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WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN THE CANADIAN HOUSE OF COMMONS

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Women's Representation in the Canadian House of Commons

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For anyone concerned about women's numeric representation in the Canadian House of Commons, the past decade has been discouraging at best. After a period of sustained increases in the representation of women between 1970 and 1993, the past decade has brought virtually no improvement in the number of women in Canada's national legislature. In the Canadian provinces, the situation is almost as bleak. Women make up only twenty percent of the membership of the country's thirteen provincial and territorial legislatures, ranging from a low of just over ten percent of the membership of the NWT and Nunavut territorial legislatures to a high of thirty percent in the Quebec National Assembly.² Looking at the most recent election in each province, we find that women's representation declined in seven provinces and territories, remained constant in one and increased in only five. One bright spot in this otherwise dismal landscape is the slow but perceptible increase in the election of women from minority ethnic groups over the period since 1993. Although minority and Aboriginal women remain under-represented, they are becoming more numerous in the country's national Parliament.³

The focus of this paper will be on explaining how progress on the electoral project came to stall, or even reverse, in Canada over the past decade. The primary focus will be on the federal level. Four possible sets of explanation for the stalled progress of the electoral project will be examined: the role of the electorate, the electoral system (broadly defined), the role of political parties and the party system, and the role of organised feminism. Each of these will be evaluated with respect to the most recent Canadian federal election and, where possible, prior elections. The chapter argues that the lack of progress in women's representation can be attributed in large part to the change in the Canadian party system from 1993 to the present and to the declining role of organised feminism in advocating political engagement for Canadian women.

The Electorate

When we consider the role of the electorate with respect to women's representation in the Canadian House of Commons, two questions arise. First, does the electorate contribute to the under-representation of women by discriminating against female candidates? Second, does the electorate

provide a basis of public support for measures designed to increase the demographic representativeness of the Canadian Parliament?

Do Canadian Voters Discriminate Against Female Candidates?

The conventional wisdom in the electoral behaviour literature holds that Canadian voters do not discriminate between male and female candidates.⁴ Given that vote choice in Canada is driven largely by national, as opposed to local, considerations, this is entirely plausible. If voters are making their choice based largely on party affiliation and evaluation of the party leader, then it would be entirely reasonable to expect that the characteristics of the local candidate would have no impact on voting behaviour. That said, recent research studying the 2000 federal election suggests that some 44 percent of voters formed a preference for a local candidate and that this preference affected vote choice.⁵ The most recent examination of this question is Black and Erickson's study of voting in the 1993 federal election.⁶ They find that female candidates receive fewer votes, on average, than do male candidates. However, once they controlled for constituency characteristics, they found that female candidates received more votes than similarly-situated male candidates, suggesting that being female offered these candidates a slight electoral advantage.

In an admittedly crude effort to re-examine the question of whether voters discriminate against female candidates, Table 1 shows the mean change in a party's vote share in each electoral district from the 1997 election to the 2000 election, broken down by gender. Although imperfect, using the change in the vote share offers something of a control for the party's competitiveness in each riding. To further control for the party's competitiveness, three categories are employed: ridings in which the party did not have an incumbent, ridings in which the party had an incumbent, and ridings in which the party won the seat in 1997, but the incumbent did not run again.⁷ Positive numbers indicate that the party increased its vote share; negative numbers indicate that the party's vote share dropped.

Among non-incumbent candidates, we find relatively modest gender differences, with female candidates reducing their party's share of the vote in their riding by one percentage point more than male candidates. Among incumbents, the gender differences in vote share change are similarly small, but once again female incumbents of all parties increased their vote share by one percentage point less than male incumbents. The most striking differences are found in the small sub-set of seats that were won by the party in the 1997 election, but did not have an incumbent running in 2000. Such seats are

generally seen as highly desirable, winnable seats. It was only in the Canadian Alliance that we find female candidates improving vote share more than male candidates did; in this instance, the lone woman nominated in an open seat improved the party's vote share by just over seven percentage points, while her male counterparts improved their party's vote share by just under four percentage points on average. The gender differences for Liberal, PC and NDP-held ridings with no incumbent are striking. Male Liberal candidates in these ridings improved the party's vote by almost four percentage points on average, while female candidates lowered the party's vote by over five percentage points. PC candidates of both genders lowered their party's vote in these ridings, but by almost eight percentage points more for the female candidates. The one female NDP candidate lowered her party's vote by 32 percentage points, which was 19 percentage points more than her male counterpart.

Although by no means conclusive, these figures suggest that further research is required to determine whether the Canadian electorate does, in fact, discriminate against female candidates. That said, if there is discrimination, its magnitude is so limited that it is unlikely to decide the outcome of local contests in most cases under the current Single Member Plurality electoral system. Discrimination against female candidates would have much broader significance under an electoral system which allows voters to select among candidates running under their preferred party's banner, such as STV or MMP with open lists. As such systems have been recommended by the Citizens' Assembly of British Columbia and the Law Reform Commission of Canada, the question of voter discrimination may become highly relevant in the Canadian context.

Table 1: Change in party's popular vote in riding from 1997 to 2000 (means)					
	Male	n	Female	n	Male – Female
Liberal					
Not Incumbent	2.81	117	1.36	30	1.45
Incumbent	3.36	119	3.77	35	-0.41
Other Liberal held riding	3.79	5	-5.16	2	8.95
PC					
Not incumbent	-6.04	239	-9	37	2.96
Incumbent	3.79	13	1.96	2	1.83
Other PC held riding	-28.16	4	-35.91	2	7.75
BQ					
Not Incumbent	0.51	31	0.91	8	-0.4
Incumbent	3.94	26	2.37	10	1.57
Other BQ held riding	1.31	8	1.54	1	-0.23
NDP					
Not Incumbent	-2.68	198	-2.98	81	0.3
Incumbent	-2.35	12	-1.64	7	-0.71
Other NDP held riding	-12.72	1	-31.93	1	19.21

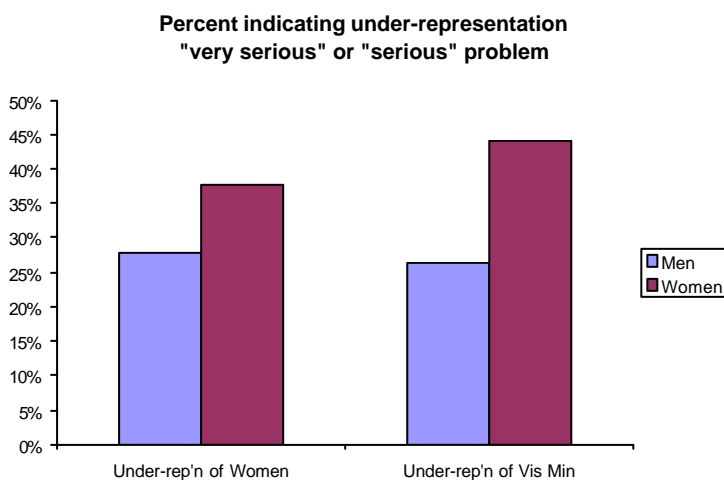
CA					
Not Incumbent	4.47	218	6.07	29	-1.6
Incumbent	7.21	48	6.77	3	0.44
Other REF held riding	3.95	9	7.35	1	-3.4
TOTALS					
Not Incumbent	-0.82	803	-1.89	185	1.08
Incumbent	3.99	218	2.95	57	1.03
Pty Held; Open Seat	-2.24	27	-15.03	7	12.79

Source: Calculated from 2000 candidate data set, Munroe Eagles principal investigator.

To What Extent Does the Electorate Support Positive Measures?

Examination of data from a survey of the Canadian public in 2000 suggests that a substantial minority of Canadian voters are concerned about the under-representation of women, and that there is a moderate degree of public support for measures designed to make the Canadian Parliament more reflective of the country's demographic composition.⁸ As Figure 1 illustrates, approximately one-third of respondents to this survey indicated that the under-representation of women was a serious or very serious problem. It comes as no surprise that women were more inclined to identify this as a problem than were their male counterparts. What is somewhat surprising, however, is that women were more inclined to identify the under-representation of visible minorities as a problem than the under-representation of women. Overall, these figures suggest that there is not an overwhelming concern among either Canadian men or women regarding women's under-representation.

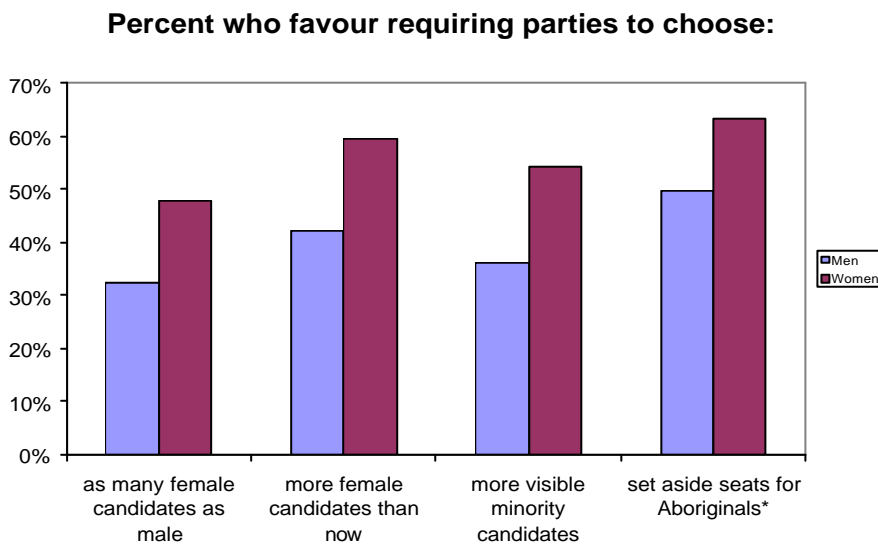
Figure 1



Source: Howe and Northrup 2000

Despite this, survey respondents expressed a considerable degree of support for measures designed to increase the representativeness of the Canadian Parliament. Figure 2 shows that a large minority of survey respondents agreed that political parties should be required to choose more women and more visible minorities. The survey split the sample, asking half of respondents whether they would favour or oppose requiring political parties to choose “as many female as male candidates” and asking the remaining respondents whether they would favour or oppose requiring political parties to choose “more female candidates than they do now.” Predictably, respondents were more inclined to agree with the less demanding option of requiring parties to choose more female candidates than they do now. Nonetheless, fully 48 per cent of women and 33 per cent of men agreed with requiring gender parity in candidate selection and almost sixty per cent of women and forty per cent of men agreed with requiring parties to choose more female candidates than they do now. The greatest public support was expressed for setting aside a small number of seats for Aboriginal people.

Figure 2



Source: Howe and Northrup 2000.

*This question did not mention parties. It asked “would you favour or oppose setting aside a small number of seats in Parliament in Ottawa for Aboriginal peoples?”

It is, however, important to keep in mind that general support expressed on an opinion survey – particularly when it has been primed with a question asking whether the under-representation of

women is a serious problem – could well melt away in the face of a public debate. Arguments about allowing parties to choose the “best qualified” candidate could well move opinion on these issues should a public debate arise. Nonetheless, these data suggest the presence of a modest reservoir of support among Canadians for positive measures, should parties or Parliament decide to implement them.

The Electoral System

Canada remains one of the last holdouts clinging to a single member plurality electoral system. A considerable body of research demonstrates that SMP electoral systems are, for a variety of reasons, less amenable to women’s representation than are variants on proportional representation.⁹ There is every reason to believe that adopting some variant of a PR electoral system would have at least a modest positive impact on women’s representation in Canadian legislatures. If nothing else, electoral system change would probably improve the electoral fortunes of the federal NDP, which has consistently nominated more female candidates than any of the other federal parties. In anticipating the effect of some variant of PR, one must of course keep two cautions in mind. First, the form of PR and the details of the system’s design are important. For instance, comparative research suggests that list PR is more likely to improve women’s representation than is Single Transferable Vote, and closed lists may be more favourable to women’s representation than are open lists.¹⁰ Second, if some form of PR is adopted without mandatory quotas for women’s representation, it will affect the number of women elected only to the extent that political parties are concerned with increasing women’s representation. As will be discussed below, at least one of the major Canadian political parties at the federal level would almost certainly take no affirmative measures to increase women’s representation under a list system.

For many years, electoral system change has been an illusory objective for Canadian reformers. In the past two years, however, several Canadian provinces have begun formal examinations of the possibility of electoral system change. The government of Quebec is expected to table legislation implementing an MMP system modelled on the German electoral system; the Citizens’ Assembly of British Columbia has recommended an STV electoral system which is to be put to a province-wide referendum; in PEI a commission has recommended a move to either PR or STV; in New Brunswick the Commission on Legislative Democracy is widely expected to recommend a move to a modest region-based MMP system.{NOTE: This will have to be updated prior to publication} At the federal

level, the Law Commission of Canada in 2004 issued a report advocating adopting a Proportional Representation electoral system for elections to the House of Commons. There is some reason to believe that the BC Citizens' Assembly process may be adapted to the federal election in the coming months.

Beyond the electoral system itself, are there aspects of the conduct of elections in Canada that have positive or negative impact on women's representation? One possibility is the regulation of political finance.

Political Finance

In all industrialized democracies, including Canada, electoral competition has become a very expensive undertaking. Contemporary voters are reached not by knocking on doors but by buying television advertising. Campaigns are staffed by high-priced professionals. Media buys, polling, direct dial and a presence on the Internet are the hallmarks of modern campaigns, and all of them are expensive. If we want to understand barriers to the election of women in this era of capital-intensive politics, then it is necessary to examine the issue of whether access to money belongs on the list of impediments to women's election.

Janine Brodie's research for the Canadian Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing found that female candidates in the 1988 federal election reported that funding outweighed all the other factors that female candidates considered to be major barriers to nomination and candidacy.¹¹ It should be noted, however, that Brodie's research only surveyed female candidates, so it is possible that male candidates might have been just as likely to report similar concerns. That said, Erickson's survey of candidates in the 1993 Federal Election found that 85 per cent of female candidates, as compared with 77 per cent of male candidates, favoured spending limits governing nomination contests.¹² Although this is not a direct measure of perceptions of the difficulty of raising money, it may lend some support to the idea that women are somewhat more concerned about their ability to raise sufficient funds than are men.

If there are consistent gender differences in the ability to raise campaign funds, we would expect to find these differences at the nomination/primary election stage rather than in the general election. In nomination contests and primary elections, individuals are generally running without the endorsement of their political party. This forces them to rely more heavily on personal networks for

soliciting campaign support, rather than drawing on their party's financial backers. If, in fact, women are disadvantaged in some way in their ability to raise funds, it would consequently be more likely to be evident at this stage.

While inconclusive, the limited Canadian evidence suggests that women do not experience substantial difficulties in fundraising for nomination bids. In her 1993 survey of candidates, Erickson found that female candidates reported outspending their male counterparts. On average, a female candidate reported spending \$2425 to secure her nomination, while an average male candidate reported spending \$2210. Of these candidates, 55 per cent of women and 55 per cent of men reported that their nomination contest was contested. On average, a female candidate whose nomination was contested spent \$3494 and a male candidate spent \$3117. While this demonstrates that successful female candidates equal or surpass their male counterparts in ability to raise funds for nomination contests, it does not tell us whether unsuccessful female candidates were outspent by their male rivals.¹³

As of January 2004, the *Canada Elections Act* includes provisions governing parties' nomination contests. The legislation now requires candidates for a registered political party's nomination to disclose the size and source of their contributions and to abide by spending limits. New rules governing the size and source of contributions also apply to candidates, who can now receive a maximum of \$1000 from any business or union, and a maximum of \$5000 from any individual. Spending limits for nomination contests were adopted in large part in response to concerns about female candidates' ability to raise funds and compete on a level playing field. Although it is too early to evaluate the effects of the spending limit on women's nominations, the early figures are not particularly promising: when we compare women as a percentage of their party's candidates between the 2000 and 2004 federal elections, we find only a one or two percentage point increase for each party. That said, 2004 was the first election to which these rules applied, and one might expect that it would take some time for potential candidates to become aware of the new regulatory environment.

If we do not find persistent evidence of gender differences in ability to raise funds at the nomination stage, then it is even less likely that we would find evidence of gender differences in raising funds for general elections. In the general election campaign, the candidate is the standard bearer for his or her political party. To the extent that support for a political party motivates the decision to make a contribution, women would only be disadvantaged if donors overtly discriminated against them. Moreover, to the extent that political contributions are motivated by a desire to influence or have access to an elected official, we would expect that the candidate's gender would affect contributions only if it affected potential donor's assessment of the candidate's ability to win the election.

Analysis of candidates' receipts in the 2000 Canadian General Election shows that in every party except the governing Liberals, total contributions to female candidates were lower than total contributions to male candidates (see Table 2). These differences were, however, fairly modest in scope.

Table 2: Contributions received and funds spent by candidates in the 2000 Canadian General Election

Party	Total Contributions to Candidate (Means in Cdn\$)		Per cent of Limit Spent (Mean Percentages)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Liberal	\$58,085	\$58,606	72%	74%
Cdn Alliance	\$36,767	\$32,465	48%	42%
BQ	\$61,198	\$57,775	83%	78%
PC	\$17,833	\$13,471	27%	22%
NDP	\$17,827	\$15,927	24%	24%

Source: Calculated from the 2000 General Election Candidate Dataset.

While these findings suggest the existence of some modest gender-based differences in the ability to raise funds, differences may well be a product of women being disproportionately represented among candidates in electoral districts their party is unlikely to win. To account for this, a regression analysis of the same data was conducted, employing the following independent variables: the candidate's gender, incumbency, the candidate's party's percentage of valid votes in that electoral district in the 1997 general election, and the average employment income in the electoral district.

Based on this analysis, Table 3 reports the effect that running a female candidate had on both campaign contributions and spending as a per cent of the limit, holding these other factors constant. The findings are broken down by party. The analysis suggests that candidate gender has only a minimal effect on ability to raise funds and rates of campaign spending.

Table 3: Effect of Female Candidate (Regression)

Party	Total Contributions to Candidate Cdn\$	Per cent of Limit Spent
Liberal	-\$806	2%
Cdn Alliance	\$199	-1%
BQ	\$1132	1%
PC	-\$5546*	-7%
NDP	-\$1831	-1%

*Statistically significant at $p=0.05$

Source: Calculated from the 2000 General Election Candidate Dataset

Overall, then, there is little reason to believe that unequal access to campaign funds has posed a barrier to women's election in Canada in recent years. To the extent that it has, recent reforms that have enriched public funding to political parties and candidates and imposed spending limits on nomination contests should eliminate any residual barriers.

Experience in the provinces is, however, suggestive of the possibility that a regulatory regime that limits the size and source of contributions may have a positive effect on women's representation. In the two Canadian provinces that have adopted such legislation – Quebec and Manitoba – the mean proportion of women in the legislature is just under 26 percent, while the mean proportion for the remaining jurisdictions is only 17 percent. Although this suggests that such a measure somehow encourages the representation of women, the finding must be interpreted with some caution. This difference is driven in large part by the substantial number of women in Quebec politics: after the 2003 provincial election, women comprised just over 30 percent of the members of the Quebec legislature. This may well be a partial product of the regulatory regime governing political finance in Quebec for over twenty-five years, but it may also reflect social and cultural differences. Moreover, it must be noted that Manitoba adopted the practice of restricting contributions to eligible electors in 2001. In the one election fought since the rule was brought in, the proportion of women in the legislature dropped by 3.5 percentage points. In short, these findings are suggestive, but not conclusive.

Political Parties

Women's Participation in Canadian Political Parties

Women were involved in Canadian political parties throughout most of the twentieth century, but until the 1970s their participation tended to be channelled into supportive roles. By the late 1960s, socially-prescribed gender roles came under greater scrutiny and women involved in all three of the major political parties started to challenge the character of their involvement in party affairs. Despite the activism of women within all three of the parties, women remained under-represented in most facets of party life through the 1980s. In her study of women's participation in Canadian political parties at the federal level and in Ontario and Manitoba, Sylvia Bashevkin found that despite extensive involvement in political parties, women were substantially underrepresented in Canadian political party

elites, and that pattern of under-representation was all the more accentuated in political parties that were highly electorally competitive.¹⁴ In other words, the closer one came to political power, the fewer women were to be found. Bashevkin's research suggested the presence of a "pink-collar ghetto" within parties, as women's participation was channelled into traditional roles like secretary of the riding association. In more influential positions like riding association president, campaign manager or candidate, however, women remained substantially underrepresented. A survey of constituency associations in 1991 found that this pattern persisted, with women making up 20 per cent of riding presidents, 32 per cent of treasurers, and 69 per cent of riding secretaries.¹⁵ Women did, however, win some modest representational gains inside each of the three major parties during this period, including guarantees of women's representation on national party executives and positions as convention delegates.

The Canadian party system was shattered in the 1993 election by the entry of two new parties – Reform and the Bloc Québécois – and the virtual decimation of the Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties. The advent of this new party system, coupled with a growing resistance to the principle of affirmative action had profound consequences for the participation of women in Canadian political parties. The party that has in many ways defined the new party system is the Reform party, which later became the Canadian Alliance and has since merged with the Progressive Conservative Party.¹⁶ This party was ideologically committed to eschew affirmative action programs of any kind, and as a consequence has not implemented any representational guarantees for women (or other groups) within the party. The Progressive Conservative party followed suit and disbanded its women's organisation. The newly-formed Conservative Party has no women's organisation. In general terms, the trend appears to be away from measures ensuring the representation of women in party affairs.

A survey of members of the five major federal parties in 2000 gives us a glimpse of the rates and patterns of women's involvement in party organisation. Broken down by party, the proportion of female respondents to the Study of Canadian Political Party Members was as follows: Liberal 47 per cent; NDP 46 per cent; BQ 37 per cent; PC 33 per cent; CA 32 per cent.¹⁷ This pattern corresponds with what one would expect, given that both the Liberal and New Democratic parties have maintained policies designed to involve women in their parties in recent years while the BQ, Progressive Conservatives and Canadian Alliance have eschewed such policies. It also corresponds generally with the patterns of gender difference in electoral support for the parties.¹⁸

Based on this survey of party members, Young and Cross conclude that although women remain somewhat less inclined than men to join political parties, they are apparently almost as active as men in all levels of party activity. Despite the pattern of general equality with respect to women's involvement in all levels of party activity, female party members still see themselves as insufficiently influential and, with the exception of women in the Canadian Alliance, are generally supportive of measures to increase their influence and the number of women holding elected office.¹⁹ That the women directly involved in party affairs perceive this influence deficit and support measures to remedy it suggests that the parties should not rush to reverse representational guarantees for women. Apparently, these measures have not outlived their utility in the eyes of women active in most of the parties.

Do the "gatekeepers" discriminate against women?

In Canada, the selection of candidates is highly decentralized, with the electoral district associations of political parties exercising considerable autonomy in candidate selection. In all of the major parties, the selection of candidates takes place through a vote of those individuals who hold a party membership in that electoral district at the time of the contest. Generally, parties require that members have held a party membership for a number of weeks prior to the vote in order to be eligible to vote in the nomination contest. For the most part, the selectorates for Canadian political party nominations are relatively small. In his study of nomination contests in the 1993 federal election, Cross found that the average attendance at a nomination meeting was just over 400 party members, and that the average attendance at a contested nomination was 574.²⁰ There are, however, always a number of hotly contested nomination battles in which candidates recruit thousands, or even tens of thousands, of new party members.

Initial studies identified political parties as the "gatekeepers" preventing women from winning party nominations. Analysing patterns of nomination between 1975 and 1994 at the provincial level, Matland and Studlar conclude that there was evidence supporting the contention that parties tended to nominate women disproportionately in ridings they were unlikely to win in the 1970s, but there is no evidence that this took place systematically after the mid-1980s.²¹ The exception to this is Jerome Black's finding that minority women candidates report being encouraged by party officials to run, but tended to be placed in ridings where their party was normally expected to lose.²²

Analysis of data from the 2000 federal election supports Matland and Studlar’s contention that parties no longer nominate women disproportionately in hopeless ridings. Table 4 lists the proportion of male and female candidates for each party in 2000, and compares them to the gender breakdown among candidates in “no hope” ridings – those in which the party won less than 15 per cent of the popular vote in the 1997 election.²⁴ The only party which fits the pattern of nominating women disproportionately in hopeless ridings is the Bloc Quebecois. For a new candidate wanting to win a seat, the best hope generally lies in a seat held by their party with the incumbent retiring. There were relatively few retirements coming into the 2000 election, so such seats were quite rare. For three parties – the Liberals, PCs and NDP – the proportion of women nominated in these desirable seats was higher than the proportion of women running as candidates for the party overall. For the CA, the proportion was comparable, but for the Bloc the proportion was substantially lower – less than half.

Table 4: Candidates by Gender and Riding Characteristics, 2000 General Election

	All Candidates		No Hope (<15% in '97)		Party-held Open Seat	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Liberal	78%	22%	89%	11%	71%	29%
N	236	65	8	1	5	2
PC	87%	13%	91%	9%	67%	33%
N	252	39	97	10	4	2
NDP	71%	29%	70%	30%	50%	50%
N	210	88	147	64	1	1
BQ	76%	24%	60%	40%	89%	11%
N	57	18	3	2	8	1
CA	89%	11%	87%	13%	90%	10%
N	266	32	119	18	9	1

Do Parties Encourage Women’s Candidacies?

Some parties, notably the federal NDP, have undertaken explicit affirmative action campaigns for women and members of minority groups, which have yielded promising results.²³ In the run-up to the 2004 federal election, the NDP froze all nominations until the riding association could demonstrate that a thorough search for candidates from under-represented groups had been completed. In addition, the party implemented a program of financial assistance in which women and minority candidates are eligible for reimbursement of up to \$500 for child care expenses incurred in seeking a nomination, \$500 for travel costs in geographically large ridings, and an additional \$500 for costs incurred in seeking nomination in ridings where the NDP incumbent is retiring. The party also allows female and

minority candidates to receipt three times as many funds as other candidates through the party for the purposes of allowing their contributors to take advantage of the generous tax credit afforded to parties.²⁴ In the 2004 federal election, the NDP nominated more female candidates than any of the other major political parties, with women comprising 31 percent of its candidates.

The Liberal Party of Canada has, on occasion, appointed female candidates, circumventing the usual nomination process. Notably, however, Liberal party leader Paul Martin has refused to intervene in nomination contests on behalf of at least one prominent female incumbent (former Deputy Prime Minister Sheila Copps) but has used his power of appointment to appoint several male “star” candidates in key ridings. Women comprised one-quarter of Liberal candidates in 2004, the same proportion in the BQ, and substantially less in the Conservative Party at 12 percent.

However, the direction of change in the federal party system as a whole is away from affirmative measures. The largest opposition party, the Conservative Party of Canada does not use any kind of internal affirmative action program and is highly critical of other parties’ efforts to do so. Its predecessor party, the Canadian Alliance, vociferously criticized other parties’ efforts to promote women.²⁵ This view apparently informs the new Conservative Party’s practices. In a letter in response to Equal Voice, a lobby group advocating election of women, the party’s leader, Stephen Harper wrote that:

While we recognize the importance of having men and women of diverse backgrounds in our party, we are firmly committed to ensuring that the responsibility for selecting candidates in the ridings remains with our grassroots members. As a result, the women who are successful in our party owe their success to their own hard work. Moreover, many of these women have gone on to serve in key positions within our caucus, such as Diane Ablonczy, who currently serves as our Senior Citizenship and Immigration Critic.²⁶

Harper’s letter reflects the Reform/Alliance/Conservative view that measures undertaken to increase women’s representation detract from local party autonomy and devalue the achievements of the relatively small number of women who have been elected without special measures.

This argument lies at the heart of the party system dynamic that explains much of the decline in the rate of progress for electing women. It is not coincidence that the rate of increase in the number of women elected has declined steadily since the 1993 election, which ushered in significant change to the Canadian party system. The 1993 election saw the decimation of the NDP, the party that has consistently led the way on the nomination of women, as well as the

stunning defeat of the Progressive Conservative party, which had made significant progress on electing women through the 1980s. The same election also witnessed the rise of the Reform Party, which went on to become the Canadian Alliance, which in turn went on to swallow up the remnants of the Progressive Conservative Party in 2003, producing the new Conservative Party. Unlike the old Progressive Conservative party, which had an active women's association focused on encouraging women's participation and election, the Reform/Alliance/Conservative Party eschews any measures designed to increase women's participation in the party or in Canadian politics. Espousing an ethic of individual merit, the party nominates fewer women than did the old Progressive Conservative Party. Since its rise to official party status in 1993, the party has consistently nominated women as between 10 and 11 per cent of its candidates. Consistent with this, the new Conservative party in 2004 nominated women in 12 per cent of electoral districts. Assuming that the Conservative party replaces the old Progressive Conservative party as the alternative governing party in Canada, there is reason to expect that the slow rate of change in women's representation will persist for some time.

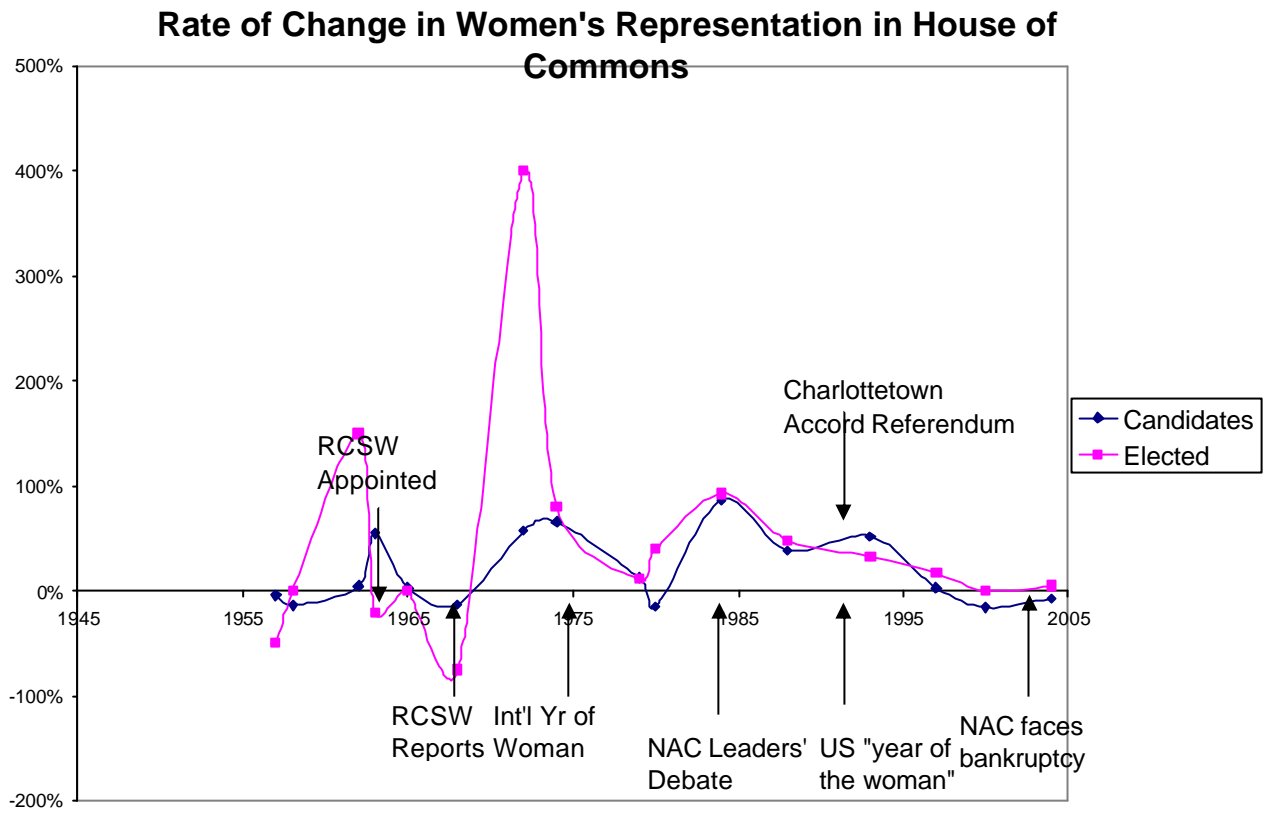
The Women's Movement

The Canadian women's movement was actively engaged in advocating the election of more women to the House of Commons until the mid- to late-1980s. From that time on, the peak feminist organisation, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, adopted more oppositional tactics and downplayed the potential substantive gains for women that might arise from election of more women to Parliament.²⁷ As NAC's funding from the federal government was reduced in the late 1980s, its voice on the Canadian political scene has declined commensurately. Recent reports suggest that NAC faces bankruptcy and has become defunct. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were a number of organisations that focused specifically on the political representation of women. Most of these organisations became defunct by the early 1990s, although some have been revived in recent years.

While it is difficult to discern the effect of the women's movement on the number of women nominated and elected, Figure 4 below lends some credence to the idea that a vibrant feminist movement focused on women's representation can have some effect. In the period since 1970, the two elections in which the number of women elected has increased at the greatest rate were the elections of 1972 and 1984. The former came one year after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada released its Report which advocated, among

other things, that political parties work to encourage the election of more women. In 1984, NAC sponsored a debate among major party leaders on women's issues, and was a prominent voice pushing the parties on issues of concern to women. (It should, however, be noted that 1984 was also an election in which there was a very high rate of electoral turnover). As the women's movement has shifted its focus away from electoral politics and as its voice has diminished overall, the rate of change has slowed. Although not conclusive, this suggests that an active women's movement focused on electoral politics can push political parties to nominate more women and possibly may focus more women's attention on electoral politics, thereby yielding a larger candidate pool.

Figure 4



Conclusion

This overview of the potential explanations for the declining progress in electing women in Canada has eliminated some of the suspects. Neither the views of the electorate, the rate of turnover, nor the system of political finance appear to explain the lack of progress in electing women in recent years. More likely suspects are the actions of political parties, particularly on the right of the political spectrum, the changing party system, and the apparent demise of organised feminism in Canada.

Prior to 1993, all three of the major political parties in Canada sustained some kind of commitment to the project of electing more women to the Canadian House of Commons. The decimation of the Progressive Conservative party and the rise of the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance shattered this cross-partisan consensus and ushered in an era in which parties on the right deliberately avoided taking any action to improve women's numeric representation. The newly-formed Conservative Party follows in this tradition and, not coincidentally, has nominated women in only 11 per cent of its districts (to date). To the extent that the Conservative party picks up additional seats in the 2004 election, the representation of women in the House of Commons will almost certainly decline.

It is intriguing that the newly-formed Conservative party has chosen to portray itself as moderate on a number of policy issues, most notably avowing commitment to public health care, but does not feel compelled to modify the old Reform/Alliance stance of not encouraging women's candidacies. This is most certainly a political calculation that writes off women as a powerful electoral block. And given the decline of organised feminism in the country, it is in all probability not an inaccurate calculation.

A second consequence of the decline of organised feminism is a decline in Canadian women's focus on politics. Although it is speculative, one can wonder whether the persistent gender gap in women's knowledge of and interest in politics might be at least partially a result of the absence of women's organisations talking about partisan politics.²⁸ In the United States, the women's movement has forced political parties to think about how to appeal to different segments of the female electorate by pointing to their voting power. The women's movement has also maintained a number of issues of relevance to women on the partisan agenda. In the absence of such cues from organised feminism, are

Canadian women once again falling into the mistaken belief that politics is the domain of men? To the extent that this is the case, the parties will feel little pressure to change their practices. Moreover, a generation of young women who believe politics does not matter to them is unlikely to yield a rich pool of potential female candidates.

If, in fact, some Canadian jurisdictions opt to change their electoral system, it will offer opportunities for women. As other chapters in this volume demonstrate, proportional representation electoral systems create opportunities for women, and not only because of their structural features. Reforming electoral democracy creates a moment during which parties must reconceive their practices for nominating candidates which opens the door to women's activism within the parties. If Canadian women have the opportunity to engage in such activism, it is the most likely route to recapturing the momentum of their electoral project.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ Thanks to Munroe Eagles for making the 2000 General Election Candidate dataset available, and to Richard Matland, Donley Studlar and Lynda Erickson for making various other data available for this paper. Portions of the paper are adapted from several recent publications and working papers: Young and Cross (2003); Young (2004a) Young (2004b).
- ² See the Still Counting website at <http://stillcounting.athabascau.ca/> for updated statistics.
- ³ See Jerome Black, "Differences that Matter."
- ⁴ Hunter and Denton, « Do Female Candidates "Lose Votes"? »; Tremblay, « Les femmes, des candidates moins performantes que les hommes? Une analyse des votes obtenus par les candidats et candidates du Québec à une élection fédérale canadienne, 1995. »
- ⁵ Blais *et al.* "Does the Local Candidate Matter?"
- ⁶ Black and Erickson, "Women Candidates and Voter Bias."
- ⁷ Because of the structure of the data set, ridings which the party won in 1997 but the incumbent retired are included in both the "Not incumbent" and "Other party member held riding" categories. Because the n's for the latter category are so low, they do not influence the first category overly.
- ⁸ Howe and Northrup, *Strengthening Canadian Democracy*.
- ⁹ MacIvor, "Women and the Canadian Electoral System"; Law Reform Commission of Canada, *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada*.
- ¹⁰ See Matland, "Enhancing Women's Political Participation".
- ¹¹ Brodie, "Women and the Electoral Process in Canada."
- ¹² 1993 Candidate Survey, Lynda Erickson principal investigator.
- ¹³ It should be noted that these figures do not represent audited or otherwise verified spending reports. They are merely based on candidates' reports of spending when asked as part of an academic survey.
- ¹⁴ Bashevkin, *Toeing the Lines*.
- ¹⁵ Carty, *Canadian Political Parties in the Constituencies*, 55.
- ¹⁶ For a discussion of the emerging party system and the role that Reform played in shaping this system, see Carty, Cross and Young, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics*, and for a more thorough discussion of the implications of the emerging system for women's representation, see Young, "Representation of Women in the New Canadian Party System."
- ¹⁷ Young and Cross, "Women's Involvement in Canadian Political Parties" 93.
- ¹⁸ See Nevitte *et al.*, *Unsteady State*, 110, 133.
- ¹⁹ Young and Cross, "Women's Involvement in Canadian Political Parties" 104.
- ²⁰ Cross, *Political Parties*, 56.
- ²¹ Matland and Studlar, "The Dynamics of Women's Representation in the Canadian Provinces."
- ²² Black, "Differences that Matter" 70.
- ²³ Erickson, "Entry to the Commons."
- ²⁴ Cross, *Political Parties*, 70-1.
- ²⁵ Young, "Representation of Women in the New Canadian Party System"
- ²⁶ Letter posted on Equal Voice Website: http://www.equalvoice.ca/response_harper.html.
- ²⁷ For a more thorough discussion, see Young, *Feminists and Party Politics*.
- ²⁸ For startling evidence of gender gaps in political knowledge, see Gidengil *et al.*, "Gender, Knowledge and Social Capital."