



8. Party Platform Builders

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Party Platform Builders

Jared Wesley and Renze Nauta

Drafters of campaign platforms face many conflicting demands. They must consider competing requests from various corners of the party. Their decisions must balance good policy goals with staying within tight fiscal limits. Their determination to win through bold policy proposals must align with the necessity of setting an achievable agenda for governing. Platform directors also serve as their parties' policy leads, providing moment-to-moment answers to journalists about their own policy commitments and those of their opponents. In this chapter, we explain the strategic objectives and challenges involved in building major party platforms in Canada.

Les rédacteurs doivent composer avec de nombreuses demandes contradictoires lorsqu'ils élaborent des plateformes électorales. Ils doivent tenir compte des demandes concurrentes des divers partis et leurs décisions doivent assurer l'équilibre entre de bons objectifs stratégiques et le respect de limites budgétaires serrées. Leur détermination à gagner par des propositions de politiques audacieuses doit s'harmoniser avec la nécessité d'établir un programme de gouvernance réalisable. Les directeurs de plateformes assument également le rôle de responsables politiques de leur parti; ils fournissent des réponses instantanées aux journalistes au sujet de leurs propres engagements politiques et de ceux de leurs adversaires. Ce chapitre explique les objectifs stratégiques et les difficultés liés à l'élaboration des programmes des grands partis canadiens.

A PARTY'S PLATFORM is among its most coveted documents. Leaks can derail an entire campaign since they expose the party's plans to scrutiny before they are ready.¹ For these reasons, only select people have access to the full platform as it is being developed. The platform director, also known as the policy director, is at the centre of this group, helping to guide the document through various stages of drafting and approval. This leader is typically an expert drawn from within political parties, academia, or the bureaucracy. Few platform directors are eager to reveal the trade secrets involved in their craft. On-the-record interviews with them have been rare. As a result, we must mine memoirs and insiders' accounts for glimpses of the world of platform design.²

Alongside advances in political marketing, platform drafting became more professionalized.³ The 1993 Liberal Red Book set the modern standard in this regard.⁴ Manifestos are no longer crafted by cadres of elites walled off from the influences of public opinion. There is a recognition that even the most artful political advertising cannot sell an unpopular suite of policies. Rather, platform directors must work with public opinion and communication specialists to determine which issues matter the most to voters and, of those issues, which ones voters trust their party the most to handle. The platform is a tool to highlight those issues. Properly crafted, it allows the party to "ride the wave" of public opinion and capitalize on "issue ownership."⁵

The platform director holds the pen on early drafts of the document. Platform directors do not work alone, however. Given time and resources, they often consult from within and outside the party to gain input and buy-in on the document. Their primary responsibility is to ensure that the party's core commitments align with the priorities of its accessible voters and stakeholders. This issue landscape is identified through polling and on-the-ground intelligence from party volunteers and candidates.

Election platforms are central to modern campaigns. They are compendiums of policy commitments and can serve as plans for

governance. They allow voters to assess parties based on how well their promises and priorities align with their own preferences and to provide the winning party with an agenda to govern. This might be an idealized view. The media gloss over much of the platforms' contents in favour of stories focused on personality and gamesmanship, and voters' social media feeds are unlikely to feature high-minded debates about public policy. Few voters base their decisions on specific policy initiatives on offer, and even fewer review the platforms themselves. For this reason, it is tempting to dismiss platforms as inconsequential.

Yet they serve another set of purposes for the parties that release them. A platform is a key part of the party's brand or personality. It binds campaign teams together and connects them to key groups of supporters.⁶ When well constructed, a platform helps a diverse collection of people and organizations to gel around a common set of objectives and policy aims. The expected and desired reactions of stakeholders place a constraint on the coherence and workability of policies. Strong support from one stakeholder, elicited by a commitment to a particular side on a given issue, might evoke strong opposition from another. In contrast, a more nuanced position might satisfy a broader range of stakeholders but fail to energize either side. In this sense, the reality that one cannot be all things to all people provides a natural limit on the ability of the party to say anything to win votes.

Platforms are key tools for internal party management and external communication. They can bind the party's various factions, providing a common rallying point and keeping everyone on message. This is a tall order for national parties whose bases are divided along ideological, generational, regional, ethnic, and other lines. At the same time, the platform serves as the central thread of the party's campaign communication. The platform captures all forms of messaging – about the leader, policy, contrast to opposition, and so on. The cover page is emblazoned with the party's campaign slogan. Different section headings announce the party's key priorities.

Photos of the leader, images, and other visual elements convey the tone that the party wishes to set. Daily press releases build on, and in some cases contribute to, the platform's contents.

Prior to the campaign, the platform director consolidates input from throughout the party apparatus. The range of people who need to be consulted in designing platforms has widened over time. As late as the 1980s, the leader and cabinet (or senior critics) shared control over the platform with the party's executive, supported by the campaign manager. Today's platform directors often engage with a variety of people at various stages. Party members and executives are usually organized into working groups for this purpose. The platform director also consults elected officials, including candidates, caucus, and critics or members of the cabinet. Allied interest groups and stakeholders are likewise involved. For a party in government, public servants are also engaged in the process. The platform director might also work with academics, think tanks, policy experts, economists, and public finance experts to refine the policy instruments included in the document. Public opinion and marketing experts are engaged to ensure that the platform resonates with the target audiences, measuring any progress against the baseline polling conducted at the outset of the campaign.

This product development stage can last anywhere from a few years to a few months before the campaign begins. Fixed election dates have helped to make the timing somewhat more predictable. Changes in leadership and the possibility of snap elections can speed up the process.

Duties in an Election Campaign

As the campaign nears, platform directors begin assembling the platform document. It must be a living text consistent with the party's brand and campaign strategy. Platforms need to be flexible enough to adapt over the course of the campaign. For this reason, the platform team's work must be integrated into the

broader campaign structure. The platform director must work with the campaign manager, the communications director, the leader's chief of staff, and others to ensure that the platform aligns with other elements of the party's strategy.

Platform directors do not work with a blank canvas. Previous commitments made by the party in past elections often act as a foundation for the party platform. So does the leadership campaign platform of the leader if he or she was selected since the previous general election. Parties in government often construct throne speeches and budget documents with an eye to the next election campaign. Policy announcements at the end of a government's term also provide ingredients for the party's platform. Platform directors must also keep the party's policy manuals and declarations in mind. They are usually produced through resolutions passed by party members or delegates at conventions midway between elections. Policy resolutions that align with the campaign narrative can make their way into the final platform, whereas those deemed not to align might be excluded. In this sense, the platform is a meeting point among the party's grassroots policy declarations, the leader's prerogatives, and the broader electorate's priorities.

At the same time, the platform director must assemble a coherent set of workable policies. The party must be able to deliver on most of these promises if elected. This includes providing realistic costing for policies, which the platform director oversees with the help of economists and experts in public finance. The costing of a platform places a natural check on a political party, which could otherwise propose policies without limits. The adoption of fiscal constraint is the choice of the party itself, subject to expectations of the public and the party's base (e.g., a balanced budget, a declining debt-to-GDP ratio, etc.). In some instances, parties might choose to muddy, distort, or ignore the cost of implementing their proposed policies. The electorate's expectations for costing can vary from election to election. Nevertheless, the accepted norm of including a detailed fiscal plan as part of the platform places a limit on the party's ability to make promises.

The costing process is iterative. The fiscal costs of desired policies are estimated and then tailored according to the available fiscal room. A political party can create fiscal room through proposals that increase revenues or decrease expenditures; however, the downside of these typically unpopular proposals has to be weighed against the upside of the policies made possible by them. The platform ultimately presented to voters is the party's best determination of the collection of policies that will appeal to them. For the first time in 2019, the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) was available to support federal political parties that wished to refer their own campaign proposals for independent costing. It too was an iterative process with a lot of back and forth between the PBO and the parties as the platforms were developed and finalized. Important questions remain about how each party availed itself of this service. The PBO's mandate is likely to evolve in future elections.

Building a platform is not like assembling a catalogue or an inventory of promises. The days of assembling a series of leaders' statements and policy commitments in an incoherent document have long since passed.⁷ Care needs to be taken to determine the order and amount of space devoted to the various policy planks. Promises that appear the earliest in the platform tend to carry more weight, whereas those at the end of the document are less central to the party's desired ballot question. To be successful, the party has to align its priorities with those that the public trusts it the most to address. It is not possible to play only to the party's strengths in a platform. The document must cover the entire issue landscape. It cannot leave entire areas of public policy in abeyance, particularly when the public might trust its opponents more to handle them. If a party owns a stable of social policy issues but is weaker on the economy, it still needs to mention the latter. In most cases, the platform director mentions but downplays the issues that the public does not trust the party to handle. Downplaying occurs by giving certain issues less space and placing them near the end of the platform. On other occasions, the platform director might take a more proactive approach. It involves taking the public's side on issues

traditionally unfavourable to the party. This strategy of inoculation counters charges that the party has a hidden agenda or is out of step with mainstream public opinion on the issues. The approach runs the risk, however, of alienating members of the party's base.

A platform director can do nothing without the support of a high-quality communications team. Once the issues are determined in consultation with the leader and chief of staff, the platform director works with communication experts to determine the right rhetoric and imagery to convey the party's position. This type of word-smithing is crucial to the party's success. The style will differ if the party wishes to project itself as competent and steady, for instance, rather than visionary and path breaking.

Once the platform team develops the policy content, the scripting team reworks the document to ensure consistency with the campaign narrative and to improve its readability when drafting news releases and backgrounders. Some parties use online tools such as Flesch–Kincaid or Hemingway to ensure that their writing is simple and understandable. Various drafts are passed back and forth between the platform and scripting teams in yet another iterative process until a final version is released.

The platform team becomes the party's *de facto* policy shop over the course of the campaign. Indeed, the group is often called the policy team. As the platform items are announced, the platform director and the policy team become the authorities on the details of platform commitments. The platform director responds to questions from the communications team about the objectives, costs, and benefits of various promises. A significant amount of time can be spent ensuring that the media and public policy experts understand the policies and what is or is not included in a given promise. As well, the director leads research on opponents' platforms by fact-checking them or drawing contrasts. A significant amount of time is therefore devoted to comparing one's own promises with those of opponents and helping the communications team to draw those contrasts in the media. Quick responses are required, especially in a fast-paced news cycle.

Strategists continue to market-test the platform until weeks or days before its official release. This product refinement phase involves a combination of focus groups, surveys, and – more recently – crowd sourcing.⁸ The Liberal Party entered the last domain in 2015 with its myPlatform app. The tool allowed users to browse different parts of the party’s platform. They could also assemble their own collection of favourite policies. The party used these data to determine which of its planks was the most popular. This allowed the Liberals to refine their platform before its official release. Other parties use data analytics on their websites and social media feeds to collect similar data. All parties rely on feedback from candidates and party volunteers on what accessible voters are saying at the doorstep or on the street. However, once the leader has signed off on the platform following this product refinement stage, there is little room for input from outside the leader’s inner circle.

One of the more artful decisions confronting the campaign team concerns the timing of the platform’s release. The choice between the two approaches – releasing it early in the campaign or closer to election day – depends on many factors, including the party’s competitive position and overall narrative. Releasing the platform before the writ is dropped, or in the opening days of the campaign, conveys a sense of confidence and openness. However, an early release can reduce the impact of announcing a new policy every day during the campaign, expose the party to prolonged scrutiny, and risk that other parties might adopt or steal ideas. Early release also means that the party cannot adapt to changing circumstances during the campaign.

Releasing the platform late holds those advantages. It allows the party to test the popularity and resonance of its core commitments. It can refine its style and tone before firming them up in the final document. Releasing the platform later in the campaign also allows the party to maximize its message potential. Issuing the document before or at the outset of the campaign removes the mystery, rhythm, and momentum of daily policy releases. However, it is risky to release a platform too late. Critics can allege that parties fail to provide

voters with adequate time to scrutinize their policy commitments, especially if the platform is released after the leaders' debates. Such charges can feed into a narrative of the party having a hidden agenda. Nevertheless, there is little to no direct evidence of voters penalizing parties for late platform releases.

After a successful campaign, some platform directors play key roles in the transition to government. They might be appointed to senior roles in policy, such as in the Prime Minister's Office. This helps to ensure that campaign promises are properly translated into policy plans in the new government. In other cases, platform directors play no part in the transitional process and return to partisan duties or work outside the government.

Overcoming Obstacles

Commentators often remark on the similarities among political parties when it comes to their campaign pledges. The 2019 campaign demonstrated this, for the Conservatives and Liberals released policies that bore striking resemblances. A look at how the Conservative campaign responded to these developments provides an interesting window into the day-by-day activities of a policy director.

The Liberal and Conservative campaigns converged on parental benefits in particular. As first announced by the Conservative leader during his 2017 leadership campaign, the Conservatives pledged to make Employment Insurance (EI) benefits for maternity and parental leave tax free. This had been the subject of Andrew Scheer's private member's bill in 2018. At the time, the party announced that, if not enacted into law, the policy would become a plank of the Conservative platform in 2019. The Liberals had voted against the bill in the House of Commons. They joined public policy experts who criticized the complexity of a tax credit offering the possibility of deferral to future years.

It therefore came as a significant surprise to the Conservative campaign when, about a week into the election period, the Liberals themselves announced that they, too, would make EI maternity

and parental benefits tax free. The Liberals promised a simpler mechanism so that parents could receive the benefits immediately. Instead of a tax credit, they pledged to remove EI benefits from the definition of taxable income. Thus began a fight about whose policy mechanism was better.

As early as 2017, the Conservative policy team had put together the finer points of how its proposed tax-free maternity and parental benefits would work. The team considered how the credit would benefit the poor versus the rich and how the timing of a pregnancy in the calendar year would change how it applied to parents. The policy developers built in a few key features to target it at those who needed it the most, make it fair for all parents, and inoculate it from criticism. Because the Conservatives had put a lot of thought into the details of the policy before the campaign, the platform team was ready to respond to the Liberals' surprise counterproposal.

That is not to say that the Conservatives expected it. Quite the contrary, Justin Trudeau's announcement of the Liberal policy surprised the Conservative war room. It quickly became clear that, by proposing tax-free parental benefits, the Liberals were proposing a similar outcome, but their policy mechanism was unknown initially. The Conservative platform team huddled together to figure out what the Liberals were proposing and to brainstorm a response. The team agreed that the Liberal policy benefited from having a simpler explanation of how parents would receive their tax benefits immediately. At the same time, the Conservative team realized that its policy provided larger proportional benefits to lower-income parents compared with higher-income parents. The platform team gave that information to the communications team, which then took the message to the media. The communication battle lasted a few days as the Conservatives attempted to explain the salient details of the EI system and the Income Tax Act.

This episode highlights the importance of several key roles of the platform director. First, it is crucial to develop a sound policy up front that can withstand the criticism of experts and alternative proposals from other parties. A policy that lacks a sound basis will

leave a gap that will be filled by an opponent. Second, platform directors must understand the fundamental points of various government systems so that they can quickly grasp the differences among competing policy proposals from various parties. It is not sufficient to understand one's own policies; one has to be prepared to respond to counterproposals from one's opponents. Third, platform directors and their teams must work seamlessly with their parties' communications teams to package policies in easy-to-understand language and get the message out. A policy proposal can be the best idea in the world, but if it is too complicated, or if people fail to hear why it is great, then it will not secure votes.

In sum, platform building is a complex and challenging craft. Platforms are more than simply collections of policy proposals. Observers are right to dive deeply into the costs and implications of a party's plans for the future. However, as central campaign documents, platforms are rightly viewed as strategic tools. They symbolize the compromises required to unite disparate groups of supporters and stakeholders behind a common vision. They represent an attempt to market that vision to a broader pool of accessible voters. A party's success or failure is not solely attributable to the strength of its platform. Yet the challenges faced by platform directors during a campaign can provide good insight into the party's performance in other areas covered in this volume.

Notes

- ¹ Flanagan, *Harper's Team*, 154–55.
- ² See Esselment, “Designing Campaign Platforms”; and Flynn, “Rethinking Policy Capacity in Canada.”
- ³ Paré and Berger, “Political Marketing Canadian Style?”
- ⁴ Esselment, “Designing Campaign Platforms.”
- ⁵ Miljan, *Public Policy in Canada*, 85.
- ⁶ Walters, “Platforms as Political Process,” 438.
- ⁷ For a compendium of early federal party platforms, see Carrigan, *Canadian Party Platforms 1867–1968*. For platforms since then, see the Poltext Project website.
- ⁸ Flynn, “Rethinking Policy Capacity in Canada.”

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