Promises, Promises: Assessing the Liberals' Electoral Reform Agenda

*Promesses, promesses : évaluation du programme de réforme électorale des
libéraux*

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/eccs/3874>

DOI: 10.4000/eccs.3874

ISSN: 2429-4667

Publisher

Association française des études canadiennes (AFEC)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2020

Number of pages: 41-64

ISSN: 0153-1700

Electronic reference

Tamara A. Small, "Promises, Promises: Assessing the Liberals' Electoral Reform Agenda", *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies* [Online], 89 | 2020, Online since 01 June 2021, connection on 22 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/eccs/3874> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eccs.3874>

Promises, Promises: Assessing the Liberals' Electoral Reform Agenda

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Despite bold proclamations, the 2015 election was not the last federal election to use the first-past-the post (FPTP) voting system. Reforming Canada's voting system was a key plank of the Liberal Party's 2015 platform. From the process to the outcome, the attempt to reform FPTP by the Trudeau government was widely panned. However, the promise to end FPTP was actually one of nine election promises made by the party in their platform. This paper assesses the Liberal's electoral reform agenda between 2015-2019. Using the pledge method, it explores the complete set of election promises made. In the pledge method, the researcher identifies the pledges made in the election platform and then examines the record of government action in order to determine how many have been fulfilled. This analysis features a detailed assessment of voting system reform, the Electoral Modernization Act and the Leaders' Debates Commission. This broader approach shows that the Liberals were successful in meeting their electoral reform goals. Of the nine promises made, the Liberals kept six and made considerable progress on two others. Only one promise was broken. While the Trudeau Liberals probably deserve much of the ire they received by breaking their voting reform promise, the 2019 federal election was remarkably different from 2015 in terms of the rules of the electoral game.

Malgré des déclarations audacieuses, l'élection de 2015 n'a pas été la dernière élection fédérale à utiliser le système de vote majoritaire à un tour (SVMUT). La réforme du système de vote au Canada était pourtant un élément clé du programme du Parti libéral en 2015. Du processus au résultat, la tentative de réforme du SVMUT par le gouvernement Trudeau a fait l'objet d'un large consensus. Cependant, la promesse de mettre fin au SVMUT était en fait l'une des neuf promesses électorales faites par le parti dans son programme. Cet article évalue le programme de réforme électorale des Libéraux entre 2015 et 2019. En utilisant la méthode de l'analyse des promesses, il explore l'ensemble des promesses électorales faites. Dans la méthode d'analyse des promesses, le chercheur identifie les promesses faites dans le programme électoral et examine ensuite le bilan de l'action gouvernementale afin de déterminer combien de celles-ci ont été tenues. Cette analyse comprend une évaluation détaillée de la Réforme du système électoral, de la Loi de modernisation électorale et de la Commission des débats des chefs. Cette approche plus large montre que les Libéraux ont atteint leurs objectifs de réforme électorale. Sur les neuf promesses faites, les Libéraux en ont tenu six et ont fait des progrès considérables sur deux autres. Une seule promesse n'a pas été tenue. Si les Libéraux de Trudeau méritent probablement une grande partie de la colère exprimée à leur égard parce qu'ils n'ont pas tenu leur promesse de réforme électorale, l'élection fédérale de 2019 a été remarquablement différente de celle de 2015 en termes de règles du jeu électoral.

Despite bold proclamations, the 2015 election was not the last federal election to use the first-past-the post (FPTP) voting system. Votes in the 2019 election were translated into seats in the same way they had been since Confederation. While in third place in the polls, the Liberal Party of Canada released its 2015 platform, Real Change: A New Plan for a Strong Middle Class, which pledged voting system reform. Specifically, the Liberals would strike an all-party parliamentary committee to review reforms such as ranked ballots, proportional representation, mandatory voting and online voting and, within 18 months of forming government, they would introduce reform legislation, thus

bringing an end to FPTP. It was less than 18 months when newspapers proclaimed that “Trudeau abandons electoral reform, breaking key campaign promise” (STONE 2017). Later when the Liberals introduced other election related reforms, Scott (2016) suggested that the Liberals were trying to “create a competing reform narrative” to “confuse voters into thinking” electoral reform happened when it had not. Is this a fair assessment of the Liberals’ electoral reform agenda? Did the Liberals break their electoral reform agenda?

The answer to these questions, in part, depends on how an electoral system is defined. Pilon (2007) argues that, while the terms electoral system and voting system are often used synonymously, the voting system is actually a ‘subset’ of the electoral system. A voting system comprises the rules of how citizen preferences in the form of votes are translated into representation, often in the form of seats for public office. For many political scientists, the electoral system is a broader concept that includes electoral administration, campaign finance, boundaries, the franchise and election law (COURTNEY 2004; PILON 2007). This broader conception has precedent. The 1991 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing was not asked to review FPTP despite exploring a wide-ranging aspect of elections in Canada (COURTNEY 2004). If we construe electoral reform as changing Canada’s voting system, then the Liberals’ electoral reform agenda was a dismal failure. However, if a broad definition is taken, then the Liberals were more successful.

This analysis assesses the Liberals’ electoral reform agenda between 2015-2019. Using the pledge method, I explore the complete set of election-related promises made by the Liberal Party of Canada in their 2015 platform. The promise to end FPTP was actually one of nine election promises. This paper begins by briefly discussing the literature on promise fulfillment in Canada and outlines the pledge method. The bulk of the paper is an assessment of the promise fulfillment of the Liberals’ electoral reform agenda. This is accomplished by exploring three areas: voting system reform, the Electoral Modernization Act and the Leaders’ Debates Commission. Each of these sections, first, puts the reform in context by exploring why it is necessary. Next using official sources, I demonstrate the extent to which the Liberals fulfilled the promise. The main conclusion is that the Liberals fulfilled the vast majority of their election-related promises. While the Trudeau Liberals probably deserve much of the ire they received by breaking their voting reform promise, from the myriad of tweaks to the Canada Elections Act to the creation of a Leaders’ Debates Commission, the 2019 federal election was remarkably different from 2015 in terms of the rules of the electoral game.

Do Governments Keep Their Promises?

It is now ritual in Canadian politics that parties release platform documents with a list of promises they would enact if elected. Election platforms of the major parties are often subject to media scrutiny including the costing of promises and comparative summaries, and campaign promises may sway some citizens in their voting decisions. An election promise or pledge is a written statement contained in a party's election documentation that commits the party to a course of action if elected (FLYNN 2011, 246). Promise keeping is a form of government responsiveness (PÉTRY 2014); at the next election, some voters may reward or punish the government for acting or failing to act on previously made promises. Research shows that there is widespread presumption that governments do not keep their promises (FLYNN 2011). For instance, Canadians gave an average score of 5 on a scale from 0 to 10 to the statement: "those elected to Parliament keep most of their promises" (LEDUC and PAMMETT 2014). Despite this, research shows that governments in Canada like elsewhere regularly fulfill many of their election promises.

Thomas and colleagues (2017) examined more than 20,000 promises made in 57 election campaigns in 12 countries (including Canada). Their findings suggest that governments are very likely to fulfill their promises with 60% of pledges at least partially fulfilled. This holds in Canada. Pétry has extensively studied promise fulfillment in Canada (see PÉTRY and COLLETTE 2009; PÉTRY 2014). For instance, he finds that the Parti Québécois government in the 1990s fulfilled 75% of its election pledges. His later examination of the 2011 Stephen Harper government found that, within twelve months, 96 of the 148 promises (65%) had been fulfilled at least partially. Only 19% had been broken or stalled, and 16% had not yet been addressed. Flynn (2011) comes to similar conclusions. His analysis of promise keeping of federal governments from 1984 to 2006 shows that around 65% of promises are wholly fulfilled, with an additional 11% being partially fulfilled. Political scientists have speculated why Canadian governments have such high levels of promise fulfilment. One reason is single-party government (THOMSON et al. 2017); Canadian governments rarely have to share decision-making power with other parties, as governments do in many European countries. Related to this is the Westminster system that provides governments with considerable latitude to govern on their own terms (PÉTRY and COLLETTE 2009).

While there are several ways that promise fulfillment can be measured (PÉTRY and COLLETTE 2009), the studies discussed the use of the pledge method. In the pledge method, the researcher identifies the pledges or promises made in the election platform and then examines the record of government action

in order to determine how many have been fulfilled. There are rules that must be followed when measuring promise fulfillment (PÉTRY 2014); first, the promises must be contained in the officially sanctioned campaign platform. Election promises are not vague statements made in speeches or on social media but statements that are testable and “can be clearly determined to have occurred or not” in official documents; phrases such as “we will,” “we promise to,” “we support” or “we favor” should be present to signal a firm commitment of the party or politician (THOMSON et al. 2017, 532). Even in a platform document, vague rhetorical statements may be present that are not testable. Second, to assess whether a promise has been kept or broken, official archival sources of government action should be used rather than media reports. Examples of the former include laws and regulations, budget speeches and departmental annual reports. Related to this, Pétry notes that assessment of promise fulfillment must be based on outputs rather than outcomes. That is, a promise may still be considered fulfilled even if the policy, regulation and law does not achieved the desired goals. Once a promise has been identified and official sources have been explored, the researcher designates the promise or pledge into one of three categories: fulfilled, partially fulfilled or unfulfilled. The pledge method is popular because it produces internally valid results (PÉTRY and COLLETTE 2009). As such, it is a useful method of assessing the success or failure of the Liberals’ electoral reform agenda. That said, this analysis differs from other studies using the pledge method discussed above in that I only explore one category of pledges rather than the entire platform. While only a small number of pledges are examined, I provide a more fulsome discussion of those promises, thereby meeting the broader objectives of this special issue.

Promise Fulfilment of the Liberals’ Open and Fair Elections Agenda

The electoral reform agenda of the Liberal Party was released several months before the 2015 election, when, in June, the party released a plan to reduce the ‘democratic deficit.’ The full platform, *Real Change*, was released early in the 2015 campaign. Consistent with the pledge method, I use the 2015 Liberal platform as the sole source for identifying promises. The Liberals’ electoral reform agenda is found in the section Open and Fair Elections (pages 26-28). The stated objective of the Open and Fair Elections section of the platform is to restore integrity to the electoral process, improve the fairness of elections, and help to renew Canadians’ faith in government (LIBERAL PARTY 2015). The organization of the platform document is as follows: each promise or set of promises has a title featured in a red box on the left side of the page. Each promise or set of promises begins with a bolded statement followed by a number of unbolded statements. Some statements are descriptive statements about the topic, while other statements include the pledge. The Liberal platform consistently uses

PROMISES, PROMISES: ASSESSING THE LIBERALS' ELECTORAL REFORM AGENDA

the phrase “we will” to signal the firm commitment of the party¹. Some sections include more than one promise.

The Liberals' commitment to democratic reform was later seen in the appointment of a Minister of Democratic Institutions. Democratic Institutions is a relatively new cabinet portfolio in Canada. Liberal Paul Martin was the first Prime Minister to appoint a minister to a portfolio that solely dealt with democratic reform issues. This was also a cabinet portfolio under Stephen Harper. Justin Trudeau appointed Maryam Monsef as Minister of Democratic Institution in 2015. Monsef was replaced by Karina Gould in 2017 after a cabinet shuffle. The mandate letters to both Monsef and Gould (TRUDEAU 2015; 2017) confirm the Liberal government's commitment not only to democratic reform but also to promise fulfillment: “Our platform guides our government. Over the course of our four-year mandate, I expect us to deliver on all of our commitments” (TRUDEAU 2015).

Table 1: Promise Fulfillment of the Liberals' Open and Fair Electoral Reform Agenda

Area	Pledge	Pledge Fulfilled	Official Source
Government Advertising	1) We will appoint an Advertising Commissioner to help the Auditor General oversee government advertising. The Commissioner will review proposed messages to ensure that they are non-partisan and represent a legitimate public service announcement.	Partially fulfilled	Treasury Board website
Fair Elections	2) We will help encourage more Canadians to vote, by removing restrictions on the ways in which the Chief Electoral Officer and	Fulfilled	<i>Electoral Modernization Act (EMA) & Canada Elections Act (CEA)</i>

¹ Methodological notes: Promises were only determined from the unbolded sections. The title and the bolded statements were excluded, even if they included a “we will” statement. Not all “we will” statements signal a separate promise. On some occasions, the section might contain two “we will” statements with the same policy outcome; these are counted as a single promise.

TAMARA A. SMALL

	Elections Canada can communicate with voters. 3) we will restore the independence of the Commissioner of Canada Elections	Fulfilled	EMA & CEA
Political Financing	4) We will review the limits on how much political parties can spend during elections, and ensure that spending between elections is subject to limits as well	Fulfilled	EMA & CEA Elections Canada website
Leaders' Debates	5) We will establish an independent commission to organize leaders' debates	Partially fulfilled	Order in Council Leaders' Debate Commission website
Electoral Reform	6) Within 18 months of forming government, we will introduce legislation to enact electoral reform.	Not fulfilled	Privy Council website Government response to ERRE
Young Canadians	7) we will support Elections Canada in proactively registering Canadians from groups that historically have lower turnout, such as students.	Fulfilled	EMA & CEA Elections Canada website
Easier voting, stronger punishments for law breakers	8) We will restore the voter identification card as an acceptable form of identification. 9) We will also increase penalties so that there are real deterrents for deliberately breaking our election laws.	Fulfilled Fulfilled	EMA & CEA Elections Canada website EMA & CEA Speech by Minister Karina Gould

Table 1 summarizes promise fulfillment by the Liberal government on electoral reform. It lists the promise identified and the section of the platform from which it comes. Nine separate promises are identified from the seven

PROMISES, PROMISES: ASSESSING THE LIBERALS' ELECTORAL REFORM AGENDA

sections, showing that the Liberals' electoral reform agenda was wide-ranging. While reforming FPTP received the bulk of attention, the Liberals looked to make changes to the accessibility of the vote, powers of election officials, campaign finance and leaders' debates. Table 1 also includes the assessment of the promise and the source(s) used to assess that promise. Overall, the Liberals kept most of their promises: six of nine promises were kept (67%), two promises partially kept and only one, voting system reform, was broken. This is on par with the averages of promise keeping seen above.

In what follows, each of these promises is assessed, moving chronologically through the Liberals' mandate. I start with promise 6, voting system reform, which was the first promise attempted in 2016-2017. Promises 2, 3, 8 and 9 are discussed together as they are all addressed by the Electoral Modernization Act, which received Royal Assent in late 2018. Finally, promise 5, the leaders' debate commission, which was announced in October 2018, is addressed. In each section, the need for the reform is discussed, followed by an analysis of how the Liberals did or did not fulfill the promise.

Before moving to this analysis, promise 1 regarding government advertising needs to be addressed. This promise stands in marked contrast to the others, as it deals with an activity that occurs after the vote and applies to the actions of the government. On the face of it, government advertising does not seem to be an electoral system issue. Perhaps one way of linking this promise with the others is through the concept of the "permanent campaign." Permanent campaigning refers to employing strategies and tactics that are normally used in electioneering in between elections, especially for governing (ESSELMONT, MARLAND, and GIASSEN 2017). Despite its origins in American politics, it is regularly used to describe Canadian politics. Government advertising in Canada is nothing new, nor has it ever been entirely without partisanship (ROSE 2003). However, there have been growing concerns about the use of public money for partisan communication purposes by the government – also called "resource exploitation" (ESSELMONT et al., 2017). The Harper Conservative government was accused of this on several occasions. For instance, Marland and colleagues (2017) point to the Economic Action Plan website and television commercials, which received an exemption to bypass normal branding standards to include the use of a Conservative Party blue color scheme. This blurs the lines between government and party priorities. Lalancette and Tourigny-Koné (2017) come to the exact same conclusions in their analysis of the "24 Seven" video website, which featured videos promoting Harper produced by the PMO.

The government's advertising promise is the only promise not tasked to the Minister of Democratic Institutions. Rather it was included in the mandate of

TAMARA A. SMALL

the President of the Treasury Board. This promise is assessed as partially fulfilled. A partially fulfilled promise implies that some action was taken, but that action falls short of full realization of the written pledge (PÉTRY and COLLETTE 2009). Rather than appoint an advertising commissioner as per the promise, the Liberals opted to employ Advertising Standards Canada. This independent review body, made up of Canadian advertising industry professionals, is tasked with reviewing Government of Canada advertising campaigns with budgets over \$250,000 against non-partisan advertising criteria and other government policies. So an independent review of government advertising will occur, just not with the mechanics initially promised. With promise 1 addressed, I now turn to the eight electoral reform promises mandated to the Minister of Democratic Institutions.

Voting System Reform: Not Fulfilled

Voting systems are the rules by which votes are translated into results. They are comprised of three elements: districting rule, ballot design and voting formula; these elements can be combined in different ways to create different types of voting systems (PILON 2016). There are several families of voting systems: plurality, majority, proportional representation (PR) and mixed. Canada's voting system belongs to the plurality family, where the winning candidate is the one who receives more votes than any other candidate.

FPTP uses single member districts, where one representative is elected from each electoral district and a categorical ballot, which requires an either/or choice between candidates. FPTP has been used in every federal election. Though some provinces have flirted with other voting systems, it is currently used in all provincial elections. The United States, the United Kingdom and several Caribbean countries also use it. Worldwide, however, PR systems are the most common type of voting system.

Voting systems matter because they shape the political landscape, "creating incentives for political actors to coalesce into parties in radically different way and for ordinary citizens to deliberate about electoral options by attending to quite different ranges of considerations" (POTTER, WEINSTOCK, and LOEWEN 2017, xvi). While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to review the advantages and disadvantages of FPTP in detail², the central issue for reformers is the "seemly capricious and unfair manner" in which it translates the popular vote into legislative seats (COURTNEY 2004, 139). In the legislature, FPTP tends to be overly generous to parties that receive the most votes and those parties whose vote is regionally concentrated. This causes smaller parties or those

² See COURTNEY 2004 and PILON 2007 for excellent reviews.

PROMISES, PROMISES: ASSESSING THE LIBERALS' ELECTORAL REFORM AGENDA

with broad national support to be under-represented in the legislature. The 1993 federal election is illustrative: the Liberals won 60% of the seats in the House of Commons with 41% of the popular vote (a manufactured majority); the regionally concentrated Bloc Québécois won 18% of the seats with 13.5% of the vote; while the Progressive Conservatives won 2 seats (less than 1% of the seats) with 16% of the vote. Other criticize the “winner-take-all” nature of FPTP, which means that voters may feel that their vote is wasted. Moreover, it is argued that FPTP contributes to the underrepresentation of women, Indigenous people and visible minorities in Canadian legislatures. This is not to say that there are no advantages to FPTP (see COURTNEY 2004) and that it does not have supporters (see LOEWEN 2017). However, many are critical. In 1968, Alan Cairns described FPTP system as “divisive and detrimental to national unity” (62). More recent, Pilon (2007) argues there is “no compelling democratic argument for the retention” of FPTP (3).

The promise of voting system reform was actually commonplace in the 2015 election. It was included in the platforms of both the NDP and Greens, who have been proponents for reform for years. This is no doubt related to the fact that they have generally experienced the more negative aspects of FPTP. Only the Conservatives made no mention of voting system reform in their platform. The 2015 promise by the Liberals was unusual, as they had been “largely silent” on the topic (PILON 2016, 231). While voting system reform had not been on the federal agenda, many provincial governments engaged in reform processes starting in the early 2000s (PILON 2016). Several of these processes serve as counterpoints to the Liberal process, which arguably contributed to the end result – an unfulfilled promise.

Trudeau appointed neophyte Maryam Monsef to spearhead this process. In May 2016, the Special Committee on Electoral Reform (ERRE) was appointed and, after some haggling, the membership included five Liberals, three Conservatives, two NDP, and one member each from the Bloc Québécois and the Greens (Elizabeth May), all of whom would have voting privileges. Normally, parliamentary committees are composed using party vote share in the House, and only parties with official status have voting privileges (the BQ and Greens did not have official status). On the one hand, this was laudable, as it ensured that the Liberals could not dominate the process with their majority. However, as will be discussed, the committee construction caused decision-making problems.

The use of a parliamentary committee is one source of criticism of the process. British Columbia and Ontario used the citizen assembly model in their reform processes. A citizen assembly brings together a diverse group of ordinary citizens to deliberate on an issue. Not only are citizen assemblies an exercise in

democracy, but in the case of voting system reform, they take the decision away from political parties who have a vested interest in the outcome (ABIZADEH 2017). Also, in contrast to the provinces, the Liberals ruled out citizen involvement in the form of a referendum, thus, leaving it to Parliament to make the final decision. BC, Ontario and PEI held referendums at the end of their processes. Like the citizen assembly, a referendum is a way to remove partisanship from the process. Additionally, some argue that changing the voting system is an issue of national importance that requires consent of the public (LEYDET 2017). Instead, the Liberals opted to use the website called MyDemocracy.ca to gauge public opinion in December 2016. This too was a misstep. The tool, likened by some to a “bad BuzzFeed quiz” (STRAPAGIEL 2016), was ridiculed by the opposition and other commentators because it did not ask specific questions about voting systems. For Dias (2017, 3), a “large part of the reason for the failure of [this] reform seems to lie in the processes set-up to create consensus around reform.” That said, the process was completely outlined in the 2015 election platform document. For better or for worse, the Liberals executed exactly what they said they would.

Compared to the government, the all-party ERRE engaged in a consultative process; holding formal hearings with expert witnesses, receiving written submissions, conducting an online consultation, holding open-mic sessions across Canada and using a special hashtag for social media engagement (ERRE 2016). However, the prospects for voting system reform were not aided when the ERRE tabled their report in the House of Commons in early December 2016. With regards to voting system reform, the committee recommended that:

- The Government hold a referendum, in which the current system is on the ballot;
- That the referendum propose a proportional electoral system that achieves a Gallagher Index score of 5 or less³.

Minister Monsef criticized the report and the committee (CPAC 2016). In Question Period, she suggested the committee had shirked its responsibility by not providing a specific alternative to FPTP. She also claimed that the committee had proposed a referendum not on an electoral system by the Gallagher Index; she suggested the referendum question would be “Would Canadians like to take the square root of the sum of the squares of the difference between the percentage of the seats for each party and the percentage of the votes cast?” In the following media scrum, Monsef held up the diagram of the Gallagher Index again

³ The Gallagher Index is a tool that measures the proportionality of different electoral system options.

PROMISES, PROMISES: ASSESSING THE LIBERALS' ELECTORAL REFORM AGENDA

suggesting that this was the recommendation of the committee. Many media reports described Monsef's tone toward the committee as "mocking" (FINE 2016). Monsef later apologized for the comments. That said, the supplemental reports call into question the level of consensus of the committee. The supplementary opinion of the NDP and the Green Party recommended that either mixed-member proportional or rural-urban proportional representation be adopted. It also expressed "serious concerns" about a referendum (ERRE 2016, 331). The opinion implies the NDP and Greens supported the referendum to get the Conservatives and the BQ members to support PR. The supplementary opinion of Liberal committee members was even more problematic. It claimed that the recommendations in the report "regarding alternative electoral systems are rushed, and are too radical to impose at this time as Canadians must be more engaged" (ERRE 2016). Both supplemental opinions provide evidence to support concerns that partisan actors cannot see past their own interests when it comes to voting system reform: "It should surprise no one that parties approach the question of institutional design from a perspective of how it will affect them electorally" (PILON 2007, 166).

Karina Gould replaced Monsef as Minister of Democratic Institutions in January 2017. A few weeks later, the results from MyDemocracy.ca were released. They ambiguously concluded that "Canadians are generally satisfied with Canada's democracy. Though satisfaction does not necessarily preclude a desire for reforming the electoral system" (VOX POP LABS INC. 2017, 5). Minister Gould stated that the government was still open to voting system reform and would review the findings. It was not until February, when Gould's mandate letter became public, that the status of the voting system promise became clear:

A clear preference for a new electoral system, let alone a consensus, has not emerged. Furthermore, without a clear preference or a clear question, a referendum would not be in Canada's interest. *Changing the electoral system will not be in your mandate* (emphasis included) (TRUDEAU 2017).

The statement is repeated in Gould's (2017) response to the ERRE report, which is used as the official source. With this, voting system reform was dead at the federal level.

It is an understatement to say that this broken promise was not warmly received. The Trudeau Liberals were the subject of protests, petitions and criticism from interest groups and other parliamentarians. At the same time, many were not surprised at the outcome. There were reports that Trudeau had long favoured a preferential ballot (WHERRY 2016). With a preferential ballot, voters

rank candidates. For a candidate to win, they need an absolute majority of the vote. If there is no majority after the first preferences are counted, then the candidate with the fewest first preferences is eliminated, and his or her ballots transferred according to the second-place candidate. This continues until a candidate wins with 50% plus 1. Commentators were quick to point out that a preferential ballot would overwhelmingly benefit the Liberals. Using data from the 2015 election, Éric Grenier shows (2015) that the Liberals would have won an even larger majority than under FPTP because they “get almost all of the second-choice support from NDP voters, and are the preferred option for Conservative voters over the New Democrats.” Scott (2016) suggests the Liberal government used the disagreement on the committee, some of which was created by Liberal MPs, as a justification to do nothing. Given little support for their preferred voting system, Liberals opted for the status quo. At the same time, however, the Liberals’ electoral reform agenda was just getting started, and their record of promise fulfillment would improve considerably.

Electoral Modernization Act: Fulfilled

A significant component of the Liberals’ electoral reform agenda stems from the previous government. The Harper Conservative government made a number of reforms to the electoral system (MASSICOTTE 2016). They received praise for some changes, such the introduction of fixed dates and the much-needed changes to the redistribution formula. Other changes, such as the requirement of visual identification of a voter (i.e. veiled voting), met with criticism. By far the most controversial was Bill C-23, better known as the Fair Elections Act (FEA), which made sweeping changes to election law (MASSICOTTE 2016). Introduced in February 2014, the Act received near unanimous criticism from election experts, political scientists and the media and also faced legal challenges (LEWIS 2015).

Reversing the most problematic aspects of the FEA was central to the Liberal reform agenda. The FEA profoundly weakened the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) by prohibiting the participation of Elections Canada in civic education and voter outreach. Described by some as a “gag order” (PAYTON 2014), the limiting of the CEO’s ability to inform and educate voters was particularly troubling in an era of declining voter turnout (LEWIS 2015). Another official, the Commissioner of Canada Election (CCE) was impacted even more. The CCE can be thought of as the prosecutor of Canadian election law. Even though the CEO and the CCE are both responsible under the Canada Elections Act, the Fair Elections Act created an institutional separation between the two. First, the CCE was moved out of Elections Canada into the Public Prosecution Service of Canada. Second, the Director of Public Prosecutions would appoint the

PROMISES, PROMISES: ASSESSING THE LIBERALS' ELECTORAL REFORM AGENDA

Commissioner instead of the CEO. Third, there were limits on information that was being shared between the two offices. Yves Côté, the current CCE, opposed the changes when he testified at a parliamentary committee in 2014 (CÔTÉ 2014).

The FEA made also changes to voter identification through the elimination of the Voter Information Card (VIC) and vouching. Sent by mail, the VIC includes the name, address, and polling station of a voter. At the polling station, it could be used as an alternative for those without proper identification. "Vouching" is the process where one elector can vouch for the identification and residence of another. Opponents suggested that both changes would have a negative impact of some voters including young people and the homeless. As Table 1 shows, the Liberals sought to address the powers of the CEO in promise 2; promise 3 and 9 focus on the Commissioner of Canadian Elections; and voter identification is dealt with in promise 8. The Liberals fulfilled all four promises.

In 2018, the Liberals introduced Bill C-76, better known as the Electoral Modernization Act (EMA)⁴. As the EMA amends the Canada Elections Act in 2019, the CEA is used as the official source in the assessment. Section 18 removes restrictions on the ways in which the CEO and Elections Canada can communicate with voters. The CEO may use any means or media to implement public education programs both inside and outside Canada. Elections Canada is now re-empowered to communicate with voters with regards to civic education and voter outreach. While on the topic of the CEO, it is worth discussing promise 8 regarding voter identification. The EMA largely reverts back to the previous process of voter identification. Under Section 143 (2.1), the CEO determines and notifies types of identification that are authorized for voting. It repeals the previous clause that VIC could not be one of those types. The VIC is currently authorized as a form of identification on the Elections Canada website (see ID to Vote). Even though vouching was not mentioned in the Liberal platform, it is also restored in Section 143(3). Promise was fulfilled.

The powers of the Commissioner of Canada Elections are found in Section 509 of the CEA. The appointment of the CCE is now shared by the CEO and Director of Public Prosecutions (509(1)) and the CCE has been returned to Elections Canada (509.1 (1)). It is the latter change that fulfills the Liberal promise of making the Commissioner more independent. Under the Fair Elections

⁴ The Electoral Modernization Act was in fact the second election bill introduced by the Liberals. Bill C-33: An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act and to make consequential amendments to other Acts was introduced by Monsef in November 2016. Little happened with the Bill after First Reading, with no explanation for the delay. The Electoral Modernization Act is more extensive than Bill C-33. More information about Bill C-33 can be found here: <https://www.parl.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?Bill=C33&Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=42&Ses=1>

Act, the Commissioner reported to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), who ultimately reports to the government through the Minister of Justice and Attorney General. It is possible that the CCE could be investigating election infractions from the previous election of the party currently in power. Indeed, at the time the FEA was proposed, the CCE was investigating the Conservative Party for several campaign offences. In his parliamentary testimony, Côté noted that the “position was placed within Elections Canada so that it would be fully independent from the government” (CÔTÉ 2014). Elections Canada is an independent agency, and the CEO, an Officer of Parliament, reports directly to Parliament, not the government. Côté went on to note that while he did not expect that the DPP or the Attorney General would interfere with investigations, it “does, it seems to me, present challenges, at least in terms of perception” (CÔTÉ 2014). By returning the CCE back to Elections Canada, promise 3 was fulfilled.

Promise 9 regarding increased penalties for those who break election laws is one of the vaguer promises made by the Liberals. However, a speech by Minister Gould introducing the EMA provides greater clarity. She notes that the EMA will create new powers for the Commissioner of Canada Elections to “ensure compliance with the law” and that it would be “more difficult for elections law-breakers to evade punishment” (GOULD 2018). The EMA expanded the CCE’s powers, including to impose administrative monetary penalties, lay charges directly and to apply to a court to compel testimony or evidence (PAL 2019). For instance, Côté (2014) had been asking for the ability to compel testimony for some time because the inability to do so was resulting in investigations being aborted. The EMA also amended section 408, which clarifies offences relating to the publishing of false statements, participation by non-Canadians in elections and impersonation (HOUSE OF COMMONS 2018). Both provide evidence of promise 9 being fulfilled.

The Electoral Modernization Act fulfilled two more Liberal promises unrelated to the Fair Elections Act: political financing and young voters. The Conservative government established fixed election dates in 2006. Generally, federal elections are to be held on the third Monday in October every four years. This raised concerns about campaign financing – the legal rules governing who can contribute to political actors and how much they can spend during an election (YOUNG 2016) – in the pre-writ period. The expenditures of political parties have been regulated during elections since 1974 and third parties since 2000. There have been concerns in many Canadian jurisdictions with fixed dates about political actors spending considerable amounts of money just prior to the regulated period. Or a group or business spending prior to the election call, but ceasing to exist during the election, thereby avoiding legal responsibilities that third parties normally have. The Liberals pledged action on party and election

PROMISES, PROMISES: ASSESSING THE LIBERALS' ELECTORAL REFORM AGENDA

spending with promise 4. To what extent the Government reviewed spending during the election is difficult to assess; however, there was decisive action regarding pre-writ spending. In the case of a fixed date election⁵, the EMA established a pre-election period, which starts on June 30 and ends on the day before the general election. During this period, political parties and third parties are subject to spending limits and reporting obligations for certain regulated activities. Pre-election expenditure limits are found in Sections 429.1 (1) and 349.1 (1) for political parties and third parties, respectively. Promise 4 was fulfilled.

There have been concerns about the decline in turnout in Canada for some time. Turnout in federal elections has not exceeded 70% since 1993. One attributing factor in this decline is youth voting (ACHEN 2019). For many years, election officials and interest groups have established programs to encourage youth voting. Young voters are the focus of promise 7. The EMA fulfills the promise of Elections Canada proactively registering young voters. Section 44 of the CEA establishes the Register of Future Electors and tasks the CEO with maintaining this registry. The FAQs on the Elections Canada website provides greater detail. Created in April 2019, the Register contains information on Canadian youth aged between 14 and 17 who consented to register with Elections Canada. Upon turning 18, eligible individuals will be added to the National Register of Electors. Promise 7 was fulfilled. With six promises made, and six promises kept, the Electoral Modernization Act is the main vehicle by which much of the Liberals' electoral reform agenda was fulfilled.

Leaders' Debates Commission: Partially Fulfilled

The Liberals' promise to establish an independent commission to organize leaders' debates was unexpected. The organization of the leaders' debates has not received widespread attention compared to voting system reform and the Fair Elections Act. The leaders' debates have been regular and important moments in Canadian elections since 1979. Cross and colleagues (2015, 101) suggest that debates "offer the leaders an opportunity to speak directly to voters in a largely unmediated format for a considerable length of time . . . Debates are also one of the few campaign occasions when leaders are in direct confrontation with one another, making it easy for voters to compare them directly." In addition to attracting a large viewership, the debates are turning points in the campaign for leaders.

⁵ Since 2007, the CEA establishes fixed dates for federal elections as the third Monday of October in the fourth calendar year following the previous general election. That said, the CEA does not prevent an election from being called at another date.

TAMARA A. SMALL

Typically, there are two televised leaders' debates, one in each official language, held approximately two weeks prior to the vote. Before 2015, the debates were organized by the Network Consortium, composed of the five major Canadian television networks. The Consortium "owned" debates because they were the only ones that could "produce a television program and distribute it to voters" (IRPP et al. 2016). For each election, the debates (i.e. the dates, format and participants) were the result of closed-door negotiations between the Consortium and officials from the major parties. The earlier discussion about partisan self-interest applies here. One of the most contentious issues was participants. Leaders of minor parties tended not to be invited. For instance, in 2008, it was reported that then Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the NDP's leader Jack Layton threatened to boycott the debates if Green leader Elizabeth May was invited (CBC NEWS 2008); May was eventually able to participate. In an article published in *Policy Options*, then Green leader Elizabeth May (2016) claims that in closed-door negotiations, the other parties also threatened to boycott the debates in 2011 and 2015 if she was invited. Overall, the Consortium process lacked transparency, consistency and equity of participation (SMALL and ESSELMONT 2018).

The Liberal promise regarding debate organization was timely, given what occurred in the 2015 election. In 2015, there were six debates. In addition to the two debates hosted by the Network Consortium, *Maclean's* magazine, the *Globe and Mail* and the Munk Centre hosted debates. Additionally, TVA left the Consortium and hosted their own debate. One of the factors in the increased number of debates was technological, that is, the Internet made it possible for organizations beyond television networks to reach voters. The issues of transparency, consistency and equity were magnified by the introduction of new and numerous debate organizers. Debate participants ranged from three to five, with only two debates having similar leaders participating. Perhaps more concerning was viewership. More debates did not result in more viewership (TURCOTTE 2016). Debates in 2008 and 2011 had more than three million viewers. The first debate hosted by *Maclean's*, which was only on the Internet, was watched by half the number of viewers and it was by far the most popular debate in 2015. While what happened in 2015 was not the reason for the Liberal promise on debate organization, it certainly helped gather broader support for reform.

In 2018, Minister Gould announced the creation of an independent commission to organize leaders' debates, later called the Leaders' Debate Commission. Former Governor General (and one-time debate moderator) David Johnston was appointed as the Commissioner. Created by an order in council (PC Number: 2018-1322), the Debate Commission was tasked with organizing two

PROMISES, PROMISES: ASSESSING THE LIBERALS' ELECTORAL REFORM AGENDA

debates -- one in each official language for the 2019 election. The Leaders' Debate Commission addressed a number of the concerns with previous organization, especially around participation. It removed partisanship from the process by providing clear rules for inclusion. To participate in the 2019 debates, a political party needed to meet two of the following three criteria:

- Have a MP at the time the election is called;
- Intend to run candidates in at least 90% of ridings; and
- Obtained 4% the vote in a previous election or a legitimate chance to win seats in the upcoming election
- The last criterion is slightly interpretative, as the Debate Commissioner would need to assess what a "legitimate chance" consists in.

With a budget of around \$5.5 million dollars, the Leaders' Debate Commission organized two official debates in 2019. There is widespread agreement that the French-language debate fared better than the English debate. The English-language debate was widely panned for having a confusing format and too many moderators who failed to enforce time limits and speaking privileges. Nevertheless, the Commission's debates did serve as a focal point for the 2019 election campaign. While there was nothing stopping other organizations from organizing debates, none did. Canadians reengaged with the debates, reaching substantially more viewers than in the previous election. More than 14 million Canadians tuned in to the English-language debate and over five million watched the French-language debate (LEADERS' DEBATES COMMISSION 2020). The debates were aired on television but also on various online channels and social media.

It would be fair to wonder after this discussion why this promise is assessed as partially fulfilled in Table 1. The Leaders' Debate Commission was created, and debates took place in 2019. However, this mandate was only for one election. As part of the mandate, the Commissioner was tasked with reporting to Parliament "to inform the potential creation in statute of a "built to last" Debates Commission" (DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS 2018). President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, Dominic LeBlanc, tabled the report in Parliament in June 2020. The report, *Democracy Matters, Debates Count*, makes ten recommendations including several related to the participation criteria, budget and format. The principal recommendation of the report is the "establishment of a *permanent*, publicly-funded entity to organize leaders' debates" (emphasis included). Despite what many would see as a success in 2019, the Leaders'

Debate Commission is currently in institutional limbo. In November 2020, Minister LeBlanc announced that the Commission would remain in place for the next federal election and re-appointed Johnston. However, LeBlanc is also reported saying that “cabinet hasn’t made a decision” on making the commission permanent (PAEZ, 2020). While the 2019 campaign saw considerable progress on leaders’ debates in Canada, the lack of permanence for the Commission results in this promise being partially fulfilled. However, when business of in the House of Commons returns to normal post COVID-19 and the Liberals remain in government, this promise could likely be fulfilled.

Conclusion

The purpose of this special issue of this journal is to review and assess the first mandate of the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau. This analysis focussed on the Liberals’ electoral reform agenda. This retrospective is important, given that electoral reform seems to be off the agenda in the Liberals’ second mandate. There were no election-related promises in the 2019 platform. And, for the first time in fifteen years, the cabinet does not include a minister of democratic institutions. While the elimination of first-past-the-post received considerable attention from the media, interest group actors and citizens, the Liberals’ 2015 platform established a wide-ranging reform agenda. By taking this broader examination and employing the pledge method, we find that, not only was electoral reform central to the first mandate of the Liberals, but they were successful in meeting their electoral reform goals. As shown, the Liberals made nine promises in their 2015 platform; they kept six and made considerable progress on two others. Only one promise was broken.

While the pledge method is a useful tool for measuring promise keeping, it says nothing of the relative importance of a promise to citizens. That is, it treats all promises as equally important. This is certainly not true in this particular case. Voting system reform was certainly more important to Canadians than, say, the powers of elections officials. A poll commissioned by Fair Vote Canada found that 70% of respondents said that the Liberal government was wrong not to pursue electoral reform (FAIR VOTE CANADA 2019). The Liberals’ handling of voting system reform received considerable negative media attention. And whether one likes or dislikes FPTP, the process by which the Liberals attempted this reform is likely deserving of criticism. Though it is difficult to measure, it is probably fair to suggest that the failure to eliminate FPTP overshadowed all the other important work that the Liberals achieved on this file. However, it would be a mistake to simply dismiss the other reforms as unimportant or only of concern to political insiders. As Dawood (2017, 718) points out, the Canada Elections Act is a fundamentally important piece of legislation, and many of its provisions “either

determine or have a significant impact on [the] democratic rights” of Canadians. While the Electoral Modernization Act did not warrant massive public attention, the law it was meant to address, the Fair Elections Act, did. As well, debates are important moments in the democratic life of a country (IRPP et al 2016). This analysis reminds us that electoral reform is a broader topic than simply changes to the voting system – this is an important distinction that is too often overlooked in academic inquiry, and, to a greater extent, in public debate.

Despite the broken promise of voting system reform, on many fronts, the 2019 federal election was governed radically differently than that of 2015. The Electoral Modernization Act made a host of other changes not mentioned in the platform. For instance, it provides greater accessibility for disabled voters and voters in the Canadian Forces. The election period was limited to 50 days. This would ensure that an election like 2015, which lasted 78 days and had almost double the spending by political parties and third parties, could not occur again. Foreign influence in Canadian elections was banned. And a number of very important provisions were added to combat misinformation on social media. These changes seem to be in response to events in the 2016 presidential election in the United States and growing cyber-threats in elections worldwide. The Liberal Party Canada put a major stamp on Canada's electoral system in their first mandate.

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TAMARA A. SMALL

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