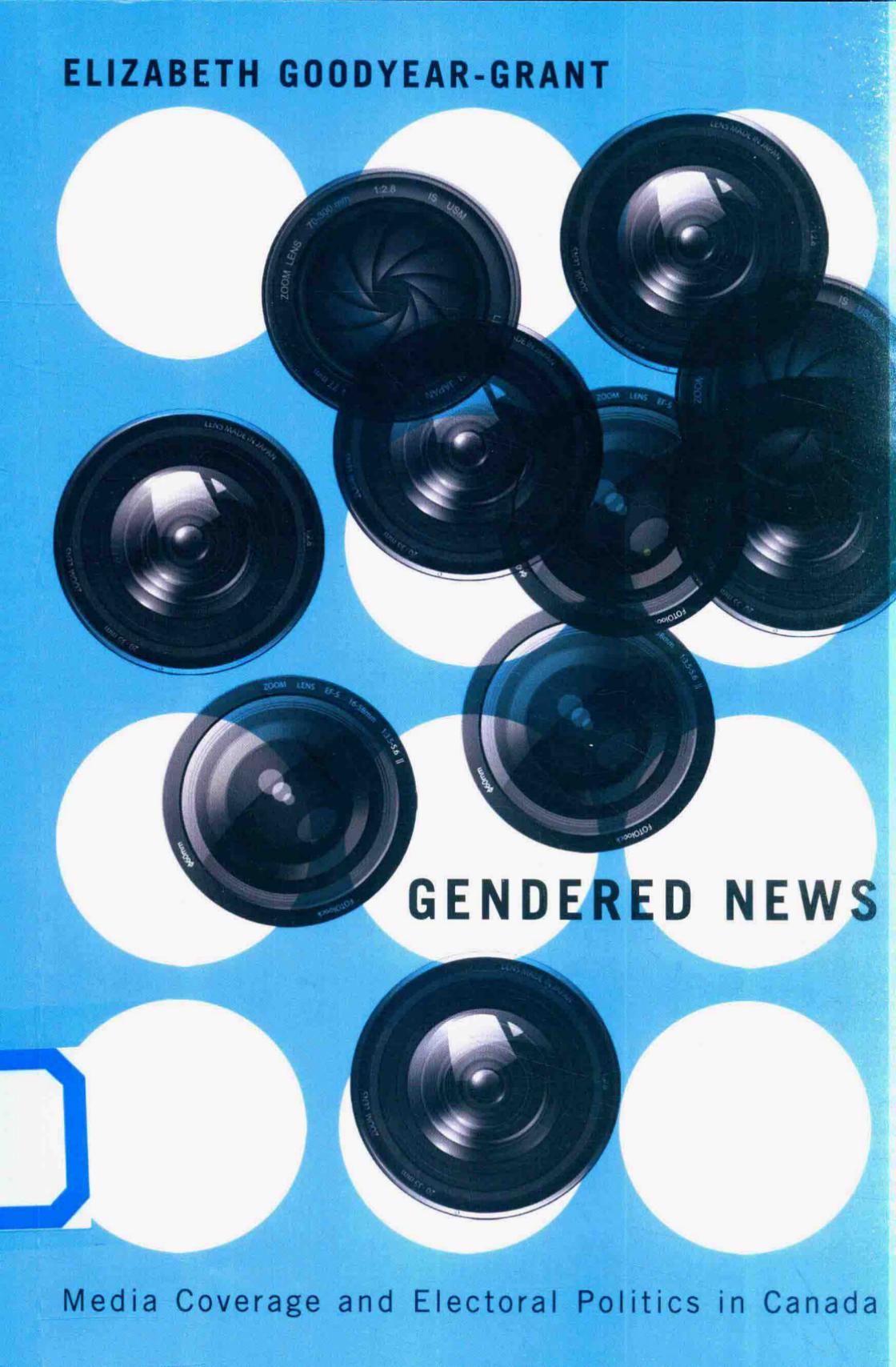


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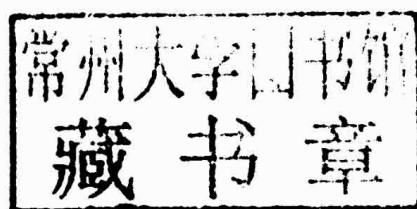
GENDERED NEWS

Media Coverage and Electoral Politics in Canada

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MEDIA COVERAGE AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN CANADA

Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant



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Introduction

Women are numerically under-represented in politics by a large margin in Canada and across the globe. Despite important improvements on a variety of representational fronts since the early 1970s, the brief period of growth in women's candidacies and share of elected seats at the federal level over the 1980s and early 1990s has largely stalled, raising grave doubts about "the view that things are moving along nicely," a perspective that Bashevkin calls "flat-out wrong" (2009, 3). Why has women's political representation stalled? *Gendered News: Media Coverage and Electoral Politics in Canada* contributes to answering the puzzle of women's persistent political under-representation by focusing on the role of the news media. This book asks whether the news media contribute to the supply- and demand-side barriers to women's political representation. It argues that the news media often present gendered representations of female politicians and of the political world, which, in turn, can become formidable obstacles to women at all stages on the path to attaining elected office. Put differently, gendered news coverage can negatively impact both the supply of and the demand for women politicians.¹

This empirical fact of women's political under-representation raises critical questions on both symbolic and substantive fronts, and it also means that legislatures operate with unnecessarily restricted talent pools. In Canada, from 1993 to 2011, there was a modest 7 percent increase in women's share of the seats in the House of Commons, from 18 percent in 1993 to

25 percent following the May 2011 federal election. Women's representation seems to have plateaued at around the 20 to 25 percent mark, a level that has been holding for the past fifteen years and that raises the possibility of a gendered "electoral glass ceiling" (Trimble and Arscott 2003, 51). When changes in women's proportions of House seats have occurred from election to election, the pattern has not always been one of growth. Women's share of seats fell slightly from 21.1 percent to 20.8 percent from the 2004 to the 2006 federal election. When we focus specifically on party leaders, the pattern is similar. Two female party leaders contested the 1993 federal election, then Prime Minister Kim Campbell and then NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin; yet, there has not been a woman heading a competitive political party in a federal election since 2000, when Alexa McDonough led the NDP. Gains are not irreversible.

Provincially, women candidates have not fared significantly better. Keeping sizeable provincial variations in mind, on average, women occupy just 22 percent of provincial legislative seats, although there has been a remarkable increase in the number of women premiers and provincial party leaders in recent years, including premiers Christy Clark (British Columbia), Kathleen Wynne (Ontario), Pauline Marois (Quebec), and Kathy Dunderdale (Newfoundland and Labrador). Women's representation at both these levels of Canadian government, however, remains stubbornly short of the so-called critical mass threshold – typically pegged at 30 percent of legislative seats – required for women to make a difference in politics. At the current rate of change – a 7 percent increase over eighteen years – Canada's House of Commons will not see a critical mass of female members of Parliament until 2029 or parity until 2075, well over half a century from now.

To attain elected office in politics, candidates must undergo three selection processes: they must select themselves to run; they must be selected by parties for nomination; and they must be selected by voters at the ballot box (Matland and Montgomery 2003). In many ways, the stubbornness of women's under-representation over these eighteen years is a puzzle, because many barriers at all three stages have been reduced, suggesting that women's shares of candidacies and legislative seats should be higher. Indeed, barriers erected by parties, fundraising, voter hesitation about women politicians, and women's positions in the candidate eligibility pool have all improved.

Political parties historically played formidable gatekeeping roles that tended to overtly scuttle women's prospects for elective office (e.g., Bashevkin 1993). Political parties certainly still have work to do to provide women the same opportunities for power and influence that men have enjoyed for our

entire history; nonetheless, they have improved. Many parties have adopted formal and informal measures to enhance women's candidacies over the past few decades. Although Canada has not joined the roughly 110 countries in the world that have adopted some form of gender-based quotas, Canadian political parties have undertaken other steps to increase the number of women candidates and legislators. Several parties have informal "targets," some of which aim for gender parity in candidate nominations. Some parties have set up funds reserved for women candidates to assist them in their bids for office. Some have adopted formal recruitment policies aimed at identifying and recruiting women candidates, as well as candidates from other under-represented groups such as minorities and Aboriginals. The federal NDP falls within this last category. Parties no longer tend to run their female candidates overwhelmingly in so-called lost-cause ridings, although this still happens in rural ridings (e.g., Carbert 2009). To be sure, different political parties offer different levels of resources for, and obviously have different levels of commitment to, the recruitment of women candidates. More left-wing and centrist parties, predictably, tend to be more supportive than more right-wing parties. This partisan pattern is fairly consistent across countries of the developed West, and in Canada it became quite overt in the post-1993 shake-up that saw the emergence of the Reform Party, later the Canadian Alliance (e.g., Young 2002). In the main, however, political parties have become more hospitable to female office seekers over recent decades, as well as to female members more generally (Young and Cross 2003).

Political parties are key, but so is money, and there are important inequalities that must be taken into account. In Canada there is a persistent gender gap with respect to income. Women are paid roughly 84 cents for every dollar paid to men,² placing Canada's gender-income gap among the highest of countries in the OECD.³ Earnings differentials can be important to self-selection into political careers and to success at the nomination stage, as well, because personal income can affect whether one can afford to run a political campaign and shoulder other costs associated with doing so, such as day care, transportation, and absence from paid work. Women do tend to earn less personally; however, we must also consider the abilities of candidates to fundraise if we are to glean a full picture of whether and how money hampers women in seeking office. Success at fundraising is a critical indicator of candidate quality and electability, and there is convincing evidence that women are not disadvantaged relative to men in raising campaign money (e.g., Young 2005). The recent overhaul of campaign and election finance laws in Canada, which has resulted in stricter restrictions

on spending and contributing, has had the added advantage of practically levelling the playing field for all candidates, male and female, when it comes to raising and spending money on electoral campaigns.

In addition to the loosening of barriers to nomination and election, the supply pool of potential candidates has grown dramatically over recent decades. Women are better educated, more professionally qualified to run for office, and more connected to political networks than ever before, factors that actually should enhance their chances of selection at all three stages. Critically, women's presence in professional and managerial occupations has grown dramatically in the past few decades. In 2008, women occupied 50 percent of professional positions in business and finance in Canada, including 34 percent of senior management positions.⁴ Law is becoming similarly feminized. Where women were just 5 percent of Ontario lawyers in 1971, over three decades later, in 2006, women accounted for nearly 60 percent of young lawyers and 38 percent of all lawyers in Ontario.⁵ Women make up much smaller portions of senior lawyers, partners, and the like, but their entrance in large numbers into this critical pipeline profession should contribute to a larger number of female politicians as well. This has not happened, however, at least not yet.

Turning to the final stage of selection – being elected by voters – women fare well. In the aggregate, when other factors are equal, voters do not appear to be systematically biased against female candidates (e.g., Black and Erickson 2003). What this means is that voters have no baseline objection to voting for women. Sometimes, women actually enjoy an electoral advantage among voters. The problem, as always, is with the qualifier “when other factors are equal,” which they often are not for many women candidates. When women have the same money, credentials, time, experience, networks, and other important resources as men, including media visibility and favourable coverage, they do not face disadvantage at the polls. As the following pages illustrate, the media play an important role in shaping voters' perceptions of female leaders and candidates and of the political world generally, thus influencing voters' support for female politicians.

What is the role of the news media in producing and reinforcing supply- and demand-side barriers to women's representation in formal politics? Broadly, this occurs mainly through a process of gendering in news coverage, whereby women politicians are systematically presented differently than their male counterparts. The term *gendered coverage* refers to all the ways that women politicians are presented differently than their male colleagues as a function of the fact that they are women, just as racialized

coverage focuses on ethnic and/or racial markers of difference – such as foreign birth, country of origin, dress and appearance, religion, or language – and promotes a view of visible-minority news subjects as novel, atypical, or exotic (e.g., Abu-Laban and Trimble 2006; Fleras and Kunz 2001; Gershon 2012; Henry and Tator 2002; Saunders 1991; Terkildsen and Damore 1999; Tolley 2012; Zilber and Niven 2000a, 2000b). Gendering can occur in both the quantity and quality of the coverage received by female politicians. Quality is particularly important, for the quantity of coverage matters little if the news presents women politicians negatively. News coverage is gendered when it systematically presents women politicians as unique or different, or implies that women are alien to politics because they are women; focuses on them as women first, and politicians second; and devotes disproportionate and voyeuristic attention to their personal lives, including their appearance and family situation, often at the expense of coverage of their professional credentials and political experience. Gendered coverage can assume a variety of guises, many of which are examined in this book – in fact, even seemingly gender-neutral coverage can have deeply gendered implications when women are presented the same as men, using masculine frames. Yet, with all forms of gendered coverage, the underlying dynamic is stunningly singular: broadly, gendered coverage assumes a male model of politician as the norm and, therefore, depicts women as gendered beings, implicitly novel and foreign to, as opposed to natural and normalized in, the political sphere.

This book is rooted in and extends the gendered mediation thesis. The original articulation of this approach in Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross's (1996) work on female MPs in Great Britain has been further refined by Canadian (Gidengil and Everitt 1999, 2000, 2003a, 2003b) and Australian scholars (Fountain and McGregor 2002). Representing a second stage in the gender analysis of media coverage, the primary focus of the gendered mediation thesis is not explicit sex or gender bias in the news. Unlike in decades past, the news today very rarely contains explicitly sexist remarks or language; rather, the gendering is more insidious, and examples include covering politicians using ostensibly gender-neutral news frames that are, in fact, masculine in nature, as well as format techniques that present more filtered, mediated representations of women than men. More details are discussed further on in this introduction.

The gendered mediation thesis is rooted in two core premises, which explain why gendered coverage occurs. First, the news media reflect the culture in which they are situated, which is gendered. Second, the mechanics