

Bashevkin, Sylvia. 2009. *Women, Power, Politics: The Hidden Story of Canada's Unfinished Democracy*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-543170-4. Paperback: 19.95 CAD. Pages: 186.

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Sylvia Bashevkin is a leading scholar on the topic of women and politics in Canada, particularly on women's political engagement. *Women, Power, Politics* is her most recent exploration of women in formal politics, particularly in positions of power, such as party leaders. The book is written for both a popular and an academic audience, promising to be particularly useful for undergraduate political science students interested in Canadian politics, democracy, and women and politics.

Bashevkin argues that there are so few women in Canadian politics due to a discomfort among Canadians with women in positions of power. She develops this argument as the *women plus power equals discomfort* equation, which neatly categorizes levels of discomfort on issues of leadership style, age, appearance, speech, and private lives, with the media playing a crucial role in reinforcing gender schemas and, as a result, the discomfort equation.

In terms of leadership style, many of the characteristics Canadians associate with an effective leader are characteristics traditionally attached to men, such as being assertive and decisive. Bashevkin argues that Canadians are comfortable with men taking on such traits, but uncomfortable when women do so. However, women who adopt a "softer," more consensual leadership style are also criticized for being ineffective. As such, there is no acceptable way for women leaders to behave. This is the line of reasoning that carries through the entire book – for women politicians there is no "right" way. Bashevkin draws on media portrayals and political memoirs to demonstrate that female politicians are deemed either too young and inexperienced (Sheila Copps in 1982) or too old (Pauline Marois in 2005); too plain (Alexa McDonough) or too glamorous (Rona Ambrose); too outspoken (Sheila Copps) or too soft-spoken (Audrey McLaughlin); too chaste and serious (Agnes McPhail) or too distracted by their love lives (Kim Campbell and Belinda Stronach). In the end, Bashevkin concludes, "political women in Canada can't seem to find ages, clothes, or speaking styles that correspond to what we as the assessors deem appropriate" (58).

My main critique of the book is Bashevkin's unwillingness to take this argument a step further to link these same critiques to all Canadian women, not just women in politics. Indeed, the more powerful the position, the more discomfort there is, but all women face judgments based on their age, appearance, speech and private lives. As with female politicians, women in general are often viewed as too young and inexperienced or too old, as there is a very short window of time when women's experience and age match up to societal expectations about what is desirable and acceptable for any position of power. Women are also judged for having children or not having children, for having a career or for staying at home to care for children, for spending too much time and effort on their appearance or for not spending enough, for being too "feminine" or too "masculine," for being single or divorced. Bashevkin's *women plus power equals discomfort* equation captures Canadian society's increased levels of discomfort when women seek top political positions, but similar arguments could be made about women seeking any position of authority or power, such as attorney or CEO, and could even be extrapolated to women in general, when there is no position of power at stake. The judgments women face regarding their age, appearance, speech, private lives, and the decisions they make are present regardless of if they are running for political office. Making these connections would strengthen the argument and make a more thorough contribution to the broader study of gender oppression.

Even without these connections, Bashevkin's discomfort argument is convincing, as she provides a thorough analysis of how female party leaders have become associated with electoral failure in Canada. She traces how women have often only been able to win leadership races in uncompetitive provincial or federal parties, and once that party fails poorly in an election, it is the female leader who is blamed. Over time, the media has begun to paint all female leaders as ineffective and associated with failure, based on the experiences of a few women who led marginal parties to marginal election results. Due to the small number of women in politics, patterns and generalizations are drawn about women such as Kim Campbell and Rita Johnston that are not drawn about men, even though there are certainly many men who have led their parties to dismal election results at the provincial and federal levels.

The overall result of the discomfort equation, argues Bashevkin, is that it limits the number of women willing to put themselves forward as candidates for elected office in Canada, knowing the scrutiny that they will face, which raises serious questions about Canadian democracy, justice and

fairness. While acknowledging the presence of socially conservative female MPs as a challenge to arguments of substantive representation, Bashevkin's focus remains on the outcomes of the paucity of women in Canadian politics and in providing solutions. Thus, she argues that one of the outcomes of women's weak political representation is that governments often neglect issues that tend to be of more salience to women, such as childcare and violence against women. In addition, the small number of women who are willing to put themselves forward for political office allows the media to continue to treat women in politics in the same manner – narrowing in on their personal characteristics and finding fault with each, rather than focusing on policy issues.

Bashevkin concludes with a chapter entitled "What to Do," which offers eight prescriptions to change the current situation faced by women in the political sphere. The first four proposals involve significant formal rule changes – from requiring mandatory voting, to adopting legislative quotas, reforming the electoral system, and contesting media portrayals through court challenges and written complaints. These formal proposals are supported by four informal proposals, which call for a renewal of the women's movement and the movement for increased democracy in Canada, informal monitoring of the media, probing anti-feminism, and getting involved in politics. Bashevkin provides compelling evidence to support the necessity of each proposal and demonstrates how each will further Canadian democracy, particularly in the present context of neoliberalism and under the federal Conservative government's political agenda. Renewing the Canadian women's movement may prove to be the most difficult, yet crucial, factor in increasing women's political representation in Canada; if it does occur, the other changes proposed by Bashevkin will support the larger project. *Women, Power, Politics* provides a thorough investigation into the underlying reasons why there are not more women at every level of Canadian politics, and Bashevkin's proposals to change the current *women plus power equals discomfort* equation provide a clear road map forward for women in Canadian politics.