



Canadian Study  
of Parliament Group

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It's a 'Man's World':

The Gendered Portrayal of Female Politicians and Politics  
in Canada

October 2019

When considering gender and politics in Canada, a common point of discussion is women's involvement, or lack thereof, in the realm of elected politics. With a self-proclaimed feminist as Prime Minister on Parliament Hill (Carpenter, 2018), and a society that seems to be moving increasingly towards demanding gender equality, it is troublesome to still observe a noticeable discrepancy between women's presence in society and their involvement in Canadian politics. Scholars have presented many different theories as to why this is, including institutional impediments such as the electoral system, the parties' lack of strong efforts to recruit women candidates, a hesitancy on the part of many women to put themselves forward in the electoral realm and a reluctance on the part of some voters to support female candidates. In addition to these commonly agreed-upon factors are the gendered portrayal of female politicians and the gendered framework used to report on politics more generally in the mainstream media. These last two factors are the focus of this essay. Cumulatively, they create an environment in which many women do not see themselves as natural participants in electoral politics while those that do enter are treated differently than their male counterparts - typically, to their disadvantage.

Mainstream media has the ability to perpetuate "news-mediated normalization," meaning that the media has the ability to communicate what are expected to be societal norms, which citizens then internalize (Trimble, Ms Prime Minister, 2017). This occurs for the perceived ordinariness of a woman in political power (Trimble, Ms Prime Minister, 2017). This normalization process uses news frameworks to deny or confer political legitimacy, and often reflects widely circulated gender norms and assumptions (Trimble, Ms Prime Minister, 2017). Politics as a whole tends to be portrayed in a masculine light, further distancing the ordinariness of women's involvement.

Melanee Thomas (2018), a scholar of gender and Canadian politics, writes that women politicians are subject to what is called a “novelty framework” in the media, which further distances female leadership from the norm. This frame portrays “women seeking political office as being new or anomalous because of their gender” (Thomas, 2018, 205) portraying every woman involved in politics as breaking the glass ceiling, as opposed to accepting women’s political involvement as a norm. Thomas writes that “this kind of coverage highlights gender above other qualities and characteristics - and in doing so draws attention to the person of the politician in question” (2018, 205).

Additionally, Thomas has written on the variance between male and female politicians being subject to privatization in the media, meaning when non-political information is presented about a politician and the focus strays from relevant information regarding their political career at hand. Thomas finds that women in politics are evaluated on private content at a much higher rate than their male colleagues (Thomas, 2018). Such private content includes relationship status, parental status, dating history, and physical appearance, little of which comes into play when determining the legitimacy of a male candidate.

The effects of society internalizing the personalized and privatized portrayal of political women in the media are relevant for further elaboration and exploration as they present the potential to help us unpack why women represent 50 per cent of the population, but only have around 26 per cent of the seats in Parliament, and make up only 33 per cent of all candidates in the 2015 election (Equal Voice, 2015; Cross, 2016). With such a significant underrepresentation of women in politics, exploring mainstream media as a potential roadblock to gender equality in the political world is an important topic of research.

When looking at the media's portrayal of individuals involved in politics, it is clear to see mainstream news treats female and male politicians differently. Women often fall victim to gender norms and stereotypes, with disproportionate amounts of attention paid to their marital status, parenthood status, and physical appearance. Women are also likely to be tied to powerful and popular male figures in politics as a way to seek legitimacy from the public, where we never see this the other way around (Thomas, 2018). A recent example of this was the routine reference to Caroline Mulroney's father during her candidacy in Ontario.

Throughout this paper I intend to defend the thesis that the gendered portrayal of women in politics in the media is a roadblock on the path to gender equality in Canadian politics. This shall be done through the examination of two main arguments. The first being that the privatization of female candidates in the media hurts their chances for electoral success due to stereotypes and gendered norms, and the second being that the political world is conveyed in the media as being an inherently male world, making women's participation seem even more alien. Both arguments work towards the same end of limiting female representation in Canadian politics.

To begin, an understanding of the current situation of women's representation is necessary. The first female to be elected to the House of Commons was Agnes Macphail in 1921, and although representation has increased, especially during the 1980s and 90s, Canada is far from achieving gender parity (Trimble & Arscott, 2013). As O'Neill notes, "there has indeed been progress of women's involvement in politics, but the progress has been neither consistent nor robust at all times" (2015, 22).

Numerous studies find that voters have demonstrated a willingness to vote for female candidates (Thomas, 2018). And when looking at the responses to Justin Trudeau's gender-balanced cabinet, public opinion was overwhelmingly positive (Ditchburn, 2015). Nonetheless, the increase in women's representation has seemed to stall, causing many to wonder if the formal political system will ever actually allow for the achievement of gender equality (Trimble and Arscott, 2013). This begs us to ask the question, that if society appears to be ready for gender equality in politics, what is holding us back from realizing this advancement?

### Media Portrayal of Female Candidates

The average Canadian voter receives a substantial amount of information on political candidates through mainstream media, clearly demonstrating the important role media plays in politics (Curry, 2018). Stories of women seeking political leadership are disproportionately written with gender norms and assumptions (Trimble, 2017), linking political women to the private sphere, with ideas of motherhood and domesticity dominating news coverage (Thomas and Bittner, 2017). This process is called privatization, when personal, "nonpolitical" information is presented about a politician (Thomas, 2018). Women experience privatization at a much higher rate than men, as men's private and personal information is often deemed to be irrelevant to their candidacy, but for their female counterparts it is seen as deeply relevant (Thomas, 2018). It is this personal and private content that voters and the media often use in their evaluations of women's political legitimacy, which actively works against their electoral efforts. By bringing the person of the politician into the spotlight, as privatization does, it causes

personal information to be taken into account when judging a women's qualification for political involvement much more so than is the case for their male counterparts.

American examples of gendered privatization are the experiences of Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Dole, two female political candidates, whose personalities and private lives received considerably more attention from the media, and more negative evaluation, during their primary campaigns for presidency than did those of their male competitors (Thomas, 2018). Factors such as physical appearance and marital status are focused on and play significant importance for a female candidate at a level not imaginable for men. Women's hairstyles, clothing choices, and marital status become just as important to media as a male candidate's policy stances, education, and political experience. This form of coverage highlights gender above other qualities, and in doing so diminishes women's chances at electoral success. In the 2016 presidential election it seemed like it was more common to see media coverage on Hillary Clinton's pantsuits, than it was on her policy stances, or relevant political experience. It would be hard to argue the gendered nature of her coverage did not contribute to her ultimate loss.

Similarly, in Canada, Environment Minister Catherine McKenna has been referred to as 'climate barbie,' by opponents, referencing her blonde hair and femininity as a method to delegitimize her policy stances and work as a senior Minister. Such gender-specific, derogatory terminology further reinforces the notion that politics is simply not a place for women. In 2017, Minister McKenna publicly asked for a commitment from the media outlet "Rebel Media" to refrain from using the nickname in their coverage of her, later stating she is concerned that use of such language will deter young women from becoming politically involved (Zimonjic, 2017).

While many are quick to defend the use of the nickname by saying politicians should simply grow thicker skin as the reality of being in the public eye includes such attacks, it is crucial to be critical of the differential treatment female politicians receive when compared to their male counterparts. I have yet to see a male politician's every action scrutinized on the basis of the colour of their hair or their choice of wardrobe.

In *Mothers and Others*, the authors unpack the tremendous disservice that motherhood does for female politicians, as the role of being a parent is a gendered identity influencing how, why and to what extent women engage in politics (Thomas and Bittner, 2017). Motherhood presents a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” dichotomy, which is never attributed to ‘father’ politicians. If women have children, their ability to balance both parental and political life is brought into question by media outlets, but if they are childless it turns into the idea that they lack empathy and are out of touch with the needs of women in the country (Thomas and Bittner, 2017). This dialogue has rarely, if ever, come up around male politicians with children, as parenthood is not a part of the expectations society places on men. Prime Minister Trudeau is rarely, if ever, asked how he is able to balance being a father to three children with his prime ministerial duties, whereas Catherine McKenna has been asked countless times throughout her political career how she is able to leave her family so often for work related travel, and how she copes with the guilt it is assumed she feels (Taber, 2018). In doing so, attention is taken away from the accomplishments McKenna has achieved in her role of Minister of the Environment, and rather focus is put on her as a woman and parent. The result is that personal information that should be irrelevant to her role becomes a central tenet.

Gendered media personalism/privatization affects both the supply and demand for women politicians, as women are less likely to see themselves as qualified for political participation, and in turn voters are less likely to see them as viable candidates. Gendered media representations of women's personal information contributes to the fact that women politicians routinely need to be more qualified than men to enjoy the same electoral success, further limiting the scope of women who will enter politics (Thomas, 2018). While the media continues to link men to the public sphere, and women to the private, it facilitates a system of beliefs which directly discourages women from seeing themselves as feasible candidates.

Male characteristics and traits are perceived to be the political norm. Female politicians' ability to exercise power in an authentic and comprehensible manner is continuously challenged due to their gender, as a result of the deeply entrenched association of leadership with men and the norms of hegemonic masculinity (Trimble, 2017). News coverage about female leaders gives undue attention to their gender identities, bodies, and family lives - something which men do not experience. In the book entitled "*Ms. Prime Minister*," Linda Trimble focuses on news coverage of four female Prime Ministers, former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell, two former New Zealand Prime Ministers Jenny Shipley, and Helen Clark, and Australia's 27th Prime Minister Julia Gillard, to examine the variance in media coverage of their exercise and display of power from that of male Prime Ministers. A total of 2,250 news items were collected to analyse and code, and the results were largely unsurprising. Being firm, assertive, and passionate are traits that are praised when displayed by male politicians, while largely criticized when shown by female candidates. An example is Kim Campbell, whose election debate tactics were constantly "touted as unduly loud, shrill, childish, and whiny, inferring that she lacked crucial leadership

qualities” (Trimble, 2017, 185). Reports on Campbell’s speech were compared to former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien’s, as they both ran for Prime Minister in 1993. While the majority of reports on Chretien’s speech were positive, Campbell received more than twice as many negative reports than positive reviews (Trimble, 2017). Campbell’s “shrill” voice was often focused on in her coverage - criticizing her “womanly” speech. While Chretien received some criticism questioning his ability to speak with sophistication (Trimble, 2017), criticism of his speech was considerably less in volume and harshness than that received by Campbell.

Additionally, Elisabeth Gidengil, one of the founding scholars of gender and electoral politics in Canada, found that conventional news frames reinforce politics in stereotypically masculine terms, by using highly charged language when reporting on female politicians. During Canadian election periods, the speech of female leaders was less likely than their male counterparts to be reported on with neutral verbs such as “say,” “tell” or “talk” about. Aggressive speech verbs were more likely to be used to describe female candidates; such as “slam,” and “hammer home.” Such aggressive speech verbs elicit negative effects for the female candidates, as they are portrayed as attacking and accusing, resulting in viewers forming a negative impression of them (Gidengil and Everitt, *Talking Tough*, 2003). Additionally, when the news coverage of elections is compared with the leaders’ actual behaviour in the debates, it is clear that the coverage focuses disproportionately on combative displays of behaviour by female party leaders, but tends to neglect the women candidates who portray a more low-key style (Gidengil and Everitt, *Talking Tough*, 2003).

## Media Portrayal of Politics as Man's World

Although the expression of politics “being a man’s world” is considered to be a saying of the past, it still holds more truth today than we may like to admit. The practice of politics is presented as an essentially male pursuit in the media, with a male oriented agenda. This is maintained and reproduced through the use of language in dominant media outlets, which supports masculinity as the political norm, and sees women politicians as novelties. There are gendered biases embedded in the very language used around politics.

Metaphors of war and sport, such as “they really hit a homerun with that speech,” or “they had the final punch in tonight’s debate” colours politics in a masculine shade, making politics even more distant from incorporating female presence (Gidengil and Everitt, Talking Tough, 2003). This language is heavily gendered, and follows an exclusively masculine narrative. Mainstream media frequently reports political events with images of the boxing ring, the sports arena, the battlefield or the back alley brawl, playing on masculine toughness, continuing to reinforce politics as a man’s game (Gidengil and Everitt, Convention Coverage, 2003). While hearing a news report about a ‘knock-out blow’ in a leaders’ debate would probably shock none of the listeners, imagine instead if the reporter said candidate X landed a triple axle tonight and danced a foxtrot around her opponents?

By framing politics with stereotypical masculine terms, it hinders women’s chances of electoral success, as it encourages voters to see politics as a man’s activity and any expression of femininity is seen as foreign and alien to being a legitimate political candidate (Gidengil and Everitt, Talking Tough, 2003). Elisabeth Gidengil presents the idea of the gendered mediation thesis, which recognizes that conventional news frames treat the male as the norm in politics, and

generally constructs reporting on political events in stereotypically masculine terms. This thesis holds that the very language that is commonly used when discussing politics perpetuates gender-appropriate behaviour, further distancing efforts to make women's presence a norm, and heavily privileges male participation. The use of stereotypically masculine imagery subtly serves to reinforce the perception that women do not belong in politics (Gidengil and Everitt, *Talking Tough*, 2003)

With men as the political norm, women are often treated as novelties, as if each female politician has personally shattered the glass ceiling for other women to follow in her footsteps. This novelty framework continues to portray women as anomalous outsiders, distancing them further from the status quo of politics (Thomas, 2018). The perception of women as newcomers to the political world further puts into question the legitimacy of their qualifications, which is another way the media works against women's political success, limiting female representation in Canadian politics.

Even when women try to conform to the favoured political ideals of masculinity, gender mediation works against them. Media coverage tends to exaggerate any authoritative behaviour shown by female candidates, making them appear overly aggressive. Behaviour of female leaders who contravene gender-role expectations are presented as more extreme, and hence more negative, than similar behaviour on the part of male leaders (Gidengil and Everitt, *Talking Tough*, 2003). To show that they belong in the traditionally masculine world of politics, women running for elected office have attempted to emphasize stereotypically masculine traits by adopting strong stances and highlighting their toughness (Gidengil and Everitt, *Talking Tough*, 2003). But this often works against them, as women are negatively evaluated when they exhibit

masculine leadership styles. Women who try to adopt masculine traits are instead perceived as emotionally charged, attacking and accusing, rather than as suited for the political world like their male counterparts. The media is more likely to portray a negative impression of female candidates when they exhibit such behaviour, as they are perceived as overly aggressive. There is no evidence to support that male candidates are penalized in similar ways for counter-stereotypical behaviour (Gidengil and Everitt, Talking Tough, 2003).

Society internalizes the gendered portrayal of politics being a man's world, which then in turn works against women's political success through voter preference. Good leaders are commonly characterized by typically masculine traits, as society has essentially been conditioned to see masculinity as essential to politics. Women's gendered qualities are used against them to make them seem unappealing as leaders, as they are often portrayed as caring, honest and family-oriented, where men are seen as tough, and able to effectively deal with "masculine issues" such as terrorism, and the economy. Such stereotypes have a profound effect on voter influence, as voters are less likely to support female candidates when they are seen in such light.

Gidengil points out that this problem in media lies at a deeper, structural level with the conventional constructions of politics that frame media coverage (Gidengil and Everitt, Talking Tough, 2003). The way politics is spoken about in the media is far from gender-neutral, and this creates the "not-too-subliminal message that politics is just another game men play" (Gidengil and Everitt, Talking Tough, 2003, 288). Additionally, it would be "naive to assume that the media is simply reflecting the way politics is" by portraying it in such masculine ways (Gidengil and Everitt, Conventional Coverage, 2003, 210). Rather it is important to acknowledge they are

active participants in perpetuating the false notion that politics is a game suitably played only by men.

Given this portrayal of politics as a male activity, it is not surprising that many studies find women are more reluctant than men to enter electoral politics. In a study of candidates in the 2011 federal election, consistent with other studies, Cross and Young (2013) found that women candidates were disproportionately likely to be asked to run than were men candidates who were much more likely to take the initiative themselves. Similarly Cross (2016) reports that female candidates in the 2015 election were significantly less likely to see running for office as a natural step in their career path and were far less likely to view themselves as a ‘political junkie’ than were male candidates. Much of this likely results from the lingering perception of electoral politics as a man’s world.

## Conclusion

When looking at women’s representation in Canadian politics, it is impossible not to see the media as a dominant force working against female political engagement. This essay has argued that the gendered portrayal of politics in the media is a roadblock on the path to gender equality in two major ways. The first is that politics is presented through a masculine lens. And the second is that women candidates are reported on in an unfavorable, gendered fashion.

The media acts as a roadblock to gender equality by portraying politics as an inherently masculine endeavour through the use of gendered language. Through the use of masculine language and imagery, the media actively perpetuates the notion that politics is a man’s world. This distances female candidates from the political norm, as they fall victim to the novelty

framework. Even when women conform to or exhibit the masculine traits seen as desirable in the political world, this works against them as they are perceived as overly aggressive.

Through this, the media discourages women from entering politics by making them feel both unwelcome and underqualified. And for those women who are able to overcome this, they are then faced with the additional hurdle of gendered portrayal by the media which works against their chances at electoral success. This means personal qualities and characteristics, such as a women's marital status, physical appearance and parental status are brought to the forefront of their candidacy's coverage and presented as a legitimate basis for voters to determine their opinions. This works against their political success, as such gendered mediation detracts from the appeal of female candidates, making them seem weaker and less qualified, and outside of the norm.

By being conscious of approaching politics with gender neutral language and imagery, and portraying male and female candidates based on the same qualities - refraining from personalization - there is hope that the effects of media on women's involvement in politics can be reversed. It is clear that to improve the rates of female representation in Canadian politics, we must address the great structural changes that must be made to the way dominant media outlets report on politics, and specifically women candidates.

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