

# Changing Faces?

**An analysis of how the political parties promoted women candidates in May 2008, published to mark International Women's Day 2009**

## **Executive Summary**

This study looks at the 2008 local elections in 74 authorities in the north and midlands of England from the point of view of women candidates, and examines how the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties performed both in selecting women for winnable seats, and in getting them elected.

It looks in detail at the specific points at which parties have a real opportunity to make a difference – e.g., at whether or not women candidates were fielded in seats where sitting councillors did not seek re-election. It draws conclusions about how the individual parties are performing, and makes some recommendations for steps which could be taken to improve the situation.

We would have liked to examine some aspects of the elections in detail, and, in particular, the incidence and success rates of younger women and women from BME communities. However, the complete lack of information collection or monitoring at the point of nomination means that the raw data is not available.

One of our recommendations, therefore, is that all candidates be required to complete a brief monitoring form when they hand in their nomination papers, so that the effectiveness of initiatives to improve the candidacy and election of women and other under-represented groups can be properly measured, and new ones informed by a better understanding of what is actually happening.

The **key findings** of this study are as follows:

- Overall, the number of women councillors in these regions went down as a result of these elections.
- In the 68 authorities with elections by thirds, the number of women councillors overall fell by 15.
- 27% of councillors elected in the 4 new unitary authorities<sup>1</sup> for which there were elections were women. Women were elected to them at a lower rate than in the elections as a whole.
- 31% of candidates overall were women (31% in 2007).
- There were no women candidates in 21% of wards (20% in 2007). All three of the main parties stood male candidates (or none) in 30% of wards (27% in 2007).
- Had there been both male and female candidates in all the wards contested, the increase in women elected would have been well into three figures.

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<sup>1</sup> Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Chester, County Durham, and Northumberland

- In wards where the candidate for at least one of the three main parties was female, the rate at which women were elected (36%) *exceeded* that at which men were elected (27%). The success rates in all the wards in this study (including single sex wards) were 27% for women and 28% for men.
- 32% of Conservative candidates were women, 34% of Labour candidates and 39% of Liberal Democrat candidates.
- 31% of councillors elected were women (32% in 2007).
- 92% of councillors elected were from the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat parties.
- 18% of male incumbents did not seek re-election, and 21% of female.
- 82% of incumbent councillors (both male and female) who sought re-election were successful – this means that in the vast majority of seats there was very little realistic opportunity for change.
- In those seats where vacancies occurred (238 in this study) 83 women candidates retired and 86 new women candidates were selected by their parties.
- 15% of the Conservative Party's replacement candidates for vacancies overall in seats they held were women, 43% of Labour's, and 43% of the Liberal Democrats'.
- In the 4 new unitary authorities, 33% of candidates were women – 31% of Conservative candidates, 38% of Labour and 30% of Liberal Democrat.
- On 1 April, 69% of current female councillors and 64% of current male councillors will leave office.

The **key recommendations** are:

1. That (whilst recognising that some parties do significantly better than others in terms of women candidates in winnable seats) all three political parties review their selection arrangements for seats in which vacancies occur so as to ensure that they take maximum advantage of the opportunity offered to increase diversity of representation.
2. That (whilst recognising that some parties do significantly better than others in terms of the number of women candidates overall) all three parties review their arrangements for identifying, training and supporting women candidates.
3. That the government consider how best to promote diversity of representation during local government re-organisation, and how to ensure that that diversity is not actually reduced.

4. That, in order to create the space for movement and for new blood to come through, consideration be given to the introduction of a retirement age for councillors, as there is for magistrates. This is currently 70, but could be extended (for both offices) to 75, given the changes in life expectancy and quality in recent years.
5. That both local authorities and political parties consider, in consultation with women councillors, how the discrepancy in the rates at which men and women decide not to seek re-election can best be addressed.
6. That all candidates for election be required to complete a brief monitoring form at the point of nomination, that these should be collated and analysed, and the results published on an annual basis so that they can inform initiatives to improve representation as well as enable the effectiveness or otherwise of such initiatives to be measured.

All three of the main political parties (as well as the Green Party) have a public commitment to increasing diversity of representation on local councils. The outcomes of this study demonstrate that the success of measures taken to implement those commitments is very varied, and that there are large discrepancies between the parties themselves when it comes to the promotion of women.

It is our view that, unless effective action is taken quickly the representation of women in public life at local level will – despite all efforts to the contrary – reduce even further in 2009 and 2010.

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**Centre for Women & Democracy**

2 Blenheim Terrace  
Leeds  
LS2 9JG

Tel: 0113 234 6500  
Email: [cfwd@cfwd.org.uk](mailto:cfwd@cfwd.org.uk)

[www.cfwd.org.uk](http://www.cfwd.org.uk)