

DEMOS

working
paper

Soft sell or hard policies?

How can the parties best
appeal to women?

Published 1997

An analysis of how the main parties
approach women voters and women's
recent voting patterns; highlights policies
that are especially important to women.

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DEMOS

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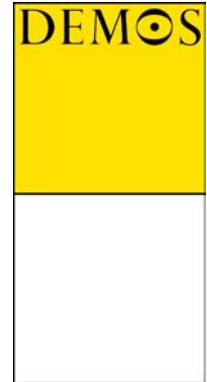
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1. Introduction

As the election approaches, politicians are finally waking up to the fact that winning women's votes could be the key to success at the polls.

This is true for all the parties:

- The Liberal Democrats currently have the support of 27 per cent of women in their key south west region. This is far higher than their national support figures;
- The Labour party is well ahead in national voting intention with all age groups, especially among young women. But young women are far less likely to vote, and Labour's lead among women over 55 is well within the margin of error of opinion polls. As significant is the fact that less than 20 per cent of women say that they trust Tony Blair. Precisely because women appear to be less committed and more volatile as voters, Labour will have to work hard to win that trust in the pre-election period;
- The Conservatives should be concerned that they have lost the support of the majority of women over 55. Historically these women have been the bedrock of local party activism and their votes were critical at the last election. So important, in fact, that some commentators argue that John Major won the election because of the votes of older women. In addition 12 per cent of women who voted Conservative in 1992 have not yet decided how they will vote this time;
- As well as keeping and attracting those who have already decided how they intend to vote, there are a substantial number of women, almost a quarter who are floating voters. These votes will be crucial to the final result. At the last election 16 out of every 100 women made up their mind during the last few days of the campaign, some waiting until they were in the ballot box. So, for women, especially the floating voters, the election campaign itself really does matter.



2. Tory short-termism, but at what price?

Historically the Conservative party can best claim to be the 'natural' party of women. But in the 1990s, they are in danger of losing their traditional female base of support - even among older women. And among young women there is now a devastating loss.

The haemorrhaging of support away from the Conservatives has short and long term causes. In the short term, there can be little doubt that among older women

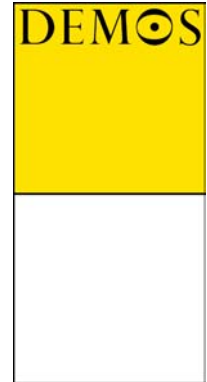
there is a sense of betrayal. Despite the Conservative's rhetoric of family values, strong communities and its promise to be the party of law and order, the reality is that they have governed a country which now has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe, high levels of crime and a pervasive sense that public spaces are no longer safe.

But the Conservatives have also undermined the confidence of many older women over pensions and long-term care. It is clear from the polling data reported in the Fawcett Society's report, *Winning Women's Votes*, that many older women do not feel that the pension is safe in Conservative hands. The issue of long term care has also been a conspicuous failure, with earlier promises to come up with a bold new policy now apparently on ice. Older women are also heavily reliant on the NHS and on local transport services, particularly buses, neither of which have been glowing success stories for the Conservatives.

However, the more fundamental problem with the Conservative party is that it is failing to keep up with the changing lives of a younger generation of women. The most visible symptoms of long term decline are reflected in the absence of young women as members and candidates. Less than 5 per cent of party members are under 35 and many of these are men. The party membership is also ageing. This is a historic turnaround compared to the beginning of the twentieth century when the Primrose League was one of the most effective of all mass movements, attracting into the party thousands of female activists.

In some ways the Conservatives are the victim of their own success. They have presided over a dramatic boom in higher education, which women are enjoying in particular. Demos' research on the changing values and aspirations of young women clearly shows that they are more oriented to success than their parents, and significantly more feminist in their values, even if they do not adopt the label. Many are also working - not just to earn a living but because they seek personal advancement and want careers. There are already more female professionals under 35 than over, and more female solicitors under 30 than male. Women are also increasingly outperforming men at school and University.

The rise of professional women, and the birth of a new generation of well educated women, have clearly been paralleled by a decline in support for the Conservatives, even though as a rule professionals and managers are more likely to support them. Ironically, the very success of Margaret Thatcher in offering a role model of female achievement has encouraged a generation of women to reject the older Tory assumption that women should sit quietly in the background devoting themselves to their homes and children. High profile role models as various as the Body Shop's Anita Roddick, the city high flier Carol Galley and Debbie Moore of Pineapple show that it is possible for women to succeed in the business world. Cherie Blair is also a role model for many women for successfully combining career and motherhood as well as demonstrating that there is nothing to stop a woman from



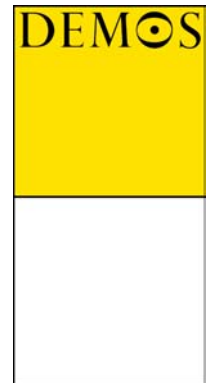
earning more than her husband. High profile Labour supporting women, including the actress Juliet Stevenson make clear the identification of success and New Labour.

Instead of harnessing these ambitions, the Tories have been sending conflicting messages. The rhetoric of Back to Basics and Tory traditionalism suggested that the Conservatives wanted to put women back in the kitchen, rather than celebrating and consolidating on the feminisation of the economy which they have presided over by stressing Britain's role as the enterprise centre of Europe, emphasising women's educational successes over the last decade and their opportunities for advancement in business.

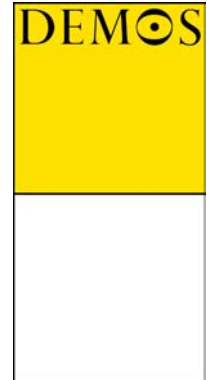
The Conservatives have also found themselves chasing change in other respects. The feminisation of the economy has not translated into a more feminised Parliament. The party itself has failed to select women candidates in reasonable numbers and to promote women to the upper reaches of the party, an issue that is now causing discontent in the ranks of Conservative women. And the Conservative's record is far worse than the other parties. Demos' focus group work, reinforced by other research, suggests that they do need to increase the visibility of women in the party, including selecting women for safe seats. Labour has clearly outwitted the Conservatives and set the pace on this issue. Techniques such as quotas (now outlawed) may have been painful and unpopular, but they have nevertheless had the desired effect. After the next general election, almost a third of the Parliamentary Labour party will be women. The Conservatives may, by contrast, have even fewer women in parliament than today. If they are to attract the attention of younger women, the Conservatives need to actively promote women within the party and take the other parties on with practical policies which will benefit working women challenging Labour and the Liberal Democrats on key issues such as childcare, and other policy initiatives such as parental leave.

In the immediate term, however, there are signs of a dangerous complacency. This is partly because in the short term at least, the demographics of the electorate allow them to ignore the generational shifts in the women's vote in the 90s. Older women make up a fifth of the electorate compared to just 6 per cent of women under 25 and they are far more inclined to vote than younger women. In the short term, it looks as if the Conservatives are relying on the fact that many disillusioned Conservative voters (especially older voters) will return to the fold. A risky assumption in our view.

The Conservatives are clearly intending to play on women's uncertainties about women's economic competence. Joni Lovenduski, an expert in women's voting patterns at Southampton University argues that women tend to judge the parties on their economic competence and they are less inclined to believe the parties' claims to competence in this area than men. Precisely because they are more cautious voters than men, they are more likely to favour the incumbent party in power. The



fact that many older women have memories of Labour in power also means that negative campaigning such as the Conservative's New Labour New Danger campaign may have a subtle undermining effect.



3. Labour's dilemma: short term obstacles, but long term promise?

Both in the long and short term, New Labour has a number of reasons to be cheerful. MORI's research suggests that Labour has more support among women now than this time prior to the 1992 general election. They are leading across all age groups of women (albeit only marginally among women over 55) whereas at a similar time prior to the 1992 election, they led only among women under 35. New Labour is, it seems, directly challenging the Conservative party's claim to be the natural party of women.

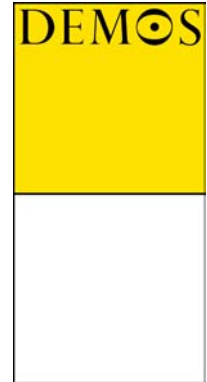
Blair's social conservatism is clearly a factor. He has made successful forays into enemy territory on family values and law and order which appeals to older women in particular. Labour also benefits from the fact that women are more inclined to view them favourably on some key policy issues: on pensions, health and education. Labour analysts have also clearly identified older and middle-aged women as a key target group for them to capture. To this end, they have actively tried to court their votes most visibly with Tessa Jowell MP, former Opposition Spokesperson for Women, who toured the country listening to women's concerns targeting organisations such as women's institutes and townswomen's guilds.

Labour's gains with older and middle-aged women are clearly important. But in the long run it is the generational shift which is likely to be most significant. Labour has a dramatic lead among young women: 58 per cent of women under 25 support Labour compared to just 17 per cent for the Conservatives. Moreover, the gender gap also goes into reverse among women under 35 with younger women being more inclined to support Labour than young men. This 'gender generation gap' is clearly a product both of wider cultural shifts in relation to changing gender roles and of the improved conditions that a new generation of women find themselves in.

Labour has better understood the importance of these underlying shifts in power between men and women. However, crude and unpopular quotas have been, they have proven extraordinarily effective at changing the party's complexion. After the next election, there will be many more women Labour MPs than any other party. In opposition, they have overtly shifted their policy focus towards women, not only on issues like childcare and parental leave, but also on low pay, part-time work, the effects of the long hours culture and the need to balance work and family life.

Labour's historical transformation from a macho labourist party to a more feminised one clearly resonates with many young women voters. Elsewhere

politicians who have addressed these issues have won great dividends. President Clinton made a direct appeal to working women in his first Presidential election campaign promising family leave and putting together a package of policies that would benefit working women. They subsequently rewarded him with their votes. In the latest successful Presidential election, he went further, actively wooing the mum's vote, showing that he understood their problems and promising an extension of family leave. Women responded by rewarding him with a 20 per cent lead over Bob Dole. (Their support was also enhanced by the fact that he had proven himself a safe pair of hands in terms of economic management). The implication of the generational shift in support to Labour among young women is that Britain is now falling into line with the pattern of other countries on the continent and North America where the rise of educated working women, has led to increased support for left of centre parties rather than centre right parties. Yet for all the progress, Labour still has problems. There is a real danger that when it comes to finally casting their votes, floating women voters may well be inclined to plump for the devil they know rather than the young Pretender to the throne (not least because Labour's Shadow Cabinet is by all accounts an extremely inexperienced team). Labour's election theme 'Time for Change' also runs counter to the inherent cautiousness of many women voters. Women's fluctuating personal satisfaction rating for Tony Blair as leader should also be a cause for concern.



Tony Blair has spent a lot of 1996 on internal party issues, particularly concerning discipline, rather than projecting a positive vision of what Labour would do in power. Not only has his leadership style been therefore somewhat defensive, it has positively reinforced the anxieties of some women. To many, Labour does not yet look like a party that is ready for government.

Blair also took over leadership of the Labour party with a promise to 'reconnect politics' by making it more inclusive and authentic. But since then, there has been a mood shift away from 'Bambi' to 'Stalin' with a more macho, more autocratic style of leadership dominating. This stark transition has perhaps run counter to his promise of a more authentic, inclusive, collaborative politics and undermined women's trust in him.

4. The potential for a third force? Women and the Liberal Democrats

There are clear opportunities for a party that is the third force in British politics to cultivate a new style of politics, and one which is significantly more women-friendly. In theory at least they can actively capitalise on women's distrust and disillusionment with traditional party politics and win over women from both sides of the political spectrum.

Since the 1992 general election, poll evidence suggests that women are more likely to vote Liberal Democrat than men by a small but significant gap of 2-3 points.

Moreover, the gap is widest among the 35-54 year old group of women who form 17 per cent of the electorate. (17 per cent of women in this age group say that they will vote Liberal Democrat compared to 13 per cent of men).

However, so far the promise of being the national third force in British politics has not yet materialised. And if the Liberal Democrats are really going to make the gender gap work in their favour between now and the next general election, they need to erode trust in the capacity of the other parties to deliver on their promises while also making clear commitments on policies which will affect women's lives.

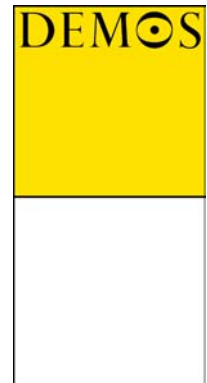
The Liberal Democrats have a clear opportunity to win over disillusioned Conservative voters who may not want to vote Conservative again but for whom a vote for New Labour may well prove a step too far. There are also opportunities for the Liberal Democrats to appeal to those young women who have not yet decided how they are going to vote or whose support for New Labour is conditional. Perhaps most important of all, the Liberal Democrats can position themselves to benefit from the support of women, particularly the floating voters, if they encourage them to vote tactically during the general election. Certainly the figures for their national support among women masks a much higher level of support from women in their key target region. Nationally they could build on their success in local politics where a focus on quality of life issues fits well with women's concerns.

5. The elusive floating woman voter?

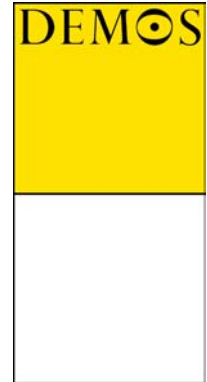
The Fawcett Society's research on women's voting patterns shows that women could decide the next election. There are more female voters than male and since 1979 voter turn-out has been higher among women than among men. But perhaps most important of all, they form the majority of floating voters. Almost a quarter have not yet decided how they will vote compared to 16 per cent of men.

Yet very little research has been done on the demographic profile of this elusive female floating voter. In fact, the research that is available suggests that just as there is no single woman's vote, there is no single female floating voter waiting to be won. Fawcett's analysis of poll data suggests that C2 women are the group most likely to be undecided about how to vote. Their research also suggests that as many as 12 per cent of women under 25 say that they do not know how they will vote (compared to 8 per cent of men of the same age). Not surprisingly, women who voted Conservative at the 1992 election are particularly likely to be undecided about how they will vote at the next election. Of women who voted Conservative in 1992, 12 per cent were undecided compared to just 6 per cent of men.

Women voters in marginal constituencies are also of key strategic significance for all the parties because they are more likely to be floating voters. (9 per cent of



women are undecided in key Conservative/Labour marginals compared to 6 per cent of men).



6. Winning women's votes before the general election

Each of the parties face different strategic dilemmas. In each case, the political challenge is to retain the base of support they have among women, while actively going out to recruit female floating voters either by winning back their support or persuading women to switch their support to them. In what follows we try to tease out the implications of this and consider what the parties have to do to win women's votes?

In our view there are two key elements which the politicians have to consider:

- the presentation of those policies
- the policies themselves.

Style over substance?

During the last general election the majority of broadcasting coverage focused on a small range of issues. Economics and electoral politics dominated and even health and education received relatively little coverage. Women disappeared almost completely, both in terms of the political agenda but also as individual spokespeople. The media too effectively colluded with the parties' electoral agendas and failed to allow women's voices to be heard.

After the 1992 election a series of meetings were held to discuss the problem of the 'vanishing women'. In the main, politicians blamed the media and the media blamed the politicians. Precisely so these lame excuses cannot be offered up after the 1997 general election, the Fawcett Society will be monitoring the election campaign and raising the issue both with the media and with the campaign teams of the political parties because in the 1990s there is no shortage of talented women in any of the parties or among the broadcasters. There are plenty of articulate women experts in the field of politics and social and economic policy and as representatives of women's organisations. It should be perfectly possible to achieve a balance in terms of visibility and the content of the election agenda. With almost a quarter of women voters not yet decided how they will vote, the aim is to make sure that women will be alongside men at the heart of the political process where they belong.

So far the message that women are concerned about hard policies not just the soft sell does not appear to have permeated the consciousness either of the media or of politicians. To date, it looks as if the political parties have concluded that it is in the area of presentation rather than content, that women's response is different from

men. At best, this means that the parties are finally recognising that many women don't like the adversarial style of British politics, a style which is reinforced by the way in which politics is reported by the media. At worst, it leads to the kind of trivialisation of British politics that we have seen recently with the reporting of 'Blair's bad hair day'.

This media trivialisation reflects the sexist assumption that women are more swayed by rhetoric and image than by hard politics. This is in spite of the fact that the available research evidence suggests quite the opposite, particularly with regards to the issue of economic competence. Commenting on the recent media reaction to Tony Blair's receding hairline, Joni Lovenduski argues $\frac{1}{4}$ 'All the evidence suggests that it is policies rather than hair do's which influence women's voting decisions'. The lessons from the recent Presidential election campaign would also point to this conclusion as would research by Demos and the Fawcett Society.

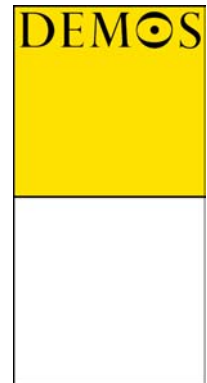
What are the policies women care about?

Clearly women are not a homogenous group. There are differences by region and by class and perhaps most significant of all, cross generation. Different issues are also more important at different stages of women's lives. In what follows we identify five groups of women to illustrate how their age, stage of life and personal circumstances affect their priorities. (The list is by no means exhaustive).

In June of this year the Fawcett Society commissioned MORI to carry out a survey to find out if there were issues of importance to women which were overlooked on the political agenda. Two issues were particularly important to **women over 55**, pension provision and the availability of public transport. Over half of all women named pension provision as important to them in our survey.

This is a key issue. In the current debate on pensions, all the parties appear to be focusing on the affordability of the state pension in the next century. However, with around two thirds of today's women pensioners already living either below or just above the income support level and struggling to get by, the inadequacy of the current level of provision is of enormous significance to them now. This is a particular problem for the Conservatives. Over the past decade Government changes have undermined women's pensions still further. A recent study of unclaimed means-tested benefits highlights how the Conservative's emphasis on income support as a substitute for an adequate state pension is failing older women.

Meanwhile, the other parties have not effectively capitalised on this weakness because they too are failing to give this issue priority. In Fawcett's recent survey as many as six out of ten women believed that not enough attention would be paid to the issue by political parties. However, the potential dividends for any party could



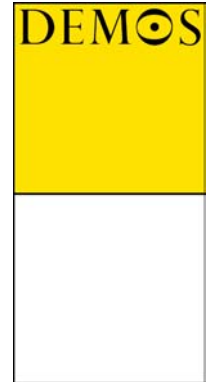
well be large. A recent MORI/Anchor Trust survey indicated that 54 per cent of older people would be more likely to vote for a party which included an increase in the state pension in their manifesto.

The other area highlighted by women over 55 as being of particular importance is public transport. Given that older women are less likely to own a car and are more dependent on public transport, a major focus of attention for them, especially in rural areas, is the availability of affordable bus services. In this area, the Conservatives have a clear image problem but the other parties are not capitalising on this. For, while half of women over 55 said that this was an important issue, nearly seven in ten thought that not enough attention would be paid to the issue in the run up to the general election.

Fawcett's survey also revealed that the minimum wage and the pay and conditions of part-time workers were important issues to **working women**. This is hardly surprising. For all the genuine progress that has been made towards greater equality between men and women, there are still major economic equity issues. Three quarters of the 2.3 million people who earn less than £3.50 an hour are women. Moreover the Conservative party's claim that the minimum wage will lead to job losses does not appear to resonate with many working women. (As many as 66 per cent of Conservative voters also support the minimum wage). Perhaps working women have grown used to such threats since the same was said about the equal pay act, maternity legislation, and recent improvements to part-time workers' rights and yet women's employment continues to rise?

Over half of the women who were part-time workers in Fawcett's survey were concerned about their pay and conditions. Since over six million women work part-time this is clearly a very significant issue. It is also clear that these women do not feel that any party is adequately addressing this issue. Two out of three women believed that it would not receive enough attention in the run up to the general election.

For **mothers** the most important issue was the level of child benefit reflecting the continuing importance of child benefit to mother's incomes. For a majority of women with young children it remains the single most important and reliable source of cash paid directly to them every week. The current Government has consistently defended the principle of child benefit recognising that it stands in place of child tax allowances, the latter benefiting mothers less directly. However there is concern that the Labour party is considering ways of targeting child benefit at poorer families, treating it more as a 'poverty' welfare benefit. They appear to fail to understand the key importance of this cash allowance to the purses of those who care for children. A new report by Holly Sutherland 'Who Benefits from Tax Cuts?' clearly demonstrates how households with children, particularly those on low incomes, benefit far more from an increase in child benefit than on any form of tax



cut. The bottom 30 per cent of households would receive 21 per cent of an increase in child benefit but only 3 per cent of the benefit of a cut in the standard rate of income tax. This suggests that the Conservatives should be capitalising on what is a popular policy among British mothers.

Younger women are seeking reassurances from all parties that they will be enabled to balance work and family life and childcare is a key issue. 25 per cent of women under 25 say that after-school care is an important issue for them personally. As significant is the fact that 73 per cent of them felt that none of the political parties would give enough attention to this issue in the run up to the next general election.

There are clear opportunities for all the parties to appeal to younger women in the light of the fact that 12 per cent have not yet decided how they will vote at the next general election. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats are committed to improving childcare for working mothers.

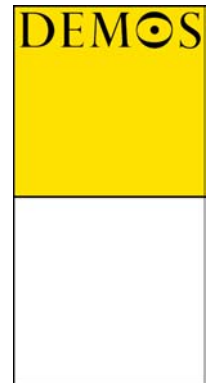
This issue needs to move centrestage during the general election campaign if they are to win these women's votes. Similarly the Conservatives should be emphasising the fact that they too have taken action on this issue through their consultation document on their national childcare strategy.

The issue of childcare also has a much broader appeal. It is a particularly pressing concern for the '**sandwich generation**', women aged between 35-55, many of whom are working (or want to) and are currently struggling to balance the care needs of their children with their elderly parents. Securing the votes of these women is important for all the parties not least because they form 17 per cent of the electorate.

By focusing on these issues, we are not intending to imply that education, health, and law and order are not of importance to women. Of course they are. Our intention is to demonstrate that there are a clear range of issues which are especially important to particular groups of women, which these women feel are being ignored by or inadequately addressed by all the political parties. Indeed in terms of women's overall priorities, it is significant that tax was the only issue that women considered would have enough attention paid to it during the election campaign.

7. Conclusion

In our view one symptom of the party's failure to address the substance of women's needs is their disconnection from and distrust of party politics. This is hardly surprising. Since the agenda of politics is defined and articulated primarily by men, many women are bound to be disconnected from traditional politics.



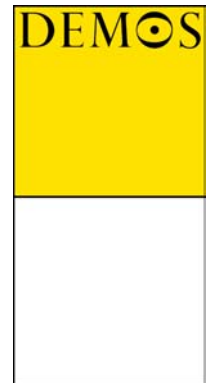
Women are certainly inclined to think of politics as a boys club, out of touch with day to day reality. Demos' focus groups with young women reveal an overwhelming contempt for the yah boo style of politics which Westminster fosters. As one young woman commented to us: 'Listening to the House of Commons they sound like a load of old school kids. All that shouting and jeering. I don't think women would be that bad.' Another recent survey, What Women Want, reinforces these findings. In this study one woman wrote of her desire for 'a parliament that is less concerned with one party bashing the other'.

At the same time, poll evidence consistently shows that women are less trustful of politicians and political parties than men. Demos' research also shows that young women are particularly disconnected, especially single parents and working class women. A MORI poll to accompany the seventy fifth anniversary of women's rights showed that 76 per cent of women of all ages were not involved in any form of party political activity, and 82 per cent of women aged between eighteen and 24. Four out of ten of these young women said that politics is all talk and no action, that political meetings are boring, that politics is dominated by men and that people only go into politics for themselves.

The political challenge facing all the political parties is to reconnect traditional politics and make it more relevant to the needs and concerns of women today. The bad reputation that politicians have generally is held particularly acutely among young women. Although these young women are less inclined to vote, in the long term the parties are foolish if they do not address younger women's widespread political disconnection, in light of the fact that Demos' research suggests that young C1C2 women are particularly frustrated that their aspirations have been raised but not met. And precisely because these women are politically volatile, non-ideological and pragmatic, all the parties have an interest in shaping their ethos to fit the values of a new generation of women who are waiting to be won politically and who will have a huge influence over the shape of British society in the next few decades.

In the short term, none of the parties can afford to discount women's views and their discontent. It is worthwhile remembering that while young women are considerably less inclined to vote, voter turnout among women is greater than among men. As important is the fact that almost a quarter of women have not yet decided how they are going to vote in the next election, and all the research suggest that many will decide in the final stages of the election campaign.

Women are looking for a party which will deliver on its promises and make a real difference to the quality of their lives. They want commitments on hard policies not just the soft sell. Women are aware that national resources are scarce but they want to be at the front of the queue when money becomes available or when spending is reallocated.



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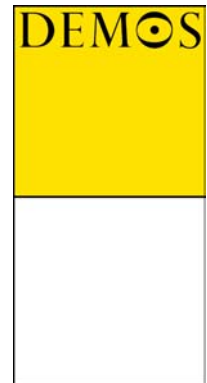
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“We came to Demos because we needed an intellectually robust and politically astute perspective.” – **Emma Gilthorpe, Vice President for Public Policy, Cable & Wireless**

Demos is a greenhouse for new ideas which can improve the quality of our lives. As an independent research organisation, our aim is to create an open resource of knowledge and learning that operates beyond traditional parties, identities and disciplines.

Demos connects researchers, thinkers and practitioners to an international network of people changing politics. Our ideas regularly influence government policy, but we also work with companies, NGOs, colleges and professional bodies – any organisation that can make change happen. Our partners share a desire to understand a complex, globalising world, and to play an active role in shaping its future.

Demos knowledge is organised around five themes, which combine to create new perspectives. The themes are democracy, learning, enterprise, quality of life and global change.

But we also understand that thinking by itself is not enough. Good ideas grow out of practice. Demos has helped to initiate a number of practical projects which are delivering real social benefit through the redesign of public services.

Like a greenhouse, Demos is open and transparent. We share our ideas as widely as possible, through books, seminars, conferences and the internet. As a registered charity, all our research is carried out in the public interest.

For Demos, the process is as important as the final product. We bring together people from a wide range of backgrounds to cross-fertilise ideas and experience. By working with Demos, we expect *all* our partners to develop sharper insight into the way ideas shape society.

