



Representation and Identity in Canadian Electoral Politics: A Feminist Perspective

by Tara Dean, September 2002

True representative democracy cannot exist when only a small proportion of the electorate is represented in Parliament. This drastic disproportion can be seen most acutely in the under representation of women at the federal level. That women have a unique social perspective formed out of women's subjugation, a perspective that is seriously lacking with our current representatives. The numbers themselves reveal that this is not just a myth or a theory. In the 2000 federal election, out of 172 seats the governing Liberals received, only 39 were held by women. The problem is further exemplified when we look at the legislature as a whole. Out of 301 seats in the House of Commons, women only hold 62, a far cry from gender parity. The number of female candidates is also dropping for every national party except the Alliance Party, whose female representation numbers are dismal at best to begin with. With less female candidacy it is safe to postulate that there will be less women representatives elected, which in turn will not increase gender representation.

Why is women's representation so difficult to achieve when all of the formal obstacles to women's political involvement have been removed? In a nutshell, there are subtle systemic barriers that impede women's progress in the political arena. These barriers operate at the social, institutional and political levels to create an almost insurmountable wall for women who want a political career. Most of the political parties have acknowledged that these barriers exist by creating Affirmative Action programs in an attempt to get more women into candidacy positions and ultimately to Parliament. However, as a long term solution these policies fall significantly short. AA should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather a part of a society-wide project to end gender discrimination. Ultimately, AA policies should not be considered long-term solutions, rather as temporary measures to ease the historical under representation of certain groups.

Dean tackles 3 key questions that always arise when discussing women's representation (or lack thereof): 1) Should "women's interests" be defined? She argues that it is neither necessary nor possible to do so. 2) Is the gender of the representative more important than the issues s/he espouses? Dean argues that who a representative is defines how they represent. 3) Why should women be represented? She argues on 2 main points that of justice - the system should be fair and equitable - and that a gender gap exists in the way women and men vote and the issues they feel are important, which can be seen in both the general public and our MPs.

Finally Dean seeks to address the question of how this under representation affects democracy in Canada. She argues that since women have not reached a critical mass (identified as 30%) women do not have a significant influence on policy formation. It can be argued that since women never reach the 30% range, true democracy does not exist since a whole range of perspectives are ignored in the political system. A possible solution is the democratisation of representation, to be taken on as part of wider social change to end gender discrimination. We need to change the very idea of representation so that it can include both collective identities and individuality and make room for women to be more accurately represented. The exclusion of large segments of the population does impair the democratic process and delegitimizes the policies that have been created within the confines of a very limited perspective. Tara Dean sees this as the greatest failure of our current political system.

Tara Dean did her BA and MA in political science at York University, specialising in women and politics in the Canadian system. Her Major Research Paper for her MA was on how to incorporate more women in the political system and why there is not gender parity in the first place. If you wish to discuss this or any other aspect of female engagement in the political system, or if you would like a full copy of Tara's paper, please feel free to contact Tara at tmdean@idirect.ca.