

## Research Article

# Gendered Candidate Emergence in Britain: Why are More Women Councillors Not Becoming MPs?

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The link between local councils and the House of Commons is well established, with many MPs learning their trade at the local level. Local councils are also fruitful environments for female politicians, with just over 32 per cent of all councillors being women. However, existing evidence suggests that women councillors are less likely than men to make the jump from local to national politics. This article uses original empirical data to assess the political ambitions of local councillors and places them in context, asking which factors have the most influence on whether a councillor has considered running for parliamentary office.

**Keywords:** local councillors; political careers; women; gender; Britain

Why are more women councillors in Britain not becoming Members of Parliament (MPs)? This article will consider this question by investigating gendered patterns of candidate emergence for the UK parliament at Westminster using original data collected about local councillors in London as a case study. It builds on a burgeoning American literature which looks at individuals across society who can be considered as 'eligible' to run for office and assesses gendered variations in the emergence of candidates for political office (Fox and Lawless, 2004; Lawless and Fox, 2005). The article goes a step beyond existing work that focuses on formal candidate selection processes already entered by potential parliamentary candidates and it analyses the decision to run for higher office from a 'pipeline' position. It begins by establishing the role of local councils as 'eligibility pools' for political recruitment as well as sites of relatively high levels of representation of women. It then discusses the gendered barriers that stand between local councillors and other higher elected offices. This is followed by an analysis of the gendered factors that may influence the decision of a councillor to run for higher office based on original data collected by the author. The role of formal and informal institutional factors is discussed. It is found that male councillors are more likely than their female colleagues to have considered running for parliament. In addition, informal encouragement to run for office is more important than formal position-holding within a hierarchy in determining the likelihood of a councillor having considered running.

## From local councillor to local MP

There is an established link between local politics and running for national political office with the former playing a pivotal role in the political pipeline (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995, p. 168; Rao, 2005, p. 334). Local councils continue to be fertile breeding grounds for future MPs, with

62.5 per cent of the 1997 newly elected intake and over 40 per cent of the comparably sized 2010 newly elected intake having been local councillors at some point. Local government is also currently a fruitful venue for female politicians, with just over 32 per cent of all English local authority councillors being women. This represents the highest percentage of women for any elected political institution in the country (Evans and Aston, 2011). As such, local government is home to a large number of 'eligible' candidates for higher office, and an obvious source of potential women MPs (Rule, 1981).

Britain is unlike other countries with similar links, such as France – or previously Ireland – in the way that MPs do not tend to retain their position as a councillor following their election to parliament. It should be noted that a small number of MPs have sat as both MPs and councillors simultaneously, but this is not encouraged by the political parties, which fear a parochial outlook among MPs who continue to serve in both local and national elected politics (Shaw, 2001, p. 38).

Existing evidence foregrounds the potential utility of experience in local politics to staging a parliamentary candidacy. The political recruitment literature notes the importance placed on local links within the British system. Candidates who have cultivated personal relationships with figures within the local party of the seat they wish to contest are often more likely to succeed, with 'informal factors' and 'party gatekeepers' playing a notable role (Cheng and Tavits, 2011, pp. 460, 468). In addition, individuals who are more active within local parties are also more likely to become presumptive candidates and receive encouragement to run from members of the party in their area (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995, pp. 28, 44, 54). Looking at local councils, these factors have been given greater attention elsewhere in the British literature (Allen, 2012). The key thrust of this research is that 'many "rules of the game" that structure political life are informal' (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004, p. 725).

The high number of MPs who have experience as local councillors suggests that there is a perception that being a local councillor is an effective route into parliament. But are some councillors more likely than others to consider running, and if so, who is more likely and why?

## Candidate emergence among local councillors

The genesis of the initial decision to run for any elected office, also termed 'candidate emergence' (Kenny, 2009), is something that has received only moderate attention in the academic literature (Fox and Lawless, 2004; Lawless, 2012; Lawless and Fox, 2005). The broader phenomenon of political ambition is considered more widely (Riddell, 1993; Rosenzweig, 1957).

Richard Fox and Jennifer Lawless (2004, p. 267) note how existing studies of political ambition have contextualised the decision to run as one based on rational choice. They conclude that people will run for elected office when the structural conditions, such as seat vacancies and term limits, best suit them. This assumes that such knowledge is available to prospective candidates, that they have the ability to analyse it and then to deduce whether it is the right time for them to run (Rosenzweig, 1957; Stone, Maisel and Maestas, 2004). Fox and Lawless (2004, p. 268) argue that this treats personal circumstances as unimportant and that studying ambition in this way misses the key element of the initial consideration of running – only if a candidate considers running in a favourable way more broadly will they begin to examine the relevant opportunity structure and emerge as a candidate. Lawless (2012) breaks political ambition down into different types. Nascent ambition is an 'embryonic

or potential interest in seeking office', whereas expressive ambition can be seen in the actual act of running for office (Lawless, 2012, p. 5). For office-holders, ambition can be static, discrete or, of key interest to this article, progressive (Lawless, 2012, p. 19). A four-stage model is used which moves from a pool of eligible prospective candidates through to those actually elected to public office, with the two middle stages comprising considering running and then actually seeking office. It has been found that the first and final stages both comprise roughly equal numbers of men and women: the potential pool of eligible individuals (which the authors constructed using existing data on political backgrounds) has gender parity, and the final stage, detailing the election rate of those who ran, confirms existing research findings that women are generally as likely as men to succeed at the ballot box when controlling for incumbency advantage (Fox and Lawless, 2004, pp. 267–8; Murray, 2008). The middle two stages, however, do highlight sex differences, with men more likely than women to have considered running and actually to have sought elected office.

As noted above, such ambition does not exist in a vacuum, and Lawless (2012, p. 52) writes:

My empirical assessment reveals that, despite similarities in levels of political participation, interest, and proximity ... not only are women less likely than men to consider running for office, but they are also less likely than men to express interest in high-level positions.

The question posed in this article is whether this is the case among a specific group of eligible candidates in the UK, namely local councillors in London. Before turning to the analysis, there will be a discussion of why we might expect to have similar findings here.

## Methods

The research presented in this article is based on original data that were collected via an Internet survey of local authority councillors in the 32 London boroughs between January and April 2010. There was a response rate of 26 per cent, with an *n* of 444. The survey contained 21 questions. In an effort to nullify sampling issues related to the online nature of the survey, participants were offered the opportunity to receive a paper copy of the survey to complete in place of an online version – this was opted for by one councillor. All councillors were contacted via their official council e-mail addresses, collected from their council web pages.

The survey included questions on the personal characteristics of councillors, including their familial and professional situations. In addition there were questions relating to their political careers to date as well as their political ambitions for the future. The demographics of this sample are similar to those seen for London councils in the National Census of Local Authority Councillors from a similar time period (their data were collected in 2010) (Evans and Aston, 2011). For example, the mean age of respondents in this sample is 53 (compared to 54.3 in the Census) and the percentage of men is 66.9 per cent (compared to the Census's 62.9 per cent). This provides reassurance that this sample is representative of London councillors more broadly and is not aberrant in any notable way. In terms of whether or not this sample is generalisable to the wider population of the UK, the answer is that it is not. Local councillors are a group of people who can be considered more likely than the average person to think about running for elected office, a group characterised as being 'eligible' by Wilma Rule (1981, pp. 60, 62) owing to their levels of education, their occupation and also other social and political associations that they possess. As such, these findings focus on a self-selecting group who presumably hold an above-average interest in politics; at least enough to have sought and won elected office. This feature inevitably stands them apart from the British populace.

Although this limits what can be said about the wider population, it provides unique insight into the political recruitment pipeline – that is, of those individuals who are already involved in politics, who makes it to the top? Whether or not we would expect the patterns found here to be amplified in the (non-political) population at large would be dependent on whether political involvement acts in a positive or negative way on the political ambitions of an individual. In other words, does it nullify for some what it catalyses for others?

Fox and Lawless use the broad term ‘gender socialisation’ to conceptualise various types of gendered barriers that will affect political ambition, described by Lawless (2012, p. 58) as the ways in which:

the primary institutions of social and cultural life ... continue to impress on women and men that traditional gender roles – embodied by heterosexual marriage, in that women assume the majority of household labor and child care responsibilities – constitute a normal, appropriate, and desirable set of life circumstances.

This is broken down into four component parts: political culture, family responsibilities, self-perceived qualifications and ideological motivations, to provide a framework of explanation (Fox and Lawless, 2004, p. 270). The first three of these will be adapted and used here to account for the British context.

The political culture of the House of Commons is male-dominated and masculine in nature. Famously, the Commons provides not only coat hangers, but also sword hangers, where members used to hang their weapons in days of old. Such ceremony is likely to be off-putting to those not comfortable in such environments (King, 2007; Puwar, 2004). Conversely, it is also likely to appeal to those of a macho nature. This is not to say that the trait of being macho is an exclusively male preserve, but the dispersion of such a characteristic is likely to favour them, resulting in the presence of women acting as an often unwelcome disturbance to the status quo (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 49). The low number of women at the very top of British politics (in the first wave of ministerial appointments of the coalition government in 2010 there were only four women in the 24 Cabinet posts of the UK government) may also suggest to women that perhaps it is simply a man’s domain.

Second, British women remain more likely than their male partners or spouses to act in a role akin to household manager as well as to undertake the majority of domestic labour tasks (Van Hooff, 2011). Lawless (2012, p. 58) argues that it is possible to see such a division as a key component of assumed traditional gender roles. Many women also juggle such commitments alongside a career, and it could be expected that women involved in politics who might consider running for higher office would be in a broadly professional career, in keeping with increasing numbers of MPs in recent times (Cairney, 2007). This will lead to pressure on their time, with Dawn Lyon and Alison Woodward (2004, pp. 213–214) arguing that in fact the conceptualisation of ‘time’ for individuals in high-pressure time-intensive occupations assumed the presence of a woman at home to complete tasks such as those mentioned above, without whom such roles would be impossible to combine with family life. Jacqui Briggs (2000, pp. 80–81) notes how many councillors see pursuing local political roles as impossible without women’s support, both moral and practical. In addition to this, once at work, women still suffer from a gendered pay gap – when running for parliament is increasingly costly, income disparity cannot be disregarded (ONS, 2008, p. 24).

Finally, people who see themselves as being qualified to be a politician are more likely to put themselves forward for higher office. Existing research has shown women to perceive them-

selves as less qualified for political careers than men in similar situations and from similar backgrounds (Fox and Lawless, 2004, p. 271). It is noted in the social psychology and management literature that there is also a gendered effect on assessments of self-efficacy more generally (Gecas, 1989; Lawless and Fox, 2005, pp. 8–9). Gendered socialisation is undoubtedly an important factor here, but when so many politicians are drawn from pre-parliamentary political institutions of both the elected and unelected kind, neglecting the formal and informal internal hierarchies of such institutions results in a potential link being missed. To quote Sven Steinmo (2001, p. 1), these institutions will ‘influence what these actors believe to be both possible and desirable’. Another factor that may impact self-perceived eligibility is the presence of encouraging voices around a councillor considering a candidacy, particularly from figures senior to them in the party hierarchy, although clearly the support of friends and family would also be of vital importance (Fox and Lawless, 2004, p. 269).

### **Institutional benefits: formal or informal?**

It is additionally reported that local councils are male-dominated environments, with the style of party politics used by many councillors embodying the stereotype of masculine and macho behaviour (Linsley et al., 2006, pp. 38–39). If such activities are assumed, on the basis of being the most predominant and visible, to be the most desirable in any local councillor seeking parliamentary candidacy this has the potential to place women councillors at a disadvantage to men in similar positions. Equally important is the nature of the activity of councillors and whether or not this is gendered. Reforms of the structure of local government enacted by Labour at the turn of the millennium presented councils with the option of having a separate executive and 81 per cent of councils adopted this leader and Cabinet model (Wilson and Game, 2006, p. 107). The adoption of this executive–backbench model by the majority of councils has resulted in large numbers of councillors becoming backbenchers, focusing solely on their wards and the issues raised by their constituents (Bochel and Bochel, 2008; Copus, 2003). It is possible that councillors who are confined to such backbench duties are either able to build a local profile in lieu of other duties held by members of the executive, or the opposite – that they do not have the resources required to build a public profile like executive members. In sum, the question here is ‘are executive members better placed to utilise their experience as a local councillor to aid a bid for parliamentary candidacy than their backbench colleagues?’ Diane Margolis (1980, pp. 26–27, p. 39), writing about a local legislature in the United States in the late 1970s, found that women were far more likely to carry out their duties in a less public fashion than the men on the council – more likely to work with people one to one, often by telephone. In contrast, she found that men would be present at higher-profile public events and in decision-making arenas, something also linked to cultural conceptions of time as discussed earlier (Lyon and Woodward, 2004). Based on these findings, it could be argued that if being a local councillor is beneficial to an attempt at selection for parliamentary candidacy, it could be based on the type of personal relationships mentioned above: the skills and political expertise gained during time spent as a councillor, or – linked to both of these – the choice of activities and ‘style of politics’ utilised by the councillor in question. Such findings, if replicated, would suggest the possible existence of different types of councillor – some who work mainly informally behind the scenes making contacts and nurturing working relationships; others who largely work in a formal public setting thanks to their defined role on the council – and raise the possibility that this typology is linked to gendered patterns of activity. This in turn may affect levels of progressive political ambition if some activities are considered to be more beneficial to any potential candidacy.

**Table 1: Ambitions and encouragement from others for parliamentary candidacy by sex, variable *n***

Variable	Men (%)	Women (%)
Considered running for parliament? ( <i>n</i> = 425)	56.4*	44.9*
Sitting MP suggest run? ( <i>n</i> = 426)	28.2	36.0
Fellow councillor? ( <i>n</i> = 426)	57.1	56.8
Party official ( <i>n</i> = 426)	40.1	38.8
Friends and family ( <i>n</i> = 426)	80.5*	71.9*
None of the above ( <i>n</i> = 426)	5.6	8.6

\* *Chi-squared test found difference significant at the 0.05 level*

### To run, or not to run?

The data collected by the author further confirm the findings of Fox and Lawless (2004; Lawless and Fox, 2005) and Rule (1981), with men being just over 10 per cent more likely than women to have considered running for parliament, a statistically significant difference. As seen in Table 1, the results are mixed, but men were overall more likely than women to have been encouraged to run for parliament. Most interestingly, there is a significant difference in whether friends or family had suggested running (80.5 per cent of men versus 71.9 per cent of women, difference significant at the 0.05 level). The need for a supportive family, in particular a supportive spouse or partner, when running for major office, is acknowledged in the literature (Briggs, 2000, pp. 79–81). This evidence suggests that even among a group of women who are already political in their role as local councillors there still remains a gendered obstacle to higher office in the form of family support, or lack thereof.

A regression analysis (see Table 2) was used to assess the relative importance of the factors discussed here. This regression suggests that sex is a factor that will not significantly affect the likelihood of an individual considering running for parliament, with other personal characteristics such as ethnicity and nature of employment being more important. These will be explored in more detail below, with the distinction of informal and formal sources of potential benefit to a candidacy being used to frame the discussion.

The regression model was run in stages, with different variables being included in each model along with the 'sex' variable, which was included in all the equations. This is shown in Table 2. The models were run separately in order to give each variable a chance to achieve significance – when a full model was run, it was found that there were increased numbers of missing values owing to the small numbers of respondents in some categories.

One factor that appears to be of importance is the suggestion by others that a councillor might make a good MP, with variables for both a sitting MP and a party official suggesting running achieving high levels of significance. The importance of being encouraged by both a sitting MP and party officials suggests that there exists an 'anointing' process of sorts, by which a representative of the party organisation or establishment will encourage a chosen individual to pursue a parliamentary seat. Receiving a suggestion from others, particularly from people already involved in politics, may help crystallise even the slightest notion of running in the

Table 2: Logistic regression 'Considered running for parliament?'+

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)
Sex	-0.611 (0.239)	0.543*	-0.294 (0.219)	0.745	-0.457 (0.214)	0.633	-0.289 (0.260)	0.749
Suggested running								
Sitting MP	1.185 (0.279)	3.269***						
Fellow councillor	0.472 (0.247)	1.603						
Official	0.795 (0.255)	2.215**						
Friends/family	0.641 (0.298)	1.899*						
None	-0.216 (0.580)	0.806						
Self-reported strengths <sup>†</sup>								
Policy			0.136 (0.218)	1.146				
Public speaking			0.677 (0.217)	1.968**				
Working with officials			0.075 (0.239)	1.078				
Constituents			-0.007 (0.322)	0.993				
Networking			0.295 (0.226)	1.343				
Local issues			-0.539 (0.372)	0.583				
Political process			0.078 (0.218)	1.081				
Political factors								
One-term councillor					0.030 (0.317)	1.031		
Two-term councillor					-0.104 (0.432)	0.901		
Senior council role					0.026 (0.223)	1.026		
Major party or small					-0.178 (0.562)	0.837		
Terms served					-0.048 (0.167)	0.953		
Councillor's party controlling council					-0.085 (0.131)	0.919		
Talents used effectively <sup>§</sup>					-0.002 (0.122)	0.998		

Table 2: *Continued*

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)
Party support <sup>†</sup>			-0.003 (0.112)	0.997				
Family support <sup>††</sup>			0.014 (0.078)	1.014				
Standing re-election			-0.184 (0.280)	0.832				
Labour councillor			0.130 (0.274)	1.139				
Conservative councillor			0.189 (0.270)	1.208				
Personal characteristics								
Ethnicity (not white)							1.029 (0.368)	2.798**
Employment type (part-time)							0.590 (0.276)	1.804*
Age							-0.024 (0.017)	0.976
Over 50							0.447 (0.448)	1.563
Highest educational qualification							0.103 (0.118)	1.109
Children under 5							0.154 (0.300)	1.167
Children under 18							0.287 (0.190)	1.333
Dependent adults							0.558 (0.250)	1.747*

Coded 1 = no, 2 = yes

\* Significant at 0.05 level; \*\* significant at 0.01 level; \*\*\* significant at 0.001 level

<sup>†</sup> Full question in survey: 'Have you ever considered entering the selection process to become a Member of Parliament?' (Yes/No)

<sup>††</sup> Full question in survey: 'Do you consider the following skills to be particular strengths of yours?' (Yes/No)

<sup>‡</sup> Full question in survey: 'On the scale below, how effectively do you feel that your specific talents and expertise have been effectively used by the council during your time as a councillor?' and 5 being not at all'

<sup>§</sup> Full question in survey: 'Do you feel that you have had the support of your party during your time as a councillor? Please indicate this on the scale below with 1 being consistently strong support and 5 being not at all'

<sup>¶</sup> Full question in survey: 'How involved have your family been in your council duties throughout your time as a councillor? Please indicate this on the scale below with 1 being very involved and 5 being not at all involved'

<sup>||</sup> Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> = Model 1: 0.286 (n = 425); model 2: 0.078 (n = 425); model 3: 0.023 (n = 425); model 4: 0.214 (n = 359)



mind of a potential candidate and evidence has been found to support this idea (Fox and Lawless, 2004, p. 269). The public speaking variable does achieve significance in model 2, not unexpectedly, as such skills are considered essential for politicians. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that none of the other variables in this model achieves significance. This suggests that self-perceived skill sets might not be as important as expected.

Also of note is the significance achieved by the ethnicity variable in model 4 of Table 2. It shows that the odds of non-white councillors considering running are higher than those of their white colleagues. Ethnicity is not a primary focus of this article, but a few explanations can be considered. Looking at Table 3, where the regression is conducted on men and women in isolation, it is clear that the ethnicity figure is larger for women councillors, although this value does not achieve statistical significance, possibly due to a small *n*. In terms of considering running, it could be the case that parties are keen to encourage councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds as part of wider pushes for more diverse parliamentary candidates. It is also feasible that age is important here, with ethnic minority councillors being generally more likely to have been elected fairly recently and at a younger age, although the evidence here shows the proportion of ethnic minority and white councillors under 50 to be roughly the same with no significant differences. It is clear that this is an avenue worth pursuing in future research. Another variable that achieves significance is part-time employment, suggesting that the odds of councillors who are in part-time employment having considered running are higher than those in full-time employment. This is likely due to those councillors who have already been selected as candidates moving to part-time hours in order to make time for their campaign.

The question of whether the impact of these factors is gendered should also be considered. Performing the regression analysis (minus the sex variable) on each sex in isolation provides interesting patterns of variation from the same analysis when undertaken on the complete sample. These are shown in Table 3.

The results suggest that for men, having a sitting MP suggest running has the most influence on them making a positive decision regarding considering running for parliament. Conversely, the women-only model shows that this is not a significant factor for women councillors, who are shown to be more influenced by encouragement from both party officials and their friends and family than by encouragement from the sitting MP or their council colleagues. With reference to Table 1, it is possible to see an unfortunate pattern here – friends and family are the only group to have been significantly more likely to have suggested running to men than to women, while at the same time being one of only two groups to have a significant impact on this decision for women. In fact, women are less likely than their male colleagues to have had candidacy suggested to them by the two groups that are significantly more likely to influence them actually to become a candidate. The higher percentage of women being encouraged to run by their sitting MP compared to men, seen in Table 1, could well be explained by whether or not the MP in question was a woman, with a sororal support network of sorts potentially being in place. This should be considered in future work.

As noted above, the Labour reforms to local government in the early 2000s split councils between councillors who had roles in the new executives of their council and those whose role was now solely of the backbench variety. The data collected for this project suggest that there are differing levels of expressive political ambition split along the lines of executive and non-executive members: 59.6 per cent of executive councillors say they have considered running for parliament compared to 50.3 per cent of non-executive councillors. However, this difference is not statistically significant. The regression analysis in Table 2 suggests that the

**Table 3: Logistic regression, dependent variable 'Considered running for parliament?'**<sup>†</sup>

Variable	Men		Women	
	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)	B (S.E.)	Exp (B)
Suggested running				
Sitting MP	1.145 (0.454)	4.118**	0.355 (0.940)	1.426
Fellow councillor	0.649 (0.387)	1.914	0.322 (0.1036)	1.380
Official	0.620 (0.398)	1.858	2.385 (0.994)	10.862*
Friends/family	-0.049 (0.547)	0.952	3.048 (1.256)	21.064*
None	-0.768 (0.963)	0.464	3.292 (1.950)	26.908
Self-reported strengths				
Policy	0.170 (0.390)	1.185	0.580 (810)	1.787
Public speaking	0.370 (0.358)	1.448	1.121 (0.831)	3.067
Working with officials	0.480 (0.439)	1.617	-0.178 (1.119)	0.837
Constituents	-0.218 (0.466)	0.804	0.753 (2.394)	2.123
Networking	0.271 (0.365)	1.312	1.582 (1.012)	4.867
Local issues	-0.121 (0.626)	0.886	-0.352 (1.985)	0.703
Political process	-0.306 (0.386)	0.736	-1.347 (0.985)	0.260
Political factors				
One-term councillor	0.396 (0.549)	1.486	-0.012 (1.440)	0.988
Two-term councillor	0.624 (0.777)	1.866	-1.664 (1.688)	0.189
Senior council role	-0.600 (0.399)	0.549	-1.680 (1.032)	0.186
Major party or small	-0.494 (1.034)	0.610	0.034 (2.623)	1.035
Terms served	0.517 (0.301)	1.677	-0.013 (0.674)	0.987
Councillor's party controlling council	-0.043 (0.209)	0.958	-0.915 (0.566)	0.400
Talents used effectively	0.040 (0.206)	1.041	-0.897 (0.579)	0.408
Party support	-0.228 (0.182)	0.796	0.847 (0.580)	2.334
Family support	-0.005 (0.136)	0.995	0.211 (0.296)	1.235
Standing re-election	-0.848 (0.525)	0.428	-0.682 (0.920)	0.505
Labour councillor	0.127 (0.445)	1.136	0.227 (0.991)	1.254
Conservative councillor	0.376 (0.436)	1.457	0.293 (1.102)	1.340
Personal characteristics				
Ethnicity (not white)	0.727 (0.573)	2.069	2.747 (1.517)	15.601
Employment type (part-time)	0.557 (0.415)	1.745	-0.159 (0.985)	0.853
Age	-0.034 (0.030)	0.966	-0.012 (0.62)	0.988
Over 50	0.035 (0.646)	1.036	-3.492 (1.902)	0.030
Highest educational qualification	0.174 (0.171)	1.190	0.395 (0.475)	1.485
Children under 5	0.311 (0.463)	1.364	-0.188 (1.380)	0.829
Children under 18	0.295 (0.266)	1.344	0.499 (0.750)	1.647
Dependent adults	0.754 (0.383)	2.126*	0.488 (1.044)	1.628

\* Significant at 0.05 level; \*\* significant at 0.01 level

<sup>†</sup> Full questions in survey: 'On the scale below, how effectively do you feel that your specific talents and expertise have been effectively used by the council during your time as a councillor?' and 'Irrespective of whether or not you have considered standing for parliament, have any of the following people ever suggested to you that you consider it?' (Yes/No)  
 Model 1 n = 248, Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> = 0.408; model 2 n = 111, Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> = 0.706

importance of this distinction in making such a decision is minimal relative to other factors, in particular the 'informal' factors discussed above, including being encouraged by a sitting MP or party official. As such, formal positioning within the hierarchy of a council structure would not appear to impact greatly on the decision to pursue higher political office.

Overall, the variation seen here highlights once again the different experiences of local government that men and women councillors would appear to have, and how different factors appear to impact decisions regarding political careers differently depending on sex. The intersectional role of ethnicity is also of interest, highlighting a path for future research. Despite the complexity of the decision to run for higher office, or progressive ambition in the nomenclature of Lawless (2012), the data here suggest that it is social factors, working in ways that are informal and harder to map, that will have the biggest effect on whether a councillor has considered running for the Commons. Encouragement from friends and family, as well as from political party figures, is vital. In practice, this suggests that building networks that facilitate and ensure such encouragement for women councillors in particular might provide a solution, at least in part, to the question posed in the title of this article.

Of course, there could be other intervening factors in play here. For example, women councillors may be more risk-averse than their male colleagues, unwilling to resign a council seat with only a limited chance of winning a parliamentary one. Additionally, it could be the case that women are simply more interested in local-level issues and, as such, perceive themselves as more effective in their current local role. Concurrently, women may prefer the fact that local council service is usually close to their home and family, whereas Westminster may not be, with this proximity providing a practical reason to limit their political career to the local level. Finally, the prospect of an arduous and expensive election campaign may prove more off-putting to women than men, given the greater likelihood that they will bear the burden of caring responsibilities. Whatever the case, these factors do not change the fact that local councils are not acting as a sex-neutral pathway to parliament.

## Conclusion

This article has used original data to look in depth at the formal and informal institutional impacts of local councils on the political ambition of those who serve within them. In terms of progressive political ambition, which would manifest as an interest in running for higher office, it was found that women councillors are less likely to have considered running for parliament than men. Further analysis of this finding showed that the informal suggestion by a number of interested groups, from family to the sitting MP for the area, had more of an impact on the decision to consider running than the position of the councillor in the formal hierarchy of the council. It was found, however, that the factors that had a positive influence on the decision to run differ by sex, with men being more likely to run if a sitting MP suggested it whereas women were shown to value the encouragement of family and friends or party officials. In sum, the role of party networks and informal contacts is key. More thought needs to be given to how equality of access and use of these networks can be extended to all councillors.

The article paves the way for future studies of 'pipeline' institutions, most obviously, perhaps, of parliamentary staff, an increasingly popular route to parliament. These analyses need to consider the formal and informal ways in which institutions might impact upon the political ambitions of those within them, and the ways in which candidates emerge from them. For feminist scholars, these findings provide new questions, particularly with regard to the

intersections of sex and ethnicity and how these might affect the flow of women politicians from local councils to Westminster. The current political climate has often seen local councillors at the front line of debates surrounding budget cuts and the deficit. Whether this prominence will affect desire to run for higher office remains to be seen – in any case, local councils will continue to act as a training ground for future national politicians for some time to come.

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