

## **Going Negative: Campaigning in Canadian Provinces**

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**Abstract** The study of political communication in Canada’s provinces suffers from an absence of pan-Canadian information. This descriptive article bridges the gap by documenting some observable trends. It submits that negative advertising is more intense in larger provinces than in smaller jurisdictions. Permanent campaigning is the new normal as electioneering ramps up in anticipation of a fixed date election. Provincial parties and citizens avail themselves of new technology by communicating with digital video, which is not subject to the same financial, technical, content or regulatory constraints as television. Similarities of political communication across Canada are noted, including copycatting of federal-level practices.

**Keywords** provincial politics, political communication, negative advertising, permanent campaigning, fixed date elections, new information and communication technologies, video communication.

**Résumé:** Les études en communication politique au Canada souffrent de l’absence d’observations pancanadiennes. Cet article descriptif comble cette lacune en documentant les tendances observables. Il soutient que la publicité négative est utilisée de manière plus intensive dans les grandes provinces que dans les plus petites juridictions. La campagne permanente est devenue la nouvelle norme, alors que l’électoratisme s’accélère dans l’attente d’une élection à date fixe. Les partis provinciaux et les citoyens tirent profit des nouvelles technologies en communiquant au moyen de vidéos, lesquels ne sont pas soumis aux mêmes contraintes financières, techniques et règlementaires qu’à la télévision. Les similitudes entre les pratiques de communication politique utilisées à travers le Canada sont constatées, incluant l’imitation des pratiques au niveau fédéral.

**Mots-clés:** politique provinciale, communication politique, publicité négative, campagne permanente, élections à date fixe, technologies de l’information et de la communication, communication vidéo.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Negative advertising is a scourge of American politics (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), and an unwelcome phenomenon that has come to characterize Canadian politics. In recent years the Conservative Party of Canada has deployed negative advertising through multiple media platforms. This was designed to damage the public image of Stéphane Dion, Michael Ignatieff, Bob Rae and Justin Trudeau as soon as each man became leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. According to Ira Basren of the CBC, it is a practice that was inspired by the U.S. Republican Party philosophy that, “You do not sidestep around your candidates’ vulnerabilities; you confront them head-on. You do not attack your opponent’s weak points; you attack his strengths” (Basren 2009).

Conservative strategists recognize that negative advertising provokes fear. It highlights or distorts select policy positions of an opponent in a distasteful manner. The objective of “fear ads” is to stimulate voter anxiety and prompt electors to reconsider who they should support (Brader 2006: 6). Such ads can also extend the reach of the party’s media buy if they generate earned media with news organizations replaying or linking to party ads. The Conservative Party’s negative advertising was distasteful, but it introduced a critical lens through which Liberal leaders were judged, and contributed to the Liberal Party’s poor performance in the 2008 and 2011 federal elections.

Whether or not negative advertising is playing by the rules is a matter of debate. Assessing the ethical merits of negative communication is a subjective exercise because what one elector may deem immoral another may

deem to be important information (Mark 2006: 2). The rule of thumb is that going negative is risky if the message sponsor is ignorant of the believability of claims, overlooks that voters scrutinize political motivations and if there is a disregard for a “sense of fair play” (Pinkleton 1997: 21). It is interesting that negative campaigning is thought to be least effective in jurisdictions with small populations, because voters may personally know party leaders, or feel that they do, and opposing politicians may be friends (Mark 2006: 177). This suggests that what happens in Canadian federal politics is not necessarily the norm in the diverse laboratories of provincial level campaigns.

Controversy about negative advertising is growing with the prevalence of the permanent campaign. The concept is rooted in the party controlling the government leveraging the perks of office including availing of government communications staff, making spending decisions, coordinating pseudo-events and commissioning publicly-funded advertising and market research (Blumenthal 1980). But pre-campaigning has evolved to engage all major political parties’ personnel in a “media-intensive, leader-focused, and round-the-clock style of campaigning” as though the next election is already underway (Gibson and Römmele 2001: 34). The advantages of relentless campaigning include shaping the personal brand of a new leader, avoiding the clutter of competing messages, capitalizing on public attention to a controversy and, in Canada, escaping the constraints of pre-campaign and campaign spending limits (Table 1).

**Table 1: Advertising Spending Restrictions and Fixed Date Elections in Canada**

Jurisdiction	Pre-campaign advertising restrictions	Campaign spending limit*	Fixed date election legislation
Canada	None. Political and election advertising are exempted from <i>The Canadian Code of Advertising Standards</i> , which does not hold the force of law.	\$21 million	Passed 2006
NL	None.	\$1.6 million	Passed 2004
NS	None.	\$1.7 million	No
PEI	None.	\$0.8 million	Passed 2007
NB	Parties may spend no more than \$35,000 annually on non-election advertising ( <i>Political Process Financing Act</i> , sec. 50).	\$1.1 million	Passed 2007
QC	None.	\$4.8 million	Passed 2013
ON	Government advertising must be vetted by the Office of the Auditor General to verify that the ads are non-partisan ( <i>Government Advertising Act</i> ).	\$7.4 million	Passed 2005
MB	In a fixed-date election year there is a limit of \$268,000 for pre-campaign party advertising ( <i>Election Financing Act</i> , sec. 58). Government advertising is prohibited 90 days before Election Day (sec. 92).	\$1.4 million	Passed 2008
SK	In a non-election year, party advertising is capped at \$274,898 ( <i>Election Act</i> , sec. 243). Government advertising is subject to limits in the four months prior to an election and is restricted 30 days beforehand, with some exceptions (sec. 277).	\$0.9 million	Passed 2007
AB	None.	No limit imposed	Passed 2011
BC	In the 60 days prior to a fixed-date election, political parties may not incur more than \$1.1 million in expenses ( <i>Election Act</i> , sec. 198).	\$4.6 million	Passed 2001

\*Official campaign spending limit normally pertains to parties fielding candidates in all electoral districts. Dollar amounts are subject to inflation adjustments. Information is for most the most recent completed campaign as of 2014. Intended for illustrative purposes only.

Sources: Election agencies and election legislation.

However, permanent campaigning is a suspect use of public resources and its criticism contributes to negative democratic discourse. In some provinces there is legislation restricting such behaviour immediately prior to the writ

of election being signed (again, Table 1) and all jurisdictions have campaign spending limits. Concerns about political communication are not magically solved through regulation, given that section 2(b) of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*

guarantees the “freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication” (Canada 1982).

Another reason for the prevalence of permanent campaigning is that the speed of communication has intensified. The 24/7 nature of political news, the expanding online sphere, and the mobility of smartphones enable political actors to engage in rapid exchanges of text, photos and video. The considerable developments associated with new communication technology are too extensive to list here. Suffice it to say that an emerging phenomenon is the growth of digital video, which has become inexpensive to create, edit, and disseminate. Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube lack the gatekeeping that pervades traditional media, which levels the playing field for small political parties, local candidates, and interest groups (e.g., Dylko et al. 2012). It also opens up opportunities for citizens to participate and potentially attract mainstream news coverage, except they often lack the skills and resources to produce high-quality content.

One outcome is that e-campaigning features material that is not suitable for mainstream media. Digital video can be longer than 30 seconds, can speak to a narrow segment of the electorate, and push the creative envelope. This includes the creation of political parody videos, some of which can be well-received and go viral, even if the intent was to inflict damage on an opponent without revealing the true identity of the video’s sponsor (Lim and Golan 2011).

All of these interconnected topics – negative advertising, permanent campaigning, and digital video communication – warrant study at the federal level of Canadian politics, but

there is a particular dearth of provincial level research. The following case study in the period surrounding the 2011 crop of provincial campaigns also considers politicking in a new era of fixed date election legislation. Knowing the anticipated date of the next election puts the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary wings of all political parties on a stronger organizational footing and encourages them to actively mobilize rather than develop policy ideas (Perrella et al. 2008: 78-79).<sup>1</sup> The election readiness of opposition parties pressures the governing party to engage in constant communication, which intensifies as the legislated election date approaches.

## **Methodology**

This invites a number of questions about political communication in Canadian provinces that are discussed in the following descriptive study. What evidence is there of permanent campaigning at the provincial level? To what extent is negativity a feature of provincial politics? In what ways are provincial actors employing e-communication as part of permanent campaigning and negative messaging? Indicators of these connected trends can be demonstrated by documenting campaign activity before the writ drop, by documenting examples of message tone, and by remarking on cases of e-campaigning. Provincial campaigns are not insulated from global trends and we should anticipate finding evidence of each of these phenomena. Changes in communications technology mean that each activity is increasingly interconnected, and strategies and tactics are transcending jurisdictions and political parties. However, we lack a pan-Canadian comparative account of their

existence, and should anticipate variations that reflect local political dynamics. The trend towards inter-provincial and intra-party convergence is beginning to be understood through the lens of political branding (e.g., Wesley and Moyes 2014), which warrants separate study.

A descriptive approach is employed to gather baseline indications of these phenomena at the provincial level. What follows is a qualitative account of a series of election case studies. It offers colour about campaigning dynamics and sets up empirical analysis for other studies. The method categorizes observations for the development of theory and testable generalizations in future undertakings.

The gathering of qualitative data began with a review of provincial political studies. New evidence was collected from media reports in recent provincial campaigns. English-language news stories were identified by CPEP research assistants<sup>2</sup> who performed daily monitoring of the websites of major provincial media outlets in autumn 2011 for Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Information for the most recent campaign in other provinces was obtained through a search of the media archive database Eureka.cc and case-specific Google searches.<sup>3</sup> As well, videos that were housed on political party websites in autumn 2011 were downloaded and reviewed in a non-systematic manner; for the other provinces, select videos were identified through news coverage and were located online. Readers should bear in mind the limitations of this convenience sampling and descriptive analysis.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in late 2013, provincial election agencies were

contacted to verify rules for pre-campaign political advertising.

## **Findings**

### *1) Permanent Campaigning in the Provinces*

Provincial parties have a history of leveraging public resources for electioneering purposes. The British Columbia NDP used polling and advertising to persuade citizens to support the Nisga'a Treaty which became a key policy plank in its 1996 election platform (Ponting 2006), and the Alberta PCs availed of the government's Public Affairs Bureau for political marketing purposes (Taft 1997). Conversely, Perrella et al. (2008) observed that in Ontario's first fixed-date election in 2007 there was little evidence of permanent campaigning, which the authors speculate was due to Ontarians' inattentiveness to politics during the summer months prior to the writ drop in September. As we shall see, parties in Ontario and elsewhere needed an electoral cycle to get into an organizational rhythm.

Across Canada there is plenty of evidence of political parties campaigning before the official writ of election. A year prior to the 2011 Saskatchewan election, the governing Saskatchewan Party launched TV spots to raise concerns that the NDP leader once lived in Alberta. In the lead up to the 2011 Ontario election, the Liberals ran party-financed videos praising their government's policy accomplishments, and issued negative spots to slag the PC Party leader. As the official campaign approached, the Liberals continued to lavish self-praise, while the PCs framed Premier Dalton McGuinty as "the taxman," and the NDP presented itself as a positive alternative. In British

Columbia, two years before that province's 2013 election, the governing Liberal Party unveiled a so-called "attack website" that critiqued the NDP's leader (CBC News 2011). On the eve of the campaign, the government spent millions to promote its provincial Jobs Plan, and the BC Liberals reinforced this with party-funded pre-campaign and campaign ads that emphasized job creation policies. Two days before the election call, the Liberals purchased an infomercial wherein Premier Christy Clark chatted at a kitchen table with electors about her background and her government's policies. The BC NDP countered with a TV spot that flashed the words "The BC Liberal campaign is based on personal attacks and negative ads. But we're NOT going negative". Proof positive: on April Fool's Day, the NDP used social media to circulate a spoof negative video that humorously blamed their own leader for everything bad about the 1990s, from the Spice Girls to Marilyn Manson, and its cheekiness succeeded in attracting mainstream media coverage. Yet another example of pre-campaigning occurred in Alberta, where in 2011 the PC Party ran its "first ever" negative ad against an opposition party (Braid 2012). The radio ad contrasted the PC government's position on an impaired driving law against that of the Wildrose Party and used the tagline "Danielle Smith: Not worth the risk." This was identical to the federal Conservatives' line against Stéphane Dion.

Sometimes the alleged victims of pre-campaigning seek public sympathy. A mild case occurred in PEI a month before the 2011 election, when the opposition PC Party complained about the governing Liberals publishing pre-campaign newspaper ads. This pales against the outcry against the Saskatchewan New

Democrats who prepared a radio ad in July 2011 which included two separate remarks by the Premier Brad Wall that were spliced together to appear as a single comment. In New Brunswick there was a tit-for-tat exchange. First, the PCs complained about a Liberal radio spot in 2010 that used a Tory MLA's quote out of context. Then, they were upset about the NDP spoofing the *Supersize Me* movie poster to depict PC leader David Alward with a mouthful of French fries. Finally, the PC website depicted Liberal Premier Shawn Graham as Pollyanna, an image that was later removed. For good measure, a Liberal cabinet minister urged the media to scrutinize how much the PC Party spent during the pre-campaign period.

A more significant trend is that provincial parties are following the federal Conservative Party's lead of damaging the image of a new opponent as soon as that person is selected party leader. In October 2011, the Wildrose Party planned to go negative against the winner of the PC Party's leadership race. Wildrose prepared a video critiquing the leadership frontrunner, Gary Mar, and intended to run the spot on the TV news broadcasts that it believed were monitored by journalists. The advertisement was quickly updated to replace Mar with surprise winner Alison Redford but, as hoped, major newspapers did reproduce screen shots of the ad to accompany their news stories. Interestingly, the objective of the negative spot was not just to frame the new premier. Wildrose found that whenever it informed supporters through e-communication about new ads this generated donations. Negative advertising, when combined with publicity and email appeals, is thus a fundraising mechanism to finance further

advertising (Flanagan, 2014) and is no longer confined to the official election period.

Similarly, in January 2013 the Ontario PC Party ran negative spots mere hours after Kathleen Wynne won the Liberal leadership contest to succeed Premier McGuinty. Within a month the PCs posted an online ad critiquing the new premier's cabinet, using photos of select ministers, gloomy piano music, and a narrator critiquing each one's past spending decisions (Box 1).

**Box 1: "How new?"  
(PC Party of Ontario video, 2013)**

Narrator: "Meet Kathleen Wynne, Ontario's new premier, and her cabinet of big Liberal spenders. This is [Minister of Finance] Charles Sousa. Taxpayers are on the hook for \$190 million dollars, wasted, moving a power plant to save his own seat. And then there's [Minister of Health] Deb Matthews. She allowed Ornge CEO Chris Mazza to spend millions on helicopters that were too small to perform CPR. And who could forget [Minister of Infrastructure and of Transportation] Glen Murray? He spent a million taxpayer dollars – on a toilet. What do they all have in common? They're all part of Kathleen Wynne's revitalized Liberal team. Turns out our new premier is a whole lot like the old one."

Wynne (heard in background): "Dalton! Dalton! Dalton..."

This personal-level affront was followed in June with negative spots claiming that nothing changed with a new Liberal leader. All of the PC videos featured visuals of Wynne and McGuinty raising their arms together at the Liberal leadership convention, a colour scheme of bright reds and dark greys, and concluded with Wynne chanting the name of the outgoing premier. Although we cannot be sure, it seems that the intensity of

permanent campaigning in Ontario was stimulated by the existence of a minority government, as occurred at the federal level from 2006 to 2011.

Knowing the date of a pending election may assist in the planning of political communication. However, as discussed earlier, pre-writ advertising in the Canadian provinces predates the advent of fixed-date legislation. Moreover, at the time of study such rules did not exist in Quebec or Nova Scotia, and yet ongoing campaigning was in play there. In 2012, the Quebec Liberal Party issued a pre-writ negative video that reproduced amateur footage of Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois banging pots and pans in a student protest. The grainy images were obtained without the videographer's permission from social media, converted into black and white, and slowed down in the style of a silent horror film. In Nova Scotia there was considerable pre-writ communication leading up to an anticipated 2013 election, despite the absence of fixed date election legislation. In December 2012 NDP Premier Darrell Dexter delivered uplifting messages about his government's policies in a televised address. The Liberals released a TV spot deriding him for millions of dollars in corporate giveaways; the NDP responded by circulating brochures and creating a website that critiqued Liberal plans to reduce Nova Scotia Power's monopoly over energy services. The NDP persisted by uploading a negative video to YouTube in February 2013 and airing it the next day on television; the advertisement used a blue colour scheme interspersed with an announcer mentioning Quebec, photos of the Liberal leader and news quotes that collectively inferred that he was a Conservative and/or a Quebecker (Box 2). The Nova Scotia case suggests that negative communication and trends in

permanent campaigning are not necessarily dependent on a legislated election date, nor on the perilous nature of a minority government. It also raises the spectre of negativity being directed at other provinces.

**Box 2: “Ask Newfoundlanders”  
(NDP of Nova Scotia video, 2013)**

Narrator: “We don’t know much about [Liberal leader] Stephen McNeil, but we do know he’s opposed to clean Atlantic Canadian power from Muskrat Falls. Instead, he says Nova Scotia should depend on Quebec for power. His people are already talking to Hydro Quebec. And it’s written right into his party’s energy plan. Maybe Mr. McNeil should have asked the people of Newfoundland and Labrador how well Hydro Quebec’s treated them. So if you want Quebec Hydro controlling our power, Stephen McNeil’s your guy. If you want an affordable made in Atlantic Canada energy future, he isn’t.”

*2) Negative Campaigning in the Provinces*

As we can see, perpetual campaigning features positive and negative communication. During the official campaign period the one guarantee is that an incumbent party will coo about how wonderful life has been under their stewardship. In the Fall of 2011 Premier Dunderdale gushed in PC Party videos about what an exciting time it was to live in Newfoundland, as images flashed of her mingling with smiling electors. In PEI Liberal video ads, the voice of Premier Robert Ghiz championed his government’s achievements overtop tourism-like images of the beauty of the province’s geography. In Ontario and Manitoba the incumbent Liberals and NDP, respectively, likewise featured the premier marvelling about government accomplishments and explaining to

electors that there was still more work to be done. Saskatchewan Party videos depicted Premier Wall as a noble leader who deserved re-election because he turned the province’s economy around.<sup>5</sup>

If positive video is more common among provincial governing parties, then comparative video is more prevalent among opposition parties, though a more comprehensive empirical analysis is needed to confirm this observation. Comparative ads that contrasted choices were regularly used by PC parties in PEI, New Brunswick and Manitoba: the first half of each spot consisted of anti-government messaging before presenting the opposition as an uplifting alternative. During the 2010 New Brunswick campaign, a PC video depicted Liberal Premier Graham in slow motion set against a black background accompanied by the text “This is a sign of desperation” before transitioning to the PC Party logo. The narrator claimed that Graham was using “US-style ads” to disparage PC leader David Alward and that this was a crafty attempt to divert attention away from the Liberal government’s broken promises. A slight twist occurred in Quebec. During the 2012 election, a Liberal video began with an English narrator and text communicating that the party would create jobs. It transitioned into a warning that Pauline Marois wanted a referendum. Footage of Marois addressing an audience in French from a balcony while waving a Quebec flag was accompanied by English subtitles. “And our dream is to create a free and independent Québec” she says, after which the narrator reminded viewers that the advertisement was sponsored by the Quebec Liberal Party. This style of advertising seeks to persuade viewers that the message sponsor offers a friendly

solution to the problems created by its opponent.

Negative advertising is much more sinister. The tone of negativity is worrisome in many provinces, and yet it was not present in all of the election campaigns under study. When governing parties used positive advertising they projected a regional political identity and positioned themselves as a magnanimous guardian of citizens' interests. When they used negative advertising they attempted to reinforce their protector status by raising fears about the danger of change. In pulling the emotional lever of anxiety they tapped into ideological values about the nature of public and private sector involvement in the economy and/or juxtaposed leadership aptitudes. The Manitoba NDP's negative spots in Fall 2011 warned that the PC Party had a hidden agenda to sell off Crown assets. One NDP ad showed visuals of flowing water and hydroelectricity as a narrator cautioned that the PC leader, Hugh McFadyen, would privatize Manitoba Hydro (Box 3).

**Box 3: "Keep Hydro Public"  
(NDP of Manitoba video, 2011)**

Narrator: "Manitoba Hydro: it's our oil, it's our future. And, it's at risk. Why? Because [PC leader] Hugh McFadyen is a privatizer. He admits he played a central role when the PCs broke their promise and privatized MTS [Manitoba Telecom Services]. He worked to privatize Ontario Hydro. Now, Hugh McFadyen says he'll open Manitoba Hydro to private investors. If Hugh McFadyen gets the chance, he'll privatize Manitoba Hydro. Our rates will go up, and we'll never get it back. Hugh McFadyen and Manitoba Hydro? Too big a risk."

This fear-mongering of privatization by the Manitoba PC party was a staple of NDP campaigns in the

2003 and 2007 elections. In 2011, it was reinforced in other ads that raised concerns that McFadyen was too big a risk because little was known about him, because of the callous decisions of past PC administrations, and by drawing attention to his crisp business suits which were used as a totem for uncaring spending cuts. Somewhat similar to this messaging was the PC Party of Nova Scotia's tagline of "risky NDP" in radio ads during the 2009 Nova Scotia campaign. In that case, the government party warned voters of the *Ontario* New Democrats' deficit financing in the 1990s, and also alleged that the Nova Scotia NDP accepted illegal donations from unions. Such warnings about the Ontario NDP's failings have been a common refrain in anti-NDP communication across Canada for years.

Fear-mongering was a staple in Saskatchewan, too. In Fall 2011 the SaskParty ran negative spots reminding electors of the failings of past NDP governments in the province. They labelled NDP leader Dwain Lingenfelter as a hypocrite who could not be trusted and portrayed him as an Albertan with the implication that he did not understand Saskatchewanians' concerns. The design of these ads was nearly identical to the federal Conservatives' portrayal of Michael Ignatieff as an American outsider. This federal mimicking previously occurred in the 2007 Saskatchewan election when the NDP used negative ads to warn citizens of the SaskParty's alleged hidden agenda. That was the same narrative of fear that the Paul Martin Liberals used against Harper and, as we have just seen, which was also employed by the Manitoba NDP in 2011.

The smallest provinces of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island appear to be outliers with respect to their aversion to negative advertising and

inoculation from federal trends. The tone of the PEI campaign was considered to be more negative than in the past yet the most adversarial tactic was a comparatively minor flap over the PC Party's newspaper ads concerning alleged government misspending on an immigrant investment program (McKenna and Desserud 2013). Ross Reid, the campaign manager for the incumbent PC Party of Newfoundland, advises that going negative in 2011 was never a serious consideration for his party for two reasons: "One, because, we're not convinced it works. Secondly, it would have been completely counter to the image of Kathy Dunderdale. It would have been sending a mixed message. It was never considered...I don't remember a conversation, ever, where we talked about using negative advertising...I think it's bad for the system. It's bad for the process. So I don't like it" (Reid 2012). This stands in contrast to the views of Ontario Liberal campaign director Don Guy who had this to say about negative advertising and the value of pre-writ electioneering: "Whether it's received as being mean or negative campaigning...The most important thing...is are we delivering information that the voter can relate to and finds useful....And the one thing that we did right in this last campaign, in 2011, and why we were able to close the gap, is we figured out that voters were going to start paying attention about a month before the writ was actually dropped" (Fowlie 2012). The size of the provincial community, local political culture, and relationship with federal parties (at the time the Newfoundland PC party had limited contact with its national cousin) are among the factors that contribute to the presence of negative communication in provincial campaigns.

### *c) e-Campaigning in the Provinces*

Communications technology has profoundly changed political campaigning, including the democratization of video communication. It is easy to create video and upload it to a party's official website, to YouTube, or elsewhere. This is an attractive proposition because of the low cost and potential for emotional resonance. As Danie Pitre, an NDP communications officer in New Brunswick, explained in 2010: "Unfortunately we don't have the budget to be doing TV and radio ads. But we have realized that with YouTube and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, we can still promote our campaign" (Nabuurs 2010: A1). Political parties across Canada now routinely upload videos which range from unedited campaign trail footage to professionally-produced TV-quality spots.

The types of online video generally mirror trends in offline video. Prior to the 2011 provincial election, the Newfoundland and Labrador Liberal Party used social media to promote a cartoon video in which a water droplet named Winston was informed by a narrator about the downsides of the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project, including that the deal would benefit other provinces. In Ontario, the Liberal and PC parties launched multiple websites for the purpose of promoting negative videos and negative news coverage of their opponents. The Saskatchewan NDP created Flash animation videos to draw attention to their policy priorities such as health care; however, its video of events from the campaign trail suffered from weak production values and poor editing. In

British Columbia, an online video issued by the Liberal Party featured footage of the 2013 provincial leaders' debate, which raised concerns about copyright because the parties agreed not to reproduce debate material.

During the studied period there is one incidence of Web video that is especially noteworthy, even though the study of e-campaigning by interest groups and private citizens is beyond the scope of this article. Towards the end of the 2012 Alberta campaign, the website [www.ineverthoughtidvotepc.com](http://www.ineverthoughtidvotepc.com) attracted media attention, and its lone YouTube video went viral (Gerson 2012). The spot featured young people urging Albertans to vote strategically in order to prevent a Wildrose government. It was five times longer than a standard 30-second TV advertisement and included language that would not appear in mainstream media (see excerpts in Box 4).

**Box 4:** "I never thought I'd vote PC"  
(unidentified Alberta citizens group video, 2012)

Woman 1: "[Wildrose leader] Danielle Smith thinks the Flintstones is historically accurate."  
Man 1 [*commenting on Wildrose healthcare and budget plans*]: "But how the fuck are they going to do it, y'all?"  
Woman 1: "Danielle Smith doesn't believe in gravity."  
Man 2 [*referring to earlier campaign gaffe*]: "And I heard her bus has tit wheels."  
Man 1: "Seriously. So, fuck it. I'm voting PC. Latino-ass me is voting PC."  
Man 2: "Listen, I want you to know, it's not like I have a hard-on for PCs. I would rather have my face eaten off by rodents."  
Man 1: "Vote strategically. Vote for people you think are good, man."

Because the "I never thought I'd vote PC" video was created and posted by an unidentified sponsor it fell outside of normal election finance regulations. This serves as a reminder that the rules of the game are changing: political parties are increasingly vulnerable at any point of the electoral cycle to unregulated negative video that is created and uploaded by pressure groups and by unknown political opponents.

### Implications

This descriptive account is a first step towards systematic research about negative advertising, permanent campaigning and digital video at the provincial level of Canadian politics. We can infer that the introduction of fixed date elections incentivizes pre-campaign electioneering, but that alone does not explain the presence of these phenomena. New technologies are helping provincial parties reach wider audiences, especially given their relative lack of resources compared to their federal counterparts. Importantly, online video is not subject to the same technical, content or regulatory constraints as television. Digital video can inhibit the ability of established political actors to control the campaign narrative, though its aesthetics can also reinforce unwelcome perceptions of the sponsor's amateurism. It can be a strong return on investment because of its ability to generate publicity and attract donations.

Another observation concerns the similarities of political communication across Canada. The government party uses the timeworn tactic of championing its stewardship and scaring voters about the unknown. The opposition criticizes government decisions and presents itself as a solution. Strategies promoted by federal parties are copied. This includes

attempting to stay on a positive message track, or using horror-style video to warn of an opponent's hidden agenda, risky policies or outsider status. The federal Conservatives' model of going negative as soon as an opposing party anoints a new leader, irrespective of the proximity of an election, is followed in some provinces and is symptomatic of a global trend of promoting and denigrating leaders rather than parties or policy. The one defining characteristic of provincial videos is the presence of a regional dimension. This pits provincial economic interests against neighbours – hydroelectricity was a theme in 2011 – or presents a leader as the embodiment of a regional identity. In Quebec, federalism and nationalism continue to be the identity fault line.

Lastly, there is evidence that political parties in small jurisdictions are unwilling to go negative, and that anywhere in Canada the proponent of negativity is publicly derided. Advertising and/or humour are used to depict negative messengers as meanies; another tactic is to seek sympathetic publicity by complaining to authorities. Sometimes the technical execution of negative spots invites ethical questions, including the use of quotes out of context or reproduction of copyrighted footage. But it is also common for negativity to generate negativity, given that parties that take the high road are eventually drawn into a response. Closer study is needed to bear this out, including an analysis of strategic decision-making which might be explained by theories such as the equivalent retaliation strategy that has proven to be successful in game theory.

Trends identified here concerning permanent campaigning, negative political advertising and e-campaigning show no sign of abatement. An emerging area for future research is election

officials' efforts to make the act of voting more accessible. In 2013 Nova Scotia became the first jurisdiction to allow what was dubbed "continuous polling," meaning that electors had the option of voting at a returning office on any day of the campaign except on Sundays (CBC News 2013). Continuous advance voting increases the incentive to operate a permanent campaign and to go negative earlier. Whether such communications would be of any additional persuasive value is open to debate given that the earliest voters are presumably durable partisans. It is a policy innovation that has significant implications for voter mobilization, and it increases the importance of social media. The emergence of continuous polling, and what it means for political communication, warrants monitoring.

All told, this synopsis adds to our knowledge about the campaign behaviour of provincial parties and provides the foundation for empirical and normative study. What are the implications of permanent campaigning for provincial politics and governance? Is there any correlation between the tone of advertising and political efficacy? Is online video the unregulated Wild West and, if so, what are the implications? What is the ideal regulatory framework for political communication? The baseline evidence presented here suggests that these are among the many areas of provincial politicking that merit pan-Canadian study.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In 2015, Nova Scotia Premier Stephen McNeil remarked that fixed election dates are a problem in other provinces, and he backtracked on an earlier pledge to introduce the requirement as part of a package of legislative reforms. In jurisdictions that have fixed date election legislation, dates are nevertheless subject to change: constitutional limits of five years, maintaining the legislature's confidence and the authority of the monarch's representative to dissolve the legislature prevail. A minority government may be defeated on a vote of non-confidence, as occurred with the federal Conservatives in 2011, and the likelihood of which prompted Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne to request that the legislature be dissolved in 2014. The first minister can still manoeuvre an early election, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper did in 2008, as well as Quebec Premier Pauline Marois after her government tabled an early budget in 2014 prior to a recess of the legislature.

<sup>2</sup> The author thanks Jared Wesley for coordinating the Comparative Provincial Election Project and Michael Penney for his capable research assistance.

<sup>3</sup> Most news story citations are not presented for space and readability reasons. They are available upon request from the author.

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<sup>4</sup> This was not the intended research design. Difficulties were experienced securing interviews with senior party strategists outside of the researcher's province of university affiliation. It also became clear that campaign expenditure data are exceedingly difficult to compare between provinces; for instance Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Ontario do not require that political parties disclose information about advertising expenses. Finally, space limitations prevent analysis of data collected about campaigning by interest groups, who played an active role in larger provinces in particular.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that two months after his party won in a landslide, Premier Wall authorized the digital release of a humorous video of outtakes and bloopers from the filming of his election campaign advertisements.