

With two strong women in the Alberta premier's race, gender's a non-starter

The Globe and Mail by Shari Graydon 23 April 2012

When former U.S. presidential hopeful John McCain vaulted Sarah Palin from the Alaska governor's chair to a seat potentially one heartbeat away from the Oval Office, his campaign celebrated the appointment as a "game changer." And as a recent TV movie by that name chronicled, it did radically alter the narrative of the 2008 American election – just not in the way Republicans had hoped. North of the 49th parallel, we're experiencing our own gender-inspired game-changing political election, albeit in a less dramatic, more Canadian kind of way.

Women have led parties into elections here since 1988 and Canada now boasts four female premiers. But never before has the race to watch been between two women. Since the start of the Alberta election, polls have been putting Wildrose Leader Danielle Smith and the Conservatives' Alison Redford neck and neck.

Suddenly, "the best man" has double the odds of being a woman. How might this change the political conversation?

It's commonly accepted that any group aspiring to break out of minority status and start wielding genuine influence needs a critical mass of 30 per cent. Although female politicians make up less than 25 per cent of those in legislatures across the land, two serious female contenders in Alberta's contest for premier adds up to 40 per cent of the leaders. That looks like an opportunity to me.

A growing body of research demonstrates that when a woman's fitness for office is being judged against only male opponents, there's a tendency to read her behaviour in stereotypically sexist ways. Tzipi Livni, Israel's recently deposed leader of the opposition, described the challenge she faced this way: "People either see you as a cold and alienated bitch, or ... soft, gentle and weak, unable to take decisions on security

issues.”

But when two worthy female politicians are squaring off and gender is no longer a point of differentiation, it may change what issues get discussed and how. If you don't have to prove, Margaret Thatcher-style, that you're tougher than any man, maybe you can acknowledge some of the realities that otherwise get ignored.

Consider, for example, that most women spend much of their lives avoiding, striving for or dealing with the consequences of pregnancy. The corresponding circumstances of each scenario have a substantial impact on their earning potential, social environment and capacity to achieve work-life balance. So the chronic short shrift given to policy debates and program proposals about reproductive health and access to childcare is remarkable, if not surprising.

As long as women's voices remain a significant minority in both politics and the broader public discourse, this isn't likely to change. But a current project that's attempting to address the latter challenge demonstrates how diversifying the voices alters the dialogue.

In response to Canadian research documenting the fact that women's perspectives make up less than a quarter of those featured in prominent opinion media, the Informed Opinions project has been encouraging and training expert women to share their ideas and analyses with the media more often.

As a result, dozens of female university professors, NGO leaders and policy advisers who had previously turned down media requests have now contributed commentary. They've offered context on issues ranging from tax policy, emergency preparedness and mental health, to refugee rights, climate change and the need for a national food strategy.

Despite the diversity of subjects addressed, a word cloud generated from the commentaries reflected repeated references to families, community, safety, health and education. More women engaging in the public discourse does, indeed, shift the conversation.

Alison Redford and Danielle Smith both lead right-of-centre parties not typically associated with some of the concerns unfairly stereotyped as “women’s issues.” But their dual presence in the Alberta Legislature increases the chances that the policy agenda will reflect the kinds of topics that are more likely to be raised when a critical mass of women is at the table.

Shari Graydon is the catalyst for Informed Opinions, an initiative that’s building women’s leadership through media engagement. Former prime minister Kim Campbell is an honorary patron of the project.