

Gender and UK elections: the gendered dynamics of campaigns, leadership, voting behaviour and party platforms

Article

Accepted Version

Ralph-Morrow, E., Shorrocks, R. and De Geus, R. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3053-2123> (2021) Gender and UK elections: the gendered dynamics of campaigns, leadership, voting behaviour and party platforms. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31 (4). pp. 423-428. ISSN 1745-7297 doi: 10.1080/17457289.2021.1968415 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/100262/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1968415>

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

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Abstract

UK politics has seen unprecedented levels of upheaval and volatility since 2015. The rapid succession of European elections, the EU-referendum and three general elections within five years of each other, have provided British political scientists with much to analyze and study. In this special issue we focus our attention on the role of gender in UK electoral politics. We argue that the increased descriptive representation of women in politics, both as Members of Parliament as well as in leadership roles, gives the illusion that women's place in British politics is secured and unchallenged. This hides the many ways in which UK electoral politics are and remain gendered. The contributions of this special issue shed light on these dynamics, focusing on themes of political violence, masculinity and the representation of women's preferences and interests.

Introduction

There have been many gender 'firsts' in recent UK elections. The 2017 General Election heralded the arrival of the modern gender gap on British shores, and was the first election in modern British history in which fewer women voted for the Conservative Party than men (Sanders and Shorrocks 2019). Two years later, the record number of LGBTQ+ and women MPs elected at the 2019 General Election helped to bring about Britain's most diverse Parliament ever (BBC News 2019). Furthermore, an unprecedented number of parties including the Democratic Unionist Party, Greens, Liberal Democrats and Scottish National Party, contested these elections with women leaders.

However, there are still many signs of gender inequalities in UK electoral politics. 20 women MPs decided to stand down at the 2019 election after levels of intimidation and harassment reached new highs, and the number of women MPs only increased by 12 at this election. Nor is gender progress shared at all levels of political leadership. Despite the gains that the Labour Party has made in the election of women MPs, its leadership remains stubbornly male, as does the British premiership more generally.

This special issue examines the gendered nature of recent UK elections. We argue that the increased level of descriptive representation of women in UK politics hides the many ways in which politics are gendered. The contributions of this special issue shed light on these dynamics, focusing on themes of political violence, masculinity and the representation of women's preferences and interests. The contributions also reflect research imperatives within the study of gender and politics more generally related to studying the heterogeneity of women's interests (e.g. Gidengil 2007), diversity and intersectionality (e.g. Hancock 2007), and masculinity (e.g. Bjarnegard and Murray 2018).

The gendered nature of British elections

Despite widespread media reports of the intimidation and harassment faced by MPs during the 2019 General Election and subsequent Brexit debates, scholarly research on the gendered nature of electoral violence in Britain is exceedingly rare. Existing studies tend to examine electoral violence in countries with weak institutions and relatively high levels of violence (Ponce 2019; Richani 2013), or focus exclusively on violence against women in politics (Krook 2017; Kuperberg 2018), thereby making it difficult to isolate the effect of gender.

Collignon and Rüdig's timely contribution in this issue uses data from surveys fielded as part of the Representative Audit of Britain to ascertain whether candidates standing in the 2019 UK General Election experienced any form of inappropriate behaviour, harassment, or security threats during the campaign. This original dataset yields sobering findings: 40 per cent of men, and 60 per cent of women, were harassed and intimidated while campaigning. The authors' study also highlights the need to take an intersectional approach to understanding gendered political violence, with women candidates being more likely to encounter Islamophobic or disablist attacks than men. The research reveals that women candidates felt more unsafe than men, and were more likely than men to modify their behaviour on the campaign trail by avoiding political meetings, canvassing voters or using social media. Political violence therefore has electoral consequences, with the authors finding that women's withdrawal from key campaign activities can reduce their vote share by about 18%. This novel data set offers crucial insights into the often overlooked violence faced by women politicians, and the consequences for representative democracy in Britain.

Building on the theme of the gendered nature of political campaigns, Smith examines and codes nearly 400 tweets disseminated by Johnson and Corbyn during the 2019 General Election campaign for masculine and feminine imagery. Few observers would doubt that gender is relevant to political campaigning and leadership (Banwart 2010; Okimoto and Brescoll 2010). However, these studies are primarily drawn from the US, where questions of gender ideology are particularly salient (Campbell 2016). Additionally, because these studies tend to focus almost exclusively on women, the role of masculinity in political leadership remains under-theorised. Better understanding of how men ‘play the gender card’ in Britain is needed, both to rebut the implicit understanding that only women have a gendered identity (Carver 2014), and to shed light on how gender influences political leadership in a parliamentary, rather than presidential, system.

Smith fills this gap by proposing a novel framework to study the use of masculine imagery in visual campaign materials. She considers two forms of masculinity: traditional masculinity manifested through displays of strength and dominance, and ‘new man’ masculinity that encompasses feminine-coded behaviour such as warmth and compassion. Smith finds that although the leaders’ visuals rarely contained the feminised imagery associated with the ‘new man’, indicators of masculinity were present in over 90 per cent of the examined tweets. Although masculine visuals were ubiquitous, Smith’s in-depth analysis reveals key differences between the two men. Johnson’s tweets often contained images of him visiting building sites, warehouses and factories, thereby projecting a masculinity associated with physical strength and toughness, whereas Corbyn’s visuals frequently featured images of him addressing rallies of supporters, thereby projecting a masculine display of agency. The study is hereby one of the first to distinguish between variations of masculinity in political campaign visuals.

Further advancing the theme of gender and political leadership, the contribution of de Geus and Ralph-Morrow shows how the leadership of Nigel Farage of first UKIP and then the Brexit Party is crucial to understanding gender gaps in populist radical right support in Britain. Although there are numerous studies seeking to understand why men support populist radical right parties at a greater rate than women in countries such as Austria, France and Germany (Givens 2004; Spierings and Zaslove 2017), Britain is often omitted from such cross-national research (but see Allen and Goodman 2020).

This limits our understanding of whether and how gender operates as a populist radical right voter cleavage in Britain.

In their contribution de Geus and Ralph-Morrow use data on five recent elections from the online BES panel to examine the gender gap in populist radical right support in Britain. They confirm that the support base of UKIP and the Brexit Party is predominately male, although the size of the gender gap varies over time. In line with comparative research, they find that neither demographic differences nor attitudinal differences explain the gender gap (Immerzeel et al. 2015). Rather, they argue, the leadership position of Nigel Farage is crucial in understanding the gender gap: across all elections women were much less supportive of Farage than men. This mattered greatly given that Farage was an important source of the party's popularity. Their contribution highlights a significant yet often overlooked mechanism that propels Britain's populist radical right gender gap and encourages the comparative literature to take leadership effects more seriously.

Also on gender vote gaps is the contribution by Shorrocks and Campbell. Until recently, British electoral behaviour has not conformed to the pattern of the modern gender gap, which has seen women more likely to support left-leaning parties than men in countries such as Italy, the Netherlands and the USA. Indeed, prior to 2017, British gender gaps tended to be small and, when present, saw women more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than men (Campbell 2012). The leading modern gender gap account put forward by Inglehart and Norris (2000), which focuses on the sweeping sociological trends that encourage women to turn left, seems unable to explain the British anomaly.

Campbell and Shorrocks use the 2019 European and General Elections to consider how issue competition and institutional arrangements influence the modern gender gap. The authors find that the novel gender gap of 2017 persisted in the 2019 General Election, with women more supportive of Labour than men, and men more supportive of the Conservatives than women. However, the European Elections tell a more complicated story. Although there was no substantive gender gap in Labour support, an examination of minor parties reveal that women were more supportive of the Greens than men, and men were more supportive of the Brexit Party than women. Addressing an important oversight in the gender gap literature, the authors argue that it is essential to take

account of electoral context to understand gender gaps; electoral rules and the salience of elections are key in understanding variation in gender gaps.

The final contribution of this special issue builds on the idea that women's preferences are complex and heterogeneous. Although scholarly research increasingly recognises the heterogeneity of the interests and needs of women voters, it is unclear whether British political parties share the same understanding. Earlier work by Campbell and Childs's (2015) reveals that policy pledges targeting women voters were surprisingly homogenous, thereby suggesting that parties are yet to understand that women voters are as varied as men.

Annesley et al's study in this special issue is the first to provide an over-time and cross-party analysis of how parties appeal to women via manifestos, offering insight into parties' commitments to women's issues, as well as party competition and issue ownership. Drawing on manifestos released by the Conservatives, Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and UKIP/Brexit Party across the past three British General Elections, Annesley et al's fine-grained analysis reveals that certain women – notably, working women and mothers – have become a focal point of inter-party competition. Other women, though, are often neglected, with few appeals made to young women, women with disabilities and women of colour. The reluctance of most parties to promote policies that recognise diversity and intersectionality may undermine the representativeness of British democracy.

Conclusion

Advances in the numerical representation of women in politics, or the presence of women in prominent leadership roles such as the Prime Ministership create the perception that women's place in UK politics has been secured. Yet, these advances hide the multitude of gendered dynamics that characterise British politics and elections. The contributions in this special issue show the challenges faced by women politicians as well as the complexity and heterogeneity of women's preferences, parties' (lack) of understanding of these preferences and the volatile nature of women's voting behaviour over time and across different types of elections. What is more, the contributions have highlighted the need to not only examine gender from the perspective of women, but to take masculinity seriously as a gender dynamic that shapes politics. In addition, both gender research and political parties tend to focus on particular types of women (white,

working mothers), reflecting the persistent underrepresentation of certain groups of women and jeopardising the representative nature of Britain's democracy.

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