The May 2010 general election substantially increased the number of women and ethnic minority MPs but the UK’s Parliament still does not reflect the diversity of its population. What, asks Judith Squires, can be done to increase the numbers of women and minorities in the House?

The diversity of the population. Only a handful of MPs identify themselves as disabled, two as lesbian and 15 as gay, while the record increases in BAME representation still leave us with just over 4 per cent representation as compared to about 8 per cent in the general population. Although the number of women in the current Parliament went up, the relatively small increase – from 128 (19.8 per cent) to 143 (22 per cent) – was viewed by many women’s organisations as derisory. The UK currently ranks joint 52nd in the international league table of women in national parliaments, alongside the Czech Republic, Eritrea, Latvia and Uzbekistan (www.ipu.org). This places the UK above the world average (which is 19 per cent), but leaves it significantly behind those countries topping the table with more than 40 per cent women in their lower (or single) house, including Rwanda, Sweden, South Africa, Cuba, Iceland, Netherlands and Finland.

Addressing Underrepresentation

Following the general election Nan Sloane, director at the Centre for Women and Democracy, argued that unless clear and effective steps were taken to rectify the underrepresentation of women it would take decades – if not centuries – to achieve parity. Similarly, in 2007 the Equalities Review suggested that at the current rate of change the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities would not be corrected until 2080, while the Fawcett Society calculated that it would be more than three centuries before Parliament represents Britain’s population of women from ethnic minorities. So what has led to increased levels of female and minority representation to date, and what steps might be taken to further improve on this in future?

There are a range of cultural and economic factors that have been shown to affect the level of women’s representation internationally, ranging from the level of secularism and the length of time that women have had the vote, to rates of female participation in paid employment and levels of state provision of childcare. Yet political factors, such as party ideology, electoral system and candidate selection rules, are clearly crucial. Internationally, higher levels of female representation have generally been secured within parties on the left, under proportional electoral systems, and where selection rules require that women are selected.

A Quota Solution?

In the past two decades gender quotas have been adopted by more than 100 countries globally. There are two main types of gender quota: party and legislative. Party quotas are measures that are adopted voluntarily by po-
litical parties to aim for a certain proportion of female candidates (usually 25–50 per cent). These measures govern either the composition of party lists (in countries with proportional representation electoral systems) or the selection of candidates (in countries with plurality systems).

Legislative quotas are mandatory provisions (enacted through reforms to electoral laws of constitutions) that apply to all parties. Party quotas were first adopted by social democratic parties in western Europe in the 1970s, whereas legislative quotas first appeared in the 1990s, largely in developing and post-conflict countries in Latin America and Africa, respectively.

Although it is possible to achieve high levels of women’s representation without quotas (as in Denmark and Finland), the adoption of quotas has led to dramatic increases in the percentage of women in Parliament in countries as diverse as Rwanda, Sweden, Argentina and Nepal. The implementation of party quotas has helped increase women’s representation to 41 per cent in the Netherlands and 40 per cent in Norway, and the use of legislative quotas has increased women’s representation to 39 per cent in both Costa Rica and Argentina (www.quotaproject.org).

During the last three decades there has been a significant increase in women’s parliamentary representation in states where proportional representation exists, but only modest increases through plurality/majority systems. Within Europe, where PR electoral systems are much more common than plurality/majority, the British first-past-the-post system and the French two-round system are known to work against women. In the UK, advocates of increased female and minority representation have favoured a move towards PR, but have generally focused their attention on changing the selection process within the current electoral system on the grounds that electoral reform was not high on the political agenda. As a result, the increases in female and minority representation achieved in the UK to date have largely been due to changes in party selection rules.

Variations in the UK political parties’ approaches to selection rules have resulted in significantly different levels of female and BAME representation. The Labour Party has the highest percentage of female MPs, at 31 per cent. Although the number of Labour women MPs fell from 94 to 81 following the election, the fall in the overall number of Labour MPs meant that there was a 4 per cent increase (see Figure 1). The number of Conservative women MPs rose significantly in 2010 from 18 to 49 (an increase from 9 per cent to 16 per cent). Although the number of Liberal Democrat women MPs fell from nine to seven (a decrease from 15 per cent to 12 per cent). In addition to the women elected for the main three parties, there was one woman elected for the Green Party, one for the SNP, one for Sinn Fein, one for the SDLP, one for the Alliance Party and one Independent. None of Plaid Cymru’s three MPs are women, nor any of the DUP’s eight.

Variation also exists across the parties in relation to levels of BAME representation. While the Lib Dems still have no BAME MPs, Labour have 16, up two, and the Conservatives have 11, up nine, after David Cameron made highly publicised gestures to show the party had changed, putting up 15 black and Asian candidates in safe or winnable seats. This variation in the level of female and minority representation across the parties is a reflection of the importance of party selection rules, and suggests that Theresa May (Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister for Women and Equalities) was correct to state, during parliamentary questions in June 2010, that ‘the first responsibility for ensuring diversity of representation rests with political parties’.

**Shortlists**

All-women shortlists are a good example of the way that selection rules can affect female and minority representation. In the early 1990s the Labour Party adopted a policy whereby a proportion of local parties were required to shortlist only women candidates for selection. The mechanism was applied in half the ‘winnable’ seats in 1993–96 and had dramatic results. The general election of May 1997 saw a record number of 120 women candidates elected, 101 for Labour (while just 13 were Conservative and three were Lib Dem). However, this policy was withdrawn in 1996 when an employment tribunal found that it was in breach of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, and uncertainty about the legal position following this led to the implementation of more limited policies to promote women candidates in the run-up to the 2001 general election. This situation was resolved in 2002 when The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 received Royal Assent, enabling political parties to take positive action to reduce inequality in the numbers of men and women, though it does

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**FIGURE 1** Women elected in UK general elections since 1945

Source: http://www.ukpolitical.info/FemaleMPs.htm

Quotas have led to dramatic increases in female representation in countries as diverse as Rwanda, Sweden, Argentina and Nepal.
not require parties to do this if they do not wish to.

The first black and ethnic minority MP was elected in 1895 (Mancherjee Bhownaggree, Conservative Member for Bethnal Green North-East). This was followed by the election of four BAME Labour MPs in 1987: Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington), Paul Boateng (Brent South), Bernie Grant (Tottenham) and Keith Vaz (Leicester East). The total number of ethnic minority MPs rose to six in 1992 (with five Labour and one Conservative), nine in 1997, 12 in 2001 (all from the Labour Party) and 14 in 2005 (12 Labour and two Conservative). This number rose in 2010 to 27 (16 Labour and 11 Conservative).

The Labour Party also uses quotas to ensure that there is always at least one BAME candidate on every shortlist, and where an all-women shortlist is being used there must be at least one BAME woman candidate. By contrast, the Liberal Democrats have consistently opposed all-women shortlists and Nick Clegg recently suggested that the problem was not the selection process as such, but the fact that not enough women were coming forward in the first place. Although they placed women in 40 per cent of the ‘winnable seats’ prior to the 2005 election and used a quota system at the shortlisting stage of selection prior to the 2010 election, the drop in levels of female representation in the Lib Dems parliamentary party suggests that they may need to review their selection rules again. The Conservative Party altered its selection process in 2005, introducing a ‘priority A list’ designed to increase dramatically the number of women and minority Conservative MPs by ensuring that women made up half the list and that it comprised a ‘significant proportion’ of ethnic minority and disabled candidates.

Next Steps

A range of actions that might increase female and minority representation was considered in some detail just prior to the general election by the Speaker’s Conference, which was established to address constitutional issues that require a cross-party solution. Its recommendations included education and outreach programmes, the appointment of diversity champions by political parties, the creation of a ring-fenced scheme to support disabled parliamentary candidates, making diversity awareness training available to members of selection panels, flexible working patterns and pastoral care for candidates. The Speaker’s Conference strongly supported the proposed extension of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to enable the use of all-women shortlists until 2030 and proposed that equivalent enabling legislation should be enacted to allow political parties, if they so choose, to use all-BAME shortlists. The Conference also recommended the publication of monitoring data in relation to candidate selection and regular statements from political parties on progress.

In response all three parties indicated that they were supportive of the extension of the 2002 Act until 2030 and Labour and the Liberal Democrats were supportive of the proposal that equivalent enabling legislation should be enacted to allow political parties to use all-BAME shortlists. In its formal response to the Speaker’s Conference the government indicated that it would extend the use of women-only electoral shortlists to 2030, and the provisions in the Equality Act, which came into force on 1 October, mean that political parties will now be able to reserve places on electoral shortlists for those with a protected characteristic, such as race, that is underrepresented in politics.

Interestingly, given that comparative research shows the importance of electoral systems to levels of female and minority representation, the Speaker’s Conference did not consider electoral reform. Yet such reform is now firmly on the political agenda: the Voting and Parliamentary Reform Bill, considered in Parliament on 2 September, includes proposals to hold a referendum on the use of the alternative vote (AV) at general elections, a reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600 through boundary changes and the establishment of fixed-term parliaments of five years.

Although it could offer opportunities to introduce new positive action measures to improve the diversity of Parliament, the Bill is not framed to address female or minority underrepresentation and is currently unlikely to do so. For example, a reduction in the number of MPs could squeeze out new MPs in favour of established predominantly white, male MPs. A switch from first-past-the-post to the AV system would preserve the one-member-one-constituency feature of the first-past-the-post system, notwithstanding the fact that multi-member constituencies are far more conducive to female and minority representation. For this reason the Fawcett Society has proposed that an equality impact assessment be undertaken in relation to the proposals in the Bill.

Conclusion

It is widely accepted by our political leaders that we do need to do more to address underrepresentation. All three main political parties express a commitment to the improved representation of women and minorities, but have significantly different track records in relation to actual diversity among their MPs, and support differing mechanisms to enhance their representation in future. A brief review of the strategies adopted in relation to female and BAME representation in the UK to date suggests that the selection rules adopted by political parties are crucial. This is supported by comparative data, which show that the adoption of gender quotas has facilitated significant increases in the representation of women internationally.

The extension of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to enable the use of all-women shortlists until 2030 should therefore make a difference in relation to gender, if all parties choose to make use of the mechanisms it allows. The positive action provisions within the Equality Act should also allow political parties to reserve places on electoral shortlists for BAME candidates. These are positive developments, which should allow parties to use their selection rules to further increase female and minority representation.

Comparative research also indicates that electoral systems influence levels of female and minority representation, with proportional representation systems and multi-member constituencies tending to generate more diverse parliaments than those with plurality systems and single-member constituencies. At a time when the Voting and Parliamentary Reform Bill is under consideration the likely impact of any electoral reform on female and minority representation should also be reviewed.

References


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