

GENDER AND DIGITAL POLITICS

Freddy Fallon, Andy Williamson & Mark Pack

The majority of the population – and the electorate – is female. There are female majorities in some areas of politics, including two out of the three audiences for TV debates in the 2010 general election (54.5% on ITV and 52.5% on the BBC).¹ However, at the elected office level, politics is male dominated and comments have often been made about intermediate levels of political involvement, such as political blogging, being male dominated.

This paper looks to bring together some of the existing evidence, along with providing some new evidence specifically related to blogging and commenting on blogs. We first review overall levels of internet access and activity, finding generally similar levels across the genders. When it comes to discussing politics, there is some evidence of male predominance, though this may partly be down to how 'politics' is defined and where politics is considered to take place.

When it comes to more active online political participation, such as writing blog posts or commenting on blogs, the figures are usually male dominated. However, this mirrors other offline and non-political activities such as the gender of those who write letters to newspapers for publication. Overall the evidence for online politics suggests that the more an activity involves self-promotion,

expounding your views to others or the risk of conflict then the more likely there is to be a male dominance.

The Gender Balance Online

Broadly speaking, access to the internet is well balanced between genders; the Office for National Statistics reports² that 84% of men had used the internet compared with 79% of women. Eighty-one per cent of men say that they use the internet every day or almost every day, and so do 76% of women. And in terms of how we use the internet on a regular basis, there is little difference reported between genders either. When it comes to blogs and social networks, 44% of men and 42% of women said that they had posted messages on chat sites, social networks or blogs. Looking at content consumption, 56% of men have read or downloaded online news, newspapers or magazines compared to 46% of women but the trend is reversed when it comes to content creation; 40% of women uploaded self-created content to be shared compared with 36% of men. A recent study of Facebook users in the US showed that 61.1% were women and 38.9% male.³

Online Political Activity

There is also evidence to suggest that women are discussing politics online in places that would traditionally have been perceived as non-political. Mumsnet, which is dedicated to sharing information

¹ D. Wring, R. Mortimer & S. Atkinson (2011). *Political Communication in Britain: The Leader's Debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).

² ONS (2010). *Statistical Bulletin: Internet Access 2010* (London: Office for National Statistics).

³ S.C. Watkins & H.E. Lee (2010). *Got Facebook?: Investigating What's Social About Social Media* (Austin: University of Texas).

and tips on parenting, has a campaigning focus, lobbying government and private companies on a variety of issues. This site has blogs from female contributors, and features a talk section, where users are able to discuss issues such as childcare, children's

online political activity is largely skewed towards men. We looked at contributions to the Liberal Democrats' Lib Dem Voice blog up to the end of November 2010 and this shows that 79% of blog posts were written by men. Of the 11,696 comments analysed on Lib

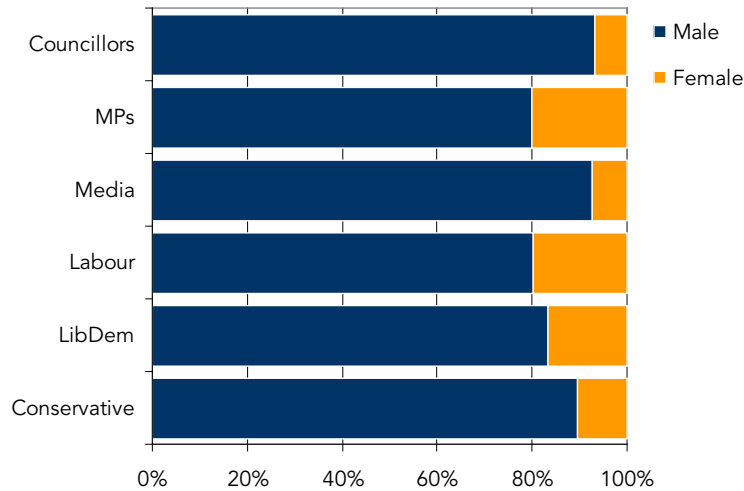


Figure 1: Total Politics Blog Awards 2010 entrants by gender

food and education, lifestyle issues, health and politics. As of July 2011, Mumsnet has a number of active discussions around the public sector pensions, the NHS, EU and Margaret Thatcher's refusal to meet Sarah Palin, all political issues.

Dem Voice, just 10% (1,157) were written by women. More passively, the Lib Dem Voice Facebook fan page had 4,268 fans, of which 37% were identifiable as women and 60% men.

When it comes to politics, data from the 2010 British Election Study shows that 73% of men had used the internet 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal' to view news, political material or discussion during the 2010 general election campaign. This compared to 64% of women.⁴ Other data supports the argument that

So, when it comes to general online activity, we see that men and women are fairly evenly balanced; men are slightly more likely to download or read newspapers online, women more likely to create content. This follows the general patterns that we would expect to see reflecting that women are more likely to network and men more likely to consume.

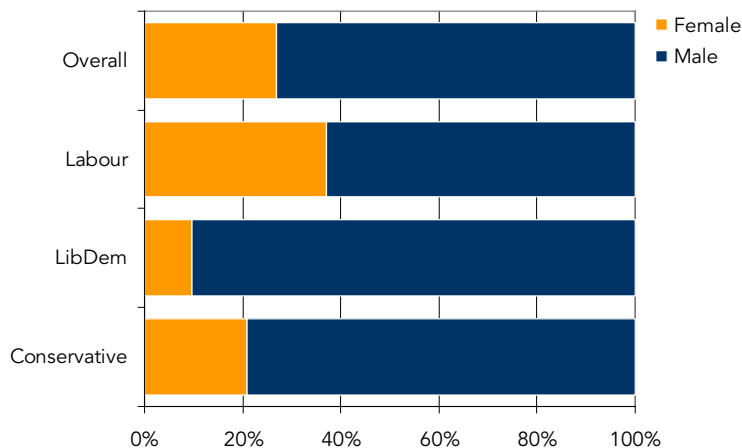


Figure 2: MPs on Twitter by party and gender

4 British Election Study (2010). CSES Internet Survey. Retrieved 09-Nov-2010 from bes.utdallas.edu/2009/bes-data.php

We start to see a slight difference creeping in around digital media use at the last general election and this is a trend that starts to accelerate as we go further into the world of digital politics. Eighty-five per cent of individual blogs featuring in Total Politics' Political Blog Awards for 2010⁵ were written by men, just 15% by women (see figure 1). Any way you slice this data, it's male-dominated; 80% of MPs' blogs are by men, as are 85% from the political media and 93% from councillors. Of the parties, only 9% of Conservative bloggers are women, figures that rise slightly to 13% for the Liberal Democrats and 17% for Labour. Fairing slightly better, Lords of the Blog⁶, a project that we run with the House of Lords, has a blogging ratio of about 2:1. Looking now at MPs, when we analysed how they used the internet two years ago we found

This points to an interesting pattern that is explored further in Table 1. When we break down the composition of Parliament by gender we see a roughly similar trend in terms of gender balance as we see in the world of digital politics. When we drill down within these numbers what we see is quite surprising; the balance starts to draw closer to New Zealand's Parliament (which traditionally has a closer gender balance than the UK). We can see that almost half of Labour's women MPs tweet, slightly more than the 45% of their male counterparts, and, at 41%, Conservative women MPs are much more likely to be tweeters than men. Only the Liberal Democrats retain the bias in favour of men, although given that they have only seven women MPs the overall numbers are also a lot lower.

Table 1: MPs on Twitter by Gender, party and representation in Parliament

	Women				Men			
	MPs		On Twitter		MPs		On Twitter	
	n=	%age	n=	%age	n=	%age	n=	%age
Conservative	49	16%	20	41%	257	84%	76	30%
Liberal Democrat	7	12%	3	43%	50	88%	28	56%
Labour	82	32%	40	49%	175	68%	78	45%

that it was a business as usual tool and we found a significant uptake in social media applications and little gender difference other than in two areas; first, men were far more likely to blog (reflecting the trend above) and women were more likely to use social networking tools (echoed in the general finding above about content uploading).⁷ When we conducted this research, only one MP was using Twitter, in two years this situation has changed quite dramatically.

As Figure 2 shows, by late 2010, over 230 MPs were signed up for Twitter with, again, male MPs being far more prominent than their female counterparts; 79% of Conservatives, 90% of Liberal Democrats and 63% of Labour MPs on Twitter were men.⁸ It does, however, show a slight positive shift for women using this medium compared to blogging, a trend emphasised when we looked at New Zealand MPs, where 53% of MPs who use Twitter are women.⁹

5 Total Politics Blog Awards (2010). Retrieved 15-Feb-2011 from www.totalpolitics.com/blog/hub/blog-awards/148272/-total-politics-blog-awards-2010.shtml

6 See: lordsoftheblog.net

7 A. Williamson (2009). *MPs online: Communicating with constituents*. London: Hansard Society

8 See: tweetminster.co.uk/mps

9 C. Busby & P. Bellamy (2011). *Briefing paper: New Zealand Parliamentarians and Online Social Media* (Wellington: New Zealand Parliamentary Library).

Recent Hansard Society research also suggests that of those in the new intake of MPs, women seem slightly more active in using social media for their work, with 55% of new female MPs using Twitter, compared with 50% of new male MPs.¹⁰

Moving Offline

So far we have seen there is a reasonable gender balance for internet use but that this balance shifts markedly when it comes to political activity, with commenting on political blogs lying at one extreme of the continuum as a male-dominated activity (the opposing end being the uploading of content to social media applications). However it is naïve at this point to claim that the internet is a barrier to equal participation in politics, indeed the data around the use of Twitter suggests that, in some forms, it might in fact be a moderate enabler. To see this picture in context, we need to look at overall participation in offline political activities by gender.

10 R. Fox & M. Korris (2011). *Briefing Paper: A year in the life*. (London: Hansard Society).

Only 22% of the MPs elected in May 2010 were women (144 out of 650), which is in proportion with the balance of male and female MPs on Twitter. It also reflects the gender balance in terms of candidates standing in the 2010 general election, again 22% were women. Looking beyond Parliament to the public's interest in politics, our most recent Audit of Political Engagement shows 63% of men are interested in politics compared with only 53% of women. Forty-seven per cent of men say that they have discussed politics in the last two or three years, compared with 37% of women.¹¹

Sixty-two per cent of men feel that they are knowledgeable about politics compared with 42% of women (although an element of this difference will lie in the respondents' self assessment of their own knowledge, something we see repeated in other surveys around political knowledge). Certainty to vote is much more evenly balanced; 59% of women are certain to vote at the next election compared with 57% of men. The same is true for signing a petition, which had been done by 40% of men and 42% of women in the last two or three years. It

11 Hansard Society (2011), Audit of Political Engagement 8 (London: Hansard Society).

seems, therefore, that a factor in the varying levels of gendered online political participation is the nature of that political participation itself and that this is reflected both online and offline. Supporting this theory the Electoral Commission's research shows that women are as or more likely to participate in cause-oriented activities, such as signing petitions and boycotting products, whilst men are more active in campaign politics across all activities, such as party membership and contacting politicians.¹²

Summary

The balance between men and women decreases as the inherent level of contention or potential for conflict rises; women are marginally more likely to sign a petition (a passive process) but considerably less likely to stand for Parliament and significantly less likely to make comments on a political blog. This brief study suggests that gender imbalance online is the result of wider political exclusion, not digital exclusion and, where women are active in politics, they are equally as likely as their male counterparts to be digitally active.

12 Electoral Commission (2004) Gender and political participation (London: Electoral Commission).

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