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NEWS

Less than 1 in 5 federal candidates chosen in competitive races since 2004, Samara report finds

By [Jolson Lim](https://ipolitics.ca/author/jolsonlim/) (<https://ipolitics.ca/author/jolsonlim/>). Published on Jul 17, 2019 10:36am



TORONTO, ON- Signs direct voters to a 905 voting station at Mississauga Celebration Square on Civic election day Monday October 22.(Rene Johnston/Toronto Star) elx18. Rene Johnston/Toronto Star

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A new report examining the often overlooked process of how party candidates are selected to run in federal elections found only 17 per cent of contestants had won their nominations in a competitive race between 2004 and 2015.

The study from the non-partisan Samara Centre for Democracy released Wednesday looks at how 6,600 candidates that have run for Canada's five major federal parties — the Liberals, Conservatives, NDP, Greens and the Bloc Québécois — were selected in the last five elections.

Using data primarily from Elections Canada, the centre found less than one in five of those candidates won their chance to represent a party in a federal election through what it defines as a competitive nomination race.

The report shows parties directly appointed more than 2,700 election candidates with no nomination process at all, although the practice has since almost entirely ended.

Meanwhile, more than 70 per cent of the remaining 3,900 nomination contests only had one person running.

Parties that win the most seats — the Liberals and Conservatives — typically attract more competitive nominations. However, there was only one instance where a party was able to average two whole contestants per nomination contest for an election: the Conservatives in 2006.

The Samara report also found women only made up 28 per cent of nomination contestants since 2004, although they were just as likely to win candidacy as their male counterparts.

Women only made up 16 per cent of Conservative candidates in that time, 29 per cent of Liberal candidates, and 40 per cent of NDP candidates.

Candidates are selected through nomination races held by volunteer-run electoral district associations ahead of an election, where local party members can choose to run as and vote for contestants. According to a 2019 Samara survey, less than 10 per cent of Canadians are members of a party.

Michael Morden, researcher director at Samara, said the nomination process is a less familiar, but nevertheless critical part of Canadian electoral democracy.

"We don't think about nominations as much, because most of us don't have any role," he said. "But the reality is that's what determines who ends up on the ballot that we have to pick from at election time."

"Nomination is the first step in a chain of democratic events that leads to the parliament we elect."

Morden said at best, nominations can be opportunities to bring new people into the political process and be an important link between local and national political scenes.

But at worst, nomination contests are predetermined, either because a party struggles to attract enough members in a riding to make candidacy races interesting or because of favouritism of certain contestants by the party.

Allegations of favouritism are common in nomination races. For example, contestant Azim Rizvee, who ran in 2015, **[said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had told him \(https://www.cbc.ca/sports/olympics/van-koeverden-controversial-liberal-nomination-1.4986180\)](https://www.cbc.ca/sports/olympics/van-koeverden-controversial-liberal-nomination-1.4986180)** he preferred former Olympian Adam van Koeverden for the Liberal candidacy in Milton earlier this year.

The Samara report notes Canadian laws largely leave parties to make their own rules for nomination contests, such as when a race occurs and how long it lasts.

From the data, the centre found half of all nominations were open just three weeks or less. There were 253 nominations that opened and closed on the same day. In the 2015 election, the average time for Liberal races was 20 days and 23 days for Conservative ones.

The NDP's average length in that election was 211 days — a change in strategy from the 2011 election, when the average length was only 15 days. In contrast to the Grits and Tories, the NDP and Greens had left open the nomination process and waited for contestants to arrive.

The report argues that shorter contests can often favour party insiders because of the time and effort it takes to gather signatures, submit required paperwork and sign up new members to support their nomination bid.

Any potential contestant without advance knowledge about a nomination period opening would be hard pressed to get organized in a short period of time.

"Timing has always been one of the big tools in an essential parties' toolbox for making sure they get the outcome they want," Morden said.

Parties also have the final say on who can run through their "green light" vetting of would-be contestants, which include looking at everything from their personal lives and finances to political views and commitment to the party.

But parties are not required to reveal information on how many contestants they reject or vote share during a nomination election.

Increasingly, as well, parties require local associations to identify and invite women and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds to run.

While the practice of appointing candidates is almost entirely gone, the report found candidates handpicked by parties were no more reflective of Canada's demographic makeup than those chosen through nomination contests.

The report ultimately recommends setting standard opening and closing dates for nomination contests, reporting on contestant votes and the number of would-be contestants vetted out to ensure transparency, all while ensuring parties' slate of candidates reflects Canada's diversity.

Spokespeople for the Liberals, Conservatives and NDP each told iPolitics they were committed to, or had open, fair and competitive nomination processes. They also each noted their parties' recent efforts in increasing the share of women or people of ethnic background running for their respective parties.

For example, Liberal spokesperson Braeden Caley said his party has made candidacy races more competitive in part by boosting its grassroots party membership through eliminating sign-up fees.

NDP spokesperson Guillaume Francoeur said the party is committed to fair and competitive races and is "proud of the fact that over 20 per cent of our nomination races so far have been competitive."

Conservative spokesperson Cory Hann said his party had open and fair nomination processes and rules are applied equally across all ridings and to all contestants.

Correction: A headline of an earlier version of this article conflated the ratio of candidates chosen in a competitive process with the number of races that were opened up to contestants. It has since been revised.

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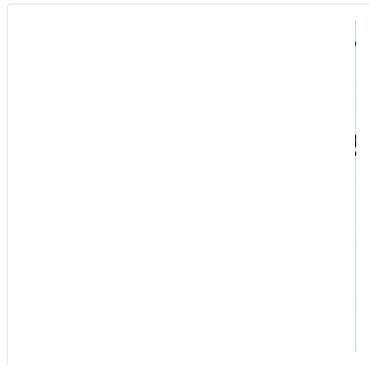
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