

‘NOT FALLING BUT STALLING’: WOMEN AND THE 2011 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

REPORT FOR ENGENDER

BY

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Alex Salmond and the SNP may have achieved a historic victory in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections, but the male-dominated political landscape looks suspiciously like ‘politics as usual’. In the latest elections, women took just 45 out of 129 seats in Holyrood (34.8 per cent), compared with previous highs of 39.5 per cent in the 2003 elections and 37.2 per cent in 1999. The performance of the victorious SNP is comparatively poor. Although the party has a number of high profile women, including deputy leader Nicola Sturgeon, just over a quarter of the SNP’s winning candidates are female.

The 2011 results are a case of ‘stalling not falling’. While the number of female candidates was widely predicted to drop in the fourth elections to the Scottish Parliament, the results represent a small improvement on the 2007 elections, in which only 43 women MSPs were elected (33.3 per cent). However, the election results raise questions as to the future prospects of women’s political representation in Scotland, pointing to underlying trends of further decline in the recruitment and election of female candidates.

The 2011 Scottish Parliament: Gender Breakdowns

As Table 1 demonstrates, 45 women and 84 men make up the 2011 parliament. Women comprise 19 of the 69-strong SNP group (27.5 per cent), 17 of the 37 Scottish Labour MSPs (45.9 per cent), six out of 15 Conservatives (40 per cent), and one of five Liberal Democrats (20 per cent). One of the two Green MSPs elected is female and the one Independent returned is a woman. Two minority ethnic candidates have been elected, both men³. Overall, the number of female MSPs has risen slightly since the immediate post-2007 election results, from 43 in 2007 to 45 women MSPs⁴.

As Table 2 indicates, a higher proportion of women MSPs were elected on the regional lists (25 women or 44.6%) than in constituency seats (20 women or 27.4%). This result stands in contrast to previous elections, in which women MSPs have been

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³ These are Hanzala Malik (LAB) and Humza Yousaf (SNP), both elected through the Glasgow regional list.

⁴ The number of women MSPs rose to 45 out of 129 MSPs (34.8 per cent) by the end of the 2007-2011 Scottish Parliament. On 31 August 2007, regional list MSP Stefan Tymkewycz (SNP) resigned his seat and was replaced by Shirley-Anne Somerville. Additionally, regional list MSP Bashir Ahmad (SNP) died in February 2009 and was replaced by Anne McLaughlin.

more likely to be returned through constituency seats than the regional lists (although fewer women were returned to constituency seats in 2007 than in either 1999 or 2003).

In 2011, the percentage of female MSPs representing Labour fell (by four per cent), while the percentage of SNP, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat women MSPs rose. Figure 1 charts trends in women's representation by party over time. It highlights a wide range of performance amongst the different parties and different trajectories in the period 1999-2011. In 1999, Labour party performance was closely matched by the SNP (50 per cent to 43 per cent) but, since then, Labour has been consistently ahead of its closest rival. The highest point in women's representation to date has been that of Labour at 56 per cent (in 2003) and the poorest record has been that of the Liberal Democrats at 11.8 per cent (in 1999 and 2003, rising to 12.5 per cent in 2007). While women currently make up 20 per cent of Liberal Democrat MSPs, this percentage increase is due to the loss of seats overall for the party in 2011 (from 16 to 5), and actually represents a numerical decrease from two Liberal Democrat women MSPs in 2007 to one woman MSP in 2011.

Of particular note is the downward trend in the SNP. In 1999, the SNP returned 43 per cent female MSPs, this dropped to 33 per cent in 2003 and again to 25.5 per cent in 2007. Despite the party's strong electoral performance in 2011, the percentage of women remains low, rising only slightly to 27.5%. In contrast, the percentage of Conservative women MSPs has risen steadily from 16.7 per cent in 1999, to 22.2 per cent in 2003 to 29.4 per cent in 2007 and finally to 40% in 2011 (albeit in numerical terms, this relates to a small increase from five women in 2007 to six women in 2011).

Candidate Selection

In the run up to the 2011 elections, there was media concern expressed about the drop in female candidates. Overall, the proportion of female candidates fell from 36.1 per cent in 2007 to 29.5 per cent in 2011 (this calculation is based upon the main parties plus the Green party). Disaggregating the headline figures, we see that women comprise 26.1% of constituency candidates and 34 % of List candidates in 2011 compared with 32.7% and 38.6% respectively in 2007. Tables 3 and 4 provide a breakdown of candidate selection figures by gender, type of seat and party.

Constituency seats

The SNP ran 21 women and 52 men in the 73 constituency contests (28.7%). Labour fielded 20 women and 53 men (27.4%). The Conservatives ran 14 women and 59 men (19.2%); and the Liberal Democrats ran 21 women and 51 men⁵ (29.2).

List seats

The SNP fielded 21 women and 58 on their regional lists (26.6%); the Labour Party ran 25 women and 30 men (45.5%); Conservatives ran 10 women and 45 men (18.2%); and the Liberal Democrats ran 19 women and 36 men (34.6%); the Greens ran 20 women and 24 men (45.6%).

⁵ The Scottish Liberal Democrats did not contest Clydesdale.

Explaining the Trends

Engender's Karen Dargo sums up the trends with the apt phrase which headlines this piece: "not falling but stalling." So how can we explain the way in which the numbers of women elected has been shored up, despite the fall in candidate numbers?

We argue that the underlying trends are those of a downward decline. In the run-up to devolution, women activists working inside and outside the main political parties succeeded in achieving substantial reforms – both formal and informal - in candidate selection procedures, including the introduction of strong equality guarantees by Scottish Labour in the first election. There are a range of measures that can be used by political parties to counter barriers to women in the political recruitment process. They include "softer" measures such as gender-balanced shortlists, training and encouragement, as well as "harder" quota-type measures such as twinning, all-women- shortlists, and the "zipping" of party lists whereby the names of male and female candidates are alternated.

Comparative evidence suggests that it is hard "equality guarantees" that are most likely to deliver higher numbers of women in parliaments and councils. In 2011, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats had "softer" shortlisting requirements for constituency contests in their party rules: in the case of Labour there is a requirement for a gender-balanced shortlist, the Liberal Democrats require at least one woman to be shortlisted. However, in practice, the rules are not uniformly implemented and enforced. Neither the SNP nor the Conservatives have such mechanisms in place. In terms of list contests, both Labour and the Greens operate "gender templates", whereby the top places on the lists are ordered in such a way – usually alternating female and male candidates – as to achieve gender balance of outcomes. In the case of Labour, five of the eight lists were topped by women candidates. Green women headed up four of the eight party lists. The SNP and Liberal Democrats applied no measures to their party lists. Only 25 per cent of the SNP's top three list places were occupied by women; and about a third of the top places for the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives do not apply special measures to the Lists but in 2011, six out of the ten women list candidates were placed in top three positions. All six of these women were elected.

There are clear gendered patterns of candidate placement in the 2011 elections, with women candidates generally placed in lower positions on party lists and less likely to be selected to contest safe or winnable constituency seats. Yet both Labour and the SNP has returned better than predicted numbers of female MSPs. This apparent anomaly can be explained by the poor electoral performance of Scottish Labour and, conversely, the strong electoral performance of the SNP in the constituency contests. Until 2011, Scottish Labour has been one of the most proactive parties in promoting gender balance and is also the party which has usually returned a greater proportion of its MSPs via the constituency contests, rather than the regional lists. The proportion of Scottish Labour women MSPs was widely predicted to fall, based on the drop in proportion of female candidates, particularly in the constituencies. Five Labour women MSPs stepped down in 2011 and all were replaced by male candidates.

However, Labour's pattern of losses and wins has actually mitigated against the projected decline. So, the fact that the party had equality measures in force on the regional lists (zipping the top places) has meant that women candidates have fared relatively well. In other words, if Labour had had a stronger showing in the constituency contests, the number of Labour women would have been significantly lower. Meanwhile, the SNP strong performance has meant that marginal candidates (in marginal constituencies or those candidates placed far down the regional lists) have been successful, rather than that the party has actively promoted women candidates.

Future Prospects

It's a case of stalling not falling for women's representation in the Scottish parliament. The trends across parties point to either relative stasis or decline in the number of women MSPs – as in the case of Labour, the SNP and the Liberal Democrats – or to large percentage increases based on small numerical gains – as in the case of the Conservatives. Above all, the 2011 results demonstrate the efficacy of strong equality measures – such as those used by Labour and the Greens - and suggest that further progress in the number of women MSPs is unlikely without greater commitment by the other parties. However, while Labour's performance on women's representation was better than expected, it remains to be seen as to whether Scottish Labour will continue to lead the way on this issue at Holyrood. Until 2011, the party has traditionally dominated the constituency contests; as such, there has not been much of a political 'cost' in having special measures on the regional lists. As the focus shifts to the regional lists as the main arena of competition for the party, there is a danger that these equality measures may fall by the wayside.

Why do numbers matter? The arguments for gender-balanced representation were well-rehearsed in the run-up to devolution and were made on the grounds of equality, justice and fairness, and on the basis of the requirements for building a legitimate and inclusive democratic institution. In addition, there were expectations that the entry of substantial numbers of women into the new parliament would 'make a difference'. Although by no means straightforward, studies of the first years of the Scottish Parliament have demonstrated that the high numbers of women MSPs have changed the focus of the traditional political agenda and transformed 'ways of working.' In particular, there has been substantial progress on action to tackle domestic violence, an agenda that was largely driven by women politicians and women's organisations. The stalling of gender balance in the Scottish Parliament, then, has potentially far-reaching implications in terms of its symbolic importance, political culture, and policy outcomes.

As such, there is little room for complacency as the Parliament enters its fourth term. The 2011 election results demonstrate that the number of women at Holyrood is once again the result of accident rather than design, as we noted in 2003 and 2007. Gender equality measures remain poorly institutionalised within parties and there is little evidence that political parties are making any ongoing efforts to reform the norms and practices of political recruitment in Scotland. If political parties are serious about making real advances in women's political representation, then they must follow the Labour Party's example and make a firm commitment – including the use of equality guarantees to ensure equal representation at Holyrood.

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Scottish Parliament 2011 by party and gender

Party	Female	Male	Total	% <i>female</i>
SNP	19	50	69	27.5%
Labour	17	20	37	45.9%
Conservatives	6	9	15	40.0%
Liberal Democrats	1	4	5	20.0%
Others	2	1	3	66.7%
<i>Total</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>129</i>	<i>34.8%</i>

Table 2: Scottish Parliament 2011 by party, seat and gender										
Party	Constituency		Total seats constituency (%women)	List		Total Seats List (%women)	Total MSPs	Total women	Total men	% women (%women 2007)
	female	male		female	male					
Labour	6	9	15 (40%)	11	11	22 (50%)	37	17	20	45.9% <i>(50%)</i>
SNP	14	39	53 (35.9%)	5	11	16 (31.3%)	69	19	50	27.5% <i>(25.5%)</i>
Cons	0	3	3 (0.0%)	6	6	12 (50%)	15	6	9	40% <i>(29.4%)</i>
Lib Dems	0	2	2 (0.0%)	1	2	3 (33.3%)	5	1	4	20% <i>(12.5%)</i>
Greens	0	0	0 (0.0%)	1	1	2 (50%)	2	1	1	50% <i>(0.00%)</i>
Independent	0	0	0 (0.0%)	1	0	1 (100%)	1	1	0	100% <i>(100%)</i>
Totals	20	53	73 (27.4%)	25	31	56 (44.6%)	129	45	84	34.8%

Figure 1

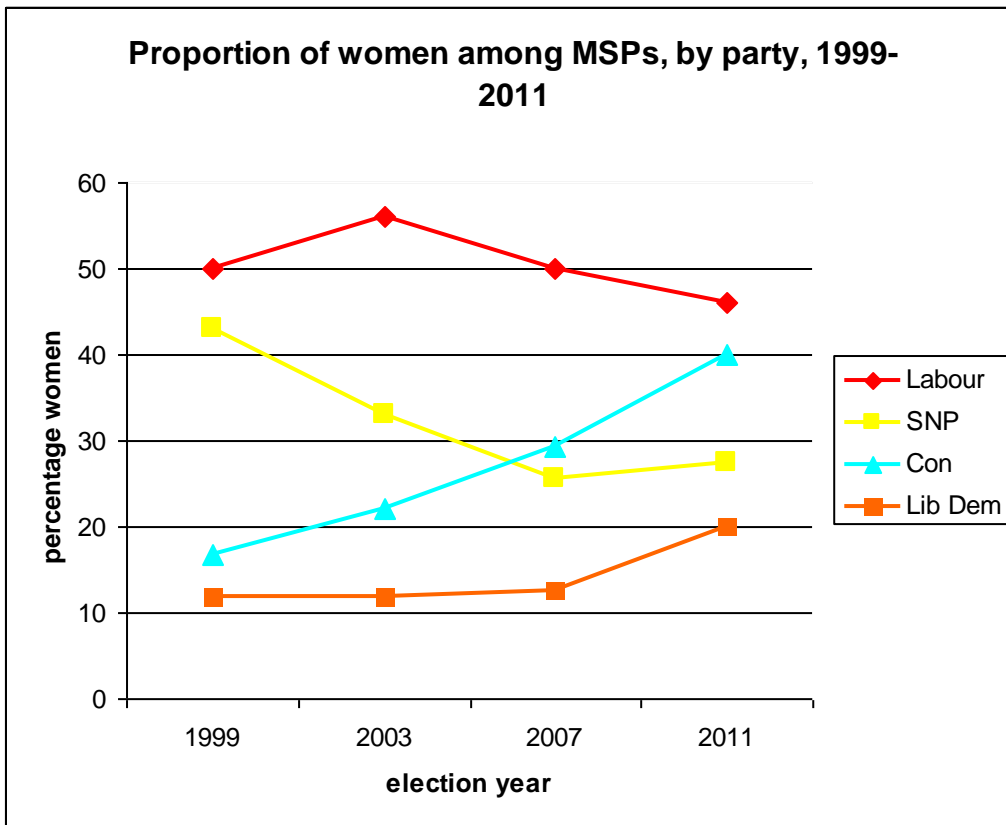


Table 3. Scottish Parliament 2011 candidates by party, gender and type of seat

Party	Constituency		Total Candidates Constituency (% women)	List		Total Seats List (% women)
	Female	Male		Female	Male	
Labour	20	53	73 (27.4%)	25	30	55 (45.5%)
SNP	21	52	73 (28.7%)	21	58	79 (26.6%)
Conservatives	14	59	73 (19.2%)	10	45	55 (18.2%)
Lib Dems	21	51	72 ⁶ (29.2%)	19	36	55 (34.6%)
Green Party	0	0	0 (0.0%)	20	24	44 (45.6%)
<i>Total</i>	76	215	291 (26.1%)	95	193	288 (34%)

Table 4. Scottish Parliament 2011 list candidates

Party	List		Total Seats List (% women)	Candidates in 'Top Three' List Places		Total 'Top Three' List Places (% women)
	Female	Male		Female	Male	
Labour	25	30	55 (45.5%)	13	11	24 (54.2%)
SNP	21	58	79 (26.6%)	6	18	24 (25%)
Conservatives	10	45	55 (18.2%)	6	18	24 (25%)
Lib Dems	19	36	55 (34.6%)	8	16	24 (33.3%)
Green Party	20	24	44 (45.6%)	13	16	24 (54.2%)
<i>Total</i>	95	193	288 (34%)	41	79	120 (34.6%)

⁶ The Scottish Liberal Democrats did not contest Clydesdale.

