

## *A Critical Gap in Democracy? ‘Yawn,’ Say Canadian Politicians.*

China and India have been accused of exploiting the opaque nomination contests of Canadian political parties to meddle in elections.



A Sikh temple in Brampton, a suburb of Toronto. Brampton is home to the largest Sikh community in Canada. Cole Burston for The New



By [Norimitsu Onishi](#)

Reporting from Brampton and Markham, Ontario

July 21, 2024, 5:01 a.m. ET

It is the “Wild West” of Canada’s political system, a “critical gap” in its democracy. But Canadian political leaders — and some foreign nations — are big fans.

Canadian elections have long rested on what many experts say is an undemocratic foundation: opaque nomination races in which political parties

select their candidates for general contests in a process mystifying to most Canadians.

Party bosses enjoy an unshakable grip. Money flows, often unaccounted for. Rules tend to be lax, with no impartial judge in sight.

“After Tammany Hall, the U.S. went through a series of reforms that resulted in the modern primary system,” said [Michael Chong](#), a high-ranking lawmaker from the Conservative Party. “But our system is largely based on a 19th-century system.”

Though the machinations behind nominations have long been an open secret among insiders, they have recently come under a harsh spotlight with Canada’s continuing sweeping investigation into foreign meddling in its political system.

Nominations have been singled out as glaring weaknesses in the country’s democratic system that some foreigners — primarily China and India — are increasingly exploiting to back certain candidates and oppose others.

Lawmakers from Canada’s major parties passed a [bill](#) last month to help fend off and prosecute foreign meddling, including with the creation of a registry of foreign agents.



Casting a ballot in Montreal during the 2021 election in Canada. An inquiry found that China and India had tried to interfere in nomination races to decide who would run for Parliament. Credit...Andrej Ivanov/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

But the new law did not address how parties choose their candidates despite increasing calls to overhaul nominations — including by placing them under the oversight of [Elections Canada](#), the nonpartisan agency responsible for conducting federal elections.

The holdouts? Parties themselves.

“Party leaders want to have a level of power so that they can abuse their power and not be held accountable,” said Duff Conacher, a founder of [Democracy Watch](#), an Ottawa-based watchdog organization.

In each federal electoral riding, or district, parties hold nomination races to choose candidates for parliamentary elections. Those vying to win try to sign up as many party members as possible and then must ensure they show up for the nomination vote.

A yearlong public inquiry into foreign interference [described](#) nomination races as “gateways for foreign states who wish to interfere in our democratic processes.” A special parliamentary committee’s redacted report [concluded](#) that nominations were “a particularly soft target” and “a critical gap” in Canada’s democracy, recommending that they be regulated the same way general elections are.

The findings were of little surprise in the immigrant-rich suburbs of Toronto that, along with similar neighborhoods around [Vancouver](#), have been the main targets of foreign interference.

In Brampton — home to a large Indian diaspora, including Canada’s biggest Sikh population — Sikh activists have warned for years about interference by Indian government officials and their proxies in nomination races.

India uses pressure and money, activists say, to sideline Sikh candidates — especially those critical of the Indian government’s policies toward the Sikh minority population in India and those who advocate a separate Sikh homeland in India.

“In Brampton, the Indian Consulate decides who they want to help and who will be a party’s candidate,” said Jarmanjit Singh, a mortgage broker and Sikh activist who ran unsuccessfully in 2017 for a nomination for a provincial election. Community organizations with ties to the consulate then back the candidates on the ground, he added.



Outside a mall in Markham, a city near Toronto. Both China and India have tried to influence party nomination races for general elections in the Toronto area, an inquiry found. Credit...Ian Willms for The New York Times

Sikh activists say the Indian government tries to curtail the influence of Canadian Sikhs, who otherwise have had an outsized impact on Canada's political system through elections and appointments to senior government positions.

The parliamentary committee described India as the second-biggest perpetrator of foreign meddling after China.

[Sanjay Kumar Verma](#), India's ambassador to Canada, said in an email that the Indian government "does not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries" and has not been given "concrete evidence" backing up the accusations.

"These allegations appear to be based on hearsay," he said, "possibly originating from anti-India extremist and terrorist elements based in Canada, who have a vested interest in undermining Canada-India relations and interfering in India's internal affairs."

Last year, Canada accused the Indian government of being behind the [killing](#) in Vancouver of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Canadian Sikh leader and supporter of a separate homeland. India has denied any involvement.

[Jaskaran Sandhu](#), a criminal lawyer and former leader of the [World Sikh Organization of Canada](#) who has been involved in political campaigns for several parties, said he had observed widespread foreign meddling in nominations.

“Parties are not very inclined to speak about nominations publicly,” he said, “because nominations are messy, nominations are often corrupt. Nominations are the dirty laundry of every political party.”



Jaskaran Sandhu has been involved in political campaigns for various parties. “Nominations are the dirty laundry of every political party,” he said. Credit...Ian Willms for The New York Times

Nominations are a mystery to most Canadians and even to party members because each party has different rules, said [Fred DeLorey](#), a former national campaign manager for the Conservative Party who said he had overseen more than 1,000 nominations.

“Political parties in Canada are private clubs,” Mr. DeLorey said, allowing them to carefully screen candidates and choose the strongest ones.

“At the end of the day, political parties are about winning elections,” he said.



Still, Mr. DeLorey does not believe party nominations need to be regulated, arguing that foreign meddling in Conservative nominations was not “something that’s happening widespread, if anywhere.”

In many districts, local party associations are often inactive, and candidates form committees only during nomination contests, said Jack Heath, a former deputy mayor of Markham, a suburb north of Toronto, and a veteran of Liberal Party campaigns.

“This is the Wild West,” Mr. Heath said.

In the past, buying memberships was a “relatively widespread” practice, he said. A candidate, he added, would gain instant supporters before a nomination vote by paying for their annual party membership fees — \$10 before the Liberals made membership free in 2016.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke in April during a public hearing held by an independent commission examining foreign interference in Canadian elections. Credit...Blair Gable/Reuters

In the continuing public inquiry, [evidence](#) also indicated how China and its proxies had capitalized on nominations’ freewheeling nature.

In a 2019 Liberal Party nomination race in Don Valley North, a Toronto district with a large Chinese diaspora, China “had a significant impact in getting” nominated a preferred candidate, [Han Dong](#), according to the parliamentary committee’s [report](#).

Buses transported 175 to 200 foreign students from China to vote, and the Chinese Consulate told them “that they must vote for Mr. Dong if they want to maintain their student visas,” according to the report.

Mr. Dong won the nomination by “a small margin” and cruised to victory in the general parliamentary election.

Nominations are an appealing target for foreign meddling, according to the report, “because the number of votes required to sway riding nominations is so small.”

And while all parties require members to be residents of a district to vote there, it is “relatively easy to show an altered phone bill with the wrong address, or a fraudulent letter from a school, in order to vote in a nomination,” the report said.

“You can fake it in five minutes,” said Bob Mok, a Hong Kong-born Canadian who has campaigned against Chinese government interference in the Toronto region. The Chinese Embassy in Ottawa, which has denied interfering in Canadian politics, did not respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Mok, who has been active in Conservative politics, said buying party memberships remained common. An individual pays for membership but is reimbursed later by a candidate, Mr. Mok said.



Outside the office of Han Dong, a member of Parliament. China “had a significant impact in getting” Mr. Dong nominated to run for office, according to a parliamentary committee’s report. Credit...Ian Willms for The New York Times

Still, party leaders are reluctant to tighten the system, Mr. Mok said.

“That would take away the absolute power of the absolute dictator of each party,” he said.

The Liberal Party — which has the loosest rules, allowing even foreigners living in Canada to become members and vote in nominations — did not make anyone available for an interview. A party spokesman, Parker Lund, said in a statement that “when it comes to nominations, the Liberal Party of Canada’s rules for electing a candidate are the most robust in Canadian politics.”

Good governance groups say the parties can no longer act as private clubs, especially with mounting evidence of foreign states’ exploiting the parties’ weaknesses.

The parties effectively control who gets into Parliament and receive significant public support through tax credits and reimbursement of election expenses, said [Sabreena Delhon](#), the head of the [Samara Center for Democracy](#), a Toronto-based organization that has studied nominations.

“It stands to reason that there be a higher standard for accountability in the interest of our democracy’s integrity,” Ms. Delhon said, adding that Elections Canada should be given oversight over the nominations.

Only the Green Party has shown any openness toward the idea.

[Elizabeth May](#), the Green leader, said in an interview that all nomination races should be regulated.

“It’s obviously a threat to democracy, and it’s easily fixed,” Ms. May said. “We need to act as leaders and send the message loud and clear that, no, Canada’s not a soft target.”

**[Norimitsu Onishi](#)** reports on life, society and culture in Canada. He is based in Montreal. [More about Norimitsu Onishi](#)

[https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/21/world/americas/canada-democracy-foreign-interference.html?campaign\\_id=301&emc=edit\\_ypgu\\_20240721&instance\\_id=129368&nl=your-places%3A-global-update&regi\\_id=177901256&segment\\_id=172758&te=1&user\\_id=eac38c6faf1f143145c18ad20dab966b](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/21/world/americas/canada-democracy-foreign-interference.html?campaign_id=301&emc=edit_ypgu_20240721&instance_id=129368&nl=your-places%3A-global-update&regi_id=177901256&segment_id=172758&te=1&user_id=eac38c6faf1f143145c18ad20dab966b)

The depravity of politics is there for us to see. Leadership rooted in love of “the people” and “the nation” is not what drives it. Biden, Trump—and as this indicates, Justin and all the rest—are only interested in the “democracy” that best offers *them* the opportunity to win. People too obviously lacking under TJB scrutiny to get elected dog catcher still control political processes & outcomes.