



14. The Independent Candidate

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Pages 197–206

**Inside the Campaign:
Managing Elections in Canada**
*Edited by Alex Marland
& Thierry Giasson*

Copyright: UBC Press, 2020
ISBN 9780774864688 (PDF)
www.ubcpres.ca/inside-the-campaign

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Book Contents

Introduction: Constantly Shopping for Votes
Alex Marland with Susan Delacourt

PART 1: CARETAKERS AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVERS

1. Election Administrators
Andrea Lawlor & Marc Mayrand
2. Political Staff
Paul Wilson & Michael McNair
3. Public Servants
Lori Turnbull & Donald Booth
4. Leaders' Debate Coordinators
Brooks DeCillia & Michel Cormier

5. News Editors
Colette Brin & Ryan MacDonald

6. Pollsters
André Turcotte & Éric Grenier

PART 2: CAMPAIGN OFFICES AND THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

7. Party Fundraisers
Erin Crandall & Michael Roy

8. Party Platform Builders
Jared Wesley & Renze Nauta

9. National Campaign Directors
David McGrane & Anne McGrath

10. National Campaign Director of Communications
Stéphanie Yates & John Chenery

11. Senior Adviser to the Leader on Tour
Mireille Lalancette with Marie Della Mattia

12. Political Advertisers
Vincent Raynauld & Dany Renauld

13. Third-Party Activism
Thomas Collombat & Magali Picard

14. The Independent Candidate
Tamara A. Small & Jane Philpott

Conclusion: Revealing the Campaign Machine
*Anna Lennox Esselment
& Thierry Giasson*

14

The Independent Candidate

Tamara A. Small and Jane Philpott

Local campaigns are understudied in Canada compared with national politics. In particular, we know relatively little about the unique challenges faced by independents in Canadian elections. An independent candidate is not endorsed by a registered or eligible political party. In 2019, Jane Philpott was one of those independent candidates. A cabinet minister in the Liberal government, Philpott resigned from cabinet in light of the SNC-Lavalin affair. The story of her campaign is the story of the challenges plaguing independent candidates in their attempts to convince citizens to look beyond parties when casting their ballots.

Les campagnes locales sont sous-étudiées au Canada par rapport à la politique nationale. Nous en savons relativement peu sur les défis particuliers que doivent relever les candidats indépendants lors des élections canadiennes. Un candidat indépendant n'est pas appuyé par un parti politique enregistré ou admissible. En 2019, Jane Philpott est devenue une candidate indépendante. Ministre du gouvernement libéral, Philpott a démissionné du cabinet à la suite de l'affaire SNC-Lavalin. L'histoire de la campagne de Philpott est celle des défis que doivent relever les candidats indépendants alors qu'ils tentent de convaincre les citoyens de regarder au-delà du parti lorsqu'ils choisissent de voter.

ACCORDING TO CANADIAN election law, candidates who are not endorsed by a registered or eligible political party are considered independent.¹ Among the reasons that there are few independent candidates in Canada is that electoral success is so elusive for them. In federal elections between 1980 and 2019, only seven independent candidates won a seat in the House of Commons. Generally, successful independent candidates are those running for re-election directly after a severed relationship with a political party. Moreover, party candidates have several benefits that independents do not have during an election campaign.

Although we talk about an election as a singular political phenomenon, in fact a Canadian federal election consists of 338 simultaneous local electoral contests. As such, the local or ground campaign is an important hub of activity during an election. Given the importance of political parties to the functioning of both legislative and electoral politics, most candidates in Canada are party candidates. That is, they are nominated to be the local representatives of a given party. Of the approximately 2,146 candidates who ran in the 2019 federal election, over 94 percent of them were party candidates; the remaining candidates were independents.

Every independent campaign is different and reflects unique local dynamics, in particular the individual candidate. Occasionally, an independent attracts national media attention. Jane Philpott was one such person. In the 2015 federal election, she was elected as an MP with the Liberal Party of Canada in the Ontario riding of Markham–Stouffville. As a member of the Liberal government, she served in numerous cabinet positions, including as minister of health, minister of Indigenous services, president of the Treasury Board, and minister of digital government. In March 2019, she resigned from cabinet, citing a loss of confidence in the government's management of the SNC-Lavalin affair.² She was expelled from the Liberal caucus in April 2019. Philpott then served as an independent MP and sought re-election as an independent candidate in the federal election that fall. Another prominent independent

candidate was former Attorney General Jody Wilson-Raybould, at the centre of the SNC-Lavalin affair.

To be sure, as a high-profile candidate, Philpott was atypical of most independent candidates in a number of ways.³ She was an MP seeking re-election. Incumbents have name recognition, direct ties to their local communities, resources associated with their position as office-holders, and potentially greater abilities to raise campaign funds.⁴ Moreover, as parliamentarians, incumbents have political experience as well as the ability to claim credit for projects in their ridings.⁵ Research shows that incumbency matters in Canadian elections. Incumbent candidates have a 9.4–11.2 percent increased probability of winning compared with non-incumbents.⁶ They are also more likely to benefit from a personal vote separate from the party or the leader.⁷ As a former cabinet minister, Philpott had considerable name recognition, experience, and political clout. Additionally, the unusual circumstances under which she became an independent candidate brought her national attention. Well-known candidates such as Philpott tend to benefit from additional volunteers and donations compared with their counterparts.⁸

Nevertheless, her bid for re-election was unsuccessful. Her Liberal Party rival (a former provincial minister) won the seat with 38.9 percent of the vote. Wilson-Raybould was the only independent candidate to win a seat, the first to do so in more than a decade.

Duties in an Election Campaign

Local campaigns are understudied in Canada compared with national politics.⁹ In particular, we know relatively little about the campaigns of independents and the unique challenges that they face in Canadian elections. The task of any campaign is to mobilize a coalition of people to vote in support of a particular candidate or party.¹⁰ On one level, an independent's task is no different from that of any other candidate: to convince local voters to prioritize the local candidate over other options.

However, independents face challenges that party candidates do not. Simply put, political parties matter in Canada. The importance of local campaigns and candidates pales in comparison to that of the national campaign and party leaders when it comes to voter decisions. Data from the 2000 election reveal that, even though 44 percent of Canadian voters form preferences for local candidates, such preferences are decisive factors for just 6 percent of voters in English Canada.¹¹ Parties and their leaders provide important information shortcuts or cues to voters about ideology and policy. Moreover, they command media and public attention.

The importance of political parties to Canadian politics shapes the direction of an independent campaign. The biggest challenge can be trying to convince voters that an independent MP will be able to represent them effectively in the House of Commons. Parties dominate the legislative process. The ability to participate regularly in Question Period and to sit on parliamentary committees is related to being a recognized parliamentary party (twelve MPs). Most Canadians vote, at both the federal level and the provincial level, for party candidates. Therefore, an independent campaign needs to communicate consistently to voters that they will still be well served, even without party backing.

Philpott launched her campaign in May 2019 at a press conference timed to coincide with a similar announcement by Wilson-Raybould. While canvassing or door knocking is a central aspect of the ground campaign, Philpott and her team aspired to attempt one-on-one conversations with every household in Markham–Stouffville because they wanted to make this particular appeal directly to voters. Before the writ dropped, the campaign had reached 14,000 doors, and by election day it had made 60,000 door knocks. Moreover, it had made about 15,000 personal phone calls with voters in the riding. These were not robocalls in which a pre-recorded message is delivered via a computerized autodialler but volunteers making live calls. The desire to have one-on-one conversations with voters influenced the decision not to use robocalls. Philpott and her team described this as a “high-touch campaign.” Although they

made use of digital technologies, including a website and social media, the high-touch campaign was about talking directly with people either in person or on the phone. Canvassing was the central method of communication. The involvement of more than four hundred volunteers was central in communicating a message of independent representation to voters.

Another area where party candidates might be at an advantage over independents is on the issue of policy. Although some local party candidates develop policy planks independent of the party, especially in regard to local issues, for many the decisions on election policies and messages are made in the central campaign. Political parties provide resources to their candidates, including campaign materials such as templates for brochures, websites, lawn signs and logos, and access to voter contact data/management systems. Independent candidates must develop policy positions on the important issues of the campaign on their own.

Electors in Markham–Stouffville expected Philpott to have policies in hand when she spoke to them at the door. To that end, she developed and published policy statements on her blog for a dozen key issues, including climate change and electoral reform. The research on and preparation of policy statements were time-consuming activities not shared by candidates with party backing. Nevertheless, policy research was necessary to convince voters that Philpott would be an equally effective representative in the House of Commons on the key issues facing Canadians. Personal policy development was one of the big differences from her previous campaign as a Liberal candidate. Although it is more work, independents have more control over their communications. They can have conversations with voters that are more authentic. Moreover, party candidates can be hamstrung during an election in cases in which the policy planks or campaign techniques are incompatible with local political priorities.¹²

These experiences are typical of other independents; however, Philpott was an atypical independent. One way of seeing this is to reflect on vote share; together Philpott and Wilson-Raybould

obtained 43 percent of all independent votes in the 2019 campaign. Put another way, the remaining eighty-four independent candidates shared the rest of the vote, averaging less than 1 percent of the vote each. There are several aspects of local campaigning in which Philpott likely differed from other independents. As mentioned, her campaign was able to attract a high number of volunteers, thus allowing her to get out her message in the riding. Although this seemed to be consistent with other high-profile candidates, it was significantly more than the typical candidate.¹³ Indeed, this was twice the number of volunteers as she had in 2015. Also related to personnel, Philpott had an extensive campaign team to support her candidacy. In addition to a paid campaign manager, other core team members coordinated aspects such as the phone bank, data management, volunteers, and canvassing.

Fundraising is another area of difference. Electoral law favours party candidates; independent candidates cannot provide receipts that are eligible for tax credits for donations received before they become official candidates, whereas registered parties, including constituency associations, can. Some local campaigns, especially in the case of a high-profile candidate or a competitive race, benefit from money flowing down from the national party.¹⁴ This lack of access to funds can be problematic for independents given the importance of money to local election campaigns.¹⁵ However, fundraising was not an impediment for Philpott. According to Elections Canada, the spending limit for Markham–Stouffville was over \$119,000. Because of her national profile, Philpott raised well above that. Fundraising was so effective that her campaign stopped accepting donations. Flush with cash, her campaign was significantly easier to operate than those of other independent candidates. Her campaign paid for the US-based data management system NationBuilder, used for the campaign website, tracking in-person and telephone contacts with voters, and analyzing email contacts. One activity that her campaign engaged in that was atypical for a local campaign was public opinion polling.

Philpott was the subject of intense media attention throughout the campaign. Research consistently shows that the Canadian media focus on the national campaign, especially on party leaders, with little attention given to local campaigns.¹⁶ Yet Philpott was featured in national media across the country, including *La Presse* and the *National Post*, in both the pre-campaign period and during the writ period. Although the campaign was committed to meeting with all local media, the media attention was so great that Philpott had to decline many national media opportunities. Her candidacy was loosely similar to descriptions of political parties' star candidates who attract national media attention but are unable to translate that into local votes.

Despite these opportunities, Philpott was unable to convince the voters of Markham–Stouffville to take a chance on an independent. She came in third place in the riding, behind both the Liberal candidate and the Conservative candidate. Despite the success of Wilson-Raybould, the story of Philpott reminds us of the challenges confronting independent candidates in Canadian elections. Not that it was up for debate, but it reminds us of the importance of political parties in shaping the electoral preferences of Canadians.

Overcoming Obstacles

As mentioned, election laws are stacked against independent candidates especially regarding their campaign finances. The inability of independents to issue receipts eligible for tax credits for donations prior to the official campaign period can mean that independent candidates cannot fundraise on a level playing field with party candidates before the campaign begins.

One of the most fascinating facts of Philpott's campaign was the phenomenal financial support that it received from across the country, almost without asking for it. Despite the disadvantages described, her campaign received substantial donations that allowed

Philpott to rent an office and order materials, including signs, in the pre-campaign period.

As soon as the writs were issued, her campaign manager filed the paperwork regarding her candidacy. The next day they received a note from Elections Canada confirming Philpott as an official candidate. Thus, her campaign could receive donations eligible for tax credits. From that point forward, donations poured in from voters in Markham–Stouffville and across the country. The campaign received donations online from every province and territory, many of them from complete strangers. Supporters in Markham–Stouffville walked into the campaign office every day with cheques. People mailed in cheques accompanied by beautiful handwritten messages for Philpott, such as these samples show:

Thank you for your courage and strength in adversity and holding to truth and what is right. You are an inspiration to all Canadians. – SM

So proud of you. Carry on and I will do my best to support you. – CC

I will be 81 in a couple of weeks and had all but lost hope of seeing any semblance of honour or integrity in government. Canadians now have living proof that honesty and integrity can be upheld, and a new inspiration will grow. – BB

Within two weeks of the official campaign start, Philpott's campaign had received an additional \$100,000 in contributions. This amount, in addition to what had already been received, was more than enough. Therefore, the campaign made the unusual decision to stop receiving donations and issued a statement announcing that financial goals had been met.

The story of this financial endorsement was one of the objective measures by which Philpott's team could demonstrate the extraordinary support that they received both locally and nationally. To her team, it was an indication of the appetite among Canadians for

seeing politics done differently. The financial backing was matched by the generous practical help of people who volunteered hundreds of hours of their time to do the hard work of local campaigning. Despite an outcome that was not what Philpott and her team had hoped for, it was an entirely positive, optimistic campaign. There are more ways to measure the success of a campaign than the final tally of votes.

Notes

- ¹ The Canada Elections Act allows either unaffiliated or independent designations. We use the term “independent” to cover both in this chapter.
- ² For an overview of the SNC-Lavalin controversy, see Dion, *Trudeau II Report*.
- ³ Sayers, *Parties, Candidates, and Constituency Campaigns*.
- ⁴ Carty and Eagles, *Politics Is Local*.
- ⁵ Marland, “The Electoral Benefits and Limitations of Incumbency.”
- ⁶ Kendall and Rekkas, “Incumbency Advantages in the Canadian Parliament.”
- ⁷ Marland, “The Electoral Benefits and Limitations of Incumbency.”
- ⁸ Sayers, *Parties, Candidates, and Constituency Campaigns*.
- ⁹ Killin and Small, “The National Message, the Local Tour.”
- ¹⁰ Flanagan, “Campaign Strategy.”
- ¹¹ Blais et al., “Does the Local Candidate Matter?”
- ¹² Sayers, *Parties, Candidates, and Constituency Campaigns*.
- ¹³ Carty and Eagles, *Politics Is Local*.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Eagles, “The Effectiveness of Local Campaign Spending.”
- ¹⁶ Carty and Eagles, *Politics Is Local*.

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JANE PHILPOTT

was MP for Markham-Stouffville from 2015 to 2019. She served in multiple cabinet posts before running as an independent candidate in the 2019 federal election.

