

A technical paper about Scottish parties' use of positive action measures (PAMs), including quotas





CONTENTS

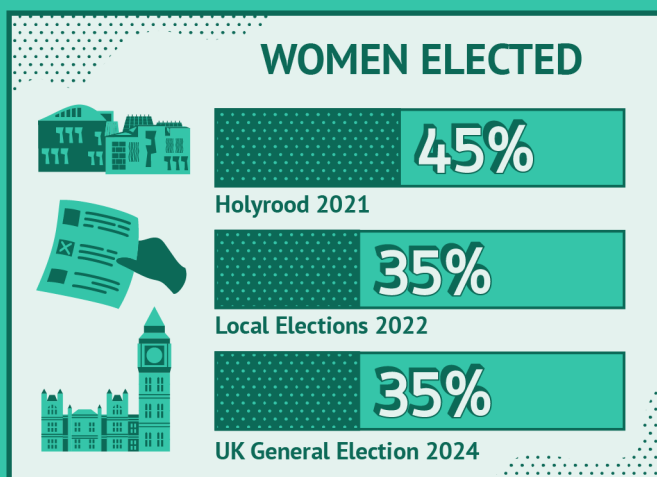
Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	4
2. PAMs by party Scotland	12
2.1 The Scottish National Party	12
2.2 Scottish Labour	18
2.3 Scottish Green Party	24
2.4 Scottish Liberal Democrats	29
2.5 Scottish Conservatives	33
3. What does the research tell us about the effectiveness of PAMs in Scotland?	38
4. Looking ahead - key focus areas for reaching equal representation	40
4.1 Intersectional PAMs	40
4.2 Local elections	43
4.3 The need for longer-term strategies and commitments	44
5. Recommendations	46
5.1 Recommendations for all political parties	46
5.2 Recommendations for UK Government	47
Appendix A: Terminology guide	48
Appendix B: Methodology	50

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the role of gender quotas and other Positive Action Measures (PAMs) in shaping candidate selection and representation across Scottish politics.

It draws on research conducted between July and November 2024 by Engender, combining candidate data analysis, desk reviews of party processes, survey responses from 159 women, and 15 in-depth interviews with women with experience of selection processes. This report analyses the use and impact of PAMs across the following Scottish political parties: the Scottish National Party (33%), Scottish Greens (18%), Scottish Labour (17%), Scottish Liberal Democrats (8%), and Scottish Conservatives (5%).

In 2021, women's representation in the Scottish Parliament reached its highest level in history, with women making up 45% of MSPs, largely thanks to parties adopting quota systems. However, progress remains fragile and inconsistent. The General Election in 2024 resulted in 35% of female MPs from Scotland, identical to the results of women elected at the Scottish council elections in 2022, just 35%.



No Scottish party has achieved equal gender representation across all levels of government. Especially worrying is the underrepresentation of minoritised women, disabled and younger women.

THE RESEARCH REVEALS THAT:

- Consistent use of PAMs leads to higher rates of women's representation. At the same time, their absence can quickly lead to rapid regression in women's representation.
- Labour and the Greens have a stronger track record with all-women shortlists, zipping and twinning, but remain inconsistent on a local level.
- The SNP increasingly uses PAMs and has attempted to support disabled and minority ethnic candidates specifically, but the approach is not as consistent as necessary or is often applied in unwinnable seats.
- The Liberal Democrats' approach to implementing gender-balancing quotas has been mixed and heavily relies on individual internal champions, without a consistent framework.
- The Conservatives often demonstrate opposition to quotas, referencing "merit-based" selection. However, some members are critical of this attitude and wish for internal reform.

Quotas and other PAMs have significant impact in improving women's representation. There remain challenges, however, that need to be addressed to ensure meaningful and sustainable impacts. Tokenism and the application of PAMs in unwinnable seats undermine their potential. Similarly, cultural resistance within parties hinders progress. Specific focus is needed in local elections as they continue to return the lowest level of women's representation.

The lack of an intersectional approach creates further barriers for disabled and minoritised candidates. Single-focus quotas mainly benefit women from majority groups, such as white women, while leaving other groups underrepresented. Research shows that without combined measures, quotas often advantage men from minority groups or women from majority groups, rather than those most excluded. We recommend the use of tandem quotas (quotas applied simultaneously for gender and race, for example) and nested quotas (quotas targeting intersecting identities, such as BME women). These approaches would better support disabled people, minority ethnic groups, and women facing multiple barriers.

Tandem Quotas:

Implementing multiple quotas at the same time, which also work interdependently, i.e., a quota for women and a quota for BME people.



Nested Quotas:

Target a group of people with multiple intersecting protected characteristics, i.e., a quota for BME women.



Lastly, improved and more detailed legal guidance and clarity on the Equality Act 2010 is needed to help parties understand the ways in which they can support women's and other groups' representation in Scottish democracy.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE:

For political parties:

- Commit to **long-term strategies** on quotas and PAMs across election cycles, focusing on winnable seats.
- Apply **consistent PAMs in local elections**, with central oversight to ensure impact.
- Expand PAMs to include **minoritised, disabled, and intersectional groups**, avoiding "single-axis" approaches.
- Increase **member awareness and support** for PAMs, countering resistance through clear communication of their effectiveness.

For the UK Government and regulators:

- Remove restrictive elements of the Equality Act, including the **2030 expiry on all-women shortlists**.
- Provide clearer **guidance and support** for parties designing PAMs beyond gender.
- Enact **Section 106 of the Equality Act**, obliging parties to publish candidate diversity data.

The research demonstrates that PAMs and quotas are 'what works' in getting more women elected in Scotland. However, inconsistent application, legal uncertainty,

Sustained and strategic use of quotas, combined with wider structural and cultural change, is essential if Scotland is to achieve authentic, long-lasting, diverse, and inclusive political representation.

and cultural resistance threaten their current effectiveness and future progress. Sustained and strategic use of quotas, combined with wider structural and cultural change, is essential if Scotland is to **achieve authentic, long-lasting, diverse, and inclusive political representation**.

The upcoming elections in 2026 and 2027 represent a critical moment of opportunity for parties to demonstrate their commitment to equality. Parties must act now to implement the changes that will benefit not only women's representation but also the overall diversity and quality of democratic participation in Scotland, now and into the future.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Women's representation in the Scottish Parliament reached an all-time high in May 2021, when 45% of MSPs returned were women. These record results were not achieved by chance, but in part due to the widespread adoption of different gender quota systems during candidate selection by most major parties.

There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating the positive impact that quotas have on women's representation globally.¹ Although they are not the only action needed, they are an **“evidence-based tool to fast-track and compensate for the persistent barriers that women face when seeking public office”**.²

While women's representation has fluctuated since the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999,³ the higher levels of women's representation have been noted in the years where electorally successful parties have adopted quota measures.⁴

In the UK, there is no legal requirement for political parties to use gender quotas or other positive action mechanisms at elections. Parties can generally choose at each election whether or not to adopt any quotas or different positive action mechanisms. Without

any certainty over whether and what type of mechanisms will be used, representative progress for women remains insecure. The risk of regression is ever-present and highly dependent on the internal decision-making within parties.

This variability in women's representation is also evident across different election types. Although levels of women at Holyrood have fluctuated since the opening of the Scottish Parliament, they have remained consistently higher than at other levels of government and are now at a record high. At local elections, women have yet to exceed 35% of councillors - a level only just secured in 2022.⁵ **Following the 2024 General Election, just 35% of MPs from Scotland are women,⁶ a result which trails other parts of the UK.** At neither of these elections were quotas employed consistently across parties.

Barriers women may face when seeking public office:



- 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

¹ Paxton, P and Hughes, M M (2015) The Increasing Effectiveness of National Gender Quotas, 1990-2010. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*. 40:3.

² 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>.

³ Engender (2023) *Engender Parliamentary Briefing: Debate on the Gender Sensitive Audit of the Scottish Parliament*. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/resources/Engender-Briefing---Debate-on-Scottish-Parliament-Gender-Sensitive-Audit.pdf>.

⁴ Kenny, M (2013) The Scottish Parliament's record on women's representation is in the balance. *Democratic Audit*. Available at: https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/54565/1/Meryl%20Kenny%20democraticaudit.com-The_Scottish_Parliament's_record_on_womens.pdf.

⁵ Engender (2023) *Sex and Power in Scotland 2023*. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SP2023NEW.pdf>.

⁶ Duncan, J (2025) The most diverse Westminster yet, but there's more to do. *The Herald*. Available at: <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/viewpoint/24451716.diverse-westminster-yet/>.

Quotas and PAMs are not the only measures needed if we are to see diverse and gender-equal representation across all elections in Scotland. Women – particularly minoritised women, disabled women and others who face greater rates of discrimination and exclusion – still contend with many cultural and structural barriers on their path to electoral success.⁷ During candidate selection processes, biased and prejudiced attitudes still regularly favour the continuation of the status quo and undermine the candidacy journeys of women and people from minoritised communities. Grassroots campaigning and many local party meetings remain inaccessible for many women, with events often held at times that do not work for people with caring responsibilities. Information and support about candidacy are often inaccessible to those not already “in the know”.⁸

To see sustained progress for women’s representation, we need parties to prioritise both structural and cultural change and to commit long-term to robust gender quotas and effective PAMs.

This paper focuses on examining the crucial role that quotas and other PAMs play when used by parties during candidate selection processes. Too often, decisions on these crucial measures are left too close to election time. We know that long-term strategy and forward planning are essential to maximise the success of such measures. Now is the time for parties to reflect on past progress gained through quotas/PAMs and commit to their

continued use (or introduction) for elections at all levels going forward.

This paper

Between July and November 2024, Engender carried out research examining the experiences of women in accessing candidacy in political parties and political party approaches to candidate selection.

The aims of the research were:

- To increase understanding of how gender quotas and PAMs have been used to support women across different parties and elections in Scotland.
- To understand how different approaches have shaped the gender balance and diversity of party candidates during the selection process, and at elections.
- To understand the relative successes and drawbacks of different party approaches in achieving their aims of increasing gender-equal and diverse representation.
- To understand how these processes were experienced by women.

This paper specifically considers what conclusions can be drawn about the impact of PAMs on creating more gender-equal and diverse representation in Scotland. It also makes a range of recommendations – cross-party, party-specific and for other stakeholders

⁷ Elect Her and Engender (2024) Women’s Equal Representation in Scotland: Towards a Collective Theory of Change (Phase 1 Interim Report). Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/resources/Womens-Equal-Representation-in-Scotland.pdf>.

⁸ Engender (2025) Women’s Political Journey: Exploring the election process and women’s experiences of abuse, exclusion and bias, including vital recommendations for improvement. Available at: [10072025 Womens political journey report - RGB no bleed](#).

– on how current approaches and frameworks around PAMs can be improved. It also suggests next steps for increasing their overall usage and effectiveness at future elections.

We have also published an accompanying report examining women's experiences of candidate selection and the cultural and process-based barriers to candidacy that persist.⁹



Electoral Context

This paper is published at a time when candidate selection processes are underway in many parties for the Holyrood 2026 election. We presented initial findings and party-specific recommendations to most of the major parties between December 2024 and January 2025, to allow time for these considerations to be integrated into their processes. As selections for this election are currently unfolding, the extent to which these have been adopted is still unclear. We have not included detailed analysis of party selection approaches for 2026 in this report. Instead, we have taken a longer-term view of parties' individual and collective journeys to date on positive action measures (PAMs).

Our findings are not solely focused on Scottish Parliament elections but also consider UK Parliament and local council elections. Local councils are often overlooked in discussions around quotas and PAMs, despite being where the need for progress on women's representation is greatest. Sustainable progress for women's representation requires cultures of acceptance and consistency around PAMs at all levels of election.¹⁰ With upcoming local elections in 2027, now is the time for parties to act to ensure PAMs are applied.

Legislative Context

This paper does not offer legal advice, and it is the responsibility of individual parties to satisfy themselves that positive actions are legally compliant. However, it is important to acknowledge the complex legal context surrounding the use of PAMs and the challenges that the current legislative framework presents for securing sustainable progress for the representation of women and other protected groups.

Quotas and associated positive action measures in candidate selection are permitted through Section 104 of the Equality Act 2010.¹¹ This gives parties the right to put in place processes that will address the underrepresentation of different protected groups. Adoption of these measures is entirely voluntary. Parties can take positive action at elections to the UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament or local councils when a protected group is underrepresented within that party's

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Equality Act (2010). Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/104>.

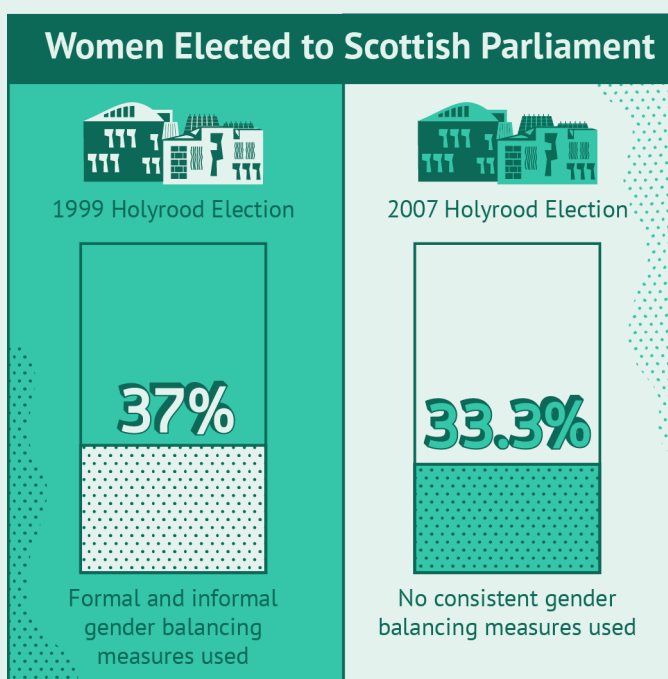
elected representatives in that body.¹²

Actions that parties can take include running all-women shortlists (AWS); “twinning” constituency candidates to ensure overall gender balance; and ensuring that underrepresented candidates are not placed at the bottom of party lists. Candidate shortlisting processes can also be used to ensure party members are presented with a diverse slate of prospective candidates to select from.

The law only allows the application of PAMs when it comes to individual party representation and not for the overall representation of a body, i.e., the Scottish Parliament. In other instances, the law is unclear. For example, a party uses all-women shortlists (AWS) to achieve greater representation for women. Once it reaches 50% of women elected, it is unclear if the party is allowed to continue to use the mechanism of an all-women shortlist again in the next election. Furthermore, this rule is time-limited and will expire at the end of 2030, meaning that without further legislative action, single-sex shortlists would be prohibited.

We know that without positive action measures in place, the number of women elected can regress sharply. This has been seen historically. During the 1999 Holyrood election, the Labour Party adopted a twinning policy and gender balancing on regional lists. Additionally, after their efforts

to adopt a motion to implement zipping were rejected, the SNP opted for informal placement of gender balancing measures. These positive action measures by the two parties resulted in 37% of MSPs elected to the first Scottish Parliament being women. No party subsequently applied consistent PAMs between 2003 and 2011, and the early success towards equal representation was lost with women’s representation regressing during that time to under 33.3% of female MSPs in 2007.¹³



This shows the impact and potential of consistent application of PAMs. However, some aspects of the law stand in contrast to this, where it all but guarantees backsliding. Similarly, the current time limit on this provision needs to be urgently addressed. Ideally, the law should guarantee a party’s right to utilise AWS as long as women remain underrepresented at all levels of our democracy.

¹² EHRC (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%3D-guide%2Bto%2Bpolitical%2Bparties#reservedplacesonshortlistss1046>.

¹³ Mackay, F and Kenny, M (2007) Women’s Representation in the 2007 Scottish Parliament: Temporary Setback or Return to the Norm? Scottish Affairs. 60:1.

No party has achieved gender-equal representation across all spheres of government. Therefore, there is much scope for more effective use of PAMs across both the political spectrum and across different levels of government. This paper considers the impact of PAMs approaches and invites consideration of next steps for parties and for other actors.

Most of our findings focus on the impact of positive action on gender-equal representation, as to date, women are the primary group that most PAMs have been used to support. Unlike all-women shortlists, the law does not permit exclusive shortlists for most other protected groups, meaning there are fewer options for parties to address the underrepresentation of minoritised groups.

There have been some limited attempts to target PAMs at other underrepresented groups, which are discussed, but our findings indicate a lack of confidence and experience across parties in designing these. This suggests a need for greater clarity, guidance and support from the UK Government as a legislator and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) as a guiding body for parties that wish to explore PAMs for groups other than women. At the time of writing, Engender has been informed that the EHRC is in the process of initiating an update to its guidance document: *The Equality Act 2010: A guide for political parties*.¹⁴ We broadly welcome this action as it

will hopefully provide a mechanism to achieve the goals and recommendations set out in this paper.

The UK Supreme Court's judgment in April that "sex" in the Equality Act 2010 refers to "biological sex" has added a further layer of complexity.¹⁵ Several political parties have subsequently paused or cancelled plans on women's political participation, citing potential legal implications from the ruling. In May 2025, it was reported that the UK Labour Party cancelled their annual women's conference, whilst the Scottish Green Party cancelled its commitment to gender quotas in its candidate selection processes for the 2026 Scottish Parliament election.¹⁶ At the time of writing, there is a lack of clarity on how parties will be able to support equal representation of trans and non-binary people, a group who are underrepresented in politics across the UK, and concerns have been raised about worsening exclusion.

Robust and clear guidance is needed on how women's and trans people's representation can be meaningfully progressed and how duty bearers can ensure they balance the rights of different groups.

¹⁴ EHRC (2025) *Equality Act 2010: A guide for political parties*. Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/equality-act-2010-guide-political-parties>.

¹⁵ *For Women Scotland v Scottish Ministers* [2025] UKSC 16. Available at: <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2024-0042>.

¹⁶ Elgot, J and Brooks, L (2025) Labour cancels its women's conferences after supreme court gender ruling. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/may/20/labour-to-cancel-its-womens-conference-after-supreme-court-gender-ruling>; Paterson, K (2025) Scottish Greens abandon gender quotas after Supreme Court ruling. *Holyrood Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.holyrood.com/news/view,scottish-greens-abandon-genderbalance-quotas-after-supreme-court-ruling>.

OUR FINDINGS IN SUMMARY: Use of PAMs across Scottish parties

Considering both the historical use of PAMs and approaches across the last three elections in Scotland, we can identify several trends and takeaways across the five major parties.

Labour, Greens, and to a slightly lesser extent SNP members remain positive about the use of PAMs to support women's representation.

Between these parties, a variety of positive action approaches have been implemented across the last three main elections in Scotland. This has included all-women shortlists, zipping, twinning, reserved places and over-arching quotas.

Some Scottish Liberal Democrats are open to more ambitious steps on PAMs, while Conservatives appear to remain the most sceptical overall.

There is interest and energy among some Scottish Liberal Democrats, backed by party leadership, to adopt a more comprehensive approach. For many Conservatives, PAMs are cited as incompatible with “merit-based” approaches to candidate selection. However, some research participants indicated that this may underestimate the appetite for change within the party overall. This “merit-based approach” leaves out systemic barriers that some women, such as BME and disabled women, face, which makes it harder to participate in politics in the first place. This risks leaving more vulnerable women unsupported.

Very few parties are using PAMs for groups beyond women.

There have been some limited attempts, notably reserved list spaces for minority ethnic and disabled SNP candidates at Holyrood 2021. Their impact was ultimately limited, and they were criticised by some as being largely tokenistic in approach. Members from several parties expressed a strong desire to extend PAMs to other groups, particularly disabled members and minority ethnic members.

The type of election has a big impact on candidate diversity and use of PAMs.

Some commonly used mechanisms, such as all-women shortlists and twinning mechanisms, are most easily compatible with First Past the Post elections (notably at Westminster), where others, such as zipping, are only applicable to the Holyrood list system. Unsurprisingly, snap elections (mostly UK General Elections), which give parties less preparation time, can have a negative impact on the use of PAMs.

PAMs are significantly underused at local elections.

We found very little evidence of consistent approaches to applying PAMs at local elections. Even where an overall quota for women's representation has been in place (i.e., in the Scottish Greens), there appears to be significant variation in how this is applied in practice at the local level.

Quotas and PAMs often benefit women from majority groups, leaving disabled and minority ethnic groups underrepresented.

Research shows that without combined measures, PAMs often advantage men from minority groups or women from majority groups, rather than those most excluded. The report calls for tandem or nested quotas to ensure fairer representation for women with intersecting identities, supported by clearer legal guidance.

Even where they're used, bias in how they are used can impact their effectiveness. This includes using them tokenistically. The following three examples show such scenarios.

- o Using PAMs in seats which are not realistically winnable;
- o Unintended consequences in PAMs design which result in higher-ranking women being placed lower on lists than lower-ranking men, known as “zipping down”;
- o Implementing PAMs alongside incumbency rules. This means sitting MPs cannot be challenged in their position. As men are overrepresented, this measure can impact equal representation.

Selecting women in winnable seats is of utmost importance - but parties should also strive to run an equal proportion of women overall.

Unexpected wins and losses do happen in politics, so it is important to make sure that women are well-represented both in priority and non-priority seats. This is particularly important for local elections, where outcomes may be less predictable, and women face the greatest rate of underrepresentation.

PAMs often face opposition from some party members, even in parties which have routinely used them.

This includes vocal and active resistance, more subtle undermining, and negative narratives characterising PAMs as being incompatible with “merit-based” approaches. This may impact the effectiveness and consistent use of PAMs even in parties where they have wider cultural acceptance and negatively impact more diverse representation.

Decision-making and institutional knowledge are scattered.

This is the case across various bodies and among individuals within parties, which can create confusion and a lack of clarity on what mechanisms are used and when. Although basic principles and commitments around gender-balancing and diversifying candidates can be found in some parties’ constitutions, it is not always clear how this translates into implementation in elections.

Prospective candidates from underrepresented groups benefit from their party being clear on if and which PAMs they use.

Knowing that PAMs are being used can encourage prospective candidates from underrepresented groups to come forward.

Research indicates that the use of PAMs underlines the party's commitment to diverse representation at a key messaging and values level.¹⁷ PAMs that work well result in a more diverse selection of members and will therefore improve the diversity of the overall pool of potential candidates for the future. This means it is important to have targets and quotas for non-target seats as well as the most winnable seats.



¹⁷ Childs, S, Lovenduski, J and Campbell, R (2005) Women at the Top 2005: Changing Numbers, Changing Politics? Hansard Society. Available at: https://assets.ctfassets.net/rdwvqctnt75b/2tGZlh46QQCYWG8w2Omkoa/9b4faa2cd5a14c2463e-853c8fd733b12/hansard-society-publication__Women-at-the-Top-2005-_2005_.pdf?utm_source=HansardSociety.

2. PAMs BY PARTY, SCOTLAND

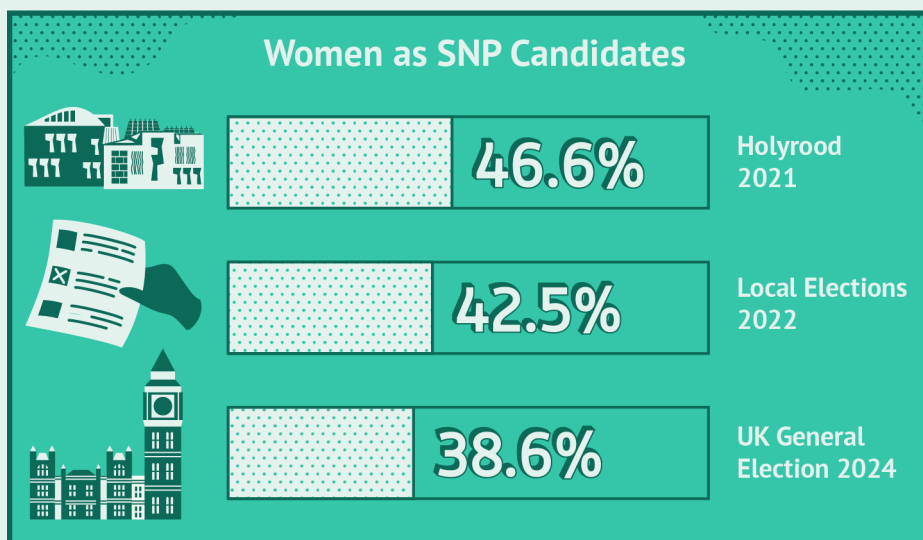
2.1 The Scottish National Party

History and attitudes towards Quotas and PAMs

Despite having made commitments to gender balancing from the early days of the Scottish Parliament,¹⁸ the SNP was historically slower than some other parties to adopt formal PAMs during candidate selection. However, since 2015, the SNP has introduced a variety of mechanisms across elections, including all-women shortlists, zipping and reserved places on Holyrood regional lists.¹⁹ The party's constitution states that they are working towards a 50:50 gender balance.²⁰ In addition to measures to support women, the party has also been the only one in Scotland to have used specific mechanisms to support disabled candidates and minority ethnic candidates at the point of selection.

In our survey, SNP respondents had fairly mixed attitudes and opinions towards PAMs. Some SNP respondents raised queries about whether the system is fair, echoing opinions more commonly held in parties that have less experience implementing PAMs. Others described resistance and witnessing challenging attitudes within the party regarding PAMs, as well as a lack of understanding and support from some members.

"It is a mixed bag of opinion. Some understand the need but often [you hear] the statement 'it's the best candidate, not if they are e.g. a woman.' This fundamentally misunderstands the nature of systemic disadvantage that women, disabled people and those from minority ethnic backgrounds face." *Survey Respondent*



Women made up 46.6% of SNP candidates in Holyrood 2021; 42.5% of candidates in the 2022 local elections, and 38.6% of candidates in Scotland standing in the 2024 UK General Election.

¹⁸ In the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary election, unlike Labour, which used a quota system, the SNP used only informal mechanisms to encourage women to stand as candidates, but ultimately did manage to elect a near gender balanced group of MSPs (42% compared to Labour's 50%).

¹⁹ Carrell, S (2015) SNP vote in 'all-women' and 'balanced' shortlists for next Holyrood election. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/scotland-blog/2015/mar/29/snp-vote-all-women-shortlists-zipping-holyrood-election>.

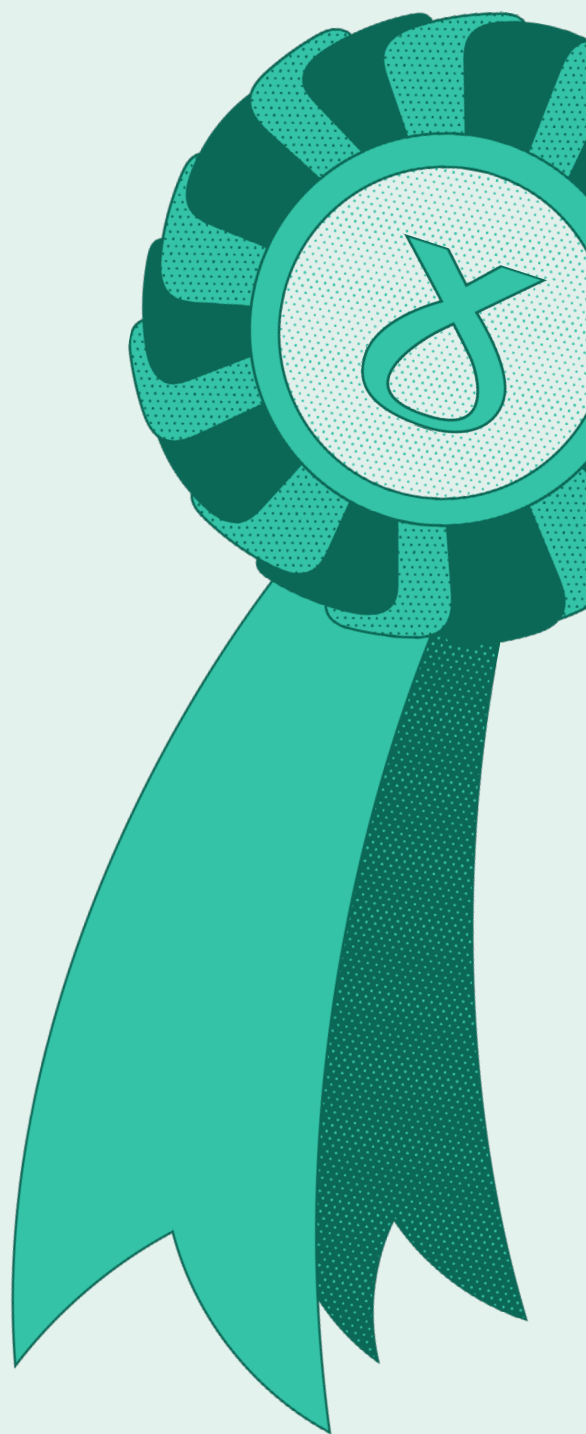
²⁰ Women 50:50 (2021) What the parties say. Available at: <https://women5050.org/what-the-parties-say/>.

Many SNP survey respondents noted how positive they felt about their party's use of PAMs and its impact on women's political representation:

"The SNP actively seeks to have gender balanced local authorities, glad to report that Highland was and maybe still is."

Survey Respondent

"It was good to see my group have such a strong group of women." *Survey Respondent*



WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY

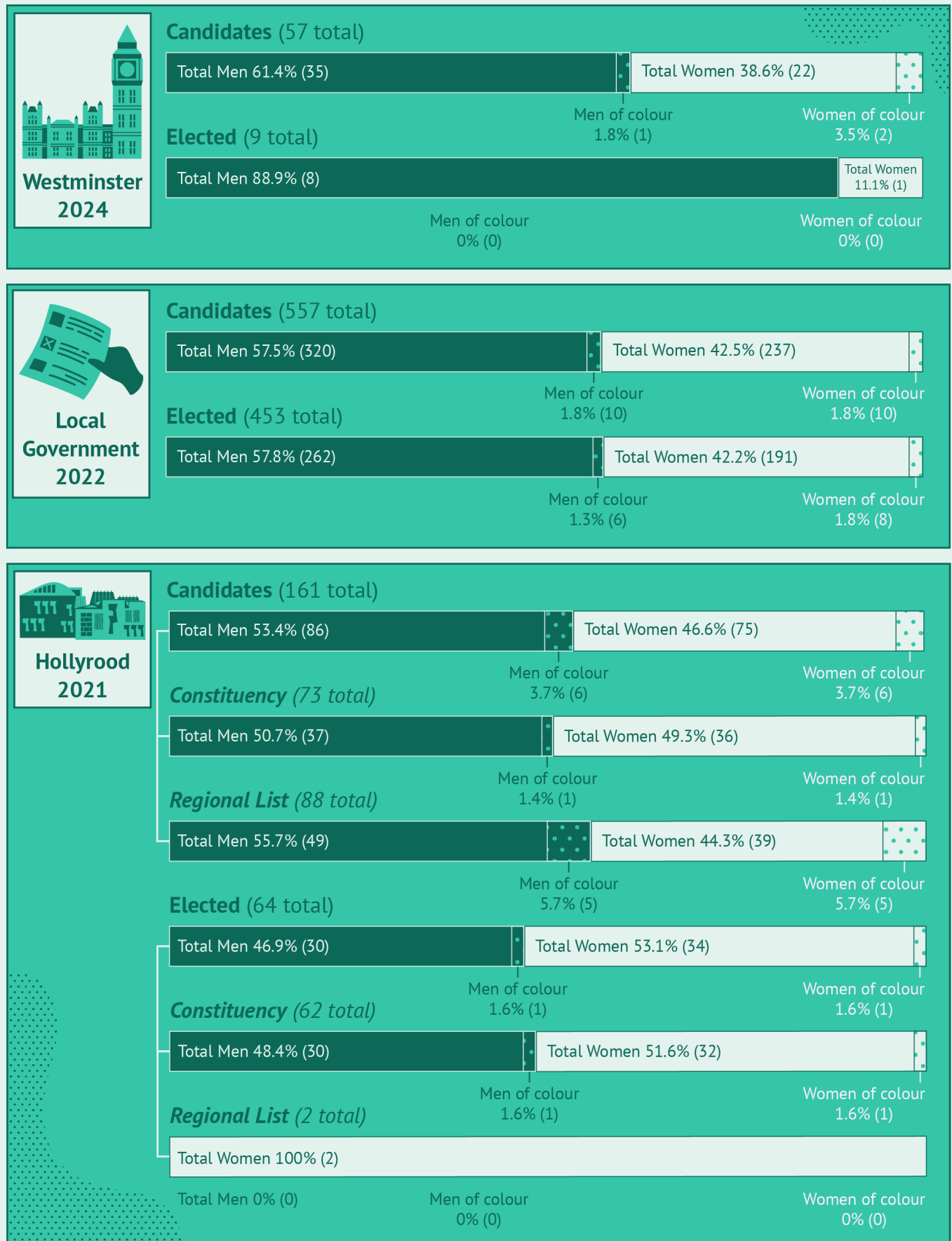


Figure 1: SNP Candidates and Elected Representatives

The table above shows our estimates of how women and people of colour were represented among the SNP's official candidates at the last three elections in Scotland. All disaggregated data is presented as a proportion of the overall total for that category. For instance, the SNP stood 22 women candidates at the 2024 Westminster Election, representing 38.6% of all SNP candidates (57) at that election. Of those 22 women, we estimate that two were women of colour, equalling 3.5% of the total candidates.

In the case of Holyrood figures, we have included a breakdown of candidates for constituency seats and the regional list. In many situations, the same individuals stood for both a constituency and a regional list seat. This is common practice across parties; however, when assessing diversity, it is worth noting as it can imply greater levels of diversity than exists. For example, in the above table, one woman of colour is recorded twice as she stood in both a constituency seat and on the regional list.

It is also important to note that our findings are based on the outcomes at each given election. These may differ from the current totals of elected representatives as they do not account for by-elections that have taken place since.

These notes on data also apply to all subsequent tables in this report.

What role did PAMs play in these results?

Westminster Election 2024

No positive action mechanisms were used by the SNP during the selections for this election. All-women shortlists (AWS) were not used even in seats where a female MP was stepping down. This was contrary to approaches used by the party at other recent elections, for instance, in 2021 when AWS were applied in the seats of vacating MSPs of any gender. Given that the SNP's existing group at Westminster was male-majority, the party missed an opportunity to utilise AWS at this election as well.²¹

Ultimately, less than 40% of SNP candidates at this election were women. Estimates suggested that 35% of women candidates were contesting seats that were realistically winnable for the party.²² Following heavy losses, the party now has only one woman in their group of nine MPs, translating to a rate of just 11%. It appears that losses at this election disproportionately impacted women's representation in the SNP group at Westminster.

Local Councils 2022

In the 2022 local elections, 43% of SNP candidates were women, and 42% of their elected councillors were women.

Our research suggests a lack of internal clarity around what PAMs the party implemented to achieve these above-average results

²¹ Uberoi, E, Baker, C and Cracknell, R (2020) General Election 2019: Full results and analysis. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8749/>.

²² Fawcett Society (2024) Women in winnable seats this General Election. Available at: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/blog/women-in-winnable-seats-this-general-election>.

for women's representation. The range of responses received in our survey recorded differing accounts, implying confusion about what measures were in place.

A 2023 letter from the party to the Scottish Parliament's Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee indicates a balancing policy was in place at the 2022 election. The letter stated that "where more than one candidate is being put up in any given ward, there would usually be a requirement for gender balance".²³ This was echoed by a survey respondent who told us that:

"During the election I stood in, the party were very keen to have at least one man and one woman standing in each ward."

Survey Respondent

However, it remains unclear how this was applied or enforced, with our results painting a mixed picture. In a sample of our data from six council areas with a strong SNP presence (Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Dundee, Falkirk, Glasgow, and Highland), we found that this policy was not universally observed across or within council areas. For instance, in Dundee, the party ran two candidates in all eight of the city's wards; however, only half of these pairs were gender-balanced, with only men running in three and only women in one. In Aberdeen City, of the 10 wards in which the SNP ran dual candidates, again only half were gender-balanced, with a further four running only men and just one women-only.

One of our interviewees indicated that, rather than formal mechanisms, most of the impact on women and other underrepresented groups at this election stemmed from greater encouragement and targeted engagement of underrepresented groups.

Holyrood 2021

In 2021, the SNP used all-women shortlists in constituency seats where a sitting MSP was standing down or where the seat was not SNP-held. This resulted in near-gender balance overall, with 49.3% of constituency candidates being women. As the party went on to win most of its seats through the constituencies, this proved an effective strategy for increasing gender equality; women ultimately accounted for 51.6% of MSPs elected via constituencies. Reporting at the time noted that record numbers

Candidates for Constituency 1 No all-women shortlist



All women shortlists (AWS)

Candidates for Constituency 2 All-women shortlist utilised



Parties can restrict candidates for selection of a specific seat or set of seats for one sex if this will help reduce unequal representation.

All-women shortlists are only one of two types of "exclusive" shortlist as it restricts candidates to those sharing a specific protected characteristic. Sex and disability are the only types of exclusive shortlist currently permitted by law in the UK.

²³ Parry, K (2024) Response from Cllr Kelly Parry, SNP Local Government Convener. Scottish Parliament Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee Correspondence. Available at: <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/local-gov/correspondence/2023/scottishnationalparty.pdf>.

of prospective candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds stood for selection in constituency seats in 2021; however, only two were ultimately selected as candidates.²⁴ This included one of the first two women of colour to become an MSP.

The party utilised a zipping approach to the regional list at this election. Women topped five out of eight regional lists for the SNP. Of the overall list candidates, 44% were women, and 56% were men. Ultimately, these efforts did not have a significant impact on the outcome as just two SNP MSPs were elected through the list – both were women.

Notably, the party also implemented measures to promote a wider diversity of representation by reserving spaces at the top of regional lists. Four of the regional lists were topped by disabled candidates, and four by candidates from minority ethnic communities. This approach was critiqued by several research participants as being ‘tokenistic’. Specifically, because the SNP was not expected to win many seats via the list:

“This was a case of us employing a mechanism that would make no difference because they were not winnable seats. Due to the fact we [were set to] sweep the constituencies, we hardly got any list candidates. It meant we elected no BAME candidates [via the list] and two disabled candidates were able to make it to Holyrood (which was some good news at least).”

Survey Respondent

The SNP was the only party in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections to introduce specific PAMs during the selection process for underrepresented groups beyond women. This is a critical precedent which should be built upon, as Black and minority ethnic and disabled people remain underrepresented overall. Rather than abandoning them, the party should re-commit to utilising a form of PAMs for these groups. However, greater consideration should be given to improving the design and focusing on the most winnable seats, avoiding tokenism and ensuring greater impact. As one survey respondent summarised:

“I think when we apply positive action measures, [...] 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 in winnable seats.” *Survey Respondent*

²⁴ Goodwin, K (2020) SNP diversity drive was ‘window dressing’, say party insiders. The Ferret. Available at: <https://theferret.scot/snp-diversity-drive-is-window-dressing/>.

2.2 Scottish Labour

History and Attitudes towards Quotas and PAMs

Historically, Labour have been at the forefront of using PAMs for women candidates UK-wide, including pioneering the use of all-women shortlists (AWS). This has also been true in Scotland, with the party telling Women 50:50 ahead of the 2021 Holyrood election that:

“From our commitment to gender balance in the 1999 election, to being the only major party in 2016 to have over 50% women candidates on both the list and constituency ballots, we have demonstrated our values through action.”²⁵

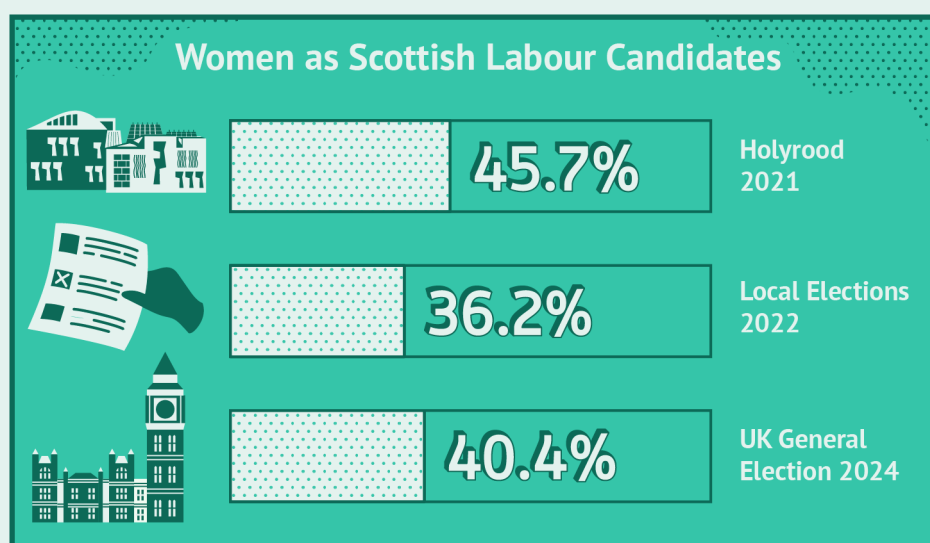
Our research indicates that gender-balancing PAMs, including AWS, twinning and zipping, continue to see high levels of general support from women Labour members. Of Labour survey respondents, 60% agreed that PAMs are effective, among the highest of all parties. However, a similar proportion also agreed that PAMs are ‘resisted’ or ‘resented’ by some party members who feel their use is “unfair”. Similarly, respondents shared concerns that

the written process is “good on paper” but not always followed in practice. Unchallenged, this risks negative feeling towards PAMs gaining traction in the wider membership and an undermining of the legitimacy of women candidates who are successful in contests where PAMs are applied.

One survey respondent summarised why PAMs remain an essential tool for the party, stating:

“Proactive action by the Party ensures that there is a degree of equality, but I fear that without these interventions we would lose women representatives very quickly.”
Survey Respondent

Labour respondents also demonstrated a strong awareness of different forms of PAMs used by the party, with many proactively mentioning all-women shortlists, twinning and zipping. One Labour respondent said that without the party’s quotas for, and encouragement of, women, they wouldn’t have considered standing.



Women made up 45.7% of Labour candidates in Holyrood 2021; 36.2% of candidates in the 2022 local elections, and 40.4% of candidates in Scotland standing in the 2024 UK General Election.

²⁵ Women 50:50 (2021) What the parties say. Available at: <https://women5050.org/what-the-parties-say/>.

Beyond gender, our research found evidence that PAMs to support Black and minority ethnic candidates at earlier stages in the candidate journey have been used in the Labour Party in Scotland, including reserved spaces on shortlists. However, our findings also suggested that clarity is needed on how these are applied across different elections.



WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

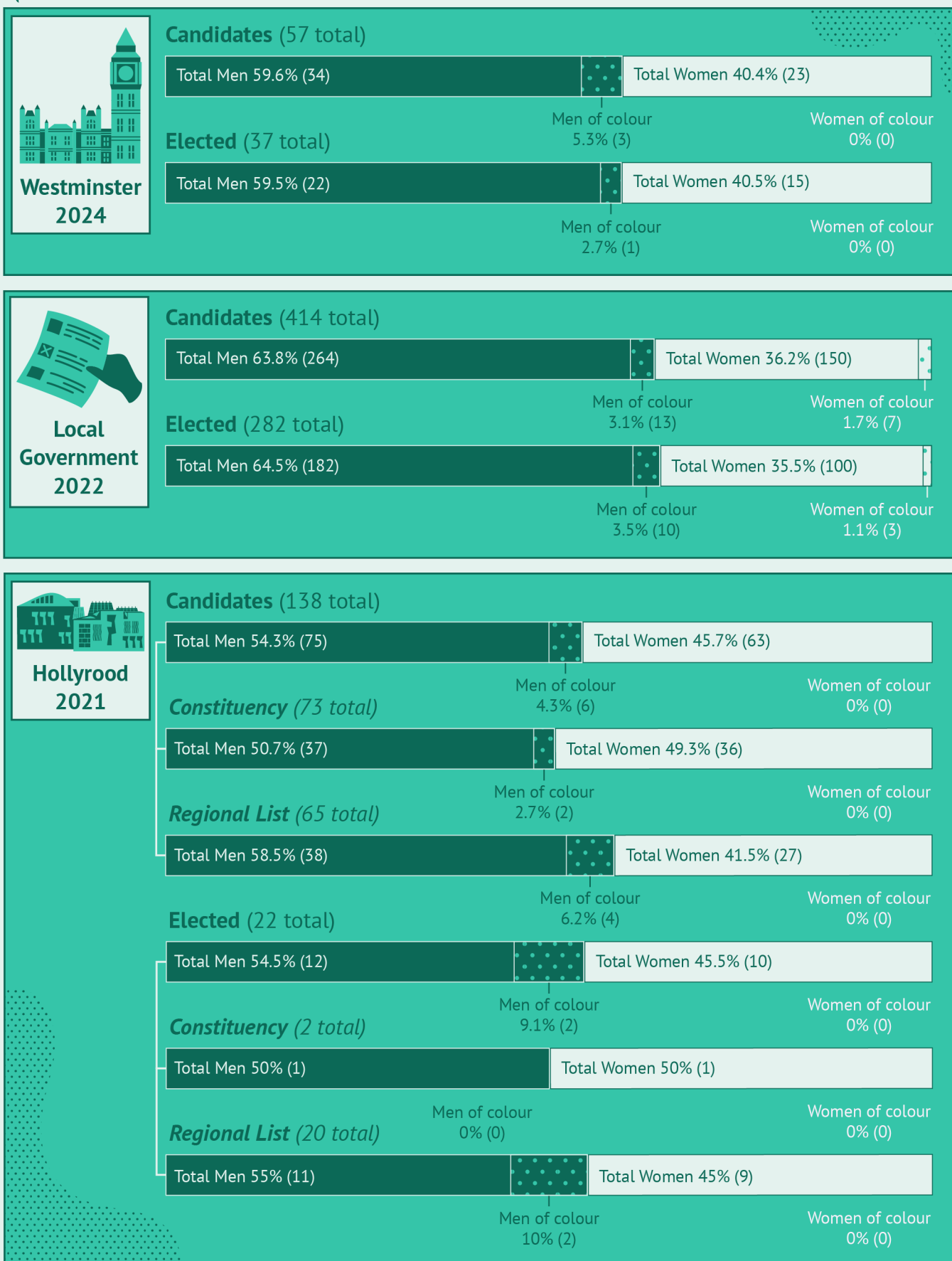


Figure 2 (for notes on data presentation, see Figure 1)

What role did PAMs play in these results?

Westminster 2024

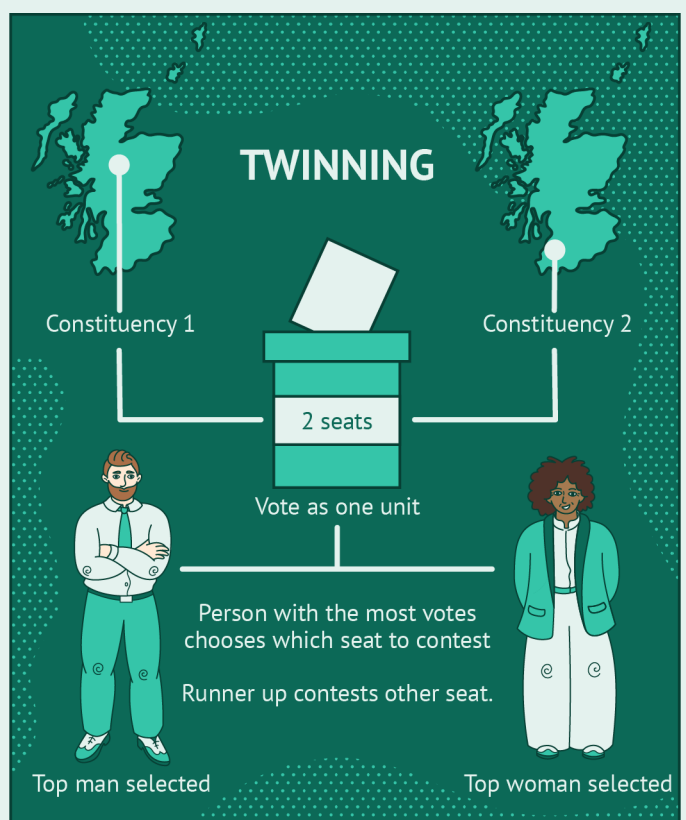
Following a strong performance at this election, Labour secured 37 of Scotland's 57 seats. Regarding gender balance, the picture was relatively positive, with women making up just over 40% of candidates and 40% of the party's elected MPs. However, no women of colour were selected as candidates, and of the three men of colour who stood, only one was elected.

Scottish Labour used a twinning system in the most recent General Election, breaking with UK Labour, which did not use any PAMs in the rest of the UK. This decision was reportedly taken based on legal advice that, as the levels of women's representation prior to the election sat at 52%, their use in the 2024 election would not have been in line with the Equality Act.²⁶

The Scottish party's twinning approach grouped constituencies into pairs of similar size, winnability and geography. Party members for the twinned constituencies voted as one unit for the purposes of candidate selection, with both the top-voted woman and top-voted man being selected for those two seats. The candidate with the highest number of votes was then given first choice of which of the two seats to contest, with the runner-up taking the other.

Mixed views on this twinning approach were reported to us by respondents of our research. Concerns were raised that in twinning, men

are often more likely to top the members' vote and thus get first pick of the available seats. While the system calls for members to cast votes for both a woman and a man, there were also some isolated incidents of members being encouraged to vote only for a man, increasing the likelihood of that man topping the poll and then selecting the more winnable of the two available seats. Other concerns relating to twinning included women candidates being effectively "capped" at 50% due to the requirement for both a man and a woman to be selected. This, in effect, means that if two women top the members' poll, the second-ranked woman will be passed over in favour of the highest-ranked man. Some participants felt strongly that this is counterproductive to addressing women's chronic underrepresentation.



²⁶ Samuelson, K (2022) Labour and the end of all-women shortlists. The Week. Available at: <https://theweek.com/news/politics/956008/labour-and-all-women-shortlists>.

Local Councils 2022

At this election, 36% of Labour's candidates were women, and 35% of the Labour councillors elected were women. Our research indicates a lack of clarity around how PAMs were used and to what extent they were used in this election.

In a 2023 letter to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, Labour's Scottish General Secretary outlined a range of measures to support greater representation of women at these elections. This included a requirement for 50% of new candidates to be women, and all-women shortlists (AWS) being run in seats with sitting female councillors.²⁷ In line with this, four survey respondents reported the use of AWS in the area where they put themselves forward, suggesting these may have been in place in at least some local areas. However, this was contradicted by findings elsewhere implying that AWS had not been used in some areas during council elections.

With just 35% of Scottish Labour's councillors being women, local elections are an outlier for the party on women's representation. Greater clarity, consistency, and transparency with regard to the use of PAMs could in future lead to better outcomes for women's local representation. A renewed focus on PAM design, implementation, and accountability mechanisms ahead of 2027 could bring the party's local results more in line with their impact at other levels.

Holyrood 2021

In January 2021, the party leadership publicly stated a commitment to having "at least 50:50 representation" on regional lists at that year's election.²⁸ Scottish Labour used all-women shortlists to achieve near-gender balance with constituency candidates, 49% of whom were women.

Among the Scottish Labour cohort was the first permanent wheelchair user to be elected as an MSP, an important moment for the representation of disabled people in Scotland.

Our data indicates that while a zipping approach was taken to ensure gender balance on regional lists in 2021, women accounted for less than half (42%) of list candidates up for election. Of those Labour list candidates elected, 9 (45%) were women and 11 (55%) were men. It is notable that the party did not have any candidates who were women of colour.

Elements of the zipping system used by Scottish Labour at the election did generate concerns among research participants. Top list spots were split equally between women and men, with the remaining candidates alternating by gender. In practice, this resulted in some higher-ranking women being "zipped down" and lower-ranking men "zipped up" to maintain the system of alternation by gender. In three of the eight regions, at least one woman benefited from the system, being zipped up the list. In three regions, the zipping resulted in no difference to women's

²⁷ Scottish Labour (2023) Letter to Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. Scottish Parliament Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee Correspondence. Available at: <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/committees/current-and-previous-committees/session-6-local-government-housing-and-planning/correspondence/2023/understanding-barriers-labour-response>.

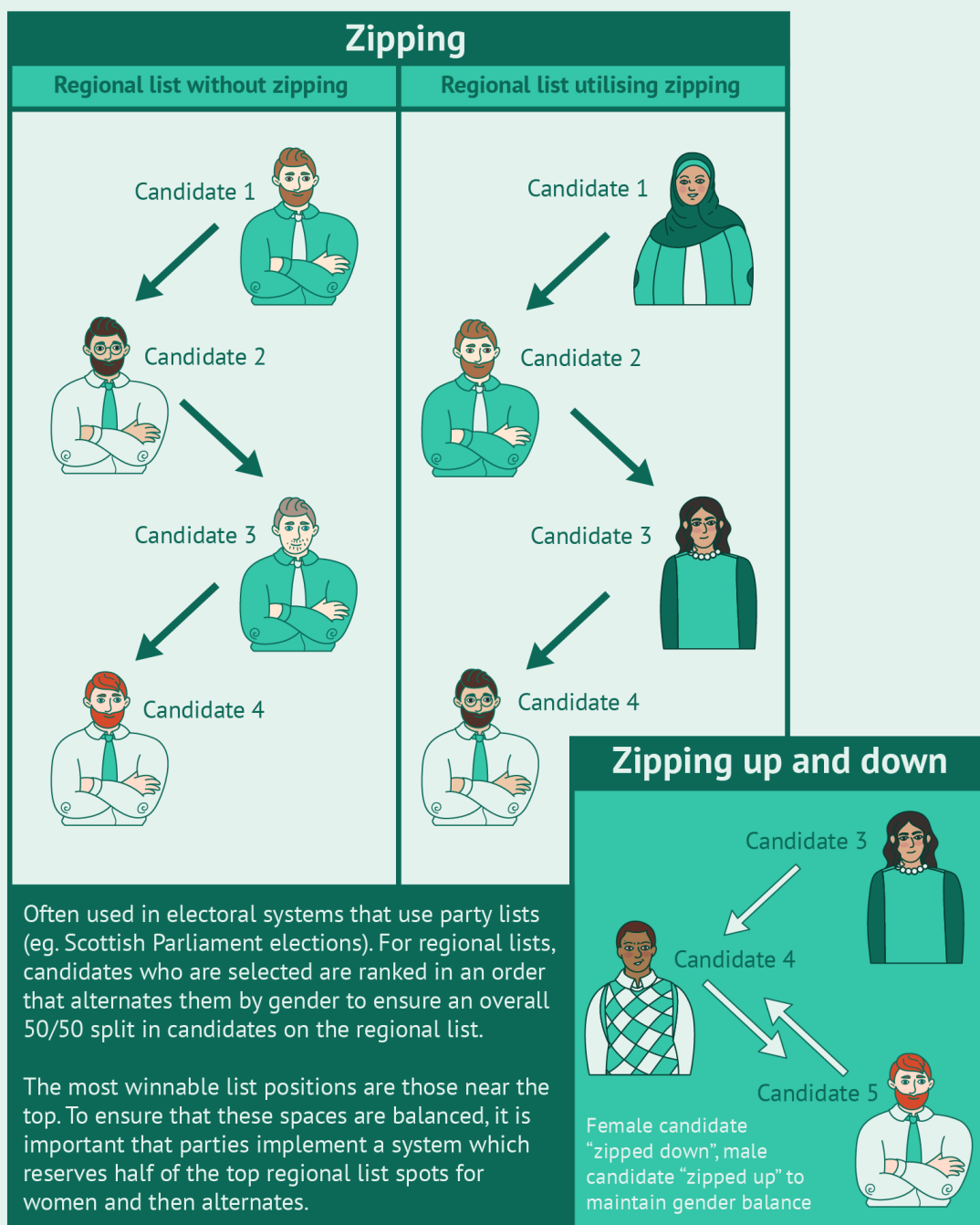
²⁸ Women 50:50 (2021) What the parties say. Available at: <https://women5050.org/what-the-parties-say/>.

placement. However, in two regions, the zipping resulted in women being balanced down the list.²⁹

In this context, there have been examples where (white) women and minoritised men have felt they have been pitted against each other. This underlines the need for deeper

understanding and guidance on intersectional approaches. We explore this further in the section on intersectional PAMs in this report.

This situation highlights the need for clear and comprehensive PAMs which support women and other groups, while maintaining commitments to overall gender-balance.



²⁹ Rodgers, S (2021) Exclusive: Scottish Labour list selection ballot votes and results revealed. Labour List. Available at: <https://labourlist.org/2021/02/revealed-scottish-labour-list-selection-ballot-results/>.

2.3 Scottish Green Party

History and Attitudes towards Quotas and PAMs

Our survey and interview findings indicate that attitudes in the party have been among the most positive about the use of gender-focused PAMs. Alongside Labour, Green survey respondents were likely to agree with positive statements about PAMs and how they are employed by the party. For example, survey respondents typically described the party's approach as "comprehensive and regularly reconsidered", "the norm" and "mandatory".

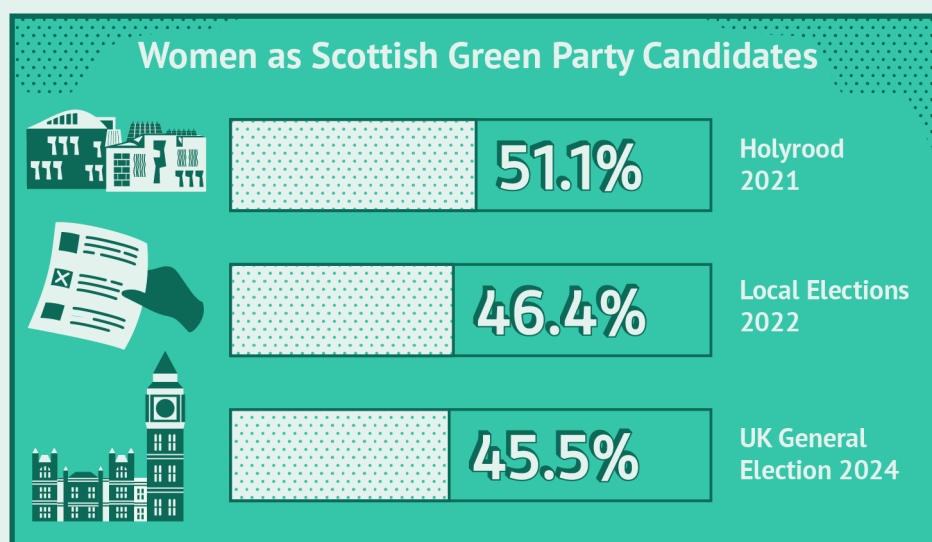
The Scottish Greens are the only major party to have operated a universal gender quota across all three election types. The quota requires that women be at least 50% of "target" candidates, and 40% of overall candidates. This is based on a system which assesses the realistic winnability of seats and targets resources at those deemed most likely for the party to succeed in. The application of the quota in practice varies from election to election. In general, however, the party has operated a selection system

"where women will be uprated as candidates in order to meet a minimum quota..., but we also don't down rate women, so we can end up with candidate shortlists which have a majority [of] women." *Survey Respondent*

Despite reporting generally high levels of support for PAMs in the party, research did indicate resistance in some sections of the membership, in common with other parties. One respondent explained a persistent problem with local branches seeking exemptions from the central party to run more men as candidates, contrary to the quota policy. One survey respondent noted that:

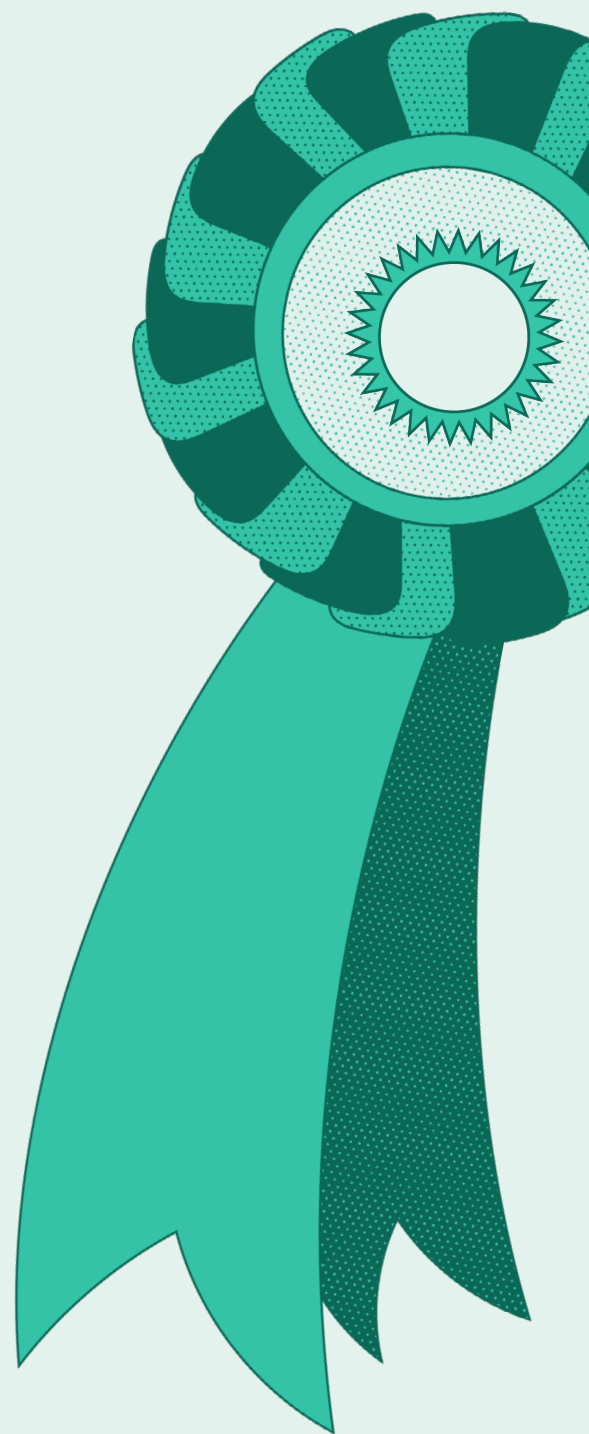
"Some branches seek dispensations, rather than choosing to contest fewer seats within our [quota] mechanisms. Often it is men in the branch wanting very badly to be a candidate who are the driver behind this." *Survey Respondent*

The Scottish Greens have previously had a policy in place to support non-binary candidates, allowing them to choose to opt-in or opt-out of any PAMs that implement the



Women made up 51.1% of their candidates in Holyrood 2021; 46.4% of candidates in the 2022 local elections, and 45.5% of candidates in Scotland standing in the 2024 UK General Election.

gender quota. We did not find evidence that the party has used formal PAMs at the point of selection to support other underrepresented groups, although the party constitution makes a reference to selections being designed in a way to encourage more disabled candidates to stand.



WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

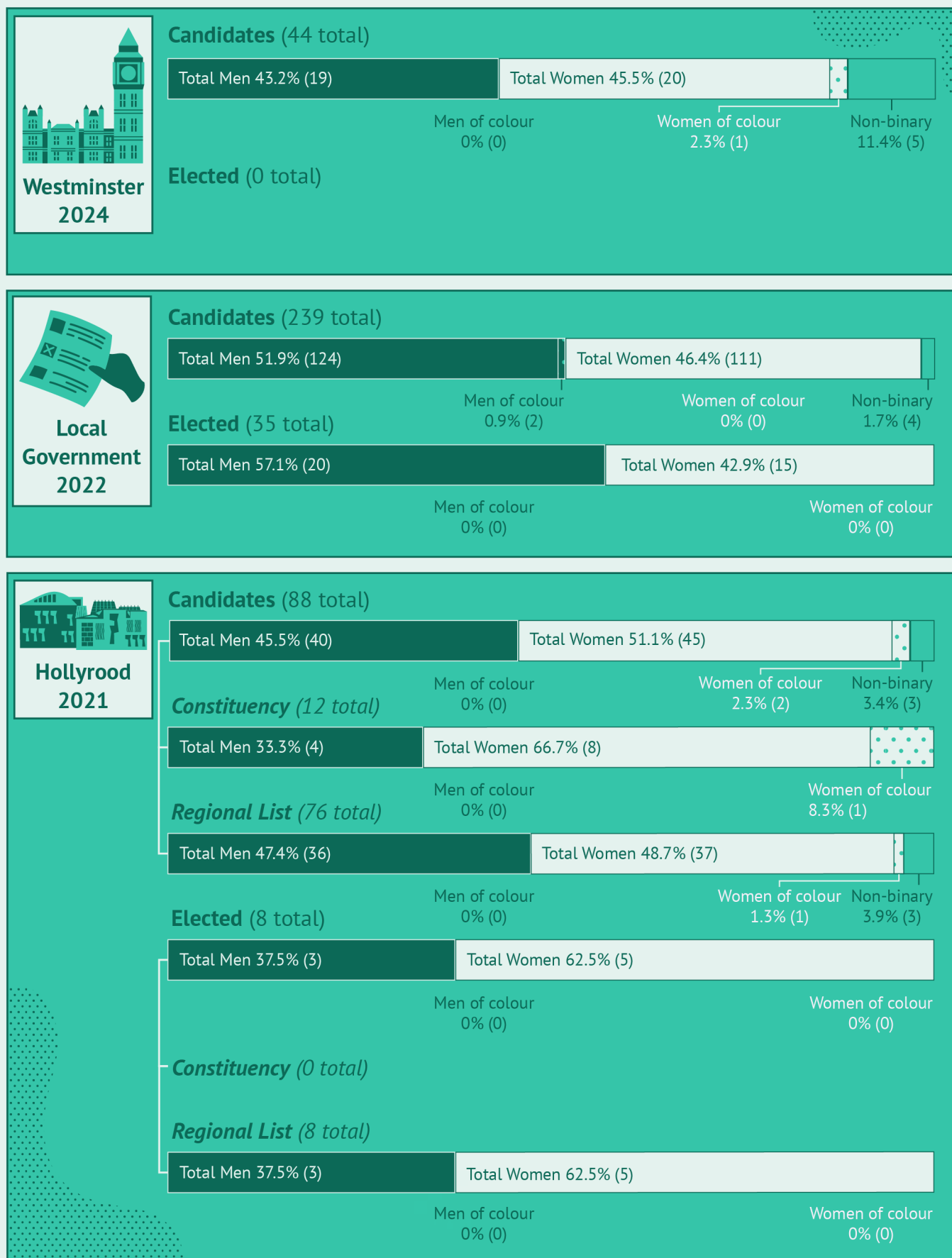


Figure 3 (for notes on data presentation, see Figure 1)

What role did PAMs play in these results?

Westminster 2024

For this election, each branch of the party was responsible for applying the quota and selecting a gender-balanced slate of candidates across the seats they had decided to contest. All seats were considered non-target, so the quota of 40% was required. The Greens ended up with a gender-balanced slate of candidates: 46% women, 11% non-binary and 43% men. However, achieving this was not without challenges. Interviewees and survey respondents noted that some branches struggled to meet, or resisted meeting, the 40% quota. This was explained in part due to the snap nature of the election and the short time available to re-run any selections if a candidate stepped down.

Local Councils 2022

The Greens ran a slate of 46% women candidates, 2% non-binary candidates and 52% men, just short of a 50:50 balance. Following polling day, this translated to 43% of those who were successfully elected being women, and 57% men.

At these elections, branches were responsible for applying the gender quota to candidate selection (women in 50% of target seats, and 40% of seats overall) and the methods for achieving this varied. We were unable to determine with certainty whether the quota for target seats was met for this election. However, it was suggested that dispensation requests (where branches may be given permission to forgo the quota) may be more likely to be granted for non-target seats. This

could lead to an overrepresentation of men in these positions and have the unintended consequence of more men being elected when the party wins seats unexpectedly, as is not uncommon at council elections.

“This is a reason for the party to reconsider or perhaps be less lenient when awarding dispensation. If dispensation is granted simply because “At least it’s all non-winnable seats,” and then we accidentally win some of them anyway, that’s a decision that could have been avoided.” *Interviewee*

To maximise the likelihood of consistency between candidates and those elected in future, the quota system could be amended to ensure that women make up 50% of both target and non-target candidates.

Holyrood 2021

For Holyrood 2021, the Greens focused attention on the regional lists, as these seats were considered the most winnable for the party. In this context, it meant the top three list spots were deemed “target seats” in areas such as Edinburgh and Glasgow. A handful of constituencies were also contested, with just one being a target – Glasgow Kelvin. On lists, a zipping system was used to alternate candidates by gender.

Rules to prevent women from being “zipped down” were introduced in response to the 2016 election results, where a highly disproportionate number of male MSPs were elected. Incumbency rules were applied, ensuring sitting MSPs could not be gender-balanced down in favour of a woman or

non-binary candidate.³⁰

In 2021, this approach, ensuring a high proportion of women in target seats, yielded results, with the Greens returning five women (62.5% of the group), including four new MSPs. All target positions, except where there were sitting MSPs, were filled by women.

The party stood just one candidate of colour on both the list and the constituency. They were ultimately not elected. Many Green respondents to our survey noted an urgent need for the party to increase the diversity of their candidate pipeline.

³⁰ Women 50:50 (2021) What the parties say. Available at: <https://women5050.org/what-the-parties-say/>.

2.4 Scottish Liberal Democrats

History and Attitudes to Quotas and PAMs

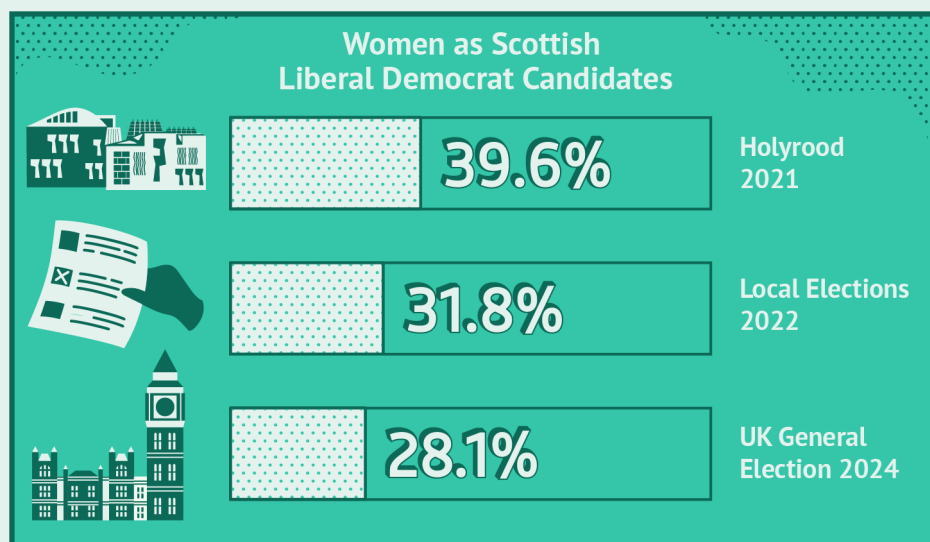
Liberal Democrats have a mixed approach and history towards the use of quotas and positive action mechanisms. A number of times, the use of PAMs (including AWS and zipping) has been passed, at both UK and Scottish party conferences.³¹ However, their use in practice has been unpredictable. It appears that individual women have played a big part in pushing for the use of PAMs in Scotland for many years, and this has also been backed by recent party leaders in Scotland.³² At the federal level, the Liberal Democrat Campaign for Gender Balance and Campaign for Racial Diversity are pushing for more action.³³

Survey responses from Scottish Liberal Democrat women indicate that attitudes towards PAMs in the wider party are

generally perceived as being ‘lukewarm’, skewing more negatively than most other parties. Respondents indicated general scepticism around PAMs and that some of the membership believe that PAMs are unnecessary and conflict with a “merit-based approach” to candidate selection. One survey respondent shared:

“Some members genuinely believe that you can either have people selected by merit OR by positive action mechanisms. Getting them to understand that all evidence suggests [with PAM use] that you get better and more diverse candidates across the board is a challenge.”
Survey Respondent

As with most parties, a key challenge remains that PAMs are adopted on an electoral cycle basis, with no policy or strategy for consistent usage. This suggests that a longer-term vision



Women made up 39.6% of their candidates in Holyrood 2021; 31.8% of candidates in the 2022 local elections, and 28.1% of candidates in Scotland standing in the 2024 UK General Election.

³¹ See, for example: BBC (2016) Scottish Lib Dem conference: More women candidates plan backed. BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-35678350>; Liberal Democrats (2025) Preparing for Selections. Available at: <https://www.libdems.org.uk/preparing-for-selections>; Park, M (2016) The Lib Dems have used all-women shortlists, and it worked. Available at: <https://www.markpack.org.uk/137184/lib-dems-all-women-shortlists/>, and Park, M (2016) All-women shortlists to be debated at Lib Dem conference in York. Available at: <https://www.markpack.org.uk/136810/women-shortlists-debated-lib-dem-conference-york/>.

³² Interview.

³³ The Liberal Democrats operate a federal structure with separate parties operating in devolved contexts across the UK. There is a UK-wide umbrella structure referred to internally as the “federal party”.

for the use of PAMs, and efforts to building the positive case for their adoption is needed.

Related to this, our research suggests a preference within some sections of party membership to focus on building more pathways for a wider diversity of candidates, rather than on PAMs during the selection process. This includes a focus on more training, mentoring and personal development support for women and candidates from other underrepresented groups. However, based on the figures outlined above, these measures do not appear as of yet to be translating into women being selected or elected in equal numbers to men. This indicates that bolder action on PAMs during candidate selection could be an effective way to drive progress for women's representation.



WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

SCOTTISH LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

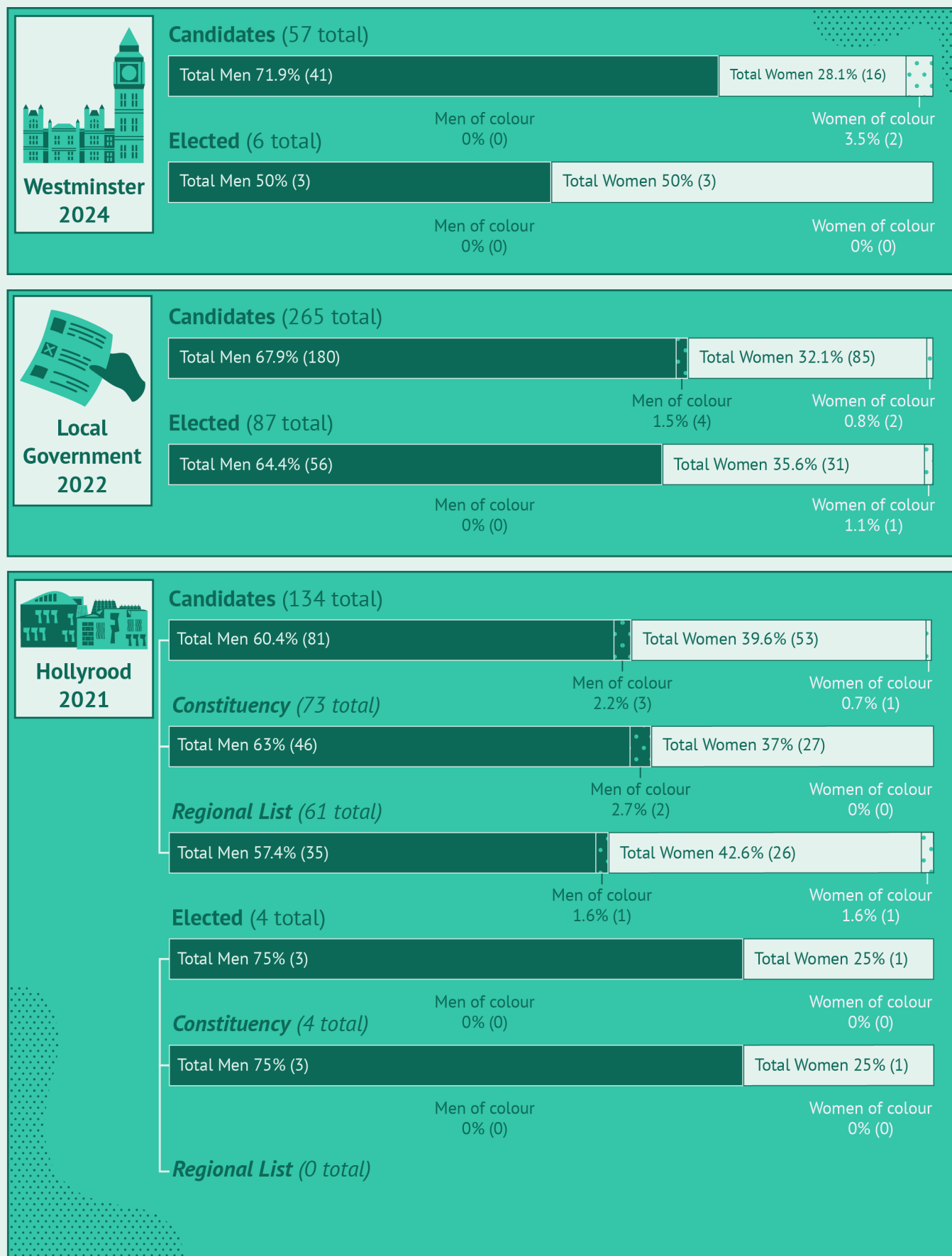


Figure 4 (for notes on data presentation, see Figure 1)

How were these figures achieved?

Westminster 2024, Local Councils 2022, Holyrood 2021

In line with the party's reportedly mixed feelings, our research indicated that PAMs are not being consistently used across any election type within the Liberal Democrats. One interviewee explained that this is in part due to constraints within the party's constitution, which require mechanisms to be adopted on an election-by-election basis only, rather than longer-term. The Liberal Democrats are not unique in this regard, with most parties taking a short-term view of positive action implementation.

No PAMs were used by the Scottish Liberal Democrats for the General Election in 2024, as per the rest of the federal party. However, despite only 28% of their candidates in Scotland being women, three of the total six MPs selected were women (50%).

Similarly, no PAMs were used in the local elections in 2022. Decision-making during these elections is described by party members as devolved to the lowest level, and decisions around the use of PAMs:

"Are at the purview of each individual local party and aren't coordinated by state or federal parties." *Interviewee*

Again, just under a third of their candidates for these elections were women, and just over a third of those successfully elected were women.

For Holyrood 2021, a combination of all-women shortlists and list-topping mechanisms were planned to be used across five of ten of their most winnable seats.³⁴ However, one interviewee stated that this process was ultimately not handled well, suggesting that there may have been discontent among some men who felt the process was unfair. Although still lower than the SNP, Labour and Greens, almost 40% of the Scottish Liberal Democrat candidates were women for Holyrood 2021. On polling day this resulted in one woman being elected for the party, out of a total of four MSPs.

At present the party has just one elected representative of colour (who is a woman) across all three levels of government.

³⁴ Women 50:50 (2021) What the parties say. Available at: <https://women5050.org/what-the-parties-say/>.

2.5 Scottish Conservatives

History and Attitudes towards Quotas and PAMs

Previous research indicates that the Scottish Conservative Party has not utilised quotas at elections in Scotland.³⁵ The Conservatives tend to demonstrate a preference for “supply-side encouragement” and cite the party’s history of female leaders as their main mechanisms for encouraging greater representation for women.³⁶

In line with this, no PAMs - for gender or any other protected characteristic - appear to have been used by the Conservatives in Scotland in any of the three elections examined in this research. Women made up only 25% of their candidates in Holyrood 2021 (with only one regional list topped by a woman); 27% of candidates in the 2022 local elections, and 31% of candidates in Scotland standing in the 2024 UK General Election. The only main party to run lower proportions of women in

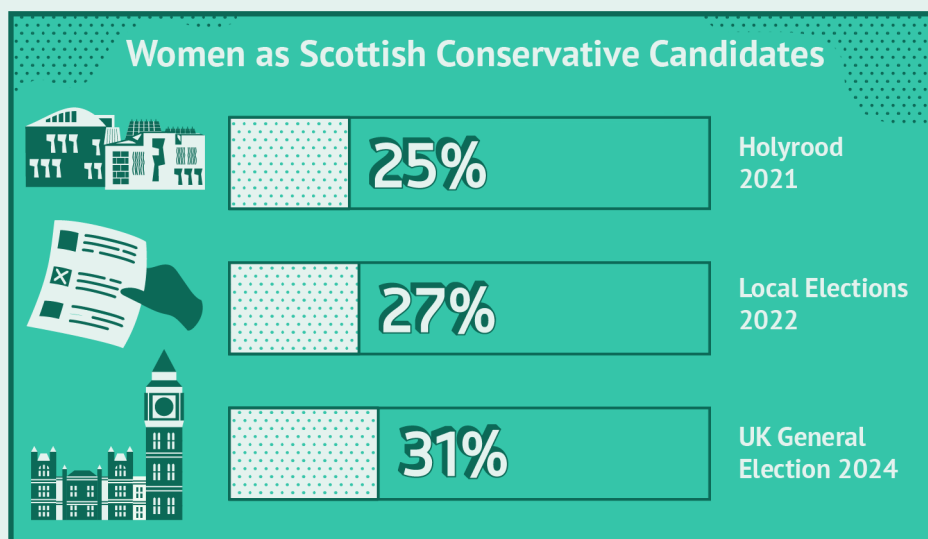
any of these elections was the Liberal Democrats, who have had a scattered approach to PAMs use to date.

Our survey results indicate that the party has employed some more informal attempts to increase the number of women candidates in the past, although these do not appear to have been impactful and may have been tokenistic. One survey respondent mentioned that in the 2019 Snap General Election:

“Women were targeted... to make the gender diversity % better by being asked to be essentially paper candidates.”

Survey Respondent

At the UK-wide level, there have also been some historical attempts by the Conservative Party to increase the number of female candidates and candidates of colour. Under David Cameron, the UK party drafted an ‘A-list’ of MP candidates, of whom 50% were women



Women made up 25% of their candidates in Holyrood 2021; 27% of candidates in the 2022 local elections, and 31% of candidates in Scotland standing in the 2024 UK General Election.

³⁵ Belknap, E and Kenny, M (2023) ‘The first but not the last’: women’s descriptive and substantive representation in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election. *British Politics*: 19.

³⁶ Ibid.

and 10% were from ethnic minority backgrounds.³⁷ Conservative constituency associations were then expected to pick, or at least include on their shortlists, candidates from this list for safe and winnable seats.³⁸ The A-List proved controversial within the party and was abandoned post-2010.³⁹ The party does maintain a requirement for “due regard to gender balancing” during candidate longlisting.⁴⁰

Our research indicates that the party membership is the most sceptical of positive action out of the major parties and is generally opposed to quotas.⁴¹ The most common explanation for this was a preference for a system that they perceived to be based more on “merit”. For example, one survey respondent told us: “Every candidate is chosen on merit, not sex or diversity or age or culture”. An interviewee further explained,

“I wouldn’t want it to be a case where you end up with, like, a genuinely less competent women, just because they’re women, I always believe things should be on merit.” *Interviewee*

The same Conservative interviewee also noted the complexity of the issue, stating:

“I can see why quotas would help get those women there because they then wouldn’t have to do the whole, you know, working twice as hard thing because they’re there anyway. Equally, I worry that it would set us back because there’s then this, oh, well, you’re only there because you’re a woman, you know, so it’s, I find it a topic very tricky to have an opinion on.” *Interviewee*

Whilst there appears to be a high degree of scepticism, some Conservative respondents felt more positive towards quotas:

“We always hear about meritocracy in our party but if that was true, we would quickly work out that older average white men is not the best we can do. We are told that Scottish Conservative women don’t want quotas or positive action. They do not listen to or canvass our views on policy, they do not know what the position of party members is on the subject of positive action mechanisms.” *Survey Respondent*

In 2021, former Conservative MSP Mary Scanlon told The Times that she was disappointed that so few had made it into winnable positions on the party’s regional list for Holyrood. She said: “The party needs to re-examine its strategy and look at how women

³⁷ Kelly, R and White, I (2016) All-women shortlists. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05057/>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Wäckerle, J (2022) Parity or patriarchy? The nomination of female candidates in British politics. *Party Politics*. 28:1.

⁴⁰ Paxton, B (2023) Conservative and Labour party selection of UK parliamentary candidates. Institute for Government. Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/general-election-candidate-selection>.

⁴¹ Belknap, E and Kenny, M (2023) ‘The first but not the last’: women’s descriptive and substantive representation in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election. *British Politics*: 19.

can be more valued and supported to enable them to be selected. It can only be to our electoral advantage.”⁴²

It’s important to note here that this approach leaves out structural and systemic barriers that women, and specifically minoritised women, face. BME, disabled, LGBTQ+ and other women face persistent barriers that prevent them from participating in politics. No research suggests they are not represented equally due to a lack of qualification or merit.



⁴² Allardyce, J and Boothman, J (2021) Conservative Party must be more female-friendly in Scotland, say party activists. The Times. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/conservative-party-must-be-more-female-friendly-in-scotland-say-party-activists-gsb05wmhm>.

WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVES

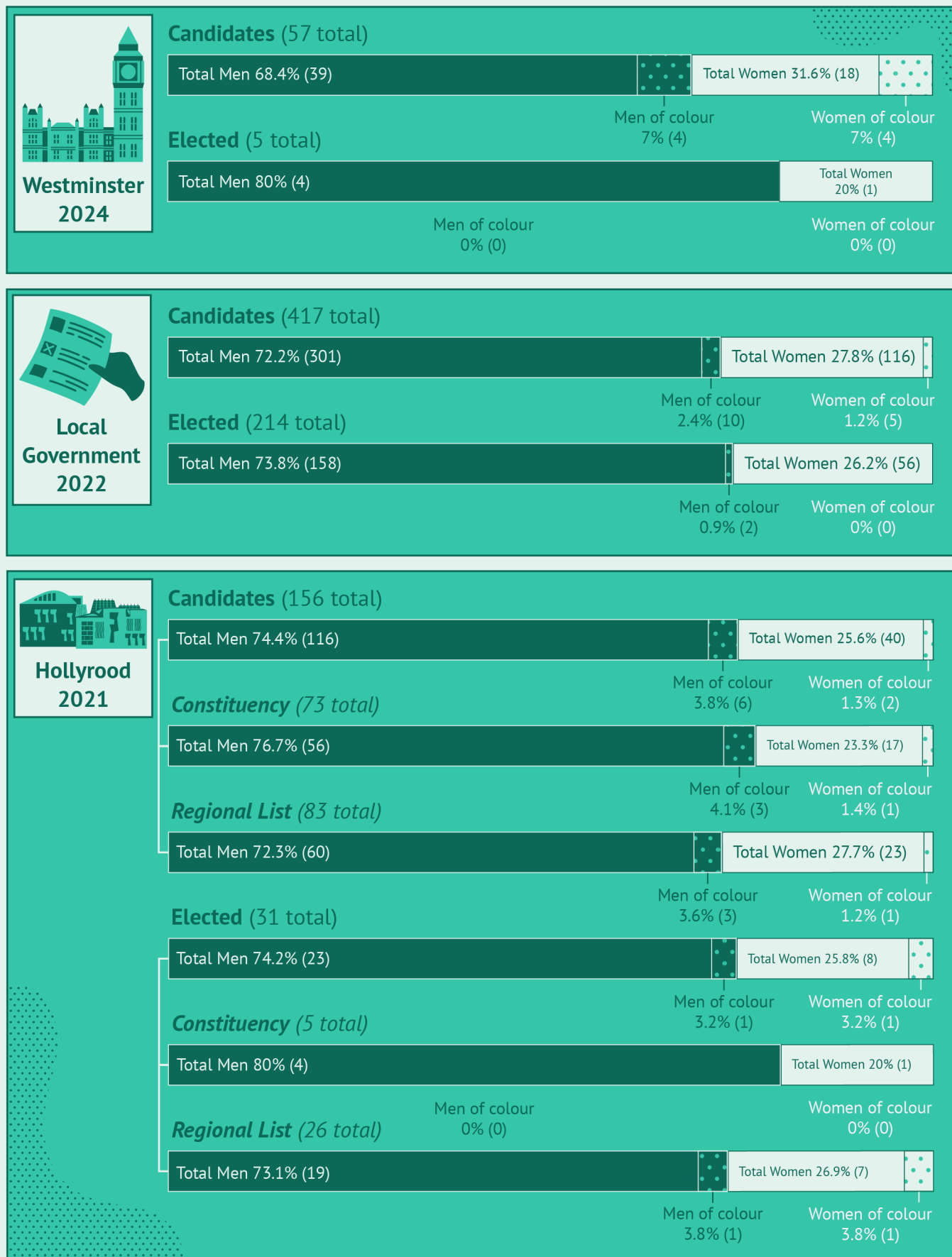


Figure 5 (for notes on data presentation, see Figure 1)

How were these figures achieved?

**Westminster 2024, Local Councils 2022,
Holyrood 2021**

As noted above, the party did not use any PAMs at any of the elections we looked at. At both Holyrood 2021 and the local elections in 2022, the party stood the lowest proportion of women as candidates. At the 2024 Westminster election, only the Liberal Democrats (who have an uneven history on PAMs use) performed more poorly on gender balance. Looking at the averages across all three elections, the party has the most imbalanced group of elected representatives, with women making up just 24% of the party's total elected representatives. These results indicate a need for the party to reconsider its approach to PAMs and begin exploring with women and other underrepresented members how a system could work for the party in practice.

3. WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PAMS IN SCOTLAND?

Considering the findings of our data collection, interviews, survey and desk research, a number of conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of PAMs in Scotland over the past three elections:

1. **There is a broad correlation between the use of PAMs and women's political representation:** The parties with more consistent use of PAMs for women are generally the parties with higher proportions of women candidates and elected representatives across all three election types. As discussed, to be effective, it is not just enough for PAMs to be implemented; they also need to be well-designed and targeted at winnable seats, which has not always happened. This correlation also suggests that PAMs are an outward sign that a party values women's participation, which in turn may encourage more women candidates to come forward.⁴³
2. **Progress is being made on women's political representation in Scotland,** albeit slowly. This is in part because the parties returning larger numbers of elected representatives across different elections (SNP and Labour) are generally the same parties that stand higher proportions of women as candidates. If the political dynamic shifts, however, we are likely to see a regression overall, meaning all parties need to commit to action to increase or maintain women's representation. **All parties have elected groups that are not gender-balanced, whether this is at Westminster, Holyrood, or in local councils.** This means there is little justification to discontinue or weaken commitments to using PAMs.
3. **When parties take action to correct technical problems with PAMs, it can work.** For example, the Greens have dramatically increased their proportion of elected women MSPs between 2016 and 2021 by changing the way that their PAMs were applied, preventing women candidates from being "zipped down" the list.
4. **When parties don't use PAMs, women often lose out.** For example, the SNP didn't use any positive mechanisms in the 2024 General Election. The number of elected women fell significantly, in contrast to the record results seen at Holyrood 2021 when a comprehensive approach to PAMs was adopted.

⁴³ Culhane, L and Olchawski, J (2018) Strategies for Success: Women's experiences of selection and election in UK Parliament. Fawcett Society. Available at: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b8a66d72-32a4-4d9d-91e7-33ad1ef4a785>.

5. PAMs implemented badly can be harmful to existing and future candidates from underrepresented groups. When candidates are placed in unwinnable seats through PAMs, this is tokenistic. Such mechanisms are unlikely to lead to better electoral outcomes and increase the likelihood of a negative experience for the candidate.
6. Much greater progress on ethnic diversity in Scottish politics is needed at all levels. Positive action to support groups other than women is not widely used, and where PAMs at the point of selection have been attempted (such as by the SNP in 2021), design flaws meant that impact was limited. Furthermore, tandem or nested quotas need to be implemented to ensure groups with intersecting identities, such as BME or disabled women, are not left behind.

4. LOOKING AHEAD – KEY FOCUS AREAS FOR REACHING EQUAL REPRESENTATION

4.1 Intersectional PAMs

In a number of parties, our research indicated a strong desire from members to expand PAMs to groups other than women, particularly minoritised and disabled candidates. Across parties, there has been little use of PAMs other than those designed to support gender equality. As outlined above, those that have been implemented have had a limited impact. One reason for this is that the law does not allow exclusive shortlists to address underrepresentation for protected characteristics other than sex and disability.⁴⁴

The Equality and Human Rights Commission outlines alternative actions that parties may consider within the law. This includes **reserving a fixed number of places on candidate longlists and shortlists prior to selection; ensuring that candidates from underrepresented groups are not ranked at the bottom of party lists.** Beyond PAMs, parties can also **provide targeted training and support to candidates from particular groups.**⁴⁵ While some of these measures can have impact if well-designed, research indicates that where there is no requirement to select a candidate from an underrepresented group (such as with AWS), measures are less effective.⁴⁶

This lack of scope to expand exclusive shortlists beyond the current permitted

categories of sex and disability means that there are fewer options available to parties who wish to introduce PAMs to increase wider candidate diversity. However, much of the discussion around PAMs and quotas focuses on exclusive shortlists, particularly all-women shortlists. However, other voting systems, such as the Holyrood list system, may offer more opportunities for creative approaches to support a wider range of groups. This could take the form of a shortlist aimed exclusively at members of the LGBTQ+ community or exclusively at BME candidates. Greater consideration, clarity and guidance are needed for political parties to support the design of impactful PAMs in a range of electoral contexts for other underrepresented groups.

Reserved Places on Shortlists		
Regional List 1	Regional List 2	Regional List 3
1.  Reserved for BME candidate	2.  Reserved for Disabled candidate	3.  Reserved for LGBTQ+ candidate
 Candidate 2	 Candidate 2	 Candidate 2
 Candidate 3	 Candidate 3	 Candidate 3

During the candidate selection process, parties can reserve places on their candidate shortlists for prospective candidates from underrepresented groups.

⁴⁴ EHRC (2025) Equality Act 2010: A guide for political parties. Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/equality-act-2010-guide-political-parties>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Krook, M L, and Nugent, M K (2016) Intersectional institutions: Representing women and ethnic minorities in the British Labour Party. *Party Politics*. 22:5.

A challenge arises here as some participants have mentioned concerns about the competitive nature of PAMs, especially amongst different underrepresented groups:

“Yeah, it’s almost as if a [white] man has a clear lane, women, and people from different racial backgrounds, orientations, different genders, we’d all come together in the one lane competing against each other. Whereas the [white] man has a lane of his own to sail right through.” *Interviewee*

Challenges also exist around “single-axis” thinking on PAMs, which separate positive actions for women from those for other groups, rather than thinking intersectionally about the barriers and solutions to increasing diverse representation among women.

As noted by Krook and Nugent, the current legal framework encourages this thinking:

“This separation not only renders invisible the specific challenges faced by BAME women but has also resulted in debates that frame women and ethnic minorities as competitors in the struggle for increased political representation.”⁴⁷

They argue that part of the solution is to move towards a system of tandem quotas, which seeks to implement multiple quotas at the same time, for example, one considering gender and one focusing on race during candidate selection decisions.⁴⁸ Or nested quotas, which describe the process of having

a mix of different quotas in place for people with intersecting identities, i.e., a quota for BME women.

The ongoing underrepresentation of disabled and BME people indicates a clear need for comprehensive PAMs which support groups other than women. These measures must also maintain commitments to overall gender balance. Our research indicates appetite for multiple-axis PAMs; however, it is clear that greater legal clarity and guidance on implementation is needed. A survey respondent described the challenge facing parties:

“...it gets extremely difficult to figure out how to implement positive action measures across multiple different groups. Further work to identify models parties could use to simultaneously implement positive action measures across multiple groups would be a useful bit of research.” *Survey Respondent*

We recommend that parties move towards developing frameworks of PAMs to support candidates from minoritised, disabled, and other underrepresented communities, which, in the design, also balance the need for overall gender-balanced representation. We know that gender quotas tend to support women from majority backgrounds, for example, white women, and minority quotas favour men from those backgrounds. Only if they are applied together, in tandem or nested, do they increase women’s representation significantly, and in particular, women with intersecting identities such as women of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

colour, disabled women, young women, etc. These findings have been supported by learnings from combining gender and youth quotas.⁴⁹

This approach is necessary to avoid underrepresented and minoritised groups' perception and experience of competing against each other.

“It’s almost as if a [white] man has a clear lane, women, and people from different racial backgrounds, orientations, different genders, we’d all come together in the one lane competing against each other.”



⁴⁹ WEN Wales (2022) Briefing Paper: Diversity Quotas. Available at: https://wenwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/DiversityQuotas.WenWales.Final_.pdf.

4.2 Local elections

The use of PAMs within local elections is particularly sporadic, and accurate information on how parties in Scotland have approached these is comparatively sparse. While some parties seem to agree on basic principles for local elections, application and enforcement are opaque. Women's local elected representation lags behind both the UK and Scottish Parliaments at just 35%. Only two parties - the Scottish Greens and the SNP - managed to yield 40% women candidates at the last local elections.

The persistent lack of diversity in local representation has multiple causes. In general, local elections receive less scrutiny in the media than others, and where coverage exists, there is a lack of focus on issues relating to inequality in representation.⁵⁰ Local elections are also often afforded less prestige than national elections within parties and the wider political landscape, contributing to less accountability on candidate diversity.

Women's lack of representation at the local level is a major democratic deficit, as many vital decisions made by councils disproportionately impact women's lives. Women make up the majority of the workforce in education and social care; they carry the greatest burden of unpaid care, and are more likely to be users of public transport and to

rely on social housing. However, too often women's voices are absent from the spaces where critical decisions on these issues are being made. These deficits have negative consequences for women, their communities and our democracy as a whole.

It's clear that there is a need for parties to strengthen pathways to candidacy for women and other underrepresented groups.⁵¹ There is also significant work needed across the political landscape to make the role of councillor viable and attractive for a wider range of citizens, addressing issues such as toxic working environments and outdated ways of working.⁵² While PAMs alone will not fix these problems, it is clear there is significant scope for harnessing them to greater effect.

Our research indicates that in many cases, the selection of council candidates is primarily the responsibility of local parties. This includes decisions around PAMs and quotas, including how to apply them or, often, whether to implement any at all. For local PAMs to be effective, there is a need for greater national direction, accountability and oversight of implementation. This does not have to undermine local decision-making principles. For instance, central parties could work with local branches to agree on a shared set of principles and develop a slate of options on how measures could be implemented locally.

⁵⁰ Elect Her, Engender and Women 50:50 (2022) Reading into the News: A review of gendered representations of politicians in Scottish election coverage in May 2022. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/2.-reading-into-the-news.pdf>.

⁵¹ Engender (2025) Women's Political Journey: Exploring the election process and women's experiences of abuse, exclusion and bias, including vital recommendations for improvement. Available at: [10072025 Womens political journey report - RGB no bleed](#).

⁵² Ledingham, R (2022) Making Local Politics Work for Women: The experiences of women councillors and their reasons for not seeking re-election. Engender. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/3.-making-local-politics-work-for-women.pdf>.

4.3 The need for longer-term strategies and commitments

At present, most parties lack long-term thinking on quotas and PAMs. Decisions around whether to use them and what format they will take are generally made election-by-election. We know that in addition to their primary objective, PAMs have a powerful signalling effect on women considering standing for election.

Uncertainty around their use has the potential to discourage women from putting themselves forward for election. In strengthening wider party acceptance around PAMs, there is also a need to build a culture of normalcy around their use. This is only likely to happen through developing a longer-term strategy and commitments on how quotas and PAMs should be approached, learning from past experiences and setting goals.

How parties choose to do this will differ in practice, but what matters is that quotas and positive action are kept on the agenda throughout the whole electoral cycle. Tactics may include introducing an overarching quota that spans all elections or that is tailored to each election; developing a national strategic plan for positive action, setting out specific targets and indicators of progress; and introducing a constitutional requirement to discuss the way forward on quotas in an appropriate timeframe ahead of all future elections.

As outlined above, our research also indicated a need for greater internal understanding

and clarity on how PAMs have been used in the past within parties. Parties should take steps to enhance and consolidate institutional knowledge on PAMs' use, ensuring this isn't lost with the turnover of volunteers and staff. Parties should maintain a central record of candidate diversity data (which should be made public where possible),⁵³ as well as details on PAM implementation at different elections. As part of this knowledge-strengthening, parties should also carry out an equalities review of the selection process following each election to reflect on successes and plan improvements where required for next time. This process should be co-led with relevant sections of the party membership that represent marginalised groups.

Enacting Section 106 of the Equality Act could also assist in providing greater insight when it comes to achieving equal representation. Section 106 of the Equality Act regulates data collection and would introduce an obligation on political parties to publish information relating to the protected characteristics of their candidates. This information is critically important in securing equal representation of women and other groups and holds huge potential to enhance understanding of where in the candidacy journey the system fails BME, disabled, young and other minoritised women. The power to enact section 106 lies with the UK Government.

In conclusion, coordinated thinking is needed from both the parties themselves and from those with the power to change the external frameworks within which PAMs operate. Parties must be proactive, and the government

⁵³ Duncan, J (2022) Data & Equality in Politics. Engender. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/data--equality-in-politics/>.

must enable PAMs, not block them.

Lastly, a dual approach is needed, which considers cultural and structural change, as our report on women's political experience has shown.⁵⁴ PAMs do not need to be implemented at the expense of other approaches to increasing diversity in the pipeline. They should be used in tandem to give the best chance of improving the gender balance of candidates and ultimately of elected representatives.

⁵⁴ Engender (2025) Women's Political Journey: Exploring the election process and women's experiences of abuse, exclusion and bias, including vital recommendations for improvement. Available at: [10072025 Womens political journey report - RGB no bleed](#).

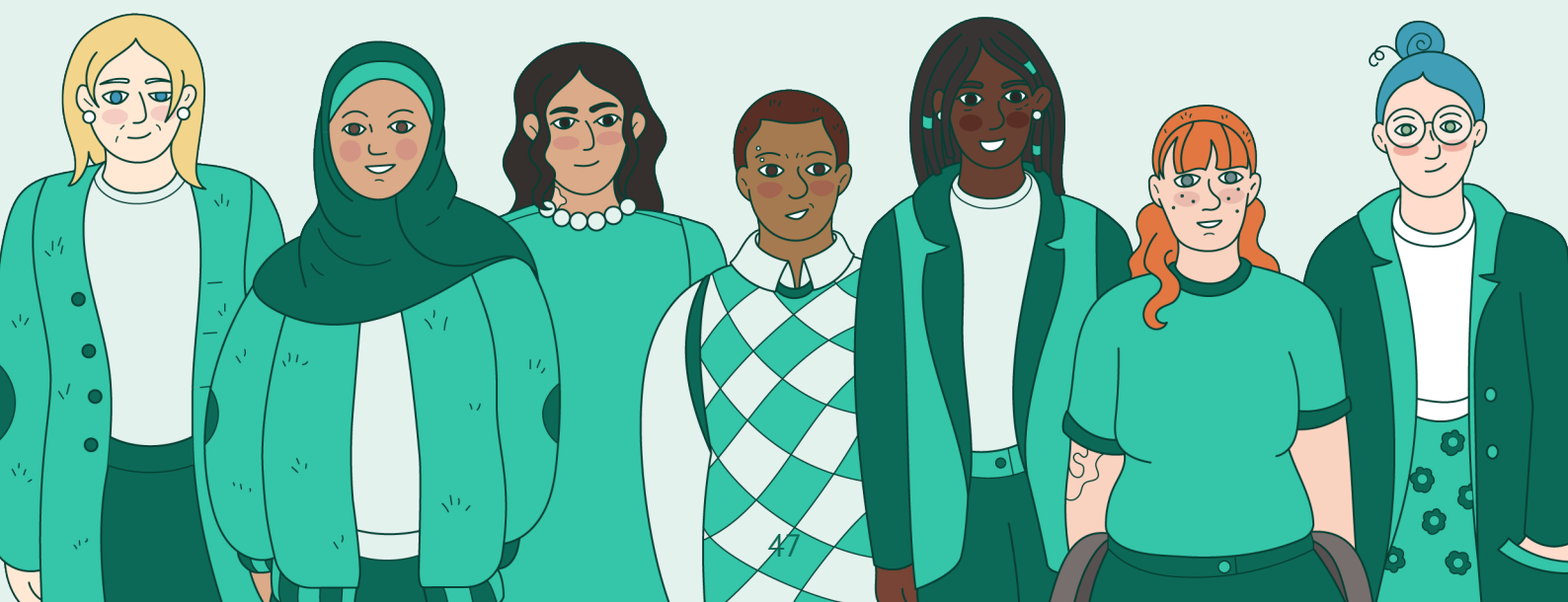
5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Recommendations for all political parties

- **Wherever possible, commit to implementing gender-balancing PAMs, focusing on winnable seats, to maintain or achieve women's equal representation at all elections.** Without renewed commitment, regression is all but guaranteed.
- **Commit to measures that select women in winnable seats, and to running an equal proportion of women overall.** This dual-track approach will help to ensure equal representation even when elections are less predictable.
- **Take steps to increase understanding of and support for PAMs among the general membership.** Focus on increasing awareness of the benefits of greater gender-equal and diverse representation, and the effectiveness of PAMs in securing change. Ensure that all members receive clear and timely information about what PAMs will be used, how they will operate and why the party is opting to use them.
- **Parties should commit to developing longer-term strategies for quotas and PAMs across multiple election cycles and types.** This should include a commitment to continuous improvement and indicators of success. Parties should also consolidate knowledge of historic use of PAMs, ensuring that learning is not lost with staff and volunteer turnover.
- **Introduce consistent approaches to PAMs for local elections.** Local government is often overlooked in the conversation on positive action, consequently returning the lowest levels of gender-equal or diverse representation. Parties must urgently begin work with local branches to develop appropriate and impactful PAMs for council elections in 2027 and beyond.
- **Explore how best to introduce more PAMs for other underrepresented groups (including minority ethnic and disabled candidates) at the point of selection.** When designing PAMs, consider the potential for intersectional approaches, which avoid “single-axis” thinking, which separates positive actions for women from those aimed at other groups.
- **Parties should commit to internal equalities reviews following every election.** Particular attention should be given to how the selection process operated, and PAMs should be evaluated against election results to understand their impact. This process should be co-led with relevant sections of the party membership that represent marginalised groups. The outcome should inform future selection approaches.

5.2 Recommendations for UK Government

- **Enact Section 106 of the Equality Act**, obliging parties to publish candidate diversity data.
- **Remove legal restrictions on parties using positive action measures like all-women shortlists once their representation in a given body reaches over 50%.** At present, this all but guarantees regression for women's representation at the following election. As a minimum, consider replacing the focus on women's representation within individual party groups with their representation in the entire elected body.
- **Legislate to allow exclusive shortlists for groups other than women and disabled people.**
- **Remove the 2030 time-limit on all-women shortlists** and replace with a guarantee to parties that they can use AWS as long as women remain underrepresented in our democracy.
- **Provide more guidance and support for parties wishing to implement tandem/nested quotas, which enable greater intersectional considerations during the design of PAMs.**



TERMINOLOGY GUIDE

A brief description of commonly used terms in this report.

Quotas: 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 under which political parties may choose to implement quotas.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ 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.

All-women shortlists (AWS): Parties can restrict candidates for selection of a specific seat or set of seats for one sex if this will help reduce unequal representation. In practice, this means all-women shortlists.⁵⁷ All-women shortlists are only one of two types of “exclusive” shortlist as it restricts candidates to those sharing a specific protected characteristic. Sex and disability are the only types of exclusive shortlist currently permitted by law in the UK.⁵⁸

Twinning: This type of PAM involves parties pairing two constituencies together and restricting selection by the members to one man and one woman. Each winning candidate will choose or be placed in one of the paired constituencies that selected them. This system is typically applied nationwide by a party, to ensure overall gender balance in their slate of candidates at an election. Twinning can also be used at council elections to pair wards, either within a specific local authority area or across the country.

Zippering: This type of PAM is often used in electoral systems that use party lists, such as that used at Scottish Parliament elections. For regional lists, candidates who are successfully selected are then ranked in an order that alternates them by gender. This is done to

⁵⁵ 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>.

⁵⁶ EHRC (2025) Equality Act 2010: A guide for political parties. Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/equality-act-2010-guide-political-parties>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

ensure an overall 50/50 split in candidates on the regional list. The most winnable list positions are those near the top (i.e., the first, second and third spots). To ensure that these most winnable spaces are balanced, it is important that parties implement a system which reserves half of the top regional list spots for women and then alternates.

Reserved places on regional lists: This type of PAM allows parties to set aside places for candidates from specific protected groups on the regional lists for Scottish Parliament elections. This could include reserving a winnable spot on the list for underrepresented candidates with a specific protected characteristic. For example, a party assumes five of its top seats will be elected. As members of the LGBTQ+ community are underrepresented in their party, they choose to reserve one of the five seats for a person from that community.

Reserved places on shortlists: This type of PAM is not implemented at the point of selection, but at an earlier stage in the candidate selection process. Parties can reserve a number of places on their candidate shortlists for prospective candidates from underrepresented groups. This ensures that during the party membership voting, there will be a diverse slate of candidates to choose from to decide on the final candidate.

Tandem/Nested Quotas: Tandem quotas seek to implement multiple quotas at the same time, which also work interdependently, i.e., a quota for women and a quota for BME people. Nested quotas aim to target a group of people with multiple intersecting protected characteristics, i.e., a quota for BME women.

METHODOLOGY

We used several key research methods to gather our findings:

Data-gathering

We undertook a desk-based data-gathering exercise to record the gender of all official candidates fielded by parties in the 2021 Scottish Parliament, 2022 Scottish Local Authority and 2024 UK Parliament elections. This includes those who were successfully elected and those who were not. We also reviewed the number of candidates of colour who stood at these elections.

Data was gathered from multiple sources. For all elections, initial gender estimates for candidates were obtained from Democracy Club. This was then cross-checked with information supplied by Women 50:50. On candidate ethnicity, additional estimates across the three elections were supplied by Women 50:50, CRER, and Elect Her. Gaps or discrepancies were filled using information from online searches based on names, photos and biographies.

Political parties and government are not required by law to gather or publish data on the protected characteristics of candidates. In the absence of more robust, self-declared diversity data being made available through official sources, all gender and ethnicity data are assumptions based on names, pictures and online information. This means that figures

may contain inaccuracies. Because of these limits, candidate ethnicity has been presented as a binary of either “person of colour” or “white”.

Desk Review

We conducted a desk-based review of party selection processes based on information available through party websites, existing research and media coverage. This process provided an overview of key features of candidacy processes across parties and highlighted some of the initial barriers that exist for women and other underrepresented groups.

Our findings are constrained by the variable levels of information about candidate selection and PAMs that parties make publicly available through their websites and public communications. Interviews with party insiders helped to address gaps; however, several interviewees acknowledged gaps in their own knowledge or were unable to offer clarity due to factors including the variable nature of candidate processes from selection to election. This indicates a need for greater transparency within parties around selection processes, both in relation to those currently in use and historical approaches.

Interviews and survey

We conducted 15 interviews, five of which were with party officials or volunteers with knowledge of the technical processes

of candidate selection in their respective parties.⁵⁹ These technical interviews were intended to plug gaps from the desk review and enhance our overall understanding of party selection processes, particularly in relation to use of any PAMs or quotas. Ten interviews were undertaken with individuals that had ran for election and focused on personal experiences of candidacy and selection.

Overall, we interviewed:

- 2 interviewees each from Scottish Conservatives,⁶⁰ 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 the UK 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.

We ran a survey on SurveyMonkey for five 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.

95% of those who answered the demographic questions were women. 2% identified as non-binary, with the remaining 3% selecting “other” or preferring not to say. 5% of respondents said that they were trans or had a trans history. 81% of respondents identified as white, with 5% from Black, Asian and non-white mixed ethnicities and the remaining 14% percent either selecting “other” or preferring not to disclose their ethnicity. 33% of respondents considered themselves disabled. 31% had regular childcare responsibilities, and 44% had other caring responsibilities. 61% of respondents identified as heterosexual/straight, 16% as lesbian or bisexual, with the remainder (22%) selecting other or preferring not to say. On age, only 5% were between 18-24 and a further 9% aged between 25-34. 17% were between 35-44. 65% of respondents were over 45.

33% of respondents were from the SNP; 18% from the Scottish Green Party; 17% from the Scottish Labour Party; 8% from the Scottish Liberal Democrats; and 5% from the Scottish Conservatives. The rest selected “other”, “prefer not to say” or “none of the above” options. In this report, survey findings have been used to help further build our knowledge of party selection processes. We have also included

⁵⁹ We focused our research on the five largest parties: The SNP, Scottish Labour, Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Green Party and Scottish Liberal Democrats.

⁶⁰ Despite efforts, we were unable to confirm a technical/process interview with someone from the Scottish Conservatives.

some findings that relate to individual experience, but the majority of these are reflected in our [accompanying report](#) on women's political experience and party culture.⁶¹

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.

⁶¹ Engender (2025) Women's Political Journey: Exploring the election process and women's experiences of abuse, exclusion and bias, including vital recommendations for improvement. Available at: [10072025 Womens political journey report - RGB no bleed](#).

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