

Forget quotas for women MPs – time to limit the number of men

August 19 2014, by Rainbow Murray



C'mon fellers – the 21st century is this way... Credit: Rebacca Naden/PA Wire

When we talk about "gender quotas", what we really mean is quotas for women. We see the under-representation of women as the problem that needs fixing. So we try to explain why there aren't more women in politics, then look at measures to boost women's representation.

The result is that [women](#) are subjected to intense scrutiny and suspicion. Is it appropriate to select candidates based on sex rather than merit – and do we risk replacing competent [men](#) with incompetent women?

Conventional arguments are misguided because they assume that the current system is a meritocracy, which in fact is not the case. We overlook the problems caused specifically by having too many men and do not subject men to the same scrutiny as women. Yet we know that women face many barriers to entering politics, including discriminatory attitudes and [sexist media coverage](#). If the playing field isn't really level then men enjoy an unfair advantage.

There is no evidence to support the notion that men are naturally superior in their ability to represent others. But if men are not naturally better at politics, then the political talent pool should be fairly evenly divided between the sexes. If men make up 50% of the talent pool, but 80% of those elected, clearly [meritocracy is not working](#).

So instead of gender quotas giving an unfair "leg-up" to mediocre women, they might actually allow in the talent that is currently being blocked out by the mediocre men, who benefited from preferential treatment based on their sex. Hence, they might enable us for the first time to select candidates based on merit rather than sex – the exact opposite of what their detractors fear. Instead of restricting political opportunities to a small sub-section of society – [mostly rich white men](#) – we would be making more efficient use of the whole of the nation's talent pool.

Jobs for the boys

It is time to reframe gender quotas as quotas for men. We should introduce quotas to limit the number of men in power, ensuring that only the best and brightest of both sexes prevail. This would mean placing

much more scrutiny on the credentials of men, rather than taking their competence for granted. To achieve a true [meritocracy](#) we also need more effective and meaningful criteria for judging merit.

The current criteria are woefully inadequate and deeply subjective which means they are frequently manipulated to favour male insiders. How about starting with a proper job description and person specification for MPs so we can measure candidates against more transparent and objective criteria?

This would make it easier for outsiders – such as women and ethnic minorities – to demonstrate their worth. It would also ensure the reduction of men's share of seats down to proportionate levels would be done as fairly as possible.

One additional advantage of quotas for men is that they would prompt us to think more about how men are represented in politics. There is a lot of research on "women's issues" and women's interests, but it is taken for granted that men's needs are met because there are so many men in politics. But as with merit, we may be too complacent in our belief that the current system is working.

The aggressive masculinity that dominates political environments is off-putting to a lot of men as well as women, and it can keep important issues off the agenda if they are seen as too sensitive or embarrassing. Having a better gender balance would benefit both sexes if it makes [politics](#) more inclusive for men too. And having a political class based on talent rather than privilege, representing all rather than just some, would raise the quality of representation for everybody.

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