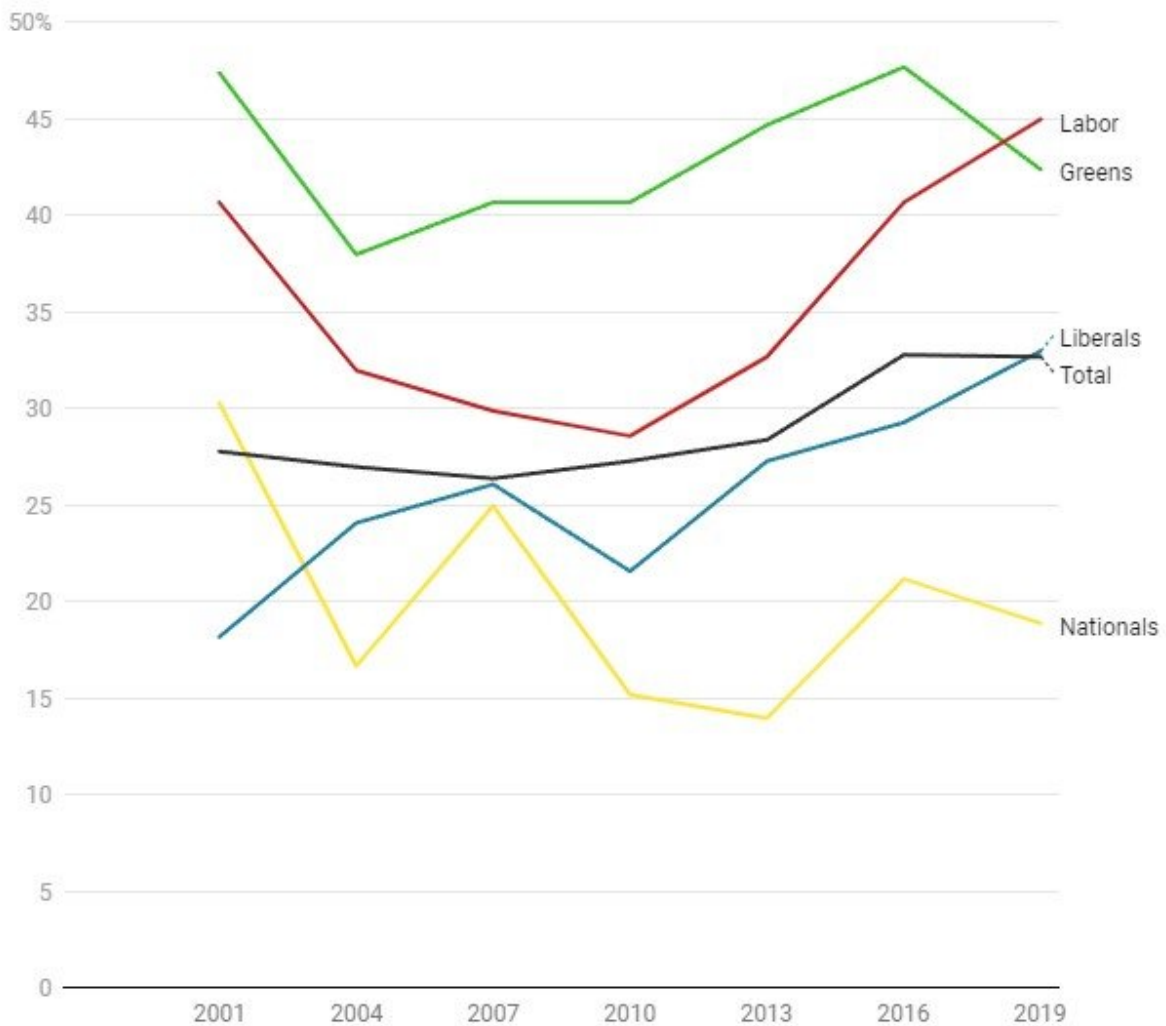


Why are there so few women Members of Parliament? Research shows discrimination against women candidates

September 29 2021, by Ferran Martinez I Coma, Duncan McDonnell

Percentage of women candidates by party



Australian women have long been under-represented in parliament. Although our country was the first in the world to give women the right to stand for election, we currently [rank](#) 56th in the world for female representation, just behind Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe, Germany and Suriname.

By comparison, New Zealand is sixth.

So why, in 2021, do we have a situation where less than one-third of MPs in the House of Representatives are [women](#)?

In our [newly published research](#), we investigated whether the low numbers were due to discrimination of [female candidates](#) by voters or political parties. We found that while Australian voters used to preference men over women at the polls, they don't tend to any more. Parties, on the other hand, do.

There are several ways in which parties can impede women getting elected. One is simply not to put them forward as candidates. Another slightly more subtle way is by preselecting them to stand for unsafe or marginal seats.

With this approach, you get to tick a box and maybe meet a quota, but you're not making a genuine attempt to create real change.

More women candidates, but fewer in safe seats

Australian voters have a history of preferring male candidates over

female ones. [Studies in the past](#) have shown that women candidates of the major parties in Australia in the 1990s and the early 2000s obtained proportionately fewer votes than men.

We wanted to see if this had changed in the 21st century.

In our study, we looked at all federal House elections since 2001 to see how many candidates were women, whether they were running for safe seats, and if voters tended to support them less than men. We used the same definition of an unsafe or marginal seat as the [Australian Electoral Commission](#).

Our research included data from 2001–19 on all 7,271 House candidates, of whom 2,101 were women.

In terms of the raw numbers, we found that Labor has increased its proportion of women candidates over the past two decades, reaching a high of 45% at the 2019 election. This placed it ahead of all other parties, including, for the first time, the Greens (42.4% in 2019).

The Liberals also fielded their largest percentage of female candidates in 2019 at 33%.

While Labor has done particularly well in terms of how many women it has put forward, it has less to brag about when it comes to the seats these women are contesting.

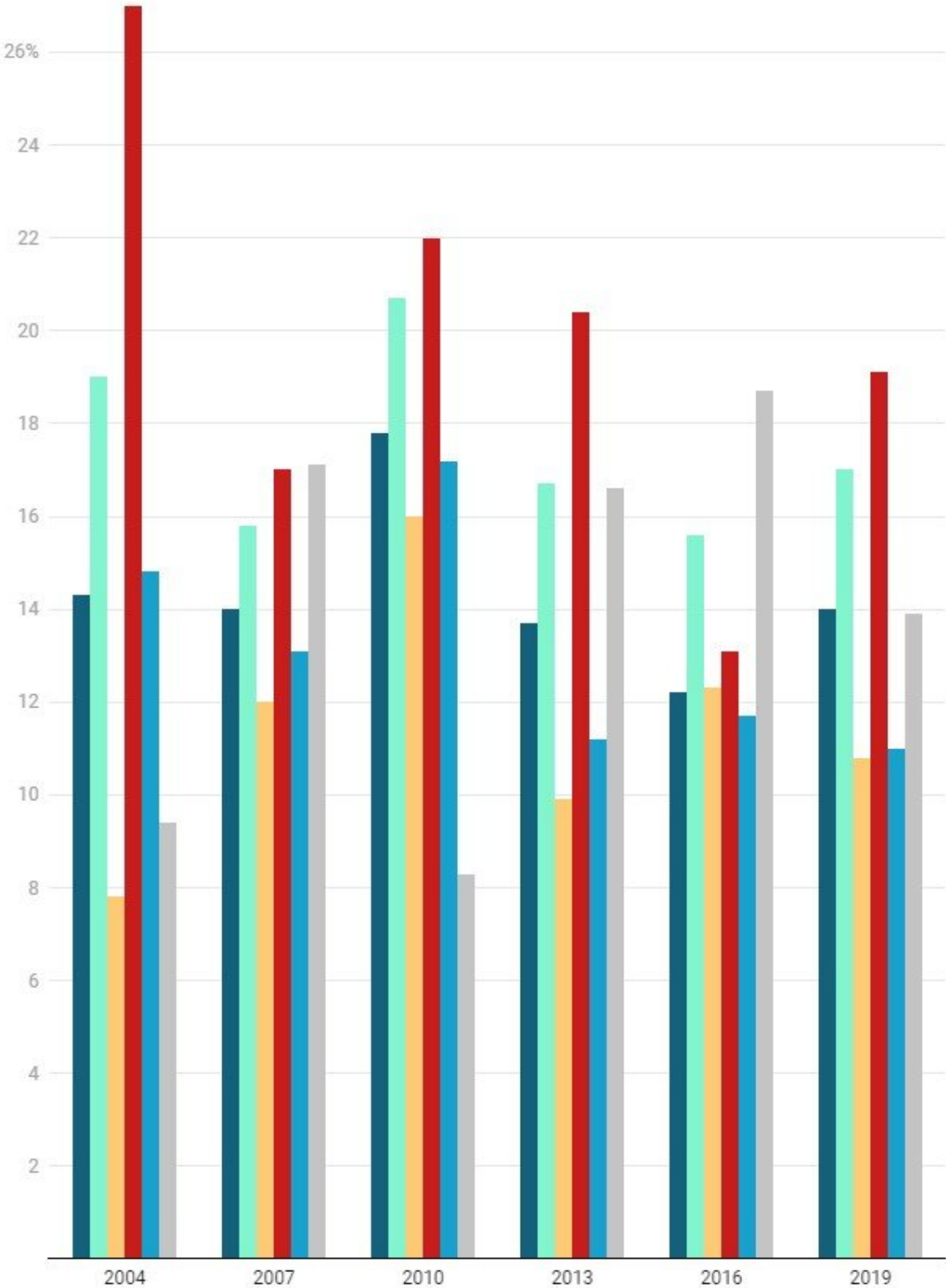
In fact, Labor has stood women in more unsafe seats than men at each lower House election since 2001. In 2019, 19.1% of women standing for the ALP were in unsafe seats, compared to 10.8% of men.

The Liberals had a smaller percentage of women in unsafe seats than men in two elections (2004, 2010), but a higher percentage in the other

four. In 2019, 13.9% of women standing for the Liberals were in unsafe seats, compared to 11% of men.

Percentage of candidates standing in unsafe seats

Men overall Women overall Men Labor Women Labor Men Liberals Women Liberals



Voters tend not to discriminate against women

While major parties are continuing to discriminate against women in this way (and others), we find a different story with voters.

Across all House seats, female Labor candidates have actually performed substantially better with voters than male candidates at four elections (2004, 2007, 2010 and 2013) and worse in just two (2001 and 2019).

As for female Liberals candidates, it's more mixed. They performed better than male candidates in 2001 and 2010, but not in the three subsequent elections.

That's still a much rosier picture than for female Nationals candidates, who have always done worse than their male counterparts.

When we ran further statistical checks, we discovered that, if everything else that might affect vote numbers is held constant (such as the marginality of the seat, [number](#) of other candidates, incumbency, and so on), female Labor candidates receive around 1,400 more votes per seat than male Labor candidates in the 2001-19 period.

In those same conditions, with all else held constant, Liberal voters don't tend to favor women over men (or vice versa), and the same is true of the Greens.

What can parties do to address this?

So, what do our findings mean for Australia's parties if they really want to increase the number of women in parliament?

First, quotas work. Only Labor has used enforceable quotas to try to increase the number of women among its candidate base—and it has succeeded.

Similar binding quotas would not only boost the number of female candidates put forward by the Coalition parties and the Greens, but would also likely have an impact on the numbers of women eventually elected to parliament.

But Labor cannot rest on its laurels. Our results show it needs to build on its quota system by standing more women in winnable seats. If it does not, it leaves itself open to accusations of box-ticking.

Fielding more women in seats they can genuinely win is in the interests not only of [political parties](#), but of democracy in Australia.

For reasons of representation, women should account for more seats than they currently do. Moreover, there are benefits for the country's political culture: [research](#) has shown that women in parliament are often more collegial and more inclined to find bipartisan solutions.

In short, given that Australian voters no longer tend to preference men over women when it comes to candidates, it is surely not in the interests of the major parties to continue to do so, either.

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