

# A Man's Game? The Grassroots Gender Gap in Britain's Political Parties



The gender disparity in Britain's elected representatives have been well documented. But is it mirrored in party members? Do grassroots female activists differ from their male counterparts? **Tim Bale, Monica Poletti and Paul Webb** report on a major study of the attitudes of women party members.

**T**he UK's Prime Minister is female. The leaders of the two largest parties in Scotland are women and so, too, was Northern Ireland's First Minister before the Assembly in Belfast was suspended. And women, of course, make up more than half of the population of Great Britain. Yet, as surveys conducted by YouGov for the ESRC-funded Party Membership Project run from Queen Mary University of London and Sussex University ([ESRCpartymembersproject.org](http://ESRCpartymembersproject.org)) reveal, only four out of ten members of the country's political parties are women. True, the imbalance isn't quite as glaring as it is in the UK House of Commons, where two thirds of MPs are men. But it's still worth highlighting.

Party members, after all, are the footsoldiers and the lifeblood of democracy. Without them, parties would find it difficult – and certainly a lot more costly – to fight elections. Members also help connect parties to society, help anchor them ideologically and provide them with pools of candidates. Moreover, they play a big part in choosing those candidates, as well as their parties' leaders. Indeed, the fact that men outnumber women at Westminster may well have something to do with the fact that they outnumber them at the grassroots, too: certainly, a quick look at the big differences between political parties on this score (see Table 1) at least suggests that there may be a link.

## Female party members

The Party Membership Project has been surveying rank and file members of six political parties: the big four we focus on here plus the Greens and UKip. The latest survey was conducted just after the 2017 General Election. These surveys – conducted by YouGov, with respondents taken from their internet panel – constitute a rich resource for anyone wanting to understand who joins political parties, as well as why and how they do so. They give us an insight into their ideas and their priorities. And they give us a sense of what members do for their parties at election time, how they see candidate selection, and their impressions of, and their satisfaction with, the organisations they've joined. The 2017 surveys generated more than 5200 respondents, with just over 1000 coming from each of the big four – the Tories, Labour, the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats.

When it comes to female members, the first thing worth noting is that the big differences

Figure 1: The Proportion of women and men in the four big parties' rank and file and MPs

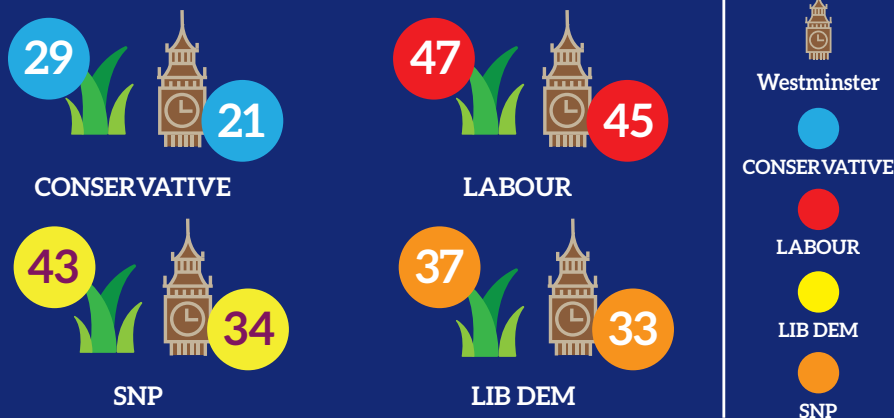


Figure 2: Change in percentage of male party members in major parties

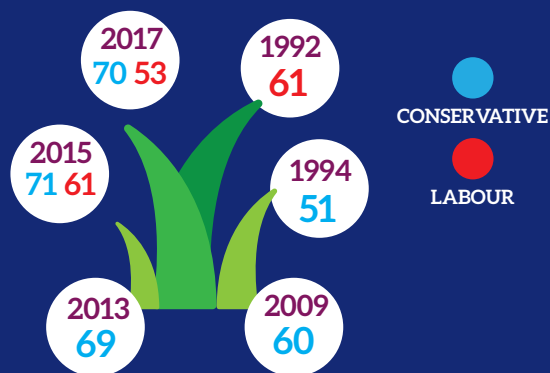
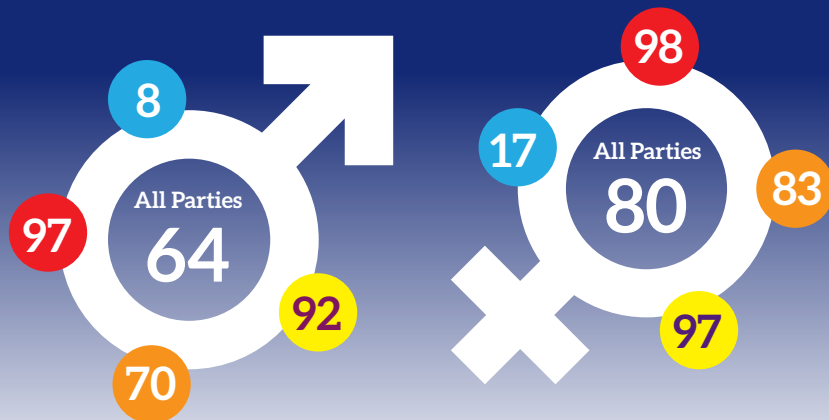


Figure 3: Members attitudes to austerity  
Cuts have gone too far/much too far.



between Britain's two biggest parties – the Conservatives and Labour – have grown over time (see Figure 2, drawn from various academic surveys conducted since the early 1990s). The discrepancies have become even starker recently as women have actually made up the majority – just – of members who joined Labour to vote for and then continue to support Jeremy Corbyn.

Demographically, there would appear to be very little difference between the women who join political parties and the men who outnumber them. Irrespective of their sex, party members are overwhelmingly middle-class (81 per cent of men and 78 per cent of women can be classified as ABC1s), middle aged (the average age for both is 54), and white (95 per cent in both cases).

Ideologically, however, there are some differences, even if they are not huge and do not generally have much to do with major differences in left-right terms: male and female members of the four largest parties don't differ a whole lot on the maldistribution of wealth and income, on whether government should be doing something about it, and on the supposed iniquities of big business. That said, as Figure 3 shows, female members tend to be more concerned about austerity than men – perhaps because women have borne the brunt of cuts to public services since 2010.

Overall, as Table 1 reveals, women party members tend to be more socially liberal than their male counterparts, except on the issue of censorship – something that could, perhaps, be a reflection of differing attitudes to pornography, and a greater focus on children and limiting their exposure to sex and violence. That said, and very interestingly, in the Conservative Party, the reverse is true: grassroots Tory women are, on balance (and except on capital punishment), actually less socially liberal than their male counterparts (see Table 1). Quite why this should be the case, we can't be sure. It could, again, have something to do with a greater focus on, for want of a better term, 'family values' – something the Tories have always made a big part of their pitch to female voters. But this is very much a finding that should prompt further, in-depth research.

Although a softer Brexit and a second referendum predictably go down like a lead balloon with the Tory rank and file of either sex, as a whole (see Table 2) women party members seem slightly keener on both ideas than men are.

## What women do for their parties

So having looked at male-female differences in what rank and file members think, what about what they actually do for their parties? When it comes to campaigning, women, as Table 3 shows, tend slightly more than men toward the more 'expressive activities', like using Facebook, rather than knocking on doors, although this preference may well be a function of the fact that the former is rather easier to combine with family responsibilities (and the so-called second- or double-shift that so many women are still obliged to do) than the latter. Note, though, that there isn't much difference between Tory men and women on this score, almost certainly because so many Conservative members (45 per cent) are over 65 and therefore a long way from being digital natives.

Our surveys revealed that men and women have very similar motives for joining a party: for both sexes, wanting to promote its policies and principles (and oppose those of its rivals) were the most popular reasons given. Party leaders appeared to be a slightly bigger draw for women, whereas more men than women saw membership as leading to a political career. And thereby hangs a tale: very few members actually want to get heavily involved, say, in policy-making or want stand for office, either inside the party or on its behalf at elections, but as Table 4 shows, women are even more reluctant than their male counterparts.

As feminist scholars have long argued, the roots of that reluctance probably run very deep. Almost from birth and often unconsciously, more encouragement is given to boys than girls to take the lead and put themselves forwards; and that acculturation is then reinforced, first, in the education system and the media and then, even more structurally, in the labour market. Meanwhile, parties – even those apparently prepared to countenance what some opponents would regard as positive discrimination – don't always help as much as they might. Even something as apparently mundane as the scheduling of the kind of activities in which would-be candidates are expected to prove enthusiastic participants (door-to-door leafletting and canvassing being the most obvious examples) can make it more difficult for women to get involved (especially the many women who do most of the child- and elder-care in their family).

Grassroots members of both sexes are more likely to have taken part in candidate selection – but even here there is a slight imbalance,



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Table 1: Members' views on social/moral issues

Agree/strongly agree		Male	Female
Young people don't respect British values	All Parties	39	30
	Tories	74	80
Schools should teach children to obey authority	All Parties	50	41
	Tories	84	86
Censorship of films/magazines necessary to uphold moral standards	All Parties	24	32
	Tories	38	55
Death penalty most appropriate for some crimes	All Parties	29	29
	Tories	55	49
Stiffer sentences for those who break the law	All Parties	40	35
	Tories	70	73
Gay marriage (support/strongly support)	All Parties	67	77
	Tories	41	39

Table 2: Members' views on Brexit

Definitely yes plus more yes than no		Male	Female
Second referendum	All Parties	63	69
	Tories	14	11
	Labour	83	73
	LD	91	90
	SNP	85	90
Stay in single market	All Parties	69	77
	Tories	25	28
	Labour	89	84
	LD	95	97
	SNP	95	93
Stay in customs union	All Parties	69	73
	Tories	27	30
	Labour	90	79
	LD	95	94
	SNP	92	90



Table 3: Members' election activity, 2017

2017 election		Male	Female
Canvassed for the party	All Parties	23	20
	Tories	23	22
	Labour	27	27
	LD	27	20
	SNP	23	19
Liked something by the party or its candidate on Facebook	All Parties	53	64
	Tories	39	38
	Labour	55	73
	LD	60	67
	SNP	68	74

and one that may have consequences. Our survey repeated a question that Professor Philip Cowley of Queen Mary University of London asked the general public a few years ago, concerning whether they would like to see more or fewer MPs from a certain background. The results, shown in Table 5, certainly suggests that involving more women in the process might, in the long-term lead to greater diversity at Westminster. Female members, by a margin over men which averages nine percentage points, would like to see more MPs from backgrounds currently under-represented in Parliament, whether they be working class people, ethnic minorities, LGBT people, younger people, people with disabilities and, of course, women.

Interestingly, and very much in keeping with our discovery that they were often less socially liberal than their male counterparts, Tory grassroots proved something of an exception to the rule in this respect. In fact, Conservative women were, if anything, slightly less likely than Conservative men to want to see more MPs coming from groups which are currently under-represented in Parliament – including women themselves. Again, we need more research on this, although anyone looking for clues would be well-advised to start by reading Sarah Childs' and Paul Webb's 2012 study, *Sex, Gender and the Conservative Party: From Iron Lady to Kitten Heels*. Then again, the answer may also lie in asking the question the other way round, namely why are Tory men more progressive (and, indeed, more socially liberal) than Tory women.

Given the latter's relative lack of enthusiasm, the fact that the Conservative Party has managed – thanks to David Cameron's

modernisation project, to the sterling work of Ann Jenkin's Women to Win, and to the unexpectedly strong result that the party chalked up at the 2015 General Election – to significantly increase the number of women Tory MPs in the Commons is actually rather remarkable. More generally, it suggests that, if parties try hard enough, difficulty in recruiting women at the grassroots needn't make it impossible to do better when it comes to Westminster. That said, failure to expand the pool and the pipeline of female candidates by attracting more female members into parties in the first place, will surely make building on whatever has been achieved so far at the parliamentary level, something of an uphill struggle.

### Female participation

Increasing female participation in electoral politics is not, we should remember, a purely British problem; women virtually everywhere face deep-rooted structural impediments to participation in politics, both at the top and at the bottom. The 61:39 ratio in favour of men that our 2017 party members surveys reveal means that the UK isn't that unusual (or even that terrible) in comparative terms. Data from the International Social Survey Programme suggests, for instance, that the grassroots gender imbalance in Germany is considerably worse and only a little bit better in the famously more egalitarian Nordic countries.

In short, parties everywhere need to take a long hard look at themselves and think about precisely why that imbalance persists and what they can do to help correct it. British scholars specialising in gender and politics, such as Rainbow Murray, Sarah Childs and Rosie

Table 4: Members' willingness to stand and make policy

Haven't	Male	Female
Stood for political office	77	87
Stood for elective office (local, nat, EU)	79	88
Taken part in formulation of party policy	59	68

Table 5: Members' views on widening diversity at Westminster

Views on candidates Would like to see more candidates who are	Male	Female
Working class	67	76
Women	72	79
Ethnic minorities	63	72
Disabled	65	77
LGBT	45	56
Young	59	66

Campbell, to name but three, may well have some pertinent – and practical – suggestions. So, too, would some of the country's most prominent female politicians, judging from the excellent contributions made by four of them (Nicky Morgan, Kirsty Blackman, Jess Phillips, and Jo Swinson) at a recent cross-party workshop on the subject, co-organised by the PSA's Elections, Public Opinion and Parties (EPOP) group and the Mile End Institute,

At that event there was widespread agreement that, while there was clearly a greater reluctance among women than men to become party members, we need to be careful not to implicitly blame women for not coming forward. In the end, there was a lot more parties on all sides could and should be doing to encourage them to do so. Pro-actively inviting women to take part in campaigns and activities that might only later on lead to them actually joining a party might help. So too, once they had joined, would scheduling activities at times when women were more easily able to take part. Even more profoundly, parties also need to re-think the definition of what being a good, hard-working activist means, since this is in itself clearly gendered. In other words, parties' difficulties in persuading women to get involved are, to some extent, a reflection of a patriarchal society. But that shouldn't stop us all trying harder to overcome them.

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