
Women in Politics: Still Searching for an Equal Voice

by Ann Wicks and Raylene Lang-Dion

In the United States Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign is cause for hope and reflection on the status of women's leadership in world politics. The prospect of a woman occupying the oval office represents an exciting turning point in history that is in need of further attention, particularly as it affects current Canadian political discourse. This article looks at recent developments in some other countries and considers the prospects for more women in Canada's Parliament following the next election.

Women have rarely held positions of political leadership. In 2006, only 11 or 5.7 percent of the world's 191 nations were lead by women.¹ Similar patterns of inequity can be observed in the world's national parliaments. Only three nations come close to boasting gender balance; Rwanda ranks first in the world with 48.8 percent female legislators, Sweden has 47.3 percent women parliamentarians, and Finland ranks third with 42 percent women elected.

While Hillary Clinton's campaign is exciting for many women, it also serves as a reminder of the challenges women encounter when seeking elected office. Despite the small gains women may have made in politics over the past two decades, political leadership remains defined on masculine terms. Political Scientists Linda Trimble and Jane Arscott note there is a "persistent observation that women leaders just do not fit," and women politicians are repeatedly evaluated by their "looks, clothing, relationships, and the tone of their voices – anything but their political skills and acumen."²

Hillary Clinton is no exception. Recently, a Fox news commentator proclaimed Hillary Clinton was losing the male vote because of her nagging tone of voice stating, "When Barack Obama speaks, men hear, 'Take off for the future'. And when Hillary Clinton speaks, men hear,

'Take out the garbage'." In Canada, a *Globe and Mail* article criticized Clinton's "dumpy pantsuit" advising the presidential candidate that she her "bee-hind looks like a tree-ruck in those boxy, double-breasted nightmare pantsuits."³

Female politicians in Canada are not exempt from similar treatment. While at a conference, a female cabinet minister from Ontario was introduced by a male cabinet colleague with the statement, "She's got better legs, what can I say?"⁴ The *Ottawa Citizen* recently reported that a female Member of Parliament "looked stunning in a black gown with a plunging neckline,"⁵ while failing to mention the attire or appearance of other politicians in attendance.

Media reports occasionally discuss the appearances of male politicians, yet the greater frequency of this type of coverage on female politicians has been well documented. Joanna Everitt, who studies media and gender in Canada, notes male leaders have "fewer sex-typed images applied to them."⁶ Given politics is still a male dominated field; it is not surprising that newsrooms covering politics are generally, male dominated as well. Everitt says political reporting generally, "employs a masculine narrative that reinforces conceptions of politics as a male preserve and treats male as normative...reinforcing the image that politics is something that men do."

The sentiment that politics is something "men do" still exists. A study conducted by Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox, uncovered a significant gender gap in how women perceive themselves as potential candidates for office. Even when men and women possessed similar

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Table 1 - The Canada Challenge: Tracking Federal Nominations

Party	Candidates Nominated 2008	Men Nominated 2008	Women Nominated 2008	Women Nominated 2006 Election	Women MPs Elected 2006
NDP	163/308 (52.9%)	101 (61.9%)	62 (38%)	35%	41%
Liberal	203/308* (65.9%)	129 (63.5%)	74 (36.4%)	25.6%	21%
Bloc Québécois	40/75 (53.3%)	30 (75%)	10 (25%)	30.6%	33%
Conservative	238/308 (77.2%)	199 (83.6%)	39 (16.3%)	12.3%	11%

*Data collected by Equal Voice Researchers, updated January 25, 2008

qualifications, women were more than twice as likely as men to believe they were not qualified to run for office.⁷ Christy Clark, British Columbia's former Deputy Premier observed this gender gap first hand. Ms. Clark who was responsible for candidate recruitment said, "Ask a woman to run for office and she'll say, 'Why are you asking me?' Ask a man, and he'll say, 'I can't believe it took you so long to ask.'"⁸

Lawless and Fox suggest political actors are less likely to see women as political leaders.⁹ Women occupying the same professional spheres as men were only half as likely as men to receive encouragement to run for office from political parties. The gender gap was also evident in the different levels of information men and women possessed on how to launch a campaign and raise money.

Kim Campbell, Canada's first and only female Prime Minister, suggests perceptions of leadership can change when women occupy high profile leadership positions, "In other words, if women are never in certain roles, then we think it's almost unnatural for them to be in those roles. That's why in most cultures leadership is gendered masculine. And the only way to change that is when people, particularly enlightened male leaders, use their positions to put women in these portfolios and give them these opportunities..."¹⁰

Societal definitions of leadership are only one piece of the gender gap puzzle. Studies have shown other factors influence women's political opportunities including: electoral systems, parliamentary systems, political culture, political party nomination processes, societal divisions of domestic labour, and the influence of women's movements.¹¹

What can be done? What are other countries doing to elect more women? Why are 47.3 percent of national legislators in Sweden female and compared with only 21.7 percent in Canada? How did the numbers of women elected to Iceland's national parliament increase from 25 percent to 35 percent in one election?

Sweden: A World Leader in Electing Women

Sweden has enjoyed gender balanced parliaments for over a decade. Gains in women's representation began in the 1970's and by 1985, women made up 31 percent of the Swedish Riksdag¹². Political opportunities for women in Sweden are shaped by its electoral system, a conciliatory political culture, the activity of women within political parties, and societal divisions of domestic labour.

Sweden uses a list system of proportional representation (PR) to elect members of the Riksdag. Political parties nominate 9 candidates per district and seats are allocated based on the party's proportion of the vote.¹³ With a list PR system, positioning on the party list is important. Political will and commitments from the party leaders are still needed to ensure women candidates are placed in "winnable" positions on party lists.

Political scientist Lisa Young concludes this structure provides more opportunities for women candidates because it "affects the behaviour of the political parties in terms of who they choose to represent them in the electoral process."¹⁴ With 9 seats open for every district, candidate turnover, and a centralized party nomination process, political parties in Sweden literally have more opportunities to nominate female candidates. The First Past the Post System used in Canada and the United States however, elects one representative per district. In the United States, where 90 percent of incumbents get re-elected, there are fewer chances to modernize the demographic composition of Congress. This is one of many reasons cited for the lack of gender and racial diversity in Congress. Financial barriers for candidates in the United States are also much higher than most democracies. With only 16 percent of women elected to Congress and the Senate, the United States is near the bottom of the pack, ranking 65th in the world on women's representation.

Typically, countries using some form of a list system of proportional representation elect the most female representatives. Olivia Chow, NDP Member of Parliament for

Trinity-Spadina recently noted, "Remember that in the democratic world, there are three or four countries that do it the way we do. The rest of them have had proportional representation for years...And on top of it they have economic vibrancy, more women elected and greater representation of different voices."¹⁵

Sweden's political culture and family friendly working conditions may be another factor facilitating the recruitment and retention of female politicians. Sweden is often referred to as a "consensual democracy," with a parliamentary system structured to support the resolution of conflict. This is reflected in its seating plan, where members of the Riksdag, sit in a semi-circle facing the speaker's chair. Whereas the Westminster model of parliament pits the governing party against the opposition, two and half sword lengths apart, members of the Riksdag have a regional seating plan. Members from the same region are seated together, regardless of political party affiliation. This may be one reason for the Riksdag's conciliatory political culture where debates are both passionate and respectful. Ingrid Ireemark Sweden's Ambassador to Canada, notes "There is no heckling in the Riksdag."

The Riksdag's parliamentary schedule is also structured to provide balance between work, family and political activity. The parliamentary calendar is prepared one year in advance with sittings scheduled Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, commencing in October and ending in June. Norway's national parliament adopted a similar schedule in the early 1990's. Kirsti Kolle Grondahl, who served as Norway's first female president of parliament, was instrumental in bringing about family friendly changes to the parliamentary calendar and the addition of on-site child care facilities. With 37.9 percent women elected, Norway ranks 6th in the world on women's political representation.

Women in Ontario's provincial legislature are looking for similar changes. "The truth, regardless of political party – is the legislature does not recognize a basic reality: women bear children," said Progressive Conservative MPP Lisa MacLeod, "Women are often primary care-givers and if we want more women in the legislature we need to respect and address our unique challenges...We have the opportunity to address some very real and systemic barriers facing parents at Queen's Park through changes to sitting hours and providing daycare options for a more family friendly Queen's Park."¹⁶

Sweden: Women's Participation in Political Parties

In the 1970's, Sweden's political parties voluntarily began facilitating women's participation in party politics. Women's movements within party structures success-

fully advocated for the aggressive recruitment and training of female candidates. In 1979, women from all political parties joined forces and worked together to pressure political parties to nominate more women candidates.

Multi-party cooperation continued into the 1980's, when a high profile report was released recommending political parties nominate 50 percent female candidates. The report served to increase awareness on the under-representation of women in politics and rallied public support for change. Political parties responded and generally "adhere to the 60/40 principle: neither sex is to have more than 60 percent nor less than 40 percent of representation within party ranks." The target is not mandatory, legislated or even formally imposed on political parties. Rather, political parties have voluntarily taken action because the public expects it; running women candidates is now seen as a necessary ingredient for electoral success.

Swedish, political scientist Drude Dahlerup says "In Sweden, it would be unthinkable to form a government or appoint government committees with fewer than 40 percent women. It is no longer democratically legitimate to have political assemblies with an overwhelming male majority."¹⁷

Ingrid Ireemark, Sweden's Ambassador to Canada notes, "In Sweden, the presence of women in politics is very normal. Political parties would have a tough time getting elected if they did not run equal numbers of female and male candidates."

Iceland: Multi-party Awareness Campaign

Iceland's parliament, the Althingi, launched a unique multi-partisan awareness campaign in 1997. Members of the Althingi, worked together across party lines to pass a motion instructing the government to form a parliamentary committee responsible for increasing the representation of women. The committee included male and female representatives from each political party, the Ministry responsible for Gender Equality and women's organizations. The product of the committee was a well funded, five year awareness campaign which included: a humorous, attention-getting advertising program, training courses, education, communications networks, public meetings, and mentoring programs. The campaign successfully rallied public support and increased public awareness about the need for gender balanced government. Women's political representation increased from 25 percent to 35 percent after the campaign had been in operation for one year.

Equal Voice: Delivering Results in Canada

The under-representation of women in Canadian politics has been documented time and time again. There have been two Royal Commissions devoted to the topic (the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women and the 1992 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing) and enough publications to fill the lobby on Parliament Hill.

Equality in decision-making is essential to the empowerment of women. Canada agreed when we signed on to the United Nations 1995 Beijing Action Plan for Women, committing to “take measures to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures, decision-making and leadership.” The United Nations notes a critical mass of at least 30 to 35 percent women is needed before legislatures produce public policy reflecting women’s priorities and before changes in “management style, group dynamic and organization culture” take place.¹⁸

Equal Voice is taking action. On International Women Day, March 8, 2007, Equal Voice launched the multi-partisan Canada Challenge, asking the four party leaders – Stephen Harper, Stéphane Dion, Jack Layton, and Gilles Duceppe – to nominate more women candidates in the next federal election. On April 17, 2007 the political parties accepted the *Canada Challenge* by making statements in the House of Commons. This is the first federal multi-partisan commitment to electing more women in Canadian history. It follows on the success of Equal Voice’s *Ontario Challenge* campaign, where in 2007, the number of women elected to Queen’s Park reached a historic milestone of 27 percent.

Equal Voice is pleased to report that the *Canada Challenge* is yielding results. Newly released data tracking federal party nominations shows the numbers of women nominated reaching historic levels (see Table 1). Since 2004, Equal Voice has monitored federal election results, via Equal Voice Researcher Vicky Smallman, providing data for Canadians, political parties and the press.

Equal Voice data shows that when women run, they win. Political parties need to be pro-active recruiting and training women candidates. To level the playing field, parliaments around the world are implementing well funded national action plans, providing family friendly working environments, launching electoral and financial campaign reforms, constitutional reforms, education, and mentoring.

All political parties need to make the decision on how to increase women’s representation and all parties have to identify processes that work for them.

It is all of us – men and women – who must take responsibility for achieving this goal. The efforts of those who came before us can not be in vain. Women must have an equal voice if Canada is to have a flourishing and prosperous democracy.

Notes

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7. Jennifer Lawless and Richard L. Fox. *It Takes a Candidate*, Cambridge: 2005, p. 98.
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