

News Women in politics

'Modest' progress sees more women elected to the House, but researchers call 2019 the 'status quo'

With the new House of Commons set to be made up of 98 women and 240 men, 'we should be asking why men are overrepresented,' says Professor Erin Tolley.



Candidates reflect on the increased number of women elected to the House of Commons this year. From left to right: Bloc MP-elect Marie-Hélène Gaudreau, Liberal candidate Tracy Muggli, NDP candidate Nikki Clarke, and Conservative MP-elect Kerry-Lynne Findlay. Photographs courtesy of Marie-Hélène Gaudreau, Tracy Muggli, Nikki Clarke, and Kerry-Lynne Findlay campaigns

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT ALLEN

Women were more likely to run in weaker ridings for their respective parties this election, while new male candidates disproportionately ran in target seats—a trend academics say lines up with historical patterns, and puts this election firmly in the "status quo" for poor gender representation.

Though 10 more women were elected on Oct. 21 compared to 2015—now up to 98 out of 338 MPs—political scientists Erin Tolley and Melanee Thomas, who study representation in politics, called the improvement incremental.

"Without some kind of mechanism or measure to address things, we know that progress will be glacial. It does not occur on a steady, upward slope," said Prof. Tolley.

Where women run matters most, both said, and whether looking at 2019 or 2015, the results of both elections tell a similar, and familiar, story. Though a record 40 per cent women candidates ran for Canada's major parties this year, only 29 per cent were elected.

"We know that women are less likely to run in desirable districts, they're less likely to be nominated in open seats where there are no incumbents, and they're more likely to appear as sacrificial lambs—these ridings that parties have no chance of winning," said Prof. Tolley.

Women were candidates in 50 per cent of the ridings in which their party secured less than five per cent of the vote, and in 45.6 per cent of ridings in which their party got between five and 10 per cent support, according to an analysis by *The Hill Times*. On the flip side, 33 per cent of candidates who got 35 to 40 per cent of the vote were women, creeping downwards as the vote share increased, with 25.5 per cent of candidates who garnered 60 per cent or more of the vote being women.

"It's the status quo," said Prof. Thomas, who works at the University of Calgary and co-authored a study looking at electoral results up to 2011, which found women were more

likely to be "sacrificial lambs," running in ridings where they didn't stand a chance.

"We are now eight years later and every single party still has a competitiveness problem," she said. "I have no patience for this."

Parties need to do three key things to improve the outlook in future elections, she said: integrate women into local party leadership, as that leads to more diverse recruitment; open nominations early; and make those internal races last longer, so they're less of a barrier to those reluctant to run or who have more barriers with work or family.

'We should be asking why men are overrepresented'

The question of how to address parity should be flipped, said Prof. Tolley, because right now it puts the "onus" on women, when it's the parties that are the problem.

"We should be asking why men are overrepresented, and to me the answer is clear," she said. "When they do enter politics, they are given the best possible odds of succeeding, that's why we see these patterns."

For example, 29 men and five women ran for the Conservatives in Alberta, and 11 men and three women ran in Saskatchewan—provinces long considered Conservative strongholds. In Atlantic Canada, where the Liberal Party swept all 32 seats in 2015, only eight Liberal candidates in 2019 were women.

It translated to wins as well, though with slight improvement. Of the 60 seats parties flipped this election, 37 per cent were taken by women. Ten of the Bloc Québécois' 22 new seats are held by women, and six of 27 for Conservatives, which returned with a caucus of 22 women out of 121. All parties but the NDP, which saw its caucus almost halved compared to 2015, are returning with more women.

Looking at 2015 electoral results among the four major parties, women represented 47 per cent of the candidates running where parties lost by 10 per cent and more in 2015. The ratio is

worse when women ran in open seats where the MP decided not to run again in 2019, with women taking 39 per cent of those seats, and only 35 per cent where the party had a near loss of less than five per cent, according to a Samara Centre for Democracy analysis.

The Conservatives were "considerably worse" at fielding women in competitive ridings, making up eight of 42 candidates, noted Samara researcher Paul Thomas.

Earlier this year, Samara produced a multi-election analysis of party nomination races and appointed candidates, and found parties were inconsistent, even flouting their own rules for candidate nominations and thereby adding barriers for women, he said.

parties are making honest efforts to recruit more women.

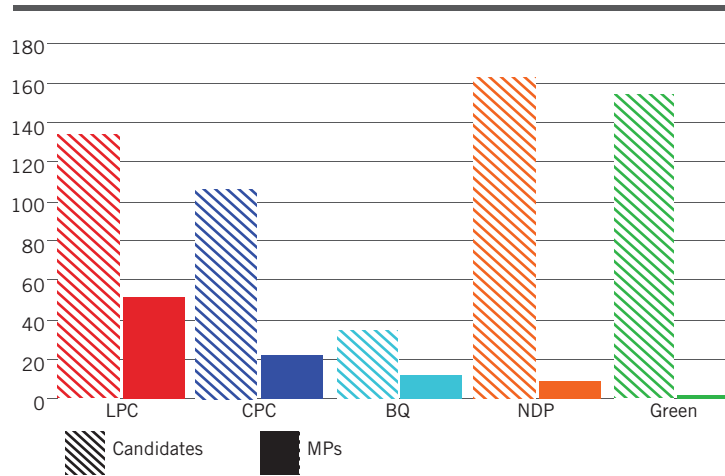
'It's up to us to claim our space'

Conservative MP-elect Kerry-Lynne Findlay, a former Harper-era cabinet minister, is returning to Parliament after securing 42.1 per cent support in South Surrey-White Rock, B.C.

She said she's not persuaded that parties are at fault for the disparities in candidate representation and success, because there are so many factors that go into decisions to run and a party's success in a given election.

"The parties don't place candidates, that's not how the system works," she said. "It's a system of

2019 women candidates and MPs, by party



Source: Compiled by *The Hill Times* from a dataset created by *The Hill Times*, the Samara Centre for Democracy, and research partners.

The practice of protecting incumbent MPs is also slowing progress, he added. With the bulk of the incumbent House of Commons being male, and only 98 new MPs elected this year, it doesn't create much opportunity for change, said Prof. Thomas.

"If all your progress has to come from less than a third of the seats," he said, it'll remain slow.

But many of the women who ran disagree that this slow progress is deliberate, or that parties are at fault. *The Hill Times* spoke with 10 women from the Bloc, NDP, Liberal, and Conservative parties, who all said they felt their

we want to win this riding, who is available, who has shown desire," she said, and the key question is: "how do you become seen as somebody who wants that position and is willing to put in the work necessary?"

Like the male-dominated law career she led before, politics is "a tough, competitive choice as a career," she said, in which women face more personal attacks.

"Not all women want to be in that contentious, competitive environment in their work life. Many do, but it isn't everyone's choice."

Conservative candidate Carol Clemenhagen was in a rare race

in Ottawa Centre, Ont., with women running for all of the major parties, which Liberal MP Catherine McKenna won. The riding has historically flipped between NDP and Liberal, but Ms. Clemenhagen, who got 12 per cent of the vote, said she chose to run in the long-shot riding because any race should involve "testing of ideas" from all parties.

Overall, with more women having run and 10 more taking a seat in the House, the 2019 election is a "very positive move forward," said Ms. Clemenhagen.

While it's important to make sure there are no barriers to women or racialized candidates, she said "it's up to us [women] to claim our space and not be turned away or discouraged by the previous electoral history of a riding."

Bloc MP-elect Louise Chabot, who won Thérèse-De Blainville, Que., over the male Liberal incumbent, said she disagreed that parties make deliberate choices to place women in unwinnable seats, and stressed that not all parties act the same.

The sacrificial lamb theory "might demotivate women to be candidates," said Ms. Chabot by email, through a translator. "I believe women make their decisions on their own judgment, just like I did."

She said she sees the 2019 result as "considerable progress," but "still too modest."

Her Bloc colleague, Marie-Hélène Gaudreau, similarly helped return Laurentides-Labelle, Que., to the party after a close loss in 2015. Ms. Gaudreau said the party knew there was a strong chance of winning her riding.

Nikki Clarke, who ran for the NDP in Mississauga-Malton, Ont., lauded NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, B.C.) for calling "on all his frontline soldiers to go out into the communities to seek out racialized candidates and to have more of a balance with women." The NDP had 146 women candidates this election.

As a woman of colour on the campaign trail, she said she dealt with both racism and misogyny.

"There are still barriers in terms of getting the message across, in terms of reaching people, in terms of them seeing you for what you have to deliver as a community worker, as a politician, as a servant for the community," said Ms. Clarke.

And while it didn't deter her, she knows of others who were approached, many women of colour, who declined.

Tracy Muggli was one of seven women among 14 Liberal candidates in Saskatchewan, none of whom were elected on Oct. 21.

Ms. Muggli said she doesn't think the "sacrificial lamb" theory applies to her or her colleagues. Instead, she pointed to the huge financial sacrifice of running, and the increasingly "negative tone" of politics, as bigger barriers to entry—during the campaign, she was subjected to the same derogatory remark recently spray-painted on Ms. McKenna's campaign office.

Canada is moving in the right direction on gender representation in federal politics, she said, "but it's still not a friendly place to be."

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