

WHERE DOES THE GENDER GAP? OR: THE FUTURE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

Naomi Black

L'expression "le conflit des sexes" est devenu un thème fréquent dans les médias au cours des dernières élections aux Etats-Unis et au Canada. Non seulement les femmes votent-elles différemment des hommes – elles ont des opinions différentes sur les questions de la politique d'État. L'auteure examine l'impact actuel de ce "conflit des sexes," et propose des conséquences possibles dans l'avenir.

In the fall of 1984, as elections loomed in North America, the term "gender gap" erupted in the newspapers, and became a recurrent feature of radio and television comments. It looked as if people had just realized that women are the majority of the voting population and, more, that we are *different* – politically, as well as biologically or socially different.

This is hardly a new discovery. For years political scientists have made the same observation. What has changed is the awareness of the media. What has also changed is the evaluation – how seriously the observation is taken, whether women are praised or blamed. And all of this is a result of some changes in the real world of politics.

The gender gap, under that name, was first discovered in the United States. But it means something for Canada too, though not quite what it does south of the border. Now, after the elections, we feel a bit differently about its potential. It may yet be important.

So what is it?

Gender in human beings is the social dimension of being female (or male), what it means in a given society. People think of it as being a result of biological or hormonal sex, believing that how women walk, talk, think, dress, earn a living follows naturally from their being female. But in fact the ways of being a woman seem to be heavily influenced by social expectations,

varying a good deal across cultures, even to points such as whether trousers or skirts are appropriate dress for respectable women. The highly puritanical current regime in Iran, for instance, insists upon trousers for women, even under the chador. Thus, to connect gender with politics is to say that, in a given cultural setting, the local consequences of being defined as a woman (or man) have some effect on political behaviour.

Specifically, the gender gap now seems to mean two things. It means, primarily, a difference between men's and women's votes that is sufficiently great and sufficiently persistent that it seems related to something permanent about women as political actors. Such a difference has been increasingly evident in American politics. There, women still show a tendency to vote in a way that cannot be accounted for by the fact that there are more old persons among women (all those widows) or that fewer women than men have advanced education. Technical analyses of such aggregate characteristics (such as comparing the votes of older, less educated women with those of older, less educated men) suggest that, in the United States, women's tendency to vote Democratic more frequently than men is linked to their gender. In Canada, women's tendency to vote for the NDP somewhat less frequently than men seems to be linked in the same way.

The second dimension of the gender gap, which makes sense out of differential voting behaviour, is the specificity of women's opinions about public policy. That is, women not only vote differently than men but also have different opinions on issues relevant to public policy. Again, we are not talking of differences that can be related to the characteristics of women as a group – that they are poorer or older (all those aging widows below the poverty line). Instead, we are saying that even

those women whose experience is most like men's – the women who are well-educated, well-paid, relatively pleased with their lives and their marriages, politically active – continue to hold some opinions that are more like those of other women than of men. These differences are increasing rather than decreasing, even though more women lead lives like men's.

Gender-linked differences of opinion have been with us since pollsters started asking questions of both women and men. As more women have become involved in public life, more have come to oppose war and armaments, differing more instead of less from men. The same pattern shows on another set of beliefs which has been labelled "compassion," consisting basically of concern about the provision of social services to the needy and ailing. Women tend to prefer budgetary commitments to social services rather than to military spending; this follows from the first two sets of preferences. There is also a general, continuing opposition to the public use of violence, including revolutionary change, as well as a distrust of some of the mechanism of what we call democracy, and indeed of the commonly accepted political ideologies. We may add that, in general, women seem to dislike extreme parties, whether of the left or of the right; we already knew that women are less likely to vote in support of them.

These are all generalizations, but they do hold to some extent across different ages, classes, even religions. They are differences between men and women, varying from country to country and time to time. Most important of all and worth repeating, they are not going away as expected but, if anything, increasing.

Political scientists have looked at women's preferences and observed, correctly, that they are not much help in

WOMEN WIN BIG!

ELECTION '84

Twenty-seven women were victors in the September federal election, nearly double the number elected to Parliament in 1980. As Walter Stewart reports, there's a future for women in Ottawa—if they get out and go for it.



Here is some good news, some bad news and some crêpe news.

The good news is that women and women's issues played a greater role in the recent federal election than ever before, and nearly twice as many women MPs were elected as ever before.

The bad news is that, when the dust settled, women represented 52 percent of the electorate and still only 9.6 percent of the

House of Commons. The winning Progressive Conservatives ran only 23 female candidates in the entire nation, and the party's impressive contingent of new women MPs, based mostly in Quebec, seems to have come about by accident. For most of them, the chances of election seemed nil when they received the Tory nomination; they rode into office in the wake of a massive shift to their party that has very little discernible equality about it. The New Democrats, who fielded the most women candidates—65—and took the deepest position on women's issues, wound up with the smallest number of female MPs—three, all incumbents.

The crêpe news is that women will have to become more aggressive about politics or else resign themselves to folding pamphlets or fetching coffee for the back-room boys for a few more decades. Continued on page 226

Women elected



From Chatelaine, November 1984 issue.

choosing among political parties. It is not upon such "women's issues" that parties and leaders base their appeals for votes. Consequently, such persistent opinions among women have been cited as evidence that, some sixty years after having acquired the vote, we have shown ourselves to be very slow learners, conservative, even perhaps basically apolitical. Women, it is said, do not understand what politics is really about.

Of course, it might be possible to respond that there is something wrong with a political system that does not permit a vote against war or in favour of compassion.

What seemed to be happening in the United States in 1984 was that, for once, it was possible to vote for or against war, for or against social services, even for or against women. Women had already seen enough difference between the two parties to be significantly more pro-Democratic in the 1980 election. Now, as another presidential election drew near, it was possible to tell the parties apart on issues that women felt distinctively about. The Republican Party had increased military spending and military rhetoric and trimmed a whole range of social programs central to the modern Welfare State. In addition, they had gone to some lengths to take stands opposed even to the mainstream version of feminism. There is more than majority approval in the States of both free choice in respect to abortion and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. There is also strong, vocal minority opposition. And the governing party had taken the minority side.

This produced in the U.S. a third element necessary if the gender gap was to have impact: a feminist leadership committed to "women's issues" and to normal politics, as well as to the leading symbols of feminism. Party difference, opinion difference, and leadership all met, and the nomination of Geraldine Ferraro as Democratic Vice Presidential candidate seemed to pull it all together. She represented the mainstream, majoritarian support for women and women's issues, embodying the differences formed by gender. Her style was perfect, the feminization of the tough, progressive ethnic politician. It was very exciting.

And it was very disappointing when President Reagan won a second term with one of the biggest majorities in history. It

bargaining for power and more concerned with ideals, goals, and service to the public. She thinks that on the whole this has damaged politics (though she favours women's increased role): it has made politics more extreme and less effective. There is a real irony in such a view being expressed by a conservative supporter of a government that brought women's issues into public life. It is true that they brought them in by supporting policies which were those neither of the majority of the American public nor of women as a group. But with those issues made partisan, women at least had the possibility of taking sides. In future elections that are not sweeps, this can make a real difference.

In Canada, we also had an electoral sweep in 1984, even if less extreme than the American one. As far as can be told at this point, women voted pretty much the same as men did. And no wonder, given that the competing party leaders put such major efforts into making sure there was no discernible difference between them on any issue that women could conceivably care about. This was not a simple bid for women's votes — on abortion, the scramble of the two prime ministerial candidates was to seem identical, not to react to the large majority support of free choice. Instead, it was an effort, successful as it turned out, to obliterate any possible gender gap in votes. It is ironic that some of the promises and even actions were on issues which do not draw any differential response from women and men. For instance, women as a group do not care

Power and Politics

We are the Gender Gap

Power and politics do not belong to men only. If women want social change, we must shed the dependency syndrome, as well as the belief that political systems will respond to our corrective action claims. We must assume ever-increasing responsibility for participation in setting political, economic, and social directions. One rule is the election process. BUT VOTING IS NOT ENOUGH.

The National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC)

NAC is a voluntary feminist organization working to improve the position of women in Canada. NAC consists of about 300 independent organizations across the country — some regional, others Canadian.

NAC gave out of the Government for the Equality of Women which sought the establishment of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. NAC has been called "the most powerful lobby for women in Canada." NAC promotes efforts to have and public opinion change.

- developing feminist positions.
- presenting letters to Government, legislators, Commission.
- lobbying Members of Parliament.
- NAC informs the public about women's concerns through:
 - Study of Women News.
 - open meetings on issues.
 - extensive media coverage.
- NAC fosters cooperation among women's organizations by:
 - clearing information.
 - organizing conferences.
 - holding a national network.

Federal Elections Kit

Elections can offer us as women, an opportunity to exercise power, responsibility, and consciousness. They offer us the historic challenge of one that gives responsibility, consciousness, and influence. It is a challenge to make visible our female presence — one which recognizes, values, and makes visible our female presence.

The commitment of public parties to the interests of women is equally expressed in election promises and political programs. To give even more women a voice in the issues of the day, the kit contains a series of materials in front of the politician. This requires awareness of the issues, and all organizing resources.

The ELECTION KIT will help you:

- Know the Candidates.
- Interview the Candidates.
- Support your Candidate.
- Get Out the Women's Vote.
- Know the Issues. Ask the Questions.

For additional copies contact the NAC Office.

We can make the difference.

From Status of Women News/La revue statut de la femme, Summer 1984 issue.

was little comfort that women had given him a slightly smaller majority than men had (65% of male votes went to Reagan, but only 60% of female).

Still, the gender gap had been translated, even if ineffectively, into normal politics. Although the condition of the economy and the need to be reassured had swept all before them, the issues women care about, usually so poorly represented in party divisions, entered into the campaigns. In some state contests in that U.S. election, it made a difference.

Jeanne Kirkpatrick, who wrote two good books on women and politics before she went to the United Nations, wrote in her New Presidential Elite that women are becoming more effective in politics because politics are becoming more like that women want, less concerned with

Ms.

HOW TO WIN WITH THE GENDER GAP:

3 Scenarios for the '84 Election

The gender gap is measured, dissected, probed, and if women register and vote in November, they will make history.

Nineteen eighty-four marks the first time that women, through their voting power, they organized strength, could decide who will be the next President of the United States, which party will control the Congress, who will exceed and shape by the Women's Movement, in its ongoing struggle for the ERA, reproductive freedom, economic justice, peace, and the other social improvement issues.

The gender gap has been established as a political fact of life. It is widely being measured, dissected, probed, analyzed, and debated by politicians, academics, journalists, the media, and by women themselves. Most agree that it is not a flash in the pan, a surprise thing. It will remain, like the night and day on a

BY BELLA ABZUG AND MIM KELBER

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more than men about the representation of women in parliament. But of course activist feminist leaders do. The promotion of women candidates did coopt or disarm many of those potentially able to mobilize a modest northern version of the gender gap. Now, after the election, the pretty promises are in abeyance, daycare sent to another taskforce, affirmative action due to be considered further, the Indian Act not amended, and so on.

But how nice it was to have daycare and affirmative action, pensions and battered wives, women ministers and maternity benefits even discussed during an electoral campaign. A lot of consciousnesses were raised by the nationwide television presentation of the party leaders' debate on women's issues. And surely it is progress to have the "womanly" preference for peace, for caring, and for reform as opposed to revolution, now greeted as progressive instead of conservative or apolitical.

The gender gap will not save us, but we may get somewhere with the by-products of politicians' fear of it. Certainly many of the twenty-seven women M.P.s in the Canadian Parliament would not be there otherwise. As to the future, of the gender gap and of women's issues alike, it remains to be seen what will happen.

Note: Analysis of the 1984 elections has barely begun, but the *New York Times* (December 16, 1984, p. 31) gives an analysis of exit polls that includes some discussion of the gender dimension (and of something called the "marriage gap" which seems also to have emerged). Gloria Steinem has a fairly optimistic feminist interpretation in *Ms.* magazine (December, 1984, pp. 53-70). For a useful description of gender-linked opinion differences in the U.S., see *Public Opinion*, (April-May 1982, pp. 21, 27-32). For Canada, John Terry has compiled for the library of Parliament (Political and Social Affairs Division, Research Branch) the poll and voting data that suggested to politicians that a gender gap was to be feared (16 May 1982).

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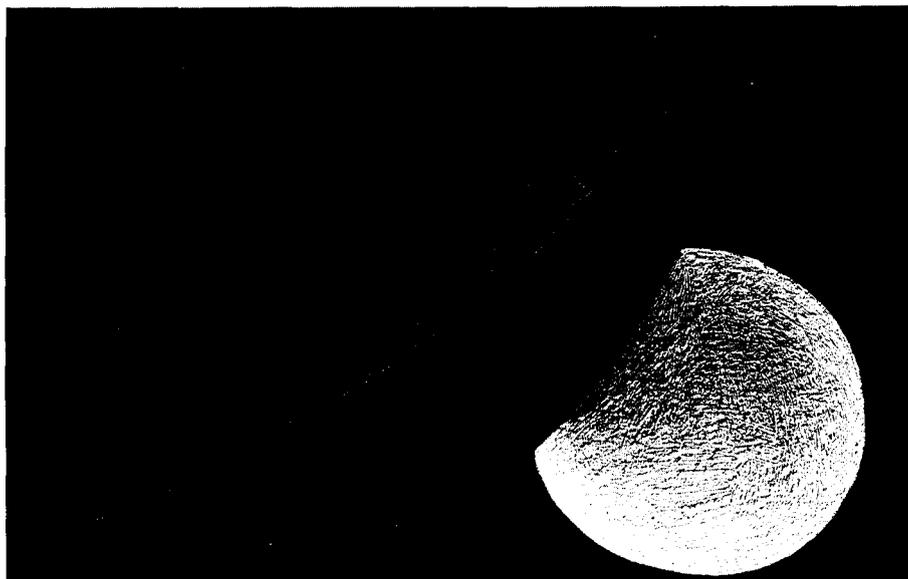


Illustration: Ruth Arnold

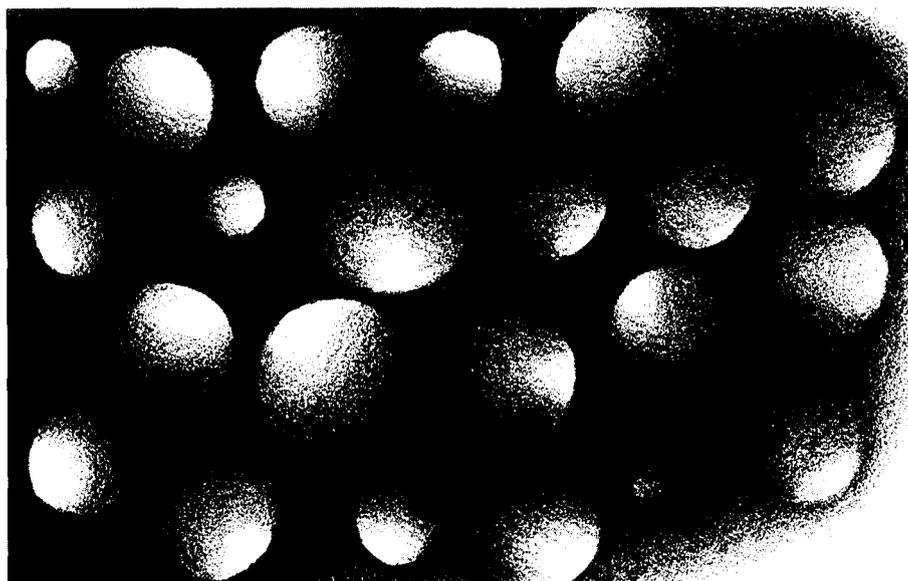


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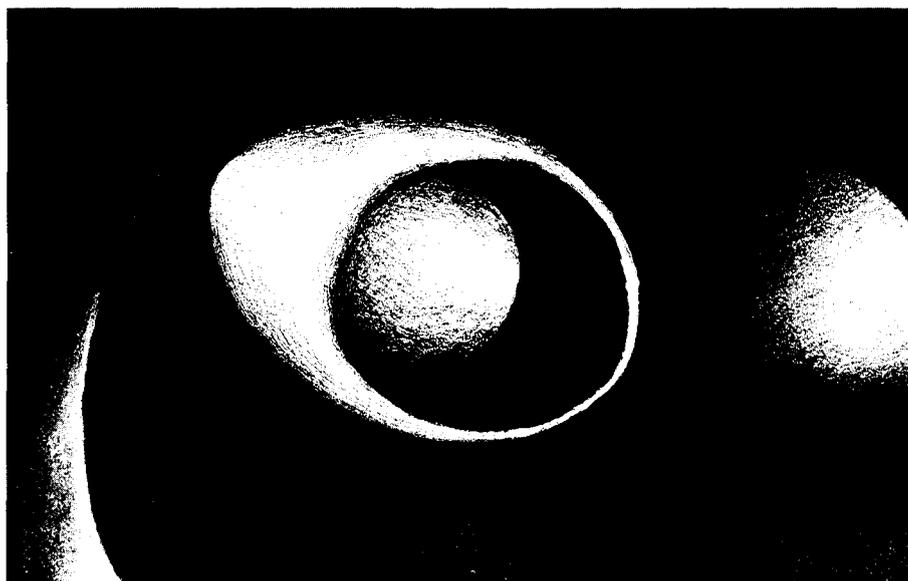


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