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60-SECOND SUMMARY

A new generation of young women is ready and willing to participate in politics. The UK general election in June 2017 saw a rise in voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-old women, with participation up from 44 to 53 per cent compared with the 2015 general election. However, so far there is little evidence to suggest that this will translate into higher levels of party membership and political representation among women. Despite making up half of the population and voting in the same numbers as men, on average only 34 per cent of political party members are women, typically the first step into participating into local politics.

This is the first in a ‘pattern of thirds’, which runs through candidate selection and election, and then thins out dramatically at the top of local government, with women entirely absent among directly elected mayors and representing just 4% of the leadership of England’s new devolved institutions – the combined authorities. Figure S1 sets out the different stages in women’s representation in the journey towards leadership at the top of local government, showing how, from party membership onwards, it is deeply unequal.

This level of representation of women at the top of institutions which claim to be bringing power closer to the people is unacceptable in 2017. We argue that political parties and institutions must seize the recent increase in voter turnout among young women to dramatically increase the numbers of women going into local politics. This must be complemented by a series of radical reforms to improve the pipeline of women rising to the top in local politics, and to correct the absence of women at the top of combined authorities.

THE CASE FOR REFORM – LESSONS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

What is clear from international comparisons is that where countries have seen a step change in levels of political representation in local or national government, this has come about as a result of decisive political action such as the introduction of equality measures like quotas. More rapid progress is possible under proportional

KEY FINDINGS

Women are less likely to become local councillors because they are less likely than men to be political party members.

Women make up just 38 per cent of Labour party members and only 36 per cent of Conservative party members.

The selection process for councillors by local parties is opaque

While national selection processes are largely formal and determined by party rules, at the local level these can be informal and shaped by networks, environment and culture. Decentralised processes tend to favour well networked and resourced candidates.

To reach a 50:50 gender balance in local government over 3000 more women councillors need to be elected

To achieve equal numbers of male and female councillors, 3028 more women will need to be successfully elected - an increase of over 50%. This means that over 12,000 women need to come forward and apply for council positions, based on previous success rates.

representation electoral systems that allow for practices such as 'alternating lists'. But this can also be achieved under first-past-the-post systems such as in the UK through all women shortlists.

Institutional support from political parties, governments and NGOs in the shape of leadership, mentoring and positive action schemes to encourage women to come forward for political office, have also played a vital role in improving female representation in countries such as Germany, Sweden and in North America. The UK has far less well developed forms of institutional support than in comparison countries, so this is an important area for development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Getting more women into local politics

There needs to be greater clarity from political parties on party membership and the numbers of people coming forward to stand as councillors, particularly women and those from protected groups. This would allow for the performance of parties on recruiting women in equal numbers to men to be understood and assessed.

Getting more women selected, elected and into leadership roles

The '50:50 Parliament' campaign and its 'Ask Her to Stand' initiative aim to recruit more women into national politics. However, there is a gap for a similar cross-party campaign focussed on encouraging women to run for local politics. The most successful international schemes were typically non-politically affiliated, and run as either national networks or individual or networked local chapters with specific local goals for an increase in candidates.

Achieving a better gender balance in the leadership of local authorities and new devolved institutions

The measures above are aimed at improving the pipeline of women councillors into local government and into leadership roles. However while this could be expected to result in changes to the leadership of local authorities and combined authority boards over the next 10-15 years and beyond, more immediate measures will be needed to address the lack of women at the top of these institutions in the short-term.

KEY FINDINGS

Combined authority boards are almost entirely composed of men.

This reflects the fact that women are less likely to be local government leaders. Ahead of local elections in May 2017, only 17 per cent of council leaders were women, amounting to just 56 female leaders, an increase of only two percentage points on 2014/2015.

Women councillors are less likely to have responsibility for key devolution deal policy areas, such as business, finance and regeneration.

Our analysis shows that of the 160 women who are currently cabinet members in councils, the words business, procurement, jobs, regeneration and finance are unlikely to feature in their portfolios. In contrast, the words health, children, community, social care and wellbeing feature much more heavily.

The progressive policy think tank

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