

Representative Democracy?

Women in the 2011 Local Government Elections in England

Executive Summary

At the present rate of progress, it will be more than 150 years before there are equal numbers of men and women elected to English local councils. Women's progress in local public life has stalled, and this year's results show no signs of improvement.

What Happened in 2011

This report looked at candidates and results in the local elections held on 5 May 2011 in 3,508 seats in 2,308 wards in 100 English local authorities. These seats were last contested in 2007.

As usual the collation of data was made difficult by the complete absence of any system for monitoring the diversity of either candidates or councillors elected.

Across the 100 authorities in the study there was a net increase of just 20 women councillors.

The Labour Party increased its number of women councillors by 152; the number of Liberal

Democrat women fell by 111 and the number of Conservative women by 19¹.

30.7% of all councillors elected on 5 May 2011 were women. This represents a fall of 2.9% on the 2010 level, but an increase of 5.9% on 2009 and 0.7% on 2007.

30.4% of candidates in 2011 were women; in 2007 30.9% of candidates were female.

33.3% of Liberal Democrat candidates were women, 31.7% of Labour and 29.1% of Conservative.

Despite predictions to the contrary, the electorate is still overwhelmingly more likely to elect candidates from one of the main three political parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat) than from smaller parties or independents. In 2011 92.5% of councillors elected were from one of the main three; in 2007 this figure was 92%. Thus the actions of these parties in terms of numbers of women candidates and their presence in 'winnable' seats is crucial if progress is to be made.

28.7% of Conservative councillors elected on 5 May were women, 32.5% of Labour, and 33.7% of Liberal Democrats.

¹ The figure of a net increase of 20 is arrived at after adjusting the figures for the main parties to allow for small parties and independents.

Women were most likely to be elected in the North East (36.0%) and least likely to be successful in the East of England. They also did better in the large metropolitan authorities of the north and midlands (32.4%) than in the smaller two-tier districts (29.5%)².

Although some authorities saw increases in the number of women councillors as a result of the election, 38 of the 100 in this study actually emerged with fewer women. Poole and Nottingham had the greatest increases (10% and 12% respectively) and Herefordshire the greatest decrease (12%).

One of the most straightforward ways of increasing the numbers of both women candidates and councillors is to use the opportunity offered by vacancies caused when sitting councillors do not defend their seats for one reason or another (usually retirement, deselection or death).

In 2011 78.2% of sitting (incumbent) councillors representing the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat parties defended their seats. The vast majority of these were re-elected.

700 incumbents did not defend their seats and were replaced by their parties with new candidates. 21.7% of male councillors for these parties did not seek re-election and only 19.9% of female. This represents a reversal of previous trends, and it remains to be seen whether or not this change is the start of a trend or just a blip.

The net gain in women councillors in these seats across the country was just 26.

The other main route for change is the loss or gain of a seat by one party from another. A total of 533 seats changed hands in this way; in 100 of them women challengers defeated women incumbents, thus making no difference whatsoever to the overall number of women councillors.

In the remaining seats there was a net loss across all three parties of 9 women councillors.

Adjusting these figures to take account of advances by the Green Party and some changes in numbers for minor parties and independents, the overall outcome is a net gain of 20 women councillors in England in 2011.

Recommendations

1. Monitoring of Nominations

In order to enable everyone concerned to develop a much better understanding of the issues, a monitoring form similar to that used in many other areas (including recruitment for public appointments and applications for funding) should be completed and submitted by candidates together with nomination forms. At present, nomination papers ask for no information other than name, polling number, description (i.e., party) and address. Monitoring information would not be published, and could easily be entered into a database by each authority's elections officer and forwarded to an appropriate body (probably the Electoral Commission) for collation and eventual publication. CFWD will be approaching the relevant organisations to discuss how to progress this matter.

² There were no elections in London in 2011

2. Council Diversity Figures

Each local authority should be required, on an annual basis after each set of elections, to publish diversity figures for its council on its website. These figures should as a minimum include gender, ethnicity, age, and disability and may include others such as sexual orientation as well. Local authorities should also be asked to forward diversity figures to the Local Government Association, which should include them in its Improvement & Development A-Z of Councils³. Again, CFWD will be approaching the relevant organisations to discuss how to progress this matter.

3. Democracy Diversity Fund

We recognise that the primary function of all political parties is to fight and win elections, and that, although they are almost all committed to diversity in theory, it is often difficult for them to find resources for training and developing thousands of local government candidates. In our submission in 2009 to the Speaker's Conference we recommended the establishment of a Democracy Diversity Fund to support parties in finding, training and selecting good candidates of both genders from all communities. Parties would have to apply to the fund with a planned programme and also be able to offer matching funding in cash or kind. The scheme would need to be monitored in terms of outcomes, and support would be withdrawn from parties not meeting targets or able to demonstrate significant improvement. Funding would be ring-fenced to the project, and the system could be subject to review after each election.

³ <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/org/la-data.do>

4. The Conservative Party

The Conservative Party is committed in theory to improving the representation of women, and made some headway at the 2010 General Election in terms of MPs, but has made virtually no improvement in the representation of women in local government. We recognise that positive action is not part of the Party's culture or tradition⁴ but we also believe that unless some action is taken the Conservatives will continue to fall further behind its rivals in terms of women's representation. We will therefore be seeking meetings with relevant bodies within the Party to discuss how this could best be achieved.

5. The Labour Party

The Labour Party has practiced positive action for local government selections since 2004, and as a result has significantly improved its performance in terms of both women candidates and councillors elected. However, its record prior to 2004 was very poor, and the actions it has taken since then have not yet brought it to the point at which it either leads in local government at the level that it does at Westminster, or does as well as it possibly thinks it does locally. It is also recognised that there is constant pressure from some parts of the Party to abandon or modify positive action measures (as happened to some extent in the recent devolved elections) and that this is matched by pressure from some minority groups to introduce it. We note that the Party has committed to retain positive action for Westminster selections, and would wish to see a similar commitment made for local government. In addition, although we note that, without

⁴ Although we also note that David Cameron threatened some Conservative Associations with all-women shortlists before the General Election.

Labour's action since 2004 the total percentage of women councillors would actually be in reverse, we believe that the Party should review its candidate recruitment policies to ensure that they are maximising opportunities to attract women candidates. We shall be seeking meetings with relevant people to discuss how these issues might best be addressed.

6. The Liberal Democrat Party

The Liberal Democrat Party does well in terms of women candidates, often out-performing Labour. A marginally greater proportion of its councillors elected are also women, but overall the fact that it holds a large number of marginal seats means that at any one election there can be substantial variations in terms of numbers. As a result the Liberal Democrats have difficulty in impacting on the overall situation, and may, in years like 2011, actually put the brake on what might otherwise have been progress. The Liberal Democrats continue to be opposed to positive action in the form of quotas, but have recently adopted new mechanisms for improving the numbers of

women parliamentary candidates. CFWD believes that a similar initiative is needed at local level to support and develop the Party's good record in terms of candidates, and will be seeking meetings with relevant bodies to discuss this.

7. Reviewing the Culture

Although the percentage of women councillors retiring was lower than that for men in 2011 this was against the general trend. Efforts to recruit women candidates and councillors are easily under-mined by high drop-out rates, and more work needs to be done to identify the causes of retirements, particularly those which take place after one term. Accordingly we recommend that both local authorities and political parties consider, in consultation with women councillors, what factors affect retirement rates and what can be done to improve them.

Centre for Women & Democracy
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www.cfwd.org.uk