

The boys hold their own: candidate gender in the 2007 federal elections

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Most attention in the 2007 federal Australian election is concentrated on the major parties competing to form government. Both the Coalition Government and Labor Opposition are led by men, as is the junior Coalition partner, the National Party. The minor parties with representation in the Senate are the Greens, led by a man and the Democrats. While this latter party is led by a woman, many observers expect a continued decline in the Democrat vote and she may well lose her seat. The impression of male domination of the election is further enforced by an examination of the candidates who have nominated for the House of Representatives and for the Senate. The raw data on candidate gender and party affiliation below are drawn from the *Electoral Newsfile* of the Australian Electoral Commission, *Newsfile 119* (2004) and *Newsfile 135* (2007). As the male and female % add to 100%, only the male % of the total has been calculated. This has been done deliberately because continually focussing on female politicians has no convincing rationale and the methodology has negative consequences for the public perception of them.

Table 1: Nominations for the 2004 election: Source AEC Newsfile 119

	F	%	Male	%	Other	Totals
Senate	107		223	67.57		330
House	299		791	72.50	1	1091
	406		1014	71.35	1	1421

Table 2: Nominations for the 2007 election: Source AEC Newsfile 135

	F	%	Male	%	Other	Totals
Senate	135		231	62.94	1	367
House	272		782	74.19		1054
	407		1013	71.28	1	1421

The aggregates in Tables 1 & 2 show that at a little over 71% of candidates, the blokes remain the dominant force in Australian elections. Their grip on nominations for the House is 1.7% higher in 2007 than in 2004, while they constitute a smaller majority of Senate nominations, even though their candidate numbers grew from 223 to 231. This is because in 2004, 26.35% of all female candidates ran for the Senate, but in 2007, 33.16% of female candidates are running for the Senate.

Both push and pull factors could explain the changes. It is possible that female candidates have abandoned the House (down from 299 to 272) because they realise the difficulty of

being elected there. Their nominations for the Senate are up from 107 to 135 and this could reflect faith in the controversial idea that the Senate proportional representation system is slightly less favourable to men than is the single member system used in House elections. A higher presence of women in upper houses definitely reflects the fact that their electoral systems favour non-major parties, and these are often newer and less prejudiced against women than Labor and the Coalition, whose longer histories created traditions in times when the public and private spheres were sex-differentiated. It might also reflect the fact that most ambitious men aim for the lower house where government is formed, and regard upper house seats as career backwaters.

The increase in female candidates for the Senate may also reflect women’s status as political outsiders. Perhaps the natural oppositional inclinations of women-as-outsiders has led them to regard the Senate as an important check on executive power. Since 2004, the Coalition Government has controlled both houses of parliament and according to its critics, has used that chamber as a ‘rubber stamp’ for executive actions. In other words, there may be a conscious push among political females to restore the Senate’s status as a genuine house of review. It should be noted however, that these statistics would be distorted considerably had not the men maintained their enthusiasm for gaining entry to the House, where the real action occurs.

The Senate elections

Table 3: Major Party Nominations for the Senate 2004 & 2007 compared

	Female	%	Male	%	Totals
Liberals					
2004	7		19	73.07	26
2007	10		15	60.00	25
Nationals					
2004	3		8	72.72	11
2007	1		9	90.00	10
Labor					
2004	11		16	59.25	27
2007	15		12	44.44	27

Table 3 shows that both the Liberal Party and Labor have endorsed fewer men in 2007 than they did in 2004. As both parties also endorsed more women for the Senate, the male proportion of candidates fell markedly in each case. The more remarkable fall perhaps occurred in Labor ranks, where men are now under half of all candidates. Only the Nationals gave greater endorsement to men, and that was by just one – up from 8 to 9. However, when matched by a fall in female candidates, the percentage of males (90%) looks extreme.

Almost certainly, cultural factors are at play here. Country Labor candidates for the House are mostly male also. It nominated 5 males and 2 females in 2004 and 4 males (80.00%) and 1 female in 2007. This disparity suggests that the male domination of the

primarily rural National Party might be attributable to general cultural factors such as an old fashioned belief that the masculine bush seats are best serviced by male MPs. On the other hand, two of the Coalition's safest NSW seats Farrer (Liberal) and Riverina (Nationals) are held by women.

The numbers of candidates can be deceptive. What is important in the Senate election is where a candidate is positioned. In the states, it is usually assumed that each major party will secure two seats of the six on offer. In the territories, the major parties return one Senator each. So, being in third place on the list is considered perilous.

Labor has placed males at the top of their Senate tickets for NSW, SA, Tasmania and Queensland. In Tasmania and Queensland, the male is a sitting Senator. In Tasmania, the number two spot is held by a female sitting Senator. In both NSW and SA the party has placed sitting female Senators in third and second spots. In both territories, sitting female senators head the ticket and in Victoria and WA females also head the ticket.

The Coalition has a joint ticket in NSW where a sitting Liberal female senator heads the ticket. She is followed by a male Nationals candidate, then by another female sitting senator. The joint ticket in Queensland is head by a male sitting senator. The Victorian ticket is headed by a male. In WA the Liberal ticket has 2 male sitting senators at the head, while the Nationals have a male candidate heading their ticket. In SA the Liberals have three sitting senators, female, male and then male. In Tasmania they have two sitting males. In the ACT they have a sitting male senator. In the NT, the Liberal Country Party has a sitting male.

It seems as though the representations are even, except for the placing of male candidates above sitting female Senators in NSW (Labor and Coalition) and SA (Labor). In SA, the female senator is placed second, which is usually winnable. In NSW, one of the major party senators placed third will probably have difficulty securing re-election. Nowhere has a sitting male senator been placed below a new female candidate. Only in SA, where there are three sitting Liberal senators, does a female head a sitting male senator.

Minor party nominations are interesting. In 2004, the Democrats ran 14 females and 8 males for the Senate. The Greens ran 14 females and 10 males. For the House, the Democrats ran 44 females and 81 males. The Greens ran 44 females and 67 males, with another candidate not declaring gender. In both cases, the majorities were reversed. This suggests that there are differences between the chambers. Even in the newer, supposedly less sexist minor parties, males seem determined to contest seats for the lower house where the power really lies. There is an alternative explanation. Because almost all lower house seats are won by major party candidates, it could be that males in the Greens and Democrats step forward to fly the flag and to maximise party presence at all polling booths. This is vital for a successful senate campaign.

In 2007 for the Senate the Greens have again nominated more women: 17 females, nine males and one not declaring gender. With 45 females and 69 males nominated for the house, the pattern is similar. Interestingly, the Democrats have 32 females and 54 males

in the House elections but in the Senate, only six females and 12 males. This might be cyclical, but it might also be explained by trends within the party, and particularly, by the fate of Natasha Stott-Despoja as leader. The Democrats have males heading in Queensland and the two territories. In Victoria the ticket is head by a female sitting senator. The Greens have males heading in Victoria, WA, NT and Tasmania (a sitting Senator). The NSW ticket is headed by a female sitting senator.

In 2004 for the Senate, Family First ran seven females and 10 males. It ran 13 females and 10 males for the House. In 2007, the Senate figures are 13 and 10, and for the House 42 and 87. As with the Democrats, the 2007 Senate nominations need explanation. Presumably, the high House nomination rate reflects the political understanding that having House candidates makes Senate campaigning more practical. Family First has males heading the tickets in NSW, Victoria, Queensland and SA. It has no candidates in the territories.

The House elections

Table 4: Major party nominations for the House 2004 & 2007 compared

	Female	%	Male	%	Totals
Liberals					
2004	29		102	77.86	131
2007	31		101	76.51	132
Nationals					
2004	5		19	79.16	24
2007	6		18	75.00	24
Labor					
2004	46		104	69.33	150
2007	45		105	70.00	150

Table 4 shows that the numbers of males nominating for the House have remained constant between 2004 and 2007. Between 75% and 80% candidates for the Coalition are male, and around 70% Labor candidates are male. How this squares with Labor's target of ensuring that 40% of candidates in winnable seats are female is unclear.

Just as position on the Senate ballot paper is crucial for a real chance of election, so too is the marginality of seats in the House. Analysts usually consider how safe seats are allocated according to gender. Coincidentally perhaps, males are defending eight of the ten safest seats of both the Coalition and of Labor. As Table 4 shows, 80% in unlosable seats is slightly higher than the percentage of candidates in each case. In Coalition seats, Labor has preselected eight male challengers, while the Coalition has nominated seven males in the ten Labor seats. So three Coalition women face unwinnable contests compared with Labor's two.

Labor needs to secure 16 Coalition seats in order to form government. According to Antony Green's electoral pendulum, the 16 most marginal Coalition held seats are:

Kingston, Bonner, Wakefield, Parramatta, Makin, Braddon, Hasluck, Stirling, Wentworth, Bass, Moreton, Solomon, Lindsay, Eden-Monaro, Bennelong and Dobell. Of these, none is held by a female MP. Karen Chijoff is the Liberal candidate in Lindsay, replacing the retiring Jackie Kelly. Fifteen seats have male Coalition candidates.

In these key seats, Labor has preselected male challengers in all but Kingston, Bonner, Hasluck, Bass, Bennelong and Parramatta. In Parramatta the sitting Labor MP is Julie Owens, but the seat is notionally Liberal following redistribution. The Liberal candidate is male. Of these 16 crucial seats, 9 will see all male contests, and none has an all female contest. Twenty-five of the 32 key candidates are male. Six of the seven women involved are from Labor. This could reflect many factors. On the one hand, preselection in a marginal is not considered to be very desirable when safe seats are available. On the other hand, preselection in a crucial marginal could be an indication that the party places its trust in the candidate.

If Labor wins those seats and fails to defend its own, then it will not secure government. The 11 most marginal Labor seats are Hindmarsh, Swan, Macquarie, Cowan, Bendigo, Adelaide, Richmond, Holt, Isaacs, Ballarat and Chisholm.

Of these 11 seats, three are held by Labor women. In Adelaide and Ballarat, there are female Liberal challengers, and in Chisholm a male. Richmond is vacant and the Labor and National candidates are both female. Cowan is also vacant and Labor has selected a female candidate to defend that seat. So, while five of Labor's marginals involve all male contests, and there are male candidates in 8 seats, five of Labor's 11 crucial seats are being defended by women. Labor officials would no doubt say that at close to a half, female representation in their own marginals is strong, especially when compared with the Coalition figure of one in sixteen in theirs. The Coalition has preselected 4 women to contest the Labor seats, the three mentioned above and Hindmarsh. Its officials would no doubt think this figure speaks highly of equal opportunity in Coalition ranks. They might also remark cynically that Labor women should have worked harder to increase the margins of their seats.

Conclusion

On 24 November, the voters might very well decide to support some unusual candidates. They have certainly sprung surprises on party tacticians and psephologists in the past. However, the fact remains that in the 27 most marginal seats in the House, 24 involve at least one male candidate for one of the major parties and 14 are all male contests. The Coalition has female candidates in only five of these 27, while Labor has female candidates in 11. The selection of candidates shows clearly that while participation by women has increased over the last two decades, Australian elections remain heavily male dominated.