

Gender Parity in Cabinets: Towards the Mediatization of a Public Problem in Canada?

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Abstract

This article focuses on the media coverage of gender parity in cabinets in Canada and three of its provinces. It paints a portrait of the Canadian discourse on women's political representation issues and reveals the way in which the arguments put forward focus both on the ideal of parity and on the rules for its implementation, gender quotas. The study is based on an argumentative analysis of the media discourse (Amossy, 2018) of ten cabinets. Our results show that media coverage is generally favorable, although counterarguments are more numerous when the novelty of parity has faded. Analysis of the results at the premium of media coverage provides a better understanding of how media coverage could influence political parties and their leaders to appoint more women to cabinet.

Keywords

Argumentative Discourse Analysis; Cabinets; Canada; Gender Parity; Political Representation; Women and Politics

Introduction

In 2007, Jean Charest appointed Canada's first Joint Council of Ministers. The announcement was welcomed both by women's groups who welcomed this political breakthrough for women, and by his political opponents. Columnist Michel Vastel, while expressing reservations about quotas, called it a “feat” and “a first in North America that will put pressure on other governments in Canada, the federal government in particular” (2007, 14, translated by the authors).

Eight years later, Canada had its first parity cabinet at the federal level. Justin Trudeau's announcement received extensive media coverage. His phrase, “Because it's 2015!” in response to journalists who asked him to justify his choice of parity was repeated around the world (La Presse canadienne 2015).

This article focuses on the mediatization of gender parity in Canadian politics. More specifically, it aims to highlight the various argumentative strategies (Amossy 2006 and 2018) used in the media speeches published following the announcement of the appointment of cabinet ministers in Canada and some of its provinces (n=218). Three aspects are studied: 1) the reaction given to the distribution of women and men in the cabinet; 2) the different positions expressed about parity and quotas; 3) the advantages invoked to demand a greater presence of women in politics.

The research provides a portrait of the Canadian discourse on women's political representation through a ten-year period and shows how arguments for and against quotas are intertwined with the more general argument for women's political representation. Through the lens of mediatization (Hepp et al. 2015; Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013), the study documents the role played by the media in influencing prime ministers to nominate more women in the cabinet (Annesley et al. 2019).

Women and politics

Since 1995, the United Nations has recognized the importance of addressing women's political underrepresentation by adopting measures to promote greater participation of women in power and decision-making structures around the world (Tremblay 2005). Actions taken can range from incentives for women to enter politics, to those offering support for elected women, to legislative quotas (Krook and Norris 2014).

Women in Canadian politics

In Canada, women are still in a minority position: the number of women elected to office in Canada is just over 29 % (Montpetit 2020) and there are 34.5% women in municipal politics, of which only 19.4% are women mayors in Canada (Sullivan 2019). Moreover, the

issue of women's presence is not the subject of any law or policy (Tremblay 2015), but rather of initiatives by the parties or their leaders. In fact, few parties have adopted measures aimed at implementing changes to improve women's political representation.

Public support for quotas is mixed. Only a minority of Canadians support measures requiring political parties to run a minimum number of women candidates in federal elections (Everitt and Gidengil 2013) and 45% of Canadians believe that parity should be a goal when composing Cabinet, but not a priority (Angus Reid Institute 2018).

Gender parity and gender quotas

Two concepts are used in this article regarding the under-representation of women in politics: gender parity and gender quotas. While gender quotas refer to binding measures adopted to ensure a critical mass of women in decision-making bodies (Tremblay 2005), gender parity, a concept that originated in France, refers to the ideal of equality resulting from a more balanced political representation between women and men. It refers both to the measures taken to achieve it and to the effects of these measures on gender dynamics within institutions and society (Sénac-Slawinski 2009).

Joni Lovenduski (2005) classifies the different arguments for increased political representation of women into three categories: 1) the representational justice inherent in women's citizenship; 2) pragmatic electoral considerations; and 3) the different approach that women would bring into politics.

In her view, these arguments would be distinct from the arguments for and against gender quotas, since there are different ways to achieve parity. A synthesis of the main arguments for and against gender quotas has been drawn from the literature. For those in favor of quotas, they are perceived as a solution to the systemic exclusion of women from the political sphere. In a system that does not recognize or leave enough room for women's merit, quotas are seen as a means of recognizing the contribution of women's specific experiences and interests. In the long run, it is believed that they could help increasing the legitimacy of the democratic system and set an exemplarity character for collective norms and projections about women's place in the society. On the other hand, others believe that skills are independent of sex and/or gender. Thus, quotas would contravene the merit-based competition process and constitute a form of unfair favouritism towards men. Some argue that they could lead to the recruitment of incompetent women because they are women. For these reasons, women themselves wouldn't want these favouritism measures that could lead to women's skills being questioned (about quotas arguments, see Lovenduski 2005; Bacchi 2006; Krook et al. 2009; Sénac 2013; Tremblay 2005 and 2015).

Gender parity in the cabinet is a strategy to ensure better political representation of women in legislative bodies, but it does not necessarily constitute a quota. Indeed, while some prime ministers, including Justin Trudeau, have announced their intention to appoint a parity council of ministers before the election results are known, this is not the case for all the people behind the parity councils of ministers studied. In the case of Rachel Notley, in particular, it was even pointed out that her ministers were appointed because of their competence and not because of their gender (Markusoff 2015).

According to Claire Annesley and colleagues (2019), the barriers to women's appointment to cabinet and the reasons why they are appointed remain little known. They argue, however, that the appointment of more women to cabinet would contribute to putting pressure on subsequent cabinets, under the concept of a "concrete floor" that "describes the minimum proportion or number of women required for that ministerial team to be perceived as legitimate" (3).

Media coverage of gender parity and quotas

In particular, political science studies have demonstrated the key role in the adoption of quotas of stakeholder groups such as women's groups and the political community as well as international organizations (mainly in developing countries) (Krook et al. 2009; Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005).

Rainbow Murray (2012) identifies the media as important potential actors in bringing about change: "Popular mobilization in favour of women's representation would need to be brought about by a well-orchestrated campaign by the women's movement and pressure groups. Such mobilisation, if facilitated by a sympathetic press, would provide the ideal conditions in which to garner public support for quotas and place pressure on politicians to take action" (736).

The impact of the media on mobilizations in favour of a greater place for women in politics has also been put forward in the work of Virginie Julliard (2012). In France, the media coverage of the parity cause from its beginnings in 1990 until the adoption of a law has made it possible to understand the relationship between the interventions and demands of feminist and political circles, in addition to the role of citizen opinion in the evolution of the debate.

In this sense, the study of the discourse and argumentation about gender parity in cabinets in the media not only makes it possible to document the arguments used by the various groups, but also serves to apprehend how the various arguments, mobilized in context, can help guide the debate with a view to convincing the population. Knowing the possible impact of media discourse, this article aims to provide an overview of gender

equality arguments used in Canadian media. While a few studies have emphasized the important role the media can play in pressuring political parties to nominate more women (see Praud 2013; Annesley et al. 2019), little has been written about what they actually say on the issue.

Argumentative discourse

According to Ruth Amossy (2006, 37, translated by the authors), argumentation is “the verbal means that a speech authority uses to act on its speakers by trying to make them adhere to a thesis, to modify or reinforce the representations and opinions that it lends them, or simply to provoke their reflection on a given problem”. Argumentative discourse analysis is part of a broader conception of argumentation that is not limited to the traditional study of arguments, but also proposes to consider the emotional dimension and the persuasive dimension as components of the argumentation (Amossy 2018; Bernard Barbeau 2015).

To operationalize this conception, Amossy proposes the notions of argumentative dimension and argumentative aim. The first, present only in a certain number of speeches, constitutes an “enterprise of persuasion supported by a conscious intention and offering strategies programmed for this purpose.” (Amossy 2006, 33, translated by the authors) Arguments in this dimension are subject to prescriptive rules of construction that determine the validity of the arguments. The second, present in all texts, even those that do not have a clear project of persuasion, considers argumentation in a broader way, that is to say, as “an approach that aims to intervene in the opinion, the attitude” of people (Amossy 2018, 2, translated by the authors).

The advantage of this approach is that it makes it possible to consider alternative forms of argumentation present in so-called information texts, such as journalistic articles, which contribute to argumentation by “trying to share opinions, views, questioning, through discursive procedures that are not formal 'arguments’” (Amossy 2018, 2, translated by the authors). Thus, it allows us to study a set of discursive elements that can guide conceptions of parity. In addition to focusing on arguments for or against an issue, it allows us to look at the discourse of “shared knowledge and social representations [which] therefore constitute the basis of all argumentation” (Amossy 2006, 99, translated by the authors).

Data and methodology

Regarding the data collected for this paper, the corpus is made up of texts that appeared in the written media within the first 10 days following the announcement of the appointment of the Council of Ministers. Of the 10 targeted councils of ministers, seven are

parity or in the “parity zone”¹ cabinets (Jean Charest, Parti Libéral, Quebec, 2007 and 2008; Rachel Notley, New Democratic Party, Alberta, 2015; Justin Trudeau, Parti Libéral, Canada, 2015 and 2019; John Horgan, New Democratic Party, British Columbia, 2017; François Legault, Coalition Avenir Québec, Quebec, 2018) and three have not reached gender parity (Pauline Marois, Parti Québécois, Quebec, 2012; Philippe Couillard, Parti Libéral, Quebec, 2014; Jason Kenney, United Conservative Party, Alberta, 2019). The documents were retrieved from *Eureka* and *Canadian Major Dailies*² search engines.

A total of 11 media outlets, mainly print and online newspapers, but also the radio and TV news website, were used for the collection. The three main French-language newspapers in Quebec (La Presse, Le Devoir, and Le Journal de Montréal) as well as the news site of the state-owned corporation Radio-Canada were used as a basis for the study of provincial cabinet meetings in that province and to provide a French-language perspective on the coverage of federal cabinet meetings. The national newspapers The National Post and The Globe and Mail, as well as the state-owned corporation English-language counterpart, the CBC News website, were used to collect data on federal councils of ministers and the three other councils of ministers in the English-speaking provinces. Local newspapers also completed the data set for each of these provinces: The Calgary Herald and The Edmonton Journal for the Alberta cabinets; The Vancouver Sun and The Province for British Columbia³.

A keyword search⁴ yielded a wide range of texts (more than 800) dealing with the composition of the cabinets and the various issues facing the new government. A selection was then made to retain only those texts that explicitly addressed the presence of women in cabinet or the distribution of women/men in cabinet. A total of 218 texts, mainly articles and columns (79.8%), but also letters of opinion were collected for analysis.

The number of documents collected varies for each Council of Ministers – see Graph 1. The number of documents dealing with the parity issue is much greater for Justin Trudeau's first federal cabinet in 2015 than for the second in 2019 (107, compared with 12).

¹ The term “parity zone” [zone paritaire] is generally used to refer to a composition of 40 to 60 per cent of men and women.

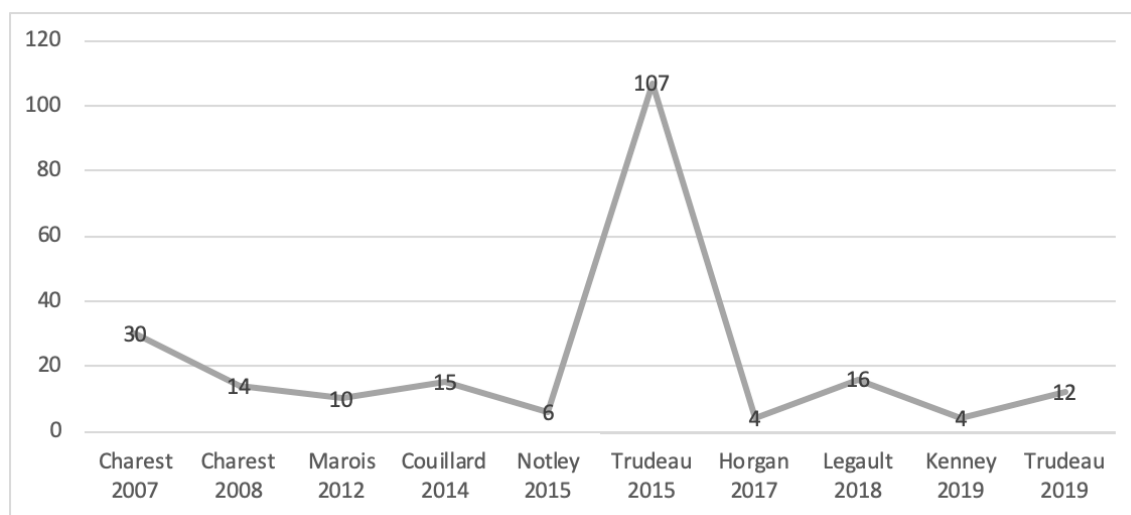
² The following media were used for the collection: La Presse, Le Journal de Montréal, Le Devoir and Radio-Canada Nouvelles (Quebec cabinets and French coverage of the Trudeau cabinet); The National Post, The Globe and Mail, CBC News (Notley, Trudeau, Horgan and Kenney). The Calgary Herald and The Edmonton Journal are also among the newspapers collected for the Alberta firms. The Vancouver Sun and The Province completed the British Columbia cabinet corpus.

³ It should be noted that Le Devoir is known for its independence positioning, but that other newspapers do not necessarily present their editorial approach.

⁴ In addition to the name of the head of government, the keywords employed are “cabinet” (French/English) and “et/ou conseil” (French).

With respect to provincial cabinets, interest is greater in Quebec, where the number of documents is always higher than in the English-speaking provinces, regardless of the place occupied by women in these councils of ministers. In the French-speaking province, the same trend can be observed as for the federal cabinets: interest is more pronounced for the first parity-based cabinet where almost twice as many documents deal with this aspect.

Graph 1: Time graph of the corpus.



Source: Authors.

The media discourse was analyzed using a mixed methodology, both quantitative and qualitative, following the two dimensions of discourse mentioned above. As such, it should be noted that disparities in the number of documents collected from one cabinet to another make it more difficult to conduct a quantitative comparison between all cases. This aspect is the subject of an overall analysis, with the exception of the Charest 2007 and Trudeau 2015 cases, for which the higher number of documents allows for more nuanced comparisons.

Argumentative dimension

For the study of the argumentative dimension, all the discourse units that contributed to qualifying the proportion of women and men appointed were collected. They were classified according to their positioning: positive, negative or neutral. The classification is based on a set of collective images from which political decisions are qualified positively or negatively. Thus, the mention of “first” or of having kept a “promise” were considered to have a positive connotation. Conversely, associations with negative traits, such as rigidity, or a facade, were seen as units with a negative tone. Neutral units, such as “remains to be seen if...” or “the subject is far from new” were coded as neutral. The content of the message conveyed in these units was then analyzed qualitatively.

Argumentative aim

The study of the argumentative aim is based on the analysis of the argumentative sequence, the basic unit of argumentative analysis according to Marianne Doury (2016). It consists of “(at least) an argumentative statement and (at least) a concluding statement, the passage from one to the other being based on a *law of passage*” (29, translated by the authors). For instance, the two statements “The adoption of parity is a desirable thing” and “Equality is an important value in our society” (29, translated by the authors) acquire their argumentative function only if they are placed in relation: “The adoption of parity is a desirable thing because equality is an important value in our society.”

The argumentative sequences were first analysed quantitatively, according to the position with regard to parity and quotas they helped to defend. The positions defended could be of four types: 1) a position in favour of parity as embodied in the context of parity and its implementation measures in general; 2) a nuanced favourable position, i.e. a position in favour of parity in general, but not entirely satisfied with the parity proposed in the cabinet; 3) a position against parity and its implementation measures in general or against parity implemented in one of the three cases studied without proposing alternative measures or solutions; 4) a position against parity in certain forms that proposes solutions or alternative measures.

These categories, which are mutually exclusive, were established in an inductive way – through an iterative process consisting of a series of back-and-forth movements between the data and the analysis categories (Allard-Poesi 2003) before being used to code all the argumentative sequences identified. A qualitative analysis of the ideas and arguments used to justify each position was then carried out.

Results and analysis: a generally favourable coverage

The results show that the media coverage is not neutral and objective with regard to the parity issue. Both the study of the argumentative dimension and the study of the argumentative purpose of the speeches reveal a tendency to portray the issue favourably.

The argumentative dimension: between innovative premiere and rigidity

The analysis of the argumentative dimension present in the speeches gives an account of discursive representations that contribute to orienting the audience's perception of gender parity. The following table shows the distribution of discursive units with argumentative dimensions according to the positioning adopted.

Table 1: Positioning of discursive units with argumentative dimensions (%)

Cabinet	Positioning			% Total discourse units
	Positive	Negative	Neutral	
Charest (2007)	97.3	2.7	0	22.8 (75)
Trudeau (2015)	81.0	17.6	1.3	46.5 (152)
Entire corpus	80.4	14.7	5	100 (341)

Source: Authors.

Overall, the positioning is mostly positive (80.4%). It is interesting to note, however, that this proportion is higher in the case of Jean Charest's first parity cabinet (97.3%), the first parity cabinet in Canada. This novelty is put forward, in addition to being seen as a sign of a new era for women in politics: "Parity between men and women is an achievement, a first in North America, which will put pressure on other governments in Canada, the federal government in particular."⁵ (Vastel 2007, 14, translated by the authors).

The announcement is particularly well received by women's groups, who are very optimistic and do not hesitate to express their emotions when they speak about the composition of the cabinet, as illustrated by the words reported by the president of the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ), Michèle Asselin: "It's impressive!'. 'It is a page in our history that must be highlighted. Now we can't go back,' she added, emphasizing how 'happy' the FFQ is."⁶ (Lévesque 2007, A3, translated by the authors)

The historical side is also reflected in the positive elements used in the texts that appeared shortly after Justin Trudeau announced the composition of his first cabinet, but it is his response, "Because it's 2015!", that attracts attention. Taken up by many, it associates parity within the cabinet with something obvious, a sign of modernity. Globe and Mail columnist Tabatha Southey even uses sarcasm to illustrate: "Gender parity in cabinet can strike at any time-well, any time that is not psychologically stuck in the 1950s - and, when something like this happens, the likelihood that it will happen again increases" (Southey 2015, F2).

⁵ "La parité entre hommes et femmes est un exploit, une première en Amérique du Nord, qui mettra de la pression sur les autres gouvernements du Canada, le fédéral en particulier."

⁶ ["'C'est impressionnant!' [...] 'C'est une page de notre histoire qu'il faut souligner. Maintenant, on ne peut plus reculer.', a-t-elle ajouté, soulignant à quel point la FFQ est 'heureuse'.']

Contrary to expectations expressed in the media, not all subsequent Quebec councils of ministers have been equal. This did not prevent people from criticizing the lack of parity in the cabinet of Philippe Couillard, who was criticized for having initiated the “return in force of the ‘boys club’ in the cabinet.”⁷ (Elkouri 2014, A9, translated by the authors)

The discursive units with a negative tone towards parity and quotas (14.7% of the units), for their part, revolve around two main axes: the false symbol of equality inherent in parity and the rigidity that underlies the quotas imposed by the prime ministers. One will not hesitate to speak of “cosmetic” measures⁸ (Trudeau 2018, 27, translated by the authors), of “the cult of diversity”⁹ (Bock-Côté 2015, 34, translated by the authors) or to congratulate Pauline Marois, who “has not, moreover, succumbed to the obsession with parity between men and women”¹⁰ (Samson 2012, 18, translated by the authors).

They are more present in the case of Justin Trudeau's first law firm (17.6%), which is associated with a “postcard”¹¹ (Bock-Côté 2015, 34, translated by the authors) that relies solely on the appearance of equality. Some even go so far as to accuse the Liberal team of trying to distort the public's perception: “Mr. Trudeau and his team are masters of symbol manipulation” (Wente 2015, F9).

Thus, while the media coverage is overwhelmingly laudatory of prime ministers who choose to appoint parity councils of ministers, it also reflects a number of more severe criticisms of parity and the symbol it represents.

Argumentative focus - changes in discourse and strategies

A study of the persuasion strategies deployed through the arguments reveals a more nuanced, albeit still more favourable, trend towards a greater presence of women in the cabinet (see Table 2).

Overall, the arguments put forward are generally in favour of parity (46.5%). As is the case with statements with an argumentative dimension, the arguments are particularly favourable when Jean Charest's announcement in 2007, where 72.2% of the arguments express a favourable position.

⁷ [“retour en force du ‘boys club’ au Conseil des ministres”]

⁸ [“cosmétiques”]

⁹ [“culte de la diversité”]

¹⁰ [“n'a, par ailleurs, pas succombé à l'obsession de la parité hommes/femmes”]

¹¹ [“carte postale”]

Table 2: Positions expressed in the arguments (%)

Cabinet	Defended position				% Total of the arguments
	Favorable	Favorable nuanced	Unfavourable	Unfavorable nuanced	
Charest (2007)	72.2	16.7	11.1	0	14.0 (36)
Trudeau (2015)	52.0	16.4	22.4	9.2	59.1 (152)
Entire corpus	46.5	21.6	23.1	8.8	100 (273)

Source: Authors.

An initially positive and optimistic reaction

A number of arguments are used to justify the merits of equal representation in the Council of Ministers, in particular the emphasis on the values of equality inherent in parity and, in the case of the Charest cabinet, the insistence on the competence of women appointees:

If the value of equality thus becomes inescapable, according to her, it is the sensitive positions entrusted to women that demonstrate the extent of the gesture. The return of a Deputy Prime Minister with Nathalie Normandeau; Monique Jérôme-Forget at Finance and Treasury; Michelle Courchesne at Education and Family; Line Beauchamp at Environment, are a few examples.¹² (Beauchemin 2007, A5, translated by the authors)

The arguments in favour demonstrate at the outset a concern about the division of power between women and men, since women have traditionally been camped in ministerial roles that gave them less power (Trimble et al. 2013). The justifications in favour of a greater presence of women in politics also do not escape some form of essentialization on the specific contribution of women in politics, as illustrated by the comments of columnist Lise Payette in *Le Journal de Montréal*, who used her experience in politics to justify her remarks:

He [Jean Charest] won't say it, but he knows that women work more and better than men in politics. I can say this because I have been able to see men botching issues

¹² [Si la valeur d'égalité devient ainsi incontournable, selon elle, ce sont les postes névralgiques qui sont confiés aux femmes qui démontrent l'ampleur du geste. Retour d'une vice-première ministre avec Nathalie Normandeau; Monique Jérôme-Forget aux Finances et au Trésor; Michelle Courchesne à l'Éducation et à la Famille; Line Beauchamp à l'Environnement, en sont quelques exemples.]

very often by inflating their egos in the same proportions. Women are more demanding of themselves.¹³ (Payette 2007, 29, translated by the authors)

The difficulty of articulating the benefits of a greater presence of women without entering into comparisons between their work methods and those of men is not unique to Quebec. A study of the discourse calling for parity in France has revealed the difficulties of demanding a greater presence of women in politics without casting the role of women politicians (and politicians in general, for that matter) in an essentialist and heterocentric perspective (Scott 2005).

The concern that equality in numbers or “places” must also be accompanied by equality in “power” and thus be based on a sharing of responsibilities (Sénac 2013) persists in the other councils of ministers. However, the prevailing personalization by emphasizing the important positions entrusted to women and the competence of women to take up such positions will give way to more general arguments refuting the idea that competence and quotas do not go hand in hand.

Changes in argumentative strategies

There has been a significant change in the media coverage of subsequent firms. As the proportion of counterarguments increases, the argumentative strategies deployed by those taking a favourable or nuanced favourable position also change, giving way to more rational argumentation. Arguments of authority, focusing on the systemic barriers experienced by women who wish to enter politics or on solutions that would ensure better political representation of women in all political spheres, not only in cabinet, are among the argumentative strategies deployed.

The following excerpt illustrates a nuanced favourable position in which one seeks to present positively the sustainable gender parity measure that one wishes to see achieved:

What does parity consist of? It is about ensuring that men and women are properly represented in decision-making bodies. To achieve this, we must first recognize that we have a problem of systemic discrimination in politics and take major steps to address it.¹⁴ (Elkouri 2018, online, translated by the authors)

¹³ [Il [Jean Charest] ne le dira pas, mais il sait bien que les femmes travaillent plus et mieux que les hommes en politique. Moi je peux le dire parce que j'ai été à même de voir des hommes bâcler des dossiers très souvent en s'enflant l'ego dans les mêmes proportions. Les femmes sont plus exigeantes avec elles-mêmes.]

¹⁴ [En quoi consiste donc la parité? Il s'agit de s'assurer au sein d'une instance décisionnelle que les hommes et les femmes soient représentés correctement. Pour y arriver, il faut d'abord reconnaître que nous avons un problème de discrimination systémique en politique et prendre les grands moyens pour s'y attaquer.]

This kind of strategy is consistent with the findings of research by Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall (2005), who have shown that the implementation of quotas is not enough to increase the number of women in parliaments, in addition to insisting on the importance of accompanying the legislation surrounding quotas with sanctions and rules in the event of non-compliance, so that quotas are not just a symbolic gesture.

The organization of the “discourse against”

Arguments against parity, less present in the speeches on the first Charest firm (11.1%), will more than triple in the coverage of subsequent firms (42.8% for the average of the nine other firms). The appointment of a non-parity cabinet by Quebec's first woman premier was used as a pretext to address the idea that women appointed to a cabinet with quotas would be appointed only out of favouritism:

At least we know that the women who will find themselves around the ministerial table, far from being women-potato or women-alibi, have been chosen for their competence and their record of service. It took a woman to refuse to sacrifice merit to the empty concept of parity, a concept that only serves to throw smoke and mirrors in the eyes of the gogos.¹⁵ (Gagnon 2012, A35, translated by the authors)

The counterargument of jurisdiction is a frequently used argument. On the one hand, resistance to quotas is justified because of the importance of politics in the lives of Canadians: “When a thing really matters to us, like, say, a hockey team, we tend to resist the imposition of quotas, insisting on merit as the sole criterion” (Coyne 2015, B5). On the other hand, the equality argument raised by pro-equality advocates is mobilized in favour of men:

By definition, when you decide in advance, and arbitrarily, that you need a certain proportion of men and a certain proportion of women in cabinet, you make a conscious decision to leave out a number of qualified candidates because they are of the wrong sex. It is a form of reverse sexism.¹⁶ (Bock-Côté 2015, 34, translated by the authors)

This type of argument against quotas is particularly mobilized in the case of the Trudeau cabinet (2015), which is blamed for having itself initiated the wave of criticism about competence: “It's just a shame that Trudeau diminished it by predetermining the outcome

¹⁵ [Au moins, on sait que celles qui se retrouveront autour de la table ministérielle, loin d'être des femmes-potiches ou des femmes-alibis, ont été choisies pour leur compétence et leurs états de service. Il fallait une femme pour refuser de sacrifier le mérite au concept vide de la parité, un concept qui ne sert qu'à jeter de la poudre aux yeux des gogos.]

¹⁶ [Par définition, quand on décide à l'avance, et de manière arbitraire qu'il faut telle proportion d'hommes et telle proportion de femmes au cabinet on décide consciemment de laisser de côté plusieurs candidats compétents parce qu'ils ont le mauvais sexe. C'est une forme de sexisme inversé.]

rather than portraying it as the natural result of the talented people available to him in his abundant caucus” (Sutcliffe 2015, A12).

The expression of unfavourable positions is thus mainly based on the notion of quotas. In a few cases, however, such argumentative sequences raise questions about the criteria on the basis of which elected persons can do a better job of political representation.

Adopting nuanced positions

Such comments are also made by individuals who defend a nuanced unfavourable position, but who show a certain sensitivity to the differentiated experience of women. The following quote from Philippe Couillard's firm illustrates this phenomenon: “True, we do not name women just because they are ... women. But between incompetent men and unknown women, we had proof again yesterday that it is the former who win more often than the latter.”¹⁷ (Marissal 2014, A5, translated by the authors)

The expression of this position does not necessarily mean that those proposing it are against an increased presence of women in politics. In the following excerpt, the author questions the effects of more women in the political sphere on the achievement of greater equality for all women:

If it were axiomatic that gender informs policy, then former prime minister Christy Clark would likely have brought in universal childcare and enhanced spending on education. She opposed both. What will likely prove more important for women than Horgan's gender-balanced cabinet is his promise that every ministry's spending will be put through a gender lens. (Bramham 2017, A1)

This echoes the concept of substantive representation (Pitkin 1967), which is measured by the achievements of elected officials with respect to certain groups, by putting forward policies or considering their reality in decision-making, rather than their gender or sex. In summary, the study of the argumentative footage also reveals a generally positive media coverage of parity in the councils of ministers, but the debate is changing over the period studied.

Discussion and conclusion

An analysis of media coverage of the cabinets provides a better understanding of the argumentative strategies mobilized on the subject of parity in Canada over the past decade or so. Broader questions are raised in speeches on the composition of the councils of

¹⁷ [“Vrai, on ne nomme pas des femmes juste parce qu'elles sont... des femmes. Mais entre des incompetents hommes et des inconnues femmes, on a eu encore une fois la preuve hier que ce sont les premiers qui l'emportent le plus souvent.”]

ministers, the context in which the announcement was made by the heads of state partly influences the arguments raised and these change over time.

Cabinets and political representation

Media speeches following the announcement of ministerial councils express both positions on the choice of prime ministers and their choice of cabinet appointees and the proportion of men and women in her cabinet, and positions on broader issues such as gender quotas in politics, political under-representation, and the characteristics of good political representation. On the one hand, the number of women appointed to the cabinet is used as a pretext for presenting more sustainable measures. On the other hand, the representation structures and the impact of the individual characteristics of elected persons on the decisions that are taken are questioned.

The results thus reveal a tangle of frequently invoked arguments in favour of better political representation of women (Lovenduski 2005), as well as different positions on quotas (e.g. Bacchi 2006 and Tremblay 2015). They also reflect a dilemma between different forms of political representation and the criteria for adequate political representation, as raised by Hannah F. Pitkin (1967). While some studies have argued that it is better to elect feminist men than nonfeminist women (Tremblay 2005), the general position in favour of parity is more in favour of descriptive representation as a way of increasing the chances of representing the interests of more women.

A matter of political context

However, the role of the context in which each cabinet is appointed on the debates and positions adopted should be stressed. The appointment of Jean Charest's cabinet in 2007 appears to be a victory resulting from several years of feminist mobilization to ensure that women can invest public space – and not specifically parity – and thus augurs new gains for women in the near future. The questioning of women appointees following the announcement of the first Trudeau cabinet is not unique to Canada. However, the personalization of Justin Trudeau, both by the media and by his team through social media – a phenomenon that began long before his election (Lalancette and Raynauld 2017) – and the high-profile announcement may have helped fuel criticism of a cosmetic ad.

In their study on the reasons for a greater female presence in the high places of political power, Stockemer and Sundström (2018) attribute an important influence to the willingness of party leaders to mark a change from their predecessors. Three of the four prime ministers who have appointed gender equal ministerial councils were in their first term (Rachel Notley and Justin Trudeau in 2015, John Horgan in 2017). In 2007, Jean Charest was

not in his first term, but was in a more difficult position following the election of a minority government. Parity and the appointment of women to key positions was therefore not intended to mark a change from his predecessor, but from his previous administration. Thus, the media coverage and the generally more favorable argumentation to first-time gender parity cabinets could contribute to giving a more positive image to the government and, more specifically, to the prime minister in charge of the composition of his cabinet.

The study of non-parity councils of ministers, particularly that of Philippe Couillard, illustrated the coexistence of opposition to quotas and a certain understanding of the systemic issues that hinder women's entry into the political sphere. The counter discourse that is more present once the novelty effect has faded can be associated with a form of backlash (Mansbridge and Shames 2012) against women's greater access to the sphere of political power. Indeed, the counterarguments put forward claimed that such measures would run counter to appointment principles based solely on merit and competence. Yet appointments to the cabinet, a place of symbolic representation, are largely based on criteria of symbolic representation of social groups, helping to demonstrate the importance accorded to them by party leaders (Annesley et al. 2019; De Winter 1991).

Mediatization and its influence on political decisions

While Claire Annesley et al. (2019) assert that the media are among the actors who can influence party leaders to appoint joint cabinets, little attention had been paid to studying the media treatment of this issue when appointing cabinet ministers. The study of the arguments deployed provides a deeper understanding that goes beyond previous findings on the number of women or the novelty of the first gender equal cabinets (Stockemer and Sundström 2018).

According to the mediatization theory (Hepp et al. 2015; Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013), the media could lead to a certain adaptation of the political environment to the media logic. First, the greater difference in interest in the first joint cabinets of Jean Charest and Justin Trudeau is part of a media logic that influences the coverage of political decisions. Indeed, beyond the context specific to the parity issue, media logic (Altheide and Snow 1979) could explain the significant media coverage of the first parity firms of Jean Charest and Justin Trudeau and the subsequent lesser interest in this notion, particularly for the firms of Jean Charest in 2008, François Legault in 2018, and Justin Trudeau in 2019. The “newsworthiness” is the criterion by which what is considered newsworthy and worthy of attention and interest (Lilleker 2006). A trend toward greater media coverage can also be observed among politicians who are out of the norm, as evidenced by various works on the

mediatization of politicians (Lalancette and Tremblay 2019) or when the socio-political context lends itself to greater interest in certain groups (e.g., women, racialized people) (Lucas 2017).

Secondly, the study showed that media interest goes beyond the mention of the number of women and that it also includes and is based on a generally favourable argument. Knowing the important role of the media as mediators of political issues among the population (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013), media coverage can influence party leaders who would like to avoid unfavourable media coverage at a time as important as the announcement of the first council of ministers following their election. While generally favourable coverage would explain why prime ministers tend to appoint more women in their first cabinet, it would be interesting to document the impact of media criticism of non-parity cabinets on the policy decisions that lead to cabinet reshuffles. For example, Philippe Couillard appointed a higher proportion of women during the cabinet shuffle. Is this an isolated case? It would also be compelling to examine the political trend of each party and the number of women it has nominated. While the decision to appoint more women to key political positions was traditionally made by the more left-wing, male-led political parties (O'Brien et al. 2015). François Legault's right-wing political party runs counter to this observation. What role might favourable media coverage over the past decade have played in the decision to appoint more women to government? A larger scale study, combining different countries, would allow a deeper understanding of the influence of the media on politics.

The transformation of argumentative strategies

The constitution of a corpus over a period of more than 10 years has made it possible to study the evolution of the arguments deployed, both in the argumentative strategies mobilized by people in favour of parity, but also in the organization of the “discourse against”.

In view of these changes, it seems relevant to draw a parallel with the findings of Virginie Julliard's study on parity in France (2012). Parity was proposed as a solution to a public problem, namely the under-representation of women in politics. According to the definition proposed by Louis Quéré (2001), she considers that a public problem is a social problem that “is thematized, that is to say that it is publicly configured from a certain point of view, that this thematization is debated in public arenas and that public action is undertaken to resolve this problem” (10, translated by the authors). The history of a public problem has four stages: the first thematizations of the problem; the controversy between the thematizations; public action; and the sanctioning of political action (Céfaï 1996).

The announcement of Jean Charest's parity cabinet, which comes at a time when the issue of women's political representation is less present in the public arena, would have helped to raise the first thematizations of the problem around the values of equality. The more important expression of unfavourable positions that followed would be part of a period of "controversies" where the "counter discourse" is more present. At the same time, we are witnessing the emergence of a thematization that is unfavourable to quotas, but which recognizes specific obstacles to women. Public action would manifest itself in the increased demands and mobilization of women's groups for better political representation of women.

Limits and research avenues

Admittedly, the large variations in the number of documents from one case to another make quantitative comparisons between each case more difficult. It also makes it difficult to analyze the arguments deployed in each media. In this respect, it would be interesting to verify whether some media tend to present a more positive or negative picture of the parity issue than others. Moreover, the study focusing solely on the cabinets ministers does not take into account all the debates that have been taking place in the media in recent years on the representation of women in the political sphere. A more in-depth study and a comparison of the thematizations and arguments could allow a more thorough analysis to verify whether the current social debate corresponds to the model of the history of a public problem.

In this regard, further research should study other times when parity has been in the media, particularly through the "vigie parité" initiative of the newspaper *Le Devoir*, which regularly reported on the number of candidates nominated by the various political parties in the last Quebec provincial and federal elections. The rhetoric about the loss of parity as a result of government reshuffles could also be relevant to study. This is notably the case of François Legault's cabinet, which replaced MarieChantal Chassé as Minister of the Environment after she was severely criticized following her first media appearances for her lack of ease in addressing journalists.

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