

OPINION

# Canada's broken candidate-nominations process is as embarrassing as the U.S.'s primary and caucus system

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There is much about the spectacle of the U.S. system of presidential primaries and caucuses that baffles and offends. The superpower's Byzantine process rewards weird ground-game strategies over broad appeals. It feels like it never ends. And of course, there was the high-profile failure of the Iowa Democratic caucuses, where a faulty iPhone app delayed the results by days. It's enough to make Canadians – with our highly trusted, low-tech elections that rely on paper ballots – feel a little smug about how we do things up here.

But resist that impulse. While Canadian elections may be infinitely superior to what we witnessed in Iowa, that's not ultimately the right comparison. Instead, the Iowa caucuses were a series of meetings where local Democrats gathered to help choose their party's presidential candidate – closer to how our parties select their riding nominees. And while our elections might be world-class, the way our parties select their candidates is nothing to brag about.

Who gets on the ballot matters for many reasons, including that in dozens of ridings where one party consistently wins, that party's nomination can effectively choose the next MP. In Canada, parties largely set the rules for nominating candidates, and have shown little interest in internal democracy. In 2019, the Samara Centre for Democracy examined 6,600 candidate nominations over the last five federal election cycles and found that only 17 per cent of candidates actually come through competitive nomination contests. The rest are simply appointed by their parties, or run unopposed.

Where nominations are competitive, they often fail to meet Canadian standards for acceptable democratic process. Contestants regularly complain that rules appear to be manipulated by party elites to ensure their preferred candidate wins. Nomination contests often aren't publicized; many begin and end within just a few weeks or less. There are even compelling allegations of ballot stuffing. A minuscule slice of the Canadian public participates – we can't say how many, because the parties don't release even those numbers – and at the same time, contests are often swamped with “instant members,” who are signed up to the party en masse by a campaign and directed to show up and vote.

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But Canadians shouldn't be satisfied with the status quo either: Our system has different problems which could potentially lead to a similar place. Canada's parties are atrophying at the community level. They're failing to tap huge reservoirs of talent by bringing new people into politics. Remote, top-heavy, and with little bench strength, the parties are terminally weak beyond their highly controlling leaders. That too could make us vulnerable to outside challenges by opportunistic demagogues, who can drastically change the direction of a party, or even a province or country.

To make nomination processes as free and fair as our elections, local candidates should be chosen by committed party members in democratic contests that can be designed by parties, but which meet Canadian standards for ethics and transparency. More people should be encouraged to participate by increasing the local party membership. Parties should do a better job of making an open call to Canadians to run for office, so that our political class is more diverse in all senses, and less dominated across the party spectrum by the children of politicians past.

If parties don't reform themselves, legal reform can help. For example, a private member's bill before the Ontario Legislature, introduced by PC MPP Belinda Karahalios, would require parties to share some information about their nomination contests and create an offence for ballot stuffing and other bad behaviour. Such common-sense changes are a nudge in the right direction.

The early response to the bill, however, is not encouraging. PC Government House Leader Paul Calandra told the legislature he'd support the bill – if it was amended to let his party permanently opt out of any oversight.

That's where we are in Canada. We don't have chaotic, interminable primary seasons to endure. But we do have party elites content to hold the first and last word on who appears on a ballot, and openly resistant to any public oversight or accountability. So while the spectacle of the U.S. primaries may not appeal, it should still remind Canadians that a key piece of our democratic system – the selection of candidates – is too often missing altogether.

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