

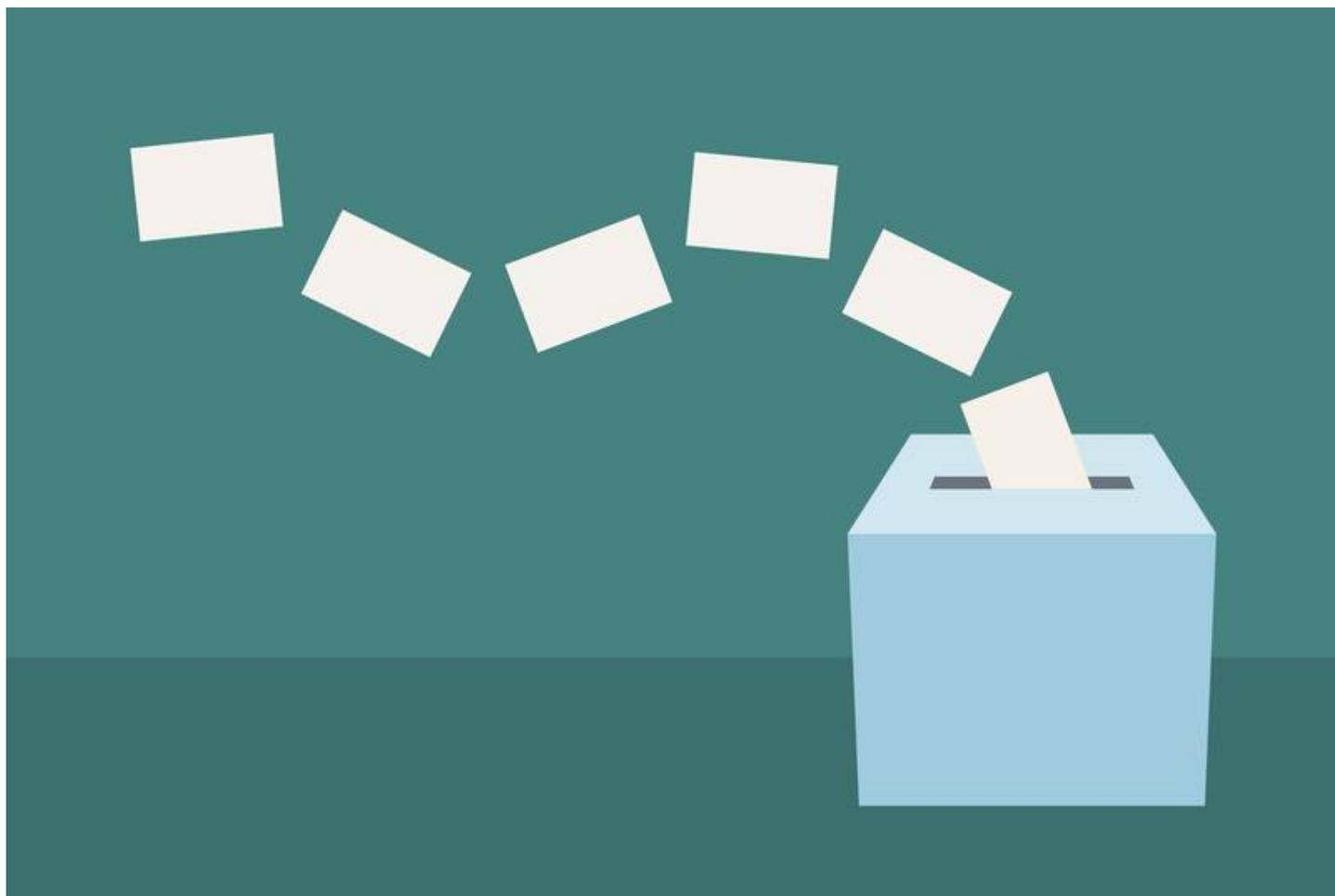
# JIM VIBERT: Party nominations a 'weak link' in democracy

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A report titled Party Favours says the nomination process poses a particular barrier to women; and control over the process by the parties' national organizations makes nominations vulnerable to manipulation and pre-determined outcomes.

It's the "black box" of Canadian democracy, only dimly understood by participants themselves, and totally opaque to party outsiders.

The candidate nomination process is a "weak link" in the nation's representative democracy because nominations are too often uncompetitive, non-transparent, and exclusionary, the Samara Centre for Democracy found after exhaustive study of how political parties nominate candidates to stand for election to Parliament.

The study, contained in a report titled: Party Favours, released today, examined constituency-level nominations that preceded the five federal elections from 2004 through 2015.

It found that there were few competitive nominations; that the nomination process poses a particular barrier to women; and control over the process by the parties' national organizations makes nominations vulnerable to manipulation and pre-determined outcomes.



"At a quick glance, local party democracy in Canada can appear strong, with grassroots members in each constituency gathering every few years to choose their candidate for the next election," the report states. "But in recent decades these contests have increasingly come under the control of the central party and many cases have emerged where nomination meetings appeared to be biased in favour of one candidate or another."

Of more than 6,600 federal candidates captured in the study, only 17 per cent arrived there through a competitive nomination race. Parties directly appointed more than 2,700 candidates with no nomination process, and more than 70 per cent of the 3,900 nomination contests had just a single person running.

The dramatic lack of competition, which holds true across all parties, suggests "shallow democracy" and a failure of parties to perform the important function of recruiting talent into the political system. Fewer than 10 per cent of Canadians are members of political parties.

The parties' rules for nominations allow the central apparatus to decide when nomination contests open and close, who can and can't seek the nomination and whether an incumbent MP will face a nomination challenge.

Candidates who are appointed or chosen through highly restricted contests, owe their position to the central party, potentially reducing their community focus.

"While parties are essential to the operation of Canada's democracy, their MPs should be more than just ambassadors for their party brands. They should know the interests of their constituencies and be willing to defend them," says the report. "And the best way to choose a community champion is through a fairly run and competitive nomination contest organized by each party's local EDA (Electoral District Association)."

The study found that the rules imposed by some parties erect unintended barriers against women seeking contested nominations. Women make up just 28 per cent of nomination contestants, which almost exactly mirrors their representation in the House of Commons.

The nomination process, Samara concluded, is a leading reason women remain profoundly underrepresented in Canadian politics.

For instance, the study shows the number of women running for a nomination increases with the length of the contest. But some parties, the Liberals most notably, often limit the duration of the contest to just a few days — and often to one day — once a preferred candidate emerges.

Women may also be disproportionately affected by the cost of running for a nomination. Conservatives require a \$1,000 refundable deposit, and the Liberals want \$1,500, which they keep.

Notably, the party with the highest proportion of women contestants — the NDP — does not require a fee or deposit and imposes spending limits on anyone seeking an NDP nomination.

Protected incumbents is another undemocratic feature, also prevalent with Liberals and Conservatives. Liberals automatically nominate incumbent MPs who have “earned” the privilege, while the Conservatives set a high threshold for anyone who wants to oppose an incumbent Conservative MP.

Where one party dominates a riding — in 2015 one-fifth of all ridings were won by more than 30 percentage points — a contested nomination may be the only way the constituency has to hold its MP accountable.

Political parties resist most attempts to regulate how they conduct themselves, but they are financed by political donations that deliver generous tax credits and they are reimbursed for election expenses.

“If parties don’t themselves commit to fairer, more consistent and open practices, Parliament has a responsibility to examine stronger regulation to represent the interests of all Canadians who support parties through their tax dollars and accept parties as intermediaries between themselves and their democratic institutions.”

The government recently put in place measures to help ensure the fall election is “free and fair.” It seems like making the nomination of candidates freer and fairer deserves equal billing, at least.

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