

## Women should not have to justify their political presence on any other basis than justice

While there a wide range of motivations underlying opposition to increases in women's political representation, [Joni Lovenduski](#) argues that they all contribute towards a much wider misunderstanding about what the data tells us about women in politics. The pervasiveness of such a state of affairs across the commentariat leads to a profoundly unhelpful framing of the wider issues.



Who opposes increases in women's political representation? I can think of at least eight types of opponents.

The *uninterested* who think it does not matter; the *complacent*, who, if they think about it at all, believe women's interests are well represented; the *traditionalists* who believe that politics is about the representation of class interests hence other inequalities are a diversion; the *diversity advocates* who argue that gender is only one of many identities; their mirror image, the *anti-essentialists* who think that claims for more women ignore the great differences among women; the *optimistic* who think it is just a matter of waiting and the *dinosaurs* who think politics is best left to men. Each of these in different ways contributes to the eighth type, the *mistaken* who misread or misconstrue data about women in politics.

The uninterested simply ignore the issue. They are probably the majority of political commentators and are dangerous because they are part of the reason why sex inequality is so often below the radar of discussion of political events, behaviour, issues, electoral forecasts and so on. When pressed they may opine that it [simply does not matter](#). The complacent, if they argue at all, hold that underrepresentation does not really matter because the UK does well on issues of sex equality. That is not the case. The UK ranking in the World Economic Forum's Annual Gender Gap Report has fallen steadily since the first report in 2006. The report measures inequalities between women and men in Economic and Political Participation, Health and Education. In 2011 the UK was 16<sup>th</sup> of 135 countries; in 2006 it was 9<sup>th</sup> of 110 countries. This is a real fall; the UK has not been pushed down the rankings by new entrants to the list. It is 34<sup>th</sup> in the rank order of economic participation and 23<sup>rd</sup> in political participation, rankings that are disguised at the aggregate level by relatively more equality in education and health. The data show that in each case except education where it ranks first, the position of UK women is improving relative to men's but [more slowly than in comparator countries](#) where women's political participation is higher. The UK position on other league tables is worse. Using the simple indicator of the percentage of national legislators who are women the Inter-Parliamentary Union's ranking places the UK at a [wretched 54<sup>th</sup>](#) behind not only the worthy Scandinavian states but also Canada, Mexico, Latvia, the Philippines and Malawi.

The optimistic will have to wait a long time. At the current rate of increase in each party and assuming a normal election cycle, it will be at least 100 years before parity of women is reached in the House of Commons, not a fast track to equality by any reasonable standards.

Traditionalists probably operate on the assumption that political inequality is a zero sum game. Often they argue that more women means more middle class women and fewer working class men. This impression almost certainly reflects party candidate selection regimes in which to be successful women aspirants must be more 'qualified' than their male opponents. But it is selector stress on particular 'qualifications' that squeezes working class aspirants, not prioritisation of women: class and gender interact. A wealth of social research shows that it is women who bear the brunt of class inequality, that gender and class are so intertwined that treating inequalities of sex simultaneously treats those of class. Some diversity advocates and anti essentialists make similar assumptions, failing to recognise that identities such as race, class, sexuality and disability cross cut each other. They also fail to

recognise that with more women representatives there are more opportunities for those who are working class, members of ethnic minorities, disabled etc.

Political dinosaurs are not quite extinct. Some thrive in UK politics sometimes as eccentrics who take pride in their exaggerated outdated prejudices. They are useful for equality advocates because they are so easy to discredit, as is the sexist behaviour that characterises their condition. Like the smile of the Cheshire cat their influence may be evident even as they fade from view. Their attitudes leave an afterglow that encourages sexist remarks which are then excused as parliamentary humour. While David Cameron is probably not a dinosaur he sometimes behaves like one. Examples include his 'calm down dear' remarks to Angela Eagle and his accusation that Nadine Dorries' interventions took place because she was 'frustrated', not exactly hilarious comments for which Cameron apologised. Press dinosaurs are very much in evidence. As recently as April 2011 *the Telegraph* ran an item entitled '[whose boobs are these?](#)' using photos of a woman MP sitting behind Ed Milliband during PMQ.

Finally the mistaken come in various forms. Some argue that women candidates cost votes for parties who select them. Yet, as Rosie Campbell and David Cutts observed in a 2009 conference paper 'Women vote for Women?', UK data on voter preferences for different types of candidates consistently shows that votes do not penalise women candidates.

Another common mistake is making unsubstantiated assertions about women's political preferences implying that they differ from men's. An example is the [widely reported Netmums claim](#) that women were turning to the Tories in 2012, based on a survey only of women, that is with no male comparators. Contrast this with contemporary evidence that [women are turning away from the Tories](#). Women may have been turning right, but the evidence was flawed. Often commentators use data and/or badly designed research to draw unsound conclusions. Common errors are women only samples, badly framed questions and mixed samples that are too small. It is bad science to design and use social surveys, or other studies that examine only women, to claim that women are distinctive in some way without systematically comparing them to men. It is bad science to collect evidence from such a small number of respondents that variations within groups are not reflected.

The case for more women in parliament more or less mirrors the arguments of its opponents with one exception. Current absolute and relative numbers are low, policy is often unfavourable to women, but concealed by gender blindness, the rate of progress is glacial, traditional roles are no longer sustainable, not least because demography shows they are rarely found. To this we must add the argument from justice. The representation of women in political decision making is vital not because it will necessarily make a difference for women, though it often does, but because justice demands it. Equal representation should be taken for granted, part of the institutional fabric. Women should not have to justify their political presence on any other basis than justice. To do so puts a special burden of representation on women MPs who become subject to scrutiny and pressure that male politicians largely avoid, a point well made by Ruth Fox. Yet as Rosie Campbell shows there are subtle but important differences in men's and women's political attitudes that warrant representation. Political parties, not voters are responsible for the male domination of politics. This is sometimes defended by the assertion that men can and do represent women's interests. While true, it begs the question of which particular version of women's interest is being represented. Moreover evidence from more balanced legislatures than ours shows that as membership of women increases, so does the sensitivity of male MPs to the range of women's concerns. So men can act for women but they may be more likely to do so when there are more women around.

**This was originally posted on the blog of [The Centre for the Study of British Politics and Public Life](#) at Birkbeck.**

***The debates at the Centre on women's representation in the UK see the resulting special issue of [Political Quarterly](#) [here](#).***

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## About the author

**Joni Lovenduski** is Anniversary Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London. She is a Fellow of the British Academy and an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences. Her current research is on gender and political representation, gender and parliament, European Equality Agencies and public policy debates.

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