

Top 10 Recommendations for Improving GPC Internal Elections

by

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Recommendations

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Overview

This essay contains recommendations to council for improving GPC internal elections. The recommendations are based on the principle that the more members know about potential council candidates, the more likely they are to elect (a) councillors who best reflect the overall vision of the GPC membership and (b) councillors who are the most qualified to do the job. At the same time, our members' privacy needs to be protected and we need to conduct our election in a way that ensures that those members who don't want a barrage of emails and/or phone calls do not receive such emails and phone calls.

In the recent internal election, I found it difficult to reach out to members. As a general observation, I think that the party went too far in limiting the ability of council candidates to contact members, perhaps in order to protect their privacy or for other concerns. My belief from informal conversations is that most members are happy to hear from party representatives on a regular basis. I also know that our database is being updated to allow detailed fine-tuning about how and when members would like to be contacted. So I think it will be possible to

implement a more balanced approach for future elections.

Certainly many things went right for this internal election, but of course we are always trying to improve. So without further ado, here are my top 10 recommendations for making things better, roughly ordered by priority ...

1. Write an internal election handbook

I think the single most important suggestion I can make is that all internal election procedures be documented in an internal election handbook. This handbook can and should include timelines, election rules, information about the Internal Election Fairness Committee (IEFC), instructions on how to legally fundraise for your candidacy, how council elections will be conducted if/when they do not coincide with a General Meeting, and so on.

During the last election, the information required to conduct the election was largely made available on a piecemeal basis. Like many other issues within the party I think this was mostly a result of our rapid growth - we are struggling to keep our processes and procedures updated to reflect the constantly changing nature of our internal affairs.

My experience from my professional life is that documenting processes will help to ensure that everyone is on the same page about issues that will arise during the election. It ensures that unclear or undocumented processes will be identified and corrected sooner rather than later. Ultimately, I think writing a handbook will help to ensure that our internal elections run as smoothly as possible. The alternative is that candidates may be faced with situations where unexpected decisions are made or actions are taken that make it more difficult for them to run their campaign. Also, if there is a desire to implement any of the recommendations in this essay then they could be documented in the handbook.

I think a similar handbook is necessary to define the process for conducting the General Meeting. Or the two handbooks could be combined into one since they are so closely related.

2. Allow longer councillor bios

During the internal election there was a ruling from the Ombuds and Appeals Committee (OAC) that the 120-word bio that should be increased from 120 to 200 or 300 words. I support the decision to increase this to 300 words. I think that many members will make their voting decisions almost entirely on this bio and it is important that they are able to get a good insight into the council candidates they are voting for. Given that future mailouts will not need to include the CRC information I don't think the booklets will need to be that much bigger to accommodate this recommendation. A slight decrease in the font size of the bios could also help to ensure that the booklets are not too large.

3. Proofread the voting booklet

As I noted in an earlier post [\[link\]](#) there were a number of problems with information published in the voting booklet mailed to our members. The internal election timeline for future elections should incorporate a few days where council candidates can proof-read the information that is going to be distributed to members. This should help ensure that such problems are minimized in the future.

4. Send more emails to the membership

One thing I was surprised and disappointed about this internal election was that there was no email sent to members at the start of the election containing candidate information. In the 2004 internal election such an email was sent. There are really no privacy concerns about sending such an email since it can be sent by the central party without providing our members' email addresses to council candidates.

At the start of the election I recommend that an email containing email addresses, web site URL, phone number, etc for each candidate be sent. The bios for each candidate could be included as an attachment to the email.

Although candidate profiles are published on the GPC website I think this email to members would be helpful to many members. For example, in the recent internal election problems were eventually corrected by sending an email to members. In my case this included my blog link, which wasn't included in the voting booklet mailout. After the email was sent I received dozens more hits than average on my blog (my blog allows me to track these numbers). So it seems that many members who won't necessarily go to the GPC web page to look up candidate info will use links in a direct email to find supplementary candidate information.

I think sending out these emails will also help to level the playing field. In many cases, council candidates who have been involved for a while with the party will have larger contact lists than candidates who are newer to the party. This does not necessarily mean that they are the better candidate. However, if candidates have to rely on their own lists to get the word out about their candidacy then it could be that the party will not get the strongest possible council.

Another benefit to sending such emails is that I think they will help to prevent unnecessary conflicts within the party. For example, many incumbent candidates may have access to lists of our members' contact information that non-incumbents will not have. One potential problem with the current system is that the incumbent may be tempted to inappropriately use this information for campaigning. Another potential problem is that the non-incumbent may be suspicious that the incumbent is using information inappropriately, even if the incumbent is not doing so. Ensuring that all candidates have equal access to all members will help to prevent these problems and conflicts.

In addition, another supplementary email sent midway through the campaign could be helpful to members. For example, council candidates could respond to survey questions submitted by members. As always, such an email will help members better understand the vision and commitment to the party for each candidate.

5. Allow phone calls to the membership

In the recent election only leadership candidates had access to members' phone numbers. This is a policy that was instituted in the 2004 internal election, in part to try to respect the privacy of our members' contact information, and in part to try to limit the number of times our members are contacted by the party. For a number of reasons, I think it is time to re-evaluate this policy.

The first reason is that there is no evidence that the majority of members are opposed to receiving such phone calls. To the contrary, much of the feedback I hear is that our members are happy to hear from other party members.

The second reason is that our new member database will allow us to track at a much finer level of detail how and when each member would like to be contacted. Prior to the next internal election members could be presented with the option of "opting out" from being contacted by phone by council candidates.

The third reason is that it will reduce the temptation to cheat. In the recent internal election many council candidates also had access to the members' phone list since they were doing get-out-the-vote (GOTV) calling for leadership candidates. During the course of such phone calling it may seem natural to also mention their own candidacy. Since it is virtually impossible to prevent such problems I think the overall policy should be re-evaluated.

The fourth reason is that it seems unlikely that members will receive phone calls from dozens of candidates during the election,

since most council candidates will not have the resources to call every member. In the election this year my understanding is that even the well-organized leadership teams of Elizabeth May and David Chernushenko struggled to call every member.

The fifth reason is that it may very well be possible to use an "alias" for members' phone numbers by routing them all through a single phone number maintained by the central party. Then each member could have a (say) 5-digit extension number assigned to them that would map to their real phone number. This would ensure that the privacy of our members' contact information is maintained. It is likely that this system could be used in other non-election situations as well.

6. Correct problems in a timely manner

In the recent election the process to correct problems and/or appeal IEFEC decisions to the OAC was slow, and likely unclear to some council candidates. The party should ensure that this process is made clear to everyone up front. We should also get buy-in from both the IEFEC and OAC to respond to complaints and correct problems in a timely manner. For example, a number of days should be specified in the internal election procedures. This would then help the IEFEC and OAC ensure that they have the appropriate number of individuals allocated to address any issues that arise.

Clearly specifying such guidelines is important since a host of other issues will be competing for the time of the individuals involved. This is particularly true if/when the internal election is coinciding with a General Meeting. Again, the problems in the recent internal election are instructive. Despite being identified very early on, the IEFEC determined that the problems could not be corrected. An appeal to the OAC took a few days, and it took two weeks for staff to fix the problems by sending out an email to members with the corrected information.

In the election, members voting by mail had about 30 days to send in their ballots. All told, it took about 20 days to fix problems that occurred. About 95% of our members voted by mail: there were around 3000 ballots cast, and about 300 voting members at the GM, but during one straw poll it seemed likely that at least half had already voted by mail. So it seems possible that 1/2 of our members voted based on inaccurate and uncorrected information in the voting booklet.

7. Subsidize the candidate mailout

In the internal election candidates were offered the opportunity to participate in a supplementary hardcopy mailout to all members. However, participating candidates were told they would have to cover the entire costs of the mailout themselves. The eventual cost to participate was \$1800 per candidate.

This cost was beyond the means of most candidates. Other than the leadership candidates, only one candidate and one slate of candidates participated. The slate was able to share the cost by including all of their info on a single sheet. I think that the mailout is useful and it keeps with the principle that it is good to provide members with as much information as possible about our council candidates. However, I think it needs to be made more accessible to candidates.

In regional elections it is normal for the region to absorb a certain amount of costs to run an election. In the case of the GPC, I agree that it would cost too much for the party to spend to mail out (say) a page of information about each council candidate. However, one way to level the playing field would be to have the party subsidize the "base cost" of the mailing. Then council candidates would be charged a fixed amount based on the number of sheets they want to mail, and the number of members in the party. Implementing this would eliminate one of the key problems that I think happened this year, which was the cost to participate

was unknown until after the fact. A fixed amount makes it possible to budget for their campaign accordingly.

Consider this example: say that we peg the base cost to be the overall cost of our mailout for this election: around \$10,000, or \$1 per member. This would cover the base amount of postage, envelopes, etc. In future elections, council candidates who want to participate would only need to be charged the incremental cost of postage. Probably this would only be 1 or 2 cents per sheet, per member. As our membership base rises the cost of participating will still go up, but at least the costs will be known to candidates up front. In addition, this cost would be less for our provincial reps since their mailout would only need to be sent to members in their province.

8. Provide more information at the convention

During the campaign, the convention organizers notified candidates that they could send a sheet of paper to the office containing information about their candidacy, and that this sheet of paper would be included in the delegate package. Candidates (and other groups such as Fair Vote Canada) were also told that they could pay \$350 for a table at the convention site if they wanted to distribute supplementary information.

Prior to the convention council passed a motion to ensure that council candidates who did not want an entire table had an opportunity to put out a small amount of materials for free. The table area would also ensure that candidates had a central area to congregate where delegates could meet and talk with them, and so on.

Unfortunately, the council motion was implemented by simply putting out the delegate package on the table instead of in the package. This result was not the intention of the motion. In keeping with the principle that having more rather than less information available about council candidates, it would

be good to have this information available in both places. Delegates can then review information included in their delegate package prior to looking for more details about a candidate.

This problem was probably not that big of an issue in this internal election, since it is likely that about 95% of our members who voted did so by mail before the convention started. However, this will start to become more important if the party ever moves to a proxy voting system or some other system that allows delegates to hold more than one vote.

9. Host internal election debates

It can be difficult for members to get a feel for who council candidates are "in person". An effort was made at the convention when each candidate was able to give a 3-minute speech. Even though most members had already voted I think it was a useful exercise, since it gave delegates a sense of who the candidates were, and how they present themselves. In the longer term, this information will be useful for better understanding those who want to become leaders in the party.

Another way to foster more direct communications between council candidates and members would be for the party to host teleconference internal election debates and/or Q&A sessions with each candidate. The idea and logistics are fairly straightforward. I think this would be a good project to assign to an interested volunteer rather than staff, since staff time is scarce.

10. Introduce the new council

At the convention this year the winners of the council election were announced, but it seemed like they were only invited onto the stage as an afterthought. This could have been done due to CPAC time constraints. However, in the future, I think time should be allocated for candidates to appear on stage for an introduction. Given the size of council having each winning candidate give an

"acceptance speech" is probably too much. But many of these candidates would have put a lot of time and effort into their campaigns and they should have their brief opportunity to be in the spotlight. This sort of public recognition is rare for councillors and I think it would be much appreciated.

Summary

In a municipal or federal election there are a number of campaigning outlets available to candidates: they get the voters list and can make phone calls, they can go door to door, they can put ads on TV or the radio, they can go to debates, they can go online with websites, emails, lists, etc, they can get profiled in the newspaper, they can run as part of a slate to pool resources and get a consistent message out, and so on.

I believe the GPC should make efforts to facilitate information sharing during our internal elections so our candidates have campaigning options roughly equivalent to candidates in regional elections. In the recent GPC election the primary options available for candidates were going online and running as a slate (especially for someone of moderate means). No consequential replacements for other typical "mass" direct-to-the-voter communication outlets were made available to candidates.

As a result, I think that running as a slate and cultivating personal contacts, significant but not exclusive factors in winning regional elections, have the potential to overwhelm everything else in future GPC elections. I don't have any particular bias against candidates who wish to run as a slate, and I think that building a good list of personal contacts should always play an important role in our elections. But I hope that the recommendations in this essay will help to level the playing field in other areas.