

Pressure to maintain the image

How the scrutiny politicians face differs around the world

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In most western countries, politicians face pressure to maintain a moral image, however, according to some, this varies significantly between Canada, the United States and Europe. David Rayside, a political science professor at the University of Toronto believes this pressure is greater in the United States than in Canada.

“There is a more substantial component of morality generally in the United States in political life and more concern about morality in American public life than in the politics of any other western country,” he says.

Religion is a part of everyday American politics, he says. More people identify the importance of religion, during elections moral issues are debated more, and religious leaders intervene more in politics than in any other western nation.

“It creates room for people to talk about the morality of the politicians themselves,” he says.

Alexander Moens, a fellow at the **Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute** and political science professor at Simon Fraser University says most North American voters expect their politicians to be “good family people.”

“It’s very different, for example, in France where a sort of marital freedom is almost expected from elite members of society.”

Moens says the differences between international politicians and what voters expect can be attributed to culture and the tradition of politics.

“What your culture is, is what you’re going to expect and that’s how you will project your image towards the politician.”

He notes the North American tradition of “the Protestant ethic of hard work, frugality and moral clean living,” whereas countries such as Italy are a mixture of both conservative Catholicism and secularism.

“Berlusconi has gotten away with it to a great degree because of his great media star status, his billionaire status. [He’s a] very rich... glamorous fellow, which Italians, especially Italian males admire,” he says. “But that would be very hard to do in the United States, and a little bit less hard in Canada, but still quite difficult.”

Rayside attributes differences to the fact that there are more political parties with a long history of ideology in Europe, resulting in less focus on the leaders themselves.

In continental European politics, Rayside says, “Generally, there’s less scrutiny of public life and it is far less appropriate politically to talk about other politicians’ family life or personal life.”

While he says Canadian negative campaigning has become more prevalent under the Conservative leadership, “there’s a greater willingness on the part of American politicians and of media to dig for and then use personal information.”

But he notes the Americanization of Canadian politics and how the Conservatives have encouraged “a willingness to look at the family life or the absence of family life of candidates.” As Canadians knew very little about former political figures’ families, Rayside says Harper has encouraged public attention to his family more than any other former prime minister.

“[The Conservatives] do try to portray themselves as family-friendly.”

Both Moens and Rayside say someone like Adam Giambrone, who recently dropped out of the mayoral race after admitting to multiple affairs, could make a political comeback and it would be unlikely for his past to be held against him.

Lee Hamu is a third year civil engineering student and the organizing chair of the Green Party of Canada at the University of Toronto. She says depending on the circumstances, she would consider voting for Giambrone in the future and forgiving his errors.

“Younger people may be somewhat more sexually liberated,” she says, “but on the other hand, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they think that lying to your partner is good.”

Rayside says the scrutiny against women in politics is much more difficult to overcome. He notes how recently-elected Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown posed mostly nude for Cosmopolitan in 1982.

“That wasn’t treated as negative at all,” he says. “If a woman had done that, it would’ve killed her candidacy.”