



What Women Want

Gender Differences in Public Opinion and Political Engagement in Western Canada

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August 2008

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This report is part of the Canada West Foundation's *The West in Canada Project*. Funding for *The West in Canada Project* is provided by the Canada West Foundation's **Founders' Endowment Fund**.

This report was prepared by Canada West Foundation Intern Janine Marshall-Giles. The author would like to thank Robert Roach and Dr. Kari Roberts at the Canada West Foundation; Dr. Loleen Berdahl at the University of Saskatchewan; and Dr. Lisa Young at the University of Calgary for their helpful comments and suggestions. Any errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the author.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2004-2008 Looking West Surveys include a wide range of public policy questions and measures of democratic participation and attitudes. This report offers a gender analysis of the opinions of western Canadians on key policy areas. Included are perennially important issues such as healthcare, education and taxes, local issues such as transportation and affordable housing, and questions of western identity and western alienation.

Women and men's public opinion differ the most on social and environmental issues because women feel stronger about government doing something to improve social programs and addressing concerns about the environment. At the same time, women's flagging political engagement means that their unique policy preferences do not receive the same public exposure as men's. As long as women remain more reticent than men to engage in political activity, their stronger opinions about social and environmental policy will not be reflected in public policy.

Key findings of the report include:

Public Policy Issues

Women and men share the same five top priorities in the 2008 Looking West Survey. The *strength* of support for the top four issues, however, varies substantially by gender. Women were much more likely to believe that improving the province's health care system, doing more for the environment, reducing greenhouse gases and reducing poverty in Canada were *very important* issues. The gender gaps in these areas were between 13 and 17 percentage points.

Local Issues

At the local level, however, there was some disagreement on which issues were the most important. Men and women both rated crime in the community as the greatest concern. Women were slightly more likely to say that reducing crime in the city was a *very important* priority. There was a large discrepancy in women and men's ranking of the importance of reducing homelessness and increasing the supply of affordable housing. There was a 10 to 12 percentage point gender difference on both of these issues with women leaning toward the compassionate side; women favour increasing affordable housing and reducing homelessness.

Western Grievances and Democratic Reform

The results show that men and women share similar attitudes toward western alienation. Most westerners believe that the West is a distinct region; they are skeptical about the amount of money their province receives from federal transfers and are not satisfied with the way provincial interests are represented in Ottawa. The strength and uniformity of support for the notion that the West is not treated well by Ottawa indicates that political discontent in the West is an integral part of the political culture for women and men.

The greatest gender divergence, however, is on how western grievances can be best addressed. Fewer women agree with the statement that their province should economically separate from Canada. In Alberta, a majority of women believe that getting more western MPs in cabinet is the best way to address western political concerns while men are more likely to put their faith in Senate reform and giving provinces more power to make key policy decisions.

Democratic Engagement

When it comes to getting involved in politics, women are less likely to contact elected officials, donate to a political party, discuss issues online and volunteer for a political party. On the other hand, women are just as likely, if not more likely, to partake in protest activities like boycotting or signing a petition. The discrepancy between men and women's propensity to contact elected officials and discuss politics indicates that women are not taking the opportunities to express their strong concern for social and environmental issues. It also points to a larger problem: women are less likely to be those who shape the political agenda (i.e, elite party members and elected party representatives).

What does this mean for the inclusion of women in public policy-formation?

Academic research has shown that women's opinions toward public policy are becoming *more* distinct which makes the issue of women's political involvement increasingly important. The recommendations in this report are aimed to address the disconnect between women's unique public opinion, political participation and policy formation. First, female role models – mothers talking about politics at home and elected women in the most powerful positions of elected office – are critical for dispelling the myth that politics is an unnatural place for women. Second, political parties can reach out to women to encourage them to run for party executive positions and local candidate nominations so that women play a larger role in shaping the agenda of political parties and have an impact upon policy outcomes.

1. Introduction

People often say that, in a democracy, decisions are made by a majority of the people. Of course, that is not true. Decisions are made by a majority of those who make themselves heard and who vote—a very different thing.

— Walter H. Judd – US Congressperson 1943–1963

In Canada, there has been relatively little examination of the differences between the opinions of men and women on public policy. Comparing gender differences highlights an important disparity in the quality of women's political engagement. While women vote at the same rates as men, they are less likely to discuss politics, influence the vote of others and join political parties (Gidengil 2004; Cross 2004). At the same time, women hold unique opinions on a variety of issues. Most notably, they show stronger support for social issues (Everitt 2002). Therefore, the quality of women's democratic experience is compromised because their distinct political opinions are not expressed as often as men's.

The objective of this report is to quantify gender differences in public opinion and political participation in western Canada. With the support of data from the Canada West Foundation's 2004-2008 Looking West Surveys, this report will uncover the areas in which women hold unique policy preferences and discuss how lower levels of political engagement among women can prevent their preferences from reaching the agenda of political parties and policy-makers.

The four Looking West Surveys employed in this report offer a unique opportunity to look at three areas of interest to western Canadians, especially with the recent economic and population growth in the four western provinces. First, the 2008 Looking West Survey provides information about westerners' opinions on important public policy issues such as healthcare, education and the environment. These issues are included because they influence the agenda of the provincial and federal governments. Some are perennial issues – healthcare, taxes and the economy – and others are relatively new such as the environment. In theory, women and men should differ the most on social welfare issues.

Second, the 2007 Looking West Survey looks at citizens' views on urban policy priorities, particularly those issues that challenge Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon

The Looking West Surveys provide reliable data on western Canadian public opinion. They are unlike other surveys that often lump provinces together or do not have provincial samples large enough to allow for meaningful analysis of opinion in a single province or reliable group-based comparisons. Beginning in 2001, the surveys asked 4,000 Canadians – 1,000 in each of the four western provinces – their opinions on a variety of public policy topics. These provincial samples are large enough to allow meaningful analysis of opinion in a single province and among sub-sections of the sample such as gender.

and Winnipeg as they seek greater federal and provincial funding to accommodate new growth. According to academic research women should be more supportive of social issues such as affordable housing and reducing homelessness. Whether women feel differently about issues such as public transportation and roadways is unclear in the existing literature.

Third, the 2004 Looking West Survey tackles issues of western alienation and democratic reform that have shaped the West's identity and political grievances. Tracking who supports western alienation tests the assumption that western identity and alienation sentiments are shared equally between men and women. The expectation is that women do not hold as strong opinions about western alienation as men because they may not feel as strongly about economic grievances, which is often the basis of western alienation. On the other hand, the absence of gender differences provides evidence that western alienation is a value cultivated by political culture.

Taken together, the 2004-2008 Looking West Survey results provide a rich and dynamic view of political opinion in western Canada which allows us to gain insight into the gendered nature of political preferences and how these differences can be better integrated into our political debate and accommodated by our democratic institutions.

Finally, the 2006 Looking West Survey goes beyond questions of public opinion to ask respondents about their political activity. For example, respondents were asked about volunteering and donating to political parties, contacting elected officials, discussing issues online, protesting, boycotting and signing

petitions. Women have stronger opinions on social welfare and environmental issues, yet they are less likely to participate in the political activities examined in the 2006 Looking West Survey. Therefore, women are less likely than men to have their policy preferences reflected in party platforms and public policy. This report recommends ways to overcome this gender discrepancy in policy preferences and political involvement.

2. Gender Differences in Public Opinion

Canadian research has shown that women tend to be much more committed to social welfare policies (Everitt 1998; Gidengil et al. 2003). This is why there is a strong expectation that there will be gender differences on opinions of social welfare policies evident in the results of the Looking West Surveys. The reason for gender gaps in public opinion, however, is an unsettled debate. While it is not the duty of this report to investigate the causes of the gender gaps, it is worth noting the competing reasons they exist.

The first explanation is related to the experience of women as mothers who use social programs more often than men. Taking children to the doctor or raising children while caring for an elderly parent are examples of first-hand experience that may be required to appreciate Canada's social programs. Closely related are women's views about the role of the government. If women regularly use social programs, they may favour greater government intervention and spending.

One of the most intuitive explanations is Gilligan's theory of difference (1982). When facing moral dilemmas, women tend to respond by giving primacy to being responsible to others by emphasizing their connections and relationships. Men, on the other hand, stress the importance of the individual and competing individual rights. In general terms, this means that men see society as a group of individuals who should maximize autonomy and utility whereas women view society as a web of connections that benefit the community and alleviate conflict. These competing values certainly shape personal debate on important issues like healthcare and education. If this explanation is correct, we should expect women to care more for social policies that benefit their family and community.

A final explanation is related to the impact of tertiary education. Highly educated women, who often have high levels of political

interest and knowledge, are less likely to be misinformed or ignorant of important political information. Interestingly, highly informed women are found more often on the left side of the ideological continuum – indicating that the more informed the woman, the more she realizes that her values correspond with beliefs held by those on the left side of the political spectrum (Gidengil et al. 2004). This implies that as women's education levels increase, so will women's identification with the values and policy issues of the left.

Identifying where women and men differ in public opinion is important because it informs us about what shapes gender differences in vote choice. There was an 11 percentage point gender gap in voting for the Reform Party in 1993 and 1997 with men being more supportive of the party than women. In the 2000 federal election, the same 11 point gender difference in voting occurred for the Canadian Alliance and a similar gender gap continues for the federal Conservatives.

The gender gap in vote choice emerged over a decade earlier in the United States during the presidential candidacy of Ronald Reagan. In both countries, gender-related values and concerns became more salient when women reacted to the rise of parties who challenged the post-war consensus of the welfare state and opposed rights to gay marriage and abortion.

Previously, there had not been large gender differences in vote choice because Canada's brokerage party system forced party politics to the centre and played-down issues that divided men and women. In the Canadian case, male-female opinion differences are now on scale with regional, ethnic and language cleavages.

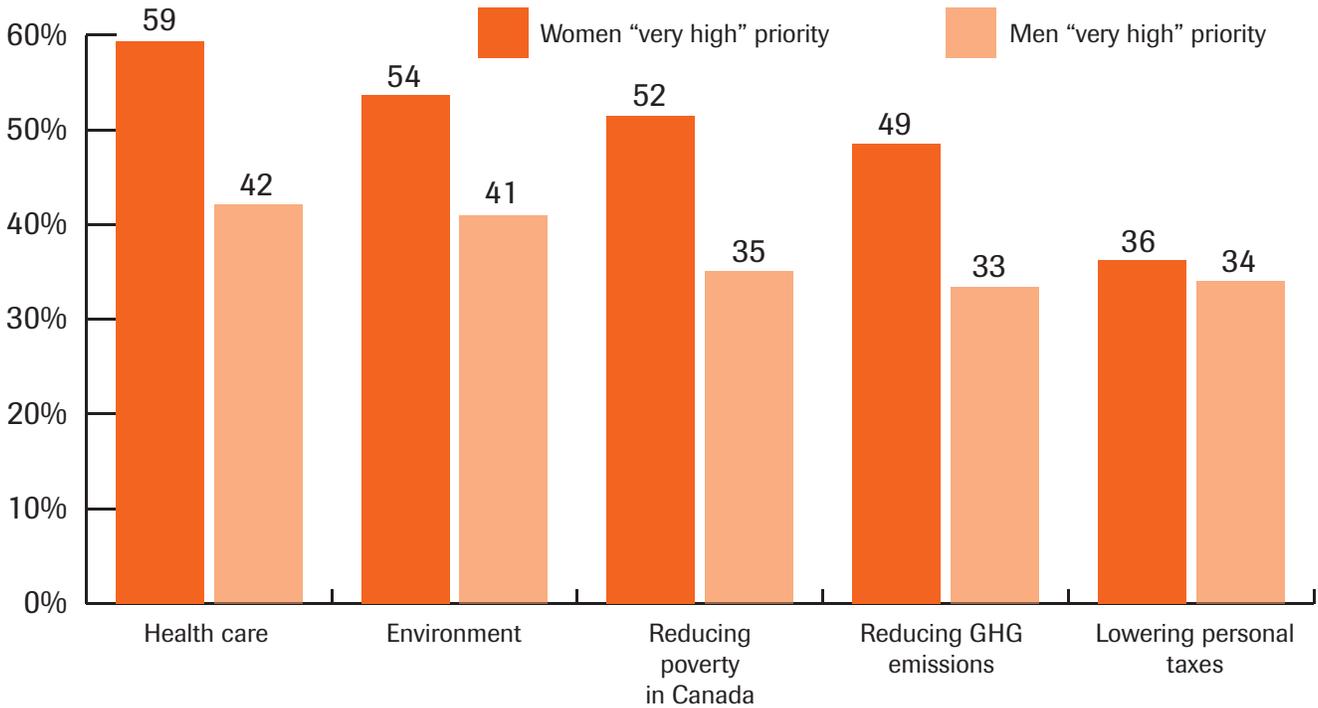
2.1. Public Opinion on Policy Issues

Our attention now shifts to understanding where gender gaps in public opinion exist. The 2008 Looking West Survey asked western Canadians about the importance of fifteen public policy issues. Using a scale of one to five, with five meaning that the issue is "not at all a priority" and one meaning that the issue is a "very high priority," respondents rated each issue. It must be acknowledged that this is not an exhaustive list of public policy topics. In particular, economic topics are underrepresented; however, the list does touch on most of the key contemporary policy debates as well as on a number of policy issues that are argued to be of particular importance to

Figure 1: “Very High” Priority Policy Issues – 2008 Looking West Survey

	Women's Rank	Men's Rank	Women "Very High" Priority (%)	Men "Very High" Priority (%)	Gender Gap (Percentage Points)
Health care	1	1	59	42	17
Environment	2	2	54	41	13
Reducing poverty in Canada	3	3	52	35	17
Reducing GHG Emissions	4	5	49	33	16
Lowering personal taxes	5	4	36	34	2
Investing more in university and colleges	6	7	34	31	3
Investing more in infrastructure	7	6	28	32	-4
Doing more to address Aboriginal social problems	8	11	27	18	9
Creating more employment opportunities for Aboriginals	9	10	23	19	4
Investing more in science and technology	10	9	22	29	-7
Expanding Canada's trade with other countries	11	8	20	31	-11
Lowering business taxes	12	12	15	15	0
Providing more aid to developing countries	13	15	13	8	6
Attracting skilled workers from other countries	13	13	13	13	0
Investing more in arts and culture	15	14	11	9	2

Figure 2: “Very High” Policy Priorities - 2008 Looking West Survey



women such as improving healthcare and doing more to help Canadians who live in poverty.

Interestingly, men and women share seven of the same “very high” priority areas. Improving healthcare, doing more for the environment and doing more to reduce poverty in Canada are ranked one, two and three, respectively. Reducing greenhouse gases and lowering personal taxes placed either fourth or fifth, depending upon whether the respondent was a man or woman. Investing more in universities and colleges and investing more in transportation infrastructure placed either sixth or seventh, depending upon gender. If there are meaningful differences in men and women’s public opinion in national issues in western Canada, it is not in the *ranking* of their top priorities.

The *strength* of support for the top four issues, however, varies substantially by gender. For issues of health care, the environment and poverty, a majority of women say that they are “very high” priority areas. No single issue draws a majority of “very high” priority responses from men. The top issue, healthcare, has a gender gap of 17 points in favour of women. The next three highest-ranked issues have gaps in the range of 13 to 17 points.

The 2008 Looking West Survey provides an opportunity to take a closer look at the dynamics of the environment issue as additional questions were included to get a sense of the strength of support for environmental concerns. This allows us to examine how many men and women consider climate change a “serious problem,” who they believe can do more to reduce emissions (individuals or industry), whether men or women are more committed to take personal action by changing their day-to-day habits, and who is more willing to pay more for gasoline or to heat their home in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

More women than men perceive climate change to be a serious problem. About 48% of women versus 39% of men said the problem is “very serious.” This is not surprising given women’s stronger support for the two environmental issues examined in the survey. However, perceptions of who can do the most to reduce greenhouse gases – individuals or industry – matters too. Approximately 32% of men believe that *individuals* can do the most to cut greenhouse gases while 24% of women said the same. Women are more prone to believe that industry, or a combination of industry and individuals, can do the most to fight climate change. Thus, this could lead women to recognize

a stronger role for government to regulate industry and coordinate individual-industry greenhouse gas reduction.

Women are more willing to carpool, take transit more often, and drive more energy efficient cars (about a 10 percentage point gender difference). However, when it comes to their pocket books, women are no different than men in showing disdain for paying significantly more for their gasoline and to heat their homes. Around 10% of all respondents said they were “very willing” to pay significantly more for gasoline and home heating. Around 35% of respondents said they were “somewhat willing” to pay significantly more.

2.2. Local Issues

Looking at the opinion of residents in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg helps us distinguish if women have unique perspectives on local politics and policy. The 2007 Looking West Survey asked respondents to consider the importance of thirteen local issues spanning from public transportation to local arts and culture.

The breakdown of support for “very high priority” issues is presented in Figure 3. The highest-ranked issues for men and women combined are reducing crime, reducing traffic congestion, reducing homelessness and increasing housing affordability. Men and women both rated crime in the community as the greatest concern, but women were more likely to rate reducing homelessness and increasing the supply of affordable housing as high priorities.

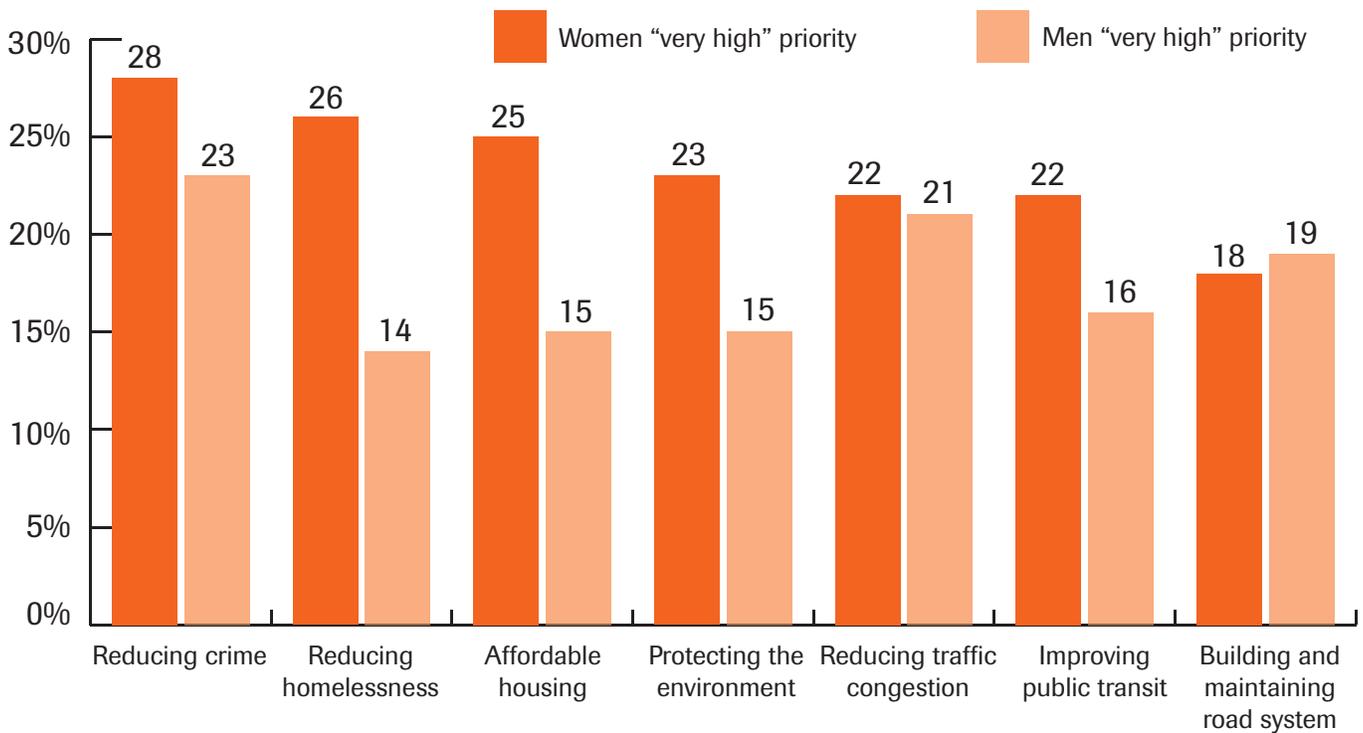
The most important local issue, reducing crime, receives much less support than the highest-ranked policy issues in the 2008 survey – improving the healthcare system, improving the environment and reducing poverty in Canada. None of the local issues received anywhere near the 50% support that women gave to the three most important issues in the 2008 survey.

Gender differences exist in the top four local issues. The largest gender difference is in support for reducing homelessness. There is a 12 percentage point difference in “very high” support for this issue. There is a 10 point gender difference in the closely related issue of increasing the supply of affordable housing and there is an eight point gap regarding protection of the environment. Issues of automobile transportation –

Figure 3: Municipal “Very High” Priority Areas – 2007 Looking West Survey

	Women’s Rank	Men’s Rank	Women “Very High” Priority (%)	Men “Very High” Priority (%)	Gender Gap (Percentage Points)
Reducing crime	1	1	28	23	5
Reducing homelessness	2	7	26	14	12
Increase the supply of affordable housing	3	5	25	15	10
Protecting the environment	4	5	23	15	8
Reducing traffic congestion	5	2	22	21	1
Improving public transit	5	4	22	16	6
Building and maintaining the road system	7	3	18	19	-1
Improving city air quality	8	9	14	10	4
Maintaining public parks/pathways/green space	8	8	14	13	1
Reducing property taxes	10	10	10	9	1
Services for urban Aboriginals	11	12	7	5	2
Support for local arts and culture	12	13	6	3	3
Helping new immigrants integrate into the city	12	11	6	6	0

Figure 4: “Very High” Local Priorities - 2007 Looking West Survey



building and maintaining the road system and reducing traffic congestion – have little to no gender gaps.

Concern about crime in the city is the highest rated priority for men and women with 28% of women and 23% of men saying that it is a “very high” priority. There is evidence that women take a particular interest in crime because of a heightened concern about safety. In the 2007 Looking West Survey, respondents were asked if they felt safe walking around their neighbourhood during the day and during the night. Most people felt safe during the day. About 81% of men and 73% of women said they felt “very safe” in their neighbourhood during the day. Strikingly, 64% of men and only 28% of women said they felt “very safe” walking around their neighbourhood at night. It may very well be women’s perceptions of the streets being unsafe that push them to rate crime as a more important issue than men. That being said, men and women give particular importance to this issue because they would like to live in a safe city. For parents, the safety of their children will certainly be top-of-mind.

The lack of concern for property taxes is also noteworthy. Reducing property taxes is likely ranked lower than other municipal issues because almost a majority of respondents believe that their city government has a bigger impact on their daily life than the provincial and federal governments. Perhaps more importantly, a majority of respondents believe that the federal government is wasteful with taxpayers’ money while only 11% said the same about their city government and 15% about their provincial government. It is, then, no surprise that people are less concerned about their property taxes. Respondents likely assume that their local tax dollars are spent responsibly on services and capital projects.

2.3 Western Alienation and Democratic Reform Issues

The 2004 Looking West Survey captures sentiments about western identity and alienation which allow us to assess gender differences in these attitudes. This examination is important because the West is often clumped together as one entity. We know little about how groups (women, minorities, recently arrived residents) feel about traditional western grievances and what methods they prefer to address these concerns. This analysis offers a starting point for group-based analysis. Juxtaposing the feelings of men and women toward western identity will test an important assumption: that women and

men share the same feelings toward western identity and democratic reform.

Tellingly, men and women share similar views on western identity and alienation. Figure 5 shows that a majority of residents in the four western provinces believe that the West is a distinct region. Residents from Saskatchewan and Alberta are the most likely to identify the West as distinct. The gender gap is small at only three percentage points in favour of men.

An even larger majority of western Canadians believe that their province receives less than its fair share of federal transfers. Men and women in BC are the most critical of the amount their province receives. In BC, at least two-thirds of respondents believe that their province does not receive its fair share of federal transfer money. However, a majority of men in Manitoba and a majority of women in Alberta believe that their province receives its fair share of federal transfers. The gender gap is again small at only three points in favour of men.

Westerners have similarly strong views about their political representation. Approximately 47% of women and men from the western provinces believe that their province’s interests are not adequately represented at the federal level. Residents of Saskatchewan are the most likely to say that their province’s interests are “poorly” represented. No gender gap exists on this question.

A gender difference appears when respondents were asked if their province would be better off if it economically separated from Canada. Nearly 24% of men compared to 13% of women either “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” with the statement, indicating that men’s economic grievances are slightly stronger than women’s.

Senate reform has often been touted a western Canadian concern. Indeed, a vast majority of westerners believe that the existing Senate should be replaced with an elected Senate with equal representation from each province (see Figure 6). A full 58% of women and 63% of men strongly agree with this statement. Among these people, 74% of men and 61% of women would support changing the constitution in order to reform the Senate. Though women and men agree with the principle of Senate reform, women are somewhat less enthusiastic about reforming the constitution to get it done.

Figure 5: Western Identity and Views on Democracy - 2004 Looking West Survey

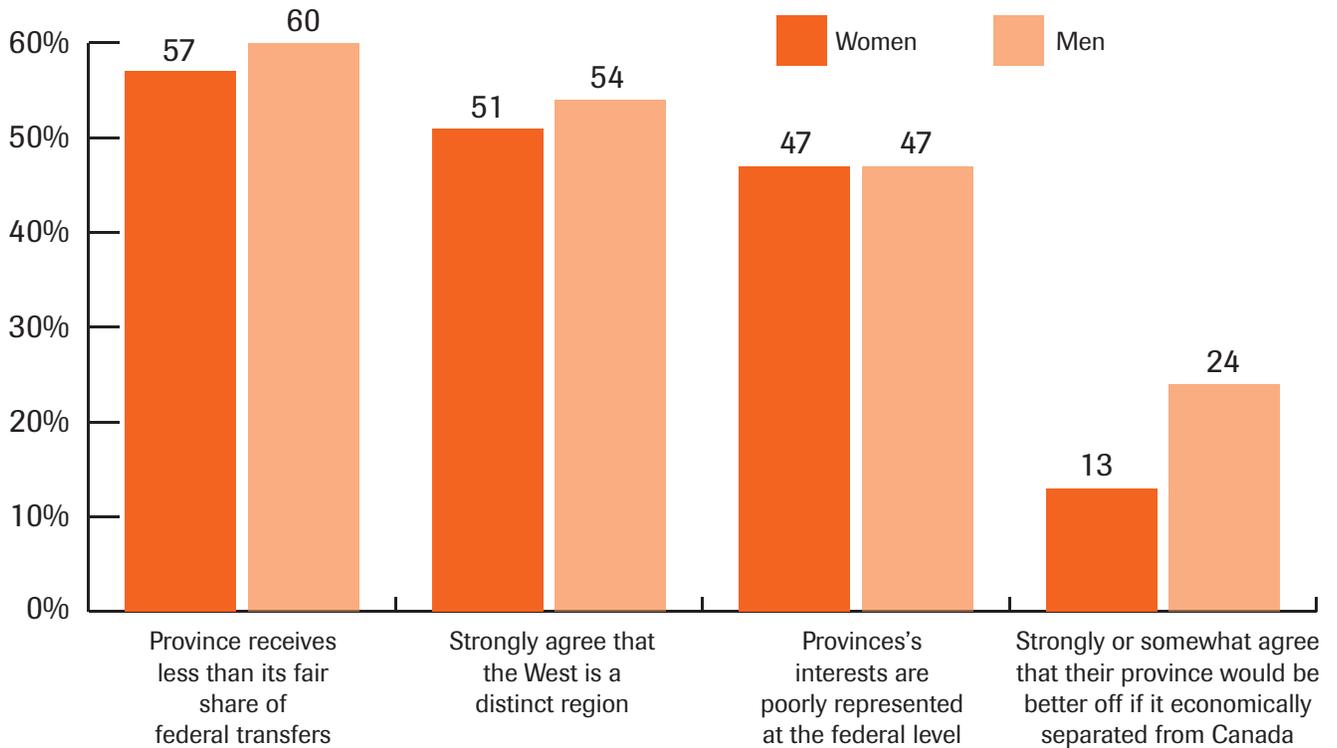


Figure 6: Senate Reform - 2004 Looking West Survey

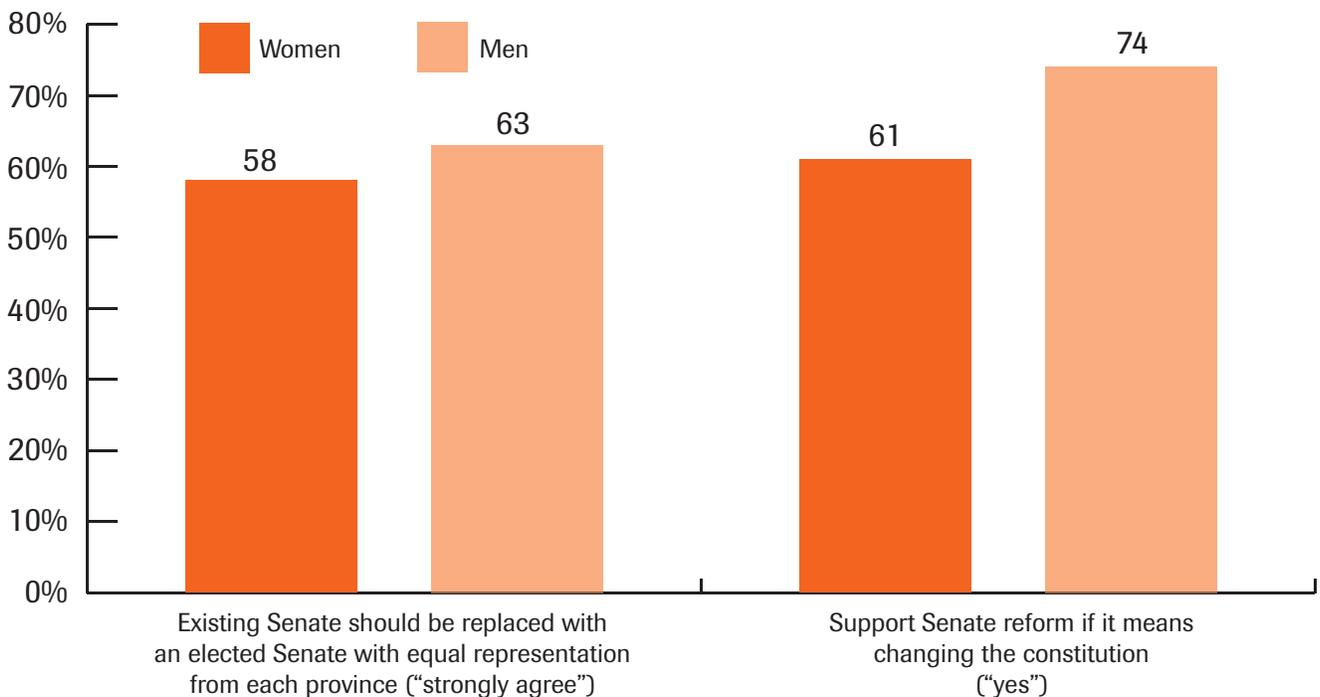


Figure 7: Who should make key policy decisions? - 2004 Looking West Survey
(Alberta respondents only)

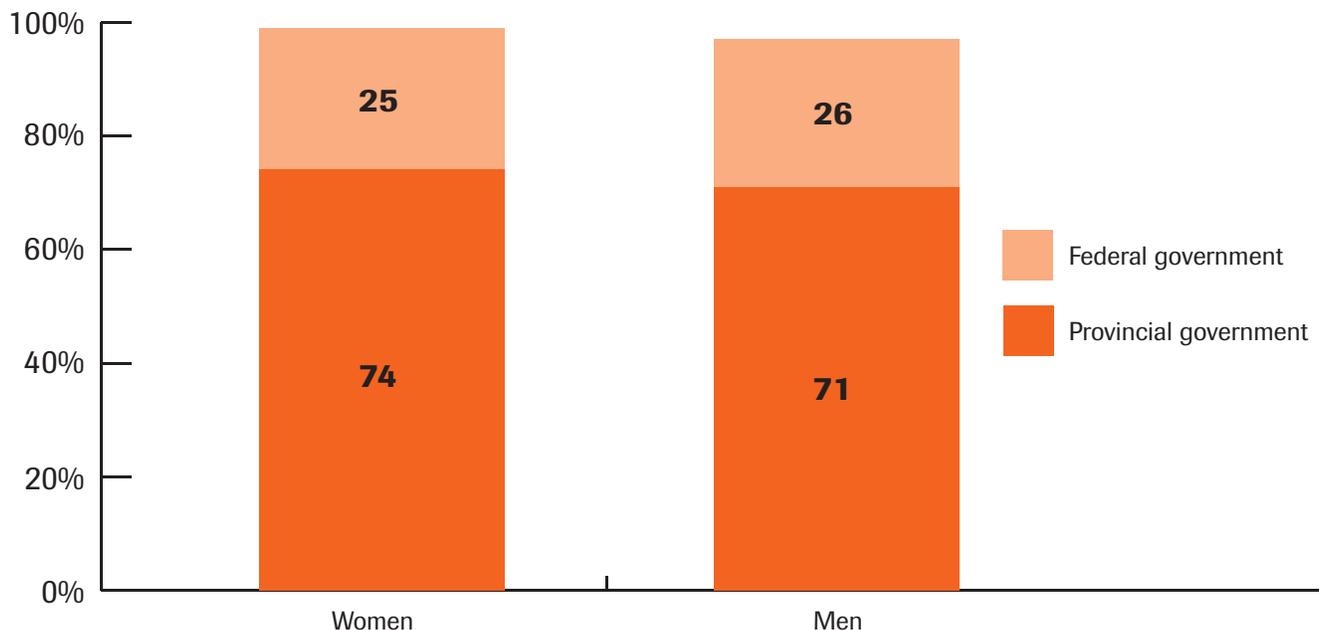
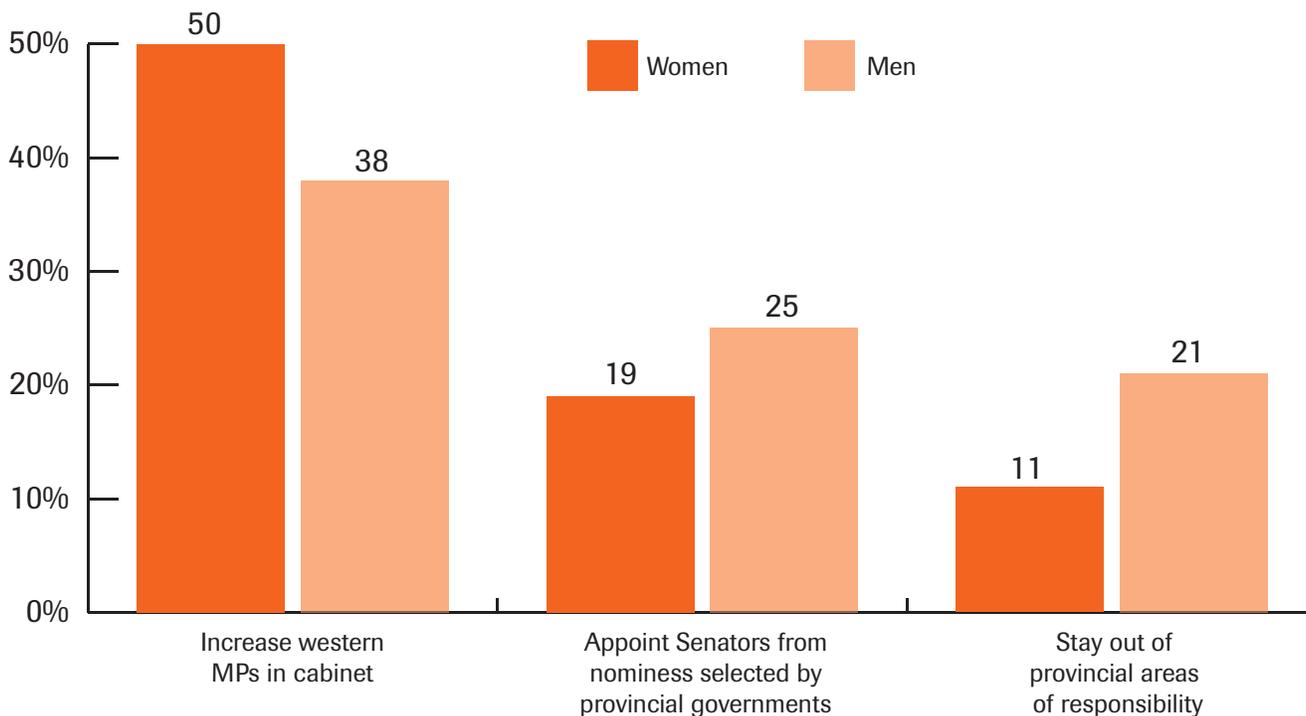


Figure 8: What would reduce western alienation the most? - 2004 Looking West Survey
(Alberta respondents only)



The next part of the analysis focuses solely on Alberta. The Province of Alberta contributed funding to the 2004 Looking West Survey so that the survey asked Albertans about which level of government should make key policy decisions and what could be done to reduce western alienation. The results show that nearly 74% of women thought the provincial government should make key policy decisions while 71% of men thought the same. Women and men share similar strong opinions about provincial autonomy.

However, when it comes to redressing western alienation the opinions of women and men in Alberta diverge (see Figure 8). Most respondents thought that increasing representation of western MPs in the federal cabinet would be the best way to address western alienation. Exactly half of the women respondents from Alberta thought this was the best approach while only 38% of Albertan men thought similarly. Appointing Senators from nominees selected by provincial governments appealed to more men than to women. A quarter of men thought this was the best approach to reduce western alienation while 19% of women thought the same. Staying out of areas of provincial responsibility was the third most supported method. Some 20% of men and 10% of women thought it would be best if the federal government stayed out of areas of provincial jurisdiction.

These numbers show that men and women share similar attitudes towards western alienation. Most westerners believe that the West is a distinct region. They are skeptical about the amount of money their province receives from federal transfers and are not satisfied with the way provincial interests are represented in Ottawa. The greatest gender divergence, however, is how western grievances can best be addressed. Fewer women agree with the notion that their province should economically separate from Canada. Though Albertans were the only ones interviewed, a majority of women believe that getting more western MPs in cabinet is the best way to address western political concerns while men put more faith in Senate reform and having more provincial autonomy.

3. Gendered Nature of Political Engagement

The woman is queen in her home and reigns there, but unfortunately the laws she makes reach no further than her domain. If her laws, written or unwritten, are to be enforced outside, she must come into the political world as well—and she has come.

– Henrietta Muir Edwards (1901) – Member of the Famous Five

Since serving notice they desired a greater role outside of the home, the public life of Canadian women has changed fundamentally. More women are earning university degrees, participating in the paid workforce and becoming independent from men through delayed marriages and increased divorce rates. The substantial changes to women's roles, responsibilities and opportunities have certainly transformed one aspect of women's public life: their politics. Since winning the right to vote in the Canadian federal election in 1918, and especially since the women's movement of the 1960s, rates of women's political engagement have increased. Rates of voting have now reached parity with men (Gidengil et al. 2004) and the number of women joining interest groups and participating in protest activities such as boycotts has reached parity as well (Young and Everitt 2004).

However, gender disparities in other areas of political engagement stubbornly endure. Most notably, women remain less interested, less informed, and less willing to discuss politics or contact elected officials. While these gender differences are not normally larger than 15 percentage points, they have persisted for decades despite rising education levels and increasing access to political information (Gidengil et al. 2004).

Education, hailed the great equalizer, was expected to open the doors of opportunity, wealth, and power for disadvantaged groups. Education fosters feelings of civic duty and increases political knowledge, both of which make politics more accessible. It is surprising, then, that women remain less politically engaged than men, given the increase in their level of education. Women have not received the same gains as men from their education for two reasons. First, women have not attained the same number of professional and post-graduate degrees – notably in the fields of science, engineering and business. While many of these programs have at least 50% women, men still maintain an advantage in the total number

of advance degrees earned. Second, women in the workforce – even highly educated women – are more likely to work part-time and less likely to be fairly compensated for their job. This gives men an advantage to exercise civic skills and make connections with political recruitment at work.

Women have not reached parity in political involvement because new opportunities have not been equally distributed. Since the 1970s, female-headed households have accounted for an increasing proportion of those below the poverty line. This trend is often referred to as the “feminization of poverty,” which highlights how the challenges of daily living take away energy that could be devoted to keeping abreast of politics. In some situations, the role of motherhood counteracts the positive impact of education. The notion of the “double day” is familiar to those who juggle a job (perhaps multiple jobs) and their family. While the number of hours women spend at the office is on the rise, women’s domestic duties often still await them at home. Indeed, the benefits of newfound independence, education and opportunities do not reach the lives of all women.

Gender norms and expectations also play an important role in explaining women’s flagging political engagement, as conventionally defined. Put simply, men remain the public face of politics. Many aspects of politics such as adversarial debate in Question Period still reflect stereotypically masculine norms of behaviour. The same is true of news coverage because of its reliance on adjectives and verbs from the boxing ring and battlefield. These would certainly deter some women from following the daily news.

Of course, the most noticeable gender difference is elite participation: getting women elected to public office and achieving positions of leadership. Indeed, women lack visible role models who counteract the notion that politics is the prerogative of men. Women have not necessarily made the expected electoral gains. The average number of women elected to federal and provincial office has stalled at just over 20%. In the last fifteen years, Canadians have witnessed a decline, or a plateau, in the number of women elected to provincial and national legislatures. Consequently, the absence of females in the positions of power makes women citizens question if they belong in the political arena.

Paradoxically, unlike gender gaps in political engagement, women’s opinions toward public policy issues are becoming

more distinct. Women tend to be more dovish on issues of war and more compassionate on issues of social policy. Canadian Gallup poll data show that these gender gaps have grown since 1965 (Everitt 1998).

Little concern has been expressed about the gender differences in public opinion because it has been falsely assumed that women have become as politically active as men; therefore, the assumption goes, women’s policy preferences have gained the same public exposure as men’s. Unfortunately, this is not entirely true. The following section identifies where western Canadian women lag in important areas of political activity. It will quantify the degree to which women are being left outside the policy fold by examining gender differences in political engagement.

3.1 Political Interest

Political interest naturally correlates with voter turnout and other forms of political activity. Being interested in politics makes getting involved in politics and volunteering one’s time and resources easier. It also enhances norms of civic duty by making citizens more aware that their engagement is an integral part of maintaining representative democracy.

Encouragingly, the majority of western Canadians report being strongly interested in Canadian political issues, ranking their interest level as either four or five out of a five-point scale (see Figure 9). Women are slightly more likely to have weak or middling levels of interest in Canadian political issues. Likewise, men have a slight advantage in the two most interested categories. Approximately 25% of men report being “very interested” (ranking themselves five out of five); 18% of women report the same.

By province, political interest varies little with the exception of women in Alberta whose political interest is three percentage points less than the women from the other western provinces. Instead, they are more likely to report a middling level of interest.

Education plays an important role in levels of political interest. Among highly educated people, a majority of respondents are “very interested” in Canadian political issues (see Figure 10). Of respondents with high school education or less, men have a seventeen percentage point advantage in being “very interested” over women. The gender gap narrows to a six point

Figure 9: Personal Interest in Canadian Political Issues - 2006 Looking West Survey

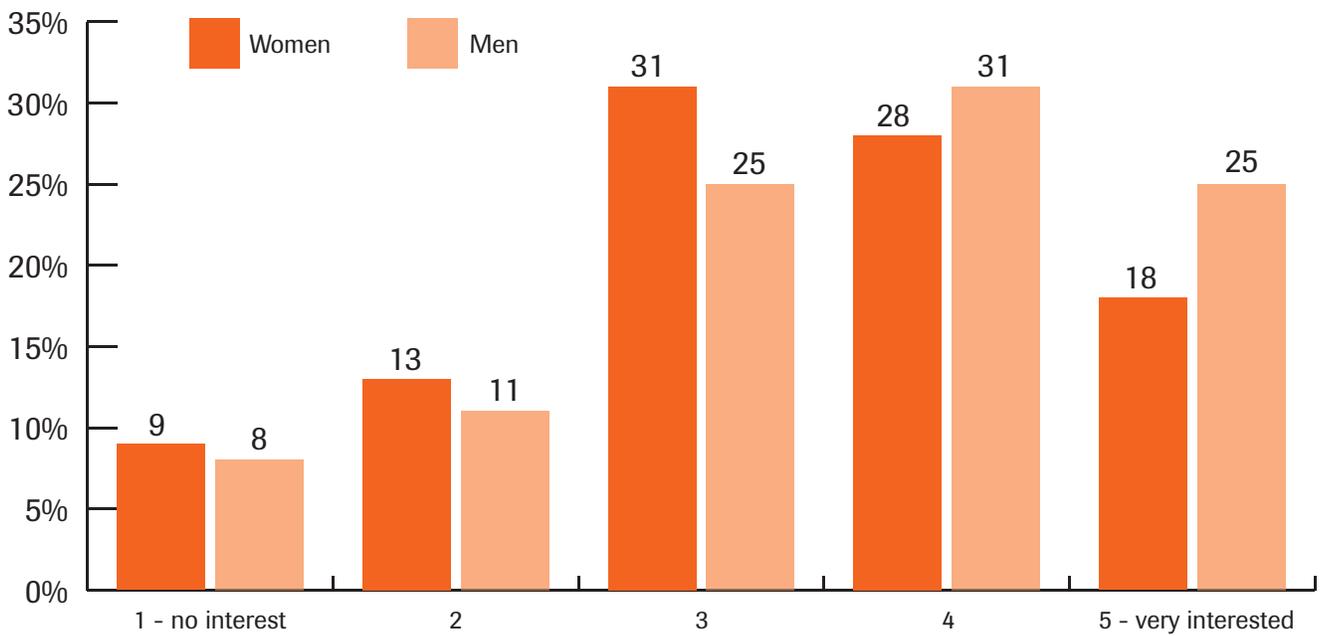
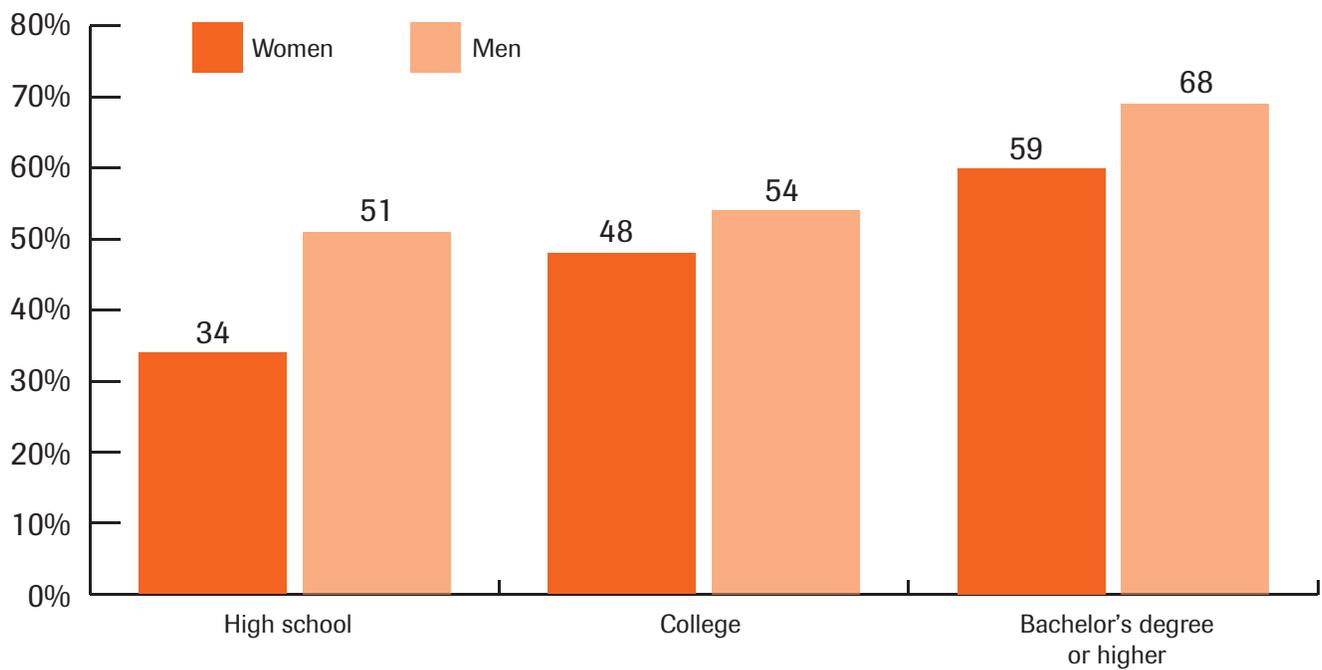


Figure 10: "High" Level of Political Interest by Education - 2006 Looking West Survey



difference among those with some college experience or a college diploma. The gap widens to nine points among people with university education, with men holding the advantage. Ultimately, education does not close the gender gap in interest. Even when a woman has the same education level as her male counterpart, she is not necessarily as politically interested. This is an indication that, while there is a positive relationship between education and political interest, something other than education is causing the gender gap in political interest.

3.2 Voting

Voting is a simple act that signifies many things in a representative democracy. At elections, citizens hold the government accountable, tell the incoming government how they feel about important issues, and evaluate their local member's performance representing the local constituency.

Though voting is the most popular expression of democratic will, voting rates in federal elections have declined dramatically since 1988. Just over 75% of registered voters voted in the 1988 federal election. By 2000 and 2004, the turnout had dropped to 61%. It recovered to 65% in 2006. The decline is largely attributed to young Canadians who are less interested and politically knowledgeable than the young Canadians of former generations (Gidengil et al. 2004, 112). The impact of the most recent generation of young voters deciding to stay home is substantial. In the 2000 election, Canadian Election Study data show turnout would have been 14 percentage points higher if younger Canadians had voted at the same rate as young Canadians from the baby boomer generation (ibid).

Despite the fact that women are less interested and knowledgeable about politics, they vote at the same rates as men. This paradox can be largely explained by women's sense of civic duty. Women tend to be motivated to vote because, simply put, they believe it is good for democracy. Feeling morally obligated to vote plays a large part in explaining why citizens vote and this attitude is often stronger among women (Blais et al. 2004).

As shown in Figure 11, there are virtually no gender differences in voting for the three levels of government. These self-reported values are higher than Elections Canada turnout figures because survey respondents tend to over-report voting. Even so, these self-reported values represent the same trend as the official numbers: citizens are more likely to vote in federal elections than in provincial or local elections. Federal elections

bring out the most voters because they have the most media coverage and the most electoral spending which mobilizes the greatest number of citizens. This is not to say that people believe that the federal government is the most important level of government. On the contrary, in 2007, only 15% of western Canadians felt the federal government has the greatest impact on their daily life.

Though women tend to vote at the same rates as men, they do not make themselves heard in other important ways. What follows is an account of women's lagging political engagement and how it can undermine the expression of their policy preferences.

3.3 Political Activity

Not surprisingly, gender differences in political interest lead to gaps in activities that take more time and energy than voting. Traditional forms of political participation such as joining a political party, or writing an elected representative, matter because they provide ways for Canadians to shape party platforms and government policies. Ideally, the more people who participate from varied backgrounds, the more accurately parties and government represent the views of all western Canadians.

To give an example of the disparity in *demanding* forms of political engagement, it's worth looking at the composition of political parties' membership. Party members are generally more affluent, more educated and more likely to be of European decent than the rest of the population (Cross 2004). The number of women in parties depends upon the party. At the federal level, the Bloc Quebecois and the Conservative party are more likely to have men in their general membership while the NDP and Liberal parties are likely to have close to equal gender representation.

More importantly, the gender composition of party executive positions raises important concerns about women's participation. In all parties, the trend seems to be that the more influential the position in party decision-making, the less likely a woman is to occupy it (Bashevkin 1993). This demonstrates that the most demanding forms of political engagement lead to the largest gender gaps.

The 2006 Looking West Survey asked respondents about their political activity in the last 12 months. Respondents were asked if they contacted an elected official, participated in an

Figure 11: Self-Reported Voting - 2006 Looking West Survey

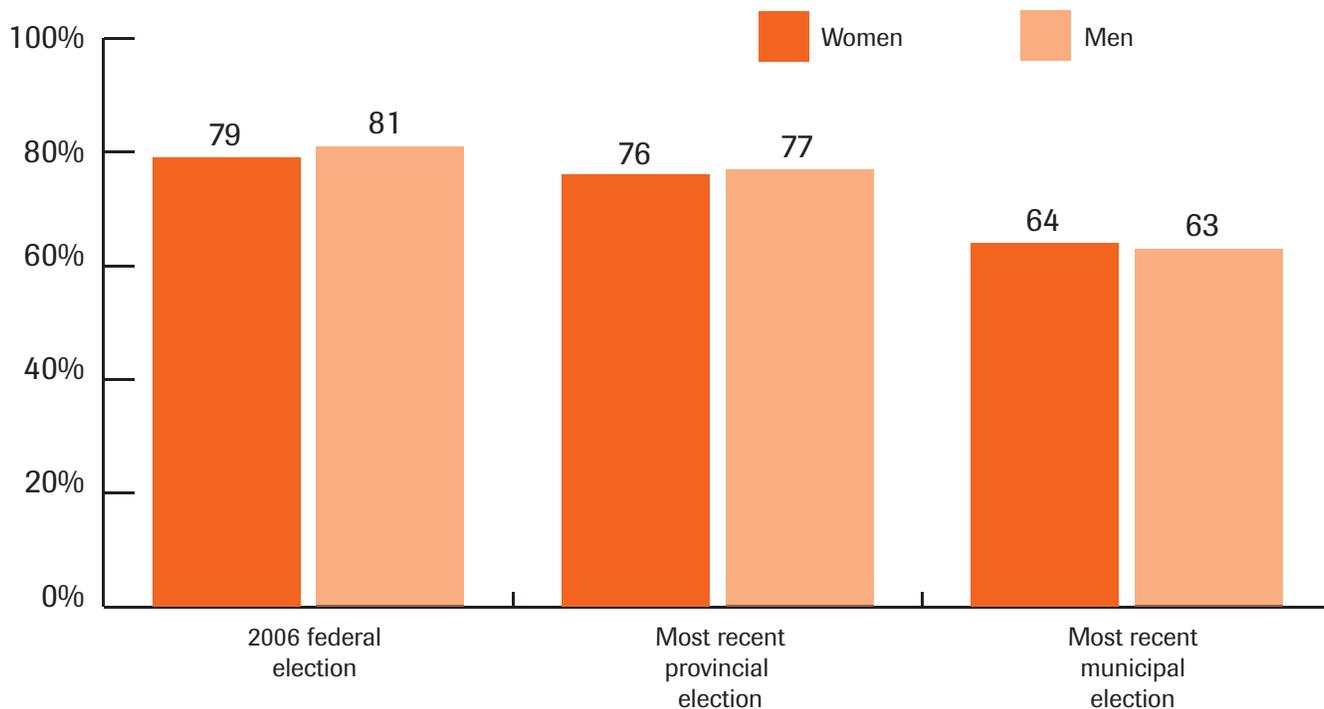
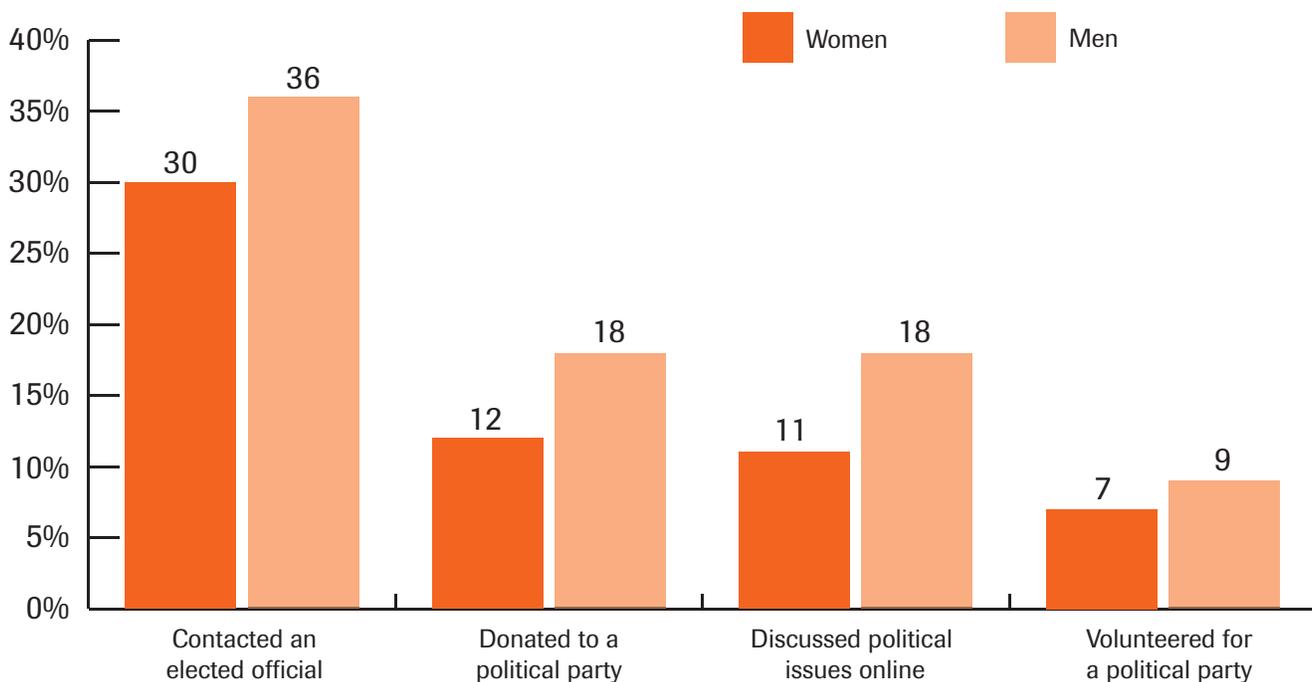


Figure 12: Political Participation - 2006 Looking West Survey



online discussion, made a party donation or volunteered for a political party. Of the four activities, one-third of respondents contacted an elected official. The gender gap in this activity is six percentage points in favour of men.

Similar gender differences were found in two other activities. Men had close to a seven point advantage over women in donating to a political party and discussing political issues online. While donating to a party does not necessarily affect a party's policy, it is an important gesture that signifies party approval. It also indicates to what degree women are engaged and whether they have enough access to personal or household money to donate. Discussing political issues online is not a perfect measure of discussing politics with other people, but the seven point gap favouring men over women is similar to the gaps found in discussing politics in the Canada Election Study.

Volunteering for a political party is the least popular activity. Among the relatively few who helped a party, the gender difference is still in men's favour, but the gap is only two points.

Protest activities such as boycotting services or goods, signing a petition and attending protests and rallies are also important forms of political expression. Seeking to influence policy from outside the government and political parties is a potentially powerful method. It can be gratifying for those who do not trust democratic institutions and who are skeptical of the ethical or leadership qualities of politicians. At the same time, these seemingly unconventional forms of participation are more likely to engage younger people and women.

Gender gaps are virtually non-existent for attending a protest and participating in a boycott. In fact, the gender gap reverses when it comes to signing a petition. Women hold a six point advantage over men for signing a petition in the last twelve months.

Despite the encouraging results that women undertake protest activity as often as men, women's differences in political activity is a concern. The rate of their political participation is important to ensure that political parties and governments fairly represent citizens' values and opinions.

3.4 Ideology

Gender differences in political ideology give us a glimpse of why gender gaps form in public opinion. Political ideology is

often a good indicator of how people believe society should work and the way respondents view the role of government.

As shown in Figure 14, women and men have placed themselves on a left-right continuum by identifying with one of the following categories: very left of centre, somewhat left of centre, centre, somewhat right of centre, very right of centre, none of these labels apply to me, and don't know. Women appear to be slightly more centrist than men. The greatest gender difference is in the categories of "right of centre" and "very right of centre." The gender gap among those on the right is eight percentage points in favour of men.

What is more concerning is the clear sign of disengagement: twice as many women as men did not place themselves on the left-right ideological scale. This phenomenon is likely the result of women having a smaller stock of political knowledge and less political confidence than men.

4. Summary

Political activity and political opinions were examined in tandem because women's lower levels of engagement lead to fewer opportunities to express their often unique point of view. We have found that men and women rate similar policies as their top priorities. Improving the provincial healthcare system, doing more for the environment and reducing poverty in Canada were the top three policy issues for both women and men in early 2008. At the local level, however, there is some disagreement on the most pressing issues. Men and women both rate crime in the community as the greatest concern, but there was discrepancy in other top-rated issues such as reducing homelessness and reducing traffic congestion.

Most tellingly is the difference in the *strength* of concern in policy areas such as doing more to reduce crime in the cities, improving healthcare, reducing poverty, greenhouse gases and homelessness. Gender differences occur most often in policies related to social and environmental issues, indicating that women's strongest opinions are informed by an ethic to care – to care more about the issues that help others and the environment.

While highlighting gender differences this report does not mean to imply that men and women are fundamentally different on all measures of political participation and public opinion. Rather, Canadian women and men live in "different but overlapping

Figure 13: Alternative Political Participation - 2006 Looking West Survey

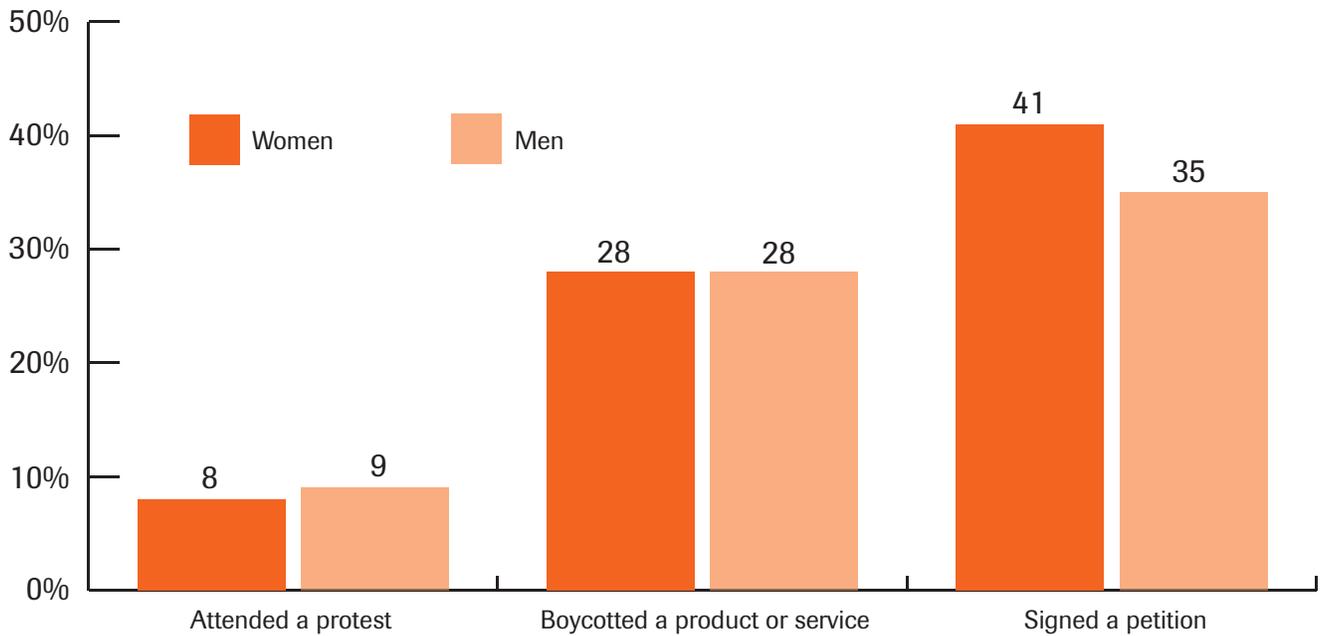
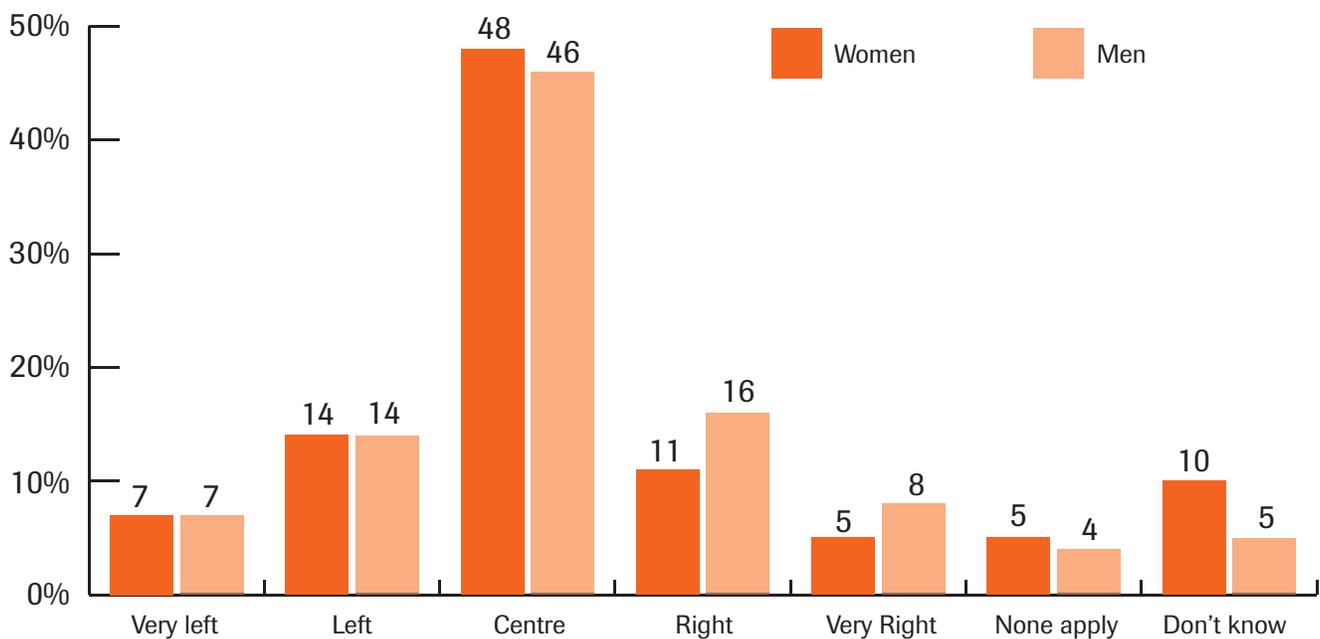


Figure 14: Self-Placement on Left-Right Ideology Scale - 2006 Looking West Survey



worlds” which shape public opinions and political behaviour (O’Neill 2002). Women are often socialized to be predominantly nurturing and caring, which shapes their public opinion and leads to calls for “a more humanitarian approach from political leaders, more caring for others and more responsiveness to citizens’ requests” (Burt 1986, 77 quoted in O’Neill 2002).

At the same time, women do not take the same opportunities as men to shape public policy. Women are less likely to contact elected officials, donate to a political party, discuss issues online and volunteer for a political party. On the other hand, women are just as likely, if not more likely, to partake in protest activities like boycotting or signing a petition. While governments and political parties use public opinion polling data more than ever to measure the attitudes of Canadians, there is still a need for women to join party organizations and take part in electoral activities. Currently those with the greatest political resources – white, middle-aged, affluent men – are the most likely to see their needs and interests reflected in collective expressions of public opinion because they are the most informed and participate the most.

5. Recommendations

How can women’s political engagement better reflect the unique policy preferences of women? There are a number of strategies that focus on improving women’s political activity.

One of the largest barriers to women’s political engagement is their political interest. Women need to be encouraged to become engaged in politics. This necessitates more political role models for women in public office. Electing more women has a positive effect on political engagement (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007). The relative absence of women in electoral politics sends an omnipresent message that politics is not a *natural* place for women. Repeated under-representation of women in high profile positions keeps women questioning their place in politics, in what is often perceived to be a man’s domain.

Unfortunately, in the Canadian political system, female backbenchers do not bring enough attention to their position to serve as role models. In the Canadian Westminster Parliamentary system, media tend to focus on the personal qualities of party leaders and key Cabinet ministers. Indeed, women party leaders and high-level members of Cabinet can transform the

perception of women in politics given the national coverage they receive in the media, especially at election time.

In this regard, the Canadian experience thus far has been dismal. Only one female has been elected provincial premier (Catherine Callbeck in PEI from 1993–1996). Canada has yet to elect its first female Prime Minister. Kim Campbell – our first and only female PM for four months prior to the 1993 federal election – was not successful in returning the Progressive Conservatives to a majority government, or even returning the PCs with official party status to the House of Commons. Campbell was criticized for her poor campaigning skills, though pollsters argued that Campbell was just as popular before the election as she was on election day. This suggests that it wasn’t her leadership that was being evaluated, but rather Brian Mulroney’s. Sadly, she is often personally blamed for the demise of her party.

Similarly, the leadership of the federal NDP, under the tutelage of Audrey McLaughlin and Alexa McDonough, never regained their electoral fortunes after the rise of unpopular NDP governments in BC and Ontario. Unfortunately – and perhaps unfairly – female federal leaders have a legacy of leading their parties into the electoral wilderness.

Role models at home also serve an important purpose. There is an important relationship between a mother’s political behaviour and her daughter’s subsequent political behaviour. When the mother is strongly engaged in politics, it can have a positive impact upon the daughter’s future political engagement (Wolbretch and Campbell 2007; Gidengil 2008). Daughters gain interest and experience vicariously through their mother’s political activities in a way that does not transfer from their fathers. This helps young women overcome socialized gender stereotypes: by being interested in politics and confident in their political abilities.

If women do not increase their political participation, their views can be expressed through women’s advocacy groups, women’s elected representatives, and women bureaucrats. Electing more women to legislatures is an interesting compromise. While attitudes of elected women do not mirror the female electorate exactly, there are gender differences between male and female legislators that are similar to those in the broader public. Elected women can represent some views that are important to women, but they may not necessarily reflect the views of all women, especially women from underrepresented groups such as Aboriginals, minorities and low income earners.

Many countries have had marked success increasing the number of women parliamentarians by taking a number of measures. Political parties and national legislatures have adopted the use of gender quotas in at least 100 countries. *Party quotas* are voluntary measures adopted by political parties to increase female candidates. Currently, the federal NDP and Liberal parties have adopted these types of quotas to increase the number of women running under their party banner. *Legislated quotas* require all political parties to nominate a minimum percentage of female candidates. *Constitutional quotas* may also be put in place, normally in newer countries, to set aside seats for women to ensure a minimum amount of representation. Rwanda is well-known for its constitutional quotas which guarantee women at least 30% of the seats in the lower house. This resulted in women winning 50% of the seats in the 2003 national election – the first time parity has been achieved in *any* country.

The onus to engage women is not solely on women. Political parties need to make their organizations more inviting for women so that they can gain high-ranking positions within the party's executive. There are a variety of strategies that can be invoked to achieve this aim. Parties can increase women's partisan engagement by recruiting them to the general party membership and asking them to run for elite positions in the party. Currently, the degree of recruitment varies by party. Some parties put little effort into recruiting underrepresented groups like women while others require a minimum number of women in the party's executive positions. Recruitment is critical for women because they are less likely than men to run for party positions or throw their name into the local nomination contest unless they have received encouragement from prominent party members.

Though parties are an important democratic institution that can be reformed to include more women, there is another important aspect of Canadian democracy that should not be overlooked: federalism. It is relatively easy to argue that women have not been served well by federalism. Perhaps it is no coincidence that social and environment issues are the exact ones for which the three levels of government have not been able to find long and durable solutions. These issues get muddled in the fray and mystery of inter-governmentalism. Without defining leadership that transcends all levels of government, these issues are perpetually difficult to govern well. While social program spending is increasing in many areas, women *remain* deeply concerned about the quality of these services.

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About the Canada West Foundation

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Our Mission

A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces and all Canadians.

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In 1970, the One Prairie Province Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Herald, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including BC and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization. To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was created under letters patent on December 31, 1970. Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Foundation's past, present and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

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