



Women's Hour?

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When the Women's Coalition faced the results of the count following the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly election, it was a bitter pill to have to swallow. After five years of on/off participation in devolved government and a relatively high profile during that period it seemed that this was a fundamental setback for the participation of women in politics in Northern Ireland. But was it the polarisation of the electorate and a return to sectarian politics that squeezed out the Women's Coalition or was there also a reluctance on the part of voters to continue to support such an upfront 'women's' party in the midst of Northern Ireland politics? The 2002 **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** included a module of questions looking at public attitudes to women in politics. Here we examine some of the fundamental questions

raised by the 2003 election results and take stock of public perceptions of women as political candidates and representatives.

Do women make things better?

One of the key questions put to respondents goes directly to the heart of the matter – did respondents feel that the greater number of women involved in politics since the beginning of the Assembly had made things better or worse in Northern Ireland politics? About 44% of respondents sat on the fence on this question, 14% thought that it had made things worse and 41% thought it had made things better. A good result for those women on the face of it, but perhaps not a ringing endorsement. An earlier question

asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with an equally pointed, though more general, statement (Table 1).

Table 1: In general, things would improve if there were more women in politics

	%		
	Men	Women	All
Agree	50	62	57
Neither agree nor disagree	29	23	26
Disagree	17	10	13
Don't know	5	5	5

Again, quite a few people were non-committal about this, though overall most (57%) think that things would indeed improve – with women markedly more likely than men to hold this view. Interestingly, this was a repeat of a question that had been asked on a survey in 1991 (Miller et al., 1996) and it is noticeable that support for this view has clearly increased among both men and women. In 1991 34% of men agreed with this statement compared with 50% in 2002, while 48% of women agreed with this statement in 1991 compared with 62% in 2002.

So support for the general notion that the involvement of women in politics would help matters has increased over time, and there is a fairly large body of people who believe that the involvement of women in the Assembly had made things better in Northern Ireland politics. But what does this really amount to? Is this concrete support for positive action in relation to women candidates or an acknowledgement of what is politically correct and socially acceptable in the climate of the post-agreement equality agenda? Other questions in the module shed light on some of these issues.

Changing views over the last decade

There is extensive evidence that public opinion on this issue has changed over the

last decade. When asked what proportion of senior government posts should be held by women, only one fifth of men in 1991 thought that half or more of senior government posts should be held by women, but this had doubled to 40% in 2002. Among women, support had gone up from 38% to 50% (Table 2).

Of course increased support for the involvement of women in politics does not necessarily imply that people feel that women would make better politicians than men, but the results in this area are more than a little interesting. Respondents were asked whether they would have more confidence in a man or a woman to represent their interests in Parliament (Table 3). The majority of men, both now and in 1991, feel that it makes no difference. The same is true for women, but quite a large minority (30%) were prepared to say that they thought a woman would better represent their interests. The proportion saying this has almost doubled since 1991 and represents a significant increase over the decade.

Why are there so few women in politics?

But what do people think about the reasons *why* there are relatively few women involved in politics in the UK?

Do they think it is because women don't put themselves forward or because barriers are put in their way? Is it because of structural discrimination within political parties or because of the traditional roles of men and women? Looking first at the notion of barriers towards women entering and succeeding in the world of politics, respondents were asked whether or not they agreed with the statement 'In general there is discrimination against women in public life' (Table 4). Although just over half of women and just under half of men did agree with this statement, they were much less likely to believe in this as an explanation than they were in 1991. Similarly there was a drop in the number of people who believed that 'Political parties don't give women the opportunity to enter politics'. Again, this is seen as less of a barrier than it was in 1991, albeit about half of respondents still think that it is at least part of the reason why there are so few women in politics.

The most widespread belief about the reason for the lack of women in politics is seen as lying in the choices that women

Table 2: About what proportion of senior government posts, for example in the Cabinet or the Executive, should be held by women?

	%			
	Men		Women	
	1991	2002	1991	2002
About half or more	20	40	38	50
At least some	47	38	38	34
No definite proportion	31	18	21	13
None	2	1	2	-

Table 3: In general, would you have more confidence in a man or a woman to represent your interests in Parliament?

	%			
	Men		Women	
	1991	2002	1991	2002
A man	22	25	21	14
A woman	8	10	16	30
No difference	71	64	63	53

Table 4: Explanations of why there are so few women in politics (% agreeing)

	%			
	Men		Women	
	1991	2002	1991	2002
In general, there is discrimination against women in public life	54	48	69	55
Women don't come forward to be considered as candidates	78	70	80	72
A woman candidate will lose votes	33	32	37	34
Political parties don't give women the opportunity to enter politics	51	46	62	52
Women put their families above a career in politics	69	71	65	71
Women don't have the confidence for politics	26	23	33	25
Women don't have the right experience for politics	25	25	25	21
Women aren't interested in politics	26	23	25	18

themselves make. Over 70% of men and women agreed with the two statements:

- Women don't come forward to be considered as candidates
- Women put their families above a career in politics

Looking closely at the trends over time there is a clear pattern. In 1991 women thought that the reason for the lack of women in politics was largely a mixture of barriers and inclination – women don't come forward; there was discrimination; women put their families first; and political parties don't give women the opportunities. By 2002 by far the most important reasons are seen as women's own inclination and choices – with the perception of barriers having receded somewhat. For men in 1991, the perceived reasons for the lack of women in politics were largely women's choice and inclination, and this remains the case in 2002.

There are a number of other results in this area that are worth noting. By and large people don't think that 'A women candidate will lose votes'. Only around a third thought so in 1991, and only a similar proportion think so in 2002. The notion that women have neither the confidence for, nor the interest in politics was never a popular view, but it is even less so in 2002 than in 1991 – particularly among women.

Yes, but what about affirmative action?

The Life and Times survey also included some more pointed questions that provide a sterner test of respondents' willingness to support women's involvement in politics. Respondents were asked about what, if anything, political parties should actually be doing about the small numbers of women candidates in Northern Ireland elections (Table 5).

Clearly, a majority of both men and women feel that, while political parties should be encouraged to put forward a proportion of women candidates, no requirement should actually be placed upon them to gender balance their candidate slates. Only about one fifth of both men and women felt that parties should actually be *required* to put forward a proportion of women candidates. Respondents were also asked whether political parties should put more 'resources' towards the campaigns of women candidates than men candidates and there was a little more support for this kind of action. Thirty three per cent of men and 45% of women

Table 5: Some people think that political parties should do something about the small numbers of women candidates in Northern Ireland elections, while other people see no need. Which of these statements comes closest to your view about what, if anything, might be done about this?

	%		
	Men	Women	All
Political parties should be required to put forward a proportion of women candidates	17	21	19
Political parties should be encouraged to put forward a proportion of women candidates	52	57	55
Parties should do as they see fit in putting forward candidates	28	17	22

agreed that resources should be disproportionately assigned to the campaigns of women candidates (Table 6).

But what people interpret as 'more resources' is a moot point. It may be that this appears a rather vague and harmless idea to many respondents. Most tellingly, when faced with a question that asks directly about preferential treatment for women candidates, the public is much more cautious about allowing women any special advantages. About two thirds of women (66%) and about three quarters of men (74%) agreed with the statement that 'Women candidates should not get any special treatment by political parties'. Although there is some support for giving women more vague and undefined 'resources' for their campaigns, anything that smacks of preferential treatment or inequality is not popular with respondents (Table 7).

The politicians people want

But at the end of the day, we elect politicians to carry out the task of representing our interests. And, it is clear from this survey that most people think that having more women in politics is good for interest representation. What is it, then, that women can bring to politics? The survey explored this area in some depth and asked people to select from a list of attributes those they would choose to describe male politicians, and then those they would choose to describe female politicians. Then, at a later point in the interview, respondents were asked to choose the attributes that they would actually like politicians in Northern Ireland to have. The four most cited attributes in each category are given below (Table 8).

Table 6: How much do you agree or disagree that 'Political parties should put more resources towards the campaigns of women candidates than men candidates'?

	%		
	Men	Women	All
Agree	33	45	40
Neither agree nor disagree	16	16	16
Disagree	47	31	38
Don't know	5	7	6

Male politicians were most popularly described as 'aggressive', 'ruthless', 'ambitious' and 'crafty'; and both male and female respondents were in complete agreement that these were the top four attributes here. Female politicians were described as 'approachable', 'able to compromise', 'honest' and 'level-headed'. Again male and female respondents were in complete agreement here. Qualities that people would *like* politicians to have include being 'honest', 'able to compromise', 'hard working' and 'approachable'. And once again these were the top four for both female respondents and male respondents. Clearly, the attributes the public associate with female politicians are closer to the ideal type than are the qualities associated with male representatives.

Conclusion

Public attitudes towards women in politics have become more positive over time. In keeping with other findings on cultural perceptions of women's role in Northern Ireland (Gray and Robinson, 2004), these

Table 7: And how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement 'Women candidates should not get any special treatment by political parties?'

	%		
	Men	Women	All
Agree	74	66	70
Neither agree nor disagree	9	13	11
Disagree	15	17	17
Don't know	2	4	3

results reveal that, for the public, the absence of women from politics has much to do with women's own choices and inclinations. There is a perception that parties are now more open to women who wish to take up a political career. The results of the 2003 Assembly elections seem to bear this out, given that 18 women were elected, representing an increase of 4 on the 1998

Table 8: Attributes of politicians

Attributes of a male politician		Attributes of a female politician		Attributes wanted in a politician	
Aggressive	(37%)	Approachable	(37%)	Honest	(69%)
Ruthless	(27%)	Able to compromise	(36%)	Able to compromise	(51%)
Ambitious	(25%)	Honest	(31%)	Hard working	(46%)
Crafty	(22%)	Level-headed	(27%)	Approachable	(45%)

result. Thus, the defeat of the Women's Coalition may be construed more as a reassertion of sectarian voting patterns rather than as a vote against women.

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References

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Key Points

- Attitudes towards women and politics have become more positive since 1991, with voters now looking to parties to present them with more women candidates.
- There is a perception that there are fewer barriers inhibiting women's political participation today as compared with a decade ago.
- The most widespread explanation for women's absence from political life is seen as resting in the personal choices made by women.
- While the public is quite happy to have parties encouraged to put forward more women candidates, preferential treatment for women candidates is not popular.
- The qualities women bring to political life are closer to the qualities identified in an 'ideal' representative than are those of political men.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2002, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The **Life and Times Survey** is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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