

Inside the Local Campaign

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Introduction

Constituency Campaigning in Canada

Alex Marland

Abstract In Canada, most voters prioritize national-level variables such as party leadership and party labels instead of local representation. As a result, local-level campaigning attracts relatively little scholarly attention. Nevertheless, there is growing interest in the work of candidates and their supporters because of competitive pressures and because political parties want them to collect and store information about constituents in a party-controlled database used for fundraising, volunteering, and voter mobilization. This introduction situates constituency campaigning in Canada, including observations about unique aspects of electioneering during a pandemic, and summarizes the ensuing chapters in the book.

Résumé Au Canada, plutôt que d'accorder la priorité aux candidats locaux, la majorité des électeurs se concentrent sur des variables nationales telles que les chefs et les partis. Par conséquent, les campagnes menées localement attirent relativement peu l'attention de la communauté scientifique. Néanmoins, comme les partis politiques incitent les candidats et leurs partisans à recueillir des données sur les électeurs et à les conserver dans des bases de données qu'ils contrôlent, leur travail suscite de plus en plus d'intérêt. Ces informations sont ensuite utilisées dans le domaine du marketing de données, y compris pour la collecte de fonds, le bénévolat, et la mobilisation des électeurs. Cette introduction dresse un portrait des campagnes électorales menées dans les circonscriptions au Canada. Il présente notamment des observations sur les aspects uniques d'un processus électoral se déroulant pendant une pandémie et un résumé des chapitres qui constituent ce livre.

CANADIAN POLITICAL PARTIES are paying renewed attention to local-level electioneering, and so should the researchers who study national elections, political representation, and party politics. Since the age of television and the advent of public opinion polling, many have viewed canvassing for votes in electoral districts – defined geographical areas also known as ridings or constituencies – as a holdover from an era when Members of Parliament (MPs) were powerful public figures and electing a representative had significant local consequences. The diminishing political influence of MPs – coupled with the dominance of national media, party leaders, issues, and partisanship – reduced the perceived relevance of local campaigning. To cynics, electioneering by candidates and their supporters was ritualistic and irrational.

Technological changes paved the way for more centralized coordination by political parties that dispensed with direct, local contact with electors in favour of coordinated, national-level indirect communication, often via news management and advertising. Skepticism intensified in the late twentieth century with the proliferation of 24/7 television news, fax machines, email, and websites and the replacement of door-to-door voter enumeration with a permanent electronic list of electors.¹ Gradually, local candidates were subsumed within party brands dominated by the national leaders' personalities and media interest in their tours. Some of the most hardened doubters were political scientists who, since the 1940s, have used public opinion survey data to establish the prevalence of national-level variables.² Research studies suggesting that a candidate accounts for less than 10 percent of the vote³ – with incumbents and rural candidates at the upper range – and the importance of partisanship, regionalism, and the electoral system have repeatedly affirmed the primacy of systemic factors that constrict the influence of local campaigns.⁴ Withering party membership, waning civic responsibility, and declining volunteerism have contributed to less local engagement and lower voter turnout,⁵ and the difficulty of examining district effects versus the comparative ease of focusing on candidate ratings has resulted in the marginalization of local electioneering in election studies and few academic publications on local political outreach, voter identification, or

get-out-the-vote (GOTV) operations.⁶ To many scholars, constituency campaigning is too difficult to study and less important than partisanship and party leaders, even though it is the local campaign that engages directly with Canadians, it is a local candidate whose name is on the election ballot, and it is Members of Parliament who represent citizens in the House of Commons.

In the twenty-first century, innovations in communication technologies have resurrected national-level interest in constituency campaigning. Suddenly, local campaigning is fashionable, even as candidates have morphed into party representatives who convey uniformity and follow directions from national war rooms. Between and during elections, political parties are harnessing web and mobile technology to assemble information about electors, which they are using to deploy cost-effective and targeted canvassing and messaging.⁷ National parties now urge incumbents, candidates, local party workers, and volunteers to compile intelligence on constituents and upload it instantly into party databases and sometimes into an MP's private database. This coordinated management of "big data" has both centralized and energized local campaign operations.⁸

In today's hyper-competitive electoral marketplace, the surge of interest in the ground game has coincided with a drift away from national-level broadcast advertising and toward social media advertising and microtargeting of electors. The embrace of digital communications is one of the many reasons why quantitative researchers have recently investigated the election effects of constituency campaigning in Canada, with one study concluding that the happenings in local electoral districts "definitely matter for party support overall [and] should be integrated more fully into existing explanations of election outcomes in Canada."⁹ Missing are descriptions of what actually occurs on the ground during a twenty-first-century campaign.

What localized work occurs in electoral districts during a Canadian federal election? *Inside the Local Campaign* sets out to answer this research question. The book's authors use the contest in 2021 as an anchor as they describe an assortment of local campaign activities in today's digital media ecosystem. Each chapter documents

an aspect of constituency campaigning within a common organizational structure. Contributors concisely summarize the (often) limited Canadian scholarship on the profiled role or topic, then build upon theory by synthesizing applicable information from recent Canadian news stories to identify trends, and finally present fresh insights into what happens behind the scenes based upon new information compiled during the recent election. But first this introduction lays the groundwork by summarizing what is known about constituency campaigning in Canada.

The Resurgence of Local-Level Campaigning

In Canada's Westminster-style parliamentary system, electors vote for the representative of a political party in their electoral district. They rarely support independents. Executives in a party's local electoral district association (EDA), if one exists, are tasked with recruiting candidates and organizing a nomination contest so that local party members can select the person who will be the party's candidate on the ballot. The EDA, the candidate, and volunteers wage a local campaign to identify, mobilize, and persuade voters. The candidate who wins a plurality of votes in an electoral district during a federal election or by-election is elected to represent the area as an MP in the House of Commons, and the party that controls the most seats forms the government, with that party's leader becoming the prime minister and heading a cabinet. Each major party therefore attempts to run local candidates and mount competitive campaigns in as many districts as possible.

Campaigning is democracy's way of ensuring that aspiring officeholders and incumbents communicate their positions and initiatives with the electorate.¹⁰ Outreach to electors raises their awareness of candidates, stimulates political interest among them, educates them politically, and informs them of policy positions. Information about campaigns is most evident on the national stage, where the media focus on party leaders, who tour the country making policy announcements and attending local rallies with the party faithful. Meanwhile, with comparatively little fanfare, local candidates and campaign workers try to secure votes from Canadians in

338 electoral districts. Under the shadow of a national campaign, they participate in local operations that put up signs, run an election headquarters, distribute brochures, knock on doors, place phone calls, and organize local rallies. Talking with electors on their doorsteps and by telephone to identify their vote intentions as “for,” “unsure,” or “against” is a pivotal aspect of GOTV mobilization used for identifying supporters who are urged to vote in advance polling and especially on election day. Provided that enough workers are available, the candidate’s election team designates scrutineers to sit at polling stations to keep track of who has voted and to relay updates to the campaign headquarters so that workers can cajole identified supporters to vote before polls close. Well-resourced campaigns can offer transportation or child-minding services.

Political scientists who study political behaviour are prone to question the rationality of constituency-level campaigning, particularly in party strongholds. Their analyses of public opinion data, including use of the Canadian Election Study data set, demonstrate the primacy of partisanship, socialization, leaders, and other macro-level variables, reflecting the stark reality that, for most Canadians, there is little payoff in investing effort to assess individual candidates in a political system in which elected officials toe the party line. Consequently, constituency campaigning has often been treated as little more than a “ritual” with minimal effect on the election outcome.¹¹ Candidate factors are estimated to matter the most for partisans¹² and to make the difference between winning and losing in up to 14 percent of electoral districts.¹³ Stories of candidates going to extreme lengths to solicit votes, such as flying by helicopter to remote areas or walking ankle deep in mud,¹⁴ are treated as laudable efforts to inform electors with little bearing on the election result. Academics are also mindful that the national party provides local campaigns with graphic design specifications, increasing the message consistency and visibility of the party brand at the cost of marginalizing candidates’ individualism.¹⁵ Ultimately, there is scholarly consensus that constituency campaigning mostly matters in close races in which there is increased voter interest and turnout, decreased information search costs for voters, and greater party resources and tactical voting.¹⁶

A problem with this reductionist thinking is that scholars have struggled to measure adequately the effects of local electioneering on voting. Constituency campaigns encompass far more than candidate ratings. Academics who work with election survey data rarely consider whether local candidates influence leaders' ratings and rarely delve into electors' positions on local issues. We therefore know little about the true impact of constituency campaigning on voter behaviour. For example, on the surface, a candidate who visits a remote area to canvass for votes likely has limited direct effect on the vote outcome. However, we need to consider the communications value of the candidate being widely hailed as a deeply committed constituency representative, which can have a positive influence on how both the candidate and the party are viewed across the electoral district. Relatedly, candidates in neighbouring ridings might have vastly different approaches to adapting to national dynamics. As David Bell and Frederick Fletcher observed decades ago, understanding how effective campaign communication is requires recognition of "the extent to which local campaigns bring out the local significance of the major issues of the national campaign."¹⁷ The focus on national variables in campaign studies results in knowledge gaps. Political scientists do not study, for example, how voters react when a local candidate departs strategically from the national campaign.

Treating constituency campaigning as foremost a vote-getting exercise ought to generate questions about and insights into the extent to which finite resources warrant redeployment from safe seats to marginal ridings. In some safe seats, a party's candidate reaches a margin of over 70 percent of the vote compared with the runner-up, whereas local campaigning and spending truly have an electoral impact in the small number of seats where the difference between winning and losing is a few hundred votes or less.¹⁸ Moreover, prevailing in close races can make the difference between whether Canadians are governed by a majority or minority government, and in which party forms the government.¹⁹ More broadly, candidates who secure a higher share of the vote, who build a local profile, and who make connections are seen as opinion leaders and augment their status within the party.

There has been some thawing in how academia considers local-level campaigning. In his presidential address to the Canadian Political Science Association in 2002, R.K. Carty advocated that we should look at Canadian parties as franchise organizations, whereby franchisors (the parties) enter licensing arrangements with local franchisees (the candidates) who leverage community networks and respond to the local marketplace.²⁰ The analogy is a good one given that it recognizes that political parties are professional operations that have invested in considerable brand architecture and that, as a result, their nominated candidates become brand ambassadors who behave as a sort of localized salesforce.²¹ In a presidential address delivered in 2016, William Cross extolled the importance of local party activity in Canadian federal elections and advocated that researchers study localized aspects of party life. According to him, “we can only fully study many important aspects of Canadian politics by collecting riding level data to include in our analyses” that otherwise would be blurred by national-level impressions.²² Practitioners are especially upbeat about local campaigns. They ascribe value to incumbency and voter outreach. They see competitive advantages in localized interpretations of national messaging, of the visibility of the candidate on doorsteps, and of GOTV field organization machinery. Between elections, the national parties encourage active EDAs and press their MPs to collect data on constituents, and in the lead-up to the campaign they organize candidate training. The perceived inability of political scientists to understand campaign dynamics is exemplified by one Canadian practitioner’s claim that “an academic left alone to come up with the campaign plan ... [produces one] in a form that no one can comprehend.”²³

In any event, elections are about much more than getting candidates elected. Constituency campaigning is a fundamental democratic function that activates, engages, and includes electors and party workers in the process of selecting a representative, deliberating public policy, and indirectly selecting a prime minister and government. It causes politicians to interact directly with constituents, to listen to their concerns, and to integrate members of diverse communities who might ordinarily be left out of politics.

Indeed, many candidates have no chance of winning, meaning that their campaign workers are motivated by a sense of loyalty, promoting a political ideology, and the allure of social camaraderie that boosts supporter morale. Their engagement instills a sense of identity and belonging. When victors are declared, they are congratulated for running strong campaigns, whereas losers attribute their defeat to factors beyond their control. As one former MP puts it, “in the elections that I won, clearly people understood things properly. And then the elections that I lost, I guess I was a little underappreciated.”²⁴

One underappreciated reason that constituency campaigning is so vital to Canadian democracy is the challenge of connecting with the growing number of electors whose first language is neither English nor French. There are now more allophones than franco-phones in Canada, with more than 400,000 citizens in each linguistic group of Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Spanish, and Tagalog, and many more collectively speak languages as diverse as Cree and Creole.²⁵ Reaching such a diverse population via mass media, social media, or so-called ethnic media is difficult, and community leaders often act as intermediaries.²⁶ But what has really fuelled interest in local campaigning has been political parties’ drive to populate databases with identified supporters who might get involved, donate, canvass, and vote.

Awareness of the importance of blending traditional canvassing with digital campaigning was propelled by the machinery of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential election bid. The Obama team leveraged digital marketing, social media, and mobile marketing to empower grassroots supporters within a centrally coordinated national operation.²⁷ Enthusiasts were asked for their cellphone numbers so that the campaign could text them information, and they were constantly asked to supply additional details about themselves and their political interests in order to refine voter profiles. Using triangulation and global positioning system coordinates, the national campaign identified the locations of supporters who had installed an application on their smartphones and sent messages urging them to visit local campaign offices. Obama’s supporters were encouraged to repurpose campaign content online, and volunteers were asked to

phone their friends in battleground states and submit vote intentions to a national database. A community online portal was used to assemble information about local supporters, to host debate parties, to share personal stories, and to invite undecided voters. Volunteers could access a repository of names and phone numbers to knock on doors and call electors in their neighbourhoods. All of this bypassed the traditional role of the mainstream news media as an information filter and harnessed a digital army of volunteers across America.

Canadian political parties' interest in digital infrastructure was bolstered by trends in the United States. When Obama became president, the Conservative Party of Canada was being celebrated for its segmentation of citizens into like-minded cohorts, who could be reached through advertising on specialized media and by promoting boutique policies, and for its voter information database that archived donor status, lawn sign history, and political concerns that constituents identified on mail-back cards.²⁸ By the Canadian federal election of 2015, all major Canadian political parties were prioritizing database marketing, spurred in part by the Harper government's winding down of the per-vote election subsidy and drastically limiting the amount that estates can bequest to political parties.²⁹ The Conservatives and the Liberals rolled out smartphone and tablet apps so that canvassers could input information directly into the party's database while talking with constituents on doorsteps.³⁰ Global positioning system technology allowed the parties to monitor the areas of a riding being canvassed. Liberal digital architects harnessed information about elector preferences to refine messaging and disseminated information via email and social media to match the right messages with potential supporters.³¹ The national parties – more so the Liberals than the Conservatives – have henceforth overseen local activities across the country and have harvested grassroots data for national purposes. More centripetal coordination and influence are being exerted over local operations, candidates, and incumbents than ever before.

It is now a norm that well-resourced campaigns mobilize a group of canvassers to knock on doors, to hurry the candidate over to greet a constituent, and to record information that is uploaded to

the Cloud.³² Talking to electors in person at their homes is perhaps the best way to identify potential supporters given that telephone canvassing is complicated by the abandonment of landlines and the fact that people screen their calls and because many Canadians do not engage with politics online. Canadian pollster David Coletto observes that

going door to door is no longer just a tool to introduce a candidate to voters or to ask a household to put a lawn sign in front of their home. It has become an important, maybe the most important, source of market intelligence for Canadian political parties ... The rise of predictive analytics and digital advertising coincided with the decline of telephone-based direct voter contact. Somewhat ironically, “go knock on doors” in the age of digital first campaigning [has become] the “new” dimension in market intelligence for Canada’s political parties.³³

Today’s constituency campaigners might not realize it, but the data that they are collecting is far more enduring and important to the party than focusing on a single election. Identifying the vote for GOTV operations, collecting email addresses, and encouraging supporters to take lawn signs have the post-election purpose of informing fundraising appeals and relationship building as part of the permanent campaign.³⁴ Increasingly, the canvassers who visit residences with a pencil and clipboard are the ones participating in a ritual of days gone by.

Trends in Local Campaigns

New profiles of local electioneering are needed to reflect these types of changing dynamics. Most of the descriptive research on constituency campaigning in Canada was conducted in a now-distant world before social media, smartphones, and wifi and before the social movements that sparked political reforms to address power imbalances that disadvantage women, Indigenous peoples, visible minorities, and LGBTQ2S+ citizens. Local news outlets have been

closing, media conglomerates have been recycling stories, and urban-based national news organizations are paying scant attention to rural and remote communities. As well, election candidates are so entwined with their party's brand that it is difficult for them to express individualism and authenticity or to know when they can push back against the messaging that emanates from the national campaign.

In each election, a cadre of incumbents do not run again, creating openings for party candidates who are indoctrinated by the need to follow the leader and lack the institutional memory of how parliamentary politics works. The pressure for party unity raises a democratic predicament: If candidates do not think that they can speak up during an election campaign, then should we expect them to display independent voices when they are in Parliament? Wayne Easter was a long-time Liberal MP from Prince Edward Island who did not seek re-election in 2021. In the lead-up to that campaign, he bemoaned that the prime minister and to a lesser extent opposition leaders were surrounded by a growing sphere of political staffers armed with "a political science degree from somewhere" who complicate the role of MPs to represent constituents. Easter reflected that the House of Commons needs "a mix" of people and opinions so that "Parliament itself continues to reign supreme as a backstop to what government, or cabinet itself, may want to do."³⁵ Frustration with party shackles is a common refrain from parliamentary veterans in Canada, as the Samara Centre for Democracy and others have repeatedly found.³⁶ The turnover of so many seats in each Canadian federal election means that there is always a crop of new MPs struggling to learn how to navigate the parliamentary process and to find their voice.

As an election nears, each party's election machinery gears up, and key campaign positions are filled by trusted operatives. Although official titles vary, at the apex is the national campaign manager, typically followed by a chair or co-chairs who are prominent party trustees or elected officials and supported by regional campaign directors who might be political staffers on leaves of absence from their work on Parliament Hill and in ministerial offices.³⁷ On the ground, titleholders in EDAs are tasked with candidate

recruitment and election readiness. The role of local party presidents in candidate recruitment can be significant, particularly with respect to encouraging women and racialized persons to run,³⁸ and they can become upset when national party operatives encroach on candidate selection. In 1972, party leaders were required to approve all party nominees standing for election, an authority that has been delegated since 2015 to representatives of the leaders. Disgruntled partisans invariably accuse a leader's circle of flouting party rules to anoint a preferred candidate or meddling in local affairs by dismissing an undesirable one. The tension over candidate selection has shifted from leaders interjecting to nominate women³⁹ to whether MPs have met party conditions for renomination. For example, the Bloc Québécois requires that its local associations in ridings held by the party raise \$19,000, be debt free, and have a minimum of 350 party members, a requirement comparable to other parties' expectations of their incumbents.⁴⁰ Aspiring candidates, including incumbents, must pass a vetting process to be eligible to seek the nomination as the party's candidate. Those nominated in advance of the writ of election have the advantage of building name recognition and assembling a campaign team. In the case of a snap election, opposition parties and EDAs can be caught off guard and scramble to nominate a candidate, particularly in places where the party's support is weak. Internal scrutiny of the backgrounds and public remarks of potential candidates can be an irritant when it delays them from campaigning, and the time pressure to nominate a full slate increases the authority of the leader. The leader's agents can invoke urgency to change nomination rules and to appoint preferred candidates, which can anger local party members who perceive anti-democratic tactics,⁴¹ and only those who pass central vetting are granted access to EDA membership lists and can begin fundraising.⁴² In party strongholds, a nomination race for a popular party can be more intense than the election, whereas weaker parties can be so moribund that they parachute in a "paper" or "ghost" candidate who perhaps has never visited the riding and is unavailable to the media.⁴³

Once nominated, a candidate assembles a campaign team, including appointing an official agent to ensure that the financial affairs

stay within the rules. Well-resourced candidates might hire a seasoned campaigner to manage their runs for office, but many others are handled by a trusted colleague or family member. As the campaign gets under way, local media dutifully profile area candidates and report on all-candidates debates, and national media identify key seats to watch and comment on battleground areas that the national parties' seat triage has identified as priorities. Occasionally, a local contestant attracts attention for standing apart from the crowd, as with climate activist Avi Lewis in 2021. The grandson of a former New Democratic Party (NDP) leader, the son of a former leader of the Ontario NDP, and the husband of celebrated author Naomi Klein, Lewis was a vocal NDP candidate in Vancouver who attracted big crowds and endorsements from celebrities such as Jane Fonda and David Suzuki. His fame in a longshot riding with a party unlikely to form the government gave him added leeway to exert his independence. "I will never vote against my conscience ... I want to go to Ottawa to shake up the entire political establishment," Lewis said, as he proclaimed that he would champion a more aggressive green policy agenda than the one in his party's platform.⁴⁴ Although he made inroads by capitalizing on the Green Party's collapse, his third-place finish illustrates that constituency campaigning goes only so far, and the campaign experience of most aspiring legislators is a far cry from that of political stars. In Canada, even incumbents are involved with grunt work. "At 5:00am a week from the election I was out gathering a stack of about 10 defaced, sexualized, phallicized, large campaign signs alone with my dog – in the pouring rain no less," recalled Lenore Zann, a Liberal MP defeated in Nova Scotia.⁴⁵

Party leaders are wary of local affairs drawing them into controversies that distract from national campaign management. In 2021, a campaign event held by NDP leader Jagmeet Singh alongside Manitoba candidates went awry when two First Nations leaders standing next to him endorsed a local Liberal. Elsewhere, some Green Party candidates shunned embattled leader Annamie Paul, whom they did not want visiting their ridings,⁴⁶ while in Quebec a Green candidate admonished her on Facebook.⁴⁷ Parties in contention to form the government are more likely to clamp down and

control the message. Candidates who contradict the leader's position often issue public retractions or apologies and then abruptly disappear from public view in an attempt to deprive the media and critics of fodder to sustain the drama.⁴⁸ If a candidate is found to have exhibited egregious behaviour, such as a prejudiced social media post that opponents supply to the media, or even a complaint about an insincere apology, then the leader might be pressed to demand the candidate's resignation.⁴⁹ The party can try to lower the political temperature by encouraging its candidate to "pause" campaigning, whereas in other cases it will rush to recruit a replacement if time allows.⁵⁰ Likewise, the leader and/or candidates can publicly admonish campaign volunteers for unscrupulous acts.⁵¹ However, coordination goes only so far: message discipline is difficult to enforce if multiple candidates break ranks, particularly if the voices of dissent come from incumbents in safe seats.⁵²

The Pandemic Election of 2021

The Canadian federal election of 2021 will surely be known as the pandemic election. During the 43rd Parliament leading up to the election, MPs contended with a torrent of constituent inquiries and adapted to physical distancing health measures by hosting video meetings and digital town halls.⁵³ They held committee meetings via Zoom, and they voted on bills and motions via a hybrid set-up of some MPs voting in person in Ottawa and others voting electronically. For months, many worked from home without being able to meet colleagues or staff face to face, while those MPs who voted in person in Ottawa sometimes felt lonely, which complicated their ability to build relationships within the caucus, with members of other parties, and with senators. Parliament adapted to new technology by setting up Wickr Pro, an encrypted messaging app, for MPs to receive vote notifications, and caucuses created WhatsApp chats to enable MPs to connect. Staying in touch with constituents was difficult given that in-person canvassing of households and mingling in public forums were no longer viable. "Even just at events – at cultural events, at community events – when you just get to talk to people one-on-one and

build those relationships in those ways, it's very different when you have to specifically book a Zoom meeting and you talk about a specific thing, right? You don't have a Zoom meeting to chit chat," lamented London NDP MP Lindsey Mathysen just before the election was called.⁵⁴

The need to avoid in-person interactions during a pandemic pushed many constituency campaign activities online, in some cases irrevocably. Candidates in large geographical areas experienced the convenience of video calls, and political organizers now know the benefits of hosting online debates, including keeping protesters at bay.⁵⁵ The trend toward digital options predated the pandemic, of course, but public health rules preventing normal in-person interactions sped up that trend. Some parties emailed supporters to urge them to consider running as candidates,⁵⁶ and social media advertising soared.⁵⁷ Many all-candidates debates were offered by Zoom or other video conferencing technology, resulting in greater accessibility to view more civil affairs now devoid of a crowd of partisan hecklers and candidates shouting over each other.⁵⁸ Conservative leader Erin O'Toole bucked participating in the leader's tour of electoral districts across the country by substituting two to three days of hosting virtual town halls from the controlled confines of a custom-built broadcast studio in an Ottawa hotel ballroom. The tactic enabled the party to reach voters directly in multiple regions and collect data on them, although a campaign post-mortem later criticized the leader for forgoing in-person engagement.⁵⁹ Reflecting on the Liberal Party's use of the Greenfly app, which helps social media influencers to share content online, a Liberal spokesperson quipped that "it's long been said that all politics is local, but the past year's unprecedented circumstances have also meant that 'all politics is digital' for the first time."⁶⁰ The pandemic election also saw a more intense effort to encourage supporters to vote in advance polls or to vote by mail.

A disconcerting trend that candidates must contend with is incivility. Some party candidates are given a hard time at public events, and all of them brace for being treated rudely on doorsteps. Almost every campaign expects its signs to be stolen or defaced, sometimes in an apparently coordinated manner soon after

they are installed, and occasionally opponents are caught pinching election pamphlets out of mailboxes.⁶¹ Seeking election requires a thick skin and the ability to endure harsh criticism, including being the target of toxic behaviour online that can spill over to in-person interactions. In the extreme, people hurl insults and vulgarities from their vehicles, and candidates in electoral districts where their party or leader is unpopular might fear canvassing alone.⁶² In rare cases, they might be chased, receive death threats, or even be assaulted physically. According to MP Michelle Rempel Garner, the Conservative MP for Calgary Nose Hill, tactics of intimidation inhibited her ability to campaign in 2021. “This meant I can’t advertise the location of my campaign office. I can’t attend public events where my attendance has been advertised. I’ve had to enhance security measures. I’m on edge and feel fear when I’m getting in and out of my car, and out in public in general,” she tweeted.⁶³ In Sudbury, a woman was charged with assault for allegedly pinning a male Liberal candidate against a wall and then kicking his car.⁶⁴ “Something has changed, and it has not changed for the good,” Rempel Garner observed.⁶⁵

Other pandemic activities were likely one-offs (see [Appendix](#)). Candidates who sought party nominations in the months before the election call tried drumming up support via telephone and social media, but signing up new members was complicated by not knowing how voting in a nomination contest would be held or how to mobilize those members to vote.⁶⁶ Fewer in-person public events were organized, with a preference for outdoor gatherings in line with public health guidelines. Politicians and campaign workers were scrutinized for wearing facemasks and whether they were vaccinated; some parties required that candidates and campaign workers be fully vaccinated or pass a daily rapid test.⁶⁷ When canvassers placed pamphlets in household mailboxes and rang doorbells, they stepped back to ensure physical distance and found that some housebound electors were excited about the opportunity for social interaction. In-person gatherings of volunteers talking politics over food and drink were scuttled in many campaign headquarters, which dampened worker morale, though it was mitigated somewhat by party operatives who posted upbeat messages to private

Facebook groups.⁶⁸ Door knockers arranged meeting points outdoors, their canvassing in apartment buildings was pared back, and telephone canvassers sat two metres apart or worked from home. In Winnipeg, a Liberal candidate did not publicly disclose the address of his headquarters in order to control unannounced visits,⁶⁹ while in Charlottetown a number of candidates speculated that the theft of lawn signs was linked to the inflated price of lumber.⁷⁰

Local campaign teams were cautious about their GOTV operations, such as considering whether drivers who offered constituents transportation to the polls should be vaccinated and ensure that the vehicle's windows were open. Elections Canada experienced greater difficulty securing spaces for polling locations given that some locations, such as schools, were no longer available. The agency required that all in-person voters wear masks and allowed people to vote past the close of polls if they were in line. More time was required to count a higher number of special ballots, meaning that some races were not decided until after election day. Another aspect that might be temporal is the surprising popularity of the People's Party of Canada, which attracted support from nearly 5 percent of voters, many of whom were libertarians expressing discontent with government COVID-19 policies.

To put the uniqueness of the pandemic election further in perspective, we can consider some of the traditional constituency campaign activities that were normal a decade earlier.⁷¹ In the lead-up to the federal election in 2011, MPs and nominated candidates had hosted roundtables and knocked on doors, and they had held grand openings for their campaign headquarters. Candidates canvassed in retirement homes, in shopping malls, and in restaurants, and they attended all manner of local events, from library openings to garden shows, though there were also many instances of candidate no-shows at all-candidate debates. They flipped pancakes at community breakfasts, ate rubber chicken at luncheons, and delivered speeches at fundraising dinners. At the time, many candidates were beginning to experiment with social media and electronic town halls. The in-person engagements seem to have generated more controversial moments for critics to complain about and for media to report on.

Since then, candidates have continued to submit their public identities to their party and to the primacy of its leader, at centre stage in everything from the party's manifesto to advertising to the leaders' debates and the leader's tour. Local campaigns might be required to provide funds for party advertising and to relinquish as much as 100 percent of their post-campaign spending rebates to the national party,⁷² and at their discretion centralized parties can deny candidates and MPs access to the local data that they collected on party members and supporters.⁷³ Even so, local flagbearers are championed when the leader is less popular, as occurred with Liberal Party advertising in 2021 that featured Quebec candidates talking about how "Team Trudeau is a tightly-knit team with a united vision."⁷⁴ A constant, regardless of the pandemic, is that the relationship between candidates and their parties is more complex and mutually beneficial than it might appear.

Goal and Structure of the Book

Inside the Local Campaign is an updated description of local-level campaign activities within a Canadian federal election. The earliest book-length academic treatment is likely Brian Land's *Eglinton: The Election Study of a Federal Constituency*, which meticulously details events in a prominent Toronto riding during the general election of 1962 and profiles an era when there was limited top-down party coordination.⁷⁵ Two notable volumes were commissioned as part of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing in 1991. In *Reaching the Voter: Constituency Campaigning in Canada*, editors David Bell and Frederick Fletcher assembled a collection of regional case studies that drew attention to a crisis of declining political participation and found that local campaigns are often – but not always – microcosms of the national campaign.⁷⁶ In *Canadian Political Parties in the Constituencies*, R.K. Carty surveyed constituency-level party work and the role of EDAs and found variations across the country, with some district associations highly active and others dormant or non-existent.⁷⁷ Another influential book in this area was *Parties, Candidates, and Constituency Campaigns in Canadian Elections* by Anthony Sayers. His profiles of select BC

ridings in the federal election of 1988 provided rich descriptions of local-level happenings and influenced our thinking of Canadian party candidates as fitting into one of four archetypes. According to Sayers, there are high-profile contestants who are political novices, local notables such as former municipal politicians who have a stable political base to draw on, party insiders who enjoy privileged status within the party, and stopgaps who have no prospects of winning and whose campaign teams might be family members sitting around their kitchen tables. A reread of these books shows that much campaigning remains unchanged from the late twentieth century to now.

Subsequently, R.K. Carty and Munroe Eagles published a quantitative analysis of constituency campaigning. In *Politics Is Local: National Politics at the Grassroots*, they find that many local party members derive satisfaction from participating in constituency elections and cast doubt on the normative view that the party centre exerts control over local affairs.⁷⁸ Another influential work is *Grassroots Liberals: Organizing for Local and National Politics*, in which Royce Koop looks at how the federal Liberal Party and its provincial cousins interact with EDAs and constituency-level campaigns. A spate of edited volume chapters and some journal articles enrich this small canon by looking at a variety of localized topics, ranging from LGBTQ2S+⁷⁹ and ethnoracial candidacy⁸⁰ to analysis of political behaviour indicating that local candidate factors make the difference in close races.⁸¹

New information is needed to understand how local campaigns operate in a faster-paced digital environment in which every mistake is magnified and party candidates amplify national-level messaging.⁸² Nowadays there is more diversity among candidates. This results in different campaign experiences, such as new mothers who take breaks from canvassing to breastfeed in the back seat of a car⁸³ and visible minorities who are subject to media stereotypes that sometimes have a bearing on their electoral performance.⁸⁴ As well, the move to digital campaigning has had profound implications for local candidates who constantly communicate via social media, who put on virtual fundraising events, and who hold Facebook Live town halls.⁸⁵

In this volume, we build upon *Inside the Campaign: Managing Elections in Canada* (UBC Press, 2020) by continuing to record what goes on behind the scenes in Canadian federal elections, this time in electoral districts. In the previous volume, academic authors collaborated with practitioners who had national-level experience. Although many practitioners shared inside information, the binds of partisanship and fears of career repercussions made it difficult for some to be objective about their campaign work or to disclose details, whereas academics often wanted to write more theory and integrate additional critical analysis. We decided for *Inside the Local Campaign* that the best way to generate inside information is to offer academics the choice of co-authoring with practitioners or compiling original data in some other manner. Another difference is our integration of some photographs to capture what local-level campaigning looks like across Canada (see the [Appendix](#)). Contributors were encouraged to prepare enduring content as opposed to documenting the pandemic election.

Holly Ann Garnett begins by building upon an insider's account of Elections Canada in the previous book⁸⁶ and her considerable research on election administration to understand how the directives issued by senior election administrators trickle down to the front lines. In [Chapter 1](#), she looks at the essential role of Elections Canada workers, who have endeavoured to ensure that the election process is smooth, especially in the pandemic context of the election in 2021. Garnett observes that the integrated teamwork of national and local electoral managers delivers world-class election administration, notwithstanding occasional hiccups.

In [Chapter 2](#), Angelia Wagner delves into the thorny topic of candidate ambition and the motivations of Canadians who consider standing for election. Past research has shown that people seek office because they are extroverts interested in a political career and want to influence public policy, or perhaps they are narcissists who pursue power.⁸⁷ Wagner's analysis of candidates in the federal election of 2021 finds that influencing public policy is the main reason that they run. There is also some variation in motivation depending on a candidate's gender or race.

In [Chapter 3](#), Anna Lennox Esselment and Matthew Bondy investigate some of the ways that party operatives recruit aspiring candidates, drawing in part from Bondy’s experience as a Conservative nomination contestant in Ontario. For some, a barrier to standing for election is the process within political parties to nominate candidates who want to run under the party banner, which according to the Samara Centre for Democracy many MPs think is a flaw in Canada’s democratic infrastructure.⁸⁸ Incumbents have the inside track, but even so there is considerable jostling between national and local arms of the party over nomination contests and candidate selections. Electoral district associations compete with the agents of party leaders for influence, with one espousing the democratic role of grassroots members and the other concerned about protecting the party brand. Esselment and Bondy show that the lack of transparency in nomination contests is a cause for concern.

In [Chapter 4](#), Cristine de Clercy veers from the Sayers archetype of Canadian election candidates by looking at the presence of star candidates.⁸⁹ She identifies dozens of local public figures who fit this categorization in the campaign in 2021, of whom about one in five was elected, and shows that commanding local attention is not necessarily a path to election victory. Her case study of a Liberal running in London enriches our understanding of high-profile contestants and fleshes out a category of the local candidate.

In [Chapter 5](#), J.P. Lewis tackles the topic of ministerial incumbents, among the highest-profile type of incumbents. We know that incumbents enjoy an increased probability of victory of approximately 9–11 percent compared with non-incumbents, particularly those who enjoy positive reputations,⁹⁰ and that cabinet ministers have particular star power, nurtured by making a slew of spending announcements in the lead-up to an election that demonstrate political prowess to constituents. Drawing from half a dozen interviews with campaign managers and ministers, Lewis describes the special advantages enjoyed by ministers who seek re-election and dubs them “incumbents plus.”

In [Chapter 6](#), Mireille Lalancette, Vincent Raynauld, and Anthony Ozorai add an examination of the personalization of local

candidates. In the last book, Lalancette delved into the role of a senior adviser to the leader on the leader's tour to illustrate the many calculations that go into image management, and Raynauld examined regional advertising.⁹¹ This time they collaborate with a local practitioner to investigate how candidates establish public personas in their online communications. Looking at the hotly contested riding of Trois-Rivières, they discover that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's social media use inspired the Liberal candidate's own use, but the medium was sufficiently flexible for the candidate to promote a personalized local image and work within national messaging.

Campaign messages stem from party platforms, and their construction was the subject of Jared Wesley's prior contribution.⁹² Wesley co-authors [Chapter 7](#) with Richard Maksymetz, a regional campaign chair with the Liberal Party. They direct attention to the role of a regional campaign chair, a position that reflects geographical variances and political cultures in a vast country where national-level issues can be less topical than local electors' concerns about provincial and local issues.⁹³ Their profile of the role of a regional campaign chair shows how the localized coordination function of party bosses has evolved over time.

[Chapter 8](#) is by two scholars who have published much work on constituency campaigns in Canada. Royce Koop and Anthony Sayers draw on an array of interviews to describe the functions of local campaign managers, whose role focuses on optimizing voter identification and mobilizing supporters to vote at advance polls, by special ballot, or on election day. Among sundry duties is signing up volunteers; as one campaign manual puts it, this requires creating "anticipation about the excitement and possibilities of Election Day" to recruit workers to participate in GOTV operations.⁹⁴ Drawing from interviews with a handful of party campaign managers, the authors suggest that the work involves managing downward, upward, and outward.

In [Chapter 9](#), Paul Wilson writes about the involvement of political staff in constituency campaigns. In the previous volume, he analyzed what ministerial political staff do during a campaign if they choose to remain in the minister's office for its duration.⁹⁵ Here

Wilson considers the work of political staff who take leaves of absence to participate in local campaigning. His interviews with party activists inform an updated look at the work on the ground carried out by individuals on local campaign teams. The profile is connected with [Chapter 10](#), which illuminates what local canvassing entails. Jacob Robbins-Kanter interviewed eight local candidates and campaign managers to inform a description of how local volunteers are an important data-collecting resource for both local and national campaigns. He finds variations in approaches to canvassing and suggests that fundamental differences are forming between candidates who can afford new technologies to harvest local data and those who cannot.

Several contributors provide examples of how local candidates and their campaigns behave as franchisees by strategically distancing themselves from their party to generate ambiguity that benefits them and, ultimately, the party. In [Chapter 11](#), Doug Munroe and Kaija Belfry Munroe leverage their past work on big data to profile how local campaigns from different political parties make use of their databases to inform their actions and decisions.⁹⁶ Contrary to past accounts of data marketing in Canadian federal parties, which tend to focus on large urban centres, their interviews with local candidates and campaign managers in Prince Edward Island reveal local resistance to using national databases. In [Chapter 12](#), Erin Crandall extends her discussion on national-level party fundraising that appeared in the earlier book.⁹⁷ Joined by Liberal MP Kody Blois, Crandall reveals some of the inside practices of local fundraising by election candidates, using Blois's experience in Nova Scotia as a case study. In contrast to the database fundraising conducted by national parties, which use electronic appeals to collect small amounts from a large number of supporters, local fundraising is labour intensive and relies on a candidate's personal connections to solicit larger donations from a smaller pool of donors. In [Chapter 13](#), Stéphanie Yates looks at the integration of national messaging into constituency campaigns, building on her work after the 2019 campaign.⁹⁸ She dissects efforts by the NDP and its candidates in Quebec to communicate a consistent message. Her conversations with NDP MP Alexandre Boulerice and his communications officer

inform her view that candidates for a political party destined for the opposition benches can deviate from national messaging, though on delicate files this might result in their use of ambiguous language to avoid brand conflict. Readers of these three chapters will find variation from conventional views of candidates as party robots and evidence that incumbents are more likely than first-time candidates to challenge centripetal forces.

The two chapters that follow focus on media. In [Chapter 14](#), Colette Brin extends her work from the previous book, which looked at how senior news editors make news judgments.⁹⁹ Joined this time by journalists François Cormier and Myriam Descarreaux, she looks at local media coverage during a federal election campaign, using the Quebec City region as a case study. The chapter shows how changes in news assemblage have consequences for information that voters receive about constituency campaigns. In [Chapter 15](#), Brooks DeCillia writes about local all-candidates' debates, building upon his work on the national Leaders Debate Commission that appeared in *Inside the Campaign*.¹⁰⁰ He demonstrates that the absence of national standards and resources means that coordinating debates among local candidates makes for a hodgepodge of approaches and a cacophony of partisan voices hoping to embarrass opponents. His analysis of over 200 news stories and interviews with eleven local campaigners shows that the democratic idealism of debates creates the expectation that candidates participate even though many of them see more value in knocking on doors.

Participating in campaign sign wars is another ritual that constituency teams engage in and about which there is debate. In [Chapter 16](#), Gillian Maurice and Tamara Small document the understudied and misunderstood practice of campaign signage in generating awareness of a candidate and, by extension, that an election is under way. Their profile of sign use by Greens in two Ontario ridings suggests that the long-standing activity performs an important symbolic function in local electioneering.

Finally, in [Chapter 17](#), Thomas Collombat further fleshes out the challenge of local engagement. He discusses local advocacy and uses the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) as a case

study, thereby contributing a localized extension of his *Inside the Campaign* study of national-level advocacy by PSAC.¹⁰¹ Collombat discloses that even a well-resourced national advocacy group faces considerable complexities with local-level advocacy during a federal election.

The book wraps up with a conclusion by Thierry Giasson, in which he adds further context for the pandemic election of 2021 and reflects on the tensions of local campaigns. Themes underscoring contributions to this volume are the stresses of determining who should run for the party, the boundaries of message discipline emanating from the national campaign, and local resistance to data-driven campaigning. Giasson then synthesizes the lingering traditions of local campaigning before commenting on the editorial challenges of assembling *Inside the Local Campaign*.

Although contributors cover a lot of ground, inevitably there is a range of topics that could fill another volume. For example, we know little about how campaigning varies between party strongholds, where competition is weak or even non-existent, and competitive battlegrounds;¹⁰² how candidates react to readjusted electoral boundaries;¹⁰³ or how political parties redeploy financial resources from their national offices to local constituency associations.¹⁰⁴ More research is needed on campaigning by the Bloc Québécois, on minor party and independent candidates, and on how canvassing works in sparsely populated areas of the country, including among concentrated populations of Indigenous peoples. As the following chapters show, there is still much to be learned about constituency campaigning in Canada.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Wiseman, “Get Out the Vote – Not.”
- 2 Black, “Revising the Effects of Canvassing.”
- 3 Blais et al., “Does the Local Candidate Matter?”; Bodet et al., “How Much of Electoral Politics”; Clarke et al., *Political Choice in Canada*, 352–53; Krasinsky and Milne, “Some Evidence on the Effect of Incumbency”; Sevi, Aviña, and Blais, “Reassessing Local Candidate Effects”; Stevens et al., “Local Candidate Effects.”

1

Election Administration

Holly Ann Garnett

Abstract What are the dynamics of local election management and administration in Canada? How much responsibility and how much discretion are retained by the central Elections Canada operation versus local electoral officials? How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence this balance between central and local officials? Drawing from theories of electoral integrity and electoral management, including the centralization of electoral management bodies and recent work on electoral officials as “street level bureaucrats,” this chapter considers how Elections Canada at the central and local levels responded to the challenges of running an election in 2021. It highlights Canada’s highly centralized system that also relies on a vast network of local electoral officials and organizations to deliver some of the most trusted and high-quality elections around the globe.

Résumé Quelles sont les dynamiques de gestion et d’administration électorales locales au Canada? Quelle part de responsabilités et de choix discrétionnaires incombe aux activités d’Élections Canada par rapport à celle des fonctionnaires électoraux locaux? Comment la pandémie de COVID-19 a-t-elle influencé cet équilibre entre les responsables nationaux et locaux? Prenant appui sur des théories de l’intégrité et de l’administration électorales, dont la centralisation des organismes de gestion électorale, et de récents travaux considérant les responsables électoraux locaux en tant que « fonctionnaires de proximité », ce chapitre examine de quelle façon Élections Canada a su relever, aux niveaux national et local, les défis de la tenue d’une élection en 2021. Il met en évidence le système très centralisé du Canada, qui compte également sur un vaste réseau de fonctionnaires et d’organismes électoraux locaux qui assurent certaines des élections les plus fiables et les plus remarquables au monde.

WHEN AN ELECTION is called in Canada, Elections Canada is tasked with the challenge of organizing it. In as little as thirty-six days, the shortest campaign time frame possible under Canada's election laws, the independent, non-partisan agency organizes the largest mobilization of Canadian citizens across the country. In 2021, it faced additional challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic and the additional safety concerns and constraints that came with these unprecedented conditions.¹ Running an election under pandemic conditions served to highlight the challenges associated generally with running elections in Canada: the highly centralized system also relies on a vast network of local electoral officials and organizations to deliver some of the most trusted and high-quality elections around the globe.²

In this chapter I ask, what are the dynamics of centralization in Canadian electoral management and administration? How much responsibility and how much discretion are retained by the central Elections Canada operation versus local electoral officials? And finally, how did the pandemic influence this balance between central and local officials? Drawing from theories of electoral integrity and electoral management, including the centralization of electoral management bodies and recent work on electoral officials as "street level bureaucrats,"³ I consider how Elections Canada, at both central and local levels, responds to the challenges of running elections.

Although often used interchangeably, the terms "election administration" and "election management" refer to two different things. Election administration refers to the concrete tasks of registering voters and managing a voting process, be that in person, by post, or online. Toby James, for example, refers to it as the front end of the electoral process, when most voters interact with the "nuts and bolts" of running an election.⁴ Electoral management, however, refers to a much broader set of institutions; often working behind the scenes to deliver trusted elections throughout the electoral cycle, they coordinate a variety of government agencies, departments, and organizations, and they cooperate with civil social groups, political parties, and candidates.

Around the globe, electoral management bodies are the government agencies and organizations tasked with administering elections.⁵

They can include a variety of bodies, from independent agencies to government departments to special judiciary bodies or some combination thereof. They can be highly centralized, running all activities through one national elections office, or rely on subnational or local bodies to fulfill key electoral tasks, such as creating an electoral register and conducting balloting. We also see differences in the permanence of electoral management institutions around the globe. Although most countries have some form of permanent electoral management body, the local and regional offices are often set up temporarily for each electoral event or make use of employees seconded from other government offices. Of course, added to this mix are the subnational and local election management bodies that might be subject to entirely different sets of rules.

In Canada, we normally think of our independent electoral management body,⁶ Elections Canada, headquartered in Gatineau, Quebec, which has been running national-level elections for over 100 years.⁷ However, Elections Canada still requires help on the ground. This is where hundreds of local returning officers (ROs) and tens of thousands of poll workers are hired for each election. Although their head office is permanent, these local offices and the returning officers hired to manage electoral processes in the riding are temporary. Returning officers can be engaged before the writs of election are issued, and remain in waiting between elections, but other staff members, offices, and materials are unique to each electoral event. Thus, with little (or no) notice, Elections Canada implements a country-wide system of local election management for each election. With a government that could fall at any moment – particularly in the situation of a minority Parliament – Elections Canada must have this complex system ready, with returning officers in local communities prepared to hire thousands of poll workers and to rent local offices to give Elections Canada an “on the ground” presence whenever word is received.

For such a huge undertaking, notably, these local operations receive little limelight. Perhaps it is because electoral laws and most procedures are debated and decided by Parliament, and Elections Canada serves as an impartial bureaucracy for implementation. Or perhaps Canada’s system of electoral management receives little

fanfare because of its relatively streamlined process, compared with that of our American neighbours, for example, in which rules that vary state by state and even county by county have led, in recent years, to claims of discrimination and voter suppression.⁸ Some notable exceptions to Elections Canada's relatively low profile were the robocall incidents in 2011, in which some voters were misled by rogue actors to the wrong polling stations,⁹ and controversies surrounding the educative role of the chief electoral officer (CEO) in the Fair Elections Act of 2014.¹⁰

Despite these exceptions, Canada's system of electoral management often works under the radar, and even more understudied are those local returning officers who conduct the day-to-day tasks of electoral management. Yet, in recent years, the study of local electoral officials has emerged as a field, outlining their important contribution to delivering high-quality trusted elections. For example, recent studies surveying people who work for election management bodies worldwide has revealed that input in policy making, recruitment practices, job satisfaction, and mitigating levels of stress is key for local election workers to perform at a high level.¹¹

The insights of local electoral officials are also crucial for evaluating policies and processes. Electoral officials have unique "inside" knowledge required to evaluate the quality of an election, which is fundamental to improving electoral integrity more broadly.¹² Since most voters will only encounter a poll worker, or perhaps the returning officer, this type of research at the local level can be important for evaluating the successes and shortfalls of electoral management. Research has demonstrated that perceptions of electoral officials can even be important for a voter's overall satisfaction with democracy.¹³ For this reason, studies of the decisions made by poll workers and surveys of these local election workers have expanded as an academic endeavour in recent years.¹⁴

Local returning officers could be considered the quintessential "street level bureaucrats."¹⁵ Research in this area of public administration has noted that local government workers can use a great deal of discretion in their efforts and work with relative autonomy. In some cases, this can even translate into a policy-making role that often stems from decentralized electoral management, such as seen in the

United States¹⁶ or United Kingdom,¹⁷ where local authorities are tasked with running elections. For example, poll workers can decide whom to ask for identification; this can result in discrimination at the polls if they make their decisions based on race and gender.¹⁸ In such cases, the decentralized nature of electoral administration has been noted to be negative for principles of electoral integrity. However, decentralized and autonomous local election management can also allow for innovation and locally targeted practices.¹⁹

But what about in Canada? Do local officials exercise certain levels of autonomy and discretion, or do they uniformly implement rules and regulations created at the centre? In a country with huge geographic, cultural, and linguistic differences, and in a climate in which global health concerns have affected different communities in different ways, what role do these street-level bureaucrats of electoral management and administration play in the running of elections in Canada?

Local Trends

The breakdown of roles and responsibilities for election administration at each level is encoded in the Canada Elections Act.²⁰ The hierarchy in [Figure 1.1](#) is useful in considering these roles and how they relate to each other.

Headed by the chief electoral officer (a parliamentary appointment), Elections Canada has a full-time central staff tasked with the implementation of Canada's election laws.²¹ Among these personnel are electoral officials who work permanently at the Elections Canada headquarters throughout the electoral cycle (i.e., between elections), and they are responsible for a broad variety of tasks, including offering public education, studying and testing new voting measures (though they must be approved by Parliament before adoption), cooperating with international electoral management bodies, and running by-elections.²² In other words, they work on the broader management of elections between electoral events.

However, general elections would not be possible without hiring additional personnel at the local level. It is there that some responsibility for electoral administration or the technical tasks of electoral

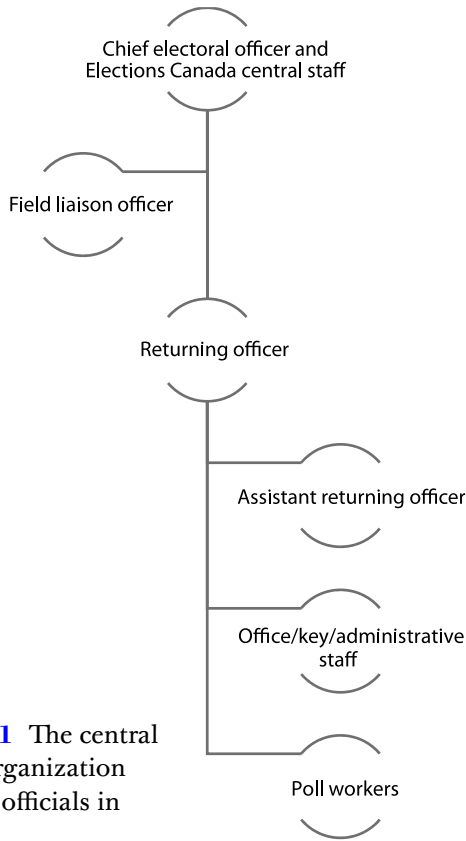


FIGURE 1.1 The central and local organization of electoral officials in Canada

management is devolved to individuals in the local electoral districts. One returning officer is hired for each electoral district and tasked with the “preparation for and conduct of an election in his or her electoral district.”²³ Returning officers are responsible for implementing election law at the local level; identifying spaces for the returning office and polling sites; recruiting, appointing, and training staff; identifying potential issues with the registration list, including where targeted revision might be necessary; and reaching out to target groups. It is in these tasks that the RO can have the most discretion since central Elections Canada staff do not have the on-the-ground knowledge required to engage effectively with staff and facilities in each of the 338 ridings.²⁴

However, unlike central Elections Canada staff, returning officers are appointed for a ten-year term but do not work full time between electoral events. Instead, they are paid a small amount between elections to be prepared for electoral events, and they are expected to be ready to work full time when the writs of the election are issued.²⁵ They are essentially “on hold” until the election is called. Thus, understandably, the position limits the types of individuals who can hold it, for anyone who has a permanent full-time position that cannot be left at a moment’s notice is unable to serve in this capacity. Unfortunately, Elections Canada does not release demographic or occupational data on returning officers.

One way that Elections Canada has sought to manage returning officers from headquarters is the development of field liaison officers (FLOs), who officially assist returning officers in the thirty-one geographic regions across Canada.²⁶ Although every RO is ultimately accountable to Elections Canada’s central office, FLOs can act as liaisons and offer additional guidance at the regional level.²⁷ In the Canada Elections Act, field liaison officers have three responsibilities: to support returning officers, to act as intermediaries between returning officers and the chief electoral officer, and to provide support to returning officers at the request of the CEO.²⁸

Their role on the ground is vast, oscillating between electoral management and strictly administrative tasks, and extends beyond the campaign period. Between elections, field liaison officers can be involved in recruiting, training, and assessing returning officers, facilitating communication and information sharing among returning officers in a specific region, and engaging with regional organizations, including the provincial electoral management body (EMB) or local councils.²⁹ During elections, FLOs can help with regional media requests and advise and coach ROs on a variety of tasks, from budgeting to dealing with issues that arise during the electoral period. In this way, field liaison officers are a means of bridging the central, permanent staff and the local staff, who might not have the same depth of experience in electoral management, particularly if they have been hired recently. In other words, they bridge the noticeable gap between the local, temporary,

and potentially newer personnel and the central, permanent, and professional organization.

There are two more devolved sets of employees hired when the writs of election are issued. The first is administrative, key, or office staff.³⁰ Up to half of these employees can be appointed before the writs, but they are not paid until after the writs.³¹ In 2021, Elections Canada listed a variety of positions available, from community relations officers – for example, for electors experiencing homelessness, those with accessibility requirements, youth, or seniors – to technical administrators.³²

The greatest number of hires at the local level, however, are poll workers and others engaged to work on election day (or in advance polls or post-election counting). Interestingly, the first point of contact for hiring these individuals is stipulated in the Canada Elections Act to be from political parties, which can provide a list of possible names for the returning officer.³³ After a period of seven days, returning officers also look beyond this list for poll workers from the general population. These poll workers, who have a variety of titles and job descriptions, from deputy returning officer to information officer, are responsible for opening polling stations, providing information to electors, ensuring that identities are checked, issuing ballots, counting ballots at the end of the day, and properly storing and transporting election materials. Thus, for election day and advance poll days, this large number of local individuals are those actually implementing election law at the local level.

In Canada, these individuals are provided with clear instructions and not given much decision-making authority, as is the case in some other countries. As mentioned earlier, though, in some jurisdictions, individual poll workers have exercised some discretion in determining who can vote ultimately, as in the case of whose IDs are checked.³⁴ But there is little mention in media reports or complaints about this happening in Canada. This is likely because of two factors. First, strict and consistent guidelines are issued and training is undertaken uniformly across the country.³⁵ Second, because of various alternative measures for essential components such as registration (e.g., election day registration) and identification

(e.g., vouching), there are few reasons for voters to be turned away at the polls. In this way, the decision-making power of local poll workers, or their direct supervisors, is limited through an already inclusive model of electoral management and election law.

Behind the Scenes

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a new set of challenges to election administration in Canada. Although the laws governing elections apply equally across the country, the conditions related to the pandemic and public health measures were not uniform. In this section, I consider three major issues that emerged in the administration of elections during the federal election of 2021: namely, COVID-19 safety procedures, staff and facilities, and the counting of ballots.

The first challenge concerns COVID-19 safety protocols and guidelines. These decisions were made in advance to ensure the safety of electors and electoral officials, including measures such as distancing, hand-sanitizing stations, Plexiglas barriers, single-use pencils, and mandatory mask wearing.³⁶ Special ballots were encouraged for those who might have been recently exposed to COVID-19 or exhibited symptoms, and it was noted that “electors who have or believe they have COVID-19 and who have not already applied to vote by mail will not be able to vote.”³⁷ There was some controversy surrounding whether poll workers would be required to be vaccinated. Ultimately, because of logistical, recruitment, and time constraints, vaccination was not required.³⁸

These guidelines were made at the central level with consultation of public health authorities, and Elections Canada’s website explicitly stated that “health and safety measures may vary by province or territory.”³⁹ For example, one mention of variation was the release of entry data for contact tracing.⁴⁰ However, though these guidelines were set at the central level, it was the responsibility of local electoral officers to enforce them. Ultimately, there were very few instances of problems with compliance.⁴¹ Notable instances were related to mask wearing and usually dealt with by

local security personnel. Thankfully, there were also few mentions in the media following the election of potential COVID-19 exposure, notable cases being exposures at two polling stations in Toronto⁴² and at a busy polling station in Kingston.⁴³ Thus, though health and safety measures were set centrally (even if they required some regional variations), local officials were responsible for implementing the procedures and seeing them followed. There were few reports that this was not achieved in the 2021 election.

The most prevalent challenge related to election administration during the pandemic was that of hiring staff and renting polling locations. There were reports of greater difficulty recruiting local workers. This task is the responsibility of local returning officers. Recruiting election staff can be difficult in ordinary circumstances: it is short-term work (only a few days) for low wages and requires workers to be at polling stations or counting facilities for long shifts (one worker reported being at the polling station for fifteen hours).⁴⁴ Although poll workers are paid for training, a 2019 survey of returning officers found the training insufficient for the job.⁴⁵ Furthermore, there are few opportunities for long-term career advancement to encourage individuals to become highly skilled election workers. Adding to this was the COVID-19 pandemic, during which hiring was reported to be a significant challenge, perhaps because of health considerations or other pressures related to work or caring responsibilities.⁴⁶ A shortage of workers had been experienced in provincial elections under pandemic conditions, notably in Newfoundland and Labrador, where the number of resigning workers contributed to the decision to postpone the election and pivot to an all mail-in election.⁴⁷ Ultimately, Elections Canada reported that it had met about 93 percent of its target for workers (or 215,000),⁴⁸ less than the estimated 232,000 workers hired in 2019.⁴⁹

Additionally, finding appropriate facilities for polling locations was reported to be a major challenge during the election in 2021.⁵⁰ There were obvious pandemic-related reasons for this challenge. First, in some cases, larger locations were sought to allow for better social distancing.⁵¹ Elections Canada officials also reported not being welcomed at some “community centres, churches and schools.”⁵²

Many school boards decided not to allow polling stations at their schools because of safety concerns. For example, the Toronto Catholic District School Board opted not to have polling stations at its schools.⁵³ Some provinces chose not to allow polling locations in schools, except in extenuating circumstances, including Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador.⁵⁴ Local school boards were given the authority to make those decisions in other provinces, including Ontario and Alberta.⁵⁵ In light of these challenges, local election officials, in coordination with their field liaison officers and Elections Canada’s central operations, sought to find larger locations where more polls could be placed within the same polling station.⁵⁶ This also resulted in some unconventional polling stations, such as at the IKEA in Winnipeg.⁵⁷ Some polling stations were also changed after COVID outbreaks.⁵⁸

There were notable decreases in polling stations in some ridings in the Greater Toronto Area. It was reported that there was more than a 50 percent decrease in polling stations in eleven ridings. Most notable among them was the riding of Toronto Centre, where only fifteen stations were available, whereas in 2019 there had been ninety-one.⁵⁹ Ultimately, Elections Canada reported having 14,440 polling stations in 2021, down from 15,484 in 2019.⁶⁰ In addition to the lack of polling stations, the changes in locations from where they might “regularly” be located also reportedly confused some voters.⁶¹ They also reported having to travel longer distances to polling stations in some cases.⁶²

Some of these shortages in facilities and staff were reported to contribute to the long lineups seen at some polling stations. Yet some of the length was the result of physical distancing and limits to how many people could be in the building. Nonetheless, there were numerous reports of lines well past the close of polling stations across the country.⁶³ One post-election survey reported that 7 percent of voters reported waiting in line more than an hour.⁶⁴ The brunt of the pressure from these lineups was managed by local poll workers, who remained into the night to provide everyone in the line with an opportunity to vote, as per the policy that those who had arrived before the close of the polls could remain to vote.⁶⁵

Other lines sprang up around university campuses, such as at a polling station in Kingston, whose long queues were attributed to many students who needed to register to vote on election day, a more time-consuming process.⁶⁶ This could have been one casualty of the decision not to pursue the on-campus voting program used in 2015 and 2019, which allowed students to vote in their home ridings from their campuses. Elections Canada made this decision centrally, not pursuing this program again because of the short notice and pandemic considerations that required staff to be reallocated. Some also questioned whether enough students would be back on campus in time for the program to be useful.⁶⁷

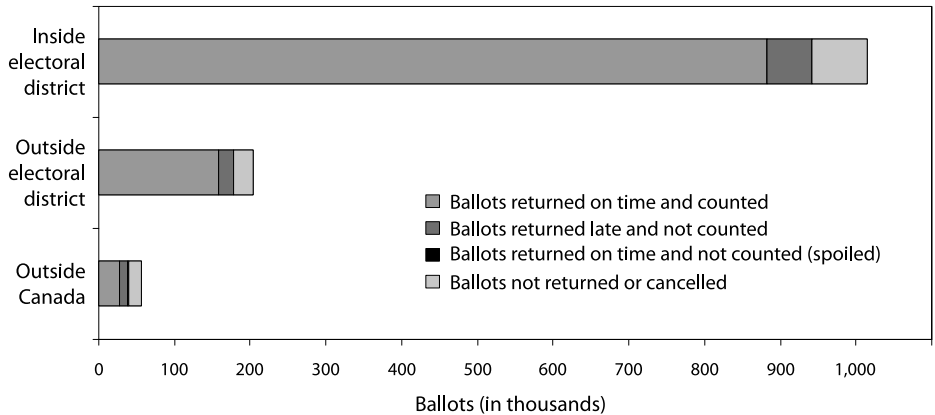
In sum, we can see that recruiting staff and finding locations comprise the major decentralized electoral process in Canada. It is this area where local electoral officials can utilize their on-the-ground knowledge, and Elections Canada's central apparatus remains most dependent on local officials.

Once voting is complete, the task of counting ballots begins. For the case of regular advance and election day ballots, the vote count is a very decentralized process, albeit following strict procedures set out in detail by Elections Canada centrally. Votes are counted in polling stations or other counting facilities by local poll workers, who then call the results in to their returning offices, which then report them to Elections Canada's central office.

However, there is considerable media attention to whether an increase in special ballots, including mail-in ballots, contributes to a longer wait for election results. This system of special ballots in Canada is shared between the central and local levels. At the central level, Elections Canada's new online portal was the focus of special ballot requests.⁶⁸ According to Elections Canada's final report on the election, 1,274,447 special ballot kits were issued. For ballots to be counted, they had to arrive before the cut-off on election night. Notably, 90,274 ballots (or approximately 7.1 percent of ballots issued) were returned late and not counted.⁶⁹

In cases in which voters are outside their ridings, special ballots are mailed to a central Elections Canada location. However, most special ballots (approximately 80 percent; see [Figure 1.2](#))

FIGURE 1.2 Special ballots in the 2021 election



Source: Elections Canada, *Report on the 44th General Election*, Table 3.

Note: “Inside electoral district” refers to “electors voting by mail or at an Elections Canada office from inside their electoral district”; “outside electoral district” refers to “electors absent from their electoral district voting by mail or at a local office, Canadian Forces base or correctional facility”; “outside Canada” refers to “electors living outside Canada voting by mail.”

are returned to the local office, either by mail or by hand delivery to the returning office or a polling station. These ballots are verified by local officials before they are counted.⁷⁰ Thus, delays that do occur are at the local level.⁷¹ And, unlike at Elections Canada’s central location, where ballots can be counted fourteen days ahead of time, local offices can begin the verification and counting process only on election night.

When tallying this volume of physical ballots, human error can happen, and when it does it is largely at the local level. In the federal election of 2021, the only potential problem seriously discussed in the media (at the time of writing) was a typo discovered in a ballot box report in the riding of Chateauguay-Lacolle, leading to a call for a recount.⁷² Thus, the only major instance of a contested election because of potential issues with the vote count was the result simply of human error at the local level. Once again, we see that centralized and consistent procedures must be implemented locally both

on and after election day; although the procedures in Canada are clearly laid out, the enormity of the task of counting millions of ballots and accounting for human error lies at the local level.

Conclusion

Federal elections in Canada are managed centrally, with decision-making power resting in the hands of Parliament (through the Canada Elections Act) and the discretion of the chief electoral officer. However, they are also administered locally during each election campaign, and this system of central management and decision making relies on local electoral officials. They are given very little discretion in their work regarding the basic procedures of running elections. This helps to retain centralization and consistent application of electoral laws, but it also makes for a precarious system that relies on temporary, potentially less experienced, individuals and local organizations.

The precarity of electoral management in Canada was highlighted by some of the challenges of election management brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic highlighted the challenges of administering elections consistently across such a geographically diverse federal state as Canada. Elections Canada had to negotiate with public health authorities in the provinces and territories to implement safety protocols at a time when these regulations were inconsistent across geography. Likewise, individuals faced local health restrictions, cultures of compliance (e.g., mask wearing), and the inability to access certain facilities.

It is in the logistics of setting up and staffing polling stations that we find the greatest need for local discretion. Local returning officers are responsible for finding staff and locations for polling stations, but they faced significant challenges in 2021 because of the pandemic. In thirty-six days, the mass mobilization had to be achieved, and that task – which could not be completed centrally, requiring on-the-ground know-how – was the first to experience difficulties.

Finally, an increase in the use of special ballots gave local administrators the additional challenge of receiving, verifying, and counting those ballots beyond election night. In 2021, the vast

majority of them were sent to local offices, where most of the public focus on the vote count was centred.

This chapter has shown that implementation responsibilities are shared between central and local election officials in Canada, but there are relatively few areas for discretion among local election administrators, except for finding staff and polling locations. As extremely short-term employees under significant time pressures, it is understandable that local electoral officials rely heavily on the central Elections Canada organization. This reliance also contributes to the consistency of electoral administration across the country, such that few anomalies or irregularities were noted in 2021. Yet this leaves little room for experimentation or innovation, potentially stifling the unique contributions of these street-level election administrators and limiting the contribution of local knowledge to election administration in Canada.

Notes

Acknowledgment: With thanks to Madison MacGregor for research assistance.

- 1 Five provinces and one territory had held general elections since the pandemic was declared: New Brunswick (14 September 2020), British Columbia (24 October 2020), Saskatchewan (26 October 2020), Newfoundland and Labrador (23 March 2021 after postponement), Yukon (12 April 2021), and Nova Scotia (17 August 2021).
- 2 *National Post*, “Good News.”
- 3 Lipsky, *Street Level Bureaucracy*.
- 4 James, “Comparative Electoral Management.”
- 5 James et al., “Electoral Management”; Catt et al., *Electoral Management Design*.
- 6 It is important to note that other bodies, such as the Electoral Boundaries Commission and the Broadcasting Arbitrator, are also involved in the broader tasks of electoral management in Canada.
- 7 Kingsley, “The Administration of Canada’s Independent, Non-Partisan Approach”; Lawlor and Mayrand, “Election Administrators.”
- 8 Pastor, “The US Administration of Elections”; Shanton, *The State and Local Role in Election Administration*.
- 9 Pal, “Canadian Election Administration on Trial.”

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