

# For the win! Male politicians are more likely to represent women's interests if their re-election is at risk

**Daniel Höhmann** shows that male MPs do play a distinct role in women's representation and that many of them are willing to represent women's interest in parliament. However, one of the key drivers of this behaviour seems to be a rational calculation of how they can enhance their re-election prospects, rather than an intrinsic motivation to stand up for gender equality: male MPs are significantly more likely to speak on behalf of women if their re-election security is low and if they are therefore forced to cater to additional (female) voters to get re-elected.

The last few decades have witnessed several examples of male politicians who have actively engaged in gender equality politics across the world. For example, Barack Obama was among the many male supporters of the United Nation's ['HeForShe'](#) campaign in 2014, and Mikael Gustafsson became Chairmen of the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in 2011. Nevertheless, the [role of male politicians](#) in the substantive representation of women's interests has, so far, largely been ignored, and we know hardly anything about the political and institutional conditions that affect men's likelihood of speaking on behalf of women in parliament.

The majority of [previous research](#) has intuitively assumed that it is the female MPs who bring women's concerns to the political agenda, and who vigorously voice women's interests. Since female MPs share gender-specific experiences and perspectives with the female population, it is expected that they are more concerned with women's interests than their male colleagues, and that they more frequently speak about topics like the gender pay gap, protection against domestic violence, or the comprehensive availability of breast cancer screenings.

In our [recent paper](#), we take a fresh perspective on the question of women's parliamentary representation and explicitly examine the motivations of male MPs to articulate women's interests. In particular, we explore the role of electoral vulnerability in this regard and analyze whether male MPs' electoral situation affects their decision to act on behalf of women.

In order to hypothesize about the conditions under which it is electorally beneficial for male MPs to represent women's issues, we draw on the concept of a [gendered leeway](#). According to this gendered leeway, male MPs – in contrast to their female colleagues – are generally not expected to be active on women's issues and will not be held accountable if they do not actively promote these issues in parliament. Since male MPs are not directly (at least not negatively) affected by gender-inequalities, and because they do not share any linked fate with women in society, they perceive no strong obligation to substantively represent women in parliament. However, if they *do* act in women's interests, they can gain additional credit because it is not generally perceived as a duty that male politicians should fulfil. Thus, if male MPs are interested in continuing their parliamentary career, they should be more likely to speak on behalf of women if their electoral security is low and they are forced to fight for additional votes to be re-elected. If their re-election to parliament is hanging in the balance and they are faced with a competitive race in the constituency, female voters present an additional source of votes for male MPs which might ensure their return to parliament in the upcoming legislative term.

Hence, we hypothesise that the higher their individual electoral vulnerability, the more vigorously male MPs will represent women's interests in parliament. Regarding the [British case](#), acting in women's interests might be particularly promising given that women's issues have usually featured prominently in the election campaigns and all major parties have made attempts to target women voters. This is exemplified by Douglas Alexander, Labour's campaign coordinator, who stated that 'Labour needs to win back middle-income female voters with children in marginal seats'.

To investigate this theoretical expectation empirically, we analysed the parliamentary activities of all male MPs in the Commons between 2001 and 2015. To measure how strong male MPs engage in women's substantive representation, we collected all Early Day Motions (EDMs) that were tabled in the parliamentary sessions prior to a General Election and identified all those motions which referred to a topic affecting women disproportionately more than men, or that addressed a social condition in which women are disadvantaged in comparison to men. Based on this coding, an original data set was created containing information on the number of women-specific EDMs that were either proposed or signed by individual male MPs. We identified 103 EDMs with a women-specific concern which, in total, received 5,055 signatures from the MPs in the House of Commons.

To operationalise electoral vulnerability, we used the vote margin of victory in the prior election. The smaller the distance between the winner and the second-best candidate, the more uncertain the outcome of the next election and the higher the incentives for the incumbent MP to fight for additional votes to guarantee re-election.

The results of our study corroborate the expectation that male MPs make use of a gendered leeway regarding women's substantive representation. Using a hurdle regression model, we find a significant positive effect of electoral vulnerability on male MPs' general decision to represent women's interests in parliament. In other words, male MPs are more likely to either sign or propose a women-specific EDM, if their re-election is at risk. The predictions in Figure 1 show that the probability of male MPs tabling or signing at least one women-specific EDM is 28.3% at the lowest level of electoral insecurity observed in the dataset. However, if the electoral vulnerability increases, the probability that male MPs will represent women's issues increases steadily. For competitive districts with vote margins of less than 20 percentage points, the predicted probability that male MPs will try to cater to female voters rises to above 40% and continues to increase to roughly 44% for the maximum value of electoral vulnerability.

Moreover, our empirical analysis indicates qualitative differences in the representation of women's interests by male and female MPs. Whereas women in the House of Commons are more likely to introduce their own EDMs on topics of women's interest, men instead engage in low-cost activities and merely sign women's EDMs, rather than writing their own motions.



In sum, our study indicates that speaking about women's interests is a viable electoral strategy for male MPs to cater to additional voters. To a large extent, men in the House of Commons are extrinsically motivated and oftentimes speak on behalf of women in order to win elections.

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*Note:* the above draws on the author's [published work](#) (co-authored with Mary Nugent) in the *European Journal of Political Research*.

### About the Author



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