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OPINION

What happened to nomination contests for local candidates?

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Liberals and NDP completed fewer than 70 nominations this election cycle.

JUSTIN TANG/THE CANADIAN PRESS

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With the window to nominate candidates for this year's federal election now closed, citizens have seen a major step backward for the open and transparent nomination process in Canadian politics.

Most parties struggled to find candidates for all 338 ridings – casting a light on the murky world of nominations and on the importance of revitalizing parties as grassroots organizations. The process by which parties select candidates has huge implications for who has access to political office – and how capable we are of holding members of Parliament accountable.

Our conventional image of candidate selection in Canada – where the local members of each party meet to choose a candidate from several potential contestants – does not match the reality. A study released by the Samara Centre for Democracy this summer found that just 17 per cent of the candidates who stood for a major party in the five federal elections between 2004 and 2015 were selected through a competitive process. The rest were either chosen through a nomination with a single contestant (42 per cent) or directly appointed with no contest at all (41 per cent). We also found that nomination races were short and highly unpredictable. With so few genuinely competitive nominations, the system seems designed to work for party insiders.

The 2015 election – the first to fall on a fixed election day – did see modest improvements, with all the major parties committing to hold open nominations. Nominations were held early and often. Even incumbents had to face a nomination to ensure they still had the support of local party members. As a result, the Conservatives, Liberals and NDP each completed at least 250 nominations by July 19 that year – three months before election day. The Greens held 164.

Fast forward to 2019. With three months to go, the parties had dramatically fewer official nominations: The Conservatives had held 172, while the Greens, Liberals and NDP had all completed fewer than 70.

For the Conservatives and Liberals, the drop occurred largely because of how sitting MPs were treated. Instead of open competitions, the Liberals reappointed the vast majority of their MPs without allowing any nomination challenges. New Conservative Party rules also meant that