**More stable than strong: women’s representation, voters and issues at the 2017 general election**

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**Abstract**

For the first time since 1987 the election was called and contested by a female Prime Minister. Our analysis shows that although in some ways women did clearly play a significant part in the election campaign, in others there was little change from previous elections. Women in general received scant media coverage and the range of policies aimed at women suggests that parties are keen to compete for female electoral support, but there were few truly radical policy proposals. The increase in female representation was also poor but like 2015 there was a gender gap in voting, with women more likely to vote Labour, this gap is especially pronounced for young women. From a feminist perspective, progress for the cause of women’s equality in the political realm was more business as usual, than a radical improvement despite the presence of many high profile women representatives.

**Introduction**

Theresa May’s unexpected accession to the Tory leadership after the historic EU Referendum means that for the first time since 1987, the next General Election was called and contested by a female Prime Minister. The election was notable therefore for an abundance of leading female figures, more so than any previous election. May and Nicola Sturgeon (Scottish National Party) dominated the post-Brexit narrative for some months (their meeting on the subject leading to the controversial ‘Legs-it’ front page in the *Daily Mail*). Many of the parties now have female leaders, such as Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru), Arlene Foster (Democratic Unionist Party) and Caroline Lucas (co-leader of The Green Party). Despite repeated assurances to the contrary, May called the election after formally triggering Article 50 and just eight weeks prior to the opening of negotiations to establish a deal to leave the EU. May sought to present herself as a strong and competent leader who would make use of her reputation as a ‘bloody difficult woman’ to negotiate the best deal possible. Our analysis assesses the importance placed on women during the campaign by firstly discussing how women were portrayed. We then go on to discuss the parties’ attempts to appeal to women voters through an analysis of their manifesto offerings, before discussing how women actually voted. Finally we analyse the extent to which the representation of women in parliament was altered as a result of the election.

**The Campaign**

Theresa May had been receiving high favourability ratings for months, especially compared to Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn, and it seemed to many that the election would be impossible for her to lose. The Conservatives’ campaign strategy foregrounded May and presented her as a competent and secure (or ‘strong and stable’) choice for Prime Minister, in contrast to her main opponent. The campaign was widely criticised for being highly stage-managed and May was accused of being robotic and socially awkward. Commentators singled her out for criticism for refusing to engage with non-party supporters, in sharp contrast with Corbyn who appeared frequently at public events. Research has shown presidentialised campaigns can be fraught with danger for women leaders. The main risk is reinforcing stereotypical assumptions about the incompatibility between traditional understandings of femininity and conventional ideals of political leadership. Female politicians are generally viewed as more compassionate, honest and warmer than men, whilst men are viewed as more competent, decisive and stronger leaders (Dolan and Lynch, 2013; Kahn, 1996; King and Matland, 2003; Lawless 2004). These differences are problematic because stereotypically masculine traits are more highly valued by the electorate (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993), which goes some way to explain the continued over-representation of men in politics. Women therefore risk being seen as ‘compassionate’ but lacking the necessary ‘aggression’ expected of leaders. Even when portrayed as aggressive, this becomes a problematic transgression of gender norms (Murray, 2010). Jamieson (1995) describes this as a ‘competence/femininity’ double bind in which masculinity is associated with leadership, but negative consequences may await women who display masculine leadership qualities. Jamieson argues that because women’s emotions are deemed to hinder their intellectual and leadership abilities, the bind reinforces that: women are emotional, so being emotional means failing as a leader, and conversely successful leadership is unemotional, but being unemotional means failing as a woman. Arguably, May was negatively impacted by these unspoken assumptions due to her socially awkward and unemotional behaviour on the campaign trail and her inability to empathise with various voters who expressed concerns about cuts to social security and the NHS, such as when she justified the continuation of the public sector pay freeze to a nurse who was struggling financially on the *Question Time Leaders’ Special*.

There is little evidence that the Conservatives were concerned about these risks. May even appeared alongside her husband on *The One Show* on BBC1 in an interview that avoided substantive discussion altogether and focused primarily on aspects of their personal lives and relationship. The purpose of the interview may have been for her to show a softer, more human, side, but the exploration of the Mays’ division of domestic chores into ‘boy and girl jobs’ seemed at odds with a woman seeking to convince voters of her public sphere leadership credentials. This contrasts markedly with May’s reluctance to participate in the televised leaders’ debates. Although such debates are often seen as highly masculinised competitions, where leaders pit their intellectual strength and wit against one another - much like Prime Minister’s Questions - the 2015 debates featured an array of women leaders, and many performed well in this environment. It is therefore surprising that May would emphasise her personal life over her debating prowess given that she wanted voters to evaluate her experience and competence.

The manifesto launch probably added to these negative perceptions. Proposals to scrap free school dinners for all but the poorest children, and changes to social care policy which was quickly dubbed the ‘dementia tax’ were portrayed as evidence that she is cold and out-of-touch with ordinary voters. Such a charge would be difficult for any Prime Ministerial candidate to mitigate but such perceptions are particularly difficult for women, given traditional gendered expectations about women being compassionate and caring. The *Daily Mirror* even featured criticism from a finalist of cooking programme *Masterchef* who argued (unfairly) that May would not have introduced this policy if she had children. References to May as the school “lunch snatcher” (*Daily Mirror*, 19th May 2017) that proliferated amongst Labour supporting media outlets were particularly gendered, and moreover demonstrated the extent to which Margaret Thatcher still looms large in the public imagination. May was also criticised for sending Home Secretary Amber Rudd as her stand-in for the televised leaders’ debate despite Rudd’s recent bereavement. Framing female politicians in this way reinforces the sexist (and sometimes misogynistic) representations that have long been employed in media discourses (Ross, 2010), although it is clear that May and her party did nothing to foresee the potential pitfalls of campaigning on a presidentialised platform as a woman. Even the much-repeated Tory campaign slogan ‘strong and stable’ was arguably risky in this context, with ‘strong’ only serving to reinforce the idea of transgressing gender norms and ‘stable’ underlining her mechanical approach to the campaign.

Other women politicians received similarly difficult media coverage. Labour’s Diane Abbott was singled out for harsh criticism by news media and the Conservative Party alike for performing poorly in a couple of broadcast interviews. The *Daily Telegraph* described an interview with *LBC* where she got her figures on the cost of increased police recruitment wrong as “the most embarrassing political interview” and as a “car-crash performance” (*Daily Telegraph*, 2nd May 2017), but less attention was given to Chancellor Phillip Hammond’s mistake about the cost of HS2 two-weeks later (*The Independent*, 18th May 2017). Clearly this was motivated by the political partisanship of much of the British press, but it is also important to recognise the extent to which intense criticism of Abbott has been a familiar feature of news coverage throughout her political career which has been attributed to her being the most prominent black woman in British public life (Gabriel, 2017). Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic female candidates have been historically underrepresented in British politics, but also tend to receive exceptionally negative coverage due to their intersectional differences (Ward, 2016).

Whilst women politicians were incredibly prominent in the campaign, much like the 2015 election women voters were not particularly prominent during the campaign (Campbell and Childs, 2015; Harmer, 2017a). In previous elections women voters have featured in marginal but distinct ways. A common trope since 1997 was to speculate about the voting intensions of target voters like Worcester Woman and ‘mumsnetters’ (Harmer and Wring, 2013). No female target group received attention although a few individual women gained some coverage as a result of encounters with politicians or the press. One vox pop with ‘Brenda from Bristol’ just after the election was announced seemingly summed up many voters’ thoughts when she declared ‘Not another one!’ (New Statesman, 19th April 2017). Cathy Mohan, who tackled Theresa May about cuts to disability benefits in Abingdon, also received much coverage (*The Guardian*, 16th May 2017).

Women voters may have been marginal within the mainstream campaign, but there was one political party which sought to put women voters and their perceived interests at the forefront. The Women’s Equality Party (WEP) was formed in 2015 and this was the first election that they had parliamentary candidates (Evans and Kenny, 2017). The most high-profile candidate (and party leader) Sophie Walker stood against controversial Conservative MP Philip Davies in his Shipley constituency. Davies had attracted their attention due to his filibustering to block legislation aimed at implementing better support for victims of domestic violence (*The Guardian*, 16th December 2017) and his frequent derogatory comments about women, LGBT people and those with disabilities (*Daily Telegraph*, 17th June 2011). Targeting Davies was controversial due to fears over potential vote-splitting and the fact that the WEP failed to engage with local feminist groups (Evans and Kenny, 2017). Walker received just 1.9% of the vote in Shipley and the other six candidates also received very small vote shares (WEP 2017).

Mainstream broadcast and print media coverage of the campaign was a largely male-dominated affair, despite the presence of high profile women party leaders, including the Prime Minister. Deacon et al. (2017) reported that 63% of all individuals who appeared in the news were male compared to 37% female. Amongst politicians, women accounted for 40% but amongst other kinds of source, male voices were preferred, for example experts, trade union voices and civil servants. Online news was equally male dominated. Our own analysis of five news websites[[1]](#footnote-1) demonstrated that women who were not politicians received very little news coverage at all. This is surprising given the fact that the most prominent politician in our study was the Prime Minister who appeared in 37.3% of all items in our study (Harmer and Southern, 2017). Figure 1 shows that of all the sources referred to online coverage just 36.8% were women.

Source: Harmer and Southern, 2017

Some parties were better than others at foregrounding women speakers though (Figure 2). For the Conservatives, 60.7% of all individual appearances were by a female politician – the vast majority of these were the Prime Minister herself. Other political parties whose female leaders dominate their parties’ appearances were the Scottish National Party (with 71.4% of their appearances being made by women representatives), Plaid Cymru (77.8%) and the Green Party (66.7%). The Labour Party sources instead tended to be dominated by men (mainly Corbyn) as Labour women only accounted for 22.6% of all appearances by Labour sources. UKIP and the Liberal Democrats managed the fewest women campaigners in online news, accounting for 12.9% and 10.1% respectively (Harmer, 2017b). The data reflects the fact that women leaders were very prominent throughout the campaign. This is potentially problematic because the media attention given to the leaders limits the potential for a diverse range of female voices within the campaign.

Source: Harmer and Southern, 2017

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Figure 3 shows that ordinary women received lower representation in the media than might be expected given how accessible members of the public are to journalists. Women accounted for 39% of all citizens featured in our study of online news. Women in non-political roles were very marginal in the coverage (Harmer, 2017b). For other kinds of sources women were completely absent. Every individual pollster or other kind of expert who received any mention or reference in the news was male, reinforcing the extent to which the public discussion of politics continues to be dominated by male voices and concerns. Despite the presence of so many women leaders in the campaign, the media coverage of it still remained stubbornly male dominated.

**Parties’ Appeals to Women Voters: The Manifestos**

One way of assessing the importance placed on women and their votes by political parties is to analyse their manifesto pledges for explicit or implicit references to gendered policy areas. As Campbell and Childs (2015) make clear, it is important to analyse the pledges made in manifestos as these are the most explicit means of targeting and representing women voters. Given the unique circumstances of this particular election, some parties offered a more extensive range of policies than others. Here, we present a summary of the seven main political parties and the Democratic Unionist Party. The latter has been included in light of its involvement with the confidence and supply agreement to support the minority Conservative government and the widespread concerns about the socially-conservative ideology of the DUP, demonstrated by the party’s resistance to the provision of abortion services and same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland, and its potential influence over the Conservative government.

All of the major parties made some mention of specific gendered policy areas (although the DUP and Plaid Cymru had fewer mentions than most, with the DUP only highlighting one pledge to pursue pension equality). Plaid Cymru argued that their policy pledges from the 2015 General and 2016 Welsh Assembly elections were still valid, meaning that more detail was possibly omitted from their ‘Action Plan for 2017’ that was published for this election. By contrast, the Green Party and SNP produced specific mini-manifestos aimed at women. The policy areas which directly referred to women followed a similar pattern to recent elections, with key policy areas revolving around women’s caring responsibilities and work-life balance (Campbell and Childs, 2015). We have divided the policies offered into the following areas:

1. Violence against women
2. International development
3. Legal/judicial matters
4. Employment
5. Social Security
6. LGBT+ issues
7. Education
8. Issues affecting minority women
9. Public Life

It is important to remember that for a number of the main parties discussed, many policy areas affecting women would be devolved to the respective national governments, therefore complicating the messages of the SNP, Plaid Cymru and DUP who are only appealing to small subsections of the electorate, and yet including them in their manifestos for the general election signals a set of clear priorities as far as women are concerned. Table 1 shows which issues were foregrounded by each party. The following discussion will attempt to contextualise the policy positions of each party, since although there is a consensus on the range of issues associated with women, the approaches of each party can be very different.

[Table 1 about here]

The Conservative manifesto was reasonably light on gender-specific policy details, particularly with issues surrounding social security. No pledges were made to reconsider controversial policy areas such as pension inequalities highlighted by the WASPI campaign or to address criticism of the so-called ‘rape clause’ whereby women can only claim child benefit for a third child if they are willing to complete a form explaining that the child resulted from rape. This policy has been widely criticised for being indifferent to circumstances where women would not wish to reveal such information as well as ignoring the personal impact of disclosure. Instead the Conservatives confined their gendered policy pledges to reasonably uncontroversial areas such as tackling violence against women at home and abroad, tackling workplace discrimination and supporting shared parental leave. They were the only party which did not make any specific pledges on social security aimed at women.

In contrast, the Labour manifesto offered the most extensive range of gendered policy pledges. Labour’s priorities focused heavily on social security, promising to address pension inequality, the so-called ‘Tampon Tax’ and child care provision by funding it directly rather than passing subsidy to parents. Labour also made a range of pledges to support women in the workplace such as increased support to tackle employment and maternity discrimination in particular, as well as increasing paid paternity leave. Labour’s offer to women voters focused on policy areas most associated with the left, unsurprisingly, but despite this women voters continue to be most explicitly invoked in traditionally gendered policy areas rather than in a range of policies across the board.

The Green Party published a whole range of separate manifestos aimed at specific sectors of the electorate. Although they were careful not to label their ‘Manifesto for Gender Equality’ as being explicitly for women, many of the policy areas discussed were similar to those focused on by other parties. The document offers an extensive range of gendered policy pledges, including a raft of measures to tackle violence against women, domestic and sexual violence, calls to decriminalise sex work and pledges to end pensions inequality and the ‘Rape Clause’. In many ways the Greens offered the most radical range of policies to tackle gender equality. The SNP similarly offered a specific mini-manifesto aimed at women which focused most prominently on social security like pensions inequality, improving maternity services and ending the ‘rape clause’.

Where the UKIP manifesto did discuss policies targeted at women, they tended to be policies about women rather than for them. Most policies focus on measures aimed at minority women, most of which could be seen as deeply problematic – for example, pledging to institute a screening process for girls deemed as most risk of FGM. Their most high profile policy proposal affecting women was the proposed ban on face coverings in public. They argued that full-veils were oppressive, a security risk, and perhaps most controversially, bad for women’s health as they could lead to vitamin D deficiency (UKIP 2017). These proposals were couched in the language of protecting women from their own culture, reinforcing problematic stereotypes about women and non-white women in particular. The inclusion of these problematic policy proposals not only reflects UKIP’s wider political agenda, but also reminds us of the importance of holding political parties to account for the way they portray women in their campaign communications and the implications of such policies.

Plaid Cymru and the DUP manifestos offered the fewest policies designed to appeal to women. Plaid Cymru focused on legal or judicial matters, such as improving the way courts treat victims of sexual violence, and social security issues. There was no mention in the manifesto of policies designed to tackle gender-based violence or improving the position of women in employment or public life. The DUP only explicitly mentioned women once in their manifesto in relation to tackling pension inequality. This lack of engagement with women voters has caused some concern since the political views of the DUP have received greater scrutiny outside of Northern Ireland as a result of their agreement to support the Conservative government. Their socially conservative stance on marriage equality and abortion (alongside nationalist counterparts) have contributed to a situation whereby women in Northern Ireland already have fewer rights than their counterparts in the rest of the UK (Thomson, 2016) and many commentators have raised the possibility of them attempting to influence policy on these issues in the rest of the UK (*The Independent*, 10th June 2017).

As Table 1 makes clear, women were explicitly mentioned in all of the manifestos under discussion and although there was a good deal of variation between the parties in terms of their priorities and approaches, there was a high degree of consensus about the policy issues which are seen as important to women voters. This appears to have changed very little from previous elections (Campbell and Childs, 2015). This shows the extent to which parties remain committed to only incorporating relatively safe, liberal feminist ideas within their policy platforms. Only the Green Party manifesto represented much of an attempt to go beyond this consensus, with its commitment to decriminalising sex work and the detention of women asylum seekers.

**Candidates**

Due to this being a snap election, the selection process for most parties was a hurried one. The approach taken by the Labour Party was indicative of many of the other parties’ processes. They invoked an ‘emergency’ selection process, bypassing the input of local party members who would usually have a vote under ordinary circumstances. Adverts for vacant seats were posted with closing dates just two days later (*The Mirror*, 21st April 2017) and the National Executive Committee (NEC) made the final decision. Planned all-women shortlists in many of these seats were suspended due to the urgent nature of the selection, although they were kept in seats where female MPs were retiring. In response to some criticism of this, the Labour NEC later announced their commitment to 50% female candidates at the next general election (Labour List, 2017).

In contrast, the Liberal Democrats did follow through with their recently-adopted commitment to all-women shortlists where male MPs were stepping down, which they adopted after their near wipe-out in 2015 left them with no female MPs. This and other measures to promote diversity in the parliamentary party, including ensuring at least two candidates for every selection were from under-represented group, led to 19 out of their top 20 target seats having female candidates (*New Statesmen*, 25th April 2017). Table 2 shows the overall percentage of female candidates for these and other parties.

Table 2: Candidate Gender by Party, 2015 and 2017

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2015 (Female\*) | % Female | 2017\* (Female\*) | % Female |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Con | 648 (169) | 26 | 638 (184) | 29 |
| Lab | 631 (214i) | 34 | 631 (256ii) | 41 |
| Lib Dem | 631 (166) | 26 | 630iii (184iv) | 29 |
| UKIP | 625 (78) | 13 | 378 (49) | 13 |
| Green | 573 (216) | 38 | 476v(164vi) | 35 |
| SNP | 59 (21) | 36 | 59 (20) | 34 |
| PC | 40 (10) | 25 | 40 (11) | 28 |
| Sinn Fein | 18 (6) | 33 | 18 (7) | 39 |
| SDLP | 18 (5) | 28 | 18 (6) | 33 |
| DUP | 16 (0) | 0 | 17 (2) | 12 |
| WEP | ~ | ~ | 7 (7) | 100 |
| Total |  | 26 |  | 29 |

i Including one trans woman; ii Including two trans women; iii Including one non-binary transgender candidate; iv Including two trans women; v Including two non-binary candidates and a trans man; vi Including one trans woman \*Transgender and non-binary candidates are highlighted here simply to give visibility to them as representatives

Sources: ‘General Election 2015: Results and Analysis’, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 2015 p58 and ‘General Election 2017: Results and Analysis’, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, 2017 p47

As Table 2 shows that apart from the Women’s Equality Party, Labour fielded the largest percentage of female candidates at 41%. This was higher than their percentage of female candidates at the last general election (34%), but lower than the percentage of female MPs Labour held at the time of the dissolution of Parliament (44%). Still, they were ahead of their main rival, the Conservatives who, despite a female leader, fielded female candidates in only 29% of seats, although this was up slightly from 2015 when they stood female candidates in 26% of cases.

The Liberal Democrats also stood female candidates in 29% of cases, up only slightly from the 26% in 2015, despite the efforts described above to boost female selection. This likely reflects the fact that despite their efforts, the effects of implementing active quotas takes time to filter through. The Greens stood female candidates in 35% of the seats they contested, a fall from 2015, where the figure was 38%. UKIP stood female candidates in only 13% of the seats they contested, by far the lowest of the UK-wide parties.

For the regional parties, the SNP stood female candidates in 34% of which was above average for parties overall but lower than the proportion they stood in 2015 (36%). Plaid Cymru stood female candidates in 28% of the seats they contested, which was higher than last time (25%) but still some way behind some of the other parties. The Northern Irish parties showed much variation. Sinn Fein selected female candidates in 39% of cases, only very slightly behind Labour. This contrasts with the DUP who stood female candidates in only 12% of cases, the lowest of any party included here, although it was an improvement from the last general election where they stood no female candidates at all.

We now turn to the number of female MPs actually elected, as shown in Table 3. Overall there was an incremental increase in female representation, from 30% to 32%. In the lead-up to the election there had been concerns that for the first time since 1979 the proportion of female MPs would actually fall due to the expected Conservative landslide. A forecast conducted by Hudson (2017) predicted 194 female MPs following the election, meaning a slight drop from the 196 female MPs there were going into the election.

Table 3: Female MPs by Party after the 2017 General Election

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | % | Female Representation on Dissolution (N) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Conservatives | 67 | 21 | 21% (70) |
| Labour | 119 | 45 | 44% (101) |
| Lib Dems | 4 | 33 | 11% (1) |
| SNP | 12 | 34 | 32% (18) |
| Green | 1 | 100 | 100% (1) |
| Other | 5 | 22 | 23% (5) |
| All | 208 | 32 | 30% (196) |

Source: ‘Women in the House of Commons’ Commons Library Briefing Paper, 2017 p4

In the event this did not happen, but the small increase in female members is still far from the 50% representation needed to fully achieve parity. Just a few months before the election was called, the Women and Equalities Committee (2016) recommended that the government should seek to introduce legislation to compel political parties to ensure at least 45% of their candidates were women, enforced by fines, among other sanctions, for non-compliance. Observing the sluggish progress seemingly being made on this front, and the very real possibility that female representation could have stalled or reversed, this does not seem unreasonable. Despite the percentage of female candidates overall increasing since the last election (from 26% to 29%), many of the parties, including the more progressive ones such at the Green Party and the SNP, stood a lower proportion of female candidates than at the last general election. This suggests that even progressive parties can slip back on female representation and a legislative mechanism which demanded more from parties on this front may be the only way to prevent this altogether. Despite this, there were some success stories in terms of underrepresented groups. The number of black and minority ethnic women increased by six. These included Preet Gill, the first Sikh female MP, Layla Moran, the Liberal Democrats first BME woman MP and Marsha de Cordova who was one of two new disabled MPs joining parliament for the first time.

**Women voters**

There has been little in the way of a gender gap in general election voting for the past few decades (Campbell, 2006). However, a generational gender gap has been identified in previous elections (Norris, 1999) and there was much talk in the run up to the 2017 election about Jeremy Corbyn enthusing and mobilising younger voters. A surge in the youth vote could potentially lead to a gender gap in voting overall, as younger women have recently tended to vote for Labour at much higher rates than they voted Conservative (Campbell and Childs, 2015).

In order to assess the gender differences in vote, we analysed wave 13 of the British Election Study (BES) online survey. The survey was conducted just after the election in June 2017 and respondents were asked to recall how they voted. Figure 4 shows the overall gender differences in votes for each party. The data show that women were slightly more likely to have voted for Labour with 42% of women having supported Labour compared to 39% of men. There were only very small gender differences in vote for other parties. This gap is broadly in line with the 2015 post-election data where 36% of women voted for Labour compared to 33% of men (BES wave 6).

Figure 4: General Election Recalled Vote by Gender

Source: BES wave thirteen (9th June-23rd June 2017). N=26,383, weighted.

Figure 5 breaks down the results by age also. Here a notable pattern emerges. Younger women voted overwhelmingly for Labour with 66% of those in the 18-24 age group supporting Labour compared to 15% supporting the Conservatives. For the 26-34 year old age group, 54% of women voted for Labour compared to 28% for the Conservatives. In 2015 a gap of this nature was present but to a lesser degree, with 40% and 29% of 18-24 year-old women voting for Labour and the Conservatives respectively, with similar figures for the 24-34 year-old group (BES wave 6).

In terms of a gender gap between male and female voters within age groups, there is a gender gap in Labour support of over 8%among the youngest age group (18-24 year-olds) and almost 6% among 26-34 year-olds. This is similar to the gender gap in 2015 where women in the 18-24 age group voted for Labour at around 9% higher than men and women in the 25-34 age group voted for Labour at 4% higher than men (BES wave 6). These data support the gender generation gap theory put forward by Norris (1999) and indicates seemingly an on-going pattern.

In contrast to 2015 however, where women in the 46-55 age group and above voted Conservative at a higher rate than men (BES wave 6), in 2017 women from all age groups voted for Labour at slightly higher rates than men. This suggests that women across the board were sceptical of the Conservatives’ proposed programme. In terms of the salient issues, many of them were gendered. The ‘dementia tax’ may have resonated more negatively with women as they tend to live longer than men and more of them may have felt they would be affected. Labour’s stronger offers on women’s pensions and childcare may well have cut through on the evidence here. More broadly, there is evidence that women have long borne the brunt of the government’s public spending cuts programme disproportionately (Women’s Budget Group, 2017) and it may be that this has affected women’s vote choice.

Figure 5: General Election Recalled Vote by Gender and Age

Source: BES wave 13 (June 9th-23rd June 2017). N=22, 379, weighted.

**Conclusions**

Although in some ways women did clearly play a significant part in the election campaign, in others there was little change from previous elections. Familiarly gendered tropes were in abundance throughout the campaign with the emphasis on May’s ‘coldness’ and the disproportionate criticism of Diane Abbott being two prominent examples. In terms of the representation of female politicians in the media, women fared reasonably well due to the high number of female leaders, and the media’s emphasis on leaders. In contrast they fared very poorly when assessing female experts, pollsters and even citizens. The range of policies aimed at women in most parties’ manifestos suggests that parties are keen to compete for female electoral support, but there were few truly radical policies from any of the parties, most of them preferring to replicate similar policies to those aimed at women in previous elections, which tend to support a liberal feminist consensus. The increase in female representation was poor. From 2010 to 2015 female representation increased by 7%, in contrast with a mere increase of just 2% in 2017. The emergency nature of the selection process likely contributed to this and the reluctance of most parties to impose quotas or other measures to increase their number of female representatives is another explanation for this stagnation. Continuing a pattern observed in 2015 however, there was a gender gap in voting, with women more likely to vote Labour, with an especially large difference among young women. From a feminist perspective, progress in the 2017 election for the cause of women’s equality in the political realm was more business as usual, than a radical improvement despite the presence of so many high profile women representatives.

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| Table 1: Summary of manifesto commitments of main political parties |  | Con | Lab | LD | SNP | PC | GREEN | UKIP | DUP |
| VAWG | * Domestic Violence * Sexual Violence * Forced Marriage/ ‘Honour-based violence’ * Trafficking | X  X | X  X |  | X  X |  | X  X  X  X | X |  |
| INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT | * Girl’s education * Sexual Health * VAWG | X | X | X | X |  |  |  |  |
| LEGAL/JUDICIAL | * Women offenders * Family Courts * Sexual violence legal process * Sex work * Abortion | X  X | X  X  X | X  X  X | X  X | X  X | X  X | X |  |
| EMPLOYMENT | * Pay Gap * Parental Leave * Maternity discrimination * Maternity Pay * Discrimination | X  X  X | X  X  X  X | X | X  X  X |  | X  X |  |  |
| SOCIAL SECURITY | * Pensions * Rape Clause * Maternity services * Child care * ‘Tampon Tax’/Sexual Health |  | X  X  X  X  X | X  X  X | X  X  X  X  X | X  X  X | X  X  X  X | X  X | X |
| LGBT+ | * Hate crime * Rights | X | X  X | X | X | X | X | X |  |
| EDUCATION | * Sex and relationships * Gender/sexuality based bullying |  | X | X |  |  | X  X |  |  |
| MINORITY WOMEN | * English language provision * FGM * Breast- ironing * Face-coverings | X | X |  |  |  | X | X  X  X |  |
| PUBLIC LIFE | * Gender quotas * Gender audits * Media representations |  | X  X | X  X | X  X |  |  | X |  |

1. We conducted a detailed content analysis of weekday news coverage of the UK General Election (i.e. Monday to Friday inclusive) between 4 May and 6 June 2017 from the following news outlets: BBC News, Mail Online, The Guardian, The Huffington Post and Buzzfeed. The first four outlets were chosen because they represent the four most used online brands in the UK (Newman, 2017). Buzzfeed was also included because it is the second most read only-online outlet after the Huffington Post. We analysed the ten most prominent election related news stories on the main news page at 9am each morning. We recorded up to 3 themes per story, the main people featured and their sex. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)