

Opinions

NATIONAL VIEWPOINT

Lessons for federal campaign

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Last week, Progressive Conservative candidate Rick Wowchuk was re-elected in his Swan River riding with 69 per cent of the popular vote. This landslide victory occurred just days after the CBC reported that an independent investigation concluded that he had engaged in at least five breaches of respectful workplace policy, some of which might be justly categorized as sexual misconduct.

In one circumstance, Wowchuk asked a former assistant if she wanted to see a picture of "hard-working beavers" on his cellphone and proceeded to show her a picture of nude women wearing hard hats and holding chainsaws. In another situation, he made a comment about an assistant wearing a bikini. Wowchuk's conduct surfaced publicly during the election campaign, although the PC caucus had been aware since June 11, 2019. He acknowledged he had "caused offence" and apologized for his actions.

Sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, and otherwise sexually inappropriate workplace behaviours are important issues that must be addressed in public discourse and policy. Newly re-elected Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister's "no wrong door" policy, announced last year, was one attempt to address the problem of sexual misconduct and workplace harassment and yet Wowchuk was not ousted from caucus and was permitted to run again. Wowchuk was certainly not the first nor the last politician to be accused of sexual misconduct, and if the past is any indication the issue of sexual misconduct is likely to surface again in the looming federal campaign.

Why was Wowchuk allowed to run again, and how did he win? These are important questions and we think that our research can provide some insight.

In our peer-reviewed paper, published earlier this year in the journal *Sexuality & Culture*, we analyzed thousands of news reports over the span of a decade tracing rhetorical processes of politicization that cause sexual misconduct to become foremost a political issue, rather than one of concern for victims and justice to hold abusers accountable for their actions.

One hallmark of politicization is a tendency for debate and discourse about sexual misconduct

to focus not on harm to victims, but on the character of the accused and how it reflects on their fitness to govern. An independent investigator reported to the Manitoba legislature that Wowchuk had breached the legislative assembly's respectful workplace policy five times; the June 11 letter from Judy Wegner, executive director of the legislative assembly's administration branch, indicated that caucus was responsible to determine any action to be taken.

Rather than face ouster, Wowchuk was instructed by the PC caucus to take sensitivity training courses to be more respectful in the workplace. The party leader was more concerned with preserving Wowchuk as an election candidate by offering him respectful workplace training, rather than addressing the harm to his victim who had resigned from her position when she was unable to get help from the party. Wowchuk, for his part, made a public statement that he "deeply regret ... and have taken full responsibility" for his actions, assuring that "I firmly believe in our government's actions to strengthen our respectful workplace policies and I will continue to work hard to represent my constituents in Swan River," positioning himself as a strong and effective representative whose unwavering work ethic outweighed his failings.

A second strategy in the politicization of sexual misconduct involves comparing the severity of the allegations relative to those levied at other political figures.

Public comments on a Sept. 5 story in the *Winnipeg Free Press* revealed that some PC supporters justified Wowchuk's behaviour as comparatively less serious than earlier allegations against NDP Leader Wab Kinew and former NDP MLA Stan Struthers. Notably, previous allegations against other MLAs (both NDP and Conservative) involved physical touching, while the allegations against Wowchuk did not, permitting the impact on the victim to be minimized by comparison.

The politicization of sexual misconduct results in a hierarchy of victims in which some experiences of victimization are considered more worthy of censure than others. Victims who come forward with stories of sexual abuse or harassment by political figures must now be prepared to meet the bar: is their experience worse than the experiences of victims of other pol-

iticians? Failing to meet or exceed the established bar of tolerance for sexual misconduct places victims in a situation in which their experience does not matter to the political conversation.

A third process of politicization involves leveraging victim narratives for political gain. Despite repeated claims by Pallister that his government has and will continue to improve workplace safety, the fact remains that the specific situation faced by Wowchuk's former constituency assistant was not addressed to her satisfaction, nor were there any appreciable consequences for Wowchuk's actions.

Thus, while the premier continues to benefit politically by making claims about his government's actions on sexual misconduct in the workplace in response to this case — he insists that the government will "do better" — this specific victim of Wowchuk's inappropriate behaviour has seen no resolution to her case. Pallister refused to justify to the public his decision to allow Wowchuk to run again. Nor was Wowchuk's political career negatively impacted by this scandal, as evidenced by his election with a sound majority.

As we move forward with the 2019 federal election campaign, there are key lessons to be learned to avoid the kind of politicization that trivializes and marginalizes victim experiences. First, it is imperative that we hold political contenders of all stripes accountable for their use of victims' experiences and for their responses to misconduct in their parties. Political leaders must send clear messages, with actions and not just with words, that sexual misconduct will not be tolerated. Second, leveraging victims' stories and exercising rhetorical comparisons to make political gains, as our research revealed, does nothing to further the just cause of holding abusers accountable for their actions.

While there is an ethical duty to give voice to victims who have been and remain silenced, these harrowing stories do not belong to politicians and should not be leveraged in exploitative ways. Victims deserve better from all of us and we must demand better on their behalf.

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