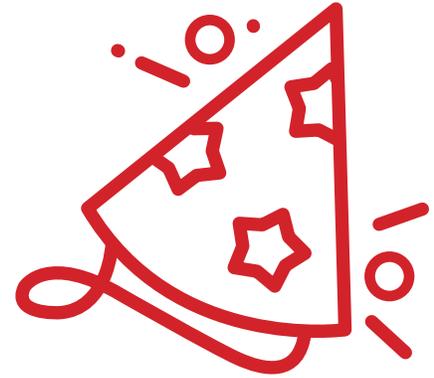


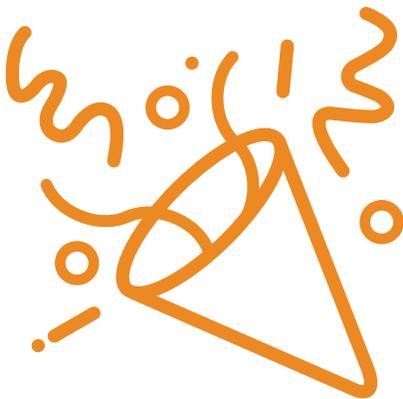


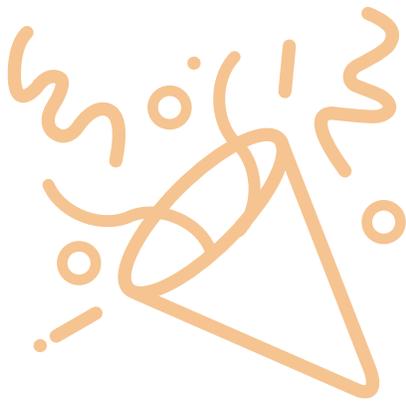
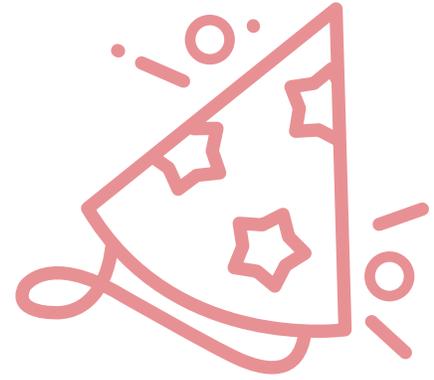
The  
Samara Centre  
for Democracy

# Party Favours:



How federal election candidates are chosen





# Table of contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	7
Finding 1: The sound of one contestant running?	12
Finding 2: Don't blink or you'll miss it	14
Finding 3: Not an equal opportunity	18
Finding 4: It's our party and we'll choose who we want to	20
Conclusion and recommendations	26
Methodology	31
About the Samara Centre's Parties Project	33
Acknowledgments	33
End notes	35

# Executive summary

More than 99% of the Members of Parliament (MPs) 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.

In this report, we examine 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 allows us to uncover how the over 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% arrived there through a competitive nomination race.
  - Parties directly appointed more than 2,700 election candidates with no nomination process at all.
  - Over 70% 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 competitors—but made up just 28% 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 over 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.
  - 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, like 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?**

Political 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.

# Introduction

“A fake democracy.”

“...the worst political experience of my life.”

“They try to interfere, get their person nominated, and then they wonder... why people don’t care.”

These are some of the ways former MPs have talked about their experience seeking their party’s nomination in exit interviews conducted by the Samara Centre for Democracy over the last 12 years.

The nomination contest, when local members of a party come together to choose their candidate in the next election, is a domain of Canadian politics which most citizens will never see or participate in. But it’s also a critically important democratic process—and the activity conducted by political parties that is most accessible to its grassroots members. Yet as demonstrated by the quotes above—which come from people who *won* their nomination—the nomination process is seen by many as a weak point in our democratic infrastructure. Worse still, many election candidates have no nomination contest at all and are simply chosen by the party directly.

## How would you say you got here?

It’s hard to imagine how Canada’s representative democracy would function without political parties. While parties are legally considered to be private institutions, they provide a public good by combining different policy ideas into platforms that citizens can choose between at elections. This allows voters across the country to know what kind of policies would likely be adopted if a particular party forms government.

Beyond their special role in linking citizens and government, political parties have a disproportionate effect on who gets elected to office. While any citizen can potentially put themselves forward to run for office, fewer than half of one percent of those elected to Parliament since 1993 won as independents, without being endorsed as a candidate representing a

# 74%

of Canadians agree that political parties are necessary in a democratic society (7% disagree).

Source: 2019 Samara  
Citizens’ Survey

certain party. Candidates' election signs, pamphlets, and advertisements all feature their party affiliation, and, since 1972, their party affiliation has been printed next to their name on the ballot.

The dominant impact of party affiliation<sup>1</sup> in shaping voter choices effectively gives parties control over the pool of people with the chance to serve as MPs. In fact, in ridings where one party consistently wins election after election, the process of selecting the party's candidate has more impact on who the MP will be than the election itself.

So a nomination is more than just a private undertaking, when members of a club come together to make a choice. It's a gateway to representative politics for citizens who want to serve. It's also one of the most opaque parts of our politics. It's time to shed some light.

### Shedding light on nominations

In *The Accidental Citizen*, the first report ever published by the Samara Centre, we described nominations as a "black box"—dimly understood even by some participants, totally opaque to the wider world.

In this report, we examine four concerns about the nominations process, namely that:

- there are few competitive races;
- the timing of nominations makes the system closed and vulnerable to manipulation;
- nominations pose a particular barrier to entry for women; and
- the central party holds the final word on who gets to represent a riding, through appointments and vetting, regardless of what local party members want.

In each case, we look at how the choices made by parties have implications for the transparency of our political system, the diversity of our representatives, the accountability of MPs to their local communities, and the strength of grassroots democracy in Canada. Based on our findings, we recommend best practices that parties could adopt to improve the way candidates are chosen. We also look at how candidate selection is shaped by the rules set out in the *Canada Elections Act*, and make suggestions for how it too can be improved.

### A note on terminology:

in this report we distinguish between election **candidates** who are chosen to represent a party in a general election, and nomination **contestants** who are competing for the right to become a party's candidate.

# 45%

of Canadians trust political parties to do what's right.

Source: 2019 Samara Citizens' Survey

We recognize that the vast majority of the work of nominating candidates and conducting election campaigns is performed by party volunteers. And the party itself has a responsibility to ensure that its candidates are representative of the core values and identity it has developed over time.

That is why our recommendations aim to improve candidate selection in the least burdensome way possible—while still clearing the bar for what Canadians would consider a fair, open, and meaningful democratic process, and ensuring that parties maintain a degree of control over their own affairs and can uphold their core beliefs.

### **Data sources**

To explore the state of candidate selection in Canada, the Samara Centre compiled the nomination meeting reports filed with Elections Canada between 2003 and September 2015. This information was combined with existing datasets on federal election candidates and candidate ethnicity. We also added gender information based on the names of candidates and nomination contestants, with web searches employed in instances of uncertainty. Please see the full methodology on page 31 for further detail.

This combination of data sources allowed us to examine not just the party nomination processes, but also those election candidates who were appointed without a nomination. In all, we compiled data on the more than 6,600 candidates who ran for one of the five major parties in general elections from 2004 to 2015, nearly 4,000 of whom were chosen through nomination meetings. Additionally, we captured details on the nomination races themselves and the over 6,000 nomination contestants who took part.

Unfortunately, there are some questions we can't answer. Parties are notoriously tight-lipped about how they manage or direct local nomination contests. And the *Canada Elections Act* only requires parties to report three things for each nomination contest they hold: the dates it started and ended, the contestants' names, and who won. But this gives us a solid foundation and a basis for future research.

## Parties—can't live with them, can't live without them

As private organizations, political parties have long insisted on their right to manage their own affairs. But how parties operate, and especially how they nominate their candidates, matters to the Canadian public for many reasons.

Party nominations determine the pool of people who can become MPs. If those processes are unfair or lack transparency, the quality of Canadian democracy is undermined. And indeed, research shows that citizens understand this relationship: transparent nomination processes can increase citizens' trust in the overall democratic system.<sup>2</sup>

How parties operate, and especially how they nominate their candidates, matters to the Canadian public for many reasons.

## It's an honour just to be nominated

The major Canadian parties have volunteer-run chapters in each constituency around the country. As elections approach, these chapters—called Electoral District Associations (EDAs)—hold nomination contests where local members vote to choose the party's candidate for their constituency. There are six steps in a nomination contest:

- 1. Opening of nominations:** the formal declaration that people interested in running can submit their nomination paperwork. Some parties also require a **call for nominations** to be sent to every local member informing them of the chance to run.
- 2. Candidate search:** to improve diversity, some parties require EDAs to identify and invite women and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds to run in the nomination contest.
- 3. Candidate vetting:** each national party screens would-be contestants before they can take part in a nomination contest. Individuals must disclose information on their professional and personal lives, their finances, their social media activities, and consent to a criminal record check. The screening is to ensure that parties do not select candidates with controversial pasts or those who are not committed to the party.
- 4. Closing of nominations:** if more than one contestant was approved by the vetting process, a date is set for the nomination vote.
- 5. Membership cut off:** only party members can vote in the nomination, and so a date is set after which new members will be unable to vote in the nomination.
- 6. Nomination meeting:** the big day itself, where party members finally cast their ballots and pick a candidate.

Beyond just setting the stage for general elections, nominations are important for strengthening **engagement, accountability, legitimacy,** and **diversity** in our democratic system.

At their best, nominations are a highly accessible form of grassroots political engagement. Many members first join a party to support a particular nomination contestant.<sup>3</sup> Candidates chosen through inclusive, transparent nomination processes receive a mandate from members of their community, giving them more legitimacy to speak on its behalf. Such open nominations also give local party members an opportunity to evaluate the performance of their party's candidate from the last election—even if that person is a sitting MP—which is particularly important in ridings where one party dominates in election after election.<sup>4</sup>

When nominations are biased in one contestant's favour, the winner may owe favours to certain groups in a community, or to central party elites, while other community voices are excluded. Candidates directly appointed by their parties are also likely to beholden to its leadership.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Parliament can only ever be as diverse as the pool of candidates that run for it. Nominations designed primarily for insiders, those already plugged into the party and political system, are a major obstacle to achieving a more diverse political class.

"You could run a fence post as a Conservative in this part of the world and they would win. So yes, it was a hard-fought nomination."

- Former MP



"It was terrible during the nomination though... I wouldn't even want to go there. I think I could start a lawsuit probably—I mean, it was incredible... It was because they wanted [a different candidate]."

- Former MP



# Finding 1: The sound of one contestant running?

Of the nearly 3,900 nomination races held by Canadian political parties between 2003 and 2015, over 70% had just a single contestant. There is no way to know whether this statistic reflects a true lack of competition, the manipulation of contests and screening of contestants to ensure a given result, or the energy and dominance of individual nomination contestants in each constituency dissuading would-be challengers. Regardless, this predominance of single contestant races means that, in most instances, nomination contests do not produce a substantially different result than if parties had simply appointed individuals directly onto the ballot.

There are some differences across parties. Unsurprisingly, the parties that typically win the most seats—the Liberals and Conservatives—attract more nomination contestants. Even then, in all the parties and election cycles captured in our data, only the 2006 Conservative Party managed to average two whole contestants per nomination contest.

There are different ways to explain this. Former MPs have described to us how they simply got organized early, signed up lots of new members, and essentially scared off any competition. In other cases, open knowledge that the party favours one candidate may be enough to discourage anyone else from running. And sometimes, there's just no interest in running to be a party candidate in a no-hope riding. But the dramatic lack of competition, which holds true across all parties, should be a worry—a suggestion of shallow democracy within some parties, or a failure of parties to perform the important function of recruiting talent into the political system, or a general disconnect with the broader engaged public.

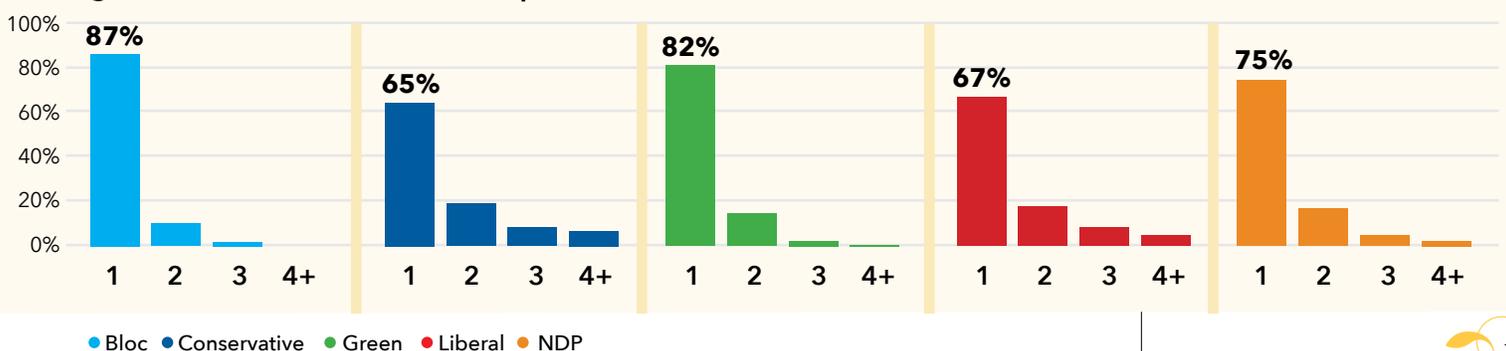
“We didn’t have any nomination, there was no local association... You go and have your paper, sign people, or whatever, you know?”

- Former MP

“It was an absolutely open process, but people said, ‘You want to do this? It’s yours.’”

- Former MP

Figure 1 - Number of contestants per nomination contest, 2004-2015



**Table 1 - Some nominations are not like the others**

Nominations are supposed to be exercises in grassroots democracy, but national party organizations set the rules governing how they are run. And Canadian law largely leaves parties alone to make their own rules. While some rules created by parties are designed to improve representation, for instance by requiring EDAs to look for women or visible minority contestants, others—like the power to choose when a nomination occurs—may help the party to favour one candidate over another. The table below reviews how the nomination process varies across the parties.

	Conservative	Green	Liberal	NDP
<b>Who decides when to open nominations?</b>	National Executive Director	Executive Council	N/A	National Candidate Nominations Committee
<b>Call for nominations sent to all members?</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Diversity search committee required?</b>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Decision to hold nomination meeting?</b>	EDA nominating committee	Executive Council	National campaign chair	National Candidate Nominations Committee
<b>Deadline for voter sign-up?</b>	21 days before vote	30 days before vote	2-7 days before notice of meeting	30 days before vote
<b>Total contest length</b>	42-54 days from call for nominations	Unspecified; at least 23 days from notice of nominations closing to vote	14-28 days	Unspecified; 14-30 days from close of nominations to vote
<b>Final sign-off on candidates</b>	Leader	Leader	Leader	National Director
<b>Nomination application fee</b>	\$1,000 refundable deposit	None	\$1,500 non-refundable fee	None
<b>Party spending limit</b>	No	No	No	\$6,500
<b>Nomination rules on party website?</b>	Yes	No	Yes	No

## Finding 2: Don't blink or you'll miss it

Parties set their own rules for when nomination races take place, and how long they last. As seen in the table on the previous page, the national parties have some freedom about when to make those calls. The length of a race is important. Contestants want to sign up new party members who will support them. Those who are less known to the existing members, or lack support from the central party machine, may need more time to recruit supporters and get organized.

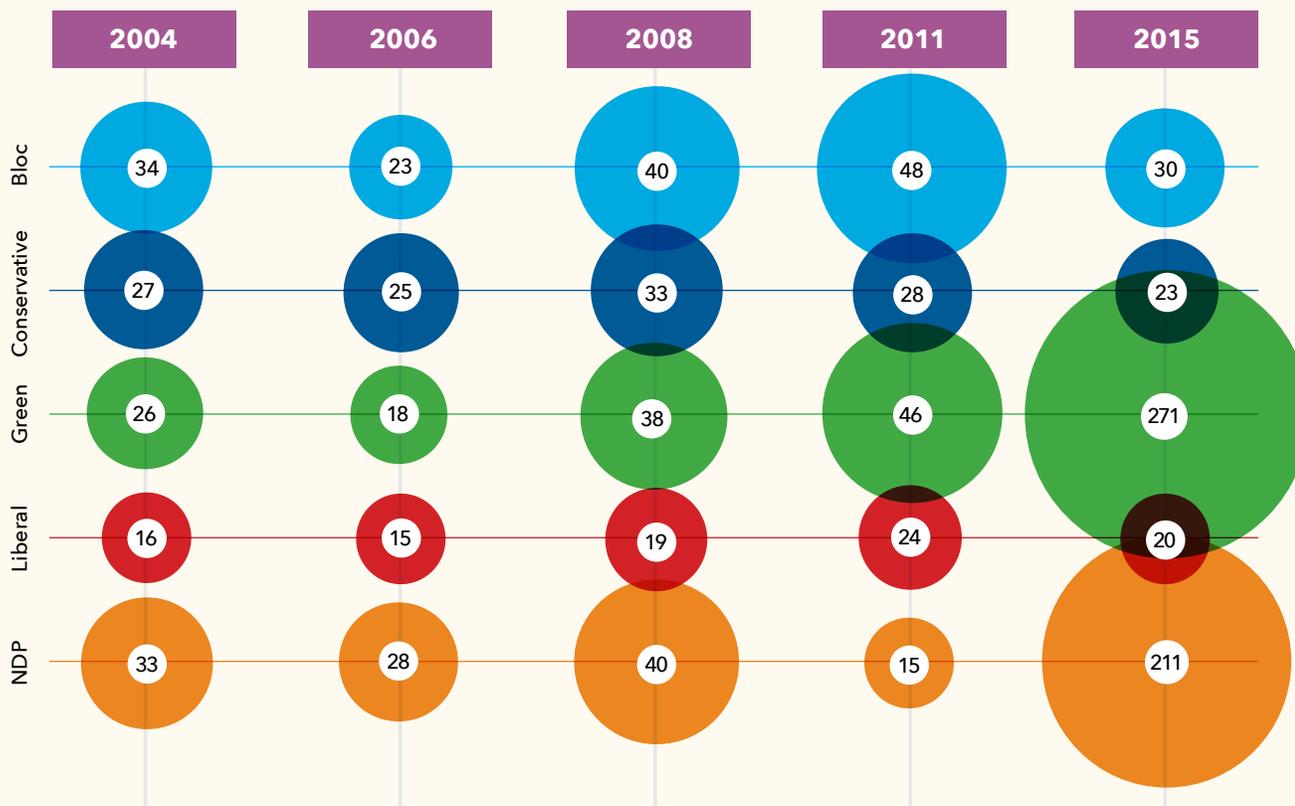
Short nomination periods are also less likely to see strong competition featuring contestants who aren't already plugged into the party, for the simple reason that they may not know a contest is happening until it's too late. This is especially true when parties aren't required to send a call for nominations to all local members telling them about the chance to apply. In fact, the Liberal Party's rules for candidate selection don't actually open applications for nominations the way the other parties do. Rather, potential contestants are just expected to apply to run in a given constituency—or to be asked to run by the local search committee. Once at least one applicant has received a “green light” from the national Liberal Party's vetting process, then the local EDA can apply to have a nomination meeting. After the meeting is called, no further contestants can apply.

Shorter nomination contests also have implications for campaign finance rules—they can reduce transparency and result in a less even playing field. Contestants who know when a nomination campaign is coming can spend money before it starts, and that money is not captured under Elections Canada spending limits.

**“You have all this great theory on paper about searching for candidates, and ‘we are never going to do what [the other parties] do in terms of appointing candidates’... but I think sometimes what we do is, we control the timing and... we can find ways to make it impossible for anyone to contest a nomination.”**

*- Former MP*

Figure 2 - Average nomination contest duration in days



It's hard to detect manipulation or interference, but the average number of days that contests were open gives a sense of how ad hoc and inaccessible contests can be. The data reveal that **most nomination campaigns are short—half last just three weeks or less**. More remarkably, during the period measured, there were 253 nominations that opened and closed on the same day. More than 450 closed in five days or less.

Figure 2 shows the average nomination contest duration for each party in each election cycle. What stands out most strongly is the massive jump in the average duration of nomination contests for both the Green Party and the NDP in the run-up to the 2015 election. These spikes appear to reflect a change in nomination strategy for both parties. Rather than opening nominations for a brief window or only after potential contestants were found, the parties opened their nomination contests and waited for contestants to arrive. Local Green and NDP EDAs then had to apply to the central party to close the nomination period and move to the vote. The parties also opened their 2015 nominations much earlier than in preceding years.

During the period measured, there were 253 nominations that opened and closed on the same day. More than 450 closed in five days or less.

Where short contests remain, they pose some clear problems. Any potential contestant without advance knowledge about such contests would be hard pressed to get organized, gather signatures from party members, and submit the required paperwork in such a short period—let alone sign up new members to support their nomination bid. The result is a process that can favour party insiders.

### Bring Your Own Voters

Only party members can vote in nomination contests. As a result, many nomination contests become competing membership drives, with each contender trying to sign up new members who are willing to vote for them. Such “instant members” can cause concern among long-time party members, who worry about the party being swamped with people who may not really share its values.<sup>6</sup> Yet many party members indicate that they initially joined to support someone in a nomination and then stayed involved afterwards. As shown in Table 1, parties set a cut off date before each nomination after which new members won't be able to vote.

### If you're reading this it's too late

Thinking about how open and accessible nomination contests are to the public, another timing question arises: When do contests actually take place? And is there any predictability?

General elections are hard to miss. With some exceptions (like the defeat of a minority government), they occur in regular intervals. They're national in scope, receive massive media coverage, and culminate in a single election day—so in terms of timing, the knowledge barriers to participation are pretty low.

Nomination contests face a different reality. There is no “nomination season.” Figure 3 illustrates this by showing the average number of days before a general election that nomination votes were held. It reveals wide variation from election to election, and party to party. In some cases, candidates were nominated, on average, nearly two years before election day—likely long before ordinary citizens are thinking about the next election. In other years, and in other parties, it was a matter of months.

More than

**90%**

of Canadians are not currently members of federal or provincial political parties. Only **15%** of those Canadians would consider joining one of the major parties in the future.

Source: 2019 Samara  
Citizens' Survey

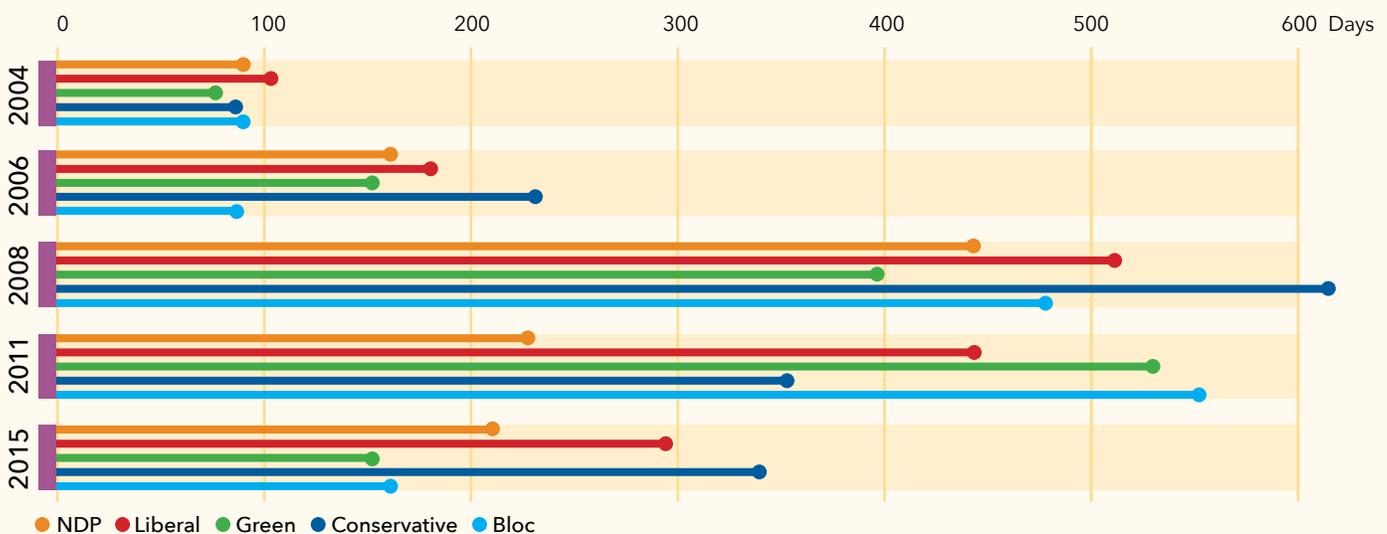
The timing also varies tremendously from riding to riding, and local associations need the permission of the central party to either open nominations, set the nomination vote, or both.

Critics argue that this central control over nomination timing allows the party leadership to pick a time that benefits their favourite candidate—or hinders one they would rather avoid.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the timing of a nomination shapes the deadline for signing up new members. Some contestants might be caught off guard if the meeting happens before they can register their supporters. In some cases, the member deadline can even be applied *retroactively*, meaning that some individuals who joined a party to support a given candidate are told after the fact that they won't be able to vote.<sup>8</sup>

It's hard to say what an ideal moment for the nomination contest would be. But this randomness makes it very challenging for anyone not closely watching local party politics to become involved. Of course, nomination contests involve membership drives, and may involve visits to some local clubs or religious centres—but they reach far fewer people on the doorstep than election canvassers do. If these contests are solely for long-time members of a private club then it's not really a problem. But if they are meant to facilitate broader participation and bring new people into a party, timing is an obstacle that should not be overlooked.

Critics argue that this central control over nomination timing allows the party leadership to pick a time that benefits their favourite candidate—or hinders one they would rather avoid.

**Figure 3 - Average number of days before election day that nomination votes are held**



## Finding 3: Not an equal opportunity

A study of more than 21,000 candidates since women first began running for the Canadian Parliament in 1921 shows that female election candidates receive just as many votes as their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup> This reality points to the nomination process as a leading reason why women remain so profoundly underrepresented in Canadian politics (women currently hold 27% of the seats in Parliament, and are underrepresented in every provincial and territorial legislature—ranging from 9% of seats in Nunavut to 42% in Quebec and British Columbia).

Unexpectedly, our analysis of nomination meetings over the last five election cycles finds that women are just as likely to win nomination contests as men. Yet our data also find that **just 28% of nomination contestants are women**—almost an exact match of the share of seats in Parliament that women hold.

While the numbers are universally low, there are pronounced differences across parties. The Conservative Party reports a surprisingly low proportion of women contestants, even relative to the others. The NDP leads, averaging 40% women contestants across all election cycles—so all parties have some distance to go to achieve gender parity.

Why then are women so underrepresented within nomination races? As described previously, the unpredictable and insider-friendly nature of the nomination process can pose a particular problem for anyone not already plugged into the system. For instance, our data show that the number of women running in a nomination contest increases with the length of the contest. Women may also be disproportionately affected by the cost of running in a nomination contest. Notably, the party with the highest proportion of women contestants—the NDP—does not require nomination contestants to pay either an application fee or deposit, has its own nomination contest spending limit beyond that imposed by the *Canada Elections Act*, and requires nomination contestants not to spend any funds until a contest is officially underway.

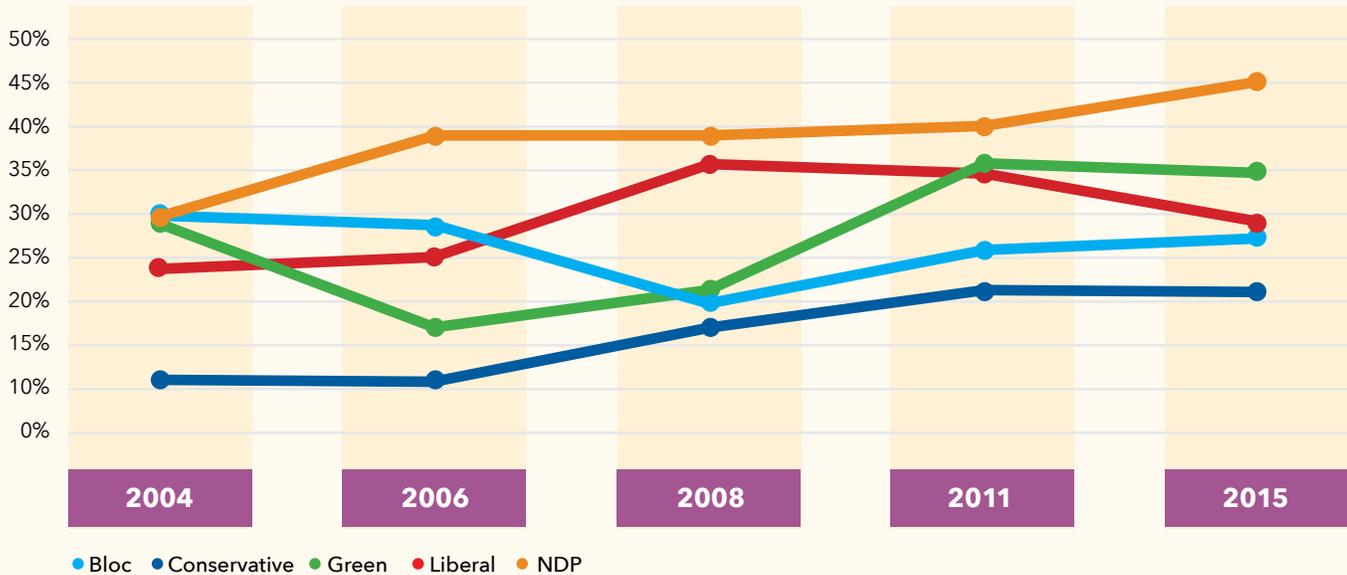
“Lots of things happened during that campaign that made it very frustrating and very hard for me to encourage any women to go into politics.... It’s those men that seem to make you think that there’s no place for women.”

– Former MP

### Percentage of female nomination contestants, 2004-2015

Bloc	27%
Conservative	16%
Green	29%
Liberal	29%
NDP	40%
<b>Average</b>	<b>28%</b>

Figure 4 - Percentage of female nomination contestants per electoral cycle



It also appears that dedicated efforts to increase the number of women contestants can produce results, as the Greens, New Democrats, and Liberals all now require EDAs to prove that they have conducted a search for women contestants. More research is required, though, given that the proportion of women seeking Liberal nominations fell in both 2011 and 2015. Despite not requiring EDAs to search for women nominees, the Conservative Party is also reportedly on track to have 30% women candidates for the 2019 election—although it will be some time before we know whether this reflects an increase in the number of women seeking Conservative nominations, or just in the proportion of women who were nominated.<sup>10</sup>

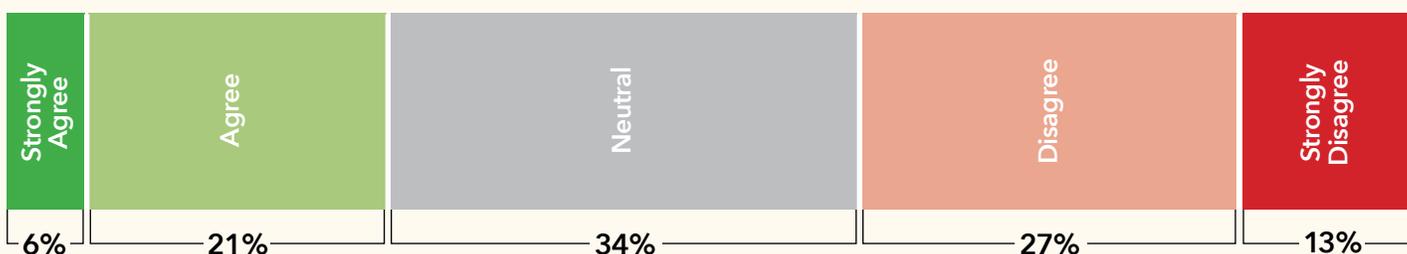
A final point is that just nominating more women is not enough. Instead, care must be taken to break with the past trend of women being “sacrificial lambs” who are only appointed in areas where a party has less chance of winning.<sup>11</sup>

“It’s not because of good will—it’s key policy. You can’t nominate a candidate until you seek out a woman... because the guys will always say, ‘Oh, I’m ready!’ Women you have to ask many times.”  
 - Former MP

## Finding 4: It's our party and we'll choose who we want to

The central party holds major leverage in the timing of nomination contests, or seeing to it that there's little competition. But parties can also exercise control in more direct ways, such as by vetting would-be contestants and appointing candidates without a nomination.

**Figure 5 - Should the leader of a political party be allowed to overrule party members in selecting the candidates who will run in an election?**



Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding. Source: 2019 Samara Citizen's Survey

### Candidate screening—it's not us, it's you

Each party requires potential nomination contestants to go through a screening process to ensure that their values are consistent with those of the party, and that there is nothing in their past that would place them in a conflict of interest. Parties are also concerned that candidates with an embarrassing, controversial, or criminal history may hurt their competitiveness and provide a distraction during elections. Those risks are amplified in an era of social media, which makes it easier both to identify candidates' past statements or actions, and for them to go "viral" during an election campaign.

Screening processes are highly intrusive, with potential contestants required to provide details on their finances, family life, social media accounts, employment and immigration histories, and to submit to credit and criminal record checks. Parties also devote considerable resources to screening activities, with the Conservative Party currently assigning 2.5 staff persons to the task.<sup>12</sup> Despite this attention to detail, in many instances rejected contestants are not told why their applications were denied.<sup>13</sup> Parties also have no obligation to disclose any information on the vetting process to Elections Canada.

"So, the nomination process is when I actually really found out I was a Conservative because it's a pretty stringent nomination process. I mean, you have to be vetted by the Conservative Party of Canada and by the riding association."  
- Former MP

To get a sense of the scope of vetting and the number of people affected, we asked the major parties to provide us with the number of contestants who they rejected during the run-up to the 2015 election. Only the Green Party replied to our request, indicating that they vetted out 7% of the applicants they received in 2015, and 5% of those received so far in the run up to the 2019 election.

It is understandable, and even desirable, that parties screen their nomination contestants. There can even be some democratic value in this; scholars who have studied the collapse of democracy around the world point to the important role parties play in keeping extremists out of the political system.<sup>14</sup> And it may be that parties only screen out such undesirable contestants—people who could damage the health of our democratic politics if they were allowed to run. But we do not know, because the process is utterly opaque. This creates the conditions for suspicion and the erosion of confidence, and makes manipulation by the central party highly possible at that earliest stage in the process—before someone is even an official contestant.

It may be that parties only screen out such undesirable contestants... But we do not know, because the process is utterly opaque.

### Appointing a candidate

Some of the candidates appearing on your ballot may not have gone through a nomination contest at all. Instead of being chosen by grassroots members, they were appointed by the party leadership.

**Figure 6 - Number of nominated and appointed candidates**

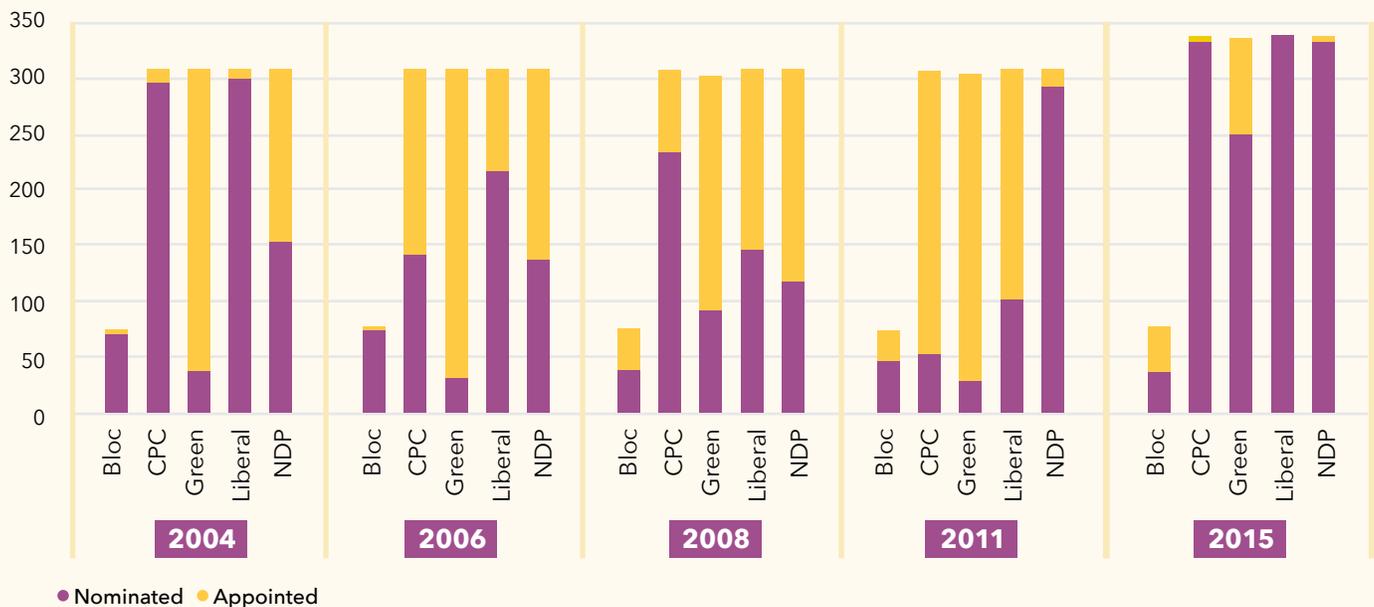


Figure 6 presents the proportion of candidates that were nominated versus appointed for each party between 2004 and 2015.<sup>15</sup> It shows that the proportion of election candidates chosen through nominations varies dramatically both between parties and over time. Surprisingly, there is no clear trend, with the proportion of nominated candidates largely falling from 2004 onward, only to shoot back up in 2015.

Why would a party simply skip the democratic process ordinarily required for picking a candidate? There are several reasons, including some legitimate ones:

- **Thin on the ground:** Parties may fail to organize a nomination meeting in a constituency because the number of party members in the community is so small as to make it impractical. Smaller parties may seek to nominate candidates in all ridings despite not having any real presence in many of those ridings.
- **Oh snap—an election!** Parties may decide to appoint candidates when elections occur unexpectedly. There tend to be more appointed candidates during minority Parliaments since the timing of elections is less predictable.
- **Making progress on diversity:** Parties may also use appointments to ensure more women and people from underrepresented communities end up in politics. Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien used this approach in the 1990s, appointing several women to ridings where the Liberals were likely to win in order to guarantee more women in caucus.
- **“I was here first!”** Parties often avoid nomination contests to protect their incumbent MPs from facing any challengers. In other words, the MP is automatically able to remain a candidate.

### Protecting incumbents

Of the four reasons to appoint, protecting incumbents is the most controversial. On the one hand, MPs often argue that being protected as a candidate has benefits for the party and Parliament. They argue that:

- their work as an MP means that they have less time to spend in their constituency to defend against a nomination challenge.<sup>16</sup>
- nominations can divide party members in a constituency, making them less likely to work together for success at the next election.<sup>17</sup>

The proportion of election candidates chosen through nominations varies dramatically both between parties and over time.

→ Parliament can benefit from having experienced MPs who are re-elected multiple times because they provide a basis of knowledge and can mentor new members.

But there are serious drawbacks, too. If one party consistently wins in a riding, nomination meetings become one of the only mechanisms for **holding an MP to account**. In deeply uncompetitive ridings, the only way to unseat a controversial MP is a nomination challenge. And there is no shortage of such ridings: in the 2015 federal election, fully one-fifth of all ridings were won with a margin of victory of over 30 percentage points. If MPs are automatically reappointed as candidates, the community loses even that ability to hold them to account.

Protecting incumbents from nomination challenges can also reduce the turn-over rate of MPs, helping to **preserve the current inequalities** in representation based on gender, ethnicity, indigeneity, or other factors. And MPs' arguments about their work making them vulnerable to nomination challenges deserves scrutiny as well. In reality, incumbency brings huge advantages, like media attention and local celebrity, a budget for local events, the ability to send mailings to constituents, and the financial freedom to campaign. With Parliament now sitting just one-third of the year, MPs have ample time in the riding.

**Table 3 - Protections for incumbents**

Party	2004	2006	2008	2011	2015	2019
<b>Conservative</b>	None	Full	None	Threshold	None	Threshold
<b>Green</b>	None	None	None	None	None	None
<b>Liberal</b>	None	Full	Full	Earned	None	Earned
<b>NDP</b>	None	None	None	None	None	None

Protection against nomination can take several forms. **Full protection** occurs when parties simply reappoint their MPs as election candidates. **Earned protection** is when parties establish criteria that MPs must meet to avoid a competition, like maintaining an active EDA or hitting fundraising goals. **Threshold protection** happens when parties place tougher requirements on those challenging an incumbent MP than those seeking to run in an unheld riding.

The decision to protect incumbents varies between parties and over time (Table 3). The Greens and NDP incumbents receive no protection, and always face a nomination contest.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the Conservative and Liberal parties have adopted different policies at different elections. Notably, the two elections where no party protected its incumbents—2004 and 2015— both took place after more seats were added to the House of Commons and constituency boundaries were redrawn.

### Less democracy, better representation?

Perhaps the most popular rationale for why parties should appoint rather than nominate is to correct the fact of underrepresentation for groups in Parliament. We've already seen how few women become nomination contestants. So is it true that appointees have pushed party slates in a more representative direction?

**Table 4 - Candidate diversity by method of selection, 2004-2015**

Party	Female		Visible minority		Indigenous	
	Nominated	Appointed	Nominated	Appointed	Nominated	Appointed
<b>Bloc</b>	27.0%	31.5%	8.1%	6.5%	0%	0%
<b>Conservative</b>	15.6%	20.7%	12.2%	7.5%	0.5%	0.2%
<b>Green</b>	33.2%	29.2%	7.0%	5.4%	1.6%	0.8%
<b>Liberal</b>	28.5%	31.7%	11.6%	10.1%	1.9%	0.9%
<b>NDP</b>	38.9%	32.8%	10.2%	11.2%	2.9%	0%
<b>Average</b>	<b>28.2%</b>	<b>28.9%</b>	<b>10.6%</b>	<b>7.8%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>

Table 4 compares the proportion of female, visible minority, and Indigenous candidates selected through nomination meetings and those appointed directly by their parties. The data suggest that while appointed candidates were very slightly more likely to be women overall, this trend masks important variations between parties. Since 2004, the candidates appointed directly by the Conservative Party were significantly more likely to be women than those chosen through its nomination contests, while the reverse was true for the NDP. This suggests that some parties may rely on appointed candidates to make up for shortcomings in their efforts to achieve gender parity through nominations.

Unlike the variation seen with regards to gender, all appointed candidates were less likely to be from a visible minority or Indigenous background than those chosen through nominations. This reality casts strong doubt on the argument that parties have used appointments to promote diversity. Instead, holding nominations may actually increase the diversity of the candidates presented to citizens at election time. According to census data, visible minorities and Indigenous people respectively accounted for 13.4% and 4.3% of the Canadian population in 2001. By 2016, these figures had risen to 22.3% and 4.9%.

Appointed candidates were less likely to be from a visible minority or Indigenous background than those chosen through nominations.

# Conclusion and recommendations

In Canada's 338 parliamentary constituencies, individual MPs are the link between voters and government. While parties are essential to the operation of Canada's democracy, their MPs should be more than just ambassadors for their party brands; they should know the interests of their constituencies and be willing to defend them. And the best way to choose a community champion is through a fairly run and competitive nomination contest organized by each party's local EDA.

Nomination contests in Canada are not living up to their potential as opportunities for grassroots democracy. While the situation improved in the 2015 election, a worrying proportion of election candidates over the past 15 years were chosen with no nomination contest at all. When nominations are held, far too many have just a single candidate. A disturbing number also happen too quickly for contestants to seriously engage with party members, or take place so far in advance of the election that most people wouldn't be thinking of choosing a candidate. The unpredictable timing and short duration of many nomination campaigns generally favours those who are already well connected within parties, while discouraging those on the outside. And more work is also needed to improve participation by women, who remain underrepresented among nomination contestants and even among those election candidates directly appointed by parties.

Conscientious voters who want to reward those parties who take the time to hold meaningful nominations are also out of luck. Canadians lack access to even basic information on nomination contests, like how many people voted in each meeting. Two of the major parties also do not post their nomination rules online, creating a further barrier to transparency.

Parties have work to do—and there's a role for Elections Canada to play, too.

Nomination contests in Canada are not living up to their potential as opportunities for grassroots democracy.

## Party best practices

We often hear from party officials that parties themselves are best positioned to determine how their nomination processes are run. Ideally, parties would compete with one another to offer the strongest value proposition to citizens, providing fair and open opportunities to choose the name that will appear on the ballot, or to seek to be that name. More transparency may help to stimulate just such a race to the top—but it is on parties to demonstrate serious interest in reform. In response to some of the issues identified in this report, we propose the following best practices.

Parties should:

- ✓ To the greatest extent possible, have nominations operate on **fixed dates prior to a general election**, rather than starting nominations at different times in different ridings. Doing so could raise the profile of nomination contests, facilitate greater public engagement, and remove the potential for nomination races to be timed to favour particular contestants.
- ✓ Issue **a call for nominations to all party members** who live in a given constituency prior to holding any nomination contest. This call for nominations should provide a reasonable period of time to allow potential contestants to submit their nomination papers for consideration.
- ✓ **Permit nomination challenges against sitting MPs**. Doing so both increases MPs' accountability to their communities, and can improve the rate at which Parliament becomes more diverse and representative.
- ✓ Set the **same requirements for people running in a nomination against an incumbent MP** as for people seeking to run in unheld ridings.
- ✓ **Remove fees for applying to become a contestant**, or at minimum move to refundable compliance deposits (which would be repaid at the end of contest for contestants who stay within the rules). The costs that some parties impose on nomination contestants can be a barrier to ensuring that all citizens can take part in the political process, especially those from disadvantaged groups.

- ✓ **Avoid retroactive deadlines** for joining the party or submitting nomination papers in advance of a nomination contest.
- ✓ If it is necessary to appoint candidates, **appoint an equal number of men and women and a proportionate number of visible minority and indigenous candidates.**
- ✓ Explore ways to **reduce the financial burden on female contestants**, such as voluntarily lowering nomination spending limits until parity is reached.

## Oversight and transparency

Nominations are an integral piece of Canada's democratic infrastructure. It's essential that they meet Canadian standards for fair, clean, and impartially administered elections. It's entirely appropriate that Elections Canada play a greater role in making sure that happens.

There are some simple steps that Parliament should take now to incrementally increase Elections Canada's oversight responsibility starting, with simply requiring more transparency from parties, and closing loopholes in nomination finance rules. These alone may prompt parties to improve their practices.

## First steps

- Parties should be required to report the number of members eligible to vote in each nomination contest, and the votes received by each nomination contestant. Reporting these figures would add little additional burden on top of the information already required, but would yield large improvements for transparency and accountability.
- Parties should be required to post their rules for nomination contests directly on their website.
- Following each election, parties should be required to report the number of individuals who applied to run as nomination contestants but were prevented from doing so through the candidate screening processes.
- Nomination contest spending limits should apply to all expenses made by a contestant in pursuit of a nomination, not just those that happen to be spent while a nomination is running. The current system allows

contestants who can support themselves to gain an extra advantage by spending additional funds before a contest has formally begun.

- Rather than forcing voters to wade through the nomination contest reports from each party to see if their local candidates were nominated or appointed, the Elections Canada website should allow voters to access a single page for each constituency that lists the candidates and find out how they were chosen.

## Future steps

Parties are private associations, but they're also public utilities. They have nearly complete control over access to Parliament. They also receive substantial public support via the generous tax credit on political donations and the reimbursement of election expenses. If parties don't themselves commit to fairer, more consistent and open practices, Parliament has a responsibility to examine stronger regulation—to represent the interests of all Canadians who support parties through their tax dollars, and accept parties as intermediaries between themselves and their democratic institutions.

In other words, party self-regulation is not necessary or inevitable. It may not even be desirable.

In thinking about regulating more aspects of political party activity, decision-makers should consider:

- Bringing nomination meetings under the administration of Elections Canada or, more simply, creating an impartial complaints process under the Chief Electoral Officer to adjudicate claims of unfairness or misconduct.
- Tying the publicly funded campaign reimbursements paid to parties to requirements that parties meet certain criteria in who is nominated. For example, parties may not receive 100% of their reimbursement if they don't exceed a particular threshold for holding nominations (rather than appointments), or for the percentage of female candidates, or candidates from underrepresented communities.
- Legislating some basic rules for how nomination contests must be run. The *Canada Elections Act* already imposes spending limits on nomination contests reflecting a realization that leaving internal party processes entirely alone in the law can create unfairness which weakens Canada's democratic infrastructure. That logic could be extended by introducing

rules around the length of nomination contests, for example, to create a basic floor of fairness and integrity across all party processes. Parties themselves would still have wide leeway to make up their own rules, above those basic thresholds.

Beyond just setting the stage for general elections, nominations are important for strengthening **engagement, legitimacy, diversity, and accountability** in our democratic system.

**“Canadian elections are primarily contests between the candidates of political parties... Thus the right of citizens to be candidates can be exercised effectively only to the extent that the nomination process of political parties provides fair access.”**

*- Royal Commission on electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991*



Parties' control over the selection of election candidates makes them the gatekeepers for who goes on to represent citizens and serve in Parliament. As the quote from the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing makes clear, this situation is not new. Yet progress towards improving the openness and accessibility of party nominations has been agonizingly slow. Nomination contests remain too short, uncompetitive, unpredictable, untransparent, and exclusionary. There are several easy steps that parties could take to reverse these trends. If they refuse to act, then Parliament should consider taking steps to ensure nominations don't remain a weak link in Canada's system of representative democracy.

# Methodology

The Samara Centre developed two datasets to conduct the statistical analyses contained in this report: one captured information on the party nomination contests that took place between 2003 and 2015 and those who competed in them; the other captured information on the federal election candidates who ran for office during the same period. There obviously is overlap between the two datasets since many election candidates were chosen through nomination contests. However, thousands of election candidates were also appointed, and many of those who ran for a nomination lost and so did not make it to the election. Examining these two pools of people (election candidates and nomination contestants) allows us to explore the different characteristics of each group and how they compare with each other.

We developed the nomination contestants dataset by compiling the information from the “nomination meeting reports” contained on the Election Canada website. Each report indicates the dates the contest started and ended, the contestants’ names, and who won. We then added gender information by making inferences from candidates’ names, with web searches when the name was unclear.

We start the nominations analysis in 2003 because that was when changes to the *Canada Elections Act* first required parties to file such reports. We exclude the 2019 election since nominations are still ongoing. When a party held more than one nomination contest in the same constituency prior to a general election, only the last one is used in the dataset. We limit the analysis to candidates and nomination contestants for the five parties that succeeded in electing MPs to the House of Commons during the study period: Bloc Québécois, Conservative Party of Canada, Green Party of Canada, Liberal Party of Canada, and the New Democratic Party. While nomination contests may be held for by-elections, we focus only on the nominations of general election candidates to allow comparison over time. All told, the nominations dataset contains information on over 6,000 nomination contestants.

Our election candidates data set was based on a pre-existing data set of federal candidates and election results compiled by Semra Sevi.<sup>19</sup> We then used the nomination dataset to add information on how each candidate was selected: if a nomination contest was reported, then we coded the candidate as having been nominated and included details on the contest (e.g. number of candidates, length, days before the election, etc.); if no nomination meeting was reported, then the candidate was coded as having been appointed. We also added demographic data using candidate ethnicity records compiled by Jerome Black and again added gender information based on candidates' names, with web searches where needed.<sup>20</sup> In the end, the dataset captured information on over 6,700 candidates.

This data analysis was complemented and placed in context by a review of each party's nomination rules. The Liberal and Conservative parties post their nomination rules online, and we are grateful to the NDP and Green parties for sharing their nomination rules with us. The analysis was also informed by discussions with the national directors of the Conservative, Green, Liberal, and New Democratic parties.

# About the Samara Centre's Parties Project

This report is the first in a new research series from the Samara Centre for Democracy that specifically examines the work and operation of Canada's political parties. The Samara Centre has previously touched on parties in our research on Parliament and in our Democracy 360 report cards on the health of Canadian democracy. Through this work, it has become clear that several of the major steps to improving Canadian democracy, such as decentralizing decision making and improving diversity in politics, can only come through changes by parties themselves.

Parties are the transmission belt that links citizens to Parliament and government. By choosing candidates and arranging different policy ideas into coherent platforms, parties make it possible for citizens to vote in elections with some idea of how the winning side will act in power. They also control much of what happens at parliament, and particularly the incentives that shape the behaviour of MPs. Given this pivotal position within the political system, the Samara Centre's parties project seeks to:

- Improve the public's understanding of political parties and their role in Canadian politics;
- Increase the transparency of party operations;
- Identify potential reforms to strengthen parties' role as open and effective facilitators of civic participation in Canada.

Going forward, our next step will be to explore how parties operate at election time, including how they campaign at both the local and national levels.

## Acknowledgments

To ensure that we approached this subject with the appropriate care and understanding, in fall 2018 the Samara Centre held roundtables with academics and members of Canada's major political parties to discuss the vital role that parties play in Canadian politics, the challenges they face, and potential areas for improvement.

We are deeply grateful to the roundtable participants who took the time to meet with us and share their insights. Participants included David Anderson, Brittany Andrew-Amofah, Sam Andrey, Michele Austin, Tom Axworthy, Yaroslav Baran, Chris Cochrane, Bill Cross, Bill Fox, Tiffany Gooch, Michal Hay, Adrienne Lipsey, Lorna Marsden, Chandra Pasma, Scott Pruysers, Jennifer Robson, Robin Sears, Hugh Segal, Leslie Seidle, David Sloly, Sean Speer, Erin Tolley, Tom Robson, Mitch Wexler, and Paul Wilson. A special thank you to Chad Rodgers and Crestview for hosting our Ottawa roundtable, and Tom Axworthy and Massey College for hosting our Toronto roundtable.

Our desire to better understand parties also led us to reach out to the national directors of Canada's four largest political parties. We are very thankful to Melissa Bruno of the New Democratic Party, Azam Ishmael of the Liberal Party, Emily McMillan of the Green Party, and Dustin Van Vugt of the Conservative Party for taking the time to meet with us. We greatly appreciated the chance to share the goals of our research and to learn more about the unique ways each party operates.

Our new engagement with parties was also assisted by the work of our volunteers, who helped us to sort through the massive academic literature on the subject. Specifically, we wish to thank Rhea Bhatia, Louise Cockram, Jamie Gibson, Hilary Hagar, Nick Harrison, Meredith Lilly, Kelly McConvey, Alex Middleton, Kirsty Rancier, Katie Rosa, and Brianna Shrimpton.

In addition to taking part in the initial roundtables, Professors Bill Cross of Carleton University and Scott Pruysers of Dalhousie University also shared generously of their expertise regarding the operation of Canadian parties throughout the research and drafting of this report. Their insights helped us to identify what information was available on party nominations and how to better understand the trends we identified.

We are further indebted to Professor Jerome Black of McGill University for sharing his immense research on the ethnic backgrounds of election candidates in Canada. And we are grateful to University of Montreal PhD Candidate Semra Sevi for publicly posting her dataset of Canadian election candidates, which saved us considerable time in developing our research.

# End notes

1. Research finds that the identity of the individual candidate accounts for only about 4% of the votes they receive. Benjamin Allen Stevens, Md Mujahedul Islam, Roosmarijn de Geus, and Jonah Goldberg (2019), "Local Candidate Effects in Canadian Elections," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 1: 83-96.
2. Yael Shomer, Gert-Jan Put, and Einat Gedalya-Lavy (2016), "Intra-Party Politics and Public Opinion: How Candidate Selection Processes Affect Citizens' Satisfaction with Democracy," *Political Behavior* 38, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 509-34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-015-9324-6>.
3. William Cross (2004), *Political Parties*, Vancouver: UBC Press.
4. In the 2015 federal election, fully one-fifth of all ridings were won with a margin of victory of over 30 percentage points, making the nomination the only mechanism to hold that candidate or MP accountable.
5. For more on the role of party leaders in Canadian politics, see Michael Morden, Jane Hilderman, and Kendall Anderson (2018), "The Real House Lives: Strengthening the role of MPs in an age of partisanship," Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy.
6. Ibid.
7. Abbas Rana (2019), "Former Ontario Conservative MP Chisu to run as a People's Party candidate in upcoming election," *The Hill Times*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/03/25/disappointed-former-ontario-conservative-mp-chisu-leaves-party-will-run-as-a-peoples-party-candidate-in-the-upcoming-election/193688>.
8. Abbas Rana (2017), "Despite Liberals' 'dirty tricks' in Markham-Thornhill Nomination, Qureshi decides not to run as Independent for sake of Grit party unity," *The Hill Times*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2017/03/06/despite-dirty-tricks-liberal-party-markham-thornhill-nomination-candidate-qureshi-decides-not-run-independent-candidate-april-3-byelection-party-unity/98526>.
9. Semra Sevi, Vincent Arel-Bundock, and André Blais (2019), "Do Women Get Fewer Votes? No.," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 1: 201-210, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423918000495>.
10. Marie-Danielle Smith (2019), "More women are running for the Conservatives than ever before. Can it erode the liberals' female vote?," *National Post*, June 26, 2019, <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/tattoo-artist-among-candidates-conservative-party-hopes-will-counter-stereotypes-attract-youth>.
11. Melanee Thomas and Marc André Bodet (2013), "Sacrificial lambs, women candidates, and district competitiveness in Canada," *Electoral Studies* 32, no. 1: 153-66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2012.12.001>.
12. John Geddes and Jason Markusoff (2019), "Andrew Scheer has a problem," *Maclean's*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/andrew-scheer-has-a-problem/>.
13. Abbas Rana (2017), "Conservatives open nominations in their 92 held ridings, but deny new rules 'advantageous' to incumbent Tory MPs," *The Hill Times*, December 4, 2017, <http://www.hilltimes.com/2017/12/04/new-nomination-rules-advantageous-incumbent-mps-place-conservative-party-opens-nominations-held-ridings/127621>.
14. Stephen Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018), *How Democracies Die*, New York: Crown.
15. For this study, a candidate is considered to have been appointed if no nomination meeting report was filed with Elections Canada.
16. Abbas Rana (2017), "Liberal MPs want Trudeau to protect them from nomination challenges in 2019 election," *The Hill Times*, June 26, 2017, <http://www.hilltimes.com/2017/06/26/liberal-mps-want-protection-nomination-challenges-2019-election/111437>.
17. Abbas Rana (2006), "Liberals to protect incumbent Grits from nomination battles," *The Hill Times*, May 15, 2006, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2006/05/15/liberals-to-protect-incumbent-grits-from-nomination-battles/6791>.
18. Abbas Rana (2014), "All major political parties to hold open nominations," *The Hill Times*, January 20, 2014, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2014/01/20/all-major-political-parties-to-hold-open-nominations/27137>.
19. Semra Sevi (2019), "Canadian Federal Candidates: 1867-2017," Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ABFNSQ>.
20. Jerome H. Black (2017), "The 2015 Federal Election: More Visible Minority Candidates and MPs," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 40, no. 1: 16-23.

PUBLICATION DATE: 17 July 2019

Copyright © The Samara Centre for Democracy 2019

CITATION: Paul EJ Thomas, and Michael Morden 2019. "Party Favours: How federal election candidates are chosen". Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy.

EDITOR: Allison Jane Smith

DATA COLLECTION: Paul EJ Thomas, Jerome Black, and Semra Sevi

DATA ANALYSIS: Paul EJ Thomas

DESIGNER: Geneviève Biloski

The Samara Centre for Democracy is a non-partisan charity dedicated to strengthening Canada's democracy, making it more accessible, responsive, and inclusive. The Samara Centre produces action-based research—as well as tools and resources for active citizens and public leaders—designed to engage Canadians in their democracy.

To learn more about the Samara Centre's work or to make a charitable donation to support our research, please visit [samaracanada.com](http://samaracanada.com) or contact us at 416-960-7926.



33 Prince Arthur Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5R 1B2  
416-960-7926 | [info@samaracanada.com](mailto:info@samaracanada.com)

 @SamaraCDA  SamaraCanada  @SamaraCDA