Addressing the Rural Deficit in Women's Political Leadership

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On constate que dans tout le Canada, beaucoup moins de femmes que d'hommes occupent des postes à tous les niveaux de la vie publique. Des exemples issus des récentes élections ont permis de déceler que cette sous représentation est concentrée dans les régions rurales. Cet article décrit les programmes passés et ceux qui sont proposés afin de promouvoir le leadership chez les femmes rurales.

Political leadership includes every aspect of public-sector governance: elected office at all levels of government; appointment to boards and commissions at all levels of government; voluntary community organizations; political parties; and publicly funded service-provider organizations. At the highest levels of responsibility is the visible tip of the iceberg: elected office. It is here that we find an unambiguous quantitative indication that something important is amiss in rural areas when it comes to women's participation in public life.

It is well-known that far fewer women than men hold elected office, at any level, throughout Canada. Currently, 21 per cent of the seats in the House of Commons are held by women, and similar proportions have applied to the national and provincial legislatures for the past decade (Trimble and Arscott). This stark under-representation (roughly 20 per cent in legislatures compared to 50 per cent by population) constitutes a fundamental challenge to the quality of democracy in Canada.

There is currently a good deal of concern about a democratic deficit in Canada. This term has come into usage to describe a pattern of deterioration in several key areas: a concentration of power in the hands of a few, political disengagement as fewer people vote and join parties, decreased trust and confidence in government, and a growing disjuncture between citizens and their elected representatives (Aucoin and Turnbull 437).

A number of arguments support the proposition that the persistence of the gender disparity in elected office is an important contributor to the democratic deficit. Most directly, the expectation that female politicians represent women's distinct interests in regard to employment equity, reproductive rights, access to childcare, and so forth, has held up to empirical scrutiny (Tremblay). This evidence supports the concepts of substantive representation and the mandate of difference (Phillips; Vickers). Earlier arguments invoking the "civilizing" influence of women in public life have largely been supplanted in the academic literature, but remain commonplace among women politicians (Clancy; McDonough). Perhaps the most universally persuasive argument is that the representation of women, in all their diversity, confers legitimacy on the entire political system. By implication, everybody—whether feminist or not, and whether left-leaning or right-leaning—has a stake in a rise toward gender parity in electoral politics.

While many people are aware of the overall under-representation of women in elected office, fewer recognize just how much this gender disparity is a rural phenomenon. To get a feel for the scale of the rural / urban contrast, consider a specific example that will be familiar to most readers: the 2004 Canadian national election. As noted above, 21 per cent of the seats (65 out of 308) were won by women. But this number pales in comparison to the proportions in the largest metropolitan centres. Women were elected in 36 per cent of the densely populated urban ridings in and around Toronto,[1] the largest Canadian city; and in 38 per cent of the urban ridings in and around Montreal,[2] the second largest city.

A direct comparison of rural and urban areas can be estimated by listing the 308 federal ridings in order of their population density, and comparing the top and bottom halves of the list. Looking first at the top, more urban, half, we find that women were elected in 30 per cent (46 of 154) of the more densely populated Canadian ridings. In the other, more rural, half, we find that only 12 per cent (19 of 154) of the less densely populated Canadian districts elected women. According to this

Table 1. The rural deficit in the 2004 national election spans from coast to coast

		West		Ontario		Quebec		Atlantic		National	
Rural	**F**	6	12%	6	14%	5	15%	0	0%	19	12%
	M	44		36		29		25		135	
Urban	**F**	8	19%	21	33%	15	37%	2	29%	46	30%
	M	34		43		26		5		108	
Regional Totals	**F**	4	15%	27	25%	20	27%	2	6%	65	21%
	M	78		79		55		30		243	

estimate, an urban riding was two-and-one-half times more likely to be won by a woman than was a rural riding in the 2004 national election.

This rural deficit extends across the country. As shown in Table 1, 41 of Quebec's 75 federal districts are in the more-urban half of the afore-mentioned national population-density list, and 15 of these seats were won by women, for a proportion of 37 per cent. By contrast, only five of the 34 more-rural seats in that province went to women, for a proportion of 15 per cent. Other Canadian regions featured even smaller proportions of rural seats won by women—14 per cent in Ontario, followed by 12 per cent in the four western provinces, and zero in the Atlantic region. While there are some variations, each of these regions features a strong rural / urban contrast in the election of women.

Neither can the rural deficit be attributed to any political party. It is true that Conservative Party support is concentrated in rural areas, and that this party does not have a reputation for preferentially promoting women's candidacy (Young 87-8). Nevertheless, other parties fared no better at getting women elected in the rural regions which supported them. For example, consider only the 135 ridings won by the Liberal Party in the 2004 general election. Forty-six of these ridings were in the rural half of the population-density list described above, and only four of these districts elected women, corresponding to a proportion of nine per cent. This ratio is actually slightly *lower* than the rural-Conservative proportion of 11 per cent (eight of 70 ridings in the rural half). In contrast, the Liberal Party was much more adept at getting women elected in urban ridings: of the 89 Liberal seats in the more urban half of the list, 30 districts elected women, yielding a 33 per cent ratio. Thus, the rural deficit within the Liberal Party caucus after the 2004 election was at least as large as in the rest of the House of Commons.

Likewise, the Bloc Québecois, a party with a reputation for promoting women's equality, attained a similarly large rural / urban distinction—16 per cent (five of the 31 seats won by the Bloc in the more rural half of districts) versus 39 per cent (nine of the 23 seats that party won in the more urban half). As might be expected for this particularly woman-friendly party, both of these ratios are relatively high; but the rural ratio is still less than half of the urban ratio. These results support the recognition of the rural deficit as a separate, independent electoral pattern that transcends regional and partisan characteristics.

The 2004 national election is not an isolated case. Estimates from this one election are entirely consistent with results of quantitative studies that have consistently found that far fewer women hold elected office in rural areas than in urban centres (i.e., Matland and Studlar). This deficit is present at all levels of government—municipal, provincial, and national—and holds independently of partisan effects. It extends to every part of the country, and has persisted over several decades. The same result has been found in the United States as well. For example, Lisa Bourke and A.E. Luloff suggested that "it may well be easier for a woman to be voted into Congress than be elected county commissioner of a non-metropolitan county" (19). But the rural deficit is amplified in Canadian legislatures, due to the practise of drawing electoral boundaries in such a way as to create an over-representation of rural ridings compared to urban ridings. So long as this practice continues, the political dynamics of rural Canada will continue to exercise disproportionate influence over electoral outcomes.

One of those outcomes is that progress toward gender parity in Canadian legislatures has hit a glass ceiling. It has become increasingly apparent since the mid-1990s that

the longstanding pattern of overall gains in women elected has stalled, at both federal and provincial levels, with proportions of women plateauing near the 20 per cent mark nation-wide. We can see this plateau in both curves of Figure 1.1, which illustrates the proportions of seats held by women over the past few decades in the House of Commons and in provincial legislatures.[3] The two proportions rose nearly in tandem during this period, starting below five per cent throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The rise was most rapid during the 1980s, approaching 15 per cent by the end of that decade. The rate of increase slowed during the 1990s, as the proportions reached 20 per cent near the end of that decade. Both curves reached a plateau thereafter, with no further significant increases, as the proportion of seats held by women languished near the 20 per cent mark.

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Just looking at the proportions of urban seats won by women in the 2004 national election, it seems clear that there is only limited potential for further increases in major urban centres. While they are not yet at parity, it would be unrealistic to expect large cities alone to bring up the entire national average very much in the near future. Rural Canada would have to play a key role in any significant future overall gains in women's election to public office.

The Case of Atlantic Canada

The rural deficit is most conspicuous in Atlantic Canada, largely because this region is more rural than other regions of Canada. For example, Table 1 shows that only two of the 32 Atlantic seats in the House of Commons were won by women in the 2004 national election. Both of these were in urban ridings (Claudette Bradshaw in Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe, and Alexa McDonough in Halifax). Considering that only seven of the 32 Atlantic federal ridings are unambiguously urban, the proportion of urban seats held by women is by no means low, relative to cities elsewhere. Here we need to keep in mind that, with such small numbers of seats, calculations of proportions are quite sensitive to individual events.[4]

The provincial scene gives us a more reliable picture in Atlantic Canada, because the provincial ridings are much smaller than the federal ridings—all below 20,000 in population. Of the 182 provincial ridings in the four Atlantic provinces, only 49 (27 per cent) are largely confined to the six main urban centres: St. John's, Charlottetown, Halifax, Saint John, Fredericton, and Moncton. The other 133 ridings (73 per cent) are geographically more extensive and located away from these centres, so can reasonably be classified as rural.

With so many rural ridings in the region, then, it is not surprising to find in Figure 1.2 that Atlantic provincial legislatures have indeed lagged the rest of Canada in proportions of women elected throughout the past few decades. The shape of the two curves is similar; both began below five per cent in the 1960s, rose slowly in the 1970s, more rapidly in the 1980s, and then levelled off starting in the late 1990s. But the proportion in Atlantic Canada has remained below that in the other provinces throughout the illustrated period, with the Atlantic plateau near 15 per cent, compared to well over 20 per cent elsewhere.

To see explicitly how these lower numbers of women elected are impacted by the rural ridings, consider the most recent elections. All four Atlantic provinces held general elections in 2003. Women were elected in 28 of the 182 provincial ridings, for an overall proportion of 15 per cent. If we separate out the more urban from the more rural ridings, we find that 27 per cent of the urban ridings (13 of 49) were won by women, compared to only 11 per cent (15 of 133) of the more rural ridings. These recent results are completely in line with the aforementioned statistical models linking low numbers of women elected to higher levels of rurality. Thus, cities in Atlantic Canada elect substantial numbers of women, just like cities elsewhere. But the fact that so much of Atlantic Canada is rural means that the rural ridings dominate, giving a lower overall proportion than in other regions.

Practical Approaches to Promoting Rural Women's Political Leadership

The fact that women's election to Canadian legislatures has stalled far below parity, after significant gains over a quarter century, is cause for concern. We have seen that rural ridings are deeply implicated in this stalling, and that rural Canada would have to play a key role in any significant future overall gains in women's election to public office. Understanding the historical reasons for, and what might practically be done to address, the rural

Figure 1. Historical proportions of women in national and provincial Parliaments

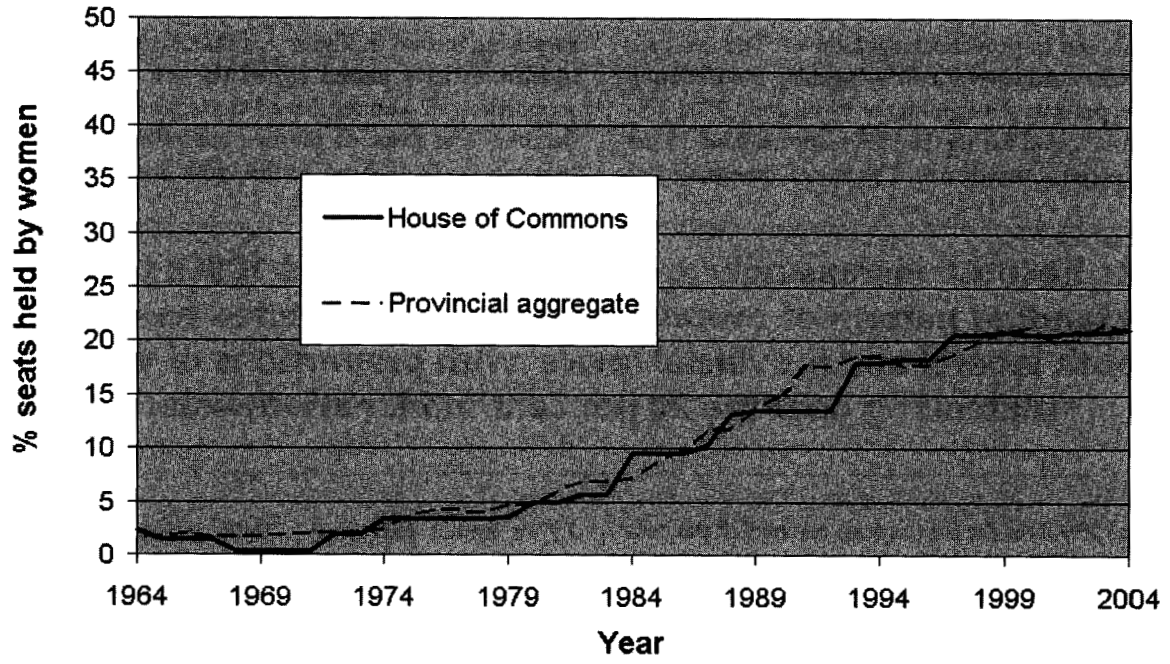
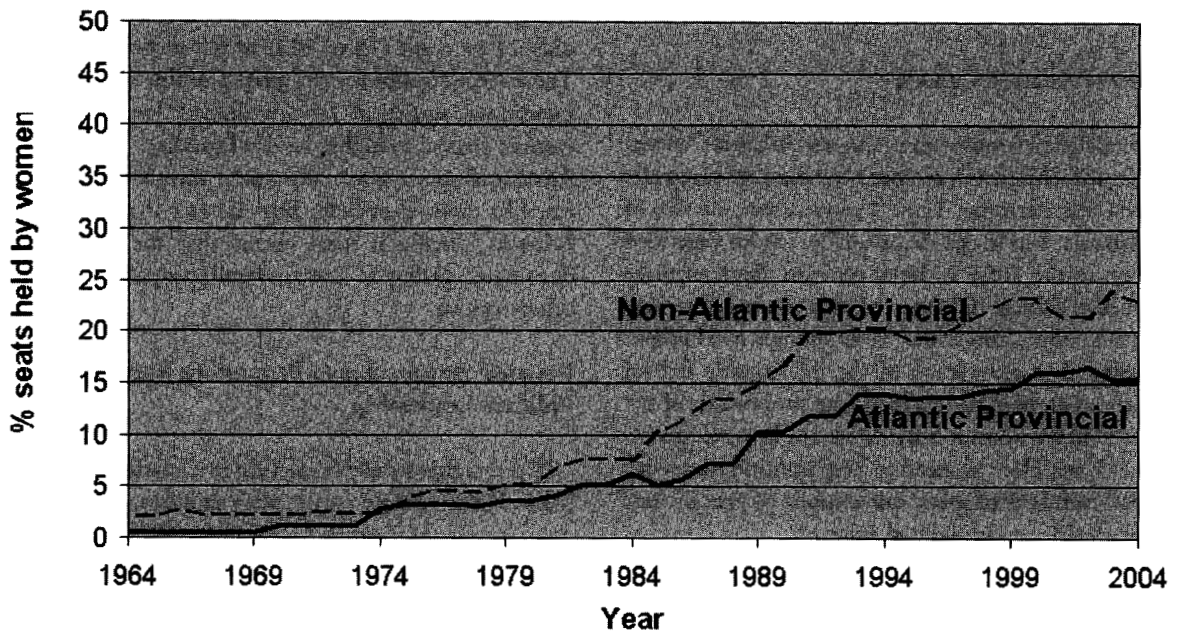


Figure 2. Historical proportions of women in provincial Parliaments in the Atlantic region and elsewhere



deficit in the election of women thus become central to the study of women's representation, and the quality of democracy in Canada.

Political parties are best positioned, among all organizations, to effect direct change in the makeup of their caucuses, but they would have to want to effect change in the first place. Part of the motivation behind the present article is to highlight the need for change by illustrating the severity of gender disparity in rural areas. But even if the desire was there, the practical challenges would be formidable. Where would a party look to, if it were trying to find more women candidates? And even if it could find them, could it assume that they wanted to be recruited? Or would it have to persuade them, and if so, what sort of reluctance would it encounter? Furthermore, would these recruitment strategies have to be tailored to the region, or even more locally? To address questions of this nature, my interview series in Atlantic Canada attempted to document rural women's leadership experiences and perceptions in this region, and to interpret them in terms of the specific economic and political environments (Carbert). Another challenge arises from the structure of parties. They are, after all, volunteer organizations, and the principle of grassroots democracy at the level of the local riding association impedes direct intervention from above. The potential for conflict is exacerbated by the need to concentrate efforts on ridings in which the party stands a good chance of winning. The practise of recruiting women to stand as sacrificial lambs in non-competitive ridings does little to promote women's empowerment, or to enhance a party's image.

Thus, political parties are in some ways uniquely constrained. Furthermore, gaining seats in provincial or national legislatures is only one component in building women's leadership. Much of public life—notably municipal government and appointed boards—is beyond the direct purview of political parties. Hence non-partisan organizations are in some ways better suited to promote many aspects of women's leadership. A good example of what can be accomplished is the 2004 Campaign School for Women conducted by the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women (NSACSW). This weekend workshop focused on a variety of leadership skills, such as writing a press release, making a speech, chairing a meeting, and fundraising. Beyond these nuts and bolts skills, rural women tend to be active volunteers at the local county level, but they often feel isolated from those outside their community. As such, attending a leadership workshop in an urban centre is an opportunity to build networks beyond kinship.

The NSACSW Campaign School and other similar initiatives elsewhere serve as useful models, but to repeat and enhance such events would move beyond the mandate and scope of the sponsoring organizations. A proposal is currently being developed, by Naomi Black and myself, to establish a single-purpose, non-government organization through which ongoing demand for rural women's leadership programs and activities can be met. The aim of this organization would be to develop and enhance the pool of rural women leaders who are willing to take on increased civic responsibilities. A major innovation of this proposal is the development of an evaluation process that monitors the career paths of people who attend workshops. In the absence of such evaluation, previous programs have generated only anecdotal evidence of impact. Monitoring the personal and career trajectories of prospective leaders would facilitate measures of impact, as well as ongoing efforts to improve programming.

Conclusion

There is currently a good deal of concern about a democratic deficit in Canada. An important component of the democratic deficit is the gender disparity in elected office. This paper has highlighted recent electoral results illustrating that this gender disparity is, to a large degree, a rural phenomenon, which holds independently of regional characteristics and partisan preferences. This rural deficit is cause for concern for two reasons. First, women's election to Canadian legislatures has stalled far below parity, and will have difficulty achieving further significant gains without substantial increases in rural districts. The second reason involves the long-term sustainability of rural Canada. A community that is capable of sustaining livelihoods also takes responsibility for administering its own affairs. Rural Canada, with its sparse populations relative to the volume of administrative infrastructure, can ill afford to squander the existing and potential leadership capacities of rural women.

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[1]This calculation includes 39 urban and suburban ridings forming a geographically contiguous block of high-population density electoral districts running from Scarborough in the east through Mississauga, Oakville, Burlington, and Hamilton in the west; and from Lake Ontario in the south to Richmond Hill in the north. The result (14 / 39 = 36 per cent, obtained from Elections Canada) is quite robust; it ranges from 32 per cent to 40 per cent, depending on which ridings are included.

[2]This calculation includes 34 urban and suburban ridings

forming a geographically contiguous block of high-population density electoral districts on and around the island of Montreal. The result (13 / 34 = 38 per cent, obtained from Elections Canada) is quite robust; it ranges from 36 per cent to 40 per cent, depending on which ridings are included.

[3]The provincial aggregate shown is calculated by assigning equal weight to all seats in provincial legislatures in the ten Canadian provinces.

[4]For example, in the preceding (2000) national election, women won four of 32 Atlantic seats, and all four were in the group of seven urban ridings (i.e. beyond parity in the Atlantic cities!). The coincidence that both Elsie Wayne (Saint John) and Wendy Lill (Dartmouth) left politics at the same time had the effect of cutting the Atlantic contingent of female MPs in half.

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