The Women in Public Service Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars is the leading platform on how to accelerate women’s equal participation in policy and political leadership. We aim to increase the percentage of women holding public service leadership positions worldwide to 50% by 2050, “50x50”. In order to get there, WPSP encourages the UK Government to take the following steps to increase women’s political participation in Parliament.

1. What steps should be being taken to increase the percentage of women MPs in the House of Commons in 2020 and beyond?

2. While there is no official quota for women’s representation in the UK, some parties have instituted their own gender quotas to fill the House of Commons. Most notably, the Labour Party initiated a “gender short list” in certain districts to ensure female representation (The Impact of Gender Quotas, 2012). The Liberal Democrats also instituted a gender quota system, in which they aimed to have 40% of their seats filled by women. This is a commendable move on the part of the Labour and Liberal Democrats parties, however, the initiatives, and thus their impact, are not widespread throughout Parliament. Moreover, the belief persists amongst some members of opposing parties that women from these short lists become MPs because of the gender quota rather than by merit. Thus, consistency throughout the parties as to the implementation of gender quotas, or the lack thereof, would ensure consistency while also minimizing party polarization on the issue.

3. We therefore firstly recommend that the UK Government consider a more comprehensive quota system, perhaps enforced by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. Quotas monitored by governments themselves or within parties prove to be less effective, but with the Standards Authority already in place, the UK would have the opportunity to transition smoothly into a national quota system.

4. Many women do not become involved in politics because they do not see themselves represented there, and thus do not think it possible for them to get involved. The Women in Public Service Project strongly encourages institutions and male party leaders to highlight the leadership capabilities of women as equal candidates to encourage emerging women leaders. Increased quotas will encourage gender diversity and pave a path for future female leaders, as well as allow for networks amongst female politicians and mentorship opportunities amongst older and younger female politicians in the same way there has been for men.

5. We would like to highlight how the UK’s First Past the Post electoral system hinders women’s political representation. Women have statistically been less likely to win elections under this system than those that use proportional representation (Quota Project, 2015). Since First Past the Post lends itself to a two-party system, much of the focus is on the two major parties, the Labour and Conservative Parties, accentuating the gender quota issue even more. Men are more likely to win First Past the Post systems even when a majority is not required. Meanwhile, proportional representation systems tend to be more diverse and elect more women because voters do not feel as much pressure to “vote strategically”.

6. Additionally, to better promote female representation, we encourage education within the Government and House of Commons as to the impact of female leadership on a country’s overall
socioeconomic well-being. Countries with higher percentages of female political participation are more stable socially, economically and politically, and women political leaders tend to ensure better access to education and healthcare for other women, securing the future of their children (The Economics and Politics of Women’s Rights, 2011).

7. Finally, a national dialogue and targeted conversations within political parties would create “safe spaces” by which members of Parliament would have the opportunity to reach across the table to deliberate ways to increase female representation across party lines.

8. **What can political parties do to ensure that female representation will increase at the next general election given the impact that the 2018 Boundary Commission Review could have?**

9. We recommend that the Boundary Commission Review assesses whether the reduction of representative constituencies will disproportionately affect female MPs and their re-election specifically. This could be achieved by allotting equal populations to each district as the Boundary Commission Review has already taken care to do; we recommend the Commission also work to not stack or pack districts that have historically favoured one party over the other or have been more receptive to female representatives in the past.

10. Moreover, political parties should inform their voters about the redistricting plan. The preliminary new districts will be published on 13 September 2016, and citizens can contact their government with their input regarding the changes during the 12 week consultation period that immediately follows. In this way, more people will be directly involved in their government’s restructuring and more women can directly ensure their representation in the House of Commons. Once the redistricting measures go through, political parties should pursue better representation of women by creating more gender-inclusive party lists as well as continuing to reach out to female voters.

11. **What further changes are needed to improve retention of women MPs?**

12. We encourage the UK Government to strengthen its partnerships with its counterparts in Scotland and Wales to exchange ideas about how to promote women’s representation and retention within Parliament. Currently, 42% of the members comprising the National Assembly for Wales are female, as are 35% of the Scottish Parliament. These statistics have been consistent for the past 10 years, only wavering a few percentage points. Both Scotland and Wales over the years have had greater female representation than England.

13. Since there will be a reduction in the number of constituencies within Parliament with the 2018 Boundary Commission Review, political parties will have to make a greater effort in the retention of female representatives through informing voters of the changes redistricting will create, as well as supporting the campaigns of women in Parliament they wish to retain.

14. Democracy functions best when everyone has the chance to be represented; in that respect, the percentage of women in Parliament should be about equal to their male colleagues. With these suggestions from the Women in Public Service Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the UK can come closer to meeting the global goal of 50% of women in politics by 2050.

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