



Summary Report

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Panel Theme: Electoral Integrity: Nomination Contests and Leadership Contests

Key Issues: Commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue recognized, in her interim report, that “nomination contests can be gateways for foreign states who wish to interfere in our democratic process.” A key image that has emerged from the evidence about foreign interference is busloads of foreign students attending a nomination contest. In turn, a key (related) concern is how to prevent similar coordinated activities by non-Canadians from occurring in the future. One of the questions asked of our roundtable is “What are the advantages and disadvantages of regulating/imposing rules on political party processes?” My comments focus on the potential disadvantages of imposing rules on political party nomination and leadership contests that would make them less inclusive and more restrictive.

Assessment: Some avenues exist for foreign actors to interfere in Canadian elections. There are points in the processes followed by parties to choose the candidates that they put forward in election campaigns that are particularly vulnerable. There is no question that the rules each party follows for their own nomination and leadership contests are sufficiently inclusive as to be susceptible to manipulation by non-citizens, or malicious actors, who want to make an impact on Canadian elections. This has already been recognized by the Commissioner.

It may seem like a simple solution is to “clean up” these processes with additional regulations for both nomination and leadership contests. One such reform could be voting eligibility. In a country where every citizen is guaranteed the right to vote, it could seem like an easy choice to prevent anyone ineligible to vote in an election from having input into who stands for that election. After all, they cannot even vote for them (yet).

However, any sort of additional regulation in party nomination and leadership contests can have unintended negative impacts on political engagement. The reality is that current levels of political engagement in Canadian political process are not very robust. In the last election less than 63% of eligible citizens voted. It wasn't so long ago that turnout fell

below 60%.¹ And most Canadians are not a member of any political party.² It is in this context that we need to be aware that any steps taken to shape the rules of parties and limit engagement in nomination or leadership processes can have serious (and potentially negative) consequences. Careful consideration of how and why people are motivated to become involved in the electoral process in Canada is therefore warranted.

First, we need to consider things from the party perspective. Parties face significant constraints, and the status quo serves their interests. Ultimately, the goal of a party is to get members elected to direct (or change) policy. In Canada we elect individual MPs to represent the interests of their local constituents. This means that understanding the needs and preferences of a community, and recruiting candidates from within it, are important parts of the electoral process. Electoral District Associations (EDAs) take on this task. In most cases, EDAs are made up of loyal activists who support the party. But the reality is that the number of members in each EDA varies widely and is often not high between elections.³ In many EDAs only one candidate emerges even when a nomination contest is held.⁴ In ridings where a party is historically unpopular, there is therefore a dual challenge – finding someone willing to be a candidate can be hard, but finding people to support the candidate, who are willing to campaign on their behalf, is even harder.

Nomination and leadership campaigns are pivotal moments for EDAs because the opportunity to vote in such contests attracts members to the parties. Parties not only *want* members – their dues, their enthusiasm, their momentum – but they *need* members. First and foremost, members from a community provide information about the needs and preferences of that community. Parties want to attract electoral votes with an appealing candidate, so this perspective matters a lot. If nomination and leadership contests do not allow people to come forward and build their candidacies by attracting new party members then there is a real risk of a party becoming staid and irrelevant for the community it is meant to serve. Second, EDAs are the engines that make local campaigns possible; in our first-past-the-post electoral system, local campaigns matter. The central parties depend upon EDAs to do the groundwork to build support for their candidates and to take care of the logistics that make campaigns happen. Strong local campaigns need volunteers and donations. For example, door knocking is a resource-intensive task, and we

¹ <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&dir=turn&document=index&lang=e>.

² William Cross and Lisa Young, 2004, “The Contours of Political Party Membership in Canada,” *Party Politics* 10(4): 427-444. <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1177/1354068804043907>

³ R. Kenneth Carty, 2002, “The Politics of Tecumseh Corners: Canadian Political Parties as Franchise Organizations,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 35(4): 723-745. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3233287>

⁴ Samara Centre for Democracy, 2019, *Party Favours*. <https://www.samaracentre.ca/articles/party-favours>

know that personal campaign contact helps attract votes.⁵ So a key question for EDAs is how to get volunteers. The answer the parties seem to have landed on is welcoming pretty much anyone and everyone who wants to get involved into the party. Attracting members through nomination and leadership contests is therefore something parties rely upon for their central mission – to win elections. If parties did not have volunteers, the types of campaigns they would be able to run would be very different from what we are familiar with. Getting enough people involved, however that might happen, can make the difference between winning or losing a parliamentary seat.

To that end, it makes sense that the current rules the parties in Canada follow are inclusive. Although the voting age is 18 the main parties do not restrict their membership to that age. Nor do they have citizenship requirements. They also vary in terms of how long someone must be a party member before voting in a nomination contest – as few as 2 days.⁶ Even to be a candidate, the rules about the length of party membership vary widely. This inclusivity likely reflects the two realities stated above – that a local candidate is meant to be drawn from and representative of the local constituency, and that parties both benefit from and depend upon having more supporters.

It is also relevant to understand that parties are not public entities.⁷ In our political system, although they play a central and pivotal role (indeed, the functioning of our political process as it stands currently depends upon them), parties are private organizations designed to bring people together to win elections. New parties can develop and old parties can die as policy ideas and issues change. The rules parties develop, then, are meant to be self-serving and they have considerable freedom to make them as they choose.

The second consideration on this point is that at the citizen level, inclusivity in party nomination and leadership processes has implications for political engagement and representation. The consequences of recruiting members to take part in a nomination or leadership process goes beyond increasing community representation in an EDA. It also means that the entire electoral process is accessible for interested people to get involved. This is vitally important if we want those who are involved in politics to represent the diversity of Canadian society, not just the established elites or traditional interests.

⁵ C. Pattie, A. Whitworth and R. Johnston, 2015, “Does campaign contact influence individuals' vote choices? An alternative approach.” *European Political Science* 14(3): 279-297. <https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2015.24>

⁶ Scott Pruyers and William Cross, 2016, “Candidate Selection in Canada: Local Autonomy, Centralization, and Competing Democratic Norms,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 60(7): 781–798. <https://10.1177/0002764216632820>

⁷ *Trost v Conservative Party of Canada*, 2018 ONSC 2733.

Returning to the idea of restricting nomination and leadership contest vote eligibility, I am concerned that such a restriction could be discouraging to future voters – those who have yet to come of age and those who are not yet citizens. Both groups are potential voters whose future engagement in Canadian democracy is uncertain. We know that one's sense of duty is a significant factor in electoral participation⁸ and there has been a decline in both duty and engagement in younger generations.⁹ But duty is not something that can be easily manipulated. Other levers are needed to motivate people to get involved in politics. Feeling like one can make a difference, or having a sense of efficacy, provides an important incentive to get involved. The excitement that one feels from being part of a nomination or leadership contest, contributing to a key stage of the democratic process, can be pivotal for someone in terms of political socialization. This point builds upon research that suggests that exposure to politics at a young age in the household is related to adult political activity¹⁰, that adolescent activities are relevant for future political engagement¹¹, that turnout can be a habit.¹² Early experiences with the electoral process can shape how one sees politics and how relevant they judge it to be in the future. When it comes time that a person *is* eligible to vote, socialization experiences become invaluable. Given what we know about trends in turnout across generations, and given that Canada is a society of immigrants, this point cannot be ignored.

Recommendations: The more restrictive nomination and leadership contests become, the more the inclusivity and accessibility of our democratic process is weakened. Two points should be considered. First, it is difficult to see how adjusting party processes to avoid foreign interference will not infringe upon the ability of parties to operate effectively. Second, the risk of alienating current and future voters with the addition of regulations is significant. Both points have implications for representation and the quality of democratic inputs that in turn are important for Canadian democracy writ large.

⁸ André Blais, 2000, *To Vote or Not to Vote* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press).

⁹ André Blais and Daniel Rubenson, 2013, "The Source of Turnout Decline: New Values or New Contexts?" *Comparative Political Studies*, 46(1): 95-117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012453032>

¹⁰ Sidney Verba, Nancy Burns, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, 2003, "Unequal at the Starting Line: Creating Participatory Inequalities across Generations and among Groups," *American Sociologist* 34 (1): 45-69. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-003-1005-y>

¹¹ Jennifer L. Glanville, 1999, "Political Socialization or Selection? Adolescent Extracurricular Participation and Political Activity in Early Adulthood," *Social Science Quarterly*, 80(2): 279-290. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42863900>

¹² John H. Aldrich, Jacob M. Montgomery and Wendy Wood, 2011, "Turnout as a Habit," *Political Behavior*, 33: 535-563. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9148-3>