

OPINION

Political parties should rethink process for winnowing candidate pool

By PAUL THOMAS (/AUTHOR/PAUL-THOMAS) MAR. 25, 2020

Fundraising prowess, which typically requires networks of wealthy contacts or ties to powerful interest groups, is a poor basis for assessing leadership candidates' viability or commitment, writes Samara's Paul Thomas.



Former cabinet minister Peter MacKay, along with Conservative MPs Erin O'Toole and Marilyn Gladu, are all vying to replace outgoing leader Andrew Scheer. The Conservative leadership race began in January of this year, giving potential candidates just 10 weeks to meet the eligibility criteria. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic burst into Canadians' lives, the Conservative Party of Canada has faced questions about whether it will delay its current leadership contest.

While the vote itself is not until June, these questions are already urgent; potential candidates only have until March 25 to pay the \$200,000 registration fee and \$100,000 "compliance deposit" to be on the ballot. They must also submit the signatures of at least 3,000 party members, drawn from at least 30 constituencies in seven provinces.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on Canadians' finances, and the difficulties that social distancing poses for campaigning, several candidates have called for the deadlines to be extended—a request the CPC's Leadership Election Organizing Committee has, so far, declined.

However, while the coronavirus outbreak has created significant new challenges for potential candidates, it has also underlined just how onerous the party's entry requirements were in the first place. Indeed, such high thresholds risk limiting leadership races to those who are well-funded and well connected.

The Conservative leadership race began in January of this year, giving potential candidates just 10 weeks to meet the eligibility criteria. By contrast, the 13 candidates in the party's last leadership race had nearly a year to secure just 300 signatures, while the entry fee and deposit were only \$50,000 each.

The sharp increases in the entry requirements this time around were presumably designed to discourage fringe candidates, and other parties are moving in the same direction. The \$30,000 entrance fee for the NDP's last leadership race—while still comparatively low—was double that from the previous contest in 2012. Contestants vying for the Green Party leadership face a \$50,000 buy-in, up from just \$2,000 in 2006.

It is understandable for political parties to be concerned that some candidates may use leadership races to gain publicity and distract from serious policy discussions. Leadership races certainly do not have to be free-for-alls. It's reasonable for parties to seek candidates with long-term party engagement. Parties also have a right to maintain some cohesiveness, and to continue to advance enduring ideas about government and society. The Trump experience reflects an undesirable alternative, where wide-open leadership selection allowed a radical oligarch with no real Republican Party history to seize control and direct it in self-serving ways.

But parties are using the wrong filters for determining the candidate pool. Fundraising prowess, which typically requires networks of wealthy contacts or ties to powerful interest groups, is a poor basis for assessing leadership candidates' viability or commitment. These rules make the race inaccessible to all but a narrow segment of the Canadian population while still failing to prevent vanity campaigns from those with few party ties, or those who hold more extreme views compared to the broader party membership.

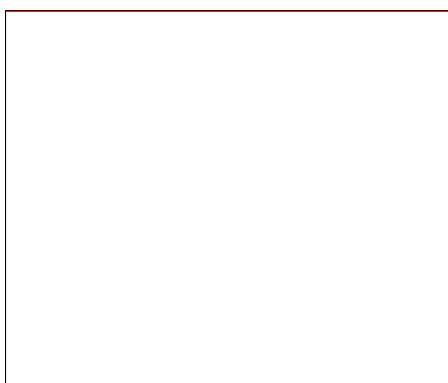
One doesn't need to look far for a more effective mechanism for selecting candidates. Until the early 20th century, the party caucuses chose the leader. Over the past century, parties steadily moved away from that model in favour of having party members elect the leader. While this approach means broader participation, it ironically also comes at a tremendous democratic cost—party leaders now receive their mandates from party members who have no way to hold them accountable on an ongoing basis. At the same time, caucuses have less leverage over leaders, and can easily become marginalized. Together, these developments facilitate the growing centralization of power in the hands of party leaders.

Caucuses could again play a greater role in leadership selection. A simple way to accomplish this would be to require candidates to achieve a certain threshold of support from existing MPs and past election candidates to qualify for the ballot. Chosen by local party members, these individuals would reflect the diversity of views in each party, would have demonstrated a commitment to its values, and would be positioned to hold the leader accountable for their performance going forward.

Both during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, the current approach to leadership selection among Canadian parties requires some rethinking. It is currently both too open and too closed off; requiring high fees limits the portion of Canadians who can realistically dream of serving in Canada's highest office, but it also creates no guarantees that leadership candidates will be serious, credible, or invested in the party. Requiring a level of support from caucus and former election candidates is a more effective way to eliminate marginal or extreme leadership contenders. Leaders would also become more accountable to their caucus, altering the power balance within the party for the better.

Paul EJ Thomas is a senior research associate at the Samara Centre for Democracy.

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