

# **INFORMATION SHEETS: 2**

## **EFFECTS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS ON WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION**

***For the National Association of Women and the Law***

***For the National Roundtable on Women and Politics 2003***

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**Convener: The National Association of Women and the Law**

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**All Party Women's Association**

**Status of Women Canada**

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# THE CHALLENGE FOR FEMINIST WOMEN ELECTED TO OFFICE

## Do Women Parliamentarians have a 'Mandate of Equality'?

Not all of the women elected to Canada's Parliament are able or committed to advancing a women's equality agenda. Many women Members of Parliament possess conservative ideological viewpoints. Further, MPs have an over-riding obligation to represent the constituents in their ridings. For feminist women, representation in official politics has additional dimensions, including:

- Working with other Parliamentarians so that women have meaningful input into the decision-making process.
- Ensuring that the diverse and collective needs, interests and values of women are taken into account.

## Can Elected Feminists Act in the Interests of Women?

### Parliamentary Constraints

Canada's Westminster style of responsible government has presented many challenges to equality-seeking, elected women. The **high level of party discipline** expected from Members of Parliament, coupled with the **realities of regional representation** in such a large federation, has made it very difficult for equality seeking women to assert a feminist agenda.

### Cross-Party Collaboration ~ All Party Women's Associations

In a few instances, equality-seeking women in Canada have successfully collaborated cross-party. In 1989, a parliamentary sub-committee on the status of women was formed to study violence against women. Defying parliamentary conventions, women from every party collaborated and wrote a unanimous report. From 1990-1993, a women's all-party Parliamentary caucus met to address logistical issues such as day care and access to washrooms. In the year 2001, this Association was revived.

## Women's Caucuses

Given the constraints of party discipline, equality-seeking elected women have also established women's caucuses in some of the federal parties. In the governing Liberal party, a women's caucus meets weekly to discuss the legislative agenda, and to hear from Ministers and the Prime Minister. This forum has been a relatively effective mechanism for women to:

- Share information and strategize
- Evaluate the impacts of legislation upon women
- Assert pressure on Ministers and other colleagues to take decisions that are in the collective interests of women.

**Mainstream political parties have avoided hard, programmatic commitments to the women's movement by recruiting highly visible and like-minded women. The recruitment of these women cannot translate into changes in public policy because parties, particularly those pursuing policy agendas inspired by neo-conservatism, are unwilling to address the structural sources of women's oppression.**

*- Lisa Young (1997)*

## EFFECTS OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS ON WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

***Changing a country's electoral system often represents a far more realistic goal to work towards than dramatically changing the culture's view of women.***

Political scholars and women's movements strongly emphasize the effect that electoral systems have on women's representation for several reasons. The differences in the level of women's representation across electoral systems are substantial. Compared to changing the status of women in society, or a country's level of development, electoral rules are more open to change.

**TABLE 1** presents data for 24 democracies over the post World War II period. It reveals that women have always had a **slight** advantage in PR systems. A marked increase in women's representation occurred in the 1970s ~ 1990s in proportional representation systems. Only modest gains arose in majoritarian systems.

<b>TABLE 1 Percent of Women MPs Across 24 National Legislatures 1945 – 1998</b>							
<b>“Majoritarian” vs. “Proportional Representation” Systems</b>							
<b>System</b>	<b>1945</b>	<b>1950</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1998</b>
<b>SMD</b>	<b>3.05</b>	<b>2.13</b>	<b>2.51</b>	<b>2.23</b>	<b>3.37</b>	<b>8.16</b>	<b>11.64</b>
<b>MMD</b>	<b>2.93</b>	<b>4.73</b>	<b>5.47</b>	<b>5.86</b>	<b>11.89</b>	<b>18.13</b>	<b>23.03</b>
<p><b>“Majoritarian” or Single-Member District (SMD) Systems are used in:</b></p> <p><b>Australia, Canada, France (1960~), Japan, New Zealand (1945–1990), United Kingdom, and United States.</b></p> <p><small>* Israel did not exist, and West Germany did not hold elections in 1945. They are therefore not included in the 1945 numbers. They are all included for all years following 1945.</small></p> <p><small>** Greece, Portugal and Spain became democratic in the 1970s and are therefore only included in the 1980, 1990 and 1998 calculations.</small></p> <p><small>© INTERNATIONAL IDEA</small></p>				<p><b>Proportional Representation or Multi-Member District (MMD) Systems are used in:</b></p> <p><b>Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France (1945 &amp; 1950), Greece**, Iceland, Ireland, Israel*, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand (1998), Norway, Portugal**, Spain**, Sweden, Switzerland and Germany (West Germany* prior to 1990).</b></p>			

### IS PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION ENOUGH?

*Many scholars, political parties, and grassroots organizations are mobilizing to add a level of Proportional Representation into the Canadian electoral system. What will this mean?*

**Q: Will PR bring significant increases in women's representation on it's own?**

**A: Not without proactive incentives that require parties to promote women in politics.**

As the chart above highlights, proportional representation systems are better at providing the conditions for increased numbers of women in politics, but it does not necessarily mean that more women will in fact be elected. There is an important dichotomy among countries with proportional representation: 1) those that have adopted incentives or quotas to purposefully encourage more women to enter politics, 2) those which have been content to maintain the “normal” and male-dominated rules of the game to the exclusion of women. **TABLE 2** (over) demonstrates effectively the reality that Proportional Representation is not a panacea for increasing women's representation. It must be combined with incentives that systematically and purposefully increase the number of women in politics.

**TABLE 2: PERCENT OF WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL LEGISLATURES OF COUNTRIES USING PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION OR MULTI-MEMBER DISTRICT SYSTEMS**

<b>Countries with Incentives</b>	<b>Nature of the Incentive</b>	<b>Election Date</b>	<b>% of Women</b>	<b>Countries with Politics as Usual</b>	<b>Election Date</b>	<b>% of Women</b>
<b>Argentina</b>	<b>Legislated Quota 40%-60% both sexes</b>	2001	30.7%	<b>Belgium</b>	1999	23.3%
<b>Austria</b>	<b>Party Quota</b> Greens began in 1993: 50% (zipper system)	2002	31.1%	<b>Germany</b>	2002	32.2%
<b>Costa Rica</b>	<b>Legislated Quota 40% women</b>	2002	35%	<b>Greece</b>	2000	8,7%
<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Party Quota 40% women</b> (Soc. Democratic Party began in 1988 for local and regional elections)	2001	38%	<b>Iceland</b>	1999	34.9%
<b>Finland</b>	<b>Legislated Quota 40% women</b> (For all relevant bodies)	1999	36.5%	<b>Ireland</b>	2002	13.3%
<b>France</b>	<b>Legislative Quota 50% (zipper system)</b> (Not in all districts)	2002	12.1%	<b>Israel</b>	1999	14.2%
<b>Mozambique</b>	<b>Party Quota 30% women</b> (Frelimo Party began in 1999)	1999	30%	<b>Italy</b>	2001	9.8%
<b>Namibia</b>	<b>Legislated Quota 30% women</b> (Started in 1992 for local elections)	1999	25%	<b>New Zealand</b>	2002	29.2%
<b>Norway</b>	<b>Party Quota 40% women</b> (Labour Party began in 1983)	2001	36.4%	<b>Portugal</b>	2002	19.1%
<b>South Africa</b>	<b>Legislated Quota 50% women</b> (For local elections)	1999	29.8%	<b>Spain</b>	2000	24.3%
<b>Sweden</b>	<b>Party Quota 50% women</b> (Soc. Democratic Party began in 1994) (Zipper system)	2002	45%	<b>Switzerland</b>	1999	23%
<b>Average Percent of Women</b>			<b>33.2%</b>	<b>Average Percent of Women</b>		<b>21.1%</b>

\* Compiled using data from the websites of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and International IDEA

# ADVANTAGES OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION SYSTEMS

Under the current system in Canada, voters are presented with candidates in their riding alone, and are not encouraged to consider the larger context of a party's slate of candidates, nor do political parties publish their national list of candidates. The driving force behind women faring better in systems that have elements of PR is the fact that parties are forced to use a **balancing process** when they select candidates. This forces a higher level of transparency and greater accountability towards women and other under-represented demographics. National Party lists make it apparent to voters which parties are able to attract a diversity of citizens to run for elected office, and moreover, which parties are committed to selecting diverse candidates to represent their political vision.

## **DISTRICT MAGNITUDE:**

The number of MPs/seats  
per geographic area

***Proportional representation systems have more candidates in each district***

- Party gatekeepers are more conscious of the need to have a balanced slate of candidates.
- When a party expects to win several seats in a district, the gatekeepers will divide winning spots on the party list among internal party constituencies.
- Women within these parties can demand that gender balance be a priority.

***Majoritarian systems only allow for a party to have one candidate in each district:***

- The party has no chance to balance the party ticket in each district.
- Female candidates must compete directly against men.
- A party nomination in favour of a woman means denying the aspirations of a man in the district.
- Sexist attitudes about who has more of a right to wield power in politics can still have an influence.

## **CONTAGION:** *Parties copy one another's policies under pressure*

*Q: Do major parties move more quickly to promote women when challenged on this issue by another party in PR systems or in majoritarian systems?*

*• The study of this question in the Norwegian and Canadian contexts is interesting. The Norwegian Labour Party increased the number of women in winnable positions in districts where they faced a serious challenge from the Socialist Left Party, which had adopted quotas for women candidates. In Canada the Liberal Party was not more likely to nominate women in those districts where the New Democratic Party had nominated women. However, the number of ridings where the NDP posed a significant threat to the Liberal Party was small, and this reduces the impact of this tactic. Contagion is more likely to occur in countries with a PR electoral system than in those with a majoritarian electoral system.*

## **ELECTORAL THRESHOLDS:**

***A minimum % of popular support is required***

- Women will be helped by having high electoral thresholds because of the effects on the average number of seats that each party may obtain per district.
- Without an electoral threshold, small parties with very little support and only a limited number of candidates (often male) can reduce the number of seats that larger parties with a more substantial base of support can receive.
- The District Magnitude affects how many seats parties expect to receive, and in turn encourages them to select a balanced slate of candidates. Some countries have adopted an electoral threshold of 5% or higher so that parties that receive less than 5% of the popular vote do not dilute the distribution of seats to parties that have more legitimacy or appeal among the population as a whole.

# PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AND PARTY LISTS

## OPEN vs CLOSED PARTY LISTS

**Closed Lists** put the responsibility on the political party to balance the representation of different demographics, interest, and groups among its candidates. Voters would be presented with a list by each party and could judge the Party's commitment to inclusion accordingly.

**Open Lists** allow the voter to choose to support candidates directly by crossing off those individuals it does not wish to win to advance those that they do support.

## OBJECTIONS TO OPEN LISTS

**Number 1:** Although open party lists allow women voters to move women up through preferential voting, closed lists are likely to be superior for women. While preferential voting provides the opportunity for some voters to promote women, other voters can also demote women. This negative effect has shown up in Norway, despite its reputation as a progressive society on issues of gender equality.

**Number 2:** With an open list, the final outcome rests with thousands of individual voters making individual decisions. If the sum of all those individual decisions is that women are voted down and out of parliament, the parties cannot be held responsible.

Closed party lists keep the parties responsible for ensuring a good balance in the party delegation. Under these conditions parties can be held accountable for their dismal commitment to fielding female candidates and for impeding women's representation in politics.

### CLOSED LISTS

#### PARTY A

Female  
Female  
Male  
Female  
Female  
Male

#### PARTY B

Female  
Male  
Female  
Male  
Female  
Male

### OPEN LISTS

#### PARTY A

Female  
~~Female~~  
~~Male~~  
Female  
~~Female~~  
~~Male~~

#### PARTY B

Female  
Male  
~~Female~~  
~~Male~~  
Female  
~~Male~~