

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN THE 2007 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT: TEMPORARY SETBACK OR RETURN TO THE NORM?

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INTRODUCTION

Since devolution, Scotland has been one of the world leaders in terms of levels of women's representation: substantial proportions of female parliamentarians were returned in both the 1999 and 2003 elections. The 'female face' of the Scottish parliament was widely regarded as one of the 'success stories' of devolution and as evidence of a new kind of politics (Brown 2001, Burnside et al. 2003, Mackay et al. 2003). However the 2007 elections have resulted in the first drop in the number of female MSPs since the creation of the parliament.

In the third elections, women took 43 out of 129 seats in Holyrood (33.3 per cent), compared with 39.5 per cent in the 2003 elections and 37.2 per cent in 1999. In terms of the victorious SNP, the performance on women's representation was comparatively poor. Although the party has a number of high profile women¹, such as deputy leader Nicola Sturgeon, just a quarter of

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¹ *Women also have gained high profile positions in the SNP minority government. Two of the five new Cabinet secretaries are female as are three of the 10 ministers. They comprise 31.5 per cent of the 16-strong political executive compared with 25.5 per cent of the SNP parliamentary party.*

Women's Representation in the 2007 Scottish Parliament

the SNP's winning candidates were female. This compares with Labour, where equal numbers of women and men were elected.

This short article² provides a preliminary report and analysis of the results of the Scottish elections from the perspective of women's representation. It charts the performance of the political parties 1999-2007 and examines factors that have contributed towards the overall downturn.

We raise the question as to whether this fall signals a temporary setback or marks the failure of efforts to promote a more gender balanced politics and an inexorable drift back to the pre-devolution norm of male dominance and female marginalisation in Scottish politics. Certainly, initial signs suggest the elections of 1999 and 2003 may come to be seen as the high tide of women's representation. Underlying trends point in the direction of further decline in the recruitment and election of female candidates, as the one-off effects of positive action in the first parliament continue to wane in the absence of significant reforms to the party norms and practices.

GENDER BREAKDOWNS AND TRENDS OVER TIME

As Table 1 shows, 43 women and 86 men make up the 2007 parliament. Women comprise 12 of the 47-strong SNP group (25.5 per cent); 23 of the 46 Labour MSPs (50 per cent), five out of 17 Conservatives (29.4 per cent), two out of 16 Liberal Democrats (12.5 per cent). The two Green MSPs are both male and the one Independent returned is a woman. For the first time a minority ethnic candidate has been elected, a male. Overall the number of female MSPs has dropped from 51 in 2003 to 43, a reduction of eight.

A higher proportion of women MSPs was elected in constituency seats (26 women or 35.6%) than on the regional lists (17 women or 30.4%). This trend can be charted now across three elections (although fewer women were returned to constituency seats in 2007 than in either 1999 or 2003). It stands in contrast to other country studies, where women tend to be more likely to be elected through PR-Lists (Matland 2002). This apparent anomaly can be explained by the fact that Labour was the most proactive party in terms of

² This article is based in part on an election briefing prepared by the authors for Engender, the Scottish Women's research and campaigning organisation.
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Scottish Affairs

promoting gender balance in 1999, and is also the party which returns the greater proportion of MSPs via the constituency contests, rather than the regional lists. We return to the issue of incumbency later.

Table 1
Scottish parliament elections by party and gender 2007

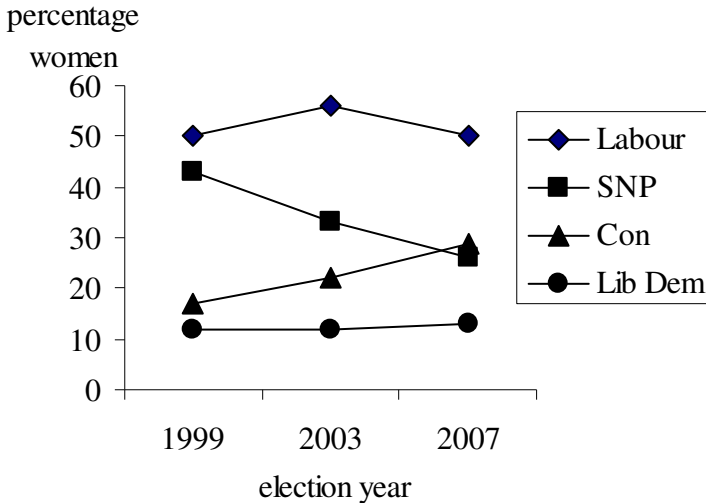
	female	male	total	% female
SNP	12	35	47	25.5%
Labour	23	23	46	50.0%
Conservatives	5	12	17	29.4%
Liberal Democrats	2	14	16	12.5%
Others	1	2	3	33.3%
Total	43 (33.3%)	86 (66.6%)	129	33.3%

In 2007, the percentage of female MSPs representing Labour and the SNP both fell (by six percent and 7.8 per cent respectively) and the percentage of Conservative and Liberal Democrat female MSPs rose (by 7.2 percent and 0.7 per cent respectively). Figure 1 charts trends in women's representation by party over time. It highlights a wide range of performance amongst the different parties and different trajectories in the period 1999 to 2007. In 1999, Labour party performance was closely matched by the SNP (50 per cent to 43 per cent) but, since then, Labour has been at least 20 points in the lead of its closest rival. The high point in women's representation to date has been Labour at 56 per cent (in 2003) and the poorest record has been that of the Liberal Democrats at 11.8 (in 1999 and 2003, rising to just 12.5 per cent in 2007). Of particular note is the dramatic downward trend in the SNP; despite the SNP's concerns to attract the female vote, it is the only major Scottish party whose performance on women's representation has worsened election-on-election. In 1999, the SNP returned 43 per cent female MSPs, this dropped to 33 per cent in 2003 and again to 25.5 per cent in 2007. In contrast, the percentage of Conservative women MSPs has risen steadily from 16.7 per cent in 1999 to 22.2 per cent in 2003 to 29.4 per cent in 2004 (albeit in numerical terms this relates to the small increase from three to five women).

Table 2
Scottish Parliament 2007 by party, seat and gender

Party	Constituency		Total seats constituency (%women)	List		Total Seats List (%women)	Total MSPs	Total women	Total men	% women (%women 2003)
	female	male		female	male					
Labour	20	17	37 (54.1%)	3	6	9 (33.3%)	46	23	23	50% (56%)
SNP	5	16	21 (23.8%)	7	19	26 (26.9%)	47	12	35	25.5% (33.3%)
Cons	0	4	4 (0.0%)	5	8	13 (38.5%)	17	5	12	29.4% (22.2%)
Lib Dems	1	10	11 (9.1%)	1	4	5 (20%)	16	2	14	12.5% (11.8%)
Greens	0	0	0 (0.0%)	0	2	2 (0.0%)	2	0	2	0.0% (28.6%)
Independent	0	0	0 (0.0%)	1	0	1 (100%)	1	1	0	100% (66.7%)
Totals	26	47	73 (35.6%)	17	39	56 (30.4%)	129	43	86	33.3%

Figure 1
Proportion of women among MSPs, by party, 1999-2007



CANDIDATE SELECTION

Turning to candidate selection: in the run up to the 2007 elections, women comprised 32.7 per cent of candidates standing for constituency contests and 38.6 per cent of list candidates. In total women were 36.1 per cent of candidates (including Labour, SNP, Conservative, Liberal Democrats, Greens and SSP/Solidarity). This translated into 33.3 per cent of the seats. Therefore, women candidates were slightly less likely to be elected than their male counterparts. Tables 3 and Table 4 provide breakdowns of candidate selection patterns by gender, type of seat and party.

Women's Representation in the 2007 Scottish Parliament

Table 3
Scottish Parliament 2007 candidates by party, gender and type of seat

Party	Constituency		Total Cands. Constituency (% women)	List		Total Seats List (% women)
	Female	Male		Female	Male	
Labour	32	41	73 (43.8%)	25	30	55 (45.5%)
SNP	24	49	73 (32.9%)	21	49	70 (30%)
Conservatives	18	55	73 (24.6%)	16	44	60 (26.6%)
Lib Dems	22	51	73 (30.1%)	23	35	58 (39.7%)
Green Party	0	1	1 (0.0%)	22	28	50 (44%)
SSP	0	1	1 (0.0%)	25	28	53 (47.2%)
Solidarity	0	0	0 (0.0%)	24	34	58 (41.4%)
<i>Total</i>	96	198	294 (32.7%)	156	248	404 (38.6%)

Table 4
Scottish Parliament 2007 list candidates

Party	List		Total Cands. List (% women)	Candidates in 'Top Three' List Places		Total 'Top Three' List Places (% women)
	Female	Male		Female	Male	
Labour	25	30	55 (45.5%)	9	15	24 (37.5%)
SNP	21	49	70 (30%)	7	17	24 (29.2%)
Conservatives	16	44	60 (26.6%)	8	16	24 (33.3%)
Lib Dems	23	35	58 (39.7%)	7	17	24 (29.2%)
Green Party	22	28	50 (44%)	10	14	24 (41.7%)
SSP	25	28	53 (47.2%)	11	13	24 (45.8%)
Solidarity	24	34	58 (41.4%)	10	14	24 (41.4%)
<i>Total</i>	156	248	404 (38.6%)	62	106	168 (36.9%)

Looking first at constituency seats: Labour ran 32 women and 41 men in the 73 constituency contests (43.8 per cent); SNP stood 24 women and 49 men (32.9 per cent); Conservatives ran 18 women and 55 men (24.6 per cent); Liberal Democrats stood 22 women and 51 men (30.1 per cent).

Moving on to the List contests: Labour Lists comprised 25 women and 30 men (45.5 per cent); SNP ran 21 women and 49 men (30 per cent); Conservatives stood 16 women and 44 men (26.6 per cent); Liberal Democrat lists comprised 23 women and 35 men (39.7 per cent). The Green lists comprised 22 men and 28 men (44 per cent); the SSP had 25 women and 28 men (47.2 per cent); Solidarity ran 24 women and 34 men (41.4 per cent).

POSITIVE ACTION AND PARTY MEASURES TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

There is substantial research evidence in Scotland and elsewhere that women candidates face barriers in the political recruitment process. Political parties can use a range of measures to counter these barriers. These include reform to selection procedures to make them fairer and more transparent and to ensure that equal opportunities are taken into consideration; positive action measures such as balanced short-lists; and 'equality guarantees' – quota-type mechanisms such as 'all-women-shortlists', 'twinning' constituency seats or applying gender templates such as 'zipping' to party lists (see, for example, Brown 1999, Childs et al 2005, Lovenduski 2005, Mackay 2004). International evidence suggests that it is these strong 'equality guarantee' measures that are most likely to result in substantial improvements (Caul 1999, Dahlerup 2005) but also that the adoption of quota-type measures by one political party may lead to a 'contagion' effect whereby other parties take formal or informal action to improve their performance (Matland and Studlar 1996).

In the run up to the 2007 elections, apart from the Green party, none of the political parties explicitly stated in their campaign material that women's representation was an issue that they were tackling in their candidate procedures. Most parties did little or nothing to promote gender equality in candidate selection in terms of 'strong' measures that guarantee equality of outcomes. Labour and the Greens implemented quota-type mechanisms on the regional lists, but did little to guard against female candidates being placed in unfavourable positions. 'Softer' measures in terms of gender-balanced short-

Women's Representation in the 2007 Scottish Parliament

lists were used by Labour and the Liberal Democrats in constituency selections.

Constituency seats

None of the parties used equality guarantee measures such as all women shortlists or twinning in the selection of candidates to contest constituency seats in 2007. As noted above, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have official short listing policies to promote gender balance: in the case of Labour the aim is to chose candidates from gender balanced short lists; in the case of the Liberal Democrats, shortlists should include at least one male and one female candidate. These policies do not appear to be strictly or uniformly enforced by either party; neither do such measures guarantee outcomes.

Regional seats

In terms of the selection of candidates to be placed on the Regional Lists, Labour has an official policy of 'zipping' or 'alternating' male and female candidates. However in 2007, only its South of Scotland list was headed by a female candidate. Men took seven of the eight top places, with women listed in second place in seven out of eight instances. It should also be noted that relatively few Labour members are returned by the list and, in most cases, the first placed candidate is the only one likely to be elected.

The SNP operated an informal rule of thumb that the lists should be more-or-less gender balanced. In 2007, around a third of all places on the SNP regional lists went to women. Furthermore women made up about 30 per cent of the top three places on each list. In terms of most election scenarios, it is the first and second place on each list that are most vital – and most likely to be won. In the case of the SNP: six of the eight regional lists were topped by men; in addition, seven of the eight regional lists also had men in second place. Only three of the top 16 (first and second) slots were allotted to women (18.7 per cent).

The Conservatives took no positive action measures, although the party at UK level under the leadership of David Cameron strongly encouraged party recruitment processes and local parties to take a more pro-active approach. In 2007, five out of the eight regional lists were topped by men; as were five of the eight second positions. All five of the successful female Conservative candidates came from the lists: Annabel Goldie, Margaret Mitchell and Mary Scanlon were all placed first on their respective lists. Due to the strong performance of the party on the regional lists, two further women – placed

Scottish Affairs

second on the North East Scotland and Mid-Scotland and Fife lists – were also returned.

The Liberal Democrats had no official policy to balance their lists by gender, but in practice they achieved almost a 40:60 ratio overall. However, women were generally placed in poor positions: all regional lists were topped by men and six out of the eight second places were also allotted to male candidates. This resulted in only one woman being successful in winning a list seat (representing 20 per cent of the overall total). The candidate in question, Alison McInnes, who was returned on the North East Scotland list was third on the list. She succeeded only because the two male Liberal Democrat candidates ranked ahead of her on the list were discounted because they had won constituency seats.

The Greens operated a ‘gender template’ for 40 per cent of places overall to be allotted to female candidates. Furthermore, the Party stated that the distribution of places would translate into 50 per cent of ‘winnable’ seats. However, five out of eight regional lists were topped by men, and four of the eight second places were also taken by male candidates. In the context of a disappointing election, only two members were elected, both men.

There are clear gendered patterns of candidate placement in the 2007 elections, with women candidates generally positioned in lower places on regional lists compared with their male counterparts across all the parties, and less likely to be selected to fight safe or winnable constituency seats. Where parties have gained better than expected returns of women, it has been because a strong party performance has meant marginal candidates (placed low down the lists, or in marginal constituencies) have been successful rather than that parties have promoted female candidates.

SETTING THE RESULTS IN CONTEXT

In the run up to devolution in 1999, the issue of women’s representation was high on the political agenda because of the 50/50 campaign run by women’s organisations, like Engender and the STUC Women’s Committee, the lobbying efforts of women activists within political parties, and wider debates about the need for more inclusive and modern political institutions. Responding to these pressures, the Labour party implemented formal positive action in candidate selection – in the form of ‘twinning’ constituencies – and its closest rival, the Scottish National Party, adopted informal measures. This resulted in women

Women's Representation in the 2007 Scottish Parliament

taking 37.2 per cent of seats in the first parliament (Brown 2001, Breitenbach and Mackay 2001, Russell et al 2002). However, Labour's twinning policy was intended for use in the first election only as a one-off means of ensuring a more balanced gender composition in the new parliament.

Since the first election, the main parties have been reluctant to take strong positive action, in other words to make equality guarantees. This is despite the introduction of permissive legislation by the UK government in 2001. In part, this can be understood as complacency engendered by the comparatively high levels achieved and the belief that discriminatory attitudes and practices are a 'thing of the past'. As a result, the issue of women's representation has not retained high salience for political parties, nor has it remained a matter on which parties competed. In the absence of wider mobilisation and publicity, internal party lobbyists have gained little ground in pressing for effective ongoing measures to reform norms and practices around candidate recruitment and selection. As the Hansard report on Women at the Top observed in 2005, 'In Scotland, gender parity has slipped down the political agenda' (Childs et al. 2005, p.43).

By 2003, there were already signs that gains made were fragile and liable to reversal. The number of women MSPs overall was predicted to fall in the second election, largely as a result of the significant reduction in the number of women selected as candidates by the SNP. However, against expectations, there was a small increase from 37.2 per cent to 39.5 per cent. This was largely as a result of the prominence of women candidates within the small parties such as the SSP, and the subsequent success of those parties in the election. The strong performance of Labour women as incumbents also played a role in shoring up numbers. Therefore, rather than reflecting a systematic or system-wide improvement, gains were the result of accident rather than design, and progress remained fragile and contingent (Mackay 2003). With the collapse of the small-party vote in 2007 – and the further downward slide in the number and positioning of the SNP's female candidates – it can be argued that an overall reduction in the number of women MSPs was inevitable.

LABOUR: A CLASS APART?

On the face of it, Labour's commitment to gender balance has held firm and the party has received praise from equality bodies such as the EOC for its performance (EOC Scotland 2007). How has Labour continued to perform so well? This is largely as a result of the continuing effect of action taken in the

Scottish Affairs

first parliamentary elections. As noted earlier, equal numbers of women and men were returned in 1999 as a result of ‘twinning’ – a form of quota-type measure designed to guarantee 50/50 distribution of constituency seats. We have seen that Labour is the only party with a higher proportion of women representing constituencies than elected from regional lists: of the twenty-three Labour women returned to office in 2007, twenty are constituency women MSPs, almost all of whom were first selected in 1999 under Labour’s since-abandoned ‘twinning’ scheme.

It is the case that the majority of Labour women continue to be returned to constituency seats, rather than the more vulnerable list seats. Most have successfully defended their seats election-upon-election, as incumbents rather than having to compete for a place on party lists each time, as do most of their counterparts in parties like the SNP. Furthermore, we note that incumbency seems to bring a gender dividend for women: although Labour lost seats overall, women were slightly more likely to hold on to their constituency seats than men, with male incumbents losing five constituency seats overall, while women incumbents lost three constituency seats overall. Incumbency therefore appears to provide a key to Labour’s continued high levels of female representation.

However, while Labour continues to perform well on gender balance, it should be noted that the underlying trend is one of erosion and decline. In terms of turnover, we can see that of the seven Labour MSPs elected for the first time (two constituency MSPs and five regional list MSPs), only one was a woman. If we include those Labour MSPs returning to the Parliament after a term away, only two out nine new MSPs were female.

CONCLUSIONS: A TEMPORARY SETBACK OR A RETURN TO THE NORM?

This preliminary analysis of the results of the Scottish elections from the perspective of women’s representation has charted the performance of the political parties 1999-2007 and examined factors that have contributed towards the overall downturn in women’s representation. The one-off effects of positive action in 1999 – in particular Labour’s twinning policy – continue to have a significant impact on headline figures. However, it is incumbency rather than the institutionalization of gender parity that accounts for Labour’s performance, whilst the pattern of turn-over suggests a re-masculinisation of Labour candidacies. Similarly, trends amongst other parties point to stasis or

Women's Representation in the 2007 Scottish Parliament

decline in the case of the Liberal Democrats and SNP respectively, or large percentage increases based on small numerical gains, in the case of the Conservatives.

Why do numbers matter? The arguments for gender parity in 'descriptive representation' were well rehearsed in the run-up to devolution and were made on the grounds of equality, justice and fairness, and on the basis of the requirements for building a legitimate and inclusive democratic institution. In addition, there were more controversial expectations that the entry of substantial numbers of women into the new parliament would 'make a difference'. Although by no means straightforward in a strong party parliamentary system with primary loyalty to party, research findings have shown that having high numbers of women in the parliament 1999-2003 changed the focus of the traditional political agenda and the way politics was carried out. In particular, there has been substantial progress on action to tackle domestic violence and violence against women and children. Scotland has outperformed England to date in both policy and comparative spending terms. The parliament's approach to domestic violence has received international plaudits and was driven by women politicians and women's organisations (Mackay et al 2003, Mackay 2006).

Women's representation in the Scottish parliament has had great discursive or symbolic appeal; seen by many as a positive sign that things could change and that the future held the promise of equal political power across the different levels of politics. However, the other levels of political life have proved resistant to the 'contagion' of gender balance. Overall men continue to dominate in Scottish politics: they are currently 66.6 per cent of MSPs; 71.5 per cent of Scots Euro MPs; 78 per cent of Scottish councilors and 88 per cent of Scots Westminster MPs. The 2007 election results reinforce claims that progress made since 1999 has been brought more by chance than design and that gender balance has been poorly institutionalized within parties. Although it is too early to make judgements on the basis of three elections, we argue that the underlying trends suggest the elections of 1999 and 2003 may come to be seen as the high tide of women's representation in Scotland unless political parties take action to reform the norms and practices of political recruitment.

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Women's Representation in the 2007 Scottish Parliament

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