

The Telegraph, 15th March 2018: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/03/15/research-finds-fewer-one-three-grassroots-tories-woman-labour/>

Female membership of Conservative Party almost halved in two decades amid claims joining up is no longer a 'social thing' to do

By Jack Maidment

The proportion of female members of the Conservative Party has nearly halved in the last two decades, new research has found, amid claims that joining political parties is no longer a "social thing" to do.

The research, based on surveys of political party members conducted in the aftermath of the 2017 general election, highlighted the extent of gender imbalance in the Conservative Party.

It revealed that 29 per cent of the Tory rank and file are women - down from 49 per cent in 1994. The research also suggested that the Conservatives are not well positioned to address the finding that fewer than one in three grassroots Tories is a woman.

Just five per cent of the party's members are aged 18-24 and as many as 85 per cent of those young adults are men, something the research described as "truly frightening" for the future of the Tory Party.

The Conservative Party's position is in marked contrast to the Labour Party which has a membership split of 53 per cent men and 47 per cent women.

The research pointed out that the Conservatives have taken action to increase female representation in the House of Commons but the imbalance at a grassroots level is a major issue.

It stated: "The lack of women among the Tory rank and file could well turn out to be a serious problem for those interested in getting the party to look more like the country it wants to govern." It also suggested that a "failure to expand the pool and the pipeline by attracting more female members will make it more difficult to build on whatever has been achieved so far at the parliamentary level".

Monica Poletti, one of the authors of the research, said it was "surprising" to have seen such a drop in female representation in the Conservative Party.

She told The Daily Telegraph: "At the MP level we have a lot more women in the Tory Party. "I was surprised that it was more equal in the 1990s but it has dropped completely."

Anthony Wells, director of political and social research at YouGov, said the drop in female representation could be the result of politics seemingly becoming a less "social" activity.

He said: "I imagine to some degree the nature of the Conservative Party has changed from the way it used to be in the 50s and 60s when it was a social thing and a lot of middle-class people joined up.

"It was something that people did. These days, for most parties, you only join a political party if you are really into politics."

The research is likely to spark major concerns at Conservative headquarters but it will have been warmly welcomed by Labour which has seen its gender split narrow.

In 1992 Labour membership was 61 per cent male and 39 per cent female but in 2017 it was 53 per cent male and 47 per cent female.

Ms Poletti said that if the current gender dynamic persisted then "the Labour Party will be much more representative of the population than the Tory Party".

Mr Wells said that Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour leader, had shown that it was still possible to "enthuse" people about politics and persuade them to join a party.

He said: "Everyone had assumed that the days of mass parties was over and Jeremy Corbyn has shown that you can still build a big party."

The research found that overall UK political party membership was split 61 per cent to 39 per cent in favour of men.

The findings come from surveys undertaken by the Party Members Project run from Queen Mary University of London and Sussex University.