Above the Fray: Rural Women Leaders on Regional Development and Electoral Democracy in Atlantic Canada

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Introduction

In his quantitative study of electoral democracy in the Canadian provinces, Donald Blake highlighted the election of women in terms of its broad linkage to all of the cultural, economic and institutional indicators of electoral democracy included in his analysis (2001: 28). His work contributes solid empirical evidence to earlier theoretical justifications for viewing the election of women as a fundamental component of the quality of electoral democracy (for example, Phillips, 1995; Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991: 113-15; Vickers, 1997; Young, 1990). Its timing was auspicious in light of a growing realization that the overall proportion of women elected in Canada had stalled after 25 years of increases. To illustrate the pattern, Figure 1 presents the relevant historical information. The top-left frame shows the progression in the ratio of women elected to the House of Commons over the period 1971-2001, as well as the aggregate provincial ratio. The two ratios have risen roughly in tandem, from below 5 per cent in 1971 to somewhere near 20 per cent in 2001. The overall pattern of increases that emerged most strongly in the 1980s was clearly not sustained in the 1990s, and seems to disappear altogether over the final half decade. The question of why these gains have not been larger has prompted a good deal of inquiry into the nature of the barriers to women’s election in Canada, as well as strategies and innovations for overcoming them.¹

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As well as varying over time, the progression of women elected in Canada has been far from uniform across the country. The other three frames of Figure 1 show the separate historical progression in the ratio of women elected to each provincial legislature alone and by region. All the provincial legislatures included fewer than 5 per cent women in 1971 with the exception of British Columbia, where nearly 10 per cent of the seats were held by women. The ratios in later years cluster geographically. From the mid-1990s, they fall roughly in the 10-20 per cent range for the Atlantic provinces, 15-20 per cent for Ontario, 20-25 per cent for Quebec and 20-30 per cent for the western provinces (Carbert, 2002a).
Abstract. This article reports on a subset of results from a field-based research project that interviewed rural women community leaders in Atlantic Canada about their experiences and perceptions of leadership, public life and running for elected office. The project is motivated in part by an effort to understand why relatively few women are elected to public office in rural regions in general, and in Atlantic Canada in particular. This article focuses on a theme that emerged consistently and intensely during the interviews: participants’ moral disapproval of, and aversion to, political life as they understand it in their local environment. Interviewees in all four Atlantic provinces describe deeply entrenched networks of patron-client relations that are played out in the administration of regional economic development programmes, and identify deterrents to their own electoral ambitions therein. These results are brought to bear on the question of what distinguishes the nature of political representation in rural communities from that in urban centres.

Résumé. Le présent article rend compte des résultats partiels d’un projet de recherche mené sur le terrain. L’auteure enquête sur les expériences et les perceptions que les leaders des communautés de femmes rurales des provinces de l’Atlantique ont du leadership, de la vie publique de même que de leur capacité à être candidates aux postes électifs. L’objectif du projet consiste en partie à essayer de comprendre pourquoi, dans les régions rurales en général et dans les provinces de l’Atlantique en particulier, le nombre de femmes élues aux fonctions publiques est relativement faible. Cet article se concentre sur un thème récurrent et dominant qui a marqué les discussions: l’aversions et la désapprobation morale que les participantes éprouvent à l’égard de la vie politique telle qu’elles la perçoivent dans leur environnement local. Dans les quatre provinces de l’Atlantique, les femmes interrogées ont parlé de réseaux de relations client-patron fortement implantés, manifestes dans l’administration des programmes de développement économique et régional, qui nuisent à leur avis à leurs ambitions électorales. La présentation de ces résultats vise à susciter une réflexion sur ce qui distingue la représentation politique dans les communautés rurales et dans les centres urbains.

As a step toward understanding what causes these variations, Richard Matland and Donley Studlar related them to characteristics of the electoral districts (1998). They performed a regression analysis of women’s election to provincial legislatures over various periods between 1975 and 1994 that considered the impact of a variety of factors. One of the strongest relationships in their model was a “rural effect,” in which significantly more women were elected in urban ridings, especially those in large metropolitan centres. The relative dearth of rural women in the provincial legislatures is in keeping with earlier work in Canada (Brodie, 1977; Moncrief and Thompson, 1991) and elsewhere. Matland and Studlar proposed that the rural effect depresses the overall rates of women’s election to Canadian provincial legislatures, due to the overrepresentation of rural ridings in the legislatures, compared to urban ridings. A series of court rulings has upheld the principle of “effective, not necessarily equal representation,” and has thus entrenched the practice of overrepresentation of rural voters. So long as this practice continues, the political dynamics of rural Canada will continue to exercise disproportionate influence over electoral outcomes. Understanding the reasons for this “rural effect” has thus become one of the central issues in the study of women’s representation in Canada.

There is very little prior empirical evidence to work with. For over a century, rural women have honed their leadership skills in voluntary women’s organizations, and they have become prominent in high-profile
public-sector occupations, small-business groups, and agricultural organizations (Carbert, 2002b). There are many qualified, talented rural women, but they are not finding their way into public office even in the same proportion as urban women, much less rural men. Why not? The statistical analyses cited above were not designed to reveal underlying causal mechanisms. They leave open the crucial question: what are the characteristics of rural life that act as barriers to rural women’s election?

It often makes sense to investigate a phenomenon where it is most conspicuous. In two such regards, Atlantic Canada is a particularly interesting region in which to conduct a study to address this question: its population is relatively more rural than in other regions of Canada, and relatively fewer women hold elected office there than elsewhere. This article presents a subset of results from a field-based research project that, for the first time, went directly to the women at the centre of action (and inaction). Rural community leaders throughout Atlantic Canada were interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of leadership, public life and running for elected office. These are the qualified and involved women who could form a pool of potential candidates for elected office, but who, for a variety of reasons, were not running in large numbers. This inquiry accesses the intermediate range of political participation between the informal and the formal. Prior work in Atlantic Canada and elsewhere has typically addressed one or the other category: that is, either studies of civic engagement in voluntary organizations (George, 2000; Neal, 1998), or interviews with women holding elected office (Arscott, 1997; Crossley, 1997; Desserud, 1997). The interviews with rural community leaders covered a broad range of topics including formal, informal and private dimensions of political participation, and the interactions among them.

This article focuses on one particular issue whose importance was unanticipated from the literature (including the above-cited works), but which kept coming up spontaneously and intensely in one discussion group after another: the dominance of regional economic development programmes in local affairs, and the associated consequences for the electoral ambitions of women in leadership positions. Many of the participants identified deterrents in the way these programmes were administered. The discussions on this topic shed new light on important aspects of public life in rural Atlantic Canada, and suggest the possibility of a more general political economy analysis of what distinguishes political representation in rural Canada from that in metropolitan centres.

**Method**

In fieldwork completed in September 2000, 14 focus groups involving 126 rural women leaders in the four Atlantic provinces were conducted. The meetings were arranged with the assistance of major government and non-
governmental organizations. The process is summarized below, roughly in chronological order. The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women employed its regional field workers to facilitate the selection of interviewees and the organization of focus groups in Lawrencetown, Amherst and Truro. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement for Women facilitated contact with the Shelburne County Women’s FishNet, an organization that operates a resource centre to disseminate information about labour-force retraining opportunities. A meeting was held with the Shelburne Business Women’s Association. Three focus groups were held with executive members of the Federated Women’s Institutes of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. The Women’s Community-based Economic Development (CED) Network arranged a focus group in Cape Breton. This network promotes women’s retraining, home-based business and integration into community decision making. The Newfoundland Advisory Council on the Status of Women directed attention to the Women and Resource Development Committee whose regional fieldworkers facilitated two focus groups, one in central Newfoundland and the other on the west coast. This Committee works in conjunction with the College of the North Atlantic to promote non-traditional vocational opportunities for women in the offshore oil and gas industry. One of these groups was also facilitated by the Conservative party of Newfoundland. An official with the Liberal party of Newfoundland arranged another focus group in the federal electoral district of Burin-St. George’s. A board member of the New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women facilitated a session in an English-speaking enclave on the Acadian Coast. To balance the Liberal party strength on the Acadian coast, an official with the Progressive Conservative party of Canada facilitated a focus group on the traditionally Tory and Loyalist Fundy Coast.

The meetings began with a brief discussion of the overall proportions of women elected in Canada and in the Atlantic provinces. Exercises on gendered images of partisanship and women’s candidacy were then used to break the ice for the discussions about local affairs. Open-ended questions led to intense discussions lasting 1.5-2 hours, typically dominated by the participants. Afterward, each participant completed a brief written questionnaire asking straightforward questions about their political experience, civic engagement, partisanship and basic socio-demographic information. The questionnaires allowed the women interviewed to be characterized in a number of relevant ways, and thus helped to put the group discussions into context. Considering that the participants were selected on the basis of their experience in, and knowledge of, local public affairs—a decidedly non-representative group within the community—such context is crucial for interpreting the results.

First and foremost, the participants reported a wide range of experience in electoral politics. Of 125 women who completed the written questionnaire, 73 had worked on an election campaign; and of that subgroup, 48 had done
canvassing, 42 had served as poll clerk, scrutineer or other election official, 38 had performed campaign administration and office work, including the job of campaign manager, 32 had donated money to an election campaign and 20 had been candidates themselves. Two of these candidates had been elected at the provincial level, of whom one had served in cabinet. Participants also reported extensive experience in serving on official government boards; 47 of 125 women had been appointed to such boards during the preceding two years, 20 to educational boards, 13 to cultural, historical or tourism boards, 12 to economic development boards and six to recreational boards.

The women interviewed were also exceptionally well educated. Fully 83 per cent had attended post-secondary institutions, including 38 per cent who held a post-secondary degree and a further 22 per cent who held a graduate or professional degree. Data from the 1996 Census (Statistics Canada) help to put these education levels into perspective. Figure 2 displays the proportion of working-age population listing “university” as the highest level of education in the federal electoral districts where research was conducted; ranging from a low in Burin-St. George’s (11.6%) to a high in New Brunswick SouthWest (18.2%). The figure also shows the proportion for the largest urban centre in the region, Halifax (47%); and the overall proportion for Canada (23%). While the Census figures are not directly comparable to the questionnaire in educational categories and age distribution, it is clear that the interviewees were highly educated relative to their local populations in particular and to Canada in general.

**Figure 2**

Proportion of Population (>15 years) Listing “University” as Highest Level of Education (in percentages)

![Figure 2](image-url)

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census
In keeping with their high levels of education, many participants had good jobs. The educational sector employed the largest number of women interviewed (28%), most often as teachers, but also as college instructors and administrators. While the majority of participants were employed in the public sector, a substantial number were employed in the private sector, and 11 of the 125 participants owned and operated their own small businesses. Of particular importance here is that nine interviewees were employed as economic development professionals; as will be shown later, these women proved to be particularly astute observers of the local political scene.

The focus-group format used is particularly suitable when dealing with sophisticated and engaged respondents speaking directly about their own circumstances (Fern, 2001; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Templeton, 1994). Utilizing this technique enabled valuable insights to emerge that were not anticipated by the investigator. The interviewees proved to be exceptionally articulate and enthusiastic about the topic. On the whole, they were familiar with the details of local political life, yet most did not occupy such high positions of responsibility that they felt obliged to be reticent or unduly discreet. Over 20 hours of testimony from the focus-group discussions constitutes a rich source of information about rural women’s leadership in Atlantic Canada. The quotes provided in subsequent sections of this article comprise only a small fraction of the data collected. They were selected for being relevant to the topic, representative of the discussion from which they were extracted and of other similar discussions in other groups, while at the same time being articulate, concise and self-contained. Great care was taken in their selection to impart a clear sense of the discussions while preserving their integrity.

Since the participants are potential and actual candidates themselves, their subjective understanding is directly relevant to what can be referred to as the “supply-side barrier” to women’s candidacies, that is, the personal reasons for deciding whether to run. Furthermore, while it is not feasible to determine independently how “objectively” accurate is their understanding of local political life, these women speak with considerable authority about the issues discussed. In addition, many participants are well qualified to identify distinct rural characteristics of their community based on their personal familiarity with, and experience in, urban centres such as Halifax, Moncton, Charlottetown or St. John’s. They had less personal experience of other parts of Canada, and therefore spoke with less confidence as to whether the characteristics were unique to Atlantic Canada or apply more generally.

The Job of Being a Rural Politician

As context for how rural women leaders articulate their own electoral ambitions, or lack thereof, it is important to understand how they perceive the job. At the most basic level, focus-group discussions made it clear that
the role of a rural politician is far more onerous than that of an urban counterpart. Consider the following discussion led off by an economic development officer:

The realities of [a politician’s job] are frightening—the silly phone calls at night, the constant phone calls. This is awful, but [counting on her fingers] I didn’t get this cheque, or this bill needs to be paid, or I want this pothole fixed, or a whole series of things—phone calls like that would disrupt my life plenty. And they are still not satisfied with anything in the end.

When I suggested that the constituency office must handle such minor queries, there was much laughter at my naïveté, and the economic development officer continued:

We feel that we own our politicians. That means own them 24 hours a day. Not me personally, but the public at large; that it gives them the right to call them at whatever time of day or night that they feel appropriate. It also gives them the right to approach you, at whatever time of day or night, in a different light at the grocery store. There is no differentiation between your personal and professional life.

In another focus group, a woman who had recently run unsuccessfully as a candidate in a provincial election voiced a similar understanding: “It would be nothing to pick up the telephone and call your municipal, provincial or federal representative in this province on your issue. You’re calling because the road wasn’t sanded properly; you haven’t had adequate number of weeks of work, all of those issues.” Astonishingly, this same participant went on to claim that the demands overflow beyond the elected member:

[John Doe] is the elected member in this area. I ran against [John] in the last provincial election and I get thirty-five, forty calls a week. And it doesn’t matter that I’m not the elected representative. [John Doe] is the elected representative. Because you ask people, “Why are you calling me?” “Well [they say] I know how it works, [your party’s] government is in, and I want this done.”

The group then reached a consensus that it is important for politicians to handle constituents’ concerns personally, as opposed to delegating them to staff in the constituency office.

Several straightforward distinctions help to understand why rural politicians might have more onerous obligations to their constituents than urban politicians. The work of representation is undeniably made more difficult by the fact that rural electoral districts are geographically larger than urban districts, and thus require much more long-distance travelling. It may also be more difficult as a result of disparities in “system-manipulation skills” between rural and urban voters. The greater proportion of urban voters with formal education means that a greater proportion of people can be counted on to have a sense of how government bureaucracies are organized; they are more likely to telephone the relevant government
office themselves than ask their elected member to phone on their behalf. Or in the case of a dispute, urban voters might be more likely to hire their own lawyer rather than depend on local politicians to defend them. A third major distinction is the relative role of the public sector in the local economy; this effect is explored in some detail in the sections that follow.

Some women cited the time factor as a barrier to women running for office, insofar as it conflicts with traditional gender roles and family responsibilities. For example, the defeated candidate referred to above explained:

I’m single so all I have is “me, myself and I.” If I had family responsibilities, I’m not sure I could take 40 calls a week in a job that is not mine. You know the job is [John’s]. My job is [another job] and then I have my volunteer work, so that makes it possible. A big issue in this riding is that women don’t have the time. But that’s life in rural [part of province]. The challenges are there but if you have a family plus a full time job, you know, it’s not an option that a lot of women would have the time to commit to.

Interestingly, this deterrent was usually attributed to other women in general (as above), but rarely directly to oneself. In fact, one woman who had served as an elected official spoke eloquently of a positive interaction between her husband’s recalcitrance and her political responsibilities. Because her husband refused to change his life in response to her election, she returned home to the constituency every weekend which, in the end, forced her to stay in touch with her constituents and thus carry out her original mandate to represent rural issues. “On Sunday morning, I would sit down with a cup of tea and a newspaper and, I would say, 75 per cent of these Sunday mornings, the phone was ringing or people were walking in; they’d catch me in my robe with a cup of tea. And your home is an open door.” She further explained that living in the district made her a better politician because she attended the weddings and the anniversaries, and thus moved in a different, more egalitarian, circle of people than she would otherwise have, either as a private person or as a member of the legislature living in the capital.

The obligations of a rural politician to constituents are undoubtedly onerous, but do they really present a major barrier to qualified women? It is important to keep in mind that all of the participants in this project are highly active and energetic in community affairs, whether or not their activities are directed toward elected office. These are women who, for the most part, have gone out of their way to seek additional responsibilities outside the home. It would be out of character for most of them to claim to be deterred from elected office by the mere existence of time intrusion and responsibilities. As an example, in response to the bathrobed politician above, another woman in the discussion group said that her life too was an “open book,” and her house was always open to everyone. Along these lines, several other groups seemed to feature a certain competitiveness
regarding willingness and ability to cope with time demands. Overall, the
time intrusion, per se, of a rural politician’s responsibilities did not emerge
as a dominant barrier to running for elected office among the majority of
the women interviewed. Delving further into the nature of representation
in these communities revealed that for many women the dominant deter-
rent lies more in the substantive nature of the responsibilities and the activ-
ities involved in carrying them out.

The Political Fray

One of the strongest common themes to emerge from the study was par-
ticipants’ moral disapproval of, and aversion to, political life as they
understood it in their local environment. The following comments feature
a tone and attitude that was shared in some regard by all of the focus-group
discussions.

Actually, I have been asked to run both provincially and municipally…. My
mom always said “Don’t become a politician as long as I’m living,” and a
more staunch [Conservative] party supporter than my mother, you’d never
find. She didn’t want me to lead that kind of life. As for getting people to
work on my campaign, if I had to do it I would do it. I’d get someone else
to go ask for money. I guess a lot of it, you feel, when you look at the peo-
ple we have running for [municipal and county positions]…

At this point, an economic development officer in the adjacent chair (who
was clearly a close friend) leaned over, touched her arm, and whispered
with self-conscious laughter: “Remember the camera.” The first speaker
then continued,

I don’t know if I would want to be in that group. I really don’t know because
I think I would get so frustrated. I really feel badly about what’s going on,
but I don’t know why they think they are the be-all-and-end-all, and I don’t
want to put myself in that position, to have to get in there and fight it. I have
better things to do. As [another woman] said, I feel I can do more in the
community by working with the organizations that I do. I feel that my work
in education and health is far more important than sitting behind that Coun-
cil desk, listening to others choose sides, wasting my tax dollars. I love these
parties they have—these wonderful planning sessions where they go to [a
nearby three-star hotel] on my tax dollar.

The economic development officer then pulled her turtleneck over her
mouth, displaying obvious discomfort, and interjected, with a sarcastic
tone, in defence of the planning retreats: “They bond” (there appeared to
me to be an unspoken understanding between the two that the latter had
attended the event in question.) To which her friend replied: “I don’t want
to put myself in that position of doing what I feel is not right. I’m very
comfortable staying at home and doing what I do. I do have family sup-
port. My husband says ‘Do what you want to do.’”
The tone of the cryptic allegations sounded rather sinister, but was there a valid reason for the economic development officer to squirm uncomfortably? The only substantive allegation in this exchange was that local officials attend a planning retreat. To most urban readers this activity must seem quite defensible, particularly considering that it was held at a three-star rural hotel in the same province (and not, say, a five-star hotel in the Caribbean). So why did the economic development officer not muster a better defence? Here it is useful to consider the socio-economic disparities in relatively impoverished rural ridings of Atlantic Canada. Elected members are typically well-educated professionals who often enter public life at some personal sacrifice. While their salaries are not competitive with salaries for equivalent positions in the private sector, they are supplemented by generous pensions; and while the overall financial package may not afford a luxurious lifestyle in major urban centres, it certainly affords an affluence that is rare in rural Atlantic Canada. In this environment, a weekend at a three-star hotel can appear to some constituents to be an unnecessary extravagance, rather than a minor perquisite to compensate for working on the weekend. A recent national opinion survey on political ethics featured some results that are relevant in this regard. It found that young people and older women preferentially thought that it was unethical for parliamentarians to accept the perquisites that typically accompany executive-level positions. In contrast, middle-aged employed men tended to see no ethical impropriety because, the authors inferred, they were familiar with, and felt themselves entitled to, such perquisites based on their own position (Mancuso et al., 1998: 112, 118).

Many other examples of disapproval emerged in the focus-group discussions, involving varying degrees of perceived impropriety, few of which involved egregious cases of political corruption.6 This could indicate either that such activities are rare, or that the subject is too sensitive to have been brought up. On two occasions, women who were very well connected politically took me aside afterwards, once the recorder was turned off, one to relate a case of cronyism at public expense, and the other an instance of corrupt election finances. In each case the allegations had been alluded to in the general discussion, but the informant had waited until after the meeting to substantiate the story, because the politician in question was closely related to another woman in the focus group. Investigating these allegations is beyond the scope of this project.

At another focus group, women made some rather preposterous allegations about electoral fraud based principally on the fact that the deputy returning officer counted the votes in the same house as (and was married to) the campaign manager for the winning candidate in a recent election. The discussion had a reckless and blustering tone that gave the impression of a vulnerable group bolstering itself against perceived bullying by local
elites. The women making the allegations may have also enjoyed shocking the visitor with exaggerations of how corrupt and oppressive their community was. They insisted that such things went on all the time. The discussion came back down to earth when a woman who had been an activist in the governing party a few years earlier said:

Speaker 1: I don’t know about that part, in terms of actually fixing the ballots. But in terms of influencing people to vote in a certain way, yes. When you use jobs as the bait, and you use other things, it’s just as bad.

Speaker 2: You might as well stuff the ballot boxes. And the bottom line is she’s not the only one who is sceptical. Maybe she’s the only one who has the balls to say it…

Speaker 3: Watch you don’t get shot on the way out of the door.

Soon after, the group resolved that electoral irregularities are bound to occur in rural polls simply because there are too few people involved (as scrutineers, poll clerks and returning officers) to avoid conflict-of-interest situations.

One substantive criticism, “using jobs as bait…is just as bad” as electoral fraud, refers to a practice that was brought up for criticism, in one form or another, by the participants in every single focus group, and more frequently than any other category of disapproved behaviour: political patronage. While this term is sometimes used in a broader sense, it is used here in the restricted sense common in the political science literature: “the giving of employment, grants, contracts and other government perquisites on the basis of partisan affiliation” (Stewart, 1994a: 92).

Numerous instances of such practises were cited, mostly in relation to positions on public-works projects such as painting buildings or cutting firewood—jobs for which nearly every able-bodied adult would be qualified. The discussions typically featured harsh moral criticism of nepotism, corruption and coercion in the electoral process. The following allegations come from a self-described “rabble-rouser on the left”:

[Suppose] for instance, there is a tourist information bureau and it is run by Joe Bob, so Joe Bob’s buddy, or his niece or his nephew, is going to get the job, so you might not even bother to apply…. Regardless of who is on Council, or who is in the political arena, I would have to say from what I have seen thus far, a lot of those jobs that come to the community go to families first who are on the council or related to the council or close to them.

When pressed further to be more specific, she said:

We are talking about [this part of the province], and politically speaking, these are the same people who had been there for years, going up on the same boards and they seemed to be the people reaping the most rewards from outside influences, because they are in office. They hold office and their families are the ones getting the benefits more so than the average Joe’s.
Although this woman had been very active in both partisan and nonpartisan organizations, she was relatively new to the community and not well established. In fact, at several points in the discussion, another participant who was professionally employed as an economic development officer corrected the “rabble-rouser” as to who had been hired from which pot of money, and who was an appointed official and who was professional staff. Significantly, though, the insider professional did not defend the politicians and other officials from accusations of nepotism and favouritism; in fact, she went on to substantiate the accusations herself in the following discussion sparked by an account of the last provincial election campaign.

An economic development officer: And there’s jobs to get too if you will have the right…

Speaker 1: And I know it works for sure, when it comes to political parties cause when I ran [labour-force development] projects, I got a call from every politician that was in there looking for a job for one of their constituents or a position for one of their constituents. And all I’d say was there is a[n official] route to go through. We’ll choose from whoever has their application in. If it is not in at my table by a certain time, it ain’t getting in.

An economic development officer: It goes right to a government member’s office. In my situation, the Development Association is supposed to be a catalyst and administers the money. My story to [a hypothetical person] when she calls looking for a job is, “We have the authority to put as many people on [a project] as we can. Whoever has less and as many weeks gets to go first.” But [John Doe] is behind me, saying “Hire this, this, and this person, and you can’t have the money unless this person comes attached to it,” because it’s patronage, political patronage.

Rabble rouser: If you don’t give this guy a job, because I’m [John Doe] and I’m in office right now, then you can kiss your funds for your Economic Development Association out the door. You can kiss it goodbye.

An economic development officer: That’s exactly how he would present it.

While a connection between participants’ disapproval and their reluctance to run for office was unanticipated, the mere fact that they disapprove is consistent with results of other studies. For example, the above-cited Mancuso et al. survey of Canadian public opinion on political ethics found that the entire country is nearly monolithically opposed to a range of perceived ethical violations. If anything, voters in the most stereotypically traditional regions of Quebec and the Atlantic provinces were less tolerant of patronage and minor ethical infractions than elsewhere. The authors concluded that the “more critical attitudes in those regions may be due to progressive zeal and a reaction to the deficiencies of the bad old days” (Mancuso et al., 1998: 195). Several other studies have also concluded that routine, large-scale patronage no longer occurs on the same scale that it once did in Atlantic Canada (Stewart, 1994a; Stewart 1994b; Stewart
2002: 182-83; Young, 1986). One focus-group participant whose personal background makes her opinion particularly credible confirmed this view in regard to lucrative professional contracts:

If you talk to people a generation above me, like my parents, they talk about the patronage, and will say, “Are you getting [party] contracts? Is the government giving you business?” Because they feel that I can go in and flash the ancient [party] card and cash goes into my hand and that is very much the way, and my parents, they are in their early sixties, and that is very much the way it worked. It does not work near to that degree now. There are still some contracts that are handed out on a patronage basis but with the public tendering act and the public services commission, there is such a strong reaction to the flamboyant abuse of it before.

Thus, while the women interviewed recognized a significant decline in patronage practices, particularly at the high end, they also made it clear that the issue remained a serious concern, and has had a real and negative impact on their attitudes toward electoral politics.

Ironically, while the remaining level of patronage deters some women, the backlash against the practice may itself deter others, especially business owners. One participant related that her family owned a heavy-equipment firm that was often hired to work on construction projects and roadwork. She felt that because her family was partisan, there was always suspicion that the firm got a public-sector contract as a result of patronage. She resented these suspicions because all governments now operated an open tendering system. In fact, she suspected that the government took these perceptions of corruption all too seriously. Her family members sometimes felt that they had to submit ridiculously low bids to get a contract, because the government wanted to avoid even the appearance of patronage by giving a fair contract to a family that was known to be active in the local riding association. The group went on to agree that people are suspicious that any kind of wealth or income is derived from patronage if a person or anyone in their family is involved in partisan politics. In this view, partisan people are, in effect, penalized for their participation because they must work twice as hard and bend over backwards to avoid the appearance of unfairness.

Another small-business owner actually claimed to have turned down the New Democratic party nomination in her riding for virtually the same reason:

Somebody asked me to run for that area, and I said no. Because even if you run for some kind of office, I noticed that people got bad-mouthed…. This fellow runs for office and he gets a new car and all of a sudden it’s because he’s…you know. Even though this guy works hard for a living and has his own career, but because he ran for office, he has this kind of funding coming in. Or there is a stigma involved as well to running for office. If you gain anything material, even if it’s gained by your own work ethic, it’s always in the back of somebody’s mind in a rural community that said “Oh, yeah, they got funding from the government for that, so they got to build a new house.
and put a new addition on because now they are on the town council.” Do you know what I’m saying? I’m not saying that it’s true. I’m just saying that is the perception.

These examples suggest a disturbing, albeit extreme, possibility. What would happen if local elites withdrew from partisanship and the institutions of electoral democracy?

Overall, the discussions with rural women leaders offered a glimpse into a public forum in flux, in which communities struggle to preserve their electoral system, while purging outdated practices that had always been part and parcel of that system. One net effect is that, at least for the time being, negative perceptions of the political fray are viewed by many qualified women as significant deterrents to running for elected office.

**Patrons and Clients**

At the same time as disapproving of the way in which public-sector resources are allocated, many of the women interviewed expressed an appreciation for the importance of these resources to the economic well-being and future prospects of their communities, and for the role of the elected officials in attracting and overseeing them. The following exchange is a good example of the interplay of these two frames of reference. It begins with a speaker, who is professionally and personally immersed in poverty and labour-force development issues, explaining why she does not want to pursue elected office or move closer to the electoral process:

Speaker 1: A lot of the political things that are of importance are not the soft issues or what they call soft issues, like the economics and stuff like that. So for us it’s not what really interests us.... I think it is very good that people get jobs and stuff like that, but I think the infrastructure has to be in place first, so I would want people to be fed, I would want people to be sheltered, I would want to have happy homes. Those would be the things I would want first in my community, and I know that that would come from economics and a good economic base, but I don’t think you can do one without the other. I think there has to be a balance, and I think when we get around the tables all we hear is “Oh, we got to create a job for this one, and a job for that one and that fellow over there who has got the ten businesses going, he needs twelve jobs,” and that’s why he is sitting at the table and 95 per cent of the people around the table are there for their own particular interests, because they have financial interests being met at the table.

An economic development officer: Wait till October. $200,000 will [fall] in my lap.

Speaker 2: That’s when the funds come in and there is a big clamour for money.

An economic development officer: We keep the list of who needs so many hours [of paid labour to qualify for Employment Insurance benefits], but
there’s still a bigger list on top of that; these people need to be hired because they helped run a campaign…

Speaker 2: So, political motivation is all it is, okay, so [economic development officer] and her Board might decide that this person in the community has a really viable project but [John Doe] might come in and say, “Listen, my cousin Bob, he wants to start a goat farm. So you better give him that $100,000.”

An economic development officer: It’s not that bad…. [Intervening discussion]…. Family is family,… but we have been beaten down [here] for the last four generations and the major source of income is social services, which is welfare, and besides that, there are a few jobs that [John’s] able to create every year which puts a few people on EI [Employment Insurance benefits]. Two per cent of the population is working steady.

In trying to reconcile these dual strands, it is useful to distinguish the role of a “patron”7 from the practise of patronage. The activities of a political patron responsible for dependent clients need not be corrupt, nor even partisan. In fact, carrying out this role can be construed as a moral responsibility. Politicians in many parts of rural Atlantic Canada are not only expected to secure collective wealth for the community by attracting investment; they are expected to attend to the subsistence of individual voters as well, such as ensuring that voters receive government support cheques on time, or enrolling voters in labour-force retraining programmes. This understanding of a politician’s role was evident in several focus groups. In the following example, there were chuckles of appreciation in response to this description of the previous member of the Legislative Assembly:

Speaker 1: [John Doe] and [his wife] probably did more career placement than Canada Employment.

Speaker 2: When you run a campaign in [this county], everybody in this room certainly knows, that even the provincial issues are not what people are voting on, not provincial leaders they’re generally voting on, and not [policy] agendas. They are voting on who is going to be at the other end of their telephone. Who is going to get them their 15 weeks work? Who is going to see that they get their six months at the government garage? That is the very, very basic issue.

At a different group, the women participating knew the local member personally (and his father and his grandfather before him); the text below cannot convey the warm good humour in their voices:

Speaker 1: The example I was thinking of, look at how many people end up at [John’s] office after the election to look for jobs.

Speaker 2: And [John Jr.] still doles out the jobs too.

Speaker 3: I don’t see why they bother with an employment office in [town] because they may as well just rely on [John’s] office.

Speaker 4: He sure does find a lot of jobs. A lot for young people.
The warmth of these comments was modified, however, when they proceeded to express disapproval for the specific ways in which the jobs in question were filled.

Speaker 5: But [John Jr.] can have the headaches. That guy’s phone never stops ringing. Like he is a very close friend of mine, but it would drive me nuts. He’s got no private life. I wouldn’t want the headaches. In relation to the employment thing, his comment is that people are at his office door, pounding every Monday or whatever. But I have also heard him say, “Come in. [Local manufacturer], for an example, is looking for 40 employees.” And there is probably 60, 80, 100 [people] every Monday sitting at his office looking for work, but none of them want that job. Because it doesn’t pay enough or whatever. It’s full time; they want term. “I’ve made 10 dollars an hour at the last job I was at, you don’t actually think that I would quit my EI to work for $6.50, with the idea that I could work full-time as opposed to 10 weeks here. I would have to be crazy cause I would make more money sitting at home on my EI half the year, so now I won’t take that job.” And it’s the same with [another local manufacturer].

Speaker 2: See, I think that’s where a woman would just say, “You don’t want it, that’s it.”

Speaker 5: They would have to be very, very assertive.

Speaker 6: But you have to be able to go to bed at night and be able to sleep.

Speaker 4: But if she had that attitude, she would never be voted in again.

Speaker 2: I would never be voted in again.

After building a consensus that they would not perpetuate the perceived practice of rounding out seasonal employment with Employment Insurance benefits, the discussion group proceeded to the following rationale for that position:

Speaker 7: The type of arguments that we have at home, now some of them would say, that the fact that [John Jr.] is being hounded by people on EI looking for more work is his father’s fault, because that was an idea that he had [that the way to keep] himself elected was to give people jobs.

Speaker 5: Just long enough to get their EI.

Speaker 7: That’s right. And that’s the conservative argument being made, because he didn’t benefit people, he kept them here, giving them work for 10 weeks. If he didn’t, a lot of our young people might have gone and furthered their education, what have you.

Speaker 2: That’s the kind of argument [in which] he takes that 52-week job and divides it up between five people, why not give one person a full-time job?

Speaker 8: And you’re not dealing with black and white in that situation. The ideal is to have five 52-week jobs with full benefits and four weeks vacation…. But, you know, it’s not going to happen.

Speaker 5: But it’s about keeping five votes as opposed to one.
Speaker 2: I’m not thinking of votes though, but long-term economics of the county.

Speaker 4: But if you’re a politician you have to think of the votes, like it or not it is always there.

Speaker 2: Just long enough to get the government pension that’s it.

In retrospect, the ease with which these women formulated this neoliberal critique, and the vociferousness with which they spoke suggests that this critique was commonly held and well tested in day-to-day discussions. It also demonstrates that their aversion to the political fray was closely associated with a considered rational concern about the net effect on the best interests of the overall community. These women concurred with those in other groups that they would not run (or, if they did, would not be elected) because they would not collude with a system which they saw as hypocritical, dishonest and manipulative by putting short-term partisan gain (votes) ahead of the community’s long-term economic prosperity.

In some ways, the responsibilities of being a “patron” in rural Atlantic Canada would seem to be compatible with what has been identified as women’s service orientation to politics (Kirkpatrick, 1974). Yet aspects of such a relationship with the community were cited by some focus-group participants as deterrents to participation. One woman spoke of being cast unwillingly as something of a patron in her job as economic development officer, and of feeling particularly overwhelmed by expectations on her at the time of the interview. Surrounded by sympathetic supporters, she explained that she saw her experience as an economic development officer as positioning her for a credible run at public office, but also as a potential threat to her electoral ambitions. She spoke of the particular difficulties that people face in her riding. “Let’s be honest, about 60 per cent of us are on welfare. I mean people are just hanging on.” As a result, people scrutinized the newspaper carefully to see if she [as economic development officer] had secured a particular application for Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) funding; and further scrutinized exactly whom she hired to work under which HRDC programme. The stakes were enormous: being hired for an HRDC programme meant several months of steady work, and several more of Employment Insurance benefits; whereas not being hired meant continuing to subsist on social assistance. She was building a record of solid expertise in economic development and a high profile in the area, but by the time she would be ready to run for office (a time-frame left undefined), she felt she would have made too many enemies, including those whom she had not hired over the years, and those who blamed her for grants that she had failed to secure. When public-sector expenditures are so important to people’s livelihoods, it is difficult to avoid disappointing their expectations.
Rurality and Regional Economic Development

From a wide variety of partisan perspectives and geographic locations, the rural women leaders interviewed for this Atlantic Canada study described specific characteristics of public life in their community that deterred them personally from seeking elected office. Despite the fact that the focus-group discussions were not structured in advance around patronage or patron-client relations, these topics were raised spontaneously for criticism in one focus group after another. This section outlines some of the structural features of rural Atlantic Canada that contribute to the deterrents identified here and considers future prospects for the election of more women.

Rurality is deeply embedded in the political fray as described by the participants in this project. In particular the dynamics of patron-client relations play out under the rubric of what may be described as the public-sector regional economic development industry, principally funded and administered through the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and Human Resources Development Canada at the federal level, and, to a lesser degree, by provincial departments of economic development. Regional development initiatives have increasingly focused on rural economies, which have lagged ever further behind their urban counterparts. As major urban centres attract concentrations of capitalist investment in tertiary service industries, urban populations are more likely to be employed in the formal labour force, with well-paying secure jobs in the private sector. The economies of rural Canada have historically been, and continue to be, based upon resource-extraction industries. While some of these industries continue to prosper and to represent a substantial share of Canada’s economy, technological innovation and declining commodity prices have resulted in sharply reduced employment levels, which, in turn, have contributed to the continuous historical process of urbanization and rural depopulation. Resource-extraction industries produce primarily for export to global markets whose business cycles can fluctuate unpredictably; thus profit and production fluctuate accordingly. They are also vulnerable to ecological crises, such as the collapse of the cod fishery in the early 1990s. As a result, the rural population is more likely to be employed in the secondary or informal labour force on temporary contracts, or to be self-employed in household-based enterprises, operating farms or wood lots. Donald Savoie predicts that “in future the split between the ‘haves’ and the ‘less developed’ regions will likely be more between urban and rural areas than between Atlantic Canada and Ontario. That is the nature of the new economy” (1997: 50).

So long as regional or rural/urban cleavages persist, governments will be called upon to facilitate and moderate the uneven and often painful transitions that become concentrated in one area or another. In addition to solid economic reasons for addressing such cleavages, Savoie asserts a pragmatic consideration: “Politicians will never buy fully into the neo-
conservative agenda. Politicians will wish to intervene and we all have a responsibility to assist them in defining the best possible measures” (Savoie, 1997: 59). It seems inevitable that economic development will continue to play a major role in rural economies and in rural public life for the foreseeable future.

Many of the most strongly articulated deterrents to electoral aspirations among the women interviewed concerned the interaction between politics and what has been described as the economic development industry. There was a broad consensus that they would not make moral concessions to perpetuate what they perceived as an unfair and dysfunctional system. Will the system evolve into a form that these women can feel more comfortable working within? There is ample evidence that rural Atlantic Canada has already come a long way in reducing discretion in the allocation of public funds. Much of the change occurred when the expenditure of public funds became formally institutionalized in government bureaucracies, especially for universal social programmes (Bickerton, 1994: 434; Simpson, 1988: 32). As shown earlier, the participants in the study recognized the progress but, nevertheless, felt that it had not gone far enough. In fact, their measured views in 2000 echoed that of James Bickerton in 1994, who, like Jeffrey Simpson six years earlier, found that essential elements of the traditional system persisted:

But in the context of continuing regional economic weakness and dependence, government spending and transfers of all sorts provided the material basis for the continuation of quasi-traditional political regimes, with bureaucratic clientelism and transfer dependency superseding (but not totally displacing) traditional forms of patronage politics. The role of elite networks and political “fixers” did not disappear, nor the importance of patron-client relations. (Bickerton, 1994: 434, 445)

The stark congruence of assessments from differing perspectives over the course of a dozen years suggests the possibility that progress may have approached a plateau. Indeed, David Siegel outlines obstacles to change that result directly from the fragile economic base supporting the structures of governance in sparsely populated areas:

Small towns are, well, small. Small-town politics and administration are more “hands-on” processes compared to other jurisdictions. The “hands-on” nature of decision-making means that small-town politicians are more likely to find themselves in situations where they are called upon to make decisions that transparently affect themselves, their families, or their friends (or enemies). This situation personalizes decisions in small towns. When a municipal council is making decisions, it is frequently very clear which individuals and groups will benefit from a decision.\(^{10}\) (1994: 218-19)

It is difficult to see how politics in a rural setting could ever become as formalized as in large cities. It seems likely that some women will always be deterred by a reluctance to incur accusations of conflict of interest, and
other women will avoid the moral ambiguities of administering public resources under such intimate circumstances. But there is, of course, a distribution of attitudes. Perhaps there is room to change enough to suit some qualified women. Would a more tightly regulated and transparent system with more distance between the decision-making process and the affected constituents offer more electoral opportunities for women?

It is possible that the degree of expansion and formalization that has occurred in economic development has had a modest impact in helping a few women to join local circles of power and influence. The discussion series included a number of women employed as economic development officers, who have acquired positions of some responsibility that were not available to women earlier. They consistently stood out in the discussion groups as sophisticated and knowledgeable “insiders.” As relatively privileged women, economic development professionals are not the designated clientele for initiatives to promote “women’s empowerment” as part of a policy shift to the development of a community’s “soft” human and social capital (Savoie, 2000), but they certainly seem to be empowered by the industry. Their detailed knowledge of local affairs typically exceeded that of party insiders at the table, including women who had run as candidates or who had been invited to run and declined. The sophistication of these economic development professionals can be related to their position straddling “the slushy intersection of politics and policy” (Sutherland, 2001: 10). As such, they are particularly well qualified to stand as candidates for public office. However, this study has found that, so far, even these most qualified women share much of the same disillusionment with public life as the other interviewees.

This discussion has considered whether the system could be made more amenable to rural women’s political candidacy and election. A more speculative and ambitious approach would be to ask what would happen if the numbers of women running for office and being elected were made to increase through organized purposeful action. Imagining for the moment that such an increase could be accomplished, would more women running and getting elected result in a more transparent system? On one hand, the women interviewed did not express much confidence in their personal ability to bring about such reform, were they to be elected. A tone of resignation was more common, consistent with their sophisticated understanding of the structural bases of the problems. On the other hand, systemic reform would not have to rely solely on personal zeal. For example, it would not seem unreasonable to expect, based on both theoretical considerations and these interviews, that a forced decrease in incumbency would have an impact on the administration of public resources by dispersing power more widely and disrupting established networks of obligations. But is it plausible to presume that an accelerated increase in women elected can be achieved by purposeful
action? It remains to be seen whether the major political parties in the Atlantic provinces will carry through with public statements, made in 2000-2002, of intentions to recruit more women candidates, and whether such efforts will include rural ridings. Even if so, and this is by no means assured, it is not clear that such efforts would succeed in rural areas. This article identifies a promising group of potential candidates, but, at the same time, identifies deeply embedded structural features that would make it an uphill battle at best.

The participants in this study, along with many other rural women leaders like them throughout Atlantic Canada, make significant contributions to public life through their roles in non-elected positions, which in some ways afford greater flexibility than elected office. Nevertheless, there is solid evidence in the literature (as cited in the Introduction) for the premise that the election of women does matter, and that the quality of democracy would be improved if more of these qualified women found their way to public office. The women interviewed here identified a spectrum of barriers and deterrents to candidacy and holding elected office, some of which they share in common with women in urban centres, and others that appear to be distinctly rural in nature. This article has focused on a range of concerns not found in earlier studies, particularly relating to the dominance of economic development programmes in local affairs. The results and analysis presented here go a long way to improving our understanding of why significantly fewer women are elected in rural areas than in urban centres. They suggest that theories of representation should take due account of the interface between partisanship and the allocation of public-sector resources, with particular attention paid to how these resources are integrated into the local community.

Notes

1 The publication of Volume 6 of the research studies of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (1991) edited by Kathy Megeyery was a landmark event in regard to barriers and strategies. Subsequent related work includes Burt, 1998; Erickson, 1998; Gidengil and Everitt, 2002; MacIvor, 1996: 261-67; Tremblay and Pelletier, 2001; Tremblay, 2002; and Young, 2000.

2 For example, Lisa Bourke and A. E. Luloff suggested that “it may well be easier for a woman to be voted into US Congress than be elected county commissioner of a non-metropolitan county” (1997).

3 In support for this logical extrapolation, Matland and Studlar cite higher rates of women’s election to the US state assemblies, where the assignment of electoral districts is based more closely on “one person/one vote” (1998).

4 Among the total of 126 focus-group participants, 125 women completed the written questionnaire. The exception was a mayor who left early to attend another meeting.

5 “John Doe” is used to refer to any elected official who appears in the transcript by his proper name.

6 The receipt of financial benefits by elected members over and above their official remuneration as a direct result of holding public office, is considered to be “corrupt,”
and can lead to charges under the Criminal Code of Canada. Politicians are generally expected to remove themselves from any situation that has the potential, or even the impression of a potential, for personal enrichment. Elected members are thus required to put their financial assets into a blind trust, which is administered by a neutral third party while holding office. In Canada, elected members are not required to put the assets of spouses and dependent children into a blind trust, nor to make family assets a matter of public record.

7 The origin of this word is from feudal relations between landlords and tenant farmers; patrons were custodians of inherited family estates who were responsible for the subsistence of their clients (the tenants). Some of this original meaning is incorporated in the contemporary use of the term “clientelism” to describe politicians in analogous environments as “patrons” (see Noel, 1976). “Patronage” comes from the same root, but it has acquired the more specialized connotation described earlier.

8 The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies makes just this point, claiming that labour shortages are unintended consequences of public policy (McMahon, 2000: 94-97).

9 The interviews ranged well beyond the issues discussed here. The participants described other significant barriers to candidacy consistent with those found in earlier urban-dominated studies, including various forms of gender-role constraints.

10 Siegel goes on to cite the example of a part-time mayor who partly owned one of three travel agencies in town to show how difficult it was to avoid conflict-of-interest situations. To prohibit the mayor’s travel agency from doing work for the municipality would be too big a sacrifice for his business, and the mayor would prefer to resign. Even were more strict regulations to be legislated in Canada, the basic problem would still remain that politicians can be tempted to make public-policy decisions based on their personal financial interests.

11 Similarly, Bourke and Luloff’s study of rural Pennsylvania community leaders found that “younger, college-educated women who were directors of local and county agencies, usually involving economic development, were recognized as leaders due to their position” (1997: 15).

References


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