

# 2009 Local Election Candidates Survey

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The survey of local election candidates, conducted by the University of Plymouth's Elections Centre, continues to provide valuable information about the types of people that compete for office and some flavour of their campaign experience. The survey covers many aspects of the electoral experience, from the moment a person decides to contest a council seat, the support network that sustains them through the campaign and the time for reflection after votes have been counted.

The issue of social diversity on council benches continues to be a challenge for local government generally. This survey offers a glimpse of the problems that political party organisations face in broadening the social base, encouraging more women, people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups and younger people to stand for election. Candidates continue to believe that local authorities have a key part in publicising the councillor role but there is little support for the idea that parties might select non-members to contest seats.

A real strength of this year's report is that now we are able to compare the types of people that contest elections across the range of local authorities – London and metropolitan boroughs, district and unitary councils and, in 2009, the remaining English counties. This should tell us whether the problem of under-representation affects all types of authority or is restricted to some but not others.

Another useful distinction that can be made between candidates is the kind of electoral experience that they have. Some are experienced campaigners, incumbents seeking re-election, but others are people fighting their first local election.

Real and significant differences between these would suggest that the battle to transform the existing local councillor stereotype is succeeding. Unfortunately, this has not proved to be the case. The survey findings show that while there is progress on some fronts; more women and younger people standing as first time candidates, the evidence is that there is still a very long way to go – particularly in the recruitment of ethnic minority candidates, as well as those outside the professional/managerial occupations.

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## The key findings are:

Among the candidates contesting the 2009 local elections 71 per cent were men, the average age was 57.3 years, and 98.3 per cent were of white ethnic origin. One in three candidates has a university degree and a further 23 per cent have also obtained a higher degree. Fewer than one in 10 holds no formal educational qualification.

Almost four in 10 candidates are retired from work, between a quarter and a fifth are in some form of full-time employment and around a fifth are self-employed. More than half holds a professional occupation and a further 28 per cent are occupied in some managerial/technical role. Fewer than two in 100 works in an unskilled occupation.

Six in 10 candidates are resident in the ward that they contest. Among incumbent councillors seeking re-election the percentage rises to 64 per cent but falls to 52 per cent among candidates contesting their first election. Candidates are well-connected in their local communities. Around six in 10 are, or have been, officers in their local political party. Half have been involved with charitable organisations and a similar proportion has been involved with a community-based organisation.

For a fifth of candidates contesting in 2009 this was their first experience of standing for election. By contrast, a quarter of the candidates standing were doing so for their sixth or more time. One in 10 had been elected on at least five previous occasions.

Three in every four candidates prepare an election campaign leaflet but only 57 per cent of these people delivered it to every ward address. A fifth canvass by telephone but only a small minority use the Internet for election campaigning.

A third of candidates contact local media to publicise their campaign but only a quarter believe that local reporting of the was adequate. Almost three in four thought that national rather than local issues dominated the election. A majority maintain that national party leaders should keep a low profile during a local election campaign.

The average candidate is active for approximately 18 hours per week of the three week campaign. Independents are the busiest candidates, averaging 25 hours per week. Half of all candidates campaign on behalf of colleagues in neighbouring wards. A clear majority enjoy campaigning and would volunteer to stand for election again.

Approximately one in three makes his or her own decision to stand the first time; two in three candidates stand after being approached by someone else, mostly a fellow party member. Support from fellow party members is vital; 58 per cent reported very strong support from this source but less than a third received similar support from their partner.

A large majority of candidates contest on behalf of a registered political party; three-quarters have been party members for five or more years. Only one in five candidates faces competition for the nomination. **Having a good reputation is the most frequently cited reason for selection.** Some four in 10 owe their selection to being the only volunteer and a slightly larger proportion than this after revealing a willingness to stand as a paper candidate.

A two-thirds majority believe people don't stand because the councillor role is too time consuming. Intrusive media coverage is also supported as a reason but only a quarter think that parties should recruit non-party members as candidates.

Although a half support the idea of more women and more people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups on the council benches, a larger proportion, 75 per cent, support an increase in younger people. It is the general perception that under-recruitment among such groups results from a failure to come forward for selection. A large majority want local authorities to publicise the councillor's role and to include information about standing for election with the council tax notification.

More than eight in 10 candidates believe that a large fraction of one-term councillors resign because of time pressures. The problems of balancing a political career with family commitments and difficulties in securing time off from work are mentioned by a clear majority. Only 17 per cent think that councillors retire after achieving what they set out to do.

The report also contains some comparisons of candidates from across the range of local authorities (London and metropolitan boroughs, shire district and unitary authorities in England and Wales and the English county councils). These comparisons consider sex, age, ethnicity, education, occupational, employment status and place of residence. A further comparison is made between candidates that are contesting their first election and incumbents seeking re-election.



## Methodology

A postal survey was issued on Friday, 5 June to 3,534 candidates randomly selected from a total of 8,962 candidates standing for election to either a county or unitary authority. Randomisation consisted of alternately selecting one candidate in two followed by one candidate in three. Candidate details, including name, address and, where applicable, party description, were obtained from nominations published by each local authority. A total of 1105 usable replies were received by the end of July, a response rate of 31.3 per cent. The responses were compared with the range of candidates contesting the elections overall and are a representative sample in terms of sex, party affiliation and for the different types of council, county and unitary. Successfully elected candidates comprise 26 per cent of the total that contested in 2009 and 27.8 per cent of our survey respondents.

As well as describing candidates according to standard demographic characteristics (sex, age, education, etc.) this report also classifies them by electoral experience. Four categories are identified: incumbent councillors seeking re-election in 2009 (35 per cent of respondents fall into this category), candidates that had previously served as a councillor at some earlier period (13 per cent), candidates that had stood before but never been elected (31 per cent) and finally, candidates for whom this election was their first experience of standing (22 per cent).

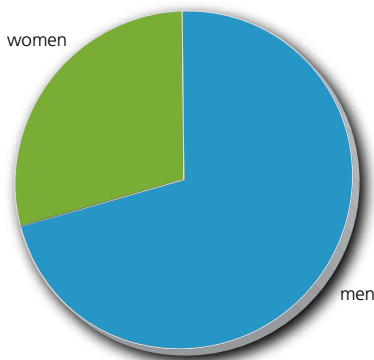
The closing section addresses some findings from candidate surveys conducted since 2006. The pooled data from four surveys are analysed according to local authority type. A further distinction is made between respondents that are incumbents seeking re-election and first-time candidates in order to compare and contrast the characteristics of people currently occupying council seats and those that eventually may be their replacements.



## Who stood for election in 2009?

More than seven in 10 of the candidates contesting in 2009 were men and only 29 per cent are women. There is some variation in the proportion of men and women candidates among the various parties. Women candidates accounted for 35 per cent of Labour's total but only 23 per cent for the Conservatives. Among the Green party candidates, women accounted for 43 per cent but only 11 per cent for the British National Party. There are some minor differences when a candidate's electoral experience is taken into account. Women comprise 28 per cent of incumbents and 31 per cent of the first-time challengers but the difference is not statistically significant.

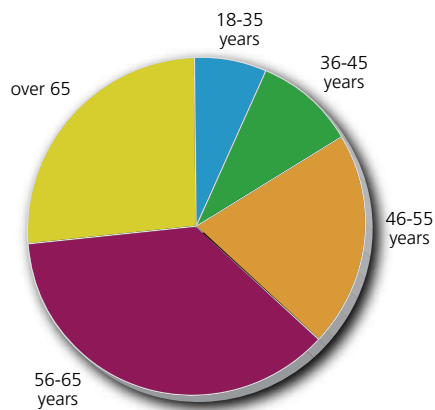
**Chart A:** candidates by gender



**The lowest age of a candidate is just 18 years whilst the oldest age is 86 years.**

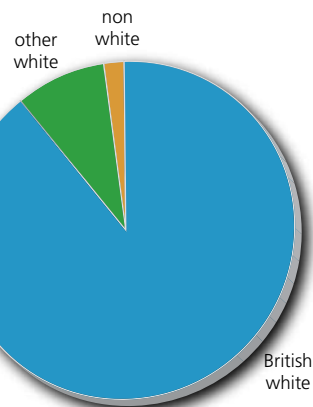
The mean for all candidates is 57.3 years, with women candidates on average being one year younger than men. Only 7 per cent of candidates are aged 35 years or younger and a further 9.8 per cent fall into the second youngest age category (36-45 years). As expected, the average age of candidates standing for the first time (52 years) is less than that for incumbents (60 years) while the highest average age (62 years) is found among those candidates that had previously served on the council.

**Chart B:** candidates by age



Virtually all candidates (98.3 per cent) that stood in 2009 described their ethnic origin as white. White British comprise the largest category, 89.6 per cent of the total, with Irish (1.9 per cent) and Other White (6.8 per cent) the remaining groups. Asian British (0.4 per cent overall) are the largest among the non-white groupings.

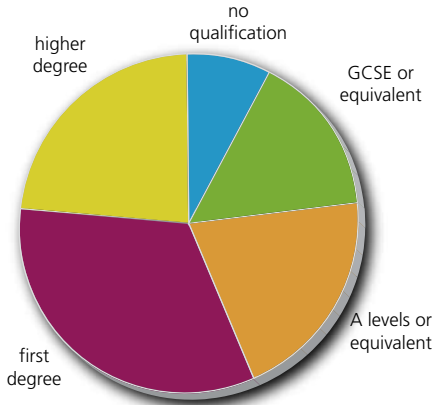
**Chart C:** candidates by ethnicity



Less than one in 10 possess no formal educational qualifications but one in five has an A-level or equivalent qualification. One in three candidates has a university degree with a further

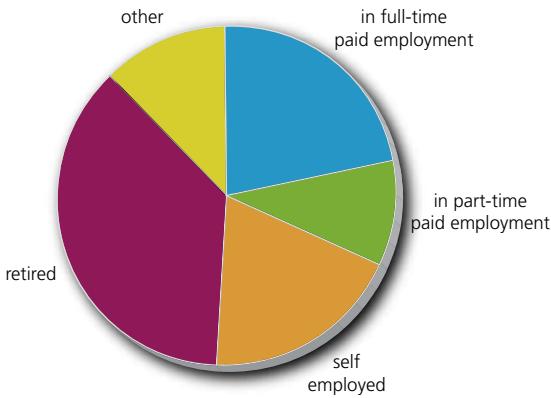
23 per cent obtaining a higher degree.

**Chart D:** candidates by educational qualification



The retired make up the largest grouping in terms of occupational status, accounting for 37 per cent of respondents. Next is the full-time employed (22 per cent ) with a further 10 per cent in part-time paid employment. The self-employed comprise a significant fraction, almost a fifth, of the whole.

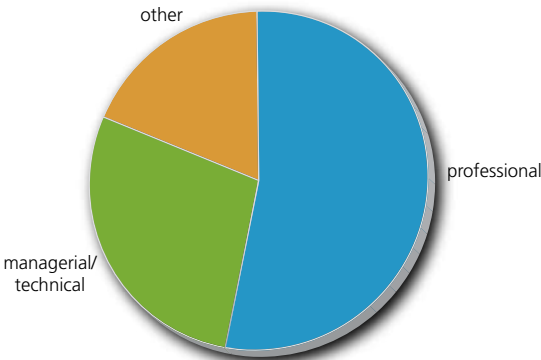
**Chart E:** candidates by employment



More than half the candidates, 54 per cent, classify themselves as professional with a

further 28 per cent in some form of managerial or technical occupation. Around one in eight belong to a skilled occupation but fewer than two in 100 have an unskilled occupation. White collar workers easily outnumber the rather small number of blue collar ones.

**Chart F:** candidates by type of occupation



Most candidates, it appears, are recruited from within their own communities although in the case of county divisions these may extend over relatively large geographic areas. Some 59 per cent of candidates live in the area that they contest, a figure that rises to a high of 64 per cent amongst incumbents but falls to just 52 per cent amongst first time candidates. Unsurprisingly, Independent candidates are most likely to reside in the area that they contest.

Many candidates have an active presence in their local communities and it is often acquired before standing for local election. Almost six in 10 hold or have held an office in their local party organisation. Among this group some 38 per cent held this office before contesting an election. Half the respondents have been involved formally with a charitable organisation, a similar proportion having a position of responsibility with a local community group of some description. More than a third

serves on a public body of some kind, for example, a primary care trust, while one in four is involved with professional associations and/or trade unions. One in eight has stood for parliamentary election (almost one in five amongst UKIP's candidates) but only 3 per cent of this number did so before contesting a local election for the first time. With the possible exception of smaller parties, therefore, candidates contest local elections before tackling the parliamentary equivalent.

**Campaigning and electoral experience**

While for 21 per cent of our respondents the 2009 election was their first electoral experience the remainder boasts a wide variety of experience. Around one in five candidates had stood once before contesting again in 2009. This falls to one in eight that have contested on three occasions while a similar proportion now has experience of four elections although this experience is not necessarily restricted to the county council contests. **More than a quarter of candidates have competed for votes at six or more elections!** Local election campaigning, it appears, becomes a serial activity for a significant fraction of candidates.

A surprisingly large proportion, 48 per cent of candidates, had been successful in winning an election at some time prior to 2009. One in 10 had been successful on at least five occasions before 2009 while a similar fraction was elected only at the previous election.

Unsurprisingly, there is considerable variation in candidates' estimates of the likelihood of winning the seat. Respondents could select from a 0-10 scale (10 being certain to win) their probability of winning. Only one in 20 chose the highest category, and the same proportion selected the next highest point on the scale. In short, only one in 10 candidates felt more or less sure beforehand that they were going to be elected. At the opposite end of the scale, one in six selected a zero probability of victory while a further one in eight ranked themselves only at one on the scale.

**The 2009 campaign**

While three-quarters of candidates produced a campaign leaflet (Table 1), only 57 per cent of these delivered it to every address. This may result from the difficulty of door-to-door

	Yes	No
Produce a campaign leaflet for distribution?	73.7	26.3
Deliver the campaign leaflets?	77.1	22.9
Leaflet delivered to all addresses in your ward?	56.7	43.3
Canvass by telephone?	19.3	80.7
Canvass by the internet /email?	8.9	91.1
Contact local media in order to publicise campaign?	33.6	66.4

campaigning in some county authorities. Telephone canvassing is undertaken by 19 per cent of the candidates but less than one in 10 use email or websites to publicise their election campaign.

Campaign leaflets largely concentrate upon the individual's record of local community involvement but also emphasise, where appropriate, a political party's local priorities. Less cited, although still mentioned by a majority of respondents, are the candidate's own virtues, such as competency for public office, personal details and previous political experience. Lagging far behind is any mention of the political party's national priorities, selected by only a quarter of respondents, and negative comments about the performance of rival parties, chosen by just 11 per cent overall.

A third of candidates make efforts to attract local media coverage. Only a quarter believe that the local election campaign received sufficient attention, but almost half disagree with this. An equal proportion, about a third, either believes that press coverage was fair or unfair. Given that the election was fought against a backdrop of revelations about various MPs' expenses claims it is understandable that 72 per cent agree/strongly agree that national issues and not local issues dominated the 2009 campaign. **A clear majority, 53 per cent, maintain that national party leaders should keep a low profile during local election campaigns and thereby allow the outcome to be determined more by purely local issues.**

During the campaign period candidates were active for 18 hours per week on average with Independents busiest of all. Virtually half of respondents campaigned on behalf of fellow candidates in neighbouring wards. A large majority enjoyed their campaign experience with

more than nine in 10 prepared to stand again.

#### **Decision to stand**

Four in 10 candidates made their own initial decision to stand but 62 per cent stood after being asked by someone else; for every candidate that is self-motivated to stand there are two that contest because they are asked to do so. Two-thirds of the self-motivated stood because they felt strongly that their presence would make a difference but only one in 10 of this group saw the initial decision as an important step forward in a political career. The importance of the local political party network is evident among those that stood after being approached; two-thirds of these people responded to the invitation from another party member while a further three in 10 were approached by a serving councillor. Parties continue to be the main recruitment agencies for local democracy.

The party connection is vital in developing the support network that candidates need to sustain them through a campaign. Some 58 per cent reported very strong encouragement from fellow party members while 51 per cent thought party agents had been similarly supportive. By contrast only 31 per cent reported receiving very strong support from their spouse or partner and only a quarter felt that other family members and friends had been very positive. That said, only one in 20 had a spouse/partner that had been negative about standing. More than one in 10 responding about the reaction of employers felt that it had been either negative or very negative.

#### **The nomination process**

Most candidates contest on behalf of a registered political party. Among these candidates three-quarters have been members for five or more years although a significant fraction, one in five, joined between one and five years before



standing for election. A rather small number, 6 per cent, joined the party within the 12 months prior to the election. There is little competition for nomination; only 20 per cent of respondents faced competition for their ward nomination. Less than one in 20 sought a nomination for a seat additional to the one that they eventually contested. Of course, this finding takes no account of informal steps that local parties take to reduce the number of people applying for a particular seat.

Candidates were invited to select the personal qualities that had been instrumental in determining their selection. The option most frequently selected was 'good reputation',

with almost two-thirds citing this, while 56 per cent believe that being a local resident is a critical factor. About four in 10 felt selection is influenced by previous service as a councillor and a similar proportion mention their ability to win the seat. Among incumbents, 58 per cent believe that being the incumbent was relevant to them securing nomination.

But the evidence also shows that 40 per cent of respondents believe that their selection was because they had been the only volunteer while a larger proportion, 45 per cent, felt it followed after expressing a desire to stand as a paper candidate only.

**Table 2: Recruitment Issues (%)**

	Strongly agree/ agree	Strongly disagree/ disagree
Being a councillor is too time consuming	68.5	14.4
Councillors are insufficiently paid	34.2	32.8
Political parties should recruit non-members to stand as candidates	27.3	50.0
More women councillors	55.2	8.9
More BAME councillors	52.2	11.0
More younger councillors	75.0	6.9
Local authorities should provide more information about councillor's role	84.0	3.6
Responsibility of parties to recruit candidates	64.9	13.3
Local authorities should advertise for candidates	46.1	32.5
Enclose leaflet about becoming candidate with council tax notification	63.3	19.0
National advertising campaign for candidates	42.8	27.3

### The wider recruitment problem

With so many candidates admitting that they were the only volunteer and that campaigning largely consisted of placing a name on the ballot paper, it is instructive to learn about attitudes generally towards the recruitment of new councillors.

More than two in three believe that people are discouraged from standing because the councillor role is seen as time consuming. Only one in three strongly agree/agree that people are discouraged because councillors have too little power or are insufficiently paid. A majority maintain that intrusive media coverage of a person's private life may deter some from seeking office. Opinion is more or less evenly divided over whether party politics acts as a deterrent to those averse to this style of local government. One recommendation aired in recent years is that political parties should widen their recruitment pools by enlisting candidates who are not paid-up party members. There is only 27 per cent of the sample that agree/strongly agree with this proposal, some 22 per cent are neutral, but exactly half disagree/disagree strongly with it.

It is widely acknowledged that certain groups, principally women, members of the Black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities (BAME) and younger people are currently under-represented on council benches. There is greatest sensitivity to the charge that local government is dominated by the middle aged. **Although between 52-55 per cent support the idea of more women and more BAME there is greater support, 75 per cent , for encouraging more people between the ages of 18-35 years.** Two-thirds of candidates believe that these changes if implemented would improve local government's public image but only four in 10 maintain that it might increase electoral turnout.

Other measures to publicise the councillor role and encourage more people to stand were presented to our respondents. Almost nine in 10 see a role for local authorities in publicising the work of elected councillors. A clear majority believe that websites offer such an opportunity while almost two in three agree that leaflets about becoming a candidate could be enclosed with council tax notifications. Two-thirds agree that party organisations are the best means for recruiting new candidates but only 45 per cent think that councillors are in the best position to do this.

Is there scope for more proactive measures designed to cast the net for candidates more widely? While 46 per cent support the idea of local authorities advertising for candidates around a third disagrees. There is slightly less support for a national advertising campaign; 43 per cent are in favour but 30 per cent are neutral and 27 per cent against.

Although there is some support for such proposals it is clear that candidates believe the problem of under-represented groups follows from the unwillingness of such people to come forward rather than from any selection bias. While 31 per cent agree that local parties don't do enough to recruit more women, for example, a greater proportion, 44 per cent , take a contrary view. The prevailing thinking is that not enough women are prepared to stand for election – almost seven in 10 candidates agree with this as an explanation for a shortage of women. The candidate shortage is not because women are uninterested in politics (only 15 per cent think this) or that they lack confidence (only 23 per cent believe this is an issue). Much more important, it seems, is that women predominantly have caring roles (68 per cent agree that women place families above political careers). Less important, but still endorsed by a majority of respondents, is agreement that women don't stand because of a dislike for

confrontational politics and the negative image of council benches occupied mostly by middle-aged white men.

An average of one in five candidates responding to questions about factors affecting women's recruitment preferred the 'neutral' position. A similar set of questions about BAME people saw that average rise to over a third. Four in 10 disagree that this group is under-represented because of a lack of interest in politics and a similar number disagree that lack of confidence is an issue. There is, it appears, a prevailing view that members of this group are discouraged because of the white councillor stereotype. Around four in 10 of our respondents maintain that political parties don't do enough to recruit such candidates but a larger proportion, over two thirds, believe that too few BAME people come forward for selection.

Respondents that feel younger people are under-represented because they are not interested in politics outnumber by two to one those taking the opposite view. Four in 10 agree that they lack the confidence but the same fraction disagree. A majority believe that whatever the cause of under-representation it is not because younger people put family before politics. Similarly, the confrontational style of local politics is not regarded as an obstacle to standing.

**Local government's image does seem relevant;**

six in 10 candidates agree that younger people are discouraged from standing because of councillor stereotypes. There is also clear agreement from two thirds of candidates that parties should do more to recruit, but rather more, 86 per cent of all respondents, put the blame on younger people for not coming forward to be selected.

Another salient issue affecting local government is the willingness of many councillors to serve

beyond one elected term. Having acquired some vital skills and experience from sitting on the council benches for four years a sizeable fraction voluntarily decide to stand down. The candidates were asked to select the reasons that might cause councillors to stand down. The most popular reason, chosen by 82 per cent of respondents, is that being a councillor is simply too time consuming. This is closely followed by the problems of balancing a political career and family commitments and the need to request leave from work, each of which is selected by three-quarters of respondents.

Less than a majority, 46 per cent, thought that the trigger to stand down is a lack of power among councillors while 36 per cent think the catalyst is either insufficient expenses or party political domination. Only one in four feel that is either intrusive media coverage or insufficient support from the local authority that produces early retirements. The least selected option, councillors retire after achieving their aims and ambitions, is chosen by just 17 per cent of respondents.

## Candidates: an overview

The 2009 national candidates' survey is the fourth in a series and provides an opportunity to study the whole of the local election cycle – since 2006 every local authority in England and Wales has held at least one election. In

this section, across the range of local authority types, we compare the findings about the people that contest elections, the nature of election campaigning and attitudes about the supply of candidates for selection.

**Table 3: Men and women candidates (%)**

		Men	Women
London Boroughs	First time candidate	61.1	38.9
	Incumbent	65.3	34.7
	All candidates	63.9	36.1
Metropolitan Boroughs	First time candidate	57.7	42.3
	Incumbent	68.9	31.1
	All candidates	66.8	33.2
District/Unitary (Whole)	First time candidate	63.6	36.4
	Incumbent	70.7	29.3
	All candidates	68.1	31.9
District/Unitary (Thirds)	First time candidate	61.5	38.5
	Incumbent	68.6	31.4
	All candidates	67.2	32.8
Shire Counties	First time candidate	70.1	29.9
	Incumbent	74.6	25.4
	All candidates	72.9	27.1
All authorities	First time candidate	63.0	37.0
	Incumbent	70.6	29.4
	All candidates	68.3	31.7



The report provides details for all candidates but makes an important distinction between two critical candidate types – those standing at their first local election and those seeking re-election as incumbents. Comparing these types is vital

when assessing any likely future changes in the composition, experience and attitudes of local councillors.

Women comprise less than a third of all local

**Table 4: Mean age (years)**

		Mean age (years)
London Boroughs	First time candidate	44.3
	Incumbent	53.5
	All candidates	50.1
Metropolitan Boroughs	First time candidate	45.5
	Incumbent	56.6
	All candidates	52.1
District/Unitary (Whole)	First time candidate	52.8
	Incumbent	58.3
	All candidates	56.3
District/Unitary (Thirds)	First time candidate	48.2
	Incumbent	58.5
	All candidates	53.8
Shire Counties	First time candidate	52.3
	Incumbent	60.2
	All candidates	57.4
All authorities	First time candidate	49.6
	Incumbent	58.3
	All candidates	54.8

election candidates (Table 3). The highest proportion, 36.1 per cent, contests London borough elections while the English shire counties attract the lowest proportion, just 27.1 per cent of candidates contesting these

seats are women. There is most likely a variety of explanations for this difference, including geography, population density, demographic characteristics and political culture, to name but a few. Among the shire districts and unitaries,

		White	Non-white
London Boroughs	First time candidate	82.6	17.4
	Incumbent	73.9	26.1
	All candidates	84.1	15.9
Metropolitan Boroughs	First time candidate	95.8	4.2
	Incumbent	95.4	4.6
	All candidates	96.3	3.7
District/Unitary (Whole)	First time candidate	96.9	3.1
	Incumbent	98.9	1.1
	All candidates	98.3	1.7
District/Unitary (Thirds)	First time candidate	96.9	3.1
	Incumbent	98.5	1.5
	All candidates	97.7	2.3
Shire Counties	First time candidate	98.8	1.2
	Incumbent	97.4	2.6
	All candidates	98.2	1.8
All authorities	First time candidate	95.3	4.7
	Incumbent	96.8	3.2
	All candidates	96.7	3.3

areas that conduct annual elections are similar to areas that hold whole council elections every fourth year.

Some encouragement for proponents of the modernisation agenda is that in each type of local authority the proportion of women is higher amongst first time candidates than amongst incumbents. Whilst the replacement of the existing councillor base may be relatively slow the evidence suggests that the proportion of women may eventually rise, albeit by a rather small amount.

The mean age of all candidates is 54.8 years but there is an almost ten-year gap between first time candidates and incumbent councillors; the mean age of the latter is 58.3 years (Table 4). The oldest incumbents are found contesting seats in the shire authorities, both county and district level, whilst the youngest are living in London and doubtless reflect the prevailing demographic. In the more densely populated urban areas, including London and the metropolitan boroughs, the mean age of first time candidates is a relatively youthful 44.3 and 45.5 years respectively. However, the mean age of first time candidates outside of these areas is mostly the wrong side of 50! Population demographics generally offers the most likely explanation for any differences between areas but the data in general offer little prospect of greatly increased numbers of younger people being elected to local government.

One of the biggest challenges facing UK political parties is their ability to attract members and activists from non-white ethnic groups who accounted for around 9 per cent of the population at the 2001 census. There are very few Members of Parliament drawn from BAME groups and the picture for local government is little better; there is still a real shortage of such people both standing as candidates and being elected.

Unsurprisingly, the London boroughs, some of which contain the UK's highest concentrations of BAME, also have the highest proportion of non-white candidates (Table 5). Across London, one in six candidates are found in this category. This figure far exceeds that found elsewhere, even among the metropolitan boroughs where the BAME population is above the national average in some cases. For some reason, not revealed by these data, the recruitment of BAME candidates in London appears better than that for other urban areas. At the 2009 shire county elections less than one in 50 candidates was of a non-white ethnic origin.

There is no clear pattern in the different proportions of white/non-white candidates that are either contesting their first local election and incumbents. In London, for example, almost three in 10 incumbents but only two in 10 of first time candidates are non-white. By contrast, in district and unitary authorities the percentage of non-white people among new candidates is twice as large as that for incumbents, albeit from a very low base.

As a general rule elected representatives are disproportionately drawn from among those with degree level qualifications and local government is no exception (Table 6). Better educated people tend to participate more in politics than those with less formal education. This pattern is very much in evidence, not only among elected councillors it seems but also among those that may challenge for office but fail to get elected.

More than half of all candidates that contested a local election in the past four years held at least a university degree or its equivalent – in a large number of cases the candidate had also earned a higher level degree. **Less than one in 10 candidates has no formal educational qualification.**



There are some rather interesting details lying beneath the surface. In London, for example, almost three in four of first time candidates possess a degree qualification but among

incumbent councillors the proportion is lower. For the metropolitan boroughs the ratios are reversed, with incumbents more likely to hold a degree than new candidates. There are also

**Table 6: Educational qualifications (%)**

		no formal qualifications	GCSE or A level	Degree level
London Boroughs	First time candidate	3.3	25.0	71.7
	Incumbent	2.8	42.3	54.9
	All candidates	3.8	27.7	68.5
Metropolitan Boroughs	First time candidate	8.5	50.0	41.5
	Incumbent	10.3	38.9	50.8
	All candidates	8.6	39.5	51.9
District/Unitary (Whole)	First time candidate	7.6	43.3	49.0
	Incumbent	11.4	44.0	44.6
	All candidates	9.0	42.3	48.7
District/Unitary (Thirds)	First time candidate	9.1	36.8	54.1
	Incumbent	10.2	49.4	40.4
	All candidates	8.0	38.9	53.1
Shire Counties	First time candidate	6.9	38.7	54.3
	Incumbent	9.9	41.7	48.4
	All candidates	8.8	34.8	56.4
All authorities	First time candidate	7.5	39.1	53.4
	Incumbent	10.2	44.2	45.6
	All candidates	8.2	38.3	53.6

contrasts among the shire district and unitary authorities. Among the authorities with whole council elections there is virtually no difference in educational qualification between first-time and

experienced candidates but the picture is varied for authorities holding more frequent elections.

The relatively high level of educational

**Table 7: Occupational status (%)**

		Professional	managerial/ technical	Other
London Boroughs	First time candidate	56.4	25.5	18.1
	Incumbent	53.4	31.5	15.1
	All candidates	56.6	27.1	16.3
Metropolitan Boroughs	First time candidate	39.1	24.5	36.4
	Incumbent	50.4	28.5	21.1
	All candidates	44.9	29.6	25.5
District/Unitary (Whole)	First time candidate	50.8	26.0	23.3
	Incumbent	48.3	28.0	23.7
	All candidates	50.3	27.1	22.6
District/Unitary (Thirds)	First time candidate	52.5	25.8	21.7
	Incumbent	43.9	31.9	24.2
	All candidates	50.2	27.2	22.7
Shire Counties	First time candidate	54.2	22.9	22.9
	Incumbent	49.5	32.3	18.2
	All candidates	53.7	27.1	19.1
All authorities	First time candidate	51.4	25.3	23.3
	Incumbent	47.9	30.3	21.8
	All candidates	50.8	27.5	21.8

qualification amongst candidates is reflected in the proportion holding either a professional or managerial/technical occupation (current or former in the case of the retired/unemployed).

Half are in a professional occupation while more than a quarter are engaged in managerial or technical work. There are very few manual or non-manual workers among the candidates

<b>Table 8: Employment status (%)</b>		Full/Part-time	Self-employed	Retired	Other
London Boroughs	First time candidate	58.3	14.1	12.8	14.7
	Incumbent	50.7	18.7	26.7	4.0
	All candidates	53.8	16.4	21.4	8.4
Metropolitan Boroughs	First time candidate	38.0	20.7	15.7	25.6
	Incumbent	46.8	8.1	40.3	4.8
	All candidates	46.2	12.3	28.9	12.5
District/Unitary (Whole)	First time candidate	38.1	20.9	27.9	13.1
	Incumbent	34.7	21.6	37.6	6.0
	All candidates	37.2	19.6	35.1	8.1
District/Unitary (Thirds)	First time candidate	48.7	16.3	20.0	14.9
	Incumbent	35.2	16.1	40.6	8.1
	All candidates	46.0	14.4	29.7	10.0
Shire Counties	First time candidate	32.4	19.1	32.4	16.2
	Incumbent	24.4	20.1	44.5	11.0
	All candidates	33.6	18.4	37.8	10.2
All authorities	First time candidate	43.0	18.4	23.1	15.5
	Incumbent	34.5	18.4	39.7	7.5
	All candidates	41.6	16.6	32.1	9.7

contesting local elections.

The general pattern is that first time candidates are slightly more likely to hold a professional occupation than do incumbents; a notable

exception is those contesting seats in the metropolitan boroughs. Here, there appears to be larger proportion of people contesting that have an occupation other than the professional/managerial categories. London boroughs and

**Table 9: Candidates and ward residence (%)**

		No	Yes
London Boroughs	First time candidate	59.9	40.1
	Incumbent	43.9	56.1
	All candidates	57.6	42.4
Metropolitan Boroughs	First time candidate	55.3	44.7
	Incumbent	42.3	57.7
	All candidates	51.5	48.5
District/Unitary (Whole)	First time candidate	41.8	58.2
	Incumbent	32.7	67.3
	All candidates	39.6	60.4
District/Unitary (Thirds)	First time candidate	45.6	54.4
	Incumbent	38.6	61.4
	All candidates	46.5	53.5
Shire Counties	First time candidate	50.0	50.0
	Incumbent	35.2	64.8
	All candidates	41.0	59.0
All authorities	First time candidate	47.6	52.4
	Incumbent	36.4	63.6
	All candidates	44.9	55.1

shire counties contain the highest percentage of professionals among the ranks of new candidates. One of the most enduring criticisms of local government is that it is dominated by people that are retired from work. This is certainly borne out to an extent by our survey data but the picture is perhaps more complex than the stereotype suggests (Table 8).

Overall, about a third of candidates are retired from work, another four in 10 are either employed full or part-time while one in six are self-employed. Generally, four in 10 incumbents are retired, compared to just half that number amongst the first-time challengers. The percentage of self-employed is the same for both categories but first time candidates are rather more likely to be employees. The detailed evidence reveals a significant larger proportion of retired people contesting elections in the shire counties and in district areas with whole council elections, many of which are in rural or suburban areas. By contrast, only one in five candidates that contest a London borough election is retired. The self-employed are more in evidence at shire council elections than in those for the metropolitan boroughs. While employees comprise a majority in London they are only a third of the candidates contesting the shire county elections. Of course, much of this patterning reflects local employment patterns but it does serve to highlight that blanket descriptions of local councillors (and candidates for that matter) are not terribly useful in understanding the broad issues of candidate recruitment and councillor retention.

One of the major difficulties faced by parties affects the supply of candidates – it is seldom easy to find sufficient people willing to stand for the available vacancies. Whilst local parties probably prefer to select candidates that are resident in the ward this may not always be practical, particularly for some of the smaller

parties. Table 9 shows for each type of local authority, the percentage of candidates that resided inside or outside the ward that they contested.

A majority, 55 per cent, of all candidates that stand for local election live in the ward that they contest. Geography impacts quite considerably on the ratio between residents and non-resident challengers however. In the English counties and shires areas with whole council elections, around six in 10 candidates reside in the wards that they contest. But in London (where wards are geographically compact) that percentage drops to 42 per cent while it is a little higher, 48.5 per cent, in the metropolitan boroughs.

There are also marked differences between incumbents and first-time candidates; 64 per cent of all incumbents are ward residents but only 52 per cent of first time candidates meet that criterion. In every type of local authority a majority of incumbents reside in the ward which they represent on the council. The range between the highest (67.3 per cent in the whole council districts/unitaries) and lowest (56.1 per cent London boroughs) suggests that all local parties with a realistic chance of winning the seat prefer candidates that are also ward residents. By contrast, first-time candidates are somewhat less likely to fulfil a residency requirement. This is particularly the case for the smaller political parties, many of whose candidates live outside the ward that they contest.

### Conclusions

The problem of under-representation of certain social groups in our democracy shows no sign of abating – it is an issue that affects a future House of Commons as well as local councils. This report shows that the situation in 2009 continues the trend – not enough women, people of Black, Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds,

and not enough younger people, are contesting and winning local elections. What this report also suggests is that there are no simple solutions to this intractable problem.

National party leaders presenting a case for positive action measures risk alienating the rank and file activists. It is these activists that stand as candidates for local election. Affirmative action also runs the risk of being a quick fix that ignores the underlying causes of under-representation. Correctly identifying those causes presents a difficult task. **Our respondents acknowledge that local political parties could do more to recruit among some groups but the prevailing sentiment is that, for a variety of reasons, people either do not present themselves for selection or reject overtures to stand.** There are some well-publicised examples where targeted recruitment drives to attract more women, BAME and younger people have been successful but the investment in time and resources is heavy. Overcoming a common prejudice about life as a councillor and the pressures this seemingly puts on people's private lives will not be achieved overnight. But, if recruitment drives by local political parties aimed at diminishing the dominance of white middle-aged men are to succeed then more attention has to be given to removing the obstacles, real and perceived, that discourage people from standing.

A start might be made by publicising the evidence that **candidates overwhelmingly retain a positive feeling about their experience.** The hours are long on the campaign trail and most, of course, do not succeed in their bid to be elected. If there is disappointment in falling short the candidates do not show it; indeed, a large majority are pleased to have stood and would do so again. These are not empty expressions of fake enthusiasm. Many

candidates stand more than once, even though by the second and third time around they are aware of the time and resources required. **For so many to repeat the experience suggests that the benefits of standing outweigh the costs.** A majority of candidates are asked to stand and do so for reasons that include a wish to give something back to their local community, to assist their party in a time of need or to lend their voice to some issue or another. These positive stories of political engagement are the ones that should be widely circulated if the pool of candidates is to be expanded and the face of local government altered in the future.



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