

Women's

Political Representation & Electoral Systems

September 2016

Federal Context

Parity has been achieved in federal cabinet, but women remain under-represented in Parliament.

- Canada ranks 62nd Internationally for women's political representation in its national Parliament.
- Just 26% of federal Members of Parliament are women.

Change over time has been slow.

- Nationally, women's representation increased by just one percentage point after the 2015 federal election.
- At this rate, Equal Voice has projected that it will take up to 90 years before we see gender parity among Members of Parliament.

Women are not running for office in equal numbers as men.

- Women made up just 33% of candidates in the 2015 federal election and in 98 of Canada's 338 federal ridings, the candidates for the major three parties were men.

Key Recommendations

The review and decision-making process regarding electoral reform in the federal arena should recognize and consider the impact on women's representation of all parts of the electoral system.

- This should include a consideration of the different effects on the *number of women* and the *amount women can do to address issues* that disproportionately affect women.

Changes to the federal nomination process and not just the voting process should be evaluated and implemented.

An on-going consideration of retention issues and political culture is necessary to increase the representation of women in Canada.

Written by

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Purpose of this Overview

Many Canadians are grappling with the prospect of changes to Canada's First Past the Post electoral system. The current consultation phase represents an enormous opportunity to better understand the limitations and opportunities of electoral systems generally. This overview generated by Equal Voice articulates the strengths and weaknesses of three categories of electoral systems that are being considered by parties, non-governmental organizations, and the media. It is designed to promote an enhanced understanding among Canadians of what is at stake for women in this process. We expect it will also serve as a catalyst for further dialogue.

Fundamentally, given that, in 2016, women are major contributors to all aspects of Canadian society, it is clear we need far more of them to lend their energy and expertise to politics. Women currently comprise just 26 percent of federal Members of Parliament. Just three of Canada's 13 premiers are women. Canada ranks 62nd internationally for women's representation in national Parliaments. We can and must do better.

As a national, multi-partisan organization, Equal Voice is not in a position to endorse a particular electoral system. This said, we believe in devising a made-in-Canada solution that considers the effects of any and all changes to the political process writ large on women's participation in politics.



“While political parties are key in this process, they are not the only factor and they alone cannot fix what is broken.”

What we know is that at every stage of the current system, there is a significant opportunity to improve the conditions under which women opt into politics, particularly as prospective candidates. While political parties are key in this process, they are not the only factor and they alone cannot fix what is broken.

In general, many aspects of politics must change if the electoral arena is to be regarded by many more women as a rewarding and realistic proposition that leverages their talents and leadership abilities.

As this overview emphasizes, the current nomination process overseen by the respective federal parties is, without a doubt, one of the major barriers/opportunities available to women who seek to become candidates.

The adoption of a new electoral system could also hold significant promise for women in Canada. But it is all in the design. As this overview reveals, no system is perfect and, therefore, it is crucial that Canadians pay close attention to the details of the discussion and what it means for women in Canadian politics.

‘Women’s Political Representation’

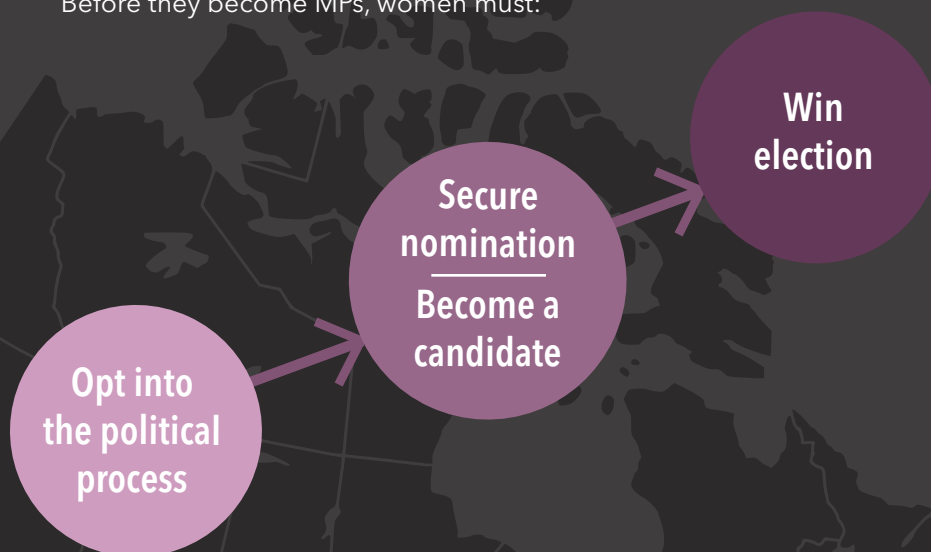
Women’s political representation is usually understood in terms of the number of women elected – this is also called **descriptive representation**. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Canada currently ranks 62nd internationally with women making up just 26% of MPs. The representation of women has increased slowly over time and was up just one percentage point following the 2015 election.

Women’s political representation may also be understood as the representation of issues or interests that disproportionately affect women, like sexual assault or domestic violence. This is called **substantive representation**.

Descriptive representation and substantive representation are **distinct but connected** – women in politics are more likely to view themselves as representatives of women. They also do more than men to prioritize policy issues that have important and distinct effects on women’s lives.

Women in the Political Process

Before they become MPs, women must:



Barriers to equality of participation and representation can occur at any of these three steps on the way to becoming an MP.

Women and Electoral Systems

Electoral systems can be grouped broadly into three types:

**1 Majoritarian/
plurality systems**
First-past-the-post (FPTP),
two round systems (TRS),
and alternative vote (AV).

2 Mixed systems
Mixed member (MMP)
and parallel systems (PS)

3 Proportional systems
List proportional
representation (PR) and
single transferable vote
(STV).

Women's **descriptive representation** is typically higher under **proportional representation** systems. According to the United Nations, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Global Database of Quotas for Women, worldwide women hold more than 25% of seats in countries that use proportional electoral systems and less than 20% in those countries that use plurality/majority systems. Mixed systems fall in the middle with women's representation sitting at nearly 23% on average.

Why does PR increase women's representation?

District magnitude, i.e. the number of seats per constituency is larger in proportional representation system than it is in plurality or majoritarian systems. This means that parties can more easily balance their candidates between women and men in any given constituency. Parties may do so because it is important to them or to appeal to voters who want to see more equality in politics. When one party balances their electoral lists, other parties are also pressured to do so – a phenomenon called contagion.

A greater district magnitude also means that parties do not need to choose between running an incumbent or a qualified male candidate and running a woman – they can do both. Because most incumbents are men, incumbency is often considered the glass ceiling for women in politics. A larger district magnitude makes it easier to break through this barrier.

List PR and a larger district magnitude are also easier to combine with proactive policies to increase women's representation. Quotas may be voluntary – where some parties commit to running a certain proportion of women – or they may be legislated – where all parties are required to have a minimum number of women on their lists.

Preferential Voting — a majoritarian system

Preferential Voting, also called Alternative Vote (AV) or instant run-off belongs to the same family as the current FPTP system. The major difference is that voters can indicate preferences between candidates (ranking them 1, 2, 3 etc) and a majority rather than a simple plurality of votes is required to win. District magnitude, however, is still one. This means that parties can only run one candidate per riding. As a result, parties will not be able to ensure gender balance between candidates in any given riding and new women entering politics will not be able to run alongside incumbents. As such, **women's descriptive representation is not likely to increase significantly without enacting other changes to the nomination process and the political system writ large.**

In Australia, for example, the lower House of Representatives currently uses an Alternative Vote system and just 26.7% of representatives are women. The Senate, however, uses Single Transferable Vote, a proportional system, and women comprise more than 38% of its representatives.

Mixed Member Proportionality

MMP combines list PR with First-Past-the Post. In these systems, the winner-take all constituencies, where one MP represents a geographic area, is combined with some form of PR to compensate for the disproportionality of our current system. The Law Commission of Canada recommended MMP in their 2004 report ***Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada***. Because this mixed system includes an element of list PR, it could increase women's political representation. As the Law Commission acknowledged, however, such a system would not, itself, result in long-term, sustainable increase to women's participation and representation. Issues around retention, nomination, and parity on PR lists would also play a major role.

But proportional representation is not sufficient.

Political culture and retention of women MPs once they are elected also matter.

Countries with the highest level of representation tend to have PR and use proactive measures like quotas.

For example, before Ireland adopted a quota, women comprised just 16% of representatives in its Lower house despite the use of an STV proportional system. In February 2016, the first election using its quota system was held and women's representation increased to 22%. This is still well below the representation of women in Canada under a plurality system.

Diversity and List PR – Consequences for Representation

While list PR systems are associated with the election of more women, they are not one thing. Rather, these systems are extremely diverse and vary on multiple dimensions:

District magnitude:
how many representatives are elected per constituency?

Determining the party list:
who controls access to and rank on the party list – party leadership, party members, or voters at large?

Who voters vote for:
do voters vote for a party or an individual candidate?

How voters indicate a preference between candidates:
can citizens indicate a preference for more than one candidate? Can voters express preferences for candidates in different parties?

How preference votes are counted:
can votes cast for individual candidates actually change the order of the list provided by the party? In other words, are lists open or closed?

For example, in the PR portion of Germany's mixed system, voters pick a party but cannot express a preference for an individual candidate. In the Netherlands, voters can indicate a preference for a *single* candidate, while voters in Belgium can indicate a preference for multiple candidates in the same party. Voters in Switzerland have the most choice and can vote for candidates from multiple parties and can even cross out candidates or vote for a candidate more than once.

Even though voters in Belgium and the Netherlands can express preferences for candidates, these votes rarely change the order of the list established by the party. In Brazil and Finland, on the other hand, the candidates elected from a given party depend on the number of votes they receive as individuals. In Spain, lists are determined by parties and cannot be changed by voters.

These differences are not mechanical or minor details. ***They have major consequences for women's political representation.***

PR systems with larger district magnitudes have higher levels of women's representation. Studies also show that when parties maintain control over who is elected, women do better. For example, if parties determine the composition and rank on the electoral list and lists are hard to change, more women are elected. This may be because parties use their influence to run more women to match party values or to appeal to or meet the expectations of voters.

New research undertaken by Dr. Grace Lore at the University of British Columbia finds that while these features of a PR list system increase descriptive representation, they simultaneously decrease substantive representation. Lore's multi-year study, using extensive statistical analysis and in-depth interviews with women in politics in seven countries, reveals that more party control over the election of candidates in PR systems reduces the amount individual women can do to pursue women's issues, specifically, once elected.

“

[...] women do more to represent and pursue issues that disproportionately affect women.”

This may be because women must focus on party priorities to ensure their re-election. On the other hand, greater voter control over who is elected increases the power of the electorate and frees politicians from strict party discipline. In these systems, Lore's research found that women do more to represent women and spend more time on issues that disproportionately affect their lives.

However, weakening the party's role has the effect of decreasing descriptive representation - the number of women. Given the political head start that many of their male colleagues have in the form of social capital, the so-called old boys club, incumbency advantages, and differential resources, including the gendered wage gap, women appear to have a harder time overcoming barriers to participation when they rely on personal rather than party votes.

In other words, the detailed features of a list PR system matter for women's representation and differentially affects descriptive and substantive representation. For this reason, **a consideration of women in politics and the input of groups concerned with women's representation must be incorporated at all stages of the review and decision-making process, from the type of electoral system to the more mechanical details of how that system will work.**

The Nomination Process: A critical barrier to equality of participation and representation

Before they run in an election, women must first become candidates. In the 2015 election, fewer than one-third of candidates were women and there were 98 ridings where all of the candidates for the dominant three parties (Liberal, New Democrat, and Conservative) were men. More women will not be elected unless more women run, and any review of the electoral system should examine the nomination process.

Women have reported that the cost and lack of predictability and transparency of the nomination process is, for some, a major disincentive. ***Changes to the electoral system can and should include changes to the nomination process.***

Some proactive measures have been successful at the candidacy stage. The NDP has instituted a practice of holding off on nominations until riding associations have demonstrated that they have sought out women and other under-represented groups. This strategy has been successful – in 2015, 43% of the candidates running for the NDP were women compared to just 31% of Liberals and less than 20% of Conservatives.

In the UK, the Labour party holds nomination races that are reserved for women called “all-women shortlists”. This maintains a competitive process while ensuring women run in winnable ridings under the Labour party banner. This strategy has also been successful. Since the 2015 election, women have made up 43% of the Labour party caucus compared to just 20% of the governing Conservative party.

After Election: Retaining Women MPs

Once women self-select into the political process, become candidates, and win elections, they can choose to run again or not. Ongoing consideration of how to improve parliamentary life for MPs with families, the strain of travel, and issues around confrontation, aggressive, or even sexist political culture can ensure that women, once they opt in, stay in the political system. We commend the work of PROC committee and encourage a consideration and adoption of a more family-friendly legislature.