



Campaigning in Canada during a pandemic

One Saskatchewan candidate's experience campaigning during the COVID-19 crisis underlined how personal contact is always important to voters.

by David McGrane
December 28, 2020

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In June 2019, I officially became a candidate for the New Democratic Party in the October Saskatchewan provincial election. Since the Saskatchewan Party had won power in 2007, I had seen lots of cuts to education funding and a lack of concrete action on climate change. I believed that running to become an MLA would bring the change that our province desperately needed on these important issues.

As a political scientist who studies election campaigns and someone who has been involved in NDP campaigns since the late 1990s, I was excited to hit the campaign trail and pretty confident that I knew what to expect. In my riding of Saskatoon Churchill-Wildwood, the Saskatchewan Party had beat the NDP candidate by 12 per cent in the last election, so there was lots of work to be done. My team and I created a step-by-step plan of how we were going to win back our riding for the NDP.

In the winter of 2020, everything was going according to plan and we had accelerated our preparations due to rumours of the premier calling a snap election. Then, it happened: the COVID-19 pandemic hit and I quickly realized that my campaign would be much different than what I had imagined.

Over the course of the next eight months, my campaign was forced to revisit every aspect of our plans and adjust to the reality of campaigning during a global pandemic. In the end, I felt that we were able to run an effective local campaign. While we did not win, we did make progress. We lost to the Saskatchewan Party incumbent MLA Lisa Lambert by only 259 votes or 3 per cent of the total vote.

The lesson that I learned from the unique experience of being a candidate in a "COVID election" was that adaptability is one of the most important and underappreciated aspects of politics.



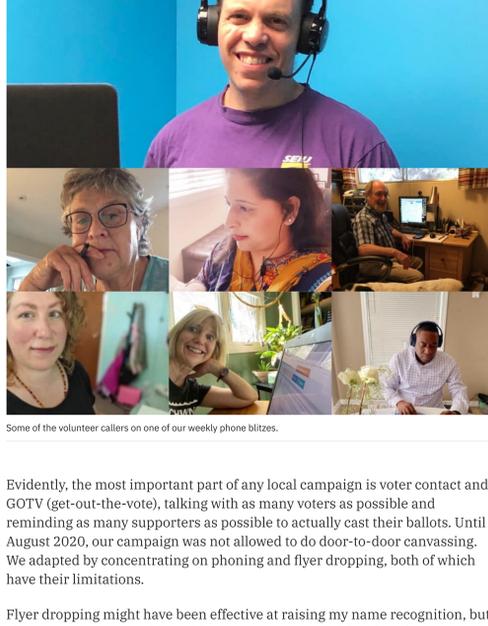
Getting ready to meet voters on the doorstep.

The pandemic meant that some traditional ways of fundraising, like selling tickets to a spaghetti supper, were out of the question. As such, we relied more heavily on another traditional method of fundraising: letter mail to donors followed up by phone calls. We were also able to hold virtual fundraising events and continue to send out multiple fundraising emails. One advantage of a virtual fundraising events was that overhead was effectively zero, so all of the proceeds went directly to the campaign.

Another aspect of our campaign that adapted well to the pandemic was digital outreach and outdoor advertising. Our ability to advertise on bus shelters and put up lawn signs was unaffected. We did shift more funds into online advertising based on the thinking that people would be spending more time on the internet during the pandemic. In particular, Facebook Live town halls were useful as a replacement for in-person events to raise awareness on what we considered to be important issues in the election. In fact, the number of people that watched our Facebook town halls was much larger than the number of people who would normally show up at traditional town hall held in-person.

The part of the campaign that was most challenging in terms of the COVID restrictions was team building. There is a social aspect to local campaigns that develops as volunteers gather at the campaign office after canvassing to exchange stories and share food. A candidate's office is also the site of events like volunteer appreciation nights and watch parties for the leader debates. Unfortunately, physical distancing requirements meant that we had to restrict access to our campaign office to only staff as well as develop disinfecting and contact tracing protocols.

The lack of in-person events meant that we had to recruit volunteers exclusively over the phone and by email. We also had to find ways to do volunteer training virtually. When someone did volunteer for us, we met them outdoors, gave them their tasks, and sent them on their way. With everybody wearing masks and trying to limit their contacts, there were few opportunities for mingling, shaking hands, and getting to know one another. As the candidate, I tried to compensate by speaking one-on-one with volunteers over the phone to thank them and get their views on how the campaign was going.



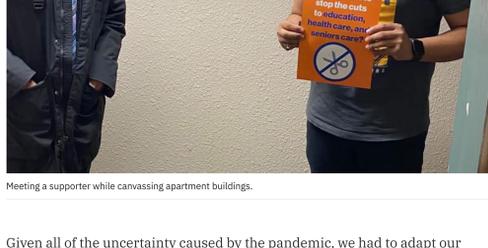
Some of the volunteer callers on one of our weekly phone blitzes.

Evidently, the most important part of any local campaign is voter contact and GOTV (get-out-the-vote), talking with as many voters as possible and reminding as many supporters as possible to actually cast their ballots. Until August 2020, our campaign was not allowed to do door-to-door canvassing. We adapted by concentrating on phoning and flyer dropping, both of which have their limitations.

Flyer dropping might have been effective at raising my name recognition, but since we were not speaking with voters it was no good for identifying our supporters. Phoning allowed us to begin to identify our supporters, but local campaigns do not have phone numbers for all voters in their ridings, lists are often out of date, and many people do not answer their phones or are reluctant to engage in political conversations over the phone.

Our voter contact and GOTV efforts would have been very compromised if we had not been allowed to start door-to-door canvassing in late summer. Given that the pandemic meant that there were almost no community events or forums for the candidate to attend, I felt that COVID-19 had given my team and me the opportunity to do what really matters in a local campaign – meeting voters face-to-face to hear their concerns and answer their questions.

But door-to-door canvassing in a pandemic required some significant changes. We had to be mindful to place our canvassing flyers in mailboxes instead of handing them directly to voters. We had stand two to three metres away from voters when talking to them. Many canvassers, particularly those working in apartment buildings, wore masks while canvassing.



Meeting a supporter while canvassing apartment buildings.

Given all of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, we had to adapt our GOTV efforts to concentrate more on giving people information about where and how to vote, and we had to start our GOTV program earlier in the campaign. With Elections Saskatchewan and the media encouraging mail-in ballots, we created a strategy to let voters know about this alternative way of voting and to explain the process to them. One problem that we could not work around was that no local campaigns were allowed to hold events or canvass inside seniors' residences. It is unfortunate that seniors living in these residences were isolated from the campaign in a way that other citizens were not.

Overall, I found that the engagement of voters on the doorstep during our campaign was equal to that of a normal campaign. Surprisingly, there was no awkwardness with voters on the door step because of the pandemic. My experience in this "COVID election" reinforced my belief in the importance of creating personal connections between voters and a local campaign.

Pandemic or no pandemic, what voters want the most in the democratic process is face-to-face engagement with politicians and their volunteers.



Giving instructions to volunteers outside the campaign office.

A final thing that was very different in this campaign as opposed to previous campaigns that I worked on was anxiety over the campaign itself being a public health risk. Normally, local campaigns can be annoying to voters by stuffing their mailboxes with too many flyers or knocking on their door while they are trying to eat supper, but they never could endanger anyone's health. As a candidate, I did often think: despite the precautions we are taking, what if I became infected with COVID-19? What risk am I taking by being candidate in a pandemic? Could I get COVID-19 and then give it to my family? How would the media react to a candidate with COVID-19? Fortunately, this nightmare scenario did not happen, but it was something I thought about every day of the campaign, and it added stress to being a candidate.

While it required determination and resilience, the COVID-19 pandemic did not force democracy to shut down in Saskatchewan. A provincial election took place and local campaigns modified their activities to work within the restrictions that the pandemic placed upon their efforts. So, if my experience as a candidate in a "COVID election" taught me anything, it is that while making good plans is very important, adaptability is the highest of political virtues.

Main Photo: The author on a canvass blitz with members of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour. Photo by Brittany Senger.

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David McGrane

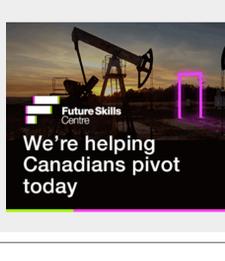
David McGrane is an Associate Professor of Political Studies at St. Thomas More College and the University of Saskatchewan. He is a specialist in Canadian social democracy and the author of *The New NDP: Moderation, Modernization, and Political Marketing* (UBC Press, 2019).

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