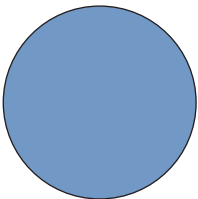I&DeA

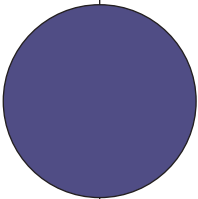# the 2007 survey of local election candidates

Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher
and
Galina Borisyuk and Mary Shears
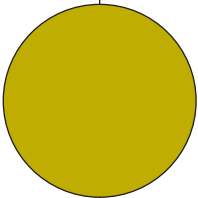
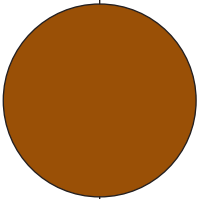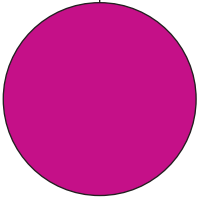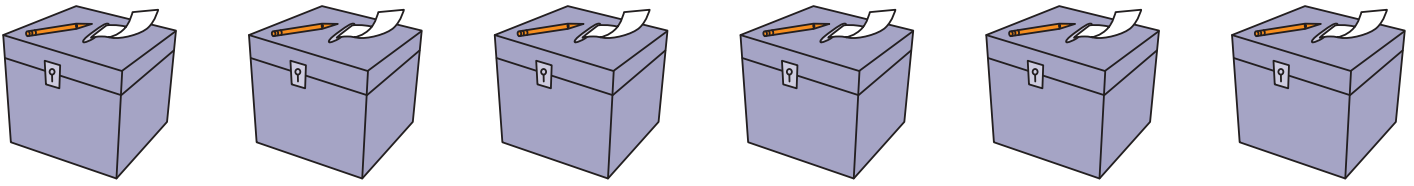This report describes the main findings of the 2007 survey of local election candidates undertaken by the LGC Elections Centre, University of Plymouth, in partnership with the IDeA.

Its general aims are to discover more about the type of person that challenges for local council election; to understand more about the recruitment of candidates; to examine the initial decision to stand for local election and the level of support or opposition encountered; to consider the level of competition in the nomination process and to evaluate each candidate's experience of the campaign process

One of the primary objectives of the 2007 candidate survey was to measure the nature and level of support for policy measures designed to broaden the social base of elected councillors. Local government councils are frequently criticised for being dominated by white, middle-aged, retired men. Some people see the broadening of the social composition as a prerequisite for local government modernisation. Three key social groupings are currently believed to be under-represented and perhaps should be prioritised for recruitment. These are women, younger people and people with Black, Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds. Accordingly, the 2007 survey sought to find out from the candidates themselves whether there was any sharing of perception that these groups were under-represented and whether positive action measures should be taken to redress any imbalance.

A postal survey was issued on 4 May to a one in ten random sample of candidates who had contested a local election just the day before.  A total of 2,848 questionnaires were posted to the candidate's address recorded on his or her nomination form. A total of 1,255 replies were received – a response rate of more than 44 per cent. Comparison with the actual election, which saw major gains for the Conservative party and significant losses for Labour and the Liberal Democrats, shows that our respondents are a representative sample in terms of sex and party affiliation and that all types of council holding election in 2007, are represented here.

The main report's structure reflects the broad aims and objectives stated above.  From information received we are able either to examine respondents as a whole or to divide them into various categories. For example, from time to time we compare the views of men and women candidates but we feel that one of the main strengths of this large-scale survey is our ability to distinguish between the following four categories of respondents:
- incumbent councillors successfully seeking re-election
- defeated incumbents
- candidates successfully elected for the very first time on 3 May
- candidates who contest but have never been successful.

The value of this categorisation is that it allows us to compare similarities and differences between councillors who lost their seats in May 2007 and those who replaced them. We can assess whether the 2007 intake is different from their more experienced council colleagues. Is the new intake a cross section of would-be councillors or are they already a class apart even before they begin to serve as local councillors?

## general findings

### who challenges for local council elections?

- two thirds of candidates were men, a majority are aged over 55 years while an even larger majority were white

- councillors who were re-elected were most likely to be retired while many candidates were likely to be self-employed

- around three-quarters of candidates were drawn from the professional and managerial classes and almost half possessed a university degree.

### campaigning and political experience

- for about three in ten respondents the 2007 election was their first as a candidate but for the same proportion it was at least their fifth

- local political parties appeared to select candidates from among the group of people who were already active in the civic society

- the vast majority produced a campaign leaflet with some personal input into its content

- there was wide variation in the amount of campaigning done, with an average of 12 hours per week spent in this way

- campaigning was of the traditional variety, leafleting and canvassing; the Internet was not widely used.

### decision to stand for local election and the level of support or opposition encountered from others

- only a third of candidates described the initial decision to stand as entirely their own – two thirds stood after being asked to do so

- women were more likely than men to stand after being asked

- candidates were motivated to stand because they wanted to do something for their local area but also to assist a local party

- being asked to stand was also a strong motivation for standing

- family and friends were most likely to be very supportive of the person's choice to be a candidate for local election

- almost three-quarters believed that many people were prevented from becoming a candidate because council work appeared to be too time-consuming; only a minority believed that financial considerations and the lack of powers for local councillors were factors.

**the level of competition in the nomination process**

- in a large majority of cases the candidate selected was the only person to apply for the nomination; only one in 12 had sought a nomination for a ward other than that for which they were selected

- one in five admitted that they were selected because they were prepared to stand as a paper candidate and one in eight because they were the only volunteer

- while most candidates were resident in the ward they contested, a significant minority was not; candidates who stood as Independents were most likely to reside in the ward

- most thought that political parties were the best means of recruiting candidates although a third thought local authorities should advertise for candidates.

**the candidate's experience of the campaign process**

- for a large majority of respondents (even those defeated), election campaigning was an enjoyable experience and one that could be repeated.

**on diversity of candidates**

- candidates believed that personal reputation was most important for their selection – personal characteristics such as skin colour, age and sex were perceived as less relevant to selection than personal qualities such as reputation, experience and community involvement

- among the social groups perceived as under-represented in local government there was most support for more younger people, next more Black, Asian and minority ethnic people and, finally, more women. A clear majority favour enhanced recruitment of candidates from among these categories

- almost two-thirds believed that greater social diversity in the council chamber would improve local government's image but only a third thought it would help to increase voter turnout

- in general, the under-representation of candidates who were women, younger people or drawn from the Black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities, was perceived as resulting from such people not being pro-active in seeking nomination. Positive action measures to redress the situation were overwhelmingly rejected.

The survey sought to discover candidates' opinions about the reasons for under-recruitment among certain social groups – women, younger people, Black, Asian and other minority ethnic people.

**possible reasons for the under-representation**

- two-thirds thought women put family commitments before a local political career and that too few women came forward to be candidates

- they disagreed with the idea that women were not interested in politics and lacked the confidence to participate in local politics

- opinion about younger people's interest in politics was evenly divided – as many thought they were not interested in politics as thought they were

- a large majority believed that younger people did not come forward to be selected as candidates for local election

- a quarter thought some voters might discriminate against younger people as local election candidates

- six in ten felt that political parties should encourage more Black, Asian and minority ethnic people to become candidates, but four in ten believed some voters might discriminate against such candidates.

**support for positive action measures for these social groups**

- women were only slightly more likely than men to favour positive action measures to increase the number of women candidates – a large majority of women was against

- fewer than one in ten respondents believed that a fixed number of council seats for this grouping was the way to redress under-representation in local government

- positive action measures – such as a guaranteed proportion of council seats reserved for women and party quotas for women – were rejected by a large majority of respondents. Among those expressing an opinion the ratio was six to one against such measures being introduced.

- positive action measures – such as a guaranteed proportion of council seats reserved for younger people and party quotas for younger people – were rejected by a large majority of respondents

- thirteen per cent thought the use of party quotas for Black Asian and minority ethnic people was a legitimate policy
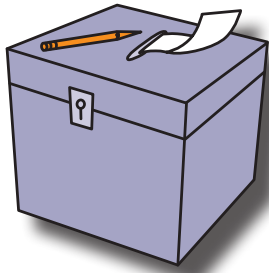
Two-thirds of candidates were male, with slightly more men than that among re-elected incumbents (see Table 1). The data is discouraging in terms of a small decrease in the proportion of women entering local government compared with the group of defeated incumbents. Some 37 per cent of losing councillors were women compared with just 34 per cent among their replacements. Women candidates, therefore, were outnumbered two to one by men and the proportion of women councillors on most local authorities is static or showing signs of decline.

Overall, more than, 58 per cent, of respondents were aged 55 years or over. The age profile of re-elected councillors was slightly different from those defeated last May and markedly different from both newly elected councillors and defeated candidates. More than seven in ten of those re-elected were in the higher age category compared with six in ten of defeated incumbents – it was younger councillors who were losing their seats in May 2007. That said, the replacements were younger still, although this should perhaps be expected. Newly elected councillors were similar in their age profile to other candidates – more or less evenly divided between the two age categories. In general, the survey confirms the general impression that local government is dominated by males and older people.

One of the starkest findings to emerge was the relative shortage of candidates from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. Overall, 89 per cent of respondents described their ethnicity as 'White' and a further nine per cent were 'Other White'. Just 2.5 per cent used an alternative label to describe their own ethnic background. The relative imbalance between white and non-white councillors appears to have been exacerbated by the May election. Just 2 per cent of continuing councillors were of a non-white ethnic background but that figure doubled among defeated councillors, while newly elected councillors reflected the current mix among re-elected councillors.

Overall, candidates who sought to replace councillors were similar in appearance. There was a two to one chance that the candidate was a man and a more than a nine in ten chance that a local election candidate was white. Candidates and councillors alike were highly educated and belonged to society's highest social/occupational classes. Councillors were more likely to be in the older age categories than were candidates. One of the few signs to emerge from this survey in terms of broadening the social base was that newly elected councillors were generally not as old as those they were replacing on the council benches.

table 2 social characteristics of candidates by candidate status in Mary 2007

| | | candidate status | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | winning incumbent | losing incumbent | first elected | candidate only | all |
| sex | man | 68.5% | 63.5% | 66.0% | 65.3% | 66.2% |
| | woman | 31.5% | 36.5% | 34.0% | 34.7% | 33.8% |
| | total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| age | below 55 years | 29.1% | 36.7% | 46.4% | 48.8% | 42.4% |
| | 55 years and over | 70.9% | 63.3% | 53.6% | 51.2% | 57.6% |
| | total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| ethnicity | British white | 90.4% | 90.4% | 91.0% | 87.5% | 89.0% |
| | other white | 7.8% | 5.8% | 7.1% | 9.7% | 8.6% |
| | other | 1.8% | 3.8% | 1.9% | 2.8% | 2.5% |
| | total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| education | no qualification | 13.4% | 7.8% | 12.3% | 7.0% | 9.6% |
| | GCSE or A level | 48.0% | 35.3% | 52.9% | 40.5% | 44.2% |
| | degree | 38.6% | 56.9% | 34.8% | 52.5% | 46.3% |
| | total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| employment status | paid employment | 33.7% | 42.0% | 40.0% | 44.0% | 40.5% |
| | self-employed | 19.2% | 16.0% | 22.6% | 15.9% | 17.8% |
| | retired | 38.8% | 36.0% | 26.5% | 28.5% | 31.4% |
| | other | 8.3% | 6.0% | 11.0% | 11.5% | 10.3% |
| | total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| occupation | professional | 43.5% | 50.0% | 43.3% | 50.3% | 47.3% |
| | managerial/ technical | 28.6% | 26.0% | 33.3% | 23.8% | 26.7% |
| | other | 27.9% | 24.0% | 23.3% | 25.9% | 26.0% |
| | total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |
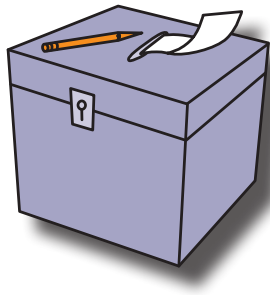
Were local parties selecting candidates to address directly issues relating to the under-representation of certain social groupings, especially women, people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and younger people? The survey evidence is clear: a person's political experience, reputation and involvement in the local community were perceived as more important than sex, skin colour, age and occupation. Of course, this question was asked of candidates and as the findings show they were more likely to be male, white and middle aged.

However, important differences emerge when distinguishing between candidates of different types. Half of all successful incumbents believed that community involvement was critical to their selection (see Table 2) but only four in ten defeated incumbents felt the same way. More than half the re-elected councillors thought their personal reputation was critical but just over 40 per cent of defeated councillors shared that assessment. The new intake of 2007 had quite different views from continuing or defeated councillors. Just one in eight understandably cited political experience as very significant. These respondents preferred instead to note their personal reputations (40 per cent) followed by community involvement (25 per cent) and being known to the party selectors (20 per cent).

table 2 candidate recruitment and active citizens

| | before becoming local candidate | | after becoming local candidate | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | number involved | % of all involved | number involved | % of all involved |
| partliament candidate | 23 | 26.1 | 65 | 73.9 |
| local paty office | 379 | 67.2 | 185 | 32.8 |
| charity office | 327 | 69.3 | 145 | 30.7 |
| professional association | 149 | 76.4 | 46 | 23.6 |
| trade union | 179 | 77.2 | 23 | 27.4 |
| women's organisation | 61 | 72.6 | 23 | 27.4 |
| local public body | 262 | 61.5 | 164 | 38.5 |
| pressure group | 192 | 72.5 | 73 | 27.5 |
| community group | 397 | 72.1 | 154 | 27.9 |

For all groups, however, gender, ethnicity and age were generally not thought to be qualities at all relevant in the selection process. When respondents were divided into men and women, however, a difference did appear. While just two per cent of men believed gender was very much/quite a lot of a factor in their selection, for women the figure was 18 per cent. However, the overall numbers was rather small.

Respondents were asked why they thought relatively few people were willing to become candidates. There was strong support for the view that the time commitment involved in council work might deter candidates. Some 73 per cent agreed/strongly agreed that being a councillor was perceived as too time consuming while less than 10 per cent took the contrary view. One in three believed that financial compensation for council work was deterring candidates but a similar number dismissed this explanation. Fewer candidates thought the lack of power for councillors was a factor – indeed an equal number agreed and disagreed with this.

Table 3 summarises responses to this question but by selecting out the neutral responses shows better the contrast in opinions. While that opinion was more or less evenly divided in respect of both power and pay, the number perceiving press intrusion as a negative factor was twice as large as those with the opposite view. The biggest agreement was with the statements that council work was time consuming and that the public was uninterested and did not know what was being done by local government. The strength of this opinion was reflected in the fact that virtually no differences could be found, for example, between defeated incumbents and newly elected councillors.

| table 3 images of council work | strongly agreee / agree | | disagree / strongly disagree | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | % percentage | number | % percentage | number |
| there is a general lack of public knowledge about local government | 96.5 | 1124 | 3.5 | 41 |
| being a councillor is too time-consuming | 88.2 | 909 | 11.8 | 122 |
| most people are not interested in local government | 86.1 | 919 | 13.9 | 148 |
| intrusive media coverage of personal life may discourage some people from standing | 63.7 | 573 | 36.3 | 326 |
| councillors are insufficiently paid | 53.7 | 411 | 46.3 | 355 |
| councillors don't have the power to make a difference | 48.0 | 489 | 52.0 | 529 |

The 2007 candidate survey presented an ideal opportunity to discover from candidates themselves why they believed some social groups, specifically women, younger people, and Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, were under represented in local government and what measures, if any, might be taken to redress the imbalance.

In each case the majority opinion was to increase councillor numbers from these particular social groupings.

Half of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that there should be more women in the council chamber and less than 10 per cent took a contrary view. There was rather more support for broadening the age range in local government, with three-quarters of respondents wanting more younger people to sit on local councils. A smaller proportion, more than six in ten, felt there should be more councillors with an ethnic minority background. In order then, the priority for changing the councillor demographic appears to be:

1. more younger people
2. more minority ethnic councillors
3. more women councillors.

Some 61 per cent believed that greater social diversity in the council chamber would improve local government's image. Only one in three, however, believed that it would improve voter turnout. Although only half thought more women should be recruited, there was near unanimity that, because of different life experiences, men and women brought distinct insights to council work. But not, it seems, to the extent that policy priorities would significantly alter. The proportions agreeing/disagreeing with the statement 'In general, women councillors have different policy priorities from men' were equal but in fact most respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.

Does service as a local councillor alter people's views about the need for and impact of greater social diversity within council chambers? There were virtually no differences in attitude – with the exception of the likely effect on voter turnout of a more diverse council. Returning incumbents were more sceptical about people participating in the local electoral process because of a socially diverse council.

Support for various policy measures, including advertising by local authorities designed to improve candidate recruitment was investigated. All but 10 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that local authorities should provide the public with more information about the work done by councillors. Three-quarters agreed that it was the responsibility of political parties to recruit candidates but fewer, 48 per cent, believed that existing councillors should undertake this activity. Just over one in three thought local authorities should advertise for candidates to stand.
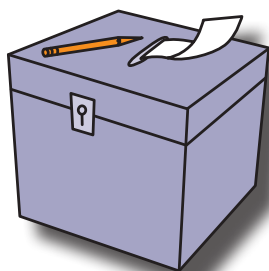
Various theories exist in relation to the under-representation of women, younger people and Black, Asian and minority ethnic people. Some of the principal arguments were rehearsed with the survey respondents in order to gauge the opinions of those who had actually taken the necessary steps in becoming a candidate and possibly a councillor too.

**women**

While 17 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that women were not interested in politics, six in ten took the opposite view. Slightly more, 27 per cent, thought women lacked confidence, although half the sample took the different view. It is often suspected that women forego the opportunity for a career in local politics because of family commitments. Certainly, more than two-thirds of respondents agreed with this viewpoint. Once women had taken the decision to stand there was no agreement that voters would then discriminate against them – fewer than one in ten took this view. The problems of women's recruitment are perceived to lie on the supply side – two-thirds of the candidates surveyed thought far too few women presented as candidates.

What of solutions to the problem of women's under-representation? There was widespread disapproval of the principle of guaranteeing a proportion of council seats for women – three-quarters stated their disapproval for this proposal while only one in eight supported the idea. Hostility was only slightly less muted towards parties introducing quotas for women candidates– 70 per cent either disapproved or strongly disapproved of this stance and just 18 per cent approving. Once those holding neutral opinions were removed from consideration, the strength of opposition was even – opinion was roughly six to one against both guaranteed council seats and even party quotas. The strongest opposition came from councillors (including the new intake) – nine in ten of whom were against any form of quota.

Because of the relatively large numbers of women respondents to our survey it was possible to separate the views of men and women on the matter of positive action measures. Table 4 shows clearly that, while women were more inclined than men to support such measures, the differences were rather small. Importantly, in both groups there was a large majority that would disapprove of attempts to engineer the composition of local councils in this way.

table 4 **quotas for women by respondent's sex**

| | | men % | women % |
|---|---|---|---|
| **guarantee proportion of seats for women** | strongly approve/approve | 9.8 | 19.4 |
| | disapprove / strongly disapprove | 90.2 | 80.6 |
| | total | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| **party quotas for women candidates** | strongly approve / approve | 14.6 | 24.1 |
| | disapprove / strongly disapprove | 85.4 | 75.9 |
| | total | 100.0 | 100.0 |

### young people

Views about the absence of younger people from local councils were clear. Opinion divided three to one in agreeing/disagreeing that younger people were not interested in politics but there was less agreement about the causes. While 37 per cent thought it might be about low confidence levels, another 33 per cent took the opposite view. But it was not family ties that were apparently holding younger people back – only one in five believed this but almost half did not.

The relative absence of younger people, it seems, was not thought to stem from any discrimination by parties and voters but, as with women, from their failure to present themselves as candidates. More than eight in ten believed this and a similar number thought parties should do more to encourage candidates from this age group. Should this proposal succeed and if more younger people became candidates there was optimism that most voters would at least not discriminate against them – only a quarter thought voters might react negatively. It is worth noting, however, that candidates compared to councillors were more likely to suspect that voters discriminate against younger people (see Table 5). This perhaps suggests that the wider public might adopt a similar view to those without any experience of working in local government – younger people themselves may be under the impression that to put themselves forward may result in voters discriminating against them for their lack of experience.

Although more younger people would be welcomed, there was no support for either guaranteed seats or party quotas. Just 13 per cent agreed with the proposal for guaranteed council seats, one in seven was neutral but 70 per cent were against. The pattern of responses to the principle of party quotas was virtually identical. Candidates, as opposed to councillors, took a slightly less rigid view but even here for every respondent favouring quotas, seats and selections, there were six against. Again, when we removed the neutrals, the strength of opposition towards any form of quota for younger people was clear.

table 5 reasons for the absence of younger people as candidates

| | | winning imcumbent per cent % | losing incumbent per cent % | first elected in 2007 per cent % | candidate only per cent % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| younger people are not interested in politics | strongly agree/agree | 69.7 | 68.8 | 75.5 | 74.1 |
| | disagree/strongly disagree | 30.3 | 31.3 | 24.5 | 25.9 |
| | total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| younger people don't have the confidence for politics | strongly agree/agree | 51.7 | 50.0 | 48.7 | 56.1 |
| | disagree/strongly disagree | 48.3 | 50.0 | 51.3 | 43.9 |
| | total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| younger people put their families above a political career | strongly agree/agree | 40.6 | 29.4 | 25.0 | 23.2 |
| | disagree/strongly disagree | 59.4 | 70.6 | 75.0 | 76.8 |
| | total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| political parties should encourage more younger people to be candidates | strongly agree/agree | 93.3 | 96.0 | 83.8 | 92.3 |
| | disagree/strongly disagree | 6.7 | 4.0 | 16.2 | 7.7 |
| | total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| voters discriminate against younger candidates | strongly agree/agree | 21.6 | 30.6 | 40.5 | 38.0 |
| | disagree/strongly disagree | 78.4 | 69.4 | 59.5 | 62.0 |
| | total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| too few younger people come forward to be candidates | strongly agree/agree | 96.5 | 96.1 | 94.6 | 94.8 |
| | disagree/strongly disagree | 3.5 | 3.9 | 5.4 | 5.2 |
| | total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
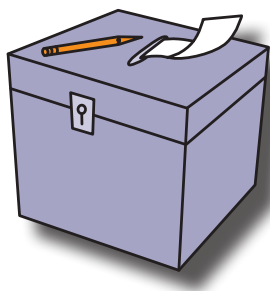
### Black Asian and Minority Ethnic groups

There was clear support for party encouragement of more candidates from this group – six in ten felt this way but four in ten believed voters discriminate against Black, Asian and minority ethnic people. Three in ten took the opposite view with a further third taking the neutral option. Opinion about voter attitudes towards this grouping, therefore, was evenly divided. On the matter of whether or not there are too few Black, Asian and minority ethnic people coming forward, almost three in ten of respondents, 27 per cent, felt they could neither agree nor disagree with this statement. This was a larger percentage than felt the same way about women and younger people. That said, almost two-thirds, 63 per cent agreed that there were too few candidates from this social grouping.

But once again there was very little support for a policy of redressing the relative under-representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people by the adoption of specific quotas. Fewer than one in ten respondents agreed with the idea of a fixed number of seats and only slightly more, 13 per cent, thought party quotas were a good idea. Even the neutral option proved relatively unpopular, 14 per cent and 17 per cent respectively. In both cases, the largest proportion lay with those who strongly disagreed with both policy ideas – 43 per cent were against seat quotas and 41 per cent against positive discrimination in terms of party selection processes. Table 6 shows the position when the neutral position is removed – as with women and younger people, there was clear opposition to any policy that would introduce quotas for these types of candidate.

## table 6 quotas for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic candidates

|  | strongly approve / approve per cent % | disapprove / strongly disapprove per cent % |
|---|---|---|
| guarantee proportion of seats for Black, Asian and minority ethnic people | 8.8 | 91.2 |
| party quotas for Black, Asian and minority ethnic people | 13.0 | 87.0 |