

A political earthquake forecast for Scotland – but will there be a genderquake?

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Polls indicate that the general election will see a fundamental rewriting of the Scottish political landscape, with the SNP poised for a near sweep. The party also seems poised to take over from Labour as leaders on the issue of women's representation in this election at least, although it is far from clear whether that will translate into support for quotas in the future, write [Meryl Kenny](#) and [Fiona Mackay](#).



The 2015 general election has the potential to be one of the most unpredictable electoral contests in British political history, with no party likely to win a majority. Amidst all the post-election scenario discussions, however, lies one certainty: on 7 May the Scottish political landscape will be fundamentally rewritten. The post-referendum political shakeup continues, with [recent polling](#) suggesting that the SNP could win 56 of Scotland's 59 parliamentary seats, a political earthquake that would mark the final death knell of Labour's political dominance north of the border (though other estimates, [including by the PSA](#), have been more conservative).

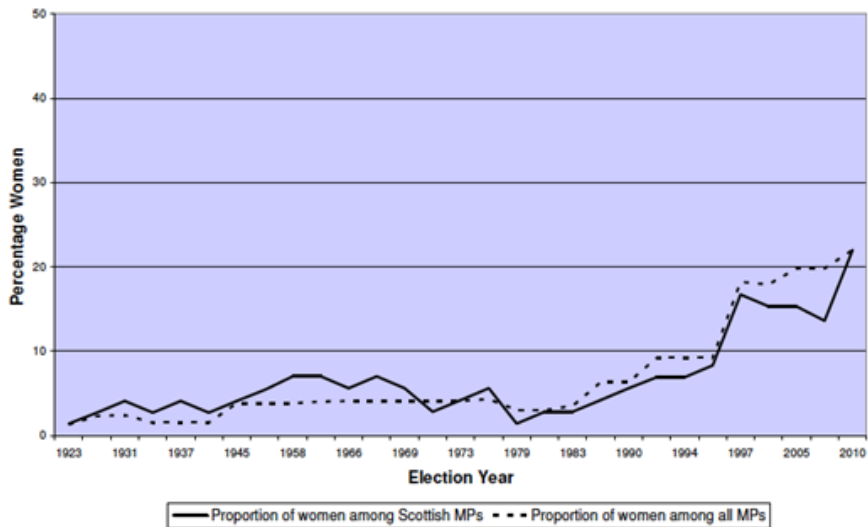


The question on everyone's minds is what happens next – who will hold the balance of power? With the SNP almost certain to be the third largest party at Westminster after May, it is very likely that it could play the role of 'kingmaker' (and we use that word advisedly) in post-election discussions. While Leader of the Opposition Ed Miliband is being pressured from all corners to rule out a coalition deal with the Scottish nationalists, [Nicola Sturgeon has hinted](#) at the possibility of a looser 'confidence-and-supply' arrangement, with the SNP supporting a potential Labour minority government on an issue-by-issue basis.

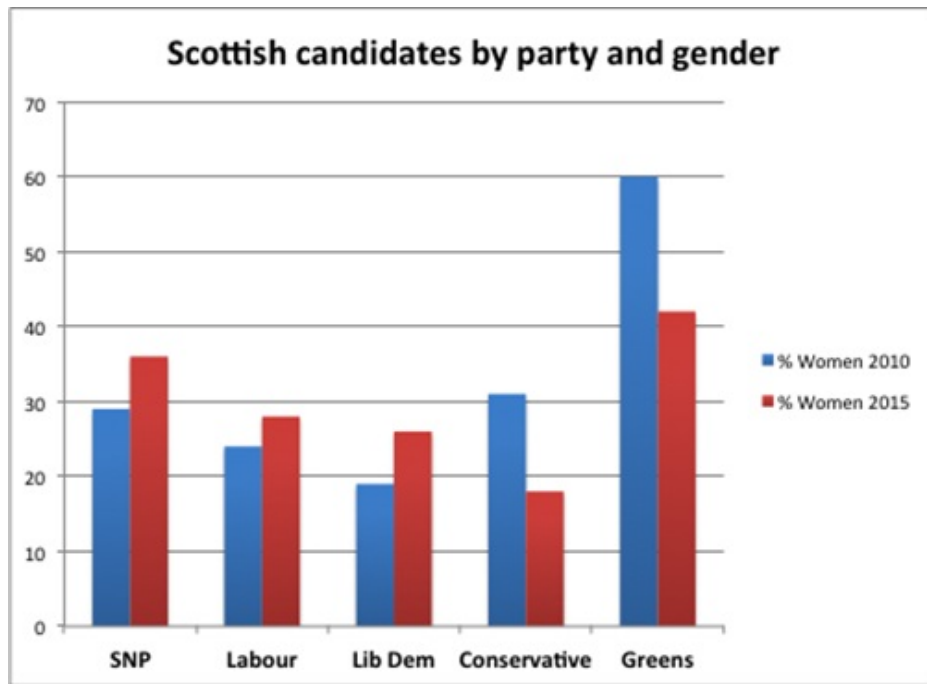
While the uncertainties of the 2015 election have made it difficult for forecasters, there is one outcome that we can predict with a high degree of certainty – the majority of the MPs that Scotland sends to Westminster – as elsewhere in the UK- will still be men. Yet, here there are also some interesting developments. At time of writing, only 29 per cent of candidates selected to contest Scottish seats in Westminster were women. Nonetheless, this is a small increase on the 2010 general election when only 24 per cent of Scottish candidates were women. Furthermore, if recent predictions by Lord Ashcroft and others prove to be accurate, and the SNP do win more than 50 seats at Westminster, this could result in a record high of 30 per cent or more female Scottish MPs (compared to 22 per cent in 2010).

These results are particularly significant given that Scotland has historically had a relatively poor record on women's representation in the House of Commons compared with the UK overall figures. Indeed, until 2010, the percentage of women MPs elected have been smaller in Scotland than for the UK as a whole (see Figure 1). [As we have observed elsewhere](#), despite relatively high levels of women's political representation in the post-devolution Scottish parliament (currently 35 per cent), there has been little evidence that women's representation has 'caught on' across the different levels.

Proportion of women among Scottish MPs, 1923-2010



What are the trends in candidate selection? At time of writing, not all selections are complete. However, all parties, except the Greens and Conservatives, have increased the number and percentage of women candidates from 2010 (see Figure 2). Only the SNP and the Green Party have achieved female candidate figures higher than 30 per cent – with the SNP selecting 21 women out of 59 candidates (36 per cent), and the Greens selecting 13 women out of 31 candidates thus far (42 per cent). The Scottish Greens have never won a seat at Westminster.



The rise in the percentage of female SNP candidates for GE2015 is notable in two respects: first, the increase is substantial; and second, it has been achieved in the context of fierce competition for seats as a result of the sea change in the party’s support. Comparative studies demonstrate that women prospective candidates typically lose out when the electoral prospects of minority parties radically improve as male candidates jockey for position. The party does not currently use positive action or quota type mechanisms so the figures are all the more remarkable.

Does this ‘leap forward’ signal a step change for a party that has traditionally been seen to have a ‘[problem with women](#)’? Despite a history of a few high profile women, the party has — in terms of its membership and organisation, culture and policy agenda — struggled to portray itself as ‘women friendly’.

Traditionally, there has been a gender gap in electoral support for the party, with women voters apparently wary of the party's 'macho' image. The issue of women's representation has been less prominent despite the efforts of feminists inside the SNP, and the party has – to date — rejected the use of quota-type measures. As a result, the Labour party in Scotland has outperformed the SNP in terms of its selection and election of female candidates at Holyrood and Westminster, employing positive action including gender quotas. Currently, women comprise 47 per cent of Labour MSPs compared with only 27 per cent of SNP MSPs.

Nicola Sturgeon's appointment as the SNP's first female party leader and Scotland's first female First Minister has created new momentum for change. She is driving change from the top with powerful statements such as her [gender-equal cabinet](#) and her public support for the [cross-party/civil society lobby group Women 50/50](#). Rule changes to be voted on at SNP conference to centralize control over candidate selection to the NEC would give the leadership the organizational capacity to implement quotas if it so wished. But the potential transformation of the SNP extends beyond a massively popular female leader who relishes her role model effect; there are signs this is a two-way street. For a start, the composition of the party has changed – its membership has grown from around 25,000 prior to the Independence Referendum to [around 85,000](#) (others have put estimates at 100,000). The SNP has thus been the beneficiary of widespread mobilization around the Yes Campaign. And 44 per cent of SNP members are women, including many grassroots feminists who saw independence as a means to create a gender-equal social democracy. Indeed, some prominent leaders of the Women for Independence campaign group are standing as candidates for Westminster.

Meanwhile, questions can be asked of Labour. Whilst its percentage of female candidates improved slightly from 2010 figures, only two selections used the quota type mechanism of All Women Shortlists (AWS): Glenrothes (a retirement seat where the sitting MP had stepped down) and Argyll and Bute. This compares to the previous GE, when five of the six new women Scottish Labour MPs elected in 2010 had been selected using AWS. The use of these measures was reflected in the overall results – 11 of the 13 Scottish women MPs elected in 2010 came from the Labour Party. In contrast, after the 2015 GE, if the Ashcroft 'earthquake' predictions pan out, there could potentially be only two Labour seats left in Scotland (both men – Jim Murphy and Willie Bain).

A political earthquake is forecast for Scotland in the general election 2015, but despite some positive developments, it doesn't add up to a genderquake. The SNP seems poised to take over from Labour as leaders on the issue of women's representation in this election at least, although it is far from clear whether that will translate into support for quotas in the future. But without system-wide statutory quotas, it remains the case that gains in women's representation are contingent upon party will or individual champions. Whatever the outcome of the general election in May, we will still have a distance to travel before equal representation becomes a realistic prospect.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [Jeannie Fletcher](#) CC BY-NC-ND

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