

GENDER BALANCE OF POWER

Women's representation in regional and local government in the UK and Germany

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60-SECOND SUMMARY

Women make up just 33 per cent of local councillors in England, 27 per cent in Wales and 24 per cent in Scotland. The picture is worse when we focus on local leadership: just 15 per cent of local authority leaders in England are women. These figures demonstrate significant under-representation of women in local government. This is important because women are disproportionately affected by services under local government control, such as social care and childcare, but also because local government is and should be a key talent pipeline for regional and national government. As the UK devolves power to the regions, it is vital that we ensure any new democratic institutions and systems set up promote gender equality rather than restrict it.

While many other countries are grappling with similar issues, there is a lack of evidence of what works in improving representation of women in local politics. This research addresses that gap by focusing on Germany – both how Germany performs in terms of women's representation at the local and state level, and what initiatives and policies have been pursued to improve this performance.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

UK

- Thirty-three per cent of councillors in England, 27 per cent in Wales and 24 per cent in Scotland are women.
- Fifteen per cent of local authority leaders in England are women.
- Of the 16 directly elected mayors currently in England and Wales, only four are women.
- Progress in improving women's representation has stalled: the proportion of women councillors in England has increased from 27.8 per cent to 33 per cent in the past 20 years.

Germany

- Women represent 32.5 per cent of members of state parliaments and 24 per cent of members of local parliaments representing large municipalities.
- Three out of 16 state prime ministers are women, and 10 per cent of mayors and district chief executives. Women make up 39.9 per cent of heads of state ministries and 23.6 per cent of heads of departments of local public administrations.
- Of top positions in administrative district and municipal councils, 10.6 per cent are women.
- Between the mid-80s and 90s, there was an increase in gender representation due

to the introduction of quotas for women by several parties. Since then there have been no systematic or significant improvements.

BARRIERS TO EQUAL REPRESENTATION AND INITIATIVES TO REDUCE THEM

- Supply-side barriers – women are less likely to be members of political parties, are less likely to have the self-confidence and political efficacy to stand, and may be held back by greater caring responsibilities compared to men.

Initiatives include the Helene Weber Kolleg, which supports women interested in running for office as well as those looking to progress with training and cross-party mentoring.

- Demand-side barriers – sexism, both direct, and indirect through political culture, can hold women back from reaching elected and leadership positions. Party recruitment and selection processes are key in determining representation of women.

Initiatives include voluntary quotas within parties. The party with the longest-standing and highest quota (the Green Party) has 40.1 per cent female councillors, which is twice as many as the party with no quotas (FDP), at 18.1 per cent female councillors.

- Systemic barriers – electoral systems, including plurality systems and single-member constituencies, can lead to lower representation of women.

Initiatives include electoral systems (which vary by state) that have been shown to lead to better representation of women – such as proportional representation with fixed-party lists and multi-member districts.

LESSONS FOR THE UK AND GERMANY

Clear from our research is that parties are the gatekeepers of power in both the UK and Germany; their structures, selection procedures, programmes and cultures are key in determining and improving gender representation. Also clear is that while policies such as quotas can accelerate progress towards equal gender representation, they alone are not enough to reach full gender equality numerically and qualitatively. Both interventions that seek to broaden the pool of candidates and support them in their political journey, as well as interventions that seek to break down prejudiced structures and cultures, are necessary to achieve this.

Drawing lessons from the UK, German political parties may be interested in exploring voluntary all-women shortlists at the local and regional levels. The UK's experience shows that while this can make sizeable changes, it must be implemented by parties with strong electoral support, and ideally in the most winnable or safe seats, in order for change to happen quickly.

There are several lessons the UK can learn from Germany, including the following.

Better data collection and comparison between areas

Mandatory reporting of gender representation in local and regional government would draw attention to the lack of representation of women at these levels, and focus activity in this space by parties. Rankings can help create competition between areas and parties to demonstrate that they reflect and represent the electorate in a low-cost way.

Greater use of quotas

The introduction of quotas by German parties in the 80s led to a large shift in female representation which has not been replicated with the use of empowerment programmes in later years. While the Labour Party in the UK uses a form of quotas, other parties have weak gender requirements and are lagging behind. Greater use of quotas could dramatically accelerate the representation of women at the local level. All parties, including Labour, should review their own quota rules and seek to improve and enforce how they are implemented.

Institutionalised support for gender representation in local politics

The German national government has demonstrated greater efforts than the UK government to prioritise gender equality in both policy-making and local representation, including publishing an annual 'atlas' profiling gender equality in Germany. There is a risk the UK will fall behind other European countries in institutional support for gender equality in local decision-making if steps are not taken.

Cross-party networks and comprehensive empowerment programmes

The UK has some programmes to encourage women into and support women in local politics, but they are either in the fledgling stage, or are not as comprehensive, open to all political denominations or institutionalised as the German equivalents. UK groups should observe the experience of German initiatives and transfer learning to improve their own programmes. Both interventions that seek to support candidates, as well as interventions that seek to break down prejudiced structures and cultures, are necessary to achieve equal representation.

For the full report, including all references, data sources and notes on methodology, see: www.ippr.org/publications/gender-balance-of-power

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