

Minority Engagement in Ontario's Political Parties
In and Out of Commissions

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Abstract

Political parties are central to our democratic system, but citizens tend to find that they are unresponsive and lack opportunities to become involved in the policy development process. The audit of Canadian democracy, conducted at the beginning of the twenty-first century, explored possibilities for democratic reform to political parties, but did not look specifically to parties in Ontario. Seeking to fill this void, my investigation focuses on the organizational structures of Ontario's three recognized political parties and questions the extent to which they encourage participation among social minorities who are underrepresented in politics. All three parties have youth and women's commissions. The NDP has additional commissions dedicated to engaging ethnic minorities, Aboriginals, LGBT people and people with disabilities, while the Liberals have more informally associated identity-based groups, and the PCs favour an issue-based approach to engaging members with Policy Advisory Councils. Through describing and analyzing the engagement models in each party, I conclude that while commissions play a role in promoting engagement, parties are very different today compared to when commissions originated in Ontario politics, some dating back to the early twentieth century. Today's commissions must adapt to the contemporary political context by being more flexible and active both in and outside the party. A revitalization of political parties will not come about from a new commission, but rather through increased activity from party members.

Introduction

In Genesis Chapter 3, Verse 3 God tells Adam and Eve: "But of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die." (The Holy Bible, King James Version, 1769). But Adam and Eve did precisely the opposite; they ate the fruit that had been forbidden to them. Perhaps it is human nature to be most curious about that which is forbidden to us.

As a participant in the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme, I work in a non-partisan capacity. My responsibilities include much legislative work, some constituency work, and staying away from partisan activity. But over the course of my year at the Legislature I wanted to learn about the partisan machines that bring MPPs to the Pink Palace, and so for my paper I decided to investigate the function of parties in our political system. Specifically, I chose to investigate the commissions that each party has in place to promote party membership among those who are underrepresented in politics. For all three parties this includes women and youth commissions, and beyond this, each party has different types of groups to encourage party engagement.

Academics like William Cross emphasize the importance of political parties:

Political parties are the central players in Canadian democracy. Many of us experience politics only through parties. They connect us to our democratic institutions. We vote in elections in which parties choose the local and [leadership] candidates and dominate campaign discourse. Our legislatures are structured along party lines. Policy debates are shaped by the parties represented in the legislatures, and they determine which interests are heard. Parties are so central to our democratic life that if they are not participatory our politics cannot be participatory, if they are not inclusive our politics cannot be inclusive,

and if they are not responsive then our politics cannot be responsive. Parties lie at the heart of Canadian democracy (2004, p. 3).

Statements like this underscore the fundamental importance of parties in the Canadian democratic process and the aspiration for parties to be participatory, inclusive and responsive. But academics agree that parties in their current state are failing as meaningful actors in Canadian democracy. Cross writes: “Parties are responsible for what voters are most dissatisfied with in their politics. The evidence is clear that Canadians find their politics overly elite dominated, insufficiently responsive to their views, and lacking in opportunities for them to influence policy outcomes.” (Carty, 2006). Spurred by the apparent failure of parties to realize their important purpose, I became drawn to investigate how and why this failure occurs.

My work builds on audit of Canadian democracy by a group of academics who investigated the state of public institutions and other areas of democratic life, including parties, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The motivations for the democratic audit included popular discontent with the state of Canada’s democratic institutions and the desire to explore possibilities for democratic reform (Cross, 2010). But there is no available research about how to strengthen democracy through Ontario’s political parties. I hope my work contributes to filling this void by finding opportunities to promote participation, inclusivity and responsiveness through the work of commissions and other similar groups.

The first party commissions in Ontario were created to encourage political participation among women and youth, who had historically been excluded from the public sphere. Since then, commissions have evolved toward varied ends. The work of commissions now tends to be some combination of representing the goals and values of a community of common interest to the party, encouraging people from a community of common interest to participate at all levels in the party, and promoting the party to a community of common interest. It is worth noting that commissions are run by volunteers, which is both a strength and a weakness. The result is that commissions are as active as their members cause them to be, which makes them self-selecting: a commission will only exist so long its members feel it is a group worth belonging to. I limit my investigation to groups that have penetrated to the level of the provincial party executive, for this investigation would become unwieldy were I to include organizations at the riding association level.

Beyond the women and youth commissions, the three parties differ in how they engage people who are underrepresented in politics. I will describe and analyze the effectiveness of the structures the three parties use to engage underrepresented groups. Relevant to this analysis, I will also explore the history of engaging underrepresented groups in politics and the evolving role of parties. My overarching aim is to investigate what makes for effective engagement in political parties and I conclude that while commissions play a role, parties are very different today compared to when commissions originated in Ontario politics, some as early as the 1920s. As such, commissions must adapt to the way parties now operate - with more flexibility and greater activity both in and outside the party. Parties in turn, should maintain openness to groups who want to organize around a shared identity or lobby on a particular set of issues, without becoming restrictively bound to such groups.

Who Belongs to Political Parties

The assumption underlying my investigation is that there are unequal levels of participation among different segments of the population and the demographics of party members are not reflective of Ontario's diversity. Indeed, studies of Canadian political parties reveal that almost two-thirds of party members are men and 40 per cent have university degrees (compared to 13 per cent in the general population). Nearly 90 per cent are born in Canada (compared to about 80 per cent of the population), with almost all being of European ancestry (Samara, 2013c). Moreover, the average age of party members is fifty-nine and almost half of party members are sixty five or older. Interestingly, even party members recruited within the past few years tend to be relatively old and overwhelmingly of European descent. Thus we cannot explain the age and ancestry of party members by saying they have belonged to parties for a long time. Rather, older, Canadian-born people are still largely the ones drawn to parties today (Cross, 2004).

These trends and statistics come from the audit of Canadian democracy conducted in the spring of 2000 (Cross, 2004). There are unfortunately no publicly available statistics about membership in Ontario's political parties. When I requested this information from the presidents of each of the three parties, I was either directly rejected or told that the party does not have such statistics. While statistics specific to Ontario would have been preferable for my investigation, the statistics about membership in Canada's federal parties are helpful to understand trends in Ontario's parties for several reasons. First, many party members are active at both the provincial and federal level. This is particularly true of those who participate in the NDP and Liberal commissions, and in fact, many provincial and federal commissions are integrated. Second, statistics about membership in Canadian political parties are consistent with trends in other contemporary industrialized countries in terms of decreasing and non-representative participation (Cross & Young, 2006). Finally, the information I gathered in qualitative interviews reflected what is revealed by the quantitative information available about federal parties. These factors make it reasonable to believe that participation in Ontario's political parties is low and dominated by older, Canadian-born, highly educated males. Although I have no definitive statistics to show that this is the case for Ontario's parties, evidence from trends in comparable areas and qualitative accounts make it reasonable to conclude that there are unequal levels of participation in Ontario's parties.

In addition to unequal levels of participation in political parties, the number of people participating in political parties is low. Cross and Young estimate that between 1 and 2 per cent of Canadians belong to a party on a year to year basis (2006, p. 18). These low participation rates cannot simply be explained by formal barriers since the only requirements to join a party are a fee of a few dollars and an age minimum, usually around 14 years. Rather, it is systemic barriers that prevent some from participating in parties, while others are simply not interested in joining. Political scientist Ken Carty concludes: "This portrait of the dominant Canadian political parties shows clearly that they remain, as they have always been, the underdeveloped institutions of a political elite playing a highly personalized game of electoral politics: they are not the instruments of an engaged or even interested citizenry" (2006, p. 6). The absence of diversity and engagement in political parties elicits a gut-feeling of disapproval, but it is worth probing further to question why it is problematic that political parties fail to reflect the diversity of our population.

Purpose of Political Parties

Answering this question offers an opportunity to consider the purpose of political parties. Parties are responsible for nominating and choosing candidates and party leaders. And parties provide a base of volunteers to campaign during elections. In addition, parties are organized so members can participate in developing policy and party platforms (Samara, 2013c). Parties are also meant to engage citizens in the democratic process by connecting them to elected officials (Samara, 2013c). William Chandler and Alan Siaroff describe it well: “Parties operate as the crucial intermediaries linking rulers and ruled. The most basic party function is that of representation involving the translation of public opinion to political leaders.” (Cross, 2004, p. 3).

Since parties play the important role of choosing elected representatives and party leaders, and communicating issues of concern to these representatives, it is important that parties are reflective of the population as a whole so that the government best serves the entire population. Party members are likely to nominate people they know and trust for political positions. And members develop policies based on their knowledge and experience. If fewer women, youth, immigrants and people without university educations are represented in parties, we run the risk of under-representing their views and experiences in elected positions and in policy, and thus the government may under-serve these segments of the population which already tend to be marginalized.

The conclusion that it is important for parties to be representative of the diversity of the population will not likely surprise many Ontarians. And all parties have to some extent acknowledged the importance of a diverse membership. After all, it is to each party’s benefit to engage Ontarians from diverse backgrounds not only to have a better party, but also to generate more votes and increase the odds of getting elected. In fact, this trend of accommodation being necessary for electoral success has deep roots in Canadian politics.

History of Engaging Minority Groups

Carty writes that the accommodative tradition of Canadian political parties is rooted in both historical practice and necessity. Until the 1970s, Canadian political parties were fairly diverse in regional and linguistic composition, but homogeneous with respect to ethnicity and gender. However, as Canada’s population became more diverse with a relatively open immigration policy and as women and people from different ethnic backgrounds called for a space in the political sphere, parties accommodated (Carty, 2006).

Accommodative practices differed between parties, for instance the NDP adopted an affirmative action program to increase numbers of visible minority, Aboriginal and female candidates and guaranteed representation on executive council. In contrast, the Conservative party manual advocated for attending cultural events so that new immigrants could be brought into contact with the party and from there were encouraged to become active in riding associations (Carty, 2006). Carty asserts that these accommodative practices stem from a tradition of brokerage politics, which began after Confederation when there was a social cleavage between Protestant anglophones and Catholic francophones. Rather than taking opposite sides, parties tried to take both sides in part by relying on patronage appointments. David Elkins says: “Without any

intention to do so, the traditional brokerage politics in Canada...laid the foundation for the successful demands of new groups seeking representation.” (Carty, 2006, p. 89).

With the political mobilization of women in the late 1960s and early 1970s, women were determined to move up from their “housekeeping” role in politics, where they supported party organizations, but had little influence on policy. And in the 1970s, a more open immigration policy made Canada increasingly diverse. All parties responded by “trying to saddle fundamental cleavages,” they tried to appeal to new groups of voters without alienating traditional party supporters (Carty, 2006, p. 92). According to Carty, Cross and Young, this accommodative strategy failed. Feminist and minority groups felt change was moving too slowly, and traditional party supporters felt alienated by representational quotas, feminist and multicultural policies (Carty, 2006). In this way, the three parties managed to drive away both newcomers to the party and long-time party supporters.

Parties Are Less Relevant Today

Other factors have contributed to the weakening role of parties in politics today. There is consensus among scholars that rates of active party members tend to be low in industrialized countries (Cross & Young, 2006). According to the modernization thesis: “increases in education, changing values held by citizens, changing modes of social organization, the rise of the mass media, tendencies toward professionalization and changes in technology all combine to weaken citizens’ attachment to political parties and to discourage membership in party organizations.” (Cross & Young, 2006, p. 17). In modern industrialized societies, citizens are more educated and so tend to be less deferential to political elites and instead more self-sufficient political actors. And with less inclination to identify as members of a social group, citizens are less likely to participate in partisan activity (Cross & Young, 2006).

In addition to citizens in advanced democratic societies being less driven to join parties, there is also less need for party members in our society. The rise of mass media like television means that parties do not rely on volunteers to disseminate their message to the electorate. Contemporary parties are also dominated by professionals, such as fundraisers, pollsters and communications consultants who fill the functions party members once did. Before, a party needed a robust volunteer force to win elections. Today, parties benefit more from capital than volunteers in electoral competitions. Cross and Young posit: “Given these trends it would be reasonable to predict that political parties may one day become organizations without members. If party leaders do not need members to run election campaigns, maintain party organization and serve as informational conduits between the electorate and the party leadership, then why should they continue to recruit party members?” (2006, p. 18).

To answer this question, we should reflect on what functions a party serves. Parties are still needed to help select candidates and party leaders. Moreover, parties gain legitimacy from their membership since the public expects to see a party membership base. But statistics about the activities of party members in today’s society illustrates what members actually do: 40 per cent of party members report not having attended any meetings over the past year, and 25 per cent report never having attended a party meeting. Meanwhile, 90 per cent report having contributed funds to the party. This illustrates the extent to which parties look for money rather than skills or time from their members. The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Policy Financing

confirms that the core of the party organization “is much less interested in discussing and analyzing political issues that are not connected directly to winning the next election” (Cross, 2004, p. 40).

It is little wonder that people feel dissatisfied with the participatory opportunities in parties. Nine out of 10 believe that parties should do more to encourage local associations to discuss policy, and seven out of 10 agree that regular party members should play a greater role in developing election platforms. Members of all parties believe that ordinary members have less influence than they should have and pollsters have more influence than they should have (Cross, 2004, p. 29). Cross points out that dissatisfaction and low levels of participation in parties becomes a chicken and egg problem: “As long as membership in a political party is not seen as an effective way of influencing public decision making, few Canadians are likely to decide to become active party members; equally, as long as few Canadians join, party elites are on solid ground in arguing that their memberships are ill-equipped to settle policy issues in a way that fulfills their brokerage responsibilities” (2004, p. 31).

Existing Structures to Promote Engagement

The audit of Canadian democracy affirms that people want more direct citizen influence on decision making (Carty, Cross, & Young, 2000), and my interest lies in investigating avenues for citizen involvement. I dedicate the rest of my paper to investigating the structures that exist in each party to promote engagement. Each party’s approach to engagement can be understood to revolve around three axes: issues (for instance finance, health, agriculture), geographic regions (riding associations), and communities of common interest (for example gender, age, sexual orientation). I focus primarily on party organization around communities of common interest, but look more broadly where it is relevant. I begin my investigation by analyzing each party’s constitution to understand the party’s guiding principles and structure. My understanding of each party’s approach to engagement and the role of commissions is fleshed out through interviews with members of the commissions and party executives.

NDP Engagement

Of the three parties, the NDP is the biggest adopter of engaging its members based on communities of common interest. The reason for this can be understood by looking to the party’s core principles, as set out in the constitution. One principle is to “substitute economic planning for irresponsible control with all its unjust consequences and thereby to give maximum opportunity for public, co-operative and private enterprise to the development of our province” (Ontario NDP, 2012). While this principle speaks explicitly to economics, it reflects the NDP’s attitude toward engaging its membership. The NDP does not believe in leaving party membership up to the “free market.” That is, the party believes that simply opening up party membership to everyone tends to result in more privileged people joining while marginalized people remain sidelined. And so, the NDP believes that to truly give everyone the opportunity to join, there must be deliberate outreach to marginalized people.

To this end, the NDP has six constitutionally recognized equity committees: Ethnic Liaison, Aboriginal, Disability Rights, Youth, Women, and Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Trans-identified

(LGBT). Because of the large number of equity seeking committees, the NDP membership's activities are largely organized around communities that face systemic discrimination. Each committee is run by co-presidents – one man and one woman – who sit on the provincial executive. Because of this structure, the diversity of the NDP is entrenched in the party membership, including at the highest level. Moreover, gender equality is required throughout the party, including on the provincial council and among the party officers (Ontario NDP, 2012).

The current Ontario NDP President, Neethan Shan, strongly believes in the importance of outreach and diversity. His role as Executive Director of the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians is indicative of his personal and professional commitment to inclusion and diversity both in and outside the NDP. Shan believes that the party must make a deliberate effort to recruit people from equity seeking groups and remain committed not just to opening up parties, but to “ensuring equal outcomes in the participation of minority groups.”

It is not just Shan who is committed to promoting diversity through equity seeking committees, but every NDP member I interviewed expressed the belief that the committees were essential in the NDP. Carly Greco, Co-Chair of the Ontario NDP Youth Committee could not imagine an NDP without so many committees because “it’s important to have those voices at the table....It’s easy to overlook disability issues or aboriginal issues and I can’t tell the story of an aboriginal person or a person living with disabilities. We need to make spaces for people to tell their stories.” Susan Gapka, Co-Chair of the LGBT Committee says that the “structure of the party reminds us of our core principles,” that is, to create a space for disadvantaged people in politics. Joyce Balaz, Co-Chair of the NDP Disability Rights Committee, points to the function of equity seeking groups as keeping the party’s focus on important issues. She compares their function to ministerial or critic portfolios which ensure that MPPs focus their attention on a single issue. Balaz says that if no one is looking out for issues like disability rights, then they are ignored in favour of issues like the economy and transportation, so committees help keep the party’s attention on important issues that affect a minority of voters. However, Shan says that the committees are not ends in themselves, but a means to promote diversity and inclusion in the policy development process and in recruiting candidates. Shan believes that if members were no longer facing issues like homophobia, pay inequity and racism, then they would not feel motivated to participate in committees.

There are benefits to having formal committee status, for instance the co-chairs sit on the provincial executive and therefore get a vote in all party and policy matters. Being inside the party fold also confers benefits such as using the party’s communication infrastructure like e-mail lists. The NDP reinforces the diversity promoted by its organizational structure with measures like a fund to help candidates from equity seeking communities. The NDP also promotes mentorship between experienced MPPs and potential candidates and offers volunteer training for candidates who are in communities that are unfamiliar with the political process.

The NDP’s inclusionary efforts have yielded some success. The NDP caucus is diverse in gender, age, and ethnicity. Moreover, there is reason to believe they may have a more active party membership. Studies of the federal parties have found that membership in the Liberal and Conservative parties varies considerably between election and non-election years, as members join only to participate in electoral activity and not in the policy development process or to relay their views to the party leadership. However, party membership in the NDP is more stable,

perhaps because today people favour direct, issue-oriented involvement in politics, which the NDP's organizational structure invites (Cross & Young, 2006). As Cross and Young state: "The party's social-democratic ideology and self-appointed role as the party of the socially marginalized make it a natural ally for many progressive social-movement organizations" (2006, p. 94).

However, the committee-heavy structure of the NDP has drawbacks. One frustration is that some party members prioritize causes or issues ahead of party loyalty. Some activists may not believe in the NDP, but merely see it as a vehicle for accomplishing their goals. This proved to be a problem when the NDP was elected in 1990. Then-Premier Bob Rae faced criticism from the party's activist base when he decreed that the parliamentary party (the government) was not bound by the policy dictates of the extra-parliamentary party (Carty, 2006). When the NDP lost in 1993, a senior Ontario party official wrote a memo condemning the "single-issue focus" of social-movement organizations, highlighting that "their agenda is not our agenda" (Cross & Young, 2006, p. 94). The other side to this argument is that when interest groups are brought inside the party, members can practice the politics of compromise and accommodation from within the party instead of, or at least in addition to, having these groups lobby from the outside.

And while it can be helpful to operate from inside the party, it does not guarantee that one's goals will be accomplished. This is illustrated with the case of Toby's Law, enacted in 2012 to protect against discrimination on the basis of gender identity and gender expression. The Bill was proposed by NDP MPP Cheri DiNovo, and was advanced in conjunction with the NDP LGBT Committee. The Bill did not pass, however, until members of the LGBT Committee went outside the NDP and garnered support from all three parties (Gapka, 2013). This example illustrates that while committees can help achieve certain goals and bring energy and activity to the party, it may be necessary to work outside the traditionally defined roles of the committee to accomplish one's goals.

PC Party Engagement

The organizational structure of the Progressive Conservative party is considerably different from the NDP, with far less emphasis on engaging marginalized groups and more of a policy orientation. Looking to the PC constitution, one of the core principles is that: "progress requires a competitive economy, which, accepting its social responsibilities, allows every individual freedom of opportunity and initiative and the peaceful enjoyment of the fruits of his or her own labour." (Ontario PC, 2012, p. 4). In contrast to the NDP's emphasis on limiting "unjust consequences," the PC vision emphasizes competition, individual freedom and benefitting from what one has worked for, rather than trying to achieve a more equitable outcome. Once again, while this statement bears directly on the PC's economic vision, it is reflective of the PC approach to engaging party members in an open manner where everyone participates according to their own interest and benefits accordingly. The constitution also stipulates that party membership is open to any person over 14 years old "without regard to race, origin, religion or sex." (Ontario PC, 2012, p. 6). The words "without regard" imply an absence of overt discrimination, without a commitment to actively eliminating systemic discrimination.

That being said, the PCs do have three constitutionally-mandated committees: the Women's Association, Youth Association and Campus Association. The party shows commitment to promoting participation among women and youth by having the presidents of all three associations sit on the party executive, as well as mandating that of the nine vice-presidents there must be two females and two youth. In the same vein, Article 17 of the constitution stipulates that "Whenever possible, the delegates and alternates [at meetings] shall be equally divided between men and women." (Ontario PC, 2012, p. 16). The language promoting gender equality "whenever possible" is significantly less demanding than the NDP's gender equality requirement.

On the theme of gender equality, the PC Women's Association has been quite inactive over the past several years, with low membership rates and few activities (Devolin, 2013). In the past year, the Women's Association has become more active, yet some PCs believe there is no longer a need for a women's association. The PC Critic for Women's Issues, Laurie Scott, relays that many PC women ask why there is still a separate women's association and say they are not interested in a separate point of entry into the party. However, President of the PC Women's Association, Jennifer Devolin, counters that there is still an important role for a women's group. Because of the large number of men in the PC party, some women look for camaraderie and a more comfortable space to share their ideas.

The goals of the Women's Association include recruiting and supporting female PC candidates. Based on the belief that women face additional obstacles to getting elected, women are offered candidate training and assistance in raising their profile. The Women's Association does not, however, offer funds to female candidates, unlike the NDP and Liberal women's groups. The Women's Association also plans to engage in the policy process, specifically reviewing the PC white papers to do an analysis from a woman's perspective (Devolin, 2013). This suggests that in some areas, there may not be enough female input in the policy development process.

Similar to the Women's Association, the primary object of the Youth Association is to promote PC candidates and help out in elections. The Youth Association has other goals, such as promoting youth participation in the party and informing young conservatives and other youth of the party's activities and policies (Ontario PC Youth, 2013). Although involvement in the policy process is a stated goal of the Youth Association, it is clear that electoral activity is the primary goal. An interesting characteristic of the Youth Association is the latent belief that at some point in the future there may no longer be a need for a separate Youth Association to exist. This idea is not farfetched considering that federally there is no youth association (nor is there a women's association). Instead, youth are involved in the party executive or on riding associations, which some PC youth feel gives them a greater voice than being separate from the main party establishment (Shulte-Albert, 2013).

Considering the tepid levels of enthusiasm toward committees organized around communities of common interest, it comes as little surprise that the PC party chooses to engage its membership differently – by focusing on policy issues. The PC party is unique in its use of Policy Advisory Councils (PACs) to engage members. PACs were created to give members a meaningful role in the policy development process and to ensure party policy is consistent with party principles by heavily involving grassroots members. PACs are reflective of ministry/critic portfolios and are

co-chaired by a caucus member so there is a direct link to caucus. The PAC vision document states: “The intent of this process is that policy should never be driven by pollsters, and political pundits, but must be firmly anchored in these values” (Policy Advisory Councils Vision). PACs harken back to a time when parties relied on members to guide the policy development process and could not rely on professionals or technology. First created in the early 1990s, PACs helped develop Mike Harris’ Common Sense Revolution. Today, PACs address some of the problems parties face by including members in more than just fundraising and canvassing and giving them a meaningful role in the policy process (Klees, 2013).

But in practice, just like the NDP equity seeking committees and virtually all aspects of democracy, PACs are flawed. The level of PAC activity is lower today than it was in times past, and the Leader’s Office, rather than party members, largely controls policy development. For instance, in the recent series of PC policy white papers, PACs played an active role in writing some policy papers, but not others (Klees, 2013).

Relevant to my research is the fact that PACs are not designed to specifically encourage the participation of traditionally underrepresented minority groups. Rather, the PAC structure reflects the belief that opportunities to participate should be “equally available” to all. However, several PC party members note that the party is often seen as being dominated by older, white, wealthy men. They are concerned about the perceived elitism and want to counter this perception. Deputy Leader of the PC party Christine Elliott, states simply, “I’m driven by a desire to make things more accessible,” referring to both her passion for making society more accessible to people with disabilities, as well as her belief that the PC party should be open and accessible to anyone interested in joining.

However, Elliott, like the other Conservatives I spoke with, is not keen on creating committees to promote accessibility. Conservatives express a clear preference for having members involved through riding associations and the main party establishment, rather than through “special interest groups.” Elliott says she believes the party can become more accessible by discussing issues that are of interest to minority groups, for instance by addressing transgender rights, traditional Chinese medicine or maternal health. In this way, minority groups can engage with the issues they care about through the main party establishment. It is an alternative to a more formal organizational structure and allows for the possibility of full participation from underrepresented groups, but whether it would work remains to be seen.

Liberal Party Engagement

Just as with the other two parties, I used the constitution as my starting point, but whereas with the NDP and PCs I could analyze their approach to minority inclusion based on the party’s stated principles, the Ontario Liberal party does not lay out a guiding philosophy other than “to advocate and support liberal political principles, to develop and determine provincial policy, to organize the Ontario Liberal Party” and other similar statements that involve promoting Liberal candidates, principles, policies and so on (Ontario Liberal Party, 2012, p. 1). As a result, I cannot use the party’s stated principles to understand its philosophy toward engaging minority groups.

Like the two other parties, however, the Liberals have constitutionally recognized affiliated associations – the Women’s Liberal Club, the Ontario Young Liberal Riding Club and the

Ontario Young Liberal Student Club (the latter two are jointly considered the Ontario Young Liberals). The presidents of the Young Liberals and the Women's Commission sit on the executive council, but the party does not otherwise enforce equal gender representation on executive council and only explicitly promotes gender equality for certain committees.

The Youth and Women's Commissions are both active in electoral campaigns as well as in policy development. The Youth Association in particular has several examples of policy ideas that were realized, including the legalization of gay marriage and the 30 per cent tuition credit. The Women's Commission focuses on policy but also dedicates considerable efforts to electoral activity and in particular encouraging women to run and helping to finance their campaigns.

The leadership of the Youth and Women's Commissions emphasize that these organizations exist to create a nurturing space for people to join the party, try out ideas and build confidence. Richard Francella, Executive Vice-President of the Ontario Young Liberals believes that the Young Liberals provides a safe space for youth to become involved in politics, in particular high school students who would otherwise find the political process intimidating. Amy Carroll, President of the Ontario Women's Liberal Commission, similarly points out the benefits of having a nurturing gateway into the party. She says that despite gains made, gender inequalities persist and women still actively seek their own space.

Carroll acknowledges that a criticism often launched against feminism is that it is dominated by white upper-class women. Mindful of that concern, Carroll is pleased by the cultural diversity of the Women's Commission, and the Commission makes an effort to reach out to other marginalized groups. For instance, the Women's Commission allied with the LGBT community to participate in the Toronto Pride Parade with a banner that read: "It's a straight man's world unless you vote."

Former Liberal Party President Yasir Naqvi points out that while commissions can be effective there are other ways to reach out to minorities. For instance, the Ontario Liberal government created positions for Ministers of Seniors Affairs and Aboriginal Affairs, whereas these groups still exist as commissions federally. Naqvi says, "Groups are often created when there is a lack of representation," and explains that the party does not see requests for new commissions because most people feel their voice is being heard by the party. Another possible explanation is that Liberal party members increasingly have a preference for informal groups.

One example of a well-organized and vocal group is the Queer Liberals. They are not a commission, but a grassroots group passionate about both the liberal cause and queer rights (Queer Liberals, 2013). The group formed organically in December 2011 during the by-election in the Toronto-Danforth riding to replace the deceased MP Jack Layton. There were a number of LGBT volunteers and they almost assumed a group already existed. President Jules Kerlinger says: "it nearly happened by accident." Kerlinger emphasizes that the Queer Liberals are not formally bound to the party, but they want to make the Liberal party the default choice of the queer community because they "feel it has done the most for the community and has the capacity to get the most productive work done." The Queer Liberals follow the general direction of the Ontario Liberal Party, but also push for certain issues of interest to them, in particular building a shelter for queer youth and stripping ex-gay therapy groups of their status. The Queer Liberals have been well-received by both the federal and provincial Liberal parties, and their activity so far illustrates how influential a partisan group without formal status can be.

The growth of the Queer Liberals happens to coincide with the election of Kathleen Wynne, Canada's first lesbian premier. Soon after she won the leadership race, she commented: "I'm not a gay activist. That's not how I got into politics. I can be an example. . . . If I can help (gay) people be less frightened, that's a wonderful, wonderful thing." (Ferguson & Benzie, 2013). This statement affirms an important point about political participation in general and participation through commissions more specifically: there are many ways to get involved in a party, and while social minorities may benefit from belonging to a community of common interest, this is not the only way to gain support or accomplish one's goals. Commissions offer several benefits: a person can join a commission if they want to take part in a community with a shared identity, if they are seeking additional support when joining a party or if they want to dedicate their partisan participation to advocate for a certain set of issues. But joining a commission is not necessary to be politically successful. Moreover, commissions can be seen as silos or special interest groups, but they can also be seen as communities that allow people to feel more comfortable or tackle issues that are a personal priority. Regardless of how one understands diversity, each person brings a set of life experiences to their participation in a party, and parties are made richer and governments are more representative with diverse membership.

Both the current President of the Ontario Liberal Party, Derek Teevan, and the Executive Director of Policy in the Office of the Premier, Karim Bardeesy, make the point that the way a party chooses to engage minority groups reflects the party's level of maturity with respect to diversity. As an example, Sumi Shanmuganathan, Vice-President of Engagement for the Ontario Liberal party, points to the fact that under one year ago, her position was known as Vice-President Multicultural. This shift in the outreach approach from a focus on multiculturalism to engagement more broadly reflects the understanding that there are many facets to a person's identity, and it is overly simplistic to try to engage a person based on just one facet of their identity.

In this same vein, Bardeesy says he was "surprised to the extent that [minority outreach] is infused in the party and government rather than ghettoized." He differentiates between more obvious issues for minority groups such as immigration and heritage, and issues that affect a particular community but may not appear to be "minority issues" on the surface, for instance high auto insurance fraud rates among certain ethnic minority communities. Bardeesy also points to the importance of having diverse candidates in ridings across the province. He says: "It's a sign of party maturity when you have people from visible minorities elected in areas where they're not overrepresented." He continues: "in every riding there is a white male who will self present," but a party that is committed to inclusiveness will make a concerted effort to find candidates from diverse backgrounds. Teevan says that he has been involved in seeking out Aboriginal candidates to run, as well as candidates who have intersecting identities – who may be multilingual or from multiple faiths backgrounds. The Liberal's changing approach reflects the idea that diversity can no longer be understood in terms of silos or individual checkboxes, which is perhaps why commissions are inadequate. Commissions may still serve a purpose, but they certainly are not enough to bring deep, engaged levels of diversity to a party.

Just as commissions do not adequately engage the diverse population in our contemporary society, party membership may be an outdated idea altogether. Teevan raises questions about

what party membership means in today's society, distinguishing membership from participation. Today, paying a fee to formally join a party seems anachronistic. A more appropriate option for participation in parties today is by opening avenues for engagement, rather than asking people to pay a fee and "put on a pin," in Teevan's words.

Effective Engagement in Parties Today

Teevan's sentiment is in line with the common narrative that people today are less interested in political parties, and more interested in community involvement. Samara, a non-partisan organization that aims to improve political participation in Canada, meets with students across the country. In a discussion about political parties students commented: "Why would I have to be a member really? I'm happy to support somebody, but I don't feel that I have to be in the club." And: "I've never felt so connected to a party, but I've felt connected to individuals...That would probably keep me from being a card-carrying [party member]." As well as: "It's not a stretch to say the way political parties in Canada currently operate is based on a technologically outdated precedent. Parties kind of act as a middle man, the voter chooses the party that will make decisions they want the government to make ... But current technology gives users a whole new way to interact directly, and it could do so in the political sphere as well." (Samara, 2013b).

These comments reflect the debate about the relevance of parties in today's society when they have such a meagre and unrepresentative membership. Commissions are, at best, a small part of the solution to engaging party members. They offer structure, grant formal authority and resources - which are powerful - but they are driven by the level of participation of their members. Commissions are as complacent or as active as their membership. In contrast, another participant in one of Samara's discussions believes that: "Political parties play a critical role in our democracy, but they depend on the dedication and support of countless volunteers. It is easy to criticize, but change comes from within. The solution to the problems of political parties is not to abolish parties, but to engage more citizens and political parties are the best vehicles to do that." (Lee, 2013). This student, Steven Lee, is an executive member of the NDP Brampton West Riding Association, which gives some context to his perspective. But his comment indicates that parties have the potential to be effective with enough engagement from volunteers. And if parties are not the best vehicles to engage citizens, well then they are perhaps the worst, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.¹

Conclusion

Academics William Cross and Lisa Young ask: are Canadian political parties empty vessels? Although parties still have a purpose in our democratic system, it is clear that their vitality is waning. And party leadership does not have much incentive to engage members. Between polls of the population, technology to spread their message and specialists to develop policy, parties do not rely on membership as they did in times past. Party members are needed to help fundraise and canvass, as well as to vote in nomination and leadership races. Sustained engagement of

¹ A play on Winston Churchill's quotation: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" (from a House of Commons speech on November 11, 1947)

party membership may seem like more work than it is worth to party leaders who only feel they need help around elections.

But parties are not (yet) obsolete institutions and there seems to be a revitalization in party activity among some commissions and informally-associated partisan groups. Studying organizations in each of the three provincial parties leads me to believe that parties will best be revitalized through the efforts and energy of volunteers, rather than through a change in organizational structure. In keeping with today's citizens' desire for direct engagement, it is more effective for groups to pursue their policy ambitions without seeking special party status and the minimal advantages this confers. That being said, there is no need to force the elimination of commissions if these commissions have an active membership who believe their formal status is worth maintaining. But members of commissions may consider looking outside the party for opportunities to enhance their activities, such as lobbying other parties like the NDP LGBT Committee did with Toby's Law, or partnering with other groups such as the Women's Liberal Commission and the Toronto Pride Parade.

It is time that parties adapt to the flexible, technology-driven and direct-participatory vision that many citizens want to see in parties. The key is that this is not a change that can come from the top down; it must be driven by the citizens who are saying this is what they want. So while parties may be flawed and commissions are far from perfect, they are both a vital part of our messy but indispensable democratic system that will become more participatory as citizens make it so.

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