Women's Political Journey:

2025

Exploring the election process and women's experiences of abuse, exclusion and bias, including vital recommendations for improvement.

VOTE!

Upcoming National Elections

VOTE

ENGENDER

Acknowledgments

= ENGENDER

Terminology Guide

Quota – A quota sets a requirement or target for the number of representatives from a particular group. In the UK, gender quotas to promote equal representation of women are the most commonly used. Quotas are not mandatory, and the Equality Act (2010) sets out the circumstances that political parties may choose to implement quotas.[1]

Positive Action Measures and Positive Action Mechanisms (PAMs) – A *positive action measure* is an action that a party may take to address disadvantages and underrepresentation by people who share certain protected characteristics.[2] This includes a variety of different approaches including training schemes, mentoring and tailored support. Quotas are a form of positive action measure.

In our report, a *positive action mechanism* refers to the specific mechanism that a political party chooses to use to implement a quota. Different mechanisms for implementing quotas could include an All-Women Shortlist, twinning or zipping.

---

[1] Engender, 2016. Equal Voice, Equal Power: The case for gender quotas in Scotland.
https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Equal-Voice-Equal-Power---the-case-for-gender-quotas-in-Scotland.pdf
[2] Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2025. Equality Act 2010: A guide for political parties. Available at:
https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/equality-act-2010-guide-political-parties?return-url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.equalityhumanrights.com%2Fsearch%3Fkeys%3Dguide%2Bto%2Bpolitical%2Bparties

Executive Summary

This research, conducted between July and November 2024, examined women's experiences of political candidate selection processes across Scottish parties. The study involved a survey completed by 159 participants and 15 in-depth interviews with women with candidacy experience, capturing reflections across political parties in Scotland: SNP (33%), Greens (18%), Labour (17%), Liberal Democrats (8%), and Conservatives (5%).

While the 2021 Holyrood election secured a 45% representation rate among women MSPs, progress has stalled in other electoral spaces. Women comprise only 35% of councillors after the 2022 local elections and 35% of Scottish MPs following the 2024 General Election.

This report explores the wide range of barriers women face throughout the candidate journey in Scotland, including standing for candidacy, getting selected, internal campaigning and selection processes, becoming an official candidate, and after the campaign.

Women, particularly Black, minority ethnic and disabled women, face multiple compounding and entrenched barriers at each stage of the candidate journey, across all parties. Party processes continue to operate based on an imagined "default candidate" that is white, middle-class, male, and non-disabled. Only 35% of survey respondents felt their party genuinely prioritised diversity in candidate selection. Everyday sexism, including inappropriate comments and gendered stereotypes, remains commonplace across parties, with 24% of selected candidates experiencing sexist language or bullying.

Specific barriers that this report explores, include:
- Lack of transparency, information and unclear processes
- Limited financial assistance
- Gaps in available guidance and formal support networks
- Caring responsibilities
- Accessibility needs
- Unclear expectations and feedback
- Decision-maker bias

The research also reveals a brewing crisis in candidate safety:
- Over 70% of participants reported having experienced online harassment during campaigns
- Only 11% felt "very safe" during their campaign period
- Women reported modifying their behaviour - limiting social media use, avoiding certain areas, and in one instance, moving house
- This is contributing to a growing retention issue of women in politics

When women's voices are equally represented, this leads to higher quality decision making and better outcomes for women, their communities and society as a whole. To secure these benefits political parties must embrace their role as active agents of change and commit to building equitable structures and cultures where women can thrive.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for political parties, the Scottish Government and councils. Achieving sustainable women's representation requires more than procedural fixes - it demands fundamental cultural transformation within political parties. Without decisive action to address these systematic barriers, progress on women's representation risks stalling or reversing, undermining the health of Scottish democracy.

The upcoming elections in 2026 and 2027 represent a critical moment of opportunity for parties to demonstrate their commitment to equality by implementing changes that benefit not only women's representation, but the overall diversity and quality of democratic participation in Scotland.

> "I have been spat on, shouted at, abused and physically shoved countless times."

> "The processes are too complex and not easy to understand. This favours established party people "in the know" who then tend to be the most represented - men, white."

> "I couldn't face the misogyny as a woman in political life. Not the trolling of women, their families and the way women are treated by the press."

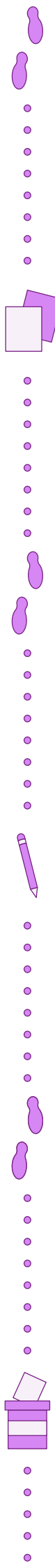> "I have no desire to put myself forward for the level of abuse that is expected."

> "Unless you're one of the boys, the wife of one of the boys, or in the 'right' political sub-group, it seems there's no interest in your involvement."

> "Someone said to me [during the election] and I quote, 'we can't win here with someone who looks like her.'"

> "We often persuade great people to join, guide them through the selection process, and they get elected. But they may eventually fall away because it can be an unpleasant experience or they experience online harassment or in-person bullying and harassment, council chambers especially can be quite hostile—worse than Holyrood or Westminster, I'd say."

Contents

1. Introduction

Following the May 2021 Holyrood election, Scotland elected its most diverse parliament ever. Women now make up a record 45% of MSPs, including the first two women of colour elected to the Scottish Parliament, and first permanent wheelchair user. These breakthroughs have rightly been widely celebrated, but progress has not kept up elsewhere. Women made up just 35% of councillors in Scotland following the 2022 local elections, an increase of just 6% on the previous election.[3] Similarly, after the 2024 General Election just 35% of MPs returned from Scotland were women – a result which trailed other parts of the UK.[4] With upcoming elections to Holyrood and local councils in 2026 and 2027 respectively, urgent action is needed to consolidate progress. Where advances have stalled, greater ambition, strategy and action is required to ensure women's representation moves forward at these elections and beyond.
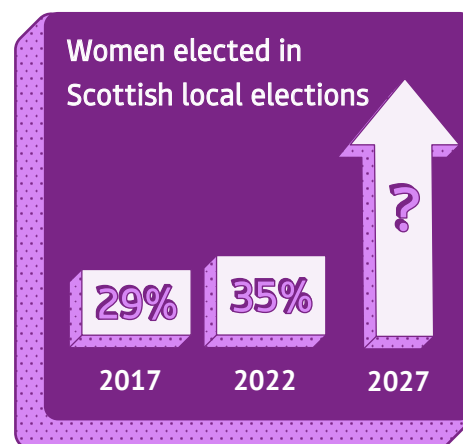
A major driver of success at Holyrood in 2021 was the use of gender quotas - by the SNP, Scottish Labour and the Scottish Greens. Quotas are proven to be highly effective in increasing women's representation.[5] They offer an evidence-based way to fast-track change and compensate against remaining barriers preventing women's equal representation.[6] However, as they are not mandatory in the UK, their use relies on parties continuing to opt-in. Without the backing of robust legislation to enforce them, the transformative impact of quotas is diluted.

Parties cannot therefore afford to ignore the many internal cultural and structural factors that are always firmly within their control, which also shape representative diversity. This includes the operation of candidate selection processes; the party culture which surround them; and what support is provided to women and underrepresented groups throughout their political journeys. Along with bold action on quotas, parties must commit to action in all these areas if women's representation is to become sustainable across multiple elections. While candidate selection processes for Holyrood 2026 are already underway, it is not too late for parties to make changes that will positively impact women's access, support and experience of candidacy in the short term.

Women elected in Scottish local elections

29% 2017 · 35% 2022 · ? 2027

[3] Engender (2023). Sex and Power in Scotland 2023. Available at:
https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SP2023NEW.pdf

[4] Duncan, J (2025). The Herald. The most diverse Westminster yet, but there's more to do . Available at:
https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/viewpoint/24451716.diverse-westminster-yet/

[5] Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019) Women in Parliament in 2018: The Year in Review. Available at:
https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2019-03/new-ipu-report-shows-well-designed-quotas-lead-significantly-more-women-mps

[6] Engender (2016). Equal Voice, Equal Power: The Case for Gender Quotas in Scotland. Available at
https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Equal-Voice-Equal-Power---the-case-for-gender-quotas-in-Scotland.pdf

Beyond 2026, parties must adopt more strategic approaches to reducing the cultural and process related barriers outlined in this report, which continue to negatively impact women's participation, candidacy and campaigns. This paper offers guidance to parties on this path, presenting research findings on women's experiences of accessing and participating in candidacy processes across parties, identifying common barriers and making recommendations for change.

2. Political Parties – Gatekeepers to Representation

Political parties play a pivotal role in determining the overall diversity of representation in our councils and parliaments.[7] Long before election day, a combination of political party cultures, practices and decisions are determining who gets the chance to be a candidate and ultimately get elected.

How parties shape diversity in representation

There are several important ways that parties control who gets to be a candidate:

- **Party cultures.** Parties, from local branches to the highest decision-making levels, foster unique internal cultures that can shape women's political aspirations, enabling or blocking women's candidacies and leadership within party life.

- **Access to information and support.** Parties determine the flow of critical information to prospective candidates on all aspects of becoming a candidate, including on selection timelines, party expectations and support. They also decide how much practical training and support to provide to prospective candidates during and following their selection process.

- **Candidate approval.** Parties make decisions on who is eligible to be considered as a candidate.

- **Selection processes.** Parties determine how candidate selection will operate. This includes deciding what is required of prospective candidates, how the final candidate decision will be made, and who will make it, and whether any quotas (implemented through positive action mechanisms (PAMs)) will be used to support underrepresented groups.

---

[7] Wackerle, J (2022) Parity of Patriarchy? The nomination of female candidates in British politics. Party Politics Vol. 28 (1). Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1354068820977242

Specific candidate selection processes vary across parties, and individual elections controlling access to candidacy is both a tremendous responsibility and opportunity for parties to create more equal and diverse democratic representation.[8]

Candidate selection is an internal party process which happens largely without public scrutiny, and concerns relating to transparency, fair access and due process are regularly raised.[9] Fawcett Society research indicates that success in selection is still often determined by prospective candidates' personal connections and access to party networks.[10] This is often reinforced by informal and highly localised approaches to candidate selection in many parties and elections.[11] This culture has profound implications for representation of all groups who historically have faced exclusion from political spaces:

"Candidate selection itself is at best opaque, and at worst, deeply unfair and alienating. It creates enormous barriers to entry, particularly affecting women, disabled people, Black people and other ethnic minorities." – Hannah Stevens, Elect Her. [12]

[8] Institute for Government (2023), Conservative and Labour party selection of UK parliamentary candidates. Available at: https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/general-election-candidate-selection

[9] Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee Letter to Political Parties on Understanding Barriers to Participation in local politics. Available at: https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/local-gov/correspondence/2023/lettertopartiesunderstandingbarriers.pdf

[10] Fawcett Society (2018) Strategies for Success: Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament. Available at: https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b8a66d72-32a4-4d9d-91e7-33ad1ef4a785

[11] Bjarnegard, E and Kenny, M (2016) Comparing Candidate Selection: A Feminist Institutionalist Approach. Government and Opposition 51(03):370-392 Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301713322_Comparing_Candidate_Selection_A_Feminist_Institutionalist_Approach

[12] Stevens, H (2024). A lack of real progress on women in politics?. The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jun/17/a-lack-of-real-progress-on-women-in-politics

These inequalities in candidate selection mirror patterns of inequality in wider society. Women continue to carry out the majority of unpaid care and domestic labour, meaning that many are "time-poor". Women therefore face higher levels of pressure on their time, finances and flexibility than men. These resources are key to securing the networks, party experience and knowledge often needed to succeed in candidate selection, placing women regularly at disadvantage.[13]

Parties also have an essential role in shaping women's journeys in positive and negative ways after they are selected as candidates.

- **Campaign management and support.** Parties provide candidates with direction, resources and support to run election campaigns. This includes providing support to candidates to manage caring responsibilities and providing support with access needs to disabled candidates. Parties also must support candidates receiving abuse – a growing threat to women and underrepresented politicians.

- **Post-candidacy support.** Election campaigns are often intense, and parties decide how much support to provide after polling day. For unsuccessful candidates the quality of the support received, can influence their future level of party engagement, or any further attempt at election.

---

[13] Fawcett Society (2018) Strategies for Success: Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament. Available at:
https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b8a66d72-32a4-4d9d-91e7-33ad1ef4a785

THE CANDIDATE JOURNEY

Political parties select candidates through processes shaped by their resources, culture, and history. Selection varies by election type (UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament, local councils) due to different electoral systems and levels of prestige assigned to them. Parties generally apply stricter selection for high-priority or desirable seats. In some cases, standard processes may be bypassed for direct appointments. Timescales also matter greatly - snap elections often use truncated processes compared to scheduled elections.

Selection processes can have a profound impact on women's representation.[14] Our research confirms previous studies showing that while specific differences exist, all major party processes share relatively common features.

These features can be summarised in 4 key stages of the 'candidate journey' below.

Stage 1: Before candidacy

Interested Individuals who are politically active decide whether to pursue candidacy for a future election. They must hold political aspirations, personal motivation and confidence.

Key factors shaping decisions will be encouragement and mentorship from party members; access to information about selection, campaign timelines and available support, as well as the expectations associated with the role.

[14] Wackerle, J (2022) Parity of Patriarchy? The nomination of female candidates in British politics. Party Politics Vol. 28 (1). Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1354068820977242

Stage 2: Getting Selected

At this point, individuals have decided to enter the selection process. This stage can include multiple important decision-points on the path to getting selected. Prospective candidates must gain party approval to stand via an assessment and vetting processes.

How will you juggle everything?

But what about your other commitments, **young lady?**

Can you handle the culture?

This may involve completing application forms, an initial informal 'sift' or shortlist, and participating in an assessment/vetting interview.

You are asked what your opinion of the opposing party is, what is your response?

While canvassing, someone aggressively confronts you, how do you respond?
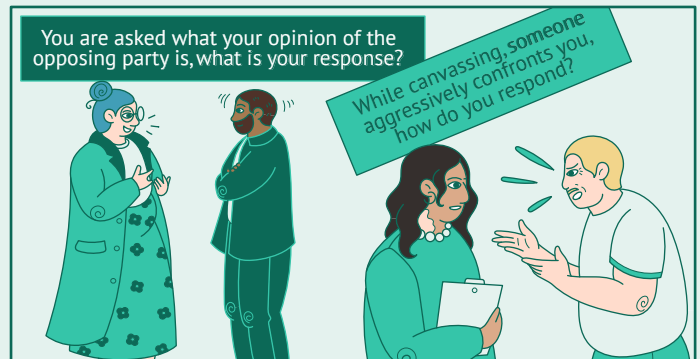
Sometimes group or role play activities may feature.
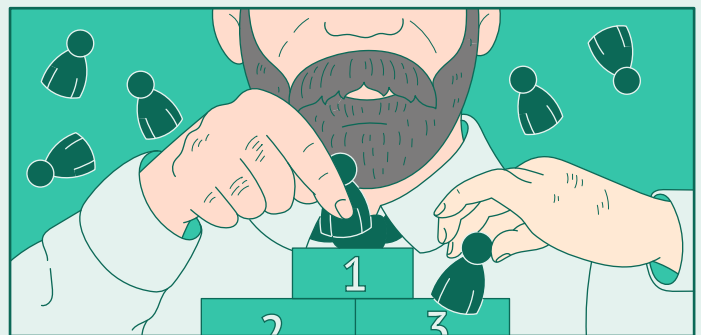
Approval may involve processes of longlisting and shortlisting of prospective candidates by party decision-makers.

Prospective candidates also must gain the nomination of their party to be the official candidate.

Candidate statement

Favoured candidate

Internal Hustings
18:00 - 20:00
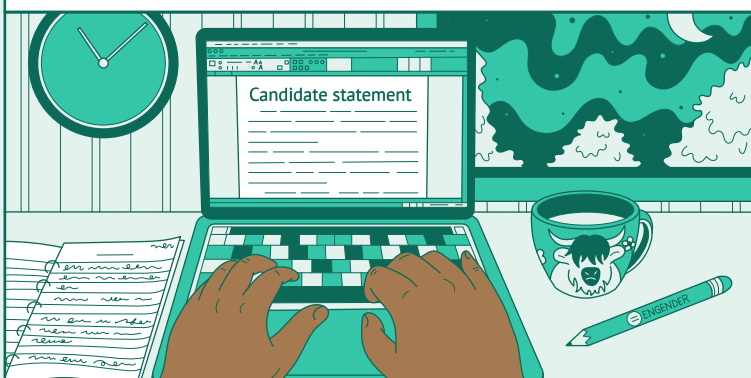
If the seat is contested there may be a selection contest. Prospective candidates might write candidate statements, participate in internal hustings, make presentations and participate in other activities to gain member support.
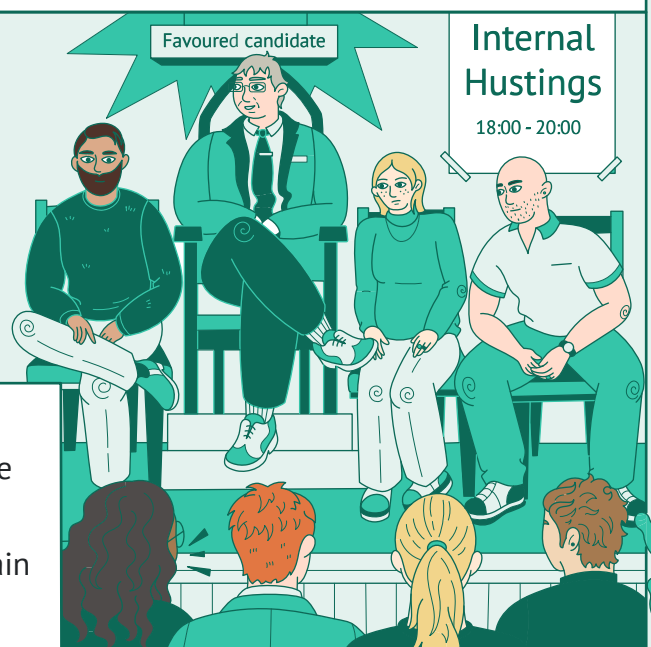
Our research indicates that the final decision on candidacy is typically by a vote of local party members. However, in some instances this decision may be taken by a panel.
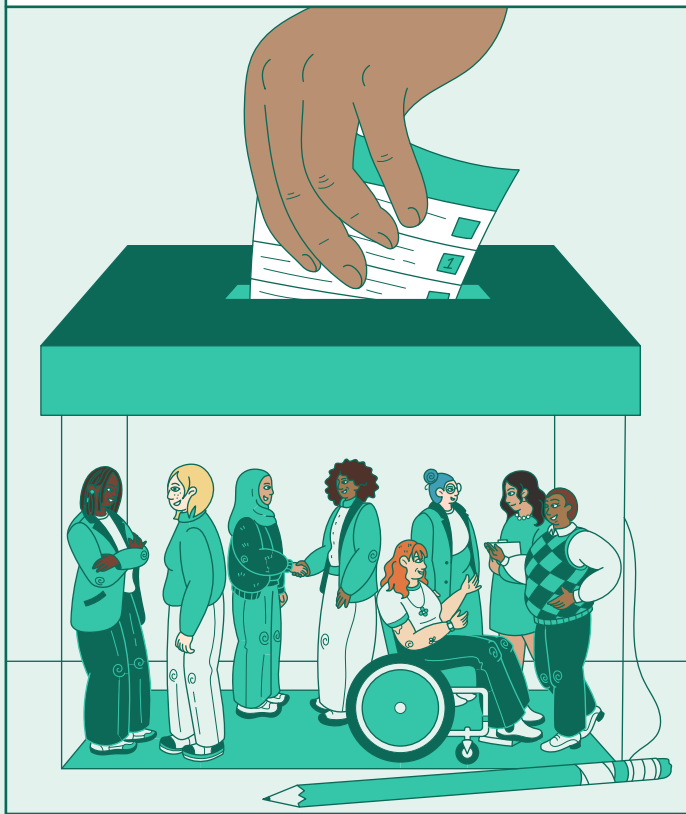
Candidates are sometimes appointed directly, either where a seat is uncontested, or where the party has opted to suspend normal selection arrangements.

The order that these decisions take place vary across and within parties and elections. Notably some parties maintain "approved lists", whereby prospective candidates who have gained approval in the past, maintain this eligibility for a given time period.

Stage 3: Campaigning as the (selected) candidate
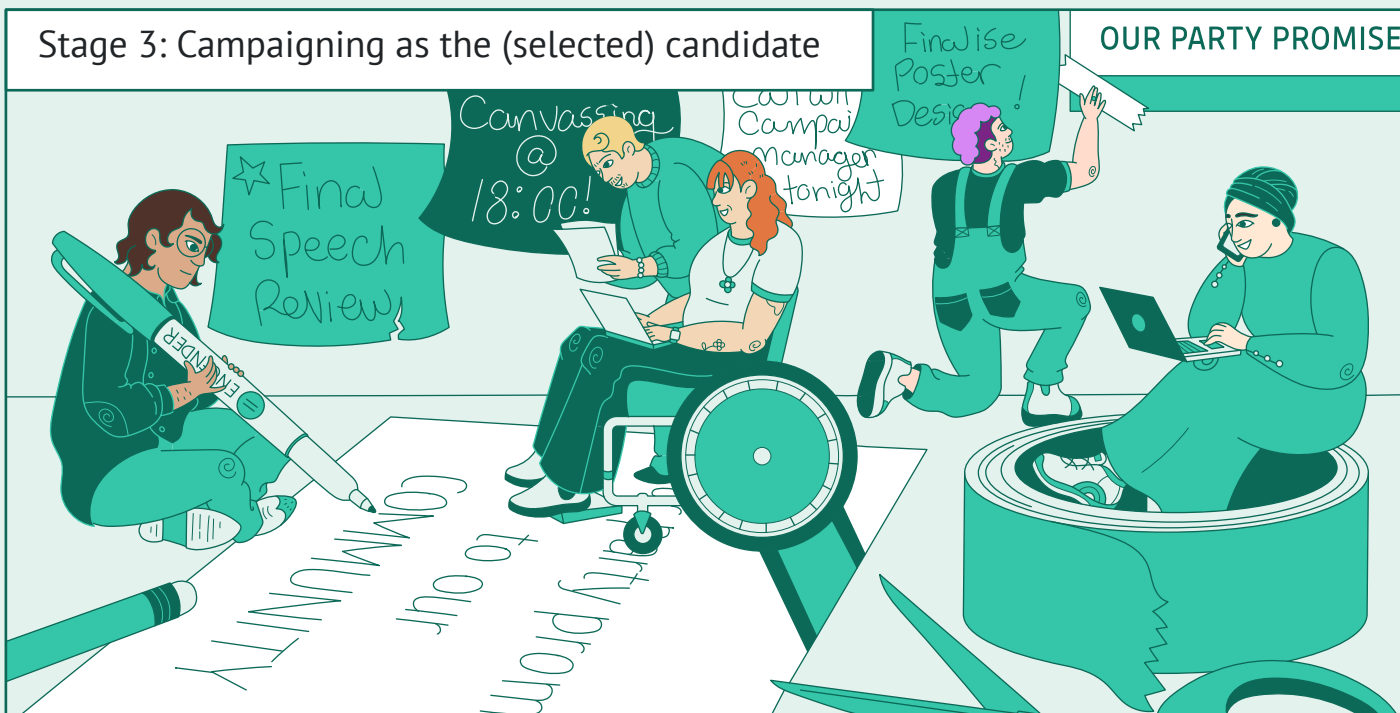
Once selected, candidates typically have to build an election campaign team.

The campaign will normally involve regular door-knocking/canvassing, participation in hustings and attending party events. The workload intensity may also be shaped by factors including seat winnability, local party support and the election timeframe.
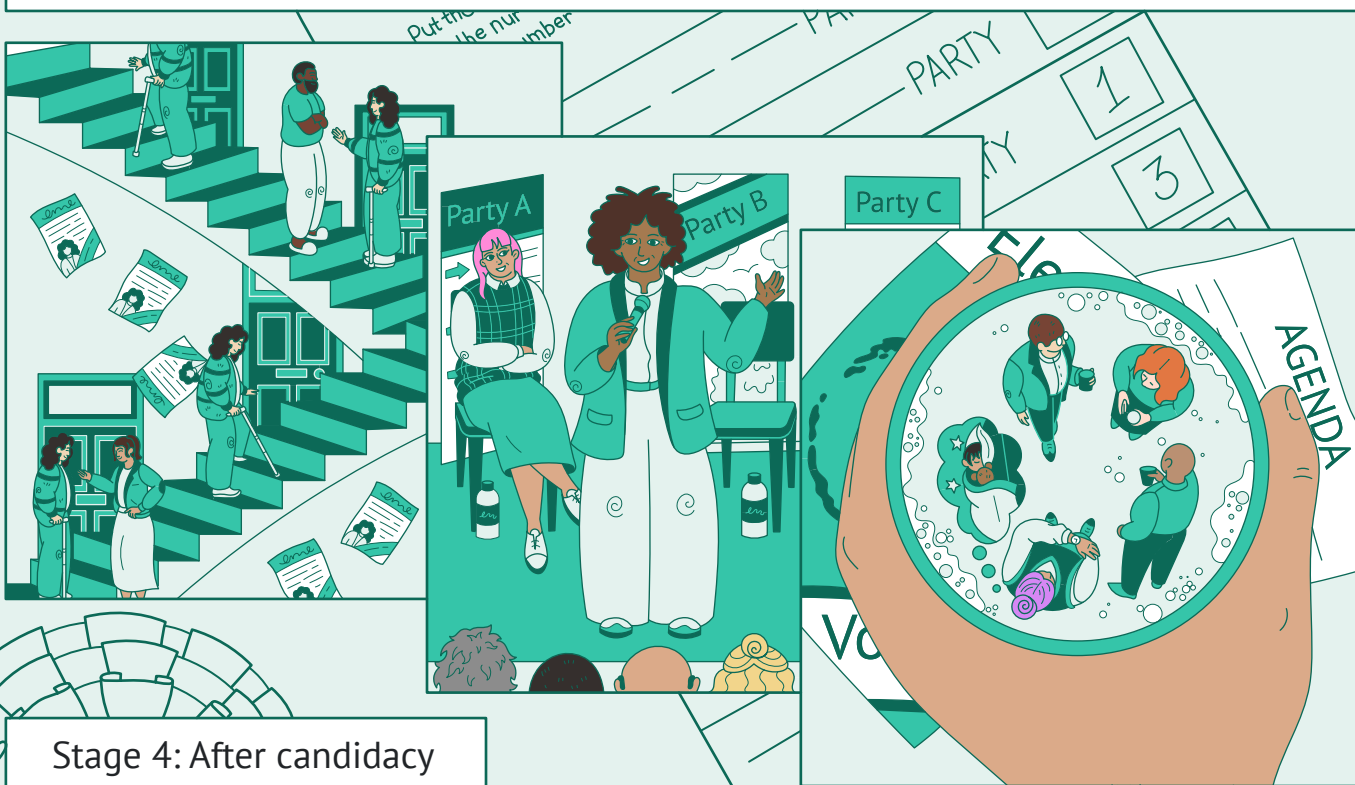
Stage 4: After candidacy

Following an election, successful candidates will become elected representatives. Unsuccessful candidates must consider the next step in their political future.
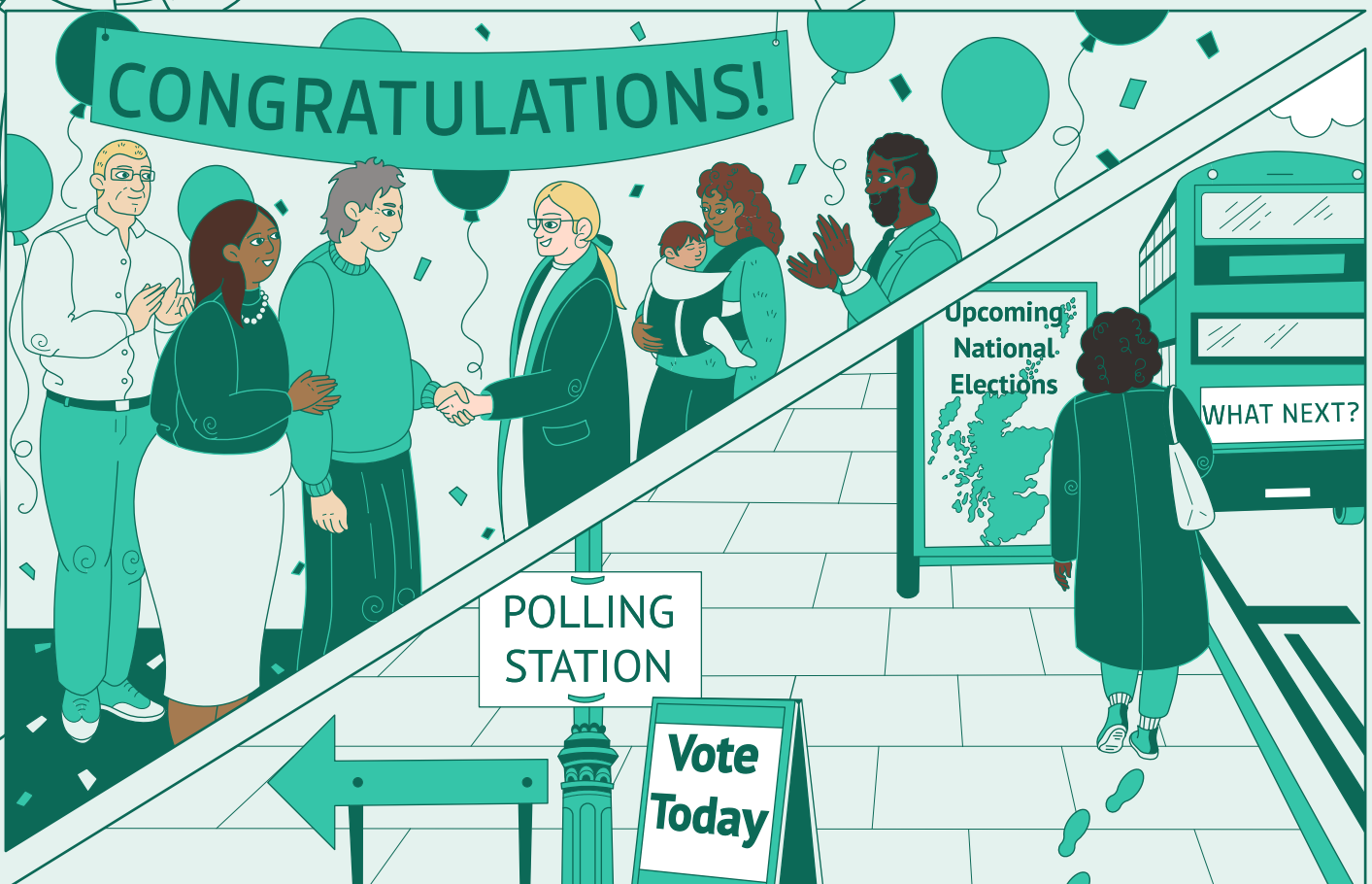
3.Our Key Findings

Across parties, our report found a number of commonalities in women's experiences during selection, campaigning and post-election, these include:

1 **Many aspects of the culture, structure and process surrounding candidacy continue to be tailored to the circumstances of an imagined "default candidate" who is by default white, middle-class, male and not disabled.**[15] In common with earlier Fawcett Society findings, we found that those outwith this model are likely to face a range of additional barriers at each stage of their candidate journey.[16]

2 **Information about candidacy is difficult to find.** This includes information about timelines, expectations and role descriptions. This is true at all stages of the candidate journey. What is available is not always accurate, high quality or transparent and there is an over-reliance on local party meetings as the main way to find out about candidacy. Better online information is needed, particularly to support those with less pre-existing knowledge or personal networks, less free time or who face additional barriers to attendance due to disability.

3 **There is a lack of formal support, guidance and training available for women to navigate candidacy processes at all stages, particularly at council level.** Gaps in support provision are also particularly evident for Black and minority ethnic and disabled people. The most useful support is often informal, provided by peers. Official members networks – i.e. women's networks – are generally valued but are often under resourced and heavily reliant on volunteers, often limiting their capacity.

4 **Selection processes often don't work for women and other underrepresented groups.** Many feel that decision-making around candidate approval and selection lacks transparency. Women can face gendered scrutiny based on stereotypes, sexist norms and double standards. There is often a lack of diversity and understanding of equalities issues in those involved in candidate approval/assessment/vetting interviews, and collection of equalities monitoring data is often not routine.

[15] Fawcett Society (2018) Strategies for Success: Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament. Available at:
https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b8a66d72-32a4-4d9d-91e7-33ad1ef4a785
[16] In their research, Fawcett Society use the term "ideal candidate" to describe this model. We use the term "default candidate" here.

5 **Caring responsibilities remain a major barrier to equal participation in candidate processes for women.** When selecting candidates, parties can place disproportionate importance on "presenteeism", disproportionately focussing on hours spent on party activities, rather than other candidate skills. This can disadvantage people with less free time due to caring responsibilities. This persists once candidates are selected and elected, negatively impacting women's overall experience and likelihood of running again in future.

6 **Sexism in party culture and process mirrors sexist attitudes in wider society, upholding barriers at all stages of the candidate journey.** Across parties we observed relatively casual attitudes towards sexist language and gendered stereotypes that feed bias and negative assumptions about women's suitability as candidates. In some areas sexist bullying is a problem and disabled and minoritised women may be more at risk of experiencing this in some parties and branches.

7 **Across parties candidates experience significant levels of abuse and harassment during the campaign period, with personal safety online and offline both major concerns.** Parties are not keeping pace with this issue, nor are they providing sufficient support or training for candidates to deal with it. Experiences of abuse and harassment frequently force women to reconsider how they engage in campaigning and risks pushing women out of politics, with Black and minority ethnic women often at greatest risk.

8 **Quotas and positive action mechanisms (PAMs) are threatened by resistance and weak acceptance in wider memberships, even in parties which use them regularly.** Parties need to actively counter narratives intended to undermine candidates selected through them, take action to target those who promote them and increase understanding of PAMs and why they're needed.

9 **Many former candidates would not recommend candidacy to others. Parties need to do more to support successful and unsuccessful candidates following the election.** This includes supporting unsuccessful candidates with burnout, and for successful candidates, advocating for policies that will improve their lives as elected representatives.

10 **Urgent action is needed from parties to diversify their active memberships and grow the pool of potential candidates to represent a wider range of experience.** However, this must happen in tandem with reforms to reduce cultural and process-based barriers to candidacy which currently persist.

We outline our specific recommendations for how parties can act on these findings at the end of this report.

4. Research Design and Methodology

The findings presented are based on research carried out between July-November 2024. Our goal was to increase our understanding of how parties select and support candidates, and the impact this has on women's representation and experience.

This paper is focussed on the insights we gained into women's experiences of candidate selection processes and barriers encountered; life as a candidate; and interactions with party support measures. Our research also examined party approaches to gender quotas and positive action mechanisms (PAMs), and the impact of these on candidate diversity at recent elections. Findings on quotas/PAMs and diversity data are mostly explored in a separate paper.

This is primarily a qualitative piece of research which focusses on telling the collective and individual stories of women's experiences. Statistics from our survey are periodically referenced to enhance these stories.

Survey

We ran a survey on SurveyMonkey for 5 weeks between August-October 2024. This was targeted at women with experience of any stage of party candidate selection processes for elections to Holyrood, local councils and Westminster.

We included 159 usable responses in the final analysis of which 115 were fully completed and 44 partially completed. 126 respondents answered demographic questions, offering some insight into who participated in our survey.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Ethnicity

White — 81%

Black, Asian and non-white mixed ethnicities — 5%

Other or prefer not to disclose — 14%

Gender

Women — 95%

Non-binary — 2%

Other or prefer not to say — 3%

Trans or had a trans history — 5%

Sexuality

Heterosexual / straight — 61%

Lesbian or bisexual — 16%

Other or prefer not to say — 22%

Age

18-24 — 5%

25-34 — 9%

35-44 — 17%

Over 45 — 65%

Barriers

Considered themselves disabled — 33%

Regular childcare responsibilities — 31%

Other caring responsibilities — 44%
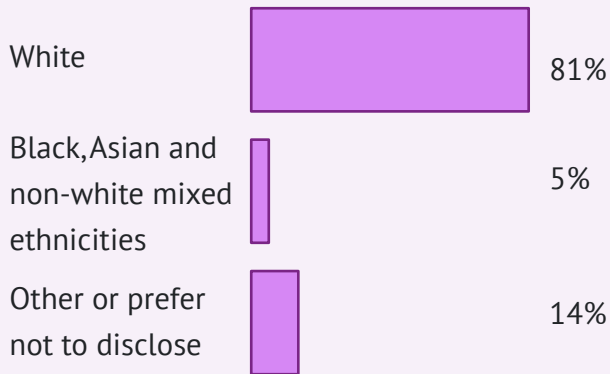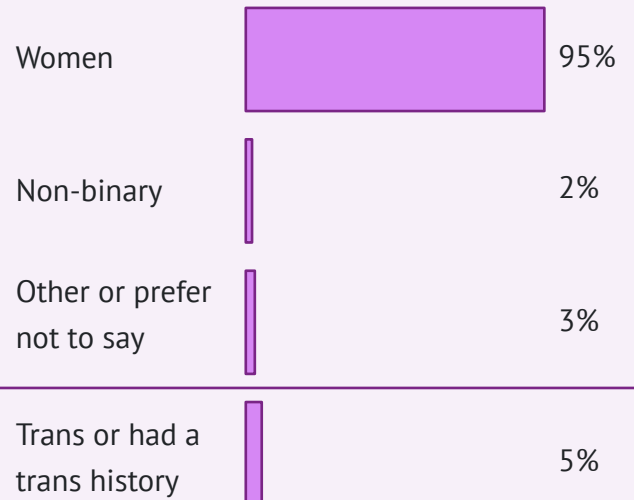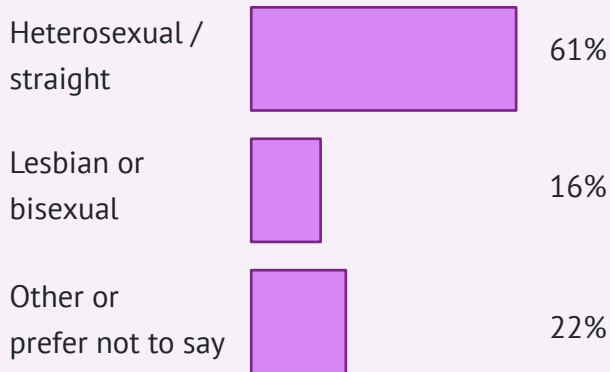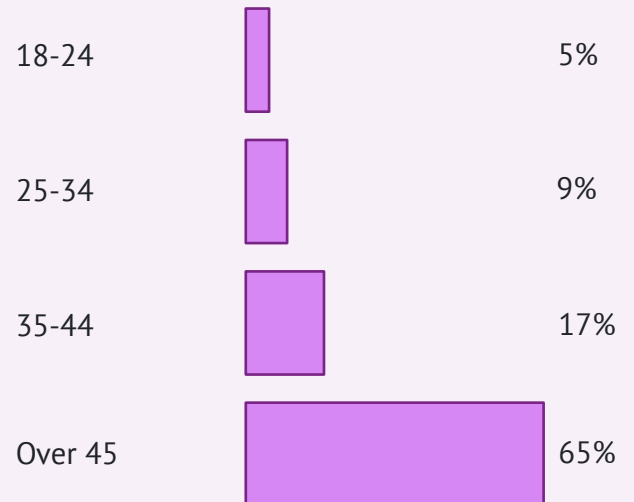
Party Affiliation

SNP - 33%

Scottish Green Party - 18%

Scottish Labour Party - 17%

Scottish Liberal Democrats - 8%

Scottish Conservatives - 5%

Other - 4%*

Unconfirmed - 15%

Those who selected "other" all said they were members of the Alba Party.

18
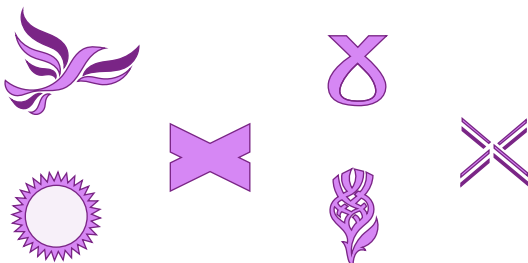
The survey captured a range of information on candidate journeys to increase our understanding of what parties require of prospective candidates, and to understand how these processes are experienced by women. It was designed with a logic that routed respondents based on what "stage" of the candidate journey individuals progressed to, with those who did not participate in subsequent stages exiting the survey early. These logic routes were:

Whether a respondent had:

Stood for an election	79%
Considered standing but decided against it	15%
Never considered it	4%

Whether a respondent had been approved by the party during vetting/assessment processes

Approved	84%
Not approved	16%

Whether, following participation in a full selection process, the respondent was selected as a candidate

Yes	89%
No	11%
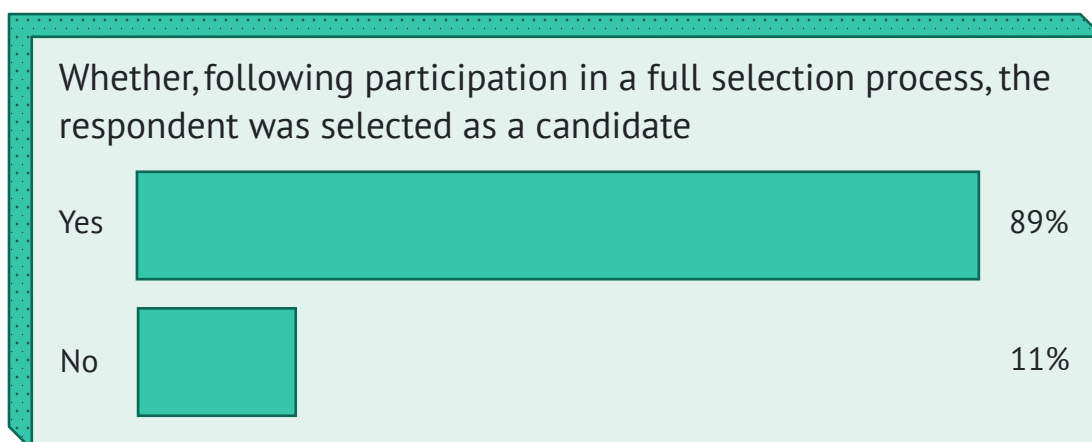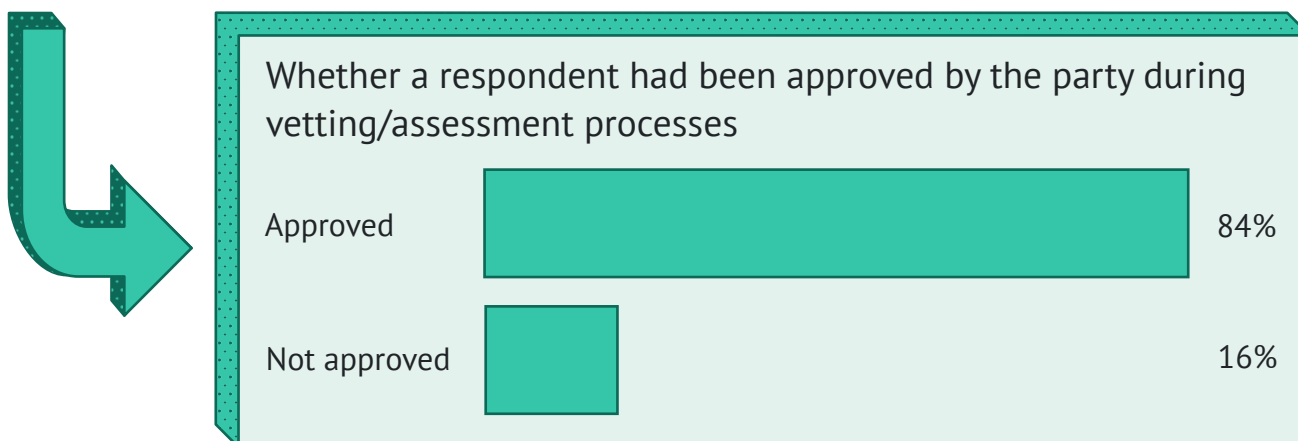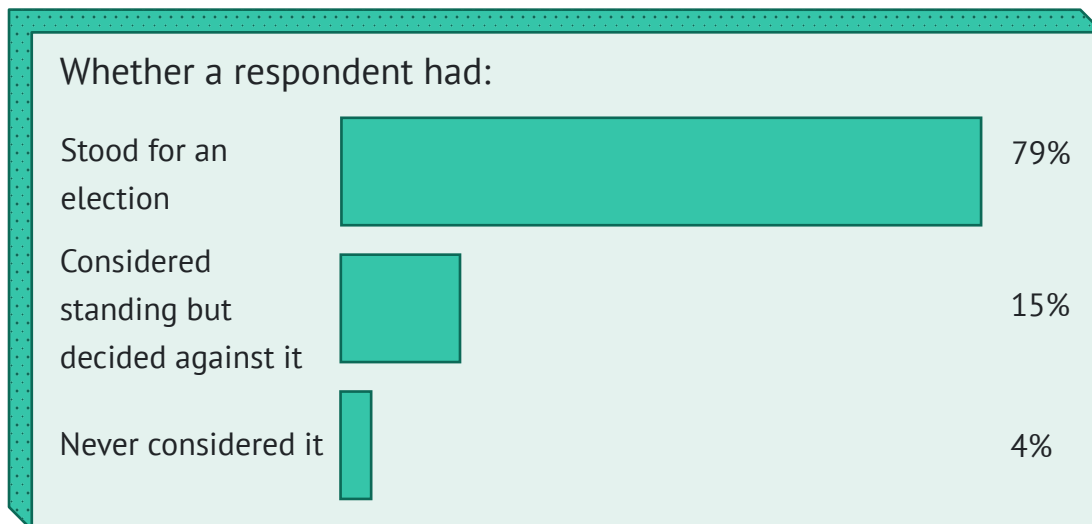
In analysis we found that while these stages of the journey were mostly relevant to the experiences of participants, some experiences did not map onto this structure or didn't capture the reality of their journeys. In presenting findings, we therefore broadened our framework for the candidate journey, outlined above.

The survey was designed that respondents were only presented with questions based on their experience, meaning those that did not proceed past each stage exited the survey early. In addition, most questions were optional and respondents chose which questions to answer. This means that where we reference percentage responses in the report, these are based on the number of respondents to that specific question. Respondent numbers vary for almost every question in the survey and we have not included full breakdowns on number of respondents per question here for the sake of brevity.

Respondents were most likely to have put themselves forward for:

- 2021 Scottish Parliament election — 29%
- 2022 local council elections — 56%
- 2024 UK Parliament election — 27%
- Other elections — 42%
- More than one election — 39%
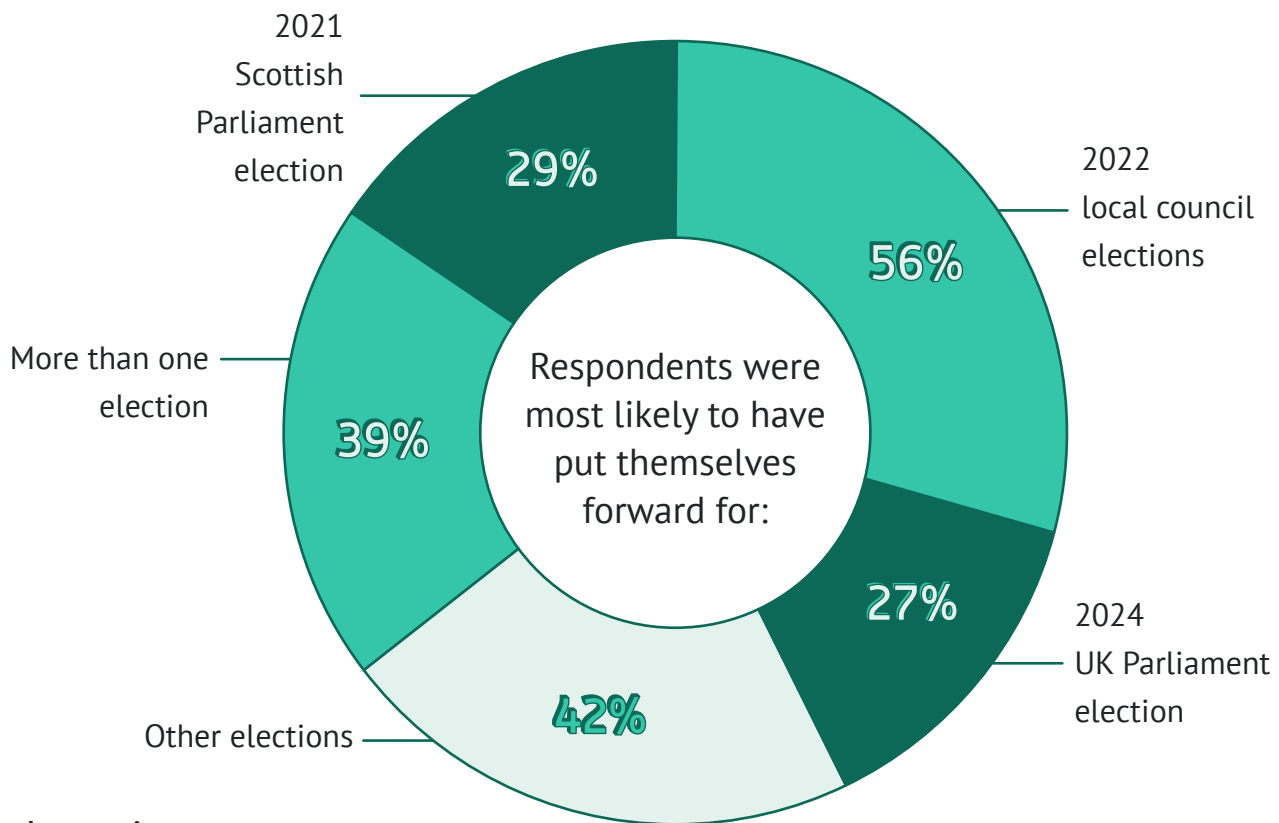
Interviews

In addition to the survey, we conducted 15 long-form interviews. Most of these (10) were focussed solely on individuals' personal experiences of candidacy and deepening our understanding of some of the survey themes. A further 5 interviews were conducted with party officers with knowledge of the technical processes of candidate selection inside their party.[17] Many of these individuals also had personal candidacy experience, and this has also been considered in the findings.

On personal experience, interviewees were recruited through the survey based on those who indicated willingness to take part. As far as possible we aimed for a range of party representation, experiences of different election types and electoral outcomes, and interviewee backgrounds. For technical/process-based interviews, key individuals were identified by our research team and approached directly based on past or present roles held within their party.

---

[17] Despite efforts, we were unable to confirm an interview on the technical/process aspect of candidate selection with someone from the Scottish Conservatives.

We interviewed:

- 2 interviewees each from Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Green Party and Scottish Liberal Democrats; 4 interviewees from the SNP; 5 interviewees from Scottish Labour.

- We interviewed 5 sitting councillors; 1 former councillor; 1 former council candidate (unelected); 1 Member of Parliament; 3 former Westminster candidates (unelected); 1 former prospective Westminster candidate (not selected); 1 former Holyrood candidate (unelected); and 3 party officials.

- Interviewees were reasonably split across different age groups, and 6 identified as disabled. Most interviewees identified as white, and 1 identified as having mixed ethnicity.

Research findings are limited by comparatively lower representation of women from Black and minority ethnic communities and younger women. This is reflective of the chronic underrepresentation of these groups at all levels of Scottish politics.

Research findings are limited by comparatively lower representation of women from Black and minority ethnic communities and younger women. This is reflective of the chronic underrepresentation of these groups at all levels of Scottish politics.

5. Cross-cutting cultural barriers

Many of the barriers identified through our research reflect wider society's biases and gender norms, with participants reporting instances of sexism, misogyny and male-dominated cultures across most, if not all, parties.

When asked if their party prioritises diversity and inclusion in candidate selection, only 35% of survey respondents who answered said "yes".

Most felt that their party was "somewhat" prioritising these factors (39%). Many feel their party is not doing enough to challenge persistent, undermining cultural and attitudinal factors which perpetuate inequality throughout the candidate journey.

> "From time to time the leadership of my party prioritise diversity…but more as an afterthought because an election is coming up rather than a commitment."
> (Survey respondent)

In particular, the following themes were particularly prominent across parties, elections and different stages of the candidate journey.

5.1 Everyday sexism

Interviewees and survey respondents described experiences of sexism throughout their journeys, with many telling of ongoing struggles against gender bias.

> "There is constant low-level sexism and harassment through inappropriate comments and assumptions." (Survey respondent)

Numerous examples were received of sexist remarks and a casual attitude to sexist language from across most parties, including from those in senior or influential positions. One survey respondent gave several examples of her encounters with sexist attitudes and how these had been used by party members to undermine her position:

> "Being referred to as a "young lady" despite being in my late 30s. Being asked where a woman such as myself gets her confidence from. Being asked to repeatedly qualify my outside professional job as if my view wasn't valid without it." (Survey respondent)

Can't handle the culture

Too soft

How can you juggle everything?

Young lady

Encounters with gendered stereotypes were also common with candidates and prospective candidates feeling undermined by these. Several participants reported being asked at different points how they would "juggle things as a woman", with another noting the double-standard as men would never be asked such a question. Multiple participants experienced stereotyping relating to a perception that women are "too soft" and not suited to politics. One interviewee was told she would not be able to "handle the Westminster culture". Several others described feeling like they could never appear uncertain for fear of being labelled incompetent or weak, reinforcing existing biases against them.

5.2 Unfair treatment

Across most parties there were accounts of selection processes being impacted by a lack of transparency. This included examples of individuals in unduly influencing, interfering, or undermining processes to favour a particular candidate. Examples included members of selection panels advocating in favour of, or against, certain candidates and experiencing double standards. One respondent noted that this kind of behaviour caused them to withdraw their candidacy.

> "I withdrew from the Holyrood selection contest due to cheating and there being a favoured candidate." (Survey respondent)

One young woman we interviewed recounted an experience of being held to a higher, almost impossible standard during her assessment process compared with a male competitor.

> "It was very clear. There was an element of, we're really going to push you, especially from the older men." She was later told by someone who had witnessed both interviews that, "He got off light…he breezed through his interview, like absolutely through… because nobody was really challenging him."

One respondent noted an experience where gender-balancing mechanisms that were supposed to be in place were not being observed in her selection contest. Querying this she received no clarity on the reasons why, and felt pressurised to stop asking questions:

> "I found it very challenging at times and felt that when I highlighted that I represented the only diversity on the list, I was almost making trouble and [was] asked why I kept raising it [gender-balancing mechanisms]." (Survey respondent)

Within some branches and local parties, sexist bullying appears to be a persistent challenge. Numerous women we spoke to reported feeling targeted or bullied at different stages of their candidacy journeys by local members who opposed their candidacy. Our survey indicates that of those who were ultimately selected as candidates, 24% experienced sexist language or sexist bullying, and 21% experienced exclusionary behaviour. Disabled and BME candidates were more likely to report these experiences.

Participants noted that this treatment is in part because of wider societal norms around how women candidates are viewed by some:

> "I guess sometimes if people don't want you to be the candidate they can make your life very, very difficult...I think it's a bit more difficult for women because as I said I think you're perceived as being a bit of an easier target and someone that they can really go after in a way that they wouldn't necessarily go after a man." (Interviewee)

The same interviewee noted that hostility from those opposed to her candidacy had almost resulted in her resignation:

> "I absolutely would have walked away from, you know, what was the biggest opportunity of my life to do something really meaningful and impactful, but there were times when I thought I just can't do this."

5.3 Diversifying the candidate pool

All parties have demonstrated different degrees of concern about wider membership diversity and the pipeline or 'supply side' of diversifying candidates. Participants noted that focussing on supporting those already "in" the process, through PAMs and better candidate support for instance, will not result in transformative change. Action must be taken to tackle cultural barriers at all stages of the process.

Those we spoke to noted that often there are fewer women actively participating in local party activities, and that this may be in part be due to local party cultures that are not welcoming or accessible for women at the earliest stages of engagement. Some noted that even where women are engaged, many are unwilling to stand for candidacy.

= ENGENDER

Tackle cultural barriers at all stages of the process
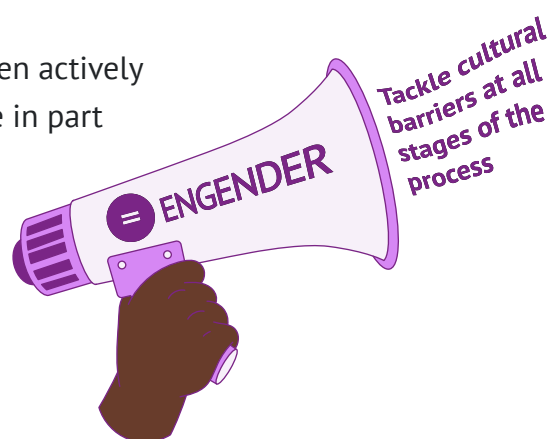
> "I think the lack of women coming forward for selection is a symptom of the culture, that we don't actually have that many women who engage at a grassroots level. So we probably have fewer female members but the ones that we do have also don't want to participate for whatever reason." (Interviewee)

> "My party has tried to have gender balance at council elections however often there's not many women [that] attend local party meetings and events. So a month before a council election, someone rocks up at their door and asks them to stand and they basically need to decide in a few days. When most say no, there's an attitude of saying women 'don't want to stand' so they get the man who has been down the pub with the organiser every week." (Survey respondent)

When discussing supply-side factors, it is essential to acknowledge that these can be used to excuse inaction by those who are opposed to or are unconcerned with the need to diversify representation. This might include arguments that women are simply less politically interested, or that supply is a factor beyond party control. Evidence is clear that this is not the case, and that when parties take proactive steps to promote women as candidates, this results in greater representation.

Parties must take swift action to attract, select and support more women and candidates from other underrepresented, diverse groups, as well as commit to the process of longer-term culture change. This will mean tackling discriminatory cultures, attitudes and practices at all levels. It should also lead to measures that ensure that party structures, activities and events are accessible, inclusive and welcoming for all. This needs to happen at all stages of the electoral cycle, not just in the months immediately preceding an election.

On policy and public messaging, parties should be vocal in their commitment to equality and diverse representation and reinforce this with meaningful policies:

> "I wouldn't trust a political party to take my disability seriously or my caring requirements seriously if none of them are actually pushing for those changes in parliament or councils." (Survey respondent)

5.4 Caring responsibilities

At all stages of candidacy, caring responsibilities are a major factor impacting women's equal participation in selection processes, election campaigns and in their role once elected. This is apparent right from the outset, with caring responsibilities cited as a primary barrier for those who did not opt to put themselves forward for candidacy. Many respondents who did put themselves forward described finding it difficult to engage in party life – including meeting attendance and campaigning activities - to the extent expected of a candidate. This negatively impacted their selection prospects and/or campaign experience.

For those with childcare responsibilities, specific difficulties include branch meetings being held at unsuitable times or locations and resistance from party members to making activities more inclusive; a lack of consistent provision of childcare at meetings and events; a lack of financial support for childcare costs.

> "At one meeting where a couple of mums including me brought youngish children along, other members made their displeasure evident despite the children being well-behaved. I and another officer bearer eventually had to stand down due to these problems, which meant that the profile of office bearers was people (mainly older) with no childcare responsibilities." (Survey respondent)

> "It is never clear if children are welcome at events and when we ask, we are told it is fine, but events are in demonstrably un-child-friendly locations and with equipment set up that is really not conducive to a child-friendly environment." (Survey respondent)

> "...very time consuming to be trying to meet every eligible voter whilst working and being a single parent. No car. No childcare or funds to help, from the party. And although my presentation at the selection meeting won the vote, postal votes from absent members went the other way. So I lost." (Survey respondent)

One interviewee called for parties to adapt their campaign approach, expectations and support offer to allow more women with caring responsibilities to realistically take part:

> "They need to start listening to women's voices and they need to change their campaigns to reflect those voices. Don't just pay lip service to it and don't make me run a campaign as a man because I ain't one". (Interviewee)

Key cross-cutting cultural BARRIERS within parties

- Everyday sexism is common at all stages of candidate journeys. This often manifests through inappropriate comments, gender-based assumptions and negative stereotypes.

- Sexist bullying is a persistent problem within some branches and local parties, with findings indicating that disabled and minoritised women may be at increased risk. These experiences can cause women to question their positions and political futures.

- A lack of transparency around assessment/vetting/approval can enable undue influence or manipulation of stated processes by individuals with influence. This can lead to prospective candidates experiencing sexist double-standards and other forms of gendered unfair treatment.

- Members of all parties are concerned with an urgent need to "diversify" the pool of potential candidates.

- At all stages of candidacy, caring responsibilities impact women's equal participation.

ENABLING factors

- Parties should take a zero-tolerance approach to casual sexist language, attitudes and bullying at all levels, with clear disciplinary consequences in place to enforce this.

- Decision-making processes should be transparent for everyone involved.

- Parties must be more consistent and proactive in providing practical and financial support to support those with caring responsibilities at all stages of candidacy.

- Parties must ensure that party cultures and structures are rooted in inclusive practice at all levels to enable more people to fully participate in party life.

6. The Candidate Journey: Before Candidacy
- Motivations and barriers to standing

Participants were motivated to stand for a number of reasons. Among these were: longstanding activism/interest in politics; a sense of wanting to use skills and experience to "give back"; to influence local change or on particular issues; wanting to see a fairer society; to improve things for the next generation; and to have fair representation of women.

Decisions were also often linked to the "winnability" of a seat. For those who had knowingly stood in non-winnable seats, candidacy was seen mostly as a development opportunity. However, some noted the significant and often disproportionate campaigning workload expected of them given that it was clear they would not win their seats, and the barrier this risks creating. Two interviewees who had stood in unwinnable seats at the 2024 General Election said were it not due to the relatively short-term nature of the campaign period due to the snap election, they would have struggled to balance party expectations with caring responsibilities and work commitments.

Those who had run in winnable seats, or who planned to in future, described the weight of the decision to stand. Prospective candidates were often concerned from the start about the potential strain that candidacy and the elected role would have on their financial security and personal and family life and wellbeing. Those with childcare responsibilities felt this particularly strongly.

"I felt like if I was to continue in politics at that point it would have had a really detrimental effect on my life, my children." (Interviewee)

"I have two young children and so I'm very lucky that I also have two grannies who are there to help support or I would be taking out the kids with me...it's some balancing act." (Interviewee)

For those who ultimately chose not to stand, financial barriers and caring responsibilities were among the most common reasons cited. Those underrepresented based on age, class background and ethnicity were most likely to be concerned about the financial impact of candidacy. Other reasons included: not feeling sufficiently well connected in the party, not having the right kind of party experience and difficulties with planning far into the future.

> "The processes are too complex and not easy to understand. This favours established party people "in the know" who then tend to be the most represented - men, white." (Survey respondent)

Misogyny and abuse of women politicians was also commonly cited:

> "I couldn't face the misogyny as a woman in political life. Not the trolling of women, their families and the way women are treated by the press." (Survey respondent)

> "I have no desire to put myself forward for the level of abuse that is expected." (Survey respondent)

Decisions to stand were also linked to encouragement from other members, with 69% of respondents reporting having received this. This eagerness to encourage women into candidacy was not usually backed up by support or accessible and honest information on roles and expectations. Informal relationships with elected officials or other party insiders were also valuable in informing candidacy decisions, offering realistic insights into the role and expectations.

Key BARRIERS at the outset of the candidate journey

- Disproportionate expectations of candidates in unwinnable seats may be off-putting particularly for candidates with caring responsibilities.

- Financial barriers to candidacy and the costs of running a campaign – particularly for marginalised women.

- Complex processes and barriers for those without pre-existing connections or networks.

- Concerns around caring responsibilities with the realities of running a campaign and being an elected representative.

- Fear of receiving misogynistic abuse and harassment as a candidate.

- An overall lack of practical support to stand beyond simple encouragement.

ENABLING factors

- Parties set realistic and proportionate expectations for candidates, particularly in unwinnable and low-priority seats.

- Clear communication from the party about any support available to candidates – particularly relating to financial barriers and caring responsibilities - allowing individuals to make informed candidacy choices.

- Ensure clear and realistic information about accessing candidacy is available to all prospective candidates from the earliest possible stage.

7. The candidate journey: Getting Selected

7.1 Candidate Vetting, Assessment and Approval

7.1.1 Interview panel diversity

For most people we spoke to, being interviewed by a panel was a memorable part of their experience. Across parties, our findings indicate a frequent lack of diversity among those carrying out assessment interviews at this crucial stage in the candidate journey. When asked whether there was diverse representation on their interview panel, just 26% of survey respondents who answered this question said yes. 42% said that there was "somewhat diverse" representation, with 25% having experienced no panel diversity at all. Notably, all respondents who identified as underrepresented on the basis of race or ethnicity answered no.

> "No one on the vetting panel necessarily looked like me, which was a little bit intimidating." (Interviewee)

> "But the one thing that struck me about my interview panel was that it was very, very, very pale, male and stale. I was just faced with these four old men and they decided I wasn't good enough." (Interviewee)

7.1.2 Interview transparency, values and feedback

62% of respondents told us that informal relationships and personal/social relationships were of importance during their assessment, vetting and interview processes. There was a relatively even split between those who felt they were impacted positively and negatively by this. There was the feeling that being well-connected is an expectation and can have a significant impact on an individual's chances of progression. Those who identified as underrepresented as a disabled person, or based on ethnicity, sexuality or class were more likely to say that they were negatively affected by these factors.

62% **of respondents told us that informal relationships and personal/social relationships were of importance during their assessment, vetting and interview processes.**

> "…we had many friends or connections in common. It does form a common bond which I think naturally works in your favour." (Survey respondent)

> "Unless you're one of the boys, the wife of one of the boys, or in the 'right' political sub-group, it seems there's no interest in your involvement." (Survey respondent)

> "[The] successful candidate appeared to have 'contacts' and was a foregone conclusion." (Survey respondent)

Another common concern from prospective candidates was feeling as though they were being judged on "informal" or "unofficial" criteria, contrary to anything advertised. 22% had this experience. A further 20% reported feeling as though decision-makers already had a pre-formed idea of their "default candidate" in mind, and this played into the outcome of their assessment process.

Those with caring responsibilities talked about the struggle of 'appearing' active within parties and attending party events and canvassing.

> "If it's not on Twitter it didn't happen mentality exists. Currently approved candidates have to log all their activities for the candidate board to review (like canvassing and leafletting)…You have to be in the right circles, known to MSPs and random individuals with influence." (Survey respondent)

Following an interview and other assessment/vetting activities, over half of prospective candidates did not receive any feedback on their performance, or advice on how to improve their chances of success in future. Of the 34% who did report receiving feedback, 25% described this as "constructive" and 9% found feedback provided "unhelpful". When asked for further detail on their experience of feedback, most of those who had received it described it as "informal", or not specific enough to be helpful for professional development. Of those that had experienced helpful feedback, this was described as improving understanding of future development needs.

Most of those who took part in our research were ultimately successful in getting selected. Of those whose journey ended after not passing initial vetting, nearly all felt that their professional experiences gained within and outside of the party and their personal ideas and experiences had been undervalued by decision makers.

7.1.3 Other candidate assessment activities

Some candidates discussed experiences of participating in other types of assessment activity, for instance: group interviews or role play scenarios to test different skills and knowledge. Some mentioned that they expected to participate in additional activities like this but then were not invited to do so, indicating potential inconsistencies and lack of clarity in processes. Some participants noted that, particularly when carried out in addition to individual interviews, these contributed to a very intensive assessment process that wasn't always proportionate to the winnability of the seat.

Key BARRIERS during candidate assessment/vetting/approval

- Lack of diversity on interview panels.

- Interview outcomes can be unfairly influenced by "unofficial" assessment criteria and personal/social relationships.

- Lack of consistent and constructive feedback for those unsuccessful in progressing following participation in assessment and vetting activities.

- Unclear expectations about what activities are involved in assessment processes.

- Disproportionate focus on the number of hours spent on party activities in determining candidate suitability. This is particularly problematic for prospective candidates with caring responsibilities.

ENABLING factors

- Interview panels should be gender-balanced and reflective of wider diversity in the party.

- Panellists have clear pre-agreed assessment criteria which is consistently applied, and do not disproportionately focus on the hours a prospective candidate have spent on party activities.

- Panellists provide clear and constructive feedback for unsuccessful candidates.

- Prospective candidates are given clear information on what is involved in the assessment process.

7.2 The candidate journey: Getting Selected: Internal Campaigning & Selection Contests

7.2.1 Challenges during selection contests

For the majority of participants, the ultimate decision on candidate selection was made through a vote of the local party membership. For many this meant a period of internal campaigning to win the support of fellow members, referred to here as the "selection contest". Internal hustings were a common, but not universal, feature. Overall, we recorded slightly more negative experience in terms of how safe, supported and prepared prospective candidates felt during internal hustings. For some, hustings were a uniquely challenging experience and felt more difficult than the eventual election campaign. Others reported encountering territorial or unfair behaviour from fellow candidates or influential individuals within the selection process.

> "I found some of the internal processes including hustings more difficult than hustings with opposing candidates once selected [during the election]. It was very acrimonious at times with long established, predominantly male members, protecting their fiefdom."
> (Survey respondent)

> "I had become aware that a member of a selection panel had been advocating against my candidacy." (Survey respondent)

Many described a lack of support from the party at this stage, including on preparation, transparency about the process, and financial barriers. For those who felt unsupported, or who found the process difficult, they described feeling nervous, isolated, or ill-prepared.

How will you manage it all?

"I don't think there is any support offered for internal hustings, especially for local council. I was a capable and confident candidate at managing my emotions, but you were not provided support from the party about what you should do." (Survey respondent)

"I felt alone in the selection and very aware that any seeking help or support would reveal weakness to other candidates and their networks." (Survey respondent)

"...there was a disadvantage for someone coming from a background with more limited income. Others had glossy leaflets which I had no idea you needed for example." (Survey respondent)

Many of the same barriers and discriminatory attitudes as those experienced during assessment and interviews were observed. Encountering negative assumptions/unconscious bias (29%); being judged against informal criteria (24%) were among the most common negative experiences recorded. The powerful role that personal connections can play in selection outcomes was also evident. Several respondents noted feeling disadvantaged by not having the "right" social group or connections.
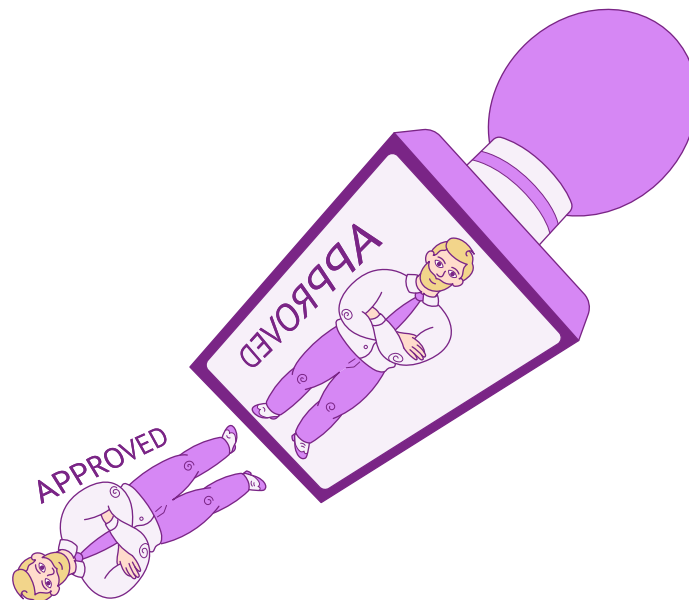
Key BARRIERS during selection contests and internal campaigning

- Hostile, territorial and acrimonious behaviour from opposing candidates and decision-makers and a lack of action to address this.

- A lack of support or training from parties on navigating internal selection processes or to prepare for specific processes like hustings.

- Prospective candidates feeling alone or isolated during selection contests.

- Lack of financial support to enable equal opportunities during selection contests for all prospective candidates regardless of income.

ENABLING factors

- Parties set expectations and hold prospective candidates accountable for conduct and behaviour during selection processes.

- Prospective candidates have access to clear information on what to expect during selection, including how to prepare for activities like hustings.

- Prospective candidates can access support – practical and emotional – to navigate selection processes.

7.3 The candidate journey: Getting Selected: Bias and barriers

7.3.1 Unconscious Bias and the "Default Candidate"

For many party decision-makers (whether panel interviewer or voting party member), the default candidate model (discussed above) continues to motivate outcomes. Our research indicated that this imagined, outdated concept of what a candidate should look, sound and live like still often functions as a barrier for prospective candidates who do not fit with it.

> "There is still a bit of active sexism, unconscious bias. People [members] think that people [electorate] still think that candidates need to have cars and wives." (Interviewee)

> "That's how selection feels currently. Waste of energy and time for those of us who are not the carbon copy of what the party wants." (Survey respondent)

Some prospective candidates also described not being taken seriously as a candidate due to racist, ableist, ageist or homophobic assumptions about their electability:

> "Someone said to me [during the election] and I quote, 'we can't win here with someone who looks like her.'" (Survey respondent)

> "As a woman/lesbian/disabled/older person they were uninterested in me being a councillor despite me having decades of public sector experience." (Survey respondent)

Connected to the imagined "default candidate", we observed cases of women being disadvantaged by the presence of a real-life "favoured candidate". Here respondents felt immediately discounted or disadvantaged during their selection due to decision-makers or other influential party figures exhibiting a clear preference for another candidate and rules being manipulated to achieve desired outcomes. In the examples we observed this favoured candidate was often a man who fit better with the "default candidate" concept. Some people we spoke to described feeling that processes were being obscured, manipulated or bypassed to ensure that this favoured candidate was selected.

> "One of the prospective candidates was felt by a number of other candidates to be favoured by senior party officials and the normal process felt manipulated by him. The pandemic was used as an excuse for the changes to the process." (Survey respondent)

7.3.2 Presenteeism

In interviews and during the selection process as a whole, survey respondents felt they were most valued for roles they had held within parties rather than for skills and experiences gained in non-party settings. Over half of those who responded felt that the number of hours put into party activities was an "important" or "very important" factor for decision-makers. This was notably the case for both SNP and Labour members.

> "You have to be "seen" in our party. You have to go to party events which are often on weekends or evenings which is difficult for those of us with caring responsibilities and for those that work weekends." (Survey respondent)

It is reasonable for decision-makers to expect prospective candidates to engage and contribute to the work of the party. However, when a disproportionate focus is placed on hours spent door-knocking or attending meetings, with less regard for other qualities (such as professional, voluntary and personal experience) those who cannot attend as many canvassing sessions are disadvantaged. This is likely to impact certain groups – including those with caring responsibilities or mobility issues – at greater rates. This presenteeism hindered multiple candidate journeys:

> "It came down to I hadn't chapped enough doors. They didn't care about my other skills, roles in the party, knowledge from professional life or experience from a different party. I hadn't chapped enough doors… so I was rejected." (Survey respondent)

A survey respondent described an all-day selection event where her husband waited outside with their infant for nine hours. She felt any breaks would have been "marked badly against her." Despite passing all tests, she was later rejected for supposedly insufficient door-to-door campaigning, despite having recently had a baby.

Sometimes respondents felt that these reasons were often used as an "excuse", and that other factors at play during decision-making – for instance the presence of a favoured or 'default' candidate.
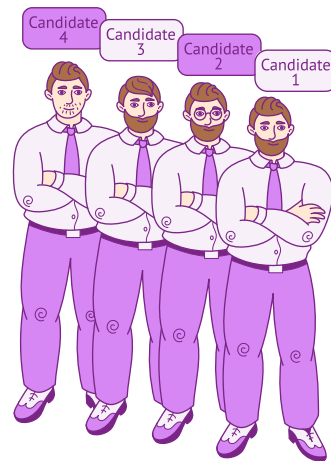
7.3.3 Caring responsibilities

Our findings indicate that caring responsibilities are one of the biggest barriers faced by women as prospective candidates throughout selection processes. This is particularly the case when there is a lack of understanding, flexibility and support from the party to manage these. One interviewee, who did become a candidate, described the following interaction as quite typical:

> "Why have you not really been out campaigning? I said, have you tried doing that with a buggy? How do you get to a branch meeting when your branch meeting is in the middle of your kids' bedtime?" (Interviewee)

Bias in relation to caring roles was also evident. Assumptions that these would negatively impact their ability to manage candidacy often resulted indiscriminatory lines of questioning during their selection. This included scepticism about their ability to balance family and political roles through questions like "How will you juggle your responsibilities?" which one interviewee noted would not have been asked of male candidates.

Some prospective candidates observed that voters and members often judged them based on their family roles, with an underlying perception that a woman with children might be "better off" if another candidate without such responsibilities were chosen.

> "Women are still being asked questions that men would never be asked. It's even more damaging when female interviewers are asking these outdated, misogynistic questions about family, ambitions, juggling career." (Survey respondent)

Key biases and **BARRIERS** experienced throughout selection processes

- Unconscious bias – often manifesting around the "default candidate" trope - continues to motivate decisions around candidate selection during interviews and selection contests. Discriminatory assumptions relating to "electability" is sometimes evident from party decision-makers.

- Conscious bias of decision-makers in favour of particular candidates, often those fitting best with the "default candidate" model disadvantages anyone without personal finance, flexibility and connections.

- Disproportionate focus on presenteeism during assessment and selection disadvantages many prospective candidates who have caring responsibilities, are disabled, or who face financial barriers to participation.

- Practical barriers to participation in party activities for candidates with caring responsibilities are persistent, i.e inflexible meeting times and campaigning sessions.

- Assumptions and bias against candidates with caring responsibilities on women's suitability as candidates from decision-makers.

ENABLING factors

- All those involved in decision-making – including interview panellists and voting party members – receive training and/or awareness raising on recognising unconscious and conscious bias.

- Presenteeism is challenged, and interviewers and voting members are encouraged to consider the skills of prospective candidates beyond only their record of attendance at party events.

- The party recognises specific barriers faced by those with caring responsibilities in its wider activities and takes steps to address these.

8. The candidate journey: Campaigning as the (selected) candidate

Many participants that went on to be selected as a candidates reflected positively on the election campaign period. However, even where experiences where largely positive, across parties and elections, major challenges around safety, access to training and accessibility support during the campaign remained.

8.1 Local campaign teams

There was a clear link between a positive experience and having strong local campaign teams. Dedicated activists were cited repeatedly as a great source of support, often helping to mitigate difficulties and making the whole experience more manageable.

> "There was support there…on the days I couldn't get out to campaign there would be people out campaigning on my behalf." (Interviewee)

> "I had people who ended up becoming really, really good friends and who rallied round and were protective…we built a very loyal team." (Interviewee)

One candidate described the overwhelming list of tasks facing candidates with no local support system in place:

> "The ward I was initially assigned to didn't have an active local team, and so as a first time candidate I was tasked with forming the local team, getting to know a ward that I wasn't a local resident in and didn't have a direct bus link to, figuring out how to be a candidate, [and] what all the party expected of me." (Survey respondent)

It is worth noting that candidates with strong existing personal networks from the outset of their candidacy journeys, may be more likely to get selected in the first place. They are likely to have access to more support once they reach the campaign stage and may be more likely to report a more positive overall campaign experience as a result.

CAMPAIGN TASKS

8.2 Personal safety and experiences of abuse

Concerns for personal safety were prominent among our research participants. When asked how safe from harm they felt during their election campaign, 36% of those who answered felt "not that safe", and a further 17% reported feeling just "somewhat safe". Just 11% of respondents felt "very safe".

Over 70% of respondents to a question on forms of abuse reported experiencing online harassment of trolling during their campaign. Around a quarter of respondents reported experiencing negative media attention, and multiple women reported experiencing verbal harassment at public events like hustings or during canvassing sessions, including being shouted at or chased. Perpetrators of abusive behaviour that were referenced included members of candidates own parties; members of other parties; and members of the public.

> "I have been spat on, shouted at, abused and physically shoved countless times." (Survey respondent)

> "I was frightened canvassing alone in remote, rural areas." (Survey respondent)

> "My main safety concerns came from activists from other parties, who behaved aggressively towards me at hustings." (Survey respondent)

> "I received several thousand hateful comments and messages on social media, which were particularly amplified by [a prominent account.]" (Survey respondent)

> "Really toxic atmosphere in some local social media groups which came entirely from men (or apparently male accounts). Belittling, piss taking and personal attacks on myself and my family." (Survey respondent)

8.3 The impact of online and offline abuse

The impact of gendered abuse and harassment can have major repercussions, often forcing women to reconsider their own behaviour to preserve their safety. This reduces women's ability to participate in politics on an equal basis with men when campaigning:

> "Being shouted at in the street by someone I thought could become violent, and not having any support, was a concern. I didn't get any back up or support after this. Since then, I've made it clear I will not put myself at risk at all." (Survey respondent)

It is widely recognised that social media presents significant risks for women in politics – with Black and minority ethnic women at greatest risk.[18] In Scotland, research indicates that many parliamentarians moderate and restrict their behaviour online because of abusive communications.[19] Our findings suggest that this begins well before entering elected office.

> "I felt social media was necessary to engage with the electorate on there, but the harassment and trolling made it very difficult to use social media as much as I would have liked." (Survey respondent)

> "Online harassment is just a regular occurrence now during elections, and I limit my engagement with social media for that purpose." (Survey respondent)

> "I don't have a Twitter/X account. At the time, my party recommended having one but I decided not to. It's never been a good 'environment' for women and it's got steadily worse" (Survey respondent)

We also heard that experiences of abuse had prompted candidates to take steps to reduce their visibility in other ways. Historically candidate's home addresses have been published on the notice of poll, however several women told us that safety concerns had caused them to opt out of this system. While candidates do now have the option to opt out of their address being published and can instead opt to publish their ward or council of residence, for many repeat candidates this information may already be in the public domain and potentially presents safety risks. [10] For one individual, abusive communications received to their home address was a factor in their decision to move house.

[18] Amnesty International UK. Black and Asian Women MPs Abused more Online. Available at:
https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps
[19] Scottish Parliament (2023). A Parliament for All: Report of the Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit. Available at:
https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/spcb/gender-sensitive-audit.pdf
[20] Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025. Available at:
https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2025/4/notes/division/5/6/1

> "For the first time, this time I didn't allow my home address to be published because of the trolling I received." (Survey respondent)

> "I had sectarian hate mail and abuse to my house in the previous election, which was a huge reason for moving and campaigning (successfully) to enable council candidates to have their addresses withheld on the ballot paper." (Survey respondent)

For others, witnessing abuse on social media motivated their decision not to stand again.

> "On social media it was clear some candidates were targets and it was really upsetting – and has made it clear to me I don't want to stand to be a candidate in other elections." (Survey respondent)

8.4 Support to manage safety concerns

Training and guidance around safety appears to be lacking across all parties, with over a third of respondents saying they didn't receive any support around safety, and very low numbers saying they received any specific support to manage online abuse. One comment alluded to the existence of a culture of silence around raising safety concerns.

> "I didn't receive support and I don't think I even reported it - you want to be seen as tough." (Survey respondent)

Where safety support systems were in place, this was most likely to focus on physical safety, for instance arrangements for in-person events and activities. Specific mentions were made of buddy systems and written guidelines for candidates. However, there seems to be significant variation in provision across and within parties. Some candidates did note positive experiences of support from local branches, and from party staff to deal with more serious safety incidents that required police intervention. Most expressed the need for more consistent approaches to safety support from parties, particularly regarding online harassment.

> "I received support from my local branch for in person events, ensuring there was always someone accompanying me, and I never went out canvassing on my own, always in a group. More support for online harassment from my party [centrally] would have been helpful though." (Survey respondent)

Our findings indicate that online "screening teams" to monitor candidate social media accounts for abusive communications are not commonplace. This sits at odds with the widespread encouragement from parties for candidates to be present and active online.

> "I think the party needs to offer more safety and emotional support to deal with online hate and abuse. I actually think that all candidates should have someone to post on social media for them and then check the social media, delete and report harmful posts and do debriefs with candidates about what is coming up rather than candidates dealing with all of this themselves." (Survey respondent)

8.5 Candidate training and development

Even where supportive teams are in place, running an election campaign can be very demanding for candidates. Specific training and support can benefit candidates' sense of preparedness and confidence. However, provision appeared variable across parties and elections. Some candidates experienced one-off training sessions (39%), skill-sharing sessions (37%), peer-support sessions (32%) and access to a training programme (25%). Just 4% reported receiving financial support for things like childcare or travel expenses.

Many participants received the most valuable support via informal channels – including from other candidates, local branch members and activists. Many respondents indicated that this informal support was more accessible and impactful that anything more structured on offer from the party.

> "We had one session for all candidates which wasn't particularly helpful. All I gained from it [was] phone numbers of other candidates."

One survey respondent shared examples of what party support they would have liked:

> "I only received support from other members and candidates - I also provided that support to many others. I would have liked media training, hustings training and training on maintaining a work-life balance. The lack of a formal structure is detrimental to candidates building their knowledge and encourages [those with pre-existing knowledge and connections] to come forward while excluding marginalised groups." (Survey respondent)

Some comments indicated that availability of training opportunities can be impacted by the type of election. Our figures indicated that candidates who stood at the local council elections in 2022 were less likely to have received any support compared to those who stood in other elections.

> "Our party offers more support for high profile Scottish Parliament elections, where there are full training programmes for candidates and staff dedicated to candidate support. There is a lot less help for council and Westminster elections though, with most of the support coming from local networks." (Survey respondent)

8.6 Barriers to Campaigning for Disabled Candidates and Candidates with Caring Responsibilities

To participate equally in politics, women must be able to access political spaces on an equal basis. Certain groups - including disabled women and women with caring responsibilities – are more likely to need adjustments to enable their equal participation.

Candidates were asked about how their access needs were considered as part of their campaign. Many respondents described barriers relating to disability, caring responsibilities and finances. Across parties, it was clear that positive experiences were often tied to having supportive local teams and branches providing flexible and ad hoc support to accommodate individual needs.

> "I have long Covid and can no longer easily get out and knock doors. I have to plan and pace my activities. Discussed with local party and we worked around me very successfully." (Survey respondent)

> "I have mobility issues so can't really do door to door work. The team cheerfully did it for me!" (Survey respondent)

> "I guess they were met informally, in terms of campaigning I could only be out and about at certain times." (Survey respondent)

Many comments recognised the significant impact that a candidates' caring responsibilities can have on their campaigning experience, and the value that having good support in place to manage this. Critically, this was not available to everyone.

> "I have caring responsibilities, so timings of meetings and events impact my ability to participate. We would hold organising meetings online… to make it easier for me and others to attend from home. For external events, there was a lot of understanding in my campaign team." (Survey respondent)

> "My campaign manager and team - volunteers!! - were extremely helpful and supportive for my caring responsibilities and we had a plan in place for if I had a caring crisis." (Survey respondent)

> "I have 3 children and was a councillor during the election. No thought was given to these responsibilities during the campaign." (Survey respondent)

Travel and financial barriers were also frequently raised. Candidates noted difficulties with travelling across large constituencies, and the logistical challenges this often presents. Very few respondents mentioned accessing financial support for travel or for any other purpose. Where they did, this was usually provided via external organisations such as Inclusion Scotland or Elect Her. Some disabled candidates specifically described the negative impacts on their wellbeing when no accessibility support or consideration was given:

> "I didn't have a direct bus link to the ward I was standing in. This meant I spent a lot time getting there and back home either on foot or bike. This physically wore me out along with leafleting and canvassing. This wasn't considered by the party because my disability is hidden. In the end, I accessed Inclusion Scotland funding which I used to pay for taxis to get me to the ward and home so that I could save my energy." (Survey respondent)

> "I have a physical disability, and this causes limitations for canvassing, leafleting etc. It's important to be seen and to support local activists (who are supporting you) and I ended up making myself ill from trying to physically do more than I was able." (Survey respondent)

> "I was really upset that I was expected to attend launch events on weekdays in towns far from my home and very early in the morning. Barriers to attending were considerable." (Survey respondent)

Summary of key **BARRIERS** during the election campaign

- Positive experiences are linked to having strong personal connections and/or an active local team of volunteers. Candidates with fewer personal connections, or in an area with fewer members may be disadvantaged due to lack of support.

- Personal safety both online and offline is a major concern during campaigning periods with candidates reporting a wide range of experiences of harassment, abuse and threatening behaviour. This can prompt women candidates to alter their behaviour or reduce their visibility to preserve their personal safety, negatively impacting their campaign and future participation in politics.

- A lack of practical support to manage safety concerns both online and offline was evident across parties.

- Candidates reported a wider lack of training opportunities and practical and financial support to manage campaigns from parties. This was especially the case at council elections.

- Support and access needs of disabled candidates and candidates with caring responsibilities during the campaign were not routinely considered by the party or campaign teams.

ENABLING factors

- The most valuable source of support during the campaign period came from informal networks, mentors and peers. Parties should step in to ensure candidates have adequate campaign support where this is missing.

- Candidates receive comprehensive guidance and practical support to manage online and offline safety concerns as standard.

- Training to manage practical and financial aspects of campaigning is provided to candidates at all elections.

- Access and support needs of candidates are routinely considered and accommodated by parties and campaign teams.

9. The candidate journey: After the campaign

Throughout both the survey and interview process, many participants – both those who were elected and those whose campaigns were unsuccessful - shared reflections on what happened after their candidacy concluded. Some notable themes emerged.

9.1 Burnout

Many survey respondents and some interviewees shared the significant emotional toll of their candidacy journeys. The environment of constant scrutiny, stress, and feelings of isolation and the lack of support coupled with personal and professional attacks, can erode confidence and contribute to anxiety. Some described the struggle of dealing with the aftermath of both their selection and election campaigns, with some later choosing to step back from the party and politics more generally.

"Party selections are often harder than elections, the nature of selections is very competitive and more after care on both I think would encourage people to stand again."

"I was a mess following polling day, I was a mess, like extremely burnt out. I was, you know, just in a really bad place, and she [senior party member] wasn't very responsive to that. I think maybe they were calling around to thank people for their efforts, which is obviously a positive thing to do, but they didn't know what to do with someone that was very angry and upset and felt that down." (Interviewee)

"One of our candidates was a woman of colour…she did a phenomenal job, but it completely burned her out, and she's not really engaged with the party at all since. So I think that's a worry when you get people who'll get engaged and get involved then end up disappearing." (Interviewee)

9.2 Recommending candidacy to others

Over a quarter (27%) of candidates who answered would not recommend the candidacy process to other underrepresented groups. Campaign demands and the lack of support around childcare and abuse left many feeling overwhelmed and burnt out. Respondents described a gap between the positive rhetoric that is promoted around candidacy – including relating flexible working and support on offer – and a much harsher reality. Several respondents noted that given their experience they felt a moral quandary in recommending candidacy, particularly to marginalised women who may face additional barriers.

> "[The] experience was brutal and why I continued is not clear to me. Some people put a lot of faith in me so I did not want to let them down." (Survey respondent)

> "The world has got worse for women in recent years. Now, I wouldn't encourage women to get involved in public life. I am not saying I would discourage them either. I just don't say anything now if someone is thinking about it. I do support women who are facing all the challenges though, whatever party they represent." (Survey respondent)

> "I have mixed feelings about encouraging other women to stand because of the level of abuse online." (Survey respondent)

> "I said I would recommend the candidate journey, this is because we need more diversity, not because it was a rewarding experience. It was not." (Survey respondent)

> "I really didn't feel I could suggest to somebody that they put themselves through what is required, and what it seems can be done to you if you volunteer yourself as tribute. It's a lot to ask of people, it's done in this happy go lucky way, where it's like "why not give it a go, put yourself forward and see what happens…" it doesn't take seriously the emotional toll, what is required, and also what it feels like to lose, either the selection or the election…" (Interviewee)

9.3 Life as an elected representative & re-election

For those who were elected as councillors, the decision of whether to recommend candidacy to others was tied to their experience in the role. For most interviewees and some survey respondents, standing again was not something they were considering. The low rate of pay for councillors, the expectation of needing to be available, a constant sense of not "doing enough," the logistical burden of managing childcare for late or unpredictable council meetings, were all huge barriers for women in elected office. This was often coupled with the misogyny many experienced from colleagues, the lack of support available to them from parties and councils and feeling unable to push for the change they wanted to see in their own communities.

"I'm leaving after this [first] term. As much as I will be heartbroken to leave, it's so damaging to life and mental health, you know, it's difficult to stay." (Interviewee)

"We often persuade great people to join, guide them through the selection process, and they get elected. But they may eventually fall away because it can be an unpleasant experience or they experience online harassment or in-person bullying and harassment, council chambers especially can be quite hostile—worse than Holyrood or Westminster, I'd say." (Interviewee)

"Another ward councillor said about me, in my absence "maybe people with children shouldn't be on the council" - a fellow councillor from another party rebuffed him strongly but the fact he thought it was ok to say that indicates what we are all up against." (Survey respondent)

"Trying to juggle being a parent or carer with the responsibilities of working as a councillor on such a low wage is nigh on impossible. It's still a role that is more accessible to retired people, those who are well off and those who have no caring commitments." (Survey respondent)

Key BARRIERS at this stage

- Many women experience burnout and a lack of aftercare from parties following election campaigns, too often causing them to scale back their political involvement.

- A quarter of candidates would not recommend candidacy to other women based on their own experiences of sexism, abuse and a lack of support during campaigns and once elected. This was particularly the case for elected councillors, for whom this was also based on their experiences of unrealistic expectations and low pay in their elected role.

ENABLING factors

- Following the election, parties consider candidates' wellbeing and offer support with next steps.

- Parties engage with former candidates to understand their experiences and use this to improve future processes.

10. Support throughout the candidate journey

Party support throughout journeys was often of variable quality and consistency. Our findings indicate that the most widespread and valuable support individuals receive is informal, and there is a need for much greater provision of structured support for candidates and prospective candidates at all stages.

10.1 Access to information on candidacy

While there is plenty of encouragement from parties for women to stand, practical support across elections appears to be less forthcoming. When asked about support received, 69% of prospective candidates had been encouraged to stand, with much lower numbers reporting any practical support to navigate candidate processes. Around 31% received support with information on running an election campaign, 23% with preparation for interviews and 12% with running a selection campaign. 24% of respondents received no support. Right from the outset of the candidacy journey process, timelines and party expectations of candidates was reportedly inconsistent. At all stages of the journey and across election types, lack of transparency emerged as a clear theme. This included provision of outdated information, and a feeling that parties were 'gatekeeping' information for 'preferred' candidates.

> "It can feel like a very secretive process with everyone playing their cards close to their chests. [I'm] thankful for strong women in branch for recognising I had something to offer and for helping me through [the] process." (Survey respondent)

Prospective candidates found it particularly difficult to find information about financial and/or childcare support - likely because of limited available provision. Information was also reportedly difficult to obtain on selection process timeframes, time commitments for campaigning, and role descriptions for relevant elected offices. Where information was available, it was not always high quality, or accurate – this seemed to be particularly the case at council level.

> "I think they could perhaps make it more clear, what is expected of a candidate [and then elected person]. I've seen a lot of people be encouraged to be a candidate without any real idea of what is to be expected." (Survey respondent)

> "The amount of time required was vastly underrated." (Survey respondent)

By far the most common way to find information about becoming a candidate was at local party meetings – with 70% of survey respondents reporting this. Other ways of accessing this information included: specific information sessions (40%); party events at the national level (38%); the party website (35%); independent research (22%); and support from third-party organisations like Elect Her (18%). This reliance on local party meetings as a source of information is likely to benefit those who face the fewest barriers to attending meetings and disadvantage anyone who may not be able to attend every meeting, for instance, because of caring responsibilities.

In terms of specific support available for different groups at elections, there appears to be greater awareness of support for women (63%) than for disabled people (30%) and Black and minority ethnic people (24%). 30% of respondents were unaware of any specific support on offer for any group. In terms of election type, prospective candidates were least likely to be aware of any specific support for underrepresented groups during the 2022 local council elections than at the other elections we looked at.[21]

Based on our findings, the quality and availability of online information appears to vary significantly across parties. Some of the most helpful information is reportedly contained within members-only areas of websites. Some parties have dedicated websites and/or toolkits to help guide prospective candidates through the process, though notably, few of these provide specific guidance for women or other underrepresented groups. For parties operating UK-wide, the easy-to-find information is often centred around UK-wide elections, and specific information regarding selection for Holyrood and Scottish councils is less readily accessible through simple online searches.

In addition to information received, very few participants reported being asked to supply equalities monitoring information at the outset of their candidate journey. Without this, it is difficult for parties to sufficiently assess or identify gaps in the candidate pool or understand where in the candidate journey proportions of women and underrepresented groups change.

---

[21] Our research looked specifically at Scottish Parliament elections in 2021, local council elections in 2022 and UK Parliament elections in 2024.

Key BARRIERS at this stage: Access to information

- Encouragement to stand is not backed up by adequate support to access candidacy processes or to facilitate equal participation.

- Information around processes, timelines, and expectations is often unclear and inconsistent within parties and elections.

- Prospective candidates found it particularly difficult to find any information about financial support and childcare support.

- There is a general lack of readily available information about candidacy online, which may inhibit participation from those who cannot attend party meetings as regularly.

- There is a lack of awareness, provision or both of specific support for marginalised groups – particularly Black and minority ethnic people and disabled people.

- It is difficult to assess candidate pool diversity as very few parties are consistently collecting equalities monitoring information on prospective candidates.
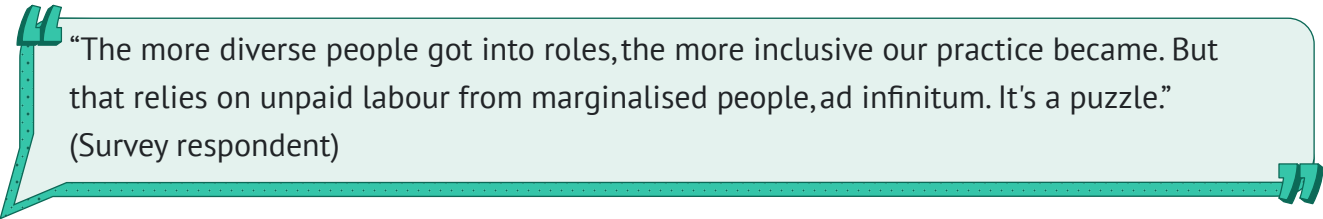
ENABLING factors

- Information about all aspects of candidacy, including requirements, expectations, timelines, and support, is transparent and accessible to all party members. This includes high-quality online information.

- Parties provide targeted information and candidate support to marginalised groups and ensure that this is well-advertised.

- Parties consistently collect equalities monitoring data from prospective candidates and publish this with consideration of data protection principles wherever possible.

10.2 Sources of support

In many cases, "formal" party networks and groups - for instance, women's networks, disabled networks and BME networks - are playing an important role in providing training, learning and peer-support spaces during both the selection and campaigning periods. Some of the most impactful types of support provided by women's and other networks that were cited by survey respondents included: mock hustings and mock interviews; peer-support circles for women candidates; and helping individuals to access training and development programmes run by the central party.
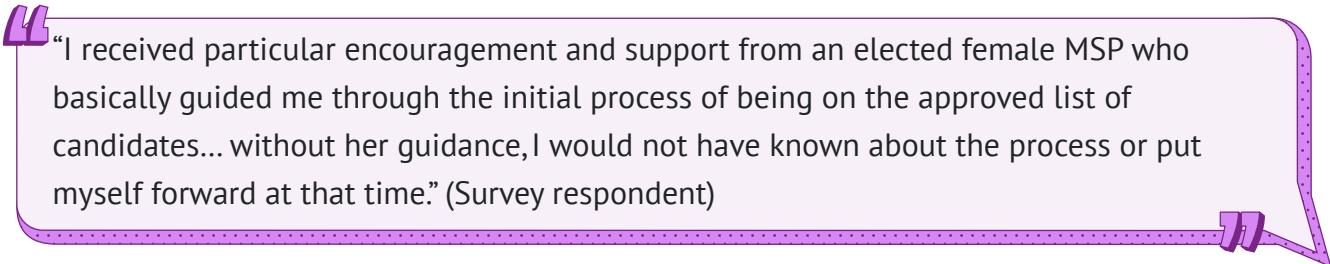
For most parties, these networks were mentioned repeatedly as having been helpful, although as volunteer-led groups, they are often under-resourced. Despite these inherent capacity limitations, parties often rely heavily on them as the sole sources of support for underrepresented and prospective candidates. This creates unrealistic expectations of what can be delivered by these mechanisms and an additional burden on the already marginalised groups involved in their running.

> "The more diverse people got into roles, the more inclusive our practice became. But that relies on unpaid labour from marginalised people, ad infinitum. It's a puzzle." (Survey respondent)

Prospective women candidates are heavily reliant on personal networks and informal support at all stages of the candidate journey. These personal relationships and friendships were the most frequently mentioned and most important forms of support for women we spoke to, and this was true across all parties. This informal support came primarily (but not exclusively) from other women, including from local members and other candidates, as well as existing MPs, MSPs and councillors. WhatsApp groups were specifically mentioned as an important tool for facilitating peer support and information sharing.
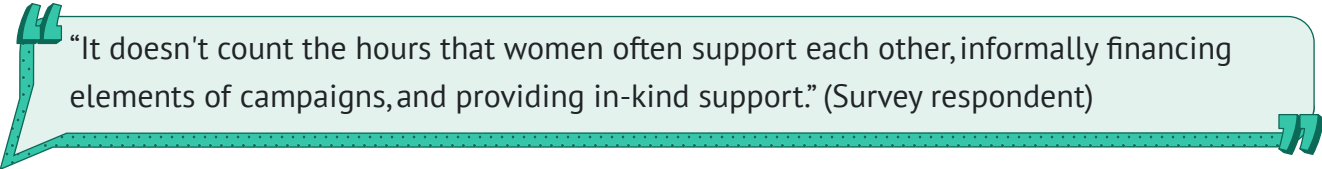
Women in all parties are encouraging one another to stand, demystifying selection processes and providing honest appraisals of expectations once elected.

> "I received particular encouragement and support from an elected female MSP who basically guided me through the initial process of being on the approved list of candidates… without her guidance, I would not have known about the process or put myself forward at that time." (Survey respondent)

Informal networks, whether campaign teams or supportive local branches, can also be invaluable sources of practical support during challenging moments. Notable examples included the provision of childcare support when needed.

The essential function of these types of support is clear; however, too often, these informal contributions – primarily provided by other women – go unnoticed and underappreciated by the wider party.

"It doesn't count the hours that women often support each other, informally financing elements of campaigns, and providing in-kind support." (Survey respondent)

It is essential to also recognise that these informal avenues of support are not likely to be equally accessible to all women. Those who are better networked within a party are likely to receive more support to navigate candidacy. This may have negative consequences for candidate diversity. In our survey, those who were underrepresented as a disabled person, or because of their ethnicity or sexuality, were more likely to report being negatively impacted by the role of informal networks during their selection processes. This emphasises the need to ensure adequate provision and access to formal support systems for all candidates.

Beyond parties, Elect Her was frequently mentioned as a helpful source of support. The organisation provides candidates and prospective candidates with training, networking opportunities, information-sharing sessions, and financial support. All mentions of Elect Her support were positive. Some respondents mentioned wishing that they had known about Elect Her sooner, suggesting that parties could do more to signpost to their services.

Key BARRIERS at this stage: Sources of Support

- Most formal networks are volunteer-led, under-resourced and overstretched. This limits their impact and often creates additional pressure on already marginalised members.

- Women are heavily reliant on personal networks and informal support at all stages of the candidate journey, and this is under-recognised.

- An over-reliance on informal networks to be successful may disadvantage those who are less well-connected in the party, including marginalised groups.

- Third-party support from Elect Her plays a valuable role in supporting women with training, networking and finances.

ENABLING factors

- Formal party networks are provided with adequate financial assistance and resources to allow them to provide high-quality support to underrepresented members, ensuring support is available regardless of a candidate's access to informal support.

- Parties routinely signpost to external support organisations such as Elect Her.

10.3 Support for disabled candidates and prospective candidates

Disabled candidates and prospective candidates reported encountering a range of additional challenges in accessing support during their journeys. Similarly to others, this included that initial encouragement to stand was not followed by meaningful support to navigate the different stages of selection and campaigning. One survey respondent described the impact that this lack of party support had on their political future:

> "The lack of support - and I really needed it - felt like a betrayal and is the main reason why I won't stand again and am now less active politically." (Survey respondent)

Many disabled candidates and prospective candidates were unsure how to access financial support from the party for essential campaign resources, leaving them feeling isolated and unprepared. We received several accounts of practical barriers to participating in various aspects of party life, including inaccessible venues and requirements to attend campaign events far from home and at inconvenient times, with little or no consideration of individuals' access needs.

> "As a disabled person, I felt I had to hide the extent of what I could and could not do." (Survey respondent)

Inclusion Scotland's Access to Elected Office Fund was mentioned numerous times as providing valuable financial support for various campaign essentials for disabled candidates, including travel costs and personal assistance. However, for some, the existence of external support meant that parties negated their own responsibilities to disabled candidates and prospective candidates.

> "I was left on my own to figure out how to access Inclusion Scotland funding. I had to go through an interview process to figure out if I qualified for it. The party's response was basically – "oh you're disabled?! Well that's what Inclusion Scotland is for." (Survey respondent)

> "Unless you already have support via care workers or a PA, political parties don't really want you to stand." (Survey respondent)

Some disabled candidates expressed frustration at a lack of alternatives to traditional canvassing, with one respondent noting campaign organisers' reluctance to consider alternative campaign strategies.

> "I'm disabled and they couldn't have cared less. I wanted to run a much more social media focused campaign for younger voters and I got no support." (Survey respondent)

Several neurodivergent candidates noted a lack of understanding from party members, feeling that their needs were often not met or misunderstood at different stages.

> "My disability is neurodivergence and my experience of accessing help for this while a candidate wasn't good. The party didn't do anything except direct me to Inclusion Scotland." (Survey respondent)

> "I didn't know what to expect and the questions were stupid. I am autistic and I need questions that make sense. for example, 'have you ever done anything that might bring the party into disrepute?' WHAT - the parameters are ridiculous." (Survey respondent)

Key BARRIERS at this stage: Support for disabled candidates

- Too often, individual access requirements are not considered by parties. This includes venue planning, event times and locations, alternative campaigning approaches and specific needs during the candidate assessment process.

- Initial encouragement for disabled candidates is often not backed up by practical party support.

ENABLING factors

- Access requirements are routinely considered by party officials and campaign teams at every stage of the candidate journey.

- Appropriate adjustments to campaigns, assessment processes and other aspects of the candidate journey are put in place to support disabled candidates' equal participation.

- A consistent approach is applied to signposting those who are potentially eligible for support to Inclusion Scotland's Access to Elected Office Fund.

11. Quotas and Positive Action Mechanisms (PAMs)

11.1 Background

Parties in Scotland have variable attitudes and histories on the use of quotas and PAMs. Across the last Holyrood, Westminster and local council elections, quotas have been applied through a variety of PAMs that have been implemented by Labour, the Greens and the SNP, including All-Women Shortlists,[22] twinning,[23] zipping[24] and reserved spaces on regional lists.[25] The Scottish Liberal Democrats have occasionally implemented PAMs, but usage is less routine. The Scottish Conservatives remain broadly more sceptical, and there is little evidence of PAM use in the party. Across Scottish parties, PAMs have primarily been aimed at women's representation. However, there have been limited attempts to use PAMs to increase the representation of minority ethnic candidates and disabled candidates. For instance, in the 2021 election, the SNP reserved top spots on the regional lists for disabled and BME candidates.[26]

Our findings suggest that PAMs significantly impact women's candidate journeys in several ways:

- Whether PAMs are in place.
- The attitudes of the party membership towards PAMs.
- The specific form of PAM used and whether it is effective in achieving its representation goals.
- Whether a PAM is meaningful, i.e. applied in realistically winnable seats.
- Whether PAMs are strengthened by overall party support and buy-in.

11.2 Experiences of PAMs

PAMs serve a crucial role in signalling that the party is welcoming of women's candidacies. As one survey respondent put it, "I would never have considered standing if the party had not set quotas and encouraged women to apply". However, across parties, women reported widespread attitudinal barriers surrounding PAMs that they considered negatively impacted their effectiveness. 57% of our survey respondents felt that PAMs are 'resented' by some party members who feel their use is unfair or unnecessary. Others reported only tokenistic acceptance of PAMs, reducing the ultimate impact of measures.

---

[22] Parties can use All-Women Shortlists to limit candidates for a particular seat in an election to women only.

[23] This type of PAM involves parties paring two constituencies together and restricting selection by the members to one man and one woman to achieve a gender balance.

[24] This type of PAM is often used in electoral systems that use party lists such as Holyrood. It means that parties alternate the order of list candidates by gender. For greatest impact, the top list spots across all regions should be split between women and men.

[25] This type of PAM allows parties set aside places on regional lists for candidates from specific protected groups.

[26] Ultimately the impact of these measures was limited as the party elected just two MSPs through the lists.

> "The party itself promotes women's inclusion within its rules... however sometimes the men running some of the party units pay lip service to these policies, but don't actually believe in equality or actively promote it." (Survey respondent)

> "Many male members say they support equality but are unwilling to step aside if that impacts on their political ambitions and entitlements." (Survey respondent)

Resistance to PAMs on the basis that they are perceived as not being 'merit-based' and result in 'unfair promotion' was commonly experienced. Participants noted the frustration that PAMs are frequently presented as conflicting with a "merit-based" system, when in fact they serve to reduce structural and cultural barriers to candidacy that often inhibit or obscure the talent and abilities of women and marginalised groups.

> "I think that some members genuinely believe that you either have people selected by merit OR by positive action mechanisms and getting them to understand that all the evidence suggests that you get better and more diverse candidates across the board [with PAMs] is a challenge." (Survey respondent)

This attitudinal resistance resulted in some candidates who came through PAMs selection processes feeling or being treated by some members as "less legitimate". In some instances, individuals reported this leading variously to sexist, racist and ableist bullying. This negatively impacted individuals' wellbeing, experience of candidacy and sends a damaging message to future prospective candidates from underrepresented groups.

> "Candidates who are on all-women shortlists or placed/zipped face criticism that they are not the best but are there because of x or y. This is a poor way to start candidacy and often leaves individuals having to defend their own selection." (Survey respondent)

> "There are a group of people, particularly white men, who resist any mechanisms. They may accept that they happen, as they have no choice, but they make life unpleasant for women and other unrepresented groups." (Survey respondent)

In relation to outcomes, it is essential that a PAM supports the electoral success of those it is intended to benefit. For this to happen, PAMs must be equally targeted at seats that are realistically winnable for the party, or the measure risks being tokenistic.

> "My experience suggests that parties are more willing when they employ them in seats or positions that are not winnable. In order for them to be successful, we need to employ them [PAMs] in winnable seats." (Survey respondent)

> "We're quite good at getting candidates through the approval process and encouraging women to stand, but not so good at getting them selected in the right places." (Survey respondent)

Some respondents expressed frustration that even where PAMs are implemented with good intentions, there can be unintended consequences. Some participants noted specific concerns with a common loophole of the zipping approach often used on the Holyrood regional list.

> "Zipping sometimes has an unintended consequence where women who are successful are sometimes leap frogged by male candidates [to maintain the system of alteration by gender]." (Survey respondent)

Some participants noted that the nature of PAMs and party resistance to them sometimes caused a "scarcity mentality" among underrepresented candidates.

> "I feel as if it [All Women Shortlists] pitted woman v woman." (Survey respondent)

Some reported feeling as though PAMs forced those who are already underrepresented to compete among themselves for a limited number of designated spaces, rather than supporting one another and challenging the wider overrepresentation of men. This led to negative perceptions of PAMs among some respondents. Others noted that PAMs alone are not enough, and that parties need a longer-term vision and commitment around their use, as well as doing work on internal cultures around them. This should include increasing membership understanding and promoting acceptance of PAMs, as well as providing adequate support for those participating in them.

Key BARRIERS : Quotas and Positive Action Mechanisms

- Resistance to PAMs exists within parties, with some members perceiving their use to be 'unfair', 'unnecessary' or contrary to 'merit-based' approaches to selection.

- Across parties that use PAMs, some members superficially accept measures but do not reinforce this with promotion or support to ensure effectiveness.

- Attitudinal resistance can lead to candidates selected through PAM processes being undermined, delegitimised, bullied or targeted with abuse.

- Parties may be more willing to implement PAMs in less winnable seats. Unless PAMs are targeted at seats that are realistically winnable, they risk being tokenistic and meaningless.

- Depending on the design of the PAM, underrepresented members can feel as though they are competing among themselves rather than challenging the overrepresentation of white men.

- A lack of understanding of PAMs, why they are needed, and how they work among the wider membership is hampering their effectiveness.

ENABLING factors

- Parties should build a positive case for PAMs and quotas among the membership, challenging misconceptions and promoting their benefits.

- Swift disciplinary action should be taken against anyone undermining or targeting candidates selected through PAMs processes.

- PAMs approaches are well-planned and targeted at winnable seats.

- Parties move towards a long-term strategy on using PAMs and quotas. This will help build cultural acceptance, understanding and effectiveness of the measures in the party.

12. Conclusion

Women in all of the major parties in Scotland continue to face a range of common challenges when trying to access political candidacy. While historic gains such as those seen at the 2021 Holyrood elections are to be lauded, topline outcomes are only part of the story. Our findings suggest that across parties, many of the crucial structures, cultures and processes surrounding candidate selection and candidacy still do not work for women.

From the earliest stages, prospective candidates who do not fit with the narrow "default candidate" model face barriers to accessing the information and support they need to succeed. Too often, selection processes are opaque, and candidates experience entrenched biases from decision-makers. Concerns around abuse and harassment - online and offline - and a lack of support to manage this, are a major deterrent for women at all stages of their journey. Everyday sexism – including casual attitudes to sexist language and double-standards – appears to be a common experience for women at all levels of political involvement. We found evidence of widespread bias at all stages against those with caring responsibilities, and a lack of practical support from parties to help manage these. Disabled women also reported a lack of consideration around access and support throughout their journeys.

Progress towards equality in our politics is uneven and remains fragile, and long-term commitment to using quotas and positive action mechanisms (PAMs) is fundamental to ensure that where gains are made, they are not lost. However, these measures must go hand-in-hand with long-term commitment from parties to tackle inequalities in their cultures, structures and processes at all levels. This includes focusing not just on topline figures and parliamentary elections but also investing resources towards local politics and grassroots activities. This is the only way to ensure a sustainable and diverse pipeline of women candidates.

We know that when women's voices are equally represented, this leads to higher quality decision making and better outcomes for women, their communities and society as a whole.[27] Through their role as gatekeepers, political parties must embrace their role as active agents of change and commit to building equitable structures and cultures where women can thrive.

[27] Dr Minna Cowper-Coles (2021) Women political leaders: the impact of gender on democracy. For Global Institute for Women's Leadership and Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Available at:
https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/research/women-political-leaders-the-impact-of-gender-on-democracy

13. Recommendations for political parties

13.1 Candidate Assessment and Selection Processes

- Introduce an Equalities Monitoring Form for all prospective candidates at the earliest possible stage. For better transparency, this data should be made public as far as possible, in line with data protection principles. This will allow identification of gaps in the candidate pool and increase understanding of where in the candidate journey proportions of women and underrepresented groups change.
- Widely publish accessible information about selection and campaign timelines, processes, role expectations and available support as early as possible.
- Improve access to high-quality digital information about all aspects of candidate selection, being a candidate, and being an elected representative, tailored for underrepresented groups where appropriate.
- Standardise candidate assessment and selection approaches across different locations/branches. Consistency in what information prospective candidates are expected to provide and activities they are expected to participate in will help increase transparency, access and trust in the process.
- Ensure all those involved in interviewing as part of approval/vetting/assessment have received recent training on due process and unconscious bias. This should be refreshed regularly.
- Ensure interview panels are gender-balanced and that interviewer diversity is prioritised.
- Offer constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants following interview/vetting/assessment.
- Make internal voting results transparent, to increase members' trust and buy-in to the selection processes and, where PAMs have been used, reduce scepticism and increase trust.
- Increase transparency at the outset of the selection process around which seats the party feels are realistically "winnable", allowing parties to be held accountable beyond just the overall number of women they select. This will also help prospective candidates make informed choices about their participation in selection processes from the outset.

13.2 Support for Candidates and Prospective Candidates

13.2.1 Safety (Online and Offline)

- Ensure that candidates have access to formal training on managing personal safety both on and offline.
- Ensure candidates can access party support to report online abuse, whether to social media companies or the police.
- Ensure that online "screening teams" or similar processes are routinely in place to manage abusive social media communications and to support women and other candidates at high risk.
- Ensure that all party communication staff and volunteers receive training on digital safety issues faced by underrepresented groups.
- Provide clear safety guidance for anyone participating in campaigning activities, hustings and other in-person events. This should discourage lone canvassing and include details of who to call for support.

13.2.2 Candidate Training & Support

- Run targeted learning sessions covering how to stand for election, what to expect during selection and effective campaigning for underrepresented groups. These should be offered at all stages of candidacy.
- Ensure existing mentorship and leadership development programmes are visible and accessible to underrepresented groups. Reserve spaces or run exclusive cohorts to boost participation of women, disabled people and BME people.
- Facilitate peer support sessions on wellbeing and avoiding burnout during busy campaign periods.
- Signpost women candidates and prospective candidates to external third-party support providers such as Elect Her.
- Ensure appropriate aftercare for candidates who are ultimately not elected. This should include recognising their contribution and offering support to retain them as active members and potential future candidates.

13.2.3 Financial support

- Use party funds to ensure financial support is available to support candidates and prospective candidates to access selection processes and campaigning activities. This should be actively promoted to groups most likely to require support, including women with caring responsibilities, disabled women, or women on low incomes.
- Ensure that candidates and prospective candidates are not charged fees to access candidate assessment processes or training opportunities, which is likely to deter already underrepresented groups.
- Provide signposting and dedicated support to help candidates access relevant external funding, such as the Access to Elected Office Fund, administered by Inclusion Scotland.

13.2.4 Access Support for Candidates and Prospective Candidates

- Routinely ask candidates and prospective candidates if they have any specific access needs to support their participation in candidacy processes and campaigning. Ensure that needs are accommodated and understood by selection panel members and campaign organisers.
- Ensure that, where appropriate and possible, flexibility is available in how campaigns are run. For instance, ensuring additional campaign support is available for candidates who are unable to canvass and/or help for candidates in managing caring responsibilities.
- Hold all party events and activities in accessible venues that are reachable by public transport.
- Make it clear if events or activities are child-friendly and whether childcare will be provided. Where this may present barriers, offer financial support to mitigate them.

13.2.5 Support Networks

- Provide adequate funding to networks that support underrepresented members, including for women, minority ethnic members, disabled members and LGBTI members.
- Recognise the invaluable role of women's informal mentoring and peer-support. Explore how parties can replicate this through formal channels.
- Increase paid roles to provide support to candidates and prospective candidates, reducing reliance on volunteers and ensuring consistent, high-quality support for all, regardless of personal party connections.
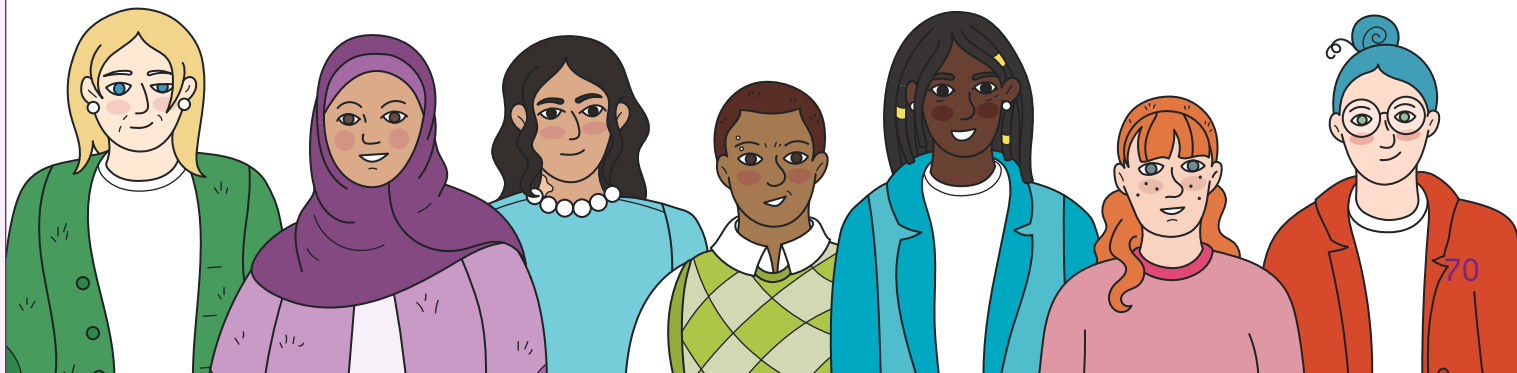
13.3 Party culture

13.3.1 Short-term culture changes

- Have clear policies in place to address internal bullying and harassment. Ensure all members know how to access this.
- Introduce a zero-tolerance approach on sexist language, with clear disciplinary consequences to support enforcement.
- Listen to women candidates' perspectives and adjust campaign strategies to be more inclusive of their lived realities.
- Counter resistance to PAMs and gender balancing quotas through increasing member awareness of the need for reform and how specific PAMs will work in practice.

13.3.2 Long-term culture changes

- At all levels, foster a party culture that takes proactive steps against sexism, racism, classism, ableism, transphobia and other intersecting discrimination.
- Adapt party structures and ways of working to better accommodate women's and caregivers' needs, respecting family and caregiving responsibilities.
- Create long-term strategies to sustainably increase party membership diversity.
- Develop an equalities-informed review of the selection process following each election that captures the views of underrepresented members and their networks.
- Agree long-term goals for diverse representation across councils, Holyrood and Westminster elections. Create accompanying strategies to guide work to achieve them.
- Show leadership on policy issues impacting women and marginalised groups, championing reforms that will increase participation, safety and equality in politics.

14. Recommendations for Government and Councils

14.1 UK Government

- Compel political parties to release candidate diversity data at all elections by enacting Section 106 of the Equality Act (2010) as soon as possible.[28]
- Amend Section 106 of the Equality Act (2010) to include local authority elections.

---

[28] Section 106 of the Equality Act (2010) has never been enacted by the UK Government. If enforced, it would compel political parties to release comprehensive equalities data on candidates at elections, having a potentially transformative impact on our collective understanding of inequality in political candidacy across the UK. At present the legislation also does not include local authority elections, which is a crucial oversight that must be addressed. For more information see: https://centenaryaction.org.uk/our-campaigns/enact-106/

14.2 Scottish Government

- Establish an independent, cross-party commission to enable dialogue, address systemic biases, safety issues, and enhance support for underrepresented groups in politics.
- Building on the success of the Access to Elected Office Fund, develop a similar fund to support candidates with costs relating to caring roles, and to support with safety-related expenditure.
- Follow the example of the Welsh Government and publish voluntary guidance on diversity and inclusion for political parties. This should be developed with expert stakeholders and, at a minimum, include: information on adopting strategies to increase candidate diversity; collecting equalities monitoring information; and using quotas.[29]
- Follow the example of local elections in England and Wales, and UK Parliamentary elections: Make campaign costs associated with candidate safety exempt from election spending rules, in line with the recommendation of the Jo Cox Foundation.

14.3 UK Government, Scottish Government, Scottish Parliament and Local Councils

- All governmental bodies should show leadership to increase participation of women and other underrepresented groups in politics, and to increase retention rates of women once elected. This should involve:
  - Addressing sexism and other forms of discrimination, bullying, harassment and abuse through ensuring robust institutional policies and reporting processes within elected institutions.
  - Ensuring comprehensive maternity and carers' leave policies are in place in all councils.
  - Where measures are not in place, guaranteeing rights to flexible working, remote participation and proxy voting in all parliamentary and council business.
  - Ensuring that fair pay for councillors is sustained.

29 Welsh Government. Diversity and inclusion guidance for registered political parties (2021). Available at: https://www.gov.wales/diversity-and-inclusion-guidance-registered-political-parties-html#168280

ENGENDER