

Women in Parliament: NSW Legislative Council

Talina Drabsch

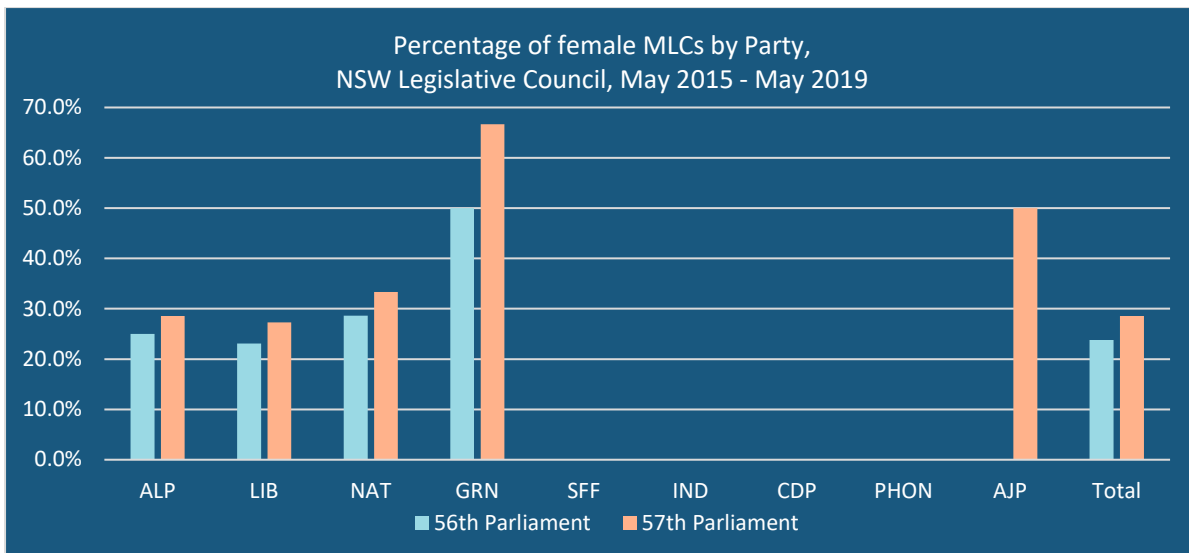
This key issues paper examines the number and proportion of women in the NSW Legislative Council following the March 2019 State Election (the Electoral Commissioner declared the results on 16 April 2019). It complements the [Women in Parliament: NSW Legislative Assembly](#) section of [Key Issues for the 57th Parliament](#).

NSW Legislative Council

At each election, 21 Members of the Legislative Council (MLC) (comprising half of the Legislative Council) are elected to serve two terms of Parliament. Eight of the 21 MLCs elected in March 2019 were women, bringing the total number of female MLCs to 12 (28.6%). In comparison to the previous Parliament (23.8%), the representation of women in the Legislative Council has improved. Nonetheless, the NSW Legislative Council still has the lowest proportion of female Members of all Upper Houses in Australian parliaments (the [national average](#) is 37.2%). The current proportion of female MLCs is actually less than it was 16 years ago (31% of MLCs were women following the 2003 election).

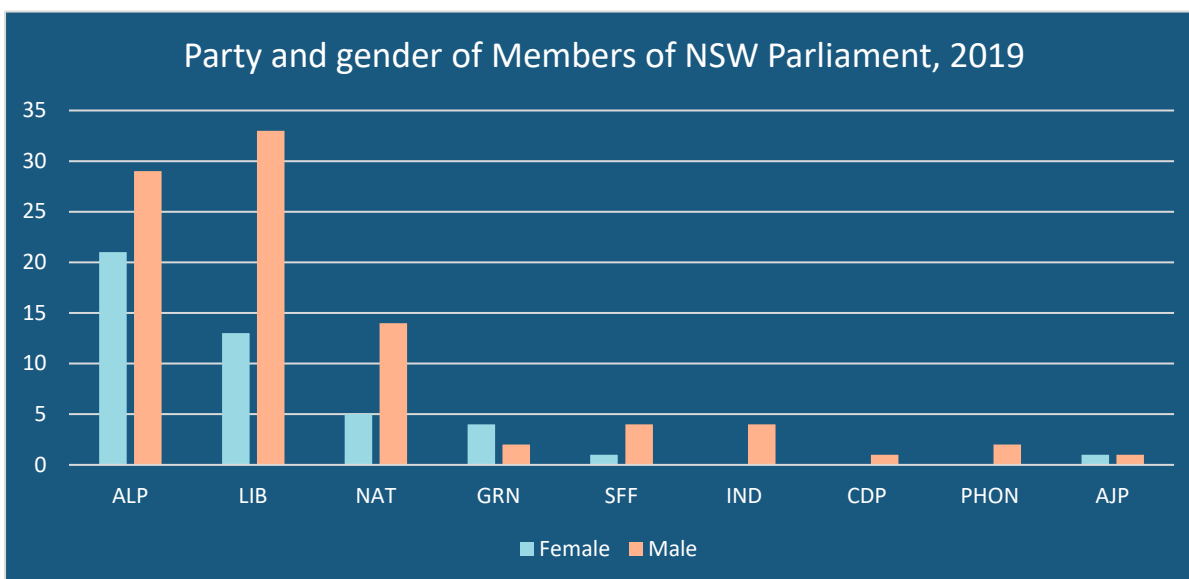
The table below shows the proportion of women in the Legislative Council by political party. Four of the 12 female MLCs belong to the ALP (33.3%), and five are Coalition members (41.7%). Within the parties, at least half of elected party members are women for The Greens and the Animal Justice Party only.

Political Party	Female	Male	Party total	% women within Party
Australian Labor Party (ALP)	4	10	14	28.6%
Liberal Party (LIB)	3	8	11	27.3%
The Nationals (NAT)	2	4	6	33.3%
The Greens (GRN)	2	1	3	66.7%
Shooters, Fishers and Farmers (SFF)	0	2	2	0.0%
Independents (IND)	0	1	1	0.0%
Christian Democratic Party (CDP)	0	1	1	0.0%
Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON)	0	2	2	0.0%
Animal Justice Party (AJP)	1	1	2	50.0%
Total	12	30	42	28.6%



Both Houses of Parliament

Forty five of the 135 Members of both Houses of Parliament are women. Of these, 47% belong to the ALP and 40% to the Coalition. The table below shows the number of Members by party and gender across Parliament.



The proportion of female Members of Parliament across Parliament has increased to 33.3% (compared to 27.4% in the previous Parliament). This percentage is similar to the Commonwealth (33.2% - prior to the May 2019 Federal election), Queensland (32.3%) and Western Australian parliaments (31.6%). Amongst the States, only the Victorian and Tasmanian parliaments have a greater proportion of women, at 41.4% and 50% respectively.

Equal representation in Parliament: An ongoing issue

Equal representation would see similar numbers of male and female Members of Parliament. Currently, only one-third of NSW parliamentarians are women. The McKell Institute has [estimated](#) that in the Federal Parliament, which has a similar proportion of female Members, it will take at least another eight election cycles for gender parity to be reached. A lack of gender parity is also evident in the allocation of ministerial responsibilities. In NSW, five of the 24 Government Ministers are women (20.8%) compared to nine of the 22 Shadow Ministers (40.9%). The low number of women in Cabinet and the notable difference between the parties has [attracted](#) comment.

Jamila Rizvi has [described](#) some of the benefits of having more women in parliament:

Having more women decision-makers helps to break down the stereotype that women aren't meant to be there, that they're an anomaly. It makes it harder for the media and the public to apply formulaic expectations of what a woman in power should be and how she should behave when there are lots of them. It also means that, when a woman fails to meet our expectations, she can do so as an individual and not be seen to have failed on behalf of all women.

Whether the use of measures such as quotas is necessary to fast track equal gender representation remains a matter of [debate](#). Women for Election Australia [argues](#) that research clearly shows that:

...to bring about real change a combination of hard measures (quotas) and additional supports, including mentoring and training programmes and women's political networks, is required.

According to La Trobe University professor Andrea Carson, recent [Vote Compass](#) data [showed](#) that:

Australians weren't opposed to female leadership per se, but conservative voters don't recognise gender as being an obstacle to getting into politics... Whereas progressive voters from Labor and the Greens very much saw gender as the number one obstacle and that's why they were supportive of gender quotas.

The ALP affirmative action [policy](#) requires 40% of women to be preselected in winnable seats, rising to 45% in 2022 and 50% in 2025. The Liberal Party is currently against the use of quotas, [debates](#) within the party over [strategies](#) to improve the representation of women remain. Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack of The Nationals, while opposed to quotas, has [indicated](#) that he is open to the introduction of a gender equity target for The Nationals.

Wallace has [shown](#) how quotas are already used within the parties in other ways, such as the quota of ministerial positions allocated to The Nationals as part of its coalition agreement with the Liberal Party in the Federal Parliament. He argues that "People don't have to like quotas. But no reasonable person can fail to accept that they are a regular part of political life".

Beauregard has considered the impact of gender quotas within political parties on the Commonwealth Parliament.¹ Her research highlights how, until the early 2000s, the ALP and Liberal parties elected a similar percentage of women to the Commonwealth

¹ Katrine Beauregard, Partisanship and the gender gap: support for gender quotas in Australia, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 53(3) 2018: 290-319.

Parliament. However, from this time onwards, the proportion of ALP women elected increased at a faster rate than Liberal women, with the percentage of Liberal women elected in the House and Senate having stagnated since the late 1990s/early 2000s. Baird and Bold have also [highlighted](#) the difference between the parties in this regard for each of the parliaments in Australia. Interestingly, Beauregard found that until 2010 men were either more likely than women to vote for a centre-left political party or there was no gender difference. However, this has changed in recent elections, with a significant gender gap opening as women are now more likely than men to support the ALP.² What impact this has on the long-term approach of the parties, remains to be seen.

Australia is not the only country considering strategies for improving the representation of women in its parliaments. Less than one-quarter of Members of Parliament [worldwide](#) are women. [The Good Parliament](#), report made 43 recommendations for achieving a representative and inclusive House of Commons in the UK (32% of its [Members](#) are women). The Report's recommendations cover three dimensions that impact on the representativeness of a parliament:

1. Equality of participation in the House – ensuring a diverse composition and achieving equality of participation;
2. Parliamentary infrastructure – how Parliament organises itself and supports the work of Members; and
3. Commons culture – making the culture of the House of Commons more inclusive.

The report [recommended](#) the introduction of statutory sex/gender quotas to take effect for the 2025 general election if, three months prior to the 2020 general election, political parties have failed to select at least 50% women in a party's 'vacant held' and 'target seats'. According to the report's author, Professor Sarah Childs, there is considerable consensus in academia and society in general that the quota-plus strategy is the most effective intervention to address under-representation. This strategy combines the introduction of sex/gender quotas with interventions such as training, mentoring and additional funding. Eighty per cent of countries with more than 30% female Members of Parliament utilise some form of quota ([Childs](#): p 17).

Achieving gender parity amongst Members of Parliament is important for many reasons. Childs [stressed](#) the symbolic role of Parliament as a 'role-model' institution before highlighting that the issue of inclusivity goes to the very heart of the effectiveness of a parliament:

When inclusive, a parliament has the potential to become a much more effective political institution. This may be due to: (i) a greater awareness of the public's multiple needs, interests and perspectives; (ii) consideration of a more expansive set of issues and interests; (iii) more informed decisions, as different talents and skills and perspectives and experiences, provide new insights and question 'group think' and the dominant ways of doing things; and (iv) enhanced legitimacy, as the public feel better represented by parliament, as a consequence of better descriptive and symbolic representation, and a greater responsiveness to them (p 6).

² Katrine Beauregard, Partisanship and the gender gap: support for gender quotas in Australia, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 53(3) 2018, p 295.