

# Parental status as an electoral asset: how voters view politicians with and without children



*Philip Cowley and Rosie Campbell examine the public's view of British politicians with and without children, as well as the behaviour of MPs in their communications with voters. They find a preference for candidates who are parents and no punishment effect for women politicians with children.*

When she was running for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2016, one of her opponents argued that the fact Theresa May had never had children meant she lacked a [‘stake in the future’](#). Previously, when she was Home Secretary, it was reported that aides to the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, were critical of her for the same reason, and [‘her lack of family makes her look “obsessed” by politics’](#).

During the 2015 British Labour leadership election, one Labour MP had said that she was going to vote for Yvette Cooper because as [‘a working mum, she understands the pressures on modern family life’](#), comments that were widely seen as a dig at one of the rival female candidates who had no children.

In both these cases, the parental status of the various male candidates for the leadership of their parties was not considered an issue.

The Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard was variously described by some of her opponents as [‘deliberately barren’](#) and [‘an unproductive old cow’](#) – phraseology that, for obvious reasons, would never be ascribed to a man – along with the claim that because she had [‘chosen not to be a parent’, she was ‘very much a one-dimensional person’](#). In New Zealand, Jacinda Arden was [asked about whether she intended to have children](#) within hours of becoming leader of the Labour Party.

Yet despite how obviously gendered this discussion is – and how often politicians of both sexes routinely use images of themselves in domestic family settings – there is curiously little written on the impact that politicians’ parental status may have on how they are viewed by the electorate. There is plenty of research that considers the impact of *voters’* parental status on their voting behaviour and political attitudes but much less that tests the impact of *politicians’* parental status on vote choice and political attitudes. Perhaps voters share the prejudices of some of those criticising Theresa May or Julia Gillard – but perhaps they do not.

In a recent paper published in the [British Journal of Politics and International Relations](#), we examined both how British MPs with children presented themselves – and how voters reacted. For the former, we looked at British MPs’ websites. Almost all British MPs now have their own website and almost all of these have a section entitled ‘About’ or ‘Biography’ or similar, in which the MP provides information about themselves. These are a useful resource, under-utilised by researchers. There is no standard format to this material. Subject to almost no constraints, they can choose what to reveal and what to omit. These websites therefore present the image that the MP wishes to project to the voter.

These profiles contain – or, more accurately, since we collected data in 2014, contained – frequent reference to MPs’ children, such as: ‘John and his wife Susan live in his Lincolnshire constituency and have two young sons’; ‘Heather has lived in Bretby for the last 22 years with her husband and daughter’; ‘Elizabeth is married with two daughters’; ‘He is married to Michelle and is the proud father of three daughters’; ‘I live in South Devon with my husband Adrian and we have 3 children, all at university’.

Once we controlled for the fact that [women MPs are less likely to have children](#), we found the majority of MPs with children mentioned this fact. There was no statistically significant difference between the propensity of men (67%) or women (62%) to do so – although we did find a difference among the (very small number of) MPs who displayed a picture of their children (of women MPs, the figure was 1%, of men it was 8%). We also found inter-party differences, with Conservatives more likely to mention their children (79%) than Labour MPs (55%).

To examine the public's reaction to politicians depending on their parental status, we used a survey experiment in which respondents read two short profiles about hypothetical politicians, and then decided which of the two politicians they preferred. We manipulated the biographical information, changing both the sex and the number of children involved for both candidates. This is a technique we have used in [other research on candidates](#). It has the advantage that it tests respondents' attitudes without it being obvious what it is that is being tested.

We found clear evidence that voters think more highly of politicians with children when compared to politicians without children. In terms of overall preference, candidates with children were rated seven percentage points higher than those without. We found no evidence that voters reacted negatively to women politicians with children but we did find some evidence that women without children were less attractive when compared to a male candidate with children. Whether measuring their approachability, their experience, their effectiveness, or voters' overall preference the result for a male candidate with children versus a female candidate without showed a statistically significant advantage for the man.

Our research shows that children are an electoral asset – and it would appear that British politicians know that. The boost the hypothetical candidates in our survey received was not massive, but neither was it trivial and in tight races it may make a difference. Given the high proportion of MPs who are parents who make reference to their children in their websites, we suspect they are intuitively aware of the advantage that this gives them.

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Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

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