2011 Survey of Local Election Candidates

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Introduction

After conducting five postal surveys the 2011 Local Elections Candidate Survey was the first to be undertaken online. From the more than 27,000 candidates standing in 2011 the survey randomly selected 4,503 candidates. This process consisted of alternately selecting one candidate in six from the list of all those contesting. Candidate details, including name, address and, where applicable, party description, were obtained from nominations published by each local authority. On Thursday May 6th letters were sent to the addresses listed on the nomination papers inviting each to participate online. The letter also explained that postal questionnaires were available upon request and a telephone hotline was provided to answer any inquiries. The survey was closed at the end of July by which time a total of 899 usable replies were received. This represents a response rate of 20%.

Response rates varied across the range of local authorities, the parties standing and candidate gender. Accordingly, the survey data are weighted to reflect the types of authority and the pattern of party competition in 2011.

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 2011 (19% of respondents fall into this category), candidates that had previously served as a councillor at some earlier period (9%), candidates that had stood before but never been elected (33%) and finally, candidates for whom this election was their first experience of standing (39%).

As well as describing candidates according to standard demographic characteristics (sex, age, education, etc.) this report also classifies them by electoral experience. Four categories are identified: incumbent councillors seeking re-election in 2011 (20% of respondents fall into this category), candidates that had previously served as a councillor at some earlier period (8.4%), candidates that had stood before but never been elected (32.3%) and finally, candidates for whom this election was their first experience of standing (38.9%).

The key findings are:

Among the candidates contesting the 2011 local elections 71% are men, the average age is 53 years, and 97% are of white ethnic origin. Almost one in three candidates has a university degree and a further 27% have also obtained a higher degree. Very few, less than 4%, hold no formal educational qualification.

Three in ten candidates are retired from work, almost a third is in some form of full-time employment and less than a fifth is self-employed. More than half holds a professional occupation and a further 30% are occupied in some managerial/technical role. Fewer than three in a hundred works in an unskilled occupation.

Slightly less than six in ten candidates are resident in the ward that they contest. Among incumbent councillors seeking re-election the percentage rises to 63% but falls to 55% among candidates contesting their first election. Some candidates were selected from the group of people who are already active in the civic society. Around four in ten are, or have been, officers in their local party. Three in ten have been involved with charitable organisations and four in ten have been involved with a community-based organisation.

For almost four in ten candidates contesting in 2011 this was their first experience of standing.

Almost eight in ten candidates prepare an election campaign leaflet; over 90% of these people deliver the leaflets and have help delivering them in their own ward. Most, 70% deliver to all addresses in the ward. The traditional method of canvassing is still favoured and less than a fifth use the Internet for election campaigning.

A third of candidates believe that local reporting of the campaign was fair. Almost six in ten thought that voters were more interested in national campaign issues of the main parties rather than local issues. However, only a fifth agrees that the national referendum on voting reform dominated the local election campaign.

The average candidate is active for approximately ten hours per week of the three week campaign. Half of all candidates campaign on behalf of colleagues in neighbouring wards. A clear majority enjoy campaigning and would volunteer to stand again.

Approximately four in ten makes his or her own decision to stand the first time; slightly more than 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 partner.

A large majority of candidates contest on behalf of a registered political party; among the party members more than 60% have been party members for five or more years. Only one in five candidates faces competition for the nomination. Having a good reputation is the most frequently cited reason for selection. A quarter owe their selection to being the only volunteer and a slightly larger proportion than this, 31% are selected after revealing a willingness to stand as a paper candidate.

A large majority, 80%, believe people don't stand because the councillor role is too time consuming. Six in ten think political party domination in local government discourages those who don't want party allegiance. Intrusive media coverage 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, a larger proportion, 62%, support an increase in younger people. It is the general perception that under-recruitment among such groups results from a failure to come forward for selection. A majority believe greater diversity among councillors would improve the image of local government.

More than eight 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 15% think that councillors retire after achieving what they set out to do.

Who stood for election in 2011?

More than seven in ten of the candidates contesting in 2011 are men and only 29% are women. There is some variation in the proportion of men and women candidates among the various parties.

Women candidates accounted for 32% of Labour's total and 26% for the Conservatives. Among the Green party candidates women comprise 42% but only 13% for UKIP.

The lowest age of a candidate is just 18 years whilst the oldest age is 87 years. The mean for all candidates is 53 years with women candidates on average being one year older than men. Only 9% of candidates are aged 29 years or younger and a further 15% fall into the second youngest age category (30-42 years).

Virtually all candidates (96.6%) that stood in 2009 describe their ethnic origin as white. White British comprise the largest category, 94.2% of the total, with Irish (0.7%) and Other White (1.6%) the remaining groups. Candidates who are Indian (0.4%) are the largest among the non-white groupings.

Less than one in twenty possess no formal educational qualifications but almost one in four has an A-level or equivalent educational qualification. One in three candidates has a university degree with a further 27% having obtained a higher degree.

The full-time employed make up the largest grouping in terms of occupational status, accounting for 32% of respondents. Next is the retired, (31%), 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 that stood in 2011

	Con	Lab	LD	Green	UKIP	Minor party/ Independent	Total
Sex							
Male	73.8	67.7	70.9	58.3	87.5	79.1	71.5
Female	26.2	32.3	29.1	41.7	12.5	20.9	28.5
Age							
35 yrs and under	14.7	17.4	14.7	20.0	7.8	12.7	15.3
36-45 yrs	14.7	9.2	16.3	18.0	8.3	8.1	13.1
46-55 yrs	16.8	22.8	19.3	24.8	18.4	22.2	20.0
56-65 yrs	33.2	29.7	35.2	28.4	41.4	28.6	32.2
65+ yrs	20.6	20.9	14.5	8.7	24.1	28.4	19.3
Ethnicity							
White British	94.4	94.9	95.0	91.2	97.4	92.0	94.2
Other White (incl. white Irish)	1.3	2.4	2.1	5.1	0.0	4.5	2.3
Other	4.3	2.7	2.9	3.8	2.6	3.5	3.4
Education							
No qualification	3.4	2.6	1.7	3.9	7.4	9.4	3.7
GCSE	15.7	12.0	11.2	0.0	20.4	22.1	13.4
A level	33.1	16.2	19.4	19.1	31.0	24.2	24.1
First degree	28.6	34.9	36.3	36.8	28.3	24.4	32.0
Higher degree	19.2	34.3	31.4	40.2	13.0	19.9	26.9
Employment Status							
Full-time paid employment	33.0	32.6	31.4	38.3	32.3	24.5	32.2
Part-time paid employment	7.3	6.8	10.6	16.0	10.1	8.5	8.8
Self employed	21.6	12.9	15.7	18.1	28.5	15.2	17.7
Retired	29.1	33.4	32.3	16.7	24.1	38.5	30.5
Other	9.0	14.3	10.0	10.8	5.0	13.3	10.9
Occupational Status							
Professional occupation	49.7	55.7	52.3	56.9	53.8	40.3	51.6
Managerial/technical occupation	36.0	26.4	29.6	21.4	25.6	26.3	29.8
Skilled occupation, non-manual	5.2	5.1	9.1	9.3	7.5	8.1	6.7
Skilled occupation, manual	4.7	2.5	2.2	7.9	5.0	6.0	4.1
Partly skilled occupation	3.5	6.4	4.6	3.0	3.0	10.8	5.1
Unskilled occupation	0.9	3.9	2.2	1.5	5.0	8.5	2.8
Residency							
Live in the ward	50.6	49.3	54.2	57.6	74.5	78.0	55.4
Live outside the ward	49.4	50.7	45.8	42.4	25.5	22.0	44.6

More than half the candidates, 52%, classify themselves as professional with a further 30% in some form of managerial or technical occupation. Around one in ten belong to a skilled occupation but fewer than three in a hundred have an unskilled occupation. White collar workers easily outnumber the rather small number of blue collar ones.

Most candidates are recruited from within their own communities. On average, 55% of candidates live in the ward that they contest. Unsurprisingly, over eight in ten Independent candidates contest wards where they are also a resident.

Many candidates have an active presence in their local communities and it is often acquired before standing for local election. Around four 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, for example, a primary care trust.

Overall, one in twelve has stood for parliamentary election, amongst UKIP's candidates this rise to one in three, with one in five doing so before contesting a local election for the first time. The candidates who stand for the three main parties are mostly local election candidates; only 3% of Conservative and 4% of Labour have stood for parliamentary elections. This rises to 9% for Liberal Democrat candidates.

Campaigning and electoral experience

Women comprise 27% of incumbents and 30% of the first-time challengers but the difference is not statistically significant. Interestingly, women comprise only 21% of former councillors that stood in 2011. This relatively small number may perhaps suggest that once women either retire or are voted off the council they are less likely to stand again at a subsequent election.

The average age of candidates standing for the first time (52 years) is less than that for incumbents (60 years) while the highest average age (62 years) is found among those candidates that had previously served on the council. A quarter of first-time candidates are located in the youngest age category while 29% of incumbents are in the oldest category.

There are few differences both of ethnic origin and educational qualifications across the four categories of electoral experience. It is the case that first-time candidates are more likely than incumbents to hold a higher degree when first degrees are also taken into account the gap between the two groups diminishes.

The differences in age also surface in the data regarding employment status. Almost one in four first-time candidates are retired from work, a similar proportion encountered among candidates that have stood more than once before but have not been elected. By contrast, almost half of the respondents that are either incumbents or former councillors are retired. Professional and managerial sectors continue to dominate among candidates contesting in local elections.

A recurring pattern of local election campaigns is that there is a more or less even split among candidates that live in or live outside. There is some variation, however with 55% of new candidates living within the ward contested rising to 63% for incumbents.

Table 2: Candidates and electoral experience

	First-time candidate	Incumbent	Former councillor, non-incumbent	Serial but never elected candidate
Sex				
Male	69.9	73.0	79.1	70.4
Female	30.1	27.0	20.9	29.6
Age				
35 yrs and under	26.2	4.4	1.7	12.4
36-45 yrs	13.4	7.0	9.8	17.3
46-55 yrs	18.9	18.4	18.3	23.0
56-65 yrs	27.0	41.0	41.6	30.7
65+ yrs	14.5	29.2	28.6	16.6
Ethnicity				
White British	94.0	95.9	96.9	92.9
Other White (incl. white Irish)	2.8	1.2	1.3	2.7
Other	3.3	2.9	1.8	4.3
Education				
No qualification	4.8	2.6	3.8	2.9
GCSE	11.7	17.0	17.3	12.2
A level	26.8	27.8	22.1	18.9
First degree	29.8	34.0	29.7	33.9
Higher degree	26.9	18.6	27.1	32.1
Employment Status				
Full-time paid employment	34.7	20.9	21.0	39.1
Part-time paid employment	8.0	6.7	10.4	10.8
Self employed	19.5	19.1	15.3	15.1
Retired	23.1	46.8	48.0	24.6
Other	14.7	6.5	5.4	10.4
Occupational Status				
Professional occupation	53.3	47.3	44.7	53.9
Managerial/technical occupation	27.7	37.1	29.6	27.5
Skilled occupation, non-manual	5.9	7.3	10.9	6.2
Skilled occupation, manual	3.4	3.8	7.2	4.3
Partly skilled occupation	5.8	3.0	6.4	5.2
Unskilled occupation	3.8	1.5	1.3	2.9
Residency				
Live in the ward	54.8	63.4	58.1	50.3
Do not live in the ward	45.2	36.6	41.9	49.7

Unsurprisingly, there is considerable variation in candidates' estimates of the likelihood of them winning their own contest. Respondents could select from a 0-10 scale (ten being certain to win) their probability of winning. Only one in fourteen chose the highest category, and one in twenty selected the next highest point on the scale. In short, only one in eight candidates felt more or less sure beforehand that they were going to be elected. At the opposite end of the scale, one in six selected a zero probability of victory while a further one in ten ranked themselves only at one on the scale.

The 2011 campaign

More than three-quarters of candidates produced a campaign leaflet (Table 3) and 70% of these delivered it to every address with help from volunteers, over 92% had help with deliveries. 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 behind is any mention of the party's national priorities, selected by less than 16% and commenting about the record of other parties /councillors was very important to just 15%.

Table 3: Campaigning in 2011

	% yes
A campaign leaflet for distribution	78.6
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)	70.3
Canvass by telephone	26.5
Use website as part of campaign/Internet campaigning	40.2
Contact local media to publicise campaign	45.6

Most candidates do not use the internet for campaigning, over a quarter have a Facebook account, 11% have a personal website but fewer than 20% of those who have an online presence used it to publicise their election campaign. Of these, fewer than four in ten say their online presence was very/somewhat effective in recruiting more voters.

Candidates were asked about various activities which frequently form part of a ward campaign. Traditional methods of canvassing are still favoured, distributing leaflets, sending out election addresses and door-to-door canvassing to introduce the candidates most cited. More than a half say they made very little or no effort to get local media coverage. Eight in ten say they put very little or no effort into telephone canvassing, e-mailing and social network sites for campaigning.

During the campaign period candidates were active for 10 hours per week on average with Independents busiest of all. Virtually half of respondents campaigned on behalf of fellow candidates in neighbouring wards. A large majority enjoyed their campaign experience with more than nine in ten prepared to stand again.

This year a referendum on the voting system for UK parliamentary elections was held on the same day as the local elections. After much debate, the referendum question was

> At present the UK uses the "first past the post" system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the "alternative vote" system be used instead?

Candidates were asked if they delivered any information about the referendum when they were campaigning. Less than a half, 48%, did deliver referendum literature to voters. Of these, 57% delivered information literature favouring a "No" vote and 41% a "Yes" vote. Those who did not deliver literature say it was because they were not asked to deliver any. Fewer than one in ten had been asked but declined to do so. Almost six in ten of respondents voted in the national referendum. The majority of those who voted for electoral reform supported the introduction of the Alternative vote system.

Decision to stand

Almost four in ten candidates made their own initial decision to stand but 61% stood after being asked by someone else; for every candidate that is self-motivated to stand there are two that contest because they are asked to do so. Two-thirds of the self-motivated stood because they felt strongly that their presence would make a difference and one in eight 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; almost six in ten of these people responded to the invitation from another party member while a further three in

ten were approached by a serving councillor. Parties continue to be the main recruitment agencies for local democracy.

The party connection is vital in developing the support network that candidates need to sustain them through a campaign. Some 58% reported very strong encouragement from fellow party members and a further 33% positive support. By contrast only 36% reported receiving very strong support from their spouse or partner and less than 30% felt that other family members and friends had been very positive. That said, only one in twenty had a spouse/partner that had been negative about standing. More than one in twelve responding about the reaction of employers felt that it had been either negative or very negative.

The nomination process

Most candidates contest on behalf of a registered political party. Among these candidates 62% 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, 12%, joined the party within the 12 months prior to the election. There is little competition for nomination; only 20% of respondents faced competition for their ward nomination. One in ten 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 parties 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 more than a half citing this while 46% believe that being a local resident is a critical factor. About two in ten felt selection is influenced by previous service as a councillor and a slightly larger proportion mention their ability to win the seat.

Among incumbents, almost nine in ten believe that being the incumbent was one factor that secured their 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 24% of respondents believe that their selection was because they had been the only volunteer and more than 30% felt it followed after expressing 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.

Approximately six in ten believe that people are discouraged from standing because the councillor role is seen as time consuming. Almost a half strongly agree/agree that people are discouraged because councillors have too little power and 36% because councillors are insufficiently paid. A little more than a third maintains that intrusive media coverage of a person's private life may deter some from seeking office. The dominance of party politics is perceived by 59% 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. There is only 30% of the sample that agree/strongly agree with this proposal, some 23% are neutral but 47% disagree/disagree strongly with it.

Table 4: Attitudes towards recruitment issues

	Strongly agree/agree	Disagree/Strongly disagree
	%	%
Being a councillor is too time consuming	80.2	8.7
Councillors are insufficiently paid	29.9	36.1
Political parties should recruit non-members to stand as candidates	30.3	46.5
More women councillors	56.1	7.2
More BAME councillors	52.9	9.7
More younger councillors	72.9	7.3

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 56% supports the idea of more women and 53% more BAME there is greater support, 73%, for encouraging more people between the ages of 18-35 years. Nearly two-thirds of candidates believe that these changes if implemented would improve local government's public image.