

2013 Survey of Local Election Candidates

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Published by The Elections Centre, 2013

Introduction

The 2013 survey of local election candidates, conducted by the Elections Centre at Plymouth University, provides data about the types of people that seek election to local councils, their motives for standing and their activities during the election campaign. The survey covers different aspects of the electoral experience, from the moment a person decides to stand and the support network that assists them through the campaign.

This is the eighth in the series of annual candidate surveys. The surveys from 2006-2010 were postal questionnaires. The 2013 survey is the third national internet survey to be undertaken and it is the first national census of candidates in the sense that every candidate was invited to participate. Each candidate was initially contacted by letter, sent to the address that appeared on their nomination papers, and asked to follow a web link to the online questionnaire. Additionally, we offered to provide a paper version of the survey to any candidate who requested one. A telephone hotline was also provided to answer any inquiries about the survey and its completion.

A total of 9,950 candidates were contacted and combining the numbers that responded online and by post the survey produced 1,989 usable replies. This is a response rate of 20%. Comparing the number and type of candidates that actually stood in 2013 the response rates varied across the range of local authorities, the parties standing and for the first time, candidate gender. Accordingly, the survey data are weighted to reflect the types of authority, the pattern of party competition and the ratios of men and women standing for election in May 2013.

In addition to describing candidates according to standard demographic characteristics (sex, age, education, etc.) this report also classifies them by electoral experience. Four categories are identified for this purpose: incumbent councillors seeking re-election in 2013 (20.3% of respondents fall into this category), candidates that had previously served as a councillor at some earlier period (10.4%), candidates that had stood before but have never been elected (32.4%) and finally, candidates for whom this election was their first experience of standing (36.9%).

Key findings:

Among the candidates contesting the 2013 local elections almost 73% are men, the average age is 57 years, and 98% are of white ethnic origin. Almost four in ten possess a first degree or its equivalent while a further 25% hold a higher degree qualification. Fewer than 5% of the respondents hold no formal educational qualification.

Almost four in ten candidates are retired from work, fewer than a quarter is in some form of full-time employment and under a fifth is self-employed. More than half holds a professional occupation and a further 28% is occupied in a managerial/technical role. Fewer than two in a hundred has an unskilled occupation.

Slightly fewer than six in ten candidates are resident in the ward that they contest. Among incumbent councillors seeking re-election the percentage rises to 67% but falls to 55% among candidates contesting their first election. Around five in ten are, or have been, officers in their local party. More than a third has been involved with professional and/or charitable organisations and more than four in ten have been involved with a community-based organisation. For almost four in ten candidates contesting this was their first experience of standing. By contrast, a quarter of this year's candidates were standing for the sixth or more time. Some 6% of the respondents had been elected on at least five previous occasions.

Almost eight in ten candidates had an election campaign leaflet available for delivery; over 90% of those that had access to a leaflet are active in delivering them and most have help when delivering in their own wards. More than six in ten deliver to all addresses in the ward. Whilst the traditional methods of door-knocking and leafleting are still favoured, almost 25% are now using the Internet in some manner for campaigning purposes.

Approximately four candidates in ten makes his or her own decision to stand the first time; about 60% stand after being approached by someone else, mostly a fellow party member. Support from fellow party members is vital; 58% reported very strong support from this source and more than a third received similar support from their spouse/family.

More than nine in ten candidates contest on behalf of a registered political party; among the party members more than 65% have been party members for five or more years but this varied considerably across parties in 2013. Only one in five candidates faces competition for the nomination. Having a good reputation is the most frequently cited reason for selection. More than one in three owe their selection to being the only volunteer and a slightly larger proportion than this, 42% are selected after revealing a willingness to stand as a paper candidate.

Two-thirds of the 2013 candidates believe people do not stand because the councillor role is too time consuming. More than five in ten think political party domination in local government discourages those who do not want party allegiance. Intrusive media coverage also emerges as a factor that may discourage people from standing.

Although more than a half support the idea of more women and more people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups on the council benches, almost three-quarters support an increase in younger people. A majority believe greater diversity among councillors would improve the image of local government.

More than seven in ten candidates believe that a large fraction of one-term councillors resign because of time pressure. The problems of balancing political career with family commitments and difficulties in securing time off from work are mentioned by a clear majority. Only 13% think that councillors retire after achieving what they set out to do.

Who stood for election in 2013?

More than seven in ten of the candidates contesting in 2013 are men and only 27% are women. There is some variation in the proportion of men and women candidates among the various parties (Table 1). Women candidates account for 34% of Labour's total but just 24% of the Conservative tally. Among the Green party candidates women accounted for 33% but by contrast only 19% for UKIP.

The lowest age of a candidate is 18 years whilst the oldest age is over 80 years. The mean for all candidates is 57 years with women candidates on average being one year older than men. Only 7% of candidates are aged 29 years or younger and a further 8% fall into the second youngest age category (30-42 years).

Virtually all (98%) candidates that stood in 2013 describe their ethnic origin as white. White British comprise the largest category, 95% of the category, with White Irish (1.1%) and Other White (2.1%) making up the remainder.

Fewer than one in twenty respondents possess no formal educational qualifications but approximately one in five has an A-level or equivalent qualification. Almost one in four candidates has a university degree with a further 25% obtaining a higher degree. In short, more than 60% of the candidates that contested the 2013 elections holds a university degree or its equivalent, a much larger rate than among the population at large – 27% according to the 2011 census.

Retired persons make up the largest grouping in terms of occupational status, accounting for 37% of respondents. Next are those in full-time employment, (22%), with a further 9% in part-time paid employment. The self-employed comprise a significant fraction, although less than a fifth of the whole.

Table 1: Profile of candidates standing in 2013

	Con	Lab	LD	Green	UKIP	Minor party/ Independent	Total
Sex							
Male	75.3	66.4	69.8	67.3	81.1	78.7	72.7
Female	24.7	33.6	30.2	32.7	18.9	21.3	27.3
Age							
35 yrs and under	11.9	9.8	9.2	14.4	5.4	2.2	9.3
36-45 yrs	8.6	9.8	11.0	7.7	8.0	9.6	9.2
46-55 yrs	18.6	18.9	18.6	29.3	17.6	25.0	20.3
56-65 yrs	34.6	39.0	33.0	33.9	28.4	29.5	33.7
65+ yrs	26.4	22.5	28.2	14.7	40.7	33.8	27.6
Ethnicity							
White British	96.0	93.9	96.8	93.3	95.8	87.0	94.6
Other White (incl. white Irish)	2.5	3.8	2.2	4.2	2.0	6.9	3.2
Other	1.5	2.3	1.0	2.5	2.2	6.1	2.2
Education							
No qualification	3.8	3.6	1.3	0.6	11.1	6.3	4.4
GCSE	14.8	10.7	5.8	3.4	18.2	21.4	12.2
A level	28.6	14.2	17.4	18.4	26.4	22.1	21.4
first degree	31.9	42.2	45.6	40.8	30.7	31.8	37.4
higher degree	20.9	29.2	29.9	36.8	13.6	18.3	24.7
Employment Status							
Full-time paid employment	17.4	26.3	22.5	26.8	19.5	17.1	21.7
Part-time paid employment	6.9	9.4	7.8	15.4	5.7	9.1	8.6
Self employed	24.6	12.6	19.8	18.6	22.1	22.3	19.8
Retired	38.1	38.8	36.9	23.2	43.0	34.8	36.9
Other	13.0	12.9	13.0	16.0	9.6	16.8	13.1
Occupational Status							
Professional occupation	56.6	52.6	55.0	58.3	42.1	40.9	51.7
Managerial/technical occupation	27.3	24.9	29.1	22.1	32.4	30.6	27.6
Skilled occupation, non-manual	7.8	10.3	9.0	8.8	8.7	9.1	9.0
Skilled occupation, manual	5.0	3.8	1.6	3.9	10.4	10.2	5.4
Partly skilled occupation	3.1	5.3	4.4	5.2	4.0	5.9	4.5
Unskilled occupation	0.2	3.1	0.8	1.7	2.4	3.3	1.8
Residency							
Live in the ward	57.8	55.3	58.5	56.6	56.3	77.7	58.7
Live outside the ward	42.2	44.7	41.5	43.4	43.7	22.3	41.3

More than half the candidates, 52%, classify themselves as professional with a further 28% engaged or formerly engaged in some form of managerial or technical occupation. Around one in seven has a skilled occupation but fewer than two in a hundred are unskilled workers. White collar workers easily outnumber the rather small number of blue collar ones.

Most candidates, it appears, are recruited from within their own communities. Many candidates have an active presence in their local communities and it is often acquired before standing for local election. Almost five in ten hold or have held an office in their local party organisation. More than a third of the respondents have been involved formally with a charitable organisation and more than four in ten have had a position of responsibility with a local community group of some description. More than a quarter serves on a public body of some kind.

Overall, one in nine has stood for parliamentary election although the proportions vary amongst the different parties. Some 16% of UKIP candidates had also stood in a parliamentary election, a rate that is comparable to 15% for the Greens and the Liberal Democrats alike. By contrast only 8% of Labour candidates had contested at a parliamentary election but this is larger than the 3% of Conservative candidates.

Campaigning and electoral experience

While for almost 40% of our respondents the 2013 election was their first electoral experience the remainder boasts a wide variety of experience (Table 2). Around one in five candidates had stood once before contesting again in 2013. This falls to one in nine that have contested on two occasions and one in eight who has experience of three or four elections. More than a quarter of candidates have competed for votes at six or more elections! Local election campaigning, it appears, becomes a serial activity for a significant fraction of candidates.

All local parties it appears are striving to select more women candidates when they are able to do so and Table 2 shows that among first time candidates the proportion of women is 31% and 34% among those former councillors that were standing again. However, among incumbents seeking re-election women comprise just 22%.

Table 2: Candidates and electoral experience

	First-time candidate	Incumbent	Former councillor, non-incumbent	Frequent candidate but never elected
Sex				
Male	69.1	78.5	66.5	75.2
Female	30.9	21.5	33.5	24.8
Age				
35 yrs and under	13.9	5.6	3.7	8.1
36-45 yrs	8.5	6.8	8.6	11.6
46-55 yrs	20.5	19.6	17.5	21.4
56-65 yrs	31.9	37.3	40.6	31.2
65+ yrs	25.2	30.6	29.7	27.7
Ethnicity				
White British	93.5	95.2	94.3	95.5
Other White (incl. white Irish)	3.2	3.1	2.8	3.4
Other	3.3	1.7	2.9	1.1
Education				
No qualification	5.8	4.2	4.6	2.9
GCSE	11.7	15.7	12.2	10.5
A level	26.1	20.3	19.0	17.5
first degree	33.8	37.5	40.7	40.1
higher degree	22.6	22.2	23.5	29.0
Employment Status				
Full-time paid employment	21.9	13.3	19.3	27.5
Part-time paid employment	8.0	9.1	6.6	9.5
Self employed	19.7	25.6	17.6	16.9
Retired	34.7	40.4	45.3	34.4
Other	15.7	11.6	11.1	11.8
Occupational Status				
Professional occupation	49.8	52.5	53.0	52.9
Managerial/technical occupation	25.5	30.1	27.1	28.6
Skilled occupation, non-manual	9.5	7.9	10.1	8.7
Skilled occupation, manual	6.8	5.1	4.7	4.2
Partly skilled occupation	5.2	4.2	4.3	3.9
Unskilled occupation	3.1	0.2	0.7	1.7
Residency				
Live in the ward	55.2	66.9	55.6	58.5
Do not live in the ward	44.8	33.1	44.4	41.5

Parties are also recruiting younger people to stand – 14% of the new candidates fall into the youngest age category. That said, the average age of candidates contesting their first election is 55 years. This is only marginally younger less than the average of 59 years for incumbents and respondents that were formerly councillors.

While local election candidates tend to possess a higher level of educational qualification than is the case for the general population there appears to be a slight dip in the percentage of first-time candidates holding a first degree. The explanation for this is almost entirely due to the large number of candidates that stood for UKIP in 2013, many of whom do not have a higher education qualification.

A relatively larger fraction of councillors are self-employed (26%), although the largest group, 40%, are retired from work. An even larger percentage of the former councillors are retired while about a third of first time candidates in 2013 are already retired. The professional and managerial occupational groups continue to be the source of a majority of local election candidates although just under one in ten of first time candidates are drawn from the partly skilled and unskilled occupations. Only one in twenty councillors is drawn from these occupational categories.

Shire council elections tend to have a larger proportion of candidates contesting the wards/divisions where they also reside compared to elections fought in urban areas of Britain. In the counties, where electoral divisions encompass relatively large areas, some 55% of first-time candidates were also residents but this proportion, while similar to other categories, is somewhat lower than the 67% of incumbents who represent the places where they also happen to live.

A surprisingly large proportion, 31%, had been successful in winning an election at some time prior to 2013. Some 6% had been successful on at least five occasions before 2013 while one in eight of our respondents had been elected only at the previous election.

Unsurprisingly, there is considerable variation among candidates' own estimate of the likelihood of winning the seat. Respondents can select from a 0-10 scale (10 is certain to win) their own probability of winning. Only 2% chose the highest category, and 6% selected the next highest point on the scale. Overall, only 30% of candidates felt more or less sure beforehand that they were going to be elected by selecting six or higher on the 10-point scale. At the opposite end of the scale 20%

selected a zero probability of victory while a further 18% ranked themselves only point higher.

The 2013 campaign

Almost eight in ten candidates had a campaign leaflet and 93% of these delivered it to addresses in their own division/ward with help from volunteers (Table 3). It may be a reflection of the different geographies across English county councils but only 64% report delivering leaflets to all addresses – about ten percentage points lower than for other types of election.

Campaign leaflets largely concentrate upon the individual’s personal background and record of local community involvement. The party’s local priorities are also emphasised, where appropriate. Less cited, although still mentioned by a majority of respondents, is the candidate’s own virtues, such as competency for public office however, mention of previous political experience is very important for only 27%. Lagging just behind is any mention of the party’s national priorities, selected by less than 26% and commenting about the record of other parties/councillors was very important to just 10%.

Table 3: Campaigning in 2013

	% yes
A campaign leaflet for distribution	70.4
Deliver the campaign leaflets? (among those who did produce leaflet)	92.9
Leaflet delivered to all addresses in your ward? (among those who did produce leaflet)	63.5
Canvass by telephone	18.5
Use website as part of campaign/Internet campaigning	25.2

The majority of candidates do not use the internet for campaigning, however one in four did undertake some campaigning online. Among this group Facebook was used by 63% and Twitter by 48%. One in three of the online campaigners has a personal website and one in four uses an email contact list. Half of the candidates who campaigned online say that the email contact list made a difference to the number of votes cast for them. The personal blog or website was also considered to be effective but Facebook and Twitter were deemed to be less effective. A large

majority, 86% of all candidates reported that they had enjoyed their campaign experience.

During the campaign period candidates report spending fifteen hours per week on average delivering their own leaflets and leafleting accounts for more than half the time spent on campaigning. They estimated that helpers spent about 10 hours a week leafleting on their behalf. Organising postal votes, internet campaigning and telephone canvassing combined to occupy on average 10% of campaign time. Door canvassing was estimated to take up less than 20% of campaigning. A rather large proportion of respondents, 43%, reported that they had undertaken no door canvassing during the campaign. Over a quarter of respondents were still actively campaigning on election day, by “knocking up”, “fetching out “ or telephoning voters. More than half of respondents campaigned on behalf of fellow candidates in another division/ward.

It appears that doorstep conversations about local issues were important to most voters, according to 95% of those responding. Overall, the economy was important to 86% of voters, closely followed by immigration and race issues, 74%. However some notable variations are to be seen amongst the candidates for the main parties and the issues they say are important to voters. Of course these differences may reflect candidates’ and party campaigning priorities along with discussions instigated by voters.

Decision to stand

Over four in ten candidates made their own initial decision to stand but 58% stood after being asked to do so by someone else. Two-thirds of the self-motivated stood because they felt strongly that their presence would make a difference and 11% of this group saw the initial decision as an important step towards beginning a political career.

The importance of the local party network is evident among those that stood after being approached; three quarters of these people responded to the invitation from another party member while a further 19% were approached by a serving councillor. Parties continue to be the main recruitment agencies for local democracy. Almost half of the respondents consulted members of political parties before deciding to

stand as candidates in 2013. Serving councillors were the source of information about the councillor's role for more than a third and a fifth obtained information from local authority web sites and a fifth did so from a political party website.

If candidates were to advise someone about standing for local election in the future, almost three quarters say seek advice from a local councillor and 68% would recommend speaking to a member of a local party.

The party connection is vital in developing the support network that candidates need. Some 58% reported very strong encouragement from fellow party members and a further 35% positive support. By contrast only 38% reported receiving very strong support from their spouse or family and 30% felt that friends had been very positive. That said, only 7% had a spouse and/or family members who were negative about their decision to stand. Fewer than 20% of candidates received positive support from their employers.

The nomination process

Most candidates contest on behalf of a registered political party. Among these candidates almost two thirds have been members for five or more years although a significant fraction, almost a quarter joined between one and five years before standing for election.

A smaller percentage, 9%, joined the party within the 12 months prior to the election although there are significant differences here between UKIP candidates and those for the three main parties. There is little competition for nomination; only 22% of respondents faced competition for their ward nomination.

One in fourteen sought a nomination for a seat additional to the one that they eventually contested. Of course, this finding takes no account of informal steps that local party organisations take to reduce the number of people applying for a particular seat.

Candidates were invited to select the personal qualities that had been instrumental in determining their selection. The option most frequently selected was 'good reputation', with 60% citing this while 51% believe that being a local resident is a critical factor. About a quarter felt selection is influenced by previous service as a councillor with a similar proportion mentioning their ability to win the seat.

Among incumbents, almost nine in ten believe that council service was a factor in securing their re-nomination. Over 90% of our respondents think incumbents enjoy a higher local profile than their challengers, two thirds say incumbents have an advantage when seeking re-election.

But the evidence also shows that 35% of respondents believe that their selection was because they had been the only volunteer and 42% felt they were chosen after stating a desire to stand as a paper candidate only.

The wider recruitment problem

With so many candidates admitting that they were the only volunteer and that campaigning largely consisted of placing a name on the ballot paper, it is instructive to learn about attitudes generally towards the recruitment of new councillors.

More than six in ten believe that people are discouraged from standing because the councillor role is seen as time consuming. Three in ten strongly agree/agree that people are discouraged because councillors have too little power and because councillors are insufficiently paid. Six in ten maintain that intrusive media coverage of a person's private life may deter some from seeking office.

The dominance of party politics is perceived by 56% to act as a deterrent to those averse to this style of local government. One recommendation aired in recent years is that political parties should widen their recruitment pools by enlisting candidates who are not paid-up party members. More than a quarter of the respondents agree/strongly agree with this proposal, some 20% are neutral but more than half disagree/strongly disagree with it.

Table 4: Attitudes towards recruitment issues

	Strongly agree/agree	Disagree/Strongly disagree
	%	%
Being a councillor is too time consuming	66.2	16.4
Councillors are insufficiently paid	28.9	38.7
Political parties should recruit non-members to stand as candidates	27.2	51.6
More women councillors	59.3	6.9
More BAME councillors	52.8	8.8
More younger councillors	72.1	8.6

It is widely acknowledged that certain groups, principally women, members of the Black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities (BAME) and younger people are currently under-represented on council benches.

There is greatest sensitivity to the charge that local government is dominated by the middle aged. Although 59% supports the idea of more women and 53% more BAME there is greater support, 72%, for encouraging more people between the ages of 18-35 years. More than two-thirds of candidates believe that these changes if implemented would improve local government's public image.

Another salient issue affecting local government is the willingness of many councillors to serve beyond one elected term. Having acquired some vital skills and experience from sitting on the council benches for four years a sizeable fraction voluntarily decide to stand down.

The candidates were asked to select the reasons that might cause councillors to stand down. The most popular reason, chosen by 76% of respondents, is that people cannot balance family commitments with council obligations. This is closely followed by the belief that being a councillor is simply too time consuming. The difficulty of requesting leave from work to fulfil council duties was selected by more than half of the respondents.

A third of respondents think that the trigger to stand down is a lack of power among councillors and party political domination within the council. Only 22% feel there is insufficient support from local authorities and fewer than 21% think that intrusive

media coverage contributed to early retirements. The least selected option, councillors retire after achieving their aims and ambitions, is chosen by just 13% of candidates responding to the 2013 survey.