

**Breaking the Barriers:  
Positive Discrimination Policies for Women**

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Chapter 10 in *Has Liberalism Failed Women? Parity, Quotas and Political Representation*. Eds. Jyette Klausen and Charles S. Maier. NY: St Martin's Press. **Draft @ 01/01/2000. 8216 words + diagrams.**

Women's social and economic position has gradually improved in many societies due to long-term secular trends, such as developments in female enrolment in higher education and adult literacy, labor force participation, and real GDP per capita (UN 1999). Nevertheless progress in female empowerment in elected office has lagged behind in many established democracies such as Japan, France, Greece and Israel, as well as in many transitional and consolidating democratic states (see Diagram 1). At the start of the twenty-first century the glass ceiling for women's political empowerment in elected office remains almost uncracked: nine out of ten members of national parliaments worldwide are male, and women are more than one third of the legislature in only a few nations<sup>1</sup> (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1999; for discussions of the full range of political, social and cultural reasons for this phenomenon see Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Karam 1998; Reynolds 1999; Kenworthy and Malami 1999). Yet against this backcloth, in recent decades countries as diverse as South Africa, India, Norway, Britain, New Zealand, and Argentina have experienced a decisive political breakthrough for women parliamentarians due to positive discrimination strategies implemented via party regulations or electoral laws. In a model of punctuated equilibrium, changing the rules for political recruitment has often - although not always - opened the door for women to enter elected office.

(Figure 1 about here)

Given this context, this chapter examines three central questions: What are the major policy options available to increase women's representation, in particular, *how have positive discrimination strategies been used worldwide?* Second, given that we would expect resistance by incumbents, *why are such strategies adopted and implemented?* This chapter presents a case-study of one such breakthrough - the British Labour party's adoption of all women shortlists in the selection process for parliamentary candidates in the run up to the 1997 British general election. As a result, after decades of modest progress, at best, the proportion of women at Westminster doubled overnight,

to 18.2%. Lastly, *under what conditions do these strategies prove most effective* and, in particular, can their use in Britain provide lessons for 'best practice' that are applicable elsewhere? The chapter concludes that positive discrimination strategies can produce a sharp increase in women's representation under certain conditions, namely where parties combine a political culture sympathetic to these policies with a bureaucratic organizational structure which implements formal party rules. In this context, changing the rules can transform the structure of opportunities for women, particularly in elections that experience a substantial landslide throwing out incumbent politicians. Under other conditions, these strategies may merely prove symbolic, altering the rhetoric more than practice.

### **Policy Options for Gender Equality**

Worldwide, three different types of recruitment policies are available to increase women's representation, reflecting different cultural values and beliefs (see Figure 2).

~~///~~ **Rhetorical strategies**, articulated in leadership speeches, party guidelines, or official party platforms, aim to change the party ethos by affirming the need for social balance in the slate of candidates. Parties may wish to widen their electoral appeal through altering their public profile in parliament, for example by attracting more women, ethnic minorities, or other types of candidates. Rhetorical statements may prove only a symbolic fig leaf of political correctness, or they may represent the first steps towards more effective reforms if they influence the selectors who choose parliamentary candidates, and if they encourage more women applicants to come forward.

~~///~~ **Affirmative action programmes** aim to encourage applicants by providing training sessions, advisory group targets, financial assistance, as well as systematically monitoring of the outcome. These meritocratic policies aim to achieve 'fairness' in the recruitment process, removing practical barriers that may disadvantage women or other groups. The policies can be gender-neutral, such as providing training in public speaking and media presentation equally to all candidates, or they can be specifically designed to correct certain imbalances in women's representation, for example targeting funding for women aspirants. Affirmative action programmes can also be applied to the party selectors, for example training them to be aware of the need for equal opportunities or providing standardized checklists of the qualities

used for evaluating applicants. Gender quotas fall into this category if they are advisory rather than binding.

~~///~~ **Positive discrimination strategies**, in contrast, set mandatory group quotas for the selection of candidates from certain social or political groups. Although the term 'quotas' is often used loosely, these strategies vary in three important ways. First, quotas can be set at different *levels*, such as 20, 30, 40, or 50 per cent. Second, these quotas can be applied to different *stages* of the selection process, including to internal party offices, shortlists of parliamentary applicants, electoral lists of parliamentary candidates, or reserved parliamentary seats. Lastly, binding quotas can be implemented either by law or by internal party rules. In general, *ceteris paribus*, the higher the level of the specified quota, the closer the quota is applied to the final stages of election, and more binding the formal regulation, the more effective its impact. Thus the strongest version would be legal measures specifying in the constitution that a high proportion of all parliamentary seats should be reserved for women, while the weakest would be party regulations specifying that women should be at least 10-15% of local party chairs, secretaries, or convention delegates.

(Figure 2 about here)

Positive discrimination aims to achieve equality of outcome or results. This has made left-wing parties, with a more egalitarian ideology, more comfortable with this strategy. Most advocates admit that these strategies are not procedurally 'fair' for individual applicants. Some groups are thereby ruled into the recruitment process, while others are automatically ruled out, by virtue of certain ascriptive characteristics such as gender, race, ethno-nationalism, region, language, or religion. The process discriminates positively in favor of certain individuals on the basis of characteristics seen as common to their group (for a discussion, see Squires 1996; Dahlrup 1998). Nevertheless, proponents argue that underrepresented political minorities need positive discrimination; at least as a temporary stopgap measure, to overcome the historical disadvantages they face in winning elected office.

A worldwide comparison indicates considerable variance in the type of positive discrimination measures implemented via laws or internal party rules.

#### Reserved Seats

The strongest measures specify certain reserved seats in parliaments for women. In India, for example, the 74<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution adopted in 1993 requires that one third of the seats in local municipal bodies (village councils) are reserved for women (Rai 1998). Other countries with legal requirements of reserved seats for women in national parliaments include Bangladesh (set at 9% of all seats), Eritrea (9.5%), Tanzania (6%), Taiwan, and Uganda (Dahlerup 1998; Reynolds and Reilly 1997: 97-100). Reserved seats are also used to ensure the representation of specific ethnic, religious or linguistic minority groups in parliament, such as scheduled tribes and castes in India, the aboriginal community in Taiwan, Hungarians and Italians in Slovenia, and the Maori population in New Zealand. The main advantage of these measures is that, if effectively implemented, this guarantees the inclusion of women or other groups in office. Possible disadvantages are that legal regulations may be difficult to pass politically, given the power of incumbents, it can be argued that the use of reserved seats limits the electorate's choice of candidates, the system may be seen as less fair than other ways to promote minority representation, and the level of the quota may reinforce the status quo, acting as a ceiling rather than a floor for any minority group.

#### Legal Gender Quotas in Party Lists

Alternatively electoral laws may specify that party lists of parliamentary candidates should contain a certain proportion of women or minority groups. In multimember districts, where election is determined by rank order on the ballot paper, laws may also sometimes regulate the position of female candidates throughout the party list, for example that women should be every third name on the ballot paper (a technique otherwise known as 'zippering'). In the past, Communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe often used gender quotas, for example for representatives of official women's organizations. These were subsequently dropped in the post-Communist parliaments, producing an immediate fall in women's representation just at the time when these bodies gained in legitimacy and authority. More recently, ten Latin American states passed electoral laws in the 1990s in stipulated that all party lists had to contain a certain proportion of women candidates, although parties could determine their rank order. Due to problems in implementation only the Argentinean law has fully achieved its objectives, but in other states in the region during the last decade these reforms have boosted women's presence in Congress by about five per cent on average (Jones 1996, 1998, 1999; Htun and Jones 1999).

### Party Rules

More often, rather than state regulation, quotas are implemented by internal party rules and procedures. This is the most common mechanism and it has been used with different degrees of success all over the world including by the ANC in South Africa, CONDEPA in Brazil, the PRD in Mexico, the Social Democrats in Germany, and Labour parties in Australia and Norway (Reynolds and Reilly 1997). A worldwide review conducted in the early 1990s, by the *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, found that twenty-two parties employed gender quotas when selecting candidates for legislative elections, while fifty-one parties used them for elections to internal party posts. These measures were commonly introduced in Western Europe during the 1980s by parties of the left (see Table 1). The impact of these strategies has often increased women's representation significantly, as shown by case studies of Norway (Matland 1993) and Germany (Kolinsky 1989). A recent study, comparing women's representation in a dozen advanced industrialized societies in the late 1980s, found that women were 28% of MPs in parties with gender quotas, compared with only 22% of MPs in parties lacking such rules (Caul 1999).

[Table 1 about here]

### **Why Are Positive Discrimination Policies Adopted?**

So why are positive discrimination policies adopted, given that we would expect resistance from incumbent office-holders, and how do they work? Here we can turn to a case study of Westminster. During the 1980s and early 1990s Britain continued to lag behind most European Union countries in the representation of women, and the general pace of progress remained glacial (see Figure 3). If secular trends from 1945-92 had continued on a linear basis, women would not have achieved parity with men at Westminster until the middle of the twenty-first century. One key barrier to change has been the structure of opportunities in British political life. About 140 new MPs usually enter the House every general election; opportunities are restricted by predominance of the two major parties, the rate of retirements from the Commons, and the limited number of marginals won or lost in general elections. If women fail to become adopted as Labour or Conservative parliamentary candidates for winnable seats, they have almost no hope of electoral success at Westminster.

(Figure 3 about here)

In an attempt to speed change; the fall 1993 Labour conference approved a policy of positive discrimination for women. When selecting candidates for

the 1997 general election, Labour agreed to introduce all-women shortlists in half their 'inheritor' seats (where a Labour MP retires), and half their 'strong challenger' seats (defined in the conference motion as Labor's 'most winnable' seats). The policy of 'all-women shortlists' meant that local party members could still decide which parliamentary candidate would be adopted in their seat, for example whether on the left or center of the party, whether a local or carpet-bagger, and whether a social worker, trade union official or lawyer, but the short-list in these constituencies would be restricted only to women applicants. Labour's policy of all-women shortlists was officially dropped in January 1996, after legal challenge, but not before the party had selected many women candidates for target seats. The landslide Labour victory on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1997 sweeping out the Conservative government produced record numbers of Labour women MPs (101). As a result, the proportion of women MPs at Westminster doubled overnight, from 9.2 to 18.2%. To encapsulate the radical nature of this change, half of all the women who have ever been elected to the House of Commons are currently in parliament. Women are also one third of the Blair cabinet, including five Cabinet ministers. Nor have positive discrimination strategies been confined to Westminster. For selection to the new Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the Greater London Assembly, Labour used a policy of 'twinned constituencies', selecting one man and one woman in each pair of seats. The result was in the first elections to these new bodies, women represent 37% of the Scottish Parliament and 40% of the Welsh Assembly, and will probably be well placed in the May 2000 London elections (see Figure 4).

(Figure 4 about here)

So why did Labour adopt this strategy? Many long-term factors influenced this process. The most important include the predominant *culture* within the Labour party, reflecting the widespread acceptance of these measures in many center-left parties, and Labour's bureaucratic organizational *structure* which ensured that all women shortlists would be implemented. Short-term factors acted as the catalyst for change during the 1990s, providing an appropriate structure of opportunities, including the *mobilization* of women activists within the party around this issue; the broader process of Labour *party modernization*; the move towards a 'catch-all' party generated by successive electoral defeats, as Labour attempted to gain women's votes; and the *politics of recent party conferences*, including the particular events, leaders and debates surrounding this issue.

## Party Culture

The move towards positive discrimination was consistent with the dominant culture within the British Labour party, reflecting the values shared with other parties of the center-left. Just as social democratic parties believe in interventionist policies to reduce social and economic inequalities, through the welfare state, so they are more likely to feel that interventionist strategies are appropriate to achieve gender equality. Some suggest that the adoption of all-women shortlists was due to a small, well-motivated radical faction within the Labour party, which managed to achieve its goals at the expense of the more moderate majority, and opinion within the party was certainly divided, but it is more accurate to understand quotas as broadly in line with grassroots attitudes.

In personal interviews a minority of Labour politicians expressed private reservations about how gender quotas work in practice. Some feared that women might desert the party:

*"This is why I worry about the quota system because putting pressure on some of our women will drive them out, it'll drive them out of the party. If you sit in a big ward, and there's sixty men and two women, and you've got to have half your officials women, half of them going to constituency as delegate, you'll have to go, and the women don't want to go. They want to be part of the movement but they don't want the spotlight on them, they don't want to be forced into positions like that."*

One woman MP thought that quotas unfair to men who had spent years in party service:

*"What about all-women shortlists?"*

*"I think its balmy and so do women in my party. They don't believe in this nonsense. It's crazy why should we have an all-women shortlist. It's the same as an all-male shortlist. One woman on the shortlist, yes. All women on the short-list, definitely not. I'm against quotas too. I think the idea the party has that party officers of the party should be women is crackers. Why should men who've been doing the job for years stand down so that they can have half the women as officers, when you can't find a woman who wants to do it. It's crazy. Give women the chance by all means. Encourage them. But not at the expense of men"*

Another MP thought it would only benefit the professional lawyers and teachers, who would probably make it anyway, at the expense of working-class candidates.

*"I'm all for positive discrimination but I think what you've got to be*

careful of is you don't just make fast tracks for certain, well-heeled, middle-class people inside our party, whether they're black, women, or whatever. And that's the danger. I've got West Indians and Asians within my constituency. Some of my best friends. They don't want black sections."

Others anticipated conflict within the grassroots:

"I've got great reservations now about the quota system, because anything you can't carry along with your members...it doesn't work. I think that is has been rushed into - I think you get a backlash then, when anything is imposed...very, very unpopular."

Some approved in principle, but expressed more ambiguous feelings about how quotas would be implemented in practice. As one ex-MP remarked:

"The danger is, bluntly, that not very good women will be selected, and that won't help the position of women in parliament. The plus side is you've got to do something like that, otherwise you are just not going to get women there. But the problem is, it has not been thought out properly...the mechanics have not been thought through, and the mechanics are going to be the downfall of the system if we're not careful."

Yet despite these voices the majority expressed more positive views, seeing the principle of quotas as a necessary, albeit temporary, move in the right direction:

"I think the idea of having quotas is a good one because at least it provides the party with a target. If you have a target that's achievable, and you see examples that show it is achievable, that's all to the good."

"I used to think that women didn't need positive action, that we didn't need to have quotas, that we didn't need to have reserved seats and all that. Because I genuinely felt that a woman with ability would be able to come through no matter what. But my experience is that that just doesn't work...I genuinely feel now that the NEC of the Labour party do have the right to impose an all-women short-list...A constituency party should choose, but they should choose from five women...they get a real choice, then at the end of the day we would have a female candidate, and that's the situation I think we should have until such times as we have a good representation of women."

Many dismissed the argument that there were not enough good women to become party delegates or candidates:

"A lot of socialist parties have direct discrimination and certainly I do think increasingly you ought to have quotas in some form. I mean, people always resent it, because they say you've got a stupid woman doing that



*instead of an intelligent man. But, frankly, we have so many stupid men at all levels, that I don't see why we shouldn't have a few stupid women. You've got to have a bigger representation of women, and therefore to start of with (positive) discrimination is the best way to do it...But it won't last forever."*

*"I think that (the shortlisting rules for women) is a step in the right direction in terms of trying to encourage women to come forward. In trying to overcome some of the suspected bias that there is among the male members, even if its not apparent, its there, I suspect, so that is a useful way of overcoming it."*

Some women felt that it might not be necessary where women were already doing relatively well, such as in London, but quotas would help give women opportunities for safe seats in the Labour heartland:

*"I'm still worried about the lack of female Labour party candidates for safe seats ...you look at places like South Wales and Scotland, bout its very hard. I get a bit worried about quotas within the part of the Labour party I operate in. And I think we must have a democratic process and not impose things. But then I get out and see how other bits of the Labour party operate and I then become a rabid convert to quotas and things because I think, well, if that is really the situation we have to use something like that."*

Systematic survey evidence suggests that, despite some reservations, the principle of gender quotas fits the mainstream culture among Labour activists. This was shown in the 1992 British Candidate Survey, when Labour party members and politicians (applicants, candidates, MPs) were asked: *"Do you approve or disapprove of the following proposals for increasing the number of women in Parliament?...Positive quotas/affirmative action for women."* Table 3 and 4 show that the principle of positive quotas/affirmative action was widely supported by most groups within the party; two-thirds of all members approved, as did three-quarters of all politicians. Support was strongest, as might be expected, among women, the middle-class, the better-educated, and younger groups within the party, but on balance no group proved overwhelmingly negative. The 1997 British Representation Survey found that Labour attitudes towards this strategy were fairly stable. According to this evidence, the policy passed by conference is in accordance with the Labour party culture. In interviews, people expressed some reservations about how all-women shortlists worked in practice, but the principle was widely supported. In contrast, Liberal Democrat, Nationalist (Scottish National and Plaid Cymru), and Green politicians were evenly divided between those who

approved and disapproved of this proposal, while there was almost no support (6 per cent) for this measure among Conservatives, who favoured more meritocratic policies.

(Table 2 and 3 about here)

### **Party Organizations**

Attitudes towards quotas are strongly influenced by party cultures. Whether quotas are implemented depends upon the type of party organization. The Labour party has a formal bureaucratic organization that places considerable emphasis on formal constitutions, structural solutions, and the power of the rulebook. Changing party rules often can, and does, change the internal power structure. Positive discrimination operates most effectively in organizations where the selection process is rule-bound and decentralized. In the Labour party, decisions about candidates are taken primarily at constituency level, under binding, standardized procedures established by national bodies (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Gender quotas implemented by party rules have also proved effective in other formal-localized parties, such as the Social Democrats in Germany, Norway and Sweden. In contrast, in loosely organized parties, like the French UDF, the Japanese LDP, or the old Italian Christian Democrats, which are largely coalitions around factions or particular leaders, changing the formal party rules has little effect because they are unlikely to be implemented. In decentralized and weak party organizations, like the U.S. Democrats and Republicans, it makes little sense to consider positive discrimination strategies for legislative elections, since parties no longer control the recruitment process.

### **Short-term Factors**

The Labour party culture and organization was therefore conducive to the introduction of all-women shortlists. The short-term context leading to reform in fall 1993 was the gradual mobilization of women activists around this policy during the 1980s and 1990s, and the structure of opportunities provided by internal party reform. Labour women were able to take advantage of the process of party modernization, initiated by the leadership in the mid-1980s, to advance their concerns onto the mainstream agenda. One of their most persuasive arguments, after successive Labour party defeats in the polls, was the electoral reward of reform. In the conventional wisdom, Labour needed to break out from its declining working-class and inner-city base,

expanding voting support among women voters. The way to achieve this aim, research for the Shadow Communication agency suggested, was for Labour to develop a less male-dominated image (Radice 1985; Brooks et al. 1990; Hewitt and Mattinson 1989). This argument influenced the leadership, particularly since other pressures were opening the door to reform of the selection process.

The process of introducing quotas at all levels of the party has been a gradual process of incremental change (for discussions, see Henig 1999; Short 1996; Eagle and Lovenduski 1998). Traditionally Labour has always been more sympathetic than the Conservatives towards positive discrimination. In 1918 four places were reserved for women in Labour's National Executive Council (increased to five in 1937), in early recognition that special arrangements were needed to facilitate female participation. But it was not until the 1980s that the patterns of race and gender politics led to demands for positive discrimination at all levels of the party. It was easier to establish gender quotas for internal party offices than for parliament, since members of constituency Executive and General Committees wanted to safeguard the principle of local autonomy in selecting 'their' prospective Parliamentary candidate. Since the mid-1980s, Labour women used the process of party reorganization to advance proposals for increasing women's representation.

In April 1983 the NEC published its *Charter to Establish Equality for Women within the Party*, stating the objective of increasing women's involvement at all levels of the party. This was the first significant step to recognize the issue, although the proposals were essentially voluntary. Subsequent attention passed to the policy of developing a Ministry for Women, and further internal reforms lay in abeyance for a few years. Then in 1987 conference passed new rules for the compulsory short-listing of women, implemented two years later. The rule specified that, where a woman was nominated in a constituency, at least one woman must be on the final shortlist for interview. If no woman had been short-listed by the regular procedure followed by the Executive Committee, the final name on the shortlist was dropped, and a ballot was held to determine which of the nominated women should be included.

In 1989 conference overwhelmingly carried Composite 54, which accepted in principle that quotas were the way forward, and called on the National Executive Committee (NEC) to present proposals for how quotas could be implemented at every level: for all party committees and local delegations,

for the NEC, and for Shadow Cabinet. The Labour rulebook lays down that women should be at least half the statutory branch officers and branch delegates to the constituency party. Constituency parties have to select a woman conference delegate at least every other year. Affiliated trade unions are required to include women as conference delegates in proportion to their membership in the union. There are a series of quotas to ensure that women are elected to Labour's National Executive Committee<sup>2</sup>.

By 1990, after a process of consultation, the party endorsed the aim of women forming 40 per cent of Labour MPs by the year 2000. To achieve this ambitious goal, the fall 1993 conference took this process a step further, with the critical decision to implement all-women shortlists in half of Labour inheritor and strong challenger seats. Once quotas had been accepted at all other levels of the party organization, it seemed difficult to resist the logic of using them for parliamentary office. In addition, the earlier move to increase the number of women as conference delegates from constituency parties, as well as their increased membership among trade union affiliates, caused a significant shift in the social composition of party conference. Many women recognized this sea change, opening speeches with "I'm a quota" as their first statement. The composite motion for all-women shortlists passed in 1993 after relatively little debate by a solid majority of votes (54 to 35 per cent). Conference was distracted at the time by heated controversy over the appropriate influence of affiliated trade unions in the selection process (Lovenduski and Norris 1994), although once passed the motion quickly produced some bitter counter-attacks.

To implement the policy, from 1994-1996 Labour held regional 'consensus' meetings to determine which seats in each region should have all women shortlists and its National Executive Committee (NEC) intervened where regional targets were not achieved. The NEC had the power to impose all women shortlists where a constituency proved recalcitrant. This decision came as part of a range of measures designed to improve women's representation in the party. New rules about the representation of women in internal party positions were important in the implementation of the candidate quotas. Under the regulations at least three of the seven constituency party officers had to be women. All seven officers were invited to consensus meetings so it became a simple matter to check that the composition of officers met the requirements. In addition, new women constituency officers were often (but not inevitably) sympathetic to the idea of promoting women candidates. Efforts to improve women's prospects had the full support of the party

leader, John Smith, the Labour Coordinating Committee, various trade unions responding to claims by women members, and a number of internal feminist women's advocacy groups including Labour Women's Network, EMILY, and Labour Women's Action Group.

Early in 1996, with 34 women selected on all-women shortlists, two disgruntled male aspirants won their case against the policy at an Industrial Tribunal held in Leeds on 8th January 1996 (*Jepson and Dyas-Elliott v The Labour Party and Others*). The Industrial Tribunal accepted the argument that the selection procedure by a political party facilitates access to employment and was therefore subject to the UK *Sex Discrimination Act*, which prevents (positive or negative) discrimination on the grounds of sex.

Anxious to complete its selections in good time for the general election, and concerned not to jeopardize the positions of women already selected under the policy, the NEC decided not to appeal the decision. Instead they established a working party to identify effective and legal ways to maximize the number of women candidates nominated and selected in the remaining vacant Labour seats. This decision disappointed feminist advocates in the party who believed that the party leadership was lukewarm toward issues of women's representation and too unwilling to take controversial decisions to improve it. After the Tribunal decision, few women were selected for target or inheritor seats as the tendency was for selections to go to the candidate who fought the seat in 1992. After the legal challenge, Labour politicians were evenly divided about use of all-women shortlists (see Table 5), although women candidates were most likely to favour this policy.

Although the policy had to be abandoned in 1996, the all-women shortlists were successful in achieving their objectives. All the women candidates chosen by this process were elected. The timing of the quotas was especially important. If the 1997 general election had been missed, later opportunities might not be as effective. As Peter Coleman, the party official in charge of candidates remarked in late 1996 *'If we didn't do it for 1996/7, all the opportunities that arise because we're going to have, hopefully, a swing that will take a lot of new members in. If we didn't achieve it that time, we lost it for another decade because the people that get elected this time, in the main I would have thought, would have been re-selected to fight the next election. So its not just one parliament, we're actually closing the door for two parliaments. And then the only way to get through is to get selected in Labour held seats where Members of Parliament are retiring. And*

*they will be in traditional seats, and that is going to be even more difficult...'*<sup>3</sup>

### **The Consequences of Gender Quotas**

What were the consequences of the use of gender quotas? The defeat for the Conservative government, and the Labour landslide under Tony Blair, in the May 1<sup>st</sup> 1997 British general election, broke numerous historic precedents (Norris 1997a). In total 259 new members entered parliament, the highest number since the war, due to the combination of record retirements and defeats.

Most strikingly, there was only a modest increase in the total number of women standing; British parties nominated 371 female parliamentary candidates, compared with 366 in 1992. But nevertheless because of the key position of Labour women in target seats, women made substantial gains; 120 women MPs swept into the House of Commons, representing 18.2% of members. Female representation doubled, bringing Britain into line with other EU member states, although remaining below Scandinavian levels. The success rates for women differed dramatically by party (see Table 4). For Labour, the election produced a record-breaking 102 women MPs, or one quarter of the parliamentary party. The change was not just in the House of Commons: five Labour women were appointed as Secretaries of State, four became Ministers of State, another nine became Parliamentary Under-secretaries. Moreover women were not just appointed to 'women's ministries': Mo Mowlam was made Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (then subsequently the Cabinet Office), Margaret Beckett became President of the Board of Trade, Dawn Primarolo entered the Treasury, Ann Taylor became Leader of the House. In total, women were more than a fifth of the Blair government.

As in the past, what was important was where the Labour candidates were standing, as British political parties have tended to place their women candidates in unfavourable seats. In 1997 many of Labour's 159 women candidates were well situated to win since they fought fourteen seats where Labour MPs were retiring, and half of Labour's 86 target marginals. What mattered was less the number of Labour women candidates per se than the type of seats they fought. The shift in votes for women and men standing in each party was identical: women candidates neither gained nor lost more support than average.

In contrast, neither the Conservatives nor the Liberal Democrats altered their candidate selection procedures to increase the nomination of women. Following their devastating defeat, in total only thirteen women

Conservative MPs were returned, representing eight percent of the parliamentary party. The party had made limited efforts to promote women candidates although they made periodic exhortations that more women should come forward, and training for women candidates was offered by the party women's section, often with disapproval from other leading officials. Officially the Conservatives were opposed to positive action and they were critical of Labour's policy.

The Liberal Democrat fielded 122 women candidates but almost all fought hopeless seats. No women were selected to replace the six MPs who stood down, although two were well placed in classic Liberal Democrat marginals. Liberal Democrats opposed positive discrimination measures such as compulsory quotas but they do insist that women are placed on shortlists where these contain at least two aspirant candidates. A significant number of their shortlists, however, contain only one name and there are no special rules to help to place women in winnable seats. Only three Liberal Democrat women candidates were returned (representing in total seven percent of their party's MPs). The SNP returned their two sitting women MPs, while Plaid Cymru's women candidates fought seats that would have required a swing of more than 25% to win, and none were returned.

#### **Conclusions and Discussion**

The process of adopting all-women shortlists in the Labour party has had a major influence on Westminster backbenches and government office. A combination of factors, notably the predominant culture of the Labour party and the process of organizational reform, produced a structure of opportunities that allowed women within the party to mobilize within a broad alliance to achieve a policy of positive discrimination in the selection process. The strategy of all-women shortlists, although subsequently abandoned, has had long-term consequences for women's representation in at least three ways.

First, the surge in women Labour MPs has increased the pressures on the Conservative party to respond to the obvious gender disparities in parliament. Although the process currently remains under review, and few visible gains for Conservative women candidates are evident at the time of writing, the party is reconsidering its selection process (Keswick et al. 1999). As shown in Table 5, the culture of the Conservative parliamentary party remains supportive of strategies like candidate training programmes designed to achieve equality of opportunity, but clearly opposed to positive discrimination strategies. Other parties also remain divided in their support

for further reforms designed to achieve gender parity, with far greater approval across all groups for strategies like improving parliamentary childcare facilities, rather than for more radical proposals, like reserved seats for women.

Secondly, the parliamentary Labour party has been altered by this breakthrough, although it remains to be seen whether the momentum for increased female representation will be maintained. The issue of reforming the parliamentary selection process remains under internal review, but in the mid-term period there seems to be little political impetus towards the reintroduction of all-women shortlists for Westminster, and a number of the Labour women MPs who first entered in 1997 have already announced plans to stand down in the next general election (*The Times*, 31 January 1999). On the other hand, Labour's use of 'twinned' constituencies for the new elected bodies in Scotland, Wales and London has produced substantial numbers of women representatives. The issue has also increased pressure on the new Ministry of Women to improve the policy performance of the Blair administration on gender-related issues, with some notable achievements such as the legislation on minimum pay which has had a significant impact on women's pay<sup>4</sup>.

Lastly, parliament itself has been transformed. At the turn of the century, the House of Commons looks more like society, and there have also been some substantive changes to the predominant parliamentary culture. Analysis of the attitudes of the 1997 parliament shows that although politicians continue to differ more by party than gender, nevertheless there are certain policy issues - especially attitudes towards women's rights - where there is a consistent gender gap within each of the major parties, and where the claim that women speak in 'a different voice' seems most plausible (Norris 2000). As such, the adoption of positive discrimination strategies to get more women into office - in Britain and elsewhere - has the potential to gradually alter legislative priorities and political debates on some issues most relevant to women's lives.

What are the lessons of this case study for elsewhere? Previous comparative studies have demonstrated that neat but over-simple monocausal explanations of the proportion of women in elected office are inadequate, since many factors have contributed towards this phenomenon, notably the type of majoritarian or PR electoral system, the structure of the economy, such as the share of women in professional and managerial occupations, and cultural attitudes towards the role of women in politics (Norris 1985, 1987, 1996,



1997b; Rule 1987; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Karam 1998; Reynolds 1999; Kenworthy and Malami 1999). In many previous global studies, however, the role of positive discrimination strategies designed to promote the recruitment of women has tended to be under-emphasized, in part because of the difficulties of comparing how these policies operate within the 'black-box' of candidate recruitment processes in different parties in many countries.

If, as we have demonstrated, positive discrimination strategies succeeded in producing an immediate boost to women's representation at Westminster, doubling the proportion of female MPs in the 1997 election, could they have the same effect if adopted elsewhere? The answer depends upon the conditions that allowed all-women shortlists to be implemented within the Labour party. If other parties have a political *culture* which shares the commitment to greater gender equality in political representation, and a *bureaucratic mass-branch organization* where party rules matter, then it does seem likely that changing the rules can have an immediate impact upon the recruitment process. This suggests that many social democratic parties in Europe, particularly those in opposition seeking to maximize their electoral support, will be most sympathetic to such strategies. But there is no single policy option that works in every situation for every party in every country. In other circumstances, reformers should look to alternative mechanisms, like equal opportunity training programmes for candidates, or to reforms to the electoral law, to achieve their objectives.

**Table 1**  
**Parties using Gender Quotas in EU Countries (1992)**

		Party	Candidate	%
		Quotas	Quotas	
BELGIUM	CVP	Y	Y	-
	PS	Y	N	20
	PVV	Y	Y	20
DENMARK	SDP	Y	Y	40
	SPP	Y	Y	40
FRANCE	PS	Y	N	-
GERMANY	SDP	Y	Y	40
	Greens	Y	Y	50
GREECE	NDP	Y	N	-
	CPL	Y	N	40
IRELAND	Labour	Y	N	20
ITALY	DC	-	Y	
	CP	Y	Y	30
	Greens	-	Y	50
LUX	GAP	Y	N	40
	Socialist	Y	N	-
NETHERLANDS	PvdA	-	Y	33
	Groes Lin	-	Y	40
	CDA	-	Y	26
PORTUGAL	Socialist	Y	N	25
SPAIN	PSOE	Y	N	25
	CP	Y	N	25
UK	Lab	Y	Y	
	Lib Dem	Y	N	33
	PC	Y	N	
		20	13	

**Source:** Inter-parliamentary Union. 1992. *Women and Political Power* (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union)



Table 2: Support for Gender Quotas among Labour Party Members, 1992

	Strongly Approve	Approve	Disapprove	Strongly Disapprove	N.
All	33	33	26	9	419
Men	26	36	21	11	255
Women	42	27	24	6	164
Middle class	33	31	28	8	344
Working class	25	39	21	14	56
Graduate	36	29	28	7	196
Non-Graduate	27	36	26	11	186
Union Member	33	32	27	9	314
Non-member	30	35	25	11	84
Older	20	39	30	12	122
Middle aged	37	30	26	7	195
Younger	35	27	25	13	79

**Note:** "Do you approve or disapprove of the following proposals for increasing the number of women in Parliament?...Positive quotas/affirmative action for women."

**Source:** The 1992 British Candidate Study

**Table 3: Support for Gender Quotas among Labour Party Politicians, 1992**

	Strongly Approve	Approve	Disapprove	Strongly Dis approve	N.
All	44	31	18	7	534
Men	35	35	21	9	395
Women	69	20	9	3	137
Middle class	45	30	17	7	479
Working class	24	36	31	10	42
Graduate	46	32	16	6	368
Non-Graduate	38	28	23	10	163
Union sponsored	38	32	23	7	136
Non-sponsored	46	31	16	8	397
Older	34	33	25	8	110
Middle aged	44	33	16	7	225
Younger	50	27	16	7	199
MPs	31	31	32	5	96
Candidates	49	30	15	6	316
Applicants	40	33	14	14	125
South	51	27	15	7	231
Midlands	39	38	16	7	102
Wales	40	30	25	5	20
North	34	31	24	12	130
Scotland	51	27	18	4	45

**Note:** "Do you approve or disapprove of the following proposals for increasing the number of women in Parliament? ...Positive quotas/affirmative action for women. "

**Source:** The 1992 British Candidate Study

**Table 4: Number of Women Parliamentary Candidates and MPs, Britain 1987 -1997**

	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat		Nationalist	
	Candidates	MPs	Candidates	MPs	Candidates	MPs	Candidates	MPs
1987	46	17	92	21	105	2	15	1
1992	63	20	138	37	143	2	22	1
1997	67	13	159	102	122	3	23	2
1997(%)	(10.3)	(7.9)	(24.8)	(24.2)	(19.0)	(7.2)	(21.2)	(33.3)

**Note:** 'Nationalist' includes Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru.

**Source:** House of Commons Research Papers. 1999. *Women in the House of Commons*. London: House of Commons Information Office.

**Table 5: Support for Policy Options, 1997**

	Cons	Lab	Lib- Dem	Nat	Green	ALL
Party training programmes for women	69	98	98	92	95	<b>89</b>
Better childcare facilities in Parliament	66	98	98	98	100	<b>89</b>
Changing hours of parliamentary sittings	57	91	97	97	100	<b>83</b>
Positive quotas/affirmative action	2	74	47	48	59	<b>43</b>
Financial support for women candidates	3	56	90	19	46	<b>32</b>
All women short-lists		53	4	8	38	<b>21</b>
Reserved seats for women	0	22	3	6	24	<b>10</b>

**Note:** "Do you approve or disapprove of the following proposals for increasing the number of women in Parliament?" The proportion of MPs and Parliamentary Candidates within each party who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the proposals.

**Source:** British Representation Study, 1997. (N.999).

Figure 1

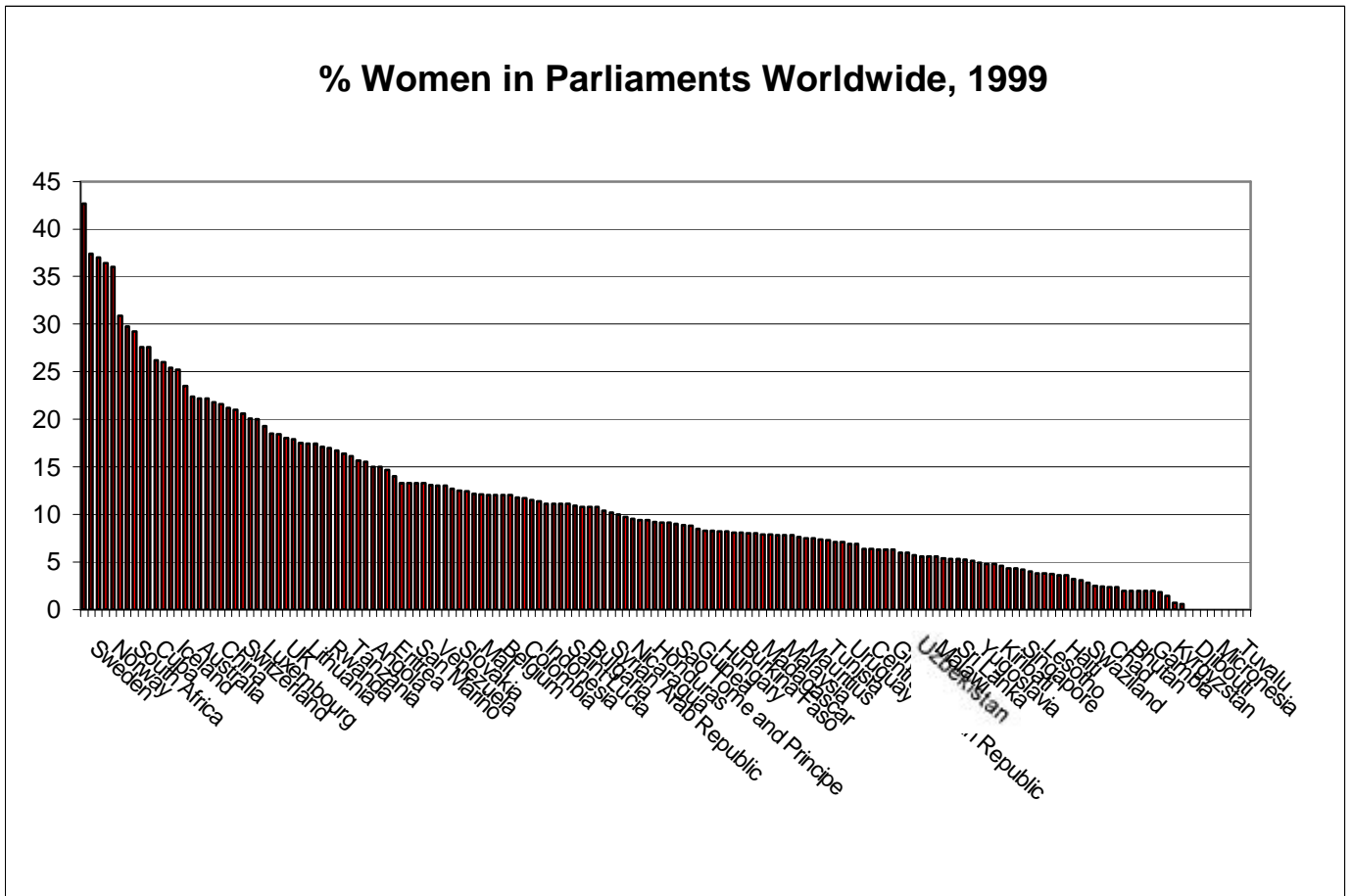




Figure 2

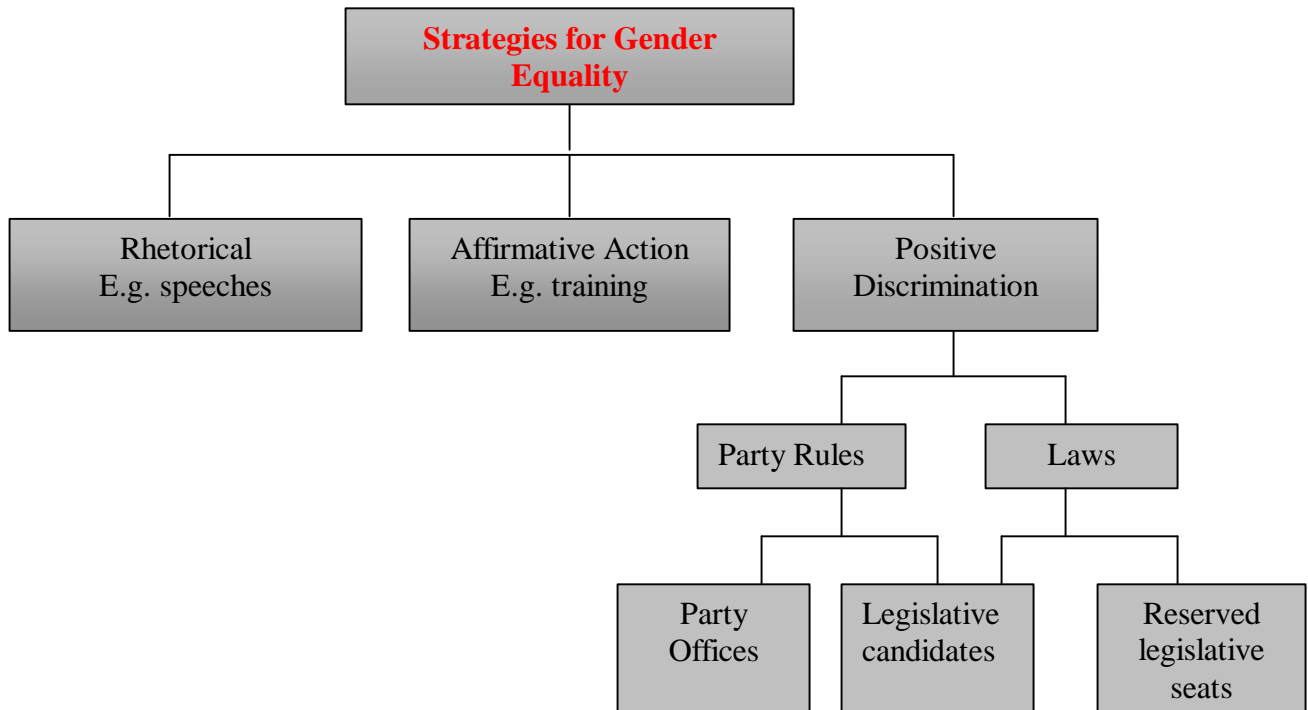
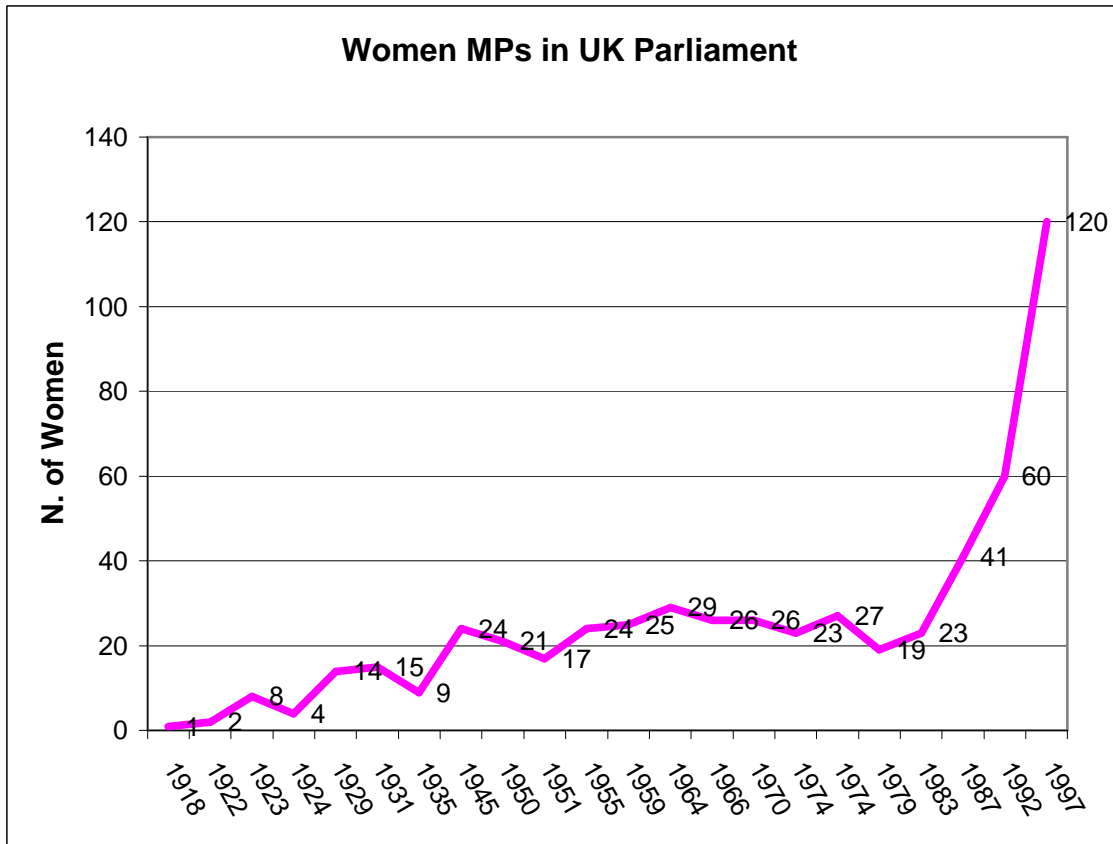
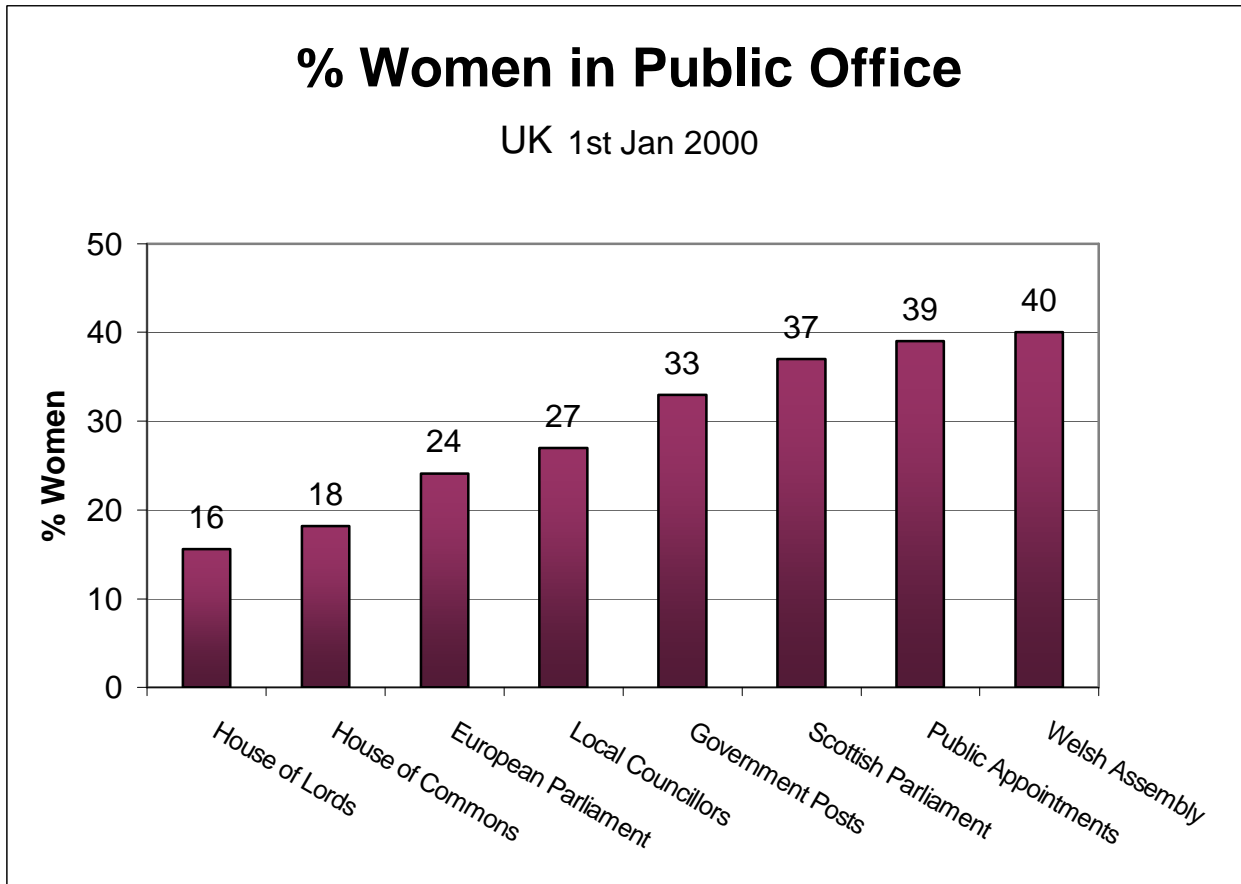


Figure 3



Source: House of Commons Research Papers *Women in the House of Commons* (Rev. August 1999). London: House of Commons Information Office.

Figure 4



Sources: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199798>

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## Notes

Data and interviews for this research are derived from two main sources. The 1992 *British Candidate Study*, funded by the ESRC, was co-directed by Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski. The 1997 *British Representation Study* was conducted under the direction of Pippa Norris (Harvard University) in collaboration with Joni Lovenduski (Southampton University), Anthony Heath (Nuffield College/ CREST), Roger Jowell (Social and Community Planning Research/CREST), and John Curtice (Strathclyde University/ CREST). The research was distributed and administered from the School of Economic and Social Studies at the University of East Anglia and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The 1997 BRS survey used a mail survey sent to all candidates selected by the main British parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru, and Green) by 1st June 1996. Fieldwork was from 18th June to 3rd July 1996. In total 1,628 questionnaires were distributed, producing 999 replies, representing a response rate of 61.4 percent. The survey includes 179 MPs elected in 1992 and 277 MPs elected in 1997. The response rate produced a fairly even balance between parties although the rate of return was higher among candidates than incumbent MPs. Full details can be found at [www.pippanorris.com](http://www.pippanorris.com)

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<sup>1</sup> In 1999, worldwide women were 13.4% of the members of lower houses of parliament and 10.9% of upper houses (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1999).

<sup>2</sup> There are five reserved places on the NEC for women. In addition, three Constituency Labour Party-elected members must be women, and four union-elected members must be women. For elections among the parliamentary party to the Shadow Cabinet, four votes must be cast for women.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Peter Coleman 14 June 1996.

<sup>4</sup> For details of policy initiatives taken by the Ministry for Women see <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/womens-unit>. For details of employment and pay see the Equal Opportunities Commission. *Facts about Women and Men in Great Britain 1999*. EOC: Manchester. <http://www.eoc.org.uk>