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Chapter 6: From Thatcher to May and Beyond: Women in British politics

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The 1979 volume of *Britain at the Polls* described that year's general election as 'a stride forward and several small steps back for women'.[1] On the one hand, Margaret Thatcher was elected as Britain's first female prime minister, a position she would go on to hold for over 11 years. On the other hand, the 1979 election saw only 19 women elected to the House of Commons—the smallest number of female MPs since 1951—no increase in the number of women appointed to the cabinet, and setbacks in the advocacy and representation of women's issues.

The 2017 general election was the first to be contested by Britain's second female prime minister, Theresa May, and provides a timely opportunity to reassess women's place and progress in contemporary British politics. Heralded as a 'record-breaking' moment for women in British politics, media coverage of the election highlighted the fact the '200 women' mark had been breached in the House of Commons for the first time, with more female MPs elected than ever before. Coverage also emphasized the wider diversity of the new House and championed the rise in the numbers of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), LGBT, and disabled MPs. As the dust settled in the aftermath of the election result, many of the key power players left standing were women, including, in addition to prime minister May, the leader of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and 'queen-maker', Arlene Foster; Scotland's first minister and the leader of the Scottish National Party

(SNP), Nicola Sturgeon; and the Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson.

Do the gains made by women in the 2017 general election signal a potential fracturing of the political 'glass ceiling'? Looking past the headlines, the House of Commons is still obviously unrepresentative. Despite the increasingly female face of political leadership in the United Kingdom, the gains in women's numerical representation have been modest, with significant differences across the political parties. Gender parity remains a very long way off. Meanwhile, the number of BAME MPs needed to have doubled in 2017 if they were to have reflected the BAME presence in the population. Instead the number rose from 41 to 52 (or 8 per cent of all MPs), most of whom sit on Labour benches. Five disabled MPs were also elected, including Labour's Marsha de Cordova in Battersea and Jared O'Mara, who memorably took Sheffield Hallam from the former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, yet they constituted less than one per cent of the House of Commons' membership. In comparison, about one in five of the population self-identify as disabled.[2]

This chapter investigates the dynamics of representation in the 2017 general election and evaluates the extent to which the 'promise' of the election for women in particular was fulfilled. It examines the numerical representation of women as candidates, MPs and party leaders in 2017, as well as the substantive representation of women's issues and policy concerns. In doing so, the chapter points to some progress made, while at the same time highlighting the distance yet to be travelled before the House of Commons can be characterized as truly representative. It concludes by evaluating the future prospects for women's representation in British politics. Without statutory measures in the form of legal gender quotas, the prospect of achieving equal representation any time soon is slim.

Women's Issues

Much like the election that preceded it, the 2017 campaign was full of women, but not necessarily about women. Despite the presence of Theresa May and other prominent female party leaders, as well as the entry of the new Women's Equality Party, which fielded candidates in seven constituencies, gender itself was not a significant political talking point in an election overshadowed by Brexit. However, since at least 1997, the main political parties in Britain have made concerted attempts to target women voters as a distinct group. Indeed, Tony Blair and New Labour's success in securing women's votes played a major role in the party's landslide election victories in 1997 and 2001. Yet, the prominence of women's issues has waxed and waned across election campaigns. For the Conservatives, David Cameron's election as leader in 2005 marked a step-change in the party's efforts to win women's votes. As part of a party feminisation strategy, Cameron called for more Conservative women MPs, promised to give one-third of senior ministerial jobs to women, and made repeated reference to women's policy concerns.[3] Subsequent competition for women's votes has brought the main parties closer together on 'women's issues'. With the possible exception of the right-wing populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), most parties have shifted towards a more liberally feminist position.[4]

Ahead of the 2017 election, all of the parties made manifesto pledges 'to', 'for' and 'about' women. Some of these pledges explicitly targeted women as women—and often as mothers—while other pledges addressed policy concerns prioritised by women voters or policies that more indirectly tend to affect women as a category.[5] For example, women, including Conservative-supporting women, often express greater support for increased taxation and spending on public services than

men, and they are also generally more strongly opposed to cuts in public spending, particularly in the areas of health and education.[6] All of the party manifestos pledged increased resources for schools, as well as higher levels of spending on the NHS.

Meanwhile, the funding of social care proved to be an unexpectedly important election issue, marking out significant differences between the main parties and dominating the headlines. Since 2010, Conservative austerity policies and cuts to public spending had exacerbated the demands of caring for an aging population. Women had borne the brunt of this social care crisis, as both the majority of those in need of care, and the majority of the (paid and unpaid) care workforce. Labour's manifesto had pledged to increase social care budgets by £8 billion over the next parliament, to 'lay the foundations' of a National Care Service for England, and to increase the Carer's Allowance, a benefit paid to unpaid full-time carers, to the same level as the Jobseekers' Allowance, the benefit paid to the unemployed. The Conservative manifesto, in contrast, proposed raising the threshold for free domiciliary social care and bringing it into line with the threshold for free residential care. Henceforth, people receiving care services in their own homes would have to pay for it themselves until they reached their last £100,000. Dubbed a 'dementia tax' by the opposition parties, the policy triggered significant backlash and prompted a hasty U-turn. Within days, Theresa May promised that if the Tories were re-elected, the government would consult on an upper cap for social care costs.

The various party manifestos also included a number of policy pledges aimed specifically at women *as women*. Labour's manifesto, for example, included a specific two-page section outlining the party's past record on women's rights and future policy commitments, including a pledge to conduct a gender impact assessment of all policy and legislation before their implementation. The Green Party, meanwhile, produced a

separate 'gender equality' manifesto, which they pointedly unveiled outside Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, a controversial facility housing adult women and family groups awaiting deportation. This separate manifesto promised to shut down such detention centres, decriminalize sex work, and save women's healthcare. UKIP, meanwhile, proposed to introduce a 'social attitudes test' to stop migrants who believed in treating women or gay people as 'second-class citizens' from entering the country. In one of their most controversial manifesto commitments, UKIP also pledged to ban the wearing of the niqab and the burka from public places. These are common tactics used by populist anti-immigration parties, which often use the liberal feminist rhetoric of gender equality and women's rights to further denounce immigrant communities[7].

To varying degrees, virtually all the parties' manifestos addressed the issue of violence against women. The Conservatives pledged to create a new domestic violence and abuse commissioner in law, to hold the police and criminal justice system to account. Labour promised to create a similar office of violence against women commissioner, as well as to establish a National Refuge Fund. The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, pledged to allocate government funding to a national rape crisis helpline; the Greens and Plaid Cymru would reverse cuts to domestic violence and legal aid services; while both the SNP and the Women's Equality Party promised to ratify the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Many of the parties also pledged specific support for pregnant women and mothers, including protecting their rights as afforded under EU law (a promise made by the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, the Women's Equality Party, the Greens and Labour); introducing mandatory workplace risk assessments for pregnant women (Labour); improving mental health

support for pregnant women, new mothers and those who have experienced
miscarriage or stillbirth (the Liberal Democrats and UKIP); creating new entitlements
to child bereavement leave (the Conservatives); reducing (the Greens) or reversing
(Labour) employment tribunal fees to ensure that women could raise complaints about
maternity and pregnancy discrimination; ensuring that pregnant women seeking
asylum or whose immigration status was uncertain could have free access to NHS
prenatal, birth and postnatal care (the Women's Equality Party and the Greens); and
introducing a legal right to breastfeed in the workplace (the Greens, the SNP and the
Women's Equality Party).

All of the main parties except for UKIP and Plaid Cymru also made manifesto
pledges regarding women's representation. Labour committed itself to a gender-parity
cabinet of at least 50% women. Jeremy Corbyn, Labour's leader, had already made
good on a prior commitment to appoint women to half the shadow-cabinet jobs,
although he was criticised for initially appointing only men to the most prestigious
posts (see Chapter 2). The Conservative manifesto, meanwhile, committed the party
to working towards parity in the number of public appointments going to women, to
increasing the number of women sitting on company boards, and to diversifying civil
service recruitment—but there was little detail of how these goals might be achieved.
The Liberal Democrats committed to pushing for at least 40 per cent of board
members of FTSE 350 companies being women, while the Greens proposed a
requirement that at least 40 per cent of all public-company and public-sector boards
should be women. The Green Party also committed to creating a '50/50 Parliament',
although the party focused on measures like job-sharing to achieve this, rather than
the introduction of gender quotas. Meanwhile, the SNP called on the British
government to legislate for gender balance in public-sector boardrooms, following the

lead of the Scottish Government. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most comprehensive proposals on women's representation were to be found in the Women's Equality Party manifesto, which promised, among other things, to encourage parties to use all-women shortlists (or other methods) to ensure that two-thirds of their candidates replacing retiring MPs, as well as two-thirds of all their other candidates, were women for the next two Parliamentary terms or until gender parity has been achieved . The party also promised to give three-quarters of all new appointments to the House of Lords to women, to introduce gender-balanced boards for all listed companies by 2025, and to appoint women to half of all ministerial posts with immediate effect.

The final set of key policy commitments outlined in the party manifestos were redistributive policies seeking to reduce inequalities between men and women.[8] All of the main parties, for example, pledged to address the gender pay gap: Labour promised a civil enforcement system to ensure compliance with gender pay auditing; both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats would require companies with more than 250 employees to publish more data on their gender pay gaps; and the SNP would require the same but from companies with over 150 employees, backed up with sanctions for employers that failed to comply. Of the two main parties, however, Labour's 'offer' on gender equality policy was the strongest and most specific, with the Tories offering few commitments to reducing gendered economic inequalities.[9] For example, Labour's manifesto set out plans to extend maternity pay to 12 months, double paid paternity leave to four weeks and increase paternity pay, whereas the Conservatives promised to improve the take-up of shared parental leave and to help companies provide more flexible work environments. Similarly, on childcare, the Tories pledged 30 hours of free care to working parents of three and four-year-olds, as well as the creation of a capital fund to help primary schools develop nurseries.

Labour, meanwhile, pledged direct government subsidy for childcare, the extension of the current 30 hours of free childcare to all two year olds (and some one-year olds), and more money for the threatened Sure Start centres, a New Labour initiative designed to support children and families in disadvantaged areas.

On the issue of social security, the Conservatives outlined that they had no plans for further radical welfare reform in the upcoming parliament and would instead focus on continuing the roll-out of Universal Credit, the new all-in-one benefit. Labour, in contrast, promised to scrap immediately the various caps on benefits and sanctions introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 (see Chapter 1), to reform and redesign Universal Credit and to end six-week delays in payments. Many of the opposition parties also made specific manifesto pledges to abolish the Conservative government's 'family cap' policy, which put a two-child limit on Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit. A particularly controversial element of this policy was the so-called 'rape clause', which allowed woman to claim assistance for a third or subsequent child if that child was born as a result of rape. First raised as an issue by the SNP MP Alison Thewliss in 2015, the rape clause was especially prominent as an election issue in Scotland during the general election campaign, with the SNP, Scottish Labour, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Green Party uniting in the Scottish Parliament chamber to condemn the policy.

Gender and Voting

Since the 1970s in the United Kingdom, women's and men's voting patterns have been largely the same.[10] Historically, women tended to be slightly more Conservative supporting than men, a tendency that underpinned the 'traditional' gender gap. Tony Blair and New Labour reduced this gap by picking up younger women's votes,

particularly those of middle- and higher-income mothers - a gender-generation gap.[11] However, this newer gap had largely disappeared by the 2010 general election, with the Conservatives able to win back some of these younger women and middle- and high-income mothers, thanks in part to David Cameron's party-feminisation strategy.[12] In the run-up to the 2015 general election, meanwhile, newspapers devoted many column inches to discussing the Conservative problem with female voters, or Cameron's so-called 'woman problem', even though the overall differences in vote choice between men and women were rather modest.[13] However, aggregate figures hid differences between age groups: younger voters were more supportive of Labour overall in 2015, and young women were more supportive of Labour than young men, just as older women were much more likely to vote Conservative than older men.[14]

While there is no straightforward gender gap in vote choice in British politics, there is evidence of consistent sex differences in some political attitudes. For example, when asked directly, women are less likely to express an interest in politics than men, although the size of this gender gap varies depending on how the question is framed and whether or not respondents are asked about specific policy areas such as education and health.[15] When participants are asked to rank order policy issues, there are differences in the priority given to particular topics by men and women[16]. In 2017, early polling suggested that women were less likely to say that Brexit was a key election issue than men, and were instead more likely to list the NHS, education, health, or welfare as important election issues[17].

Women are also more likely than men to say 'don't know', when pollsters ask him who they are going to vote for. Ahead of the 2015 general election, this tendency had prompted Labour's then deputy leader Harriet Harman to deploy a pink 'battle bus' in order to reach the '9.1 million missing women voters'. In the run-up to the

2017 general election, concerns were again expressed that turnout might be especially low among women, with the Fawcett Society warning of a 'missing 8 million women' voters on the basis that fewer women than men said they were certain to vote in the election or were registered to vote. However, such warnings should be taken with a large pinch of salt. While surveys generally show women to be more uncertain about their vote intentions than men, the evidence suggests that they turn out to vote at a similar rate. Indeed, data from past British Election Studies shows that men and women have voted at roughly similar rates in recent general elections.[18]

Our knowledge of women's and men's voting behavior in the 2017 general election necessarily reflects the available data at time of writing. Most of the polls published at the start of the campaign suggested that, as in 2015, younger women would be more likely than younger men to support Labour, whereas older women would be more supportive of the Conservatives than older men. Later polls also suggested that women were increasingly shifting towards Labour as the campaign drew on, and that this movement was a key driving force in the tightening of the race.[19] In particular, the Conservatives' lead among female respondents fell dramatically after their difficult manifesto launch, with women generally expressing more negative views about the party's social care policies than men.[20] Overall, available data suggest that women were more likely than men to vote Labour and less likely than men to vote Tory, and that the gender gap among younger people has grown, with women under 50, and particularly women in full-time work, especially likely to vote Labour.[21]

Women as Candidates

The 2017 general election presented a favourable opportunity for increasing the

number of women elected to Westminster. As an unexpected snap election, the various parties' central headquarters could be expected to play a more significant role in candidate selection. Previous research suggests that centralised candidate selection procedures can have a positive impact on women's political presence, as they give party leaders who wish to implement and enforce gender-equality reforms, including measures like quotas, the opportunity and power to do so.[22] The election was also notable because of the presence of the Women's Equality Party, which, as noted, fielded candidates in seven constituencies, most notably Shipley in West Yorkshire, where party leader Sophie Walker challenged the high-profile 'anti-feminist' Tory incumbent Philip Davies. The party's presence, however, proved to be controversial. In Shipley, the party attracted criticism for potentially splitting the anti-Davies vote and for its failure to engage local feminists. The Women's Equality Party also attracted controversy for contesting the north London constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green, which was held by a sitting female MP, Labour's Catherine West.

A record proportion of female candidates were selected in 2017, 973 out of 3,304 (or 29 per cent of the total). Although the actual number of female candidates was lower than in the 2015 general election, fewer men stood as well, and thus the proportion of women to men increased. As ever, the overall numbers masked significant inter-party differences (see Figure 6.1). In 2017, Labour selected 256 women, the highest number of any party, which equated to 41 per cent (compared to 34% in 2015). 35 per cent of the Greens' candidates were women, as were 34 per cent of the SNP's candidates and 28 per cent of Plaid Cymru's candidates. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, selected women in 29 per cent of the seats they contested. For the Tories, this amounted to a 9-point increase on the proportion of women candidates selected in 2015, and a record number for the party.

By contrast, only 13 per cent of UKIP candidates were women. The Women's
Equality Party fielded an all-woman candidate slate, albeit in just seven
constituencies.

FIGURE 6.1: Proportion of female candidates by party, 2017
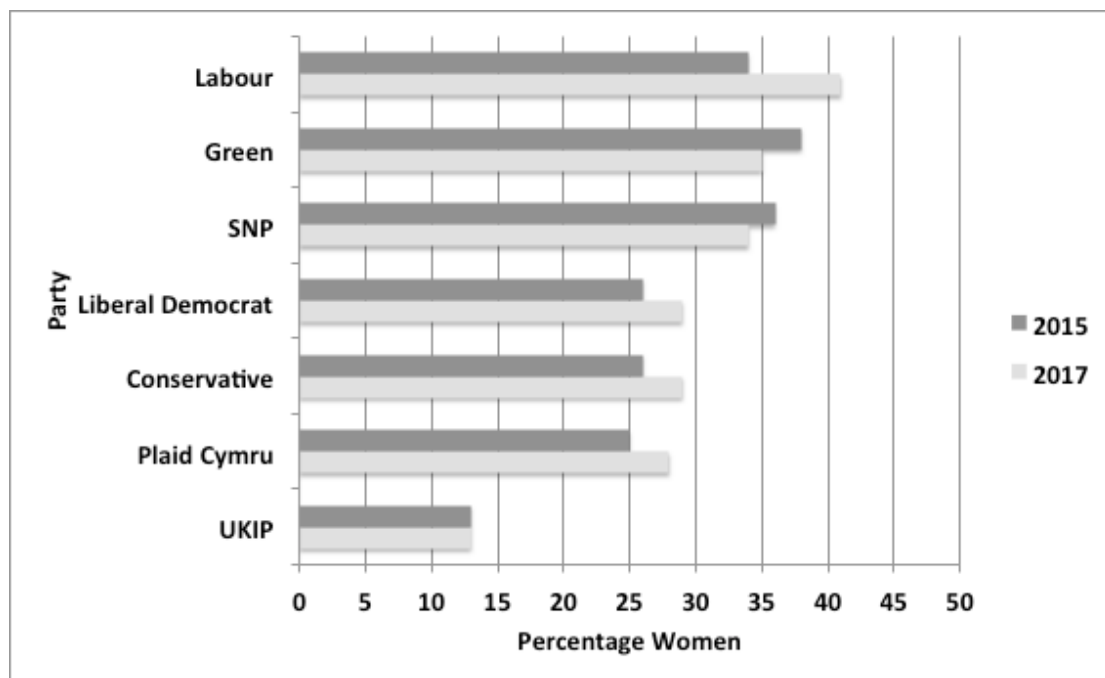
Source: House of Commons Library (2017) *Women in Parliament and Government*.
Briefing Paper SN01250 (12 July).

There are three key strategies that political parties can use to increase
women's political presence, all of which were employed in 2017.[23] *Equality rhetoric*
involves the public acceptance of claims for women's representation and features in
party platforms, manifestos and speeches. As already noted, few of the major parties'
manifestos made explicit commitments to increasing women's representation in
politics, with the exception of Labour's pledge to appoint a 50/50 cabinet. *Equality
promotion* entails measures like training, mentoring and, in some cases, financial

assistance, and is aimed at getting women to the starting line. The Conservatives'
Women2Win campaign is a good example of such a strategy, and most of the parties
had similar initiatives in place. Lastly, *equality guarantees* involve the use of
measures such as legal or party gender quotas to secure places for aspiring women
candidates. The evidence clearly suggests that strong measures like equality
guarantees are the most likely to produce substantial improvements in women's
representation. There is also evidence that the adoption of quotas by one political
party means they may 'catch on' across the political spectrum, as other political
parties respond by implementing similar measures.[24]

The use of gender quotas, however, has been largely one-sided in elections
thus far to the House of Commons. As in all elections from 2005, Labour
successfully employed gender quotas in the form of 'all-women shortlists'. The
Conservatives, however, have continued to reject the logic of equality guarantees,
preferring instead to use equality rhetoric and equality promotion measures. The party
under Cameron did experiment with an 'A List' in 2010, a priority list of approved
parliamentary candidates that was 50 per cent women, but the initiative proved
controversial and was quietly dropped before the 2015 general election[25]. Labour's
use of gender quotas continue to hold up headline figures. As already highlighted, the
party had the highest proportion of female candidates overall in 2017, but also had the
highest proportion of women candidates in safe seats. Women were 70 per cent of
Labour candidates in constituencies that the party had won in 2015 by a margin of 20
to 30 per cent, compared to only 26% of Conservative candidates in similarly safe
seats[26]. In contrast, 43 per cent of Conservative candidates in the party's most
winnable target seats—those with up to a 10% majority to be overturned—were
women, compared with 33 per cent of Labour candidates in similarly winnable

constituencies.

After years of resisting the arguments for gender quotas, the Liberal Democrats also implemented all-women shortlists in key seats for the first time, and over half their female candidates (56.3 per cent) stood in potentially winnable seats. Only the SNP fielded a higher proportion of female candidates in winnable seats, but this point is misleading: the party won all but three seats in Scotland in 2015, and fielded women in two of those seats it did not win—Orkney and Shetland, and Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale—in 2017. Despite speculation that they would do so, the SNP did not implement all-women shortlists in Glasgow East and Edinburgh West, two seats they had won in 2015 and in which the sitting MPs, both women, had left the party in controversial circumstances. Male candidates were selected to contest both of these seats in 2017 – with David Linden narrowly holding on to Glasgow East for the SNP, whilst Toni Giugliano lost to the Liberal Democrat candidate Christine Jardine in Edinburgh West.

The use of gender quotas, then, has still not fully caught on across the political spectrum. Most of the other parties continue to lag behind Labour on the recruitment and selection of women candidates, and in translating women candidates into MPs, as we shall discuss in the following section. And although the proportion of female candidates did increase overall between 2015 and 2017, there were still 105 constituencies (16 per cent of the total) in which no women stood in 2017. This compares with just one constituency, Glasgow Central, where no men stood for election. While there were on average 5.1 candidates per constituency across the United Kingdom, the average number of female candidates per constituency was still only 1.5.[27]

Women as MPs

The last MP to be elected in 2017 was Labour's Emma Dent Coad, who was finally

declared the winner of the once-safe Tory seat of Kensington after three recounts.

Dent Coad's victory took the total number of women in the House of Commons up to

208, up from the 196 in office immediately before the election. The 208 included

some notable 'firsts' in British politics: Preet Gill became the first female Sikh MP,

winning Birmingham Edgbaston for Labour. Marsha De Cordova, a disability rights

campaigner, overturned a large Tory majority in Battersea to become the first black

disabled female MP. Layla Moran's win in Oxford West and Abingdon made her the

first British MP of Palestinian descent, and the first female Liberal Democrat MP

from a minority background.

Ultimately, however, these women still only comprised 32 per cent of all MPs,

a glacial two-point increase from before the election. Much was made in subsequent

media coverage of passing the '200 women' mark, but this is an arbitrary threshold

that is less than one-third of all MPs and far short of the 325 women MPs needed to

achieve gender parity in the House of Commons. Within the United Kingdom, the

Commons lags behind two of the three devolved legislatures when it comes to

women's representation, including the National Assembly for Wales (42 per cent

women), and the Scottish Parliament (35 per cent women). Globally, the United

Kingdom presently ranks thirty-ninth in the league table of women's national

representation at time of writing, and lags behind many of its European comparators.[28]

A large number of the countries that have overtaken Britain in this area have done so

through the use of 'fast track' equality guarantees: 18 of the top 20 countries for

women's representation worldwide use some form of gender quota, whether voluntary

party or legal quotas.[29]

The outcome of the 2017 general election highlights a number of classic issues around women's representation. The first is that progress cannot be assumed. The overall trend in recent years has been one of glacial progress with elements of stagnation and even fallback. Gains in women's representation continue to be slow and incremental, while aggregate trends conceal a great deal of regional and inter-party variation. In Scotland, for example, the proportion of female MPs fell between 2015 and 2017, from 34 to 29 per cent, largely as a result of Conservative gains. Only one of the 13 Scottish Tory MPs elected in 2017 was a woman. Although the Scottish Tories are led by the high-profile and charismatic Ruth Davidson, the party has adopted a laissez-faire approach to women's representation and continues to resist the use of gender quotas, with the result that fewer than one-in-five of Scottish Conservative MSPs and councilors are women. Meanwhile, the defeat of the SNP's Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh in Ochil and Perthshire has left Scotland without any BAME MPs in the new parliament.

The second issue is that of party asymmetry (see Table 6.1). The overall increase in the proportion of women MPs again masks significant differences between the parties. In 2017, Labour's use of gender quotas in the form of all-women shortlists continued to deliver. As already highlighted, Labour had the highest proportion of female candidates in safer seats, and the highest number of women MPs elected (119), 20 more than in 2015. These women are now 45% of all Labour MPs in the House of Commons.

TABLE 6.1: Women MPs by Party, 2015 and 2017

Party	2015 (N)	2015 (%)	2017 (N)	2017 (%)
Conservatives	68	21%	67	21%
Labour	99	43%	119	45%

SNP	20	36%	12	34%
DUP	0	0%	1	10%
Liberal Democrats	0	0%	4	33%
Sinn Féin	0	0%	2	29%
Plaid Cymru	1	33%	1	25%
Green	1	100%	1	100%
SDLP[30]	1	33%	--	---
Independent	1	100%	1	100%
Total	191	29%	208	32%

There was some speculation in the run-up to the election that the Conservatives would achieve a 'breakthrough moment' on women's representation, potentially catching up to Labour for the first time.[31] In the end, there was no such moment: in fact, the gap between the two main parties widened slightly. The Conservatives, in contrast to Labour, saw a fall in the total number of female MPs elected, dropping from 70 women MPs immediately before the election to 67 in 2017. However, in the context of an overall loss of seats, the percentage of female Tory MPs remained unchanged at 21 per cent.

Turning to the other parties, the Liberal Democrat went from being a men-only party after their coalition-induced electoral meltdown in 2015, to having four female MPs out of twelve in 2017. Of these, the most notable was former junior equalities minister Jo Swinson, a possible future leader of the party who re-took her old seat of East Dunbartonshire. Meanwhile, the 12 female SNP MPs—six less than in 2015—comprised just over a third of the party's reduced group at Westminster. Only one of the ten DUP MPs elected in 2017—a crucial group that acted as political 'queen-makers' by supporting the minority Tory administration—was a woman, Emma Little-Pengelly who won Belfast South. Caroline Lucas retained her seat in Brighton Pavilion as the only Green MP, as did Liz Saville Roberts, Plaid Cymru's only female MP. The remaining three women MPs were elected in Northern Ireland:

Sylvia Hermon, an Independent, and Michelle Gildernew and Elisha McCallion, who, as Sinn Féin Members, refuse to take their seats. The Women's Equality Party failed to make an electoral impact and lost all seven of its deposits. The party faces significant obstacles going forward, particularly in a political context where all of the main British political parties have responded to demands for women's individual and collective representation in some form, even if they have not fully delivered on this front.

Women as Leaders

The 2017 general election was the first since 1987 to be called by a female prime minister. Theresa May's ascent to the top in British politics prompted many (perhaps inevitable) comparisons between her and Margaret Thatcher. From the right of the Tory-leaning press, for example, both the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* proclaimed the party had found another 'Iron Lady', the moniker first given to Thatcher by the Soviet newspaper *Red Star*. May's debut at prime minister's questions in 2016 prompted the Guardian's John Crace to declare that the 'Thatch is back…close your eyes and it could have been the early 80s'.[32] There are, of course, many differences between May and Thatcher, whether in terms of their background, political positions, experience or ways of working. Indeed, back in the early 2000s when she had been party chairman, May had famously alighted on Thatcher's legacy as one of the reasons behind the Tories' reputation as the 'nasty party'. For many journalists and commentators, however, the logic seemed to be that May and Thatcher were women and therefore immediately comparable. May herself dismissed these comparisons between her and Thatcher as being 'lazy', stating that she'd never thought of herself 'like anybody else, or as doing the job like anybody else'.[33]

Like many women leaders, Theresa May came to power at a moment of crisis. Research on female leaders around the world suggests that women are more likely to get the chance to lead in times of political upheaval or decline, usually when parties are out of power or losing favour with voters.[34] Margaret Thatcher became Conservative party leader after the party had lost two successive elections. Angela Merkel took the lead of the Christian Democratic Party in Germany after a major electoral defeat and political corruption scandal[35]. In other words, women leaders often come to power when the job at the top is least desirable, and are left to clean up someone else's mess. The reason is straightforward: periods of political or party crisis often result in the disgrace or removal of party leaders and their immediate teams, the vast majority of whom are likely to be men, and thereby open up more opportunities for women to run for the top job.[36] Other male challengers may also decide not to throw their hats in the rings, waiting for a better opportunity to come further down the line, particularly in contexts where they are weak candidates running against more experienced women[37]. In the case of the Conservatives in 2016, David Cameron's failure to keep Britain in the European Union led to his immediate resignation and terminally damaged the leadership aspirations of chancellor George Osborne. Meanwhile, as Nicholas Allen describes in Chapter 1, the assumed front-runner Boris Johnson's leadership bid crashed before it had even started thanks to his last-minute betrayal by fellow Leave campaigner Michael Gove. The absence of Osborne and Johnson left the field clear for both May and junior minister Andrea Leadsom, who were due to contest a ballot of all party members before Leadsom pulled out.

The unfortunate flipside of crises favouring aspiring female leaders is that they can also leave them on the edge of a 'glass cliff': they are more likely to be elected to leadership posts when there is a high chance of failure. And women are more likely

than men to be thrown out—and thrown out more quickly—if their parties continue to flounder.[38] In Theresa May's case, the cliff she found herself on was particularly sheer: she inherited a divided country, a divided party, and a deeply uncertain political and economic future. At times, however, it seemed that May was actively running towards the edge of her own political glass cliff. 'Presidentialised' election campaigns can be particularly difficult for female leaders and politicians to navigate, in that they face an almost impossible task of having to live up the masculine expectations of political and executive office, while simultaneously maintaining and 'managing' their femininity.[39] Yet, by any measure, the Tories' 2017 election campaign was a complete shambles. May presented herself as a 'strong and stable' leader who would be a 'bloody difficult' women in Brexit negotiations, but then refused to participate in televised leaders' debates. Her notable absence prompted the widespread use on social media of the hashtag #wherestheresa. She did, however, appear with her husband on the BBC's *One Show*, a supposedly relaxed magazine format, where she awkwardly said there were 'boys and girls jobs' in a discussion over who took out the bins at home.

While the election was undoubtedly a failed gamble for May, some post-election criticism went further and associated this failure specifically with her 'being prime minister while female'. Indeed, the media personality and broadcaster Janet Street-Porter argued that 'May's incompetence had set women in politics back decades', and that 2017 had 'been a disaster for women in politics'.[40] It is hard to conceive of such a headline being written about a male politician. In 2016, for example, no column inches were dedicated to how David Cameron's failed gamble in calling the Brexit referendum had set men in politics back decades.

Has May's premiership benefited women more generally? Some studies have found that having more women in leadership positions boosts the overall numbers of women candidates and parliamentarians.[41] May has made a number of high-profile female appointments during her premiership, including Amber Rudd as home secretary, Liz Truss as justice secretary (subsequently moved after the election), and Justine Greening as education secretary. Yet, after her post-election reshuffle, there were only six female Cabinet ministers, including the prime minister, or 26 per cent. Liz Truss and Andrea Leadsom also attend cabinet, as Chief Secretary to the Treasury and Leader of the House of Commons, respectively[42]. Meanwhile, the key ministerial portfolios responsible for managing Britain's withdrawal from the European Union continued to be occupied by men: David Davis as secretary of state for exiting the EU, Liam Fox as international trade secretary, and Boris Johnson as foreign secretary. Their initial appointments owed much to their well-established leadership ambitions: Davis had run unsuccessfully in 2001 and 2005, Fox in 2005 and 2016, and Johnson not quite in 2016. By giving them these important offices, May had doubtless sought to protect her base, an instance of 'keep your friends close, and your enemies closer'. Had the Tories increased their parliamentary majority, an emboldened May might well have replaced one or more of them. In the circumstances she was unable to do so.[43]

Theresa May's record on the promotion of women's issues is also decidedly mixed. On the one hand, she had once memorably associated herself with this agenda by donning a 'This is what a feminist looks like' t-shirt in support of a Fawcett Society campaign, and she had also founded *Women2Win*, the equality-promotion initiative set up to encourage and help more Conservative women to run for office. Moreover, as home secretary, May had introduced laws criminalising coercive control

and ordered an inquiry into police treatment of domestic abuse cases. On the other hand, as home secretary she had also presided over a draconian immigration regime and the indefinite detention of pregnant women at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre (see above). Throughout her time in government, she had also backed austerity policies which had had a disproportionately detrimental impact on women, particularly women of colour.[44] And as prime minster, she had sought to forge a good relationship with Donald Trump—at one point holding his hand during a visit to the White House—despite the new American president's history of misogynistic remarks and discriminatory policies. Lastly, in the wake of the election's indecisive outcome, she had reached out to the anti-abortion, anti-gay marriage DUP in order to secure a confidence and supply agreement in parliament.

Theresa May is not, of course, the only woman at the top in British politics. Going into the election, the DUP were led by former Northern Irish first minister Arlene Foster; the SNP and Scottish government were led by Nicola Sturgeon; and the Scottish Tories and Scottish Labour were led by Ruth Davidson and Kezia Dugdale respectively. Moreover, Plaid Cymru was led by Leanne Wood; Sinn Féin, at least in the Northern Ireland Assembly, was led by Michelle O'Neill; and the Greens were co-led by Caroline Lucas. UKIP was now led by a man, but it had briefly been led by be a woman in 2016, Diane James, who quit only 18 days after being elected.

Not surprisingly, female party leaders and MPs played a prominent role in the 2017 campaign and especially in the televised debates. During the *ITV Leaders' Debate*, the UKIP leader Paul Nuttall memorably referred to Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood as 'Natalie', an apparent reference to the Green party's former leader Natalie Bennett, which raised questions as to his ability to tell women apart. Yet, as in previous elections, media coverage in 2017 was dominated by men.[45] Indeed, a report

by Loughborough University's Centre for Research in Communication and Culture found that 63 per cent of politicians that featured in election news were male, and that men dominated in all election media roles, whether as experts, spokespeople or pollsters.[46] In contrast to 2015, when minor parties received more column inches and higher levels of news presence, 2017 was a highly personalised campaign in which media coverage focused largely on the two main party leaders, May and the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Although the prime minister was the most prominent politician in news coverage, followed by Corbyn, the next most prominent woman, the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon, was a long way behind them being the subject of just 3.7 per cent of news coverage[47].

In 2017, women were also subject to the sexist stereotyping and objectification that characterises a great deal of the traditional and new British media. Shortly before she called the election, for instance, Theresa May had met with Nicola Sturgeon to discuss Brexit and the possibility of a second Scottish independence referendum. Despite the huge political significance of their meeting, the *Daily Mail's* front page had focused on their physical attributes with the headline: 'Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!' The 2017 election also brought into sharp focus the continuing abuse and threats faced by women politicians, particularly women of colour. In one particularly stark incident during the campaign, Women's Equality Party candidate Nimco Ali received a death threat signed 'Jo Cox', the name of the female Labour MP brutally murdered during the 2016 Brexit referendum. Meanwhile, research by Amnesty International found that almost half of all abusive tweets sent to female politicians in the six weeks before polling day were received by Labour's shadow home secretary Diane Abbott, who was a frequent target for racial and sexist abuse.[48]

In the previous six months, Abbott had received just under a third of all abusive tweets sent to female MPs.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?

While women made small gains in the 2017 general election, the results amounted to a scratching, rather than a shattering of the political glass ceiling. There is still a long way to go before we reach equal representation at Westminster. Patterns established in previous elections also persisted. Labour continued to lead the way on women's representation, while most of the other parties continued to lag behind. Without greater intervention by all of the parties across the political spectrum, gains in women's representation will continue to be slow and incremental at best.

All of this suggests, yet again, that the prospect of equal representation in British politics cannot rely solely on individual party champions and 'soft' equality measures like equality rhetoric or equality promotion. The next general election might be a few months away, or it might be in five years' time, but the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that stronger equality measures are needed to ensure real change in the representativeness of the House of Commons. Yet, the debate over gender quotas in Britain continues to be marginal—in that it has largely taken place within the parties—and parochial and non-scientific—in that it has largely disregarded the global evidence.[49] Pressure for a new approach is building, however. A number of recent inquiries have all recommended it is time for the United Kingdom to consider introducing legislative quotas, including a 2010 report by the Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation, a 2014 report by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Parliament, the 2016 *Good Parliament Report*,

and the parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee's 2017 report *Women in the House of Commons after the 2020 Election* .[50]

Yet, the Conservative government has shown a distinct lack of enthusiasm for such recommendations, as well as a lack of ambition and political will. In responding to the recent Women and Equalities Committee report, for example, the government agreed that a 'gender-balanced Parliament is long overdue', but argued that legislative quotas were not the 'right approach' to the issue and preferred to leave responsibility in the hands of political parties.[51] The government also refused to commence section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, which requires parties to publish candidate diversity data, on the grounds that this represented an excessive 'potential regulatory burden'. It also held off from extending the time for which Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 is in force, as well as allowing gender quotas to be used for electing local mayors and police and crime commissioners.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the 2017 general election, the unrepresentativeness of the House of Commons again hit the headlines over the issue of select committee memberships. Women formed a majority on just three committees—those dealing with women and equalities, education and health—and made up less than a quarter of the Brexit, transport, defence and foreign affairs. This reflects wider gendered patterns in politics, where women are often disporoportionately represented in 'feminine', low-prestige committees and portfolios, whilst men are over-represented in 'masculine', high-prestige areas. Scorn was heaped on the membership of the Science and Technology Committee after it was revealed that it had no female members at all. Conservative MP Vicky Ford was subsequently elected to become the only woman on the committee. Another case, then, of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.[52]

Why does all this matter? While the link between women's political presence and the promotion of gender equality policies is far from straightforward, nonetheless, there is considerable evidence to suggest that women politicians 'make a difference', or more accurately, that more gender-balanced parliaments and councils do. Troubled times lie ahead. Britain faces the possibility of continuing austerity and economic recession. As a result of Brexit, it also faces the potential scrapping of various EU frameworks, including those offering certain legal protections for women, and the loss of the recourse provided by the European Court of Justice. The EU has been a crucial actor in promoting gender equality, particularly in the area of women's employment rights, yet there has been little substantive discussion of the consequences of Brexit for women and for gender equality. Even the United Kingdom's Brexit negotiating team presently includes only one woman. The continuing exclusion of women from British politics is thus a serious democratic deficit that demands action. It is vitally important that women sit at the table as Britain negotiates its exit from Europe, as well as its own constitutional future. Leadership and vigilance are needed in order to keep women's representation and equality issues on the agenda; otherwise gendered inequalities are likely to widen. There is no room for complacency in the days ahead.

Notes

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the UK Gender Equality Policy Agenda', *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 15 (1), 125-146.

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[18] Campbell and Childs (2015b).

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[37] Beckwith (2015) identifies these dynamics in the cases of Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel. See also Rikhil R. Bhavnani (2009) 'Do Electoral Quotas Work after They Are Withdrawn? Evidence from a Natural Experiment in India', *American Political Science Review,* 103 (1), 23-35.

[38] O'Brien (2015).

[39] Kathleen Jamieson (1995) *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Rainbow Murray (ed) (2010) *Cracking the Highest Glass Ceiling*. Oxford: Praeger.

[40] Janet Street-Porter (2017) 'Theresa May's incompetence has set women in politics back decades', *The Independent*, 9 June.

[41] See for example Kittilson (2006).

[42] The nature of cabinet membership in Britain has been muddied in recent years by prime ministers inviting an increasing number of ministers to 'attend' cabinet, a strategy they have sometimes but not always used to 'make up the numbers' on women's representation. When measuring levels of women's political presence, the comparative literature on gender and cabinets generally focuses only on ministers who are formally recognized as having full cabinet status. In keeping with this comparative literature, this chapter counts only full members of cabinet, not attendees. Cabinet ministerial positions are comparable across contexts; whilst sub-cabinet positions or those who get to attend cabinet meetings vary considerably across contexts. On this point, see especially Claire Annesley, Karen Beckwith and Susan Franceschet (2017) *Cabinets, Ministers and Gender*. Unpublished manuscript.

[43] All prime ministers have to manage the ambitions of those who seek to replace them. Since most challengers to female leaders are likely to be men, it is perhaps not surprising that female leaders trying to hold onto power are often especially vulnerable to male challengers and try to encourage loyalty by rewarding them with key government posts. On this point, see especially Diana Z. O'Brien, Matthew Mendez, Jordon Carr Peterson. and Jihyun Shin (2015) 'Letting Down the Ladder or

Shutting the Door: Female Prime Ministers, Party Leaders, and Cabinet Ministers',
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[52] The more things change , the more they stay the same.