



BRIEFING PAPER

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Women in the House of Commons

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Summary

At the General Election of June 2017, 208 women were elected as Members of Parliament. Of the 87 new members elected to Parliament for the first time in 2017, 33 were women.

Since the 2017 General Election, the number of women MPs has increased to 209. The number of women currently serving in Parliament is at its highest ever, with just over three in ten MPs (32%) now a woman.

This background paper provides a breakdown by party of female MPs currently sitting in the House of Commons. It also gives a history of the campaigns to give women the vote and to allow them to stand as candidates for election. The history of parliamentary representation by women is also briefly examined.

Further information on women in Parliament, including some international comparisons, and in Government is available in the Library Briefing Paper [Women in Parliament and Government](#) (SN01250).

A separate briefing paper is available which lists all the women who have ever been elected to the House of Commons, [Women Members of Parliament](#) (SN06652).

1. Women sitting in the House of Commons

At the General Election of June 2017, 208 women were elected as Members of Parliament, the highest number ever. Over three in ten (32%) of the 650 MPs was a woman. Of the 87 new Members elected to Parliament for the first time in 2010, 33 (37.9%) were women.¹

Since the 2017 General Election, the number of women MPs has increased to 209. Two new women MPs have been elected at by-elections and one woman MP stood down.

Table 1 shows the party breakdown of all women MPs elected at the 2017 General Election and the party breakdown of the women MPs elected for the first time in 2017, and the current party breakdown. It also shows the breakdown of women MPs at the beginning and end of the 2015 Parliament.

Immediately after the General Election, of the three largest parties in the House of Commons, Labour had the highest proportion of women MPs, with 45%; the Conservatives had 21%; and Scottish National Party 34%.

Table 1: Number of female MPs by party in the 2017 Parliament and in the 2015 Parliament

	2017 Parliament			2015 Parliament	
	June 2017 (Election)	of whom elected for the first time	Aug 2018	May 2015	Apr 2017
Conservative	67	6	67	68	70
Labour	119	22	119	99	101
Liberal Democrat	4	3	4	-	1
Green	1	-	1	1	1
Independent	1	-	1	1	3
Plaid Cymru	1	-	1	1	1
SNP	12	-	12	20	18
DUP	1	1	1	-	-
Sinn Fein	2	1	3	-	-
SDLP	-	-	-	1	1
Total	208	33	209	191	196

Notes: DUP – Democratic Unionist;
 SNP – Scottish National Party;
 SDLP – Social Democratic and Labour Party

Table 2 shows the number of women elected by party at each general election since 1918.

¹ At the beginning of the 2015 Parliament 177 new Members were elected, of whom 79 (44.1%) were women

Table 2: Women Members elected at General Elections: 1918-2017

Election date (a)	Con	Lab	Lib (b)	SNP	Other	Speaker	Total	% of all MPs
14-Dec-18	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	<i>0.10%</i>
15-Dec-22	1	-	1	-	-	-	2	<i>0.30%</i>
06-Dec-23	3	3	2	-	-	-	8	<i>1.30%</i>
29-Oct-24	3	1	-	-	-	-	4	<i>0.70%</i>
30-May-29	3	9	1	-	1	-	14	<i>2.30%</i>
27-Oct-31	13	-	1	-	1	-	15	<i>2.40%</i>
14-Nov-35	6	1	1	-	1	-	9	<i>1.50%</i>
05-Jul-45	1	21	1	-	1	-	24	<i>3.80%</i>
23-Feb-50	6	14	1	-	-	-	21	<i>3.40%</i>
25-Oct-51	6	11	-	-	-	-	17	<i>2.70%</i>
26-May-55	10	14	-	-	-	-	24	<i>3.80%</i>
08-Oct-59	12	13	-	-	-	-	25	<i>4.00%</i>
15-Oct-64	11	18	-	-	-	-	29	<i>4.60%</i>
31-Mar-66	7	19	-	-	-	-	26	<i>4.10%</i>
18-Jun-70	15	10	-	-	1	-	26	<i>4.10%</i>
28-Feb-74	9	13	-	1	-	-	23	<i>3.60%</i>
10-Oct-74	7	18	-	2	-	-	27	<i>4.30%</i>
03-May-79	8	11	-	-	-	-	19	<i>3.00%</i>
09-Jun-83	13	10	-	-	-	-	23	<i>3.50%</i>
11-Jun-87	17	21	1	1	1	-	41	<i>6.30%</i>
09-Apr-92	20	37	2	1	-	-	60	<i>9.20%</i>
01-May-97	13	101	3	2	-	1	120	<i>18.20%</i>
07-Jun-01	14	95	5	1	3	-	118	<i>17.90%</i>
05-May-05	17	98	10	-	3	-	128	<i>19.80%</i>
06-May-10	49	81	7	1	5	-	143	<i>22.00%</i>
07-May-15	68	99	-	20	4	-	191	<i>29.38%</i>
08-Jun-17	67	119	4	12	6	-	208	<i>32.00%</i>

Notes: (a) By-elections not included in above list.

(b) Liberal Democrat from 1992

2. Long Service

Viscountess Astor was the first female MP to sit continuously for 25 years. She was a Member from November 1919 to 1945.

The female Members with the longest continuous service are:

Harriet Harman	Oct 1982 – present
Dame Margaret Beckett	June 1983 – present
Ann Clwyd	May 1984 – present
Gwyneth Dunwoody	Feb 1974 – April 2008
Barbara Castle	July 1945 – May 1979

Those with the longest total service are:

Dame Margaret Beckett	Oct 1974 – May 1979 June 1983 – present
Gwyneth Dunwoody	Mar 1966 – June 1970 Feb 1974 – April 2008
Dame Irene Ward	Oct 1931 – July 1945 Feb 1950 – Feb 1974

Current Members

The three longest continuously serving women MPs are all current MPs:

- Harriet Harman has the longest continuous service. She was elected at a by-election in October 1982;
- Dame Margaret Beckett has sat continuously since June 1983 – but a previous period as an MP means she is woman MP with the longest total service;²
- Ann Clwyd was elected at a by-election in May 1984.

On 16 December 2016, Harriet Harman overtook Gwyneth Dunwoody as the woman MP with the longest continuous service ever. At that point she had been an MP for 34 years and 49 days.³

On 24 March 2017, Dame Margaret Beckett overtook Gwyneth Dunwoody as the woman MP with the longest total service. At that point, she had been an MP for 38 years and 128 days.⁴ Her continuous service exceeded Gwyneth Dunwoody's on 28 July 2017.

Ann Clwyd's continuous service exceeded Gwyneth Dunwoody's on 22 June 2018.

² She was first elected in October 1974 but lost her seat in 1979. She was elected again in 1983 and has served continuously since then

³ "[Harriet Harman record breaker!](#)", *UK Vote 100 Blog*, 16 December 2016

⁴ "[Another record breaker! Margaret Beckett, longest serving woman MP](#)", *UK Vote 100 Blog*, 27 March 2017. On 7 April 2017, Dame Margaret will overtake Barbara Castle's record of continuous service

3. Women's right to vote and to stand for election

The fight for women's suffrage began in earnest during the second half of the nineteenth century, though it is generally recognised that the campaign for the freedom and equality of women had been founded a century earlier by Mary Wollstonecraft; her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792.

The first debate in the House of Commons on women's suffrage was initiated by John Stuart Mill, a great advocate of the cause, and held on 20 May 1867. From then on, attempts to pass legislation on the subject were made during almost every parliamentary session, but without success, although a few bills did pass the second reading stage.

A variety of arguments were used at the time for and against women's suffrage. One argument in favour, for example, was that if women were given the vote, logically they could not be prevented from becoming Members of Parliament. Another was that those who had to obey the law should have a say in its making. However, those who argued against female suffrage suggested that women's interests were fundamentally the same as men's. Because of this, they could be expected to vote the same way. The converse argument to this was also made - that women's interests were different, and so they should be directly represented in Parliament.

Although achievement of the campaigners' aims was still many years away at this stage, a small advance was made in 1869, when the franchise for municipal elections was extended to women ratepayers.

Of the many groups and societies formed to promote the cause of women's suffrage, the best known is probably the Women's Social and Political Union, founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, who had been campaigning amongst working women in Manchester. In 1905 it was decided that the methods of persuasion which had been employed until that time were achieving little, and campaigners embarked upon a course of more militant action, which resulted in repeated arrests and imprisonments.

The outbreak of the First World War brought about a truce whilst campaigners devoted themselves to the war effort. However, the subject came to the fore again in 1916 when it became obvious that the movement of military personnel had rendered the electoral register quite out of date. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, as President of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and acknowledged leader of the constitutional movement, secured a concession from the then Prime Minister, Henry Asquith, that the matter should be considered once more. A conference on electoral reform, chaired by the Speaker, was set up. In February 1917 this conference recommended a limited measure of women's suffrage. The recommendations were duly enacted in the *Representation of the People Act 1918* (Royal Assent, 6 February 1918), which gave the vote to women over thirty years of age.

4. Women as Members of Parliament

4.1 Eligibility to stand

After the lengthy struggles to achieve this degree of suffrage for women, it was a matter of some surprise to the campaigners that legislation to make women eligible (at the age of 21) for nomination and election to the House of Commons was passed later in 1918. With a General Election looming, it was acknowledged that the law was ambiguous and women were already being chosen as parliamentary candidates. On 23 October 1918, the House of Commons passed a motion (by 274 votes to 25) proposed by Herbert Samuel "that . . . it is desirable that a Bill should be passed forthwith making women eligible as Members of Parliament". Accordingly, the *Parliament (Qualification of Women) Bill* was introduced by Lord Robert Cecil, a Government Minister, on 31 October. It was passed, almost without opposition, within three weeks, and received Royal Assent on 21 November, the day that Parliament was dissolved, some three weeks before the General Election.

4.2 Election of the first women Members

At the 1918 General Election, out of a total of 1,623 candidates, only 17 were women. Most had been active campaigners in the suffrage movement, including Christabel Pankhurst, daughter of the founder of the Women's Social and Political Union. It was felt that she, along with several other candidates, stood a reasonable chance of success but she was defeated by 775 votes although she polled more votes than any of the other women candidates.

In fact, the only successful candidate had taken no part in the campaign and was never to take her seat. Countess Constance Markievicz, of Anglo-Irish background and married to a Polish Count had contested the election from her cell in Holloway Prison. She was being held under suspicion of conspiring with Germany during the war (although there is no evidence that she did so) having earlier been released under an amnesty from a life sentence for her part in the Irish Easter Rising. In common with other Sinn Fein members, she did not take her seat (the St Patrick's division of Dublin) in protest against Britain's policy on Ireland.

Although the women candidates who had stood at the 1918 election were prominent in the suffrage movement or dedicated political activists, it was ironic that the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons had never campaigned for women's rights.

American-born Viscountess Astor was elected for the Sutton division of Plymouth on 15 November 1919 at a by-election caused by her husband's accession to the peerage on the death of his father. She was a character of considerable wit and charm who soon took up the interests of women and children and, in particular, those problems

related to the abuse of alcohol. In her maiden speech, on 24 February 1920, on this subject, she concluded by saying: "I do not want you to look on your lady Member as a fanatic or lunatic. I am simply trying to speak for hundreds of women and children throughout the country who cannot speak for themselves".⁵ In 1923, the *Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons under Eighteen) Act*, introduced by Lady Astor, became the first Act to result from a bill introduced by a backbench woman Member of Parliament.

The first three women Members of Parliament to take the oath were all elected for seats which had been held by their husbands. Lady Astor (Conservative) was joined in the House of Commons in 1921 by Margaret Wintringham (Liberal), who was returned for the marginal constituency of Louth even though, as a mark of respect to her dead husband, she had not spoken in public throughout her campaign.

In 1923, Mabel Hilton Philipson who, as Mabel Russell, had been a well-known musical comedy actress took over as the Conservative Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed after her husband (a National Liberal) had been unseated because of the fraudulent practices of his agent.

The first Labour woman MP to be elected was Arabella Susan Lawrence, returned for East Ham, North on 7 December 1923, but the first female Labour MP to take the oath was Dorothea Jewson, on 9 January 1924. The third Labour woman to be elected in December 1923 was Margaret Bondfield (see Ministers, below).

A full list of all women Members of the House of Commons since 1918 is available in a separate briefing paper.⁶

4.3 Women Legislators

As already noted, Viscountess Astor was the first women MP to introduce a private Members' bill that went on to be enacted – the *Intoxicating Liquor (Sale to Persons under Eighteen) Act 1923*.

The first Act to have been sponsored through both Houses of Parliament by a female MP and female Peer was the *Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960*. Mrs Margaret Thatcher introduced a private Members' bill in the House of Commons to extend the rights of the public and the press to be present at meetings of local authorities and other public bodies. The Second Reading of the Bill took place on 5th February 1960 and Margaret Thatcher made her maiden speech. The Bill successfully passed its Commons stages and was passed to the Lords. It was then sponsored by Baroness Elliot who was the first peeress to speak in the House of Lords in 1958 following the creation of life peers with the passing of the *Life Peerages Act 1958*. The Bill successfully completed its Lords stages and received Royal Assent on 27 October 1960.

⁵ HC Deb 24 February 1920 c1631

⁶ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, [Women Members of Parliament](#) (SN06652)

5. Equalisation of voting age

In 1928, the *Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act* (Royal Assent, 2 July) was passed. This lowered the voting age for women to 21 years, the same as for men. The Act therefore removed the anomaly which had stood since 1918, that a woman could be elected as a Member of Parliament up to nine years before she was allowed to vote in parliamentary elections. The new electoral registers, including women over 21, came into force on 1 May 1929. However, at a by-election in Lancashire on 21 March, 24 year-old Jennie Lee was elected as an MP. The *Manchester Guardian* commented that "It is amusing to reflect that no girl of her own age had a chance of voting for the youngest woman MP".⁷

⁷ Cited by Pamela Brookes, *Women at Westminster*, 1967, p66.

6. Office holders: firsts⁸

6.1 Women Ministers

The first woman to hold ministerial office was Margaret Bondfield (Labour) who, in January 1924 after Stanley Baldwin's resignation and the formation of Ramsay MacDonald's Government, was appointed Under Secretary in the Ministry of Labour. Miss Bondfield lost her seat at the General Election later that year but was returned again at a by-election in 1926. On 7 June 1929 she was appointed Minister of Labour; the first woman member of the Cabinet and also the first British woman politician to be admitted to the Privy Council. She held this position until her parliamentary career came to an end in 1931 when she was defeated and Labour lost the General Election.

Margaret Beckett was the first female Foreign Secretary. She was appointed as Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 5 May 2006.

Jacqui Smith was the first female Home Secretary. She was appointed as Secretary of State for the Home Department on 28 June 2007.

6.2 Women Prime Ministers

The Conservative victory at the 1979 General Election brought about another 'first' when the Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher became the first British woman Prime Minister having led the Conservative Party since February 1975. However, at the same time, the 1979 election returned the lowest number of women MPs for nearly thirty years. Only one other woman held Cabinet office during the time that Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. This was Baroness Young, who was Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords in 1982-83.

Margaret Thatcher went on to become the longest serving Prime Minister of the 20th century, serving for 11 years, 209 days. Only four Prime Ministers in history have served for a longer period.

On 13 July 2016, Theresa May became the second woman Prime Minister, after becoming leader of the Conservative Party on 11 July. (On 24 June 2016, following the European Union referendum, David Cameron announced that he would stand down as Prime Minister once a new leader of the Conservative Party had been elected.)

6.3 Woman Speaker

The first, and so far only, woman Speaker was the Rt Hon Betty Boothroyd (Labour). She was elected as Speaker by the House of Commons on 27 April 1992, following the first contested election since 1971. She was addressed as "Madam Speaker". Miss Boothroyd retired as Speaker, and as a Member of Parliament, in 2000.

⁸ Further "firsts" and significant events over the last century for women in Parliament and political life; and a list of all the women appointed to the Cabinet are included in [Women in Parliament and Government](#), SN01250, 16 July 2015

Miss Boothroyd had previously served as Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker since 1987, in which capacity she had become the second woman to occupy the Speaker's Chair.

The first woman to do so was the Rt Hon Betty Harvie Anderson (Conservative), who was appointed Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means on 2 July 1970. She took the Chair later on the same day, during the debate on the Queen's Speech, when she was addressed as "Mr Deputy Speaker".

6.4 Committees

Although women MPs had been active in various committees, it was not until the beginning of the 1946-47 session that Mrs Florence Paton (Labour) became the first woman to be nominated by the Speaker to the Chairmen's Panel of Members to act as temporary chairmen of committees of the whole House and chairmen of standing committees. In the former capacity, Mrs Paton became, on 31 May 1948, the first woman to preside over the whole House, during a supply day debate on Scottish civil aviation estimates. She did not, however, sit in the Speaker's Chair, but at the Table, as is the case when the House is in committee.

7. Recent Developments in Women's Representation

The General Election of 1 May 1997 saw a record number of women candidates elected, with 120 women candidates returned. A record number of women had stood as candidates in the 1997 election largely because of the Labour Party, which had adopted a policy of women-only shortlists. This required a proportion of local parties to only shortlist women candidates for selection. The mechanism was applied in half the 'winnable' seats in 1993-96. This Labour Party policy was withdrawn in 1996 when an employment tribunal found that it was in breach of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975*.

7.1 Legislation

Uncertainty about the legal position, which made it difficult for parties to develop policies on selection procedures aimed at introducing more women MPs into Parliament, was resolved by the passage of the *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002*. The Act, which received Royal Assent on 26 February 2002, amended the *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* and the *Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976* that outlawed sexual discrimination, to enable political parties to take positive action to reduce inequality in the numbers of men and women, though it does not require parties to do this if they do not wish to. The legislation resolved the issues raised by the findings of the employment tribunal in the case of Labour's women only short lists. The Act was scheduled to expire in 2015 but the *Equality Act 2010* extended women only shortlists for political parties until 2030.⁹ It is worth noting that methods of positive action to redress inequalities between men and women are in use in many EU countries, though the question of the selection of party candidates as an employment issue has not been tested by the EU.

⁹ For further information, see House of Commons Library Standard Note, [All-women shortlists](#), SN/PC/5057

8. Further reading

8.1 Library briefings

- [*Women in Parliament: Making a difference since 1918*](#), RP 13/65, November 2013
 - A booklet produced by the Library for the 2013 Parliament Week, which had the theme “Women in Democracy”:
- [*All-women shortlists*](#), SN/PC/5057, 7 March 2016
 - This note looks at the background to the *Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002* and includes a bibliography.
- [*Women Members of Parliament*](#), SN06652, 24 June 2016
 - This background paper provides a list of all the women who have ever been elected to the House of Commons.
- [*Women in Parliament and Government*](#), SN01250, 16 July 2015
 - In addition to information on women in Parliament, the note also includes details of women Cabinet ministers and information on the number of women ministers appointed, along with some international comparisons.

8.2 Other parliamentary publications

An exhibition was held in Portcullis House in 2015, displaying a number of pictures of women MPs from the House of Commons Art collection. A guidebook was produced for the exhibition:

- Houses of Parliament, [*Women in parliament: a guide to the history of women's participation in Parliament and their representation in the historical collections*](#), March 2015

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