
Original Article

Last in, first out – Gendered patterns of local councillor dropout

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Abstract Councillor retention is an issue that has been largely neglected in recent academic literature despite being a present concern for policymakers in the field and those involved in the practice of local politics. This article utilises original data to consider the dropout patterns of councillors in greater detail, particularly with regard to sex. It confirms the finding of the existing literature that women are more likely to drop out of local politics than men and then goes further than previous work to examine reasons as to why this might be the case and to introduce data looking at the future political intentions of councillors after they have stood down. Evidence is found that, having stood down from their council duties, women councillors are less likely to want to remain politically involved than their male colleagues.

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Introduction

The under-representation of women in British politics is increasingly written about by political scientists at the same time as becoming an established focus of the rhetoric of political parties (Childs and Cowley, 2011, p. 1).¹ At the same time, the question of why more women do not make the transition from local to national politics is under-researched. This article will consider councillor dropout as both an example of how, and possible explanation of why, women do not make the transition from local to national politics. It maintains that this issue does not relate solely to the problem of councils failing to retain women councillors for the same amount of time as their male counterparts, but also that, once they have left their council posts, women may

well be less likely to be pursuing other political ends and will instead be removing themselves from political life altogether.²

Currently, many studies looking at either women in local politics or the parliamentary candidate selection process in the British context acknowledge a link between the two but fail to investigate it further (Norris, 1997; Briggs, 2000), and in recent literature, attention has returned to local politics as both an arena in which women politicians are more abundant as well as a location of candidate emergence from which female parliamentary candidates may be drawn (Bochel and Bochel, 2008; Magin, 2009). There is a well-established path from local councils to Westminster in the United Kingdom, with the Local Government Association (LGA) estimating that roughly a third of all MPs elected in the post-war period have had local council experience before entering the Commons (LGA, 2008, p. 26). This tradition, when combined with the fact that women are present in greater numbers on local councils than at Westminster,³ leads to questions of why this springboard does not seem to be having the equalising effect that could perhaps be expected if accepting the tenets of lag theory, for example, which speculates that a rising number of women at one level of politics will result in a natural spillover effect into the level above (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 8).

The article will begin by defining councillor dropout and review existing work on the subject. It then analyses the dropout patterns of councillors in London at the time of the 2010 local elections, highlighting how these differ along the lines of sex. Having established that this link is gendered in nature, the article presents a detailed analysis of why this might be happening. It then addresses a further area unexamined in the literature by asking councillors who stood down what their plans for the future of their political lives, if any, consist of. A gendered analysis is considered throughout the article.

Councillor Dropout

Councillor dropout is the process by which councillors stand down from their elected duties for reasons other than retirement or non-election, something termed ‘non-electoral turnover’ by Game and Leach (1993), and as such is an issue of (non-)retention. It is a relatively under-researched phenomenon and existing studies into it have tended to be mostly descriptive. The majority of the existing literature focusing specifically on dropout is nearing 20 years of age and often examines it in tandem with councillor recruitment, as both a generator of vacancies and therefore a catalyst for recruitment drives, as opposed to considering this within the context of political career progression and as something that is of interest in and of itself. Mentions of dropout in recent years have come as part of reports relating to local elections and profiles



of councillors involved in them (Rallings and Thrasher, 2006; Rallings *et al.*, 2008). In terms of the interaction between sex and dropout rates, authors such as Rallings and Thrasher (2006), Rallings *et al.* (2008), Rao (1999), and Haberis and Prendergast (2007) have all found that women are more likely than men to dropout after a single term on a council, as are younger councillors of both sexes. These existing findings give rise to the first two hypotheses that are to be tested in the article:

Hypothesis 1: Women councillors will be more likely than their male colleagues to stand down from their council duties for reasons other than electoral loss.

Hypothesis 2: Councillors who are dropping out will be more likely have served only one term in office.

Rallings *et al.* (2008, p. 16) note that this leads to a ‘double whammy’ for councils, where younger (and more diverse) councillors are dropping out quickly at the same time that older (less diverse) councillors are becoming almost impossible to remove from safe seats. This has negative implications for the descriptive representation of traditionally under-represented groups, and it is also suggested that it may have a similarly negative impact on local political practice and method, with the newer, younger and more diverse councillors being unable to embed themselves and their practices into the culture of local government in the way that the older councillors have been (Rallings and Thrasher, 2006, p. 326). Figures from the 2010 Census of Local Authority Councillors show that some 10.5 per cent of councillors have been in their positions for over 20 years, a figure that has remained more or less constant (the percentage ranging from 8.5 per cent to 10.5 per cent since the 1997 census). Councillors elected at that time were overwhelmingly male, and, as such, those well-entrenched councillors are likely to be men. The slow increase in the percentage of councillors who are women (rising from 27.8 per cent in 1997 to 30.6 per cent in 2010) will not translate into an entrenchment of these councillors if they are more likely to drop out after shorter periods of service, regardless of the natural life cycle turnover of older councillors (Evans and Aston, 2011).

Despite these findings, there has been no detailed cross-sectional research looking for gendered patterns behind dropping out in the British context. As such, we can assume from the available descriptive statistics that there are gendered patterns of councillors standing down from their elected duties, but it has yet to be fully considered why they occur and to speculate as to what can be done to alter them. Something also unaddressed in the existing literature are the post-dropout activities of these councillors who stand down. Do they remain politically active, perhaps by moving on to run for higher office? Or do

they revert back to either a less time-consuming party activist role, or even remove themselves from political life altogether?

Previous work offers reason to consider that these post-dropout patterns may be gendered in nature, with Rao (1999) and Briggs (2000) noting that women often have more negative experiences of local councillorship than their male colleagues, and will also often face a number of gendered barriers when considering using their local office as a springboard position. The key gendered pressures here relate to a lack of time, and how this in turn affects the interaction of women with both their paid employment and their familial role. The sexual division of labour, both domestic and in the arena of paid work, is alive in modern Britain with women still more likely than men to be the primary carers within a household as well as managing it (van Hooff, 2011, pp. 19–20). This could be argued to have an impact on a decision to run for higher office. If women councillors already feel that the combination of their domestic, working and political lives is unsustainable, they are unlikely to be keen to take on an even greater set of responsibilities by running for parliament. Lyon and Woodward (2004, pp. 213–214), discussing their concept of ‘leadership time’, argue that the cultural conception of time that is placed upon leaders in politics and business is one that takes for granted the presence of a woman to maintain a home and raise a family in order for the leader to be available at all times to perform their duties at will. In addition, Briggs (2000, pp. 80–81) found that many women councillors only felt able to continue their political role due to the presence of a supportive partner at home. As well as this gendered division of domestic labour, women in the workplace are likely to be paid less than their male colleagues for the same work, with the gender pay gap yet to be eliminated despite the introduction of legislation to rectify this inequality (Office for National Statistics, 2008, p. 24). Kathleen Lynch (2010, p. 57) has highlighted the assumption made in various fields of work, including politics and higher education, that practitioners will be ‘care-less’, noting that:

The idealized worker is one that is available 24/7 without ties or responsibilities that will hinder her or his productive capacities. She or he is unencumbered and on-call, even if not ‘at work’. Much of the work, including answering emails, writing papers and books, is implicitly expected to be undertaken in ‘free time’, including at nights and weekends.

Although writing in this case about higher education, Lynch’s observations are applicable to the activity of local councillors, as well as politicians more generally, leaving the top roles in these areas as ‘care-free zones’, and female councillors’ perception of the amount of time they will have to devote to any activity being premised on their perceptions of their own caring responsibilities. As such, what is perceived to be possible is not simply a case of what the



woman thinks they could achieve politically, but is as much based on what they perceive to even be a possibility (Lynch, 2010, p. 57).

These factors will be likely to affect the decisions made by women councillors, not only with regard to remaining in their current role, but also in terms of remaining politically active in a broader sense, either occupationally or voluntarily. Political activism is currently more professionalised than ever before, with the staffs of political parties growing both within the offices of MPs at Westminster, in party headquarters more generally, and then in regional offices around the country (Rush and Giddings, 2011, p. 235). Indeed, these jobs are seen by some as a fast route to both the House of Commons itself, and to the higher positions on offer within it (Allen, 2012, pp. 19–20; Cowley, 2012, p. 36). Concurrently, more traditional types of political activism also remain; for example, the classic party foot soldier who pounds the pavements and knocks on doors in search of potential support. A gendered pattern of post-dropout activity may present itself in two ways. First, in terms of whether councillors are involved politically at all following their decision to stand down, and second, if they are involved, in what capacity. Such a split may have knock-on effects in terms of both the numbers of women moving from local to national office, and if they do make this move, their potential success when they get there. On the basis of this, it is possible to generate a third and final hypothesis, which will guide the following data analysis:

Hypothesis 3: Male councillors will be more likely to remain involved in either elected or unelected political activity following standing down than their female colleagues.

Methods

This article analyses cross-sectional individual-level survey data that was collected by the author using an online survey between January and April 2010 following a pilot study in late 2009.⁴ All councillors within the 32 boroughs of London were sent an invitation to complete the survey via their official council e-mail addresses as listed on their personal council Webpages. A total of 444 responses were received from 1679 potential respondents, a response rate of 26 per cent. An online survey was chosen for reasons of cost and access, with it being deemed an acceptable risk that this may result in small sample rates from councillors less likely to use technology, such as very elderly councillors. In order to overcome this, councillors were offered the opportunity to have the survey mailed to them in larger print.⁵ Turning to ethical considerations, the anonymity of respondents was guaranteed throughout, and the questions asked were considered to be appropriate for the method of postal survey, which by necessity is ‘cold’, with no face-to-face contact between the participant and

researcher (Kelley *et al*, 2003, p. 262). The data collection focused on London due to the large number of councils that were scheduled to hold elections on the same date, thereby allowing for consistent data regarding the decision to run for re-election to be collected.

It should also be acknowledged here that London is unique as a site of local government. London's councillors tend to be different to those across the rest of the country in a number of ways – more of them are women, from ethnic minorities, are employed in full-time work and are educated to degree level than their counterparts nationally (Evans and Aston, 2011, pp. 50–52). There is also the geographical proximity to Westminster and national headquarters of their respective parties that living in London affords councillors in the capital. Although it is hard to assess the precise impact of this, it is something that should be borne in mind throughout the analysis and discussion that follows.

Findings and Discussion

Turning to the data analysis, the article will first look at the number of terms served by councillors before assessing whether the number of terms served by an individual can be linked to the likelihood that they will stand down at the next election. Following this, an explicitly gendered pattern will be highlighted and possible explanations for this investigated in greater detail using both regression and further cross-tabulations. Building on this, attention will turn to the future political intentions of councillors who have stood down, focusing again on the gendered patterns visible here.

As noted above, London councils often have markedly different demographics to councils across the rest of the country as a whole, and, as such, it is worth outlining the overall demographics of the sample before conducting a fuller analysis. The mean age of respondents is 53, and the median age 54. A total of 31.3 per cent of respondents are under the age of 50, compared with 53.6 per cent who are 50 or above. In addition, 3.7 per cent of the sample is under the age of 30, 66.9 per cent of respondents are male and 33.1 per cent female, and 85.8 per cent identify as White, with 14.2 per cent identifying membership of a different ethnic group. These are similar to the demographic statistics for London collected in the National Census of Local Authority Councillors (2010), which found a mean age of 54.3 and 62.9 per cent and 36.4 per cent of councillors to be male and female, respectively (Evans and Aston, 2011, p. 29). In terms of ethnicity, 84.6 per cent of councillors were found to identify as White, with the remaining 15.4 per cent identifying a different ethnic background. The closeness of these figures to those in the sample used in this article suggests that it is not, at least in terms of demographics, an outlier.

**Table 1:** Terms served/sex cross-tabulation

<i>Terms served</i>	<i>Sex</i>		<i>Total (%)</i>
	<i>Men (%)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>	
1	36.6	39.9	37.6
2	20.6	24.6	21.9
3	14.6	14.5	14.6
4	11.8	9.4	11.1
5	14.6	9.4	12.9
More than 5	1.7	2.2	1.9
Total (%)	67.5	32.5	100
	100	100	

$n=425$; χ^2 test found no significant differences.

Patterns of councillor dropout

Existing research broadly concludes that women councillors, on average, are likely to have served for less time than their male counterparts. The 2007 Councillors Commission found the mean length of service for men to be over a year longer (8.6 years compared with 7.5), and the 2008 National Census of Local Authority Councillors found the gap to be widening (National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2009). Nationally, both of these surveys place the national average length of service for all councillors at around 8 years. The sample used in this article would appear to have a much lower mean length of service, with close to 60 per cent of respondents having served two terms or less. It should be noted that this could be due, in part, to the online method of data collection utilised, something perhaps more likely to be completed by younger councillors than old, and that this could bias results in areas such as this, or, indeed, the impact of using data that looks at London only, with London having a higher percentage of councillors under the age of 40 than anywhere else in England (Evans and Aston, 2011, p. 50).

In terms of sex, the findings here are fairly consistent with existing research and confirm Hypothesis 1 to be accurate; although a sex gap is perhaps less pronounced than may have been expected, as shown in Table 1. Women are more likely to have served two or less terms than their male counterparts (64.5 per cent of all women councillors fall into this category compared with 57.2 per cent of men), echoing existing research, but interestingly women are also slightly more likely to have served more than five terms (2.2 per cent compared with 1.7 per cent). This could either again be for methodological reasons or it could simply be due to a large number of older women councillors who are established in safe seats. As expected, men are more entrenched within councils in general, with them serving for longer than women across the

Table 2: Terms served/standing for re-election cross-tabulation

<i>Terms served</i>	<i>Councillor standing for re-election?</i>	
	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>
1	36.0	46.9
2	21.9	21.9
3	14.7	14.1
4	12.2	4.7
5	13.6	9.4
Over 5	1.7	3.1
Overall total (%)	84.9	15.1
	100	100

$n=425$; χ^2 test found no significant differences.

3–5 term categories (41 per cent compared with 33.3 per cent). This suggests that when turnover does occur among these more established women councillors, it is not necessarily to be expected that they will be replaced by more women. It should be noted, however, that none of these differences were found to be statistically significant.

Also of interest is the ‘source’ of the dropouts – do they tend to be new councillors or those who have served for longer? Table 2 confirms the ‘double whammy’ as outlined by Rallings and Thrasher (2006, p. 16) as well as also confirming Hypothesis 2. The table shows the overall percentage of those standing down and those remaining split by number of terms served.

The large percentage of first- and second-term councillors not standing for re-election is clear, with 68.5 per cent of dropouts being drawn from these two categories. In addition, only 3.1 per cent of dropouts are those councillors who have served in excess of five terms. This is, in effect, the double whammy in action, with a broad trend of councillors who stay longer being more likely to remain in place and embed themselves in their seat and be able to establish themselves within the culture and workings of the council in question, something unlikely to occur for councillors who leave after only a single term. There is also what could be considered some natural dropout at the 5-term point, with 9.5 per cent of councillors standing down doing so at this juncture.

It would also seem to be the case that this pattern differs for men and women. A statistically significant relationship exists between the sex of a councillor and whether they are standing for re-election (shown in Table 3), with 87.8 per cent of men confirming that they will be contesting another election compared with 79 per cent of women. Once again, this confirms the findings of existing literature (Haberis and Prendergast, 2007, pp. 24–25), providing further evidence that the phenomenon of councillor dropout is a gendered one as well as confirming Hypothesis 1 to be accurate.

**Table 3:** Cross-tabulation of councillors standing for re-election by sex

Sex	Standing for re-election?		Total
	Yes	No	
Man (%)	87.8*	12.2*	100
Woman (%)	79.0*	21.0*	100
Total	84.9	15.1	100

$n = 425$; * = χ^2 test found difference significant at 0.05 level.

Explaining dropout

As the statistics detailed above suggest, there is a sexed pattern visible in figures relating to the number of councillors standing down for non-electoral reasons, something well established across the literature. It is important, however, to subject such statistics to scrutiny. It may be the case that women are more likely than men to drop out of their council duties but it is unlikely that this is based entirely on biological sex alone, but rather a wider range of gendered factors that combine to result in a pattern that presents itself as a sexed division.

To test this, a logistic regression model was run, using whether or not a councillor was running for re-election as the dependent variable. The results are shown in Table 4. The results are split across two models: Model 1, including variables relating to children under the age of 5, and Model 2, including those variables but for children under the age of 18. This split was included in order avoid multi-collinearity. Interaction terms for sex and variables related to parenthood were included in each of these models. Model 2 was found to suffer from multi-collinearity between the variables ‘Children under-18’ and the interaction term between this same variable and sex. The decision to report these coefficients as part of Table 3 has been taken following the rationale of Jaccard and Turrisi (2003, pp. 27–28), who state that correlations as seen below (that is, between the interaction term and one of its component parts) are not a concern as they will not affect significance testing. Of more concern would be a correlation between the two component parts of the interaction term, but that is not an issue here. As such, the model has been left intact and is reported in full below. Sex is the only variable that achieves significance in either model, with women being well over twice as likely as men to not be standing for re-election in both cases, alongside β values of 0.851 in Model 1 and 1.002 in Model 2. Such results are somewhat stronger than anticipated, and as such should be subject to further investigation. In terms of interpreting such a result, there is a possibility that this model is incomplete, despite a factor analysis failing to identify any latent variables within the data used in the model. The low R^2 figure suggests a potential missing variable bias.

Table 4: Logistic regression model of factors affecting dropout, dependent variable ‘standing for re-election?’

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	
	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>Exp (B)</i>
<i>Personal characteristics</i>				
Sex (woman)	0.851 (0.349)	2.342*	1.002 (0.352)	2.724**
Children under-5	1.193 (1.195)	3.296	—	—
Children under-18	—	—	18.609 (6085.249)	1207E8
Sex*children under-5	−0.902 (0.921)	0.406	—	—
Sex*children under-18	—	—	18.609 (6085.249)	0.000
Dependent adults	0.060 (0.321)	1.062	0.163 (0.335)	1.178
Ethnicity (not White)	−0.376 (0.543)	0.686	−0.442 (0.540)	0.643
Full-time employment	0.178 (0.381)	1.195	0.173 (0.383)	1.189
Over-50	−0.069 (0.429)	0.933	−0.206 (0.426)	0.814
Under-35	0.430 (0.561)	1.537	0.222 (0.563)	1.249
Highest educational qualification	0.004 (0.164)	1.004	−0.019 (0.166)	0.981
Family involvement in council duties	0.126 (0.128)	1.134	0.126 (0.127)	1.134
<i>Political factors</i>				
Senior council position	0.243 (0.355)	1.275	0.227 (0.357)	1.255
One term councillor	0.268 (0.424)	1.307	0.217 (0.429)	1.242
Two term councillor	−0.014 (0.452)	0.986	0.126 (0.454)	1.134
Party support	0.278 (0.174)	1.320	0.245 (0.177)	1.278
Talents used effectively	0.321 (0.198)	1.378	0.285 (0.198)	1.330
Considered running for parliament	−0.478 (0.345)	0.620	−0.440 (0.349)	0.644
Labour councillor	−0.299 (0.391)	0.742	−0.364 (0.395)	0.695
Conservative councillor	−0.571 (0.395)	0.565	−0.644 (0.399)	0.525

Coded 0 = yes 1 = no; $n = 425$.

* = Significant at 0.05 level, ** = significant at 0.01 level; Model 1 Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.112$, Model 2 Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.145$.

Ideally, another sample would be surveyed and the results compared. However, owing to a lack of existing comparative research, these results can only be analysed in isolation.

In terms of considering dropout patterns in the context of a political career, with local councils acting as springboard positions into higher office, it would also appear that considering a run for a parliamentary seat is a fairly minor factor here and does not achieve significance, something for which there are a number of possible explanations. First, it is worth remembering that it is a small percentage of people more broadly that discussions regarding parliamentary candidacy deal with. It could also be the case that councillors are choosing to retain both positions, a phenomenon not entirely without precedent in the United Kingdom, although, as noted previously, one that is far more prominent in some European countries (Borchert, 2001; Murray, 2010).



Table 5: Percentage of councillors scoring each factor between 1 and 3 on Likert scale (very important–slight influence on decision) by sex

	<i>Factor was influential in decision to stand down (1-3 on Likert scale)⁷</i>	
	<i>Men (%)</i>	<i>Women (%)</i>
Time pressure relating to work ($n = 54$)	65.7	68.2
Time pressures relating to children ($n = 52$)	25.0	10.0
Time pressures on general family life ($n = 58$)	68.7	57.7
Health reasons ($n = 55$)	25.0	30.4
Not enjoying council duties ($n = 53$)	51.6	45.4
Felt did not have support of party ($n = 50$)	37.9	23.8
To pursue other political positions ($n = 51$)	32.3	20.0
Financial remuneration too low ($n = 51$)	20.0	9.5

Alternatively, it could be that councillors are retaining their local position until the end of the election campaign (it should be noted that this research was conducted before the local and general elections had taken place).

Running the regression (minus the ‘Sex’ variable) on men and women councillors in isolation, and using separate models to include variables relating to children under-5 and under-18 in order to avoid potential multi-collinearity, seems to confirm the primacy of the ‘Sex’ variable as the only significant predictor of dropout in this equation and no variables achieve significance in either model.

The findings outlined above may be better explained by looking at the views of those councillors who did drop out and their explanations as to why. These results, shown in Table 5, focus on a small proportion of all those councillors surveyed, limited to an n of 64 that is too small to allow for effective significance testing. As such, the results should be prefaced by an acknowledgement that they could well be based simply on sampling error.

Table 5 shows how councillors perceive the impact of various factors as having affected their decision to stand down from their role as councillors. Men surveyed are more likely than women to have cited time pressures relating to their children as either important or very important when deciding whether to stand down or not. A total of 25 per cent fall into this category, compared with 10 per cent of women. One possible explanation for this is a common finding throughout the literature that women are more likely to wait until their main caring duties are fulfilled before becoming councillors in older age than their male counterparts (Morgan, 2003, p. 24). It is also speculated by Rao (1999) and Briggs (2000) that younger women who become councillors may be very career-focused, and as such, may not have children yet. To best

Table 6: Cross-tabulation of children under-5 and under-18 by sex

Sex	Children under-5			Children under-18			Total
	None	One	Two or more	None	One	Two or more	
Man (%)	91.9***	5.4***	2.7***	86.5***	5.1***	8.5***	100
Woman (%)	91.2***	4.1***	4.8***	83.7***	9.5***	6.8***	100
Total	91.6	5.0	3.4	85.6	6.5	7.9	100

$n = 444$; *** = χ^2 test found difference significant at 0.001 level.

Table 7: Cross-tabulation of children under-5 by sex, split by councillors aged under 40 and 40 and above

Sex	Children under-5						Total
	Councillors aged under 40 (<i>n</i> = 71)			Councillors aged 40 and above (<i>n</i> = 305)			
	None	One	Two or more	None	One	Two or more	
Men (%)	85.5*	9.1*	5.5*	93.6	4.5	2.0	100
Women (%)	68.8*	18.8*	12.5*	97.1	1.9	1.0	100
Total within age group (%)	81.7	11.3	7.0	94.8	3.6	1.0	100

$n = 372$; * = χ^2 test found difference significant at 0.05 level.

understand this pattern, we turn again to the whole sample, and an n that allows for significance testing. Table 6 breaks the parenthood figures down by sex. The clearest overriding trend is that most councillors have no children at all, regardless of sex, although women would appear slightly more likely to have children under-18 than their male colleagues, rendering the explanation just offered incompatible with the evidence to a large degree.

As part of a deeper analysis, the parenthood by sex figures were broken down further by age group, with councillors being split into those over and under the age of 40. These figures are seen in Tables 7 and 8, looking at children under-5 and under-18, respectively, so as to allow for a distinction between young children, who will require more care on account of both their age as well as their sporadic or non-attendance at school, and those children who are of school age.

The key finding of note here is that women under-40 are more likely, in both cases, to have children of all ages than their male colleagues, with this difference being nearly 20 per cent in the case of children under-5. In terms of using this to explain the findings in Table 7, there are a number of factors that could be in play. One potential factor is that women perhaps do not want to



Table 8: Cross-tabulation of children under-18 by sex, split by councillors aged under 40 and 40 and above

Sex	Children under-18						Total
	Councillors aged under 40 (n = 71)			Councillors aged 40 and above (n = 305)			
	None	One	Two or more	None	One	Two or more	
Men (%)	96.4	1.8	1.8	83.7***	5.0***	11.4***	100
Women (%)	87.5	12.5	0.0	81.6***	8.7***	9.7***	100
Total within age group (%)	94.4	4.2	1.4	83.0	6.2	10.9	100

$n = 372$; *** = χ^2 test found difference significant at 0.001 level.

meet any gendered and stereotypical expectations they may have encountered in their work, which assume, that as women, their children would prevent them from functioning effectively as councillors in the care-less environment of the council chamber (Lynch, 2010). Alternatively, it could also be the case that women councillors had simply expected their council duties to be incompatible with their family life and had considered this eventuality before their election, and, as such, are not considering this factor so prominently when answering the question, preferring instead to focus on factors that they had not considered so extensively or anticipated so keenly. That is to say, women councillors perhaps overestimated, or were at least prepared in some way for, the impact of council duties on their family lives, whereas men could have been the opposite to an extent.

Possibly linked to this is the finding that women are slightly more likely than their male counterparts to rate pressures relating to their work as an important or very important consideration when deciding to stand down as a councillor. Other issues such as personal health or dissatisfaction with the level of financial remuneration for council duties do not register particular importance in the process of making this decision, and there exist no gendered differences. In terms of support of party, 37.9 per cent of men list this as an important factor in their decision compared with only 23.8 per cent of women. It should be noted that the wording of this question, particularly the use of the word 'support' in a relatively vague way, leaves it open to interpretation as well as the possibility that councillors answered it with different things in mind, but it is still possible to glean an overall sentiment of either positivity or negativity from the findings. Similar research in future would benefit from more specificity in this area. Overall, it would seem that pressures on work, family and non-enjoyment of council duties are the key influences on the decision of these councillors to stand down, although to a certain extent it is hard to

untangle these fully – the source of the lack of enjoyment is not entirely clear, for example.

The findings above establish the phenomenon of councillor dropout as a gendered one. This has two potential implications. If women councillors are dropping out in order to try and move to higher political office, including running for parliament, this is perhaps a positive thing, although as outlined above, it requires local councils to meet high replenishment rates even in order to maintain current numbers of women councillors. Conversely, if this is not what is happening, and if women councillors are dropping out of elected politics and staying out, this is concerning for feminists as it brings into doubt the prescriptions of lag theory, which assumes that increased numbers of women at lower levels will result into an automatic spillover of these women in higher level positions, in this case the step-up from local to national politics (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 8). In turn, this raises concerns that traditional ‘political apprenticeship’ routes to Westminster work in gendered ways (Ashe *et al*, 2010). In order to fully understand what is happening here, a step beyond the existing literature is required to look at how councillors who do drop out consider their political futures, if at all.

Leaving politics for good?

Unaddressed in the existing literature is whether those councillors who stand down from their elected roles are keen to remain a part of the political system in another way or instead intend to steer clear of political activity of any kind. As noted, this has potential implications for the workings of local government as a springboard position into the national political arena, as well as the tenets of lag theory. Building on the analysis of dropout patterns above, which are shown to be gendered in nature, the obvious subsequent question is whether women councillors who are leaving their local councils are also leaving politics altogether.

To see a gendered pattern here would not be unprecedented; although most of the existing work is not looking directly at the political intentions held by those councillors who have dropped out, but rather speculates on the gendered nature of barriers to entry for potential women councillors or on the experiences of incumbent women councillors (Rao, 1999; Briggs, 2000). Men are found to be more likely than women (32.3 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, from a small *n* of 51, as seen in Table 7) to list the pursuit of other political positions as a factor in their decision to stand down, suggesting that the jump from local to national politics, in the context of a political career, is more favourable to men than women. The evidence presented here finds the opposite of that which proponents of lag theory would assert – despite increasing numbers of women councillors overall, women are more likely than

**Table 9:** Post-dropout political aspirations of councillors by sex, variable *n*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Men [Yes] (%)</i>	<i>Women [Yes] (%)</i>
Work For A Think Tank? (<i>n</i> = 47)	44.8	38.9
Voluntary Party Work? (<i>n</i> = 59)	88.2	80.0
FT Paid Party Role? (<i>n</i> = 45)	7.1	0
PT Paid Party Role (<i>n</i> = 44)	3.6	6.3
Enter Parliamentary Candidate Selection Process (<i>n</i> = 48)	17.2	10.5

men to drop out, and when they do so, are less likely to be doing so in order to attempt to move to higher office. As such, there is no natural spillover from one level of government to the other. There is a potential for such evidence to be used by advocates of gender quotas, for if the *status quo* is unlikely to shift by way of a natural process, recruitment and selection methods that guarantee a certain percentage of women being presented to voters at the ballot box are perhaps more urgently required.

Table 9 shows that in terms of remaining political in a more general sense, the results are also split along the lines of sex, with over 44 per cent of men stating that they would consider working for a think tank after standing down compared with 38.9 per cent of women, over 88 per cent compared with 80 per cent continuing in voluntary party work and 7.1 per cent compared with no women willing to consider continued involvement through a full-time paid party role, thus confirming Hypothesis 3 as accurate. The only activity which women were more likely than their male counterparts to express an interest in pursuing having dropped out was a part-time paid party role, although only nominally, with just over 6 per cent of women doing this compared with 3.6 per cent of men. Despite the small *n* (too small to test for statistical significance), it is possible to speculate that these patterns suggest two key things. First, the large majority of councillors who drop out are not leaving politics altogether and are seemingly happy to consider continuing in voluntary roles within their party. On the other hand, it would seem that men have their gazes focused more keenly on the attainment of the higher-end jobs available, particularly positions within think tanks and full-time paid party roles. In terms of political careers, this is of some interest, with think-tank roles being seen as effective 'instrumental' roles in modern politics, roles from which parliamentary candidates are increasingly drawn (Cairney, 2007, p. 215). If this is the case, and a switch to such roles is a conscious career choice of sorts, this too could be further evidence of the gendered local-national link. Unfortunately, such research lies beyond the reach of this article, but this line of



enquiry remains open for future work. Again, the small n here limits the ability to make broad conclusions, but it would seem to be the case that dropping out of council duties often means the end of a career in elected politics for many women councillors who take this step.

Conclusions

This article has used original data to look in-depth at councillor dropout for reasons other than electoral defeat, and finds that women councillors are more likely to drop out of their council duties than their male colleagues. It is also found that the majority of dropouts do so having served less than two terms, leading to a 'double-whammy' effect when combined with the fact that a very small percentage of dropouts are drawn from those councillors who have served in excess of three terms. These findings contribute to the existing body of literature that considers councillor retention (Game and Leach, 1993; Rallings and Thrasher, 2006; Rallings *et al*, 2008) and also introduces an explicitly gendered lens through which this process can be viewed, at the same time speaking to existing feminist accounts of processes of political recruitment (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). It moves beyond the scope of previous work by addressing the question of what those councillors who do stand down from their elected posts do afterwards. It is shown that having dropped out, men are more likely to remain politically active than their female colleagues, suggesting that women councillors who drop out of council duties are then staying out of politics more broadly.

In addition, it was found that men are also more likely to consider moving into other, higher, political positions, both elected and unelected, than their female colleagues who also chose to stay politically involved. This suggests that local councillorship acts as a gendered springboard into higher political office, a finding that has implications for future work looking at political career paths, with problems relating to the poor supply of women coming forward for national-level office being located in formal institutions lower down the political pipeline.

Future work on councillor retention and political recruitment should be contextualised as part of a holistic view of British political careers so as to allow political scientists to track where and how gender disparities first materialise and to, in turn, allow equality activists to best articulate methods to make parliament more representative of the population from which it is drawn.

Notes

- 1 Earlier versions of this article were presented at the PSA Women and Politics Specialist Group One Day Workshop held at Birkbeck, University of London in February 2011 and at the



- 'Studying Women' panel at the 2011 PSA Conference, London. The author thanks all participants for their feedback.
- 2 The author would like to acknowledge the sex-gender distinction at this point, recognising that these concepts are not the same and to show awareness of the debates around the terms (Lovenduski, 2005, pp. 20–21). The article will primarily use the term 'gender', as it is social-based trends that are being discussed rather than a biological distinction, but 'sex' will be used when looking at data that uses variables distinguishing directly between men and women.
 - 3 Following the 2010 general election, women constitute 22 per cent of the 650 MPs in the House of Commons (Ashe *et al.*, 2010, p. 457) compared with 30.6 per cent of local authority councillors in England (Evans and Aston, 2011, p. 5).
 - 4 The study was piloted on two London councils (selected by virtue of being the first two on a list of London's councils in alphabetical order) and allowed for the testing of the software being used to administer the survey as well as providing an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the questions in the survey. Following the pilot study, a small number of minor changes were made to the survey, none of which were significant enough to cause incomparability with the questions included in the full survey, and, as such, the responses of the pilot were incorporated into the overall sample detailed above.
 - 5 This offer was taken up by only one councillor.

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