**‘Girly Swots’ and The Most Diverse Parliament Ever: Women’s representation, voters and issues in the 2019 election campaign**

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The 2019 election had felt inevitable for months once Theresa May had been replaced as Conservative leader and Prime Minister by Boris Johnson. The UK was back at the polls just two-and-a-half years after May’s miscalculation that a snap election would produce a parliamentary majority large enough to pass the EU withdrawal agreement. May’s leadership had been dogged with the difficulties caused by her slim majority and subsequent confidence and supply arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party. Once Parliament asserted its right to approve the withdrawal agreement, her premiership became defined by her frustrated attempts to secure an agreement with the EU which her own Eurosceptic backbenchers, the more moderate members of her party and opposition parties would vote to approve. She fought on but her failure to pass a withdrawal agreement ultimately led to her resignation and Johnson’s victory in the leadership election. As well as the Conservative Party dispensing with its female leader after only three years, the run-up to the campaign was marred by a number of high-profile women MPs taking the decision to stand down, citing threats and abuse they had received as partially responsible (Ross, 2019). 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 voted. Finally, we analyse the extent to which the representation of women in parliament was altered as a result of the election.

**The Campaign**

In 2017, many of the major political parties were led by women for the first time (as well as it being the first election contested by a female Prime Minister for 30 years). The landscape of female leadership changed dramatically in advance of the 2019 election. While Nicola Sturgeon and Arlene Foster remained in post and the Green Party retained the idea of gender balanced co-leaders, Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives both elected male leaders and Jo Swinson was elected as the first female leader of the Liberal Democrats. These changes meant that the only viable candidates for prime minister were both men which led to women returning to the margins during this campaign.

In 2017 the Conservatives ran a highly personalised campaign centred around May’s competence and leadership which proved risky (Harmer and Southern, 2018). Her disappointing election campaign should perhaps have served as a warning to any subsequent female party leader to avoid conducting a campaign which was focused around her own leadership credentials. Academic research has shown that personalised campaigns are particularly risky for women (Van Zoonen, 2006). The main problem is that they may inadvertently reinforce stereotypical assumptions about the incompatibility between traditional understandings of femininity and conventional ideals of political leadership. Political leadership is often associated with traditionally masculine traits and behaviours such as combativeness, strength and assertiveness (Campus, 2013; Conroy, 2015). Empirical evidence suggests that female politicians may generally be viewed as more compassionate, honest and warmer than male opponents by voters, while men are viewed as more competent, decisive and stronger leaders (Dolan and Lynch, 2013; Kahn 1996). Women therefore risk being perceived as ‘compassionate’ but lacking the necessary ‘strength’ expected of leaders. On the other hand, when they are portrayed as strong or assertive, they risk being perceived negatively because they are transgressing gendered behavioural 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.

Despite these risks, the Liberal Democrats seemed content to emphasise Jo Swinson’s leadership at every opportunity, even branding the party as Jo Swinson’s Liberal Democrats on their campaign bus. This decision was perhaps particularly ill-advised given that her own parliamentary seat was very precarious. Much like May’s attempt to own the pejorative title ‘bloody difficult woman’, Swinson attempted to capitalise on her position as the only woman leader of the Westminster parties by insisting that she ought to be included in the first Prime Ministerial debate to be broadcast. The Liberal Democrats set up an online petition calling for her inclusion in this televised debate, claiming Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn were running scared of debating the woman leader of the strongest party of Remain, arguing that the voters deserved to hear from Swinson, not just from two men who want to deliver Brexit. They also released campaign posters which simply said, ‘Debate Her’, alongside a photograph of Swinson.

At the same time as arguing that it was important for women’s voices to be included, Swinson also attempted to portray herself as just as tough and competent as her male opponents by at times adopting masculinised campaign tactics. For example, she appeared in a boxing ring like her male opponents whilst wearing a T-shirt which read ‘Girly Swot’ – a reference to the revelation that Boris Johnson used this insult to describe a male rival. This attempt to reclaim a sexist put-down was only partially successful, however, as it has been argued that it seemed to support her framing by the press as a domineering ‘head girl’ figure (McKay, 2019). While a strategy of presenting women leaders as strong and combative can have advantages, there are also risks inherent in this approach. It may be desirable to be perceived as masculine in terms of leadership credentials, but it can also mean transgressing the expected norms of femininity which can have a negative impact on how voters perceive a candidate (Jamieson, 1995).

One particularly acute example of this phenomenon was when Swinson was asked in a television interview if she would consider using nuclear weapons. When she immediately responded in the affirmative without appearing to think about it, she was roundly criticised by political opponents and campaign groups alike (*The Independent*, 2019a). Nicola Sturgeon’s response showed the inherent risk in Swinson’s decision to embrace traditionally masculine politicking. She stated that ‘it is sickening to hear this question asked and answered as if it’s some kind of virility test and without any context’ (*The Independent*, 2019b). With her use of the word ‘virility’ to describe effective leadership, Sturgeon disparages Swinson’s willingness to engage in the masculinised rhetoric over an important issue. Sturgeon’s remarks also served to undermine Swinson’s efforts to present herself as a strong leader by drawing attention to the fact that as a woman she cannot be considered ‘virile’. Sturgeon’s comments also allowed some news organisations to stereotype these two women leaders as bitter rivals. This is perhaps best highlighted by the *Daily Mail* suggesting that Sturgeon celebrated her party’s victory in unseating Swinson on election night too enthusiastically (*Mail Online*, 2019).

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). Much like the 2017 campaign, no female target group received attention. Even the one party that might be more interested in women voters and their political priorities, the Women’s Equality Party, were marginal in the campaign despite fielding a handful of candidates. Some individual women gained prominence due to their robust questioning of politicians on the campaign trail, such as the junior doctor who confronted Boris Johnson about cuts to the NHS during a hospital visit (*The Independent*, 2019c).

News media are central to election campaigns as they offer a means for the electorate to gain information about the policies and values of political parties. Typically, women struggle to receive substantial representation in news coverage of elections (Ross *et al*., 2013; Harmer and Southern, 2018). Election coverage also tends to focus on party leaders (Deacon and Harmer, 2019) so when the two most likely candidates for Prime Minister are male, this can mean women are even more marginalised in news coverage. Loughborough University’s Centre for Research in Communication and Culture analysed the main print and broadcast output throughout the five weeks of the campaign. Their analysis showed that only five women appeared in the top 20 list of most prominent politicians in the coverage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Jo Swinson was the most prominent women and yet she was a distant fourth behind her Conservative and Labour counterparts and received less coverage than the Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. Swinson was only just ahead of Brexit Party’s Nigel Farage who, despite having no MPs in the previous Parliament, was given more attention than Nicola Sturgeon (Deacon *et al.*, 2019). The other most reported women were Priti Patel, Angela Raynor and Diane Abbott, all prominent members of the cabinet or shadow cabinet. The Loughborough research also showed that at the end of the first week of the election, women accounted for just one third of quotations on television and one fifth of quotes in newspapers (Deacon *et al*., 2019). The lack of women quoted in the campaign coverage demonstrates that once again women’s voices were marginalised (Harmer and Southern, 2018).

The increased importance of digital media in election campaigns has led some scholars to suggest that by using social media, women are given an opportunity to counteract the fact that they are being ignored or reported stereotypically by mainstream print and broadcast media (Osei-Appiah, 2019). While this can be true, others have suggested that social media, particularly Twitter, tends be full of gendered abuse and stereotypes, and that it reinforces the gendered coverage witnessed in print and broadcast (Southern and Harmer, 2019). An analysis of tweets sent to candidates in the last week of the campaign by Margetts *et al*., (2019) shows that well-known women like Diane Abbott received a high proportion of abusive tweets. Digital politics then appears to present the same gendered patterns as mainstream print and broadcast coverage.

**Parties Appeal to Women Voters: Manifestoes**

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 (Harmer and Southern, 2018). It is important to analyse the pledges made in manifestos as these are the most explicit means of targeting and representing women voters (Campbell and Childs, 2015). Women are obviously affected by all the policies that parties propose, but here we analyse the policies which explicitly invoke women in the manifestos. Here, we present a summary of the six main political party manifestos.

Just as in 2017, we see a lot of consensus around the kinds of policy areas where women are most visibly invoked in the manifestos. Many policy areas affecting women are devolved to the respective national governments of Scotland and Wales, meaning the manifesto commitments of the SNP and Plaid Cymru are aimed at a much smaller set of electors than the other parties discussed here. Nevertheless, including gendered proposals in their manifestos for the general election signals a set of clear priorities as far as women are concerned. Table 14.1 shows which issues were foregrounded by each party.

[Insert Table 14.1 here]

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. The policies which are included in the manifestos fall into seven main areas:

1. Violence against women and girls
2. Legal/Judicial
3. Employment
4. Social Security
5. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+
6. Education
7. Public life

All the major parties made some mention of specific gendered policy areas (although the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru had fewer mentions than most). 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; Harmer and Southern, 2018). All parties (except for the Conservatives) proposed a range of policies aimed at tackling structural inequalities. Labour for example proposed the creation of a new Department for Women and Equalities with a full-time Secretary of State to make sure all policies and laws are equality-impact assessed. Labour, Plaid Cymru, the SNP and Greens all made pledges to increase the representation of women in politics. Labour and the Green Party furthermore pledged to make it compulsory for parties to publish diversity data about their candidates. The SNP manifesto went the furthest in this respect by promising to push for further devolved power to acquire the option of imposing gender quotas for the Scottish Parliament. The Greens also promised to introduce job sharing at all levels of government to enable greater representation of women. Beyond political institutions, the Liberal Democrats and Greens both pledged to require 40% of company boards to be comprised of women and to carry out gender pay audits.

All six parties included policy proposals related to tackling gender-based violence. Some parties took a more detailed approach to these issues than others. The Conservatives included pledges to pass the domestic violence bill and to fight crime against women and girls, specifically citing female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage. Many parties focused on addressing domestic abuse. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and SNP all promised to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Labour, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats all pledged to address funding cuts to refuges and other services which have suffered under austerity. Plaid Cymru included policy proposals to register repeat offenders of domestic abuse and to improve police training around these issues. The Green Party offered the most comprehensive proposals for tackling violence against women, promising to develop and implement a UK wide strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, including sexual violence, FGM and trafficking.

The area with perhaps the most policy proposals across the board were employment related issues which recognise that women often experience the labour market differently. Labour, the Greens and SNP all promised to act to address the gender pay gap. All parties (except Plaid Cymru) made promises to make improvements to parental leave. Labour introduced plans to increase paid maternity leave from 9 to12 months, double paternity leave to four weeks and increase provision for flexible working (where possible). The Conservatives’ proposals were less definitive. They pledged to extend the entitlement to leave for unpaid carers (of whom women make up the majority) to one week, encourage flexible working (although it was unclear what they meant by ‘encourage’) and look at ways to make it easier for men to take paternity leave. The Conservatives (along with Plaid Cymru and the SNP) also pledged to reform the law to protect women from being discriminated against while pregnant or returning from maternity leave. The Liberal Democrats promised to increase statutory paternity leave and ensure that parents have the right to parental leave from day one of their employment. The SNP pledged to increase maternity pay, promote shared parental leave and increase paid leave for fathers to attend six antenatal appointments. While these policies are clearly aimed at younger women, the Labour and Green parties also targeted older voters by including proposals to encourage companies to implement menopause policies including menopausal leave.

Except for the SNP, all other parties proposed policies related to legal or criminal justice matters. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and Greens promised to ensure safe and legal abortions in all parts of the UK (including Northern Ireland). The Green Party pledged to make misogyny a specific hate crime and to improve press regulation to ensure complaints about discriminatory media coverage could be tackled. The Greens and Plaid Cymru proposed reducing the number of female prisoners by providing alternative punishments, in recognition of the poor outcomes for women in detention. Plaid Cymru also pledged to tackle the very low conviction rates for rape and provide more training for professionals working in the criminal justice system about sexual violence and its impacts on women.

The manifestos made a wide range of pledges relating to social security and taxation. All six parties addressed the provision of good quality childcare for working parents. Some of these policy proposals were vague such as the SNP’s pledge to increase childcare provision and the Conservative proposal to establish a £1 billion fund ‘to help create more high quality, affordable childcare, including before and after school and during the school holidays’. (Conservative Party, 2019: 17). The Labour Party on the other hand pledged to extend 30 hours of free childcare or preschool education for all two, three- and four-year-olds within the next five years. It also promised to increase childcare provision for one-year-olds. The Liberal Democrats pledged free childcare from 9 to 24 months for working parents as well as extend free childcare for every child two to four years old. They additionally announced plans to invest £1 billion per year in children’s centres. Plaid Cymru pledged free care and education for one-to threeyear olds. The Green Party promised the most by pledging to offer 35 hours free childcare from nine months. Other policy proposals aimed at parents included Labour and the SNP pledging to abolish the controversial ‘rape clause’ which requires women to disclose if their child was conceived as a result of sexual violence if they need to claim child benefit for more than two children. Plaid Cymru pledged a £35 a week payment for every child in low income families in Wales. There were also pledges from the Conservatives and SNP to remove VAT on sanitary products.

Policies aimed at older women were mainly focused on correcting inequalities in the current pensions regime. Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the SNP all included proposals to support the so-called WASPI (Women Against State Pension Inequality) women, who were born in the 1950s and have been left disadvantaged by repeated changes to the pensions age. The Green Party proposed to assist these women first in the introduction of a universal basic income which would also help women of all ages.

Other policy areas included education and LGBT rights. The Liberal Democrats and Green Party both pledged to improve sex and relationship education in schools. Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party and Plaid Cymru all pledged to reform the Gender Recognition Act to allow self-identification. The Greens and Plaid Cymru also pledged to provide further support for gender clinics.

**Candidates**

From the very beginning of the campaign, gender shaped the debate around candidates. Seventy-four MPs stood down, which was high compared to the 31 who stood down in 2017 but was slightly below the usual average of 86 between 1979 and 2010. There were also slightly fewer women than men who stood down with 9% of female MPs standing down compared to 13% of male MPs. What makes this particularly pertinent though is that several female MPs specifically cited online abuse and other malicious communications in their resignation statements in a way that few male MPs who were standing down did (Ross, 2019). Former Conservative Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, spoke of the ‘sacrifices involved in, and the abuse for, doing the job of a modern MP’ in her resignation statement (*The Guardian*, 2019). She had earlier been subject to threats including from a man who rang her office to say her ‘days were numbered’. The man was later jailed (*BBC News*, August 2019). Former Conservative MP Heidi Allen, who defected to the Independent Group, which morphed into Change UK, left them to sit as an independent and later joined the Liberal Democrats, during the 2017-19 parliament, made perhaps the strongest statement on the abuse she received when she announced she would not be standing for Parliament again, saying: ‘Nobody in any job should have to put up with threats, aggressive emails, being shouted at in the street, sworn at on social media, nor have to install panic alarms at home. Of course public scrutiny is to be expected, but lines are all too often regularly crossed, and the effect is utterly dehumanising’. (*BBC News,* October 2019). Allen had also been subject to an abusive email campaign and her abuser also later jailed (*BBC News*, April 2019). This led to a high-profile debate around the tone of political discourse often facilitated by the polarised Brexit debate and the disproportionate effect this may have on already under-represented groups.

Some parties had adopted new mechanisms for selecting candidates since the 2017 selection process. The number and proportion of candidates for each of the most prominent parties are shown in Table 14.2. Table 14.3 shows the number and proportion of women who were elected. In the lead up the last election some had claimed that the snap election had led to processes not being properly followed when it came to gender balance. The Liberal Democrats seemed to learn this lesson, placing most of their new female candidates in their most winnable seats. This led to them now having 64% female MPs. Similarly, certain high-profile figures in the Labour Party had voiced disapproval over 2017’s ‘emergency’ selections (Harmer and Southern, 2018), which some felt had side-lined female candidates in certain places. In light of this, Labour put in place extra mechanisms to ensure female representation did not slip back. This paid dividends for them in terms of gender equality even despite their heavy losses on the night. It increased their number of female candidates dramatically compared to 2017, with 335 as opposed to 256, and meant that for the first time in their history, they now have more female MPs than male ones, at 51% female. However, the slight drop in terms of elected female MPs compared to selected female candidates potentially still raises questions about the placement of women into winnable seats.

In terms of the other parties, the Women’s Equality Party predictably led the pack in terms of the percentage of female candidates, at 100%. The Labour Party and Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) fielded a slate of candidates that were 53% female. The Green Party put forward the next highest proportion of female candidates, at 41% - still below 50% but showing a marked improvement on female representation in their candidates at the last election, where only 35% were female. The SNP, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats all selected women as around a third of their candidates and made no significant improvement, in terms of increasing female representation among their candidates, on the last election. Plaid Cymru and Sinn Fein both put forward a list of candidates that were around a quarter female, meaning both these parties had actually gone backwards in terms of female candidates since the last election, Sinn Fein significantly so, falling from 39% in 2017 to 27% in 2019. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two parties with the lowest proportion of female candidates were the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), with 18% and 12% female candidates respectively. UKIP did make some improvements on the last election, moving up from 13%, but the DUP’s female representation among their candidates remained stagnant. Overall, female candidates comprised 38% of all those who ran for parliament, showing that, except for a few parties, there is still long way to go before female representation in selections is equal.

**Table 14.2** Candidate Gender by Party, 2017 and 2019 General Elections

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | 2017\* (Female\*) | % Female | 2019\* (Female\*) | % Female |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Con | 638 (184) | 29 | 635 (194) | 31 |
| Lab | 631 (256i) | 41 | 631vi (335viii) | 53 |
| Lib Dem | 630ii (184iii) | 29 | 611vi (186viii) | 30 |
| UKIP | 378 (49) | 13 | 44 (8) | 18 |
| Green | 476iv(164v) | 35 | 497vii (203viii) | 41 |
| SNP | 59 (20) | 34 | 59 (20) | 34 |
| PC | 40 (11) | 28 | 36 (9) | 25 |
| Sinn Fein | 18 (7) | 39 | 15 (4) | 27 |
| SDLP | 18 (6) | 33 | 15 (8) | 53 |
| DUP | 17 (2) | 12 | 17 (2) | 12 |
| WEP | 7 (7) | 100 | 3 (3) | 100 |
| Total |  | 29 |  | 38 |

i Including two trans women; ii Including one non-binary trans candidate; iii Including two trans women; iv Including two non-binary candidates and a trans man; v Including one trans woman; vi Including one non-binary candidate; vii Including four non-binary candidates; viiiIncluding one trans woman

\*Transgender and non-binary candidates are highlighted here simply to give visibility to them as representatives

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Sources: House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (2017) ‘General Election 2017: Results and Analysis’, 47; House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (2019) ‘General Election 2019: Results and Analysis’, 41. Pink New ‘Meet the Trans and Non – Binary People Running for Parliament in the UK General Election. <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/11/15/uk-election-trans-non-binary-candidates-lib-dem-labour-greens/>. November 15th 2019. Accessed February 14th 2020.

**Table 14.3** Female MPs by Party, 2017 and 2019 General Elections

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2017 | % | 2019 % |
|  | N |  | N  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Conservatives |  67 |  21  |  87 24 |
| Labour | 119 |  45 | 104 51 |
| Lib Dems |  4 |  33 |  7 64 |
| SNP |  12 |  34 |  16 33 |
| Green |  1 | 100 |  1 100 |
| Other |  5 |  22 |  5 22 |
| All | 208 | 32 | 220 34 |

Source: House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (2019) ‘Women in the House of Commons’, p.46.

Overall, 220 women were elected to Parliament. This was 34% of the total and was the highest percentage in history, continuing a trend of continuously increasing female representation which started in 1979. Following the election, the Liberal Democrats now have 64% female MPs, Labour have 51%, the SNP have 33% and the Conservatives have 24%. This shows a steady but stubbornly glacial pace of improvement in female representatives elected to the House of Commons. It is welcome however, that the Labour Party, the main opposition party, and the Liberal Democrats now have female representation above (and in the case of the Liberal Democrats, way above) the long-touted 50% target for equal representation. At the very least, this shows that active initiatives, such as specifically selecting good female candidates to the most winnable seats, which the Liberal Democrats favoured, and all-women shortlists, which have long been used by Labour, do work in terms of increasing female representation. In terms of more intersectional female representation the number of women of colour increased by nine to 35 overall (Quartz, 2019). These included Munira Wilson for the Liberal Democrats, meaning they doubled their black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)women’s representation, and Nadia Whitmore for Labour, who also became the baby of the House. Other notable ‘firsts’ were Labour’s Kim Johnson becoming Liverpool’s first black MP, Labour’s Sarah Owen who became the UK’s first female British-Chinese MP, and Labour’s Apsana Begum, who became the first MP to wear hijab. The increase in new black female MPs furthermore led to a debate on racism after the *Evening Standard* and BBC repeatedly mis-labelled photos of Black female MPs, mixing their names up (*The Guardian*, 2020). The House of Commons is now more diverse than it has ever been.

**Women Voters**

Earlier studies of gender and voting behaviour have largely concluded that there is little in the way of an aggregate gender gap in British voting patterns (Campbell, 2006). There is, however, a well-established pattern of a gender-generation gap (first identified by Norris, 1999), where older women voters are more likely to vote Conservative than older men, while younger women are more likely to vote for left-wing parties than their male counterparts. There was no focus on youth issues or a ‘Youthquake’ as there had been in the 2017 election, and what issues did emerge in the muddled campaign did not have the gendered and age implications of the highly prominent policies of the 2017 election, such as the so-called ‘dementia tax’. In 2017 a gender gap in voting was present for each age group (Harmer and Southern, 2018) with women favouring Labour, and it is important to consider whether this gap endures even with the reduction in specific factors that may have accounted for this at the last election. We analysed wave 19 of the British Election Study (BES) online survey, which was conducted in the ten days just after the 2019 general election. Here we present the findings from the question which asked voters to recall their actual vote. Figure 14.1 shows the recalled vote for the main parties by gender. Figure 14.2 shows the recalled vote of just the two main parties by gender and age. The data show that there was a small aggregate gender gap, with 42% of women voting Conservative compared to 44% of men, and 34% of women voting Labour compared to 31% of men. This is largely in keeping with the gender gap from the 2017 election, where there was also a three point gender gap in votes for Labour.

**Figure 14.1** 2019 General Election Recalled Vote by Gender

Source: BES wave 19 (13–23 December 2019) N= 25,777, weighted.

**Figure 14.2** 2019 General Election Recalled Vote by Gender and Age

Source: BES wave 19 (13-23 December 2019) N= 25,777, weighted.

A much more striking pattern emerges when age is considered alongside gender. Women aged 25 and under voted overwhelmingly for Labour, with 58% of them doing so compared to 19% of them voting Conservative. There was still a large gap in favour of Labour for male voters aged under 25 but not to the same degree as women. Here, 43% of men aged under 25 voted Labour compared to 28% who voted Conservative. For women between 26 and 35 years old there is a still large but not as extensive gap in favour of Labour, with 43% voting for Labour compared to 30% for the Conservatives. In this age group men still favour Labour, but the gap is narrow with 38% voting Labour compared to 34% voting Conservative. It is interesting to note that for the 56-65 age group, slightly more women recalled voting Conservative than men in this age group (55.2% compared to 54.6%), but this stronger performance for the Conservatives among women than men then disappears for the oldest group (66+). This of course may reflect the results from 2015 (wave 6 of the BES), where in all age groups above 46 women voted Conservative at slightly higher rates, only now these voters have aged into an older cohort. However, the gap for women in favour of Labour in the very oldest group here suggests that policies such as the ‘dementia tax’ in the 2017 election, which were seemingly disproportionately targeted at older women, have not been so easily forgotten by these women. Overall, the generational gender hypothesis forwarded by Norris (1999) is supported here due to the overwhelming proportion of younger women who voted in favour of Labour compared to the Conservatives. The gap, however, is lower than it was in 2017, suggesting that even among a group that are seemingly inclined to vote for them, Labour did not offer enough to attract their votes compared to 2017. This might be something Labour wish to consider if they are serious about improving their performance at the next election.

**Conclusion**

The 2019 election was a mixed picture where women are concerned. The circumstances of the election meant that women were marginal in the campaign compared to the previous one, which was contested by a woman Prime Minister for the first time since 1987. Jo Swinson was the most prominent woman and unfortunately did not learn the lessons of Theresa May’s 2017 campaign, falling into the trap of running a personalised campaign. The gendered policy proposals from each of the main parties tended to be focused on those areas which we have come to expect - the role of women in public life, social security and employment. While the parties addressed similar policy areas, their proposals differed somewhat. The election resulted in a very small increase in women’s representation in Parliament overall. There were some important gains for women, however, given that the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats have now both reached and surpassed the goal of 50% representation. Women’s voting patterns altered slightly from the 2017 results, but the gender generation gap remained in place for all but one age group.

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**Table 14.1** 2019 General Election Manifesto Issue Coverage (X denotes manifesto mention)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Con | Lab | LD | SNP | PC | GREEN |
| VAWG | * Domestic Violence
* Sexual Violence
* Forced Marriage/‘Honour-based violence’/FGM
* Ratify Istanbul Convention
 | XXX | XXX | XXX | XX | XX | XXX |
| LEGAL/JUDICIAL | * Women offenders
* Family Courts
* Misogyny as hate crime
* Abortion
 | X | XX | XX |  | X | XXX |
| EMPLOYMENT | * Pay Gap
* Parental Leave
* Maternity discrimination
* Maternity Pay
* Discrimination
* Menopause policy
* Flexible Working
 | XXX | XXXXXX | XX | XXXX | X | XX |
| SOCIAL SECURITY | * Pensions Equality
* Rape Clause
* Maternity/sexual health services
* Child care
* ‘Tampon Tax’
* Other gendered tax
 | XXX | XXXX | XXXX | XXXX | XXX | XXX |
| LGBT+ | * Gender clinics
* Gender Recognition Act
 |  |  | X |  | XX | XX |
| EDUCATION | * Sex and relationships
 |  |  | X |  |  | X |
| PUBLIC LIFE | * Gender quotas
* Increase women’s representation
* Government department for women & equalities
* Gender audits
 |  | XXX | XX | XXX | X | XX |