



The Stalled Electoral Project

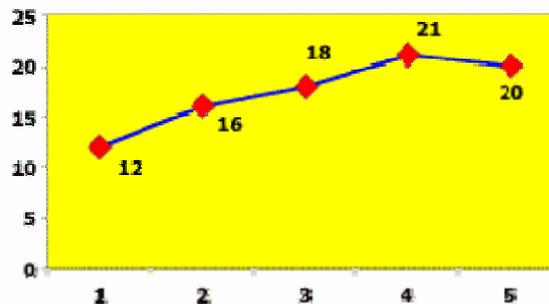
By Linda Trimble and Jane Arscott, authors of Still Counting: Women in Politics Across Canada (Broadview Press, 2003).

We have been counting the number of elected women in Canada's legislatures for over a decade now and we persist for two reasons. First, by any measure, Canada is far short of gender parity, the goal of electing women to about 50% of the political posts. Second, we can't assume steady progress for women in the political arena. Indeed, there is clear evidence of a downward trend, signalling that the electoral project, the goal of electing more and more diverse women, has stalled. Recently women have been bumping their heads on the electoral glass ceiling, an invisible barrier to women's progress in public life.

When we published *Still Counting* a year ago, only 20% of Canada's elected representatives at the federal and provincial level were women. We argued that the electoral glass ceiling seems set at the 25% mark for the foreseeable future. Since *Still Counting* went to press, 9 provincial and territorial elections have been held. 565 seats were available; women won only 113 of them. So, after 12 months and 9 elections there was no change in the percentage of women elected across Canada. Women still only hold 20% of the seats in Canada's legislatures, well below the glass ceiling mark of 25%. (See <http://stillcounting.athabascau.ca/table3-1.phb> for data, by jurisdiction, regarding the most recent elections).

Graph #1 shows the trend over the last 5 elections, averaged across jurisdictions. Point number 1 on the graph represents elections held in the mid 1980s, when the number of elected women finally inched above 10%. Point number 5 indicates the most recent elections, all of which have taken place since 2000, most in the last year. From the mid 1980s to the late 1990s, progress was slow but steady. Now the trend is down.

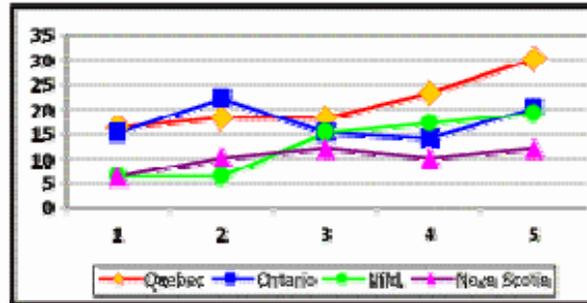
Graph #1
Percentage women elected across Canada, 5 most recent elections
(mid 1980s- present)



If we break down these numbers, the picture is even clearer. There is modest progress in very few places. Quebec is the one province bearing good news; there the percentage of women elected has been rising steadily, and increased dramatically in the last election. In 2003, Quebec women won 30% of the seats in the National Assembly, setting a record. In Newfoundland, Ontario and Nova Scotia the increases were much more subtle, under 3%. As graph #2 graph shows, only Quebec is above the glass ceiling mark of 25% as a result of recent elections.

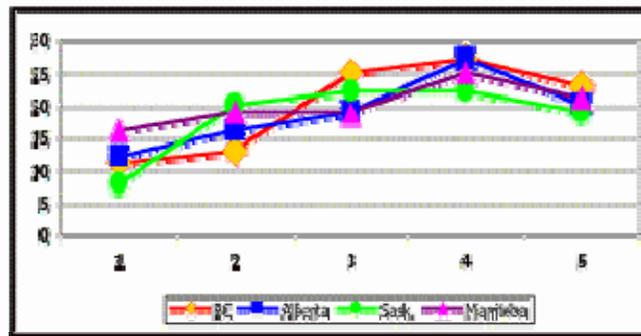


Graph #2
Percentage women elected, 5 most recent elections
Quebec, Ontario, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia



Overall, the news is bad for women. Numbers have dropped in half of Canada's provinces and territories as a result of most recent elections. The prairie provinces, where women first won the right to vote and first entered political office, provide a clear example. These 4 provinces were leading the way in the 80s and 90s, with 3 of them reaching or exceeding the 25% mark. As Graph #3 shows, in the most recent elections across the prairies women lost ground. This evidence punctuates the point that we cannot assume progress for women in electoral politics. Vigilance and activism are essential to re-mobilizing the electoral project for women.

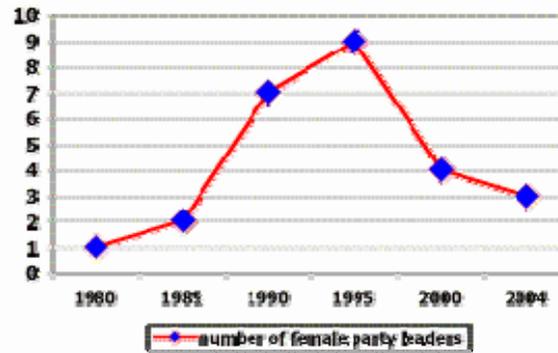
Graph #3
Percentage women elected, 5 most recent elections
BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba



The same is true for the top political jobs - - party leadership. When we published our first jointly produced book, titled *In the Presence of Women: Representation in Canadian Governments*, in 1997, there were 8 women leaders, and a pool of eligibles for the available party leaders' posts. Now, with the departure of Alexa McDonough from the federal scene and the recent election of Carole James in BC, there are only three female party leaders across Canada. Conservative leadership candidate Belinda Stronach's treatment by the press illustrates but one reason why women may be shying away from competing for party leadership positions.



Graph #4
Number of Female Party Leaders, at 5 year intervals
(Federal, Provincial and Territorial)



What can be done? First, we need to shake political parties from their complacency. Political parties seem to think 20% representation is “good enough” representation for women. We need to remind them that it’s not even halfway good enough. Secondly, we need to be active in promoting election finance reform, to reduce the role of money in the campaign and nomination process, and in urging electoral system reform. More progress will be made, and more quickly, with a fairer, more transparent electoral system. Thirdly, we need to work on recruiting, training and supporting female political aspirants. Finally, we should recognize the sacrifices and hard work of those women serving in legislatures across the country, regardless of their political affiliation. Women need to know that their public service is appreciated and valued.