

## Gender, Municipal Party Politics, and Montreal's First Woman Mayor

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### *Abstract*

In 2017, Montreal elected Valérie Plante, the first woman mayor in the city's 400-year history. Using this election as a case study, we show how gender did and did not influence the outcome. A survey of Montreal electors suggests that gender was not a salient factor in vote choice. Although gender did not matter much for voters, it did shape the organization of the campaign and party. We argue that Plante's victory can be explained in part by a strategy that showcased a less leader-centric party and a degendered campaign that helped counteract stereotypes about women's unsuitability for positions of political leadership. Our analysis highlights the evolution of municipal political parties from highly personalized, singularly focused electoral entities to more institutionalized and embedded features of local governance.

### *Résumé*

En 2017, Valérie Plante est devenue la première femme à être élue au poste de mairesse de Montréal. Cet article présente une étude de cas de cette élection, afin d'explorer l'influence du genre sur cette élection. L'analyse du comportement des électeurs, à l'aide d'un sondage représentatif, démontre que les facteurs liés au genre n'ont pas été déterminants dans le vote des Montréalais en 2017. Pourtant, le genre a été central à cette campagne et ce, de deux façons. Notre analyse propose que la victoire de Plante s'explique en grande partie par l'impact combiné d'une stratégie de campagne visant à neutraliser le genre de la candidate à la mairie et par la consolidation de Projet Montréal comme alternative partisane stable, moins centrée sur la personnalité d'un chef. Ces forces ont contribué à contrecarrer les stéréotypes sur l'inaptitude des femmes en politique. Ce cas illustre l'importance d'analyser l'impact de la consolidation des partis politiques municipaux pour la vie politique des villes.

### *Keywords:*

local elections, mayors, political parties, gender

### *Mots clés :*

élections locales, maires, partis politiques, genre

In 2017, Montreal elected Valérie Plante as mayor, the first woman to hold the position in the city's 400-year history. Her victory was a surprise. Early polls and conventional wisdom favoured the incumbent candidate, Denis Coderre. In the end, however, Plante received 51 percent of eligible votes and was victorious. Coderre finished second with 46 percent of the vote and subsequently announced his departure from municipal politics. The media framed Plante's success in relation to her gender, and her victory was held up as evidence that the glass ceiling had been shattered in municipal politics: voters had shown they were willing to elevate a woman to the city's highest and most prestigious office (Elkouri 2017; Eltahawy 2017; Gervais 2017; Grégoire and Bourque 2017; Handfield 2017; Lowen 2017; Pelletier 2017).<sup>i</sup> This development was historic for Montreal, and it was also a relative novelty across Canada. We therefore ask whether, and in what ways, gender contributed to the election of a woman mayor? We show that gender did not matter much for voters, but it did shape the campaign's dynamics and the structure and organization of Plante's political party.

Our focus follows Baer (1993) who argues that political parties are "the missing variable" in research on women's electoral participation. Although literature on gender and political parties is growing, much of it focuses on the national level (Caul 1999; Cross and Pruyers 2019; Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Hinojosa 2012; Kenny 2013). We shift the focus in three ways. First, we build on existing work at other levels and apply those insights to the municipal level. In doing so, we heed the call for more analysis of local politics (Trounstein 2009). Second, we look not at candidate selection processes or quotas, measures that have been the emphasis of most scholarship on increasing women's political representation, but instead at the ways in which party organization and strategy may help to bolster women's electoral success. Third, rather than positioning parties as a barrier to women's political participation, we theorize them as a mobilizing institution with the potential to facilitate women's electoral success at the local level.

Although there is some evidence that Montreal's electorate turned away from the incumbent candidate, explanations that centre around voter preferences tell only part of the story. Campaign dynamics and party organization were also important. First, Plante's strategy to not run explicitly as a woman candidate but instead to play with gender was significant. She did not promote herself as a feminist, emphasize her womanhood, or focus her platform on issues that could be associated with gendered policy issues. Instead, her campaign strategy largely limited discussion of her gender, or playfully alluded to it through targeted messaging at the outset of the election. This agenda control allowed Plante to escape stereotypical positioning as a woman candidate and, instead, to frame her own message. That message was shaped by a commitment to gender equality but rather than being overtly foregrounded, that principle was embedded within much of the party's structure and organization.

Second, the growing importance of political parties in Quebec municipal politics, a process documented by Mévellec and Tremblay (2013), allowed Plante to position herself, through her party, as a viable alternative to the incumbent. *Projet Montréal* has a stable presence at the local level, one that is evident in the inter-electoral *and* campaign periods. It has a clear policy agenda beyond simply gaining power, which distinguishes it from most other municipal political parties

in the province. This policy-focused durability, alongside the party's process of depersonalization, which occurred after the departure of its founder in 2013, contributed to making *Projet Montréal* (and Plante) a clear alternative to Coderre.

Drawing insights from the literature on gender stereotyping, we show that women mayoral candidates present voters with a somewhat paradoxical choice. On the one hand, women are stereotyped as being well suited to municipal politics because it is grassroots and focused on issues that might, in a traditional sense, appeal to women. This equation could work in Plante's favour. On the other hand, women are viewed as less suited to positions of leadership, such as the mayoralty, a stereotype that could work against Plante. Through her party and a campaign that highlighted policy over personality, Plante was able to overcome any hesitation voters may have had about voting for a woman mayor.

Results from a survey of eligible Montreal electors show that for voters, gender was not a significant determinant of the election's outcome. Although there were differences between those who supported Plante and those who supported her male competitor, there were not dramatic variations along gender lines, nor were there strongly divergent views about equality. There was also little evidence that voters who supported Coderre differed significantly from those who supported Plante. We conclude that gender was not a salient predictor of mayoral vote choice in this election and that party organization and strategy should be given greater attention in the literature on women's representation, particularly at the municipal level.

### **Women, Parties, and Municipal Politics**

There are good reasons to conceive of municipal politics as fertile ground for women politicians. Municipal politics is often viewed as more compatible with women's interests, less competitive, less expensive, and more part-time, all factors that might increase the presence of women (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstone 2015; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Holman 2017). Even so, the Canadian evidence generally does not bear this conclusion out. Women are no more likely to hold office municipally than at the federal or provincial levels of government (Tolley 2011), and women are outnumbered as mayoral candidates and office-holders (Breux, Couture, and Koop 2018a). Across Canadian cities of all sizes, women hold just 18 percent of mayoral positions (Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2015).

The relative dearth of women mayors may be a reflection of individual-level factors associated with women's under-representation in other elected offices, including their weaker socio-economic status, lower levels of political ambition, and gendered political recruitment (Allen and Cutts 2018; Butler and Preece 2016; Crowder-Meyer 2013; Holman and Schneider 2018; Lawless and Fox 2010; Pruysers and Blais 2018). Meanwhile, system-level political factors, such as the electoral system, at-large versus ward-based districting, term limits, and legislative quotas can all influence women's representation on council and in the mayor's chair (Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Krook 2009; Lévêque 2005; Matland 2005; Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012; Trounstone and Valdini 2008).

It is also possible that stereotypes and the lack of women mayor role models discourage women from vying for the top spot (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstin 2015). Research suggests that women are less successful in mayoral elections than in races at the council level because of mayoral elections' increased competitiveness, the perceived prestige of the top spot, and a tendency to see women as better suited to constituency service than to political leadership (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstin 2015).

Political parties have long been identified as gatekeepers to women's political success (Franceschet 2005; Karnig and Walter 1976; Sanbonmatsu 2006), but municipally focused research provides no evidence that nonpartisan local elections increase women's success at the mayoral or council level in any significant way (Smith, Reingold, and Owens 2012; Trounstin and Valdin 2008). Even in municipal contexts where political parties are largely absent, women remain under-represented as mayors (Breux, Couture, and Koop 2018b; Holman 2017). In Canada, the absence of parties in most cities is often presented as an opportunity for women to enter into local politics, since potential candidates can bypass these gatekeepers and directly enter the arena (Bherer and Collin 2008; Mévellec and Tremblay 2013; Tremblay 2014).

This positive assessment of the non-partisan nature of municipal politics is in stark contrast to research that suggests such a context may *hinder* women's electoral success because in the low-information context of local politics, "candidates cannot rely on party labels to assist them" (Breux, Couture, and Koop 2018a, 6). Without party labels to guide them, voters may be more likely to assess candidates on the basis of their personal characteristics. This impulse could disadvantage women because of voters' tendency to stereotype them as less politically competent (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993b). Political parties also provide financial and organizational capacity to candidates, which may facilitate electoral success (Couture Gagnon, Palda, and Sepielak 2019; Tremblay 2014). We therefore position parties as mobilizing institutions, a concept adopted from Barnes and Rangel's (2018) work on compulsory voting. We adapt this idea to explain the link between gender and political parties in the municipal context.

We theorize parties as potential facilitators of women's electoral success at the local level. Our focus on municipal political parties diverges from much of the literature, where the scale is typically national even though the majority of elected positions are in local politics. We help to remedy this gap and argue not only do local politics often serve as a training ground for other levels of office and therefore offers insights into broader questions about representation (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013), but the municipal level itself may offer different answers and theoretical insights than a purely national focus (Trounstin 2009).

### **Case Study, Methods, and Data**

Municipal political groups first appeared in Montreal in the 1950s, with the emergence of the Civic Action League. Beginning in 1978, the provincial government passed a series of amendments formalizing municipal political parties. The province's municipal amalgamations in

2001, which led to the creation of more city-regions, solidified the presence of municipal parties and ushered in a series of changes to their form and function (Mévellec and Tremblay 2013). By 2020, there were more than 130 authorized municipal political parties listed in the provincial registry. No longer simply ephemeral, administrative bodies, Québec's municipal parties have begun to resemble their more institutionalized provincial and federal cousins (Chiasson, Gauthier, and Andrew 2014; Chiasson and Mévellec 2014; Mévellec and Tremblay 2013).

The article examines this shift in the structure and orientation of municipal parties through the lens of Montreal's 2017 city-wide mayoral election, a race with eight candidates.<sup>ii</sup> Three of these candidates were associated with municipal political parties: Denis Coderre (Équipe Denis Coderre pour Montréal), Jean Fortier (Coalition Montréal), and Valérie Plante (Projet Montréal). The other five candidates were independents and considered long-shots. Coderre, the incumbent, had been elected as mayor in 2013 winning 32 percent of the popular vote. Coderre was a well-known political figure, having served as a Liberal Member of Parliament and Cabinet minister for 16 years prior to making a move to municipal politics. Plante had served as district councillor since 2013 and became leader of Projet Montréal in late 2016. Prior to the 2017 campaign, she remained relatively unknown outside of the party. Fortier, the third candidate, withdrew from the race in October 2017 and endorsed Plante. His name remained on the ballot, as did the names of the five independent candidates, but collectively these contenders received just 3 percent of all votes cast. We therefore restrict our focus to Coderre and Plante.

To understand the dynamics of the 2017 campaign, we look first at the relationship between gender and vote choice. Here, we use data from the Canadian Municipal Election Study's (CMES) survey of Montreal municipal electors. The CMES was an online panel survey of residents recruited through random digit dialling in the weeks before and after the municipal election. Our analysis is based on the subsample of respondents who reported in the post-election survey that they did cast a ballot ( $n=787$ ). We use these results to analyze whether there were important differences between those who voted for Plante and those who did not and find gender does not emerge as a central distinguishing feature.

We therefore draw on the literature on party politics to theorize possible explanations for the 2017 result. We propose that this election marked the completion of Projet Montréal's maturation as a party that is qualitatively different from Quebec's traditional municipal electoral machines. We argue that the party's transformation facilitated Plante's victory in two ways: first, because Projet Montréal provided a clear policy alternative to the incumbent and, second, because the party's efforts at depersonalization helped to mitigate concerns voters may have had about choosing a woman mayor.

## **Gender and Vote Choice**

Research suggests that voters use gender as a cue to make inferences about women candidates' competence, policy preferences, and ideological placement and that this stereotyping might be more common in low-information contexts, such as municipal elections, where voters have less

information about candidates generally (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstein 2015; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993b; McDermott 1998). The research on gender affinity suggests that women voters are a natural constituency for women candidates because of the belief that a woman are best-placed to represent their policy interests, especially in offices that women have not typically occupied, such as the mayoralty (Cargile and Pringle 2019; Holman 2015). Although in some contexts there is evidence of gender affinity effects (Bird et al. 2016; Cutler 2002; Dolan 2008; Sanbonmatsu 2002), in other cases, women appear to no more likely than men to vote for women candidates (Cutler and Matthews 2005; Goodyear-Grant and Croskill 2011).

Using results from the CMES, we look first at general differences between male and female voters. As is shown in Table 1, among survey respondents, Plante was the preferred mayoral candidate among 59 percent of survey respondents (about 8 percent higher than her actual vote share), while 35 percent say they preferred Coderre.<sup>iii</sup> Six percent were not sure who they voted for, or said they favoured a candidate who subsequently withdrew from the race. Plante was the favourite of both male and female respondents, and male voters actually formed a very slim majority of her overall base of supporters. On the surface then, it does not appear that Plante was hoisted to victory on the shoulders of women voters.

**Table 1. Preferred Mayoral Candidate, by respondent sex**

	Male		Female		Total	
	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%
Coderre	136	34.7	131	34.8	269	34.8
Plante	234	59.7	220	58.5	455	58.9
Other	22	5.6	25	6.6	48	6.2

Source: Canadian Municipal Election Study (n=787)

Even so, women respondents demonstrated a more feminist orientation than men. Women were more likely than men to express favourable feelings toward feminists, with 44.8 percent rating them 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale, compared to 28.6 percent of men ( $p < .01$ ). When asked whether society would be better off if more women stayed home with their children, 86.5 percent of women disagreed with this statement, compared to 81.9 percent of men ( $p < .10$ ). Finally, there was some difference in male and female respondents' views on the importance of gender parity in elected institutions. Among women, 84.1 percent agreed that the gender composition of city council should reflect the gender composition of the city, compared to 75.7 percent of men ( $p < .05$ ).

In sum, although women respondents showed a stronger feminist orientation and believed that council should reflect the city's gender composition, they were no more likely to vote for Plante than men. This result stands in contrast to some of the existing research, which suggests not only that women voters will desire women representatives but also that they will be especially likely to express this gender affinity "when given the opportunity to elect the first woman to any political

office” (Cargile and Pringle 2019, 12). If voter sex is not the explanation, then what other factors help to explain a preference for Plante over Coderre?

Perhaps voters who supported Plante did so not because of a simple gender cue but because of a feminist disposition. Asked about their feelings toward feminists on a scale of 0 to 100, survey respondents gave a mean value of 68.8, but there was no statistically significant difference between Coderre and Plante supporters. When asked whether society would be better if women stayed home, 84 percent of respondents disagreed, but there was no difference between Coderre and Plante supporters.

By contrast, when asked whether city council should reflect the gender composition of the population, a distinction does emerge. Approximately 85 percent of Plante supporters agreed with this statement, compared to 75 percent of Coderre supporters ( $p < .01$ ). Moreover, there was a nearly 7-point gap between Coderre and Plante supporters who disagreed. In other words, while Plante’s victory was perhaps not a result of a straight gender affinity effect, the context in which she emerged was one in which there was increased support for women in politics and a sense that elected bodies should include women’s voices.<sup>iv</sup>

The survey also points to some ambivalence toward Coderre. In the pre-election wave of the survey, more than one-third of respondents (35 percent) said they absolutely would not vote for Coderre, compared to just 9 percent who said the same about Plante. In addition, when they were asked to rate their feelings toward mayoral candidates on a scale of 0 to 100, Coderre received an average rating of 50.8, while Plante’s rating was 68.1. Even when we look at the post-election wave of the survey, where respondents were asked to assess their feelings about the mayoral candidate whom they ultimately supported, 55 percent of Plante supporters said their views about her were “all positive,” while only 28 percent of Coderre supporters said the same about him. More than one-quarter (26 percent) of Coderre’s own supporters said their views about him were “mixed,” a response given by just 7 percent of Plante supporters.

These results do not provide definitive evidence that a widespread protest vote was responsible for Coderre’s defeat, but they do suggest he might have faced an uphill battle. In this context, a candidate like Plante who provided a viable alternative was likely an attractive option. However, our analysis of electors suggests that the explanation is more complicated than Plante’s gender. Indeed, although voters seemed open to more gender diversity on council, it does not appear that, for voters, gender alone was the deciding factor in Plante’s election. We therefore look elsewhere, arguing that institutional configurations helped to shape voter preferences and the eventual electoral outcome. We suggest that Projet Montréal’s campaign and the party’s configuration helped Plante overcome stereotypes about women’s unsuitability for positions of political leadership.

## Municipal Party Politics and Institutional Configurations

Équipe Coderre fit the classic mould of a Quebec municipal political party. It was leader- and executive-dominant, with very few local associations, centralized candidate selection, and very little grassroots participation. Its orientation centred on brokerage not ideological principle and its primary role was to organize and finance the election campaign, with almost no presence in the inter-electoral period (Breux and Bherer 2012; Mévellec and Tremblay 2013). The mayor's platform was characteristic of that of an incumbent. It reported on the administration's prior achievements and urged continuity, with Coderre taking credit for addressing several of Montreal's longstanding issues, such as corruption and crumbling infrastructure and for improving the city's profile, while arguing that the work was not complete (Labbé 2017; Normandin 2017).

The incumbent had to deal with growing discontent toward some of his policies, including the costs and congestion associated with an electric car race he advocated for in the summer of 2017, the city's near constant construction, and a proposed ban on pitbull dogs. Post-mortem analyses pointed to weaknesses in Coderre's campaign organization, including its tendency toward tight centralization and evidence of ill-preparedness (Corriveau 2017; Ducas 2017), as well as the mayor's perceived lack of dynamism (Groguhé 2018).

Plante's party, Projet Montréal, helped to break this mould, introducing a model that is less leader-centric and which emphasizes decentralized candidate selection, grassroots engagement, and a more ideologically coherent policy platform. As in other municipal parties, campaign organization and fundraising are among Projet Montréal's central objectives, but the party diverges from this singular focus in at least two ways. First, it is guided by a vision statement on urban governance, which informs its policies both during and between elections. Its key principles include the application of sustainable development to urban issues, the implementation of democratic decision-making, and the pursuit of accountability and transparency (Projet Montréal 2018). Second, the party has a stable internal organization, which replicates the franchise model adopted by many provincial and federal parties in Canada (Carty 2002; Mévellec and Tremblay 2013). The franchise model is more decentralized and gives greater power to grassroots members. Projet Montréal maintains local associations through which party members elect district and borough candidates, and the platform is developed collectively, rather than centrally, through a bi-annual Congress where party members vote on priorities and positions (Projet Montréal 2018). Projet Montréal also maintains formal and informal alliances with the provincial party, Québec Solidaire, and it has informal connections with several New Democratic Party staffers. Many Projet Montréal members are also deeply involved in Quebec's rich network of community groups and political action communities. In other words, Projet Montréal is more than a campaign machine. The party is embedded in the city's civic and political life during and between elections, with networks that are both vertical and horizontal. This structure is a marked departure from the city's traditional municipal political parties and might foretell a transformation toward more institutionalized and embedded structures of local governance.

We argue that this shift provided Plante with a strategic advantage. The stability of the party and its institutionalized policy positions gave voters clear ideological and issue cues. If voters had any lingering doubts about electing a woman mayor, they were likely mitigated by these ideological and issue cues, which may have dampened stereotypes of women as weak or ineffective leaders (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; McDermott 1998). In other words, a policy-forward rather than leader-centric party likely helped to quash any gender-based concerns voters may have had.

Moreover, the strength and stability of the party's local associations gave Projet Montréal considerable organizational capacity, with diffuse grassroots members campaigning on behalf of a mayoral candidate who diverged from the traditional male prototype. This strategy can be contrasted with the one employed by Mélanie Joly, who ran for mayor in Montreal's 2013 election. Joly adopted the typical strategy, creating a party, *Vrai Changement pour Montréal*, that was solely oriented around her election campaign (Ouimet 2013; Radio-Canada 2013).<sup>v</sup> She was ultimately defeated by Coderre, and although her party remained active until 2017, it did not develop any distinguishable policy statements, had limited activities outside of the campaign period, and barely survived Joly's departure from municipal politics.

By contrast, from its inception in 2001, Projet Montréal, adopted a different approach, but it was not until 2017 that the advantages of this transformation were fully realized. In 2017, the election was essentially a two-party race; Coderre and Plante were the only serious contenders on the mayoral ballot, and their parties were the only ones to run candidates in every district. This context coincided with the politicization of municipal parties, characterized by their increased longevity, visibility between election campaigns, and differentiation on key issues (Chiasson, Gauthier, and Andrew 2014; Mévellec and Tremblay 2013). These features were absent in 2013 when four relatively strong candidates—Mélanie Joly, Richard Bergeron, Marcel Côté, and Denis Coderre—all ran for mayor. In the inter-electoral period, a contrast between the two main parties, *Équipe Coderre* and *Projet Montréal*, was increasingly evident, as was realignment and consolidation. Throughout Coderre's tenure as mayor, elected council and borough representatives began to align themselves, generally choosing to side with his party or that of the main opposition party, *Projet Montréal*. These alignments were driven by the dissolution of other parties, the perceived popularity of the two main contenders, and the hope that alignment with Coderre might lead to a plum position on his executive team.

The 2017 campaign marked the culmination of *Projet Montréal*'s transition from a highly personalized party in which a single leader dominated to a more diffuse policy-focused approach. Originally founded by Richard Bergeron, a former public servant at the *Agence Métropolitaine des Transport*, *Projet Montréal* morphed from "Bergeron's party" with a fairly tight focus on introducing a streetcar line to a more collective entity with a wider range of policy proposals and an increasing number of *Projet Montréal* representatives at city hall. Although Bergeron was defeated in his 2013 mayoral bid, his third attempt at the position, *Projet Montréal* elected enough members to form the council's official opposition; Plante was among these. She was a political newcomer when she ran for council in the city's *Sainte-Marie* district, besting Louise

Harel, a former provincial cabinet minister and past candidate for mayor. Plante served as the opposition critic for downtown, tourism, and women's affairs; she was also named vice-president of city council. In 2014, Bergeron departed Projet Montréal, setting the stage for a leadership contest. This was the first time in the party's history that a leader would be chosen through a democratic selection process. Plante threw her hat in the ring, narrowly defeating the party's finance critic with 51.9% of members' votes (Cherry 2016). Plante was not viewed as a long-time party insider, and her somewhat unexpected ascension to the leadership helped to cast her as the leader of a new era. This transition coincided with the Projet Montréal's increased council power. It shifted the party from an exclusive focus on the leader toward a more diffuse set of players and party policies.

Projet Montréal's maturation occurred alongside a more partisan landscape, which presented the party—and its new leader—with an opportunity. More than 15 years after its establishment, Projet Montréal entered the 2017 election as a visible and viable alternative to the incumbent and his more traditional style of local politics. The strong presence and performance of borough and council representatives who were aligned with Projet Montréal and, by extension, Plante, gave voters additional cues about the leader's support and potential. Rather than channelling their electoral desires through a single candidate, one whose gender may have marked her as a risky option in a city that had never elected a woman mayor, voters could conceive of their vote for Plante as a vote for an entire party. The depersonalization of the party and shift toward a more diffuse and policy-focused structure may have helped to neutralize the potentially negative effects of the leader's gender.

### **Playing the (De)gendered Card**

Of course, some might argue that Plante won the mayoral race simply because she ran a better campaign. Certainly, Plante was presented as a non-traditional politician and Projet Montréal as an alternative to Coderre's governance style. The party's platform focused on public transportation, construction management, equitable taxation, affordable housing and city planning (Projet Montréal 2017). The party had a dynamic, fast-paced communications strategy, while Coderre's campaign was more muted (Corriveau 2017).

At the same time, however, what constitutes a “good” campaign for a woman candidate might be quite different than that of their male counterparts. Women candidates have to overcome stereotypes that suggest they may not be well-suited to positions of political leadership (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstone 2015); they may therefore have to be more prepared, more qualified, and less error-prone than their male counterparts to be viewed as equally viable contenders.

One way for women candidates to overcome this disadvantage is to adopt a campaign strategy that downplays their gender or deploys it strategically.<sup>vi</sup> This process is referred to as “degendering.” In its strictest articulation, degendering will result in the abolition of gender as an organizational category and the abandonment of the biological differentiation between masculine

and feminine norms of behaviour (Lorber 2005). In its less demanding form, and the one employed here, degendering helps to challenge, rethink, and reconceptualize gender codes (Sasson-Levy and Amram-Katz 2007; Yildirim, Ucaray-Mangitli, and Tas 2018).

Degendering might be achieved by actively choosing to ignore one's gender, by framing proposals in gender-neutral terms, or by avoiding explicit appeals to women's interests. Degendering does not mean that gender is absent—indeed, it may shape other aspects of the campaign—but rather that, for women, it is not equated only or explicitly with femininity. Racialized candidates, and particularly those running in majority white districts, frequently opt for a deracialized campaign strategy that downplays the candidate's own racial background and sidesteps racially loaded policy issues, like welfare or crime (Jeffries and Jones 2006, 247; Johnson 2017; Wilson 1990). Women candidates similarly have tried to broaden their appeal by avoiding explicitly gendered appeals and the perception that they are playing the “woman card” (Dittmar 2015). Gender matters, but it is not engaged as “womanhood.”

We argue that Plante's campaign successfully employed a two-pronged degendering strategy. First, they limited gender-specific proposals in the party platform. Instead of women's rights or women-focused policies, Plante concentrated on public transportation, city work management, equitable taxation, affordable housing and city planning. To the extent that gender-specific proposals were advanced, similar platforms were put forward by both parties. For example, Coderre pledged to initiative a gender-balanced executive committee and create more opportunities for female leadership as well as entrepreneurship. Plante also promised gender balance on the executive committee and within the municipal civil service, while pledging to fight street harassment and increase the number of female firefighters (Santerre and Normandin 2017). Although gender parity is one of *Projet Montréal's* founding principles and is adhered to in the party's organizational structure (*Projet Montréal* 2018, 5; 2019), very little attention was paid to the party's gender-specific campaign commitment, possibly because a similar promise was made by the opponent. In addition, Plante chose not to highlight her engagement in feminist organizing and her efforts to increase women's political female representation in politics, which suggests a strategic move to downplay her background (Grégoire and Bourque 2017) and avoid the suggestion that she was running to represent women alone.

Second, although on the eve of her selection as party leader, Plante noted that Montreal would have the chance to “break the glass ceiling” with the election of a woman mayor (Cherry 2016), throughout the mayoral campaign, the party worked to control how Plante's gender was portrayed. They frequently played with gender, while carefully avoiding a casting of the mayoral candidate in women-first terms. This strategy was visible at the outset of the campaign and relied somewhat on humour. For example, the party's first campaign materials included a poster of Plante with the slogan “L'homme de la situation,” translated roughly as “the man for job” (Champagne 2017). The slogan appeared in blue, grey, and black lettering and was accompanied by a front-facing photo of Plante wearing a grey suit jacket, her arms crossed. In an interview, Plante said the slogan accomplished three objectives: it highlighted her bold and irreverent character, brought more attention to her as a candidate, and got ahead of the gender issue at the

very beginning of the campaign (Grégoire and Bourque 2017). Projet Montréal's proposal for an extension of the Montréal subway appeared to be a gendered appeal because it was called the "pink line," but party documents and rhetoric repeatedly framed the proposal in gender-neutral ways and as illustrative of the party's core commitment to public transit. If this promise was targeted at women voters, the intention was purely implicit. By neutralizing the gender issue and doing so in a playful manner, opponents and critics were harder pressed to use gender to delegitimize Plante. She set the agenda and used language and symbolism that engaged with masculinist or degendered stereotypes about leadership in electoral politics.

Plante's efforts to effectively control the portrayal of her gender is consistent with research that suggests voters still see politics, even at the local level, as a man's career (Thomas 2012). This imagery was certainly present in the 2017 election. Plante's opponents were all male and, with his formidable physicality, gregarious style, and long political tenure, her main competitor, Coderre, was the embodiment of traditional political masculinity (Sabin and Kirkup 2019). At the same time, even in the male-dominated field of politics, women are expected to behave in appropriately feminine ways: to "smile more," dress nicely, and not dissent. When women politicians violate these gendered norms, the media tend to exaggerate and condemn this behaviour (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). The coverage of women party leaders is more individualized and personalized than that of their male counterparts. Women politicians' bodies, romantic relationships, and private lives are all used to explain their competence as leaders (Trimble et al. 2013). In this context, women leaders must carefully consider their own political marketing (Marland, Giasson, and Lees-Marshment 2012), walking a fine line to brand themselves not just as qualified leaders but also as acceptable women. Plante's messaging, branding, and platform did not deny the existence of gender, but skillfully neutralized it as the defining feature of her campaign. This strategy helped to depersonalize her candidacy and shift the focus back to the party and the issues.

Of course, it would be misleading to suggest that Coderre's weak campaign performance did not help to bolster Plante's prospects. But it is clear that Plante and her party thought consciously about how to present her as a viable alternative. Degendering was an important part of this strategy. This strategy may have appealed, in particular, to voters who were hesitant to elect a woman mayor. Although post-campaign analysis celebrated Plante's victory as one earned by a woman, her campaign strategy was that of a candidate who just happened to be a woman.

## **Conclusion**

The election of Montréal's first woman mayor was historic and marked a shift in the position of women in municipal politics. No longer relegated to the sidelines, women may be more readily able to envision a political career, and a leadership position, for themselves (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018). That said, gender does not seem to have played a straightforward role in the election's result. Survey data suggest Plante was not elected *because* she was a woman, and voters' support of her candidacy does not seem to be the result of

feminist orientation or gender affinity. To understand Plante's victory, we have to go beyond an analysis of voter characteristics and preferences.

Instead, we have documented the context in which Plante emerged as mayor. We argue that her victory was shaped by institutional configurations and campaign dynamics. Coderre was a long-time politician whom the population had perhaps grown tired of. However, as we have shown, Projet Montréal made two crucial shifts that may have helped solidify Plante's election as mayor. First, the party's campaign strategy likely mitigated the possible risks of running a women leader. Post-electoral analysis of the historic nature of the election of a woman mayor have obscured the ways in which gender was *not* employed during the campaign; gender was certainly present, but Plante's womanhood largely became salient *after* her victory. Second, the maturation of Projet Montréal as a distinct type of municipal party—one not focused on a leader, but as an entity with a stable structure and a clear ideological stance—provided voters with additional cues, beyond Plante's gender, that may have dampened the effects of stereotypes about women leaders. Plante set herself up to be more than just a woman candidate.

Our analysis demonstrates that parties are not just gatekeepers to women's political participation; they can also play an enabling role as mobilizing institutions. Projet Montréal's policy focus facilitated Plante's success, but so too has its broader commitment to gender parity and active women's committee helped to develop women leaders from the ground-up. These normative and structural features are indicative of a party culture that supports women candidates (Gauja and Cross 2015). Our analysis of Plante's victory helps to highlight how parties can facilitate women's representation and overcome stereotypes voters may have about women political leaders.

This is not entirely a good news story, however. Indeed, the analysis presented here suggests that while women can be elected as mayors, their victories are hard-won and may be dependent on their successful navigation of gendered stereotypes. Future research should look closely at the conditions under which women mayors emerge. Certainly, there are prominent examples of strong women mayors—Barbara Hall in Toronto, Hazel McCallion in Mississauga, Charlotte Whitton and Marion Dewar in Ottawa, Elsie Wayne in Fredericton, Madeleine Redfern and Elisapee Sheutiapik in Iqaluit, and Lisa Helps in Victoria—but by and large, Canadian mayors are men. The absence of women leaders at the municipal level makes the election of Valérie Plante all the more notable and underscores the confluence of factors that must align to make such an outcome possible. Comparative research examining the election of women mayors in other contexts might help to identify the conditions in which gender is most likely to be mobilized as a political resource (Dulong and Lévêque 2002).

Finally, this article builds on work that suggests a shift is occurring within Quebec municipal political parties (Mévellec and Tremblay 2013). Rather than functioning primarily as campaign machines, parties are becoming more institutionalized and embedded inter-electoral actors. This maturation has the potential to transform municipal elections and local governance itself. Moreover, Projet Montréal's emergence as a less hierarchical and more depersonalized political

party suggests future municipal elections may become less leader-centric and mayoral-focused than has historically been the case. If the trend holds, researchers may want to turn their attention to municipal council races, a domain that has sometimes been overshadowed in the study of local politics.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The focus on Plante's gender is consistent with research on gendered mediation, which suggests the media often focus on the novelty of a "political first" when reporting on atypical politicians (Goodyear-Grant 2013; Tolley 2016; Trimble 2017). It is also perhaps not surprising in a municipal context where the bulk of mayors remain male (Federation of Canadian Municipalities 2015).

<sup>ii</sup> In Montreal, voters select representatives—mayor and council—at the borough and city level. At both the borough and city level, there is an election for a single councillor per district, and a separate vote for mayor. The winner in each contest is the candidate who receives a plurality of votes. We set aside the borough and councillor elections to focus exclusively on the city-wide mayoral election.

<sup>iii</sup> It is not unusual for post-election surveys to show some positivity bias toward winning candidates.

<sup>iv</sup> Although we only report bivariate results here, we also ran a logistic regression (see supplementary appendix). These results confirm that attitudes toward gender balance on council was a significant correlate of support for Plante, while voter sex was not.

<sup>v</sup> The Party was often referred to as "Vrai changement pour Montréal – Groupe Mélanie Joly" during the 2013 election. The use of Joly's name in the party's title is indicative of its more traditional leader-centric nature.

<sup>vi</sup> Degendering is not the only strategy employed by women candidates. In some contexts, a focus on gender may provide a strategic advantage (Herrnson, Lay, and Stokes 2003). For example, after the departure of a corrupt male predecessor, women candidates may be viewed as most qualified to "clean up" politics, and they may use this type of domestic imagery in their favour. At the same time, research suggests gender stereotypes may lead to voters to see women as ill-suited to politics, and particularly for positions of political leadership or offices where women are more rare (Dolan 2014; Meeks 2012). In those cases, women may better served by a strategy that downplays their gender.

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## APPENDIX

*This appendix provides additional details on the quantitative analysis contained in Tolley and Paquet (2021), “Gender, Municipal Party Politics, and Montreal’s First Woman Mayor.”*

The bivariate results reported in the text of the article suggest that women voters were no more likely to vote for Valérie Plante than Denis Coderre. To further probe the relationship between voter sex, feminist orientation, and support for Plante, we also ran a logistic regression.

The dependent variable is support for Plante. We ran the model in four stages, looking first at voter sex. We then added variables related to a voter’s feminist orientation, including their feelings toward feminists, their support for a municipal council whose gender composition matches that of the population, and their views on women staying home rather than entering the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

After that, we added in two variables, one that measured respondents’ interest in municipal politics, as well as an index of four questions that measured respondents’ political knowledge.<sup>2</sup> We reasoned that voters with higher levels of political knowledge and political interest might be less likely to rely on heuristic cues (and therefore more likely to vote for the less-known political newcomer). Finally, we added basic demographics that might influence support for Plante; these include age, income, education, identifying as francophone or a visible minority.

The results are shown in Table S1 and confirm that women were no more likely to vote for Plante than were men. We also find that respondents’ demographic characteristics are not correlated with support for Plante in any systematic way, save for a negative association between age and income and a positive association between one’s identification as francophones and support for Plante.

The only other variable that emerges as significant is the respondents’ support for a gender-balanced council. Those in favour of city council reflecting the gender composition of the city were much more likely to support Plante than Coderre. This value position might be the driver behind their support for Plante, but it could also be a post hoc explanation for their vote choice.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey included three questions related to respondents’ feminist orientation. The first asked respondents to indicate their feelings toward feminists using a scale that ranged from 0 to 100, with zero meaning they really dislike feminists and 100 meaning they really like them. The second question asked respondents to use a five-point scale to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement that “The gender composition of City Council should reflect the gender composition of the population. (i.e. roughly 50% of the population is female, so 50% of councillors should also be female).” The third question also used a five-point scale with respondents indicating whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that “Society would be better off if more women stayed home with their children.” Responses to all three questions were rescaled to run from 0 to 1.

<sup>2</sup> The four political knowledge questions asked respondents to correctly identify the premier of the province, the mayor of the city, the name of the federal Finance minister, and the number of city councillors. These were combined into a scale that ranged from 0 to 1. The Cronbach’s alpha for the index is 0.75.

**Table S1. Correlates of Support for Valérie Plante**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>
Woman	-0.011 (0.166)	-0.098 (0.172)	-0.107 (0.174)	-0.114 (0.177)
Feminist orientation				
<i>Feminists</i>		0.455 (0.301)	0.456 (0.305)	0.509 (0.313)
<i>Gender-balanced council</i>		0.872*** (0.317)	0.875*** (0.319)	0.940*** (0.332)
<i>Women staying home</i>		-0.303 (0.341)	-0.267 (0.346)	-0.129 (0.361)
Political interest and knowledge				
<i>Interest in municipal politics</i>			0.006 (0.383)	0.224 (0.399)
<i>Knowledge of politics</i>			-0.297 (0.437)	-0.039 (0.456)
Demographics				
<i>Under 35</i>				-0.501* (0.298)
<i>Over 54</i>				-0.655*** (0.199)
<i>Income under \$50,000</i>				-0.265 (0.184)
<i>Income above \$100,000</i>				-0.080 (0.207)
<i>University degree or higher</i>				-0.484*** (0.217)
<i>Francophone</i>				0.392* (0.225)
<i>Visible minority</i>				-0.179 (0.122)
Constant	0.569*** (0.116)	-0.077 (0.346)	0.069 (0.444)	0.072 (0.501)
Observations	626	626	626	626

\*\*\*p<.01 \*\*p<.05 \*p<.10. Standard errors are in parentheses