

Older women in local parties: marginalised or empowered?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The subject of older women in politics has rarely been investigated and very little is thus known about their motivation to be active in party membership. **Vicky Randall**'s interview-based study in seven English parliamentary constituencies sheds some light on the matter. Randall finds a mixed picture, showing that older women give a substantial contribution to the party, not least through fundraising activities, while facing a number of obstacles in making their voice heard. At the same time, however, political life benefits senior women by allowing them to claim an active role in society.*



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If studies of older people in British politics remain few, specific focus on the experience of older women is rarer still. This observation by Hudson and Gonyea (1990) about US politics could easily be applied more widely:

The salience of older women in the world of politics has been and continues to be low [...], confined almost entirely to a role as policy beneficiaries [...], in stark contrast to their highly marginalized role as participants in the policy process.

Feminist political science has increasingly engaged with intersectional analysis, where gender 'intersects' with other dimensions of identity, notably race, but until recently much less has been said about age. When considered, old age has been assumed to be another predictor of marginalisation and discrimination, its combination with female gender amounting to 'double jeopardy'.

In interview-based research in 7 parliamentary constituencies extending across 3 local authorities (Barnet, Islington and Hertfordshire) in the north London area, undertaken from 2012-14, I focused on the role and experience of older (65 and over) members of local party organisations. As part of this inquiry, I looked for gender differences in terms of numbers of members, positions held, and contribution, but also in more subjective experiences of participation.

By 2012, 16% of the UK population was aged 65 and over. Women on average lived significantly longer than men: there were 256 women for every 100 men aged 90 and more. Even so, in the 2010 Parliament, older women were still less well represented than men: of the 48 MPs aged 65 and above, only 7 were women. Within the main political parties' membership, at least until very recently, the average age has been steadily rising and is considerably higher than that of the adult population at large, but there are no official data on whether women's share of membership increases with age.

In the local party organisations in question, whilst definite figures were hard to come by, the proportion of older members, especially in the Conservative Party, was relatively high. But it was also noticeable that the older they were, the fewer were men. As one woman in her early 90s observed: 'our old men seem to have disappeared'.

Older members took on the full range of local party offices and were also disproportionately represented on local councils. But women's share of council seats also increased significantly with age, although the same could not be said of their membership of key party 'cabinet' positions. Older members, including women, also made a substantial and valued contribution to their local party organisations – notably in terms of the amount and flexibility of time they could offer, and the experience they could bring to bear.

They likewise made an important contribution to local fundraising. Here, gender differences were more marked, especially in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties. In one ward, the elderly Liberal Democrat widows were described as 'the bees' knees, fabulous in their generosity' – be it financial generosity, or in making their time, cooking and houses available for fundraising activities. In Conservative parties, older women – through their constituency committees, ladies' lunches, or else – similarly played a major fundraising role.

The intersectionality perspective has tended to emphasise exclusion and inequality in gender relations, and these are certainly aspects of older women's experience in local party organisations. Older people in general were rarely overtly criticised by other party interviewees, and some considered their contribution essential.

There was nonetheless some negative comment on their physical limitations, and inflexibility as well as ageism, especially when prompted, that their substantial presence could be a deterrent to potential new younger members. Young people might not want to be with people 'old enough to be your granny', and they could be put off by the reading of death notices of former members.

Older members themselves, while generally keen to present their participation in positive terms, reported problems facing their attempts to participate. Whilst women may live longer than men, they do not necessarily enjoy better health in old age. They frequently found it difficult to get to meetings and were especially nervous about evening meetings which meant returning in the dark. Often they were dependent on others for a lift but as one woman in her 90s said 'I don't like to bother people'.

There was some suggestion, especially in Islington, that older people had trouble getting themselves heard at meetings; but men could also interrupt women 'with their heavy voices', as one Islington member in her 80s reported. In all three local councils there were rumours or stories in the press of moves to 'weed out' older councillors.

When questioned about their motivation for taking part, older members and especially women tended to refer to other considerations altogether. For many, the reasons were ideological – 'I do it because it's right'. This did not, incidentally, usually extend to a sense of obligation to represent the views and interests of older people. As in the population generally, there was a marked reluctance to identify themselves as elderly, even amongst the mainly female members in their 80s and early 90s.

But in addition, especially for Conservative women, social incentives were key. As suggested by one Conservative councillor, especially for the widows 'the party becomes their life'. It also provided a form of community involvement. Several older members, primarily women, commented it was a way to stay active in retirement. It 'gives a

framework to one's week. Days might stretch a bit for me otherwise'.

This study suggests that in many ways the common expectations of exclusion and discrimination associated with intersectional analysis do also apply to the specific case of older women party members. But it also points to the limitations of this focus. In other respects, many older women found their experience very positive, enriching their social life and helping to maintain their contacts with their local community. Or in the words of one widowed Conservative activist in her 80s, it enables them 'to feel part of the world outside'. Some local party organisations could perhaps do more to acknowledge and accommodate this valuable and enthusiastic section of their membership.

Reference:

R B Hudson and J G Gonyea (1990) 'A Perspective on Women in Politics : Political Mobilization and Older Women', Generations, 14 (67).

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This post represents the views of the author and not the position of the Democratic Audit blog, or of the LSE.

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Vicky Randall is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Government, University of Essex.