

Who Runs for Office? Understanding Candidate Diversity, Safety and Localism in the UK General Election 2024

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Abstract

A record number of candidates contested parliamentary seats in the 2024 general election in the United Kingdom. This article discusses three key aspects that have garnered attention from both academics and practitioners studying the characteristics, motivations and experiences of candidates: gender representation, security concerns and local residency. Candidate data shows that, despite an increase in female MPs, the overall number of female candidates declined, highlighting structural barriers within party selection processes. Second, the rise in harassment, abuse and intimidation has led many candidates, particularly women, to withhold their home addresses on ballot papers, impacting their perceived local connection to voters. Finally, while localism remains a valued asset for candidates, security concerns diminish its role in contemporary campaigns. Challenges for future elections remain for political parties to address gender imbalances during the selection process, enhance candidate safety and reconsider local engagement strategies to foster a more inclusive and connected political landscape.

Keywords: candidate diversity, political representation, gender representation, harassment, abuse and intimidation, localism, security, SOPNs

Introduction

FOR DEMOCRACY TO WORK, people must come forward to stand for election. In the UK general election of 2024, a record number of people did just that: 4,515 candidates stood for election in 650 constituencies, breaking the previous record of 4,150 who stood in 2010. While information on the background of MPs is the subject of immediate scrutiny after an election, comparatively little is known about the pool of candidates from whom the MPs are drawn.¹ Yet, candidates play a vital role in elections, shaping the choices available to voters. Studying who runs for office sheds light on the diversity or lack thereof in political representation.

In this article, three key aspects are examined that have garnered attention from both

academics and practitioners studying the characteristics, motivations and experiences of candidates during the 2024 general election. First, the descriptive representation of women among parliamentary candidates is examined. Second, the issue of harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) in politics is explored by looking into the publication of home addresses. Finally, the issue of localism is reviewed and its implications for vote choice in Britain. The evidence presented here illustrates a complex political landscape where security concerns impact gender representation and the decision not to publish the home address of the candidate. The latter prevents candidates from communicating their localness to voters, breaking a fundamental link between the candidate and the people they seek to represent. These findings highlight the need for political parties to address security concerns through proactive measures to ensure a safer and more inclusive political environment.

¹E. Holt-White, *Parliamentary Privilege 2024: Educational Background of the New House of Commons*, The Sutton Trust, 2024; <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/parliamentary-privilege-2024/>.

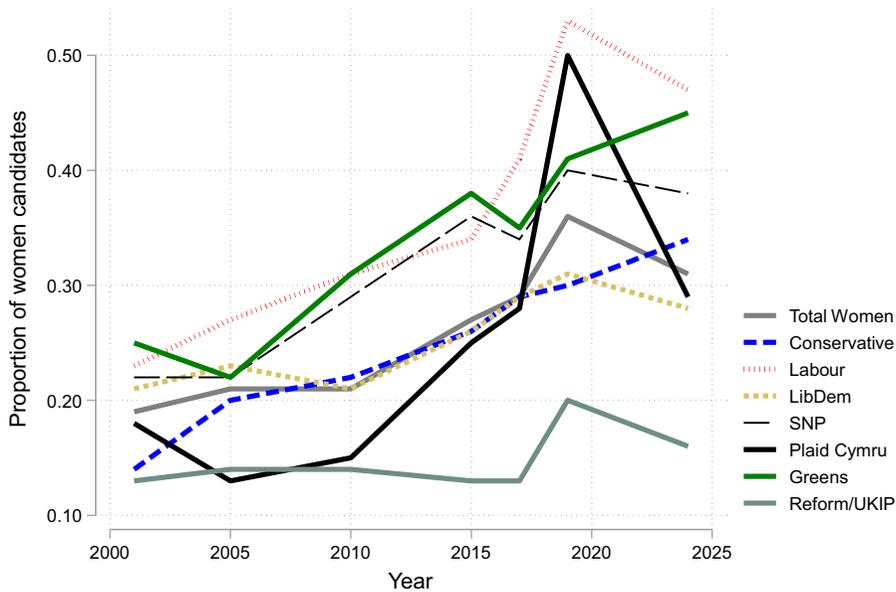


Figure 1: Change over time in the proportion of women candidates

Women candidates 2001–2024

In 2024, a record number of female MPs were elected—263, representing 40 per cent of all MPs—continuing a steady increase in the share of female MPs over the past two decades.² However, when looking at candidates overall, 2024 saw a decline in the number of women standing for Parliament. This inconsistency may indicate systemic barriers within political parties or candidate selection processes that need to be addressed to sustain or increase gender representation.

Compiling the share of female candidates for all major parties from 2001 to 2024, Figure 1 shows that the proportion of women candidates increased steadily (although at different levels) in most parties, but the upward trend stopped in 2024.³ Except among Conservative and Green Party candidates, all other major parties experienced a slight decline in

the number of women candidates. While Labour tops the list of parties with the highest share of women candidates, UKIP and their successor parties, the Brexit Party and Reform UK, find themselves at the bottom of the list. Until 2017, UKIP had about 13–14 per cent of women candidates. Since then, the Brexit Party and Reform UK have slightly increased the proportion of women, but men still dominate to an extent common among the other parties more than twenty years ago.

Thus, it can be said that the recent increase in the number of women MPs is not a result of more women running for office. Instead, it is linked to Labour's election victory, as the party fielded the highest proportion of female candidates. Additionally, many women contested winnable seats, giving them a better chance of being elected compared to female candidates from other parties.

Historically, the percentage of female candidates running for a party was higher than the percentage of those elected because parties tended to nominate them to stand in unwinnable seats. This trend began to shift for Labour in the 2010s—particularly in 2015—when a higher proportion of female candidates successfully won seats. However, the Conservative Party has never achieved a positive balance in this regard, with 2024 continuing the

²G. Allen, '2024 general election: how many women were elected?', House of Commons Library, 6 August 2024; <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/2024-general-election-how-many-women-were-elected/>.

³W. Rüdiger, 'Out of touch and out of time? A cross-temporal and cross-level analysis of the social and ideological distance between UK voters and political elites', ESRC-funded project, ES/R003785/1.

pattern: 24 per cent of Conservative MPs are women compared to 34 per cent of their candidates, raising concerns about how committed the party is to closing the gap in gender representation and selecting women in winnable seats.

The share of women elected versus the share of women candidates indicates that the main barrier to closing the gender gap is not coming from voters, but from within parties (especially a certain few). Ceri Fowler and Chris Hanretty's analysis of declared candidacies and a pre-election Suration poll predicted that 266 women MPs would be elected, a prediction close to the actual figure of 263.⁴ Fowler and Hanretty also indicated that the share of women MPs could have been higher if late selections had not favoured male candidates.

Further research is needed to examine how the 2024 selection process impacted the representation of women in Parliament. The use of all-women shortlists (AWS) clearly played a significant role in increasing the number of female Labour candidates in the past. As shown in Figure 1 above, 50 per cent of Labour candidates were female in 2019, with reports suggesting that Labour was worried about the legal basis of AWS in 2024 because of its success.⁵ In 2024, their abolition likely contributed to the decrease in women candidates. A key question is whether AWS were effective in changing party cultures or if the removal of such measures will lead to a continued setback in women's representation.

The 2024 general election shows that, to sustain and advance women's representation, political parties must prioritise selecting female candidates for winnable seats and consider mechanisms that promote gender balance in candidate selection. Without proactive measures, the gains made over the past two decades could stall, risking the under-

representation of women in Parliament. Addressing structural barriers within party selection processes is crucial to ensuring long-lasting change.

Safety concerns 2010–2024: to publish or not to publish home addresses?

Concerns about MP security have long existed, but the murders of MPs Jo Cox in 2016 and Sir David Amess in 2021—along with widespread reports of harassment during the 2017 and 2019 general elections—brought the issue to the forefront of the political agenda. Survey-based research revealed an 11 percentage point increase in candidates experiencing HAI between 2017 and 2019.⁶ Several reports suggest that HAI remained a significant issue during the 2024 campaign.⁷ Although there is insufficient systematic survey data on HAI for 2024, one clear indicator of increased security concerns among candidates is the sharp decline in candidates willing to publish their home addresses on the ballot paper.

Since 1872, election candidates in the UK have been required to publish their home addresses on nomination and ballot papers. For more than a century, this practice was largely accepted as a measure of transparency in democratic elections. However, concerns about security began to surface in the 1980s, with some MPs fearing that publishing their

⁶S. Collignon, R. Campbell and W. Rüdiger, 'The gendered harassment of parliamentary candidates in the UK', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 1, 2022, pp. 32–38; <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1467-923X.13070>

⁷H. Al-Othman, 'Female election candidates report increasing abuse', *The Guardian*, 14 June 2024; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/14/abuse-female-election-candidates-getting-worse-uk-targeted>; E. Lawson, 'Female MPs call harassment an assault on democracy', *BBC News*, 5 July 2024; <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4ng3j1pnpqo>; E. Courea, 'Deluge of abuse sent on X to prominent UK politicians in election period', *The Guardian*, 9 September 2024; <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/sep/09/abuse-x-uk-politicians-election-period>; G. Scott, 'Home secretary vows to tackle "alarming rise" in threats to MPs', *Times*, 15 July 2024; <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/cooper-condemns-alarming-rise-in-threats-to-mps-k3qvzbs70>.

⁴C. Fowler and C. Hanretty, 'The 2024 parliament is likely to have a record-breaking number of women MPs', *Suration*, 2024; <https://www.suration.com/the-2024-parliament-is-likely-to-have-a-record-breaking-number-of-women-mps/>.

⁵M. Jones, 'Without all-women shortlists, can Labour maintain gender balance among its MPs?', *The House, Politics Home*, 8 March 2021; <https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/without-allwomen-shortlists-labour-maintain-gender-balance-among-mps>.

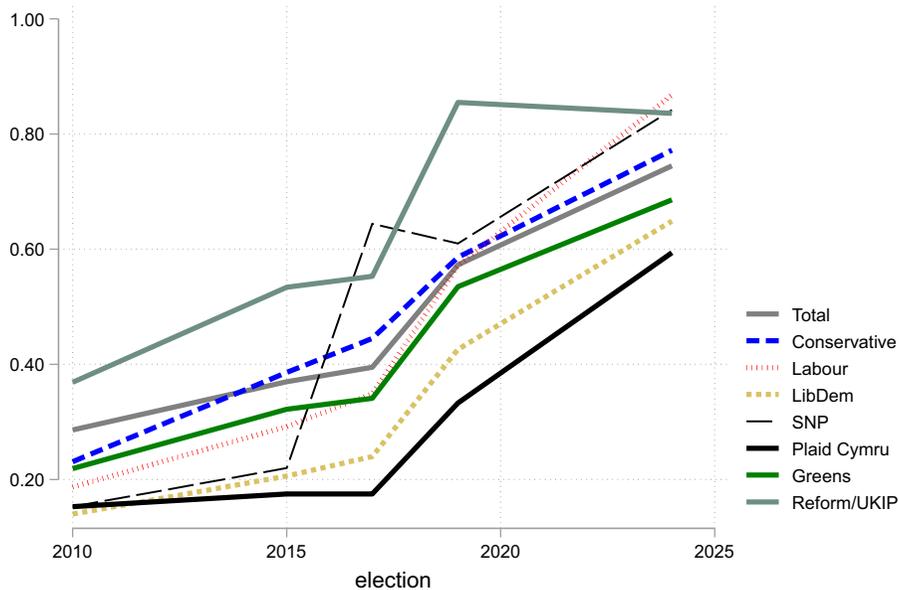


Figure 2: Proportion of candidates not publishing their home addresses

addresses could expose them to verbal abuse and physical harm. In 2008, Julian Lewis MP raised similar security concerns, leading to a government consultation and a subsequent change in electoral law. This change allowed candidates in general elections to choose whether to publish their home addresses or instead display the name of their constituency.⁸

To investigate how security concerns have evolved over time, all the statements of persons nominated (SOPNs) published by returning officers were processed. Figure 2 shows the share of the candidates for the major parties who decided not to publish their home address. The new rule allowing candidates to choose whether to publish their home address was first implemented in the 2010 general election; about a quarter of candidates opted not to publish their addresses. By 2024, three quarters of candidates decided against disclosing this information, supporting the notion that HAI has been a major concern for politicians in recent years. Female candidates were more likely to withhold their address than male

candidates, indicating that they are more concerned about their security than their male counterparts.

There are some interesting party differences over time. UKIP (as well as the Brexit Party and Reform UK) candidates are consistently more likely than candidates of other parties to withhold their home addresses. Green Party candidates are consistently more likely than other party candidates to publish their addresses. SNP candidates in 2010 and 2015 had low shares of candidates who withheld their home addresses. However, this changed dramatically in 2017 when almost two thirds of candidate withheld their addresses. A new height was reached in 2024, with 84 per cent not releasing their addresses.

Figure 3 shows the differences between men and women in their decision to publish their home addresses. Women are less likely to publish their home addresses in the SOPNs and this trend has been consistent over time. In 2010, 73 per cent of men and 66 per cent of women published their home addresses. By 2024, only 30 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women did so.

Figures 2 and 3 also shows that, after the murder of Jo Cox MP in 2016, men and women candidates from all parties became more concerned about their security. Since then, the

⁸I. White, 'Candidates' addresses on the ballot paper', House of Commons Library, 16 March 2009; <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05004/>.

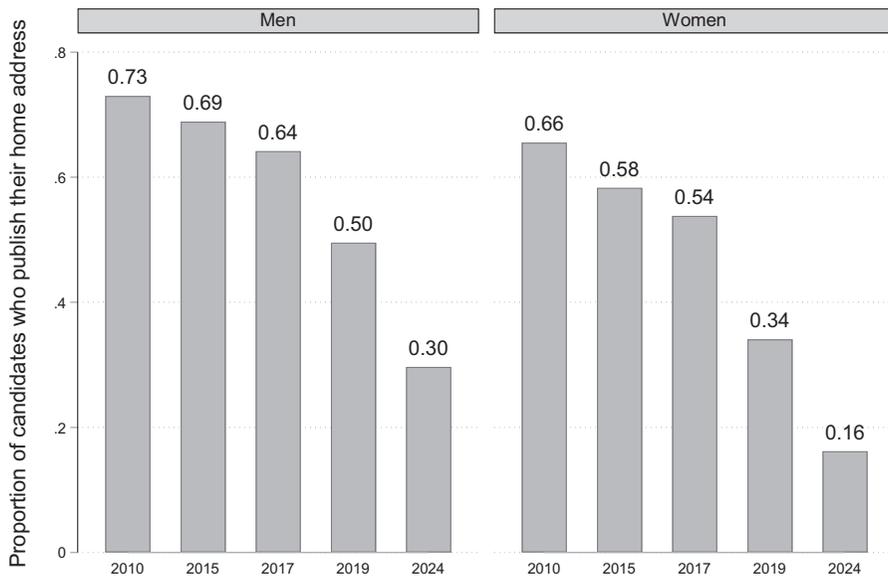


Figure 3: Proportion of men and women who publish their home address in the SOPNs

Committee on Standards in Public Life has launched an inquiry and there has been more awareness among parties and other stakeholders of security protocols. Yet, judging by the time trends shown in the graphs, candidates' safety concerns have not been alleviated.

What does the lack of publication of home addresses demonstrate about candidates' security concerns? While waiting for the results of the 2024 candidates survey, it seems likely that the high share of candidates deciding not to publish their home address reflects an increasing sense of insecurity. This notion is supported by previous candidate surveys, where candidates were asked about their decision on the issue of publication of home addresses.⁹ For those withholding the address, concerns about security for them and their families was the most important factor for doing so.

Previous analyses of the behaviour of candidates who experienced harassment show that they tend to change their campaigning behaviour, avoiding activities that involve face-to-face contact with voters, such as canvassing.¹⁰ A troubling increase in feelings of

insecurity threatens to weaken the link between voters and their representatives, political participation and representation. To create a safer and more inclusive political environment, parties must provide more support for candidates and launch public awareness initiatives promoting respectful discourse.

Does localism play a role in candidate selection?

Conflicts between local party members and party headquarters over the selection of 'local' versus 'outsider' candidates have long been a feature of UK selection processes. This issue resurfaced in the lead-up to the 2024 election, with Labour and the Conservatives facing accusations of 'parachuting' in candidates and overriding local preferences.¹¹ This is

harassment, abuse and intimidation towards parliamentary candidates in the UK', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2021, pp. 429–449.

¹¹E. Malnick, 'Tory HQ "parachuting Sunak allies into safe seats"', *Telegraph*, 27 May 2023; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/05/27/tory-safe-seats-rishi-sunak-allies-favoured/>; C. H. Jones, 'Labour criticised for "parachuting" in candidate', *BBC News*, 31 May 2024; <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cw993v797ggo>.

⁹R. Campbell, 'The representative audit of Britain', ESRC-funded project, ES/L016508/1.

¹⁰S. Collignon and W. Rüdiger, 'Increasing the cost of female representation? The gendered effects of

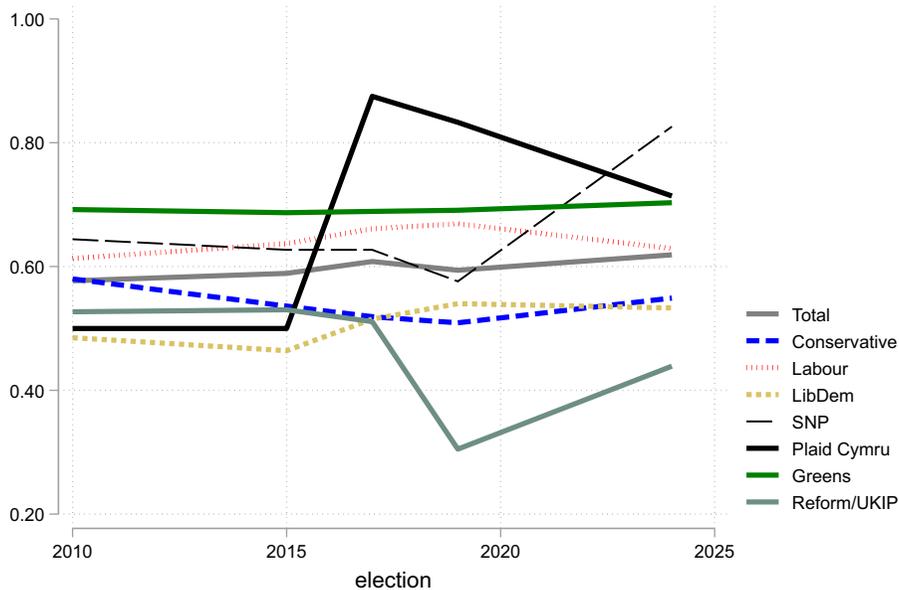


Figure 4: Proportion of local candidates in each election, 2010–2024

despite research showing that local residence—defined as the candidate living in the constituency at the time of selection—constitutes the strongest predictor of successful election.¹² Thus, local candidates seem to have an electoral advantage compared with non-local candidates. Given this evidence, one might expect that political parties would have a higher preference for the local links of candidates in their selection processes.

However, there is little evidence that there has been any major change over time in the proportion of candidates that are considered ‘local’. Figure 4 shows the share of candidates who live in the constituency in which they

stand according to the information they provide on the SOPN by returning officers. The postcode or constituency when listed by the candidate was used or the council area provided depending on which was provided. If the candidate acted as their own election agent, the home address published as part of the notification process was used. It is possible that some candidates move to a constituency some time before the election and, therefore, there is not the information about the extent or deepness of their local connections. In any case, the overall picture is one of stability, with around 60 per cent of all candidates living in the constituency in which they stood in elections since 2010. For the two major parties, there is very little change over time. Since 2015, the share of Conservative candidates living in the constituency in which they stand is slightly lower than the overall average. Labour candidates are consistently more local than candidates from other mayor parties. Regarding gender, women were less likely to live in the constituency where they stand in 2010—59 per cent of men and 54 per cent of women, $p < =0.05$ —but, since then, the differences have been consistently not significant (in 2024, 62 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women indicated that they live in the constituency). One possible explanation

¹²K. Arzheimer and J. Evans, ‘Candidate geolocation and voter choice in the 2013 English county council elections’, *Research & Politics*, vol. 1 no. 2, 2014; C. Butler, M. Miori and R. Ford, ‘Inside the “secret garden”: candidate selection at the 2019 UK general election’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, September 2024; <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241270519>; S. Collignon and J. Sajuria, ‘Local means local, does it? Regional identification and preferences for local candidates’, *Electoral Studies*, vol. 56, 2018, pp. 170–178; P. Cowley and R. Campbell, ‘What voters want: reactions to candidate characteristics in a survey experiment’, *Political Studies*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2014, pp. 745–765.

is that localism is a constant factor in the selection process which has not seen any major change over time and that claims of ‘parachuting’ have been exaggerated, as are claims that candidates are now more local than they used to be, to the detriment of politics.¹³

For the electoral bonus of localism to be realised, candidates must be able to communicate their ‘local’ standing to the electorate. Kai Arzheimer and Jocelyn Evans showed for the 2010 general election that the distance between the residence of the voter and the candidates is an important factor shaping voters’ choice as they are more likely to vote for a candidate who lives closest to them. Therefore, the ballot paper showing the candidate’s address used to be one way of signalling ‘localness’ to voters. The aforementioned removal of the requirement for the home address to be published on the ballot paper removes one key way to communicate with voters and thus to take advantage of any local bonus. With only 23 per cent of Conservative and 13 per cent of Labour candidates in 2024 allowing their home address to appear on the ballot paper, it appears unlikely that many local candidates could take the electoral advantage. If this trend continues, localism might lose its influence in British electoral politics.

Conclusions

The study of candidates standing in the 2024 general election highlights significant trends shaping political representation in the UK, particularly around gender equity, localism and the growing challenges posed by HAI. While it is undeniable that progress has been made with regards to the descriptive representation of women in Parliament, there was a decline in the total number of women candidates. The 2024 election marked the abolition of AWS in the Labour Party and other main parties have not reached gender parity in candidacy. This raises concerns about potential

setbacks and emphasises the need for structural reforms within party selection processes to ensure gender balance in the candidate pool.

The reluctance of candidates—particularly women—to publish their home addresses reflects a growing sense of insecurity, posing barriers to political participation and representation. This trend not only affects the personal safety of candidates, but also influences broader electoral dynamics such as the perceived disconnect between politicians and the electorate. Moreover, security concerns drive the decision of men and women candidates to remove home addresses from ballot papers, diminishing the ability to communicate ‘localness’ to voters, potentially reducing the influence of localism in elections.

Challenges for future elections remain. Parties should audit their structures, policies, culture and practices to identify barriers to gender balance and inclusion. They should include recommendations to improve them, starting from a serious reflection of the selection process and how they can work with selectors to ensure diversity in the candidate pool. In the absence of AWS, this could include setting specific diversity targets for candidate selection panels and providing training for selectors to recognise and mitigate biases in their decision-making processes. Additionally, parties should prioritise creating safe and supportive environments for candidates by establishing clear protocols for reporting and addressing HAI, both online and offline. Training sessions on digital safety, personal security, positive communication and conflict defusing should be mandatory for all candidates. Furthermore, political parties can enhance local engagement to ensure community participation. This may help candidates have robust local support networks, potentially opening a new avenue to express ‘localness’.

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¹³A. Gimson and P. Goodman, ‘Interview: Crick on the “purge” in candidate selections of the Labour left, and the threat to democracy posed by localism’, *conservativehome*, 15 March 2023; <https://conservativehome.com/2023/03/15/interview-crick-on-the-purge-in-candidate-selections-of-the-labour-left-and-the-threat-to-democracy-posed-by-localism/>.