

# **Candidate Gender in the 2010 Australian Federal Election**

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History was created when Prime Minister Julia Gillard asked Governor-General Quentin Bryce to dissolve the Australian Parliament so that an election could be held for the House of Representatives and half of the Senate. Ms Gillard asked the voters to endorse her position as Australia's 27<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister by returning the Labor Government, which had been led to victory by Kevin Rudd in 2007. Late in the life of the parliament, the Governor-General had accepted that Ms Gillard, having the confidence of a workable majority of MPs, was able to head the government. In just a few years, Her Excellency had become Australia's first female federal Head of State, the first to appoint a female Prime Minister and the first to authorise an election called by a female Prime Minister. In the space of a few months, Ms Gillard has become Australia's first female Head of Government and the first female to lead a major party in an election campaign. These achievements have produced some powerful symbolic moments, suggesting the removal of the 'glass ceiling' that has historically inhibited the full participation of Australian women in the political process. As the campaign has unfolded however, it is clear that gender remains a significant political factor, and that men and women still participate differently in elections.

Ms Gillard secured the support of her Caucus colleagues who were concerned that the Government was losing its way. Neither Prime Minister Rudd nor the Labor Party as a whole was performing well in opinion polls. Caucus' decision was vindicated when Ms Gillard secured an immediate 'bounce' in the polls for both herself and her party. Although Ms Gillard was Mr Rudd's deputy and it was widely expected that she would lead the party eventually, the sudden nature of her achievement of the leadership surprised most observers. Almost certainly, one influence on backbenchers defending narrow margins in their electorates was an anticipation that Ms Gillard would provide an appealing contrast to Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott. A campaign in which both major parties have abandoned vision and decided to concentrate on incremental 'micro-policies' has placed even greater emphasis on the alternative leaders. The 2010 campaign is proving to be our most 'presidential'.

While men are occasionally reminded of their masculinity, women are constantly reminded of their sex. Mr Abbott has been criticised for past actions which might have given him a poor image with women. As Health Minister for example, his paternalistic approach to the contraceptive RU486 inspired a multi-party revolt by female MPs. During the 2007 campaign, he appeared discourteous when debating Labor's female Health spokesperson and more recently he has attracted criticism for publicly stating conservative views on female sexuality. By contrast, although Ms Gillard is obviously an extremely capable politician, neither her supporters nor critics seem able to escape her image as a woman.

Surveys of voter opinion suggest that any 'gender gap' between support for Ms Gillard and Mr Abbott could be volatile, closing or even illusory. With little to choose between the parties' policies on big issues such as asylum seekers, climate change and economic management, small differences could become significant. The Coalition's parental leave policy seemed to be biased when it revealed that not all male workers would be supported if they decided to stay home with a child. This suggested an old fashioned view that women were the natural child-raisers. It also seemed to endorse the gender pay gap that means women's income is still lower

than that of men. Within a few days however, the Coalition announced that it would honour Labor's promises in this area for some part of its term should it gain government. Mr Abbott's careful demeanour during the campaign and Coalition awareness of potentially divisive issues seems to have neutralised gender in the campaign.

### **Candidate gender: major parties and the House of Representatives**

It is generally believed that an even gender balance in parliament is desirable. Equal numbers of male and female MPs would reflect the balance in society, would result in better decision-making and would reflect an open political culture. In the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament, there were 110 males among the 150 Members of the House of Representatives (about 73.4%) and 49 males among 76 Senators (64.5%). These figures represent slight decreases historically. So what are the prospects for better gender balance after the 2010 election?

An important factor in the return of MPs is the way that parties preselect male and female candidates. While three independents are defending safe seats at this election, the remaining 147 seats are likely to be won by one of the major parties, Labor and its Coalition opponents, the Liberal and National Parties. Clearly, candidate endorsement is relevant to the eventual gender balance in parliament. The Australian Electoral Commission has published lists of candidates on its website and in most cases it is possible to determine the gender of a candidate from this data. Antony Green's ABC election website is also valuable. Green provides profiles of candidates and his figures sometimes challenge the AEC's assessments. There is some room for disagreement following redistribution of boundaries in some states. So while the AEC does not allocate Bowman in Queensland to a party, Green makes it very, very marginal Coalition. The redistribution also complicates psephological assessments in that some incumbents might no longer be defending their seats but challenging under the seat's new status. In a few cases in New South Wales, sitting MPs have moved to challenge for neighbouring seats. Such complications notwithstanding some general trends can be found among the candidates.

**Labor's safe seats:** The AEC classifies seats as safe, fairly safe or marginal depending upon the projected 'Two Party Preferred' vote. Where the incumbent has over 60% support the seat is described as safe, between 55% and 60% fairly safe and under 55% marginal. Among 88 notional seats, Labor holds 37 safe seats. Twenty-eight of these are being defended by males and twenty-nine of the Coalition challengers are males. Unless something extraordinary occurs Labor's 28 males and nine females should be returned. At this stage men are likely to hold about three-quarters of Labor's lower house seats.

**Coalition safe seats:** Being in Opposition, the Coalition suffered a swing of the pendulum against it in 2007. It is not surprising then that just 13 of its seats are regarded as safe. Nine are held by males. Labor is fielding eight male challengers to wave the flag in these seats. At this point, Coalition men will hold two-thirds of its seats, a smaller proportion than Labor. Between them the major parties should return 37 males and 13 females in safe seats – 74% males.

**The independents:** The three independents' seats are held by comfortable margins. Perhaps because these are all in traditional National Party territory, the incumbents are males and the main challengers from both Labor and Coalition are also male. The independents bring the totals to 40 males and 13 females.

**Labor fairly safe seats:** Clearly, it is unwise to predict results in the remaining seats. Labor has 20 fairly safe seats, of which 13 are held by males. Seventeen of the Coalition challengers are males. In only one seat is a female sure to be elected because both Labor and Coalition candidates are women. In eleven seats both are males. The remaining eight could return a man or a woman, but Labor has women defending six of these. How they fare could depend on the general swing, or on specific local factors.

**Coalition fairly safe seats:** The Coalition has 19 fairly safe seats of which men are defending 15. Labor has preselected males to contest 14. There is only one all female contest but 11 all male contests. In the remaining seven seats, the Coalition has four male defenders and three females.

**Labor marginals:** Labor has 31 marginals, 19 of which are held notionally by males. So while males hold 75.67% safe Labor seats and 65% fairly safe seats, they hold only 61.3% marginals. The risk to males then does not seem as great as it is to females. It is interesting here to compare Labor's situation with that of the Coalition in 1998. Labor claimed that the record number of Liberal women elected in 1996 were the accidental result of a landslide and that they would be evicted from the House at the next election. In fact, some of these Liberal women established themselves as such effective local members that they resisted a general anti-government trend. It is arguable that Prime Minister Howard owed his victory in 1998 to MPs such as Jackie Kelly and Danna Vale. If Labor retains office, it might well be because of 12 females defending small margins in 2010. The Coalition has preselected 23 males as challengers. Two of these marginals will go to females, while 13 will go to males. Sixteen seats could return males or females. Labor females are defending ten of these.

**Coalition marginals:** Of the 27 Coalition marginals, males are defending 25. Males hold 69.23% safe seats, 78.94% fairly safe seats and 92.5% marginals. This inverts the Labor figures where males are more dominant according to seat safety. However, the numbers are smaller. The Coalition has only 13 women defending seats while Labor has 28. Interpretation of the figures is also difficult because the relatively small numbers of males in marginals could reflect an inclination to trust them less in crucial seats. In 2007, 60% female Labor candidates were successful while 53.3% males were. Liberal women were slightly less successful than males, while only 16% female Nationals won compared with 50% Nationals males. In Coalition marginals, Labor has preselected 17 male and 10 female challengers. One contest will return a female MP while 16 will return males. Of the remaining ten seats the Coalition has just one female defender. In 2007, over a third of Labor's female challengers were successful while a quarter of males were.

The following table summarises the positioning of major party male and female candidates for the election.

### Major party candidates by gender: number in 147 electorates by winnability

	Safe Labor	Fairly safe Labor	Marginal Labor	Marginal Coalition	Fairly safe Coalition	Safe Coalition	Total
Labor men	28	13	19	17	14	8	99
Labor women	9	7	12	10	5	5	48
Coalition men	29	17	23	25	15	9	108
Coalition women	8	13	8	2	4	4	39

By adding in the candidates for the independent held seats, some comparisons with 2007 are possible. Labor males are down by three on 2007 and female numbers are up by three. In 2007, the Coalition fielded 37 female candidates; the figure at this election is 39.

Retirements also shed some light on the future gender balance. Twenty MPs retired, eleven of them male. Nine of 40 female MPs is almost a quarter and so a significant number to replace. Eleven among 110 males seems less significant. Of the twenty seats, seven were considered safe. Four were held by women. In these seats, Canberra has a Labor female being replaced by a female candidate, but Fowler and Throsby both have Labor women replaced by male candidates. Riverina has a Coalition female replaced by a male candidate. In the three seats vacated by Labor males, all went to male candidates. Potentially, of this group of twenty new MPs, 14 could be male, which represents a considerable increase on 11.

### The Senate

The Senate elections for each state and territory are conducted in a different culture. The Senate has always had a higher proportion of female MPs than the House. With 27 females among 76 Senators over the last two years, the Senate has 35.5% female members, while the House with 40 of 150 members has 26.66%. Some theorists agree that the Senate electoral system of proportional representation favours women and other minorities. In fact, proportional representation favours only minor parties. There are more convincing arguments about feminisation. The most ambitious candidates have no interest in Senate preselection because government is formed in lower houses and so the Senate is regarded as something of a backwater. Minor parties such as the Democrats and the Greens are relatively new and so claim to be free of the historical baggage that limits the gender attitudes of the major parties. Because minor parties do have a chance in senate elections, many women have secured election to the Senate through these parties. The major parties have then needed to counter the minor party challenge to be more inclusive.

In 2007, 40 candidates of 367 (10.9%) were successful while in 2010, 40 of 349 (11.46%) will be. Of the 40 Senators whose terms end next year, some have retired and some are

recontesting. Fourteen of the 27 female Senators are in this category as are 26 of the 49 men just over half in each case. The gender distribution of the 349 candidates competing for the 40 spots is of interest.

In most states the six Senators usually comprise two Labor and two Coalition with fifth spot often going to a third party, probably the Greens. The sixth spot could go to any of these groupings. The count usually takes some weeks to finalise. The top spot is crucial for minor parties and the top two for the major parties.

In the territories, Labor and its Coalition opponent should each retain a seat. Labor's Senators are both female while the Liberals (ACT) and Country Liberals (NT) are both male.

In Tasmania the Liberal ticket has three males only, all incumbents. Labor has three females, the first of whom is incumbent. The Green ticket is headed by an incumbent female, then has a male and a female.

In WA, the Liberals have two males, two females and a male. The top two males and first female are incumbents. The Nationals run a separate ticket with three males. Labor has two males, a female and another male. The top two males are incumbents. The Greens ticket runs female, male and female, with the top female being incumbent.

In SA the Liberal ticket is headed by a female incumbent followed by three males. The Labor team has a male and two females, but the two females are the incumbents. The Greens have two female candidates.

In Victoria the Coalition ticket has an incumbent male Liberal, a Nationals female, an incumbent male Liberal and a Liberal female. Labor has three males and two females. The top two males are incumbents. The Green ticket has male, female, male followed by three females.

In Queensland, the Liberal-National Party has four males and a female. The males are all incumbents. Labor has male, female, male, female with the first two incumbents. The Green ticket has three females.

In NSW, the joint Coalition ticket has Liberal female, Liberal male, Nationals female, Liberal female, Nationals male, Liberal male. The top three are incumbents. The Greens have a female, two males, two females and a male.

Senate candidates unlikely to be elected show some interesting gender clusters. Some groups are male dominated: One Nation 9 of 10 candidates, Climate Sceptics 12 of 14, Shooters and Fishers 13 of 14, Secular 9 of 12, Building Australia has six males, Non-Custodial Parents two males, Australia First has two males, Fishing and Lifestyle one male, the Liberal Democrats 9 of 11, Citizens Electoral Council 8 of 10.

Females dominate the Sex Party with 10 of 15 candidates and the Carers with 8 of 10. Other parties including Family First, Christian Democrats, Australian Democrats, DLP and Senator Online are male dominated, with close to 2 of every 3 candidates male. Independents include 45 males and 17 females.

These minor parties are perhaps more ideologically tight than the majors, and some might be described as 'single issue'. The nature of the issue can determine whether the party considers male or female candidates to be more appropriate.

### **Little prospect of a gender revolution**

For the House Elections in 2007, 1054 candidates contested the 150 available seats. About one in seven, or 14.2% were successful. Of 272 female candidates, 40 were successful, a rate of 14.7%. Of 782 males, 110 were successful – a slightly lower rate of 14.1%. These figures certainly give the lie to the old fear expressed by parties that female candidates would not be successful. In 2010, there are fewer candidates, 849, so the success rate overall will be greater at 17.66%. It will be interesting to see whether the unique circumstances of 2010 correlate strongly with the success rates of female candidates.

Despite likely strong polling by the Greens, only Labor or Coalition candidates are likely to be elected in 147 seats (with the possible exception of the seat of Melbourne). The status of seats in which Labor and Coalition men and women are candidates can then be indicative of a party's attitude to the gender of its candidates. Some MPs never serve on their party's front benches as Ministers or Shadows because their time is consumed defending their own seats. Similarly, some candidates are mere flag-wavers, running in unwinnable seats for the sake of the experience, to ensure a party presence at polling booths to hand out Senate tickets and to score some points for a future candidacy, perhaps even a casual vacancy.

Assuming that safe seats are held, then the 2010 election will return at least 40 males and 13 females to the House of Representatives. Predictions are also possible in other seats where there are female-female or male-male contests. In fairly safe Labor seats, 11 males and one female will be victorious and coincidentally the same return will be gained from fairly safe Coalition seats. In Labor marginals 2 women will win and 13 males, while in Coalition marginals 1 female and 16 males will be returned. Males: 40, 11, 11, 13, 16 = 91. Females: 13, 1, 1, 2, 1 = 18. The remaining 41 seats involve contests between male and female candidates. The seats already decided by gender show that males hold some 83.5% seats, much higher than the 73.4% of MPs before the election. Female candidates have a great deal of work before them. They must gain 22 of the remaining 41 seats if they are to match their total of 40 in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Parliament. History might be made on 21 August. If Labor secures enough seats, then Julia Gillard will be the first woman to lead a party to victory in a federal election. This would suggest that Australian political culture is no longer male dominated. Should the number of female MPs in the House fall however, then that suggestion will be difficult to accept. Perhaps the Lodge and House will have different gender dispositions.

### **See also**

'The boys hold their own: candidate gender in the 2007 federal elections', *Australian Policy Online*, 23 November 2007, <http://apo.org.au/commentary/boys-hold-their-own>

'Parliament: Increased threat to male dominance', *Australian Policy Online*, 4 February 2008, <http://apo.org.au/commentary/increased-threat-male-dominance>