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'The first, but not the last'

'The first, but not the last': women's descriptive and substantive representation in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election

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Abstract

The 2021 Scottish Parliament election delivered the most diverse range of MSPs in Holyrood's history, including a record number of women. We situate the 2021 election within its wider context, evaluating dynamics of party feminisation over time. Drawing on original candidate data and analysis of party manifestos across the main Scottish parties, we assess parties' substantive appeals to women voters; the integration of different groups of women as candidates, MSPs and leaders; and the adoption and implementation of gender quotas. We find evidence of descriptive and substantive party feminisation in Scotland over time—including increases in both the amount and diversity of party manifesto pledges directed at women voters; improvements in the number and diversity of women selected and elected; and the increasing diffusion of, and inter-party competition over, gender quota measures. Yet we also find that progress has been uneven across parties and that some groups of women continue to be descriptively and substantively under-represented in Scottish politics.

Keywords Women's representation · Scottish Parliament · Party feminisation · Gender quotas · Candidate selection · Party manifestos

Introduction

The results of the 2021 Scottish Parliament election were historic. After years of stagnation in levels of representation, 45% of members elected to the new parliament were women, a record-breaking achievement (though still short of gender

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equity). Amongst their number were the first two women of colour elected in the history of the Scottish Parliament (including the first Sikh member) and the first permanent wheelchair user elected to Holyrood. This article places these results within their wider context, asking how much has changed for women in Scottish politics post-devolution.

We assess the above question through an analysis of the dynamics of party feminisation in Scottish parties over time. Gendered accounts of political parties emphasise that a feminised party must—at its core—integrate women into its structures, and address women's policy concerns, acknowledging that the latter are complex and contested (Lovenduski 2005; Childs 2008; Childs and Webb 2012). We explore these different dimensions of descriptive and substantive feminisation across the main Scottish political parties, situating the 2021 elections within trends and patterns over time. We first review the literature on party feminisation, continuity and change; and set out our data and methods. We then evaluate the ways in which parties related to women during the election campaign, assessing the number and diversity of manifesto pledges directed at women voters in 2021, and over time. We move on to assess the extent to which parties' equality rhetoric around representation has translated into outcomes, tracing both the descriptive representation of different groups of women as candidates, MSPs and party leaders over time, and the existence and effectiveness of party quota measures aimed at increasing the political presence of women and other under-represented groups.

Our findings provide evidence of increasing party feminisation in Scotland—highlighting increases in both the amount and diversity of party manifesto pledges directed at women voters; improvements in the number and diversity of female candidates selected and elected; and partial 'contagion' of gender quota measures across most of the party system. Yet we also find that progress has been asymmetrical and that gaps remain across the different parties in terms of how they both seek to appeal to different groups of women voters and promote women's diverse representation. We conclude by evaluating the prospects for women's representation in Scottish politics and consider avenues for future research.

Party feminisation, continuity and change

Existing typologies of political parties have rarely taken gender into account (Kenny et al. 2022). As a result, they have largely failed to engage with major developments like the feminisation of party politics and the adoption and implementation of gender quotas. Women activists—inside and outside parties—have been key players in debates over political representation worldwide. They have also been vocal advocates for quota measures, one of the most far-reaching electoral reforms of recent times, aimed at reforming the recruitment practices and changing the priorities of political parties in ways that facilitate the election of women (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2011). Whilst parties overall remain dominated by men, women now occupy over a quarter of the world's parliamentary seats, compared to 12% in 1998 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023).

At the same time, however, the feminisation of party politics and political institutions worldwide has not always been straightforward or linear. Party responses to the 'twin dimensions' of feminisation—women's descriptive presence and the substantive representation of women's interests—are shaped by external pressures and factors (including electoral and party system dynamics) as well as intra-party rules and norms (including party organisation and ideology) (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Lovenduski 2005; Kittilson 2006). In responding to these pressures, parties may make some changes whilst resisting others. For example, a party might have increased the proportion of women in its parliamentary party, whilst still failing to address and integrate women's policy concerns, or, in some cases, pursuing anti-feminist policies (Childs and Webb 2012; see also Young 2000). The task for researchers, then, is to investigate both the proportion and form of women's participation in party structures, as well as the extent to which parties regard women as capable of being represented, evidenced in representative claims and in policy proposals and outcomes (Childs and Webb 2012).

In the scope of this article, we assess substantive feminisation through a manifesto analysis of party appeals to women voters in election campaigns (cf. Sanders et al. 2021), evaluating which groups of women are being targeted by party policy pledges, as well as the type and content of policies proposed. Studies of British state-wide political parties suggest that the number of party pledges directed at women voters has increased over time (see for example, Campbell and Childs 2015; Sanders et al. 2021). Electoral incentives exist for parties to address women's interests, with women disproportionately represented amongst undecided voters (Campbell 2012). And whilst men's and women's voting patterns are largely similar, there are some gender differences in vote choice for particular parties, and in the priority that men and women attach to particular issues (Campbell 2012). Women, for example, have historically been markedly less inclined to support and join the Scottish National Party than men, largely because they have been less supportive of independence (Johns et al. 2012). Parties have also faced internal pressures to appeal to women voters. In some cases, as highlighted above, feminist actors have strategically used voting gender gaps to campaign for women's descriptive (numerical) and substantive representation within parties (Norris 1996; Eagle and Lovenduski 1998; Campbell 2016).

Empirical analyses of party pledges to women voters have largely focused on party manifestos (see for example, Childs et al. 2010; Campbell and Childs 2015; Sanders et al. 2021). Manifestos are a crucial campaigning tool used to directly inform voters, providing a comprehensive summary of party positions (Eder et al. 2017) that are reported extensively across different forms of media (Allen and Bara 2017) and are generally fulfilled post-election (Bara 2005). In seeking to differentiate themselves from other parties, and in doing so, giving attention to some priorities over others, parties can also develop and establish 'ownership' of particular issues (Allen and Bara 2017). These party strategies are, in turn, shaped by broader organisational and institutional conditions, with political parties in Scotland and the UK operating within complex multi-level contexts, marked by different powers and varying degrees of policy autonomy (Clark and Bennie 2018; Bennie and Clark 2020).

Manifesto analysis generally involves multiple methods, ranging from quantitative forms of content analysis, including mentions of words and the amount of attention given to various issues, to more qualitative approaches seeking to identify and provide a more fine-grained analysis of underlying themes (see for example, Allen and Mirwaldt 2010; Allen and Bara 2017; March 2017; Clark and Bennie 2018). In this article, we build on both approaches, looking first at the number of party appeals to women over time across the main Scottish parties (Scottish National Party; Scottish Labour Party; Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party; Scottish Greens; Scottish Liberal Democrats), comparing 2021 election manifestos to those from previous elections in 2011 and 2016. Existing comparative tools and resources around party manifestos—specifically the Manifesto Project—are limited in that they use a broader 'equalities' category, rendering it difficult to examine a party's explicit stance on women and/or gender equality issues (Sanders et al. 2021; Kenny et al. 2022). We, therefore, categorise policy pledges around key words, 'auditing' manifestos for mentions of 'women', 'gender', 'intersectional/intersectionality', and 'feminism/feminist', focusing on average mentions by page to account for differences in manifesto length (cf. Sanders et al. 2021).

We then go on to examine which categories of women were identified and targeted in manifestos in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, using key words of 'women', 'gender', 'female' and 'sex', as well as associated words, including 'mother/s', 'maternity/maternal', 'misogyny', 'feminist/feminism', 'intersectional/ity' and 'LGBTI/Q' (cf. Sanders et al. 2021). We recognise the limitations of the above analysis, in that it only includes those policies that directly appeal to (different groups of) women, and doesn't identify policies that might still benefit women, but are not explicitly labelled as doing so in party manifestos. Childs et al. (2010, p. 212), for example, identify a general shift in Conservative party manifestos over time, where mentions of 'family and parents' have replaced 'women' in party pledges with the family represented as a 'single, homogenous, non-sexed or non-gendered unit.' Simple counting against a pre-existing set of criteria, therefore, is unlikely to fully capture the diverse constituency of women and what constitutes women's concerns and interests (Childs et al. 2010), or more complex patterns of privilege and disadvantage, and the interplay between different identities (Crenshaw 1989; see also Sanders et al. 2021 on this point). We, therefore, also carried out a more fine-grained analysis of underlying manifesto themes and detailed party pledges, focusing in particular on the 2021 election, and examining manifesto pledges 'to', 'for' and 'about' women. Typologies of gender equality policies generally classify these according to three categories (Htun and Weldon 2010, 2018; Annesley and Gains 2013; Sanders et al. 2019, 2021). First are policies which address women's *status* as women, seeking to empower all women as a group (such as violence against women, gender quotas, abortion). Second are *class-based* policies, which are redistributive and seek to address inequalities between women and men (such as maternity/parental leave, pensions, and childcare). Third and finally are *blueprint* policies, which provide a legal or regulatory framework to promote gender equality.

We assess descriptive feminisation largely in terms of each party's parliamentary presence, evaluating the integration of different groups of women as candidates,

MSPs and party leaders, as well as the existence and enforcement of rules and practices promoting the selection and election of women and other under-represented groups. As there is no official requirement for political parties to collate or report on the diversity of candidates, candidate data was gathered on the basis of public information obtained from official Notices of Poll, with demographic characteristics confirmed where information was publicly available using party websites, candidate campaign material and social media, and local and national media reports. We revisited available data for candidates iteratively and throughout the election—including before, during and after the campaign (cf. Lamprinakou et al. 2016).

The contributions of our analysis to research on women, gender and political parties are threefold. First, we consider the descriptive and substantive dimensions of party feminisation across a multi-party system, allowing us to assess similarities and differences in party responses to women's demands. To date, research mapping the feminisation of British party politics has largely focused on individual parties, with the predominance of studies focusing on Labour (Perrigo 1995, 1996; Childs 2004) as well as more recent work on the Conservative party (Childs and Webb 2012; Campbell and Childs 2018) and the Liberal Democrats (Evans 2011). Studies of party appeals to women voters have also focused largely on British state-wide parties and Westminster elections (see for example, Campbell and Childs 2015; Sanders et al. 2021). Yet, party responses to demands for women's inclusion vary not only across parties, but also *within* parties across different levels of the political system (see for example, Kenny and Mackay 2014). Therefore, and second, in focusing on Scottish Parliament elections, we can begin to explore the extent to which party claims and policies work within and around the boundaries of multi-level party and political structures, and with what impact. Third, we examine the descriptive and substantive dimensions of feminisation across intersectional lines, asking which women are represented in Scottish party politics, and the extent to which parties recognise and seek to appeal to different groups of women.

Substantive feminisation: trends in party manifestos

The run-up to the 2021 Scottish Parliament election was a campaign like no other—with Covid-19 severely limiting traditional canvassing and campaigning. With door knocking and in-person hustings largely out of the question, much of the campaign took place online or over social media, whilst party leader debates featured questions from virtual audiences. A new political party had also entered the arena—with former First Minister Alex Salmond leading the pro-independence Alba party, joined by some other former Scottish National Party (SNP) defectors.

In other respects, however, the 2021 campaign represented 'more of the same.' Robert Johns (2021, p. 497) notably asserts that 'independence is currently the basis of Scottish politics more than class ever was of British party politics.' The majority of voters in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election, as with every election since the 2014 independence referendum, voted for a party that shared their views on independence (Johns 2021). The primacy of the constitutional question was reflected both in manifestos and party campaign material in 2021, with, for example,

the Scottish Conservative manifesto opening with 'End Division, No Referendum, Rebuild Scotland' (Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party 2021, p. 6). Nevertheless, Scottish parties made a number of appeals to women voters during the election, which we consider below.

Party appeals to women voters

We first audited the party manifestos of the five main Scottish political parties from 2011 to 2021 to examine the number of party appeals to women over time. We began by counting the frequency at which the words 'woman/women', 'gender', 'intersectional/intersectionality', and 'feminism/feminist' were mentioned in each party manifesto (see Fig. 1). Manifesto content and style varies across a number of different areas, in terms of format, layout, page and word length, and number of chapters (Clark and Bennie 2018; see also Bara 2005). We, therefore, following Sanders et al. (2021), examine average mentions of keywords per page to account for differences in manifesto length. Table 1 outlines the page length of parties' manifestos in the 2011, 2016 and 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.
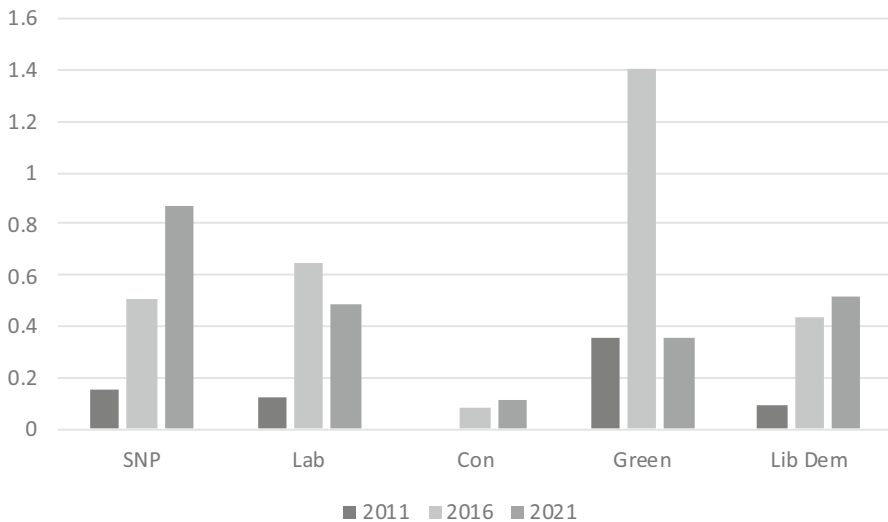
Fig. 1 Manifesto mentions of 'women/woman', 'gender', 'intersectional/intersectionality'; 'feminism/feminist' (per page) by party at the 2011, 2016 and 2021 Scottish Parliament elections

		SNP	Conservatives	Labour	Greens	Lib Dems
Table 1 Page length of Scottish Parliament election manifestos	2011	44	36	98	28	83
	2016	76	50	68	48	36
	2021	76	60	116	96	54

Most parties have seen an increase in the number of manifesto pages over time, but these trends are not universal or consistent.

Figure 1 shows trends over time in the mention of 'women' and 'gender' (in terms of average mentions per page) in party manifestos across the 2011, 2016 and 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. Across these three elections, significant differences between parties remain, with a notable increase in the number of mentions aimed at women in almost all parties from 2016 onwards. From 2016 onwards, the average number of mentions of 'women/gender' is overall higher for most Scottish parties competing in Scottish Parliament elections (bar the Scottish Conservatives) than British state-wide parties in the 2015, 2017 and 2019 General Elections (see Sanders et al. 2021). Notably, there are no mentions of 'women/gender' in the 2011 Scottish Conservative manifesto, and only very limited mentions thereafter. Whilst manifesto mentions of women/gender were much higher amongst the Scottish Greens in 2011 and 2016 than other parties, the SNP, Labour and Liberal Democrats have seen notable increases between 2011 and 2016 in particular, and have higher average numbers of mentions (per page) from 2021 than the Greens. In the case of the SNP, this may reflect changes from 2014 onwards, including changes in party leadership and party membership after the independence referendum, which we return to in subsequent sections. As highlighted in Table 1, the Scottish Green Party manifesto has also more than tripled in page length since 2011.

Whilst repetition of an issue in a manifesto may point to its importance (Allen and Barra 2017), it could also simply indicate 'a narrow or poorly developed gender agenda' (Sanders et al. 2021, p. 518). These numbers must therefore be viewed with a degree of caution, given that in some cases, mentions of the above are contextual text in the manifestos (including forewords and acknowledgements), rather than identifiable policy pledges. Nonetheless, there is an interesting shift apparent from 2021, where references to feminism and intersectionality notably appeared for the first time in two Scottish party manifestos. The Scottish Green Party manifesto (2021, p. 79) outlines a central commitment to an 'inclusive, intersectional feminism', and support for a free, feminist and democratic society in Syria (p. 55, 63). Meanwhile, the 2021 SNP manifesto commits to adopting a feminist foreign policy (SNP 2021, pp. 72–73), and to improve data collection to 'be able to gauge intersectional inequality, measure outcomes, and recommend improvements' (p. 32). Overall, these findings suggest that (some) Scottish parties have increased their appeals to women over time but this trend is not universal across the party system.

Which women are targeted by party pledges? We looked further at which categories of women were identified and targeted in manifestos in 2011, 2016, and 2021, using keywords of 'women/woman', 'gender', 'female' and 'sex', as well as associated words, including 'mother/s', 'maternity/maternal', 'misogyny', 'feminist/feminism', 'intersectional/ity' and 'LGBTI/Q' (following Sanders et al. 2021). Our analysis of party manifestos across the 2011, 2016 and 2021 Scottish Parliament elections suggests that most Scottish parties have begun to address a wider range of groups of women over time—and identifies specific policy pledges addressing the needs and interests of pregnant women/mothers/carers, working women, young women, older women, lower-income and vulnerable women, women

victim/survivors,[1] LGBTQ + women, as well as commitments or proposals aimed at women more generally.

Some groups have received more attention over time. For example, almost all Scottish parties (particularly Scottish Labour) have seen an increase in and a wider range of policies aimed at working women across the 2011, 2016 and 2021 manifestos. In the 2021 election, this included a wide range of class-based policies focused on enabling women's equal participation in the workforce, for example, pledges around suspending interest on student loan payments during maternity/paternity leave (SNP, Greens); supporting women starting new enterprises and business ideas (SNP, Labour); and encouraging family and flexible working (SNP, Labour). Almost all parties also included status policies in 2021, such as appeals for increasing women's representation in apprenticeships (Labour, Greens, Liberal Democrats, Conservatives). Many party pledges aimed at working women functioned as 'blueprint' policies, setting out potential legal and regulatory frameworks for ensuring gender equality—for example, pledges around developing a minimum income standard and/ or Universal Basic Income (SNP, Labour, Greens, Liberal Democrats); incorporating Engender and Close the Gap's economic recovery principles (Greens); integrating gender budgeting (Greens, Labour); introducing and/or expanding gender pay gap reviews and reporting (SNP, Labour); proposing an Equal Pay (Scotland) Act (Labour); and creating an occupational segregation commission (Liberal Democrats). Outwith their pledge to encourage more girls to take up more apprenticeships after school, the Scottish Conservatives made no specific pledges that directly mentioned working women as a group in 2021. The party did, for example, pledge to increase uptake of funded childcare hours and introduce free wraparound childcare for children in Primary 1–3—but these commitments were framed around building capacity and creating choices for parents specifically, rather than related to women's economic participation or wider gender inequalities.

Women as victim/survivors have been a key group addressed in most Scottish party manifestos over time, with the number and range of status-based and blueprint policy pledges aimed at preventing domestic abuse increasing from 2011 to 2021 and evidence of some cross-party convergence and agreement on several issues. In 2021, for example, almost all parties committed to providing additional funding for domestic abuse charities and service providers (Conservatives, Greens, Labour, SNP); and several manifestos linked domestic abuse to pledges around education and young people, for example, promising to launch a national campaign targeting attitudes towards sexual harassment (Conservatives); or ensuring the delivery of consent-based relationship and sex education training (Greens, SNP). In terms of blueprint policies, almost all parties pledged to enshrine the right to anonymity for victims of sexual offences in law (Conservatives, Greens, Liberal Democrats,

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[1] Sanders et al. (2021) include pledges around domestic abuse policy within the wider category of 'vulnerable women.' We instead code these specific pledges under the category of 'women victim/survivors', reflecting feminist critiques of more passive constructions of 'victims' and vulnerability (see, for example, Kelly and Radford 1990). This is also more common terminology in Scotland, reflecting Scottish/ UK divergences in domestic abuse policy post-devolution.

SNP); alongside commitments to reviewing Scotland's three-verdict system (SNP), including abolishing the 'not proven' verdict (Greens, Labour); appointing a Victims Commissioner for Scotland (Greens, Labour, SNP); and supporting the work and implementing the recommendations of the Working Group on Misogyny and Criminal Justice in Scotland, including potentially introducing new legislation (Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP). The prominence of this focus in Scottish party manifestos reflects diverging policy trajectories between Scotland and the rest of the UK post-devolution, with Scotland one of the first countries in the world to produce a national strategy on domestic abuse in 2000, which was also unique in its incorporation of a gendered and human rights framing (Mackay 2010). Indeed, the passing of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 is widely viewed as the new 'gold standard' for domestic abuse policy, drawing on the gendered concept of coercive control (Brooks-Hay et al. 2018).

Yet, despite a growing number and range of party pledges to women, some groups of women were not as prominent as others or have been absent almost entirely from party manifestos. From 2011 to 2021, there have been very few direct appeals to older women in Scottish party manifestos. These appeals have largely focused on class-based policies aimed at supporting and/or compensating 'WASPI' women born in the 1950s and affected by changes to the state pension age. In 2021, party appeals to older women included, for example, commitments to pursuing justice and closing hardship gaps for WASPI women (Liberal Democrats), and pledges around ensuring better support for, and public understanding of, the diagnosis and management of menopause (SNP), including menopause workplace policies (Labour). We found no direct appeals to older women in Scottish Conservative party manifestos 2011–2021, a surprising omission given the Conservative party's traditional voting base (on this point see Sanders and Shorrocks 2019; Sanders et al. 2021). There are also almost no direct manifesto appeals to disabled women, bar a reference by the Scottish Greens in 2016 to disabled women, older women, and carers in pledges around social care, and more generally in terms of the party's commitment to a Gender Equality Bill. BAME women similarly have not been targeted directly by Scottish parties in manifestos, with the exception of a 2021 commitment from Scottish Labour highlighting the importance of single-sex sports opportunities for encouraging the participation of women from various religions and diverse minority communities. Thus, whilst many Scottish party manifestos acknowledged the differential impacts of particular policies on different groups, by and large, they did not specifically address disadvantages at the intersection of categories like gender, race and disability.

Scottish party appeals to women voters also reflect the complexities of operating within a multi-level political system, and, in particular, the ambiguities embedded within the evolving devolution settlement with regards to equal opportunities, which are both a founding principle of the Scottish Parliament, yet also formally reserved to Westminster (see Mackay 2009; O'Cinneide 2009). Discussions of devolved and reserved powers are sometimes mixed together throughout Scottish party manifestos, as are critiques of both party opponents at Westminster and in devolved institutions (cf. Clark and Bennie 2018; Bennie and Clark 2020). For example, in 2021, the SNP both critiqued 'UK-wide rules' about migration policy (with immigration, defence

and national security, foreign affairs, and trade and industry reserved to Westminster), but also committed to creating a new global affairs framework grounded in a feminist approach to foreign policy (SNP 2021, p. 73). Scottish Labour's manifesto, meanwhile, included a reminder that 'Scotland does not have its own foreign policy', whilst also highlighting its important role in 'a range of international issues' (2021, p. 114), and calling for the incorporation of international human rights standards into Scots law, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The above examples reflect the importance of national identity and symbolism in Scottish party manifestos, highlighting the role of detailed policy promises, as well as broader statements of principle, in expressing parties' identity and ideology (Leith 2008; Clark and Bennie 2018). Although showing variation in the details of policy pledges and levels of commitment, most Scottish party manifestos in 2021 at least rhetorically integrated inclusion and equality as part of their party's values, and addressed intersectional inequalities to some degree. The Scottish Greens, for example, highlighted equality as a core party value, including a central commitment to an 'inclusive intersectional feminism' recognising how gender inequality is 'affected by other kinds of inequality like wealth, disability, racial injustice, LGBT + discrimination and more' (2021, p. 79). Scottish Labour also positioned itself as the 'party of equality' (2021, p. 95), and argued for a 'recovery that works for everyone including women, disabled people, young people and diverse minority communities' (p. 37). The SNP set out a vision of Scotland as a 'global leader in diversity and inclusion' (2021, p. 32) and a 'welcoming and inclusive nation' that values everyone (p. 72). Meanwhile, the Scottish Conservatives highlighted the centrality of equality of opportunity to 'our conservative values' and committed to embedding the removal of barriers into all of their policies (2021, p. 51).

Descriptive feminisation: trends in women's representation in Scotland

Devolution in Scotland brought with it a number of favourable institutional, electoral, and party-political conditions theoretically conducive to the promotion of women's representation, including the creation of new parliamentary spaces and governance structures, a new and more proportional electoral system,[2] the inclusion of new political actors, and the integration of new concerns and issues on the political agenda (Kenny and Mackay 2014; Mackay 2014). In the run up to the first Scottish Parliament election in 1999, a pluralistic coalition of women's organisations and activists worked as part of a broader-based movement for constitutional reform to engender wider devolution debates, and push for equal representation under the banner of 50/50 (Brown 1996; Breitenbach and Mackay 2001). Post-1999, however, studies highlight that progress on women's representation in Scotland has been

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[2] Elections to the Scottish Parliament are held under the Additional Member System (AMS), with 73 MSPs elected in single-member constituencies, and 56 elected on regional lists.

neither straightforward nor linear, with variable outcomes across the party system, and across different party and political levels (Kenny and Mackay 2014, 2020).

Recruitment and representation in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election

Did the 2021 Scottish Parliament election signal a step-change for women's representation in Scotland? As previously highlighted, much of the focus of the political debate in the run-up to the 2021 election remained squarely on the union, leaving little space for wider media or public discussion of women's representation. Vote shares were more or less the same as the 2016 election, with only a small number of seats changing hands, and with the majority of Scottish voters voting for a party that shared their views on independence (Johns 2021). And whilst there was some excitement over whether or not the SNP would obtain a majority of seats overall—with the party falling just short on the night—the ultimate outcome, a pro-independence majority with a dominant SNP, was not in doubt. There were only two women amongst the five major party leaders in 2021—then SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon and Lorna Slater, the co-leader of the Scottish Greens—a decrease from 2016.[3] Moreover, around a quarter of MSPs stood down in advance of the 2021 election—including several women MSPs from across the party spectrum who cited the difficulties of balancing a political career with care responsibilities.

Yet whilst in many respects 2021 was an 'as you were' election (cf. Johns 2021), the results did mark a significant change in a crucial respect, with a record 58 women elected to Holyrood on 6 May 2021 (45%). Figure 2 outlines trends over time in the percentage of women elected to Holyrood.
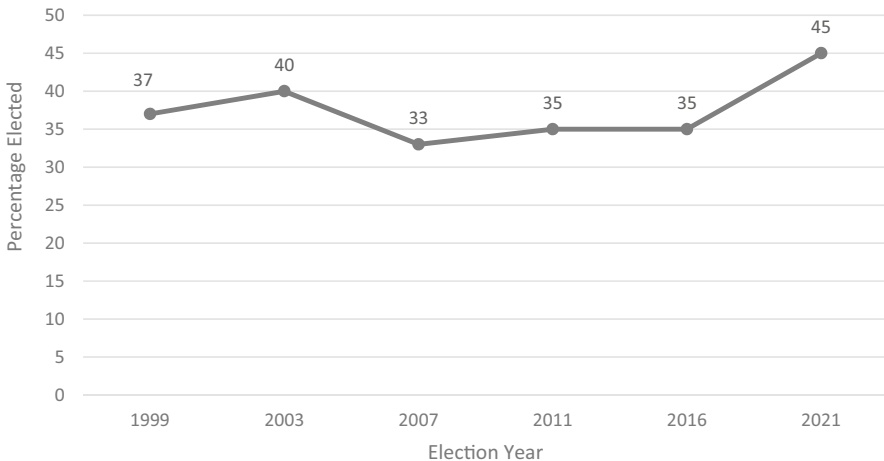

Fig. 2 Women's descriptive representation in the Scottish Parliament, 1999–2021

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[3] In 2016, four of the five main parties were led or co-led by women, including the SNP (Nicola Sturgeon 2014–2023); Scottish Conservatives (Ruth Davidson 2011–2019); Scottish Labour (Kezia Dugdale 2015–2017); and the Scottish Greens (Maggie Chapman, Co-Convenor 2013–2019).

Table 2 Descriptive representation in the 2021 Scottish Parliament

Party	Women		Men		Total MSPs	% BAME (% 2016)	% Women (% 2016)
	BAME	Total	BAME	Total			
SNP	1	34	1	30	64	3% (2%)	53% (43%)
Conservatives	1	8	1	23	31	6% (0%)	26% (19%)
Labour	0	10	2	12	22	9% (4%)	45% (46%)
Greens	0	5	0	3	8	0% (0%)	63% (17%)
Lib Dems	0	1	0	3	4	0% (0%)	25% (0%)
Total	2	58	4	71	129	5% (2%)	45% (35%)

Italics indicates the percentage of women in the previous election in 2016 as a comparator

Representative 'firsts' in 2021 included the first two women of colour MSPs in the history of the Scottish Parliament—Kaukab Stewart (SNP) and Pam Gosal (Conservative), the latter also the first practising Sikh to serve as an MSP—as well as Holyrood's first permanent wheelchair user, Pam Duncan-Glancy (Labour). Stewart and Gosal were joined by four other BAME MSPs in the new Parliament, including new MSPs Foysol Choudhury (Labour) and Sandesh Gulhane (Conservative), and returning MSPs Anas Sarwar (Labour) and Humza Yousaf (SNP). Eight out LGBT MSPs were elected to Holyrood. This number is similar to 2016, with Paul O'Kane becoming the first openly gay man elected to the Scottish Parliament for Scottish Labour. Whilst a number of candidates who identified as non-binary stood in the 2021 election, none were successful, and there has never been an openly trans or non-binary member at Holyrood.

Overall, the proportion of places occupied by female candidates for the main parties was about the same as in 2016 (41%), noting that across all the main parties, some candidates stood in both constituencies and on the regional lists. However, underneath these headline figures lie significant differences between the main Scottish political parties in terms of the integration of different groups of women as candidates and MSPs, as well as the existence and enforcement of equality measures promoting the selection and election of women and other under-represented groups. Looking at individual party performance (see Table 2), the number of women SNP MSPs increased in 2021 (from 27 to 34), with women now making up over half of the parliamentary party (53%). Having elected only one woman in 2016, the number of women Green MSPs also rose dramatically, with women making up almost two-thirds of its parliamentary group (5 of 8 MSPs, 63%). Labour's performance was almost identical to 2016, with 10 women elected (45%); whilst the Conservatives (8 women, 26%) and the Liberal Democrats (1 woman, 25%) saw small gains in the number and proportion of women elected, albeit in the latter case in the context of very small numbers overall and a starting point of zero women.

Figure 3 charts trends in women's representation by party over time, highlighting a wide range of party performance from 1999 to 2021. Whilst Scottish Labour has historically been a 'class apart' on women's representation since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the party has now been overtaken by the SNP and the
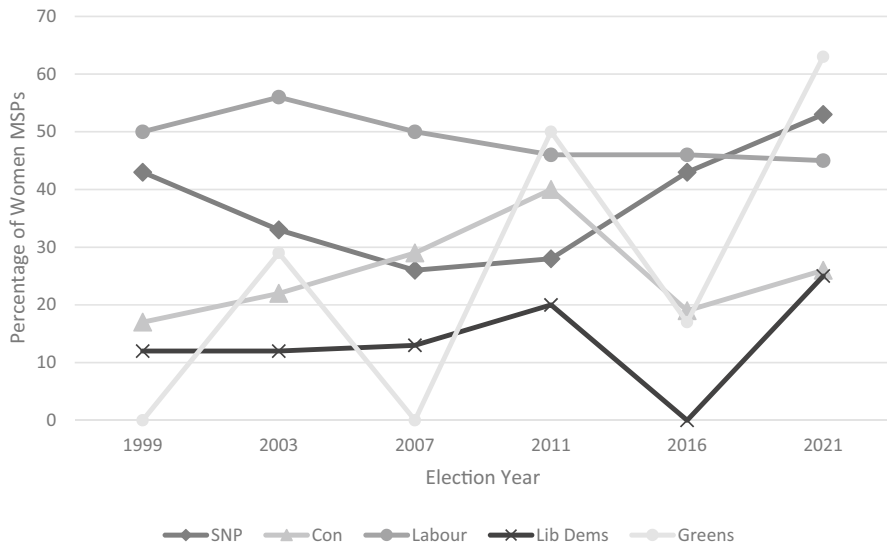
Fig. 3 Proportion of women MSPs by Party, 1999–2021

Greens. The poorest record on women's representation over time has been that of the Liberal Democrats, with the Conservatives also lagging behind their competitors, particularly in recent elections.

The wider literature on gender quotas suggests that as some parties start promoting women candidates, others will follow suit to compete for votes and gain political advantage (Matland and Studlar 1996). Women within parties may also utilise gains made in other parties to directly pressure their own party leadership to promote women's representation to 'keep up' with their political rivals (Kittilson 2006). In 1999, for example, Scottish Labour and the SNP were closely matched, with women comprising 50% of Scottish Labour MSPs and 43% of SNP MSPs. These numbers are the result of Labour's implementation of strong gender quotas in 1999 (in both constituencies and on the regional lists), whilst the SNP implemented informal measures ensuring that female candidates were placed in favourable positions on regional lists (Russell et al. 2002).

From 1999 to 2016, however, there is little obvious contagion amongst Scottish political parties in terms of gender quota measures (see Fig. 3; see also Kenny and Mackay 2014, 2020). During this period, only Scottish Labour consistently implemented gender quotas, which, post-1999, largely focused on 'low cost' quota measures aimed at the regional lists. The SNP adopted no formal quota measures until 2016, with a resultant negative impact on headline figures. More broadly, during this period, the parliament's historical record arguably engendered a sense of complacency amongst some political parties, making it difficult for feminist party activists to press the case for further reform (Mackay and Kenny 2007; Kenny and Mackay 2011).Trends from the 2016 Scottish Parliament election onwards, however, suggest that women's representation has been 'catching on' again in a wider range of Scottish political parties (see Fig. 3). Key to this shift has been the impact of the 2014

Table 3 Scottish Parliament candidates 2021

Constituencies					Regional lists			
Party	Men	Women	Total	% Women (% 2016)	Men	Women	Total	% Women (% 2016)
SNP	37	36	73	49% (41%)	49	39	88	44% (45%)
Con	56	17	73	23% (19%)	60	23	83	28% (18%)
Labour	37	36	73	49% (53%)	38	28	66	42% (50%)
Greens	4	8	12	67% (33%)	37	37	76[a]	49% (50%)
Lib Dems	46	27	73	37% (38%)	35	26	61	43% (43%)
Total	180	124	304	**41% (38%)**	219	153	374	**41% (42%)**

Italics indicates the percentage of women in the previous election in 2016 as a comparator

[a]The total number of candidates for the Scottish Greens includes several regional list candidates who publicly identified as non-binary. Candidate information was cross-checked wherever possible with media and campaign sources, but we acknowledge the limitations and partialness of some of this data in the absence of required reporting on candidate characteristics. Candidate survey data has only recently been collected by the Scottish Government, focusing on local government elections, and has had low response rates (below 30%), which presents additional methodological challenges with regard to the representativeness of candidates (see Scottish Government 2022).

Scottish independence referendum on both elite-level representation and grassroots women's mobilisation, and the SNP's adoption of strong gender quotas for the first time (see for example Kenny 2014; Alonso 2018; McAngus and Rummery 2018).

The impact of gender quotas depends not just on whether they are 'on the books', but also on how they are implemented, including whether women are selected for seats or places where they have a chance of being elected. In 2021, the SNP and Scottish Labour implemented all-women shortlists in a proportion of safe or winnable constituency seats. In Scottish Labour's case, however, although about half of its constituency candidates were women (see Table 3), the party won only two constituency seats, both occupied by incumbent MSPs (Jackie Baillie in Dumbarton and Daniel Johnson in Edinburgh Southern). The party selected no women candidates of colour in 2021. The SNP also achieved near gender parity in the selection of constituency candidates, and more women than men were elected through constituency seats. At the same time, the party also attracted criticism for the lack of BAME representation amongst these candidates. Twenty-two BAME candidates stood for selection for constituency seats in the SNP, and only one—Kaukab Stewart—was successfully selected, contesting the safe seat of Glasgow Kelvin previously occupied by Sandra White. The Scottish Greens also selected more women than men to stand as candidates in the limited number of constituency seats that it contested (twelve in 2021), but as in previous elections, won all of its seats through the regional lists.

Turning to the regional lists, all of the Scottish parties, bar the Conservatives, selected 40% women or more on their party lists. Whilst overall numbers can point to a party's general commitment to promoting women's representation, list placement mandates are key, with the top positions on party lists the most likely to be won. Women topped five of eight regional lists for the SNP—with this number including three BAME women candidates, none of whom were ultimately elected. As in 2016, the party gained the overwhelming majority of its seats through the constituencies, with only two successful list candidates, both women—incumbent MSP Emma Harper (South Scotland) and new MSP Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands). Roddick, who has borderline personality disorder and PTSD, became the youngest MSP elected to Holyrood, and has talked openly about the barriers to younger and working-class candidates, particularly highlighting the financial costs of becoming an MSP.

Half of Labour's regional lists were topped by women, with quota measures in the form of 'zipping' employed down the list to alternate men and women candidates. Further, male candidates were asked before selection results were announced whether they wanted to voluntarily vacate their positions on the list to the next highest placed female candidate, in line with the STUC's 'Step Aside, Brother' campaign. This informal practice did happen in several cases—most notably when new party leader Anas Sarwar, who topped the vote amongst members in Glasgow, stepped aside to second place to ensure that a woman candidate was at the top of the party's list. But this system also generated controversy, for example, when Maddy Kirkman, a young, disabled woman candidate, won the third most votes amongst party members in the selection process in Lothian but was 'zipped' from third to fourth place on the list in favour of a BAME male candidate, Foysol Choudhury,[4] who had received the fifth highest number of votes. Choudhury did not step aside and was ultimately elected to the Scottish Parliament, whilst Kirkman was unsuccessful.

The Scottish Greens had employed zipping in previous elections but saw just one woman elected in 2016, despite tripling their number of Green MSPs. In 2021, women topped every regional list not being contested by an incumbent (five out of eight lists) and were placed second in six regions. This strategy delivered, with four new Scottish Green MSPs elected in 2021, all women. The Scottish Liberal Democrats did not use a formal zipping system on the regional lists, though women topped half of its party lists. Ultimately, as in 2016, the party won all of its seats through the constituencies, with its sole female MSP Beatrice Wishart retaining her Shetland seat won in a 2019 by-election.

Previous research in Scotland highlights that the Scottish Conservative Party has remained largely 'immune' to quota contagion effects (see Kenny and Mackay 2014). Despite the increased focus placed on women's representation at Westminster by some Conservative party leaders over time (see Childs and Webb 2012), there has

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[4] See Maddy Kirkman (2021) Scottish Labour's system of gender zipping candidates is not working, 3 February, https://labourlist.org/2021/02/scottish-labours-system-of-gender-zipping-candidates-is-not-working/, accessed 20 January 2023.

been little action on women's representation by the party in Scotland. The party has tended to adopt a more 'laissez-faire' attitude in line with its ideological foundations and emphasis on 'merit', one centred around supply side encouragement, and citing the party's history of female leaders (Kenny and Mackay 2020; Thomson 2020). As in previous elections, the Scottish Conservatives implemented no quota measures in either the constituency seats or regional lists in 2021, with a woman topping only one of eight party lists (Annie Wells in Glasgow) and women making up just under 30% of list candidates overall. Conservative women were also poorly placed on several lists—for example, the Highlands and Islands list topped by party leader Douglas Ross included only one woman candidate in sixth place. Women made up 23% of its constituency candidates, with Rachael Hamilton, the sole female constituency winner, holding on to her Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire seat won in a 2017 by-election. The party did achieve a prominent representative 'first' in the election of Pam Gosal as one of the Parliament's first women of colour (placed fourth on the party's West Scotland list), but overall lags behind its competitors, with only 26% women in its parliamentary party.

Conclusion

'Whilst I may be the first, I will not be the last', stated Kaukab Stewart MSP, in her acceptance speech as the first woman of colour elected to Holyrood. Stewart's words are emblematic of a historic turning point, with Scottish voters electing the most diverse range of MSPs ever. The results of the 2021 Scottish Parliament election were not a 'flash in the pan', but reflect an ongoing process of party feminisation since devolution, particularly amongst parties of the left and centre-left, with increases in the number and diversity of party appeals to women voters; the level and diversity of women's descriptive representation; and the adoption and diffusion of gender quotas to guarantee women's political presence. At the same time, our analysis suggests that processes of party feminisation are neither straightforward nor linear, with variance both between the parties and over time in terms of the implementation (or not) of gender quotas and other measures aimed at increasing the presence of under-represented groups; and the extent to which parties are taking which women's interests seriously. Accounts of party feminisation suggest that parties across the political spectrum increasingly compete for women's votes (Childs 2008; Campbell and Childs 2015; Sanders et al. 2021). Yet, despite its history of prominent female leadership, the Scottish Conservative Party has remained remarkably 'immune' to processes of party feminisation over time, potentially indicating the continuing importance of party ideology in shaping women's descriptive and substantive representation in Scotland. Moreover, gaps remain across all Scottish parties in terms of the descriptive representation of women at the intersections of multiply marginalised identities, and the substantive representation of their interests in party manifestos—pointing to the need for Scottish parties to shift further from 'single-axis' to 'multi-axis' thinking when designing strategies to promote the representation of under-represented groups (cf. Krook and Nugent 2016) and to better

integrate women who are multiply marginalised into internal party structures and processes.

Our analysis points to a number of directions for future research. In focusing on devolved elections, we offer an important corrective to the methodological nationalism that has imbued much of the existing gender and politics work on party feminisation in the UK, which has largely been focused on Westminster. Future research on party feminisation could further productively examine dynamics *within* parties across multiple political levels, as well as across party systems and devolved nations (cf. Kenny and Mackay 2014; Clark and Bennie 2018). Parties are not simply responding to the pressures of electoral competition; they are also responding to intra-party pressures, tensions and power struggles. Whilst our analysis has largely focused on the 'external' dimension of descriptive and substantive feminisation— that is, on representation in party manifestos and in parliament—further research could look more closely at these internal party dynamics, as well as whether parties deliver on their pledges to, for and about women.

What is the future of women's representation in Scotland? The history of the Scottish Parliament shows that gains cannot be taken for granted, and that progress has often been uneven. Moreover, the continuing asymmetries across Scottish political parties in terms of their performance on women's representation renew ongoing activist and academic debates about whether the Scottish Government should evaluate possibilities for the introduction of legal gender quotas—which would apply to all parties. In the aftermath of an election largely framed in terms of independence and the union, big questions lie ahead over what recovery from the pandemic might look like for different groups, and how to ensure a modern and inclusive parliamentary culture. In all of these discussions, it is vitally important that women's diverse voices are at the decision-making table.

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