# Political Elites in Canada

## Power and Influence in Instantaneous Times

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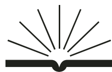

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PART 1

# Introduction

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# 1
# Political Elites in the Age of Digital Media

*Alex Marland, Andrea Lawlor, and Thierry Giasson*

> *Political elites:*
> *Individuals who hold public office, who act as agents of those who do, or who otherwise have greater political influence and power than other citizens do.*
>
> *(from the Glossary)*

Digital media have the potential to revolutionize the relationship between government and the governed. The enhanced information environment, driven by low-cost technology and instantaneous access to information, enables citizens to hold leaders to account in ways previously unimaginable. The speed of communication provides an agile forum for participation. Yet competing political agendas are leveraging digital media, sometimes with negative outcomes for civic engagement. The sheer volume of information can dampen engagement and push citizens toward apathy. In short, society is undergoing an intensification of political competition. Those hoping to maintain the informational status quo are in a power struggle with those seeking to disrupt established institutions.

Elite politics occurs at the intersection of these motivations. *Political Elites in Canada: Power and Influence in Instantaneous Times* focuses on the techniques that elites use to communicate with one another and with the public. It is a timely undertaking given the anti-elitism expressed worldwide and the rise in skepticism toward the use of digital media in political discourse. Many insights presented here about elite communication in Canadian politics are generalizable to democracies everywhere. Studying these behaviours can help us learn more about what it means to be a political elite in today's society and the nature of elite influence.

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We set out to explore three overarching themes. We are interested in understanding the nature of *political representation* in a digital environment. Attempts to remove institutional barriers and the ubiquity of digital communications technologies have flattened the once narrow power hierarchy. Traditional elites embedded their status within formal institutions. New ones are informing the policy space using affordable, user-friendly digital technologies such as blogging, social networking, and other modes of online influence. There is a push within existing institutions to diversify representation through formal means, such as a more diverse selection of candidates for election and appointment, and through informal mechanisms, such as broader consultation when making decisions. How do political elites in Canada represent interests using their position and relationship to formal power? How are elites integrating new forms of communication into their offices? Are digital technologies being used to enhance or stymy participation and two-way communication? Which constraints, if any, bind elites in an age of digital media and hypermediatization of politics? These are some of the many questions that we contemplate under the political representation umbrella.

We are also concerned with *political decision making* and the implications of digital communications on elite behaviour. This encompasses the nature of the deliberative process as much as it does the policy outcomes. One measure of elites' ability to represent the public interest is the extent to which societal preferences are reflected in their actions. Historically, citizens have formally passed judgment in elections; increasingly, interelection assessments are rendered through standings in public opinion polls and an ability to win the media cycle. Either way this reflects a belief that democracies require "two-way communication and trust" with citizens (Fenno 1978, 243). An interactive dialogue can be difficult to achieve when the public lacks information about the behaviour of elites. It thus becomes necessary to explore how Canadian elites engage in political or policy decision making, the transparency of these activities, and the role of the public in this process.

Finally, we examine the *political accountability* of elites where digital communications is concerned. Democracy depends on formal structures and processes that shape public policy outcomes (Krane 2007). There are growing expectations that these processes should be out in the open and inclusive, contrary to traditional elite influence, which tended to occur through backroom channels. On occasion, it has even been suggested that elites protect

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the interests of the public, even when those interests might diverge from public opinion (Converse 1964; Mills 1957). More recent work suggests that leadership can, in fact, lead public opinion, simply by cultivating the list of available alternatives (e.g., Van der Wal 2014). In whatever manner political elites are conceptualized, they are characterized by their access to and influence over those with substantive decision making and representative capacities in the government. Ideally, their activities should be subject to public oversight. However, codes of conduct have been absent from many areas of the government, and conflicts of interest are often difficult to monitor (Stark 2008). For decades, many elites were thought to operate away from the public eye, and the business of the government was presumed to be conducted smoothly enough (Alboim 2012; Presthus 1973; Pross 1992).

What, then, are the corresponding mechanisms to enforce compliance and responsiveness of political elites? To what extent does the presence or absence of accountability impact the practice of representative/responsible government and democracy in Canada? How does the existence of new forms of communication challenge the traditional opaque nature of elite communication? These are some of the many questions that permeate this book, the answers to which are somewhat tempered by the very pace of change that prompts us to ask such questions in the first place. Before embarking on this research undertaking, we need to establish who political elites are.

## Elites and Political Elites: The Theoretical Terrain

Whether appointed, elected, hired, or self-proclaimed, elites are individuals in positions of authority who wield influence over citizens. At the broadest level, elites sit atop the economic and social hierarchy. In *The Power Elite,* Charles W. Mills (1957) explained that American society is replete with people who hold positions of authority. They make decisions that affect many lives and can leverage their status to bypass institutional barriers faced by ordinary citizens. Elites are found in the smallest of communities and the largest of metropolises, where family lineage and old money press up against migrants and the nouveau riche. Historically, many of them have risen from an exceedingly narrow segment of society – well-off, white, older, heterosexual, anglophone, Christian, male – meaning that elite structures have generally not mirrored society's diversity. Moreover, public figures ranging from entertainers to elected officials are accorded prestige among their kind and by their followers. They are attuned to the importance

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of media relations, Mills noted (5), but there is so much interest in celebrities that the masses are distracted from paying attention to those at the top of the power hierarchy with lower profiles (359–60).

Much of this rings true in Canada. Yet there is a more nuanced picture of power structures north of the forty-ninth parallel, heavily influenced by ethnicity and political culture and often pronounced in provinces and small communities. As John Porter (1965) outlined in *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada,* positions of authority in Canadian society have historically been held by men of British or French ancestry, while citizens of other heritages have faced barriers to upward mobility. The upper class shaped churches, corporations, media, political parties, the public service, trade unions, and other institutions, each of which had its organizational norms. This led Porter to conclude that ethnicity was the dominant characteristic of Canadian society. Others have observed the influence of regionalism, social class, religion, and education and how some elites switch roles within and between bureaucratic, corporate, and political worlds (e.g., Clement 1975). If Porter were to update his work today, he would surely comment on the ascent of women among elite enclaves, reflect on how the country is attempting to reach reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and examine the erosion of traditional media gatekeeping. Those who study the Canadian establishment add that, since the 1990s, the globalization of business and the influence of online technologies have been turning the upper echelon into more of a meritocracy (Newman 2013). Furthermore, we struggle to establish the socio-economic characteristics of those who engage in "elite-challenging" behaviour and to define the nature of that behaviour (Painter-Main 2014).

However, no matter their sociodemographic characteristics, elites know the value of leveraging status. Social historians who research the public and private lives of Ottawa elites tell tales about how those with ambition navigate their way to the top (e.g., Gwyn 1984). They are willing to employ personalism and their connections to brush aside institutional barriers (Savoie 2010, 214–15). They tend to congregate in "a very similar set of social circles" (Clement 1975, 262) and are prone to hold convictions disconnected from those of the public, giving rise to populist uprisings that unnerve the established hegemony. Indeed, social diversity in itself does not resolve ideological disconnects: Canadian elites' philosophical orientations are increasingly a function of their occupational positions rather than their class backgrounds (Ornstein and Stevenson 1999).

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Analyzing the political power of those with considerable economic and social capital is difficult.[1] Elites do not generally flaunt their ability to access each other. Some of them exert political clout by mingling in private settings with the political class, by offering resources, and by sharing their knowledge and connections. Others hold sway over those who travel in political circles by exploiting their fame and ability to command media attention. Some do both. How can we know in which, if any, political activities Canada's wealthiest families – among them the Thompson, Saputo, Rogers, Irving, and Weston families – are involved? What of the CEOs of Canada's largest companies? The few news reports that identify the Quebec-based Desmarais family (Power Corporation) and the Beaudoins (Bombardier) as heavy donors to Liberals and Conservatives, to identify only a couple of examples, offer limited insights into a hidden world. How can we be definitive about the politicking of the heads of labour unions, many of whom are affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress, which has ties to the New Democratic Party? Likewise, cursory information about galas and parties at which socialites hobnob with aspirants and office holders offers no insight into the flow of political power. Demystifying the interconnected web of the upper class requires some broader context beyond information available through media coverage, lobbying reports, financial documents released by an elections agency, or an individual's social media posts. Unravelling all of that would be a formidable socio-anthropological undertaking that extends well beyond our present objectives.

Turning to politics and governance, there is not even an agreed way to define the elites who exercise political power. They are traditionally described as individuals "who in any society rank toward the top of the (presumably closely intercorrelated) dimensions of interest, involvement, and influence in politics" (Putnam 1971, 651). An earlier description defines them as "a small stratum of individuals much more highly involved in political thought, discussion, and action than the rest of the population" (Dahl 2005, 90). Understanding the term invokes epithets such as "ruling class, political class, elite, power elite, and leadership group," sometimes applied synonymously, other times working in deliberate opposition to one another (Stanworth and Giddens 1974, 2). As Mills (1957) noted, some are public figures and lauded as celebrities, whereas others are unknowns who toil in obscurity.

How, though, to distinguish political elites from those who occupy high positions in business, the bureaucracy, labour unions, the media, and other

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aspects of society who might or might not dabble in the political realm? Moreover, the concept has application to new forms of elites. Even as social media enable pan-Canadian mobilization – such as the Idle No More movement, which connected formerly disparate Indigenous voices (see Coates 2015) – those who participate in politicking are themselves elites of some form. The reason is that people involved with political parties, interest groups, and social movements are attuned to public policy in ways that other citizens are not. In whatever manner we conceptualize political elites, we must be mindful that there are different layers of political information among citizens. For instance, through social media, governments are disseminating news content, thereby displacing the fourth estate's role of filtering information (Garland, Tambini, and Couldry 2017). Lobbyists, religious groups, antiglobalization protesters, social movements, trade associations, charities, corporations – these and countless other organizations are producing digital information every day. So are individuals. Political activists and ordinary citizens have been exerting influence online over their fellow citizens for over a decade now (Harmon 2004).

If "only a small minority of politically, socially, and economically privileged Canadians are quite knowledgeable about politics" (Fournier 2002, 93), then it stands to reason that those discussing politics online are prone to be mistaken as a representative sample of the broader public mood. We are left with the muddy waters of trying to differentiate the "higher circles" of the power elite from those who participate in protests and other forms of political expression compared with backroom actors and the "ordinary" people who shun the limelight (Mills 1957). The confusion might be related to the overlapping nature of political processes and concepts. Scholars have many concerns, yet they lack a definitive understanding of the complexities of political power in policy making (e.g., McFarland 2007).

Given this, how can we conclusively determine who warrants the label of a "political elite"? Porter (1965) confined that term to the executive and judicial branches of the government. Certainly, the cabinet and higher courts represent the pinnacle of the political system, particularly when there are bursts of executive federalism or judicial activism. In comparison, *Elite Accommodation in Canadian Politics* (Presthus 1973) afforded this treatment to the legislative branch, the public service, and the heads of interest groups, all of which revolve around cabinet in some way. That study differentiated Canadian elites in the following manner: "The 'political elite' in-

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cludes legislators and bureaucrats in the official government apparatus and private interest group leaders; the 'government elite' includes only legislators and bureaucrats; while interest group leaders and their representatives will be characterized as 'private elites'" (3). This begs the question of whether interest groups and the mass media ought to be studied because of their roles in political life or excluded because of their corporate ties. To us their exclusion is inconceivable given the transformative social changes brought about, in part, by changes in communications strategies and technologies.

The political elite, then, is an amorphous concept. It encompasses the three branches of the government, the extraparliamentary wings of political parties, and the upper echelon of public administration. Political advisers are included. After that, the political activities of media and interest groups warrant attention. New dynamics mean that everyday citizens who interact online with powerful figures should be studied, as should the implications of digital media for how political elites behave. A wide net must be cast to consider the broadening variety of political actors who wade into and out of circles of influence.

## Political Elites in Canada: Who They Are Today

In contemporary Canadian scholarship, conceptions of political elites are often narrowly drawn, limiting the concept to senior politicians, high-powered civil servants or partisans, and partisan-aligned corporate interests (e.g., Lindquist 1992). Although our aim here is not to create a taxonomy, it is helpful to identify the positions of political authority and influencers, including some portrayed as apolitical. Table 1.1 summarizes diverse types in the Canadian political system. That it contains so many positions but is not an exhaustive inventory speaks to the variety of political elites in Canada. There is no mention of those whose power has been waning, such as the church and party financiers, or of those who have a formidable presence in crisis situations, such as the military and police. We do not discuss elites who represent Canada abroad, namely ambassadors and members of foreign missions. As well, there are varied power structures within Indigenous governance and of Indigenous peoples in Canadian society not addressed here. We are also not preoccupied with elites' sociodemographic composition (but see Chapter 5). Rather, we illustrate the use of their power, the relationships among these elites, and how these relationships are changing in a digital era characterized by enhanced communication ability and monitor-

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Table 1.1

**Political elite types in Canadian politics and government**

| *Elite type* | *Functions* | *Examples of political actors* |
|---|---|---|
| Formal executive | Head of state, constitutional and ceremonial duties | Monarch, governor general, lieutenant governors |
| Political executive | Apex of government decision making; main spokespersons for government | Prime minister, premier, cabinet ministers |
| Legislators | Representing constituent concerns; voting in the legislature | MPs, senators, members of provincial legislatures, mayors, city/town councillors |
| Officers and officials of the legislature | Watchdog organizations charged with reviewing, regulating, or overseeing government decisions; annual reports to the legislature | Access to information commissioner, auditor general, chief electoral officer, commissioner of lobbying, conflict of interest and ethics commissioner, official languages commissioner, privacy commissioner, public sector integrity commissioner |
| Political staff | Agents of senior public officials | Partisans in the PMO, premiers' offices, ministers' offices, opposition offices, legislators' offices |
| Judiciary | Interpreters of the Constitution and laws; rule on legal matters | Supreme Court justices, lower court and federal judges, crown lawyers |
| Senior civil service | Senior members of the permanent administration of government; might or might not exhibit partisan leanings | Clerk of the Privy Council, central agency personnel, DMs, ADMs, directors, chairs of boards, officers of the legislature, diplomats and consular officers |
| Political parties | Senior office holders in the extraparliamentary wing of a party | Leaders, riding association presidents, candidates/nominees |
| Interest groups and social movements | Groups of people who seek to influence the government and/or society | Leaders or spokespersons of corporations, unions, business organizations, professional organizations, single-issue groups, community groups |
| Lobbyists and public affairs personnel | Individuals who cultivate relationships with senior political personnel and seek to persuade them about courses of action | Government relations personnel, in-house lobbyists |

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| *Elite type* | *Functions* | *Examples of political actors* |
|---|---|---|
| Traditional media | Operators and employees of broadcast and print media; act as the fourth estate to hold the government to account | Publishers, editors, news anchors, television personalities and hosts, syndicated columnists, journalists, broadcast producers, media research teams |
| Online influencers | Citizen journalists; heavy users of digital media who become opinion leaders | Social media mobilizers, bloggers, media aggregators |
| Political consultants/ advisers | For-hire or in-house communications strategists and boutique operators | Pollsters, marketers, political strategists |
| Intelligentsia | Purveyors of informed opinion in the public sphere | Think tanks, academics, pundits, public intellectuals |

ing of elite behaviour. It is important to understand that some individuals belong in more than one category. This is instructive: the more roles converge, the more potential influence an individual has over others, and the more power becomes concentrated in one person. This helps to explain why prime ministers and premiers hold so much sway. It suggests that, generally speaking, the most powerful elites are those who simultaneously hold multiple positions of authority.

At the top of Table 1.1 and the elite pyramid is the formal executive. The institution of the Crown is often cited as a relic of a bygone era, playing a meaningful role in the parliamentary process in rare and sometimes obscure cases. The criticism is signalled by Canada's waning British connection, the appointed nature of the monarch's representatives, and a position that rubber-stamps the first minister's requests. Public opinion about Canada's relationship with the British monarchy goes through ebbs and flows, with support for continuance seemingly rooted in strong public approval of Queen Elizabeth II (CTV 2016) and outbursts of anger spurred by reports of dubious financial costs of the Canadian monarchy (Zemanek 2011). Rarely is there anything but nominal public discussion about what a republican head of state might look like – an essential question to resolve given the governor general's role in legislative approval and role as commander-in-chief of the Canadian Forces. Even if largely formal responsibilities are retained by a homegrown head of state, that individual would have to maintain

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a greater sense of relevance in the contemporary political age and would be subject to greater media scrutiny locally. This does not even delve into matters such as the method of appointment or the nature of its functions. In the absence of significant political pressure for change, the monarchy of Canada busies itself with ceremonial duties, such as award ceremonies and the delivery of throne speeches.

The de facto political executive attracts considerable media and academic attention. The prime minister and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), along with the heavy hitters on the most powerful cabinet committees, sit at the unquestionable centre of power. With respect to the acting political executive, there is a widening scope of centripetal influence in policy-making and agenda-setting circles, and there are perceptions that everything flows through "the centre" of the government (e.g., Savoie 1999). The growth of communications and marketing practices brings a need for more staff and a confrontation of partisan/political priorities with an apolitical public service. This requires resources. Thus, generally speaking, larger jurisdictions and administrations that have been in office the longest are prone to house the most entrenched central operations. Prime ministers and premiers avail themselves of these supports for priority files. Sometimes this strains the federalist system as premiers lobby on the national stage for elite accommodation that favours their interests. Globalization and the recent dearth of first ministers' conferences, which shower national attention on regional grievances, confound the ability of premiers to become household names whose demands must be placated (e.g., Tossuti 2002).

The debate about centralized authority over departmental communications is a healthy one. Political communicators prioritize urgent directives from the PMO and must work with the public service communications personnel required to uphold written practices established by the Privy Council Office (PCO), Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS), and Public Services and Procurement. This top-down hierarchy contrasts with the precarious nature of some external mechanisms of accountability, such as the parliamentary budget officer and freedom of information requests. Other government watchdog agencies – such as the Offices of the Auditor General, the Chief Electoral Officer, and the Official Languages Commissioner – have periodically set the political agenda over the years.

In the face of institutional barriers, government leaders have advanced their agendas using mainstream and social media as their platforms. This

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shift toward a personality-driven executive has been a long time in the making, beginning with radio broadcasts and televised debates (Cross 2004). Prime ministers and premiers dominate the mainstream media or manufacture their own coverage through social media platforms. Justin Trudeau and his team have embraced social networking technology, which enhances his celebrity image and connection with ordinary citizens. There is more going on than selfies; the Liberal prime minister has participated in seemingly uncontrolled question-and-answer sessions with everyday Canadians online and in traditional media. Yet the Trudeau administration is the latest to make copious use of government resources for publicity, particularly media events as well as a growing online presence for the prime minister (Boutilier 2016). At the federal and provincial levels, centralization of government power shows no sign of easing off in a 24/7 hybrid media environment in which information is constantly emerging, shared, and discussed in real time across platforms.

When media attention focuses squarely on first ministers, it detracts from the roles of other parliamentarians. What individual legislators had to say mattered more in late nineteenth century, yet representatives have always struggled to balance the public interest with agency for constituents (Franks 1987, 58). As political parties formed, members of Parliament and their provincial counterparts cultivated a tribal loyalty to those sharing their party label, a loyalty that shifted to deference to the leadership circle as broadcast media emerged. Not only did the number of backbenchers grow – there were 180 MPs in the first Parliament, whereas now there are 338 MPs – but so did the size and complexity of the government, in conjunction with the technological ability to coordinate internal messaging. Today parliamentarians are commonly thought to have limited capacities to represent their constituencies or hold the behaviour of the political executive or party leadership to account (Cross 2000). Many of them exercise (presumably meagre) power through committee or constituency work. Even then strong party discipline and message control can severely constrain independent thought. That said, technological advances might counter these effects: through social media and strong local connections, MPs have potent means to develop and communicate with their constituents and with people outside their electoral districts. Politicians can reach out to Canadians with a frequency previously enjoyed only by a select few with a team of employees and large budgets. Problems can be heard and sometimes resolved in real time. Communications

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and criticism are direct, low cost, and managed by just one or two staffers. But it is unknown at which junctures this transforms into real political influence as opposed to conveying the illusion of strong representation, particularly among backbenchers. They learn early on to fall in line or face the wrath of a party centre that jettisons candidates based on their digital footprints (Daro 2015).

Staffers in political offices appear to be on the rise both in number and in power. Political operatives in the PMO and ministers' offices have access to politically sensitive information. Staff assist ministers in directing the actions of senior public servants at the department level. Those in the PMO have a hand in the complex and interweaving operations of many government ministries and agencies (Esselment and Wilson 2017). Elected and appointed officials are displaced on the spectrum of power by unelected hired hands who represent the prime minister and who employ digital communications to coordinate actions across departments and agencies. It has been a long-standing practice that political staffers stay out of the public eye; however, this norm is changing. These influential individuals are often the subjects of media attention during election campaigns, and they maintain social media profiles after elections. In particular, Prime Minister Trudeau's chief of staff and his principal secretary are active Twitter users, even making news for engaging in policy debates online (Farooq 2016). This strategy is fraught with risk, for ignoring the rules and regulations that govern staffers' actions and advancements could result in misstatement of their authority (Brodie 2012).

Likewise, public engagement by members of the judiciary can be controversial. The prominence of the courts in directing policy as well as receiving and adjudicating the role of interests in policy making drives both criticism and applause. It is marked by a perceived increase in judicial activism that encourages legislatures to revisit policy, particularly with respect to the Supreme Court of Canada's (SCC) interpretation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Macfarlane 2012). Judicial enforcement and interpretation of the Charter significantly constrain the power and composition of elite networks in Canada. The prominence of judicial advocacy extends to the chief justice of the SCC, who periodically delivers public speeches about matters of public policy, or media coverage of the comments of judges on the decisions made by policy makers. Even in the digital age, Canadians continue to rely on news coverage of court decisions that, like all news, is subject to media agendas and biases (Sauvageau, Schneiderman, and Taras 2011).

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Moreover, the appointment of judges is a constant source of concern. Prime Minister Harper went from initiating a public hearing process for his first SCC nominee in 2006 to publicly sparring with former Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin over a failed appointment in 2014. Controversial remarks made by a Federal Court justice when he was a provincial judge led the Canadian Judicial Council to hold an inquiry in 2016 about his suitability to serve. In contrast, Prime Minister Trudeau's first appointment to the top bench was smoother, yet his mechanism for appointment supplanted multiparty representation of MPs with an external committee that he appointed (Fine 2016). Ideological and partisan undercurrents flow through the one branch of government positioned as apolitical. The Supreme Court might well be a culmination of the weighing of evidence, but its members are unelected elites with considerable power who can retain their positions until reaching seventy-five years of age.

This type of job security is a feature of many aspects of the Canadian public service. This hearkens back to sociologist Max Weber's criteria for an ideal bureaucracy, namely a division of labour among skilled experts who follow a chain of command and written rules and who collectively operate as an "efficient machine" (Swedberg and Agevall 2016, 20). The influence of top mandarins in the public service, particularly the clerk of the Privy Council, has always been significant (e.g., Granatstein 2015). At times, the urgent stubbornness of political personnel clashes with the process-driven meritocracy and organizational hierarchy of the government. In his introduction of New Political Governance (NPG) associated with the increased politicization of public administrations in Westminster-style democracies, Aucoin (2012) speaks of turf wars between partisan loyalists and civil servants. Changes in the communications environment, increased demands for transparency, and a more competitive and polarized political market are identified as causes of this trend. The phenomenon is depicted as a threat both to an impartial public administration and to managerial performance.

The nature of the influence of the public administration hierarchy has diversified as the government has grown. The proliferation of government surveillance agents such as the auditor general and the parliamentary budget officer is a noteworthy trend. Legislative steps to enhance transparency in the early 2000s included improved freedom of information requests and creation of the positions of conflict of interest and ethics commissioner, lobbying commissioner, and public sector integrity commissioner. As digital technologies became more prevalent in Canadian society, so did the

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open-government movement. All can be understood as attempts by elites to put representation, decision making, and accountability back at the fore of the relationship between the government and citizens. For instance, executives of businesses and charities seek to mingle with ministers and senior bureaucrats over meals and at events, but now they must register with the lobbying commissioner, and government employees must pay for their own tickets and meals, and these expenses are posted online. Yet top public officials, including Prime Minister Trudeau, have hosted exclusive private events for large donors, something that Minister of Finance Bill Morneau has defended as a mechanism to "support the democratic process" and "good people in public life" (quoted in Payton 2016). Public outrage at the impression of "pay-to-play" fundraising led both the ethics commissioner and the lobbying commissioner to initiate investigations (Thompson 2016). This response demonstrates the important role of officers who report to the legislature to advance matters in the public interest when elected officials themselves do not.

Another area where power is shifting is the composition of membership in political parties. There is decreasing grassroots volunteerism and (paid) party membership numbers. In their place are the centralization of authority in executive offices, increased scrutiny of candidates and grassroots fundraising, and precise control of communications. The party leader has become the face of the party and is generally perceived as being responsible for political successes and failures. Interactivity is predominantly digital as members vote online in leadership contests and as parties fundraise through email and social media. The move by the Liberal Party of Canada to dispense with membership in favour of no-fee registration is a stunning example of how party structures are evolving. Trudeau branded the renewal of the party constitution as part of a "movement" (Bryden 2016), implying that the Liberal organization uses technology to advance the interests of a coalition of everyday Canadians. He did not refer to new clauses for the leader to wrest control over election platform development and campaign committee composition away from party members (Naumetz 2016).

The relevance of membership in political parties is declining as the ability of special interests to mobilize citizens grows. Elite accommodation occurs when interest groups and government officials interact. In a robust democracy, pluralist theory holds that representatives of political interests external to the government will compete to influence public policy and that majority and minority interests are mediated by politicians (Dahl 1956). In Canada,

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these groups have varied structures, resources, and methods, but all of them have some sort of mission to achieve (Presthus 1973, 117). As with political parties, the power and influence of interest groups and social movements are changing considerably with digital technologies. The prevention of direct contributions to parties and candidates and the increases to third-party spending (see Crandall and Lawlor 2014) force organized interests to find less direct, and often less transparent, ways to influence elite behaviour. Stricter political finance rules result in shifts in advocacy tactics that include increased court challenges, social media campaigns, and organized protests. Social movements build momentum by using inexpensive digital media tools to connect with their audiences. Elites and non-elites alike gather in the virtual sphere to put an issue on the public agenda and to pressure decisions made by public officials.

Other outsiders who seek to influence those with political power include people in the government relations or public affairs business. The activities of registered lobbyists who meet with political decision makers are underrepresented both in the media and in the academic literature. Lobbyists and those in the government relations field make it their business to interact with fellow elites (e.g., Bennedsen and Feldmann 2006). In Canada, we lack an understanding of how their role has changed with constraints introduced under new legislation, such as the Accountability Act (2006), and with technological and social changes. This lack of knowledge matters, given that every day parliamentarians are contacted by over a dozen registered lobbyists, and lobbying activity has increased considerably in the Trudeau government (Abma 2016; McGregor, Mayeda, and Kennedy 2010). Relationships between the lobby community and its political clients can change policy and alter the communications tactics used by the government. These relationships typically go unnoticed by citizens but are much more visible through digital tracking of information and emails obtained through freedom of information requests.

The traditional media are among the few providers of information on elite activity and arguably the last body that can hold institutional elites to account. Which people own the media and how political elites try to control coverage have long been objects of study (e.g., Levine 1993; Taras 1990). Media ownership confers control over the dissemination of ideas and how information is presented. Editors and journalists decide what is newsworthy as they balance what politicians publicly disclose and what is in the public interest to report. They are gatekeepers who compete to obtain

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information, frame news, and set the public agenda (Castelló and Montagut 2011, 517). Thus, the concentration of ownership concerns scholars, particularly when a media organization communicates content over different platforms.

The decentralization of mainstream media amid the rise of social media, civic journalism, and blogging is creating a new category of elites. Parliamentary press galleries are wrestling with accreditation issues (McQuigge 2016) even as the circulation of fake political news on social media illustrates how important fact checking is (Cheadle 2016). Adopting these technologies has enabled mainstream media to grow their research capacities, despite waning demand for print media and tendencies to republish content freely travelling on social media. Yet the challenges are obvious: mainstream media now compete with emergent digital platforms in capturing audiences and selling advertising. The growth of digital media and citizen journalism has far-reaching implications for mainstream news media, as it does for political actors. These implications include a forced presence online, engagement with a broader array of information providers, and a reduced ability to control information. Although mainstream media might still qualify as part of the elite, they are under fire as much as any political actor.

An emerging form of the elite is the everyday citizen who develops an online following. Increasingly, elites include people who wield power through their ability to connect with thousands and even millions of people online. This power ranges from the influence of individuals who have many online followers to lesser knowns whose social media posts abruptly destabilize political agendas (Karlsen 2015; Vaccari and Valeriani 2015). The turn to online communications alters elite-citizen relations given that voices typically sidelined now have a pulpit. Increasingly, online influencers are better positioned to promote political messages than many higher-ranking officials (Small et al. 2014). Digital media have profound repercussions for how political elites are conceptualized and how they operate.

Among the fastest-rising "new" elites are political consultants and advisers. These figures play the roles of part partisan actor and part public servant as they serve as mediators between the public and the government. Pollsters, advertisers, marketing strategists, and communications professionals are receiving unprecedented attention from the media and the public. This profile increases their ability to influence the policy judgments of their clients and to advance their opinions and perspectives through the mass media (Pétry and Bastien 2013). Digital communications technologies enhance the speed

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and frequency with which they can get their messages out. For instance, the tracking of poll results has gone from an item of interest to a mandatory in-house strategy for political parties (Turcotte and Vodrey 2017). The sphere of influence of pollsters extends to the media when they provide commentary on public impressions of policy and party elites. Pollsters give a voice to ordinary Canadians, confronting elite opinion with public opinion, simultaneously reducing the power of parliamentarians and pundits (Adams 2007, xii). Nevertheless, the concept of political consultants is a more appropriate description of the American arena. In Canada, political strategists are the norm, as this book will show.

In many ways, the role of political strategists is like that of the intelligentsia. The influence of public figures such as academics, think tanks, media personalities, and pundits on policy decisions and agenda setting is not as pronounced as some of their more institutionalized counterparts. Nevertheless, public intellectuals are routinely called on to provide information – and in some cases legitimacy – for the opinions and policy goals of other political actors. Political pundits are often better able to influence public policy and public opinion precisely because of their relative distance from the political process (e.g., Rogstad 2014; Wiseman 2013).

Each set of actors above represents its own locus of power. There is a need for more work in these fields together, particularly as power structures evolve with communications technologies. We lack an overarching understanding of how political elites interact and how their actions can complement, influence, or oppose one another's policy goals. Among the reasons is difficulty gathering data from elites themselves. This volume makes strides in addressing these gaps in knowledge in the digital media environment.

## Outline of the Book

This book explores who Canadian political elites are, how they exert power, and how communications in the digital era has changed access to and application of power. Questions of decision making, representation, and accountability are addressed to determine to what extent the range of policy influencers affects our understanding of their role in governance and representation. An overarching research objective is to consider whether the role of political elites in the government or with access to the government is changing in the digital media environment.

The book is organized into four parts. In this first chapter we have provided an overview of the core theoretical underpinnings of the concept of

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political elites and sought to identify them in Canadian society. In Chapter 2, Alex Marland and Anna Esselment delve into methodological challenges for researchers, including getting access to data from government actors. They conduct a social experiment by contacting a small number of people who interact with political elites and seek suggestions for the best ways to secure interviews with public officials. Their tips and tactics will be useful to emerging and experienced social scientists alike, particularly when the subject matter concerns remote and shadowy political or partisan processes. That guidance lays the groundwork for ensuing chapters and further study.

Part 2 tackles political elites within the government. Contributors explore how political elites navigate interest representation and policy making with government officials and institutions. This section contrasts elites who obtain their positions by election and appointment. It highlights core differences in maintaining accountability. This includes the importance of political staff and their roles with civil servants along with those of PMO staff in influencing political agendas within departments. In Chapter 3, Robert Shepherd and Bryan Evans examine how communications processes intersect with the roles of senior civil servants in policy making. They present insights collected from in-depth interviews with well-placed administrators to describe the implications of changes in the media landscape for public administration. This leads into Chapter 4, by Jennifer Robson and Paul Wilson, who examine the tension and compatibility between political and permanent personnel in the government. They draw on surveys of Canadian federal public servants and in-depth interviews with political staff to understand how they are coping with the direct and indirect pressures of a 24/7 media environment. The next two contributions consider the provincial context. In Chapter 5, Melanee Thomas, Allison Harell, and Tania Gosselin examine online media coverage of premiers in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario to ascertain to what extent these leaders attract attention and to what degree media treatment differed on the basis of a premier's gender. J.P. Lewis and Stéphanie Yates build on this examination in Chapter 6 through their study of how all Canadian premiers use social media or at least how their handlers exploit the resources of the premier's office to mount a social media presence. Their review of videos posted to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and government websites is a timely understanding of connectivity with citizens in a controlled manner that bypasses news filters. The chapter is buttressed by Erin Crandall, who looks at how SCC judges – perhaps at once the most elitist and egalitarian of all – operate in the digital world. In Chapter 7,

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she conducts a media analysis of the public dispute between Prime Minister Harper and Chief Justice McLachlin and weighs in on how the courts are adapting to the evolving public environment.

Part 3 turns to political elites who operate outside government. Chapter 8, by Cristine de Clercy, delves into the operations of the Liberal Party caucus. Her analysis of the party constitution, supplemented by information procured from the caucus chair, seeks to understand the relationships among the party leader, the caucus, party members, and the electorate. In Chapter 9, Jamie Gillies and David Coletto investigate the prevalence of political consultants in Canada. Their in-depth interviews with senior political strategists uncover insider/outsider dynamics within the party's inner circle and the implications of digital technologies for traditional approaches to campaigning. Ensuing chapters look specifically at social media. Geneviève Chacon, Andrea Lawlor, and Thierry Giasson's analysis in Chapter 10 moves beyond conventional understandings of elites by researching the diverse informed publics who participated in campaign-related online chatter using the #cdnpoli and #elxn42 hashtags. Likewise, in Chapter 11, Fenwick McKelvey, Marianne Côté, and Vincent Raynauld offer a detailed case study of the use of Twitter by two external, non-traditional political actors and how they helped to shape campaign coverage. Then, in Chapter 12, Julie Killin and Tamara Small examine messages posted to election candidates' Twitter accounts. Their coding for national versus local messages reveals the extent to which party candidates parrot central messaging as opposed to engaging in constituency-level dialogue. In Chapter 13, Rachel Laforest draws on research reports and in-depth interviews to document how Canadian interest groups use digital technologies. Her investigation seeks to get past the chronic resource constraints to identify how non-profits are benefiting from inexpensive technologies.

Finally, in Part 4, we reflect on all of these case studies. In the concluding chapter, we draw out the broader implications for knowledge about political elites and their communications behaviour. We argue that, at a minimum, digital media are disrupting traditional conceptualizations of this powerful class of citizens. However, taken together, the chapters point to a stronger trend in the evolution of who constitutes the elite and what drives their behaviour, linked, in good part, to digital media.

The analyses in these chapters move beyond the question of who is part of the political elite in Canada. They study what elites do to represent groups and interests and how they communicate these perspectives. These analyses

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account for the greater communication freedom experienced by (most) elites in a digital working environment as well as the challenges of maintaining confidentiality or secrecy. In this way, this volume differs from standard institutionalist approaches. It embarks on a new path of study that focuses on why and when political actors use communication strategies to divert decision making to their advantage. We look at how people in positions of authority can break down traditional hierarchies and circumvent rules to interact directly with other elites and members of the public. This implies reordering traditional distributions of power. As this volume attests, the outcomes of these changes are still unfolding.

## NOTE

1 Information in this paragraph was gleaned from CB Staff (2016); Employment and Social Development Canada (2016); and McMahon (2016).

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