Women's Struggle for Legislative Power: The Role of Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the literature on aspects of the electoral process that prevent women from being elected to public office in greater numbers. It focuses on Canada, discussing the barriers that women encounter during the candidate recruitment and selection processes, particularly those related to political parties and constituency-level executives.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente un aperçu de la littérature sur les aspects du processus électoral qui empêche les femmes d'être élues en plus grand nombre. Il se concentre sur le Canada, discute des barrières que les femmes rencontrent lors du recrutement des candidats et du processus de sélection, particulièrement ceux reliés aux partis politiques et aux cadres au niveau de la circonscription.

A substantial body of research demonstrates that the road to political power remains blocked by barriers that vary according to gender. The goal of this paper is to present a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature on women's political involvement. It focuses on the barriers encountered during the candidate recruitment and selection process, particularly those related to political parties and their constituency-level executives as possible gatekeepers to women's access to legislative power.

According to Tremblay and Pelletier (1995), there are four stages in obtaining political power: (1) eligibility; (2) recruitment; (3) selection and; (4) election. However, not every stage represents the same degree of difficulty. First, eligibility is no longer an obstacle in Canada, as in most of the world. Second, once women have been selected as candidates, they have at least as much chance of being elected as their male counterparts (Groeneman 1983; Hunter and Denton 1984; Nelson and Chowdhury 1994; Pelletier and Tremblay 1992; Tremblay 1995). The search for answers in regard to women's political under-representation thus becomes very complex because the remaining impediments, most of which stem from the candidate-recruitment and -selection process, are informal and subtle.

THE CANDIDATE-RECRUITMENT PROCESS

In order to run for office a person must first be recruited and then selected by a political party. The recruitment process consists of identifying people who may aspire to political involvement. More precisely, the process seeks people in the greater population or among party activists who may be interested or could be convinced to run for office. However, there are many barriers between the personal will to run for office and becoming a candidate.

Norris (1997) believes that the demographic composition of decision-making institutions reflects both a problem of supply and demand. On the supply side, the political scene may be male-dominated because few women offer to become candidates. Local party élites cannot recruit and nominate female candidates if there are no women from whom to choose in the larger pool of political aspirants. In order to have more women "offer" to become candidates, two elements are crucial: political capital and motivation. Political capital includes financial resources and also networks, political experience, education, and political aptitudes. Unfortunately, women may not have developed - or at least feel that they have not developed - as much political capital as their male counterparts. For that reason, they may be unequipped for running for office. Political motivation refers to "the drive which makes aspirants want to stand" (Norris 1997, 13). It varies greatly from one individual to the next; the reasons may be personal, professional, altruistic, family tradition, and so on. While Norris believes a candidate's motivation principally comes from a person's "individual psychological drive," Fowler (1993) argues that it is, above all, structured by the institutional context. That is, an individual may choose to run in a given context but not in another. Norris also suggests that social as well as structural barriers may influence not only women's motivation to run for office, but also their perception as to when the conditions for doing so are appropriate.

A number of Canadian studies have looked at the different aspects of women's lives that may limit their ability to develop political capital or influence their motivation to run for office (Andrew 1984; Bashevkin 1991; Brodie 1985). The social obstacles which may influence women's ability or will to "offer" to become candidates may be summed up in three categories: (1) the sexual division of labour (in the home and in the workplace); (2) the public-private dichotomy and; (3) sexual identity (MacIvor 1996). When all these barriers are considered, it is not surprising that few women actually choose to run for office.

Still, Epstein (1988) argues that we must be careful about explaining women's lack of political involvement by socialization and the gendered division of labour; it amounts to blaming women for their own absence. While it is important to take social barriers into account, MacIvor believes that more weight should be given to obstacles relating to the political system itself: "We have to stop looking at women as if they were politically defective. The blame lies with the gendered structures of power in our society, and with the male-dominated political system, not with women themselves" (1996, 245). Blaming women's exclusion on their unwillingness to be candidates implies that political parties and other political institutions recruit and encourage all citizens equally without regard to gender. Political parties, and especially the political élites who control the recruitment and selection of candidates, determine the rules, the procedures, and often the criteria according to which candidates will be recruited. The perceptions of local party élites about important characteristics for political life guide their choice among aspiring potential candidates.

After recruitment by a political party, the second part of the process consists of determining "which citizens from the pool of those recruited into political activity are deemed to be qualified for a political position and put up as candidates" (UN 1992, 40). In fact, this selection process not only determines which names will be on the ballot, but also who will have legislative power and who will form the government. Unlike the formally institutionalized electoral system, the selection process mostly stems from "informal power struggles, which are crystallized in the nomination process" (Tremblay and Pelletier 1995, 38). The factors that underlie the nomination of candidates are not well understood, for it is difficult to generalize about a process which varies greatly from one case to the next, and there seem to be important gaps between the written rules and the actual practices. Each party has its own goals and procedures, and variations in the recruitment and selection processes produce different types of candidates (Norris 1997; Rahat and Hazan 2001).

Although some may be inclined to believe that localized nominations are more favourable to female candidates because women are more often involved at the community level, others argue that a more centralized process may increase the number of female candidates and may also offer more structured opportunities for women to climb the internal party hierarchy (Krashinsky and Milne 1985 & 1986; Matland and Studlar 1996). By moving from the bottom to the top of the party ladder, women may be in a position to be rewarded for their long-time party involvement with a nomination for an election. A more rule-oriented approach or institutionalized candidate-recruitment process might also make it easier for newcomers to understand the process. Institutionalization prevents arbitrary dismissal of candidates in favour of others. In the absence of institutionalized selection processes, candidates seeking nomination may rely more heavily on personal political capital to be recruited. According to Caul, "if the rules do not overtly discriminate against women, women might have a better chance in a highly institutionalized environment" (1999, 81).

Constituencies in Canada rely on decentralized nomination practices, which is not surprising considering the regional character of Canadian politics (Carty and Erickson 1991; Cross 2001; Sayers 1999). Traditionally, the selection process has been organized and controlled by riding executives whose members resent any interference from the central party. Until recently, the nomination process involved small groups of local party élites designating those they believed had the best chance to win the election. Today, efforts have been made to open up the process and make it more democratic. Candidate selection is still locally based, but grass roots party members now select the candidate in a multi-round vote.

Tremblay and Pelletier (1995) argue that the selection process still does not live up to its own "ideal of impartiality." Although the process claims to seek the "best person" to represent the interests of the constituents, "it stems from criteria and is led by people whose objectives" do not necessarily meet those of gender representation at every level of political institutions. If candidate selection were, in fact, a neutral stage of the political process, legislatures would better reflect the actual population.

Because women usually have not developed as much political capital as their male counterparts, they may be disadvantaged by the current process. Without the support of the party organization and the "selectorate," it is difficult - if not impossible - to make it to the political scene (Young 2000). The selection process is thus the real "strong point" for political integration. Some authors suggest that this observation holds particularly true for women because parties simply do not encourage women to run (Brodie 1985;

Burrell 1993; Erickson 1991; Maillé 1990). By contrast, Carroll argues that obstacles linked to the candidate-selection process are unfavourable to female candidates not for sexist reasons but rather because of the rules of the game:

> Barriers in the existing political opportunity structure work to keep outsiders out, regardless of gender, and to perpetuate the power of those who hold political positions. Since those who are in power are disproportionately men, the present structure of political opportunity helps to maintain the power of those men. Because far fewer women than men presently hold elective office, the barriers in the political opportunity structure work against women as a group to a far greater extent than they work against men. (1994, 158-9)

Consequently, it becomes a vicious cycle for women. Since they are excluded from the political process, their interests are also marginalized and the only way to reverse the cycle is to integrate political structures. For women, the situation amounts to systemic discrimination, much of which emanates from political parties.

THE RULES OF THE ELECTORAL GAME

Significant structural barriers are related to parties' responses to the electoral system and its characteristics, such as the form of ballot used and the rate of legislative turnover. Studies have shown that proportional representation systems elect more female officeholders than a first-past-the-post system like that used in Canada, Great Britain, the United States, and Australia's House of Representatives, as many as three to four times more female representatives than in other countries with similar political cultures (Arscott 1995; Duverger 1955; Matland and Studlar 1996; Mossuz-Lavau and Sineau 1984; Rule 2001; Shvedova 1998).

Political parties in proportional systems may be more willing to run female candidates because they are able to present more than one candidate per riding (Lovenduski and Norris 1989; Moncrief and Thompson 1992; Studlar and Welch 1991; Welch and Studlar 1990). By contrast, when only one person per riding can be elected, and when assumptions concerning the preferences of the electorate are taken into account, party élites are less likely to "risk" selecting female candidates. Parties in a proportional representation system may also choose to include women on their party lists in order to broaden the party's appeal. However, if political parties are serious about wanting to increase female representation, they must be willing to place women's names in favourable positions on the party list. The candidate selection process is also more centralized in proportional representation systems, which may translate into greater opportunities for women (Caul 1999).

Another problem related to the electoral system may be the legislative turnover rate. Krashinsky and Milne (1985 & 1986) found that incumbent members are less likely to face a contested nomination, an obvious advantage. They also noticed that few incumbents leave their seats voluntarily. Aspiring candidates thus have little chance of being nominated when competing for nomination against an incumbent (Pelletier and Tremblay 1992). In Canada, there are no limits to the number of terms in the House of Commons or provincial legislatures; it must also be noted that most incumbents who run for re-election are male. When the number of "open" seats (where the incumbent is not running) is limited, political parties are less likely to select women; conversely, the higher the turnover rate, the higher the proportion of female candidates (Garand 1991).

The legislative turnover rate may be least positive for Canadian women at the provincial level. In New Brunswick, for example, governing parties have won two to three consecutive strong majorities and each time the level of incumbency remained high. During the 1999 provincial election, the New Brunswick Liberal Party, which had governed since 1987, had 35 incumbents running for re-election out of 55, thus leaving very few open seats to be contested at the nomination stage. At the federal level, however, the legislative turnover rate is relatively high, so the overall context for nominations may, in fact, be quite positive for women in Canada (Erickson 1993; Young 1991).

POLITICAL PARTIES

No matter what the electoral system in place, the form of ballot used, or the rate of legislature turnover, it finally boils down to the "will of political parties" to select female candidates (Beckwith 1992). Parties are responsible for the recruitment, selection and election of candidates. They are in charge of finding and motivating aspiring candidates to run for nomination and then giving candidates the necessary resources to run their campaign. As MacIvor (1996, 241) puts it, "if parties deny women a realistic chance to run for office, numerical under-representation is inevitable."

While some parties are well aware of the problem of women's political under-representation and adopt initiatives to ensure greater female participation, other parties seem to be less enthusiastic. Initiatives can take the form of quotas, target numbers, or affirmative

action measures. They are also important indicators of a party's eagerness to solve the problem of women's political exclusion. After the Norwegian Labour Party introduced gender quotas in 1983, the number of women nominated increased from 33 in 1981 to 51 by 1989 (Matland 1995). In Canada, the New Democratic Party (NDP) is the most obvious defender of gender equity in representation. In the 2000 Federal Election, the NDP had the highest proportion of female candidates (88 / 298); the Bloc Québécois had 18 women out of its 75 candidates, followed by the Liberals (65/301), the Progressive Conservatives (PC) (39/291), and the Alliance (29/298).

The implementation of formal rules to increase women's representation depends on both party organization and party ideology. When a party is highly centralized, the leader can create opportunities for women - it is a matter of having the will to promote female candidates. What is more, it is easier to hold centralized parties accountable for women's political integration (Caul 1999). When seeking better representation, marginalized groups may have more success when they have only one target, the central party organization. In a more decentralized setting, women seeking better representation would have to put pressure at every level of the party organization, making accountability almost impossible.

While a party's organizational structure can influence its ability to enforce rules for gender or minority representation, whether it chooses to do so or not is a product of its ideology. Although right-wing parties may include female candidates because they view women as "an important societal group - as mothers, as workers, as religious adherents," left-wing parties with a more egalitarian standpoint can be expected to support more equal gender representation as such (Beckwith 1992, 10). A left-wing party is also more likely to see the need to intervene in order to help under-represented groups than right-wing parties, which might see special measures as a form of discrimination because they imply not treating everyone the same (Erickson 1997; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Tremblay and Pelletier 2000 & 2001; Young 2000).

Pitre's work in New Brunswick lends credence to this idea. While NDP local riding executives were very supportive of the idea that their party adopt special measures to increase women's representation, the PCs showed very strong resistance to the idea. Liberals could be found somewhere between the two. At the time of the 1999 New Brunswick provincial election, the NDP was the only party to have specific representation guidelines concerning gender, and it was also the party with the highest female representation among its candidates. They ran 50.9 percent women (28/55), while the Liberals and the PCs had 14.5 percent (8/55) and 18.2 percent (10/55) female candidates respectively (Pitre

forthcoming). In Ontario the unexpected election of the NDP in 1990 significantly increased the proportion of women in the Provincial Parliament, from 15 to 22 percent; in 1995, the PC victory brought the proportion of female Members of the Provincial Parliament (MPPs) back down to 15 percent.

Lovenduski and Norris (1993), however, are not convinced that party ideology still plays a determining role in the election of female candidates. They believe that, today, "contagion from the left" means that all parties are now more open to women be it only to attract new support from female voters. Parties may also be more likely to use female candidates as an electoral strategy when they are facing a crisis. As Epstein (1988, 13) writes: "When political parties lose power and need new members to bolster their resources and do the work (or need work done cheaply, e.g., as volunteers), women are welcomed." In Canada as well, political parties in search of legitimacy seem to be opening up to women (Tremblay, Pelletier [with Pitre] forthcoming; Young 2000).

According to Darcy, Welch and Clark (1994, 187), political parties in single-member district electoral systems would have much to gain by centralizing control over the nomination process. The authors believe that greater central party control over candidate nomination should be "combined with greater participation of women in selecting committees." This supports Caul's (1999) point concerning female party militancy. In her opinion, it is much easier for women to make their demands for greater representation known once they have moved into at least the lower ranks of partisan organizations. She believes that women's involvement as local executives, party organizers, members of the women's associations, and officeholders should increase women's power within the party. Sainsbury (1993) concurs; the number of female activists within a party can positively influence the number of elected female representatives.

However, while Caul believes that greater female involvement within the party can give women more opportunities to lobby in favour of better female representation, Young (2000) argues that a woman would have to be a feminist or at least a feminist sympathizer in order to lobby for such demands. In the same vein, Tremblay and Pelletier (2001) maintain that although the gender of party élites, especially that of local riding chairs, may be important factors in the recruitment of female candidates, feminist consciousness is the most significant indicator of women's representation. In fact, their results suggest that, in the Canadian context at least, more feminists on local riding executives, be they male or female, would be a better strategy to increase the number of women running for office. That is because constituency

executives, more so than party organizations, act as gatekeepers to women's political involvement.

CONSTITUENCY EXECUTIVES

Over the last ten years, the role of constituency executives in the candidate recruitment and selection process has been under close scrutiny. Studies have shown that when women express an interest in running, they face resistance mostly from local party establishments (Brodie 1991; Erickson and Carty 1991; Lovenduski and Norris 1989; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Tremblay and Pelletier 2001). Looking at the attitudes, values and priorities of the local selectors, Norris (1997) argues that these people are the real gatekeepers to women's political involvement. They may limit women's access to the political scene via control over both organizational and financial support. Because women usually have not developed the same political resources and networks as their male counterparts, organizational and financial support from the constituency party associations is all the more important. To have a reasonable chance of winning a contested nomination, candidates need financial assistance. In Canada, nomination campaigns are not regulated by electoral law and most parties have refused to establish any spending limit on local nominations. The costs of running for nomination can rise to several thousands of dollars, which may translate into one more obstacle for women since the gendered division of labour means that women are more often employed in lower-paying jobs. Because the costs of a nomination campaign are not refundable or, as in New Brunswick, parties may only refund nomination expenses in case of a victory - women may think twice before engaging in a race. Accordingly, some authors argue that nomination expenses should be refunded or limited (Brodie 1985; Tremblay 2000-2001).

Early research suggested that local executives are more likely to nominate women as candidates in ridings where the party stands little or no chance of winning (Bashevkin 1993; Hunter and Denton 1984). In other words, women might end up running in non-competitive or so-called "lost-cause" ridings where male candidates would not run, with women merely as "token candidates." Pelletier and Tremblay (1992) found this proposition difficult to substantiate in Quebec. In fact, their results show that once the political party is taken into account, women who make it onto the ballot as candidates have as much chance of being elected as their male counterparts - if not more. Studlar and Matland (1994 & 1996) also refuted the idea of women as "sacrificial lamb" candidates. Not only is the electorate's perception of female candidates not unfavourable, it may sometimes even be quite positive (Groeneman 1983; Tremblay 1995). Nonetheless, once

women have been recruited, they are still more likely to face contested nominations than are male candidates, especially in ridings where the party has a decent chance of winning (Erickson 1991).

Tremblay and Pelletier (1995) further argue that women running for nomination may also face hostile and even disloyal attitudes on the part of local party executives during their nomination campaign. These attitudes may be the result of direct and even indirect discrimination on the part of constituency executives. Local party élites may influence some people to come forward, or discourage others from doing so; they may rally behind a specific candidate, help to create a network and even help during the electoral campaign. In fact, they jealously guard the candidate nomination process. The perceptions of local party élites concerning what constitute important characteristics for political life guide their choice among aspiring potential candidates (Norris 1997). Although some may emphasize party service, others may look at previous political experience or financial resources. Candidates may be recruited on the basis of their class, ethnicity, race, or even gender. There are no predetermined rules; the favourable characteristics vary from one political system to the next, from one political culture to the next, even from one riding to the other. For example, in some northern ridings of New Brunswick where the Francophone population predominates, it may be important for local riding executives to find a bilingual candidate, while in Anglophone ridings it may not be an issue.

In Canada, the ideal candidate is financially well-off, middle-aged - rarely young - most often white and almost exclusively male. The informal model of the candidate does not necessarily mean that local party élites are consciously prejudiced against aspiring female candidates (Shvedova 1998). In the case of Atlantic Canada, for example, in some rural ridings where fishery or farming is an important aspect of the local economy, local party élites may feel that the best person to represent the interests and needs of the constituency would be a fisherman or farmer, a description that very few women fit. In an urban riding, local search committees may be tempted to seek candidates who are lawyers, business leaders or local politicians, all areas that women in Atlantic Canada are just starting to integrate into. In general, local riding associations are inspired by an informal model candidate or *homo politicus* which very few women seem to match (Norris and Lovenduski 1989, 94; Studlar and McAllister 1991).

Constituency party executives may also discriminate directly against aspiring female candidates by evaluating them according to stereotypes about the proper roles and capacities of the female gender. "This involves assumptions being made about all women candidates which may or may not be true either in

general or in the case of the applicant in question" (Lovenduski and Norris 1989, 535). For example, local party élites may overlook female candidates with young children, assuming that they would not have enough time to devote to the party. In the same vein, the local selectorate could abstain from seeking female candidates to represent their party because they consider that women do not have the abilities to manage public affairs. Local party élites may also discriminate indirectly, by "defining the role of the candidate in such a way that, whilst not explicitly choosing candidates on grounds of gender, selection committees will tend to favour men" (Lovenduski and Norris 1989, 535).

Moreover, even if some women do fit the bill and make it to the nomination meeting, they may also face such sexist obstacles as having to look their best and being judged and criticized on this basis, as well as having their candidacy belittled, or constantly having to prove they are worthy politicians. In sum, indirect discrimination may "take a variety of forms and will arise from the normal practices of the selection committee rather than from any explicit prejudice against women candidates. For just that reason it may prove an intractable problem" (Lovenduski and Norris 1989, 537). In fact, these authors believe that the problem rather lies "with the constraints arising from the general position of women in society and with extra-party cultural preconceptions about women's role." If local riding executives recruit the candidates, the values of their political culture set the pace of the political process and may even legitimize certain practices such as the exclusion of women. In the case of Atlantic Canada, the stereotype of a traditional political culture has now been discredited (Kenny 1999; Stewart 1994; Young 1986-87), which leaves us to look afresh for cultural hurdles.

CONCLUSION

Obstacles to women's political integration have generated a growing body of literature since the beginning of the 1970s. While the first generation of studies focused on gender-specific social and psychological barriers to political involvement, more recent studies have started to look at the systemic obstacles in the electoral process. The studies presented here show that while social factors may still limit women's ability or willingness to stand as candidates, one must not fall into the trap of blaming women for their own political exclusion. As the growing number of women involved in the political arena seem to suggest, such supply-side barriers are not impossible to overcome.

There are also important demand-side obstacles to consider. The studies discussed show that systemic barriers relating to the rules of the political game and the political parties also play a determining role in the recruitment and selection of female candidates. Parties can create either opportunities or obstacles to women's political integration. While central party organizations can implement measures or have goals to increase female representation within their ranks, constituency-level party executives also play a determining role. They run the candidate search process and then organize the screening of these candidacies through the riding-level nomination meeting; they control the demand for candidates. Their attitudes toward female candidates are thus crucial in women's struggle for legislative power. Without the genuine support of local party executives, women will continue to be conspicuous by their absence.

As explained by Norris (1997, 14), the demand for and the supply of female candidates are tightly intertwined: "the political system sets the general context, the recruitment process sets the steps from aspiration to nomination, while selectors demand and candidate supply determine the outcome." In order to have significant change in the proportion of women contesting nominations, much change is needed at every level of this equation. Unfortunately, most research dealing with women's political exclusion focuses on the federal level or on Québec or Ontario. It would be interesting to see whether women all over Canada face the same barriers or if aspiring female candidates in the Atlantic Provinces face a particularly chilly climate, as their limited presence at both the federal and provincial levels would suggest.

Acknowledging the presence of impediments is the first step toward levelling the playing field. The second challenge is to come up with viable or concrete solutions to this obvious breach in democracy. One lead to be considered is some sort of consciousness-raising among local party executives about the nomination process. It must be brought to their attention that we cannot talk about the actual selection process as a democratic one - or as an effective way of selecting the "best person" for the job - when half of the population still has not had equal opportunity to be part of the race.

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