

# Unpacking Gender's Role in Political Representation in Canada

The story of women's political representation in Canada has generally been told as one of progress. While substantial progress has been made, particularly in recent years, there have also been periods of stagnation. In this article, the author interrogates a theory of demand and supply with respect to candidate recruitment strategies. She writes that the undersupply of women candidates does not have to do with voter preferences, but rather partisan selection processes, media-influenced gender norms, and the kinds of issues which dominate political discourse. She concludes that a demand and supply model of political recruitment provides a useful framework for understanding variation in women's political underrepresentation in Canada.

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In recent years much of the research into women's political representation has focussed on the tremendous growth in the number of countries, now standing at over one hundred, that have adopted gender quotas as a means of increasing the number of women in legislatures around the world.<sup>1</sup> But in the absence of such quotas, how well do women do politically? To what extent, for instance, does women's political representation vary in Canada, where there are no formal legislative requirements for ensuring minimal numbers of women candidates on the ballot? And what are the primary forces shaping when and whether women are recruited into politics in Canada, given the absence of any such formal requirements?

A starting point in any domestic examination of women's level of representation is to compare their presence in the national legislature to others around the world. On this measure, Canada's current level in the House of Commons, 25.1 percent, sits 55<sup>th</sup> amongst the 189 countries included in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's classification, behind a diverse set of countries

that includes Rwanda and Senegal (two countries with legislated gender quotas) and Sweden and New Zealand (two without).<sup>2</sup> But such a ranking tells us little about Canadian women's political recruitment over time. Conventional wisdom might suggest that women's levels of political representation have been progressing at a regular pace. *Figure 1* presents the percentage of women elected to the House of Commons since 1917. The overall trend is definitely one of progress, with a particularly strong period of growth between 1980 and 1997. But a closer look also reveals periods of stagnation, the most recent one between 1997 and 2006. So while there has been progress at some political levels, that progress has been neither consistent nor robust at all times.

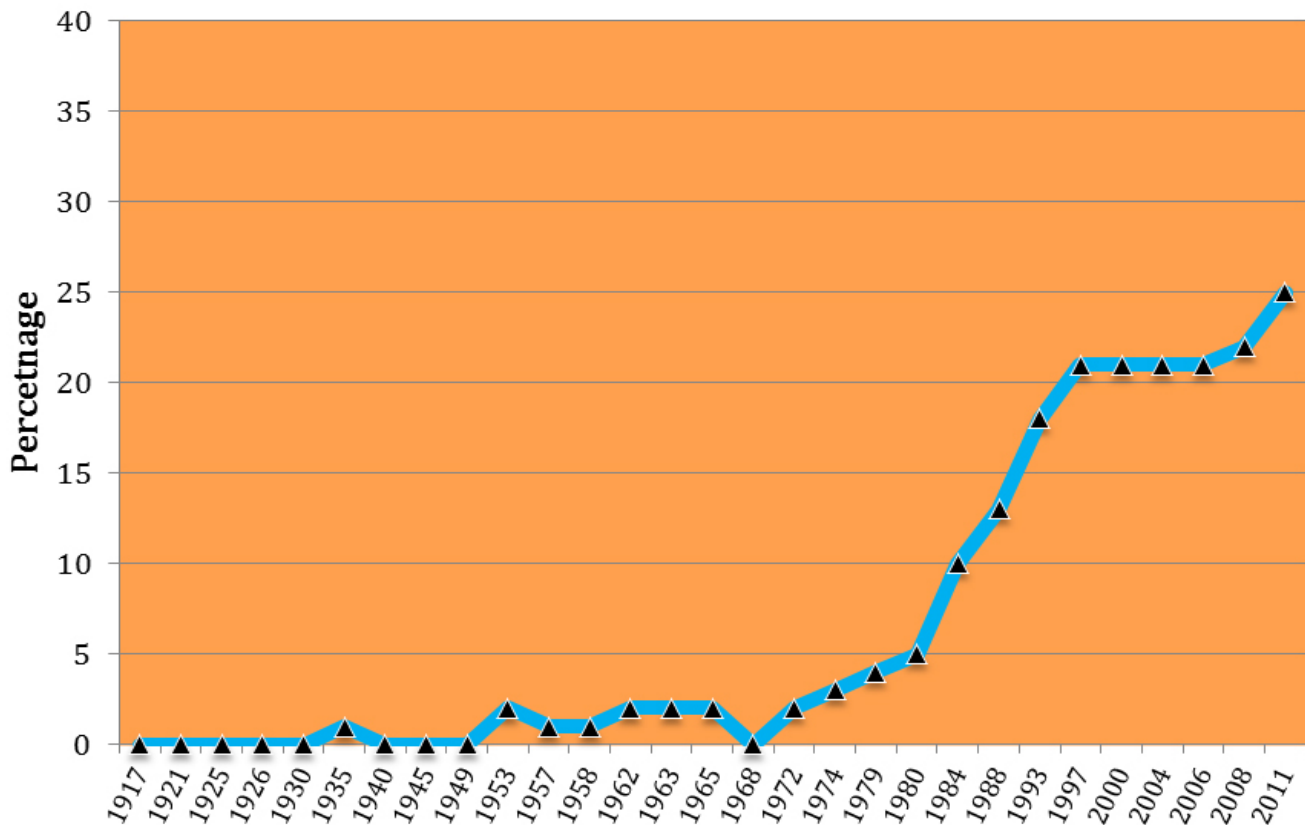
A second point to underscore is that breakthroughs, when they appear, can be surprisingly short-lived. Parity in gender representation, for example, was recently achieved at the level of provincial premier. Kathleen Wynne's Liberal leadership win in Ontario in 2013 generated significant attention as it brought the number of women provincial premiers to a record high of five. The resignation or defeat of three women premiers in quick succession shortly thereafter – Kathy Dunderdale in Newfoundland and Labrador, Alison Redford in Alberta and Pauline Marois in Quebec – quickly silenced the celebrations.

That parity was achieved at the level of premier underscores a third point regarding gender and political

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*Figure 1: Percentage of Women MPs in the House of Commons, 1917 to 2011*



Source: Lisa Young, "Slow to Change," p. 256.

representation in Canada: like focussing on the tip of an iceberg, celebrating victory at the top levels can easily blind us to the bulk of the problem that lurks beneath the water. As previously mentioned, women's level of representation in the House of Commons currently sits at one in four. If we examine the percentage of women sitting as legislators at the provincial level (as of October 2014), we find that nowhere do they make up more than 40 per cent of sitting legislators (see Figure 2). Indeed, in only two provinces is the share over 30 per cent (British Columbia and Ontario), but more importantly perhaps, in three provinces it sits at below 20 per cent (Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador). In the remaining five provinces, the percentage of women legislators varies between 20 and 30 percent. Even a quick examination such as this suggests that some provinces have succeeded in ways that others have not.

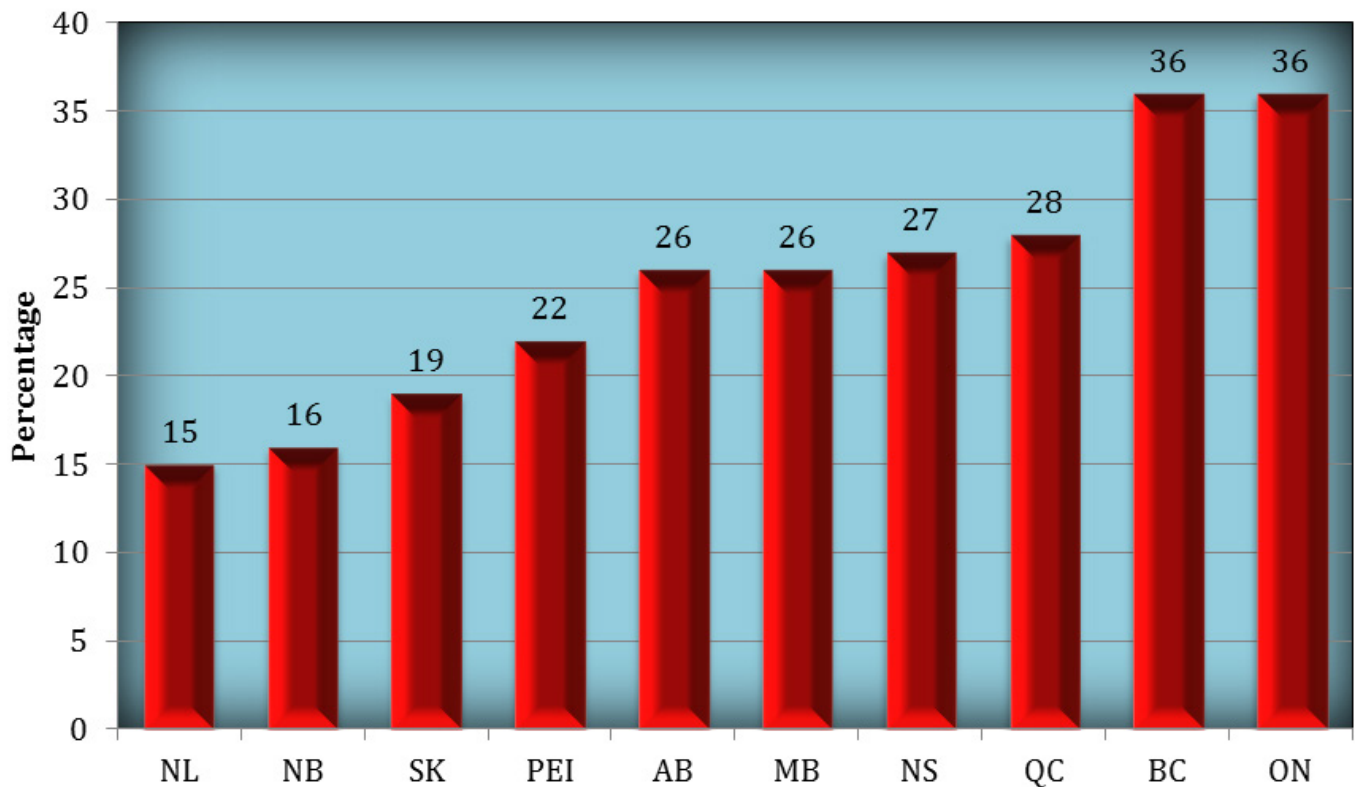
A snapshot at one point in time provides only a limited understanding of women's level of political

representation in the provinces given that fortunes can quickly change from one election to the next. Recent research on the subject reveals that in some provinces the trend has been one of a slow and steady progress (British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Ontario), in others it is a peak followed by a decline (Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta), and in still others it has plateaued (Quebec).<sup>3</sup>

The fact that there is such variation in women's representation over time, between levels and across the provinces, suggests that assuming women's political representation will naturally progress is inappropriate. What then might explain why progress cannot be taken for granted?

One explanation that has been largely discredited is that women's levels of representation are due to voter preference; that is, that women are more or less likely to win office than men because voters may or may not

*Figure 2: Women's Political Representation in Provincial Legislatures, October 2014*



Source: *Equal Voice, Fundamental Facts: Elected Women in Canada By The Numbers*, June 2014, [www.equalvoice.ca](http://www.equalvoice.ca), with updates by author, B. O'Neill.

show a preference for male candidates. Studies have found that voters are as likely to support male as female candidates.<sup>4</sup> If there is an undersupply of women in Canadian legislatures, it is not due to any particular preference on the part of voters. Explanations need to be found elsewhere.

One particularly helpful framework for understanding decisions regarding the recruitment and supply of political candidates is the demand and supply framework outlined by Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski.<sup>5</sup> The framework depicts political recruitment outcomes as the interaction between two separate decisions: the first, the demand for political candidates by political parties, and the second, the supply of political candidates that is the result of individual decisions to stand for election. As the gatekeepers of the electoral process, parties play a particularly important role in determining who ultimately runs for office, serves as party leaders,

and indirectly, sits in cabinet. Equally important, however, is the supply of individuals willing and able to step forward to stand for office. Evidence worldwide makes clear that the process of candidate selection is such that certain groups of people are more likely to be selected as candidates, and potentially as legislators, than others, namely the well-educated, affluent, middle-aged and male. The process, then, is not neutral but rather reflects differences within these groups in their willingness to run, and in the decisions made by gatekeepers regarding their fit as the "best" candidates. Decisions made in one process also affect those made in the other: if aspirants to a political position perceive that the party is unlikely or unwilling to select them as a candidate, then they will be less likely to put themselves forward for the position.<sup>6</sup> Understanding variation in women's representation in Canada can come from examining how those who select candidates, and how those who are willing to put themselves forward as candidates, varies.

Within the context of women's political representation, the key questions to ask are what specific factors encourage, or discourage, parties from seeking out women to run as candidates in elections (demand)? And, what encourages, or discourages, women from putting themselves forward as candidates in elections (supply)?

### **The Demand Side: The Candidates That Parties Select**

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The demand side of the political recruitment framework suggests that political parties are more likely to select candidates associated with a reduced electoral risk. The assessment of risk, that is the determination as to how likely the candidate is to win the seat, is largely one of perception given that electoral outcomes are rarely foregone conclusions. Assessing that risk provides plenty of room for assumptions to directly and indirectly shape women's chances of being selected as candidates. Who is considered a "suitable" candidate? What type of candidate "best" represents the party? Is the riding "winnable"? What are the voters looking for in their representative? Who, in short, is the "best" candidate?

One factor influencing parties' strategic calculations is the electoral system, as it provides specific incentives regarding the recruitment of candidates. Each party's electoral chances in a riding are vested in a single candidate. The winner-take-all nature of the contest means that political parties are less willing to take a chance on an unknown quantity than they might be otherwise, especially in ridings where the party is perceived to have a very good chance of winning the seat. Each party's perception regarding the "winnable candidate" is not likely to be gender blind;<sup>7</sup> existing networks and past experiences will likely guide choices towards candidates who meet the perception of who is likely to be able to win. Canadian politics continues to operate in a highly masculinized environment which privileges power and competition. For women to conform to these norms they must challenge prevailing conceptions about how women should act, that is as individuals who are compassionate, willing to compromise, and people-oriented.<sup>8</sup> Male stereotypes, on the other hand, include being assertive, active, and self-confident, which directly correspond with perceptions of the key criteria of merit and suitability for the political arena. Male candidates are more likely to fit the perceived criteria simply by conforming to the norms associated with their gender.

Although merit is often identified as the basis for candidate selection, the particular criteria associated with the concept are often difficult to pin down and as such there is plenty of opportunity for post hoc rationalization of choices. Norris and Lovenduski argue that candidate assessments often rely on group-based judgments about the candidate's characteristics (for example, sex or ethnicity) or about the voters' willingness to support the candidate at the ballot box.<sup>9</sup> Research by Cheng and Tavits confirms this important role played by party gatekeepers in the selection of candidates.<sup>10</sup> Examining the 2004 and 2006 Canadian elections, they find evidence that women are more likely to be nominated when the local constituency party president is a woman. Importantly, the effect need not be a direct one. According to Cheng and Tavits, "Even if party leaders are not directly responsible for their party's nomination process, the leadership can informally encourage preferred candidates to contest nominations or, even less directly, send signals about who would be welcome and would fit in with the existing local party elite."<sup>11</sup> In short, people are more likely to support and recruit candidates who are like themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Related to the perception of winnability is the greater likelihood of selecting candidates perceived to be more meritorious in competitive ridings, given the increased probability of electoral success. The flipside is that less competitive ridings are likely to adopt lower standards regarding merit given the decreased desirability of the nomination. The concept of sacrificial lambs – women nominated to run in ridings where the party is not competitive – has been touted as a potential explanation for the limited number of women found within Canadian legislatures. Until recently, however, little empirical support for the practice could be uncovered.<sup>13</sup> As shown by Thomas and Bodet, however, employing a more dynamic empirical measure of district competitiveness than in the past uncovers evidence of the sacrificial lamb hypothesis at the federal level in Canada; except for the Bloc, parties are more likely to nominate men than women to run in districts that they believe can be won.<sup>14</sup> If women were placed in competitive ridings in numbers equal to men, women's political representation would necessarily improve.

The propensity to select women when electoral strength is weak rests, necessarily, on predictions of the party's likelihood of winning the next election. Parties are not, however, always able to accurately predict their chances. When predictions are off, what can happen is a landslide, an unexpected electoral sweep for a party

that can result in a significant increase in women's political representation.<sup>15</sup> Canadian examples include the Liberal sweep in New Brunswick in 1987, where women's share in the legislature rose from 7 to 12 per cent.<sup>16</sup> Another is the NDP win in 1990 in Ontario, where the percentage of women legislators rose 7 percentage points in a single election to 22 per cent, a record that stood until 2007.<sup>17</sup>

The conclusion that party efforts are instrumental for the political representation of women cannot be over-emphasized. While the first-past-the-post electoral system creates incentives and disincentives, it does not vary across the provinces, and so its ability to help explain variation across the provinces is limited. But the electoral system does increase electoral volatility, and so small shifts in electoral fortune can lead to large shifts in women's representation, both up and down, if the parties in the system have very different records of nominating women as candidates. Electoral volatility also decreases the ability to determine electoral chances, which raises the stakes, and potentially decreases women's chances of being nominated if they are seen as more risky choices.

Another factor that needs to be underscored is that party systems vary across the provinces and between the federal and provincial levels. Since parties vary in the degree to which they see a perceived need for the adoption of concrete mechanisms for improving the lot of underrepresented groups such as women, variation in party systems can help to explain variation in levels of women's representation. Parties on the right of the ideological spectrum have refused to make special allowances for women to increase their numbers within party caucuses.<sup>18</sup> In the 2012 Alberta election, for example, fewer than one in five candidates (13 per cent) for the Wildrose Party were women; in the 2014 Ontario election, the corresponding percentage for the PC party was one in four (25 per cent). In contrast, the NDP has adopted multiple mechanisms specifically designed to increase women's numbers within its ranks.<sup>19</sup> In the 2012 Alberta election, almost half (47 per cent) of the NDP's candidates were women; in the 2009 BC election, this figure was 48 per cent. So while parties can act as gatekeepers to women's political representation, they can also serve as mechanisms for potentially improving the gender balance.

These mechanisms can be explicitly identified as a core element of the party's platform, or can be less structured, in the form of a "gender" champion who strongly promotes women's nominations, such as BC NDP leader Mike Harcourt in the early

1990s, and Manitoba NDP leader Howard Pawley in the early 1980s. More recently, Danny Williams is said to have largely decided that Kathy Dunderdale would be his successor as leader in the PC party in Newfoundland and Labrador.<sup>20</sup> These champions can make a significant difference by simply signalling the importance of the issue to the party. Their impact can be far more direct by explicitly choosing to parachute women candidates into ridings, for example. These tactics, however, are often strongly criticized; they butt up against a political norm that sees the local party organization as independent and political parties as private organizations.<sup>21</sup> The departure of a champion can also have an immediate and negative effect on women's political fortunes if the issue was never strongly championed by anyone else in the party.

Nominating women as candidates is only the first step to improving their political representation; the next is getting them elected. And this depends to a large extent on the relative electoral strength of the various parties in the system. The greater the electoral strength of parties on the left, the better the level of women's political representation given their increased tendency to nominate women as candidates. Provinces with electorally strong parties on the left of the political spectrum will often reveal greater gender equity in representation; British Columbia, Quebec and Manitoba, for example, have enjoyed particularly strong showings amongst parties on the left and rank among the top of the provinces for the percentage of women found in their legislatures. Tendencies are rarely certainties, however, and Saskatchewan does less well on this score in spite of the strength of the NDP in that province.

The strength of parties on the left of the spectrum can also matter more indirectly for levels of women's representation through the "contagion effect."<sup>22</sup> The contagion effect argues that one party's efforts to increase women's representation can spur other parties in the system to do the same through a desire to remain competitive.<sup>23</sup> More recent work on this effect in Scotland suggests that the conditions of the host (party) may be more important than the presence of the virus for explaining women's political representation.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Supply Side: Why Women Choose to Run**

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Understanding why the level of women's representation might vary across the country requires not only an understanding of parties and party

systems but also an understanding of what factors explain why some women choose to run for office and others not. In outlining the demand and supply framework, Norris and Lovenduski argue that one factor helping to explain the supply of women candidates is gender norms – the set of expectations regarding appropriate female and male public and private roles. Although gender norms are shifting, their influence continues to shape many aspects of women’s and men’s lives. Gender norms establish gender appropriate behaviours and attitudes, which indirectly shape everything from the education and occupations women and men choose, to the levels of political interest and knowledge that they exhibit. Along these same lines, gender expectations create beliefs that can directly discourage women from seeing themselves as feasible candidates; although perhaps less explicitly than in the past, a political candidate who is the mother of small children is still likely to raise more eyebrows among the public and some party members, than one who is the father of small children. Many women have internalized these expectations and norms, and as such, they are brought to bear on their willingness to stand for office. In equal measure, the strength of these gender norms among the political party elite can only add to women’s difficulty in breaking down these barriers.

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The pipeline theory of political representation posits that once women take on the same occupations, have similar levels of education, and earn similar incomes to men, their numbers as legislators would naturally increase. But while we have had dramatic changes in each of these areas in recent years, we have not seen much evidence that the pipeline theory holds much water – or, as Malinda Smith noted, “that’s a fairly *leaky pipe*.” How then are we to understand why women continue to be less willing to put themselves forward as candidates in spite of gains in these areas?

One theory for understanding political participation decisions suggests that people will participate when they can, when they want to, and when they are asked.<sup>25</sup> The theory suggests that women are less likely than men to run for office because they are less able; that is, because they do not possess the necessary resources. This argument gains traction when we recognize that women continue to earn roughly 80 cents for every dollar earned by men<sup>26</sup> and that despite their increasing numbers at colleges and universities, their training is less often in those occupations from which most politicians are drawn: business and law. The latter also means that they are less likely to find themselves in occupational networks most associated with politics. While we know that women candidates are as equally capable of raising campaign money as men,<sup>27</sup> there is still debate about whether their weaker financial position relative to men keeps them from putting themselves forward in the first place and about how this lower participation rate shapes perceptions of party elites of their financial capacity and winnability.

Women’s relative absence as political aspirants may also come down to a matter of time, another resource which has been investigated. Findings, however, have failed to uncover much evidence that time constraints account for gender differences in terms of willingness to run. Investigations of leisure time availability show little difference between women and men; women’s leisure time is more likely to be consumed by child care and unpaid work in the home than men’s, but men’s leisure time is more likely to be reduced by additional time spent at work outside the home. More time at work does, however, provide increased opportunities for political networking, which might indirectly account for any apparent gender differences in political recruitment.

A second important explanation behind participatory decisions is associated with possessing a desire that can spur action. Women’s decreased levels of political interest, political efficacy, and political

knowledge, even when controlling for education and occupational differences, are important explanations for their decreased willingness to run.<sup>28</sup> Women are simply less likely to want to enter politics than men given their decreased engagement with politics.

The adversarial nature of partisan politics can also put some women off politics altogether; the polarized and adversarial nature of British Columbia politics was identified by some women in interviews as a reason for staying out of politics.<sup>29</sup> Other research has identified that the harsh treatment of women politicians – Sharon Carstairs in Manitoba, as one example – is linked to women’s unwillingness to run.<sup>30</sup>

The third explanation links participation decisions to the availability of opportunities. Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox note that women are more likely than men to run for political office if they are directly asked to do so. The underlying explanation for this phenomenon is that women have less political ambition than men; they give less weight to their qualifications and skills, and they put off running until their qualifications actually surpass those of men. As such, political parties that establish mechanisms for explicitly identifying potential women candidates will succeed by increasing the number of women within the networks from which gatekeepers look to recruit potential candidates and by increasing the likelihood that women will be approached to run.<sup>31</sup>

An additional explanation for women’s political underrepresentation is likely linked to political parties’ varying appeal to women across the political spectrum. Research on the gender gap in attitudes and in voting tells us that women, in the aggregate, are more likely to support positions and parties that fall on the left of the ideological spectrum and to vote for parties on the left.<sup>32</sup> Women are also more likely to be chosen to lead parties on the left than men.<sup>33</sup> As such, party systems with a stronger partisan presence on the left of the spectrum are likely to see a greater supply of women political aspirants than others.

Finally, an important point to recognize is that not all women are equally marginalized: Across the country, Aboriginal, immigrant and ethnic minority women face significantly greater barriers that lead to weakened capacity and desire to engage politically. These barriers are as high, if not higher than, those faced by men from these groups, and as such, might help explain these women’s relative absence from the political arena.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

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The demand and supply model of political recruitment provides a useful framework for understanding variation in women’s political underrepresentation in Canada. How parties select candidates and why some individuals decide to run for office are central pieces of information to understanding who eventually occupies seats in the legislature. Is there any sense of which matters more for women’s underrepresentation? While earlier studies pointed to the importance of women’s unwillingness to run as a key factor, more recent work by Ashe and Stewart on legislative recruitment in British Columbia suggests that demand constraints are more important for understanding outcomes.<sup>35</sup> And, as Mona Lena Krook notes, it is not necessarily an optimum outcome that is achieved at the intersection of the demand and supply curves; the gendered nature of both processes means that the outcome is likely less desirable than it might be otherwise.

The demand and supply model necessarily restricts our focus in the search for explanations. Four additional characteristics can be identified for their role in shaping women’s political representation across the country. First, the economic and cultural context can directly influence the number of women who step forward and are selected as candidates. A second characteristic of some importance is the relative strength of women’s groups in supporting women who choose to run and in putting pressure on parties and governments to address gender inequality. A third and related factor is the disappearance of gender and women’s issues from the political agenda. This phenomenon has been described as one of *gender silence*.<sup>36</sup> The last piece of the puzzle is the media. Research makes clear that the media treat women and men differently as candidates and this difference likely influences both how women are perceived by the party elite and how willing women are to run for office.<sup>37</sup> These differences are diminishing over time but have not yet disappeared.

The last word may well be given to a scholar of Canadian politics, Lisa Young. She notes that “political parties, as the primary agents of recruitment and as the gatekeepers of the political process, must change their recruitment and nomination practices if there is to be substantial change in the number of women in the House of Commons.”<sup>38</sup> Written in 1991, the conclusion still stands almost 25 years later.

## Endnotes

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- 17 Raney, p. 167.
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- 19 William Cross, *Political Parties*, University of British Columbia Press: Vancouver, 2004.
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