Women in the Parliament of Canada

Women in the House of Commons

Four women ran in the 1921 federal election, but only Agnes Campbell Macphail was elected, becoming the first woman to sit in the House of Commons. She would remain the sole female member of Parliament (MP) for 14 years until Martha Louise Black was elected in the 1935 federal general election. Since the first federal general election in 1867, 352 women have been elected to the House of Commons, accounting for 7.8% of all MPs.

According to data received from Elections Canada, in the 43rd federal general election held in October 2019, 736 of the 2,146 candidates were women – a record both in terms of the number of female candidates and the proportion of women among all candidates (see Figure 1).

This election also marked the first time that data was compiled on candidates' gender identities other than “man” or “woman.” According to Elections Canada, five candidates identified as another gender identity, and 19 candidates did not specify their gender identity.
According to preliminary data on the 43rd federal general election, approximately 30% of ridings had no or only one female candidate. In comparison, approximately 3% of ridings had no or only one male candidate. On election day, women won 98 of the 338 seats (29%) in the House of Commons, a record proportion (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, the election of four more women would have been necessary to meet the target of 30% to 35% set by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women to ensure a “critical mass” of women in the House of Commons.
Similarly, other population groups are also under-represented in the House of Commons. For example, 3.1% of MPs in the 42nd Parliament were Indigenous, yet Indigenous peoples represent more than 5% of Canada’s population. Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender have also historically been under-represented in electoral politics in Canada.

Women in the Senate of Canada

As a result of a legal challenge known as the Persons Case launched in 1927 by the Famous Five (Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy and Irene Parlby), women were recognized as “persons” under the British North America Act, 1867 and gained the right to sit in the Senate of Canada. In 1930, the Honourable Cairine Reay Wilson became the first woman appointed to the Senate.

Since the 1980s, women’s representation in the Senate of Canada has been higher than in the House of Commons. As of 14 January 2020, women hold 48 of the 100 occupied seats (48%) in the Red Chamber.

Why are women under-represented in Electoral Politics?

Many factors can explain women’s under-representation in electoral politics, for example:

- Interest in running as a candidate: According to research [in French only], girls are socialized differently from boys, which could explain why women, because of gender stereotypes, can have difficulty seeing themselves as potential candidates.
Nomination processes: The uncertainty of nomination contests (launch, duration, etc.) and the fact that their rules are often complex and not easily accessible to people who are not already involved in politics may partly explain why women are under-represented in nomination races [p. 18].

Violence against women in politics: Female politicians can be the targets of psychological and physical violence because of their sex or gender identity. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, this situation may discourage women from entering politics, prevent them from taking leadership roles in legislatures, hinder their ability to perform their duties and cause them to withdraw from political life.

In 2016, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women published a report presenting its concluding observations on the latest periodic reports of Canada and recommended that the Canadian government step up efforts to increase women’s representation in various decision-making bodies.

**What initiatives were undertaken during the 42nd Parliament to help improve women’s representation in the Parliament of Canada?**

Several initiatives were undertaken during the 42nd Parliament with the goal of increasing women’s representation in the Parliament of Canada. In April 2019, for example, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women tabled a report in which it made 14 recommendations to the Government of Canada to help improve women’s representation at all levels of electoral politics in Canada.

Various measures have been introduced in recent years to make the Parliament of Canada more gender-sensitive and family-friendly, including:

- the availability of full-time and short-term child care services for families;
- the adaptation of facilities to help parliamentarians with children, such as reserved parking spots and washrooms with changing tables;
- the adoption of the House of Commons Members’ Sessional Allowance Regulations (maternity and parental arrangements); and
- the development or revision of sexual harassment policies by the Senate and the House of Commons.

**Additional resources**


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