

# Electing women councillors

## 50/50 representation?

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With the upcoming local government election drawing closer, gender representation has become an issue once again. The use of a quota policy to address the problem of under-representation of women has been the subject of heated debate. This debate has brought to the fore the role of parties' policies on gender representation within the context of the current electoral system.

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### The legal framework

The *White Paper on Local Government* suggests that equal gender representation can be achieved through the introduction of a quota system by political parties in the proportional representation component. It encourages parties to draw up their party lists in such a way that the first candidate on the list and every second candidate thereafter is a woman. The Municipal Structures Act encourages parties "to

ensure that 50% of the candidates on the party list are women and that women and men candidates are evenly distributed through the list".

### Status quo

An audit conducted by the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) to determine the extent to which women are represented and participate in local government revealed that women are significantly under-

represented. The 2000 local government elections saw 16 573 candidates on the party lists, 34% of whom were women, ranging from a high of 38% in the Northern Cape to a low of 31% in KwaZulu-Natal and 32% in Northern Province and Western Cape. As a result of this election, 29% of the local councillors elected were women. Gauteng is the only province where there is (near) equal representation as far as women mayors are concerned. (For more, see *Local Government Bulletin* Vol. 6 No. 4, September 2004.)

This gender inequality becomes glaring in light of the fact that women constitute the majority of registered voters. According to the chief elections officer, Pansy Tlakula, the 2005 election registration stood at 20 717 895 people, of whom 60% are women.

### **Party policy on gender representation**

The ANC has promised to ensure that 50% of its candidates on election lists for the upcoming local government election are women. The IFP supports equal representation of male and female candidates on the party list, while it holds that ward candidates should be elected on merit. The DA has a “total equality programme” and all councillors have equal decision-making powers, says Gail Daus, the chief whip of the DA. “We believe in merit. The system works and there is a good balance of genders.”

In our system where half of the councillors are elected from the political party’s proportional representation (PR) list, the parties can influence the election of women significantly. Parties determine the order of the PR list and can thus determine how many of their women candidates are placed in positions on the list that will ensure their election. In the absence of legislation that establishes mandatory quotas, the policy of each party on gender representation determines the extent to which women will be represented in municipal councils. By adopting their own quota policy, parties can thus contribute to the enhancement

of equal representation of women in local government.

## Concerns regarding quota policy

The ANC's decision to field 50% of women candidates will go a long way in addressing the problem of under-representation of women in local government. The ruling party's quota policy has, however, raised the concern that it may worsen current problems of capacity in municipalities. "If the ANC makes the mistake of putting women on the lists on the basis that they are women, and not because they have the skills that are required, local government will sink into a deeper crisis", says political analyst Aubrey Matshiqi. There is a general concern that the quota will merely enhance the quantity of women representation and not the quality of public representatives at the level of local government.

## Comment

The ruling party's decision to have equal representation of women in local government is highly commendable as it represents a significant stride towards addressing the under-representation of women in this level of government. This reinforces President Thabo Mbeki's plan to have women well represented in all spheres of government. However, parties should note the concern that the quota policy must not compromise the efficient running of municipalities, which are already suffering from

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capacity problems. They must ensure that women are listed as candidates not only because of their gender but also because they have the skills that are required to improve the capacity of local government. It is not, however, sufficient that women simply constitute 50% of the party list; they must also be positioned on the list as every second candidate to ensure their election. It is not sufficient to have gender equality on the PR list; parties should also strive to field as many ward candidates as possible to ensure that the overall result is 50/50

representation.

## key points

- The policy of each party on gender representation determines the extent to which women will be represented in municipal councils.
- The ANC has promised to ensure that 50% of its candidates on election lists for the upcoming local government election are women.

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