

Power to the party? Report raises questions about federal nominations

Report author Michael Morden says the lack of competition is evidence of a “shallow democracy.”

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The House of Commons in Ottawa. *ADRIAN WYLD / THE CANADIAN PRESS*

A new study suggests federal party nominations may be troubled by a lack of transparency, competition

and diversity in candidates.

The Samara Centre for Democracy, an Toronto-based charity that aims to make Canadian politics more accessible to voters, examined 6,500 people who ran in the five federal elections from 2004 to 2015 and found most ran unopposed for their party nomination.

In 3,900 nomination processes, only 17 per cent of nominees faced competition, the study says.

“If you think of the nomination as the first link in a democratic chain we use to elect our parliamentarians, it should be the first opportunity a community has to exercise some decision-making on who represents them in parliament,” said report author Michael Morden.

On average, 65 per cent of Conservative nominations had only one contestant, 67 per cent of Liberal nominations had one contestant, 75 of NDP nominations had one contestant and 82 per cent of Green nominations had one contestant.

With the exception of the Greens, who disclosed they rejected seven per cent of applicants in 2015, parties wouldn't disclose how many candidates were “vetted out” before the nomination process.

There are several reasons a party may not have a contested nomination, such as an incumbent running, a low chances of the party winning a riding, or a snap election.

Morden says the lack of competition for party nominations is evidence of a “shallow democracy” where federal parties tip the scales in favour of a chosen candidate and thus limit choices for voters.

But UBC political science professor Robert Johnston points out that “curating” candidates is a party's job. He said parties are private entities with the right to choose candidates with the best qualifications who — in theory — will win them elections.

“Parties are teams. Politics, in the Westminster system, is a team sport,” he said.

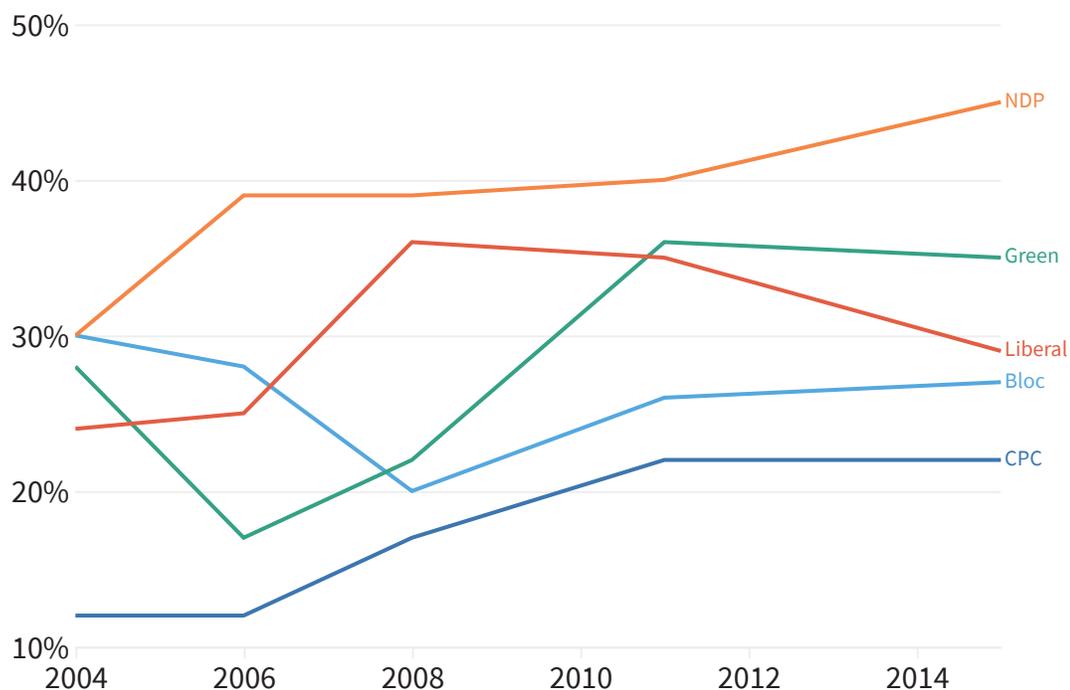
Johnston agrees that parties may become too hands-on in certain ridings. But he says the bigger problem is weak parties with decentralized messaging, which can become co-opted by extremist political forces.

“Part of the power of parties for voters is that they simplify the choices,” he said. “If they can’t have some role in simplifying the menu of choices, what are they for?”

But Morden says party nominations aren’t a fair playing field. He says political parties use short, rapid nominating windows to favour established party candidates. Out of 3,900 nomination processes, more than half lasted fewer than three weeks.

Women are underrepresented in the nomination process

Female nominees by party, 2004-2015



Source: Samsara Centre

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According to the report, those short periods give little time for prospective nominees seeking support to challenge incumbents, which could reduce representation of women and visible minorities in certain ridings.

The report says women were equally as likely to win elections as men, but that they only represented 28 per cent of nominees in the past five elections.

Currently, 88 of 338 MPs are women.

Women were more likely to run for a nomination when there was a longer nomination period, the study said.

The party with the most female candidates was the NDP, with just under 39 per cent, and the lowest was the Conservative Party with less than 16 per cent.

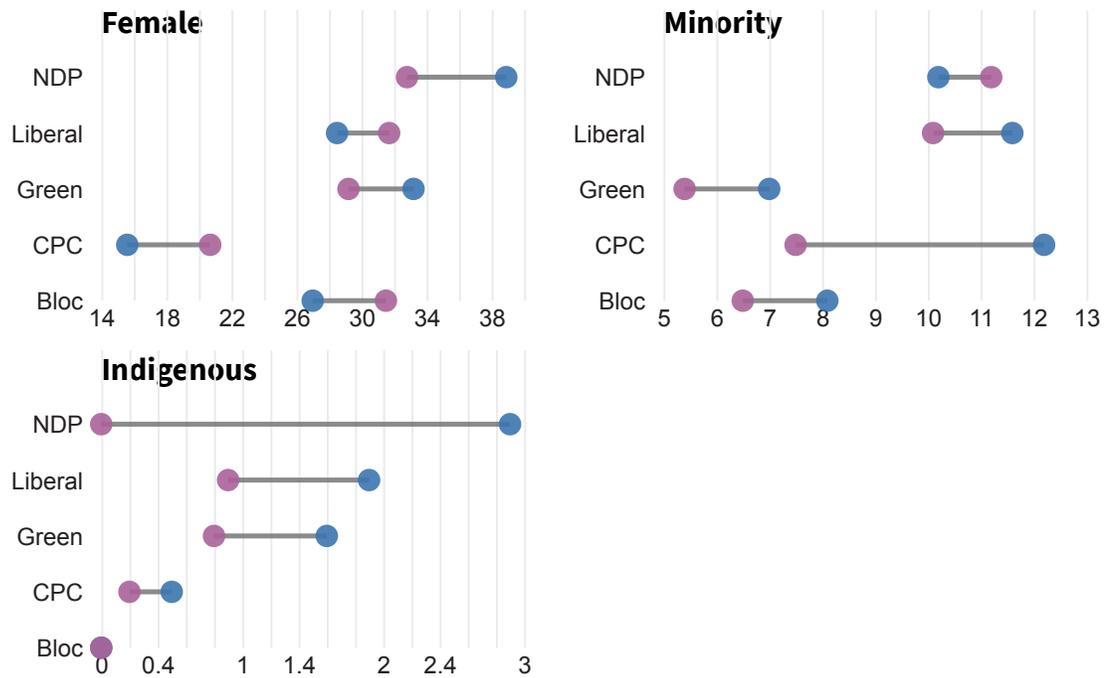
“The party apparatus is probably more biased against women than voters are,” said Amanda Bittner, a professor and director of the Gender and Politics Lab at Memorial University.

She says parties should have discretion to choose their nominees, but cautions parties aren’t taking the opportunity to nominate diverse female candidates.

Appointments don’t address underrepresentation

Nominee diversity by method of selection

nominated Appointed



Source: Samsara Centre

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“Parties having some control over who is being nominated is a good thing, because that says parties are trying to shape something,” she said. “If they abdicate that responsibility completely, that’s not good for democracy. ... Democracy is more robust if they make an effort to recruit widely.”

Morden says the study’s key take-away is that parties are a “black box” without any obligation to reveal their decision-making process.