

Improving gender representation in Canadian federal politics and parliament

How can we establish equitable gender representation in Canadian politics and parliament? What obstacles stand in the way of this goal? And, what can serving Canadian parliamentarians tell us about the challenges they have either experienced or witnessed among their colleagues. In this article, the author use primary interviews with six MPs and a secondary literature review to explore theories used in support of methods designed to improve gender representation. They conclude by suggesting that methods to improve gender representation in politics need to be fulsome and diverse.

Jennifer Galandy and D. Scharie Tavcer

Discussions about gender representation occur in workplaces across Canada; so it's no surprise they have also emerged within the world of politics. Researchers have examined gender representation in parliaments and sought to determine which political parties have had the most success at accomplishing equitable representation – or at least improving gender representation. Studying methods to improve representation¹ is important. If we determine which methods work well, our research can guide governments and political parties to enact effective change. In this article, through a secondary literature review and interviews with sitting parliamentarians representing three parties, we explore some of the barriers to achieving effective gender representation² within Canada's federal political system. We conclude by suggesting that methods to improve gender representation in politics need to be fulsome and diverse.³

Theoretical Foundation

A variety of theories have been used in support of methods aimed at improving gender representation in formal politics. Although we mention them only briefly due to space constraints, these theories inform the approaches used to address disparities

in representation. Gender Politics Theory⁴ declares that societal gender norms permeate roles in the workplace. Politics of Presence Theory⁵ maintains that only through increased representation of women, and by prioritising women's ideas and issues, can a gender-balanced political environment be achieved. Dramaturgy Theory⁶ states that humans have "front and back stages" that may or may not be authentic, but that people adopt those "stages" for compliance and acceptance in the (political) workplace.

Society informs gender roles and also creates barriers for women's political involvement; these include defining "...the ways considered appropriate for women or men [to act]."⁷ Gender roles, in turn, inform relationships at a workplace. Broadly, Western cultures have assigned a higher status to men in public spaces; men are, therefore, considered more powerful in these spaces. In return, women's value is diminished. This (artificially constructed) idea of power contributes to how gender roles are expected to be expressed in the home, at work and, consequently, in politics. The "unequal distribution of power... in most contemporary democracies"⁸ is therefore unsurprising. Canada ranked 62 of 190 countries (26.3 per cent) for representation of women in political roles in 2017; the United States ranked 104 (19.1 per cent); and the United Kingdom ranked 47 (30 per cent).⁹

Even if women gain entry to political office, various barriers continue to prevent them from moving to a "higher rung on the ladder" using the same level of effort as men. One barrier is the "glass ceiling" effect.¹⁰ Invisible constraints, including gendered expectations

Jennifer Galandy received an M.A. in Public Policy from the University of Nottingham and works as a strategy manager in the United Kingdom's Ministry of Justice. D. Scharie Tavcer is an associate professor in the Department of Economics, Justice, and Policy Studies at Mount Royal University.

of managing work-life balance and financial limitations (unequal pay and lack of access to funding networks), contribute to blocking promotion and advancement to higher levels of office.

Another barrier is the “sacrificial lamb” concept. Inexperienced women are sometimes recruited to be candidates to demonstrate a party’s commitment to gender representation, but placed in constituencies where a party has little chance of winning.¹¹ If female candidates are more likely to be found in unwinnable districts, it creates false female representation.¹² These “sacrificial lamb” campaigns, combined with the media’s tendency to focus on women’s personal life and physical appearance, feed into the (false) belief that women are unqualified.¹³ Voter expectations are also gendered from decades-old conditioning against female candidates who they may “like,” but not necessarily “respect” or “support” when they are “seeking power.”¹⁴ Scholars acknowledge that “gendered socialisation patterns”¹⁵ hinder the supply of women candidates who may be shamed for stepping out of the socially constructed role as caregiver.

In this article we contend that a means to increase women’s representations must be based on two principles:

- 1) supporting more women in politics (into viable constituencies and into effective positions); and
- 2) prioritizing female representation within “all male or mostly male assemblies.”¹⁶

Methodology

Drawing on Galandy’s previous work,¹⁷ we explored gender barriers within Canada’s federal political system through three theoretical lenses: gender politics, politics of presence, and dramaturgy, along with analysing primary data (individual interviews with MPs) and secondary data (literature review). The interviews queried how politicians conduct themselves in parliament and how their conduct may relate to the social structures and roles of women outside and within politics. This was a snapshot case study of a single entity at a single point in time with the goal of uncovering patterns in politics that articulate barriers women face in Canadian politics.

Interviews used a semi-standardised format, and the purposive sample was generated from the three political parties that have obtained official party status in the House of Commons. One woman and one man from each of the three parties were interviewed who were between ages 20-40 years (women), and ages 40-60 years (men)¹⁸, totalling six participants (Participants

X2-X7).¹⁹ MPs were from British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island, and all interviews took place in Ottawa during June 2017.

Data from the larger study²⁰ spoke to the theoretical claims hypothesized, but only results relating to methods to improve gender representation are offered here. While recognizing the sample size was small, the qualitative value of the responses did provide worthwhile insight into women’s representation within Canadian federal politics.

Discussion

Parliamentary sessions run Monday-Friday from 10am-7pm. Participant X4 and X5 both believed that if night sessions were implemented it would make parliament more inclusive to everyone – especially for women with young children – as they would only have to be in Ottawa for a few days at a time, rather than the full week. The media often ask women, “who is looking after the kids?” (X4), and if broader conversations about masculinity take place, as well as the application of a feminist lens, this would make it easier for women to “express political ambitions” (X5) without being seen as violating norms.

Participants X5, X6, and X7 noted that women are frequently “heckled,” or asked, “what will happen when you get pregnant?” and women receive comments on their “looks and emotions instead of on ambitions” (X6). Ageism and sexism increase “self-doubt” because it signals to women that politics is on “male dominated terms, schedules, actions, and priorities” (X5). MPs are not protected on social media where threats and “vile, sexist, disgusting messages” are directed at the female MPs (X6). Progressive women are attacked and treated “harshly” (X5), and conservative women are seen as “traitors to our gender” (X7). Yet, as one participant noted: “I work with feminist men and we believe in grassroots politics, but I also work with conservative women, who have voted against women’s rights bills” (X6). Training programs could educate everyone to be more inclusive and gender-focused.

Participant X2 concurred that women see each other as “competitors” instead of “supporters,” and that “family-friendly aspects in parliament” are lacking. He suggested the status quo likely comes from a heteronormative model where men are expected to be “making connections” while women are expected to be home. Participants also mentioned barriers such as age, being an immigrant, as well as commuting while having a young family.

Several participants acknowledged that

“motherhood does not discourage female involvement in politics,” and “society honours motherhood, but also uses it against women.” Childcare is a concern for women running (compared to men); some women feeling “guilt” and request a “shift in mind-set” from colleagues. For example, when “XX was pregnant, the party adjusted the debate schedule, so she did not have to fly as much towards the end of her pregnancy” (X6).

Participants had differing views on whether or not a glass ceiling still exists within federal politics. Participant X6 argued it does, “because people think men are naturally better leaders and women are too emotional.” X7 believed the “gender-balanced cabinet is also a glass ceiling because women can only succeed with quotas and not by merit.” With a quota system, X7 believed women are not chosen based on the merit of their work towards becoming cabinet ministers, but instead it’s based solely on the fact of whether you are male or female; whereas others believed that having only “26 per cent of women in politics is absurd and there is an even smaller percentage of young women” (X6). Although there was disagreement about the value of quota systems, participants noted examples where it has been effective. For example, Alberta’s NDP has had an equity policy since 1984, that advocates for at least 50 per cent of all female candidates to be in winnable ridings.²¹

Participants X5 and X6 both agreed that parity cabinets are a valid goal but suggested it must be more than ‘symbolic’ and ‘tokenistic.’ But X4 and X7 argued that a parity cabinet creates a “glass ceiling, saying women can only succeed in quotas not merit.” Participants X2 and X3 thought the symbolism of such a cabinet was important in itself because: “it inspires more women in politics” and a gender balanced cabinet “even motivated people at the United Nations” (X3). Attitudes towards the 2015 gender parity cabinet did appear to fall along party lines in terms of participant responses.

All female participants (X3, X5 and X7) agreed that the concept of the “sacrificial lamb” still exists. Some participants suggested that if a party nominates significantly more women than it elects, the sacrificial lamb concept is evident. Participant X4 believed this concept is more evident in the United Kingdom.

All participants expressed that it is up to the individual parties to support and make changes to increase women’s representation, especially financial support. Funding helps with election organization, media relations, combating harassment, norm expectations, and/or family costs. Participants X2, X6, and X7 each agreed that women have less opportunities

because of a lack of networks and limited financial resources. Participants X5 and X6 believed that parties could provide more support for the competitive constituencies with equivalent resources to actually help women candidates win (instead of treating them as “sacrificial lambs”).

Not one participant believed that the House of Commons accurately represents Canada today (women are 51 per cent of the population, but only represent 26 per cent in parliament). All expressed that the current representation is a failure, and that prioritising women is still needed.

Removal of structural barriers is also necessary to promote women’s participation. For example: providing equitable pay for equal work (Canada, in 2016, is ranked as having the 8th highest gender pay gap out of a list of 43 countries examined by the OECD²²); eliminating systemic violence against women; creating affordable childcare options; and finding ways to prevent women from losing ground financially during child bearing years.”²³ Participant X5 believed that “parties and government need to help remove these barriers.” She argued that,

parties need to work with women on the ground, gearing up to elections, encourage councils and organisations and listen to what women want and need. We need to start improving this now and how we do this is by being more realistic as to why women do not run and challenging it.

Another structural barrier is Canada’s current electoral system of first past the post (FPTP), which had varying levels of support among the participants. Some participants said they believed that proportional representation (PR) has potential to cater to minorities only. Moving away from FPTP to a form of PR could allow parties to elect a more representative group of parliamentarians from their pool of candidates using party lists.²⁴ This, in turn, may encourage more women candidates to come forward.

PR allows that “seats in a constituency are divided according to the number of votes cast for party lists” and “the rank order on the party lists determines which candidates are elected.”²⁵ Participants X2, X3, X4, and X7 all mentioned that a change in the electoral system will not in itself change the percentage of women elected; instead, they suggested parties should focus on mentoring and supporting more viable female candidates. Conversely, participants X5 and X6 stated that reform is necessary in order to give women more opportunities: “PR would encourage more women to run and win; FPTP doesn’t discourage women from

winning, but few get elected, which is discouraging” (X5).

Whether changing the electoral system happens or not, without addressing the other barriers, no change will be meaningful or long-lasting. Making parliament more collaborative can encourage women to participate, but we suggest this proposition may be counter-productive. It implies that women generally do not like debating and competing and prefer collaborating. We contend this is a stereotype informed by societal gendered norms.

Participants had mixed views on quotas and tended to believe that “a gender lens is more important.” Some participants believed that women’s networking and supportive organizations can help more. Participant X4 noted that boys and men need to get involved to alter that gender lens. Participant X7 contended that quotas are not effective because they create a ‘fence post’ or another ‘glass ceiling’. However, others countered that quotas can work, but only if they are acceptable to voters. If parties were reimbursed for election costs based on their ability to elect women, some participants suggested it may be more effective than quotas. Participant X6 suggested that their party did not set specific quotas because candidate-selection committees knew they had to achieve at least a 50 per cent benchmark from senior party staff.

Participant X7 believed that role modelling from external organisations was a better route to increase representation. Participant X4 said changing the system would take away the “clash of ideas”, which is an essential part of democracy. Instead he suggested we should work towards making politics more “collaborative to encourage women”. Participants suggested that mentorship programmes would work well for women.

All participants said external funding organisations could help promote and support women through the election process. Participant X4 confirmed that networks helped his partner become involved; and X5 mentioned “unions and advocates linked to grassroots social movements” can help drive the agenda. Participant X3 believed that Equal Voice is the most prominent external organisation to offer support, and X3 mentioned it is especially helpful if you “don’t have support at home.” However, participants X6 and X7 stated they believed Equal Voice has “done nothing” and suggested it favoured one of the parties.

The Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) programme was mentioned by participants X2, X3, X4, and X7. They agreed that it helped raise awareness of issues such as workplace

harassment (non-governmental organisation Equal Voice works to mainstream gender in all legislation²⁶ across society). But participants X4 and X7 pointed out that while it has been effective, the programme is actively against men (X4); and X7 believed GBA+²⁷ was not implemented in a way that is actually encouraging the current government to enact change.

Conclusion

Various theories have been proposed to respond to inequitable gender representation within politics. One position contends that unequal power distributions exist within society as a whole;²⁸ whereas another position offers that there is inertia among governments to change the status quo in meaningful ways.²⁹ Still others believe that establishing a ‘family-friendly parliament’ would encourage more women to get involved;³⁰ or that parties should create recruitment initiatives that dismantle the practice of putting women in unwinnable constituencies as ‘sacrificial lambs’ which makes the goal of equitable representation nearly impossible.³¹

We suggest the gender politics theory has little to contribute in terms of methods to eliminate these barriers. The politics of presence theory provides some response in terms of the supply and demand of female candidates and suggests that working alongside organisations can help candidates succeed; however, these suggestions will not necessarily address the accompanying problems of giving women “softer” ministerial positions with less importance or parties choosing candidates who carry minimal risk defined by cultural norms.³² Since women are reported on differently in the media and at work, these barriers could be addressed through external organisations (such as Equal Voice); however, at a minimum, mandatory training would be needed to change the culture that informs these views.³³

There was a general consensus among participants that harassment training and gender-focused education should be mandatory, which would shift the culture towards one that is more supportive and inclusive of women politicians; nevertheless, overall, dramaturgy theory fails to articulate solutions that address under-representation and structural barriers. It hypothesises that politicians act differently in the public eye than they do at home and that the political realm defines how women must act, which is often in opposition to how they are expected to act within the social/personal realm. If the political environment was more accepting of women – as women wish to be seen – then perhaps they could be more authentic. Many participants agreed that women “protect more aspects of their

personal life, to avoid sexist comments, and if upfront about being a feminist, in politics you have to be more guarded" (X5 and X6). Women "probably have to promote themselves differently in politics, especially because women leaders have to show they are tough, male leaders have to show they are compassionate."

The politics of presence theory does have merit in terms of addressing barriers and suggesting methods to implement change. It prescribes: a gender lens throughout parliament (implemented with mandatory programmes such as GBA+); policies enacted within political parties to provide training and funding resources; and a relationship between political parties and external organisations that support candidates with networking, personal support, and funding.

The results provide an account of ideas for change from standing MPs that fall within current convention strategies and that critique those strategies. Each of the three theories supports different methods to shift the foundation towards equitable representation, although each might be challenging to implement (for various reasons). What is conclusive though is that a shift is needed that is fulsome. A shift is needed that incorporates change from several directional sources in various ways; change will not be meaningful should it be one method applied at a time. Change is needed in the broad sense; change within the political culture that also extends beyond its boundaries (into media, constituencies, and the social realm). Change is needed that will be meaningful, all-compassing, and sustained. Policies and programmes developed at the party level, would not only be considered recruitment strategies, but also retention strategies, all of which are needed to bring gender representation to an equitable level.

Endnotes

- 1 Jennifer Galandy, "Critical Analysis of the Obstacles Female Politicians Face in Canada's Federal Political System" of your thesis, [unpublished thesis Master of Arts in Public Policy], School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham (2018).
- 2 The term 'gender representation' is not parity with 'fair gender representation'. The former is synonymous with gender bias (favouring one gender over another); whereas the latter means gender diversity that is equitable. In the context of the Canadian system under study here, the authors suggest that efforts need to focus on eliminating bias in the process of selecting and supporting candidates (i.e., supporting as many women as men).
- 3 Hilary M. Lips, *Gender: The basics*, 1st edition, print, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3. Anne Phillips, *From a Politics of Ideas to a Politics of Presence*, ebook, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 (print version published in 1998), 25.
- 4 Hilary M. Lips, *Gender: The basics*, 1st edition, print, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3.
- 5 Anne Phillips, *From a Politics of Ideas to a Politics of Presence*, ebook, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, print version published in 1998), 25.
- 6 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Monograph No. 2, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 13-30.
- 7 Hilary M. Lips, *Gender: The basics*, 1st edition, print, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3.
- 8 Olle Folke and Johanna Rickne, "The glass ceiling in politics: formalization and empirical tests." *Comparative Political Studies* 49,5, (2016): 568.
- 9 United Nations Women, *Women in Politics 2017 Map*, (New York, NY: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2017), <http://www.unwomen.org/en>. In 2015, the newly elected federal government made a point to create an evenly divided cabinet by gender (15 women and 15 men). Prime Minister Trudeau said: "it's important to present to Canada a cabinet, that looks like Canada." Jessica Murphy, "Trudeau Gives Canada First Cabinet with Equal Number of Men and Women," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2015.
- 10 U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, *A Solid Investment: Making Full Use of the Nation's Human Capital (Final Report of the Commission)*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2017). http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/key_workplace/120/
- 11 Shannon Proudfoot, "Not quite as equal as we think we are," *Maclean's*, July 31, 2016. Mirya R. Holman and Monica C. Schneider, "Gender, Race, and Political Ambition: How Intersectionality and Frames Influence Interest in Political Office," *Politics, Groups, And Identities* 6, no. 2 (2016): 264-280.
- 12 Melanee Thomas, "Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Canada," *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 64, no. 1 (2013): 218-233.
- 13 Clare Walsh, *Gender and Discourse: Language and Power in Politics, the Church, and Organisations*, 1st edition, (London: Pearson Education, 2001), 983-986. Linda Trimble, "Gender, Political Leadership and Media Visibility: *Globe and Mail* Coverage of Conservative Party of Canada Leadership Contests," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 40,4. (2007): 969-993.
- 14 Hilary M. Lips, *Gender: The basics*, 1st edition, print, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 29-30.
- 15 Mirya R. Holman and Monica C. Schneider, "Gender, Race, and Political Ambition: How Intersectionality and Frames Influence Interest in Political Office," *Politics, Groups, And Identities* 6, no. 2 (2016): 264-280.
- 16 Anne Phillips, *From a Politics of Ideas to a Politics of Presence*, ebook, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, print version published in 1998), 72.
- 17 Jennifer Galandy. "Critical analysis of the obstacles

- female politicians face in Canada's Federal Political System." Master's thesis, University of Nottingham, 2018.
- 18 The difference in age groups between the male and female participants is explained, unfortunately, that at the time of data collection, there were no women aged 40-60 years from any of the political parties.
 - 19 The six participants are labelled Participant X2-Participant X7. The reason why Participant X1 is missing in this paper, is because only a selection of participants (which were interviewed in Galandy's original thesis) are included here.
 - 20 Jennifer Galandy. "Critical analysis of the obstacles female politicians face in Canada's Federal Political System." Master's thesis, University of Nottingham, 2018.
 - 21 New Democratic Party of Canada, *Policy of the New Democratic Party of Canada 2016*, (Ottawa: Government Printing Office, November 26, 2018).
 - 22 Note that Canada is ranked after the European Union, which is listed as a single country, but actually includes 28 countries. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Gender wage gap (indicator)," 2018, doi: 10.1787/7cee77aa-en (Accessed on 23 November 2018).
 - 23 See Scott Pruyers and Julie Blais, "Why Won't Lola Run? An Experiment Examining Stereotype Threat and Political Ambition," *Politics & Gender*, 13, no. 2 (2016): 232-252.
 - 24 Pippa Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems," *International Political Science Review* 18, no. 3 (1997): 297-312.
 - 25 Pippa Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems," *International Political Science Review* 18, no. 3 (1997): 297-312.
 - 26 Francesca Constantini and Jonathan Malloy, "Women's Representation in Canadian Politics: Obstacles Towards Progress" (Carleton University, 2014), 14, [Womens_Representation_in_Canadian_Politics__Obstacles_Towards_Progress_.pdf](#). Melanee Thomas, "Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Canada," *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 64, no. 1 (2013): 218-233. M. Janine Brodie, *Women and Politics in Canada*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1985).
 - 27 Status of Women Canada, *What is GBA+?* (Ottawa, Canada: Status of Women Canada, [November 28, 2017](#)).
 - 28 Olle Folke and Johanna Rickne, "The glass ceiling in politics: formalization and empirical tests." *Comparative Political Studies* 49,5, (2016): 568.
 - 29 Matthew Godwin, "Awaiting the watershed: Women in Canada's Parliament," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 33, no. 2 (2010): 34.
 - 30 Francesca Constantini and Jonathan Malloy, "Women's Representation in Canadian Politics: Obstacles Towards Progress" (Carleton University, 2014), 14, [Womens_Representation_in_Canadian_Politics__Obstacles_Towards_Progress_.pdf](#)
 - 31 Hilary M. Lips, *Gender: The basics*, 1st edition, print, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 29-30. Melanee Thomas, "Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Canada," *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 64, no. 1 (2013): 218-233.
 - 32 Clare Walsh, *Gender and Discourse: Language and Power in Politics, the Church, and Organisations*, 1st edition, (London: Pearson Education, 2001), 983-986. Brenda O'Neill, "Unpacking gender's role in political representation in Canada." *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 38, no. 2 (2015): 22-30.
 - 33 M. Janine Brodie, *Women and Politics in Canada*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1985). Linda Trimble, "Gender, Political Leadership and Media Visibility: *Globe and Mail* Coverage of Conservative Party of Canada Leadership Contests," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 40,4, (2007): 969-993.