

Constituency Campaigning in the 2015 Federal Election



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Canadian parties’ national campaigns are accompanied by the constituency campaigns that must be run in each of the nation’s ridings. The goals of constituency campaigns in 2015 remained largely identical to those of campaigns of the past. The 2015 election, however, saw some innovation in how local campaigns pursued their goals.

There are two such goals. First, and most important, constituency campaigns identify supporters and get them out to vote in either the advance polls or on election day. Second, local campaigns seek to identify and persuade undecided voters.

Constituency campaigns draw on an arsenal of methods to achieve these goals. Canvassing and phone calls are used to identify supporters. Literature drops, door hangers, and signs are used to help persuade undecided voters as well as give the campaign a sense of momentum. On election day, campaigns dispatch scrutineers to polling stations where they mark off supporters who have cast their ballots on sheets of paper; “runners” who retrieve these sheets from scrutineers; callers who phone supporters who have not yet cast their ballots; and fleets of drivers who fan out into the riding to shuttle those who need a ride to the polls.

The local canvass remains the centerpiece of any strong constituency campaign. Canvassing—or door-knocking—remains likely the most important activity carried out by these campaigns. Face-to-face contact, both campaign managers and political scientists know, is the gold standard for getting supporters out to vote, and canvassing allows for a reliable record of supporters to be constructed. Accordingly, campaigns typically commit substantial resources—either

volunteers or funds—into the local canvass.

Observing the canvass in several constituencies allows for three observations to be drawn about constituency campaigning in the 2015 election. First, there is substantial variability in the resources available to commit to both the canvass and other forms of local campaigning. Some MPs hit the streets with a group of six or more volunteers. One volunteer (typically armed with a smart phone or tablet) records names and whether residents are supporters, while the other volunteers knock on doors. If a resident is home and is identified as undecided, the candidate jogs up to the doorstep to provide their pitch. In this way, campaigns can canvass entire neighbourhoods in a single afternoon. In contrast, other candidates canvass all by their lonesome selves, slowly and inefficiently making their way down streets.

Second, the canvass in 2015, while similar to past elections, was characterized by some technological innovation. Canvassers from all parties were equipped with apps on their mobile phones that carried the names and contact information of electors in the riding, provided by Elections Canada, and included in their organization’s database. Canvassers used the apps to quickly identify whether residents were supporters, confirm telephone numbers so residents could be called on election day, and record whether residents would like to host a lawn sign or volunteer with the campaign. All information was updated in real time to the party’s central database. Furthermore, the apps use GPS technology to track the location of canvassers so that others working on the campaign can coordinate with teams already in the field.

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Finally, the canvass provides an example of how central party campaigns attempt to direct local operations. For instance, in 2015 the central Conservative campaign mandated the number of supporters local organizations would be required to identify each day of the campaign. Those that fell short of their targets could expect to receive a disapproving phone call from “national.” This behaviour suggests that the parties appreciate the role of constituency campaigns in identifying supporters and subsequently getting them to the polls.

A classic question about constituency campaigning is whether they are labour or capital intensive. While the tasks described above would seem to demand a vast army of grassroots volunteers, capital also played a role in the 2015 campaign. Some campaigns hired specialized businesses or even community leaders to carry out a quick canvass of the riding in order to identify supporters. Companies were

also paid to put up and maintain election signs along roadways throughout the campaign. And volunteer callers in some local operations were replaced by firms that delivered robocalls into the constituency; indeed, one campaign (Gordon Giesbrecht’s Conservative campaign in Winnipeg South) planned to dispatch four robocalls to every identified supporter on election day reminding them to get out and vote. While volunteers are undoubtedly important to campaigns, these examples demonstrate that some of the functions traditionally associated with volunteers have been replaced with paid services.

Constituency campaigning is by its nature a massive exercise in voter engagement and mobilization. While the national campaigns may engage in voter suppression and drive down turnout, through negative advertising for instance, constituency campaigning exists to literally move voters from their homes to voting booths.