

A Persistent Sacrifice

The 'Sacrificial Lamb' Effect, Women Candidates, and Underrepresentation In the 44th Parliament

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ABSTRACT: In August of 2021, Canadian Parliament was dissolved and the 44th federal election was called. Its result was a Parliament that was only marginally more representative of female and gender-diverse candidates than the last. This is in part due to the 'sacrificial lamb' effect identified by Melanee Thomas and Marc-Andre Bodet, which highlights the persistence of parties in running women and gender-diverse candidates in unwinnable or 'swing' ridings – such that they become 'sacrifices' and are destined for failure. Previous research has confirmed the presence of the 'sacrificial lamb' effect across several elections. I examine specific incidents of gender-diverse candidates being run in the 'stronghold' riding of another party, as well as the slates of candidates in several 'swing' and 'stronghold' ridings across the country. Further, I consider the likely implications of the 'sacrificial lamb' effect and the general underrepresentation of female candidates on the 44th Parliament, as well as the extent to which the 'sacrificial lamb' effect may have compromised the freeness and fairness of the 2021 campaign. I conclude that the 'sacrificial lamb' effect continued in full force throughout the 2021 campaign, which is likely to have a detrimental impact on the representation of women's interests, specifically as they pertain to the pressing women's issues of today.

KEYWORDS: Canadian politics, Canadian Government, Political Representation, Agenda Setting, Women's Issues, Women in Politics, 2021 Federal Campaign, Canadian Parliament

The 44th federal election was called with ambiguous intentions by a government that seeks to attach itself to a distinctly feminist label (Gerster 2019). Despite this goal, the election produced a Parliament that was nearly identical to the last. This is contemptible, given that while Parliament continues to elect record numbers of women, there is a difference of about twenty percentage points between women's representation in Parliament and their share of the broader population (Montpetit 2020). Thus, I will argue that the 2021 federal election was ultimately unsuccessful at advancing women's representation, and by extension, women's interests. This is because women continued to be run in unwinnable ridings, squandering an opportunity to incorporate the perspectives of women from diverse backgrounds into Parliamentary discussion. By excluding these perspectives from Parliament, parties cemented the exclusion of women's issues from the government agenda. Within this discussion, I will consider the slate of candidates in both swing ridings and party strongholds, as well as the effects this systematic exclusion will likely have on government priorities and action.

Compared to the 2019 election, the 2021 election produced five new women-led seats, with a considerable slate of flipped or new-member seats being held by women (Equal Voice 2021a). However, while 43% of candidates across all major parties were women, only 30% of those elected were women, reflecting a substantial disconnect between candidates ran and candidates elected (Equal Voice 2021b). This demonstrates a need for all major parties to make a concerted effort to nominate women and gender-diverse candidates within their slates, particularly in party stronghold ridings to ensure their diverse perspectives are present in Parliament. Such an effort proves particularly important as Canada grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately impacted women within both economic and social spheres (Madgavkar et al. 2020). Additionally, given that under Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system, parties have less control over their final caucuses (Virgint 2016), but voters remain heavily constrained by first-past-the-post ballot structures (Trimble 2021a), it is necessary that a substantial effort by parties occurs at the nomination stage in order to ensure women's interests are effectively voiced in

Parliament. In this essay, I will consider the repercussions of the underrepresentation of women and gender-diverse individuals in Parliament, as well as the flawed nomination strategies of parties that directly influence Parliamentary underrepresentation.

Nomination and the 'Sacrificial Lamb' Effect

Melanee Thomas & Marc-Andre Bodet identify a persistent phenomenon wherein women candidates are nominated as 'sacrificial lambs.' Candidates can be defined as 'sacrificial lambs' when they "run in the stronghold of one of their competitors" or serve as standard-bearers in a riding that a given party does not realistically expect to win (Thomas & Bodet 2013, 154). This phenomenon is mainly a result of flawed nomination strategies, for example, Thomas identifies the Conservative Party's strategy of both finding the 'best possible' candidate (with few other formal restrictions) and automatically re-nominating all incumbents, who are overwhelmingly more likely to be men (House of Commons Canada 2019, 57). While the New Democratic Party offers financial incentives for the successful nomination of 'affirmative action' candidates, the Liberal Party and Bloc Quebecois set targets for women's representation but have few other formal measures (Thomas & Bodet 2013, 154). Clearly, few formal mechanisms exist for the recruitment and nomination of women and gender-diverse candidates, which, when coupled by the 'sacrificial lamb' effect, contribute to a distinct underrepresentation of women and gender-diverse individuals in Parliament. Going forward, I will consider key instances of the 'sacrificial lamb' effect in the 2021 election, demonstrating its pervasiveness across electoral campaigns.

The 'Sacrificial Lamb' Effect in the 2021 Campaign

A 'stronghold' riding can be defined as one where a party gathers more than 50% of ballots for two elections in a row (Thomas & Bodet 2013, 158) or, more broadly, where one party has a sufficient edge over the others, such that it is unlikely that other parties will flip the seat. The riding of Victoria has been widely identified as an NDP stronghold, given that the NDP has won the riding in each of the last four elections with a significant plurality of the vote – their highest share at 50.8%, lowest at 33.2%, and with 44% of the vote in 2021 (338 Canada 2021e). In 2021, the Conservative Party of Canada nominated Hannah

Hodson in Victoria – the party’s first openly transgender candidate, and had she been elected, Parliament’s first openly transgender MP (Kay 2021). For a party that has been traditionally hostile towards transgender individuals, this was an important step in increasing representation among the Conservative slate of candidates, as well as a chance to increase the diversity of perspectives represented in Parliament. However, the Conservatives have consistently failed to win a plurality in Victoria for the last four elections and were projected with a 0% chance of winning entering the 2021 campaign (338 Canada 2021e). Further, they have never exceeded 23.6% of the vote there (338 Canada 2021e). Hodson’s nomination perfectly captures the unfortunate impacts of the ‘sacrificial lamb’ effect – her nomination provided an essential opportunity to promote tolerance and transgender acceptance, as well as affirm the importance of diverse perspectives within Conservative circles and the broader Parliamentary community. Despite this, she was nominated in a riding that the Conservatives had nearly zero chance at winning, securing her position outside Parliament Hill.

Two important swing or ‘battleground’ ridings can be considered: Fredericton and Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill. Fredericton is a quintessential swing riding – it has seen Conservative, Liberal, and Green Party seat-holders over the last four elections (338 Canada 2021c). Yet, its slate of candidates in 2021 were overwhelmingly female, with 3 out of 4 major party candidates being women (Elections Canada 2021c). Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill has seen very close competition between the Conservatives and the Liberals over the last four elections, with each taking between 40% and 45% of the vote in the last three races, alternating between Conservative and Liberal-held seats (338 Canada 2021a). Its slate of candidates in 2021 was similarly overwhelmingly female – the 3 major parties (Conservatives, Liberals and New Democrats) each ran a woman candidate (Elections Canada 2021a). A consideration of the stronghold ridings of Battle River-Crowfoot and Souris-Moose Mountain is also in order. In Battle River-Crowfoot, where the Conservative Party has garnered more than 71.3% of the vote in each of the last four elections (338 Canada 2021b), the Conservatives ran a male candidate, Damien Kurik,

in their ‘safe’ jurisdiction, whereas both the Liberals and the New Democrats ran women as ‘sacrificial lambs’, given that they had a near-zero chance of achieving a plurality (Elections Canada 2021b). Further, in Souris-Moose Mountain, where the Conservatives have won with more than 70.1% of the vote in each of the last four elections, the Conservatives ran Robert Kitchen, and the NDP, who have experienced a steady decline from an 18.1% plurality in 2011, ran Hannah Ann Duerr (Elections Canada 2021d), who garnered just 8% of the vote (338 Canada 2021d).

These observations speak to three main points. Firstly, the ‘sacrificial lamb’ effect was certainly persistent throughout the 2021 election. This is especially concerning given both the New Democrats’ and Liberals’ commitment to achieving gender parity in their caucuses, as well as their long-standing desire to be seen as feminist parties (Tremblay & Pelletier 2003, 80). While feminist concerns cannot be addressed entirely through electoral means, Karp and Banducci argue that the presence of women in Parliament can positively influence women’s political engagement through heightening the importance of women’s policy issues in the government agenda and increasing political efficacy among young women (Karp & Banducci 2008, 106). These, in turn, can provide a stronger vehicle through which women’s interests can be addressed. Secondly, the persistence of the ‘sacrificial lamb’ effect into the 2021 campaign also reflects a broader need for feminist reform and initiatives, even within progressive circles. The easiest of these to implement would likely be stronger recruitment initiatives, especially in stronghold ridings, and doing away with nomination processes that favour incumbents, given that these are overwhelmingly biased towards men (House of Commons Canada 2019, 57). These would not necessarily have to be financial incentives, as the NDP currently employs, given that they may appear to exploit women’s nomination for partisan financial gain. A more concerted effort on behalf of parties to seek out qualified, politically engaged women, rather than simply ‘the best’ candidate (given that these processes, too, are biased towards men), would certainly be sufficient so long as it is solidified with formal mechanisms and is done with proper intentions (Thomas & Bodet 2013, 155).

Thirdly, it is essential to consider whether the 'sacrificial lamb' effect compromised the degree of freeness and fairness of the 2021 campaign, as well as the degree of inherent political equality of the campaign. Bishop and Hoeffler outline several determinants of freeness and fairness, one of which is relevant to this discussion: ballot access. For proper ballot access to be fulfilled, "parties/candidates [must] get equitable treatment when applying for office" (Bishop & Hoeffler 2016, 611). Whether this was sufficiently achieved is questionable for two reasons. Firstly, some parties have nomination processes that favour incumbents, which are biased towards men and may not be considered 'equitable' treatment. Secondly, it is questionable whether the 'sacrificial lamb' effect, which has been documented extensively in feminist political literature, "constitutes equitable treatment when applying for office. If women candidates are disproportionately placed in unwinnable ridings compared to their male counterparts, can this be considered truly equitable treatment at the nomination stage? Further, it has been established that an essential component of representative democracy is, in fact, political equality (Trimble 2021b). While political equality mainly encompasses the right to vote and the right to run for office, it also consists of equal capacity to seek office (Trimble 2021b). The 'sacrificial lamb' effect certainly compromises this variable, both through its role as a deterrent for women to seek office, and its effect of disadvantaging women to the extent that they do not have the equal political capacity to seek and hold office.

Thus far, I have established that the 'sacrificial lamb' effect was persistent in the 2021 federal campaign and may have been a contributing factor to the relatively small increase in women-held seats from 2019. I will further consider the likely impacts of these results on the government agenda, as well as on the broader representativeness of Parliament.

Likely Implications for the 44th Parliament and Beyond

Jonathan Homola identifies that across Europe, the United States, and Canada, women members of government tend to diversify policy agendas more effectively than their male counterparts. For example, they often increase party focus on social justice issues, family-friendly initiatives, and feminist policies (Homola 2021, 2). This is certainly evidenced by Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland's spearheading of the universal \$10/day childcare program (McCuaig 2021), and the tendency of several women MPs across party lines to call out Prime Minister Trudeau for his anti-feminist actions throughout his tenure (Maddeaux 2021). Additionally, Homola argues that governments fulfill more of their policy pledges when they employ more women in their highest ranks, suggesting that higher levels of women's representation can lead to "more effective policymaking and a stronger program-to-policy linkage" (Homola 2021, 2). With only a marginal increase in women MPs this Parliament, feminist concerns may not get as much traction as they need to make their way to the top of the government agenda. Further, this was a missed opportunity to sufficiently address women's issues relevant to our current political and economic climate, such as the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), and economic recovery in the context of a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted women (Madgavkar et al. 2020). Kubik and Bourassa argue that the MMIW crisis has been given insufficient attention by a broad range of governments, despite being used as a campaign platform point across multiple elections (Kubik & Bourassa 2016). Thus, if we consider Homola's finding that governments with women in leadership positions are both more effective at keeping their campaign promises and addressing feminist issues (Homola 2021, 2), it is to be lamented that a potential opportunity to sufficiently address this pressing crisis was wasted.



Women's representation in the 44th Parliament and beyond must also be considered in terms of its impacts on women's overall political engagement. Karp and Banducci expand upon Homola's findings, arguing that the positive policy outcomes that are an effect of increased women's political representation may foster a stronger sense of political efficacy and engagement among women in general, given that it sends a cue that politics is an "appropriate activity for women" (Karp & Banducci 2008, 111). This would likely increase the number of politically minded women who seek public office, and, as a result, exert greater pressure on governments to implement feminist concerns. Further, in his study of the voting patterns of racialized individuals, Randy Besco argues that affinity voting, or voting based on one's shared characteristics, could form an essential base of support in terms of advancing minority interests, and act as a counterbalance to discrimination (Besco 2019, 4). It is essential to consider the impacts of this finding on women's representation. While it is unclear whether the Canadian electorate discriminates against women candidates (Young et al 2006, 3), encouraging women of differing backgrounds to unite as a voting bloc in support of women's interests, similar to Besco's suggestion of a broad coalition of racialized voters (Besco 2019, 6), could counterbalance the 'sacrificial lamb' effect seen in the 2021 election, which will likely persist into the future.

Addressing Concerns

Firstly, it is important to note that this analysis is not to discredit nor gloss over women candidates who do run in stronghold ridings. They certainly play an important role in ensuring women's voices are effectively represented in Parliament. The goal is to emphasize the need to increase this practice, such that more women are cemented into the Parliamentary makeup and are not used as disposable pawns in a male-dominated system.

Secondly, it may be argued that the strategy of nominating 'the best' candidate is ultimately preferable, given that doing otherwise may imply that women are not 'the best' candidates, or may incline women to think they are not being sought out for their merits, but rather for their token status. Both arguments have merit, and I will address them as follows. In terms of continuing to employ strategies that seek out 'the best' candidate, these are not necessarily harmful on principle, and they do have a clear

aim to promote a general sense of equality across racial and gendered lines. However, these strategies are rife with internal bias, which is what ultimately leads to negative outcomes for women and gender-diverse candidates.

It is known that when men are in positions of party and constituency leadership, they are more likely to nominate male candidates. The same is true for women in positions of leadership (Thomas & Bodet 2013, 155).

However, Cheng and Tavits note that women constituency and party presidents are significantly in the minority (Cheng & Tavits 2011, 464), meaning male-to-male bias has an unequal presence in the party selection process. Hence, strategies that seek out women candidates are needed to mitigate this bias.

These are not done with the intention of discrediting the merits of women candidates, but rather, to create an equal playing field among qualified male and female candidates. These would further the necessary democratic objective of political equality and ensure that the candidate selection process is not disproportionately biased towards one demographic (Trimble 2021b), ensuring that 'the best' candidate is chosen without implicit favoritism.

Conclusion

While the 2021 campaign was successful in increasing the number of women-held seats in Parliament, it was still plagued by many issues detrimental to women's representation and interests. Throughout this essay, I have sought to argue that the campaign was unsuccessful in advancing women's representation and interests by highlighting the persistence of the 'sacrificial lamb' effect and its impacts on the fairness of the campaign, as well as the likely implications of the effect on the government agenda. Further, I have analyzed party practices that contribute to the 'sacrificial lamb' effect and offered suggestions as to how parties can mitigate this effect at the nomination stage. The 'sacrificial lamb' effect continued to influence the 2021 campaign, and it will not be diminished unless parties make substantial efforts to nominate women and gender-diverse candidates. Pressing women's issues essential to political progress will not be sufficiently addressed unless women's representation in Parliament is increased, which can be best achieved under our current electoral system by the concerted efforts of parties. The future of women's representation under single-member plurality is in the hands of party policy, and it is essential to look to this area should we want to achieve sufficient political and economic progress.

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