

Still Different After All These Years? A Comparison of Female and Male Canadian MPs in the Twentieth Century

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This article compares the backgrounds, political experiences and social characteristics of men and women who served in the Canadian House of Commons during the twentieth century. This examination is based on two hypotheses: (1) that the former polarisation of female and male politicians has given way to harmonisation; (2) that harmonisation has occurred because women's profiles have changed to become more like those of men. This study finds that a straightforward linear model of initial polarisation between women and men followed by a period of convergence resulting in harmonisation receives only partial support. Gender continues to act as a causal variable shaping the characteristics and careers of federal politicians, but its effects are complex and multi-dimensional.

Early studies of women's participation in Canadian politics showed key differences in the social and political backgrounds of male and female politicians. Notably, the academic and professional qualifications of female legislators are more modest than those of male legislators, and this is also the case for their experience within political parties more generally. For example, women elected to political office were less likely than their male counterparts to be lawyers. This observation sparked the idea that to gain credibility in political institutions, women had to be more like men by acquiring the attributes male politicians held. More recent studies of women elected to political office indicate that women have indeed responded to this analysis; today, women politicians are as educated as men, they have entered the professions in numbers equal to those of men and they are just as involved in their communities. Some studies go further, suggesting that women have exceeded their male counterparts in some socio-demographic areas and in their political and electoral progress.¹ What accounts for this apparent convergence between women and men in politics? Have women changed over the years, or have the characteristics of both men and women shifted over time?

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