wider strategy, diversity aims or political messaging.

Selection meetings and ballots

In many cases, local party members vote to select the candidate from a shortlist. Candidates may give speeches, answer questions and campaign among members. For council seats, the process may be smaller and more local. For parliamentary seats, it can be more formal and competitive.

A selection contest is not the same as an election. The audience is party members, not the whole public. A candidate who appeals to members still has to persuade wider voters later.

Incumbents

Sitting MPs and councillors may face reselection or readoption processes. Some are automatically supported unless challenged. Others must go through a full process. Local parties may be loyal to incumbents, but poor performance, boundary changes or internal disputes can create pressure.

This is one way parties can hold their own representatives to account, although the strength of that accountability depends on the rules and the willingness of members to use them.

Independent candidates

Independent candidates do not need party selection, but they still need to meet legal nomination requirements. They must organise their own campaign, message, leaflets, volunteers, funding and voter contact.

Independents can benefit from being free of party control. They can also struggle without the campaign machinery, data, volunteers and recognition that parties provide.

Legal nomination

To appear on the ballot, candidates must complete nomination papers and meet election rules. Requirements differ depending on the election. There may be subscribers, deposits for some elections, deadlines and rules about descriptions and spending.

This formal stage is important. A candidate can have support and still fail to appear on the ballot if paperwork is wrong or submitted late.

What good selection should test

- Local knowledge and commitment.
- Integrity and past conduct.
- Ability to listen and communicate.
- Understanding of the role.
- Campaigning effort and resilience.
- Judgement under pressure.

What voters should remember

The ballot paper shows the final choice, not the process that created it. Voters are entitled to ask how candidates were selected, what experience they have and whether they are likely to be independent-minded representatives or simply loyal campaigners.

Key takeaway

Candidate selection is one of the least visible but most important parts of democracy. Better selections give voters better choices.

Sources and further reading

- [Electoral Commission: Political parties](#)
- [UK Parliament: General elections](#)
- [GOV.UK: Register to vote](#)