

BENEFITS AND OBSTACLES FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES: AN ACCOUNT OF SCOTTISH WOMEN CANDIDATES' EXPERIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

Women's political representation has been the subject of much debate and research. Explanations of obstacles which impact on representation levels have been presented, and in recent times the structure of these arguments have centred around demand and supply side factors (Lovenduski 2001; Norris and Lovenduski 1996; Randall 1987). Supply side explanations focus on the supply of women candidates and representatives, and the issues that impact on the availability, or lack of, women candidates. Demand issues focus on the demand for women candidates by party selectors.

Demand and supply side explanations are presented within the context of the political structures and electoral system. For Westminster elections in the UK, it is the party system that is central in determining whom the representatives are (Lovenduski 2001), because voters largely vote along party lines and the electoral system is based on single-member constituencies. Therefore, the selection decisions of parties, particularly for safe and winnable seats, has traditionally heavily influenced the gender makeup of the Parliament. Therefore research into women's political representation in the UK, based on the supply-demand model, has focused only on the recruitment and selection stage, whereby issues of resources, motivation, selector discrimination, and selection procedures are considered; or the period of being an elected representative, whereby adversarial politics, hours of sitting, and travelling

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distances are considered. There has been no research which explores the gendered experiences of candidacy during the campaign stage,¹ a stage in the representation process which holds valuable insights into gender discrimination in politics.

Drawing on qualitative research findings, this article presents the perceived gender experiences of Scottish women candidates during the 1997 UK general election campaign. By focusing on the gendered experiences of women candidates, obstacles that women face in the campaign period, and that potentially affect women's final representation levels, are explored. In addition to this, positive gendered experiences are also presented, highlighting the benefits of selecting women as candidates, and providing them with the opportunity to have a candidate experience.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

This research draws on the responses of women candidates contesting Scottish constituencies in the 1997 UK general election.² In this election a total of sixty-two women candidates represented Scotland's four main political parties (Labour Party, Conservative Party, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party). Each of these women was approached to participate in a project which required respondents to reflect on questions in a journal style, for the last three weeks of the election campaign. The requirements for participation were that the respondents were female, represented a main party, and were an 'active' candidate in a Scottish constituency.³ Twenty-three of

¹ Stephenson (1998) does, however, explore media coverage of the election campaign period from a gendered perspective. This is done from the perspective of policy and news stories, and not the experiences of candidates.

² The author acknowledges that by focusing solely on the candidate experience during an election campaign, its contributions to why women are under-represented are limited to its context, and the perspectives are those of aspirants who have already been successful in the selection stage.

³ An 'active' candidate is a person who has been nominated to contest a constituency and undertakes campaigning duties. This differs from a 'paper' candidate who has been nominated to contest a constituency but does not undertake any active campaigning. In these circumstances this constituency is unwinnable and the candidate has simply been provided for traditional party supports and so a party has a presence on the ballot paper. Three women who were approached to participate in

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the sixty-two women (37%) approached agreed to participate. The author believes the response rate reflects the candidates' recognition of the value of gender-based research, and the importance many Scottish women attach to gender issues within politics (Brown 1995).

As Table 1 shows, there was a broad distribution of women candidates from the four main Scottish parties, which ensured that responses were not dominated by any particular political party experience.

Table 1
Scottish response rate of candidate reflection project

Party:	Conservative	Labour	SNP	Liberal Democrats
Number of respondents from each political party	4	6	6	7
Percentage of party's total Scottish women candidates	40	37.5	35.3	36.8

Furthermore, there was a broad distribution of candidates contesting different types of seats. Three identified themselves as incumbent MPs who expected to retain their seats (13% of respondent sample and 43% of all Scottish incumbent women). Two women (9%) who were not incumbents were confident they would win their seats. A further three (13%) expected to achieve *at least* the second highest vote in their constituency. Eleven (48%) respondents judged themselves to be contesting an unwinnable seat. The remaining four (17%) respondents did not indicate the type of seat they were contesting. The overall distribution demonstrates a diversity of participant perspectives.

The exercise was designed to explore women's experiences through a qualitative study. Responses were structured in a journal style, and the

this research responded saying they would have liked to, but could not as they were simply paper candidates.

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question design was developed out of preliminary findings from interviews with women in each of the four political parties⁴ and the UK literature on women's political under-representation.⁵ This approach was intended to test the perseverance of obstacles that women seeking selection face once selected (e.g. discrimination, limited resources) and the premature onset of obstacles and structures that have been identified as disadvantageous to elected women representatives (e.g. unfriendly work hours, adversarial politics). In addition to this, the design of the questions was also very reflexive, and themes which emerged from the weekly responses were often further developed through questions the following week. The questions posed were as follows:

Week One (which was half way through the election campaign): (1) As a female candidate, what have been the highlights and lowlights of your campaign experience to date? (2) Do you believe that you have had any experiences so far that your male peers have not? Please offer details. (3) How successful have you been made to feel, as a female candidate, in your campaign and who did this come from and what form did it take?

Week Two (week preceding the election): (1) Did you face any specific obstacles in your campaigning week that you believe that you would not have faced, had you been a male candidate? (2) Do you think that your gender has aided you in your campaign, and given you an advantage over your male peers? When did this occur and how did this make you feel? (3) Did you have any experiences in your campaign where you felt that the media focused on inappropriate gender aspects that were not relevant to your campaign?

Week Three (election week): (1) How seriously do you believe you were taken this week as a potential representative for your constituency? How did this make you feel and who were the significant contributors? (2) What was your reaction to the election result (both personally and for your party)? (3) Did you feel it was worth standing, and would you stand again?

⁴ *Twelve in-depth interviews (three per party) were undertaken with Scottish women in 1996 as part of a doctoral research project, which explored issues of candidacy, recruitment and representation.*

⁵ *The British Candidate Survey interview questions used by Norris and Lovenduski (1996) and the themes developed in Brown and Galligan's (1996) paper were particularly influential.*

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The emphasis on journal-style responses was designed to provide the opportunity for a considerable amount of anecdotal experience to be recounted and for experiences to be explored. Through the correspondence, the candidates were aware that they were being asked to be reflective of their overall candidate experiences, and the questions were designed only to provide an initial focus for this reflection.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The candidate responses in this project provided a unique insight into election campaigning, finding that overwhelmingly respondents felt that women regularly had different campaign experiences to their male peers. Analysis of the responses shows that while women felt that their interaction and support from the public was more favourable because they were women, the political culture, established style of electoral campaigning, and the media treatment of women candidates was more likely to discriminate against them than their male counterparts.⁶ These findings show that the obstacles women in politics face are embedded in each stage of the process towards representation, and that discrimination appears to be promoted within the political culture instead of challenged.

Obstacles

(1) Discriminatory attitudes and practices

Discrimination within parties at the selection stage has been cited as a major explanation for women's political under-representation in the 1997 general election and those elections before it (Stephenson 1998; Russell 2001; Squires and Wickham-Jones 2001; Elgood et al 2002). This research found that issues of discrimination continued for women once selected, for example:

Chauvinism from blokes, in my own party, from other candidates, from journalists, and sometimes from the public was a constant problem for me.

The research found that sixteen women believed they had been subject to some form of discrimination, while as many as twenty-one of the respondents

⁶ *These conclusions were shared by respondents from all four parties, and there was little evidence to suggest that party affiliation impacted significantly on this aspect of the campaign experience.*

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believed that, overall, women faced more discriminatory obstacles than their male opponents in election campaigning. While a range of sources were cited, overwhelmingly the sources of discriminatory attitudes and practices came from opposing candidates and opposition parties. These complaints formed a pattern which suggested that male opponents used sexism as a campaigning tool to undermine women candidates. Interestingly, this suggests this type of direct discrimination is 'constructed' and is a tool in which a conscious choice is made to use it.

The implications of this for parties is that by allowing, or not challenging, this behaviour in male candidates they are contributing to a political culture which allows their own female candidates to be undermined, which potentially deters women from seeking selection, and which ostracises the electorate – confirming negative attitudes of male 'yob' culture that have been recorded as putting off the electorate, particularly women voters (see Brown and Galligan 1996; Miller et al 1996; Stephenson 1998; Lovenduski 2001).

(2) Adversarial political culture

While some behaviour may be contrived to earn political points in a campaign, the macho competitiveness and adversarial nature of the formal political arena appeared to be entrenched in the political culture. This made many women feel uncomfortable throughout the campaign and many voiced their reluctance to support or engage in this type of political behaviour⁷, for example:

When I have travelled long distances only to be faced with hostility from opponents and supporters from other parties it can be really defeating.

Interestingly, unlike attacks of direct discrimination such as sexist remarks, the adversarial style of politics was not seen so much as a 'constructed' political tactic of an opposing candidate, but more a 'natural' consequence of a male-dominated political culture. This is a perception held not only by respondents, but also political analysts (Brown and Galligan 1996; Lovenduski 2001; Stephenson 1998). While men per se were not perceived by respondents as the enemy within this context, the dominance of men in

⁷ Interestingly this mood fits with that of the general women's movement in the period leading up to the Scottish parliament which argued for a 'new' style of politics to be developed, one that was more consensual and less adversarial (see Gill 2000; Russell 2001).

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politics, and the often aggressive nature of political discourse and campaigning, was part of the culture that women identified as 'male'.

Specifically, adversarial politics was experienced by seven of the respondents, and was recorded as general hostility and aggressive verbal and printed attacks from other political activists, some in the form of lies or 'smear campaigns':

I have had some sexual hate mail, but my real lowlight was definitely the lies and abuse generated by [opponent's name deleted] about me in my constituency. This definitely undermined my campaign, and I think that politics should be about more than this.

Interestingly, while there was a consensus that adversarial styles were personally very difficult to handle, it was believed that they were not supported by the electorate:

Last week at a hustings at the local housing co-op association two of the male candidates were shouting and being aggressive almost to the point of physical violence. I was able to present a different political style, plus I knew my opinions on housing and could give well-informed responses. The audience was mainly female and on the 'clap-o-meter' I did well. I felt very positive and affirmed and more and more convinced that women, and a lot of men too, are turned off by beer-garden politics with suited heavies.

(3) Conflict of private and public responsibilities

Consistently research has showed that a common explanation offered for the lack of women in politics relates to the incompatibility of caring responsibilities and political life (Hills 1981; Norris and Lovenduski 1993; Brown 1995; Miller et al 1996; Stephenson 1998; Elgood et al 2002). In this research exercise many of the respondents commented specifically on what they felt was an unrealistic amount of time demanded of candidates with home responsibilities. The responses confirmed that individuals' responsibilities in the private sphere generally have a direct impact on their political activity and vice-versa. This suggests that the relationship between a candidate's personal and political performance is inextricably linked, and that women are more likely than men to feel the impact of these dual responsibilities.

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Respondents emphasised the difficulties in the amount of time absorbed in election campaigning and the detrimental effect this had on their personal lives and responsibilities. While the intense schedule applies to all candidates, respondents felt that women, who traditionally have been primary care givers and homemakers, suffered most from a lack of support with home duties during the intense period of campaigning. Twenty-one of the respondents identified this conflict impacting on their campaign:

Only within my family life were there more obstacles being a woman. Being a 'mum' it is very hard to cut yourself off and concentrate wholly on the campaign. I think this is much more relevant for women than it is for most men.

Even those candidates who had made long-term arrangements to juggle personal responsibilities with the political demands of Westminster found the intensity of the election campaign period difficult on their personal lives. Specifically, the importance of having personal support to help with home duties was highlighted, and often ironically referred to as 'not having a wife'. The inference was that a 'wife' was someone who both assisted with domestic responsibilities and gave direct support to the candidate. The suggestion was if a candidate was in a partnership then mutuality and reciprocity of support in the home environment was crucial for a successful campaign. Importantly, this arrangement had to ensure it included as well as extended beyond the emotional level to something more tangible, such as having clothes ironed or someone to do the shopping:

There are lots of different obstacles, but the two most obvious are that I do not have a wife to keep house for me, and that men have better shoes than women.

I have long believed that every woman candidate needs *A WIFE* to take care of the clothes, food, and timetable. My experience is the male campaign workers have no idea of the particular needs of women candidates to be well presented for the public, to have an orderly home life, and to juggle a hundred different home and work and campaign duties at once. If any of these are not done it would surely have been commented on! It is OK for men, they get to wear the same suit every day, something like that just shows the different expectations on women, as they certainly couldn't wear the same outfit for three weeks! [respondent's own emphasis]

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These findings fit with the common perception that, comparatively, women have less time and energy for political activities due to home and family responsibilities (Clark 1994, p. 105). However what is wrong with this perception is that it puts the onus on women's resources, as opposed to party resources and responsibilities. The nature of political campaigning is clearly geared towards individuals who are assumed to have adequate support in the home ('a wife'), and only require resources to aid their campaign in the public sphere. This however is clearly an antiquated idea.

Clearly, parties need to acknowledge that there is a conflict between campaign and home responsibilities, and that financial and human resource support is required to address this. For example, when constituency activists and volunteers are recruited to be letterbox distributors, canvassers and so on, other labour resources should also be recruited. Therefore, party members should be encouraged to offer additional support to help lighten the load of candidates, particularly those with primary care responsibilities, be it through childcare, laundry services or house cleaners for the campaign period.

(4) Seat distribution

It is recognised that debates over seat distribution traditionally belong with the parties' recruitment and selection procedures. However, this study shows that the implications of seat distribution are not restricted to election results alone, but also extend to the impact on the candidate's personal political development. For example, for those candidates who stood in winnable or safe seats, the findings indicated a high sense of satisfaction in their campaign experience:

I felt very successful and confident. I was taken seriously as I was the sitting MP after all – which makes for a very different kind of campaign, I guess there is more an element of optimism.

Alternatively, for candidates contesting unwinnable seats the experience was less positive:

...being selected for a seat that I don't have a chance of winning can sometimes be frustrating. I think that you have a different type of campaign when contesting an unwinnable seat, it is not exactly the 'real thing' (although all the hard work is still there!).

Scottish women candidates have traditionally been disproportionately selected for winnable and safe seats (Brown et al 1996; Donaghy 1999). This

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is a pattern that was repeated in the UK general election (Squires and Wickham-Jones 2001). This inequity was observed to be a result of existing sexist structures in selection procedures:

I would have liked to have contested a more marginal seat, instead of simply campaigning to retain our third spot, but I suspect there will have to be some challenge to the old boys club before that happens.

Therefore, there is gender relevance in the finding that contesting an unwinnable seat had negative ramifications which contesting a winnable or safe seat did not. Specifically, it implies that men are more likely to get more benefits from the candidate experience than women, due to inequities in seat distribution.

(5) Media

There has been some literature which provides a gender perspective of media coverage of the 1997 general election. This has primarily taken the form of an analysis of topics and policies covered in a campaign and the presence of, or lack of, women in election coverage (Stephenson 1998). Additionally there has been some analysis of the (critical) media coverage of 'Blair's Babes' in Westminster – a reference to the 101 Labour women elected in the 1997 election (Lovenduski 2001; Squires and Wickham-Jones 2001). Additionally, there has been some research which has assessed Scottish political coverage, which highlighted the media preference to cover stories which were more likely to involve aggressive exchanges, something identified as a 'male' thing, while developments that women were more likely to be involved in were considered less newsworthy (Gill 2000).

This research also found that the media coverage of the campaign period had a gender agenda, this time in the form of how the media treated female and male candidates. A number of respondents accused the media of sexist reporting and displaying discriminatory attitudes against women. Specifically, the majority (seventeen) felt the media applied 'double standards' in their coverage of the campaign, and that reporting on their campaign was often trivialised:

My appearance at the count on May 1st was commented on in [name of local paper] more than the hard work I had put in to come second: 'The Tories came second with their gal sporting a neat two-piece- in Tory blue of course'. I couldn't help but feel because I was a woman it was OK to give me the once over in the dress stakes!

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While I didn't experience anything personally, one of my male opponents had had a baby at the start of the campaign and he was not criticised by the media (or others) for throwing himself into the election campaign. I can just imagine the condemnation if a woman candidate had been in the same position!

In addition to supporting sexist double standards, eight women identified the press as supporting aggressive and confrontational styles of behaviour:

At a press conference, I felt totally inexperienced and inadequate in the slick processes of media election coverage, I felt as if they were just trying to catch me out. ... I have difficulty dealing with male aggression and ego. I retreat and make myself as unnoticeable as possible in an attempt to avoid it. Not good behaviour patterns at a press conference.

However, not all respondents felt that gender-specific media coverage was detrimental, and several women (four) recorded that they felt the gender bias they were subjected to in the media was of a positive nature:

I was the only candidate whose children were referred to in a press outline of the constituency. I suppose I could resent being a 'mum of three', but in fact I think it makes my candidacy more approachable and relevant to voters.

Therefore the impact of gender-specific coverage is complex. While there appears a general consensus it occurs, particularly in local media coverage, there is less consensus over its ramifications. Importantly however, the majority of candidates who did experience this believed it to be detrimental to their campaign coverage.

Benefits

While women may have faced more obstacles than their male peers, this did not mean that the candidate experience was not beneficial. Quite the contrary, the research has found that there were a number of key advantages for women contesting elections.

(1) Improved confidence and political skills

In a study on local councillors in Scotland, it was found that there was a link between political experience and confidence levels (Mackay 1996). Similarly this project found the experience of running in an election campaign related directly to improved confidence levels and political skills. Nineteen

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respondents articulated that their campaign experience was responsible for an increase in their confidence levels.

Meeting people and solving problems while promoting the Party was an amazing experience. Also just getting my message across and being told by the audience that you were great was a real ego boost.

Feeling endorsed and receiving support from party colleagues was particularly identified as having contributed positively:

My agent needs a medal, he seems to instinctively know when I need moral support and when to back off and let me take the lead. ... I do feel very successful. I have also had support from women (in my party) in the form of a letter and a cheque and also postcards, this did boost my morale. The Party nationally are very happy with my campaign and they have been reasonably vocal on the subject. Also the financial appeal this time brought in more money than ever before which has to be an indication of how well I have gone down with the membership – unless of course they have all just won the lottery?!

Respondents articulated that the confidence, experience and skills they had developed as a candidate were substantial, regardless of the biases, obstacles and even election results that some of the respondents were faced with. This demonstrated that the benefits women received from being selected and participating as a candidate in an election campaign outweighed the negatives. Furthermore it highlights the individual benefits of promoting women as candidates, while supporting earlier findings on the importance of encouragement throughout the political process (Wilford et al 1993; Brown and Galligan 1996).

(2) Improved political ambition

Along with, or potentially because of, the improved confidence levels and political experience, all of the respondents indicated that they would welcome the chance to stand again as a political candidate.⁸ Earlier research found that one of the most difficult aspects of getting more women involved in leadership positions is their transition from 'background' work to taking on a more prominent role (Wilford et al 1993). This research suggested that once

⁸ *Some women did voice a preference for standing for the Scottish Parliament rather than Westminster, but all indicated they would seek candidate selection again.*

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this transition has occurred individuals will experience improved self-esteem and a greater willingness in the future to pursue representative positions. This was proven to be the case in this research, whereby each respondent immediately envisaged themselves progressing forward with their political career, regardless of the election outcome:

I was devastated by the result, especially by the loss of every Conservative representative in Scotland and Wales. On the doorstep obviously there were some who thought we had been in too long and were talking about time for a change. Being a Conservative in a mainly Labour area was hard, but not insurmountable. I would be honoured to stand again, and at least I didn't lose my deposit and live to fight another day!

I am so hugely relieved that all the personal pressure is now off. I achieved second place and we campaigned effectively at constituency level and had a warm response from the electorate – one of the spoiled papers had 'sorry' printed against my name and an 'X' against the sitting Labour man. It was a poignant comment. ... I expect to be standing again.

I was always proud of the Labour Party's affirmative action policies and to see so many women elected, well, I was just thrilled, as well as with the general landslide. Of course I would stand again, it is the ultimate wish of any political activist to be elected, to represent your party and to represent the electorate.

I would have preferred Labour to win with a smaller majority, and the SNP and the Liberals to have gained more seats, and thus been able to exert some power over the coming Parliament. Because of this I don't feel part of the general euphoria, although I am glad the Conservatives are now out and do believe it was worth standing despite the hard work. ... I would stand again as I always saw this as a trial run.

While these reflections do not highlight specific gender differences they remain significant. They demonstrate that for these women their sense of achievement and willingness to be electoral candidates again transcended any discrimination, annoyance at electoral systems or voting patterns, and seat distribution frustrations that they may have been confronted with in their campaigns. The implications of this is that, despite discrimination, women candidates experienced substantial benefit from the process of campaigning in terms of improving political skills, gaining confidence, and developing their political views and perspectives. Ultimately the value of these positive experiences over-rode all others.

(3) Electoral benefits of promoting women candidates

In addition to the individual benefits for women standing as candidates, the research suggested that there were broader, party benefits in having women as candidates. Many women recorded the belief that they felt they were advantaged because they were women. Specifically, nineteen respondents recorded receiving gendered support and encouragement from the public:

I have been made to feel very positive from the responses I have had from the electorate as a whole, from meeting and talking to them. Most people feel that females are under-represented in political life and so felt that the more female candidates the better. ... Most of the voters think it is a great achievement for a young woman to be standing in the election, and that really helps.

My highlight was meeting the voters at public meetings and receiving a very positive response as a 'young female' from nearly all people, no matter what their party political position was. People are very positive as they see a new breed of politicians who they hope will be more honest and open.

Past research has consistently found that increasingly, when given the opportunity, the electorate prefer women and their political styles over their male counterparts (Hickman-Maslin 1987; Leijenaar and Mahon 1992; Sawer and Simms 1993, Miller et al 1996, Donaghy 1999). These findings exist in the context that women are also more likely than men to vote (Russell and Stephenson 2001). This research contributes to the body of literature that women are potentially valuable electoral assets. The findings support these claims, showing that there is a gap between electorate attitudes and party attitudes in the recruitment and seat distribution process, with the electorate being more supportive of women candidates than parties. This suggests that parties would benefit from a more pro-active approach in recruiting and selecting women as candidates.

CONCLUSION

Norris and Lovenduski have argued that too often studies which seek to explain reasons for women's political under-representation have focused on outcomes instead of processes (1996, p. 11). They argue the importance of not just 'counting what can be counted' but pursuing and understanding 'micro-level data', as they believe it is only by doing this, that women's

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under-representation can be explained, as opposed to simply described (ibid.). They centre this discussion on the need for research into selection procedures, and developing scholarship on not just who the legislative elite are, but why and how they got there through analysing candidate's experiences of recruitment and selection procedures. In response to these calls, this article explores the candidate experience at the final stage of candidacy (instead of the recruitment and selection stage). Through this approach, an in-depth understanding of women's experiences during this crucial, competitive period is provided, and the analysis is significant in that it is based on a previously unexplored stage of the process of representation.

The findings show that discrimination, adversarial behaviour and androcentric structures of the political environment are obstacles which recur throughout various stages of the recruitment, selection and election process. Furthermore obstacles specific to a particular stage in the process of becoming a representative have a reverberating effect (such as the impact seat distribution has on campaign experiences), which highlights the complex interplay of factors that act to ultimately undermine women's representation levels.

Despite recurring obstacles, there were clearly significant benefits for women who were selected as candidates and for their parties. This was highlighted by the majority of respondents believing their candidature received greater support from the electorate because they were women; and they believed they gained valuable experience, confidence and skills, all of which contributed to their willingness to stand again for election. Clearly, therefore, parties would do well to encourage and select more women candidates based on the potential electoral benefits for the overall party and the political development opportunities it can provide to their women members. However, this must be done within the context of recognising that these developments can only be fully successful if parties simultaneously reassess their own contributions to androcentric political processes; promote more inclusive gender policies; and attempt to curb the type of sexist behaviour currently deemed acceptable in the present political environment, as these are the problems which combine to undermine women at every stage of the political process.

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