

2014 Survey of Local Election Candidates

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Introduction

The 2014 survey of local election candidates 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 ninth in the series of annual candidate surveys. The surveys from 2006-2010 were postal questionnaires. The 2014 survey is the fourth national internet survey to be undertaken. 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 number was also provided should anyone have any inquiries about the survey and its completion.

A total of 7,000 candidates were contacted and combining the numbers that responded online (a significant majority of all respondents) and by post the survey produced 904 usable replies. The final response rate is 13%. Comparing these responses with the number and type of candidates that actually stood in 2014 the response rates varied across local authorities, the parties standing and for the first time, candidate gender. Accordingly, the survey data examined in this report are weighted to reflect the types of authority, the pattern of party competition and the ratios of men and women standing for election.

In addition to describing candidates according to standard demographic characteristics (sex, age, education, etc.) these reports also classifies them according to four levels of electoral experience: incumbent councillors seeking re-election in 2014 (13.7% of respondents), candidates with previous experience as a councillor at some earlier period (8.5%), candidates that had stood before but never been elected (35.9%) and finally, candidates for whom this election was their first experience of standing (41.9%).

Key findings:

Among the candidates contesting in 2014, 74% are men, the average age is 53 years, and 90% are of white ethnic origin. Almost four in ten possess a first degree or its equivalent while a further 33% hold a higher degree qualification. Only 3% of hold no formal educational qualification.

Almost three in ten candidates are retired from work, a third 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 26% is occupied in a managerial/technical role. Only three in a hundred has an unskilled occupation.

Slightly over a half of candidates are resident in the ward that they contest. Among incumbent councillors seeking re-election the percentage falls to 42% but rises to 52% among candidates contesting their first election. Almost 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 almost four in ten have been involved with a community-based organisation.

For more than four in ten candidates contesting this was their first experience of standing. By contrast, a quarter were standing for the sixth or more time. Some 6% of our candidates had been elected to the council on at least five previous occasions.

Almost seven 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 seven in ten deliver to all addresses in the ward. Whilst the traditional methods of door-knocking and leafleting are still favoured, 40% 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; just under 60% stand after being approached by someone else, mostly a fellow party member. Support from fellow party members is vital; 56% reported very strong

support from this source and almost one in four 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 62% have been party members for more than five years but this varied considerably across parties in 2014. Only one in five candidates faces competition for the nomination. Having a good reputation is the most frequently cited reason for selection. One in four owe their selection to being the only volunteer and a larger proportion than this, 43% are selected after revealing a willingness to stand as a paper candidate.

Two-thirds of the 2014 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. Almost six in ten believe that intrusive media coverage is a factor that may discourage people from standing.

Although approximately six in ten support the idea of more women and more people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups on the council benches, almost seven in ten support an increase in younger people. More than two thirds believe greater diversity among councillors would improve the image of local government.

Two thirds of 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 seven in ten candidates. Only 12% think that councillors retire after achieving what they set out to do.

Who stood for election in 2014?

More than seven in ten of the candidates contesting in 2014 are men and only 26% are women. There is some variation in the proportion of men and women candidates among the various parties (Table 1). Women candidates account for 30% of Labour's total and 27% of the Conservative tally. Among the Green party candidates women accounted for 39% but by contrast only 14% for UKIP.

The youngest candidate is 18 years of age whilst the oldest is 90 years. The mean value for all candidates is 53 years with the average for women candidates being one year older than men. A fifth of candidates 12% of candidates are aged 29 years or younger and a further 16% fall into the second youngest age category (30-42 years).

Very many (90%) candidates that stood in 2014 describe their ethnic origin as white. White British comprise the largest category, 84.4% of the category, with White Irish (1.9%) and Other White (4.1%) making up the remainder.

Only three in a hundred 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 33% obtaining a higher degree. In short, more than 70% of the candidates that contested the 2014 elections holds a university degree or its equivalent, a much larger rate than among the population at large – 27% according to the 2011 census.

Persons in full-time employment make up the largest grouping in terms of occupational status, accounting for 33% of respondents. Next are those who are retired (28%), 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 2014

| | Con | Lab | LD | Green | UKIP | Minor party/ Independent | Total |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|-------|------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Sex | | | | | | | |
| Male | 72.6 | 69.4 | 79.8 | 61.3 | 85.6 | 79.3 | 74.1 |
| Female | 24.7 | 33.6 | 30.2 | 32.7 | 18.9 | 21.3 | 25.9 |
| Age | | | | | | | |
| 35 yrs and under | 25.4 | 22.7 | 18.9 | 20.9 | 8.4 | 22.9 | 20.7 |
| 36-45 yrs | 15.6 | 11.1 | 10.6 | 16.5 | 10.7 | 6.5 | 12.2 |
| 46-55 yrs | 15.9 | 17.9 | 19.2 | 22.6 | 21.0 | 19.3 | 18.7 |
| 56-65 yrs | 21.6 | 23.9 | 22.5 | 22.9 | 24.8 | 27.6 | 23.4 |
| 65+ yrs | 21.4 | 24.5 | 28.7 | 17.2 | 35.2 | 23.7 | 25.0 |
| Ethnicity | | | | | | | |
| White British | 83.8 | 82.6 | 88.7 | 86.2 | 84.0 | 81.1 | 84.4 |
| Other White (incl. white Irish) | 4.6 | 7.0 | 6.2 | 9.5 | 3.9 | 5.2 | 6.0 |
| Other | 11.6 | 10.4 | 5.1 | 4.3 | 12.1 | 13.7 | 9.6 |
| Education | | | | | | | |
| No qualification | 1.8 | 4.9 | 2.3 | 0.0 | 5.8 | 2.8 | 3.0 |
| GCSE | 7.8 | 6.3 | 4.2 | 6.4 | 12.9 | 10.1 | 7.5 |
| A level | 23.0 | 15.3 | 15.8 | 9.8 | 24.6 | 19.8 | 18.2 |
| First degree | 32.7 | 41.0 | 41.3 | 42.1 | 38.3 | 34.9 | 38.3 |
| Higher degree | 34.7 | 32.5 | 36.4 | 41.6 | 18.4 | 32.4 | 33.0 |
| Employment Status | | | | | | | |
| Full-time paid employment | 35.6 | 38.4 | 37.0 | 27.5 | 19.3 | 34.3 | 33.5 |
| Part-time paid employment | 9.9 | 14.1 | 4.2 | 10.6 | 2.5 | 14.5 | 9.5 |
| Self employed | 18.7 | 12.1 | 16.8 | 18.5 | 22.7 | 16.7 | 17.0 |
| Retired | 23.1 | 26.6 | 28.5 | 22.1 | 43.7 | 24.5 | 27.5 |
| Other | 12.7 | 8.8 | 13.5 | 21.3 | 11.8 | 10.0 | 12.5 |
| Occupational Status | | | | | | | |
| Professional occupation | 53.7 | 55.9 | 52.5 | 54.1 | 44.4 | 46.4 | 52.3 |
| Managerial/technical occupation | 29.3 | 20.7 | 30.2 | 21.3 | 33.2 | 17.7 | 25.8 |
| Skilled occupation, non-manual | 10.1 | 11.4 | 11.6 | 12.0 | 9.7 | 13.5 | 11.2 |
| Skilled occupation, manual | 3.4 | 4.4 | 1.3 | 4.4 | 6.4 | 5.7 | 4.0 |
| Partly skilled occupation | 1.3 | 5.2 | 3.7 | 5.2 | 2.5 | 6.8 | 3.8 |
| Unskilled occupation | 2.2 | 2.4 | 0.6 | 3.0 | 3.9 | 10.0 | 3.0 |
| Residency | | | | | | | |
| Live in the ward | 48.6 | 44.2 | 43.3 | 57.0 | 63.8 | 61.4 | 50.7 |
| Live outside the ward | 51.4 | 55.8 | 56.7 | 43.0 | 36.2 | 38.6 | 49.3 |

More than half the candidates, 52%, classify themselves as professional with a further 26% engaged or formerly engaged in some form of managerial or technical occupation. Around one in seven has a skilled occupation and only three 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 just under four in ten have had a position of responsibility with a local community group of some description. Almost a quarter serves on a public body of some kind.

Overall, approximately one in fifteen has stood for parliamentary election although the proportions vary amongst the different parties. Some 9% of UKIP candidates and 9% of the Liberal Democrats had also stood in a parliamentary election, a rate that is comparable to 7% for the Greens. By contrast only 5% of Labour candidates and 5% of Conservative candidates had contested a parliamentary election.

Campaigning and electoral experience

While for more than 40% of our respondents the 2014 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 2014. 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 28% and 26% among those former councillors that were standing again. However, among incumbents seeking re-election women comprise 23%.

Table 2: Candidates and electoral experience

| | First-time candidate | Incumbent | Former councillor, non-incumbent | Frequent candidate but never elected |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|---|---|
| Sex | | | | |
| Male | 71.7 | 76.6 | 74.3 | 75.7 |
| Female | 28.3 | 23.4 | 25.7 | 24.3 |
| Age | | | | |
| 35 yrs and under | 33.2 | 10.5 | 1.3 | 15.2 |
| 36-45 yrs | 12.1 | 15.9 | 11.0 | 11.3 |
| 46-55 yrs | 18.7 | 17.6 | 11.9 | 20.7 |
| 56-65 yrs | 19.2 | 30.3 | 35.2 | 22.8 |
| 65+ yrs | 16.8 | 25.8 | 40.5 | 30.1 |
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| White British | 79.6 | 86.5 | 91.6 | 87.3 |
| Other White (incl. white Irish) | 6.8 | 3.5 | 1.6 | 7.1 |
| Other | 13.6 | 10.0 | 6.8 | 5.6 |
| Education | | | | |
| No qualification | 3.0 | 5.4 | 6.5 | 1.4 |
| GCSE | 9.1 | 5.6 | 9.2 | 6.0 |
| A level | 22.1 | 11.1 | 7.3 | 19.1 |
| First degree | 33.9 | 41.7 | 47.6 | 39.8 |
| Higher degree | 32.0 | 36.1 | 29.4 | 33.7 |
| Employment Status | | | | |
| Full-time paid employment | 36.9 | 28.0 | 23.0 | 34.3 |
| Part-time paid employment | 9.7 | 14.2 | 8.1 | 7.9 |
| Self employed | 18.4 | 11.8 | 15.5 | 17.7 |
| Retired | 20.8 | 32.8 | 43.2 | 29.3 |
| Other | 14.2 | 13.2 | 10.2 | 10.8 |
| Occupational Status | | | | |
| Professional occupation | 52.5 | 58.4 | 60.1 | 47.9 |
| Managerial/technical occupation | 22.6 | 28.3 | 19.2 | 29.9 |
| Skilled occupation, non-manual | 12.4 | 8.9 | 9.5 | 11.1 |
| Skilled occupation, manual | 4.2 | 0.8 | 1.6 | 5.4 |
| Partly skilled occupation | 3.3 | 2.6 | 6.6 | 4.1 |
| Unskilled occupation | 4.9 | 1.0 | 3.0 | 1.6 |
| Residency | | | | |
| Live in the ward | 52.0 | 41.5 | 48.2 | 53.3 |
| Do not live in the ward | 48.0 | 58.5 | 51.8 | 46.7 |

Parties are also recruiting younger people to stand – 33% 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 2014, many of whom do not have a higher education qualification.

A relatively large fraction of councillors are in full-time paid employment (28%), although the largest group, 33%, are retired from work. An even larger percentage of the former councillors are retired while about a fifth of first time candidates in 2014 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 4% of councillors are drawn from these occupational categories.

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 4% chose the highest category, and 7% selected the next highest point on the scale. Overall, only 31% 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 almost a quarter of candidates selected a zero probability of victory while a further 17% ranked themselves only point higher.

The 2014 campaign

Almost seven in ten candidates had a campaign leaflet and 94% of these delivered it to addresses in their own division/ward with help from volunteers (Table 3) Seven in ten report delivering leaflets to all of the addresses in their ward.

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 24%. Lagging just behind is any mention of the party's national priorities, selected by less than 27% and commenting about the record of other parties/councillors was very important to just 16%.

Table 3: Campaigning in 2014

| | % yes |
|--|--------------|
| A campaign leaflet for distribution | 68.5 |
| Deliver the campaign leaflets? (among those who did produce leaflet) | 93.9 |
| Leaflet delivered to all addresses in your ward? (among those who did produce leaflet) | 71.2 |
| Had help delivering leaflets | 90.2 |
| Campaign online | 40.5 |

The majority of candidates do not use the internet for campaigning, however four in ten did undertake some campaigning online. Among this group Twitter was used by 27% and Facebook by 22%. One in ten of the online campaigners has a personal website and about one in six uses an email contact list. More than half of the candidates who used an email contact list as part of their campaign felt 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, 85% of all candidates reported that they had enjoyed their campaign experience.

During the campaign period candidates report spending twelve 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 9 hours a week leafleting on their behalf. Organising postal votes, internet campaigning and telephone canvassing combined to occupy on average 12% of campaign time. Door canvassing was estimated to take up approximately 40% of campaigning. Over a third of respondents were still actively campaigning on election day, by “knocking up”, “fetching out “ or telephoning voters. Almost seven in ten respondents campaigned on behalf of fellow candidates in another ward.

It appears that doorstep conversations about local issues were important to most voters, according to 96% of those responding. Overall, housing was important to 80% of voters, the economy was important to 76%, closely followed by immigration and race issues, 73%. However some notable variations are to be seen amongst the candidates for the main parties and the issues they say are important to voters.

Decision to stand

Over four in ten candidates made their own initial decision to stand but 59% stood after being asked to do so by someone else. More than half of the self-motivated stood because they felt strongly that their presence would make a difference and 17% 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 21% were approached by a serving councillor.

The party connection is vital in developing the support network that candidates need. Some 56% reported very strong encouragement from fellow party members and a further 37% positive support. By contrast only 38% reported receiving very strong support from their spouse or family and 31% felt that friends had been very positive. That said, only 6% had a spouse and/or family members who were negative about their decision to stand. Fewer than 7% of candidates received very positive support from their employers with a further 15% reporting positive support.

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, more than a fifth joined between one and five years before standing for election.

A smaller percentage, 11%, 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 23% of respondents faced competition for their ward nomination.

One in thirteen 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 54% citing this while 48% believe that being a local resident is a critical factor, one in five mentions their ability to win the seat. About a quarter felt their selection was because they were the only volunteer and 43% 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.

Two thirds of respondents believe that people are discouraged from standing because the councillor role is seen as time consuming. A quarter strongly agree/agree that people are discouraged because councillors have too little power

and three in ten because councillors are insufficiently paid. Almost 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 55% 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 | 65.8 | 14.5 |
| Councillors are insufficiently paid | 28.8 | 41.3 |
| Political parties should recruit non-members to stand as candidates | 25.5 | 54.9 |
| More women councillors | 59.0 | 8.1 |
| More BAME councillors | 57.2 | 10.1 |
| More younger councillors | 68.0 | 9.7 |

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 57% more BAME there is greater support, 68%, 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 71% 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.

More than a quarter of respondents think that the trigger to stand down is a lack of power among councillors and party political domination within the council. Only 19% feel there is insufficient support from local authorities and fewer than 18% 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 12% of candidates responding to the 2014 survey.

We are extremely grateful to all those candidates that responded to our survey.