Women Viewed Within Three Western Party Systems: An Analysis of a Political Minority Group

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Efforts to study women and politics inevitably are confronted with at least three types of conceptual and analytical difficulties. First is the problem of isolating classification by sex as having sufficient political saliency to warrant attention as a single analytical category. For many the assertion is that at least for certain purposes the political experiences of women have sufficient features in common, both within a given political system and cross-nationally to warrant other distinctions which run across the same populations such as social class, age, race, religion, ethnicity, and organizational structure being considered at least on a secondary level or even as dependent variables. The basic question to be asked here is simply whether relations in society originating from sex-based classification schemes can be couched in political terms. As political scientist Jeane Kirkpatrick describes it: "Questions about women's share of power and their political behavior assume that sexual differences are in some sense relevant to politics." In short, does politics transcend sex or does sex transcend politics? Or neither? Or both? If, as one might suspect, it is both, at what levels of interaction does the political impact become most salient?

Second, such studies must consider precisely at what level of political activity such analysis is to be employed. This is no simple matter or choice. Are political populations divided according to sex in democratic systems merely additional fodder for discussion and analysis of political pluralism? Certainly, in classic democratic theory the vote could give women the avenue to become the dominant force in democratic politics. What then accounts for any significant levels of inequality between male and female populations even when other factors such as class, education, age, etc. are held constant? Obviously, there are serious problems with sex deterministic models of politics and not the least of which is defining that which is political. Consequently, a search for viable explanatory models of this nature suggests that such attention needs to be given methodological as well as substantive scrutiny.

Finally, but certainly not least, is the simple but serious problem of the availability of data according to sex in political populations. Historically, efforts to assemble sex-based political data appear to have been plagued by indifference and skepticism towards its utility as well as the legacy of conventional channels of participation being limited to males only. Notwithstanding a few noteworthy exceptions, only very recently has the collection of systematic information relating to the political roles of women been of more than passing interest.
For purposes of this paper, women will be examined as a political minority group viewed cross-nationally. Without pursuing the separate topic of "what constitutes a minority?", perhaps it is sufficient to start with the definition that a minority is any group which, as a result of being classified by its physical and/or cultural characteristics, is not permitted the advantages and opportunities afforded the dominant groups of that same society. While such a definition is not intended to be all-inclusive, surely under this definition women qualify as a minority political group.

Using such a definition, one might anticipate that an analysis of political parties would reveal that if women are indeed a minority group, their levels of participation would be considerably less in scope and influence than those of their male counterparts. Furthermore, if such gaps can be identified, perhaps future policy and programmatic decisions by party elites might be influenced to broaden the base of recruitment and support for future party alignments. One recent study goes so far as to conclude that current restrictions on the political participation of women arising out of sexual role assignments make democracy unworkable. Certainly for political party specialists who have often argued that parties are crucial to modern democratic politics, this issue posits considerable concern. Kirsten Amundsen has even suggested in her appropriately titled work, The Silenced Majority, that no democratic society can avoid the undemocratic consequences of continued exclusion for substantial portions of its population.

The assertion here is that not only are parties essential to democratic politics, but that if they are to fulfill the role of fostering consensus, parties must view most, if not all, social groups as at least potential supporters. Consequently, appeals are directed to and promises are made to such groups to satisfy the specific needs of different elements of the population. Because party politics are essentially consensual in this sense, inconsistent and infrequent responses to any sizeable portion of a system's population may risk severe ostracism for the party by that social group.

This paper will attempt to assess the expressed concern for women as a political group demonstrated by major political parties in three relatively similar Western nations: Canada, Great Britain, and the United States. Specifically, the effort will be to complete a content analysis of party platforms for the three party systems since 1900. Included here will be a compilation of the times in which women per se or women's issues are mentioned in published party platforms.

The selection of the British, American and Canadian party systems provides a comparative perspective in which the differences which might be culturally based are minimized. The dominant Anglo-Saxon populations and ancestry provide a similar base from which gender roles couched in specific religious or cultural values endemic or peculiar to such systems would not appear to be singularly important. The assumption made here
suggests that in similar cultures one would expect to find similar gender roles. Admitting that any such reduction of political cultural differences is fraught with obvious oversimplification, the hope is that by minimizing the cultural, historical, and legal factors distinctive in each of these three systems, the question of what extent women per se were systematically excluded from normal channels of participation within party systems can be confronted. In short, cross-culture studies will help to separate those factors which are incidental to sex-based classifications from those which are indeed more directly related. Certainly, some legal and structural differences should be noted. Two of the systems are parliamentary, one is presidential. Two are federal, one unitary. The federal category may provide some comparative conceptual problems in that the national party systems are essentially loose federations of parties organized at the state and province levels. With some important deviations all three party systems have two major parties and all share single-member, simple plurality election systems in national legislative elections. And finally, there is the common legacy of Western political democracy.

Since one of the traditional functions alleged to be performed by modern political parties in democratic states is that of providing a vital link between the people and the representative machinery of government, one would expect that a competitive party system would produce considerable effort by parties to gain the allegiance of new groups gaining the right to vote. Given the substantial numbers of potential new voters produced by the success of women’s suffrage, one would think that extensive efforts by dominant parties to gain and maintain the support of women would be an obvious strategy for their own self interests. Potentially, no other single group of newly enfranchised voters provided parties with more opportunity to recruit new supporters than the successful women’s suffrage movement. The chance to maximize party support among any group whose members had heretofore not participated in electoral politics were, of course, not limited to women. Newly-arrived immigrant groups, new generations of young voters, and others eligible because of franchise restrictions being abandoned provided similar opportunities for parties to augment their levels of popular support. No group, however, provided the theoretical potential of the newly enfranchised female population.

II

Previous efforts to study American party platforms have produced several descriptive case studies and some evaluative analysis. Such attempts generally have focused on the importance of the platform as a catalyst in bringing together disputing factions and as a mechanism which provides some recognition of interest groups by the party. There is no scholarly consensus as to how much significance should be given to party commitments made in the platform and their importance to the party and the electorate. While party platforms are frequently criticized as being excessively vague
and ambiguous, a case can certainly be made that such imprecision is a product of the rather extraordinary diversity of competitive party systems. Moreover, as Gerald Pomper has concluded from his extensive study of the content of party platforms, such general promises can be important. Not only were many of the statements specific in nature, they reflected considerable differences between the American major parties. Pomper also concluded that a very high percentage of party pledges have in fact been adopted. This would suggest that party elites at conventions do take such measures quite serious.

Several precautions are in order before making cross-national comparisons regarding stated party platforms as an index of political parties and their respective commitment to women or women's issues. The task undertaken for this study was to simply compile a systematic list of those instances in which party platform planks were devoted to women or women's issues. To operationalize the concept of "women's issues" for this study was no easy task. However, the content analysis of party platforms was undertaken defining a women's issue to be: (1) any complete statement which mentioned women as a separate political classification; (2) any portion of a complete statement which addressed itself to an issue designated either directly or by implication as a political issue designed to appeal to women as a group; or (3) an issue which designated women as such to be the object of its appeal.

Pomper also reminds us that "admittedly, content analysis can disregard important qualitative differences between units which are otherwise given equal quantitative weight." No effect is made to access the qualitative differences in the various party planks as they raised issues pertinent to women. Certainly, some differences were substantial. A commitment by an American party to support ERA would appear to constitute considerably more sensitivity to women in politics than a minor reference in a British party platform to increase funding for the widows pension fund. Nevertheless, they would each be counted as one, and only one, instance of party commitment. Differences between parties in the same systems may also exhibit more or less importance than differences among parties viewed cross-nationally. The issues themselves are different at different times. To count the number of stated positions in a given election year for a given party is not necessarily to count those same issues for each party—even in the same election year. Some differences in party platforms may also reflect individual electoral system differences. No effort is made to allow for issues which might be paramount in a parliamentary election because of dissolution in contrast to the kinds of issues drawn up in the course to party conventions in a presidential system. Finally, one might ask "What is a women's issue?" Or perhaps "What is not a women's issue?" Are party platform commitments to better housing, tax reform, and peace any less women's issues than increased attention to maternal medical care? Furthermore, some issues dealing with women may, in fact, be considered
by many to have been anti-woman. Protective legislation is perhaps a good example. While issues like the right to vote and equal pay for equal work tended to generate little opposition, not every "women's issue" can necessarily be assumed to have had consensus support for women themselves.

A recently study of selected platforms from the dominant American parties does suggest a need to be concerned with the changes in the use of language over time. The study concludes that contemporary platforms are probably better indicators of today's "aggregate value preferences" than those of earlier years. By contrasting the platforms over time, the authors conclude that changes in language, values, and preferences are quite likely. Specifically, they found that recent platforms show increased concern with problems and values of the economy, technology, health and education, the problems of international order. A diminishing concern with status differences and party debates couched in programmatic terms (as opposed to arguments over basic notions of political society) were also found to be significant in contemporary platforms.

In short, despite such difficulties and methodological problems, the effort in graphs #1-3 is to provide a reasonable estimate of patterns of party support and commitment to women and directly related issues. Consequently, it does give one a guide to a level and direction of party support for women as a distinct political entity since suffrage. Acknowledging the above limitations, one probably should not read undeserved significance into differences in the actual number of platform planks. While certain individual election years did produce some instances where single statements were qualitatively important in regard to women's issues, most such differences were minimal.

—United States—

Historically, the patience, and perhaps the perseverance, of women's suffrage leaders in the U.S. was nowhere more strongly evidenced than in their continued appeals to American national political conventions to recognize woman's right to the franchise in their party platforms. Such efforts date from 1868 and were only infrequently successful among the major parties. Except for several minor parties, most of the response was sheer indifference. For at least two of the minor parties, it was never necessary to appeal. Both the Prohibition and Socialist parties had planks advocating women's suffrage from the beginning of their existence as active albeit minor parties. For the major parties, however, the pattern is one of stark contrast. A committee of women had attended every national convention of the two major parties since 1868 seeking endorsement of at least the idea of female suffrage. Scant references were made in Republican convention resolutions in 1872 and 1876. No further mention of women's rights occurs until 1896. Ironically, despite several references in party platforms, to "every citizen . . . shall be allowed to cast one free and unrestricted ballot . . .;
as will secure to every citizen, be he rich or poor, native or foreign, white or black, . . .”, little effort was made by party speakers to apply such declarations to women. No Democratic national platform even used the term until 1916. Even the Populists whose beginnings included the slogan, “Equal rights to all, special privileges to none, “excluded any mention of women in their first platform, except for a brief reference in the platform’s preamble.

Before the Democratic and Republican conventions of 1904, letters were sent to all 2,269 convention delegates urging the insertion in the platforms of a resolution supporting suffrage. In both instances, the results were nil. In 1912 the Progressive Party took up the suffrage cause and joined the Socialist and Prohibition parties by including it in their platform. By 1916 the two major parties also had platform planks supporting adult female suffrage. By 1920 both major parties had multiple planks including not only support for suffrage, but also improved industrial working conditions and equal pay provisions.

In the period following the granting of full suffrage to women age 21 and over, the immediate response of the two U.S. major parties to women as a distinct faction referred to in party platforms was one of almost complete neglect. No mention at all of women as a separate group was included in the 1924 Republican platform. The two statements included in the Democratic platform refer to women as welcome participants in government and offers the party’s congratulations for their zeal, progress, and “the exaction of fidelity in public service.” The 1928 platforms for both parties included several references to specific issues as they relate to women. These include equal wage for equal service provisions and a call for fuller participation by women in party management and activity. By 1932, however, no mention is made by either party of issues couched in such terms.

By 1940 and 1944 support for a constitutional amendment providing for equal rights was included in the platforms of both parties. Support for general position of equal rights was gradually broadened during the ensuing two decades to include several specific proposals in Democratic platforms. Among the proposals were planks supporting day care facilities and the lowering of possible retirement age for women. Also, during this period, the stated platform of the 1948 Progressive party included five rather strong statements concerning various women’s issues. Curiously, no platform for either of the major parties in the 1960 campaign included any mention of sex in their civil rights sections despite otherwise extensive detail covering 1–2 full pages in just this section alone. Similarly, only minor references are made to women in the 1968 platforms. Essentially, these were to include sex categories in those areas in which general concern for discrimination was expressed.

Quite obviously, the 1972 Republican and Democratic platforms represent by far the most detailed and substantial support for women as a political group ever articulated by American political parties. In contrast,
the platform of one minor party, the American party, included planks not only opposing passage of the then proposed Equal Rights Amendment, but described the goal of “equal rights” as an “insidious socialistic plan to destroy the home, make women slaves of the government, and their children wards of the state.” Such statements to the contrary, the claims made in popular rhetoric that 1972 was the “year of the women” and that the advocacy of equality for women became a political plus for many candidates are buttressed by the content of party platforms.

Although the 1976 platforms indicate a return to a quantitative level of support for women’s issues higher than that of the mid 1960’s, they reflect a considerable decline from the peak of 1972. Substantively however, it would appear that the platform summaries of both the Republican and Democratic parties for 1976 represent as much a consolidation of previous issue stands as they do any decline in their importance.

—Great Britain—

The British experience in granting the franchise to women was, by most standards, a more bitter and antagonistic experience than the American. Despite its bitter and even violent overtones, it is regarded by most observers as the leftover business of earlier nineteenth century franchise expansions. The Representation of the People Act (called by some the “flapper vote”) lowered the voting age for women to 21. By 1969, this was reduced for both sexes to age 18.

Despite persistent efforts by leaders of the suffrage movement to organize meetings, marches, and submit petitions, no political party would commit itself to suffrage in the nineteenth century. Many of the more vocal suffragists had turned initially to the Liberal party in hopes of gaining some support and subsequently to the newly formed Labour party. As portrayed by graph II, inclusion of a plank regarding women’s suffrage first occurred in 1900 with the beginnings of the Labour party. Neither the Conservative nor the Liberal party took such a position until 1918. Direct appeal to women as a political faction and support for specific issues as they relate to women continued to occur largely in the Labour party until 1924. With final enactment of the 1928 bill, still only minimal attention to women’s issues was paid by the Conservatives in 1929. Their planks consisted largely of increased support for care and benefits for expectant mothers. It was not until 1945 that both the Conservatives and Liberals return to anything resembling the level of support for women previously taken in 1924.

Except for the Liberal platforms, of 1945 and 1951, the post World War II period is characterized by only minimal, if not marginal, support for specific women’s issues. Not until 1970 and 1974 do both the Conservative and Labour platforms include more than brief references to widow’s benefits, consumer protection for housewives, and equal pay provisions. As was true in the U.S., the platforms of the 1970’s reflect an exponential increase in the amount of attention and space devoted to women as a distinct
social group. The Librals, however, remain a curious deviant to this pattern. After including an entire section on women for the February 1974 election campaign and adopting a resolution stating that differences growing out of gender roles were not innate, the Liberal party did not put forth a single statement regarding women or women’s issues in the platform for the October, 1974 election.

—Canada—

The women’s suffrage movement in Canada has a somewhat shorter and less abrasive, although parallel, history compared to the equivalent movements in Great Britain and the United States. Although there is some evidence that Canadian women participated as delegates in the women’s rights conventions in the U.S. in the 1850’s, the first formal Canadian organization for women did not exist until 1876 under the guise of the Toronto Women’s Literary Club. Despite some earlier activity by Canadian women in the temperance movement during the nineteenth century, it was not until 1910 that limited suffrage victories were won in the municipal franchise and in certain school board elections.

Furthermore, despite the fact that full suffrage without regard to sex in Canadian national elections occurred in 1920, the legacy of male-only suffrage lingered on at the provincial level until 1940. All five Western provinces had extended suffrage at the provincial level during 1916-17. The first breakthrough at the federal level occurred in 1917 as female participants (and certain close relatives) gained the federal franchise in September, 1917. The 1918 Women’s Franchise Act extended the federal vote to women 21 years of age and over who possessed the same qualifications required for male voters in their province. By 1920, the Dominion Elections Act separated federal voting from provincial requirements by establishing a separate federal voting list. Quebec, however, did not grant women the right to vote in provincial elections until 1940. New Brunswick granted women the right to cast ballots in provincial elections in 1919, but withheld eligibility for public office from women until 1934. Women in Newfoundland saw their right to vote granted to those 25 years and older in 1924, taken away from all women beginning in 1934 and granted to all at age 21 in 1948. In a number of instances, the debate at the dominion level over women’s suffrage centered around provincial versus federal franchise control.

Although support as early as 1911 was shown by their party platforms (see graph III), the 1917 campaigns were the first instances in which Canadian parties take notice of the suffrage issue. Both the Union-Conservative coalition and the Liberal party included planks of support for granting women the right to vote in 1917. By 1921, the coalition of Conservatives and some old Liberals not only took notice of women voting in federal elections for the first time, but their platform concludes with a direct appeal to Canadian women as future constituents. The Liberal platform had, by 1921, been broadened to include provisions concerning equal pay for equal work and
increased support for widow's and maternity benefits. 1921 also saw a third party, the Progressive, call for the opening of seats in Parliament to women on the same basis as men. Since this party gained 64 seats in the 1921 election, they constituted no small scale appeal to Canadian voters.

Beginning with 1925 and running through the 1940 campaign, no major Canadian party included a single platform plank with a direct appeal to women. Two exceptions from platforms of minor parties provide some insight into the kinds of issues which might have been raised in campaigns. The 1926 and 1930 platforms for United Farmers of Alberta called for increased research for maternity medical benefits and revision of statutes governing divorce and legal domicile. Similarly, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federal (a labor-farmer alliance) made a direct appeal to women for support in 1940 and urged adoption of a labor code which included provisions of equal opportunity irrespective of sex. The CCF’s 1945 platform also included planks calling for increased pensions for widowed mothers and increased support for maternity benefits.

The 1945 platform of the Progressive-Conservatives included a section on women’s issues for the first time in 24 years. Rather general support was given to women in public agencies in addition to a provision endorsing equal pay for equal work. With the exception of 1957 when a plank urging elimination of discriminatory regulations affecting married women was adopted, no further mention of women or related issues in the platforms of the Progressive-Conservative party from 1959 through 1968.

During the 1972 campaign, the leader of the PC, Robert Stansfield, did call for greater representation of women in Canadian public policy making. However, such comments were generally reserved for those occasions when specific support was also being sought for the election or reelection of a particular female Canadian MP. By the election of 1974 the political attractiveness of the women’s movement had found its way into official PC literature. A position paper listing some twenty separate areas in which the party expressed its concern was distributed in May 1974, two months before the most recent federal election.

The record of the opposing Liberal party is almost one of mirror image. No provisions were included in any platforms for the periods 1925–45, 1953–58, and 1965–68. The three exceptions are all single issue years insofar as the party’s platform reflected women’s issues. The year 1949 includes a general statement equating the functioning of a democratic state with equality of women. In contrast, since the early 1970’s, Liberal party publications are replete with substantial discussion of women’s issues and the need for increased female participation in Canadian electoral politics.19

III

In summary, any effort to generalize about women and political parties based solely on an analysis of party platforms might render such conclu-
sions vulnerable to deserved criticism. Nevertheless, some patterns do seem worthy of note. On a few occasions women as a separate political entity have been capable of extracting specific demands from political parties. Such instances generally have been limited to the immediate post-suffrage period, during and immediately following World War II, and the 1970’s. It is clear that this final period accounts for most of the attention paid by parties to women as a distinct political group. Whether differences among the three systems suggest something more than the fact that Canadian parties have generally ignored women while the British and American parties barely mention them requires more careful analysis of precisely what party platforms do and do not reflect within the individual party systems.

To be sure, further study is warranted before making comparative judgement as to how other political minorities have fared compared to women. However, as indicated by party platforms women and women’s issues certainly deserve the label of minority status viewed over time. Sufficient evidence is available to document the evolution of women as a political minority whose attention by major parties in three Western systems has been both scant and inconsistent until the 1970’s. Judging from this pattern of inattention by parties, certainly it can be concluded that classification by sex has had, and continues to have political meaning.

No doubt more rigorous comparative analysis, of both intra-party systems and cross-nationally, is the next logical step. It may well be that we have paid so little attention to women as political actors and that we really do not yet comprehend what questions we need to ask—let alone the answers. The assertion here has been that it is important to preface comparative analysis with the “stuff” of descriptive analysis. In short, as a precondition of synthesis, we need to know considerable detail about national circumstances. Given the recent proliferation in the amount of attention to politics based on classifications by sex, further attention seems inevitable as well as necessary.
GRAPH # 2
BRITISH ELECTIONS, 1900–1974

NOTES


5Although the actual numbers indicate that fewer voters were enfranchised by the 19th Amendment than the 26th which lowered the voting age to 18, as a percentage of existing voters, however, no group could provide the potential of women as a new voting group.


7Ibid., p. 324.


9Ibid., p. 60.

10Ibid., pp. 58–60.


12It is perhaps worth noting that women could vote at the subfederal level as early as 1 7 7 6 .

The 1800’s provide several examples of limited female suffrage in school board elections (Kentucky—1836—to widows with children and property) and certain municipal and tax bond elections. By 1910 over half the presidential electors were chosen in states where women participated in some direct fashion in the voting process. The pattern of granting full suffrage began largely in the Western, less populous states. In at least two instances (New Jersey and Utah) women were granted (at least it was not denied them) the right to vote at the state or territorial level only to see it subsequently withdrawn by federal law. The volume of historical literature on American suffrage is enormous, however, a good summary of this literature is Joanna Schneider Zangrando, “Women Studies in the United States: Approaching Reality,” *American Studies International*, XIV, No. 1 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 15–36.


17Although there was apparently some voting by certain Canadian women in early 1800’s. This was brought to my attention by the Chief Electoral Officer, Ottawa, *Contract*, No. 20 (February 1, 1977), pp. 4–6. New Brunswick allowed some women to vote as early as 1873; Henrietta Muir Edwards, “The Political Position of Canadian Women” in *Women of Canada* (1975), p. 52.

18*Contract*, p. 8.