

Women's political activity

A survey of women's involvement in politics by the South London Fawcett Group (SLFG) ¹

1. Do women care about politics?

A survey of over 400 south London women shows they appear to prefer informal or 'social' political activity to formal or 'party' politics

- The South London Fawcett Group (SLFG) surveyed 439 local women to find out about their political activities ¹
- 70% of women surveyed had voted in the local and European elections in June 2004
- Although 90% of the women had signed a petition, less than 2% had stood for local council election
- Two-thirds (66%) were members of voluntary groups or organisations

SUMMARY

Women are politically active when their interest is engaged and they feel that the issue is relevant to them.

2A. Why do most women vote?

VOTERS – 70% of the women surveyed had voted in the June elections

"I always vote"

- Surveyed women felt that voting is, variously, a right, a privilege and a responsibility

"Because it is my civic duty to participate in organised elections . . ."

- More than a quarter (27%) of those who voted felt it was their duty to do so
- The other main motivating factors, among those who voted, included:
 - political [a wish to vote for/against a specific candidate/party/policy] (12%)
 - the campaign for women's votes was hard fought/suffragettes/women died (11%)
 - to have a say/influence democracy (11%)

SUMMARY

The majority of women who took part in the SLFG survey had voted.

2B. Why do some women not vote?

NON-VOTERS – 30% of the women surveyed had not voted in the June elections*

"Completely forgot due to a family crisis on the day"

- Among those who did not vote, the main reason, cited by 4 out of 10 women (39%), was due to circumstances on the day i.e. too busy/working/away from home/ill)

"No point – what difference will it make?"

- More than 1 in 5 (22%) who did not vote were disaffected with politicians/parties

SUMMARY

When women did not vote, it was usually due to events on polling day.

For more information about the survey or the South London Fawcett Group, please contact us:
e-mail: southlondonfawcett@hotmail.com phone: 07958 753284
or write to SLFG at Bts, PO Box 817, London SE21 7BY

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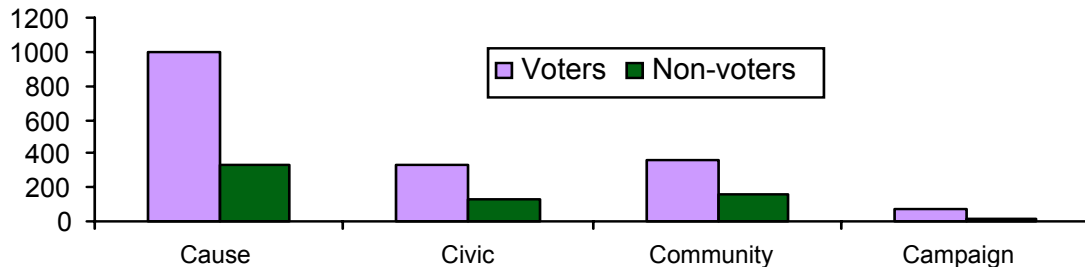
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2C. Activity is the issue

The SLFG survey found that women ARE politically active – but prefer informal, issue-based or 'social' political activity to more formal or 'party' politics

- Most women had engaged in a wide range of informal or issue-based activities
- The South London Fawcett Group has created the term 'social ' or 'societal' politics to define the less formal type of political activity favoured by women in the survey
- In its report on gender differences in political activity (April 2004²), the Electoral Commission also found a social element to women's political activity but did not attempt to name this phenomenon
- SLFG has developed a new category of 'community'-based engagement to reflect the popularity of belonging to a voluntary or religious group among local women

Women's political activity



Cause – signing a petition, consumer boycott/purchase, writing to an MP, taking part in a demonstration/rally/march

Civic – belonging to a sports, social, trade or other professional organisation

Community – membership of a voluntary organisation or faith group

Campaign – working for a political party, standing for local council election

Some facts and figures from the SLFG survey of 439 women in south London

Activity	All	Voters	Non-voters
Cause-based			
Signed a petition	90%	93%	86%
Purchased for political/ethical reasons	56%	70%	39%
Taken part in demonstration/rally/march	53%	58%	40%
Civic-based			
Member of a voluntary group/organisation	66%	72%	55%
Community-based			
Member of a trade union	42%	47%	31%
Campaign-based			
Worked for a political party	14%	18%	7%

SUMMARY

The SLFG survey found that local women are keen to engage in political activism but this tends not to take the form of party political activity.

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3. Implications

“ . . . women may experience greater practical barriers to activism, especially those with home responsibilities for care of dependents.” (Electoral Commission)

- For much of their lives, many women are too busy with work, family and dependants to have time for issues that are not relevant to their everyday activities
- Policies directly affecting their income or family (education, health care) appear more likely to engage women's interest than issues that seem remote or irrelevant (European Union)
- A key exception to this is the conflict in Iraq – several respondents had voted specifically to protest against the 'war'
- How an issue is presented and, crucially, by whom is important to women – they are more likely to become engaged if their local candidate is a woman rather than a man

SUMMARY

The main political parties will ignore women's votes at their peril at the next election. Women are slightly more than half the electorate – the difference, potentially, between electoral victory and defeat.

4. Recommendations

“ . . . more visible women in politics may act as role models sending signals to women citizens that politics is an arena open to them.” (Electoral Commission)

- Political parties must recognise that women engage in politics in fundamentally different ways from men. The South London Fawcett Group survey shows that women are more likely to respond to issues that are relevant to their daily lives and are less interested in male-dominated political parties.
 - To make themselves more attractive and pertinent to women, political parties should focus on policies that would make a real difference to women (e.g. childcare)
 - By giving women an opportunity to vote for a female candidate, political parties could engage women's interest, thus increasing the likelihood of their involvement in the political process
 - Political parties must introduce specific measures to ensure that women are elected in greater numbers

SUMMARY

Select to elect – without more women candidates, the main political parties risk disenfranchising women, a significant proportion of voters

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5. The Fawcett Society

The South London Fawcett Group works with The Fawcett Society

- Fawcett, the UK's campaign for equality between women and men, is calling for³:
 - Political parties to review their recruitment and selection procedures to assess them for equal opportunities
 - All political parties to use positive action, such as all-women shortlists, to ensure the House of Commons and local government are more representative of women
 - Political parties to listen and respond to women's political agendas which may be different from those of men

SUMMARY

Women are under-represented in almost all the UK's democratic institutions leading to exclusion from decision-making and, hence, political disengagement

References

1. South London Fawcett Group survey. June-August 2004. A total of 439 local women were asked about their voting patterns and their political activities. Survey forms were completed at: Myatts Fields Summer Fair (SE5, June 12th 2004), Clapham Common Church Fayre (SW4, July 3rd 2004), Lewisham People's Day (SE6, July 10th 2004) and Capital Age Festival (SE1, August 8th 2004).
2. The Electoral Commission. *Gender and political participation*. London, England, April 2004.
3. Fawcett. *Towards Equality*, Autumn 2004, A Manifesto for Equality.

*Somewhat alarmingly, a small proportion of women who had not voted (4%) mistakenly believed that they were ineligible to vote because they had not received a polling card. Keepers of electoral registers need to take steps to clarify this point before the next general election.

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