

LESS MALE, PALE AND STALE? WOMEN AND THE 2012 SCOTTISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Meryl Kenny and Fiona Mackay

Whilst devolution heralded a ‘new dawn’ in women’s representation – with Nordic levels of women MSPs elected to the first Scottish Parliament (Brown 1999) – the story has remained very different at local government level. The percentage of women councillors has flat-lined, hovering at around 22 per cent overall, since the creation of unitary authorities in 1995.

The 2012 local elections saw a modest improvement: women are now just over 24 per cent of Scottish councillors, up from 21.8 per cent in 2007. These numbers represent a new high in women’s representation in local government – but we ask whether it adds up to a breakthrough and a sea change in attitudes of the political parties? Drawing on an analysis of candidate figures and electoral results,¹ we evaluate the lessons learned, future prospects, and

Meryl Kenny is Visiting Fellow, University of Edinburgh and Vice-Chancellor’s Research Fellow, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

Fiona Mackay is Professor of Politics, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh.

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¹ *There is no official requirement for the Electoral Commission, political parties or councils to collate or report on the gender (or ethnicity) breakdown of candidates and elected councillors. All candidate and councillor breakdowns have been compiled by the authors. Candidate information was obtained from the official Notices of Poll for each local authority. The sex of the candidate was then confirmed using local media reports or party websites to compile gender breakdowns by party and local authority.*

actions needed with regards to women's political representation in Scottish local government. We argue that without decisive action across all political parties, Scottish local politics will remain decidedly 'male, pale and stale'.

THE 2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS: GENDER BREAKDOWNS

Overall, women are 297 out of 1223 local councillors elected in 2012 (24.3 per cent). However, putting these results in context, fewer than 1 in 4 Scottish councillors is a woman. These numbers are particularly disappointing compared with electoral results elsewhere in the UK. Women comprise 35 per cent of councillors in England, a rise of 3.7 per cent (CfWD 2012). Although only a third of council seats are contested in each English local election, around 40 per cent of those councillors elected in the 36 English metropolitan councils in 2012 were women. Several councils reached gender parity or better in terms of the seats contested in this round, including Bury (64.7 per cent), South Tyneside (55.6 per cent), and Gateshead (54.5 per cent)². Only one of the 32 local authorities in Scotland is led by a woman (3.1 per cent) – East Dunbartonshire Council, which is led by Rhondda Geekie (Labour)³ – compared to three in 2007. Patterns of gender imbalance persist; for example, 136 of the 353 council wards are represented by teams of all-male councillors (38.5 per cent), while just four wards are women-only (1.1 per cent).

In terms of diversity more broadly, there are just 17 ethnic minority councillors out of 1223 councillors overall (1.4 per cent)⁴. This compares to

Where possible, these figures were also confirmed with political parties, although only the Liberal Democrats and the Greens provided candidate gender breakdowns. The breakdown of male and female councillors was collated through analysis of the election results. Our figures have been confirmed by checking against the official council website profile for each councillor.

² *These figures represent women as a percentage of total councillors elected in these elections, rather than as a percentage of the overall total of councillors. See CfWD 2012.*

³ *Lisa Beattie (SNP) was initially elected as leader of Midlothian Council, but resigned in June 2012 and was replaced by Bob Constable (SNP).*

⁴ *'Racial equality in Scottish councils: less male, less stale but still very pale', Guardian Scotland Blog, 18 May 2012.*

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equally low figures at Holyrood, where there are two ethnic minority MSPs (1.5 per cent). Labour has 11 black or minority ethnic councillors, including three women, the SNP has five black or minority ethnic councillors, and the Liberal Democrats have one black or minority ethnic councillor. Neither the Conservatives nor the Greens have any ethnic minority councillors. Further analysis is needed to see what is happening in terms of the socio-economic and professional backgrounds of local councillors and their pathways to power.

Table 1 disaggregates the 2012 results by gender and party. Women are 103 of 394 Labour councillors (26.1 per cent), a substantial improvement on the party's performance in 2007 (17.5 per cent) and 2003 (20 per cent). 105 of 425 SNP councillors are women (24.7 per cent), compared to 24.9 per cent in 2003 and 22.3 per cent in 2007. While the SNP has the highest actual number of women councillors of any of the parties (105 to Labour's 103), this translates into only 1 in 4 SNP councillors.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats have returned to their 2003 levels of performance on women's representation, with women making up 26 of 71 elected councillors (36.6 per cent). This improvement, however, is set in the wider context of a collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote across Scotland, which makes it difficult to make strong conclusions about the party's performance. The Conservatives experienced a small decline from their 2007 performance, dropping from 25.9 per cent in 2007 to 24.3 per cent in 2012. Meanwhile, the Greens have dropped from 50 per cent to 28.6 per cent women councillors, albeit in the context of very small numbers overall. The percentage of women Independent/Other councillors remains low at 15.2 per cent.

Turning to patterns of women's representation across local authorities, the picture is one of wide variation. Only five of the 32 local authority councils have achieved levels of women's representation of 30 per cent or more, including Aberdeenshire (33.8 per cent), Glasgow (30.3 per cent), Moray (30.8 per cent), South Ayrshire (30 per cent), and South Lanarkshire (34.3 per cent). None has achieved gender parity. While South Lanarkshire tops the scale, Inverclyde (previously an all-male council) lags at the bottom with only one woman elected (Vaughan Jones, Labour) out of 20 councillors overall (5 per cent). Along with Inverclyde, the 'laggards' on women's representation are: East Lothian (2 women councillors, 8.7 per cent), Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (3 women, 9.7 per cent), and Orkney (2 women, 9.5 per cent). Over a third of all councils in Scotland have failed to break through the 20 per cent barrier. In addition to those listed above, these include Dumfries and Galloway

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(17 per cent), East Renfrewshire (20 per cent), Falkirk (18.8 per cent), Midlothian (16.7 per cent), North Lanarkshire (20 per cent), Scottish Borders (17.6 per cent), and Shetland (13.6 per cent).

Table 1
Male and Female Councillors by Party

Party	Women Councillors	Men Councillors	Total Councillors	Percentage Women (% 2007)
Labour	103	291	394	26.1% (17.5%)
SNP	105	320	425	24.7% (22.3%)
Liberal Democrats	26	45	71	36.6% (30.1%)
Conservatives	28	87	115	24.3% (25.9%)
Green	4	10	14	28.6% (50%)
Independent/ Other	31	173	204	15.2% (N/A)
Total	297	926	1223	24.3% (21.8%)

Note: 2007 council figures are taken from Denver and Bochel (2007) who disaggregate Independents and Others.

CANDIDATE SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT

In the run-up to the 2012 elections, our analysis of candidate lists revealed that women were fewer than a quarter of total candidates, sparking media attention and predictions that the May 3rd elections would bring ‘more of the same’ to

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Scottish local government⁵. Indeed, our research found that 1 in 7 council contests was male-only, and that all the major political parties were fielding fewer than 30 per cent female candidates.

Overall, women were just over 23 per cent of Scottish local government candidates, slightly up from 22.8 per cent in 2007. Table 2 disaggregates these figures by party. Women were 27.4 per cent of Labour council candidates (up from 20.3 per cent in 2007), 23.9 per cent of SNP council candidates (compared to 22 per cent in 2007), 27.9 per cent of Liberal Democrat candidates (31.4 per cent in 2007), 25.9 per cent of Conservatives (25.3 per cent in 2007), 40.7 per cent of Green council candidates (39 per cent in 2007), and just under 15 per cent of Independents/Others.

The best performers in terms of percentages of women candidates were Clackmannanshire (36.7 per cent) and Angus (34 per cent). Ten councils failed to cross the 20 per cent threshold of women candidates: Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Dumfries and Galloway, Dundee City, East Lothian, East Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Orkney, Shetland, and Stirling. Of particular note was Inverclyde Council, which lagged at the bottom of the tables with only one woman standing out of 38 total candidates (2.6 per cent).

EXPLAINING THE RESULTS

However, despite these poor candidate numbers, the 2012 local government results represent a modest improvement on previous elections, rising from 21.8 per cent women in 2007 to 24.3 per cent in 2011. How can we explain this? Above all, the 2012 results demonstrate that equality guarantees can deliver. The barriers to women's political access are well-documented and there are a range of measures that political parties can take to counteract these obstacles and increase women's political presence in parliaments and councils. These range from 'softer' measures such as gender-balanced shortlists, training and encouragement, as well as 'harder' quota-type measures such as twinning, all-

⁵ See, for example, 'Male, pale and stale: Scottish council elections will fail women, say academics', **Guardian Scotland Blog**, Wednesday 18 April 2012; 'Male, pale and stale: Report condemns lack of women on candidate lists for council elections', *The Herald*, Friday 20 April 2012; 'Why do so few women stand in local elections', **Scottish Daily Mail**, Friday 20 April 2012; 'Fewer than a quarter of all candidates are women', **The Scotsman**, Friday 20 April 2012

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women shortlists, and the ‘zipping’ of party lists whereby the names of male and female candidates are alternated. International research evidence suggests that it is these hard ‘equality guarantees’ that are most likely to result in substantial improvements in women’s political representation (Caul Kittilson 2006; Lovenduski 2005).

Table 2
Male and Female Candidates by Party

Party	Women Candidates	Men Candidates	Total Candidates	Percentage Women (% 2007)
Labour	136	361	497	27.4% (20.3%)
SNP	147	467	614	23.9% (22.0%)
Liberal Democrats	69	178	247	27.9% (31.4%)
Conservatives	94	268	362	25.9% (25.3%)
Green	35	51	86	40.7% (39.0%)
Independent/ Other	103	588	691	14.9% (N/A)
Total	584	1913	2497	23.4% (22.8%)

Note: 2007 council figures are taken from Denver and Bochel (2007) who disaggregate Independents and Others.

We can see the impact of strong equality guarantees most clearly in the case of Scottish Labour in 2012. The dismal performance of the party in terms of women’s representation at local level has, until now, stood in stark contrast to the party’s trailblazing performance in the Scottish Parliament, where the party achieved 50/50 in 1999 and maintained gender balance in its parliamentary group until 2011. In the run-up to the 2012 local elections, the party implemented for the first time a policy of placing female candidates in half of

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all vacant seats, with a stated long-term goal of reaching 50/50 gender balance in its council candidates within eight years. This was part of a wider process of modernization of candidate recruitment at local level within the party. Although the number of Labour women councillors elected in 2012 is still low (26.1 per cent), these figures represent significant progress from the party's poor showing in 2007 (17.5 per cent).

The effect of these measures was clearly visible in the key contests of Edinburgh and Glasgow, where the party's strong performance helped to boost headline figures. In Glasgow, for example, the number of women councillors has increased from 19 in 2007 (24 per cent) to 24 in 2012 (30.3 per cent), the majority of whom are Labour women. Meanwhile, in Edinburgh, while the number of female councillors elected has dropped overall (from 17 in 2007 to 15 in 2012), the number of Labour women has increased from five out of 15 Labour councillors in 2007⁶ (33.3 per cent) to eight out of 20 Labour councillors in 2012 (40 per cent). In contrast, only two out of 18 SNP councillors in the capital are female (11 per cent).

The SNP had no measures in place, though it has reported that it is drafting a new equalities strategy, including new guidance and advice to party branches and the establishment of a 'women's academy'. In addition, a taskforce, headed up by National Executive member Julie Hepburn, has been appointed to address the problem of women's under-representation at both local and parliamentary level. Yet, while the party made substantial gains on 3 May, fewer than 1 in 4 SNP councillors is a woman. It is important to note that it is not just the number of female candidates overall that matters, but also whether they are placed in winnable seats. However, in Glasgow, where the SNP hoped to make substantial gains after Labour's internal strife, two out of three SNP slates were male-only, suggesting that the party was reluctant to 'risk' women in target areas. The party's performance at local level mirrors that at Scottish Parliament level where, in 2011, only 27.5 per cent of SNP MSPs elected were women.

Similarly, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have no measures in place to promote women's representation. While the Liberal Democrats highlight their **Future Leaders** Programme as a strategy for encouraging

⁶ This then dropped to 4 Labour women in 2008 (26.7 per cent) after the death of Elizabeth Maginnis.

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women's political participation⁷, the party lost both of its female council leaders in 2012. City of Edinburgh leader Jenny Dawe lost the leadership and her council seat in a high-profile defeat, whilst Anne Robertson stood down as leader of Aberdeenshire council on the eve of the elections, although she retained her seat. Meanwhile, the Conservatives rely upon active encouragement and the 'role-model effect' of prominent female leaders, past and present. John Lamont, the party's local election campaign organiser, has argued that, 'We now have a young, dynamic female leader of the Scottish Conservative Party and I am sure we will continue to attract the brightest and best women to stand for election'⁸. A spokesman for the Scottish Conservative Central Office stated in email correspondence⁹:

Scottish Conservatives do not believe in positive discrimination and we do not select candidates based on anything but merit. We are pleased that over a quarter of our candidates are female, but do not agree with increasing this percentage just for the sake of it. We want to attract candidates of the highest calibre irrespective of gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, marital status, or disability.

In the run-up to the 2012 elections, the Scottish Greens were lauded for having the highest proportion of female candidates (40.7 per cent). The party has gender balance mechanisms that are triggered if the percentage of female or male candidates drops below 40 per cent, or where the distribution of winnable seats looks unequal. The prospect of central intervention is meant to ensure that local selectors keep these equality criteria to the front of their minds when selecting candidates, according to the Green Party. However, while the party's equality mechanisms were supposed to ensure that women candidates were fairly placed in winnable seats, this did not translate into improved numbers of Green women councillors, as only four of the 14 Green councillors are women (28.6 per cent).

The results of the 2012 elections also raise questions as to the progressive promise of the Single Transferable Vote in Scotland. Reformers had high hopes that the introduction of a PR-STV electoral system in the run-up to the

⁷ Reported in *Guardian Scotland Blog*, Thursday 19 April 2012

⁸ Reported in *Guardian Scotland Blog*, Thursday 19 April 2012

⁹ Email correspondence with the authors, 20 April 2012

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2007 local government elections would rejuvenate local politics and provide new opportunities for women to be selected and elected. However, progress did not materialize. In fact, there was a marked drop in the number of women candidates selected and the number of women councillors elected in 2007 stalled at 21.8 per cent.

Whilst proportional representation systems have the capacity to enhance gender balanced representation, electoral systems are better viewed as facilitating factors rather than guarantors of women's more equal political representation (Curtin 2006, Evans and Harrison 2012). In the run up to local government reform, PR-STV was promoted as 'good for women' and a step forward from first-past-the-post, in terms of opening up voter choice. Supporters like the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) have consistently argued that PR-STV opens up more opportunities for small parties and Independents, which may benefit women, and that multi-member wards encourage parties to run gender-balanced and more ethnically-diverse lists¹⁰.

While some commentators see PR-STV as largely gender-neutral, others suggest that PR-STV can be disadvantageous, especially when operating with smaller size wards (Engstrom 1987), as is the case in the Scottish model. Indeed, none of the relatively few countries that use STV can be said to be 'trailblazers' on women's representation. For example, a smaller proportion of women are returned under STV to the Irish Dail (15 per cent) than under first-past-the-post to the Westminster House of Commons (22 per cent) (Galligan 2008, 2011). It is clear that more research in Scotland and comparatively is needed to analyse the gendered effects of PR-STV in different contexts.

The 2012 local government figures also challenge expectations that a system that facilitates the rise of Independent candidates enhances opportunities for women in any straightforward way. STV promotes candidate recognition over party recognition. This advantages individual candidates (within parties and as Independents) with access to the time, money and political networks needed to gain high levels of recognition in a constituency. It is still the case that it is men who have disproportionate access to such resources (Curtin 2006, Mackay 2004). The local government results bear out these concerns, as around 85 per cent of Independent/Other candidates and councillors in 2012 are men.

¹⁰ ERS Website: <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/local-government-in-england/> [accessed 16 April 2012].

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Why does women's representation matter? It is widely accepted that men and women should play an equal role in political decision-making to ensure legitimacy, representativeness and quality (Phillips 1995). We need local councils that look like their communities and also draw upon 'all talents' (Brown et al. 1999). Whilst the link between women's political presence and the promotion of women-friendly policies is far from straightforward, nonetheless there is considerable evidence to suggest that women politicians 'make a difference,' or, more accurately, that more gender-balanced parliaments and councils do (Mackay et al 2003; Lovenduski 2005).

What is seen to be at stake beyond issues of simple justice? In times of economic austerity and welfare state retrenchment, it is crucial that women's voices and perspectives (in all their diversity) are included in the process. This is especially the case at the local level, where difficult decisions are made and the impact of cuts will hit hardest. Evidence suggests it is harder for progressive policies, such as action to tackle domestic violence, to rise up the political agenda in male-dominated local government than, for example, in the more gender-equal Scottish Parliament. Whilst the Scottish Parliament's innovative domestic violence strategy has been widely lauded, it stands or falls at local level where it is implemented on a daily basis. Worryingly, recent data from Scottish Women's Aid reports that, in real terms, 61 per cent of refuge groups have experienced a reduction in the level of funding received from their local authority (2009-2010)¹¹.

CONCLUSION: AN END TO MALE, PALE AND STALE?

The 2012 elections have been presented in media commentary as a wake-up call to parties and councils that something has to change in order to make local politics more inclusive. The modest increase in the percentage of female councillors elected represents a step in the right direction, although it remains to be seen whether it constitutes a breakthrough – or a 'blip'. All parties have restated their commitment to equality, but Scottish Labour is the only party to implement quota-type measures. Although the other parties are considering

¹¹ *Scottish Women's Aid (2010):*

<http://www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk/assets/files/Funding%20of%20Women's%20Aid%20services%20report.pdf>

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initiatives including promotional measures to encourage more female candidates to stand, it seems unlikely that (with the exception of the Greens) they will follow Labour's lead and introduce what Lovenduski (2005) calls 'equality guarantees' – measures such as zipping, twinning or All-Women-Shortlists – which produce concrete gains¹². As the **Herald** highlighted in its call for action to address 'the gender imbalance on our councils': 'If parties do not do more to encourage women into their ranks, the call for quotas will surely grow'¹³.

Publicity, through media reporting, and visibility, through the efforts of academics and campaign groups to 'count women in',¹⁴ appears to provide a spur to action for political parties. One way in which political parties and political institutions could be held to account would be to require them to 'count for themselves' and report their performance on a regular basis. The Westminster parliament Speaker's Conference on parliamentary representation which reported in 2010 recommended that parties be required to report candidate gender and ethnicity breakdowns every six months (recommendation 25) and that parties should publish a gender/diversity breakdown, together with targets (recommendation 26).¹⁵ There are calls for the Conference and its recommendations to be revisited¹⁶ – and expanded to or replicated by the devolved jurisdictions (Engender 2011). We argue that it is important that all political levels should be included: the public reporting by political parties, local councils, and parliaments of the gender and ethnicity breakdowns of candidates and elected members would serve to keep the issue and party performance in public view.

The reluctance of the major parties to take bold and sustained action, and the wider trends of glacial progress, stagnation, or slippage in women's representation over time – and across different levels – raises the question as

¹² *Personal communication.*

¹³ **Herald** 'Addressing the Imbalance in our councils', *Herald View*, April 20 2012.

¹⁴ See, for example, the *Counting Women In* campaign group <http://www.countingwomenin.org/>

¹⁵ See <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/spconf.htm>.

¹⁶ [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1467-923X/homepage/feminising_politics.htm](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1467-923X/homepage/feminising_politics.htm)

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to whether women's representation is 'too important' to be left up to political parties. Has the time come to consider statutory quotas, in other words legislation which requires parties to take positive action on women's representation, following the example of countries like Spain, Belgium, France, and even the Republic of Ireland, which is currently drawing up electoral quota legislation? Feminist academics and lobby groups such as Fawcett, Engender, Women into Public Life, and the Centre for Women and Democracy are arguing increasingly that this is the case.

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