

‘THE ADVENT OF A WOMAN CANDIDATE WAS
SEEN ... AS OUTRAGEOUS’: WOMEN, PARTY POLITICS
AND ELECTIONS IN INTERWAR SCOTLAND
AND ENGLAND

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The interwar years were a time of radical transition in Britain’s party political system. The period 1918 to 1939 witnessed the emergence of the Labour Party as a potential party of government, the decline of the once mighty Liberal Party to virtually minor party status, and the re-affirmation of the Conservative and Unionist Party as one of two major political powers in Britain. Arguably, it was in Scotland that the degree of political change was most marked. 1918 brought a ‘radical realignment of Scottish politics’ and heralded the end of almost a century of what Tom Devine has labelled Liberal hegemony in Scottish politics.¹ The Liberal Party, which had hitherto totally dominated Scottish politics, was left as a divided and broken force by the Great War and was set on a course of terminal decline in its traditional Scottish bastions. From 1924 onwards, general elections effectively became two-horse races as the Unionist Party (as the Conservatives remained known in Scotland until 1965) and Labour battled it out to elect the largest number of MPs from north of the border—a pattern that would prevail until the 1960s.

Almost simultaneously, far less well-documented changes were taking place in local elections. In urban Scotland, local government elections became particularly competitive and more party political than ever before. Rising numbers of Labour candidates in local elections were accompanied after 1919 by the arrival of candidates run by centre and right-wing groups, typically styling themselves as ‘moderates’ (or later ‘progressives’). According to the leading Dundee moderate, T. B. Barnes, himself a former Labour councillor and brother of ex-Labour Leader G. N. Barnes, such groups sought to preserve ‘the Scottish tradition’ of local government free ‘from political party influence’, but ultimately usually proved to

¹ T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000* (Harmondsworth, 1999), p. 308.

be just as partisan as their Labour opponents.² The result of this was that until the 1960s Scottish local politics would largely have a two-party system, with often very close electoral battles between moderates/progressives and the Labour Party fought every year.

These sweeping changes in the makeup of the political world coincided with the arrival of women on to the centre stage of UK politics. In 1918 female electors voted in parliamentary elections for the first time. Simultaneously, women took advantage of new legislation allowing them to stand as candidates for parliament and mainland Britain gained its first female MP in November 1919. Scotland eventually obtained a female member of parliament in late 1923, and by 1939 five women had been returned for Scottish constituencies. At the same time the role of women in municipal elections in Scotland was changing. Whilst women across Britain had been allowed to stand for election to city and burgh councils from 1907, it was only after the Great War ended that women in Scotland began to contest these local elections regularly. Indeed, while some of England's large cities had had female councillors prior to 1910, it was only in 1919 that a Scottish city returned a female town councillor, and it was not until 1937 that all four Scottish cities simultaneously had female councillors.³

Clearly, this was a key period for the histories of both party politics and women in Scotland and the UK as a whole. Yet while the above provides clear evidence of this being a period of significantly increased female involvement across British politics, it also suggests that the story of women in the Scottish political world was different from the situation in England. This is perhaps predictable. Scotland's political parties operated largely as independent bodies from their sister organisations south of the border and Scotland had a distinctly different local government system from England. Equally, some of the points raised above would seem to suggest that women in Scotland were slower to make a mark on party politics. Does this mean that Scotswomen made less of an impact in this field than their English cousins? This is something 'British' histories of the topic have not considered in depth. Some historians, notably Arthur McIvor, have suggested that women in public life in Scotland made less of an impact in public life than women in England before 1939. In contrast the present author has argued elsewhere that 'Scotland nearly always had a greater proportion of female Members of Parliament than England did' and that Scottish women had particularly successful careers at Westminster.⁴ Both arguments would nevertheless suggest that there were notable divergences in the nature of female involvement in party politics in

² *The Dundee Advertiser*, 3 Nov. 1924.

³ For fuller details of these events see K. J. W. Baxter '“Estimable and Gifted”? Women and Party Politics in Scotland c1918–c1955' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Dundee, 2008).

⁴ See A. McIvor 'Women and Gender Relations' in A. Cooke et al (eds), *Modern Scottish History, 1707 to the Present, Volume 2: The Modernisation of Scotland, 1850 to the Present* (East Linton, 1998); Baxter '“Estimable and Gifted”?', ch. 1, and K. J. W. Baxter 'Identity, Scottish Woman, and Parliament, 1918–1979' in E. Ewan et al (eds) *The Shaping of Scottish Identities: Family, Nation, and the Worlds Beyond* (Guelph, 2011), p. 147.

England and Scotland. These differences require further study in order to properly understand how female involvement in party politics in interwar Scotland fits into the wider narrative of women's participation in British formal politics.

I

As T. C. Smout has noted 'Scottish party political life is . . . distinctive'.⁵ Thus, women entering Scottish party politics were coming into a world similar, yet different to, that of their counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom. However, the vast majority of so-called 'British' histories of women in party politics have failed to pick up on this distinctiveness and offer no consideration of how the story of Scotswomen in party politics may differ from that of women elsewhere in Britain. This is no doubt due to the fact that nearly all key works which purport to be on female involvement in interwar British party politics in reality focus almost exclusively on England. For instance, works on Labour women in Britain by Pamela Graves and Pat Thane and works on Conservative women by G. E. Maguire and David Jarvis contain few, if any, substantive remarks about these parties and their female members' work in Scotland.⁶ Admittedly, some historians of women in the Communist Party of Great Britain, such as Sue Bruley, have been keener to look at examples from Scotland, but they too fail to make explicit whether the English and Scottish situations were different.⁷ Even authors such as Martin Pugh and Deirdre Beddoe, who consider women in party politics as part of a wider discourse on British feminism and the wider women's movement in the interwar period, tend largely to ignore Scotland in their analysis.⁸ These are just a few examples of a much broader trend, and similar charges could be levelled against the vast majority of the 'British' literature on the topic of women and politics. Some attempt at redressing this imbalance has been made with the recent publication of *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, which includes chapters specifically on Scottish subjects, as well as pieces on Wales and Ireland, and so offers hope that in the future 'British' works may more accurately live up to their description. While this work is to be warmly welcomed, not least because it offers readers the chance to understand some of the background to recent successes of women in the elections

⁵ T. C. Smout 'Patterns of Culture' in T. Dickson et al (eds) *People and Society in Scotland Volume III: 1914–1990* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 280.

⁶ P. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working Class Politics 1918–1939* (Cambridge, 1994); P. Thane, 'The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906–1945' in H.L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, 1990); G. E. Maguire, *Conservative Women* (Basingstoke, 1998); D. Jarvis 'The Conservative Party and the Politics of Gender, 1900–1939' in M. Francis and I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1990* (Cardiff, 1996).

⁷ S. Bruley, 'Socialism and Feminism in the Communist Party of Great Britain 1920–1939' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1980).

⁸ D. Beddoe *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London, 1989); M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1999* (Basingstoke, 2000).

to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, the fact that it covers the whole twentieth century and many topics relating to women's citizenship means that its coverage of women in interwar party politics in Scotland is inevitably brief.⁹ Thus, the bulk of the published 'British' historiography of women and party politics may be said to create the impression that the story in Scotland (and Wales) was the either the same as in England, or that any differences were unimportant.

Clearly, this is not the case. However, is it true that Scottish women fared worse in the political arena than English women? Arthur McIvor has explicitly claimed that Scottish women were underrepresented in parliament when compared to their English counterparts. This contention is part of a wider argument, which McIvor advanced across several works on the role of women in Scottish society, that women in Scotland made less of an impression on 'the public sphere' (of which he includes politics as being a part) than English women and that 'Scottish society was more patriarchal than English society' before 1939. The obvious conclusion to be drawn from McIvor's works is that women played less of a role in what might be termed 'public life' or 'the public sphere' – and thus in party politics also – in Scotland than they did in England.¹⁰

Other historians have adopted positions which are broadly similar to that of McIvor. Devine, in what is arguably the most widely read history of Scotland in recent years, observed that, although women's experiences in the interwar period should not be painted too blackly, Scotswomen of this period faced 'discrimination and inequality based on gender differences'.¹¹ The late Myra Baillie argued that a 'patriarchal resistance to women in the workplace' was 'a prominent feature' in 'industrial life' in the west of Scotland at the time of the Great War and it is not unreasonable to suppose this would have also extended to the political sphere.¹² Certainly, this has been suggested by historians of the Scottish left. The late Neil Rafeek's work on women in the Communist Party in Scotland provided several examples showing that the prevailing attitudes to gender present in Scotland at this time dictated that women should primarily remain in the domestic sphere and that this impacted upon the nature of women's involvement in the Communist Party.¹³ Similarly, Annmarie Hughes has argued that, in the years following the Great War, there was a crisis in masculinity and

⁹ E. Breitenbach and P. Thane (eds) *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2010).

¹⁰ A. McIvor, 'Gender Apartheid? Women in Scottish Society' in T.M. Devine and R. J. Finlay (eds), *Scotland in the 20th Century* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 206; McIvor 'Women and Gender Relations' pp. 183–4; A. McIvor 'Women and Work in Twentieth Century Scotland' in A. Dickson and J. H. Treble (eds), *People and Society in Scotland, Volume III, 1914–1990* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 175.

¹¹ Devine, *The Scottish Nation*, p. 537.

¹² M. Baillie, 'A New View of Dilution: Women Munition Workers and Red Clydeside' *Scottish Labour History*, 39 (2004), p. 46.

¹³ N. Rafeek, 'Against All the Odds. Women in the Communist Party in Scotland, 1920–91: An Oral History' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Strathclyde, 1998), p. 104. Rafeek's work was posthumously published as N. Rafeek, *Communist Women in Scotland: Red Clydeside from the Russian Revolution to the End of the Soviet Union* (New York, 2008).

that in response men tried to limit women's role to 'motherhood and the private sphere', which had a major influence on the nature and level of female political involvement of working-class women in the Clydeside area of Scotland in this period.¹⁴ Equally, Catriona Burness has suggested that there was a reluctance to let women enter 'the political sphere' and that this impacted upon the numbers of female elected representatives.¹⁵

However, it can be proposed that arguments such as these obscure a far more complex reality. It has been demonstrated that McIvor's assertion that Scottish women were underrepresented in parliament in comparison with English women is inaccurate. Recent research has shown that between 1924 and 1970 Scotland almost always had a higher proportion of MPs and parliamentary candidates who were female than did England.¹⁶ Similarly, in one of the more recent works on women and parliamentary politics in Scotland, Burness has also concluded that over the period between 1918 and 1990 as whole 'Scotland had a marginally better record in returning women' to Parliament and a surprisingly high number of female ministers.¹⁷ Moreover, it should be noted that in 1939 one-quarter of the women sitting as MPs in the House of Commons represented Scottish constituencies at a time when Scotland had less than one-eighth of the UK's parliamentary seats, which would seem to contradict McIvor's proposition.¹⁸ This evidence therefore brings into question whether the differences between women in party politics in the two nations were as black and white as might be presumed, and may even challenge McIvor's thesis that Scotland was, as he terms it, a more 'patriarchal' nation than England.¹⁹

II

An obvious way to test whether Scottish women did make less of an impact in party politics than their English cousins is to analyse quantitative evidence relating to the involvement of women as candidates in national and local elections in both Scotland and England. Women's participation in parliamentary politics is an obvious place to start, not least because it has attracted more coverage from British

¹⁴ A. Hughes, "'A Rough Kind of Feminism': The Formation of Working Class Women's Political Identities on Clydeside, c.1919–1936,' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Strathclyde, 2001), pp. 1–3, 22; A. Hughes, "'The Politics of the Kitchen'" and the dissenting domestics: The ILP, labour women and female 'citizens' of inter-war Clydeside' *Scottish Labour History*, 34 (1999), p. 34.

¹⁵ C. Burness, 'The Long Slow March: Scottish Women MPs 1918–1945', in E. Breitenbach and E. Gordon (eds), *Out of Bounds: Women in Scottish Society 1800–1945* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 151.

¹⁶ See Baxter 'Identity, Scottish Women, and Parliament', p. 149.

¹⁷ C. Burness, 'Count up to twenty-one: Scottish women in formal politics 1918–1990' in E. Breitenbach and P. Thane (eds) *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2010), p. 59.

¹⁸ Figures calculated from P. Brooks, *Women at Westminster* (London, 1967), pp. 271–8.

¹⁹ McIvor, 'Women and Gender Relations', p. 184.

Table 1. Number of candidates in England and Scotland who were female at stated general elections 1918–1935.

	1918	1922	1923	1924	1929	1931	1935
Scotland	1	3	3	6	9	10	9
England	13	27	30	35	56	49	55

Based on data in F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918–49* (Glasgow, 1969).

historians than women’s other formal political activities.²⁰ Additionally, the works of Catriona Burness have ensured there is at least some coverage of the topic in a Scottish context.²¹ At first glance, the evidence appears to suggest that Scottish women fared less well as parliamentary candidates than their English counterparts. Table 1 illustrates that Scotland always had far fewer women candidates in general elections in the interwar period than did England. In 1923 ten times as many women stood in England as stood in Scotland, while the peak number of female candidates at one general election in Scotland, ten, was actually three less than the lowest total number of female candidates at one general election in England.

The sole woman candidate in Scotland in 1918 was Eunice Murray, an independent. No major political party ran a female candidate in Scotland until the three women Liberals, two from the Asquithite faction and one from the (Lloyd George) National Liberal Party, contested seats in 1922, with the Unionist Party running its first official female candidates the next year.²² However, Helen Fraser, the National Liberal candidate for Govan in 1922, had considerable support from the local Unionist association and had originally been chosen as a supporter of the Lloyd George coalition government. This had collapsed shortly before the election so Fraser might be classed as the first Unionist candidate in Scotland.²³ In England, all three major parties put forward at least one female candidate in 1918 (as did Sinn Fein in Ireland). Additionally, it was not until the end of 1923, four years after Nancy Astor was elected as Conservative MP for Plymouth Sutton, that a Scottish constituency elected a female MP. This honour fell to Katharine Stewart–Murray, Duchess of Atholl, who narrowly won Kinross and West Perthshire for the Unionist Party. It is also interesting to note that, unlike most of England’s early female Conservative and Liberal MPs, Atholl got into parliament by gaining a seat her party did not hold. Admittedly, like Astor, her husband had been an MP, but the circumstances of the situation were different. It is not entirely accurate to say that, as Bill Knox has claimed, she simply ‘inherited

²⁰ For example Brooks, *Women at Westminster*.

²¹ Burness, ‘The Long Slow March’ and Burness, ‘Count up to twenty-one’ are the most widely available of these. However the latter’s coverage of the interwar period is briefer than ‘The Long Slow March’ and it also lacks references to much of the more recent historiography of the topic.

²² F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918–49* (Glasgow, 1969).

²³ National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS), The Papers of the Scottish Unionist Association, Acc10424/26 (iv), Glasgow Unionist Association Annual Report 1923; *The Scotsman*, 5 Oct. 1922.

Table 2. Number of Liberal, National Liberal and Independent Liberal candidates in Scotland and England who were female at stated general elections 1918–1935.

	1918	1922	1923	1924	1929	1931	1935
Scotland	0	3	1	1	0	0	2
England	4	13	11	5	23	5	8

Based on data in F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918–49* (Glasgow, 1969) & *The Times House of Commons* (Various editions, London, 1929–1935).

the seat from her husband', the eighth Duke of Atholl.²⁴ He had ceased to be MP for West Perthshire (which did not then include Kinross) when he succeeded to the dukedom in 1917, and his successor as Unionist MP had lost the new constituency heavily in 1918 to a Liberal, who had been unopposed in 1922. Indeed, Atholl's victory was not regarded as a foregone conclusion.²⁵

It is notable that the Unionists took until the general election in December 1923 to run a female candidate in Scotland, five years longer than the Conservatives did in England. However, as noted, the party had supported Fraser in 1922 and it can be pointed out that Dundee's Unionist Association did approach Lady Edith Baxter about contesting that seat in 1921.²⁶ The Labour Party failed to run female candidates in Scotland until the general election of 1924—the fourth national contest in which women could seek election for parliament. Furthermore, both female Labour candidates standing in 1924 fought seats which were such poor prospects for Labour that their party had not even bothered to contest them in 1923.²⁷ It was only in 1929, when Jennie Lee won Northern Lanarkshire at a by-election, that a Labour woman was finally elected in Scotland. Again, this contrasts starkly with the situation in England, where Labour had fielded women candidates from 1918 and where three Labour women were elected as MPs in 1923.

Despite their pioneering activities in 1922, Liberal women's involvement in parliamentary elections in Scotland would ultimately prove to be comparatively poor. The numbers of female Liberal parliamentary candidates contesting seats in Scotland at general elections often compared very unfavourably with England and Wales, as can be seen from Table 2. Indeed, in the general elections of

²⁴ W. Knox, *Lives of Scottish Women: Women and Scottish Society, 1800–1980* (Edinburgh, 2006), p. 167.

²⁵ *The Glasgow Herald*, 26 Nov. 1923 suggested that the Liberal Helen Fraser, contesting Hamilton, could be elected as Scotland's first woman MP, implying its editorial staff was not convinced Atholl would emerge victorious.

²⁶ NLS, Acc10424/26 (iv); University of Dundee Archive Services (hereafter UoDAS), Dundee Conservative and Unionist Association Collection, MS 270/1/1/1, Dundee Unionist Association Minute Book 1, 20 Feb. 1921.

²⁷ Namely Agnes Dollan in Dumfriesshire and Eleanor Stewart in Edinburgh Leith. See Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918–49*, pp. 582, 621.

Table 3. Percentage of Candidates in England and Scotland who were female at stated General Elections 1918–1935.

	1918	1922	1923	1924	1929	1931	1935
Scotland	0.6%	1.8%	1.8%	3.8%	4.6%	6.3%	5.2%
England	1.1%	2.3%	2.6%	3.0%	4.0%	4.7%	5.1%

Calculated from F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918–49* (Glasgow, 1969).

1929 and 1931 no Liberal women stood in Scotland, despite twenty-three Liberal women contesting English seats in the former election. Moreover, while three Liberal women in England were elected to the Commons between 1918 and 1945, no female Liberal was elected in Scotland until 1987, when Ray Michie captured Argyll and Bute at the very last general election the party contested before its merger with the Social Democrats. However, it must be noted that no Liberal woman was elected in England between Hilda Runciman's by-election victory in St Ives in 1928 and the victory of the Liberal Democrat Elizabeth Lynne in Rochdale in 1992. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to conclude that Scotland was noticeably slower to select and elect female candidates than England.

Yet, while the facts outlined above are undeniable, a deeper exploration and a closer analysis of the evidence reveal quite a different picture. It is perfectly true that at every general election between 1918 and 1939 fewer women sought election in Scotland than did in England, but this is largely meaningless. It was inevitable that more women would stand in England as Scotland had just seventy-four seats available for candidates, while England had 492.²⁸ In other words, there were almost seven times as many seats available in England than there were in Scotland. Thus, any conclusions based upon a comparison between the total numbers of candidates in each nation are not, of course, particularly useful. A more appropriate approach is to contrast the percentage of all candidates in each nation who were women. When this comparison is made, as Table 3 illustrates, the difference between the two nations is much narrower.

It can be seen from Table 3 that there was a slightly higher proportion of candidates who were female in England in the first three general elections in which female candidates were allowed to stand. However, from 1924 onwards Scotland actually had a higher proportion of female candidates. Strikingly, in 1931 around one in sixteen Scottish candidates was a woman, compared with less than one in twenty-one in England. Nor was this a brief trend. Although this gap closed in 1935 (and England would briefly regain a lead in 1945), in three of the four elections in the 1950s Scotland had a lead over England in this respect. Indeed, in the 1955 general election 7.7 per cent of candidates in Scotland were women,

²⁸ Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918–49*, passim.

as opposed to 6.4 per cent of candidates in England.²⁹ Additionally, a few of the women who stood in elections in England had Scottish roots. This trend started in 1918 with the well-known trade unionist Mrs W.C. Anderson, better known by her maiden name, Mary MacArthur, contesting Stourbridge for the Labour Party and performing strongly (her early death in 1921 would prevent her from making any further attempts to gain election). Another example was Miss Frances Josephy, a perennial Liberal candidate, who sought election to parliament for various English constituencies in all six general elections between 1929 and 1951.³⁰ Scotland also compared favourably with England in terms of the percentage of its MPs who were female. After the 1931 general election 4.1 per cent of MPs from representing Scottish constituencies were women, compared with just 2.2 per cent of MPs from English seats.³¹ Indeed, only in the 1970s would the percentage of English MPs who were female eclipse the figure for Scotland. Equally, between Atholl's election in 1923 and the 1970 general election the percentage of all female MPs representing Scottish constituencies was always greater, often dramatically so, than the percentage of all MPs representing an English constituency.³²

Moreover, many of these Scottish women had particularly successful careers in parliament.³³ The outstanding success story among Scotland's five female MPs in the interwar period was Florence Horsbrugh, the Unionist MP for Dundee from 1931 to 1945, and arguably the most successful female Conservative parliamentarian until Margaret Thatcher. Horsbrugh's performances in the House of Commons were praised by no less a figure than Stanley Baldwin, and a Unionist-supporting Dundee newspaper claimed in 1935 that she was 'reckoned to be the best' MP Dundee had ever had.³⁴ While such claims are undoubtedly partly tinged with bias and hyperbole it cannot be denied that Horsbrugh had a remarkable and pioneering career as MP for Dundee, with one Labour opponent later describing her as 'one of the pioneers of the representation of women at Westminster . . . a great woman'.³⁵ She was a formidable performer in the House of Commons, speaking on a variety of topics but earning a particular reputation for her championing of policies to protect her constituency's jute industry, with Neville Chamberlain commenting that 'She always puts her case so well that naturally the sympathies of the House are inclined to be with her in the arguments which she puts forward'.³⁶ Other admirers included Lord Halifax, with whom she

²⁹ Figures calculated from Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918–49*; F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950–70* (Chichester, 1971) and *The Times House of Commons*, Various editions (London, 1929–1959). The exception was the General Election of 1959 when just under 5.3 per cent of candidates in England were female compared with just over 5.2 per cent in Scotland.

³⁰ *The Times House of Commons*, Various editions (London, 1929–51).

³¹ *The Times House of Commons 1931* (London, 1931).

³² Baxter 'Identity, Scottish Women, and Parliament' pp. 149–50.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *The (Dundee) Courier and Advertiser*, 14 Nov. 1935, 30 Nov. 1935.

³⁵ *Parliamentary Debates: House of Lords*, vol. 306, col. 436, 9 Dec. 1969.

³⁶ *Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons*, vol. 279, col. 601, 19 June 1933.

worked at the San Francisco Conference which set up the United Nations.³⁷ She made history in 1936 when she was chosen as the first woman to move the reply to the King's Speech and she was also the first woman to pilot two private members' bills through the Commons.³⁸ Horsburgh also became the second Conservative woman to hold ministerial office in the period up to 1939 when she was brought into Chamberlain's government as parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Health. The only woman to hold office in an earlier Conservative administration was the Duchess of Atholl, who had served as a junior minister throughout Baldwin's Second Government (1924–1929) and was the second British woman, after Margaret Bondfield, to hold government office. Remarkably, this meant that the Conservatives' first two female ministers (and two out of the first four women in Britain to hold government posts) were Scots. Indeed, it is striking that two out of Scotland's five women MPs between 1918 and 1939 became ministers, compared with only two of England's thirty female MPs.³⁹ Additionally given that Jennie Lee would become a prominent minister in post-war Labour governments, it seems likely that if she had held her seat in 1931 (and 1935) and Labour had won power, at some point in the later 1930s she might well have been in line for an early promotion to a ministerial position. All of this could be taken to suggest that Scotland was producing a higher calibre of female MP than England, or at least female MPs who were better equipped to make an impression in Westminster.

Whatever the case, it is clear that Scottish women's overall participation in parliamentary politics in the interwar era does not compare unfavourably with England. Indeed, if anything, the available quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest the reverse was true. However, at municipal level the story was very different.

III

A major problem when writing about Scottish municipal politics is that, with one or two exceptions, the subject has traditionally received limited attention in published histories.⁴⁰ While some recent works have begun to correct this, there is, as yet, no published work containing an in-depth study of the topic.⁴¹ This has meant that the electoral workings and political structures of this complicated field are not widely known, particularly as Scottish local government

³⁷ Churchill Archives Centre (Cambridge), HSBR 1/4, Horsburgh Papers, Letter from Lord Halifax, 30 May 1945.

³⁸ Brooks, *Women at Westminster*, pp. 115–116, 126–127 and K. J. W. Baxter, 'Florence Gertrude Horsburgh. The Conservative Party's forgotten first lady', *Conservative History Journal*, Winter 2009/2010, pp. 21–23.

³⁹ Figures calculated from Brooks, *Women at Westminster*.

⁴⁰ Until recently the most prominent exception to this trend was probably J. J. Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow 1896–1936: Socialism, Suffrage, Sectarianism* (East Linton, 2000).

⁴¹ One recent work which gives some attention to municipal elections is E. Breitenbach 'Scottish women's organisations and the exercise of citizenship c. 1900–c. 1970' in E. Breitenbach and P. Thane (eds) *Women and Citizenship in Britain and Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2010) pp. 65–67.

worked quite differently from that of England and had its own unique political flavour.⁴² Further, and unfortunately, some scholars, most notably Hughes, who have mentioned women's involvement in local elections, have made erroneous statements which inadvertently distort the true picture of female involvement. For instance, Hughes incorrectly states that eight Labour women were elected as councillors in Glasgow in 1920, when in fact only two Labour women were elected. She also suggests that, by 1925, twenty-four per cent of Glasgow councillors were female, when in reality less than five per cent were women.⁴³ While these mistakes do not really influence the overall impact of her valuable and extensive works, they are regrettable. Similarly, while Norman Watson has devoted some attention to municipal politics in his works on female political participation in Dundee, these also contain inaccuracies. For example, Watson stated that the first woman to seek election to Dundee Council was Mrs Lily Miller (when in fact two other women had stood previously) and provided inaccurate information about the number of times she sought election before her eventual success.⁴⁴ Consequently, the historiography of this subject is both incomplete and flawed.

This is disappointing, for the story of Scotswomen in municipal elections is a complex and interesting one. While space prohibits a detailed exploration of this subject here, it is possible to draw attention to some striking patterns which show that, in stark contrast to the situation in national elections, women made much less of an impression as candidates in local elections in Scotland than they did in England. First, and as alluded to in the introduction to this article, Scotland took longer to elect women to its most important local authorities (the councils of the four big cities) than did England. The London County Council and a number of county boroughs (the English equivalent of counties of cities), including Bath, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, had female councillors before 1914.⁴⁵ Yet it was not until January 1919 and the election of Mrs Ella Millar to Edinburgh Council that Scotland gained a female city councillor. Until that point the only women who were elected to office in Scottish cities served on their school boards or their parish councils/parochial boards.⁴⁶ Edinburgh elected a second woman, the independent Mrs Euphemia Somerville, a few months later and by the end of 1930 its council had six female members. Although Glasgow was fairly quick

⁴² For a basic guide to the workings of Scottish local government and its politics see Baxter, '“Estimable and Gifted”?' pp. 100–4.

⁴³ Hughes, '“A Rough Kind of Feminism”', pp. 134–5. The same author's *Gender and Political Identities in Scotland 1919–1939* (Edinburgh, 2010), p. 41 identifies Agnes Lauder and Mrs Hay as councillors in Glasgow, but neither was ever elected to office.

⁴⁴ N. Watson, 'Daughters of Dundee: Gender and Politics in Dundee: The Representation of Women 1870–1977' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Open University, 2000), p. 115; N. Watson, 'Emerging from Obscurity: How Dundee Women Have Made Their Mark' in G. Ogilvy (ed), *Dundee. A Voyage of Discovery* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 201–2.

⁴⁵ *The Times* 2 Nov. 1910 & 3 Nov. 1911 and W.E. Jackson, *Achievement. A Short History of the L.C.C.* (London, 1965).

⁴⁶ The members of these parish councils were the equivalent of the poor law guardians in England.

to follow Edinburgh's lead (electing the first five women to its council in 1920), the other two cities were noticeably slower. Aberdeen took until 1930 to elect its first woman councillor, Miss Isabella Burgess, while Dundee did not elect a female councillor until 1935, some four years after it had elected a female MP. Indeed, Aberdeen did not even have a female council candidate until 1925. While one woman had sought election to Dundee Council in 1913, it was 1924 before a second woman stood for election to that city's council, and she was the first woman to be nominated by a political party (Labour).⁴⁷

Dundee's tardiness in electing a woman councillor can be sharply contrasted with Bury and Burnley. These English towns both had councils of a similar size to Dundee and their economies were also centred on the textile industry. Yet Bury had a female councillor in 1919 and the voters of Burnley first elected a woman to their council in 1924.⁴⁸ Comparisons between Glasgow and Liverpool are also revealing. Both were west coast ports and industrial centres of a similar size, and both had large immigrant populations. Yet Liverpool elected a female councillor in 1909, while Glasgow took until 1920. Equally, while Liverpool gained a female lord mayor in 1927, it took Glasgow until the 1960s to gain a female lord provost (the equivalent position in Scotland), and this was the only time a Scottish city would have a female lord provost prior to the 1980s. By contrast, women held the office of lord mayor in several significant English conurbations in the interwar period, with Norwich, East Ham and Coventry among a few county boroughs to see a woman reach the top civic office in this era.⁴⁹ It is also notable that Scotland's first female lord provost, Jean Roberts, had sought her Labour group's nomination for the post on four occasions before finally being chosen for nomination.⁵⁰ Scotland was undeniably slower to elect women to positions of local power than England.

There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that female members of Scottish councils were rarer than women councillors in England. Indeed, this was acknowledged during this time period. In 1920 the Women's Freedom League periodical *The Vote* noted that Scotland had only three women town councillors and no female county councillors. At the same time, 142 women were serving on London metropolitan borough councils, 132 women were town councillors in other parts of England, forty-six women were county councillors and 333 women

⁴⁷ See also K. Baxter "“Matriarchal” or “Patriarchal”? Dundee, Women and Municipal Party Politics in Scotland c.1918 c.1939" *International Review of Scottish Studies*, 35 (2010) pp. 97–122; Baxter, "“Estimable and Gifted”?", ch. 2.

⁴⁸ S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Election Results, England and Wales, 1919–38: A Comparative Analysis. Volume 2: Bradford-Carlisle* (Aldershot, 2000).

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 10 Nov. 1927; S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919–1938: A Comparative Analysis Volume 3 Chester to East Ham* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 78, 580.

⁵⁰ See *The Glasgow Herald*, 5 May 1949, 8 May 1952, 5 May 1955 and 5 May 1958.

Table 4. Percentage of council candidates who were women in stated English County Boroughs and Scottish cities in annual municipal elections for period 1919–1938.

Greater than 9%		7.1%–9%		4.6%–7%		Less than 4.5%	
Coventry	12.1%	Carlisle	8.9%	Bournemouth	7.0%	Aberdeen	4.4%
Barrow	11.6%	Birmingham	8.8%	Glasgow	7.0%	Dundee	4.0%
Croydon	10.7%	Bristol	8.6%	Derby	6.6%	Dewsbury	3.9%
Birkenhead	10.4%	Doncaster	8.6%	Bath	6.4%	Blackburn	3.5%
East Ham	10.0%	Chester	8.0%	Burnley	5.5%	Barnsley	3.3%
Eastbourne	9.8%	Bradford	7.8%	Burton	5.4%	Dudley	3.0%
Edinburgh	9.6%	Bolton	7.3%	Brighton	4.6%	Blackpool	2.7%
Canterbury	9.6%	Bury	7.2%	Bootle	4.6%	Darlington	1.7%
		Liverpool	7.1%				

Calculated from election results in: *The Scotsman*; *The Glasgow Herald*; S. Davis, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences of the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900–1939* (Keele, 1996); S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Election Results, England and Wales, 1919–38: A Comparative Analysis. Volumes 1–3*: (Aldershot, 1999–2006).

were rural or urban district councillors.⁵¹ In 1931 Isabella Burgess, who had been elected to Aberdeen Council eleven months earlier, addressed a conference in St Andrews on the subject of ‘Women on Town Councils’ and recounted to her audience that the total number of women councillors in Scotland’s four cities, along with the towns of Dumfries, Greenock, Paisley and Dunfermline, totalled just twenty. Yet, as she noted, the London County Council alone had twenty-one female members. Burgess went on to argue that women’s ‘contribution to local government’ was ‘still at its minimum’ which she regretted as she believed women were needed to serve in this role.⁵² Looking at more detailed figures for the whole interwar period presents an even more interesting picture. By extracting data from the election results presented in the first three volumes of Sam Davies and Bob Morley’s series of county borough election results (covering twenty-eight English county boroughs), those in Davies’ work on Labour in Liverpool and the election results for the four Scottish cities, it is possible to make detailed quantitative comparisons between female council candidates in the Scottish counties of cities and those women who sought election in the county boroughs.

Doing this reveals that there were some striking differences. As table 4 reveals, England’s second city, Birmingham, could boast that 8.8 per cent of its candidates in the twenty annual November municipal elections between 1919 and 1938 were women, yet in the similarly-sized Glasgow only seven per cent of candidates

⁵¹ *The Vote*, 23 Apr. 1920.

⁵² *The Scotsman*, 3 Oct. 1931.

Table 5. Percentage of female candidacies which resulted in election in stated English County Boroughs and Scottish cities in annual municipal elections for period 1919–1938.

Over 55%		40.1%–55%		30.1%–40%		0–29.9%	
Canterbury	66.7%	East Ham	52.5%	Birkenhead	38.7%	Blackpool	30.0%
Dewsbury	66.7%	Derby	51.6%	Glasgow	37.9%	Dudley	30.0%
Chester	65.2%	Barrow	48.6%	Croydon	36.7%	Bootle	27.2%
Doncaster	60.7%	Birmingham	48.5%	Burton	36.4%	Bradford	26.0%
Eastbourne	60.7%	Bristol	47.1%	Burnley	36%	Dundee	16.7%
Bournemouth	60.0%	Brighton	46.2%	Bolton	33.8%	Aberdeen	16.7%
Carlisle	58.6%	Liverpool	45.9%	Bury	30.4%	Blackburn	15.8%
Bath	58.3%	Barnsley	41.7%	Coventry	30.1%	Darlington	0.0%
		Edinburgh	40.7%				

For the sources on which these calculations are based, see list under Table 4, above.

were female.⁵³ Glasgow also fared worse than the fellow west coast ports of Liverpool and Bristol. In Edinburgh, women accounted for a more impressive 9.6 per cent, but even this figure was bettered by at least six English county boroughs. The percentage of council candidates who were female in Dundee and Aberdeen was particularly low, with only six of the twenty-nine English county boroughs covered in Table 4 having had a lower percentage of candidates who were female. The Dundee figure (four per cent) is also interesting given that in the same period 5.5 per cent of Burnley’s and 7.2 per cent of Bury’s municipal candidates in the annual elections were female. In addition, it seems to belie the popular perception of Dundee as a ‘women’s town’ and contradicts claims made by historians, including McIvor and John Kemp, that women played a bigger role in the life of Dundee than they did in most parts of Scotland.⁵⁴

Table 5 highlights that even greater Anglo-Scottish difference can be found in the success rate for female candidates. In six of the thirty-three councils studied more than sixty per cent of candidacies by women in the annual municipal elections of the interwar period resulted in success, with there being a further four

⁵³ All figures for female participation in English council elections in this article are calculated from the raw data in S. Davis, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences of the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900–1939* (Keele, 1996); S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Election Results, England and Wales, 1919–38: A Comparative Analysis. Volume 1: Barnsley-Bournemouth* (Aldershot, 1999); Davies and Morley *County Borough Election Results, Volume 2* and Davies and Morley, *County Borough Election Results Volume 3*. All figures for Scottish elections calculated from raw data compiled by this author from results recorded in *The Scotsman*, *The Glasgow Herald*, *The Aberdeen Press and Journal* and *The Courier and Advertiser* and the minutes of the councils of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

⁵⁴ J. D. Kemp, ‘Drink and the Labour Movement in Early Twentieth Century Scotland with Particular Reference to Edwin Scrymgeour and the Scottish Prohibition Party’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Dundee, 2001), p. 192; McIvor, ‘Women and Gender Relations’, p. 183. For further discussion of this issue see Baxter, ‘“Matriarchal” or “Patriarchal”?’

instances where this victory rate topped fifty per cent. Strikingly, all of these cases occurred in England. The highest win rate for women in a Scottish city, the 40.7 per cent achieved in Edinburgh, was bettered by no fewer than sixteen English county boroughs. In both Dundee and Aberdeen only 16.7 per cent of female candidacies were successful, with only Blackburn and Darlington, which never returned a woman to its council at any annual election in this period, having poorer rates. These figures point to women having considerably less chance of becoming councillors in Scotland than in England.

It is of course likely that there were regional variations within England, as is suggested by some of the figures above. It is also possible that if other local authorities, such as county councils, were considered a different picture would emerge (although, as Scottish County Councils seemingly had an exceptionally low level of female representation, it seems unlikely that England would fare worse in this respect).⁵⁵ However, this does not alter the fact that all the available evidence indicates that the stories of women seeking election to councils in England and Scotland were far from identical. Although there were notable variations within the two nations, for instance the fact that Aberdeen and Dundee took much longer to elect a woman councillor than Edinburgh and Glasgow did, the general differences between them were nonetheless clear. In particular, three striking trends make the situation in Scotland distinct. First, it is clear that Scottish cities were generally slower to elect women to their councils than were English cities. Secondly, three of the Scottish cities had a smaller proportion of candidates who were women than a majority of the twenty-nine English county boroughs considered, with Dundee and Aberdeen in particular comparing very poorly with several English conurbations in this respect. Even in Edinburgh, which had a far higher proportion of candidates who were women than the other Scottish cities, less than one-tenth of municipal candidates were female, which is not a spectacular achievement considering that in Coventry the figure was close to one-eighth. Finally, and in many ways most interestingly, the success rate for female candidates in Scottish cities tended to be significantly poorer than that of women in the English county boroughs. Thus, in contrast with the situation in parliamentary elections, the available evidence suggests that Scottish women had comparatively less electoral success in city council elections than did English women.

IV

Clearly, there are two important, and apparently contradictory, patterns which need to be explained. The first is that women seemingly made more of an impact in parliamentary politics in Scotland than they did in England between 1924 and 1939. On the other hand, the longer time it took women in Scotland to make an impact in parliamentary elections was accompanied by a trend of a more limited

⁵⁵ See Baxter, ‘“Estimable and Gifted”?’, pp. 142–3.

and less successful involvement by women as council candidates in municipal elections in Scotland.

There is no one clear explanation for there being a greater proportion of female parliamentary candidates in Scotland, but taken at face value it seriously challenges the idea that Scottish society was always less tolerant of women participating in public life than English society. On the other hand, the fact that Scotland took nearly five years longer than England to elect a woman MP, and that all the political parties took longer to nominate female candidates in Scotland, would certainly seem to suggest that the party organisations, and perhaps the electorate, in Scotland were at least initially a little more uncomfortable with the idea of women MPs than was the case in parts of England. However, this needs to be taken in the context of England having had more than six times more seats available for women to contest, which made it statistically more likely that women would stand and be elected there before they did so in Scotland. Ironically, even if there was a greater reluctance to run and elect female candidates in Scotland, or even an impression of there being one, it could have helped aspiring female politicians. A perception of there being greater opposition to women playing a role in public life in Scotland would have ensured that Scotswomen who wanted to be candidates had to develop exceptional political abilities so that they could win selection. This could also partly explain why Scotland's women MPs made a significant impact at Westminster, although other factors, most notably a broader tradition of Scots MPs attaining high office, can be said to have played a part in that phenomenon.⁵⁶ Whatever the case, it seems unlikely that even if a greater degree of gender prejudice existed in Scotland that it by itself would have made such a difference.

A factor which almost certainly had some bearing was the slightly different, and arguably more equitable, approach to the integration of female membership after 1918 undertaken by the Unionist Party in Scotland to that of the English Conservatives. G. E. Maguire's research has shown that in most English constituencies the Conservatives retained mainly separate men's and women's organisations before 1928.⁵⁷ However, in Scotland most Unionist constituency organisations opted to have women as full members of the main party organisation, although women's (sub)-committees also operated very effectively within both local associations and at divisional council level. These committees did not stop women being well represented on local and divisional party bodies and, crucially, they ran a series of activities and events to promote female members' political development.⁵⁸ This makes it possible to argue that women were more

⁵⁶ See Baxter, 'Identity, Scottish Women, and Parliament, 1918–1979'.

⁵⁷ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p. 75.

⁵⁸ See Baxter "'Estimable and Gifted'?", pp. 269–73. The Unionists' main governing organisations in Scotland were the Eastern Divisional Council (covering constituency associations in the north and east Scotland) and the Western Divisional Council (covering constituency associations in the west of the country).

quickly integrated into and accepted by the Unionists in Scotland than they were in the Conservative Party in England. This would partly explain why, between 1923 and 1935, twenty-five per cent of all female Conservative and Unionist candidates in general elections in the UK ran for election in Scotland (a striking percentage given that Scotland had less than one-eighth of the UK's parliamentary constituencies).⁵⁹ Ultimately, the Unionists ran more female candidates before World War Two than any other party in Scotland, while in England Labour fielded approximately double the number of women the Conservatives did. Thus, this body of Unionist women was a major factor in explaining why Scotland had a greater proportion of candidates who were female than did England.

After 1945 Labour started to match and ultimately forged ahead of the Unionists in the number of female candidates fielded in Scotland. In the 1955 election Labour fielded two-thirds of Scotland's women candidates and by 1958 one-quarter of Labour's female MPs represented Scottish constituencies. This progress could be seen as Scottish Labour's response to the previous Unionist success in this field and a desire to convince female voters that it was just as committed to giving women a voice in parliament. Indeed, it is worth noting that Labour had in 1936 selected Mrs Jean Mann to run against Florence Horsbrugh in Dundee at the next election; partly, it seems, because they believed a female candidate had a better prospect of defeating her.⁶⁰

In some ways it could be seen as surprising that Labour did not advance more women as parliamentary candidates in the interwar period. Unlike the Unionists and Liberals, who kept women in totally separate organisations before 1918, women could join the Labour Party via its affiliated bodies such as the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Women's Labour League (WLL).⁶¹ Indeed, the latter body was guaranteed the right to send two representatives to the party's Scottish (Advisory) Council and elect one woman on its executive, ensuring a female presence on these governing party bodies from the time of their inception in 1914.⁶² In 1918, the Women's Labour League was disbanded with women's sections being set up on local Labour Parties in its stead. These new bodies were given the right to nominate four members to the executive committee of the Scottish Council, ensuring that more than one-fifth of the Labour's governing body in Scotland were women. At the same time, the new post of Scottish Women's Organiser was created.⁶³

⁵⁹ Figures calculated from Brooks, *Women at Westminster*, passim.

⁶⁰ *The Courier and Advertiser* 11 Oct. 1937 and J. Mann *Woman in Parliament* (London, 1962), p. 23.

⁶¹ Baxter '“Estimable and Gifted”?', pp. 261–5.

⁶² The Labour History Archive and Study Centre (Manchester) (hereafter LHASC), LP/SAC/14/1, Labour Party Collection, Scottish Advisory Council Papers, Report on setting up of Scottish Advisory Council c. 1914.

⁶³ LHASC, Labour Party Collection, Labour Party Regional Reports: Scotland, Conference Report 1918, p. 5; Glasgow City Archives, TD 1384/3/1/1, Labour Party Collection, Conference Reports, passim. See also Burness, 'The Long Slow March' p. 156 and Baxter '“Estimable and Gifted”?', pp. 264–7.

Yet, just as Graves and others have suggested was the case in England, primary and secondary evidence makes clear that the Labour Party had problems both in organising its women and in the levels of female membership it attracted.⁶⁴ A variety of factors can be proposed to explain this why this should be the case. Hughes has suggested that on Clydeside women found their ‘agenda’ opposed by men in the ILP.⁶⁵ Certainly there were instances when the men of the ILP did seem to act to weaken the position of its female members. For example, in 1926 the Glasgow ILP Federation abolished its Women’s Advisory Committee over the protests of its members and replaced it with a much weaker body.⁶⁶ The ILP was much stronger in Scotland than it was elsewhere in the UK; indeed, it was arguably Scotland’s key Labour Party body until shortly before its disaffiliation in 1932. Thus, any negativity it displayed towards women would have had a great impact in shaping women’s role in the Scottish Labour Party as a whole, and the chances of women being selected to contest seats as Labour candidates in particular.

Other organisational issues were also apparent. Jean Mann, who was both a parliamentary candidate and councillor in this period, believed that the fact that Labour appointed a women’s organiser for an area the size of Scotland was a mistake as the job involved too much work for one person.⁶⁷ Other research has suggested the weakness of women in the trade union movement impacted upon their involvement in the Labour Party and it is also the case that as early as 1919 the Labour Party’s annual report stated that, although women’s sections were emerging across Scotland, ‘the importance of this side of the work’ had yet to be ‘sufficiently realised’ by the Scottish party.⁶⁸ Moreover, after the early 1920s the ILP and other affiliated bodies tended not to elect women to the Scottish Council’s executive, leaving it with just the four female members sent by the women’s sections. This left women with a weak voice in the party and was also in sharp contrast to the situation in the Unionists where significant numbers of women sat on key party bodies in Scotland.⁶⁹ Clearly, this would not have helped Labour women to be selected by their party as candidates for office.

Additionally, Burness has suggested that the procedures for selecting parliamentary Labour candidates were more competitive than in other parties and Labour candidates often required sponsorship of one of the male-dominated unions, putting women at a disadvantage.⁷⁰ While this was almost certainly true to an extent, it should be noted that, in 1929, *The Scotsman* claimed that all

⁶⁴ Baxter ‘“Estimable and Gifted”?’, pp. 276–90.

⁶⁵ Hughes, ‘“A Rough Kind of Feminism”’, p. 188.

⁶⁶ Mitchell Library (Glasgow), Glasgow Room, Glasgow ILP Federation Collection, Executive Committee Minute Book 1925–1929, 12 Feb., 25 Feb., 26 Mar. 1926.

⁶⁷ J. Mann, *Woman in Parliament* (London, 1962), pp. 245–6.

⁶⁸ Baxter ‘“Estimable and Gifted”?’, pp. 287–8; *Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of the Labour Party, 1919* (London, 1919), p. 32.

⁶⁹ Baxter ‘“Estimable and Gifted”?’, pp. 272, 283.

⁷⁰ Burness ‘Count up to twenty-one’, p. 50.

three major parties found it difficult to persuade local party organisations to select female candidates.⁷¹ Moreover, the selection stage was not the only problem. At a conference of British Labour women in 1930, a Glasgow councillor indicated that the party really needed to ‘educate their women to believe that they were equally capable’ of representing people in the House of Commons and implied that the key problem was a reluctance by women to put themselves forward as candidates. The arguments of women who participated in this debate also suggested that obtaining Labour female parliamentary candidates was very much a Britain-wide problem, even if there were also local factors at work.⁷²

On the other hand, the lack of successful Liberal female candidates in Scotland was almost certainly connected with an organisational difference to England. Whereas female Liberals in England had their own group within the party in the shape of the Women’s National Liberal Federation, the Scottish Liberals were virtually unique among political organisations in that in the aftermath of the granting of female suffrage they opted not to have a women’s sub-organisation within the party. In fact, when in 1918 the Scottish Liberal Federation was formed from the (male-only) Scottish Liberal Association and the Scottish Women’s Liberal Federation (SWLF) the concept of such an organisation was specifically rejected by female Liberal leaders. They believed that so much effort had been taken by the party’s male and female leaders to ensure equality between men and women in the new organisation meant that they had secured full equality, denoting that a women’s body would be out of place. Yet this decision came to be regretted. In 1925, at the initiative of the Scottish Liberal Federation’s female members, a Scottish Women’s Council was set up, but even this step was, arguably, too little, too late. The new council was not seen as particularly effective and by 1938 it had lacked a national chairman for two years and many Scottish Liberal Constituency Associations had no official connection with it.⁷³ Thus, the Liberals in Scotland can be said to have failed to organise their female membership effectively. This would have led to a lack of Liberal women emerging as strong candidates for parliament and meant there was not a strong body to champion the idea of female candidates or influence selection proceedings. Equally, party in-fighting and general electoral decline did not help the situation.

The quantitative differences between England and Scotland in terms of female participation as candidates in local government contests have a range of possible explanations. One factor which was undoubtedly significant was that English local government operated differently from the system in Scotland. As well as directly elected councillors, English councils had a number of aldermen, who enjoyed the same powers as ordinary councillors, but had a more senior status. Unlike ordinary councillors, they were not elected by the public but were appointed

⁷¹ *The Scotsman*, 3 May 1929.

⁷² LHASC, Labour Party Collection, *Report of the Eleventh Annual Conference of Labour Women, 1930*, pp. 97–9.

⁷³ Baxter, ‘“Estimable and Gifted”?’, pp. 262–3, 291–2.

by the council. No such system existed in Scotland. Perhaps because aldermen tended to have had a fairly lengthy period of service as an elected councillor behind them there seem to have been few female aldermen in this period. For instance, Croydon had only one female alderman in the interwar period and she was only elected to that office in 1935.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, this system meant that many experienced male councillors were not required to contest local elections, these clearing the way for new and less experienced candidates to take their place as councillors. This would have helped women at a time when only a limited number had much experience of being actively involved in party politics.

Another relevant structural difference was that between the office of lord provost and the office of (lord) mayor. Typically, a (lord) mayor was elected for a one-year term, meaning that between the world wars there were around twenty occasions when an English council would elect its (lord) mayor. However, lord provosts were generally elected for three-year terms, meaning that there were far fewer opportunities to gain this post in Scotland. In some cases, this was made worse as lord provost could serve a second three-year term. Thus, the office of lord provost was vacant much less frequently than lord mayoralities, and it was an office that few councillors could hope to reach. Moreover, preference would often be given to those with a long record of service behind them. Thus, it was only really in the late 1930s that there were women on Scottish city councils with enough experience to be considered as serious contenders for the civic chair, and they would have had far more potential male opponents than a lot of the women in English county boroughs.

Differences in the way local politics operated were also important, and again it can be seen that the role of the Unionist Party was crucial in shaping women's destiny. With the partial exception of Edinburgh, in Scotland the Unionists (and indeed for much of this period the Liberals also) never officially fielded candidates in local elections, leaving the right-wing challenge to usually come from locally run 'moderate' and 'progressive' parties (whose membership, initially at least, usually included a fair number of Liberals). It is noticeable that generally far fewer right-wing women contested municipal elections in Scottish cities than did Labour women. In Edinburgh, the number of moderate, progressive and independent female candidates was almost identical to the number of Labour women who sought election to the council, but this partly reflects the fact that the Labour Party often contested a smaller proportion of council wards in Edinburgh than in Dundee or Glasgow. It is also worth noting that in Edinburgh the Unionist and Liberal Parties did sometimes run candidates of their own, particularly before the late 1920s, and were also known to formally endorse and campaign for some independents, and even moderates and progressives. For example Annie McGregor, a candidate for Morningside ward in 1928, was formally endorsed by the Liberals.⁷⁵ In other cities, where there is little evidence of the Unionists

⁷⁴ Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections Volume 3*, p. 154.

⁷⁵ *The Scotsman*, 20 Oct. 1928.

officially supporting any candidates, the situation was very different.⁷⁶ In Glasgow, moderate and progressive women accounted for little more than one-quarter of female candidacies, but Labour women managed to account for just over fifty per cent. In Aberdeen independents and moderates accounted for thirty-nine per cent of female candidates compared with Labour's fifty per cent. In Dundee the moderates failed to select a female candidate before 1945.⁷⁷ Interestingly, it seems highly likely that part of the reason for this was that the leadership of these groups was dominated by local businessmen and professionals, groups that contained few women among their ranks. Elements of the press saw such affluent men as the best opposition to Labour, with the Dundee-based *Evening Telegraph and Post* calling for such 'men of independence to stand for election' to oppose Labour in the wake of gains made in the 1935 municipal election.⁷⁸

In England the situation was more complicated, but in many county boroughs the Conservatives and Liberals did run candidates for at least part of the interwar period. For example, in both Birmingham and Bolton several women stood as Conservative candidates and in Birkenhead thirty-seven per cent of female candidates in the annual interwar elections were Conservatives. In Liverpool, Conservative and Liberal women accounted for over forty per cent of all female candidates, which was obviously very different to the situation in Glasgow. That said, in Barnsley, where the Liberals and Conservatives did not run candidates, an independent or citizens movement, similar to the Scottish moderates, put forward three-quarters of the female candidates who stood in the annual elections in that town in the interwar period. Similarly, in Croydon forty per cent of all female candidates in these elections either came from the Rate Payers' Party or stood as independents. Nonetheless, the general failure of the Unionist Party to officially run and select candidates in Scottish local elections undoubtedly contributed to Scotland's lower numbers of female candidates.

However, there is also evidence that political parties and/or voters in Scotland were less comfortable with the idea of female councillors than England. This is particularly suggested by the lower success rate for female council candidates in Scotland than in England, for which two possible explanations seem likely. One is that several Scotswomen fought wards where they had a low chance of election. This explanation is backed up cases like that of Lily Miller, who on eight occasions fought council wards in Dundee which the Labour Party had no chance of winning before she was finally given a safe ward to contest. Similarly, it is noteworthy that in Glasgow in the 1930s on each of the seven occasions a female

⁷⁶ The Dundee and Glasgow Unionist Associations' records show that although formally fighting local elections was considered in the 1920s and 1930s, it was ultimately felt best to leave running council candidates to separate organisations. See, for examples: UoDAS, Dundee Conservative and Unionist Association Collection, MS 270/1/1/1, Dundee Unionist Association Minute Book 1, 24 Sep. 1920; NLS, The Papers of the Scottish Unionist Association Acc, 10424/74, Glasgow Unionist Association General Committee Minute Book 1929–1941, 5 Sep. 1932.

⁷⁷ Baxter, "Estimable and Gifted?", pp. 371–2.

⁷⁸ *The (Dundee) Evening Telegraph and Post*, 6 Nov. 1935.

moderate/progressive candidate, who was not a sitting councillor, contested an election she was chosen to fight a ward in which her party could expect a heavy defeat. Mrs Annie Masson, a former parish councillor, fought Parkhead ward three times in this decade for the moderates. Parkhead, in Glasgow's east end, was a solidly working class district which elected either Labour or independent Labour Party candidates in nineteen of the twenty annual elections in the interwar period; the sole exception being due to a split in the Labour vote in 1927. This strongly suggests that women found it more difficult to be selected by parties for winnable and safe wards, but this is difficult to prove as there is very little surviving direct evidence relating to council selection procedures in this period.

The other obvious explanation for the poorer female success rates in Scotland is that Scottish municipal voters were more hostile to women. This is more difficult to prove, but there were some notable cases of women doing poorly compared with male candidates when multiple vacancies occurred in the same ward. In 1920, when every seat on Glasgow council was available, Kingston ward elected two male Labour candidates but the third Labour candidate, Mrs Agnes Lauder, failed to secure election. In the same election Miss Margaret Gilchrist ran on a joint platform with two male moderate candidates in Kelvinside ward. However, while both men were elected, the third seat in the ward went not to Gilchrist but to a rival male candidate also using the moderate label.⁷⁹ In the same city, Mrs Margaret McKell finished third in a battle for two places in Whitevale ward in 1935, despite her male Labour colleague topping the poll. As late as 1945, when there were three vacancies in St. Clements ward in Aberdeen, councillor Margaret Grant (who had been co-opted to the council during the war) could only finish in fourth place behind her two male Labour colleagues and a male Communist candidate.⁸⁰ Equally, there were some occasions where women lost wards their parties would normally have expected to win, although other factors, such as splits in political parties, also had an impact upon these results.

There certainly were women who felt that their gender was an obstacle to winning a place on Scottish councils. In 1913 when standing for Leith council Clarice McNab observed that several people had written to her, 'some wishing her success in her candidature, and others giving her advice. Part of that advice was that she should withdraw from that campaign, because the Town Council was not a place for a woman'.⁸¹ In 1920 Mary Barbour, a successful Labour candidate for Govan ward on Glasgow council claimed that 'the advent of a woman candidate was seen by some men and women as outrageous', but argued women were needed on councils to deal with issues that particularly affected women and children.⁸² This was an argument that many other women also adopted.

⁷⁹ *The Glasgow Herald*, 4 Nov. 1920. Note that in the early 1920s it was not uncommon for candidates using the moderate label to oppose each other.

⁸⁰ *The Glasgow Herald*, 6 Nov. 1935; *The Press and Journal*, 7 Nov. 1945.

⁸¹ *The Scotsman*, 22 Oct. 1913.

⁸² *The Govan Press*, 29 Oct. 1920.

Edinburgh provides a good example of this. Ella Millar reportedly argued in her 1919 by-election address that Edinburgh faced a number of problems, towards 'the solution of which' women could 'render valuable service'.⁸³ A few months later, at a meeting to launch Euphemia Somerville's ultimately successful bid to become Edinburgh's second female councillor, it was argued that women were needed on the council to tackle key issues such as public health and child welfare which were 'women's questions' and that despite being a substantial portion of the electorate women were underrepresented on the council.⁸⁴ Indeed, throughout the interwar period women candidates and their supporters would argue that Scottish councils had too few female members. At a meeting in support of Alexia B. Jack, who stood as an independent in Edinburgh in 1923 in an unsuccessful bid to become that city's third female councillor, a speaker argued that Edinburgh 'required far more than three women' councillors and stated that 'women wanted to take their share of the work of the town'.⁸⁵

McIvor has suggested that 'innate male opposition' was a barrier to Scotswomen becoming involved in party politics.⁸⁶ While this was by no means the only factor in explaining why women had less electoral success in Scottish local elections, it certainly seems plausible that opposition to, or at least uncertainty about, women being councillors was stronger in Scotland in the interwar period, perhaps because there was less of a tradition of women holding this role than there was in England. Yet it should be noted that even in English boroughs, which had very good records of returning female candidates, there was evidence of similar problems. Davies and Morley note that the defeats of some Labour women in Chester were believed to be connected to the fact that they were women.⁸⁷ Similarly, in 1920 Hannah Clark, an independent candidate for Doncaster council, was told by a male candidate that a woman's place was in the home. She cleverly turned this potentially damaging attack to her advantage by asking women voters to return her to the council so they would get a say in how their homes were made. Like Mary Barbour, she was victorious.⁸⁸

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The absence of significant references to the situation in Scotland in many 'British' histories of women and party politics could be taken to suggest that there was no variation between women's participation in party politics in Scotland and in England, but this would be erroneous. It is true that the involvement of women in Scottish and English politics did have a number of commonalities

⁸³ *The Scotsman*, 3 Jan. 1919.

⁸⁴ *The Scotsman*, 23 Oct. 1919.

⁸⁵ *The Scotsman*, 29 Oct. 1923.

⁸⁶ McIvor, 'Women and Gender Relations', p.183.

⁸⁷ Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, Vol. 3, pp. 3–34.

⁸⁸ Davies and Morley, *County Borough Elections*, Vol. 3, p. 422.

and there is clear evidence that women in both Scotland and England faced opposition to their participation in formal politics because of their gender. Yet quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that the participation of Scotswomen in parliamentary and local elections was distinctive from that of women in England. Indeed, Scotswomen, particularly those in the Unionist Party, arguably made more of an impression in parliamentary politics than did their English counterparts, indicating that any notion that women always fared worse in public life in Scotland than they did in England is, at best, rather misleading and too simplistic. However, it is true to say that Scotswomen lagged some way behind their English cousins in municipal politics in terms of their involvement as candidates and councillors.

There were many reasons for these divergent patterns but the oft overlooked, yet vitally important, structural differences between English and Scottish politics were undoubtedly crucial in shaping these divergent trends. Most notably, the contrasting figures for the numbers of female councillors in Scotland can be argued to have been heavily shaped by the particular structure and political character of Scottish municipal politics. What of the idea that Scottish society was 'more patriarchal than English society'?⁸⁹ It is perhaps partly true that some women in Scotland faced more opposition to their participation in politics than English women, and this may have also played a part in the generally lower levels of female representation on Scottish local authorities. On the other hand, the Unionist women in Scotland were arguably organised in a more equal fashion than were Conservative women in England, helping push up the proportion of female Tory MPs from north of the border. Indeed, it is also notable that the Liberal Party in Scotland in 1918 made extraordinary efforts to secure equality of the sexes in its organisation, even if this proved to be counter-productive.

Thus, when the story of women in Scottish electoral politics in the interwar period is looked at in detail it can be said to raise serious challenges to the existing historiography. Clearly, and in spite of some obvious similarities, the Scottish story had unique elements, which makes the glossing over of it by 'British' historiography completely unjustifiable. Equally, it can be said that to presume that women always fared worse in public life in Scotland than they did in England is both simplistic and inaccurate. Any misrepresentation of women's role in this era of Scotland's party politics is unfortunate, not only because the importance of this period in reshaping the Scottish political landscape, but also given that fact that since 1999 Scotland has had a parliament with one of the highest rates of female representation in the world. To fully understand this recent tale of female success, historians need to be aware of the complex story of women's entry into formal electoral politics in the 1918 to 1939 period.

⁸⁹ McIvor, 'Women and Gender Relations', p. 184.