

# Thomas and Morden: Political party nominations in Canada need an overhaul

As MPs and would-be MPs gear up for the fall federal election, the Samara Centre for Democracy has released a new report, "Party Favours, How federal election candidates are chosen." Here's what it discovered about the state of democracy in our system.

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Then-Liberal candidate for Ottawa-Orléans, Andrew Leslie, speaks at his acclamation during a Liberal nomination meeting in December, 2015. A 'star' candidate, he went on to win the riding in the 2015 election. *DARREN BROWN / OTTAWA CITIZEN*

*As political parties gear up for the fall federal election, the Samara Centre for Democracy (<https://www.samaracanada.com/>) has released a new report, "Party Favours, How federal election candidates are chosen" ([https://www.samaracanada.com/docs/default-source/reports/party-favours-by-the-samara-centre-for-democracy.pdf?sfvrsn=a888052f\\_2](https://www.samaracanada.com/docs/default-source/reports/party-favours-by-the-samara-centre-for-democracy.pdf?sfvrsn=a888052f_2)).” The following is an edited excerpt:*

More than 99 per cent of the members of Parliament elected to Canada's Parliament over the last 30 years were elected as representatives of a political party. Therefore, collectively the parties have almost complete control over the pool of people who have the opportunity to serve in Parliament. But how do parties pick who appears on the ballot?

At a quick glance, local party democracy in Canada can appear strong, with grassroots members in each constituency gathering every few years to choose their candidate for the next election. But in recent decades these contests have increasingly come under the control of the central party, and many cases have emerged where nomination meetings appeared to be biased in favour of one candidate or another.

We examined how election candidates for Canada's five major federal parties were chosen over the last five elections (2004-2015). To do so, we looked at the law governing nomination contests, the parties' own contest rules, the local contest reports submitted to Elections Canada, and the candidates who actually ran in the federal election. This allowed us to uncover how the more than 6,600 candidates who stood for election under major political parties ended up on the ballot.

Key findings:

- Of the more than 6,600 federal candidates captured in the study, only 17 per cent arrived there through a competitive nomination race;
- Parties directly appointed more than 2,700 election candidates with no nomination process at all;
- More than 70 per cent of the 3,900 nomination contests held had just a single person running;

- Women who ran in nomination contests were just as likely to win as their male competitor — but made up just 28 per cent of nomination contestants;
- Candidates directly appointed by parties were no more reflective of Canada's gender, ethnic, or Indigenous diversity than those chosen through nomination contests;
- Contests were short, with half lasting just three weeks or less, and more than 450 closing in five days or less;
- Contests were unpredictable, with no standardized start or end dates.
- The parties' rules for nomination contests allow the central parties to decide: when contests open and close; who can and can't run in a contest; and whether an incumbent MP can stand again as a candidate without facing a contest.
- Contests lacked transparency. Parties have no requirement to release information on how many votes were cast or how many contestants were prevented from running.

Parties play a vitally important role in Canadian democracy: They offer Canadians an entry point into the political process, combine diverse policy positions into unified platforms, and select candidates for elections. In the age of social media and 24-hour news cycles, it can be tempting for national parties to operate with little local input to ensure consistent messaging. And there are times, such as snap elections, when parties may need to appoint candidates.

But open, locally controlled nomination contests can strengthen parties by attracting new members, ensuring candidates have local support, and increasing the public's confidence in the political system. In contrast, candidates who are appointed or chosen through highly restricted contests owe their position to the central party, potentially reducing their community focus.

So how can we improve the nomination process going forward? Parties should:

- Set standard opening and closing dates for nomination contests;
- Hold contests whenever possible – even if a constituency has a sitting MP;

- Report how many members cast ballots in each contest and how many votes each contestant received;
- Reveal the total number of people they “vetted out” or prevented from running in each election cycle;
- Ensure their candidate slate reflects the diversity of the country.

If parties don't adopt these changes voluntarily, Parliament should consider increased regulation over the nomination process.

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