

All-Women Shortlists: Myths and Realities

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Gender quotas have emerged globally as a key solution for improving women's political representation. Yet in Britain—where they take the form of all-women shortlists (AWS)—they remain contentious, both within and outside political parties. We identify nine common criticisms of AWS in the British context, related to candidate recruitment and selection, party and voter support and the effectiveness of 'quota women' as politicians. Using qualitative and quantitative data, we find that these objections do not hold when subjected to rigorous empirical analysis, suggesting that quotas do not pose a threat to 'merit' at any stage of the political process.

Keywords: All-women shortlists, British politics, Gender quotas, Gender and politics, Labour Party, Women in politics

1. Introduction

Gender quotas have emerged in recent years as an increasingly popular solution to the under-representation of women in elected positions around the globe. By 2014, more than 130 countries had witnessed the adoption of some type of electoral quota, ranging from seats reserved for women, to laws requiring all parties to include female candidates, to party rules committing individual political parties to select more women (Krook, 2009).¹ The impact of these policies, while uneven, has been dramatic, with the world average of women in national parliaments nearly doubling in the last 20 years, from 11.7% in 1997, when the Inter-Parliamentary Union first began to publish world rankings, to 21.8% in 2014.²

Quotas in the British context take the form of all-women shortlists (AWS), a policy introduced by the Labour Party in 1993.³ In other countries, governed by

¹For an updated list, see <http://www.quotaproject.org>.

²See <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world010197.htm> and <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

³Other quota strategies, notably 'twinning' and 'zipping,' have been applied in elections in Scotland and Wales.

proportional representation, quotas typically mandate a percentage of women to be included on party candidate lists. The British electoral system—majoritarian and organised around single-member districts—requires a different strategy, focused on the composition of candidate applicant lists. The Labour policy mandates that only female aspirants be considered in half of the vacant seats the party is likely to win. Shortlisting rules are not restricted to Labour: both Liberal Democrats and Conservatives call for gender-balanced shortlists, such that local parties must consider both male and female aspirants—but are not obliged to select women.

From the beginning, the policy of AWS has proved controversial. While passed by majority vote, the provision attracted strong criticism after it was approved at the 1993 party conference (Squires, 1996). Indeed, the party was sued in 1996 by two male members, arguing before an industrial tribunal that their exclusion from candidate selection violated the terms of the Sex Discrimination Act. Their victory—on questionable legal grounds, according to some—inspired a reform to the Sex Discrimination Act in 2002 to permit parties to use positive action in candidate selection. Set to expire in 2015, the exception was extended in 2010 until the year 2030, permitting Labour—and other parties, should they so desire—to use AWS.

Yet AWS remain contentious, even after two decades. A recent YouGov survey found that 56% of those polled did not support the use of AWS, with UKIP, Conservative, older and male respondents being the most opposed.⁴ Even Harriet Harman, a strong supporter, observes that ‘no one likes AWS’.⁵ The concerns expressed about AWS in Britain are echoed in debates around the globe (Franceschet *et al.*, 2012). But how well-grounded are these objections to gender quotas? Do AWS have the many negative features and consequences attributed to them by opponents? Or, do quotas—contrary to expectations—have any positive effects?

In this article, we identify and evaluate nine common criticisms of AWS in the British context, which—similar to predictions made in other cases—focus on dynamics of candidate recruitment and selection, party and voter support and the effectiveness of ‘quota women’ as politicians. We do not address purely principled objections (i.e., ‘quotas are unfair’), but rather focus on claims—including some principled arguments—referencing assumed realities that can be assessed using empirical data (i.e., ‘quotas are unfair because they undermine merit’). The nine claims we identify emerged as common themes across extensive interviews and comprehensive searches of news coverage around AWS. The data we draw on to evaluate these claims come from various sources, including qualitative interviews conducted in 2012 and 2013 with men and women from the three main parties; as yet unpublished data on candidate selection collected by the Labour Party; original quantitative datasets constructed from publicly-available sources; and

⁴<http://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/08/28/across-the-board-opposition-all-women-shortlists/>.

⁵<http://press.labour.org.uk/post/97961634439/harriet-harman-speech-to-labours-national-womens>.

existing quantitative studies by other scholars. We also include evidence from international studies, whenever possible, to situate these findings in relation to the conclusions reached in other contexts.

We find, in short, that criticisms against these measures do not hold when subjected to rigorous empirical analysis. AWS, much like gender quotas elsewhere, do not facilitate the entry of unqualified women, jeopardise a party's electoral fortunes or lead to the election of sub-par MPs. Rather, they reduce barriers for well-prepared women to stand as candidates, have neutral or positive effects on party vote shares and produce diligent and active MPs. Consistent with emerging research on other countries, these results suggest that quotas are not a threat to 'merit' at any stage of the political process—but rather, may foster diversity while also contributing to positive democratic outcomes.

2. Candidate selection

At their core, quotas constitute technical reforms to candidate selection procedures. As such, it is not surprising that many objections focus on perceptions about what quotas mean for how candidates are chosen and what kinds of individuals benefit from these rules. Few people today are openly opposed to including more women: governments worldwide have signed international commitments to enhance women's role in decision-making (Krook and True, 2012), and both male and female citizens believe that political institutions are more legitimate and democratic when more women are elected (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005). Electing more women is viewed as important for achieving justice, promoting women's interests and making use of women's resources for the good of society (Phillips, 1995).

Despite this broad agreement on the *ends*, however, there is less consensus on the *means* for change: some prefer strategies to increase the supply of female candidates, while others seek to foster demand for women in elected office (Krook and Norris, 2014). Stimulating supply and demand, quotas can be an effective way of interrupting prevailing patterns of political recruitment. For this reason, however, they are decried as 'artificial' measures that undermine 'merit' in candidate selection—concerns that, some suggest, outweigh the projected benefits of greater diversity in political bodies.

2.1 Claim 1: all-women shortlists lead to the selection of 'unqualified' women

Perhaps the number one objection to gender quotas everywhere is that they lead 'unqualified' women to be nominated solely because they are female, without regard to whether they truly deserve to be selected (Franceschet *et al.*, 2012). Yet there are multiple ways to operationalise the concept of 'qualifications' when it

comes to political office-holders (O'Brien, 2012). Furthermore, views on who is a 'good' candidate may vary by country, party and proximity to power. In Britain, prior political experience is one way to measure whether a person is 'qualified' to be a candidate for parliament. This definition is at the heart of Edwina Currie's contention that AWS women 'have skipped several steps so their skills may be deficient' (Ridge, 2013).

To assess this claim, we compiled a dataset of MPs in the last five parliaments, using profiles in *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*, a reference book detailing each MP's career before and in parliament. This dataset includes 3265 MP profiles,⁶ which were coded for previous elected political experience—if any—at the local, regional and European Union levels. We also recorded other variables, like sex, party, and year elected, relevant to the analysis. We then added information on the mode of selection for each Labour woman to denote whether she was currently, previously or never selected on an AWS.

Table 1 reports the mean number of years in elected office prior to entering parliament, broken down by party, sex and—in the case of Labour women—mode of selection. A number of observations can be made. First, women selected via AWS—either at that election or in a previous election—have *higher* levels of political experience than their Labour colleagues, male and female, in every year except 2010, when Labour men have slightly more prior experience. Second, women selected via AWS have the highest level of previous experience of *any group*, regardless of sex or party, in 2001 and 2005, as well as the second highest level in 1997. Third, patterns for the other two parties indicate interesting gender dynamics. Conservative MPs tend to be elected with the fewest years of prior experience, but in every election examined here, the women had more experience than the men. In contrast, experience levels of male versus female Liberal Democrats vary, most likely due to the low numbers of women returned.

Interview data illuminate these counter-intuitive findings. Consistent with research observing that women tend to underestimate their own qualifications, and therefore feel a need to accumulate more experience before they believe themselves qualified to run for office (Lawless and Fox, 2005), an MP recalled a conversation with a party selector who commented, when choosing from an AWS: 'They were all so good; I didn't know who to vote for!' In line with plentiful evidence suggesting that party selectors are often biased against women (Murray *et al.*, 2012), the MP observed that such experiences 'provided an education for party members' that it was possible to have 'brilliant women'. These views are shared by the respondents in Evans' (2008) study of female Liberal Democrats, noting greater support for AWS among MPs and candidates who had stood in multiple elections—who as a result were perhaps more keenly aware of the need to change the mentalities of selectors.

⁶These are not all unique cases, as MPs reelected during this period appear multiple times.

Table 1 Years of prior political experience, sex and party

	1992		1997		2001		2005		2010	
	N	Years								
Lab men	232	6.3	319	7.9	300	8.1	256	8	176	7.8
Lab open women	36	4.6	66	5.0	62	5.7	48	6.1	30	5.7
Lab AWS women			35	8.5	33	9.3	50	8.4	51	6.8
Con men	319	3.5	151	2.8	149	2.8	181	3.2	257	4.4
Con women	19	6.2	14	3.8	13	4.2	17	3.6	49	4.5
LD men	18	1.8	41	7.3	45	7.3	53	7.7	50	8.4
LD women	2	0	3	8.7	5	8.6	9	4.8	7	5.3

Other academic studies on quotas and qualifications reach similar conclusions. A study of men and women elected for the first time in 1997 discovers that the age, education and prior experience of AWS women were comparable with those of Labour men (Allen *et al.*, 2014). Comparisons in other countries find either few differences (Murray, 2010) or that quota women are *more qualified* than their male and female counterparts (O'Brien, 2012; Sater, 2012). Twenty years of Swedish data indicate, furthermore, that the quality of *men* increased after quotas were adopted (Besley *et al.*, 2013). Quotas thus not only open doors for qualified women, but may also raise the quality of MPs overall.

2.2 Claim 2: all-women shortlists provide an 'easy way in' to parliament

A second claim, related to the first, is that AWS—and quotas more generally—allow women to be selected with little competition. The implication is that it is 'easy' to be selected via an AWS, either because few women apply or because women in general lack the qualities to be competitive candidates. In an editorial published in the *Daily Mail*, for example, Austin Mitchell wrote that there appeared to be 'more shortlists than women', with the result that 'AWSs are much shorter than open selections. . . so a lot of talent is being excluded and the range of choice is narrowed' (Mitchell, 2014).

The first part of this claim can be evaluated using data obtained from the Labour Party, which is currently tracking the sex and race of individuals participating in the four stages—applicants, longlists, shortlists and winners—of the selection process for prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs). The dataset used here includes information from 319 constituencies where PPCs have already been chosen for the 2015 elections. Data on all four stages are complete for 107 open seats and 31 AWS seats.

Among the 138 constituencies with full data, the mean total number of applicants for an AWS seat is 6.2, compared with 7.5 for open seats. Among open seats, the mean number of female applicants is 1.3. These findings reveal, first, that there is no statistically significant difference in terms of how many applications are made for AWS versus open seats. AWS seats do not as a whole attract fewer applicants. Second, women who are applying to be considered as PPCs are *four times* more likely to target an AWS selection. While difficult to ascertain without further interview data, this pattern points to what [Geissel and Hust \(2005\)](#) call the ‘mobilising capacity’ of quotas. In a qualitative study of India and Germany, they find that introducing quotas leads women to come forward as candidates who otherwise would not have considered running. In their absence, only women with very high levels of ambition are willing and able to break through the barriers to women’s representation.

The second part of this claim insinuates that women are weaker candidates than men overall, an argument that has already been disproved in a wide range of studies of Britain and other countries (for a review, see [Murray et al., 2012](#)). Furthermore, interviews with Labour women who have gone through the selection process on AWS—sometimes on several occasions—dispute the suggestion that it is ‘easier’ to compete against women. Rather than ‘getting a hand up’, one suggested, it turned out to be more challenging to be selected than elected. Another interviewee, who had also participated in open selections, observed that it was relatively straightforward to distinguish herself among men, but this was much more difficult to do in an all-female field. A third woman described a need to work ‘just as hard’ in an all-women selection. These voices suggest a more nuanced picture of the experience of contesting an AWS from those who have participated.

2.3 Claim 3: black, Asian and minority ethnic women are not selected on all-women shortlists

A third objection to AWS relates to the diversity of women selected via this mechanism. As in other countries, quotas for women—it is feared—may only serve to benefit women from dominant groups ([Krook, 2009](#); [Hughes, 2011](#)). In Britain, concerns have been voiced primarily around racial diversity, suggesting that AWS come at the cost of black men being represented or, most famously Diane Abbott, stating that AWS were in effect ‘all-white-women-shortlists’ ([Gimson, 2009](#)). It is worth noting, however, that the reverse also operates: in 2005 seats deemed by Labour to be winnable by a black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) candidate were less likely to be designated for AWS ([Cutts et al., 2008](#)). A result is that while women (22.6%) and BAME citizens (4.2%) are not present in parliament in proportion to their numbers in the population (50.9 and 12.9%, respectively),

ethnic minority women are particularly under-represented (Wood and Cracknell, 2013, p. 2).⁷

To explore how AWS have shaped the electoral opportunities of BAME women, we collected data on BAME candidates and MPs from Operation Black Vote⁸ and Wood and Cracknell (2013) and combined it with our data on AWS. We find that these claims are accurate in 1997 and 2005,⁹ when not a single BAME woman was nominated or elected via an AWS. In 2010, however, the picture began to change: BAME women comprised 14.3% of candidates selected and 12.7% of those elected via AWS, roughly equivalent to the BAME share of the UK population. The Labour Party PPC dataset permits closer examination of trends leading up to the 2015 elections. As described above, these data map the sex and race of individuals participating in the four stages of the selection process, with complete data currently available for 136 constituencies.

Figure 1 reveals the percentage of BAME aspirants at each stage, comparing the share of BAME across open and AWS seats. Because the Labour data record 'sex' and 'race' as separate categories, it is not possible to know exactly how many BAME men versus women participated in the open selections—in contrast to the AWS data, which only includes women by definition. This mapping shows that in the first three stages—application, longlisting and shortlisting—there is a larger share of BAME individuals in open districts, when compared with AWS seats. However, these trends reverse dramatically at the fourth stage, when PPCs are ultimately chosen: BAME women constitute 16.1% of those selected via AWS, while BAME aspirants—male and female *together*—comprise only 2.9% of the open selections.

A possible explanation for these patterns may be found in the official Labour Party Selections Procedures, which require that BAME candidates be longlisted where BAME aspirants have submitted applications and urge 'due consideration' to BAME candidates. There is no requirement, however, to select candidates from that category at the final stage. A similar drop-off does not occur, however, in the case of women. According to the party's official procedures, open seat nominations, longlists and shortlists must also include women, with the goal of achieving gender balance in the final shortlist. The data show that women are 25% of the applicants, 33.5% of the longlists, 33.3% of the shortlists and 26.5% of the winners in the districts for which we have complete data.

Interviews with women from the three major parties, all of which have compulsory shortlisting rules for women, indicate a shared concern that such

⁷<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> and <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/index.html>.

⁸<http://www.obv.org.uk/>.

⁹AWS were not applied in 2001, due to lingering legal ambiguities that were resolved in 2002.

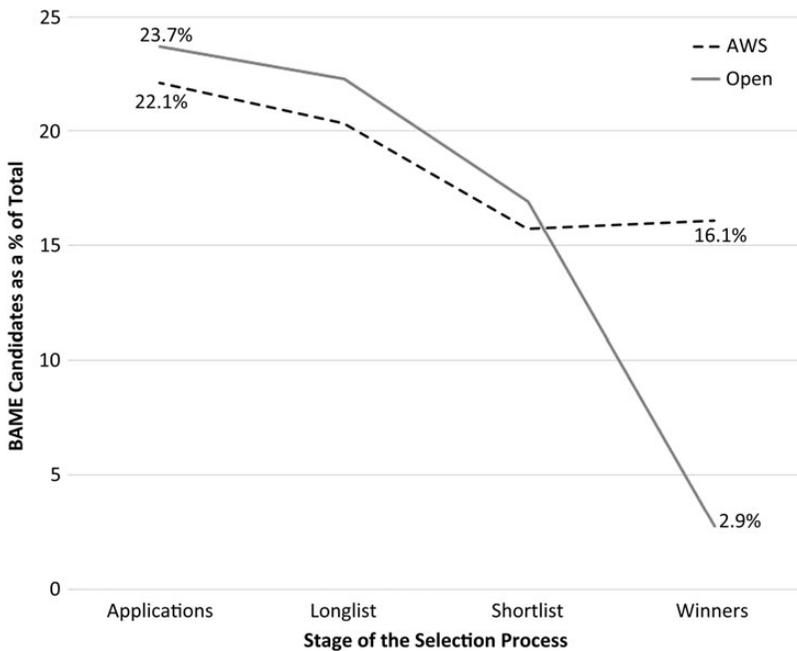


Figure 1. Proportion of BAME aspirants in Labour Party selections, open and AWS seats

policies—while expanding access to members of traditionally under-represented groups—can potentially be counter-productive, as they allow selection panels to ‘tick a box’ before going on to choose mainly white men. In addition to working to ‘develop a genuine commitment’ to selecting more diverse candidates, as expressed by one interviewee, a useful solution in other countries to enhance minority women’s representation is through ‘tandem quotas’ for both women and members of minority groups (Hughes, 2011). As of yet, this appears unlikely in Britain, given that all-black shortlists have gained little traction among BAME groups (Hampshire, 2012).

2.4 *Claim 4: elite women are unduly favoured in all-women contests*

A fourth claim, with echoes in many countries, is that quotas benefit elite women, although ‘elite’ is defined in a variety of ways (Franceschet *et al.*, 2012). This critique intersects with the first claim about qualifications and the third claim about ethnic diversity. Being ‘elite’ is imbued with positive and negative connotations, with some noting the superior educational credentials of quota women (Sater, 2012), while others point to their family connections (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2014). In Britain, analyses lamenting the ‘elite’ profiles of MPs focus on educational and professional backgrounds—pointing out that 90% of MPs are university educated,

Table 2 Share of members attending Oxford or Cambridge Universities, sex and party

	1992		1997		2001		2005		2010	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Lab men	232	19.8	319	18.4	300	18.0	256	18.8	176	18.8
Lab open women	36	13.8	66	15.1	62	14.5	48	12.5	30	20.0
Lab AWS women			35	20.0	33	21.2	50	22.0	51	23.5
Con men	319	48.3	151	56.3	149	49.7	181	48.6	257	37.4
Con women	19	21.1	14	35.7	13	30.8	17	23.5	49	37.4
LD men	18	33.3	41	36.6	45	31.1	53	32.0	50	22.4
LD women	2	0	3	0.0	5	20.0	9	44.4	7	32.0

compared with 34% of the UK population as a whole (Williams and Paun, 2011, p. 10), and that 40% of MPs come from a handful of professions, like barrister, solicitor, journalist, civil servant or teacher (Durose *et al.*, 2013, p. 263). Some fear that quotas only exacerbate these trends, with Owen Jones arguing that AWS have been ‘most successful in expanding the career options of a tiny elite of professional, university-educated women’ (Jones, 2011).

Given that the overwhelming majority of MPs are university graduates, we define ‘elite’ in a stricter sense to refer to individuals with degrees from Oxford or Cambridge (‘Oxbridge’) universities. Using the career data coded from *Dod’s Parliamentary Companion*, we calculated the percentage of members who attended either Oxford or Cambridge, organised by party, sex and mode of selection. Table 2 reports the results. The data reveal that, indeed, by this measure, women selected via AWS are slightly more ‘elite’ than their male and female Labour Party counterparts—a relationship that is not, however, statistically significant. More strikingly, perhaps, AWS women are far *less* ‘elite’ than men and women representing the other two parties. The most ‘elite’ group by far is Conservative men: roughly half of those elected in 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 were Oxbridge graduates. In each year, moreover, Conservative women were more ‘elite’ than Labour women, regardless of their mode of selection.

2.5 Claim 5: all-women shortlists are at odds with selecting local candidates

A fifth claim, especially prominent in Britain, is that the application of AWS exists in tension with selecting local candidates. Recent studies find that citizens place great priority on being ‘local’: 82% of respondents in a 2009 survey agreed that there should be more ‘MPs who come from the area they represent’, with as many as one-third saying this was more important than having an MP who shared their political viewpoint (Cowley, 2013, p. 147), while an experiment revealed that location/

residence had by far the biggest effect on voting choices (Campbell and Cowley, 2014). Emphasis on local candidates has melded, in some instances, with critiques about AWS, such that 'local' is increasingly equated with 'male' (Childs and Cowley, 2011). An illustrative quote comes from a local party member, expressing fears that the central party leadership would, against the local party's wishes, 'decide an AWS should be drawn up. . . [as] part of a process to parachute someone in from outside the area' (McKenzie, 2012).

A study by Demos assesses these claims, using a three-part definition of 'local' as being born, going to primary or secondary school, or living at least five years prior to seeking election within 20 km of their current constituency's boundaries. Analysing these data by sex, party and mode of selection, several patterns stand out. First, Conservative MPs are less likely to be local than Labour or Liberal Democrat MPs, 51% versus 73% and 82%, respectively. Second, female MPs are less local than male MPs, with Conservative women being the least so at 49%. Third, AWS women are less local than their Labour colleagues at 67%, yet only slightly less so than male Labour MPs at 70%, with Labour women selected in open seats being the most local at 77% (Scott, 2014). Far from being the group most likely to be 'parachuted' in, AWS women thus compare favourably with female MPs from the other parties, as well as with Conservative men.

3. Election processes

Another set of arguments regarding gender quotas focuses on their potential impact on the electoral fortunes of political parties. As detailed in many academic studies, party activists tend to emphasise the electoral *benefits* of adopting quotas, which they frame as a way to close gaps in voter support from women (Krook, 2009). Evidence from Britain suggests that similar dynamics operated in this case: the Labour Party adopted AWS after consecutive electoral losses led it to revamp its image as a male-dominated party (Russell, 2005), followed by the Conservatives who began to take steps to appeal to women after their own string of defeats (Childs and Webb, 2011). Such responses reflect a reversal of traditional assumptions about voter bias (Murray *et al.*, 2012). Objections to AWS revive these beliefs, suggesting that quotas have an electoral *cost*, harming the party's ability to win.

3.1 *Claim 6: women selected via all-women shortlists do not receive local party support*

A sixth claim intersects with the argument about localism, but takes it in another direction by suggesting that AWS may be 'imposed' on local party organisations, with the result that the latter will not campaign for the candidate, thus reducing the likelihood that the party will win that constituency. A study of diversity and

UK politics attributes this to differences in the attitudes of the national leadership and local parties on the value of non-traditional candidates (Durose *et al.*, 2013). The problem is also a practical one: once nominated, candidates rely on the local party to campaign on their behalf. As Mario Creatura writes, ‘If you can’t convince your loyal local supporters that you are the best candidate, then you’ll never make it in a general election fight’ (Creatura, 2013).

To evaluate this claim, it is important to start by recognising that some of these debates have less to do with AWS *per se* than with broader tensions between local autonomy and central control in British political parties (Childs and Cowley, 2011). One interviewee noted, indeed, that her local party was fully supportive of a female candidate, who later won the local selection process overwhelmingly. Nonetheless, they resisted the idea of an AWS because they ‘did not get a lot of chances to make a point to head office’. This insight suggests that, as elsewhere, opposition is not always about rejecting quotas or the election of women *per se*—but part of a larger landscape of political struggles (Krook, 2009).

Sensitive to these concerns, Labour Party leaders sought from the beginning to solicit volunteers for AWS, using language like ‘consensus’ and ‘voluntary’ to describe their implementation. According to a party insider, it was vital to know ‘where people were positive’ as well as ‘where the resistance was’, recognising that the process might otherwise be ‘very difficult’. In some cases, local women were the driving force, as part of a strong local women’s section. In others, another interviewee noted, prominent men in the community pushed for their districts to apply AWS, even at the cost of their own prospects for being selected. Even with such support, however, internal dissension could be present, with some locals viewing the policy as being imposed even if the formal procedures were otherwise.

3.2 Claim 7: *all-women shortlists are counter-productive to Labour’s electoral fortunes*

A seventh claim is a stronger version of the last, proposing that—far from eliciting greater voter support—AWS may prove counter-productive to party efforts to win more seats. This issue was raised in an acute form in 2005, when a disgruntled local male party member stood as an independent candidate in Blaenau Gwent on an explicitly anti-AWS ticket and defeated the AWS candidate in a traditionally safe Labour seat. The perceived unpopularity of AWS thus leads some, like Caroline Spelman, to suggest that quotas can become a ‘handicap’ because ‘people use their objection to [AWS] as a reason to then not fully support their candidature and you don’t want to create that hostage to fortune’ (BBC News, 2014).

Subjected to rigorous statistical analysis, this claim has been thoroughly rejected for all three elections—1997, 2005 and 2010—in which AWS have been applied. In a

series of studies, David Cutts with various co-authors compare the electoral fate of AWS women with that of other Labour candidates, controlling for whether or not the person was a new candidate. In 1997, women selected via AWS fared much better than new non-AWS women. In non-incumbent seats, they also performed better than other new candidates, while in Labour-held seats, they won at similar rates as incumbent candidates (Allen *et al.*, 2014). Despite the negative publicity, the data suggest that the anti-AWS backlash in Blaenau Gwent in 2005 was a ‘one off’, as there were no wider electoral costs for AWS candidates that year. Rather, being a new candidate played a much greater role, a factor masked by the fact that AWS women also tended to be first-time candidates (Cutts *et al.*, 2008). In 2010, being a new candidate was again the most decisive factor shaping electoral success. Controlling for the strength of the seat, Cutts and Widdop (2013) find that both AWS and non-AWS candidates in Labour-held seats performed significantly better than AWS and new candidates in non-held seats.

These conclusions are similar to what Durose *et al.* (2013) observe in relation to BAME candidates in the UK, namely that local parties overestimate the negative electoral consequences of selecting a diversity candidate. The findings are also logical given the design of the AWS policy. From the very beginning, the provision explicitly targeted the seats that Labour was likely to win, recognising that this was the only way to ensure that more women would be elected. Without such a strategy, evidence from other countries indicates, women nominated through quotas tend to be placed in districts and list positions that parties judge to be lost in advance—an example of elite, not voter, bias against female candidates (Murray *et al.*, 2012). In other words, while the public may continue to hold stereotyped views on women and politics, this rarely translates into their voting behaviour, which is more often guided by party allegiance (Matland and Tezcür, 2011).

4. Performance in office

A final set of claims about gender quotas concerns their effects beyond the electoral moment. A wave of scholarly studies has begun to explore, for example, whether quotas alter existing dynamics of political representation (Franceschet *et al.*, 2012). In a seminal essay, Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) theorise two ways in which quotas may alter women’s legislative behaviour. On the one hand, being elected via quotas may cultivate a ‘mandate effect’, leading quota women to feel obliged to act on behalf of women. On the other hand, it may produce a ‘label effect’, generating a stigma that quota women seek to overcome by disavowing women’s issues to demonstrate they are ‘serious’ politicians. Public debates in Britain focus more on the latter effect, proposing that AWS create a stigma around ‘quota women’, which is further reinforced by the fast-tracking of women to political positions who are not yet ready or suited to hold public office.

4.1 Claim 8: women elected via all-women shortlists are stigmatised in parliament

An eighth claim, in this vein, is that being elected via AWS leads to the stigmatisation of women elected through this mechanism. The insinuation is that an MP's 'provenance' is well-known to all, both the public and to parliamentary colleagues, causing AWS women to face such derogatory treatment that they decide to leave politics earlier than their non-quota counterparts. Their shorter tenure, together with this lack of recognition, prevents them, in turn, from enjoying successful parliamentary careers. In the words of Nadine Dorries: 'Everyone knows who they are. They are constantly derided. . . No one in any party takes them seriously. . . I would find that very tough, impossible even' (Dorries, 2009).

Although often repeated, the first part of this claim—that 'everyone knows' who quota women are—is largely disputed by interview evidence. In a study by Childs and Krook (2012), some AWS women did feel stigmatised: one stated that she had been made to feel like 'some sort of. . .excuse of an MP, some sort of second class MP'. Yet others disputed this, saying that their AWS status had 'never, ever, ever been mentioned'. Original interviews bolster this perspective, with respondents from all three parties asserting that 'no one knows' or can 'tell the difference' between quota and non-quota Labour women. One reported that the fact that she was elected via AWS was mentioned when she was first elected, but this was not a problem now. Nonetheless, this did not stop some female Labour MPs from feeling the need to clarify that they were not selected via AWS, according to another interviewee.

Judgements regarding quota women, moreover, appear to be based at least partially on errors in identification. In a study uncovering substantial, ongoing resistance to AWS among Conservatives, focus groups who were asked for examples cited a number of female Labour MPs, only one of whom was selected via an AWS (Childs and Webb, 2011). Such misrecognition was also reported in interviews done by Childs and Krook (2012), in which an MP recalled that 'I was elected on an all-women shortlist and I've had Tories say to me, "Oh, you weren't, you're too good"'. These slippages suggest that negative evaluations, to the extent that they exist, are not based on objective assessments of these women's experiences—but rather prejudices against the use of positive action itself.

The second part of this claim, concerning shorter careers, is taken up by the Centre for Women and Democracy (2014), which uses data through February 2014 to examine retirement rates among MPs, broken down by sex, party and length of service, from 1997 onwards. Women are more likely to retire than men, 8.2 versus 4.6%, across all the parties. Notable partisan differences emerge, however: the 7.0% rate for Labour women is lower than the 8.2 and 28.6% rates for Conservative and Liberal Democrat women, respectively. Retiring Labour women have, furthermore, served longer than Labour men: 25 versus 20 years.

As such, when the data for the 1997 cohort are examined—in an imperfect test of the impact of AWS on women’s legislative tenures—Labour women (40.8%) were more likely than Labour men (27.6%) to retire in 2001, 2005 and 2010, but a higher share—27.0% of women versus 22.5% of men—retired in 2010 after serving three terms.

Adding force to this finding, the CFWD report—in data addressing the third part of this claim with regard to subsequent parliamentary careers—observes that women from the 1997 cohort were slightly more successful than their male colleagues in achieving cabinet or shadow cabinet rank, at 15.5 versus 10.9%. More nuanced analysis incorporating women’s modes of selection largely confirms this pattern, revealing that neither sex nor being selected via quotas had any significant influence on an MP’s subsequent legislative career—leading the authors to conclude that AWS women were not perceived negatively or discriminated against by gatekeepers of executive office (Allen *et al.*, 2014).

4.2 *Claim 9: women elected via all-women shortlists ‘underachieve’ compared with other MPs*

A ninth claim circles back to the very first claim regarding the ‘quality’ of women, implying that because quota women are not ‘capable’ or ‘ready’ for higher office, they are not effective once elected. They ‘fell by the wayside’, in the words of one Conservative interviewee, because they ‘came in not knowing what was involved’. Using less delicate language, Iain Duncan-Smith criticised AWS because ‘instead of getting people who are of high quality, what we’ve actually got in is people who haven’t really performed as politicians for the Labour Party’ (Landale and Rees, 2001).

We assess this claim using data collected from TheyWorkForYou.com, a website drawing data from the Hansard parliamentary records and summarising the outputs for each MP. As the website is updated every time another speech is made or another question is written, we archived the website in August 2014 and created a dataset with statistics for the MPs in the 2010 parliament. These data permit us to compare women selected by AWS—previously, as well as selected for the first time in 2010—with their non-quota counterparts on a host of different performance measures.

We examine five activities: writing questions, speaking in debates, attending votes, rebelling against the party and responding to constituents. Starting with earlier stages of the legislative process, Table 3 reports the number of written questions asked and occasions spoken in parliamentary debates for all MPs,¹⁰ disaggregated by party, sex and mode of selection. We also differentiate among quota women, based when they were initially selected. Looking at parliamentary

¹⁰Ministers are excluded from the analysis, because they do not ask written questions.

Table 3 Activities in Parliament, sex and party

	N	Written parliamentary questions asked	N	Occasions spoken in a debate
Labour men	176	80.9	176	34.5
Labour women				
All	81	78.0	81	41.3
Open seat	30	52.4	30	31.5
AWS previously	27	81.2	27	44.7
AWS now	24	106.2	24	49.8
AWS any	51	93.0	51	47.1
Conservative men	200	37.2	257	33.5
Conservative women	37	32.5	49	32.9
Lib Dem men	38	37.6	50	32.2
Lib Dem women	4	62.5	7	34.0
Total	536	57.6	620	34.6

questions, the data are striking: while Labour MPs ask more questions than other MPs, the subgroup that asks by far the most questions is women selected via AWS in 2010, followed by any women ever selected on AWS and women previously selected on an AWS. In comparison, Labour women in open seats ask less than half as many questions as the 2010 women. Only female Liberal Democrats are as active. Similar patterns are evident with regard to the number of times an MP speaks in a debate. The most active groups by far are quota women, with the newest AWS women being most likely to participate. In addition, Labour women in general are more active than Labour men—as well as any group in any party.

In terms of voting behaviour, we calculate vote attendance using data collected by PublicWhip.org.uk and posted on TheyWorkforYou.com, recording participation by each MP in the 1115 votes taken from 2010 to August 2014. Using a simple *t*-test, we find that AWS and all other MPs have basically identical rates of attendance. A regression analysis controlling for sex, party and newness, however, indicates that AWS women cast 39 more votes on average than their non-quota counterparts, although this difference falls just shy of statistical significance ($p = 0.080$).

For rebellions, we employ the five-point scale developed by TheyWorkforYou.com to measure the regularity with which an MP votes against their party line in parliament, with 0 being ‘never rebels’ and 4 denoting ‘quite often rebels’. Comparing AWS women to the overall mean, we discover that quota women rebel less often, at a rate of 0.8 versus 1.4. This effect remains negative, but disappears from statistical significance when other factors determining rebellion are included, namely party affiliation, ministerial/shadow ministerial positions, newness and sex. These results update the conclusions of [Cowley and Childs \(2003\)](#), who found

new Labour women to be much less rebellious than other groups. Yet, as they note, it is not clear whether rebelliousness is a ‘good’ trait in an MP.

Lastly, we analyse data from WriteToThem.com, a website that enables citizens to contact their representatives, national and local. In 2008 and 2013, the organisation behind the website, My Society, conducted a survey of its users to find out about their experiences in communicating with their MPs, asking whether citizens had received a reply (not just an acknowledgment) from their representatives two to three weeks after sending the message. Analysing the data from more than 50,000 respondents in each wave, we find no statistically significant differences between AWS women and other MPs, male or female, in terms of their responsiveness to constituents. In sum, across all five measures of parliamentary activity, AWS women performed equally or better than their non-quota colleagues.

5. Conclusions

Gender quotas remain controversial, even as their reach extends to new parts of the globe. Although studies from other countries explore their broader impact (Franceschet *et al.*, 2012), over 20 years of data and studies of AWS in Britain make it a particularly fruitful case for evaluating the various arguments against quotas that have been put forward over time, in turn informing debates in this country and elsewhere regarding the effects of quota policies. In short, the results reveal that nine common claims regarding AWS do not hold when subjected to empirical analysis: they are either conclusively or largely rejected based on the available data (see Table 4). Far from anomalous, these conclusions are highly consistent with research on other countries, suggesting that it is time to recognise these claims as myths rather than realities—appealing to data and evidence, rather than prejudice and disinformation, to grasp what gender quotas in fact imply for politics and democracy.

It is worth reflecting on why these myths are perpetuated, repeated by actors from various corners as if they had the status of truth. One potential explanation lies in the zero-sum nature of projects to enhance women’s representation—namely, that for the share of women to increase the number of men must decrease. As one interviewee observed, continued resistance within Labour is not surprising, given that there may always be men wanting to contest these seats. According to a different interviewee, AWS have thus remained controversial, at least in part, ‘because they have worked’. A similar point was made by a female MP from another party, who said that she had come to realise that there was ‘so much cultural baggage that we needed a sledgehammer’ to open up the way for women. Various Labour interviewees stated, furthermore, that they were convinced that women’s numbers would decline without quotas—a point echoed by politicians interviewed in other countries.

Table 4 Summary of claims versus evidence

Claim	Evidence	Conclusion
Candidate selection		
1. AWS lead to the selection of 'unqualified' women	AWS women, on average, have more political experience before entering parliament	Reject
2. AWS provide an 'easy way in' to parliament	There are similar numbers of candidates standing in AWS versus Open seats	Reject
3. BAME women are not selected on AWS	While true in the past, in the 2015 cycle, BAME candidates were more likely to be selected in AWS versus Open seats	Reject
4. Elite women are unduly favoured in all-women contests	AWS women are slightly, but not significantly, more likely than other Labour MPs to have attended Oxbridge—but are less 'elite' than MPs in the other parties	Largely reject
5. AWS are at odds with selecting local candidates	AWS women are slightly less local than Labour men, but are more local than Conservative women and men	Largely reject
Election process		
1. Women selected via AWS do not receive local party support	Opposition, if it exists, tends to be short-lived Constituencies volunteer for AWS.	Largely reject
2. AWS are counter-productive to Labour's electoral fortunes	There has been no negative effect of AWS on Labour's electoral fortunes	Reject
Performance in office		
1. Women elected via AWS are stigmatised in parliament	AWS women report limited experience of 'stigma' It is not well known which Labour women were elected via AWS versus Open seats AWS women retire at similar rates and are as successful in reaching ministerial positions as other Labour MPs	Reject
2. Women elected via AWS 'underachieve' compared with other MPs	AWS women ask more parliamentary questions and speak more often in debates than other MPs AWS women perform similarly to other MPs in terms of their rates of vote attendance, rebelliousness and replying to constituents	Reject

Academic research, in turn, provides leverage for understanding societal resistance. Research in psychology finds that men and women 'punish' women who behave counter-stereotypically by aspiring to leadership positions. The same traits deemed most desirable for women in the 1970s continue to be viewed as most desirable for women today (Rudman and Phelan, 2008)—with women

associated with ‘communal’ attributes, concerned with the welfare of others, and men portrayed as more ‘agentic’, as assertive, controlling and confident (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Women pursuing leadership positions, therefore, confront a ‘lack of fit’ between feminine stereotypes and leadership qualities, as well as risk backlash when they behave against type. These dynamics can be exacerbated by the ‘hyper visibility’ of female politicians, whose relative scarcity can render them subject to greater scrutiny (Kanter, 1977).

Despite challenges to AWS, survey data indicate public support for more female MPs (Cowley, 2013). Weighing the evidence, the Speaker’s Conference highlighted demand-side obstacles, calling on parties to reform their selection practices to increase women’s representation (Lovenduski, 2010). Steps have been taken by Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to identify and train female candidates, but these measures fall short of the ‘equality guarantees’ employed by Labour (Lovenduski, 2005), resulting in stark differences across parties: 31% of Labour MPs are female, compared with 16% of Conservatives and 12% of Liberal Democrats (Kelly and White, 2012, p. 4). In 2010, leaders of the latter parties suggested that they would be open to AWS if nothing else could be done¹¹ (Childs and Krook, 2012), while both vocally and in private, a growing number of non-Labour women are now less ‘anti-quota’ than before (Evans, 2008; BBC News, 2014). While non-quota strategies remain important (Krook and Norris, 2014), the data analysed here suggest that parties have little to fear and much to gain from a stronger strategy: quotas reduce barriers to women’s entry, opening up politics to qualified and committed women who otherwise might be overlooked.

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¹¹A first step is to hold parties to account for commitments made in 2010 by all three party leaders—but thus far only fulfilled by Labour—to monitor and report applicant characteristics at various stages of the selection process.

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