

She'll be right: why conservative voters fail to see gender as an obstacle to political success

Written by Andrea Carson, Incoming Associate Professor at LaTrobe University. Former Lecturer, Political Science, School of Social and Political Sciences; Honorary Research Fellow, Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

When Julie Bishop called out that it was “not acceptable” for her party to add to Australia’s political gender gap, it marked a watershed moment for conservative politics.

Her [speech](#) at a Women’s Weekly forum last week marked the first time Bishop, a party heavyweight, had publicly acknowledged the party’s role in the under-representation of women in Australian politics.

Women make up 50.7% of the Australian population, yet just under a third of the [federal parliament](#)

About one in five federal Coalition MPs is female.

Bishop’s comments followed a string of Liberal women exposing the party’s discriminatory culture which many women find so unwelcoming. The most explosive was first-term Liberal Julia Banks’s [decision](#) to quit parliament because of alleged bullying from “within my own party”.

Despite this, our latest research shows there is little public appetite on the conservative side of Australian politics for embracing gender quotas.

University of Melbourne colleagues Leah Ruppanner, Jenny Lewis and I undertook a survey of 2,100 voting-age Australians in June this year. We found that conservative voters generally fail to see how being female can impede political success. Left-of-centre voters list gender as the main obstacle to success.

This study suggests the Coalition parties have little incentive to introduce gender quotas when their voters do not see any reason for them.

Read more: [**A 'woman problem'? No, the Liberals have a 'man problem', and they need to fix it**](#)

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To test voters' attitudes about female politicians, we used identical vignettes about a hypothetical politician, then invited a representative sample of Australians to rate that politician's likelihood for success. The only differences in our vignettes was that half the respondents (1,050) answered questions about a male politician, while the other half responded to questions about a female. As the survey unfolded, additional identical information was posed about the hypothetical politician's professional and personal traits, but not their party identity.

Overall, we found Australians on all sides of politics supported the idea of more women in parliament. But, through the hypothetical scenarios, we found strong political party divides in internalised attitudes towards female politicians

Liberal and National voters favoured our male candidate more than those who voted Labor or Greens. This fits with [previous studies](#) that find "desirable" traits for leadership are typically linked to men.

Our findings are consistent with the different paths Australian political parties have taken to improve female representation in politics. Labor has instituted strict quotas to increase [female representation](#) since the 1990s. The Coalition favours voluntary targets and remains [opposed to mandatory quotas](#)

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The key argument against quotas has long been that there is simply no need for them. According to former prime minister [Malcolm Turnbull](#), the Coalition has a "completely different culture" from Labor. In 2013 he said:

You can't say to people, 'every second prime minister has to be a woman', you have to let parties choose candidates based on their quality.

This cultural difference appears to extend within the Liberal Party itself. When Banks resigned, some male party colleagues such as [Craig Kelly](#) failed to see this bullying environment as an issue – and adopted a "toughen up" stance. ANU [Professor Marian Sawer](#)

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calls this off-putting approach "gladiatorial politics".

As a result, the Coalition is languishing far behind Labor on female representation. Overall, [a fifth](#) of federal Coalition MPs are women. That's a long way behind Labor's 48%, which has doubled since quotas were introduced.

The results indicate that conservative voters reflect the Coalition's support for meritocratic or individualistic principles, a common argument used against quotas. Yet they fail to see how "meritocracy" is heavily skewed towards men, ignoring structural impediments that hinder women such as equal access to political networks, financial participation, a lack of mentors, and behind-the-scenes practices of political parties and preselections.

Notwithstanding maverick Coalition women like Judith Troeth, Sharman Stone, Judi Moylan and Sue Boyce, Liberals and Nationals deny Australian politics has a gender problem made worse by their parties' attitudes towards women.

For this reason, Julie Bishop's high-profile turnaround is significant because it directly links Australia's low world ranking in female political representation to her party. She said:

It's not acceptable for our party to contribute to the fall in Australia's ratings from 15th in the world in terms of female parliamentary representation in 1999 to 50th today.

Some male Coalition MPs seem to understand the problem. Bishop's view has been partly upheld by male MPs like [Greg Hunt](#), who told Channel Nine news: "I don't think we'll be at the right place until we have parity." Moderate Liberal [Craig Laundry](#) has also flagged using quotas as a short-term intervention.

While new Prime Minister Scott Morrison has notionally increased the number of women in his [ministry](#)

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from five (under Turnbull) to six, three-quarters of his full ministry is male. This suggests a significant problem for conservative women entering politics. The sudden removal of Bishop as deputy Liberal leader adds damage to the Coalition's image of having a problem with women.

Non-partisan, philanthropically supported programs such as the University of Melbourne's [Pathways to Politics](#) program attempt to address the pipeline issue by teaching women from all sides of politics the skills to become politicians.

Read more: [The Liberals have a serious women problem – and it's time they took action to change it](#)

Our study suggests the representation gap is unlikely to narrow unless the Liberal Party shows leadership to its voters, or vice versa, and heeds Bishop's advice that "there's a lot to be done" beyond reliance on the flawed and failed argument of "merit".

Andrea Carson is a guest lecturer for the University of Melbourne's Pathways to Politics program and previously worked as its academic coordinator. Our study was funded with grants from the Melbourne School of Government and the University of Melbourne's Policy Lab and Arts Faculty.

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