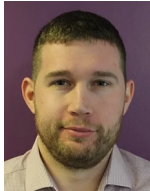


Party matters more than gender in explaining how different candidates campaign



Election campaigns often differ in their style and focus. [Isobel Parkes](#) and [Siim Trumm](#) compare the leaflets distributed by candidates in the run up to the 2019 General Election, using data from the [OpenElections](#) project. They find some minor differences in how female and male candidates campaign, and much more variation along party lines.

Female candidates are making up an increasingly large proportion of candidates who stand for office at general elections. There is certainly a long road still to go to reach parity, but the 2019 General Election did witness the highest number (1,121) and percentage (33.8%) of female candidates to date. With that in mind, we compare how female and male candidates campaigned in the run up to the 2019 General Election.

The [OpenElections](#) project aims to increase the transparency around what parties and their candidates say during general election campaigns, hosting over 1,200 leaflets from 2019. These leaflets are analysed, among else, with respect to whether they include a candidate photo, negative mentions of another party and/or its leader, and refer to the tactical situation in the constituency. They certainly do not tell the full campaign story, but they do give us some sense of the kind of campaigns different candidates run.

Female and male candidates are both running personalised campaigns

The decision about whether to include a candidate photo or not in the leaflet is an important one. The inclusion of a candidate photo signals an effort to market oneself as personally electable. One would expect that it is male candidates who are more likely to include a photo of themselves than female candidates, given that masculinity is still often perceived as the norm when it comes to leadership. However, we do not find this. Male and female candidates are equally likely to include their photo in election leaflets, with 74.1% of male candidates doing so, compared to 74% of female candidates. The importance of including a photo of oneself and making the leaflet more personalised trumps any differences that may exist between male and female campaign styles.

Interestingly, there is nevertheless variation along party lines. Green Party candidates are most likely to include their photo, with 94.3% of their female and 97.6% of their male candidates doing so. At the other end of the spectrum are Liberal Democrat candidates. Only 54.4% and 64.6% of the leaflets we have in our dataset from constituencies where the party had female and male candidates, respectively, include a candidate photo. Liberal Democrats were seen to run a leader-centred campaign in 2019, focusing heavily on the profile of Jo Swinson, and our evidence lends further support to it. Table 1 shows the percentage of leaflets also for the other parties.

Table 1. OpenElections leaflets including a picture of candidate

	Female candidates (%)	Male candidates (%)
Conservative Party	75.3	70.3
Green Party	94.3	97.6
Labour Party	86.6	84.7
Liberal Democrats	54.4	64.6
National parties	85.7	91.3
Total	74.0	74.1

Female candidates are (slightly) less likely to go negative

The tone of British politics is often seen as increasingly negative. Election campaigns are no exception here. We do believe that referring to and attacking opponents has become widespread. Our data reveals a mixed picture.

Table 2 shows the percentage of OpenElections leaflets with a negative mention of another party's leader. There is no evidence of overwhelming negativity. However, we do find some evidence of a gender divide. This is quite personal form of negative campaigning, and male candidates are more likely to partake in it, with 43.5% of leaflets distributed by male candidates targeting another party's leader compared to 36.7% of leaflets distributed by female candidates.

Table 2. OpenElections leaflets with at least one negative mention of another party leader

	Female candidates (%)	Male candidates (%)
Conservative Party	47.9	57.6
Green Party	0.0	0.0
Labour Party	15.6	21.2
Liberal Democrats	58.1	52.1
National parties	50.0	39.3
Total	36.7	43.5

Again, political party is significant. Green Party leaflets in our dataset did not mention opposition leaders at all. A campaign method attacking individual party leaders has been rejected by their candidates, maybe showing a lean towards a nicer side of politics. Leaflets from Labour Party candidates were also very unlikely to attack an opposition leader. Only 15.6% of leaflets distributed by its female candidates did so and only 21.2% of leaflets distributed by its male candidates did so. On the other end of the spectrum are Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, with approximately half of both their female and male candidates including a mention of another party's leader in their election leaflets.

Table 3 shows the percentage of OpenElections leaflets with a negative mention of another party. The story here is different. Referring to opposing parties was much more common and differences along gender lines smaller: 71.9% of leaflets from male candidates attacked another party and 68.4% of leaflets from female candidates did so. Green Party candidates stand out once again as least likely to be negative. Mentions of another party were included only in 8.6% of the leaflets in our dataset from the party's female candidates and in only 16.7% of the leaflets from its male candidates. This does appear to show a rebellion from an increasingly attacking nature of British politics, where focus on policies and progress is deemed to be of greater importance.

Table 3. OpenElections leaflets with at least one negative mention of another party

	Female candidates (%)	Male candidates (%)
Conservative Party	60.6	72.8
Green Party	8.6	16.7
Labour Party	75.6	81.0
Liberal Democrats	80.2	76.7
National parties	85.7	64.3
Total	68.4	71.9

Female candidates are (slightly) more likely to use tactical messaging

There is a lot of talk about the rise in tactical voting, most recently in relation to the by-elections in Wakefield and Tiverton and Honiton. It is of course not only voters who are strategic: in 2019, the Brexit Party did not field candidates in Conservative-held seats. It might be surprising, then, that tactical messaging in election leaflets is quite rare. Liberal Democrat candidates were most likely to refer to the tactical situation in the constituency, with 39.1% of leaflets distributed by their female candidates doing so and 37.1% of leaflets from its male candidates doing so, but we are still only talking about around 1-in-3 here. The percentages for other parties' candidates were even lower.

We do find that female candidates are a bit more likely to use tactical messaging. 29.6% of their leaflets mentioned the tactical situation in the constituency, while only 22.8% of leaflets from male candidates did. This is largely down to the Labour Party, where 37.8% of leaflets distributed by its female candidates mentioned the tactical situation in the constituency, compared to 17.5% of the leaflets distributed by its male candidates.

Table 4. OpenElections leaflets mentioning tactical situation in constituency

	Female candidates (%)	Male candidates (%)
Conservative Party	13.7	14.1
Green Party	13.5	14.3
Labour Party	37.8	17.5
Liberal Democrats	39.1	37.1
National parties	0.0	14.3
Total	29.6	22.8

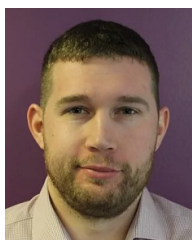
To sum up, there are some, albeit quite minor, differences in how female and male candidates campaign. Female candidates are slightly less likely to go negative, but a bit more likely to use tactical messaging. There is much more variation in campaign messaging along party lines. In some ways, it is the party that counts (more) when it comes to the kind of election leaflets voters receive.

Note: You can find the OpenElections website [here](#) and on Twitter [@OpenElectionsUK](#).

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Photo by [Krisztina Papp](#) on [Unsplash](#).