

Can Harper align Venus with Mars?

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From Saturday's Globe and Mail

March 28, 2008 at 11:50 PM EDT

OTTAWA — One day last December, opposition airtime during Question Period was occupied by female Liberal MPs raising issues from the party's newly released Pink Book, a policy document aimed at women voters. As Liberal staffers watching from the gallery were only too happy to report, Prime Minister Stephen Harper sat in his front-row seat, off-camera — reading the sports pages of The Globe and Mail.

The Prime Minister, like many MPs, is an equal opportunist about zoning out during his required afternoon appearances in the House. But as Parliament returns from spring break on Monday, buzzing as ever with pre-election plotting, Mr. Harper may want to pay particular attention when women have their say.

To win a Conservative majority, most analysts agree, he will have to woo more women. And as things stand, they aren't overwhelmingly enamoured of his party.

South of the border, where a black senator and a white former first lady fight to become the Democratic presidential candidate, the role of gender has become a hot issue, with single women turning out in unprecedented numbers to cast ballots.



Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper speaks during Question Period in the House of Commons on March 5, 2008. (*Chris Wattie/Reuters*)

In Canada, polls consistently put the Conservatives behind the Liberals when it comes to women – far enough behind that it could make the difference between a minority and a majority government. That's what happened in 2006. In the last 10 days of the campaign, the Liberals ran ads hinting that the Conservatives might restrict abortion access. Women got nervous. And the Tories wound up with the smallest minority in Canadian history.

In the last election, Beverly Binhammer, 70, a retired nurse living in Etobicoke, put her first Liberal sign on her front lawn – a personal protest against Mr. Harper, whom she describes with words such as “arrogant” and “devious.” She worries that, with a majority government, he would make Canada look like the United States, a place she thinks cares more for tanks than for poor people.

She's lukewarm on Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion – he wouldn't be her choice, either – but ask her about Mr. Harper and she fumes. “He plots,” the self-described political junkie says. “I can't even stand to look at him.” With the right leader, she might consider supporting the Conservatives. But there is no way Mr. Harper is getting her vote.

But women such as Ms. Binhammer are only one slice of the gender gap. While the Conservatives trail among women, the Liberals consistently underperform with men. And women themselves don't form a united voting bloc: Rural women, for instance, love Mr. Harper. His biggest problem is young, single and urban women. These groups want and care about different issues. For party leaders, it's like negotiating whether the toilet seat should be left up or down in a marriage where the husband and wife are not speaking.

The gender gap is a known phenomenon: Around the world, women lean left and men tilt right. Elisabeth Gidengil, a McGill University political scientist who does analyses of the Canadian Election Study (which samples about 4,000 voters during and after each election), points to women's greater distaste for the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance as preventing those parties from a breakthrough in Central Canada.

In 2006, the gender gap for the Conservatives was only about six points – but enough, political scientists say, to change the results of a close election. Current surveys, depending on the week and the polling company, put the gender gap at seven to 12 points.

It has long been assumed that women vote differently than men primarily because of their income, the jobs they hold and their place in the home. If this were true, politicians would have it easier. But low-income women – like low-income men – are not more likely than middle-class Canadians to vote for the New Democrats, a party that loudly defends more social programs for the poor. University-educated women, on the other hand, are more likely than others to support the NDP, while the same can't be said for educated men.

The one characteristic that strongly influences a woman's vote is religion: Women are far more likely than men to say their faith factors into their ballot, and among Protestant evangelicals, the checkmark is almost guaranteed to go Conservative. (Atheists prefer the NDP.)

“When it comes to women being more supportive of a more caring approach to public policy, it's not really based on their position in society,” says Paul Nesbitt-Larking, chair of political science at Huron University College in London, Ont. “It's much more based on the values that they have.”

And values are harder to change with campaign promises. Women tend to be more skeptical of the benefits of the market economy, favouring government-directed social programs. (In the last election, the big issue for men was corruption; for women, by a wide margin, it was health care.) They are more suspicious of close ties with the United States – a view heightened by the war in Iraq. But the most significant influence on the gender gap are social issues, in particular same-sex marriage, gender roles and abortion.

In the last days of the 2006 campaign, nearly one in three women – compared with fewer than one in four men – identified the Conservatives as the one party she would “absolutely not vote for.”

Tim Woolstencroft, a managing partner with the Strategic Counsel, a polling firm, suggests that Conservatives have had to play defence: They have crafted a tough-on-crime image (since women worry about safety) but played down traditional conservative positions on issues such as the death penalty and gun control. Since they do not support universal daycare, they send mothers monthly \$100 cheques. And they try to hush up issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

“The Conservative Party has to look like they won't do ‘crazy’ things so that the female voter isn't galvanized to go out and vote,” Mr. Woolstencroft

says. “The Conservatives are working hard to be benign. They want women sitting at home.”

Come, all ye faithful

Jennifer Peters might be the Conservative Party's ideal woman in the next election. Ms. Peters, a 48-year-old divorced mom works as an office clerk. She prays at the Praise Cathedral Worship Centre in Mississauga, a new-line Protestant Church. “My religion does shape my values as a whole,” she says.

Born in Jamaica, she came to Canada as a teenager. She was disappointed that the latest budget did not say much about poverty – a strike against the Tories. On the other hand, she opposes abortion, except when the mother's life is in danger, and thinks homosexuality is wrong. While she says it's time Canada left Afghanistan (“these are young men giving their lives for what seems like something that will be going on forever and ever”), she's not bothered by the idea of closer ties with the U.S.

She sounds more like a Conservative, but, like most of her family, she has always voted Liberal. Currently, she says her vote is up for grabs – and she lives in a sought-after riding where the Tories lost to the Liberals in 2006 by 3,000 votes.

“That's the kind of women you work on, because they ought to be Conservative,” says Tom Flanagan, a close adviser to Mr. Harper who has returned to teaching political science at the University of Calgary.

But Mr. Flanagan says the focus on the gender gap is spin, no more significant than patterns that see rural Canadians go Conservative or new Canadians vote Liberal.

Leslie Turnbull scoffs at that. “The Conservatives know damn well the gender gap is important,” the NDP political consultant says. “And what they are trying do is minimize the impact of it.”

Ms. Turnbull understands the importance of the female vote from the NDP majority win in Manitoba last December: In two suburban Winnipeg ridings the party had never carried, the NDP noted “stunning” polling results by gender. If only men voted, the riding was lost. If only women voted, the NDP posted a clear victory. So they ran female candidates who focused on issues vital to women, and won.

Every party employs a similar strategy. The Conservatives, for instance, aren't likely to pursue young urban women – nicknamed “Zoes” by the party in the last election – who tend to live in places such as downtown Toronto ridings the party doesn't expect to win.

The Liberals have the opposite problem in urban Edmonton and Calgary ridings, where they were shut out of the last election. “There's hundreds of thousands of Edmontonians and Calgarians who fit the typical profile of a Liberal voter,” Mr. Flanagan says. “They vote Conservative because you breathe it in the atmosphere, I guess. And it's very frustrating for the Liberals.”

If Ms. Peters is the woman of Conservative dreams, then Melanie Thiessen is the Liberal fantasy.

At 32, she owns her own business, a successful design store called Desidero Home in downtown Edmonton. She is pro-choice and does not have an issue with same-sex marriage, and she thinks the war in Afghanistan “should have been over a long time ago.” She lives in the riding of former deputy prime minister Anne McLellan, whom she greatly admired. However, in the last election, disgusted with the sponsorship scandal, she went over to the Conservatives, joining a groundswell that cost Ms. McLellan the election.

But under the right conditions, she says, she would be willing to go Liberal next time.

Taking the lead

What will woo Jennifer Peters and Melanie Thiessen during an election campaign? That, it seems, is largely the job of the party leader.

While Ms. Peters is willing to keep an open mind, to her the Prime Minister seems “arrogant, like it's his way or the highway.”

But Ms. Thiessen doesn't care that Mr. Harper is not “warm and fuzzy.” She thinks he's smart and pragmatic and she is glad he's from the West. “It's important to be charming and charismatic, but you don't have to be kissing babies.”

The significance of the party leader in deciding election outcomes is a bit murky, but in close campaigns, the popularity of leaders can make the difference between, say, a majority and a minority.

Compare Stephen Harper and Brian Mulroney midway through their second elections, in 2006 and 1988, respectively: Mr. Mulroney was seven points more popular among women. Mr. Mulroney lost women with the free-trade accord, but won them with the tone of his leadership: The first Conservative candidate to participate in a national debate solely on women's issues (no reading the sports pages there), he also appointed women to high-profile cabinet positions.

Plus, he had Solange Denis, the Quebec women who famously confronted Mr. Mulroney outside the House of Commons over his plans to de-index old-age pensions, saying that if he went ahead, it would be, “Bye, Bye, Charlie Brown.”

“She was a four-foot-nothing little Quebec granny with this towering, muscle-jawed man, waving a finger at him, and he was standing there like a little boy,” Dr. Nesbitt-Larking says. “But the point is, he actually said, ‘I’m hearing you. I think you’re right. We’re going to reconsider.’ Now, I don’t know if a Harper government would act in the same way. I have my suspicions that they wouldn’t.”

In the 2006 campaign, according to the Canadian Election Study, Mr. Harper lagged behind Paul Martin by about two points with women but was two points ahead among men. According to a mid-February poll this year by the Strategic Counsel, Mr. Harper led Mr. Dion by a wide margin with both genders, but while 47 per cent of men said they trusted Mr. Harper as Prime Minister, only 32 per cent of women said the same.

Dr. Nesbitt-Larking says Mr. Dion, for his part, should be faring better among women: “Harper’s style tends to have more to do with battening down the hatches and engaging in battle. Mr. Dion has gone out of his way to appeal to the team and inclusiveness, and to talk about enhancing the presence of women in the Liberal caucus.”

But right now, both Ms. Thiessen and Ms. Peters consider him a blank slate, and a bit wishy-washy at that – the kind of perception that also significantly hurts the Liberal leader’s chances with men.

“Mr. Dion, from listening to some of his speeches, seems to be floating in the wind and not really sure of what he wants to do,” Ms. Peters says.

“Has Mr. Dion even made any trips to Alberta?” Ms. Thiessen asks. “If I feel like he's flying under the radar, how are you going to run a country? I feel like he doesn't have a backbone. Where's your tenacity? Where's your spine?”

Of course, the real test doesn't come until a leader is stomping through fairgrounds, shaking hands, in an exhausting election campaign. If ever there was evidence of the power of strong, charismatic leaders to galvanize an electorate, it's the Democratic presidential primaries. But while the U.S. primaries make history, voters in Canada are still choosing among middle-aged white guys.

Since 40 per cent of eligible voters stayed home during the last election, non-voting women are also an untapped resource for left-of-centre parties. And while women are less likely than men to identify themselves as having a good grasp of politics, a study by Dr. Gidengil suggests that being better informed would push women even farther to the left on almost every issue.

For the Conservatives, Dr. Nesbitt-Larking says, the question is whether the right leader – if it's not Mr. Harper – could ever overcome the resistance women have for parties on the right. One poll suggests so: According to a survey conducted by Harris/Decima in early March, either the Liberals or the Conservatives could win by a landslide, obliterating the gender gap – if Senator Barack Obama were leading them.

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