

The gender imbalance online seems to be the result of wider political exclusion, not digital exclusion.

The gender balance in UK politics is one of the most unbalanced in Europe, as only 22 per cent of candidates standing for Parliament in the last general election were female. New research by the Hansard Society on gender and digital politics has looked at the gender difference in online political discussion and debates, and here [Andy Williamson](#) examines the findings of the research, concluding that a more conversational, collaborative and less combative model of politics is really what is needed.



Politics remains a male bastion. The gender balance amongst MPs and also amongst the candidates who stood for Parliament at the last general election is low, at 22 per cent women in both cases, although unfortunately this will come as no surprise to many.

There are more women than men in the UK, more women vote than men, and, interestingly, women are marginally more likely to blog than men. So can blogging and the internet pave the way for more equal political participation and representation? [According to recent research](#) by the Hansard Society on gender and digital politics, the possibility looks slim.

Online political participation

When it comes to active online political participation, such as writing blogs or commenting on them, the research found male authors account for 80 per cent of content on MPs' blogs, 85 per cent of political media blogs and 93 per cent of local councillor's blogs. In fact, 85 per cent of all the blogs in last year's [Total Politics Blog Political Awards](#) were written by men. Taking one political blog as an example, 79 per cent of posts on [LibDemVoice](#) were written by men, as were 90 per cent of the comments.

Whilst these figures mirror offline activities such as writing to newspapers, access to the internet is more evenly balanced: 84 per cent of men and 79 per cent of women have access, with 81 per cent of men and 76 per cent of women using the internet every day or almost every day. When it comes to blogs and social networks, 44 per cent of men and 42 per cent of women said that they had posted messages on chat sites, social networks or blogs.

New sites for political discussion

But there are other places that some women use to discuss politics online, which aren't included in surveys of political blogs, for example, as they are places that would not traditionally have been perceived as political. One example of this is [Mumsnet](#), a website for parents, which this month has active discussions around public sector pensions, the NHS, EU and phone hacking, all political issues.

The results of a survey found that more men than women feel that they know about politics; 62 per cent say they are knowledgeable about politics compared with [42 per cent of women](#). Most likely the variation lies in the respondents' self-confidence, sugared with a little social desirability bias. Certainly, it is repeated in other surveys about political knowledge. Certainty to vote is more evenly balanced; 59 per cent of women say they are certain to vote at a general election compared with 57 per cent of men. The same is true for signing a petition, which had been done by 40 per cent of men and 42 per cent of women.

Political exclusion, not digital exclusion

It seems that a factor in the differing levels of gendered online political participation is the nature of that political participation itself, reflected in both online and offline activity. Indeed, [Electoral Commission](#) research shows that [women are as or more likely to participate](#) in cause-oriented activities but men are more active in campaign politics.

The evidence for online politics suggests that the more an activity involves self-promotion, expounding your views to others or the risk of conflict, the more likely there is to be a male dominance. The balance between men and women decreases as the inherent level of contention or potential for conflict rises. Gender imbalance online seems to be the result of wider political exclusion, not digital exclusion. Where women are

active in politics, they are just as likely as their male counterparts to be digitally active. The glimmer of light in all of this is that women MPs are as or more likely than their male counterparts to use social networking tools such as [Twitter](#).

Perhaps movement towards a more conversational, collaborative and less combative model of politics is really what is needed.