

# The Scottish Parliament's record on women's representation is in the balance

By Democratic Audit

*Since its establishment, the Scottish Parliament has set the standard in the UK for gender representation, with elections in 1999 and 2003 bringing record numbers of women into the legislature. Since then, however, progress towards a consistent equality has stalled. In the latest post in our Gender and Democracy series, **Meryl Kenny** of the University of New South Wales argues that an impressive record hangs in the balance, and that parties must be vigilant to avoid undoing all of their good work.*

One of the notable achievements of devolution in the United Kingdom has been the high numbers of women elected to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. Of the 129 MSPs elected to the Scottish Parliament for the first time in 1999, 48 were women (37.2%), a 'gender coup' that was all the more dramatic given that Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom have had a



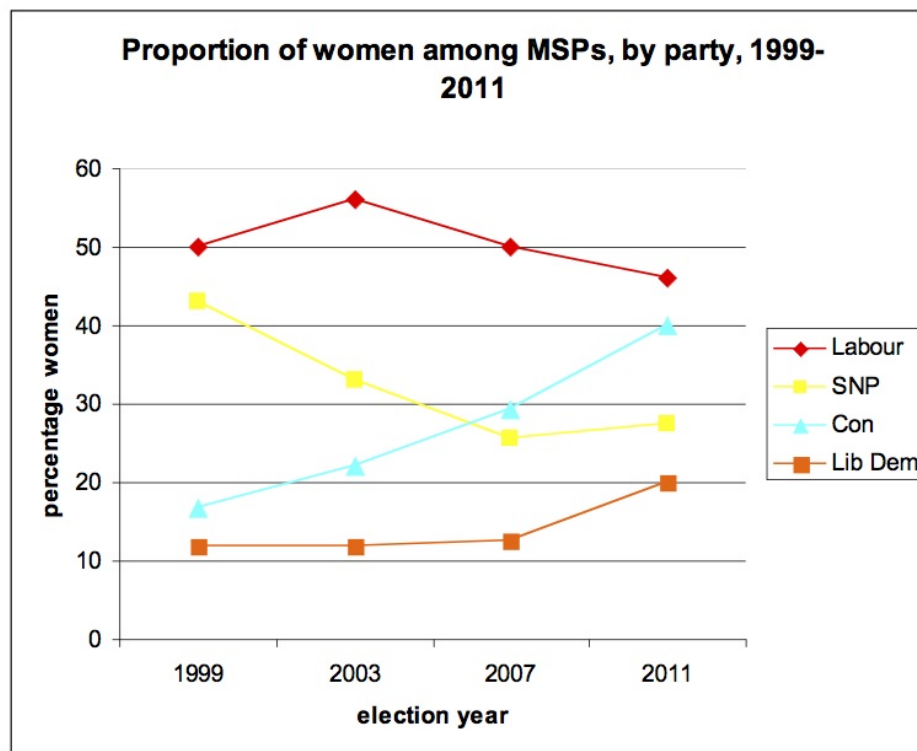
*Will Scotland continue its impressive record on gender representation? (Credit: Copytaker, CC by ND 2.0)*

relatively poor historical record on women's representation. To put the results in context, on 6 May 1999, more women were elected to the Scottish Parliament in one day than had been elected to represent Scotland in the House of Commons since 1918, when women were first eligible to stand for political office.

The election of Nordic levels of women MSPs in 1999 did not happen by accident, but was the result of a sustained struggle by a diverse coalition of women's organizations, grassroots activists, female trade unionists, party women and gender experts. Framing their demands within wider calls for a 'new politics' in Scotland, women working inside and outside the main political parties pushed for equal representation in the new parliament. In response to these pressures, Scottish Labour implemented gender quotas in the run-up to the 1999 elections – using a mechanism called 'twinning' in constituency seat contests as well as a placement policy on the regional lists – while its main electoral rival, the Scottish National Party, implemented informal measures which ensured that female candidates were placed in favourable list positions. These measures had a clear impact on headline figures: notably, women made up 50% of Scottish Labour MSPs and 42.9% of SNP MSPs elected in 1999.

The subsequent 2003 elections resulted in a modest increase of the proportion of women in the Scottish Parliament, rising to 51 out of 129 MSPs (39.5%). Since this high point, however, the numbers have dropped. The 2007 Scottish Parliament elections resulted in a significant decrease in the number of women MSPs elected, dropping from 51 to 43 (33.3%). And while the recent 2011 elections represent a small improvement on 2007 – rising to 45 women MSPs (34.8%) – these results were set within [an overall pattern of decline in the number of female candidates selected](#).

After four successive elections to the Scottish Parliament, we can identify several key trends with regards to women's representation. First, as the figure below shows, patterns across the four main Scottish political parties point to either a stalling or falling in the number of women MSPs elected – in the case of Labour, the SNP and the Liberal Democrats – or to large percentage increases based on small numerical gains – in the case of the Conservatives. The high point in women's representation to date has been Scottish Labour at 56% (in 2003), while the worst record on women's representation has consistently been the Liberal Democrats (stagnating around 12% until 2011). While women are currently 20% of Liberal Democrat MSPs, this is due to the overall loss of seats for the party in 2011 and represents a numerical decrease from two women MSPs to one. Of particular note is the downward trajectory of the SNP. In 1999, the SNP's performance on women's representation closely matched Labour's, but since then the party has adopted no measures to promote women's representation (either formal or informal) and has been almost 20 percentage points behind its main competitor.



The second main trend is that the use of gender quotas by Scottish political parties has been relatively one-sided. Political parties can use a range of measures to counter obstacles to women's political participation, ranging from 'softer' measures such as special training, financial assistance, or informal targets, to 'harder' measures such as party or legislative quotas which secure places for aspiring women candidates. To date, Scottish Labour has been the only party to adopt strong quotas across all four elections. Since 1999, however, these have been measures aimed solely at the regional lists. These are 'low cost' measures for the party because, until 2011, Labour has gained the majority of its seats from the constituency contests. As such, Labour's strong performance on women MSPs over time has been largely due to incumbency – that is, women selected in 1999 under the twinning scheme successfully defending their constituency seats – rather than the active promotion of women's representation by the party.

What lessons can we learn from Scotland? First, guaranteeing women's equality through measures such as gender quotas works. As already highlighted, the considerable achievements of the Scottish Parliament on women's representation are largely the result of Scottish Labour's use of gender quotas and the SNP's use of informal measures in 1999. Yet, in heralding these historic gains, we must also remain attentive to the possibility for backlash and reversal. Since 1999, the issue of women's representation does not appear to have retained high salience for Scottish political parties, nor has it remained a prominent feature of inter-party competition. [Quotas have not 'caught on'](#) to the same extent since the initial elections, either across parties or across different political levels. At local level, for example, [the proportion of Scottish women councillors has flat-lined](#), hovering around 22% until 2012, when the numbers rose slightly to just over 24%.

What matters also is not just how many women candidates are selected, but whether they are placed in winnable seats or positions. Since 1999, there have been clear gendered patterns of candidate placement in Scottish Parliament elections, with women generally placed in lower positions on party lists and less likely to be selected to contest safe or winnable constituency seats. In 2011, for example, five prominent Scottish Labour women MSPs stepped down from constituency seats, but each was replaced by a male candidate. This highlights the crucial importance of quota implementation and enforcement. To deliver increases in women's political participation, quotas have to be well-designed, effectively implemented, and accompanied by strong sanctions for parties that do not comply. This has not been the case in Scotland where quotas and other equality measures have been inconsistently applied and unevenly enforced across parties post-1999, and where there have been few consequences for non-compliance with quota measures and candidate selection equal opportunities procedures more broadly.

These trends suggest that the Scottish Parliament's reputation on gender equality is 'in the balance', and that 1999 and 2003 may come to be seen as the 'high tide' of women's representation in Scotland. It seems increasingly unlikely at this point that the other Scottish parties (with the exception of the Greens) will follow Labour's lead and implement strong quotas that guarantee equality outcomes. This raises the question as to whether the time has come to consider statutory quotas in Scotland – that is legislation which requires parties to take positive action on women's representation – following the examples of countries like Spain, Belgium, France, and more recently the Republic of Ireland. Regardless, lessons from Scotland point to the need to avoid complacency, to keep counting women in parties and parliament, and to monitor achievements and gains – as without vigilance, gendered disparities in political participation and representation are likely to widen.

*Note: This post represents the views of the author, and not Democratic Audit. Please read our comments policy before posting.*

**Meryl Kenny** is Vice-Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Her current research focuses on gender, political parties, and candidate selection. She has published widely on women and Scottish politics, including her monograph *Gender and Political Recruitment* (Palgrave 2013), as well as ongoing collaborative research with Professor Fiona Mackay at the University of Edinburgh.



This post is part of Democratic Audit's **Gender and Democracy** series, which examines the different ways in which men and women experience democracy in the UK and explores how to achieve greater equality. To read more posts in this series [click here](#).

