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Thatcher's Rise and Fall: An Institutional Analysis of the Tory Leadership Selection Process

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In 1975 a relatively unknown Margaret Thatcher defeated then party leader Edward Heath, despite the predictions of observers who said that she possessed little support among the Conservative MPs. In 1990, Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, resigned her position as leader of the British Conservative Party, although she had received a majority of MP support in her party's leadership selection contest. In my study I show that two factors can account for these paradoxical outcomes: the electoral system and Hobbesian loyalty. Through its 15% rule and run-off procedure, the electoral system (a three-ballot run-off contest) seeks consensus candidates, or in other words, candidates who meet the Condorcet criterion. It also encourages 'stalking horse' candidates to run on the first ballot in an attempt to unseat the party leader. Second, a strand of Hobbesian loyalty exists among the MPs. Ministers with this Hobbesian trait vote for the party leader on the first ballot out of loyalty, causing an overstating of support for the party leader. This 'rallying' around the leader is quite ephemeral, and these Hobbesian MPs desert the leader after the first ballot. As such the party leader can achieve first-ballot majorities, which are not indicative of the true preferences of the MPs. The combination of these two factors is that, while the institutional rules favor a challenge to the party leader, the normative actions of the MPs favor the reelection of the party leader. The counter-intuitive finding of this analysis is that early majorities for the party leader (as for Thatcher in 1990) may actually hide the lack of a majority of support. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

The British Conservative Party leadership elections in 1975 and 1990 determined Margaret Thatcher's rise and fall in leadership. In each election a sizable proportion of the Conservative MPs found the current leader unpopular, and in each election the party leader failed to meet the challenge from within his or her own party.[1] In 1975 a relatively unknown challenger, Margaret Thatcher, outpolled Edward Health, the party leader at the time, on the first ballot election. Thatcher then defeated the 'heir apparent' to the leadership, William Whitelaw, on the second ballot. In 1990 Thatcher, as the party leader and Prime Minister, held a majority of the vote on the first ballot, yet still did not win the election. Despite controlling greater than a majority of support, Thatcher resigned her position.