



## Reaching critical mass: Women in the Ontario legislature

Jennifer Wilson

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The role of women in democracy has come a long way since the boy's club days of Confederation, but many argue the provinces, and Canada as a whole, still have work to do to have their legislatures reflect the country's gender makeup.

### Victory

Ontario, this election, could take a step forward. The three main parties are running 22 per cent more women candidates — a total of 104 — this election than in 2003.

What's more, after the nominations closed, the women's advocacy group Equal Voice conducted a study that suggested as many as 40 ridings could be won by women this time around. That would be a huge increase over the 26 female MPPs who currently sit at Queen's Park.

Beyond the increased number of candidates, the other opportunity presenting itself this election is the electoral reform referendum that is being held alongside the general election vote.

In this election, voters will be asked to choose between the current, first-past-the-post system where seats are awarded to whoever has the most votes, regardless of whether that is a majority, and a new, proportional system.

Under the proposed Mixed Member Proportionality system, voters would vote for both a local candidate and a party, and the party would get to add extra seats based on its share of the popular vote and from a list that would be made public before the election.

Many interest groups believe that a system of proportional representation could help address gender imbalance by letting parties use their PR lists to add more women and other under-represented groups to the legislature.

Most of the countries with the most female representation in their legislatures use some sort of proportional electoral system, but of course there is no guarantee that Ontario's parties would use their lists this way.



## Women candidates and their party affiliations Party Women candidates % of total

Liberal 38 35.5%

PC 24 22%

NDP 42 39%

Green 23 21%

## The barriers

With a quarter of its legislature female, Ontario currently ranks second place in the country for women representatives, behind Quebec where women occupy just over 30 per cent of the seats.

In some respects, it has made great strides, in recent decades in particular, since the first females in the Ontario legislature, Agnes Campbell Macphail (who later became the first female MP in Ottawa) and Margarette Rae Morrison Luckock were elected in the 1943 election.

Equal Voice researcher Lesley Byrne said the role of women in politics is certainly changing, with increasing numbers of female candidates and younger women running for office.

"In the early days of women in politics, you probably wouldn't be married if you were running, or you wouldn't have children or your children were grown. Women would reach the age of running in their early fifties," she said, adding that today there are more females in their late twenties to early thirties, and many more mothers running.

However, she said there are still a few barriers to women in politics, including its cost and the current perception of politics as a nasty, often testosterone-fuelled mudslinging match.

Election costs are a key reason why more women don't run, Byrne said. Running a local campaign can be very expensive, in the \$70,000-plus range, and without help from the party or a network of fundraisers, this can be a real barrier especially for young women not willing to take the financial leap on something as risky as an election campaign.



The current proportion of women to men in elected life is another reason women may be hesitant to run. "When you see that most of the politicians are men, it closes the door a little bit," Byrne said.

### What women bring to the table

For many observers, legislatures that truly reflect regional demographics are viewed as more democratic and ultimately legitimate.

"When there's a huge gap in who you see on the street and in your government, that undermines the legitimacy of the government," Byrne, for one, argues. "It affects participation and creates the sense or feeling like you can't be part of government."

With Ontario's gender imbalance — 25 per cent representation versus 51 per cent of the population — many fear that women's issues and needs are not being addressed on the same scale as men's.

Another advantage to female representatives, Byrne said, is that they offer a different view on many important issues.

"When you talk to women politicians, regardless of their political stripe, they say they bring a different perspective to the table," she said. "They see public policy in a different way. For example, they're more likely to understand or empathize with what it might be like to be a single mother and on welfare."

Equal Voice wants female representation to reach 33 per cent in the legislature, which is considered the "critical mass", or the point where a minority group can fundamentally affect a decision-making body.

To help achieve this goal, in June 2006 Equal Voice challenged the three major Ontario parties to run and elect more females in this election.

The Liberals pledged to run women in 50 per cent of their unheld ridings. The party actually surpassed its goal, hitting 55 per cent, with 25 women running in 45 open seats. In total, there are 38 women running for the party — about 35 per cent of the candidates — up from 23 in 2003.

The NDP committed to running 50 per cent women candidates. They missed their goal, but did increase their female candidates to 39 per cent, running 42, up from 33 per cent in 2003.



The Progressive Conservatives promised Equal Voice that one-third of their candidates would be women. They didn't quite meet their goal, running 24 candidates, or 22 per cent, up from 21 in 2003.

The Green Party was not part of the challenge, but is running 23 female candidates, or 21 per cent, in the upcoming election.

### Hitting critical mass?

Based on the number of women the parties are running and the ridings they will be running in, Equal Voice and G.P. Murray Research analyzed the "winnability" of the nominated candidates to see if the numbers would hit the so-called critical mass.

The chances of winning were determined by transposing the candidate party's 2003 vote totals onto the new riding boundaries, with ridings where the party had the highest vote being considered "highly winnable." The research also found "somewhat winnable" ridings, where the female candidate's party came within 10 percentage points of the winner.

Of the 40 potentially winnable ridings, 26 were considered highly winnable and 14 somewhat winnable. If most of these ridings were won, representation would break the critical mass barrier.