

# The glass cliff: Evidence that women and ethnic minorities contest “hopeless” seats

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*Are women and ethnic minorities set up to fail when they run in UK General Elections? [Clara Kulich](#) from the University of Geneva (Switzerland) presents findings from collaborative research with colleagues at the University of Exeter (UK) and the University of Queensland (Australia) which show that in past UK General Elections (2001 to 2010) women and ethnic minority candidates of the Conservative party were preferentially chosen to run for “hopeless seats” — that is, in constituencies where their party was likely to lose.*



## The glass cliff

Female and ethnic minority are still a highly [underrepresented group](#) in positions of power. Nevertheless, some women and ethnic minority have broken through the “glass ceiling” — the invisible barrier that makes it hard for individuals from disadvantaged groups to gain top positions. Over the last decade, ground-breaking research by Michelle Ryan from the University of Exeter and the University of Groningen and Alex Haslam from the University of Queensland has investigated the conditions under which minority groups enter the competition for positions of power. Their archival and experimental research reveals a clear pattern: Women are more likely to become leaders under precarious conditions, for example, when a company is in a crisis. Such glass cliff positions expose women to working conditions that have a high risk of failure. This in turn has been shown to lead to stress, burnout, and a decision to opt out of such hostile working environments.

## The glass cliff and candidate gender in politics

After observing that certain political parties have quite large numbers of female candidates but only a small proportion of them win in the elections, Michelle Ryan, Alex Haslam and I sought to further explore under which conditions these women were appointed as candidates. The aim was to see if women are also exposed to glass cliffs in the political sphere. Analysing candidate selection of the two most influential UK parties, Labour and Conservative, in the 2001 and 2005 General Elections [revealed](#) that in the Conservative party female candidates were less successful in the elections than male candidates. However, these female candidates were also chosen for seats that were much harder to win. Thus, women were more likely to run for seats that the Conservatives had lost by larger margins in the previous elections than their male counterparts. Women’s lower success, compared to men’s, was hence entirely due to the fact that they were selected to run in constituencies where seats were much harder to win. In the Labour party, however, there was no such pattern because they had introduced positive discrimination measures (“twinning” and “zipping”) which assured that an equal number of women and men compete for seats that are difficult (or easy) to win.

Extending these glass cliff findings in UK politics, we conducted experimental research in which we asked participants to choose between a male and a female candidate of the same party to run in by-elections in a UK constituency. The advantage of this experimental paradigm was that we could control for the candidates’ experiences and capabilities which may vary considerably in real candidates. In this way, participants saw two candidates who only differed in gender but had equivalent CVs. Moreover, the party in this study was referred to only as Party X, thereby controlling for the impact of perceivers’ political orientation. Party X was presented to one group of participants as the winner of the previous election and to another group of participants as the loser. Experimental results clearly replicated the pattern found in the archival study: The woman was more likely to be chosen as a candidate in the experimental group that read about a hard-to-win seat; that is, in constituencies where the party had lost the previous elections.

## The glass cliff and candidates' ethnic background in politics

After having demonstrated the glass cliff for women in politics, we were interested if atypical politicians from other social groups would suffer from the same type of disadvantage. For example, it is interesting to note that the number of ethnic minority candidates in the UK has risen from 30 in 1997 to 131 in 2010 but the representation of this group in parliament has only increased from 9 in 1997 to 26 in 2010.

In a [recent paper](#) we illustrate that ethnic minority individuals were indeed confronted by glass cliffs. More specifically, the analysis of the past three UK General Elections (from 2001 to 2010) clearly revealed that the Conservative Party was clearly inclined to choose female and ethnic minority candidates for “hopeless” seats. Not surprisingly, hardly any minority group candidate won and accordingly minorities are highly under-represented in the parliament. The under-presentation of minority group individuals in parliament is thus not a product of their limited political nous but rather the effect of discriminatory treatment by those in decision-making positions.

### Why do we find glass cliffs in politics?

Appointing women in times of crises may be due to their association to stereotypical “feminine” qualities which are considered suitable in times of crisis, such as compassion, or conflict solving. This interpretation may be less suited to explain why ethnic minorities face glass cliffs. We are thus considering two further interpretations that may apply to either group. First, women and ethnic minority group members may be perceived as particularly capable in these situations because it takes stamina and determination for them to overcome stereotypes and discrimination in order to advance in politics. Thus, they may be considered precisely the right type of person for a difficult job. Second, though, it may be a case of straightforward discrimination — a case of women and minorities simply being treated poorly and unfairly.

A nuance in this case is that social pressures demand diversity and equality in the political realm and the increasing number of minority group voters push parties to nominate minority candidates. Choosing minority group candidates for unwinnable seats may thus be a “window dressing” strategy — sending the signal that the party favours diversity while in reality little changes as these candidates are unlikely to succeed. From the perspective of the dominant group (white males) choosing them for “hopeless” seats has the added advantage that their failure can be attributed to their lack of aptitude, thus appearing to justify the practice of continued discrimination.

### About the Authors

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