

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LOUISE CARBERT, *Rural Women's Leadership in Atlantic Canada: First Hand Perspectives on Local Public Life and Participation in Electoral Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, vii + 190 p., index.

Louise Carbert's text explores an important issue, the under-representation of women in electoral politics, and in particular, the under-representation of rural, Atlantic Canadian women in electoral politics. Arguing for gender equity, not from moral or ideological grounds but from a pro-democracy position, she notes gender disparity across all levels of government, geographical regions (particularly in rural Canada, and even more so in rural Atlantic Canada), and political parties; and then turns to the more important question of why this disparity exists.

Carbert uses the introductory chapter to detail the fact of under-representation, to negate a few plausible theories as to why this inequity continues (e.g., sexism in voting behaviour), and to then position the issue as an under-participation of qualified women. For Carbert, the issue is not to be explained by voting patterns but running patterns; it is not a question of who we vote for as Canadians, and in this case rural Atlantic Canadians, but who is nominated and runs in a riding, and thus who we get to vote for. From this premise, she has then completed an exploratory study examining the critical question of why there is an absence of female candidates in potentially winnable seats, and what factors potential female candidates experience and articulate as prohibiting their entering the race.

Through 14 focus groups, Carbert talked with 126 women living in rural Atlantic Canada. All of the women invited to participate in her research were "active," "community leaders" and thus "potential candidates" for nomination races and election campaigns. Perhaps not surprisingly, given her recruitment methods and target group, Carbert's sample shows her findings to be based on the experiences and perceptions of a relatively privileged group of civically engaged, educated, professional women.

Carbert's analysis of her focus group data is presented within three thematic groupings, the "slushy intersections" between politics and family, politics and work, and politics and the historical practices of rural economic development. Within each of these three intersections, barriers were uncovered that served to limit the political engagement of these women. For example, within the politics and family theme (more important than the time barriers introduced through family roles and commitments)

the women interviewed spoke of deep connections to extended family. These connections served to quell partisan involvement, particularly when political affiliations were different from those of their families or when their political involvement could negatively affect their families' standing or reputation, or their business or livelihood. Within the intersections between politics and work, the women referred to now defunct work place policies that expressly prohibited partisan involvement. While these policies were no longer officially in place, they appear to have created a lasting legacy in the form of a culture that stifles partisan engagement. Within the intersections between politics and economic development, Carbert unearthed loud and repeated aversion to political patronage, an aversion that quelled the women's interest in political office.

Having completed a very intriguing and important piece of exploratory research, Carbert's presentation herein is hampered by: a tendency to under-reference (probably in an attempt to make it reader-friendly across diverse audiences – a worthwhile effort but one that will undoubtedly leave many readers wanting more detail); a tendency to under-present quantitative data (I had to use my calculator to identify frequencies or percentages in some of her tables); and minimal articulation of her specific data analysis process (e.g., how did she identify her analytical themes and how did she attend to issues of validity and reliability within her qualitative analysis?). This text would also have benefited from a broader introduction or conclusion that incorporated more research findings from the field of gender disparity and barriers to political engagement (e.g., the structural, institutional, cultural, and individual factors that prior research has identified) and that interpreted her findings within the broader field of political theory (e.g., how do these findings relate to an overall shift in the bureaucratization of politics? What are the plausible advantages and disadvantages that these “active,” “community leaders” and their organizations and causes stand to gain and lose through increased involvement in electoral politics and official political institutions? How do we ensure a broad representation across all women, not just the traditionally privileged groups whom she accessed?). While her introduction and conclusion provided some of this information, I found myself wanting more detail. These tendencies combined to create a sense that perhaps this very important piece of research was published a little too quickly.

Carbert's work uncovered several interesting findings that merit further consideration and analysis (e.g., a “role model paradox” wherein confident and accomplished women did not perceive themselves as role models, and their tendency to identify a particular visual image as the ideal for a female leader). Like most good research, the volume serves as impressive fodder for future queries. I look forward to reading more from this program of research. In the meantime, researchers, activists, political party executives, and policy analysts interested in women's political participation and the political experiences and interpretations of rural women will find this a quick and interesting read that stimulates facets of their sociological imagination.

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