

Report to the Canadian Study of Parliament

Re: Mallory Grant Award 2021

Title: Communicating Difference: The Role of Candidate Identity in Federal Election Campaigns

Grant Holder: Dr. Angelia Wagner, University of Alberta

Description of the Project:

Representation is a fundamental principal of parliamentary democracy, with descriptive and symbolic representation especially important to the democratic legitimacy of legislative bodies. Canadian parliamentarians increasingly reflect the diversity of the general population as more women and Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQ people are elected to the House of Commons in each election. Non-traditional candidates often leverage their social identities to emphasize strengths believed to be linked to these identities and to attract voters with shared affinities. However, extant research typically focuses on the communication strategies of elite politicians such as party leaders, prime ministers, or cabinet ministers.¹ Little is known about how rank-and-file candidates decide to deploy their social identities for representational purposes during an election campaign. This project therefore asks the following research question: ***How do candidates deploy, or not deploy, their social identities during an election campaign and what motivates them to do so?*** To answer this question, 44 candidates of varying gender, Indigenous, racialized, and sexual identities were interviewed about how they chose to communicate their identities during the 2021 Canadian election.

Scholarship suggests candidates choose to highlight or downplay their social identities for various reasons. LGBTQ candidates avoid discussing their sexuality when voters in their riding tend to

¹ Marland, Alex, Thierry Giasson, and Andrea Lawlor, eds. 2018. *Political Elites in Canada: Power and Influence in Instantaneous Times*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

be religious or socially conservative.² Racialized candidates must be equally strategic. In majority-minority ridings, racialized candidates might draw attention to their ethnicity if it aligns with the majority of racialized voters (Chinese/Chinese) but downplay it (Vietnamese/Chinese) or recast it (Asian/Asian) when it does not. Meanwhile, women running for conservative parties typically dismiss the importance of gender to their candidacies because of right-wing opposition to “identity politics.” These examples focus on a single axis of identity, but candidates must navigate voter expectations on several fronts. Each candidate’s identity is a composite of their specific gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, class, and age.³

Regardless of their approach to identity, candidates carefully craft their public image to maximize voter support. Local candidates might have less impact on vote choice than parties or party leaders, but evidence indicates that local campaigns are highly personalized affairs with great attention placed on these candidates. The (projected) qualities of a local candidate can even influence non-partisans and more informed voters. Investigating how candidates choose to discuss their social identities allows us to better understand their mobilization strategies and how they navigate the pitfalls and challenges of not fitting traditional candidate norms.

Canada is an ideal case to explore the self-presentation choices of diverse candidates. A growing number of parliamentary candidates are women, racialized, Indigenous, and/or LGBTQ and this diversity allows for more nuanced and intersectional analyses of candidate communications. Canadian federal elections present a natural experiment with 338 different elections occurring at the same time in constituencies that vary not only in geographic but also political, demographic, and socio-economic ways. Various identities could be primed in different constituency elections and through candidates’ differential self-presentation choices. Finally, because of the increasing personalization of

² **Wagner, Angelia.** 2019. “LGBTQ perspectives on political candidacy in Canada.” In *Queering Representation: LGBT People and Electoral Politics in Canada*, ed. Manon Tremblay, pp. 259-278. Vancouver: UBC Press.

³ **Wagner, Angelia** and Joanna Everitt. 2019. “Introduction: Gendered identities and political communication.” In *Gendered Mediation: Identity and Image Making in Canadian Politics*, eds. Angelia Wagner and Joanna Everitt, 3-23. Vancouver: UBC Press.

politics, the identities of local candidates could have an important role in multicultural societies like Canada whose parliamentary systems allow citizens to only vote for their constituency representatives and not party leaders.

Collection of the Data:

This project is part of a larger research agenda with Joanna Everitt, Karen Bird, and Mireille Lalancette designed to understand the linkages between candidate self-presentation, media representations, and voter evaluations. Other studies explore potential similarities and differences in how candidates talk about their social identities, how journalists cover them, and how voters evaluate them. However, none of these other research approaches allow us to identify the real motivations for why candidates choose to highlight or downplay their identities as women, racialized, Indigenous, and/or LGBTQ individuals. For this reason, we have focused this aspect of the research program on interviews with individuals who ran as candidates in the 2021 Canadian federal election.

While securing research ethics approval from the University of Alberta, University of New Brunswick, McMaster University and Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (a process that took until February 2022), we used money from another source to hire undergraduate students to compile a master list of all candidates who ran in the 2021 Canadian federal election and then identify all those who were women, racialized, Indigenous, or LGBTQ. The gender of the candidates was determined from the candidate lists, which often include this information. Potential sexuality research participants were identified using an up-to-date list of all publicly out lesbian, gay, and bisexual politicians in the 2021 election drawn from various websites and media sources including: ProudPolitics, the LGBTQ news outlet Xtra, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, web searches, and candidate biographies. The generated list was then compared to those produced by other organizations and scholars working in this field. Indigenous and visible minority candidates were similarly identified through news reports, party commissions, recruitment officials, publicly available online sources, and referrals.

Once ethics approval was secured and candidate list was prepared, we recruited individuals for the study according to political and personal criteria. The political criterion related to their status as a candidate in the 2021 Canadian federal election while the personal criteria involved recruiting candidates of varying gender, Indigenous, racialized, and sexual identities. The complexity of this intersectional approach necessitated the use of a quota sampling system, which selected participants who display particular combinations of characteristics. Our goal was to interview up to 50 candidates, but we began with a target of 22 women and 22 men. Each gender category was then further broken down to 11 racialized and 11 white people. The racial/ethnicity categories would then consist of an even number of heterosexuals and queer individuals. Although we hit our initial target of 44 research participants, the challenges of securing interviews with our targeted individuals meant that we did not reach our expectations within several of the smaller categories. Of these 44 candidates, we interviewed 24 women (one trans), 19 men, and one who identified as gender fluid. This group also included 12 LGBTQ+ candidates, 16 racialized (6 Chinese, 5 Black, and 3 South Asian), and 8 Indigenous. In terms of political characteristics, 4 candidates won election while 40 lost and 19 ran for the NDP, 11 for the Liberals, 6 for the Green Party, 5 for the Conservatives, and 3 for the Bloc Québécois.

All research participants were recruited with a letter (emailed if email addresses could be found or via post if not) outlining the nature of the research project and their potential role within it. We approach several hundred former candidates about participating in the project, with 18 individuals outright declining (often sitting MPs) and another 13 individuals agreeing to be interviewed but changing their mind or refusing to settle on a day for the interview. The others did not respond to our requests for an interview, even after three or four attempts to contact them via email, Facebook, LinkedIn, or website over a period of months. As a result, the interviews that were conducted were spread over a period of a year and a half, with the first one occurring in July 2022 and the most recent one taking place in February 2024. We hope to interview more individuals in the near future, especially white women and members of other targeted social groups whose presence in our data is currently limited.

For those individuals who agreed to be interviewed, we provided them with a link to an informed consent form that could be completed online. They also had the option of completing a paper form and returning it via e-mail or post. Follow-up communication was done either by email or telephone. Individuals were given the option to conduct the interview by phone, videoconference, or in person (where possible) and in either English or French. As this process began in early 2022, the option of in-person interviews was only provided if pandemic restrictions allowed. Interviews in English were conducted by Angelia Wagner of the University of Alberta and those in French were conducted by Mireille Lalancette of the Université de Québec à Trois Rivières.

Prior to conducting the interview each candidate was asked to complete a short online questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was threefold: It would gather basic descriptive information about a candidate's personal background in order to (1) ensure the subsequent one-to-one interview could focus on exploring their communication strategies, (2) develop a biographical profile of each participant, and (3) facilitate analysis of the interview transcripts at a later date. All data from this survey are housed securely on the UNB server.

During the interview itself, candidates were asked whether or not they had chosen to highlight their social identities and why this might have been the case (see Appendix A for interview questions). To ensure accuracy, the interview was recorded and **later transcribed with the funds provided by the Mallory grant**. The securely encrypted transcript, which contained the participant's responses to the interview, was returned to them so they could review their remarks and revise the content, if desired. All collected data will be destroyed after 7 years.

Budget and Expenditure:

The Mallory Grant was \$4,961.60, with \$4,461.60 allocated for transcription of an expected 44 interviews and another \$500 for an upgrade to MAXQDA software to analyze the transcripts. Because of challenges recruiting interview participants, we spent \$4,612.28 on transcription services and none

on software upgrades, leaving a surplus of \$349.32 that should have been returned to your organization by the University of Alberta once the research account was closed. Because we would like to continue to recruit more interview participants, I would respectfully request that this \$349.32 surplus be sent back to us. This money would likely cover the cost of two transcriptions.

Deliverables from the Project:

Because of ongoing challenges in securing and transcribing interviews, we are only now able to delve into the interview data. We anticipated that candidates from different social backgrounds might choose to deploy their identities in different ways, and we opted to begin our analysis with the 8 Indigenous candidates. We combined a preliminary analysis of their social media posts and interview data for conference papers presented at the Canadian Political Science Association conference in Montreal in June 2024 and at the European Consortium on Political Research conference in Dublin in August 2024. We will receive additional feedback on our analysis at the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association conference in Edmonton in November 2024.

Our preliminary analysis reveals that limited Twitter discussion of their own Indigeneity was a deliberate communications strategy of Indigenous candidates during the 2021 Canadian election. Candidates of all parties generally avoided discussing their social identities unless voters did. Candidates preferred to focus on the issues, and many of them said voters wanted to do the same. But avoiding identity was also necessary if they wanted to avoid voter discrimination. Research indicates that highlighting a candidate's Indigeneity, gender, sexuality, or other identities runs the risk of priming them in voter evaluations. A gender-fluid Métis candidate learned this the hard way in a previous election campaign when she emphasized that she was a mother. She said that some voters "told me to my face that they don't believe women of childbearing age should serve in public office." She added that both women and men expressed this traditional view: "They seem to be able to wrap their heads around how fathers have the time to serve, but they can't seem to wrap their head around mothers

having the time.” This experience led her to downplay her motherhood status in the 2021 federal election. Meanwhile, another Métis female candidate avoided gender because it offered no electoral advantage: her riding had long seen female candidates and representatives.

Candidates had more complex motivations around the decision to emphasize or downplay their Indigeneity during the election. A Métis candidate who ran unsuccessfully for the Liberals did not highlight his heritage because 25 percent of the electorate in the northern riding was non-Indigenous. “We wanted to represent them too to be fair to everyone,” said the man, who had a Twitter account but did not issue a single tweet during the election. “So, we didn’t expand [on my] Aboriginal ancestry. We didn’t talk about it even though a lot of people were proud to have an Indigenous candidate.” Meanwhile, a First Nations woman who ran unsuccessfully for the Liberals in a diverse riding in another province, downplayed her Indigeneity to avoid the perception that she was a one-issue candidate, a common accusation against politicians from traditionally under-represented groups. A different First Nations woman who ran for the Greens in an urban riding said she highlighted her Indigeneity during the campaign but mainly by viewing issues through an Indigenous lens.

Political and identity differences amongst Indigenous communities made it problematic for some candidates to publicly claim their Indigeneity. A female candidate who ran unsuccessfully for the Conservatives avoided discussing her Métis heritage for this reason. “Straight out people that I grew up with [would] say, “You’re not one of us.” A family friend told her it was because Métis people had not gone through what First Nations people had gone through. Being Métis was thus a liability in that riding. Another candidate downplayed her Indigeneity in the 2021 election because she had only begun the process of reclaiming her Indigenous heritage and acquiring her Métis membership. “Much of the culture and tradition had been lost to my family through generations of sort of intentional denial of it for the purposes of not being discriminated against,” she said. “So, I haven’t done enough work on that front yet to really claim that identity publicly.” Instead, she trumpeted her party’s other Indigenous candidates.

Rather than discussing their social identities, Indigenous candidates were generally more attentive to the social composition of the electorate in their riding. They could not only identify the relative strength of Indigenous and major ethnic groups in the constituency but also those of various economic groups (poor, middle-class, wealthy), immigrants, and partisans. A successful election campaign required candidates to be attentive to the needs and interests of these diverse groups. Only candidates who ran in predominantly Indigenous ridings could focus mainly on Indigenous topics. “[I]f you’re going to run and you’re Indigenous, you don’t have to ride on an Indigenous ticket. That’s not necessary,” said one woman. “What you have to ride on is—what are the realities in the territory in which you live? And if you happen to be in a riding that has a lot of Indigenous peoples ... then there’s a need to uptake that. But if it’s a riding that’s very mixed, you need to be conscious of who you’re going to be talking to.” In other words, candidates should care more about the social characteristics of voters and what that might reveal about the policies they need to highlight during the campaign. As one female candidate noted:

I’m proud to be Métis, but I didn’t want that to be a deciding factor because to me personally, everybody is equal. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Métis, if you’re First nations, if you’re Inuit, if you are from South Africa. We are people, and we’re all going through the same type of thing, so everybody has an equal vote. Vote for me because of my worth, not because of my ancestry.

Indigenous candidates’ preference to focus on everyone else’s concerns is in line with what Réal Carrière and Royce Koop⁴ learned in interviews with Indigenous politicians serving in federal and provincial legislatures in Canada: they did not see Indigenous interests and constituency interests as mutually exclusive—they were capable of representing both.

⁴ Carrière, Réal and Royce Koop. 2023. “Indigenous political representation in Canada.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 56(2): 257-278. DOI: 10.1017/S0008423923000173

Although other candidates addressed a broad range of policies to appeal to the entire electorate, one candidate focused specifically on party supporters while door knocking. A Conservative candidate only spoke at length with voters most likely to support his party or candidacy. He wasn't interested in trying to convert non-committal voters or other parties' stalwarts. "As much as it's interesting to have a grousing political discussion with somebody who isn't really a supporter, that's not your job as a candidate," said the Conservative candidate, who failed to win his diverse urban riding. "You've got to find your supporters." He swiftly thanked everyone else for their time before knocking on the next door. He advised other Indigenous candidates to develop a campaign message that resonates with voters and focus on delivering it to their potential supporters and ignore the rest.

If Indigenous candidates discussed their social identities during the campaign, it was typically when they spoke face to face with voters on the doorstep. Candidates recalled their social media posts mainly focusing on policy issues and campaign events. That is, if they used Twitter at all. Five candidates did not tweet during the campaign, whether it was because they did not have a known Twitter account (two) or opted not to use it (three). Facebook was far more popular, with Instagram and TikTok used far less. Whatever the platform, many candidates were not able to develop a strong social media strategy because of the timing of the election. Not only did Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau call a snap election two years before the end of his government's mandate but the campaign period itself was also just 36 days long. That left little time to make effective use of social media to reach voters. Limited posting meant candidates had few opportunities to highlight their social identities online anyways.

Future plans:

Constructive feedback gathered at the two conferences has encouraged us to split the Indigenous social media analysis into at least two papers. The first paper would take a thematic approach to understanding the motivations and nature of Indigenous candidate discourses on Twitter,

concentrating on how and why Indigenous talk about Indigeneity identity and related issues rather than on how much. The second paper would address the *how much* question, comparing the degree to which Indigenous and non-Indigenous candidates discussed Indigenous issues on Twitter during the 2021 campaign. This paper will enable us to determine if Indigenous candidates talk more about Indigenous issues than other types of candidates, providing important quantitative support to the first, interview-driven paper. Once the first paper is revised, we will submit it to a peer-reviewed journal for publication. We also propose to write an opinion piece for Policy Options in advance of the next federal election, depending upon the latter's timing.

We also intend to write three additional journal articles using this interview data. The first paper would compare how Black, South Asian, and Chinese candidates choose to highlight their identities on Twitter during the 2021 campaign. The second paper would draw upon the Black feminist theory of intersectionality to explore how women from different social groups employ their gendered and raced identities to appeal to voters in their ridings. Finally, a third paper would identify the motivations behind LGBTQ+ candidates' decision to highlight or downplay their queerness on Twitter and Instagram. Given the various projects and papers the team in which the team is involved, it is likely these three papers will be presented at CPSA conferences over the next three or four years.

Benefits of this research

The under-representation of women and Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQ individuals in the Canadian House of Commons limits the policy responsiveness of the federal government. By purposively interviewing diverse candidates, we can gain important insight into how diverse candidates deploy their social identities in electoral campaigns and identify possible strategies that future diverse candidates can use to increase their likelihood of electoral success. Policymakers and activists can also use knowledge developed from candidate insights to develop programs to improve the conditions for political candidacy for members of their respective communities.

Appendix A — Interview Questions

Candidate interview protocol

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question that you wish. You can also stop the interview at any time. I would also like to remind you that you are being recorded for note-keeping purposes only. Are you ready to begin?

- 1) As you will know from our letter explaining our research, we are carrying out interviews to learn about campaign and communication strategies of local candidates in Canadian federal elections. If you were at the library and were to pick up a book about local candidates and how they campaign during a federal election, what would you want to see discussed in it?
- 2) In a few words, how would you describe the riding where you ran as a candidate in the last federal election?
- 3) Of course, you were the candidate for the *X Party* in your riding. Beyond your party affiliation, what was the most important thing you wanted voters to know about you as a candidate?
- 4) In our pre-interview survey, you answered a number of questions about your identity, including your gender, ethnic or Indigenous background, religious faith, and sexual orientation. Was your identity in any of these regards something that was ever discussed with your campaign team as part of your overall strategy?
 - a) If YES: What did you discuss about that?
 - b) If NO: Was there a conscious decision about that? Can you tell me why this wasn't part of your strategy?
- 5) Regardless of your campaign strategy, did you find that your identity characteristics were a factor in how the voters perceived you or responded to your message? Can you describe an example?
- 6) Did you find it necessary at any point to modify how you engaged or presented yourself, particularly with respect to your identity as a *[insert identities here]* candidate? If so, can you tell me what happened?

I'd like to turn now to your "ground game" for persuading and mobilizing voters – whether door-knocking, campaign signs, attending community events, get-out-the-vote, and so on.

- 7) How did you prioritize your campaign efforts in this regard?
 - a) To what extent did you focus on mobilizing voter support among members of the *[insert identities here]* community?
 - b) Do you feel your strategy was effective, and what would you change?
- 8) Did you seek or receive endorsements from any identity-based organizations? (This could be a religious or ethnic association, a youth or seniors' organization, or groups like Equal Voice Canada, Operation Black Vote Canada, and ProudPolitics Canada?)
 - a) If YES: what was the nature of the organization(s), and how did that involvement come about?
If NO: was outreach to such organizations ever a consideration?

9) Thinking now about your main opponent, how did they strategize or reach out to voters in different identity groups? In what respects did their approach differ from your own?

a) How did you adapt your strategy in response?

10) On election night, as far as you can tell, did you receive higher support among voters who share your identity – or was support reasonably even among voters across all groups?

I'd like to shift gears now, to the "air game" and your use of various media channels during the campaign.

11) Did you find social media an important tool for your campaign?

If YES: What platform did you focus on? Did you manage your social media accounts yourself or did you have help?

a) Was your identity as a candidate a point of focus in your social media posts, was it something you didn't address at all, or perhaps somewhere in between? Can you elaborate?

b) Did your approach differ depending on the platform? (Twitter, FB, IG, etc.) Can you provide some examples of this?

c) Did you take out any paid social media ads? Did you find these to be effective?

d) Did you experience any social media harassment during the campaign? Was this related in any way to your identity?

12) What about more traditional news media outlets (newspapers, TV, radio): Did you engage or get much coverage from this kind of media? For example, were you interviewed or featured in any election-related newspaper story? Did you take out any paid advertising?

If YES: Was this kind of media outreach something you handled, or did you have help?

a) In traditional media coverage, was your identity as a *[insert identities here]* candidate a point of focus, was it not addressed at all, or perhaps somewhere in between? Can you elaborate?

b) Did this differ depending on the type of media outlet? (e.g., tv / newspaper, or mainstream versus more niche media outlets)

c) Did you find traditional media to be a valuable channel for communicating your message and connecting with voters? How would you compare the importance of the two in your campaign: social media vs traditional media?

13) Thinking about your engagement with media overall, was your identity as a *[insert identities here]* candidate something that you or others tended to *emphasize* or *downplay*? Could you please elaborate?

14) What advice do you have for other *[insert identities here]* candidates when it comes to campaign and communication strategies? What advice do you have for your party?

15) If we think back to the book we discussed at the beginning of this interview, what information would you now want to add to it?

16) Are there any other aspects that you hoped we would address today but that we haven't discussed?

17) Can we contact you with any follow-up questions specifically related to the local campaign?

Thank you!