

Do Women “Do Better” in Municipal Politics? Electoral Representation across Three Levels of Government

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The study of women in politics is a burgeoning field of research. Scholars have examined women’s political participation, disparities in their electoral representation and the institutional, social and economic factors that influence their presence in politics. While this literature is rich, much of it tends to examine a single level of government, providing only a partial understanding of women in politics. When researchers have looked at electoral presence across jurisdictions, the dominant conclusion is that women will find greater electoral success municipally than at the federal, provincial or territorial levels (Blais and Gidengil, 1991; Brodie, 1985; Gavan-Koop and Smith, 2008; Maillé, 1994; Sharpe, 1994; Trimble, 1995; Vickers, 1978).

Although the idea of a municipal advantage has achieved remarkable academic currency, the empirical evidence has been rather mixed and muted. Using a comprehensive dataset, this article sheds new light on women’s electoral presence over time and across the three levels of government in Canada. Following a review of the relevant literature, the article presents several new findings on the presence of women at the three levels of government. It challenges the notion of a municipal advantage and argues that women experience nearly equivalent levels of underrepresentation at all three levels of government.

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Women, Hierarchies and the Municipal Advantage

Hierarchies are central to this examination of women's electoral presence. Most polities are characterized by some degree of hierarchy in which power—whether in the form of resources, influence, prestige or scope for action—resides at the top of institutional and social structures and filters down to those at the bottom. Hierarchical arrangements can influence the nature and degree of subordination and marginalization, with the bottom rungs of the ladder typically dominated by particular groups, including women, ethnic, racial and religious minorities, youth, persons with disabilities, Aboriginals and the LGBT community. This is evident, for example, in the distribution of women in executive positions (MacIvor, 1996), in academe (Sussman and Yssaad, 2005) and in the legal profession (Darcy et al., 1994; Williams and Thames, 2008). We also see the effects of hierarchical arrangements on women's presence in the political arena. Putnam labelled this the “law of increasing disproportion,” arguing that “the disproportionate advantage of male, educated, high-status elite recruits increases as we move up the political stratification system” (1976: 33).

Bashevkin (1985, 1993) used Putnam's law of increasing disproportion as the basis of her work on the presence of women in Canadian political parties. In her analysis, Bashevkin conceptualized party activity as a hierarchy, placing riding secretaries at the bottom, followed in ascending order by convention delegates, party executive members, campaign managers, candidates, legislators, cabinet members and party leaders (see also Tremblay and Pelletier, 2001). Upon examining the presence of women in each of these positions, Bashevkin argued that the trend could be most aptly characterized as “the higher, the fewer” (1993: 92). While her original research focused only on political parties, this maxim has been applied across a variety of political structures and, in a more recent work, Bashevkin notes that “one observation, made in 1985 and summarized in the phrase ‘the higher, the fewer,’ continues to resonate because it identified the increasingly limited presence of women as one looked up the ladders of political parties, legislatures, cabinets and public bureaucracies” (2009: 4).

The three levels of government have also been conceived of hierarchically, with municipalities at the bottom, provinces and territories in the middle, and the federal government at the top.¹ In the Canadian case, this is not, strictly speaking, the arrangement set out in the *Constitution Act, 1867*. There, the relationship between federal and provincial governments is framed as one of equal orders of government, with the municipal governments occupying a subordinate status. The latter feature—municipal subordination—is not typically disputed, although some may argue that Canada's larger cities, which have significant responsibilities

Abstract. This article examines the electoral presence of women in federal, provincial and municipal governments. It casts doubt on the notion of a municipal advantage—a prevalent theme in the women in politics literature—and suggests, instead, that female legislators are increasingly present in roughly equivalent proportions across all three levels of government. Unlike prior analyses that have tended to focus on a limited number of provinces, a distinct time period or a select group of larger urban centres, this article uses longitudinal data that encompass all provinces and territories, as well as nearly all of Canada's 3750 municipalities. The findings demonstrate that female legislators often find greater electoral success at the higher levels of government but that the proportion of women elected rarely exceeds 25 per cent at any level. The article thus challenges a pervasive theme in the literature on women in politics.

Résumé. Cet article étudie la présence des femmes parmi les élus aux divers paliers de gouvernement, soit aux niveaux fédéral, provincial et municipal. Il remet en doute l'idée voulant que les femmes soient avantagées au niveau municipal – thème très courant dans la littérature sur les femmes au gouvernement – et propose, au contraire, que les législatrices sont de plus en plus présentes dans des proportions à peu près semblables aux trois niveaux de gouvernement. Contrairement aux études antérieures, qui ont eu tendance à se concentrer sur un nombre limité de provinces, sur une période déterminée ou sur un groupe particulier de grands centres urbains, cet article se sert de données longitudinales qui englobent toutes les provinces, tous les territoires et la majeure partie des 3750 municipalités du Canada. Les conclusions démontrent que les législatrices réussissent souvent mieux aux paliers supérieurs de gouvernement, mais que la proportion des femmes élues excède rarement 25 pour cent, peu importe le niveau. L'auteure remet donc en question un thème omniprésent dans la littérature sur les femmes au gouvernement.

and represent sizable populations, are perhaps more powerful than some of the smaller provinces or territories. That being said, regardless of size, all municipalities are limited in terms of their restricted tax base and jurisdictional authority.

While provincial governments are not technically subordinate to the federal government in a formal, constitutional sense, the specific division of legislative powers, centralization in the federal government and limited monetary resources have, in practice, “placed the provinces in a subordinate position, somewhat akin to municipalities” (Dyck, 1998: 225). The federal government has primacy over economic and fiscal policy, it regulates trade internationally and interprovincially, and it can override the provinces if a national emergency warrants (Simeon and Elkins, 1980). Moreover, although Canada is relatively decentralized, and provincial and territorial governments are seen as the legitimate voice of regional interests, the federal government nonetheless has a national mandate and includes representatives from across the country; it thus plays an important integrative role and works to bridge differences across jurisdictions. As such, there may be a perception that it is the “highest” level of government, an assumption that this article adopts.

Absent from this conceptualization of the government hierarchy are school boards which, although sites of local political power, are not typically considered in the Canadian literature on multilevel governance (for example, Lazar and Leuprecht, 2007; Young and Leuprecht, 2004), local government (for example, Bashevkin, 2006; Gavan-Koop and Smith,

2008; Gidengil and Vengroff, 1997; Graham and Phillips, 1998; Kushner et al., 1997) or women's electoral presence more generally (for example, Bashevkin, 2009; Brodie, 1985; MacIvor, 1996; Pitre, 1998; Vickers, 1978). When women's presence on school boards has been considered, the analysis has tended to be situated in the United States (Deckman, 2007; Dudley, 2008) or limited by its focus on a single city (Kopinak, 1985). The lack of attention to school boards is perhaps somewhat surprising given that it is here that women have made perhaps the greatest inroads.² This may be a result of the more limited competition for school board seats, women's tendency to be more actively involved in their children's schools or the more part-time nature of trustee positions (Deckman, 2007). While the question of women's presence on school boards is an important one, consistent with the existing literature in the field, I confine my analysis to the federal, provincial and municipal levels of government.

As such, the municipal level of government is conceived of as the first rung of the ladder and, for political newcomers, it may be an electoral access point. The literature provides support for this, asserting that the municipal level of government is more accessible to women because many of the barriers that have been found to influence participation at the higher levels of government are less present or important at the municipal level. These barriers include lower campaign costs and smaller financial hurdles (Kushner et al., 1997; MacIvor, 1996; Maillé, 1994), a relative absence of political parties and nomination contests municipally (Gidengil and Vengroff, 1997; Pitre, 1998; Vickers, 1978), less arduous time commitments and travel requirements that are viewed as being more compatible with women's roles as wives and mothers (Brodie, 1985; Maillé, 1994; Trimble, 1995), lower levels of competition for municipal seats, which are often thought of as less desirable (Gavan-Koop and Smith, 2008; Kushner et al., 1997) and a perception that women are more interested in the issues addressed by municipalities than by other levels of government (Maillé, 1994; Trimble, 1995).

These findings are bolstered by some historical evidence that indicates women have achieved proportionately greater electoral success at the municipal level. For example, Vickers charted candidacies at the federal and provincial levels and within 24 municipalities between 1945 and 1976 and found "with some real security ... [that] there is a pyramidal pattern in politics whereby the higher the political position and the greater the power it controls, the smaller the percentage of women" (1978: 46). Other authors reach similar conclusions, whether they use a smaller sample of cities (Maillé, 1994; Sharpe, 1994) or focus on a single province (Gavan-Koop and Smith, 2008). Some, like Brodie, find that women were candidates for federal and provincial office more frequently than for municipal office, but she notes that the small number of cities included

in the sample limits the study's generalizability and concludes that "it is certain that women contest municipal offices more frequently than they contest [federal and provincial] legislative offices" (1985: 20). There are also studies that simply state that the municipal level is the most accessible to women (Blais and Gidengil, 1991; Ship, 1998).

There are, however, studies that contradict the notion of a municipal advantage. Some find uneven evidence, with the proportion of women elected at the municipal level only exceeding the proportion of women elected federally or provincially in some cities (Andrew et al., 2008). Others find little difference between the three levels, as in Pitre's study (1998) of women's representation in New Brunswick where women were elected in roughly equal proportions across jurisdictions. There is also research to suggest that while women may do better municipally, their representation at the federal and provincial levels is about the same (Trimble, 1995). This is confirmed by Studlar and Matland's examination of women's representation in Canadian provincial legislatures between 1975 and 1994 in which they found that "rarely has women's representation in provincial legislatures been greater than in the House of the Commons, and even then by only small margins" (1996: 272-73). This conclusion is also consistent with Vengroff and colleagues' comparative analysis (2003) of national and state, provincial, canton and county legislatures in 29 countries, including Canada, which found only a weak correlation between the level of government and women's electoral presence. These findings call into question the linear relationship between the level of government and electoral presence that is suggested in the literature on women in politics.

Other researchers note that there is also an intra-level dimension to consider in that women's representation will not just vary across levels but within levels as well. This may be a function of the perceived power and prestige of an office, with research positing that women may find greater electoral success in positions with limited influence and scope for action (Darcy et al., 1994; Gidengil and Vengroff, 1997; Vickers, 1978). According to this perspective, we should see more women as municipal councillors and backbench members of Parliament than as mayors, party leaders or cabinet ministers, a conclusion to which I will return in the discussion of my findings. There may also be differences between larger and smaller cities (Gavan-Koop and Smith, 2008; Gidengil and Vengroff, 1997; Kushner et al., 1997; Trimble, 1995) and between rural and urban areas (Carbert, 2009; Matland and Studlar, 1998; Moncrief and Thompson, 1991). These differences have been attributed to variations in political culture, the presence of women's organizations, levels of education, women's labour force participation and the overall size of the female candidate pool.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the relationship between level of government and women's representation is not necessarily

straightforward. While there is evidence that women sometimes do better municipally, there is also evidence to the contrary. Of course, this raises the question: is there something unique about the Canadian case? For example, the use of a ward system in most municipalities, the relative absence of political parties at the local level and the smaller size of Canadian cities relative to those in other countries all may render the situation of women in Canadian municipal politics somewhat anomalous. Political recruitment differs in Canada, as well, with legislators in this country less likely than those in the United States to leverage their political experience and move upwards from sub-national to national legislatures (Schlesinger, 1966). We also know that Canada's electoral turnover is relatively high (Matland and Studlar, 2004; Moncrief 1998) and that this could favour new political entrants because it opens up seats and removes incumbents' considerable electoral advantage. As is shown below, however, there is little evidence that these political and institutional specificities should alone be used to discard Canada as an outlier. Importantly, in Canada as elsewhere, evidence in support of a municipal advantage for women is decidedly mixed.

For example, Kjær's analysis (2010) of local and national governments in 2008 finds that in Greece, Luxembourg, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands and Denmark, women did best at the highest level of government, while in Italy, Romania and Portugal, their representation at the two levels was on par. An earlier study by Stokes (2005) confirms that women did significantly better nationally than municipally in Denmark and Finland, while in Sweden and Norway, women's representation at the two levels at that time was roughly on par. Similarly, in 2000 in New Zealand, women comprised 32 per cent of legislators at the municipal level and had a nearly on-par presence of 31 per cent at the national level (Drage, 2001). In Australia in the same period, women comprised 26 per cent of legislators at the municipal level, 22 per cent in the houses at the sub-state level and 25 per cent in the houses at the national level; women's presence was thus comparable at the highest and lowest levels, with the weakest representation occurring at the middle level (Irwin, 2001). Meanwhile, in Japan, 11 per cent of parliamentarians in 2000 were women, compared to 6 per cent in local assemblies; here, then, women actually did better at the higher level (Hashimoto, 2001). Finally, in Germany, we find a similar situation with women taking 24 per cent of municipal seats in the 2004 local elections, compared to 32 per cent of Bundestag seats in the 2005 national election (CEMR, 2008).

In other countries, we find more persuasive evidence that a municipal advantage may exist. In the United States, for example, one study found that female councillors comprised 23 per cent of elected officials, compared to 11 per cent of members of the House of Representatives

and 7 per cent of senators (Darcy et al., 1994). Meanwhile, in Ireland, the 2004 elections saw women take 22 per cent of city council seats, compared to the 13 per cent who were elected to the country's lower legislative house in 2002 (Stokes, 2005; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2005). In the United Kingdom in 2005, women comprised 20 per cent of legislators in the central government, compared to 24 per cent of county councillors in Britain and 23 per cent of councillors in Scotland (Bochel and Bochel, 2008; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2005); again there was a slight municipal advantage. More recent data suggest, in addition, that when compared to the national level, women do better municipally in Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (Kjær, 2010).

While the notion of a municipal advantage is often presented definitively, we see that comparatively—as well as in Canada—the evidence is uneven. Although it appears to be the case in some countries, there are many others where women's presence is relatively even across all three levels or where the municipal advantage is non-existent or only minimal. When we look more closely at these countries, there is little to suggest that the alignment of women's representation across the three levels of government is a result of some common element. For example, while political parties are relatively absent from municipal politics in Australia, as in Canada, they are present in many other cities, including those where the municipal advantage holds and those where it does not. In some countries, particularly in Europe, municipalities have greater autonomy than in Canada, but autonomy alone cannot explain women's electoral representation given that across Europe, we also see variations in women's electoral presence. Moreover, a number of different electoral and districting systems are used across each of these countries, and so these factors alone cannot be responsible.

Finally, we might wonder if Canada's high levels of legislative turnover render it an outlier. In their examination of national legislative turnover between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, Matland and Studlar (2004) found that turnover was much higher in Canada (13.01% per year on average) than in many other countries, including the United Kingdom (5.58%), the United States (7.51%), and Australia (7.87%). Canada's electoral field may, as a result, be more open to newcomers. With respect to women's electoral presence in the lower houses of each country, Canada's proportion in the mid-1990s (18%) was certainly higher than in the United Kingdom (9.5%), the United States (11.7%) or Australia (15.5%) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1997). However, if we look more broadly at all 25 countries examined by Matland and Studlar, we find that there is only a slightly positive but very weak relationship between legislative turnover and women's electoral presence (data not shown but available from the author). For example, while Canada's turnover rate is high (ranking 23rd

out of the 25 countries studied), women's electoral presence is somewhat average (ranking 13th out of the 25 countries studied). Moreover, there are several countries that run counter to our expectation, including Greece, which has very high legislative turnover (13.43%) but elects very few women (6.3%), and Germany where legislative turnover is comparatively low (5.77%) but the proportion of women elected is quite high (26.2%). This suggests that it is not simply a country's institutional, political or cultural context that leads women to do better or worse in municipal, provincial or federal politics. This is in line with Kjær's assertion that while women achieved a higher municipal electoral presence than national electoral presence in 56 per cent of the 27 countries he examined, "the pattern is not so strong as to simply discard the deviant cases as anomalies, as has hitherto been the practice" (2010: 345).

Given this, it would seem prudent to re-examine women's electoral presence in Canada. This is critical because existing research has tended to focus on women's representation in the country's largest or predominantly urban municipalities (Brodie, 1985; Maillé, 1994; Sharpe, 1994; Trimble, 1995; Vickers, 1978). This may have skewed the findings given that many of the factors that affect electoral presence, such as education, income and majority ethnocultural status are also positively correlated with one's metropolitan location. Moreover, as Gidengil and Vengroff (1997: 536) point out, women's experiences in larger cities may be "atypical" because it is in these centres that women's organizations can most assist in mobilization efforts. As such, an exclusive focus on larger urban centres may provide a biased assessment of women's electoral fortunes. There may also be regional differences, with Carbert (2002) finding that women's representation tends to be stronger in the Western provinces than in the Atlantic, likely a result of provincial political culture and the relative influence of populism. As such, single-province studies or analyses that rely on a limited sample of municipalities may over- or under-estimate women's electoral presence. Similarly, longitudinal analysis is important given that single-point studies can conceal variations or magnify anomalies and, moreover, because representational plateaus and valleys can occur (Black, 2008; Hughes and Paxton, 2008; Trimble and Arscott, 2003a). The analysis provided here is thus based on historical and cross-national data and includes, for the first time, a comprehensive picture of women's electoral representation across Canada's three levels of government.

Women and Electoral Representation

This article deals primarily with numerical representation and focuses on the demographic composition of elected institutions. Numerical representation is about the characteristics of elected officials, about who they

are, what they look like and whether they reflect the characteristics of those who elected them; it is thus sometimes referred to as mirror or descriptive representation. In contrast, substantive representation refers to what representatives do and whether or not their actions and decisions are in the interests of those they represent. In a now well-cited distinction, Pitkin (1967: 11) characterized numerical representation as "standing for" and substantive representation as "acting for."

Critiques have been leveled at both these understandings of representation. For example, some see numerical representation as too mechanical or as symbolic and not necessarily linked to better outcomes for women (Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000; see also Trimble and Arscott, 2003a). According to this view, an understanding of representation based only on the demographic characteristics of elected officials is insufficient because it overlooks the ways in which representatives may act in a manner that is contrary to the interests of those who are demographically similar to them. As Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers (2007) note, it is likely that so-called "women's interests" would not be well-protected by conservative or "family values" legislators, even those who are women. Moreover, critics argue that descriptive approaches reduce representation to a tallying of characteristics with little regard for what legislators actually do once in office. What this critique misses is that inclusivity—that is, the presence of a diverse range of perspectives in elected bodies—is not only symbolically important, but it gives legitimacy to the institutions, their deliberations and the democratic process (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995; Trimble and Arscott, 2003a).

This is not to say that representation is only achieved when women are proportionately reflected in electoral institutions or that substantive outcomes require the presence of a threshold number of female legislators. Unlike the literature on "critical mass," this article does not assert an ideal proportion of female legislators. It does not assume that the presence of women in elected office will accelerate their electoral gains nor that there is a linear relationship between legislative presence and policy outcomes (Childs and Krook, 2006; Studlar and McAllister, 2002; Trimble, 2008). Although favourable policy outcomes are of course desirable, a numerical conception of representation avoids the implication that women have distinct or homogeneous policy interests (Sapiro, 1981; Tremblay, 1998; Tremblay and Pelletier, 2000) or that legislators can actually achieve the "authentic representation" of electors, even those whose characteristics they mirror (Vickers, 1997: 40; see also Andrew et al., 2008).

To be clear, this article adopts the view that women must achieve a presence that goes beyond tokenism but that this presence has implications apart from its specific impact on political or policy outcomes. Importantly, it suggests that while a numerical assessment offers only a partial picture of representation, it is a crucial first step for understanding leg-

islative behaviour. That is, it is only when women are present that they can begin the process of representing substantive interests. As such, the numerical composition of electoral bodies is central to our understanding of broader representational issues (see Williams and Thames, 2008).

I test, in effect, one principal hypothesis concerning women's numerical representation and that is whether women will, in proportionate terms, "do better" and achieve a greater electoral presence at the lower levels of government than at the higher levels. This article provides a new and more comprehensive examination of women's presence in municipal, provincial and federal governments. It probes whether the well-established notion of a municipal advantage continues to accurately portray the theoretical and empirical realities of women's electoral representation. The data presented here also provide a baseline against which to assess women's future electoral gains (or losses) both in Canada and comparatively.

Data and Methods

Data gaps have long plagued the study of women in politics, particularly at the municipal level, where research has been hampered by the enormous task of compiling information about legislators from a disparate number of sources and in thousands of locales (Kjær, 2010; Paxton et al., 2007). A cross-Canada study, however, has now been made possible through a data collection initiative spearheaded by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). The FCM is an umbrella organization of Canadian municipalities and has a program on women's participation in municipal government. As part of this program, the FCM has undertaken a comprehensive effort to track the presence of female legislators in municipalities across Canada. Municipal data for this article are drawn from the FCM's database, which includes information on the roughly 3750 municipalities in Canada with an elected council, as well as gender information for mayors and councillors that goes back as far as 2002 and up to January 2009. The data are remarkably complete, with an average of 99 per cent of all municipalities included for any of the years under study.³

One limitation of the FCM dataset is that the data are reported in aggregate form by province; this allows researchers to track the number of municipal legislators in any given province, but because individual cities are not coded, specific cross-city comparisons are not possible. This also prevents researchers from connecting women's electoral outcomes in individual cities to contextual variables, such as demographics, electoral competitiveness, voter turnout or social movement mobilization. We are thus not able to link institutional or population characteristics to women's overall electoral presence in each city. In addition, because the FCM's data extend back only until 2002, we are provided with just a

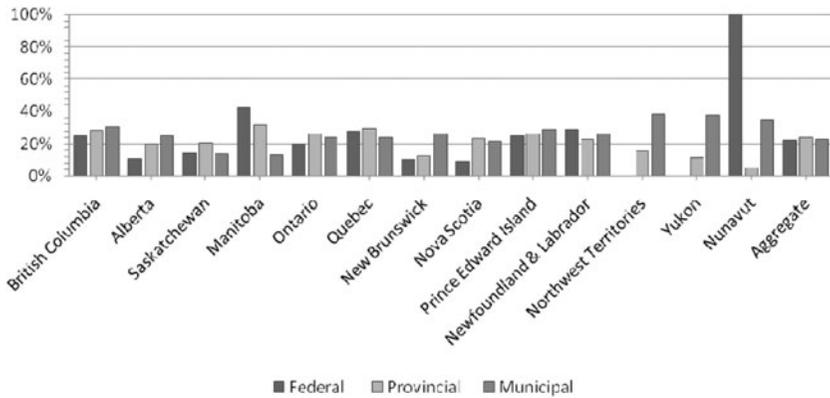
snapshot in time. Given the difficulty of collecting historical data across so many municipalities, it is unlikely that we will ever have a full picture of women's electoral representation at this level prior to 2002. Nonetheless, while there are limitations to the data set, this article does provide the most comprehensive examination to date of the presence of women in municipal politics in Canada.

Data—both historical and contemporary—tend to more readily available at the provincial, territorial and federal levels than at the municipal level. This is partly because there are simply fewer positions to track. Moreover, unlike the municipal level, the biographical information and photographs of federal, provincial and territorial legislators are available on the websites of their respective jurisdictions, as well as in a wealth of secondary studies; this makes the compilation of complete data at these levels much more feasible. To ascertain the sex of sitting legislators in the 10 provinces, three territories and federal House of Commons, I consulted the applicable websites for each government, turning to secondary sources if there was any uncertainty. To provide a longitudinal analysis, a number of data sources were used, including compilations by other researchers, by the Parliament of Canada and by Equal Voice, a non-profit organization that aims to increase women's representation in elected office. Results are current as of June 2009; they encompass general elections as well as any intervening by-elections. Note that although jurisdictions have alternate ways of referring to their elected officials, this article uses member of Parliament (MP) to refer to federally elected officials, member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) to refer to provincially and territorially elected officials, and municipal legislator to refer to mayors and councillors.

Findings

Figure 1 shows the presence of female legislators at the three levels of government in 2009, at which time women comprised 22.6 per cent of legislators at the municipal level, 23.7 per cent in provincial and territorial legislatures, and 22.1 per cent in Canada's House of Commons. This demonstrates that, in the aggregate, women do not really experience a municipal advantage. Looking at the data by province, we find that in six jurisdictions—British Columbia, Alberta, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Northwest Territories and Yukon—women do comprise a greater proportion of legislators at the municipal level than at the provincial, territorial or federal levels. In the Northwest Territories and Yukon, however, this is partially because there is only one federal seat and in both cases it was, at the time the data were compiled, held by a man; as such, women's representation at the federal level was zero.

FIGURE 1
Electoral Presence of Women across Canada, 2009



Sources: Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2009) and websites of the provincial, territorial and federal legislatures.

In the remaining seven jurisdictions, there is no evidence of a municipal advantage, with women's electoral presence at the provincial, territorial and/or federal levels surpassing that at the municipal level. In four of these cases—Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia—the pattern is peak-shaped, with women's representation at the provincial level higher than that at the municipal or federal levels. In two of these cases—Newfoundland and Labrador and Nunavut—the pattern is valley-shaped, with women's representation at the provincial and territorial level lower than that at the municipal or federal levels. And finally, in one of these cases—Manitoba—we see the reverse with women's electoral presence highest at the federal level, followed by the provincial and municipal levels.

It would thus seem that the presence of women at the three levels of government varies across jurisdictions, with some provinces and territories demonstrating a pattern that is consistent with the notion of a municipal advantage, while others do not. Thinking more broadly, we can also assess the applicability of Bashevkin's "the higher, the fewer" thesis to the government hierarchy. That is, when we compare the municipal level to the other two levels in isolation, we can see that the presence of women is higher at the municipal level than at the federal level in eight of the 13 jurisdictions, a finding that is replicated when we compare the municipal level to the provincial and territorial level. While still not offering overwhelming support, the federal–municipal and provincial/territorial–municipal comparisons do suggest that when the

levels are compared separately, women experienced a municipal advantage in just over 60 per cent of the jurisdictions in 2009, although the differences are sometimes small and the advantage does not hold in the aggregate. In addition, this apparent municipal advantage is inconsistent over time. This is illustrated in Table 1, which shows the aggregate presence of women at the federal and provincial levels between 1975 and 2009 and at the municipal level between 2002 and 2009. The last three columns of this table indicate the gap in women’s presence at the highest level when compared to that at the lower levels. If, as the hypothesis suggests, women will do better at lower levels of government, then the figures in these columns should be negative. However, we see that this is not the case. Rather, only half of the gaps lean in a direction that is consistent with such a hypothesis and the notion of a municipal advantage.

TABLE 1
Electoral Presence of Women across Three Levels, Canada,
1975–2009^a

Year	Federal (%)	Provincial ^c (%)	Municipal (%)	Federal–Municipal Gap	Provincial–Municipal Gap	Federal–Provincial Gap
1975	3.4	3.7	—	—	—	–0.3
1980	5.0	4.8	—	—	—	0.2
1984	9.6	7.2	—	—	—	2.4
1988	13.4	11.8	—	—	—	1.6
1993	18.0	18.4	—	—	—	–0.4
1997	20.6	19.3	—	—	—	1.3
2000	20.0	16.4	—	—	—	3.6
2002	20.0 ^b	16.4 ^b	19.4	0.6	–3.0	3.6
2003	20.6	20.9	19.4 ^b	1.2	1.5	–0.3
2004	20.6 ^b	20.9 ^b	21.7	–1.1	–0.8	–0.3
2007	20.7	22.0	21.8	–1.1	0.2	–1.3
2009	22.1	23.7	22.4	–0.3	1.3	–1.6

^aThe years included in this table were selected on the basis of available data. Data limitations prevent the inclusion of the three territories in this longitudinal analysis.

^bWhere federal, provincial or municipal data are missing, the gaps were calculated using data from the most recent available preceding year for the level in question. These figures are presented in italics.

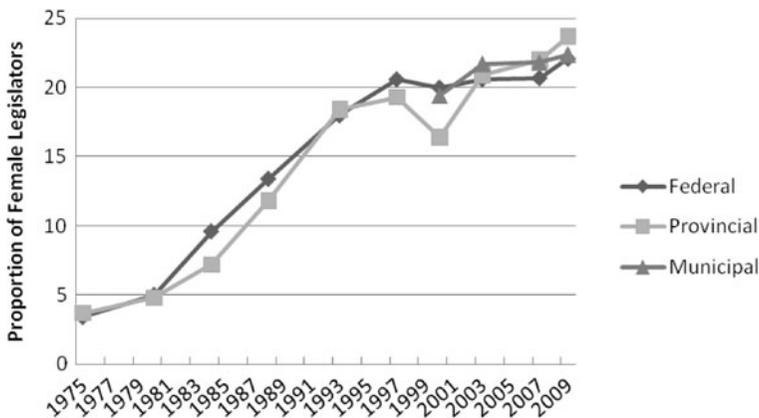
^cProvincial proportions were calculated by dividing the total number of women elected by the total number of legislative seats in all provinces.

Sources: Author’s calculations based on federal, provincial and municipal election results as well as Campbell (2000); Equal Voice (2007a, 2007b); Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2002, 2004, 2007, 2009a); Gauld (1998); Parliament of Canada (2009); Studlar and Matland (1996); Studlar et al. (2000); and Trimble and Arscott (2003b).

The aggregate data are also plotted over time in Figure 2, which shows quite plainly that women’s electoral presence at the municipal level has been roughly on par with the federal and provincial levels. Where there are gaps, these are in the range of 1 percentage point. Consistent with 2009 data, there is little evidence of a municipal advantage for women. Instead, it appears that regardless of level of government, female legislators occupy no more than 25 per cent of the seats. These findings suggest that we should not necessarily expect women to “do better” municipally, nor should we be overly optimistic about the achievement of gender parity in elected bodies at any level of government. Increases have generally been incremental, and when more significant—as is the case at the provincial level since 2000—the gains are in some ways only a rebound from earlier erosions in representation.

While the data are not shown here, three other findings at the municipal level merit discussion. First, with respect to the intra-level dimension of women’s electoral representation, the findings suggest that at the municipal level, women tend to be councillors (23.9% women in 2009)

FIGURE 2
Electoral Presence of Women across Three Levels, Canada,
1975–2009^a



^a The years included in this table were selected on the basis of available data. Data limitations prevent the inclusion of the three territories in this longitudinal analysis.

Sources: Author’s calculations based on federal, provincial and municipal election results as well as Campbell (2000); Equal Voice (2007a, 2007b); Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2002, 2004, 2007, 2009a); Gauld (1998); Parliament of Canada (2009); Studlar and Matland (1996); Studlar et al. (2000); and Trimble and Arcsott (2003b).

and not mayors (15.2% women in 2009). The gap in women's representation at the mayoral and council level remains essentially unchanged since 2002 (FCM, 2002, 2009a). The underrepresentation of women in mayoral positions mirrors, in some ways, findings at the federal and provincial level, where women tend not to occupy the positions that are at the pinnacle of power, such as prime minister, premier or party leader (MacIvor, 1996; Trimble and Arscott, 2003a). There is also significant variation across the provinces and territories, with the proportion of female mayors in 2009 ranging from the highest (37.5%) in Yukon to the lowest (7.3%) in Nova Scotia, a finding without any clear explanation and which merits additional research (FCM, 2009a).

Second, we are able to examine the size of municipality in which women are more likely to hold office. In particular, the FCM's database separates rural and urban municipalities, using a population of 10,000 people as the cutoff. This measure is admittedly somewhat blunt, but because the FCM's database does not include individual-level city data, we are not able to make a more finely grained distinction. According to this definition of rural–urban, we find that women in rural and urban settings reached nearly equivalent levels of municipal representation in 2009, comprising 22.6 per cent of legislators in rural areas, compared to 22.7 per cent in urban areas (FCM, 2009b). This suggests that women's electoral presence may be influenced by factors that are common across all municipalities, regardless of size. This finding can be compared to previous research, which has come to mixed conclusions, with some suggesting that smaller municipalities attract a larger proportion of female legislators (Gavan-Koop and Smith, 2008; Gidengil and Vengroff, 1997), while others suggest that larger municipalities are more open (Kushner et al., 1997; Trimble, 1995). Additional analysis is required, including studies that use more sophisticated measures of ruralness, such as those developed by Carbert (2009).

Third, there are striking rural–urban disparities at the municipal level in three provinces and two territories, although there are inconsistencies in terms of where the advantage lies. In Saskatchewan municipalities, women's electoral presence is stronger on urban councils than rural councils. Although simply conjecture, this may in part be related to the large number of rural councils in the province; in 2009, there were 702 rural councils in Saskatchewan, compared to just seven urban councils. In New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, we see the opposite situation, with the presence of women on rural councils outpacing their presence on urban councils. This finding differs somewhat from Carbert's (2009) research, which suggests that elected office may be less accessible to women in rural areas, at least at the federal level. Additional research is needed, again employing more sophisticated measures.

Discussion

By extending the research beyond a handful of major cities and over time, this article provides new information about women's electoral presence across the three levels of government. In particular, it finds that there is not a clear linear relationship between level of government and the presence of female legislators and, more to the point, that there is little evidence to support the assertion of a municipal advantage for women. Rather, the data presented here suggest that women face an uphill climb in terms of achieving gender parity, regardless of level of government.

This has implications not just for our understanding of women's representation across the three levels of government, but also for our understanding of the barriers that women face in achieving gender parity. The findings suggest that the municipal level is not barrier-free nor that the obstacles are necessarily less pronounced. Financial resources, time and travel pressures, recruitment, gate-keeping and the desirability of the office may all have an impact on women's electoral presence across all three levels of government. In particular, we need to probe why women continue to struggle to gain entry into municipal politics, even though some of the most common electoral barriers are seemingly absent at this level. The findings presented here provide a rich basis for future inquiry, which will contribute to the development and refinement of theory on women's political participation.

In particular, we need better explanations for the seeming absence of a pyramidal political opportunity structure in Canada. While theories about the political pipeline propose that legislative gains at the lower levels of government will eventually translate into gains at the higher levels (Mariani, 2008), this pattern is not borne out in Canada where women's electoral presence is relatively flat across all three levels of government. Given that limited attention has been focused here, the explanations are at best suggestive, but future research should probe the varying effects of incumbency and electoral turnover, as well as the increasing professionalization of politics across all three levels. We need to look as well at the role played by political parties and should expand our analyses to include cities, such as Vancouver and Montreal, where municipal parties exist formally, as well as those, such as Ottawa and Toronto, where provincial and federal political parties may encourage particular municipal candidacies or assist in campaigns, albeit largely informally (Andrew et al., 2008; Tolley, 2000). This may create opportunities or constraints for women in politics. Further, variations in social movement mobilization across levels and contexts may contribute to differing electoral outcomes (Hughes and Paxton, 2008), while reductions in the number of electoral seats as a result of municipal amalgamations may increase electoral com-

petitiveness and decrease opportunities for political newcomers (Andrew et al., 2008).

We need to know more, as well, about the movement of legislators between the three levels of government. This is particularly important given that federal legislators in Canada are more likely to have held office municipally than provincially or territorially (Studlar et al., 2000). The extent to which gender affects this political springboarding and leapfrogging is not clear, although the American literature suggests that the political pipeline is gendered (Mariani, 2008). Moreover, if women are vacating their municipal seats to try their hand at higher office, this could depress their numerical presence at lower levels, particularly if their bid for the other electoral office is unsuccessful. Future research should also try to disentangle interprovincial and rural–urban variations in women’s representation, as well as examining the causal and contextual factors that may lead to electoral success in some venues but not others.

Importantly, we need to examine the apparent stalling of women’s electoral fortunes at the 25 per cent level. This is not only evident from the results of this study, but also in the comparative work at the national and sub-national level, particularly in countries that use a non-proportional electoral system (Hughes and Paxton, 2008; Vengroff et al., 2003). It is possible that in Canada and elsewhere, plurality electoral systems disadvantage women because they tend to be more candidate-centred, a factor that favours those who are either recruited to run for office or who opt to put themselves forward. Research suggests that, in the United States, at least, men are not only more likely than women to consider themselves potential electoral candidates but also more likely to be recruited and encouraged to run by others (Lawless and Fox, 2005). This, in combination with the electoral system, may prevent women from achieving proportionate electoral outcomes. Further analysis of the determinants of the candidate pool could prove instructive.

To probe some of these questions, it would be useful to expand the FCM’s database so that it includes unique identifiers for each municipality. This would allow researchers to merge the FCM’s data with other demographic, institutional and political variables. Canadian researchers should also take advantage of new comparative data, which would allow us not just to track cross-national differences, but also to identify and isolate the factors that contribute to, or hamper, political representation.

Through continued longitudinal and comparative research on women’s electoral presence, we can better establish whether the findings presented here are anomalies or evidence of a longer-term trend. In addition, intersectional analysis and research that looks specifically at the experiences of other marginalized groups is needed. Immigrants, minorities, Aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities, youth and LGBT individuals may all encounter similar representational gaps, and the effects

may be mitigated or magnified when these identifies are combined. Admittedly, such research is challenging because of a lack of existing data and sensitivity about the disclosure of legislators' personal information, such as their ethnic background, religion or sexual orientation, but examinations of representation should not be confined to the attributes that are seemingly the least difficult to study (see Andrew et al., 2008).

The politics of presence—to adopt Anne Phillips' phrase—is structured by a number of factors, and the patterns are fluid, changing and context-specific. The findings presented here suggest that even seemingly persuasive conclusions demand re-evaluation, at which time new developments may cast doubt on commonly held perceptions. In the absence of such reflection, we risk masking women's continued electoral underrepresentation at all levels of government.

Notes

- 1 Here I treat the territories as having a quasi-provincial status. Unless otherwise noted, I use the word "province" to refer to the 10 provinces and three territories. Although the territories initially had only delegated authority, many responsibilities have been devolved, and these governments now wield significant jurisdictional power and are also included in most federal–provincial meetings and negotiations.
- 2 My own examination of the 54 school boards in Canada's 10 largest cities found that in 2010, women comprised 47 per cent of all elected trustees in these cities (data available from the author).
- 3 There are approximately 3750 municipalities in Canada, but that number has fluctuated slightly in the years under review, generally because of municipal amalgamations. The total number of municipalities captured in the data set for each year of analysis is $n=3831$ in 2002, $n=3728$ in 2004, $n=3798$ in 2007, and $n=3747$ in 2009. In no year do the municipalities missing from the data set constitute more than 1 per cent of the total. The FCM compiles the data through a survey of municipalities, which is conducted following each provincial and territorial election; updates are made on the basis of contacts with key municipal officials, often following municipal elections or by-elections, and FCM staff also periodically consult municipal websites to ensure the accuracy of their database.

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