

## **More Feminists or More Women? Descriptive and Substantive Representations of Women in the 1997 Canadian Federal Elections**

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**ABSTRACT.** The debate about the underrepresentation of women in politics rests on two conceptions of political representation, namely the descriptive and the substantive. The descriptive perspective is that political institutions should reflect the composition of civil society, while the substantive (or feminist) conception argues that, since women offer unique perspectives, their exclusion from political power means that their needs, demands, and interests would currently not be echoed in the political arena. However, a causal link is sometimes too easily established between the number of women elected and its consequences for the female population in general. This article defines, within the context of Canadian parliamentarianism, the scope and limits of this equation between descriptive and substantive representation of women. The conclusion reached is that feminist consciousness has a more significant influence than gender on opinions regarding liberal and gender-related issues. It appears the best feminist strategy to descriptively and substantively represent women is to promote women within political parties, and to elect women who are feminists.

The names of the Canadian political parties appear in abbreviated form: Bloc Québécois (BQ), Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), Liberal Party of Canada (LPC), New Democratic Party of Canada (NDP), and Reform Party (RP).

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In Canada, following the lead of the United States, there is debate within political science—driven mostly by feminists—concerning the limited presence of women in politics. This debate polarizes two conceptions of political representation, namely the descriptive and the substantive (Pitkin, 1967). On the one hand, the descriptive model of representation calls for an increase in the presence of women in political institutions, until it better reflects their proportion in the population.