

Media in the Maritimes: Do Female Candidates Face a Bias?

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies election coverage received by candidates in Canada's Maritime provinces. It examines six regional newspapers and concludes that there are few gender biases in terms of quantity of coverage. However, women receive more coverage of their background characteristics than men. They also receive more issue coverage.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie la couverture des élections provinciales que les candidats ont reçue. Il examine six journaux régionaux et conclut qu'il n'y a pas de biais contre les hommes ou les femmes en termes de la quantité de couverture. Cependant, les femmes reçoivent plus de couverture sur leur expérience que les hommes. Elles reçoivent aussi plus de couverture quand il s'agit de questions.

Traditionally a major obstacle to the electoral success of female candidates is the media and the amount and nature of the coverage it assigns to their candidacy. Numerous studies have revealed that women frequently receive less coverage than their male counterparts and that the coverage they receive has tended to focus on their electoral viability and stereotypical feminine characteristics and issue competencies. While there is some evidence that this coverage may be changing and that national media organizations may be attempting to provide fairer and less biased coverage, there has been no examination of these trends at the provincial or regional level.

Instead there is anecdotal evidence that the media continues to frame politics in a masculine manner and stereotype the women who engage in political activities. Studies of women in parliament or in provincial legislatures regularly uncover female politicians who claim to be the recipients of stereotypical coverage and who believe that they have been examined more critically by the media than their male counterparts (Arscott 1997; Desserud 1997; Tremblay 1999).

This paper will examine the 1999 provincial elections in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and the 2000 provincial election in Prince Edward Island to assess the nature of the press coverage given to female candidates. It focuses on the amount of coverage and the nature of the coverage, comparing the degree to which male and female candidates receive "horse race"-type coverage, issue coverage or coverage that describes them in terms of appearance, character traits and personal backgrounds.

PAST STUDIES OF WOMEN IN POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

The literature examining the media's coverage of women in politics has frequently drawn attention to the lack of neutral reporting given to female politicians. Studies conducted in both the United States and Canada have highlighted the limited amount of news space accorded to women (Gingras 1995; Kahn 1996). Differences in the quantity of coverage may affect women's chances of getting elected as they will be less well known to the public and as a result, voters may be less willing to support them.

A second common finding of this research is also that the coverage received by women tends to be more critical, presenting them in an unfavourable light or raising questions about their viability as candidates (Gingras 1995; Kahn 1996; Tremblay and Bélanger 1997). For example, women have tended to receive more "horse race" coverage than men. This type of coverage focuses on "who is ahead, who is behind, who is gaining, who is losing, what campaign strategy is being followed, and what the impact of campaign activities is on the candidate's chance of winning" (Joslyn 1984, 133). By its very nature, horse race coverage is evaluative and there is evidence that women receive lower viability assessments than their male counterparts (Kahn 1996; Ross 1995). This tendency has significant impacts for female candidates as it is through the media that voters get the information to make their assessments of candidates and their electability.

The literature also suggests that along with more negative assessments of their abilities, the media covers female politicians using sex-based stereotypes.

For example, Robinson and Saint-Jean's (1991 & 1995) research on the media's portrayal of female politicians in Canada found that women's coverage focussed on personal characteristics such as clothing or hair rather than on the substance of their speeches. Similarly, research in the US has found that the media focuses more on women's appearance than men's (Heldman et al, 2000) and they are also referred to more frequently in terms of their families than men (Devitt 1999).

Other scholars have concluded that the media frames women's personality traits in stereotypically feminine terms focussing on examples of compassionate or caring natures rather than evidence of toughness or strong leadership (Carroll and Schreiber 1997; Jamieson 1995; Kahn 1996; Robinson and Saint-Jean 1991 & 1995; Ross 1995). Kahn found that while female politicians attempt to emphasize masculine traits in their advertising and campaign communications, the media focuses instead on their stereotypical feminine traits (53). On the other hand, when female candidates try to capitalize on their perceived strength on issues such as healthcare and education, the media ignores their efforts and tends to be more responsive to the agendas of male candidates than female candidates. In fact, Kahn found that the media's tendency to downplay a discussion of issues in their coverage of female candidates is consistent across all electoral contexts. It did not matter whether the women were incumbents or challengers, whether they were running in winnable or lost cause constituencies.

While more recent studies suggest that the application of feminine stereotypes may be declining (Carroll and Schreiber 1997; Norris 1997; Smith 1997; Tremblay and Bélanger 1997), media biases have not completely disappeared. Evidence of sex-differentiated coverage is still detected (Heldman et al. 2000), but not on the scale uncovered by Kahn (1996) in the 1980s. One possible explanation for this decline in gender bias is the greater professionalism and self-reflection on the part of the media. Another is the increase in the number of women holding elected office which may have reduced the novelty factor which influenced so much of women's coverage (Smith 1997).

Most studies suggesting a decline in gender bias have focused on major national newspapers or large circulation regional newspapers. In part, this is because the media's attention to larger races means that "gender differences in news coverage are potentially more consequential in national and statewide elections than in local contests" (Kahn 1996, 14). However, journalists working for these papers may be more experienced and professionally-trained than those employed by smaller, more locally-focused newspapers. News personnel frequently begin their careers with smaller papers before advancing to national papers with much larger circulations. The greater experience of journalists

working for major papers may make them more attentive to criticisms of gender biases in coverage and less likely to reproduce it as time goes on. Furthermore, national papers focus almost solely on party leaders, cabinet ministers or star candidates, and provide little coverage to lesser known candidates. This is even more so for television broadcasting, which is why few studies of gender biases examine television news coverage.¹ On the other hand, papers with a more regionally- or provincially-based audience can afford to cover the "average" candidates, many more of whom are women. The local flavour of this coverage may create situations where details about personal or family life receive more attention, or where horse race coverage becomes more prevalent than in stories with a national interest, creating greater opportunities for gender biases to creep into news stories than in the national media. This is even more likely the case for the weekly papers with smaller and more localized distributions.

It is possible that examinations of gender biases at the national level may not truly reflect the situation of women in all parts of the country. Not all female candidates face the same electoral experiences. For example, in Canada the proportion of women involved in electoral politics is much lower in the Maritimes than in other regions. This may in part be attributed to Moncrief and Thompson's (1991) arguments that women in rural communities are less integrated into mainstream political institutions than women in urban centres. Given their smaller numbers, women running for elected office in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island may still be viewed by the local media as novelties on the electoral scene requiring greater assessment and evaluation than their male counterparts. Together, these factors point to the need for greater examination of the media's treatment of female politicians at the provincial level.

WOMEN IN POLITICS IN THE MARITIMES

The proportion of women holding seats in Canadian legislatures varies from west to east with provinces in Western Canada tending to elect more women than provinces in Eastern Canada. This trend continued in the provincial elections of 1999 in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and the 2000 election in Prince Edward Island. In fact, in one of the three provinces the proportion of women holding elected positions declined as a result of the most recent election. The 1999 election in Nova Scotia saw the number of women elected drop from 8 out of 52 to 6 out of 52 resulting in a legislative assembly comprised of 11.5 percent women. This decline can be attributed to the failure of the New Democratic Party (NDP) to repeat its surprising success in the earlier election. This saw the election of a record number of candidates, five of whom

were women, elected in a province where the NDP had never before won more than four seats. In New Brunswick, one more woman was elected than there had been in the 1995 election, increasing the proportion of women in the legislative assembly to 18.2 percent. Prince Edward Island saw the number of elected women rise by two between the 1996 and 2000 election, increasing the proportion of women from 14.8 percent to 23.1 (see Table 1).²

The decline in the number of women elected in the most recent elections in Nova Scotia cannot be attributed to a decline in the number of women running for office. The numbers of women candidates in the two previous elections in this province actually increased from 33 to 51 and the numbers in the other two provinces remained almost the same. Nonetheless, women made up only a fraction of the total candidates in each of these elections and in most cases were found to be running for the NDP, a party which has seldom had any success in the region. As a result, women who run for elected office are still a novelty in the Maritimes and, given their tendency to run for the NDP, are often losers in election campaigns.

EXPECTATIONS ABOUT MEDIA COVERAGE

Based on the literature about women, politics and the media in other jurisdictions we can approach this study of the Maritime media with some obvious expectations. First, it is expected that women will receive less coverage than the men. The small numbers of women who run for the more competitive Liberal and Conservative (PC) parties and the larger number of women who run for the less competitive NDP make it likely that the media will give less attention to female candidates than to male candidates. However, even women who run for the two traditional parties in the region may lag behind their male colleagues in terms of the amount of coverage that they receive as the media may deem them less worthy of attention. This points to a second expectation from this analysis. Given that women are still a relative novelty in Maritime politics and are more likely to run for a party with a limited chance of getting elected, it is expected that the coverage of female candidates will include more negative evaluations of their electoral viability than that of the male candidates. Third, because of the more intimate nature of politics in the Maritimes and the fact that the regional media may be less experienced with covering women who are active on the political stage, it is expected that the stories about the women in the election campaigns will focus more on their appearance, personality traits, and their families than stories about men. Finally, as a result of this, and the fact that the women may receive more horse race coverage, it is

expected that female candidates are likely to receive less issue coverage than male candidates.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a content analysis of the election coverage of six Maritime newspapers. The coverage of the 1999 New Brunswick election is drawn from the *Telegraph Journal*, the *Times Globe* and the *Daily Gleaner*. For coverage of the 1999 Nova Scotia election the analysis focuses on articles found in the *Halifax Chronicle Herald* and the *Cape Breton Post*. *The Guardian* is the source for the analysis of the coverage of the 2000 PEI election. These newspapers were selected because of the size of their circulations in their province and their attention to provincial events. The study does not include election coverage of Newfoundland and Labrador as copies of the province's newspapers were unavailable. For the same reason it does not focus on the weekly papers in these provinces. In addition, the limited number of editions of the "weeklies" which appeared during the course of the election campaigns and the challenges of gathering a representative sampling of these papers limit their usefulness in a quantitative study such as this.

For each province the period of analysis includes stories from the day that the election was called to the day the election was held. In New Brunswick the election campaign ran from May 3 to June 7, 1999. The Nova Scotia campaign ran from June 16 to July 27, 1999 and the PEI election ran from March 21 to April 17, 2000. All articles that referred to a candidate in the provincial election were included in the analysis, including editorials, candidate profiles and regular news stories. In total there were 845 stories about the New Brunswick election, 1,728 stories about the Nova Scotia election and 639 stories about the PEI election. Stories were coded to indicate the newspaper they were found in, as well as the name, gender and party affiliation of the candidate being referred to. They were also coded if they included either a positive or negative assessment of the candidate's viability, if they made reference to the candidate's appearance or stereotypical traits, if they mentioned the candidate's family and/or referred to personal information about the candidate, and if they discussed the candidate's issue positions.

FINDINGS

The results in Table 2 make it clear that if the analysis only focuses on average candidates and does not include the coverage of party leaders, then there are very few discrepancies in the ratio of the proportion of coverage given to women to the proportion of candidates who are female. Women comprised 25.6 percent of the candidates running in these three elections and received 24.2 percent of the media coverage. While the proportion of coverage varies from province to

province, in terms of total amount of coverage, women in all provinces appear to receive proportionately more coverage than men. However, a closer look at provincial and party breakdowns shows some important differences. In both New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, women in both the PCs and the Liberals (the most competitive parties) receive slightly more than their fair share of the coverage, whereas in Nova Scotia, female candidates for these parties receive slightly less. This is particularly the case for female Liberal candidates.

When all of the coverage is analyzed, including that of the party leaders, a different story presents itself. As might be expected news stories focused more on party leaders than any other candidates. Elizabeth Weir, leader of the New Brunswick NDP was the only female party leader at the time of these elections, although other parties in the region had been led by women in the past (Arscott 1997; Crossley 1997; Desserud 1997). As a party leader she received a great deal of media attention and her coverage actually increased the attention paid to female candidates by the New Brunswick press during the 1999 election. Without her, the proportion of the NDP coverage which focused on female candidates in New Brunswick would have dropped to 58.5 percent. Her coverage alone comprises 16 percent of all of the coverage awarded to female candidates in the region in these elections. As the leaders of the other eight major parties in the region were men, including the coverage of party leaders into the analysis has the effect of decreasing the overall amount coverage awarded to female political candidates.

A second result that proves to be counter to expectations is the fact that women were no more likely to receive horse race coverage than men, nor was their electoral viability assessed more negatively than men's. This may be due in part to the limited coverage that some of these candidates received. Of the 114 female candidates that ran in these elections 5 percent (six candidates) received no coverage at all in the papers under examination. Another 19 percent only received mention in one article. Approximately 50 percent of the candidates were covered less than three times throughout the duration of the election campaign and many of the references to them were very brief. However, almost 7 percent of the male candidates received no coverage at all, 14 percent received only one mention and, similar to the women, just over 51 percent were mentioned less than three times during the election. This represents a significant number of candidates, both male and female, whose coverage was so limited that it did not provide the press with the opportunity to do more than refer to them in passing.

Noteworthy gender differences appear in the amount of coverage that focuses on a candidate's

appearance or stereotypical traits, but only in New Brunswick. In New Brunswick the tendency for the media to focus more attention on the appearance or the traits of female candidates is accounted for solely by its attention to Elisabeth Weir. No story about female PC or Liberal candidates included references to their appearance or traits, although a few stories about the male candidates did. Given the fact that there were no real differences in the nature of the coverage given to women and men in the other provinces we might attribute the New Brunswick results to the fact that Weir broke her ankle just days before the election was called and was forced to campaign wearing an awkward cast. The media frequently made reference to her injury suggesting that she was "hobbled by a badly fractured ankle" (Kaufeld May 10, 1999, A1) and that her campaign plans had been "cramped" as a result of it (Nobes May 11, 1999, A4). Often her injury was used as a metaphor for her party's fortunes in the campaign.

She leaned on her crutches, resting her broken ankle, after knocking on six floors of apartment doors. The star of the NDP team is playing hurt, but you wouldn't know it from the energy she is bringing to her favourite game. It will take more than a walking cast and a pair of crutches to sideline New Brunswick's toughest politician. (Lee May 29, 1999, A1)

However, not all appearance or trait references were to her broken ankle. The same story goes on to describe Weir as a "brash," "intelligent" "towering red head, flashing her trademark gap-tooth smile." If instead of coding stories we had coded each references to a candidate's appearance or trait, the number of references to Weir would have been substantially higher. As it was, 22 percent of the stories covering Weir included references to her appearance or traits, whereas only an average of 12.5 percent of the stories covering the male party leaders did so.

While this analysis does not find that the newspapers in the Maritimes have treated the average female candidates differently from men in terms of horse race coverage, viability assessments or attention to appearances or stereotypical traits, there are distinctive differences in terms of references to candidates' families or to personal information. In all three provinces the coverage received by female candidates contains more discussions of their family and personal lives than does the coverage received by male candidates. Eighteen percent of the coverage accorded to the women included references to their spouses, children or family situation. This does not change whether the coverage of Elisabeth Weir is included or not. On the other hand, 11 percent of the coverage given to men made these sorts of

references and this increases to 14 percent if the male leaders are excluded from the analysis. Interestingly, the amount of coverage given to these personal details varied by province. In New Brunswick, almost 18 percent of the total coverage given to all candidates included personal information and close to 22 percent of the articles in Prince Edward Island contained such references. Again, this amount increases if the coverage of the leaders is excluded. Only 6 percent of the coverage in Nova Scotia referred to candidates' personal lives whether they were leaders or not.

The results for the final expectation about issue coverage and female candidates is a complicated one (see Table 3). At first glance it would appear that only 33 percent of the stories which refer to a female candidate discussed her in relationship to a campaign issue, whereas 41 percent of the stories involving male candidates made mention of campaign issues. However, when the leaders are excluded from the analysis both women's and men's issue coverage drops to 29 percent. It should be noted though, that a closer examination of the relationship between candidate gender and issue coverage in the three provinces shows that the New Brunswick results are suppressing an expected relationship in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. The New Brunswick press and in particular the *Telegraph Journal* gave a significant amount of issue coverage to female candidates. In this newspaper alone, an average of 40 percent of the coverage of female candidates features some discussion of their issues, whereas only 21 percent of the coverage of the male candidates received issue coverage. This trend held whether the candidates were running for the PCs, the Liberals or the NDP. The other newspapers in New Brunswick gave less attention to the issues of the female candidates, but women still received slightly more issue coverage than the men. The situation was quite different in Nova Scotia and PEI where there was a tendency for the press to give the male candidates more issue coverage than the female candidates. It is interesting, however, that in PEI almost half of the coverage given to male and female candidates was issue coverage, whereas in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia closer to a quarter of the coverage focused on issues.

DISCUSSIONS

One of the main conclusions to be drawn from this research is that even in small provinces, local candidates have limited access to the print media. The fact that approximately 50 percent of both male and female candidates are mentioned no more than three times during the campaign presents a serious challenge to candidates in their efforts to create a public image. This is especially a problem for women who traditionally have less of a public image than men before entering a political career. Likewise the

dominance of leader coverage perpetuates the impression that women are less active in politics than they actually are. While female candidates receive coverage that is proportional to their numbers, the fact that most party leaders are male means that women in general are under-represented in election news coverage.

A second important point arising from this study relates to the discrepancies in the way that female candidates are covered from one province to another. While the press in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island have tended to give added attention to female candidates, the newspapers in Nova Scotia have tended to discriminate against them. Part of this discrepancy may be accounted for by the fact that the *Cape Breton Post* seriously under-reported the candidacies of the one woman running for the PC Party and the one woman running for the Liberal Party on the island. However, the *Halifax Chronicle Herald* also significantly under-reported the campaigns of the female Liberal candidates.

The limited coverage received by so many candidates reduces the discussion of appearances and traits in many of the stories, but the comparison of the coverage of Elizabeth Weir and other male leaders suggests that more extensive candidate coverage could result in more of this type of reporting. It clearly points to the need for a more thorough analysis of media's attention to leaders, as it is only the leaders who receive enough attention, even in regional media, to provide journalists with the opportunity to focus on these details.

Despite these passing references, it is remarkable how many stories included details about candidates' families or personal lives. Here, gender differences did appear as women received more attention to their family and personal situations than men. Again, these results varied by province with journalists in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick paying over three times the amount of attention to personal details about both male and female candidates than journalists in Nova Scotia. Why this is the case is difficult to determine. One might guess that it is because New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island are provinces with smaller populations than Nova Scotia and are less dominated by a single urban center. This may produce an environment where family connections are important pieces of information to know about a candidate. If this is the case, then women may be advantaged by the media's tendency to pay more attention to who they are and perhaps who their "people" are. On the other hand, the fact that the media continues to feel it is more necessary to provide this information about women than men reinforces the impression that female politicians are not independent actors who should be judged on their own merits.

Finally, results indicating that issues coverage of female candidates differs from one province to another, and more importantly from one paper to another, suggests that journalists may make a difference. Unexpectedly, it was the largest paper in the region, the *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, that was most likely to discriminate against the women in their lack of issue coverage. This was not the case for the *Cape Breton Post* or any of the other papers in the region which tended to give balanced if not slightly more issue coverage to women than men. This indicates that paper size and urbanization of the main readership does not necessarily mean that women will be treated more fairly. Even though it acts as the provincial newspaper in New Brunswick, the *Telegraph Journal* focused no more on the issues of female candidates than the Saint John-based *Times Globe* or the Fredericton-based *Daily Gleaner*. Furthermore, it was the Charlottetown *Guardian* that paid the greatest attention to issues of both male and female candidates overall. Clearly, arguments that smaller newspapers with more limited circulations are more likely to be biased against female candidates do not hold true in the Maritimes.

Unfortunately, this data set was not coded to record the gender of the reporters so it is impossible to determine whether the greater attention to personal details and issues in the coverage of female candidates is due to the writing of female journalists. There is reason to believe that this may be the case. First, other studies suggest that female reporters do tend to provide more in depth coverage of female candidates than male reporters (Heldman et al. 2000) as well as pay attention to different aspects of female candidates campaigns (Kahn 1996). While female reporters are socialized into the same newsroom environment as male reporters and

this may mean that the "professional norms" of journalism may have more of an impact on their reporting than their gender (Weaver 1997), they may nonetheless bring different experiences and concerns to their work (Mills 1997). The second reason to believe that the gender of the reporter may make a difference is that a follow-up study of the gender breakdown of the reporters for the different papers indicates that the New Brunswick newspapers had a higher percentage of female reporters than the papers in the other provinces. It was these papers that provided more issue coverage of female candidates than male candidates.

What this study does do is dispel some common beliefs about politics and the media. In the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island the average female candidate receives the same proportion of news coverage as the average male candidate. Unfortunately, for most candidates this is not much as most of the attention of the press is focused on party leaders. It is clear, however, that the fact that the Maritime provinces have lagged behind other parts of the country in terms of female representation in their legislative assemblies has not resulted in gender biases in terms of the quantity of coverage or the type of coverage received by women. Nor can one argue that the smaller number of women in provincial legislatures is the result of gender biases in election coverage. True, female candidates in the region receive greater attention to their personal backgrounds than male candidates, but except in the *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, they receive the same amount or more issue coverage. Furthermore, there is little evidence that local newspapers with smaller circulations are less professional in their coverage than larger, more urban newspapers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank Angela Gallant, my Honours student in the Political Science Program at the University of New Brunswick - Saint John for her research assistance.

ENDNOTES

1. The exception to this is the work of Gidengil and Everitt who have examined the coverage of male and female party leaders in the 1993, 1997 and 2000 elections. See Gidengil and Everitt 1999, 2000, 2002.
2. For a more thorough discussion of the experiences of women in these three provinces see the appropriate chapters in Arscott and Trimble 1997.

Table 1

Percentage of Women in the Legislative Assemblies of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and P.E.I. in the 1990s					
New Brunswick		Nova Scotia		Prince Edward Island	
1991	17.2	1993	10.0	1993	25.0
1995	16.4	1998	15.3	1996	14.8
1999	18.2	1999	11.5	2000	23.1

Table 2

Media coverage given to female candidates in recent Maritime Elections.
 (Coverage is the number of times that a female candidate was mentioned by name, given here as a proportion of all news stories during the election Campaign.)

	New Brunswick 1999			Nova Scotia 1999			Prince Edward Island 2000		
	candidates with leaders	coverage without leaders	female candidates absolute coverage	candidates with leaders	coverage without leaders	female candidates absolute coverage	candidates with leaders	coverage without leaders	female candidates absolute coverage
PC	10.7	17.8	16.4	8	15.5	17.3	22.3	34.5	14.8
Liberal	10.8	17.8	16.4	8.9	15.6	25	9.6	15.6	14.8
NDP	77.1	58.5	45.5	20.4	38.5	38.4	18.9	33	33.3
other	7.4	7.3	12.9	17.1	17.6	40.9	—	—	—
Total	25.6	24.6	23.4	17.5	22.2	21	12.2	28.3	28.6

Table 3

Percentage of Coverage of Male and Female Candidates Referring to Issues (Coverage is the number of stories that referred to a policy issue supported by a candidate as a percentage of the total number of news stories during the election campaign.)				
	New Brunswick	Nova Scotia	Prince Edward Island	Total
male candidates	35.5	38.2	56.4	41.1
female candidates	41.2	17.5	47.3	33.2
males candidates without leaders	19.8	24.1	53.9	28.9
females candidates without leaders	31.5	17.5	47.3	28.9

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