

SELECTING WOMEN A CRITICAL

It is clear that the major political parties in Britain consider the under-representation of women in numerical terms a challenge to be addressed. **Dr Lisa Harrison** presents (i) a brief overview of existing debates on the 'state' of women's representation; (ii) aggregate data about the numbers of elected women Liberal Democrats; (iii) a focus on the structure of the party, considering how this may aid or hinder the selection of more women candidates; and (iv) a review of quantitative and qualitative data which

considers the attitudes within the party towards mechanisms for encouraging and assisting women candidates. It is important to acknowledge that underpinning some of the rather more crude debates based on numerical representation alone are more nuanced arguments surrounding effective representation. The factors influencing the decision to stand for election are subject to a range of potential issues – of which securing representation may not be the most important.

THE UNDER-REPRESENTATION of women in virtually all political institutions in the UK has become an issue of increasing academic research. Much has been said of the Labour Party's use of women-only shortlists (WOSLs), the reintroduction of which at the 2005 general election proved important. In contrast, the Conservative Party is frequently portrayed as failing to make even token attempts to increase its female presence in key political bodies, and the introduction of the 'A' list – a quota-based selection process to increase the number of female and ethnic minority candidates – was not without internal critics. The responsibility for this cross-institution inequality is furthermore perceived to be attributable to an organisational, rather than societal, bias:

There is no evidence to show that voters discriminate against female candidates; it is primarily the lack of equal opportunity in party selection procedures which accounts for the gender imbalances in UK legislatures.¹

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Whilst there is a growing (but by no means complete) consensus that more female elected representatives is desirable, there are strong divisions on how best this should be achieved. For some time there has been considerable debate concerning 'supply and demand' factors.² For example, there may be 'legitimate' reasons for party activists not wanting to stand for particular types of representation (often justified in terms of geographic proximity of institutions and existing priorities and commitments). On the 'demand' side, criticism is often made of candidate selection processes which are looking for a *type* of candidate – often determined by previous political experience, formal qualifications and personal characteristics.

Yet the presence of women in elected office is deemed as being more important than merely balancing the scales of representation, and recent research suggests that it can positively affect women's political activism.³ As such, the opportunity to vote for female candidates may have interesting implications for the future health of British democracy.

Central to this article is a consideration of what actions are deemed as desirable and effective.

This said, positive discrimination is rarely seen as an ideal approach, but rather a necessary means to an end, which is why the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act (2002) has a sunset clause (a proviso which was supported in the House of Lords by Liberal Democrat Baroness Thomas of Walliswood). The antipathy towards what may be labelled as 'special measures' is particularly notable among Liberal women – as will be evidenced later. Certainly, forcing political parties to achieve some level of parity does not necessarily work if a supporting culture within the party is absent:

... positive discrimination strategies can produce a sharp increase in women's representation under certain conditions, namely where parties combine a political culture sympathetic to these policies with a bureaucratic organisational structure which implements formal party rules.⁴

Murray demonstrates that the implementation of parity laws in French elections has met variable success. For example: 'Where applied, it proved

successful in local and regional elections and, to a lesser extent, European elections. However, parity had a much weaker impact at the national level, with poor performances in the Senatorial elections being eclipsed by the unmitigated failure of parity in the 2002 legislative elections ...'. French political parties have not treated the parity laws with the same level of 'respect' and as a result, major parties such as the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) have faced substantial fines for non-compliance.⁵

Central to this article is a consideration of what actions are deemed as desirable and effective. We can distinguish between 'facilitating' steps (e.g. training, financial and lifestyle support, and changing the process of politics) and 'parity' steps (e.g. WOSLs, reserved seats and quotas). Indeed, a recent report published by the Hansard Society drew particular attention to the Labour Party's use of WOSLs and the Liberal Democrats' preference for utilising quotas at the shortlisting stage.⁶ By considering evidence from party documents and the attitudes of candidates we can see

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patterns of support for particular mechanisms which serve to encourage women candidates.

The Liberal Democrats' recent record of electing women candidates

It is well documented that the process of attaining 'gender balance' within the main political bodies has been slow and uneven. Table 1 shows the percentage of female candidates and MPs in general elections in the post-war period.

In terms of *candidates* the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors have a slightly better track record than parties overall, yet whilst the percentage of candidates who are female has grown, they have generally not been placed in the most 'winnable' seats. As Russell et al.⁷ observe, women candidates in general elections have tended to be more successful in English, rather than Scottish or Welsh, constituencies (the exceptions being Ray Michie in Argyll & Bute, Jo Swinson in East Dunbartonshire and Jenny Willott in Cardiff Central).

It is not that the Liberal Democrats (and the party's various predecessors) have been reluctant to field women, but the post-war MP record was generally a poor one – only one

female Liberal MP in 1945 and 1950, then nothing until 1987, when two women were elected for the party (repeated in 1992). In 1997, the Liberal Democrats fielded 142 women (22.2 per cent of their candidates), yet only four in winnable seats (Argyll & Bute, Richmond Park, Rochdale, Taunton) three of whom were elected. After the 2001 election the number of women MPs actually declined to 118, yet the Liberal Democrats was the only one of the three main parties to get more women into Parliament. Women made up 21.9 per cent of Liberal Democrat candidates in 2001, and 10.9 per cent of the party's MPs (a total of five, which increased to six with the election of Sarah Teather in the Brent East by-election).

In 2005, women made up 23.2 per cent of Liberal Democrat candidates, and the number of women Liberal Democrat MPs increased from five to nine (briefly ten). Six Liberal Democrat MPs retired in 2005, including Jenny Tonge in Richmond Park, yet the Liberal Democrats ventured only a single woman in these vacated seats – Richmond Park once again has a woman MP. Indeed, six of the nine Liberal Democrat women returned to the House of Commons in 2005 were new faces,

and five were able to get there by winning seats from other parties (notably Labour in the case of Falmouth & Camborne, Hornsey & Wood Green, Cardiff Central and Dunbartonshire East, and Solihull, which it took from the Conservatives). An important consideration when reviewing representation in well-established institutions (particularly those such as Westminster which are not subject to fixed terms of office) is the degree to which retiring male MPs are succeeded by male candidates. Unless a political party takes the step of WOSL for vacated yet safe seats then the balance between male and female MPs will be a slow one to achieve.

The picture in other bodies is mixed. Women are often better represented as a result of second-order elections, and we may expect to see more women in the European Parliament (particularly since 1999), the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, and local authorities with multi-member districts. There are two reasons put forward as to why women may be better represented in political institutions other than the House of Commons. One relates to the electoral system, as first past the post may encourage parties to 'play safe' and

Table 1a – Female candidates and MPs since 1945

	1945	1950	1951	1955	1959	1964	1966	1970	1974(f)
Per cent candidates	4.9	6.7	5.7	6.6	5.5	4.9	4.4	5.2	6.2
Per cent MPs	3.8	3.4	2.7	3.8	4.0	4.6	4.1	4.1	3.6
	1974(o)	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	
Per cent candidates	7.0	7.4	10.4	12.9	18.3	19.0	19.4	20.7	
Per cent MPs	4.3	3.0	3.5	6.3	9.2	18.4	18.0	19.8	

Table 1b – Female Liberal/SDP/ Liberal Democrat candidates since 1945

	1945	1950	1951	1955	1959	1964	1966	1970	1974(f)
No. candidates	20	45	11	14	16	24	20	23	40
Per cent of candidates	6.5	9.5	10.1	12.7	7.4	6.6	6.4	6.9	7.7
	1974(o)	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	
No. candidates	49	52	76	105	143	142	140	145	
Per cent of candidates	7.9	9.0	12.0	16.6	22.6	22.2	21.9	23.2	

put forward ‘traditional’ candidates (following the *demand* side model), whilst multi-member seats allow parties to field different *types* of candidates. A second reason is that women are more prominent when less power is at stake.⁸ Recognising the disadvantages of being a ‘third party’ in a two-party system may mean that the Liberal Democrats view local government and devolved bodies as offering *better* opportunities for their candidates, including women.

Intrinsically linked to the electoral system effect and thirst for power is the possibility that women are more likely to stand as ‘paper candidates’ – that is, they are prepared to fill up the party slate but only in seats where the chance of election is slim to non-existent. If this is the case, then we might expect to see a clear distinction between candidacy and elected rates. In the 2001 general election, the Labour Party saw 64 per cent of its female candidates elected, whilst the corresponding figure for the Conservative Party was 15 per cent, but only 3.6 per cent for the Liberal Democrats. In 2005, these figures changed to 59 per cent, 13.8 per cent and 6.2 per cent respectively. The motivation for MPs of any party to ‘retire gracefully’ is influenced by various factors, age being just one, but there are clearly less opportunities for the Liberal Democrats to use vacated safe seats as a means of increasing female representation than is the case for Labour and the Conservatives.

Simply changing the electoral system to one which incorporates party lists does not automatically ensure that more women will be elected. The total number of female MEPs increased in 1999 to 24 per cent, partly due to the use of party lists. In this election the Liberal Democrats ‘zipped’ their candidates, alternating male and

Table 2 – Female Representation in Scotland and Wales

	Female MSPs	LD Female MSPs	Female AMs	LD Female AMs
1999	48	2	25	3
2003	51	2	30	3
2007	43	2	28	3

female candidates on their party lists, but this was a one-off measure. As of the 2004 European elections, women again make up 24 per cent of British MEPs (although a drop in real figures from 21 to 18 as the number of total seats had been reduced). In 1999, women made up 49 per cent of the Liberal Democrat candidates, but only 43 per cent in 2004. This said, the 50:50 balance of MEPs achieved in 1999 was replicated in 2004 (and the party increased its total presence from 10 to 12 MEPs). It could be argued, therefore, that one-off measures such as zipping are an acceptable alternative to positive discrimination *in general*. A review of the candidate lists for 2009 in the English regions alone shows that women constitute almost 34 per cent of the lists in total, and are in first or second place on all but one list (this being the East Midlands).

In 1999, female MSPs constituted 37 per cent of the total in the Scottish Parliament, whilst female AMs accounted for 42 per cent of all elected representatives in the Welsh Assembly (see Table 2). The Liberal Democrats’ strategy was more successful in Wales than in Scotland. Perhaps this is not surprising when we appreciate that in Wales, women represented 13 of the 40 constituency candidates (two of who were elected) and topped two of the five regional lists (one of which was elected). In Scotland women represented 19 of the 55 constituency candidates, but tended to be low down on the party lists.⁹

In 2003, the number of female AMs increased to 50 per cent of the Assembly and women made up four out of nine Cabinet members, although the Liberal

Democrats achieved much of the same with the three AMs from the first term being re-elected (two were from the 13 constituency candidates and one from a party list). Women represented 39 per cent of MSPs. The number of female Liberal Democrat constituency candidates in Scotland rose to 21, whilst those who were successful numbered just two of the 17 Liberal Democrat MSPs (and indeed were the same constituency MSPs as elected in 1999).

In 2007, the number of women declined in both institutions (to 33 per cent of MSPs and 46 per cent of AMs). The three female AMs are those first elected in 1999, and the number of women fighting in constituency seats declined to 11. In Scotland there were again two Liberal Democrat MSPs but with a small change in personnel – whilst Margaret Smith retained the Edinburgh West seat she first took in 1999, Nora Radcliffe lost the Gordon seat to the Scottish National Party’s Alex Salmond (22 women had stood as Liberal Democrat constituency candidates). However, the party’s overall female representation remained intact as the Liberal Democrats took a list seat in North East Scotland.

Two issues are worth noting. First, the potential impact of being a federal party is that the strategies employed to help women get elected can differ across similar electoral system types. Second, the frequent observation that electoral systems other than simple plurality facilitate the selection of women candidates has not to date been beneficial to the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish and Welsh elections, as in constituencies

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where the party wins or comes close to winning:

... the party's constituency vote often far outstrips its list vote. It seems that, far from suffering from first past the post in Scotland and Wales, at least the party's fortunes are heavily reliant on the ability of individual candidates in particular constituencies to win support on the basis of a personal vote, a trick that the party is unable to repeat on any party list vote.¹⁰

Unless this trend in support changes, it is important that the Liberal Democrats place women in winnable *constituency* seats in Scotland and Wales if increased gender parity is an ambition.

According to the Fawcett Society's website approximately 30 per cent of all councillors are women. A national survey of councillors in British local government in the early 1990s estimated that 75 per cent were male,¹¹ indicating that slow progress has been made in the last decade. Meadowcroft refers to the Liberal Democrats as the 'undisputed second party of local government between 1995 and 1998',¹² yet perhaps disappointing is the fact that their councillors 'match the narrow socioeconomic profile of representatives found in all modern democracies'.¹³ Borisyuk et al¹⁴ point out that the Liberal Democrats have been proportionally more successful at electing women councillors than either Labour or the Conservatives, particularly so until the early 1990s, and indeed 34 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors in 1997 were women.¹⁵ However, Bochel and Bochel¹⁶ claim that 'the increasing involvement of parties in local government elections has, in general, had a benign influence upon the election of women ...'.

The introduction of the single transferable vote (STV) in Scottish local elections in 2007 actually led to a small decline

in the number of women councillors overall (a net loss of six). However, while previously the difference between the proportion of female candidates and female councillors had been high, this was not the case in 2007: 'in 2007 women were elected at more or less the same rate as men, once they had been selected.'¹⁷ However, the Liberal Democrats were left with fewer women councillors – both in actual numbers and as a proportion (52 – down 7, and 31.3 per cent compared to 33.9 per cent) – although this does compare favourably with others; only 17.5 per cent of Labour's Scottish councillors are women, and the equivalent figure is 23.8 per cent for the Conservatives.

In certain cases there may be evidence to suggest that there is something flawed about a party-defined model of a 'good candidate', and that the more involved the central party organisation becomes in selecting candidates, the less this has to offer women. Yet local election candidacy is a good example where there is no central party interference in who is selected for the Liberal Democrats.

The Liberal Democrats' strategy on gender and representation

When facing any election, political parties have to take strategic decisions about what their priorities should be. Indeed, it could be argued that adopting radical strategies to promote particular groups and interests is more difficult for established parties. Whilst new institutions and new parties provide the best opportunity for radically different approaches to promoting particular types of candidates, it is important to bear in mind that established parties may be somewhat reluctant to neglect the interests of those who have an established track record as elected representatives. As such, strategies for providing balanced

party slates may be frustrated when dealing with incumbency. Therefore, being selected by a party to stand for election is one thing, being elected is quite another.

The development of debates surrounding the issue of why women candidates may or may not be successful needs also to take into account the structure of the party, as well as the contribution made by women-focused internal groups. Unlike the Labour and Conservative parties, the Liberal Democrats are a federal party, making them, in Webb's words, 'comparatively democratic' as individual members have 'clear incentives to participate'.¹⁸ The federal system provides four tiers of organisational structure, which allows for competing views about which strategies for promoting women candidates should be adopted, and it is feasible that discrepancies can occur over policy preference. Indeed, survey responses (see below) show some differentials between respondents in Scotland and Wales. Russell and Fieldhouse identify 'the dual identities' of the Liberal Democrats – that is a difference between the grassroots members and the leadership elite.¹⁹

In addition, the party includes the Women Liberal Democrats (WLD), a Specified Associated Organisation (SAO), alongside the more recently formed Campaign for Gender Balance (a 2006 rebranding of the Gender Balance Task Force) which reports to the party's Federal Executive. The latter aims to reach a target of 40 per cent of women in elected bodies, aided by the encouragement of 150 extra approved candidates. Assessing the 'effectiveness' of WLD and the GBTF is not included here, though anecdotal evidence suggests the latter has been more prominent in assisting women seeking candidacy.

So how have the Liberal Democrats dealt with positive

The Liberal Democrats have been proportionally more successful at electing women councillors than either Labour or the Conservatives.



discrimination? Between 1983 and 1987 the SDP applied a gender quota for shortlisting PPCs.²⁰ In 1995 the Scottish Liberal Democrats signed the Electoral Agreement with the Labour Party, committing them to balanced candidate numbers for the Scottish Parliament, which was further endorsed at the 1996 and 1997 state party conferences, although the outcome did not match the intention.²¹ In 1997, the Liberal Democrats offered themselves as ‘the party for women’, utilising strong spokeswomen to promote policies and organising two press conferences focusing specifically on women’s issues and perspectives.²² At the 1997 autumn conference the Welsh Liberal Democrats rejected the federal party’s endorsement of positive action on gender balance for future candidate lists (despite the policy also being backed by Richard Livsey, the Welsh leader²³), again indicating that federalism can produce an inconsistency between organisations within the same party.

1998, according to Meadowcroft,²⁴ marked a turnaround in Liberal Democrat willingness to accept positive discrimination within selection procedures. However, faced with the real opportunity to impose positive discrimination (via the Sex

The Campaign for Gender Balance was formed (as the Gender Balance Task Force) in 2001 to provide support, training and mentoring for women candidates.

Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002), the party proved somewhat cautious. Lovenduski²⁵ claims that there was an absence of experience of overt discrimination in the selection processes for the 2001 general election, but that the rules on gender-balancing shortlists led to feelings of ‘tokenism’, as the norm was to select a PPC who fitted the traditional male model – the empirical evidence then suggests that attempts to assure equalities of opportunity are frequently frustrated.

The proposed imposition of quotas for women was rejected at the 2001 party conference, which instead favoured a 40 per cent target of female candidates in winnable seats – a decision which subsequently led to some women refusing to participate in photo-calls. However, the mechanisms for achieving such a target fuelled internal party disagreement. A proposal that all currently held seats where the sitting MP stands down should appoint woman candidates was rejected in favour of focusing specifically on training and support for candidates. The challenge was epitomised by Evan Harris’s comment, ‘we still have not got full agreement on the best way forward’. As such, it may be more appropriate to discuss strategies, as opposed to a ‘one-technique-fits-all’ approach. The data below demonstrates that there is no particular consensus about what exactly the party should do to promote women.

A second strategy – applicable specifically to winning seats, rather than to participatory democracy – is the ‘localism’ approach to building up a bedrock of support, crucial in a two-party plurality electoral system. MacAllister et al. suggest that evidence of this approach can be traced back to 1955 in the Liberal Party, and it has been widely accredited for the successes achieved in general elections since the 1990s.²⁶

Might this emphasis on ‘localism’ help to encourage women to become both activists and candidates, when they may otherwise be ‘put off’ by centralised agendas?

Perhaps worthy of note is the party’s approach to Westminster Parliamentary by-elections. The gender balance of candidates in winnable contests has been very striking, which suggests something about party elite motivation and strategies. Whilst the party put forward a male candidate in Cheadle in July 2005, Brent East was secured by Sarah Teather in 2003, and significant vote gains were made by female candidates in Ipswich in 2001, and Birmingham Hodge Hill and Hartlepool in 2004.

Attitudes within the party to the promotion of women

As well as the opportunities which exist within the selection process, as outlined above, we can look to the party’s ideology. A political strategy which has been consistent since 1970 is community politics. Electing more women (and more generally candidates which reflect the broad make-up of society), is just one aspect of community politics, which requires broad representation in as many discussion and decision-making forums as possible. This said, policies of positive discrimination are problematic ‘with many in the party believing that such mechanisms were fundamentally “illiberal”’.²⁷

In terms of attitudes towards promoting women we can engage with three sources of data. First, we have access to some party documents and debates; second, we can draw on comparative data from the British Representation Studies²⁸ (BRS); and third, we have the findings of a survey of female Scottish and Welsh Liberal Democrat candidates in the 2003 elections.²⁹ Response rates for the latter source were

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good considering that this was a self-completion questionnaire, although the relatively small numbers means we should generalise with caution. In addition, we cannot make any claims about the similarity or otherwise of the non-respondents. However, several respondents did take the opportunity to supply additional (and detailed) information, reflecting the fact that this was an issue of significance to them.

The road to selection

In the survey of Scottish and Welsh candidates, respondents were asked if they had previously put themselves forward but not been selected. The responses indicated a notable difference in experience; in Wales all claimed they had never been unsuccessful. This could tell us two things – first, the Liberal Democrats place gender balance high on their selection priority list, or second, any candidate was preferable to the party not being able to contest a seat. In addition, it may indicate a stronger support for the promotion of women in Wales despite indicators otherwise at state conference, although this difference may also reflect the fact that the Welsh women had not been active in the party for as long as the Scottish respondents. These candidates also had plenty of experience of standing in unwinnable seats, though of course we should treat such figures with caution as we do not know how typical this pattern is for all candidates (male and

female). It was suggested by one respondent that there appeared to be a particular culture in parts of Wales where male local candidates were preferred, although this obstacle is not only faced by Liberal Democrat women – as, in reference to the Labour Party, there is ‘traditional thinking about gender roles, most prevalent in the South Wales valleys, which has been an obstacle to the recruitment of women candidates’.³⁰

In the survey of Scottish and Welsh candidates, respondents were asked if they had thought about standing as a candidate, but been discouraged in some way. This did not appear to affect the Welsh respondents (who had not been party members for as long as their Scottish counterparts), but had affected five of the Scottish candidates. All these women stated that existing commitments were the main reason, though one also stated that she ‘did not feel ready’. Optimistically, no one appeared to be dissuaded by the selection process or the slim chance of success, although one Scottish respondent in her thirties claimed:

If I decide not to stand this time for Westminster 2005 it will be because of the cost (money and emotion and time) of the selection campaign.

Strategies to increase the number of elected women

In the survey of Scottish and Welsh candidates, a majority of

the respondents (83 per cent) felt that gender imbalance within political institutions is an issue – and this was more strongly felt in Scotland (93 per cent). This could of course reflect purely personal attitudes, or the fact that male/female equity was achieved in Wales in the 2003 election. However, in Wales 86 per cent felt that political parties do not do enough to encourage women to stand for election. The BRS study of male and female candidates in 1997 found the following pattern of support for policy options (see Table 3).

Clearly, Liberal Democrat candidates at this point were strongly in favour of facilitating rather than parity steps. Furthermore, it was not the case that men and women candidates held notably distinct views. The 2001 BRS asked questions about support for women-only shortlists – 69 Liberal Democrat women candidates responded, with 10 per cent strongly approving, 13 per cent approving, 58 per cent disapproving and 19 per cent strongly disapproving. Clearly, there is a common rejection of this strategy by female candidates across the party. The opportunity to utilise positive quotas or affirmative action received the same number of responses with 25 per cent strongly approving, 45 per cent approving, 25 per cent disapproving and 4 per cent strongly disapproving.

In the survey of Scottish and Welsh candidates, respondents in both countries were clearly against women-only shortlists (83 per cent), and this was felt irrespective of candidate age. These women also felt that candidates selected in such a way would be perceived as ‘weaker candidates’ (70 per cent) – possibly a legacy learnt from the experience of many of the Labour Party’s 1997 new intake who were labelled by the media as ‘Blair Babes’, akin to the Stepford Wives. In contrast, techniques

Table 3 – candidate support for ‘women-friendly’ policy, 1997

	LD	Lab	Con
Party training for women	98	98	69
Better childcare in Parliament	98	98	66
Changing parliamentary hours	97	91	57
Financial support for candidates	90	56	3
Positive quotas/ affirmative action	47	74	2
Reserved seats for women	3	22	0

Source: Norris, 2001

Table 4 – party provisions to help women candidates

	GBTF	WLD	Training	Twinning/ zipping
Scotland	7	5	7	2
Wales	2	2	2	1

such as pairing and zipping were viewed more favourably (though not overwhelmingly so – 52 per cent) and may not foster the same notion of ‘weakness’. Again, age appears to have no bearing on this opinion. As such, it is unlikely that a consensus can be reached within the different state parties that special measures are desirable, let alone appropriate.

Existing party provisions

Respondents in Scotland and Wales were asked if they were aware of any specific steps taken by their party to encourage women to stand for election, and whether they had benefited personally.

Candidates were clearly aware of the two main organisations aimed at women (Women Liberal Democrats and the then-named Gender Balance Task Force), and the training that these and the party provided – although the issue was raised that the latter was not unproblematic, as it was encouraging women to ‘play a man’s game’.³¹ In addition, incidental mention was made of mentoring and one-to-one advice and of the Nancy Seear Trust.³² In the 2001 BRS, respondents were asked about the level of influence that women’s groups or organisations had over the selection process. Of the 41 female Liberal Democrat candidates who responded, 12 per cent felt there was far too little, 27 per cent felt there was too little, 58 per cent felt it was about right and 2 per cent claimed it was far too great. A sizable minority clearly felt that these groups had more to contribute, and a more detailed analysis of these intra-party organisations is long overdue.

Some Scottish/ Welsh respondents noted multiple forms of assistance, which is reflected in Table 5, as is the somewhat differential experience. For Welsh candidates there had been little formal assistance, except for the candidate who benefited from the Nancy Seear Trust. For the women in Scotland, there was no apparent age effect to the types of assistance encountered, although in Wales it tended to be the younger candidates who had benefited (the eldest being only 32). It was also notable that in Scotland three women had received help from both the GBTF and WLD, suggesting that from the candidate perspective at least having two women-centred organisations within the party is not necessarily problematic. Party documentation provides a broader picture of the activities of the GBTF, with a report by Baroness Harris of Richmond claiming that at least 70 per cent of the 2005 women candidates had received training.³³

Future strategies?

When the Scottish and Welsh respondents were asked what the party could do in future to help female candidates, a range of alternatives were offered, following no particular country trend. Some focused on the very practical – such as one-to-one assistance, a realistic understanding of the commitments which needed to be met, better working conditions, financial support

and learning from role models. However, one Welsh respondent (in her thirties) claimed that ‘other women are sometimes not as supportive as they could be. I have come across a lot of “Queen Bee” syndrome.’

There was also support for what was already being done; just more of it was needed. Three respondents supported a continuation of twinning or zipping. Others felt the party needed to place more women in high-profile positions and overcome stereotypes, and attention was drawn to the example of Fife, where there was a clustering of female local representation – ‘this must make it all look “possible” to other women considering standing for election’. Another member in Scotland (in her twenties) pointed out that many branches of the party that she was involved with were female-dominated. Interestingly, two respondents (both in Wales) felt that ‘nothing was needed’, whilst a Scottish respondent (mid-fifties) claimed that ‘I am optimistic that younger women will enter politics in increasing numbers and that will change the institutions.’

Looking at the broader picture, there was also support for changing political institutions:

Curiously, we have lots of women at all other levels in the party – councillors, council group leaders, chairs of local parties, members of executive committees etc. Parliament is the big stumbling block. (Welsh respondent, fifties)

Twelve respondents (nine in Scotland) wanted to see more family-friendly environments to encourage more women to stand

Table 5 – personally benefited?

	GBTF	WLD	Training	Encouragement/ mentoring
Scotland	3	4	6	3
Wales	–	–	1	1

as candidates, and one respondent suggested penalising those bodies which had a poor gender balance record. Several suggested making local government more attractive in terms of both status and payment. Interestingly, a post-election report by Baroness Harris of Richmond highlighted the fact that assistance was given to female candidates in providing more foot soldiers, telephone canvassers and financial assistance,³⁴ and it would be interesting to see if candidates felt that other forms of assistance would have been an asset. The Campaign for Gender Balance aims to be more proactive in encouraging all female members to consider standing for election and by targeting interest at the regional level, but also to continue with training and one-to-one work.

Conclusion

The data present some interesting findings, both specific to the Liberal Democrats and applicable to political parties more generally. In the short term, the Liberal Democrats still have to deal with self-made claims that the party is ‘women-friendly’, and in doing so may face challenges due to: (i) a federal structure in which different organisations may support or oppose specific measures; and (ii) two women-oriented groups which may (or may not) be endorsing common strategies.

Yet the respondents did not present a wholly pessimistic outlook of their own role and the opportunities for other women within the Liberal Democrats. Indeed, they presented a more positive outlook than some of the views expressed within and about other political parties. Paper candidacy is not uncommon (among both men and women) and it is important to distinguish between candidates genuinely seeking office and those who stand for election clearly hoping not to win.

Indeed, the very interesting challenge is that Liberal Democrat women themselves do not appear to want special measures – a point worthy of future comparison with women in other parties. Clearly, there is a perceived ‘problem’ in terms of suitable women securing seats, but the solution is not simply one of quotas, but about a personalised approach to support.³⁵

Further research is now required to examine: (i) the extent to which women representatives ‘cluster’ (at all levels of election); (ii) even if women do start out as ‘paper candidates’ it may be the case that their commitment and motives are altered by experience, and so an examination of what the term ‘paper candidate’ actually means is worth investigating; (iii) the ‘route’ along which women enter politics is worthy of examination (it has been suggested by one elected representative that this is different for men); (iv) do political parties look for different qualities in their candidates for different levels of elections?

Whilst the party continues to reject WOSL, substantial changes in the balance of male MPs to female MPs will rely on significant shifts in the party’s internal culture. Whilst some of the evidence presented here suggests that generational shifts are occurring, gender balance among elected representatives does not appear to be a likely short-term outcome.

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 2 Norris, P. and Lovenduski, J. (1995), *Political Recruitment: Gender,*

Whilst some of the evidence presented here suggests that generational shifts are occurring, gender balance among elected representatives does not appear to be a likely short-term outcome.

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- 30 Edwards and Chapman, 2003, op.cit., p. 398.
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- 35 Echoed in personal interview, 4 November 2003.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65). Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden). Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.

'Economic Liberalism' and the Liberal (Democrat) Party, 1937–2004. A study of the role of 'economic liberalism' in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. Of particular interest would be any private papers relating to 1937's *Ownership For All* report and the activities of the Unservile State Group. Oral history submissions also welcome. Matthew Francis; matthew@the-domain.org.uk.

The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002. PhD thesis. Cynthia Messeleka-Boyer, 12 bis chemin Vaysse, 81150 Terrasac, France; +33 6 10 09 72 46; cynthiandrea@aol.com.

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16. Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.

The Liberal Party in the West Midlands from December 1916 to the 1923 general election. Focusing on the fortunes of the party in Birmingham, Coventry, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Looking to explore the effects of the party split at local level. Also looking to uncover the steps towards temporary reunification for the 1923 general election. Neil Fisher, 42 Bowden Way, Binley, Coventry CV3 2HU; neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com.

The Lib-Lab Pact. The period of political co-operation which took place in Britain between 1977 and 1978; PhD research project at Cardiff University. Jonny Kirkup, 29 Mount Earl, Bridgend, Bridgend County CF31 3EY; jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk.

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935. Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.

Liberal Unionists. A study of the Liberal Unionist party as a discrete political entity. Help with identifying party records before 1903 particularly welcome. Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.

The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper. Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com.