



The impact of electoral systems on women's political representation

About Fawcett

The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading campaign for gender equality. Our vision is of a society in which women and men enjoy equality at work, at home and in public life. We advance women's equality and women rights through campaigns that:

- Raise awareness and change attitudes and beliefs
- Influence changes to legislation and policy
- Promote and support better practice
- Increase women's power and influence in decision making

For more information on Fawcett and our work visit www.fawcettsociety.org.uk

Counting Women In

The Fawcett Society, The Centre for Women and Democracy, the Electoral Reform Society and The Hansard Society have formed the *Counting Women In* (CWI) coalition to address the lack of women in politics. We believe the under representation of women in Westminster, the devolved assemblies, and town halls around the UK represents a democratic deficit that undermines the legitimacy of decisions made in these chambers. Together, we will be fighting to ensure women have an equal presence and voice within our democratic system.

Introduction

This briefing paper will:

- Consider the limitations and benefits of different electoral systems on women's representation. This will include an analysis of the impact of plurality-majority systems such as First Past the Post (FPTP) and the Alternative Vote (AV) system and Proportional Representation (PR) systems on women's representation;
- Examine the utility of implementing positive action measures in increasing the representation of women in political life;
- Examine and consider how best to embed gender equality within the process of political appointments and;
- Identify what lessons can be learned internationally, from countries with higher levels of women's representation than the UK.

Principles for Reform

- There is a positive relationship between PR systems and women's representation, however, PR in and of itself will not deliver women's representation.
 - PR offers political parties more opportunities and flexibility and less risk in adopting equality strategies to ensure equal numbers of women to men in selection and election.
 - The process of equality strategies "catching on" is more likely to operate effectively within a PR system. Equality strategies are therefore more likely to be adopted within a PR system and in turn, will positively affect women's representation.
 - Positive action measures are needed to ensure substantial increases in women's representation in all areas of political life. Positive action measures can be time-limited and regularly evaluated for utility. They allow political parties proactively to cast the net wider by ensuring equal numbers of women when considering candidates for selection and election. Only such radical action can bolster the change so urgently needed to ensure women in equal numbers in all aspects of political life, including in the top echelons of power and decision making.
 - Looking cross-comparatively, international experiences inform us that countries that have achieved highest levels of women's representation (over 30%) have combined some form of PR **and** positive action measures, such as legislated or voluntary party quotas, to achieve substantial increases in women's representation.
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Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation

The Report made a series of recommendations which, if implemented, would go some way towards broadening the diversity of people standing for and entering parliament:

Both civil society and political bodies need to work to make women in politics more visible and the link between community activism and politics should be strengthened.

If the number of women in the House of Commons does not exceed 25% after the 2010 General Election there should be a debate in parliament on the way forward in general, and the issue of quotas in particular.

The proposal of a Democracy Diversity Fund should be pursued to create an environment for supporting candidates.

Work should be done by both civil society and the political parties to engage both men and women in Parliament to look at the issues of candidacy and diversity and to implement the recommendations of the Speaker's Conference.

Parliament should abide by the same employment law and working practice requirements that it legislates for in other areas of national life; the anomaly whereby MPs are treated as being self-employed and therefore exempt from some requirements should be resolved.

The impact of voting systems on women's representation

Fawcett maintains that no voting system, in and of itself, will progress gender equality or redress our current democratic deficit. We have seen no substantive evidence to support the view that electoral systems in and of themselves can ensure an increase in women's representation or will embed gender equality within the systems, processes and culture of Parliament.

Ideally, an electoral system should deliver real choice for voters. It should involve a range of candidates and parties and each vote should count equally. The electoral system should effectively represent constituencies and proportionately reflect gender, age, ethnic, religious and socio-economic groupings of the electorate at large.

In order to achieve progression of women's representation in politics, a multi pronged approach is required that:

- Implements progressive electoral systems that facilitate women's representation;
- Cements political will and commitment to increasing women's representation;
- Breaks down barriers to women's representation in nomination, selection and election processes;
- Retains the number of women who are elected;
- Changes the adversarial and family unfriendly culture within Parliament that deters women from political careers and;
- Introduces legislative measures that take a hard line on increasing women's representation in both presence and voice.

First Past The Post: why it does not deliver for women

In FPTP systems, contests are held in single-member constituencies and the winner is the candidate with the most votes, though not necessarily an absolute majority of the votes. Accordingly, FPTP systems produce a disproportionate result between votes cast

and seats won for parties, normally over-representing the leading party and particularly penalising minority parties whose support is widely dispersed rather than concentrated.

The FPTP system can distort voters' preferences as a candidate only needs one more vote than that received by any other candidate to win. Therefore voters may vote 'tactically' for their second or third choices to avoid letting the party they most dislike in.

Research suggests that multi-member proportional representation systems are more likely to benefit women than plurality-majority systems such as FPTP. There is a distinct gap in women's representation in countries with single-member constituency electoral systems and those with PR systems. When there is only one seat per constituency to be won as in the FPTP system, appealing to a broader base of voters is seen as riskier for parties. This is because female candidates must compete directly against a male candidate, which often implies more risk for the party as in nominating a woman, a party must deny the selection of a often established, recognisable man in the same constituency. Therefore there is less incentive for parties to balance their field of candidates to include more women, as only one candidate will be able to

represent the party banner and cannot seem to be risky within the party or to voters.

The Alternative Vote (AV): a step in the right direction

The Alternative Vote (AV) system is used to elect representatives for single-member constituencies and allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. The principle behind AV is that a winner requires the support of a majority of the people. If no candidate receives 50% support, the last placed candidate drops out and their voters' second choices come into play. This continues until one candidate has majority support.

As a more progressive and accountable voting system than FPTP, AV should encourage the views of women voters to be better represented by politicians. At the last election two thirds of MPs (433) were elected with less than 50% of constituents' votes. Under AV, MPs will require 50% of local votes to be elected and will no longer be able to rely just on their core vote to win seats, nor will parties be able to focus simply on marginal constituencies. AV is likely to make seats more competitive as parliamentary candidates will need to make sure they get second preference votes where appropriate to be sure of winning, so will have to work harder to reach as many people as possible. Accordingly, the majority of MPs will have to campaign on a broader range of issues to attract a wider reach of constituents and secure their votes. Since AV will reward candidates who reach out to, and listen to, all sections of the community this could see the views of women and other groups traditionally marginalized by the current political system given higher priority.

Proportional Representation (PR): more opportunity for equality

PR systems have been promoted as a fairer system of electoral representation. Political parties receive seats in proportion to their electoral strength and no single political party should have a monopoly of power. Academic research classifies PR as a *facilitator* rather than a *guarantor* of better female representation, as no voting system in and of itself can guarantee gender parity in political life.

PR systems aim to reduce the disparity between a party's share of votes and its share of parliamentary seats. Proportionality is often considered best achieved through the use of party lists where political parties present lists of candidates to voters and where multiple members are elected from each constituency to ensure the representation of even small minorities. In *list PR systems*, parties present a list of candidates to the electorate. Lists can be *open*, where voters can specify their favoured candidate(s) within a given party list or *closed*, where they can only vote for a party rather than a candidate and parties receive seats in proportion to their overall share of the national vote. Winning candidates are taken from the lists in order of their respective positions.

Other forms of PR include *Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)* where a proportion of the parliament is elected from single-member constituencies whilst the remainder is elected using PR lists. This allows parties to use equality guarantees whilst placating local party members that they can still select a 'local' constituency candidate.

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) uses multi-member constituencies, and voters are asked to rank candidates in the order of preference as in the AV system. An advantage of STV is that the voter is enabled to show their preference between parties and also between party candidates. Accordingly, a voter could use their preferences to select a woman candidate. This of course only works if there are enough women candidates standing per seat in the constituency.

Why do PR systems act as facilitators for increasing women's representation more than FPTP or AV? There are several explanations for the positive relationship between PR and women's representation. As PR systems operate in multi-member constituencies, there are more seats to win within a given constituency and more

opportunities for parties to win seats . This in turn affects party strategy when choosing candidates.

The party gatekeepers, who consider which aspirants to choose as candidates, have more flexibility and less risk in putting women candidates forward. This is because when there are more seats to win per constituency, the chances that a party will win several seats in the constituency increase. When a party expects to win several seats, they become more interested in trying to balance their field of candidates to appeal to different sub sections of voters to bring in more widespread appeal and support for their party. There is less risk involved in putting women candidates forward and more incentive to do so in ensuring a more balanced slate of candidates. Accordingly, gatekeepers will divide winning slots on the party list among various internal party interests, one of which being the representation of women.

There are several explanations for a party balancing its slate of candidates within a PR system. Firstly party gatekeepers view this as a way of directly attracting voters. Rather than identifying a single candidate to appeal to a broad base of voters like in FPTP, party gatekeepers think in terms of different candidates appealing to specific subsectors of voters. For example, a women candidate may appeal to specific voters within a party. A women candidate can be seen as a benefit to the party without requiring men to step aside for election as would be the case in FPTP systems. Moreover, failing to provide some balance by nominating men **only** could have the effect of driving voters away. Balancing the field of candidates is regarded as a matter of equity and is a means of dividing safe seats among the various factions in the party and assuring the continued support of different factions within and external to the party.

There are generally greater gains of adding a woman candidate to a party's slate of candidates in a PR system as it could result in the party winning more seats. Research also suggests that PR systems reduce incumbency effects, i.e. the advantages that elected representatives have over newcomers in getting re-elected (e.g. prior experience, familiarity and access to voters and funders etc.) This is because there is more than one seat per party that candidates are competing for and therefore the risk voters are willing to take in electing a new (and female) candidate is higher.

Contagion of policies: the benefits of parties cottoning on

Contagion is the process by which political parties adopt policies initiated by other political parties. In terms of increasing women's representation, traditional parties are likely to feel pressured to nominate more women if competing political parties start to promote the representation of women. Contagion is more likely to operate effectively in a PR lists system than in a single-member constituency system, such as FPTP. Single-member constituency systems tend to be two party systems and therefore often lack the incentive of a minority party innovating on strategies for women's representation. For example, unless pushed on the issue of women's representation, a major party may see little need to change tactics to promote women's representation. The political costs for larger parties to respond to policies adopted by smaller parties within PR are smaller. Where a party stands to win more seats in a constituency, balancing the slate of candidates to include women is significantly easier, so it is therefore possible for the party to nominate women without there being powerful internal party interests at stake. Added to this, the threat of losing votes is more serious and worthy of counteraction in a PR system than in a single member constituency. The differences in the costs of losing votes in the two systems lead for contagion of policies to be more widespread within PR systems. In Norway, the Norwegian Labour Party increased the number of women in winnable seats in the districts where they faced a serious challenge by the Socialist Left, the first party to adopt quotas in Norway.

Positive action measures: bolstering change

While PR as a system has greater potential than other voting systems to improve women's representation and diversity, this can only be achieved in conjunction with additional positive action measures. Where progress has been made in delivering more women into positions of power – both in the UK and internationally - the driver for this has been the implementation of positive actions measures, such as quotas, All-Women-shortlists, zipping or twinning shortlists such that women and men are equally represented, or reserved seats for women in appointment-only systems.

Positive action measures need not be implemented on a permanent basis. Instead they can be time-limited and regularly re-evaluated to gauge their utility and necessity. Given the longstanding dominance of male MPs, positive action measures can provide a boost to the change already in process. Raising the number of female candidates and MPs can help to stimulate the style, content and perception of politics – in turn feeding the re-balancing of the number of women and men in politics.

The success of women's political representation is not solely determined by the electoral system. Parties can employ different strategies to ensure gender balance in their selection of candidates. Where there is political will and commitment to increase women's representation, parties employ equality strategies to meet this aim. However, it is well documented that political parties can play the role of 'gatekeepers' in the candidate selection process which can in turn affect the electoral success of women.

Research has identified three main strategies available to political parties for increasing women's representation: equality rhetoric, equality promotion and equality guarantees. Equality rhetoric is the public acknowledgement of the need to increase women's representation. Equality promotion relates to training or financial assistance in order to redress women's underrepresentation. Equality guarantees identify the need for direct intervention in the selection process to increase the selection and election of more women representatives. This three-tiered equality framework is useful in examining the extent to which party strategies can take advantage of different electoral systems to effectively select women candidates.

The following section details different forms of positive action measures that can be adopted by parties in order to redress the under-representation of women in politics.

Learning from past success

Apart from the Labour Party, other UK political parties have rarely implemented equality strategies for the selection of candidates. The most successful (and high profile) examples of implementing equality guarantees in English politics are Labour's use of AW shortlists on winnable seats. The number of women MPs in the House of Commons doubled from 60 to 120 between April 1992 and May 1997. This was largely a result of the Labour Party implementing AW shortlists and accordingly over 80 per cent women elected at the 1997 General Election were Labour MPs. Of the 65 new female Labour MPs who were elected to the House of Commons in 1997, 35 were selected for their seats as a result of the party's policy of AW shortlists. Out of a total of 418 Labour MPs, 101 women were returned (24.2 per cent).

Within the UK, both the Welsh assembly and Scottish Parliament have impressive records when it comes to ensuring the representation of women in Parliament. In neither of the two legislatures did gender balance happen by accident; it was largely intertwined with Labour's use of positive action measures at the dawn of devolution. For example, in Scotland, the Labour Party made strong provisions, under the new Additional Member voting system, to ensure gender balance within their party through the 'twinning' of pairs of winnable constituencies between male and female candidates. Labour's use of twinning practices in the Scottish Parliament election meant that constituency seats were paired up on the basis of 'proximity' and 'winnability', with a male and female candidate selected for each pair of seats and this approach had the same outcome as the use of All Women Shortlists but without

approach had the same outcome as the use of All Women Shortlists but without excluding men from the selection process.

Open vs. closed lists

PR list electoral systems are considered advantageous for women candidates because parties might be more willing to gender balance their lists in response to internal and external pressures. Different PR systems use either closed party lists, where the party determines the rank of ordering candidates or open party lists, where voters can specify their favoured candidate(s) within a given party list. The difference in using either closed or open list systems relates to whether it is easier to convince voters actively to vote for women candidates or easier to convince party gatekeepers to include more women on the party lists in prominent positions.

It is important to consider the cultural and political landscape of the country when examining whether closed or open lists are likely to more positively impact on women's representation. When using open lists, the opportunity for some voters to promote women can be outweighed by the opportunity for other voters to demote women. If the turnout is that women are voted down and out of parliament, the parties cannot be held responsible as they cannot control how their supporters vote. With closed party lists, the responsibility lies with the party in terms of ensuring gender balance within their lists. The party has the opportunity to examine the composition of candidates on the lists rather than rely on the outcome of voters' decisions. There is therefore scope for parties to be held to account if women's representation does not increase under the closed lists system.

Quotas

The introduction of quota systems have been adopted internationally as one way of redressing the under-representation of women in politics and speeding up the slow rate of progress. The premise of quotas is that women must constitute a certain number/percentage of the members of a body, whether it be a candidate list, parliamentary assembly, committee or government. The quota system places responsibility on those in power and monopolising the recruitment/selection process to open up access rather than placing the onus on individual women to break through the glass ceiling. Many quota systems aim at ensuring a 'critical minority' of 30 or 40 % and are often considered a temporary measure until the barriers to women's representation are removed.

Quotas can be written into the constitution or introduced through national legislation.

During the 1990s, 11 Latin American countries passed national legislation requiring a minimum of 20 to 40 per cent women candidates in national elections. Quotas can also be implemented on a voluntary basis through political parties. This means that no constitutional clause or law demands a set number of women candidates or representatives in legislature, but parties voluntarily apply a quota system as an internal party strategy for increasing women's representation. In this way, the Labour Party implemented a policy whereby both sexes must be represented by at least 40 per cent in all elections and nominations.

Appointment process: ensuring gender equality

The barriers women face in being appointed in the House of Lords are currently different to the barriers faced by women MPs given that Peers are unelected. Power to increase women's representation rests with party leaders. Given that party leaders are central to the appointment process in the Lords, there is an opportunity for parties to increase the diversity of their parliamentarians –and this is what has happened in the upper chamber in Canada. This is an external mechanism that would overcome structural barriers to parliamentary politics as opposed to legislation that governs how parties chose to select their candidates.

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Given that we have not seen women being appointed Peerages in equal numbers to men, leaving women's representation up to political will clearly is not working. As well as mandating a number of appointed seats to women, there should be an independent advisory committee whose role and remit ensures the representation of a diverse range of women in the House of Lords.

In the UK the majority of peers are appointed after demonstrating a record of achievement elsewhere in public life. Given that white, middle class men tend to dominate senior roles in the public, private and charity sectors, this has a serious impact on the types of people nominated for peerages. The committee should accordingly oversee the appointment of Peers from a more diverse range of backgrounds and areas of expertise to encourage representation of women from areas of public life that are not exclusively dominated by men.

It is worth noting that some Peerages which are de facto reserved seats for men (e.g. Bishops) compound the unequal representation of women in the House of Lords.

Cross Country Comparison

Most countries who have been successful in increasing the number of women in Parliament have used some form of PR together with positive action measures. There is robust evidence that shows positive impacts on women's political representation where PR systems are supported by positive action measures, such as the use of open party lists, reserved seats and quotas.

Internationally, the vast majority of countries who have achieved over 30% female representatives have used some external mechanisms to overcome structural barriers to women's political representation, most notably forms of positive action.

Spain now has 31% women in its upper house. Interestingly, this has been achieved by using legal quotas and voluntary party quotas. In this way parties independently chose to implement quotas internally. In addition to this there are legislated candidate quotas at the sub-national level (i.e. regional/local) and in both houses as part of electoral law, meaning they are now compulsory. The 2007 Equality Law meant that party electoral lists must have a minimum 40% and maximum 60% of both sexes. As Spain's electoral system is a form of list PR, this percentage also relates to list order for every 5 posts. There are nine women in the Spanish cabinet and nine men including the Prime Minister. The Spanish model might be replicated in the UK with individual political parties encouraged, at the very least, to ensure they use mechanisms which bring them beyond the legal minimum proportion of women in the Upper House.
