

2021 Campaign Debrief

Prepared by the Campaign Review Committee

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INTRODUCTION

On August 15th, 2021, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau requested Governor General Mary Simon to dissolve Parliament. The Governor General approved the Prime Minister's request, triggering the 44th Canadian general election with election day set for September 20th, 2021.

Many viewed this as a “snap election” – it had only been two years since the last campaign and the writ period was the minimum of 36 days required by federal election laws. For the first two weeks of the campaign, the Liberals struggled to justify the election amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Speaking after his request to the Governor General, Justin Trudeau justified the election saying,

“The decisions your government makes right now will define the future your kids and grandkids grow up in. So in this pivotal, consequential moment, who wouldn't want a say?”

Canada's New Democrats entered the election with high hopes. Going into his second federal campaign, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh had higher favourability ratings than any other party leader². The party had paid off its previous campaign debt³ and had \$24 million to spend – more than double what was raised for the 2019 campaign.⁴ Relative to the last election, New Democrats were in a much better position to compete for seats.

Following the 2019 campaign, the NDP set three strategic goals: to secure tangible wins for people in a minority Parliament, to retain all our incumbent seats, and to win new seats. A target list of battleground ridings was established, and our research had identified that Jagmeet had universally positive impressions. Where in 2019 New Democrats had to show the party could maintain some seats, in 2021 we could show Canadians that Jagmeet was the “real deal” and the NDP were a competitive and viable national party.

ELECTION RESULTS

At dissolution of the 43rd Parliament, New Democrats held 24 of 338 seats. Three incumbent NDP MP's – Scott Duvall, Jack Harris, and Mumilaaq Qaqqaq - decided not to run again.

The final results were incredibly similar to the results from the 2019 election. New Democrats had won 25 seats and secured 17.8% of the national votes, gaining 1 seat. The Liberals once again formed a minority government, gaining three seats, and the Conservatives formed the Official Opposition losing two seats. The Bloc Quebecois finished with 32 seats in Quebec, and the Greens finished with two seats. Despite not winning any seats, the People's Party of Canada won nearly 5% of the national vote.

All incumbent New Democrats who chose to run again were re-elected. Of the three seats where incumbent MPs decided not to run again, two were lost (Hamilton Mountain and St. John's East), and the other (Nunavut) was won. New Democrat candidates also won in three new ridings: Nanaimo-Ladysmith, Port Moody-Coquitlam, and Edmonton-Griesbach.

¹ <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/federal-election-2021/trudeau-calls-federal-election-voters-to-go-to-the-polls-sept-20-1.5547815>

² <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/singh-emerges-as-most-likeable-leader>

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/ndp-campaign-debt-repays-pandemic-1.5894840>

⁴ <https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal-election/2021/08/17/the-ndp-plans-on-winning-back-some-lost-seats-with-an-engaging-leader-a-seasoned-campaign-team-and-lots-of-money.html>

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The 2021 Federal Election must be viewed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Where we are tempted to view this election relative to other federal elections, the pandemic had unique impacts which must be considered and are often overlooked in public analyses of the 2021 election.

Internal research demonstrated that for most people the pandemic was their number one issue and took up virtually all of their attention. In addition, people believed that Justin Trudeau and the Liberals had generally done a good job managing the pandemic and getting vaccines. Very few people recognized the role the NDP had in shaping pandemic management policies.

Local campaigns had to be mindful of changes to voting procedures amidst the pandemic. Elections Canada needed to modify its practices to comply with public health orders, including, but not limited to, physical distancing and providing single-use pencils. Many traditional voting locations had to be re-considered, either because they did not comply with new public health orders, or because they were being used as mass vaccination clinics. Elections Canada further expanded options to use vote-by-mail and advanced voting to limit in-person contacts on Election Day.

Due to public health restrictions across the country, many traditional campaign events – such as indoor rallies or in-person meetings – were rethought. In some provinces, canvassing in large buildings (like high rises) was prohibited. Several aspects of the campaign relied on effective digital organizing: nomination meetings were held via Zoom, call-centre volunteers phone-banked using digital tools, and campaigns were forced to use more digital outreach than ever before. Many campaign volunteers and employees worked from home, rather than from a more central campaign office.

While much bigger in scale, the federal election was not the only campaign to take place in Canada amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Five provincial

and territorial elections took place under COVID conditions: in New Brunswick, British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, and Nova Scotia. Government responses to COVID were significant considerations for voters in each election, frequently forming the basis of why that government should be re-elected. With the exception of the Nova Scotia election, every government that triggered an election was returned to power and voter turnout went down.

Not only did the pandemic affect election and outreach organization, but it also affected voter intentions. Due to the health, social, and economic impacts of the pandemic, many people in Canada were disengaged from the election. For the first few weeks of the campaign, voters struggled with the justification for having an election at all. Ultimately, COVID-19 negatively affected voter turnout as it limited engagement opportunities, motivations to vote, and disrupted normal voting behaviours.

SUMMARY OF DEBRIEF PROCESS

As with every campaign, it's important to identify what went well and what went poorly in order to learn lessons for the next campaign. Shortly after the 2021 election, Jagmeet Singh asked Bob Dewar to lead a review of the NDP campaign. Singh said he was proud of the campaign that was run but was also disappointed by the results, highlighting there were several ridings where New Democrats were very close to winning.⁵

Committee members were tasked with undertaking a review of the campaign, with a specific focus on the barriers that limited our success and what prevented the party from winning more seats in Ontario and Quebec. The committee was further tasked with providing recommendations to the party on what actions it can take in the next 18 to 24 months in order to prepare for another campaign. Committee members were instructed to focus on those practical goals that we need to address in the short- and long-term to elect more NDP Members of Parliament.

On October 12, 2021, the first meeting of the Debrief Committee took place. The committee membership included:

- Bob Dewar, Chair
- Dhananjai (DJ) Kohli, Member, President of Canada's NDP
- Rosane Doré Lefebvre, Member, Vice President of Canada's NDP
- Raymond Guardia, Member

The committee wishes to thank the volunteers that assisted the committee with its work.

Committee Activities

- Central Campaign team debrief activities:
 - 11 Departmental exit reports submitted
 - 12 Debriefs with Department Heads and Campaign Director
- EDA Outreach
 - 182 Survey Submissions Received by Debrief Committee
 - 9 Regional Roundtables with Campaign Directors and EDA Members
 - 26 Candidate Interviews
- Caucus Outreach
 - 1 Listening Session held with NDP Caucus
 - 4 Individual meetings with elected Caucus members
- Governing Bodies Debrief Activities:
 - 8 Debrief Sessions with Federal Council Commissions
- Other Debrief Activities:
 - 2 Debriefs with external organizations
 - 3 Debriefs with Vendors

An electronic survey was created and sent to all candidates, EDA Presidents, the organizers distribution lists and campaign managers on November 1, 2021.

The committee wishes to express its gratitude to those who gave their time and shared their experiences with the committee. The committee is hopeful that the recommendations we put forward will make future campaigns easier, impactful, and better for those who choose to participate in them.

⁵ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-singh-to-tell-caucus-that-indigenous-rights-are-a-top-priority-for-ndp/>

WHAT WE HEARD

The committee decided to approach the report by categorizing what we heard through the departments of the Central Campaign. Based on the information that was submitted to the committee, each section of campaign is summarized below from the perspective of those in the Department. When provided to the committee, we worked to include external feedback and recommendations based on the surveys, interviews, and submissions that we received. It is our hope that both the external feedback and recommendations will be given consideration in the future direction of the party.

Organization

The Organization Team's objectives for the campaign were to run a full slate of 338 candidates, re-elect the incumbent Members of Parliament, pick up more seats in Parliament, and to support campaigns and candidates. 338 candidates from diverse backgrounds, including a record number of equity-seeking candidates, were secured and all incumbent MPs were re-elected. The Department expressed a feeling of bittersweetness that the gains in seats weren't what was hoped for, and a desire for a larger team to help with candidate support.

The department highlighted that there is a need to "improve our fundraising culture". A new fundraising program, tested with incumbent MPs, was extremely helpful to the department and allowed them to focus on candidate search and support for non-incumbent candidates. Having a dedicated staff person to support fundraising for incumbent MPs and pre-determined battleground ridings was very helpful. For non-incumbent ridings, building fundraising capacity and offering training to local staff is essential to all EDAs.

The search for new candidates was time-consuming and long, but ultimately proved worthwhile with a full-slate of nominees. An intense focus on getting candidates on the ballot until E-21 made it hard for the organization team to do anything else, with many outreach resources being spent on candidate search.

A shortage of effective organizers meant individual field staff were assigned too many ridings and were not able to spend the time they wished to on each campaign. The department expressed the need for more central organizers to spend more time with individual campaigns, and having those organizers in place well ahead of the election.

The nature of the COVID campaign created new opportunities that should be continued and obstacles to overcome for future campaigns. The Central Official Agents Program was well-received by candidates and organizers and was very helpful in recruiting candidates. As many campaign tools were digital, there were issues with training and communication. Tools like Campaign Dashboard were helpful and time-saving, where other tools like Mobilize and CallHub were unreliable and a source of frustration for organizers and local campaigns. Improved onboarding, training, and consistent use of important campaign tools is essential for future successes.

External Feedback

- **Start Earlier** – local campaigns shared that beginning campaign work earlier is a huge asset. From fundraising, nominating candidates, ensuring campaign staff are in place, and making sure campaign resources are shared early on lead to successful campaigns.
- **Better Communication** – establishing a clear line of communication and making sure that responsibilities are outlined is crucial. A more collaborative approach in nominating candidates ahead of an election is needed. Several campaigns were upset that it took a long time to receive answers from their organizers or to receive materials (either generic or localized). Some campaigns were unaware of the support central could offer.
- **Improved Training** – where some campaigns benefitted from party resources, others struggled immensely. Consistent training on digital tools, volunteer recruitment and engagement, campaign logistics, and GOTV are needed on an ongoing basis.

- **Engagement Outside of Campaigns** – campaigns would benefit from open communication with the Central office and ongoing training between campaigns. Some EDAs need to be developed and work to become more self-sufficient. Non-winning candidates can be asked to run again and build on the momentum from close campaigns and name recognition.
- **Financial Support** – campaigns expressed a wide spectrum of financial assets and capabilities through the campaign.
- **Hire More Staff** – in virtually all areas of campaigns, more staff are needed to support the work of candidates, EDAs, campaigns, and volunteers.
- **Hire more Equity Staff** – having more employees who are members of marginalized and historically-oppressed communities will improve the workplace and culture of the NDP as well as produce the results the NDP are hoping for in campaigns.

Recommendations:

- Better and more communications with EDAs about organizing, the candidate nomination processes and the windows for fundraising.

DATA

The Data Department provided essential data infrastructure to the central campaign and to EDAs. They were responsible for working with contractors to create and publish digital ads, and to use and collect information about voters to deliver results on E-Day. Throughout the campaign, the data department supported EDAs with using digital tools such as Populus, Dandelion, CallHub, and others.

Extra money for digital ads made a real difference to local campaigns, but there were ongoing issues with the digital tools used on E-Day. Both CallHub and Dandelion crashed when they were needed most. The Data Department advised that capacity testing for these tools is needed ahead of the next campaign.

Going forward, the Data Department recommended that the party continue training EDAs to use data tools and to maintain election modelling between campaigns. Having a data department that can continue and increase digital engagement and digital ads, testing ads with market audiences, and working with our provincial counterparts to share knowledge will be necessary ahead of the next election.

Recommendation:

- Test creative with market audiences to ensure maximum outreach.

PRODUCTS

The Products Team were responsible for the design and delivery of various products, such as signs, hand-outs, advertisements and social media-shareables.

Products worked closely with every branch of the campaign to ensure messaging was consistent, meaningful and accessible to the NDP audience. Often working with extremely tight deadlines, Products expressed the need for a clear line of coordination between departments. Failures to communicate effectively with Products on what was needed led to stressful turn-around times, side-lining of other important projects, and wasted money in printing.

Due to the short timeline between elections, it was decided early on that the branding of the 2021 campaign would be essentially the same as the 2019 campaign. Products felt this was the correct decision and allowed them to focus on getting products into material to central and local campaigns quickly. The products team expressed frustration that, while they were limited within the existing brand of the NDP, outside contractors were given the creative freedom to define their work.

External Feedback

- **More Timely Delivery of Products** – several campaigns shared that they received products later than desired (such as leaflets for door knocking), or too late for use at all.
- **Products Literacy** – An over-reliance on insider terminology left people confused about what products were available to them. Using accessible, lay-person language would be helpful to people unfamiliar with ordering products.
- **Better communication on Products**– some campaigns felt limited by the products that were offered to them, and others did not know what products they could use. Being upfront about availability, timelines, and the process of acquiring materials would avoid confusion and develop expectations. The Committee heard that the use of Asana was extremely helpful in managing projects.

- **Chain of Command** – both internally and externally, confusion about who contractors reported was problematic.

Recommendations:

- Give EDAs access to templates and historical products for campaigns to choose from for use locally, and remain open to coordinate with EDAs on what can be distributed in the riding.

COMMUNICATIONS

The core objective of the Communications team was to share the message of the NDP with as many people as possible. This meant having our message in national, regional, and local news cycles, contrasting the NDP with the Liberals every single day, and making sure that local candidates were equipped to share that message on the ground. It was expressed to the committee that the Communications team was less focussed on communications and more on media relations, leading to internal confusion about what the role of communications would be.

Part of the Communications team's job was to ensure that candidates across the country stayed on brand and stuck to the NDP message guide. Communications was successful in message discipline - people generally knew what the NDP message was and what principles the party stood for.

The department identified several areas of improvement, with an acute focus on the need for better preparation ahead of future campaigns. Maintaining accurate regional and specialty media lists is necessary at all times, and having a larger communications team to manage local media and comms would be an asset. Communications with media or voters often fell flat because of a lack of validators, quotes, and other substantive content. Such content must be prepared in advance of the next campaign.

Internally, clearer lines of support are needed to support candidates. A number of items, such as local candidate debate preparations, were neglected due to unclear expectations as to who was responsible for the material. Having a larger communications staff integrated in regional campaigns can help build better media relationships and support candidates in a more meaningful way.

External Feedback

- **Engagement with minority language media** - Expanding media outreach with the non-English or French media was worthwhile and well-received. Growing our outreach to new language markets should be continued.
- **Support for Media Interviews and Events** - local campaigns expressed gratitude for the support that was given to them for local media requests.

Recommendations:

- Decide where the responsibilities of Director of Communications and Media Relations will be housed within the campaign and provide clarity to all campaign staff about those duties.
- Maintain media market lists, including minority language lists, so that they are ready to go before the writ drops.

DIGITAL

The in-house Digital department was launched in October 2020, and is inclusive of social media, web, organic acquisition, and mobilization efforts. The 2021 Campaign was the largest digital campaign in NDP history, consisting of three programs: Digital Mobilization, Digital Communications, and Digital Web and Paid.

The Digital Mobilization Program ran under the mantra “votes, volunteers, and dollars.” It supported Team Jagmeet in mobilizing events and voters, online fundraising (through email and SMS), and influencer management. During the first two weeks of the campaign, this program met and exceeded its goals in fundraising and volunteer recruitment. While immediately successful, the program found issues with its infrastructure and reliability, gathering data from multiple sources, and a shortage of staff.

Digital Communications was responsible for “amplifying and illuminating big moments”, supporting acquisition and GOTV efforts, and creating content for online social media in partnership with other departments. Jagmeet’s online presence was a talking-point for many Canadians, and the program benefitted from creative license and pre-established message guides and voter profiles.

Digital Web and Paid were responsible for candidate websites, data optimization and analytics, and paid digital ads. Ad buying and ad creative was largely contracted out early on in the campaign. Because work wasn’t done in-house, there were delays in communications and turn-around for urgent content. Having more clearly defined roles with contractors, and building capacity in-house could rectify the issues faced during the campaign.

Though it had its issues, the Digital Department expressed a healthy optimism for the future. It is not lost on the Debrief committee that the

Digital department is one of the most racially diverse departments within the NDP. Between Jagmeet’s leadership and the competency of the young women and racially diverse young people in this department, their successes show that representation matters.

External Feedback

- **Quicker Turn-around Needed** – some local campaigns shared that slow-turn around in setting up their website delayed outreach opportunities, especially in providing “further information” resources on printed material.
- **Use of Social Media** – local candidates shared that Jagmeet’s and the federal party’s use of social media helped them build support on the ground, especially with young voters. There was suggestion that Jagmeet’s notoriety on TikTok makes him appear “less serious”, which needs to be addressed.
- **Providing Website Support** – many campaigns expressed appreciation for the website development and support they received, although some wished they would have received this support faster.

Recommendations:

- Maintain a robust digital presence and share that presence with EDAs to ensure the NDP message and achievements are being shared with Canadians.

OPERATIONS

The Operations Department are responsible for keeping the NDP in-order during the campaign. From budgeting, technical support, and administration, the Operations team keeps the NDP running.

The Department reported that the NDP was kept on-budget, and had very few unexpected costs. Fundraising targets during the campaign were met, and a repayment plan is in place to paydown campaign debt. The department shared that having official agents offered to EDAs went well from their perspective.

Operations advised that better campaign-related practices could be in place. The pre-election budget was “ad hoc”, though that was partly due to the function of a minority Parliament and the uncertainty around when the writ would drop. Bringing together department heads earlier would help with the budget process, rather than having a “top down approach”, and a better system for discretionary spending would be useful.

Ahead of the next election, Operations advised that having more training available to campaign staff would be beneficial. EDAs will be on their own for staffing, and having campaign and field staff in place earlier would help ensure proper training on elections compliance.

Recommendations:

- Review Campaign Procedures with the goal of exploring other EDA roles that could be centralized.
- Modernize Fundraising tools to ensure that the NDP are keeping up with 21st century fundraising practices.

TOUR

The Tour team was responsible for the Leader’s Tour across the country. Duties included scheduling of travel, coordinating appearances with local venues and stakeholders, and working directly with the Leader in battleground ridings to share the NDP message. The tour team was successful in creating and executing an in-depth calendar of events (both in-person and digitally) and aligning community visits with the theme of the day.

The reception to the Leader’s tour was overwhelmingly positive. Having the Leader in communities speaking about issues helps to build relationships with people who live there, with local EDAs, candidates, and stakeholders. Throughout the campaign, the Leader remained more popular than other federal leaders and received a favourable response during visits. Building on this momentum is crucial to success in the next election.

Tour identified a lack of experience and staff working on the Tour in the lead-up to the election. Not all staff were using the calendar to coordinate important information (such as daily message and digital assets). Further, an additional staff member could ease the burden in working on logistics and vendors.

External Feedback

- **More Visits from the Leader** – Riding teams really liked hosting Jagmeet in their communities. His presence mobilized volunteers and crowds, and raised the profile of local candidates. The committee heard repeatedly that Jagmeet should spend less time in the House of Commons and more time in communities building relationships.
- **Build on the B-Tour** – The NDP is more than just Jagmeet, and local campaigns could have benefitted from having star-incumbents do riding visits (especially for those ridings that the Leader is not able to visit). While there was some coordination between campaigns and incumbents visiting other ridings, institutionalizing the B-Tour would be of benefit.

- **Coordination on Issues** – a handful of campaigns expressed concerns that about the events that were being held. Issues ranged from daily issues not aligning with local priorities, to talking points actively hurting local candidates. Greater communication is needed between the Tour team and EDAs to ensure that Leader visits are beneficial to everyone.
- **Coordination on Validators** – in one instance, validators at the Leaders event endorsed non-NDP candidates. Not only did this gain national attention, but it was a situation that could have been avoided.

Recommendations:

- Institutionalize the B-Tour and encourage caucus members and key supporters to coordinate visits with battleground ridings across the country.

RESEARCH AND POLICY

The Research and Policy team were responsible for ensuring that the Leader’s and candidates’ daily messaging was consistent with NDP Policy (the Platform) through briefing documents, for providing proof-points for our platform commitments, for doing opposition monitoring and assisting with candidate requests. The bulk of the Research and Policy team’s work was to respond to stakeholder questionnaires and letters regarding the Party’s position on issues.

Having the platform done ahead of the writ drop helped the Department immensely. Clear policy positions helped the team draft responses in a timelier manner and allowed the team to focus more on day-to-day preparation work, obscure policy questions, and candidate support. The ability to work from home suited the style of work of many in the department, but did regrettably hinder the social dynamics of a normal campaign.

The Committee heard from many within and outside of the Research and Policy department of several areas of improvement. Generally speaking, several issues within the platform lacked a consistent national articulation that was viable in all regions of the country. There was also a lack of validation of our platform, making it seem as though our policy objectives were not achievable. For example, on the NDP climate platform there were no country-wide issues that the party could claim as their key message on the environment. Furthermore, the party lacked climate-minded validators to step up and say that not only was our platform achievable in the timeframe we established, but also that it was better when compared to other parties climate policies. In general, our lack of validators was exacerbated by the delayed release of the platform costing and a perception that our solution to a problem was to “throw money at it”. This hurt our credibility with voters and did not provide the true “fix” that they are looking for.

The Committee also heard that the NDP must have a more formal relationship with organized labour, maintained not only by the Leader and caucus members, but also by staff. Where labour organizations wanted to be supportive of the NDP, we heard that some unions were supportive of other parties and held a “Don’t Vote Conservative” mentality. The committee heard that there must be more collaboration on issues with labour that we can take credit for, and that the Leader must do more engagement with workplaces and blue-collar workers.

External Feedback

- **Aligning Validators** – Both the Central campaign and local campaigns would have benefitted having external validators to promote the NDP Platform.
- **Collaboration on Questionnaires** – in responding to stakeholder surveys, the research team should consult with local campaigns when possible. The NDP Indigenous Commission had positive experiences with the Research team. Other campaigns heard about surveys and letters from prominent local stakeholders through media and would have been able to provide language if they were approached.
- **Regional Platforms** – the desire to have targeted, regional platforms was repeatedly stated. In many constituencies, the NDP appeared light on policy when compared with their opponents. This was particularly problematic in rural and remote areas, where the PPC made significant inroads by articulating clear “solutions” to the current state of affairs. Having regional platforms done ahead of the campaign gives candidates the opportunity to build on them during the campaign.
- **Improve Policy “Fixes”** – many people told the campaign that there was a lack of solutions the NDP were offering. There was a perception that we were only able to talk about why the Liberals were bad but incapable of offering anything better.

- **Not Just Trudeau** – an exclusive messaging focus on Trudeau isn’t helpful in the Prairies, or rural and remote communities. Sharp contrasts with the Conservatives and the PPC must show the NDP is the voice of the working class.

Recommendations:

- Release Election Platform and Platform costing simultaneously, and line up validators willing to endorse the platform
- Take advantage of established knowledge base within Federal Council to build the platform and party positions.

“It’s like someone is drowning: Jagmeet is very caring and genuinely understands what the person is going through. He then tells them other leaders cannot help. But then he didn’t throw a buoy, a rope that gives hope of getting out of there, something concrete to hold on to, something clear and real that will change things in Canadians’ day-to-day life, something to make the situation different, and better.”
– Central Campaign Staffer

QUICK RESPONSE-BATTLEGROUND-ENDGAME

Quick response, also known as Rapid Response, was responsible for targeting NDP opponents, supporting daily announcements, and managing candidate issues as they came up. This department also focussed on battleground riding supports and endgame messaging.

The feedback the committee heard from this department was largely positive. A well-staffed, efficient team was able to take measured risks to hit opponents and get their candidates in the news. This team had clear direction from its leadership, had a dedicated graphic designer for quick turn around and benefitted from the authority given to make speedy decisions.

The committee heard from many people about the need for a stronger endgame. While the communications team did an effective job of keeping candidates across the country on-message, the party was unable to overcome the issue of strategic voting. Their “Why NDP” message was not resonating. Articulating the endgame message relying solely on the Leader’s Tour is not enough, and future messaging must be shared with and executed by local and regional campaigns. Having all staff and all aspects of the campaign coordinated on endgame messaging through products, advertisements, media lists, and social networks is needed.

External Feedback

- **No Ballot-Box Question** – the committee heard that local campaigns struggled to compel voters to get to the ballot box. Having a clearer reason to tell potential voters about why the NDP, rather than the status quo, was missing.
- **Focus on the Battlegrounds** – several respondents said the party should focus on incumbent and battleground ridings, rather than a full 338-candidate election.

Recommendation

- Continue targeted opposition research in between campaigns.

In-Focus: The Campaign in Quebec and Ontario

QUEBEC

The 2019 Campaign introduced Jagmeet to Quebecers. His appeal was emotional and the campaign addressed by saying “I’m not like the others, I will fight for you”. While the results were devastating, losing all but one MP and garnering 11% of the vote, the feeling in 2019 was that the foundations for future growth had been laid. Indeed, shortly after the election, a Leger poll placed Jagmeet as the fourth most popular politician in Quebec.⁶

The enthusiasm and optimism New Democrats felt across the country going into the 2021 Campaign was not present in Quebec. Public opinion polls pegged our support on average at 11% but some put us in the 6%-8% range and Jagmeet’s popularity was significantly lower in Quebec when compared with the rest of the country.⁷

What happened?

There was considerable damage to our standing in Quebec by the perception that the NDP and Jagmeet are anti-Quebec. This perception was exacerbated by the public debate regarding systemic racism and our inability to find a way to discuss this issue in the Quebec context that didn’t fuel the narrative of “Quebec bashing”. This inability put us on the wrong side of public opinion in Quebec going into the 2021 Campaign.

Consequently, the NDP entered the campaign hoping for the best but preparing for the worst.

The Party hoped to light a spark, to connect with Quebecers by once again making an emotional appeal to them. This time Jagmeet said; “Quebecers have had to be bold and daring. I’ve had to be bold and daring too, so imagine what we can accomplish if we are bold and daring together”.

Bloc Quebecois Leader Yves-Francois Blanchet, who had the luxury of campaigning in only one province and had a media presence that dwarfed Jagmeet’s, decided to devote his most virulent attacks against Jagmeet. By continuously labelling Jagmeet as anti-Quebec, our attempts to get past these issues and gain traction on our own messaging proved difficult. It was only in the TVA debate that Jagmeet was able to push back forcibly and eloquently. After the TVA debate, Blanchet dropped his attacks.

In the end, far too much of the Campaign was devoted to playing defence. The NDP was limited to an overall vote at 9.8% and re-elected Alexandre Boulerice. Despite the fact that it was an error-free campaign, Jagmeet’s performance in French was good and the ads and tour events were very well received. The committee would also like to take note of Ruth Ellen Brosseau’s inspiring return to the campaign trail and a gutsy campaign by Nima Machouf in Laurier-Ste-Marie; in both ridings, the margin was tighter than in 2019.

Mindful of our mandate to begin to chart a path forward, the Committee offers the following sets of recommendations.

Structural Issues

The “two-track” approach to campaigning, which was developed during the early years of Jack Layton’s leadership, is no longer providing the Party with the benefits it once did. Simply put, the current underrepresentation of Quebecers in the central teams coupled with the understaffing of the Quebec team produced frustration. Much greater integration is now required between how we campaign in Quebec and the rest of the country.

The Committee recommends:

- The National Campaign Director should be accompanied by a Deputy Director whose responsibility is to oversee the Quebec campaign.
- Each central department should have a director or deputy director who is a Quebecer.

⁶ <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/these-are-the-10-most-and-least-popular-politicians-in-quebec-according-a-new-poll-1.4741600>

⁷ <https://abacusdata.ca/what-canadians-think-about-the-leaders/>

- A closer working relationship should be forged between the ad and polling agencies hired in Quebec with those hired for the rest of the country.
- Due to the absence of a provincial infrastructure in Quebec, a robust team should be put in place as soon as possible to assist EDAs to select candidates, prepare the ground game, raise money and ensure regional media coverage.

APPEALING TO QUEBEC VOTERS:

The feedback the Committee heard is that the damage caused by the period between 2019 and 2021 is generally behind us and that we once again have an opportunity to grow our support. The Committee has come to two conclusions:

1. Jagmeet remains our greatest asset, and
2. The NDP must show through actions and not words that Quebecers are a priority for the party.

The Committee Recommends:

- More of Jagmeet's normal day should be spent speaking in French.
- Debate preparations in French should become an ongoing activity.
- A team should be created to discuss Quebec issues and general strategy with Jagmeet on a regular basis.
- The question "how will this play in Quebec?" should be posed before important decisions are taken.
- Jagmeet should visit Quebec more often, and should sometimes make significant announcements in Quebec.
- Increase Jagmeet's presence in Quebec media markets, including through 'lifestyle' TV shows and talk shows where he can highlight his personality.
- A team of bilingual MPs should be created and encouraged to visit target areas in Quebec regularly. They should attend events, hold public meetings or media events with candidates whenever possible.

In closing this section, and as a prelude to the next, the Committee believes that proceeding in this manner will not only improve our standing in Quebec, but that being more viable in Quebec will also make us more appealing to that large segment of voters in Ontario who will only vote for truly national parties.

ONTARIO

New Democrats approached the campaign in Ontario with high hopes, and the feedback the committee heard from organizers and campaigns was largely positive. Especially in those ridings that were considered battlegrounds, the committee heard that fundraising was greater than expected, campaigns were well co-ordinated, and tour events were well-received. Some campaigns expressed frustration with a lack of communication with central.

Campaigns in Ontario highlighted two key areas of success: the Leader's Tour, and engagement with young people. The Leader was well-liked across the country, and his presence in the province helped to engage with a lot of people who had never considered voting for New Democrats. The Leader's presence on social media helped immensely to engage with young and first-time voters. One campaign identified that historically Liberal families are having children who are more left-leaning than their parents, and Jagmeet's ability to resonate with them means good things for the party. There was concern that, while young campaigners were energized for the 2021 campaign, the support and resources may not be present in EDAs to keep them engaged until the next one.

The committee did hear about the outsized impact that strategic voting and motivations to vote played on the ground. While these issues are not unique or exclusive to Ontario, their impact was magnified. This is also exacerbated by the idea among Ontario voters that the federal government is "their government", as compared to other provinces, where voters identified with the provincial level of government more closely. The result of that was that, for Ontario voters, the calculus of gaming out the results played a significant role in deciding who to vote for, both in stopping the Conservatives (in downtown Toronto and the 905) and in stopping Justin Trudeau (in rural Ontario and the north). The NDP's endgame messaging was unable to change voter's minds or convince them to "take a risk".

Again, these issues are not unique to Ontario, but in considering how many battleground campaigns are in the province, and in how many we came within 15% of victory, the committee wanted to highlight this issue.

While people in Ontario liked Jagmeet and the support for the Liberals was waning, there was no significant upswing in support for the NDP as was hoped. The committee heard that messaging around "strategic voting" was never nailed down for ridings in downtown Toronto and Brampton. Simply stated, the NDP did not offer enough of a reason for people to disrupt the status quo, and concerns about Conservatives coming to power were significant. Jagmeet was going after Trudeau a lot but was failing to communicate how he would be a better alternative.

Building on the momentum from 2021 will be crucial. Not only in keeping young people engaged with their EDAs and with the NDP, but also in keeping support available to the EDAs. Local campaigns expressed the need for education packages to assist with training, keeping organizers engaged, and having more input on NDP policy to feel a part of something bigger. Engaging with candidates early, identifying star candidates, and establishing expectations for a campaign are essential for long-term victories. Some candidates knew they were not likely to win, but small vote gains today could lead to bigger successes.

NORTHERN, RURAL AND REMOTE RIDINGS

In the context of a COVID-19 election, campaigns in Northern, rural and remote Ontario had unique experiences that are worth mentioning.

The experience among local campaigns was that there is a deep disdain for Justin Trudeau and folks are eager to get rid of him, turning to the Conservatives or to the People's Party as their solution. The feelings of uncertainty, precarity and vaccine hesitancy were seized upon by the PPC, and campaigns communicated a significant shift towards serious consideration of the PPC. This was most prominent in Timmins-James Bay, where the PPC finished with 13% of the vote total. Engaging with these voters is crucial.

Some campaigns experienced significant organizational issues. Outside organizers did not fully understand the context of a Northern campaign, most notably with limited internet and infrastructure resources. While a Northern Ontario platform was helpful, having campaign staff able to work with local staff and communicate that message to local voters was lacking. Additionally, having bilingual campaign materials is crucial in many rural and remote Ontario communities.

Engagement with Indigenous voters was done too late, with an Indigenous Rock-the-Vote coordinator brought in a couple weeks into the campaign. While not exclusive to Ontario, Elections Canada did not provide voting stations in some reserves and communities, making it difficult to get potential voters out. This is a serious issue that Elections Canada must address and NDP must be more vocal about accessibility issues ahead of all future elections.

The Committee Recommends:

- Amplifying what New Democrats win for Ontarians before and during the campaign. Voters in Ontario did not see our wins on issues like paid sick leave and did not see the NDP as the party to get things done for them.
- Have a stronger, more consistent response to voters who believe they must vote strategically.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE

1. Adopt a regional model for campaigns.

In large, urban areas having a regional model would work well. A regional approach to campaigning has worked in British Columbia and would help to remove the stigma of battleground, incumbent and hero riding labels. Such models are more cost effective, allowing several campaigns to share one campaign office and several resources. When possible, regional offices should be opened well in advance of a campaign. Work would need to be done with EDAs to adopt this approach well ahead of writ drop.

2. Maintain a Permanent Campaign

New Democrats cannot win more seats if we are dormant between campaigns. The committee heard the need to fundraise, nominate candidates, prepare materials, and establish organizers well ahead of future campaigns. One elected MP told the committee that the formula for winning is to have \$20,000 in the bank and 20 committed volunteers before the writ drops – meaning an ongoing campaign effort is needed.

3. Maintain a Year-Round Data Program

Future campaigns will be reliant on information about our voters and on maintaining a strong digital presence. The party should invest in digital outreach and digital tools to build and maintain modern campaign infrastructure.

4. Be bold on communicating what the NDP has done and will do for Canadians

The Party must do better in differentiating between us and the other parties. Highlighting not only the victories that we have won but also the specific policy fixes we will bring is essential to defining a ballot-box question for voters and showing Canadians that the NDP are working for them.

5. Continue and refine a 21st century fundraising program between elections.

Fundraising is essential. Elected caucus members should be spending a specific amount of time fundraising, and EDAs must have the skills and tools needed to fundraise.

6. Establish key working relationships and expectations with vendors

The Party must do a better job of building productive working relationships with our vendors. There must be more clarity about the mandate and it must be communicated. There must also be clearer chains of communication with regards to responsibilities and reporting structures in working with vendors.

7. Expand the Leader's Tour outside of the Campaign

The Leader is the NDP's greatest asset. The Leader needs to show his personality between elections, visiting EDAs and speaking to workers in their workplace, youth, seniors, and leaders in the business community. The Leader must also be seen in big media markets talking about what the NDP is doing and can do for Canadians. We should also explore remote options to get the Leader into more gatherings.

8. NDP Caucus needs to focus on picking up seats.

The elected NDP Members of Parliament must continue fighting on the issues that matter most to Canadians – universal pharmacare and dental care, wealth inequality, and other issues affecting ordinary families. In addition, the NDP Caucus should explore new opportunities to win seats, such as "buddy EDA" programs to assist the NDP in other ridings.

9. Embrace diversity of thought

We believe that having some creative tension can yield better policy choices and campaign directions that the party would benefit from. Bringing in more voices to be involved in the strategic direction of campaign will help the party grow and help the party benefit from the complexity of voices that exist among New Democrats.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The members of the Debrief Committee remain optimistic about the NDP's future if the party is able to build on the lessons of the 2021 election.

The impact of COVID-19 made this campaign unique from previous ones. Given the personal, political, and practical effects of COVID-19, the committee believes that the 2021 campaign is not indicative of the NDP's future. While there are certainly lessons to be learned, the party must consider that this campaign took place amidst a global pandemic that dominated the minds and hearts of voters. To treat the 2021 campaign as we would any other campaign would be to ignore the circumstances that COVID-19 had on staff, voters, and the media environment in which it took place.

We also believe the NDP has a solid foundation on which to build for future campaigns. While we did not achieve the outcome in terms of seats in the House of Commons, New Democrats were the only major party who grew our vote share. There is a clear appetite for New Democratic policies and to have New Democrats in Parliament. The Party must continue to organize between campaigns, to focus on improving the lives of Canadians, and communicate our goals and our victories with the passion the same passion that brought us all into politics.