

# Whipped

## Party Discipline in Canada

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**Communication, Strategy, and Politics**

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# 1

## Party Discipline in Canada

Canadians should be proud. Canada is among the best places to live and boasts one of the world's strongest democracies.<sup>1</sup> High levels of freedom and low levels of government corruption are among the reasons why Canadians are some of the happiest citizens on Earth.<sup>2</sup> Yet, if you look deeper than their pride in universal health care, in the maple leaf flag, or in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, you will discover frustration with the Gordian knot of party discipline.<sup>3</sup>

Political parties are essential actors with a reputation problem.<sup>4</sup> World-wide, there is democratic malaise, and trust in public institutions, politicians, and political parties is eroding. Party memberships, once a source of pride, have become a mechanism for party operatives to collect personal information for the database marketing that fuels polarization. In democracies using the Westminster parliamentary system, such as Canada, power is concentrated in executive offices, and partisanship infuses impartial public administration. The corollary of communications technology focusing more attention on party leaders is that most of Canada's elected representatives are increasingly peripheral actors. Canadians are right to believe that many people elected to the House of Commons and provincial legislatures are under the thumb of a political party.

Discipline permeates almost all aspects of politics in Canada, especially communications. In the Westminster system, some parliamentarians are part of the government (the cabinet), whereas the rest (known as private members) are not. In a parliamentary assembly, the functions of private members as legislators include

- 1 participating in law-making by debating bills and motions, proposing amendments, voting for or against proposals
- 2 scrutinizing the government, such as by seeking information through Question Period, submitting written questions or requesting documents
- 3 considering proposals to raise and spend public money.<sup>5</sup>

Status in a parliamentary party influences a parliamentarian's role in the above activities. Hierarchy is reflected in seating arrangements in the legislative chamber, which assign titleholders such as ministers and their official critics to the front benches and relegate rank-and-file private members to the back benches – hence the moniker of backbencher, which denotes a politician with little power.<sup>6</sup> A hidden forum for them to exert influence is a caucus meeting, which convenes all of a party's members of the assembly, where anything said is confidential. That influence is in flux in a digital society that amplifies partisanship.

Political parties are using communications technology to tighten their grip on political life in Canada. Parties are considered “the most important organizations in modern politics.”<sup>7</sup> They are gateways for citizens to become involved in parliamentary politics by recruiting election candidates, presenting voters with clear choices in elections, and bringing order to legislatures. The leader of the party that has the confidence of the representatives in a parliamentary assembly heads a government. Political parties are essential for keeping large numbers of politicians organized; however, the systematic integration of politicians is so successful that some believe Canada has the most rigid party discipline of any liberal democracy<sup>8</sup> and that party government has supplanted parliamentary government.<sup>9</sup> The tight binds of partisanship among Canadian politicians are at odds with political parties' loosening grip on the electorate.<sup>10</sup> The “near iron hand of party discipline” that keeps parliamentarians in the fold is arguably “the greatest frustration” that Canadians have with their system of government.<sup>11</sup>

The reluctance of private members to contravene their party engenders a repertoire of complaints that Canada's political system is broken. Discipline saps their ability to represent constituents or vocalize constructive criticism, resulting in a “democratic deficit” whereby power is concentrated in prime ministers, premiers, and a cluster of senior advisers.<sup>12</sup> Historically,

party discipline has referred to unity in the legislative chamber and consequences for disobedience. Today, expectations of conformity extend to most public interactions. Preoccupation with coordinating votes on bills and motions has mutated into message discipline.

The calculated strategy of self-control over public communications now pervades Canadian politics. If a political handbook for Canadian parliamentarians existed, then rule number one ought to occupy the entire first page: *Exercise extreme caution about going off-message in public*. Message discipline involves sticking to core phrases and political values in all public information exchanges. It is a form of self-censorship. The anthropomorphism of parrots who learn to repeat phrases and buzzwords is replacing the time-worn comparison of Canadian backbenchers to trained seals who vote according to the party whip's instructions. For many of today's elected officials, the "party line" refers interchangeably to voting and messaging (i.e., message lines).

This book is about the struggle for an equilibrium between the need for discipline in party politics and its suppression of political representation. The research endeavours to expose the communications management practices that intensify party discipline, suffocate policy entrepreneurialism, and stifle individualism. It provides a fresh take on how a leadership circle leverages group psychology, reward systems, team socialization, and lopsided rules to exert influence on backbenchers. The general frame of reference is the 42nd Parliament (December 3, 2015, to September 11, 2019), during which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau presided over a Liberal majority government. Documenting how things work can help readers to think about ways that members of Canadian legislatures can be strong representatives within institutional constraints.

In this opening chapter, I synthesize what is known about party discipline in Canada. I begin by defining the practice and by showing that Canadian parliamentarians tend to vote the party line. I summarize the advantages and disadvantages of discipline in parliamentary politics. I also trace the origins of political parties and the need for order in legislatures, and treat party constitutions and platforms as the anchors of all messages that permeate party politics. Finally, I consider politics without political parties. This tour of the political institutions, practices, and structures that make party discipline such a powerful force in Canada sets up the research

objectives and communications-related focus of the book. Readers already familiar with the history of party discipline might consider jumping to the research method on page 25.

### **POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY DISCIPLINE**

Tallies of votes in Canadian legislatures that show elected representatives behaving as partisan blocs usually reflect their inherent support for party positions. Yet legislators frequently endorse policies that they know little about. Sometimes they publicly support things that they privately oppose. They dissent by staying quiet and missing a vote. Their acquiescence comes with a quid pro quo understanding: siding with the parliamentary group improves their ability to champion a policy that they care about, to access resources, and to improve their prospects for promotion and re-election. Discipline is far less chafing for Canadian parliamentarians than might appear – and this is part of the problem of representation.

#### **Defining Party Discipline**

In all aspects of life, discipline can be a laudable trait or a maligned practice. Discipline refers to actions that encourage, if not enforce, standards of behaviour. Ideally, it involves self-restraint to achieve a shared objective in an efficient manner. In a group hierarchy, leaders implement structure to guide individual actions, and they correct behaviour by applying punishments. In workplaces, discipline refers to problems with an employee's work performance. Oral and written warnings are delivered as well as disciplinary measures up to the point where the employee is suspended or fired. Some organizations have reasonably standardized, transparent processes for exacting discipline, whereas inconsistent or hidden processes are common in others. Its absence cultivates disorganization, confusion, and chaos.

In parliamentary politics, party discipline is a system of norms, rules, and consequences designed to ensure the public alignment of group members, especially in legislative voting. It is a mechanism to hold together a diverse coalition of political interests.<sup>13</sup> Social conditioning, persuasion, coercion, and control mechanisms foster unity and dampen dissonance. Members of a parliamentary party set aside their petty differences as diverse points of view are reconciled, and actions not yet committed are influenced.



Party discipline also refers to the parliamentary party leadership, often through the party whip, doling out rewards to sycophants and punishing troublemakers. In the narrowest sense, party discipline is pressure from the party leadership on members of the caucus to vote the party line, which Canadian parliamentarians usually do. Generally, private members in Ottawa defy the party whip's guidance on votes less than 1 percent of the time.<sup>14</sup> Their recorded disagreement tends to arise on innocuous motions and private members' bills.<sup>15</sup> In a tightly knit formation, voting differently is such an affront to the group that it can sever relationships.

Discipline has negative connotations because it supposes an infringement on free will and, in politics, on appropriate representation. It compels politicians to pick sides. It also pressures them to align with the "leadership" – a term used herein to refer to the party leader as well as the leader's entourage, particularly senior political staff – over other interests. For more than half a century, people have been warning that Canadian party leaders are becoming more powerful over private members, and the number of political staff has been growing.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, legislators are lampooned as robots, puppets, lobby fodder, potted plants, or bobbleheads. The impotence of backbenchers comes through in books about the prime minister and senior retainues.<sup>17</sup>

Politicians are among their own harshest critics. In the 1970s, a backbencher lamented that most of them on the government side of the House were "useless," and another believed that they must "stay in line, lick boots and keep their noses clean."<sup>18</sup> Other self-criticisms include descriptions of "a lackey on a leash,"<sup>19</sup> "jacks-in-the-box" who pop up to vote,<sup>20</sup> and backbenchers who are "invisible."<sup>21</sup> Academics refer to a "mindless flock of sheep" and use laborious epithets such as "legislative eunuchs"<sup>22</sup> and "a tribe whose emblem is servitude."<sup>23</sup> Think tank research suggests that Members of Parliament (MPs) are scripted party clones,<sup>24</sup> an impression widely shared by journalists, who dismiss them as "wind-up dolls pawing at the master's feet"<sup>25</sup> and "cheerleaders for the party line."<sup>26</sup> The following opinion is typical among Canadian political observers: "They disagree in private. They clam up in public. They smile and repeat whatever today's line is. The trade-off, whether explicit or assumed, is that party harmony is a necessary condition of effectively contending for power."<sup>27</sup> Tropes of backbenchers playing Follow the Leader are commonplace in Canada.

In the House of Commons, MPs initially opposed their party in order to advocate for constituency interests, but gradually political parties became ideologically cohesive and party unity on votes has been the norm since the end of the Second World War.<sup>28</sup> The drive for cohesion spread to all public forums, both spurred and facilitated by changes in communications technology. Oppressive message coordination climaxed under Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006–15) who was criticized for imposing the will of the executive on all facets of the government.<sup>29</sup> During the first two years of the 41st Parliament, when Harper led a Conservative majority government, Conservative MPs voted as a unified bloc on 76 percent of votes, the official opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) voted together 100 percent of the time, and Liberal MPs did so in 90 percent of cases.<sup>30</sup> The forward march of message coordination persisted post-Harper. Calculations of recorded divisions in the entire 42nd Parliament (2015–19) when the Trudeau Liberals had a majority find few dissenting votes. Liberal MPs sided with their caucus on 99.6 percent of votes on all types of bills and motions, the official opposition Conservatives voted the party line 99.5 percent of the time, and NDP MPs were unanimous on 99.8 percent of recorded votes.<sup>31</sup> Of 142,189 individual votes in the House of Commons by Liberals, there were 585 dissenting votes; out of 88,628 votes by Conservatives, 418 were dissenting; and among New Democrats, out of 36,336 votes, only 62 were dissenting. Thirty-nine MPs voted exclusively with their party (14 Conservatives, 11 Liberals, 14 New Democrats), and another forty MPs rebuffed the party line once (14 Conservatives, 12 Liberals, 14 New Democrats). The most prolific dissenter was a Liberal who voted with his party 96.1 percent of the time.<sup>32</sup> Pressure to vote the party line is even more intense when the governing party has a minority of seats. Many MPs would doubtlessly protest that the numbers are inflated by routine procedural votes and fail to account for disagreement expressed by not voting. The fact remains that Canadian MPs rarely, if ever, vote against their party.

Deviation from the party line is rare in Canadian provinces as well.<sup>33</sup> An examination of division votes in the National Assembly of Quebec identified party unity in 99 to 100 percent of votes cast between 1935 and 1989.<sup>34</sup> In British Columbia, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) voted against their party just .25 percent of the time from 2001 to 2012.<sup>35</sup>

Vote cohesion is thought to be even more prevalent in small provinces where there are fewer formalities.<sup>36</sup> Compared with the House of Commons, provincial legislatures have a higher proportion of members in cabinet, fewer resources, and smaller press galleries (Table 1.1). Large or small, in all settings vote cohesion along party lines is particularly visible on high-stakes issues. There are fewer mavericks than in the past, making today's backbenchers vulnerable to perceptions of being interchangeable bit players in a party salesforce. Occasionally, a private member does defy the party on a whipped vote, and sometimes a group of government-side backbenchers aligns with the opposition benches against the whip's explicit instructions.<sup>37</sup> Leaders must calculate whether a pressure release valve will calm caucus unrest or sow the seeds of mutiny.

Researchers warn that the encroachment of party discipline suppresses legislatures as a marketplace for public debate.<sup>38</sup> In *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons*, political scientist David Docherty cautions that the turnover of so many MPs in a general election contributes to the centralization of power. He finds that, because of the high number of rookies, many of whom lack prior elected experience, Canadian legislatures are characterized by their amateurism.<sup>39</sup> New entrants with fresh perspectives confront a system that takes years to master, but their parliamentary careers can be cut short before they accomplish changes. Those who are re-elected become ensconced in established practices as veterans teach them about parliamentary norms and scold them when they go out of bounds.<sup>40</sup> Docherty builds on the work of parliamentary scholar C.E.S. Franks, who observed in his classic book *The Parliament of Canada* that party discipline is "the most dominant and pervasive force" in parliamentary politics and that curtailing it is "the greatest single challenge" to making the role of an elected representative more meaningful.<sup>41</sup> Franks also believed that communications rank among the most important functions of a legislature.<sup>42</sup> He made this observation before twenty-four-hour news cycles, the World Wide Web, social media, smartphones, viral video, and online disinformation, all of which have contributed to turning party discipline into message discipline.

David E. Smith, one of Canada's foremost parliamentary scholars, counters that party discipline is undemocratic only when it is looked at in isolation, not when it is considered as a component of a larger system.<sup>43</sup>

**TABLE 1.1**  
**Profile of Canadian legislative assemblies (2018)**

Legislature	Population <sup>1</sup>	Members	Quorum <sup>2</sup>	Members in cabinet (%) <sup>3</sup>	Constituents per member (mean) <sup>1</sup>	Legislative reporters <sup>4</sup>
House of Commons	36,890,000	338	20	9	109,100	320
British Columbia	4,974,700	85	10	27	58,550	18
Alberta	4,283,900	87	20	24	49,250	5-10
Saskatchewan	1,159,500	58	15	31	20,000	1
Manitoba	1,347,500	57	10	25	23,650	6
Ontario	14,241,400	124	12	17	114,850	25
Quebec	8,356,300	125	21	26	66,850	41
New Brunswick	769,000	49	14	31	15,700	9
Nova Scotia	955,400	51	15	33	18,750	5
Prince Edward Island	152,200	27	10	41	5,650	2
Newfoundland and Labrador	526,500	40	14	33	13,150	4

*Notes:*

- 1 Population estimates for second quarter of 2018. Rounded figures.
  - 2 Includes the Speaker.
  - 3 April 2018 figures, including first ministers and, in Quebec, the chief government whip and the caucus chair. July figures used for Ontario to reflect seat increase as of the 2018 provincial election.
  - 4 Number of national legislative reporters in 2016, provincial reporters in 2017.
- Sources: Britneff (2016); Hanney, Alam, and Keller (2017); Statistics Canada (2020); government websites; legislative standing orders.

Party discipline is a mechanism for compromise to prevail over infighting. It nurtures predictability, routine, consistency, and clarity. Bringing order to chaos stabilizes otherwise volatile political situations. Discipline enables government formation, is necessary for the government to deliver on election promises, and enables collective accountability. Smith believes that party discipline is essential for the operation of the parliamentary system. In his opinion, “democracy is about mediating conflict and refining positions. Discipline in Parliament is defended as a way of levelling up, not down.”<sup>44</sup> Holdouts are pressed to choose the peace of consensus over the disruption of dissent. Consensus is more organic than we might think.

There are other benefits of party discipline. Voting with a party is easier than figuring out a position on every issue. Individual politicians can place responsibility on their party when it suits them, which buffers lobbying by stakeholder groups and irate constituents. The party’s approved message lines are a security blanket when pressure groups urge citizens to flood their elected representative’s office with correspondence. Furthermore, party discipline encourages teamwork. Arguably, the parliamentary system cannot work without it.

A fundamental flaw of conformism is that it stifles creativity. Democratic politics must be open to fresh thinking, but most backbenchers are engaged too far along in the decision-making process to offer much more than a communications disaster check (see Figure 2.2). For members of the governing party, distinctions among the government (i.e., the prime minister or premier, the cabinet, political staff in executive offices), the parliamentary party (i.e., the leader, the caucus, political staff funded by the legislature), and the extraparliamentary party (i.e., the national council, election candidates, electoral district associations, staff working in party headquarters) are slight. There is little opportunity for innovation, constructive criticism, public engagement, and big ideas. The perspectives that arise from diverse styles of representation can be missed. Furthermore, governments can exclude caucus input on drawn-out negotiations on sensitive topics and barrel along when they respond to an emerging situation. Parliamentarians understandably struggle to make a mark within a system that minimizes their contributions and encourages public displays of their allegiance to the party leader. They can feel alienated and unhappy,

particularly those who are younger and educated.<sup>45</sup> Resentment builds as they conclude that conformity is the only way to advance their interests.<sup>46</sup> As they come to understand their finite roles in policy decisions, and limited prospects for career advancement, the disenchanteds do not seek re-election.<sup>47</sup>

### **Origins of Political Parties and Party Discipline**

Why is party discipline so stringent in Canada? To understand how it permeates politics today, we need to look at the history of the parliamentary system of government and acquire some baseline familiarity with the incursion of party organizations.

Canada's main political parties and parliamentary practices originated in the United Kingdom. The UK House of Commons exercised limited influence on public policy for centuries after the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, an early charter of rights that limited the divine rights of kings to rule. Many parliamentarians were royal loyalists who supported the monarch's government. Knights and burgesses pledged secrecy and loyalty to one another so that they could speak freely and avoid retaliation from the oppressive power of kings and queens.<sup>48</sup> In 1621, the role of the whip originated when the king's supporters were summoned to Parliament.<sup>49</sup> The monarch's divine rights and absolute powers ended in 1689 with the Bill of Rights, which granted Parliament an array of political powers. The Glorious Revolution, as it came to be called, afforded British parliamentarians freedom of speech in the legislative chamber and committees.

The roots of British political parties date to the years leading up to the Glorious Revolution.<sup>50</sup> People loyal to the monarch and religious traditions were known as Tories, whereas reformists were known as Whigs. The labels referred to individual parliamentarians' political tendencies. Political groupings evolved, with political parties forming in the mid-eighteenth century. Partisan mobilizations were largely confined to the legislature. The etymology of *party whip* originated in this period when parliamentarians were likened to a pack of hounds on a fox hunt.<sup>51</sup> The 1832 Reform Act that restructured the British electoral system led to the formalization of extraparliamentary wings of the parties (i.e., a privately funded external organization of party staff, members, and volunteers).

Whig reformers became Liberals, and Tory traditionalists became Conservatives. Party whips ensured that members were present to vote and kept a watchful eye on those sneaking off.<sup>52</sup>

Colonial settlers in British North America carried over these political formations with minimal concern for preserving Indigenous rights and traditions. As well, settlers agitated for new practices. English and French dualism manifested, and in 1848 Nova Scotia became the first British colony to achieve responsible government.<sup>53</sup> The principle that the executive council (i.e., the cabinet) appointed by the monarch's representative to run the government must have the confidence of the elected assembly became an intrinsic characteristic of the parliamentary system. The connection between the confidence convention and party discipline is formidable.

Political parties congealed along religious, ethnic, regional, and nationalist dimensions before and after the formation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867. The Constitution of Canada identifies the supremacy of executive power, organizes the legislative branch, and outlines the federalist division of powers, but does not mention parties. In the immediate post-Confederation era, political parties were still forming, and representatives were elected to the House of Commons without an official party affiliation. They either pledged support to a party or waited until after the election to decide which one to join. Consequently, affiliations of MPs in early Parliaments included Conservative, Independent, Independent Conservative, Independent Liberal, Liberal, Liberal-Conservative, and Liberal Reformer. The cabinet advanced its legislative agenda without being able to rely on the support of quasi-Independent MPs. Patronage commitments for infrastructure spending and jobs were handed out in exchange for the votes of so-called loose fish, shaky fellows, ministerialists, and waiters on providence.<sup>54</sup> Buying votes with the spoils of office was such a normalized practice that some local shopkeepers believed that the survival of their businesses depended on their MP's ability to access public funds.<sup>55</sup>

Parties fortified in order to maintain stable coalitions. They became vehicles for groups of like-minded politicians to present electors with choices during elections, to mobilize voters, and to form the government.<sup>56</sup> The expansion of the right to vote, the socialization of parliamentarians, patronage appointments, and ideological groupings spurred the trek toward party cohesion.<sup>57</sup> The party system fractured in the 1921 federal

election, resulting in an array of MP affiliations during the 14th Parliament, including Conservative, Independent, Labour, Liberal, Progressive, and United Farmers. Some members' dependence on their party to pay for election expenses instilled a compulsion to vote the party line, as this 1926 *Ottawa Citizen* editorial indicates:

The party member is bound to vote in accordance with the crack of the whip, or face the ordeal of being branded as disloyal, or even dishonest. The majority of members are obligated to central party funds for financial aid in paying election expenses. After accepting such aid, they cannot feel wholly free to express themselves as free men in the House of Commons ... [MPs] learn too late that they have tied themselves, according to conventional standards of morality, to support the party blindly.<sup>58</sup>

Less significant factors in party cohesion included adopting the secret ballot, replacing staggered elections with ones held on the same day, and ending the practice of members simultaneously holding seats in federal and provincial legislatures.<sup>59</sup> The growing rigours of party discipline coincided with intensifying party identification and leadership power even as the extraparliamentary parties remained a network of localized interests.<sup>60</sup> As parliamentary parties gained momentum, some MPs insisted that parties were for elections only, and they expressed loyalty to Parliament and their constituents.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, recurring influences and processes – most of them hidden from public view – gradually treated parliamentarians as cogs in a party voting machine, especially those beholden to the governing party.

The rights and privileges of private members eroded as they consented to granting government representatives more control. Party leaders assigned House officers, namely the House leader and whip, to organize parliamentary business around procedural rules known as standing orders set by parliamentarians and enforced by the Speaker. These permanent written rules govern the structure of how each legislature is organized. Standing orders also limit the ability of an individual member to impede the will of the assembly. Beginning in 1906, private members' ability to introduce motions in the House of Commons was restricted. Closure was adopted in 1913, a procedure that suspends the normal rules by dealing



with several stages of debate in one day. Private members' speaking time was reduced to forty-five minutes in 1927.<sup>62</sup> In 1962, the time for private members' business became secondary to the time for government business, a reflection of the growing size of government.<sup>63</sup> In the 1970s, the time management tool of parties preparing lists of speakers was introduced for Question Period. In 1982, an annual parliamentary calendar was adopted, evening sittings ceased, ninety-second private members' statements were introduced (now down to sixty seconds), and the time for speeches was again reduced.<sup>64</sup> Around this time, a private member's ability to delay legislative proceedings was lost because a single member should not be able to thwart the government. Today the House of Commons standing orders comprise a detailed bilingual document that runs more than two hundred pages.<sup>65</sup> For example, an entire chapter is devoted to spelling out types of parliamentary committees, of which the most prominent are the standing committees that generally mirror the names of government departments. A long list of rules encompasses procedural minutiae such as the election of committee chairs.

The evolution of the standing orders reflects a historical pattern of members agreeing to cede power to leaders and government business. The foremost remaining procedural power for a private member is withholding unanimous consent, which is necessary to bypass normal House rules or practices,<sup>66</sup> and an MP determined to participate in debate irrespective of political parties' subjugation must engage in the parliamentary tradition of "catching the Speaker's eye."<sup>67</sup> Further retrenchment is on the horizon given that some MPs want Friday sittings eliminated.<sup>68</sup> Similar patterns of self-marginalization are found in provincial assemblies. It remains to be seen whether recent experiments in virtual meetings take root and, if so, what the implications are for the role of private members.

In Canada, the accountability function of responsible government leaves little room for legislators to dissent from their party's position. The confidence convention holds that a government's core policies, particularly the budget, must have the support of a majority of parliamentarians. Losing a confidence vote results in the prime minister asking the governor general to dissolve Parliament; likewise, a premier asks the lieutenant governor for an election if the provincial government is defeated. The confidence convention therefore plays a pivotal role in discipline,

especially for governing parties. The party's leadership can exploit it to whip votes on lesser items, causing some to believe that a separate non-confidence motion should be required if a budget bill is defeated so that governing party backbenchers can vote against a budget.<sup>69</sup> Discipline need not be as exacting in opposition parties, particularly in the aftermath of an election defeat or during a party leadership contest. As well, some parties are more ideological than others, which fosters natural cohesion. Yet any party can split into factions during an internal struggle.

The decline of the autonomy of members of legislative bodies coincides with the ascendancy of the party leader as the chief public spokesperson. Extraparliamentary parties are such small outfits in Canada that the leader fills a power vacuum as the main connection with the parliamentary group.<sup>70</sup> In 1919, the Liberal Party of Canada held a leadership convention so that party delegates could select the leader, effectively terminating the practice of an outgoing leader or members of the caucus making that decision. The Conservatives followed suit in 1927. Subsequent developments have seen parties use televoting and online voting that broaden leadership selection away from party delegates to the masses. Charging fees for party membership is being replaced with signing up supporters to populate the party database and ramping up rhetoric in digital fundraising. The result is leaders accountable to a somewhat amorphous extraparliamentary group, whereas members of the parliamentary caucus might believe that the leader is accountable to them.

A monumental change occurred with amendments to the Canada Elections Act that came into effect for the 1972 federal election.<sup>71</sup> Up to that point, federal election ballots featured the name, address, and occupation of each candidate. The legal recognition of federal political parties set the groundwork for the regulation of party finance and the introduction of party labels on election ballots. Formally listing a candidate's party affiliation reflected a desire among the parties for their candidates to be identifiable as well as to reduce confusion should people with identical names contest a seat. It resolved the problem of prime ministers, ministers, and party leaders using those titles on ballots in their electoral districts.<sup>72</sup> As well, henceforth the only candidate who could campaign as a representative of the party would be the party's nominated candidate.<sup>73</sup> The leader was granted the final say over who is nominated, causing

incumbents to face discipline from above and below because a dissatisfied leader can refuse to approve a nomination while local party members can mobilize to nominate a different candidate. To avoid criticism of the leader for overruling a decision by grassroots members, the party manipulates the nomination process to shun undesirable candidates, such as the subtle announcement of cut-off dates for membership submissions that only the preferred contestant hears about.<sup>74</sup>

Party officials scrutinize the suitability of Canadians who express interest in being an election candidate. Vetting applicants for the party nomination grants the leadership a pre-emptive veto to reject undesirables, a process that doubles as a mechanism to ensure that future parliamentarians yield to discipline imposed by the party hierarchy, headed by the leader. For example, the Green Party of Canada promotes grassroots representation. It shuns whipped votes. In theory, Green MPs may vote as they wish. In practice, the party screens out aspiring candidates whose beliefs do not align with its values, thus increasing cohesion before any votes are cast. Vetting affects party unity: when legislators are beholden to a small electorate in the extraparliamentary party hierarchy – that is, registered party members and party officials potentially loyal to the leader – they are pressured to satisfy that oligarchy instead of voters.<sup>75</sup> Conversely, formal accountability of parliamentary party leaders is beyond the grasp of the caucus (but see below), with the exception of a crisis that ruins the leader's public legitimacy, in which case extraordinary action is taken to push the leader out. In such moments, presenting a unified front to protect the party brand is at the forefront and demonstrates the upper limit of a leader's control.<sup>76</sup>

Avenues now exist in Ottawa for a caucus to act as a formal fail-safe over the party leader's power, provided its members opt in. The Reform Act, 2014, amended the Parliament of Canada Act to require that MPs in a parliamentary group with official party status (twelve MPs) hold a series of internal votes in their first caucus meeting after a federal election.<sup>77</sup> The decisions are in effect until Parliament is dissolved. The first of four voteable items authorizes one of the caucus or the leader to expel or readmit an MP. If the caucus opts in, then a member can be expelled only if 20 percent of the caucus submits a written request for a secret ballot vote and then a majority votes the colleague out. A second provision is to choose whether

the caucus should have a say in the process of installing and removing the caucus chair. A third option concerns a process for the caucus to initiate a leadership review. A fourth involves electing a temporary leader. To date, Conservatives have voted to select the caucus chair and to be the ones to decide about expulsion, but voted against empowering themselves to overthrow the leader, with many rationalizing that the extra-parliamentary party should decide.<sup>78</sup> The Bloc Québécois caucus did likewise. Liberal and NDP caucuses have been slow to follow the requirements and voted against all four options, seeing the Reform Act as a Conservative instrument.<sup>79</sup>

### **Party Values, Constitutions, and Platforms**

The conformist behaviour of Canadian legislators has been seeping out of Canada's legislatures into all aspects of public life. In the 1970s, a veteran Member of Parliament (MP) observed that mavericks could criticize their party as long as they voted the party line, because the leadership would "tolerate loose talk more than they can deviation in voting."<sup>80</sup> Things changed by the late 1990s. Docherty writes in *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa* that "not voting with the party is acceptable; however, speaking in a way that brings the party into disrepute is a far more serious matter. Members cannot allow the integrity of the party itself to be questioned."<sup>81</sup> There is even less tolerance of message dissymmetry in the twenty-first century, particularly where the virtue of the party leader is concerned.

Politicians' acceptance of party discipline is anchored in their support for a political party's core principles. Every parliamentary group has a cast of characters, from staunch partisans and careerists to agitators and plotters.<sup>82</sup> They draw on political ideologies to conserve mental energy and speed up the process of evaluating political choices. Their belief systems, often deeply held, are reduced to values that influence attitudes and behaviours.<sup>83</sup> Adhering to shared convictions is what bonds a political party in the pursuit of a common cause. Party values guide policy decisions, election platform content, and message development. They underpin the policy resolutions approved by delegates at party convention meetings. Party leaders used to be bound to promote those policies on the campaign trail. Today leader loyalists might screen draft motions, and the leader might vow to disregard a contentious motion passed by delegates. A party's

election manifesto reflects diverse sources of information, ranging from public opinion testing to consultation with experts.<sup>84</sup> Cost estimates are calculated, and the pledges are collated into message planks. The platform of the party that forms the government becomes a moral contract with voters. Policy commitments do not include disclaimers that delivery depends on private members who vote in sufficient numbers or that members might have pet projects.

Major political parties systematically weed out non-conformists. They recruit people who connect intellectually and emotionally with a political vision. Their vetting processes disqualify people whose values differ, particularly if opponents are likely to dredge up an intolerant comment. A nominated candidate is welcomed into a social unit and gains a greater prospect of being elected but forfeits many political freedoms. After the election, the intensity of partisanship sinks in further as newly sworn-in parliamentarians prepare to take their seats in the assembly. The full range of the leader's surrogates comes into focus, as does the esotericism of legislative proceedings. A paucity of written rules about a caucus means that private members learn about party discipline through observation and scuttlebutt. They come to accept the principle of negotiation log-rolling, whereby mutual advantage results from exchanging favours and accepting trade-offs, with the understanding that support for a group position will be reciprocated by colleagues on something else. They settle into the multifaceted role of lawmaker, caseworker, and brand ambassador (i.e., party representative).

Canadian political parties set some extraparliamentary parameters around discipline. During Justin Trudeau's tenure, changes to the Liberal Party of Canada's constitution updated its principles and assigned more power to the leader.<sup>85</sup> That constitution makes no mention of how MPs should vote. The party pledged in the 2015 election to restrict party discipline to matters concerning the "electoral platform; traditional confidence matters such as the Speech from the Throne and significant budgetary measures; and those that address the shared values embodied in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms."<sup>86</sup> Some interpreted the commitment as offering Liberal backbenchers more independence than other parties offer. That democratic spirit carried over to the 2019 Liberal platform, which asserted that MPs ought to be "free" to "be the voice for their communities, and

hold the government to account.<sup>87</sup> In practice, there are far more disciplinary subtleties than the party lets on.

First, whipping votes on all bills related to implementing a party's electoral platform is a broad statement. Governing party members are expected, if not required by the leadership, to support cabinet initiatives. This holds even though a government bill can be different from what the party promised in the campaign. As well, whereas backbenchers must publicly support all aspects of the platform, the cabinet can reverse course. Backbenchers are compelled to defend the flip-flop even though they played no part in renegeing on a campaign pledge to constituents, and they risk embarrassing the leader if they publicly apologize for the turnabout. Conversely, parliamentarians become frustrated when a free vote is announced on an election commitment that they passionately support.<sup>88</sup>

Second, cabinets interpret confidence measures to their own liking. In Canada's early years, the government often lost votes but did not resign.<sup>89</sup> In the twenty-first century, governing parties sometimes follow the British three-line whip system (see page 53).<sup>90</sup> Their members must always support the throne speech and budget; if not, then they cease to be part of the governing party's caucus because they are expressing utter disagreement with the leadership. The government can fiddle with confidence votes by burying items in a budget omnibus bill that bundles many proposals. Furthermore, a cabinet can argue that anything involving money relates to the budget. It can even decree that a routine motion is a judgment of its suitability to govern.<sup>91</sup> The threat of a snap election is ever present.<sup>92</sup>

Third, party discipline is fragile on issues that weigh on a parliamentarian's personal moral compass. In Canada, the constitutional protection of the fundamental freedoms of conscience and religion can chafe against the freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, as well as with certain rights, notably equality rights. Debate on these highly charged issues risks tearing a party apart. Capital punishment, abortion, same-sex marriage, and medically assisted death are some high-profile morality issues that have exposed fissures. Other flashpoints encompass diverse topics from provincial self-determination in separatist referendums to the national firearms registry. On occasion, leaders back off to permit private members to vote as they wish. At other times, a leader demands conformity on a highly charged issue.

The Conservative Party of Canada constitution accords slightly more individual agency. A policy document declares that “all votes should be free, except for the budget, main estimates, and core government initiatives,” and that Conservative MPs should consult with their constituents “on issues of moral conscience, such as abortion, the definition of marriage, and euthanasia.”<sup>93</sup> What constitutes a core initiative and what soliciting constituent input means for voting are unspecified. In any event, consecutive leaders have decreed that the Conservative Party will not reopen the abortion issue and shall consider same-sex marriage a settled matter, topics that are nevertheless sources of wedge politics. Conservative parties in Canada often struggle to unite on social issues.

The New Democratic Party is the only major federal party that mentions party discipline in its constitution. A section titled “Discipline” briefly disentangles disciplinary responsibility between its federal and provincial parties.<sup>94</sup> Discipline is implied because New Democrats share ideological commitments to social democracy, and the party has formal alliances with the labour movement. One recent survey of NDP MPs found that their party’s position was a significant, and sometimes the only, consideration in deciding how to vote in the House.<sup>95</sup> Despite party nomenclature that champions democracy, the New Democratic Party’s constitution, policy declaration, and election platforms are conspicuously quiet about the rights of elected representatives.<sup>96</sup>

Niche parties can be less regimented. The Bloc Québécois’s founding principles state that its MPs are not subject to voting discipline as long as they remain united on core party values.<sup>97</sup> That is an ideal that fell away over time.<sup>98</sup> The Green Party’s constitution establishes its core values as a “basis of unity.”<sup>99</sup> The Green leader once presented a private member’s bill to curb a leader’s authority over nomination papers, which she maintained is “an undemocratic tool for discipline and control over MPs.”<sup>100</sup> Issue-based parties offer flexibility on topics for which party ideology might not have clear application, such as whether to reduce the voting age.

Notably, party constitutions and platforms do not specify the consequences for saying or doing something inconsistent with party values. For many new entrants into party politics, it is not obvious that they will be scolded for something as innocuous as clicking the “like” button below the Facebook post of someone affiliated with another party. Serious

disruptions are generally dealt with by the disciplinary process outlined in Chapter 10. The rigours of party discipline cause some to wonder whether representation in parliamentary legislatures would be better off without political parties.

### **Politics without Political Parties**

Politicians' use of prescribed messages is a symptom of their dependence on party affiliation. Just 4 to 5 percent of the Canadian electorate prioritizes candidate factors in elections, a percentage even lower in urban areas, among less informed voters, and outside Quebec.<sup>101</sup> Voter assessments of local candidates matter to the outcome of elections in only 10–14 percent of seats.<sup>102</sup> This means that candidates make a difference in close races but otherwise have no practical bearing on who wins or loses. If political parties did not exist, or even if party labels did not appear on the ballot, then voters would be more attuned to their local representatives.

Parliamentary politics without political parties might result in a greater medley of candidates. A slew of Independents would generate innovative, responsive policy ideas. The political polarity that divides society might tone down – or it might ramp up. Regardless, the absence of structure would bring complications. Without visible political coalitions, it would be hard for voters to differentiate between political choices.<sup>103</sup> Interest groups would have considerable influence, and legislators' votes could be bought. Periods of paralysis would likely result from mass bickering, personality conflicts, grandstanding, and vote trading. Factions would emerge, possibly dominated by regional loyalties, with the most populated areas exercising their voting muscles. Forming an executive, distributing resources, and ensuring that legislators are present to vote would be daunting. The electorate would lose their bearings in the political sphere, unsure of which policy agenda is on offer or whom to hold accountable.

Occasionally, a message of prioritizing constituents inspires the electorate. In the aftermath of the First World War, many suffragettes worked outside the male-dominated two-party system. The National Progressive Party formed as a coalition of anti-party agrarians, reformers, and westerners to rally against the “big interests” dominating party politics.<sup>104</sup> The Progressive movement nominated grassroots candidates to run against the lawyers and professional politicians whom it alleged were beholden to



party and donor obligations. Many Progressives were motivated to “destroy” the centralized control of a parliamentary caucus over the party.<sup>105</sup> In the 1921 federal election, the Progressives won the second most seats. Their anti-partyism was so resolute that they refused to form the official opposition. As with all MPs, the conflicts inherent in weighing constituent, regional, national, party, and personal interests beset them. Initially, Progressives lined up to support economic policies that favoured their provinces. Ultimately, on most bills, they voted together.<sup>106</sup> Internal division followed. In a minority government, it was apparent that only “a tightly organized group” could hold the balance of power, but policy disagreement impaired the Progressive caucus,<sup>107</sup> and a number of Progressives switched parties.<sup>108</sup> Suffragettes gravitated toward working with the established political parties, and the movement fizzled out.

An effort to do away with partisanship is under way in the Senate of Canada.<sup>109</sup> It is an ambitious task given the unelected chamber’s history as a landing spot for party loyalists, some of whom a judge found to be “robotically marching forth to recite their provided scripted lines” during Prime Minister Harper’s tenure.<sup>110</sup> Justin Trudeau’s commitment to appointing unaffiliated senators promises to stimulate thoughtful examination of public policy. Senators now question ministers, and they amend government bills with greater frequency than their predecessors did. Independent senators do not have a whip to discipline their voting. There is a scroll meeting instead of an order paper, and they put their names forward to the Speaker instead of the party whips controlling who can speak. A senator with the title “government representative” learns about government messaging on bills by attending the Cabinet Committee on Agenda, Results and Communications chaired by the prime minister. The applicable minister and public servants debrief senators about a government bill. Parliamentary secretaries – the government-side legislators assigned to assist ministers – lobby them, as do ministers.

There are recognizable practices even as overt partisanship recedes in the Senate. A “government liaison” tries to identify how senators intend to vote and provides them with information to convince them to support the cabinet. Senators with shared values form affinity groups around geography, profession, background, and socio-demographics. Many like-minded senators congealed into the Independent Senators Group. In the 42nd

Parliament, its members voted with the government representative on 86 percent of bills because, they said, the appointed upper house should respect the will of the elected lower house.<sup>111</sup> Senators who leave the Independent Senators Group have their seats moved to the back corner of the chamber. At the start of the 43rd Parliament, some appointees formed the Canadian Senators Group and the Progressive Senate Group, demonstrating that legislators are inclined to work in like-minded teams. As well, familiar communications tendencies arise: senators stonewall the media during a controversy, and sparring on social media occurs among senators and their staff, including during committee proceedings.<sup>112</sup> More time is required to see how the Senate experiment turns out.

For evidence of the parliamentary system functioning without political parties, we only need to look at the consensus system of government in two of Canada's territories. There are exclusively Independents in the legislatures of the Northwest Territories (nineteen MLAs for 45,300 citizens) and Nunavut (twenty-two MLAs for 37,800 citizens). In those territories, after a general election, the MLAs use a secret ballot to choose a premier and the cabinet. Power shifts from the executive branch into the hands of elected representatives, and there is more cooperation than conflict. On the surface, the setup suggests that parties are not required for a Westminster system of government, at least not in places with small populations.<sup>113</sup> Looking deeper, though, there are complaints that the cabinet is too weak and that excessive power is concentrated in the head of the government. The public has little say in selecting their premier. An opposition still forms. Private members can become upset with closed-door decision processes and believe that the cabinet pays insufficient attention to their opinions.<sup>114</sup> Indigenous communities likewise have governance structures without political parties. With consensus-based decision making, Indigenous leaders are not slotted automatically into positions. They can have vigorous debates before coming to general agreement. Nevertheless, significant challenges arise in Indigenous governance, such as issues of accountability and transparency.<sup>115</sup>

Political parties are also absent from (most) Canadian municipal politics.<sup>116</sup> As in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, seating arrangements tend to place representatives in a circle or horseshoe, which is less adversarial than the parliamentary practice of grouping the government and

opposition on different sides of the debating chamber. The mayor is directly elected, and candidates run on their own recognizance, giving them greater incentive to be responsive to public opinion. Without the ideological tempering of parties, there are more candidates holding diverse points of view. However, it is difficult for most citizens to discern a municipal mandate. Public interest is limited; voter turnout is low. Citizens lack sufficient knowledge to judge candidates' policy positions and cannot substitute party labels as information cues. They might defer to other cues, such as name recognition or family dynasties, making incumbency a barrier to entry for new politicians. As well, some municipal politicians have well-known partisan affiliations, and sometimes candidates present themselves as a united slate. Others engage in private bargaining once in office as they form alliances, organize into coalitions, and trade votes. The absence of parties complicates the electorate's ability to keep individual members of a municipal council accountable for decisions.

Small-scale legislative assemblies can evidently operate without party labels. The House of Commons and provincial legislatures can have spurts of all-party cooperation, particularly when there is a public emergency. The predicament for most of the occupants is about trying to optimize their influence in normal circumstances. That means playing by entrenched codes and rules that are often concealed from public view.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The purpose of this book is to disclose the many facets of discipline in Canadian parliamentary politics, particularly those devoted to communications. The research describes party discipline in an integrated digital environment. It presents the architecture for identifying ways that parliamentarians can be strong representatives within the constraints of message conformity. In the following pages, I present the objectives of the study and the types of data.

### **Canadian Research**

Literature on party discipline in Canada is surprisingly enduring. Canadian MPs interviewed in 1962 talked about ambition, wanting to avoid the label of malcontent, frustration with the binding confidence convention, and the need for unity. One MP remarked that the "party system simply

does not tolerate MPs who disagree publicly with their party,” while another believed that cohesion “strengthens the image of the party in the eyes of the public.”<sup>117</sup> In the 1970s, scholars found that party cohesion exists because of rules and peer pressure, not because of rewards or punishments.<sup>118</sup> In 1985, the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, chaired by MP James McGrath, reported that communications technology contributes to a lesser role for private members in legislative business and a greater role as constituent ombudsmen. An MP quoted by the special committee foreshadowed the connection between legislative votes and the party brand, particularly for the party in power, saying that “the longer a government is in office the more every vote is maybe not a vote of confidence but a vote of reputation, which is close to confidence, and therefore you have to have uniformity.”<sup>119</sup> The 1991 federal speech from the throne acknowledged that impressions of “excessive party discipline and over-zealous partisanship, of empty posturing and feigned outrage,” were eroding respect for Parliament.<sup>120</sup> In 2003, an MP complained that party discipline turns backbenchers into “potted palms” who adorn the background and that freedom of speech is “forbidden.”<sup>121</sup> Such observations are just as relevant, perhaps more so, in a digital communications environment. Yet despite decades of concern, the internal details are largely undocumented because they involve secretive business that politicians are unwilling to betray. Research on party discipline in Canada is wanting.<sup>122</sup>

The two main academic examinations of party discipline in Canada conduct statistical analyses of division roll call votes that identify how each Member of Parliament voted. Empirical testing in *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Politics* of a model dubbed “loyalty elicited through advancement, discipline, and socialization” propelled scholarly thinking about why MPs rarely dissent.<sup>123</sup> *Lost on Division: Party Unity in the Canadian Parliament* documents the evolution of parliamentary party unity in Canada through a historical review of voting in Parliament, concluding that parliamentary reforms will not resolve party discipline because “parties will always find a way to maintain their influence in the legislative process.”<sup>124</sup> Despite these works’ considerable insights, analyzing votes has some limitations, such as an inability to account for parliamentarians who express dissent by missing a recorded vote or that like-minded politicians cluster together irrespective of party label.<sup>125</sup> We know little about private

deliberations that computer software cannot measure, such as the inner workings of party caucuses, or the undisclosed ways that governance bleeds into the legislative branch. In particular, we lack information about how communications management intensifies party discipline in Canada.

A growing canon of Canadian research shows that a fixation on marketing infuses the parliamentary system with communications discipline.<sup>126</sup> In *The New NDP: Moderation, Modernization, and Political Marketing*, David McGrane documents the federal New Democratic Party's adoption of message discipline protocols.<sup>127</sup> At the turn of the millennium, the leader's office exerted minimal control over parliamentary business. Messaging was devised during roundtable discussions at caucus meetings, and MPs managed their own interview requests. When the leadership introduced more formalized processes, MPs' ideas for Question Period had to be pitched by email, and the leader and House leader selected topics that might get the leader on the news. The leader's staff wrote questions. They designated MPs to rehearse with a QP preparation team. They used a central spreadsheet to manage the distribution of speakers and topics. Staff tracked MPs' media appearances. Private members' bills and motions were vetted through the leader's office and caucus; sometimes topics originated from staff. MPs relinquished their independence as they ceased to prioritize their own pursuits in favour of issues of interest to the leadership circle. As McGrane puts it, the use of political marketing was a choice of "discipline and order over freedom and discretion for MPs."<sup>128</sup> Discipline seemed to translate into electoral results when the NDP formed the official opposition in 2011 for the first time.

The micromanagement of Members of Parliament by their party's leadership is now routine in Canada. We still have a lot to learn about the hidden practices that lead Canadian politicians to behave as "skilled ideological chameleons" and party messengers.<sup>129</sup> Little Canadian-wide information is available about party discipline in the provinces despite similar parliamentary, electoral, and party systems. Academic study of discipline in a digital communications environment is especially limited.

### **Research Objectives and Data**

How would you describe party discipline? Only parliamentarians experience it, but it is so vast that even party whips might not grasp its full scope.

A component in the pursuit of power is only part of the story. In this book, I reveal ways that party-affiliated members of Canada's House of Commons and provincial assemblies are conditioned to prioritize party interests and are infused with reminders to stay on-message. In particular, I comment on the absorption of governing party backbenchers into the government's publicity apparatus, a practice that diverts them from critical commentary. My objective is to document the inner workings of party discipline and to show that communications are integral to how we understand it. Through the richness of qualitative research, I intend to explain who is involved, what it is, where it reaches, when it occurs, why it exists, and how it happens. Given that there is so much secrecy involved, a description of the goings-on in private political quarters promises to be an exhibition of "how social research attempts to make the invisible visible."<sup>130</sup>

Gathering information about political secrets is exacting, especially when a study delves into the caucus principle of confidentiality. Hansard records of legislative debates are insufficient because party discipline and caucus management are off limits in Question Period.<sup>131</sup> Access to information legislation does not apply to the political executive or parliamentary parties, and in any event sensitive information is shared verbally. Caucus meetings consist of oral reports with "no printed agendas, no minutes, no recorded votes, and no press releases."<sup>132</sup> The only thing in writing is the internal email informing members of the time and location of a meeting.<sup>133</sup> Everything is shredded when a politician leaves office, and a computer specialist wipes digital files; Library and Archives Canada mandates only that ministerial records related to departmental matters must be preserved.<sup>134</sup> This is why one former chief of staff in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) believes that studying how a caucus works is more difficult than studying the cabinet. As he points out, at least the cabinet makes formal records publicly available after a holding period of twenty to thirty years.<sup>135</sup>

Interviewing people who have experience in party politics is the best way to reveal confidential information about what happens in private settings off limits to outsiders. Refusals to provide basic information belie political secrecy. Politicians who agree to speak with a researcher can become silent when asked about what happens in the caucus<sup>136</sup> and some require anonymity for fear of retribution.<sup>137</sup> A staffer in the chief government whip's office in Ottawa explained to me that a whip's work is too

sensitive to discuss, even in the abstract.<sup>138</sup> Consider the following attempt to identify the MPs who belonged to an all-party democracy caucus created in response to reports by the Samara Centre for Democracy about former MPs' disillusionment with party control.<sup>139</sup> The Parliament Hill office of the Liberal who chaired the all-party caucus offered the following reply when I enquired by email about the group's membership.

FROM: Alex Marland

TO: MP's Office

SUBJECT: Request for list of All-Party Democracy Caucus members

I am looking for a list of the MPs who are members of the all-party democracy caucus. I wasn't able to locate this online. I would be obliged if you could provide me with this information.

FROM: MP's office

SUBJECT: RE: Request for list of All-Party Democracy Caucus members

This is to confirm I have received your email, and am working on putting together a list of names!

FROM: MP's office

SUBJECT: RE: Request for list of All-Party Democracy Caucus members

Thank you for your patience, I looked into getting the names of the all-party democracy caucus members, and realized the reason for its absence online is because this kind of information is not disclosed to anyone for privacy reasons.

FROM: Alex Marland

SUBJECT: RE: Request for list of All-Party Democracy Caucus members

Thank you. However, I'm confused. What are the privacy reasons?

FROM: MP's office

SUBJECT: RE: Request for list of All-Party Democracy Caucus members

No problem! It is for confidentiality.<sup>140</sup>

The culture of secrecy means that much of our knowledge about the practices of parliamentary parties is anecdotal, unsystematic, and/or dated.

My priority in this book is learning from practitioners who are or were in the cut and thrust of political action. National-level politics in Canada is my main unit of analysis, supplemented by provincial-level information. Collecting data from Ottawa and ten provinces responds to a methodological problem that studies of party cohesion usually examine one legislature.<sup>141</sup> For the purpose of readability, I identify a person's position at the time of the quotation, and I sometimes need not explicitly differentiate a federal or provincial source. Instead of naming provinces, I sometimes distinguish between large places where operations are more professionalized (e.g., House of Commons, Ontario) and smaller places with fewer formalities and resources (e.g., Manitoba, Prince Edward Island). Because of space limitations, and to keep the focus on Canada, I integrate information from other countries sparsely. The main exception is the British Westminster system when insufficient Canadian information is available, such as *How to Be a Government Whip* written by a then-British MP.<sup>142</sup> American sources have limited application, in part because the independent-minded communications of American politicians are alien to those of MPs.<sup>143</sup>

Using multiple methods to gather qualitative data about party discipline across parties, jurisdictions, leaders, and time enables general observations. The first of three sources of data is publicly available information. I scoured Canadian political memoirs and consulted academic publications. I reviewed reports about how to fix Parliament. I read countless Canadian news stories, many of which were published by the *Globe and Mail* and the *Hill Times*, which I supplemented with historical and contextual research for specific information using the Google search engine and the Newspaper Archive and ProQuest subscription news databases. I conducted purposeful searches of Canadian legislatures' websites including those of the Parliament of Canada, Hansard, and House of Commons procedural documents, and sometimes submitted emails requesting additional information. I looked for details via government and political party websites, in the political texts archived by Laval University on Poltext, and in political ephemera on file in my office. I transcribed content from two documentary films on party discipline and some televised news stories, political podcasts, and YouTube videos. I inspected some transcripts of Library of Parliament archival interviews, four of which were with party whips who served in



the 1970s and/or 1980s. A fifth with James McGrath concerned the aforementioned special committee that he chaired. Some limited quantitative data are part of this review, such as the prevalence of party candidates who retweet their colleagues (see Table 4.1). I examined social media only when an applicable item was mentioned in a news story, in which case I tracked down the original post.

The primary source of data comprises 131 semi-structured, in-depth interviews held between 2018 and 2020 with current and former Canadian politicians and political staff, many of them involved with the 42nd Parliament. Conversations lasted from twenty minutes to over two hours. Some required follow-ups. People with experience as prime minister, premier, minister, House leader, parliamentary secretary, opposition party leader, whip, caucus chair, backbencher, senator, or as a defeated election candidate were interviewed. Political staff included current and former members of the PMO, premiers' offices, ministers' offices, caucus research bureaus, MPs' offices, and leadership and election campaign personnel. Appendix 1 lists the main people interviewed for this book. To respect their requests for confidentiality, some names are withheld, and attribution sometimes obscures whether the participant held the stated job title at the time of the interview. Original quotes are interspersed with quotes found in publicly available information. Appendix 2 documents the sampling and recruitment methods, including a breakdown by highest position attained and party (Table A1) and by province and gender (Table A2). Participants received a discussion guide, also included in Appendix 2. In addition, I communicated informally in person, by telephone, or by email with approximately a dozen other politicians and staff to obtain specific information related to their sphere of expertise.

I asked many of the participants about the best way to obtain private files on party discipline. As might be expected, they emphasized that internal politicking goes undocumented or unsaved. Instead, they shared personal experiences, role-played, or read out party messaging from their smartphones. Although certain topics remained off limits even when I developed rapport, some people shared internal emails, photographs of documents, and in one case a flash drive of internal messages. As a quality control measure, I obtained feedback on draft chapters from some current

and former parliamentarians as well as some political science subject area experts.

A third source of data comprises transcripts of in-depth exit interviews with 131 retiring MPs conducted by the Samara Centre for Democracy. The policy institute's corpus encompasses MPs who exited during or on conclusion of the 38th Parliament (2004–06) through the 41st Parliament (2011–15). Interviewers asked about motivations for entering political life, the work of an MP, connections with civil society, and advice for future parliamentarians. The controlling nature of party discipline arose often.<sup>144</sup> Among the Samara Centre's findings was "a deeply held view that anything other than absolute message control would make a party unelectable" in Canada.<sup>145</sup> I read transcripts of the organization's lengthy interviews with retired party whips, and I examined the entire collection of interviews for more than three dozen terms to isolate information about specific topics that needed fleshing out. Some searches were fruitful (e.g., ninety-six of the former MPs mentioned the whip) and some less so (e.g., just five mentions of candidate vetting). Multiple terms routine in the House of Commons precinct did not appear, such as "duty whip," "lobby desks," and "vote sheets." The transcripts were mostly used to verify information, as were the Samara Centre's publications, such as *Tragedy in the Commons: Former Members of Parliament Speak Out about Canada's Failing Democracy*.<sup>146</sup> We interviewed a small number of the same people, and I am careful not to overstate that input. Advice for parliamentarians gleaned from the transcripts is presented in Figure 12.1.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

The chapters that follow reveal strategic mindsets and internal management practices in Canadian politics. Much of this information takes parliamentarians years to learn; many never do grasp it.

In Chapter 2, I look at political representation. I begin by examining the invasive vetting of prospective election candidates by Canadian political parties. I summarize some theories about styles of representation before disentangling the functions of government-side backbenchers. The story of a Conservative MP whose frank conversation with constituents appeared on YouTube animates the real-world challenges of representation in Canada. I explain that, as government expanded, backbenchers evolved

from lawmakers into caseworkers. As emphasis on communications unity grew, they became brand ambassadors. A missive from a New Democratic Party MLA in Alberta outlines the constraints on parliamentarians absorbed into a government message machine. We learn about a Liberal MP who used social media to build a personal brand that became a source of tension with the Trudeau PMO.

In Chapter 3, I emphasize how partisans are integrated into a political team. To understand caucus mindsets, I look at the social psychology of group behaviour, including the famous Stanford University prison experiment. Applied to politics, we see that self-discipline arises from membership in a party whose shared quest requires group cooperation and sacrifice. This gives rise to the parallels some see between political groups and competitive sports teams. We learn how Brian Mulroney, Canada's prime minister from 1984 to 1993, built personal loyalty throughout the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party. Coupled with information in Chapters 4 and 7, the story of his extraordinary interest in caucus solidarity helps to solve the puzzle of how Mulroney remained popular in his party despite political upheaval and public disapproval. The chapter marks the first of several forays into the work of the party whip by looking at human resources functions.

I provide an overview in Chapter 4 of the political communications arena. I examine the media ecosystem, including the ways that journalists cover political news. The disruption wrought by digital communications technology has tightened party message control in Canada. Political correctness and populism are two notable phenomena that pull message conformity in different directions. I explain how parliamentary parties exploit media interest in caucus division and use the threat of media drama as a reason to close ranks. The practices of message amplification, wedge politics, and trap votes are discussed. Vignettes include a distressed MP who voted against a motion about compensating hepatitis C victims and the Liberal communications machine exploiting a Conservative MP's quip about abortion.

Chapter 5 is about message discipline. I look at how a secretive atmosphere and an aversion to surprises increase the appeal of message consistency. I touch on how non-stop campaigning and political marketing influence a relentless effort to control information, including through the

deployment of branding. Next I summarize how party values, anecdotes, and public opinion research inform the construction of concise messages. Communications strategists urge message repetition, but they warn about robotic delivery as they encourage speakers to convey an image of authenticity. I conclude the chapter by observing that the quantification and centralization of data collected on citizens are further ways that political parties exert influence on elected representatives. Strategic thinkers from the Harper PMO and Trudeau PMO are among those who share wisdom.

Chapter 6 presents insights on discipline coursing through the political executive in Canada. Management of the cabinet and centralized coordination of government communications are profiled, as are ways that the executive branch exerts control over government-side backbenchers. I touch on the formidable role of staff in the PMO, premiers' offices, and ministers' offices, including the types of planning meetings they engage in. I explore the work of staff who station regional desks to act as liaisons with governing party backbenchers. The ability of politicians to put differences aside in a public emergency is discussed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when partisan silos fell away but message discipline grew.

Chapter 7 is a journey into the clandestine world of a parliamentary party's caucus meetings. I tackle the internal dynamics of caucus gatherings, including variations in format and how prime ministers have run their meetings. Leaders say that caucus is the place for parliamentarians to make their voice heard, but leaders and their inner circle may not grasp the intensity of social and institutional forces that cause many backbenchers to fall silent. I give attention to sub-caucuses, notably regional caucuses. I also examine the divisive topic of staff attending caucus meetings, whose presence has become a permanent fixture. The attention paid to social media in Ottawa caucus meetings is particularly illuminating.

In Chapter 8, I delve into the communications work of parliamentary caucus research bureaus, and profile that of the Liberal Research Bureau. These publicly funded units of political staff play an underappreciated role in providing parliamentarians with messages. Although messaging is essential for MPs to do their jobs, the practice invites questions about whether a bureau works for the caucus, as intended, or whether the staff are agents

of the leadership and the extraparliamentary party. A bureau can also become integrated into public administration. I provide examples of internal messaging circulated to Liberal MPs that show how government-side backbenchers are encouraged to be government messengers.

Chapter 9 presents new insights on how message discipline affects what parliamentarians do in the legislature. I offer a brief history of behaviour in the House of Commons to dispel notions that representation was necessarily better in the past or is beyond reproach today. After profiling the interlocking work of the House leader and whip, I acquaint readers with communications facets of members' statements, Question Period, government orders, and private members' business. I review the ways in which political parties exert control over MPs in the House of Commons, including the conflicted roles of standing committees as organs of the party leadership versus checks on the executive. I discuss how party whips manage attendance and deliver votes. For the first time, non-MPs will get to see what a party whip's vote sheets look like. Readers will also gain an appreciation for the digital interactions between the whip's office staff and MPs during committee proceedings.

Chapter 10 discloses how discipline is exacted when a partisan goes off-message. I begin the chapter by delving into conflicts within a caucus. Process, policy, and personality disputes sometimes escalate into arguments, coarse language, and tantrums. I touch on bullying and harassment, which appear to be less prevalent in parliamentary politics than some might think, at least by political standards, with the notable exception of power imbalances between senior and junior political staff. The steps that disciplinarians follow when dealing with a breach of unity are profiled, as are the types of punishments. I conclude the chapter by identifying how rare it is for Independents to be elected at the federal or provincial level in Canada.

Chapter 11 is about the SNC-Lavalin controversy. The events comprise a pivotal case of party discipline, for they expose the mayhem that results when immovable positions spill into a public disagreement. In 2019, the Trudeau Liberals went into a bunker mentality over controversy about the PMO's attempt to persuade the attorney general to cut a special deal so that the Quebec-based engineering and construction company could

avoid criminal prosecution. Tracing the policy dispute sets up a summary of cascading events, followed by perspectives shared by some Liberal MPs and PMO staff. There are many layers to the story. This version focuses on a standoff that, among other things, divulges Justin Trudeau's management style of delegating unparalleled authority to senior PMO personnel.

Chapter 12 concludes by presenting ways that parliamentarians can be compelling advocates within partisan boundaries. It differentiates the stereotypes of team players and political mavericks from party robots who act on command or troublemakers who bristle at receiving orders. I channel suggestions from parliamentarians into maxims that offer promise for rejuvenating the relevance of private members within the restraints of party discipline. The chapter concludes with a return to the research objectives and suggests best practices, such as adopting a caucus code of conduct. A few areas for further research are identified.

In the pages that follow, readers ought to keep in mind that rules, processes, and actors are subject to change, as is the emphasis that a leader places on message control. As well, political parties and leaders routinely make commitments to legislative reform that do not amount to anything. We should therefore be suspicious about Prime Minister Trudeau's ministerial mandate letter to the government House leader urging more time in the 43rd Parliament for private members' business, to "eliminate the use of whip and party lists" that guide the Speaker when recognizing MPs, and to further limit when backbenchers must vote with the government.<sup>147</sup> As this book makes clear, in Canada the culture of discipline penetrates party politics far deeper than promises of reform or what goes on in a legislature.

## **SUMMARY**

The political institutions that make Canada a model democracy simultaneously undermine the democratic functions that they are supposed to perform. Party discipline draws out compromise to accomplish a shared political agenda. It is rooted in a culture of secrecy necessary to foster trusting relationships, compromises, and smooth workplace operations. Its potency evolved as political parties formalized and as party leaders gained more authority. Gradually, parliamentarians transformed into party soldiers following orders in a command hierarchy. The encroachment of

the confidence convention has become a significant impetus for solidarity among governing party backbenchers. As will be shown, the power emanating from party discipline intensifies as it spreads into message discipline.

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