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# A Quebec Perspective on Women in Politics

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by Charlotte L'Écuyer, MNA

*Women currently hold 40 of the 122 seats in the Quebec National Assembly. In the April 2003 election, there was a remarkable 7.2% increase in the number of women elected, the second largest increase in Quebec's contemporary parliamentary history. While there has been considerable progress women still occupy significantly fewer positions. This article considers some of the obstacles to increasing the number of women in politics including the organization of political parties and the electoral system. It also looks at the impact of women in politics and some recent government initiatives in Quebec.*



Let me review some factors that may prevent women from getting involved in politics. Institutional barriers are the first such factors. Traditionally, the political system has placed obstacles in the path of women considering political careers because its values are rooted in conflict and coercion, whereas women generally prefer discussion and consensus building.

Thus the political system is not as attractive for women as it is for men. As one speaker at an Interparliamentary Union symposium in 1989 succinctly put it “whether explicitly or subtly, the philosophy of power and the language and rules of politics are still defined by men”.<sup>1</sup>

In 1994, Quebec's *Conseil du statut de la femme* even evoked the possibility of a “certain male conspiracy” limiting the evolution of our institutions and political cul-

ture and the number of women in government. The Council did not accept or reject the conspiracy idea, but simply reported that certain researchers had suggested it as a possible explanation.

In a 2003 survey, the Quebec *Secrétariat à la condition féminine* found that women and women's organizations felt that the political system—with its emphasis on economic development rather than social progress—was an unwelcoming and hard-to-access environment for women, who tend to share “social” values and work in the “social” sphere, notably healthcare, social services, and education.

Party discipline in parliament also plays a role by limiting women's ability to join forces with members of other parties to defend women's issues, although discipline can also be an advantage for women when party members get a particular point included in the party program. This makes it an issue that all party representatives, men and women alike, are required to defend.

Sexism has not completely disappeared from the candidate nomination process either. It may take the shape of maneuvers to discredit a housewife seeking nomination. Sexism is all the more present in electoral districts deemed winnable by the party in question. However, it is not customary in Quebec to “save” women candidates for ridings where there is no chance of victory.

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Job type and career prestige are major factors in party candidate selection. Since women are often less active than men from a career perspective, and less numerous in management positions, they also have fewer opportunities to develop the kind of high-profile professional reputation that political parties look for. Male party members are much more likely to be asked to run for office than their female counterparts.

Economic barriers are a second factor. In 1988, a study of the women members of the National Assembly and Montreal City Council found that nomination and election financing was not a major obstacle for Quebec women seeking to get involved in politics. In this area, women in Quebec probably have an advantage over their counterparts in the rest of Canada. Indeed, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (the 1991 "Lortie Commission") found that in a federal election campaign, many women consider the nomination a much greater challenge than the election itself.

It would seem that the financing rules introduced under the Quebec *Election Act* in 1977 have had a positive impact on how political parties select candidates. The main Quebec parties have all adopted rules limiting nomination spending to keep it within reasonable limits. This prevents candidates from using personal fortunes to buy their way into politics.

Since 1977 only individual voters have been allowed to make donations to political parties. The *Election Act* bans contributions by companies, corporations, unions, and associations. The Act also imposes a \$3,000 ceiling on individual contributions, limits party and candidate campaign spending, and provides for reimbursement of party election expenses and for party financing under certain conditions.

Cultural barriers are a third factor. Even today, women assume a greater share of household and family responsibilities than men, and many have limited availability for public life. In a 1999 survey of parliamentarians in Ottawa and Quebec City, a number of women declared that they delayed their entry into politics in order to attend to the childcare and education needs of their children. No men had any such story.

The following quote from a European Union document probably comes quite close to describing the situation in Quebec: "The sharing of household tasks is not yet the norm. Women still handle most domestic and educational chores and have little time to even stay informed or talk politics with their families."<sup>2</sup> However, an interview survey of Parti Québécois and Quebec Liberal Party members found that only 4% of women cited family responsibilities as a reason not to consider seeking nomination.

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## The Impact of Women in Politics

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There is controversy over the real impact of women's presence in politics. Some studies fuel the notion that women and men—parliamentarians and citizens alike—deal with "social" issues differently. Women voters and politicians in the United States have been found to be more liberal than men, especially with respect to government spending, social services, and racial issues.

According to another U.S. study, a greater female presence can also have an impact on the number of laws passed on government spending priorities and issues that affect women. However, other factors may have just as much influence over the type of policies adopted, including political party affiliation, ethnic origin, and identification with feminism. The fact remains that women tend to introduce more health and education bills than men.

In Norway, a study also found that women parliamentarians had different priorities and interests than their male counterparts. The study went much further than that, describing women parliamentarians as having a more people-oriented style. The women interviewed remained on their guard and did not want to appear too different from their male colleagues.

In a similar vein, French and Canadian analysts have affirmed that the presence of women in parliament leads to the modernization of laws on the status of women. Moreover, women parliamentarians reportedly pay more attention to the impact that policies have on the population. Male parliamentarians, in contrast, place more emphasis than their female counterparts on their legislative role. A number of studies also draw attention to women's distinctive parliamentary style and their moderating effect on the warrior-like behavior of their male colleagues.

In keeping with the idea that women humanize politics, a number of female parliamentarians claimed that the presence of women has changed the way politics is practiced, shifting the emphasis from conflict to consensus: Women are said to try to bring people together rather than provoke confrontations. Women parliamentarians apparently find it easier to cooperate because they feel a sense of solidarity rooted in the shared experiences of discrimination they faced as they tried to break into this traditionally masculine arena.<sup>3</sup>

Those who believe women have not had any particular impact on politics claim that their numbers are insufficient to make a real difference, or that they are absent from parliamentary committees with real clout. This opinion echoes the notion that women do not have sufficient critical mass. Another argument to the effect that women do not change the way politics is practiced is re-

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lated to the idea of diversity. According to this view, the large-scale arrival of women would generate no more changes than the election of large numbers of seniors or members of ethnic minorities.

No matter what the assessment of the effects of women's arrival in parliament, one thing seems clear: solidarity between women from different parties is not strong enough to cut across party lines.

In 1995, the action program of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, included a section on the place of women in positions of responsibility and decision making. At the conference, 181 states committed to developing measures to ensure women equal access and full participation in power and decision-making structures.

To meet this objective, certain countries, including France and Belgium, chose legislative means to increase the presence of women in leadership bodies. France adopted the "Parity Act." Other states, including Quebec and Canada, opted for incentives.

In Quebec, in terms of political representation for women, some groups are calling more for incentives and support than legislative measures. Others oppose quotas imposed by law or the Constitution.

The principle of quotas of women is based on the notion that women must be present in certain percentages in the various bodies of state, either on candidate lists, in parliamentary assemblies, in committees, or in government. With the quota system, recruitment does not fall to women themselves, but rather to those responsible for the recruitment process. Today, quotas target 30% to 40% female representation as a minimum "critical minority."<sup>4</sup>

A number of women politicians in Quebec have misgivings regarding legislated quotas. They often express "their discomfort with and opposition to the idea of being singled out in the electoral system and before their elected colleagues, and possibly having people believe they are only there as the result of a special measure."<sup>5</sup>

Among a group of Parti québécois card holding members who responded to a survey in 2000 on political involvement in Quebec, only 20% were in favor of quotas (vs. 58% against). At the time of the survey, the Parti québécois was in power in Quebec. The results for the Quebec Liberal party were nearly identical, with only 21% of members in favor (vs. 50% against). When the survey was carried out, the Liberal Party was the official opposition.

Members from both parties were strongly in favor of setting up government financial support measures or political training courses as means of increasing the number of female candidates running in future elections.

In a study conducted in 2004 on the politicization of youth, Quebecers aged 18 to 30 were against measures such as parity, and even affirmative action for women. They considered qualifications more important than the actual number of elected or appointed women. The issue of elected officials' qualifications or abilities is also by far the main reason members opposed quotas in the 2000 study mentioned earlier. Another important reason, according to the study, was respect for women's freedom. Some women (and even more men) considered quotas antidemocratic.

### Political Parties and Women

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Allow me now to briefly describe the organization of the two main political parties in Quebec in terms of the position of women. The Liberal Party is the only party that has existed since the current Canadian Constitution came into effect on July 1, 1867. The Liberal Party once had an independent women's wing, the Quebec Liberal Women's Federation. Although the federation was dependent on the Party for funding, it was a forum for discussion, awareness, and political training for over twenty years, from 1950 to 1971.

At the Party's annual convention in 1971, Liberal women were successful in having their Federation integrated into the Party itself. The Liberals were forced into this decision because the independent federation had only succeeded in getting one woman, Claire Kirkland, elected to the National Assembly. During the same period, only three women had sat on the party's Executive Committee.

It was also at the 1971 convention that young Liberal Party members successfully called for a third of seats in various governing bodies to be set aside for members of the Youth Commission, made up of young Liberals aged 16 to 25. The Youth Commission quickly became a "training school" for future political assistants, members of parliament, ministers, public relations specialists, and private practice professionals.

In November 1971, Liberal women also secured a type of representation quota in party associations at the electoral district level, as well as at member conventions.

One of the concessions made when the QLWF was swallowed up was that each riding [or electoral district] Liberal association had to ensure that its executive included one female vice president and one member chosen or elected by youth (as well as one male vice president and member), a provision that remains in effect today. In addition, nine men (including three youth) and nine women (including three youth) must be elected to all party conventions.<sup>6</sup>



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Before leadership conventions, which bring some 3,000 party members to elect the party leader, local associations choose a total of 12 men and 12 women to represent them. Under the Quebec Liberal Party's by-laws, the Youth Commission's Coordinating Committee is also gender neutral, with 7 women and 7 men.

There is no statutory parity between women and men for the party's other officials. However, the party is determined to continually improve the place of the women who have been among its ranks for nearly 34 years now, since it brought the Quebec Liberal Women's Federation under its wing.

The Parti québécois was created in 1968 more than one hundred years after its great Liberal rival. It quickly took the place of a party founded in 1935–1936, the Union nationale, itself having earlier replaced the former Conservative Party on the provincial stage. In 1975, a few Montreal-Centre members of the Parti québécois decided to form a committee on women's issues, which came into being in September 1977 under the name *Comité national de la condition féminine*. In September 1980, after sovereignty-association was turned down in the first referendum, the committee changed to become the *Comité d'action politique des femmes*, or the Women's Political Action Committee. The new committee would now focus more on training the party's women members in order to advance the cause of women by getting more of them involved at the grassroots level.

In 1985 and in 2001, when the Parti québécois president stepped down, the Women's Political Action Committee refused to throw its support behind any female candidate in particular in order to avoid denigrating the male candidates. A number of feminist party members disagreed with this decision.

There is a provision in Parti québécois by-laws that makes a general acknowledgement of the need for more equal representation of men and women within the various bodies of the party. The party's statutory provisions on women are therefore neither as precise nor as varied as those of the Liberal Party. However, ever since Jacques Parizeau was leader (1988 to 1996), the National Executive Council has included an equal number of women and men.

Many political parties around the world have voluntarily adopted quotas on the number of women running for election. A report by the Socialist International Women shows that member parties in 55 countries have introduced quotas. The *Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec* has also drawn up a list showing party quotas in 48 of the 80 countries it studies.

In Canada, the federal New Democratic Party has introduced a form of quotas (or rather, an "objective") set-

ting out a 60% minimum for women candidates in electoral districts the NDP has a chance of winning. This excludes ridings in which the incumbent is running for reelection.

Quebec's leading political parties—both the Liberal Party and the Parti québécois—have opted instead for informal targets (not governed by their by-laws) for the number of women running in any given election. This led the *Conseil du statut de la femme* to recommend in 2002 that Quebec's parties adopt recruitment committees made up of equal numbers of women and men in electoral or municipal districts. Another solution would be for parties to add to their by-laws the requirement that local executives consider gender diversity.

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### A Few Quebec Government Initiatives

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I have mentioned the *Conseil du statut de la femme* (CSF) a number of times. It is an independent public body that serves as an advisor to the Government of Quebec on all matters related to equality and respect for the rights and status of women. This advisory council was created by a law passed by the National Assembly in 1973.

In its 2001–2005 strategic plan, the CSF points out that a growing proportion of decisions affecting women's living conditions are made at the local and regional levels. However, women are still very under-represented in municipal political bodies.

The CSF therefore suggests we reopen the debate on the importance of equal representation by women and men in the halls of power. The CSF believes it would be worthwhile to take a careful look at parity in Quebec. It also wishes to inform women—especially young women—about the importance of partaking in power, through information campaigns on the subject.

Another public agency – the *Secrétariat à la condition féminine* (SCF) is charged with fostering government action in support of equality between women and men and ensuring its consistency. The SCF is under the responsibility of the minister of families, seniors, and the status of women, who in turn reports to the premier.

In 1995, its discussion paper "Decentralization, a collective decision," reiterated the importance of involving women in the exercise of power. This wish was reasserted in 1997 in the government policy on the status of women entitled "A Future to Share." A position paper on this policy prepared by *Secrétariat à la condition féminine* addressed the role of women in the development of Quebec's regions. This government policy led to the launch of the program "Equal to Decide" in 1999. It seeks to increase the number of women in decision-making positions in local and regional bodies. To do so, it supports

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nonprofit organizations and native band councils in developing and carrying out “results-oriented projects directly in the field.”

The projects must have one of the following objectives:

- Facilitate and promote women’s access to decision-making positions at all levels
- Increase the pool of female applicants for these positions
- Prepare and train women to fill these positions
- Help keep women in these positions
- Encourage the bodies in question to act to achieve equal representation of men and women in decision-making positions

The program is in effect until 2008 and has an annual budget of \$1 million. It can cover up to 80% of a project’s cost, with a maximum of \$40,000 a year per project.

In December 2004, the Government of Quebec tabled a draft bill in the National Assembly to replace the current *Elections Act*. The bill included incentives to increase the proportion of women in the National Assembly. This draft bill proposes increasing political party funding by the Chief Electoral Officer in proportion to the number of women candidates in each party who ran in the previous election. A party with 30% to 34% of its candidates women in the previous election would receive an additional 5% in funding. For 35% to 39% women candidates, they would receive an additional 10%, and for more than 40% women, 15%.

In the general election on April 14, 2003, 26% of the 125 candidates of Action démocratique du Québec were women while 28% of the Quebec Liberal Party’s 125 candidates were women and 34% of the Parti québécois’. Under the proposed rules, the Parti québécois would have received 5% more in funding. The draft bill also proposes increasing expense reimbursement for female candidates, again based on the number of female candidates running.

These measures would be temporary and would be withdrawn when 50% of seats in the National Assembly are held by women. In addition to replacing the *Elections Act*, the draft bill also proposes changing the voting procedure in Quebec to a new “mixed proportional” system.

Quebec still uses the “first-past-the-post” system (FPTP). This system has been questioned a number of times since the late 1960s, largely due to distorted results in certain elections, particularly the general election of

November 30, 1998. The party that won the most votes in that election still won fewer seats than the runner-up.

In December 2001, the National Assembly’s Standing Committee on Institutions undertook to study the first-past-the-post system and possible alternatives to it. In fall 2002, Quebecers were invited to submit briefs to the National Assembly or convey their opinions through its website. The majority of respondents supported proportional representation.

In their briefs to the Standing Committee on Institutions, several individuals and groups addressed the question of women and representation. The main such brief on the issue came from an organization founded in 2001, *Collectif féminisme et démocratie* (CFD). With the support of the *Fédération des femmes du Québec*, CFD recommended that Quebec institute a compensatory mixed system with 74 seats allocated through a party-list proportional method and 51 seats “independent of parties,” allocated to each of the 17 administrative regions of Quebec by preferential majority.

## Notes

1. Union Interparlementaire, *Symposium interparlementaire sur la participation des femmes au processus de prise de décision dans la vie politique et parlementaire – rapports et conclusions*, (“Rapports et Documents” series, no. 16), Genève, 1989, p. 71.
2. Commission des Communautés européennes, *Femmes et hommes d’Europe aujourd’hui – Les attitudes devant l’Europe et la politique*, Service information femmes, Direction générale audiovisuel, information, communication, culture, 1991, p. 7.
3. See Manon Tremblay and Réjean Pelletier, *Que font-elles en politique?*, Québec, Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1995, pp. 251-252.
4. Julie Ballington and Marie-José Protas (eds), *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002, pg. 108.
5. Lucie Desrochers, *Pour une réelle démocratie de représentation – Avis sur l’accès des femmes dans les structures officielles de pouvoir*, Québec, Conseil du statut de la femme, April 1994, p. 8. Reported in Anne Quénart, Julie Jacques, *Apolitiques, les jeunes femmes?*, Montréal, Les éditions du remue-ménage, 2004, p. 57.
6. Évelyne Tardy, *Premiers résultats – enquête sur les différences de genre dans le militantisme politique (PQ et PLQ)*, Montréal, UQAM, Faculté de science politique et de droit, December 2000, p. 69.