

PROPOSED CHANGES TO ALBERTA'S ELECTION RULES MISS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE DIVERSE REPRESENTATION IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

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As organizations working to eliminate systemic barriers that have long blocked women from achieving equal representation on municipal councils, Parity YEG and Ask Her YYC are concerned that amendments proposed in Bill 29 fail to level the playing field for half of Alberta's population. Bill 29 introduces significant changes to the Local Authorities Election Act that affect key stakeholders, including candidates and third party advertisers. Fundraising - a key concern for prospective candidates - will see new rules that may deter women from mounting effective political campaigns.

After analyzing these proposed changes through an intersectional lens, we recommend that:

- The Minister and Government of Alberta defer the implementation of Bill 29 until after the 2021 election to allow future candidates, third party advertisers, community service organizations, and other affected stakeholders a period of transition to properly adjust their operations and align with the forthcoming changes to legislation.
- The Government of Alberta engage in further consultation regarding the changes proposed in Bill 29 to ensure equity-seeking groups do not face additional obstacles to running for office. Ask Her YYC and Parity YEG would welcome the opportunity to participate in further consultation.
- The Minister consider further amendments to restrict campaign contributions between election cycles, including personal contributions, reduce the amount individuals can donate to campaigns, and require candidates to file their financial disclosures during the campaign period.

Amidst a cultural reckoning seeking social and economic justice, the need for plurality in politics cannot be ignored. Neither Edmonton nor Calgary have come close to achieving gender parity on City Council. Respectively, women make up only 15% and 20% of Councillors in these cities. Without further action, the proposed legislation will have significant impacts on the incumbency advantage, exaggerate existing economic barriers, and reduce transparency, making it more challenging to elect leaders that represent the communities they serve.

Reducing Incumbency Advantage

The proposed changes in Bill 29 bring forward many notable amendments for candidates, campaigns, and third party advertisers which may encourage more women to participate in the electoral process: Ensuring campaign surpluses over \$1,000 are donated to charity instead of being held in trust allows for a 'clean slate' after each election cycle. By increasing the limit for personal contributions and fundraising outside of the campaign period, new candidates are also able to increase public awareness and solicit support for their candidacy. These measures can reduce advantages for incumbents, and given that men are disproportionately represented among those currently elected, make a compelling case for increasing the overall diversity of candidates.

However, we remain concerned that some of the proposed changes to Bill 29 may amplify known barriers for women, especially with regard to socioeconomic status, fundraising, and transparency.

Economic Obstacles For Women Candidates

Before COVID-19, unemployment rates were only marginally higher for women. Since the pandemic began, 14% of men who lost their jobs have regained their employment compared to only 5.4% of women in similar situations. This compounds the existing socioeconomic disadvantages women are already facing.

Women in Canada earn, on average, 12% less than men and are disproportionately responsible for unpaid labor such as childcare and family care-giving. An increase in Alberta's aging population and lack of affordable childcare means that women are often faced with the difficult choice between sacrificing opportunities for career advancement and domestic responsibilities, placing them at an economic and experiential disadvantage. Additionally, 80% of single parents are women and are more likely to lose hours when employed precariously. These circumstances present significant challenges for women considering candidacy, and particularly for women with families.

Research shows that most campaign finance regulations have not engaged in gender-based analysis and fail to notice impacts that disadvantage women's participation and primarily benefit men as incumbents. Bill 29 would increase the personal contribution amount to \$10,000 per year between election cycles, expand the amount individuals can donate, and provide the opportunity to fundraise up to \$5,000 between election cycles. While removing restrictions on the overall amount individual Albertans can donate may increase a candidate's overall access to campaign funds, it may also disadvantage candidates with lower socioeconomic status or without an established network of wealthy supporters. All of these changes would likely favour wealthy or incumbent candidates, and put women and other traditionally underrepresented candidates at a disadvantage before the writ is even dropped.

We know that women are more likely to succeed when elections include limits on campaign expenditures and donations, higher transparency requirements, and limitations on third party advertising, and as such, strongly believe our recommendations can assist in creating such an environment.

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency in the electoral process encourages transparent governance. The reduced financial disclosures proposed in Bill 29 can undermine the importance of small donations and campaign activities that do not involve financial contributions, making it difficult for financially under-resourced campaigns to succeed using alternative methods of engagement. Additionally, removing requirements for financial disclosures until after election day may provide particular advantages for incumbents by incentivizing them to leverage their powers of influence while in office.

We also have concerns regarding the removal of financial disclosures for third party advertisers outside of the election period. Without more specific regulations to manage engagement between third party advertisers and candidates, we risk allowing significant direct and indirect advantages for candidates to leverage funding provided to, and relationships with, third party advertisers, reducing overall transparency in the electoral process.

The Path Forward

Ask Her YYC and Parity YEG are encouraged to see steps taken towards reducing incumbent advantages. We believe the Government of Alberta can further improve upon the positive aspects of Bill 29 by strengthening regulations pertaining to fundraising and financial disclosures.

These alterations would help to ensure that the Government's laudable goal of levelling the playing field between new and incumbent candidates is achieved, and would allow for more women and underrepresented candidates to succeed.

We remain willing and eager to continue this dialogue with our community and the Government of Alberta and continue working towards more inclusive and democratic elections.

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