Hi everyone,

I hope you’re all well. Thank you for being accommodating in rescheduling my paper, I’ve had to take a few weeks off from work but happily things are almost back to normal now.

In the intervening time I have had the peer review back from an article that I submitted before Christmas. I was invited to contribute an article to a special issue marking the centenary of Nancy Astor’s election. It’s been accepted with revisions and I am just starting the process of revising it, so I thought having some extra readers would be great.

I’ve also included the peer review reports at the end as I thought it might be useful for anyone (like me) who is submitting their first article, and a helpful way for us to discuss experiences of the peer review process. But it would be great to have feedback/thoughts on the piece and topic more widely. The substantial work I need to do on it is refining the argument and situating it more thoroughly within the historiography on women and politics in this period.

Thank you for reading and look forward to seeing you on Monday!

Best wishes,

Ellie

**Abstract**

This article analyses the parliamentary phenomenon that historians have referred to as the ‘halo effect’. A model famously adopted by Nancy Astor, the halo effect describes candidates fighting parliamentary seats that had previously been contested by their spouse, a route that accounted for almost a third of the women elected to parliament between the wars. This article discusses the implicit contrast that is made in the historiography between ‘seat-inheritors’ and ‘self-made’ female MPs. It argues that this distinction is unhelpful and by using the halo effect candidates as examples instead, we can better understand the circumstances in which women were able to succeed politically post-suffrage. It demonstrates that these candidates benefited from three circumstances through marriage that led them to dominate the female parliamentarians of the interwar period: political experience and connections, an ability to utilise their identity as a wife and a supportive and politically useful spouse.

**Things Left Unfinished: Spouses, Seat Inheritance and Parliamentary Elections in Post-Suffrage Britain**

The death of William Waldorf Astor, was both sad and problematic for his son, Waldorf Astor. Waldorf had been elected as the MP for Plymouth Sutton and had proved himself as an active and politically ambitious member in the nine years he had served. The death of his father meant that he was elevated to the peerage as Viscount Astor, disqualifying him from sitting in the House of Commons. Legally, Waldorf had no choice. Although he investigated the possibility, he could not relinquish his peerage. But there was another option. His wife Nancy was well-known and well-liked within the constituency and in 1919 was now eligible to stand as an MP. Nancy maintained that it was Waldorf who first suggested the idea of her going into Parliament, saying that ‘So it seemed that it was best,’ Nancy said ‘to keep it in the family, and for me to try for it, which I did.’ (Fort, 2012: 159)

The method by which Nancy entered parliament, the first woman to take her seat in the house, has been subsequently called the ‘halo effect’, by historians. (Vallance, 1979; Harrison, 1986; Pugh, 2000) A term used more widely in the disciplines of psychology or business studies, it refers to the idea that people tend to ‘think of a person in general as rather good or rather inferior and to color the judgment of the qualities by this general feeling’. (Thorndike, 1920: 25) The term seems to have been first used in this context historically by Elizabeth Vallance to describe women taking over a seat that their husband had vacated. Vallance claimed the advantage was that women benefitted from this halo effect of male acceptability that legitimized their political aspirations. (Vallance, 1979: 27) A wife became an electoral extension of her partner and could be trusted to embody the same values and bring the same qualities to the constituency her husband had exemplified.

Nancy Astor was in fact not the first candidate to stand in her husband’s stead. In the 1918 election the first woman to stand as a Conservative candidate, Alice Lucas, was selected after her husband died suddenly - mid-campaign - in the Spanish influenza pandemic. She polled much more strongly than her husband was expected to and came a mere 832 votes away from being elected. A circumstance that Pamela Brookes notes commends the fact that ‘there is nothing like bereavement, injury or childbirth to commend a candidate to the British electorate.’ (Brookes, 1967: 14).

  An analysis of the instances of the halo effect up to 1970 can be seen in Table 1. This details all candidacies where a spouse stood in a parliamentary seat that had previously been contested by their partner. There were three main sets of circumstances in which spousal succession can be seen to be in operation. The most common circumstance was that of the Astors: women succeeded their husbands when they were elevated to this House of Lords. After the death of a family member who held a hereditary title, men would have to, often begrudgingly, relinquish their seats in the Commons and their wives stood in the subsequent by-elections. This method had a near total rate of success within this period. Only one woman who stood in a seat after her husband had been elevated to the Lords did not win her election. The second most common circumstance was a woman standing in her husband’s constituency after his death in office. This again was a successful route to election for women. Every woman who stood in the by-election called as a result of their husband’s death won.

While in all the examples above, wives succeeded husbands, there were three instances of men standing in seats previously held by their wives. Walter Runciman and Hugh Dalton employed what was known at the time and in the historiography as the ‘warming-pan’ strategy. They both were already elected as MPs but wished to change their parliamentary seats. In both cases, to avoid triggering two simultaneous by-elections with the move their wives stood in their desired seat and resigned once their husbands were available to take over. They were very frank with the electorate about this scheme. The Runcimans saw this as a boon for the constituency and suggested that the voters were flattered by the suggestions that electing Hilda meant they would gain two members representing them in parliament rather than one. These circumstances did indeed mean that the Runcimans and Daltons were the first married couples to sit concurrently in the house. Speaking at a lunch after the by-election Hilda said that she had not won the election because she was a woman:

‘I am afraid I was only a wife, which is not quite the same thing. It was not so much on my merits that I was invited to contest the seat but because they thought any wife could be relied on to vacate the seat for her husband when the time came.’(*Times*, 1928:21)

The other man to stand in a seat that had previously been contested by his wife was Oswald Mosely. In 1931 he stood in Stoke-on-Trent for his fledgling New Party, a seat previously held for Labour by his wife Cynthia Mosely. Although her constituency party wanted her to continue, Cynthia did not fight for reelection due to health considerations and political disillusionment. Cynthia’s connections in Stoke did not pull Oswald through and he finished in last place. This use of seat inheritance for political tactics was not as successful as the circumstances of elevation or widowhood. There were others who used the halo effect as a form of political tactic. Along with the ‘warming-pan’ candidates and Oswald Mosley, two women - Juliet Rhys-Williams and Kitty Wintringham - stood in seats that had been previously contested by their husbands in the pursuit of some political advantage. These instances will be discussed later in the article.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Year | Outcome | Party | Circumstance |
| Nancy Astor | 1919 | Successful | Conservative | Elevation |
| Margaret Wintringham | 1921 | Successful | Liberal | Widowed |
| Mary Emmott | 1922 | Unsuccessful | Liberal | Elevation |
| Katharine Stewart Murray (The Duchess of Atholl) | 1923 | Successful | Conservative | Elevation |
| Mabel Philipson | 1923 | Successful | Conservative (husband Liberal) | Husband barred from standing |
| Gwendoline Guinness (Countess of Iveagh) | 1927 | Successful | Conservative | Elevation |
| Walter Runciman | 1929 | Successful | Liberal | Political tactics |
| Hugh Dalton | 1929 | Successful | Labour | Political tactics |
| Lucy Noel-Buxton | 1930 | Successful | Labour | Elevation |
| Oswald Mosely | 1931 | Unsuccessful | New Party | Political tactics |
| Joan Davidson | 1937 | Successful | Conservative | Elevation |
| Agnes Hardie | 1937 | Successful | Labour | Widowed |
| Juliet Rhys Williams | 1938 | Unsuccessful | Liberal | Political tactics |
| Beatrice Rathbone | 1941 | Successful | Conservative | Widowed |
| Violet Bathurst (Lady Apsley) | 1943 | Successful | Conservative | Widowed |
| Kitty Wintringham | 1945 | Unsuccessful | Common Wealth | Political tactics |
| Lena Jeger | 1953 | Successful | Labour | Widowed |
| Muriel Gammans | 1959 | Successful | Conservative | Widowed |

Some historians have suggested that there were cross-party differences in levels of enthusiasm about adopting the halo effect, and that the Conservative party were the most enthusiastic proponents of seat inheritance. (Stobaugh, 1978: 54). It is true that it was not until the Conservative domination of the 1931 general election that the Tories had a female MP who had not won in a seat her husband had previously held. Yet it is wrong to understand this as simply a tactic from a socially conservative party negotiating the role that women should play in parliamentary politics. Of the full number of interwar halo effect candidates, four were Labour, four Liberal, seven Conservative and one Independent.

The peak of the halo effect was before 1939. Twelve women contested seats previously held by their husband, and ten of them were successful. This meant that almost a third of women MPs elected between the wars held a seat that their husband had previously won. During the Second World War, two women, Violet Bathurst (Lady Apsley) and Beatrice Rathbone, won uncontested by-election seats after their MP husbands were killed in action. Yet by 1945, when the largest number of female candidates stood and won seats, the halo effect had all but disappeared. Only one candidacy could tentatively be classed as an attempt to capitalize on a seat previously contested by a spouse. From this time until 1970, only two women stood in seats previously held by their partners – in both instances standing in by-elections when they had been unexpectedly widowed.[[1]](#endnote-1) Elizabeth Vallance (1979) has argued that this change occurred because the ‘legitimisation process’ had become less significant. In other words, the idea of ‘male equivalence’ that some have considered important immediately post-suffrage had waned in potency. (Harrison, 1986: 225-226)

This change over time can also be contextualized within a wider cultural turn against the value of familial political dynasties. Familial ties to constituencies did not die away with the abolishment of pocket boroughs in the Reform Acts.[[2]](#endnote-2) But as the twentieth century progressed, there was increased criticism of nepotism. Beatrice Rathbone found this to her cost when contested the Bodmin seat in 1941. Her local newspaper decried:

‘the idea that when a member dies his widow should succeed him is bad, not good at all. It establishes an hereditary principle in the Lower Chamber…we must for the future seek out those who have greater claims upon our suffrage than the simple one of family connection.’ (*The Cornish Times*, 1941:3)

As the seat was uncontested, the criticism had no effect, but Rathbone was not to be a long serving MP and stood down at the next General Election.

This critical attitude was not just towards the idea of women taking over seats from their husbands. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Paul Channon was heavily criticized when he attempted to be selected for Southend West in 1959. Southend West was a seat with a long lineage of familial MPs. Paul Channon was part of the Guinness family who had represented Southend since 1912. Rupert Guinness passed the seat to his wife Gwendoline, the Countess of Iveagh in 1927 when he was elevated to the Lords. On her retirement in 1935, her son-in-law Henry ‘Chips’ Channon took over until his death in 1958. Although only 23 and still an undergraduate at Oxford, Henry’s son Paul wanted to represent the Southend constituency in the by-election. Although the local constituency party ultimately backed Paul over 129 other candidates, his selection was not plain sailing. Lord Beaverbrook’s *Daily Express* took great umbrage to his selection campaign. The *Express* described Paul Channon as a ‘hotly indignant controversial candidate’ and reported that the public houses were full of anger at this ‘hereditary principle’. (Gale*,* 1959:2)The night before the selection poll the paper ran a large feature on this ‘nasty business, a discredit to the party,’ heavily criticizing Channon’s age and inexperience. When charged with these accusations of nepotism, Channon replied that: ‘All I can say is that my selection was done scrupulously fairly. You must ask those who selected me; I don’t think it is reasonable for me to comment on the reasons of those who selected me.” His ex-MP grandmother, Lady Iveagh saw the reasons for his selection as simple. The voters had instinctively done their duty by ‘backing a colt when you know the stable he was trained in’. (Gale*,* 1959:8)

This is part of the problem in any discussion of the halo effect. It is entangled in ideas of nepotism, meritocracy and democracy that can render the phenomenon unpalatable to both contemporary and modern observers. The distaste for halo effect candidates seen above is also present in the tone of later scholarly assessments of women’s election to parliament to parliament between the wars. It is tempting to see in a negative light the idea that women’s success in politics during this period hinged upon, or was greatly benefitted by, their relationships with their husbands.[[3]](#endnote-3) Laura Beers (2016:2) in her biography of ‘Red Ellen’ Wilkinson, praises her for being a ‘self-made woman’ in an ‘era when several of her female parliamentary colleagues – including Lady Nancy Astor and Lady Cynthia Mosley – entered parliament on their husbands’ coattails’. This suggests an uncritically negative view of women accessing parliament through the networks of marriage. Similarly, Maguire (1998:25) in her study of Conservative women deems that there was ‘something rather pathetic’ about women’s methods of accessing political circles by their roles as hostesses and spouses as they were dependent on men for their political power and involvement.

It’s easy to frame, as these authors do, the phenomenon of women inheriting seats from husbands as problematic for any interpretation of ‘progress’ for political women in the interwar period. However, closer examination of the halo effect reveals a much more nuanced picture of both gender and political cultures in the interwar period. Instead of seeing these candidates as the undeserving and fortunate recipients of a seat in the House of Commons, it is far more productive to understand their marital status as a category of analysis which illuminates the factors leading to success for women with political aspirations. Instead we should ask: what was so beneficial for politically ambitious women about being married to a previous member of parliament? This article argues that a moral distinction between self-made and inherited female MPs made explicitly or implicitly in the historiography is unhelpful. By closer examination of this cohort of women, we can better understand the both the circumstances in which women were able to succeed politically, and the attributes and relationships – personal and political – that allowed them to do so.

Ellen Wilkinson grappled with these issues throughout her political career. Her novel *Clash* explores the dilemma of a young trade union organiser as she weighs up whether a woman can both pursue a dream of becoming an MP and find love. Wilkinson is one of the most iconic examples of the spinster MP, who claimed that:

‘if a woman is to marry and have children, her peak period is between eighteen and twenty-five. But if her ambition is to be … a politician, she inevitably kicks her colt-feet around till well in the thirties, as a man does, suffering and learning from her mistakes, building the personality that can do things in the forties.” (Wilkinson, 1936)

This article takes a different view, arguing that through marriage to a politically active man we do see these women ‘building a personality’. In fact, it was one of the best forms of political training, and this may attest to why comparatively so many women found their route to parliament in this way. The analysis below demonstrates how the ‘halo effect’ candidates benefitted from three circumstances that led them to dominate the female parliamentarians of the interwar period: political experience and connections, an ability to utilise their identity as a wife and a supportive and politically useful spouse.

**Political experience and connections**

The halo effect MPs were not plucked from the domestic hearth, adorned with a rosette and thrust clueless onto the hustings stage; they often had long political experience both before and throughout their marriages. Lucy Noel-Buxton met her husband Noel on a campaign trail in North Norfolk in 1914. They had become acquainted as Lucy (then a Conservative in her formative political years) was speaking on a platform against his then Liberal politics under the slogan ‘No Noel for North Norfolk’. They later joined the Labour party together and Lucy was very active within the Half-Circle club, the organisation founded by Beatrice Webb to promote friendships between the wives of Labour MPs, candidates and Trade Union officials.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Mary Emmott, who unsuccessfully fought the Oldham seat some years after her husband Alfred was elevated to the peerage, had served on the Oldham Board of Guardians since 1898, had been the vice-chair of the national Women’s Liberal Federation and numerous other political organisation and societies.(Law, 2000: 58-59) Hilda Runciman, was considered the archetypical ‘warming-pan’ candidate but had a considerable political life before her husband. In 1897 she was the first woman to be elected to the Newcastle school board. Later, in the 1920s, she extended her public role and served as a Justice of the Peace and as president of the Women’s National Liberal Federation in 1919-21 as well as other housing associations and on the executive of the League of Nations Union.It is important to recognise that most of these women had a considerable amount of political interest and ability independent of their relationships with their husbands. What their marriage often enabled them was different opportunities and modes of engagement.

Regardless of their levels of experience, the political connections and networks of these women was often considerable. Although taking over the Southend-on-Sea seat directly after her husband’s elevation to the House of Lords, the Countess of Iveagh was the 22nd member of her family to enter parliament, including three former speakers of the Commons. (*The Times*, 1927:16) Katharine Stewart-Murray, the Duchess of Atholl, also enjoyed a wide circle of personal political connections that helped her in her selection. The networks that she and the Duke of Atholl jointly possessed made it far more achievable to stand for and win election. Katharine describes how the suggestion that she should stand for parliament came from Lloyd-George himself:

‘I therefore began to think over his proposal seriously, and of course discussed it with Bardie [the Duke of Atholl]. He raised no difficulties, and shortly after the Prime Minister and Dame Margaret had left us, we had a talk about it with Sir George Younger, Chief Unionist Whip…The King was our guest at luncheon one day, on his way south from Balmoral at the end of the shooting season. I told His Majesty of the proposal the Prime Minister had made to me. He was evidently doubtful how I should be able to combine the duties of hostess at Blair with parliamentary work, but I knew I could rely on Bardie, with his wonderful domestic gifts, to make good the deficiencies such work might force on me.’ (Stewart-Murray, 1958:127)

It is not enough to decry the advantages that these women had because of their relationships with their husbands without considering the other, and often more important, social and cultural capital that they possessed in their lives. And indeed, the prominence of these connections was no less important for men when seeking candidature for parliament. In the case of the Plymouth Sutton seat, if Nancy hadn’t accepted the role it would have still be an Astor on the ballot paper: the committee would have asked Waldorf’s brother John Jacob Astor to fight the seat in the event of her refusal. (Fort, 2012:160)

Being married to and fighting a seat after their husbands did give some of the women a significant advantage for their political career in another, more direct, way. In addition to any political connections they possessed or developed, it was often through their husbands’ campaigns that they discovered and then honed their political talents and abilities. For the Duchess of Atholl, whilst her parents had been politically inclined, she was not active in party politics until her husband was adopted as the Unionist candidate. Katharine took up canvassing and campaigning to support the Duke of Atholl enthusiastically, but it also gave her the opportunity to engage politically in a public forum herself. As is reflected throughout her autobiography, she presents herself as the altogether more politically interested of the pair, as for example she says on campaigning: ‘He was not, I think, as interested in political speaking as I was, for I enjoyed trying to explain things…. In the election which came a few weeks later, I spoke in public every night for the last week or two.’ (Stewart-Murray, 1958:55-57) Similarly, although family and friends close to Lady Astor noted her rhetorical talents, it wasn’t until she was supporting Waldorf’s campaigns in 1910 and 1918 that she was able to share these abilities in a public forum. (Musolf, 1999: 24)

The work that women had undertaken in the constituencies was essential in helping their selection and election. Many also had built up significant experience of serving alongside their husbands in their constituencies. This was very clear in the case of the Duchess of Atholl. When an election was called in 1923, the local association felt that they needed a strong local candidate so unanimously voted for the wife of the former MP and current President of the local association, the Duchess of Atholl, to be the candidate. (Ball, 1990:51-52) Stuart Ball (2013:327) claims that she was more popular than her husband within the constituency. The Conservative party especially saw the role of the MP’s wife as more codified than the Labour party. In the 1930s, the Conservative Training Centre developed a course for MPs wives, training them in political issues, public speaking, party organisation, local government and running bazaars amongst others. Local newspaper reports of the new course commented that: ‘It is a sign of the times that many MPs who were necessarily kept at Westminster during the Parliamentary Season rely on their wives to maintain that personal contact with voters which, to-day, is regarded as essential.’ (Berthezène and Gottlieb, 2017:101)

**Identity as a wife for political gain**

In the same way that the roles that women played in supporting their husbands’ careers gave them an advantage in selection and election for parliamentary seats, women were able to use their identity as a wife as a political advantage. Having such a prominent role in the constituencies allowed women to build upon the persona of ‘Lady Bountiful’: the image of the women doing good deeds for the poor and needy in society. For Nancy Astor, this grounding in the local community of the constituency and the ability to cite the works she had done in the areas of maternity work and child welfare, enhanced her political credibility and public image. (Musolf, 1999:22) The Countess of Iveagh similarly had attracted this reputation to herself, being described in the press as ‘given to good works, she is the “lady bountiful,” helping where help is needed, and seeking, in every way possible, to make happier and brighter the lives of fellow citizens.’(*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 1931:7)

The halo effect also provides an insight into the relationships that MPs held with their constituencies. The era of mass democracy did not necessarily result in MPs and their families feeling any less personal ownership over their constituencies, but the fact that wives could now be incorporated into keeping the seat within the family suggests an interesting new trend. Due to the changing nature of politics, with an increased emphasis on an active role in the constituency, administering welfare and civic presence, the role of women made them now eligible to be considered as political successors, just as brothers, sons and nephews had been for the preceding centuries. Lady Iveagh was reported as saying that she was seeking election for the borough ‘partly because she and her husband had been associated with it for so long that she felt loath to allow circumstances over which they had no control to sever that connexion.’ (*Times*, 1927:16) The familial connection with the seat was felt just as keenly by Lord Iveagh. He featured on Lady Iveagh’s election address with an imploring ‘Message from your old member’:

‘It is with the keenest regret that, after fifteen years I am retiring from that position, but my regrets are lessened by the hope that you may return my wife as your Member, placing that confidence in her which you have never failed to give me throughout the years during which we have been so happily associated. Should this come to pass I shall rejoice that my connection with Southend will still remain.’ (Iveagh, 1927:4)

Four women in the interwar period came to the House in by-elections triggered by their husband’s death and this was a key part of their public identity during the campaign. Like those women who gained their seats after their husband’s elevation to the peerage, it is wrong to imagine that these women’s forays into the political scene came only after their husband was deceased. These women had been highly active within the political sphere, not just as an appendage to their husband but as activists in their own right. Margaret Wintringham and Lady Apsley both served as presidents of the local women’s associations for their respective parties in their husband’s constituencies. Agnes Hardie had been a Labour party organiser and served on the Board of Education even before her marriage to George Hardie (incidentally the younger brother of Keir Hardie). (Knox, 2004) They met through the Labour movement and worked together a great deal in politics before their marriage. *The Times* (1951:5) described how she accepted ‘pressing invitations’ to become the Labour candidate upon her husband’s death.

The narratives of the success of the women candidates were constructed differently by different parties. Taking Agnes Hardie for example, her pronouncement on her victory with a majority of 5,978 (2449 votes fewer than her husband George received at the last poll) she felt showed: “The magnificent result…indicates that Springburn had remained loyal to its Labour allegiances and has given entire support to the Labour Party’s programme of reconstruction at home for the benefit of all people.’ (*Glasgow Herald*, 1937: 13) However, her Unionist opponent Colonel M’Innes Shaw ‘hoped that Mrs Hardie would regard the result as a token of the esteem in which her husband had been held.’ In her comments on her election, Agnes Hardie positioned herself as an independent actor who was representing the Labour party before she was representing herself or her husband. She is describing the result only in the terms of what it meant for the Labour party rather than herself as an individual or in her identity as the wife of George Hardie. It was not just esteem and regard of the constituents that was being transmitted through their candidature in the place of their husbands, but there was often an understanding that they would embody the same political views as their spouse had also held. Yet this was not always a positive factor for women following on from their husbands. Margaret Wintringham faced difficulties in her election as her husband’s radical views were cited against her by the Conservative candidate in the local press. (Harrison, 2011)

Widowhood presented an opportunity for women to embody the identity of a loyal wife whilst being able to allay concerns that she would not be able to perform her duties and roles in the domestic sphere. This was certainly portrayed as a benefit in the case of Margaret Wintringham when *The Times* (1921:11) reported that:

‘There are not many men in the House of Commons with so fine a record of service outside. Mrs Wintringham has had to do a considerable amount of speech-making in the discharge of these multifarious duties during the past 20 years…She has no children, and this absence of home ties affords her all the necessary leisure to devote herself to the business of the House.’

Agnes Hardie’s son had also passed away even before the death of her husband. These women could thus still be considered as appropriately and safely feminine without concern that they were neglecting any of their traditional duties in the domestic sphere. The theme of mourning was present in Beatrice Rathbone’s election after her husband was killed in the Battle of Britain. On being sworn into the House she was described as in ‘deep mourning, and her only ornament was a silver brooch of the Royal Air Force.’ (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, 1941:4) The special circumstances for those deep in mourning similarly benefitted Margaret Wintringham:

‘Mrs Wintringham was known during the contest at Louth as the silent candidate. That was not because has not the gift of speech-making. She is on the contrary, an experienced and fluent public speaker. But having regard to her recent bereavement – the sudden death of her husband in the smoking-room of the House of Commons – she naturally thought it more fitting not to take a prominent part in the election. She was, however, to be seen, in deep mourning, on the platform at Liberal meetings.’ (*Times*, 1921:11)

Perhaps the most unashamed use of marital identity as an election tool came from Hugh and Ruth Dalton, the second of the two ‘warming pan’ candidacies in this period. The sitting MP for Bishop Auckland, Ben Spoor, died before the planned retirement of his seat at the next general election. He had been due to be replaced by Hugh as the candidate for Bishop Auckland, moving from his marginal Peckham seat. In order to keep the seat ‘in the family’ Ruth was nominated in the ensuing by-election. Though she did not attend the selection meeting, she was unanimously selected to be the by-election candidate. She had two main credentials in her favour of selection: she was a well-respected LCC councillor and most importantly for the constituency who wanted Hugh Dalton as their MP, she could be relied to stand down as soon as Parliament was dissolved. The idea of Ruth as a ‘warming pan’ was widely acknowledged, as Hugh said in his diaries: ‘They say they don’t want any other warming-pan…they want to get people into the habit of voting Dalton.’(Pimlott, 1986: 173) To this purpose, Ruth stood on the ballot paper under the name Mrs Hugh Dalton. (*Times*, 1929:9) However, Ruth did not covet a parliamentary career for herself. As she said when asked by Ramsay MacDonald to consider continuing her political career, she told him that she had never wished to become an MP and preferred her work on the LCC: ‘There we do things. Here it all seems to be talk’. (Dalton, 1953:210)

Yet it was the also the case that the shared identity of a husband and wife could not overcome all political obstacles. Tom and Kitty Wintringham were the least successful example of a couple employing the halo effect. When fighting in Spain as part of the International Brigades, Tom Wintringham met American journalist Kitty Bowler and they married back in Britain in 1941. Tom had a turbulent relationship with the Communist party and in 1942 he and Kitty were founding members of the new Common Wealth party. Tom stood in the 1943 by-election for Midlothian and Peebles under the Common Wealth banner. Although ultimately unsuccessful, he polled an impressive 48% of the vote, missing out on victory by a few hundred votes. For the 1945 general election, the couple decided that Kitty would try her luck in the same seat. She had come to know the constituency when campaigning for Tom and they hoped that the Wintringham name and previous success of her husband may help to carry a decent poll. Kitty’s election material reflected this theme. Her election leaflet carried a large endorsement from her husband Tom in the centrespread that proclaimed:

‘Kitty Wintringham does five jobs well: wife, politician, secretary, housekeeper and journalist. She is particularly good at the first two of these, and I am all in favour of her concentrating on them. Working with me as my secretary she has often completed things I left unfinished: pamphlets for training the Army and Home Guard, choosing instructors for the Osterley Home Guard School, and articles for the papers. In Midlothian I left something not quite finished. The Tory majority came down from over 10,000 to under 900. You can see that she finishes that up neatly.’[[5]](#endnote-5)

Unfortunately, this was not a job that Kitty could finish up neatly. She finished in last place with a paltry 6.4% of the vote. Correspondence between Tom and Kitty reveal the rationale for Kitty contesting the Midlothian seat; they had built up connections in the area during Tom’s campaign that they felt that Kitty could capitalise on. They were both simultaneously contesting seats in the 1945 election and with Kitty in Scotland and Tom in Aldershot, their contact was limited to frequent letters. However, from Tom’s experience he was able to suggest possible supporters and endorsers for Kitty, even if his advice often simply amounted to: ‘Be good, don’t panic, and go on without worrying what the Tories do.’ Yet the election leaflet reveals the importance that the Wintringhams felt was attached to the name after Tom’s success. The belief in this name ignored the other circumstances that had led to Tom’s impressive share of the vote in 1943 - this was a by-election held during WWII when the parties in the coalition governments had agreed not to stand against the incumbent party. Once Kitty stood in the 1945 general election, she came a distant third to the Unionist and Labour party candidates who fought a close contest.

**A supportive and trusted political partner**

Halo effect candidates experienced a bonus to their candidature by having the support and experience of their husbands. Karen Musolf in her study of the election of Nancy Astor’s 1919 election campaign characterises Waldorf Astor as ‘keeping control over the overall operation’. (Musolf, 1999:67) She explains Waldorf’s role involved being the connecting link between the local party organisation and the home circle, soliciting speakers on her behalf, speaking at her meetings and elaborating, explaining and justifying her positions. (Musolf, 1999: 62) Brookes (1967: 18) similarly describes Waldorf as her campaign manager who wrote all of her speeches.

Yet, there is little in this list of duties and roles that these women had not performed themselves in their husbands’ election campaigns. They all canvassed enthusiastically, explained their husbands’ positions, spoke on platforms and provided logistical support. However, there is a gendered element to how this political work is characterised. Whilst in their roles of wives, women’s work is characterised in the mode of supportive wives and hostesses. Once their husbands were the ones in the back seat, the men are viewed as ‘organisers’ and ‘strategists’, even if there is little difference in the actual work that they performed. This may be a useful consideration of historians in their reading of wives’ political work for their husbands.

Katharine’s characterisation of her life with the Duke of Atholl is perhaps more of a ‘Working Partnership’ (as is the title of her autobiography) than it is any kind of romantic marriage. The numerous affairs that her husband engaged in were no secret, and whilst not referred to in her autobiography there is a certain distance. A quote from the Duchess in Sheila Hetherington’s (1989) biography perhaps sheds some light on this incongruity:

‘‘My husband and I made a success of our marriage, largely because we tried to devote ourselves to causes in which we believed. We took immense interest in each other’s activities, but sometimes out paths diverted. One of us would be fighting in one cause while the other was battling in aid of another.’

Juliet Rhys-Williams and Rhys Rhys-Williams were another couple who functioned effectively as a political partnership. Rhys Rhys-Williams had served initially as an MP for Banbury in Oxfordshire, but really wanted to represent the Pontypridd seat where the family home was based. He unsuccessfully stood here in 1922 but lost by over 6,000 votes. When a by-election came up for Pontypridd in 1938, the couple decided that Juliet would try her luck. The press noted Juliet’s candidature for the 1938 Pontypridd by-election for the fact she accepted the invitation to stand only eight days after giving birth to her youngest daughter Elspeth. They reported her as being confident that fighting the election and possible parliamentary duties would not interfere with the bringing up of her daughter, saying: ‘I think I should be able to combine family life and parliament.’ The reporter requested Juliet respond to comments made by the Conservative MP Sir Paul Latham, who said that he was not going to stand for parliament when his term ended because his parliamentary duties ‘did not allow him to see as much of his four-year-old son as was proper for a father to see of his child.’ Juliet used this as a moment to spin this in favour of her strong local credentials for the seat and replied: ‘It is very different in my case, for my interests are in Pontypridd. When my husband was a member for Banbury we used to find things a strain, but you don’t feel that when you belong to the place you are to stand for.’ ( *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1938:8) Juliet lost the seat by over 7,000 votes to the Labour candidate. Although suffering another substantial loss, the Rhys-Williams’ family still do not give up on Pontrypridd. Their son Brandon contested the seat in 1959, this time losing by nearly 16,000 votes.[[6]](#endnote-6)

As well as being another example of the emotional ties to certain constituencies that inspired many adopters of the halo effect, it also demonstrates that usefulness of a political partner’s experience and skills. We see evidence of Rhys acting as Juliet’s secretary and assistant during her career, when she was away he would open and organise her post for her and only send on anything that *he* deems to be important. This horrified their daughter who wrote to warn Juliet: ‘He toils over your letters for hours but I simply can’t persuade him not to. I hope the ones he is keeping back are not anything you want, but he says they are of no interest and he has answered them, and filed them.’[[7]](#endnote-7) Rhys was thirty-three years Juliet’s senior and had served as Transport Minister for a number of years. Their age gap allowed for her political career to ascend and his was waning, and in him she had a deeply experienced and, most importantly, loyal and trustworthy political partner.

Particularly within the Conservative party, selection of a male candidate for a seat would involve his wife, as they would attend the selection meetings with their husband. Viscountess Davidson had played an important role from the early days of her husband’s Hemel Hempstead seat, feeling that at her husband’s selection for the seat, it was not just he who was being selected but also her:

‘We were met by the agent…he having talked to us, decided at once – I think I am right in saying – that we were the couple he would like to have work for the constituency and with him; we were young and active and keen, and my husband had very high recommendations from Bonar Law and other leading people in the Party.’ (Davidson and Rhodes James, 1969:89)

Joan Davidson refers to the Hemel Hempstead constituency repeatedly as ‘our seat’ in her writing even before she was elected as an MP. (Davidson and Rhodes James, 1969:101) There was the growing importance of the role of the MP in the local constituency in the model of social worker and civic figure, and these women were often instrumental in helping the formation and functioning of these constituency systems. During the 1922 election campaign Joan worked out of the local campaign headquarters extensively, sending instructions and orders to John Campbell Colin Davidson’s many other personal assistants and secretaries.[[8]](#endnote-8) Her main political astuteness came from her local knowledge – she was the best placed to know which issues had the most local salience and which of the constituents needed to be replied to with the greatest haste and care. Joan Davidson had effectively run the Hemel Hempstead constituency for nearly 20 years before becoming the MP herself in 1937. In doing so much constituency work she saw herself as ‘releasing her husband for his work in parliament and government’. (Elliot, 2004) When J.C.C Davidson left parliament it seemed natural for her to take over the seat. The local press reported that: ‘Lady Davidson brings to the House an intimate knowledge of politics behind the scenes over a long period. Her husband ‘J.C.C,’ was ‘keeper of the Premier’s secrets’ in two regimes and he found in his wife a colleague whom he could consult with benefit to himself and safety to the realm.’ (*Buckinghamshire Examiner*, 1937a:3) The by-election was deemed by the electorate to be a foregone conclusion and political apathy was high. At the declaration of the poll, Lady Davidson said she would try to represent the men as well as her husband had tried to represent the women.’ (*Buckinghamshire Examiner*, 1937b:7) This sense of interchangeability between the Davidson’s made them a formidable political force. At the victory dinner given six months after Viscountess Davidson’s victory the local constituency party proposed a toast saying: ‘Lady Davidson used to be Lord Davidson’s right-hand, and now Lord Davidson is her left hand, but the combination is just the same as before.’ (*Buckinghamshire Examiner*, 1937c: 8)

**Conclusion**

The unmarried Labour MP Jean Mann speaks in her autobiography of the difficulties that women faced in getting selected for winnable parliamentary seats post-suffrage. She recalls fighting seven ‘hopeless seats’ before being in the running for a safe seat, citing the problem that the ‘Labour men, particularly in the unions, meet together often. Friendships are made, sometimes around the bar; introduction to those who have influence in the safe seats follow…[the] difficulty is to get into the inner circle of influential members in a safe constituency.’ Jean Mann (1962: 44-45) herself was sympathetic to women who had entered parliament in seats left vacant by their husbands. She said that: ‘Knowing these MPs, and having worked with them, I cannot agree that they did not have a place in the House on their own right.’

This question of what qualified women to have the ‘right’ to stand is not one that has followed men so questioningly in their centuries of attaining political power by familial and social connections. For women, it seems that the picture was indelibly influenced by the fight to attain suffrage and the hopes, and subsequent disappointment of some activists (and more recently, some historians) of what the first female MPs should look and act like. In some ways, this tension might contribute to explain why the numbers of female MPs have been so slow to trickle in throughout the twentieth century – the bar for the calibre and pedigree of those who were considered to have the ‘right’ has been set so high. The presentation of women like Ellen Wilkinson forging the path alone with no assistance is a narrative formed partly out of modern conceptions of an idealized image of successful woman MP, rather than the reality of political circumstances in the early 20th century. Historians seeking to discover political agency for women before suffrage have often looked to the work of women within their families’ political activities.[[9]](#endnote-9) We should not discard this method of analysis as regressive from the instant women were able stand as MPs themselves. Simply the theoretical ability to be added to a ballot paper did not mean the obstacles for women had been removed.

As Jean Mann herself comments, these women had many attributes that qualified them to be credible and effective members of parliament. Their relationships with their husbands provided them with the circumstances that were necessary to forge a parliamentary career when many were still so resistant to lady members. They had experienced an excellent training in political organisation, platform speaking and canvassing, they had built up the trust and loyalty of local constituencies and they themselves had a supportive and politically experienced spouse to help them navigate their route. For these women, their identities as wives was used as a tool for electability. We shouldn’t see the presence of the halo effect as a marker of women’s failure to break effectively onto the political scene. Instead, it tells us much more about the nature of political cultures and the challenges that every candidate experienced in seeking a parliamentary seat.

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Peer Review Comments  
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Reviewer A:  
  
The review process in academic processing is usually an ordeal for any author so I hope that I can couch things in the nicest possible way.  The first thing is that you are to be congratulated on putting together a perfectly good paper that makes a useful contribution to scholarship.  It does, however, require a little tweaking to make it really work for the reader.  If I've managed to misunderstand something always remember that there are other readers who will come to the same misunderstandings, so even if you think I am wrong you might want to have a close look at something and see if there is a better way to get something across.  
  
Beyond these tweaks I have a number of other suggestions you might like to consider.  The tweaks are esential revisions to make the, but the suggestions relate to what you might like to do, in an ideal world (where time and word length offer no constraints), in the interest of maximising REF star ratings.   
  
Tweaks:  
  
1. Paragraphing.  In some places you indent - in others we also have a line space.  One or the other I would suggest (depending on house style).  
  
2. Wording - in a couple of places I wasn't sure what you meant and you need to have a look, reword/clarify.  
  
3. Early part of the essay - you are feeling your way a little and are rather tentative.  The list of women MP's needs to come earlier in the piece to clarify and give detail to the phenomenon that you are discussing.  You might also like to give a little more detail (if space allows - and perhaps in footnote form) of majorities, swing, nature of contest (eg. other parties standing in election). Details matter to us anoraks who do political history/psephology.  
  
4. Second part of the essay when you discuss specifics you really get into gear and make a lot of interesting points, but the first part really needs to work better to situate the reader before you get to the qualitative discussion.  
  
Suggestions - The What Else you might want to think about:  
  
1. The halo effect is talked about in terms of individuals getting elected, but before they got to that stage they had to secure the nomination of a local party. So to what extent did the halo effect extend to getting selected and were there differences between the parties?  Some constituencies may have been private fiefdoms where manipulation was easier than in others, and for tactical reasons securing women candidates at the local level was very much encouraged by the national party.  If one of the party big beasts like Runciman could vouch for a women candidate (because they were his wife) it just short-cutted the process.  
  
2. Your local press stuff is really useful but (time and word length allowing) more would be better.  Are there comments at constituency level about electors reacting badly against halo candidates.  
  
3. Modern political history makes great play of the use of constituency minute books.  I don't know if any are available for any of the contests that you describe but if they were accessible it would add to the source base for the piece (and they might show reaction for or against the halo effect).  If they are not then it might be worth while saying it to sandbag yourself from any comment about not using minute books.  
  
4. As with 3. above you've got some useful material from MP's papers, but is there more out there that might be used (eg. Astor papers).    
  
5. Lastly, party archive material might also be drawn in (including papers by the likes of Lloyd George).  Detailed catalogues for the likes of the Lloyd George papers might be worth a quick scan to see if there is anything relevant, and the Parliamentary Archives are good, quick and cheap at distance photocopying if you do spot something of relevance.  
  
As I said towards the start, the above 5 suggestions are (if time and space allows.  1, 2 and 5 would be quick to do using things like parliamantary archives on online and the British newspaper archive.  
  
Good luck with it and well done.  
  
  
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Reviewer B:  
  
I enjoyed reading this article and it does help to shed light onto the little explored area of political wives who become MPs. The author is right to note that the focus on the first female MPs has tended to be upon those whose candidature was not primarily upon a familial or marital connection. The author goes some way to uncovering the extensive networks, political activism and key local roles many of ‘halo effect’ MPs held prior to their election. They successfully make the case that historians need to pay more careful attention to the roles of these women in their own right, rather than seeing them as a mere appendage to their husband’s political careers. The author draws upon an extensive range of primary materials and the use of life writings is particularly welcome. The efforts to explore where women stood as MPs unsuccessfully is important in helping to demonstrate the breadth of political activity of women in the era after suffrage. The cross-party approach was to be welcomed, although greater sensitivity to party culture at times was needed as I outline below. I think the article is a potentially valuable addition to the literature on political women in the first half of the twentieth century, but it does require some work to help draw out the position of the halo effect MPs in the context of gendered party politics to add nuance to the conclusions drawn on the achievements of the first female MPs.  
  
   
  
While the author is right to note that the careers of many of the halo effect MPs have been dismissed or ignored, how they frame this critique is problematic. We are told ‘This article argues that a moral distinction between self-made and inherited female MPs made explicitly or implicitly in the historiography is unhelpful’, but it is not clear who has made this moral distinction. They also, perhaps, unfairly focus upon Laura Beers’ biography of Ellen Wilkinson as typifying the wilful dismissal of halo effect MPs in championing Wilkinson’s self-made rise to MP. Beers’ point is to demonstrate how Wilkinson overcame both gendered and class obstacles and inequalities to become an MP. She did not have the advantage of the connections of her well-born peers or the undoubted advantage given in a marriage to a leading political figure. This was true not only of Wilkinson but other key figures such as Margaret Bondfield, although little is said of them in contrast to Wilkinson. This leads to one of my main criticisms of the piece, which is the failure to fully consider social class. In many places, there is little effort made to consider the background of individual women although this is crucial to the political careers that they had. There is a world of difference between a lower middle-class or working-class woman who has been a party stalwart prior to marriage, and an upper-class woman whose political work has largely been the result of a marriage to a political candidate or through their own family connections. The author needs to pay careful attention to the privilege of different women and how careers developed as a consequence. While they are right to stress that framing all halo effect MPs as ‘accidental’ MPs is misleading, more work needs to be done to break down the sometimes monolithic characterisation of all women. Greater sensitivity to place, political party and social class is needed. In the introduction, the central purpose of the article might have been laid out more clearly in this respect; this comes on pages 7-8 but I felt could have appeared closer to the start. To this end, setting out the rationale of considering together seats held by particular families, those women MPs who were keeping seats warm, and the politically active wives who took over seats from their husbands was needed.  
  
   
  
   
  
There is also little in the way of grounding in the wider gendered political culture of the period under concern. The position of women within different political parties requires much more rigorous treatment. For example, while we are told the wives of Conservative MPs were offered training, there is little else on the work of all parties in organising women. What was the position of women more generally in their parties and especially in terms of selection to stand for parliament? This context is vital to considering the position of female candidates and their own political journeys through the party. One wonders what female members of all the main parties made of the undoubted ‘leg up’ that the wives of MPs were given. Whatever their own merits and standing, it is difficult to escape from the fact that there must have been equally experienced and dedicated women who did not make it to the starting line because they lacked such connections. This is not simply down to the ‘modern conceptions of an idealized image of successful woman’ MPs from historians and activists, and it needs to be historicised. Did women party members feel aggrieved at the progress of such women or were they simply pleased to see women progressing publicly? While such personal reflections might be difficult to uncover, some consideration of this from the author is needed along with a fuller consideration of women’s place within the party. Engaging with more recent works on women’s position in the Labour Party will help to develop this aspect of the article.  
  
   
  
The section on how the identity of wife was utilised by women MPs was, perhaps, less successful and again I felt that further reflection of party culture and gendered political culture in the interwar period was needed. How were women ‘able to use their identity as a wife as a political advantage’? Was it promoting their identity of wife or was it a connection to their husband’s political work? I think drawing out this distinction will be important in demonstrating women’s representation in public political discourse as wives and mothers in the period under concern and how the first female MPs negotiated this.  
  
   
  
Finally, I think a fuller conclusion is needed to help draw out the significance of the article and its contribution to the literate. The author might wish to reflect upon whether the desire to show the political successes of these women in their own right has perhaps led to a failure to fully critique the negative consequences of the rise of political women in this way.

1. A handful of more recent examples do exist, including a candidacy at the 2019 general election where Natasha Elphicke stood for the seat of Dover in place of her husband. Charlie Elphicke was unable to stand as he had been suspended from the Conservative party on charges of sexual assault. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For historiography on parliamentary familial ties after reform see *inter alia* Jalland (1988), Reynolds (1998), Cannandine (1990), Spychal (2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for one example a blog where Markievicz is lauded for: ‘Unlike the next three female MPs (Nancy Astor, Margaret Wintringham and Mabel Philipson) she had no advantage of a husband who was previously MP in her seat.’ (Takayanagi, 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Half Circle Club: Prospectus and notice of first gatherings, 6January 1921, LSE Archives , PASSFIELD 4/16 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kitty Wintringham North Midlothian Campaign Leaflet, 1945, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, WINTRINGHAM Tom 3/2/5 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A message from Lady Rhys-Williams, 1959, LSE Archives, RHYSWILLIAMS/J/21/10/1 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Susan Davson to Juliet Rhys-Williams, 13 August 1949, LSE Archives, RHYSWILLIAMS/J/21/9/1 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For example Joan Davidson to Col.Storr, 28 November 1923, Parliamentary Archives London, DAV 164 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See for example Gleadle (2009:ch3) Lynch (1994) Chalus(2005) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)