

*Women candidates in the 2013 Nova Scotia election:
Is the NDP “contagion from the left” all sneezed out?*

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The current Nova Scotia election campaign marks a watershed event of sorts for women candidates. For the first time in several decades the NDP has to share top billing in the recruitment of women. In fact all three main parties – the New Democrats, the Liberals, and the Progressive Conservatives – are barely distinguishable in this regard. This development is notable because it goes against longstanding trends that extend far beyond Nova Scotia.

Generally speaking, in democratic regimes throughout the world, left-wing parties have nominated and elected more women candidates than have other parties. This distinction was first observed in Europe in the 1950s. Over the ensuing decades other parties on the right and centre were found to follow suit, just as they did with other leftist innovations. To describe this pattern, political scientists, beginning with Maurice Duverger, adopted the colourful term “contagion from the left.” It can be thought of as a tongue-in-cheek poke at the centre / right parties, who are caricatured as feeling compelled to adopt unwanted policies and practises (i.e. catch the leftist disease) in order to defend their vote share.

This same pattern has held in Nova Scotia until now, as the NDP has led the way to promoting women in politics. Like its NDP counterparts elsewhere in Canada, this party has provisions for gender parity and women’s-rights representatives in its extra-parliamentary wing. Although there are no hard rules to force gender parity in the nomination of candidates, in practise the Nova Scotia NDP has led the other parties in recruiting women. A recent study traced this unbroken streak back to 1981.

Alexa McDonough, who led the provincial NDP from 1980 to 1994, was especially effective at recruiting and mentoring women to stand as candidates. In 1988, women comprised nearly half (44%) of all NDP candidates – a record that stands to this day. One of McDonough’s notable achievements in this regard was to recruit Yvonne Atwell, who later became the first African Nova Scotian woman to be elected to the House of Assembly (1998).

To be sure, until recently not many of the NDP candidates – men or women – expected to be elected. Nevertheless the NDP can be seen to have pulled along the other parties over time. The rise of women candidates has brought more women to Nova Scotia’s House of Assembly. In comparison with other Canadian provinces, we have moved from near the bottom of the pack ten years ago to the middle of the pack in the last session (24% women at dissolution).

Much of the credit for this rise goes to the NDP. When the New Democrats faced the real prospect of forming the government in the 2009 election, they might understandably have shifted women’s candidacy to the back burner. They did not. Their candidate slate in that election included 17 women, or 33%. Of those 17, nine were elected to the governing NDP caucus. In that context, the current tally of twelve women on the NDP slate of 51 candidates seems a bit underwhelming.

If the NDP slips, does that mean that the province falls too? No, it doesn’t, thanks to “contagion from the left.”

It’s not just an NDP story any more. The Liberals and Progressive Conservatives have caught the bug, as both parties have nominated “personal-best” numbers of women for the current campaign. In fact the

Liberals have caught up to the NDP by nominating a matching number of twelve women candidates. Moreover another twelve Liberal women contested but lost their nomination races. The Progressive Conservatives are not far behind, with eleven women candidates.

As a result, the number of women elected on October 8 is not expected to depend much on which party wins the most seats. On a more discouraging note, there are still too few women running as candidates overall. Based on the candidate numbers, we can expect to see about the same number of women elected on October 8 as were sitting in the last session, regardless of who forms the government. Prospects for progress depend on parties to nominate women candidates in proportions *above* – not equal to – the level sitting in the House.

Now that the contagion from the left for nominating women has sneezed itself out for the time being, the path for the future is wide open. If history were to repeat itself, the NDP might be expected to catch a renewed fever and nominate far more women in future elections, and then pass the bug on to the other parties. A more disappointing possibility would be for all three parties to rest on their laurels. Having achieved a modicum of respectability, it might be tempting to be satisfied with holding women's recruitment steady, and not being outdone by the other parties.

There is also an intriguing third possibility. Perhaps the goal of moving toward gender parity in politics is beginning to go mainstream. If so, recruiting more women candidates would no longer be a contagious disease – an unwanted practise that must be mimicked – but rather a core element of every party's identity. Now, that would be progress.

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