

## In Pursuit of Women's Representation: A Pragmatic Approach to Improving Women's Representation in Canadian Politics

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**Abstract:** This essay addresses the democratic deficit in women's representation in Canadian politics that hinders the access of *all* citizens in Canada to free, equal, and meaningful opportunities to engage in all levels of political affairs. In doing so, a number of socio-cultural and structural barriers to women's participation in federal politics are identified. In turn, strategies to overcome these barriers are presented while making effort to tackle the conditions underlying women's misrepresentation, as opposed to promoting explicitly compulsory solutions such as affirmative action legislation. The purpose of my research is to guide Canadian policy structures and social standards toward a new paradigm in Canadian politics where women are liberated from having to face the tension between the implications of their status as the 'other' and their desire to meaningfully contribute to the political affairs of the Canadian state.

Almost one hundred years after attaining political rights equal to men, Canadian women continue to be chronically under-represented in federal parliament and in the upper-echelon of federal political parties. Although women's participation at the federal level has made measurable gains since acquiring suffrage in 1918, women's statistical representation has stagnated in the last few decades and has been unable to attain a ratio that one might consider genuinely equal. Even more troubling, the number of female candidates in federal elections has *decreased* from a peak of 476 candidates in 1993 to 452 in 2011,<sup>1</sup> indicating a trend that is counterintuitive to Canada's image as an equal and progressive modern democracy. Until women achieve equitable and stable levels of participation in federal electoral

institutions, a unique perspective of the Canadian experience will perpetually be misrepresented, potentially affecting the ability of parliament to pass legislation required for Canada to flourish.

This review of Canadian representational politics will analyze gender in federal institutions and chart a course for developing greater participation for women in federal electoral politics. The female perspective needs to be brought into party and electoral politics to provide a greater degree of democratic legitimacy, especially when federal parliamentary institutions address women's issues such as child care and domestic violence. Rather than creating another form of democratic deficit (as may be constructed with a simple quota system), this might be accomplished through policies that facilitate the deconstruction of women as the tokened 'other,' and by overcoming systemic structural and socio-cultural barriers women face that men may not. This writing will address how the participation

<sup>1</sup> "Women Candidates: Canadian Federal Elections, 1921-2011," Simon Fraser University, accessed November 20, 2011, [www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/women-elected.html](http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/women-elected.html).

of women in federal party politics could be improved by endeavoring to understand what constitutes the full participation of women in federal electoral politics, by exploring the systemic barriers to women's representation in upper-level positions such as in the federal parliament, and by presenting realistic approaches for countering the barriers outlined through key legislative action.

For the clarity of this analysis, key terms should first be defined. Rhetoric of the 'other' will follow Edward Said's interpretation of the cultural construction made by a dominant group in society to define itself as 'normal.' The dominant group begins to exist only when juxtaposed by a defined 'other,' whereby dominant groups construct an idealized version of normal through deeply entrenched narratives of the 'other.'<sup>2</sup> This essay will utilize the 'other' to denote the stereotypes which situate women as alien or 'outsiders' of politics, and as unable to participate to the full extent that members of the dominant, 'normal,' group can. Thus, women as the 'other' will embody a sense of inherent inferiority and incapability projected by a group culture dominated by men. Finally, 'gatekeepers' will refer to individuals in executive positions in federal parties who have serious clout in deciding who is desirable for nomination to leadership or promotion to high ranking position within the party.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Meghan Nayak and Christopher Malone, "American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 11 (2009): 256.

<sup>3</sup> Sonia Pitre, "Women's Struggle for Legislative Power: The Role of Political Parties," *Atlantis* 27 (2003): 7.

One route to increasing women's representation in federal party politics might involve increasing the numerical presence of women in upper level positions. Electing a greater number of women to parliament would lead to symbolic political equality,<sup>4</sup> and such representation may have real influence in terms of bringing women away from the status of the 'other.' At present, the Canadian Parliament consists of 24.6 per cent women, ranking Canada 40<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of women's representation.<sup>5</sup> Where women are numerically few, they may be tokenized and defined by the dominant work culture of the majority.<sup>6</sup> To retain a presence in a male dominated arena, women must adjust and restrict their own participation to meet the pressures of the dominant culture. For example, women may be pressured to over-perform in order to prove their worth and debunk the perception that they are 'outsiders.' Women may accept token roles involving "donkeywork"<sup>7</sup> in 'feminine' departments (such as education) or in the lower echelon of the

<sup>4</sup> Manon Tremblay and Réjean Pelletier, "More Feminists or More Women? Descriptive and Substantive Representation of Women in the 1997 Canadian Federal Elections," *Political Science Review* 21 (2000): 397, accessed November 15, 2011, doi: 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2009.01279.x.

<sup>5</sup> "The Facts, Ma'am."

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Childs and Mona L. Krook, "Critical Mass Theory and Women's Political Representation," *Political Studies* 56 (2008): 725-736, accessed November 15, 2011, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00712.x727.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia B. Bashevkin, *Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), 67.

party simply to maintain their presence. With greater nominal representation, women may comfortably begin to define themselves as political actors rather than being defined by the group. Self-defined, women may pursue differentiation vis-à-vis other women who subscribe to token status' in a new environment where the idea of women in parliament is not so exotic.<sup>8</sup> With balanced numerical representation, "stereotyping decreases, because so many types of women now occupy the political arena."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, legislatures with higher proportions of women, or those that have attained the elusively defined "critical mass,"<sup>10</sup> introduce and pass more bills on women's issues than in low-representation legislatures.<sup>11</sup>

Even with numerical representation, however, the specific ideologies of the women involved can make a difference in the extent to which policies supporting women will be passed. Although one might assume that women are more likely to promote solutions for women's issues than men of the same political party,<sup>12</sup> the same cannot necessarily be said of men across certain party lines. In fact, liberal men can be said to be more feminist than conservative women.<sup>13</sup> In a mail survey of male and female candidates after the 1997 federal election, Tremblay and Pelletier assessed the candidates'

support for women's rights and their willingness to take measures to improve them across gendered and partisan lines. The findings consistently revealed that women from the Reform Party, a reputedly right-of-center protest party, were less inclined to support both women's rights and government measures to improve them than men of every other party.<sup>14</sup> These results suggest that the degree of feminist consciousness in the candidates themselves is integral to achieving progressive legislation that could increase the unimpeded participation of women in federal politics.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the presence of women who actually support women's issues is the crux of passing progressive legislation.<sup>16</sup> To Childs and Krook, "the performance of a few outstanding women as role models"<sup>17</sup> may be *more* substantial than mere nominal representation, however even feminist men cannot counter the illegitimacy "of a political system overtly monopolized by one gender over the other."<sup>18</sup>

One barrier to the participation of women in federal politics exists in the structure of the Canadian electoral and party systems. Barbara Reskin proposes a heuristic model for the wage gap that can be applied to understand why gatekeepers may exclude women. To Reskin, "dominant groups remain privileged because they write the

<sup>8</sup> Childs and Krook, "Critical Mass Theory and Women's Political Representation," 728.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 731.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 725.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 732.

<sup>12</sup> Tremblay and Pelletier, "More Feminists or More Women," 383.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>15</sup> Sonia Pitre, "Women's Struggle for Legislative Power," 7.

<sup>16</sup> Childs and Crook, "Critical Mass Theory and Women's Political Representation," 728.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 732.

<sup>18</sup> Tremblay and Pelletier, "More Feminists or More Women," 398.

rules,<sup>19</sup> and they are written in such a way that perpetuates the ability of the dominant group to continue to write the rules. The political process becomes unfavourable to women not for explicit sexist reasons, “but rather because of the rules of the game”<sup>20</sup> that put a premium on masculinity. Rather than the members being explicitly sexist or discriminatory, an ideological estimate of worth has been ingrained in the popular definition of what constitutes a good politician. Sexual divisions of labour and gendered sexual identity are both socialized in individuals through norms and practices that ultimately present a societal context to women that does not encourage them to attain upper-level political careers.<sup>21</sup> These rules have the effect of reducing the quantity of women pursuing candidacy, because an ideal candidate’s political capital is more accessible through men’s gender roles than women’s. Therefore, attempts at increasing the participation of women in politics must also address the institutional and social obstacles to women’s success in politics embedded in the electoral system and party systems.

Other barriers to the full representation of women are derived of a group culture that restricts the willingness of men in gatekeeping positions to include women. As the numerically dominant group in federal parties and legislature, men implicitly perpetuate a group culture that defines

<sup>19</sup> Barbara F. Reskin, “Bringing the Men Back in: Sex Differentiation and the Devaluation of Women’s Work,” *Gender and Society* 2 (1988): 199.

<sup>20</sup> Sonia Pitre, “Women’s Struggle for Legislative Power,” 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

an ideal political candidate in the image of the dominant group.<sup>22</sup> Another aspect of stereotyping women in parliament goes beyond what women *are* and involves stereotyping what they *are not*. The ideal political actor is constructed as “financially well-off, middle aged – rarely young – most often white and almost exclusively male.”<sup>23</sup> Gatekeepers encourage actors with these attributes to come forward by rallying behind certain candidates, by helping them network, or by lending experienced advice to them during the electoral campaign.<sup>24</sup> In addition, if the representation does not surpass a critical mass, women may be systemically placed as “token candidates”<sup>25</sup> in ridings against powerful male incumbents – as so-called “sacrificial lamb”<sup>26</sup> candidates. That is to say, the candidate is intentionally ‘sacrificed’ by the party by placing her in a riding she is not expected to win, ostensibly supporting women by increasing the number of candidates without an authentic expectation of their election.

On the socio-cultural front, media representations may contribute to the othering of women as exemplified by an analysis of gendered leadership norms presented in media coverage by the *Globe and Mail* in the 1993 Canadian federal election. From this review, Trimble, Treiberg and Girard find that the information selected by the media to

<sup>22</sup> Childs and Crook, “Critical Mass Theory and Women’s Political Representation,” 727.

<sup>23</sup> Sonia Pitre, “Women’s Struggle for Legislative Power,” 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Sonia Pitre, “Women’s Struggle for Legislative Power,” 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

describe the electoral race between Kim Campbell and Jean Chretien was set in terms of a “pugilistic framework”<sup>27</sup> that presented “aggressive language and macho imagery as the ideal.”<sup>28</sup> The media imposed huge political incentives for Campbell to conform to the established standards of leadership to ensure the press construct her as an authentically viable candidate.<sup>29</sup> Having to refute her status as the ‘other’ by competing on a playing field her opponent dominates naturally by virtue of being a man, Campbell was at a systemic disadvantage. One can interpolate that similar dynamics operate at the party level, as women are forced to prove themselves worthy to gatekeepers mindful of the media’s preconceived ideal political executive.

As acknowledged above, political capital such as financial resources, networking, and prestigious education are less accessible to women because of social and structural barriers still prevalent in Canadian society.<sup>30</sup> One imaginative solution to tackle such obstacles has arisen in response to Prime Minister Harper’s promise to remove per-vote party subsidies for federal parties. In December of 2011, New Democratic Party Member of Parliament Paul Dewar proposed transforming the subsidy into “an

<sup>27</sup> Linda Trimble, Ntasia Treiberg and Sue Girard, “Kim-Speak: Gendered Mediation of Kim Campbell During the 1993 Canadian National Election,” *Recherches Feministes*, 23 (2010): 31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

Original French: “Un langage agressif et une imagerie machiste à souhait.”

<sup>29</sup> Trimble, Teilberg and Girard, “Kim-Speak,” 32.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

incentive to improve the participation of women in politics”<sup>31</sup> by allocating the subsidy only to parties that achieve a minimum of 30% female candidates. Dewar’s proposal would allocate per-vote subsidies to parties that met escalating participation benchmarks, so if a party ran 30-39 per cent female candidates it would receive \$1.50 per vote, if it ran 40-49.9 per cent it would receive \$1.75 per vote, and “only when it reached at least 50 per cent women”<sup>32</sup> would the party receive the standard \$2 per vote. Knowing that those parties that do pursue gender parity in federal politics have come to rely heavily on the per-vote subsidy Harper intends to remove - for example, the Green Party received \$600,000 of its \$1.3 million campaign fund in 2011 from the subsidy<sup>33</sup> - there may be substantial value in Dewar’s proposal. If undertaken, this subsidy would be a great incentive for both the protection of women currently in parliament and in time, the institutionalization of a critical voice for women across the political spectrum.

Through parliament, the Canadian government should consider

<sup>31</sup> The Canadian Press, “Dewar Eyes Subsidies for Parties that Run More Women Candidates,” *CTV News*, December 8, 2011, accessed February 14, <http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/QPeriod/20111208/dewar-ndp-women-candidates-111208/>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> CBC News, Chrétien urges Harper not to kill party subsidy, *CBC News*, May 9, 2011, accessed February 14, 2012, [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/05/09/pol-chretien-party-subsidies.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2011/05/09/pol-chretien-party-subsidies.html).

incorporating a “*compensatory type*”<sup>34</sup> of proportional representation through substituting Canada’s current single member plurality (noted as SMP) electoral system with a mixed-member proportional (noted as MMP) system. Under a MMP system, two ballots would be cast in a single vote in each district: one would be for a preferred candidate, another for a preferred party where candidates are chosen from a party list.<sup>35</sup> This would benefit the Canadian population as voting would not be drawn out with multiple elections, representatives would retain a trustee relationship to the local concerns of their constituents,<sup>36</sup> and the SMP style could be retained for the majority of seats. Because the second ballot would go to one’s preferred party, parties could ensure that under-represented groups would benefit from the reform. For example, the Maori indigenous people of New Zealand benefitted substantially from its unicameral parliament adopting an MMP system in 1996. Consisting of 15% of New Zealand’s total population, under the SMP system the Maori represented only 7.1% seats in parliament in 1993. With a reformed electoral system, this number rose to

13.5% in 1996 and to 16.5% by 2005.<sup>37</sup> Based on this evidence, the opportunity the increased representation of women in Canada via electoral reform is an available and realistic solution.

As Canadians from across the federation marked their preferred party in the second ballot, a nationwide percentage of votes cast would be translated into seats won based on party lists presented to Canadian voters prior to the election.<sup>38</sup> Because support for women is a salient policy for drawing votes from a large segment of Canada’s population,<sup>39</sup> political parties would have great incentives to institute voluntary quotas (even only temporarily) in their party lists. With a closed list system, candidates could be ranked in order to ensure gender representation by supporting parity in the party list itself.<sup>40</sup> This would orchestrate greater nominal representation for women in parliament and facilitate a greater role for women in federal political parties,<sup>41</sup> while simultaneously providing incentives for federal parties to continually train women for higher levels of participation. With the entrenchment of women in electoral politics through reform, counter-cultures may emerge in parties to debunk the ‘othering’ of female politicians by normalizing the presence

<sup>34</sup> Matthew S. Shugart and Martin P. Wattenberg, “Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: A Definition and Typology.” In *Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?*, edited by Matthew S. Shugart et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> R. Kent Weaver, “Electoral Rules and Electoral Reform in Canada,” in *Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?*, ed. by Matthew S. Shugart et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 552.

<sup>37</sup> Alexandra Xanthaki and Dominic O’Sullivan, “Indigenous Participation in Elective Bodies: The Maori in New Zealand,” *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 16 (2009): 200.

<sup>38</sup> Shugart and Wattenberg, “Mixed-Member Electoral Systems,” 10.

<sup>39</sup> Sonia Pitre, “Women’s Struggle for Legislative Power,” 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> Shugart and Wattenberg, “Mixed-Member Electoral Systems,” 13.

<sup>41</sup> Weaver, “Electoral Rules,” 551.

of political women in the upper echelon of federal parties.

The 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women's 118<sup>th</sup> Recommendation states that nationally assisted child care could be a beneficial policy for improving the status of women's representation in Canadian politics.<sup>42</sup> Forty years later, this has still not been initiated nationwide, and women continue to be underrepresented in the highest earning occupations in Canada.<sup>43</sup> Reducing barriers to women in federal parties through a national child care program would institute a more complex definition of equality that recognizes the reality that privilege and access are not evenly distributed between women and men. This socio-cultural solution would allow women to be able to support a family without interfering with their ability to pursue a career. Reform in this sense would not just empower women's participation in politics, but would benefit *all* women in Canada who value giving birth as a part of their fulfillment. With more women being represented in other male dominated occupations, such as "lawyers and business people,"<sup>44</sup> the prestige of these occupations would be better shared by both sexes and foster growth in societal support for women in politics. Under present conditions, elected women as a group tend to be "either childless or with children older than those of their male counterparts."<sup>45</sup> Having the support of a national child care program would allow women to

participate meaningfully in the labour force and develop professionally for years longer than in present conditions, placing them on more even footing with their male counterparts. If fewer women had to choose between a family and participation in the political sphere, more women could develop sources of political capital such as experience, networking and finances earlier in their lives and achieve longer and more fulfilling political careers.

To conclude, the improved participation of women in federal party politics should be pursued by understanding the nuances of numerical and substantial representation, by deepening the public's consciousness of barriers to women's representation, and by initiating and supporting legislation to overcome these barriers. Under present circumstances, potential reserves of intelligent and dedicated patriots are side-lined by the demands of family and entrenched patriarchal structures. Until the political resources women offer to Canada are properly acknowledged and developed to their full potential, not only will women's issues in Canada continue to be neglected, but the unhindered perspective of a majority of Canadians will be absent from Canada's democratic institutions. This democratic deficit has endured centuries already – how much longer will Canada's legislators neglect necessary adjustments to our system, and continue to shame the Canadian standard of good, democratic, governance?

<sup>42</sup> Royal Commission on the Status of Women Canada, *Report* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), 411.

<sup>43</sup> Reskin, "Bringing the Men Back in," 204.

<sup>44</sup> Tremblay, *Quebec Women*, 98.

<sup>45</sup> Bashevkin, *Toeing the Line*, 86.

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