Summary:

- Quotas represent one method for increasing women’s representation in the House of Commons. The consensus on their effectiveness, however, has been overemphasised. A more effective strategy for increasing women’s candidacies is to require parties to adopt mechanisms for effectively identifying, recruiting, mentoring, and, most importantly, financially supporting women for open and winnable seats.
- Biased media coverage hinders the successful candidacies of women and may discourage them from standing. As a first step, a report on gender bias in the media coverage of politics should be commissioned. A system of recognising and rewarding best practice in Politics media coverage should be established.

1. Introduction: I am responding to the Committee’s call for written evidence as experts in the fields of voting, registration, and media. We have conducted research on these topics in the United Kingdom, the European Union, the United States and New Zealand. In this submission, we will focus on the Committee’s questions about women’s representation in the House of Commons. In particular we focus on three recommendations made in *The Good Parliament*, the recent report by Professor Sarah Childs.

2. In the below I address the broad question in the terms of reference: What steps are and should be being taken to increase the percentage of women MPs in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond?

3. In the evidence below I focus on the representation of women in the media, the influence of the media on the representation of women and how recommendations in *The Good Parliament* may or may not serve to increase women’s representation. In particular, I focus on the role of the media in influencing the success of female candidates, potential bias in media coverage and how the visibility of women MPs in the media is likely to mobilise women to seek political office.

4. Media coverage is important to electoral success. Candidates must rely on the news media to get their message out to voters and biases in the amount or type of news coverage can influence the perceptions of voters and the viability of candidacies. If women are covered differently than male candidates in the media, and research demonstrates this is the case, this is a potential barrier to their electoral success and could explain the underrepresentation of women. Data presented by the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture at Loughborough show that both the press and TV coverage of the general election and EU referendum was dominated by men. This bias in coverage not only influences the electoral success of candidates but influences perceptions of the legitimacy of political institutions (Banducci 2012) and political engagement (Banducci et al. 2016) which could influence the supply of women candidates.

5. Our evidence suggests that when comparing men and women candidates in similar positions (e.g. party leaders), the gender gap in media coverage persists (Luhiste and Banducci 2016). Drawing on media coverage in 25 EU member states during the European Parliament election

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campaigns, we find evidence of a gender gap in the amount of media coverage (Luhiste and Banducci 2016). Some of this difference is due to the fact that party leaders, incumbents and high list position candidates are more likely to be men. However, even for highly prominent and competitive candidates, the gender bias in media coverage remains. Focusing on the UK, over 30% of MEP candidates were women but they received less than 10% of the media coverage during the 2009 campaign. Using these data we have been able to investigate the factors related to the difference in attention attributed to men and women candidates.

6. There is need for further evidence on the state of gender and media coverage in the UK. Much of the scholarly evidence on gender bias comes from outside the UK. There tends to be inconsistent findings. Some scholars have failed to find a gender bias in candidate coverage (see, for example, Hayes and Lawless 2013) while others do find gendered patterns in media coverage (for example, Gidengil and Everitt 2000; Luhiste and Banducci 2016). For the most part these studies are largely from outside the US or rely on elections to the European Parliament. Therefore, it is necessary to provide an authoritative benchmark for the coverage of women in politics.

Recommendation 1: Commission an up-to-date report on the status of women in UK political news to include traditional media sources (TV, radio and press) and social media (Twitter and opinion leader blogs).

7. Given that media reporting, rather than candidate characteristics or party selection processes, may be leading to bias, a system of recognising and rewarding media outlets that adopt policies to promote political coverage that is unbiased in regard to the attention paid to women candidates will increase the salience of gender bias in media coverage. As in paragraph 5, some of the bias in media coverage is due to party and incumbent factors (e.g. incumbency, viable candidacies). However, when comparing men and women in similar positions or even as party leaders, the gender gap in media coverage persists. This persistence suggests that policy recommendations should focus attention on how the press, broadcast outlets and social media outlets cover women in political news.

Recommendation 2: Encourage and recognise a commitment to removing bias in media coverage of women in politics and policy-making by adopting a charter mark scheme similar to the Equality Challenge Unit’s Athena SWANN mark.

8. The Good Parliament Report recommends legislating quotas for parties. While we do know some of the bias in media coverage reflects the parties’ pre-selection of viable candidates and that where there are remedies in place to address the underrepresentation of women (i.e. quotas) women candidates actually have lower visibility in campaign coverage (Luhiste and Banducci 2016). Quotas increase the number of women candidates and this should lead to an increase in the proportion of women in parliaments.

9. The effect of quotas on the women’s representation is not always positive (e.g. Górecki, and Kukołowicz 2014). Our analysis (Luhiste and Banducci 2016) indicating there is less media coverage of women where there are quotas (especially without mandated placement) points to a possible confounding factors in preventing women’s electoral success. Quotas are intended to increase women’s electoral representation by ensuring the important first step of increasing the share of

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2 Recommendation 9 (Longer Term) “Introduce prior to dissolution in 2020 statutory sex/gender quotas to take effect for the 2025 general election if, three months prior to the 2020 general election, political parties currently represented in Parliament have failed to select at least 50 percent women in a party’s ‘vacant held’ and ‘target seats’.
women among candidates. However, we see that becoming a candidate does not equal media coverage. Our analysis suggests that further work is necessary to understand the conditions under which quotas are adopted. If quotas are adopted when other measures are not in place to reduce bias in media coverage and equalise party finance, the effect on women’s representation of quotas may not materialise.

![Figure: Media Coverage of Similar Male and Female Candidates in EP Elections (2009) by Type of Quota System](image)

*Source: 2009 European Election Media Content Analysis (as described in Luhiste and Banducci 2016).*

**Recommendation 3:** Rather than quotas, promote a party centred strategy for increasing women’s candidacies by requiring parties to adopt mechanisms for effectively identifying, recruiting, mentoring, and, most importantly, financially supporting women for open and winnable seats.

September 2016

**References:**


