

NEWS

Too much party control in 'highly uncompetitive' candidate selection: Samara study

By SAMANTHA WRIGHT ALLEN (/AUTHOR/SAMANTHA-WRIGHT-ALLEN) JUL. 17, 2019

'Parties effectively get to choose the pool of people who will become Members of Parliament,' says Paul Thomas, based on Samara's recent analysis of 6,600 candidates between 2004 and 2015.



The Samara Centre for Democracy looked at Canada's five major parties' approaches to candidate selection. From left: Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, Green Party Leader Elizabeth May, and Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet. *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade and courtesy of Twitter

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Over the past five elections, fewer than one-fifth of candidates earned their name on the ballot through a competitive party nomination process, found a new Samara report, a statistic the group says shows candidate selection is “highly uncompetitive, opaque, unpredictable, and centrally controlled” by parties.

In effect, party brass—not party members or the Canadian public—have the most control over the people who end up in Parliament. That runs contrary to the common belief that most MPs first rise to represent their party from grassroots, local competitions, where the local community has considerable influence, suggests Paul Thomas, a senior research associate with The Samara Centre for Democracy.

“It was surprising to us to dig in and find actually, in a very substantial majority of cases, that’s just not what happened,” said Mr. Thomas, a Carleton University professor, of the recent study, *Party Favours: How federal election candidates are chosen*, published July 17. “It seems to be getting more and more centralized.”

He helped analyze more than 6,600 candidates who ran for the Conservatives, NDP, Liberals, Green Party, and the Bloc Québécois between 2004 and 2015. Almost three-quarters, or 70 per cent, of the 3,900 nomination contests analyzed had one person running, and parties directly appointed more than 2,700 election candidates without a nomination process at all.

Samara found that the vast majority of candidates arrive through appointment, or don’t face a nomination challenger, which Mr. Thomas noted is “not functionally all that different from appointing someone.” Only 17 per cent of the 6,600 candidates studied were found to have been nominated through competitive races.



Samara's Paul Thomas says candidate nominations seem to be getting 'more and more centralized.' *The Hill Times* photograph by Laura Ryckewaert

That means “parties effectively get to choose the pool of people who will become Members of Parliament,” a reality the report authors said doesn't serve democracy, and “representation suffers as a result.”

There's also the fear that such biased nominations make the winner beholden to certain groups, party leadership, or “central party elites,” as the report puts it.

When nomination contests occurred, Samara found that women were just as likely to win, but only made up 28 per cent of the party-choice pool. That's roughly equal to the 27 per cent of female MPs elected to Parliament in 2015, up from 22 per cent in 2008.

“The barrier [for women] doesn’t seem to be the competitiveness of the candidates,” observed Mr. Thomas.

Instead, with the few competitive races, timing becomes an issue, Mr. Thomas said, with some contests running mere days while others could last weeks or months. The short window and inconsistent contest dates and notification requirements make the system “closed” and vulnerable to manipulation.

Parties affirm open, grassroots approaches

Much of Samara’s resulting recommendations centre on the process becoming more predictable, Mr. Thomas said. Those include having parties set standard opening and closing dates for nomination contests, and holding contests whenever possible, even in ridings held by a sitting MP. The group also suggests parties report on the votes at the ballot box, reveal the total number of people they vetted-out each election cycle, and have policies that ensure their slate reflects the diversity of the country.

In response to those findings, parties reaffirmed the fact they consider themselves grassroots and their nominations open, with some saying they would consider the recommendations.

The Hill Times also asked the parties how many of their current slate faced at least one challenger to get the nomination, but most didn’t have the data available or didn’t respond. The Green Party said 41 of its 208 candidates nominated so far—or 20 per cent—fell into that category. The party expects around 50 more nomination races in the coming months, which would bump that up to 35 per cent.

As a grassroots party, the Green Party tries to ensure members “exert the greatest possible level of control over candidate selection,” said spokesperson Rosie Emery.

“Our party strongly supports an open and transparent nomination processes and grassroots decision-making. We favour contests wherever possible,” she said by email.

While the vetting process is “strictly confidential” to protect potential candidates’ privacy, she said, “we are willing to consider the study’s recommendations” on that front.

NDP spokesperson Guillaume Francoeur said the party is proud that more than 20 per cent of its nomination races so far have been competitive. The NDP is at the back of the pack with less than a third—115 candidates—named as of July 12.

The NDP doesn't appoint candidates, he said, and riding associations "are required to engage in a candidate search process that encourages competitive races and includes women, people of colour, and members of Indigenous communities."

The Conservative Party, which leads parties in confirmed candidates at 320 of 338 ridings, has "completely fair and open nominations," said spokesperson Cory Hann.

"We apply the rules equally across all ridings and to all nomination candidates," said Mr. Hann by email, also noting some MPs faced nomination challenges. *The Hill Times* reported last year (<https://www.hilltimes.com/2018/01/22/seven-conservative-mps-facing-divisive-nomination-challenges-party-abound-speculation-leadership-behind-least-challengers/131486>) that seven MPs faced challengers. Four of those incumbents ultimately decided not to run for re-election in 2019, and three MPs will re-offer: Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke, Ont.), Deepak Obhrai (Calgary Forest Lawn, Alta.), and Mike Lake (Edmonton-Wetaskwin, Alta.).



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, pictured July 10 at a nomination event for new Liberal candidate Steven Guibeault, who's running for the party in Laurier-Sainte-Marie, Que. *Photograph courtesy of Twitter*

The governing Liberals have the highest proportion of returning MPs, noted Liberal spokesperson Braeden Caley, with at least 162 of the 184 elected in 2015 deciding to go for another term. As of July 12, the Liberals had confirmed 213 candidates running under the red banner in 2019.

Mr. Caley said the party is always open to “fresh approaches” that would bring more Canadians into the party and strengthen grassroots involvement in the nomination process.

“We always welcome new ideas to open up the nomination process even further and to be able to invite more Canadians to all aspects of how the party’s process operates, whether it’s having robust electoral district associations, or nomination contests or the selection of national and provincial boards.

After 2015, the Liberals introduced community engagement thresholds for its incumbents, setting out fundraising, door-knocking, and phone contact targets which MPs had to meet if they wanted to secure their spot, creating the uncontested environment the Samara study questions.

Mr. Caley said he disputes the assertion the MPs are guaranteed unchallenged seats when “there are very clear and robust community engagement standards put in place—which is a first.”

That approach arose out of “extensive grassroots consultation within the Liberal movement,” he said. “And it won’t be a surprise to many that after electing a very strong team that Liberals are pretty keen to see much of that team reflected.”

Unclear ‘to what extent’ parties are gatekeepers

One party didn’t necessarily perform better than the others when it came candidate selection, Samara found.

The Conservatives and Liberals, as parties that have formed the government, drew more candidate interest, increasing their number of contested nominations.

The NDP and the Green Party, meanwhile, have no nomination application fee, which Samara said promotes involvement. The Conservative Party has a \$1,000 refundable deposit, and Liberal Party hopefuls must pay a \$1,500 non-refundable fee. That cost may be a barrier to enter, Mr. Thomas said. On that criticism, Mr. Caley repeated that the party would review the report, and highlighted that it took the “important step” in 2016 to open its membership, dropping the fee to \$10, which he said “has knock-on effects” for the “internal democracy of a party that are very important.”

Though candidates must represent the core values of the party they're running for, it should still be possible to have a more accessible, and open approach, the Samara report authors suggest. A party's right to manage its own affairs must also be balanced with the public interest.

Mr. Caley cautioned against viewing single candidates in nominations "necessarily as an inherently bad thing," noting there are many reasons that might be the case.

While Mr. Thomas acknowledged that point, and said it was raised by parties and MPs during research—that strong early organization scared off competition, or a candidate's status as the party's preferred option discouraged others to throw a hat in, or a no-hope riding created little interest—the proportion suggests a level of centralized control that gives disproportionate power to the party, rather than members, to select candidates. That power is especially highlighted in stronghold ridings where some parties are all-but-guaranteed wins (e.g. the Conservatives in Alberta), and given the low likelihood of independents getting elected—less than one per cent in the last 39 years.

Questions remain, however, over how local nomination contests are managed, because parties are "notoriously tight-lipped" about their approaches, said Mr. Thomas.

"We don't know to what extent they are serving gatekeepers," he said.

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