2012 Survey of Local Election Candidates

Colin Rallings, Michael Thrasher,
Galina Borisyuk & Mary Shears
The Elections Centre

Introduction

The 2012 candidates' survey is the second of our annual reviews to be conducted using an online questionnaire. The Elections Centre has been undertaking these surveys since 2006 and the annual reports provide opportunities to track the types of people that come forward to be selected by local parties, the level of campaigning experience those candidates have and, of course, to measure some of their broader attitudes towards local government.

One feature of concern in previous surveys that we have conducted has been the problem of eliciting responses from candidates whose ethnic origins are Black, Asian or from some other non-white ethnic minority grouping. Accordingly, we took steps to try and address that problem. The normal procedure is to draw a random sample of a sufficiently large number of candidates to ensure that approximately one thousand useable replies are received. In 2012 we first examined the full list of nominations and using OriginsInfo software that allocates an ethnic origin to each candidate on the basis of their forename and surname we identified a number that suggested a non-white ethnic origin of some kind. All of these candidates were invited to participate in the survey. For all remaining candidates the sampling frequency was one in every two.

In total 6,450 candidates were selected in this manner and each was sent a letter to the postal address that appeared on their nomination forms. This letter explained the purpose of the survey and provided an Internet link to the online questionnaire. Candidates were also given the opportunity to request a postal version of the questionnaire and a telephone hotline that could assist with any inquiries.

A total of 1,043 useable replies were eventually received, of which 42 responses were from candidates whose ethnic origin was Black, Asian or another minority ethnic group. This represents an overall response rate of 16%.

The survey data have been weighted to take account of the differing sampling frequencies among the white/non-white candidates and the response rates of these two groups. The weighting procedure also takes account of the pattern of responses from each local authority separately and also the party composition of all candidates that stood in 2012.

Key findings:

Among those seeking election in 2012 some 28% are women. Women candidates comprise 26% of incumbents seeking re-election and 32% of those standing in their first election.

The youngest candidate to respond is aged just 18 years; the oldest is 88 years. The mean age for all candidates is   53 years. Women candidates are, on average, two years older than men. Younger candidates, those aged between 18-35 years, comprise 18% of the total. For first-time candidates the average age is 48 years, ten years younger on average than an incumbent facing re-election.

Almost 97% of candidates are of white ethnic origin. Respondents describing their ethnic origin as Asian British account for less than 1% of the total; overall nearly 3% of candidates contesting in 2012 have their ethnic origin in the Indian sub-continent.

Only 5% of the respondents have no formal educational qualifications while a further 14% have obtained a GCSE or its equivalent. More than one in five has an A-level or equivalent qualification. Overall one in three of candidates contesting in 2012 have a university degree with a further 25% completing additional studies towards a higher degree.

Retired people account for 28% of all candidates. The full-time employed are the largest grouping (28.4%) with a further 10% in part-time paid employment. The self-employed comprise a significant fraction, approximately a seventh, of the whole.

Almost 50% classify themselves as professional with a further 26% in a managerial or technical occupation. Around one in six has a skilled occupation but fewer than three in a hundred describe themselves as working or having worked in an unskilled occupation.

A majority of candidates are recruited to contest wards where they are also resident. Overall, some 53% of candidates live in the ward that they contest and more than one in five of those who do not live in the ward in 2012 have lived there previously. Just over a half of first time candidates were selected to stand in the ward where they reside, although this figure is greater for incumbents and rises to 60%.

More than a third of those standing hold or have held an office in their local party organisation. More than a quarter had held office before contesting their first local election.

Almost four in ten candidates contested a local election for the first time in 2012. The remainder exhibit a broad range of campaigning experience. Over 70% of candidates produce a campaign leaflet and 91% of these deliver it to every address.

Candidates spent an average of 17 hours per week campaigning. Almost six in ten campaigned for fellow party members in neighbouring wards. A large majority enjoy the experience of contesting a local election and would stand again.

Four in ten candidates made their own initial decision to stand and 60% stood after being asked. Some 61% reported very strong encouragement from fellow party members and a further 30% state strong support. By contrast, 33% of candidates receive very strong support from their spouse or partner and more than a quarter felt that other family members and friends had been very positive.

There is some competition for nomination; 21% faced a challenge to secure their ward nomination. Less than one in fourteen sought a nomination for an additional seat. More than a half identifies a good personal reputation as a factor in their selection while 46% believe that being a local resident is important. Fewer than two in ten mention previous service as a councillor and 11% standing as incumbents.

However, almost 30% also believe that their selection was because they were the only volunteer while a greater proportion than this, 37%, felt selection followed after first agreeing to be a paper candidate only.

Six in ten believe that people are discouraged from becoming a council election candidate because the role of councillor is seen as time consuming. By contrast, fewer than one in three strongly agree/agree that people are discouraged because councillors have too little power or are insufficiently paid.

Although a majority of candidates, approximately 55% support the idea of more women and more candidates from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups there is greater support, 71% for encouraging younger people to contest for local office.

The prevailing view is that insufficient women come forward for selection. Around four in ten maintain that parties do not do enough to recruit candidates from among ethnic minority populations; a similar proportion believes that members of this group are discouraged by the white councillor stereotype. Almost six in ten believe that too few people from Black, Asian and other groups come forward for selection.

More than five in ten feel that younger people are under-represented because politics is not interesting but more than three in ten disagree with this viewpoint. Three in ten agree that younger people may lack confidence but over four in ten disagree. Six in ten feel that parties should become more proactive in recruiting younger people but most contend that the fault lies with younger people; more than 80% agree that they are under-represented because they don't volunteer to be candidates.

The problem of councillors retiring after serving just a single four-year term is viewed by two-thirds of those surveyed as the result of council work becoming too time-consuming and a similar number think balancing a councillor's role with family commitments is a cause of councillors standing down.

Who stood for election in 2012?

Table 1 shows that just 28% of candidates are women, a figure that shows little sign of increasing and indeed is slightly lower than for recent elections. Labour appears to be pursuing a strategy of selecting more women and the Liberal Democrats kept pace in 2012. By contrast, both the Conservative party and UKIP are finding it difficult to select women candidates.

Among the Green party candidates women accounted for 39% of the nominations but only 15% of independent candidates (this excludes candidates standing for "other" parties) are women.

The lowest age of a candidate is just 18 years whilst the oldest to respond to our survey is aged 88 years. The mean age for all candidates is 53 years. Women candidates are on average two years older than men. Only 18% of candidates are aged 35 years or younger and a further 10% fall into the second youngest age category (36-45 years).

The Conservative and Green parties were the most successful in recruiting younger candidates with UKIP the least successful. Two in three UKIP's candidates are aged at least 55 years but among the three main parties half of their candidates are of a similar age.

A high proportion of all candidates (96.5%) that stood in 2012 describe their ethnic origin as white with 93.1% described as 'white British', Irish (0.9%) and Other white (2.6%) comprise the remaining element in this grouping. Asian British (0.9%) are the largest among the non-white groupings and Asian candidates collectively comprise 2.6% of the total.

Among the 2010 candidates only 5% overall possess no formal educational qualification and 14% succeeded in obtaining only GCSE level or its equivalent. One in five has an A-level or equivalent qualification. But in common with earlier surveys, one in three overall has a university degree with a further 25% obtaining a higher degree. Approximately one in three candidates that stood for Labour and the Green parties hold a higher degree qualification but that proportion falls to one in five among Conservatives.

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Table 1: Profile of candidates that stood in 2012

	Con	Lab	LD	Green	UKIP	Minor party/ Independent	Total
Sex							
Male	78.4	67.9	67.9	60.9	91.0	77.0	72.2
Female	21.6	32.1	32.1	39.1	9.0	23.0	27.8
Age							
35 yrs and under	23.3	18.3	17.4	23.1	11.7	11.1	18.2
36-45 yrs	11.0	8.6	11.9	14.4	8.3	8.3	10.3
46-55 yrs	17.1	22.2	18.5	22.1	13.3	25.0	20.3
56-65 yrs	24.8	32.3	27.7	32.7	31.7	34.0	30.1
65+ yrs	23.8	18.6	24.5	7.7	35.0	21.5	21.1
Ethnicity							
White British	92.9	92.1	90.7	94.2	98.3	95.1	93.1
Other White (incl. white Irish)	1.0	4.3	5.5	4.8	0.0	3.5	3.5
Other	6.2	3.6	3.8	1.0	1.7	1.4	3.5
Education							
No qualification	5.2	3.2	4.9	0.0	15.0	9.1	5.2
GCSE	17.2	11.1	9.3	4.8	21.7	21.0	13.5
A level	28.1	23.7	17.5	17.3	26.7	19.6	22.4
first degree	32.4	31.2	42.1	40.4	21.7	28.7	33.5
higher degree	17.1	30.8	26.2	37.5	15.0	21.7	25.4
Employment Status							
Full-time paid employment	29.4	32.4	29.3	26.0	24.6	21.7	28.4
Part-time paid employment	8.1	12.6	7.6	11.5	11.5	11.9	10.4
Self employed	19.9	8.3	17.4	17.3	11.5	21.0	15.5
Retired	25.6	30.2	33.7	16.4	34.4	26.6	28.1
Other	17.1	16.5	12.0	28.8	18.0	18.9	17.5
Occupational Status							
Professional occupation	49.2	51.9	54.6	52.6	40.7	41.1	49.6
Managerial/technical occupation	28.2	23.7	28.5	17.5	27.1	29.8	26.0
Skilled occupation, non-manual	6.0	10.7	6.4	16.5	5.1	6.4	8.5
Skilled occupation, manual	7.5	5.9	4.7	6.2	18.6	16.3	8.4
Partly skilled occupation	5.5	5.2	4.1	3.1	6.8	2.8	4.6
Unskilled occupation	3.5	2.6	1.7	4.1	1.7	3.5	2.9
Residency							
Live in the ward	51.8	54.0	41.1	54.5	56.1	67.8	53.3
Do not live in the ward	48.2	46.0	58.9	45.5	43.9	32.2	46.7

The retired make up a large group in terms of occupational status, accounting for 28% of respondents. The full-time employed are the largest grouping (28%) with a further 10% in part-time paid employment. The self-employed comprise a significant fraction, almost a seventh, of the whole.

There are not large differences in the pattern of recruitment among the various parties contesting in 2012. Labour has the largest fraction of those in full or part-time employment while the Conservatives are attractive to the self-employed. It is interesting to note that although a quarter of Conservative candidates are retired from work that number rises to 34% among Liberal Democrats and falls to just 16% among Green candidates.

Almost half the candidates are in a professional occupation with a further 26% working in some form of managerial or technical role. Around one in six has a skilled occupation but fewer than three in a hundred are unskilled. There are clear differences among candidates recruited to stand on behalf of UKIP compared to the other parties; a smaller proportion are likely to be occupied in a profession and a larger proportion have a skilled manual occupation.

A small majority of candidates, 53% reside in the ward that they contest. Of the 47% who currently live outside the ward, more than a fifth has lived there in the past. It appears that in 2012 the Liberal Democrats did not succeed as the other parties did in recruiting a majority of their candidates from among local residents.

Candidate recruitment continues to be dominated by a relatively small number of social networks, particularly local parties, community groups and charitable organisations. One in four of those standing in 2012 hold or have held an office in their local party organisation. More than a quarter held this office before becoming a candidate. Similarly, more than a quarter have been involved formally with a charitable organisation and more than a third have or had a position of responsibility with a local community group of some description. One in five serves or has served on a public body of some kind, while one in three is involved with professional associations and/or trade unions. One in ten has stood for parliamentary election but only 5% did so before contesting a local election for the first time.

Table 2 describes differences in the social composition among four different types of candidate. These are first time candidates (41% of those responding), incumbent councillors at the time of the 2012 election (15%), candidates that had formerly been councillors (9%) and finally people who had stood before but had never been elected (36%).

There are some minor differences when a candidate's electoral experience is taken into account. Women comprise 26% of incumbents but 32% of the first-time challengers, evidence of some growth in the proportion of women challenging for local office. .

Although the proportion of women standing is rather low there is perhaps encouraging news that 32% of first-time candidates are a woman compared to 26% among incumbents. Hope too that 26% of first-timers are aged 35 years or younger. But the proportion of minority ethnic candidates remains stubbornly low.

The pattern in all of the candidate surveys is confirmed by the 2012 data – local elections attract people who hold university-level qualifications and are more likely to be drawn from the professional/managerial/technical work sectors. The differences in these respects between veterans (all those contesting at a previous election) and those new to the voting experience are so small that they are not statistically significant.

For all categories there is a majority of candidates that contest the ward where they also reside, although this is more likely to happen for incumbents than for other types of candidate.

Repeatedly, these surveys reveal that candidates enjoy the experience of standing and would repeat the experience. Yet, candidates are also willing to acknowledge that their individual chances of winning are negligible. Candidates are asked to consider how they felt, before the election, about their own chance of winning; the range of options runs from zero (no chance at all) upwards to 10 (highly probable chance of success). Only one in twenty five selected the top point while a further one in sixteen selected the next point down on the scale. Among those located at the opposite end of the scale, almost one in five, 18% rated their chances as zero with another 16% selecting the next category.

Table 2: Candidates and electoral experience

	First-time candidate	Incumbent	Former councillor, non-incumbent	Frequent candidate but never elected
Sex				
Male	68.3	74.2	74.4	75.8
Female	31.7	25.8	25.6	24.2
Age				
35 yrs and under	26.4	9.2	1.2	18.4
36-45 yrs	12.5	4.9	7.3	10.9
46-55 yrs	17.8	19.7	29.3	20.7
56-65 yrs	26.6	36.6	32.9	30.3
65+ yrs	16.7	29.6	29.3	19.6
Ethnicity				
White British	92.4	97.2	93.9	91.9
Other White (incl. white Irish)	4.2	2.8	2.5	3.2
Other	3.4	0.0	3.7	4.9
Education				
No qualification	5.0	4.2	2.5	5.7
GCSE	14.9	18.3	17.3	10.1
A level	26.4	19.7	18.5	19.5
first degree	30.9	35.9	34.6	35.9
higher degree	22.8	21.8	27.2	28.7
Employment Status				
Full-time paid employment	26.7	28.9	26.8	31.9
Part-time paid employment	11.5	10.6	9.8	8.0
Self employed	16.8	10.6	18.3	15.8
Retired	21.7	40.1	34.2	28.2
Other	23.3	9.9	11.0	16.1
Occupational Status				
Professional occupation	47.7	50.3	56.8	49.1
Managerial/technical occupation	25.0	28.8	22.2	27.4
Skilled occupation, non-manual	9.0	6.5	6.2	9.5
Skilled occupation, manual	9.0	9.4	8.6	7.4
Partly skilled occupation	5.3	3.6	4.9	3.6
Unskilled occupation	3.9	1.4	1.2	3.0
Residency				
Live in the ward	53.0	60.0	50.0	51.7
Do not live in the ward	47.0	40.0	50.0	48.3

The 2012 campaign

Local election candidates, it appears, remain reluctant wholly to embrace new technologies to assist in campaigning. The principal method for attracting votes continues to be hand-delivered leaflets. Some 71% of candidates prepare a campaign leaflet (Table 3) and 76% of these deliver it to every postal address in the ward. By contrast, online campaigning is undertaken by only 27%. Despite technological advances and widening patterns of computer ownership and Internet access a minority of candidates use Facebook, (25%), Twitter, (17%) and personal websites, (7%) to publicise the campaign.

Table 3: Campaigning in 2012

	% yes
A campaign leaflet for distribution	70.9
Deliver the campaign leaflets? (among those who did produce leaflet)	93.0
Leaflet delivered to all addresses in your ward? (among those who did produce leaflet)	76.4
Canvass by telephone	22.0
Use website as part of campaign/Internet campaigning	27.8
Contact local media to publicise campaign	70.9

The contents of campaign leaflets largely concentrate upon an individual's record of local community involvement but also emphasise, where appropriate, a party's local priorities. Less cited, although still mentioned by a majority of respondents, are personal qualities, such as a competency for public office, cited by 87% as either important or very important. Interestingly, fewer than this, 61% dwelt on previous political experience in their campaign literature, highlighting that for many this was their first foray into election campaigning. Unlike much general election campaign literature, local election pamphlets are not usually negative about rival parties and candidates; only 16% thought it was very important to cover rival parties. During the campaign period itself candidates were active for 17 hours per week on average with Independent candidates the busiest of all. A high proportion, almost six in ten, campaigned on behalf of fellow candidates in neighbouring wards; nine in ten of

respondents had helpers to deliver their leaflets. A large majority, 82% enjoyed their campaign experience, although many found that voters were more interested in the economic recession and national campaign issues of the major parties.

The majority of respondents are not concerned about electoral fraud; almost eight in ten think voting is very/fairly safe. Nine in ten did not witness any incidents that constituted electoral fraud, only 3% reported incidents to returning officers, election staff or the police.

To stand or not to stand?

Four in ten candidates made their own initial decision to stand but 60% stood after being asked by someone else. Six in ten from the first category do so because they feel strongly that they can make a difference. One in six of this group, however, were using a local election to launch a political career. The importance of local party networks is evident among those that decide to stand after initially being approached by a fellow party member; over 60% of these were responding to an invitation from another party member while over a quarter were persuaded by a serving councillor.

The party connection remains vital in developing a strong support network for candidates. Some 61% reported very strong encouragement from fellow party members and a further 31% state strong support. By contrast, less than a third receive very strong support from their spouse or partner and approximately three in ten feel that other family members and friends are very positive. But this does not infer that close personal contacts are negative about standing. Only one in twenty admits that a spouse/partner became negative about standing for election.

The nomination process

A clear majority of candidates contest on behalf of a registered political party. Among these candidates almost 60% have been members for five or more years although a significant fraction, one in four, joined between one and five years before standing for election. A rather small number, 9%, joined the party within the 12 months prior to the election. There is some competition for nomination with 21% of our respondents facing competition for their ward nomination bid. Less than one in

fourteen sought a nomination for a seat additional to the one that they eventually contested.

Candidates are asked to identify the qualities that were instrumental in their selection. More than half selected 'good reputation' while 46% believe that being a local resident is critical. Fewer than two in ten felt selection is influenced by previous service as a councillor.

One in nine overall believe that being an incumbent councillor is important in securing the nomination. Of course, when only incumbents are considered the proportion within this group rises considerably with 70%% identifying incumbency as a factor in the selection process.

The wider recruitment problem

There is little doubt that negative images of the councillor's role create barriers to candidate recruitment. Nearly seven in ten believe that people are discouraged from standing because the job is seen as time consuming (Table 3). By contrast, fewer than one in three strongly agree/agree that people are discouraged because councillors have too little power or are insufficiently paid. A majority maintain that intrusive media coverage of a person's private life may deter some from seeking office and 60% think party politics in local government acts as a deterrent. One recommendation for broadening participation is that political parties should open up the selection process to candidates that are not party members. This is not supported generally by candidates with only 26% agreeing/strongly agreeing with this proposal.

Table 4: Attitudes towards recruitment issues

	Strongly agree/agree	Disagree/Strongly disagree
	%	%
Being a councillor is too time consuming	65.1	16.3
Councillors are insufficiently paid	28.4	41.9
Political parties should recruit non-members to stand as candidates	25.7	53.5
More women councillors	55.3	9.5
More BAME councillors	53.7	11.2
More younger councillors	71.6	9.7

Some social groups, principally women, members of the Black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities and younger people are currently under-represented in local councils. Although around 55% of 2012 candidates support the idea of more women and more ethnic minorities there is greater support generally, 72%, for encouraging more younger people to contest. These findings correspond with previous surveys that found greatest support for the recruitment of younger people onto council benches. Nearly seven in ten candidates believe that a broader social base among councillors would improve local government's public image.

Generally, candidates believe groups are under-represented because people are reluctant to stand rather than because party selection processes are biased. Although, for example, 33% agree that local parties don't work hard enough to recruit more women, a larger proportion, 42%, take a contrary view. Prevailing opinion is that insufficient women want to be councillors – almost seven in ten concur with this explanation for the shortage of women. This reluctance does not originate from a lack of interest in politics (only 12% support this explanation) or lack of confidence (only 20% support). Women's personal circumstances are largely to blame it seems; 57% agree that women place families above political commitments. Four in ten agree that some women don't want to be councillors because of their dislike of the style of confrontational politics and a slightly greater percentage, 45%, because of the image of councils being governed largely by men.

More than six in ten disagree that people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups are under-represented because they lack interest in politics. Similarly, a general lack of confidence among minority ethnic groups is not regarded as an

obstacle to recruitment. Around four in ten of our respondents maintain that parties don't do enough to recruit such candidates and a similar number believe that members of this group are discouraged because of the white councillor stereotype. However, a majority, 59% in 2012, continues to believe that simply too few people from minority ethnic groups volunteer for selection.

A rather different set of factors are perceived to be working to deter younger people from standing; the views are sometimes polarised. A majority of respondents, 53% feel that younger people are under-represented because politics is not interesting to them but quite a number, 35% takes the contrary view. Similarly, three in ten agree that a factor explaining few younger people is a lack of confidence but over four in ten disagree with this viewpoint. A majority, however, believe that whatever the cause of under-representation it is not because younger people put family before politics. Equally, the confrontational style of local politics is not regarded as an obstacle. Local government's image does appear to be important; a majority believe that younger people are reluctant to engage because of councillor stereotypes. There is also agreement from more than six in ten candidates that parties should become more proactive in recruiting this group. However, the most support is found for the suggestion that the fault lies with younger people; more eight in ten feel that they are under-represented simply because they don't want to be councillors.

An important indicator of the health of local democracy is the unwillingness of many councillors to serve beyond a first term. This means that valuable experience is being lost when councillors decide to resign after a single four-year stint. The most popular explanations for this decision, chosen by 65% of respondents, are the belief that being a councillor in modern local government is too time-consuming and councillors can't balance family commitments and council duties. A majority of respondents, 57%, think the need to request leave from work to attend council meetings causes problems for employees.

By contrast, a smaller proportion, just fewer than 30%, thought that the catalyst for the decision to resign is a lack of power and party political domination. Approximately one in five believes that a lack of support from local officers or insufficient remuneration is factors that influence councillors to stand down. Less than 20% attribute intrusive media coverage or the sense of job completion are the cause of early retirements.

In 2012 candidates were asked about their opinion of various initiatives designed to encourage more people to be actively engaged in influencing and shaping local policy. Some like directly elected mayors, the forthcoming November elections for Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales, (PCCs) and e-petitions are already in place. Others such as local referendums, elections for local officials and "recall" elections of councillors have been proposed. In general candidates approve of providing more opportunities for the public to express their opinion, e-petitions, local referendums, and recall elections are favoured by the majority. Almost half support the introduction of internet polling of local citizens. What is not supported by many is the extension of franchise to include the election of Crime Commissioners, mayors, judges or magistrates.

When asked in more detail about the Police and Crime Commissioners, a small majority of respondents agree that political parties should be able to select candidates. More than six in ten think the public should be allowed to determine by referendum whether or not they have Crime Commissioner for their local area. Nearly six in ten think the new PCCs will reduce the powers give to local authorities over policing policy.