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Brittany Bouteiller, USRI Summer Research Intern
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Introduction

The Money and Local Democracy Project explores the effects of campaign finance rules on municipal election campaigns and election outcomes in Canada. Governments around the world regulate election campaign financing to ensure that elections are fair and competitive, although they do so in different ways. Funded by a Western University Undergraduate Student Research Internship (UWO) grant, research assistant Brittany Bouteiller was tasked with conducting preliminary research on 65 municipalities across Canada to determine the availability of campaign finance data from local and provincial governments and to identify clusters or trends.

Methods

Sixty-five municipalities are included in this study. These met the following criteria:

- The ten largest municipalities in each province with population greater than 25,000 in the 2016 Census.
- If this yields fewer than four municipalities in a province, the top four are included regardless of population size.
- Every provincial and territorial capital.

Together, this group makes up more than 50% of Canada's total population, and a majority of the population in five of the ten provinces. See Table 1.

Table 1: Municipalities in Sample

	Number of municipalities	Case pop. as % of prov. population	Median case population	Maximum case population	Most recent election year
BC	11	52%	139,284	631,486	2018
AB	10	69%	82,159	1,239,220	2017
SK	4	48%	125,516	246,376	2020
MB	4	61%	32,344	705,244	2018
ON	10	52%	460,370	2,731,571	2018
QC	10	47%	200,512	1,704,694	2017
NB	4	30%	62,898	71,889	2021
NS	4	59%	59,574	403,131	2020
PE	4	46%	12,268	36,094	2018
NL	4	35%	24,578	108,860	2017
CA	65	52% of national population	117,285	2,731,571	

Standardized data were collected for each of the most recent three election cycles to determine rules in effect, candidate disclosure data, contact information, offices available, and the number of candidates that ran. Candidate data was collected from the Canadian Municipal Elections Database and from information available on municipal and provincial websites. The rules in effect include the categories of donation limits, expenditure limits, and disclosure requirements. The most recent three election cycles span the 2009–2021 period. This data was collected from municipal and provincial websites and compiled into excel tables for analysis. In many cases, campaign finance rules are legislated by the province with no local discretion, and so most or all municipalities within a given a province may have the same rule set. In jurisdictions with discretion to set their own rules under provincial law, information was collected from municipal election bylaws, municipal campaign finance bylaws, or on the elections page of municipal websites.

Findings

1. Candidates and offices

Overall, the data show no significant change in the total number of offices available nor in total candidates running between the most recent (C1) and second most recent (C2) election cycle. Over all three cycles, the total number of offices available decreased slightly (-2.1%). Yet, between C2 and the third most recent (C3) election cycle, there was a significant increase (+16.8%) in the total number of candidates running for election despite a small reduction in the number of offices available (-1.3%). This finding is corroborated in the final row of Table 2, where we see an increase in the average number of councillors per offices available (the ratio column) between C3 and C2.

To explain some of the outlying numbers, Quebec has substantially more offices available due to some municipalities electing borough councillors and/or a borough mayor in addition to the municipality-wide mayor and municipal councillors. Ontario also has a high number of offices, which is partially attributed to its tiered municipal system. As such, some jurisdictions directly elect regional councillors in addition to lower-tier municipal councillors.

The results show that on an inter-provincial level, there is significant variation in the relationship between candidates and offices available over the three election cycles. As seen in Table 2, Ontario yields the highest ratio of candidates to offices available across all three election cycles. In all election years, Ontario has a much higher ratio, but most strikingly in C2 (2014) as there is a 2.1 candidate per office difference between Ontario and the next closest province (Quebec). Also in Ontario, between C3 (2010) and C2 (2014), there was a 35% increase in the number of candidates running despite an increase of only one office. Looking at what rules or policies changed in Ontario between these two elections may provide insight on why the number of candidates increased so dramatically. In B.C., Saskatchewan, and PEI, there was no change in the number of offices available over all election cycles. B.C. was the only province in which the ratio of candidates to offices increased with each election cycle. Alberta had the most variation in the ratio of candidates to offices, decreasing from 3.4 to 2.7 between C3 (2010) and C2 (2013), and then increasing from 2.7 to 4.0 in C1 (2017).

Table 2: Candidates and Offices Available by Province

	C1: Most recent election cycle			C2: Second most recent election cycle			C3: Third most recent election cycle		
	Offices	Candidates	Ratio	Offices	Candidates	Ratio	Offices	Candidates	Ratio
BC	99	395	4.0	99	337	3.4	99	307	3.1
AB	98	391	4.0	98	267	2.7	99	336	3.4
SK	38	133	3.5	38	141	3.7	38	123	3.2
MB	41	107	2.6	35	80	2.3	27	61	2.3
ON	174	1001	5.8	193	1130	5.9	192	837	4.4
QC	291	902	3.1	299	1132	3.8	313	924	3.0
NB	33	113	3.4	44	100	2.3	44	100	2.3
NS	52	189	3.6	52	143	2.8	51	145	2.8
PE	20	58	2.9	20	58	2.9	20	44	2.2
NL	34	91	2.7	20	38	1.9	28	57	2.0
CA	891	3380	3.8	898	3426	3.8	910	2934	3.2

2. Rules in effect

The rules in effect for campaign finance and disclosure vary substantially across Canadian municipalities. Table 3 counts the number of municipalities which have campaign rules in effect. Of the municipalities studied, those in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec have no discretionary authority to set their own rules and follow provincial regulations. The municipalities in this category make up 63.1% of those studied. New Brunswick has no provincially determined rules on local campaign finance, and the municipalities do not set any rules themselves. There were many municipalities that had no election bylaw or campaign finance bylaw publicly available or generally available to refer to. In some of these municipalities, it was unclear whether the bylaws did not exist and thus there were no rules in effect, or whether those rules were not publicly available. Table 4 refers to discretion and counts the municipalities which do and do not set their own rules for campaign finance and disclosure. A strong majority of municipalities have their campaign finance rules set by the province.

Table 3: Summary of Rules

	Has donation limits	Has expenditure limits	Summary disclosure available	Itemized disclosure available	Number of Municipalities in Study
BC	11	11	11	11	11
AB	10	0	7	1 + 6 (donations only)	10
SK	0	3	3	3	4
MB	4	2	1	1	4
ON	10	10	9	9	10
QC	10	10	1 + 1 (expenditures only)	2 + 10 (donations only)	10
NB	0	0	0	0	4
NS	1	1	1	1 + 1 (donations only)	4
PE	4	4	2	2	4
NL	1	1	1	1	4
CA	51	42	37	47	65

Table 4: Local discretion over rules

Does the municipality set its own...	Donation Limits	Expenditure Limits	Disclosure Requirements
Delegated and have set	6	11	9
Delegated, but none set	14	8	5
No, provincially mandated	45	41	49
No information available	-	5	2
Total	65	65	65

Donation Limits. Overall, 51 municipalities had donation limits – more than any other category. 70% of municipalities able to set their donation limits set none. Saskatchewan and New Brunswick are the only provinces where no municipalities have donation limits. In Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, it was only the capital cities – Halifax and St. John’s – that had donation limits. Halifax and St. John’s, as well as the PEI municipalities, are the only municipalities which set their own donation limits. Halifax and Toronto¹ are the only municipalities which have

¹ Toronto’s donation limits are set by the provincial government.

different donation limits for the offices of mayor and councillor. Beyond the municipalities that follow provincial legislation,² Halifax was the only municipality that set its own limit on self-financing by the candidate/spouse. Cornwall, PEI was the only municipality to set the donation limit below a threshold set by the province. Donation limit data are available in all jurisdictions that have donation limits.

Expenditure Limits. There were 42 municipalities that made expenditure limits publicly available. Manitoba requires that municipal bylaws mandate expenditure limits. However, Steinbach and Hanover, MB do not appear to have these bylaws, and they do not have disclosure statements publicly available that indicate limits. It is unclear whether the bylaws are publicly unavailable, or if they do not exist.

From the information available, approximately 40% of municipalities that set expenditure limits set a dollar amount and approximately 60% determine the amount via formula. Of those that used formulas, 12% were Consumer Price Index-based and 88% were population-based. Some municipalities using a formula either set the expenditure limit for councillors at a percentage of the mayoralty amount or they had a separate formula for the office of councillor. The type of formula used to calculate the mayoralty amount did not dictate how the jurisdiction calculated the councillor expenditure limit. For example, Saskatoon, SK and Winnipeg, MB both set mayoralty expenditure via a formula that is indexed to inflation (using the Consumer Price Index), yet Saskatoon calculates councillor expenditure as a percentage of the mayoralty amount, and Winnipeg uses a different Consumer Price Index-based formula for each office. Excluding St. John's, all municipalities in the Atlantic provinces that have expenditure limits set a dollar amount. Brandon, MB was the only municipality in the Prairie provinces to set a dollar amount limit. Prairie municipalities were the only municipalities which used Consumer Price Index-based formulas. More than any other category, expenditure limits had the greatest number of municipalities with discretionary authority. Of the 19 municipalities able to set expenditure limits, the majority (11) have.

² British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec.

Disclosure Requirements. Regarding disclosure requirements, 75% of municipalities follow provincial legislation. There were 37 municipalities who made available disclosed summary totals for donations and expenditures, and there were 47 municipalities who made itemized disclosure available. All jurisdictions that had summary disclosure also had donations itemized and/or expenditures itemized. The municipalities that set their own disclosure requirements are Halifax, St. John's, those in PEI, and most of Saskatchewan. Prince Albert, SK is the only Saskatchewan municipality which sets no disclosure requirements. In Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, municipalities are required to have disclose donations and donors, but in some jurisdictions, that disclosure has not been made publicly available. However, in Conception Bay South, NL and Mount Pearl, NL, disclosure may be available on request. An interesting outlier in Ontario was Windsor, having no disclosure available for any of the last three election cycles. Windsor did, however, have disclosure statements available for their 2020 by-election. Across all provinces, disclosure statements were unavailable in 15 municipalities for the most recent election cycle.

3. Disclosure data availability

There is significant variation in campaign disclosure requirements across Canada. Data pertaining to the most recent election are available for at least one municipality in each of the other provinces. Quebec only offers a general list of contributors per municipality during the overall campaign period that includes donations to all candidates. This is recorded at the provincial level on provincial websites. Gatineau and Laval are the only Quebec municipalities that publicly offer disclosure data beyond the provincial requirement and on their own website. Quebec municipalities have no obligation to make disclosure information available to the public. British Columbia also administers disclosure requirements for municipalities and hold a provincial-level database. The only municipalities in BC that have disclosure data on their municipal websites are Coquitlam and Delta. Although Alberta municipalities do not have expenditure limits, all municipalities that had disclosure statements available disclosed a summary of campaign expenses.

The most prominent format of disclosure availability is through scanned forms completed by individual candidates. Ottawa, ON is the only municipality that provides a “born digital” version of their disclosure, and it was found to be more difficult to interpret than available scans. In some municipalities, including Ontario, disclosure forms are standardized by the province, so forms are identical across municipalities. While it may be expected that cities governed by their own charter, such as Halifax, NS or St. John’s, NL would have disclosure forms independent from a provincial standard, it was the case that many municipalities defined their own disclosure forms, leading to significant variation within provinces. Those Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan municipalities which had disclosure statements available all used their own forms. Specifically in Alberta, there was significant variation in the method of disclosure for certain candidates. Prior to the 2021 elections, campaign finance rules were largely regulated at the municipal level in Alberta. While some municipalities required self-funded campaigns to submit disclosure statements, others did not. Moreover, in those jurisdictions that did require self-funded campaign disclosure, the method of disclosure included the generic disclosure form that signified the campaign was self-funded, a specific self-funded form, and written letters stating the campaign was self-funded.

As seen in Table 5, there are a significant number of municipalities for which disclosure data is not available or does not exist. Paradise, NL, for example, had disclosure statements available on their website at the beginning of the research project, but months later the data was no longer publicly available. It appears there are many jurisdictions that remove their elections page or their disclosure from their websites in non-election years (or during an election year in the case of Paradise), rendering disclosure data unavailable. It is unclear if the data no longer exist, or if it is no longer publicly available. In some cases, municipalities are required by their provincial governments to collect disclosure data from candidates, but that data is not publicly available. For example, Quebec municipalities are not required to make collected disclosure information publicly available. Yet, it remains unclear whether other municipalities are non-compliant with provincial legislation or if the information is simply not available online. Summerside, PEI as well as Conception Bay South and Mount Pearl, NL were the only municipalities which indicated that more election information could be made available through an access to information request.

Table 5 indicates that itemized contributions are the most common type of disclosure across all election cycles. Conversely, expenditures itemized is the least common category of disclosure. Overall, if a jurisdiction had any summary available (contributions or expenditure), they also had either contributions or expenditures itemized. That is, there was no municipality which strictly had summary information for each candidate. By the third-most-recent election cycle, candidate disclosures are publicly available for only a handful of municipalities. Indeed, no data are available for Quebec and Manitoba municipalities in the third-most-recent cycle. While some data may not be available anymore, it could be the case that some jurisdictions did not have disclosure requirements during C3.

Table 5: Count of Municipal Disclosure Data Availability

	C1: Election Cycle 1				C2: Election Cycle 2				C3: Election Cycle 3			
	Contribution Summary (CS)	Expenditure Summary (ES)	Contributions Itemized (CI)	Expenditures Itemized (EI)	Contribution Summary (CS)	Expenditure Summary (ES)	Contributions Itemized (CI)	Expenditures Itemized (EI)	Contribution Summary (CS)	Expenditure Summary (ES)	Contributions Itemized (CI)	Expenditures Itemized (EI)
Scan	32	33	32	27	27	28	27	25	6	6	8	3
Scan & Digital	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-
Text-Searchable Scan	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	-	-	-	-
Webpage	-	-	8	-	-	-	8	-	-	-	-	-
On Request	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Excel Spreadsheet	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
Does not exist and/or not available	26	25	18	31	31	30	23	33	56	56	53	59
Total	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	65	65

4. Candidates and Disclosure Availability

In a summary analysis of candidates per municipality, and a general assessment of disclosure availability, Table 6 and Table 7 indicate the total number of local candidates across all municipalities studied that could have disclosure data available in the most and second-most recent election cycles respectively. Minimally available data for C3 did not warrant assessment in this category. For C1, 87% of all candidates had some form of disclosure data available to study, and that number drops only to 73% for C2.

Table 6: Candidates with Disclosure Data Available for the Most Recent Cycle

	Number of Candidates	Count of Municipalities
Disclosure Available	2950	49
Disclosure Unavailable	430	16
Total	3380	65

Table 7: Candidates with Disclosure Data Available for the Second-Most Recent Cycle

	Number of Candidates	Count of Municipalities
Disclosure Available	2513	37
Disclosure Unavailable	913	28
Total	3426	65

5. Typology of Rules in Effect

Table 8 displays a typology of all the municipalities studied defined by (1) stringency of limits on donation to any one candidate by dollar value, and (2) disclosure type and availability. High limits are greater than \$2,500. Low limits are less than or equal to \$2,500 and greater than or equal to \$1,000. Very low limits are less than \$1,000. Donation limit caps range from \$100 per candidate in Quebec, to \$5,000 per candidate in Alberta.

The typology could be made more nuanced if we consider limits on total amount donated, limits on self-financing by the candidate and their spouse, differentiating between mayoral and candidate donation limits, limits on corporate and union donations, and the dollar threshold for disclosing itemized donations or expenditures. For example, many municipalities set different donation limits for their mayoral and councillor candidates; Manitoba even specifies a different amount for ward councillor candidates than at-large councillor candidates. However, with as much variation as there is across Canada in campaign finance regimes, to typologize them is difficult. I initially attempted to interpret stringency as compliance with provincial legislation, resulting in a different typology than what is seen in Table 8. Charter cities stood out in this scenario, as they differed from the provincial standard. Nova Scotia, for example, sets no donation limits, yet Halifax, NS – being a Charter city – sets limits of \$1,000 per councillor candidate and \$2,500 per mayoral candidate. These limits were interpreted as high in relation to

the provincial standard. It proved difficult to assess municipalities in this manner. Defining stringency using dollar value ranges was the most straightforward way to separate municipalities into a limited number of categories.

The multiplicity of campaign finance regimes across Canada made it difficult to include all three types of rules in effect: donation limits, expenditure limits, and disclosure requirements, in the typology. Subsequent research could develop typologies for each rule type. In such an analysis, particular consideration would have to be made to expenditure limits. Since many jurisdictions calculate their expenditure limits via population-based or Consumer Price Index-based formula, each municipality would need a separate calculation, even in instances where a formula is standardized by the province. Compounding the difficulty, is that more than any other category, expenditure limits see the most municipalities having discretionary authority to set their own limits.

To illustrate what this would entail, expenditure limits in Winnipeg, MB are set by two Consumer Price Index-based formulas (one for the office of mayor and one for the office of councillor). Researchers would need to reference the campaign expenses and contributions bylaw to determine the formula and what is required for each of its parts, such as locating the correct Consumer Price Index for the months leading up to the election period and the average annual Consumer Price Index that is correct for the election cycle in question. Another example would be St. John's, NL where expenditure limits are calculated at \$10,000 plus \$0.43 for each voter on the voters' list as of the date of the election. Overall, the final dollar amount after these calculations were made was not readily available at the municipal or provincial level in any jurisdiction, and it is unclear whether the final number would be available upon request.

Conclusion

This exploratory project indicates that there is considerable in the substance of municipal election campaign finance rules across Canada, including limits on donations and expenditures and requirements for candidates to publicly disclose this information. This information can be used to analyze the effects of these rules on election results and, ultimately, to assess whether the rules make local elections more fair, competitive, transparent.

Table 8: Disclosure Requirements/Availability vs. Donation Limit Stringency

Disclosure	Stringency of donation limits				
	No limits	High limits (>\$2,500)	Low limits (\$1,000 to \$2,500)		Very low limits (<\$1,000)
Itemized statements available	Contributions and expenditures	Red Deer, AB	Vancouver, BC Surrey, BC Burnaby, BC Richmond, BC Abbotsford, BC Coquitlam, BC Kelowna, BC Langley, BC Saanich, BC Delta, BC Victoria, BC Winnipeg, MB	Toronto, ON Ottawa, ON Mississauga, ON Brampton, ON Hamilton, ON London, ON Markham, ON Vaughan, ON Kitchener, ON Halifax, NS Charlottetown, PE St. John's, NL	Laval, QC Gatineau, QC
	Contributions only	Cape Breton, NS	Calgary, AB Edmonton, AB Strathcona Cty, AB Lethbridge, AB Medicine Hat AB Airdrie, AB		Montreal, QC Québec City, QC Longueuil, QC Sherbrooke, QC Saguenay, QC Lévis, QC Trois-Rivieres QC Terrebonne, QC
	Expenditures only	Saskatoon, SK Regina, SK Moose Jaw, SK		Stratford, PE	
Disclosure required but statements not available	Lunenburg, NS East Hants, NS *Conception Bay S., NL *Mount Pearl, NL Paradise, NL	Wood Buffalo, AB St. Albert, AB Grand Prairie, AB	Windsor, ON *Summerside, PE Cornwall, PE Brandon, MB Steinbach, MB Hanover, MB		
No disclosure requirement	Prince Albert SK Moncton, NB Saint John, NB Fredericton, NB Dieppe, NB				

* Municipalities may have disclosure information available on request.