

New Unitary Authorities and the Representation of Women

Provisional Analysis of 2009 Local Election Results

1. Five new 'super-unitaries' - Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Shropshire and Wiltshire - came into existence on 1 April 2009 and held their first elections on 4 June 2009.
2. They replaced four counties¹ and eighteen shire districts².
3. 28.5% of councillors on the twenty-two authorities which were abolished were women. This was below the national average of 30%.
4. 27.1% of councillors elected to the 395 seats in the new authorities are women. This represents a reduction of 1.4% in the representation of women in elected public office in these areas.
5. 271 women left elected office when the old authorities ceased to exist in April; 107 were elected to the new authorities on 4 June.
6. Work on a full analysis of all the 2009 local election results is ongoing, but initial indications suggest that the overall percentage of women elected in 2009 will be significantly below the figure for 2008 (which was 31%), and will be closer to the figure quoted above for the new unitaries.
7. 30.9% of candidates for the new authorities were women - 30.4% of Conservative candidates, 36.3% of Labour, 33.6% of Liberal Democrat and 23.1% of Independents.
8. In terms of leadership, seven³ of the authorities abolished on 1 April had women leaders. Two of the new authorities - Central Bedfordshire and Wiltshire - are led by women.
9. It is intended in the longer run to upgrade and revamp existing parish and town councils in the new 'super-unitary' areas, and to create them where they do not exist. This has already happened in Salisbury, in Wiltshire, where the parish council was renamed Salisbury City Council and given responsibility for services such as parks, allotments and crematoria. Elections for Salisbury City Council were also held on 4 June, and eight - 34.8% - of the 23 councillors elected were women.
10. This figure is in line with other work done⁴ on town and parish council membership which suggests that women are most likely to serve on small (i.e.,

¹ Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Shropshire and Wiltshire

² Bedford, Bridgnorth, Caradon, Carrick, Kennet, Kerrier, Mid-Bedfordshire, North Cornwall, North Shropshire, North Wiltshire, Oswestry, Penwith, Restormel, Salisbury, Shrewsbury & Atcham, South Bedfordshire, South Shropshire, and West Wiltshire.

³ Bedfordshire, Bridgnorth, Mid-Bedfordshire, Penwith, Restormel, South Shropshire and Wiltshire

local and accessible) councils and least likely to serve on counties, where travel distances and time commitments are likely to be greater.

11. In 2008, 4 other new 'super-unitaries'⁵ came into existence, and at elections for these in May of that year 33% of candidates were women, and 27% of those elected.
12. The level of women's representation is heavily dependant upon both the practical commitment of the political parties to increasing it, and the fortunes of those parties at the polls. In addition, women are more likely on balance to be fielded as candidates in marginal seats, and are therefore disproportionately vulnerable to swings.
13. It is the stated policy of both the government and all the main political parties that the representation of women in elected office in local government should be increased. However, despite a number of initiatives, women's representation appears now to be reducing.
14. The Centre for Women & Democracy is currently working on a full analysis of the 2009 local election results, which will be published later in the summer. Its annual analysis of women in leadership roles will be published in July.

Centre for Women & Democracy
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⁴ Unpublished research by the Centre for Women & Democracy

⁵ Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, County Durham and Northumberland