

Falling Off the Ladder: Gendered Experiences of Councillor Turnover

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MUCH of the literature discussing the role of women in British politics focuses its gaze very much at the national level, leaving local political arenas languishing in relative obscurity. Often this hegemony of attention afforded to Westminster belies the fact that women are more numerous in local councils across England than at Westminster, and make up roughly 32 per cent of all elected local authority councillors across the country compared to a fewer 21 per cent of MPs. Once elected, however, gendered patterns re-assert themselves, with women being more likely to hold Cabinet portfolios relating to 'caring' areas such as education and health rather than responsibilities dealing with budgetary affairs—areas being disproportionately dominated by men.

The two key issues troubling advocates of gender parity at the local level are those of recruitment and retention—two issues that are inextricably linked and that signal the beginning and end of a local political career. Political recruitment is a longstanding area of interest for feminist political scientists, with a distinction often being made between factors of supply (that is, how many women are coming forward for election) and demand (that is, do the parties want to select women even if they come forward). In reality, it is arguably both of these factors combining to create a feedback loop which reinforces the image and perception of politics as a male-dominated field that often treats women as unwelcome intruders.¹ At the local level, there have regularly been problems getting anyone at all to stand in certain seats, with significant numbers of paper candidates being seen at each election, although this is perhaps as much to blame on the deadening of electoral competition due to the use of a majoritarian electoral system as anything else. Having said that, with over half of the United Kingdom population being women, it should

not be an insurmountable task to find just over 9,000 who are willing and able to be elected to roughly half of the council seats that are contested every four years. The apparent lack of progress in achieving this goal suggests that there is more going on here than is immediately obvious.

Councillor dropout is the process by which a councillor stands down from their council duties for reasons other than losing at the ballot box. But is such councillor turnover an inherently bad thing? It is possible to argue that a regular refreshment of our elected officials breeds a healthier politics than one which is stagnant and full of overly familiar faces. Is losing councillors after one or two terms such terrible news for local politics?

In the British case, it is. In the United Kingdom, councillor turnover doesn't provide the desired effects as outlined above as it affects different groups of councillors in different ways. Women have consistently been found to be more likely to drop out after just one term as a councillor (usually four years), and this author has found the same to be the case when looking at two-term dropouts as well.² Political scientists Michael Rallings and Colin Thrasher have described this as a 'double-whammy' for local councils, whereby they lose those councillors who have been recently elected, and are generally more likely to be younger, women or from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, while at the same time retain those councillors who have been in place for longer—councillors who are more likely than not to be older white men.³

Also of interest here is what councillors intend to do once they have dropped out: whether they are leaving politics altogether or are they giving up their council duties instead to pursue higher office at the national level—namely running for election to Westminster. This career route is not unusual in the British system: 62 per cent of newly elected

MPs at the 1997 general election had experience as local councillors and this figure remained relatively high at the 2010 general election, with 42 per cent of newly elected MPs having such experience. It would seem, however, that this link is a gendered one and works in different ways for men and women with it being the case in both 1997 and 2010 that roughly three-quarters of the MPs who had been councillors were men. Evidence from the local level supports this. Out of those councillors who intended to drop out, the men doing so were more likely to list the pursuit of a parliamentary seat, among other full-time national-level political roles in think tanks and in the parties themselves, as one of their reasons for doing so. Among women, this number was much lower, and the only type of post-dropout political activity that women were more likely to be participating in was voluntary party work at constituency level. In sum, men who drop out are more likely to do so in order to pursue higher-end political activity, mostly professional, whereas women return to constituency-level voluntary work.

So why are women more likely to stand down than their male colleagues, and why are they less likely to be pursuing top political jobs after doing so? It has been found in numerous studies that non-political reasons are the most influential in councillor's decisions to stand down. The two key areas that are cited are those of family life and the impact of elected duties on it, and how being a councillor has affected their careers and working experiences. The percentage of councillors who work full-time differs across the country (from 33.9 per cent in London to 11.2 per cent in shire counties—a figure that has also fallen consistently since 1997), but there is a significant section of local authority councillors who combine their council work with some sort of paid occupation. Women are more likely than men to work in a part-time role and are also more likely to have caring responsibilities of some kind. On top of any paid work, women in the United Kingdom additionally remain more likely to complete the majority of domestic and household labour than men. Councillors devote an average of 23.1 hours per week to their council duties, with women reporting themselves to devote slightly more time than their male colleagues (23.9 and 22.2 hours, respectively).

The main issue here is time—a concept that has been recognised as being gendered in previous research,⁴ with councillors struggling to fulfil their elected duties and simultaneously make time for their family, their work, or both. Solutions should speak to both of these issues with reference to the points at which they become salient: those of recruitment and exit. In both cases, more effort needs to be made to increase the viability and attractiveness of the councillor role in ways that will lead the broadest range of people possible to consider themselves eligible, and also to remain in situ once elected. Examples of possible policy interventions to achieve this include making the councillor role a fully-fledged part-time job, paying councillors an above-average wage whilst offering them and their employers special provisions to ensure they can perform their elected duties effectively. If combined with a term-limits system, councils would theoretically see an influx of diverse and qualified councillors while at the same time enforcing a regular rejuvenation of personnel rather than the current natural refresh rate which is skewed in favour of certain groups of councillors. The current political climate is not conducive to suggestions of increased public spending—spending which the above proposals would most likely require. Taken as a theoretical starting point, however, they can be used to generate further discussions about policy solutions to the issue of councillor turnover, and encourage broader discussions about the nature of the role of local councillor.

Notes

- 1 For more on this idea, see J. Lovenduski, *Feminizing Politics*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005; N. Puwar, *Space Invaders*, Oxford, Berg, 2004.
- 2 The author carried out survey research looking at councillors across the London boroughs between February and April 2010, prior to the May 2010 local elections.
- 3 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, with M. Shears, *The 2008 Survey of Local Election Candidates*, London, IDeA/LGA, 2008.
- 4 Dawn Lyon and Alison Woodward, expounding their concept of 'leadership time', argue that assumptions made regarding the time constraints placed on people in positions of importance or leadership in politics and business tacitly assume the presence of a home-making woman

and thereby gender the working of 'time' for women who instead hold leadership roles. See D. Lyon and A. Woodward, 'Gender, time and

the top: cultural constructions of time in high level careers and homes', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2004, pp. 205–21.